

The ruddle pit (engraving of a painting by George Walker from 'The Costume of Yorkshire in 1814')



The text accompanying this illustration noted the following: Ruddle [a type of red ochre] was used for 'the coarser purposes' of painting, for example, carts and wagons and also by carpenters for marking their timber*. It was found at Micklebring in Braithwell parish. [Ruddle was once quite a scarce commodity. Edward Miller wrote in 1804 that Micklebring was one of only two places in England where ruddle was found. According to Chambers Encyclopaedia of 1895 Micklebring was by then one of only four places in England where ruddle was found.]

A shaft about 5 feet in diameter was sunk 23 feet in depth passing through limestone and gritstone below which was clay about 6 feet deep. Running through the centre of the clay was a vein of ruddle about 9 inches thick. A miner sat down to excavate the ruddle up to 4 yards from the centre of the shaft using a short, sharp, axe. Because the clay could not be easily propped up, after reaching this distance from the shaft, work halted and another shaft was sunk near to the first one.

The ruddle was taken to a mill where it was ground to a powder, mixed with water then ground again before being put in a reservoir. Here the ruddle subsided and the water evaporated after which the ruddle was cut into small squares, packed in casks for transport to Hull and on to London from where it was exported. £5 a ton was paid for the ruddle. [This method of processing ruddle was first developed in France in the 1780s. Edward Miller noted that Messrs. Gleadhill and Shepherd have mills for grinding ruddle and carry on a considerable trade at Micklebring.] The man in the old regimental jacket and the boy were employed at the Micklebring pit where the drawing was made.

There are several reminders of the processes described above:

- Ruddle Lane runs north east from Micklebring to Old Edlington suggesting that ruddle was mined in the vicinity.
- The ruined ruddle mill at Braithwell is on the south side of Austwood Lane. A photograph of it can be seen at website <www.geograph.org.uk/photo/3224089>.
- Ruddle Mill Lane runs eastwards from Austwood Lane (east of Braithwell) to the north of Stainton.
- The stream next to the ruined (water) mill is known as Ruddle Dike. This becomes Denaby Wife Dyke south east of Stainton then flows into Paper Mill Dyke and on to Tickhill's Mill Dam.
- The land near the mill is called Ruddle Mill Holt.

**Other uses of ruddle not mentioned in 'The Costume of Yorkshire in 1814' included marking sheep, painting brickwork and marking the edges of doorsteps. Ruddle mined at Brixham was combined with oil, for example, and used to coat sails to protect them from sea water.*