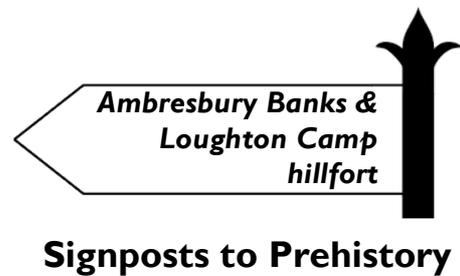




THE
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Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Ambresbury Banks (TL 438 003) and Loughton Camp (TQ 418 975) are in Epping Forest, Essex. Ambresbury Banks is between Long Running and Epping Thicks; Loughton Camp lies just 3.5 km to the SW in Great Monk Wood, Loughton.

Main period: Iron Age

Access & ownership: Both sites are easily accessible using trails developed by the City of London. The [Oak Trail](#) starting from Jacks Hill car park or Theydon Bois tube station passes close to Ambresbury Banks; Loughton Camp can be reached via the [Beech Trail](#) starting from the Pillow Mounds car park. Both sites are Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Ambresbury Banks and **Loughton Camp** are Iron Age hillforts in Epping Forest, thought to have been part of a network of such earthworks marking the territories between the Trinovante and Catuvellauni tribes. They did not necessarily have a defensive role, but could have been settlements, stock enclosures, or perhaps a refuge in times of crisis.



The hillforts lie in ancient woodland on a ridge between the valleys of the Lea and the Roding. Unsuitable for agriculture, the area was made a Royal Forest by Henry II in the 12th Century. This protected the earthworks, although they have suffered from natural erosion. Both sites were excavated in the 1880s by the Essex Field Club under the guidance of General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900; Fig.1), who is noted for his innovations in archaeological methodology and for founding the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Fig 1. General Pitt-Rivers. Illustration from Wikimedia Commons.

Ambresbury Banks is situated at c. 109–116 m OD on the crest of the forest ridge overlooking the Lea Valley; the ground slopes gently towards the SE. Impressive banks and a ditch remain, enclosing an area of c. 4.5 ha, now wooded (Fig. 2). In the Iron Age the trees would have been cleared providing both agricultural land and an extended field of view. The NE side of the enclosure is straight; the three others are slightly convex following the natural contours (Fig. 3). The outer bank or 'rampart' rises in places to 2 m above the interior ground surface. The ditch, originally V-shaped, is now 3 m deep and 9 m wide. A small counterscarp bank was added to the outside lip of the ditch.

A natural depression to the west may be the result of a stream that once issued through a gap at the south corner and that, if dammed, would have provided a convenient water supply. The defences now have six gaps but that on the SW side appears to be the original entrance. The fort was built in the second half of the 1st millennium BC. The ditch was later re-cut, possibly in the pre-Roman conquest years of the 1st century AD, but no later evidence of occupation was found. Finds at the site included shards of red, grey, and black pottery (Fig. 4), flints, a barbed and tanged arrow head, and lumps of baked clay.



Fig. 2. The wooded banks and ditch. Image by Chmee2 [CC BY-SA 3.0]

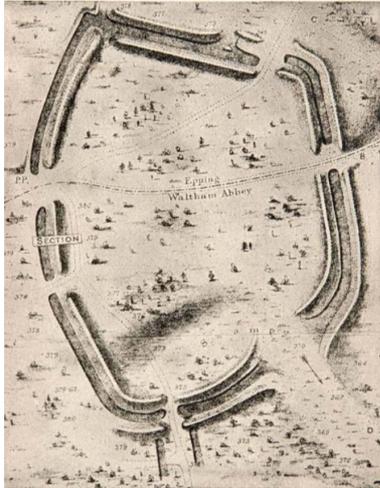


Fig. 3. Plan of Ambresbury Banks. Illustration © Essex Field Club, 2010. Essex Field Club Digital Archive Project: Unlocking the Natural History Heritage of Essex from Pitt-Rivers 1881: pl. III Copyright reserved

During the medieval period and later, the site was used for quarrying sand and gravel, and perhaps as an enclosure for cattle being moved to London markets. A post-medieval trackway on the line of the parish boundary crossed through the centre, and in the 18th century a second trackway broke through the NE and SW banks.



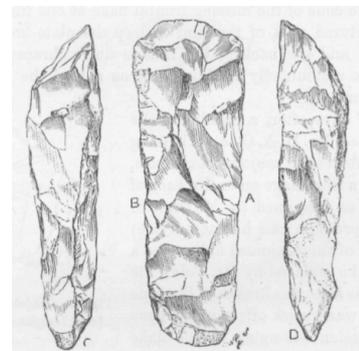
Fig. 4. Chromolithograph showing pottery from Ambresbury Banks. Illustration © Essex Field Club, 2010. Essex Field Club Digital Archive Project: Unlocking the Natural History Heritage of Essex from Pitt-Rivers 1881: pl. V Copyright reserved

Loughton Camp lies 110 m above sea level on a SW facing slope just below the crest of the ridge. It was around the same size as Ambresbury Banks (around 4 ha), but has suffered more deterioration. A single bank and ditch earthwork, with slight traces of an outer counterscarp bank, are amplified by steep natural slopes to the west (Fig. 5). The bank survives to a height of c. 1 m above the interior ground surface and is between 8 m and 18 m wide; the surrounding, partially in-filled ditch is now up to 8 m wide and 1.4 m deep. Like Ambresbury Banks, the enclosure had a water supply: a spring rises in the SW where there is a large gap in the defences. The marshy area here may once have been a dammed pool. The gap in the NE rampart is thought to be the original entrance. Areas of later quarrying can be seen in the interior.



Fig. 5. Plan of Loughton Camp. Illustration © Essex Field Club, 2010. Essex Field Club Digital Archive Project: Unlocking the Natural History Heritage of Essex from Pitt-Rivers 1881: pl. V Copyright reserved from Pitt-Rivers et al. 1883: pl. 3. Copyright reserved

The camp was reported by Mr Benjamin Harris Cowper in 1872. Partial excavations were undertaken in 1882 by the Essex Field Club who recorded many flint flakes, a flint chisel or axe (Fig. 6), and fragments of pottery. Excavations in the 1920s by Hazzeldine Warren found further pottery shards that fitted to some of those found in 1882! Subsequent investigations in 1954, 1959, and 1971 also reported large numbers of flint implements found in the vicinity,



evidence of earlier Mesolithic occupation at the site. The SW edge of the site falls away sharply to an area known as Kate's Cellar, reputedly the home of a hermit. Dick Turpin, the infamous 18th century highwayman, is also rumoured to have hidden out at Loughton Camp, but there is no evidence to support this!

Fig. 6. Flint tool from Loughton Camp. Illustration by permission of Cambrian Archaeological Association from Pitt-Rivers et al. 1883; fig. 3. Copyright reserved

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