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## Welcome to Fontmell Down Forest School



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**This woodland is dedicated for Forest School activities, a resource for local schools and groups to help individuals connect with nature and each other, and develop themselves as people.**

### **The woodland**

Planted in 1897, this woodland is called Stony Plantation after Richard Stony who worked for the owner of Fontmell Down. It started as two parallel lines of Beech trees and then later Birch and Corsican pine were added. In 2017 the Corsican pines were felled, as they were unsuited to shallow chalky soils and were dying from Chlorosis – an inability to make chlorophyll. This has opened up the woodland and encourages self-sown sapling trees to grow. We have also replanted native broadleaves including Whitebeam, Hornbeam and Spindle. Trees planted in the 20th century on the cross-dykes will be gradually removed to reduce the threat of damage to the ancient earthworks caused by roots and windblown trees. We will continue to manage the woodland to help improve its biodiversity.

### **Evidence of early farmers**

The Downs have been occupied by farming communities since the first farmers arrived from the continent over 6000 years ago in the Neolithic (New Stone Age) period. Here in the wood and nearby are ancient boundary banks and ditches, or dykes, created by later farmers in the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age, about 2500-3000 years ago. At that time, climate change and population growth

brought increased pressure on the fertile lands of present-day Dorset. This led people to build field-systems and boundary dykes across the Downs to secure their land and to manage their precious livestock - their cattle and sheep were the main source of wealth for these communities. Some dykes ('cross-dykes') run for short distances across the ridges between valleys. Others run for many kilometres and probably served as territorial boundaries. (Both types can be seen on nearby Melbury Hill.) They often continued in use for many centuries and some still serve as parish or county boundaries.

In the later Iron Age (around 2000-2500 years ago) the local tribal communities built hillforts enclosed by great earthwork ramparts. They were a combination of fortified stronghold, settlement and communal gathering places for trading and for religious and ceremonial events. From the far side of the wood, looking west, is the impressive hillfort on Hambledon Hill with a Neolithic long barrow on its central hilltop.

The cross-dykes here at Fontmell have survived because they have not been ploughed. In the Middle Ages this land was sheep pasture belonging to Shaftesbury Abbey and some areas have remained pasture ever since.