



Historic England

# Hillforts

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to hillforts. As the name implies, hillforts are defended places, surrounded by one or more circuits of banks and ditches, and generally placed on hilltops, ridges, spurs or promontories. Hillforts have been studied by archaeologists for 150 years. A brief chronology from 900 – 100 BC and a description of hillforts and their development follows. The variability amongst hillforts in terms of their size, form, defensive strength and occupation is immense. Some hillforts were built on the sites of Neolithic causewayed enclosures, some incorporate barrows, and many are associated with a number of other monument types in their contemporary late prehistoric landscape. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

This document has been prepared by Mark Bowden and edited by Joe Flatman, Sarah-Jane Hathaway and Pete Herring. It is one of a series of 41 documents. This edition published by Historic England October 2018. All images © Historic England unless otherwise stated.

Please refer to this document as:

Historic England 2018 *Hillforts: Introductions to Heritage Assets*. Swindon.

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## Front cover

The massive ramparts of Maiden Castle, Dorset, one of the biggest of the developed hillforts.



# Introduction

Hillforts are amongst the most striking of all archaeological monuments in England; their hilltop locations and often massive earthworks make a very powerful statement to the modern observer about the organisation, manual skills, labour and beliefs of Iron Age peoples over 2000 years ago (Figure 1).

As the name implies, hillforts are defended places, surrounded by one or more circuits of banks and ditches, and generally placed on hilltops, ridges, spurs or promontories (there are some instances of sites that from their form would be classified as hillforts but which are in very low-lying situations,

one of the more extreme examples of which has been called a 'marsh fort'). They were built and occupied during the period from about 900 to 100 BC, though many have been re-used since, as medieval castles, for instance (Figure 2).



**Figure 1**  
Barbury Castle, Wiltshire, a bivalent hillfort on the Marlborough Downs.



**Figure 2**  
British Camp hillfort, Herefordshire, on the Malvern Hills, conforms to the narrow ridge that it occupies; a medieval castle was later built on the highest point, Herefordshire Beacon.

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Hillforts were built across Europe (there are more than 3000 hillforts in the British Isles) but they are not found everywhere: within England the main hillfort areas are Wessex, the Welsh marches and the south-east, where hillforts are often very large,

covering up to 85 ha; smaller hillforts are found in Northumberland and the south-west. There are few hillforts in eastern England, the Pennines or the north-west.



# 1 History of Research

Hillforts have been studied by archaeologists for 150 years. At first much effort was put into the excavation of the defensive works themselves. More recently, attention has been paid to the features inside the forts, which are mainly the remains of structures associated with domestic and agricultural use, including storage pits.

Though they are surrounded by monumental earthworks (Figure 3), and therefore seen primarily as defended sites, hillforts had a varied range of other purposes in Iron Age society, and this is the subject of current debate; there is still much to be learnt about these impressive sites and the people who created them. The archaeological information stored within them is potentially very great.



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**Figure 3**  
The massive ramparts of Maiden Castle, Dorset, one of the biggest of the developed hillforts.

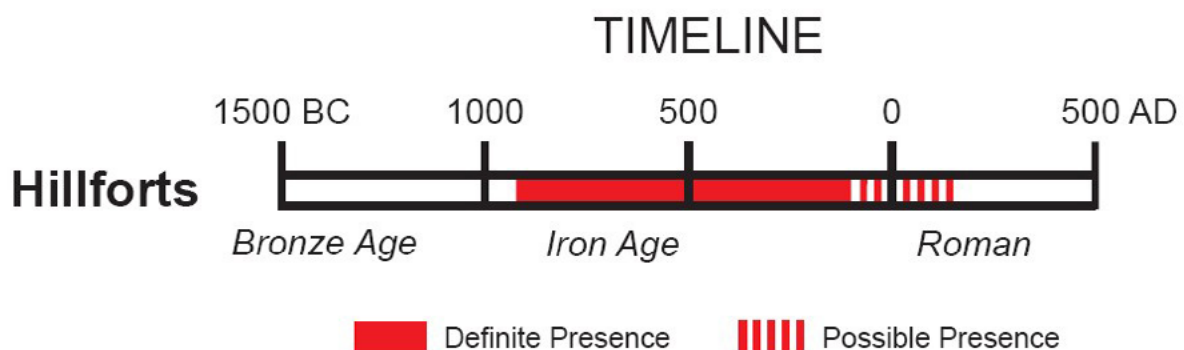
# 2 Chronology

The chronology of hillforts is understood in broad outline, in the south of England at least, but the details are uncertain. In other parts of the country the sequence is even less well understood. The first hillforts were probably built shortly after 900 BC in the later Bronze Age but the main building phase did not begin until five or six generations later, between 800 and 700 BC.

The early hillforts were 'univallate' (with one line of defences) and relatively slightly built, though they could occupy large areas. It was to be another three or four hundred years before these early hillforts were 'developed' into 'bivallate' and 'multivallate' forms, about 400 BC. At about this time many hillforts were abandoned, so though the survivors became much more elaborate and imposing, there were fewer of them. The 'developed' hillforts remained in use until they were abandoned round about 100 BC and replaced by a very different type of major settlement, the oppida.

Each of these periods of change in the story of hillforts marks a major change in the Iron Age societies which created them, though the mechanics of those changes and the reasons for them are unclear.

There is inconclusive evidence that some hillforts in southern England were defended against the legions during the Roman invasion of AD 43.



# 3 Development of the Asset Type

Hillforts were preceded by, and in many cases developed from, palisaded enclosures and early hilltop enclosures. Palisaded enclosures comprise one or more foundation trenches, still visible in some cases, which held substantial timber fences; they cover areas of less than 0.5 ha and are predominantly oval or circular. Most had a single entrance with a timber gate structure (Figure 4).



**Figure 4**  
The gate of Westbury Camp, Somerset, a small hillfort on Mendip; reconstruction drawing by Pete Dunn.



The distribution of palisaded enclosures centres on the uplands of the Anglo-Scottish border but examples have been found in the south. Upon excavation, the sites produce little material but the date range indicates a currency extending from the Late Bronze Age through to the post-Roman period. Many were subsumed by later developments. Timber roundhouses are frequently found within palisaded sites.

Early hilltop enclosures are 'univallate', predominantly rectilinear and usually in excess of 10 ha in area. The distinction between these enclosures and other hillforts is that the enclosure boundary is slight and irregular in relation to the large area enclosed and has no complex entrance arrangements: occasionally, the circuit is incomplete or disjointed. They are usually found in prominent locations but they are not confined to the highest points; many are overlooked by higher ground. Upon excavation, many are largely devoid of internal structures, containing only sparsely scattered features; artefact distributions are generally low, leading to their interpretation as either temporary refuges or communal storage sites. These enclosures are amongst the earliest to appear in the Iron Age, possibly in the 8th century BC.

The shape of a hillfort conforms usually to the shape of the ground it occupies; the variation in form and size of hillforts is therefore extensive. The defensive works of an early hillfort usually consist of a bank and an external ditch, which may have a 'counterscarp', or small bank outside it – a 'univallate' fort. In some cases a second bank and ditch was added, creating a 'bivallate' fort. In a few cases further lines of banks and ditches have been built; these 'multivallate' forts can have up to six defensive circuits. Bivallate and multivallate hillforts are also sometimes called 'developed hillforts'.

The banks, or 'ramparts', can be very large, up to 150 m wide overall, while individual ramparts can be more than 10 m high above the base of the surrounding ditch, as they survive today – originally the ditches would have been much deeper, as excavations have shown. In many cases, however, the defences are much smaller. Where there are steep slopes the ramparts often have very little substance at all; the builders have scraped up just enough soil to give the appearance from outside of a substantial earthwork. Ramparts sometimes had timber frames and were originally topped with timber palisades.

Where hillforts occupy the ends of spurs they are called 'promontory forts'; where ramparts demarcate promontories in cliff top locations on the coast, they are called 'cliff castles' (Figure 5). While cliff castles are broadly contemporary with hillforts and are generally seen as being similar, in practice they are quite different and far from offering a safe haven are often in dangerous and exposed situations, unsuitable for normal domestic activities – they present something of an enigma.



**Figure 5**  
Cliff castle at Chynhalls Point, St Keverne, Cornwall.



A variant is the multiple enclosure fort, occurring mainly in south-western England and comprising two or more enclosed elements either concentrically arranged or in a conjoined pattern; they are sub-circular or sub-rectangular. They date to between about 350 BC or earlier and the mid-1st century AD, but the duration of occupation is poorly defined. The inner enclosure usually covers an area of less than 1 ha but the outer earthworks can incorporate up to 10 ha or, exceptionally, up to 24 ha.

Excavations have revealed evidence for a range of circular structures, found predominantly within the inner enclosures, and small rectilinear structures, possibly granaries. These enclosures are found on hill slopes overlooked by higher ground, on plateaux, on the tops of steep-sided hills or on inland promontories or spurs.

Small hillforts usually have one entrance and larger ones two, rarely more. In southern England at least, where a hillfort has only one entrance it faces east and a second entrance nearly always faces west, regardless of the natural topography – north and south facing entrances are very rare. This pattern is reflected in contemporary farmstead enclosures and presumably reflects Iron Age beliefs.

Though ramparts and entrances now appear as grassy mounds they were originally sophisticated, engineered structures incorporating much stone and timberwork in their construction. Entrances in particular often had elaborate gateways; where the ramparts were very high there might be a bridge carrying a walkway at rampart-top level over the roadway. No doubt any exposed timberwork was elaborately decorated with carving and colour but this does not survive.

Entrance passages are sometimes elongated with extra earthworks and may incorporate other structures, such as recesses that have usually been interpreted as ‘guardrooms’ but which may have had some other, less obvious, function. Entrance ways were sometimes deliberately blocked during the occupation of the fort and

are therefore difficult to detect; conversely, the ramparts of hillforts have very often been breached in later times to improve access but these gaps are usually easily distinguished from original entrances.

The interiors of hillforts have been found to contain the remains of roundhouses (Figure 6), storage pits and other structures, such as small ‘four-post’ structures that most likely acted as agricultural stores. Other hillforts, however, appear to contain no trace of activity that can be detected by surface observation, geophysical survey or excavation. Roundhouse orientation in Iron Age Britain was strongly biased with most doorways facing east or south-east, probably reflecting religious or social beliefs; this pattern is reflected in most hillforts but it breaks down to some extent in ‘developed’ hillforts where a wider range of doorway orientations is evident.



**Figure 6**  
A roundhouse under construction within Danebury hillfort, Hampshire; reconstruction drawing.

It is notable that the roundhouses within a hillfort are usually all within a restricted size range and that no one structure appears to have a particularly dominant position or yields more signs of material wealth when excavated when compared to others. It is also true that hillforts do not appear to be wealthier, in terms of objects found, than other contemporary sites such as farmsteads. However, it may be that the 'wealth' of hillforts should be measured in the effort required to build and maintain their ramparts, and in their capacity for storing large amounts of agricultural produce.

Hillforts are often placed on scarp edges (Figure 7), overlooking lower ground, and this has sometimes been interpreted as representing 'chains' of forts in a system controlling a particular valley or vale. However, the variation amongst hillforts in terms of their size, form, defensive strength and occupation is immense. Some were flourishing and important places which lasted for some time, others appear never to have been

extensively used. Evidence for unfinished works is frequently seen.

Each hillfort seems to have been the expression of a local group and was an individual site, rather than part of a defensive 'system'. Although the defensive nature of hillforts implies that they were built in response to some threat of violence, there is very little unequivocal evidence of warfare taking place at the hillforts in general. However, there is strong evidence for warfare at Cadbury Castle (hillfort), where archaeological evidence in the destruction in the south-western gateway revealed deposits of fragmentary and partly-burnt human remains, weaponry, and dress fittings dated to the 1st century AD.

Though they may have seen some fighting in other hillforts, it is possible that most Iron Age acts of aggression – and we can be sure that there were many – took place elsewhere. The hillforts' other roles as settlements, food stores, meeting places and perhaps religious centres, became more important than their role in warfare.



**Figure 7**  
Kimsbury, Gloucestershire, on the Cotswold escarpment overlooking the Severn; the defences of this triangular hillfort are substantial on two sides but along the escarpment edge there is a very slight single earthwork.



# 4 Associations

Hillforts were often built on the sites of Neolithic causewayed enclosures; this may reflect the deliberate appropriation of a site that was significant because of its antiquity, rather than being simply coincidental. Hillforts sometimes incorporate barrows and are associated with a number of other monument types in their contemporary late prehistoric landscape. At their origins in the Late Bronze Age they are to be seen alongside, and developing out of, early hilltop enclosures and palisaded settlements (see above).

Hillforts flourished alongside a range of farmsteads, both enclosed and unenclosed, and may have been contemporary with some field systems, including cord rig, though interestingly they do not seem to be directly contemporary with the main periods of development of these systems. Hillforts also fell between the major periods of construction of linear boundaries and were not associated with them except in so far as they were often built over the junctions of Late Bronze Age linear ditches.

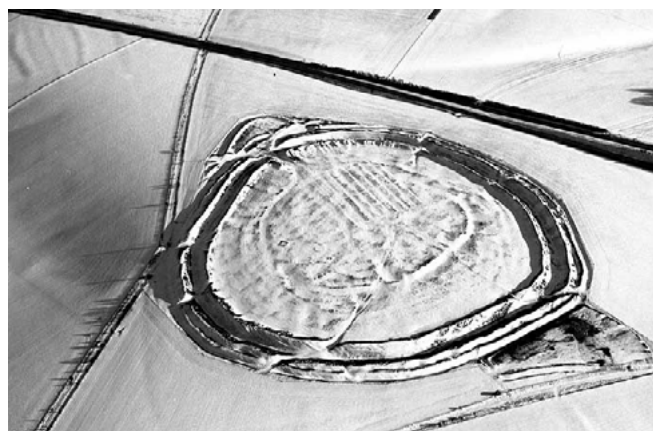
There may have been a brief period in the Early Iron Age, before 400 BC, when hillforts were the only settlement type in some parts of Wessex, for instance, and a significant number of the population could have lived within them.

After the end of the main period of hillfort occupation they were abandoned. A few had Roman forts built within them. Later in the Roman period, particularly in the middle of the 4th century AD, many temples were built within hillforts. In the post-Roman period (AD 450-700) several hillforts, mainly in the western part of Wessex, were re-fortified.

Saxon forts, medieval castles, and indeed whole towns or cities with cathedrals (Figure 8) and monasteries, were sometimes located within hillforts. Other hillforts became the venues for fairs and markets (Figure 9). Some hillforts acquired a new defensive role in the 20th century when they became the location for military installations, such as searchlight and anti-aircraft batteries.



**Figure 8**  
Old Sarum, Wiltshire, an Iron Age hillfort occupied until the 13th century by a medieval city with castle and cathedral.



**Figure 9**  
Yarnbury, Wiltshire, an Iron Age hillfort encompassing an earlier enclosure, was in the 18th -19th centuries the site of a sheep fair; earthworks of pens and stalls are visible.



# 5 Further Reading

The most complete source book for Iron Age Britain is Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (4th edition, 2005). For hillforts the same author's *English Heritage Book of Danebury* (1993; previously published in 1983 as *Danebury: Anatomy of an Iron Age Hillfort*) and Niall Sharples *English Heritage Book of Maiden Castle* (1991) are thorough studies of two Wessex hillforts.

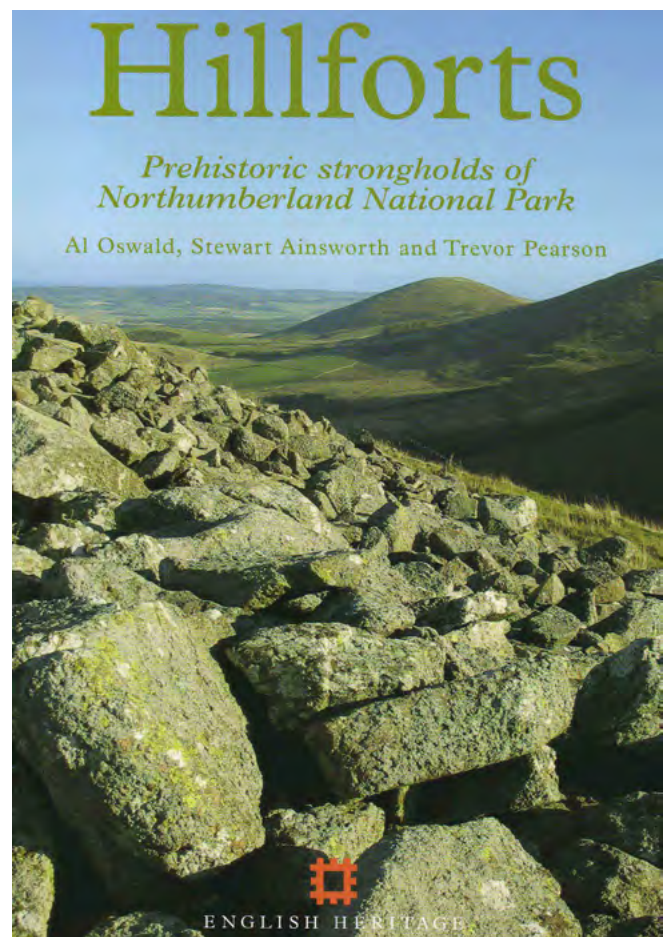
There have been few general works on hillforts since J Forde-Johnston's *Hillforts of the Iron Age in England and Wales: a Survey of the Surface Evidence* (1976); a recent well-illustrated survey is Ian Brown, *Beacons in the Landscape: The Hillforts of England and Wales* (2009). However, there is growing literature on regional and individual site-based research, as well as thematic works on the use of hillforts, such as P Robertson *Iron Age Hillfort Defences and the Tactics of Sling Warfare*, Archaeopress (2017).

In 2017 a new website was released, funded by the Arts and Humanities Council, and produced by Oxford University, called 'Atlas of Hillforts'. This contains an interactive digital map of all known hillforts in the UK, and is a great resource for understanding the distribution and number of hillforts: It can be accessed from: <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/>.

Two good regional studies are Andy Payne, Barry Cunliffe and Mark Corney, *The Wessex Hillforts Project* (2006) – a study of hillfort interiors through geophysical survey – and Alastair Oswald, Stewart Ainsworth and Trevor Pearson *Hillforts: Prehistoric Strongholds of Northumberland National Park* (2006). Ian Ralston's *Celtic Fortifications* (2006)

gives some useful European background. Also see Dan Garner et al, *Hillforts of the Cheshire Ridge*, Archaeopress (2016)

There are also excavation reports of individual hillforts, such as those at Cadbury Castle: Woodward, A., Barrett, J., Freeman, P., *Cadbury Castle Somerset: The later prehistoric and early historic archaeology* English Heritage (2000).



**Figure 10**  
Cover of *Hillforts: Prehistoric Strongholds of Northumberland National Park*, a book resulting from a major English Heritage survey project.

# 6 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk) noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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# 7 Acknowledgments

Figure 7: © R. Bewley





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HEAG206  
Publication date: v1.0 May 2011 © English Heritage  
Reissue date: v1.1 October 2018 © Historic England  
Design: Historic England and APS