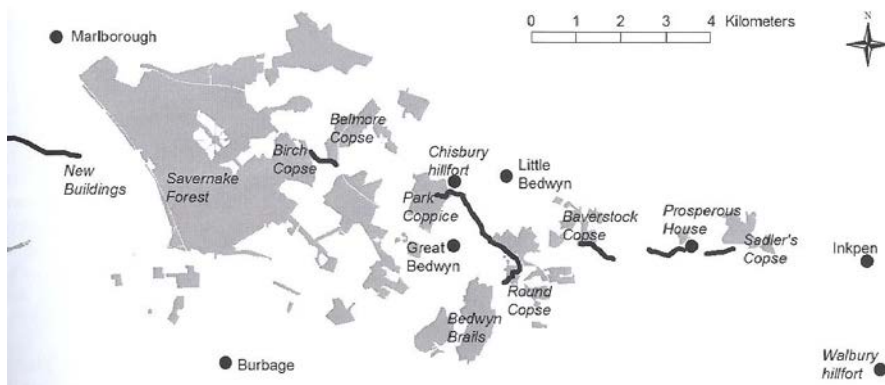


Chisbury, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

The Iron Age hillfort at Chisbury is on the top of a steep slope up from the Vale of Pewsey, and was part of the Bedwyn estate in the Anglo-Saxon period (see on-line entry). The



relationship of various linear dykes to Chisbury, and to Walbury to the south, is intriguing. They are rarely visible from the ground, but the lane leading up to Chisbury overlies one of them; they are

controversial as claims have been made that they formed an Anglo-Saxon extension to East Wansdyke (see on-line entry). They are much less substantial than that earthwork, however, and seem more likely to be prehistoric, like many others in Wiltshire (Lennon 2010; map from Lennon 2012). They probably show the landscape being divided up into territorial units, replacing extensive grazing systems that had existed in the Bronze Age.



Chisbury hillfort is roughly oval, with a single ditch and bank strengthened by outer ones on two sides. The ramparts have not been excavated, and are now obscured by tree-planting; they can only be seen from the road that runs through the middle. This may well use the original entrances, but has also obscured them. A small excavation inside in 1988 produced no early evidence, but previous work, and random finds, show later Iron Age and Roman use; the interior has not been plotted by geophysics (Chisbury hillfort from the south. Image: Google Earth)

The fort was used as one of the Wessex strongholds in the late ninth/early tenth century, being Cissanbyrig in the Burghal Hidage, just possibly from 'Cissa', a shadowy figure in the Wessex royal dynasty. What Alfred the Great or Edward the Elder did to make it

defensible has not been shown by excavation; refurbishment like that recently demonstrated taken place at Malmesbury, one of the other four Wiltshire 'burhs', is likely (see on-line entry). It never developed an urban function, however, unlike Malmesbury, that role being taken by Bedwyn, rivalled and surpassed after the eleventh century by Marlborough (see on-line entry).



Just outside the hillfort defences on the east side is a small thirteenth-century chapel, long out of ecclesiastical use and an unusual survival in such a ruinous state; its thatched roof shows that many small ecclesiastical medieval buildings could not afford fireproof tiles any more than most houses (photograph by courtesy of English Heritage, which maintains the building). It was not a parish church, and was presumably built by the lords of the manor (and is accessed from the Little Bedwyn road, not from the hillfort). Nevertheless, some 'burhs' had churches or chapels at their gates, so there is a remote possibility that the present building had a predecessor; the dedication is to St Martin, like the late Saxon church by Wareham's north gate. If there were a western entrance at Chisbury, however, it seems likely to have been a very minor one, as there is no direct road from it down the slope. The First Edition of



the Ordnance Survey does not even show it, but an earlier, eighteenth-century, map shows that it was then in existence.

The chapel's windows are thirteenth-century, but their glass windows and much of their tracery have long gone. The roof is probably sixteenth-century. As with the thatch, the beaten earth floor is also likely to have been the norm in many chapels, just as in medieval houses. The vertical



scar in the wall between the two windows shows where there was a rood screen to divide the nave from the chancel. Despite the appearance of poverty, money had been spent on carving decorative details. Vestiges of a painted red consecration cross survive. The building probably ceased to be a chapel in 1547, when Edward VI's government was zealously pursuing the Reformation and their own profit. No-one



bothered to obliterate the cross, as would have happened at some time in the century after 1547 if the building had remained in ecclesiastical use (photographs by Isobel Thompson).

The lane having climbed up to Chisbury hill-fort from the south then falls away quite steeply northwards down to a stream valley, which shows that the fort was well sited for overseeing the area round it. The valley contains the main pre-motorway London-Bath road, and a Roman road route (see Savernake Forest on-line entry).

References and further reading

LENNON, B. 2010. The Bedwyn Dyke: a revisionist view, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Magazine*, 103, 102-29

LENNON, B. 2012. *Savernake Forest: Continuity and Change in a Wooded Landscape*, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports British Series 555

RAMSAY, J. AND BATHE, G. 2008. The Great Inclosure of Savernake with a note on cross-valley dykes, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Magazine*, 101, 158-75

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Chisbury were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.

