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The future of the past

Cadbury Hill Fort – A Brief History

The hill fort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is of more than local importance, not perhaps because of its construction during the Iron Age (?600BC-50AD), but because of the evidence of re-occupation during the period c.450-550AD. By this time, Rome, of course, was no longer the centre of the Mediterranean world, but a Romanised civilisation was now based in Byzantium. Pottery of an eastern Mediterranean type that had previously been found in only two places - Tintagel and South Cadbury – was found during excavations in 1968-73 (Rahtz *et al*, 1992), along with evidence of imports of wine, olive oil and glass. This showed that the hill fort was a high-status settlement with long-distance trade links in the post-Roman period, both to the Anglo-Saxon areas to the east, and to North Africa and perhaps Spain or France, as well as the eastern Mediterranean. There are a number of other local hill forts (Worlebury, Dolebury, Cadbury-Tickenham, Brent Knoll, for example), but after the excavations the national importance of Cadbury Hill Fort was recognised.

A Multivallate Hill Fort

The hill top has produced signs of activity in Neolithic and Bronze Age times, but the first evidence of occupation comes from the pre-Roman Iron Age, when substantial defences turned the hill into a multivallate hill fort. It has often been said that the hill fort has only one rampart (univallate), but anyone who has climbed up or down the hill on the eastern side will know that there are a series of impressive ditches and banks defending the approach from that side. There are two small enclosures at the top of the hill, beside the eastern entrance, which have been interpreted as 'guard houses', reinforcing the defences of the fort.



In addition to the main hill fort, the top of the adjacent Henley Hill was the subject of excavation in advance of quarrying in the 1960s (Watts and Leach, 1996). Finds from the site included some pottery, at least one brooch and the remarkable bronze figurine, which seem to indicate some religious activity during the late Iron Age.

Bronze figurine from Henley temple site

Later, a series of Roman temples of increasing size were built in the 1st – 4th centuries, surrounded by about 90 burials which may have been from the post-Roman period. However, all these remains were completely destroyed by quarrying and only the slightest trace of them might possibly remain. But it has recently been

noticed that there is one place in the uppermost ditch on the north-east side of the hill fort where a causeway across the ditch has been left when digging out the rock. This is in such a position that an observer looking out along the causeway would look directly at the religious site and later temple on Henley Hill, suggesting that the site was important to the people who built the ramparts in the Iron Age.

Within the fort, excavations found that it was re-occupied in the late 5th century, and subsequently new earthworks were built, including a bank dividing the hill top into two parts. Although only a small part (6%) of the area was dug, there was evidence of 8 structures, both circular and rectangular, from that period, and by the sixth century the occupants had achieved the high status shown by the imports described above. However, in the late sixth or early seventh century the settlement appears to have declined, or been abandoned. There was some mediaeval and post-mediaeval activity on the hill, including ochre and lead mining, and iron mining at Henley Wood.

It was probably in the 19th century that the various quarries were established around the site, including the Congresbury parish quarry (which eventually destroyed 6% of the interior of the hill fort), Henley quarry and two others. Also in the 19th century, the hill top copse was planted. The 20th century saw the construction of the reservoir on Henley Hill (in 1907), and the cessation of grazing on the hill, first by sheep, and later, disastrously, by rabbits, due to myxomatosis. This has allowed the growth of scrub over much of the grassland, with dire consequences for both biodiversity and archaeology.

The area of Ancient Monument status forms the core of the Local Nature Reserve, which extends as far as Henley Lane. There is a 'Right to Roam' over all the hill and there is much of interest to see. Firstly, of course, the ramparts, especially on the eastern side, consist of massive banks and ditches and at the top of the track, where once there was an entrance to the fort, it is still possible to spot the low banks of the small 'guardhouse' enclosures. From the track, follow the ramparts through the woods to the north and you will come to the 'causeway' blocking the main ditch and forming a viewing platform across to Henley Hill. In the interior of the fort, it is not easy to see the cross-bank which bisected the hill fort because of later disturbance, but if the grass is short you might spot several circular depressions where the houses of the Iron Age (and later) once stood.

Cadbury Hill Fort is one of the most important historical features in the two parishes of Congresbury and Yatton – equally as important as the two parish churches. It is vital that it receives the level of care and attention that it deserves, and we have every reason to be proud of the heritage that our ancestors left us.

References

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