

Beggarwood Down and Old Down, an Archaeological Story

Material supplied by David Hopkins;

In the Mesolithic, about 10,000 BC to 4,500 BC, the population were hunter gatherers, moving through the landscape. They were very familiar with their environment and their wanderings were certainly planned seasonal, coming to the places where their food could be found, perhaps living in small camps and then moving on. These people lived in the landscape but did not shape it. On Old Down and Beggarwood, the downs would have been wooded, but with glades of grassland where strong winds had ripped glades into the woodland. In these glades grass could grow as the break in the canopy allowed light to penetrate to ground level, and animals would graze. The woodland would have provided fruits and nuts and plants, and the animals of the wood, such as deer, would have been hunted.

The archaeological evidence for the Mesolithic people is limited. Their camps were small and temporary and rarely leave a trace that we can find today. Their stone tools are however distinctive. These have been found through out the Basingstoke area and we can be sure that Mesolithic families roamed across these downs.

In the Neolithic, 4,500 BC to 2000 BC the landscape started to be bent to the will of man. The development of agriculture in this period meant that woods were cut and fields were created for farming. Farms, settled occupation, appear and along with these, burial mounds known as Long Barrows. We can't be sure, but it may be at this times that the downs are first cleared. If this is so, it seems most likely that they would have been open grazing downland rather than tilled. Whilst no evidence of fields or farms have been found on these two downs Neolithic stone tools, including fine polished stone axes, have been found in Basingstoke. In all probability the first fields and farms in the Basingstoke area appeared at this time down in the light and fertile soils of the Loddon Valley.

By the Bronze Age, 2000 BC to 750 BC, we can surmise that these downs had been cleared of trees and are grassland. In this period, when metal working first appears, agricultural practise spreads, with more fields created, land boundaries constructed and farms are more common. On Old Down, overlooking the farming communities in the valley below, were two Bronze Age burial mounds. They were at the top of Old Down just slightly west of the A30. From here they would be visible to people coming in to the area, and to people in the valley, and they asserted the kind of rights to the land that the presence of your ancestors will bring you. That they were created to be visible implies that the tree cover was now removed. That the burial mound survive long enough to be mapped in the 19th century also tells us that the down was used for grassland rather than being ploughed. However both mounds were ploughed down and away during the 20th century. By the time that the parks were created one mound could just be discerned as a slight swelling in the ploughed field, and later as a ring of dark grass when the grass started growing. A small bank and a ring of trees was put in to mark this ancient spot and so now it is easy for visitors to see where it was. At the eastern end of Beggarwood there had been another Bronze Age burial mound. This is only recorded as a ring ditch. A ring ditch is the circular ditch around a mound from which the mound material is quarried. Even when the mound has been ploughed away the ditch survives below ground and affects the growing crop on the surface. This causes a ring pattern in the crop that betrays where the mound once stood.

In the Bronze Age the downs were probably grazed. Burial mounds standing sentinel on the flanks over looking the farmers in the valley. However, twice whilst the new houses were being built at Beggarwood Bronze Age crouched burials were found. Inhumations where the skeleton is found in a pit showing the body had been laid in a crouched position, like curled up sleepers. Perhaps these downs overlooking the valley had a special significance.

In the Iron Age, 750 BC to 43 AD, Beggarwood seems positively to have been buzzing with activity. Several settlements are known up on this high ridge. In the west, where the Blue Hut Café used to stand an Iron Age oval enclosure was excavated when the road was built. This small round enclosure was a small domestic settlement, possibly occupied by an extended family, with many pits and post holes showing the location of structures within the area enclosed by the ditch. Loom weights are evidence of weaving, and the bones of horse, cattle, pigs and sheep were found. Charcoal and seeds tell us about the trees in the area, oak, field maple, ash and hazel.

To the east of this site the road curves around the edge of the down, and in this way avoided a large Iron Age farmstead, which lies secure below the turf. Its presence is known from crop marks seen on aerial photographs. Like a ring ditch, the ditches and pits of the settlement survive and influence the growing crop causing traceable patterns. These crop marks show a large circular enclosure, where the farmstead was, surrounded by tracks and paddocks.

Further east still, behind the shelter belt of trees, was yet another Iron Age farmstead. This one was excavated by archaeologists before the houses were built. In the early Iron Age around 5 to 6 hundred BC there was a square enclosure, with evidence of domestic occupation, and a mixed economy of crops, such as Wheat, Barley and Oats, and of animals (cow, sheep and pigs). In the middle Iron Age this was replaced by small oval enclosure a little to the south, of a similar economy. The evidence suggests that this was in turn abandoned and even ploughed over. But by the Late Iron Age and into the Roman period a large and increasingly complex enclosure. Large ditches defined these enclosures and protected the farmstead. Postholes show us where their round, conically thatched houses stood, and pits tell us something of their lives. The pits were originally dug to store corn. When they were no longer used they were then filled up with rubbish. It is through the study of the things they threw away which tells us what tools they used, who they traded with, what cereals they grew, what animals they raised, how and at what age they butchered them. The enclosure and the paddocks do suggest that this was a farm that had a lot of animals, and it seems likely that the farmers here took their herds south and east into the adjacent area which was at this time still wooded with a much lower density of population.

These Iron Ages continued in use into the Roman period, but went out of use eventually. There are many Roman sites in Basingstoke and it seems likely that Basingstoke was quite an important area at this time. The western edge of Old Down is defined by the line of the Roman road from Silchester to Winchester. The road is long since abandoned, but its line remains important in the landscape as a boundary even today. Along what is now a hedge once trod Roman soldiers on their way to garrison Silchester, their hob nailed sandals crunching on the gravel road surface. Horses thundered along carrying the imperial messengers. Creaking wagons of trade goods lumbered up from the coast bringing foreign goods like wine and olive oil, as well as local goods like New Forest Pottery or oysters from the Solent.

A small Roman cremation cemetery was found when some of the houses were built close to Beggarwood Lane. These were found and excavated by the Basingstoke Archaeological society, and comprised of up turned pots set into the ground, with ash and burnt bone.

By the medieval period all that was left of this rich history was the line of the Roman road and two Bronze Age burial mounds. The rest was lost to memory but awaiting discovery by archaeologists. We think that these downs would have been grazed by sheep and rabbits. There was a warren in this area. It was the warren to the village of Hatch. Hatch Warren. Hatch was a lost village. The name was recorded but its location lost. It was rediscovered by archaeologists when Hatch Warren houses were built. A manor, a small church and a small village, close to what is now the community centre.

The village might have had its origins in the Saxon period, but was abandoned in the fifteenth century. Part of it is preserved under the open space behind the community centre here. The settlement was

around a small two cell church, with a nave and a chancel. There was a grave yard around the church and about 500 graves were laid out, enclosed by a ditch. In the 11th and 12th centuries the village included a small manorial complex.

In the 12th to 14th centuries the manorial complex had been abandoned and the settlement was clearly in decline and by the mid 14th century occupation appears to have ended. By the late 15th century the site has been levelled.

The archaeological evidence ties in with the historical evidence. The site existed in Domesday, 1086, and was passed from Alsi, a Saxon, to Norman. This manor became amalgamated with that of Cliddesden, with Cliddesden was dominant. The slow and general decline of the settlement follows and in 1378, about the time that occupation ceases in the archaeological record the king is petitioned for the village to be relieved of paying tithes as no one lives in the parish and the church is ruinous. In 1380 the petition was granted and Hatch disappeared from the records.

Supplementary

Blue Hut Cafe Site (Early to Mid Iron Age)

Animal bones were found in the ditches and pits, but they were fragmented, particularly those found in the ditch. There was limited evidence to call upon. Other than small mammals and frog (shrew, vole, wood mouse, which probably found themselves trapped after falling into open pits) the animals were all domestic. Horse, cattle, sheep, pig and dog. There was some evidence of butchery marks, as well as some evidence of dog gnawing. However, one metacarpal allows the estimation of the height of one of the ponies which was 13 hands.

The only plant remains found was charcoal, and this will have been the remains of fuel. Therefore as sample of vegetation it will be biased to those woods collected for fuel. It included oak, field maple, elder, ash, hazel, buckthorn, hawthorn, rowan, service and white beam. These represent mature woodland, hedge and scrub, and of course the hazel may well bring forward images of managed sustainable woodland.

Kennel Farm

The animal bone assemblage was fragmented, but included in addition to that found at the Blue Hut site, goat and a small amount of deer. Goat was dominant, and the picture of goat herds being used in the less intensively farmed landscape to the south east is tempting.

There was poor preservation of plant remains, but some charred fragments did survive. These represented both crops and associated weeds. Wheat, Barley, Oats and Rye were found. "The presence of chenopodiums suggests a nitrogen rich soil" to quote the report.

Some pulses were found. Rosehip was also found, although this may be deliberate collection for medicinal purpose.

Images

There are some very good images that would illustrate these periods which are held by the Hampshire County Museums Service, done by a chap called Mike Codd.