



Location: The Breiddin hillfort (SJ 292 144) is on the summit of the most northerly of three prominent hills in north-eastern Montgomeryshire, an easily recognised landmark between Shrewsbury and Welshpool and visible for miles.

Main period: Later Bronze Age–Iron Age

Access & ownership: Parking is available at SJ 295 149 where a notice board shows footpaths of various lengths and steepness through the forestry plantation to Rodney's Pillar, the late-18th century monument erected within the remaining northern part of the hillfort.

The Breiddin ('Br-eye-then') hillfort, one of the largest in the region, occupies the ridge of volcanic rock that forms the western side of the distinctive block of hills emerging from the Severn valley. It is part of a dense band of hillforts that extends along the Wye Valley and the tributaries of the Severn, into the central Marches, and onward via the Clwydian Range to the North Wales coast. Much of the hillfort has been lost to quarrying; only the ramparts, the entrance, and the NE part of the hill now remain but these, and the views from the summit are ample reward for the walk up through the forest.



Fig. 1. The Breiddin

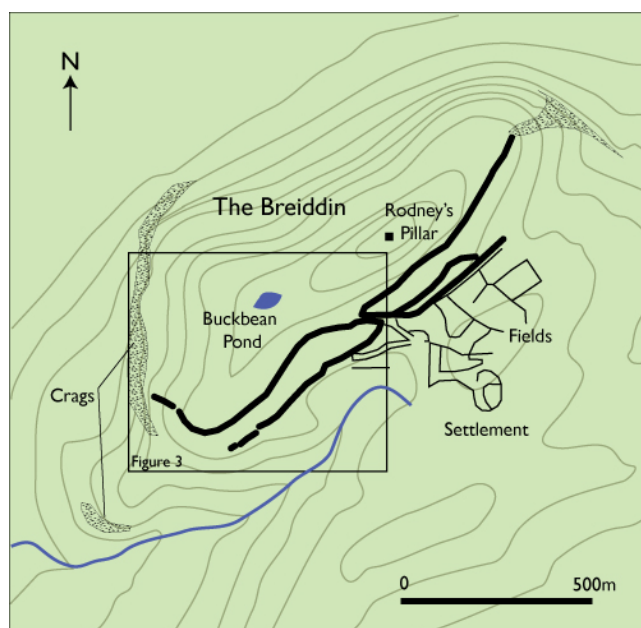


Fig. 2. The Breiddin with ramparts shown in heavy black lines

The NW side of the hill drops away sharply to the valley of the River Severn. Craggs and scree slopes along this flank provide a natural defence. Along the SE side the slopes are less severe and here the hilltop is protected by a double line of stone-built ramparts, augmented towards the northern end by a third rampart with an external ditch. A deeply funnelled entrance still used by a modern track, provides access about half way along the 1100 m length of the hillfort. The ramparts enclosed around 28 ha of the hilltop ridge, making the Breiddin one of the largest hillforts in Britain, but only a fifth of the interior is sufficiently flat or sheltered for the siting of domestic or other buildings. Excavations were carried between the end of the 1960s and mid 1970s in advance of quarrying, which later destroyed parts of the hillfort interior that had been explored by excavation. A long sequence of activity was found, dated by a string of radiocarbon dates.

The excavations revealed small-scale or sporadic activity on the hilltop from the Mesolithic to the Late Neolithic and Middle Bronze Age, followed by a substantial occupation and the building of a timber-reinforced defensive bank beginning towards the end of the Bronze Age in around 1000 to 800 BC. An important collection of Late Bronze Age pottery and metalwork was recovered, though few structures were found from this phase of occupation either behind the rampart or in the interior.

About 500 years later, around the middle of the Iron Age, the hilltop was re-fortified with a larger stone-faced rampart and external banks, the interior producing plentiful evidence for timber-built circular and rectangular buildings but few associated finds. Pottery and coins show some form of reoccupation in the later part of the Roman period and (on a nearby ridge to the east) well into the post-Roman centuries. Three areas at the southern end of the hillfort were explored: A) a stretch of the inner defences; B) an area of flatter ground higher up the slope; and C) a boggy area known as Buckbean Pond farther north on the summit ridge (Fig. 3). Each area revealed differing details of the hillfort and its people.

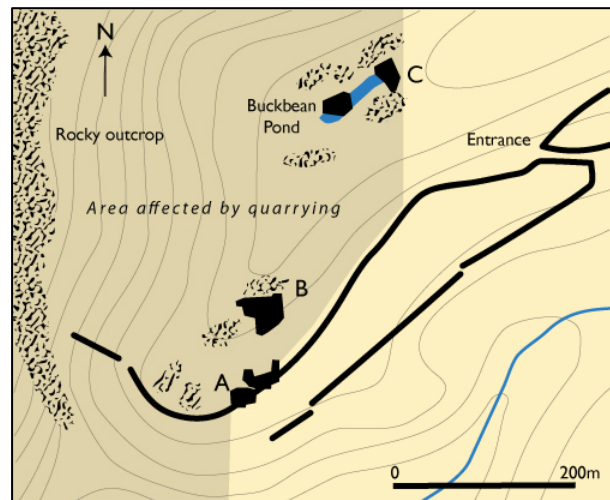


Fig. 3. Main excavation areas A, B and C shown in black. The area to the west indicated by darker shading was subsequently lost to quarrying

Area A: The Iron Age rampart was a 6m-wide bank of scree and locally quarried stone with a vertical facing of larger stones and boulders at the front. The narrow, sheltered zone just behind the bank had signs of intensive activity: two different types of buildings – roundhouses and four-posters – were crammed into the space. The roundhouses, mostly 7–8 m in diameter both here and in the interior, had walls of stakes with larger posts at the doorways. Some had central hearths; others may have been workshops or stores. The four-poster structures, 2 – 3 m wide, had massive posts, up to 0.5 m across and may have been storage barns with grain and other dry goods set on raised floors. Both roundhouses and four-posters had been built, repaired, and replaced over a considerable period of time. An important discovery below the Iron Age rampart was a narrower bank of soil and stones reinforced at the front by a double line of posts and linking timberwork for a rampart-walk and frontal palisade of the hillfort's Late Bronze Age defence. Finds from this period of occupation, from around 1000–800 BC, included bronze tools and weapons such as a socketed axe, a socketed hammer, socketed spearhead, a sword handle, and ornaments such as dress pins.

Area B: The level area excavated further up the hill was ringed by rocky outcrops and revealed intensive settlement activity similar to that of Area A, with Late Bronze Age metal-working activity (and a possible post-built roundhouse) succeeded by a pattern of Iron Age roundhouses and four-posters.

Area C: The excavation of Buckbean Pond, closer to the summit of the hill provided further insight into the lifestyle and economy of the hillfort's inhabitants. This boggy area within a natural hollow provided ideal conditions for the preservation of organic remains. A large pit or cistern had been dug into the bottom of this area in the Iron Age, around 400–200 BC, presumably to provide a permanent source of water within the hillfort. Various wooden artefacts, rarely found elsewhere, had collected in cistern's muddy sediments, including a wooden bowl, a large mallet, a pestle, twisted withies forming a kind of rope and a wooden 'sword' that may have been used in weaving or possibly as a child's toy. A sequence of pollen and other plant remains also provides an environmental history of the hill.

References and further information

Musson, C., Britnell, W.J., Smith, A.G. & Casey, P.J. 1991. *The Breiddin Hillfort: A later prehistoric settlement in the Welsh Marches*. Council for British Archaeology. Available at:

<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/cbaresrep/pdf/076/076tl001.pdf>

Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust: www.cpat.org.uk/keysites/breiddin/breiddin.htm

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