

# Slapton

## Parish Heritage Appraisals

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



### Introduction

This is a brief account of the development of Slapton 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 old), with a few later intrusions of volcanic Diabase. These rocks have been eroded into the landscape of gently rolling hills and deep valleys which characterises this part of the South Hams. The parish rises gently from the coastal lagoon of Slapton Ley. A level spur just east of Slapton is formed by a pocket of Permian breccia (a conglomerate rock composed of solidified sands and gravels), dating from between 225 and 180 million years ago. A long shingle bank encloses Slapton Ley, running down the eastern side of the parish bordering Start Bay. The shingle bank finally closed off the former estuary from the sea in about 900 BC.

### Neolithic 4500 BC - 2300 BC

Flint scatters have been found in fields around Slapton village, suggesting early settlement in this area, supported by later activity here in the Bronze Age. A polished greenstone axe was found at Loworthy Farm, and would have been used for tree felling and woodworking.

### 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 location of Bronze Age burial mounds, which are found scattered along these routes, some in Slapton Parish. One of the most

important ridge roads which would have been used as a droveway in transhumance stock movements, passes down the centre of the parish, finishing on the coastal heath east of Slapton village.

Later in the Bronze Age, major land divisions followed parts of this drove route, with east-west boundaries dividing the landscape on the east side of the South Hams into a sequence of large regular blocks. Several of these were divided into coaxial field systems of the same design as examples found on Dartmoor, which date from 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. Ovoid enclosures, possibly corrals for protecting stock, have been found on the lines of these routes in Slapton village and just north of Higher Green Cross, both of which were used in the Bronze Age.

The remains of coaxial field systems can still be seen in the existing field patterns, mostly on an east-west alignment, crucially respecting the line of the drove route and areas of former open heath associated with it. These areas are to the west of Higher Green Cross, and between Heathfield Farm and Battle Ford. A large coaxial field system can still be seen east of the parish between Strete village and Slapton Ley. Cropmarks of later Iron Age or Romano-British enclosures lie within this field system.

Several other possible settlement sites of this period have been identified from aerial photographs and the locations of early Bronze Age flint scatters, some within the coaxial field systems, others outside, such as one just north of Higher Green Cross, which lies on the drove route described above, on a later Iron Age settlement enclosure, suggesting continuity of settlement.

Silt samples taken from Slapton Ley show that the now-flooded valleys of the River Gara and its tributaries were tidal estuaries until c.900 BC. Pollen analysis shows that tree cover was decreasing from the Middle Bronze Age and grasses increasing, suggesting deforestation, possibly due to human activity. After c.900 BC, much willow and alder pollen appeared, suggesting that the fringes of the lagoon were similar to today.



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A Bronze Age ritual landscape was located between Slapton village and the sea. A large cremation urn, was discovered in 1830 in Slapton Churchyard, within the ovoid enclosure, whilst several more cremations, some in urns were discovered just east of Slapton Ley Field Centre in 1927. Circular cropmarks on a south-west to north-east alignment have been seen on aerial photographs in this area, and may represent a linear barrow cemetery.

Several fields here are called Longstones, suggesting the former locations of standing stones, possibly from a Bronze Age ritual monument such as a stone circle, stone row or menhir.

This area can be seen for some distance from all directions and is flat, unlike the surrounding land. Such unusual locations were often chosen as the sites of prehistoric ritual monuments, which needed wide views to see astronomical alignments.

Another ritual landscape with concentric ditched enclosures and a barrow cemetery lies near Frittiscombe, 1.5km to the south-west in Stokenham parish, where rare late Bronze Age ritual metal objects have been found.

### Iron Age 700 BC - 50 AD

A defended hilltop settlement just north of Higher Green Cross was enclosed with a substantial bank and ditch which probably dates from the earlier Iron Age, perhaps about 600-300 BC. Finds of egg-shaped pebbles just behind its ramparts suggest slingstone dumps, often found behind the ramparts of Iron Age hillforts, but rare on a site as small as this. A subrectangular ditched enclosure which was superimposed on the site may have been a later Iron Age or Romano-British farmstead.

Slingstone dumps are also known from Slapton Castle, in Stokenham parish just to the south. A dated episode of silting in Slapton Ley c.600 BC may provide a date at which the land here was cleared of woodland for construction of this and other settlement sites in the locality.

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

Only one artefact of this period has been found in Slapton parish - a Roman coin of Gallienus who reigned 253-268 AD, from Slapton village. A small rectangular ditched enclosure overlying the Iron Age site near Higher Green Cross, may have enclosed a Romano-British farmstead.

### 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. Parts of it remained in Crown

ownership until the early 12th century. No clear evidence for exploitation by Anglo-Saxon or earlier settlers is available until the later 10th century, although the droveway and the ovoid enclosure it led to in Slapton village, could have been used during this period.

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

In the earlier part of this period, Slapton lay within a portion of the 846 AD royal estate known as the Barony of Harberton. It was also partly within the Hundred (or local government district) of Coleridge. The only settlement in the parish known to be of Anglo-Saxon origin is Slapton, which was owned by the Bishop of Exeter in 1086 and let to Baldwin de Redvers, Sheriff of Devon, its 6 hides paying £12 per annum. It is probable that the Slapton estate was given to the Diocese of Crediton (later Exeter) by King Athelstan in about 925 AD, as a foundation gift.

This meant that the tithes which were normally payable to the parish priest, were paid direct to Exeter Cathedral, leaving the parish without support for a priest.

The parish system seems to have been created in the 12th or 13th century in this part of Devon. The edges of the new parishes followed land ownership and tenancy boundaries. It is of exceptional interest that many of these follow probable prehistoric and in this case, late Saxon estate boundaries: ownerships which continue in some cases to the present day.

After the Norman Conquest, several new farming settlements were created. As the surnames of many people living in the parish in the 14th century were related to the names of their farms, the 1332 Lay Subsidy Roll is very important, recording Hansel, Buckland, Blackland, Alston, Start, Dittiscombe, Clovelly, Torr, Molton, Loworthy, and Coltscombe.

Pittaford, Pollardscombe, Heathfield and Dearswell may also have existed at that time, but are not represented by surnames. A later tax list of 1524 recorded Badworthy (uncertain, but possibly Pollardscombe), Merrifield, Millcombe (now in Blackawton) and Redcliff (possibly just south of Slapton village) as surnames.

Many of these places seem to have colonised areas which were previously open heathland. This process is known as 'assarting' and can also include clearance of woodland for the same reason, which may be the origin of valley settlements such as Clovelly and Hansel.

Slow advances of heathland enclosure made field patterns like tree rings, moving outward from the farm into the heathland or woodland. This can be seen on the hilltop north of Dearswell, while later encroachment onto an area of heath is visible as a broad oval area with Lower & Higher Heathfield at its edges and Dittiscombe Cross at its centre.

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Transhumance seems to have continued, large parts of the parish being used to overwinter animals, using enclosed areas around farmsteads with access droves down to woodland in the valleys. These include Higher Coltscombe, whose land gave direct connection to woodland in the Start valley, and Dearswell, where two parallel sided droves are visible in the field pattern, giving access to woodland in the valley north of Buckland and eastward to the Gara valley, while Wood Lane gave similar access from Slapton village to Slapton Wood.

Several 'Run' field names record the locations of seasonal pastures in the medieval period, and lie directly off the droeway between Lower Green Cross and Pool, and south-west of Alston.

All the farms had open field systems associated with them. Some open field strips were grouped into ferlings, each of which was a single holding for a tenant farmer, of 15-20 acres. Three or more blocks of ferlings were located north-east of Slapton village, surrounding an area of enclosed pasture for plough animals. The majority of open field strips in the parish were unplanned (although measured as ferlings), being fitted into the existing prehistoric field systems, or scattered randomly across the heathland towards the north end of the parish.

In 1307 there were 24 ferlings, rising to 46 by 1356. This is a dramatic rise, indicating that development of the land was rapid in the 14th century. Little change took place after then, as 43 farmsteads are listed in a survey of 1760, indicating that the agricultural landscape we see today, and therefore the distribution of land, seems largely to have been formed by the 14th century.

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. At the extremities of the parish, high ground and coastal areas remained as heathland until later. Large irregular fields with heath, moor, down and furze names show that these areas remained open for a long time.

The parish church of Slapton, first recorded in the 13th century, was located inside the possibly prehistoric ovoid enclosure, which could have had a previous Christian presence. In 1359-62, the Lord of the Manor Sir Guy de Bryan founded a small collegiate chantry on the north side of the village, where priests and clerks could sing masses and pray for his soul and that of his family 'for ever'. This grand building had a chapel, with a cloister alongside, flanked by buildings which included a chapter house. Few remains survived the chantry's dissolution in 1547 other

than the tall tower, once topped with a spire, which still dominates the village.

A church house was built in the late 15th or early 16th century just east of the church, where the parishioners could celebrate religious and other festivals. In the 1530s, the way in which parish priests were funded changed, and new areas of land were given over, often by the Lord of the Manor, as glebe land, being let to tenants to provide the parish priest with a stipend on which he could live. The area of former heathland on the droeway between Buckland Cross and Lower Green Cross was enclosed for this purpose, and remained glebe land until the 19th century.

A large defensive gatehouse flanked by two towers with a drawbridge across Slapton Ley, defended the approach from the sea at Slapton Bridge, and is shown on a map of 1540, although no trace survives. This is thought to have been constructed in 1359-62, to protect the chantry and manor house at Slapton from pirates, which were a major problem in the English Channel during the medieval period. The manor house was at Pool Farm, and is recorded as having been of considerable status in 1307, when the manor had: 'a capital messuage with a large garden, 100 acres of arable, 6 acres of meadow, several plots of pasture totalling 20 acres, 5 acres of wood, 1 dovecote, a lake fishery, a water mill, a fulling mill and a sea fishery. There are 24 villeins who owe labour service to their lord and 10 cottars who pay a yearly rent of 1 shilling each'.

One possible source of the wealth which created the mansion at Pool was the woollen industry. In 1307 the manor had two mills, one for grinding corn; the other for fulling. Fulling is a process which involves beating woollen cloth to flatten out the weave and supports the suggestion that sheep farming was important in Slapton parish between the 11th and 14th centuries.

It is not certain where these mills were located, although the corn mill could have been on or near the site of the later Deerbridge Mill. Other water powered mills were located along the Gara valley at Higher and Lower North Mill at Hansel and Gara Mill. Several field names which probably refer to the cloth industry include Nap/Knapp - knapping having the same meaning as fulling; and Rickers, possibly where cloth was hung on racks to dry. Winding Down may have been where wool was spun into yarn, and cloth bleached at Calico Meadow, while flax was grown at Flax Fields.

A windmill, probably for grinding corn, is recorded in the field name Mill Park, just south of Buckland.

Fishing was a major industry from the medieval period onwards. The customs of the manor of Stokenham, recorded in 1309, state that some of the manorial tenants were to 'station themselves, each day between Candlemas and Hockday (February 2nd to the second Tuesday after

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Easter), by three rocks on the sea shore, nine of them by each rock, with their own boats and tackle and at their own charges, to take mullet. The lord has the option of taking 1/3 of the fish or 1/3 of the price if it is sold. In like manner the lord is entitled to buy every porpoise his men take at 1 shilling apiece; and all salmon. Every season if the lord buys fish in the manor, he is to have 8 plaice for a penny, 1 skate for a penny, and 12 pennyworth of conger for 11 pence'.

Both Stokenham and Slapton manors used Slapton Ley as a fresh water fish-pool. In addition to fish, a swannery is mentioned in 1309 as belonging to Stokenham manor.

The fishing communities 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. Fish were salted and packed into barrels which were carried to market in Dartmouth and further afield. A salt pan is mentioned as having been located in Slapton manor in 1509, when repairs to it were carried out. It is likely that this was at or near Slapton Cellars (see below).

Rabbit warrens were a common possession of manors and supplied fresh meat all year round. A warren was suggested by the field name Coney Park, near Buckland Farm, while parts of Slapton Sands were used as a rabbit warren in the 15th century.

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

This period saw the completion of the subdivision and enclosure of the open field systems, although expansion of the enclosed lands continued into heathland at the north end of the parish. These areas are still occupied by quite large fields, enclosing a mixture of rough pasture and arable. Woodland continued to be lost in the Gara valley.

The manorial buildings at Pool continued to develop, owned by the Ameridith family in the 16th and 17th century. By 1674 it had probably grown to a courtyard mansion with 16 hearths. In the later 17th or early 18th century, the mansion was described as 'a house charged to 18 chimneys which was almost come to ruin'. A part of the house containing 12 of these chimneys was taken down shortly afterwards; the remainder seems to have been demolished in about 1800.

The woollen and corn milling industries continued to flourish into the 18th and 19th centuries; the mills at Deerbridge and Hansel being in existence throughout this period, although the windmill may have gone out of use by the 18th century.

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Documentary evidence for fishing villages in south Devon suggests that the creation of fishing settlements on the sea shore did not take place until the late 15th or early 16th century. This may have been due to the activities of French and Spanish pirates, who were a constant source of harassment from the 15th to the 17th centuries. Fishermen therefore only had stores and boat sheds beside the sea, while living inland in the farming settlements. Fishing was a secondary business to farming, and it was not until the late 15th century that the rising population meant that non-inheriting sons of farmers could go into the fishing industry full time. It was at that point that the clusters of boat sheds became regularised as settlements. Just such a settlement was located at Slapton Cellars opposite Slapton Bridge by the early 18th century and may have been in existence by 1509.

### 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 and their buildings lost. The tithe map of 1841 shows this period of change in progress, many small farms being amalgamated, their landless buildings being demolished or turned into labourers' cottages.

Such social changes were accompanied by religious change, several non-conformist chapels appearing in the parish by the 18th century. Charitable institutions flourished, though in a small way.

The Church House was converted to a poorhouse, being supplemented by a larger one with three storeys, built beside the lane west of the church in the 18th century, and sold off in 1838 when the Kingsbridge Workhouse opened.

### Modern c.1900AD - present

Three major landscape changes characterise the 20th century in Slapton parish. Firstly, developments in agricultural machinery have made many field boundaries disappear, leaving large 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, many houses have been built in and around Slapton village, almost doubling its size.



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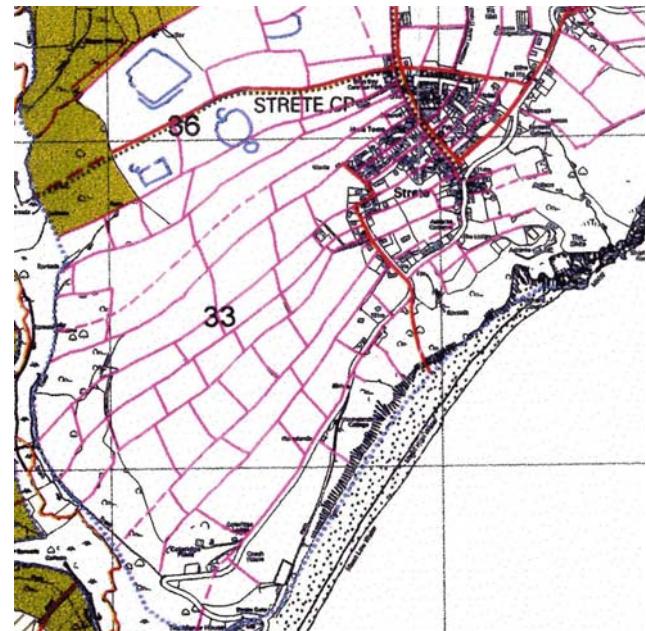
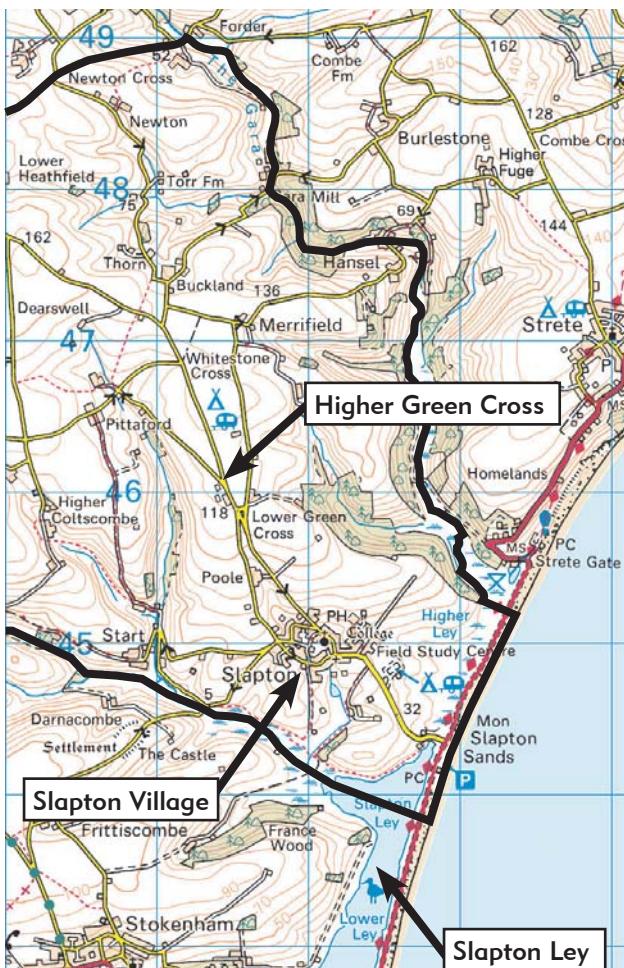
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### Further reading

This is a summary of the detailed parish heritage appraisal for Slapton 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).



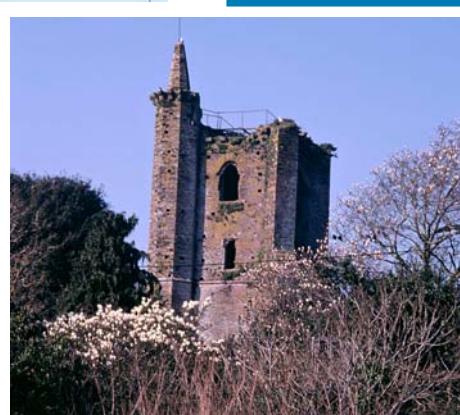
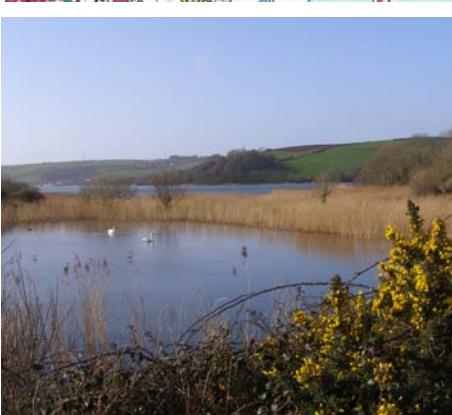
The planned "coaxial" field pattern SW of Slapton village

### 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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