

Memories of Cole's Pits

Faringdon in the 1950's, for those of us growing up then, provided a rich, natural adventure playground on all sides. Coles Pits, an area on the brow of the densely wooded hill, to the right of Wicklesham Farm, above the railway line and overlooking Fernham and Shellingford was as well loved as Badbury Hill is now.

The long treks for summer outings and picnics began as soon as the bluebells started flowering and continuing until school holidays finished.

It was a special place, a magic land of deep pits filled with brambles, bracken and even bushes and trees, surrounded by high hillocks and banks crisscrossed by grassy paths, and covered with a profusion of willow-herbs, ferns and foxgloves - all the beneath the canopy of tall firs.

While it was a perfect place for hide and seek and chasing butterflies and grasshoppers it was even more special because we knew it to be the remains of an ancient stone age pits village and that once, the pits had been roofed over with bracken and branches to provide dwellings for the hunter - gathering people who had lived there.

Even then, it was identified as a particularly important paleolithic / neolithic site one of only a few in existence.

Some years on - the date is lost to my memory - in the shortest space of days, the trees were raised to the ground and smoke rose from the brush bonfires and the earth movers levelled the land for planting.

There was no time for protest; it was cleared and the pit village was lost. These days it could surely not happen and we can only hope that some of the 10 -20,000 year old archaeology remains beneath the cultivated land, so that one day it can be properly evaluated.

Robin Britton

Information from owner of Wicklesham Farm and quarry

Re theory of neolithic flint mining, is that the soil isn't flint bearing - it is sand. Before it was ploughed out the pits and planted with trees, an Oxford archeological expert came out to inspect them.

The pits consisted of two depths, shallow, containing sand, and deep which reached a strata of clay. The verdict was that they were the remains of a medieval millstone factory, the sand and clay being mixed to produce household millstones. This is borne out by the quantity of shattered stones we still plough up around the site; they are quern style millstones, about a foot across, the lower stone being flat and the upper with a hole in the centre, so the top stone could be revolved against the lower one to grind the seed - very similar to a Roman one found at Wadley, which is now at the museum in Woodstock

Possibly the land was owned and worked by Mr. Cole?

We have a pre-enclosure vellum map here of 'Wickensham' (sic) which list the pits as Upper & Lower 'Coalspitts' and 'Pye pitts': other fields are owned by a Mr. Tucker and a Mr Stybbs, Woad Ground covers the area now worked by Grundon's gravel, and presumably provided blue dye before the trade discovered indigo - and the surrounding land is 'Faringdon lands', 'part of Coxwell Common' and 'Stanford Plain'.