

Dorchester's Cultural Heritage under Threat

When it comes to protecting its archaeological heritage, Dorchester is no stranger to controversy. In the 1850s the Great Western Railway proposed to slice through Poundbury hillfort and the ancient henge monument of Maumbury Ring, but was forced to rethink its plans in the face of local opposition. Isambard Brunel was obliged to construct a tunnel under Poundbury and realign the track to avoid Maumbury Ring.

Given Dorchester's antiquity – the Romans are the 'Johnny come latelies' in this ancient, prehistoric landscape – it is perhaps inevitable that debates around progress and preserving heritage occur regularly, but the latest controversy is about an attack on Dorchester's heritage on an unprecedented scale.

A decision by Dorset Council to promote the construction of approximately 4,000 houses on ancient chalk downland to the north of Dorchester has provoked strong opposition from local residents. The site, known as DOR13 in the draft local plan, encompasses the flood plain of the River Frome through which a link road will be constructed, and the gently rising land to the north, a prehistoric landscape where the archaeological evidence is still being revealed. Modern techniques have identified a putative Bronze Age cemetery which although ploughed out on the surface, may well have primary burials intact.

Unlike the high ground to the south of Dorchester where agriculture has been limited and extraordinary Bronze Age burials survive, land to the north has seen more intensive agriculture. Even so, enough evidence survives to associate the northern downland with the South Dorset Ridgeway, one of the richest archaeological landscapes in England.

Inevitably the promotion of DOR13 has attracted other potential developments, threatening the timeless landscape which inspired the writer Thomas Hardy. In his stories and poems Hardy often made reference to the antiquity of the landscape; he famously re-erected 'The Druid Stone' in his garden at Max Gate. His short story, The Three Strangers is set in this landscape, which is also part of the wider setting for Bathsheba's farm in Far From the Madding Crowd.

For further information please see Save The Area North of Dorchester (STAND's) web site: www.stand-dorchester.net

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