

Chert quarries at Kilrubie Hill, Eddleston Valley

In rough pasture on east facing slopes near the summit of Kilrubie Hill lie a small group of archaeological features. These are small and large scoops, humps and breaks of slope. Some are difficult to see in high vegetation, others are more obvious. Most are sub-circular, often broader than they are deep and less than 5m in maximum dimension, but some are as wide as 10m: few are deeper than 5m. There may be twenty scoops in total, varying in size and shape. But what are they – high on a hillside overlooking the Eddleston valley?

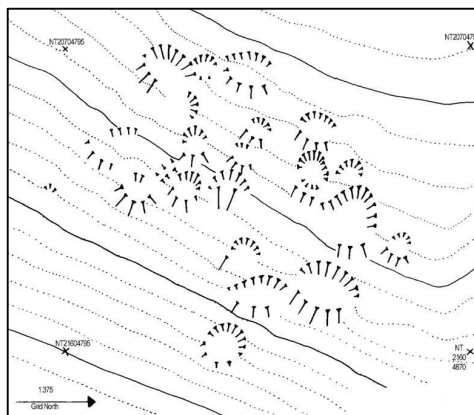


Quarry pit at Kilrubie Hill, with Eddleston valley in the background

The clue is in the bedrock beneath the visitor's feet, for this part of the valley lies on a line of outcropping chert, a fine-grained rock similar to flint, and used to make stone tools. Southern Uplands chert, which is often blue-grey or purple in colour, was used throughout prehistory in the Peebles area. Chert pebbles were collected from rivers or glacial dumps, but at Kilrubie we have evidence for prehistoric quarrying at the source of the material itself. Chert at the surface is frost fractured, and it may have been possible to get better quality material by digging into the hillside itself.

Kilrubie is not the only quarry in the area and Bob Knox has been instrumental in the recognition of these sites. To the west of Peebles a further complex of pits are known at Wide Hope Shank, whilst more have been found at Flint Hill on the Hopehead Burn and slightly further away,

the Biggar Museum Trust have identified more pits at Burnetland Hill.



Plan of features at Kilrubie Hill

No excavations have taken place at Kilrubie, but small trial trenches at Wide Hope Shank have shown that the quarry pits were made by people using a 'blade' technology – this focuses on the removal of small neat chips ('blades') of chert from prepared blocks ('cores'). It is difficult to be certain, because there is still much that we don't understand about prehistoric chert use, but a blade technology is probably early prehistoric in date. Therefore the quarries were most likely either made by the gatherer-hunter-fishers of the area (Mesolithic in our terminology) or by the first farmers (Neolithic). The quarries were probably not where anyone lived, but somewhere visited by communities living in the lower river valleys. These visits may have been seasonal, fitting into lulls in other rhythms of work and movement.

Further work on the quarries is planned, to look for evidence of activity in the area surrounding the pits, to gain dating samples, and to answer more detailed questions about the character of activity on these hill-sides. At this stage it is difficult to offer any further details, but the quarry pits are a fascinating hint of the labours of people many thousands of years ago.

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