Quarries Old and New
South-East Worcestershire

Much of the quarrying in this area of the county has focussed north and south of Bredon Hill along the sand and gravel terraces of the Avon Valley and its tributary, the Carrant Brook. Further quarries exploiting these terraces exist throughout the Vale of Evesham continuing as far east as Broadway.

Extraction of sand and gravel in this area has a long history and small parish quarries can be traced back into the 18th and 19th centuries; as at Deford where a map of 1775 reveals the presence of a quarry in the field name ‘Gravel Pit Close’. Up until the middle of the 20th century these small quarries remained typical. However, since the Second World War, larger quarries have been worked to extract the rich sand and gravel resources often expanding the small, earlier sites. These larger enterprises include the quarry at Salters Lane, Lower Moor in the Avon Valley but they mostly focus along the Carrant Brook, where, from the mid 1950s until the mid 1990s, a series of substantial quarries were operated at Beckford, Overbury and Conderton, Kemerton and Bredon’s Hardwick. A new quarry is currently being planned at Strensham but, otherwise, despite this long tradition of quarrying for sand and gravel there are currently no active quarries in the southeast of the county. However, the lakes left behind at many sites are still readily visible.
Good examples are the quarries at Kemerton, which has been restored as wildlife reserves and at Beckford, which is in private ownership but permits regulated public access.

Many old limestone quarries also exist in this area on and around Bredon Hill, and on other outcrops of Cotswolds limestone, such as, at Cleeve Prior. This quarrying has a very long history as evidenced by the use of locally quarried stone in the defences and walls of buildings at the Iron Age hillforts on Bredon, and at Conderton Camp. Local limestone was also used extensively in the construction of the footings of a Roman villa at Childswickham, and in the walls of the medieval castle at Elmley, as well as in many of the medieval and later buildings and field walls in the locality (Wilkes pers comm. 2001).

Documentary evidence provides further information, with manorial accounts dating from 1376/7, recording quarries on ‘Breodonhull’ (Bredon Hill) and that stone, from a quarry at Great Comberton, was used in the building of a dormitory for the Priory of Worcester. Later, 15th and 16th century documents note that ‘..quarries were a source of revenue to the Lords of Elmley Castle … there was one called Brandon Hill Quarry another in Wodeygate and one on Bredon Hill’ (VCH III, 338). The overgrown remains of many of these small stone quarries can still be found on and around the hill and elsewhere, but despite this long history, the only currently active stone quarry in this area (and in the county as whole) is that at Fish Hill, just outside Broadway.

The earliest documented finds resulting from quarrying in the whole county were found in this area in 1811, at a limestone quarry near Cleeve Prior. Here, there is an account of ‘two earthen pots, the one containing gold and the other silver Roman coins, found by a labourer while digging stone in a quarry’. Just over 50 years later, in 1863, a Bronze Age urn (dated to the period 2000-1700 BC) was reported from Ballast Hole Gravel Pit at Charlton , while, in 1882, an archer’s wristguard of probable Beaker date (about 4000 years ago) was recorded at Aldington (Smith 1957). These were the first of many important finds which have been made along the sand and gravel terraces of the River Avon.
In the 1930s quarrying, at Lower Moor, uncovered two Beakers and a small ‘food vessel’ accompanying crouched inhumations.

Here, the initial discoveries were associated with a skeleton, dug up by quarry workers, and taken to the local police station. However, another burial, found some weeks later, was investigated by a local archaeologist, W J Else. This is the earliest known example of an archaeological excavation in a quarry in Worcestershire, and it allowed the grave to be carefully recorded.

Shortly afterwards, to the east, near Broadway, in the late 1930s and 1940s, finds from a small sand and gravel quarry also came to the attention of a local archaeologist, Miss C N Smith. With the help of a small team of enthusiasts she excavated and recorded Roman skeletons, ditches and pits associated with pottery, brooches and other finds indicative of Roman settlement (Smith 1943; 1944; 1946).

Some highly decorated Late Neolithic pottery was also found, and featured in an article in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society for 1936, which for the first time identified an important style of Late Neolithic pottery known as Grooved Ware. It was not until 2006 that a more important assemblage of this type of Neolithic pottery was found in Worcestershire, at a quarry at Clifton, in the Severn Valley.
In the 1950s an Anglo-Saxon cemetery dating from the 6th century AD was investigated at Broadway Hill, first by members of the Vale of Evesham Historical Society and then by the Ministry of Works. Eight graves were recorded, some of which were associated with rich grave goods including brooches, beads, pins and weapons.

At about the same time, the first formal large-scale rescue excavations to take place in advance of quarrying in this area occurred, in 1954 and then in 1958-9, when two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries were investigated at Carrant Brook Quarry, Overbury and Conderton (Evison and Hill 1996). Over 130 graves were excavated, many associated with grave goods, including brooches and beads accompanying female graves and spears and shields in the male graves. Our e-gallery has a detailed reconstruction of an early medieval burial ceremony.

The full archaeological potential of these terraces was recognised shortly afterwards when aerial photography identified numerous cropmark complexes along the Avon Valley. These mainly represent settlement enclosures, trackways and field systems of Iron Age and Roman date, but also include some potential Neolithic monuments (Webster and Hobley 1964).

Large-scale rescue excavations followed along the Carrant Valley as a result of the threat of quarrying to several of these cropmark sites. During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, a series of Iron Age settlement enclosures and small Romano-British cemetery sites were extensively recorded at Beckford (Oswald 1974; Britnell 1975; Wills forthcoming). At Beckford, Iron Age settlement enclosures were surrounded by complexes of large ditches, and included the remains of numerous roundhouses, other buildings, paved yards and numerous storage pits. Some 50,000 sherds of pottery and many other finds were recovered.
To the west, in the 1980s, targeted rescue excavations covered a small part of a large quarried area at Aston Mill Quarry, Kemerton revealing early prehistoric, Iron Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon period remains (Dinn and Evans 1990). More recently, during the 1990s, work at Huntsmans Quarry, Kemerton, resulted in the salvage recording of an extensive area of Late Bronze Age settlement. Discoveries of waterholes and field systems represent the earliest evidence for settled farmers recorded in the county to date (Napthan et al 1997; Jackson forthcoming). Neolithic and Beaker period features and finds provided evidence for earlier periods of activity.

The excavations described above focussed on deposits revealed at the surface of the sand and gravel. These date to the period known as the Holocene covering the past 12,000 years. However, at Beckford, Kemerton and other quarries in this area, quarrying into the sand and gravel has also uncovered Palaeolithic stone tools, such as handaxes, and the remains of animals like mammoths and hippos. These date from the Ice Ages and most of the finds have been made by local collectors and quarry workers rather than during formal archaeological excavations. Some of the stone tools recovered may have been
discarded over 300,000 years ago by some of the first humans in Worcestershire. However, most appear to date from the period 35-40,000 years ago and may have been deposited by Neanderthal communities hunting and gathering in this area.