

Village Echoes

Walking along the tarmac paths of Bedgebury Forest, most people will be unaware of the uneven terrain just a few yards into the undergrowth. Mountain bikers will certainly be aware of the sudden change in the track that creates the jumps and climbs that provide the excitement of this type of ride. It might surprise visitors to know that these are not natural rises in the land but man-made over time, some dating back to prehistoric times.

In 2006 a two-year community archaeology project investigated some of the many features in Bedgebury Forest on behalf of the Forestry Commission. A team of volunteers set out to identify and record the history of the forest, in particular the many banks and ditches which mostly run in a continuous line from the south-west corner at Flimwell, north-east towards Hartley, near Cranbrook.

Bedgebury originated from at least the medieval period, and probably earlier, as a woodland landscape which was once part of royal estates. It lies at the end of two large Wealden commons close to the county boundary with Sussex and straddles two lathes (divisions of land created by the Jutes). It contains several manorial swine pastures called dens.

The natural features include the water catchment between two major river systems, the River Medway via the Rivers Teise and Beult and, in the south, the River Rother and Jury Gut, which drains towards Romney Marsh. The access to water was one of the vital needs of early man.

Just as standing stones mark boundaries in other parts of the country, banks and ditches were also used to mark territories and ownership. Along these boundaries were droveways, mostly used for moving pigs from the north of Kent to summer grazing in the Forest. These tracks were constructed above the natural clay soil which sometimes made the land impassable. Surviving sections of banks and ditches are substantial with earthworks some 15 metres wide with the ditches alongside 0.75m deep and 1.5m wide. Where there is a series of six banks running parallel, the earthwork can be up to 60m wide. One can only imagine how big they were originally and what impact they had on the landscape.

During the medieval period, the northern part of the Forest was owned by the Bedgebury family, followed by the Culpepper family in 1424. The southern part of the Forest was part of the property of Battle Abbey in the Royal Manor of Wye.

To try to make sense of the lumps and bumps, the surveyors consulted many pieces of documentation including records of the Bedgebury estate lodged at The National Archives, and aerial photographs taken by the RAF in 1947 after much of the Forest was felled for the war effort. Looking beyond the Forest, the routes extend to meet the line of the A21. To the west of that road another series of earthworks leads south to the iron-producing area at Beauport Park, near Hastings, while through Ticehurst a similar area is reached at Bardown, Wadhurst. This is evidence of the Romans who worked the Wealden iron long before their Tudor counterparts.

The invading Jutes created a series of administrative boundaries and divisions by subsequent rulers such as hundreds, and parish boundaries followed. In most cases these divisions of land or authorities re-used the old routes and therefore kept them maintained.

And so when you next take a leisurely walk in Bedgebury, look beyond the main track and underneath the bramble undergrowth to imagine Roman iron workers transporting their products to the rest of the Weald and further.

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