



Book Reviews

THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE OF THE MENDIP HILLS BY E JAMIESON

Historic England, Swindon, 2015. 294 pp, 292 illus ISBN: 9781848020429, hb, £35

The Historic Landscape of the Mendip Hills details the results of the latest survey of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) by Historic England. These surveys aim to inform conservation and management strategies for the archaeology/standing buildings of landscapes which have been designated for their significant environmental, geological and heritage value. Other notable monographs in this AONB “series” include surveys of the Quantocks (Riley 2006) and the Malvern Hills (Bowden 2005). The current volume is handsomely produced and richly illustrated with a large number of colour plots, plans and photographs. The project took a multi-disciplinary approach involving various teams from within the organisation, including Archaeological Survey and Investigation, Architectural Investigation, and Aerial Investigation and Mapping. Although Elaine Jameison is the credited author it is obvious that many individuals had input into this project, as the acknowledgments show.

We should start by saying that this is not the first archaeological survey of this AONB: that accolade goes to Peter Ellis’ 1992 publication *Mendip Hills An Archaeological Survey of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*, funded by English Heritage and Somerset County Council. More recently the publication, *The Archaeology of Mendip: 500,000 years of continuity and change* (Lewis 2011a) was the first to consider the archaeology of the entirety of the Mendip Hills, not just the AONB. Whilst the first is mentioned in the current publication in its round-up of archaeological research in the region, it is rather surprising that it does not include the latter, despite referencing it in individual chapters. This rather lax approach to citation is a point to which I will return.

The book is organised into eight chapters and takes a standard chronological approach, starting with the Palaeolithic and finishing in the 21st century. For readers of this review it is likely that Chapters 1-4 may be the primary interest, dealing with the physical environment and the Palaeolithic through to Iron Age. A total of 82 of the 294 pages of the book are devoted to prehistory, or slightly less than a third of the total: the lengthiest chapters are unsurprisingly those concerning the later medieval and the post-medieval periods. There are also occasional “panels”, detailed case studies relating to a particular site or theme of a chapter, though there is a rather inconsistent approach to their inclusion. It would seem to make sense for each chapter to have had a panel, but this is not the case: instead there are four split (chronologically) unevenly across the eight chapters.

The first chapter sets out the physical environment, the history of archaeological research and the project methodology. Here we learn that the whole of the AONB was considered in the fieldwork stages and a number of sites selected for more detailed investigation. All major prehistoric sites were assessed and representative samples of Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows and all upstanding hillforts and enclosures were surveyed. The architectural recording included buildings of different dates and types and in addition, a north-south transect was chosen for more detailed architectural investigation. Aerial survey transcriptions from the Mendip Hills AONB

National Mapping Programme (NMP) and other aerial reconnaissance projects were also utilised.

The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic chapter is one of the shortest in the book, perhaps unsurprising considering the field survey approach of the project. It offers an overview of the current state of knowledge, together with some distribution maps and artefact and landscape photographs. This is fine and written in an accessible style but does not really move us on from Jacobi and Currant's 2011 re-evaluation of much of the same material. It is perhaps not as tightly referenced as it could be, for example the clustering of lithics at the tops of combs and gorges, indicating patterns of movement, has been previously noted and explored in various publications by Roger Jacobi, Rick Schulting and the author of this review, as have ideas about encounters with the past revealed through repeated cave use.

The Neolithic and Early Bronze Age chapter offers rather more to sink one's teeth into, with new survey data of long and round barrows and henges with plenty of good photographs and distribution maps. However, a problem imposed by the adherence to the artificial AONB boundary is a lack of adequate contextualisation of this material. For example, the discussion of long barrows mentions the three possible examples within the AONB, and the four immediately outside, it but makes no reference to the broader northern Somerset landscape where there are nearly 40 of these monuments (see Grinsell 1971 and Lewis 2005). Similarly, the discussion of the Bronze Age barrows and cairns within the AONB makes no reference to those outside it, which means the impact of the (very real) concentration on the western plateau is lost. The new surveys are to be welcomed however, though I would take issue with the interpretation of a mound on Beacon Batch as a long barrow: I am not convinced by this and indeed the plan is almost interchangeable with another monument within the same cemetery, which is interpreted as a Bronze Age ring cairn (page 65 Figure 3.25 d). No mention is made of the co-existence of megalithic and non-megalithic long mound traditions in this region and thus the discussion of the invisibility of long barrow ditches misses the point that this may relate to different monumental traditions, with the possibility of off-set quarry pits rather than side ditches. A somewhat inconsistent approach to citations is also notable in this chapter. For example, despite discussion of the relationship between long and round mounds, no mention is made of a consideration of exactly this phenomenon in this landscape (Lewis 2008). Similarly, the sequence put forward for the Priddy long barrow is credited to Phillips and Taylor (1972) when it actually derives from a reinterpretation of the primary archive material by Lewis (2002). The excavation at the Tynning's Farm round barrow cemetery is highlighted, yet some of the interpretation appears to be loosely based on the review of the site by Lewis (2007). More broadly, the ideas included about the presence/absence of ditches at Mendip round barrows, the significance of the materials employed in their construction and the visibility of barrows through the successive phases of construction were also considered in Lewis 2007 but there is no acknowledgement of this here. In addition Mullin's review of the chronology of Mendip barrows (2011) is not mentioned, though the ideas put forward about the important Pool Farm cist footprints are similar to those explored by him.

The results of the important new work on the burials within Hay Wood Cave by Schulting *et al* (2013) are not included, perhaps because of publication cut-off dates, and so the "old" interpretation of this site is given. This is unfortunate, as the new study has now shown that the deposition of the multiple burials within the cave centre on 3600-3500 cal BC, with the possibility that one individual was deposited in the 39th century cal BC. The idea of the deliberate mound in the cave is continued here, but has been convincingly questioned by Schulting *et al* (*ibid*).

Many will have been awaiting the publication of the survey of Priddy Circle 1, one of the four unusual Neolithic enclosures centrally placed on the plateau. Circle 1 hit the headlines after

recent criminal damage and it is fortuitous that it was surveyed before this episode (as published by Baker and Jamieson in Lewis and Mullin 2011). Yet there is no discussion of the features shown abutting the west side of the circle and again, ideas voiced elsewhere (eg, Lewis' ideas (2005; 2011b) that the large number of sinkholes in the landscape of the circles may have been part of the reason for the siting of the circles) are recounted but not acknowledged. However, one of the most striking omissions from this AONB project was that only Circle 1 was surveyed: the Priddy Circles are unique monuments and have not been surveyed since the 1960s. This project offered an excellent opportunity to investigate all four enclosures, using much improved technology. Obviously, difficult decisions had to be made about what to include and exclude, but not grasping this opportunity seems inexplicable.

The slightly loose grasp of chronology in this chapter is at odds with recent, meticulous approaches to prehistoric monuments which emphasise the relatively short histories of these sites. The Neolithic and Early Bronze Age as presented here appears to be the coherent and cohesive entity presented in popular accounts of old, rather than a period spanning some 2500 years punctuated by historically situated episodes of monument construction, use, abandonment and occasional reuse. That said, the informed reader will know of this and adjust their understanding accordingly.

The Later Prehistoric chapter makes the greatest contribution to our understanding of prehistoric Mendip, in the form of the 15 new surveys of field systems, enclosures and hillforts, with additional aerial photographic transcription. As would be expected in a volume primarily concerned with data collection, interpretations are of lesser importance and those offered are unlikely to upset the status quo. Thus hillforts are “enclosed and defended places” which “dominate” the surrounding landscape. However, unlike some of the surveys presented in the previous chapter, here the details shown by the new plans are discussed and phasing offered. This is not always consistent: Phases I and IV for Banwell Camp hillfort, for example, are considered in the text but not Phases II and III. It might also have been helpful to have provided a combined plan showing the Dolebury field system and hillfort, rather than separate the two, as it will be difficult for those unfamiliar with the site to understand their relationship. Those unfamiliar with this landscape may also find it slightly frustrating that the distribution maps are of “the dots on map type” and so one cannot cross-reference the sites discussed in the text with a physical location. A Site Gazetteer, including grid references, is provided at the end of the book, but the emphasis here is on the major sites and many sites mentioned in the text are not included.

Romano-British and Early Medieval sites are considered in the next rather concise chapter, where photographs and location maps rather than surveys dominate. The earthwork survey of the Charterhouse-on-Mendip Romano-British industrial settlement is exceptional however, recording an incredible amount of detail that illustrates the complexity of the site. No real mention is made of the pre-Roman lead extraction here, even though we know this dates to at least the Bronze Age. Whilst the new research on speleothem records identifying three main extraction peaks dating to 1800–1500 BC, 1100–800 BC and 350–0 BC by McFarlane et al (2014, though available online in 2013) may have been published too late to make it into this volume, the suggestions of Rohl and Needham (1998), also considered by Mullin (2011) could have been mentioned.

Other Romano-British settlement and industrial sites of this period are considered in the text, along with religious and burial sites. On this note it is worth mentioning that the discussion of temple sites fails to consider the possible contender outside of the Burlledge hillfort, where research by Corcos and also by Dunn (2005) considered a *nemeton* place-name. The aerial photograph reproduced as Figure 4.28 clearly shows the oval field, identified by these authors as the (broad) location of a possible Romano-Celtic temple. The Early Medieval discussion

contains plenty of descriptive detail and whilst we have no plans or plots, it may have been helpful to have included some illustrative material, phased plans in particular, for sites such as the Cheddar royal palace. To return to the topic of place-names, two further comments must also be made. The first is the perpetuation of the idea that 'Mendip' derives from the Celtic word 'mynedd'. This is taken from early work by Frances Neale (not Neal as misspelt in the text) and ignores the more recent and widely accepted suggestion by Coates (1986) that the name comes from the element 'yype', meaning either a hunting dais or 'plateau' (ibid). Similarly, the toponym 'leah' is now acknowledged to mean a wood pasture and not a woodland clearing, as is suggested here: the implications of this are significant to our understanding of the early medieval landscape. The rather haphazard approach to citations noted earlier is also apparent in this chapter: no mention is made of Michael Costen's important publications on Somerset place-names for example, and where we do have reference to his work it is to *The Origins of Somerset* (1992) rather than his rewritten and updated *Anglo-Saxon Somerset* (2011). It also seems rather strange that results from the excellent Shapwick Project (Gerrard and Aston 2007; Aston and Gerrard 2013) were not mentioned as they provide a local comparison for the organisation of the early medieval landscape.

The chapters dealing with the later medieval and post medieval periods take up almost half of the book and are arguably the strongest. The new architectural surveys and photographs of private dwellings, often revealing unexpectedly early origins, are remarkable and force us to rethink what we know about the buildings in this region. All the classic medieval themes are covered - building typologies (both ecclesiastical and secular), land use and landscape organisation, power and ownership, settlement types and hierarchies, growth and abandonment - and richly supplemented with archaeological and architectural surveys. The post medieval chapter documents the periods of boom and bust that typify many rural upland landscapes and also settlement patterns, agricultural change and industry. The approach taken to the early farmsteads is interesting, considering first the surviving architectural examples and then the archaeological examples, showing that it is the latter which actually tell us more about their layout due to the way surviving structures have been remodelled. The section on the health institutions draws attention to the incongruity of their co-existence with dangerous industries such as lead mining: definitions of a "healthy situation" were obviously rather narrow in the post medieval period.

The final short chapter considers some of the features of the 20th century landscape, namely the important military structures and sites. It is rather frustrating that there is no transcription of the First World War practice trenches apparently shown by aerial photograph (Figure 8.4), as it is difficult to identify the features that are discussed in the text. The volume then concludes with a short summary of the changing nature of the Mendip historic environment.

Overall, this is an important addition to the Mendip literature and the new archaeological and architectural surveys will allow intra and inter comparisons and provide a conservation benchmark for the future. However, as this review has outlined, there are issues with this work, some of which may be a result of the intended audience. It rather falls between the stools of a popular, though informed, publication and an academic research volume, not least in terms of the referencing of source materials. As has been noted, ideas identical or very close to those proposed by others have, on occasion, been included without adequate acknowledgment, certain key publications which could have enriched the volume have been missed and some outdated sources have been utilised. Rather than a stand-alone text, future researchers are recommended to read this in conjunction with the afore-mentioned *Archaeology of Mendip* edited volume which provides some of the richness that only scholars deeply familiar with their subject and this landscape can bring.

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Review received: November 2015

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