

# FOB NEWS

Friends of Berry Castle Newsletter - Spring 2021



## **Berry Castle – more than a hilltop enclosure**

As the snowdrops, primroses and daffodils raise their heads to the oncoming Spring, a positive feeling is beginning to spread. After another lockdown and the consequences associated with it, a sense of optimism is gradually breaking through.

Berry Castle has offered a 'retreat' for many. A quiet place for them to escape to. As I mentioned in the previous Newsletter, the emails we've received and conversations which we've had, have been truly uplifting. Despite the first lockdown, the maintenance group worked even harder, from August onwards, to keep the site accessible. So, let's begin this edition, with something uplifting. This is what you are telling us about what Berry Castle means to you.

People visit the site for many different reasons. Some, as part of a stroll around the woods. Others for the views and seclusion. Several have commented about how, for them, the site gives them the opportunity to leave what's happening in wider world; bringing about a little bit of peace. Below are contributions from people who've found BC to be a positive place, for them.

*'We used Berry castle, everyday, during the first lockdown, as a part of our daily exercise. Not knowing a great deal about the Huntshaw area for walking, we used the Berry Castle area as a focal point for our daily walks, trying a different route each time. A year later, we still pass the site regularly, as our knowledge of our own local area has grown, due to the many paths, roads and woods leading to and from it.'*

Adam

*'Berry castle is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Its main pull is the amount of trees in the surrounding area. In my mind, trees bring nature. It's a stark contrast to much of Devon, for which large areas of woods are scarce. The castle site continues to be of interest and brings some important heritage to north Devon, of a time when much is forgotten. A trip to Berry brings the imagination of this period to mind, it could almost be felt as a reflection of when humans were much more in touch with their natural surroundings. Perhaps the conservation of Berry and its woodland can inspire us to rekindle this passion. For me, I enjoy my photography and the site is a place I can go and capture memories and find stillness. I am aware of the fine balance between preservation and opening up such a site to the masses, so far the volunteers have seemed to strike a good balance.'*

Dan (provided our heading picture.)

*'After finally being released from the first lockdown, I was looking for places to walk to. A friend recommended Berry Castle to me. Although I live on the edge of Bideford, I considered it a challenge to get there – I wasn't disappointed! Arriving from the bottom gate, the imposing corner bank ahead of me was striking. In many ways, I love walking because you can leave the modern world behind and be with your thoughts. Berry Castle certainly stirred my imagination of how people would have arrived at the site, thousands of years ago. Now, I often visit the site, but use the car to get there!!! I plonk myself on the stumps and losing all sense of time. Perfect. Well done to the Fobbers who have managed such a wonderful sanctuary.'*

Sue

*'I've had an interest in the Iron Age, since childhood. I grew up in Dorset, where Maiden Castle always attracted my interest. I've lived in North Devon for over 2 decades, but had never known about Berry Castle. We visited with my son and his children. I loved how the boards give you an insight into what may have gone on there, in the past. They were easy to understand and didn't baffle you with terminology. It was like history repeating, when my grandson became excited. Just like when I was his age. Even though it may not be quite on the scale of Maiden Castle, Berry Castle seems more intimate. We'll be visiting again many more times, I hope.'*

Chris

*'I had heard about hillforts at school. I thought it would be boring when we went, but it wasn't. My dad hid in the trees and jumped out on us shouting about Romans invading. We got sticks to protect ourselves with and made sure we didn't get attacked. The boards had good pictures which helped me understand what it would have looked like. They are very good artists. I wouldn't want to live there like they did because its too windy.*

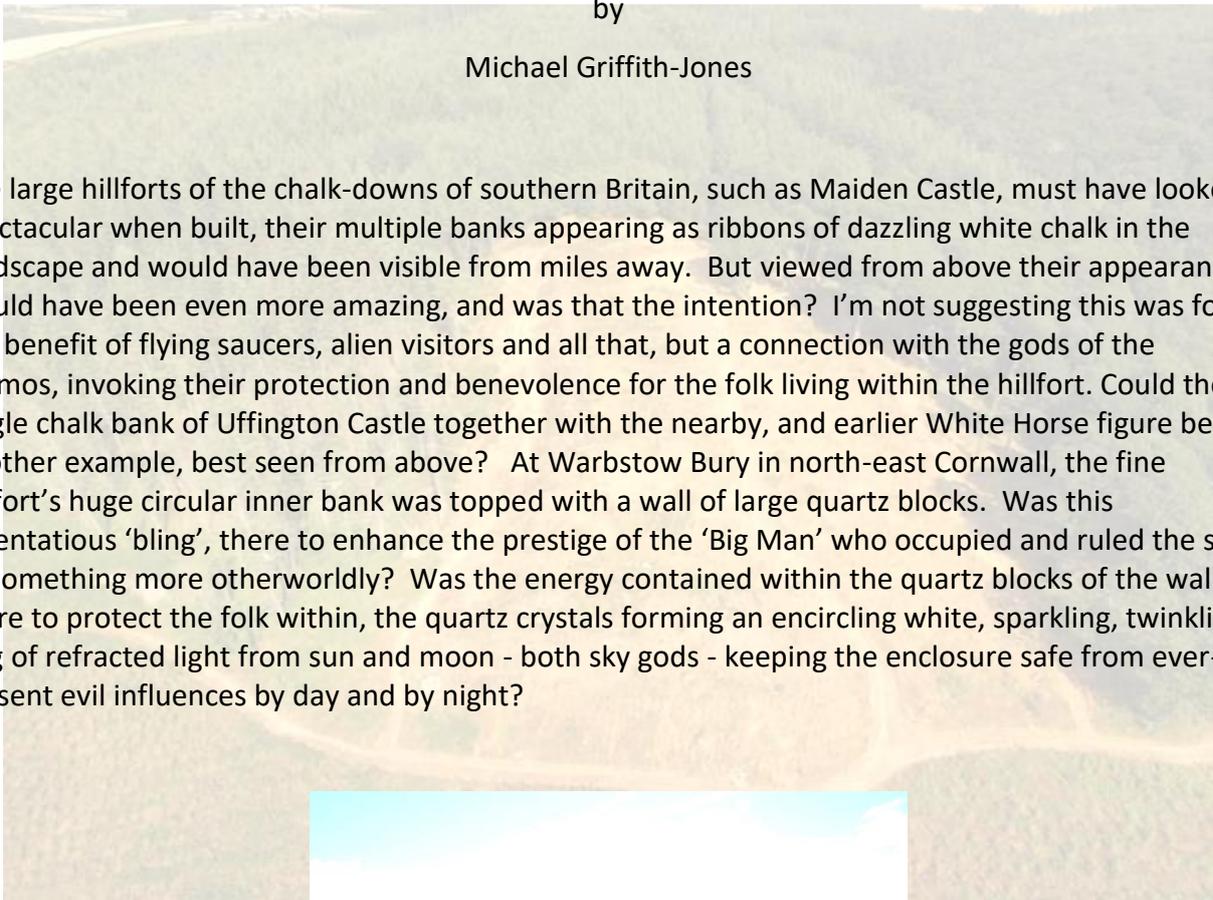
Seb (8 yrs old)

## **Are Hillforts really Forts? – A view from the ramparts (part 2)**

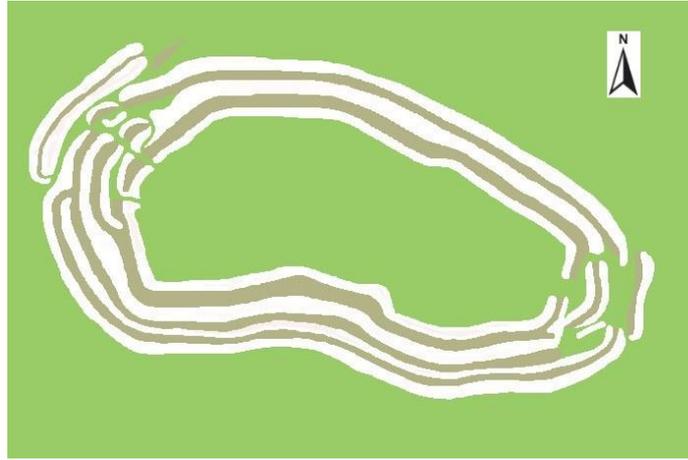
by

Michael Griffith-Jones

The large hillforts of the chalk-downs of southern Britain, such as Maiden Castle, must have looked spectacular when built, their multiple banks appearing as ribbons of dazzling white chalk in the landscape and would have been visible from miles away. But viewed from above their appearance would have been even more amazing, and was that the intention? I'm not suggesting this was for the benefit of flying saucers, alien visitors and all that, but a connection with the gods of the cosmos, invoking their protection and benevolence for the folk living within the hillfort. Could the single chalk bank of Uffington Castle together with the nearby, and earlier White Horse figure be another example, best seen from above? At Warbstow Bury in north-east Cornwall, the fine hillfort's huge circular inner bank was topped with a wall of large quartz blocks. Was this ostentatious 'bling', there to enhance the prestige of the 'Big Man' who occupied and ruled the site, or something more otherworldly? Was the energy contained within the quartz blocks of the wall there to protect the folk within, the quartz crystals forming an encircling white, sparkling, twinkling ring of refracted light from sun and moon - both sky gods - keeping the enclosure safe from ever-present evil influences by day and by night?



The huge south-eastern triple ramparts of Maiden Castle, looking east. September, 2020.



An impression of how the banks and ditches of Maiden Castle, Dorset may have looked from above in its 'heyday'.



Uffington Castle viewed from the ancient Ridgeway. June, 2020.



Uffington Castle and the White Horse.



Warbstow Bury, Cornwall. Quartz blocks which have tumbled from the inner bank wall and were found lying in the ditch below. The measuring rods are 30cm long. July, 2020.

Small sites such as Berry Castle, along with the others of the Torridge and Exmoor, are now referred to as 'hilltop' or 'hillslope' enclosures. These smaller settlements occupy a wide variety of locations: rounded hilltops, sloping ground and even valley floors, with the most favoured location being on a slope just off a high point. These are all non-defensive locations, and indeed many enclosures are overlooked from nearby higher ground, but for some reason they are still referred to as 'defended settlements'. The selection of their location was possibly an attempt to imprint the identity of a community on the local landscape, serving as a symbol to 'outsiders' of the tenure which that particular community held over the surrounding land; a landscape which supported and sustained them, and demonstrated their independence and difference from others. Even among these sites Berry Castle maybe very different, being one of the very few in the county to be enclosed by a stone wall rather than an earth and stone bank, something quite unusual and special in Devon! The other small hill enclosures of the Torridge which have recently been the subject of study, also possess a particular intimacy with rivers and streams, all being situated on prominent hill-spurs or hilltops which are embraced by watercourses on three sides – and like Berry Castle, must be considered as truly special places.

It has recently been suggested that the particular landscape location of sites such as Berry Castle indicate that they may have had a ceremonial function, or were even constructed as a centre for ceremony; gathering places at the centre of special 'venerated' ancestral lands through which those taking part had traversed. Not far from Berry Castle is the Darracott Moor Bronze Age barrow cemetery, where in one of its round barrows the Huntshaw Dagger was found during excavations in the 19th century. With the aid of LiDAR scans, it is just possible to trace the line of an old trackway for some of the way between the two sites. Could this be the ghost of a long-established ancient 'processional way' from the land of the long-dead ancestors to the land of the living??



A sling-stone, found by the author at Maiden Castle, Dorset in September, 2020. It had been 'unearthed' by moles near the eastern entrance of the hillfort, close to the section of the enclosure excavated by Mortimer Wheeler during the 1930s.

To finish on a simple sober note: - the actual construction of a hillfort enclosure may have been an end in itself, and by looking for more complex reasons through our modern eyes, we are missing the point completely. The considerable effort involved in building even a modest hill enclosure may have been simply to display a community's organisational and physical ability and therefore project status to others; or acted to bind families together into a wider cohesive community with its own identity by a display of committed communal labour. Was this the ultimate purpose - to

demonstrate that the construction of the enclosure was undertaken, not because it was easy, but because it was hard?

The last word must go to a gentleman, who 87 years ago, disagreed with the 'military hillfort' theories proposed and supported by most of his contemporaries.

*[Hillforts] are the products of peace and not of war and I would disabuse the minds of those prone to imagine scenes of battle and strife, wherever and whenever they see the remains of the homes of the people of long ago. I, however, do not want anyone to believe that the old Celt was remarkable for his peace-loving character; no one loved a scrap more than he'.*

D.C. Evans, 1933. Transactions of the Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society.

## AGM

With little idea of how the year was going to pan out, our virtual AGM was a low-key affair. What was agreed on, was to focus our attention to the North bank, where erosion is the most damaging. The plan, with kind permission from Clinton Devon Estates and Historic England, is to encourage shallow rooted grass to grow across it, protecting it from further erosion. Visits to BC and other sites will be planned, further on in the year.

The committee from last year is rolled over to 2021, as follows.

Chairperson – Simon Carroll

Vice Chair – John Eaton

Treasurer – Adrian White

Secretary – Simon Carroll

Karen Smith

Phil White

Ann White

