Neanderthals and Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherers.

Neanderthals were the first humans to occupy Pen Ridge. At the end of the glacial period ca. 10,000 BC, the ice retreated and a new land of dense forests and rivers emerged in a snow covered Britain. Large herds of reindeer and big game like mammoths, bison and woolly rhinoceros roamed freely having walked across a dry land-bridge over the English Channel from Eurasia. Homo-heidelbergensis, Homo-antecessor and Homo-erectus all members of the Homo-genus family crossed into Britain from mainland Europe following these herds, but would die out when the big game became sparse or extinct.

Britain was inhabited abandoned and re-inhabited for thousands of years as Stone Age hunter-gatherers were often forced to retreat back to southern Europe when hunting in the snow became too difficult. Gradually their dominant Homo-sapiens ancestors made it out of Africa, these more intelligent humans began to master survival in the harsher northern climates and were the only species from that same family group to ultimately remain and prosper in Palaeolithic Britain by out-thinking and out hunting their physically stronger Neanderthal cousins. Cheddar man is the name given to the remains of a human male found nearby in Gough’s cave, Cheddar Gorge. The remains have been dated to the Mesolithic period, approximately 7,150 BC.

Around a thousand years later the sea-levels finally rose for good, the climate improved dramatically and Mesolithic Britain became an island permanently. The land-bridge disappeared around 6,000 BC, now nomad hunter-gatherers were constantly on the move, hunting red deer and packs of wild horses in the bountiful fertile forests and sheltering in caves or other naturally protected areas like Pen Ridge, which was an ideal spot for a Mesolithic hunting camp, with great views over the forests, good shelter and plenty of water to draw all sorts of prey in. Most of the animals that lived in the area would be familiar to us today, as well as rhinoceros, giant deer, bears and extinct species of wolves, even bones of hippos have been found in the Somerset levels.

Pen Ridge was a key point in the landscape, a plateau between two rivers in a prominent position where animal tracks or routes are likely to have crossed. We know Mesolithic communities often settled near rivers and lakes, not just for drinking and fishing but because this is where animals came to drink. Groundwater levels generally rose during the postglacial period in Britain and there was much waterlogging, so any early settlement tended to be on higher ground where the forest cover was not too dense. In fact this is what makes settlement on Pen Ridge so long lived, for geographically it was ideal, even if the position was a little exposed to the elements; it is surrounded by water and commands magnificent views dominating the valley of the upper Stour to the east and to the west the Blackmore Vale.

Early Neolithic Farmers.

At the dawn of the Neolithic period in Britain around 4,000 BC, the hunter-gatherers occupying Britain were now indigenous to the island, they were descendants of Mesolithic communities and can be considered the first primeval Britons, who continued hunting but also embraced a new era of farming from the Near East with vigour and undertook deforestation of the land using stone hand-axes; they started planting seed and cereal like rye and barley. Neolithic society developed significantly as a result, communities began worshipping their ancestors and the fertile land they inhabited, developing new gods, rituals and religious beliefs. It is in the Neolithic that we first encounter the great field monuments such as barrows and henges, presumed to be built by these efficient farmers, who without the use of metal tools were able to use their wealth cultivating arable crops and keeping livestock, to construct a range of ceremonial monuments some of which were enormous, consequently they are considered altogether different from their hunter-gatherer forebears.

The wooden ‘Sweet Track’ in the Somerset Levels nearby is of great antiquity described as the oldest road in Britain, it has been precisely dated by tree-rings to the winter of 3,806-07 BC. These dates serve as a good reference for the first ancient human tracks on Pen Ridge, all of which seemed to converge into one ridgeway along the top, which descends through a gap at the northern end of the escarpment and connected to what became known as the Old Way or Harroway route. At the southern end multiple archaeological finds surfaced along the A303 road corridor as it past Pen Ridge and for approximately another mile during its excavation in ca. 1996. Along the route large distributions of Flint and Chert waste scatters were excavated from a seven-hundred meter area, where a great bank or palisade trench defined a boundary, along with remains of a compacted house floor; a collection of postholes, gullies, wall slots, pits and hearths and a ditch filled with animal burials were discovered near modern day ‘Encie Farm’, probably the remains of a Neolithic settlement.

Neolithic farming created permanent tracks that developed when the same paths or drove-ways were trodden on a daily basis by people and animals as with the Harroway route, which no doubt began as a drove-way for animals coming off Wiltshire
chalklands. Archaeological work at Cadbury Castle nearby revealed that the area was very busy during the third millennium BC, with many human bone remains found at the site, that have been radiocarbon dated to between 3,400 and 2,700 BC. Pen Ridge was well connected and accessible, for not only did it have two prominent routes at the northern and southern ends, but also the Stour river route-way which meanders all the way from the Pen Ridge to the ancient trading bay at Hengisbury Head, Christchurch, in the English Channel.

This natural harbour bay became hugely important in the Neolithic period as a trade link to mainland Europe and is the estuary of the river Stour which flows south from its sources at Pen Ridge and Stourhead. Travelling along the banks of rivers was often necessary in the Neolithic, as the forest cover was so thick making it impossible to navigate without using the natural clearing provide by a river route, so much so that many river routes came to be seen as Neolithic super-highways.

Decoding the Pen Pits

The Pen Pits; a Lithic Extraction Site, and Sandstone Quarry.

The Pen Pits are anciently famous, one of the largest set of Neolithic Chert pits in the country. The many collapsed quarry trenches had turned the area into a strange looking landscape of craters that have puzzled people for centuries.

The village’s historical importance is based as much on its geology as it is its geography. This next chapter on the Pen Pits presents collaborative research on: ceremonial and residential pits, pitted boundaries, and also the extraction and acquisition through quarrying, of Chert for tool production and Sandstone for quern production; with the intention being to lay down a new level of data on the archaeological heritage of Pen Ridge.

Only sparse archaeological work has ever taken place at the Pen Pits, there has been no geomagnetic survey or soil coring, or any targeted test excavations to locate a possible settlement. Retrievable datable materials have been recorded over the years, but any artefact samples for analysis have since been lost. Consequently the quarry site at Pen Sehwood where in the past up to 20,000 surface pits and depressions have been documented extending over an area of more than 700 hectares, remains a mystery. Particularly as Neolithic Britons were not renowned quarrymen, and would have laboured with the hard rocks of Sandstone with the tools at their disposal, their great henge monuments were constructed from rough stones or boulders. So a quarry the scale of Pen Pits must have had more than one purpose in its lifetime, originally there must be a stone available that was more useful and more accessible than the Sandstone.

Early Ceremonial and Residential Pits.

In their earliest Mesolithic phase many of the pits on Pen Ridge may have initially been created to; ‘commemorate a community’s seasonal visit from their winter caves, to a summer camping ground. The tradition of digging and filling pits is enshrined with tribal lore and ideology, it was a process of creating and fixing history, easily achieved by a group of people coming together and digging and filling a pit. Pits were also created as an offering, burying material in pits in meaningful ways was part of a ceremony, and very often these pits were filled with fresh flint, pottery and bone.

The pit phenomenon across Britain was widespread and there was also a trend towards more formal arrangements of pits for ceremony in the Neolithic period, the recurrent use of many pit sites became common. Pits were often dug on sacred ground, and water and wet places played a very important part in religion in Britain.’ Francis Pryor. ‘Britain BC’. There is evidence that the
earliest primitive Mesolithic people resided near rivers in rudimentary pits, usually fashioned from antlers of red deer, and used pits for their refuse.

Although antlers which were used as digging tools have been unearthed in the limited excavations of Pen Pits over the years, there has never been any trace recorded of wooden buildings on the site, meaning the pits therefore cannot just be the surviving component of a settlement; at some point they must have been the major structural component of it. Furthermore it is hard to ignore some of the C-shaped and L-shaped alignments of circular pits as being purposefully arranged for residential use, however the domestic pits puzzle can only truly be solved by the discovery of hearths, of which none have been recorded to date.

Pen Ridge Geology

The ridge of Upper Greensand on which most of the parish lies reaches 210 meters and is made up of rich deposits of Greensand which cover a deep fine stratum under a bed of Chert, creating a characteristic landscape of high ground with a level plateaux of open farmland, woodland or heathland, and steeply incised valleys with Greensand forming steep valley side escarpments often with a spring line along the base, and in some places landslips with strangely irregular ‘tumbling fields’ and a ‘hummocky surface’, which is a geological term referring to a small knoll or mound above ground. The Upper Greensand collection
on Pen Ridge is divisible into a threefold ascending sequence of Cann Sand, Shaftesbury Sandstone, and Boyne Hollow Chert.

The Chert beds which are yellow/brown sands and sandstones with visible layers and lumps of a hard mineral; these Chert nodules are easy to work off by hand. The beds also include layers of tabular Chert, which is the blue/grey variety. The Shaftesbury Sandstone on Pen Ridge consists of about 15 m of glauconitic, fine-grained and weakly cemented sandstone, as well as a calcareously cemented, bioclastic sandstone known as Ragstone. The base is usually marked by pronounced negative feature break and the member forms a scarp face rising abruptly from the shelf formed by the Cann Sand where it is most accessible for quarrying.

Natural springs and seepages of groundwater from the base of the Greensand on Pen Ridge supply the network of surface streams and rivers, and also drinking water into the landslide areas. A local drinking water supply is an important resource derived from the Greensand groundwater aquifer. Pen Ridge is well protected by these steep escarpments which add to its sense of strength and impregnability. There is a large wide expanse on top with ample room for a settlement and rural activity, the land is well drained due to the chert surface, and there is enough shelter and water in the valleys for a prehistoric community to thrive. The area is bounded by numerous springs and three large rivers; the Brue to the north, the Cale in the west and the Stour in the east. Within the promontory at Pen Ridge are the six sources of the Stour, marked today at 'Six Wells Bottom', which carved the east side of the ridge into several deep internal valleys, scooping them into capacious basins and craters.

The springs and rivers around the plateau of the ridge would have been seen as sacred in Neolithic society, a source of life and regeneration. The plateau’s position commands a boundless expanse of the surrounding open country, over the great vale of Blackmore to Glastonbury which was the coastline in the West at the time, and towards Dorchester and the Jurassic coast in the South. It was the backbone of a vast forest, a frontier and boundary between the chalks of Wiltshire and the vales of Somerset. Pen Ridge was a geographical strong spot for it lay at the centre of the surrounding territories, a natural boundary site that still exists today marking the three modern counties.

**Boyne Hollow Chert.**

In attempting to decipher how the regular and circular pits evolved, it is important to understand what is under the ground on Pen Ridge, the Chert lay on top of the Shaftesbury Sandstone (Ragstone) stratum, and Chert was much cherished by Stone-Age communities. On the ridge plateau a number of pits were created, exactly where the modern geological map of Pen Ridge reveals the Chert to be located. Indeed the scale and regularity of the pits, along with the singular appearance which they present are unequalled in Britain, and to date there has never been any attempt to investigate the possibility of Chert procurement on Pen Ridge.
Yet Chert formed an important component of early pre-historic lithic tools in Britain. Sources of available Chert for pre-historic exploitation and Chert procurement can even be traced back to the Late Upper Palaeolithic period around 14,000 years ago and since it is known that Chert was used throughout the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Ages, a Mesolithic age seemed an attractive assumption for an early camp site, especially considering the amount of broken Chert fragments still visible today on the ridge along rabbit and sheep exposures, it seems more akin to small blade production, something which we know began in the Mesolithic period, however early lithic extraction sites have not often been recorded despite the extraordinary concentration of visible sites dating from that period to be found across much of the southern Britain.

The Mesolithic people appear to have found Chert in Britain relatively soon after their arrival at least ten thousand years ago. Up on the ridge plateau the landscape would have been sparsely vegetated and more visible than in the surrounding area, where forests and deep soils would have covered the ground. It is likely that the ceremonial and domestic activities that took place on Pen Ridge also helped in exposing the Chert veins that lay just under the surface. Mesolithic Chert microoliths and waste flakes abound on numerous sites in south-west Britain. Numbers range in the thousands on particular sites including Pen Ridge, indicating perhaps that loss was not a concern, since there was always an abundance of Chert to be had from this well-known source. Radiocarbon dating at sites all over Britain proves this kind of manufacturing activity did take place as far back as the Late Mesolithic period. Clearly it did not take long for the earliest inhabitants of Britain to find the Chert.

**Methods of Chert Extraction, Manufacturing and Uses**

To locate the Chert veins or seams, trenches were dug often as deep down as the hard stratum of Sandstone which covers Pen Ridge, then the quarrying would commence along the alignments of the Chert veins, extracting the nodular Chert which broke up readily, but the more useful blue/grey tabular Chert was quarried using a percussion method with stone hand tools, smashing the Chert apart with stone pounders, these pounders were usually procured from a variety of rock sources, such as the Sandstone which is found more exposed surrounding the edges of the ridge.

Chert and Flint materials were in high demand for tools, weapons and building materials throughout the age of stone, Chert was particularly good for small blade production. The lithic assemblages on Pen Ridge are dominated by unmodified flakes, blades, cores, and angular debris. Chert made fine hunting tools, like arrow-heads and spears. The use of Chert had been widespread since as early as the Mesolithic period; for making picks and a wide range of finely crafted daggers, scrapers, points, burins, axes and other tools, all based on the people's skill at crafting fine flakes and blades from the stone. Chert is also similar to Flint; and the spark it emits can be used for starting fire. When a Chert stone is struck against an iron-bearing surface sparks result. This makes Chert an excellent tool for starting fires. Although Flint was brought into the area throughout the earlier pre-historic periods and in many cases formed the entire lithic assemblage on many sites in neighbouring Wiltshire, Chert generally remained the dominant raw material for small tool production.

Chert fragments have been found at locations where these objects were produced in what was one of the earliest manufacturing activities of people. Chert fractures in a Hertzian cone when struck with sufficient force, the partial Hertzian cones produced during lithic reduction are called flakes. The Pen Pits are one of the largest examples of a lithic quarry in Britain and likely produced a vast quantity of small stone tools for many centuries, extracted using stone pounders or hammer stones as mentioned.

A good example of stone manufacturing that has been accurately accounted for are the ‘Grimes Graves’ near the Norfolk-Suffolk border, these are attributed as being Neolithic flint mines which continued to be used well into the Bronze and Iron ages much like the Pen Pits did. It is said the medium-depth shafts at ‘Grimes Graves’ could yield as much as 60 tons of flint nodules, which could be brought to the surface and roughly worked into shape on site. The blank tools were then traded elsewhere for final polishing. It has been estimated that 60 tons of flint could have produced as many as 10,000 of the polished stone hand-axes. Chert
could be mass produced in the same way too, and could also be used as building stone in walls and dwellings as irregular or dressed blocks. Local sources were from small pits and ploughing of fields. Furthermore loose nodular cherty sand has often been used for building sand, from numerous small pits and as local aggregates for primitive concrete and track-stone.

Grimes Graves. The Grimes Graves images above are what is left behind after several years Neolithic mining activity and imply many similarities to the Pen Pits site.

Explaining the Regular and Circular Appearance of the Pits:

It is likely the depressions now only visible on the east side of Pen Ridge today, do not reflect individual prehistoric pits or mine shafts, but are the product of a complex, multiphase sequence of intersecting pit or trench excavations, with accompanying spoil heaps and fill, representing different patterns or time periods of Chert extraction, and from the late Bronze Age onwards extraction of Shaftesbury Sandstone. The Chert-vein trench galleries of spoil and fill intersected and sunk back into the ground over time forming the ‘regular and circular’ pits naturally. The disturbed earth would sink along the lines of these trenches, giving the impression that individual pits had been dug proportionately in a neat line, when actually it was just the fill or refuse that had receded along trench lines that had been pushed through the soil with an even width. Rain would saturate the overlapping trenches causing the loose soil to sink back into the ground, often creating near perfect circular shapes, and making it look like individual pits had been excavated in perfect symmetry to each other. In short; the continual procurement of Chert on Pen Ridge over thousands of years had poikmarked the surface of the earth and created this pitted landscape which was entirely formed by a web of trenches and spoil heaps over a very long period of time.

Chert Trade

By the late Neolithic period the Harroway route had already become the most important east west route in southern Britain. It passes through the north side of Pen Ridge just under half a mile away from the pits site and this was an extremely important factor in the development of the Pen Pits, as the Harroway generated a tremendous amount of trade over the centuries and became a well-known route for tin trading. Indeed the ridgeline to which Pen-Ridge belongs is the first Greensand with Chert ridge located west of the high chalk-lands of Wiltshire; and signifies the beginning of the vale of Somerset, and an entirely different type of terrain. That combined with the numerous fresh water springs of the Stour and the Cale that abound from the ridge; would have made it a very alluring site to settle and trade at. Indeed over the centuries quarrying could have taken place east of the Stour where the very same Chert was plentiful too, yet the ridge plateau remained the primary target for excavations, likely because the Chert was more exposed up on the ridge and easier to get to.

The early habitation and ceremonial pits on Pen Ridge had grown to become a set of Chert quarries on such a large scale and with such a capacity; for the Ragstone base was slowly being exposed by the labour of an immense number of human hands through the centuries, and the Chert trenches would certainly be capable of providing the local region with more stone tools than it could possibly have needed. By trading to passers-by on the local Harroway route and also by using the Stour river-route to Hengisbury Head, these early Britons exploited a ready-made market and successfully sustained their manufacturing industry. In fact the Harroways’ close proximity to the pits can be seen as vital in explaining how this site got so big, with up to 20,000 pits once recorded. It is also of great significance that the natural harbour at Hengisbury Head was the main trade link to Europe in southern Britain, and is directly connected with Pen Ridge, transporting people and goods along the river Stour.

Interpreting Previous Excavations.

The ploughing of fields for farmland is fast destroying archaeological sites all over the country and has been doing so for many centuries. With this in mind, it is important to appreciate that the pits were more evident in the past, in fact topographer Sir Richard-Colt Hoare undertook excavations of these circular pits that lay so contiguous to each other (ca.1810), and observed, ‘some many thousand pits of a regular and circular form, and in every single one of them, the bed of Sandstone was still found at the bottom of the sand, always at the very point where these ancient excavations terminated’.
Back then Colt-Hoare was able to distinguish between the oldest pits with the Shaftesbury Sandstone (Ragstone) base intact which pre-dated the newer larger ones where the Ragstone had been quarried; he describes the older smaller pits as being further back towards the centre or top of the flat plateau. The modern geological map confirms this to be exactly where the Chert lay. Colt-Hoare even wrote about how ploughing was already destroying the site back then, and expressed his concern at how quickly the pits on top of the ridge were disappearing. These were the Chert pits that were of the greatest antiquity and today (ca. 2015) they are no longer visible. Only recently has the study of archaeological Chert begun; the reason for apparent disinterest in it may be that good contextualised assemblages were not available for study.

The majority of Chert in museum collections derives from arable field walking projects, and even these were not recorded in any great details as to location, in many cases the name of a farm or even district sufficed for ‘find spot’. Today the presence of an abundance of fractured Chert lying on rabbit and sheep scrapes all over Pen Ridge has been exposed, had it not the original purpose of the pits may never have been revealed. Colt-Hoare and Pitt-Rivers both failed to appreciate that the majority of the pits they examined were in fact dug into Chert-bearing residual clays to extract Chert. The presence of Sandstone had seemingly distracted them along with a lack of knowledge on lithic assemblages and the importance of Chert to Neolithic people, whose ability with the material was remarkable.

Shaftesbury Sandstone (Ragstone) Extraction

The Greensand collection on the plateau also includes Shaftesbury Sandstone, which lies predominantly to the sides of the ridge. Previous archaeological excavations of the pits have uncovered, antler picks, various animal bones, large circular stones with a perforation in the centre, which were quern-stones and hand-stones for grinding a variety of materials. Fragments of ancient pottery and both bronze and iron objects have also been dug up from the pits. This is because the pits continued to be used throughout the Bronze-Age and beyond when gradually quarrying patterns shifted and ultimately by the Iron-Age the Ragstone became the sole object of desire. The exceptional quality of Sandstone at Pen Ridge made it highly desirable for querns and meant quarrying would continue well into the middle-ages and people would have travelled great distances specifically for this renowned Sandstone, there were several quarries opened in the local district to exploit this stone.

Quern Stone

The arrival of bronze technology had slowly replaced the need for stone as a tool or weapon, and as the Chert pits on Pen Ridge became redundant; a new use slowly evolved and larger open quarry pits were created along the sides of the ridge in amongst the scarp faces where the sandstone was easiest to break off, even today many of these openings are still visible. This shift is represented by different extraction techniques needed for hoisting out the bigger, heavier lumps of Ragstone from its stratum beneath the Chert, including larger and deeper open holes still excavated with hand tools. By the late Iron-Age stone tools were fairly outdated leaving only the Shaftesbury Sandstone of any use, which was quarried at the site primarily for grinding querns and also as building stone for the Romans and the Normans. However quarrying for the Ragstone was much more intermittent and on a much smaller scale than had been the case during Neolithic heyday of the Pen Pits, when the Chert was procured continuously for thousands of years from Pen Ridge to supply the stone tool trade.

Bronze-Age Boundary on Pen Ridge.

We also know Neolithic boundaries of circular pit alignments persisted through the Bronze and Iron ages, when these so called multiple-ditch systems often bounded areas in a wide range of settlement where, economic, political and religious activities took place. At Pen Ridge a manmade earthen boundary or a cross-ridge dyke can still be seen today towards the northern end; it runs east-west across the entire peninsula ending either side of the escarpment and is now almost entirely ploughed out on the flat part of the ridge. Natural boundaries from the Neolithic period such as watercourses and escarpments were often supplemented by artificial boundaries in the Bronze-Age. Yet it is often difficult to determine whether a particular boundary like this was used for defence, stock-herding or purely as a symbol; it probably served all of these functions to varying degrees at different times in its existence. Modern research indicates that linear earthworks of this kind often continued to influence not only the natural landscape but the social and economic landscape too; in an area that is known to be extremely busy during the Bronze-Age. This boundary certainly lasted for many centuries as records show the bounds of Pen Parish in ‘Tudor times’ were marked in the north by this causeway ditch.

The Bronze-Age, on Pen Ridge.

At Stonehenge the final significant phases of construction with the larger Megalithic Sarsen-Stones are dated from 2,280 BC to 1,930 BC, by which time over a hundred generations had worshiped at the site. Britain in the South-West changed around this time, the abundant copper and tin ores in the area meant great mineral wealth, and this wealth saw economic and cultural contact with mainland Europe grow. A new land had emerged, with fresh opportunities for commerce and wealth; and for those with the specialist knowledge and expertise in bronze-casting, copper or tin mining, it was to become a golden era for prosperity.
Now power had become more concentrated in Britain, and bronze became the glue of a 'beaker culture' society, based on a new ceramic style of beaker pottery, where distinctively different shapes of beaker vessels were found in different regions of southern Britain. The Bronze Age elite were wealthy; the smelting and trading of bronze led to great prosperity for native Britons in the south-west. The extremely dense forestation had generally steered settlement upward into camps on elevated spots near water like at Cadbury Castle and Pen Ridge including Gasper and Bourton around the gorge of the Stour.

Evidence of a cluster of pits or hut circles from a settlement has been identified on top of Pen Ridge in the south-western corner as mentioned, but has yet to be accurately dated. These pits are known locally as the 'Home Pits', and are larger than the Pen Pits and more irregular, suggesting occupation or some form of hut settlement, where its steep natural escarpment strength in the south and west appears to have been artificially boosted by a double Chert stone bank. Circular huts were terrace into the hillside, with walls no doubt partly constructed of the earthy Chert stone that was so plentiful and partly of oak timbers. Several Chert assemblages and some 'beaker pottery' have been found at the Home Pits site, presumed to be where settlement was more prevalent.

The great river route-ways of the Brue and the Stour that led from Pen Ridge to the Sea Channels were now further established as trade routes becoming highways for transport of heavy goods to the coast at Hengisbury Head and Glastonbury. The Old Way or Harroway route to Stonehenge was also used and passed by the northern end of Pen Ridge. At the southern entrance of the ridge there was a junction as today, where two of the earliest tracks in the village split along routes that today are known as Long Lane and Underhill. It is in the Bronze Age that small farmsteads and hamlets emerge from the Neolithic period better equipped with more resources to farm and survive. Trade was prevalent and therefore settlements tended to be alongside tracks and ancient route-ways, like the Long Lane track which crossed into Pen Selwood where the gorge of the Stour leaves Bourton today, it was the major Stour-valley junction onto Pen Ridge where many no doubt came to quarry at the ancient site of the now renowned Pen Pits.

During the Bronze-age mining copper and tin had become widespread in the south-west, and Bronze had grown into an elite economy, an exchange-currency, a form of art, and a tool for farming or weapon for fighting. Sigwells just a few miles away is a good indicator for the type of activity taking place in the area; it is known for having the earliest identified bronze-casting enclosure in Britain from around 1,800 BC, where excavation has revealed a rectangular enclosure which contained a roundhouse and four-hundred fragments of different moulds for casting bronze.

Smelting and Casting of Bronze.

The Bronze Age was also a spiritual time of 'beaker pottery burials', and of round barrows being built as a burial rite for a single important individual, one can be seen today at the northern end of the ridge, this tumulus is known as 'Jacks Castle'. The steeply elevated Neolithic site at Whitesheet Hill three miles east of Pen Ridge was an old causewayed camp that had become a sacred burial ground in the Bronze Age; its round barrow burials are also still visible today.

The Willow forest around Pen Ridge provided for many basic needs. Willow is relatively pliable and less likely to split while being woven than many other woods, and can be bent around sharp corners for basic crafts, such as baskets, fish traps, wattle fences and wattle and daub walls. Bronze-Age longbows were also fashioned with far greater precision for hunting and bronze arrowheads were easier to mass produce than the Neolithic flint arrowheads, bows were now made mainly from yew, a tree species that was perfect for the craft and was abundant in the south-west. The bronze economy had encouraged good trade and industry opportunities, inspiring larger settlements in the south and more clearances of the forests, which were also thinning out naturally at this time too.

Much of the pattern of dispersed settlement in South-West England, particularly Dorset and Somerset is a result of Celtic achievement rather than those of later periods, and often these achievements stretched further back in the past; where a number of Celtic farmsteads and hamlets began in the Bronze-Age, some of which would have been continuously occupied since their Neolithic beginning, others abandoned and re-occupied. Visible evidence in the landscape of these early farms are found in lynchets or cultivation terraces like the ones that can be seen on top of Pen Ridge. As agriculture begins to intensify larger farmsteads develop having been maintained and rebuilt over several generations, with field systems spreading out in the surrounding vales and on top of Pen Ridge. In amongst the Bronze-casting, quarrying and ceremonial activity at the Pen Pits, roundhouse dwellings would have been scattered around the ridge, easily fashioned from the ample local Chert and Sandstone supplies and the vast surrounding oak and willow forest, no doubt using the latest bronze tools.
Druidism was no doubt practised on Pen Ridge, the cult was in its early stages in the Bronze Age; its exact beginnings in Anglesey are unclear, but it represented an ancient ‘Priesthood of Wizards’ that were seen by worshipers as ‘masters of time’, with great knowledge of the Earth’s Solar and Lunar cycles. Druidism was fashioned from the mystical concepts and rituals of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods; latest research implies; they were the inheritors of an ancient religion that had been at the centre of British lives for thousands of years, and many of the vast monuments from these times like Stonehenge, were adopted by the Druids who were to wield great power and influence over Celtic Britain.

**Celtic Iron-Age, Hill-Forts.**

The emergence of Iron in Britain around 800 BC saw a rapid loss of faith in Bronze, and the great Bronze economy collapsed as the very base of power and exchange in Britain and Europe was discarded. Chronic climate changes had plunged Britain further into despair and a new more insular Country emerged with a different outlook on life, one in which taming the landscape was now more important than the building of large ceremonial structures. Land, grain and livestock became more valuable than Bronze metal. As deposits of iron ore were located in different places to the tin and copper ore necessary to make bronze, trading patterns also shifted and the old elites lost their economic and social status. Power passed into the hands of a new group of Celtic people with a different set of Druid religious beliefs.

Elevated settlements like Cadbury Castle, (the most extensively excavated hill-fort in the country) are known from the Bronze-Age, but the great period of hill-fort earthworks construction was during the Iron-Age when the climate finally began to improve again. Early Iron-Age defences from 600 BC tended to be built on existing Neolithic sacred worship sites with very steep elevations overlooking farmland valleys. Around this time there is increasing evidence of Britain becoming closely tied with the Celts from continental Europe, especially in the south of Britain. As the native population increased through larger-scale farming, gradually more of these Celtic tribes’ people began to migrate across the channel and arrive in the south-west from mainland Europe; many would have wandered up the Stour river valley searching for new territory, farmland and trading opportunities.

From around 500 BC when iron appears in increasing quantity, a warrior culture emerges as European Celts now live amongst the native Britons integrating at hill-forts, they co-inhabited in simple thatched roundhouses, grew food, grazed animals and traded goods in fortified market places. They feasted together and often raided their rivals, fighting and cattle-rustling; and would use Druid priests to settle their disputes. The ‘Age of Warriors’ was a more tribal, violent Celtic way of life, mimicking that of mainland Europe, with Chieftains now fighting for wealth and prestige through territorial power, they used more sophisticated, stronger iron weapons and tools. Increased iron production had empowered these new Celtic Britons; iron ploughs helped them control more of the land, where grain and animals had become vital for sustaining the larger settlements.

Somerset is home to around some seventy hill-forts, in neighbouring Dorset and Wiltshire there are as many too. The numerous steep knolls and hills in the south-west make the region perfect for hill-forts. The Castle Wood (Pen Ridge) and Park Hill (Gasper) sites were now firmly established as forts, Park Hill was particularly well defended, perched high up on a spur it made good use of the natural protection and defence on offer from the greensand escarpment, its intimidating ramparts were only interrupted by an elaborate gate entrance in one corner that was maze like. Dominating the landscape both forts were well-connected to major ancient tracks within the area, from a look-out tower at the Castle Wood and Park Hill camps, constant smoke would have been visible from any of the following fort sites on a clear day; Cadbury Castle, Fox Covert, Small-Down, Worminster Down, King’s Castle, Westwood, Dundon, Maesbury Castle, Blackers Hill, Tedbury, Wadbury, Roddenbury, Whitesheet Hill, Castle-Rings, Castle-Ditches, Hambledon Hill, Banbury Hill and Dungeon Camp, most of which are within a fourteen mile radius of Pen Ridge.

Camps ranged from fairly simple designs, with a single bank and ditch extending around the hilltop, to more extravagant systems of multiple ramparts and ditches. Many of the hill-forts that belong to the middle Iron-Age from 350 to 200 BC were built...
this way, at times more as a symbol of wealth and status than for security. They were built using Iron tools, with large labour forces from the local tribal community. By the late Iron-Age there was a trend for the principal enclosed settlements to be established beside rivers. Archaeology shows that dwellings were generally erected within the banks of forts, both round-houses and rectangular constructions. It is also in this period that Celtic art emerges from mainland Europe, although Britain was a lawless tribal society led by warriors fighting over booty, it was united by a common Celtic language and culture, mostly imported from Europe. That culture however was easily manipulated by the devious Druids who were between the tribes.

The “Celts” from mainland Europe spoke a group of languages that had a common origin in the Indo-European language known as Common Celtic. Insular Celtic languages are those Celtic languages that originated in the British Isles, in contrast to Common Celtic languages of mainland Europe and Anatolia. All surviving Celtic languages today are from the Insular Celtic group; the Continental Celtic languages are extinct. The six Insular Celtic languages of modern times can be divided into: the Goidelic languages from the north; Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic and the Brittonic languages from the south; Breton, Cornish, Welsh and Cumbric.

By 100 BC Britain was a land of firmly established very powerful Celtic tribes, with a large network of hill-forts that had been forged over centuries. Britain was commanded by no more than a hundred or so regional Celtic leaders, elites who now saw themselves as warrior Kings who were granted elaborate chariot burials, while the Druids acted as their spiritual advisers. In the late Iron-Age Gold, silver and bronze began to be used for a variety of purposes, including the production of coins and the creation of beautiful personal ornaments; jewellery like torc necklaces and brooches were very common, they also elaborately decorated swords and shields. These tribes were wealthy; trading with mainland Europe they enjoyed Roman luxuries and wore Celtic tartans made from woven wool. Copper, tin and iron were used in daily-life, yet their existence was entwined with the land they inhabited, they rode horse-drawn chariots, like the ones found at Ham Hill into battle, and continued to worship the sun and moon, they also believed the springs and rivers to be sacred, which meant they rarely ate any fish.

The British tribes that occupied the area around Pen Ridge, or Caer Pensuaelcoit as it came to be known in this period, enjoyed a thriving Celtic settlement in its prime, small hamlets and farmsteads would have been scattered widely across the Pen Ridge plateau, including the modern parishes of Gasper, Stourton, White Cross and Bourton, connected by a network of ancient tracks and with life being competitive and warlike, the two hill-forts in the vicinity would have been well guarded busy trading markets by the late Iron-Age, particularly for livestock, grain and the renowned Sandstone from the pits. These Celtic tribes also minted silver coins long before the Roman invasion and many have been found in fields on the ridge. Yet the lack of any indication of a royal lineage shows how regional Britain had become and leaves us with very little evidence as to their great warrior leaders, their many Gods and Druid rituals, like “burning wicker-men” sacrifices, which were only later recorded in Roman accounts.

**Caer Pensuaelcoit in Written History.**

"Coitimawr" was the word by which this great forest was known to the Britons, but numerous influences with many dialects from Brittonic, Breton, Cornish or Welsh words would have been used to describe the large settlement area around Pen Ridge, words such as Caer meaning castle/place, or 'Penn', meaning Hill and 'Coit/coyt' to describe wooded areas, are Brittonic Celtic words that originated from a time long before the Roman writers of the late Iron-Age had first recorded them.

The first written account of the name 'Caer Penhwyelcoit' appears in, 'The Ancient British Chronicle of the Kings', 'Brut Tysilic', which supplements the Roman writings around the time of the invasion in the south-west 44 AD; two passages from Suetonius and Eutropius ascribed to the year 47AD, state that Vespasian after landing on his second expedition from Germany to Britain under Claudius, marched to besiege a place which in various texts appears as, "Caer Benhwelgeot", "Caer Pen Hwynlocyt", "Ócha Penhwyelgoit", "Kaer Pen Huyloct", and other forms of orthography.

The name Caer Pensuaelcoit would next appear eight centuries later in another document ascribed to Nennius, the 'The History of the Britons' (Historia Brittonum), in a catalogue of the main twenty-eight British towns in sub-Roman Britain, in which occurs one, Caer Pensuaelcoit. Nennius was a Welsh monk; his purported history of the indigenous Brittonic people was written around (ca.828AD). Although archaeological evidence would seem to suggest that many of the towns he refers to had ceased to be occupied by the end of the fifth century AD. Geoffrey of Monmouth later wrote the legendary History of the Kings of Britain (ca.1136 AD) in which he too wrote of a City, spelling it Caer Penhuelcoid.

The name also appears in 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', which is in the form of annals, by year; the earliest annals are dated at 60 BC, in these early annals reference is made to 'Brut Tyselfic' and the Roman accounts of a battle at 'Caer Penhwyelcoit’. Yet when the original manuscript was written late in the ninth century, the Chronicle referred to the area as Pennum. While William Camden in his "Britainina" (ca. 1577AD) makes no illusion to the pits he does refer to Pen as "an obscure village, but anciently famous." Yet Gough in his enlargement of Camden’s work, published in (ca. 1806AD) refers to some 20,000 existing pits. He also draws attention to the name Pen Selwood, describing how it would have changed from the British Caer Pensuaelcoit of Celtic times, when the Saxons replaced the word ‘coitimawr’ with the word ‘wood’, naming the forest Selwood.

**The Romans and the Durotriges.**

The Romans were scared of Britannia, superstitious of the tribes and although they shared similar Pagan beliefs with the Celts, they feared the elite priesthood of the Druids, the human sacrifices and fierce warriors from this mystical island. Julius Caesar
was so intrigued that in 55 BC he set sail across the channel; but his landing force was met by enormous Celtic resistance and did not make it to the shore. He came back a year later with more ships where he reported; ‘that there was no real unified identity, that it was a fragmented territory, a collection of tribes divided and warring’, and after only a few months exploring in the south-east of Britain he left.


The start of Roman Britain in the south-west is therefore traditionally dated to the campaigns of the Roman army General Vespasian following the invasion of 43 AD under the imperial command of Emperor Claudius. Vespasian marched through the lands of the Atrebates, Hampshire, who were friendly to Rome, his first real opposition coming from the Durotriges and the Dobunni, these were names coined by the Romans for the different tribes living in the south-west region at the time. The Durotriges meaning ‘hill-dwellers’ were the hill-fort elite in the area and had become the dominant Celtic settlers in the region, they were known for their well-positioned large hill-forts and for being anti-Roman. They were a collection of trading tribes who minted their own coins but had no real centralised control; their trading capital was at Mai Dun, Durnovaria, modern day Maiden Castle, Dorchester.

Mai Dun was one of the most important iron production sites from the late Iron Age in southern Britain. The Romans planned to conquer these hill-top settlers the Durotriges. Their territory stretched through the mineral rich south-west region right up to the Severn valley, bordering Dobunni territory. At the time of the Roman conquest, occupation of the larger hill-forts around Britain had dwindled, increased trade from mainland Europe saw forts begin to be used in different ways, for ceremony, for storage or as a marketplace. With the Roman army looming however, the Durotriges sought refuge in their most secure forts. Under the leadership of Vespasian the Roman Second Legion Augusta managed to over-run the fortress Mai Dun in 44 AD; in a bloody battle their military force easily overwhelmed the Durotriges with their slingshots and longbows.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles supplement the Roman Narrative on the subjugation of Southern Britons, stating Celtic leader Caractacus fought a bloody and unsuccessful battle with Vespasian, and was sworn to perpetual fealty and taken with the General himself to Rome. Vespasian was said to have used the Stour river route-way that was flanked by hill forts such as Banbury Hill, Hambledon and Hod Hill, which were some of the twenty ‘oppida’, captured. Roman records show Vespasian fought a battle with the Durotriges and the Dobunni, near the Pen Pits, most probably at the imposing Whitesheet-Hill which was an exceptionally well-protected strong fort that had become an important Celtic trading site and thoroughfare. Where even today one can still see a ruin of a Roman road running alongside it, and evidence of terraced Roman vineyards nearby. A little further west at Cadbury Castle there is also archaeological proof of a bloody assault taking place too.

Both Roman and British accounts agree that Vespasian’s second invasion occurred in 47 AD. Original Annals taken from Roman sources appear in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and describe the second incursion to the settlement at Caer Penhwyelcoit as being intended to suppress a revolt by the Britons against the tribute that had been imposed on them by Claudius. The Ancient British Chronicle of the Kings, ‘Brut Tysilic’, supplements the Roman narrative, describing Vespasian’s expedition, “The Chronicle goes on to say; ‘that the Britons having been overcome at Caer Penhwyelcoit in a bloody battle, peace was concluded and Vespasian returned to Rome’.

In most cases the Romans had occupied the hill-forts for only short periods after arriving, although in some cases longer term settlements arose around economic activities such as mining and quarrying. Hod-Hill nearby became a permanent Roman military Garrison for the next six years. Away from the early Roman military sites there is little evidence of change, and Celtic settlement forms persisted with many Durotrigian tribes only finally surrendering to Vespasian and agreeing to the ‘civitas’ after his second conquest. The Castle-Wood site is sometimes referred to as Vespasian’s camp; as the Romans are thought to have commandeered the site and quarried the Sandstone at the pits throughout their rule, using the coarse grits derived from the lower-greenand to line the inner surface of Roman grinding-bowls, with the larger stones sent off in cartloads to build Roman roads, villas and temples in the surrounding area.

After the conquest Celtic resistance was pushed further and further to the west and the north. The Druids, as an alternative political structure were seen as a threat by the Romans. By 60 AD most had retreated west to Anglesey which had long been associated with the Druids. The Roman general Gatus Suetonius Paulinus, determined to break the power of the Celtic Druids, attacked the island destroying the shrine and the sacred groves and the last Druid resistance was defeated. Boudicca’s Iceni rebellion was the last hope of Celtic resistance, as the Romans extended control over their newly acquired colony of Britannia, with oppressive often brutal government. In 100 AD Roman records show a second ‘Durotrigian Civitas’ was created this time administered from Lindinis, modern day Ilchester, which had become a big Roman town just fifteen miles west of Pen Ridge. In fact the proximity of Lindinis so close to Ham Hill and Cadbury Castle hill forts, indicates the probable decline of Caer Pensauelcoit as a major Celtic trade metropolis during the Roman era despite the pits remaining in use.
The fort at Lindinis was initially surrounded by a settlement of British round-houses which were themselves replaced by a vicus (an unplanned civil area) before the end of the century. By 125 AD only on the northern frontier in the land of the Picts, did Iron-Age British tribal customs and traditions truly survive, behind the newly built ‘Hadrian’s Wall’. By 200 AD memories of the brutality had mostly subsided, and in Londinium their political nerve-centre, the Romans had created a provincial capital of a single territory, and had succeeded in imposing a single unified political structure on Britain, Celtic culture in contrast had been more regional and divided.

Roman plundering of British natural resources was still widespread, like mining Gold in Wales, tin in Cornwall and vast quantities of lead in the Mendips, which they turned into silver for their coinage. There is much evidence of a very Romano-British culture in the mid-south-west region, of large governing Roman towns like Aquae Sulis and Lindinis. The town of Lindinis appears to have become dominated by luxury private villas decorated with complex and expensive mosaic floors, and underfloor heating, such remains have also been discovered at Bratton Seymour nearby dating from 222-286 AD, at Creech Hill still today there remains a Pagan Roman Temple in excellent condition from around the same period. Yet there is a lack of any major Roman roads in the immediate area surrounding Pen Ridge, which likely suggests that a well-established network of Celtic trackways was already in use that was deemed adequate for Roman needs.

Native Britons loyal to Rome could choose to be educated, and see a written language for the first time, speaking Latin and learning much from the Classical world, yet those who rejected Roman rule had seen their tribal Celtic heritage brutally conquered and written out of their own history, in fact the gradual refinement of the Celtic dialects to the Brythonic language was seen as a form of passive British resistance, of which there was much in the south-west, to the Latin Roman way of communicating.

The city of Aquae Sulis (Bath) was built around the ‘sacred healing spring’, long venerated by the Britons, it had become a series of stone Baths and a Spa complex, the Romans twinned one of their Gods Minerva with the British God Sulis, to rename the baths Sulis-Minerva. These sacred baths were only abandoned in 391 AD with the Roman Empire in decline and the introduction of Christianity to Romano-Britain in Glastonbury around this time.

**The Dark Ages, Cenweals Camp.**

Most of the Romans had long gone by 410 AD when Rome was sacked and Britain was left to become lawless again, a new enemy, the Saxe (Saxons) and Angle Barbarians, ‘wolves of the sea’, were now invading freely. Native Romano-Britons now Christians either fled to Europe or stayed to face the barbarians. In 433 AD early British King Vortigern recruited a Saxon army from Europe to stop the Picts advancing from the North, they subsequently turned against him. Sadly details like the massacre of the Britons by the Saxons at Stonehenge known as, ‘the night of the long knives’, are mostly composed of folklore. We do know Romano-Britain was reduced to the west; in the east Saxon settlements were starting to be built on the ever advancing western frontier.

The Dumnonii were a strong native British tribe in the South-West, who extended their own semi-independent state to encompass the former territory of the Durotriges, creating a greater Dumnonian/Brythonic kingdom that emerges into full independence by the end of the fourth century. The lack of centralised tribal control in the region prior to the Roman invasion may be to blame for this; with no Durotrigian state able to re-emerge now that central control was slackening, the Durotriges had disbanded under stern Roman rule. Excavation work at Cadbury Castle revealed it was re-fortified around 470 AD and had a large timber hall, remains of pottery imported from the Mediterranean indicate that the site was a flourishing trade town around this time with a powerful Brythonic leader, according to folklore this was King Arthur’s Camelot.

The two forts at Caer Pensauelcoit may well have been re-fortified around the same time as Cadbury Castle. Naturally the indigenous Britons descended from the Celtic tribes, sensed they belonged in the region by ancient right and were prepared to re-fortify and fight the Saxons for their land. The settlements and trading sites in Caer Pensauelcoit especially the two secure hill-forts were now part of the greater Dumnonian Kingdom.

![Saxon Warrior Helmet.](image)

However the Britons could not stop the Saxon advance as gradually the country was divided into Seven Kingdoms. Cerid was the first West-Saxe King of Wessex from 519 AD to 534 AD, and was cited by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the founder of the Kingdom of Wessex and ancestor of all its subsequent Kings. Excavation at Cadbury Castle shows in 577 AD the Dumnonian Britons abandoned the fort, with the forts at Caer Pensauelcoit likely to have followed the same pattern and been abandoned too around this time. The boundary with the West-Saxons of Wessex and the Britons of Dumnonia seems to have been set, agreed as the forest of Selwood; and thus it remained until the Wessex Kings began to interfere in western affairs in the early 7th century.

The name Penna, Pennho or Pennum was a Brittonic/Saxon word that had been partly renamed or translated, and gradually morphed from the old name Caer Pensauelcoit of Celtic heritage. The name Selwood forest derived from the Latin/Old
English word ‘Salix’ meaning willow forest, it was a large area of woodland on the borders of modern Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire, it was very substantial, forming a natural barrier between the territories. The Saxons did not massacre all the Britons during their early reign, latest research shows it is likely the British Dumnonii occupying the area at the time would have stayed on the farms in under West-Saxon rule, living alongside them and trading in relative peace. Native Britons were seen as low ranking in Saxon society however, often referred to as ‘Wealas’ (Welsh) meaning slave or follower. The arrival of Saxon raiding parties had undoubtedly changed the Political and Social conditions for the Dumnonii tribes living in the south-west at the time.

A third force approached from the north in 628 AD, when the Pagan King Penda of Mercia defeated King Cynegils and the West-Saxons at the battle of Grecaster in Wessex and took control of the Severn Valley. Yet the Mercian advance into the south-west was slow; King Penda diplomatically attempted to make allies with Cenwealh the son of Cynegils by offering his sister in a marriage alliance. Cenwealh, (or Kenwalh/Cenwalh) was a West-Saxon King who reigned in Wessex from 643 to 672 AD. Throughout much of his reign Cenwealh fended off his enemies, the British Dumnonii in the west and from the north King Penda of Mercia, who was constantly pushing into West-Seaxe territory.

Though his father had become a Christian, the fierce red-haired Cenwealh had long remained a pagan. Bede wrote that Cenwealh; “refused to embrace the mysteries of the Christian faith, and of the heavenly kingdom; for he put away the sister of Penda, Brytwelda King of the Mercians, whom he had married, and took another wife; whereupon a war ensuing, he was by him expelled his Wessex kingdom”. (Bede III 7) Bede says that his exile lasted three years. While in exile in East-Anglia he was baptized, and in 648 AD on his return to the throne in Wessex he built St. Peter’s in Winchester.

In 652 AD on the West-Saxon frontier with Dumnonia, Cenwealh made a breakthrough against the Dumnonian defensive lines at the battle of Bradford-upon-Avon and more land was expanded as Wessex territory. Dumnonia was reduced further west, now its entire eastern half had become part of Wessex. The Chronicle then records a battle between Cenwealh and the Dumnonian Britons in its entry for 658 AD, the Battle of Peonnum took place on Pen-Ridge; “the Dumnonians had angered Cenwealh by convening rebellion and demanding ancient liberties be restored”; (Bede). The two forts at Peonnum had long been the gateways into Selwood Forest; and the ridgeline was the old Dumnonian border with Wessex. “Here Cenwealh fought at Peonnum, where he thrashed the Britons, causing them to flee as far as the River Parret”, (Bede).

This is why the local folklore of ‘Cenwealh’s Camp’ is still told today. The Dumnonians that had remained in the area, now part of Wessex and under West-Saxon rule were protesting. These rebel Britons rallied their forces here at the old boundary site on Pen-Ridge. It was a good spot for a battle, where the rebels most likely rather hastily re-fortified the abandoned Castle-Wood hill fort in 658 AD and waited for Cenwealh to arrive. The battle was one-sided as Cenwealh chased the Britons thrashing them for nearly fifteen miles as far as the river Parret (Yeovil), back to their own lands and out of West-Saxon territory for ever more. Cenwealh is said to have camped at Castle-Wood around this time, guarding the old frontier gateway and boundary for a brief period, for it was a good strategic site, overlooking Selwood forest, Glastonbury Tor and his enemy the Dumnonians to the west.

It is not clear how long he stayed in camp, his advance into the British south-west is obscure, although Cenwealh’s relations with the Britons were not always hostile, and he was reported to have endowed British Monasteries at both Sherborne and Glastonbury around this time. Some sixteen years after Cenwealh’s death, Ine a West-Saxon nobleman finally became King of Wessex again, from 688 to 726 AD. He successfully established Wessex as a true kingdom by creating the ‘shires’, and a code of laws. To mark territory for three of these ‘shires’, Ine used the old natural boundary divides at Peonnum for; Wiltshire, Hampshire (later Dorset) and Somersetshire. During his reign Ine continued to be at war with Geraint, King of Dumnonia.
Another West-Saxon nobleman Athelheard succeeded Ine as the King of Wessex from 726 - 740 AD. He took the powerful kingdom of Wessex left to him by Ine, and lost much of it to Mercia. In 733 Somerton was lost to King Aethelbald of Mercia. This was quickly followed by the territory beyond Selwood being lost to Mercia too. By 793 AD the first Viking raids were beginning at Lindisfarne, the monastery that held Saint Cuthbert’s relics.

The Eggbryhtestan or Egbert’s boundary stone was an important place for King Egbert, also spelled Ecgbterht or Eggbryht, it was traditionally set up by him sometime between 801 and 826 AD, at the side of the river Stour where the borders of Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire met. King Egbert raised the Stone to mark the boundaries when he further established Ine’s legacy of dividing the land into shires. Wessex was blessed with well-marked frontiers; the chalk downs of Wessex held the different parts of the land in touch with one another, connecting east and west by good turf tracks along the ridges. The place where three roads or boundaries meet is a powerful place in folklore, and Egbert had united much of Wessex from this ancient boundary point.

Local evidence of Saxon Christianity, a stone with a complicated interlaced pattern found near the site of Saint Mary’s Church in Gillingham, it is believed to be the remains of a ninth century Saxon cross, either a preaching cross or a grave marker.

Yet Mercian ‘Bretwaldas’ including King Offa continued to rule until 826 AD when eventually the West-Saxons under King Egbert finally broke free of Mercian supremacy, defeating King Beorngulf of Mercia at the Battle of Ellandun. The success of Wessex over the other kingdoms was marked by Egbert’s raised the Stone to mark the boundaries when he further established Ine’s legacy of dividing the land into shires, ruled and led by their ealdormen had been crucial in uniting Wessex. Mercia was now in decline as the Vikings were raiding Britain’s eastern shores, ever more relentlessly and mercilessly, the barbaric raiders gorged their appetite for plunder.

King Alfred, Norsemen & Normans on Pen Ridge.

By the winter of 877 AD the fate of England rested on the shoulders of one man. All of the Kingdoms of England had submitted to the Vikings, with Wessex the final to fall. The approaching ‘Great Heathen Army’, led by the warlord Guthrum gathered in Chippenham, and the young King Alfred was forced to take refuge, hiding in the Somerset marshes at the Isle of Athelney. Here Alfred and his men strengthened the ancient defences of a fortress that he had known existed at Athelney dating from the Iron-Age. Evidence of extensive metalworking on the site suggests that he also used the island to equip his army.

‘In the seventh week after Easter, Alfred rode to the stone of Egbert, which is in the eastern part of the wood called Selwood, and there met him all the inhabitants of Somerset and Wiltshire, and all such inhabitants of Hampshire as had not sailed beyond sea for fear of the Pagans, and upon seeing the King received him as was proper like one come to life again after so many troubles, and were filled with excessive joy, and there they encamped for one night.’ (Asser’s, “The Life of King Alfred”). Alfred had called the levy at the Eggbryhtestan, where his family had gathered much strength in the past in uniting Wessex, and where a shire-stone still stands today on a marshy bank of the river Stour at the rear of Bourton Mill, this slab of Sandstone is known locally as the Egbert’s Stone. It is later version of the original Egbert’s stone, situated where the three counties converge in the eastern part of Pen Selwood. King Alfred went on to defeat the Danes in May 878 AD at the bloody Battle of Eddington, near modern day Westbury.

Saint Bede (672-735 AD)
Around 880 AD Alfred founded the network of burhs (defended settlements), distributed at strategic points throughout the Kingdom. There were thirty-three in total, spaced nineteen miles apart enabling the military to confront attacks anywhere in the Kingdom within a single day; Shaftesbury is the nearest burh to Peonnum, which was described as an Anglo-Saxon city at the time. Alfred was restored as ruler of Wessex and had pushed the realm all the way back to London, the Chronicle describes how, in victory Anglo-Saxon king Alfred had united the Country against 'Daneflaw', and Anglo-Saxon ruler-ship was now greatly accepted by the native Britons and Mercians, who finally adopted a more unified English identity.

By 886 AD London was restored as a thriving Anglo-Saxon city again. Alfred was an indefatigable warrior, a man who showed exceptional imagination in the arts both of peace and of war, he had saved Wessex and laid the foundations on which his successors were able to build a united English kingdom. Throughout most of the tenth century a period of domination by Wessex over all of England led to a period of peace and unity, with the Duneonians, Saxons and Mercians becoming one Anglo-Saxon nation, England.

However in 988 AD, according to the Chronicles Viking raids had begun once more in Somerset, at Watchet. This latest wave of Danish aggression forced King Aethelred the Unready to attempt a pay-off using vast sums of Danegeld. Minting in the county increased to meet this demand and vulnerable mints, like the one at Ilchester were moved to more protected hilltop locations, in this case the old hill-fort at nearby South Cadbury. Danish raiders harried Devon, western Somerset, and south Wales in 997AD, then Dorset, Hampshire, and Sussex in 998 AD. The settlement at Peonnum or Penna is said to have been burnt to the ground by Viking marauders around this time, possibly under Svein Forkbeard, for Aethelred had his sister killed in 1002 AD, prompting a series of vengeful massacres.

In 1013 AD, the Vikings fed on their successes and grew bolder, raiding turned to invasion. Across the country, the shires began submitting to the forces of the new King Svein Forkbeard of Denmark. He received the leaders of the western shires at Bath where the Saxons thames submitted to him and gave hostages. Upon Swin's death soon afterward, his son, Canute, carried on the process of conquering England. Yet the English did not crumble before them as the Britons had yielded to the Anglo-Saxons, and Canute fought Aethelred's son, Edmund Ironside on Pen Ridge in 1016 AD, folklore has it there were at least 'seven hundred dead', and Viking artefacts including a shield have been found on the ridge in the past, eventually a division of the country was agreed. Edmund received Wessex while Cnut took Mercia and probably Northumbria, only for Ironside to die mysteriously soon afterwards.

We know the destruction of the hill-forts in Peonnum took place in 1016 AD, burnt down by King Canute and his Viking warriors who had taken control of the area. Evidence of the bloody and abrupt end of the hill-forts in the area is supported by excavation work done at Cadbury Castle, which revealed an Anglo-Saxon settlement and fort as being active for centuries until its eventual destruction at the beginning of the eleventh century on the orders of King Canute as part of the unification of the Saxons into the Kingdom of England under Danelaw. The original Egbert's stone of the three counties is said to have been unearthed from its resting place according to folklore and destroyed by the Vikings around this time, for it was a renowned rallying point and symbol of Anglo-Saxon strength in Wessex. King Canute died in 1035 AD in the Saxon burh of Shaftesbury which in the Domesday Book was recorded as Scepteserie.

Saxon dominance only finally returned with the accession of Canute's step-son, King Edward the Confessor or There is a tradition that Edward the Confessor was declared King at Gillingham in 1042 AD. During his reign, Somerset was largely held by the mighty Earl Godwin and his family. In homage to the recent events that had occurred in the area, a Norman style stone Church was likely first built in its existing location on top of Pen Ridge in Edward the Confessors reign ca. 1042-1066 AD, (although the font, the south doorway, and the proportions of the nave and chancel suggest a church of the 12th century). It honours Alfred, the great Saxon King who rallied his troops at Selwood, the shire stone we see today marking the three counties was likely erected around this period near the same spot as the original from King Egbert and King Alfred's days.

The Normans invaded in 1066 AD under William the Conqueror; dismissing Saxon Thane Britnod who held Penna (Peonnum) at the time and by 1086 AD it had become part of the estate of Roger Arundel, by which time the Normans had installed three Motte and Bailey Castles to guard Pen Ridge. Orchard Castle was erected in the middle of the pits site on a spur where a watch tower had long commanded the pitted area, and is further proof of the continued importance of Penna as a military boundary site. Ballands Castle (Barrowlands) was erected on the remains of a previous settlement, thought to have been the site of the lodge occupied by the 'lieutenant of Selwood forest'. It has two Baileys either side of its Motte, which appear to have been built on an...
existing natural mound, or perhaps an earlier manmade round-barrow, it has spring-water running through its enclosure. The third site, Cockroad Castle is also placed at a strategic view point on a spur near watercourses on the west side of Penne, which was by 1086 AD only a relic of a settlement having been completely destroyed by the Vikings who had burnt it to the ground seventy years earlier. Some small settlements grew around the Motte and Baileys but Penne, later Penzelwood (Pen Selwood) never recovered its former status.

To Conclude...

The anciently famous Pen Ridge grew to become an important boundary site long before the Roman interlude, in the Bronze Age then the Iron Age when the ridgeline divided the Celtic tribes in the region, later even becoming a battleground for Saxon and Viking armies such was its strategic importance. Yet it was the altered Neolithic plateau landscape, pockmarked, scarred and cratered that has made this pitted site so renowned for so many centuries. The ridge had been an industrious place since the Neolithic era began; over time an immense number of human hands had left their mark on the plateau, helping to make this great quarry site become an imposing boundary settlement, battleground and anciently famous gateway into the forested vales.

The burgeoning springs that surround Pen Ridge made it a sacred place for many; the large clusters of pit remains all over the south-east part of the ridge still today tell an ever evolving story of ceremony, of boundary and of a large quarrying industry. The ‘Boyne Hollow’ chert quarrying trenches specialized in stone tools for trade. The tracks that link the Pits site to the main arteries of the Harroway were vital in its development, as these routes provided a ready-made market of passing traffic. Polished or unfinished stone tools could be traded extensively from this particular site simply because of its geology and geography, exploiting the Pen Pits for trade of stone tools was therefore a natural occurrence over time.

The sheer number of pits and vast scale of the original Neolithic site is testament to the wide range of uses offered by the Chert. Sir Richard Colt-Hoare observed when excavating: ‘the Sandstone base was still found at the bottom of thousands of the pits, which have yet to be adequately accounted for’, that is until one can appreciate the capacity Neolithic communities had to quarry Chert stone on such a scale, in his limited excavations he had missed the fact the entire top part of the ridge was made up of Chert stone, and was thus unaware how much Chert existed on the ridge, and how the collapsed trenches with their sandstone bases intact account for the formation of thousands of Chert stone pits.

The original Pen Pits therefore were testimony to the generations of quarrying activity that took place on Pen Ridge before the integration of metal into society was complete. The Ragstone in comparison could only be used as querns or much later as building stone. We know the Beaker people of the Bronze Age, the Celts, Romans, Saxons and Normans used the Pen Pits site, trading the exceptional quality Sandstone for querns to grind their grain; this practice became more prevalent with the development of more widespread farming, those that settled in the area no doubt traded their manufactured Sandstone using the same principle of a ready-made market of passers-by as their Neolithic predecessors had with the Chert.

The area gradually developed through the ages of Bronze and Iron, becoming a prominent settlement ultimately secured by two hill-forts in the late Iron Age, when Celtic chariots charged along the well-drained Harroway and Pen Ridge tracks. Yet the settlement met its demise during the incursions of 44 AD and 47 AD as described in Roman accounts. During the Roman occupation the scattered settlement declined but excavation nearby reveals it was probably revived as a boundary site in the Dark Ages around 470 AD, as Penne, Penne or Pennum slowly became a series of prosperous single farmsteads and small trading hamlets again, which saw much bloodshed particularly in 658 AD, and during the many social and dynastic changes that took place throughout the Dumnonian, West-Saxon, and Mercian eras.

By 880 AD according to the Chronicle and later the Domesday Book, Pennum was recorded as a thriving city united by Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons, only for Viking arsonists to instigate its destruction around 1001 AD and again in 1016 AD when shortly after Canute's battle on Pen Ridge with 'Ironside', Canute burnt out all the hill forts in the area in his attempt to rule England. By the time the Normans were quarrying at the pits and excavating their strategically placed Motte and Baileys, well over twenty-thousand pits had been dug out around Pen Ridge. Although even back then, already many of them had been backfilled or ploughed out of view. As gradually the long sequence of occupation at this complex, multi-period landscape declined, and most of the evidence of a vast stone-age quarry and scattered boundary settlement ever existing gradually decayed away with it. In fact almost the whole of the parish history comes to an end before 1066 AD.

‘When time is old, and hath forgot itself, and blind oblivion swallowed cities up, and mighty states characterless are grated to dusty nothing.’ Thomas Kerslake (ca.1881)