

# FOB NEWS

Friends of Berry Castle Newsletter - Autumn 2020



Welcome to our Autumn edition. We hope that this Newsletter find you well. We have several longer articles, for you, featuring community archaeology, the first of a two-part piece delving into the question 'Are hillforts really forts?' and an account of the Devon Archaeological Society's visit to Berry Castle.

Last Spring, with an AGM under our belts, we had a number of events planned for the coming year. Like most groups, these were then put on hold. Although visits and talks were difficult to conduct, in person, technology offered an answer, with online talks and also the Festival of Archaeology. I was pleased to hear that several supporters took part in the festival and enjoyed the way it had 'evolved' for these strange times.

With lockdown in force, but with good weather, we had a larger than usual number of visitors to the site. It was wonderful to hear the positive comments from those who'd never visited before, despite lockdown halting the usual maintenance work.

However, with increased numbers, came significant damage to the site, itself. Stone sculptures began springing up, using stones from the bank and the area inside the monument. Some stones had been dug out of the ground, leaving many holes, scattered across the site. Signs were displayed, pointing out that it was an offence to damage a scheduled monument. This appeared to work, but sadly, the damage had already been done.



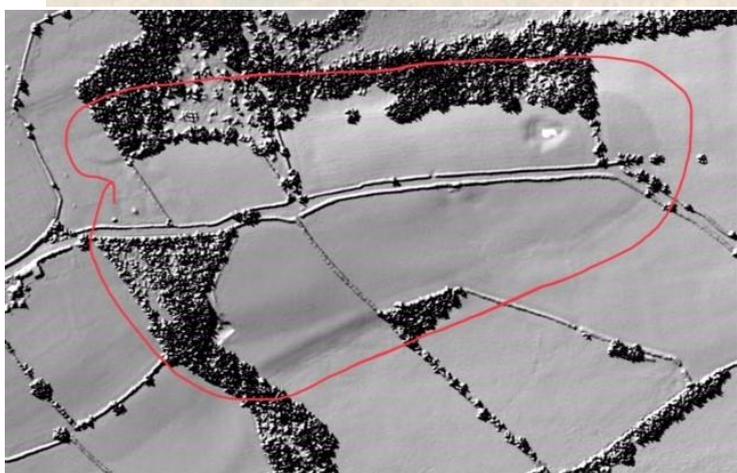
A number of years have been spent, attempting to preserve the site for the community. Please support us in stopping any more damage, whether it's intended or otherwise, by drawing people's attention to the signs, if you feel that it's necessary.

### Community History

When the Friends of Berry Castle was first formed, one of the objectives was to involve the community. Not just in maintain the site, but also creating a space in which people could visit. Whether it be for historical interest, or just a pleasurable walk around the site, taking in the views.

Making History and archaeology accessible, is vital to encouraging the community to engage with what you are doing. It's all too easy to give a high-brow response to a question, often forgetting that a simple answer was all they were looking for! Maintaining the initial interest can be difficult. As with anything new, people are curious. After that, the novelty value drops away as do the numbers.

Lockdown has given people time to investigate the archaeology in their own area.



From LIDAR images, more sites have been discovered.

With drones, aerial pictures can be taken of crops and markings in the landscape, highlighting possible new archaeology. Examples of trackways and a number of long and round barrows could be seen from above. Something which hadn't been observed before. Most Interesting was the set of wide parallel lines which ran for just over half a mile, through old field boundaries and a stream. With a number of buried stone axe heads nearby, could this be a possible cursus? The Eastern terminal gives a great view of Dartmoor, where the rising Winter Solstice sun appears to roll up the flank.



Possible cursus and flints

After presenting several talks to groups in the local area, communities have begun to investigate their landscape. For example, the dig at St Petrock's Well, back in 2019, brought the village of Newton St Petrock together. Although only a few villagers took on the digging itself, many others' interest was sparked off.

With time on their hands, due to lockdown, plenty of gardening seemed to be undertaken. Pottery, flints and lumps of quartz were unearthed. Others took it upon themselves to field-walk. Although the local farmers are not keen for strangers to carry this out, they don't bat an eyelid when it's just the villagers! Again, flint and large rounded lumps of quartz were common. Some weighing over 2kg. Interestingly, the large lumps of quartz show 'pecking', indicating that they had been struck, at some point. The shape of these stones, appeared to fit snugly in a hand, giving support when it was hit. With so many broken quartz flakes found around the well, could this be connected? As well as larger pieces, small quartz pebbles were also unearthed. Lumps of chalk and other non-native rocks were also found, along with a few strange carved stones.



Photographs and location of finds were sent to me, which I plotted out, on a map, where interesting patterns emerged. The concentration of quartz and chalk, often linked to cropmarks of enclosures, trackways and barrows. Maybe the quartz was used to make the sites stand out in the landscape, similar to Newgrange and other monuments with light coloured walls and banks.

Metalwork was also found, inside a cropmark of what is believed to be a Bronze or Iron Age enclosure, whilst metal-detecting. One appeared to be a latch, whilst the other, a thatching tool. Considering that there is no written record of any dwellings in the field, could these be from the prehistoric settlements? All significant finds were logged and reported to the County Archaeologist. Engaging the community, can be surprisingly productive. Finds which would never have been given a second look are now coming to light. Yes, there are lots of random stone; shards of a plate, probably from a picnic; bits of broken off agricultural equipment. However, every so often, something interesting is unearthed.



Without any real idea of how the future is looking for digs, I truly believe that engaging the community, in archaeology, is the way forward in these uncertain times.

Maybe you have found something which is of interest? Why not let us know about it as it would be great to feature the archaeology which you've discovered in your community.



Possible round and long barrow either side of a track?

## Are Hillforts really Forts? – A view from the ramparts

by

Michael Griffith-Jones

The vocabulary used to describe Iron Age settlements still troubles archaeologists as no-one is satisfied with the term "hillfort". If "fort" is understood in the modern sense of the word, it is misleading, as these enclosures may have been anything from a cattle compound to a small town, but were seldom exclusively military in purpose. The term ramparts is widely used to describe the banks or walls enclosing these sites, but it also has a strong military connotation and so, from now on, I will avoid using it as far as possible. There is no such thing as a 'typical' Iron Age hillfort, for they range in size from 0.5 hectares to over 20 hectares, and from simple univallate enclosures of a single modest encircling bank and ditch to those with several huge concentric 'ramparts' and ditches - the multivallate hillforts. Some were centres for large communities, others for small farming families, and yet at others no trace of human occupation has been identified. Hillforts may reflect a significant social change brought about by the introduction of iron farming implements and tools, together with new crop species, which enabled more land to be brought into cultivation. This in turn led to population growth and probably competition between communities for available resources. The smaller hillforts and enclosures of the Early Iron Age were surrounded by their own territory of arable fields and open pasture, but with the passage of time there was a process of consolidation, in which many of these smaller hillforts were abandoned or incorporated within enlarged landscapes. This brought about the emergence of larger and even more complex social groups of the Middle and Late Iron Age who now controlled very large areas of territory, together with the trade in goods that passed through them. This necessitated the building of large, impressive enclosures which dominated the landscape.

A belief that all hillforts were functional military strongholds has become difficult to support when considering the sheer range of these monuments. The 'defences' of small to medium sized hillforts can consist of massive banks and ditches in places, but with great gaps in the perimeter. There are strong defences built on naturally steep slopes, but none to block more gentle approaches. The weakest slopes around an enclosure could include strategic 'blind spots' which are defended by earthworks of negligible height, whereas the easiest natural approach to the hillfort and its entrance was completed with huge banks or walls. Some hillforts are considered to be 'unfinished' as they lack banks and ditches around part of their circuit, but perhaps in some cases that's what the builders may have planned. These gaps in the banks and ditches may even have been closed by stout dense thorn hedges which have left no trace. Such oddities of hillfort architecture go beyond the sober buildings of prehistoric people obsessed with protection and defence against attack. They speak of monumental symbolism and grand design, of neighbourhood one-upmanship and

tribal swagger, of community cohesion and of intimidation and the conjuring up of fear and respect in the minds of both one's friends and potential enemies alike, as they approach the hillfort from a direction chosen by its builders.

The elaborate serpentine approaches to some of the great hillforts, their long in-turned entrances and the architecture of their huge gates and gate-towers were also designed to impress, over-awe and perhaps belittle all those who came calling. These elaborate approaches have been found to actually hinder the view from the hillfort entrance of potential attackers and give them a degree of 'cover'. Some argue that the large caches of sling-stones, found in their thousands near the gates of some large hillforts, - about 40,000 were found during excavations at Maiden Castle - are proof of tribal instability and conflict. But, could these huge caches of 'ready ammunition' have been put on deliberate display to all who entered the hillfort, a sort of not so subtle deterrent? – "mess with us and this is what you'll get!" After-all during the Cold War, between them the USA and the USSR had thousands of nuclear armed missiles pointed at each other, and each knew the other had them, but nevertheless it maintained the 'peace'. None of those missiles were built with the deliberate intention of using them. Therefore, could we be looking at an Iron Age version of MAD – mutually assured destruction??

Excavations have found definite evidence for conflict at some hillforts, but at surprisingly few. Whether the trauma inflicted on the skeletons found during these excavations was the result of skirmishes, raids, single combat, sacrifice, murder, execution or warfare is unclear, but they reflect periods of social instability and acts of aggression throughout the Iron Age. They may have essentially been the result of tribal squabbles or clan feuding over such as land or water resources, combined perhaps with cattle and sheep rustling and even the taking of slaves. What appears to be the most compelling evidence for conflict comes from the end of the hillforts' use following the Roman invasion of 43AD. The account of the Roman attack on the great hillfort of Maiden Castle in Dorset, by its excavator Mortimer Wheeler during the 1930s, has become the stuff of legend for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is still to be found in the literature today. The Roman army first softening up the target with a barrage of ballista 'artillery', cutting down the stoic defenders, followed by the advance across open ground by the grim-faced Roman heavy infantry, putting the remaining warriors to the sword; the dead being hastily buried in a 'war cemetery'. Wheeler was an artillery officer during the First World War, and his account of his experiences on the Western Front read just like his Maiden Castle account. More recent research has revealed that there was no Roman attack and no war cemetery, just a long established cemetery, although the majority of the skeletons exhibited serious trauma. The ballista bolt found in the spine of one of skeletons excavated by Wheeler, is not a ballista bolt after all, but a javelin point, probably "native in origin". By the time of the Roman invasion of Britain, Maiden Castle had been largely abandoned as a 'fortress', with its 'ramparts' tumbling down, its power diminished

and many of its former inhabitants living in scattered communities around the hillfort. However, there is evidence for Roman assaults on hillforts which didn't end well for their inhabitants. The Romans seemed to dislike people living in high places and looking down on them, so they 'persuaded' these folk to abandon their lofty hilltop homes and live in the valleys below. Those who declined the offer inevitably suffered the consequences of their resistance to leave their high places.

The study of the location of some Iron Age enclosures has suggested that they could have been built in 'venerated landscapes', as the ancestors, their activities and 'presence' appear to have assumed great importance and possibly influenced the location of the enclosure. There may also be links with features in the natural world – landform, rocks and especially water – all of which exerted a 'magical' presence. It must be considered that 'enclosure' was a complex process which served different purposes through time and place during the Iron Age. Such purposes could have been social, economic, political or sacred in nature, or a combination of some or all of these, each being very significant to the people concerned. The basis of hillfort design may therefore have been, that by enclosing an area of land, a special place was defined, distinct and separate from the world outside and imbued with symbolic powers, the surrounding earthworks possibly themselves similarly imbued in containing that power. The burning of the gates observed at some hillforts and the apparent destruction of parts of their structure were widely thought to be the result of hostile action, but recently it has been suggested that the burning could have been a 'symbolic' act, marking a significant change of function of the hillfort, as in many cases occupation did not cease following these events.

### Superstition and Belief

With these things in mind, it has been proposed that Iron Age hill enclosures could have performed the role of cult centres or places of ceremony and spirituality. The term 'ritual' has now lost favour amongst archaeologists and academics alike, after being 'done to death' during the Time Team era, being replaced by the terms 'sacred' or 'spiritual'. The beliefs of the people of the Iron Age probably manifested itself in all aspects of the building and life of a hillfort from its beginning to its end and was woven into its very presence in the landscape.

Most of the large hillforts in the Clwydian Hills of north-east Wales are located around the flanks of Moel Famau the highest mountain in the area, and are regularly struck by lightning, so why would people want to live in such a frightening place, but they did. The hillfort on the great hogs-back hill of the Wrekin, Shropshire, standing high above the valley of the River Severn is often, even in high summer, shrouded in mist and low cloud while the valley below is bathed in sunshine: why would people want to live up there, but they did. Some of the coastal cliff-castles of the south-west are situated on exposed headlands which are subjected to fierce Atlantic gales and storms. Why did people want to live in such extreme places - probably for the same

reason that early Christian monks chose to live in baking-hot deserts, on barren, rocky windswept islands or on top of cold, wet mountains - because they felt closer to their God. On the other hand Uffington Castle, the hillfort situated on the crest of White Horse Hill, commands magnificent distant views to both the north and south across the Berkshire Downs, and would have been a truly superb place to live, but it appears that it was not inhabited, as little trace of occupation during the Iron Age has been found. Why wasn't it occupied? – a situation found at several other hillforts. These unoccupied sites may shed light on another aspect of hillfort use - that of ceremonial, *religious* gathering places for widespread community groups.

It is thought that the gods of the other-worlds were supremely important to prehistoric societies, controlling every aspect of life. Were enclosures built in high places considered to be closer to the gods of the sky, where the impact of wind, rain, thunder and lightning, the passage of the sun and stars across the sky and the phases of the moon would be seen and felt more strongly? There also appears to have been links with features in the natural world, most especially water, which exerted a powerful 'magical' presence in the prehistoric mind. Water, whether in the form of rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, springs, waterfalls, bogs or the sea was of immense importance, achieving a mythical significance as the interface between this world and the underworld. Many Iron Age enclosures are situated close to the confluence of watercourses and the most obvious reason for this is that water is essential for life, but does their location have a spiritual dimension, a closeness to that ever-moving watery interface and the embrace of the gods or spirits of water? [Berry Castle is situated close to the confluence of two watercourses, with another confluence a little further away – a special place?]

Together, these gods of the sky and the underworld gave life and fertility to man, beast and crops alike, but each was capricious. Gentle rain gave life to both crops and livestock, a storm and flood could wash away the crop and drown both man and beast. Too little rain could cause drought and famine, too much could also bring on hard times. A fresh breeze could help dry a ripened cereal harvest, a gale could scatter and destroy it. Illness, disease, or plague could stalk the land and strike down people at random and without reason or warning. A lightning strike among a village of closely grouped round-houses could burn down and destroy the whole community – and there was no local fire brigade to come to the rescue. The gods who were believed to control these forces were to be feared, being pacified and placated with acts of propitiation and even human sacrifice.

## Devon Archaeological Society field visit to Berry Castle, Saturday, 17th October, 2020.

by Michael Griffith-Jones



During the summer Devon Archaeological Society (DAS) approached the Friends of Berry Castle about a possible visit to Berry Castle as part of their annual field trip programme with the 'Friends' acting as guides. Due to Covid 19 restrictions DAS had arranged a small number of field visits for the autumn with limited numbers and socially distancing measures, as a way for outdoor activities to continue for

interested members, with a maximum number of twelve visitors plus a guide. The subsequent introduction of the 'rule of six' made a change of plan necessary, so two groups of five, plus guide were arranged, with a morning and afternoon tour each meeting up at Foxes Cross carpark.

The day was dry and sunny and Berry Castle looked particularly good, thanks to several work sessions by the dedicated BC maintenance squad, who had strimmed the paths and interior, cleared the banks of brambles and cleaned the information boards and treated their woodwork. We were a little uncertain about what the DAS members' views on Berry Castle would be, as the hillforts they knew and had previously visited in south and east Devon are larger and far more impressive than BC, and few had visited North Devon sites in the past. Our uncertainties were unfounded as everyone in both groups thought the site was truly impressive and one even said he thought it was an 'amazing place'. Our information boards received favourable scrutiny and hand-outs of the plan and geophysics of the site helped further explain Berry Castle.

A thorough inspection of the site was made by both groups, and following a close look at the very stony northern 'bank' of the enclosure the 'experts' agreed with our assessment that Berry Castle was almost certainly enclosed by a dry-stone wall rather than an earth and stone bank, which is the more normal construction for the small Iron Age enclosures in England. This makes Berry Castle rather unique in the area and perhaps throughout much of Devon. The large 'quarry pit' in the ditch at the north-west corner of the enclosure was also investigated and was considered to be an original feature, and not the result of quarrying for local road-building stone during the 1920s, as previously thought and documented.

The DAS visitors were horrified at the irreparable damage that had been done to Berry Castle during the first lockdown by a few unthinking visitors to the site and they strongly condemned their actions. It seemed to have been 'a thing' to create 'stone sculptures' and cairns by tearing large stones from the banks and the interior of the enclosure to build these elaborate structures. Suitable notices stapled to the information boards seems to have deterred further thoughtless actions.

Everyone was very impressed with the work the Friends of Berry Castle had undertaken in order to promote, conserve and preserve Berry Castle, and the Society expressed a wish to return with a larger party when we finally get back to more 'normal times'.

A final comment was made by one of the senior DAS visitors;-  
'It would seem that Berry Castle has been subjected to very little human interference since its abandonment, probably in the Late Iron Age, apart from years of forestry management. The result is an Iron Age enclosure that still looks very fresh and largely undisturbed since its building, which is something quite special'.

### **A Fond Farewell**

On a more sombre note, I'm sad to inform you of the passing of Sue Scrutton and Michael Barrow, earlier this year.

Many will know Sue from Torrington Museum and the Historical Society. She had championed the Friends of Berry Castle, from the beginning always took an interest in what we did.

Michael, as well as serving on the committee for a number of years, helped with the installation of the information boards and the site preparation for the Berry Castle dig.

We offer our condolences to their friends and families. Both Sue and Michael will be greatly missed.