

Hillforts

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Introduction

The often substantial earthwork enclosures which archaeologists call hillforts were constructed between about 600 BC and 100 BC for various purposes including settlement and farm stock management, but their primary function was defence. They are important in the South Devon AONB for their contribution to our overall understanding of past land-use. There are 12 known hillforts or defended hilltop enclosures in the South Devon AONB.

A typical hillfort has one or more deep ditches with high earth banks on their inner sides, enclosing an ovoid area of from three to ten acres. They usually have one or two entrances, which were defended in a variety of ways. Most hillforts have other, more recent entrances, broken through the ramparts for agricultural reasons.

Some forts were packed with buildings, mostly circular huts with conical thatched roofs, though other post-built structures, both circular and square were sometimes found, and have been interpreted as granaries, hayricks or animal shelters.

Distribution

In Southern England, hillforts are typically found on hilltops, spurs and occasionally valley sides or promontories. Devon and Cornwall have a larger number than usual, particularly of the smaller, simpler variety. They imply many small territories, some of which had correspondingly small hillforts, such as one north-west of Slapton, which only covered one acre.

Function

Hillforts developed at a time when interaction between social groups in the Celtic tribal world of Western Europe was becoming increasingly territorial and tense. Roman commentators pointed to constant low-level disagreements, and a tendency for hot-headedness among warriors of the period, which often spilled over into cattle raiding between tribal groups and occasionally full-scale war.

Hillforts are seen by classical historians and archaeologists as a response to this fractured society, each territory apparently having one, to which the population could resort in case of trouble. Their often large size may have been to accommodate the cattle and other stock which were under threat, as well as people.

How did they work?

The defences of hillforts can be complex. The outer faces of the ramparts are often set at an angle which made firing missiles such as slingstones and arrows easier. In addition, in the later Iron Age, it was common to find an upcast bank or glacis on the outer side of the ditch, the outer face of which sloped gently, to ensure that attackers would present a perfect target to the defenders and would have nowhere to hide once they got within a certain distance. On the insides of ramparts, dumps of slingstones were often placed: small rounded pebbles from the seashore or local rivers. These have been observed in ploughed hillfort interiors at two sites near Slapton.

Entrances varied from simple openings in the ramparts with timber gate structures within them, to complex zig-zagging alleys formed by overlapping ramparts and projecting hornworks. These ensured that it was most unlikely that attackers would reach the fort interior alive.

Very few of these hillforts occur in Devon, but another type, known as 'Multiple Enclosure Forts' do, and four examples are known in the South Devon AONB, at Wasteberry Camp near Brixton, Holbury Camp near Holbeton, Noss Camp near Kingswear and Burleigh Dolts near Marlborough, illustrated here. Burleigh Dolts is one of the most complex multiple enclosure forts in Devon, with a particularly convoluted approach to its inner enclosure.



Blackdown Rings



Ariel View of Bolt Tail



Blackdown

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History & development

The majority of hillforts belong to the European Iron Age, which started in about 700 BC when the knowledge of how to produce iron for tools and weapons was brought from Asia. Some however originated in the Late Bronze Age. The majority of hillforts date from the period from about 600 BC to 100 BC. Over this period, they developed from relatively simple enclosures into often complex sites with several lines of defence.

Many hillforts seem to have gone out of use by about 100 BC. It is not known why, though perhaps the constant cycle of small-scale cattle raiding and war had finally changed the way people lived. However, it seems likely that they continued to be used as stock corralling areas, especially when they were located on droveways, such as Blackdown Rings near Loddiswell.

Some hillforts were redefended in later centuries. There is some evidence for re-use between the fourth and seventh centuries AD at some sites, such as Oldaport, near Modbury, where a quadrangular fortification with a stone-faced earth rampart was constructed within an earlier Iron Age promontory fort. Limited excavations have produced Roman pottery and various scholars have suggested that a late Roman fort was located here.

Detail

The construction of hillforts varies. Their banks were usually heaped up directly from the ditches, but other methods such as stone revetment walls to earth banks, and timber box-ramparts are known, especially in the earlier Iron Age. The latter took the form of frameworks of timber posts with planking between, retaining earth and stones. Such methods ensured rapid construction, but were not long-lasting.

The majority of hillforts in Devon have earth banks, though as few have been excavated, local variations such as box ramparts could once have existed. Stone revetments are known from Oldaport promontory fort near Modbury (no public access).

Almost no evidence is available for the internal arrangements of hillforts in the South Hams. However, a geophysical survey of the interior of Boringdon Camp near Plympton in the 1990s showed that most of it was featureless, circular huts and small associated fenced areas only being found close to the ramparts.

This could mean that the fort, which covers about three acres, was primarily for controlling stock, its location on a major droveway off the moor being very significant. It is very likely that it continued in use as a stop-over for herds on the droveroad well into the post-medieval period.

Where can I visit hillforts in the South Hams?

There are many Iron Age hillforts in South Devon, but only a few of them are publicly accessible. The following are accessible and well worth a visit:

■ Burleigh Dolts, Malborough

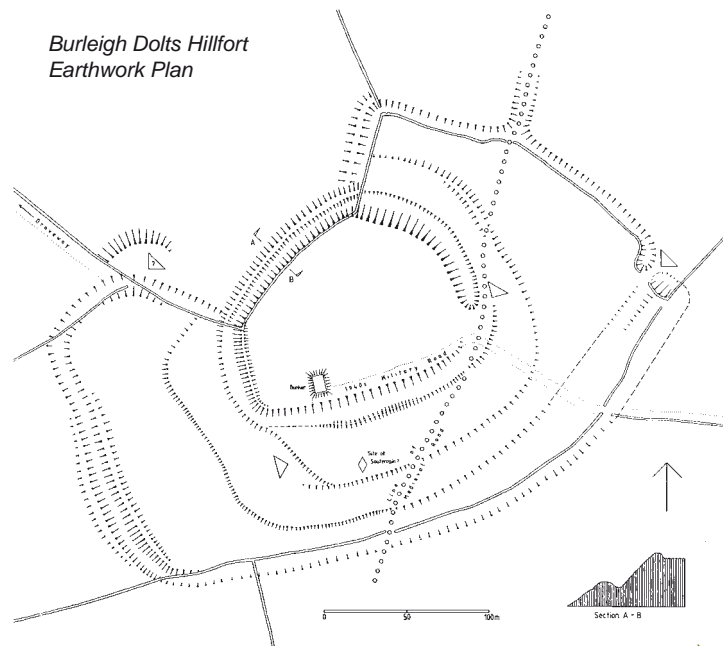
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This complex site probably originated as a single-enclosure fort of the early Iron Age, dating from about 600-400 BC. It was then developed in about 300-100 BC as a multiple-enclosure fort. The plan shows that it eventually had four lines of defences, although only the inner and outer ramparts were very substantial. The name Dolts was originally pronounced Dikes, describing these ramparts, which survived until improved ploughing equipment in the 19th and 20th centuries partially destroyed them. Faint earthworks survive at the site, with two short stretches of well-preserved outer rampart.

No geophysical surveys or excavations have taken place at Burleigh Dolts, but the earthworks are interpreted in the plan, shown here. It is likely that the spaces between the ramparts were used for the control of stock and that defence was a secondary consideration.

In 1788 a souterrain or underground chamber constructed of stone slabs was dug up just to the south of the fort. Such structures were common in Cornwall during the Iron Age and were probably used for storing food. Unfortunately, we do not know its exact location as it was subsequently destroyed.

*Burleigh Dolts Hillfort
Earthwork Plan*



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Burleigh Dolts is especially important as it appears to have long territorial boundaries running away from it to the west, enclosing a strip of land 1.5km long and 0.8km wide. This is interpreted as being an area of open pasture, controlled by the fort. The boundaries seem to have been in existence by 846 AD, when an Anglo-Saxon estate boundary followed part of one. The area continued as a land-holding and became the Domesday Manor of Huish before 1066. A similar sized enclosure to the south belonged to the Domesday Manor of Galmpton and the two estates later became South Huish parish.

How to get there

A public footpath crosses the site, which can be followed from the north side of Malborough village.



Bolt Tail Promontory Fort, Hope Cove

Grid Reference SX 670 398

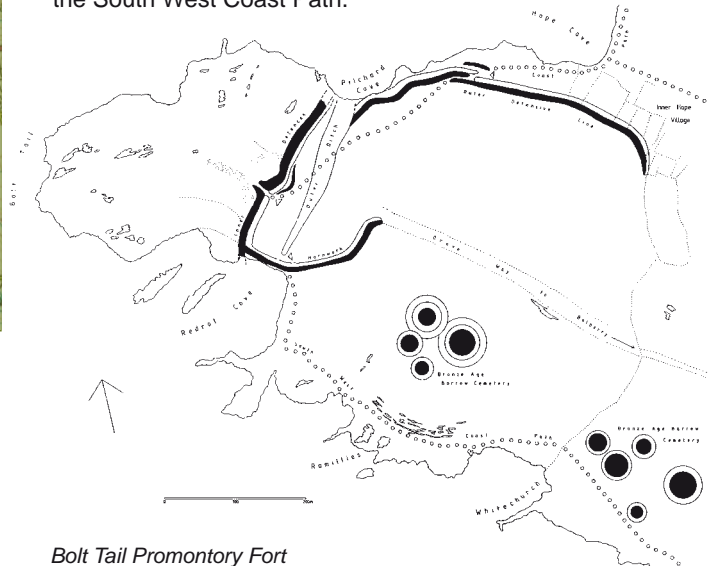
Promontory forts are common in Cornwall, but rare in Devon, where only three are known. This is the best preserved: a substantial bank and ditch, cutting off this spectacular rocky headland. No clear evidence of internal features can be identified, and no excavations or geophysical surveys have taken place, so it is not known whether any structures were ever located inside.



Further defences were identified recently, forming ramparts which extend outwards from both ends of the inner bank. These seem to guard against attack along the coast from the south-east and north. The northern rampart has a staggered entrance at the point the coast path crosses it, and the rampart continues right across the south side of Inner Hope village; a footpath runs along the top of this bank. See the plan below.

How to get there

A public footpath approaches the site from the beach at Inner Hope, where car parking is available. This is part of the South West Coast Path.



Bolt Tail Promontory Fort

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■ Blackdown Rings, Loddiswell

Grid Reference SX 720 520



Artist's reconstruction

This single enclosure fort of the earlier Iron Age probably dates to circa 600-400 BC. No excavations or geophysical surveys have taken place here, and the interior was regularly ploughed until a few years ago, so no clear features are visible here.

Its location is presumably significant, at the junction between a north-to-south ridgeway from Dartmoor to the River Avon near Loddiswell, and an ancient cross-country route from the mouth of the River Erme to Dartmouth.

The hillfort has very sharply defined ditches, which are probably the result of cleaning out and reprofiling in the later 11th century AD, when a small Norman ringwork and bailey castle was inserted into the north-west corner. It is likely that this castle was placed here to control people travelling the east-west and north-south routes in exactly the same way as the earlier hillfort did.

How to get there

Blackdown rings are signposted off the B3196 between California Cross and Loddiswell. A permissive path leads from a small car park just south-west of the fort. Two explanatory boards show how the fort and Norman castle may have appeared. The site is owned by the Arundell Charity who allow free public access..



Where can I find out more?

Displays which include material on Devon's Iron Age archaeology are to be found at Plymouth and Exeter museums. These include excavated material, although most of this is from sites in East Devon.

Specific published accounts of hillfort sites in the South Hams are in the Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society for 1990 (Blackdown Camp); 1995 (Re-use of hillforts in the post-Roman period); and 1998 (Oldaport promontory fort).

An excellent general introduction to the subject is Aileen Fox's booklet 'Prehistoric Hillforts in Devon', published by Devon Books, while Barry Cunliffe's 'Iron Age Communities in Britain', published by Routledge but out of print now, has a good nationwide overview.

Hope Archive Group has published a history of South Huish parish containing an analysis of Burleigh Dolts and Bolt Tail Hillfort.

Author

This factsheet was produced by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life.

Drawings reproduced from 'Prehistoric Hillforts in Devon'.

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