

Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages

The discovery of Brading Roman Villa in 1880 has shown us the problems that archaeologists and landscape historians (people who study the past) have in understanding what happened thousands of years ago. A bank of grass may be an old field boundary or a medieval manor. A mound may be the site of a prehistoric burial ground or the remains of a medieval windmill.

The tracks on Brading Down may be the work of Roman travellers (2,000 years ago) or caused by medieval farmers and their herds of cattle (700 years ago). Some of the earliest man-made tracks are over chalk downland. Many were animal pathways which prehistoric man followed when hunting. As people settled in villages and needed to travel for goods and materials, these pathways gradually became well-defined tracks to other places. They followed the top of the Downs, as it was easier to see the way ahead and to avoid densely wooded or boggy ground.

We can make some guesses about what men and women did here, based on studies which have been made elsewhere on Britain's chalk grassland. Archaeologists break down the period of time before history was written into the following five parts:

Palaeolithic Age (before about 7000 BC)

This was the earliest period of man's existence on the Isle of Wight. However, the Island as such did not exist, as the land was joined to the mainland and the continent. It is unlikely that people lived here permanently, but it is thought they passed through on hunting trips as flint tools have been found. As the Ice Age ended, perhaps 8,000 years ago, the land became warmer and the ground gradually became covered by a thick forest. People started to live in the same area, rather than move around in nomadic hunting parties.

Mesolithic Age (from about 7000 to 4300 BC)

The mixed forest of Oak, Elm, Lime, Ash, Birch, Hazel and Elder enabled people to start producing enough fuel and food to remain in the same place. For the first time, people actually changed the look of the countryside using flint tools and fire. Man had discovered by now how to make and use charcoal. Forests were gradually being cut down partly for fuel and partly for raising farm animals and crops. The Isle of Wight became separated from Hampshire about 6000 BC and became roughly the same shape as it is today.



Neolithic Age (from about 4300 to 2300 BC)

People had by now developed improved farming methods, growing cereals and domesticating animals. Forests could be cleared more easily as tools had improved. The population started to form into farming communities (groups of people working the land rather than moving from place to place). We can tell that people had started to settle as pottery remains have been found. Burial mounds or Barrows were built and the remains of these can be seen on chalk downland. We can guess that labour was available to carry out this work.

Bronze Age (from about 2300 to 600 BC)

Most of the forest which covered the Downs had been cut down by this time, and the field systems developed. Aerial photographs have shown complex areas of land use and possibly settlements on chalk downlands. Unfortunately, very few other signs of settlements have been found, probably because they were destroyed by later Iron Age settlements. The early Bronze Age climate was drier and warmer than today but, towards the end of the period, the weather became wetter and cooler, so that erosion of the top soil on the Downs would have taken place. Grazing animals would have been introduced.

Left: The one remaining burial mound (tumulus) of several others now ploughed flat. It is located in the field to the right of the B29 to Nunwell, across the Brading Down Road from the Information Boards.

Iron Age (from about 600 BC to AD 43)

By this time, the population was growing, so that meant more and more land was being cleared, settled, grazed and cultivated for crops. The use of iron – a hard metal – was an important move forward as it could be made into ploughs and axes which did not break so easily. Can you think of another use for iron?

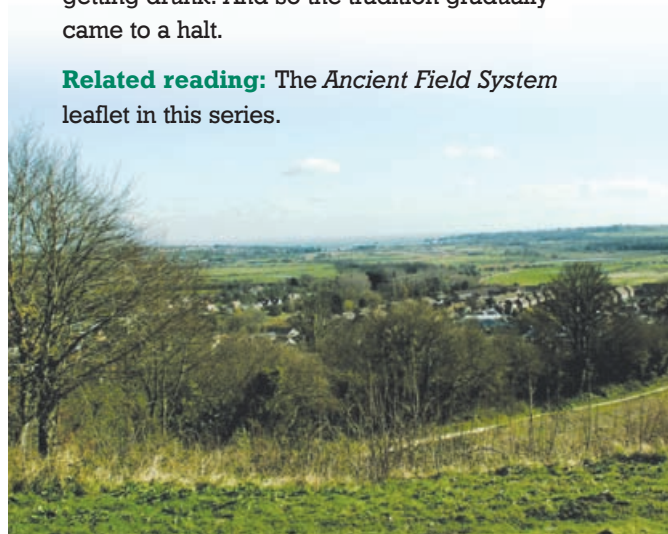
Domesticated animals as well as game birds and fishes were eaten more often in people's diets. The fields below Brading Down would probably have been cultivated with wheat, barley and oats. People would have lived in round huts, making cloth, processing cereals and metal working. The grain from cereals may have been stored in pits dug into the downland chalk, and small sheep would have been grazed on the Down. The sheep were probably also milked and their hides and wool used for clothing.

The end of the Iron Age is marked in Britain by the Roman invasions of AD 43. The Romans were armed with a fresh set of skills and inventions which would soon begin to influence the use of land and materials, and to change the way people thought and lived.

Brading Fair

All over southern England, Downs have been places where people meet to have fun. At Brading in the 17th and 18th centuries, three-day fairs were held twice a year on the Down. Horses were bought and sold, goods were displayed, and merry-making took place. In their heyday around 1620, the occasion was important both agriculturally and commercially. Many officials were present to ensure cheating and swindling did not take place. This continued until Victorian times when certain officials disliked the idea of ordinary people merry-making for three days! Moreover, the event was frowned upon by the 'decent' people of Brading as a place for trinkets, 'fairlings', and getting drunk! And so the tradition gradually came to a halt.

Related reading: *The Ancient Field System* leaflet in this series.



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BRADING
TOWN
COUNCIL

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Isle of Wight
area of outstanding
natural beauty

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Brading Down

History

In the Domesday Book, Brading is mentioned as Brerarding or Brereding. The name is said to mean 'Broad Meadow' from the rich pastures between the Down and the Haven.