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Quarries are very varied places. In the UK, they include immense pits like the Mountsorrel granite quarry (Leicestershire), long adits leading to underground caves for chalk at Totternhoe (Bedfordshire), whole mountainsides of slate at Penrhyn (Wales). At these quarries, the archaeological problem is that the quarry erases itself. But other stones are harder to find and their exploitation leaves smaller clues. These include materials like British jet and shale, taken from cliff-sides in Yorkshire and Dorset, arguably more evident in the objects worked from the desirable material than at their source locations.

Sarsen is somewhere in-between. Sarsen is a stony material both very evident in its use, and at its source. It was used most famously to make the huge trilithons and lintelled circle of the late-Neolithic settings at Stonehenge (Wiltshire). It has been exploited ever since, most recently in buildings, street-furniture, and 'new' prehistoric monuments. Sarsen boulders lie scattered about the surface across parts of southern Britain. Things made of sarsen, and the places to quarry the stone, are evident. But the quarry is almost exclusively on the surface, and scattered over hundreds of kilometres.

This presents unique problems. In order to explore the human-mineral interactions resulting in these structures, to begin to understand the network, it is essential to distinguish between the quarrying of different times for different purposes. The paper discusses methodological problems of researching an ephemeral quarry, showing how it is essential to debate a range of theoretical approaches to the interpretation of stone, and building with stone, through two case studies of sarsen use.