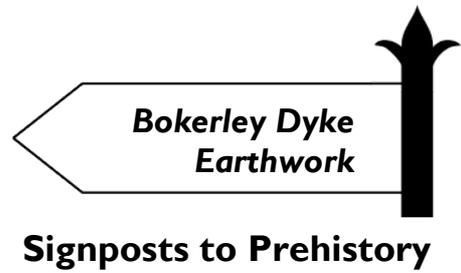




THE
PREHISTORIC
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SINCE 1935



Location: Bokerley Dyke (50.9722, -1.94156) snakes across NE Dorset for 5.75 km, passing close to the villages of Woodyates and Pentridge.

Main period: Multi-period landscape

Access & ownership: The earthwork is a listed monument and accessible to the public. It is marked for about 5 km on OS Explorer 118 and can be followed on foot for most of its length. Martin Down is a National Nature Reserve in the care of English Nature, with open tracts of chalk downland, heath, scrub and woodland. Parking is available either on the A354 just north of Bokerley Junction (signposted Martin Down nature reserve), or on Martin Down, at the end of Sillens Lane, accessed from the village of Martin (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Section of Bokerley Dyke with Hampshire on the right and Dorset on the left. By Jim Champion [CC BY-SA 2.0]

Bokerley Dyke still forms part of the boundary between the counties of Dorset and Hampshire (Figs 1 & 2). The substantial earthwork that we see today is a frontier work of Final-Post Roman date intended to block movement from the Salisbury area where there is evidence of a Saxon presence by c. 500 AD (Roman coins and pottery from a settlement at Bokerley Junction were found under the bank and in the ditch). But, rather than starting afresh, it seems likely that the builders of these defences deepened and enlarged an earlier ditch alignment that may have marked a significant,

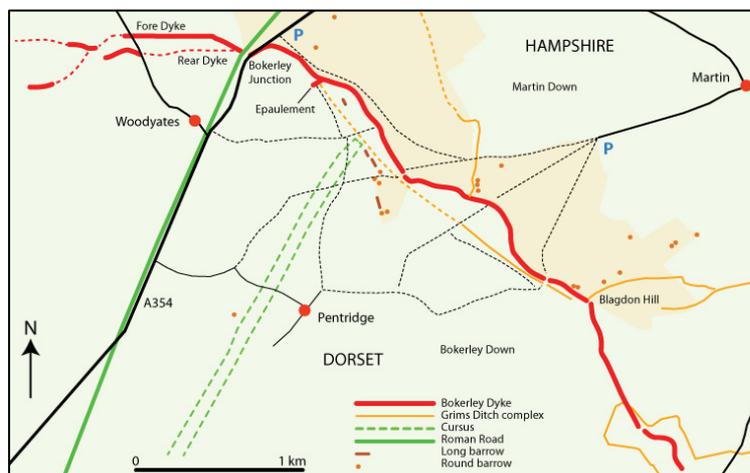


Fig 2. Route of Bokerley Dyke, with other nearby prehistoric features

longstanding territorial boundary. H.C. Bowen (1990) sets out the reasons for this belief as: 1) the often unmilitary line of the dyke (more defensive terrain existed close by); 2) slighter ditches (yellow on the map below) that mark out large blocks of land to the north east, and that have been shown to be of Middle Bronze Age date, terminate against Bokerley Dyke; 3) the road (Ackling Dyke) from Old Sarum to Badbury that was established early in the Roman period appears to have passed

through a gap in the ditch line at Bokerley Junction (in the Final-Post Roman period a massive ditch was cut across this to block movement but later refilled).

The boundary marked by the presumed predecessor of Bokerley Dyke appears to have been of very long standing significance: there are notable differences in the type and form of Early Bronze Age round barrows on either side of it, while the very large scale parcelling up of land by Middle-Late Bronze Age linear ditches is restricted its north east side; Grim's Ditch that shadows its south west side from Blagdon Hill to the Epaulement is undated.

The dyke runs NW along the crest of a ridge towards the summit of Blagdon Hill (see Fig. 2); it then descends across a dry valley, continuing across the undulating ground of Bokerley and Martin Downs towards Bokerley Junction, the gap used by the Roman road and now by the A354. The dyke is crossed by various tracks, some deeply sunken. About 500 m from Bokerley Junction, a short offshoot called the Epaulement branches off to the SW.

The earthwork consists of a bank to the SW of a ditch and, occasionally, a slight counterscarp bank to the NE (Fig. 3). It is at its most impressive between the Epaulement and the northern slope of Blagdon Hill where it is around 27 m wide, the bank rising to 5 m above the base of the 17 m wide ditch. In the area of Martin Down, stepped or 'double-ditch' sections, perhaps indicating different phases of construction, are up to 34 m wide. West of the A354 the monument is now less substantial.

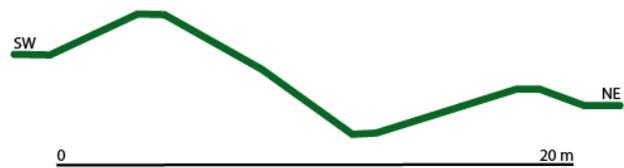


Fig. 3. Profile of Bokerley Dyke, NW of Blagdon Hill. After RCHME 1975

The Grim's Ditch complex is a complicated, far slighter and more variable system of bank-and-ditch features, enclosing approximately 40 km². Work by C.M. Piggott in the 1940s concluded that it was not built as a single feature, and developed between the Late Bronze Age and the Romano British period. It probably represented some form of large scale land division. The single section that runs along the south west side of Bokerley Dyke has been largely levelled by ploughing. It follows an almost straight alignment NW from Blagdon Hill, with slight changes of direction seemingly to avoid south western projections of Bokerley Dyke. As this section of dyke is undated this could mean it was laid out respecting the predecessor of Bokerley Dyke or that it is a much later boundary laid out behind the Late-Post Roman defensive barrier; it similarly has a ditch on its north eastern side.



Fig. 4. Google Earth view of the NE terminus of the cursus showing relationship with barrows and Bokerley Dyke

The **Dorset Cursus** is evidence of much earlier use of this complex landscape. A cursus is a long, narrow rectangular earthwork enclosure of Neolithic date, usually defined by a bank and ditch and thought to have had a ceremonial function. The Dorset monument runs SW-NE for 10 km and is, in fact, two such enclosures laid end-to-end, meeting on Bottlebush Down. The NE (Pentridge) cursus begins just south of Bokerley Dyke (see Figs 2 & 4), and is defined by parallel banks with external ditches, around 110 m apart. It has been levelled by ploughing.

A large Neolithic long barrow, around 150 m long, 20 m wide and 2 m high, lays just a few metres from the terminus of

the cursus. It is suggested that the barrow is contemporary and was deliberately aligned on the terminal, as were several other nearby long barrows. Today the barrow comprises two distinct parts, 50 m and 90 m long, respectively. They were once thought to be two, joined, long barrows,

but probing and aerial photography has revealed them to have a common continuous ditch (now ploughed out).

References and further information

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Piggott, C.M. 1944. The Grim's Ditch Complex in Cranborne Chase. *Antiquity* 18, 65–71

Martin Down Nature Reserve: <http://www.lymington.org/placestovisit/martindown.html>

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