Bredon Hill

Down in the south of Worcestershire, things get a little bit hilly. There's the Cotswold Escarpment, of course, elbowing its way in from Gloucestershire, and the towering summits of the Malvern Hills. There's Clee Hill too, and Clent.

But one hill in particular has a sense of mystery and permanence about it. It's said of Bredon Hill that once you have lived in its shadow, you cannot move anywhere else. It's not that you can't sell your house; more that the hill itself demands that you stay.

I'm not one for ley lines or force fields; I disposed of that set of beliefs back in the 1970s. But if a landscape can have an aura of antiquity, of things long forgotten, then Bredon and its surroundings have it.

Let's put the place on the map to begin with. The southern slopes of Bredon Hill mark the end of Worcestershire, with Tewkesbury to the south of it and Pershore and Evesham to the north. If you prefer more prosaic directions, look left as you head down the M5, just after Strensham services. The hill stands 961 feet in its stockinged feet.

Every self-respecting hill needs something on the top of it to mark its rendezvous with heaven. (Imagine Glastonbury Tor without the church tower.) In the case of Bredon they had to wait until the 18th Century for a suitable culmination in the square tower of "Parson's Folly". Historians differ as to the exact date when the folly arrived, but agree that it operated more as an eye-catcher than for any practical purpose.

Parson's Folly had one useful contribution to make, however. Add its 39 feet to the height of the hill, and Bredon is rounded up to a neat 1,000 feet. This is either coincidence or something much more mystical.

Not that the summit of Bredon Hill was ever truly deserted or unclaimed. The ramparts of an Iron Age hill fort, known as Kemerton Camp, are still to be seen at the top, with the remains of another - Conderton Camp - a little further down on the southern slopes. Archaeological evidence of a Bronze Age "beaker" burial shows that the site was in use much earlier still, perhaps as far back as 2000 BC. There are, in addition, a number of standing stones scattered across the hill, which were either free-standing structures or the solid remains of collapsed long barrows. The so-called King and Queen stones appear to be the latter, taking the period of human occupation back as far as the Neolithic period, more than 5,000 years ago.

In their efforts to untangle the mysteries of Bredon Hill, the archaeologists have only served to deepen the mystery. Excavations at Kemerton Camp in the 1930s uncovered, near the entrance to the inner ramparts of the fort, the burial place of some 50 slaughtered men, along with a great number of weapons. Are they evidence of a last stand against the Roman invasion, or of some internecine strife between warring tribes ?

Throw in a few ring-ditches and the odd holy well, and you have a site which was clearly marked out as important by our ancient forebears.

Nor did the fun stop with the Roman occupation. Hills do not stop being strategically important for a millennium after that. Charters from the late Saxon period show that there was a settlement - a burh - on top of Bredon Hill as late as the 10th Century, probably re-using the defensive ramparts that the Iron Age had left behind.

However, useful as a hill-top site no doubt was in the turbulent days of Viking attack, it's an awful long way to carry the groceries, and the village must have been abandoned sometime before Domesday. It was down at the foot of the hill that most of the Anglo-Saxon villages sprung up.

It's equally possible that when the Normans arrived to build their castle at Elmley to the north-east of Bredon Hill, they didn't take kindly to being overlooked (it's an issue with house-hunters even today), and evicted the villagers.

Elmley Castle - both a military fortress and a placename - was constructed around 1080 by Urse D'Abitot, Sheriff of Worcestershire and buddy of William the Conqueror. Here too use was made of the remains of an old Iron Age fort to build up the castle defences. No doubt Urse or someone like him was also responsible for the marvellously disturbing Norman font in the village church, around which four dragons sinuously entwine. There are equally odd, and very un-Christian, carvings in the nearby church of Beckford.

As for the castle, it later fell into the arms of the Beauchamps, Earls of Warwick, and until they settled on the latter as a preferred seat of power, Elmley served them well enough. The Beauchamps were still using and extending the castle well into the 15th Century, before leaving it to crumble away.

When the antiquary, John Lelend, visited the area in 1545 or thereabouts, only one tower of the haughty structure was still standing, and Leland watched as cartloads of stone were being taken away to effect repairs to Pershore bridge.

But for all the comings and goings, from the Bronze Age to the 21st Century, Bredon Hill has stood, proudly indifferent to changing times and fashions. That, in essence, is what hills do.