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Castle Hill
Wittenham Clumps

Signposts to Prehistory

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

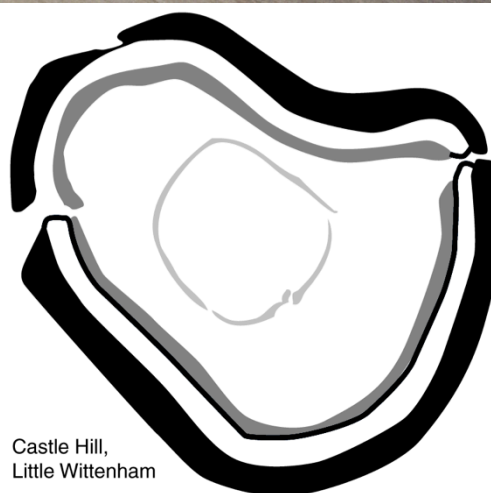
Main period: Late Bronze Age to Iron Age (1000–100 BC)

Access & ownership: The site is within the Little Wittenham nature reserve – part of the Earth Trust 500 ha 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

Fig. 1. Top: ©Videotext Communications Ltd; Bottom: the Late Bronze enclosure (left) and Iron Age hillfort (right)
(© Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology)

The earliest enclosure on Castle Hill, built around 1000 BC during the Late Bronze Age, 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 (Fig. 1). The enclosure ditch was about 4 m wide and 2 m deep. Almost 300 years later (around 700 BC, Early Iron Age), a much larger ditch, with ramparts (banks) on its inner and outer sides was built at a natural break in the hillslope (Fig. 1). This can still be seen very clearly today. 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 8 m deep. The outer bank is 7 m wide and 1.4 m high. During the Iron Age it would have been an extremely impressive sight (Fig. 2). 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.

The archaeological landscape at Wittenham Clumps has been excavated and mapped several times over the last century. The most substantial investigations took place from 2003–2006, being funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and involving teams of professional archaeologists and local volunteers. 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 (Fig. 2). The Castle Hill hillfort was built using a mixture of soil, clay, turf, chalk rubble and wood. The inner rampart probably had a timber facing (revetment). The ditch and bank would have been dug and shaped by hand-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 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.



Fig. 2. Excavating the Castle Hill hillfort ditch and rampart (© Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology)

Archaeologists think that hillforts were built for many different reasons. Small-scale warfare and raiding were probably endemic in Iron Age life and it is possible that people built hillforts because they felt they needed protection from invasion. Weapons and skeletons showing wounds have been found at several hillforts. Other hillforts include settlement remains – roundhouses, pits and granaries – and some were probably inhabited over long periods of time. Alongside this, people may have used hillforts for celebrations, religious ceremonies and trading. Building, maintaining and using hillforts was also probably important because it brought groups of people together. The activities that took place at hillforts allowed people to express their attachment to the local landscape, to other households, to their own community and to other communities, both near and afar. Recent investigations inside Castle Hill hillfort suggested that the area within the ramparts was lived in only occasionally – it was probably used more intensively for religious ceremonies (feasting and human burials) during the Middle Iron Age period.



Fig. 3. Late Bronze and Iron Age finds from excavations in the landscape around Castle Hill (a broken needle, a toggle and a Late Bronze Age pot) (© Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology)

Many of the prehistoric people who built and used Castle Hill would have been farmers. They grew wheat and barley, and tended cattle, sheep, goats, horses and dogs. They also hunted wild animals such as deer, wolves and water voles, fished in the river Thames, and managed patches of woodland so that they had good timber to build with. Sometimes they gathered together strange collections of animal bones – one of the excavated pits contained an unusual mix of cattle skulls and raven, fish, pig, horse, deer, weasel and sheep bones. The presence of complete raven skeletons on Iron Age sites (including at Castle Hill) perhaps points to the semi-domestication of birds known to respond well to human contact. Finds from the recent excavations show that these people were also making pots, sewing, spinning and weaving (Fig. 3), grinding corn, fastening their clothing with pins and toggles, cooking in ovens, smithing iron, and trading stone (and probably also other items) over very long distances. From time to time, they also probably raided and fought with other communities using swords and slingshots. Evidence from skeletons excavated on the site shows that dental hygiene was not a strong point, that there were probably periods of famine causing malnutrition, and that older people (over 30) often had quite painful arthritis or injuries that had only partly healed. When the Iron Age occupants of Castle Hill died, they were often buried in pits along with rubbish from the settlement.



Fig. 4. Excavating an Iron Age floor on the slopes beneath Castle Hill (© Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology)

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 (2500–1500 BC) burial mound or round barrow on the hilltop to the south east of Castle Hill, capped

with a small clump of trees (Fig. 5). During the time that the hillfort was being built and used, people were living in roundhouse settlements spread across this landscape (Fig. 4). 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).



Fig. 5. Brightwell round barrow (marked by the distant clump of trees) looking south-eastwards from Castle Hill
(© Earth Trust & Oxford Archaeology)

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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