

Archaeological discoveries of prehistoric mines in Britain

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological work carried out in the UK by the Early Mines Research Group between 1988 and 2009 has led to the discovery of 11 Early Bronze Age copper mines (nine in Wales and two in England). Together with the Bronze Age – Iron Age workings on the Great Orme (Llandudno), some 12 Bronze Age mines have now been identified. The radiocarbon dates from these mines indicate a relatively short phase of small-scale mining/ prospecting in Western Britain for secondary oxidised copper ores, using primitive cobble stone, bone and antler mining tools and fire setting, which commenced at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, most sites having been abandoned by the Middle Bronze Age. These well documented finds have proved something of a revelation concerning the age of the first non-ferrous mining and use of indigenous metal in the British Isles; the first earliest beginning in SW Ireland around 2400 BC, then after a few hundred years in Wales, the metal being extracted from the ores in very simple smelting furnaces with almost no production of slag. This story of early metal production continues with an account of recent research which has located some of the sites of Iron Age and Roman non-ferrous metal mining and smelting.