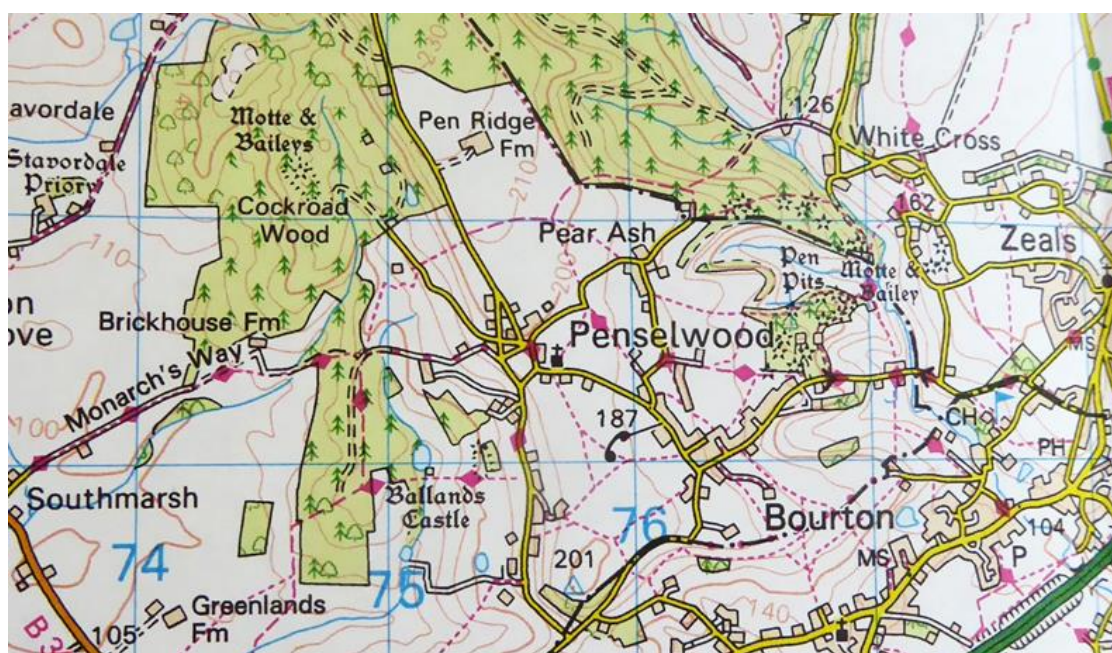


Checking out Pen Selwood

Pen Selwood stands on a ridge dominating the valley of the upper Stour, the Blackmore Vale, and roads to the west and north to the Mendips. It lies on the border of the Selwood Forest which had formed a natural boundary in early medieval times and commanded the crossroads as a strong point. In the immediate area are the Pen Pits (20,000 of them over 700 acres), an Iron Age hillfort, three mottes and baileys as well as a Norman church. Although many county boundaries bear little relationship to the wider landscape, those in Somerset did: the eastern, southern, and western boundaries of Somerset all lie close to major watersheds which were either only sparsely settled or unoccupied until the post medieval period: to the east lies the woodland-covered scarp of the eastern hills at Penselwood, while to the south lie the Blackdowns and associated hills west of Chard; to the west lies Exmoor¹.



Location of Pen Selwood ©Ordnance Survey

SANHS Proceedings 1910: *This otherwise unimportant parish has been most remarkably endowed with material for archaeological study and discussion. The questions bearing on the early history of this island, connected with Pen Pits, Orchard Castle and other earth works...the sites of battles between the Britons and Saxons and Saxons and Danes...are of the highest importance; lack of evidence forbids an absolute discussion in nearly every case.* Pen Selwood is tucked away in countryside of narrow river valleys and prominent hills overlooking the surrounding landscape – well they would be, but the current tree cover hides what would have been key vantage points in the past.

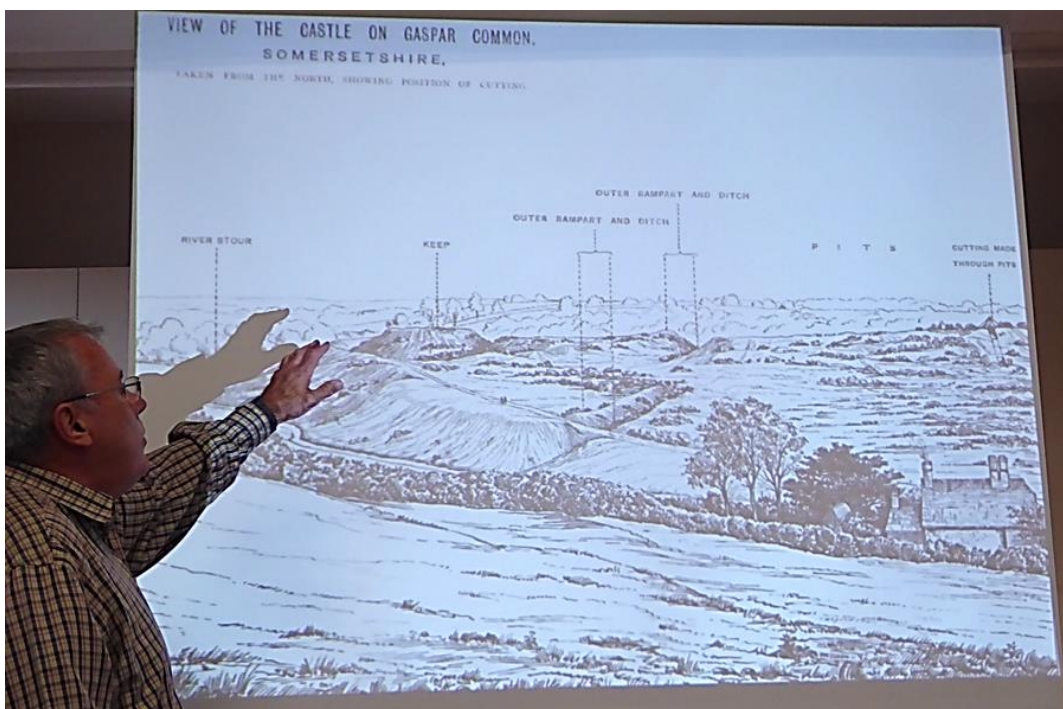
The Pen Pits are a scheduled monument. The Historic England website notes that: *The southern part of the multi period stone quarry called Pen Pits survives well and will contain archaeological and environmental evidence relating to the date, quarrying processes, development of differing technologies, longevity, relative chronology of the quarry pits themselves and the overall landscape context through a prolonged period of exploitation.* Geoff Parcell's discussion Pen Pits in the SSARG Newsletter February 2017 goes into considerable detail about the Pits and reviews the current state of knowledge about them – not a great deal, we learnt on a recent outing by SSARG².

As you may gather, it's an interesting small part of the world full of unanswered questions. SSARG were there at the invitation of the Pen Selwood Historical Society. We met and walked around the parish in June, to learn about the village and its archaeology and as an introduction to our planned excavations.



Home Pits field location marked with an arrow above with the geophysics plot to the right

SSARG has conducted a survey in a field at the southern end of the ridge, outside the scheduled monument area. The ancient field name is Home Pits and surface depressions are very marked. An initial magnetometer survey in 2016 identified a number of circular features and also linear features which may well be settlement boundaries. With the amount of quarrying going on over a significant time, the workers must have lived somewhere. These features have the potential for further archaeological investigation. SSARG will be involved, with members from the local history group, in doing some small scale excavations over the course of the summer (see below). The aim will be to gather some dating materials from the features and check the preservation.



Geoff Parcell indicating the extent of one of the motte and bailey enclosures

After an introductory talk from Geoff Parcell, who organised the field trip, the crew set off on a perambulation. We visited the Norman Castle Orchard overlooking the River Stour, courtesy of the landowner John Hole, who showed us a model of the motte and bailey (see below). We examined several of the Pits which we passed over the course of the day and walked down to Egbert's Stone at the three counties border. This is the place where, tradition holds, King Alfred summoned troops to combat the Danes.



Orchard Castle – a model based on the plan made by Pitt Rivers of the site in the mid nineteenth century



A Pen Pit in the woodland by the village with our guide Jonathan to add a bit of scale

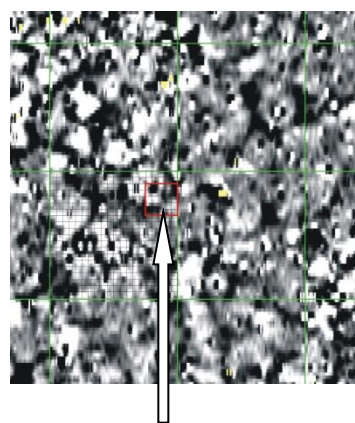
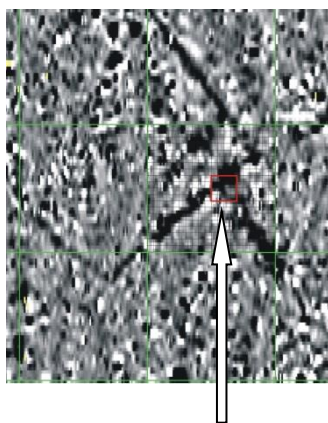
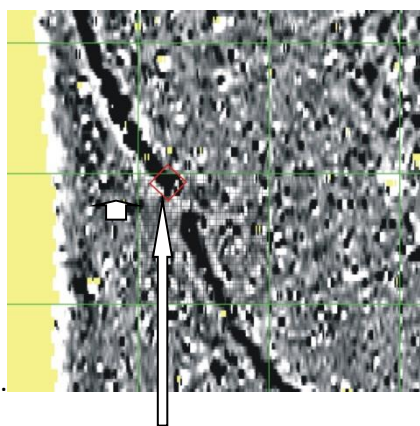


Egbert's Stone at the three county boundary



Long Lane hollow way

We walked up Long Lane, an ancient Holloway and once a main route across the countryside and eventually came to Home Pits, where we will working next month. We will be supporting the local history group on a series of test pits. Test pits 1 & 2 are 4x4m and TP3 is 5x5m. The locations are shown in the images below (North to top of page). Arrows marking the planned test pits (red squares) are shown below.



Not on the walk, but worth a look, the church in the middle of the village is believed to have been rebuilt in the fifteenth century with later work undertaken in the early part of the sixteenth century when it was dedicated to St Michael. In the nineteenth century, the church was extensively renovated and many parts rebuilt. The fine bench ends were carved in the early part of the twentieth century by a renowned local carver by the name of Clemency Angell.



It was a long day, a long walk and much to see – and to eat. We were treated to a magnificent lunch courtesy Pen Selwood residents Peter and Sarah Fitzgerald and cooked by a team of workers led by Annie Harvey and Stella Parcell and our guides were, at various points along the way: John Hole, Peter Fitzgerald, Jonathan Cox, Charles Buckler, Jenny Steadman and Richard Place. Many thanks on behalf of SSARG to all those involved for being so generous with their time, hospitality and for sharing their knowledge of Pen Selwood and its history.



Sarah Fitzgerald, Annie Harvey and Stella Parcell. Photo: Jim Hart

NOTES:

- 1 Stephen Rippon 2003: Historic Landscape Analysis: deciphering the countryside.
<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/32872/CBAHbk.pdf?seq> accessed June 2018.
- 2 Geoff Parcell's article can be found on the SSARG website: <http://www.ssarg.org.uk/42601.html>

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