

The History in our Green Belt: are we about to lose it?

by Dr Kevin James

The Black Country is no longer black. Today, it's deep-red brick hues and varied shades of concrete-, steel- and tarmac-grey are punctuated by occasional islands and rivers of green. These much needed open spaces serve as havens and migratory corridors for all kinds of wildlife: birds of course, but also small mammals, bees, butterflies and other insects, as well as many species of plant. The benefits afforded to us humans are equally important. Trees and vegetation improve the quality of the air we breathe; and many people use these green spaces for cycling, walking the dog or just finding a few moments of peace and calm away from the tumult of urban living.

But most of these green areas possess another asset, something that is equally worthy of preservation: our history. Even sites that are devoid of buildings and other obvious signs of human occupation may contain a great deal of historical information within them. Lumps and bumps in a field, a kink in a road or path, or the course of a land boundary each represent the actions and choices of our ancestors. Why did they build in certain places? Why did their field boundaries curve this way or that? There were very good reasons at the time; and if we can interpret the clues before us we can gain an extraordinary insight into the lives of our forebears.

As many of our green spaces have escaped the ravages of recent centuries, they provide a window into a deeper past: the feudal arrangements of the medieval; the estate distribution and land management of the Anglo-Saxon period; and even the road and settlement patterns of the Roman and prehistoric.

The threat

A great deal of the Black Country's historic open space is currently designated as Green Belt and thus enjoys a certain level of protection against development. But this may be about to change.

In July 2017 the four Black Country planning authorities (i.e. Dudley, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Sandwell) issued a 'Call for Sites', in which landowners were able to register their willingness to sell their land for future development. This was the first phase of an exercise required by national Government as part of the Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment. It closed on 1st June this year, and the process is now entering its second phase, with a draft Black Country Plan scheduled for publication next year.

Given the fact that land with building potential is worth vastly (and I do mean vastly) more than the same area of 'green' agricultural fields, it is unsurprising that land-owners have been motivated en masse to submit their agricultural land for development. Such land includes much of the Black Country's Green Belt. You can see exactly which parts of it are now under threat by visiting <https://blackcountrycorestrategy.dudley.gov.uk/bccs/>, navigating to the 'Call for Sites' page and then clicking on the '**You can view the call for sites map here**' link near the bottom.

While it is alarming to see the vast swathes of Green Belt land that have been submitted, it is unlikely that all of these locations will ultimately be considered suitable for development. Nevertheless, it clearly demonstrates that the regions we once assumed were safe — our valued Green Belt — are again under threat. If our local authorities do remove Green Belt status for parts of this land, any development would still be subject to planning approval but, as the local authorities would already have earmarked these sites for building, it is a safe bet that planning applications would be looked upon favourably. Market forces would do the rest.

What might we lose?

If development of our Green Belt does go ahead, we would all lose a great deal more than just pretty views, recreational spaces and greenhouse-gas-absorbing trees (which, of course, would be bad

enough). Our protection against noise and pollution would be further eroded, wildlife habitats would be devastated, archaeological sites may be destroyed and important elements of our history and heritage would be lost forever. Everyone would feel the loss differently, and perhaps has different priorities. For me the obliteration of our historic landscape would be felt most acutely. No longer would it be possible to view the landscape first hand to appreciate the history of its lumps and bumps and myriad convolutions. No longer would it be possible to study its topography in relation to ancient hedge lines, tracks and field systems or to relate it to ancient land use.

A few years ago I wrote an article for *The Blackcountryman*¹ about my analysis of an Anglo-Saxon charter that listed several features in the landscape around Stourbridge. (If you are interested, further details of the research were also published elsewhere².) The results provided a lot of information about the area's history: which of today's roads were in use in the tenth century (and which ones were major, surfaced roads), the location of woodlands and fishponds, the extent of Oldswinford's and Pedmore's agricultural field systems, the boundaries of the estate that preceded the manors and parishes of Oldswinford and Pedmore, as well as an indication of the chronology of manorial origins and settlement in the area. I was able to undertake that study only because there had been limited development in the Green Belt around Stourbridge. It was possible for me to explore the landscape in some detail and attempt to match its various features to those described in the thousand-year-old charter. Had the modern landscape been heavily developed, none of this research would have been feasible. Much of the historical information it contained would have been lost.

Green Belt land is threatened all across the Black Country. There are about 230 endangered sites in total, but to give you a flavour of the history that is now under threat, I'll list just five areas of Green Belt near the south-west corner of the Black Country, the region with which I am most familiar. (Dudley Historic Environment Record³ numbers are quoted, where relevant, in square brackets.) Here, we could lose:

1. The Three Fields (Site 264)

This site lies adjacent to the ancient county boundary, a crucially important line which has been used over the centuries to delineate ancient parishes, civil parishes, manors, ecclesiastical dioceses, Kidderminster Rural Deanery, the Anglo-Saxon estate of Swinford, the Domesday hundred of Clent, the medieval Halfshire hundred as well as the Norman forest of Kinver⁴. It may also have marked part of the northern boundary of the 7th-9th century Hwiccan kingdom. The Three Fields site is located just south of a set of boundary dykes on Wollaston Ridge (and which may have extended, with a break, onto Kingswinford ridge⁵). The dykes are known to be over one thousand years old. There is evidence that the Wollaston dykes may have originally continued southwards into the Three Fields site, and there may still be sub-surface archaeology here relating to their construction or use. The Three Fields area was, most likely, also the location of an important landmark, the *Croked Apelte*, 'crooked apple-tree', referenced in the AD 1300 perambulation of the Royal Forest of Kinver.

2. Land opposite Clent View Road (Site 280)

The first-century Roman road connecting Droitwich (*Salinae*) to the various military encampments (and probable civilian *vicus*) at Greensforge passes through the site. At least one Roman villa or farmstead is known to have existed near this section of the road (a little further north, near Barratt's Coppice)⁶, and it is not inconceivable that there are other Roman deposits or even remnants of settlement in the threatened area as well. A deviation in the county boundary near High Lodge Court (named Iverley Farm in 1882) may indicate early settlement alongside the Roman road here. The deviation is recorded on a 1782 map of the area, but its curved, rather than straight-sided, nature suggests the settlement's boundaries ante-date the parliamentary enclosures. Given its extreme proximity to the Roman road, a Roman or sub-Roman origin is possible.

3. Stourbridge Golf Course and land south of Racecourse Lane (Sites 114, 339, 45 and 50)

Several historical features are known to exist here. The threatened area is traversed by an ancient trackway that was probably part of the Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon salt-way network. There is an indication of Bronze Age occupation in the east; and at an early date, the elevated land of Burys Hill and Iverley seems to have served as a link between Wychbury Hill fort and Ismere, the central place or moot (meeting) site of the people of *Husmeræ*⁷. (The latter was a province that occupied the Stour valley near Kidderminster and Wolverley, and perhaps extended across the region to Halesowen⁸. The name *Husmeræ* is a compound of

Old English with a Brittonic river name; and the territory, which may have pre-English roots, remained important enough to be referenced in a royal charter of 736 AD.)

Place-name evidence suggests the presence of a medieval open field system near Burys Hill. Ridge and furrow ploughing is known to have occurred nearby, north of Racecourse Lane [DHER 7657]. One or more early-medieval fortifications also appears to have existed on the high ground near the county boundary⁹. An Anglo-Saxon settlement known as Compton (*cumb tūn*) may be the same site that is visible in crop marks in the field named Light Acres [DHER 10602]¹⁰.

Near Ounty John Lane, a landscape feature, referenced by name in the tenth-century and often associated with Roman roads and important Anglo-Saxon sites, has provided toponymists with a *unique* insight into the usage and meaning of the widespread Old English place-name element *ofer*¹¹. Neolithic pit alignments have been observed as crop marks in Upper Flat Field, and Romano-British pottery sherd and Mesolithic and Bronze Age flint scatters have also been discovered in Chamber Field nearby [DHER 8531, 7047, 12523].

4. Land near Pedmore Hall at the base of Wychbury Hill (Sites 103 and 203)

These sites lie in a key location between the Iron Age fort on Wychbury hill and an ancient road (probably a salt-way) connecting Droitwich with Penkridge. The road (now the A491) and the fort may be intimately related, and the land between the two was probably well used from the Iron Age or earlier. Ring-ditch crop marks have been observed in Park Field, just south of Pedmore Hall [DHER 12285]. A second-century coin and jewellery hoard was found in the grounds of the Hall during the eighteenth century; and a ditched enclosure, also dating from the second century and accompanied by Romano-British finds, is located very close by. The area may have been occupied and farmed from the Roman right through the Anglo-Saxon period when the settlement of Pedmore became established (c600 AD). The position of Pedmore's parish church in relation to the A491, Pedmore Lane and Pedmore Hall Lane suggests that the road pattern here delineates an early (Anglo-Saxon) infield system¹².

5. Multiple parcels of land near Oldnall Farm, Foxcote Lane, Wynall Lane South and Lutley (Sites 178, 216, 295, 225, 218, 219, 271 and 319)

This area is very rich in archaeology and seems to have been farmed and otherwise occupied for millennia. Mesolithic flint scatters, dating from around 8000 to 5000 BCE, near a spring 200m north of Oldnall Road may represent some of the earliest occupation. Almost 6000 pieces of struck flint have been recovered. The source of the flint is not local; and cores were probably transported from elsewhere to be worked upon the high ground of Oldnall, probably in a seasonal camp¹³. (Mesolithic sites such as this are relatively rare in the West Midlands.) A lesser number of Neolithic flints, including arrowheads, have also been found here. A small ring-ditch observed in cropmarks north-east of Foxcote, near the head of Lutley Gutter, is a likely example of Bronze Age settlement [DHER 7639]. The pool and spring here may have had religious or ritual significance from prehistoric times onwards¹⁴, and various flint artefacts recovered from the pool indicate that the area was visited, if not occupied, from the Paleolithic through to the Bronze Age [DHER 1655, 12047]. There are also rectangular crop-marks north-east of Foxcote [DHER 7632] originating, most probably, from the sub-surface remains of a Romano-British settlement or farmstead. It is interesting that the curve in Foxcote Lane may have arisen to circumnavigate this settlement. There is evidence of another Romano-British farmstead in the fields north of Oldnall road, with some 350 pottery-sherd finds there [DHER 7629]¹⁵. A concentration of Romano-British pot sherds has also been found near Lutley Lane [DHER 7534]; and other sherds of a similar age have been discovered near Foxcote [DHER 7590], Lutley Gutter [DHER 7067] and Lutley itself [DHER 7802]. The latter is one of several sites where the distinctive undulations of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing can be observed [DHER 7617]. Site 216 near Oldnall Farm encompasses part of a deer park dating from the 13th century or earlier¹⁶.

As the entire region has clearly been farmed and occupied extensively for many centuries, the field-boundary and road pattern here is intrinsically valuable from the perspective of landscape archaeology. At least one of the field boundaries (on the southern edge of site 295) is over one thousand years old, having been referenced as *da ðic bufan foxcotun*, 'the dyke above Foxcote', in a mid-tenth century charter¹⁷. The landscape features, crop marks and the vast quantity of small finds mark out the whole of this region as historically very important. Most of this archaeology would be obliterated if developers' plans to build 1500 houses here are allowed to go ahead.

This does not constitute an exhaustive list of endangered archaeology by any means. Just around Stourbridge, there are other threatened sites (e.g. Wollaston Farm and Bromwich Lane) each encapsulating unique, perhaps valuable, information on the area's history. Indeed, even those sites discussed above probably contain additional archaeological and landscape evidence that I've not

listed. At the moment, we just don't know what that evidence might be; and we may never find out if these parts of our Green Belt are destroyed by development.

That is almost certainly the case for the Green Belt sites near you as well, wherever you live in the Black Country. It is disturbing to contemplate the landscape, the knowledge, the history — our heritage — that may be lost forever.

What can be done?

A few local groups are already fighting to preserve parts of our Green Belt. In Kingswinford the Friends of Ridgehill Woods (<https://friendsofridgehillwoods.com/>) is campaigning to prevent development of land there and to the south. In the Stourbridge area, the Save Stourbridge Green Belt campaign (<https://www.stourbridgegreenbelt.co.uk/>) is attempting to protect, amongst other sites, The Three Fields (site 264) by applying for a Local Green Space designation. If granted, this would provide an additional layer of protection should its Green Belt status be removed in the review. Other groups in the Black Country and around the wider region are also at work trying to save their local green spaces. Most have set up web sites, Facebook groups and Twitter feeds which can be found via Google.

But despite their selfless dedication, they can't do it alone. What all these groups need is public involvement and backing - even if it's only signing a petition. I'm not a natural campaigner by any means, but I was so shocked to discover the extent of potential Green Belt loss that I felt I had to help. I have also been very surprised indeed by the number of people that regularly use our green spaces yet have no idea that these sites may soon be built upon: our local authorities don't seem to be making much effort to publicise the region-wide threat of development.

Protecting the Green Belt is likely to be a long, drawn-out, multi-pronged process: petitions will need to be organised and things like letters of support (or objection) will need to be written at the appropriate time. Sheer weight of numbers will be influential at every stage. So, if you don't want to lose what is left of our landscape history, if you don't want your amenity space given over to yet more development in this already highly urbanised area, if you don't want to lose wildlife like the rare black foxes that currently inhabit one of the threatened sites, please do whatever you can to follow developments in your local campaigns and help save our valuable green spaces. Few people will benefit if the Black Country becomes an unbroken expanse of grey.

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