

Hillforts: Background information for teachers

Hillforts were constructed from at least the beginning of the Iron Age, roughly 800 BC. They can be found right across Britain but are particularly clustered in Wiltshire and Dorset, and along the border of England and Wales. They vary hugely in size from small 1.2 ha (3 acre) sites that were not much more than defended homesteads, through normal 6 ha (16 acres) sizes to the vast 19 ha (16 acres) of [Maiden Castle](#) in Dorset. Most are defended by a single large bank and ditch, but many of the larger examples have two or three bank and ditches. There is usually only one entrance but it is rarely a simple gap. To increase defensibility, the entrance is often turned inward so that people attacking the gate could be fired at from two sides as well as the front. Other hillforts have an extra bank and ditch in front of the entrance to stop a rushed attack, and some, like Maiden Castle, have a maze of extra banks and ditches there.

Inside, hillforts appear blank. This led early investigators to call them forts, thinking they were only used for shelter in an emergency. When later investigators found the marks left by the posts of roundhouses, the idea developed that they were defended towns. But excavation of hillforts has shown that the number of houses inside them varies greatly: some have lots of houses and others just a few or none at all. The most extensive hillfort excavation was at [Danebury](#), near Andover, Hants., where over half of the interior was stripped. This showed there were far more 2 m square four-post structures (taken to be granaries raised on stilts) and pits for grain storage (2400 in the area excavated), than houses (grain storage pits have been left out of the Lesson Plan and PowerPoint presentation as the process of grain preservation in the earth is more difficult to grasp than within raised granaries). There was far more grain being stored in the hill fort than the people living in it could possibly have needed. It seems likely then that the hillfort was built to protect grain tribute (tax) brought to a chief who would use it to feed his warriors, slaves and workers on great building projects like hillforts. His herds of cattle may also have been driven in to protect them from capture. It is unlikely, though, that chiefs lived in these windswept places, except during an attack, as no evidence has been found of particularly large houses inside hillforts.

The largest hillforts seem to have been different. So many houses have been found at Maiden Castle that it was probably like a small town.

Further reading:

Cunliffe, B. 1993. *English Heritage Book of Danebury*. London: English Heritage

Dyer, J. 1981. *Hillforts of England and Wales*. Aylesbury: Shire Archaeology

Evidence from [Danebury](#) is displayed in the [Museum of the Iron Age in Andover](#).

To find the nearest hillfort to your school, visit the [Hillforts Atlas](#).

National Curriculum: Prehistory Units

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