

WEG - August 2018

Beacons of the Past Project - Hillforts in the Chilterns Landscape by Dr. Wendy Morrison.

This new project with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Chilterns Conservation Board is due to run for a three and a half years with three strands of activity:

Discovery – to include targeted excavation and extensive surveying. It's coming to be understood that Hillforts do not exist in isolation.

Learning – a volunteer core is planned – there will be opportunities for both digital and practical volunteer work.

Protection – Our heritage is at risk and the study will aim to provide a guide for the protection of sites both those already vulnerable and those perhaps not yet discovered.

There are various levels of Hillfort sites within the Chilterns AONB including:

- Desborough Castle near Wycombe – a top level site with extensive remains to be studied, but is not well known locally.
- Pulpit Hill north east of Princes Risborough is a second level site, but as such is in need of further examination and has many mature trees which have been allowed to grow over the site, damaging valuable evidence.
- Whelpley Hill – has been ploughed out and Ivanhoe Beacon has suffered serious footfall erosion.

A map of the Chilterns showed already identified hillforts with some noticeable gaps – especially in our area – which will be recipients of further survey work if volunteer numbers are sufficient.

The nature of our Hillforts is still open to conjecture. Iron age enclosures might be part of a hillfort site but not necessarily a fort at all. Often there would be rows of defences but the forts do not always occupy obviously defensible sites. They may also have used as fair grounds or other centres of community activity.

The forts generally date from the Late Bronze age to the early iron age – so 1150 BC – 43 AD. The introduction of iron enabled an increase in the population as agricultural practices were able to improve and yields increased (the invention of the 'Ard' stick for example which was an iron 'shoe' added to a stick which meant that land could be cultivated more efficiently). In turn this led to hierarchies in society as grain surpluses were a form of wealth. Hillforts came to be a manifestation of power, as the time and commitment required to build them was substantial.

Hillforts represent a significant period of our history, as such, they contain the secrets of a large period of human development.

- The hillfort study aims to address the issues of:
- Our limited knowledge
- Neglect and damage suffered by numerous sites in the past
- Inappropriate management
- Variable public access
- A lack of interpretation and understanding of their importance
- Low public awareness and engagement

One of the major focuses for the study will be a large number of high level LIDAR surveys. Otherwise known as Airborne Laser Scanning, an area of 1300 square kilometres is to be surveyed with a higher level of detail than previously tackled. Enormous detail in the hidden landscape can be discerned by this process and training volunteers to interpret the high resolution LIDAR visualisations of the landscape is a really important part of Dr. Morrison's remit.

Funding for the study only allows for two full time roles so the volunteer workforce will be vital. There will also be volunteer opportunities of a more practical nature, which might include some clearing of new and existing sites, field surveying, Palaeo environmental coring and checking LIDAR findings on the ground. Lidar flights are due to begin in November, and by April 2019 data should be available to look at.

To sign up for the project or to get further information visit:

<https://www.chilternsaonb.org/about-chilterns/historic-environment/hillforts/beacons-of-the-past.html>