



Gittisham Hill and the Bronze Age

a prehistoric ritual landscape

A special place

Gittisham Hill is rather a special place, it contains part of the Broad Down and Farway Bronze Age necropolis – a place to commemorate the dead. This prehistoric ritual landscape, arguably the most important of its kind West of Stonehenge, was first seriously investigated by the 19th century antiquarians, the Rev. Kirwan (Gittisham) and Peter Orando Hutchinson (Sidmouth).

Whilst Bronze Age communities probably did not live up here, these high ridges were used as routes between Bronze Age settlement sites in the combes below (such as the one discovered at Hayne Lane, Gittisham, in the course of creating the dual carriageway between Honiton and Exeter). The dozens of Bronze Age monuments on the higher ground are mainly round barrows of varying construction, but there are, in addition, examples of larger circular earthworks. There are also other things going on near the Hare and Hounds – also known as Putt's Corner. Four parish boundaries converge here on or near one rather damp spot: the Ring-in-the-Mire of legend. In the absence of any clear topographical markers the parish boundaries sometimes pass over the Bronze Age barrows and may indeed actually be prehistoric territorial markers. The word mire is, interestingly, very similar to the word 'Maere'.



Ring in the Mire by Hutchinson (1854)

The Gittisham/Sidbury parish boundary forms a straight line between Westgate hill (perhaps the site of a former gate onto the heathland) and the Ring in the Mire, passing straight through the important cross roads at the Hare and Hounds, marked by the Witches Stone or Slaughter Stone, also of legend, and first recorded by Hutchinson in 1855.



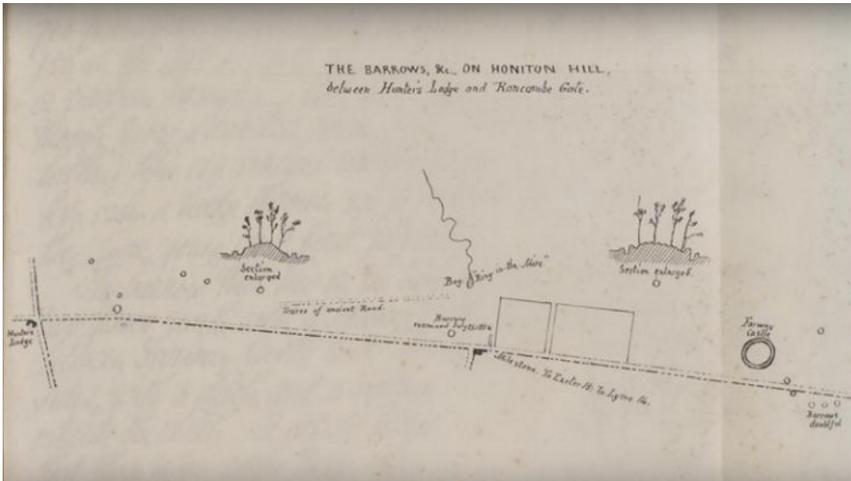
Stone at Putt's corner by Hutchinson (1855)

When Hutchinson and Kirwan first investigated the Farway/Broad Down barrows in the mid-19th century, the area was in a state of flux, with much open heathland being enclosed and taken into cultivation. Hutchinson was anxious to conserve and record prehistoric evidence before it was ploughed up. Kirwan had a more cavalier approach, making no drawings of his excavations and taking few notes. Hutchinson was an accomplished water colourist and his recordings of the excavations can still be seen today.



Hutchinson drawings of sections, features and finds from Farway Broad/ Down

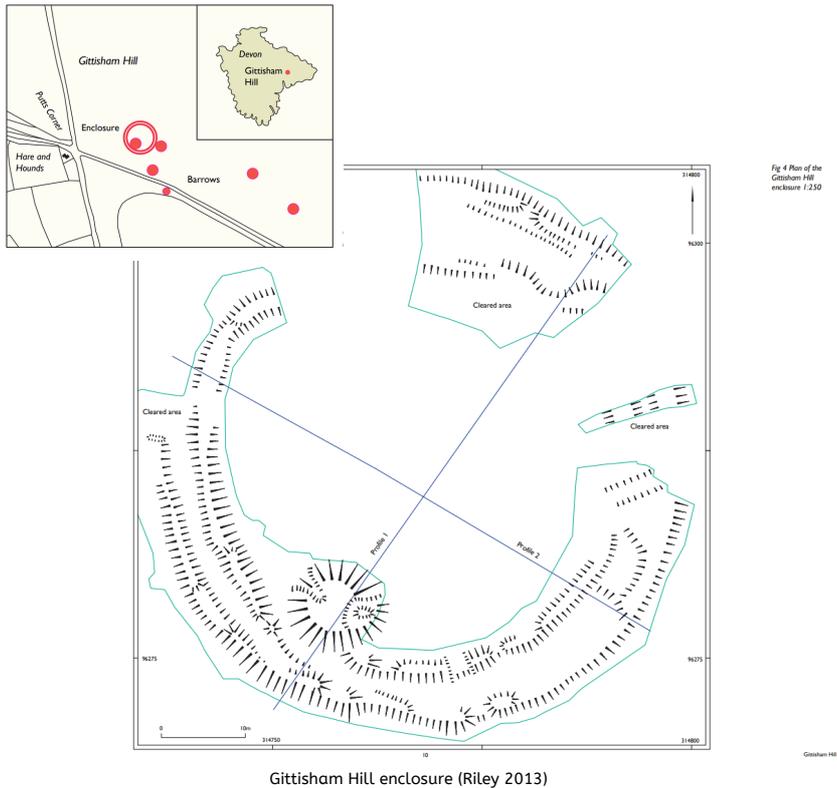
What did Hutchinson and Kirwan find? The earthworks were of varying types of construction and included: “earthen barrows, simple cairns, ring-cairns and mounds surrounded by free-standing stone settings”. When excavated, the barrows sometimes included inner structures and often featured pottery grave vessels, burnt deposits (including human bone) and shale and bronze artefacts. It was rare in the Victorian period for antiquaries to be interested in anything except the precious objects, but fortunately Hutchinson was ahead of his time.



Hutchinson's working plan of the barrows on Gittisham Hill (also called Honiton Hill) from the Hare and Hounds to Farway Castle, with section drawings of two barrows (1854).

As a direct result of Hutchinson's painstaking work, many of the artefacts survive and are held by the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. Scholars such as Lady Eileen Fox in the mid-20th century were able to examine these artefacts in the light of more advanced knowledge without commissioning new excavations of the few unexcavated mounds. Fox made comparisons between Farway/Broad Down and the Wessex Culture around Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, though today archaeologists also see a local dimension in both the burial tradition and the grave goods of the East Devon sites.

In the late 20th century Norman Quinnell found a smaller version of the Farway enclosure just opposite the Hare and Hounds and made the interesting suggestion that, because it was partly overlain by a later barrow, these enclosures were in fact the earliest monuments in the landscape. But we still have no idea what they were used for.



Gittisham Hill enclosure (Riley 2013)

In 2006 the finds from this ritual landscape were once again re-examined, this time in the search for suitable organic material, such as charcoal and bone, which could be used for radio-carbon dating. Andy Jones and Henrietta Quinnell obtained dates clustering around 2210 and 1660 BC, which confirmed the dates which were already suggested by the presence of Early Bronze Age beaker pottery. Of course Hutchinson could not even suspect the age of the artefacts he had found – his chronology was relative and not absolute, due to the absence of any reliable dating method in his day.

Jones and Quinnell also made some other interesting discoveries. There is a suggestion that the barrows were ‘works in progress’ and used over several hundred years, something we associate more with Neolithic tombs; the final phase being the insertion of material into the outside of the barrow.

Excavation on Gittisham Hill – or, Victorian excavation as a social event

“Some tents were pitched in the field on the west of the milestone where we had a splendid collation ... and then we went out onto the open heath. The rector of Gittisham stood on the nearest barrow, number one and the first opened and gave an address

The afternoon was quiet, warm and delightful and some two hundred or more people sat in groups on the heath number 2 barrow consisted of a circle of large rough flints from 12-18 inches long, inside which was apparently a heap of earth covered by a layer of flints, again covered with earth.” (Hutchinson’s diary for Saturday August 21, 1869)

Between 2010 and 2013, a project delivered through the East Devon AONB team ‘*In the Footsteps of Peter Orlando Hutchinson*’ made it possible for members of the public and local historians to re-visit this Bronze Age landscape through a series of guided walks and events.

In the footsteps of Peter Orlando Hutchinson

A community heritage project

2010 - 2013

This project has drawn on the work of the little known Victorian antiquary Peter Orlando Hutchinson (1819 -1897), who resided in Sidmouth during the mid 1800s. Hutchinson studied historical features of the landscape extensively such as ancient hill forts, tumuli, burial mounds and quarrying sites. His work provides a detailed and fascinating account of the landscape at the time and an ideal resource around which to base a community heritage project. This report provides a brief summary of the project and its achievements.





Gittisham Hill in 2019

Today Gittisham Hill is designated as open access land, which allows for public access on foot with certain restrictions for site operational or management requirements at specific times of the year.

There's a general rule that visitors using their open access rights must keep dogs on a short lead of no more than 2 metres between 1 March and 31 July each year (except in the coastal margin) and at all times near livestock.

Further reading

Fox, A. *The Broad Down (Farway) Necropolis and the Wessex Culture in Devon*, 1948.

Hutchinson, P.O. *Travels in Victorian Devon*, ed. Butler, J. (2 vols) 2000 and 2010.

Jones, A. M., Quinnell, H. and Taylor, R. T., (2008). The Farway barrow complex in East Devon reassessed. *Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings* 66, pp. 27-57.

Honiton



Gittisham Hill

To Ottery St Mary



Hare and Hounds
public house

To Beer/Seaton



Sidbury/Sidmouth

