The Landscape Archaeology of Martin Down

Martin Down and the surrounding area contain a variety of well-preserved archaeological remains, largely because the area has been unaffected by modern agriculture and development. This variety of site types and the quality of their preservation are relatively unusual in the largely arable landscapes of central southern England. Bokerley Dyke, Grim's Ditch, the short section of medieval park boundary bank and the two bowl barrows west of Grim's Ditch, form the focus of the Martin Down archaeological landscape and, as such, have been the subject of part excavations and a detailed survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. These investigations have provided much information about the nature and development of early land division, agriculture and settlement within this area during the later prehistoric and historic periods.

*See attached map for locations of key sites*

**A ritual Neolithic Landscape.....**

**Feature 1. The Dorset Cursus**

The Cursus dates from 3300 BCE which makes it contemporary with the earthen long barrows on Cranborne Chase: many of these are found near, on, or within the Cursus and since they are still in existence they help trace the Cursus' course in the modern landscape. The relationship between the Cursus and the alignment of these barrows suggests that they had a common ritual significance to the Neolithic people who spent an estimated 0.5 million worker-hours in its construction.

A cursus circa 6.25 miles (10 kilometres) long which runs roughly southwest-northeast between Thickthorn Down and Martin Down. Narrow and roughly parallel-sided, it follows a slightly sinuous course across the chalk downland, crossing a river and several valleys. The monument in fact comprises two cursuses laid out end to end, the earlier southwestern (Gussage) portion terminating on Bottlebush Down. Both are defined by parallel banks with external ditches, though for much of their length these are visible only as cropmarks or soilmarks. The southwestern end survives as an earthwork. RCHME fieldwork in the (?) 1950s recorded the bank here as surviving to a height of more than 4 feet in places, and up to 30 feet in width. The ditch was also up to 30 feet across and up to 3.5 feet deep. The width of the cursus at this point was measured as circa 350 feet. This southwestern stretch is relatively straight though it changes course northeast of Gussage Hill before heading to its terminal on Bottlebush Down. The northeastern (Pentridge) Cursus then continues on a slightly different alignment, adjusting its course slightly on a few occasions before terminating on Martin Down. The cursus incorporates two long barrows. On Gussage Hill, ST 91 SE 9 lies across the interior of the cursus, while the Pentridge Cursus has SU 01 NW 47 actually incorporated into the bank of the northeastern side, although the barrow's alignment differs slightly. The full extent of the Dorset Cursus was not appreciated until the publication of Atkinson's fieldwork in 1955. The central portion, from Gussage Down to a point southwest of Pentridge, had been known as an open-ended earthwork since at least the early 19th century. The terminals survive as earthworks but hadn't been identified as parts of the same monument. The only published excavations were undertaken in 1982 by Barrett et al, who sought to interpret the cursus within a study of the prehistoric landscape of Cranborne Chase.

The overall orientation of the Cursus is northeast-southwest; it does not follow a perfectly straight line between its terminals, but consists of several straight sections (of varying lengths) with abrupt but small changes in direction. It is believed that the cursus was built in two separate phases. First the 5.6 km (3.5 mi) southwesterly section from Thickthorn Down to Bottlebush Down, sometimes
referred to as the Gussage Cursus. This was later extended another 4.3 km (2.7 mi) northeast, from Bottlebush Down to the terminal on Martin Down.

**....within a Neolithic landscape of the dead**

Neolithic Long barrows were constructed as earthen or drystone mounds with flanking ditches and acted as funerary monuments during the Early and Middle Neolithic periods (3400-2400 BC). They represent the burial places of Britain’s early farming communities and, as such, are amongst the oldest field monuments surviving visibly in the present landscape. Where investigated, long barrows appear to have been used for collective burial, often with only parts of the body selected for internment. Certain sites provide evidence for several phases of funerary monument preceding the barrow and, consequently, it is probable that long barrows acted as important ritual sites for local communities over a considerable period of time. On Cranborne Chase, some long barrows occur in groups and some are also associated with other broadly contemporary monument types, such as the Dorset Cursus. Some long barrows within this area also appear to have acted as foci for later Bronze Age round barrow groups which are concentrated within the surrounding areas. Some 500 examples of long barrows and long cairns, their counterparts in the uplands, are recorded nationally. Long barrows are known to occur across Wessex, and the concentration on Cranborne Chase is particularly significant on account of the range of examples present and their archaeological associations. Long barrows, therefore, form an important feature of the Cranborne Chase landscape. As one of the few types of Neolithic structure to survive as earthworks, and due to their comparative rarity, their considerable age and their longevity as a monument type, all long barrows on the Chase are considered to be nationally important.

**Feature 2. Long Barrows to the west of Bokerley Dyke**

The long barrows survive as roughly rectangular mounds with buried side ditches aligned roughly north west to south east. The southernmost is 80m long, 14m wide and up to 2.4m high with visible side ditches.

The northernmost is 29m long, 21m wide and up to 1.2m high, its side ditches are clearly visible on aerial photographs as buried features. This long barrow was excavated by Hoare and Cunnington in the early 19th century. The finds were Anglo-Saxon and related to a 7th century intrusive burial. An extended female skeleton had been interred, possibly laid on a bed, and finds included an ivory ring possibly from a pouch bag, a small hook, a buckle, 2 glass beads, a jet bead, and a millefiori plaque suspended from a chain. The central long barrows are closely associated with the north east terminal of the Dorset Cursus. They are seen by various authors as either two separate long barrows or possibly with the southern barrow being an extension to the northern one thus forming a bank barrow.

The northern mound measures 52m long, 16m wide and up to 2.4m high at the southern end. The southern mound measures 88m long, 18m wide and up to 1.3m long at the southern end. The side ditches are preserved as buried features, which seem to be separate, although Atkinson (1955) suggested they were contiguous.
At the south western end of the southernmost long barrow is a small square enclosure measuring up to 18.5m long and surviving as a platform surrounded by a slight ditch with no visible entrance.

**Dividing up the landscape in the Bronze Age – Creating Linear Boundaries**

These are substantial earthwork features comprising single or multiple ditches and banks which may extend over distances varying between less than 1km to over 10km. They survive as earthworks or as linear features visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs or as a combination of both. The evidence of excavation and study of associated monuments demonstrate that their construction spans the millennium from the Middle Bronze Age, although they may have been re-used later. The scale of many linear boundaries has been taken to indicate that they were constructed by large social groups and were used to mark important boundaries in the landscape; their impressive scale displaying the corporate prestige of their builders. They would have been powerful symbols, often with religious associations, used to define and order the territorial holdings of those groups who constructed them. Linear earthworks are of considerable importance for the analysis of settlement and land use in the Bronze Age; all well preserved examples will normally merit statutory protection.

**Feature Three: Bokerley Ditch**

Bokerley Dyke is a linear earthwork circa 5.75 km long and is one of the most substantial and visible of all the monuments on and in the vicinity of Martin Down. It has been the subject of part excavations and detailed survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. These investigations have provided much information on the nature and development of the earthwork. Bokerley Dyke is thought to have originated in the Bronze Age or Early Iron Age and was an important political and cultural boundary which divided areas showing markedly different patterns of land division. Once established, the dyke continued in use but was remodelled and adapted to suit the needs of the later periods. These included the more defensive requirements of the later Iron Age and Roman periods and it was possibly then that the dyke became the focus of the associated series of earthworks making up the 'Bokerley Line'. Excavations by General Pitt-Rivers in the vicinity of the junction are the chief source of information concerning the structural sequence and date of the earthwork (Pitt- Rivers, Excavations III, 3-239). His report has been the subject of reinterpretation by C F C Hawkes (Arch. J. CIV (1947), 62-78). Further excavations on the dyke were carried out by P A Rahtz in 1958, in advance of road widening (Arch. J., CXVIII (1961), 65-99).

The name Bokerley Dyke or Bokerley Ditch appears first in the medieval period (Bockedic 1280). The earliest 10th century reference is merely to 'dich'. The name 'Bokerley' appears to be descriptive and to relate quite specifically to deer ('Buck' and 'Wood clearing') and so plausibly to the 'chase' and the 13th or early 14th century Blagden deer park, which at that time was bounded at the north east by Bokerley Dyke.

**Feature Four: Grim’s Ditch**

This is also of probable Bronze Age origin. It consist of
4a Grim’s Ditch – 4a The three linear earthworks are aligned broadly from north to south and include: at the south, an earthwork c.570m long; a second earthwork, c.1.81km long, running west and then NNW from the southern earthwork; an ‘L’-shaped earthwork c.300m long adjoining the northern end of the second earthwork.

4b Grim’s Ditch is also of probable Bronze Age origin, its almost straight course here contrasts with the more irregular path of Bokerley Dyke. As the major linear earthwork south west of the central section of Bokerley Dyke, it forms an additional strand to the ‘Bokerley Line’.

4c two associated linear earthworks of Bronze Age date in Vernditch Chase, the longer of which forms part of Grim’s Ditch, an extensive series of prehistoric boundaries lying mainly east of Bokerley Dyke. The section of Grim’s Ditch runs broadly eastward from the Hampshire/Dorset county boundary for c.1.91km, crossing part of the Martin Down National Nature Reserve before entering Vernditch Chase.

4d The monument includes two adjoining linear earthworks running eastward from Bokerley Dyke, a levelled, elongated barrow, a bowl barrow and overlapping Iron Age and Romano-British settlements on Tidpit Common Down. The eastern earthwork and the barrows are of Bronze Age date. The western linear earthwork, which makes a detour around the levelled barrow, is thought to be of Late Iron Age date. This linear earthwork (SM25607) abuts SM25610 (Bokerley Dyke) but for purposes of clarity these monuments have been defined as separate schedulings. The linear earthworks, which form part of Grim’s Ditch, run eastward along a ridge from Bokerley Dyke on Blagdon Hill. They have a combined length of 1.82km: the western earthwork is c.1.06km long, the eastern one c.0.76km. The junction of the two earthworks, recorded as crop marks on aerial photographs, occurs in an area now under cultivation c.140m east of the levelled barrow. The western earthwork makes two almost right-angled turns c.60m west of the levelled barrow, probably to avoid earlier field boundaries, and a small diversion takes it around the south side of the barrow.

A Bronze Age funerary Landscape

Feature 5: Bowl barrows.

These, the most numerous form of round barrow, are funerary monuments dating from the Late Neolithic period to the Late Bronze Age, with most examples belonging to the period 2400-1500BC. They were constructed as earthen or rubble mounds, sometimes ditched, which covered single or multiple burials. They occur either in isolation or grouped as cemeteries and often acted a focus for burials in later periods. Often superficially similar, although differing widely in size, they exhibit regional variations in form and a diversity of burial practices. There are over 10,000 surviving bowl barrows recorded nationally (many have already been destroyed), occurring across lowland Britain. Often occupying prominent locations, they are a major historic element in the modern landscape and their considerable variation of form and longevity as a monument type provide important information on the diversity of beliefs and social organisations amongst early prehistoric communities. They are
particularly representative of their period and a substantial proportion of surviving examples are considered worthy of protection.

5a. The three closely spaced bowl barrows, aligned from north to south, lie alongside the bank of the southern earthwork c.110m north of its junction with Bokerley Dyke. All three barrow mounds are irregular, probably as a result of antiquarian excavation, of which there are no known records.

5b One of several dispersed barrows in the National Nature Reserve on Martin Down east of Bokerley Dyke. The barrow lies on a slight south east facing slope. The barrow has a mound 19m in diameter and c.1m high. Surrounding the mound is a ditch from which material was quarried during its construction. This has become infilled over the years but survives as a buried feature c.2m wide. The surface of the mound shows no irregularities which might indicate the site of antiquarian excavation, although this is known to have occurred to other barrows on Martin Down.

5c The barrow has a mound c.11m in diameter and 0.5m high. Surrounding the mound is a ditch from which material was quarried during the construction of the monument. The ditch has become infilled over the years but survives as a buried feature c.1.5m wide. The surface of the mound shows no irregularities which might indicate the site of antiquarian excavation, although this is known to have occurred to other barrows on Martin Down.

5d The bowl barrows survive as circular mounds surrounded by buried quarry ditches from which the construction material was derived. Three are grouped centrally at the southern end of the central long barrows and the fourth is to the south east of the southernmost long barrow. The mounds vary in size from 14m up to 18m in diameter and from 0.3m up to 1.5m high.

A Middle Bronze Age farmed landscape with settlement

Small enclosed settlements dating from the Middle Bronze Age are often associated with earlier field systems and are known on some sites to have replaced earlier unenclosed settlements. Enclosures of both sub-rectangular and curvilinear plan are known; the sites are wholly or partly surrounded by a ditch, bank or palisade, or by a combination or succession of all three. Where excavated, sites have usually been found to contain a small group of domestic buildings sufficient for a single or extended family group, although a few larger enclosures are known. Evidence of a succession of buildings has been found on some sites. The buildings are usually circular in plan but occasional rectangular structures are known. Both types of building would have provided a combination of living accommodation and storage or working areas.

Feature 6. A middle Bronze Age enclosure

The monument includes a sub-rectangular enclosure situated near the head of a dry valley on Martin Down, a National Nature Reserve. Excavations carried out by General Pitt Rivers in 1895-6 showed that the enclosure was constructed in the Middle Bronze Age but evidence was also found of later Romano-British activity on the site. Approximately half of the interior and all of the bank and ditch were excavated, the present earthwork being Pitt
Rivers’ reconstruction. The enclosure is surrounded by a single bank and external ditch and has internal measurements of c.90m (south west to north east) by 63m. A gap of c.40m occurs at the eastern end of the north side, which excavation showed to be original.

An Iron Age and Roman farmed Landscape...

Feature 7. An overlapping Iron Age and Romano-British settlement. These lie toward the eastern end of the ridge and are marked by earthworks extending over an area of almost 4ha. The earlier settlement, which lies within an enclosure measuring c.140m (west to east) by at least 80m, occupies the northern part of the site. The area of occupation expanded southwards and eastwards in the later period, but was not then enclosed. At least one hut circle of the earlier settlement and occupation platforms of the later one were recorded during a survey of the site by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

Feature 6. Excavation at the Bronze Age enclosure showed that the ditch had silted-up almost completely by the Romano-British period and a child burial found within it is thought to date from this phase. Finds recovered during Pitt Rivers’ excavation included much worked flint, animal bone and Bronze Age and Romano-British pottery. Recent reconsideration of the pottery distribution shows that Romano-British material was much more commonly recovered from the ditch than from the interior of the enclosure and it has thus been suggested that the focus of activity at this time lay beyond rather than within the enclosure, perhaps in the area of a field system not far to the north

...not forgetting the Ackling Dyke

Feature 8. A Roman road which originally ran from Old Sarum (Sorviodunum) to the hillfort of Badbury Rings (Vindocladia) a total distance of approximately 22 miles (35km). The depth and height of the agger has led archaeologists to suggest that this road was constructed to make a statement of Roman dominance over the Iron Age peoples in this area.

A landscape of Post Roman Change

The impact of the end of Roman rule in the AONB and the interpretation of the fifth century in particular is difficult because the use of coinage and the mass production of pottery died away. However the boundary of two of the civitas, between the Durotriges to the west and the Belgae to the east, may be represented by the line of the east facing Bokerley Dyke.

Similarly ‘Teffont’ in the north of the AONB means ‘spring on the boundary’. The limited archaeological evidence suggests that between AD 450 and AD 675 there was contact and intermingling between the indigenous population and immigrants in Wiltshire. This evidence includes the adoption of ‘generic’ novel styles of buildings such as the Grubenhause (a sunken feature building) which is absent from West Wiltshire, and the use of new burial customs including deposition in prehistoric barrows and the accompaniment of inhumations with distinctive Anglo-Saxon artifacts, including brooches and pins.

Evidence from place names and burials can be used to chart the sphere of Saxon influence across the Cranborne Chase and northwards to the West Wiltshire Down. During the late 5th and 6th centuries AD, there appeared to be a boundary running north south across the AONB dividing the in coming Saxon culture in the east and the indigenous culture in the west.
During late 5th and 6th centuries AD Anglo-Saxon burials are evident as far west as Teffont in the Nadder Valley, and Warminster in the Wyley Valley, but absent from the extreme South West of Wiltshire going into Dorset, including the Upper Wyley and the Deverills. It is possible that the existing Civitas boundaries such as at Teffont or Bokerley Dyke representing the ‘frontier’ of Saxon influence at this period, possibly indicated by the final built up phase of the bank.

During the 7th century AD the sphere of Saxon influence had finally subsumed the rest of the Chase, represented by the Saxon burial barrows at Alvediston, and Maiden Bradley.

A Medieval Landscape Hunting Landscape – Cranborne Chase

The modern perception of Medieval hunting forests is of great swathes of trees, but in the Medieval period it meant a place that was outside normal laws. Both the terms ‘Forest’ and ‘Chase’ meant hunting grounds and were terms used in legal documents and disputes from the Medieval period onwards, and there is often overlap and uncertainty in their usage and distinguishing between them.

Feature 9. Vernditch Chase

The inner Cranborne Chase, in which the Chase laws were most strictly applied, was split into a series of walks. These provided the infrastructure through which the hunting grounds could be maintained. There were eight named ‘Walks’, and six of these were grouped into the inner Chase bounds, forming the heartland of the Chase. From west to east these were West Walk, Bursey Stool, Rushmore, Staplefoot, Cobiley and Vernditch.

The latter walk, Vernditch, was sold off as discussed above in 1671. In each walk the majority of the area was woodland which was divided into copses.

Hawkins (1980), for example, describes how Cobiley Walk was divided into an unbroken block of 50 copses on Thomas Aldwell’s map of 1618. Large parts of this woodland still survive. The other walks were Alderholt and Chettered.

A post-medieval landscape of open sheep grazing

The surviving open chalk downland represents traces of what would have once been large tracts of downland. In the 18th and 19th century this land formed a major part of the sheep-corn husbandry system of farming.

In the 18th century the open downland supported vast flocks of sheep, marvelled at by Daniel Defoe in his travels as ‘a sight truly worth observation’ (Furbank et.al. 2006: 91).

However, much of this land was transformed into fields in the 19th and 20th century, leaving only small areas surviving, notably at Martin Down.

In the context of historic landscape character, however, it also represents an often unappreciated historical survival of land use and grazing regimes, which was once more ubiquitous and widespread and in this sense is as nationally important as the Scheduled Ancient Monuments which are found scattered across it.
A 19th and early 20th century Military Landscape

Feature 10. Military Archaeology – Earliest rifle range here in 19th century, the present day earthworks date to the 1940’s.

Today a landscape for wildlife and Recreation......

An interesting reflection about the area of Martin Down in particular is that the protection and continuing survival of this area is due firstly to its use as a military area in the early 20th century and latterly to its status as a National Nature Reserve, which is based on the quality of its grassland habitat and the wide range of downland flowers, insects and birds it supports

........tomorrow ......to be continued

ER/PP February 2015