

Ancient Stanmer

The woods, valleys and gentle slopes of Stanmer have over the centuries hidden the secrets of its ancient peoples. It is only in this century that historians and archaeologists have begun to search and find evidence for the past. Slowly and painstakingly the studies are beginning to create an image and chronology for the inhabitants of ancient Stanmer.

The earliest material evidence from the past is a collection of flint flakes and tools. The flint tools consisting of axes, scrapers, blades and other artifacts would have been used for clearing the slopes of the downs in this area. The light woodland compared favorably to the heavy Wealden clays for use as farmland. The Neolithic or New Stone age period started about 3500B.C. and the woods around Stanmer would have been removed during this period. The fields surrounding Stanmer abound with flint flakes, at Iron Square an adze has been found and at Marquee Brow a collection of waste flakes indicate the area where a stone age person looking up and down the Moulsecomb valley sat and manufactured some form of cutting tool.

It was about 2200B.C. that first signs of metal working are noted. During the early part of this new technology there was also a change in burial methods. The stone age long barrow burial mounds, where mass burials were interned, were replaced with individual burial mounds. Stanmer has several of these burial mounds in its precincts, including two pond barrows which are normally associated with female burials. Other burial mounds are known about from excavations conducted by Walter Gorton and Charlie Yeates. Barrows are known from Ditchling Field, Patcham Fawcett school and even inside Hollingbury hill-fort. Tegdown barrows are a Scheduled Monument, which means they are protected by law. Recent excavations along the Brighton bypass produced evidence of settlement along the south west side of Stanmer in Coldean wood. Another settlement is known in the same area at Varley Hall. Other houses of this time are known about going up into the woods at Coldean. The type of houses in the Bronze age and Iron Age consisted of round buildings with either thatched or turfed roofs. The roof was supported by sturdy beams, the walls were wattle and daub. Some had porches and they faced south east to catch the rays of the rising sun. Bronze age and Iron Age houses resembled the circular houses found in Africa today. The houses at Downsview on the outskirts of Stanmer were found to have survived for over 450 years.

Eastwick Barn west, of the Ditchling road had some of the most impressive Iron Age "Celtic" lynchets or field boundaries. Sadly these were destroyed by the Brighton bypass. Iron Age hill-forts are located at Hollingbury and Ditchling Beacon and Celtic fields are known about in the Hollingbury area. Within the precincts of Stanmer itself, excavations at Rocky Clump have produced storage pits, pottery and a loom weight probably dating to the late Iron Age. A large rubbish pit has some suggestion of possible ritual activity with the burial of a dog head. This particular site continued in occupation into the early second century A.D. and coin evidence suggest it was re-occupied during the 4th century. Whether Rocky Clump is a shrine or a small farmstead is still subject to debate and recent excavations are seeking the answers to this question.

Rocky Clump is also the main focus of Roman occupation. The copse of trees contained evidence of a building with extremely large post holes in the shape of a square. The excavators, Walter Gorton and Charlie Yeates interpret this configuration as suggestive of a temple precinct. Recent digging has uncovered a cobbled yard with surrounding post holes to the north of this building. Further work in this area will be required to reveal the whole picture. Fourth century pottery has been found at Marquee Brow and more recently sherds have been recovered near Grannys Belt. It was during the building of Coldean estate that other Iron Age and Roman features were found suggesting occupation in this small valley. Roman burials are known from the Patcham Fawcett school near Ladies Mile. It is not known whether any Roman villas lie within the parish of Stanmer, but it is unlikely judging from those locations of villas sites found nearby. Early Roman villas are sited close to the coastal zones while later ones are found north of the downs, as at Plumpton. The nearest known villa to Brighton is at Preston Park. In Stanmer there would have been very little change in the way people lived during either the Iron Age or Roman periods.

It is the Saxon period of Stanmer that remains the least known. Apart from ancient names, Stanmer (stoney pond), Moulsecoomb, and Patchway very little is known about occupation in Stanmer in this period. There is a charter of A.D.764 about the change of land ownership, from the Priory of St Pancras to the monks of South Mailing but little else. Early Saxon settlement tended to be on hill tops, progressing down the slopes with time. The Medieval farmstead at Patchway is a possible clue as to the location of a Saxon settlement, a spring does lie close to Piddingworth and it is perhaps in this direction that the original houses are still hidden? The Saxon house was a timber framed building with a thatched roof leaving very little evidence behind. It is suggested by the excavators of Rocky Clump that the burials found there are of Saxon dating. Although the chronological sequence suggested by the report entitled 'Rocky Clump, A Forgotten Shrine' is possible further hard archaeological evidence is required to confirm this hypothesis, investigations are currently underway to seek support for this idea.

The Medieval Stanmer is well documented. There was a small 13th century farm inside the enclosure at Patchway field, and other small farmsteads are suggested by pottery sherds eroding out of the soil in the vicinity of Flint Heap. However, further field work is required to identify the exact location of these places. The Medieval vicinity of the present day village is perhaps opposite the village shop in the paddock to the west. In this field house platforms and trackways can be observed. The type of house would have been timber, with wattle and daub walls and probably thatched roof. The village is mentioned in the Domesday book and in depth studies of this and subsequent periods have been published in the Sussex Archaeological Collections.

Stanmer lying in the folds of the south downs still has many secrets to reveal. Stanmer has for the past 6,000 years been the focus of farming activity, and this still continues today. The Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society are conducting further investigations into the origins and chronology of the parish. Hopefully in the not too distant future a greater insight into the archaeology and history of Stanmer may be forthcoming.

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