

Quern stones

Mike Southall

I was walking the dog in March of this year, 2020, when I noticed a flattish stone sticking up from a tractor wheeling near the headland of a field. I noticed the bowl shape on one side of the stone and realised that it was a quern stone, a primitive milling device. It has one or two chips but otherwise it is remarkably intact. Further research leads me to believe that it is a Saddle quern (01) dating from the Neolithic or Bronze age. The stone is a fine-grained green sandstone, 24cm by 17cm, and 4cm thick. It is unlike our local red sandstone and may have come from the Malvern area. May Hill sandstone has been used as a quern material since the Neolithic. Further research is needed to determine this.



01. Saddle quern and muller. Mike Southall.

A previous find in the same field makes a good match for the stone's rider, also known as a muller or rubber (02). This is the handheld stone which ground the grain on the quern. This stone has diagonal ridges on its surface ideal for crushing grain. The lower side has been worn smooth by the grinding action. It has been found that grain which has been malted, that is germinated and dried, mills far more easily than raw grain in this type of quern. The Saddle stone weighs 3032 grams, and the rider 496 grams, light enough to transport if needed.



02. Muller or rubber. Mike Southall.

The field in question has been owned by my family since 1985, but my grandfather told my father that he remembered seeing corn being cut there by hand. This would have been around the turn of the previous century. The field is called the Halfmoon due to its curving Southern boundary, and a dogleg Western boundary caused by an issue. A ridge of ground running East to West in the field forms a

watershed with marshy ground to the South and North, which would have been more extensive in the prehistoric time before drainage took place. This is also the area where I have found a concentration of flints, some worked, mainly blades and scrapers, and some waste. The field is in the parish of Elmley Lovett, with Ombersley parish to the South, and Hartlebury to the West of its hedgerows. It is thought that many of the present parish boundaries may well have had significance in the prehistoric era.

Over thirty years ago I had ploughed up the top stone of a Rotary quern (03) at Norchard. This was said to have been from the late Iron age, as a similar example had been found from a Hereford hill fort. The Rotary or beehive quern had been introduced to Britain around 400-300 BC during the middle Iron age. This find was quite close to a water issue along Tugwood Lane. The quern stone is 28cm in diameter at its widest, and 17cm high, and not of local sandstone. The upper stone weighs in at 14 kg with at least a kilo worn away by grinding. Combined with the lower stone (04) this would have made the quern too heavy to transport easily, suggesting a more settled lifestyle. The Rotary quern would have been capable of milling far more material than the Saddle quern, and therefore catering for many more people.



03 Rotary or beehive quern. Mike Southall.



04 Lower quern stone. Mike Southall.

There is something quite humbling to handle these tactile objects which were everyday utensils to our ancestors thousands of years ago.

Images

- 01. Saddle quern and muller. Mike Southall.
- 02. Muller or rubber. Mike Southall.
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- 04. Lower quern stone. Mike Southall.