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‘AN EXCEEDINGLY CURIOUS ROCK, INHABITED BY A CLEAN AND DECENT FAMILY’: UNDERSTANDING ROCK-CUT STRUCTURES IN QUARRIED LANDSCAPES

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Abstract: The English Midlands has a surprisingly large number of substantial rural rock-cut buildings, ranging from Early Medieval hermitages to 19th century working-class housing. Even in many demonstrably early sites there is often a very close relationship between quarrying and rock-cut buildings. Most commonly this is when structures are set within artificial cliff faces, created by earlier extraction, but sometimes, the relationship is more complicated, and things are not what they seem. This paper looks at two sites at Kinver Edge, Staffordshire. Both are case studies from the Rock-Cut Buildings Project; this project is the first attempt to look at British domestic rock-cut structures as a group, to develop methodologies to record and

understand them and their landscapes. The paper explores the relationship of these sites, to a wider extractive landscape of quarries, causeways, terraces and boundaries. It looks at evidence of eremitic landscapes evolving into and forming the setting of extractive, industrial and touristic places. The dataset presented along with the paper is a point-cloud model of one of the key sites, it is hoped that this data will be usable by other scholars working on rock-cut buildings. The author is director of the Rock-Cut Buildings Project at the Cultural Heritage Institute, Royal Agricultural University, U.K.

Keywords: rock-cut buildings, quarried landscape, English Midlands

1. Introduction

There are rock-cut buildings all over the world, sometimes they may be enhanced caves or fissures in the rock, sometimes, buildings cut entirely from the rock. In Britain they have been a very neglected subject for study, there was some interest in them as sites from early antiquaries including William Stukeley and Sir Robert Plot and later historians such as Sabine Baring Gould (Plot, 1686). Some individual sites or areas have been investigated in some detail, particularly the “caves” of Nottingham (Kinsley, 2020; Waltham, 1996) and a few isolated sites such as Saint Catherine’s Hill

(Shapland, 2020), which have undergone archaeological investigation. As a group, however, they remain largely unstudied.

The rock-cut buildings Project was started in 2020 to investigate, record and understand rock-cut buildings as a group, focussing particularly on rural domestic structures. Its main aim is to use the techniques of buildings archaeology (but modified to understand and interpret entirely negative spaces) and apply them to these sites. The emphasis is on understanding what we can learn from places which are often sterile of conventional archaeology and which are voids and negative spaces, but where the potential for survival of historic elements is high¹.

Rock-Cut Buildings throughout Europe and beyond are often (but not exclusively) set into quarries or quarried faces, in broad terms, the older rock-cut buildings are generally set into natural cliffs², although there are a number of sites where a quarry has partly or entirely cut away an earlier rock-cut building leaving some traces.

There is, therefore, a very close relationship between quarrying and the creation of rock-cut buildings. This relationship has often been seen as almost incidental, with the buildings themselves being the most important element, but as more sites have been analysed, it has become apparent that many of the buildings are of considerable antiquity and therefore and, in many cases, it is possible to demonstrate that the quarrying must be earlier. This means that some very large quarried landscapes are much older than had previously been imagined and that they may be worthy of further consideration³.

In this short paper I will look at two sites which lie on the sandstone ridge of Kinver Edge in the English Midlands, both these sites have been subjects as recent case-studies as part of the rock-cut buildings project and all have been fully or partially recorded with high definition laser scanning, photography and drone recording. The main emphasis of the work has been on the buildings themselves, on their record and analysis (Simons, 2023; Simons, forthcoming). This is the first attempt to understand the origin, phasing and significance of these sites and how they relate to the wider national and European corpus of similar sites. The quarries they are set in, and the adjacent quarried landscape, has been rather secondary to the main focus on the buildings, this short paper aims to remedy this a little, and to describe how, in some cases, quarrying is an essential part of the process of construction.

Both sites lie within soft granular red Permian and Triassic sandstones. These can be quarried and cut with relative ease. As with any large geological feature there are deposits which are harder and less granular and others which are friable and weak. The sandstones are aeolian and, in places, one may see the dune bedding within the rock, or layers of pebbles relating to ancient flooding events. The sandstone can make up impressive ridges, hills and hummocks, and can outcrop on the surface as small ridges or as impressive cliffs carved out at the end of the last Ice Age.

¹ The results are to be published in a book (Simons, 2023, in press) and individual case-studies are being published in papers, relevant ones are referenced later in this paper.

² Ibid

³ Sites such as Nesscliffe (Shropshire) where there are vast quarries which retain medieval structures such as dated rock houses must largely be medieval at least, despite remaining in use until the 19th century. Yet the earlier phases are very poorly understood.

2. Kinver Edge: A Quarried Landscape?

Kinver Edge is sandstone ridge running roughly north to south across the county boundaries of Staffordshire and Worcestershire. It is made up of Permian and Triassic sandstone of the Kidderminster Formation, topped with bunter pebble beds made up of large cobbles in a matrix of sand. On the east side the ridge is a sloping hill and, on the west, is a very steep escarpment, with natural cliffs and numerous stone outcrops. Jutting out from this nearly straight ridge sit several large outcrops of exposed sandstone with long histories of occupation.

The Edge itself is now largely in the care of the National Trust and is open to the public, much of it is covered by woodland, but historically, it was almost all open sandy heathland (Simons, 2018). The land was so sandy that it even had large wind-blown sand dunes and was described by Scott in 1832 thus:

“At Sandy Town is a small plain covered with sand, compared by some authors to the deserts of Africa, the particles driven by the wind sometimes obliterating the traces of the public road” (Scott, 1832, p. 167).

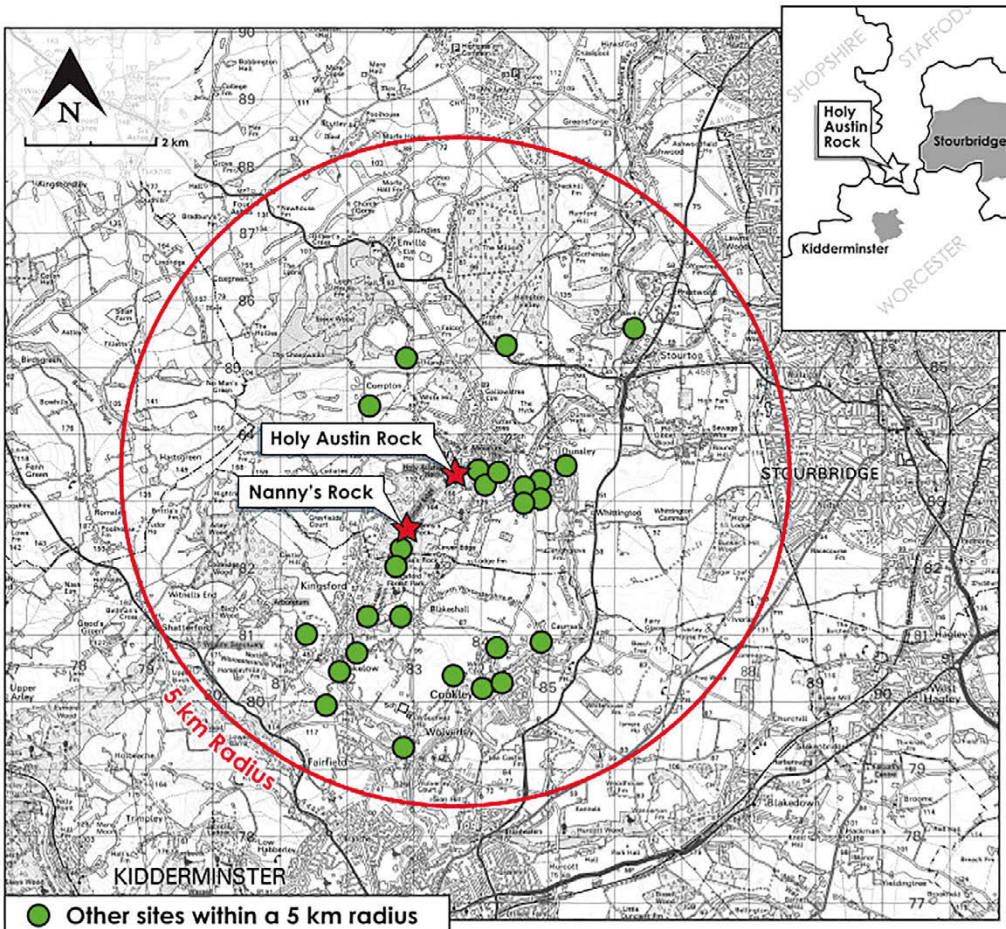


fig. 1. Site Location Plan showing other main rock cut sites within a 5km radius of Holy Austin Rock.

The local sandstone is, generally, a poor buildings stone, but was extensively used, as attested by the large number of medieval sandstone buildings which survive throughout the area. Even after the early 17th century when the use of brick becomes almost universal locally, buildings are frequently constructed on a footing or dwarf walls of local sandstone blocks, by the mid 19th century however, its use declines and quarry largely ceases.

Regionally and locally, humans have exploited the rock since an early date and there is evidence to suggest that some of the local sites may be prehistoric in origin (Simons, 2023). The area is famous for its rock-cut buildings, some inhabited until the 1960s. These range from small individual houses, to large complexes of up to twenty dwellings clustered on a single outcrop. The later history is reasonably well understood and until very recently the presumption was of a recent origin for the sites and that they were constructed as part of the 18th and 19th century expansion of industry in nearby settlements (Bills & Griffiths, 1978; Willets, 2011).

Recent analysis, as part of this project has established that the majority of the dwellings on the Edge are at least medieval in origin (possibly Early Medieval) but with later phases of addition and alteration. The buildings themselves are almost sterile in terms of archaeological deposits, each time a site was re-used it was cleared out to down to the stone floors and where movable features such as doors or windows do remain, they are reconstructed, or comparatively late. Therefore, scientific dating or “traditional” archaeology had proved to be unproductive, excavation in the early 1990s at one of the sites reinforced this idea of a recent origin, but was undertaken with only a limited analysis of the fabric itself (Shoemith, 1990).

To understand the structures themselves, we have had to use very traditional, almost antiquarian methods, which include interrogating the form, and phasing of the structures and of groups of structures as well as identifying diagnostic features. By treating these structures as one would a traditional building, it has been possible to identify features which clearly predate the 18th-19th century presumed construction date. Features such as hooded fireplaces, distinctive arched openings and pre-Reformation graffiti, would all conclusively demonstrate an early origin in a conventional building and the same principles apply to more unusual rock-cut examples. In addition, by looking at a large, national, sample we see the same patterns at other sites and we are establishing a broad typology of dated and undated sites.

All of the sites have extensive evidence of re-use, often after considerable periods of abandonment, this process can be traced in historical records, illustrations and in the standing archaeology.

The number of rock-cut buildings within a 5km radius of Kinver is quite remarkable and the project has established it represents the highest concentration of domestic rock-cut buildings in the UK (fig. 1). This is the first examination of their quarried landscape and is a work in progress, it is descriptive rather than analytical, but does provide some suggestions as to the origin of some of the quarried features.

3. Holy Austin Rock

3.1 Description and Phasing

Holy Austin is the largest outcrop on Kinver Edge, it is a great sandstone knoll, projecting to the north of the escarpment and beneath the Iron Age hillfort which lies high above it to the immediate south. The site is now open to the public and was extensively restored and refurbished in the 1990s. It contains at least eight main dwellings and was occupied until the 1960s (fig. 2).

It was first mentioned as late as the 1770s when Joseph Heeley left the following description.

'I found this exceedingly curious rock inhabited by a clean and decent family, who entertained me during the violence of the tempest with what they had done, how long they had lived there and the immense trouble they had been at in excavating the rock for their purposes. The rooms were really curious warm and commodious and the garden extremely pretty lying on a shelf of rock towards the south and full of every necessary even to luxuriance, this I was told cost them infinite labour as there was never a particle of soil upon that part until they brought it thither on their shoulders. 'To account for this mass of rock being left in the middle of a large waste naked and distinct from any other is I believe not in my power: however I cannot think it probable the perpendicular sides are owing to(?) and that time past the rock was used as a stone quarry.

Indeed two sides evidently shew the marks of the tool upon them, and I don't think it improbable that it was once joined to the Edge itself for I observed at the foot of that precipice another perpendicular scar with familiar marks upon it, as visible as at the rock right opposite and parallel in height ... we may conclude that formerly both joined the chasm being but 20 or 30 paces between both. Believe me, it is a very great curiosity and well worth your observations.'

(Heeley, 1777)

This late date was long presumed to be the origin of the site and there are good records for its occupation and use from the 18th and 19th century. Its attraction as a site for local tourism dates back to at least the 1880s and reached its height in the early 20th century, the cave dwellers at this time operated tea rooms and provided entertainments for visitors.

The site lies on three levels, the lower of which contains three houses which were in occupation well into the 20th century and have been refurbished based on old photographs, paintings and illustrations (fig. 3 and fig. 4). At the centre lies a large (once subdivided) space which exploits natural fissures in the rock and is amongst the deepest of the rock-houses locally. The houses on the lower level are all set into tall quarried faces.

The middle level is set into a natural sloping cliff and is very different in form from the buildings below, with tiny arched doors, very low ceilings and the fragmentary

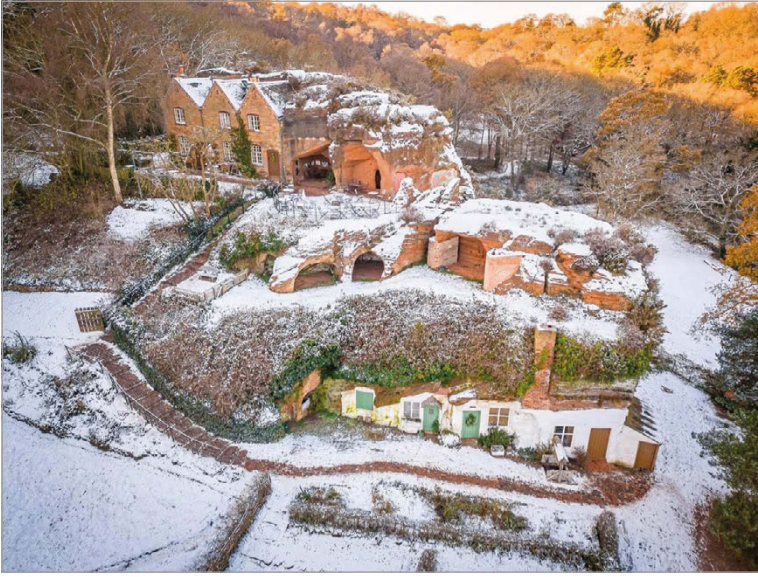


fig. 2. Holy Austin Rock Ground Terrace Plan showing quarried Faces.

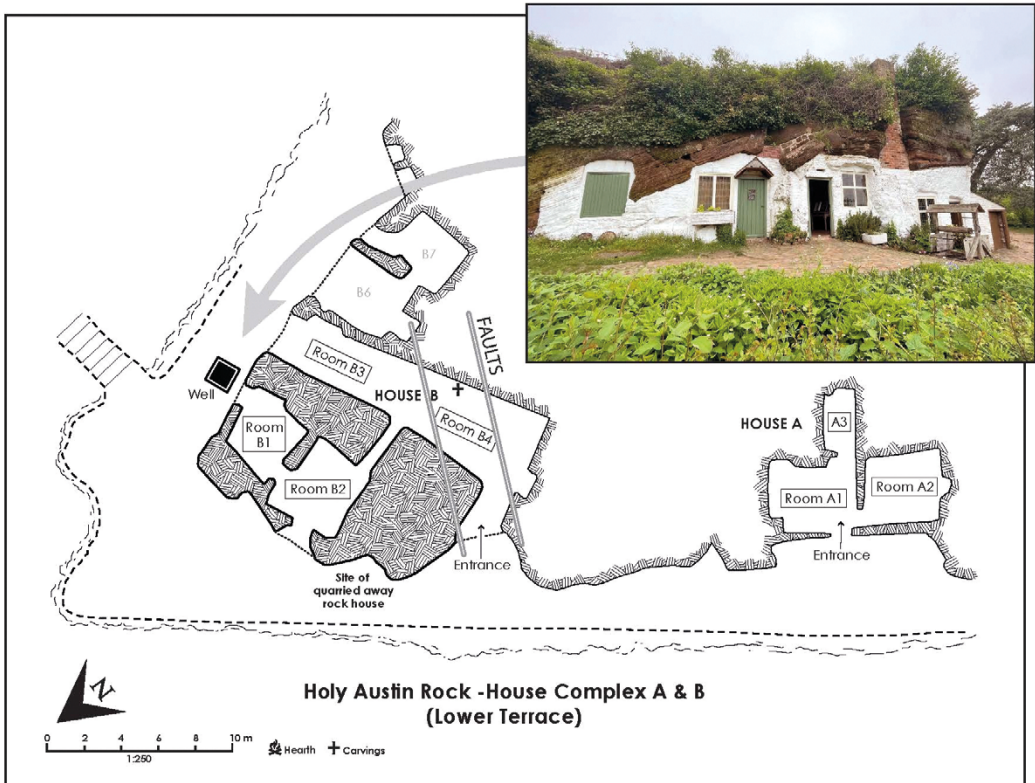


fig. 3. Holy Austin Rock from the Air (Courtesy of Steve Sant).



fig. 4. Holy Austin Rock Lower Terracef.

remnants of fireplaces. It has been largely abandoned since at least the 1830s⁴ with periodic reuse, but is very different from the level below.

The upper level now houses reconstructed 18th century cottages which are set into the stone and have stone stairs, rear walls and rock-cut rooms. Next to this lie a group of very eroded rock houses which were part demolished in the late 20th century.

The analysis as a case-study demonstrated that there are broadly medieval features on all levels, this included the layout and form of buildings and rooms, the known 18th and 19th century examples are very regular in plan, generally with a heated main room with stove, a smaller (sometimes unheated) bedroom and a panty or store, they are skeuomorphs of working-class housing of their era. In addition, they are nearly all set into quarry faces which are late in a site's. The earlier sites are more organic in form, may have very low or very tall ceilings, can be connected by very narrow tunnels and are generally (but not always) quarried straight into a rock outcrop, often above the ground level and were accessed by ladders or stairs.

The key identifier of an early origin, however, were the diagnostic features, these include fragmentary late medieval fireplaces (with round hearths and evidence for corbelled hoods, in the Midlands such fireplaces are not found after c1450 in domestic buildings), round and pointed arched doors and windows, small surviving areas of moulding and religious graffiti of a type which in England is not found after the Reformation of the mid 16th century. This physical evidence tallied with the place name "Holy Austin" being a portmanteau name referring to early hermits or solitaires, possibly (but not necessarily) associated with the Augustinian Order. It was possible

⁴ A drawing by Thomas Peploe Wood of 1839 (William Salt Library SV.87 a) shows the east face of the rock, the middle level appears to have brick chimneys, but looks abandoned and perhaps already ruinous. It was used after this date, but was presumably refurbished



fig. 5. Holy Austin Rock quarrying showing remnants of quarried way building (lower left on photograph).

to conclusively demonstrate that the site is early in origin, much of the fabric (or. More correctly, forms) of the buildings may even be early medieval and it exhibits similarities to other proven early hermitages⁵.

3.2 The Quarried Landscape

Holy Austin is, in effect, a quarry, it is quarried on all sides, indeed the spit of rock which once joined it to Kinver Edge has been entirely cut away at some time before 1777⁶. The rock houses on the lower terrace and the cottages on the upper are set into obvious quarries, these are best seen on the west side, where neatly dressed quarry faces are easily visible and include tooling marks (including from handpicks, wedges and chisels). The upper parts of the rock on the southeast and west sides are natural cliffs, made up of irregular and eroded beds of sandstone overlain by runnels and eroded paths and climb routes.

The quarrying is of unknown date, but the photographs of the lower south west house (Building C) shows that it had windows of a broadly late 17th-early 18th century type and it must have predated these. On the tallest west quarry, a ledge

⁵ For example Anchor Church (Simons, 2021) and several other case studies in Simons (2023). An historical literature discussion of such early sites possibly being alluded to in literature may be found in Osbourne (2022).

⁶ See the mention in the description by Heeley (1777).

has ben left, presumably to support quarrying around a natural cleft in the rock. Also, an earlier rock-house survives which has been almost entirely cut way and is visible now only in plan, but retains the remnants of a cupboard and a door channel on one jamb (fig. 5).

The immediate setting of the site is taken up by hedges and plots of gardens/allotments which replicate those seen on 19th/20th century maps and photos. Some of the pathways sit on (reconstructed) low sandstone terraces. This landscape of small enclosures is visible on early 19th century maps and drawings⁷, and appear to be late and domestic in nature. As the site is part early, but clearly underwent considerable periods where it was unoccupied, it seems likely that these boundaries and plots are of a relatively late date, but they may incorporate earlier features. To the west of the site lies a large heavily eroded quarry built around a trench into the sandstone. On the hill slope around this are the remnants of stone walled terracing. This is not shown on historic mapping and is on what was common heathland, its date is unknown.

4. Nanny's Rock

4.1 Description and Phasing

This site is very different in form from Holy Austin, it is excavated from an entirely natural cliff, not a quarry face, it is at a raised level from the ground level (and was formally accessed by a now vanished stone stair) (fig. 6 and fig. 7). There is a small detached room to the north and the rest of the rooms are arranged roughly north-south along the cliff face. There are four main spaces (but these may have been subdivided). These include tall rooms with regular form and some irregular spaces with low ceilings.

The site has the earliest attested occupation locally and an occupant from here was buried locally in 1617 and, as with so many sites appears to have been occupied and abandoned in phases (Staffordshire Parish Registers Society, 2008). Its last occupant was mentioned in 1882 when a semi-vagrant lady was living in a then-already ruined site with minimal shelter (Price, 1953).

The analysis (Simons, 2024) has, again demonstrated that the site is almost certainly at least medieval in origin and diagnostic features include two fragmentary medieval fireplaces (with circular hearths a fragment of “lamb's tongue” moulding and which probably had corbelled, hooded canopies, and what must be pre-English Reformation (c1550) graffiti⁸. As with the majority of these early sites and due to the presence of religious graffiti, comparisons with other sites, the known history and the architectural features a hermitical origin (or at least use at some point by a divine) seems likely. In its later history it became a residence of the poor and then a focus for tourism and remains as such to the present day (fig. 8).

⁷ See Bright's Survey and Drawings of People Wood

⁸ Matthew Champion has identified that most use of even crude long armed crosses in England pre-dates the Reformation, see a useful discussion of cross graffiti in Champion (2024).



fig. 6. Nanny's Rock.

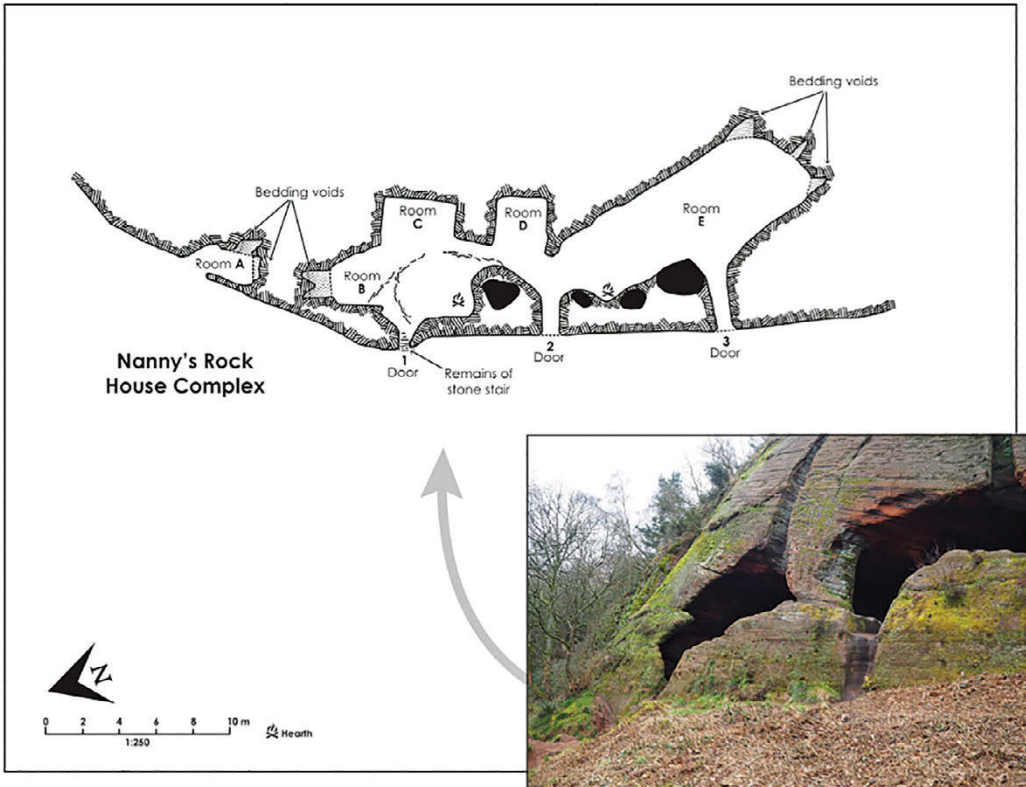


fig. 7. Ground Plan of Nanny's Rock.

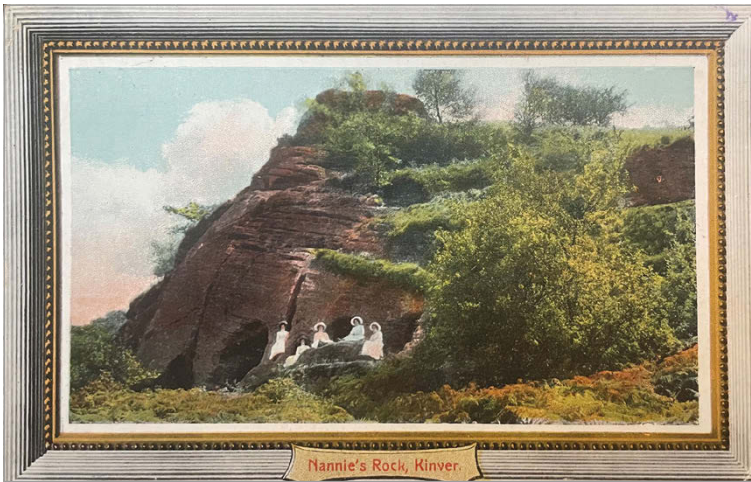


fig. 8. Postcard of Nanny's Rock.



fig. 9. Quarry near Nanny's Rock.

4.2 The Quarried Landscape

Unlike Holy Austin, there is no quarrying at Nanny's Rock itself. It is set into a natural cliff. As with all such sites stone must have been extracted during phases of the building's excavation. Some may have been used, some may have ended up on the terrace below the rock and some may have been used in the walling which once fronted the now bare openings on the west side⁹.

To the immediate west of the site, below the rock, lie a number of quarries, including a quarried roadway, a well, quarried building bases and quarried outcrops. These are largely covered by greenery and although tooling is visible, they remain very difficult to date (fig. 9).

⁹ A Drawing of 1839 by Thomas Peplow Wood shows the walling, windows and stairs in remarkable detail William Salt Library SV. V86

5. Interpretation

At both sites we can establish that there is quarrying and that this may have occurred in phases, but at Holy Austin it must predate and have largely finished by c1700 and at Nanny's Rock possibly at a similar date?

The quarries at Holy Austin are extensive, large in scale, and would have provided a considerable amount of usable stone of a reasonable quality. It is very close to Kinver village (itself with many rock-cut buildings and quarries) and it is probable that the stone was used here, for walls, the bases of buildings and general use¹⁰. The church, which is set above the village, is entirely made of local sandstone and the earliest identifiable elements of c1100 are made of squared blocks of local sandstone or rubble walling. The bases of several of the local timber-framed houses are made of stone walls, including the Old Grammar School (1515), the White Hart (c1450), the Armoury (c1450), later brick houses such as 123 and 124 High Street (c1660), the Burgesses (now lost, was c1550) and Stourton Castle domestic range (c1530) are all built on large squared blocks of sandstone. Holy Austin was the largest quarry, and had the best quality (hardest) stone locally, but the blocks used in construction could have come from numerous other sites in and around the village. A remarkable sandstone house of Late Medieval Origin called "the nook" may be found on Church Hill and includes some very neatly dressed sandstone blocks.

The smaller scale quarrying at Nanny's and numerous other sites along the Edge, is less easy to understand. It would have produced far smaller quantities, of stone and the quarries may have been opened for individual projects on nearby structures. The site is isolated from almost all historic houses (with the exception of the part sandstone Kingsford Cottage c1800) and would not have provided many of the large blocks required in building bases for houses.

The numerous field boundaries that cross the Edge now survive as simple banks hidden by woodland undergrowth, or even as lines of grown-out trees which show signs of former hedge laying some are traceable on historic maps, others must predate them (Burn & Simons, 2011). It is easy to presume that these are simple hedge lines or boundary banks, and some are, but where they can be seen in section or plan due to erosion or weathering, it is clear that the majority are stone walls.

These stone walls have four main types:

- Drystone terrace revetment walls
- Collapsed drystone walls which have formed banks and in some cases topped with laid hedges
- Drystone walls made of large neat blocks
- Walls with stone orthostatic uprights filled with rubble

¹⁰ The site lies within the Malvern Hills Geopark and we have worked with geologists, unfortunately it has not been possible to identify which quarries produced what building stone as it is all the same, coarse grained, silica rich material extracted from a comparatively small area. We are hoping to look again at this aspect in the future.

These may all be found in abundance at Nanny's Rock and are being mapped by the author and the National Trust (2023). At the immediate base of the rock-cut building is a terrace and causeway revetted with drystone walls which runs for some 3km along the base of the Edge from north to south. Where it crosses hollows or runs parallel with steep slopes it is a causeway with walls up to c 3m in height. It is associated with a dense network of roadways and field systems which may be found all over the Edge, but are particularly associated with rock-cut buildings.

Only one drystone wall of large neat blocks survives on the Edge, and this is a peculiar monument which runs along the lip of the cliff above Nannies Rock from some 1.5km. at the south end where it meets the county boundary it becomes an earthwork and adjoins a much earlier (probably Bronze Age) bank.

This wall is not a simple barrier and is far better in quality than a lot of local work. It actually sits just back from the lip of the slope and there is a roadway on its outer edge. As such it's tempting to think it relates to the 18th century enclosure of the flatter land at the top of the escarpment and it has been identified as such (Worcestershire Archaeology & Simons, 2012). But quite why it would be needed is unclear when a far easier causewayed path lay at the base of the hill following the same route.

The collapsed drystone walls are found all over the Edge and in the wider area. Almost none were maintained as walls, but a few isolated ones can be still found. The character of the landscape must have been radically different before these were replaced by hedges and this is still apparent in a few drawings and early photographs which show an open landscape divided by drystone walls¹¹.

Perhaps the oddest use for quarried stone must be the last wall/boundary type. This is where large (up to one meter tall) flat stones have been set upright about a meter apart and the inside filled with rubble to create a high bank, often set on earth banks. These can survive up to three meters in height and run dead straight across the landscape, to an extent ignoring the topography. A few appear on historic maps, many do not. In two places where the wall has met an outcrop, the boundaries have either been built over it, or deep channels have been cut into the rock to support hurdles or similar barriers. The date of these structures is unknown and no evidence was revealed in a recent watching brief¹². They don't fit into the pattern of Post Medieval land division on the Edge, where we can see enclosed fields created as part of the 1774 Inclosure Act¹³, overlying an earlier fieldscape of stone walls and stone banks. They are clearly divisions of the landscape which take no account of either topography or earlier boundaries (which Burn in 2012 demonstrated they overlie and cut in a number of places). Because they are such defining features in the landscape, with no regard for earlier patterns of division, it is tempting to think they may relate to the medieval Royal Forest of Kinver (Burn & Simons, 2012).

¹¹ Kinver Library has an extensive collection of old photographs and postcards which show this open landscape. Drawings such as an anonymous sketch of 1867 (courtesy of Pat Cartwright) show an open landscape with almost no trees.

¹² Recent work on behalf of the National Trust (not yet published).

¹³ See Enclosure in Greenslade et al. (1984).⁴



fig. 10. Part of the extensive terracing at Nanny's Rock.

At both these case study sites we have surviving fabric which can be demonstrated to be far older than was originally imagined in the rock houses themselves, but the landscapes in which they sit remain poorly understood. The numerous quarries at Holy Austin must largely pre-date the 18th century and may relate to the expansion of the village from the 15th to the 17th centuries. The local setting of stone walls is later (probably 18th century and later). At Nanny's Rock we have a somewhat different situation. The small quarries may be later and relate to 18th century enclosure of common land which required stone for new boundary walls (which now survive as banks). The presence of a network of much earlier banks of different construction however, may indicate the quarrying was earlier and they may have been opened again at a later point.

The impressive stone causeways at the base of the Edge, particularly near Nanny's Rock are of unknown origin (despite recent limited excavation), but they are the only way to and from the rock-house and this suggests they may have some antiquity (fig. 10). It is conceivable that they are part of an eremitic landscape which enclosed the cliff for use by hermits. If this is the case it fits well with the familiar pattern of hermits requiring some form of precinct wall, their association with building and repairing walls and roads and the preference for cliffs and unneeded places for their refuge (Clay, 1914). The walls and causeways may not have an eremitic origin, but one must ask as to why a secular occupant would require an almost sheer cliff to be enclosed by a well-built stone wall.

6. The Data

The data presented with this paper is a point cloud scan of the lower terrace of Holy Austin Rock. The scan was carried out for use as an analytical tool and a simple

aide memoir, not as an archaeological record, and should not be treated as such, it has not been cleaned, cropped or tied into national data. That it can be included in the journal in this way, however, is most appreciated and I hope it will be of interest to other scholars of rock-cut buildings. The scan focuses more on the building than the landscape, but you can see how the buildings are set into quarried faces and the remnants of earlier, almost obliterated, rock houses. Early features include elements of the large central room which may be the primary element of the whole site. The windows, furnishings etc are all modern reconstructions.

7. Conclusions

As stated above, this is very much a 'work in progress' the Rock-Cut buildings project has, by necessity, largely focussed on the buildings themselves. The session #386 at the 2023 European Archaeological Association Conference, very much demonstrated that wider rock-cut landscapes are important and can be essential in understanding the context of more easily appreciable monuments.

What is clear from recent works by other researchers and from sessions such as the one in Belfast is that we are still in the infancy of our discipline and are still developing ways of recording and understanding rock-cut buildings and structures. There is much work to be done and we are only just beginning to see how these sites fit into local, regional, national and international contexts.

Acknowledgements

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