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Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Castle Ring (SK 044 128) is situated high up on the southern edge of Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, in the village of Cannock Wood.

Main period: Iron Age

Access & ownership: From the free car park off Holly Hill Road in the village of Cannock Wood, a short walk leads to the hillfort. Since 1933 Castle Ring has been owned by the [District Council](#). It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.



Fig. 1. Footpath along the banks of Castle Ring hillfort. By Bs0u10e01 [CC BY 3.0]

Castle Ring is the best preserved of eight Iron Age (IA) hillforts in Staffordshire (Fig. 2). At 244 m OD, it is the highest point on Cannock Chase; the word 'Cannock' may be a derivation of the Celtic word 'C'noc' meaning 'high place'. The site is now surrounded by forest but would once have commanded views of seven English counties and three of Wales! Today there are still fine views north over the Chase. The IA occupiers of Castle Ring would have been able to see other forts: Brownhills, 7 km to the south, and the Wrekin 32 km west.

The hillfort lies on the boundary between the two major Midland tribes, the Cornovii and the Coritani; it may have been an important place for one of these: a defensive fort, ceremonial site, stockade, communication beacon, and symbol of power. The discovery of elaborate gold torcs at nearby Needwood and Glascote suggests that there was a high status chieftain somewhere in the area. Very little archaeological investigation has been undertaken but it is believed that Castle Ring was abandoned in around AD 50.

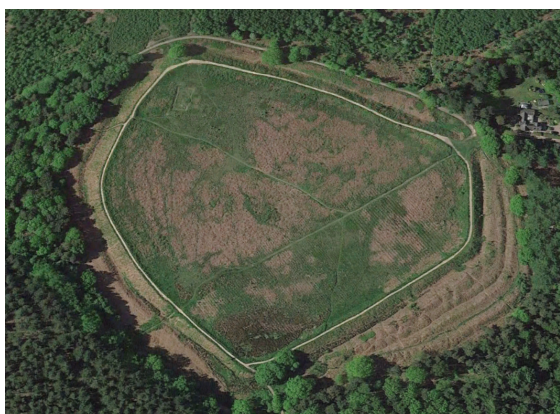


Fig. 2. Google Maps image of the hillfort

The main rampart (Fig. 1) may have been faced with timber and topped by a timber palisade. The ditch still reaches a depth of 4m in places, but some sections are more eroded. On the north and west sides the sloping ground provides good natural defences. At its widest, the hillfort measures 260 m across, and its interior encompasses some 3.4 ha. Originally there was only one entranceway, at the NE corner. It has been suggested that the site is incomplete or that it was being modified when it was seemingly deserted around the time of the Roman invasion.



Fig. 3. View of Cannock Chase from Castle Ring. By John M. [CC CC BY-SA 2.0]

In the medieval period Cannock Chase (Fig. 3) formed part of the Royal Hunting Ground, later passing to the Bishop of Coventry & Lichfield. This protected the site, although the remnants of a medieval hunting lodge can be seen in the northern corner of the enclosure. In the mid-16th century, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Henry VIII gave the lands to Sir William Paget who began exploitation of the nearby coal and iron resources. The wooded landscape of the hunting forest was used for charcoal making. At some stage the eastern interior of the hillfort was ploughed and farmed. The most significant effect on Castle Ring was the development of a landscape park at Beaudesert in the late 1700s. The north and west side of the inner rampart was levelled for a walkway and for viewing the landscape, and two carriage drives were created. One runs along the Northern boundary, the other from the main entrance in the East, bisecting the inner enclosure and cutting through the Western embankments. The footpath following the top of the rampart around the perimeter (Fig. 1) was created in the Victorian era. The remains of the lodge and the plough marks can be seen in an aerial photograph from 1931. The forest present today was created largely to provide a reserve of timber following WWI. Castle Ring has seen its fair share of alleged paranormal activity with reports of black (and sometimes white) figures in the centre of the ring, noises of hammering, chanting and singing, 'Bigfoot' type creatures, wolves, black panthers, UFOs, and aliens!

References and further information

The Victoria History of the County of Staffordshire I 1908, 336–7

Cannockwood Parish Council: www.cannockwood.org

Cannock Chase Council: www.cannockchasedc.gov.uk/residents/leisure/parks-open-spaces/nature-reserves/castle-ring-scheduled-ancient-monument

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