

NEROCHE LANDSCAPE EVOLUTION

by Rjijijii MMokokkk

The landscape of the Blackdown Hills has evolved since the last Ice Age from tundra to woodland and farmland. This has been due to climate change and the influence of man, who over millennia has tamed, controlled and exploited the land. The northern scarp of the Blackdown Hills retains a wild edge – the steep slopes made farming impractical, and the woods have been valued as resource for over 2000 years. So who has been here and how has the landscape evolved?

Since the Upper Palaeolithic, over 13000 years ago, man has left evidence of his presence. Although the last ice sheet 117,000-13,000 years ago did not reach the Blackdowns, full glacial conditions and a barren polar-desert environment prevailed until some 13000-10800 years ago. Then a warmer climate, lasting about 1200 years, saw birch and willow woodland, open grassland and scrub. With this warmth came more animals: elk, red deer, auroch and horse, with man following in

their wake and again retreating as tundra conditions returned. Scattered across the Blackdowns are indications of man's first use of the area. Palaeolithic flint and chert implements have been found in Broadway, Corfe, Poundisford, Otterford, Staple Fitzpaine, Stoke St Mary and Orchard Portman.

Although there have been few finds of Mesolithic (10,000-4000BC) material from the northern Blackdown Hills, confined to Buckland St Mary and Castle Neroche, there are other strands of evidence that point to this period being the origin of man's

influence on the Blackdowns landscape. The early Mesolithic saw a rapid transformation in the





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appearance of the landscape. Over 4000 years, a stable warm climate developed and woodland species such as birch, pine, oak, elm, hazel, alder and lime spread across the hills. Pollen evidence from Bywood Farm, Dunkeswell suggests a middle Mesolithic landscape of open grassland with oak and hazel woodland. It also indicates that lime formed a major component of the late Mesolithic woodland, and that there were small-scale woodland clearances from the late Mesolithic onwards. Clearings could have been maintained by large herbivores, such as deer and wild oxen, making easier targets for hunters. Trees would have provided the material for constructing shelters and making tools such as bows and arrows.

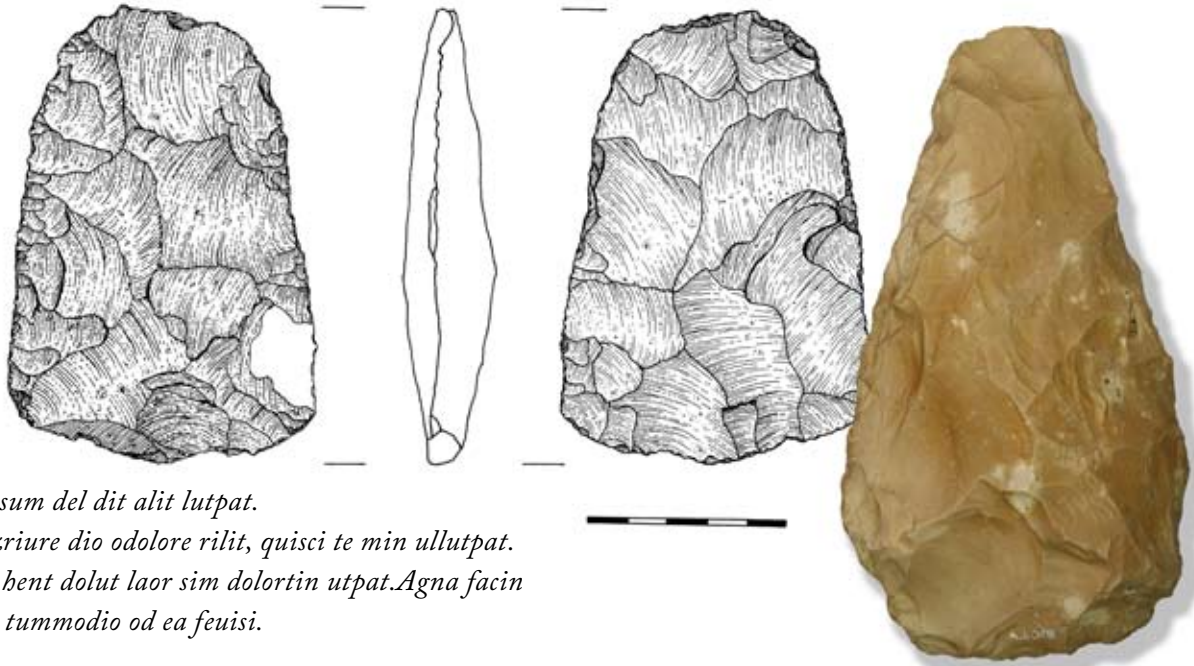
The Neolithic landscape saw highly diverse temperate forests, but as we have seen, this 'wildwood' had already begun to be affected in the later Mesolithic period. Clearance of woodland took place for arable

cultivation and pasture and the Neolithic landscape can be seen as a mosaic of small clearances, abandoned clearings and woodland where domestic animals such as cattle and pigs may have grazed. The population during the Neolithic period is not represented here by the ritual monuments seen elsewhere such as henges, stone circles, and long barrows, but their presence is confirmed through finds of flint and chert tools from Broadway, Churchstanton, Pitminster, Angersleigh and Stoke St Mary.

From the start of the Bronze Age, 2000BC, there was a significant change to a cereal-based subsistence economy. An open, man-made landscape dominated, with extensive deforestation in favour of agriculture. The Bronze Age barrows of Churchstanton, Otterford, Culmstock and Clayhidon, are the first obvious sign of prehistoric occupation but other indications come from flint, bronze and pottery finds in Buckland St Mary, Curland, Pitminster, West Buckland and Hemyock. By the late Bronze Age, the agricultural revolution was well underway, fields were in evidence throughout the south-west and substantial roundhouses were built in enclosed or unenclosed settlements such as Trethellan in Cornwall, within the reaves on Dartmoor, Hayne Lane, Devon and Brean Down, Somerset. Evidence from Bywood shows that woodland clearance continued.

Iron Age (750BC-43AD) communities practised mixed subsistence farming. Where the environment could support it, the landscape was typically one of arable, pasture and managed woodland dotted with





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farmsteads. Simple hillforts appeared in the earlier Iron Age, such as Orchard Hill, while the later Iron Age saw smaller settlements become enclosed and more complex hillforts appear such as Castle Neroche. There are many more currently undated earthwork and crop-mark enclosures which could relate to this period. Oak and hazel woodland continued to be significant throughout and after the Iron Age, probably on steeper slopes and possibly under management for the iron industry.

There appears to be little environmental change throughout the Roman 'occupation' (AD43-AD410). Arable cultivation continued within a mixed farming economy, but the known Roman presence is sparse

in comparison with other locations in Devon and Somerset. The continuation of oak and hazel woodland indicates a certain management, possibly in association with the iron extraction industry that is just coming to light for the Blackdown Hills. The Romans were probably coppicing rather than clear-felling in order to gain wood fuel. The route of the M5 near Wellington revealed a number of Roman sites, but finds are also known from Buckland St Mary, Pitminster, Sampford Arundel, Stoke St Mary, West Buckland and Hemyock. Actual settlement sites may be included within the known but undated crop-mark or earthwork sites.

At the end of the Roman period, the Blackdown



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EXTINCT ANIMALS



Many animals that would have lived in the Neroche area have become extinct in the recent past. These include large predators such as the brown bear, the wolf and the lynx, which were hunted to extinction partly for their fur but mainly for sport. Auroch, large and dangerous wild cattle, were wiped out by prehistoric hunters, partly as a test of manhood and also because they competed with domestic cattle for food. Beavers were exterminated by humans, not because of their dam building activities, but because they were so useful. Their fur made excellent clothing, especially hats, their tails were good to eat and their scent glands were used in medicines and are still used for perfumes today. The extinction dates of these animals in the British Isles are:

- Auroch c.1,000 BC
- Brown Bear c.500 AD
- Lynx c.950 AD
- Beaver 1789 AD
- Wolf 1743 AD

Hills were probably under a civil administration from Ilchester. This governance changed to one of royal kingdoms and then to one of large estates belonging to the king and nobles and the church. Little archaeological evidence survives for this period so it is the landscape history, the environmental evidence and the documentary sources such as charters and place-names that combine to shed light on the 'Dark Ages'. From the Bywood pollen evidence it is known that pasture and woodland is accompanied by localised cereal production at the end of the 10th Century AD and there is also evidence for continued iron working on the southern Blackdowns. The Domesday Book of 1086 gives an indication of the complexity of the society that evolved in this time. The only find of this date from the northern Blackdown Hills is an Anglo Saxon vessel found near Wellington Hill in the 19th Century.

Throughout the medieval period (AD1066-AD1540), the Blackdown Hills had a distinctive landscape with farmed valley sides colonised by the Domesday manors of dispersed settlements, isolated farmsteads and small hamlets, areas of woodland on the higher steeper slopes and expanses of open common pasture on the flatter hill top plateaux, very different to the medieval landscape to the north-east where parish settlement was usually based on a single village. The Royal Forest of Neroche and the many deer parks show that the Blackdown Hills were valued as a resource for both timber and livestock by the royals and ecclesiastics. The castle at Hemyock



and the motte and bailey at Castle Neroche, churches, moated sites and deserted settlements are the visible elements of medieval life left today. Evidence of quarrying, parks, mills, woodland management, mining and warrens are more widespread, but less immediately visible. It was only in the 18th and 19th Centuries that the final areas of common land on the flat topped plateaux were enclosed.

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