

Kelsborrow Castle: A late prehistoric promontory fort **Above Boothsdale**

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.

Kelsborrow Castle exploits the natural defences of a wedge-shaped spur of land formed by the steep slopes of the sandstone ridge to the west and the deepcombe of Boothsdale to the southeast. A single curved bank and external ditch enclose around nine acres of the hilltop. Limited excavations in 1973 suggested the original defences comprised an early timber-faced box rampart with an earth and rubble core. Today, the bank and ditch end close to the top of Boothsdale, implying an entrance along the lip of the slope. But when the Cheshire historian George Ormerod surveyed the fort in 1882, he found two clear gaps in the bank and ditch, roughly a quarter of the way in from either end.

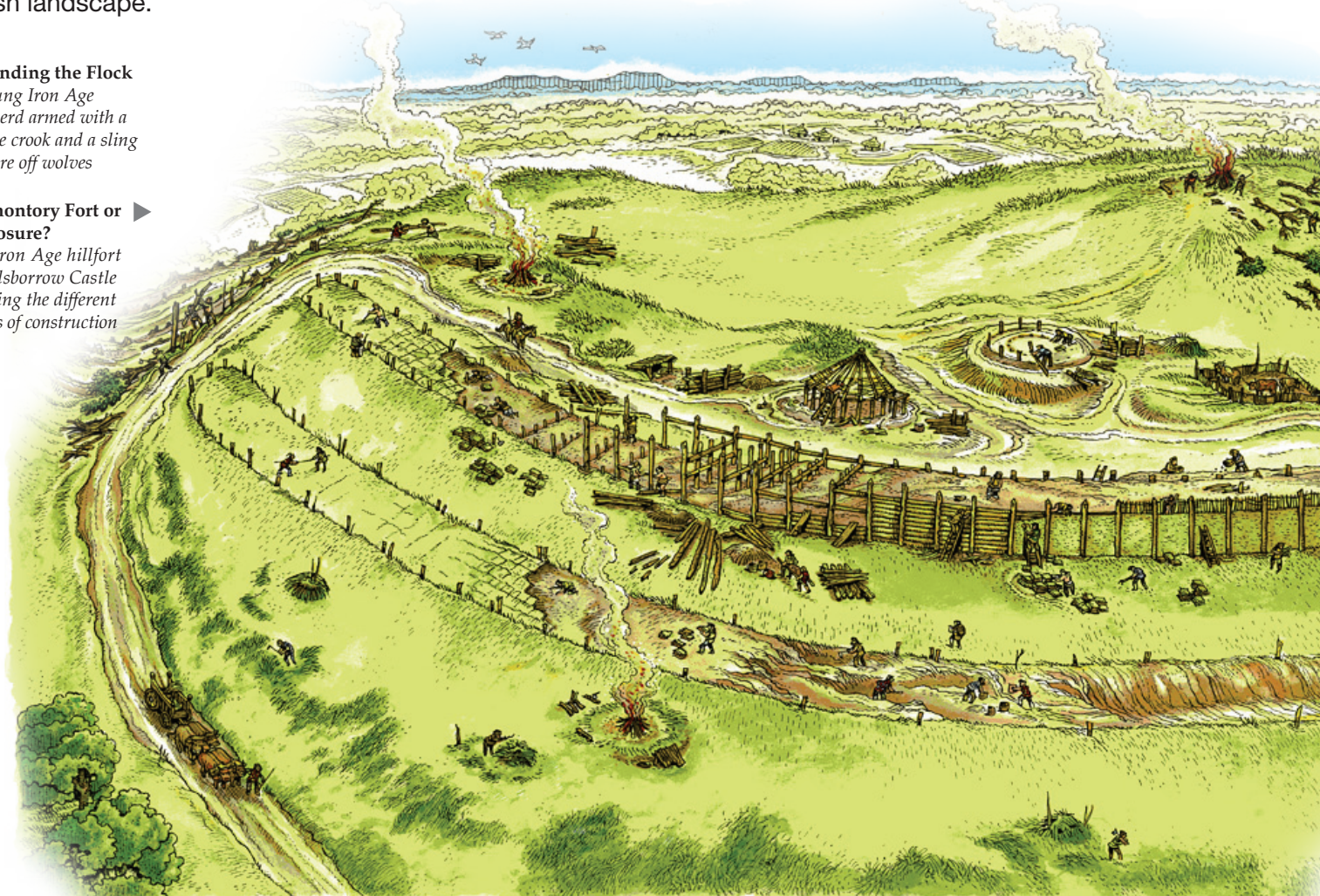


◀ Defending the Flock

A young Iron Age shepherd armed with a simple crook and a sling to scare off wolves

Promontory Fort or Enclosure? ▶

The Iron Age hillfort at Kelsborrow Castle showing the different stages of construction



ON THE HILL: Theme 4

Protecting cattle and sheep

FARMING WAS CENTRAL TO BRITAIN'S Iron Age economy. Most people probably lived outside the hillforts in farmsteads and crofts among the fields and pastures where they grew crops and raised livestock.

Animal bone does not survive well in the acidic, sandy soils of the Cheshire hillforts, but there is plenty of evidence of animals from hillforts elsewhere. Common Iron Age animals included ponies, sheep, cattle, pigs, and geese. Prehistoric livestock was generally smaller and lighter boned than our modern counterparts. Soay sheep and Dexter cattle are the closest parallels today. Cattle and sheep provided not only meat, hides, and wool but also fertilised the land.

It seems likely that one of the hillforts' key roles may have been to protect these valuable animals from predators: both human raiders and wild animals. Brown bears and Eurasian lynx were still indigenous to Britain until the end of the Roman period, while packs of wolves roamed Delamere forest until the early fourteenth century. Livestock was doubtless herded to safety each evening and corralled overnight in secure places like hillforts.

“For livestock, Celtic farmers relied primarily on sheep, cattle and pigs, although the varieties kept were different from today’s.”

Simon James, *Exploring the world of the Celts*, 2005

“A bronze palstave and a fragment of an iron sword found at Kelsborrow suggest activity during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age.”

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

Pointers to the Past

The promontory was probably important long before the enclosing bank was built. A Mesolithic flint blade and two Neolithic polished stone axes have been found within a few hundred metres of the fort. Nearby Bronze Age burial mounds, barrows or ‘lows’ include Seven Lows, Higher Billinge, and Rough Low — just over the hill to the east. The hillfort's name may also point to a missing burial mound close by.

The fact that later styles of defence don't seem to have replaced the early timber-faced ramparts at Kelsborrow may suggest the hillfort didn't continue in use beyond the 7th-4th centuries BC. However, a fragment of an iron sword discovered within the hillfort in 1810 could hint at later activity on the hill.



Ceremonial Macehead?

This painstakingly drilled and polished Early Bronze Age macehead was found at Organsdale Farm, immediately to the north of Kelsborrow

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The Archaeology of Kelsborrow Castle



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