

Pen Pits - Quarries or an ancient city?

According to Historic England, Pen Pits are stone quarries worked during the Iron Age, Roman, early Medieval and later periods for the production of querns and building material and are designated a scheduled monument (see right). They originally covered at least 700 acres, the two designated and best-preserved areas are now within woodland where they have not been levelled by ploughing, although faint earthworks are visible in other areas. The working pits are generally circular in plan, up to 10m in diameter and 3m deep.



The parish of Penselwood in Somerset, where they are located, stands on the southern end of a prominent wooded ridge which formed the core of the ancient forest of Selwood and at the boundary between Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire (marked by Egbert's stone). The ridge forms a watershed between the Stour and the Brue.

The site was a strategic crossroads since it overlooked an East-West route descending the chalk Ridgeway near White Sheet Hill onto the Somerset levels following the Harrow Way to Exeter, and was one of the North-South routes via the river Stour between Hengistbury Head and the lead mines in the Mendips. It is an area rich in history with evidence for Bronze Age settlements, Cenwalch's castle (an Iron Age fort), and three Norman Motte and Bailey castles.

Reference to Pen Pits first appeared on Bowen's 1750 map of Somerset and they were mentioned by Hutchins in his 'History of Dorset', 1771. But it was Richard Colt Hoare, living at nearby Stourhead, who investigated them in depth in his *History of Ancient Wiltshire*, 1812. He even mapped them (see left), covering an area much larger than the scheduled monument now identified.



Hoare investigated three hypotheses as to their use, but reached no firm conclusions as to their nature:

- The ground was excavated for the simple purpose of procuring stone '*but so large a tract of land would not have been excavated for quarrying stone.*'
- The Britons resorted to this spot for the querns, or millstones, with which they bruised their corn. '*On finding a bed of stone suited to their purpose, would not any being endowed with common sense have followed the stratum instead of opening so many pits?*'
- They were made for the purpose of habitations, or a place of refuge in times of danger. '*We do not yet find a sufficient quantity of hard wood, animal bones or pottery to justify us in fixing this spot as a permanent residence of the Britons.*'

It has additionally been suggested that nodules of hard cherty sandstone were formerly dug for whetstones and stone implements.

The uncertainty remained and the Somersetshire Archaeological & Natural History Society (SANHS) made field excursions to Pen Pits in 1857 and again in 1878. Augustus Pitt Rivers joined the later one, along with Thomas Kerslake, at Castle Orchard to investigate Pen Pits. Castle Orchard is one of the sites of a Norman castle along with many pits. Thomas Kerslake, who was regarded as the expert on the site, argued that Pen Pits were the remains of a large and populous pre-Roman city,

Cair Pensauelcoit. Kerslake, had published *A Primeval British Metropolis* the previous year, revised in 1882 as *Caer Pensauelcoit, a long-lost unromanized British Metropolis*. He asserted that Penselwood was the site of Caer Pensauelcoit, the pits were thousands of pre-historic dwellings and that Castle Orchard was built to protect the pits.



Left: Reconstruction of a pit dwelling

Nennius, the 9th Century monk, listed Caer Pensauelcoit as one of 28 British cities in 'Historia Brittonum', but other places including Ilchester, Pevensey and Exeter lay claim.

On becoming Inspector of Ancient Monuments in January 1883, Pitt Rivers decided that Pen Pits deserved official attention. In October that year he excavated a section across the site and concluded that the pits predated the motte and bailey castle on the site and also that there was no evidence of habitation in the Pits. This caused a very public disagreement between Pitt Rivers and Kerslake, including articles in the national press.

Interestingly, a look at the geological map shows that the extent of the Cretaceous Upper Greensand is greater at this point of the ridge and is closer to the surface making it an ideal place for quarrying. A LIDAR survey obtained by the Environment agency for flood prevention covers part of Pen Pits. This shows surface relief with vegetation and trees filtered out. The pits clearly stand out and in terms of density and distribution look remarkably like Grimes Graves, the prehistoric flint mines in Norfolk.

Some pits were excavated in 1995 during surveying for the Codford-Ilchester water pipeline on the Zeals side of the Stour river, confirming the earlier excavation by Pitt Rivers. The pits are shear sided rather than bowl shaped and infilled with Greensand rubble. A millstone rough-out approximately 90 centimetres in diameter was recovered. Pottery found was limited to post-Medieval. So were they a source of millstones? In 1992 the British Agricultural History Society published an article by David Farmer based on manorial accounts. Bailiffs recorded the place of purchase of millstones because of the cost of transporting them, which could be as much as the cost of the millstone. Most large stones were taken to ports with facilities for unloading.



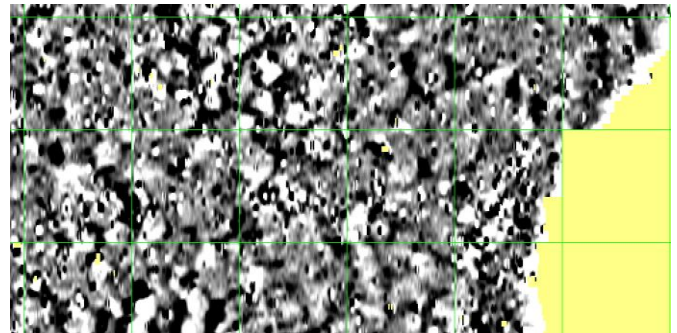
Left: A millstone as a feature in a wall

Mills in Medieval times were at the forefront of medieval technology. The most prized were French stones ferried from Southampton or London. However when millstone prices increased in the 13th and 14th centuries (doubled after the Black Death), manors often changed to British stones which were cheaper but lower quality. A single French stone often cost more than a year's sales, or more than the annual lease. It was usually down to the lord of the manor not the miller to replace them.

It emerges from the accounts that Penselwood was significant supplier of stones to manors in southern England especially Longbridge Deverill, Rimpton, Taunton and Downton between 1208 and 1454.

Querns of Penselwood stone are also said to have been found in a Roman villa at Bradford Abbas, in Dorset, while the remains excavated at Penselwood in and about 1878 contain one or two bits of tile and pottery which may be Roman, while the rest are post-Medieval. There is an early Bronze Age sword from Pen Pits at Salisbury museum.

Currently SSARG is helping survey the southern end of the ridge, outside the scheduled monument area, with stunning views to the west across to Glastonbury and Hinkley Point, south to the Dorset Downs and east to White Sheet Hill. The ancient field name is Home Pits and surface depressions are very marked. An initial magnetometer survey in 2016 has identified a number of circular features and also linear features which may well be settlement boundaries. With the amount of quarrying going on over a significant time, the workers must have lived somewhere.



Magnetometer survey showing circular anomalies

I'd be interested to know what members think Pen Pits were used for, how old they are and if they think their use may have changed over time. The research has been challenging as finds have reached Salisbury, Devizes, Taunton and Dorchester. I'll also be pleased to hear of other references to Pen Pits.

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