

From Prehistory to the Romans

An eminent archaeologist was walking across Holden's Firs on Boxing Day in 1969. He chanced upon the oldest man-made object ever found in Mortimer - a hand-axe chipped from flint about 200,000 years ago. This date is from that part of the Stone Age known as the lower Palaeolithic and is one of the earliest periods from which traces of human occupation are found in southern England. The hand-axe, which is now in Reading Museum, was probably dropped by its owner when hunting in the area. It is known as an Acheulian hand-axe because the industry of making stone tools of this sort was first studied by archaeologists at St. Acheul in the Somme Valley of northern France. The hand-axe was made by repeatedly striking a nodule of flint with another flint, to remove flakes until a more or less regular edge was produced on either face.

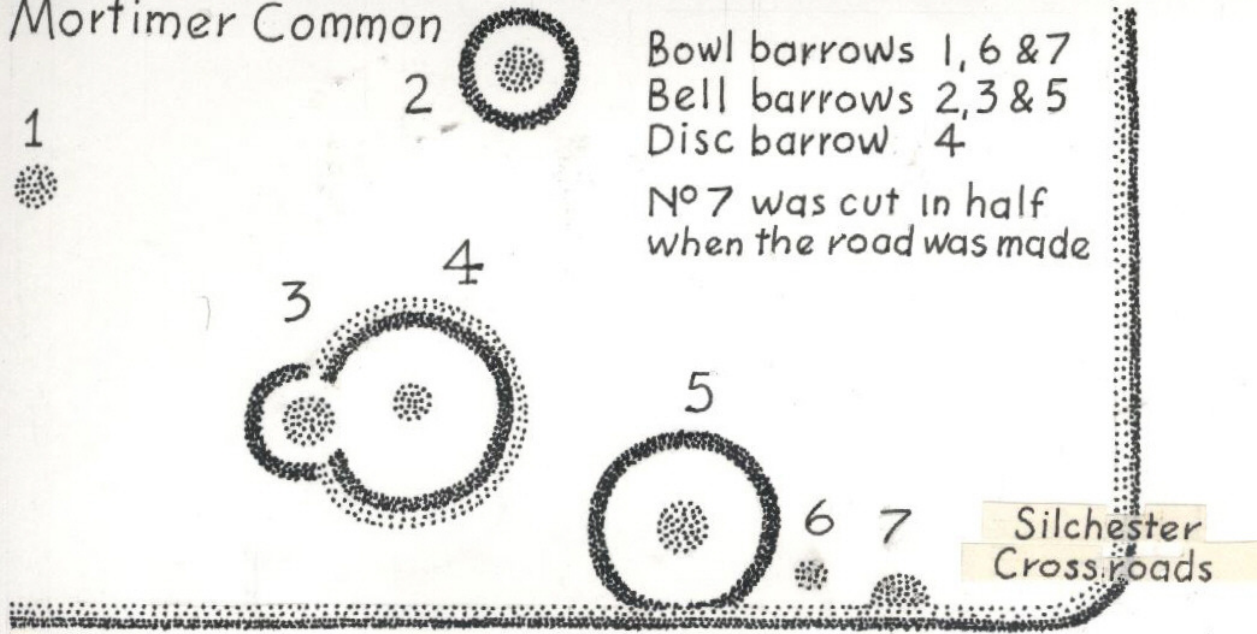


There have been a few other stray finds from prehistoric times in Mortimer, but the fact that they amount to only nine pieces of worked flint, a flint knife, two pieces of pottery and another axe suggest that very few, if any, people lived in Mortimer during that period.

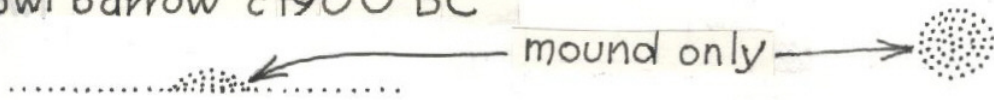
Mortimer does, however, have one prehistoric monument of national importance and that is the group of Bronze Age barrows in Holden's Firs and Stephens Firs. Although recently restored, these barrows have been seriously damaged by gravel extraction, earlier fir tree planting and, before that, ploughing. There were originally at least ten barrows in the group in which people from the Wessex culture were buried perhaps 3,500 years ago. It is characteristic of the Wessex culture that we know what they did with their dead, but we have very little evidence about how or where they lived. No grave goods survive from the Mortimer Common group. Probably the barrows were robbed in the 18th or 19th century.

There must have been considerable human activity in the Mortimer area during the late Iron Age and the Roman occupation of Britain. One of the major settlements in southern England at this time was Calleva Atrebatum, the capital of the tribe of the Atrebates, whose kings ruled a large part of Berkshire, Hampshire, Sussex and Surrey and the place we now know as Silchester. The Romans built their town on the site of an earlier settlement that extended beyond the area still enclosed by the Roman wall. The town's amphitheatre is outside the wall in Mortimer West End. Here the townspeople could have watched such events as gladiatorial combat, wrestling, bear-baiting, and cock-fights. The even crueller spectacles that Romans enjoyed, such as men fighting wild beasts to the death, are not thought to have taken place commonly in Britain. The amphitheatre was excavated in 1982, but so far no such extensive investigations have been made anywhere else beyond the boundaries of Calleva, that is beyond the city walls. Two pieces of Iron Age pottery have been recovered in Mortimer and a total of five Roman coins (four from the late third century and one from the early fourth century). Considering the proximity of Calleva, it is

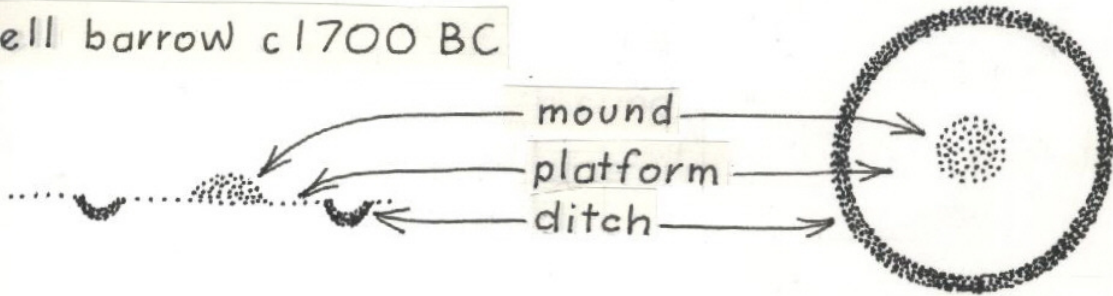
Plan of barrows on Holdens Firs at Mortimer Common



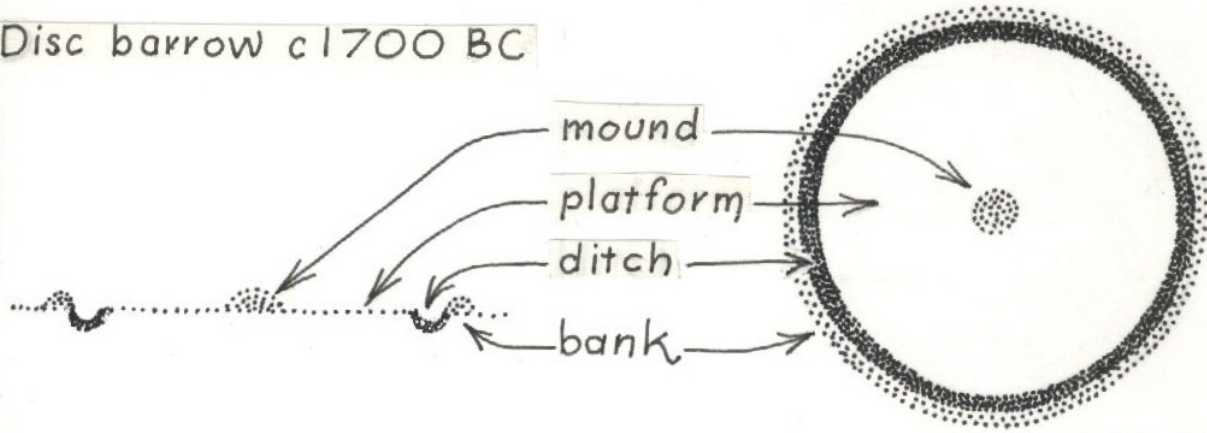
Bowl barrow c1900 BC



Bell barrow c1700 BC



Disc barrow c1700 BC



surprising how little has been found from this period in Mortimer. Even if we cannot point to any Roman habitation of Mortimer, there were certainly plenty of Romans travelling across the parish! At least two Roman roads cross Mortimer, one going north to Dorchester-on-Thames and the other west to Cirencester. A third, the Devil's Highway, marks most of the southern boundary of the parish and was part of the road from Calleva via Staines to London; it gave the village part of its name. Stratfield (or Stratfeld) means an area of open land crossed by a Roman road.

It has been suggested that areas with 'field' place names (such as Stratfield and Wokefield) were only brought into cultivation by the Anglo-Saxons and not earlier. If this is true it would explain why there is so little evidence of human occupation in Stratfield Mortimer before this time.