Early Medieval Cemeteries and Settlements

The end of the Roman period (around 400AD) is marked by massive changes. Towns, and most villages and farms, were abandoned. Industries and trade networks declined at the same time. The reasons for these changes are much debated but it is likely to be connected with the collapse of the Roman Empire and periods of war, famine and plague. In the following centuries, which are often referred to as the Dark Ages, there is clear archaeological evidence of cemeteries and settlements.

At Beckford, Broadway and Upton Snodsbury, archaeologists have found cemeteries with fine examples of richly furnished graves. Weapons, jewellery and other valued items reveal much about the religious beliefs and social values of these non-Christian, immigrant communities.

Anglo-Saxon burial, based upon excavations at a cemetery near Beckford

The Christian communities of this time are less readily identifiable in the archaeological record because, for religious reasons, burials did not contain grave goods and were placed in graveyards, many of which remain in use today.

Settlement sites of this period are less frequently found. However, evidence from excavations at quarries at Ryall and Kemerton show that lifestyles had changed considerably since the Roman period. Timber halls and other forms of building with ‘sunken floors’ have been interpreted as timber stores, or craft-working sheds, with the sunken areas providing storage space.
Early Medieval settlement near Ryall

(Steve Smith Cotswold Archaeology)

This artist’s reconstruction is based on archaeological evidence and depicts a 6th to 8th-century settlement near Ryall, close to the banks of the River Severn.

Lying among the remains of a Romano-British farmstead archaeologists found six buildings, identified by sunken floors and large postholes. Such buildings were probably stores or workshops. The sunken area may have provided secure underground storage space below a suspended wooden floor. The structures had two large postholes at either end which were probably for ridge posts that supported the main wooden frame and thatched roof.

A particular type of (organic tempered) pottery was found within these buildings along with a number of loomweights, which have helped archaeologists to describe the lifestyles of the people who lived here. Early medieval, or Anglo-Saxon, settlement was previously unknown in the locality and is the most westerly of this type so far discovered in Britain.

Medieval Fields and Villages

Medieval villages are rarely discovered during quarrying because they are mainly situated below, or close to modern ones. There are many visible signs of the character and layout of these, which are usually
focussed around the church and the manor. The surrounding land was communally farmed in open (undivided) fields. Remains of these field systems are often still visible in the landscape, primarily in the form of ridge and furrow. Evidence for the arable farming which supported these communities is regularly recorded in advance of quarrying.