

# Lowland Heath, Landscape Features and Yateley Common

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The very presence of lowland heath is testament to the uses that our ancestors put to the sand and gravel landscapes of Southern England. It records the expansion of woodland glades from c.5000 BC by late Mesolithic hunters in order to encourage animals to congregate and feed; followed by the clearance and cultivation activities of early farmers. As the environment begins the change to heathland during the Bronze Age c.2000 BC it becomes a place of burial and reverence for the dead. Subsequently from the Iron Age c.650 BC to later historic periods, the peripheral areas of subsistence farming denote acidic soils with limited growing opportunities.



Bronze Age bell barrow near Blackwater Lodge by Carol White

these rapidly diminishing environments. Nevertheless, if the sum of lowland heath in the Hampshire Basin, Thames Basin and Weald are considered, there is still a significant record of past human activities in landscape evidence and environmental effects.

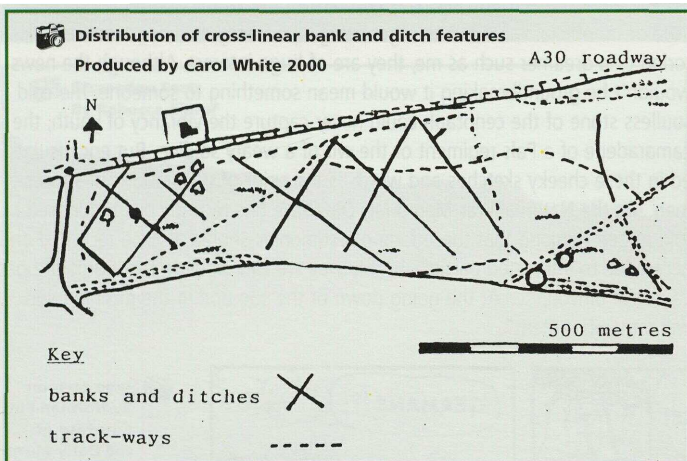
The military training area of the Combat Engineer School, Gibraltar Barracks, in north-east Hampshire is an example of the complex relationship between environmental changes and human activity that may span several thousand years. To the south of the River Blackwater in North East Hampshire, the training area is situated within a landscape known as Yateley Common, part of a plateau that overlies gravel deposits. The environment contains extensive sections of dry heath with Ling, Bell Heather, Dwarf Gorse, Purple Moor-grass, pockets of plantation conifer and marginal regeneration broad leaf woodland. The landscape has been given Site of Special Scientific Interest status with Nightjar, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler amongst the species of ornithological interest.

At just above 100 metres, the plateau ends and the gentle slopes descend to the surrounding river valley sides of the Blackwater river, below Yateley Common. Crossing the common from east to west, the A30 trunk road creates a north-south division, with Hampshire County Council controlling the north side and much of the south area managed by the Ministry of Defence and English Nature. On the west side of the plateau to the north of the A30 road is Blackbushe Airfield, and beyond this is an area known as Castle Bottom with a small bowl barrow discovered during the October storms in 1987 and recorded in county records. Sources for other Prehistoric discoveries in the Yateley area can also be found in the Archaeological and Historical Buildings Record at Winchester and in local archaeological and historical publications.

From the early twentieth century archaeologists such as Stuart Piggott and local specialists such as Colonel Stilwell documented finds from Yateley, mainly extracted from the commercial gravel workings in the area. They included pottery fragments and human remains, now stored at museum facilities at Winchester. There are several references to miscellaneous objects found within the rural town of Yateley, but limited tangible evidence survives.

In 1994 the local authority published a project directed by William Boismier as part of a major landscape survey of surface finds within Hampshire. In the mid 1980s during observations using walk over survey techniques on the Hampshire County Council north side of the common, he recorded locations of burnt mounds and finds of worked flint of suggested Mesolithic age (between 10,500 - 5,500 years ago). The training area itself, on the south-east side of the plateau has a known scheduled monument which lies near to Blackwater Lodge within metres of the perimeter fence of the Combat Engineer School, Gibraltar Barracks. This was recorded by Leslie Grinsell as a mid Bronze Age bell barrow (circa 1500 BC). The site was investigated in 1770 by Mr Norris of Hawley House, who left no details of his methods, only a cursory reference to a find of a coarse earthenware urn, which was reputedly conveyed to one of the collections of antiquities at Hughenden House. During the building of the barracks, a small portion of the burial mound was removed to lay a service road around the perimeter fence, exposing a small section of the monument.

The Yateley Common landscape with the training area that includes the Bronze Age burial monument, was given little consideration prior to 1997,



Regarded as uneconomically viable for many centuries, lowland heath has been referred to as 'the waste' and gained a reputation as a wild landscape, associated with highwaymen, hangings and other nefarious activities. Typical negative perceptions of heathland can be found in the diaries of reformers such as William Cobbett and the novels of Thomas Hardy. From these latter centuries of the second millennium, reclamation was promoted with farming techniques and financial incentives available for widespread improvement and rural development to take place. Where development was not seen to be cost-effective, heathlands have remained landscapes of ecological studies and outdoor activities, including military training. The latter part of the twentieth century has seen the development of a programme of conservation to protect

# Yateley Common

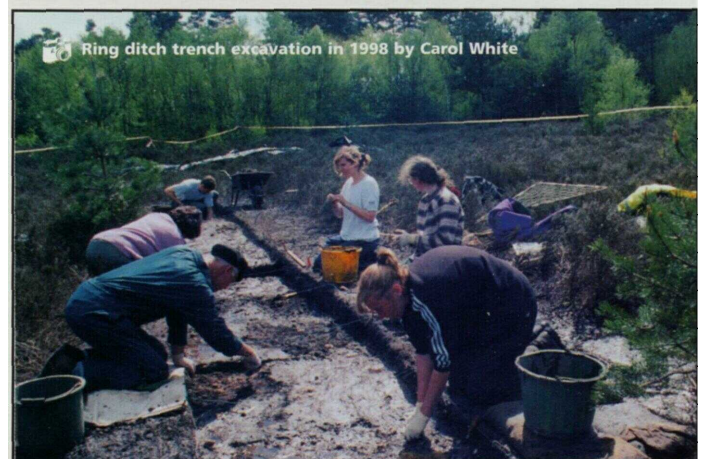
despite indications of its potential and the characteristics of its environment, as lowland heath representing a landscape with distinct evidence of past human activity.

As part of a teaching programme of archaeology courses held at Farnborough College of Technology, local areas were sought for basic field survey exercises. Locations around the plateau were considered for suitability. On close examination of aerial photographs and subsequent landscape surveys of training area on the south section of Yateley Common, various earthworks were detected. A ring ditch feature with an outer small bank was discovered to the north-east of the bell barrow. Survey also revealed an interesting arrangement of cross-linear features comprised of banks and ditches which vary in style of construction, bank height and depth of ditch. These earthworks are camouflaged by the heathland vegetation but cover over one kilometre square of the military training area and extend from the south section to the north side of the A30 road. It is known that the landscape has been used for military exercises through history; for example, 1st Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment during the late nineteenth century. However, enquiries made to the National Monument Records Centre at Swindon and the Sites and Monuments Record at Winchester produced no record or explanation for the landscape features, and it was suggested that further investigations would be beneficial to place the features into a chronological sequence.

Since 1998, information relating to the landscape history of the military training area has accumulated through continuous recording and data collection made possible from permissions given by the Ministry of Defence, Defence Estates and English Nature, with annual summaries included in 'Archaeology in Hampshire' Hampshire County Council reports. Studies of the landscape have provided countless educational opportunities and field experience for many students taking archaeology courses at Farnborough College of Technology and Basingstoke College of Technology. These include numerous landscape walking exercises, surveys, mapping and surface measurement of sections of the cross-linear configuration, excavation by small evaluation trenches, and 'shovel pit' tests located at intervals across the landscape. The military have given support with each season of fieldwork activities and provided tentage and assistance during excavations. In 1998, a small trench was positioned from the outer bank of the ring ditch feature to its central area, with test pits placed around the ditch at measured intervals. Several small pits were uncovered and soil samples taken, although no artefacts were found. From 1999, a range of methodologies have been employed as part of the research design for field activities. Data collection has included an adaptation of a prospection method known as 'shovel pit testing', used to an advantage during the Shapwick Project by Bristol University and King Alfred's College, Winchester, to investigate the chronology of a settlement on an estate owned by Glastonbury Abbey. The method is recognised for its suitability in protected environments and large area sites. It involves the collection of a measured sample of sediment, usually of units based on a cube defined by the width and depth of a shovel (about 30 litres of sediment) from test pits placed at strategic intervals, and then sieved to retrieve finds. The Methodology used on the training area at Yateley Common is based on a framework of equilateral triangles across the landscape at triangulation intervals of twenty metres. Sediment units of approximately 30 litres are removed and sieved, with careful recording of level depths, materials and soils. The work has concentrated on the sector of cross-linear features nearest to the

Bronze Age burial mound, discovering a range of building techniques employed in the construction of the banks, including an eroded bank which underlies other features in the north limits of the cross-linear configuration. Excavation using an extended pit allowed a clear inspection of the construction techniques of the bank in this section and the use of the local geology of plateau gravel and sediments, which had been mixed and appeared similar to those observed in the exposed section of the Bronze Age monument.

During the 'Foot and Mouth' crisis of 2001, there was a possibility that restrictions on group access to the training area would continue through the sum-



men. Fortunately, gorse bushes which screened the training area from the A30 road and had become an area for fly tipping, were assigned for a programme of clearance by the military. Following the removal of the gorse bushes, two mounds from the terminals of cross-linear features were exposed and offered a remarkable opportunity for a thorough examination of structural and environmental evidence. With authorisation given for a small excavation, an area was cleared of vegetation and an east-west trench placed to cut across both banks. As with other activities, students from Farnborough College of Technology and Basingstoke College of Technology provided valuable assistance with the recording and collection of material from the site. As the site was excavated, it became clear that the mounds represented more

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than one event, including considerable mutilation. The mound to the west of the excavation area had undergone substantial breaching and disturbance. Stems of clay pipes dating to the seventeenth century or later were found in this area. The mound which lay to the east of the trench presented a stratigraphy with soils in distinct layers and clear evidence of a specific construction in bank building, seen at other locations on the training area. The bulk of material within the mound comprised of at least two different mixes and uses of Plateau Gravel and topsoils, suggesting more than one phase of construction. The layer of soil buried below the bank has been sampled for analysis. A quartzite pebble with the appearance of human modification is under current examination.

Alongside data collection in the field, a geo-prospection method which measures the magnetic susceptibility of soils in the field or in soil samples and laboratory analysis has been undertaken as part of the research project. By identifying areas of localised magnetic readings against the background magnetic field readings, differences in magnetic susceptibility can expose phases of clearance and land-use. Soil samples have been collected from natural and earthwork profiles on the training area of Yateley Common. Using analysis techniques based in the soil laboratories at King Alfred's College, Winchester, methodologies are being developed through the study of frequency levels, to identify land-uses on lowland heath and establish a chronological framework.

Initial results show a pattern of frequency readings from buried soils beneath bank features, taken from a range of locations on the training area which suggest land clearance. As samples are processed and analysis continues, results will be made available within reports and communications.

Although there are few artefacts recovered from this location, it has repeatedly demonstrated the value of examination of the landscapes once referred to as the 'waste'. Whatever is discovered about the chronology associated with in the range of cross-linear earthworks that cover the military training area, they are part of our cultural heritage and worthy of consideration. The fact that they lie within a setting that is an environmental record of ancient human activities and part of a sequence of use gives reason for their protection and appreciation of the archaeology of lowland heath.

## Acknowledgement

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