

Sarcen Stones



Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve

In Medieval times the Sarcen stones were used for building. Heating them on a fire and pouring cold water on them crudely split them. In 1850 Edward Free moved to Fyfield and set up a Sarcen stonemason. He developed a system of cutting the Sarcen stones to size. When the Kennet and Avon canal brought coal from Somerset the Free family would collect the coal and load the barges with Sarcens. The stones were found to be ideal for tramway setts and for roadside kerbs. In the early part of this century the output was 300 tonnes per year and the Sarcen stones were disappearing so fast that £600 was raised by the National Trust and others to purchase Piggledene, Lockeridge Dean and a large part of Fyfield Down to conserve the remaining Sarcen stones.

Maps showing the location of sarsen stone on the downs in 1841 and 1941 are in WAM 63.

The last major order for Saracen stone from the Marlborough Downs occurred in 1938 when four cartloads were sent to Windsor for the repair of Windsor Castle. The stone used to be sent to Honey

Street by cart and from there by canal barge, the carts returning from the canal wharf laden with coal for the Kennett villages. The Saracen cutters tended to die young from a combination of silicosis and prolonged exposure to the rigours of downland weather, as their graves in the local churchyard testify.

An example is the headstone of Edward Free (1830-1875) in Fyfield churchyard. Other masons who died early include Charles Waite aged 45, Henry Waite 42, Frank Kemmer 50, and Walter Bristow 48.

The stones are very hard and the sarsen masons' tools had to be specially tempered. Initially they could only be purchased or sharpened at High Wycombe. In 19? John Radbourne, the then blacksmith in West Overton learnt the trade and the work could then be carried out locally.

In the 1920's two partners Thacker and Johnson established a stone crushing operation in West Woods at Hurley Bottom (WAM 63 p. 88). The concrete base of the crusher is still visible in the woods (153 665). They used explosives to blow the stones apart and then crushed them for road building on the Bath Road. The stone however was of poor quality and the two went bankrupt.

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