

Eddisbury Hill: A powerful Iron Age fortress

SIX PREHISTORIC HILLTOP ENCLOSURES, or 'hillforts', dominate Cheshire's sandstone ridge.

All have long and complex histories that began in the Neolithic or early Bronze Age with the ritual burial of the dead, perhaps associated with seasonal festivals, fires and feasts.

The hilltops were probably first enclosed in the late Bronze Age to mark them out as special places. By the Early Iron Age these enclosures had become increasingly defensive, possibly to protect and regulate important goods such as grain and livestock. Many 'hillforts' were abandoned as society changed in the Late Iron Age. Yet, even today, they remain an atmospheric and essential part of the British landscape.

Eddisbury hilltop enclosure

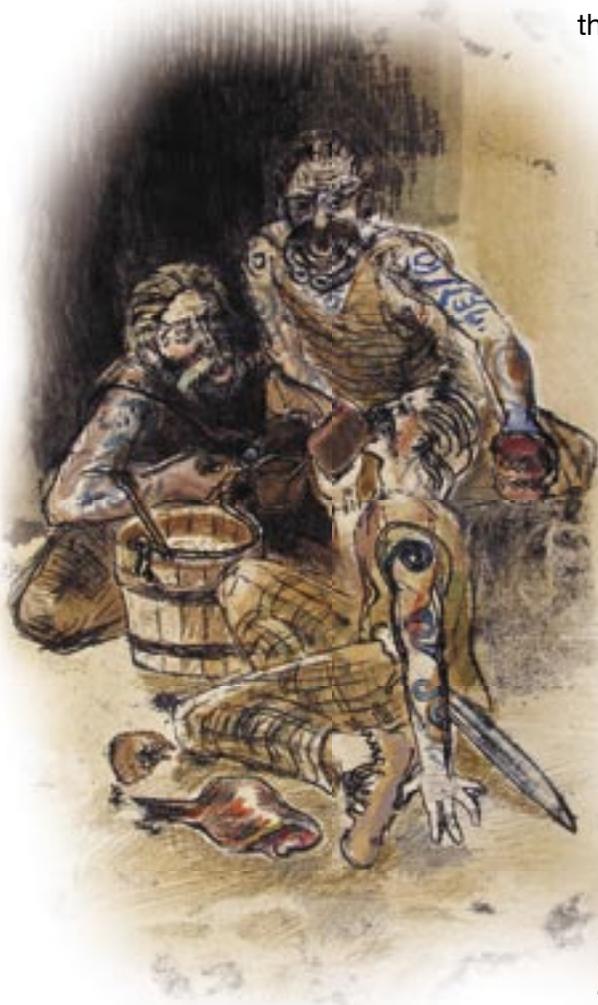
Eddisbury is one of the largest and most complex of the Cheshire 'hillforts' whose impressive ramparts still dominate the hill today. The enclosure occupies a flat-topped sandstone plateau just to the east of the main Sandstone Ridge. Evidence suggests the outcrop may have been enclosed since the Late Bronze Age, at first by a freestanding timber palisade, perhaps dating from as early as 1,000-700 BC; and then by two parallel ramparts, constructed around 600-500 BC. Excavations of the eastern gateway, in the second phase defences, show that the timber-laced and timber-faced earthen ramparts were later encased in drystone walling. Occupation of the hillfort appears to have continued throughout the Romano-British period, and the hillfort was apparently refortified by the Saxons in the tenth century.

◀ Ale for Heroes

Feasts awash with ale, mead and wine were essential emblems of a prehistoric chief's right to rule

Ritual Enclosure ▶

Eddisbury hill was an important ritual site long before the first defensive ramparts were built



ON THE HILL: Theme 3

Feasting and drinking

THE ALE-FUELLED CELTIC FEAST has passed into folklore. Feasts, with all their social implications, may have been central to the development of the human species.

Building hilltop enclosures must have required huge resources. As a result, it may have been a catalyst for social and political competition. Vast amounts of food would have been needed for construction festivals, whilst seasonal gatherings may have been the focus for elaborate exchange rituals between neighbouring communities. This, in turn, may have led to the rise in dominance of one hillfort over another, and the erratic growth of others.

Decorative bronze attachments from wooden or leather drinking tankards have been found at several hillforts, including Beeston. The remains of fire-damaged cobbles used to boil large amounts of water are also commonly found at hillforts. Recent experiments suggest they may have been associated with the brewing of ale made with malted barley flavoured with honey, blackberries and rosehips. Could the burnt rocks and charred wheat and barley from Cheshire's hillforts be evidence of large scale brewing? Perhaps the brewing process was a key part of the preparation for seasonal feasts and gatherings.

“Iron Age leaders bolstered their claim to rule by giving feasts awash with prodigious quantities of booze.”

Bettina Arnold, *Power Drinking in Iron Age Europe*, British Archaeology, 2001

“The camp of Eddisbury is erected at a point calculated to command the British road, as well as the Roman road from Condate [Northwich] to Deva [Chester].”

George Ormerod, *History of County Palatine and City of Chester*, 1882

Early Evidence

Several early artefacts from Eddisbury pre-date the enclosure of the hilltop. Five polished stone axes found at the foot of the hill, and a perforated macehead from just south of the plateau, date from the Neolithic. A number of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age 'grooved ware' funeral urns from around the hill may have come from two or three lost burial mounds. Finally, a Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead was picked up recently within the hillfort.

More intriguing, though, is the Bronze Age 'cup and ring' decorated boulder unearthed close to the eastern gateway in 2010. It seems the hilltop may have been a sacred enclosure long before the first defences were built.



Bronze Age Drinking Cup
A unique bronze and leather Iron Age drinking cup reconstructed from fragments excavated from the ramparts at Beeston

To learn more about the Habitats & Hillforts project, visit www.habitatsandhillforts.co.uk

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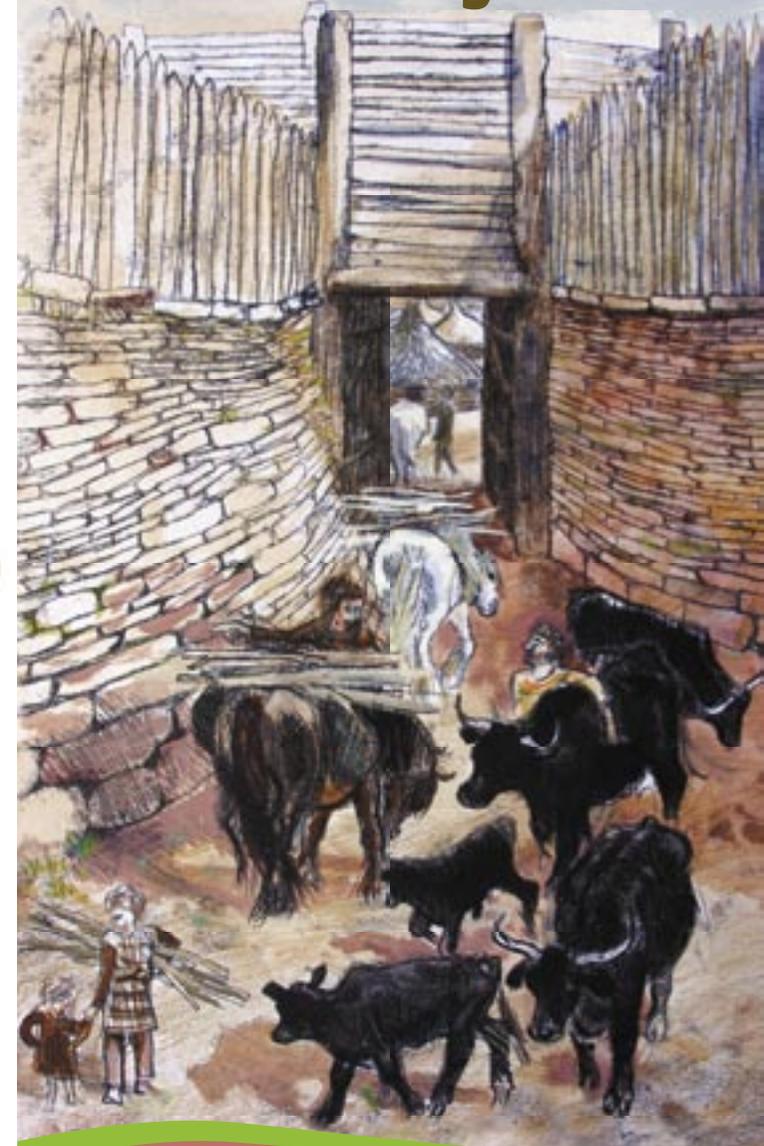


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The Archaeology of Eddisbury Hill



Discover Cheshire's prehistoric hillforts

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