

Maiden Castle: An Iron Age cliff edge fort

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.

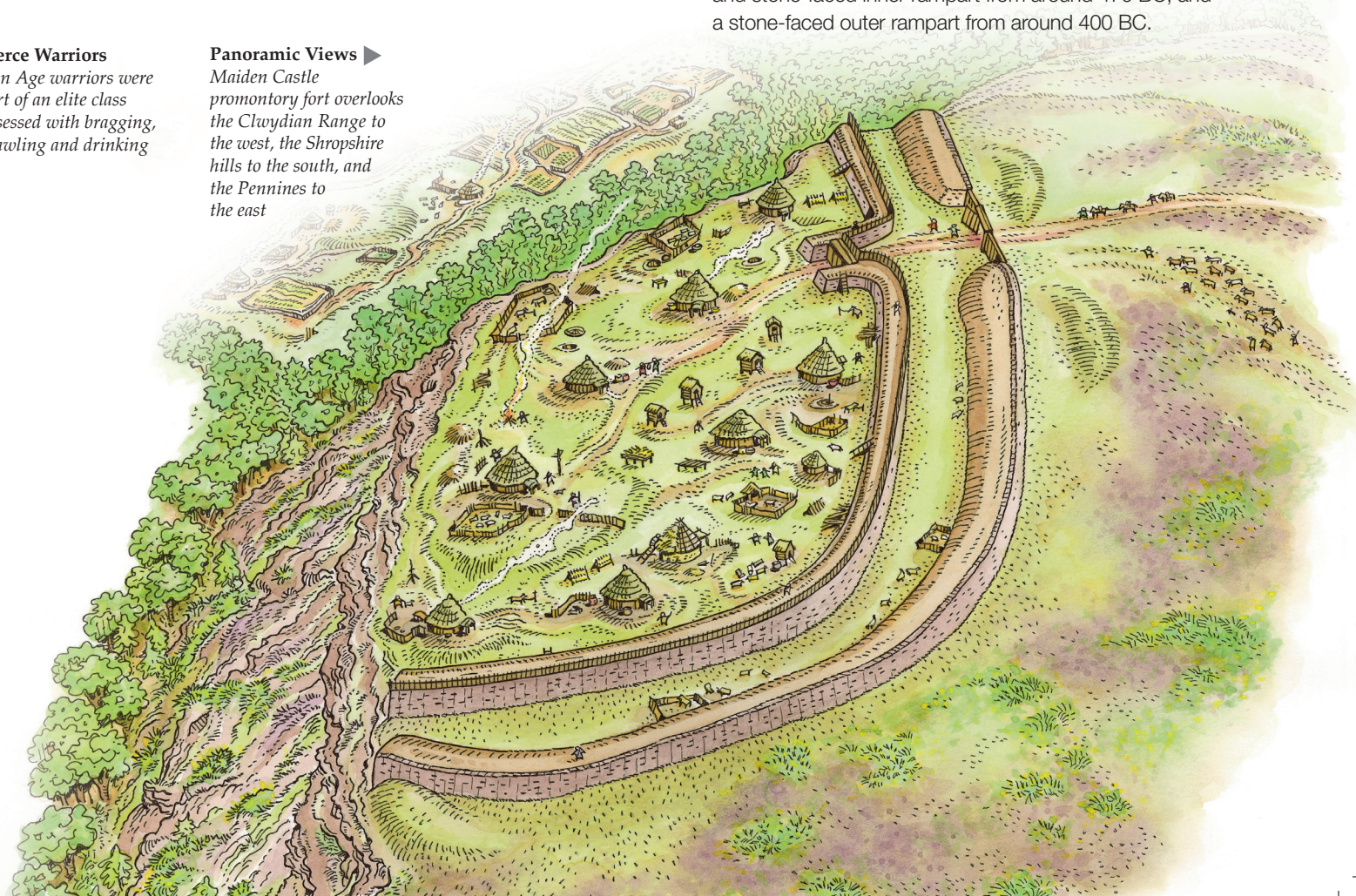
Southernmost Promontory Fort

Maiden Castle is the southernmost of the hillforts on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, with commanding views to the south, east and west. It occupies an outcrop that rises gently from the southeast with steep sandstone bluffs to the west. The hillfort makes the most of these cliffs, enclosing three acres of the hill within twin, curved ramparts and an intervening ditch. Excavations in 1934-5 uncovered an inturned entrance with possible guard chambers at the northern end of the defences. Further evidence suggests there may have been three building phases at Maiden Castle: an early freestanding timber palisade, possibly from around 900 BC; a timber-laced and stone-faced inner rampart from around 470 BC; and a stone-faced outer rampart from around 400 BC.



Fierce Warriors
Iron Age warriors were part of an elite class obsessed with bragging, brawling and drinking

Panoramic Views
Maiden Castle promontory fort overlooks the Clwydian Range to the west, the Shropshire hills to the south, and the Pennines to the east



ON THE HILL: Theme 6

Hillforts, warfare and warriors

HILLFORTS ARE TRADITIONALLY SEEN as defensive strongholds that were occupied during periods of social stress or conflict but abandoned in calmer times. Indeed, they may reflect late prehistoric developments in military organisation and strategy. This view seems to be supported by their siting on hilltops, cliff edges and promontories, as well as by their defensive banks, ditches and complex entrances. Both their design and construction suggest they were intended to intimidate, implying a well-honed understanding of aggressive warfare and associated defence.

Of the six hillforts along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, both Eddisbury and Maiden Castle featured elaborate inturned entrances and multiple banks and ditches. Excavation of Eddisbury's eastern entrance uncovered two guard chambers supplied with piles of sling-stones. At Beeston there is evidence of a timber entrance through the line of the ramparts, as well as bronze and iron weapons, including a dagger and javelin head.

Warriors were certainly central to late Bronze and Iron Age society; yet very few hillforts have produced actual evidence for pre-Roman violence. Perhaps the defensive nature of hillfort architecture was more about fear of one's neighbour than anything else?

"The whole [Celtic] race is war mad, and both high spirited and quick for battle ..."

Strabo, Greek historian, first century BC

"The chief feature of the camp was its inturned entrance."

WJ Varley, *Cheshire before the Romans*, 1964

Early Activity on the Hill

There is evidence of early activity on the hill from at least the Bronze Age. Local finds include a small leaf-shaped flint, two barbed and tanged flint arrowheads, and part of a bronze spearhead. Several Bronze Age barrows, or burial mounds, are also known from the vicinity.

The mounds and hollows within the hillfort seem to be the result of quarrying in recent centuries, but could conceal earlier features. It's possible, too, that the nearby cave at Mad Allen's Hole may have been occupied in prehistoric times. But surely the most interesting theory is that the hillfort could have been associated with the possible, but as yet unproven, prehistoric mining of a vein of copper that runs along the eastern side of the Bickerton hills.



Weapon of War
A Late Bronze
Age spearhead with
leaf-shaped blade and basal
loops, dating from around 1500-
1200 BC, from the Broxton Hoard

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The Sandstone Ridge Trust



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SandstoneRidge

The Archaeology of
Maiden Castle

Discover Cheshire's prehistoric hillforts

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