ASPECTS OF THE FOREST OF BERE FROM THE LATE IRON AGE TO THE MIDDLE AGES

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ABSTRACT

The extent of the medieval Royal Forest of Bere followed closely the limits of the tertiary sands and clays of the eastern extremity of the Hampshire Basin.

Since late Iron Age times, clearance and settlement have eroded the forest at varying rates according to existing population and economic pressures. Iron Age penetration of the forest appears to have been negligible and contrasts with the systematic exploitation of forest resources in Roman times. The greatest expansion of settlement and the consequent pattern of farms and hamlets which we see today began in Saxon times, the process being accelerated during the middle ages by assarting condoned and encouraged especially by the great ecclesiastical landlords.

Place-name and documentary evidence suggests that the practice of intercommoning livestock in the forest had a Saxon or earlier origin, but it is unlikely that transhumance, typical of the Weald of Kent and Sussex, was practised. Away from the open-field landscapes of the coastal and downland areas and subject to forest law, settlement and institutions developed along independent lines until enclosure in the later middle ages and disafforestation in 1810 put an end to these important differences. The date of the formation of the Royal Forest of Bere is uncertain, but this probably occurred in the late 12th or early 13th century.

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Forest of Bere, from its institution in Norman times until its disafforestation in 1810, appears to have undergone some changes in its extent, but from the later Middle Ages until the 19th century its bounds were probably much the same as those described in the perambulation of 1688 (Fig 1). It is possible to trace these bounds with a reasonable degree of accuracy, and they are found to correspond closely to a well-defined geological region lying from east to west between the Lavant and the Meon, and north

to south between the chalk outcrops of the South Downs and Portsdown. This region comprises the tertiary clays and sands of the eastern extremity of the Hampshire Basin. The London and Reading clays favour the growth of an Ash-Hazel-Oak woodland, and these heavy soils were the last to give way before clearance and settlement, whilst the lighter, though more acid, and poorer soils of the Bagshot and Bracklesham Beds yielded more readily to clearance, but provided soils of little agriculture value. Testimony to this fact would appear to be provided by the Norman-French place-name of Crookhorn, literally 'break-heart', for the settlement on the Bagshot Sands in Farlington parish.

Late Iron Age, or Belgic, settlement seems to have been restricted almost entirely to the chalk uplands of the South Downs and Portsdown, and to the fertile soils of the coastal plain. The economy was based on the cereal crops of wheat and barley and livestock consisting of cattle, sheep and pigs. The cattle and pigs may have been grazed entirely on the rough grassland and woodland in the vicinity of the settlements or a combination of this and the resources of the forest. The only indication of permanent occupation on the tertiary clays during the Iron Age is found at Horndean, on the northern edge of the Reading clays, where occupation began in the late Belgic period and continued into the early 4th century AD (Cunliffe 1961).

LOCAL LAND USE IN ROMAN TIMES

The south coast of Britain was one of the first areas to experience the effects of the Roman occupation, and the road from Chichester to
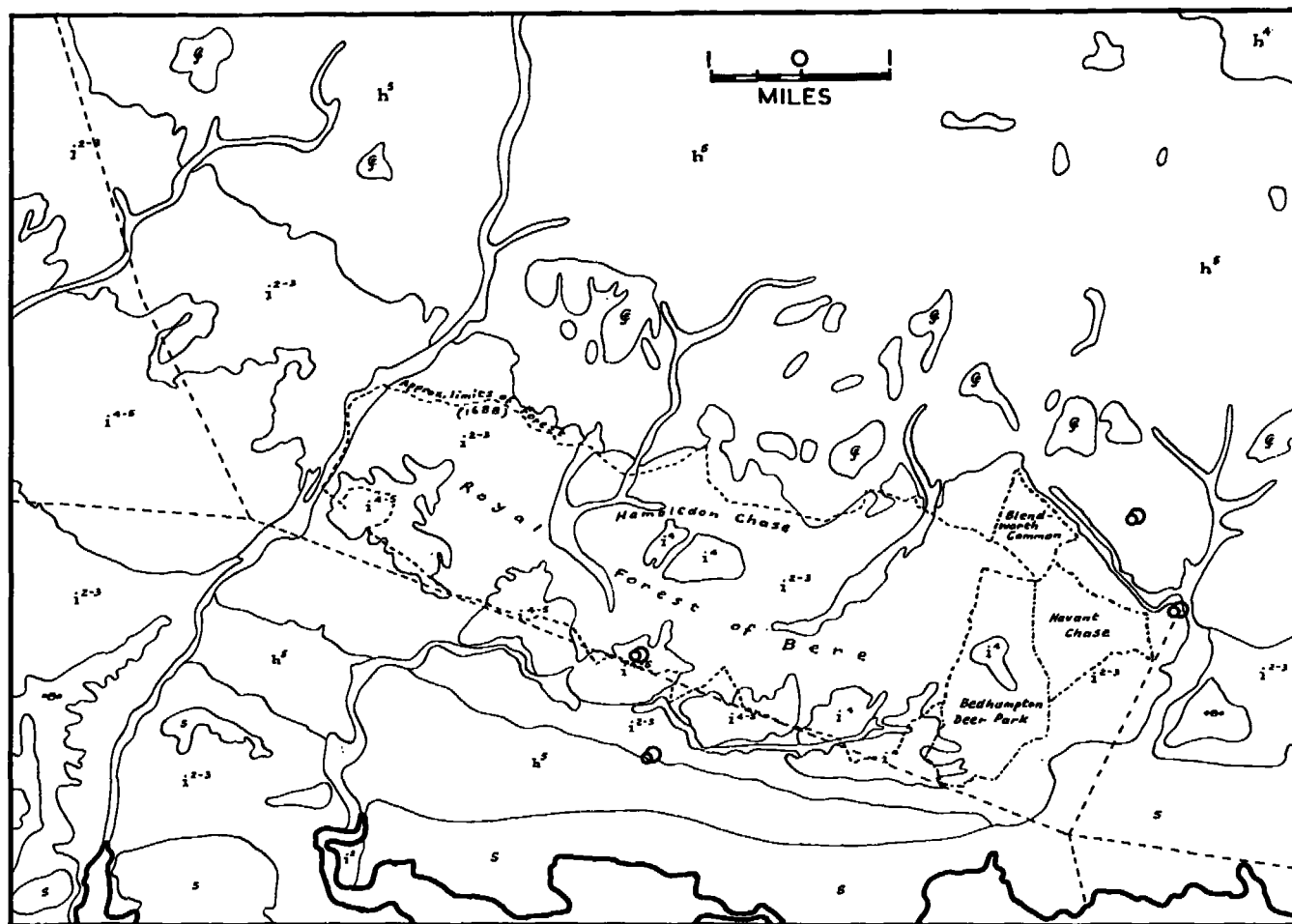
Fig 1. Map showing the extent of the Forest of Bere in 1688, and the geology of the region. Key: h^4 Upper Greensand, h^5 Chalk, i^2 Reading Beds, i^3 London Clay, i^4 Bagshot Sand and Pebbles, i^5 Bracklesham Beds, f Clay-with-Flints, s Valley Gravels, Brickearth and Alluvium, – –Roman road, ...Approx limits of Royal Forest in 1688, ⦵ Earthwork castle.

Bitterne is considered to have been built soon after the invasion (Soffe & Johnston 1974). The road appears never to have dropped entirely out of use, and its influence on the local settlement pattern may be traced into Saxon and early medieval times. Before O G S Crawford's discovery that the line of the road ran to the north of Portsdown, it had been assumed, quite reasonably, that west of Bedhampton it took to the crest of Portsdown. However, the Roman road is now known to have traversed the tertiary outcrop, making careful use of the extensive areas of the drier and lighter soils of the Bracklesham ˙and Bagshot Beds which form convenient 'stepping-stones' across the heavy London Clay. It is interesting and relevant to consider the state of this southern edge of the forest when the route was laid down. Had the forest already been substantially cleared, or did the road-builders drive the road through unbroken woodland?

An important characteristic of Roman land use in south-east Hampshire, was the extent to which local resources were exploited. From Havant, a local market centre on the Chichester – Bitterne road, a local road penetrated the eastern part of the forest, following the Lavant valley. This linked the pottery kilns on the Reading Clay at Rowlands Castle with their centre of distribution on the coastal plain. At Crookhorn close to the London Clay, bricks and tiles were being produced, while at the western edge of the forest near Wickham an iron furnace exploited the timber and ferruginous deposits of the London Clay. In addition to the industrial exploitation of the forest, some permanent settlement of the more accessible fringes of the clay lands occurred, no doubt leading to some further clearance of the surrounding woodlands.

Several estimates of the population of Roman Britain have been made, the most recent being as high as 5 or 6 millions (Frere 1969); a population not to be reached again until the years before the Black Death. The pressure of this population must have had its effect on the exploitation of marginal land, and there can be little doubt that some of the less attractive soils of the forest were worked for the first time during the Roman period. Archaeological evidence for the nature of rural settlement and its economic basis in the late 4th and early 5th centuries remains scarce and difficult to interpret (Applebaum 1972). A drastic decline in population in the countryside, and a withdrawal to defended and self-governing urban centres has been suggested, and Barry Cunliffe, following Martin Welch, provides a map of the Hampshire and Sussex coast showing possible enclaves held by Germanic mercenaries separated by areas administered by the sub-Roman population from urban centres. According to this view, the whole of the Forest of Bere is included within the mercenary-held enclave centred on the Roman fort at Portchester (Cunliffe 1973).

SAXON CONTINUITY

That the degree of continuity of occupation between the sub-Roman and Saxon periods necessary to preserve pre-Saxon place-names did exist is supported by the survival of several place-names of both Celtic and Latin origin. Creech, from British *crouco-*, 'a hill, barrow, or mound', is situated well within the forest, but little more than a mile from the Roman road. The Latin loan word *funta*, 'a spring', considered by Margaret Gelling to be a particularly important indicator of Roman to Saxon continuity (Gelling 1978), occurs in Boarhunt and Havant, both on the southern edge of the·tertiary clays.

Ideas about the nature of the Saxon settlement of southern England have changed considerably with the last twenty years, and it is now believed that the Saxons arrived initially as mercenary soldiers at the invitation of the Roman-British authorities, but with the weakening of Roman control there may have been a "political take-over of a disintegrating society rather than a mass replacement of population" (Taylor 1983). The effect this had in our area is uncertain, but the impression gained from what evidence there is, is of a gradual and peaceful transition from a sub-Roman to a Saxon society.
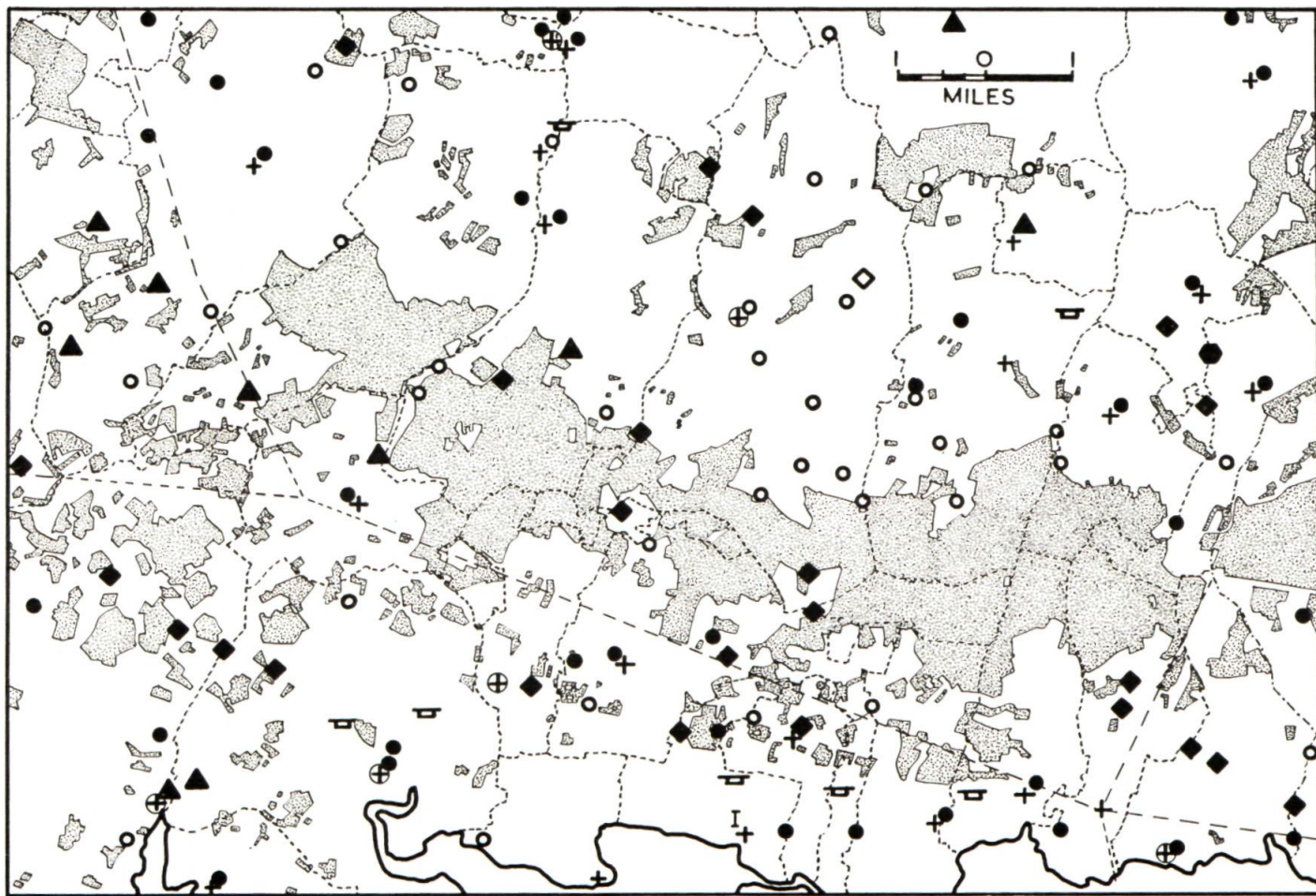
MILES

Fig 2.   Map of Anglo-Saxon south-east Hampshire. Key: I folk name, O nature name, ◆ -ley, ▲ -field, ● habitative name, + parish church, ⊕ parish church with Saxon features, ⊏⊐ Anglo-Saxon burial, ⬟ Saxon village, - - - parish boundary *c* 1810. The stippled areas represent woodland *c* 1810.

The old certainties about the origins of Saxon settlement based on place-name studies have also gone. The -*ingas* names are no longer considered to indicate the earliest settlement under a pioneer or warleader, but as John Dodgson has suggested, "it might turn out that quite ordinary native names such as *burna* 'a stream', *leah* 'a wood', *feld* 'open land' are the first to be used by settlers in a new land" (Dodgson 1966, quoted by Gelling 1974). Whatever the precise chronological significance of the *leah*, 'settlement in a woodland environment' and *feld* 'cleared or open land', their distribution (Fig 2) suggests that clearance and settlement had occurred well into the forest probably by mid-Saxon times (Gelling 1984).

WOODLAND PASTURE

The boundary clause of a 10th-century charter (Sawyer 1968, nos 430, 837) relating to an estate at Havant gives a little insight into physical conditions in the Saxon forest. The charter refers both to a road, 'haere path' leading north from the coastal plain into the forest, and to a ridgeway, 'hrycg wege', apparently leading south out of the forest. Within the forest are mentioned a clay hillock or copse 'lam hyrsthae', and two fenced or hedged enclosures, one of which is called the 'Iwwara Hagan', possibly the enclosure of the 'Yew-people'.

Unlike the extensive woodland pastures in the Weald of Kent and Sussex, the geographical Forest of Bere can never have been more than about 3 miles wide, and the boundaries of the parishes to the north and the south, no doubt following those of earlier estates, meet along its central axis. The pasturing of cattle and swine from the settlements within the forest must have been a custom established well before the Norman Conquest. There is little evidence for *detached* swine pastures in the Forest of Bere such as those mentioned in Domesday Book and Saxon Charters for Kent and Sussex, but the Thirteenth Report of the Commission on Crown Woods and Forests of 1792 lists those parishes

which were allowed to turn out into the Royal Forest horses, horned cattle and ringed swine at all times of the year, apparently without stint and without restriction on their movements (Munby 1985, 271–4). It is likely that the right of intercommoning in the forest was based on much earlier practice originating before it became subject to Forest Law. The only parishes not adjacent to the forest which possessed the right of common were Portsea and part of East Meon.

Domesday Book gives swine renders for some of the manors adjacent to, and partly within, the forest, while others, for example Soberton and Boarhunt, inexplicably received no income from pannage. The area of the Forest of Bere does not show up at all on Welldon Finn's map of Domesday woodland in Hampshire, although unlike the New Forest, which is also a virtually blank area on the map, the Forest of Bere was not under Forest Law in 1086 (Darby 1962). This may indicate that pannage in the forest was by custom free from manorial dues. Charles Wood in Soberton (SU 615 123) is probably the Charlewood of 1404, probably denoting a wood belonging communally to peasants (Smith 1956, *sub ceorl*). Menslands Pond in Hambledon and Menslands Lane, Meneland, Meniland, 14th century, may also refer to land under common ownership, i.e. *gemaennesland* (Tittensor 1978 on The Mens, Sussex).

Joan Thirsk (1984) believes that the medieval and later evidence for intercommoning of pasture and waste "is the residue of more extensive rights which were enjoyed from time immemorial, which the Anglo-Saxon and later Norman Kings and manorial lords curtailed, but could not altogether deny." If such were the case in the Forest of Bere, this would explain the occasional suggestions of intercommoning, although it need not imply transhumance or long-distance droving as practised in Sussex (Brandon 1974) and Kent (Witney 1976).

TYPES OF FOREST CLEARANCE

The circumstances and processes in the clearance and settlement of the forest will have

varied over time according to population pressure, economic factors, the status and ownership of the forest, social conditions and the means available to effect clearance. It would be incorrect, for example, to explain Saxon settlement of some forest areas in terms of 14th century assarting, although some aspects of the process may have features in common. The medieval process of assarting may be observed in operation in a document of 1336 (Goodman 1927) in which Adam of Orleton, Bishop of Winchester, grants two purprestures – illegal enclosures of the forest usually acknowledged upon payment of a fine and, or, an annual rent – at Hoe Moor in Hambledon to Robert of Hoo and his wife Lucy. Although considerably later than the end of our period, the grant is of interest because we can see the "two pieces of waste assarted, enclosed and brought into cultivation" and held for an annual rent. The tenancy includes the right of "common of pasture with all animals and flocks in all the waste of his [the Bishop's] manor". Although a relief is payable on the death of the tenant, the tenancy is hereditary and free of the services which distinguished villein tenure. The important characteristic of the assarter was his independence of the restrictions which copyhold tenure placed upon him, and freedom from the need to conform to the custom and practice which was part and parcel of the open field system of agriculture. If there is any aspect of medieval assarting relevant to the Saxon situation, it is probably this notion of relative independence possessed by the isolated forest dweller which the dweller in the established settlements to the north and south did not have.

The one-inch map of 1810 shows a forest landscape considerably eroded by clearance and scattered settlement, much of which, as we may deduce from the archaeological and place-name evidence, had been proceeding from Roman and Saxon times. Some of the place-names are a direct comment on the process of clearance, such as Mitcheland in Southwick (SU 627 098), probably from micel + land 'a large area of cleared land' in this context; Newlands in Southwick (SU 665 086) 'land newly reclaimed from waste'; and Stubbins in Bedhampton (SU 700 075) 'a place where trees have been stubbed or coppiced'. Place-name study does not, as yet, allow of chronological limits to be imposed upon the formation of particular names, but there is no reason to doubt that the examples given are of Saxon origin.

ROYAL FORESTS

There is a little evidence for hunting in the forest before the Norman Conquest. Two place-names appear to incorporate the element *hunta* 'a hunter'. Huntbourne in Soberton (SU 620 133) is probably 'hunter's stream' and Hontwyche in Droxford (SU 597 147) may be 'hunters dwelling' (Dr Richard Coates, pers comm).

We cannot be certain when the Forest of Bere became a Royal Forest, but there is no suggestion of this status in 1086. It has long been considered that the four earthwork castles at Place Wood (SU 636 092), Pinsley (SU 639 073), Motley Copse (SU 725 122) and Rowlands Castle (SU 734 106) were associated with the Royal Forest perhaps from its inception, and a possibly late 12th or early 13th century date for these is most likely. The effect of Forest Law would be to inhibit assarting, although the Bishop of Winchester's chases in Hambledon and Havant appear to have been exempt from this restriction. The extent to which ecclesiastical institutions were encouraging the clearance of forest during the middle ages was very considerable, and it has been estimated for example, that the Bishop of Winchester's manors of Wargrave (Berks) and Witney (Oxon) each grew at the expense of the surrounding woodland by some 1,000 acres in the first half of the 13th century and by almost 700 acres during the last half of the same century (Miller & Hatcher 1978).

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