

Falmer Hill in the prehistoric and Romano-British periods

A REAPPRAISAL

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During the 1980s, ploughing on former downland on the upper north face of Falmer Hill began to expose a substantial new enclosure site. This ditched enclosure survives only as a ploughed-down earthwork. When considered in conjunction with the known archaeology of the area, it becomes apparent that Falmer Hill is a much more significant area than at first appears. Topographically the hill is sited in a strategic location at the junction of north–south and east–west communication routes. Much of the archaeology revealed by aerial photography overlooks the main east–west dry valley.

FALMER HILL

Falmer Hill (TQ 345 075) lies on Cretaceous Upper Chalk to the north of the city of Brighton and Hove, and reaches a height of 163m OD at TQ 35469 07523. The hill is aligned in an east–west direction, and is connected to Newmarket Hill to the east by a NW–SE saddle. The soil is a thin, stony calcareous rendzina with a high proportion of silt (60–80%) of loessic origin, abundant fragments of chalk and flint, and intermittent patches of loam. Environmental evidence from the surrounding chalk downland (e.g. Mount Caburn and the Vale of Brooks) indicates that during the early Holocene the chalk supported deciduous forest. Forest clearance beginning in the neolithic led to accelerated erosion of the loess cover. Modelling by Favis-Mortlock *et al.* (1997) suggests that the loess achieved depths of about 1m, while Catt (1978) hypothesises depths of up to 4m. The eroded material has subsequently been transported to the valley bottoms, the flood plains and eventually the sea (Thorley 1981; Bell 1983; Waller and Hamilton 2000; Boardman 2003).

The dry valleys surrounding Falmer Hill cut into the chalk, and are partly infilled with Quaternary head deposits (Boardman 2003; Jarvis *et al.* 1984; Gallois 1969; Geological Survey of England and Wales 1:50,000 map [Sheet 318/333, Brighton and Worthing]). Detailed analysis of the valley bottom deposits at the site of the American Express Community Stadium has revealed a sequence of Coombe deposits (periglacial solifluction material composed of calcareous chalk marl and flint gravel), overlain by fluvially reworked, decalcified

head, which was in turn overlaid by loess. These Pleistocene deposits were subsequently overlain by Holocene colluvium and top soil (Garland and Pope 2008). Tertiary deposits found at Falmer include weathered Reading and Woolwich Beds, while large sarsen stones can be found on the surface (Ullyott *et al.* 1998; 2004).

Topographically, Falmer Hill occupies a significant location in the midst of the South Downs. To the north is a broad east–west dry valley, which follows the route of the current A27. This feeds into the main Lewes Road dry valley, which is to the west of Falmer Hill. This valley runs to the south, where it merges with the London Road dry valley at The Level, 4km to the south. These two valleys unite to form Brighton's Central Valley, which runs to the sea at the Steine. These dry valleys were carved out by the solifluction and fluvial processes associated with the Pleistocene weathering of the Chalk (Garland 2010).

BACKGROUND

In the 1930s, when the application of aerial photography to archaeology was in its infancy, George Alfred Holleyman published a seminal paper on the distribution of prehistoric and Romano-British field systems and occupation sites on the Downs around Brighton (Barber 2011; Beazeley 1919; Crawford 1928; Crawford and Keiller 1928; Curwen 1929; Holleyman 1935; Holleyman and Curwen 1935).

Using a combination of aerial survey and field observation, Holleyman identified 32 groups of field systems on the South Downs between the

valleys of the Adur in the west and the Ouse in the east (a study area which encompassed 168 km² – 65 square miles – excluding the river valleys and coastal plain). Although distributed fairly evenly across the whole area, many concentrated on an almost continuous belt 3–5km wide stretching from the northeast of Shoreham to Lewes. South of the Brighton–Lewes valley another, less complete, belt of field systems stretches across the Downs. In total these field systems covered an area of 29km², or 18% of the area studied, which led Holleyman to estimate that at least 23% of the area was under cultivation during the prehistoric and Romano-British periods (Holleyman 1935, 446).

On Falmer Hill, Holleyman recorded field systems over much of the hill and two occupation sites, one to the north near the village of Falmer and one to the south near what is now Upper Bevendean. The area considered for the purposes of this paper is that contained between the Drove to the east, Upper Bevendean to the south, the Lewes Road to the west and the A27 to the north. Both sites were associated with scatters of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery. Unfortunately, no large-scale map was produced at the time, and the earthworks were not individually mapped; only their broad extent was indicated. However, Holleyman's publication made a significant contribution to the archaeological interpretation of Falmer Hill because until this time the only archaeological sites evident were a group of eight tumuli near the crest centred at TQ 3547 0754, and a Bronze Age bowl barrow (TQ 3558 0750). The area surrounding Falmer Hill has numerous examples of so-called 'valley enclosure' earthworks such as at Newmarket Plantation (Toms 1907; 1926; Anon. 1907).

The few archaeological finds were dominated by worked flint. The earliest recorded such find, a neolithic polished flint axe, was found on Falmer Hill in 1875 and presented to Brighton Museum in 1932 by Dr. H. C. Visick (Acc. No. R 3532/303). A neolithic or Early Bronze Age scraper with sides shaped for hafting was found in a garden at Upper Bevendean, and presented to Brighton Museum in June 1923, by Mr G. S. Urquhart (Acc. No. R 2480/3). The 1912 1:10,560 scale Ordnance Survey map of the area also indicates that 'flint implements' were found immediately NW and NE of Wick Farm between 1898 and 1908. Neolithic and Bronze Age implements were recovered in

the area centred at TQ 3596 0651 between 1898 and 1921.

About 1918 four 'Sussex Loops', a flint knife 14.5cm long, a leaf-shaped arrowhead, a tanged arrowhead, an unpolished neolithic axe and several fragments of polished axes were found 'on Falmer Hill near Hodshrove Farm' (Holleyman 1948). Hodshrove Farm was located at TQ 333407233. Some of the finds came into the possession of George Holleyman, who donated one of the 'Sussex Loops' and the Early Bronze Age flint knife to Brighton Museum in 1948 (Acc. No. R4697/1–2). Primarily neolithic flints were recovered in the area of TQ 3546 0733 between 1927 and 1929 during fieldwalking by Leslie Grinsell (Grinsell 1930). They included 'a damaged polished celt, a transverse arrowhead, two or more other arrowheads (leaf and single barb), a knife with ripple flaking, innumerable scrapers, etc'. The finds were originally placed in Hove Museum, but are now lost.

No published evidence for Iron Age or Romano-British activity was recorded from the hill, although a bronze cupid of Roman date had apparently been recovered during ploughing in 'Falmer' although the precise find spot remains unclear (Anon. 1848). It is now in the British Museum (Acc. No. 1853,0412.108). However, some Roman material undoubtedly ended up in antiquarian collections and escaped publication. For example, Gideon Mantell records in his unpublished journal for August 3, 1821: 'A fine middle brass of Domitian [was] brought [to] me by a labourer, who dug it up on Falmer Hill; cost me 1/6'. (Cooper 2010).

The upper slopes of Falmer Hill have seen little archaeological investigation since the publication of Holleyman's paper, and no further work has been undertaken on the lynchets and field systems, although some field-walking campaigns took place in the early 1970s and 1980s (Saville 1983; 1984). In contrast, a large number of archaeological investigations and watching briefs have been conducted on the lower slopes and valley floor around Falmer, usually as a by-product of development. They have generally yielded little archaeological material. For example, investigations prior to the construction of the Falmer Sports Academy at Falmer High School revealed no significant archaeological deposits, although a substantial quantity of residual worked flint was recovered (Garland

2011, 8). Archaeological evaluation in advance of construction of the East Sussex Record Office, at Woollards Field, revealed no archaeological features (Place 2004; Pope 2008). Watching briefs prior to the construction of the Community Stadium in Falmer recovered little archaeological material (Pope and Peyre 2008; Stevens 2008; Garland 2011). But further archaeological investigation undertaken between September 2008 and January 2009 at the American Express Community Stadium uncovered evidence of possible mesolithic pits, a possible neolithic flint mine, Bronze Age ring ditches and a potential Saxon sunken-floored building (Garland 2010). Taken as a whole, the archaeological evidence is suggestive of a moderate level of activity around Falmer in the mesolithic and the Bronze Age (Garland 2010; Peyre 2010, 17).

Although archaeological investigations have focused on the area around Falmer itself, Falmer Hill has been comprehensively covered by aerial photography. Between the mid-1940s and early 1960s numerous RAF photographic sorties encompassed the hill. Unfortunately, the RAF vertical aerial photographs were intended for mapping and were never intended for archaeological survey purposes, so were often taken at times of the day or year that were unsuitable for recording earthworks and other features. However, they were taken shortly after the war, when many archaeological features that are now lost were still extant and so represent a unique record of downland earthworks that have in many cases now been levelled (Carpenter 2008, 11). After these dates, good coverage has been provided by Ordnance Survey aerial photographs and those taken by commercial air survey companies. These aerial photographs have been used as a foundation to map the enclosures and field systems on the hill.

THE FALMER HILL ENCLOSURES

Holleyman's surveys in the 1930s revealed evidence of Iron Age/Romano-British settlements on the lower northern and southern slopes of Falmer Hill, in conjunction with extensive evidence for field systems across the hill. He recorded nothing on the upper slopes. Aerial photographs from 1947 show the upper slopes as rough pasture, which is in accord with Salzman's description of the parish of Falmer published in 1940, which recorded the

presence of arable on the lower slopes and sheep-pasture on the hills (Salzman 1940, 223).

By the early 1980s ploughing on downland below the crest of Falmer Hill began to expose a group of new enclosure sites preserved as soil marks, which were not evident to Holleyman in the 1930s (Fig. 1). The principal enclosure site is centred on TQ 34529 07659 (Fig. 1: Site A; Fig. 2) and lies between 120m and 145m OD on the gently sloping, upper north face of Falmer Hill. This substantial double-ditched enclosure survives only as a ploughed-down earthwork and is not apparent on the surface. In 2012 the enclosure site was once again under pasture. The southern border of the enclosure is less well-expressed as a soil mark. A build-up of colluvium against a former field boundary has raised the surface level on the southern edge of the site, burying the archaeological features more deeply than the area to the north of the boundary. Site A encloses approximately 3.6ha (in comparison, Hollingbury Hillfort encloses approximately 3.0ha within its ramparts). It has a maximum east–west dimension of *c.* 250m and a maximum north–south dimension of *c.* 200m. Twenty-five metres to the NW the ground falls sharply away into the Hog Plantation dry valley.

To the north of the main enclosure is what appears to be another enclosure of similar scale and construction centred at TQ 5336 1065 (Fig. 1: Site B). From the soil marks alone it is unclear whether this is a contemporaneous extension of the southern enclosure, or an elaborate entrance area, or a completely separate earlier or later site. However, the eastern boundary of the two enclosures does superficially appear to be continuous. If the northern enclosure is a separate entity, it is not clear whether it was completed. The soil marks appear to peter out as they approach the Hog Plantation dry valley. These enclosures are the largest archaeological features currently evident on Falmer Hill. Clearly, the fact that the enclosure has been ploughed flat indicates that prior to the 20th century Falmer Hill was subject to arable agriculture. The environs of Falmer Hill were extensively explored and the surrounding earthworks mapped by field researchers such as Herbert Toms and members of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society in the early 20th century. It is unlikely that if extant earthworks were evident they would have been overlooked (Toms 1907).

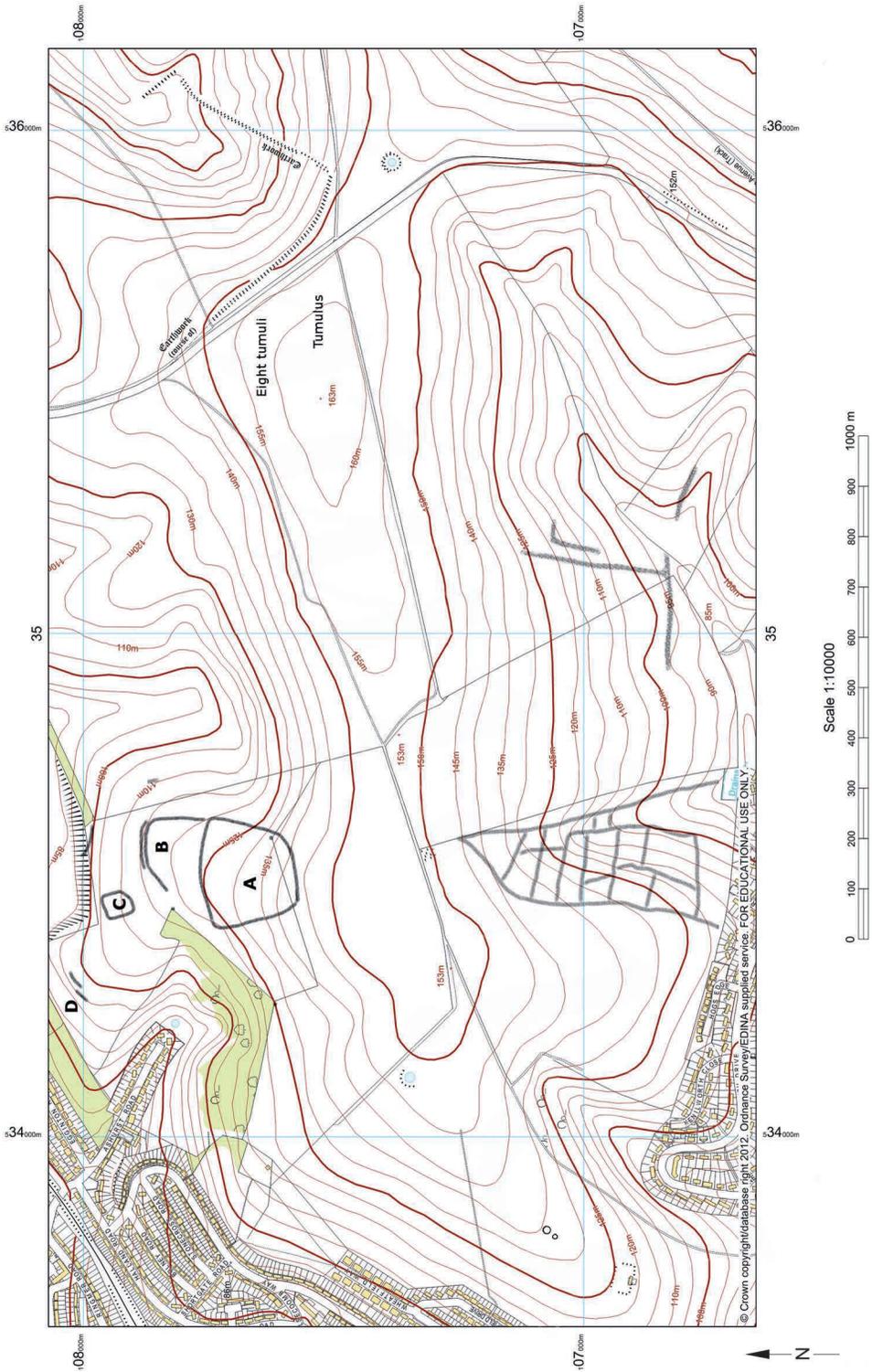


Fig. 1. Crop and soil marks on Falmer Hill.



Fig. 2. Enclosure A on Falmer Hill. ©2011 Google – Imagery ©DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, TerraMetrics (Photograph taken 21 April, 2007).

FALMER FIELD SYSTEMS AND ENCLOSURES

To the north of enclosures A and B on Falmer Hill the downland gradually dips towards the village of Falmer. Holleyman (1935, 1948) was the first to record a Romano-British occupation site to the south of Falmer. Finds included calcined flints and late Iron Age (La Tène III) and Romano-British sherds; Holleyman does not refine the date range of the Romano-British sherds further. The location of these finds marked on Holleyman's small-scale map corresponds with the location of a small, squarish, single-ditched enclosure seen on aerial photographs centred at TQ 3448 0791 (Fig. 1: Site C). In the 1930s the occupation site was surrounded by the remains of 'Celtic' field systems, but by March 1972 only some well-defined lynchets up to 1.5m high were still evident in a small area centred

at TQ 3460 0795 (Fig. 1: Site D). Today much of the field system that was seen by Holleyman has been ploughed out. The field system is visible on the NMR air photograph: F21/82/1121 0114-5 21.3.55).

UPPER BEVENDEAN

The field system at Upper Bevendean lies between 90m and 120m OD on the gently sloping SE face of Falmer Hill (Fig. 3). A group of enclosures and lynchets are visible on aerial photographs centred at TQ 3459 0690 (NMR aerial photograph F21/82/1121 0088-9 21.3.55). They were first discovered by Holleyman (1935, 448), who recorded calcined flints and Romano-British sherds and traces of three depressions, while field survey in March 1972 recovered more Romano-British sherds. Since Holleyman's time, the whole area has been ploughed or built over. At the time of

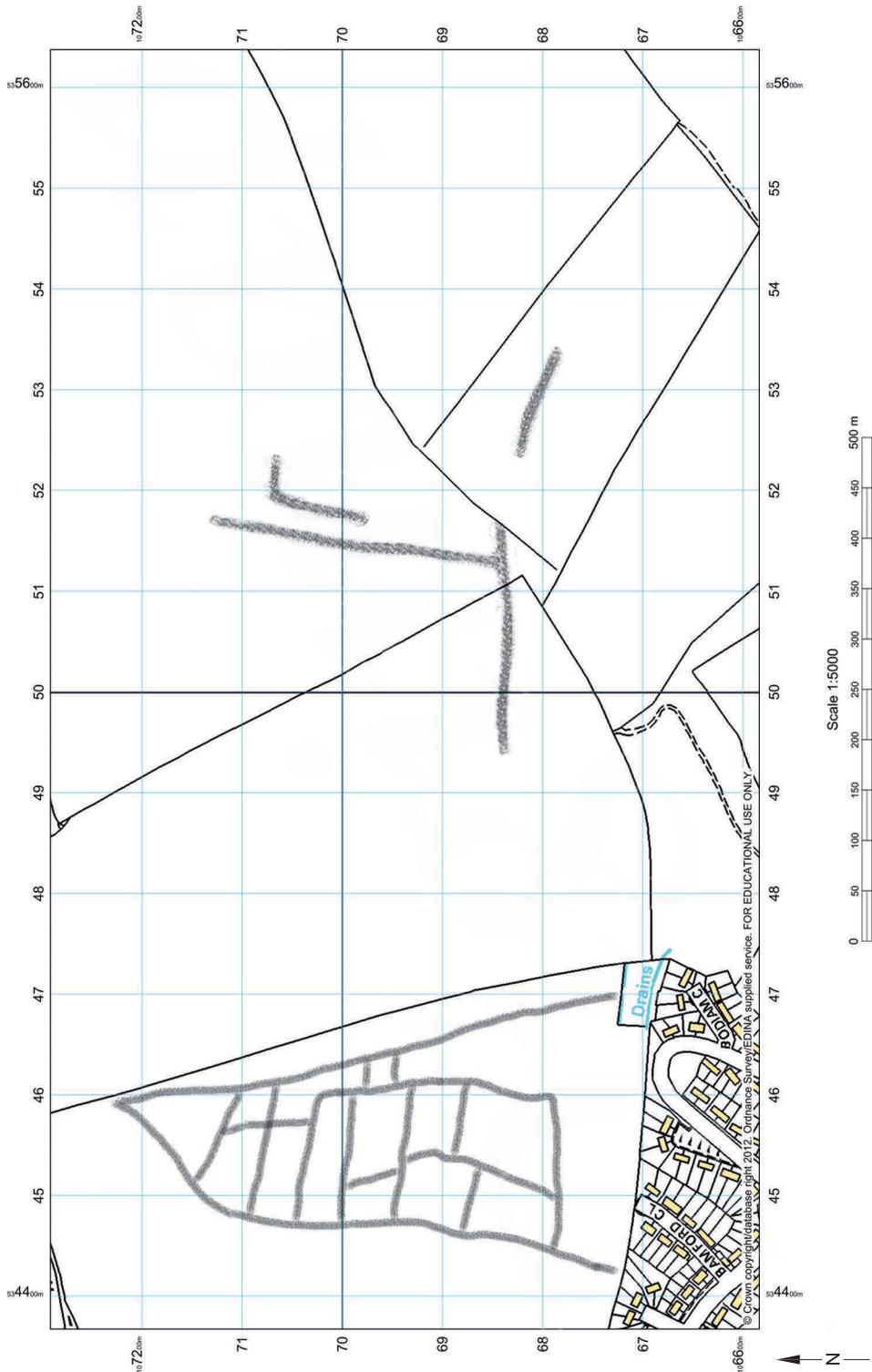


Fig. 3. Field systems north of Upper Bevendean.

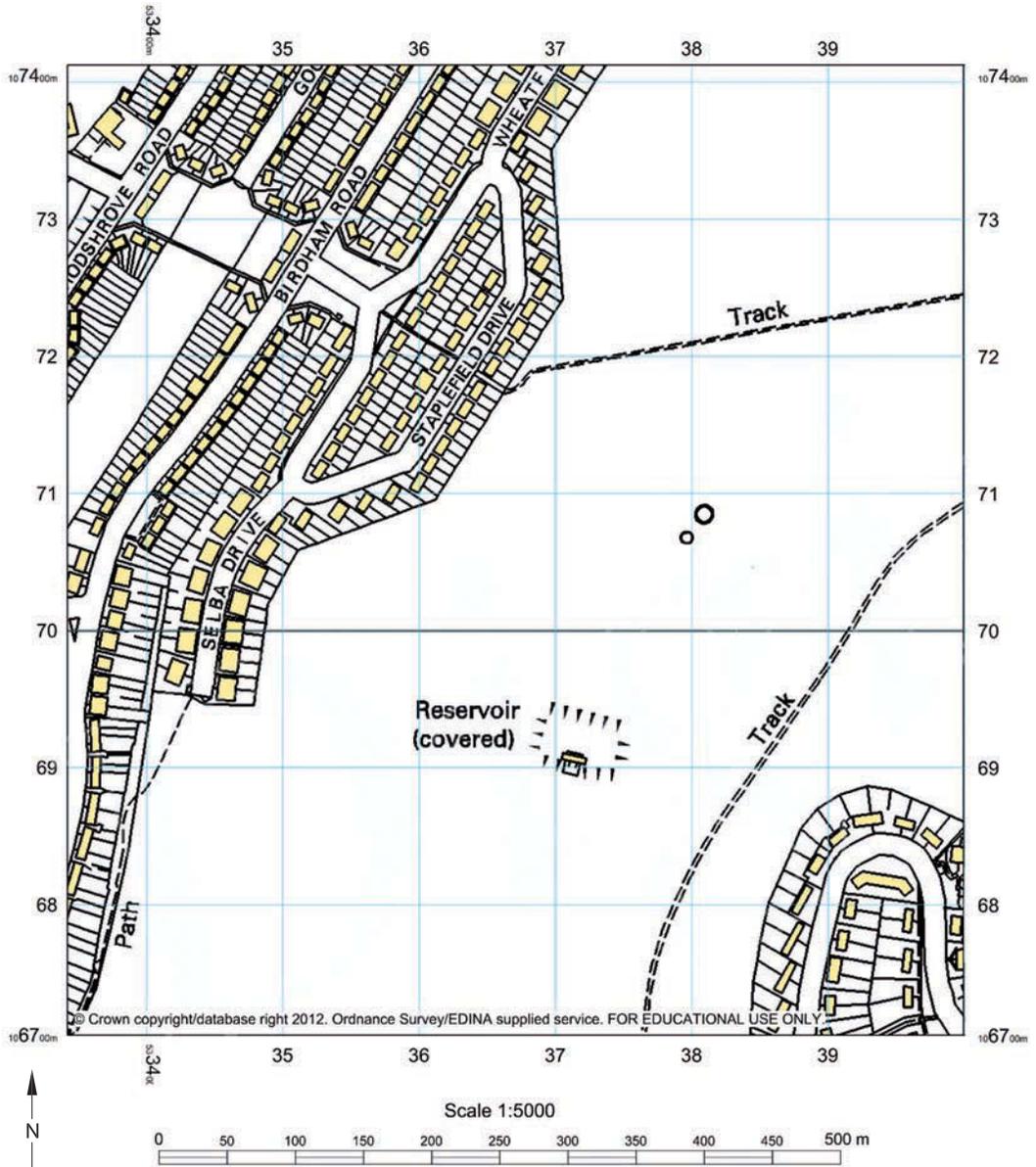


Fig. 4. Two circular features to the west of Hogstrough Bottom.

Holleyman's survey the Upper Bevendean estate to the south of Falmer Hill was yet to be built. The lynchets are now very faint or destroyed. There is no surface evidence of the enclosure, although crop and soil marks are still evident intermittently when conditions permit.

OTHER FEATURES

To the west of Hogstrough Bottom are two circular features that have shown up intermittently on aerial photographs (Fig. 4). The northern feature (TQ 3382 0707) is larger and more clearly defined than the southern feature. The size of these features

is suggestive of the ploughed-out remains of round barrows or ring ditches. Although they are sometimes confused for anti-aircraft defences from WWII, there is no evidence for such sites on the hill (Dobinson 1996; 2001).

A feature centred to the NE of the Upper Bevendean enclosures and field systems at TQ 3525 0718 that is visible as both a crop mark and a soil mark is the remains of Cambridgeshire Farm. This building was originally called Hill Cottage in the 19th century, before being renamed Cambridgeshire Farm after the First World War. After falling into dereliction during the 1960s it was finally demolished in the 1970s. Building debris is still evident in the plough soil.

CONTEXT

Aside from the field systems and two occupation sites noted by Holleyman, and the usual barrows and background scatter of worked flints often found on the Downs, the available evidence for archaeological sites on Falmer Hill had until now concealed its archaeological importance.

There have in the past been tentative hints that the hill was host to more prehistoric settlement than previously thought. Saville (1984, 12) considered that the quantity and range of tool types found during fieldwalking in the 1980s made it likely that Falmer Hill was the site of neolithic/Bronze Age settlement. Field walking was also undertaken by C. Skeggs in the area centred on TQ 350 074 around 1974 (Saville 1983, 5).

The discovery of the large enclosure sites below the crest emphasises that, far from an archaeological backwater, Falmer Hill was an area of some importance during prehistory. Enclosure sites A and B below the crest hold a commanding position above the entrance of the Lewes Road dry valley, mirroring the position of Hollingbury Hillfort, which is sited on the western side of the valley. The Early Iron Age univallate hillfort at Hollingbury was preceded by a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age enclosure which has been interpreted as a hedged animal pound (Holmes 1984). In the absence of dating evidence from the site, it is difficult to determine whether the Falmer Hill enclosure sites A and B were contemporary with any of the phases of the Hollingbury Hillfort or its precursive enclosure. However, the Falmer Hill enclosures and Hollingbury Hillfort reveal

intriguing parallels in size and position in the landscape.

The Falmer Hill enclosures illustrate some of the difficulties of interpretation and chronology presented by such features. The curvilinear enclosure is only visible on aerial photographs as a soil mark. There is no direct dating evidence for the site; it is comparable, if not larger in size and scale, to nearby hillforts on the South Downs (e.g. Hollingbury, Mount Caburn). If it was still an extant earthwork, rather than having been plough-levelled, it might have been described as a hillfort.

The key to the importance of Falmer Hill lies in its location. Topographically Falmer Hill is a strategic location at the junction of north-south and east-west communication routes. The orientation and position of the Falmer Hill enclosure indicate that the focus was the main A27 dry valley and the junction with the Lewes Road dry valley. When viewed in the context of the other enclosure sites and earthworks in the vicinity, it becomes apparent that the Falmer Hill enclosure was one of a number of sites overlooking the A27 dry valley.

In addition to Hollingbury to the west, other less well-dated earthworks are situated to the east. On Newmarket Hill near Newmarket Plantation (centred at TQ 358 076) a well-preserved ditch up to 1.5m deep and 2.7m wide, running south and turning north-east, is visible in an arable field. A section of the ditch to the north of the scheduled area has been obliterated by road widening. This has been interpreted as the boundary of a deer park, although historical evidence for this is lacking (Sussex Archaeological Society 6" OS sheet No. 66 NE in Barbican House, Lewes). A further well-preserved enclosure of unknown date is evident further to the east at Loose Bottom (centred at TQ 365 080).

Aside from the archaeological sites on Falmer Hill, some of the small finds appear to indicate high-status activity. One such group of finds from Falmer Hill are the 'Brighton' or 'Sussex Loops'. These high-status, Late Bronze Age ornaments, often thought to be decorative armbands, are concentrated in a zone within a 6-mile radius of Brighton. But the majority (7) have been found on the Hollingbury-Falmer Hill axis, four examples being discovered on Falmer Hill itself (Holleyman 1948; Piggott 1949; Rowlands 1976). In the absence of archaeological investigation, the field systems

recorded in the 1930s on Falmer Hill are undated. As Holleyman noted from surface finds of ceramics, they were in use from the Late Bronze Age to Romano-British periods.

Clearly Falmer Hill was an important location in the prehistoric era, but it is also apparent that Falmer Hill and its environs were a focus for Romano-British settlement. But unlike the prehistoric activity, Roman sites clustered in the valley bottoms at the foot of the Hill or on its lower slopes. Holleyman recorded settlement on the southern slopes near what is now Upper Bevendean, and on the northern slopes above Falmer. Holleyman considered the site on the northern slope to be unusual, recording only one other settlement in his study area on a northern slope. However, in the context of Falmer Hill, the northern slopes overlooked the A27 dry valley communication route and so would have been highly attractive for settlement.

To the north of Falmer Hill a small rural Romano-British settlement seems to have existed at Falmer (TQ 353092) in the dry valley. In addition to the field systems, two corn-drying ovens and domestic debris have been found (Norris 1956). The dating evidence (pottery and a coin of Constantine) is suggestive of occupation in the late 3rd–4th century. In the early 1920s Roman and Romano-British sherds were recovered ‘while excavating on the site intended for the Moulsecoomb school’. Moulsecoomb Junior School was the first of the school buildings to be erected in 1920 (TQ 332072). One of the sherds is of considerable size and was part of a large amphora. Such a large fragment seems unlikely to have moved far beyond its original site of deposition and so appears indicative of settlement and/or burial in the vicinity.

Further to the west, across the valley floor, a 1st–2nd century Romano-British cremation urn containing calcined bones was found at a depth of about 60cm on a SE-facing chalk slope (Anon. 1952). The urn, described as a ‘clay pot, globular in form and about 7.5 inches high’, was found in March 1952 by workmen digging a trench on the new Bates Nursery housing estate at South Moulsecoomb (now occupied by a block of flats at 122–6 Ryelands Drive, TQ 3286 0721). The urn was initially thought to be of Saxon date. Interestingly, ‘a smaller pot of rather the same style and containing a human cremation burial, was found at Moulsecoomb in June 1923, only

300 yards from the site of the present discovery’ (Anon. 1952).

What appears to be tentative evidence for Romano-British settlement has been recovered from TQ3808. Roman and Romano-British sherds, a copper alloy nummus of the House of Constantine (AD 317–364) and a large quantity of smithing slag were recovered. The quantity of smithing slag recovered could indicate that the site was providing blacksmithing services for those traversing the dry valley. Interestingly, a sherd of Early or Mid Iron Age pottery and a sherd of Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age pottery were also recovered. *See* Portable Antiquities Scheme SUSS-814AF1, SUSS-816AD4, SUSS-8136C5, SUSS-812824, SUSS-809751. MIA ceramic: SUSS-81AF32, and LBA-EIA pottery: SUSS-81C386.

CONCLUSIONS

Falmer Hill was clearly an important location in the prehistoric and Romano-British periods. It occupied a key position between the main body of the Downs to the north and the coastal belt to the south. Moreover, its proximity to the natural communication routes that followed the dry valleys through the Downs would have been beneficial for early communities.

Prehistoric and Bronze Age activity favoured the upper slopes of the hill, with some limited activity in the surrounding valley bottoms and lower slopes. In contrast, by the Romano-British period settlement is focused on the lower slopes and the valley bottoms. Evidence for clearly defined Iron Age activity is poor, but this may be a function of less diagnostic dating material for the period compared to the preceding Bronze Age and later Romano-British.

Aerial photographic and other archaeological evidence reveals more archaeological sites on the northern slopes of Falmer Hill overlooking the A27 dry valley than on the southern slopes. During the 1930s Holleyman noted that the position of the Romano-British on Falmer Hill was unusual.

There is no definite rule concerning the positions of villages and hamlets except that the majority favour summits (not on the main ridge) and southern slopes. Variations occur, for a small late 4th-century (A.D.) village was situated on the northeast face of Wolstonbury Hill, and a Romano-British

settlement flourished on a northern spur of Falmer Hill.

This is significant. The location of Falmer Hill at the junction of east–west and north–south dry valleys that would have acted as natural communication routes could go some way to explaining its importance. The A27 dry valley was clearly an important communication route in the prehistoric and Romano-British periods, providing the main access route through the valleys of the South Downs, from the coastal belt in the region of Brighton to what is now Lewes. Controlling or influencing access to and from the coastal belt, coupled with the easy communications and transport that the valley provided, would have been attractive for early communities.

Today, however, extant earthworks are rare. As with many downland sites, more intensive agricultural activity from the second half of the 20th century, coupled with the capacity for deeper ploughing, has degraded many minor earthworks and lynchets. These are often now only evident as soil marks, if at all. In 1935 Holleyman noted that the principal reason why so much surface evidence remained was that so little downland had been subject to ploughing in the recent past, but even in

the 1930s he expressed concern that ploughing was beginning to impinge on some lynchets and field systems. He recorded that ‘present day ploughing is rapidly encroaching on several of the groups and several of the larger ones have been split and divided’. Holleyman also noted that building was beginning to impinge on field systems around Brighton including those on Falmer Hill and Tegdown Hill (Holleyman 1935, 445–6).

Over 70 years later the situation has deteriorated considerably. Many of the field systems recorded by Holleyman are either degraded or destroyed. The barrows once so prominent near the Falmer Road have all now been flattened by ploughing. Entire swathes of downland are now ploughed flat. Today, with so many areas of downland flat and featureless, the discovery of new earthworks is becoming less common and is being replaced by the discovery of sub-surface features exposed by ploughing. The enclosures below the summit of Falmer Hill are just such sites.

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