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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**The historic landscape of the Mendip Hills, by E. Jamieson, Swindon, Historic England, 2015, 294 pp., RRP £35.00 (HB), ISBN-13: 978-1-84802-042-9**

The Mendip Hills ('Mendip' to locals) are a relatively low east-west orientated range of hills, formed primarily of Carboniferous limestone with some Devonian sandstone, which rise abruptly out of the archaeologically more famous Somerset Levels in southwest Britain. Mendip is designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and this book forms part of a series of AONB surveys by Historic England, the UK Government's statutory body for heritage protection in England. The content is multi-disciplinary, drawing on archaeological, architectural, and aerial investigations, and is testament to an impressively executed campaign of research.

The book takes a chronological approach to describing the historic landscape, and begins with a discussion of the topographical setting. The Mendip range consists of an undulating plateau up to 320 m above sea level, which is cut by deep gorges and pocked with limestone karst landscape features. It is largely covered in well-drained acidic brown earths, with poorly drained soils in higher areas. This supports a mixture of improved grassland, bracken-rich heath and pockets of old woodland (primarily lime, ash, oak and hazel). The karst landscape of Mendip contains bones of Pleistocene animals and evidence of hominin activity dating from much of the span of the Palaeolithic. The earliest evidence (at Westbury Cave) probably dates from Marine Isotope Stage (MIS) 15 (c. 600 ka yr BP). There is a Mesolithic cemetery at Aveline's Hole, and Neolithic long barrows and henge monuments on the plateau, perhaps most famously the Priddy Circles. Bronze Age round barrow cemeteries are present, such as on Pen Hill and the Priddy Nine Barrows. The earliest clear evidence for settlement and agriculture, rather than ritual and funereal activity, dates to the later prehistoric period, and includes hillforts on the plateau and fossilised field systems, which are present even on steep escarpments. Romano-British archaeology includes a former town at Charterhouse, with fort, amphitheatre and evidence for extensive mining for galena, a source of lead and silver. Agriculture and settlement proliferated through the medieval and post-medieval periods and there are important archaeological remains from the modern period. This includes evidence of prisoner-of-war camps and an elaborate decoy system designed to mimic the city of Bristol to disorientate German bombers during the Second World War.

For human palaeoecologists, Mendip presents a difficult gap in our knowledge of environmental change in southwest Britain, but not for lack of trying. As Davies (2011) has previously outlined, there are no substantial peat, fluvial or lacustrine deposits on Mendip which might allow pollen sequences or waterlogged organics to be recovered. The Carboniferous limestone weathers slowly, releasing little calcium carbonate into the soil, a situation inimical to preservation of snail shells and less robust bones. Short pollen records do exist, but the situation is better away from the plateau, in the waterlogged peats and clays of the Somerset Levels and

Moors, at the windblown coastal dune systems due west of Mendip, and in tufa deposits associated with spring lines at the foot of the hills.

Sadly, this study does not include new evidence of Holocene environmental change in Mendip. Indeed, there are slim pickings here in regard to the traditional domains of interest to this journal. Of note are a short synthesis of animal bone and cereal grain evidence from the Iron Age sites at Dibble's Farm, Christon, and Whitegate Farm, Bleadon. This includes a discussion of symbolic deposition of animal bones, and the age profile of sheep (the dominant taxon) at both sites. Elsewhere, the discussion of late Prehistoric field systems is thorough and highly informative, as are the sections on medieval agriculture and upland commons.

Overall, this is a meticulous study, testament to a well-planned and executed project. It is rather more informative on the medieval and later archaeology, with in depth discussion of a number of surveys of buildings that feel somewhat tenuously linked to the 'Historic Landscape of the Mendip Hills' (viz. the book's title), but that is a pedantic grumble. Students of Mendip archaeology would be best served by using the book as a companion to the recent volume edited by Lewis (2011), from which individual papers of clear relevance are not often cited in this volume. Minor complaints aside, this is an important study, well-written and illustrated clearly in colour.

## References

Davies, P. 2011. "Assessing the Holocene Environmental History of Mendip: The Potential of Tufa Deposits." In *The Archaeology of Mendip: 500,000 Years of Continuity and Change*, edited by J. Lewis, 85–92. Oxford: Heritage.

Lewis, J., ed. 2011. *The Archaeology of Mendip: 500,000 Years of Continuity and Change*. Oxford: Heritage.