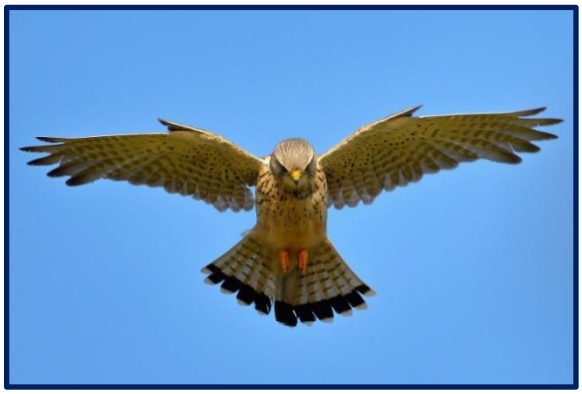
WESTON MUSEUM

Uphill Quarry

Uphill Quarry is a peaceful place today, and a rich habitat for plants, insects and wildlife. Many types of plants grow on the rocky ledges, including the rare Goldilocks Aster. Owls nest here, kestrels and peregrine falcons hunt for food and swallows and house martins gather in autumn before migrating to Africa. Badgers and foxes have also been spotted.



A kestrel in flight © Paul Cousins

Part of the quarry can be used for rock-climbing and abseiling and it is a popular spot with tourists and local people. It is hard to believe that it was the site of an important local industry for almost 150 years. It would have been a very noisy and dangerous place!

The quarry is at the far western end of the Mendip Hills, which stretch from Weston to Frome. They are rich in limestone, a rock formed 300 million years ago when most of Britain was covered by warm, shallow seas. These rocks were then lifted and folded by huge earth movements to create the hills we see today.

As Weston grew in the 1800s there was great demand for limestone, which is hard-wearing and perfect for building. Villagers in Uphill had always quarried stone for their own use along the hill's northern edge.

Commercial quarrying on the western side began in the 1820s, and ended in the early 1940s. Huge amounts of stone were removed during this time.

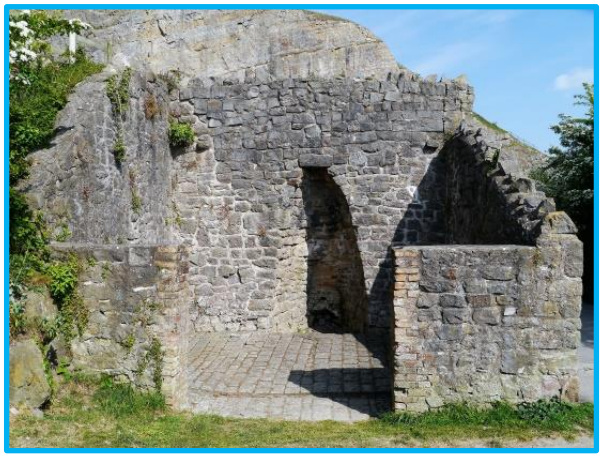
Quarrymen in the 1800s worked in small gangs and did all the blasting, breaking and moving of stone. Rows of holes up to eight feet deep were drilled into the rock using a sledge-hammer and a sharp-edged pole. The holes would be filled with gunpowder and fuses added. Sounding a warning, the quarryman would then light the fuses and retreat to a safe distance. Up to 30 tons of rock could be blasted from the quarry face in one go.

Quarrying at Uphill © Weston-super-Mare Library

Factory-made fuses were available from 1831, which were much safer than the original home-made ones. Pneumatic drills powered by compressed air, dynamite and electrically-fired detonators were all introduced during the early 1900s. These replaced sledge-hammers, gunpowder and fuses.

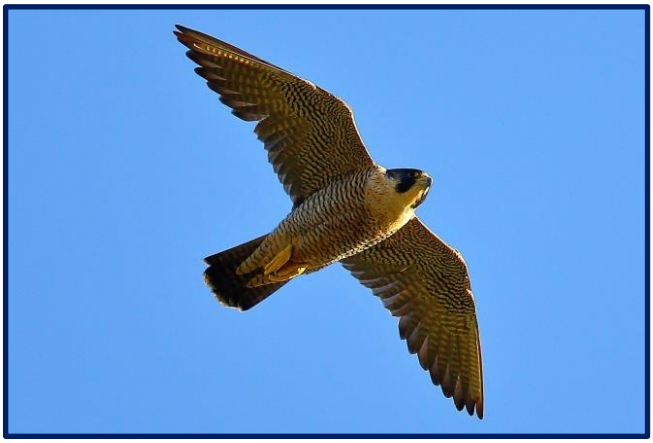
Quarrying became less dangerous, although accidents still happened and sometimes resulted in serious injury or even death.

Explosives used in quarrying were kept securely in a special store known as a powder house. Uphill's was built from local limestone, and the overgrown ruins can still be seen on the left of the path running south past the quarry.



The lime kiln at Uphill quarry © Fraser Darke

Limestone could be burnt in a special oven called a kiln to make quicklime. This was used in the steel industry, to fertilise farmland and by the building trade as mortar and plaster. Uphill's lime kiln was built in front of the quarry for easy access, sometime between 1780 and 1850. The building was restored in the 1980s, giving us a good idea of how it worked.



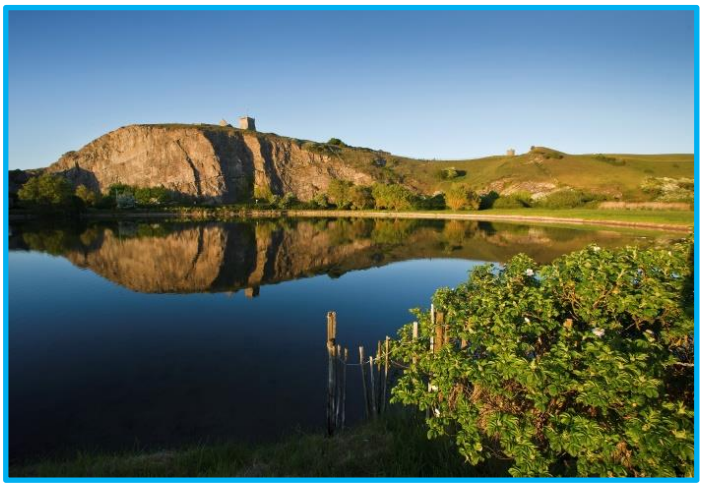
A peregrine falcon in flight © Paul Cousins

Layers of broken stone and fuel, either coal or wood, were loaded into the top of the kiln. A fire would be lit underneath and, once it was hot enough, the limestone would be converted to quicklime. The fire would be kept burning for days or even weeks by adding more layers of limestone and fuel. After cooling, the quicklime would be dug out of the draw-hole opening at the base.

A number of caves and narrow passages called fissures were discovered during quarrying in the 1800s. Animal and human remains up to 50,000 years old were excavated.

Bones belonging to cave hyena, which inhabited Britain during the last Ice Age, were found inside the first cave in 1826. The floor was covered with the chewed bones of other animals, including wild horse, bison and woolly rhinoceros. These were favourite prey of the hyena, which used the cave as a den. A pot containing Roman coins was found soon after in a second cave. A cave containing human remains, including six skulls, was discovered in 1863.

More discoveries were made in another cave in 1898. Flint tools, including knives and a hand axe, reveal that the first people to live in the area were using the cave 30,000 – 40,000 years ago. The bones and teeth of the animals they hunted, such as cave lion, mammoth, bear and reindeer, were found too. These people also left behind a pointed object made from bone or deer antler. This is the earliest non-stone artefact made by a modern human being to have been discovered in the British Isles.



The site of the quarry today © Nick Pound

Most of these caves and fissures have been destroyed by later quarrying. The valuable pot of Roman coins disappeared soon after discovery. The animal bones and stone tools can be seen in the collections of various museums, however, including our own Weston Museum.

HERITAGE FUND | Weston-super-Mare Town Council