

Dorset National Park - Short Case Study Series

To supplement evidence submitted in 2013, 2014 and 2018 on the environment, heritage and biodiversity, and the recreational opportunities in the proposed National Park.



1. The Isle of Purbeck - an Archaeological Case Study

National Parks have a statutory responsibility to conserve and enhance their landscapes and cultural heritage. Dorset is immensely rich in such heritage and this short report focuses on just one area, the Isle of Purbeck in the east of the proposed Dorset National Park area, to highlight the exceptional national and indeed international significance of the early heritage of this part of England.

The Isle of Purbeck is bounded by the River Frome to the north and extends as far west as Lulworth Cove, encompassing a landscape of heathland, Wealden clays, chalk downs and limestone beds. The underlying geology has dictated and affected the development of settlements through time. Palaeobotanical evidence has confirmed the evolution of the local environment. Recent archaeological work at Worth Matravers in the south of Purbeck has uncovered evidence for 5600 years of continuous occupation while at Bestwall Quarry on the edge of Poole Harbour occupation spans 10,000 years. The results from these two sites provide a framework of how this part of south east Dorset developed.

PIONEERS AND THE FIRST SETTLERS

Mesolithic (c. 9000-4000 BC)

Evidence for the activities of Mesolithic nomadic hunter gatherers dating to about 9000-8000 BC has come from two occupation sites in Purbeck; on Winfrith Heath and at Bestwall Quarry. Flint tools, fashioned from easily accessible river gravels enabled groups of people to hunt for game, fowl and fish. Flintwork of this date and later has been found all over the area confirming that these groups roamed widely utilising the area's natural resources. It is probable that much of the land at that time was covered by open woodland of pine and birch.

Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (c. 4000-1700 BC)

The subtle change from nomadic hunter-gatherers to semi-sedentary farmer-gardeners was gradual and probably complex. Neolithic features first appeared in south east England in the 41st century BC moving progressively west and north. Evidence for this Neolithic society is characterised by clearances of the landscape, monument building, domestic architecture, ceramic and stone artefacts and the domestication of animals and plants for agriculture. This cultural package came to Britain from the continent via the English Channel when sea levels were lower and the crossing much shallower. The oak-dominated landscape was steadily opened up by small populations who grew crops and husbanded animals. They were however, dependant on available local natural resources.



The first Neolithic monuments to mark the landscape were causewayed enclosures which were introduced to Britain in the late 38th century BC and flourished during the 37th and 36th centuries. At Worth Matravers (see image on left) such a monument was hewn into the very bedrock on a cleared high plateau overlooking the still wooded land to the north, east and west and the English Channel to the south. The construction of the earthwork and finds of well-crafted pottery and flint tools indicate planning, organisation and the ability to provide the necessary workforces.

This class of monument is represented in Dorset by the causewayed enclosures at Maiden Castle and Hambledon Hill which were constructed in the mid-36th century BC. The construction of monumental enclosures would have entailed planning and organisation on a large scale with access to workforces who could spend time moving vast quantities of topsoil, subsoil and rock. As a consequence, such activities may have created 'group identity'. At Worth Matravers, the task of excavating large, deep ditches into the natural clay and limestone bedrock would not have been easy and suggests a nearby society of considerable size.

Lesser features are no longer visible and it is only by rigorous archaeological work that they are recovered. East of Wareham, at Bestwall Quarry, overlooking the River Frome and on the edge of Poole Harbour, a series of four Early Neolithic pits were dated by radiocarbon to 3900-3640 BC. Further along the coast overlooking Weymouth Bay at Southdown Ridge, a series of 21 pits were similarly dated. Worth, Bestwall and Southdown are rare examples of continuity of occupation from the Neolithic to the Post-Roman period and beyond.

The next major event was the construction of long barrows, which were initially used as communal burial places. A long barrow is sited on Ailwood Down approximately 4km to the north of Worth Matravers and a rounded long barrow, also on the Purbeck ridge, is 6km distant near Church Knowle.

The appearance of pottery in the early part of the fourth millennium BC indicates a cultural change in lifestyle. A relatively settled existence would have required new sets of communal obligations, possibly reinforced by ceremony and feasting. This novel ceramic material with heat-resisting qualities was suitable for use as containers and for developing new ways of cooking and serving foodstuffs. The existence of rich clay deposits in Purbeck no doubt assisted this change.

Kimmeridge shale exposures lie approximately 5 km to the west of Worth Matravers and the shale 'industry' saw its beginnings in the Neolithic period. Initially this was a prestige material used for the manufacture of exotic and unusual objects which were transported long distances and exchanged for other goods. Shale jewellery consisting of a complete arc pendant and beads was recovered from Peak Camp in Gloucestershire indicating the status of this material. Stone axe heads found at Bestwall Quarry and made from Cornish gabbro rock, indicate exchange links with the West Country.



The Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age spanned the period c. 3000-1700 BC and during this time the landscape was opened up. At Bestwall Quarry, there is evidence for agriculture in the form of charred cereals and extensive finds of Beaker sherds indicating pottery manufacture. Again, settlement must have been close by.

A bronze age chisel from Worth Matravers.

MIDDLE BRONZE AGE (c. 1700 - 1000 BC)

Bestwall Quarry provided radiocarbon-dated evidence for the development of extensive field systems and associated houses; it is possible that some of the fields in the immediate area of Worth Matravers may have their origins at this time. Human cremations indicated that the dead were buried near their settlements. More visible in the landscape, and generally in elevated positions, are the numerous burial mounds of this period which are scattered all over Purbeck. The associated settlements however, have not yet been located.

At Bestwall Quarry, pottery making continued throughout the period. There is evidence too at Worth Matravers that small-scale production was taking place there. Trade and exchange of shale goods and stone artefacts continued.

LATE BRONZE AGE c. 1000-800 BC

Farming practices locally were based on a mixed agricultural system of cereal growing and the raising of livestock. On the Purbeck limestone areas a trend towards sheep rearing took place. The tradition of post-built roundhouses continued as evidenced at Bestwall Quarry and Worth Matravers, as did the manufacture of pottery, the designs of which were conservative and long-lived.

INTO THE IRON AGE

The Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition c. 800-600BC

Society underwent changes at this time which are dramatically illustrated at Worth Matravers. Excavation revealed a midden site which was formed during this period. These places are categorised as 'ceremonial feasting places, locations for the structured deposition of farmyard detritus and communal meeting places'. Such sites are rare with limited distributions in Wiltshire and the Thames Valley with an outlier at Llanmaes in Glamorgan which is on the western edge of their distribution. Worth Matravers is the southernmost. The presence of such a site in Purbeck is noteworthy not least since within a couple of kilometres radius of Worth Matravers are at least 12 other occupation sites of this date, suggesting that the area was of some importance. The quantity of material from Worth Matravers is exceptional and was derived from the accumulating midden deposit and pits which were cut into it. The finds include large amounts of pottery, animal bone and shale and smaller quantities of metalwork and even human bone. Pottery styles changed and a new repertoire of vessels was introduced possibly indicating new foodstuffs and certainly a new way of serving these.

A bronze Armorican axe and other objects date to the 8th-7th centuries BC and, based on their chemical compositions, it is likely that they were made in northern France. A single piece of glass, part of a broken finger ring, originated in Poland; its overland and sea journey to Worth Matravers, perhaps via France, strengthens the case for continental trade and exchange networks. Landing sites in and around Poole Harbour may also have been used. Links with the West Country continued; illustrated by the presence of a large quern of micaceous sandstone. It is possible that shale objects made in the Purbeck area were exchanged for such exotic items.

It has been noted that major midden sites such as Potterne, Bishops Cannings, All Cannings Cross and East Chisenbury all face west. The Worth Matravers site is on the west side of a small plateau and conforms to this orientation. During its occupation it would have been visible from all directions but probably had particular impact from the south and west, and perhaps of major significance was its visibility from the English Channel. It is located about 2km from the cove at Chapman's Poole which may have been the nearest safe landing for sea-borne vessels. Significantly, this part of the coastline was also the closest in distance to north-west France (Cap de la Hague in Normandy) where Armorican bronzes were manufactured for importation into southern Britain. During its period of use, the midden site would have dominated the landscape and it is highly likely that it was frequented by populations from nearby communities and those from further afield.

THE IRON AGE c. 600 BC - AD 45

Recent work has highlighted the importance of feasting in Iron Age societies. The congregation of relatively large numbers of people helped maintain social relationships, re-distributed wealth, mobilised labour, created allies or enemies and celebrated life events such as births, marriages and deaths.

Eight hillforts have been identified in south-east Dorset: the largest, at Maiden Castle near Dorchester (illustrated left), is the 'most massively defended prehistoric earthwork in Britain' with origins in the Early Neolithic. It was greatly expanded around 450 BC to become the largest hillfort in Britain and perhaps the largest in Europe. Many early hillforts appear around 800 BC; with a second wave appearing in the 4th-3rd centuries BC. These provided secure defended accommodation and storage facilities which may have functioned as possible community foci. It has been posited that hillforts served as 'central places in complex re-distribution networks...', and were religious foci and centres of coercive power'. Such sites display a 'similarity of development, hinting at common culture and



contact over long distances and long periods of time'. Such a hillfort was constructed at Flowers Barrow on the Purbeck coast. Much of this monument has now eroded into the sea. Overall in Dorset there are around 30 hillforts and perhaps 1,000 burial mounds - a remarkable concentration.

Construction work involving much planning and the mobilisation of considerable manpower also took place in Poole Harbour in the 3rd century BC, when two massive, limestone-capped moles or jetties at Ower and Green Island formed a monumental entrance to the harbour.

As the Iron Age progressed, the utilisation of the natural resources of clay, shale and stone developed. Pottery making was centred on the shores of Poole Harbour and by the River Frome. The development of this Black Burnished Ware pottery industry was of huge economic importance. The pots are recovered from all over Dorset and beyond. The shale industry grew in tandem with this. In limestone areas, stone was increasingly used for the walls of roundhouses. Cross-channel trading links at Hengistbury Head and in Poole Harbour brought in continental imports of pottery and wine; less is known of the exported items.

The tribal unit, the Durotriges, was centred on Dorset and was defined by its coinage (which was introduced at the end of the Iron Age), by its distinctive Purbeck-made Black Burnished ware pottery and by the unusual crouched burial traditions. Within the proposed area of the Dorset National Park, the upstanding archaeological remains at Maiden Castle are of national and international importance.

THE ROMAN PERIOD (c. AD 45-410)

During the Roman period, this area of south-east Dorset was of enormous significance. The mineral wealth was recognised and utilised by the Romans. The Black Burnished Ware pottery industry which used the local clays was located at Worgret, Redcliffe and Bestwall and produced pottery on a quasi-industrial scale. It has been estimated that about one million pots left Purbeck annually, the evidence for this being the presence of Black Burnished Ware all over this country as well as on the continent. The pottery production site at Bestwall Quarry is the largest to date to have been excavated. Shale working reached its apogee and objects of this material (bracelets, plates, trays and furniture) were traded widely.

Dorchester the (Roman) tribal capital was founded about AD 60 and new building forms were introduced which required large quantities of stone for the buildings and their roofs. Purbeck limestone was in great demand and the Roman towns of Britain used this material lavishly in their civic buildings. It was also used for official inscriptions and for gravestones. Purbeck at this time was economically important because of its mineral wealth, but agriculture continued to form the backbone of most communities as evidenced by the large grain dryer and associated barns at Worth Matravers. Three villas are known in the area; at Bucknowle, Creech and Brenscombe. Only Bucknowle has been comprehensively excavated.

AFTER THE ROMANS AND BEFORE THE SAXONS (c. 410-700)

Three sites in Purbeck have yielded evidence from this poorly-understood and often archaeologically invisible period. Two cemetery sites, at Ulwell and at Worth Matravers date to the latter part of this period. There were 58 burials at Ulwell, near Swanage and 27 at Worth Matravers. The inhumations were all similar in that they were aligned east-west with the head of the deceased always at the west end of the grave. Grave goods were rare (an iron knife from Ulwell and a copper alloy buckle from Worth). A stone anchor was used as a 'pillow stone' in one Worth grave, perhaps hinting at seafaring associations. The Worth cemetery was notable in that three graves held two bodies and one grave had three.

A very large area (55ha) was available for scrutiny at Bestwall Quarry and over the 13-year excavation programme, evidence for a wide-spread iron-working and charcoal burning industry was revealed. These activities were dated by radiocarbon and were seen to start in the late 400s (effectively replacing the pottery industry) and by the late 800s these activities had ceased. It is possible that the church or crown may have been associated with these industries. Iron-working was also located at Worgret and it is at this time that the first church at Wareham was established. Five memorial stones commemorating Celtic Christians date to this period. Originally grave markers, they were ultimately incorporated into the fabric of the Saxon minster church which was built by the River Frome.

ANGLO-SAXON PURBECK (AD 700-1066)



The development of the Saxon burh at Wareham with its nationally important earthen defences of the mid-9th century together with its minster church of Lady St Mary and subsidiary parish churches of St Andrews and St Martins formed the focus for the developing town which was the economic hub of the area. Wareham has reputedly the finest set of Saxon walls anywhere in England (see adjacent picture - courtesy Alamy.com). By the eve of the Norman Conquest, Wareham was Dorset's most populous town with over 1000 residents and the right to mint its own coinage. The outlying countryside was feudal, rural and agricultural based, with a developing parochial system. The crown (based

at Corfe) and the church dominated society. Domesday Book compiled in 1086 documents the Purbeck settlements, their Anglo-Saxon names hinting in many cases at their origins. The document notes their acreage, agricultural potential, woodland, livestock and inhabitants providing a snapshot of society in 1066 and then 20 years later after the political and economic upheavals of the conquest had settled.

CONCLUSION

This note has highlighted the occupation of this part of south east Dorset, and Purbeck in particular, from the earliest Neolithic when man first set down roots, to the Norman Conquest. It is a story that is largely unknown to the casual visitor. It is hardly marked by any information boards - the only ones being at Maiden Castle and a few other hill forts - notably those in the care of the National Trust. No visitor to Worth Matravers, for example, would appreciate the continuous occupation of the village for the last 5600 years.

Over the last fifty years major excavations have taken place at Eldon's Seat, Rope Lake Hole, in the Wytch Farm area, on sites around Poole Harbour and more recently at Bestwall Quarry and Worth Matravers. The results have shed light on the development of this rich landscape over ten millennia. Even minor archaeological interventions often reveal significant information. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence and it is highly likely, indeed highly probable, that sites of all periods are yet to be discovered.

A Dorset National Park would have the responsibility and opportunity for promoting awareness, understanding and enjoyment of this deep and significant cultural heritage. It is a story that deserves to be told to more people and to be better understood.

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April 2018
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