



Blackbury Camp

Iron Age Settlement



A historical guide



Blackbury Camp

The landscape of East Devon is dotted with defensible Iron Age enclosures overlooking the surrounding landscape. They are called hill-forts but not enough is known about them to know whether status or defence was the main motive in their construction; nor do we have a picture of whether they were occupied throughout the year or even if the sites were all in use at the same time during the Iron Age. Only extensive excavation would yield this kind of information. We do, however, have the evidence of partial excavation of Blackbury and other East Devon sites, and their similarities or differences to better excavated examples elsewhere.

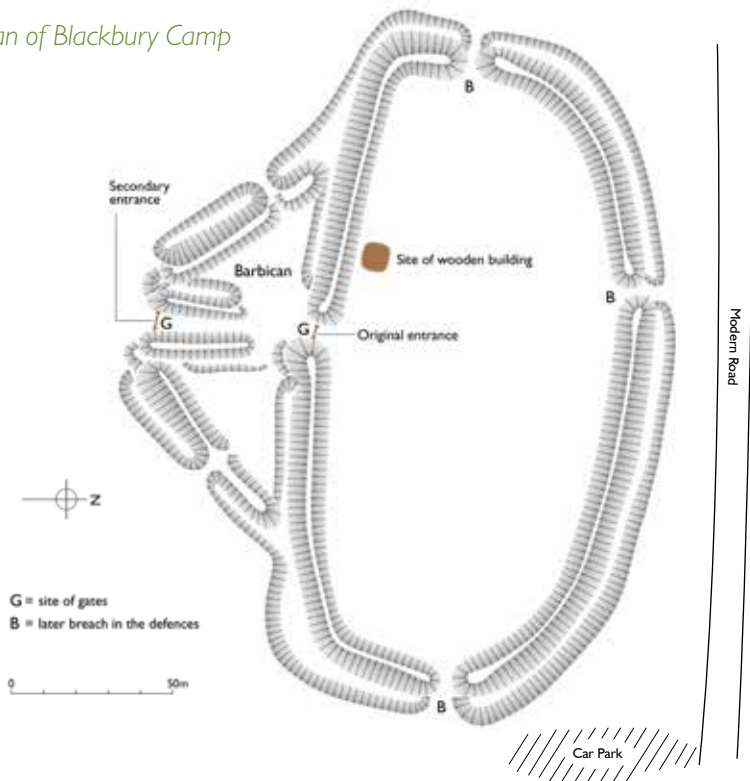
It must be emphasised that the excavation of Blackbury, undertaken nearly 60 years ago, has so far been very limited and when modern techniques such as geophysical survey and radiocarbon dating were unknown. Most of Blackbury's secrets remain to be discovered, but for the moment it slumbers on, waiting for future generations of archaeologists to awaken it, but in the meantime providing a unique historical and leisure resource.

What's the Iron Age anyway?

The Iron Age is a period of prehistory in which iron first appears in the archaeological record and gradually replaced bronze as the principal metal used for tools and weapons. People didn't stop using bronze or for that matter stone completely.

Broadly speaking the Iron Age stretches from around 800BC to the time of the Roman conquest of England in the 1st Century AD. Late Iron Age societies in South East England were essentially Romanised: they minted coins, lived in oppida (early towns), ate from Roman tableware and drank Roman wine. However, further West, in Devon, no coins were minted and we know, from archaeological evidence at sites such as Hod Hill and Maiden Castle in nearby Dorset, that the Romans had to fight their way into these tribal territories which had not been subject to cultural, political or economic Romanisation.

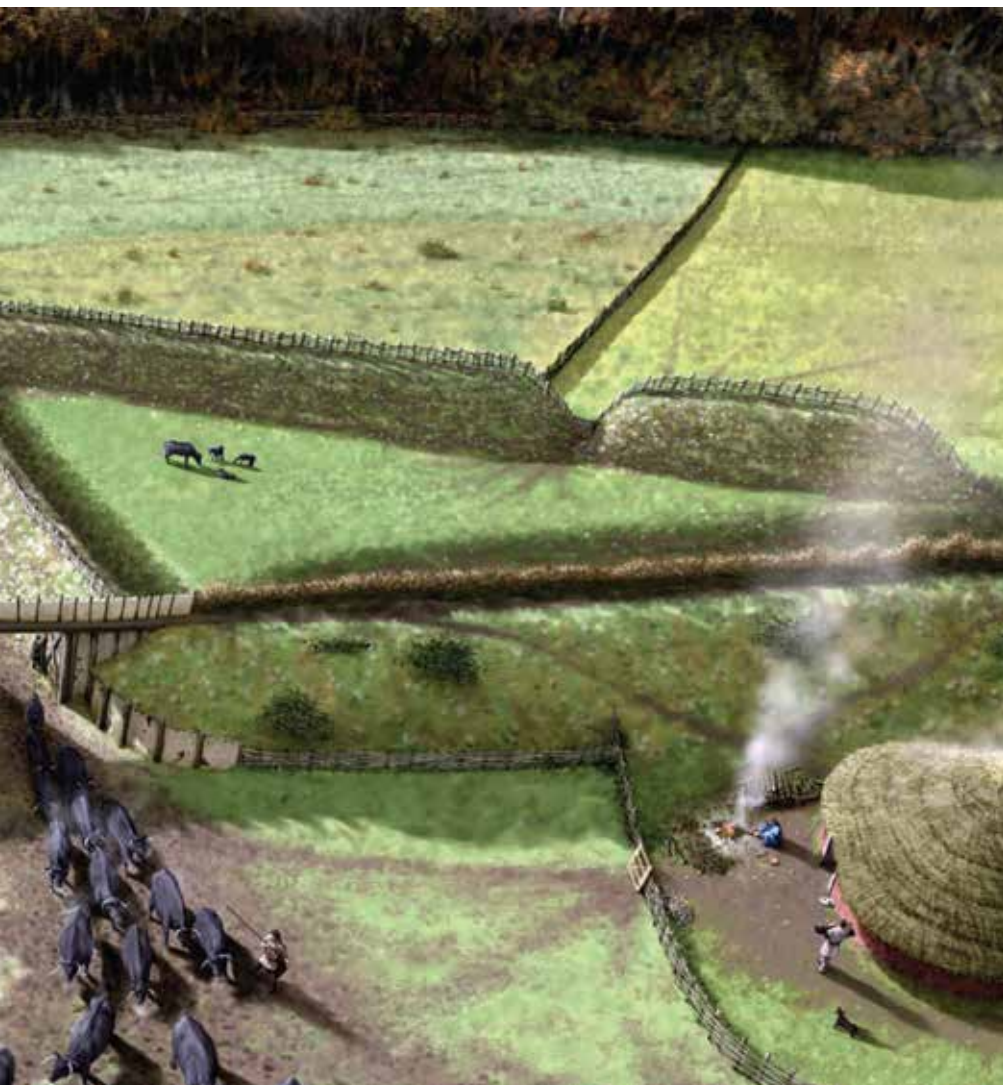
Plan of Blackbury Camp





What the camp entrance looked like based on the findings of the 1950's excavation

We do not know for certain what name people at the time used to describe themselves but communities in Devon and Cornwall were described as 'The Dumonii' in the Roman period and this is likely to have been a pre-Roman name. We do know that the Iron Age was a time of increase in population



(Illustration: Peter Urmston)

and land use, with large areas of fields in many parts of the country. We do not however know in detail what the landscape around Blackburn looked like but is likely to have been a patchwork of woods, open grazing lands and small arable fields.

Blackbury's position and its earthworks

The earthworks are on a ridge extending east from a plateau, but are not quite on the highest part of the ridge. Interestingly there is still a good spring below the original entrance to the site, where the Greensand meets the underlying Gault.

During excavations in the 1950s a few flint tools were found which demonstrate that the site was used, if occasionally, back in the Late Neolithic or Bronze Age periods.

The first thing that strikes the visitor to Blackbury, apart from the beauty of the site, is its size - and this is not even one of the larger hill-forts. Clearly this site was large enough to shelter both the surrounding community and its livestock. We should think of hillforts as community centres rather than residences for an upper class elite. If the latter were the case, sites would have been much smaller, perhaps resembling a Norman motte and bailey castle. The original entrance was to the South and, being the most vulnerable part of the enclosure, is very complex. This ensured that all guests would have been really impressed by the scale of the works and that unwelcome guests would have to run the gauntlet through a narrow passage, through the earthworks that project on either side, termed a barbican – similar in some respects to an early phase of the entrance to Maiden Castle (Dorset). The three other entrances to the interior are not of Iron Age date. That defence was at least one of the criteria for building Blackbury is evidenced by finds over of over 1000 sling stones on the site, most of them in the area of the main entrance and some of these in small groups or 'hoards'. The Sidmouth antiquary, Peter Orlando Hutchinson, records the finding of similar smooth beach pebbles in a cache at nearby Sidbury Castle.



Other Iron Age camps in the area (most not publicly accessible).

The 1954-5 excavations at Blackbury

The excavations were conducted by Alison Young and Kitty Richardson who had worked before World War II under Mortimer Wheeler at Maiden Castle, and, though delayed by the war, were very much influenced by this great archaeologist. Trenches dug into and through the rampart around the site appeared to indicate that it was all of one phase and had rough walling of chert and blocks dug out from the ditch on its top. The ditch has up to 2 metres of silt in it today, so that the earthworks would have looked even more imposing when built than they do today. From pottery found within the rampart we know that it was built in the Middle Iron Age, roughly between 300 and 100 BC.

The excavation concentrated on the extended entrance to the earthworks on the South side of the site and the area immediately within the main D shaped enclosure. The excavators hoped to provide a date for the hillfort, to understand something of how the defences worked, solving some puzzles, for example, why were there gaps on either side of the lower entrance.



This photo of the Barbican bank and ditch, from the 1958 excavations at Blackbury, show how deep the Iron Age ditch was and how much material was heaped onto the original ground surface to form the bank.

Excavation concentrated on the East side of the entrance and uncovered evidence for a wooden palisade here where the rampart expands to form a kind of platform. This palisade was represented by a series of post holes about 90 cm apart, from 25 cm to 60 cm in depth and from about 15 cm to 30 cm in diameter. The posts in these holes would have formed a revetment to the end of the rampart, supplemented by rough chert walling. The revetment would have been of wattle and daub, with fragments of burnt daub found in the excavations.

Two much larger post-holes were discovered, lined or packed with flints, on either side of the entrance. These enormous post holes, which were cut several feet into the clay were large enough not only to hang gates but also to carry a walkway above the gates and this is the interpretation that has been followed in the English Heritage reconstruction drawing of the site. Two further opposed postholes were found at the outer end of the entrance through the barbican. Gravel was found as a roadway in the main entrance and this had been brought up from around the stream at the bottom of the hill. This is useful evidence of the extent to which the entrance was used and the lengths those who used the site went to bring gravel up to the site, to make sure people and animals did not lose their footing.



Today it is obvious that there are gaps in the earthworks of the barbican. We know that material has been removed from this area as Hutchinson noted in his diary:

"On the East side of the entrance the man (James Mutter) told us that about 1825, he had taken away some seventy cartloads of what he believed to have been burnt or calcined flints. Amongst these were many pieces of charcoal, as much as would have filled a cart."

(Diary: 19 September 1859).

(Left) A section through the earthworks.

Such evidence is not inconsistent with a burning episode at some time during the use of the site and this is commented on by the excavators:

“Many fragments of baked clay, some of them stick marked, as well as charcoal from the vertical rampart face inside the entrance suggest that the revetment posts were linked by wattle and daub hurdling, which had at some time been destroyed by fire”

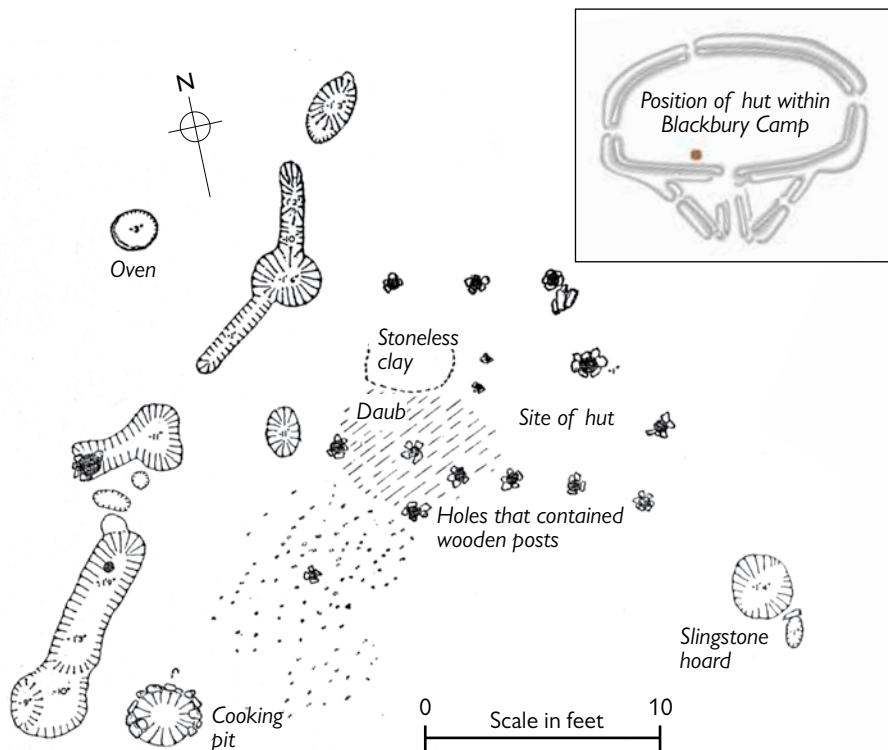
Some of the modern irregularities in the barbican were confirmed by excavation and it remains an open question as to whether it was built at the same time as the hillfort enclosure or was added later.

Evidence of occupation



(Illustration: Peter Urrnston)

Illustration of what the area around the hut might have looked like.



Plan of the hut area based on the excavation report.

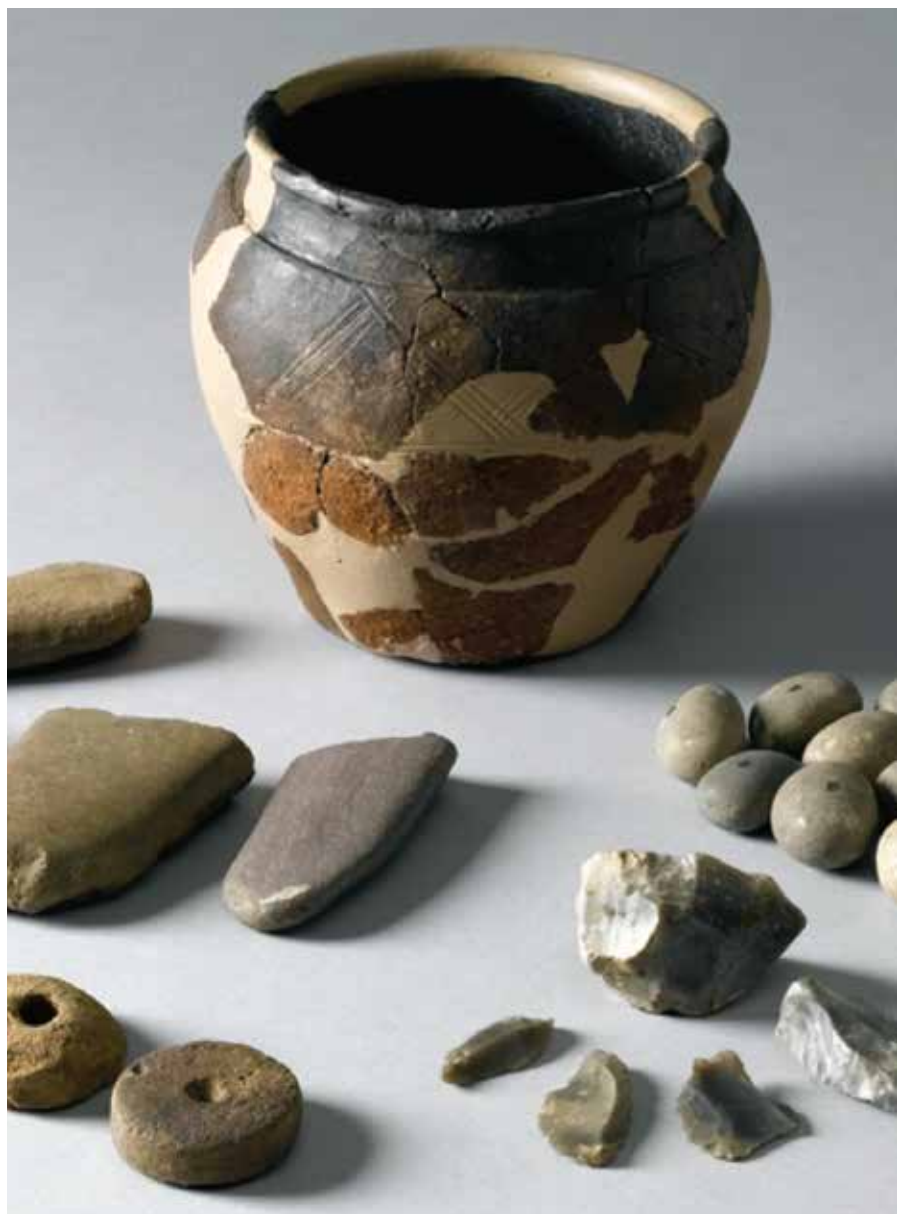
Within the hillfort enclosure, a few metres West of the entrance, 15 post holes were found indicating the presence of a timber structure but this had no clear plan; the surviving holes may have been of several stages. The associated material builds up a picture of considerable activity within and immediately outside: 25 sling stones; a heap of stoneless clay; a hollow rimmed by burnt clay suggesting an oven; a stone-edged cooking pit containing ash, pottery sherds and iron slag; an unfinished spindle-whorl.

Life at Blackbury in the Iron Age

We do not even know whether the community who built Blackbury lived in it all the year round or only maintained it for major community and intra-community events and festivals. Pottery was the most common find, small handmade vessels of suitable size and shape to have been used for cooking vessels for porridge and stews. Inclusions in the pottery show that minerals derived from the local Greensand were mixed with clay to make the pots more durable. This mineral ‘temper’ could be found locally, and small clues in the clay allow us to speculate that most of the pottery was made and fired somewhere close to the site. Some of the pottery is decorated with geometric designs around the shoulder: some of these have sandstone inclusions which are found around Shepton Mallet in Somerset. These vessels provide a hint that the Blackbury community was not isolated but had contacts for trade and exchange over some distance. Four whetstones were found of which two were more local, quarried from the Greensand which outcrops below the major hillfort of Hembury and is also found in the scarp below Blackbury. Such whetstones were dug out and used right up to the early 20th century when they were replaced by carborundrum for sharpening blades.

Soils at Blackbury as in most of Devon are acid meaning that bones from animals – and humans – do not survive. However we know from other areas that the main domestic animals, especially small sized cattle and sheep, were important to Iron Age communities. Two spindle whorls of local chert, one in the process of manufacture, point to the working of wool on the site. Minute fragments of bronze and a scrap of iron remind us of the metal which was once used. The presence of iron slag shows that this metal was certainly smithed, just possibly smelted, on site. A rather more exotic find was a partly shaped fragment of black Kimmeridge shale from Dorset: this often found its way into Iron Age sites in the South West in the form of bracelets.

There are slight hints in the form of some of the pottery found in the interior of the site that activity may have continued as late as the first century BC. However, like the few hillforts in Devon which have been excavated, there is no evidence that it was still in use at the time that the Roman army arrived.



Finds from the archaeological excavations. © Royal Albert Memorial Museum

For further information

More information about the archaeology of East Devon can be found within the following leaflets,

Time Trails; The Archaeology of Beer Head.

Time Trails; The Archaeology of East Devon.

These are also available as PDF's on our website as are Peter Orlando Hutchinson's diaries his History of Sidmouth and his watercolours.

The Devon Archaeological Society, founded in 1928, is an active and friendly organisation with a membership of over 800. The archaeology of Devon is without equal in England: it includes the rich historic landscapes of Dartmoor and Exmoor and extends in time from the Palaeolithic axes of the East Devon river valleys to industrial remains from the extraction of tin and other minerals. To find out more visit <http://devonarchaeologicalsociety.org.uk/das/>

Glossary

Barbican	is a fortified gateway
Calcined	something that has been heated up but not to its melting point
Chert	is a fine-grained silica-rich sedimentary rock
Gault	a thick heavy clay
Greensand	a local sandstone
Revetment	a structure which holds back a bank
Spindle whorls	an artifact providing evidence of the spinning of thread
Wattle and daub	wattle is a way of building walls by weaving sticks in and out of upright posts, daub is the earth and clay pushed between the sticks

Websites of Interest

www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk

www.english-heritage.org.uk/.../blackbury-camp/history-and-research/

www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=14788

www.theroundhouse.org/index.htm

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It is part of the same family of nationally important landscapes that also includes National Parks. There are 41 AONBs covering nearly 20% of England's best bits!

The East Devon AONB Partnership is a body working together to conserve and enhance the special landscape qualities, whilst encouraging a vibrant rural economy. For more information on our work, grants or what's going on contact us at; **www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk**

Location map



www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk

