

Bratton's Lost Medieval Hamlet: The Littlestoke Project

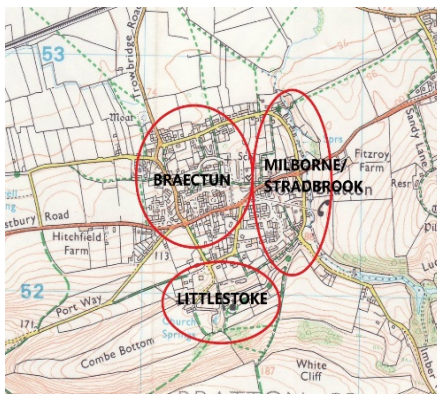
Mike Manson

The village of Bratton, lying beneath the northern escarpment of Salisbury Plain, is rich in history dating back to the Roman period and beyond. Much of this has been researched and recorded by the Bratton History Association in a series of booklets, *Bratton: Between Chalk and Cheese*.

There is, however, one historical mystery still to be solved. Beneath the fields to the south of the modern village lies the ghost hamlet of Littlestoke. Today, there are no traces of Littlestoke above ground, but its existence is known from historical records, and evidence of domestic occupation has been discovered in the area in recent years.

The Bratton History Association is keen to learn more about Littlestoke and its medieval inhabitants. How large was the hamlet, what types of buildings existed, how many families lived there, what kind of life did its residents experience? Then, of course, there is the greatest mystery of all: why did Littlestoke vanish so completely in the late Middle Ages?

These and other questions the Bratton History Association hope to answer in their new project to be launched in 2023. The exact launch date will depend upon volunteers coming forward.



Littlestoke

The village of Bratton was formed from the merger of three hamlets (in Old English): Braectun, Milborne (later Stradbrook) and Stoc (later Littlestoke).

The area covered by the first two of these hamlets forms most of the current village, which has been substantially developed over the centuries. However, Littlestoke disappeared completely with the exception of St James' Church, which now stands isolated.

Where Was Littlestoke?

Littlestoke existed as the south-western hamlet. It probably came into existence in the early Middle Ages, sometime after the Romans left England. Its inhabitants were almost certainly attracted by the fairly flat land at the bottom of Church Coombe and also by the spring at the southern edge of the area. The hamlet disappeared in the late Middle Ages, most probably in the mid-fourteenth century as a result of the Black Death although, to date, no written evidence has come to light confirming this.

As can be seen from the map (above) and aerial photo (right), most of the likely area of Littlestoke has been developed over the years. There are two houses, Combe Cottage and Hillside in Combe Lane, and Combe Farm with a large barn and other outbuildings at the western end of Combe Lane. The remaining area is given over to fields to the west, two gardens and large paddock in the centre, and Reeves Orchard and the extended churchyard to the east.



Aerial photo of Church Combe, looking west showing (within the red line) the probable area of Littlestoke

Is There Any Physical Evidence of Littlestoke?

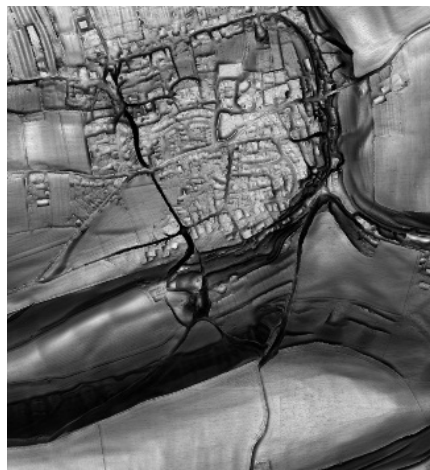
Some evidence of original building and occupation of the area has been found.

- Before the churchyard of St James' Church was extended to the south of the original graveyard in 2009, two trenches were dug to determine whether there was any significant archaeological evidence. A small quantity of broken pottery and other small items were found, but not significantly important enough to stop the churchyard extension.
- A brief magnetic imaging survey of part of the area south of the original, eastern extension of the graveyard was carried out in 2019. Unfortunately, this didn't identify anything significant except for a possible ancient trench.

Can We Find Out More?

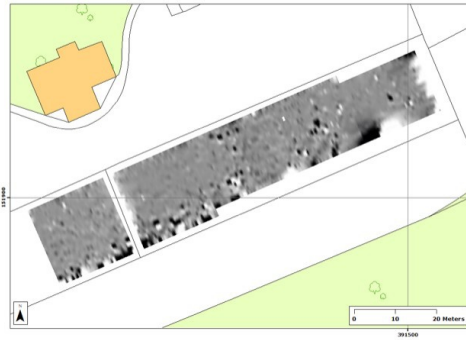
The Bratton History Association would like to find out much more about Littlestoke. There are various ways in which we might achieve this:

- **Archival Research.** The Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre is an obvious resource. However, the late Mrs Jean Morrison – whose research is housed at the Centre – carried out research on Bratton in the second half of the twentieth century and found very little about Littlestoke. To supplement this, research in other archives, such as the National Archive, should be possible.
- **Lidar imaging.** Coarse-scale LIDAR images of the area are available but they do not show anything significant. Fine-scale images could be obtained, but would be expensive. Nonetheless, these could be very useful in determining the more promising areas for investigation and we can apply for funding.



*Lidar image of Bratton provided by Phil Barrett. Source: Environment Agency.
The Littlestoke area is in the centre of this image*

- **Magnetic imaging.** The survey of 2019, mentioned above, was carried out by volunteers. We could ask them, or other colleagues, to carry out a wider survey. Access permission would need to be sought from the owners of the existing buildings and land mentioned above.



Geophysical magnetic image of part of Bratton churchyard, provided by Mike McQueen.

The church is the yellow/brown building in the top left.

- **Archaeological investigation.** It should be feasible to undertake an archaeological dig in the area. This would need to be carried out mainly, or perhaps entirely, by professional archaeologists. To save time and effort, this would take place after Lidar and/or magnetic imaging had identified the most promising sites.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Littlestoke project requires the involvement of professional historians, at the very least to provide expertise, direction, and coordination. It will hopefully be possible to interest the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, based at the Wiltshire Museum and Devizes respectively. We will try to involve one or more university history or archaeology departments. If enough evidence was found, we hope that a TV company, such as the one that produces the BBC's Digging for Britain series, might feature the project.

How You Can Help

In order for this project to get off the ground, we need volunteers. Tasks for volunteers might include:

- Archive research, which may involve travel. Ideally you would have some experience in research.
- Contacting and working with companies that offer to provide LIDAR surveys.
- Welcoming, guiding, and supporting a magnetic imaging team who might be expert volunteers.
- Contacting and liaising with a university archaeology department.
- Helping to administer the project as it develops, collating the various products from the work listed above.

If the project is successful then there are likely to be other tasks, especially if we reach the stage where an archaeological dig is thought to be worthwhile.

If you can help in any way, please contact Mike Manson, the BHA's Archive Project Officer, by emailing him at archive@brattonhistory.co.uk.

Posted 1 February 2023