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Chapter 7 A Dene in the Downland: *Pyttledene and Overton Down Barn*

Introduction

Down Barn area: an area of old pasture, fringed by arable, most of it 'old', some of it new and with part of the pasture in the dene having been lightly ploughed or at least scarified c 1970. Analysis of this critical area for its contribution to an elucidation of landscape history also allows a setting to be provided for two of the excavations (Down Barn enclosure in Chap. 4; OD XII, Chap. 6); but the primary reason for choosing this area as a 'window' is that, despite its undistinguished and almost innocent air, it seems to have been a long-term node in patterns of communication, settlement and fields not only of the downs but within a larger locality. Down Barn is now the site of some modern barns, surrounded by a field archaeology which, both despite and because of long-term, intensive use, is well-preserved. Its elucidation is signally aided by air photography, especially some vertical APs taken by OGS Crawford on 22 June, 1924. The key one is here published for the first time (pl. %%; NMR SU1370/1).

Down Barn lies on the S side of a dry valley, Pickledean, AS *pytteldene* (BCS 734). Its AS context, and its role in the Charter evidence, are discussed *below* p. 00. This coombe is curving generally NW from the R. Kennet and is here, at a slight widening 180 m. above OD, about 2 km. from its mouth. It continues to climb gradually up to the NW for a further 1.5 km., finally eliding with the smooth contours of Overton Down at 220 m. above OD. It is pasture throughout, though bordered on the S for most of its course by arable. This reflects the historical fact that, in general, it marks the boundary between 'old arable' and 'old pasture' in the two Overton tithings; presumably it did likewise in the AS period, though this was certainly not the case in RB and prehistoric times. The land-use in the dene has, nevertheless, been basically pasture for some 2000 years and continues to be so.

From NW-SE, the main archaeological features around Down Barn are (fig. 00):
`Celtic` fields over the SE area of Overton Down on the NE side of the dene
A terrace-way, or double-lynchet track, running out of the dene to the NE from a turning by a former square pond; and running SE along the NE side of the dene as far as the SE end of RB settlement OD SE
Potential **RB settlement** area marked by 5 possible buildings sites immediately on the N side of the small area of uncleared sarsens marking a shallow re-entrant dropping into the dene off OD between the two ponds. The site lies immediately downhill and W of ODXII and looks remarkably like it before excavation; it could well be a part of it, unrecognised at the time of excavation.

A zone of **ridge-and furrow**, subdividable into four different localised types and areas: a. `Broad rig` N of the DL track, c 8-9 m (27 ft.) broad and laid out in furlongs, as demonstrated by OGSC (WFA 1928, pl XIX) and common over much of Overton Down

b. Similar broad rig E of the DL track and N of ODXII, probably part of the former open fields of Lockeridge tithing

c. Narrower rig SE of ODXII and E of the `stone circle`

d. Narrow rig in a fan-like pattern running up the slope towards OD XII from the gateway into the NNR NE of Down Barn. Almost certainly explicable as the temporary cultivation intake during the Crimean War recorded in 1963 as oral evidence from Mr. Swanton who had been told of this locally-unusual event by (name in archive).

`**Stone circle**` (OS) E of ODXII, in descending order of likelihood, is either an accidental configuration of sarsens resulting from disturbance in a much ploughed and otherwise used area; the very disturbed remains of a round barrow containing some form of sarsen structure; or the disturbed remains of a, possibly round, stone-based building e.g. a 'hut-circle' (it would be the only one on the Downs since all the evidence here points to stone only having come to be used for domestic buildings in the Roman period and from the 13th century AD onwards: put this point in chap 10).

Three **lines of sarsen stones** on the downland of OD:

along the DL track *above* where it turns to the N (on OS 25 in.);

probably RB and part of the C1 land re-organisation

N of ODXII: med. or later, associated with r-and-f b. or c. *above*

E of ODXII (on OS 25 in.): marking line of race-horse training gallop, probably late C19

A **square pond**, now filled in

OD XII: an excavated **RB settlement** (part of?; Chap 6, and Bowen and Fowler, 1966, fig. 7)

Down Barn enclosure: an undated **trapezoidal earthwork enclosure** (fig. 3.00, Pl. 00) of C5-12 date, overlying late-Roman and prehistoric stratigraphy and material, with its E ditch cutting into the ledge of the (late?) RB DL trackway. No contemporary material and hence, with the absence of medieval material too, the suggested dating bracket. (More detail to go in here re stratigraphy: crucial to general OD land-use hypothesis in Chap 10)

A **round pond** at the SE end of the trapezoidal enclosure, now smoothed over OD South West: a large **RB settlement** (Bowen and Fowler 1966, fig. 6)

Down Barn: modern barns, replacing corrugated iron Dutch barns still standing into 1960s on the site of the early C19 ones first shown on ?(Check) Enclosure Map 1816. The original Down Barn was built on the N edge of the 'open' field (get its name) where it ended on the downland pasture, and would have been intended for overwintering stock, notably cattle - a characteristic Wiltshire chalkland site in its position, form and function

A **round pond** in front of i.e. N of, the Barns, associated with at least one underground drain of sarsen construction

Two **standing stones** (SMR 108) in the hedge-line some metres S of Down Barn: probably the two stone referred to in the E. Overton charter (AD 939, BCS ???): they are the only standing stones in the right area even though the tithing boundary does not run through them. A bridle way, perhaps marking an old route, passes along their east side, but the suspicion exists that the stones have been moved from elsewhere (their position on the AS charters? - *below* p. 00)) and reset in the low bank now beneath the hedgerow along the W side of the path. They appear to be secondary to that bank.

The extant **bridleway** passing along the W side of Down Barn comes from the N and could well be a reflection of, or even continue, the 'RB' track coming from Totterdown, passed Wroughton Copse and across Overton Down through the RB settlement OD South (*above* and fig. 2.00). From Down Barn it continues S along the E side of the field boundary marked by the two standing stones, continuing S along the Anglo-Saxon estate boundary (pl. 3.00) to come out on the A4 opposite the ford across the Kennet (*below* p.00). Its route continues thence up the road between the two Overtons (*below* p.00) and then S out through the 'open' fields towards West Woods and the Vale of Pewsey beyond. The suggestion is, therefore, that this now little-used path, obviously once of some local service, could well be a length of a former north-south route through the area. Down Barn's position and status as a nodal point in the communications network is therefore markedly enhanced with this N-S route crossing the more obvious E-W one(s).

Down Barn **cottage**: a Grade 2 Listed building, late C18 with thatched roof. Last inhabitant died 1970s? Renovation for holiday/weekend tenancy 1995-6.

Concrete foundation/floor of former **Nissen hut**, erected to service a searchlight (or was it AA? - CHECK) battery during WWII, used for farm purposes thereafter, and then used as dormitory and kitchen both during the construction of the Overton Down Experimental Earthwork (Jewell 1963) and in the mid-1960s as the HQ for the excavations of ODXI and ODXII (*below* Chaps. 5 & 6). The hut reached a state of unusable dilapidation in 1967 and, after it finally collapsed during a storm in the 1970s, was cleared away.

Late Roman settlement ODXII

Down Barn enclosure

4.G The Down Barn enclosure, Overton Down (Pls. 4.00, 4.00; figs. 4.00, 4.00, 4.00)

This particular earthwork enclosure is described in its landscape context *above*, Chap. 3, p. 00. Trapezoidal in plan, it lies across the bottom of the narrowing dry valley just uphill of Down Barn, with old pasture upslope to its immediate north on Overton Down and permanent arable similarly sited to its south. The former contains, only 100 m. distant, late Roman site OD XII (Chap. 6); the latter may well have been continuously under cultivation since the 10th century AD (Chap.

8). The enclosure's northern ditch cuts along a narrow terrace, or double lynchet track, on the coombe's north side, apparently a continuation down the dry valley of the RB track running right across the Overton Down landscape (figs. 2.00, 3.00). A round pond lay outside an entrance on the enclosure's southern and downhill side. Inside, a low platform lay against the bank on each of the long sides. The whole site has been smoothed over by some form of light cultivation in the early 1970s, so the sharpness of the earthworks and some of the critical detail existing when surveyed in the early 1960s has now gone; but the site is still visible (Pl. 4.00), and damage appears to be only superficial. The position, shape and size, and relationships of this enclosure, suggested it was 'late' in the local landscape sequence and likely to be of considerable significance. This has proved to be the case.

Excavation has occurred twice since the enclosure's discovery in November, 1961, on both occasions with this author's encouragement in the hope of advancing the Fyfod project. Firstly, J. Scantlebury with boys from Marlborough College Archaeological Society started a fairly ambitious trial excavation on four afternoons a week through the summer term of 1962. The work was not renewed but enough had been done to establish the basic stratigraphy. Furthermore it was related to a Roman horizon which predated or was contemporary with the enclosure, a crucial point which has now been clarified (*below*). An interim report was published (Scantlebury in Fowler 1963, 349-50). A second excavation was carried out in 1995 in circumstances described *below*.

The 1962 excavation

The following is a summary of the published interim report (Fowler 1963, 349-50), with interpretive interpolations by this author in [square brackets].

A grid of 10 ft. squares was laid out across the centre of the enclosure but was not completely excavated; and a section was cut through the enclosure bank and ditch on the SW. The ditch was c 1.20 m. deep, V-shaped and cut through a humic layer into the Chalk. The bank was merely a low spread of soil and occupation material. Within the enclosure, all over the area excavated, was a rubbly spread of occupation material, "rich in pottery, bone and iron" but without evidence of a substantial structure. "Traces of what may be a small hut were found, defined by two parallel lines of small broken sarsens with a floor of packed chalk between" but the "complete ground plan" was not recovered. [This is the only record of this 'structure', the exact location and stratigraphical context of which are unknown. There is no good reason, however, to doubt the existence of a feature as described. Its description now reads similarly to that of the also somewhat ambivalent 'Building 5' subsequently excavated on the adjacent Site OD XII though only recognised in post-excavation analysis (*below* Chap. 6, p.00). This feature was probably in the central area of the western 'platform'. The doubt about its context is only whether it was associated with or laid into the (here apparently late RB) occupation level. The 'platform' itself is now known to be post-Roman (*below*), and so too would be this 'structure' if it was actually on,

rather than covered by, the 'platform'. It is one of two possible excavated structures recorded by the 1962 excavation (for the other *see below*) from inside the enclosure, though a "possible building" was described in the slight earthworks on the 'platform' on the E side of the enclosure. The critical evidence has now been smudged out but re-interpretation of the plan (fig. 4.00) would suggest the earthworks in question may have been residual elements of the terrace-way, not a building.

The 1962 excavation produced "large quantities of pottery and a considerable amount of animal bone, of which a high proportion appears to be sheep, iron nails, three very eroded bronze coins and the pin of a bronze brooch." Among the pottery were "a fairly soft red ware", a "rather harder, light grey ware", and a "black ware". The last was subdivided into a wheel-made fabric with "a fine burnished surface", and a much more gritty fabric, "apparently hand-made" (This sounds like BB1 and BB2. -pjf). Recognisable forms in this black ware included "low-sided dishes and fairly straight-walled pots with a characteristic outer flange just below the rim". The conclusion was that "the whole assemblage would fit quite well into a late Romano-British context towards the close of the 4th century or possibly rather later." "Two or three stray medieval sherds" were also found.

The occupation layer rested on "a sterile layer of fine, dark brown earthy clay, some 3 ft. [0.90 m] thick at its deepest point and thinning out towards the sides of the valley." [Scantlebury was not to know this but the material was remarkably similar in appearance and texture to that in the upper centre of the linear ditch across Overton Down North and Totterdown, as exposed in cuttings OD I and TD VIII, *above* p.00]. Two suggestions were made. One, that this layer [illustrated here in Pl. 4.00 from 1995] might "represent a flood deposit in the valley bottom", a preference for this interpretation being expressed because of "the archaeological sterility of the layer" [now known not to be the case, *see below*]. Second, that the soil accumulation in the coombe bottom was "the result of accelerated soil creep and rain wash from arable fields on or immediately above its sides" [an interpretation now tending to be preferred, *below* Chaps. 9 and 10, pp. 00, 00].

Beneath this thick humic layer was another rubble layer lying on the Chalk. It apparently contained "a grouping of large sarsen boulders suggesting some form of rectangular structure" [but again this was not followed up and this published phrase is the only record]. From the layer came about half-a-dozen "sherds of undecorated, coarse pottery, rich red-brown in colour and containing a large amount of crushed chalk." [PJF saw some pottery from this layer at the time and seems to recall that one or two sherds might have been 'Beaker' while thinking that in general an EBA phase was probably being indicated].

Unfortunately, the excavation was uncompleted and the records of it disappeared. Considerable efforts to trace them, and/or the excavator, failed. When, therefore, in a remarkable return to the project's origins, a site was

needed in 1995 for a small-scale training excavation to follow up an adult education archaeology course for Bristol University, it was suggested that the 1962 cuttings be re-emptied and their sides cut back to record what was known to be, from memory, a particularly important sequence not just about the enclosure but about the landscape's evolution.

The 1995 excavations

The 1962 excavation plan had been surveyed on to the original field survey at the time so it was possible to relocate the trenches exactly. Furthermore, the outlines of the actual trenches were momentarily visible before new growth of the very, very short, sheep-grazed grass over the site early in 1995. Under the direction of the tutor (and co-landowner), Gill Swanton emptied the trenches of the main NE-SW cutting with a mechanical back-acter. Work to clean up and record the archaeology proceeded during the first part of 1995. So much data and material were recovered that a full excavation report is now being prepared for publication by the director elsewhere (probably in *Wilts. Archaeol. Mag.*). Meanwhile she has provided full access to the evidence and material to enable the following note to be prepared with particular reference to the matters germane to the Fyfod project i.e. this is a highly selective note by PJF, not GS. We are especially grateful for the photograph of the section (Pl. 4.00), published in preference to a drawn section which, it was agreed, should not be abstracted to go with a short note rather than the full report; for the use of Dr. Sheail's environmental report (STILL TO COME?); and for access to the all the excavated material.

The new excavation essentially confirmed the main points in the interim report. It produced, however, two major chronological differences (*below*, Mesolithic and early RB), and a lot more archaeological detail with which we are not particularly concerned here. Stratigraphically, in the centre of the dry valley the coombe floor of solid Chalk lay some 1.5 m. below the present surface, creating the need and the opportunity to explain those 1.5 metres in terms of landscape development (Pl. 4.00). It was covered with a thick, humic old land surface below and in which were evidences of both structure (post-holes) and activity (flints, pottery). This layer contained an area of Mesolithic activity (flints, almost absolutely rare in the study area) with a Neolithic/EBA horizon or horizons on or in its surface. From the Fyfod point of view, the important fact is a 'latest date' of around c 2000 BC for a phase which preceded the bulk of the section's (and valley bottom's?) deposit. This was a virtually sterile, thick layer of chocolate-brown humus, as recorded in 1962 above ?EBA/?Beaker sherds (*above*). It was now seen more fully in 1995 stretching, with variations but basically as in Pl. 4.00, right across the width of the enclosure from ditch to ditch and outside.

It remains unclear whether this layer results from long slow accumulation or a sudden circumstances (*above*; further discussed *below* Chap. 10, p.00); but it is interpreted as the product of either or both alluvium and/or colluvium deriving from cultivation of the slopes on either side but particularly on the north (Overton

Down). In itself, the layer is not securely dated, though the latest material in it were a few EBA sherds (**GILL: is this correct?**). Overlying an EBA phase, however, completely devoid of EIA material, and sealed by early RB material, it seems likely that the layer represents a process, perhaps an event, in the 2nd millennium BC (*above* Chap 2, p.00; *below* Chap 10, p.00).

The bulk of the archaeological material came from an occupation layer apparently stretching across the coombe on top of the thick humus deposit. In some places, indeed, it appeared to be on an land surface which had developed there. In the interim report, the equivalent material was identified as similar to that from OD XII and therefore C4. Close examination of the material from the 1995 excavation highlights the almost total absence of characteristically late RB artefacts and suggests, in contrast, that it is predominantly of C1-2 AD. Most of it came from under or in the bank of the enclosure, or from the make-up of the platform on the SW side of the enclosure (fig. 4.00). There is no doubt, therefore, that the enclosure itself is of late- or post-Roman date.

A context for the C1-2 activity is provided locally by the early Roman phase of landscape organisation generally. Specific to the environs of the Down Barn enclosure is the C1-2 cultivation on Overton Down (*above* Chap 2, p. 00; *below* Chaps. 5, p.00, and 10, p.00); the C2 phase underlying the C4 settlement on OD XII (*below* Chap. 6, p. 00); and the early RB material collected from the surface of settlement Overton Down South (*above* Chap. 3, p.00), of which indeed this layer in the coombe may be a part.

The enclosure itself remains something of a mystery, as it has been since its discovery. The total absence of material associated with it is puzzling, as is the total absence of any material later than late RB apart from two or three medieval sherds. It might, of course, have been constructed for a use not requiring artefacts or generating discarded ones e.g. an animal fold, and could therefore be of any date later than, say, c AD 400. The ready availability of medieval and post-medieval artefacts, especially pottery, as witnessed at WC (Chap. 7) and the Delling Enclosure (*below*), and their near-absence from the Down Barn enclosure, inclines interpretation towards its use in a post-Roman/pre-medieval phase, possibly one that was aceramic but more probably one in which, whatever the state of material culture, its use did not lead to the deposition and/or accumulation of rubbish. A cattle pen or sheep fold seems a likely purpose, beside a pond, on marginal land between arable and pasture, and close to an intersection in local tracks and regional routes.

The enclosure, which could well be only the visible part of a wider complex, may, however, be one of the missing medieval sheep-cotes (*above* Chap. 8, p. 00). Those "two or three stray medieval sherds", only evidenced in that published phrase, may be the slight but significant evidence indicating that here is the Overton equivalent of *Raddun* (especially triangular enclosure C, *above* Chap. 3,

p.00, and *below* Chap 7, p. 00). That site, however, produced a lot of material. Nevertheless, the Down Barn enclosure may well be a medieval sheep-cote. It may, however, have originated earlier and been abandoned, or originated earlier and lasted a long time. The Down Barn enclosure could well have originated in the Anglo-Saxon period, at a guess between the C7-9 when pottery locally was at best scarce and before the C10 charters which do not mention it. It is very near to two boundaries, and it may well have been referred to if it was relevant. An implication of the lack of post-Roman material is that, whatever the date of its use, it was disused and forgotten before the 13th century when pottery became common locally, even on Fyfield Down. This makes its absence on Overton Down, and from the Down Barn enclosure in particular, striking. Indeed, the two or three medieval sherds, perhaps indeed strays, draw attention to rather than dispute this absence on that line of argument. Even shepherds and cow-hands break the occasional jug and glass bottle out in the open, again as some of the post-medieval material at WC illustrates (*below*, p.00). Yet such evidence is completely lacking from the Down Barn enclosure, an oddity especially since the post-medieval habitation site at Down Barn itself is so near.

Interesting though the enclosure is in its own right, particularly in hinting at post-Roman elements in the landscape, the site is even more significant because of the underlying prehistoric stratigraphy to which the earthwork accidentally drew attention. The early phases, so convincingly stratified, point to the similarities with the buried evidence examined by Evans *et al.* 1993 along the main valley: this seems a downland equivalent, also with a high environmental potential whatever its chronological and cultural significances. The subsequent sequence is interpreted as illustrating large-scale and probably widespread erosion on the downs in the 2nd millennium BC (*below* Chaps. 9 and 10, p. 00), a key factor, so it is argued, in understanding this landscape. A monument-led approach can, apparently, produce bonuses.