

◆ The Cross Dykes Project. Interim report I: The River Cuckmere to Eastbourne

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Cross dykes on the South Downs between the ridge overlooking Folkington and Eastbourne and the River Cuckmere have been subjected to non-invasive study and the number of probable and possible examples increased. The distribution is heavily skewed towards the eastern ridge and there appears to have been a concern for visibility from the low lying Levels and the Channel. Relatively few have been found on the northern ridge. A role in guiding travellers, particularly coastal or cross-Channel is suggested but relationships with settlements and field systems are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Cross dykes are a poorly understood monument type found on the South Downs and other chalkland areas throughout southern Britain. Most comprise a bank and parallel ditch, although a few are of greater complexity, and are generally dated to the Late Bronze Age or Early to Middle Iron Age, despite the relative lack of evidence. The aim of the Cross Dykes Project is to identify, record and analyse the cross dykes on the South Downs between the M3 in the west and Eastbourne in the east; the work follows on from a previous study carried out by Professor Sue Hamilton and Mike Seager Thomas, who kindly made their unpublished data available.

This report looks at the first phase of the project and focuses on the downland block between the River Cuckmere and Eastbourne. It contains preliminary findings and observations, which are likely to be modified as the project progresses.

The identification phase involved the use of aerial photographs and LiDAR (data from the Environment Agency with a 1m discrimination), together with ground examination of all possible sites as well as the walking of all ridges and spurs which might bear relevant earthworks. The positions of the cross dykes were plotted using GIS and measurements were taken in the field of the height and width of each bank and the depth and width of each ditch. Notes were made of the viewshed and the visibility of rivers, the sea and other prehistoric monuments and possible routeways.

The elimination from the data of earthworks thought not to be cross dykes involved comparison with tithe maps and early Ordnance Survey (OS) maps to ensure that parish and other administrative boundary banks were not included (although the re-use of cross dykes was sometimes clear, and these examples remain on the list).

Anti-glider ditches, which cut across flat areas of the ridge in a series of parallel ditches or a V-shaped configuration, were also excluded following examination of aerial photographs taken immediately after WWII on which the exposed chalk still appeared as white lines. Babylon Track South, one of the Butts Brow group (see T1/T2), is the only example in this sector of the downs where confusion may occur. An anti-glider ditch appears on aerial photographs, but it is some 30m north of the cross dyke and both the visible morphology of the latter earthwork, and its extension down-slope, confirm its identity.

THE CROSS DYKES

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Various terms have in the past been used to describe these earthworks, including 'covered ways' (Curwen and Curwen 1918; Curwen 1929). More recently, the term 'cross-dyke' or 'cross-ridge dyke' has been used to cover relatively short, straight bank-and-ditch complexes which span narrow necks of land, running between steep slopes or abutting sheer escarpments (English Heritage 2011). For this project we have used the definitions below.

Cross dyke: a general term covering prehistoric earthwork complexes, usually comprising a single bank and ditch, which cross a ridge or a spur.

Cross-ridge dykes: cross dykes which span the entire width of either the main east/west ridge bounding the northern edge of the downs or the scarp between Willingdon and Eastbourne.

Half-ridge dykes: a cross dyke which only traverses a portion of one of the ridges, usually starting at approximately the highest point and running down one side.

Cross-spur dyke: a cross dyke which spans the entire width of a spur running away from one of the ridges of the South Downs.

Half-spur dyke: a cross dyke which only cuts across a portion of a spur, usually starting at approximately the highest point and running down one side.

Contour dyke: an earthwork complex of bank/s and ditch/es which run more or less parallel to the contours along a ridge or spur.

IDENTIFICATION

Fifteen cross dykes were noted from the East Sussex Historic and Environment Record (ESxHER). Of these, two had multiple entries with different names, leaving 12 individual dykes. A further two, listed as ditches, fit the criteria for cross dykes and were taken as such for this survey (Beachy Brow North and Beachy Brow West). A further 19 possible cross dykes were also recorded, giving a total of 33 for the block of land between the River Cuckmere and the Folkington/Eastbourne ridge.

The distribution of these earthworks, and their identifying names, is shown in Fig. 1; details of their location, designation, scale and dimensions are shown at the end of this article in Tables 1 to 3. The NGR co-ordinates refer to the approximate end points of the cross dykes. All measurements refer to the condition of the cross dyke at the time of visit and are taken at a representative point along its length. The overall width is the distance across the ditch and bank including any slump; the ditch width is the distance across the opening of the ditch at the estimated present ground level (not always available); the height of the bank is measured from the present ground level to the top of the extant bank; the depth of the ditch is measured from the estimated ground level to the top of the fill in the ditch.

It should be noted that number 8 (Babylon Track North) was found by excavation to be a natural feature (Greg Chuter pers. comm.) and has been taken out of consideration. Further details

of each cross dyke can be found in an interim report deposited with Sussex Archaeological Society, ESxHER and the NMR (Lea *et al* 2016). It is not certain that all the earthworks recorded are prehistoric cross dykes. All that can be said from the above-ground evidence is that bank-and-ditch complexes which appear to fit the criteria were located and recorded.

THE EASTBOURNE RIDGE

The great majority of the cross dykes found on this section of the downs cluster on the eastern ridge overlooking the low-lying land now comprising Willingdon, Eastbourne and the Levels area, together with the spurs jutting eastwards from it. Their locations and, particularly, those of the half-ridge dykes positioned only on the eastern side of the main ridge, suggest that they were intended to be visible from the lower ground which, during the late prehistoric period, would have been a zone of shifting salt marshes, mudflats, fen, islands and braided streams, with a period of marine inundation in the Late Bronze Age (Greatorex 2003).

The visibility of the earthworks above would have depended, to some extent, on whether their white chalk surface was maintained. Observations at Down Farm on Cranborne Chase, Dorset, suggest that the chalk could have remained clear of extensive vegetal regrowth for up to 20 years; clearance every five years or so would have kept them pristine (Martin Green pers. comm.). The vista of the Eastbourne ridge from both the High Weald and the English Channel is shown in Fig. 2. While it is not suggested that the cross dykes would have been visible from the distances shown, the steep scarp would have been, and the earthworks would have come into view as the traveller drew nearer.

One pattern which emerges from this area is that of one or more cross-spur dykes cutting across the upper end of an east-facing spur, finishing where the sides of the spur steepen acutely. Above these, cross-ridge or half-ridge dykes were placed on either side of the spur. Anyone attempting to access the ridge from the Willingdon Levels and adjacent low-lying land would encounter first the dykes crossing the spur, then, if they persisted and turned either right or left on the high ground, the dykes placed across the ridge. Examples of this pattern occur around Well Combe and Butts Brow (Fig. 3) and also at Beachy Brow and above Longlands Road.

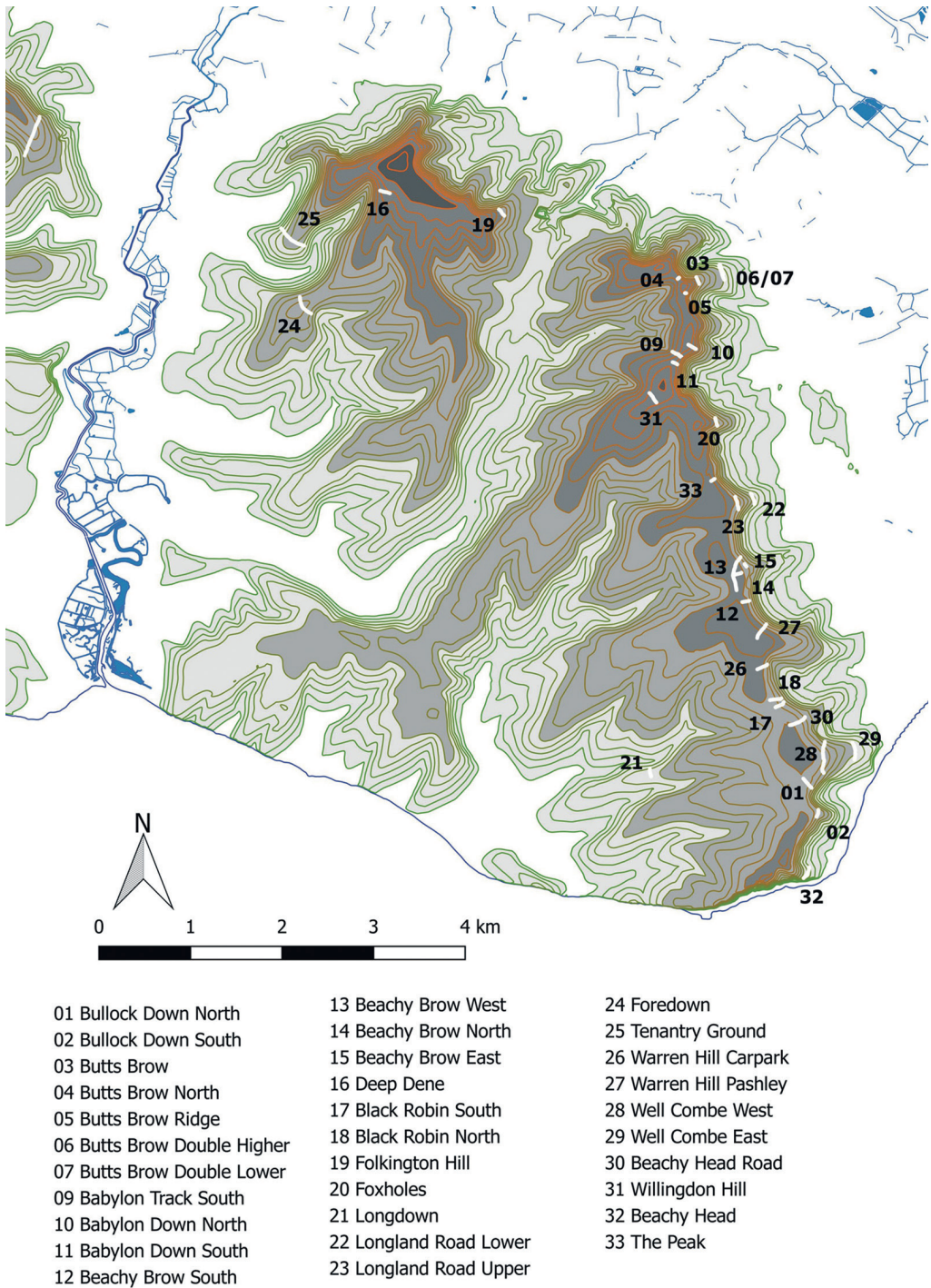


Fig. 1. Location of cross dykes east of the River Cuckmere (contours at 10m intervals). (Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right).

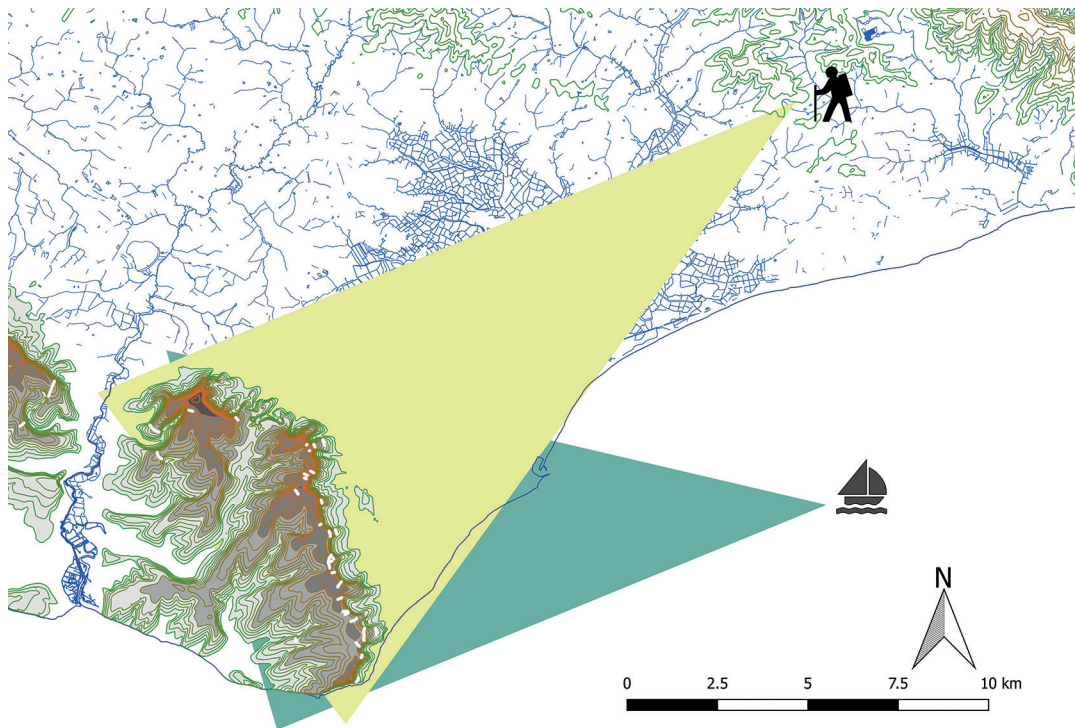


Fig. 2. The view to the Eastbourne ridge from the High Weald and the English Channel. (Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right).

The view down Butts Brow is shown in Fig. 4 and the half-ridge dyke, Beachy Brow South, in Fig. 5.

Of the cross dykes identified, the most northern is on Folkington Hill which faces north-east from the eastern end of the main north-facing scarp of the downs. The most southern overlooks the Channel and is being rapidly lost to erosion at Beachy Head. None were located further west along the coast. However, coastal erosion over the last 3,000 years may have been considerable and one study suggests a rate of land loss of between 0.3 and 0.5m a year. At Seaford Head this may even be as high as 1.25m a year (Robinson & Williams 1983). Taking a mean figure of 0.4m a year, the coast may have retreated by around 1.2km since 1000 BC, certainly enough to destroy any cross dykes on the spurs which may have overlooked the Channel.

TENANTRY GROUND, FORE DOWN AND DEEP DENE

Only a small number of cross dykes have been located away from the Eastbourne ridge, with

none on the northern scarp slope of the downs west of Folkington Hill. Away from the periphery of the chalk block are five cross dykes. Three are in a cluster near Lullington Heath (Tenantry Ground, Fore Down and Deep Dene), of which only Tenantry Ground includes the Cuckmere valley within its viewshed. The remaining two, on Willingdon Hill and Long Down, near East Dean (see Fig.1), are set across long, south-west-facing spurs.

The example on Tenantry Ground, again a south-west-facing spur, overlies field boundaries apparently created as part of a very large coaxial system and then re-used as part of a smaller area of enclosed land comprising fields restricted to the flatter ground on top of the spur (see Fig. 6). Re-use of those constructing the cross dyke ensured that no land was lost to arable use. Although direct dating evidence is not available, it is believed that both phases of the field system date to the Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (English 2013, 84–109). On Fore Down, to the south and crossing a steep-sided

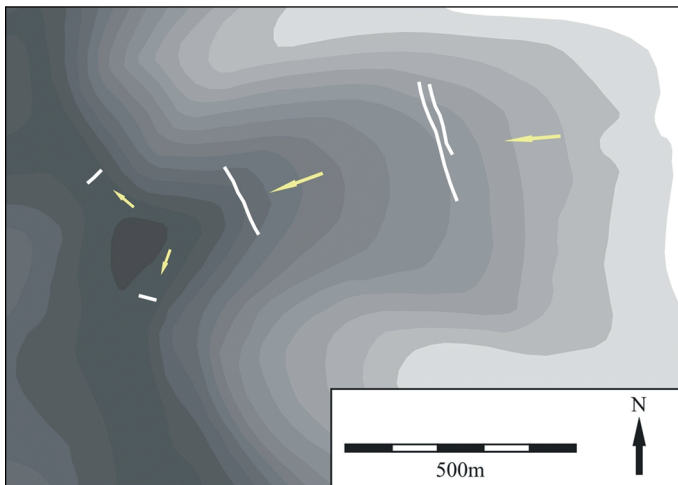
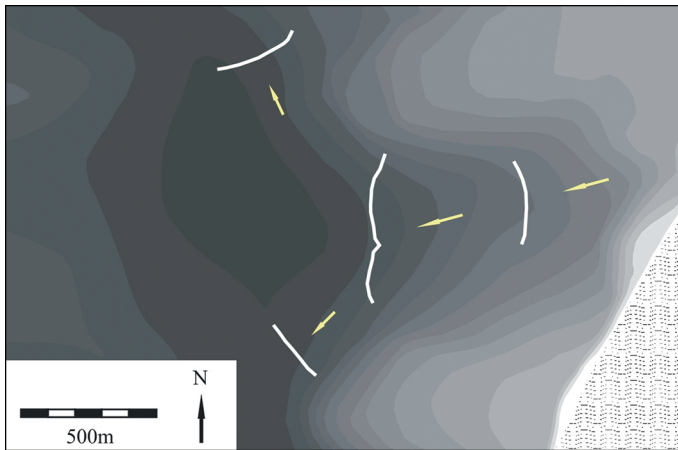


Fig. 3. Top: Pattern of groups of cross dykes at Well Combe. Bottom: Pattern of groups of cross dykes at Butts Brow. The yellow arrows represent possible routes to the high ground. Contours are depicted at 10m intervals and the width of the cross dykes is exaggerated for clarity. (Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right).

saddle point, is a curved cross dyke placed close to a large barrow and, possibly, two very small ones, while to its north-east is an extensive Late Bronze Age settlement area (Chuter 1987; English 2013, 84–109). The small cross dyke at Deep Dene crosses the same spur further north-east.

SITING OF BANKS AND DITCHES

The placement of the bank relative to the ditch affects how easily the feature can be seen from a distance; on a steep slope, placing the bank uphill from the ditch effectively increases the visible area

of exposed chalk. The disadvantage is that erosion will diminish the size of the bank, allowing it to slump back into the ditch. Where the cross dyke is dug on gently sloping ground the importance of the placing of the ditch has less relevance. However, there is no clear preference as to which side the bank is placed and with several examples the relative placement varies along the length of the earthwork. Five ditches have banks on both sides of the ditch; there is the possibility that this is the result of re-cutting the ditch.

DISCUSSION

Few cross dykes have been excavated and therefore any consideration of the reason for their construction is hampered by the lack of conclusive dating evidence, although the late prehistoric period is usually suggested.

Of the cross dykes covered by this report, only Long Down has been excavated, the evidence implying only “a prehistoric date for the earthwork” (Bedwin 1982). The picture across the South Downs is similar, with excavations at Alfriston (O’Connor 1976), Stanmer Great Wood and Pudding Bag Wood (Funnell 2016), Upper Beeding (Bedwin 1979) and Upwaltham Hill (Curwen and Curwen 1918) providing Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age dating, albeit only from secondary fills.

Several of the cross dykes described here, and some of those farther west, can be shown to cut, and therefore post-date, coaxial field systems. The two-phase field system on Tenantry Ground, with a boundary overlain by a cross-spur dyke, was probably associated with the settlement areas on Fore Down and Lullington Heath which have produced Deverel-Rimbury and post-Deverel-Rimbury type pottery. The former is dated to around 1700–1150 BC and the latter to around 1150–950 BC (Seager Thomas 2008; 2013, 101–102). The placing of



Fig. 4. The view eastwards from Butt's Brow spur towards Willingdon.



Fig. 5. Looking eastwards along Beachy Brow South towards the English Channel.



Fig. 6. Aerial photograph of Tenantry Ground (Cuckmere Valley) taken in the 1920s (donated by E. C. Curwen and reproduced by kind permission of Sussex Archaeological Society).

the dyke ensured that the field system could remain in use and the build-up of plough-soil against the bank indicates that this did in fact happen.

On Willingdon Hill, another cross-spur dyke changes direction as it descends the southern slope and reduces from two banks with a central ditch to a single bank and ditch, passing along the outer edge of a field system (Toms 1917, Figure 2). Here again, the fields remained in use.

A further possible association with settlement sites lies with the earthwork on Long Down. Here a cross-spur dyke divides the spur between the settlement at Heathy Brow, which has been dated to the Early Iron Age (Bedwin 1982), and Birling Gap, where evidence of activity indicates a probable settlement site. The suggestion has been made (*ibid.*) that the cross dyke may represent the boundary of land farmed from Heathy Brow. Alternatively, it may have discouraged movement along the spur, leaving the trackway along Bullock Down as the preferred route to Heathy Brow.

To the west of the Cuckmere, at Stanmer Great Wood and Pudding Bag Wood, the cross dykes may have been positioned to divide land associated with the settlements excavated at Varley Halls, Patcham Fawcett School and Eastwick Barn, although the contemporaneity of the settlements and earthworks is far from certain (Funnell 2016). In general, however, any understanding of the positioning of cross dykes into an already populated landscape is hampered by the lack of data, particularly the number and location of settlement sites.

Consideration of any relationship between cross dykes and barrows is made more difficult both by the widespread destruction of both monument types, mainly by ploughing since 1945, and the sheer number of barrows. Although there may be an association between cross dykes on, and adjacent to, east-facing spurs on the Eastbourne ridge and barrows on the spurs and main ridge, there is a strong possibility, since both generally occupy high

ground, that this apparent juxtaposition is merely coincidental rather than causal.

What is clear, particularly from the number of half-ridge dykes positioned down only the eastern side of the ridge, is that the primary concern of the great majority of cross dykes east of the Cuckmere is their visibility from the Levels and the Low Weald. It would seem that access to high ground, and a possible long-distance east-west route along the northern scarp of the downs, was in some way being controlled. It may be relevant that no cross dykes were found on the east-facing spur east of Eastbourne Downs Golf Club (TV 990587), which has the gentlest slope, although even here, on reaching high ground, a turn to the north or south would encounter the earthworks on Plashley Hill or Plashley Hill car park.

The earthworks would not have formed an insurmountable barrier, although they may have been surmounted by palisades or hedges, but those travelling would have been aware of their presence,

usually from a considerable distance. In many cases both cross-spur and cross-ridge dykes end at points where the slopes steepen, reducing the ease of simply walking round them. The pattern illustrated in Fig. 3 would appear to have been designed to deter movement in either direction along the scarp, even if the cross-spur dykes had been ignored.

Whether these obstacles were intended to discourage movement, to guide people and stock onto 'permitted' routes, or simply to emphasize the downs dwellers' interests in their land, the view towards the scarp would have sent a clear message to those below.

The potential importance of the area below the scarp is illustrated by the finds at Shinewater (Greatorex 2003). The timber platform of the 9th century BC may indicate extensive use of salt marshes in the Late Bronze Age and some of

the artefacts from the site hint at cross-Channel contacts. Ceramics similar to British post-Deverel-Rimbury and later traditions have been found at sites in the Canche estuary (Pas de Calais), immediately across the Channel (Philippe 2009), in particular close to Mont-Bagarre near Étaples (Desfossés 2000, 39–40). Although the Shinewater site was abandoned due to inundation in around 800BC, it is likely that once trade routes had been established, a drier site could have been found beside one of the palaeochannels (Greatorex 2003, Fig 7.12). Certainly, the area meets the criteria for landing places (Wilkes 2007) and the eastern end of the South Downs, with its exposed chalk, would have provided an outstanding seamark. Travelling through the salt marshes would have given a view to the west of high ground, marked by the exposed chalk of the cross-ridge and cross-spur dykes (Fig. 7).

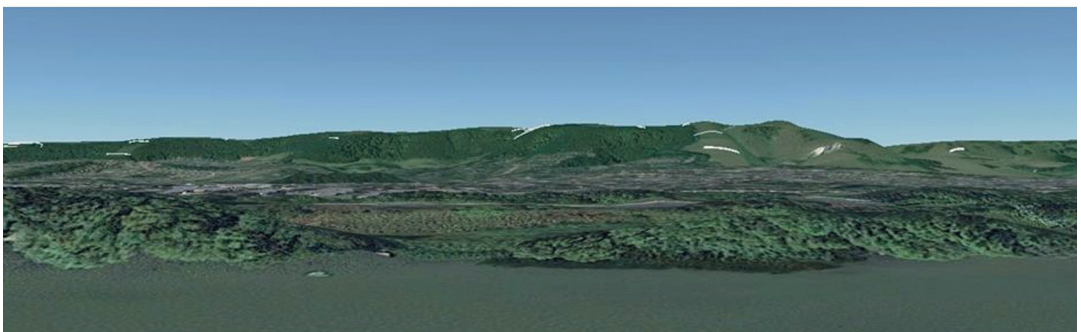


Fig. 7. Top: An impression of the downs from the low-lying land now occupied by Eastbourne. Bottom: An impression of the site of Shinewater. (Both adapted from GoogleEarth).

The scarp above Eastbourne and the Levels may have been regarded as a liminal zone, placed as it is between the very different landscapes of the chalk downs, the Low Weald, the low-lying coast to the east, the Levels themselves and the open sea. Both the Low Weald and the salt marshes could have provided rich natural resources, particularly for stock and perhaps on a transhumance basis. The cross dykes could have limited the grazing between several downland communities.

There are, however, a small number of cross dykes, such as Long Down and Fore Down, where visibility is limited to a few hundred metres in either direction along the ridge or spur. If these locations were designed to limit movement, it would seem to imply a prior knowledge of the presence of these cross dykes, for travellers unexpectedly arriving at a cross dyke might well be reluctant to retrace their steps. If their location was known, an alternative route could be sought.

This infers a local use for those cross dykes set away from the periphery of landscape blocks, a type met increasingly frequently farther west along the South Downs. Indeed, at the western end of the downs cross dykes are accompanied by linear earthworks similar to those found in Wessex (Bradley 1971); it is not clear that the two site types are contemporary but, if they are, they presumably derive from similar cultural changes.

This is the first section of the project to be reported, but it is already clear that the plethora of cross dykes on the Eastbourne ridge is not repeated elsewhere on the South Downs. The term ‘cross dyke’ may therefore come to be seen as a generic term for earthworks similar in form, but with varying purposes and positions within the landscape. It should also be possible to set this area within a wider context, both of the various ecotones of south-east Britain and of coastal and cross-Channel communication.

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Table 1

Identification			Configuration				Description			
Site Name	Site Number	HER	Part of Group	Number in Group	Multivallate Ditch	Number of Ditches	Bank			Extends Down Side of Spur
							Up Slope	Down Slope	Either Side	
Bullock Down North (01)	1		1	4	1	1			1	1
Bullock Down South (02)	2		0			1		1		1
Long Down	21	MES703	0		0	1	1	1		0
Babylon Track North (01)	8	MES656	0							
Babylon Track South (02)	9		1	2	0	2	1	1		1
Warren Hill, Pashley	27		1	2	1	1			1	1
Well Combe (West)	28		1	4	0	1	1	1		1
Beachy Brow	12	MES585	1	4	1	1	1		1	1
Folkington Hill	19	MES1745	0		0	1		1		0
Fore Down, Lullington	24	MES2981	0		1	1			1	1
Willingdon Hill	31	MES704	0		0	1	1			1
Butts Brow	3	MES806	1	5	0	1		1		1
Butts Brow North	4		1	5	0	1		1		1
Butts Brow Ridge	5		1	5	0	1	1			1
Deep Dene	16		0		0	1	1			1
Black Robin South	17		1	2	0	1	1			1
Black Robin North	18		1	2	0	1		1		0
Beachy Brow West	13		1	4	0	1	1			1
Beachy Brow North	14		1	4	0	1	1			0
Beachy Brow East	15		1	4	1	1		1		0
Foxholes	20		0		0	1		1		1
Longland Road Lower	22		1	3	0	1	1			0
Longland Road Upper	23		1	3	0	1		1		0
Tenantry Ground	25		0			1		1		1
Warren Hill, Car Park	26		1	2	1	1			1	1
Well Combe East	29		1	4	0	1		1		1
Babylon Down North	10		1	2	0	1	1			0
Babylon Down South	11		1	2	0	1		1		0
Beachy Head Road	30		1	4	0	1	1	1		0
Beachy Head	32		0		0	1		1		0
The Peak	33		1	3	0	1	1	1		0

Table 2

Identification		Description													
Site Name	Site Number	Shape				Alignment	Crosses				Extent				
		Straight	Curved	Series of Straight Lines	Zigzag		Spur	Ridge	Coastal Plain	Other	Top of Ridge	One Side	Both Sides	Truncated	
Bullock Down North (01)	1	1				SE-NW		1				1	1		
Bullock Down South (02)	2		1			N-S	1								
Long Down	21	1				N-S	1					1			
Babylon Track North (01)	8														
Babylon Track South (02)	9		1			NW-SE		1				1		1	
Warren Hill, Pashley	27		1	1		E-W		1					1		
Well Combe (West)	28		1			N-S	1					1		1	
Beachy Brow	12	1				E-W							1		1
Folkington Hill	19	1				NW-SE	1					1			
Fore Down, Lullington	24		1	1		N-S	1					1		1	
Willingdon Hill	31	1				NW-SE	1					1	1		
Butts Brow	3	1				N-S	1					1		1	
Butts Brow North	4	1				NE-SW		1				1	1		
Butts Brow Ridge	5	1				NW-SE		1					1		
Butts Brow Double Higher	6	1				N-S	1					1			
Butts Brow Double Lower	7	1				N-S	1					1			1
Deep Dene	16	1				NW-SE	1					1	1		
Black Robin South	17	1				E-W		1				1	1		
Black Robin North	18		1	1		E-W		1				1	1		
Beachy Brow West	13			1		N-S & E-SW		1				1	1		
Beachy Brow North	14	1				E-W		1				1			
Beachy Brow East	15	1				N-S	1					1			
Foxholes	20		1	1		N-S	1					1	1		
Longland Road Lower	22	1				N-S	1					1			
Longland Road Upper	23		1			N-S	1					1			
Tenantry Ground	25		1	1		SE-NW	1					1		1	
Warren Hill, Car Park	26		1			E-W		1					1		
Well Combe East	29		1	1		N-S	1					1		1	
Babylon Down North	10	1	1			E-W	1	1					1		
Babylon Down South	11	1				NW-SE		1					1		
Beachy Head Road	30	1				NE-SW		1				1	1		
Beachy Head	32		1			NNE-SSW	1					1			1
The Peak	33	1				E-W		1					1		

Table 3

Identification		Description								
Site Name	Site Number	Gap		Dimensions (metres)					Distance from Ridge	Distance from End of Spur
		Gap in Feature	Gap Original Feature	Length	Overall Width	Ditch Width	Height of Bank	Depth of Ditch		
Bullock Down North (01)	1	1	?	130.0	12.0	4.5	0.3	0.3		
Bullock Down South (02)	2	0			7.5	2.0	0.3	0.1		
Long Down	21	0	0	106.0	2.7	2.7	0.1	0.1	1590	1910
Babylon Track North (01)	8									
Babylon Track South (02)	9	1	0	112.0	10.2	2.5	0.2	0.1		
Warren Hill, Pashley	27			200.0	14.0		0.5	0.4		
Well Combe (West)	28	1	0	350.0	18.0		0.6	0.6	260	340
Beachy Brow	12	1	0	78.0	7.0					
Folkington Hill	19	1	0	92.0	11.0	4.0	0.5	0.5	235	530
Fore Down, Lullington	24	1	0	224.0	11.0		0.5	0.5	1865	3250
Willingdon Hill	31	1	0	153.0	10.0	4.0	0.4	0.5	150	2430
Butts Brow	3	1	?	82.0	10.0	3.0	0.3	0.5	200	600
Butts Brow North	4	1	0	18.4	5.5	3.0	0.1	0.1		
Butts Brow Ridge	5			28.0	6.0		0.1	0.1		
Butts Brow Double Higher	6	1	0	126.0	5.5	2.0	0.1	0.1	458	315
Butts Brow Double Lower	7	1	0	120.0	10.0	3.0	0.1	0.1	466	307
Deep Dene	16	0		120.0	8.5		0.2	0.2	290	4460
Black Robin South	17	1	0	126.0	7.5	3.5	0.2	0.1		
Black Robin North	18	1	0	138.0	10.0	5.0	0.3	0.4		
Beachy Brow West	13	0		425.0	9.0	4.0	0.4	0.3		
Beachy Brow North	14	0		129.0	5.0	1.5	0.1	0.2		
Beachy Brow East	15	0		64.0	4.5	1.5	0.2	0.1	195	500
Foxholes	20	0		38.0	12.5	6.0	0.4	0.2	160	355
Longland Road Lower	22	0		112.0					326	184
Longland Road Upper	23	0		150.0	12.5	6.5	0.3	0.3	176	370
Tenantry Ground	25	0		390.0	8.0		0.6	0.2	910	245
Warren Hill, Car Park	26	1	0	112.0	6.0		0.2	0.3		
Well Combe East	29	1	0	141.0	5.9	2.0	0.3	0.3	683	266
Babylon Down North	10	0		130.0	8.0	4.0	0.2	0.2		240
Babylon Down South	11	1	0	52.0	6.0	2.5	0.2	0.2		
Beachy Head Road	30	1	?	145.0	9.0	8.5	0.2	0.1		306
Beachy Head	32	0		142.0	8.0	3.5	0.1	0.1	375	
The Peak	33	0		50.0	7.5	3.5	0.2	0.1		