

The archaeology of the Malvern Hills

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The Malvern Hills have a very long history of human occupation. This document is a brief overview of the archaeological evidence for human activity in the area, by period. It was originally produced in 2013 for [Café H2O](#) at the [Wyche Innovation Centre](#), Colwall (well worth a visit for excellent food and amazing views!) and for talks to various local societies. It draws heavily upon the English Heritage survey of the hills, published in Mark Bowden's [The Malvern Hills: An Ancient Landscape](#) (2005).

The Palaeolithic (up to 10,000 B.C.):

Only one artefact of Palaeolithic origin has been discovered in the vicinity of the Malvern Hills: a [handaxe](#), probably of Middle Acheulian date (300,000 to 200,000 B.C.), [recovered from a field to the north of Colwall Stone](#). The handaxe was produced during a geological stage known as the Wolstonian, a period punctuated by extensive periods of glaciation, between which groups of ancestral hominin species were periodically occupying the area.



Replica Acheulian Handaxe, produced by Karl Lee for Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

The Mesolithic (c10,000 – 4,000 B.C.):

The Mesolithic covers the period between the end of the last Ice Age and the origins of agriculture. It encompasses the point at around 6,000 B.C. at which Britain became separated from the continent by rising sea levels, and was characterized by the widespread growth of woodland, within which small human populations led a mobile, hunter-gatherer lifestyle. As such, archaeological clues to their presence tend to be ephemeral. Only a handful of confirmed artefacts from the Mesolithic period have been identified from the Malvern area, though several scatters of [stone tools believed to be of Mesolithic date](#) have been reported.



Mesolithic Settlement. Illustration by Steve Rigby, ©Worcestershire Young Archaeologists' Club

The Neolithic (4,000 – 2,500 B.C.):

The emergence of the Neolithic period is associated with the adoption of farming as the primary mode of subsistence, and a move towards living year-round in permanent settlements. Across much of Britain the Neolithic is characterised by large-scale monument building, but no evidence for such activity has been discovered in the Malvern area, although evidence for Neolithic occupation in the form of [flint tools](#), tool-making debris and stone axes is widespread.

[On-going excavations by Worcestershire Archaeology at Clifton Quarry](#) in the Severn Valley to the east of the hills have revealed extensive Neolithic activity: it may be that during this period, settlement was focused in the fertile river valleys, with the Hills utilised for grazing or woodland industries such as coppicing.



Replica Neolithic Axe. ©Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

Early Bronze Age (2,500 – 1,500 B.C.)

The earlier Bronze Age is a period characterized by the construction of burial mounds known as 'barrows', by a culture often referred to as 'Beaker' people after the characteristic bell-shaped, decorated drinking vessels they produced. Beaker pottery has been discovered within hollows on Hollybush Hill, and finds of flint arrowheads have been recorded from North Hill, End Hill and [West Malvern](#). Early Bronze Age burials are known from [Worcestershire Beacon](#) and Pinnacle Hill, and circular cropmarks identified from aerial photography at Ledbury, Redmarley D'Abitot, Dymock and [Donnington](#) probably represent the remains of barrows.



Bronze Age Burial Scene. Illustration by Steve Rigby, ©Worcestershire County Council

Later Bronze Age (1,500 – 700 B.C.)

During the later Bronze Age more formal field systems and land boundaries begin to emerge. A number of tantalizing hints of rectangular field systems and roundhouses thought to date to this period have been identified from aerial photographs at Donnington. More substantial land boundaries dating to around this time have been discovered in Malvern and Frith Wood. Intriguingly, a recent English Heritage survey has raised the possibility that the medieval [Shire Ditch](#) follows the course of a much earlier, Late Bronze Age land boundary. Where the Shire Ditch meets the Iron Age hillfort at [Midsummer Hill](#), the ditch appears to split into two parallel earthworks. The more prominent of these, representing the Medieval phase of the ditch, cuts through the hillfort's defences, and is therefore later than the fort; however, the shallower ditch of the two disappears beneath the Iron Age fortifications, suggesting that it belongs to a far earlier, probably Late Bronze Age feature, possibly a territorial boundary.

During this period changes in the treatment of the dead were reflected in a gradual shift from barrow construction to cremations in cemeteries, often known as 'urnfields' after the common practice of placing cremated remains in ceramic 'urns'. [One such cemetery](#) was discovered during sand extraction at Mathon during the early 20th Century.



Late Bronze Age burnt mound excavated at Clifton Quarry, with Malvern Hills in background. ©Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

Iron Age (700 B.C. – 43 A.D.)

The transition between the Bronze Age and Iron Age is thought to have been a period of social, economic and ecological upheaval. The climate became considerably wetter, trade with the continent increased and complex iron-working techniques were gradually introduced. The advantages of Iron as a material for tools, weapons and fixings contributed to a collapse in the previously substantial trade in Bronze and a corresponding shift in power structures and trade routes.

The most visually imposing elements of life in Iron Age Britain are 'hillforts'. The earliest of these were probably built in southern Britain in the final stages of the Late Bronze Age, but most were constructed in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. The Malvern Hills are dominated by two of these hillforts: ['British Camp'](#), which tops the Herefordshire Beacon, and [Midsummer Hill](#). In addition to these, three smaller hillforts of Iron Age date have been identified: one at the northern end of the hills at [Berrow Hill](#), Martley and two at the southern end at [Gadbury Bank](#), Eldersfield and [Haffield Camp](#), Donnington.



British Camp. ©Mike Glyde, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

The exact purpose of hillforts remains a subject of debate among archaeologists. Whilst they undoubtedly have a defensive aspect, it is very likely that they served symbolic and practical purposes in addition to their military function. Many larger hillforts, including [Midsummer Hill](#) and [British Camp](#), contain numerous 'hut platforms'; circular areas upon which structures would have been sited. It is by no means certain that occupation of hillforts was permanent – some appear to have been occupied on a seasonal basis. Many hillforts contain evidence for the storage of grain and other foodstuffs. Estimates of the occupying populations vary, and whilst it has traditionally been thought that they served as focal points for a particular tribal territory there is increasing evidence that many stood on the boundaries between territories. Given the evidence of large-scale Late Bronze Age boundary divisions on the hills, it may well be that territorial divisions were maintained into the Iron Age.

Evidence for Iron Age settlement outside of the hillforts is relatively sparse: several small agricultural settlements at [Cradley](#) and [Bromsberrow](#) have been identified. [Two hoards of iron currency bars](#) dating to the later Iron Age were discovered in the 1850s to the north of the Wyche Cutting. Several distinct types of pottery produced from 400 B.C. onwards using chips of Malvern Stone as a 'temper' (to prevent the clay from cracking or shrinking during firing) are commonly found on archaeological sites in the region.

Roman (43 – 410 A.D.)

The most striking evidence for the Roman period in the Malvern Hills is the widespread distribution of pottery manufactured in the area. There is evidence of over twenty pottery kilns, spanning most of the Roman period, concentrated in the area of Great Malvern and Malvern Link. Pottery from Malvern has been discovered on archaeological sites in North and South-West Wales, all over the Midlands, and even at Hadrian's Wall. The local stone has a characteristic geological signature that makes Malvern pottery identifiable wherever it may be found. In addition to the pottery, tiles also seem to have been produced locally: [a tile kiln at Leigh Sinton](#) was partly excavated in the 1960s.



Malvernian Ware Pottery, produced 1st – 4th centuries A.D. ©Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

Another Roman settlement site is known at [Dymock](#), which saw intensive occupation during the third and fourth centuries. Interestingly, most of the Roman activity in the area is industrial and civilian. There is little trace of high-status 'Villa'-type sites, and little evidence for military activity, perhaps suggesting that the native population, part of the tribal group known as the [Dobunni](#), was generally receptive to Roman rule, or at least not actively rebellious!

Early Medieval (410 – 1066 A.D.)

Evidence for human activity in the Malvern Hills between the end of Roman rule and the Norman Conquest is very sparse. Place-name evidence suggests that the area was heavily forested, and the hills are thought to have formed a boundary between the British kingdoms of the Magonsaetan and the Hwicce from the early 7th Century A.D.

Whilst much of the area may have been largely uninhabited, a notable exception was Ledbury, where a [minster church](#) formed the centre of a small village shortly before the Norman Conquest.

Medieval (1066 – c1540 A.D.)

In stark contrast to the pre-conquest period, there is a wealth of archaeological evidence for medieval occupation in the area.

Norman Military sites

The Norman Conquest can sometimes be difficult to identify in the archaeological record, but one feature that does define the social upheaval of the post-Conquest period is the construction of castles. Three castles dating to the medieval period have been identified in the Malverns. One is located to the south of the church at [Castlemorton](#), probably built by the Foliot family during '[The Anarchy](#)', the Civil war that ravaged Britain between 1135 and 1153. Another, at [Castle Green, Leigh](#), was built on land leased by the Pembridge family from the Abbots of Pershore, and may have been constructed during the [Baron's War](#) between (1264-7). The third and largest of the medieval castles in the area is the 'ringwork' built on top of the Iron Age Hillfort at [British Camp](#), which probably dates to the late 11th/ 12th century.

Landscape

Another highly visible landscape feature of the medieval period is the late 13th Century earthworks of [Shire Ditch](#), which appear to have utilised and extended a Late Bronze Age land boundary. The medieval phase of the earthwork is said to have been constructed by the Earl of Hertford and Gloucester, [Gilbert de Clare](#), in the latter half of the 13th century. Tradition holds it that de Clare, a fiery '[Marcher Lord](#)', had fallen out with the Bishop of Hereford, Thomas de Cantilupe, over hunting rights and constructed the earthwork to prevent deer from moving from his land onto that of the Bishop.



Shire Ditch, looking WNW towards British Camp ©Tom Vaughan, Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service

Hunting and the creation and management of deer parks shaped large parts of the medieval landscape of the Malvern Hills. At the time of the Norman Conquest, a large proportion of the area would have been forested, and shortly after the conquest the area, known as 'Malvern Chase', became subject to [Forest Law](#). However, the woodland did not remain fixed throughout the medieval period: evidence for woodland clearance and cultivation through assarting during the 13th and 14th centuries can be found in local place names such as '-end', '-street' and '-feld'. Evidence for medieval agriculture is also present in the area in the form of hillside terraces known as '[strip lynchets](#)' at [Frith Wood](#), Ledbury and [Crews Hill](#), Suckley. Also present at these sites, and at many other locations in the area, are the distinctive remains of '[ridge and furrow](#)' cultivation, visible in fields today as a series of parallel ridges resembling corrugated iron. Interestingly, some of these features are now once again covered by woodland, indicating that the boundaries of the forest have been fluid over the centuries.

Other medieval landscape features include artificial rabbit warrens known as [pillow mounds](#) at Coneygore Coppice, Alfrick ('coney' being common term for rabbit prior to the 19th century) and around the Iron Age hillforts at Hollybush Hill and British Camp. Rabbits were an important source of meat and fur. Warrens, carefully fenced off or moated to protect the occupants from predators, were often maintained by local Lords of the Manor.

Settlement

Medieval settlement in the area mostly conformed to the 'dispersed' pattern typical of woodland areas. Small farmsteads and cottages were scattered throughout the landscape. Where groups of dwellings existed, they would often have followed an 'interrupted row' pattern, in which small homesteads surrounded by their own plot of land were spread out along the sides of a road. A very good example of this can be found at [Pendock](#), [subject of a detailed study by Christopher Dyer](#).

Earthworks relating to a number of moated sites have been identified in the area. The presence of a moat is often perceived to be an indication of a high-status site, but this is not necessarily the case: sites at [Colwall](#) and [Lulsey](#) were probably associated with relatively humble farmsteads, where moats were dug for security, drainage and display.

More focused, 'nucleated' settlements were present in the area: most notably, Ledbury expanded from its small pre-Conquest origins, growing rapidly after the establishment in 1125 of a marketplace and '[borough](#)' status.

Industrial activity in the form of pottery and tile production was taking place in the Malvern area throughout much of the medieval period. A tile kiln was attached to Great Malvern Priory during the 2nd half of the 15th century, and its products can still be seen today: [over 1300 medieval tiles adorn the walls of the Priory](#).



Medieval Floor Tile. ©Worcester City museum collection

Religion

Malvern's status as a slightly wild and remote area during the medieval period played a part in attracting religious communities, hermits and 'Holy Men' to the Hills. Monastic communities sprung up alongside the many 'Holy Wells' in the area, as at the Benedictine priories at [Great Malvern](#) and [Little Malvern](#). In addition to the priories, numerous Parish churches were founded from the 12th Century onwards. [St James's Church, Colwall](#) is a good example of this medieval expansion.

Post-Medieval (1540 – 1900)

The transition between the medieval and post-medieval periods was marked by the religious upheavals of Henry VIII's split with Rome, and the subsequent dissolution of the monasteries. This had a significant effect upon the Malverns, as the two priories were perceived to be beneficial to the communities, and would have been a source of employment and economic opportunity.

Change was slow and gradual during the century following the Reformation, but around 1630, King Charles I's decision to sell the royal forest of Malvern Chase sparked riots among people fearful of losing the common rights that allowed them to collect firewood, graze animals and collect wild foods. Despite the protests, the sale went ahead, and paved the way for widespread forest clearance, drainage of the marshes and [enclosure of common land](#). Although the extent of forest clearance increased dramatically, the dispersed settlement patterns of the medieval period continued largely unchanged until the mid-19th century.

Orchard plantations of apple, pear and damson were a significant feature of the landscape during this period. Also important to the economy of the area were the quarrying and mineral extraction industries. Evidence for extensive quarrying of the Malvern stone can be found across the hills, and associated lime kilns are clustered around the southern range of the Hills. Short-lived attempts to extract coal and gold were also undertaken. Tanning, gloving and weaving were significant cottage industries. In the surviving woodland, charcoal-burning continued; this activity required careful management of the woodland, and evidence of [coppicing](#) can be seen in many of the woods around the Hills.



Great Malvern Blacksmith's Shop: 1871 Oil Painting by Benjamin Williams Leader ©Worcester City museum collection

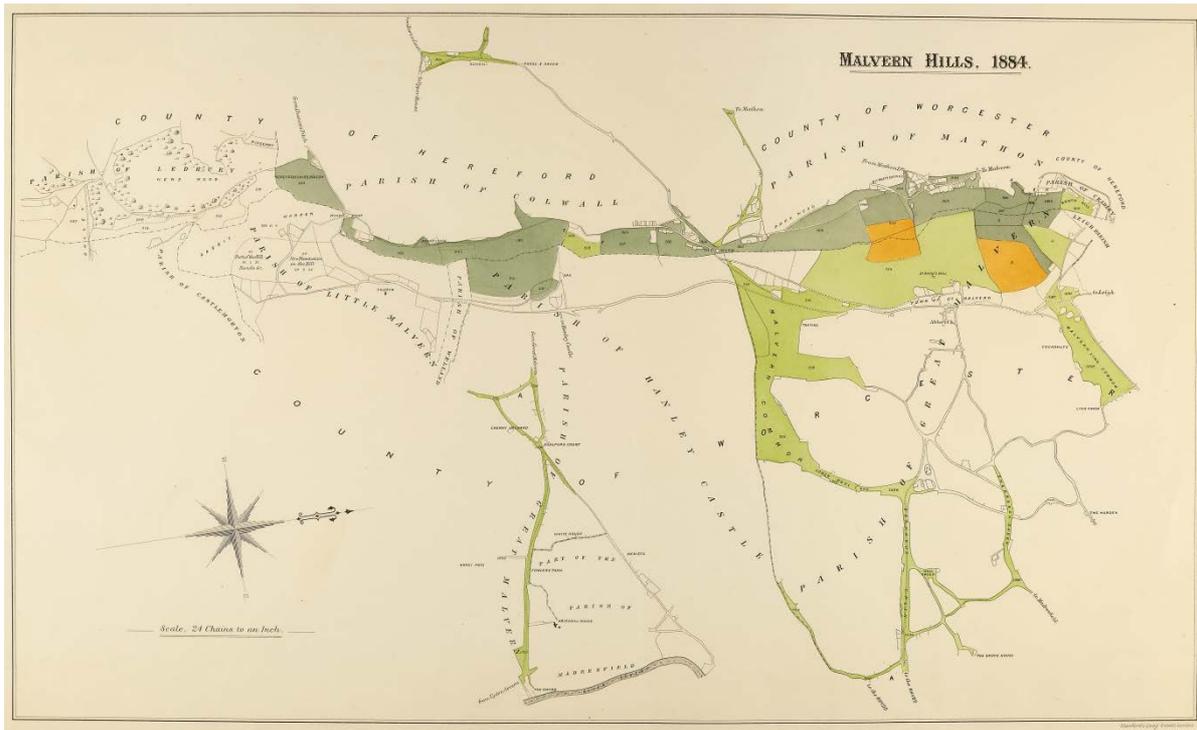
The growing reputation of Malvern as a Spa resort during the 19th century fuelled increasing economic prosperity. A network of paths and carriageways, ornamental buildings, shelters and benches on the Hills are evidence of a 'landscape of leisure' ([Bowden 2005](#), 49) reflecting the Town's growing popularity among visitors seeking the health-giving properties of the air and water. At Eastnor Castle, a carefully managed [ornamental landscape](#) was laid out in the early 19th century, including the prominent [Obelisk](#), which commemorates the son of the 1st Earl Somers.

Overlooking this obelisk from HANGMAN'S HILL is the curious site of [Clutter's Cave](#). It has traditionally been thought of as a medieval hermit's cave, but no mention of it can be found before the mid-19th century, and it may have been constructed as a 'grotto' associated with the Eastnor estate.



Clutter's Cave, Hangman Hill. ©Su Vale, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

By the late 19th century, the extent of enclosure of the common land around the Malvern Hills was a cause for concern. The Malvern Hills Preservation Association was formed in 1876 by local residents to try to prevent further loss of common land. This led, in 1884, to the passing of the Malvern Hills Act and the formation of the [Malvern Hills Conservators](#), the body responsible today for the management of around 1200 hectares of the hills and surrounding commons.



Map showing the common lands of the hills at the time of the formation of the Malvern Hills Conservators in 1884.
©Malvern Hills Conservators

Archaeological Investigations in the Malvern Hills

The Malvern Hills have long intrigued those with an interest in the history of the region.

Early Discoveries

The recovery of archaeological artefacts has been carried out by antiquarians and amateur collectors for centuries. Notable examples of early finds include the [18th century discovery of a Bronze Age axe](#) 'many feet underground' on the common at Malvern Link, the [hoards of Iron Age currency bars](#) discovered in the 1850s at the Wyche Cutting, and the discovery of [Mesolithic and Neolithic flint tools](#) during house building in West Malvern in 1879.

19th Century Pioneers

The artist and antiquarian [Henry Harris Lines](#) was a key figure in the burgeoning intellectual movement in mid-19th century Worcester, and carried out field surveys of the ancient landscape of the Malverns. He published a series of papers in *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, including a survey of the Hillfort at Midsummer Hill.

Among the pioneers of archaeological excavation in the area was a London banker named [Frederick George Hilton Price](#), who was an active antiquarian and amateur archaeologist in the latter half of the 19th century.

Hilton Price published a paper on 'Camps in the Malvern Hills' in 1881, in the *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, in which he summarised the results of his excavations on Midsummer Hill. He also carried out works on a number of other monuments in the area, including British Camp. One such investigation proved somewhat disappointing: an earthwork to the southeast of British Camp was initially thought to be a prehistoric burial mound. Upon excavation, it turned out to be a 'pillow mound': an artificial rabbit warren! The man who deduced the true nature of the earthwork was [Augustus Pitt-Rivers](#), regarded as the founder of modern systematic archaeological excavation methods, who appears to have acted as a mentor to Hilton Price.

Archaeology in the 20th Century

Further excavation on the hills was undertaken by I.T Hughes in the early 1920s, including work on Midsummer Hill, published in the [Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club 1924-6](#), Seven trenches were excavated, targeting hut platforms within the hillfort and the outer defences.

Further work on Midsummer Hill was carried out by Dr S. C. Stanford between 1965 and 1970. He published several books and papers on the subject: references and a summary of his findings can be found on the [English Heritage Pastscape record](#).

Christopher Dyer's work on [medieval settlement patterns at Pendock](#), published in 1990, did much to enrich understanding of the medieval occupation of the Malverns.

In 1999, a major survey exploring the historic landscape of the Malvern Hills was instigated by English Heritage. Aerial reconnaissance, photography and ground-level observation were used to identify and inspect archaeological features, which were then mapped and interpreted. Historic aerial photographs from RAF and Ordnance Survey flights were also analysed. Where possible, investigators visited the sites and carried out ground surveys, although the outbreak of Foot & Mouth disease in 2001 hampered their efforts!

The result was an impressively comprehensive analysis of the archaeology of the Malvern Hills, and an understanding of the Hills as a distinctive landscape: a region that for much of the history of human occupation has formed a marginal boundary zone. The survey highlighted the spiritual significance often attached to the Hills; this significance is evident from the Bronze Age burials, the medieval Christian hermits and subsequent monastic foundations, and the belief in the healing properties of the spa water that fuelled Malvern's expansion in the 19th century.

Mark Bowden's '[The Malvern Hills: An Ancient Landscape](#)', published by English Heritage in 2005, provides a comprehensive overview of the results of the survey. It is the chief source for the material on these pages, and is essential reading for anyone seeking to explore the subject further.

What Next? Current and future archaeological work

The majority of archaeological excavation in the area is now developer-funded, and comprises part of the planning system: developments or industrial activities that are likely to have an adverse effect upon the archaeology are encouraged to fund works to mitigate the impact. Such projects are undertaken by 'archaeological units' such as [Worcestershire Archaeology](#). This system ensures that sites under threat are fully and professionally investigated, but it tends to result in greater density of excavation in areas subject to higher development pressures. [As the Malvern Hills is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty \(AONB\)](#), little developer-funded excavation has taken place in the area. The work undertaken by voluntary groups and research institutions is therefore very valuable.

However, as the English Heritage survey demonstrates, archaeologists do much more than excavation. Aerial reconnaissance, satellite imagery, digital survey, geophysical survey, fieldwalking, mapping and analysis of historic records are all part of the toolkit of the archaeologist. Excavation is only undertaken after consideration of all other options. It may seem counter-intuitive, but archaeologists often prefer to preserve sites rather than excavate them. The process of excavation is destructive; if a site is not under threat, it is sometimes preferable to use non-invasive techniques.

Future research aims

The English Heritage survey highlighted a number of areas that would benefit from further research. The small number of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic finds may reflect a lack of systematic searching rather than the absence of early human occupation of the hills. River terraces of sand and gravel deposits in the region of Mathon and Cradley are likely to be good locations for recovery of flint artefacts of this period.

Our understanding of the Early Medieval activity within the area is patchy. Whether further traces of settlement are yet to be discovered, or whether the area was simply largely uninhabited for much of this period, remains to be seen. Further research into the environmental archaeology of the region is needed; recovery and analysis of plant and pollen, insect and animal remains may help to establish whether there was significant re-growth of woodland after the end of the Roman period, and whether this reflected neglect or a conscious policy by the inhabitants.

Since the English Heritage survey in the late 1990s and early 2000s, new remote sensing techniques have been developed which enable much more accurate aerial survey to be undertaken. 'LiDAR' (Light Detecting And Ranging) uses aircraft-mounted pulsed laser beams to sweep an area, taking tens of thousands of measurements every second to build up a detailed elevation plan. A key advantage of LiDAR in an area like the Malverns with dense tree and scrub cover on the lower slopes is that the light beams can penetrate the vegetation canopy and survey the ground surface. LiDAR coverage of the Malverns Hills is currently patchy, but will hopefully prove to be a significant resource for archaeologists in the near future.

Links, Sources and Further Information

Find out more

If you'd like to discover more about the historic environment in the Malvern Hills, the [Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service](#), based in [The Hive, Worcester](#), maintain the [Historic Environment Record](#), a [GIS database](#) of over 26,000 records (and counting!) of monuments, events and archaeological discoveries in the county.

[Herefordshire's Sites and Monuments Record](#) compiles and maintains the database on sites within Herefordshire, and summaries of most records are available online.

Much of the data contained within the Historic Environment Record can be viewed via the [Heritage Gateway](#), which also allows you to simultaneously search English Heritage's [Pastscape](#) database and collections of photographs of monuments and listed buildings. Also available is [Worcestershire's Online Archaeology Library](#), a collection of around 1500 unpublished 'grey literature' reports relating to archaeological work in the area.

Also accessible online is the [Worcestershire Ceramics database](#), a comprehensive database containing detailed descriptions and photographs of all the pottery types produced and/or found in Worcestershire from 4000 B.C. to around 1650 A.D.

[Museums Worcestershire](#) looks after a wealth of collections relating to the history of the area, many of which can be seen on display at the [County Museum, Hartlebury Castle](#), the [Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum](#) and [The Commandery](#). In addition to the collections themselves, the Museums run special exhibitions and events throughout the year.

Aged 8 – 16 and interested in finding out more about Archaeology in Worcestershire? [Worcestershire Young Archaeologists Club](#) is the local branch of the [Young Archaeologists Club](#). Meetings take place monthly, and recent activities have included archaeological excavations, geophysics and an archaeological murder mystery party. The club is supported by Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council, and meetings are run by CRB-checked professional archaeologists, teachers and parents.

Books

For the source for much of the information within this guide, and an excellent overview of the historic landscape of the Malverns, see Mark Bowden's *The Malvern Hills: An Ancient Landscape* (2005), published by English Heritage and available to [buy](#) or [borrow](#).

Amanda Simons; 'British Camp: Herefordshire Beacon' guide to British Camp, containing a wealth of historic photographs, maps and illustrations, is available to [borrow](#) from local libraries.

Images

Many of the images on these pages are available as high-quality prints and canvases on the [Worcestershire Prints](#) website. Proceeds from the sales of these prints directly support Worcestershire's [Archive & Archaeology](#), [Libraries & Learning](#) and [Museums](#) services.