



THE
PREHISTORIC
SOCIETY
SINCE 1935



Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Little Wittenham, Oxfordshire, OX14 4QZ (SU 560 940)

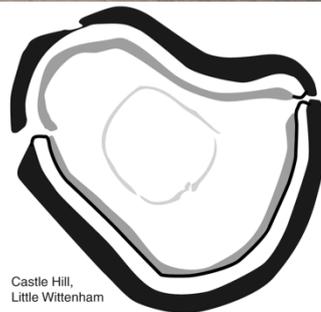
Main period: Late Bronze Age to Iron Age (1000–100 BC)

Access & ownership: The site is within the Little Wittenham nature reserve – part of the Earth Trust 500ha farm. It is protected at a national level as a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The reserve is owned and cared for by the Earth Trust. It is open for everyone, free of charge, all year round. Parking is free at 'The Clumps' car park, immediately adjacent to the hillfort. The hillfort is a short uphill walk away from the car park. The ground can be muddy during the winter months and wet periods. There are no toilet facilities on Castle Hill itself.

Site type: A hillfort. Hillforts are hilltops enclosed by at least one very large ditch and rampart (bank). They were usually built in the Iron Age.



Castle Hill



Castle Hill,
Little Wittenham

Top: ©Videotext Communications Ltd; Bottom: Late Bronze enclosure (left) and Iron Age hillfort (right) © Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology

Description

The earliest enclosure on Castle Hill, built around 1000 BC, can no longer be seen on the ground. It defined a roughly circular area (c. 100 m in diameter) with three small entrances along its southeastern side. The enclosure ditch was about 4 m wide and 2 m deep. Almost 300 years later (around 700 BC), a much larger ditch, with ramparts (banks) on its inner and outer sides was built at a natural break in the hillslope. This can still be seen very clearly. The Iron Age ditch defined an irregular bell-shaped area (covering c. 4 ha) with entrances to the east and west. Even now, after many years of weathering, the ditch is 16 m across and almost 8m deep. The outer bank is 7 m wide and 1.4 m deep. During the Iron Age it would have been an extremely impressive sight. Given its prominent hilltop siting, it would also have stood out for miles around. The traces of Iron Age activity within the hillfort – mainly pits filled with settlement rubbish – are no longer visible on the ground.

Investigations

The archaeological landscape at Wittenham Clumps has been excavated and mapped several times over the last century. The most substantial investigation took place from 2003–2006. This was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and involved teams of professional archaeologists and local volunteers. The investigations even featured on the TV programme the 'Time Team'. This recent work included mapping the archaeological landscape using aerial photographs and geophysical survey, and excavating trenches across the most important archaeological sites including the hillfort at Castle Hill.

How was the hillfort built and why?

The Castle Hill hillfort was built using a mixture of soil, clay, turf, chalk rubble and wood. The earthen rampart was supported on the outer side with a timber kerb. The ditch and bank would have been dug and shaped by hand using tools made of wood, animal bone and antler. It was probably built over the course of many years. Overall, this may have involved the labour of tens if not hundreds or even thousands of people. When it was first built, the white chalk of the bank would have been striking – it may have taken many years for the grass to grow over it. The recent excavations only uncovered a small part of the inside of Castle Hill. This suggested that the hillfort was lived in and used for religious ceremonies (feasting and human burials) most intensively during the Middle Iron Age period.

The Castle hill landscape

Castle Hill lies on a chalk ridge known as the Sinodun Hills. It overlooks the Thames valley to the northeast and a low-lying plateau to the west – it can be seen for miles. Its high visibility together with its fertile and easily farmed soils may explain why it has attracted human activity over such a long time period. Recent investigations show that the Castle Hill hillfort was only one part of an incredibly rich archaeological landscape. This includes traces of activity relating to all prehistoric periods from the Mesolithic (10000–4000 BC) onwards, the most conspicuous of which (beyond the hillfort) is an Early Bronze Age (2500–500 BC) burial mound or round barrow on the hilltop to the south east of Castle Hill, capped with a small clump of trees. During the time that the hillfort was being built and used, people were living in roundhouse settlements across this landscape. The largest and densest Late Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement, including a massive pile of prehistoric rubbish (a midden), lay just outside the hillfort, and stretched all the way from the Earth Trust centre to the field south-east of the Clumps car park. In the Roman period, settlements (including a possible Roman villa) and fields were established on the plateau to the west of Castle Hill. The hilltop itself was occupied and used as a burial ground towards the end of the Roman period (in the 4th century AD).

References

Allen, T., Cramp, K., Lamdin-Whymark, H. & Webley, L. 2010. *Castle Hill and its Landscape: Archaeological Investigations at the Wittenham Clumps, Oxfordshire*. Oxford: Oxford Archaeology and the Earth Trust. (Available from the Earth Trust or from Oxford Archaeology for £9.95)

How can I find out more?

One reason that Castle Hill is a fantastic place to visit is that it forms part of a much broader archaeological and natural landscape that is now protected as a nature reserve. Information about the Little Wittenham nature reserve including walks, events, educational workshops, volunteer programmes, and much more is available on the Earth Trust website.

General information: <http://www.earthtrust.org.uk/Places/at-little-wittenham/Earth-Trust-Centre.aspx>

Earth School: <http://www.earthtrust.org.uk/Learn/EarthSchool/SearchLessons.aspx>

Living History: <http://www.earthtrust.org.uk/Our-work/livinghistory.aspx>

Volunteering page: <http://www.earthtrust.org.uk/SupportUs/Volunteer.aspx>

The abbey museum at Dorchester-on-Thames includes displays of important prehistoric and later archaeological finds excavated from the north of the Thames and has its own educational programme:

General information: <http://www.dorchester-abbey.org.uk/museum.htm>

Information for schools: <http://www.dorchester-abbey.org.uk/education.htm>

Visitor information for other amazing hillforts in the area can be found at:

White Horse Hill, Uffington: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/white-horse-hill/>

Segsbury Camp: <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=6961>

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