

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 9

Kit's Coty House and the Medway Megaliths

Introduction

This brief provides a short history of the ancient megaliths to be found in the Medway Gap area, situated 4 miles south of Rochester, alongside the North Downs Way and close to the ancient trackway known as the Pilgrims' Way. These megaliths include; the entrance to a long barrow known as Kits Coty House; the countless stones, also known as Little Kit's Coty and a large sarsen dolmen known as the White Horse Stone.

According to Jessop all the megaliths are constructed from local sarsen stone. However Christopher John Wright states that while the megaliths are made of sarsen stone, which comprises sand hardened by silica infiltration, he argues that the stones are not of a kind quarried locally and may be the remains of stones strewn around after an ice-age.¹

Directly due west from Kits Coty House, on the other side of the Medway valley lie a set of stones similar to Kits Coty House. These are known as the Coldrum stones. As with Kits Coty, the Coldrum stones are very close to the Pilgrims Way. It has been suggested that an avenue of stones linked the Coldrum stones with Kits Coty and served as an aid that marked the Pilgrims Way as the track left the obvious route of the valley's shoulders and made its way across the Medway Gap. This pathway may have crossed the Medway at Snodland, which lies on the river midway between Kits Coty on the eastern shoulder and the Coldrum stones on the western shoulder.

Frank Jessop states that the makers of the long barrows were from the "same general civilisation as the men who erected Stonehenge."² However Christopher John Wright, in his guide to the Pilgrims' Way suggests that the Coldrum stones and Kits' Coty share an affinity with similar megaliths to found in the Rhineland and are dissimilar from those found in Wiltshire.³ He also suggests that the people who built them

¹ Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs way*, Constable, p.183.

² Frank W Jessop, *Kent History Illustrated*, 1966, Kent County Council, p.10

³ Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs way*, Constable, p.210.

travelled northward to southern England both by land and sea and that their settlements remained close to the rivers or sea. The area around Aylesford, which is close to Kits Coty, is an area where many remains of megalithic and neolithic flint implements and pottery have been found.

Kit's Coty House

The OS map reference for Kits Coty House is TQ 745608. Each of the three upright stones is 3 metres high with a table stone or capstone laid across the top. The stones served as the entrance to a long barrow, estimated to have been 70 metres long and covered by a mound of earth. Today the site comes under the jurisdiction of English Heritage.

Samuel Pepys wrote about the stones in the seventeenth century when he described them as " Three great stones standing upright and a great round one lying on them, of great bigness, although not so big as those on Salisbury Plain. But certainly it is a thing of great antiquity and I am mightily glad to have seen it".⁴ Hilaire Belloc in his classic description of what became known as the Pilgrims' Way linked the history of the ancient trackway with that of Kits Coty when he wrote "the overwhelming age of the way we had come was gathered up in that hackneyed place"⁵. It is believed that the ancient trackway itself originally went to Salisbury Plain. Robert Vermaat suggests that the name Kits Coty is derived from 'Coty' meaning 'house' and that 'Kit' comes from the name 'Catigern' who fought Hengist and Horsa here in 455AD.⁶

According to Frank Jessop the origin of Kits Coty dates back to 2500 BC when migration to Britain took place. He suggests that in the beginning of the Neolithic period these newcomers from mainland Europe were culturally far ahead of the Middle Stone Age inhabitants that mainly hunted or gathered wild fruit. The migrants brought new skills associated with land cultivation and livestock. He argues that their most spectacular achievement was the construction of great stone monuments known as megaliths.⁷ However later commentaries suggest that Kits Coty was built earlier, between 4300 BC and 3000 BC. This was in the New Stone Age but prior to the migration of neolithic farmers to Britain referred to by Jessop.

Early prints show that a large stone stood at the west end of the long barrow. However it is known that this stone, known as the General's Stone was blown up in 1867, probably to make it easier to plough the land.

⁴ **Roert Vermaat, The Grave of Catigern, internet site**

⁵ **Hilaire Belloc, The Old Road, published 1904, p.254 Constable and Co**

⁶ **Robert Vermaat, ibid.**

⁷ **Frank W Jessop, Kent Illustrated History, 1966, p 10 Dept Kent County Council**

A survey undertaken in 1981 by the Kent Unit showed that the mound of the long barrow is 70 metres long and about 1 metre high. It is believed that originally a stone kerb or peristalith surrounded the mound, which was 11 to 15 metres wide. An example of a burial chamber that still has the mound intact can be found on the east bank of the river Stour at Chilham, which is only a few hundred metres from the North Downs Way.

Little Kit's Coty House or the Countless Stones

The Countless stones lie 200 metres to the south of Kits Coty at OS 744604. These are the remains of a ruined prehistoric long barrow burial chamber. This group of stones has become known as the countless stones because it is said that no two people can count them and come up with the same answer. The countless stones are made of the same sarsen stone as Kit's Coty House.

The White Horse Stone

About 400 metres due north east of Little Kit's Coty lies the White Horse stone. This single sarsen stone is situated 2 metres to the left of the North Downs Way just after the trackway crosses the Euro raillink bridge and starts its ascent into Westfield Wood.

Legend has it that the Saxon leader Horsa was buried under the stone. It has also been suggested in popular folklore that when Horsa and Hengist landed in the Britain in 449AD, the White Horse standard was draped across the stone. The first time Kent was linked with the white horse emblem was when Richard Verstegan included in his book 'A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities' written in 1634, a woodcut of Horsa and Hengist landing in Kent with a standard depicting a rampant white horse. However armorial emblems were not used until the 12th century, so it highly unlikely that there is any validity in the link between the white horse emblem and the Saxons.

It is most likely that the White Horse stone was part of a megalith similar to the others that exist in the Medway area. However it is likely that it took its present name sometime around the 17th century.

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Catigern p.43 Discovering the North Downs Way David J. Allen, Patrick R Imrie 1980 Shire.