

Charleton

Parish Heritage Appraisal

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Introduction

This is a brief account of the development of Charleton 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 underlying rocks are Devonian slates (c.350 - 270 million years old), with a few later intrusions of volcanic Diabase. These rocks have been eroded into the landscape of gently rolling hills which characterises this part of the South Hams. Two bands of harder slates pass through the parish from east to west, both of which were quarried in the medieval and post-medieval periods. The southern edge of the parish is heavily indented by the Kingsbridge Estuary. The land is relatively low here, long tongues of land known as Hams projecting into the estuary, with shallow tidal creeks between them.

Neolithic 4500 BC - 2300 BC

The earliest evidence for human settlement in the parish comes in the form of scatters of flint tools and waste on the hilltop just north of Charleton village and includes a leaf-shaped arrowhead, which would have been used in hunting.

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. Bronze Age burial mounds known as round barrows are found scattered along the ridge roads which are believed to have been used as droveways in livestock movements from Dartmoor to the coast.

Both of the ridges which run across Charleton parish from north to south have evidence for burial mounds, with a probable linear barrow cemetery of up to 12 possible mounds scattered along the eastern ridge. The western ridge certainly had a drove road, which meets the eastern ridge just north of the parish, and from here one of the most important ridge roads in the area leads up to the hilltop site of Stanborough, where four droveways met.

Later in the Bronze Age, major land divisions followed parts of these ridge roads, long boundaries dividing the landscape into a sequence of large regular blocks, some of which on the coast were laid out as coaxial field systems of the same design as examples found on Dartmoor, dated to the Middle Bronze Age. It is therefore suggested that the transhumance routes connected seasonal pastures based on planned fields at either end, on the high ground of Dartmoor and on the coast.

Traces of a possible coaxial field system have been observed on aerial photographs just south of Charleton village. As Bronze Age burial mounds were normally located on open ground, it seems likely that those parts of the parish in which they were located were open heathland in the Bronze Age, only relatively small areas being laid out as field systems.

Pollen evidence from nearby Slapton Ley shows that tree cover was decreasing from the Middle Bronze Age and grasses increasing, suggesting deforestation, possibly due to human activity. It may be assumed that this was also the case in Charleton parish.

Iron Age 700 BC - c.50 AD

An Iron Age hilltop enclosure may have been located on the hill just north-east of the village, where field names record the name Creber. Ber may derive from the Anglo-Saxon word Bearu, meaning woodland, but on this hilltop site it is more likely to be from the word Burh, meaning a fortification. Its location on a possible transhumance route is matched by cropmarks of two subrectangular ditched enclosures, probably a farmstead of the late Iron Age or Romano-British period at the south end of the western ridge road, close to the head of Charleton Creek.



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Romano-British c.50 AD - 400 AD

The farmstead enclosures mentioned above may have continued in use throughout the Romano-British period, a similar site at Stoke Gabriel, excavated in the 1960s, still being occupied in the 4th century AD. As an ovoid settlement enclosure which may date to the early medieval period lay just to its north-east, settlement is likely to have been continuous in this vicinity from the late Iron Age right up to the present. It is likely that the possible coaxial field system to the east continued to be used.

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

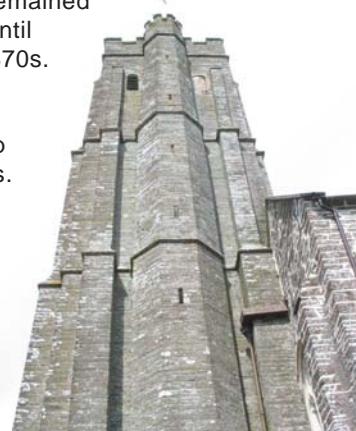
This part of the South Hams was included in a major estate granted as Royal land to King Aethelwulf of the West Saxons in 846 AD. It remained part of the 'Royal Demesne' until the early 12th century. Three later medieval settlements in the parish have traces of ovoid enclosures centred on them, at West Charleton, East Charleton and Croft, a farm to the south of West Charleton village. Only West Charleton is recorded as having existed before 1066. Enclosures of this type have been shown to be common between the 5th and 13th centuries in Devon and could represent the primary enclosures of Saxon settlers in a largely open landscape.

The Anglo-Saxons settled in Devon from the mid-8th century, so these enclosures might date back to then. They could contain a farmhouse and its buildings, but were often empty, perhaps being used as stock corrals. Only that at West Charleton clearly contains the church and manor house, although these are later.

Later Medieval c.950AD - c.1540AD

In the earlier part of this period, Charleton lay within a portion of the 846 AD royal estate known as the Barony of Harberton, and Domesday Book of 1086 records two estates, called Cherletona and Cheletona. These separate holdings became the parish of Charleton in the 12th or 13th century, but strangely remained isolated areas of land until reorganisation in the 1870s.

This was because the edges of parishes followed land ownership and tenancy boundaries. The current parish incorporates most of the southern estate of Cheletona, although its eastern edge which included half of the planned village of Frogmore, was given to Sherford Parish then.



The Domesday Book records the fact that in 1086 Cheletona had 5 hides of land, an extraordinarily large area considering the size of the estate, at a time when Domesday Book seldom noted the entire area of land in a manor - only those parts which were managed. It was directly held from the King by Juhel de Bretagne, who was Lord of Totnes.

Two hides of land were directly farmed by the Manor, and may have been enclosed by the intriguing concentric enclosures in the valley to the north-west of Charleton, which presumably represent three or more sequential reclamations from woodland or heath. These were probably used as an agricultural 'infield' and are similar to other late Saxon or early post-Conquest manor sites in the area, such as Stokenham and Widdicombe.

A second settlement almost certainly existed at East Charleton before 1086. This also has traces of an ovoid enclosure, and a possible elongated agricultural infield in the valley to the north. Domesday Book often failed to name smaller settlements within a manor, including them under the primary settlement.

The parish church of Charleton was first recorded in the 13th century, like many in the area, and lay immediately beside the manor house at Charleton Court, suggesting that it originated as a manorial chapel. Both were located inside the ovoid enclosure and may have been placed there by the Pypard family, who were Lords of the Manor of Charleton between c.1251 and 1376.

The two settlements of East and West Charleton had medieval open field systems of long narrow strips associated with them. These were grouped into ferlings, a unit of measurement which appears to have contained between 22 and 30 acres in the South Hams and constituted a single tenant farmer's holding. The tithe map of 1841 shows that ferlings were mostly located in large blocks, side by side, between East and West Charleton to the north and south of the road between the two, which may also date from the Norman period, linking the manor with the rich fishing grounds in Start Bay.

At least five blocks of ferlings sharing common north-south boundaries can be identified to the north of the road, with four to the south-east of East Charleton, reclaimed from a former area of heath called Frog Moor, from where Frogmore gets its name. A further two or three lie south of the road between East and West Charleton. These field systems are clearly planned on a large scale, and similar patterns have been observed in the adjoining parishes of Stokenham and South Pool. As Charleton was part of a Royal Manor, with ferlings being recorded as early as 1086, this may mean that they are of early Norman or even Saxon origin.

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

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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. It is highly likely that the deep deposits of mud in the Kingsbridge Estuary were also caused by this, both in the medieval period and in the 20th century, when removal of hedges has again returned the landscape to a very open form.

At the extremities of the parish, high ground and coastal areas were occupied by open heathland, indicated by large irregular fields with heath, moor, down and furze names. The long tongues of land between the creeks, projecting into the estuary, were heathland until the post-medieval period, perhaps because the salty environment discouraged the growing of crops. These tongues were known throughout the district as 'hams': the Saxon word hamm sometimes meaning an area of rough grazing land surrounded on three sides by water. This is also the origin of the Saxon name for the whole district, from which the current name of the South Hams derives. The names of many of these tongues of land have ham names, Wareham Point being the only named example in the parish, although Charleton Point was probably known as Charleton Ham in the past.

In the 12th or 13th century, a large planned village was laid out to the east of the West Charleton manorial enclosure, on either side of the road. This had a sequence of rectangular hedged plots parallel with each other, each of which was intended to contain a house. Precisely why Charleton was planned on such a large scale is uncertain, although the new town of Childdington 3km to the east was probably intended to tap the fish trade, for which Start Bay was famous in the medieval and post-medieval periods.

From the 14th century and possibly before, the parish developed an important regional industry. Slate was quarried in three broad bands across the parish, the northern band being used for building stone, while the southern two bands outcropped at Cleavehouse and Geese Quarries, which produced rich blue roofing and flooring slate from at least 1439. These bands of slate continue eastwards into South Pool and Stokenham parishes; many quarries, some of medieval origin, exploiting the veins as far east as Torcross. Dartmouth Castle was built in 1453 from Charleton Slate, while many tens of thousands of roofing slates were exported from South Devon between the 14th and 16th centuries, going as far afield as Windsor Castle and the Abbey of Mont Saint Michel in Normandy.

The fishing industry is not recorded as having been an important feature of the estuary shores, although salt pans are to be found on the beach near Wareham Point, and the placename element Ware may refer to fish weirs of stone or timber, which trapped fish on the falling tide.

Later Medieval & Post-Medieval c.1540AD - c.1750AD

The enclosure of the open field systems was probably completed by the 17th century, although expansion of

arable land into the heaths continued, a sequence of reclamation lines being evident in the field boundaries on Charleton and Wareham Points. Most of these probably date from between the 17th & 19th centuries, forming intakes of small areas, still occupied by quite large fields.

Cleavehouse and Geese Quarries grew larger, while other smaller attempts at quarrying were made elsewhere in the parish. It is noticeable that most of the quarries were on heathland: arable farming may not have been permitted to spread into these areas.

The money which quarrying brought in may have been responsible for the development of West Charleton manor house, which developed into a courtyard form in the 16th and 17th centuries. It certainly made use of the Bowcombe quarries, as good quality dressed slate slabs from here were used in the buildings' construction, and in 15th century additions to the church, notably the tower.

Early Modern c.1750AD - c.1900AD

This period was characterised by the slow desertion of many settlements, with smallholdings unchanged for centuries being swallowed up by larger farms. The tithe map of 1841 shows this period of change in progress, notably in West Charleton village, where many small farms were amalgamated, their buildings being demolished or turned into labourers' cottages. There were many landless cottages in the parish at this time, five farms being lost in East Charleton between 1841 and 1886.

Between 1725 and 1850, the Parker family of Boringdon, near Plympton, owned the manor.

In 1820, they reclaimed Charleton Creek from the estuary by the construction of a large stone faced earth bank across its mouth. The reclaimed area was used for rough grazing.

A turnpike or toll road was constructed from Kingsbridge to Dartmouth as part of these improvements, the fine six-arched bridge across Bowcombe Creek being engineered by James Rendel in the 1830s. This connected West Charleton directly with Kingsbridge for the first time.

The slate industry continued to be important until cheaper Welsh slate imports via the railways forced the quarries' closure in the mid-19th century. Cleavehouse Quarry had been developed in the 18th century by the construction of a quay beside the estuary. Several limekilns were constructed around the estuary, some in Charleton parish. Coal and limestone were brought by barge and burnt in the kilns, the resulting quicklime being spread on the fields to improve crop yields.

Modern c.1900AD - present

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

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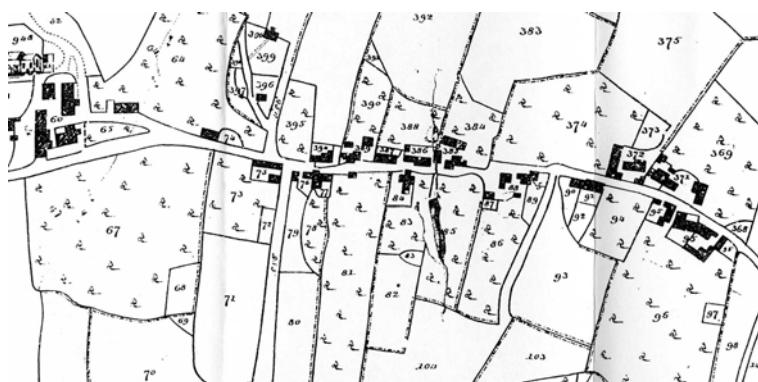
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Secondly, since the 1960s, West Charleton has expanded up to three times its former population, with suburban housing developments on the north and west, alongside the main road.

Happily, despite these major changes, the parish has more woodland than at any time in the last thousand years, as a result of the natural regeneration of former quarries, and a later 19th century plantation alongside Bowcombe Creek.



West Charleton Tithe map extract 1841

Further reading

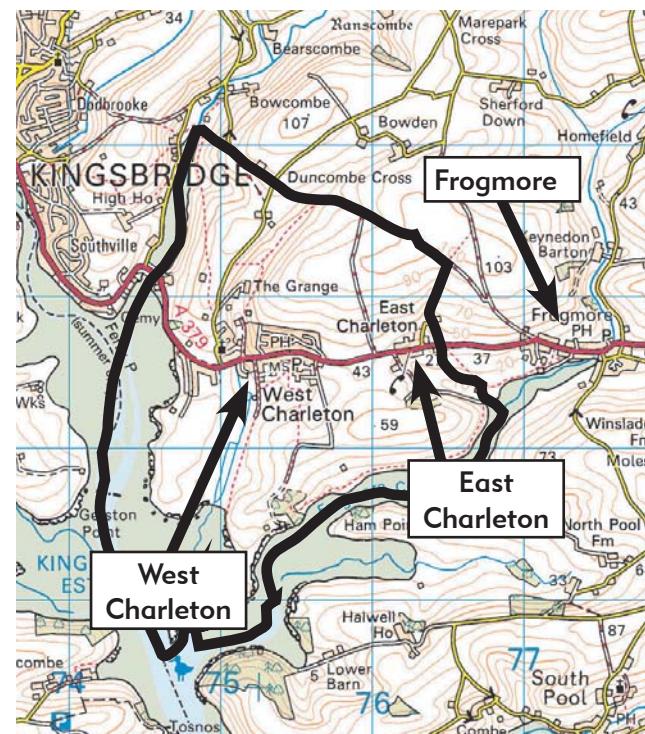
This is a summary of the detailed parish heritage appraisal for Charleton parish commissioned by South Hams District Council and first published in 2002. Reference copies are held in local libraries.

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.

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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