

Cycling through (Pre) History

17th August 2014

Our annual gathering of the velocipede section this year took us to the Marlborough Downs and a cross country tour through a largely Neolithic and Bronze Age landscape. Meeting at Barbury Castle we set off along the Ridgeway, our knobbly tyres following in the ancient footsteps of our ancestors.

After a mile or two we dropped off the Ridgeway and into the valley heading for the deserted medieval village of Richardson. Apart from lumps and bumps in the ground, little of Richardson remains above the surface. Nevertheless the field it occupies marks a strong contrast against the pristine grass fields of the stud next door. We had a pleasant chat to the tenant, who was evidently surprised to see cyclists regarding his field and clearly pleased to meet people with some enthusiasm for the historic value of his land.



Richardson DMV

The aforementioned stud had some equestrian event in progress that blocked our route (ironically the bridleway) through to Winterbourne Bassett so we had to backtrack slightly before continuing to our next site.

The stone circle just outside Winterbourne eluded us once again – despite be clearly marked on the OS map there are no stones to be seen today and we continued on to Windmill Hill. This was an exhilarating section of the route; along the edge of the fields with deep ruts to negotiate we put our mountain bikes through their paces concluding with an excellent rough and steep track up to Windmill Hill. We lingered on Windmill Hill for a while pondering the Bronze Age barrows, the differences between bowl and saucer barrows and the earlier Neolithic banks and ditches of the causewayed enclosure. It had become much more overgrown since the CAC Kids trip in July.



On Windmill Hill

The next section of the route was equally exciting, taking us down the track from Windmill Hill to the Longstones at Avebury Trusloe. A fast descent, more ruts and big muddy puddles tested our cycling skills as we approached our destination. For added atmosphere and effect we enjoyed a heavy rain shower making the surface more slippery.



This is why we brought mountain bikes!

The Longstones are a little off the usual Avebury trail, perhaps overshadowed by all that is Avebury. Anywhere else these stones would be major archaeological features in their own right. However, they are very much a part of the Avebury complex. Excavations in 2000 suggest that the larger of the stones (“Adam”) is the surviving part of a cove, whereas Eve belongs to the Beckhampton Avenue (see Pollard and Reynolds, 2002: Avebury, The Biography of a landscape).

On site we discussed the efforts required to erect these stones. Interestingly, “Adam” toppled over in 1911 and was re-erected a year later by Maud and Benjamin Cunnington. It took them four weeks,

and they finally gave up on using traction engines borrowed from the Great Western Railway, and completed the job using timber and wedges (and a little concrete).

We peddled on through Avebury, resisting the temptation of refreshment at the Red Lion, heading off through Overton and Fyfield Down and the sarsen fields – the source of all this Avebury monumentality. This was lovely riding over smooth grass and alongside and across the many pristine gallops, stretching like fairways into the distance. No horses to be seen to day – they must have all been at Winterbourne Bassett clogging up our bridleway!



Sarsens lurking in the long grass

We finally picked up a track taking us up a delightfully long yet gradual hill just to test out the quads, and back to Barbury Castle.

After 22 miles, almost all off road and just over four hours in the saddle, we enjoyed a relax and picnic up on this magnificent Iron Age hill fort. We met with some CAC Kids for a bit of an explore of the most impressive ramparts.

This was a splendid day out, there were no mechanical failures or punctures and only minor bumps and bruises to ourselves. As far as we are aware, only one person fell off their bike. We shall be arranging a second velocipede outing later in the year for those with a preference for road bikes.



CAC Kids picnic at Barbury Castle