

The History of Quarrying on Crickley Hill

Steve Peacock, June 2026

The escarpments of Crickley Hill are composed of fine examples of Middle Jurassic limestone, exploited throughout the centuries for building stone, aggregate and lime production. Whilst the historical scale of quarrying on Crickley Hill was not as significant as on neighbouring Leckhampton Hill for example, principally due to the lesser quality of its 'freestone', it was still substantial and worthy of its story being told - a story that began some 3,000 years BC.

During the first incarnation of the Hill's Neolithic settlement, a causewayed enclosure was constructed utilising stone dug with antler picks from shallow ditches to create two lines of low parallel banks. Whilst not quarrying as we might think of it today, this is arguably the first deliberate use of excavated stone for construction purposes.

Utilisation of the stone resource would almost certainly have continued through the Middle Ages, focussed on the hill top pits, and largely for the use of the estates to which the land belonged. 'Pea Grit' from Crickley Hill may have been used for the ballflower ornamentation in Badgeworth church c.1314.

During the Georgian to Regency heyday (early 18th to mid 19th century), an uptick in demand for Cotswold stone was seen across the region and Crickley's quarrying activity expanded from the hill top to include the southern escarpment - although with negligible records. The stone for the carved reredos in Gloucester Cathedral, completed in late 1872/early 1873, reportedly came from Crickley Hill.



One of Crickley's hilltop quarries on the Scrubs - still active until the earliest 1900s.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, Crickley's industrial attention shifted to its northwestern slopes with new quarries opening up along the escarpment below the current lower car park. Sandpits and two stone lime kilns were also established at the foot of the slope next to the current gateway onto Cold Slad lane. Local companies Packer & Sons Ltd and Sealey's were involved in the extraction and sale of the stone, sand, gravel and lime produced. Steam wagons and traction engines shuttled to and fro regularly, delivering fuel and taking away the products.



A c.2010 artist's impression of the steel kilns in operation.

Then, in the late 1930's, the most momentous and visually impactful industrial installation in Crickley's history took place, all the more remarkable for its paucity of documentation! c. 1939, two steel limekilns commenced production adjacent to the site of the old stone kilns, facing westwards towards Shurdington. The kilns were each about 40 feet high and came from the Cheltenham Gas Works having seen previous service as gas scrubbers. They were fired by layers of coke, burning between alternating layers of crushed limestone, and made a dramatic spectacle perched high up on the Hill

overlooking Cheltenham. Eye witnesses likened the sparks produced to a 'spectacular free show'. The problem became however that their visibility attracted the attention of German bombers and served as a useful landmark to attack Gloucester Aircraft Company's facilities at Hucclecote Aerodrome. On one fateful evening the kilns themselves were subjected to heavy incendiary attack, along with Cheltenham Gas Works and Pilley Bridge. Production from the kilns was suspended in the early 1940's, probably 1940 itself, and as it turned out, seemingly never restarted - a glorious but brief life.

Remarkably, given their prominence, any photos that exist of the kilns actually in operation have yet to come to light, and the best we have is a few photos of the site during construction and an artist's impression of what the completed complex (may have) looked like, produced by Gloucestershire County Council in c 2010. Today, there is no physical trace of the kilns or their surrounding infrastructure at all, only some remnant piles of coke. The likelihood is that they were fully decommissioned and removed by Gloucestershire County Council when the land was converted to a Country Park in the 1970s. Whoever did the work did a very thorough job (unfortunately!). Some relic machinery from the steel kilns, and the old stone kilns themselves however, are almost certainly still there, buried under hummocky vegetation by the Cold Slad Lane gateway.



The kilns area under construction c. 1938



Tom Morris Ltd's operations - the final phase of quarrying on the Hill.

The final phase of quarrying on the Hill began in the 1950's, when Tom Morris (Sands & Gravels) Ltd. extended the quarries behind and above today's lower car park. The stone was excavated using a ripping hook mounted on a bulldozer, and having put aside the best of any blocks suitable for building stone, the rest was tipped into a crushing and conveying unit, and onto a lorry for hauling away for screening, storage and export as aggregate. This phase of operations ended in 1963, bringing to a close the patchy but fascinating history of quarrying on the Hill.

The story still feels incomplete despite best efforts. There are a number of references to promising sounding internal reports and 'eye-witness' interviews by S. Dorey of the Gloucestershire County Council Planning Department, but that are unpublished; there are references to photographs of both the old stone kilns

and the new steel kilns actually in operation, but which have yet to come to light, and there is the lack of any information as to exactly where and when quarrying along the Southern Escarpment took place. It has felt at times like the final warehouse scene from *'Indiana Jones - Raiders of the Lost Ark'*. More material is surely out there somewhere, the question is 'where?!'

Steve is a retired geologist who has given several talks/walks on the geology and related activities on Crickley Hill and Leckhampton Hill as well as authoring 'Geology for Walkers' - or 'Geology for the Curious' as he now wishes he had titled it! The full paper on the history of quarrying on Crickley Hill can be accessed on the GSIA's website.