

SE8 – Historic Environment Statement

There has been little archaeological excavation work in and around Bere Regis, so recorded information is patchy. There have been two test-pit excavations on the slopes of Barrow Hill in the early 21st century. One produced a Romano-British burial urn plus two others of slightly later date.

It is possible to draw some broad conclusions from the layout of the modern village, and from the few records of finds and features that we do have. In the medieval period there appear to have been three settlements within the immediate area of Bere Regis village, which had previously been significantly larger in area. These settlements were Shitterton, Doddings Farm, and Bere Regis, the latter always the largest and most important of the three, and the site of the modern village.

Parts of Bere Regis church are thought to date from before the Conquest (1066), and a stone-built church at that time would suggest an important settlement here in the early medieval period. Domesday Book entries, on the other hand, suggest it was quite populous but not particularly wealthy. Later in the medieval period, King John is known to have had a house at Bere Regis. This may have been at Court Farm, where there are earthwork remains of a manorial settlement. However, this has not been confirmed by archaeological or other evidence. John Hutchins, published his 'History of Dorset' 177, which reproduced an engraving from an early 18th century drawing showing the manorial hall of the Turberville House on Court Green.

Bere Regis was made into a free borough by Edward I and became an important market town. There are known to have been severe fires in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and it is generally presumed that any medieval buildings were destroyed by these fires. There is no information to indicate survival of parts of, or architectural components from medieval buildings by incorporation into later buildings. This is probably quite unlikely, but there has been little building survey work in the village, so it cannot be ruled out entirely. What can be seen, however, is that property boundaries within the historic 'core' of the village appear to perpetuate medieval boundaries. These are in the general area of Court Farm and the church, and the eastern end of West Street. It is clear that after serious fires at Bere Regis, renewed buildings were constructed on the old foundations of the previous buildings. This is shown by reference to maps and limited observational evidence. Similar evidence of survival can be seen at Shitterton.

The medieval open fields of Bere Regis were situated adjacent to and north of the village. These continued in use until 1846 when they were enclosed. Many of the 17th and 18th-century houses in the village were built as farm houses in conjunction with the open fields. Strip lynchets are recorded around Barrow Hill, but this small area is by no means conclusively an agricultural feature.

The southern part of the parish was heathland until relatively recently, and here we find small farmsteads, many of 13 or 14th-century origin, dotted around. Recorded archaeology here tends to comprise prehistoric features such as burial mounds and remnants of field systems, or associated with relatively recent exploitation of the heathland such as small-scale mineral extraction and brickmaking. Extensive water meadow systems are recorded along the river.

On a more speculative note, there are a lot of prehistoric monuments in the vicinity of the modern settlement. For example, there are two Neolithic long barrow remains and 53 Bronze Age burial mounds, together with Woodbury Hill, an Iron Age hill fort, situated just to the east of the village. There is also scattered evidence of prehistoric enclosures and field systems, which would have been extensive, and a Roman road not far to the north, joining the old Dorchester to the west to Badbury Rings in the east, together with an ancient trackway to where the present village is located. So, we know there was a lot going on here in the prehistoric and Roman periods. A find of Iron Age pottery from West Street could be simply an isolated occurrence but raises the tantalising possibility that there may have been a prehistoric settlement on the same site as the present village, or close by. Evidence from elsewhere, where there has been more fieldwork, hints more and more at continuity of use of good settlement sites from the prehistoric to the medieval and on into the modern period.

Within the present settlement there is still some potential for survival of below-ground archaeological remains of the medieval period and earlier periods, particularly in areas that have not been disturbed by later development. Although we can be fairly confident of the extent of the medieval settlement, and that it did not extend beyond the present village, there may well be as-yet-unrecorded below ground archaeological remains of the prehistoric and Romano-British periods.

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