

“The Ancient South Downs Way”

Talk by Dr Dawn Cansfield, January 2024

HADs first talk of 2024 was by Dr Dawn Cansfield, a “mortuary archaeologist” and visiting research fellow at the University of Winchester. The talk, titled “The Ancient South Downs Way”, looked at prehistoric features from the western end of the ancient trackway.

The South Downs Way is a 100-mile trackway, running from Eastbourne to Winchester, passing through 66 parishes. It was initially opened in 1972 and then extended to Winchester in the 1980s. Humans have been traversing the trackway for at least 8,000 years, the chalk surface being relatively easy to clear, making it ideal for constructing earthworks and tombs from very early times.

Neolithic “Causewayed Enclosures” are amongst the very earliest earthworks and there is an example known as “Barkhale Camp” near Bignor Hill. Causewayed enclosures are still not well understood and Barkhale has been the subject of extensive archaeological examinations over many years. To the north are two, much later, Bronze Age round barrows, indicating the site was used for many centuries. Archaeology has uncovered pottery from the Bronze Age and later.

Another enclosure, this time from the Bronze Age, is at Harrow Hill. Nearby 245 shafts for flint mines, dating back to Neolithic times have been identified. Quite close is Cissbury Hill, an Iron Age hill fort. This also contains earlier flint mines where excavations in the 19th and early 20th centuries uncovered some human remains.

“Devil’s Jumps” contains five Bronze Age round barrows. These were excavated in 1853, but human remains were found in only two of them. Other barrows have been identified and with the help of LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) the total is now 12, not all of which are visible from the ground.

Heyshott Down contains a Bronze Age barrow cemetery, aligned east to west. Excavation has found burnt bone and pottery. The site also includes several “cross dykes” dating from the late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age. These features are little understood. Graffham Down contains yet more Bronze Age barrows.

Coming into Hampshire, we encounter Old Winchester Hill, an early Iron Age hill fort with Bronze Age barrows within. This site does not appear to have been examined archaeologically.

Another Hampshire Iron Age hill fort can be found at Beacon Hill; this includes a late Bronze Age enclosure. The site was excavated in 1948-52 and 1976-77, where evidence for post holes, timber palisades and granaries as well as more of the mysterious cross dykes was found.

The advent of LIDAR has led to the discovery of a lot of unknown ancient features, many of which are not visible from the ground.

Over the years we have had many talks about archaeological sites in Wiltshire and Dorset so it was particularly interesting to hear about prehistoric discoveries in Sussex and Hampshire.



Harrow Hill Bronze Age enclosure and flint mine shafts

Alan Sandford

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