

SEEKING THE PEAK DISTRICT'S MILLSTONE CURIOSITIES

On the roasting-hot, sun-kissed Friday of 25 June 2012, my wife Christine and I found ourselves ensconced high above a long abandoned Millstone Grit quarry or 'delph hole' at Burbage Edge in Derbyshire's Peak District. Looking down over a virtual moonscape of Ice-age boulders – 'erratics' – among the thousands of gigantic and small gritstone boulders, we could discern here and there a number of gritstone enigmas: beautifully worked millstones, some of which were lying flat partially covered with grass and heather, with others peeping out from earthen banks, and with one or two resting up against the towering rock walls of the Edges.

We were amazed and excited too, for we had purposely driven almost 100 miles from our home in North Yorkshire to seek out and to photograph these enigmatic millstone curiosities, produced by Victorian stonemasons.

To our astonishment we soon discovered large numbers of these millstones lying abandoned all around us.



***Alan, the 'Mad Professor', ensconced upon a massive millstone.
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***A partially completed gritstone trough.
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***An unusually carved millstone.
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***A massive millstone lying within a 'Moonscape' of gritstone boulders.
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A Short Excursion Into The History of the Peak District Millstones

For over two thousand years man has quarried, hewn and worked the Millstone Grit of the Peak District and the South Pennines into querns and millstones for the grinding of corn and oats. Querns – hand-carved, round-nosed cones with matching cylindrical-shaped

stone blocks which were operated by hand have been discovered at Wharnccliffe, near Stocksbridge in South Yorkshire.

At Burbage Edge near the Fox House Inn situated a mere few miles south-west of Sheffield, large numbers of finished and partly finished millstones are to be found lying among huge concentrations of gritstone Ice-age 'erratics'. Numerous examples of these enigmatic and highly attractive products of the Victorian stonemasons' skills are between 5 feet and 7 feet in diameter, with thicknesses ranging from around a foot to approximately 20 inches. Many specimens have either circular or square holes cut through their centres; others are plain. Several are neatly dressed with radiating shallow-cut grooves; others are acutely domed in profile.

The majority of the several hundred millstones found hereabouts which date from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries would have been specifically worked from large gritstone boulders for water-powered mills, wind-mills and for steam-driven mills that produced flour. These millstones were dispatched all over England. Some of these millstones were 'edge-runners', which were used in a variety of industries located all over Britain. They were used for the crushing of lead and other metalliferous ores; for grinding down glass cullet for the South Yorkshire glass industry; for the pulping of rags for the paper mills; and for the crushing and pulping of apples for cider-making. Large quantities of millstones were also exported to Canada and the Scandinavian countries for the pulping of wood for paper-making and bark for the tanning industries.

In numerous flour and corn mills scattered country wide, these millstones worked from Derbyshire gritstone were generally known as 'Peaks'. The quarrying and working of the millstones was generally carried out by local farmers who were also highly skilled at stonemasonry. The work was also seasonal. It is on record that a skilled stonemason assisted by a lad could work up a pair of millstones within a month. An astonishing achievement as they would have to endure working in all weathers.

The millstone quarries rapidly declined by the early 20th century leading to the closure of many of the 'delph holes' – the typically small quarries cut into the Edges, such as at Burbage. This resulted in large numbers of millstones being abandoned on the hillsides where they had been dressed.

Our trip to the Derbyshire 'Edges' was indeed delightful and highly recommended.



***Alan stands at the mouth of the 'Delph Hole'.
© Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage
Collection.***



***The 'Prof' and two huge millstones near
the 'Delph Hole'.
©Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage
Collection.***



***An enigmatic grouping of huge and heavy millstones.
©Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage Collection.***



***To the rear of this millstone there is a curiously-carved gritstone boulder.
©Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage Collection.***



***A seven feet diameter millstone.
©Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage Collection.***



***A fascinating specimen of the Stonemason's skill, a circular gritstone trough.
©Alan McEwen Industrial Heritage Collection.***