

Woodhouse Hill: A late Bronze Age hilltop enclosure **Unfinished or Eroded?**

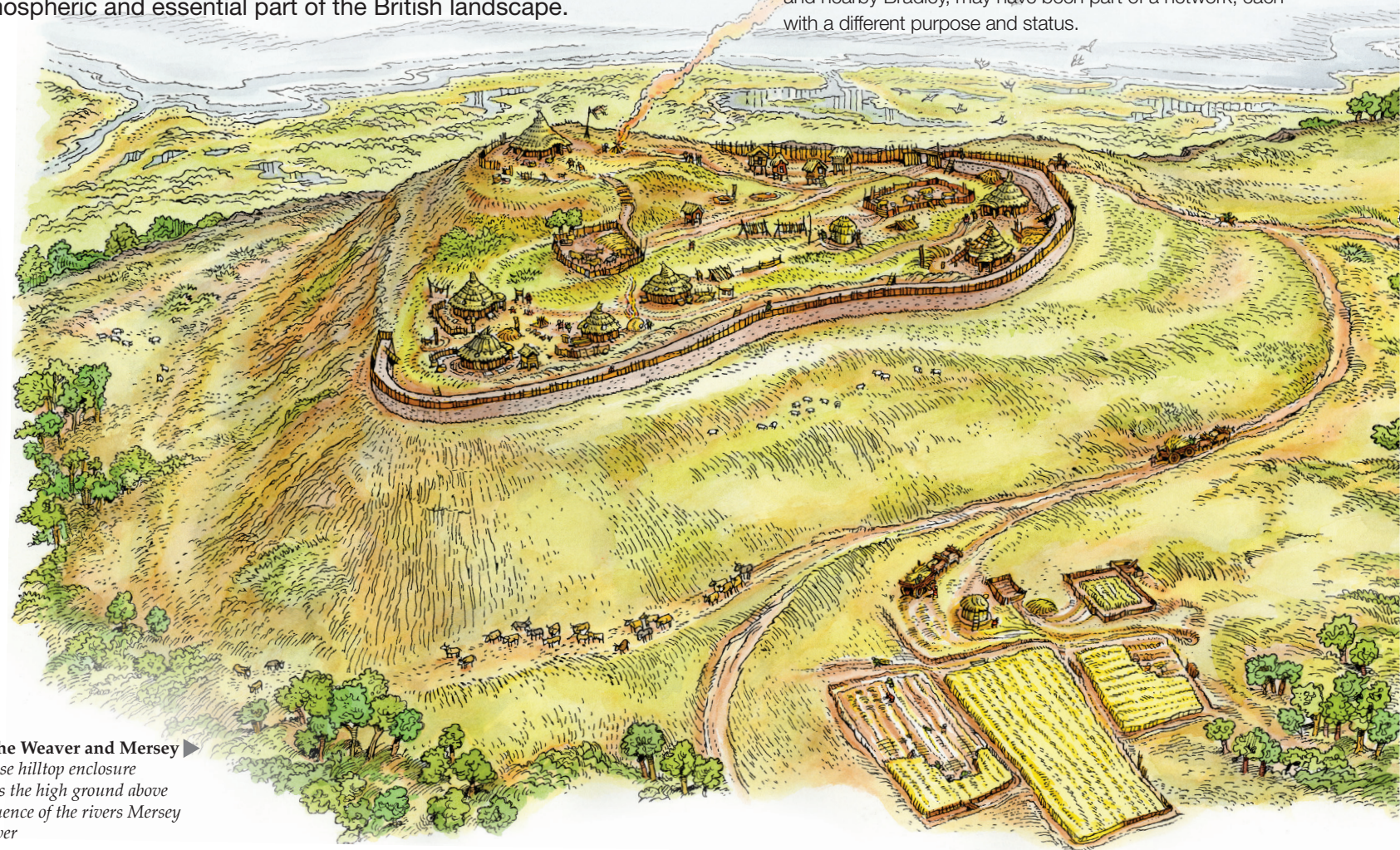
SIX PREHISTORIC HILLTOP ENCLOSURES, or 'hillforts', dominate the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. All have long and complex histories that began in the Neolithic or early Bronze Age with the ritual burial of the dead, perhaps associated with seasonal festivals, fires and feasts.

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.

The ancient enclosure at Woodhouse straddles a rocky outcrop close to the northern end of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Roughly 4½ acres of the hilltop are secured by a stone-faced rampart that curves around the gentler slopes to the north and east, with low cliffs to the west and southwest. Advanced dating techniques suggest the ramparts were originally built during the Late Bronze Age. Apparent breaks in the eastern defences have been interpreted as evidence of either unfinished work or military catastrophe; current thinking suggests they are simply the result of erosion and historic stone-robbing. The enclosures at Woodhouse, Helsby Hill, and nearby Bradley, may have been part of a network, each with a different purpose and status.



Dead and Buried
The Iron Age dead were sometimes buried in stone-lined cists



Above the Weaver and Mersey
Woodhouse hilltop enclosure dominates the high ground above the confluence of the rivers Mersey and Weaver

ON THE HILL: Theme 2

Burial rituals

CHESHIRE'S IRON AGE HILLFORTS contain ample evidence for the ritual disposal of the dead. The hilltops were probably used for ritual burials from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age onwards. Well-preserved Bronze Age pottery urns containing cremation burials have been excavated at both Beeston and Eddisbury hillforts.

Disposal of the dead in the Iron Age sometimes included inhumation — the laying out of a body in a grave, which was often lined with stones to form a burial cist. A possible cist was found within the hillfort on Woodhouse Hill during excavations in 2009; however, all traces of the body and any grave goods had long since disappeared.

A commoner method of disposing of the dead was probably excarnation. This involved leaving the body exposed to wild animals and the elements and later cremating the bones or depositing them in nearby pools and rivers. One theory suggests that the four-post structures often found within hillforts could have served as raised platforms for excarnation. When ritually combined with four-poster granaries, they may have symbolised the timeless cycles of death and rebirth.

“They hold that the soul of a dead man does not descend to the silent, sunless world of Hades but becomes reincarnate elsewhere.”

Lucan, Roman writer, 1st century AD

“The present form of the site [at Woodhouse] suggests that the primary motivation of the builders was to create a secure enclosure.”

Oxford Archaeology North, *Archaeological Desk-based Assessment*, 2008

Occupation Evidence

Evidence for prehistoric use of the hilltop prior to the hillfort is limited to a flint arrowhead found within the ramparts. However, the surrounding area has produced a wealth of flint artefacts ranging in date from the Late Mesolithic to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. A huge collection of Late Mesolithic flints found at nearby Harroll Edge suggests the area was once a seasonal camp used by a band of hunter-gatherers. Closer to, a Neolithic or Late Bronze Age flint scraper and flint knife were discovered just to the south of the hilltop.

The interior of the hillfort has never been excavated. But if its primary role was as an arena for the ritual burial of the dead, then perhaps we shouldn't expect evidence of a settlement for the living.



Cremation Urn

This decorated Bronze Age collared vessel from Kelsall was found inverted over a cremation burial

This leaflet was originally produced as part of the Habitats & Hillforts Project (2008-12) with the generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

To learn more about the work of the Sandstone Ridge Trust and its partners, visit

www.sandstoneridge.org.uk

Concept and text: Tony Bowerman

Illustrations: Kim Atkinson, Dai Owen

Artefacts: Grosvenor Museum, Chester

Photography: David Heke

Design: William Smuts

The Sandstone Ridge Trust



Cheshire West and Chester

Copyright © Cheshire West & Chester 2011. All rights reserved.

Printed on 100% recycled paper


SandstoneRidge

The Archaeology of
Woodhouse Hill



Discover Cheshire's prehistoric hillforts

Helsby Woodhouse Eddisbury Kelsborrow Beeston Maiden Castle