Father Christmas isn’t the only one preparing for a flight across the wintry skies—our LiDAR flights have begun, with the first sortie commencing on Thursday 13th December.

No fear of the jolly sleigh getting picked up in our laser scans though as the efficient team at Cyient will have gathered all our data points by then. (We have made some back-of-the-envelope estimations that nearly half a trillion measurements will be taken!)

Covering the areas in blue on the above map, this 1400 km$^2$ will show a plethora of new archaeology to consider, as well as contextualising the features we know about already.

We will have the processed data ready to share with you all through the online portal in May, so we can begin to discover together what lies under the trees.

Seasons Greetings from
 Beacons of the Past!

This festive season saw the team lead two walks around some perhaps less well understood hillforts: Maiden Bower and Bozedown Camp. Each will be explored more in future ‘Featured Features’ columns.

With seasonable but pleasant weather, we took in some of the archaeology and local lore, whilst fortifying ourselves with mince pies and a hearty pub lunch at the road’s end.

Thanks to all who came along and be sure to watch out for repeat walks (and new ones!) in the New Year if you missed out!
We have said it before, and we will say it again! The heart and soul (not to mention the strong arms!) of the project are our volunteers. We are so fortunate to have such enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and fun people signed up to work with all aspects of Beacons of the Past.

We have begun training sessions for archaeological Geographic Information Systems (GIS), with three sessions held across the region in Aylesbury, Oxford, and High Wycombe. Ed led the groups through how to use spatial data to make maps, and investigate archaeological patterns.

Attendees were very kind with feedback, and encouraged by this, and the fact that sessions continue to be over-subscribed, we will be holding many more. If you missed out, there will be one coming to a venue near you soon!

We have also begun training in earthworks topographic survey, led by Dr Olaf Bayer. On a cold but clear day, he lead a dozen of us in beginning the new topo survey of Cholesbury Camp.

Scrub bashing has taken off, working with David Wodehouse and Paul Dean at the National Trust site on Pulpit Hill. Yet another sunny day saw a dozen volunteers cutting through brush and bramble to restore some of the chalk grassland environment below the ramparts.

If you are not already on the list, do sign up to be kept in the loop on all the events going

A large component of the activities Beacons of the Past will relate to increasing understanding of local prehistory among primary and secondary school children.

We want to help teachers to bring the past to life in the furtherance of delivering the National Curriculum’s mandate on British Prehistory, and we are offering some helpful tools to do just that. These range from resource boxes to bring into the classroom, assemblies held by project members and partners, facilitated site visits and virtual tours in the classroom. We intend to leave a legacy of information, resources, and guidance that will outlive the length of the project and hopefully be of use to Chilterns schools for years to come. But most importantly, we want to deliver help that teachers actually need and want!

We are holding a free workshop on 08 March 2019 to discuss how we might best be able to help schools achieve their goals through the support of the Beacons project.

Lunch (and cake!) are provided and reasonable travel reimbursed (no flights via Hawai’i, please).

If you know a teacher, or want your children and grandchildren’s schools to get involved, please help us spread the word!

A downloadable flyer is available here.
What’s coming up?

What:  **Introduction to LiDAR for Archaeology**
When:  Wednesday 23 January  **1000-1200 or 1300-1500**  (Chalton Village Hall, NW of Luton)
Where:  Thursday 07 February  **1000-1200 or 1300-1500**  (Chalfont St Peter, nr Amersham)
Join Dr Ed Peveler for one of these four 2-hour training sessions which will outline basic theory and method behind LiDAR survey and visualisations, as well as how archaeologists interpret the data, and the sites specific to the Chilterns which will be appearing. No previous experience is required. These events are limited to 15 individuals.

What:  **Neolithic Scrub Bashing**
When:  Tuesday 12 February  0930-1530
Where:  Waulud’s Bank, Luton
Katherine Miskin of TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) will guide us in beating the scrub back to help reclaim and preserve the northeast ditch and bank of the Neolithic enclosure. Safety training, as well as tools and gloves appropriate for the task will be supplied. Bring your own packed lunch and drinks, and we will provide a little light entertainment (i.e., a brief talk about the archaeology) during lunch. Wear old clothes and dress for all weather, and bring a spud for baking in the fire if you like! This event is limited to 15 individuals.

What:  **An introduction to using QGIS for Archaeology**
When:  Saturday 19 January  1000-1400
Where:  Chalton Village Hall
Join Dr Ed Peveler for a 3.5-hour session designed for beginners or novices at GIS to gain an increased understanding of ways to use this software, with a particular focus on archaeological questions. No prior knowledge is required, but a basic working knowledge of the Windows PC operating system would be useful. In this session we hope to give you some knowledge and skills of GIS, a really important tool for archaeological research. Please note that this session is slightly different from the earlier ones in that you will need to have and bring your own laptop, with the QGIS software (free!) already installed, in order to participate. Instructions will be sent to those who successfully get a place. The event is limited to 14 people.

To participate in an event, fill in the form linked in the title. If numbers are limited, all participants will be entered into a random ballot to fill the spaces. Ballots close 10 January 2019

If you don’t get a space, there will be plenty of repeat events, so keep trying!

Erosion right before our very eyes!

A big shout to *Beacons* volunteer Clare Pavers, who is undertaking a photographic record of the chalk erosion at Ivinghoe Beacon. This hillfort is one of the most visited and well-known sites in the Chilterns, and yet it is being ‘loved to death’ by well-meaning walkers who frequently walk to the side of the eroded bits in order to not exacerbate them, yet in doing so spread the damage. By conducting this photographic survey over the next 6 months, Clare is helping us look at the rate of change, which is the first step in examining how to find solutions that work for the monument as well as for the thousands who love it.
Featured Feature: Ivinghoe Beacon

Prominently set at the northern end of the Ivinghoe Hills, over 230m above sea level, Ivinghoe Beacon is probably the most recognizable of all the Chiltern hillforts.

Sedimentary bedrock was formed here almost 100 million years ago during the Cretaceous period, when sea levels were much higher, covering this area. That’s had a significant impact on the landscape, because the chalk of the Chilterns hills has eroded more slowly than the clay that dominates Aylesbury Vale below. As a result we are left with a high grassy vantage point overlooking a flat expanse of valley. To the north, the route of the ancient Icknield Way is still visible, whilst the Ridgeway Trail, which follows the southern corridor of the Icknield Way, can be seen stretching south from the hillfort.

The view from the top attracts many modern day visitors, but we know from archaeological enquiry that this spot was also appreciated by ancient peoples. One of the earliest hillforts in Southern Britain, Ivinghoe was likely first constructed in the Late Bronze Age (c.1150 BC). Possible evidence of flint extraction on nearby Pitstone Hill may suggest earlier activity.

The fort occupies the entire summit of the hill and several round barrows (or burial mounds) have been found in the vicinity, as well as a substantial bowl barrow within the perimeter earthworks of the fort itself. This archaeological feature is a prominent flat topped mound 23m in diameter and part of a cemetery which may hold as many as 11 barrows.

Evidence abounds for the daily life of the prehistoric communities of Ivinghoe: a possible midden (or rubbish tip) situated just outside the earthworks; simple foundations of several houses, indicating a short street below the northern ramparts; the belongings of early settlers including Iron Age pottery and late prehistoric flints; animal bone fragments, and human remains. A Wilburton-type bronze sword dated to between 1200-1000 BC, in excellent condition was discovered by a metal-detectorist illegally – metal detecting on this site, as on all Scheduled Monuments, is a prosecutable offense.

Cumulatively, the evidence suggests the hillfort may have been a focus for funerary arrangements as well as a substantial settlement, but there is still much to learn. Certainly the viewpoint, escarpment, and earthworks would have benefited settlers defensively, but the extensive evidence for less violent activity such as farming is just as significant.

The Beacons of the Past LiDAR survey will provide new insights into the history and culture of this fascinating place.

Ivinghoe Beacon provides a haven for wildlife due to the important chalk grassland, which covers the steep scarp slopes. For many centuries, this species-rich land has been maintained coincidentally, as part of traditional agricultural practices, such as sheep grazing and hay-cutting.

Up to forty species of flowering plants can be found in one square metre of chalk grassland, and some species are unique to the habitat, including many beautiful orchids, gentians, wild candytuft, Great Pignut and other wildflowers. In turn, the variety of wildflowers attracts many species of insect, including moths and rare butterflies such as the Duke of Burgundy, Small Square-spot and Brindled Beauty.

With all the history and wildlife that Ivinghoe Beacon has to offer, it is important that modern visitors should enjoy hiking the monument without causing undue damage or erosion – a balance the National Trust, the Ridgeway Partnership, and the Chilterns Conservation Board strive to monitor regularly.