OIL AT SETCH Name: ENGLISH OILFIELDS

In 1918, just after the war, a man found signs of oil floating in the River Puny, and shale could also be seen near the waterline. He had this analysed and found it contained oil.

Works then began at the end of 1918, but they were not really busy until 1919. Setch was looked at very closely because of the appearance of the oily surface on ponds and dykes, so holes were drilled adjoining the Setch - West Winch common which extended from Setch through West Winch and then to the Hardwick Road, King's Lynn at a distance of 3½ to 4 miles, but many more holes were drilled a year or two after.

The money from the project was subscribed from the public, after the company was formed, by the purchase of shares. A million pound scheme was the authorised capital and 879964 pound shares were sold.

53 Boreholes were put down in a radious of 5 to 10 miles, at Shouldham, Wormegay, Stow, Hardwick, West Winch and various other places from Setch. The deepest hole being drilled at Wormegay at approximately 500 feet, but this showed no trace of ~~shale beds~~ liquid oil, although shale beds existed at various depths over the whole area. The nearest being bored from the common which was 10 to 14 feet deept, below the overburden of the land. Other bores showed the shale bed at approx. 50 to 100 feet. There was also a limestone layer covering the area.

Tests on the shale core brought to the surface showed this contained a sulphurous oil. It was then decided to quarry for the shale at West Winch, the shale being at a depth of 10 to 14 feet. The shale uncovered showed a bed of 4 to 6 feet in depth and a dark grey colour, the best quality being in large hard slabs, others being broken and much softer. Out of every 20 tons of shale 3 gallons of oil were extracted, but this contained sulphur which was very hard to extract, and therefore was never a commercial proposition.

Between the layers of shale silvery forms of fossils called Icthyal was occasionally found, proving that the shale bed had been the sea bottom thousands of years before.

After quarrying the shale it was transferred to the works at Setch in small trucks, to be retorted by heat, the oily gases captured in the cold tanks laying as oil on the surface drained off and treated by sulphuric acid and ammonia, to transform it to a British Pharmacy called Icthamel, the standard ointment was for eczema, irrisiplas (skin diseases). It was made from the start by the Germans. In Britain it was bought from the crown agents, and shipped to the colonies. In the early 1930's when penicillin came out, the substance was never used again. The retorted shale now reduced to ash finally went to a fertilizing company, where it was grounded to powder to make the and the growing elements added.

At the time the possibility of the successful strike of oil, shares boomed to 80 shillings, and then finally to a few coppers a share.

In the 1930's the firm bought oil in bulk from Russia and sold it in small quantities under the name of Technical Oils.

In 1960 they went into liquidation, but not finally until 1969. They sold all their equipment, put their money into other firms and then with this money paid back 12 shillings to every person who had a share.

Crash went a million-pound dream, but it very nearly built a boom town.

Told to me by a Mr. Arthur Ransom who had started work as a tea-boy there, and worked his way up to Manager.

Some of this information was given to me by a person who worked at the deepest drill at Wormegay, but he wishes to remain anonymous.

Mr. Arthur Ransom lent me some photographs for photostats to be taken from them, but were too old and too faint to use. Some of the best ones I have used and these help and explain the Oil Fields at Setch.

by: S.Sainty,
12 Spenser Road,
Grange Estate,
King's Lynn,
Norfolk.