

Walking Woolbury Hillfort* and Stockbridge Down

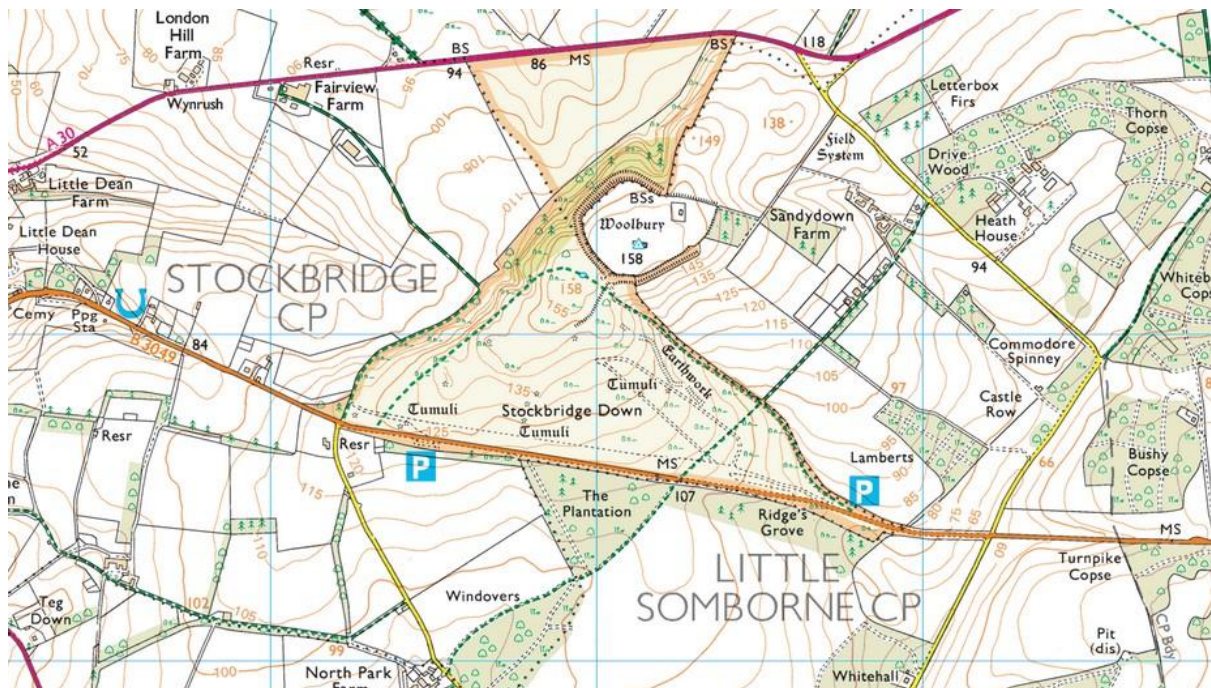
By Jan Bristow



Photograph: John Wrayton

This piece is inspired by the idea that both a good walk and archaeology can be combined, and makes use of the excellent report by Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe and Cynthia Poole (*see key reference below) to give some details of both Stockbridge Down and Woolbury hillfort, and includes some of the finds that they discovered when excavating Woolbury.

Stockbridge Down is an isolated piece of relatively untouched chalk down land near Stockbridge in the care of the National Trust (postcode SO20 6BY). There are two car parks located off the B3049 (Winchester-Stockbridge), where people can walk from, in order to experience it. The first approaching from the Winchester direction is on the right-hand side (at **SU 387 344**), the other is on the left-hand side of the road, so that the road has to be crossed to reach the Down (**SU 375 346**).



Both car parks can provide a starting point for the walk, in that the Down is a roughly triangular shape (see map above), and the key points of interest will be passed on the way to the highest point of the walk at **Woolbury Hillfort**.

Woolbury hillfort (**SU 3812 3527**) sits on the highest part of this ridge of down land at 150m OD, 2 km to the east of the River Test, on a capping of *clay with flints*, with the north and eastern edges of underlying chalk.

The area of Stockbridge Down is a “**rare survival of juxtaposed ancient agricultural regimes.**” A linear ditch clearly divides the down. There are *lynchets* on the north east side which continue as *crop marks* in the arable land to the north (see Plan A). On the south west side many Bronze Age barrows survive. An **outstanding** point of interest is that Stockbridge Down is ancient pasture land, which dates back to the Second Millennium BC, which has remained unchanged for 4,000 years! So this relatively small piece of downland is well worth a visit, both archaeologically and environmentally.

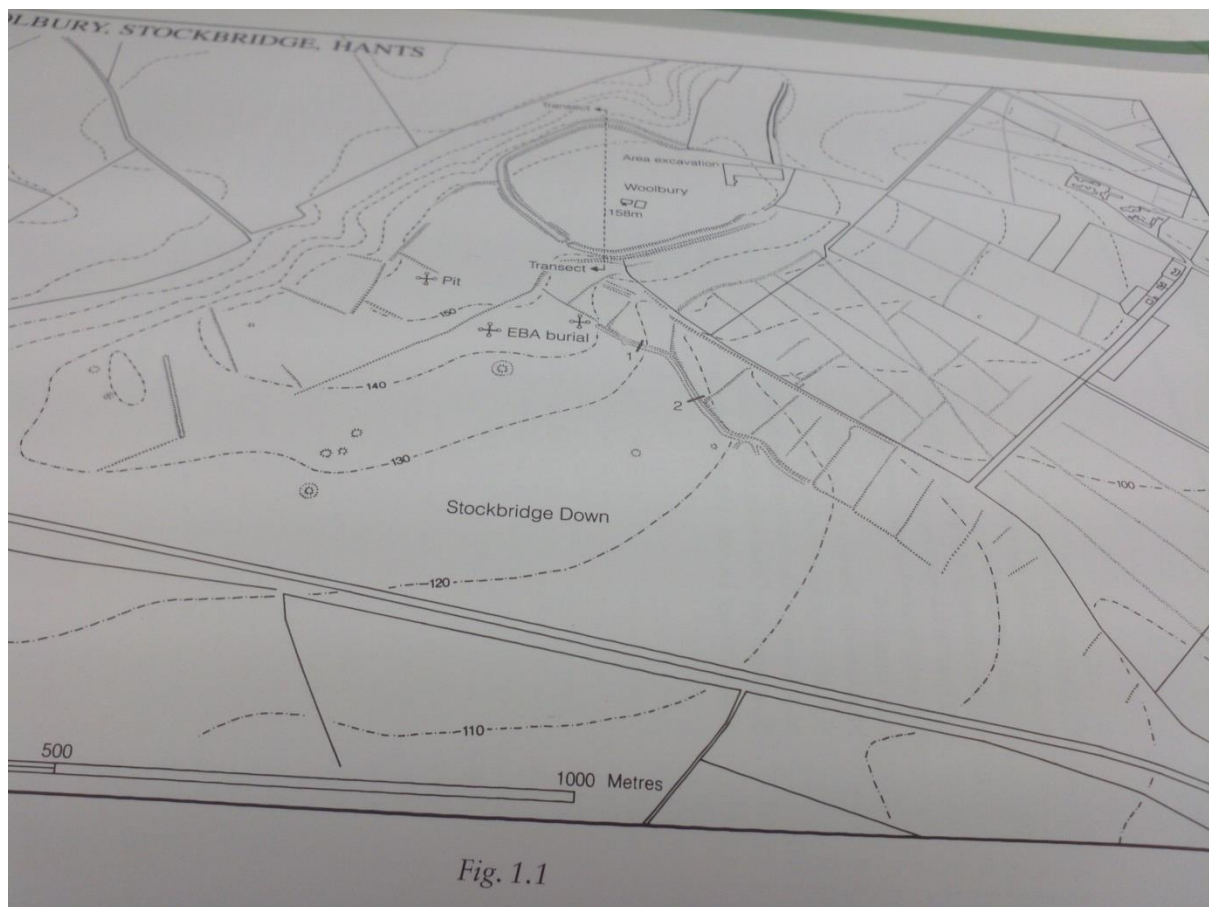


Fig. 1.1

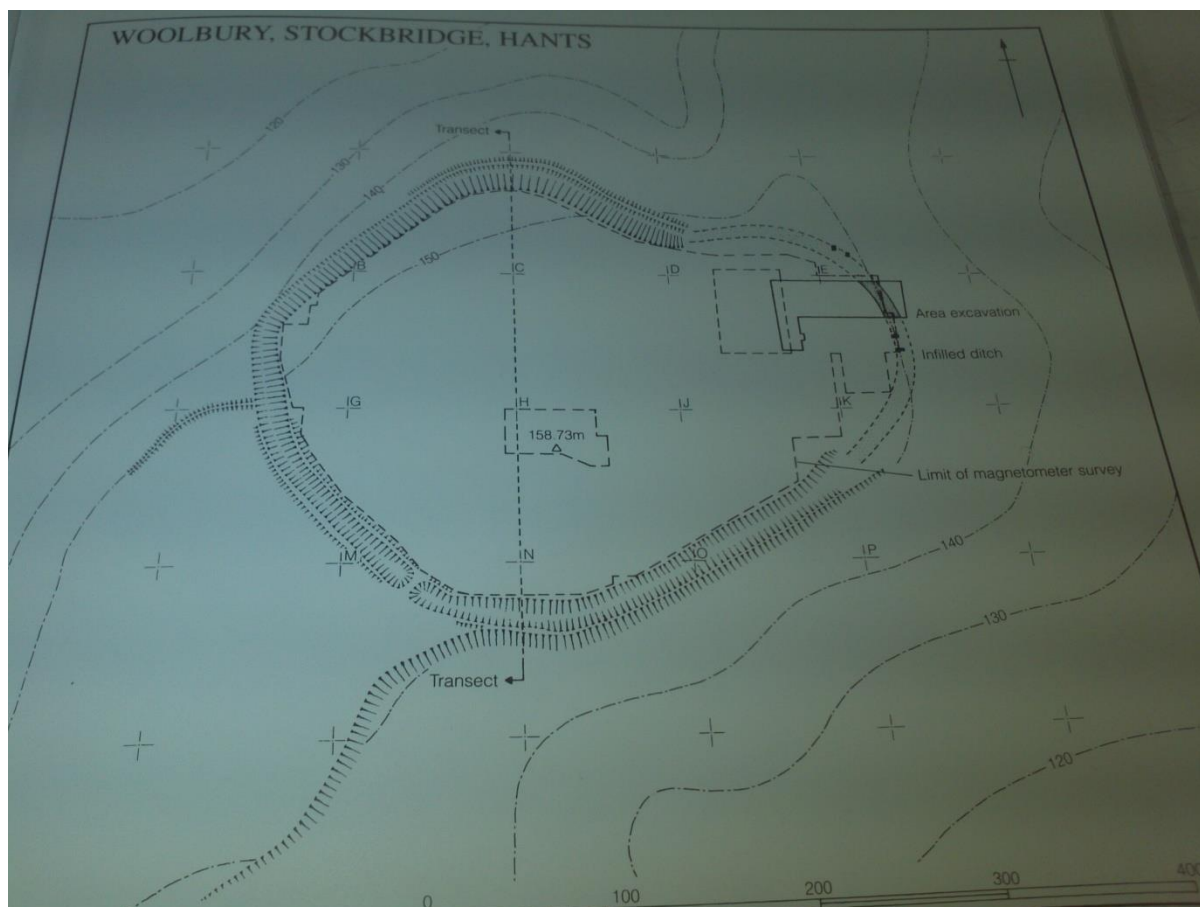
Plan A (reproduced from Cunliffe and Poole, 2000)

Details from the Danebury Environs Project report

Note: Further information on the Down and the hillfort, for those requiring further information on the archaeology connected to this walk.

Although close to Danebury hillfort (also excavated by Sir Barry Cunliffe), Woolbury has only a **single rampart (or bank) and ditch**, with a slight *counterscarp* on the downhill side. These are still visible except on the east side (see Plan B) where 150 metres has been ploughed out. The single rampart and ditch indicates an early hillfort. There is one entrance on the SW side, also clearly visible today.

There is concern that the continued ploughing of the centre of the hillfort places it “at risk”. A *magnetometer survey* showed “ditches, pits, hollows and scoops”. So there are **not** a lot of pit-type anomalies, indicating that the use of the hillfort was only sporadic or limited.



Plan B (reproduced from Cunliffe and Poole, 2000)

There is evidence of early Prehistoric use, which was mostly from the *Mesolithic* period. A *Bronze Age* phase follows a lot later; there is clear evidence by this time of farming in the form of a definite field system, which runs under the counterscarp of the hillfort ditch, plus settlement evidence is provided by a large pit. There are also a number of Bronze Age round barrows visible.

Iron Age

Hillfort ditch

This was excavated at the eastern part of the fort, straddling the line of the ploughed out ditch. A sampled transect was also excavated running north-south through the centre of the fort (see Plan B).

The hillfort ditch (see Figure 1) showed a classic Iron Age ditch profile, i.e. it was flat bottomed with steep sides; it was originally 6 metres wide, at a depth of 4.1 metres. There were LIA pottery sherds from the upper part of the *primary fill*. The ditch was filled by Romano- British period dumping. The rampart was dump constructed (not reinforced construction), indicating a 5th to early 4th century BC date, this is also indicated by the ditch shape.

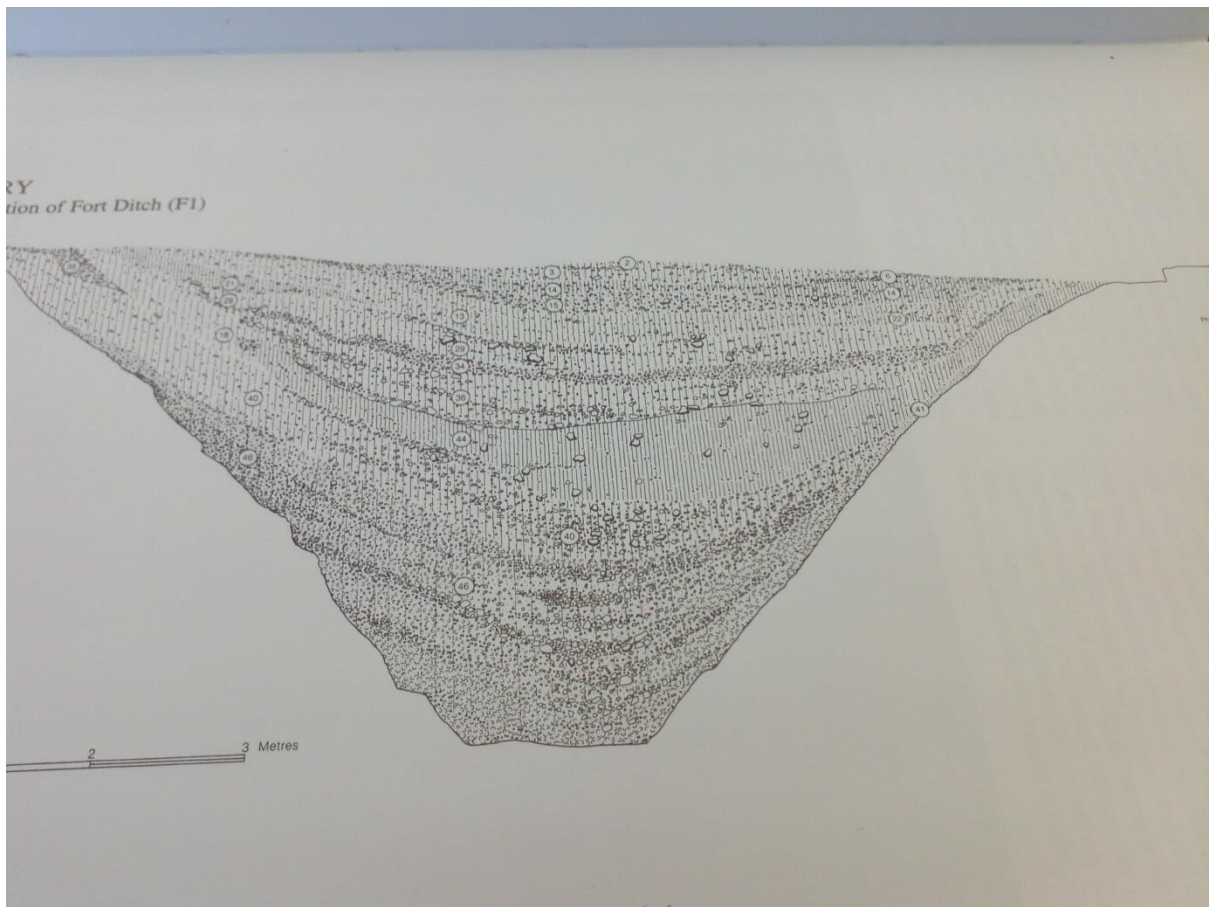


Figure 1: Ditch section

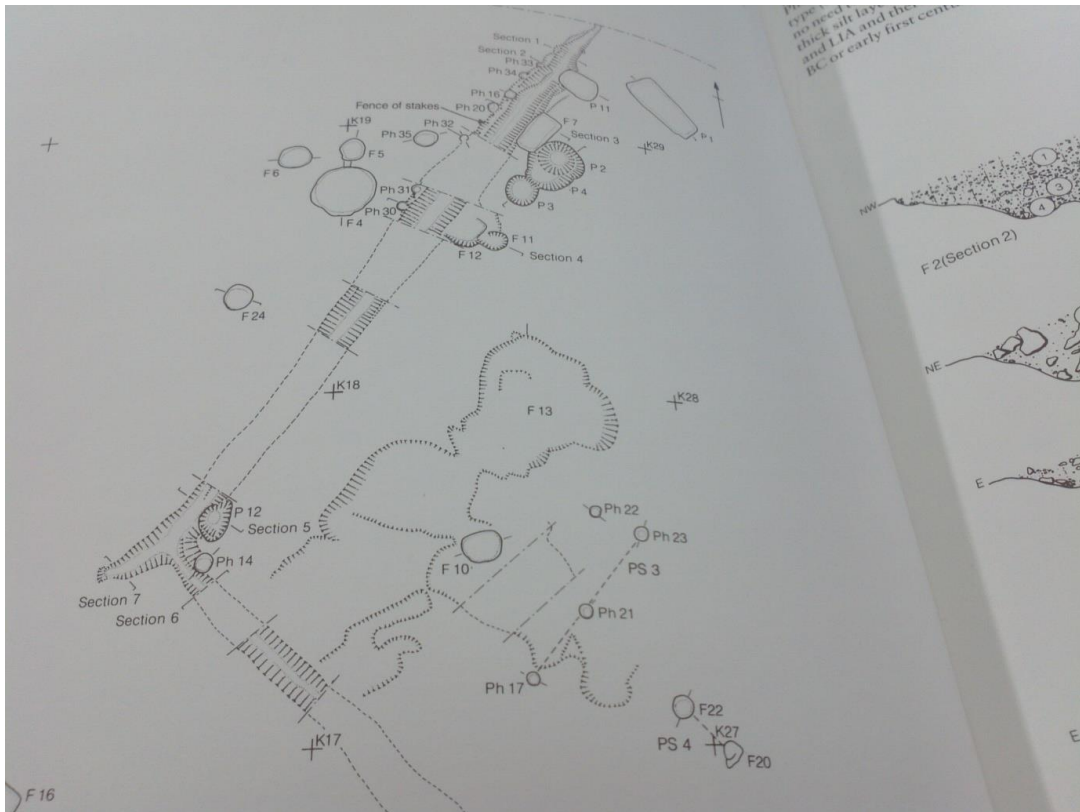
Pits There were a few pits in form and size like Danebury, otherwise a sparse occupation. There were two eroded beehive pits, which may have provided grain storage. Only two pits show special deposits or activities.

Other Features

Following this phase, the LIA and R-B occupation was much more intensive. Within the excavated area this period showed two enclosures created in the north-western corner. Some features uncovered included an extensive layer of flint gravel metalling; a few post holes indicating structures; a straight ditch indicating a boundary (G1-F23, running SW-NE), which became a shallow gully once out of use. Stratified pottery was used for dating.

The shallow quarry hollow (see Plan C, designated **F13**) was filled in with debris which included a coin from the house of Constantine. Part of the western boundary features was a grave, **F7** (Plan C), of a male, aged about 25, buried with a complete pot (see Figure 2), dated to the mid first century AD.

There is a negative *lynchet* of a Roman period field system, which developed on the hill slope south east of the hill fort.



Plan C – The quarry hollow (reproduced from Cunliffe and Poole, 2000)

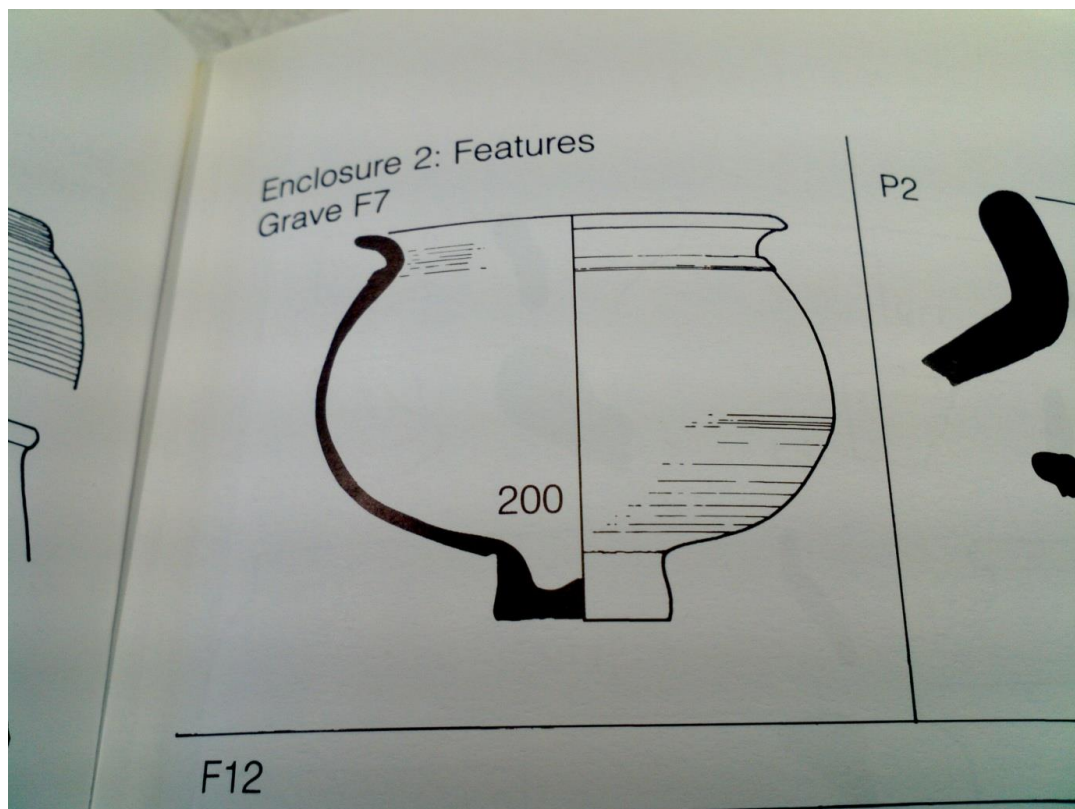


Figure 2 (reproduced from Cunliffe and Poole, 2000)

Summary of specialist reports

The **pottery** was dominated by 69% of Roman period pottery; the rest was Iron Age, which included two late *Durotrigan* bowls, which had an earliest date of First century BC.

Small Finds A total of 8 coins were found, but only 3 from a well stratified context. They were low value, which is typical of a rural Romano- British site.

There were also a few copper alloy objects. An interesting iron object was a 'barb spring padlock', probably 3rd or 4th century AD in date (see fig. 3; one other was found at Vindolanda). There were few other objects found, but they do show signs of domestic activity: 11 *quernstone* fragments and some fired clay fragments from either ovens or hearths.

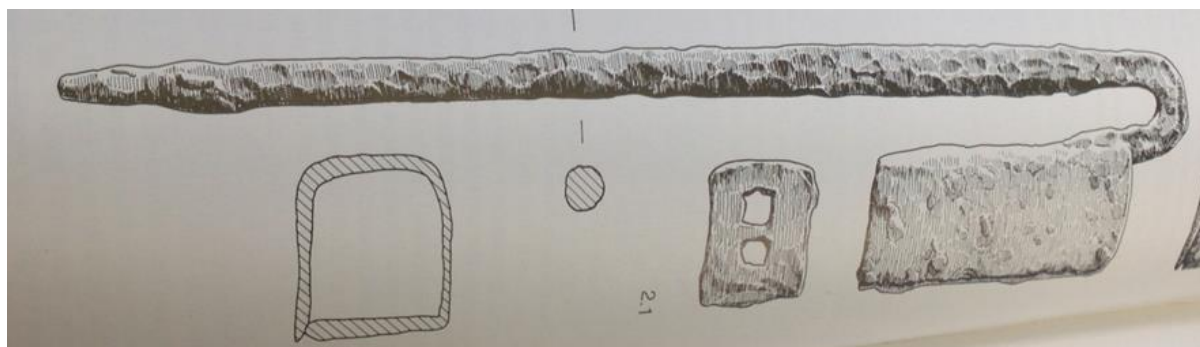


Figure 3: Iron barb spring padlock

Environmental

As well as the field systems, evidence of agriculture is shown by barley and *spelt* being found at the site from an Early Iron Age pit (P1), but this is a very small amount.

There was a large assemblage of hulled barley from the Early Roman period layer, a single event because it contained few weed seeds.

Summary of sequence of events

Firstly there were linear earthworks, then the hillfort was constructed in the middle of the First Millennium BC, but this was **not** evidence of intensive use. Of interest is the fact that this shows a social system in that the hillfort was next to and partly destroyed the earlier linear boundary, which ran along shoulder of the ridge (see map). This must mean that the hillfort builders were laying claim to the large tract of *co-axial fields*, which were already a significant feature of the landscape.

The rampart of the hillfort had a different structural history on two sides; the north-west side had a substantial addition, which is like Danebury hillfort, which also has a massively enlarged north-west side; therefore the two halves of these enclosures are treated in a different way.

An important conclusion from the report is that in the Early and Middle Iron Age phases of Woolbury **it functioned entirely differently to that of Danebury.**

The Late Iron Age phase of occupation lasted into the Roman period (the ditch and rampart had to be levelled, because it was 'in the way'). The LIA phase thus occurred after the abandonment at the end of the MIA, but in this it is like Bury Hill (another local hillfort), where the late occupation overrode the old fort entrance. **Again, the hillfort of Danebury is not used like this in the LIA.**

References

***Key Reference:** Danebury Environs Programme, Vol.2, part 1

Woolbury and Stockbridge Down, Stockbridge Hants., 1989

By Barry Cunliffe and Cynthia Poole, pub. English Heritage and Oxford Committee for Archaeology, Monograph No. 49, 2000

Also: www.heritagerecords.nationaltrust.org.uk Record ID 120035*0/MNA 120035

www.getoutside.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/local/woolbury-ring-test-valley

O.S.Map: Explorer 131: Romsey, Andover and Test Valley; map extract Ordnance Survey© Crown Copyright 2021

Also recommended is a visit to the **Museum of the Iron Age, Andover**, which displays information, fascinating artefacts and reconstructions on the Iron Age way of life based mostly on the excavations at nearby Danebury hillfort.

Glossary

Bronze Age - dated from c.2500BC to c. 800/700BC

Clay with flints - A residual deposit of red-brown sandy clay, with abundant nodules and rounded pebbles of flint

Co-axial field - Small, conjoined field plots, the whole system develops along a particular, dominant axis, or, at right angles to it.

Counterscarp - outer wall of a ditch in a fortification.

Crop marks - buried archaeological features shown up by crops growing above ground, ditches hold moisture, grow taller, darker green crops.

Durotrigan - (made by) a Late Iron Age tribe of a close-knit confederacy, occupying Wessex and the coast of England West of the Solent.

Lynchets - earth terraces on a hillside, features of an ancient field system.

Magnetometer survey - A means by which local magnetic distortions caused by past human activity can be detected, e.g. creating ditches or hearths.

Mesolithic - Middle Stone Age, dated from c. 11,000BC to 4,000BC

Primary fill - A deposit which first accumulates in a pit or ditch after it has been constructed, it is generally accepted that artefacts from such a fill date to approximately the time of the pit or ditch construction.

Quernstone - a stone tool (later ones are two round stones one on top of the other) for hand grinding materials, most importantly (wheat) grain to make flour.

Spelt - *Triticum spelta*, an ancient grain (found from 5,000 BC), still grown today.