

CPD Combe Prehistoric Downs

Historic Character

This is a section of the Hampshire Downs scarp, comprising a mix of downland, 20th century fields, and areas of recent woodland. Historically, most of this zone was covered by common downland grazing. By the 18th century, fields had been enclosed from the downs around a group of small farms at Eastwick and Lower Eastwick. A few scattered small ancient woods also existed on the downs scarps.

Agricultural change over the later 20th century led to a drastic modification of the zone. The arable extent has been greatly increased through enclosure of large areas of downland. Substantial areas of unenclosed downland survive despite these losses, largely on the steep scarp slopes. It is unclear whether these survive because cultivation is impractical or because of awareness of the significance of downland as a habitat. The surviving areas are important as they are the largest areas of downland in the district, although they represent only a fraction of the original historic extent. The historic fields have been reorganised into more regularly-shaped fields better suited to mechanised agriculture. The zone is now almost totally uninhabited and of the original farms and buildings all but Lower Eastwick Farm are deserted and demolished. At Lower Eastwick Farm the farmhouse building survives and it is now a house known as Eastwick. Under-grazed sections of downland and disused farm sites have been colonised by tress and this has led to the growth of several blocks of secondary woodland across the zone and a large number of plantations have been created. Most are linear and run counter to the sinuous grain of the landscape and have caused disruption to the fluidity and openness of the zone.

Historic Environment

HER records exist across the zone and include two of the district's most iconic and popular archaeological monuments, Combe Gibbet and Walbury hillfort, amongst other above-ground remains. The zone was covered by the National Mapping Programme and some barrows were excavated in the early 20th century, but little other work has been carried out. There are seven Scheduled Monuments in the zone: Combe Gibbet long barrow, five barrows within a Bronze Age barrow cemetery at Rivar Copse, and Walbury Camp hillfort.

Prehistoric records are widespread, but early material is fairly scarce. No Palaeolithic material has been recovered and Mesolithic finds are also scarce, consisting of a single find of a tranchet axe from Wigmoreash. Combe Gibbet long barrow and a find of an axe from the east of the zone are the only Neolithic records in the zone. The long barrow has not been excavated and stands in a prominent position on the downs scarp; its long axis coincides with a footpath and this has caused some erosion of the monument. A byway also runs through its southern ditch. Bronze Age records are mainly of barrows although several finds of this date have also been recovered around Walbury Camp. The cemetery at Rivar Copse includes the five barrows south of Rivar Copse on the downs crest as well as a sixth just across the county boundary in Wiltshire, known as Oswald's Barrow and mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon charter. A mound, interpreted as a probable barrow, exists in nearby Little Rivar Copse and may be part of the group; unlike the other monuments this lies further down the scarp slope. Walbury Camp hillfort is the only definite Iron Age feature in the zone but has not been excavated. Ringworks at the southwest tip of the hillfort, and a bank running along the crest of the scarp from Wigmoreash pond into Wiltshire, have also been suggested to be Iron Age in date. Extensive cropmarks of field-systems exist across the zone and have generally been ascribed a later prehistoric/Romano-British date. Elements of the field-systems survived until recently as earthworks but most have been levelled due to increased intensity of ploughing.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Apart from the field-systems, little other Romano-British activity has been documented. The only other record is of finds of pottery from the edge of the zone near Wright's Farm. An inhumation of this period was found just outside the zone at Combe in CVP HECZ, it is thought likely that this was from a cemetery. The extent of the cemetery is unknown and it may continue into this zone; the existence of a cemetery would also imply a nearby Romano-British settlement and it is possible that this too may lie within the CPD zone.

Traces of later periods are scarce and are confined to an early medieval hoard(s?) of sceattas from Walbury car park, and other features of unknown date: the historic farms and outfarms, a possible dewpond and rabbit warren. The gibbet was erected on the apex of Combe long barrow in 1676 and apparently used only once. It has become a popular and well-recognised local landmark and has been replaced four times since its erection with the current version dating to 1992. Eastwick, formerly Eastwick Farm, is the only listed building and is a 17th century farmhouse. There is also a record of a Second World War German aircraft crash on Walbury Hill although it is not clear whether remains exist at the crash site.

Historic Environment Potential

Deposits of Bronze Age to Romano-British date are likely across the zone but preservation may be varied. Deep ploughing is likely to have caused significant truncation of many features. The extent of survival of the cropmark features is unclear as few have been excavated, and deposits may range from relatively intact to very ephemeral and indiscernible. The survival of deposits at the extant monuments is also unclear as little modern archaeological work has been carried out on them. The extent to which land-use and antiquarian activity have compromised deposits at these monuments is also unclear. This is a very popular area for recreation which had led to serious erosion of the surviving earthworks at Combe Gibbet and Walbury, largely due to the course of rights of way and established paths. This zone has good potential for public engagement and promotion of the importance of these sites and downland landscapes.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- The continued use of the byway through the southern ditch of Combe Gibbet long barrow is a significant concern. Improving the management of the Combe Gibbet, with new fences, realigned track, improved signage, etc, is a major priority.
- Intellectual and physical access to Combe Gibbet and Walbury is restricted. Walbury interior is not fully accessible on foot and there are significant issues with the use to the byway at both monuments.
- The extension and expansion of modern agricultural practices will continue to erode the character of this zone.
- There is an ongoing need to understand in more detail the nature and extent of the archaeological resource.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- Need to ensure that any new tree planting avoids the visually and archaeologically erosive impacts of recent plantations. Where possible opportunities to soften the impact of recent plantations should be encouraged.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Research Potential

- Do Neolithic burial remains survive in the long barrow? Does evidence for pre and post barrow land-use survive?
- Do Bronze Age burial remains survive within the Rival Copse Barrow cemetery? Does evidence for pre and post barrow land-use survive?
- What are the origins of Walbury camp? Does it date to the late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age? Does evidence for function survive? What can the site tell us about the Bronze Age Iron Age transition?
- What is the nature and extent of the Roman cemetery? Does a related settlement exist in the vicinity?
- What are the date and functions of historic buildings in the zone?
- What are the origins and nature of farms and small settlements in the zone?