

# PREHISTORIC SLOPE SOARING SITES

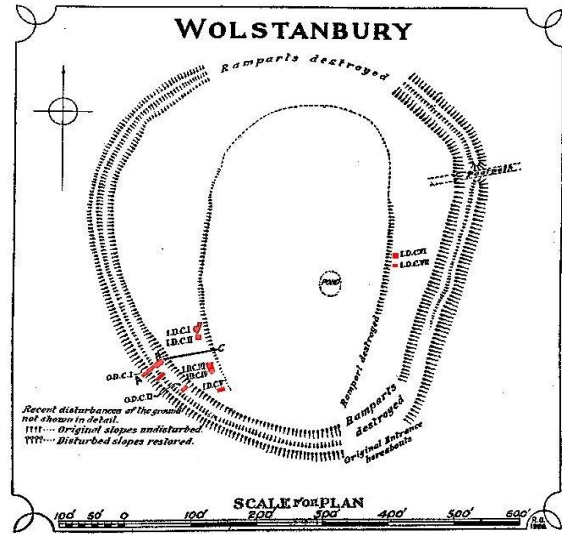
Many slope soaring sites have remarkable prehistoric features. Here is a summary for any slope soarers who are interested (admittedly many are not!)

The reason there are so many prehistoric remains on slope soaring spots is that Stone Age people often selected the same hilltops favoured by flyers as ideal areas for forts and burial mounds. In Stone Age times the lowlands were often densely forested while the hilltops were bare. So the hilltops were used for walkways that sometimes ran for a hundred miles or more. For instance the North Downs Way that passes flying sites such as **Colley Hill** and **Thurnham Castle Hill** was probably formed in Stone Age times, then used by the Romans, followed by the Saxons and later medieval Christian pilgrims.



*All that remains of prehistoric forts these days are grassy ramparts, but there used to be much more there*

Prehistoric forts were built on prominent hilltops for defensive reasons, but also for prehistoric partying (such as the summer solstice). An example is **Trundle Hill**, which has a Bronze Age enclosure and an older Stone Age fort within it. **Whitesheet Hill** has a large Bronze Age fort by its southwest slope. **Maiden Castle** is larger still – the world’s largest Bronze Age fort. These days flyers sometimes fly from the ramparts (a use the original builders probably never envisaged!) Many others exist, such as **Mount Caburn**, **Wolstonbury Hill**, **Ivinghoe Beacon**, **Butser Hill** and **Cissbury Ring**. Only recently, a 3000 year old Bronze Age village was discovered on **Itford Hill**.



*Victorian map of Wolstonbury Hill's Stone Age fort*

Most of these hilltop enclosures began life about 5600 years ago, when there seemed to be a craze for building them lasting several hundred years. The labour involved in shovelling the earth into walls and cutting down trees to create wooden palisades must have been immense – and all achieved with stone tools. Later, perhaps around 3500 years ago, bronze tools were developed and the forts were enlarged. When the Romans invaded they often turned these forts into military camps. Later the Saxons sometimes took over the Roman forts. Vikings even attacked a few. Now, more than a thousand years after the Vikings, the walls are often reduced to gentle grassy slopes – but still prominent enough to create lift to fly from.



*Cissbury Ring was built in the Stone Age and then occupied and adapted by the invading Roman army*

Archaeological digs within the forts have found burials, flint Stone Age tools, bronze weapons, Roman coins and Saxon iron objects such as belt buckles and occasionally daggers. Even today it is not uncommon for walkers (and slope soarers?) to find artefacts lying around, such as Stone Age flint tools and Roman arrowheads.

Even older than the forts are burial mounds. Long Barrows (long ridges with stone tombs at one end, up to 5800 years old) are reasonably common, and smaller Round Barrows (circular mounds, probably slightly younger) are even more common. They are marked on Ordnance Survey Maps as 'tumuli' (as the Romans called them). For instance there are many at **Firle Beacon** and **Bopeep Hill**. At Firle there is a Round Barrow that slope soarers routinely use to shelter behind – probably without ever realising what it is. Many of the mounds have hollows in the top where Victorian treasure hunters dug into them. **Whitesheet Hill** has many mounds that were all but destroyed by Victorians following the discovery of a couple of gold items there. At most sites treasure was seldom found: the tombs generally contained a skeleton (or skeletons) and some Stone Age tools and bone beads.



*Stone Age tomb at Firle Beacon*

A few slope soaring sites have ancient stone monuments nearby. The slopes of **Dartmoor** overlook several stone circles and the remains of Neolithic houses, built at the time when people first settled down and started farming rather than roaming and hunting. **Blue Bell Hill** has several Stone Age megaliths near its base. These are like smaller versions of Stonehenge – except older than Stonehenge.

Perhaps ancient Kent folk honed their construction skills locally and then headed west to build a bigger version!



*A precursor to Stonehenge at Blue Bell Hill*

The castle on **Thurnham Castle Hill** is around 800 years old and is probably built over older Roman foundations. Buried Roman treasure has been found nearby. It is likely that a wealthy Roman family buried their treasure and fled when the Saxons invaded, intending to return to collect it. Whatever happened to them, they never did.



*Thurnham Castle is roofless after 800 years*

At **Long Man Hill** there are several Round Barrows and at least one Long Barrow. There is evidence of a Stone Age fort at the peak of the hill.

The reason the track to the top of Long Man Hill is so sunken is that it was a walkway in prehistoric times and then a major route in Roman times. Over the millennia countless thousands of feet have worn it into the sunken track that causes so much turbulence for slope soarers today.

The Long Man himself is made from concrete blocks less than a century old.

However these concrete blocks were placed over an ancient Long Man that was probably there when the Romans arrived. This original prehistoric Long Man was somewhat different and may have represented a Bronze Age pagan deity.



*The Long Man has a long history, but possibly not as long as the tombs on the summit*

If the Stone Age is not old enough for you, some slope soaring areas have much older remains: dinosaurs. The **Isle of Wight** once had herds of Iguanodons roaming across it. Fragments of their bones can still be found on the beaches below the Isle of Wight's many slope soaring cliffs. The shoreline below **Beachy Head** is a world famous fossil hunting spot. The beaches on the **Isle of Sheppey** are also known for fossils. Some of the slope soaring spots in **Devon** overlook beaches where fossil dinosaurs were first discovered.



*A Stone Age tool can be hard to spot but this shows some of the signs: carefully sharpened edges, with the (originally black) flint turned white by millennia of contact with the chalky South Downs soil*

**Overall, there are too many prehistoric sites on slope soaring hills to list. In fact slope soaring sites with no prehistory are probably in the minority!**



*Bronze Age tools may be younger than Stone Age ones but they are rarer and more valuable*



*Well dressed for a bit of Neolithic slope soaring*



*Some Stone Age forts may have had houses a little like this in them*

*These slopes can be seen on the Google Map link at:*  
[www.slopehunter.co.uk](http://www.slopehunter.co.uk)

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