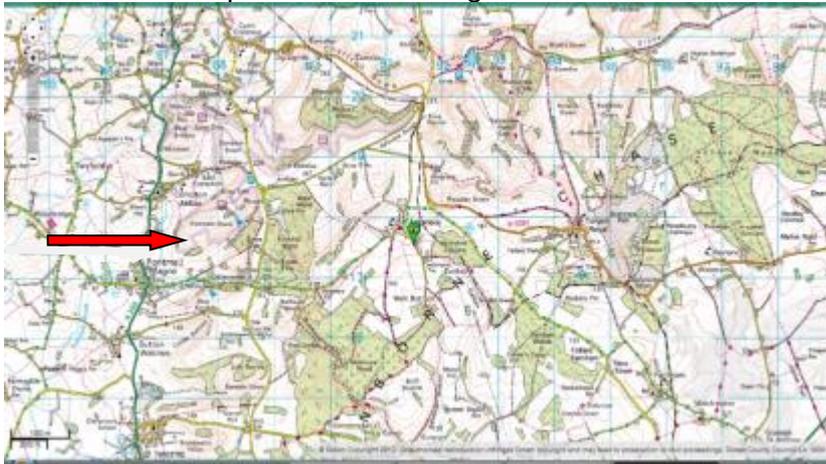


The Archaeology of Fontmell Down, Fontmell Magna, Dorset – and a test of geophysics

In 2013, as part of a degree at Bristol University, I examined the prehistoric archaeology of Fontmell Down, Fontmell Magna (ST 880 180), on National Trust property. Here, there are two scheduled cross ridge dykes (Monument No 205941) on a dramatically positioned spur end of the Cranborne Chase chalk downlands with wide views across the Blackmore Vale. My aim was to identify and clarify the archaeology of the Down, to establish whether the dykes and earthworks were part of a system of prehistoric settlement and if so what it was. The archaeology includes: remnants of field systems visible on historic aerial photos and on the ground; two cross dykes; earthworks between them and two purported round barrows.

Figure 1 shows Fontmell Down arrowed in red. The steep, sinuous scarp slopes provide a dramatic landscape and far-reaching views to north and west.



Cross ridge and spur end dykes ('cross-dykes' for short) are stretches of bank and ditch across narrow ridges, usually dated to the Late Bronze Age or the Iron and Romano-British periods.

There are many examples across the Oxdrove Ridge, of which Fontmell Down is the western spur end.

Fig 1: The north-west edge of the Cranborne Chase

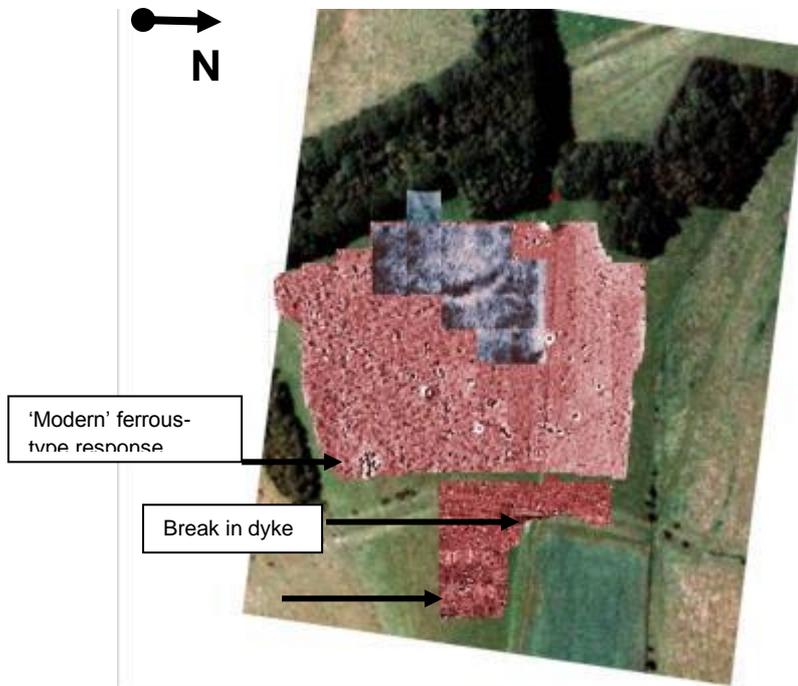
I used a variety of geophysics techniques with equipment from the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society. John Oswin managed magnetometry, resistivity, ground penetrating radar, profiling and an EDM survey. I combined the results with earthwork survey, historic aerial photography and aerial reconnaissance (in a light sports aircraft from Compton Abbas) together with field surveys. The methodology would test the veracity of the results, demonstrate my understanding of survey techniques and provide training and experience for BACAS members whose members kindly came along to help.

Middle Down

This is the area on the crown of the spur between the cross-dykes. The field survey indicated extensive earthworks here and so a magnetometry survey was carried out across the field to the east of the plantation to ascertain the nature of these disturbances. We also surveyed the break in the eastern cross-dyke to establish whether it was original or a secondary break and finally to the east of the cross-dyke where the Dorset HER is a bit woolly about the slight mounds there, described as possible round barrows (Monument 205935). We then targeted a smaller area of Middle Down and the cross-dyke break with resistivity. Unfortunately, the latter was corrupted by a faulty connection.

The first magnetometry results were frustratingly negative. There appeared to be little or no pattern to the multitude of scattered anomalies. It was obvious that linear features with

occasional high responses represented modern footways: the spur is Open Access. Aerial photographs taken in the very dry spring of 2012 indicated cultivation lines across the crown of Clubmen's Down. These can be identified in the geophysics as stripes and may be ridge and furrow or narrow rig, but were outside the scope of the project. The reading from the 'barrow' does not suggest a barrow site; instead the results look modern.



The most worrying aspect of the magnetometry survey was the lack of result across the dyke itself. The survey failed to register any difference between a 1.5m bank and associated ditch, this negative response is more apparent without the enhancement of the aerial photograph.

Chris Ellis (2012) had a similar negative result on extant features on chalk geology at Home Farm, Sixpenny Handley. He suggested that shallow features, either not filled or back-filled with a similar material to the surrounding geology would fail to provide a contrasting signal. This provided a good explanation for the Down results, but it was anticipated that the break across the dyke and the ditch with its bottom fill would

respond.

Fig 2: Pink: Magnetometry results. Grey: Resistivity results. BACAS interpreted results overlain onto an aerial photograph © Dorset County Council, explorer.geowessex.com.

The Surveyors of the Highways accounts for Fontmell Magna from the latter half of the eighteenth century indicate that the parish was responsible for maintenance of their roads and this involved metalling with considerable quantities of stone and flint. Most of this stone came from the surrounding downs: simple gouges and deeper quarries are still in evidence on the downs. Fontmell Down is littered with poor quality brittle flint nodules and irregular earth working, so the most likely explanation is that it was extensively and shallowly quarried for flint.

However, there was one area which appeared to have been avoided and we ran the resistance meter across it with rather spectacular results (Fig 2, grey). Was this the ring ditch of a settlement? Alas, this was not the case. I had been warned, but I took little notice of the local history group's advice that this area had been a golf course between the World Wars. I was advised that a small-scale local course such as this would not be constructed with extensive, expensive landscaping. I thought I could 'look' between the features. I had not reckoned with the added complications of historic quarrying. This bank and ditch is a putting green with a small associated teeing mound to north. This can clearly be seen on the 1940s oblique aerial photographs and so can the putting greens and bunkers in the vicinity of the 'barrows' on Clubmen's Down. The upkeep of the course would also require substantial breaks through the dykes for ground maintenance - would further geophysical survey prove these breaks to be modern contrivances?

The Dyke Break

We used a number of survey techniques across the break in the east dyke to ascertain whether the ditch continued under the track. These showed that the ditch is continuous. With no suggestion of an original entrance and no indication of prehistoric activity here, it must be concluded that there was no prehistoric settlement on Middle Down.

West Cross-Dyke

I had no evidence of settlement, but I still needed to argue the role of the cross-dykes in the late prehistory of the Cranborne Chase. Much of the prehistoric archaeology on the west spur end has been destroyed by intensive arable farming, the golf course and shallow quarrying. However, aerial photographs showed that a system of parallel banks ran across the west end of the spur, orientated on the west cross-dyke. The west dyke itself is unrelated in position and construction to the east cross-dyke (Fig 3). This discrepancy in morphology is witnessed along the ridges of the northern Chase escarpment.

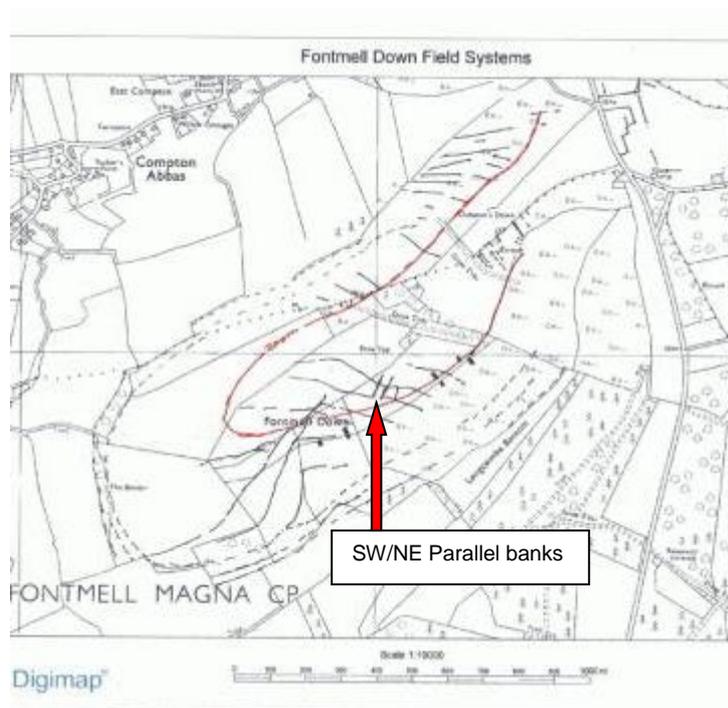


Fig 3: Field systems (in black) mapped from aerial photographs. Pathways from the southern spur end lead up to the Down. The dotted lines around the base represent lynchets still in use in the nineteenth century. Map – Courtesy of Edina Digimap

A field survey further identified a small area of banks at right angles with the alignment to the south side of the spur. These remains suggest a system of small fields orientated NW/SE, perhaps to alleviate soil erosion. Dating such systems is not straightforward, the evidence is a palimpsest and field systems have been reused and adapted across the centuries. However, there was some evidence to suggest that the spur end had been a focus for agricultural modification since the Later Bronze Age. Environmental samples from the west cross dyke suggested that following the construction of the dyke, the prevalent lank pasture and scrubby woodland was replaced by more intensively grazed grassland. The construction of the dyke was one element of a system facilitating a more intensive and managed pasture. Perhaps the dyke marked the edge of this pasture. Intensification of grazing is usually associated with the extensive coaxial field systems of the Late Bronze Age.

East Cross Dyke

There is no dating evidence for the east dyke. I could only attempt to date it by analogous comparison with dykes on the ridge and the Salisbury Plain. It appears to have been later, perhaps Iron Age. As part of continuously used agrarian systems, its meaning and purpose may well have changed over time.

Conclusions

Melbury Hill, next to Fontmell Down, is one of the highest points of the Chase. It is a prominent outstanding landmark with a viewshed encompassing the Mendips and Hengistbury Head: the trading route of the Durotrigians. To the west is the highest point of the Chase, Win Green. I contended that the heights of this corner were dedicated to pasture. There are a number of dykes running around the NW corner and closely associated with this area are banked enclosures such as Boosey Stool, Winkelbury and, perhaps, the monument at Hatt's Barn which has not been fully explored. These bank and ditch structures are still outstanding earthworks today and would have been formidable physical landscape markers, imbued with meanings: containment, protection or celebration a significant place.

I surmise that, as the break in the eastern dyke appears not to be original, it was unlikely that there was a settlement between the two dykes. However, the historic uses have masked or destroyed any such remains if they were there. What I can say is that the cross dykes differ in morphology and direction (this is true along the northern Cranborne Chase ridges, where spur end dykes and cross dykes are quite different). I concluded they were not part of the same system, and had different uses. The western dyke shares an orientation with the spur end field systems and these may have been LBA (from artefactual evidence). The eastern dyke is mightier and datable by analogy to the iron age. Influenced by Oosterhuizen (2013), I propose this dyke is one element of an enclosure of communal tribal permanent pasture.

I would be interested in comments on the methodology and the conclusions reached, especially in my interpretation of archaeology within the context of Cranborne Chase.

Gill Vickery

References

Ellis, C. 2012 'The excavation of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age-Middle Iron Age Settlement at Home Field Farm, Sixpenny Handley, Dorset' in *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* Vol. 133, pp 77-97

Oosterhuizen, S.2013 'Common People' in *British Archaeology* January/February 2013. pp 42-45