



Improving biodiversity & socioeconomic returns in the Cotswolds

Sapperton – The Archaeological Perspective

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Nestled on the slopes of the Golden Valley and with splendid views over the river Frome, Sapperton village reveals an ancient past and one imprinted with the great technological innovations of the Industrial Age. The Sapperton landscape has it all: first farmers, monument builders and industrial innovators,

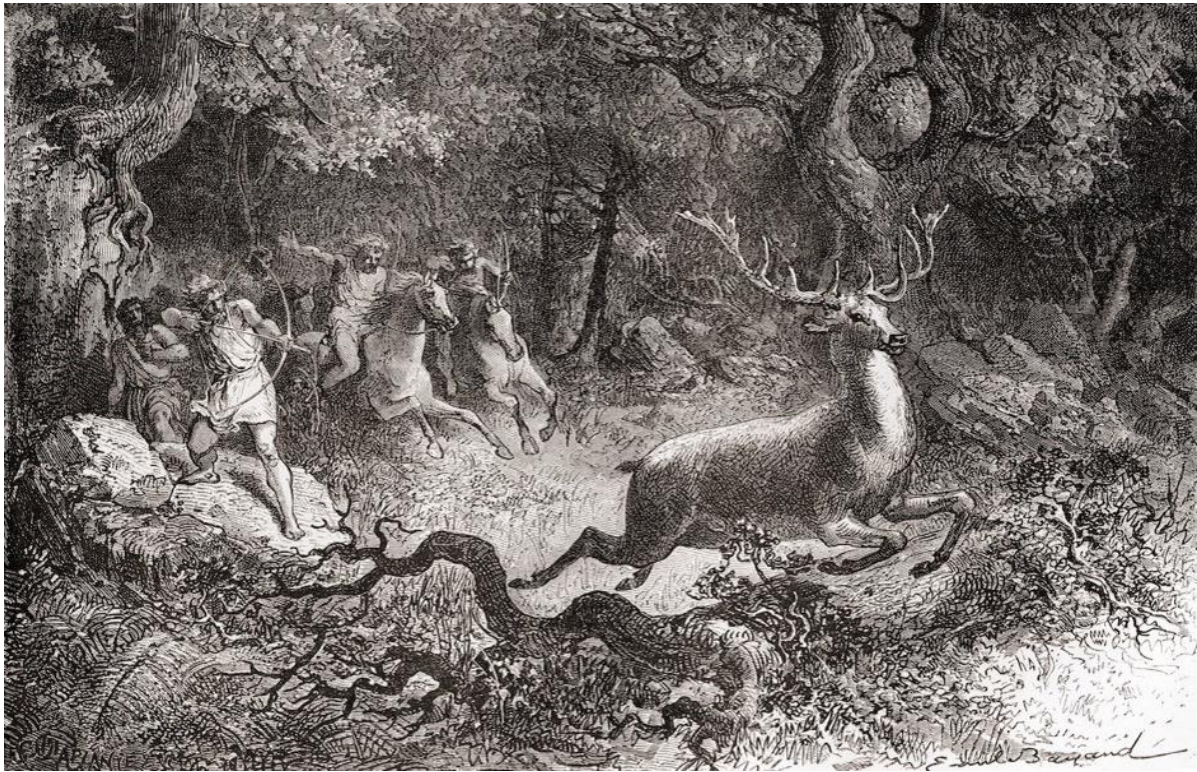
Domesday records of hundreds and hides, an industrial legacy of tunnels, canals and railways and a mix of local writers, artists and architects. It reveals a fascinating story of land-use, farming, technological development and people. People who, for over 6,000 years, have lived, worked, farmed and shaped a unique Cotswold landscape.

From 8000 BC to the end of the Bronze Age

By 8,000 BC, the British climate had become warmer and temperatures had stabilised following the last ice age. The first modern humans to visit the Cotswolds were hunter-gathers, who came to exploit herds of deer and other wild animals. They set up seasonal camps hunting animals and gathering plants and fruits.

Around 4,000 BC, the Cotswold landscape began to change dramatically. Woodland was cleared to create small open fields to farm. Houses were built and people began to settle. Early farming communities grew cereal crops and kept sheep, pigs and cattle. This period is called the Neolithic. In 2010 at Park Corner, near Sapperton, archaeologists excavated a small, shallow pit. It contained stone tools, burnt hazelnut shells and charred cereal grains including barley, emmer and spelt wheat. They had discovered a 6,000-year-old rubbish bin.





Men hunting a deer during the Bronze Age. From *L'Homme Primitif*, published 1870. [alamy.com](https://www.alamy.com) JGAK4J

These first farmers also constructed monuments known as long barrows. Four have been recorded north of Sapperton around the headwaters of the River Frome at Duntisbourne Abbots and Duntisbourne Rouse. Long barrows were mounds of earth covering one or more stone chambers. Human remains were placed in the chambers and represent the burial place of the farming communities.



West Kennet Long Barrows, Wiltshire. [iStock Neill Bussey 1344273433](https://www.iStock.com/NeillBussey)

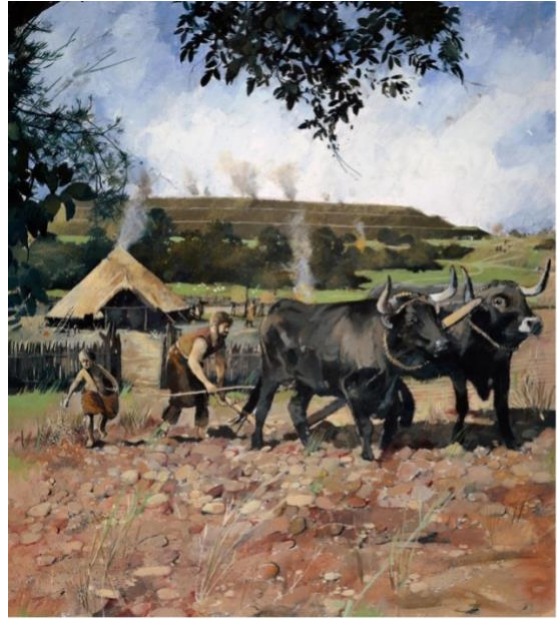
After 2,500 BC, important technological advances associated with the extraction of metal ores resulted in the production of the first metal tools. Farmsteads were built and enclosure of the land began with evidence for field systems. This period is known as the Bronze Age. People were buried in individual graves covered by a circular mound. A small group of round barrows, north of Overly Wood, cluster on the crest of the hill.



Iron Age Farming

During the first millennium BC, the population of the area and the density of settlement expanded rapidly. The period from around 800 BC to 43 AD is known as the Iron Age.

Farmers spent their lives raising crops, tending herds and managing woodlands. The Cotswold landscape was covered with hillforts, settlements and farmsteads. The development of land boundaries, in the form of banks, ditches and hedgerows began. Hillforts were often situated on or connected to major routeways to move herds of animals and crops across the Cotswolds and beyond. Hillforts have been identified at nearby Trewsbury, Coates and Pinbury, Duntisbourne Rouse. Horse-breeding, cereal production and the manufacture of coins generated wealth for the communities in the eastern Cotswolds.



Iron Age Arable Cultivation, c.1990-201, Ivan Lapper alamy.com HT3K5H

Roman Sapperton

A group of buildings dating to the Roman period have been identified close to Hailey Wood. The site is located on a low hill overlooking the source of the River Thames and just 200 metres from the famous Sapperton Canal Tunnel. Recent survey work suggests that these buried remains represent a temple site similar to those discovered at nearby Uley and Nettleton. The existence of sanctuaries at the source of major rivers is well known and this seems the most likely explanation for the complex at Hailey Wood.

At Hanover Firs, Duntisbourne Rouse, a rare iron buckle plate inlaid with silver wire and gold studs was found in a grave of an adult male. A date of 600-850 AD was obtained from scientific analysis of the human bone. The burial was a short distance from a field boundary, perhaps part a late Roman farming estate.

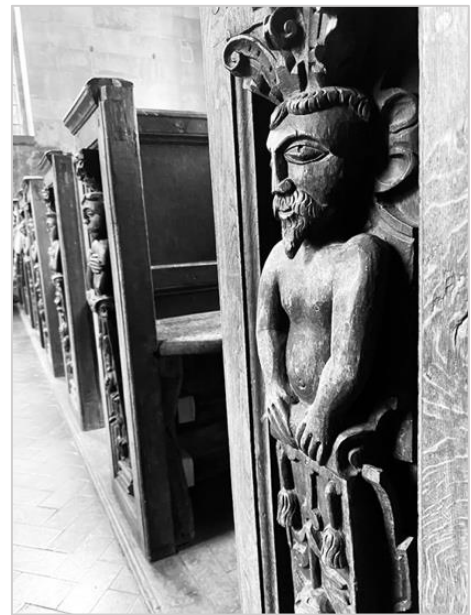


The Second Millenium: From Feudal Farming to Arts and Crafts

The Norman invasion saw William the Conqueror reward his knights with gifts of land. In 1086, the Domesday Book records Robert holds "Sapleton" and Frampton (Mansell) in Bisley Hundred with 5 hides in one, and 5 in the other. A hundred was a unit of local government and taxation, between a village and shire. A hide was a unit of land required to support one family. The combined value of the two manors was £16. Sapperton was in the possession of Robert de Todini from Tosny, a village on the Seine.

The buildings of the village also command great interest, particularly the parish church dedicated to St. Kenelm. The church, 12th century in origin, was last remodelled during Queen Anne's reign. It houses a number of important monuments to once prominent members of the village including Sir Henry and Lady Anne Poole and Sir Robert Atkyns.

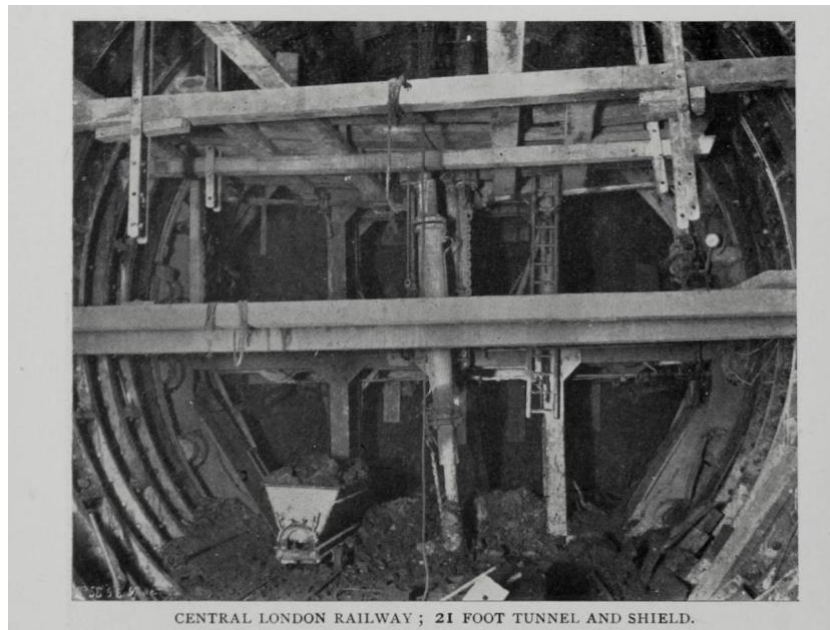
The church is filled with Jacobean carvings and panelling once part of the banqueting hall of the manor house (figure to the right). The 1st Earl Bathurst had them donated to the church before the manor was demolished in 1730. The churchyard contains a base and shaft of a 15th century stone cross; one of many found across the Cotswolds which marked stopping points on pilgrimage routes.



The tombs of Ernest Gimson, Ernest Barnsley and Sidney Barnsley, prominent members of the Cotswold Arts and Crafts movement, lie at the entrance to the churchyard. From the churchyard, there are commanding views into the valley where the famous canal tunnel begins just below the village.



Sapperton is renowned for the presence of the Thames and Severn Canal and the two-and-a-half-mile tunnel dug deep below the earth. The canal, linking Bristol to London, was completed in 1789. The construction of the canal and tunnel was a colossal undertaking and a triumph of 18th century engineering skill. It has been disused since the early 1900s. The arrival of the railway by 1845, with Brunel's Cheltenham and Great Western Union Railway, marked the



Central London Railway 21 foot Tunnel and Shield from the Article THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAYS OF LONDON. By Frederick E. Cooper, from The Engineering Magazine Devoted to Industrial Progress Volume XV 1898 The Engineering Magazine Co

inevitable decline of the canal. The railway route largely duplicated that of the canal and a second tunnel, dug to carry the railway, is still in use. The canal, railway, mills, tunnels, locks and bridges represent the most important industrial landscape to survive in the Cotswolds.



Sapperton Railway Tunnel



Sapperton Railway Tunnel, Daneway Portal

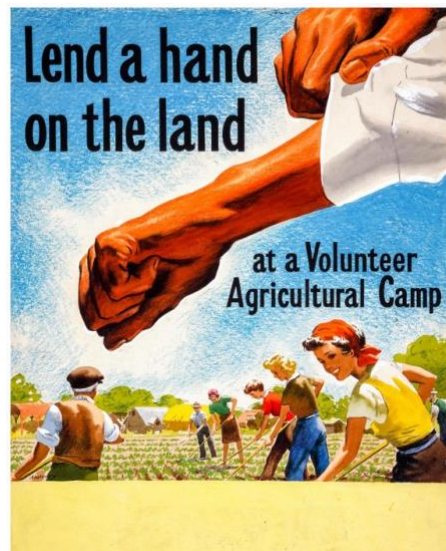
Early twentieth century Sapperton became the hub of the Cotswold Arts and Crafts movement. It is connected with four of its leading designers Ernest Gimson, Norman Jewson, Ernest Barnsley and his brother Sidney Barnsley, who made the village the centre for their craft workshops. They built or rebuilt many buildings under the patronage of the Bathurst family in the Arts and Crafts style including Sapperton village hall.





Sapperton Village Hall, architecture from the Cotswold Arts & Crafts era

Farming intensification, driven by the post WWII need for food security, saw the adoption of increasingly mechanised and input dominated farming, to the detriment of the natural environment.



British WWII food production poster "Lend a hand on the land at an Agricultural Camp" 1939-1946 alamy.com 2A1F3A2 & 2A1F3A7



We know now that nature can respond rapidly if allowed to and while the challenges seem huge, the archaeological perspective shows us that actually, many of the principles of regenerative farming have been used by thriving communities for millennia.



Dr Alison Grierson-Brookes is a freelance Archaeologist based in Gloucestershire, with over 20 years' experience in museum curatorship, historical interpretation, research & development, and public speaking. She combines her passion for walking and archaeology to research and interpret the historical landscape.

