

## The Ancient Downland Field System

Brading Down has not been ploughed for many centuries. Ploughing was a problem – the Down slopes steeply. This was solved by ploughing from side to side, which formed flat terraces called lynchets: the ancient downland field system.

It is probable that, in the 13th century, ploughing stopped for an easier alternative. Grazing by sheep and cattle was becoming popular in the south of England – especially so with the Bishop of Winchester who encouraged the eviction of tenants from the villages in favour of the more profitable sheep! The wool trade was beginning to boom, and the downland was being established once more.

From about 2000 BC onwards, farmers in many areas of England were creating fields which have left traces that are still visible to us today. Incomplete remains of these field systems can be seen in several places on the Isle of Wight, but the finest one left on the Island is Brading Down. This consists of a series of earthen banks on the ridge and the southern slope of the Down, preserved in an area of old grassland.

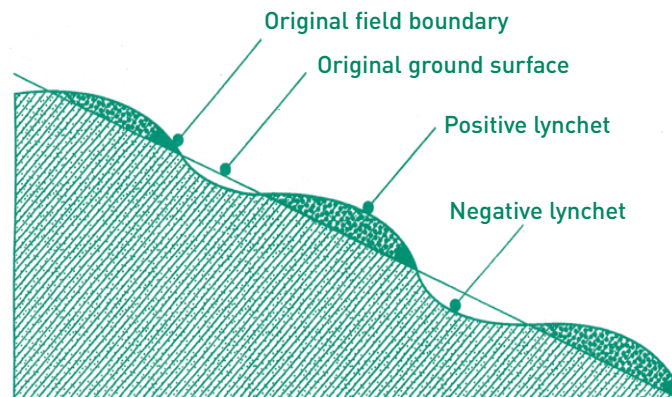
Archaeologists think that the field system dates from late Iron Age and Roman times. They also think that it is somehow connected with the Roman Villa which lies a short distance away at the foot of the Down.

Today, we can only find traces of ancient field systems in areas of old grassland such as Brading Down. This is because modern farming methods would plough over and obliterate the banks which form the boundaries of the ancient fields – which may have been made originally in turf or soil, but stone walls, fences, hedges and ditches were also used.

On sloping ground such as Brading Down, repeated ploughing, year after year, caused soil to move downhill. This soil would have built up against the original field boundaries. Eventually, they would have been covered, forming earthworks known as lynchets. The banks of soil built up over the original field boundaries are called 'positive lynchets'. Below these boundaries, in the next field, soil was removed by the same process, forming 'negative lynchets'. A number of the lynchets on the Down are 3 metres high, which shows us the long-standing use of the land for arable farming. You can see this process illustrated in the diagram below.

During the time these lynchets were being formed, environmental remains such as snail shells, pollen, seeds, and so on, were being buried both beneath and within the lynchet banks. In this way, the remains have been preserved beneath the surface of the ground, awaiting discovery by modern archaeologists. The Brading Down Field System is important

### The Formation of Lynchets



archaeologically and so it has been given protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument by an Act of Parliament dating from 1979. This means that no-one can damage, destroy, alter or cover the Down without written permission from the Secretary of State for the Environment.

In the 1980s, the South Wight Borough Council carried out a scrub removal programme on Brading Down, before which the banks of the field system were almost hidden from view. If we want to preserve the field system, then it has to remain a grassland. To do this, it has to be grazed carefully so that the soil is not eroded by the hooves of too many animals, whilst also preventing the scrub from taking hold again.



## The Roman Villa

The Romans conquered the Isle of Wight in AD 47 and built a strongly fortified and defended camp at Brading. The Roman Villa was built on the flat land at the bottom of Brading Down, developed from a small structure from AD 50 onwards. Archaeologists think that the house probably belonged to a high ranking Roman official.

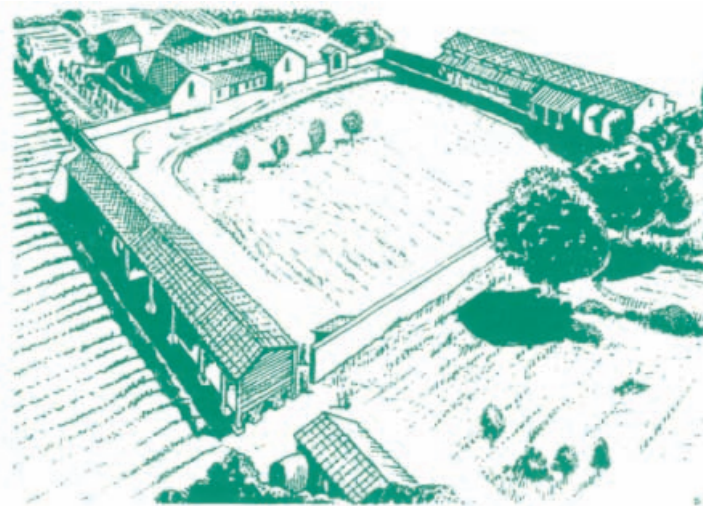
In those times, the sea lapped the shore within view of the Villa. It must have been a very pleasant place to live, facing south with shelter from Brading Down behind. The occupiers almost certainly would have grown grapes for wine making, as happens today at the nearby Adgestone Vineyard.

The Romans stayed as conquerors on the Island for 400 years, but it was not until Victorian times that the Villa was discovered by Mr. William Munns and Captain John Thorpe, on Good Friday 1880. Roman tiles and coins had been found near the site for many years, so the discovery was not a complete surprise. Many things have been excavated in the grounds and

surrounding area since that time. For example, there are deer antlers on display inside the Villa – it is possible that these animals grazed on the Down above.

Other things, such as human and animal bones, pots, tiles and even window glass, have been recovered from the ancient well at the Villa. Some very interesting tiles show the imprints of a hand, a foot, a sandal, and a dog's paw! See all these and much more at the new Exhibition and Visitor Centre which protects the Roman remains.

**Related reading:** Leaflets in this series on the *History and Character* of Brading Down.



A reconstruction of the Roman Villa



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BRADING  
TOWN  
COUNCIL

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Isle of Wight  
area of outstanding  
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# Brading Down

## Ancient Field System

