



Location: Wandlebury Hillfort (TL 4940 5343) is 6.5 km south east of Cambridge.

Main period: Iron Age

Access & ownership: The site lies within Wandlebury Country Park, a nature reserve owned by *Cambridge Past Present and Future*. The park is signposted from the A1307 Cambridge to Haverhill Road, 4km south of the Addenbrookes Hospital roundabout.

Also known as the **Wandlebury Ring**, this impressive Iron Age (IA) hillfort (Fig. 1) on the Gog Magog Downs is set in a line of defences controlling the Cam Valley and the Icknield Way; it may have been an Icenic border fort.

Excavations in 1955–6 by Clark and Hartley (Hartley 1957; Fig. 2) revealed that the hillfort was first constructed in the 4th century BC, with a steep-sided ditch (4.6 m deep and 2.4 m wide at the bottom), and a timber-revetted rampart. It fell into disrepair but was re-fortified early in the 1st century AD, when the ditch was widened to 10.7 m, the rampart was rebuilt, and a counter-scarp bank was built. A new, inner, V-shaped ditch and rampart were also added.



Fig. 1. Google Maps view of Wandlebury

Further investigations in the 1990s (French *et al.* 2004) revealed extensive evidence for Early to Middle IA occupation outside the fort, to the east of the ramparts, and predating their construction. They also identified an original entranceway on the south side.

Although no 'house' structures were identified, a large number of storage pits were found. Analysis confirmed that these once contained grain. A number had been intentionally closed, and items deposited within them. Finds from the pits included many metal items: an iron ring-headed pin, an iron knife, a bronze, torc-like brooch, and an iron ferrule. Bone objects included a highly polished needle, a gouge made from a sheep's tibia, and a comb. The presence of a spindle whorl, carding combs, and fragments of loom-weights indicate weaving activity. IA pottery was also found, as were hundreds of fragments of animal bone.

Skeletal fragments were present in several pits and four contained inhumation burials. One of these comprised the upper half of a six-year-old infant. The lower limbs were entirely absent, removed prior to the burial, and before the flesh had decayed. The remains were buried in a sack or shroud, tied by a single bronze needle. An adult female skeleton in another pit was also mutilated. Her head lay apart from her trunk, and both femurs had been broken off below the pelvis. A well-preserved male skeleton

was excavated from a large circular pit in the 1990s. A cow mandible had been placed below his shoulder, and a roe deer pelvis lay close to his feet; he had a blade injury to his jaw and a fractured rib. In 1976 high winds uprooted trees, revealing five more skeletons. All had mutilated limbs; one skull had a sword cut to the chin.

There is evidence of occupation during the Roman period but no structures of this period were found. The Anglo Saxons named the site 'Wendlesbiri' ('Waendal's fort') and it was used as a Hundred council meeting place. In 1685 a house, garden, and racing stable were built within the old fort for King James II, and the inner rampart and ditch were levelled. The mansion was bought in 1734 by Francis, 2nd Earl Godolphin. It was finally demolished in 1956; only the stable now remains.

Today, the earthwork now has a diameter of 300 m. It consists of a double bank and a ditch (Fig. 2) that ranges from 1.8 to 2.7 m in depth, with a fairly constant width of 11.5 m. The internal rampart, part-levelled in the 18th century, is now c. 0.5 m high. The counterscarp bank ranges between 0.4 and 1.8 m in height. The internal area would have been 5.64 ha in the early phase, and 3.73 ha following the addition of the second rampart.



Fig. 2. The ditch and bank as they appear today.
Image by Ethan Doyle White [CC BY-SA 3.0]

The fort is shrouded in myth. Gervase of Tilbury said in his *Otia Imperialia* of c. 1211:

'... there is a town called Cantabrica, just outside of which is a place known as Wandlebria, from the fact that the Wandeli, when ravaging Britain and savagely putting to death the Christians, placed their camp there. Now, on the hill-top where they pitched their tents, is a level space ringed by entrenchments with a single point of entry, like a gate. A very ancient legend exists, preserved in popular tradition, that if a warrior enters this level space at dead of night by moonlight and calls out 'Knight to knight, come forth', he will at once be faced by a warrior armed for fight, who charging horse against horse, will either dismount his adversary or himself be dismounted.'

In the 1950s TC Lethbridge, archaeologist, parapsychologist, and explorer, investigated reports of giant figures on the Gog Magog Hills by pushing iron rods into the hillside to detect disturbed chalk. He believed that he had found a 'warrior', a 'hooded goddess', and a 'sun god'. His publication (Lethbridge 1957) was ridiculed and he resigned from his post at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

References and further information

- French, C., Cyganowski, N.D., Evans, C., Gdaniec, K., Prospection, G.S.B., Hanks, B., Hill, J.D., Lewis, H., Miracle, P., Oswald, A. & Pattison, P. 2004. Evaluation survey and excavation at Wandlebury Ringwork, Cambridgeshire, 1994–7. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* XCIII, 15–66
- Hartley, B.R. 1957. The Wandlebury Iron Age hill fort excavations of 1955–6. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 50, 1–28

Lethbridge, T.C. 1957. *Gogmagog: The buried gods*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
Wandlebury Country Park: www.cambridgeppf.org/places/wandlebury-country-park/

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