

The local landscape

The entire Estate is located on the chalk uplands of southern England, and was once primarily given over to sheepwalks – huge open areas of unimproved downland that supported large numbers of sheep.

Early maps show no woodland in the area apart from Hills Copse (which is undoubtedly ancient woodland) and possibly the oddly named Windy Dido, which has uncertain origins. It seems that much of this downland was replaced by ploughed farmland early in the 19th Century, before the present Estate was created.



Archaeological excavations in the Windy Dido area support the theory that this landscape was cleared of its original woodland cover in Neolithic times and was farmed for as much as 4,000 years, perhaps up to and beyond the Roman Conquest. After this time, the land became grassland, grazed by huge numbers of sheep in medieval times.

In most places, the chalk soils are thin. Famously 'hungry', they hold little in the way of rich organic material and require regular applications of manure to keep them in good heart. It is this 'challenge' with such soil types that attracted Stephens to the area in the first place; he wished to show that a scientific approach to agriculture could achieve good results no matter what the circumstances. In this he

was spectacularly successful, creating a model example of farming for Victorian agriculturalists.

Much of the landscape of the Estate today is the result of those 19th Century innovations. This applies particularly to the numbers of trees and hedges.