WESSEX

A Landscape History

Hadrian Cook

Archaeopress Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-535-2
ISBN 978-1-80327-536-9 (e-Pdf)

Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Preface

Mesolithic, Malthus and mangelwurzels

For over 30 years I have enjoyed teaching people about the British landscape, both within universities and delivering courses to adult learners. It is never easy, for the challenge is that nobody can write about landscape from a single-subject perspective. While there are many accounts of 'landscape', there remains much confusion around the concept because it is largely understood from a user definition of the term.

At one extreme, 'landscape' is determined solely by geology and landform and at the other it merits literary or artistic description. Wessex's own writer Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) ascribes human characteristics when describing landscape elements and uses the landscape to paint word-pictures of mood[1] as well as expressing the historic and archaeological aspects of the landscape[2].

What is important is that landscape is the outcome of natural and human factors whereby human beings worked both with and against 'natural forces' in a dynamic and assertive way. The drivers of this process encompassed anything from food and fuel production, construction, or other economic imperatives to the ritual or aesthetic considerations behind landscapes generally produced by elites. People's experience of landscape is therefore a kick-back from something created by us and (in human terms) typically over a long time.

The approach to landscape description becomes interdisciplinary, focusing on the interplay between historic factors and conventional 'landscape ecology'. Yet this book is also a response to regional *genius loci*. For within this large area we call Wessex, diverse landscapes are on offer, each (as Hardy would have noted) capable of imparting its own mood. Here are the heaths, woods, forests, river valleys, water meadows, downland, limestone and chalk uplands, clay vales, reclaimed wetland and coastlands - and those who live and work among them. That is the romantic stuff; there are also perceived 'facts'.

Relatively early in my career a senior colleague asked if I 'might help out' by teaching undergraduates the essentials of land use statistics. I was flattered because previously this area was covered by two of Wye College's long-past academic celebrities, Professors Gerald Wibberley and Robin Best[3]. Agricultural land use data has been collected systematically for England and Wales on a parish basis from the mid-19th century[4] and proved invaluable for official purposes of monitoring food production, setting agricultural policy prescriptions and looking at land use change. Actually, earlier situations had already demonstrated a need for detailed systematic information, especially when plucky little England, back to the wall, was fighting a certain dastardly Corsican. Times of national stress forced the establishment to

1 Thomas Hardy Society (n.d) <http://www.hardysociety.org/about-hardy> Accessed November 2017
2 M.J.P. Davies (2011) Distant Prospect of Wessex: Archaeology and the Past in the Life of Thomas Hardy. Archaeopress
3 S. Richards (1994) *Wye College and its World* 206, 225-6. Wye College press, Ashford
4 Agricultural Statistics (2017) <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/agricultural-statistics-england-wales/> Accessed May 2020

focus on management of natural resources such as timber production, armaments, and food security. This concern for auditing by state interests pre-dated Napoleon Bonaparte, however. For one thing, Samuel Pepys was deeply concerned about the condition of the English Navy following a devastating raid by the Dutch who burned the fleet in the Medway, something that would impact on national timber production.[5]

Back in the nineteen eighties, I took up my new teaching challenge but soon discovered why I had been passed this numerical buck. This land we all enjoy has a fascinating history with interesting detail (which illuminates landscape history) hidden in statistical information. Like swimming through cold water, statistical information is an acquired taste. Sadly, I found imparting such wisdom to (mostly) 20-year-old students challenging; there is a limit to interest generated by acreages of fodder root crops.

Rescue was at hand through colleagues in the environmental and historical communities who inspired me to place bare nineteenth and twentieth crop area and livestock data into a wider context. After all, I had personally completed courses in geology, geography, social science, archaeology and ecology and researched and taught soil science at various stages, as well as benefiting from classes delivered through the Workers' Educational Association.

Add a bit of 'how did they do that' and undergraduate students were hopefully now able to place a historical framework around their studies in ecological science, rural study, and agricultural management. No, the British countryside had not arrived by chance, rather economic interests, political imperatives, and social change driving pure graft had created something special. The landscape is a window through which we view the history of the nation as well. I was thus able to link with colleagues in related disciplines - and everybody seemed happy.

Predictably drivers of landscape form and function have been largely, although by no means exclusively, economic. How do you make decent a living? How do you expand production during times of growing population? What of famine? Plague? Will the grim predictions of Malthus (where population growth might outstrip food supply) be supplanted by increased production, better technologies or imported raw materials? Who might be creaming off the surplus value of others' labour? Thomas Hardy was a compassionate man, most concerned about the condition of the poor, and parallels with Karl Marx have been observed.[6]

I learned from, and taught with reference to, scholars such as Oliver Rackham, John Sheail, Marion Shoard, Joan Thirsk and Tom Williamson. I started by embedding stark observations (quantitative or otherwise) into a narrative around the English landscape. As his books emerged, I was inspired by Peter Brandon's writing on the South Downs[7] and Kent and Sussex Weald[8] in an integrative and engaging manner. Brandon really understood the human-natural dynamic of landscape history and gives insight that landscape writing for any purpose remains highly personal. While grateful he stopped at the borders of 'Wessex' leaving the field open for

[5] H. Cook (2018) *New Forest: The Forging of a Landscape* Windgather press ch 7

[6] S. J. Flynn (2016) The Return of the Poor Man: Jude the Obscure and Late Victorian Socialism The Hardy Review (18) 1 56-65 <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1073&context=engfac> Accessed May 2020

[7] P. Brandon (1998). *The South Downs*, Phillimore, Chichester

[8] P. Brandon (2003). *The Kent and Sussex* Weald, Phillimore, Chichester

others (!) I came to landscape writing from a similar place to him. Within Wessex, however, the work of historian Joseph Bettey and archaeologist Barry Cunliffe further provided invaluable accounts in support of this book.

Over time at Wye College my original three lectures expanded to five, then to ten. Eventually friends in ecology re-combined my contribution into courses explaining not only *how conservation management might be undertaken*, but *how we got here in the first place,* while friends in archaeology alerted me to the fantastic record preserved within the landscape. A plethora of historic maps, thematic maps of geology and soils, remote sensed and geophysical survey information, hydrometric information, documentary records, old photographs and more are now available.

By way of illustration, I recently visited a field just outside Salisbury where a university geophysical practical class was underway. Those leading the class were contemplating where, during a plausible 2000-year time corridor, one linear feature evident through survey and visibly manifest at the surface may be located, although a modern origin has since been ruled out. For another real-world example, contemplating the possible origins and maintenance of heathland one must consider: turf stripping for energy, over-exploitation through agriculture of vulnerable sandy soils, burning, grazing and vegetation cutting over many historic periods.[9]

The Malthusian nightmare applied to England of resource availability being outstripped by an exponential grown in population was largely prevented due to improved means of food production and expansion of production abroad. With that expansion went surplus population. Wessex in the meantime experienced the benefits of colonial expansion driving investment in its industries and infrastructure. The working classes at home may have paid for it through enclosure and being herded into poor conditions in the expanding towns; colonial 'subjects' of the Crown experienced still more grievous exploitation, including slavery.

Then there are the people themselves: for one, in Wessex as elsewhere, some people may migrate while others stay. How much similarity to other surrounding areas is displayed by the population at a moment in time is a legitimate question. Using a study published in *Nature,*[10] the *Mail Online* (26th July 2017) reported the results in terms of how much indigenous Brits are (more or less) like the (modern) French and Germans:

> Many people are a quarter German and 45% of their DNA is French.

Quelle surprise! One wonders where the others came from? They surely cannot all be EU nations?..... We move swiftly on.

It is fairly certain that Cheddar Man (who died around 10,000 years ago) has living relatives,[11] and this suggests some continuity from the earliest populations who migrated into Wessex following the retreat of the ice and continental-scale warming, although the time of their arrival might have coincided with a rapid decline in the existing insular population, for reasons

[9] H. Cook (2018) *New Forest, op. cit.* 38
[10] S. Leslie *et al.* (2015) The fine scale genetic structure of the British population. *Nature* 519, 309–314. doi:10.1038/nature1423
[11] L. Barham, P. Priestly and A. Targett (1997) *In search of Cheddar man* Tempus ch 7

that are unclear.[12] On the other hand, the 'Beaker Culture' demonstrably had continental links. One fascinating example is the 'Amesbury Archer' skeleton (the man had lived *c.* 2300 BC) that is located in the Salisbury Museum. An oxygen isotope signature from his teeth suggest he grew up in central Europe, while a presumed younger male relative buried nearby was likely raised locally.[13]

My own genes left Wiltshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire on steam trains and would mingle with others before returning. These new infusions include Kentish Men (although this county was once included in an enlarged 'Wessex' as were some South Saxon forebears). For the exotic, there are Roman Catholic immigrants from southwest Germany in the mix, and one helpful family-tree enthusiast found the surname 'Lloyd'; I can claim some ancient British lineage. All this means that my own family heritage is redolent of the geographical, archaeological, and historic evidence suggesting people moving in and out of our region from surrounding areas. My children, whose west of England lineage is strengthened through my wife and who also have some Scottish heritage from her, keep moving around as they study and work. Wessex people have always been on the move one way or another.

This book is aimed at students, professionals and the interested general reader alike. It is about how people have shaped, developed and run their landscape. There are intimations for sustainable development and a strong message that we ignore our heritage landscapes at our peril. It is a personal synthesis of a mass on multi-disciplinary information. As I sign off for a tea-break, I do wonder if I may be remotely related to the 'Amesbury Archer' or maybe to Cheddar Man. I may never know, although their descendants and my own ancestors worked - and shaped - the Wessex Landscape.

Hadrian Cook, Salisbury, Mayday 2023

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank those who supplied information or reviewed aspects of the text, often not pulling punches. Specific appreciation is offered to: Katherine Barker, Dr David Benson, Dr Peter Buckley, Dr Ian Cummings, Prof Madge Dresser, Dr Alan Dykes, Dr Amy Frost, Steve Hannath, Prof Alex Inman, Dr Howard Lee, Anthony Robinson, Sean Rice, Mike Schurer, Ben Heaney, Dr Kathy Stearne, Adrian Targett and Dr Nick Thorpe. Any errors or misconceptions remain with the Author.

Brief Bibliography

J.H. Bettey (1986) *Wessex from AD 1000*. Longman
J. Chandler (1987) *Endless Street*. Hobnob Press
H. F. Cook, Cowan M. and T. Tatton-Brown. (2008). *Harnham Water Meadows: History and Description*. Hobnob Press.

[12] McNish (2018) The Beaker people: a new population for ancient Britain. https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/february/the-beaker-people-a-new-population-for-ancient-britain.html Accessed Aug 2021
[13] Wessex Archaeology The Amesbury archer (2011) < http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/projects/amesbury/archer.html> acc. Nov 2017

H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds. 2007). *Water Meadows: History, ecology and Conservation*. Windgather Press. Especially chapters by J.H. Bettey, K. Stearne, C. Taylor and R.Cutting and I. Cummings.
H. Cook (2018) *New Forest: The Forging of a Landscape*. Windgather Press
Cook H. and T. Williamson eds. (1999) *Water management in the English Landscape Field Marsh and meadow*. Keele University Press
Cowan, M (2005) *Wiltshire Water Meadows*. Hobnob Press.
B. Cunliffe (1993) *Wessex to AD 1000* Longman
B. Cunliffe (2012) *Britain Begins* Oxford University Press
M.J.P. Davies (2011) *A Distant Prospect of Wessex: Archaeology and the Past in the Life of Thomas Hardy*. Archaeopress.
Davis, T. (1813) *A General View of The Agriculture Of Wiltshire, second ed*

Introduction

Where and what is Wessex?

A massive change caused by people occurred around 4000 BC across Britain.[1] Mesolithic people who had hunted and made artefacts with exquisite 'microliths', forming arrow heads, sawing devices and even fishhooks, were, in ways unclear, persuaded by incomers to clear the 'wildwood' and start agriculture. These people, agriculturalists from Anatolia, mixed to some degree with the indigenous hunter-gatherer population during the earlier Neolithic although ancient DNA suggests a large replacement of population at this time.[2] There were furthermore likely regional differences of this wildwood within which Mesolithic people lived, migrated and hunted.

Pollen sequenced in wetlands as well as plant remains help reconstruct vegetation communities of the past.[3] In around 5000 BC, Wessex would essentially have been dominated by mixed deciduous woodland:[4] alder, oak, elm, and with small-leaved lime (*Tilia cordata*) dominant, although in the extreme west this may have given way to oak and hazel, where less fertile soils developed over older rocks on higher ground.[5] In so doing, Neolithic people changed a landcover dominated by trees (but not necessarily displaying a dense cover) to one dominated by animal and arable agriculture.

Landscapes do not happen by chance. The area we call 'Wessex' is the outcome of natural ingredients that have been worked over and over again by humans for millennia, and which today, more than ever, are contested spaces between anything from agricultural intensification and urban development to road construction. Legitimate questions include:

1. Where is Wessex?
2. What is Wessex?
3. When was Wessex?
4. To what extent has Wessex imparted identity to humans?
5. What can a study of the region tell us about the wider World?

Where is Wessex? For convenience, the region is defined as the counties of Hampshire (including the Isle of Wight), Dorset, Wiltshire, historic Somerset, and Berkshire. It borders two seas – the English Channel to the south, and the Bristol Channel, an extension of the Atlantic Ocean, famed for a high tidal range.[6] Neighbouring southern Gloucestershire and parts of Oxfordshire and Devon may also be alluded to.

---

1 V. Gaffney, S. Fitch and D. Smith (2009) *Europe's Lost world, the re-discovery of Doggerland*. CBA Research report 160, York, 26-27

2 S. Brace, *et al.* (2019) Ancient genomes indicate population replacement in Early Neolithic Britain. *Nature Ecology and Evolution* 3(5),765-771.

3 J. Grove and B. Croft, eds (2012) The Archaeology of Southwest England <https://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/downloads/swarf/swarf_strat.pdf> accessed Sept 2021

4 D. Blakesley and P. Buckley (2016) *Grassland Restoration and Management*. Pelagic Publishing, Exeter. Chapter 1

5 O. Rackham (2006) *Woodlands.* Collins, London. Chapter 4.

6 J.H. Bettey (1986) *Wessex from AD 1000.* Longmans, New York, 3.

The writer Thomas Hardy re-invented the region when writing of the area in the 19th century, changing the names of major places, i.e. Salisbury became Melchester, Dorchester became Casterbridge, Exeter became Exonbury. The County of Devon was in there and Stonehenge remained Stonehenge! This present volume, however, is about the origins and management of real semi-natural ecosystems, farming systems, and the associated settlements which, through diversity, have come to define the region.

What is Wessex? Wessex is diverse in landscape with varied geology, soils, and climate. To take one indicator, the region varies in height from sea level to over 500m above Ordnance Datum (mAOD) on Exmoor; the chalklands seldom rise above 200m. AOD is taken as Mean Sea Level (MSL) at Newlyn in Cornwall, between May 1915 and April 1921, outside Wessex indeed, but near enough, although sea level rise in 100 years places it out of kilter with the modern actual MSL, which is more than 200mm higher!

Elevations in metres AOD are in part a reflection of the underlying geology. As an approximate rule of thumb, the older the rock sequence (see Chapter 1), the harder it is against erosion by the elements and the sea. Across Exmoor, annual average rainfall ranges of typically between 1000 and 1900mm[7] are recorded; for the lowland areas of the south coast and the Somerset Levels this can be as little as 650-850mm per annum, for example some 800mm around Bournemouth.[8]

The agricultural basis for the economy of Wessex reflects the diversity of the wider landscape, and this is surely its economic strength – if one believes strength lies in diversity? The Exmoor uplands are largely grazed, the chalklands are complicated, but they have supported vast areas of arable agriculture in modern times. Other limestone areas, particularly the Cotswolds, include significant past and present wool production. This, after all, was the staple product of the Realm of England. Those vales enjoying better soils have been characterised as the 'Cheese Country', to differentiate them from the sheep and corn husbandry of the Chalk. Another stereotype is 'Zomerset Zider Apples'. Cod folk songs apart, this reference is to established horticulture industries in lowland areas. Behind such knowledge lies a plethora of information, once gleaned from observation, from estate records, or sifting through other historic maps and records, although latterly (for around 150 years now), detail is rooted in systematic survey and statistical collation.[9]

Sizable towns and cities also abound within Wessex and were supported by a rural hinterland. Part of Roman trade involved the export of grain, metals, and slaves from Britain. Although the focus here is less urban and more rural, the development of urban centres was commonplace from the *oppida* of the late Iron Age through to the Roman period, and on to the rapid growth of medieval and modern times. Salisbury (or New Sarum) did not exist as such before AD 1220 and yet was ranked within the top ten urban centres by population in England for much of its history, losing its pre-eminence (perhaps) in the 17th century.[10] Since then, it is Bristol that has enjoyed a comparable league table position and together with Bath, Portsmouth and Reading,

[7] Exmoor National Park (n.d.) <http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/learning?a=122273> Accessed April 2012
[8] Holiday Weather.co <http://www.holiday-weather.com/bournemouth/averages/> Accessed April 2020
[9] Agriculture in the South West of England 2009/2010 (2009) <http://farmbusinesssurvey.co.uk/regional/commentary/2009/southwest.pdf> accessed April 2020
[10] J. Chandler (1987) *Endless Street.* Hobnob Press, Salisbury. Chapter 2.

it recorded a population above 10,000 in 1801.[11] Elsewhere, on the south coast, overseas trade greatly stimulated Southampton, while Portsmouth soon realised its importance to the Royal Navy.

Hence, Wessex continued to owe much to its own imports, exports, and services. The region has always been the centre of a diverse economy. Theoretically speaking, the nature of the feudal system had meant that large estates could be acquired in return for military service (Chapter 3) and this pattern of landholding dominated the middle ages. Things were to change with the rise of a more capitalistic economy and new wealth included that derived through agricultural development (Chapter 5).

Here we must pause to reflect which centres owed their success less to 'worthy' agriculture, commerce or manufacturing, and those whose economy, growth and influence was boosted by slavery and slave trading in the Americas, typified by the Bristol merchant Edward Colston (1636-1721).[12] More notorious was 'Alderman' William Beckford (1709-1770)[13] and his son, also called William (Chapter 5). Locally, the resulting wealth was realised largely in Bristol and Bath.[14] Romans aside, while historians have made much of the negative impacts of in-country economic injustices resulting from factors such as enclosure, industrialisation, or urbanisation affecting the British or Irish poor, the disaster affecting millions of Africans is all too often overlooked as a source of ill-gotten economic gain.

When was Wessex? The roots of the West Saxons are far from clear. Human activity is well attested in the Old and Middle Stone Ages (the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, respectively). There was significant activity in the Neolithic period as humans began to settle and farm, and it is presumed that a proportion of the population, rather than being local people who adopted agriculture, were migrants who arrived by boat. The routes in may have been from what is modern Northeast France, Belgium and the southern Netherlands, where there were already Neolithic cultures.[15] The crossing route(s) is not known, the shortest being around Calais-Dover, and there is evidence for associated settlement activity in Kent.[16]

There is also much activity from this period in Wessex, but no model exists for the adoption of the new Neolithic technologies: textiles (spinning and weaving), domestication of animals, cultivation and improvement of crops, enclosures, ceramics, stone building, monuments associated with funerary rites, and mining. Indeed, so important was the area in the Neolithic that Stonehenge was constructed, a significant monument for the island of Britain, and likely a place of pilgrimage from further afield.[17]

---

[11] J.H. Bettey (1986) *Wessex from AD 1000.* Longmans, New York, 230-231.
[12] M. Dresser (2007) *Slavery Obscured*. Redcliffe, Bristol, Introduction.
[13] Historic England (2020) <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/>'; A. Frost (2008) Big Spenders: The Beckford's and Slavery. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wiltshire/content/articles/2007/03/06/abolition_fonthill_abbey_feature.shtml> Accessed April 2020
[14] The Bath Scrinium (2013) <https://thebathscrinium.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/slavery-in-bath/> Accessed April 2020
[15] B. Cunliffe (2013*) Britain Begins.* Oxford University Press, Oxford. 139.
[16] N. Crane (2016) *The Making of the British Landscape*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London. Chapters 4 and 5.
[17] S. Viner *et al.* (2010) Cattle mobility in prehistoric Britain: strontium isotope analysis of cattle teeth from Durrington Walls, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37.

There is some human DNA evidence for widespread replacement of population with the arrival of the '(Bell) Beaker people' from around 2900 BC.[18] Yet the survival within the present population of earlier hunter-gatherer populations is also attested.[19] Rich burials dating from around 2000 BC were once considered to be an early Bronze Age 'Wessex Culture', belonging to the first half of the second millennium and implying a cultural identity centred in the region. It is now considered to be an indigenous people developing more elaborate burial furnishings, rather than some new tradition arising from invasion.[20] However, continental contacts did exist, and there has been a tendency to ignore indigenous products in favour of the presumed exotic.[21]

The late Bronze/early Iron Age saw the arrival of technologies and defensive practices in 'hillforts'. By the late Iron Age we know the names of the dominant tribes – the Atrebates, Durotriges (who give their name to Dorchester), and Belgae (making Wessex a continental gateway); the Roman name for Winchester was *Venta Belgarum* ('Market Town of the Belgae'). These people created *oppida* and built impressive hillforts throughout the region, and enjoyed a thriving economy. The presence of re-constructed tribal boundaries is not conducive to any single Iron Age identity for Wessex.[22] It appears that Late Iron Age Wessex splits into an eastern part, where hillforts (for example Danebury) had been abandoned for *oppida*, such as Silchester, and a western part where hillforts continued to be occupied, for example Maiden Castle and Hod Hill. [23] Furthermore, long distance boundaries in the landscape evident from studies of field systems in Wessex would seem to add further weight to extensive subdivision of the landscape into territories.[24]

The Romans under Julius Caesar sent expeditionary forces in 55 and 54 BC respectively. They knew much about Britain and its people, such that after AD 43 they made a decision to subdue the region to exploit the already developed Iron Age economy. It is, however, now clear that some hillfort sites were neglected or abandoned by the 1st century BC, and the interpretation of the battle between the Romans and Durotriges at Maiden Castle in Dorset has been challenged in terms of the formerly believed ferocity of a Roman attack.[25] The Roman military commander Vespasian (later emperor) whose father had been a tax collector, did however, launch a campaign across what would become Wessex.[26]

---

[18] E. Callaway (2017) *Nature News* 545, 276–277. (18 May 2017) doi:10.1038/545276a; McNish (2018) The Beaker people: a new population for ancient Britain, https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/february/the-beaker-people-a-new-population-for-ancient-britain.html Accessed Aug 2021

[19] K. Lotzof (2018) Cheddar Man: Mesolithic Britain's blue-eyed boy. <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/cheddar-man-mesolithic-britain-blue-eyed-boy.html> Accessed April 2020

[20] Cunliffe (2013*) Britain Begins.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 220.

[21] S. Needham (2010) 'A Noble Group of Barrows': Bush Barrow and the Normanton Down Early Bronze Age Cemetery. *The Antiquaries Journal* 90, 1-39. DOI:10.1017/S0003581510000077

[22] S. Rimmer (2020) Maps of Britain and Ireland's ancient tribes, kingdoms and DNA. <http://www.abroadintheyard.com/maps-britain-ireland-ancient-tribes-kingdoms-dna/> Accessed April 2020

[23] N. Thorpe, Pers. Comm. 2021.

[24] Historic England (2018) *Prehistoric Linear Boundary Earthworks: Introductions to Heritage Assets*. Swindon, Historic England.

[25] J. Last (n.d) Roman invasion at Maiden castle. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/maiden-castle/history/roman-invasion/> Accessed April 2020 ; M. Russell (2019) 'Mythmakers of Maiden Castle' *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 38, 2019 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ojoa.12172> accessed Sept 2021

[26] Encyclopaedia Britannica (2020) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian> Accessed April 2020

The Roman army conquered the region. One strategic motive may have been to stop the Britons supporting the Gauls against the might of Rome, although internal political reasons associated with the Roman Empire may have incentivised Claudius to conquer, so as to demonstrate his military and organisational abilities, and hence silence his critics. At least as far as the *bandes dessinées* comic-book character *Asterix* (1966) is concerned, the Britons were *cousin germain* to the ancient Gauls.[27] Indeed, the Romans, *inter alia*, were concerned about the security of Gaul, threatened by an unconquered Britain of the day.[28]

That human occupation and settlement are ancient, there can be no question. Placename evidence suggests a blend of Brythonic ('Celtic') and Germanic (English) elements in naming certain settlements and topographic features. Anglo-Saxon names predominate, but a search for likely Brythonic placenames soon proves fruitful. Opinion suggests that the roots of the Royal house of Saxon Wessex lies in both British and Anglo-Saxon elements dating from the post-Roman Period. For one thing, the supposed founder (Cerdic) bore a name that may derive from the Brythonic name Caratacos (Caradoc), who ruled in the upper Thames Valley around Dorchester; the original people at this time were known as *Gewisse*.[29]

Wessex, as a named geographical identity, has been retro-fitted to the early Bronze Age by modern scholars – and by Thomas Hardy, as a gloomy, thinly disguised and real 19th-century region. It has never been a county or a planning region, although the name survives within the region as a well-known water service company. Neither, frankly, is it tidy from a border point of view. For one thing, the block of land comprising the counties of Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire, historic Somerset, and Berkshire straddle two sea areas (the south coast of England and the Bristol Channel). Otherwise there are untidy land borders that show little reference to physical borders, such as ranges of hills or rivers. For another, the variety of geology and landform is hardly a unifying factor. Neither is the region coterminous with ideas of the 'West Country' or even the 'South West', for much of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Devon, As well as all of Cornwall are generally considered as being outside it.

To what extent has Wessex imparted identity? This question creates interest. In the 9th century, King Alfred came to signify central and southwest England as defined not so much against other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (there was by his time close co-operation with Mercia) but against invaders – the Danes.[30] Hardy effectively resurrected it as a fictionalised region, and members of the Windsor family have since used the name in an aristocratic title. These back-constructions are perhaps created out of a notion of English identity, closely referencing Alfred.

Wessex is therefore at once an archaeological province, the core kingdom of a nascent idea of England, and a thinly disguised fictional region. On the basis of what has been already written, one imagines no clear pre-existing racial or cultural identity emerging. As far as archaeological, DNA, or isotopic studies on human remains are concerned, nothing clear has

[27] *Asterix in Britain* (n.d.) <http://www.asterix.com/the-collection/albums/asterix-in-britain.html> Accessed April 2020

[28] G. Hovell (2020) <http://www.historyextra.com/article/romans/roman-invasion-whose-side-were-britons-0> History Extra Accessed April 2020

[29] D. Parsons (1997), 'British *Caratīcos, Old English Cerdic', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 33, pp. 1-8; H. Hamerow C. Ferguson and J. Naylor (2018). The Origins of Wessex <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/wessex.html> Accessed April 2020

[30] D. Horspool (2014) *Alfred the Great*. Amberley, Stroud. 7-12

come forward that tells us anything defining for Wessex. Spatial resolution of larger studies has shown differences between the east and west of Britain, as indeed for the north and south. A study published in *Nature* suggests statistically different genetic features for the populations of modern Devon and likewise for Cornwall, but the bulk of Wessex remains undifferentiated from much of the remainder of England. Interestingly, this study suggests strong in-migration between the Mesolithic and the coming of the Romans, a mere 4000 years, for:[31]

> Significant pre-Roman but post-Mesolithic movement into south-eastern England from continental Europe, [shows] that in non-Saxon parts of the United Kingdom, there exist genetically differentiated subgroups rather than a general 'Celtic' population.

There is no clear 'Englishness', and likewise nothing that can definitively be described as 'Celtic' (in any case a difficult concept). Incorporation into the Roman empire caused not only individuals but also new communities from both within and without Britain to settle. In Winchester particularly, isotopic information suggests several individuals possibly originating from the Hungarian Basin and the Southern Mediterranean.[32] Differences in genetic make-up will reflect not only in-migration, but also geographic isolation and language in choice of marriage partners. Yet there are other, earlier points of interest. We do know that 'Cheddar Man' apparently has living relatives, suggesting continuity from earlier populations.[33] On the other hand, the 'Beaker Culture' demonstrably had continental links, for scientific analysis of the 'Amesbury Archer' skeleton suggests he grew up in central Europe.[34] Modern humans have moved within and without the region since at least the end of the Ice Age. Extrapolating from archaeology, the inhabitants of Wessex should have genes from a wide area across Europe.

The degree and timing of migration of Germanic peoples, once presumed largely in the post-Roman period (after AD 410), remains an area of scholarly and scientific debate. Genomes recoverd from burials in York suggest a strong influence from post-Roman Germanic settlement,[35] and a substantial continental population migration has been proposed for burials near to Cambridge.[36] Some favour more, some less, migration *vs.* acculturation. However, in the year AD 552, near to modern Salisbury, and led by Cynric, son of Cerdic, the Germanic invaders were victorious over the Britons and were likely significant in terms of the establishment of the Kingdom of Wessex. Later, the laws of King Ine of Wessex (ruled AD 688 to 726) prove that there were Britons among the population, although their status may not have been especially high.[37] Ine's time sees the first mention of 'shires', i.e. territorial areas of legal, fiscal, and military importance (the king strengthened the concept of military service), and provided a firmer basis for the 'concept' of Wessex overall.[38]

---

[31] S. Leslie *et al.* (2015) The fine scale genetic structure of the British population. *Nature Journal* 519, 309–314. doi:10.1038/nature1423

[32] H. Eckardt, G. Müldner and M. Lewis (2012) *A Long Way from Home: Diaspora Communities in Roman Britain* [data-set]. York: Archaeology Data Service. <https://doi.org/10.5284/1000405> accessed Sept 2021

[33] L. Barham, P. Priestly and A. Targett (1997) *In search of Cheddar man.* Tempus, Brimscombe. Chapter 7.

[34] Wessex Archaeology (n.d.) <http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/book/export/html/5> Accessed April 2020

[35] R. Martiniano, A. Caffell, M. Holst, *et al.* Genomic signals of migration and continuity in Britain before the Anglo-Saxons. *Nat Commun* **7,** 10326 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms10326

[36] S. Schiffels, S. Haak, W. Paajanen, *et al.* Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon genomes from East England reveal British migration history. *Nat Commun* **7,** 10408 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms10408

[37] History of England (n.d.) <https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/resource/selected-laws-of-ine-688-695/ > accessed April 2020

[38] K. Barker (2020) Pers. Comm.; The History Files (1999-2020) Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms. <https://www.historyfiles.

By the 870s, the Christian Saxon king Alfred's kingdom was strong enough to hold the Danes at bay and nurture the roots of a notion of England. An expansionist Wessex by the time of his grandson Athelstan (reigned AD 924 to 939) stretched (in the south) from Cornwall to Kent and became subsumed in a unified England.[39] Alfred also initiated the assessment (for taxation purposes) known as the *Burghal Hidage*, a document listing towns, *burhs*, almost all in Wessex, each listed with a tally of hides (areas of assessment used for tax purposes) – areas for which the 33 listed *burhs* were responsible for the defence of the Kingdom of Wessex against the Danes. The idea was to provide the haven of a fortress for all within a day's ride, around 20 miles (32 km). To achieve this, new burhs, or re-fortified existing settlements were built or maintained. Alfredian *burhs*, furthermore, played an important role in relation to the management of trade, including agricultural and food markets.[40]

Needless to say, the Normans made significant political and economic changes that impacted on the landscape, including removing English landlords, but they remained numerically a very small minority in Wessex, though the development of cathedrals, fortifications, and the designation of Royal hunting forests were all clear demonstrations of their power.[41] Winchester was to lose out to London as capital of post-conquest England. Perhaps one conclusion we may draw is simply to say that the region is, and has always been, open to both influence and opportunists seeking to benefit from a potentially wealthy region. While agricultural land in Wessex may not everywhere be top quality, the climate, diversity, and proximity to markets (be they within Britain or accessible by sea) stimulated development. The region would always be open to economic development, welcome or otherwise, and this is reflected in the landscape. To the Normans, like the Romans before them, the promise of taxation formed the real draw and incentive.

What can a study of the region tell us about the wider world? By the Middle Ages we can be certain of a strong agrarian economy, matched by the size and importance of towns for manufacturing, commerce, and active trading through the ports.[42] Wessex contributed to both the English and wider European economies. The region may also be said to have had considerable industry before the 'Industrial Revolution' affected employment and productivity in the midland and northern regions of England, as elsewhere. Considering investment in transportation, for example, this led in turn to Roman roads, turnpike roads, canals, railways, and motorways, which proliferated to create an integrated transport network.

By early modern times, Wessex people traded externally, through ports on two coasts, grew diverse crops, raised animals, mined, manufactured textiles, made clothes and hats, glass products, made ceramics, tiles and bricks, engaged in developed transportation and hospitality, and developed specialist engineering, including clocks and light engineering; they brewed beer, made cider, made rope and tobacco products – to name just a few initiatives. In the mid-17th century, the agricultural writer and improver Walter Blith[43] (actually a Midlander)

---

co.uk/KingListsBritain/EnglandWessex.htm> Accessed April 2020

39 T. Hall (2016) *Athelstan*. Allen Lane, London. Pages 3-10

40 K. Barker (2020) Pers. Comm.; The History Files (1999-2020) Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms. <https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsBritain/EnglandWessex.htm> Accessed April 2020; D. Crowther The Burgal Hidage < https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/resource/the-burghal-hidage/ > Accessed April 2020

41 H. Cook (2018) *New Forest: The Forging of a Landscape.* Windgather Press, Oxford. Chapter 4.

42 J.H. Bettey (1986) *Wessex from AD.* Longmans, New York. Chapter 2.

43 W. Blith (1649/1652) *The English Improver Improved, or the Survey of Husbandry. Surveyed* (2nd edn). Printed for John

could advocate irrigation, land drainage, improvements to tillage and soils, the restoration of a healthy balance between arable and tillage, and promote 'wood by new plantation'. Interestingly, one of the 'six peeces of improvement' advocated by this former captain in the New Model Army is: 'By such enclosures as prevents Depopulation, & advanceth all Interests.'

As early as 1653 this progressive writer could infer that enclosure certainly need not 'advance all interests.' Enclosure of open agricultural land was seen as progressive by some, generally wealthier, members of society and the government. In Wessex, as elsewhere, enclosure excluded the poorer and less politically powerful from access to the land. A study of the Wessex landscape tells us about agrarian change and the transition from more rural to urban societies, across a diversity of geological and climatic provision. In wider terms, Wessex was (and is) of considerable national and international significance, and, as such, the region reflects both environmental and social change, without being urbanised to the degree of other regions.

A legitimate question now arises: '*How might we approach a study of the Wessex landscape?*'

An approach to studying the landscape

The literature of landscape study and research is varied, complex, and arguably worthy of a book in itself. That is not the purpose here. The objective is to explain how landscapes function, and why humans value them in different ways and to different degrees. The notion of 'landscape' derives from the aesthetic, but is applied in an analytical-scientific sense as well. For example, appreciation of paintings such as Dutch 'Old Masters' is concerned with 'the view'. *Landschap* is a Dutch word linked to concepts of scenery and countryside that gives us the English word 'landscape'.[44] Other writers attempt to link it to analytical frameworks, including ascribing numerical values to elements of the landscape. There must be another way!

Landscapes are changing/evolving entities reflecting economic imperatives and subsequently those of culture, of ritual or private agency. The wider 'productive' landscapes of field, forest, heath, meadow and so on, relate to making a living, and, by definition, are integral to human activity and well-being. Control of the means of production came to be the preserve of elites, and generally operated with powerful interests in mind. Elite groups created their own landscapes, such as their 'stately homes', set in grounds created by great landscape architects, such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, and used to display power and prestige. Many prehistoric landscapes (apart from field systems) are often of unknown purpose, although a religious significance may be inferred: the areas around Avebury or Stonehenge are examples. It is furthermore likely (but not proven) that these, too, are products of societies controlled by elites. However, the real work of creating and maintaining landscapes was undertaken by humbler people – ploughmen, graziers, cowmen, shepherds, drowners, marshmen, foresters, woodsmen, miners, quarrymen – folk who also made the Wessex landscape work.

So, the region, history and landscape of Wessex are complicated. Denis Cosgrove found the term 'landscape' in geographical usage 'an imprecise and ambiguous concept', yet it extends terms like 'area' or 'region' while being in common currency with sub-disciplines such as

Wright, London.

[44] The Free Dictionary (2016) Landscape < https://www.thefreedictionary.com/landscape> Accessed April 2020

environmental planning and design, as well as links to art and literature. Landscape denotes the 'external world mediated through subjective human experience' – more than the world we observe. Landscape is a social construct and hence prone to subjectivity. Cosgrove became cautious of the economic determinism of Marxian thought.[45]

Here, the present author is in no way pretending to present a narrative that is other than basically explanatory of how this amazing historical region works, incorporating natural resources, landscape ecology and social history. Subjectivity is permitted and themes are chosen that hopefully the reader will find helpful in navigating a complex subject area. We are able to improve on the (often) nebulous concept of 'landscape', such that it possesses certain characteristics.[46]

In this account five themes are selected:

- **Structure** – landscape has definable and describable component parts that exist in clear relation one to another.
- **Function** – landscape does something for somebody. This is typically food, or other natural resource production; the concept is anthropocentric.
- **Value** – what is done conveys economic or other identifiable value to somebody. Non-economic values tend to be ecological, heritage, or those involving social cohesion, including presumed ritual and religious landscapes.
- **Scale** in description will include habitat, field-scale, domestic, local, settlement, regional, river valley, upland area, and more. Scale not only gives expression to the components of the whole, but may indicate how significant some components are, if the landscape really is to be set in a wider context.
- **Change** – applies to all considerations over time. Obvious this factor may be, but it explains how we move in geological and human time.

Structure is what is observed on the ground. It may be fields of given crops, trees comprising a woodland or forest, communities of plants comprising a chalk grassland, heath, or constructed features associated with water meadows or field boundaries, and so on. There is seldom any controversy as to what a surveyor or a remote sensor may reveal. *Function*, on the other hand, is not always so straightforward. While the function of a field or meadow may be relatively obvious, the cultural context of prehistoric monuments is lost, making their interpretation difficult.

Value is arguably the most controversial factor to evaluate, for it raises many questions. What is the nature of the value? It may be a market value, perhaps growing trees for timber or crops for food. Components of certain valley landscapes, such as mills and their infrastructure, concern manufacturing. Non-market value is more difficult. Ironically a landscape imbued with aesthetic value, something that dates from the original concept of *landschap*, was often captured on canvas. The only 'value' is perhaps the price of an Old Master! However, aesthetic,

[45] D. E. Cosgrove (1998) Social formation and symbolic landscape University of Winsconsin Press xiv. <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=NrD2-nJ52aYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=cosgrove+landscape&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiHjvqc4b7lAhUwQRUIHf2VD40Q6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=cosgrove%20landscape&f=false> Accessed April 2020

[46] E.G McPherson, D. Nowak, G. Heisler *et al.* (1997) Quantifying urban forest structure, function, and value: the Chicago Urban Forest Climate Project. Urban Ecosystems 1, 49–61 https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014350822458

historic, archaeological heritage, 'ecosystem service', and, recently, 'spiritual' values, are all defensible and invoked in conservation policy.

For example, we may conserve a wetland area for non-market reasons, such as a habitat for marsh orchids, or perhaps water voles, only to find that it is also providing 'ecosystem services', including clean water and flood detention. These properties may have monetary value ascribed to their function, with environmental economists striving to place market value. The cost of clean water is an example of something readily ascribed as a 'value'. *Scale* in this context might apply to a small, localised wood or wetland, it may equally apply at a regional scale, as, for example, the Somerset Levels and moors.

The New Forest, largely in Hampshire, is an example of an area with a complex *structure*. And there are landscape elements at many scales. This reflects the geology, topography and soils beneath, and today presents a mosaic of valuable habitats, including woodland, commercial forestry, heaths, wetlands (often of considerable local complexity), and, of course, 'wood pasture' – considered to be the largest surviving area remaining in Europe.[47] *Function* is a tad more problematic and liable to *change*. The Forest as a legal entity was created by King William I for his pleasure and to show the English that Norman rule came with serious intent. Charles II was said to be the last monarch to hunt there (although famously he had other leisure pursuits). However, the state effectively had an asset. Until iron battleships emerged in the 19th century, the area was valuable as a plantation supplying the Royal Navy. These factors conflicted with the locals' interests, who grazed animals and gathered fuel and timber and thus found themselves in conflict with the powerful.

The value to William I was in recreation and, in effect, political. No Norman ruler really gained much economically from the New Forest, although others did from its products – including timber, underwood exploitation, hunting (including poaching of deer) and high-end-value products, such as honey. To the exchequer (from about the time of Samuel Pepys) the value would become directly economic, and to the government it was both political and strategic; production of timber would be measurable in economic terms. The Royal Navy famously used the 'Hearts of Oak' to deter dastardly foreigners, of whichever nation.

Yet iron warships came to be the norm, and as increased transport, rising standards of living, and as environmental awareness became commonplace in a democratising 19th century, more people could enjoy the New Forest for recreation. Rights of commoners were assured and the state retained, often controversially, a direct market economic interest through the 'Office of Woods', which would become the Forestry Commission. Given time, aesthetic, historic and conservation interests were to win out, such that the present century witnessed the establishment of the New Forest National Park. Functions changed dramatically over time.

The landscape of Wessex is the outcome of human activity, much of it direct economic activity, whereby people maximised land use and activity across the landscape just to make a living. Simply stated, there are lessons here for sustainable development; for while the micro-economic commentary of Thomas Hardy dwells very much on the efforts of poor people to survive, even to 'better themselves', many (including the present author) are concerned

[47] H. Cook (2018) *New Forest: The Forging of a Landscape.* Windgather Press, Oxford. Chapter 2.

variously as professionals, volunteers, campaigners, writers, and the like, in conserving the Wessex landscape for its own sake. Alternatively, it performs some function that is neither obviously economic, but which provides environmental services. Restoration of peatlands, historic water meadows, the maintenance of heathlands or coppice woods, are all good examples that will be considered in this book.

This volume is concerned with the place where landscape history meets landscape ecology – in a dynamic involving geology and climate, ecological processes and human intervention in creating an intriguing array of landforms and associated ecosystems within the landscape. The focus is rural, with the material organised mainly in accordance with semi-natural ecosystems that developed in response to human and economic forces.