



## ANCIENT TRACKWAYS

The chalk downs to the north and south of the Weald of Kent, Surrey and Sussex are dry and open; they have served as convenient east-west trackways, or 'Ridgeways' from the earliest times. North-south trackways were few.

Between the bordering downs lies the ancient Saxon forest of Andredesweald. The soil is mainly composed of Wealden Clay and Hastings Sand. Around the higher central area there is a wide zone of clay; flat, ill-drained and very sticky. There is evidence of a primitive track leading south through what is now Godstone, to Tilburtstow, then continuing south to cross the clay lands between Blindley Heath and Horne. There is evidence too of a track leading south from Titsey to Dwelly Lane and Haxted Mill, then crossing the River Eden at Longbridge and continuing south towards Dry Hill.

Early settlement in the area was limited to the light-forested higher grounds. The obstacle of the River Eden, running west to east, was compounded by marsh lands and frequent flooding of the low areas throughout the winter months.

Prehistoric trackways converged on the hill fort at Dry Hill. Modern roads and footpaths still follow the same lines for much of their length. Dry Hill was a fortified settlement site, probably originating from the early Iron Age period (700 – 450 BC). The fort was in a district of dense forest which was very rich in iron ore, the source of economic stability for the settlement of ancient warrior farmers. To the east of the site is a hollow way joining a trackway; probably a communication route between Castle Hill at Tonbridge, and Saxonbury Hill Fort on the border of Kent and Sussex.

In the spring of 1932 an archaeological investigation of Dry Hill confirmed the evidence of pre-Roman iron smelting; the ore used was to a large extent Cyrena Limestone. Dry Hill Camp is about 550 ft. above sea level; it covers an area of 24 acres and has a circumference of nearly one mile. Trial pits were dug through the earthwork defences which consisted of three banks and two ditches; the inner bank, highest in position and piling, was the defensive line. On it were laid selected collections of grey flint pebbles, both hand missiles and sling stones.

Fresh water was collected in clay-lined ponds, one good example exists today. Disappointingly not a single shard of pottery was found during the 1932 investigation. A search for post holes, evidence of domestic building, was also unsuccessful although the archaeologists thought it unlikely that evidence of post-holes would remain in the very fluid sand. The weight of pebbles lying on the old surface was enough, they

suggested, to cause the post-holes to subside vertically. No archaeological investigation was undertaken in the inner fort area, an area that may prove productive in any future archaeological project.

The late Peter Gray calculated that one hundred men would be required to work for a full year in order to build the fortress. Over time the settlers and their families would swell the population to the size of a small town. Iron Age farming communities built circular houses in an enclosure with fields around. Grain was stored in pits. Sheep provided wool for clothing. Iron domestic equipment included sickles, hammers, adzes and ploughshares. Wood was used for bowls, loom frames, ladders and dug-out boats.

Field walking, aerial photography and further archaeological investigation may reveal more about our prehistoric community and its trackways. Our history lies just a few feet beneath our boots.

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Sources:

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