

# Stokenham

## Parish Heritage Appraisals

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



### Introduction

This is a brief account of the development of Stokenham parish from the earliest times to the present. It concentrates particularly on the changing patterns of landscape and settlement. It summarises the much more detailed study of the parish commissioned by South Hams District Council and written by local archaeologist Robert Waterhouse.

### Geology and Topography

The majority of the parish's underlying rocks are Devonian Slates (c.350 - 270 million years ago), with a few later intrusions of volcanic Diabase. These rocks have been eroded into a landscape of gently rolling hills which characterises this part of the South Hams. The southern end of the parish is much higher, being composed of hard, brittle Mica Schist, of the Devonian period or perhaps earlier. Here, jagged cliffs fall abruptly to the sea from a high, level plateau.

A long shingle beach runs down the eastern coast of the parish bordering Start Bay, retaining the large coastal lagoon of Slapton Ley, closed off from the sea in about 900 BC.

### Mesolithic 12000 BC - 4500 BC

Flint scatters at Slapton Castle and south of Frittiscombe, where a chert handaxe was found, provide evidence for hunter-gatherers in the valleys behind Slapton Ley, which would have been a tidal estuary then. Other scatters of flint tools suggest activity around the coast at the southern edge of the parish and other such sites in the area suggest seasonal settlement on the edge of the plateau, people making forays down to the coastline (further south then) to collect seafood and hunt for fish.

### Neolithic 4500 BC - 2300 BC

Flint scatters, some prolific and suggesting permanent settlement, have been found in the same areas as in the Mesolithic, suggesting that these areas continued to be important. Three polished stone axes have been found,

two from Frittiscombe, the third from Kellaton. The flint and volcanic greenstone these were made from were imported from Beer in East Devon and Callington in Cornwall respectively.

### Bronze Age 2300 BC - 700 BC

Transhumance, the practice of moving livestock between summer pastures on high ground and winter pastures in low-lying areas, is thought to have begun between Dartmoor and the South Devon coast during the Bronze Age. Evidence for this comes from the position of Bronze Age burial mounds, which are found scattered along these droveways, some in Stokenham Parish, which lie beside one of the most important routes, which passes from north to south down the centre of the parish, finishing on the coastal heath of Start Point.

Later in the Bronze Age, a major land division followed parts of this route, with east-west boundaries subdividing the landscape into a sequence of large regular blocks, two of which, between Beesands and Hallsands, were demarked by coaxial field systems of the same design as examples found on Dartmoor, which date to the Middle Bronze Age. It is therefore suggested that the transhumance routes connected seasonal pastures at either end, on the high ground of Dartmoor and on the coast.

Several possible settlement sites of this period have been identified from aerial photographs and the locations of early Bronze Age flint scatters. Some are within the coaxial field systems, others are outside. Frittiscombe and the valley slopes at the north end of the parish continued to be important, while Bronze Age pottery and a bronze axe of c.1500-1000 BC were found at Lannacombe, where a peat deposit containing tree stumps buried under the sand at Lannacombe Beach suggests that a marshy wooded valley once existed here, perhaps behind a sand-bank. A similar deposit at nearby Thurlestone dates from the late Bronze Age.

Other evidence for the Bronze Age landscape includes core samples taken from Slapton Ley, which show that the now-flooded valleys of the River Gara and its tributaries were tidal estuaries until c.900 BC. Pollen analysis shows



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that tree cover was decreasing from the Middle Bronze Age and grasses increasing, suggesting deforestation, possibly due to human activity.

Two concentric ditched enclosures and a barrow cemetery lie on the ridge between the France Farm and Frittiscombe valleys, where an important find of two late Bronze Age metal objects of a type often found in burials, was made recently. It is possible that this area, in addition to ample prehistoric settlement evidence, had a ritual significance. Other possible ritual sites, perhaps with stone settings, are suggested by placenames such as Dunstone, Durlstone and Longstone.

### Iron Age 700 BC - 50 AD

One known Iron Age site existed prior to the study - the hillfort of Slapton Castle. However, more recent study of aerial photographs showed several more enclosures probably of Iron Age date, clustered across the northern edge of the parish, many supported by "Berry" or "Ber" field names, which are Anglo-Saxon in origin and can mean 'fort'. A dated episode of silting of Slapton Ley in c.600 BC was recorded at Deer Bridge, just north of Slapton Castle. It may provide a date at which the land here was cleared of woodland for construction of some of these sites.

Similar enclosures include an important sequence of three ovoid enclosures which the ridge road from Stanborough to Start Point passes through. These may have been overnight stopping-off places for stock on this probable transhumance route, or were corrals for localised stock management. A particularly large one of nine acres was sited at Hollowcombe Head, just north of Start, and recorded by several 'castle' fieldnames, suggesting a former defensive appearance.

Later Iron Age and Romano-British concentric subrectangular enclosures in various parts of the parish were probably farmsteads. One particular one just south-west of Dunstone Cross is of considerable importance, as it respects one of the major east-west estate boundaries which may be Bronze Age in origin, showing it to predate the enclosure.

### Romano-British c.50 AD - 400 AD

Artefacts of the 1st-2nd century AD have been found just north and north-west of Stokenham village, suggesting the former site of a settlement.

### Dark Age & Anglo-Saxon c.400AD - c.950AD

This part of the South Hams was included in a major estate granted as Royal land to King Aethelwulf of the West Saxons in 846 AD. It remained part of the 'Royal Demesne' until the early 12th century. No clear evidence for exploitation by Anglo-Saxon settlers is available until the later 10th century, but several settlements in the parish

have ovoid enclosures centred on them, at Coleridge, Stokenham, Widdicombe, Dunstone, Kellaton and Beeson. Coleridge, Widdicombe and Dunstone were recorded as having existed before 1066. Ovoid enclosures can date from between the 5th and 13th centuries, perhaps representing the primary enclosures in a largely open landscape, created by Anglo-Saxon settlers from the mid-8th century onwards.

One enclosure at Stokenham developed more than the others. This is now suspected of having been the pre-1066 Manor of Chillington, due to its later importance. The site has produced evidence for an Early Christian site of the 5th-11th centuries, suggested by recent finds of slab-lined graves of this period within one of the ovoid enclosures, near the later church.

### Later Medieval c.950AD - c.1540AD

In the earlier part of this period, Stokenham lay within a portion of the 846 AD royal estate known as the Barony of Harberton, later being split again between the Manors of Harberton and Chillington. It was also partly within the Hundred (or local government district) of Coleridge. Although the Manor of Chillington had previously included what is now Blackawton parish to the north, the area which became the parish of Stokenham after the 12th century excluded this, but included the parishes of Chivelstone and Sherford, which were in turn split away in the 1530s.

The edges of the new parish followed land ownership and tenancy boundaries. It is of exceptional interest that many of these follow the probable prehistoric territorial boundaries: ownerships which continue in some cases to the present day.

The Domesday Book records the fact that in 1086 Chillington was a very rich manor. It was directly held by the King, with an annual income of £24, and had been held before 1066 by King Harold's mother Gytha. There were 91 tenants with land for 53 ploughs, and woodland 3 miles long by 1½ miles wide. The two other neighbouring manors of Dunstone and Coleridge were tiny by comparison. The astonishing number of 53 ploughs can only mean - that there were many settlements within the manor. Some of these could be the 28 settlements which were listed in a late 14th century survey, all but two of which are identifiable today.

Each of these settlements had open field systems associated with it. These were grouped into ferlings, which in Stokenham appear to have measured about 30 acres. They were located in long blocks, side by side in many locations such as Kernborough, where up to five blocks sharing common north-south boundaries lay to the north of the settlement, which appears to have developed within the field system after it was laid out.

These field systems were clearly planned on a large scale, and as this was a Royal Manor with ferlings being recorded as early as 1086, it may mean that they are of

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early Norman or even Saxon origin. Dunstone Manor just to the south was a separate holding in 1086 but was laid out in the same way.

Recent measurements and dating of silts in Slapton Ley detected a marked increase in siltation from the late 10th century until about 1275, presumably caused by soil erosion associated with the growth of arable farming and ploughing in large open fields. However, the rate of siltation then markedly decreased from 1275 to 1400 and it is thought that this resulted from the subdivision of the large open fields into much smaller enclosures by the construction of hedgebanks, which helped to reduce the soil run-off. Nevertheless, expansion of cultivation into former heathland continued, as did felling of the parish's woods, reduced from the small forest described in 1086 to 140 acres by 1309. At the extremities of the modern parish, high ground and coastal areas remained as heathland, indicated by large irregular fields with heath, moor, down and furze names.

The ovoid enclosures described above were probably corrals for stock which grazed the heaths; the cluster of enclosures at the probable Manor of Chillington being the largest and most complex, suggesting that it developed over a long period of time. In the early 12th century, this place was also known as Hurdstock, ie: the stockaded enclosure for cattle. The present name of Stokenham (Stock in Hamme in the 13th century), refers to the stockade's location in the area known to the Saxons and Normans as Hamm, and which we know as the South Hams. Similar-sized ovoid enclosures surround the Domesday Manor of Widdicombe, a little to the south.

In 1198, the King gave the Manor of Chillington to a nobleman, Sir Matthew Fitzherbert; who appears to have developed the manor over the next thirty years into a wealthy magnate's seat, with a new manor house and adjoining church at Stokenham, and a new 'planted town' a little to the west. This is now called Chillington, and it seems likely that the Manor of Chillington, formerly at Stokenham, had given its name to the new town. This town was probably intended to tap the fish trade, for which Start Bay was famous in the medieval and post-medieval periods, but being landlocked, it appears to have failed within a couple of hundred years, only a handful of tenants being recorded in a survey of 1309. It had a weekly market and fair, which may have been held near the church and manor at Stokenham, where many medieval coins have been found, perhaps dropped by traders.

A small portion of the estuary shore in the adjoining parish of South Pool was at that time part of Stokenham parish and is thought to have been used in the medieval period as a fish landing and processing site. Fish were salted and packed into barrels which were carried to market in Dartmouth and further afield. Herring Street at South Pool may record the route by which the barrels were carried back to Stokenham parish.

From the 14th century and possibly before, the parish developed an important regional industry. Slate was quarried in a broad band across the centre of the parish from Torcross to Molescombe, the band of rich blue slate continuing into South Pool and Charleton parishes. Roofing slates were exported from South Devon between the 14th and 16th centuries, going as far afield as Windsor Castle and Mont Saint Michel in Normandy.

Various religious establishments in the medieval parish included the central parish church of Stokenham, first recorded in the 13th century, but probably on an earlier site, and public chapels at Sherford, Chivelstone and Beesands. A private chapel to St Lawrence may have been sited within Stokenham Manor. A leper hospital was founded at Chillington by 1300, but was probably closed after leprosy died out in Europe in the 15th century. A Church House where the parishioners could celebrate religious festivals was built near Stokenham Church in the late 15th or early 16th century and is now a pub.

### Later Medieval c. 1540AD - c. 1750AD

This period saw the completion of enclosure of the open field systems, and enclosures of open heathland also continued. It also saw the fragmentation of the Manor of Stokenham, after which the parish remained largely unchanged until the 20th century.

In 1547, the deer park belonging to the Manor of Stokenham was disparked, and the 90 acre Hay Wood within it was felled: the last major area of woodland in the parish being lost.

The tenements (tenant farms) of the manor were sold in 1580 to their sitting tenants, while its demesne lands (directly farmed by the manor) were sold in 1585 to Edward Ameridith of Slapton, who sold them on to the Cary family in 1608. The manor house was abandoned, becoming a ruin by 1620.

Between 1690 and 1704, three new farms at Ireland, France and Gibraltar, were created by the Carys in the former coastal heathland north-east of Stokenham, and seem to have been named after naval and military victories between these dates. Reclamation of heathland continued, several sequential lines being visible in the field patterns between Kellaton and Start Point, forming intakes of large blocks of coastal heath.

The slate industry continued to grow, with large quarries at Torcross, Winslade and Molescombe. Slate mining also appears to have been attempted, although with little success.

Some of the larger houses constructed between 1500 and 1850 may have been funded by this, such as Molescombe, rebuilt in the late 17th century, and Widdicombe, reconstructed in 1725 in the Queen Anne style by Arthur Holdsworth.



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The fishing industry continued to grow, with for the first time, fishing villages growing up on the beaches from which the boats were launched. Many of these are first recorded in the 16th century, Torcross not being mentioned until 1601. The reason usually given for this move is security - piracy being a problem in the English Channel until then. The fishing villages on the coast between Start Point and Dartmouth were all linked by a lane, the Green Street, commemorated still by placenames such as Strete and Greenstraight.

Perhaps because of this movement of fishermen to the coast, the medieval planted town of Chillington continued to shrink, its market rights being given to Dodbrooke in the 17th century. The parish also became smaller, losing land to two neighbouring parishes created in 1530, centred on Sherford and Chivelstone. As a result of such change and shrinkage, the parish slowly became a largely agricultural one, with settlement and agricultural expansion slowing and fossilising.

### Early Modern c.1750AD - c.1900AD

This period was characterised by the slow desertion of many settlements, with smallholdings being swallowed up by larger farms. The tithe map of 1841 shows this period of change in progress, many small farms amalgamated, their landless buildings being demolished or turned into labourers' cottages. Farming too changed, with some estates such as Coleridge, Stokeley and Widdicombe following changes in agriculture by enlarging their fields or laying out new ones, although many such as Beeson had not carried this out by 1841; the difference between their field sizes and layout being clearly visible on the tithe map.

Such social changes encouraged religious change, several non-conformist chapels appearing in the parish by the 18th century. Several denominations including the Wesleyan Methodists and Bible Christians had chapels or meeting houses in the parish by the 19th century. Charitable institutions flourished, though in a small way. An almshouse or small hospital may have existed at Carehouse Cross, while schools at Batton and Stokenham were founded in the later 19th century.

### Modern c.1900AD - present

Three major landscape changes characterise the 20th century in Stokenham parish. Firstly, developments in agricultural machinery have made many field boundaries disappear, leaving huge open spaces, more suitable for combine harvesters and large tractors.

Secondly, large parts of the parish were requisitioned by the American Army in 1943-44 in order to practice for the Normandy Landings. This caused a considerable amount of alteration to the landscape, with hedges being removed, bombs destroying buildings, and military structures being introduced.

Thirdly, since the 1960s some settlements, notably along the Kingsbridge to Dartmouth road, have expanded up to three times their former size, with suburban housing developments.

### Further reading

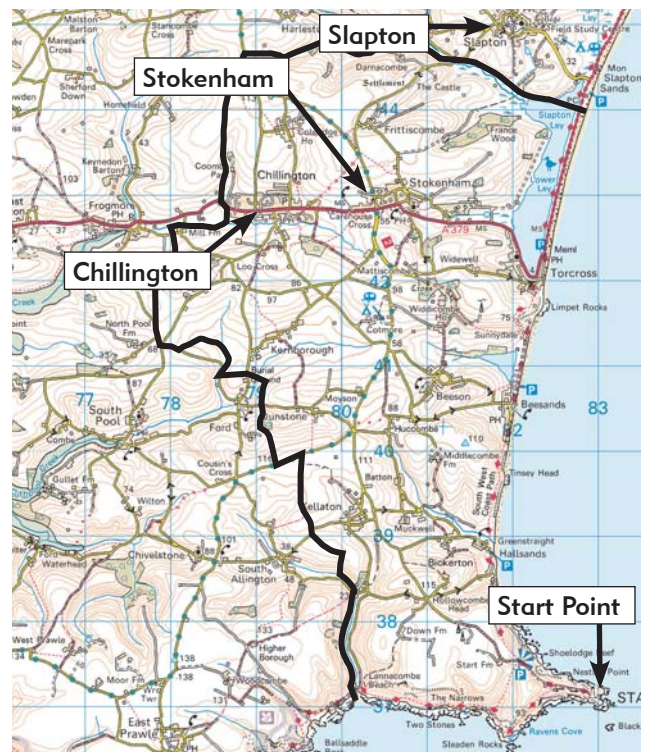
This is a summary of the detailed parish heritage appraisal for Stokenham parish commissioned by South Hams District Council and first published in 2002. Reference copies are held in local libraries.

This is one of a series of factsheets about the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which can be viewed on [www.southdevonaonb.org.uk](http://www.southdevonaonb.org.uk).

### Acknowledgements

This fact sheet was written by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist and architectural historian and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life. Thanks are also due to Win Scutt for some of the ideas on prehistoric fields and agriculture.

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Any enquiries to the  
South Devon AONB Unit,  
Follaton House, Totnes, TQ9 5NE or  
[enquiries@southdevonaonb.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@southdevonaonb.org.uk).