

Codford Circle

Standing sentinel over the Wessex chalklands and their valleys are prehistoric enclosures, generally referred to as hillforts. Some, such as Battlesbury and Scratchbury, further up the Wylde Valley, are massive and formidable, and clearly could have had a military and defensive purpose. Many others, however, are more modest and are perhaps more likely to have had functions connected with agriculture, ritual or display. One such hilltop enclosure, which has had a bewildering variety of names – Oldbury, Oldborough, Woolborough, Yarnbury, Wilsbury, Codford Camp and Codford Castle – surmounts Malmpit Hill, on the spur of downland north-east of Codford St Mary village.

Evidence from sites which have been excavated has led scholars to think that such enclosures date from the Iron Age. But the reality is often more complex. At Codford, an aerial photograph revealed cropmarks within the extant single bank and ditch, consistent with a much earlier type of monument, a Neolithic causewayed enclosure. An archaeological investigation was therefore conducted in 2001. The work was directed by Drs Michael Allen and Julie Gardiner, both eminent prehistorians and Codford residents, and many local people participated as excavators.

A section cut through the bank and ditch revealed that, although the bank had never been very high, the ditch was originally a substantial feature – over

5 metres wide and 2.2 metres deep. The two cropmarks were found to have been produced by pits, one of which was fully excavated. Cut into the solid chalk to a depth of 3 metres and measuring 2 x 3 metres across, it contained a dark sticky deposit comprising charcoal, burnt flint, burnt or charred animal bones and a small, scorched sarsen boulder. This material, which has been interpreted as deliberately dumped food waste, something akin to the residue of a large prehistoric barbeque, was covered over soon after it had been placed in the pit. All the datable finds suggest that the pit and its deposit belong to the early Iron Age rather than the Neolithic period. Nothing comparable has been found in other similar hilltop enclosures.

A later ground survey, conducted in 2005 by Dr David Field of English Heritage, again with the assistance of local residents, confirmed the cropmarks and showed the presence of a potentially earlier non-defensive inner ditch circuit. Further investigations are planned.

Sources: This information has been supplied by Dr Mike Allen. More information can be found in 'Codford Circle: Iron Age Pits and Feasting', in *Past: the Newsletter of the Prehistoric Society*, No. 53, July 2006. This is available online at <http://ucl.ac.uk/prehistoric/>

