



Brean Down

Standing on the seafront at Weston and looking to your left you will see Brean Down. Its steep sides jut out into the Bristol Channel towards Steep Holm Island.

These two limestone peaks are the last of the Mendip Hills as they meet the sea.

The Down's formidable natural defences led to it being inhabited by humans for thousands of years. The earliest remains discovered on the site date from around 10,000 BC. Archaeologists have also discovered the remains of several barrow mounds that formed an ancient cemetery there.



Brean Down seen from Weston beach ©James F Clay

Evidence of people living on Brean Down in the Neolithic period (4000 BC - 2500 BC) was uncovered in excavations in the 1960s and 1980s. Decorated pottery as well as bone and flint objects were found.

In 1936 a gale uncovered a burial pit believed to date from the Early Bronze Age (2500 BC - 1500 BC) based on two Beaker vessels found in it. Over the years many other finds have been made. These show that Brean Down was occupied throughout the Bronze Age by people who farmed the land on the hilltop.

In the Iron Age (800 BC - 100 AD) a hillfort was built on the Down. Part of the ramparts that protected it can still be seen at the western end of the Down today. Several pieces of pottery from the era have been found at the site. It is thought that the hillfort was abandoned soon after the Roman invasion and conquest of Britain that began in 43 AD.

Under the Roman occupation Brean Down became the site of a Romano-British settlement. The remains of a temple on the site, believed to have been built around 340 AD, were excavated in the 1950s.

Made from the same limestone as the Down itself, the temple was in use for perhaps 30 years before it was abandoned. It fell into disrepair and was demolished around 390 AD. Finds from the excavation of the temple can be seen in the collection at Weston Museum.

After the Roman withdrawal in 410 AD, Romano-British people continued to live on the Down. Some of them inhabited a building near the site of the temple, which was likely built with stone taken from it.

A cemetery dating from the Romano-British period (which lasted until the late 600s AD) has also been discovered. 18 burials from this time were excavated in the 1950s and the 1980s. All of the bodies in the graves were lying east to west with the heads pointing to the west. This strongly suggests that the people living on Brean Down at this time were Christians.

People continued to live and work there through the middle ages and beyond. Records from the 1300s mentioning rabbit warrens are supported by archaeological evidence. Further mention of warrens is found in records from 1637. The remains of buildings from around this time have been found, as have pieces of locally made pottery.

With the vast tidal range in the Bristol Channel, Brean Down offered an ideal location for a harbour that could operate at all tides. The late 1800s saw an attempt to build such a harbour on the tip of the promontory.



The remains of the Iron Age hillfort ©Howard



An artist's impression of the planned harbour © Weston Museum

The foundation stone was laid and construction begun in 1864. However, disagreements within the company financing the construction, and the death of the contractor, led to the abandonment of the scheme in 1868. Much of what had been built was destroyed by heavy storms in 1872. All that can be seen today are the foundations of the harbour's pier at low tide.

Also to be found on the tip of the promontory, the most obvious historical remains on the Down today are those of the fort built in 1866. Not long before this the French Navy had launched its first Ironclad battleship, and the fort was meant to protect the Bristol Channel from invasion. It originally housed a garrison of 50 men and had space for 20 horses.

The stone walls of the fort held several large rifled cannons that could fire on ships moving up the channel. These cannons were supplied with ammunition from underground magazines.



A trench outside the Victorian fort © Chris Talbot

In 1900 a huge explosion in one of the magazines, thought to have been caused by a gunman firing his rifle into it, severely damaged the fort. After this, the fort was closed and the guns sold off in an auction.

More military installations were built on Brean Down during the Second World War. The fort itself was modernised and used as a coastal battery and observation post. Nissen huts, the foundations of which can still be clearly seen, were built nearby to house military personnel.

At the same time, six brick machine gun emplacements were built on top of the landward end of the Down. Soldiers practised firing light machine guns from these positions at targets moored in Weston Bay. On the south side a huge concrete arrow was constructed to guide trainee bomber pilots on their missions.



The former machine gun emplacements © Chris Talbot

Brean Down was also used by the Directorate of Miscellaneous Weapons Development as a launch site for rockets and other experimental weapons. Some of the DMWD's better known weapons, such as the naval bouncing bomb, were tested there.

Today, Brean Down is a peaceful place and a popular attraction for tourists drawn by its spectacular views and fascinating history.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council