

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

Marden henge, in the western part of the Vale of Pewsey and close to one of the streams that form the River Avon, is about equidistant between Avebury and Stonehenge, and is the largest in Britain, though only its earth bank and ditch are usually visible (photograph of the

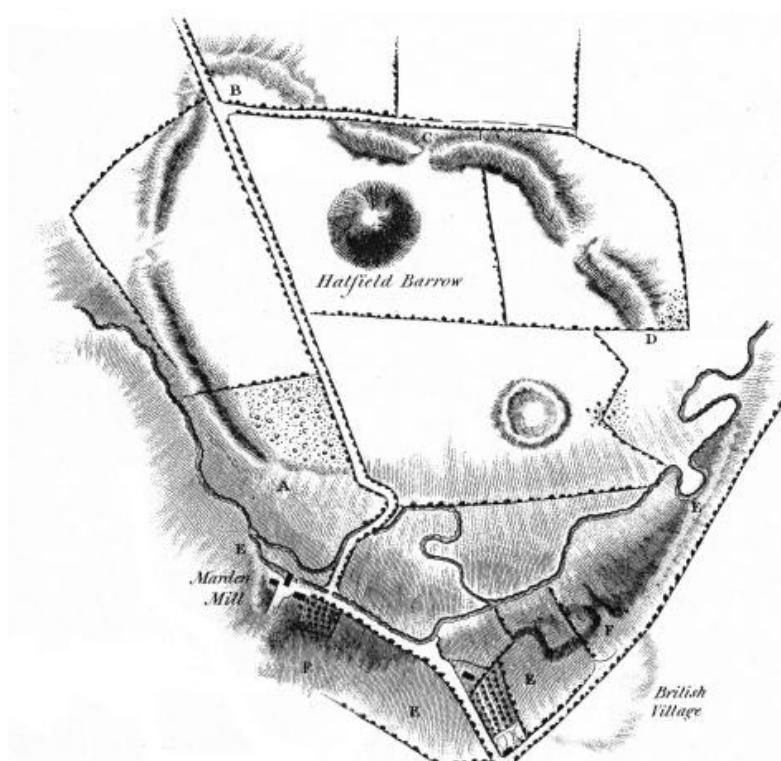


north side by Pasicles, reproduced under common licence agreement CCO, accessed from Wikimedia). Inside it were a smaller henge and a large artificial mound known as the Hatfield Barrow (shown on the eighteenth-century plan), which at about 15 metres was half the height of Silbury Hill (see separate on-line entry). It was tunnelled into in 1806,

and the collapse of the shaft damaged the whole mound, so the site was flattened for agriculture. Happier excavation interventions have included work by Geoffrey Wainwright on the north entrance in 1969, and in 2010 an inner henge was found to have a rectangular Neolithic building on its bank.

Marden henge is now the focus of a University of Reading project directed by Jim Leary and Amanda Clarke. Their first season in 2015, in collaboration with Historic England and the Wiltshire Museum, extended the excavation of the Neolithic building, and included work on a smaller henge at Wilsford on the other side of the river, where a Bronze Age skeleton was found in the ditch, as well as a Romano-British barn. A post-hole in the middle of where

Hatfield Barrow had been showed that in an early phase a large timber upright had stood there, and had either been removed before the mound was heightened, or had been buried within it. The Neolithic building had fire-reddened stones around it, possibly so that water could be boiled in cauldrons for cooking food, or possibly to create a sauna for humans.



The hope is to establish a chronological sequence like that now emerging for the Avebury

and Stonehenge landscapes (see on-line entries). Those who believe that the River Avon was a route for the spirits see Marden as their transshipment point for making the shortest land crossing from Stonehenge to Avebury, or vice versa.

From the Vale of Pewsey a steep north scarp runs up on to the chalklands of the Marlborough Downs, which are sprinkled with barrows and other monuments (see also Great Bedwyn on-line entry). Visible from Marden is the Alton Barnes white horse, one of several



cut into the turf in Wiltshire to celebrate King George III (1760-1820), the Hanoverian succession and the guarantee of Protestantism and the Church of England, the horse having become an emblem on the royal coat of arms. The Alton Barnes horse was cut in 1811; a hundred years later the tradition was revived, but with regimental badges, and other figures have appeared more recently (Edwards 2005. Air photograph by Psb, reproduced under common licence CC BY-SA 4.0, accessed from Wikimedia. There is a Bronze Age barrow behind it, slightly to the right, and East Wansdyke runs through the middle distance).

References and further reading:

EDWARDS, B. 2005. The scouring of the White Horse country, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 98, 90-127

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 Institute is grateful to Jim Leary and Amanda Chadburn for showing members round the site during the visit to Marden; these notes were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.

