

Great Archaeological Sites in Merthyr Tydfil



2. BURNT MOUND PENGELLI FAWR, PONTSTICILL



The Brecon Beacons are thickly dotted with archaeological sites, many of which have been known for more than a century, but not all. This burnt mound was only discovered in 2016 by staff of the Fforest Fawr Geopark. Rising above the reeds and other coarse moorland vegetation at SO 0449 1158 is a low mound covered in fine turf. It is roughly 12m long and 6m wide, and is shaped like a kidney bean. Although the turf covers it completely, masking the stones of which it consists, the shape and location make it a classic example of a burnt mound.

Burnt mounds are made up of burnt and heat-fractured stones. They are found near water – the Pengellifawr mound stands on the slope that rises from the shallow marshy valley of the Nant y Ffrwd. Although this example has never been excavated, others that have sometimes preserve the remains of troughs hollowed out of tree trunks, or out of the living rock. Archaeologists are generally agreed that the burnt stones that form the mounds are the debris created by boiling water using stones that were heated in a fire and then dropped into water. The thermal shock caused by plunging red-hot stones into much cooler water caused the stone to

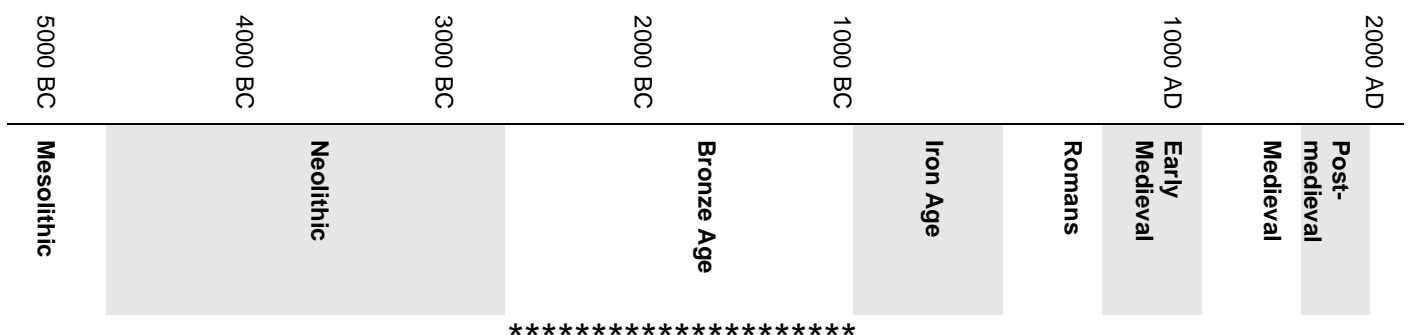
fracture, and the pieces were discarded when no longer usable. We can tell that the stones had been heated, because they show the characteristic colour changes caused by the fire and charcoal is sometimes mixed with them.

What they were for is, however, a subject for debate. One theory is that they were cooking places used by hunting parties who wanted to boil the meat from animals they had caught. Another theory is that they were used for saunas, although a sauna as we understand it would have needed some sort of structure to keep the steam in, perhaps a bender, since they do not have evidence for any structures solid enough to leave traces. But we really don't know. We can't be certain of the date either. The majority of excavated examples come from the Bronze Age, but some are much later.

There is another possible burnt mound in this area of moorland, near the entrance to deserted farmstead of Cwm Moel. This mound is rather more amorphous in shape, and it is possible that it merely consists of debris from the ruined farm buildings. It is however marked by the Ordnance Survey on their Explorer map, unlike the Pengellifawr mound which was discovered too late to make it on.

A number of tracks lead into the moorland north of the farmland west of Pontsticill village, Pontsticill Brecon Mountain Railway station and the Taff Trail. Keep close to the boundary wall enclosing the fields. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 160, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 12.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the possible time-span)



You can learn more about this site, and other similar archaeological sites in Wales, by going to <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. The Pengellifawr burnt mound has the PRN (Primary Record Number) 08003m. The mound at Cwm Moel is PRN 08005m. You can search for other similar sites here too. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page.