

Offham Chalk Pit near Hamsey, East Sussex



The village of Offham was a farming community for many centuries, but it also produced lime and chalk from the quarry further up the hill.

The Chalk Pit Inn at Offham first started life as the offices for the chalk pit. Situated just a mile and a half outside of Lewes, you can still see the kilns, and railway used in the mining of the chalk in the 18th Century.

The chalk quarry had four associated lime kilns in operation from 1809 -1890. The kilns have been largely destroyed, only two draw eyes formed by low brick arches retaining their interior grates survive in the East corner of the car park.

The 18th Century inn first started life as offices for the Chalk Pit. Accounts can be still seen in the pub and are dated 1793. Opposite the front door tunnels can be seen which used to support a funicular railway built in 1808 by George Shiffner & William Jessop. Once the Chalk was burnt in the kilns (which can also still be seen), the lime was transported down to barges on the river Ouse. This lime had many uses, one of which was to be used in agriculture to make soil more alkaline.



The railway was an amazing technological innovation for its time and even with the arrival of steam railways leading to a loss of traffic on the river Ouse, the railway survived until 1870 due to the efficiency of its design & the economic way of transporting bulky lime.

The interesting part of the story is that in order to get the chalk and lime down from the slopes of Offham Hill, these clever engineers built a funicular railway which went under the London road passing as it does in front of the quarry and down towards the river where it could be loaded directly on to waiting barges.



The entrance to the incline is formed by two low-arched brick tunnels. The incline is 22m long and passes beneath the road, emerging at the base of a high brick retaining wall and continues to the river as a steep-sided gully. It had a large wheel at the top with a brake, the weight of full trucks of lime and chalk travelling down pulled the empty ones back up the 60% sloped track. This method of transport was used until 1870 when the pit was closed. . A tramway linked the kilns to a wharf on a branch of the Upper Ouse Navigation. It is thought to be part of the oldest railway in Sussex.

There are very few remains of this quarry, with only a couple of the old lime kilns hidden in the grassy hills behind the pub. The pub was the old site office, now extended and very nice inside. There are, however, the old tunnels, which the loaded trucks, would have disappeared into on their journey down to the river bank. All the tracks have gone and equipment shed with the pulley system, but there is enough for the imagination to get a hook on how it might have looked.