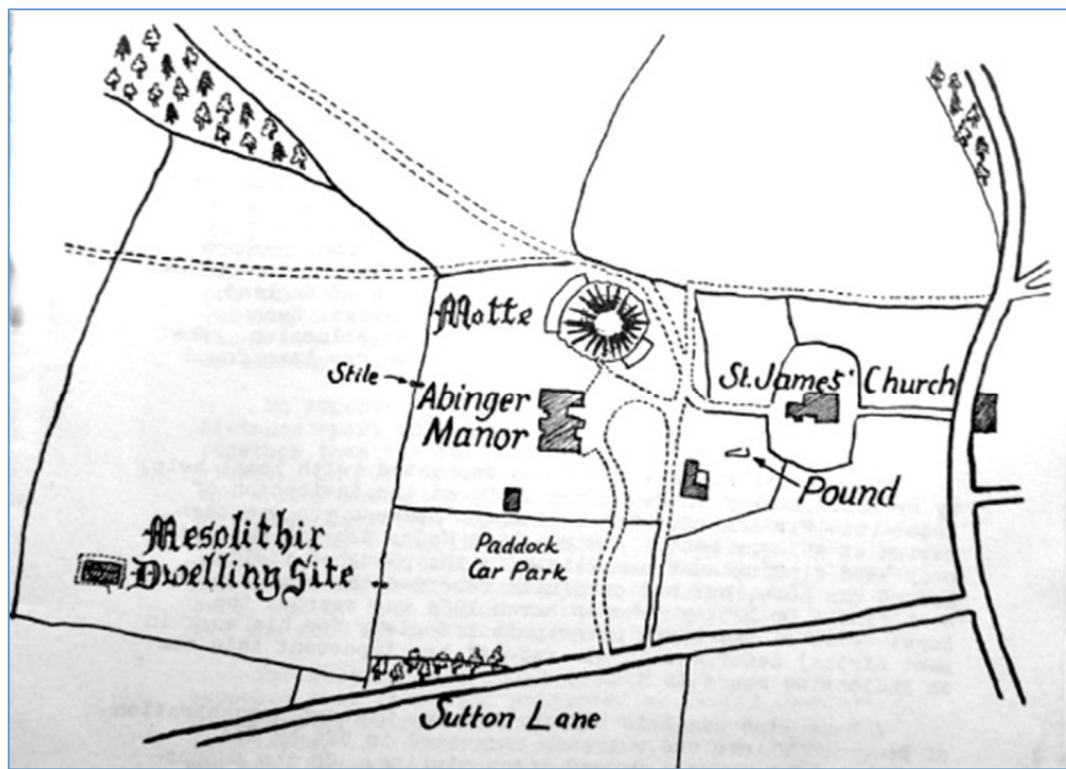


Historic Sites at Abinger



To be seen at Abinger:

The Mesolithic Pit Dwelling (ca.4000 B.C.). The Church (pre 1086). The Norman Motte (1066-1150). The Jacobean Porch (1696). The Manor Pound and the Stocks.

RETURN OF MAN TO BRITAIN AFTER THE ICE AGE

A meteorologist's theory of the Ice Ages is that there was a temporary increase in the power of the sun. Water evaporated excessively from the oceans, and the cloud cover in summer prevented the melting of all the winter snow. As the sun returned gradually to normal, more of its rays could reach the ground. The great ice-caps slowly grew smaller, the glaciers retreated northwards, and the land, relieved of their weight, recovered isostatic balance and rose up.

Animals and man returned to Britain across the land bridge from Europe. Man brought his new skills with him. With the melting of the more northerly ice the sea level rose and flooded the English Channel, but for a time the climate was equable up to the north of Scotland. Man demonstrated his knowledge of mensuration and right-angled triangles by making hundreds of stone circlesⁱ, many of them ellipses and ovoids, all based on a standard Megalithic Yard of 32.64 inchesⁱⁱ.

At first he could live and sleep in the open, perhaps with some flimsy shelter against the rain. But as time passed something more snug was needed. In the south of England, where there were no caves, he made Pit Dwellings. Such dwellings have been found at Farnhamⁱⁱⁱ and at Selmeston. What is believed to be the oldest of them all has now been found at Abinger.

THE MESOLITHIC PIT-DWELLING

The Abinger Pit was found and excavated (with local help) by Dr. L.S.B. Leakey in September 1950, at the invitation of Major (now Sir Edward, CBE) Beddington Behrens who was then living at Abinger Manor. Since 1948 Major Behrens had not only been finding numerous flints in the ploughed fields around his home, but had carefully recorded the position of each find. Dr. Leakey (who in March 1964 was awarded the Royal medal of the Royal Geographical Society for his work in East Africa) describes in his report^{iv} how important this was in indicating where to dig.

A base line was laid out through the highest concentration of recorded flints and a trench excavated in 5ft by 2ft sections. The subsoil proved disappointing. On the supposition that flints near the surface would be more likely to have worked down the slope of the land, two parallel 2ft strips were marked out up the slope perpendicular to the base line, and alternate 5ft sections were dug out. The top 8 in of soil disturbed by recent ploughing was not sieved, but every spadeful of soil and sand below was passed through 1/2" and 1/4" sieves.

Below the topsoil was a variable thickness of subsoil that may have been disturbed by ploughing at an earlier date; below this a layer of sandy clay, comparatively rich in flints; and below this again the original surface of the greensand, except that in places there was a layer of barren yellow sand between these last two. This material, also found in the pit itself, is regarded as having been dug out when the pit was constructed and piled round the sides and perhaps even over the roof. The pit was found on the eleventh day of the dig, and Major Beddington Behrens arranged for a marquee over the site so that work could continue despite the inclement weather. It is now covered with a hut that also serves as a museum for the finds of flints. The sandy sides of the pit have been chemically hardened, but must on no account be walked on.

Dr. Leakey thinks that this was probably one dwelling among many, and that excavation in the immediate neighborhood would reveal others. Illustrations in the museum show how they might have looked. The only evidence of the roof structure lies in two post-holes just outside the deepest end of the pit. It is supposed that there were two forked posts with a horizontal cross-bar between them, and that the roof was made from saplings and branches resting on this, with their other ends on the ground. These would have been covered with bracken, deerskins or, as already suggested, sand from the excavation.

No importance was attached by Dr. Leakey to the distance apart of the posts, which are much closer together than the full width of the pit, 10ft at its widest. On 30th March 1964 (after removal of shoes) the writer measured this distance; if the posts were about 4" diameter, the distance between them could have been exactly 2 Megalithic Yards (68½" between post-hole centres). In so important a matter as the building of his home, the head of the family would naturally exercise care, and if this figure is more than a coincidence we see the work of one of Britain's first true architects.

Two hearths were found outside the pit, and it is supposed that it served primarily as winter quarters and for sleeping only, all ordinary occupations being carried on outside. A collection of stones at the entrance end was considered by Dr. Leakey to have come possibly from a small mud-and-stone wall built to keep out wind and rain; but it is at least arguable that they constituted steps down into the dwelling.

The date has been estimated by an examination of the flint-working techniques used. When man first began to use flints to supplement bones and antlers, he selected a stone and knocked bits off it until its shape was right.

This was a core implement. Thousands of years later he learnt how to knock pieces off the 'core' which were themselves useful, or could be made so after further trimming. These are called "flakes" and are typical of the Mesolithic period. Neolithic man went further, making arrow-heads and grinding and polishing some of his implements. It was inevitable that a site like that at Abinger, with a permanent spring of fresh water, should have been used by later generations, and Mesolithic flints as well as fragments of tile, glass and porcelain were found on the site.

Dr. Leakey is himself an expert flint-knapper and knows how to make Burins (chisels for wood), Tranchet-axes (which were sharpened by a special technique of removing a transverse flake at the working end), Microliths (small implements with one or more edges deliberately blunted so as not to cut into the finger or handle), Fabricators (flakes used in making microliths), and can also recognize the peculiar waste-products of microlith manufacture (misleadingly called Licroburins). From the absence of "Horsham Points" and other more advanced examples, Dr. Leakey concluded that the Abinger Pit is the oldest man-made dwelling so far found in Britain. The 6561 flints and 280 modern pieces found at various levels were carefully analysed layer by layer. There were a few Mesolithic flints in the surface layer, doubtless brought up by ploughing the uneven ground. There were also 15 modern pieces in the sandy-clay layer, but five of these were close together and had obviously fallen down a rabbit-hole.

Dr. Leakey believes that the same accident accounts for the others, and for the few Neolithic flints found in the bottom layer.

The beginning of the Neolithic Age in Britain has recently been estimated by I.V. Grinsell, Curator of Archaeology in the Bristol City Museum, at not later than 3200-3000 B.C., which would make the Abinger Pit nearly 6000 years old.

When one considers that the mental capacity of these people was fully equal to that of the present day, it seems surprising that progress was so slow. But the techniques were far from simple: for example, "If a blade flake is taken and suitable notches made ... and then inserted carefully into a slit in a piece of hard rawhide ... and a half twist is given ... it fractures in a special manner ...".

Also, the tools were very efficient. They could not fell trees and the preparation of two 36" posts would have been a major undertaking, but experiments in Kenya have shown that an animal such as a goat can be completely skinned and cut up with one small-backed blade in about 20 minutes. Also it is very easy to shape and sharpen wooden arrow-heads and spears.

It is perhaps not irrelevant that when a modern scientist requires an extremely sharp knife for cutting really thin sections for an electron-microscope he uses the same technique: he breaks a piece of glass in a special way.

THE NORMAN MOTTE

Apart from the Neolithic flints in the surface layers, there is no obvious evidence of occupation of the site until about 1060 when it is recorded that a Huscarle held the manor of King Edward. In the Domesday Book (ca.1086) ^{vi}William Fitz Ansculf is shown as holding it of the King, and presumably he constructed the Motte for its better protection.

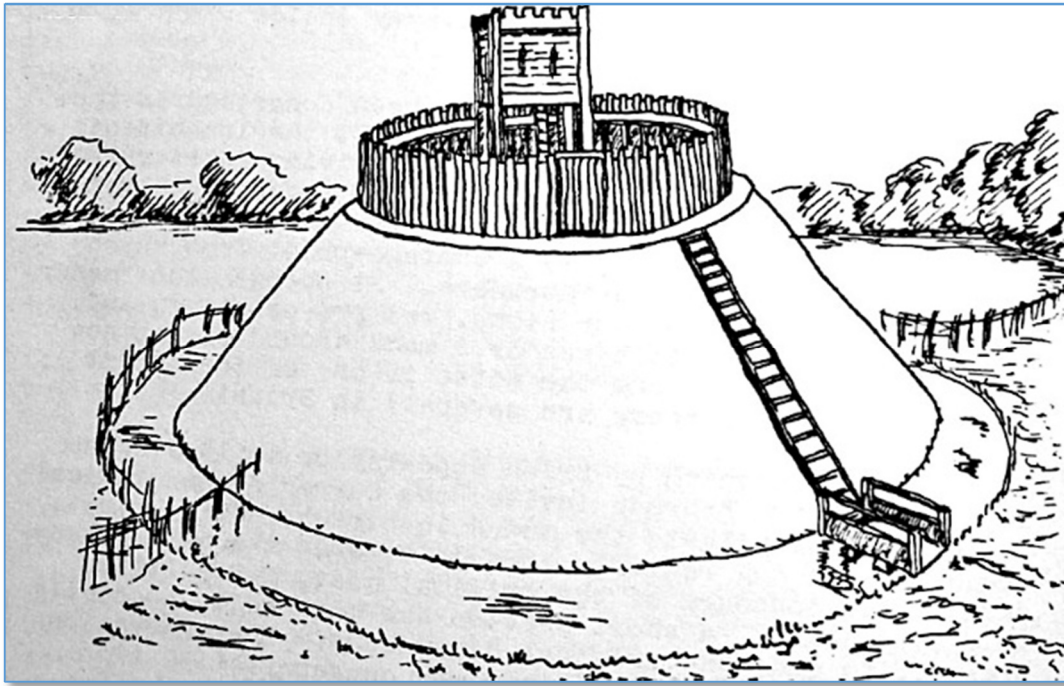
Gate-towers on four stout legs were used by the Romans, as depicted on Trajan's Column in Rome, which shows a development to a watch-tower within a pallsade. Apparently it was found that to pile earth up against and around the legs not only made the structure more stable, but the resulting ditch made it more defensible. The Romans took this a step further, by first throwing up a large mound within a circular ditch, and then erecting the stilted tower with its legs embedded in the top of it. A pallsade round the top with a walkway inside added to the impregnability^{vii}

Motte-and-Bailey Castles have been described as the Norman "secret weapon" whereby they kept the inhabitants in subjection. The Bailey constituted living-quarters for the garrison, and probably consisted of wooden huts surrounded by a ditch and earth-bank; the Motte carried the look-out tower and served as a vantage-point from which arrows could be fired at intruders. At Abinger the "manor house", whether of wood or stone, was pre-existing, and whether a hedge or ditch was ever made around it can now only be conjecture. But the Motte is one of the finest examples (of which there are several) in Britain.

It was excavated by Brian Hope-Taylor in 1949, when Major Beddington Behrens invited the Surrey Archaeological Society to investigate the mound in his grounds^{viii}. First, trenches were dug radially inwards towards the base. These defined the contours of the original moat, since filled up with rubbish. A short section has been left, specially drained, to show the original dimensions. The excavations also revealed a cunningly-contrived causeway, with two platforms (just below the water level) to carry a bridge made on the ships-gangway or duck-board principle. The absence of post-holes shows that it was removable. When taken up, intruders would be presented with an apparently unbroken water surface.

There are pictorial representations of Mottes in the Bayeux Tapestry, showing a "flying bridge" from beyond the ditch to the Motte top. At Abinger, with the natural spring, this was improved upon.

Most Mottes in Britain have been so overgrown or damaged in one way or another by rabbits or humans as to make excavation unrewarding. That at Abinger was in excellent condition. After removal of the turf a layer of soil and ash was found, which was carefully trowelled away. The sand surface was then so level that in all probability the top had been shaved off and levelled prior to covering with soil and grass. But the post-holes were clearly visible as a discoloration. In the sun they rapidly faded, and they were marked out with string and pins as soon as found. A few discolorations had been caused by tree-roots, but these were easily recognised because of their shallowness, and because stones were found at the bottom of genuine post-holes. Some of these showed how the timber had morticed for cross-bars even below ground-level. The drawing, made from a reconstruction by Brian Hope-Taylor, shows what it might have looked like when in use.



There is evidence of an original structure and a new structure at a later date. The dating has been revealed by "scratch-marked" pottery at the bottom of the ditch. The second structure was not raided for its timber, but was allowed to rot, as shown by the lop-sidedness of some post holes. It may have been an adulterine castle in support of Matilda in the lawless times of King Stephen, and probably became redundant when the country became settled in the latter half of the 12th century. The positions of the major postholes have been preserved in concrete in the grass surface of the Motte.

THE JACOBAN PORCH

The ownership of the Manor has been documented for the past 900 years, but there is no information about the structure of the actual building or buildings prior to 1696. John Evelyn, the diarist and author of various treatises, was born at Wotton in 1820. A copy of his "Sylva" is in the Manor Library, and his "Fumifugium", recently reprinted by the National Society for Clean Air, has had its influence on the Clean Air Act.

For nearly half a century he lived (between his travels) at Sayes Court, Deptford, which was wantonly desecrated by Peter the Great as tenant in 1698. But by then John Evelyn had retired to his native Surrey, and he built the Manor House, of which the original porch remains, although the rest has been altered and restored. The Porch is a scheduled Ancient Monument.

It is an intriguing thought that had John Evelyn, whose suggestion to Robert Boyle gave rise to the Royal Society (of which he was for some time Secretary), gone to Abinger well before his 75th birthday, he might well have written treatises on ancient fortifications and the art of flint-knapping.

THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES

The Church can be reached along the path through the five-barred gate near the Motte. It was built some time before 1086, partially destroyed by enemy action in 1944, and has been restored. There is a complete record of the incumbents since 1200, and since 1600 the Evelyn family have been patrons of the living. The present Rector is the Rev. Paul M.H. Kelly, M.A. Oxon. (Balliol)^{ix}.

THE VILLAGE STOCKS AND POUND

The Stocks will be found beyond the Church a short distance to the north. The Manor Pound can be seen from the top of the Motte. It is now in the gardens of Abinger Manor Cottage, which occupies the site of the old Manor barn and stable yard. Permission has been given to visitors to pass through the garden to look at it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

These notes were written for the visit on 23rd May, 1964, of the "Surrey" Branch of THE OXFORD SOCIETY by the Hon, Branch Secretary, F. Fraser Ross, M. A., B.Sc., F. R. I. C., M. Inst. F. (Merton). K.A. Ross, President of the O. U. Design. Society (St. Oath' s) drew the map, the Motte, and the illegible Gothic title (below).



The compilation would have been impossible but for the ready help and co-operation of Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Clarke and Mr. R. S. Clarke, M. A. (Christ Church).

Transcribed and set by Philip Rawlings, 2023. Additional comments in colour.

i G.C. Simpson, Qu. J.R.M.S. 1934 & 1957, quoted in "African Genesis" by Robert Ardrey (Collins, 1961)

ii Prof. Alexander Thom, "The Megalithic Unit of Length" J.Roy.Stat.Soc., 125, 2, p.243 (1962), also The New Scientist, 21, p.690 (12 March 1964)

iii Clarke and Rankine, "Excavations at Farnham, Surrey (1937-8)", Proc. Prehistoric Soc., 1939

iv Dr. L.S.B. Leakey, "Preliminary Excavations of a Mesolithic Site at Abinger Common", Res. Paper No.3 of the Surrey Archaeological Society. Also: "Mesolithic Surrey", The Spectator, 15 Dec. 1950

v As reported in the Daily Telegraph, 31 March 1964

vi <https://opendomesday.org/place/TQ1145/abinger/>

vii Brian Hope-Taylor, "Norman Castles", Scientific American, March 1958, p.42-48

viii Brian Hope-Taylor, "The Excavation of a Motte at Abinger in Surrey", Archaeological Journal, 61, p.15, Feb. 1952. Also: Chapter 10 of "Recent Archaeological Excavations in Britain" (edited by R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford; Routledge & Kegan Paul)

ix [Rector 1961-1965]