

= Maiden Castle , Cheshire =

Maiden Castle is an Iron Age hill fort , one of many fortified hill @-@ top settlements constructed across Britain during the Iron Age , but one of only seven in the county of Cheshire in northern England . The hill fort was probably occupied from its construction in 600 BC until the Roman conquest of Britain in the 1st century AD . At this time the Cornovii tribe are recorded to have occupied parts of the surrounding area but , because they left no distinctive pottery or metalworking , their occupation has not been verified . Since then it has been quarried and used for military exercises . It is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument , and is owned by the National Trust . The hill fort is open to visitors , but unrestricted access to the site has resulted in it being classified as " at high risk " from erosion .

= = Background = =

Hill forts developed in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age , roughly the start of the first millennium BC . The reason for their emergence in Britain , and their purpose , has been a subject of debate . It has been argued that they could have been military sites constructed in response to invasion from continental Europe , sites built by invaders , or a military reaction to social tensions caused by an increasing population and consequent pressure on agriculture . The dominant view since the 1960s has been that the increasing use of iron led to social changes in Britain . Deposits of iron ore were located in different places to the tin and copper ore necessary to make bronze , and as a result trading patterns shifted and the old elites lost their economic and social status . Power passed into the hands of a new group of people . Archaeologist Barry Cunliffe believes that population increase still played a role and has stated that

[ the forts ] provided defensive possibilities for the community at those times when the stress [ of an increasing population ] burst out into open warfare . But I wouldn 't see them as having been built because there was a state of war . They would be functional as defensive strongholds when there were tensions and undoubtedly some of them were attacked and destroyed , but this was not the only , or even the most significant , factor in their construction

= = Location = =

Although there are over 1 @, @ 300 hill forts in England , they are concentrated in the south of the country , with only seven in Cheshire . There are two groups of hill forts in Cheshire , each with three members , but Maiden Castle is the outlier , about 9 miles ( 14 km ) south @-@ south @-@ west of the southern @-@ most group . Located at grid reference SJ498529 , Maiden Castle lies on the central ridge that runs north ? south through the county , as do all of the hill forts in Cheshire .

Maiden Castle sits on a slight promontory which is the highest point of a plateau on Bickerton Hill , 694 ft ( 212 m ) . The ground to the west and north of the hill fort is steeply sloping , making artificial defences unnecessary and providing a commanding view of the Cheshire Plain . To the east of Maiden Castle , the plateau continues for about 1 mile ( 2 km ) and 0 @. @ 5 miles ( 800 m ) wide , where ramparts were constructed in lieu of natural defences .

= = Layout = =

Maiden Castle has no artificial defences on its northern and western sides because of the naturally steep slope of the hill , but there are two artificial banks , 35 ft ( 11 m ) apart . The banks are similar in dimension , both are 40 ft ( 12 m ) wide , and because the ground they are on slopes , the exterior side of each bank is higher than the side on the inside of the fort ; they are 5 ft ( 1 @. @ 5 m ) high on the inside of the fort and 7 ft ( 2 @. @ 1 m ) on the exterior face . There is no evidence that Maiden Castle was protected by a ditch along with the banks . The main entrance is on the east side of the fort where the inner bank turns in towards the fort , and while there is a gap in the outer rampart it does not turn in . There may also be two other entrances to the site where the banks meet

the cliffs to the north and south ; the outer ditch runs inwards at both ends , possibly indicating an inturned entrance abutting the edge of the cliff ? similar to the entrance at the Helsby hill fort also in Cheshire ? or perhaps an attempt to make the banks run flush to the cliff edge to ensure there were no gaps in the site 's defences .

= = History = =

Radiocarbon dating indicates that the ramparts defending Maiden Castle were built in around 600 BC . Built from earth and timber , the inner rampart was originally 20 ft ( 6 m ) wide , with a revetment of dry stone walling behind the bank , and at least 10 ft ( 3 m ) high . The outer bank was originally 25 ft ( 7 m ) wide and about 10 ft ( 3 m ) high . It was built from sand and had a dry stone facing at the front and no revetment behind . The outer bank was later enlarged : the outer face was extended 8 to 10 ft ( 2 m to 3 m ) away from the fort and the revetment moved . Its height was probably increased to 12 ft ( 3 m ) . The defences cover about 1.66 acres ( 6,700 m<sup>2</sup> ) out of the entire 3 acres ( 12,000 m<sup>2</sup> ) of the Maiden Castle site . According to archaeologist James Forde Johnston , who conducted a study of the hill forts of Lancashire and Cheshire in 1962 , this was an unusually strong defence for such a small site . Few artefacts have been recovered from the site ; they include a piece of Iron Age pottery . Maiden Castle was probably occupied until the Roman conquest of Britain in 1st century AD , and the outer bank may have been reconstructed around this time .

The name Maiden Castle is not unique to the site and occurs in several other places in Britain , such as Maiden Castle in Dorset , and probably means a " fortification that looks impregnable " or one that has never been taken in battle . Despite quarrying in the 17th century and 20th century military exercises on the site , Maiden Castle survives well . Maiden Castle was excavated between 1932 and 1935 by W. J. Varley , who also undertook excavations at Eddisbury hill fort , as part of his investigation into the origin of Cheshire 's hill forts . Further excavations were undertaken in 1980 ? 1981 . The structure was made a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1995 , giving Maiden Castle protection against unauthorised change . The environment of the hill fort is a mixture of heathland , heather , and bracken . The site is owned by the National Trust and is open to the public . Unrestricted access has led to problems such as erosion . Maiden Castle has been damaged by animal burrows and is designated as " at high risk " due to erosion caused by visitors and the spread of bracken . Five of Cheshire 's seven hill forts have been assessed as being " at high risk " compared to 15 % of North West England 's Scheduled Monuments .