

Power and Authority

Hillforts

Hillforts are large enclosures defined by one or more lines of substantial banks and ditches set high on hills, often at their summits. They are widespread throughout Western Europe and generally date from the Iron Age (800 BC – AD 43) although some are now known from the late Bronze Age.

Hillforts are among the best known prehistoric sites in Britain owing to their massive scale and their imposing position in prominent locations. The most famous is Maiden Castle in Dorset which encloses nineteen and a half hectares and was attacked by the Roman armies in AD 45. Cornish hillforts are much smaller in scale but, nonetheless, are still striking features in today's countryside.

In Cornwall, as elsewhere, the period which saw the introduction of iron is marked by the appearance of hillforts in the landscape. Cornish hillforts on the whole are relatively small-scale in comparison with those of central southern England, although there is considerable variation in their size and form. Some have a single bank and are irregular in shape, others have two or more concentric lines of banks and are near enough circular, a few have 'outworks' – banks set some distance from the main enclosure – separating the hillfort from the surrounding landscape.

The idea of enclosing hilltops was not new. A number of hilltops were defended in the Neolithic period by tor enclosures, such as Carn Brea and Helman Tor, and a few hilltop enclosures were built during the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. In fact some hillforts re-used these earlier sites; at Carn Brea the earlier tor enclosure was absorbed and extended to form a large, irregular bank enclosing much of the hill's upper slopes.



Iron Age hillfort at Cadson Bury, St Ives. Cadson Bury's single rampart closely follows the hill top contours and this is probably one of Cornwall's earlier hillforts. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

There has been very little excavation of Cornish hillforts but it is generally presumed that sites which are irregular in plan and with a single bank hugging the contours of a hill date from the earlier Iron Age. Hillforts with concentric banks were built in the late Iron Age from around 400 BC onwards; a time of great cultural change in Cornwall. The construction of these later hillforts, sometimes called multiple enclosure hillforts, coincided with the introduction of new pottery styles and the appearance in the landscape of settlements known as rounds, enclosed by a bank and ditch.

Whereas the earlier hillforts are few in number and often enclosed large areas, the multiple enclosure hillforts are more numerous, more closely spaced in the landscape, and generally smaller. Cornish hillforts do not appear to have been in use in the Romano-British period although this may not have been entirely a result of Roman influence; most had been abandoned by the end of the Iron Age.



*One of the most impressive hillforts in Cornwall at Castle an Dinas, St Columb. This site is a good example of a multiple enclosure hillfort dating from the later Iron Age.
Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

How Were Hillforts Used?

The term hillfort is an oversimplification and has become a catch-all label frequently applied to any prehistoric enclosure on a hill top or similar location. 'Hillfort' immediately assumes a defended place. It reflects the traditional interpretation of these sites as the defended centres of local chieftains who were in conflict with each other.

Modern thinking questions this militaristic view. Hillforts may well have been used as defensive sites when the need arose, but this should not necessarily be seen as their principal function. Excavations in Cornwall have produced evidence of permanent settlement in some hillforts, such as Gear, St Martin in Meneage; but others may only have seen occasional use. There is considerable variation in their size and in the

scale and nature of their enclosing banks and ditches, and some are on hill slopes rather than hill tops. It is far more likely that a range of activities took place in hillforts, and we should not assume they were all used in the same way.



Tregear Rounds, St Kew. A multiple enclosure hillfort sited on a hill slope. It is often presumed that the wide spaces between the ramparts in this type of multiple enclosure were designed for the corralling of livestock. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Archaeologists believe the construction of Iron Age hillforts represents a change in the organisation of society. One theory is that technological developments - the gradual change from bronze to iron - set this change in motion. The establishing of new trade networks to the exclusion of the old 'bronze' system was manifested in the new hillforts. It is also generally accepted that the population was steadily growing during this period. This coupled with a deterioration in climate around three thousand years ago, which would have affected crop production, will have led to increasing pressure on available resources.

Perhaps a response to these pressures can be seen in the way land division was reorganised in parts of Cornwall during the Iron Age, with the appearance of small rectangular fields laid out around the settlements of those who cultivated them. These major changes in field layout can only have been organised at a regional level of authority. The traditional view of the Iron Age sees the countryside divided into territories within which hillforts housed the elite who exercised authority over the lower levels of society occupying the farming settlements.

Recent thinking on Cornish hillforts suggests an alternative model. Authority need not have been held by an elite or aristocracy. Rather it was formed by representatives of the farming community itself who controlled their own territories or regions. This

model sees hillforts as formal meeting places for local farmers who understood the issues affecting the economy of their region and in whose interests it was to keep the farming system sustainable.

Hillforts, then, have much in common with the tor enclosures and hill top enclosures of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age. The ramparts can be seen as symbols not of power vested in an elite, but of the status and permanence of the community. Activities at hillforts may have included the resolution of disputes, the exchange of ideas, produce and materials, and the enjoyment of ceremonial or ritual festivals.

Of particular interest is the fact that some hillforts are carefully located at the site of earlier ceremonial and ritual centres. Some, such as Tren crom and Carn Brea, re-used existing tor enclosures; others were centred on former hill top enclosures, as at Caer Bran and Castle an Dinas in West Penwith.



The multiple enclosure hillfort at Caer Bran, West Penwith built on the site of a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age hill top enclosure, faint traces of the circular bank of this earlier ceremonial enclosure can be seen within the more substantial Iron Age banks. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Cliff Castles

Cliff castles are among the most spectacular ancient monuments found in Britain. They were created by constructing one or more substantial banks and ditches across the neck of a narrow headland. In most cases the enclosed headland is bounded by steep cliffs, preventing access from the sea and many cliff castles incorporate dramatic coastal scenery.

Cliff castles date from the Iron Age; they are broadly contemporary with hillforts although finds of later material in some suggest that their use continued into the Romano-British period. Cliff castles are distributed around the northwest seaboard of Europe; they are found in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Brittany and Normandy as well as on the coasts of Cornwall and Devon; two have been identified on the Isles of Scilly.



The cliff castle at Lankidden, St Keverne. More than a hectare of the headland is enclosed by a single bank and ditch. This cliff castle occupies a typically spectacular location. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

As with hillforts there is considerable variation in the scale of the enclosing earthworks at cliff castles. Some have only a single stone wall, some a single bank and ditch, whilst others have multiple banks and ditches. Excavations at cliff castles have shown, however, that there are frequently several phases of earthwork construction and that where there are multiple banks and ditches we should not assume that these all worked together to form complex 'defences'.



Cliff castle at Winecove Point, St Merryn. A complex site consisting of multiple banks and ditches. The earthworks occur on each of three promontories. It is not known whether it developed as one composite site based on the three promontories or whether it originated as one cliff castle which has subsequently become severely eroded. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

What Were Cliff Castles For?

Although round houses have been found inside some cliff castles, the steep rocky slopes enclosed by many, and their exposed position, makes it unlikely that they were permanent settlements. Current thinking is that Cornish cliff castles were the focus for seasonal or occasional activities.

Traditionally cliff castles have been seen as safe refuges in time of stress. Although defence may have been one of their functions it is now thought that their fortified appearance may have been primarily for prestige and display. They may have served a similar role to hillforts as meeting places and as administrative or trading centres. Some, close to beach landing places, would certainly have made impressive places at which to receive coastal traders.

Many of the headlands where cliff castles are found had long been identified as special places in the landscape. Barrows and cairns had been built on them or overlooking them during the early Bronze Age. There was a strong ceremonial and religious focus among prehistoric communities on natural places, including sites associated with water, and one obvious role of cliff castles might have been to provide the Iron Age population with dramatic settings for communal ceremonies of either spiritual or secular nature.



Cliff castle at Trelvague Head, Newquay. This large and complex cliff castle was a centre of activity over a long period of time. The headland was already the site of two Bronze Age barrows before being enclosed, probably in the early Iron Age. There are several phases of earthwork-building, the latest of which belongs to the Roman period. The outer headland contained numerous house platforms and a terraced field system. One of the most interesting aspects of the site is evidence of metalworking from the late Iron Age. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service