

Early farming in the East Meon Hundred¹

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The beginning of farming

For over 10,000 years, men and women have fed themselves in the surrounds of East Meon by hunting or cultivating animals and plants. The high ground around East Meon is covered by prehistoric field systems referred to as “crop marks” in the world of archaeology as they are preserved as earthworks or soil marks, mostly identified from aerial photography.

The small size (35-50m) of these fields implies that each was cultivated by one individual of family. Lynchets, evidence of early ploughing, can often be seen at the upper and lower ends. Large scale Roman agriculture destroyed them in lowland Britain thus they are more common on the undisturbed downland.



Crop Marks around East Meon

¹ This background information in this paper is largely extracted from Barry Cunliffe's wonderful book, Britain Begins

Mesolithic - 10,000 BC to 4,000 BC

The Mesolithic period was characterised by small groups of nomadic hunter gatherers, who moved through the landscape hunting, fishing and gathering wild foods.

Britain was still linked to continental Europe until about 6000 BC. People started to return to Britain after the last Ice Age which came to a sudden end in about 9600 BC with a rapid rise in temperature exacerbated by the reestablishment of the Atlantic Ocean currents bringing the warm waters of the Gulf Stream once more to Atlantic-facing shores of Europe. Pollen sequences and ice core studies have allowed climate scientists to model, in some detail, progressive changes in vegetation throughout the Mesolithic period. The gradually improving climate brought with it changes to the vegetation, beginning with open scrub-land with occasional surviving trees and culminating in a closed canopy woodland – the wildwood that was to clothe the country by 5000 BC. By about 9000 BC birch and pine woods were fast spreading across Britain. This created an environment that was uncongenial to reindeer and wild horses which had been the major source of food for the hunting communities that had come to Britain. Trees were at first sparse but gradually increased in density with hazel becoming the major component by 8000 BC. A thousand years later the diversity had increased, with oak, elm, and alder, alongside hazel, now forming a significant part of the woodland canopy.

With the spread of woodland came a new range of woodland animals: red deer, roe deer, elk, aurochs, horse, and wild pig, together with brown bear, wolf, badger, wild cat, lynx, otter and hare. The basis of subsistence was now much broader and much more reassuring than in past times when survival depended on unmitigated reindeer diet eked out by horse-meat. Communities had to adapt to this new environment which required significant changes in behaviour and organisation. The quantity of animal protein available was now diminished: forested habitats support only 20-30 per cent of the total biomass of animals compared with more open landscapes. Moreover, forest animals are much less migratory in their habitats and are more widely dispersed in smaller groups than the herds of reindeer and horse. Adapting to these new conditions would have led to smaller hunting bands working more limited territories. It may also have encouraged communities to explore more varied food resources, including plant foods, water fowl and the rich haul of produce to be had from the shores and sea.

To adjust to these new conditions the hunter-gatherers developed new toolkits characterised by small tool components (microliths) snapped from larger flint blades, designed to be set into wooden hafts, and larger axes and adzes useful in carpentry for cutting down or ring-barking trees and for grubbing up roots and rhizomes. There are many small finds in the East Meon area of their distinctive stone tools. A major flint production site recently excavated on Petersfield Heath shows that there was a substantial Mesolithic presence in our area.



Mesolithic Flints

There is a general assumption that sectors of Mesolithic communities moved between winter base camps in the more wooded areas and summer hunting camps in upland areas or the coast, where particular resources available for limited periods were to be exploited. However, base camps may have been occupied year-around, at least by the aged and the very young, and were places that the active hunters and gatherers would return to when the season's gleaning was over.



Mesolithic Shelter: Reconstruction Butser Ancient Farm

One environment much favoured by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers was the Greensand of the Weald. Many hundreds of sites are known with the closest to East Meon being at Oakhanger, where several discrete locations have been identified. Oakhanger is situated close to the edge of the Weald, where the varied geology would have given rise to a range of environments each with its own potential. A

short 4 km walk would have taken a hunter across a band of very heavy and densely wooded clay, followed by the lighter calcareous Upper Greensand to the scarp of the chalk uplands. At different times of the year these landscapes would have yielded all the foods and other resources necessary to maintain the communities. The local acid soil has destroyed all trace of bone and antler, but pollen is well preserved giving insight into the local vegetation. One notable find was that the percentage of hazel was exceptionally high. This suggests that there may have been deliberate felling of other trees such as alder, lime and oak around the camp to allow hazel to flower more freely and thus to produce a greater yield of hazel nuts. There was also a high percentage of ivy pollen; it is suggested that ivy was collected and brought to the periphery of the camp as fodder to attract deer in winter months, when food was in short supply. Lulled by piles of feed, the deer would be easy prey.

The tool kit found at the camp was dominated by processing tools, adding support to the idea that the site was occupied during the autumn and the winter when there was time to make and repair equipment.

The practices of the Oakhanger site and the use of fire to clear vegetation which has been detected in other Mesolithic pollen sequences show that communities had started to manipulate their environment. The use of fire to clear dense woodland would have been a productive strategy. It would have encouraged new growth, attracting animals to graze on the new shoots. Moreover, by providing feed, beasts such as red deer could be made to become used to human presence – the first stage in the process of domestication.

Neolithic – 4,000 BC to 2,200 BC

In four brief centuries, 4200 BC - 3800 BC, the landscape of Britain was transformed by the arrival and spread of new practices and behaviours that together make up what is referred to as the “Neolithic package”. The transformations were fundamental and irreversible and set in motion dynamics of change that are still being played out today.

The most far-reaching of the innovations was the introduction of an already fully developed food-producing strategy based on the cultivation of emmer wheat and barley and the husbanding of domestic cattle, sheep and pigs. All of these crops and animals had to be carried to Britain by boat from Continental Europe as the land bridge no longer existed. The new subsistence strategy reduced the dependence on hunting and gathering to such an extent that even in coastal regions the majority of protein intake was from land-based animals. Samples of animal bones taken from Neolithic sites across Southern Britain show that domesticated cattle were the dominant source of animal protein with sheep and pig competing for second place. So cattle were very important to the community and the status of the group or the individual may well have been measured by the size of the herd.

Alongside these major changes in food sourcing came much reduced mobility in everyday life. While flocks and herds would have been allowed to wander as they browsed, the need to tend them and to protect fields of grain meant that populations became more sedentary and the home base became increasingly important. Arrangements also had to be made to store the all important seed grain essential for the well being of the community. It is no coincidence that large timber-built houses now begin to appear for the first time. The construction of large timber halls was a statement

of society's wish to make a permanent mark on the landscape which was not present in the preceding Mesolithic period.



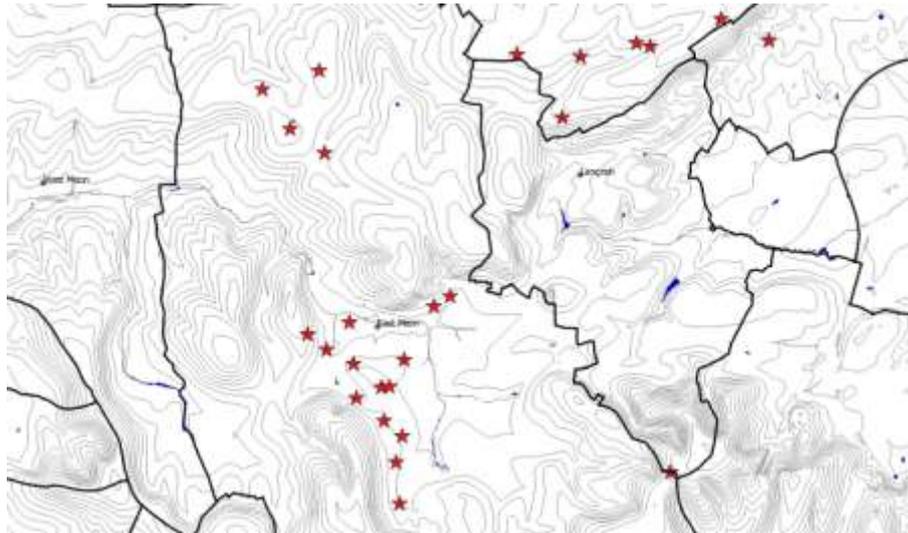
Neolithic Hall: Reconstruction Butser Ancient Farm

A new range of material culture was also introduced. The first pottery appears widely across the country in the first two centuries after 4000 BC. This is the first artificial material to be made in Britain, the product of carefully controlled pyrotechnics. Another technological innovation was the grinding and polishing of stone to make symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing axe-heads. The flaked stone repertoire also developed to include leaf-shaped arrow heads and plano-convex knives.



Mesolithic Axe-head

There are finds of flints in our area, but unfortunately there is little differentiation in the archaeological record between Neolithic and Mesolithic flints. However they do show that there was significant activity on the slopes of the Meon Valley



Neolithic and Mesolithic Flint finds

As the new communities settled into their ecological niches, so their surplus energies were harnessed and directed towards communal works and monuments. The first were the flint mines on the Sussex Downs. Not long after, long barrows, long mortuary enclosures, and cursus monuments (parallel earthworks defining strips of land) were being built. There is a well known long barrow on Salt Hill, south of East Meon.



Bronze Age - 2,200 BC to 801BC

The Bronze Age was started by the influx of the Beaker people who brought the knowledge of metal working to Britain. They also brought a new culture and burial practices as we shall see later. Recent genetic studies of over 400 ancient burials have produced the surprising result that over 90% of the Britain's gene pool comes from the Beaker people, who originated in the steppes of Northern and Eastern Europe. The reasons for this are unclear but climate change, disease or an ecological disaster

could all have played a role. It's a shock to the system that we are not after all primarily descended from the builders of Stonehenge!

Paradoxically the influx of bronze technology had little effect on farming itself. Rather bronze was used for weapons and jewellery which did however need a farming culture that could create surpluses in order to afford such luxuries. One of the great mysteries of the Bronze Age is why so many of these bronze items were taken out of use by being placed in graves as "grave goods" or discarded in apparent ritualistic fashion into the waterways of Britain.

In the Bronze Age, the appearance of Britain began to change as communities started to impose themselves on the landscape, not just to create monuments but to take hold of the land itself. Man-made boundaries begin to proliferate. Regular patterns of fields were laid out and on sloping hillsides the cultivated areas were shaped by constant ploughing. Elsewhere linear earthworks running for kilometres across the landscape separated vast areas of territory. The coercive effort needed for such endeavours implied that communities were working together to impose a permanent system of land management.

On the chalk downs territories were divided up by ditches running for many kilometres across the countryside and regular systems of small square fields were laid out, probably with timber markers or fences defining individual cultivation plots. Constant ploughing caused soil to move downslope forming lynchets while the boundaries between grew into hedges and eventually stands of trees which could be cropped for wood.

At the same time that land was being apportioned and defined by newly constructed boundaries, homesteads were being set up among the fields. Often these were enclosed by banks and ditches and palisades in various combinations. On the chalklands of southern Britain fenced enclosures set within low banks were the norm, each enclosure containing on average two circular houses. This was a break from the past when settlements had been far more diffuse and undefined. Settlement boundaries may have had some protective function, not the least keeping animals away from living areas, but there was probably more to it than that. By enclosing the living area, the community was making a visible statement about privacy and ownership. Each enclosed homestead, integrated with its fields, was a separate entity defining the family or kin group.

The intensification of agriculture would have made a careful appreciation of the changing seasons all the more important to the livelihood of the community. It required the creation of a calendar more designed to meet the demands of the farming year than one relying on the solstices. By 100BC the calendar was divided into four quarters:

- **Samhain**, beginning on 1 November, heralds the quiet winter period when people are at home repairing and making equipment and tending livestock that are being overwintered
- **Imbolc**, beginning on 1 February, marks the time that when lambing and calving takes place and land has to be prepared for sowing
- **Beltane**, beginning on 1 May, is when animals are put out to summer pasture
- **Lughnasadh**, beginning on 1 August, is the period of harvesting and the preparation of grain for storage and for turning livestock onto harvested fields.

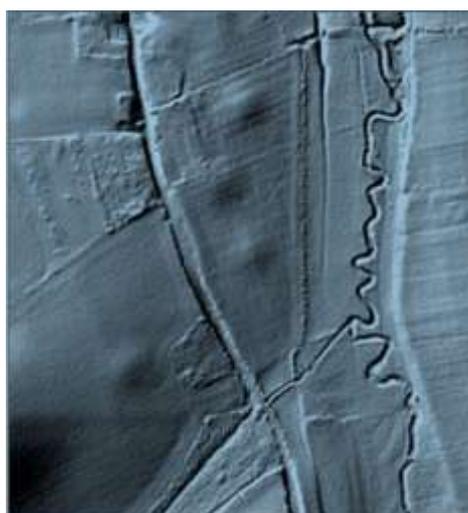
The culling of flocks and herds, with the accompanying feasting, took place in the days leading up to Samhain, which was appropriated by the Christian church to be the festival of All Saints; it was also Halloween in pagan cultures.

The aspect of the Bronze Age that has left the most visible sign on the landscape is the construction of bowl barrows. There is a huge barrow cemetery on Petersfield Heath which has been re-excavated over the last 3 years (full results are eagerly awaited.) It used to be thought that, as well as having religious connotations for the burial of the dead, barrows were primarily used as territorial markers. The bowl barrows on the top of old Winchester Hill are a classic case of this sort of barrow.



Barrows on Old Winchester Hill

However, new findings from a survey of local barrows conducted as part of the Petersfield Heath Barrow project are throwing doubt on that hypothesis as can be seen from the LIDAR picture of Church Farm in East Meon.



Church Farm, East Meon Barrow Cemetery

These newly identified barrows form a group on the west bank of the River Meon; there is a further group at Parsonage Farm on the other tributary of the Meon. Just like the barrow cemetery of

Petersfield Heath, they are situated close to water sources, an association now being recurrently recognised country-wide. It may be that every centre of population had its own set of local barrows which served a similar function to that of a church in more modern times; most of them are now unknown because they have been ploughed away in the valleys.

Iron Age – 800 BC to 43AD

The Iron Age was a time of further agricultural intensification with the landscape filling up with farmsteads maintained and rebuilt over generations. Many of the newly created farms were now focused on very large, substantially built, circular houses up to 15 metres in diameter. These structures had imposing porches and were divided internally by the main roof-supporting timbers into a central open area and narrow peripheral space under the eaves. These were not mere huts but grand residences, the Iron Age equivalent of medieval halls, in which family affairs were worked through, the resident family lived and feasts could be comfortably be accommodated.



Iron Age Village reconstruction: Butser Ancient Farm

The Iron Age staple crops remained barley and wheat; protein came largely from milk, cheese and pork, augmented by beef, horsemeat and mutton which became available when beasts were slaughtered for culling or feasts. Domestic chickens were also kept, probably for their eggs.

Agricultural technology was comparatively simple: the ground was broken with an ox-drawn ard which could now be iron-tipped, crops were sown by hand and they were reaped by hand using an iron sickle.



The Ard

The ard was quite effective on light chalk soils but since it does not turn the soil like a modern plough the fields may have been ploughed in two directions at right angles which would explain the square plan of many early fields.

The other main feature of the early Iron Age was the hill top enclosure, usually a large area of 15 hectares or more, enclosed by a bank or ditch. We know comparatively little of what these sites were used for though they were probably used over long periods of time for the corralling of animals. This would have facilitated the castration, culling, redistribution and other tasks necessary for the efficient husbandry of animals. So the agricultural regimes would seem to have been concentrated around farmsteads providing the centre for arable operations and hill top enclosures used for livestock management which required intercommunity coordination. Certainly an annual round-up would have been an occasion for the population to gather together to celebrate, feast and thank the gods.

In the 5th and 6th centuries BC many of these hill top enclosures were further developed into hill forts which are characterised by a rampart and ditch of defensive proportions and are accessed through two gates on opposing sides. We have an outstanding local example of such a hill fort in the Old Winchester Hill Fort.



Old Winchester Hill Iron Age Fort

Evidence for the use of hill forts varies considerably. Some contained streets with houses together with storage facilities and evidence of domestic occupation. Others show little trace of internal structures or sustained use. Unfortunately Old Winchester Hill Fort has never been properly excavated though some traces of storage pits can be seen. However its overall design and the outer ramparts that lie further down the hill show that would have been an excellent place to corral livestock in times of trouble. It certainly dominated the whole area above the Meon Valley.

Hill forts were largely abandoned in about 100 BC for reasons that are not entirely clear. However, it was a time of rapid social, economic and political change brought about by the resurgence of overseas trade generated in advance of the Roman annexation of Gaul and of course later Britain.

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