

## **The Hill – *The Story of a Place***

### 358 MYA (Carboniferous Period)

Sub-tropical forests of huge (up to 20M tall) plants related to club-mosses and horsetails cover the global continent of Pangea. They die and fall, but because various decomposing bacteria have not yet evolved, are buried and eventually transform by pressure into coal – the “coal measures” that later fuel the Industrial Revolution.

### 298 MYA (Permian and Triassic Periods)

Pangea has split into Pangea and Siberia, and climate change has destroyed the Carboniferous forests and the world is almost total desert. Amphibians, reptiles, giant insects (dragonflies and cockroaches) and the ancestors of modern trees evolve, but are almost totally wiped out by a planet-wide extinction that killed off 95% of all sea life and 70% of all land life. But the deserts eventually fossilise into sandstone over the Carboniferous coal-bearing rocks, setting the scene for the future development of the land that would become the Welsh marches.

### 115,000 - 11,500 BC (The Last Ice Age)

Huge glaciers carve their way down the mountains to the west and the lands to the north, depositing churned-up gravel, boulders and clay. When the glaciers begin to melt, they leave behind a landscape of mud, silt and sand – and two isolated hills of gravel and stone at the edge of the plain: at last, the hills we know as Old Oswestry and the Coppie were born. The Hill is raw and rough, and looks out over a landscape of mud and gravel threaded by rivers and streams carrying meltwater from the vanishing glaciers. The newly-thawed land attracts first grasses and weeds, then insects, birds and rodents, then deer and aurochs, then mammoths (such as the ones trapped at Condover), and finally...

### c. 10,000 – 4,000 BC (Paleolithic - Mesolithic)

... people. The first hunter-gatherers arrive in Britain about this time, following the herds. Because sea-levels are still lower than they are today, Britain isn't an island, but part of mainland Europe. Lowland areas gradually become covered in thick forest – fast-growing birch, willow and alder at first, then elm, ash and sycamore, and finally ancient oaks. The Hill looks out over a heavy forest full of wildlife. But there aren't many traces of people nearby; people prefer first upland caves and then settlements built along the edges of lakes and rivers and the coasts.

### c. 4,000 – 2,500 BC (Neolithic)

As people become bolder and more numerous, they start to explore the inland parts of Britain. They shape the earth with large stone axes, clear-cutting and burning forests to create land for their big new idea: agriculture. They journey up the Severn River into Shropshire, clearing land and settling in more-or-less permanent farmsteads and small hamlets. Fragments of thick neolithic pottery and carefully-shaped stone axe-heads (from quarrying “factory” sites like Cwm Mawr near Montgomery) tell us that although they may have camped on or near The Hill, they do not appear to have settled on it. And for the first time, the scattered peoples of the island begin to come together, travelling great distances over upland trackways to centres of religious, social and economic power to raise giant stone monuments and be part of something greater than themselves.

### c. 2,500 – 800 BC (Bronze Age)

The human population grows, and farmsteads and hamlets became villages and towns. Isolated families group together into clans and tribes. In the hills around, people mine copper (Llanymynech) and tin, and trade both the ore and elaborate metalwork. The view from The Hill changes: instead of thick forest, the land is now a patchwork of woodland and fields, dotted with scattered settlements linked by new roads. People live increasingly complex lives which connect them to the continent and beyond. New ideas and ways of life begin to enter the island, bringing with them new kinds of burial monuments (family/dynastic barrows), pottery (and the beer drunk with it) and artistic and creative styles. Some people became richer and more powerful than their neighbours, and tribal loyalty becomes increasingly important. The Hill, with its commanding views over the landscape, now hosts a cluster of houses surrounded by a timber palisade – perhaps a defended settlement for a local ruler.

## 800 – 43 BC (Iron Age)

Across the country, tribes begin to look for ways to show how powerful and wealthy they have become – perhaps also, ways of protecting that wealth and extending that power. On hilltops and high ground, they build enclosures of earth and stone to use as market-places and show-grounds, staging mock-battles and martial displays, holding festivals and important political and religious gatherings. These enclosures are not settlements – they contain few permanent structures; they are not forts – only a handful of the thousands built show any evidence for military activity. But they are safe places to guard prized herds and temporarily house non-combatants during periods of raiding between tribes.

On The Hill, two ramparts are built around the summit by digging out the material from the ditches and piling it above the inner slope of the ditch. These are extended first with an elaborate entranceway and then with two more ramparts. The hill's gravel and stone are used to create a fine stone front to the ramparts. Several generations later, two more ramparts were constructed, along with a complex series of elaborate hollows along the main entranceway.

The enclosure is a great statement of power – of a local ruler's visible ability to mobilise their people, of the sophistication of the tribe's command and control networks. Circled with fresh-earth ditches and stone-fronted embankments – perhaps topped with wooden palisades or fences decorated with flags and totems – The Hill is forever changed: no longer a “natural” feature in the landscape, but something that reflects the power and authority of the people who have carved and shaped it.

## 43 BC – AD 450 (Roman Period) – c. AD 800 (Post-Roman Period)

All that human endeavour means little when the Roman armies arrived in Britain, bringing with them a completely different culture and society. For a few tribes, their hill enclosures become last refuges against the Roman military machine; the hill enclosure at the Wrekin appears to have been one such place. But not the one on The Hill; it is already empty and abandoned by the time Roman troops marched up the Severn to the Dee and built a camp overlooking the confluence of the Dee and Ceiriog rivers. Perhaps the tribes here have already sensed that history has moved on. In the political, economic and military upheaval that follows the departure of Roman authority, new peoples briefly give The Hill new meanings in the competition for land and resources. An earthwork dyke to control trade and separate kingdoms (Wat's Dyke), reminiscent of the ramparts raised in the Iron Age, connected to it north and south. But The Hill's brief time as a place of human endeavour is over, and it is reclaimed by scrub and woodland.

## c. AD 800 – AD 1900 (Post-Roman Period – Early Middle Ages – The Industrial Revolution)

The Hill becomes a place of myth and legend – the Lost City of the Giant Ogyrfan, father to the wife of Arthur, last King of the Britons; its ramparts are thought to be evidence of the work of giants and elves. Covered over by trees, lost to the ghosts of mythology and the spirits of folklore, The Hill slumbers through the next millennium and a half, playing little part in the dramatic events which shaped our modern era – the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Welsh Wars, the English Civil War, the Industrial Revolution and the coming of the canals and railways. Through this time, though, from the summit of The Hill, perhaps Mercian Kings, Norman Lords, Royalist and Roundhead generals, Georgian bandits and finally the industrialists and entrepreneurs of the new age of capital have all surveyed a fine prospect of the increasingly-significant town of Oswestry.

## The Twentieth Century

By this time, Oswestry has grown from a mediaeval market village to a prosperous railway town. The Carboniferous coal measures and limestone and Permian sandstones that surround The Hill are now dug up in quarries and mines to provide coal to fire factories and steam locomotives, lime to improve the surrounding fields, the sandstone to build grand edifices for the modern century's rich and powerful. The gravels of The Hill make it poor soil for grazing and thus convenient enough for it to be turned over to Canadian soldiers in which to practice trench-digging in 1914-15. The nodding poppies nurtured by those same gravels presaging the remembrance of the wartime loss that is to come. Those poppies, the foxgloves, the cow parsley and the broom and gorse eventually face their own losses: the environmental degradation spurred by the industrial use of lime and coal have reduced them to strangers in their own native habitat. That threatened loss, and the threat of ultimately losing sight of thousands of years of The Hill's story, brings us ultimately, to the present, where – perhaps as never before – we stand at a crossroads of consequence, where both the future of The Hill and its fragile natural and human history, is now *ours* to shape.