

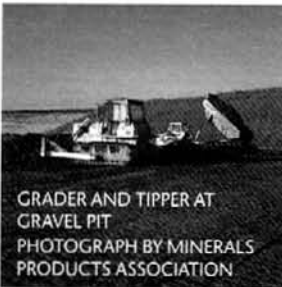
Sand, gravel and rock

'Minerals' is the general term for material derived from the earth. In Oxfordshire the principal minerals produced are sand, gravel and rock. These are termed 'aggregates'. In addition, much use is made of recycled minerals, largely derived from demolition waste, and marine-dredged sand and gravel.

Government policy for minerals supply states that "A reliable supply of minerals for construction is essential for the economy, and for building the homes and infrastructure that we all need." No one can argue about the purpose. But one can reasonably be alarmed about the amount of quarrying that this policy implies, and one can also wonder about the implications for other aspects including the massive effort put into planning, inspecting and monitoring, and the policy of 'safeguarding'.

Production targets

Quarrying is just about the most destructive activity permitted in the countryside. One recalls the description of the horrors after the 1987 storm in the south east and the 1990 one in Oxfordshire. The analogy commonly drawn was with Passchendaele. Admittedly a quarry operation looks more orderly than a windblown wood but its impact on neighbouring residents, landscape, wildlife, hydrology and archaeology is far greater. And, because of the capital intensity of operations of cleaning and sorting, operators favour large sites so that the impact on any one neighbourhood lasts far longer. One plus point is that a more diverse habitat may result from careful restoration.



GRADER AND TIPPER AT GRAVEL PIT
PHOTOGRAPH BY MINERALS PRODUCTS ASSOCIATION

The principal concern is with primary aggregates, a term which means newly extracted material and covers land-won sand and gravel and crushed rock. So far as sand and gravel are concerned, two types are distinguished. One is soft sand used in making mortar, the other sharp (or concrete) sand and gravel used in making concrete. In Oxfordshire the sources of each are distinct. Soft sand comes from the Corallian ridge

running east from Shrivensham to just outside Oxford. River gravels of the Thames and its tributaries are the sources of sharp sand and gravel. Very broadly one hectare of river gravels may be expected to yield 50,000 tonnes of sharp sand and gravel, and 1 ha of soft sand workings 250,000 t.

CPRE's interest lies largely in the winning of sand and gravel. So it is pleasing to report that a revised target proposed for sand and gravel working in the county is 13% lower than the current figure. This is the proposal of the latest SE Plan's policy for minerals, an Examination in Public (EiP) into which was held in early October 2009.

The latest target figure for supply from the South East region allows for substantial increases in sand and gravel from marine dredging and recycled material. Even before this recent reduction in the target figure for land-won aggregates in SE England, marine-dredged material, recycled and re-used aggregates and imports, principally by rail, to England (i.e. excluding inter-regional trade) were projected to account for 56% of total supply. By any measure this is impressive. On the demand side account has been taken of the changing mix of materials used in buildings. Less concrete is employed today and more metal and glass.



MINERAL EXTRACTION AT COXWELL, FARINGDON,
JULY 2009. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS KEEBLE

The table below shows the changes from the current Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

Target for annual production 2010-2026 for Oxfordshire, million tonnes per annum:

	recent actual average		previous plan	latest proposal
	2002-4	2005-7		
Total sand and gravel	1.62	1.17	1.82	1.58
Crushed rock	0.70	0.59	1.00	0.71

A troubling feature of the figures is that the new guidelines are, apart from sand and gravel in the earlier years noted, higher than in the recent past. The two Inspectors on the EiP asked Minerals Planning Authorities (in Oxfordshire's case the County Council) and producers for their views on the reduced figure. Counties rather realistically accepted the figure; the alternative being that each simply beggars their neighbour(s). Quarry owners appear to tolerate the new figures. Once the Examiners' report is considered and the government has blessed it, each county can go ahead with the formulation of its Core Strategy for minerals. It is hoped that the county will consult on core strategy preferred options early in 2010. This document will foreshadow the broad areas intended for new workings, and it is at this stage that CPRE will contribute.

The policies set out in the Oxfordshire Minerals Plan of 1996 ran to 2006. In subsequent years the policies have been saved, that is they continue to have effect until the new Development Framework comes into force.

Other matters

Planning for aggregates supply is jointly decided by the government department responsible (Communities and Local Government), the Regional Authority, now called the South East of England Partnership Board, and the County Council. Thus practice in planning minerals' supply is very much a top-down exercise. The current political fashion is to favour (or so they say) more devolution of public services to lower levels. There is also a renewed emphasis on the reduction of bureaucracy. In part the current system of Development Frameworks with their many stages and multiple consultations is responsible for the slow progress in revising existing plans. A question which arises is how far government, whether local or central, should be involved in setting 'guidelines' or 'targets'. After all, no one sets targets for the supply of tonnes of oil seed rape, cubic metres of water or cubic metres of wood.

A levy of £1.60 per tonne on the production of aggregates used in the UK was introduced in 2002, since when it has been increased to £2. Its aims are to recognise the significant environmental impact of extracting aggregates and to encourage the use of alternative material. Some of the proceeds are channelled into a sustainability fund to finance improvements to the environment. The levy appears to have had some effect on production of land-won sand and gravel.

Finally a special feature of minerals policy may be noted. This is that mineral resources are 'safeguarded'. Present policy in Oxfordshire states that "Development that would prevent or make significantly more difficult their (mineral resources) possible future working will not be permitted". Making sand and gravel extraction a pre-eminent use of land against the claims of housing must be a questionable practice; allocating land for developments alongside existing settlements is hard enough without a limitation of this kind.

Arnold Grayson

Abingdon Reservoir to be the subject of a Public Inquiry

Thames Water's (TW) Resource Management Plan, including the proposed reservoir, is now to be the subject of a Public Inquiry. In making this announcement, the Secretary of State said that TW "...does not provide adequate justification for its preferred options or the decision process and does not provide enough detail, particularly in relation to household demand." The Secretary of State backs up these statements with a damning analysis of the shortcomings of the Plan. Remember that this is a plan which took several years to prepare and for which we, the customers, paid £40m. The successful technical opposition, led by the Group

Against Reservoir Development (GARD), cost approximately 0.1% of this! We should be asking for our money back from TW's shareholders.

We are now waiting for the appointment of an Inspector and for guidance on the scope of the Public Inquiry. It would be impractical to include the whole of the 900 page plan plus all the back-up material, but anything less would be a compromise. Meanwhile all the people who would be affected by a reservoir are still no nearer to a definitive answer.

Hubert Beaumont