



Location: Near Tunbridge Wells, East Sussex (TQ 561 382)

Main period: Mesolithic Rock Shelter and Iron Age Hillfort

Access & ownership: High Rocks (TQ 561 382) can be reached either from the A26 south of Tunbridge Wells via Major Yorke's Road, Hungershall Park and High Rocks Lane, or from the A26 west of Tunbridge via Tea Garden Lane. During weekends from March to November and some other days (timetable online) it can also be reached by the Spa Valley Railway (a Heritage Railway) from Tunbridge Wells West or Eridge mainline stations. The site lies within the gardens of the High Rocks Hotel and a fee is payable to enter, tickets from the Lower Bar of the Hotel – at the time of writing it is not open on Mondays.



Fig. 1. The Tunbridge Wells Sandstone outcrop showing the type of overhang which could be used for shelter by hunting groups

High Rocks is an extensive and spectacular outcrop of Tunbridge Wells Sandstone which can be seen both from the approach road and from the railway. The site comprises two main elements of very different character. On the north-west side is a sheer cliff with overhangs used as **Mesolithic Rock Shelters** (Fig. 1). Most sites dating to this early period comprise only scatters of worked flint implements and manufacturing waste, usually found on the surface and very seldom *in situ*. Rock shelters represent some of the very few sites where some impression may be gained of the contemporary life style. A number of these sites have been discovered in the High Weald of Sussex; the best evidence comes from Hermitage Rocks in Buxted near Uckfield but this site is on private land and cannot be visited. Excavation at Hermitage Rocks produced a Mesolithic occupation floor with a hearth of sandstone blocks; charcoal produced radiocarbon dates in the Late Mesolithic period (Money 1960).

Evidence of occupation during the Mesolithic period at High Rocks is more limited but includes large quantities of flint tools and production waste characteristic of the period. Charcoal associated with these flints gave a radiocarbon date of c. 4500 BC, again in the Late Mesolithic. A variety of microlith forms (small flints used to tip projectile points) was found suggesting intermittent use of the rock shelters by hunting parties. Analysis of pollen samples indicated continuous woodland cover with hazel scrub predominant, but oak, beech, birch and yew were also present (Money 1960).

The site also produced evidence of activity during the early Neolithic period with findings of both characteristic flint implements and pottery. The latter includes an earlier Neolithic round-bottomed bowl dated by thermoluminescence to 3324 ± 375 BC (Drewett *et al.* 1988, 29). This again probably represents a hunting camp rather than the home base for a farming community and this pattern of use may extend into the late 3rd millennium BC to judge from a single sherd of Grooved Ware pottery.

The plateau behind the rock-face was later enclosed by an **Iron Age Hillfort** (Fig. 2). A single bank and ditch enclosed some 8ha, and a simple entrance showed signs of having been gated with the

ramparts surmounted by a palisade (Money 1968). Although not strictly a promontory fort the builders took advantage of the exposed escarpment of the sandstone outcrop to enhance the visible impact of the enclosure. It is possible that at this stage the hillfort was only intermittently occupied. Dating this first phase is difficult – Early or Middle Iron Age pottery from the interior may relate to either agricultural use of the plateau or the first phase of enclosure. However, a later date of c. 150-100BC was considered the most likely date by the excavator. The site was later strengthened by the addition of an inner bank, and both it and the outer bank were revetted with stone on their outer faces. The entrance, facing east, was also altered by the addition of a ‘guard house’ and a paved approach. The date of these alterations appears to lie in the early 1st century AD; the finding of a Samian bowl of Claudio-Neronian date and sherds of Patch Grove pottery suggests that activity within the enclosure continued into the early Romano-British period.

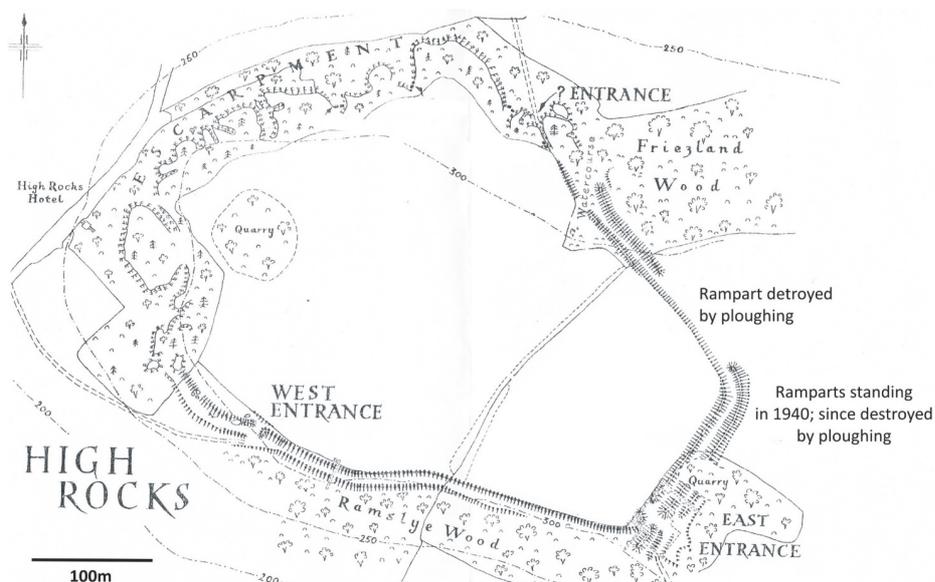


Fig. 2. Plan of High Rocks hillfort (after Money 1968)

It has been suggested that the first phase enclosure at High Rocks may relate to a view of the specialness of the rocky outcrops within the prevailing cosmology. The comparable site at Philpots (West Hoathley) has ‘sheer sandstone cliffs with caves and ravines and a dramatic perched rock stack’ (Hamilton & Manley 2001). Although there is no evidence of iron production at High Rocks, other Late Iron Age hillforts of the High Weald – Saxonbury (Rotherfield), Garden Hill (Hartfield) and Philpots – are thought likely of have played a role in the exploitation of iron ore resources (Lea & English, in press).

References

- Drewett, P., Rudling, D. & Gardiner, M. 1988. *The South-east to AD 1000*. London: Longman
- Hamilton, S. & Manley, J. 1997. Points of view: prominent enclosures in 1st millennium BC Sussex. *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 135, 93–112
- Hamilton, S. & Manley, J. 2001. Hillforts, monumentality and place: a chronological and topographic review of 1st millennium BC hillforts of south-east England. *European Journal of Archaeology* 4, 7–42
- Lea, D. & English, J. In press. Analytical survey and landscape context of Saxonbury hillfort, Rotherfield, East Sussex. *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 153
- Money, J.H. 1960. Excavations at High Rocks, Tunbridge Wells, 1954-1956. *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 98, 173–221
- Money, J.H. 1962. Excavations at High Rocks, Tunbridge Wells, 1954-1956. *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 100, 149–51
- Money, J.H. 1968. Excavations in the Iron Age hillfort at High Rocks, near Tunbridge Wells, 1957-61. *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 106, 158–205
- Tunbridge Wells tourist website: <http://www.visittunbridgewells.com/things-to-do/high-rocks-p114921>
- Pastscape: <http://www.pastscape.org.uk>

The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). When visiting sites, it is important to assess the terrain and expected weather conditions and then take appropriate precautions before embarking. The Prehistoric Society accepts no responsibility for any accidents or injuries sustained during such visits. Date published: 11/2015.