



HISTORY MYSTERIES

Why did Iron Age Britons build hill forts?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	Victorians	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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The Iron Age in Britain began in roughly 800BCE, when people started to use iron, which was tougher than stone or bronze, and therefore made more fearsome weapons. With efficient weaponry, came more conflict between the tribes living in Britain at the time. It was during this period that many hill forts were constructed around the country – it is estimated that there are around 4000 hill forts in Britain.

So, what is a hill fort? Simply, a hill fort is a **settlement** built on top of a hill. They are constructed of **ramparts** made of earth, stone or wooden fencing, or a combination of all three, which form a barrier around a hilltop to create an **enclosure**. It has long been assumed that hill forts were purely **defensive**, but it is now believed that they may have had a variety of uses.

Source A



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An aerial photograph of Maiden Castle, one of the most extensive hill forts in Britain. It is located in Dorset, England.

Source B



Map showing the location of hill forts in North Devon.

https://www.northdevoncoast-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/legacy/resources/FINAL%20Iron%20Age%20school%20resource_digital_low%20res.pdf

Source C

Why did people build Maiden Castle?

- The fort is on top of a large hill which is 914 metres long. That's about as long as 10 football pitches.
- In the Iron Age, hundreds of people lived there.
- They built the fort to protect themselves. They could see attackers better from high up.
- In Roman times, these people were called the Durotriges tribe, meaning 'hill fort-dwellers'.

BBC Bitesize – Maiden Castle: An Iron Age hill fort

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z7q98hv#z7hy3j6>

Source D

LIFE IN THE HILLFORT

The nature of the occupation of the hillfort changed considerably as the Iron Age progressed. At first, the fort was home to a small, self-sufficient community, but in the following 400 years it became the most important settlement in southern Dorset.

Excavations have discovered early Iron Age post-holes in square arrangements within the hillfort. These are thought to have been above-ground stores, used for keeping grain produced in the surrounding fields, perhaps to feed the workforce occupied in building the huge ramparts.

At the height of its occupation, the fort was densely populated and there were many roundhouses. These had central hearths, large pits for storing grain and were often circled by drainage gullies. Various finds from the site show that activities such as textile production and metalworking were taking place here.

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/maiden-castle/history/>

Source E

Who made hillforts and why?

There are many different reasons for why hillforts were built, but it is most likely that those living and working around the area they appear in created them. Reconstructions often show them as bustling little towns on top of hills, but most sites show no evidence of any roundhouses or village life. It is more likely that hillforts were made by those living in the landscape *around* the site and were built as a community effort, perhaps as somewhere to gather for a fayre, for **refuge** or to swap livestock. Yet, the most stand out reason for building them appears to be as a status symbol – local people demonstrating their dominance or influence over the landscape around them.

<https://www.chilterns.org.uk/our-landscape/history-heritage/prehistoric-chilterns/hillforts/>

Source F

There is evidence for many similarly enclosed settlements on low ground too, but these sites are more frequently damaged or erased entirely by farming or building. The prevalence of forts on high ground and is, to some extent, the result of differential survival: they remain visible today because the hilltops aren't as suitable for growing crops or for building towns and cities. There were lots of forts on lower ground too, but many of these have been erased by centuries of farming taking place over the top of them.

Hillforts were once thought to be entirely defensive in nature, to protect against attack. These ideas were popular in the Victorian period, when it was widely believed that people in prehistory were wild and savage. Now we know that prehistoric society was more complicated, with highly developed social structures. Prehistoric art, for example, makes clear that the people living here thousands of years ago were highly skilled, imaginative and creative, with complex ideas to communicate.

One issue with the notion of hillforts as primarily defensive sites is that they are sometimes so huge, they would be almost impossible to defend. Rather than being defensive, hillforts may have functioned at least partly as social signifiers, or status symbols. These hilltop constructions with their massive ramparts would have been visible for miles around. They were a visual representation of the power of the people who had built them, or the people who had the power to control the resources required to build them: materials and people.

What is a hillfort? AOC Archaeology Group

<https://www.aocarchaeology.com/callanderslandscape/what-is-a-hillfort>



What do YOU think?

Glossary

settlement – a place where humans live

ramparts – a length of wall or bank built around a castle or fort

enclosure – an area of land surrounded by a fence, wall or hedge

defensive – describes a place built so that it can be defended against armed attacks

excavations – when historic sites are dug up to find evidence of what life was like there

refuge – safety

Further Reading:

Prehistoric Adventures: Hill Forts by John Malam

Prehistoric Britain: Bronze Age and Iron Age Hill Forts by Dawn Finch

Everything Stone Age to Iron Age by National Geographic Kids

Explore! Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages by Sonya Newland