

"The Natural".

By R.P.L. Pett.

In excavation, when the natural sub-soil is reached, the archaeologist ceases to have any further interest in what his spade brings up. Beneath the surface layers, which reveal a tale of human life long ago, there is, however, another story written in the rocks, incredibly longer and more varied.

The area which interests us most is, of course, our site at Caserton, and here as at a great number of other places in North Somerset, the natural sub-soil consists of a rock called "oolitic limestone". The name itself is descriptive, for it comes from the two Greek words, "oon" meaning egg, and "lithos" meaning stone, and even a cursory examination of a piece of this rock shows it to be made up of hundreds of minute spherical particles which give to it an appearance very similar to a fishes roe. Roestone is, in fact, another name for this rock.

The era of Geological time when this rock was formed is known as the Jurassic period, and it lasted approximately 25 million years, and terminated approximately 120 million years ago. In these remote times, the majority of the British Isles as we know them, were under water, except for small areas of the South West, East Anglia, and Wales. The fauna of this period consisted mainly of the much popularised Dinosaurs; the whole of the Mesozoic period (of which the Jurassic forms part) was in fact an age of reptiles. The Mammals, from which man ultimately evolved, and which now dominate the animal kingdom, had only a few primitive representatives in Jurassic times.

Of the two general classes of rock viz. sedimentary and igneous, oolitic limestone belongs to the former, which means it was deposited under marine conditions. There is still some doubt amongst experts as to the exact mechanism of the formation of oolitic limestone, but the following is the generally accepted theory. Calcium carbonate in solution in sea water will, under suitable shallow water conditions, be deposited around shell particles or small sand grains, and, due to the constant movement of the water, form the small spheres characteristic of an oolite. On the Bahama Bank in the West Indies, oolites are at the present day being formed.

A study of archaeology may tend to make us think that man is an animal of great antiquity, but a very brief dip into geology will soon dispel this conceit, for even the humble ammonite flourished many millions of years before becoming extinct, thus making the species homo sapiens a mere babe-in-arms by comparison.