

## **Savernake Forest, Great Bedwyn and the Vale of Pewsey, Wiltshire: archaeology and history** (Notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

The Vale of Pewsey cuts roughly east-west through Wiltshire's chalk downland, its western part being a wide tongue of Greensand with Gault clays and sands stretching from Devizes to Burbage. The eastern part is a chalk valley with the Bedwyn Brook flowing through it towards the north-east, and joining the River Kennet just outside the county boundary. The area also has large patches of clay-with-flints, agriculturally poor soils that provide little incentive for clearance and cultivation.

Neolithic causewayed enclosures, Knap Hill and Rybury, overlook the vale, and within it is lower-lying Crofton, the largest of all these 'camps' in Britain and Ireland with a diameter of around 600 metres, but invisible on the ground. Also within the vale is the largest of all the henge monuments, Marden (see separate on-line entry), as well as smaller henges.

Open pastoral landscapes seem to have created the environment for these monuments. The area has a number of enigmatic dykes, mostly untested archaeologically though probably late Bronze Age/early Iron Age in origin, and territorial markers associated with grazing rights (see Chisbury on-line entry, and Tubb 2011). There was a major Roman villa at Castle Copse, south of Great Bedwyn, and a ritual site nearby was probably associated with it (Brindle, Payne and Hinds 2012). Savernake Ware is a well-known Romano-British product, made at kilns in Savernake, Tottenham and surrounding areas. A cemetery and settlement south of Devizes at Market Lavington (Williams and Newman 2006), and a cemetery near Pewsey (Annable and Eagles 2010), are the largest recent Anglo-Saxon excavations; otherwise, a few objects, but no other early cemeteries, have been found in the Vale. Nevertheless, many manors were recorded in the eleventh-century Domesday Book, and it was well-populated. Farming continued despite the area becoming royal forest. Farmers in settlements surrounding the king's wood-pasture had grazing and wood-collecting rights in it, which, with the deer both red and fallow, inhibited regeneration and led to a very open landscape of pasture and ancient trees. 'Savernoc', first recorded as a wood in the tenth century, became a royal forest covering an extensive area, not just the area immediately south

of Marlborough. It was always focused, however, on the king's main extra-manorial land-holding, equating closely with the area that still bears its name.



The Kennet and Avon Canal was opened in 1810, and runs through the Vale of Pewsey, using water from streams feeding the Avon and the Bedwyn Brook. At the highest point, Crofton, steam-driven beam engines, one a Boulton and Watt, are still used to pump water into the canal. This lowered the local water table so that streams no longer had enough flow to turn water-wheels for mills, and the Wilton windmill, a five-storey brick tower with a turning cap, was built in 1821 (photograph by Chris Talbot, reproduced under common licence, accessed from

Wikimedia). Canal, beam engines and mill are all now maintained by volunteers. The London-Reading-Exeter railway, opened in 1841, follows the same route as the canal almost as far as Devizes, eventually putting it out of business, but transport improvements did not stimulate significant industrial growth locally, though there was brick-making, and bracken was burnt to produce lye, used in soap.

Near Crofton is the manor that gave its name to 'Wolf Hall', the award-winning novels and television programmes about Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII. Nothing medieval survives at Wolfhall, though in Domesday Book eight workers were recorded in 'Ulfela', and in 1377 fourteen people paid tax. If there were a central focus, its site has not been located; nor for certain has the site of the manor-house, although it may be indicated by a brick drainage system recently found below the present Wolf Hall (Bathe and Holley 2015; the present village is south of the tunnel on the map below). The manor belonged to the Esturmy family for most of the Middle Ages. They became hereditary wardens of Savernake forest; a horn of tenure symbolized their prestigious office from the twelfth century, though the splendid example now in the British Museum may only have come into their ownership after the Middle Ages (Bathe 2012). The estate and wardenship passed by marriage to the Seymour family (the current warden, the Earl of Cardigan, is a direct lineal descendant via the Brudenel-Bruce line). The manor-house was visited by Henry VIII, who married Jane. The future Edward VI was born in 1537, becoming king in 1547. His uncle Edward, made Duke of Somerset, became 'Protector', and engaged 280 men to build a huge palace, its site perhaps identified by recognition of an aqueduct leading to it (Bathe 2006). That enterprise ended with Seymour's execution in 1552.

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Great Bedwyn is now a small market town, but antiquity is suggested by the name, which may be Brittonic rather than Anglo-Saxon. Two Anglo-Saxon charters show that



Bedwyn was also a major estate, being divided up in the tenth century. The area's importance is underlined by the recent discovery of a rare gold Kentish 'shilling' of c. 675, now in the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes. The church was almost certainly an Anglo-Saxon 'minster', its large parish an indication of its early parochial territory. Another indication is that its church is a large building, with transepts

and side aisles, which are not Anglo-Saxon in date, but are features that often show that a church had an above-average income to spend on its fabric (photograph: Wiltshire County Council). An early manuscript was housed in it, suggesting a library and a religious



community. Bedwyn also had one of the very few recorded Anglo-Saxon guilds. The relationship both to various linear dykes and to Chisbury hillfort (see on-line entry) is intriguing. Chisbury was clearly the late ninth-century defended stronghold, but local rights remained with Bedwyn.

Despite this early advantage, Great Bedwyn did not develop into one of Wiltshire's major towns (VCH 1999). It had 25 burgesses in Domesday Book, but ominously for its future its mint was transferred to Marlborough. Its failure to become significant is shown by its having only 87 tax-payers in 1377. As a prebendal manor, it was linked to Salisbury and was at times the home of the Archdeacon of Wiltshire, who had a house in the Close (see on-line entry). The market-place is now triangular, but has been encroached upon – it was rectangular in the 18th century, with a small market-house. Unusually, the church is some distance from it, not placed to oversee and benefit directly from it. This might indicate minor replanning, as at Amesbury (see on-line entry).

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Today's Savernake Forest is only a small part of the area subject to medieval forest law. It is planted woodland, established on the medieval royal wood-pasture (Lennon 2012; VCH 1999, 207-21; plan, Greenwood's map of 1820, from Lennon 2012). The planned



landscape of both straight (compass-point) and serpentine rides and monuments contains many ancient trees, some of which, based on size alone, may be around 1000 years old but incorporated into what is effectively an eighteenth-century creation. The air photograph (below, by Phil Laycock, reproduced under common licence agreement, accessed through Wikimedia) is taken looking south-east, with the Vale of Pewsey in the background. The mature trees in the foreground contrast with the more recent plantation on the left, set in straight lines. The characteristic straight ride through the woods leads past the Ailesbury



monument in a clearing all the way to Tottenham House (private), a huge nineteenth-century mansion on the site of a house constructed in 1575 by the Duke of Somerset's son as a replacement for the ruinous Wolfhall. In the eighteenth century, the whole area, comprising the open parkland around the house, Savernake Forest and the nearby Bedwyn and Wilton Brail, were conceived as a single landscaped entity, in consultation with Capability Brown.



The Ailesbury column was not originally intended for a sylvan setting in Savernake, but was brought in 1781 from the garden of a house near London, presumably a more formal and semi-urban context. It was re-inscribed, one text giving thanks for the recovery from 'a long and afflicting disorder' of King George III – sadly, only a temporary respite – and the other to the uncle from whom the Earl of Ailesbury had inherited the estate, and to thank the king for his earldom. Such expressions of loyalty to the sovereign were political, stressing the Hanoverians' support for Protestantism and stability (photograph by Brian Marshall under common licence agreement, accessed from Wikimedia).

Much of Savernake is only accessible to walkers, but a distant view of Tottenham House can be seen from its gate on a public lane, as

can the park and the Ailesbury monument. The road north from Burbage to Marlborough crosses both the Avon and Kennet canal, and the railway, and then climbs steeply and has dense woodland with its ancient trees on the east side. New LiDAR surveys are able to ‘see’ through the tree-cover to reveal earthwork and other features, including the remains of Second World War munition stores hidden from overhead bombers (Lennon and Crow 2009). To the west is Savernake Great Park, but the roadside is a narrow fringe and the park is now entirely agricultural (another area of mixed woodland, West Woods, is off the map above). The road drops steeply into the Kennet Valley and to Marlborough (see on-line entry), which is outside the forest though much of the medieval administration of the king’s rights in it was dealt with from the castle. Frequent infringements were made by the ‘borderers’ living in the settlements surrounding the king’s wood-pasture, who had common rights to graze sheep and cattle, turn out pigs in the pannage season, and take sticks, turves, fern and tree-browse, all of which, coupled with the substantial fallow and red deer populations, inhibited regeneration of woodland, leading to a very open landscape of pasture interspersed with mature trees.

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The other south-ward road from Marlborough heads over the Downs and past various earthworks, including Wansdyke (see on-line entry), mostly difficult to identify from ground level. Pewsey was not a medieval town, despite having a small market-place; it ‘boasts’ a statue of King Alfred, erected in 1911, but the village is a good way from the probable site of his victory at the Battle of *Ethandun* in 878. As at Great Bedwyn (above) the Kennet and Avon Canal and the railway run through the village. A good example of a house with a cruck truss (see Bradford-on-Avon on-line entry) can be seen from the road to Burbage, and the lane going south-east to Everleigh climbs the Downs past one of Wiltshire’s white horses, cut in 1785 in a gesture of loyalty to King George III, like the Ailesbury monument (above) and recut to celebrate a coronation in 1937 (Edwards 2005). The slopes also retain good examples of strip-lynchets, cut into the slope to create terraces that could be ploughed when arable was in very high demand, as for instance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. Further west in the Vale, however, are some of the very few such lynchets to have been excavated, and the amount of late Iron Age and Roman pottery found caused them to be interpreted as originating in a much earlier period (Wood and Whittington 1959; 1960); in some cases, medieval farmers may have remodelled earlier systems.

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological institute held in July 2016; see [www.royalarchinst.org](http://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 were prepared by David A. Hinton with the help of Graham Bathe. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.