

may have been some form of worship at this site in prehistoric times due to the concentration of ley lines here, but the chapel itself was a later Christian construction, which also gave the hill its name.

There is a fable of stones being mysteriously moved from the hill to the site of Christchurch Priory in the town below, which led to the building of what is now the longest parish church in England. This also led to the neglect of the hill site, which was finally demolished after the dissolution of the monastery at Christchurch in the sixteenth century.

The hill, being distant from the town, is believed to have been used as an isolation area in the event of epidemics and there could have been plague pits in the area. Christchurch certainly enforced quarantine in 1664 when bubonic plague was a risk locally.

In more recent years it has served as a military training ground. In the First World War, St Catherine's Hill was used to train troops, and a complete set of trench works were built to train men for the Western Front, both in terms of trench construction and in trench warfare. This included the use of barbed wire, machine guns, mines, mortars and grenades.

The hill even had a role to play in the Cold War as the Royal Observer Corps built an atomic-blast observer post into the hill when the Cold War threatened us with nuclear oblivion. This three-man post was sunk into the

hill and intended to be self-contained for up to three weeks. The post is now long closed.

St Catherine's Hill has also had its industrial uses, with part of the top of the hill being removed for gravel quarrying in the early twentieth century. The quarrying tore the centre out of the hill so that it looks like a desert or moonscape. As such, it has attracted the attentions of filmmakers. There are also two large closed water-storage reservoirs, built in 1895 and 1963, on the plateau.

The hill and Town Common below it represent an internationally important wildlife haven in an ever-expanding human environment. The open heather landscape is ancient, the result of around 4,000 years of human interaction. It is also one of the most threatened, which is why this area is now an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest).

Town Common is an area where local commoners can still graze their animals. The commoners used Marsh Cottage here, which dates from 1573, for their meetings.

Around 200 years ago a vast area of Dorset and much of Southern England was covered by heath. Since then building development, agricultural intensification and planting of fast-growing coniferous trees across the area has changed things.

Locally less than fifteen per cent of our heathland heritage now remains, which is why the hill and the common are so important.