5. HUMAN INFLUENCES

Introduction

The landscape of Wiltshire as we see it today is the product of a series of major changes through which its character has been transformed by the interaction of natural and human or anthropogenic processes. Like most areas of Britain, the landscape of the county bears the imprint of successive periods of human inhabitation and land use. While the basic landforms have remained the same, the vegetation covering and land use have been subjected to constant change, although some periods of change have been far more rapid and radical than others. These changes are important not only from an archaeological perspective but also in determining the overall character of the county. The following is a summary of the past human influences on the landscape of Wiltshire.

Early Prehistory c.18,000 BC to c.2,500 BC (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic)

During the time of the last glacial maximum, from 18,000 to 11,000 BC, Wiltshire lay to the south of an ice sheet extending over Europe and was extremely cold with tundra vegetation. As the climate began to stabilise from 11,000 BC pine, juniper and birch forest spread, giving way to hazel scrub and then more mixed broad-leaved oak forest with elm, ash, alder, lime and hazel. Although flint hand axes dating from the Lower Palaeolithic period have been found in the gravels of the Avon near Salisbury and at Knowle Farm, Savernake Forest, evidence of human population in Wiltshire during the Upper Palaeolithic is very scarce and seems likely to have been confined to limited activity in river valleys such as the Kennet and the Salisbury Avon.

By 8,500 BC, the higher downland within the county may have formed upland hunting areas for Mesolithic groups, with valleys exploited for plant foods, freshwater fish and wildfowl By the Late Mesolithic, groups were deliberately clearing areas of the forest uplands to attract grazing animals, and herds may have been selectively culled or even provided with fodder over the winter. Edible wild plants might also have been managed and encouraged to grow and spread. Evidence of Mesolithic settlement in Wiltshire is limited to remains of river side camp sites at Cherhill and Downton (where traces of light tent-like structures were found) and flint tools concentrated on the upper reaches of the Bristol Avon and its tributaries and on the uplands, particularly on the downs to north and south of the Kennet.

The fourth and third millennia BC saw a major transformation in the landscape of Wiltshire, from the gatherer-hunter economy to one involving food production. This resulted in a series of changes in material culture, plant cultivates and animal domesticates and the first human influenced changes to the landscape.

None of Wiltshire's ancient field systems have been dated to the Neolithic period but almost certainly the first fields were established at this time. It is likely that the landscape was still heavily forested with the new settlements having the appearance of clearance areas within woodland.

Evidence for new activities in the Neolithic included pottery making and weaving. Cattle, sheep, goats and pigs would have had to be taken to areas of grazing or forage, and clearings created where plants were cultivated or managed. Communities may still have been very

small, though people were coming together in greater numbers at certain times of the year. This was the time when huge monuments were being built which suggests an advanced degree of co-operation and organisation. The earliest evidence for treatment of the dead comes from the Neolithic period in the form of two types of site where human bones are commonly found. These are large enclosures, formed by segmented (or "causewayed") ditches, and long mounds or long barrows.

Examples of causewayed enclosures in Wiltshire, are located at Windmill Hill, north west of Avebury, Knap Hill and Rybury on the scarp overlooking the Vale of Pewsey and at Whitesheet Hill (Kilmington) and Robin Hood Ball Camp (Shrewton). Although the function of these monuments is by no means certain, archaeological evidence suggests that they may have been used to define an area where the dead could be excarnated.

There are numerous examples of Neolithic long mounds in the county, including some 20 examples around Avebury. These monuments comprise long earthen mounds, which cover a variety of structures associated with burials. One of the most dramatic, the West Kennet long barrow, for example, is some 113m in length and contains individual chambers constructed of sarsen slabs. The long barrows are distinctive forms in the landscape and are often positioned on hilltops or ridges, or follow the lines of rivers and valleys.

Henge monuments are also part of this period, the most famous being Stonehenge, although it is only the bank and ditch that are Neolithic. Stonehenge is surrounded by other henge monuments, which vary considerable in their size, such as Durrington Walls and Woodhenge, both of which contained circular settings of timber posts. Huge henge enclosures such as at Avebury and at Hatfield Farm, Marden in the Vale of Pewsey were built, together with the remarkable circular mound of Silbury Hill. This period of construction was followed by a time of lithicization when many existing monuments were further enhanced by rows and circles of standing stones, as dramatically illustrated at Avebury. These monuments are, without doubt, some of the most remarkable manifestations of human organisation in prehistoric Europe.

By 3000 BC and the Late Neolithic, there is more evidence for scrub, grassland and cereal cultivation, though some stands of old woodland remained in the landscape, particularly on slopes and valley sides.

The Bronze and Iron Ages c.2,000 BC to AD43

The number of Bronze Age burial mounds in Wiltshire suggests a huge increase in population and a major impact in the opening up of the landscape. The county contains about 130 Neolithic long barrows but evidence of at least 2,500 Bronze Age round barrows.

Many of these were constructed in the Early Bronze Age. Sometimes the barrows are highly visible on ridges and hill tops while others follow the lines of valleys and streams. Notable examples include the Seven Sisters by Beacon Hill and the large number of barrows on Salisbury Plain. Many barrow groups are focused around earlier monuments, or form linear alignments, as on Overton Hill, near Avebury.

During the Middle Bronze Age from 1500 BC, round barrow construction continued, but the most dramatic change in the landscape was the widespread appearance of field systems defined by banks, ditches and possibly hedges. Associated with these fields were small enclosures containing roundhouses and ancillary buildings, and these would have been the farmsteads of extended family groups. Settlements are still rarely found belonging to the

Bronze Age, but three huts were found under Longbarrow Crossroads, west of Stonehenge, during the construction of the roundabout, while nine huts have been excavated on Thorny Down on the Porton Ranges.

In the Late Bronze Age from 1100 BC larger linear earthworks were constructed that often cut across the earlier fields, and it has been suggested that these were territorial markers, perhaps defining lands and 'valley territories' claimed by specific groups of people, who may have practised predominantly pastoral agriculture. This suggests that some areas of former arable cultivation were replaced by grazing. Woodland was probably carefully managed through techniques such as coppicing. Earthworks such as Grim's Ditch may have their origins in the Late Bronze Age, although they were later re-used.

In the Early Iron Age from 700-400 BC, most people lived in open settlements of roundhouses, and field systems continued to be used, or were re-used from earlier periods. Hillforts also appeared, for example at White Sheet Hill, Mere, Fovant, Grovely Castle and Old Sarum. These constructions used to be regarded as evidence for full-scale 'Celtic' warfare but they may have often been more concerned with communal gatherings, trading and storage than they were with defence. Most hillforts had been largely abandoned by the end of the Middle Iron Age.

During the Late Iron Age of 100 BC to AD 43, fields and farmsteads were linked together by trackways and complex social networks of kinship, reciprocity and trade. Placed deposits of metalwork, pottery and human and animal bones in grain storage pits, ditches and watery places were an important part of Iron Age beliefs. On lower ground there are what are known as 'Little Woodbury type' settlements. Little Woodbury lies to the south east of Salisbury and its excavation between 1936 and 1939 identified one or more circular huts occupied over a long period of time enclosed by a bank and ditch. The huts belonged to farmers who were cultivating and processing grain, which was usually stored in large pits below ground. In other cases, for example at Southmill Hill, Amesbury, there may be groups of huts which are not enclosed by a bank and ditch.

The range of arable crops was greater than at any other period until the 19th century, and sheep became the most numerous animals. Cattle were grazed in valleys close to water sources, but sheep require less water, and would have been grazed on the higher downland and maintained the distinct short-cropped downland turf. Hardier crops such as barley and spelt meant that cultivation had spread across the higher downs, even onto Clay-with-Flint areas, and the fragile downland soils were beginning to be eroded or exhausted in places.

Agriculture during the Bronze and Iron Ages concentrated on the medium to light soils of the county, the gravels of the Thames Valley, the alluvial deposits of the other rivers and the chalk uplands. These soils gave a reasonable return when cultivated with the limited tools available.

The Roman-British and Anglo Saxon Periods AD43 - 1066

According to Roman writers this country had a reputation for exporting grain to Europe even in the late Iron Age and there is no doubt that the Roman invasion was inspired by the need to secure a supply of grain for the Empire's western armies. The Romans would have found a landscape under widespread agricultural use in Wiltshire and would have exploited this by establishing towns and a road system.

Many field systems, farmsteads and roundhouses continued in use into the Romano-British period signalling that the acculturation process was a long and complex one, with native beliefs and practices merging with Roman ideas. The pressure for agricultural production in the landscape increased under the Romans with investment in the form of villas from which large estates were managed. These were established particularly in the valleys, some over previous Iron Age settlements. The villas tended to be grouped around urban settlements such as Verlucio (Sandy Lane), Cunetio (Mildenhall), Sorviodunum (south of Old Sarum) and Aqua Sulis (Bath) and used the limestone of the west of the county for building stone.

Roman roads such as Ermin Way, the Fosse Way and Sandy Lane were an important development. New markets and consumers were created as a result of these roads. The Romans also introduced significant agricultural innovations, especially in equipment, and better breeds of livestock. Improvements in ploughs meant that heavier soils could be cultivated allowing more agricultural use to be made of the clay areas of the county and place names indicate that by the Saxon period much of the land in the clay vales had been cleared of forest.

By the late 4th century AD Saxons were among the raiders pillaging the southern and eastern areas of England, but some were invited to settle England as paid mercenaries. The early Saxon evidence in Wiltshire is mostly found to the east of a line which runs north/south through Marlborough and Salisbury. To the west of this line occupation and land use is uncertain at this time and there is some likelihood that a Celtic/Romano-British population survived in the county.

The decline of centralised political control following the withdrawal of the legions created a power vacuum, and the loss of the market that had driven the agricultural economy meant that agricultural production returned largely to subsistence levels. The agricultural use of the high chalk land during Prehistoric and Roman times had, in any case, largely exhausted its fertility leaving it suitable only for extensive sheep grazing. These areas were not brought into cultivation again until the mid 20th century with wartime pressure and later the introduction of agricultural chemicals.

Saxon settlements were probably concentrated in the valleys. There is little evidence for this period, although some modern villages may overlie Saxon settlements. In the chalk river valley land units were often developed in the form of strips that dissected the valleys from side to side, thereby giving access to a range of arable and pastoral areas and other resources. Some Saxon estate boundaries may still be reflected in early modern or modern landscape boundaries. Heytesbury and Donhead St. Mary were possible Saxon mother churches, sited at the centre of large estates. Officials called reeves administered these estates, and political and ecclesiastical power was thus already becoming interlinked. From the late tenth or eleventh century this system began to be replaced with the parochial parish church system.

Many earlier Saxon burials were inserted into Neolithic long mounds or Bronze Age round barrows.

The Medieval Period 1066-1499

The Norman conquest of England from 1066 replaced an English speaking elite with a French speaking nobility, based in castles and manor houses. The Crown, the nobility, the bishoprics of the Church and the great monastic houses owned most of the land between them, and the parochial system began to replace the earlier Anglo-Saxon system based on

mother or minster churches. Each medieval parish contained a group of tithings, which on the downland often retained the long, thin shapes from the Anglo-Saxon period. The Domesday survey of 1086 shows that medieval villages were also located in the valleys, and some may have been continuations of Saxon settlements.

Many chalkland villages adopted two field systems, where half the arable land was left untilled each year to be grazed by cattle, manured and thus recover its fertility. In more fertile areas villages adopted three of four field systems, with the land cultivated for two years for cereal crops, and then left fallow for a third year. Extensive tracts of ridge-and-furrow are evidence for this. Individuals had the rights to farm different strips within each larger field. This allocation of strips ensured that no-one had all the best land, and it also reduced risks from crop failure, blight and flooding.

Trade became wider and large-scale once more, with wool and livestock being the predominant downland exports. This was taken to burgeoning market towns such as Warminster and Salisbury. Many medieval droveways and tracks may have had earlier origins, and some were themselves incorporated into later roads. Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries there was there was an expansion in both arable cultivation, and a large rise in sheep grazing, the result of growing populations and the increase in the woollen trade. On steeper slopes within the county many strip lynchets reflect this period of agricultural expansion.

The Saxons had established hunting parks, but it was the Normans who codified their management in the Forest Law. Forests, which included areas of woodland, downland, arable and pasture, and settlements, did not necessarily belong to the king, but Forest Law gave the Crown rights to exploit the land's resources. Forests provided deer and revenue (in the form of fines) for the king, but the areas of woodland also provided timber for construction, wood for fuel, grazing for animals, particularly pigs, and other resources for the local communities. Large areas of Wiltshire were regarded as forest including Grovely Forest, Braydon Forest and Savernake Forest. Chases such as Cranborne Chase were unenclosed but nevertheless delimited hunting preserves, usually for the nobility.

The phase of agricultural expansion was slowed or even reversed during the later 14th century, with the Black Death causing rural depopulation and an economic depression. Some villages were completely deserted such as Yarnfield (Maiden Bradley). This was unusual however, and much of the desertion or shrinkage of villages took place over centuries rather than years or decades. Again, the area of land in agricultural use did not necessarily reduce but arable declined whilst pastoral agriculture increased. There was growing specialisation in sheep farming, and records show that the flocks of neighbouring manors were often run together as thousands of animals. By the 15th century, in many areas of the chalk downlands this led to the consolidation of land blocks and their enclosure as fields using hedges, banks or ditches. Assarts or intake fields in areas cleared of woodland were common in some areas too. Serfdom largely disappeared after the Black Death, and paid labourers and classes of landed peasants and yeoman farmers emerged. These changes were tied into wider social developments, including the gradual breakdown of the feudal system.

The Post-Medieval Period 1499 - 1800

This period is marked by the transformation to a capitalist market economy. By the 16th century there was a middle-class yeomanry emerging in the countryside. The expansion of

the woollen cloth industry and the sale of monastic properties following the Dissolution encouraged this. Many field systems remained little altered in some areas until the 18th century, but elsewhere enclosure during the 15th and 16th centuries meant land use became more intensive. In some cases enclosures were informal and the result of moves within the communities involved, but in others they were forcible events dictated by Crown officials or wealthy landowners. Large areas of former arable land on the downs were converted to pasture, and increases in stock numbers led to shortages of late winter and early spring fodder. From the 16th century systems of managed water meadows developed in many valley bottoms, able to produce early grass crops, and hay later in the year. Particularly fine examples of such water management features are found at Wylye and Broadchalke. Many meadows have now reverted to marsh or dry pasture.

The system of sheep-and-corn agriculture of the chalk lands involved the folding of large flocks of sheep onto arable land overnight, their dung fertilising the poorer downland soils and increasing crop yields of wheat and barley. Hurdle fences made from hazel coppices were used to create temporary pens, and the small managed woods were therefore important elements in the downland landscape. Long sheep runs were created between existing roads, tracks and paths, often several kilometres long, and some are still reflected in present-day field patterns. Fields continued to be worked from existing villages.

By the 18th century informal, piecemeal enclosure had created a patchwork of small, irregularly shaped fields and winding lanes and tracks in many areas. From the later 18th century though, some areas of down pasture were converted to arable, and common woods, heaths and grasslands were also enclosed. The rectangular, regular patterns of field systems bounded by hedges on low field banks seen in many parishes today were the result of these later enclosures. They are especially evident south of the Ebble Valley and on the West Wiltshire Downs. Many of the ordinary, previously land-owning peasantry thus lost rights to common land, and became paid labourers in the employment of larger farms.

Many villages became completely deserted during the post-medieval period, as their populations continued to fall. Some early 16th and 17th century enclosure and the creation of estates for deer parks or 'polite' landscape gardens may also have contributed to this process. In some instances though, emparking was made easier because villages had long been deserted. These polite estates for the aristocracy and rural gentry were also associated with the building of new, large houses or the refurbishment of existing ones. These estates were often characterised by extensive areas of short-turfed grass, plantings of trees, including many exotic species, and the construction of a variety of follies. There was an increasing preference for more naturalistic designs, with irregular plantations and sweeping panoramic vistas. Enclosure was a prerequisite for the creation of these parks, removing the tightly bound and inter-weaved rights of landlord and tenant to communal land, and restricting access to the now private land.

During the 18th century there were further changes, partly prompted by the onset of the Napoleonic Wars. There were land improvements and drainage, new crops and breeds of cattle, sheep and pig were introduced. Chalk was often extracted and burnt in lime kilns to produce lime fertiliser. The demands of the navy and industry for timber and fuel meant that many surviving woods and copses were clear felled, or substantially reduced. Turnpike roads and, towards the end of the 18th century, canals were significant improvements in communication.

The Early Modern and Modern Period 1800 - present

Following the Napoleonic Wars conditions in the countryside for the poor were dire, and town populations grew rapidly. There were economic crises in the 1820s and 1870s, and the 'Captain Swing' riots took place across Wiltshire in 1830. By the end of the 19th century more people were working in industries based in towns than were working in agriculture.

The First World War saw further woodland and scrub clearance, and large areas of pastoral land ploughed up for cereals. Following the end of the war there was increased mechanisation on farms, and farm labouring as a way of life declined rapidly. In the 1920s however prices for wheat, cattle and milk fell, and there was further economic and social hardship as part of the Great Depression. During the Second World War many areas that had been under pasture for centuries were ploughed up again to maximise arable production and large areas of woodland were felled.

Post-war intensification of agriculture continued with the ploughing of slopes and elevated downland, the removal of hedgerows and field boundaries to create large scale fields and a continued decline in active management of water meadows. This resulted in loss of archaeological features and, in some instances, loss of topsoil, a decline in chalk grasslands, meadows and hedgerows, with an associated decline in wild plant, bird and insect species. The use of the countryside for shooting and hunting retained some historic features, in particular small woodlands.

Some areas are now once again improving - hedgerows are being re-planted and agri-environment schemes have started to encourage animal and plant species back to the downlands. Recent changes in agriculture as well as indications of future trends are examined in more detail in the chapter on agricultural land use.

Landscape Character Types (LCT) (1:250,000 scale) developed for the Countryside Agency by Steven Warnock (in conjunction with the Living Landscapes Project and Entec Ltd). Copyright: Countryside Agency and Cranfield University (soil component) 2001

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WILTSHIRE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

Figure 17:
Historic Landscape

Key

- Battlefield
- Historical Parks & Gardens
- World Heritage Site
- Scheduled Ancient Monument
- Wiltshire and Swindon
- Other county boundary

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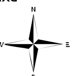

LAND USE CONSULTANTS
43 Chalton Street
London, NW1 1JD
Ph: 020 7383 5784
Fax: 020 7383 4798
www.landuse.co.uk