



## Book Review

**Defined by Stones:****50 extraordinary places that connect our prehistoric ancestors to northern landscapes.**

by Ian Jackson

Published (2025) by Northern Heritage Services Limited  
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

112pp. ISBN 978-1-7394861-8-1 (softback).

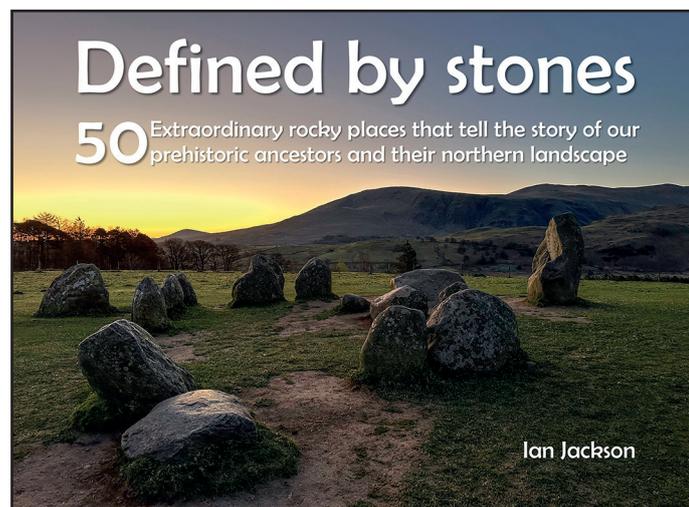
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In reviewing this fascinating book, it seems helpful first to examine its underlying context. Firstly, it is not an “out-and-out” cave or karst publication. Nevertheless, it does include sections about caves, alongside others linked to complementary geological and landscape features that relate to caves, to karst and to closely interwoven topics such as mineral provenance.

Readers might already have encountered four earlier books authored by retired BGS geologist Ian Jackson, all of which remain available. Published in 2021, 2022 and 2023, the first three were essentially highly accessible descriptions of the geology of Northumberland, Cumbria, and Durham respectively. In the fourth book (*Rocks at the Edge of the Empire*, 2024) the author considered geological background and current knowledge of history and archaeology in providing a consideration of how the rocks, and the landscape elements related to them, affected activities and developments during the Roman occupation of Britain. To achieve this in an interesting and undaunting fashion, the author moulded accrued knowledge and personal insights into extremely well-illustrated discussions of 50 sites, many of them on or close to Hadrian’s Wall, with just a few scattered widely across adjacent areas to the north and south. A similar approachable game-plan is followed in *Defined by Stones*, which again looks at 50 sites, carefully chosen and photographed by the author, this time within a region stretching from north Yorkshire to the Scottish border.

Whereas, conceptually at least, the former book is dominated by an exploration of conditions, situations, events and outcomes during the almost 370 years of the Roman Occupation, the more recent one is focussed upon similar, but necessarily broader, considerations relating to the thousands of years between the end of the final Pleistocene glaciation and the arrival of the Romans.



In both cases the timescales are mere blinks of the eye, lying between “now” and the foregoing hundreds of millions of years of geological history occupied in emplacing, modifying and (locally) removing the rocks and landscapes that underpin the human-related activities and developments covered by the two books. Nor is this irony ignored by the author... not detracting from his excellent and thought-provoking site discussions, for me an unexpected highlight of *Defined by Stones* is a succinct but remarkably comprehensive *Introduction*, which compresses the fundamental geological history of Britain into (my estimate) a 400- to 500-word precis.

A handful of cave sites stand out among the list of 50 vignettes in the book. Kirkdale, Kirkhead – with several other caves nearby – and Victoria caves. Also there is Heathery Burn and its eponymous cave... a site of massive archaeological importance in Victorian times, but subsequently lost to quarrying. Other, less obvious, examples include “rock shelters”, mentioned almost incidentally in, for example, the Fell Sandstone beds of Goatscrag Hill in Northumberland, and various caves in the “Magnesian Limestone” at Ryhope in County Durham. Necessarily, all of these, alongside various allusions to natural cavities and karst features in general, sit among other geological, archaeological, and more-broadly anthropological considerations that include discussions of many types of human interaction with limestone.

Other rock types, their geological contexts and wider landscapes (natural and those created or impacted by human activities) are also included. Likewise, on a more local scale, some of the site descriptions relate to specific individual landforms – or in some cases to collections of landforms, the erratic boulders at Norber being a stand-out example. Even limestone pavements appear centre-stage at some sites (including their role as inhumation sites), or among the supporting cast elsewhere. Also included are fascinating anthropogenic features at many scales, including not only standing stones of various types, but also ones that are essentially excavations, built-up landscape modifications, or both.

Prominent within the texts is the fact that features at many sites display significance related to more than one research aspect – or theme. Helpfully (in my opinion), the author has subdivided his 50 chosen sites into four broad themes, and the text describing many sites admits to such overlapping significances – or at least to recognition of multiple possibilities. “*Shelter and defence*” (11 sites) is an obvious broad theme, as is “*Ritual*” (20 sites), whereas “*Implements*” (11 sites) might be considered more tightly constrained, and “*Freeze and thaw*” (8 sites) feels potentially more wide-ranging. Thus, some overlaps must be expected, and the underlying knowledge, interpretation and opinions are inevitably at least partly volatile. The considerations presented are fascinating, if not provoking, but a ubiquitous scope for subjective speculation forms a major part of the enjoyment of the balanced and presumably objective coverage provided by the author.

Nowadays, if drafting a review, I don’t embark on seeking things to criticise, preferring to be ready to enthuse about the underpinning concept of a book (and, in this case, its predecessors). A comment met regularly within *Cave and Karst Science* reviews is that the item in question “...deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone with interests in caves and karst”. I’m not sure that I can recommend *Defined by Stones* in quite those terms. Instead, I can say that I believe it would be a worthy addition to the bookshelf, bookcase or even the coffee table of many who have specific related interests; more so those who have a more eclectic fascination with aspects of the natural world and, specifically, of northern England.

Contemplating the review, I started by reading the many broadly “introductory”, “endnote”, “sources”, and “acknowledgements” sections, which help to set context and introduce the author. It then seemed productive (also enjoyable) to “cherry pick” my way (via the sites list) to places I had heard about and/or visited. Moving on, I switched from picking cherries, simply to playing bagatelle, ricocheting between new, enthralling, eye-opening descriptions. For me, that is the most fulfilling way to read this book.

In a nutshell, *Defined by Stones* provides undoubted “good value”, as do its still available predecessors. It’s also gratifying that the proceeds from the book sales go to charity.

Review by: **David Lowe**.