

# Hillforts

*Prehistoric strongholds of  
Northumberland National Park*

Al Oswald, Stewart Ainsworth and Trevor Pearson



ENGLISH HERITAGE

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*with a contribution by Paul Frodsham, Archaeology and Historic Environment Team,  
Northumberland National Park Authority*



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Foreword: Discovering our Hillfort Heritage</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 Introduction: seeing into the past	1
2 Writing the story of the past	9
3 Before hillforts	33
4 Understanding hillforts	44
5 Life at home	71
6 Hillforts in the landscape	85
7 The afterlife of hillforts	101
8 Hillforts today and tomorrow <i>(by Paul Frodsham)</i>	119
<i>Visiting hillforts safely</i>	126
<i>Further reading</i>	127
<i>References</i>	127
<i>Index</i>	129

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- Northumberland National Park Authority
- English Heritage.

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# Foreword: Discovering our Hillfort Heritage

In Northumberland National Park, a unique landscape protected for the good of everyone, countless traces of our past are preserved to an exceptional degree. It is our responsibility – the National Park Authority and English Heritage – to work together to initiate and support projects designed to advance the understanding of that priceless heritage.

In 1998, the National Park Authority launched its most ambitious ever programme of archaeological research: the Discovering our Hillfort Heritage project. Funded primarily by the European Union and the Heritage Lottery Fund, the partnership also involved English Heritage, the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, the Northumberland Archaeological Group and the National Park itself, with an outstanding individual contribution from aerial photographer Tim Gates. The project has been nothing short of a broadside of research into the nature of Iron Age life in the region. The fire and smoke of that broadside is now beginning to clear sufficiently for us to recognise what needs to be targeted next.

This book presents the results of a key component of Discovering our Hillfort Heritage: the detailed and extensive landscape surveys carried out by English Heritage. Like the best pieces of detective work, these investigations have combined the precision of the microscope with the

ability to stand back and appreciate the big picture. The authors have collectively spent eight decades exploring England's historic sites on foot, and this book is aimed primarily at walkers and other visitors to the National Park. It is designed to be used in conjunction with Ordnance Survey walkers' maps, as well as the various trail leaflets produced by Northumberland National Park Authority.

This research should teach us, above all, that we must continue to develop our understanding of this special landscape if we wish to protect it for future generations. The landscape of the National Park is in few senses a natural one: it is the product of 10,000 years of human management. We wish to dedicate this book to today's farmers and landowners, who have consistently been welcoming, interested and concerned to do the right thing for the archaeological remains in their care. Such enthusiastic cooperation makes it easier for the National Park Authority and English Heritage to achieve their aims: to promote everyone's understanding and enjoyment of our past, in order to value and care for it more.

*Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage  
Tony Gates, Chief Executive of Northumberland National Park*

## Preface

I vividly remember my first encounter with Northumberland National Park, almost exactly 30 years ago. I had just joined the Ordnance Survey's Archaeology Division as a new recruit and a colleague had taken me out for some on-the-job training, surveying the remains of various prehistoric settlements in the north-eastern Cheviot Hills. I was immediately struck by three things: the friendliness of the people I met, the wild beauty of the landscape and the astonishing amount of information that could be extracted simply by looking carefully at the surface of the ground. One of my earliest efforts at archaeological survey – of the hillfort on St Gregory's Hill – is included in Chapter 2, and I am proud to say that even as a trainee with only a limited time to carry out the fieldwork, I was able to improve understanding of the site and pass on that knowledge to others, through the Ordnance Survey's excellent maps.

So, a quarter of a century later, I was delighted to be asked to manage English Heritage's contribution to Discovering Our Hillfort Heritage, the research project initiated and overseen by Northumberland National Park Authority. My involvement over the past decade in Channel 4's *Time Team* has taken me all over the

British Isles, but I still find Northumberland National Park one of the most exciting places to work as an archaeologist. And it has been a great pleasure to introduce this amazing landscape to my friend and fellow *Time Team* member Victor Ambrus.

The new field surveys, in which I have taken part as a member of the English Heritage team, have made one thing clearer to me than ever: the story of our past keeps changing and moving forward. Pleased as I was with my work on St Gregory's Hill 30 years ago, this new survey is definitely a big step forward, and we must expect that future interpretations will build upon – or perhaps demolish parts of – our new theories. It is not advances in technology that have brought about this progress, though they have certainly helped. Above all, what has changed is people's expectations of what they can learn through examination of the surface remains. This is a lesson for us all: the more carefully we examine and consider what we see, the more we learn.

*Stewart Ainsworth  
Senior Archaeological Investigator with English Heritage*

# 1

## Introduction: seeing into the past

A visitor coming to Northumberland National Park for the first time could be forgiven for expecting to see one of England's last great natural wildernesses, untouched by human hand.

But that is far from the truth. In fact, the unique character of today's landscape is largely a product of human activity over the past 10,000 years. Look at any of the Ordnance Survey walkers' maps that cover Northumberland National Park and you will immediately see that this region is littered with archaeological sites of all periods, from stone circles to ruined medieval farmsteads (Fig 1.1). Look at the land itself and you will soon see that many of these ancient remains are not buried or hidden away, but clearly visible on the surface (Figs 1.2 and 1.3). Collectively, they are a key ingredient in this landscape's unique flavour. Among the most important visible relics are Iron Age hillforts, of which there are around 50 within the boundaries of the National Park. Hillforts will not escape the notice of anyone who spends time in the region, for even today, more than 2,000 years after they were built, their tumbled defences still dominate many horizons and crown many summits (Fig 1.4; *see also* Fig 1.9; together these two figures show the locations of all hillforts and other archaeological sites discussed in this book).

What would you see if you were able to go back to the Iron Age, to the time when these dramatic monuments were newly built? This book will not describe what each and every hillfort would have looked like, but it will provide the tools to allow you to visit the sites and do much of the detective work for yourself, just by looking carefully at the traces that survive on the surface (Fig 1.5). To reconstruct a hillfort in your mind you will need, above all, sharp eyes, an inquisitive mind and a good imagination. What were hillforts? Who built them, and why? What was life like for those who occupied them? When and why were they abandoned? In trying to answer these questions, you will need to look at the many clues that

can be seen on the surface, and a grander story will begin to unravel itself: the long and complicated epic of how humans have exploited the land.

This book will present the latest conclusions reached by experienced archaeologists. But, like all experts, archaeologists change their minds and disagree with each other from time to time. So, above all, this book should help you to reach your own conclusions. Archaeological research in the National Park has not been exhaustive – there have been relatively few modern excavations – so it is entirely possible that you will notice something that has never been found by anyone else. Your discoveries and ideas may help to push forward everyone's understanding of our rich heritage.

### The Romans, the Celts and the Votadini

The Iron Age in Britain is usually considered to have lasted from about 800 BC to AD 43, the year in which the Roman emperor Claudius threw his legions into the full-scale conquest of the island. In this region, however, there is no clear evidence for the manufacture of iron before around 650 BC, and the conquest of Northumberland and southern Scotland was not complete until the campaign begun in AD 79 under the great general Julius Agricola. Even after that, the Roman dominance that was to persist for more than 40 years remained half-hearted.

Following his visit to Britannia in AD 120–1, the emperor Hadrian decided to build the famous wall which is now named after him, giving the province a formal boundary for the first time but slicing the territory of the local tribe in two. Almost overnight, the land to the south of the wall became definitively Roman. Britons there continued to adopt Roman ways, while the Romans – not just from Italy but from all over the empire – settled down so that, gradually, population and culture fused to become 'Romano-British'.

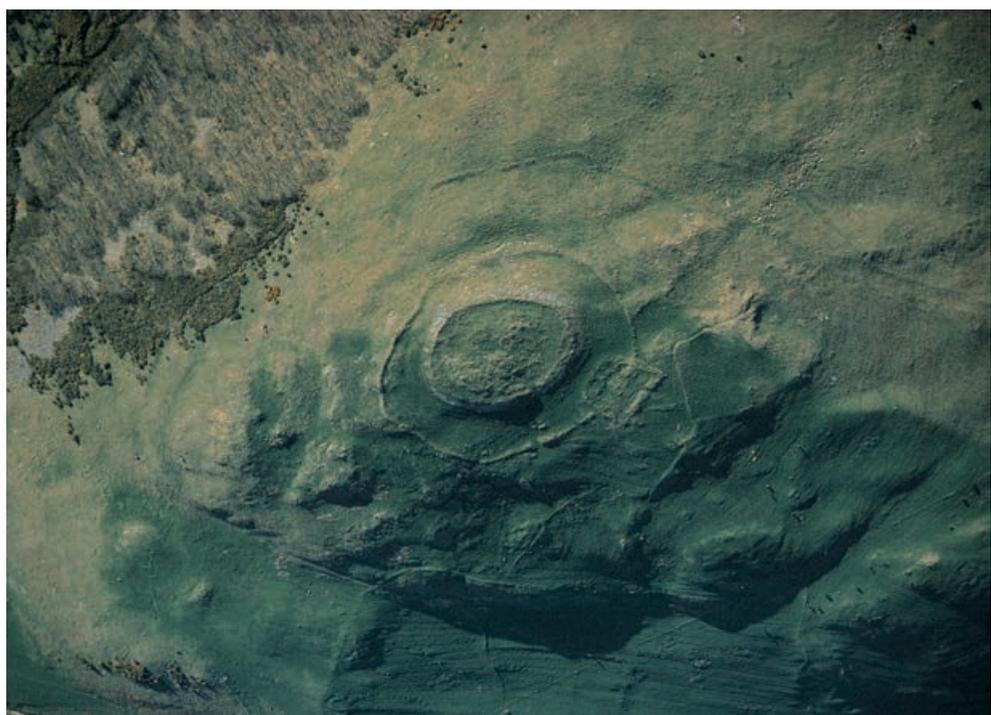
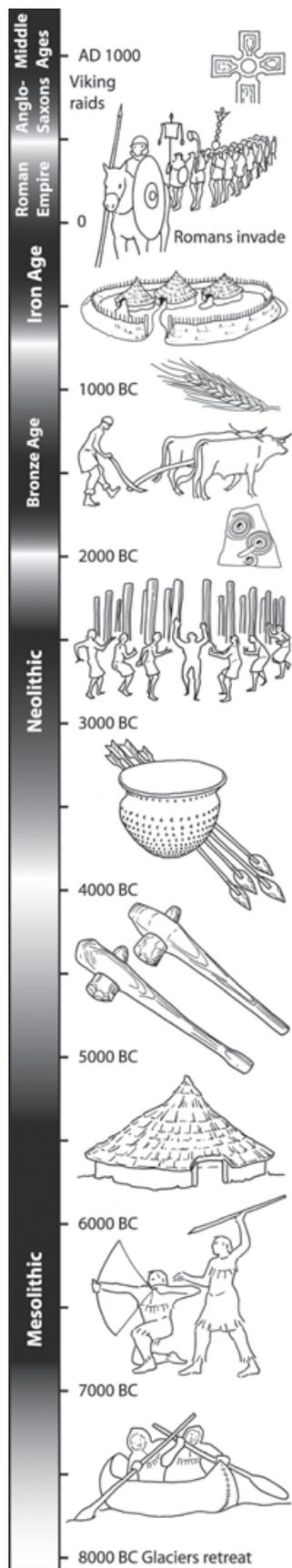


Fig 1.1 (left) Timeline.

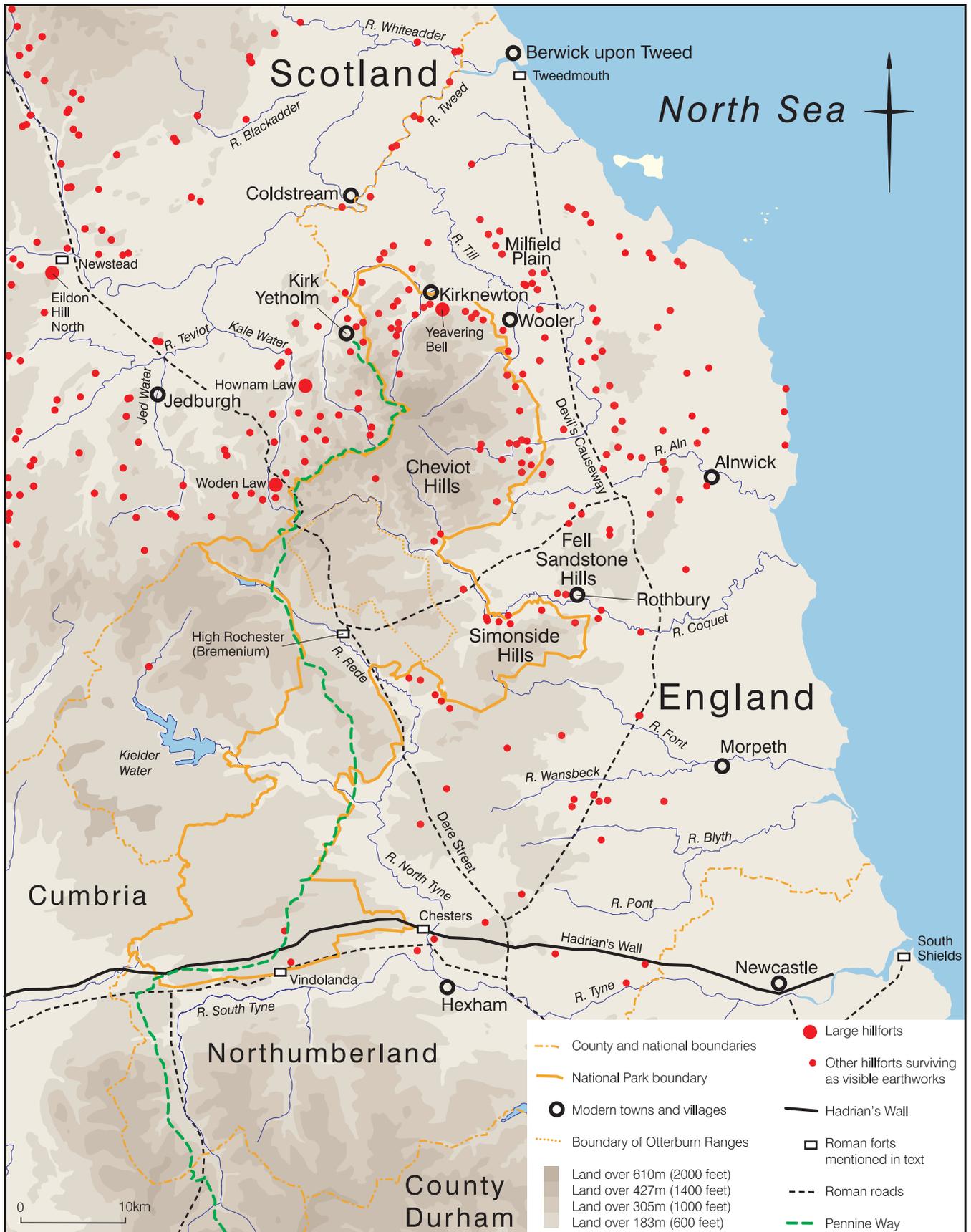
Fig 1.2 (above) Aerial photograph of the hillfort on West Hill. In the surrounding landscape, archaeological remains ranging from the Stone Age to the early 20th century are visible on the surface. (Photograph by Tim Gates. Copyright reserved)

Fig 1.3 (below) Low November sunshine makes it easy to see the humps and bumps on West Hill, even at ground level. In the 1930s, these particular earthworks were interpreted as the site of a village

belonging to the Iron Age Votadini tribe. The latest research suggests that they are livestock pens, perhaps constructed around the time of the Roman occupation.

Fig 1.4 (opposite) Hillforts in Northumberland National Park and beyond. (This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or criminal proceedings. English Heritage 100019088. 2006)







*Fig 1.5  
Stewart Ainsworth using  
GPS satellite mapping  
equipment on West Hill to  
record archaeological  
remains visible on the  
surface.*

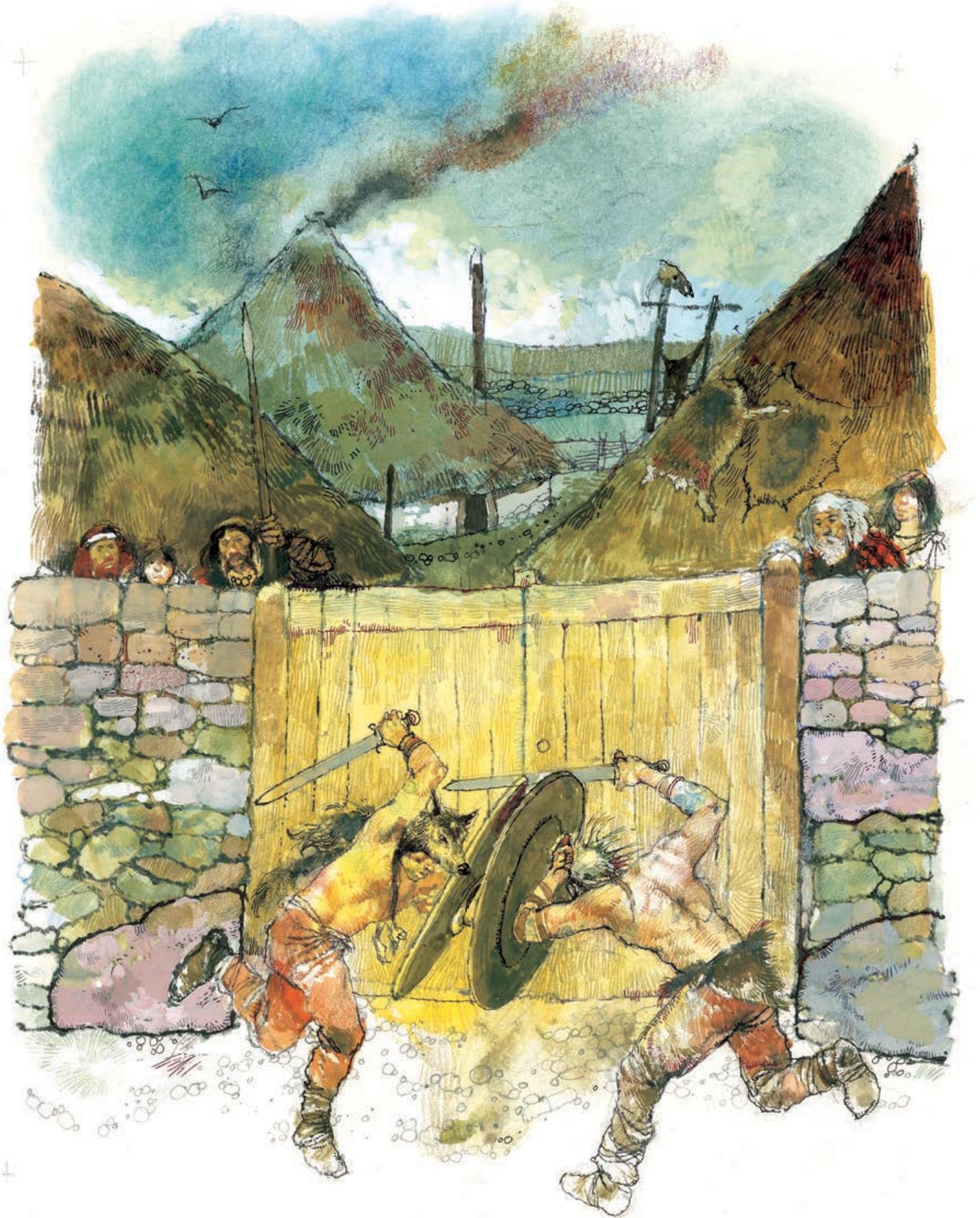
*Fig 1.6 (opposite)  
Tattooed Celtic warriors  
are, for many people, the  
epitome of Iron Age  
Britain. However, it  
remains open to question  
whether the Iron Age  
inhabitants of Northumber-  
land were genuinely Celtic  
and what role their hillforts  
played in armed conflicts.  
(Drawing by Victor  
Ambrus, courtesy of  
Northumberland National  
Park Authority)*

Britons to the north of Hadrian's Wall, on the other hand, were left to find their own way forward. Direct contact with the Roman way of life had lasted for less than two generations, not long enough to take root strongly, and people began returning to their traditional ways. Two decades after Hadrian's visit, in about AD 140, his successor, Marcus Antoninus Pius, again advanced northwards, to a line between the estuaries of the rivers Forth and Clyde, and built the so-called Antonine Wall. While this had tactical advantages over Hadrian's Wall, it was at least partly a political stunt designed to capture headlines for the new emperor. After another 40-year occupation, during which Romans and natives seem to have interacted directly and regularly, the Roman army pulled back to Hadrian's earlier frontier. Thus in most of what is now Northumberland National Park, as in Scotland and Ireland, the Iron Age lived on, after a fashion, developing along its own path like a prehistoric parallel universe. This twilight period, which the Romans overshadowed without playing an

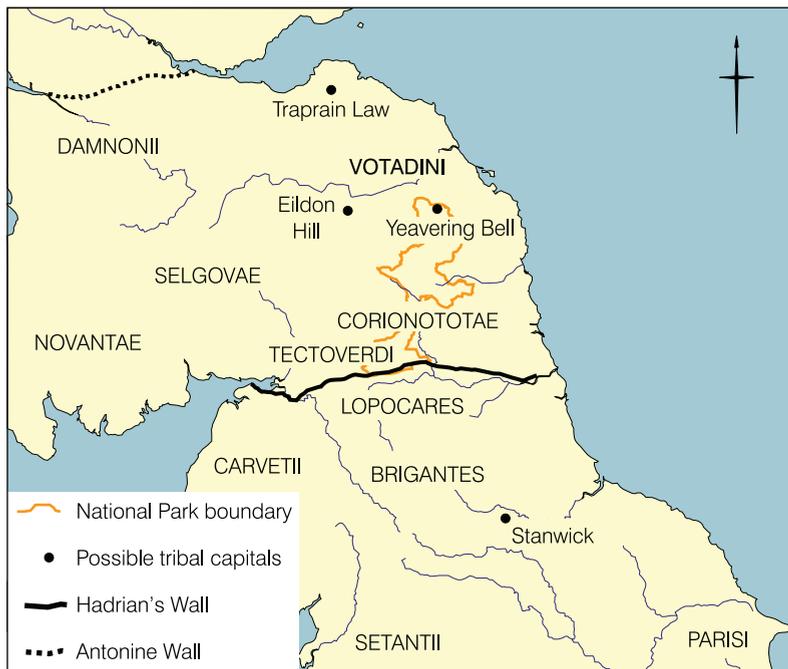
active role, is referred to throughout this book as the Roman Iron Age.

The term 'Celtic' is often used in reference to the Iron Age, but archaeologists still debate whether it should really be applied to Britain (Fig 1.6). There is little hard evidence that any Celtic people ever crossed the sea from their heartland in central Europe (indeed some scholars argue that there were no people who called themselves Celts, that the name is simply a label for what was incorrectly perceived as a single ethnic or cultural group). Through trade and social contact, however, some aspects of Celtic culture clearly did arrive in Britain and fused with, or found expression through, home-grown traditions. As a result, 'Celtic' now embraces a confusing mixture of concepts. In art, it is often used to denote anything with a swirling, interwoven design, from metalwork crafted in Austria before 1000 BC to the illuminations in the Lindisfarne Gospels, dating from about AD 700. Linguistic historians use it to denote the language which evolved into the variant forms spoken in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall and Brittany, although they are uncertain how and when this evolution took place. The Celtic badge has been claimed by the modern inhabitants of these regions to symbolise their sense of shared culture, commonly expressed through music. Most archaeologists prefer to rely instead upon the material evidence of the past, so 'Iron Age' is used in preference to 'Celtic' throughout this book.

Accounts by Roman authors of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD allow us to piece together something of the tribal geography of northern Britain at the end of the Iron Age (Fig 1.7). It has long been known that the region spanning the present border was occupied in the late Iron Age by a single tribe, whose name the Romans rendered in Latin as Votadini, while the southern parts of what is now Northumberland National Park seem to have been occupied by tribes they called the Corionototae and the Tectoverdi. It has been suggested that these tribes owed allegiance to a larger tribe, the Brigantes, whose power base lay in the Pennines. But archaeologists have begun to realise that tribal politics are unlikely to have remained static throughout the Iron Age, and that even the few grains of information we can glean from written sources may be irrelevant when it comes to understanding the time when hillforts were built.



## HILLFORTS



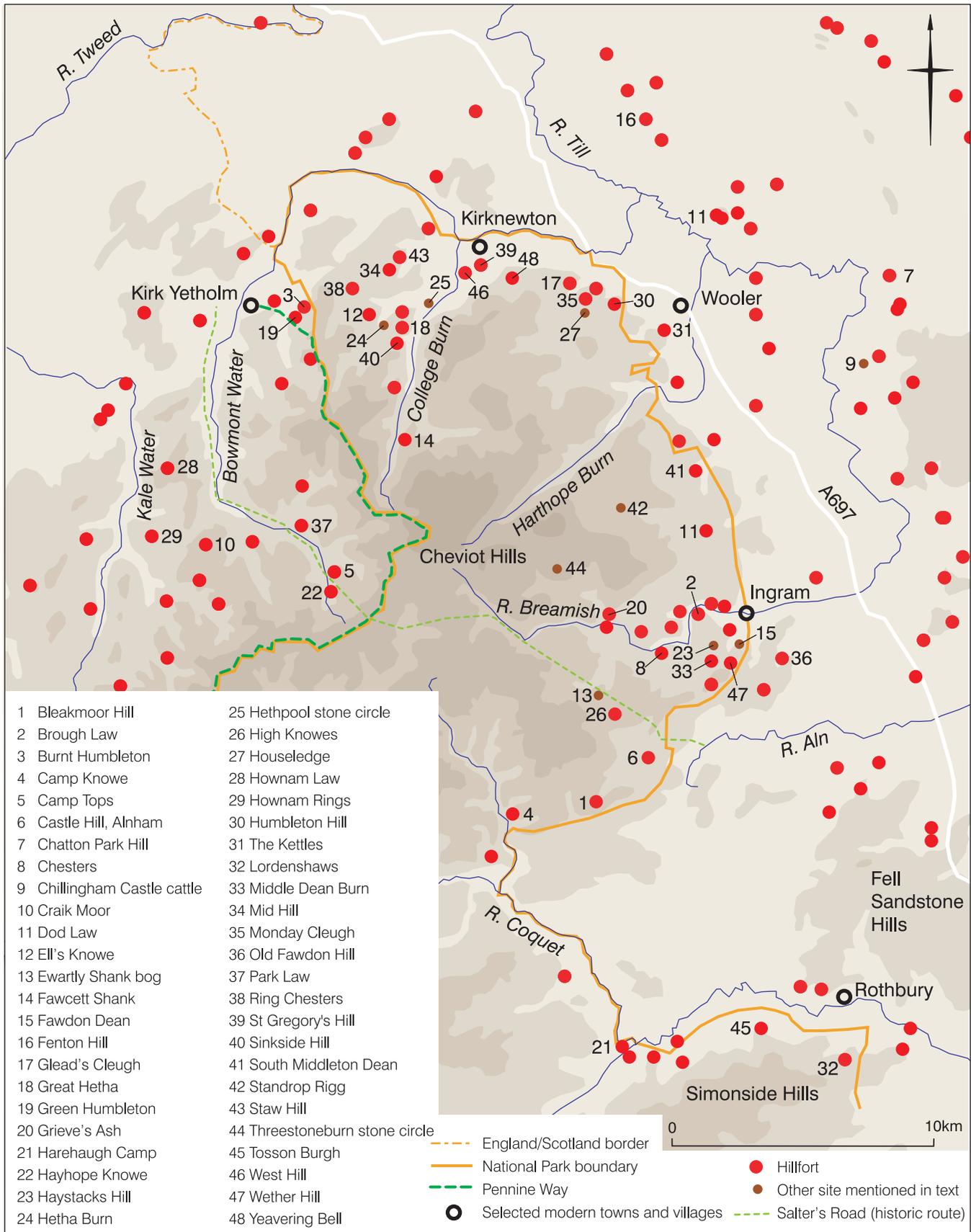
To get any further with this period, which is literally 'before history', we must turn to the monuments themselves.

Hillforts, the Iron Age's monumental works of defensive architecture, have long been regarded as icons of their age. The best known hillforts in England, such as Maiden Castle in Dorset, Danebury in Hampshire and Cissbury in West Sussex, which all reached their peak in the middle of the Iron Age, around 400 BC, are awe-inspiring civil engineering projects on a colossal scale, testifying to a sophisticated and well organised society (Fig 1.8). Excavations at these and numerous other hillforts in the south of England have confirmed this impression, leading some to call them 'Britain's earliest towns'. The writings of Julius Caesar from the time of his invasion of Britain in 55–54 BC, right at the end of the Iron Age, tell us that some southern hillforts were still occupied then, and were in some cases defended fiercely by the local tribespeople.

*Fig 1.7 (above)*  
Northern tribal territories at the end of the Iron Age, according to various sources, including a map made by the Egyptian geographer Ptolemy at some point before AD 165. (This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or criminal proceedings. English Heritage 100019088. 2006)



*Fig 1.8 (right)*  
Excavations at the Maiden Castle hillfort, in Dorset, have shown it to be one of Britain's earliest towns. (NMR 23025/12)



*Fig 1.9 (previous page)*  
*Locations of key Iron Age hillforts and other archaeological sites referred to in this book. (This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or criminal proceedings. English Heritage 100019088. 2006)*

## What's so special about Northumberland National Park?

What about Northumberland National Park, most of which lies north of Hadrian's Wall and which remained, for all but a few decades, part of what the Romans regarded as 'barbarian wilderness'? Classical historians tell us nothing directly about the region's hillforts and nothing about the lifestyles and beliefs of their inhabitants. To anyone familiar with the Iron Age monuments of southern England, the first encounter with a hillfort here may come as a disappointment. The defences of many of these hilltop enclosures can be overcome in a single jump, and few are large enough to have held more than a handful of houses: hardly even villages, let alone prototype towns. The few that have been excavated have produced only scraps of pottery, without any sign of the abundant and exotic artefacts found in the south.

Is it possible to understand these monuments without the years of large-scale excavation invested in the hillforts of southern England? Is it even worth the attempt, if they are apparently backward even by Iron Age standards? The answer to both questions is definitely 'yes'. Firstly, the hillforts here are extraordinarily well preserved, rivalling anything that can be found elsewhere in Europe.



*Fig 1.10*  
*Careful examination of the defences of the hillfort on St Gregory's Hill.*

Where the interiors of most hillforts in southern England have been hidden or disfigured by every kind of land use, from centuries of ploughing to the construction of country houses, most of those in Northumberland National Park have been left relatively untouched since they were last occupied in the Roman Iron Age, perhaps 1,500 years ago (Fig 1.9). In many cases even the foundations of Iron Age timber-built roundhouses can still be seen.

The Roman Iron Age settlements reveal much about their occupants' lifestyles and about their attitudes to the monuments which, even then, had become part of an ancient past. Traces of arable agriculture, possibly as old as the hillforts or even older, and countless features indicative of the mixed farming regime of the Roman Iron Age are among remains still visible in the surrounding landscapes. These offer clues to how the occupants exploited their environment and how they interacted with one another.

In other words, during a day's stroll in Northumberland National Park a walker with a keen eye and an inquisitive mind can learn a great deal, not just about the Iron Age but about the evolution of this land over millennia (Fig 1.10). An understanding of the National Park's hillforts is also valuable because the standard story of the Iron Age, that derived from research in southern England, is definitely not the whole story. In fact, because they were more common, the small communities that have left their traces here were in a sense the norm, while the giant hillforts of southern England might be seen as freaks. In Northumberland the Iron Age, its hillforts and its people were clearly different in many ways from the long-established picture. Using this book to explore the hillforts of the National Park, you will certainly discover much about this region's specific character, and we hope that in the process you will also reach a deeper understanding of England's heritage as a whole.

## 2

# Writing the story of the past

### Discovery

While this book is about Iron Age hillforts in Northumberland National Park, in a wider sense it also concerns the processes by which we discover and understand the past. We are often led to believe that an archaeological discovery comes about in a single instant, a ‘Eureka’ moment in which the truth is suddenly revealed. It is certainly true that extraordinary coincidences – the right person in the right place at the right time – have been responsible for some of the most exciting archaeological discoveries ever made: the tomb of Tutankhamen, unearthed as a result of an astute guess just as Howard Carter and his patron Lord Carnarvon were on the verge of giving up their quest; the Dead Sea Scrolls, stumbled upon by a goatherd searching for one of his flock; Ötzi, the Bronze Age ‘Ice-Man’, found by a party of skiers at precisely the moment that an Alpine glacier released him from 4,000 years of imprisonment.

But the vast majority of discoveries follow on from a gradual accumulation of small pieces of evidence and the careful analysis of that evidence over days, years or even centuries. A new understanding achieved in this way may itself form a small piece of evidence on which a subsequent discovery is based, and so on. Archaeology is not simply about finding monuments or artefacts, even those that are rare, valuable or beautiful. It is far more concerned with the discovery of information which can help us to understand those monuments and artefacts and, above all, to understand the societies and individuals who made and used them. If an object can tell us nothing about our heritage and the people who created it, then in archaeological terms it is worthless, no more than a trinket.

Some important archaeological discoveries have not been monuments or artefacts at all. In recent years, popular media have featured the spectacular leaps in understanding made possible by sophisticated scientific techniques, and the general public has become familiar with ideas such as radiocarbon dating, geophysical survey and the use of DNA analysis by archaeologists. Each of

these techniques has brought about its own revolution in understanding. Each new monument, artefact or technique, while it may have its moment in the headlines, forms one small link in an endless chain of discoveries. This is certainly true of archaeological research in Northumberland National Park.

In 1999, excavation by the Northumberland Archaeological Group near the hillfort on Wether Hill, overlooking the National Park visitor centre at Ingram, revealed one of the finest prehistoric burials ever found in the region (Topping 2004; Fig 2.1). The grave comprised five pottery vessels in various states of preservation. Some may have held the cremated remains of the dead, while others probably contained offerings of food and drink to sustain the deceased in the afterlife. The two lowest vessels (both of a type referred to by archaeologists as ‘beakers’ because of their distinctive shape) had been placed in a small oak casket and set in a shallow grave-pit. Some time – possibly hundreds of years – later, the grave was reopened and the upper part lined with stone slabs, alternately coloured deep pink and palest grey, which seem to have been carried up from a stream, a lengthy and tiring climb. These stones were eventually to crush the wooden casket and break the pots within it. Within the newly remodeled grave were placed three pots, of a later type referred to as ‘food vessels’ (though, once again, some may have held cremated human remains rather than offerings). Archaeologists refer to each distinct, identifiable episode of activity – whether it lasts for a century or a single day – as a ‘phase’.



*Fig 2.1  
A member of the Northumberland Archaeological Group uses plaster to remove the fragments of an oak coffin, following the discovery of a prehistoric grave near the hillfort on Wether Hill.  
(Pete Topping, Northumberland Archaeological Group)*

In the case of Wether Hill, the initial burial and the later remodelling of the grave have been designated Phases 1 and 2.

The people who reopened and reused the grave were perhaps not even distant relations of those who took part in the original burial rites. For them to have identified the grave, there must have been a marker, such as a cairn of loosely packed stones, a standing stone or a carved post, on the surface. As a result of later activity in the area, nothing of such a monument remains to be seen or otherwise detected. Study of the pottery and radiocarbon analysis of the carbonised wooden casket have shown that the earliest of the burials dates to about 2100 BC, around 1,800 years before the nearby hillfort is thought to have been built.

Seeing a cluster of excited people crouched over the tiny excavation trench in the middle of the vast expanse of the National Park, one passing walker was understandably prompted to ask, 'How on earth did you know where to dig?'. The answer to that question is a long one, so long that it takes up the remainder of this chapter.

## Myths and monuments

The reopening, nearly 4,000 years ago, of the grave on Wether Hill to allow its deliberate and respectful reuse illustrates the fact that a concern for historic monuments is not a modern phenomenon. Even before that remote time, ordinary people had begun to use basic observational skills to interpret traces left by earlier societies, and

have continued to do so ever since. It is easy to imagine how, in the absence of any obvious explanation of the function or origin of a monument, stories would have grown up among shepherds and farmers, based on the shape, size or position of what they saw. These 'explanations', perhaps involving gods or heroes, real or imaginary, would then have passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, growing and changing in the telling. At best, all we are usually left with is an intriguing place name.

Sometimes such folklore contained insights that were not far from the truth, at least as we understand it today. The siting of hillforts and the appearance of their tumbled ramparts clearly suggested at an early date that they had once been defensive in function. Long before anyone dreamed up the term 'archaeology', this interpretation had become firmly established. The term 'castle' is attached to several hillforts in Northumberland, though its use is certainly no older than the medieval period. The names of at least seven hillforts include the word 'chester', from the Anglo-Saxon *cæstir*, meaning 'military camp' (Fig 2.2). Because this word was usually applied to Roman forts, including many along Hadrian's Wall, it may be that people had come to believe, more than 1,000 years ago, that some hillforts had been built by the Romans.

Baldersburyhill, just west of Berwick upon Tweed, is the site of a hillfort that has been entirely flattened by ploughing but is still visible from the air under the right conditions. The 'bury' element of the name,

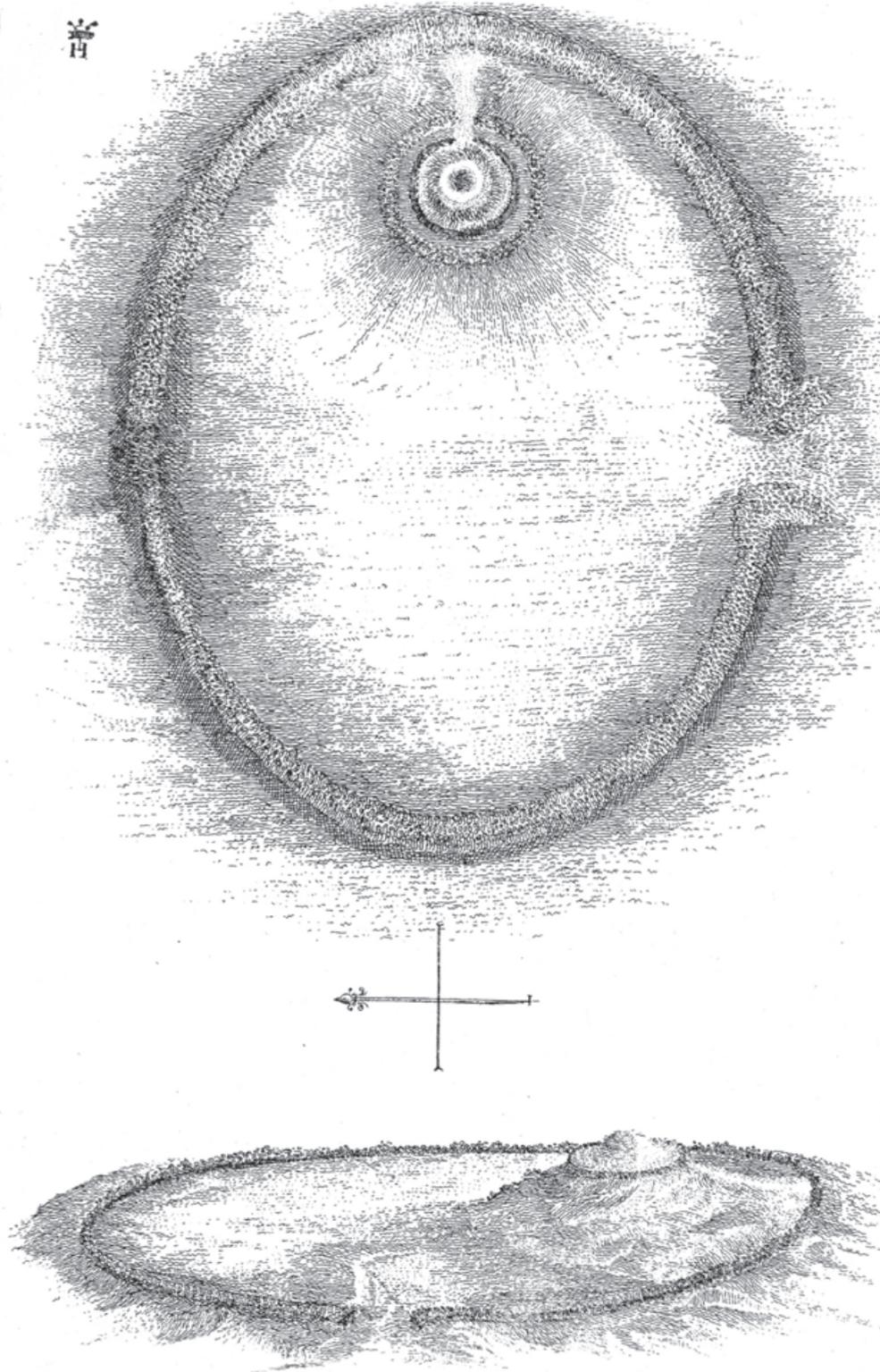
*Fig 2.2*  
This hillfort, at the head of the valley of the Elsdon Burn, has long been called Ring Chesters, derived from the Anglo-Saxon *cæstir*, meaning 'military camp'.



like the 'burgh' in Tosson Burgh, a hillfort near Rothbury, derives from another Anglo-Saxon word, *burg*, often applied to fortifications considered to be of non-Roman origin.

The first 'scientific' archaeologists, in the 18th century, gradually gained a clearer

understanding of the form of Roman camps, which led them to debate whether hillforts might instead have been built by invading Danish Vikings or by Celtic Druids, an idea prompted by the writings of Roman historians (Fig 2.3).



*Fig 2.3*  
 William Hutchinson's  
 bird's-eye view of Yeavinger  
 Bell, engraved in 1776. He  
 observed that the ramparts  
 were 'of very remote antiq-  
 uity' – a phrase widely used  
 at that time to indicate a  
 prehistoric origin – and  
 discussed the possible ritual  
 use of the site by druids.  
 (Hutchinson 1778)

## By appointment to His Grace

Most Victorian antiquarians were well-educated men with time and money to spare, with a passion for the emerging discipline of archaeology which was often matched by a fascination with other branches of science. Their curiosity

about Roman civilisation was usually the result of long school days spent studying the writings of Julius Caesar and the classical historians. Their interest in 'ancient Britons', on the other hand, sprung from a patriotic desire to cast those they saw as their ancestors in a favourable light, as 'noble savages' (Fig 2.4).



*Fig 2.4*  
A Briton of the Interior, as imagined in 1815 by Sir Samuel Meyrick and Charles Smith. Described as being 'clad in the skin of the brindled or spotted cow', the Briton is equipped with an assortment of objects from all over Britain, some now known to be of Bronze Age date. He stands in front of a hillfort modeled on the White Caterthun in Scotland, which Meyrick describes as an 'alarm post, in which the inhabitants of a district assembled in time of invasion'. (Meyrick and Smith 1821)

Against this background, the archaeological achievements of Henry MacLauchlan are all the more remarkable (Charlton and Day 1984; Fig 2.5). Born in 1792 into a family that was neither wealthy nor privileged, MacLauchlan went on to become one of the most accomplished archaeologists of his day. He embarked on his career at the age of 13, training as a mapmaker with the Royal Corps of Military Surveyors and Draftsmen. In about 1824 he secured a job with the Ordnance Survey, and for the next 20 years worked as a mapmaker across the length and breadth of England and Wales. For some of this period he was tasked to investigate and record geological phenomena, a subject closely allied, both then and now, with archaeology. As early as 1833, a friend commented that MacLauchlan was ‘fond of antiquities’. Following his retirement from the Ordnance Survey in 1844, MacLauchlan turned his skills to ancient monuments. First in Cornwall and then in North Yorkshire, he carried out surveys of various remains surviving as upstanding earthworks. At a time when many antiquarians were concerned with the study of classical texts, and excavation was seen as a means of collecting artefacts to exhibit in glass cases, MacLauchlan’s fieldwork directed attention back to the analysis of physical evidence surviving in the great outdoors.

His Grace the fourth Duke of Northumberland, Fellow of the Royal Geological Society, Fellow of the London Society of Antiquaries and Patron of the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, was in many ways the archetypal Victorian antiquarian himself, though immeasurably richer than most (Fig 2.6). The Duke was keen to record the wealth of ancient remains on the doorstep of his ancestral home at Alnwick Castle, out of personal interest and, presumably, in order to be known as a generous patron of scientific research. In April 1850, he contacted Henry MacLauchlan with an offer of employment, and so began one of the most productive periods of field survey in the history of British archaeology.

First, the Duke set MacLauchlan to make an accurate plan of the Roman road known as Dere Street (see Fig 1.4, the modern A68 in Northumberland follows the same line for much of its route). MacLauchlan was then reaching the height of his powers as a field surveyor. He was not the first to use mapmaking as a tool for archaeological research, but he brought unprecedented skill to the process. He observed not only the plan and condition of the earthworks



Fig 2.5  
Henry MacLauchlan, who began his research into the hillforts of the Cheviots at the age of 68. (Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle)

that picked out the course of the road, but slight changes in types and colours of vegetation, the nature of the local geology and topography, scraps of pottery he came across in rabbit burrows, place names which might be of early origin, observations of earlier historians, recollections of local farmers; in short, every source of information that he could bring to bear without actually excavating (Fig 2.7). He surveyed not only the road, but all the Roman and prehistoric settlements in the fields on either side that could still be identified as patterns of surface humps and bumps.



Fig 2.6 (right)  
The fourth Duke of Northumberland, enthusiastic sponsor of the archaeological research undertaken by Henry MacLauchlan and George Tate in the 19th century. The Duke’s collection of ‘antiquities’ is still on display at Alnwick Castle. (Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle)

Fig 2.7 (next page)  
Henry MacLauchlan, interviewing an intrigued local shepherd in the course of his research into Iron Age hillforts in the 1860s. As an expert archaeological field surveyor, MacLauchlan would have understood the value of listening to the recollections and interpretations of local people. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)



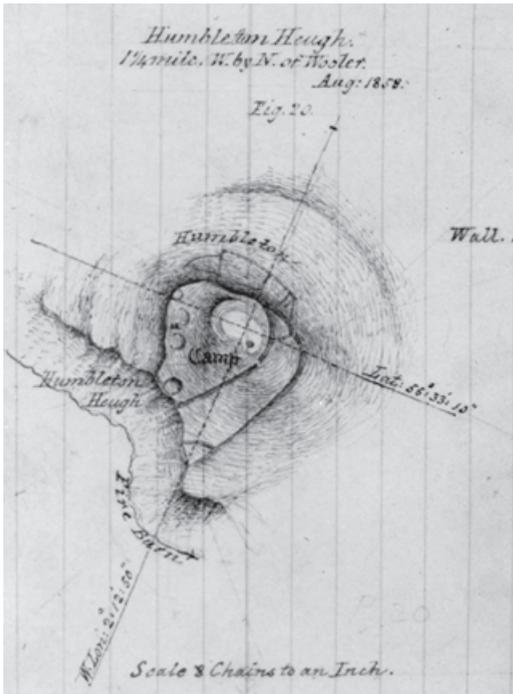


Fig 2.8  
Henry MacLauchlan's plan of the hillfort on Humbleton Hill, dated August 1858. (Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle)

chancellor) Benjamin Disraeli and to many academic and scientific societies.

Without allowing MacLauchlan to pause for breath, the Duke put him to work again, this time to survey the Devil's Causeway, the Roman road which runs along the eastern edge of the Cheviot Hills to the harbour at Tweedmouth (see Fig 1.4, its course is partly followed by the modern A697). As part of this work, MacLauchlan examined the hillforts on Yeavinger Bell, Humbleton Hill and other hills overlooking the line of the Roman road (Fig 2.8).

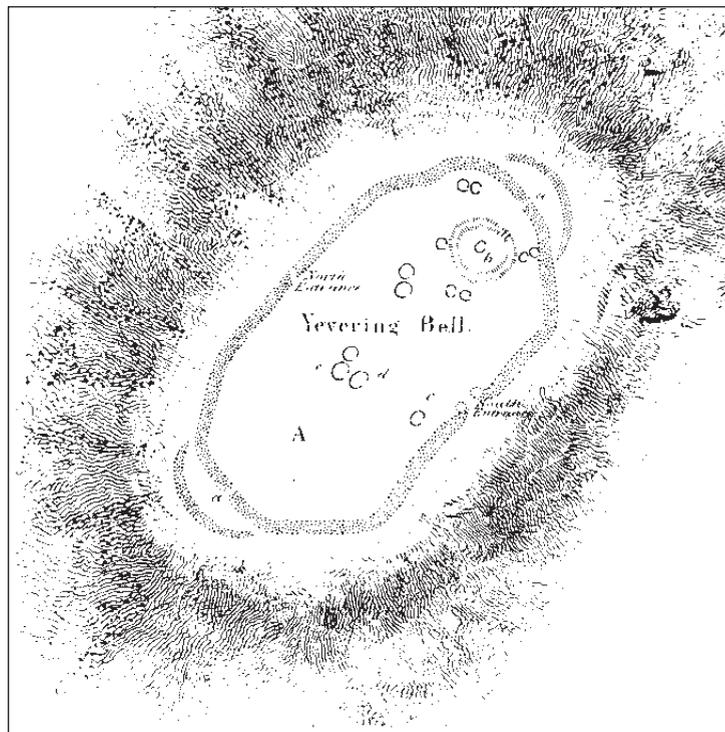
Fig 2.9  
George Tate, the talented archaeologist and geologist, who was also postmaster of Alnwick. (Courtesy of Roger Miket)

Three years later, in 1861, the Duke funded George Tate, the remarkably accomplished postmaster of Alnwick, whose interests included geology, archaeology and local history, to carry out excavations on the summit of Yeavinger Bell (Figs 2.9, 2.10 and 2.11). Tate's investigations (Tate 1863a) confirmed that the bank of rubble on Yeavinger Bell was the remains of a massive wall, and artefacts recovered from several of the roundhouse sites led him to date the hillfort to the 'Celtic' period, a term applied in the mid-19th century not just to the Iron Age but to the entire pre-historic period leading up to the Roman invasion, and to all of Britain's so-called 'native' inhabitants. Tate had also supervised excavations at Brough Law, Grieve's Ash and Chesters in the Breamish Valley (Tate 1863b), and his conclusions echoed those of fellow antiquarians all over England:

Fig 2.10 (below)  
George Tate's plan, made in 1861, of the hillfort on Yeavinger Bell, showing the surface remains he targeted for excavation. (Tate 1863a)

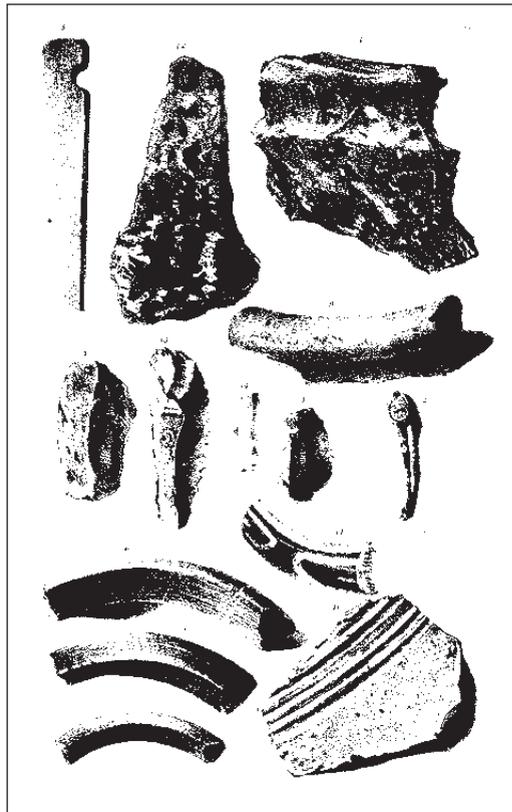


The Duke was so impressed that he immediately directed MacLauchlan to his next task: a survey of the whole length of Hadrian's Wall, then known simply as 'the Roman Wall', together with all the camps and forts associated with it. This enormous undertaking took three years. Once it was completed, the Duke distributed copies of the resulting atlas (MacLauchlan 1857) to the royal families of Great Britain and Germany, to the future prime minister (then



HILLFORTS

Fig 2.11  
Some of the artefacts excavated by George Tate on the summit of Yeavinger Bell. Interestingly, none of them can be dated with confidence to the Iron Age. (Tate 1863a)



In these ancient times the hilltops bristled with fortresses, and the whole district wore a threatening aspect, and breathed distrust and strife, rapine and bloodshed. These arrangements tell of a divided state of society – of separate tribes and clans, often at war with each other. That Celtic race, though warlike and brave, was weakened by intestine strife, and through want of union, perished beneath the swords of foreign invaders.

In the preceding year, the Duke had commissioned MacLauchlan to survey ‘the old Celtic camps in the fastness of the Cheviot Hills’. MacLauchlan was by then 68 years old and simply did not have the energy to go roaming across 5,000 sq km of difficult terrain in search of the widely scattered sites. Fortunately, he had earlier maps to guide him. Nearly a century earlier, Captain Andrew Armstrong had taken time out from his own military career to complete a survey of Northumberland (Armstrong 1769). Armstrong’s survey included schematic depictions of many of the county’s antiquities, from what he called ‘druidish temples’ (Stone Age stone

Fig 2.12  
Extract from Captain Andrew Armstrong’s 1769 Map of the County of Northumberland. One of the many annotations reads: ‘On these Hills has been a Chain of Forts, supposed to be a Refuge for the Christians against the Pagans’ – that is, the invading Vikings. (with permission of Northumberland Collections Service)





Fig 2.13  
Part of Christopher Greenwood's Map of the County of Northumberland, surveyed in 1827-8, showing the valley of the College Burn. (Greenwood 1828)

circles) to medieval battle sites (Fig 2.12). Although he recorded only the larger and more impressive hillforts, probably from information passed to him by local shepherds and landowners, it was a useful start. Christopher Greenwood's map, surveyed in 1827-8 and, like MacLauch-

lan's work, dedicated to the Duke of Northumberland, went on to indicate the positions of most of the hillforts missed by Armstrong (Greenwood 1828; Fig 2.13). There is evidence to suggest that MacLauchlan carried this improved map with him as his guide.

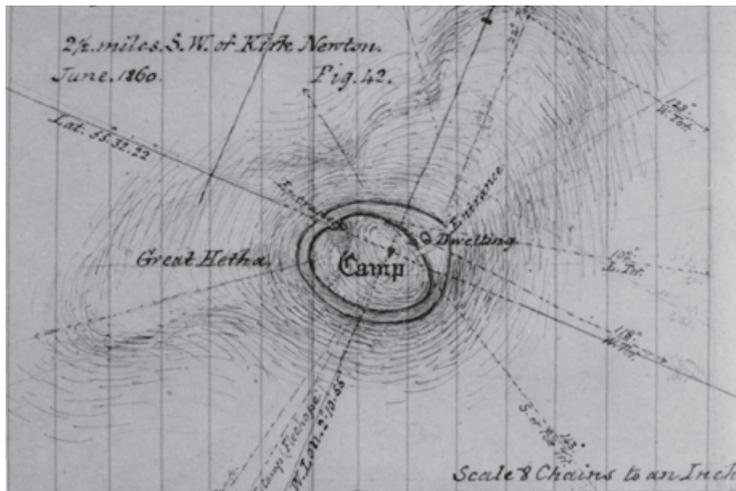


Fig 2.14  
Henry MacLauchlan's  
plan of the hillfort on Great  
Hetha, dated June 1860.  
(Collection of the Duke of  
Northumberland, Alnwick  
Castle)

Over the next four years, often working alone and with cumbersome equipment, MacLauchlan made detailed large-scale plans of nearly 150 'camps' and other 'native' settlements, a staggering achievement (Fig 2.14). For the first time, all the hillforts could be compared so that common characteristics could be recognised, a vital step towards understanding the monuments. Sadly, the report on this work (MacLauchlan 1867) was published two years after the death of his patron, the Duke.

It was less than 30 years since the expression 'scientist' had been coined. It was less than eight years since Charles Darwin had published *On the Origin of Species*, whose clinical observations and deductions challenged the long-held belief in the absolute truth of the Christian account of creation. It was only two years since the publication by John Lubbock, later Lord Avebury, of *Pre-historic Times*, regarded as the 19th century's single most influential archaeological work in English (Lubbock 1865). As well as dividing prehistory into three 'ages' – Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age – Lubbock drew parallels between British prehistory and the lifestyles of 'modern savages' elsewhere around the globe, a science that we would today call ethnography. It was to be another 20 years before Arthur Conan Doyle would invent the character of Sherlock Holmes, with his now-legendary insistence on the importance of elementary observations. But MacLauchlan's genius for detective work in archaeological field survey – along with Darwin's work in biology and Lubbock's in ethnography – epitomised the Victorian passion for analysis and deduction which inspired the creation of the fictional sleuth.

## The national mapmakers

The Ordnance Survey had begun making maps before 1800, and had worked gradually northwards from England's south coast, reaching Northumberland in the early 1860s. As its name suggests, the Ordnance Survey had at first been a military organisation, established to ensure that in the event of the expected invasion by the French under Napoleon, the British army would have the better knowledge of the terrain. Some of the larger prehistoric hillforts near the south coast occupied commanding hilltops with excellent visibility, and were potentially of strategic importance to both sides; this perhaps explains why an initial decision was taken to map them as accurately as roads and woodlands (Figs 2.15 and 2.16).

As the survey progressed and the threat from Napoleon diminished, the aims of the Ordnance Survey evolved: the completion of the first accurate large-scale map of Britain came to be seen as an important end in its own right. Detailed rules for recording archaeological remains were not written down until 1884, but as early as 1816 Major-General Mudge, then Superintendent of the Ordnance Survey, had issued a memorandum instructing '... that the remains of ancient Fortifications, Druidical Monuments, vitrified Forts and all Tumuli and Barrows shall be noted in the Plans whenever they occur' (Fig 2.17).

Only recently has the word 'tumulus' (Latin for 'bump') – once widely used in reference to prehistoric burial mounds, or barrows – been dropped from Ordnance Survey maps. In some cases in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, even 'antiquities' unearthed by chance, such as hoards of coins and Roman mosaics, were marked on maps. The quality of the archaeological research undoubtedly varied according to the interest and skill of the officer in charge of the fieldwork for each map sheet, but in general the standard of analysis and mapping was high.

By the 1860s, when work on the large-scale survey had progressed to northern Northumberland, the surveyors had gained a breadth of experience that is unsurpassed even today. They differentiated between Iron Age forts, settlements of the Roman Iron Age and later remains with a confidence that some later archaeologists have found astonishing in the absence of written

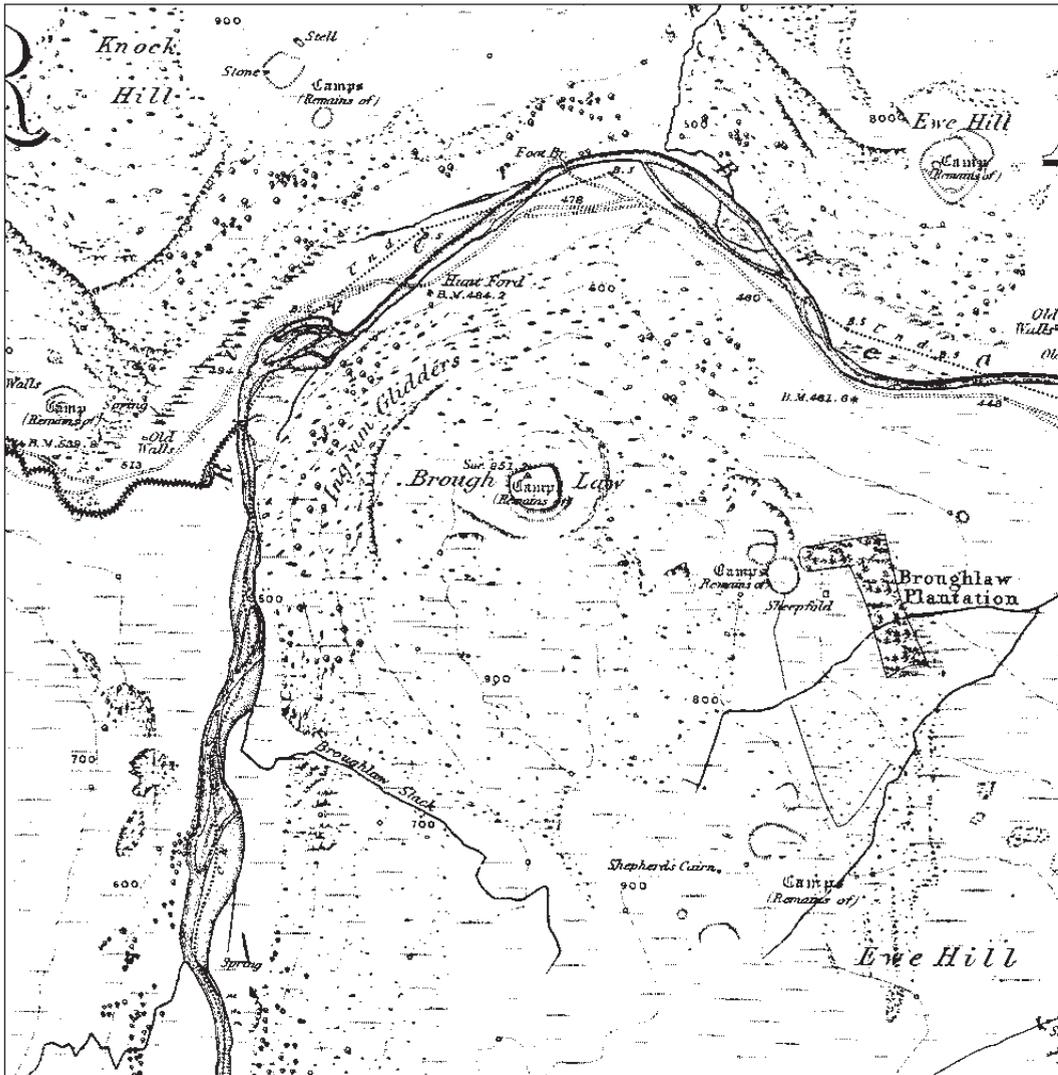


Fig 2.15  
The hillfort on Brough Law and its environs, as mapped in 1864. In the most remote upland areas, the Ordnance Survey used a scale of 6 inches to the mile (roughly 1:10,000). Despite the small scale, the quality of the mapping was outstanding. Iron Age hillforts and settlements now thought to date from the Roman Iron Age are all termed 'camps'. (Reproduced from the 1866 Ordnance Survey map, Northumberland sheet XXX)

academic discussions. There is some evidence that MacLauchlan, who was after all a former colleague, was occasionally able to ride piggy-back on the Ordnance Survey's fieldwork, although it is uncertain whether any discussion was shared on the subject of the hillforts themselves. This early survey work – an undertaking that it is hard to imagine repeating now – was the basis for the maps we all use today, and also laid the foundations for modern databases of archaeological information.

The Ordnance Survey's depiction of archaeological humps and bumps was more sophisticated than MacLauchlan's line drawings. Small wedge- or tadpole-shaped marks known as hachures were used to define slopes, the narrowing shape symbolising the effects of perspective. In fact, MacLauchlan had been trained in his youth to use a similar technique to illustrate

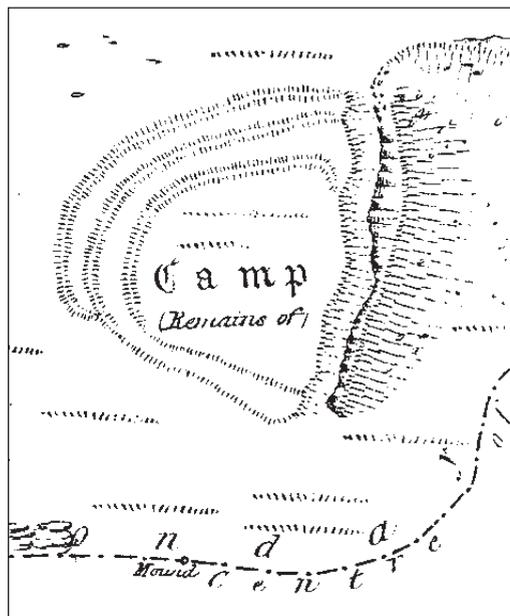


Fig 2.16  
The hillfort on Monday Cleugh. A scale of 25 inches to the mile (1:2,500) eventually became the basic scale for Ordnance Survey mapping. (Reproduced from the 1895 Ordnance Survey map, Northumberland sheet XIX.7)

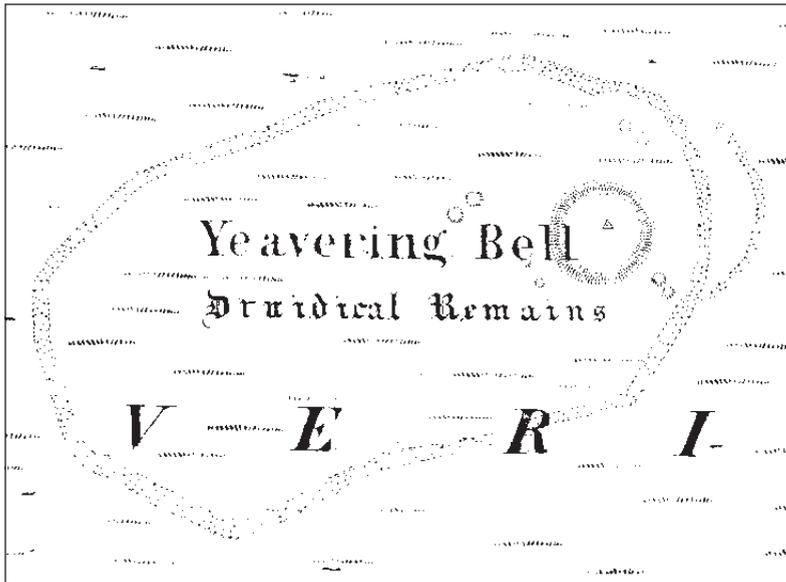


Fig 2.17 (above)  
 In 1860, when the Ordnance Survey first mapped Yeavinger Bell, academic interest in druids was at its height. On map editions published after this one of 1895, the hillfort was simply described as a 'camp'. (Reproduced from the 1895 Ordnance Survey map, Northumberland sheet XIX.2)

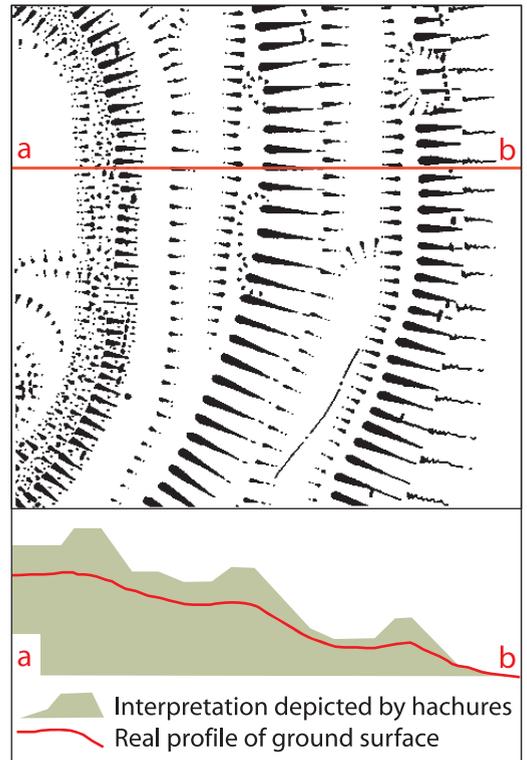
Fig 2.18 (above right)  
 Slight but significant variations in elevation can often be depicted more clearly with a subjective hachure plan than with an objective three-dimensional survey. The photograph shows the three ramparts of Ring Chesters, stepping down the natural slope. Below it is a hachure plan of the same earthworks. And at the bottom the red line shows the actual elevation across the three ramparts, while the green tone represents the changes in slope as depicted by the hachures

natural slopes (Fig 2.18). Hachures had one main advantage in the depiction of artificial earthworks: wherever they happened to find themselves, surveyors could make an accurate record of the form of any monument, whether a prehistoric hillfort or the site of a medieval pond, without necessarily understanding exactly what they were dealing with.

Another advantage (of less concern to the Ordnance Survey at that stage) was that hachures allowed surveyors to show minor details: subtle changes in the size and steepness of a bank as it encircled a summit, for example, or faint remnants of earthworks damaged by later development. For this reason, the technique was to prove an unexpectedly long-lasting legacy: you will still see tiny hachures on Ordnance Survey walkers' maps today. (Contours lines were first used experimentally in the late 19th century, but it was to be some decades before the whole country had been mapped sufficiently accurately to portray every slight hillock in this way.)

### Rome steals the limelight

In May 1849, a notice appeared at the Athenæum, the London club reserved for students of the classics, announcing that in June of that year, Mr John Collingwood Bruce would conduct a tour of the Roman Wall, which he believed to have been built by the emperor Hadrian, who ruled in AD 117–38. This event, styled a 'pilgrimage', was the first of the once-a-decade guided walks along the wall which continue to this



day (Fig 2.19). Bruce's ability to awaken his audience's imagination and evoke the lost glory of Rome enthralled both the local public and famous antiquarians from further afield, and the pilgrimage was accounted a huge success by all.

Within weeks of the pilgrimage, Bruce had decided to publish his findings. Needless to say, the Duke of Northumberland was among the 300 subscribers to the handsome volume, published in 1851 and entitled *The Roman Wall* (Bruce 1851). The publication generated fierce debate in print over whether Hadrian was genuinely the builder of the wall. Henry MacLauchlan, among others, believed that the emperor Severus, who ruled in AD 306–7, had been responsible. As ever, publicity and



Fig 2.19  
The 1989 'pilgrimage'  
along Hadrian's Wall.

controversy only served to boost interest in the Roman occupation: the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle experienced massive growth in its membership, and in 1850 the Duke initiated large-scale excavations at the outpost fort at High Rochester (Bremenium) in an attempt to cast more light on the issue (Fig 2.20).

Were it not for the meteoric rise in the fame of Hadrian's Wall and the consequent surge in academic interest in the Roman period, the work of MacLauchlan and the Ordnance Survey might well have inspired more campaigns of excavation targeted at Northumberland's prehistoric monuments. Similar episodes of field survey in the south



Fig 2.20  
Roman Bremenium – now  
called High Rochester – may  
have been sited to control the  
settlement from which it took  
its name: Bremenion, which  
Ptolemy, writing in the  
middle of the 2nd century  
AD, referred to as 'a city of  
the Votadini tribe'. Note the  
characteristic 'playing card'  
plan of the fortress and the  
walling exposed in 1852  
by the Duke of Northumber-  
land's excavations.  
(Photograph by Tim Gates.  
Copyright reserved)

of England stimulated dozens of middle-class enthusiasts to contribute to a period of energetic research that began to answer many fundamental questions about hillforts. In the late 19th century the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club organised several no-expense-spared sightseeing trips around prehistoric sites in the Cheviots, which were reported with glee in their annual journal but did not lead to any excavations.

### Early excavation and the understanding of the Iron Age

Excavation prior to the mid-19th century was a fairly crude operation, carried out by unskilled labourers with picks and shovels, using techniques that today would seem to have more in common with treasure hunting than with research. Subsequently, excavation began to adopt a much more scientific approach, taking note of minor changes in soil colour and texture, as well as the precise location of finds. Specialists began to pay attention to evidence previously ignored, such as the carbonised seeds and tiny snails that could reveal information about the state of the prehistoric environment. For the first time, detailed drawings were widely made and written records kept. Excavations at hillforts on the chalk uplands of Sussex and Wessex appeared to confirm the notion that their builders, assumed to be the Celts referred to by Caesar, were warlike savages who lived underground in primitive pit-dwellings (Fig 2.21).

Fig 2.21  
A prehistoric pit-dwelling,  
as imagined by the  
prehistorian Stuart Piggott.  
(Piggott 1935)

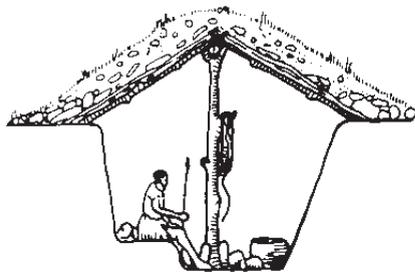


Fig 2.22 (opposite)  
This 1911 drawing by A  
Forestier, based on discoveries  
at Glastonbury in Somerset,  
was commissioned for an  
article by Bulleid entitled  
'Not the woad-daubed sav-  
age of the old history books:  
The civilised ancient Briton'.  
(Illustrated London News  
Picture Library)

By the end of the 19th century, however, excavations at Glastonbury and Meare in Somerset, on the sites of two Iron Age villages which had once lain at the edge of a shallow lake, were beginning to reveal a very different picture of prehistoric life (Bulleid and Gray 1911). At these villages, which had been occupied in the late Iron Age just before the coming of the Romans, the exceptional waterlogged conditions preserved organic material, including woodwork, leather and cloth, of startlingly

skilful manufacture. The excavators found the remains of circular houses, built of timber and wattle-and-daub, which presented such a striking contrast to the notion of underground pit-dwellings that in 1911 a drawing of a spacious, civilised Iron Age interior was featured on the cover of *The Illustrated London News* (Fig 2.22).

Yet it was not until the 1940s that the idea of the pit-dwelling was wholly abandoned. Excavations at that time at Little Woodbury, in Wiltshire, demonstrated that the pits had been used as airtight silos for the storage of grain, while circular houses – similar to those at the lake-edge villages – could be identified by the circular arrangements of post-holes dug to support timber uprights (Bersu 1940). This makes it all the more remarkable that, in Northumberland, circular earthen platforms had first been recognised as the sites of timber round-houses by Henry MacLauchlan in the 1860s.

Thus in the late 19th century the 'southern' picture of the Iron Age began to dominate academic discussion and popular imagination, while the study of Northumberland's evidence slipped quietly into obscurity. The eclipse of northern Britain's prehistoric remains is well illustrated by the experience of the Reverend E A Downman. A resident of Laindon in Essex who had made trips to various parts of southern England and Wales to examine hillforts and other ancient monuments, Revd Downman came to Northumberland in August 1909. He visited dozens of hillforts, sketching plans of their defences and noting the strategic qualities of their locations (Fig 2.23). In his manuscript notebooks, he recorded the surface traces of stone-built roundhouses within the defences, but he was clearly mystified by what he saw, describing them as 'tiny circular spaces'. He even went so far as to describe the exceptionally well-preserved settlement remains within the ramparts on West Hill, overlooking Kirknewton, as being '...in a state of chaos' (Downman 1916).

Walter de la Aitchison, a successful businessman from a Northumberland family, was well acquainted with many of the big names of archaeology in the 1920s and 1930s. His friend O G S Crawford, appointed as the Ordnance Survey's first Archaeological Officer in 1920, began in the 1930s to collect aerial photographs from RAF airfields, and it may have been he who first encouraged Aitchison to make use of them (Fig 2.24).



HILLFORTS

Fig 2.23 (right)  
The Revd E A Downman's  
plan of the hillfort on West Hill,  
surveyed in August 1909.  
(Extract from British Library  
manuscript Add 39320.f.73)

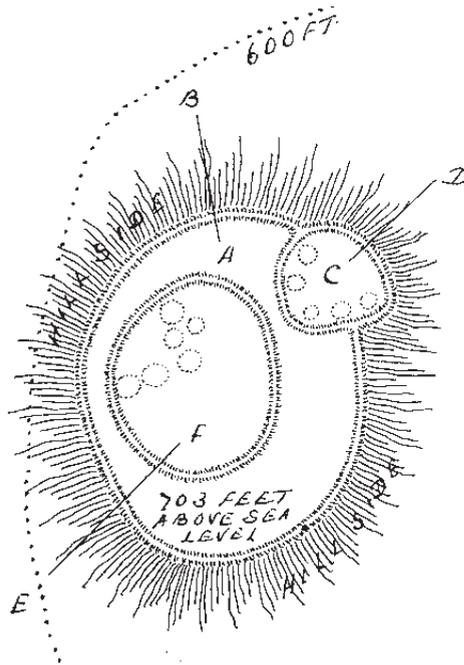


Fig 2.24 (below)  
This early aerial photograph,  
one of a series taken by the  
RAF in the spring of 1936,  
shows cultivation terraces in  
the valley of the College  
Burn. The photograph seems  
to have been part of the  
collection amassed by O G S  
Crawford, the Ordnance  
Survey's first Archaeological  
Officer. (CCC 9147/M462  
EH (NMR) Crawford  
Collection)



Particularly since the 1970s, aerial photography has been used by archaeologists for the detection of earthworks long since levelled by ploughing, by means of so-called cropmarks or soilmarks: patterns of darker or lighter shade which appear, respectively, in ripening crops or on the surface of recently ploughed fields but which are generally invisible from the ground. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, it was thought that the technique would be most useful for detecting slight earthworks which were difficult to see on the ground. Aitchison began to examine RAF aerial photographs of the Cheviots, using them to guide his visits to particular areas of interest and to interpret whatever he found there (Fig 2.25). Eventually, he bought his own complete set of the 1948 National Air Survey for the region and, in a semi-official capacity, passed his findings about the earthworks on to the Ordnance Survey for possible inclusion on their maps. Sadly, Aitchison's



*Fig 2.25  
Photographs taken by the  
RAF in the early 1930s  
remain an excellent record  
of archaeological remains,  
especially those remains  
whose condition has since  
deteriorated. The hillfort  
on Fawcett Shank (today  
hemmed in by plantations  
of coniferous forest) is  
visible towards the bottom  
right of the image, together  
with other earthwork  
remains destroyed by the  
planting. (CCC  
9085/M226 EH (NMR)  
Crawford Collection)*

enthusiasm was not always matched by his observational skill, and his efforts did little to further the cause of the Iron Age in Northumberland. Some of his discoveries – from stone circles to ‘native homesteads’ – proved, on closer inspection by the Ordnance Survey, to be entirely fanciful.

### **Local hero**

If Aitchison’s contribution was characterised by his enthusiasm rather than his ability, George Jobey was a man who combined skill and passion for archaeology in equal measure (Fig 2.26). The period between the

1951 Festival of Britain (a grand exhibition of modern design aimed at fostering a positive national outlook after the years of post-war austerity) and the mid-1980s saw the rapid expansion of towns, roads and airports across much of Britain, and quarrying in more rural areas for sand and gravel to supply the urban building boom. Alarm at the consequent destruction of archaeological remains led to the founding of the ‘Rescue Archaeology’ movement in 1972, and culminated in the Government’s decision in 1990 to require developers to foot the bill for whatever archaeological research their work makes necessary.

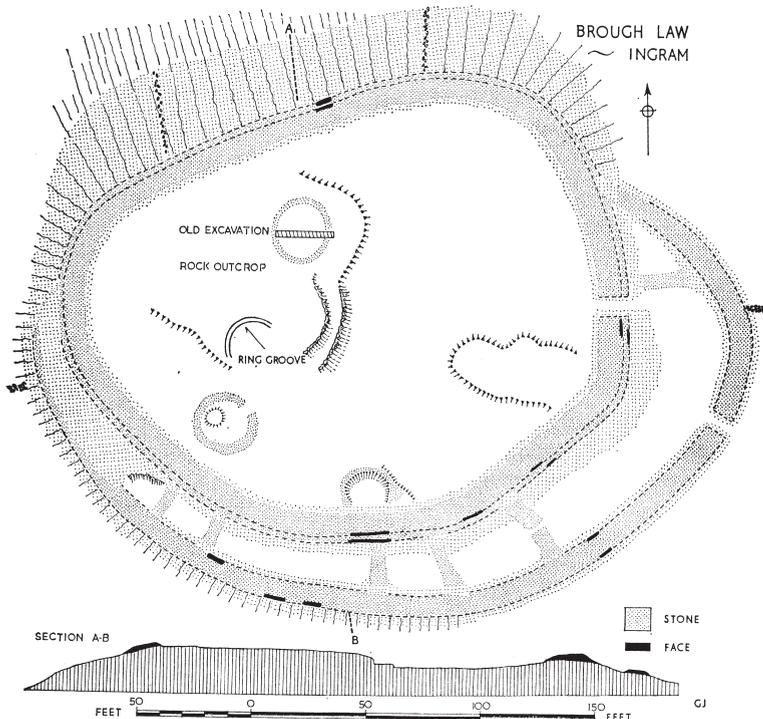
Fig 2.26  
George Jobey, whose research remains a milestone in the developing understanding of hillforts and other monuments in the Cheviots.  
(Courtesy of Roger Miket)



Computers increasingly became front-line weapons in the battle to record and categorise the mass of information and artefacts, from urban excavations in particular.

The Cheviots, incorporated into Northumberland National Park in 1956, saw little of this urban struggle, but George Jobey generated new information and understanding at an incredible pace, as though the Cheviots too were under imminent threat of destruction. Having started work as a history teacher, he went on to teach archaeology to adult education classes

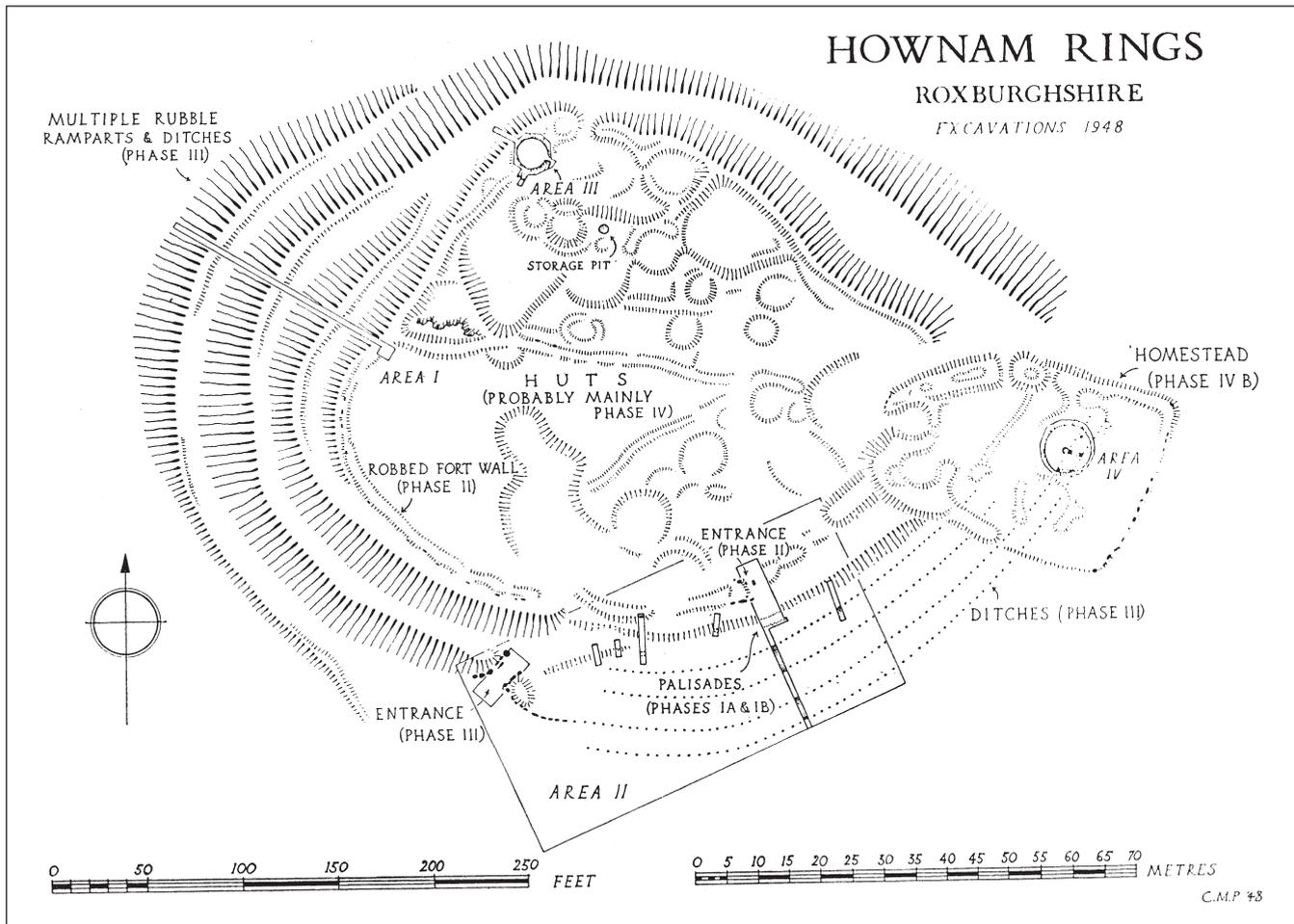
Fig 2.27  
George Jobey's plan of the hillfort on Brough Law, where he excavated in 1970. The 'old excavation' is one of the three trenches dug by George Tate in 1861. (Courtesy of Liz Gray and Ian Jobey)



at Newcastle University. In the field, he made it his business to examine almost every Iron Age and Roman settlement in the Cheviots at some point in his life, both in Northumberland National Park and in the Scottish Borders, though he seldom spent more than a few hours at each site (Fig 2.27). Sometimes assisted by his students, but with few other resources, he carried out rapid surveys using an old-fashioned plane table (essentially a drawing board, mounted on a tripod over a central point, and used for sighting topographical features and mapping them using a tape or measuring chain). Not infrequently, the results of his investigations were recorded on the backs of envelopes. Interpretation of this 'database' was undertaken in his favourite corner of the Haymarket Pub in Newcastle, in the company of friends, a few cigarettes and a pint of beer.

Jobey's concern was to analyse the remains, not simply to map them. The overview he achieved of the region's prehistory represented the greatest leap forward in the understanding of Northumberland's past since the time of Henry MacLauchlan. Among the most important outcomes of his fieldwork was the recognition that many hillforts in the Cheviots occupied the sites of earlier enclosures, defended by timber stockades or palisades, whose foundation trenches could occasionally be seen as shallow depressions in the turf. This was a sequence already proposed by the prehistorian Margaret Piggott during her excavations in 1948 at the hillfort known as Hownam Rings, overlooking the Kale Water in what was then Roxburghshire, now the Borders region (Piggott 1948; Fig 2.28). The excavations at Hownam Rings also featured in the research of Kenneth Steer, who, like Aitchison, had begun using photographs from the 1948 National Air Survey, to discover traces of timber palisades and other sites in the Scottish Borders (Steer 1949).

The timber-built forts seemed to be contemporary with timber roundhouses, whose footings could also be traced on the surface, as shallow grooves rather than upstanding rubble banks. These roundhouses were similar in plan to the stone-built ones recognised by MacLauchlan and the Ordnance Survey, but were often larger in diameter, and fewer in number. Jobey suspected them to be of early Iron Age date, perhaps around the 6th century BC. Margaret Piggott had argued that the development of the defences, from



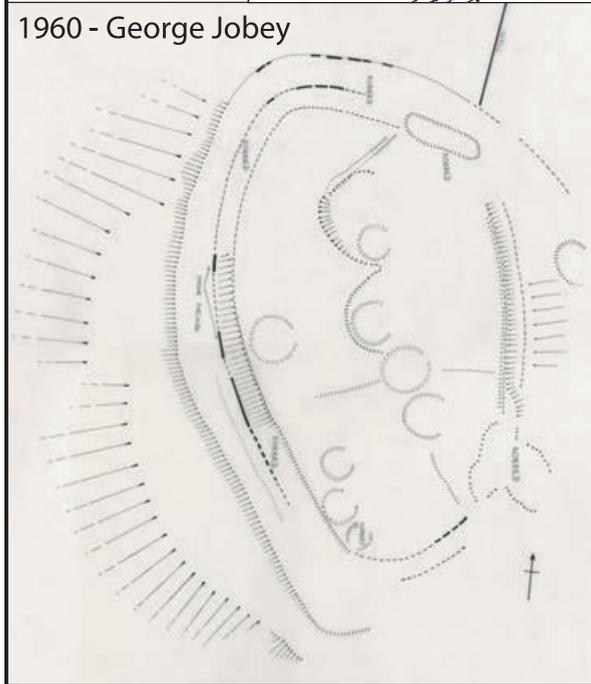
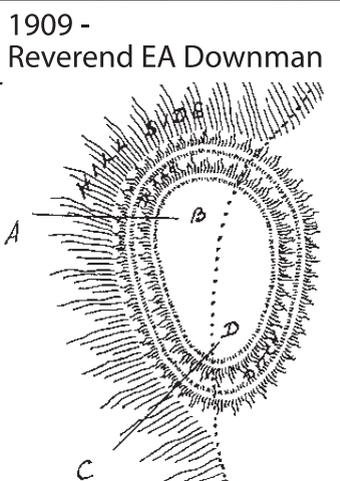
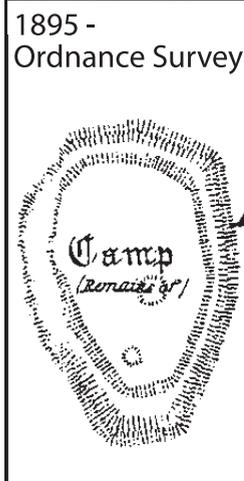
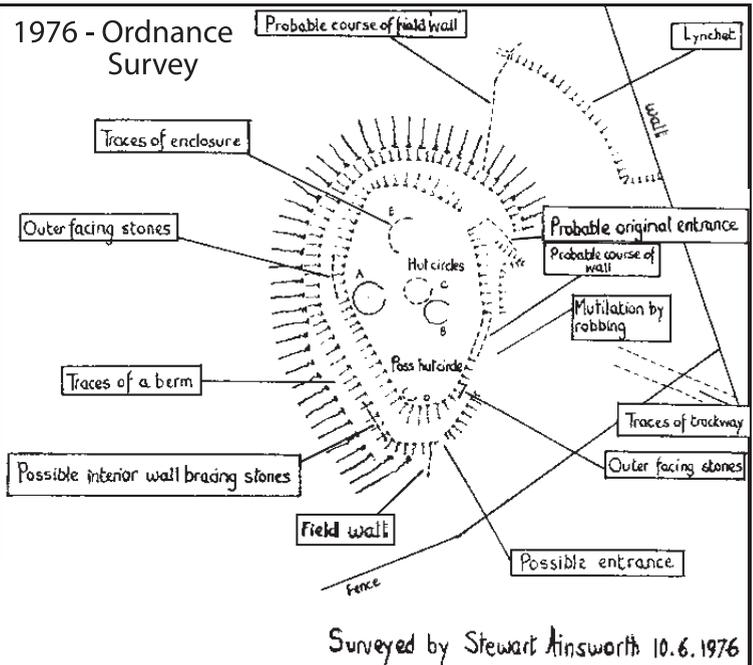
timber palisade to single earthen rampart and eventually to multiple ramparts of earth or stone, reflected three waves of Celtic invasion from the European mainland. This theory was universally accepted in southern England at that time, and Margaret Piggott forced the Cheviot evidence to fit the same model. This so-called 'Hownam sequence' was to colour perceptions of hillforts in the region for many decades.

Looking at the other end of the Iron Age, George Jobey came to realise that many of the sites had also been occupied in the Roman Iron Age, and that the stone-built roundhouses previously accepted as being of Iron Age date were in fact later (Jobey 1962; 1964). To test his theories, he carried out excavations of the hillfort at Brough Law (Jobey 1971). His colleague at Newcastle University, Colin Burgess, examined several other sites, including the hillfort on Ell's Knowe and a nearby Iron Age and Roman-period settlement overlooking Hetha Burn (Burgess 1970). This detailed information helped to refine the broad patterns detected

through investigations of surface evidence.

Jobey published most of his research in the local academic journal *Archaeologia Aeliana* (which took its title from the family name of the Roman emperor Hadrian). There was only a single year between 1955 and 1980 when he did not produce at least two articles; among the most important as far as hillforts are concerned were two published in 1964–5 (Jobey 1964; 1965). He also produced a field guide to the prehistoric monuments of Northumberland, an excellent summary of the state of knowledge at that time (Jobey 1974). Taken together, this mass of research rescued the study of the Iron Age in Northumberland from the backwater into which it had slipped. George Jobey was honoured with a Chair in Archaeology at Newcastle University, elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and, towards the end of his life, presented by his fellow archaeologists with a collection of studies on the topics to which he had dedicated his career (Miket and Burgess 1984; Fig 2.29).

Fig 2.28  
Following her excavations at Hownam Rings, Margaret Piggott proposed that the hillfort illustrated an evolutionary development typical of hillforts in the region, subsequently called the 'Hownam sequence'. (Piggott 1948)



## Adjusting the focus

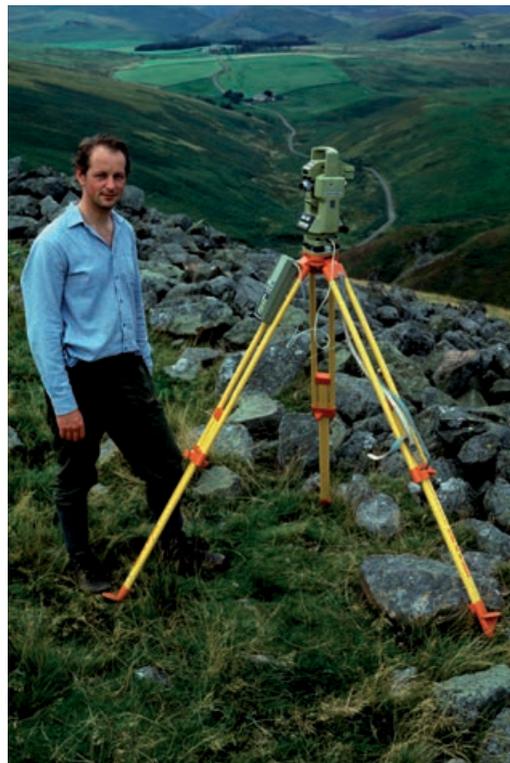
One of George Jobey's most important legacies was to inspire a new generation of archaeologists, many of whom went on to play their own parts in advancing our understanding of the region's past. Among these was Tim Gates, who in 1977 took the first of what was to become a large and important collection of aerial photographs of Northumberland, almost unrivalled in Britain for the quality of the images (see Figs 1.2, 2.20, 4.1, 4.12, 4.29 and 6.1). At a well-attended conference in Hexham in 2000, hosted by Northumberland National Park Authority, every single speaker made use of Gates's photographs, though the topics ranged from the Stone Age to the Industrial Revolution (Frodsham 2004).

Aerial photography was a driving force behind the new movement of landscape archaeology that emerged in the late 1970s. Several research projects, both aerial and ground-based, had demonstrated that archaeologists who concentrated too closely on one site or period, ignoring evidence that lay beyond that site or period, ran the risk of misunderstanding the single piece of the jigsaw with which they were concerned. It was vital to consider the wider context of whatever piece of the puzzle was placed under the microscope of excavation. Aerial reconnaissance, which literally offered an overview of the wider landscape, was well placed to achieve this broadening of focus.

Sharing a building with Newcastle University's Archaeology Department from 1983 to 1997 was the local office of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Granted a Royal Warrant in 1908 to record every architectural and archaeological monument in the land, the Royal Commission (as it was always known) was the inheritor of the field survey skills of MacLauchlan and the Ordnance Survey. Because of the enormity of their undertaking, its investigators were expected to deal with large geographical areas and with the full spectrum of historic remains, a broad-brush approach which naturally gave them an appreciation of the 'big picture'. Like aerial archaeologists, they came to understand that individual monuments existed not within a static landscape but one that was always evolving, interweaving threads of earlier land use with changes and innovations that were sometimes gradual and sometimes dramatic.

George Jobey was sometimes referred to as a 'one-man Royal Commission', and his work had certainly transformed the understanding of the region's prehistory, but his choice of survey equipment had always been limited by a shoestring budget. Through contact between archaeologists and urban developers, powerful electronic theodolites, capable of measuring position to high precision at great distances, were increasingly available to organisations like the Royal Commission (Fig 2.30). As a result, it was possible for the first time in field survey to look far beyond the bounds of individual monuments and so to begin to understand their place in the big picture.

Having commenced the recording of the Cheviot landscape from the air, Tim Gates now urged that the focus be adjusted back to ground level. This had already been done on the Scottish side of the border: the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland – as grandly named as its English counterpart and also usually abbreviated to 'the Royal Commission' (or 'the Scottish Commission') – had begun to compile an inventory of Roxburghshire's ancient monuments in the late 1940s (RCAHMS 1956), using ground survey to follow up the examination of National Air Survey photographs, as Kenneth Steer had recommended.



*Fig 2.29 (opposite)*  
The hillfort on St Gregory's Hill, though omitted from Armstrong's map of 1776 and Greenwood's map of 1828, has been depicted by a succession of archaeological surveyors spanning nearly 150 years. George Jobey eventually chose not to include the site in any of his many published works, probably because the early settlement remains had been so badly damaged by stone quarrying. (1860 – Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle; 1895 – Reproduced from the 1895 Ordnance Survey map, Northumberland sheets XIX.1 and XIX.2; 1909 – Extract from British Library manuscript Add 9320.f.53; 1960 – Courtesy of Liz Gray and Ian Jobey; 1976 – © NMR; 2002 © EH)

*Fig 2.30*  
Mark Bowden, of the Royal Commission, surveying with an early laser theodolite in the mid-1980s.



*Fig 2.31*  
Members of the Northumberland Archaeological Group excavating a trench across the ramparts on Wether Hill. (Pete Topping, Northumberland Archaeological Group)

Walter de la Aitchison's one-man effort in Northumberland, spanning a period similar to that of the Scottish Royal Commission's survey, had been less comprehensive and – perhaps inevitably, considering the limited specialist photography of the region then available – less expertly accomplished. The English Royal Commission took up the challenge, embarking on a five-year field survey of some 66 sq km in the northern half of Northumberland National Park. As earthworks were plotted from aerial photographs, and surveyors on the ground conducted close-up examination, it became apparent that there were hundreds of previously unidentified sites surviving as humps and bumps (Topping forthcoming). It also became clear that the landscape,

far from being essentially prehistoric and Roman, contained medieval and later remains in abundance, each contributing its own colour and texture to the rich tapestry of the Cheviot landscape.

Archaeologist Pete Topping, who as a student had come into contact with George Jobey and Colin Burgess, was responsible for coordinating the Royal Commission's landscape survey. As the fieldwork came to an end, he judged that the time was right to adjust the focus once more, by looking in more detail at a single hillfort and its immediate environs.

Topping was a long-standing member of the Northumberland Archaeological Group, many of whose members had excavated with George Jobey, so it was inevitable that the group would provide the volunteers for this next step. The chosen hillfort crowned the summit of Wether Hill, where we began this chapter (Topping 2004; Figs 2.31 and 2.32). Aerial photography and detailed ground survey had already shown that the site had been left relatively untouched by medieval land use, and that it was surrounded by swathes of narrow furrows typical of a cultivation technique thought to belong to the late Iron Age. The proposed programme of geophysical survey followed by excavation was to be the start of the National Park Authority's Breamish Valley Archaeology Project, which evolved into an 11-year partnership with the Northumberland Archaeological Group and Durham University (Frodsham and Waddington 2004).

Geophysical survey is often seen as an archaeological cure-all, magically revealing features not visible as humps and bumps on the ground or as cropmarks from the air. A number of geophysical techniques can be brought to bear, including ground-penetrating radar, which provides three-dimensional images of buried features; magnetometry, which measures variations in the earth's natural magnetic field; and resistivity, which detects changes in the ground's ability to conduct electrical current (Fig 2.33). The ancient volcanic stone of the Cheviots, however, limits the effectiveness of all these techniques, and the few faint signals detected around Wether Hill were almost unintelligible. So, in 1994, Pete Topping decided to excavate an area 250m beyond the hillfort, where marks visible from the air hinted that late Iron Age agriculture might have levelled the surface traces of an earlier roundhouse (*see* Fig 6.11).

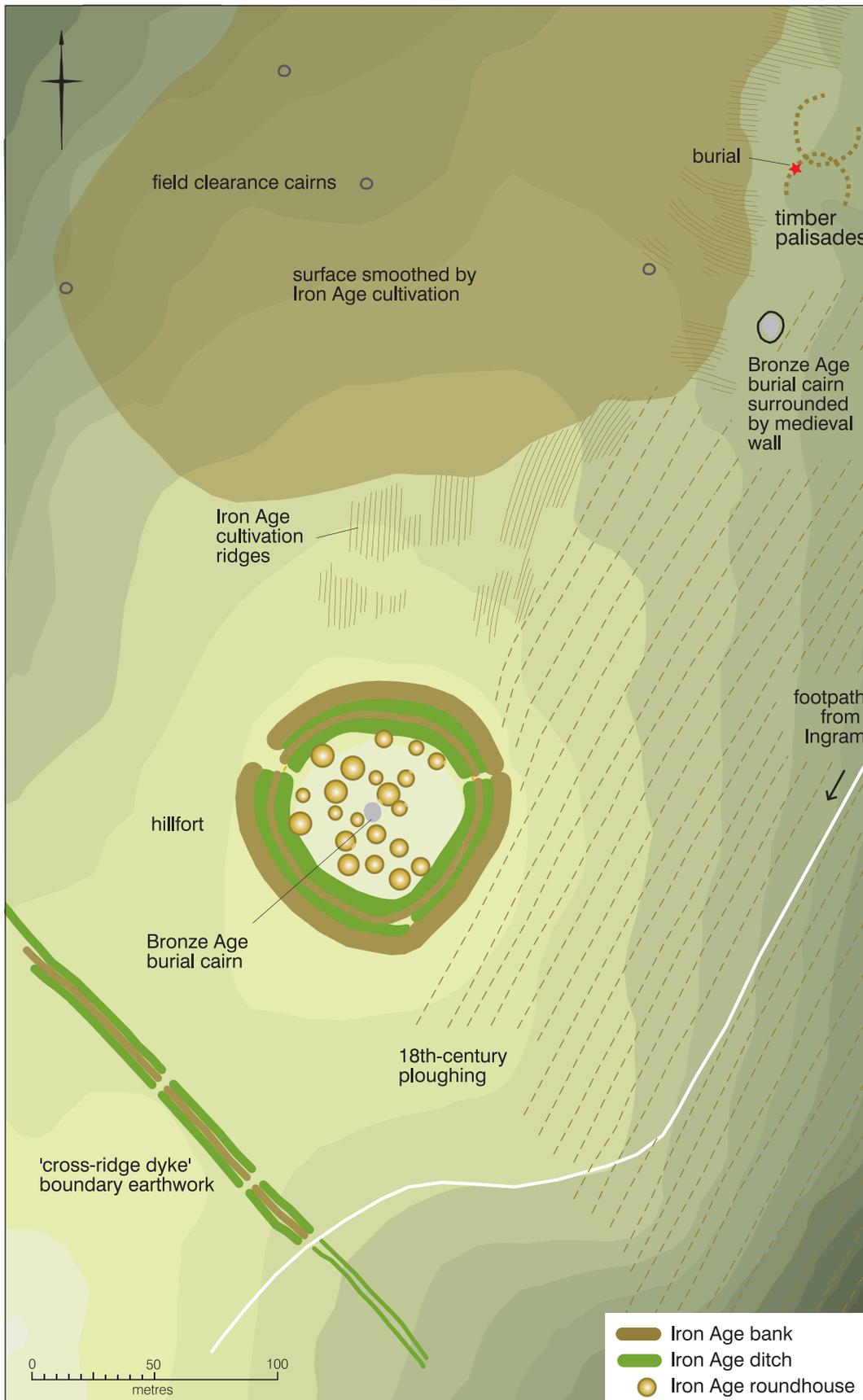


Fig 2.32  
The hillfort on Wether Hill,  
and archaeological remains  
in the surrounding land-  
scape.

*Fig 2.33*

*Geophysical survey often supplements examination of surface traces, by 'seeing' remains hidden beneath the surface. Unfortunately, geological conditions in the Cheviots limit the effectiveness of all geophysical techniques.*



While the search for the building proved fruitless, the trench exposed the stone footings of an Iron Age timber palisade dating to around 350 BC, which seems to have enclosed a previously unsuspected settlement

outside the hillfort. Over the course of five years, further large-scale excavations shed more light on the extent of the palisade and revealed that it was one of a sequence of three such enclosures in roughly the same location.

The site had another surprise in store. On the final day of excavation in 1998, routine cleaning of the ground surface within the trench revealed the edges of what seemed to be a small pit, although further excavation had to be postponed until the following year. In 1999, a small trench was opened precisely at this spot – a piece of archaeological ‘key-hole surgery’. As diggers of the Northumberland Archaeological Group gently excavated into the pit, the rim of a pot was gradually exposed, filling experienced diggers and recent archaeology converts alike with nervous anticipation. It was the uppermost of the five ceramic vessels described at the start of this chapter, the last vestiges of an earlier landscape that occupants of the nearby Iron Age hillfort had almost erased. This, then, was the discovery to which many centuries of investigation and discovery had led. It was a fitting climax, but it was also just the beginning of another chapter.

# 3

## Before hillforts

Ancient though they are, the first hillforts were not built in a land that was in any sense a ‘blank canvas’. The landscape had already been shaped by thousands of years of human activity, from gradual clearance of the native wildwood to the establishment of settlements, routes and ceremonial monuments. These physical changes would have been accompanied by, and sometimes brought about through, developments in people’s thinking, as they named hills, valleys and earlier monuments, identified some places as ‘home’ or ‘sacred’ and feared others as ‘foreign’ or ‘taboo’. They would have developed a folklore, both of their natural surroundings and of the heritage left them by earlier generations, to explain what they saw and come to terms with their place in the world. A tapestry of human activity, knowledge and belief, handed down over almost 10,000 years before the Iron Age, forms the backdrop to the introduction of hillforts.

### Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age – what is an ‘age’?

More than 50 years before the birth of Christ, the Roman philosopher Lucretius developed an idea which was to influence the thinking of archaeologists and historians right up to the present day. The material world, he argued, could be divided into three ‘ages’: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Lucretius was drawing a parallel between this progression and the human past, implying that the process had culminated with his own literate, civilised age, the golden age of Rome. From the 16th century onwards, this idea was built upon by scientists who, like Lucretius, regarded the Romans as the founders of an enlightened modern era. In the wake of Charles Darwin’s theories on the development of the natural world, and John Lubbock’s adoption in 1864 of the ‘three age’ system to describe British prehistory, this concept of progression came to be known as ‘cultural evolution’. Each age followed a leap forward in technology resulting from the discovery of a new raw material, whose mastery allowed the manufacture of a wider range of more

efficient tools and weapons. Although Lucretius’ simple framework has been frequently revised, and the prehistoric time span is now known to be far greater than he suspected, archaeologists still use the Roman philosopher’s basic template.

This being said, it is important to recognise that by defining an ‘age’, archaeologists are simply using a convenient name-tag. The adoption of new technology did not occur in sudden leaps, nor at precisely the same time or pace throughout Britain, and little would have remained static between the start- and end-points of each age. Objects made of stone, bronze and iron tend to survive to the present day in good condition, but we must not forget that other raw materials, such as wood, pottery and cloth, would have undergone their own technological advances at different times and speeds. People have probably always felt themselves to be living in times of constant and rapid change – just as we do today, in what future archaeologists might call the Plastic Age, the Space Age or the Information Age.

And, of course, technology is only one of many yardsticks that might be used to measure changes in the nature of society: religion is another one, implicit in the division of time into the periods Before Christ and *Anno Domini*. We also regularly use changes in architectural style to define periods of time – Tudor, Georgian, Regency – and these styles in turn often take their names from the rulers at the time. So it would be perfectly reasonable to divide prehistory along different lines: the stone-circle period, the tumulus period, the hill-fort period. In fact, the centuries during which the Stone Age metamorphosed into the Bronze Age have long been named after the distinctive style of pottery in use at the time: the Beaker Period.

### From stone to metal

Some of the history of ancient land management can be pieced together by comparing and dating pollen preserved in the region’s peat bogs (Fig 3.1). This shows that until around 4000 BC, what is now Northumberland National Park was, like much of the



*Fig 3.1 (above)  
Yetholm Loch, near Kirk  
Yetholm, is one of a number  
of places where ancient  
seeds, leaves and pollen are  
preserved under waterlogged  
conditions.*



*Fig 3.2  
In about 1540, John  
Leland, appointed Royal  
Antiquary by Henry VIII,  
commented in his Itinerary  
that ‘the great wood of  
Chivet is spoyled now, and  
crokyd old trees and shrubs  
remain’ (Toulmin-Smith  
1906). This small grove  
of stunted oaks on the  
northern slopes of Yeaveering  
Bell may represent one of  
the last fragments of very  
ancient woodland in  
Northumberland.*



*Fig 3.3  
Maelmin Henge, a replica  
henge built by archaeologist  
Clive Waddington at  
Milfield, and based on a  
real example which he  
excavated nearby. The  
banks and ditches of the  
original monument  
survived until they were  
bulldozed and ploughed  
flat in the 1960s.*

rest of Britain, covered in a dense blanket of mixed woodland, comprising mostly Scots pine, birch and hazel. Rowan and willow would have preferred the damper ground alongside streams, as they do today, while oak, ash, wild cherry and elm would have dominated the valley floors and plains (Young 2004).

A scatter of small clearings may have existed, some created naturally by the death of mature trees or occasionally by lightning strikes or storm damage. Others may have been made deliberately by hunter-gatherers using fire, in order to encourage wild animals to graze on the tender regrowth. Undergrowth of hazel, crabapple, blackthorn, hawthorn and blackberries, all with edible fruit, would have been quick to colonise the clearings, adding to the range of resources available there.

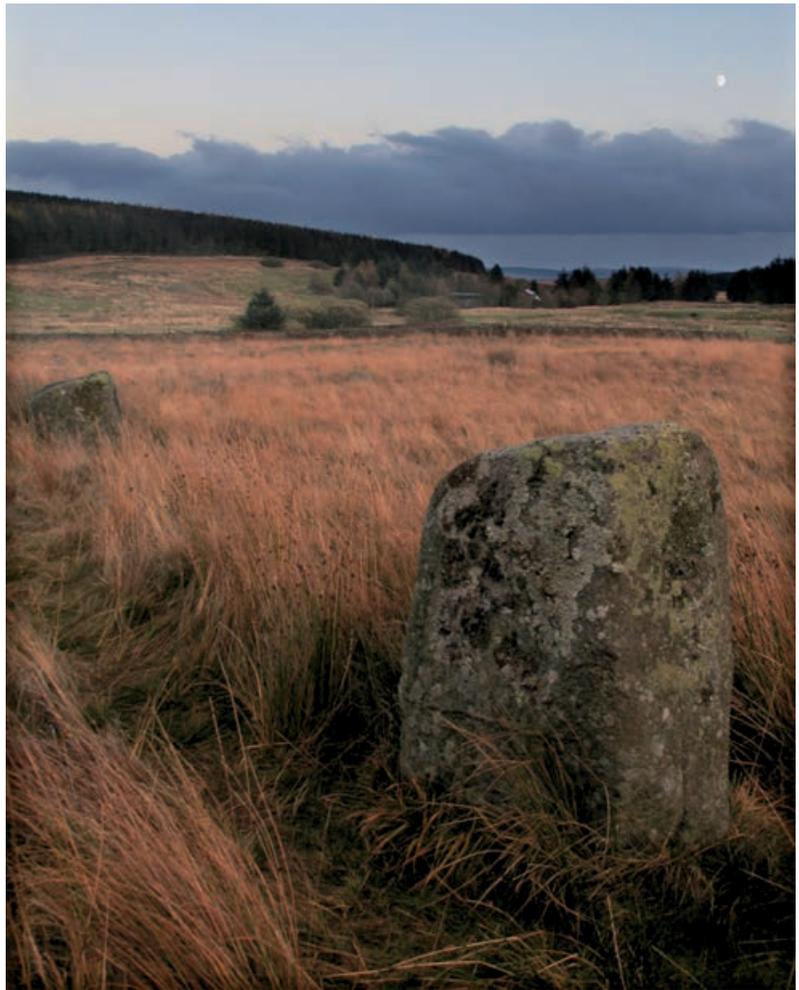
Yet it is no accident that in the Neolithic – the final period of the Stone Age – the polished stone axe became a symbol of power, and remained so into the Bronze Age. On the fertile, low-lying plains just outside the present National Park, patches of wildwood were gradually chopped and burned down to make way for farming (Fig 3.2). Aerial photography, field survey and excavation have shown that by the beginning of the Bronze Age, around 2000 BC, the Milfield Plain,

immediately to the north-east of the Cheviots (*see* Fig 1.4), was littered with small farms and ceremonial monuments, including standing stones and the embanked circular enclosures known as henges (Fig 3.3).

The Cheviot hills still remained wooded for the most part, but a few trail-blazing farmers had begun to edge their way up the major valleys, carving small sunlit outposts into the green twilight of the woods. In these early clearings, we can still see stone circles like those at Threestoneburn and Hethpool, the latter hardly recognisable today thanks to the efforts of medieval farmers to clear the land (Fig 3.4).

So-called ‘rock art’, much of which also dates to the later part of the Stone Age, is far more common on the softer outcrops of the Fell Sandstone Hills, to the south-east of the Cheviots, than it is within the National Park. There are many different interpretations of these enigmatic symbols, which usually comprise circular hollows known as cupmarks, sometimes with one or more concentric rings (‘cup-and-ring marks’). Many archaeologists believe that the symbols marked territorial boundaries or overlooked important routes, but most accept that we will never fully understand their meanings. Equally, we can only guess at how Iron Age people interpreted these symbols. At Chatton Park Hill a particularly large and impressive panel of rock art lying within the perimeter of a hillfort seems to have been surrounded by its own additional enclosure, as if to accord it special respect (Fig 3.5). In the landscape around the hillfort on Lordenshaws, near Rothbury, many outcrops and boulders are covered with enigmatic cup-shaped depressions and concentric rings (Fig 3.6). Here, some of the stones were broken up by the hillfort’s inhabitants and incorporated into the stone façades of earthen ramparts.

In recent years, a few examples of rock art have turned up in the Cheviots. One sandstone boulder, into which cup-and-ring motifs have been laboriously chipped and ground, probably using pebbles and sand, is on display outside the National Park visitor centre at Ingram. Two more boulders, these of local granite-like andesite rock, stand guard over the pass into the valley of the College Burn, to the south of the hillfort on West Hill (Fig 3.7). These stones, which today have a clear view of the stone circle at Hethpool, 2.4km away, may have marked the limit of the territory of the community who built the ceremonial monument, or perhaps acted as signposts to mark the approach.

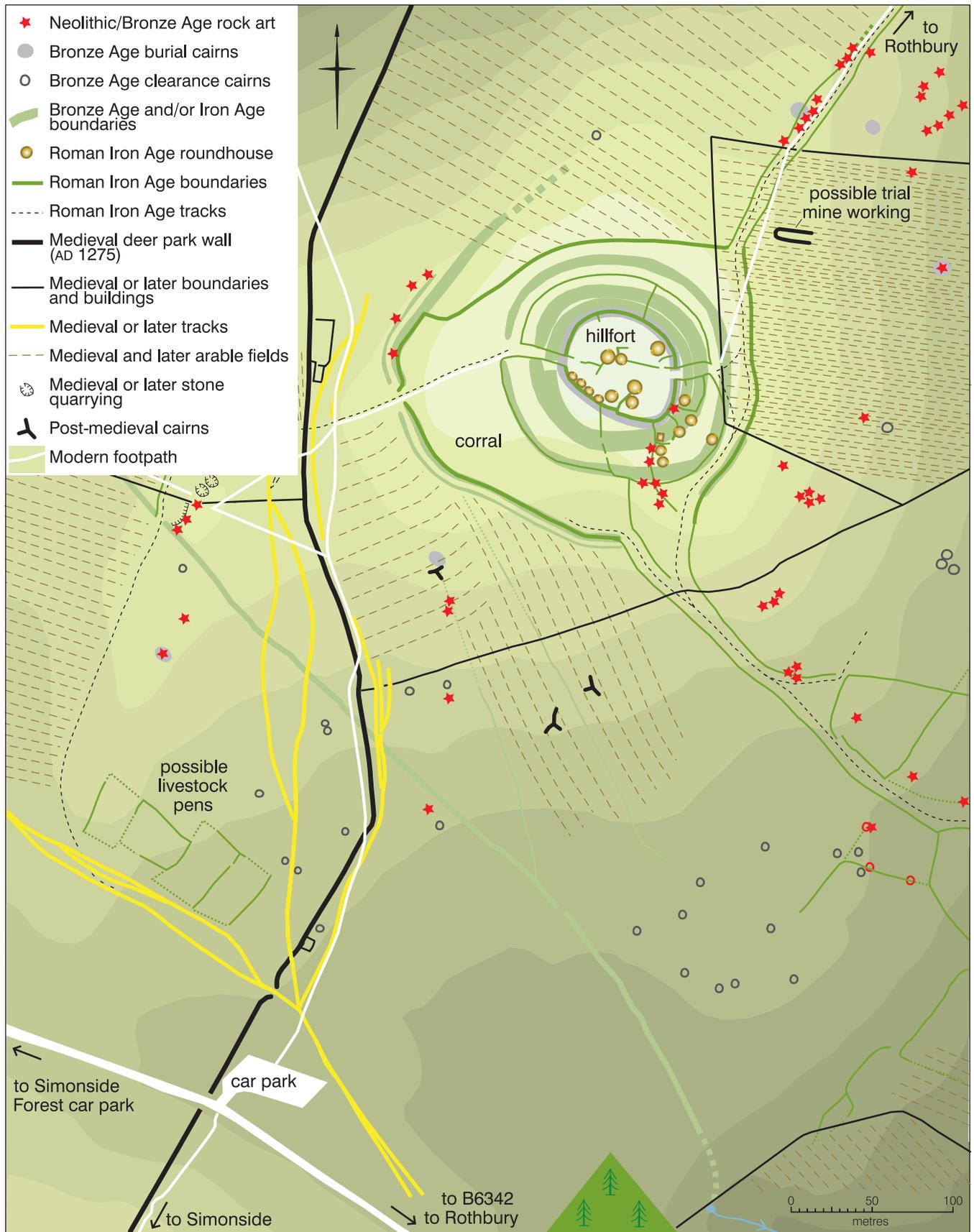


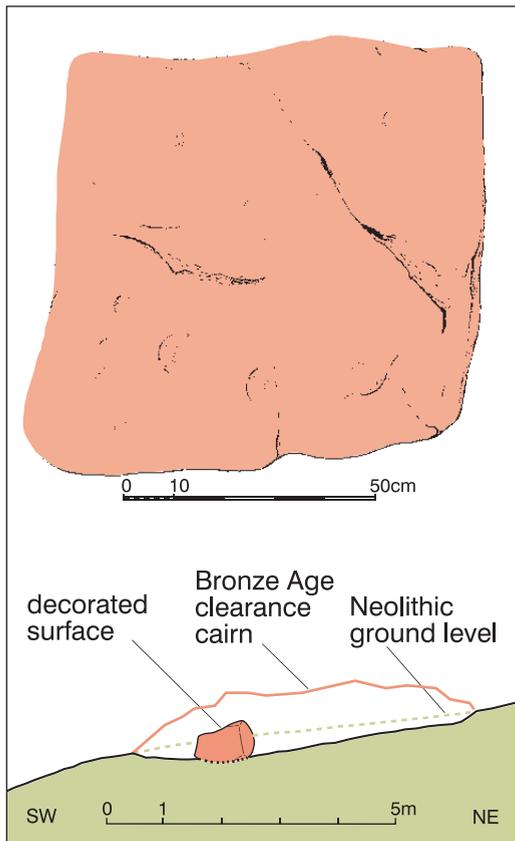
*Fig 3.4 (above)*  
The stone circle at Threestoneburn was built at the end of the Neolithic, around 2500 BC, and continued in use into the Bronze Age.



*Fig 3.5 (left)*  
An unusual panel of late Neolithic or early Bronze Age rock art within the Iron Age hillfort on Chatton Park Hill. In the foreground is an exceptionally deeply incised cup-and-ring mark, which regularly fills with rainwater, perhaps as intended by the person who created the markings. Much of the outcrop has been quarried away – note the line of large chisel holes – so the group of enigmatic symbols was probably larger and more impressive in the Iron Age.

HILLFORTS



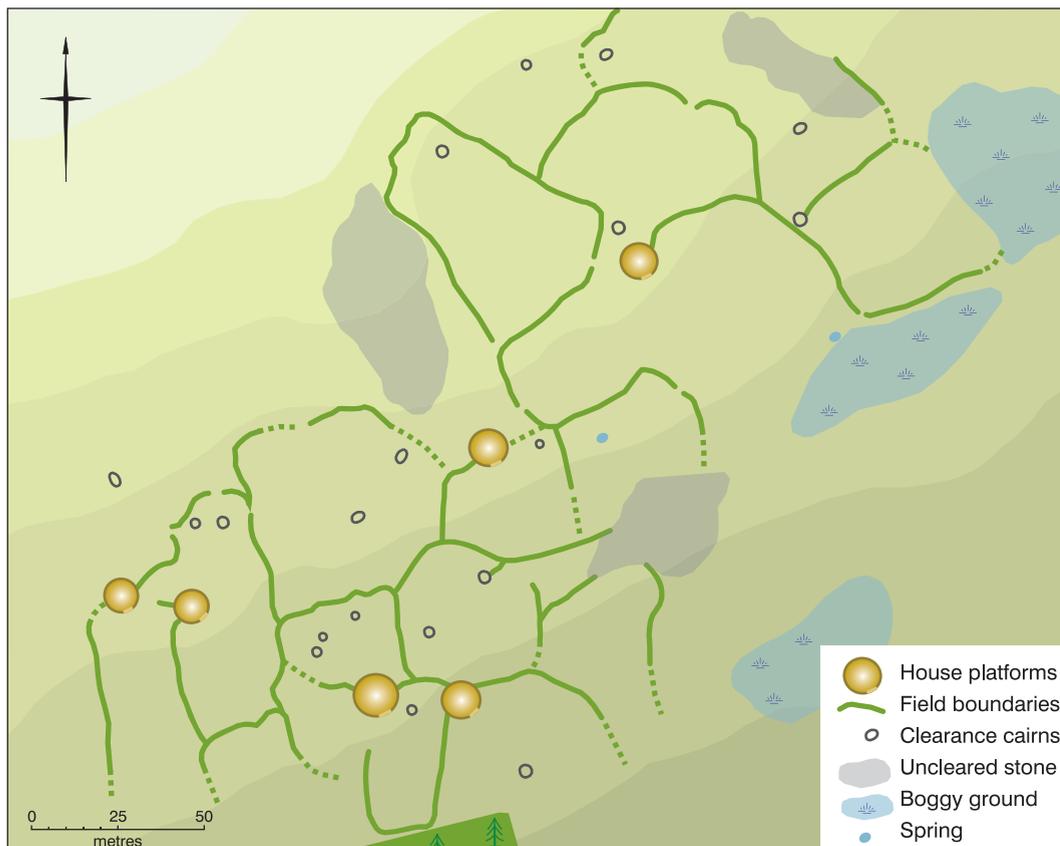


There are also a few possible burial monuments, although none has been excavated in modern times. These oblong cairns of stones are similar in shape to the earthen 'long barrows' scattered throughout Britain. One lies near the hillfort on Harehaugh Hill, usually known as Harehaugh Camp, overlooking the Elsdon–Rothbury road. It is possible that certain large circular cairns, of which there are several near Hethpool, may also be Neolithic, although all those excavated to date have proved to be of early Bronze Age origin.

Archaeologists continue to debate where and how Neolithic people lived their day-to-day lives. Were they settled, living and farming cheek by jowl with the ceremonial and burial monuments that we can still see, or did they move from clearing to clearing every few years as the fertility of the deforested land was exhausted? Pollen evidence suggests that some cleared ground was allowed to revert to scrub. No Neolithic house has ever been identified in this part of Northumberland. Perhaps this is because Neolithic people generally used lightweight structures better suited to a semi-nomadic lifestyle, which have left only faint traces in the ground. Alternatively, later agriculture

*Fig 3.6 (opposite)*  
Inhabitants of the hillfort on Lordenshaw must have been aware of the many stones displaying rock art in the landscape around them. Some of the stones were broken up for use in the hillfort's defences.

*Fig 3.7 (left)*  
Drawing of one of the boulders on the southern slope of West Hill, which display a pattern of 'cup-marks'.



*Fig 3.8*  
Plan of the Bronze Age settlement and field pattern at Standrop Rigg, based on a 1979 survey by Stewart Ainsworth and Tim Gates.

## HILLFORTS

*Fig 3.9*

*A scatter of Bronze Age clearance cairns not far from the footpath between Brough Laxw and Middle Dean Burn.*



and erosion may have completely worn away the Neolithic land surfaces where obvious remains might have been left. It is also possible that the buildings differed so little from those of later periods that we are simply failing to recognise evidence that is staring us in the face.

It is easier to detect the traces of Bronze Age settlement, from 2300 BC to the beginning of the Iron Age, around 800 BC.

Various sources of evidence indicate that for much of the Bronze Age, the climate may have been as much as 2°C warmer than today, adding several weeks to the growing season and allowing crops to be grown at relatively high altitudes. With the aid of bronze tools, farmers tightened their grip on the valley floors and began to make bolder forays onto the hillsides. The first evidence for the cultivation of wheat and barley in the



*Fig 3.10*

*A large Bronze Age burial cairn at the eastern end of the Simonside Hills, overlooking the hillfort on Lordenshaw.*



uplands dates to this period. Rocks were cleared from south- and east-facing slopes (which attracted more sun and less rain) to form small, irregularly shaped fields bounded by low drystone walls.

Along the edges of the fields, people built their houses, undefended except by fences and barking sheepdogs. At Standrop Rigg, towards the upper end of the Breamish Valley, and at Houseledge, near Wooler, scatters of houses set among small paddocks and fields were identified by aerial and ground survey as Bronze Age (Fig 3.8). Subsequent excavation has confirmed that Standrop Rigg was occupied around 1200 BC and Houseledge possibly earlier. In both cases, the houses were circular in plan, built with timber from the surrounding woods and perhaps thatched with straw from the fields. The house sites can be recognised as level platforms, or occasionally as abrupt kinks in the field boundaries. This style of building was to change little for 2,000 years.

The land gradually became peppered with small dumps of cleared stone, called ‘clearance cairns’ (Fig 3.9). Many of these were probably thrown up around the rotting stumps of trees felled to make way for agriculture. Others covered larger boulders that farmers could neither move nor shatter using fire and water. The cup-marked stone

on West Hill (*see* Fig 3.7) appears to have been encased within a clearance cairn, probably because the boulder proved too heavy to shift. We might pay little attention to these humble piles of stone, but through them the farmers expressed their bonds with the land they worked, sometimes burying their dead within them, perhaps so that the ghosts could watch over the crops from the afterlife. The monument that presumably marked the burials on Wether Hill (*see* Chapter 2) may have been one of these small cairns.

Larger burial cairns were also built, the stony equivalents of the great round earthen tumuli that can be seen throughout Britain (Fig 3.10). Their sites were carefully chosen, often so that their silhouettes crowned the skyline when seen from below. Perhaps, in some cases, new clearings were deliberately cut into the shrinking wildwood to frame the monuments. More than 1,000 years later, the builders of the hillforts chose similar locations, so that, in some cases, their ramparts enclosed an earlier cairn on the summit. As a result of repeated stone quarrying and early archaeological excavation, these cairns – for example, on the eastern peak of Yeavinger Bell and on the summit of Wether Hill – are often difficult to distinguish (Fig 3.11).

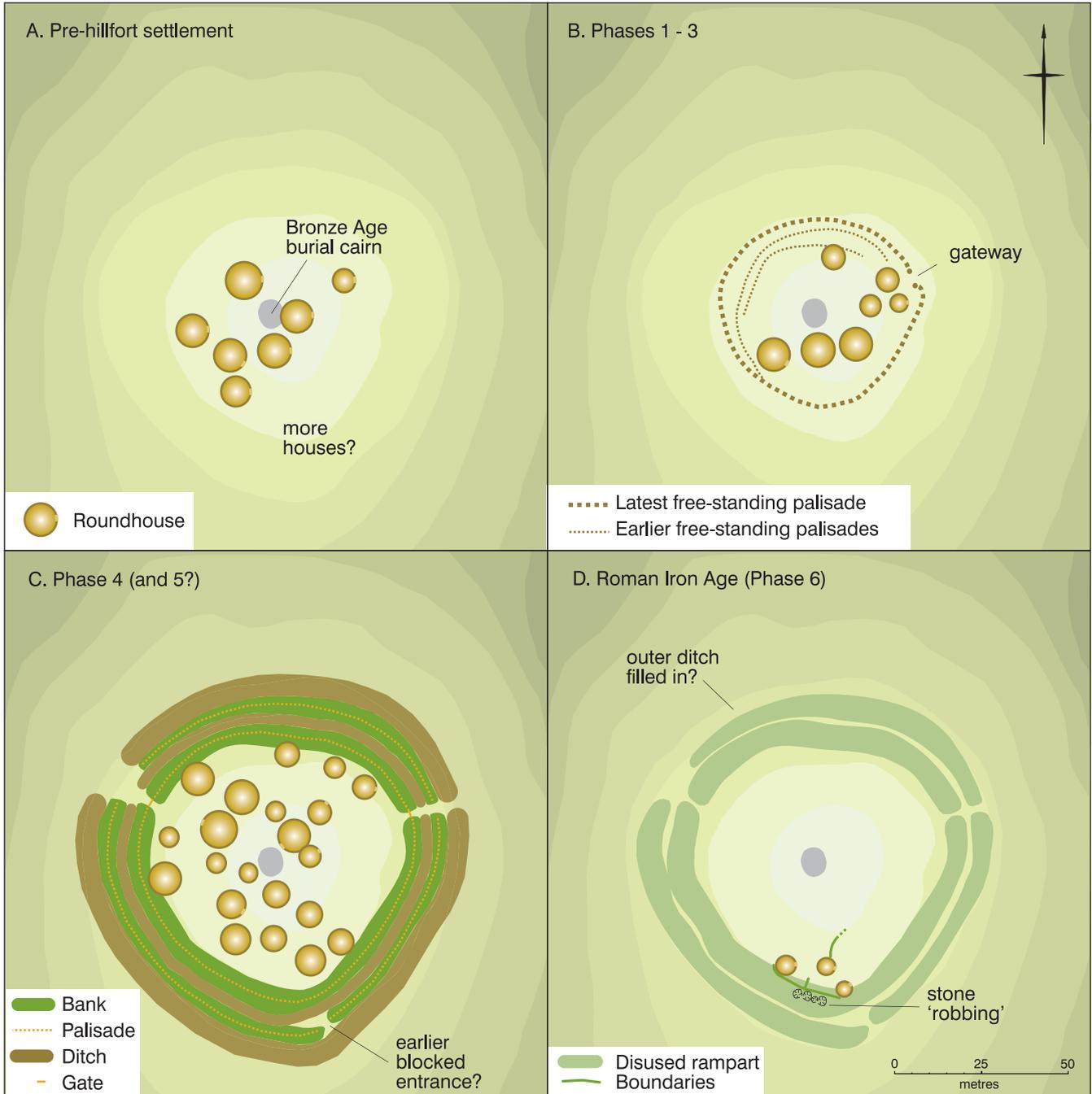
*Fig 3.11*  
Next to a modern walkers’ cairn on the eastern summit of Yeavinger Bell lies an irregular hollow, all that remains of a Bronze Age burial cairn. The monument probably once looked similar to the cairn in Fig 3.10, but ancient looting, coupled with archaeological excavations by William Hutchinson in 1776 and by George Tate in 1861, have virtually destroyed the mound. Most of the material has probably been incorporated into the modern cairn.

Fig 3.12 The hillfort on Wether Hill grew up around a Bronze Age burial cairn. This may have been mere coincidence, since burial cairns were often built on summits, but how did people treat the ancient monument at the heart of their community?

We can probably assume that by the Iron Age, people had formed some idea of the purpose of these earlier cairns, but it is difficult to guess how the occupants of the hillforts might have felt about the presence of the ancient dead in the heart of their communities. Did they, as people certainly did in more recent times, regard the mounds as convenient stockpiles of building stone and the graves as potential treasure chests to be looted? Did they whisper fearfully as they passed around the burial place?

Or did they regard the person within the mound as a great ancestor, someone familiar whose protection they could win if they treated the burial place with proper respect?

Analysis of surface traces on Wether Hill suggests that one of the earliest roundhouses on the hilltop was built directly next to the cairn, and apparently cutting into it, while a later house faced directly towards it, its doorway only a couple of paces from the burial monument (Fig 3.12). It is impossible to know how exactly to interpret either



relationship, but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the presence of the cairn was recognised and acknowledged.

In the early 1960s, excavation of a well-preserved cairn, part of a scatter of similar monuments to the south of the prehistoric settlements on High Knowes, recovered a late Iron Age ornamental pin, made of bronze. The excavators believed that the cairn, which had been carefully constructed to cover the remains of a funeral pyre, was of the same date as the pin. But with hindsight, given the presence of numerous flints among the remains of the pyre, it seems more likely that the pin had been inserted, apparently as a votive offering, into the heart of a much earlier monument. Like many such offerings, it appears to have been deliberately snapped in two before being placed there, as though to indicate that it too had ended its life.

From around 1250 BC the climate began to worsen, after 1000 BC becoming similar to today's, and then declining seriously after 850 BC, as the Iron Age began (Fig 3.13). The range of tiny creatures trapped in ancient peat bogs reflects this change, for certain species of insects gradually disappeared altogether from northern Britain. As the temperature dropped, the growing season became shorter and the range of crops that could be grown became more limited. Dependent on their land and, like all farmers, highly attuned to the seasons and the climate, the hill farmers must have gradually become aware that they were being pushed towards the brink of survival.

Unfortunately, desperate circumstances seldom lead to clear thinking. Seeking to increase their harvests, the farmers apparently cleared more trees to expose new patches of rich, dark, humic soil. Trees, by taking up water through their roots and improving the soil structure with their decaying leaves, as well as binding the soil together with their roots, contribute to the stability and good drainage of the land. With the loss of woodland, the increasingly frequent and heavy rains began to wash soil from the slopes, carrying away vital nutrients.

Several centuries before the beginning of the Iron Age, farmers in the Cheviots may have begun laying simple lines of stones along the hillsides in an attempt to prevent soil from being washed into the valleys below (in recent years, an identical technique has proved effective during flash floods in the drought-blasted plains of



*Fig 3.13  
Fieldwork under way near  
Ring Chesters hillfort in  
February 2002. For much  
of the Iron Age, the climate  
was colder than today.*

Africa). Year by year, as silt built up against the stones and as more stones were ploughed up and discarded along the margins of the fields, the original lines of stones turned into low walls and so became the forerunners of the agricultural terraces we see in the National Park today (Fig 3.14).

People did not desert the uplands completely, but their attempts to cope with climate change do not seem to have succeeded in every case. The fact that we can still see the well-preserved surface remains of Bronze Age settlements like those at Standrop Rigg and Houseledge, and Bronze Age fields like those north of the Iron Age hillfort on Humbleton Hill, indicates that these areas were abandoned towards the end of the Bronze Age and never settled or cultivated again.

## From Bronze Age to Iron Age

As the Bronze Age drew to a close, the climate was becoming significantly colder and wetter than today. Little villages comprising compact clusters of roundhouses had sprung up – some of them on hilltops – perhaps as a means of pooling resources in the face of increasingly difficult times for farming communities. While some, such as those excavated near the hillfort on Wether Hill, and at Green Knowe in the Scottish Borders, were unenclosed and undefended, the roundhouse clusters at High Knowes, and perhaps on Mid Hill, overlooking the valley of the College Burn, may have been surrounded by timber palisades (see Figs 4.12 and 7.8A).

Excavations within the great hillfort on Eildon Hill North, overlooking Galashiels in the Scottish Borders, have shown that a significant number of roundhouses there – perhaps the majority – were built in the late Bronze Age (Owen 1992; see Fig 7.2). There is a hint, but as yet no more, that these may

Fig 3.14

On the northern side of the Breamish Valley, a series of agricultural terraces (on the left of the picture) evidently remained in use for longer than the medieval ridge-and-furrow (on the right). Low sunshine reveals a trackway cutting across several of the snaking ridges, giving access to the terraces.



have been defended by an earthen rampart. More recent excavations at the equally impressive hillfort on Traprain Law, in the Lammermuir Hills south-east of Edinburgh, suggest that it may have been occupied before 1000 BC. Again, the settlement was first enclosed towards the end of the Bronze Age. Archaeologists are beginning to suspect that the same may be true of the large hillfort on Yeavinger Bell, long thought to be the capital of the late Iron Age Votadini tribe. The picture appears to be similar in southern England. By the late Bronze Age, before 800 BC, the seeds that were to grow into the hillforts of the Iron Age had probably already been sown.

The first hard evidence for the manufacture of iron in Northumberland dates to around 650 BC. The introduction of the new metal, like that of bronze before it, did not change the world overnight. Tools made of other materials, including bronze, were more than adequate for many tasks and there was no reason to break away from long traditions of fine craftsmanship or throw out possessions valued for years. All the same, people seem to have fairly rapidly recognised the advantages of the new metal.

In much of lowland Britain, people had to rely on iron imported either as bar-shaped ingots, ready-made for forging, or as iron ore. The skills needed to smelt the bright metal from dull rock may have

seemed little short of wizardry 4,000 years ago, so metalworkers were probably highly respected members of the community, perhaps even regarded as magicians. In the uplands, on the other hand, thin deposits of iron develop naturally in many of the bogs, often leaving a distinctive rusty orange scum. While this ‘bog iron’ has often been dismissed as useless for making tools, in part because the quantities are usually tiny, recent experiments have shown that it is quite possible to collect sufficient amounts to smelt. To retain a high status in the community, metalworkers must have had to guard their trade secrets closely.

At first, iron objects would doubtless have been prized for their rarity, and it is unlikely that the metal would have been used for everyday tools. Objects of prestige, power and beauty – especially weaponry and personal ornaments – may have been the first objects made of iron. Regrettably, the metal itself was such a valuable commodity

Fig 3.15

This lump of corroded iron, excavated decades ago at Hayhope Knowe, represents one of the few Iron Age weapons – or indeed iron tools of any kind – ever found in the Cheviots. (© The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)



that most of these were probably eventually melted down for reuse. An iron spearhead found during excavations in 1949 on the hillfort at Hayhope Knowe (Piggott 1949) and a blade discovered at Brough Law in 1861 (Tate 1863b) are among the few exceptions (Fig 3.15; *see* Fig 4.36).

It was to be some considerable time before the new metal would play a direct role in the story of hillforts. The introduction of iron axes and saws may have allowed people to chop down and shape timber for palisades more quickly, but it did not bring about any fundamental change in this respect. It was in the process of stoneworking that iron perhaps brought about the most significant developments as far as hillforts are concerned. Softer

metals like bronze could have been used to split and shape sandstone, but they would have made little impression on andesite, the tough volcanic stone of the Cheviots. Wooden levers, together with the application of fire and cold water, could have been used to break up fissured andesite outcrops into irregular chunks, and this is probably how most building stone was obtained during the Iron Age. But the defences of many hillforts are faced with large blocks of dressed stone, showing a regularity that could not have been guaranteed by splitting. With iron, the people of the Cheviots would have possessed for the first time a metal with which to make chisels hard enough to shape the rock that lay just beneath their feet.

## 4

# Understanding Hillforts

### When were hillforts built?

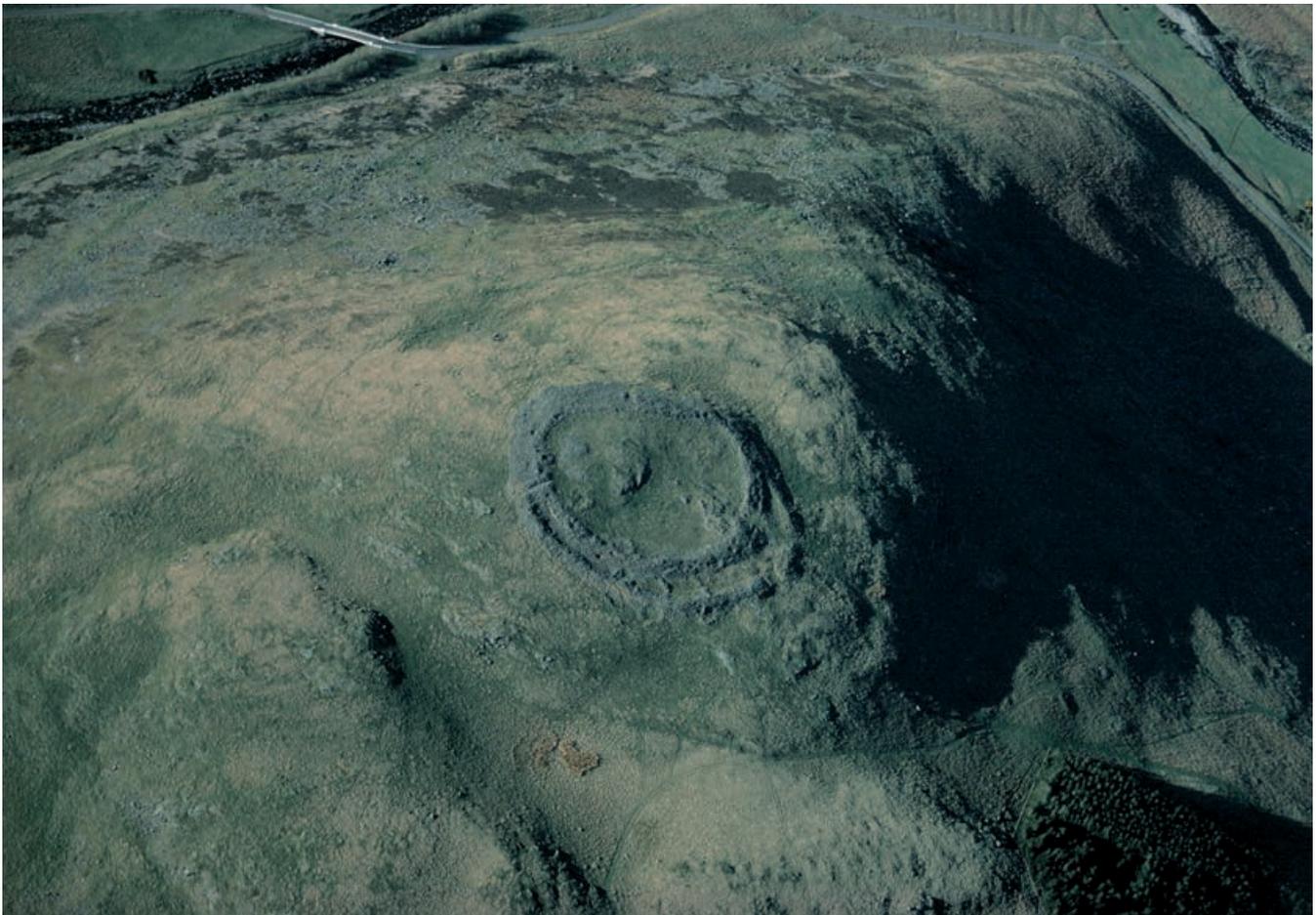
There have been very few excavations of hillforts in Northumberland National Park and the surrounding region. Even where excavations have taken place, there are too few artefacts, with too few stylistic differences, to allow detailed chronologies to be constructed. Equally frustrating is the fact that radiocarbon dating for the Iron Age is seldom as accurate as we might wish. For example, dating of a charcoal sample taken from the hillfort on Fenton Hill, north of Wooler, gave a 95 per cent probability that the earliest rampart was built some time between 800 and 200 BC (Burgess 1984). In effect, this result could have been guessed beforehand, without high-tech analysis. However, radiocarbon dates from recent

excavations on the hillfort on Wether Hill suggest that the first defensive circuit may have been built about 350 BC (Topping 2004). The hillforts on Dod Law, on Doddington Moor and at Harehaugh Camp were constructed around 300 BC; that on Brough Law about 220 BC, give or take a century (Fig 4.1).

On other sites, the sequence of constructional episodes can sometimes be deduced from surface traces. The hillforts on Lordershaws and at Ring Chesters are two of many instances where the latest episode of rebuilding is a near-circular defensive circuit built in stone (*see* Figs 4.25D and 4.26C). Yet at both these sites, as at most other hillforts where a conversion to stone occurred, the date of that event in absolute terms remains unknown.

*Fig 4.1*

*The hillfort on Brough Law is among the most imposing in the National Park. It is also one of the very few from which archaeologists have been able to obtain dating evidence. (Photograph by Tim Gates. Copyright reserved)*



## What did hillforts look like?

The most obvious remains of hillforts are their defensive perimeters or ramparts, whether these survive today as massive earthen banks and ditches or as low spreads of tumbled stone rubble (Fig 4.2). In fact, in Northumberland National Park, it would be hard to miss these monumental ruins: walking along some valleys in the Cheviots, you may feel menaced by strongholds on every summit.

It is generally easy to imagine what stone-built ramparts would have looked like in their original form, for close inspection of the outer slope of the rubble will often reveal facing stones, usually in ones and twos but sometimes in longer stretches, still standing in the midst of the tumbled rubble, precisely where they were set by Iron Age masons (Figs 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5). The distance between these facing stones and the inner edge of the rubble bank, usually between 2m and 4m, indicates the original width of what would once have been a huge drystone wall.

In most cases, a glance at the quantity of tumbled stone will tell you that there is not sufficient building material present for the wall to have maintained such breadth to any great height. In some cases, stone was evidently removed later in the Iron Age for the construction of new defences, in the Roman Iron Age for building nearby houses, in the medieval period for byres, or in recent centuries for field walls. But such 'recycling' of building materials has not seriously damaged many of these remote sites, so we can assume that the quantity of building material is more or less the same today as when the ramparts were built. Therefore, the broad stone foundation probably supported a narrower parapet, taller than anyone on the outside, with a level walkway for those on the inside (Fig 4.6). The outer faces of the ramparts on Sinkside Hill and at Brough Law survive nearly to waist height in places (Fig 4.7). Careful inspection reveals how skilfully the drystone walls were constructed, with neat joints and thin slivers of stone packed into the cracks between the larger stones. It would have been difficult for anyone trying to climb the outer face to find a toehold. Such well-preserved prehistoric walls are extremely rare outside the Cheviots. In Britain, only the walls of a few remote *brochs* and *duns* – the late Iron Age fortified round towers of the Scottish highlands and islands – survive to a much greater height.



*Fig 4.2*  
Despite the collapse of the ramparts on Brough Law, the lines of both circuits are clearly visible in the tumbled rubble.



*Fig 4.3*  
George Tate, who exposed this section of the rampart facing on Brough Law in 1861, quite rightly described it as 'excellent masonry'. Today, it is recognised that the overlying rubble protects the ancient structure and must not be removed.



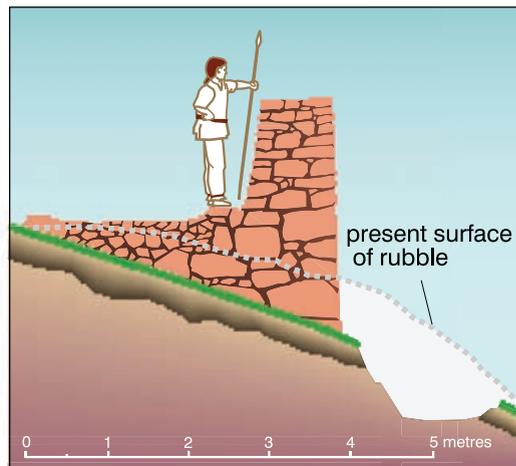
*Fig 4.4*  
Rampart facing stones of the highest hillfort in the Cheviots, on Craik Moor. The larger, squarer facing stones retained a core of smaller rubble.

*Fig 4.5 (below)*  
Rampart facing stones on West Hill.



Fig 4.6

Stone-built ramparts, though ineffective as defences today, would once have been far stronger and more impressive, with a higher frontage and a level platform on top, perhaps protected by a parapet.



You may also notice that relatively few of the stones in hillforts in the Cheviots are rounded. Most have sharp edges, because they were obtained by deliberate quarrying, although some larger facing stones have been roughly shaped into squared blocks, probably using iron chisels. Most of the stones appear a dull grey today, but when freshly split they would have had the distinctive pink-orange colour of the local volcanic andesite. In the low sunlight of a summer evening, the newly constructed ramparts would have glowed like beacons on the hill-tops, signalling the presence of the builders'

homes across the surrounding landscape.

Where was so much stone obtained? Although andesite is an exceptionally hard rock, it has natural fractures which can be exploited to break off angular blocks. At Mid Hill and at St Gregory's Hill, overlooking Kirknewton, stone was quarried out immediately in front of the wall to form external ditches, which can still be seen (see Figs 7.8B and 8.1A). Elsewhere, it is difficult to tell at first glance whether this was the case, because this zone is usually concealed beneath rubble tumbled from the rampart. The excavations at Wether Hill showed that the outer rampart was originally accompanied by an external ditch. This was not visible on the surface prior to excavation because it had been deliberately filled in, late in the life of the hillfort (see Fig 3.12D). In this case, while the ramparts had stone façades, most of the material dug out of the ditch to build the rampart bank was a mixture of earth and stone.

A walk around a hillfort will also often reveal scatters of shallow depressions, typical of the pits left when large stones are split and prised out of the ground. You may also notice rock outcrops where segments have apparently been removed. In some cases, such as at Brough Law, you may see that the terrain within the ramparts has been



Fig 4.7

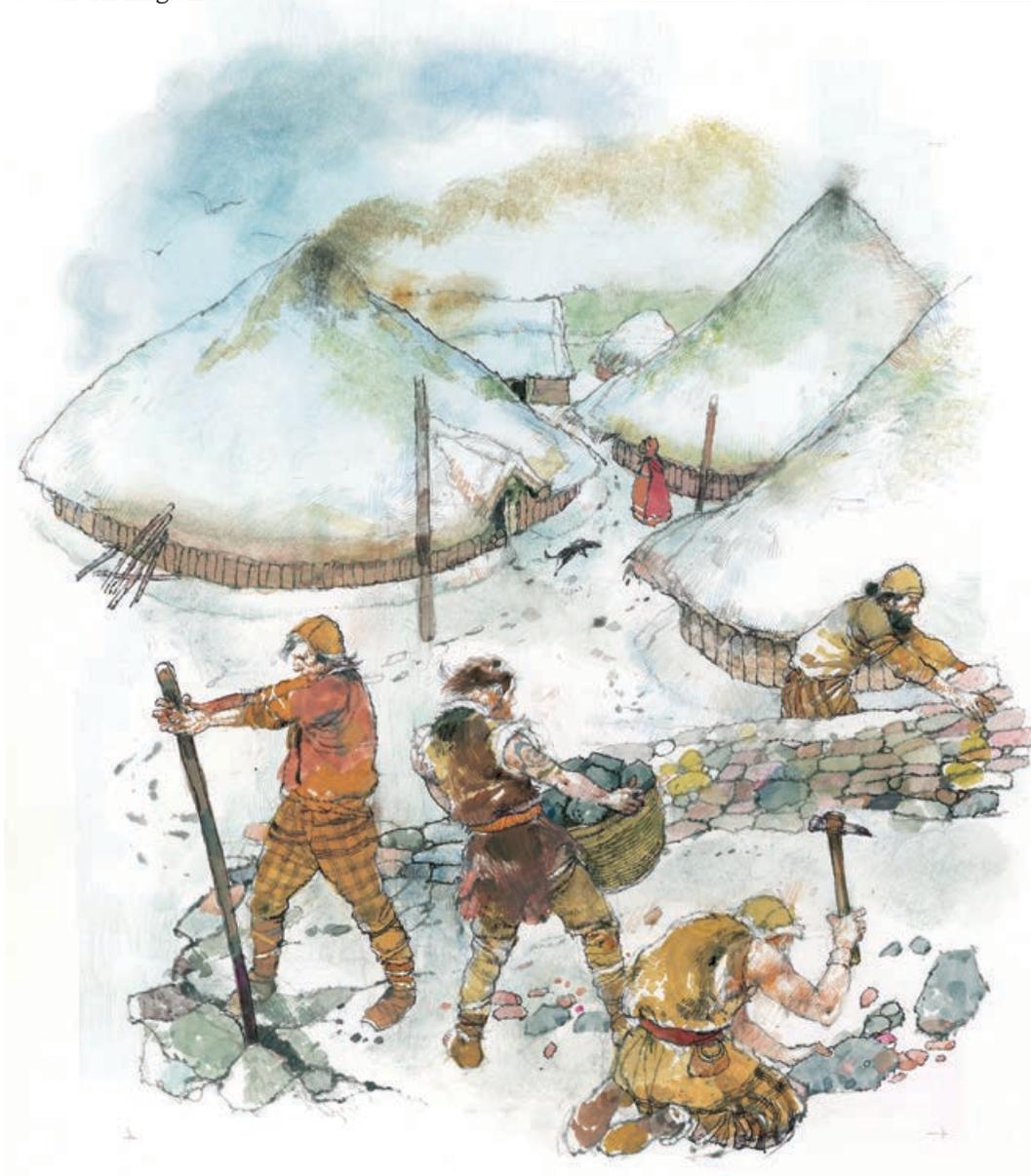
A well-preserved section of the rampart on Sinkside Hill. As happened elsewhere, the collapsed remains of the defensive circuit were reused as a sheepfold in the Middle Ages and some of the rampart was crudely built, but this stretch remains intact.

disturbed, with ragged rock surfaces exposed in many places (Figs 4.8 and 4.9). At these sites, it seems likely that large outcrops were completely quarried away to build the ramparts.

To some degree at least, ramparts were designed to take advantage of the natural topography. By constructing a rampart on a naturally steep slope, the builders reduced the amount of material needed at the rear of the wall, so that the front face could be raised to create an impressive barrier. At many sites, what appear from downslope to be the remains of formidable walls prove, when seen close up, to be nothing more than steps in the natural slope. The same efficient technique was employed in many of the most impressive earthen ramparts in southern England.



*Fig 4.8  
Evidence of Iron Age  
quarrying within the hillfort  
on Brough Lax.*



*Fig 4.9  
Most construction work,  
including stone quarrying  
and the building of ram-  
parts and roundhouses,  
may have been carried out  
over the winter months, on  
a schedule dictated by the  
demands of the agricultural  
year. (Drawing by Victor  
Ambrus, courtesy of  
Northumberland National  
Park Authority)*

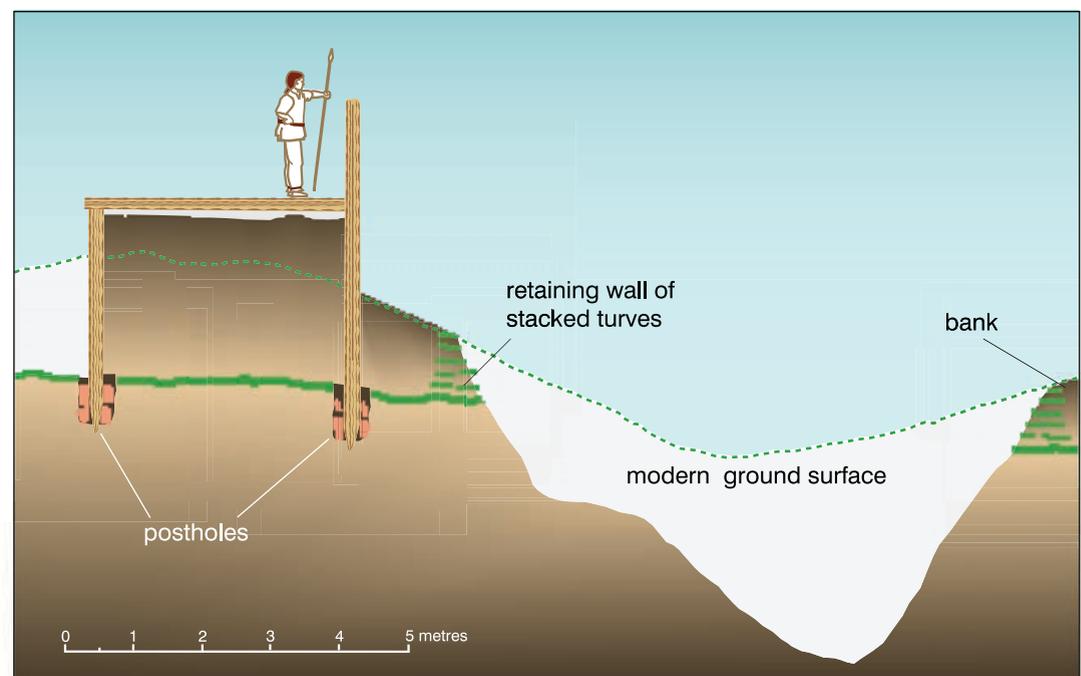


*Fig 4.10*  
The multiple earthen ramparts of the hillfort on Castle Hill, at the southern end of the Fell Sandstone Hills, where stone is less readily available than it is in the Cheviots.

Unfortunately, this savings in effort seems to have structurally weakened the drystone walls of the Cheviots. The walls of some Scottish brochs survive to a height of several metres because they are free-standing and built on level ground, so that the weight of the stonework remains fairly equally distributed. The use of sloping

ground in the Cheviot hillforts created greater pressure on the outer face, which seems to have led eventually to sudden collapses, with stone spilling forward to form the broad spreads that we encounter today.

In areas where stone was in less plentiful supply, including the Fell Sandstone Hills, builders created earthen ramparts (Fig 4.10).



*Fig 4.11*  
Reconstruction of a box rampart, based on evidence from excavations by Colin Burgess at Fenton Hill.

These may have presented a similarly impressive outward appearance. By dumping soil against the rear of a stone façade or a well-built timber palisade, it would have been possible to create a vertical outer face to a flat-topped bank. In some cases, there was probably a timber revetment to retain the earth at the rear, so that the profile closely resembled that of walls built in stone. Because the timber effectively formed a box around the soil, this type of defence is known as a box rampart (Fig 4.11). Unlike stone ramparts, box ramparts could easily be braced with horizontal tie-beams running from front to back, so that the structure remained stable until the timbers rotted away. The builders probably favoured oak, which is surprisingly easy to shape when first felled, yet becomes rock-hard within a couple of years and, even in contact with damp ground, resists rotting for decades or even centuries, as modern inhabitants of medieval timber-framed houses will testify.

Fronted by a deep, steep-sided ditch, from which the material for the bank would have been obtained, these defences would have been just as imposing as their stone counterparts. It is possible that the outer face of the timber wall was plastered with the same mixture of mud, straw and dung used to coat the walls of the circular houses, fired or baked hard in the sun. This would not only have made the timbers more fire-proof, but would have allowed them to be more easily painted or decorated.

### Wooden walls

The Greek historian and geographer Strabo (64 or 63 BC–c AD 24) remarked of the people of Britain that ‘their cities are the forests, for they fell trees and fence in large circular enclosures, in which they build huts and pen their cattle’.

In Northumberland National Park, there are indeed examples of settlements whose defences seem to have comprised continuous lines of timber posts, or palisades, apparently with little or no earthen reinforcement (Fig 4.12). Until fairly recently, it was believed that timber palisades usually evolved into bigger and apparently stronger earth or stone defences, often enclosing a larger area. Excavations in 1948 at Hownam Rings seemed to show this sequence of development (*see* Fig 2.28). The so-called ‘Hownam sequence’ has, until recently, been widely accepted as a template that could be applied to other hillforts in the region (*see* Chapter 2).

While few, if any, stone or earthen defences appear to have been replaced in the end by timber palisades, excavations since 1948 elsewhere in southern Scotland have shown that hillforts seldom underwent a straightforward evolution. Instead, the defences were rebuilt at intervals using various styles and materials, and sometimes to enclose a smaller area than the original. There may have been periods when some settlements had no defensive perimeters at all. Recent re-examination by the Scottish Royal Commission of the surface remains at Hownam Rings has prompted investigators to ask whether excavators misunderstood the sequence there. Yet even where several episodes of construction can be identified from surface traces, it is important to be aware that additional phases may have been completely hidden by later modifications.

Palisades are sometimes obvious only when seen from the air, with the foundation trench that held the upright timbers standing out clearly as a line of lush green grass. In a few cases, most of the trench can be traced on the ground as a shallow depression. One of the most dramatic of such enclosures occupies the summit of Old Fawdon Hill, 2km south-east of the National Park visitor centre at Ingram. There, two circuits of palisade are visible, although the outer one is intermittent, with short stretches made up by a low bank, or absent entirely, perhaps because it was replaced by a hedge or repaired using a different construction technique (*see* Fig 5.7). At Wether Hill, traces of three palisade circuits, which are likely to belong to separate phases of construction, can be traced within the later ramparts. The gateway of the clearest of the three, which is probably the latest, coincides with the entrance through the later stone-faced rampart. This suggests that, in this case, the earth and stone defences did directly replace a wooden palisade. An equally complex sequence is evident at the hillfort on Craik Moor, overlooking the upper reaches of the Bowmont Water. At 457m above sea level, this is the highest hillfort in the Cheviots, and one of the most spectacular and least visited sites. Here, there are no fewer than four lines of palisade trench and two of stone-built rampart. The smaller stone-built circuit seems to have been the latest phase of construction, but may have been contemporary with a timber palisade shielding the entrance.

Such large foundation trenches imply that the timbers were thick and tall. Where archaeologists have been able to detect



*Fig 4.12  
Tim Gates' aerial photograph highlights the slight depressions marking the lines of timber palisades at High Knowes. (Photograph by Tim Gates. Copyright reserved)*



*Fig 4.13  
It is usually difficult to be certain whether concentric circuits were constructed at the same time, but at High Knowes the two palisade trenches run perfectly parallel, suggesting that they must be components of a single structure. Note how the low spread of spoil from digging the trenches, thrown up between the two, supports a different mix of grasses.*



traces of the individual posts through excavation, for example at Hayhope Knowe, they have had an average diameter of around 20cm. With careful carpentry, these could have formed barriers just as strong and impenetrable as the stone and earthen defences that are better preserved today.

Closely spaced double palisades, like that forming one of the two enclosures at High Knowes, may represent the remains of hollow box ramparts, identical in outward appearance to their earth-filled counterparts (Fig 4.13). The front face of the double palisade at Craik Moor may have been replaced, for three lines of palisade trench lie in close proximity (Fig 4.14). Alternatively, this may be an example of the replacement of a single palisade by a hollow box rampart, or vice versa; even the most painstaking excavation might not reveal the precise sequence. On the whole, though, it seems that timber palisades were no different in purpose than the earth and stone ramparts normally thought to characterise hillforts.

It is uncertain whether there was any raised walkway along the rear of single palisades; there is no clear evidence that there was, and it is difficult to see how one could have been securely supported on a single line of timbers. This suggests that, while the palisade could have prevented opportunistic foraging by the wolves and brown bears that still roamed wooded areas in the Iron Age, it could not have been defended actively, as a broader rampart with a raised walkway could have been. Therefore it would have offered no opportunity for those on the inside to engage attackers without emerging from the security of the circuit: in other words, very little advantage at all.

## Gateways

Gateways and doorways – the crossing points between one world and another – were particularly important in Iron Age Britain. Gateways in stone and earthen ramparts are generally easy to identify, usually marked by clear gaps (Fig 4.15). It is usually more difficult to identify breaks in palisades, which are harder to trace in the first place. In exceptional cases, for example at Wether Hill, the pits that once held the large gateposts can be seen. Most Northumberland hillforts seem to have had a single original gateway, though some, such as that on Castle Hill, apparently had two or even three (Fig 4.16). Often, gateways were located at the midpoint of the rampart facing the easiest approach, so that today you are likely to find yourself heading towards the original entrance. There are a few instances, for example on St Gregory's Hill, where original gateways were deliberately blocked and new entrances created elsewhere.

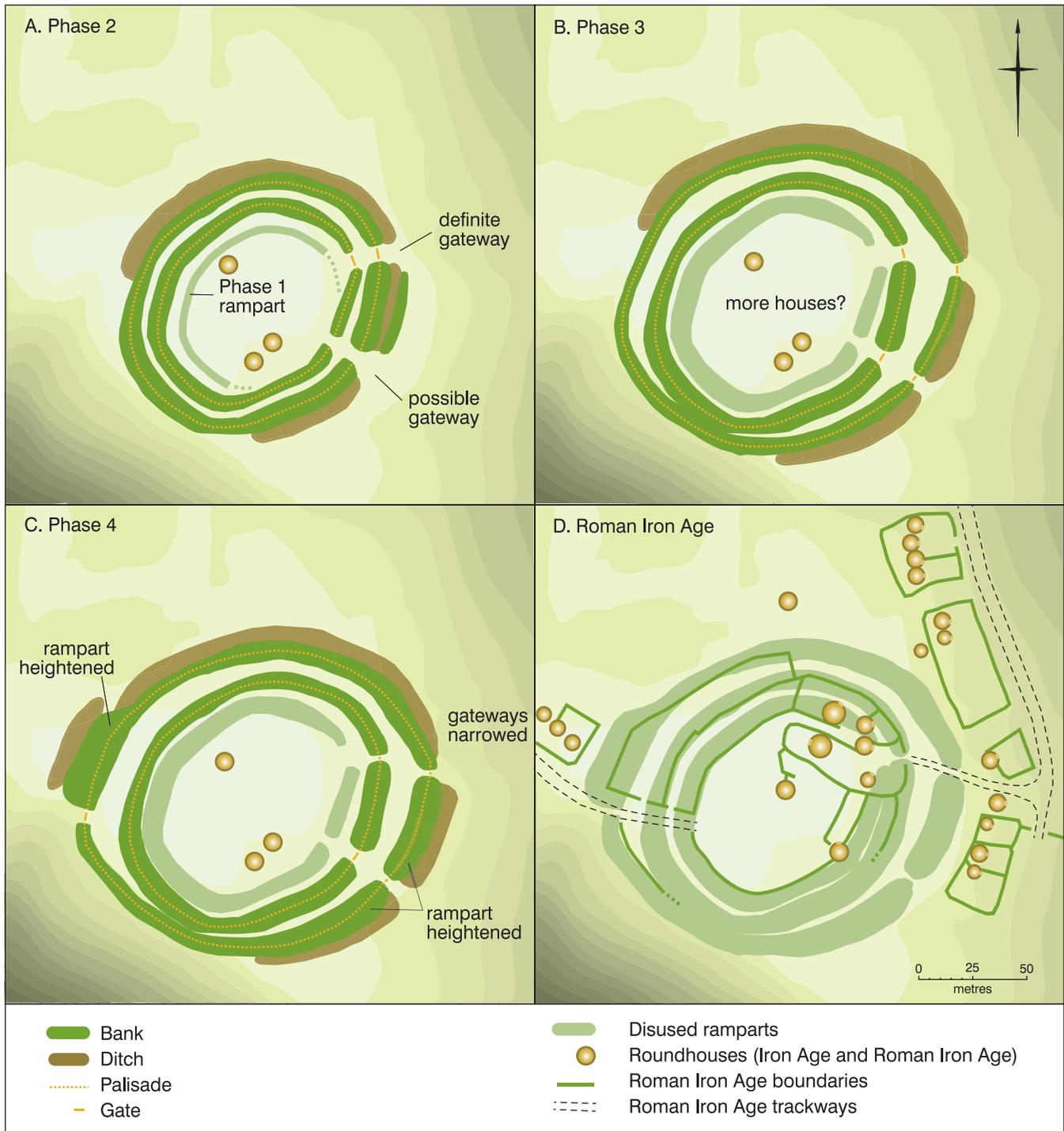
Although the natural topography often influenced the siting of gateways, a significant proportion were oriented due east. As discussed in the next chapter, this trend is also observed in the doorways of the circular houses within the defences, suggesting that the direction held symbolic importance. There may have been a 'lucky' or 'respectful' direction from which to enter the settlements, just as some people still consider it proper to enter Christian churches from the south.

Particularly large facing stones, including massive squared blocks, were used to build the wall terminals flanking the gateways, and these stones can provide useful clues as to

*Fig 4.14*  
Part of the triple palisade outside the stone rampart on Craik Moor.

*Fig 4.15*  
The gateway of the hillfort on West Hill faces directly towards the region's largest hillfort, on Yeavinger Bell, as well as due east. Both factors may have been significant to its builders.





*Fig 4.16*  
The hillfort on Castle Hill may have had multiple entrances throughout its use, all eventually flanked by enlarged defences.

whether a gap originated in the ancient past. Stones of similar size were also used in the Roman Iron Age, but by then were usually set upright in order to retain an earthen bank behind, rather than as part of a coursed wall (Fig 4.17). In the Iron Age, large stones were probably used in part because gateways made the walls on either side structurally weaker, but they may also have been a way of

making the entrances especially imposing. The effort and skill needed to place such large stones certainly commands respect, even today. Accurate surveys show that ramparts flanking gateways are often straighter in plan, as though to present a longer, more formidable frontage to those outside, or to afford those inside a good view of approaching strangers (Fig 4.18).



You will not be able to identify any trace of the gates themselves, for these would have been constructed entirely of timber. Rampart terminals are seldom more than 2m apart, so the gateways would have been too narrow for large carts to enter, or for two people on horseback to ride through abreast (assuming there was no lintel or walkway above the gate, which might have forced them to dismount). The carpentry was doubtless of good quality, with gates made of stout planks, swinging smoothly on massive posts.

At some hillforts, for example Ring Chesters, entrances through consecutive circuits were staggered, so that even when the gates were open, there would not be a clear view into the interior (see Fig 4.26B). Anyone trying to pass through would have to slow down and turn side-on to the rampart, leaving their flanks undefended as they came into striking range. Elsewhere, for instance at Mid Hill, gateways were sited next to steep natural escarpments, so that the approach was restricted and exposed. On Humbleton Hill this principle was applied on a larger scale with the addition of an extra defensive arm inside the main rampart (Fig 4.19; see also Fig 6.1). Similar earthworks in southern England seem to date to the late Iron Age, and are known as hornworks because of their distinctive horn-like plans.

At a number of hillforts elsewhere in Britain, so-called ‘guard chambers’ – small rooms contained within the thickness of the rampart terminal, immediately inside the gateway – have been identified. There are few, if any, of these in the Cheviots, although one has recently been tentatively identified in the terminal of the inner rampart on Humbleton Hill. Both Henry MacLauchlan and George Tate, working in the mid-19th century, identified what they believed to be a pair of guardhouses, set just

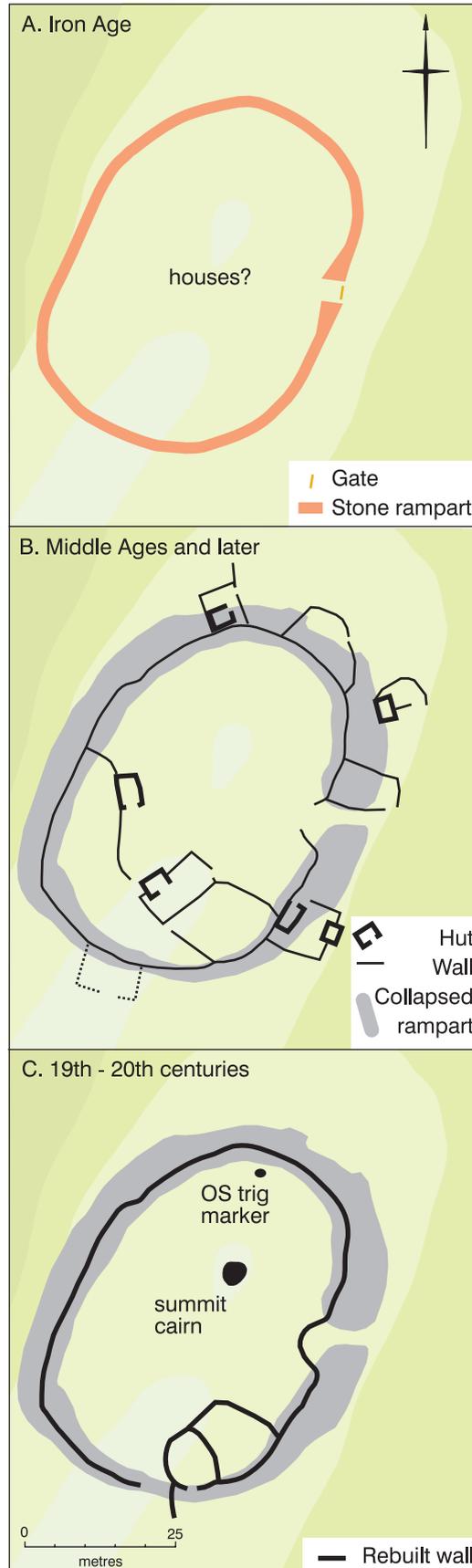
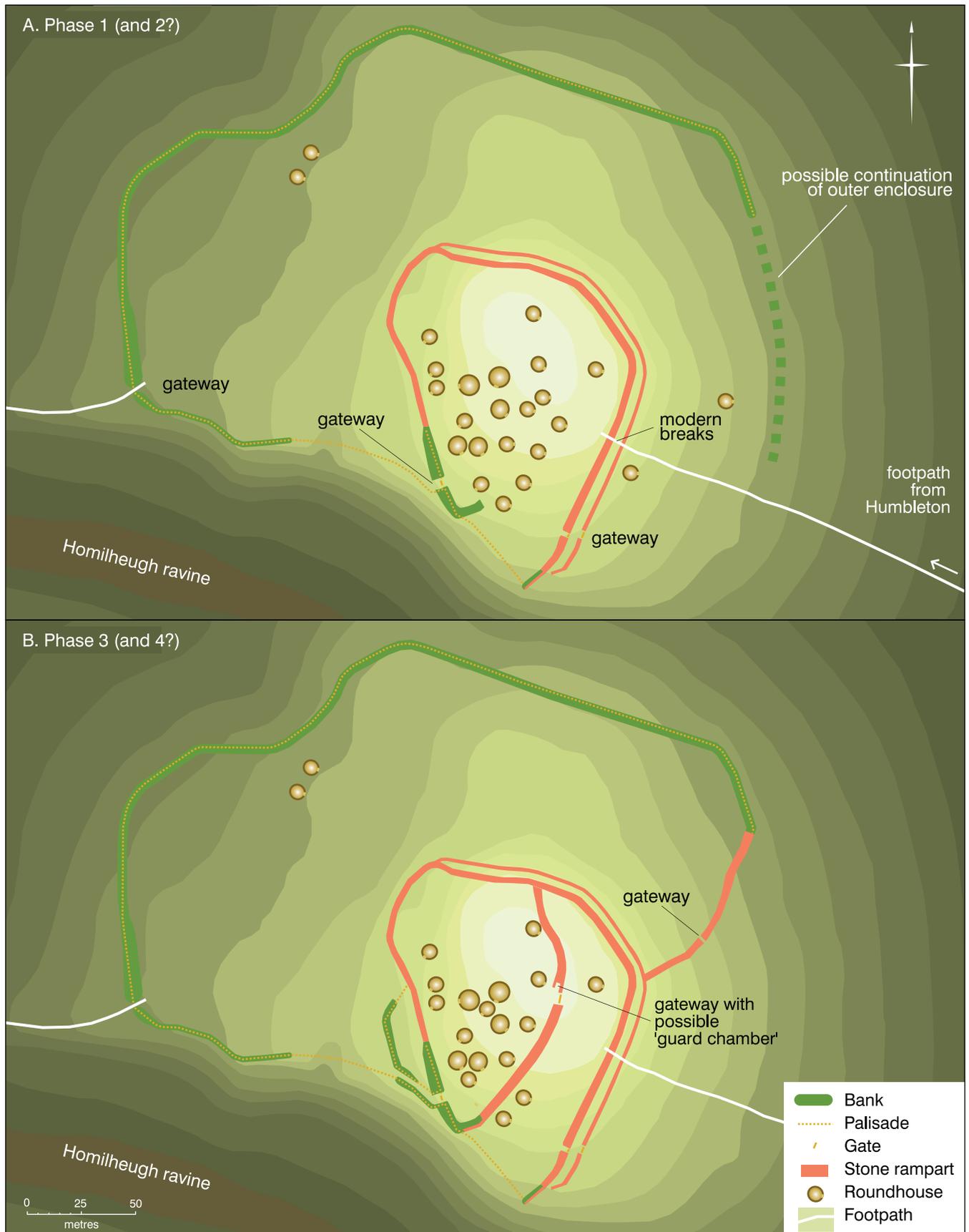


Fig 4.17 (far left)  
The east-facing entrance of the hillfort on Lordenshaw is clearly defined by upright slabs, but these are characteristic of the Roman Iron Age and may represent a modification of the latest Iron Age gateway.

Fig 4.18 (left)  
The rarely-visited hillfort on Fawcett Shank, hemmed in by coniferous plantations, was long believed to be nothing more than a medieval sheep pen. Closer inspection shows that this pen was built on top of a collapsed Iron Age rampart. Accurate survey reveals the characteristic original plan of the circuit: straight stretches of rampart flank the gateway, slightly distorting an otherwise almost circular plan.





*Fig 4.19 (opposite)  
The development of the hillfort on Humbleton Hill. After the Iron Age, and right up to the present day, the collapsed ramparts underwent dozens of minor modifications which have left easily recognisable remains.*

*Fig 4.20 (right)  
The south-facing gateway of the great hillfort on Yeavinger Bell is probably the only original entrance.*

inside the southern gateway (probably the only original entrance) into the great hillfort on Yeavinger Bell (Tate 1863a). This gateway seems to have been almost twice as wide as most other hillfort entrances, suggesting an impressive double gate, as would befit the largest hillfort in Northumberland (Fig 4.20).

Tate went on to excavate the more westerly of these buildings, recovering a small millstone made of local sandstone. Nearly a century later, in the course of his investigation of a now famous Anglian royal palace site overlooked by the hillfort, Brian Hope-Taylor re-excavated the same structure. This repeated disturbance has left its outline more clearly visible, though we are little closer to understanding its date or function. The millstone, a rather domestic item, does not conjure up a picture of unceasing vigilance. Though Tate's description of the artefact is not conclusive, it could be of Roman Iron Age date, a possibility supported by surface traces, for both structures seem to have been built after the rampart had collapsed (*see* Fig 4.27C). It was probably this observation which led Hope-Taylor to excavate.

### Making use of natural settings

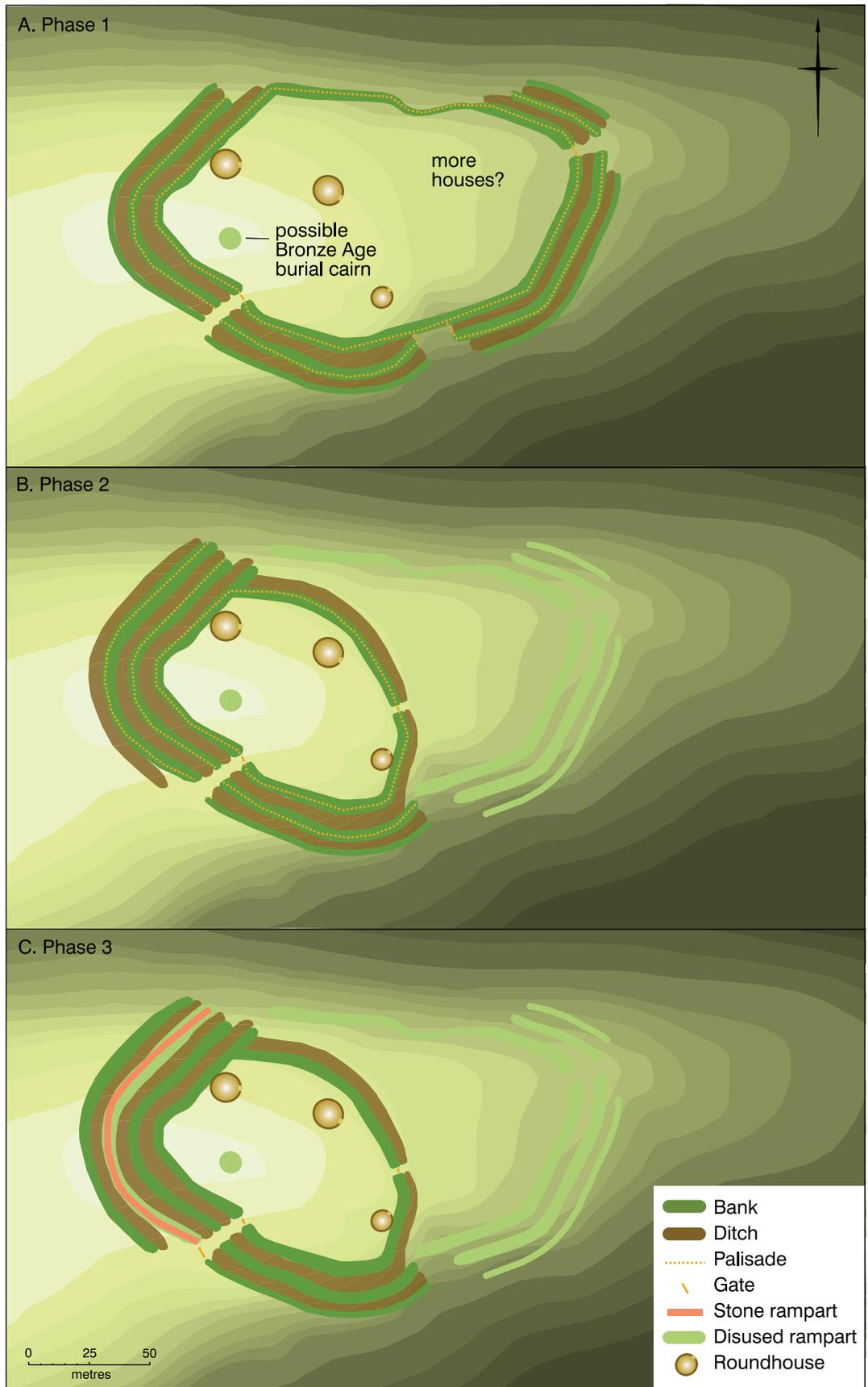
It is not always easy today to see how Iron Age builders exploited the natural qualities of the sites they chose. In some cases, the

ramparts follow the topography fairly closely, so that the overall plan is irregular, as at the hillfort known as The Kettles, on Wooler Common, or on Yeavinger Bell (*see* Figs 4.27 and 7.16). Such hillforts are conventionally known as 'contour forts', although close examination shows that their perimeters seldom follow the contours precisely. At Harehaugh Camp and Glead's Cleugh, promontories were used to similar effect (Fig 4.21; *see* Fig 5.8). At Park Law, just on the Scottish side of the border, a second circuit was added to a summit hillfort, the new circuit enclosing part of the promontory below. The eventual plan of the hillfort resembles a medieval motte-and-bailey castle.

In some cases, natural escarpments were incorporated into the circuits. This doubtless saved some labour, although an artificial barrier was often added as well, for example at Monday Cleugh and Camp Knowe, where the escarpments are almost sheer cliffs (Fig 4.22; *see also* Fig 2.16). It would appear from these examples, and similar sites, that the artificial barrier was important in its own right, perhaps to give the impression of a finished piece of architecture, or simply to give the occupants extra shelter from the elements. At South Middleton Dean, the decision to make use of the steep sides of a promontory may literally have proved the downfall of the defences. Unstable geological conditions have caused much of the rampart along these slopes to slip

# HILLFORTS

Fig 4.21  
In its early stages, the hillfort at Harehaugh Camp represents a form of 'promontory fort'.





*Fig 4.22  
The builders of the hillfort overlooking Monday Cleugh preferred to make use of the defensive strength of a ravine (cleugh) rather than the adjacent hilltop, yet they constructed a wall along the lip of the cliff which is the perimeter's strongest side. Why?*



*Fig 4.23  
Low sunshine highlights the landslips caused by local geological conditions overlooking South Middleton Dean Burn.*

away, leaving intact only a short section of what may once have been a complete circuit (Figs 4.23 and 4.24).

A number of circuits, built at different dates and of various sizes and materials, are very nearly circular, their designs executed

regardless of variations in the contours. In these cases, detailed survey of all the visible facing stones reveals the care taken to achieve smoothly curving perimeters (Fig 4.25). Why was this? Did the prehistoric builders recognise the defensive

advantages (on more even ground) of a circular plan, as military architects have done for much of the historic period, or was the circular plan an expression of Iron Age architectural fashion? Circularity is a theme that runs through monumental architecture from the Neolithic until the arrival of the Romans, and it may be that Iron Age

people were unconsciously following a cultural norm established millennia earlier.

Drawing an accurate circle does not require great skill – just two people equipped with a length of rope – although the hillfort builders appear to have been less concerned with geometrical accuracy than with defining a space that looked circular as

Fig 4.24 (right)  
Accurate survey shows that a significant proportion of the hillfort at South Middleton Dean has been lost to erosion, though it is uncertain whether the defences formed a complete circuit.

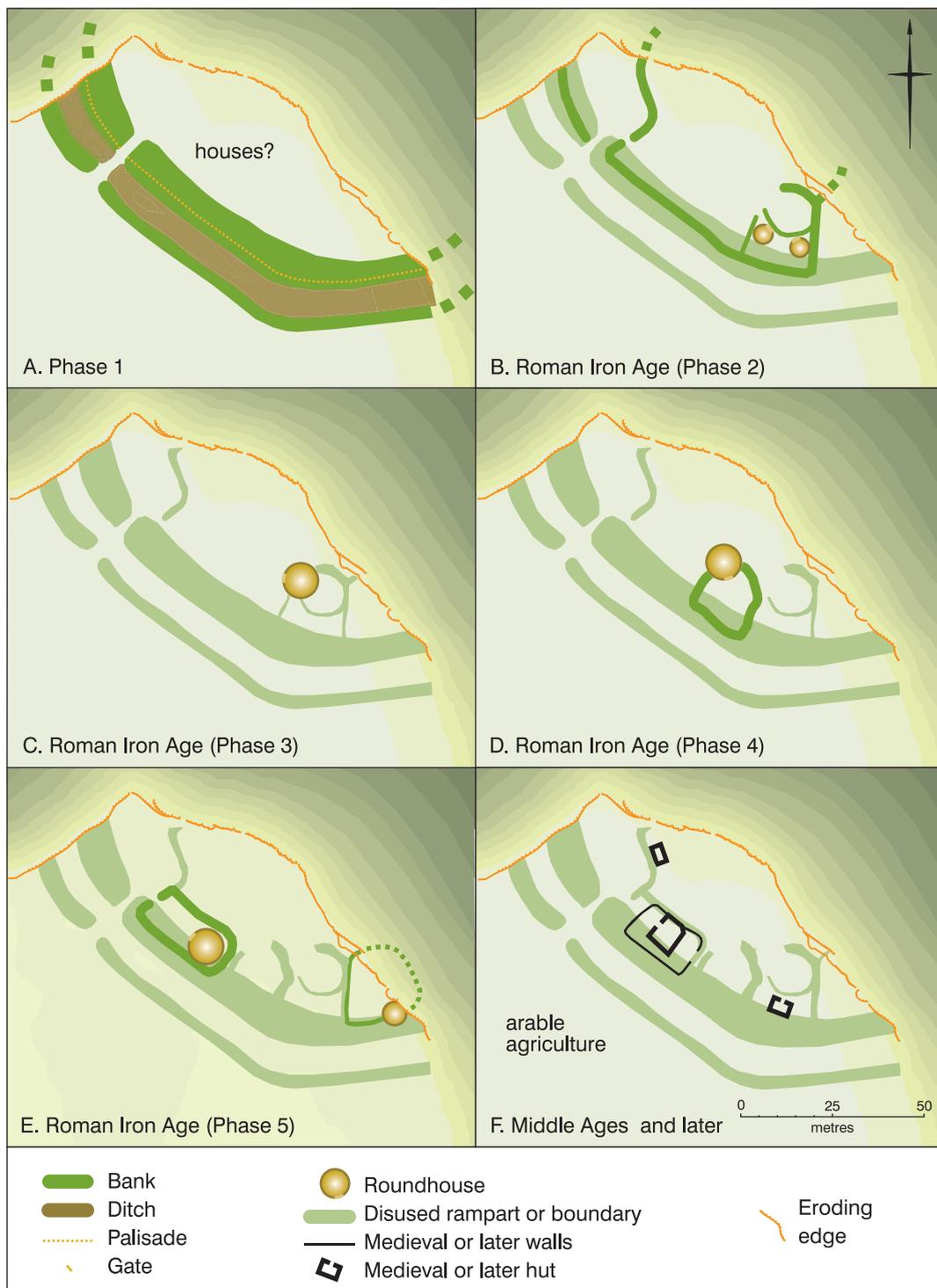
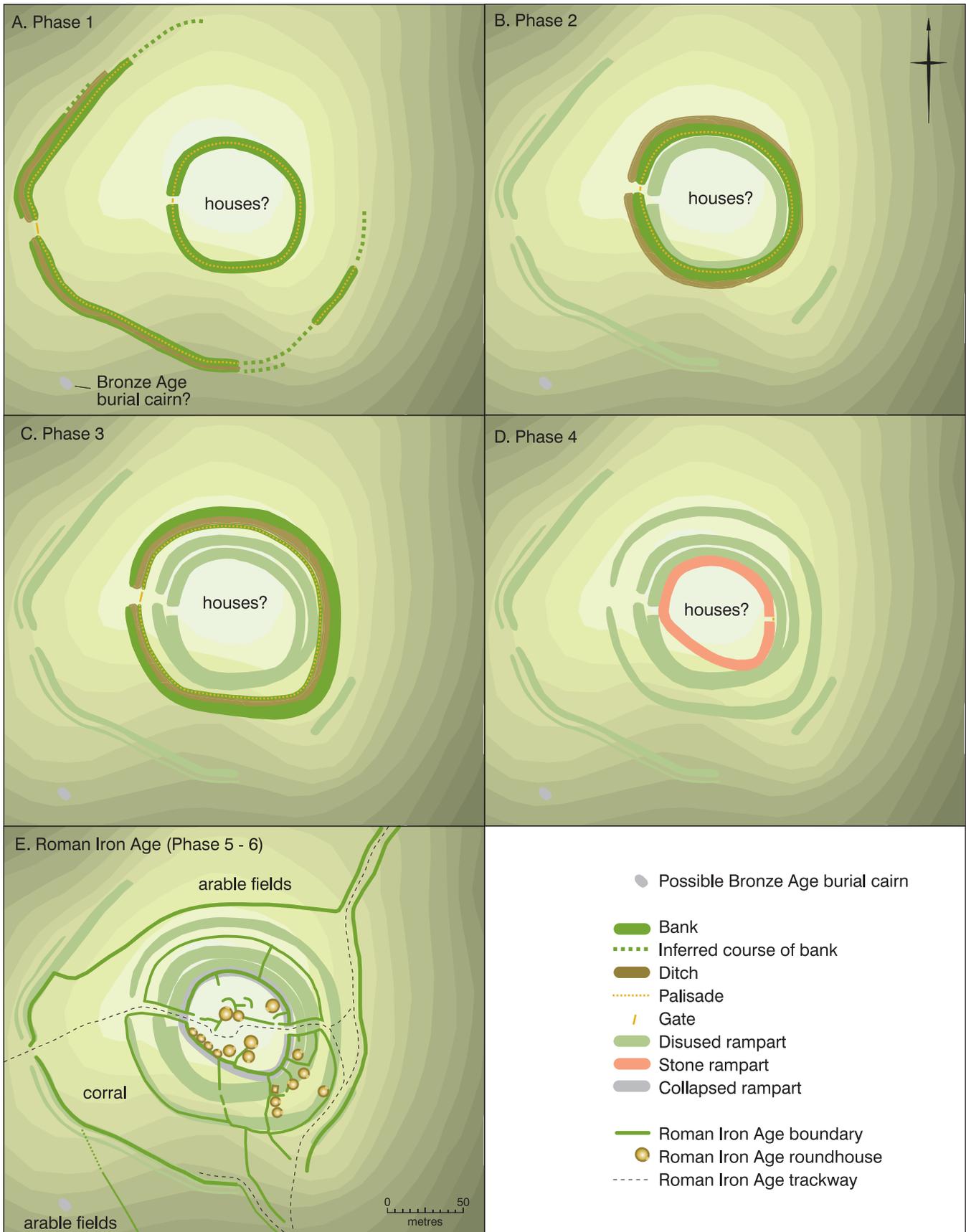
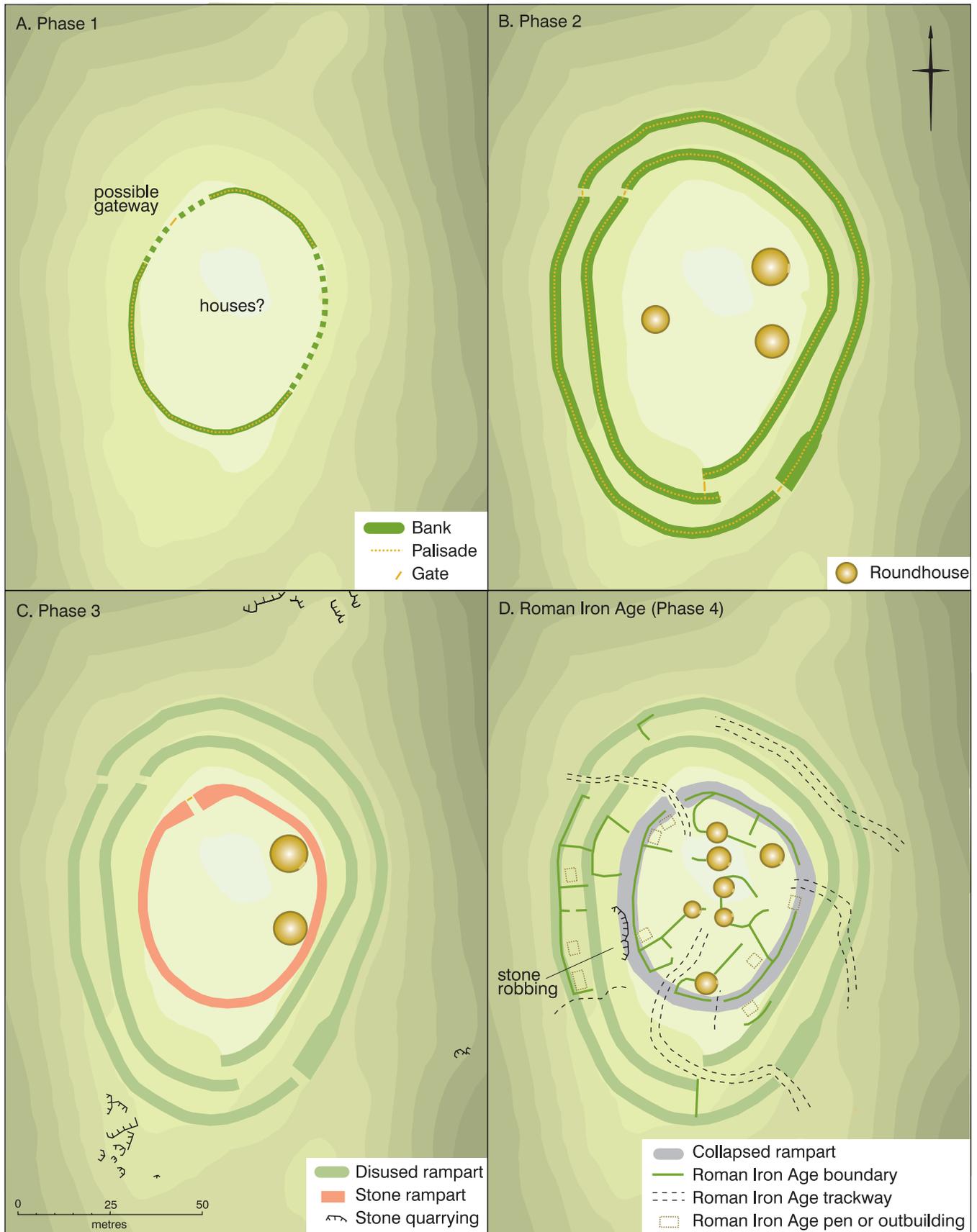


Fig 4.25 (opposite)  
The hillfort on Lordenshawes underwent a series of modifications, all of them retaining its original, almost perfectly circular, plan.





seen from ground level. It is interesting to note that before Henry MacLauchlan's measured surveys of the mid-19th century, hillforts were almost always portrayed on maps as circles (*see* Figs 2.12 and 2.13).

In some cases the builders seem to have gone out of their way to achieve a perimeter that was very close to a perfect circle. At Ring Chesters, the inner of the two earthen banks that defined the earlier, egg-shaped perimeter was deliberately quarried away to ensure that the later stone circuit maintained a circular plan (Fig 4.26). The only distortion in the circle seems to result from the inclusion of an existing timber house within the rebuilt perimeter. Striking cases like this hint that circular plans might have been the product of something more complex than military pragmatism or respect for tradition. Perhaps, as in so many societies where diverse settlements possess essentially identical plans, the shape of the perimeter and the design of the settlement as a whole held an implicit symbolic meaning that can no longer be deciphered.

## How many hillforts were there?

The answer to this question depends on what we define as a hillfort; which characteristics we choose to single out as typical of hillforts. We might presume that location on a hilltop would be the obvious starting point. Furthermore, archaeologists familiar with the monstrous hillforts on the chalk downland of Wessex and Sussex have often used the scale of the defences and the size of the settlement as yardsticks, leading them to disregard all but a handful of sites in northern England and the Scottish Borders. Within Northumberland National Park, only the site on Yeavinger Bell, with its 900m-long rampart enclosing an area of 5.6ha and containing at least 125 house platforms, would qualify as a hillfort on this basis (Fig 4.27).

So far in this book, we have chosen the broader definition of a hillfort traditionally employed in Northumberland and the Scottish Borders, which includes any enclosure built on a hilltop in an apparently defensive style, regardless of size. Using these criteria, 43 hillforts survive as earthworks within Northumberland National Park. If we accept that many palisaded enclosures were essentially hillforts built with timber walls, and take account only of the sites where palisades remain visible as earthworks, then that number rises to around 54.

Once it was widely believed that prehistoric people avoided low-lying ground, either because it was swampy and unhealthy or because it was too densely wooded to allow easy movement. This theory was based on the distribution of prehistoric monuments which have survived as earthworks, the vast majority of which are found on high ground. From the 1930s onwards, aerial photography began to challenge this notion, demonstrating that an even greater number of monuments had once existed on low-lying ground. Of these, most surface traces have been levelled by centuries of ploughing, so that ditches, pits and other features cut into the subsoil are now only visible from the air, as cropmarks or soilmarks. It gradually dawned on archaeologists that the truth was perhaps the exact reverse of what they had previously believed: that, as with modern land use, prehistoric exploitation of lower-lying ground had actually been more intensive.

Northumberland is no exception. Most of the 54 hillforts which survive as earthworks stand above the 'high-tide' mark of arable agriculture, dating in some areas to the Roman Iron Age and elsewhere to the medieval period. On lower-lying ground, both inside and outside the National Park, reconnaissance from the air has revealed dozens of roughly circular enclosures, once defended by earthen banks and ditches that have since been ploughed flat (Fig 4.28). Enclosures formed by timber palisades, again comparable to those long known in the hills, have also been recorded in large numbers. If we accept that all these vanished monuments were hillforts too, the total number within the boundary of Northumberland National Park rises to 60. But the more striking increase occurs in the intensively farmed lowlands outside the National Park, where the density of such monuments suddenly rivals their density within the park.

In the absence of excavation, the dates and functions of these plough-damaged sites remained uncertain. In the summer of 1989, aerial reconnaissance by Tim Gates identified the cropmarks of two ploughed-out enclosures, one round and one square, at Fawdon Dean (Fig 4.29). In 2000 and 2002, a team from Durham University followed up the discovery as part of the National Park Authority's Breamish Valley Archaeological Project (Frodsham and Waddington 2004). Their aim was to determine the dates and functions of the

*Fig 4.26 (opposite)*  
*The development of Ring Chesters hillfort, as revealed by analysis of surface remains.*

HILLFORTS

Fig 4.27 (right)  
 The hillfort on Yeavinger Bell, among the largest hillforts in the region and probably the most densely inhabited, contracted to an internal area of 5.6ha in the second identifiable phase of its use. The earlier circuit was considerably larger, though perhaps more sparsely occupied.

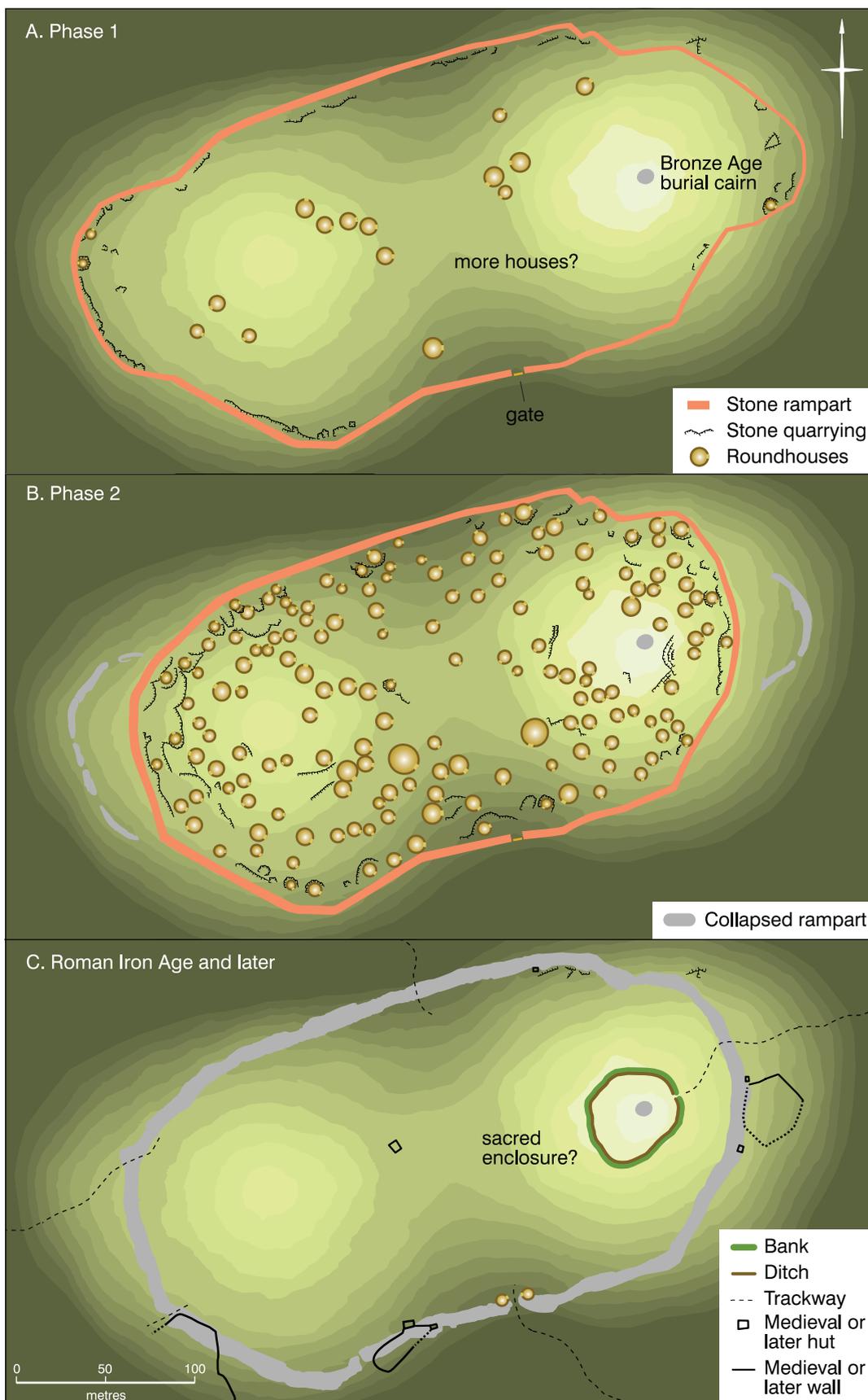
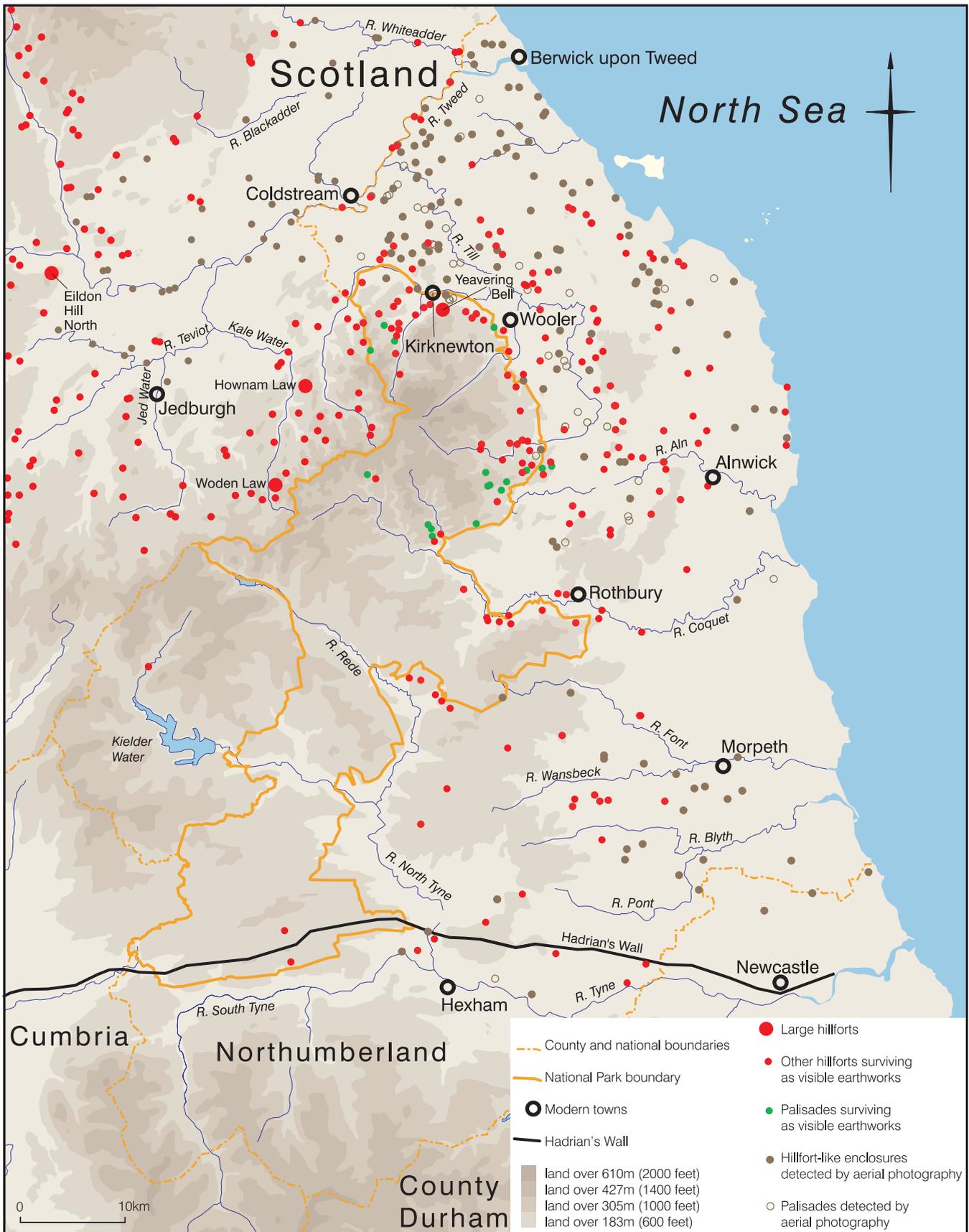
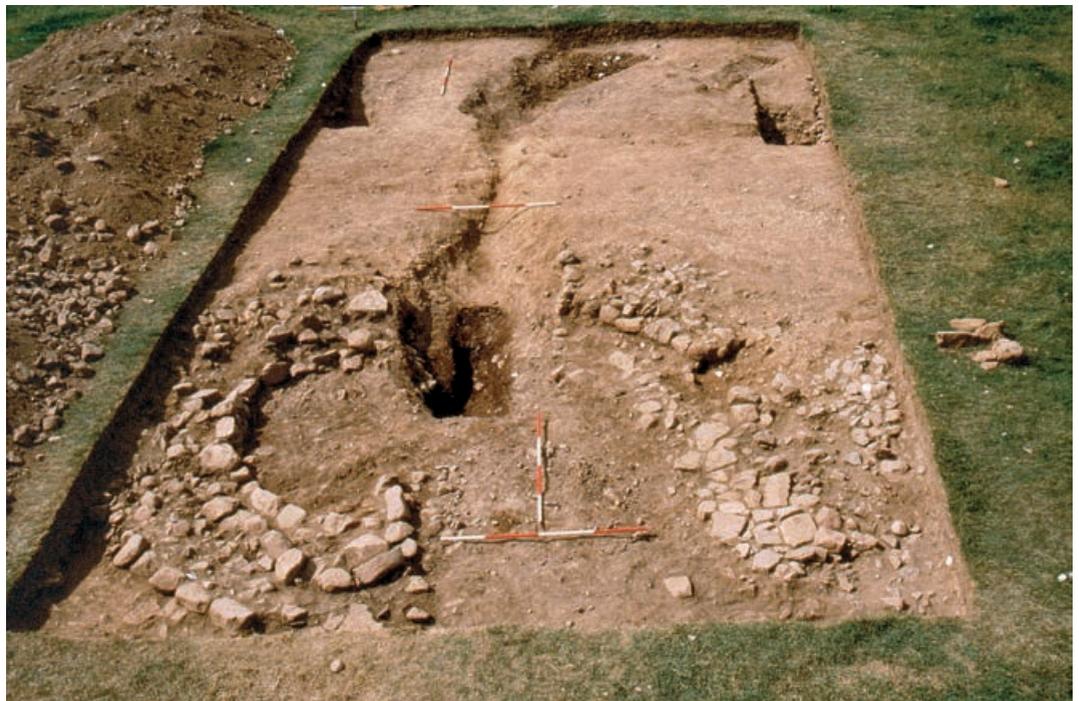


Fig 4.28 (opposite)  
 Aerial photographic recording of enclosures long ploughed flat, indicated on this map by brown symbols, has transformed our understanding of how many hillforts once existed and, in fact, of what hillforts really were. Many of the plough-levelled sites were discovered by Tim Gates during decades of aerial reconnaissance and survey. (This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or criminal proceedings. English Heritage 100019088. 2006)





*Fig 4.29 (above)*  
*Tim Gates' 1989 aerial*  
*photograph of the two*  
*enclosures at Fawdon*  
*Dean. (Photograph by Tim*  
*Gates. Copyright reserved)*



*Fig 4.30 (right)*  
*Durham University's*  
*excavation at Fawdon*  
*Dean in progress, showing*  
*the footings of a stone-*  
*walled roundhouse which*  
*dates to the Roman Iron*  
*Age. (Courtesy of*  
*Northumberland National*  
*Park Authority)*

enclosures, using geophysical survey and carefully targeted excavation. The smaller, round enclosure proved to be the earlier of the two, dating perhaps to before 200 BC. As well as being comparable to upland hillforts in terms of date and plan, its defences evidently surrounded several large timber-built roundhouses, similar to those identifiable on the hilltops (Fig 4.30).

This new evidence allows us to argue that the Fawdon Dean enclosure and others like it fit the definition of hillforts, though they are not on hills. In other words, we may be wrong to have assumed that hilltop location has any real validity here. The term 'hillfort' may be less appropriate than just 'fort', which in any case has long been preferred by the Ordnance Survey and still appears on current maps. This change of perception opens a Pandora's Box of countless so-called 'hillforts' located on hillsides and even on valley floors. In the Iron Age, small communities like these would have been scattered all across the land. More sites almost certainly wait to be discovered, either by chance or through continuing aerial reconnaissance.

## Were hillforts really military monuments?

As the preceding sections of this chapter demonstrate, hillforts have various characteristics that might lead us to think of them as military monuments: defended villages or strong refuges in times of tribal warfare. The causes of the supposedly warlike nature of Iron Age society have been thought to lie in rising population levels, leading to greater competition for land and other resources (for the fullest discussion of this viewpoint, *see* Cunliffe 2005). To maintain their grip on power, it has been argued, chieftains were forced to seize greater wealth for their communities through raiding, until eventually warfare became a normal aspect of everyday life.

In *The Go-Between*, the novelist L P Hartley famously wrote that 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. It is important to realise that our interpretation of the past is always coloured by our own modern prejudices. So is the interpretation of hillforts really as straightforward as archaeologists long believed?

Since hillforts first became the subject of intensive research in the late 18th century, Britain has lived almost constantly with the possibility of war, either overseas, in the

course of building of its own empire, or at home, under threat of invasion by other nations. It is hardly surprising, then, that hillforts have been interpreted as strongholds, built to defend against the invading Roman army or attacks by neighbouring tribes. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there are hints that, nearly 1,500 years ago, Anglo-Saxon invaders interpreted them in the same way, possibly for similar reasons.

While a stone wall standing more than head-high is clearly defensible, it is questionable, as already noted, whether a timber palisade could have been actively defended at all. Most hillforts which survive as earthworks appear to be strategically sited because they occupy summits, frequently commanding vast panoramas and often with clear views of other hillforts nearby. But aerial photography has shown these earthworks to be heavily outnumbered by forts which are identical in architectural terms, but are not located on hilltops.

Even some hillforts surviving as earthworks are sited away from the highest ground, or are overlooked by higher ground. For example, a hillfort occupies the remarkable promontory at Glead's Cleugh that has been severed from the surrounding landmass by glacial action (Fig 4.31). Although the promontory's isolation offers some security, the fact that it is overlooked by higher ground, literally within a stone's throw, must raise questions as to whether defence was really the main concern. Blazing torches hurled from the adjacent escarpment could have had the entire settlement in ruins within minutes.

The hillfort on St Gregory's Hill, as seen from the valley floor around Kirknewton, seems to occupy the highest ground, and its defences look formidable because they follow a steep natural escarpment on two sides (*see* Fig 8.1). However, the original gateway (which was blocked in the Roman Iron Age and replaced by a new entrance further round the circuit) faces onto the plateau, away from the escarpment, and this is the direction from which most people must have approached. Anyone visiting the place, even for the first time, would have immediately noticed that the entrance is overlooked by two hillocks several metres higher than the rise occupied by the hillfort. The hillfort on Staw Hill is even more comprehensively overlooked (Fig 4.32). To the modern way of thinking, any attacker who had a good view of a hillfort could be assumed to hold a strong tactical advantage.

## HILLFORTS

*Fig 4.31*

*The multiple ramparts fronting the approach to the hillfort on Glead's Cleugh are certainly impressive, but the flank of the settlement is overlooked by higher ground within a stone's throw.*



*Fig 4.32*

*The hillfort on Staw Hill, overlooked by the highest point of the ridge that offers a natural approach.*



*Fig 4.33*  
Like its neighbour on Staw Hill, the rampart of the hillfort on Mid Hill is impressive when seen from specific directions, particularly its natural approaches.

Furthermore, detailed survey reveals that, even where a hillfort does occupy the highest ground, defences seldom make the best use of the natural topography. Many perimeters – for example, that of the hillfort on West Hill (see Fig 6.3A) – do not hug the contours closely, but instead ‘tilt’ across them. At these sites, the circular circuit, whose design might be presumed to reflect the summit’s domed form, is actually laid out without regard to the natural topography. This has the effect of making the defences more conspicuous from a particular direction, often a tract of low-lying ground, or a pass that seems a natural approach to the hilltop. The defences on this more conspicuous side are often the strongest, with the broadest foundations and the largest volume of tumbled stone (hence perhaps the greatest height). The opposite sides of the defensive circuits, which often make less effective use of the natural topography and are therefore more vulnerable to attack, can be the weakest sections (Figs 4.33 and 4.34).

At Ring Chesters, the earthworks crossing the neck of the spur which offers the only level approach are tiny, while those on the steep slopes flanking the entrance are impressively large (see Fig 4.26B). The situation is equally striking at Hayhope Knowe, where the bank and ditch simply terminate towards the tip of the promontory. Excavators in 1949 were unsure whether

the rampart was unfinished or whether the circuit had been completed with a timber palisade, which can also be traced on the surface, just inside the earthwork. With hindsight, it seems unlikely that the palisade was even in existence at the same time as the earthwork.

Finally, let us turn to what was arguably the strongest hillfort in the National Park: that on Yeavinger Bell. Clearly its broad, high stone wall would have deterred casual intruders (Fig 4.35). Yet with a perimeter more than 900m long, it would have needed every single inhabitant of the hillfort to defend against a concerted attack. The siting of the wall in relation to the summits would have meant that there was no single interior point from which the entire perimeter could be seen, making it impossible to coordinate a defence (see Fig 4.27B).



*Fig 4.34*  
This stretch of the circuit on Mid Hill crosses the tip of the spur, which is both less visible and harder to approach. The ‘defensive rampart’ never seems to have stood much more than knee-high and, even then, owes much of its diminutive size to an upgrade in the Roman Iron Age.



*Fig 4.35  
View along the southern  
side of the circuit on  
Yeavinger Bell: could such  
a long perimeter have been  
effectively defended?*

Defenders on the north side of the circuit would have been unable to tell whether the south side had been overrun.

Thus these so-called 'strongholds' could only have withstood an assault if their attackers had announced themselves and attacked from the front. If they had chosen to attack secretly or to adopt siege tactics, they could quickly have identified and exploited the weaknesses of the design. In other words, it seems to have been more important to use the architecture and the natural qualities of the site to give an initial impression of strength, than to make the defences genuinely strong. Close inspection would have shown this bravado to be pretence in many cases. Most hillforts in Northumberland National Park lie within sight of their neighbours, so close inspection would doubtless have been taking place all the time.

It may be helpful to compare hillforts with moated manor houses of the Middle Ages. Although most medieval moats

certainly could keep out casual intruders, some were never complete circuits, while others were built in relatively peaceful times. Evidently, one of their most important functions was to show off the wealth and status of their owners. Some moats thus became primarily ornamental accessories to the lord of the manor's residence. Some medieval houses were also adorned with battlements (crenellations). Permission to crenellate a house had to be granted by the king, so wealthy landlords added these military embellishments not because they felt threatened, but in order to show that they were well-connected.

Some archaeologists have reacted against the long-accepted view of Iron Age society by arguing that, far from being warlike, its people were generally peace-loving farmers, who merely had a taste for the superficial trappings of military power and used fashionable military architecture to impress one another. This theory is plausible, but may be equally far off the mark, for conflicts

do occasionally arise in most societies. The evidence to be presented in Chapter 6 shows that the inhabitants of hillforts were farmers first and foremost, but even if there was not constant warfare in a modern sense, this does not mean that rural lives were always peaceful.

Thus hillforts were not primarily military monuments, at least in the way that we understand the concept today. But we need to accept that our modern concept of warfare may differ considerably from that of Iron Age people. Perhaps the question ought to be: what form did the inevitable conflicts take and, when they occurred, were hillforts involved?

### Rethinking our understanding of 'warfare'

Acts of display may have been a key aspect of Iron Age conflict. It may be that by showing off as much grandeur and strength as possible in hillfort architecture, the community hoped to ward off the attentions of potential aggressors. Even aggressors who were well aware of real physical weaknesses in the defences may have paid close attention to the symbolic bravado of the gateway and frontage. Over recent decades, archaeologists have come to terms with the idea that symbolism is important in every aspect of life: buildings, objects and actions are imbued with meanings and purposes that are not obvious to those who do not share the culture. The suggestion of only superficial threat in the design of many hillforts tallies well with what archaeologists are beginning to realise about Iron Age warfare in general.

As noted in Chapter 3, weapons are not commonplace finds (Fig 4.36). While this is partly because iron was undoubtedly too valuable to discard, it must also reflect a genuine scarceness, not at all what we might expect if battles were breaking out on a regular basis. Like later swords and firearms, most Iron Age weapons were beautiful items which only the wealthiest could have afforded and which it would have been rash to brandish in an everyday quarrel.

Julius Caesar observed that British warriors entered battle on chariots, but then immediately descended to fight, surrendering the advantages of speed and height. Recent reconstructions of chariots found in Iron Age graves in East Yorkshire, which date to broadly the same period as the hillforts in Northumberland National

Park, show what sophisticated vehicles they were and therefore how much they would have cost to construct. As with weapons, the impression is once again that warriors placed more importance on trap-pings and the display of aggression than on actual combat.

A show of ferocity and fearlessness can of course be a highly effective way of winning a battle before it is fought. Caesar tells how his troops were reluctant to disembark when they saw the terrifying display by the tribespeople (of both sexes) waiting for them on the shore. It is worth remembering that these native warriors were also farmers. Once the Romans' initial fear was overcome – reportedly the result of another symbolic act of fearlessness, this time by one of their own standard-bearers – the superior tactics, discipline and equipment of the Roman army allowed them to dispatch their enemy quickly and efficiently, annihilating them with the very savagery that Caesar claimed to despise. Nor could it be said that the Romans had dispensed with symbolism: Caesar's expedition into Britain was itself a symbolic act designed to capture political support back in Rome. Most archaeologists agree that Hadrian's Wall, built nearly two centuries later, was largely a self-indulgent symbolic display on the part of an emperor renowned for architectural experimentation.

### Celtic 'warfare'

Celtic Irish epic literature of the 9th and 10th centuries AD has long been thought to offer insights into Iron Age life. Although there are good reasons for not accepting these much later tales as perfect mirrors of the Iron Age, it is likely that they do offer a blurred reflection of a time long before the stories were actually written down. For instance, the emphasis on the hero, who gains high status for his bravery, cunning and prowess in single combat, may have roots in Iron Age practices 1,000 years before.

Nobody can be sure whether single combat – a very stylised form of conflict – was the norm in Iron Age Northumberland. If it was, it might explain why so many hillforts seem to have been incapable of defence against concerted mass attack. It might also partly explain why hillforts have such well-constructed gateways, flanked by defences that were higher and more impressively built. For the challengers, the gateway would have provided the backdrop against

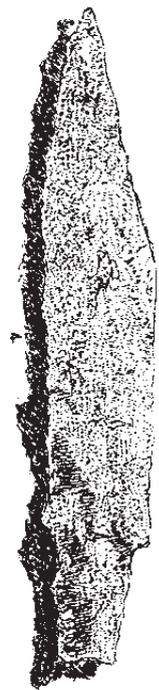


Fig 4.36  
A 9cm-long iron knife blade, discovered during excavations by George Tate in 1861 within the hillfort on Brough Law. Tate's suspicion that the knife might be Anglo-Saxon was probably correct, but regrettably the object has not survived. (Tate 1863b)

which combat might take place, so hillfort builders would have designed this frontage to overawe the opposition before they even dared to approach. Presumably, any combat would have been watched intently by supporters on both sides, but the consequences of defeat would have been more serious for the inhabitants of the hillfort. This may explain why, even when the rest of the circuit is nearly circular, the walls flanking gateways are usually straight, allowing not only better defence of the gateway but a better view for those watching anxiously from the walls.

At Yeavinger Bell, the two largest houses overlooked the hillfort's main southern gateway, with their doorways facing directly towards it (*see* Figs 6.18 and 6.19). At Wether Hill and elsewhere, a single large house faced the gateway (*see* Fig 3.12C). These are among the very few instances, anywhere in Iron Age Britain, where it may be possible to pinpoint the homes of the community's most important members.

Whether they were chieftains, warriors or druids, they seem to have been entitled to houses which dominated the gateway – the hillfort's most important point – both visually and physically.

It is possible to imagine the gates swinging slowly open and the little community's warrior emerging, with as much drama as he and his supporters can muster, dressed in his most flamboyant clothes and bearing his best – or perhaps only – weapon. A war of words might ensue with the enemy's champion and then, if this does not prove enough, blows might be struck to establish who is in the right. A fight to the death was probably a rare event: a wound, a humiliating climbdown or a suitable offer of compensation might usually be sufficient to bring the dispute to an end.

In short, hillforts may well have played a role from time to time in conflicts between the little farming communities, but those conflicts may have had little in common with warfare as we understand it today.

# 5

## Life at home

### What were Iron Age houses like?

Circular buildings known as roundhouses are one of the defining features of Iron Age Britain (Fig 5.1). They are often referred to as ‘huts’, but were in fact sophisticated buildings. Their conical frames, built primarily in timber and woven hazel rods, stood up to 8m high and their walls enclosed areas up to 15m in diameter, creating a single open-plan room over 150 sq m in area. It is worth reflecting that this makes a roundhouse as tall as a modern two-storey house, with more floor space than many.

The vestiges of Iron Age roundhouses visible on the surface today – mostly in the Cheviots – are not spectacular, nor even easy to see. All the same, considering the age of these vanished buildings, it is extraordinary that any trace at all can be detected without excavation. Even more than the survival of hillfort ramparts, the preservation of direct evidence for prehistoric settlement is one of the most remarkable features of Northumberland National Park.

The ground surface within hillforts is usually uneven, so terraces were often created to support the roundhouses and ensure that their floors were more or less level (Fig 5.2). These platforms, cut into the slope at the rear and embanked at the front, are sometimes the most obvious signs of settlement, as for example on Yeavinger Bell, where nearly 150 can be seen.

You will need excellent conditions – low light and short vegetation – to recognise the ephemeral surface traces of the timber roundhouses themselves, even where they are well preserved. What at first appear to be ‘blank’ areas may show traces of shallow circular gulleys, usually no more than a few centimeters deep, or sometimes just arcing lines of lush grass (Fig 5.3). These gulleys, known as ring grooves, served as foundations for the continuous lines of planks or posts that formed the walls. A close examination of building platforms on sloping ground may also reveal ring grooves, generally coinciding with the perimeters of the platforms. Another, much less common, type of roundhouse features a broader, deeper ditch; a good example is visible within one of the

palisaded enclosures on High Knowes. Considering how slight the surface traces are, it is easy to imagine how often such evidence must have been erased by Roman Iron Age and later activity, to say nothing of over 2,000 years of gradual erosion.

In a third type of house, the radiating beams that supported the roof rested, at their lower ends, on a low bank of turf, and were supported towards the middle of the roundhouse by a timber collar, carried on a ring of vertical posts. Although the holes for the posts cannot be detected without excavation, the level platforms and encircling banks can sometimes be seen (Fig 5.4). It is not clear whether this technique indicates a different date, a different function or simply a different style of construction.

Anyone who has stood on the summit of a Cheviot hill on a stormy day is bound to be impressed by how strong roundhouses must have been. People presumably chose to live on these exposed, windswept hilltops, confident that their homes were equal to the task and would keep them warm and dry. There may have been more woodland here during the Iron Age, which would have absorbed some of the strength of the winter gales. All the same, hillforts were generally built to be visible, so it can be inferred that any adjacent trees would have been cleared, at least on one side. On Yeavinger Bell, whose twin

*Fig 5.1*  
*Reconstruction of an Iron Age roundhouse, based on well-preserved remains discovered beneath the Roman fort at South Shields. The roofs of many roundhouses may have been supported by a central post, although at South Shields the centre of the floor space was occupied by a hearth.*





*Fig 5.2*  
A large roundhouse platform with a 'ring groove' foundation on it, behind the rampart of the hillfort on Craik Moor. Though the platform was probably never perfectly flat, 2,000 years of erosion and soil movement have made its surface less level than it would have been when first built.

summits stand more than 20m above the lowest point of the rampart, many roundhouses must have been completely exposed above the canopy of the trees outside the hillfort (see Fig 6.18). While trees may have been retained within the rampart to offer some shelter, this seems unlikely in view of the density of settlement remains and the fact that these trees would have been the most easily accessible source of timber.

The conventional term 'hut' suggests a rather weak and temporary structure, but Iron Age roundhouses were also sturdy and potentially had long life-spans. Detailed survey of the hillfort at Mid Hill reveals that while its defensive perimeter was first built as a timber palisade, later rebuilt as a stone wall enclosing a larger area and finally strengthened along one side, its roundhouses seem to have remained unchanged throughout, as if they had outlived the refurbishment of the defences (see Fig 7.8).

*Fig 5.3*  
The 'ring groove' foundation trench of a timber roundhouse on Wether Hill.



Since the 1980s, groups of enthusiasts all over Britain have attempted to reconstruct roundhouses (see Fig 7.5). Visitors to these buildings are often struck by the impression of space and by how little the walls are penetrated by wind and noise from the outside. We can be sure that few of these modern replicas are as well built as the original structures, on which their occupants' comfort and survival depended, but the reconstruction projects have taught us much about the materials and technical expertise required. From the few recovered examples of their work (mostly from waterlogged sites where some organic materials have been well preserved), it is clear that Iron Age people were capable of skilled carpentry.

Wicker working – the weaving of split or whole hazel rods to form basket-like panels – was another skill much in use in the Iron Age. Exterior walls made in this way would have required much thinner upright timbers, leaving little or no impression in the soil. Because hazel rots quickly when left in contact with the ground, the builders may have used a more resistant timber, such as oak, for the uprights, and perhaps fixed them into an oak wall plate rather than the ground. Once protected by a layer of daub – a plaster made up of mud, animal hair and dung – and sheltered beneath the overhanging roof, the hazel walls could have lasted for many decades. Although a few fragments of wickerwork have been recovered by excavation at waterlogged sites around Britain, it is more common to find impressions of the hazel rods preserved in pieces of wall daub that have been baked hard as a result of fires. One advantage of wicker is that the frame of the house, effectively a giant upturned basket, would have been incredibly strong, without the need for internal supports, so that the floor space remained completely open.

To prevent wind damage and to carry rain well away from the plastered walls, the broad eaves of the conical thatched roofs would have swept out from the wall-lines, reaching almost to the ground. Cord, perhaps made of the boiled inner bark of willow trunks as it has been in historic times, may have been used to bind the thatch together, or even to form a net that covered the whole roof, preventing strong winds from lifting the bundles. Excavation of roundhouses in the lowlands has often revealed shallow concentric ditches well outside the walls, to catch the drips from the eaves, keep surface water away from the walls and interior, and lower



*Fig 5.4*  
*Surveying a roundhouse*  
*defined by a low earthen*  
*bank, on St Gregory's Hill.*

the water table inside the building. No trace of such ditches has been detected through surface survey, presumably because most houses that survive as earthworks within the National Park were built on sloping ground, which was naturally better drained.

Reed is today considered the best material for thatching. In post-medieval times, an important industry developed in areas like the Norfolk Broads, to supply the national need for thatching material. Demand cannot have been much less in the Iron Age, when a higher proportion of roofs were probably thatched, though the population was undoubtedly much smaller. Reed may well have grown along the edges of slow-flowing water channels in the Milfield Plain, to the north-east of the Cheviots, around Yetholm Loch (near Kirk Yetholm) and elsewhere (Fig 5.5; *see also* Fig 3.1). However,



*Fig 5.5*  
*Reed suitable for use as*  
*thatch, growing in a marsh*  
*near Morebattle in Scotland,*  
*which may well have been a*  
*much larger expanse of open*  
*water in the Iron Age, similar*  
*to Yetholm Loch today.*

there could not have been enough to supply the whole region, so other locally available materials must have been employed.

Turf, which is still used to roof small, stone-walled buildings in parts of Scotland and Ireland, may have been too heavy for the broad roof spans of the largest Iron Age roundhouses. Moorland heather – regularly cut down since the mid-19th century in Northumberland, to allow grouse to feed on the fresh shoots – may have been ‘harvested’ every few years as a roofing material in the Iron Age, as it was in parts of this region well into historic times. Wild broom and rushes, whose long straight stems can be compressed into compact bundles, may have been gathered in the same way, as they were in the Middle Ages. While bracken is generally regarded as a problem by modern livestock farmers because it spoils the grazing and is difficult to eradicate, peasants in Cumbria and the northern Pennines in medieval and later times jealously guarded their right to cut fronds of the fern between late August and mid-September, for use as a roofing material.

In historic times, these various forms of thatch were used in the northern uplands where there was little arable farming, while in the lowlands grain crops, particularly wheat and barley, provided peasant farmers with a by-product that made an excellent roofing material: straw (Fig 5.6). Arable farming may be scarce within the boundaries of Northumberland National Park today but, as Chapter 6 will show, during the Iron Age it was widespread around the fringes of the uplands. Straw thatch – at least when grown without chemical intervention – has much the same properties today as it did in prehistory. In order for straw to remain waterproof, the roof must be pitched at 45 degrees or steeper, from which it can be calculated that the apex of a larger house would have stood nearly 8m above the ground, allowing plenty of space for storage under the eaves. There may even have been some form of upper floor, perhaps for storage. Joints of meat, cloth bags of cheese and bundles of herbs might have dangled on cords from the rafters, safe from scavengers, as the smoke rising from the hearth dried, flavoured and preserved them (*see* Fig 5.12).

It seems likely that most domestic buildings would have had central hearths, made of clay or packed stones, both for cooking and for warmth. The smoke from the fire was probably allowed to escape gradually through the thatch; modern experiments



have shown that a smoke-hole at the apex of the roof would have created a strong updraft, increasing the danger of the thatch catching fire. The floor was probably hard earth, initially beaten flat and gradually compacted further by use. Areas away from the hearth and the doorway may well have been carpeted with rugs or animal skins.

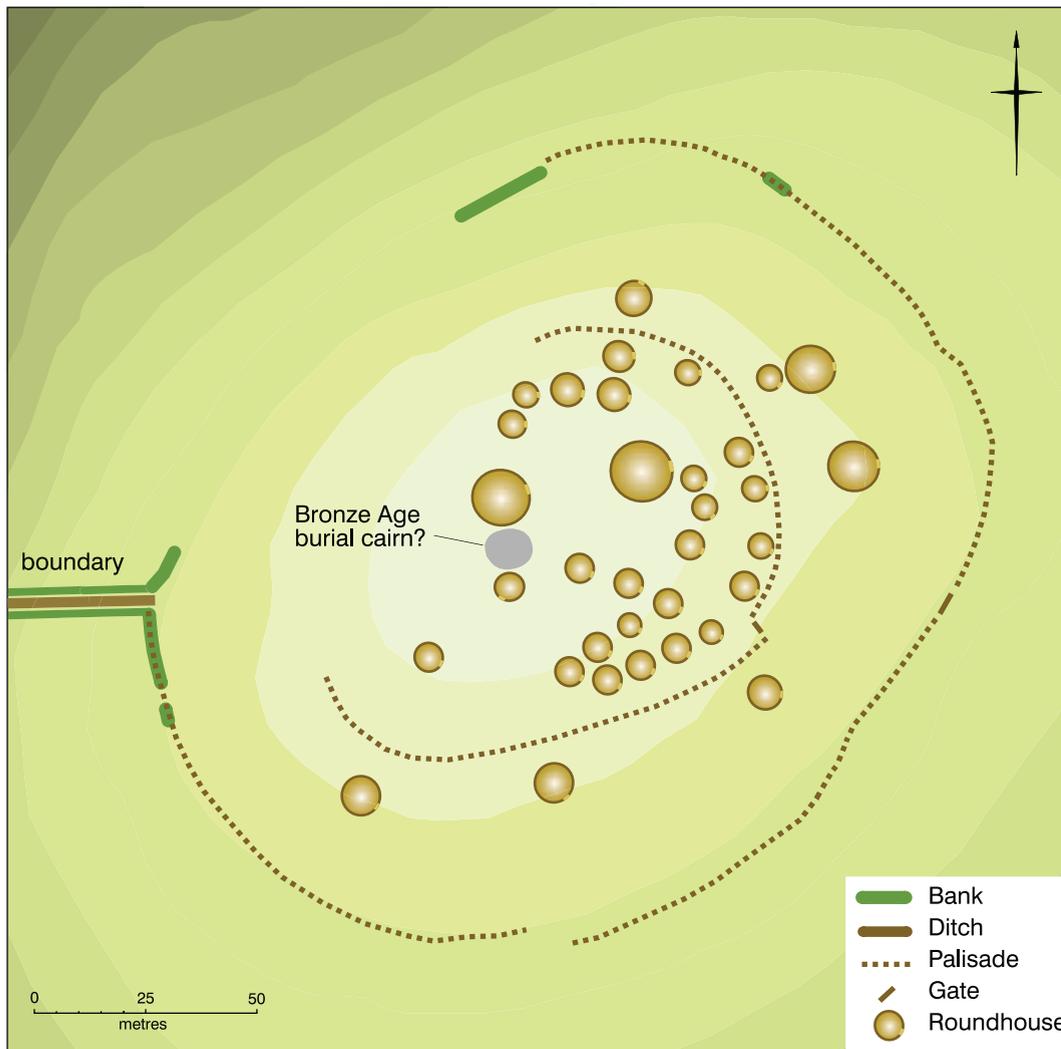
Only a single Iron Age door has ever been found, surviving in the waterlogged conditions of the lake-edge village at Glastonbury in Somerset, and there is nothing primitive about the quality of its construction. There is no reason to assume that the farmers of Northumberland were any less skilled or would have been satisfied with anything of poorer quality. Roundhouses are often reconstructed with square porches sheltering the doorways, but in the Cheviots no evidence for these is detectable on the surface, even where the ring-grooves are clear.

### Were all roundhouses really houses?

Without excavation, it is almost impossible to tell whether a particular roundhouse was genuinely a house, in which people lived permanently. Some circular buildings were perhaps workshops, stores, meeting places or winter livestock shelters. Some which were built as domestic houses may have ended up serving other functions, and vice versa. In southern England, small square buildings with raised floors served as granaries, while pits were dug to store grain over the winter in airtight conditions, for use as seed in the spring. In Northumberland, buildings identical to domestic roundhouses in structure and superficial appearance may have served these functions.

Occasionally, the overall plan of a settlement allows us to make intelligent guesses about how specific buildings were used. On Old Fawdon Hill, small circular buildings

*Fig 5.6 (opposite)*  
Iron Age people were undoubtedly highly skilled in the crafts needed to build their homes. Though thatch was probably the main roofing material, it is possible that animal skins were used as an underlay in the lower part of the roof, providing additional insulation and drawing the smoke from the fireplace up into the eaves. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)



*Fig 5.7*  
The palisaded enclosures on Old Fawdon Hill surround an intriguing pattern of roundhouses. Based on a 1979 survey by Stewart Ainsworth and Tim Gates.

cluster within the inner palisade, while a ring of isolated buildings of much larger size, spaced at regular intervals, occupies the zone enclosed by the outer palisade (Fig 5.7). From what we know of other sites, it might be argued that the two building sizes represent separate phases of occupation. However, there are hints that the only two large buildings within the inner circuit were in use at the same time as the smaller buildings surrounding them, suggesting that the different sizes represent different functions: large houses and small storerooms, for example.

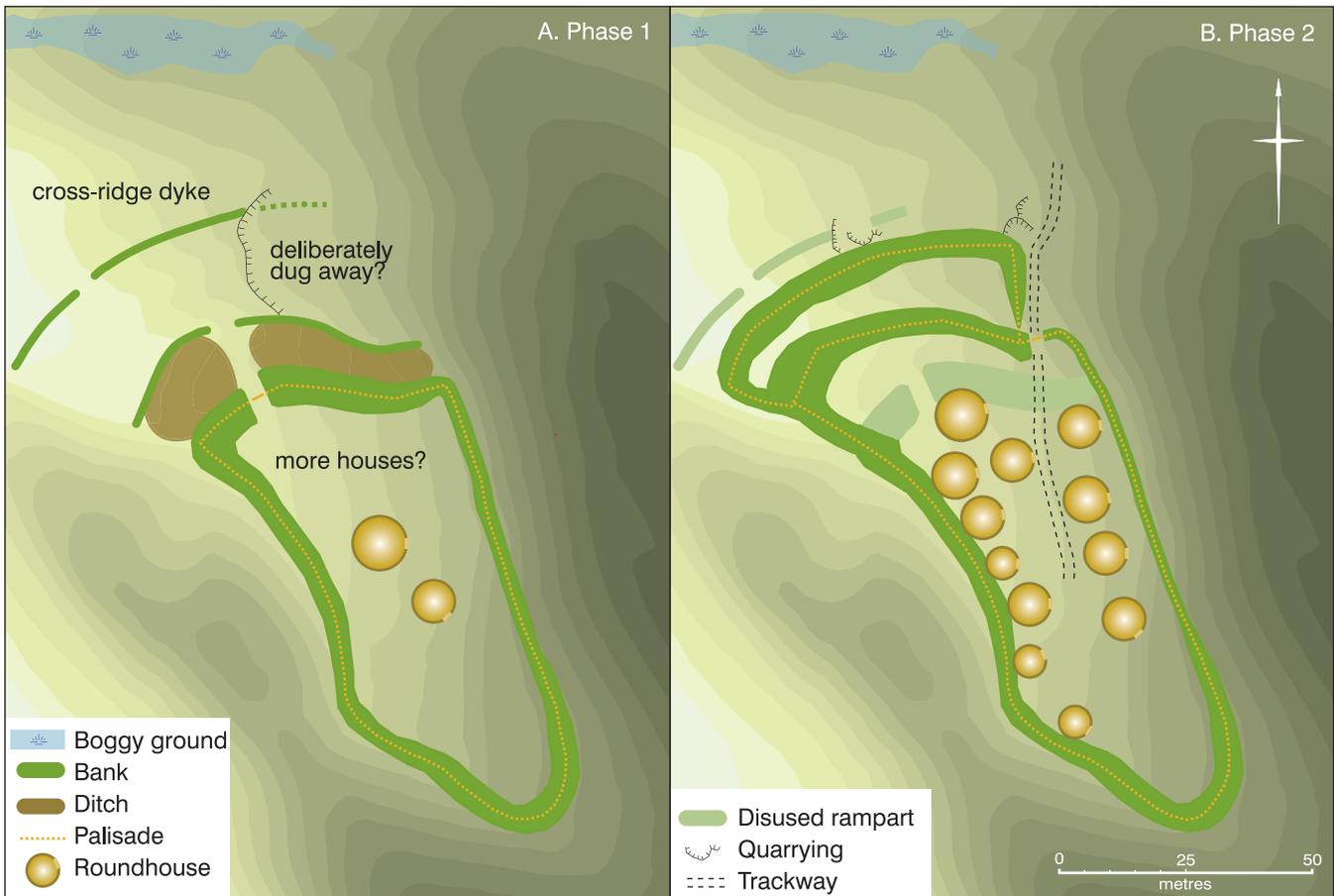
### What was village life like?

Where traces of a whole Iron Age settlement can be identified on the surface, for example at Glead's Cleugh, Wether Hill and Mid Hill, it is clear that the interiors of the hillforts would have been densely packed with roundhouses (Fig 5.8; *see* Figs 3.12 and 7.8). It is worth remembering that the ring grooves detectable on the surface do not represent the edge of the building but the line of the wall, beyond which overhanging eaves may have extended for almost 2m. So,

in some cases, there can have been very little space to move between the buildings. Access to doorways and movement around the settlement would have been restricted by the siting of the roundhouses themselves. This may help to explain why no evidence of any Iron Age boundaries has been identified inside any hillfort in the National Park, in striking contrast to the norm for the Roman Iron Age, when settlements within hillforts were routinely divided up by walls, hedges and fencelines, as Chapter 7 will show. Another possibility is that the inhabitants, perhaps all related to each other by blood, were such a close-knit community that they felt no need to subdivide the small space they shared. Overall, there is little variation in the size of roundhouses, suggesting that social relations were fairly egalitarian. At Yeavinger Bell, where the population must have been so large that they could not all have been so intimately connected, it is noticeable that the house sites are generally more widely spaced (*see* Fig 6.18).

The image of hillforts as little defended villages may well be accurate in many cases, but the picture is not always so

Fig 5.8  
Glead's Cleugh: a hillfort where the closely spaced roundhouses seem to have been arranged in two terraced rows.





*Fig 5.9  
The hillfort on Burnt Humbleton and its near neighbour on Green Humbleton both have impressive ramparts, which must have demanded a sizeable workforce, but neither hillfort can have contained more than a handful of roundhouses.*

straightforward. At Staw Hill, only two Iron Age houses can be detected within the rampart (see Fig 6.14A–B). Although Roman Iron Age houses may conceivably have destroyed the traces of one more, most of the rocky interior cannot have supported timber buildings. The story is similar with the hillforts on Green Humbleton and Burnt Humbleton in the Scottish Borders (Fig 5.9). Even the massive ramparts on Brough Law surrounded only a handful of houses (see Fig 2.27). Thus the communities housed within these Northumberland hillforts, all of which possess impressive ramparts, must have been tiny, perhaps numbering no more than three generations of a single family. Perhaps the inhabitants were able to call upon the labour of others who lived in unenclosed roundhouses outside the ramparts. Such buildings, isolated and exposed to the effects of medieval and later ploughing, would only be recognisable on the surface in exceptional circumstances.

### What was life indoors like?

So little excavation has been carried out within the National Park that we lack the raw data on which to base any discussion of life indoors. Yet even if many more excavations of roundhouses were carried out, it is likely that we would still not know for

certain. Human social values are spectacularly diverse and the roles played by individual members of Iron Age families can only be guessed at. There is no reason to assume, for example, that men were the heads of the household and oversaw farm work, nor that women were responsible for child-rearing, cooking and cloth-making. Life expectancy was probably not high and relatively few people would have reached what we now consider middle age, so the physically frailest family members may have been respected as the wisest and most powerful. Infant mortality would probably have been high, so children may not even have been regarded as fully alive until they had passed a certain age or rite of passage.

To flesh out the picture gained from the few excavations within the National Park, we need to refer to excavated roundhouses in the lowlands, and make deductions from surface remains. For example, many of the roundhouses that can be identified on the surface were large enough to accommodate three generations, if not an extended family of as many as twelve people.

Despite variable terrain, a high proportion of recognisable roundhouse doorways faced approximately east, echoing the trend for the hillfort gateways themselves. It could be inferred from this that doorways generally faced towards the hillfort entrance, but

this is not always the case; at Mid Hill, for example, several houses faced away from a west-facing entrance (see Fig 7.8B–C). Orienting the roundhouse doorway towards the east must have helped shield it from prevailing westerly winds and so protected the fireplace from sudden gusts that might spell disaster for thatched roofs.

Yet the pattern of orientation is often followed very strictly, and occurs all over Britain. Closer analysis shows that the orientations of Iron Age roundhouse doorways tend to cluster around the positions of sunrise on the spring and autumn equinoxes – due east – or the winter and summer solstices – respectively just north of south-east and just south of north-east (Oswald 1997; Fig 5.10). George Tate made exactly this observation following his excavations in 1861 at Grieve’s Ash, and concluded that ancient Britons had been involved in sun worship (Tate 1863b). The importance of the sunrise in particular may have been less straightforward: more a symbol of life and rebirth. The attraction of east is also understandable in a world before the magnetic compass: the word ‘oriented’ actually means ‘turned towards the dawn’.

Why is this observation important? In most societies where doorways are oriented in specific directions – and ethnography has recorded a surprisingly large number of such societies around the globe – the components of the building (including wall and door posts, roof, central hearth and various floor areas) often have symbolic meanings and are named, carved or painted to reflect these meanings. There may also be rules about which activities may be carried out in which parts of the building, and even about how people may move

about in it. Feng shui – lately a popular guide to the layout of home interiors in Britain – has its origins in mountainous regions of China, where it was customary to orient the doorways of houses southwards, and the layout of rooms worked in harmony with this. South was considered a lucky direction – wisely, for it was the direction from which cool summer breezes came, while north was the source of bitterly cold winter winds (Oliver 1987).

Because we are subconsciously familiar with how we should behave in our own society, it is easy to overlook the fact that we ourselves have rules that might seem bizarre to someone from a different culture. For example, we might be offended if a stranger came straight to our back door, and we would probably choose to entertain important guests in the dining room rather than at the kitchen table. Where the floor surfaces of Iron Age roundhouses have been well preserved, excavation can begin to reveal clues to the habits and rules that governed people’s lives within the house. These may have been completely alien to our own habits and rules.

Where there was an inner ring of vertical posts within the roundhouse, these may have marked the boundary between a peripheral space under the eaves and a central zone around the hearth. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, the posts may have defined segments of floor space radiating out from the centre. Lightweight screens or hangings, extending either between adjoining posts or between the posts and the outer wall, may have effectively subdivided the interior without leaving recognisable traces.

In the 1990s, finds recovered from the floor of a roundhouse buried beneath

Fig 5.10 (right)  
The orientation of roundhouse doorways on Yeavinger Bell.

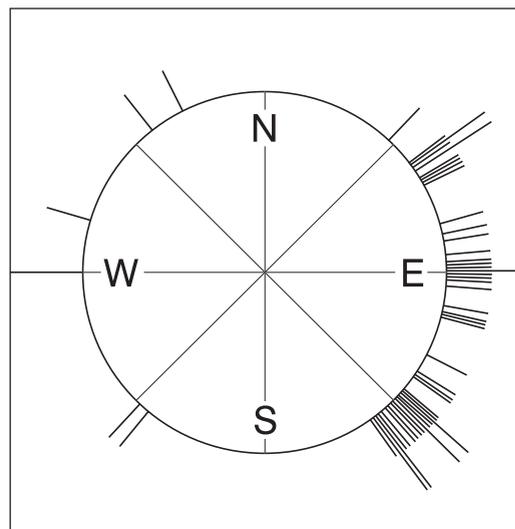
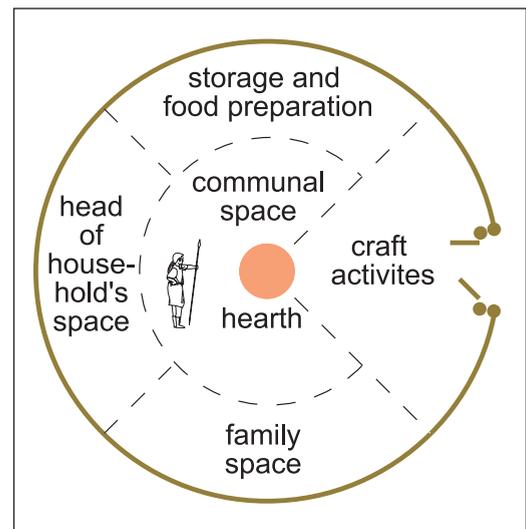


Fig 5.11 (far right)  
Zones within a roundhouse, a speculative interpretation based in part on excavations of a number of roundhouses in the British Isles where distinct patterns can be detected. Underlying this approach is an understanding, based on ethnographic studies, of how various cultures make use of space.



the Roman fort at South Shields (see Fig 1.4) suggested that the interior was divided into zones around a central hearth, with mattresses of bracken and heather arranged in a concentric strip around the periphery (Hodgson *et al* 2001). Close examination of the surface traces of large roundhouses in the Cheviots reveals that this peripheral strip is often slightly raised above the central part of the floor, like a continuous low bench. Both of the larger houses within the palisaded enclosure at High Knowes, on the other hand, had broad, shallow depressions immediately inside the ring grooves. George Jobey, who excavated the site, suggested that cattle might have been stalled around the perimeter of the larger buildings, facing inwards, and that the hollow might have resulted from repeated mucking out.

Excavations elsewhere seem to indicate that the zone opposite the doorway was where most items of metalwork and other exotic artefacts were lost, or perhaps deliberately deposited, by the occupants (Fig 5.11). It follows that this place may have been afforded the highest status, the place where the head of the household ate, greeted guests and slept. If stories were told, or songs were sung, or music played to pass the long hours of winter darkness, it may be that the performer was invited to stand in the place of high status, lit by the fire (Fig 5.12). One side of the roundhouse, to the right or left of the head of the household's place, may have been considered more important than the other. Therefore, there may have been a correct way of moving around the hearth to and from the door, depending on the circumstances and on the status of the individual.

Craftwork and preparation of food often seem to have been carried out just inside the door, where the light was brightest. Craft activities may have provided a welcome form of relaxation or even entertainment, after a hard day's labour in the fields, or at constructing or remodeling the ramparts. Ceramics were apparently not highly valued in Northumberland in the earlier part of the Iron Age, for it is relatively rare to find even small fragments of pottery. For inhabitants of the north-eastern Cheviots, the nearest source of high-quality clay would have been the Milfield Plain, although poorer-quality raw materials, suitable for making cooking pots and the like, would have been available in many valleys. Most vessels that have been found are crude, utilitarian cooking vessels, made without the use of a wheel.

Woodworking, basketry, cloth-making and leather-working, on the other hand, were almost certainly crafts in which Iron Age people excelled, so there would have been no shortage of containers (Fig 5.13). The tools required for these crafts, such as spindle-whorls, bone needles, knives and chisels, sometimes survive, but the actual objects created, because they were made of organic materials, are very rare discoveries. Within the roundhouse beneath the Roman fort at South Shields, archaeologists discovered part of a finely made basket which had carbonised, together with some of the grain it had last been used to carry, when the house was destroyed by fire at some point between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC.

In some ways, the pattern of life within the house may be seen as a replica in miniature of life within the hillfort. The fact that many hillforts shared the circular plans of the roundhouses is unlikely to be mere coincidence. The doorway of the house, like the gateway of the fort, was the only point of transition between the security of the interior and the danger of the outside world. Within the house, just as within the interior of the hillfort, there seem to have been very few physical boundaries separating the occupants, although everything and everyone had a proper place.

### What was the Iron Age diet like?

In recent years, archaeology has received an exciting boost from the discovery that isotopes preserved in ancient human bone can reveal key information on diet. This in turn can tell us something about cultural values. Unfortunately, bones are rarely preserved in the harsh conditions and often acidic soil of the National Park's uplands, but enough research has been done elsewhere to allow a general picture of Iron Age diet to emerge.

Wheat, rye, barley and oats were almost certainly staple foodstuffs, while eggs and milk products, including cheese, were probably the main sources of protein. Cereal crops would have been ground into flour for making bread, probably using millstones made from the relatively soft rock of the Fell Sandstone Hills. Millstones (querns), operated by hand, came in two types: saddle querns, in which an upper stone was pushed and pulled across a lower one, and rotary querns, in which the upper stone, often shaped like a bun or beehive, could be turned with a projecting wooden



handle (Fig 5.14). Cereal crops may have been fermented to make beer, and were probably also boiled to make a porridge-like mash. Greens, peas and beans may have been grown as well but, unlike cereal crops, their seeds are seldom preserved, so it is difficult to be certain.

Livestock were much more than sources of meat: they provided milk, from which cheese and a spectrum of other products could be made. Until well into the historic period, sheep's cheese was far more common than cheese made from cows' milk. The level of meat in the diet seems to have been quite low, from which we may infer that only on rare occasions were livestock slaughtered, or wild animals hunted. Doubtless these meals – perhaps feasts in which the whole community shared – were timed to celebrate special events, such as religious festivals. Fish, either from the sea or from local streams, was apparently eaten even more rarely.

Wild herbs must have been gathered and dried to provide variety. Wild fruits, rosehips and the haws of hawthorns and other species, eaten raw or cooked, would have been a key source of sugar. Honey, from wild bees or managed hives, must have been even more highly prized. Salt, made on the coast by evaporating seawater, was probably valued above all other commodities, and traded far inland. The old trackway known as Salter's Road, which passes through the north-eastern Cheviots from north-west to south-east, may be among the most ancient routes in the area.

In short, Iron Age meals must have been essentially bland and repetitive. Recent studies have highlighted a dramatic contrast with the rich and varied diet enjoyed by Roman soldiers and native people living under the umbrella of their empire. Texts recovered from the fort at Vindolanda (see Fig 1.4) record 46 different foods, including venison, olives, wine, pork and oysters.

### Where did people get their water?

This is often the first question that modern visitors to hillforts ask. In part, the question reflects the mistaken belief that hillforts were strongholds designed to withstand long sieges (those in the National Park were definitely not, as noted in Chapter 4). In part, the question is also a reminder of how heavily modern western societies rely upon a ready supply of running water. Obviously the human body's requirement

for water has not changed, but right up until the middle of the 20th century, people in Britain used far less water for their daily washing and chores than they do today. In the Iron Age, much of a family's requirement may have been supplied by channeling rainwater into barrels or leather bags from the huge surface areas of round-house roofs. If this was not enough, water could be carried from elsewhere. The people of many developing countries are accustomed to walking long distances every day to wash clothes and bring back drinking water, while livestock are driven down to ponds or streams. In what is now the the National Park, natural water sources were never far away.



*Fig 5.12 (opposite)*  
In the Iron Age, and indeed right up until the modern era, music, singing and storytelling, as well as craft activities, must have been important means of entertainment and education. Many of the stories and songs probably concerned the deeds of gods, heroes and ancestors, both real and imaginary. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

*Fig 5.13*  
Willows can be pruned back hard so that they produce masses of young stems ideal for basket making. These specimens are on private land at the mouth of the valley of the College Burn.



*Fig 5.14*  
Excavation of an Iron Age quern (millstone) near Ingram. This is the upper of two stones, and would have been rotated by hand. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

Another common question concerns the disposal of human sewage and other waste. Being an excellent fertiliser, much of this waste would have been collected and spread on cultivated ground. Other domestic waste may also have been heaped up and carted away from time to time, to be spread on the fields. As a result, the interiors of houses and settlements may have been surprisingly clean. Ironically, much of the household waste that could tell us about life indoors may now be scattered across the open hill-sides.

### Did people believe in gods and an afterlife?

It is notoriously difficult for archaeologists to reach an understanding of ancient religious beliefs and the rituals associated with them, largely because these beliefs and rituals may have been utterly different from our own, and have either left no material traces or traces whose significance we completely fail to recognise.

Druids are a good example. Druids certainly existed at the end of the Iron Age, and are often thought of as the priests of a uniform Celtic religion. Something is known of the spectrum of gods and religious beliefs at that time in parts of mainland Europe, but next to nothing about those in Britain, still less about those in Northumberland (Fig 5.15). It is not known whether the druids were purely a phenomenon of the last century before Christ, or whether their

power began to grow much earlier in the Iron Age. It is quite possible that they did not exist throughout Britain, for what little we know indicates that many gods, and the cults associated with them, were very localised, sometimes relating to a specific natural feature such as a spring or a wood. While some druids were important political figures, there are hints that others may have lived hermit-like existences, their high status perhaps marked only by long hair and robes. The chances of positively identifying such individuals, or the places where they lived and worshipped, are incredibly slim.

Unlike the Bronze Age, the Iron Age is a period for which remains of the dead, and monuments constructed to their memory, are extremely scarce. Until the late Iron Age, the people of only one region of Britain – the Yorkshire Wolds – practiced the rite of burial and erected individual monuments to the dead, and this only continued for about 300 years, from the 4th century BC. We are therefore faced with the tricky problem of explaining what happened to millions of Britons who died during the Iron Age. Particularly with regard to Northumberland National Park, we must build reasonable theories based largely on the absence of evidence.

One of the most important clues comes from the rich metalwork of the Iron Age. The majority of really spectacular artefacts found in Britain have been deliberately deposited in lakes, streams and bogs, a rite which had its origins in the Bronze Age (Fig 5.16). For example, an ornate bronze cauldron, of late Bronze Age or early Iron Age manufacture, was discovered in the late 19th century during the draining of bogs near Ewartly Shank.

Added to this are the occasional discoveries of so-called ‘bog bodies’ of Iron Age date, like the red-bearded man found in a crouching position in peat deposits at Lindow Moss in Cheshire (and inevitably named ‘Pete Marsh’ by archaeologists). He had been ritually executed and his body placed into what was then a pool of standing water. The tantalising evidence suggests that water, perhaps because of its reflective qualities or because it appears to continually renew itself, was seen as a point of contact with the gods and therefore as a gateway to an afterlife. Why have only a few such bodies been found? The most likely answer appears to be that the execution of Pete Marsh – perhaps a warrior or druid whose sacrifice was important –



*Fig 5.15*  
This faint carving of Roman date, found near Chesters fort on Hadrian's Wall (see Fig 1.4), depicts the Britons' war god, whose name the Romans transcribed as Cocidius. The discovery was made in 2005 by a local enthusiast, during a project to record Neolithic and Bronze Age rock art in Northumberland and Durham.



*Fig 5.16  
A bronze neck ornament or torc, discovered in boggy ground 2.1m below the surface during the digging of a well near Stichill in the Scottish borders, in 1747. The torc and two ornate bronze armlets that accompanied it are thought to have been ritually deposited in a spring or bog at some point in the 2nd century AD. (© The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)*

was exceptional. It is possible that the normal practice was cremation; the ashes were evidently not buried or retained in ceramic vessels, so they may have been scattered on water. It would seem that this practice, perhaps with many local variations, extended throughout Britain.

In southern Britain, single human bones – typically lower jaws, pelvic girdles or shin-bones – are occasionally found in what at first seem surprising places: the foundation trenches of houses or in storage pits. For many years it was thought that these isolated bones represented full burials that had subsequently been disturbed and dispersed. Now it appears that they fit into a wider pattern in which objects of all kinds were treated as offerings, placed in the ground at special locations to obtain, or give thanks for, good fortune from the spirit world. Such offerings include dogs' skeletons, bird wings, broken pots and millstones, bronze

brooches, human bones and probably countless joints of meat and cups of beer – indeed anything of value to the people making the offering.

This may also explain why few Iron Age temples or other obvious signs of religious behaviour have been identified. Religion seems to have been part of every aspect of daily life, with gods and spirits to be found in the fertile ground, in the sun and bright stars, in swooping eagles and ancient trees, and in the carved doorposts of roundhouses.

### **What did Iron Age people look like?**

Around the time of Christ, the Greek historian and geographer Strabo remarked that 'the people of Britain are taller than the Gauls and not so blond', although it is unlikely that he or his contemporaries had met many people from northern Britain.

Fig 5.17  
 The Dying Gaul – a Roman copy of a Greek original sculpted around the 2nd century BC – is one of the few contemporary images of an Iron Age warrior. (Museum of Classical Archaeology, Cambridge)



In the popular imagination all Iron Age men resemble the warriors pictured in Figure 1.6, their semi-naked bodies covered with elaborate tattoos, dyed blue with woad, while Iron Age women had flame-red hair and wore long woollen dresses in drab tones of brown. Regrettably, neither the study of surface remains nor excavation adds much to these preconceptions.

We can guess that, as hard-working upland farmers, few Iron Age people living within what is now the National Park would have been able to afford the expensive trappings of *The Dying Gaul* (Fig 5.17): his sword, shield, horn and, above all, his *torc*, a neck ornament made of twisted strands of precious metal (see Fig 5.16). *The Dying Gaul* himself is an inhabitant of the Mediterranean region; opportunities to wear sandals and go bare-chested must have been rare in Northumberland. For both sexes, leather boots, woollen trousers, fur

gloves and hats would have been more appropriate for much of the year, so if body tattoos were indeed popular, they would seldom have been on display.

We can guess, too, that poor nutrition would have made the inhabitants of this region relatively short by modern standards. A lifetime of hard manual labour would doubtless have kept most people looking slim and muscular, but equally would have resulted in many degenerative illnesses and unhealed injuries, so few would have looked as physically perfect as *The Dying Gaul*. As to hair, you will have to use your imagination to interpret Strabo's comment that the British were 'not so blond'. In any case, it would be misleading to conjure up an image of a 'typical' Iron Age person: over the course of 700 years and across the vast expanse of the National Park, the appearance of individuals must have varied enormously.

## 6

# Hillforts in the landscape

It would be easy for a modern visitor to imagine that hillforts were always remote and isolated monuments, as most appear today (Fig 6.1). This is far from the truth: in its day, each hillfort sat at the centre of a web of activity that stretched across the surrounding land. The problem is that most of these activities – meetings with inhabitants of other hillforts, hunting expeditions, religious festivals, games – are, by their nature, difficult for an archaeologist to identify. Evidence for day-to-day activities such as trade and exchange may be revealed by excavation, although even exchange is hard to detect in a society with no coinage and in which most exchanged goods were perishable. Where surface remains are the main source of available evidence, many everyday goings-on are simply impossible to detect: we can only offer informed guesses. However, one activity that was of enormous importance to the occupants of hillforts has left traces that are still visible today: farming.

### ‘Celtic cowboys’ and the role of livestock in Iron Age farming

Until fairly recently, it was believed that Northumberland’s rural economy during the Iron Age was based almost exclusively on cattle. The prehistorian Stuart Piggott coined the term ‘Celtic cowboys’ to describe communities that he believed were constantly raiding their neighbours to enlarge both their herds and their fearsome reputations (Piggott 1958). He based his theory primarily on early medieval tales about the heroic warriors of Celtic Ireland, although he must also have had in mind the well-documented times of the Border Reivers, who terrorised the Anglo-Scottish border region for some 200 years up until about AD 1630, continuing even after the union of the crowns in 1603.

In a similar vein, it has been suggested that some hillforts, including the one overlooking Middle Dean Burn, may have been deliberately ‘hidden’ in sheltered positions away from the hilltops to deceive cattle raiders. It is debatable how well this could have worked in practice and, in any case, most hillforts were built in locations that

flaunted their own existence. The hillfort above Middle Dean Burn is only hidden from certain directions and can be clearly seen throughout the natural approach from the Breamish Valley (Fig 6.2).

Other evidence for ‘Celtic cowboys’ also looks unreliable on closer consideration. George Jobey believed that in the many cases where hillforts had two widely separated circuits of rampart, or where lengths of rampart seemed to form annexes to the main circuit, these could be interpreted as corrals for cattle. Current research suggests that Jobey’s theory was not correct in most cases. Some outer perimeters clearly were built as corrals, but were not added until much later, as described in Chapter 7 (Fig 6.3). Other lengths of rampart that Jobey interpreted as annexes, such as the outlying stretches at both ends of the hillfort on Yeavinger Bell and the one outside the impressive rampart on Great Hetha, have proved to be remnants of earlier defences, which had fallen into disuse when the inner circuit was constructed (*see* Fig 7.15C).

Nevertheless some cattle, thought to resemble today’s Dexter breed in size and appearance, almost certainly were kept. Perhaps larger breeds – similar to the ancient herd of wild cattle which has roamed the former deer park of Chillingham Castle, near Wooler, since the 13th century – were also kept (Fig 6.4). Cattle skulls found within the deer park suggest that the animals were once much larger, and genetic analysis hints that their ancestors were aurochs, the now-extinct prehistoric wild ox. Iron Age sheep and goats would have had more in common with ancient breeds like the small, wiry Soay than with the relatively large and long-haired beasts that graze the hillsides today (Fig 6.5). It is tempting to imagine that the magnificent but shy feral goats that wander the uplands behind Yeavinger Bell might be descendants of ancient farm animals, but it is generally agreed that most were introduced, or escaped from captivity, in recent centuries (Fig 6.6).

Meat may have been a luxury in the Iron Age diet, as noted in Chapter 5, but livestock provided more than just meat and dairy products. Cattle may have pulled carts

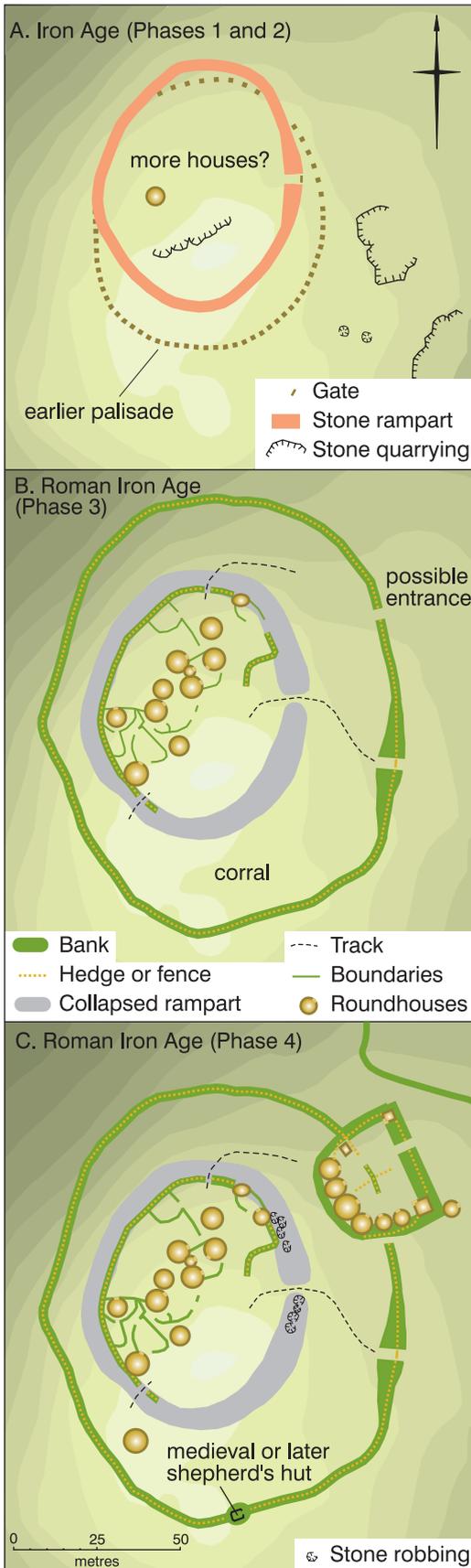
## HILLFORTS

*Fig 6.1  
English Heritage field survey  
in progress on Humbleton  
Hill in April 1997; the red  
Land Rover parked outside  
the ramparts (almost halfway  
down the left-hand edge of  
this figure) gives an idea of  
scale. (Photograph by Tim  
Gates. Copyright reserved)*



*Fig 6.2  
The hillfort above Middle  
Dean Burn has been  
described as 'hidden',  
reflecting a view that  
hillforts were used to corral  
livestock. In fact, the  
hillfort is very conspicuous  
throughout the natural  
approach along the floor  
of the Breamish Valley.*





and ploughs. Wool from sheep and goats, and hides from cattle and other species, would have been used to make containers and clothing. Horns and bones would have been worked to manufacture items such as needles, tool handles and musical instruments. Gut could have been turned into strong cord, and bladders into waterproof containers. Even dung would not have gone to waste: sheep dung is an extremely rich fertiliser.

The routes of early trackways suggest that by the Roman Iron Age, if not before, livestock were moved each year from lowland paddocks and stalls, where they were kept through the winter, to summer pasture on the hilltops and moors. This practice, known as transhumance, still goes on in mountainous parts of mainland Europe and further afield. Some hillforts may not have been permanently occupied at all, serving instead as seasonal encampments for lowland herders. It is even possible that whole

Fig 6.3 (left)  
The corral around the hillfort on West Hill was built after the Iron Age ramparts had collapsed. Note that all the circuits retained a pronounced 'tilt' across the contours, despite successive redesigns, apparently in order to make the hillfort more conspicuous from the valley floor.

Fig 6.4  
Members of the extraordinary herd of ancient wild cattle, confined for nearly 800 years within the former deer park of Chillingham Castle.



Fig 6.5  
A small Soay sheep is dwarfed by a ram belonging to an even more ancient breed, the Loghtan (meaning 'mouse-brown' in the Manx Celtic language). Loghtan, reimported from the Isle of Man in modern times, were once common on upland pastures; in harsher conditions, rams would not have grown so large. Both sexes have multiple horns and the wool is excellent for spinning and weaving. The wiry Soay, which also provides good wool, is noted for its hardiness.



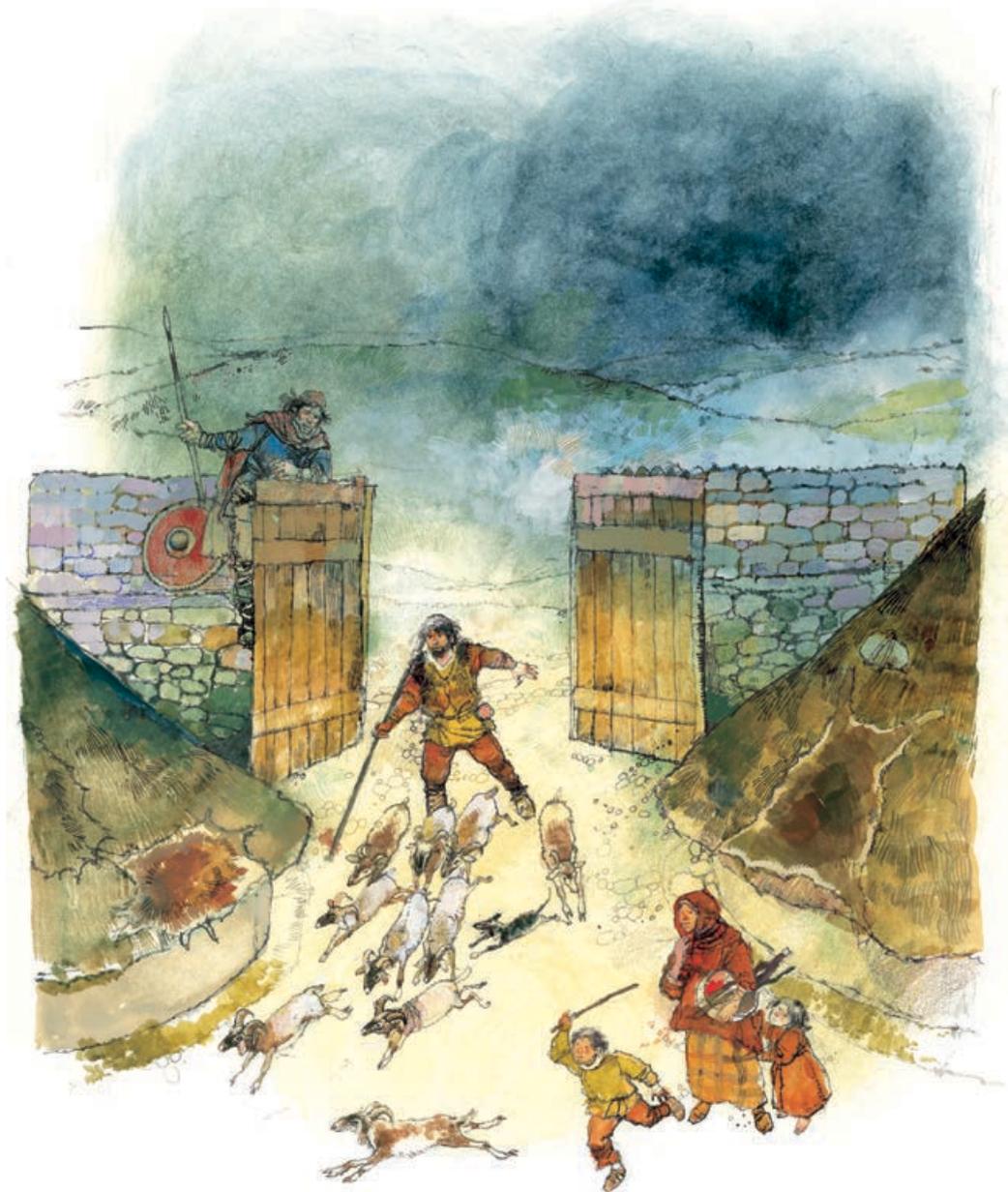
Fig 6.6  
Cheviot wild goats, generally shy and elusive, descend onto the pasture fields around the Yeavinger Bell hillfort towards dusk. Intriguingly, Gefrin, the oldest recorded name for Yeavinger Bell, is believed to derive from gafr, meaning 'goat' in the Welsh variant of the Celtic language.



communities migrated into the hills to pass the summer months (Fig 6.7). Regardless of the details, which must have varied from community to community, it is certain that the passage of the seasons would have ruled the rhythms of life for the whole population and shaped the appearance of the countryside at various times of year.

In historic times, livestock farmers throughout northern England chose Ellenmas (3 May) as the day for driving their beasts out onto the unenclosed hilltops. The day took its name from St Helena, mother of Constantine, proclaimed Emperor of Rome in York on 25 July 306. Constantine was later responsible for making Christianity the Empire's official religion and converting

Helena herself, thus putting her on the road to sainthood. Despite the overtly Christian nature of Ellenmas, Helena's connection with Britain, and her mother-figure status, hint at pre-Christian origins for this festival. In parts of Scotland, even into historic times, Ellenmas was explicitly linked to the Celtic festival of Beltane (meaning 'bright fire'), when cattle were driven between pairs of bonfires to purify and protect them over the summer months. Most farming communities in northern England brought their cattle back from the hills on All Hallows' Day, 1 November. The preceding night, All Hallows Eve, which we know today as Hallowe'en, was marked in the Celtic calendar by the festival of Samhain ('summer's end').



*Fig 6.7*  
Wolves still roamed Northumberland's hills in the Iron Age, so sheep and cattle would have needed protection. Some enclosures once identified as corrals can now be shown to pre-date the hillforts to which they were originally thought to be attached, while others are Roman Iron Age additions. Thus it seems likely that, at least during the Iron Age, flocks would have been brought within the ramparts overnight. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

## Icons of the Iron Age: horses

The Iron Age is inextricably linked, in the popular imagination, with horses. Mounted warriors galloping into battle against the invading Romans; Boudicca's horse-drawn, scythe-wheeled chariot; the ancient white horse carved into the chalk at Uffington in Wiltshire; horses' skulls buried as ritual offerings: all these images may spring to mind. Metal fittings, dating to around the 3rd century BC, from chariots drawn by pairs of horses, have been found in several places in the Scottish Borders. George Tate's 1861 excavations at Chesters discovered the bones of a horse within the hillfort (Tate 1863b).

In the days when archaeologists believed that cattle were central to Iron Age upland farming, it seemed likely that the region's 'Celtic cowboys' must have lived in the saddle. Horse meat might have been eaten, horse hair could have been used for stitching cloth, and horse manure might have fertilised the crops. But the recognition that cattle were not all-important in economic terms makes it worth reconsidering the importance of the horse.

Warfare might seem another obvious role for horses. Here again, however, the recognition that hillforts were not primarily military structures calls into question the long-held belief that warfare was a normal aspect of Iron Age life (Fig 6.8). The involvement of horses in battle may have been rare in the uplands of Northumberland, where any combat would have taken place on steep slopes, offering mounted warriors little advantage. A horse, like shiny bronze weapons and fearsome headdresses, may have been just another showy possession with which to overawe the opposition. This view is supported by Julius Caesar's evident puzzlement that mounted British warriors terrified his troops with the speed of their approach, but then dismounted to fight, though he conceded that they did so with great speed and agility.

Iron Age farming communities in what is now the National Park would have had to weigh up the advantages of owning a racing car or a tractor: the horse, an intelligent animal offering the potential for speed and long-distance transport, or the ox, a stupid animal that could provide milk and horn, and heave the plough through the stoniest ground and the cart up the steepest slopes. A solid wooden wheel found at Blair Drummond in Perthshire, dating to around



1000 BC in the late Bronze Age, probably belonged to an ox-drawn cart. It seems unlikely that many farmers would have had much reason to travel over long distances or any need for great speed, so the choice may not have been difficult. Horses would probably have been luxury items which most people had little use for and could ill afford.

Fig 6.8

*Reconstruction of an Iron Age horse-drawn chariot, based on excavated examples from south-eastern Britain.*

## Ploughing the fields

For the vast majority of Iron Age men, women and children, one activity above all would have been a key part of everyday life: arable farming (Fig 6.9). Undoubtedly the family would have come together in spring and autumn for the agricultural year's most vital and labour-intensive tasks: planting and harvesting. These times of desperate hope and exhausted relief (or of fearful anticipation of a difficult winter) may well have been marked by festivals or ceremonies.

Arable agriculture, especially in hilly terrain, leaves traces on the ground surface which, if left undisturbed, can survive for thousands of years. It is partly the recognition of these traces, followed by the gradual

Fig 6.9

*Tasks for all the family: ploughing and sowing in spring; reaping, gathering and threshing in autumn.*



*Fig 6.10*  
*Lynchets on the slope below*  
*Ring Chesters, revealed by*  
*low sunlight and a light*  
*covering of snow.*



acceptance that they might be of prehistoric origin, which has led to the rejection of Stuart Piggott's engaging picture of 'Celtic cowboys'.

Ploughing on a slope drags soil away from the top of the field, so that the surface is gradually cut away, eventually forming a step, known as a 'negative lynchet', along the field's upper edge. Along the bottom edge of the field, soil builds up to form a raised step or 'positive lynchet' (Fig 6.10). Because deeper soil retains more nutrients and moisture, allowing crops to grow longer, stronger roots, farmers in hilly country around the world actively encourage the build-up of positive lynchets by constructing low walls along the lower edges of each field, so that in due course the fields become fully terraced. The true nature of such terraces in

Northumberland, previously interpreted as the traces of ancient rivers or as artificial platforms for watching druidic rituals, was first explicitly recognised in 1861, during a visit to the Breamish Valley by the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club.

As noted in Chapter 3, arable farming on the fringes of the uplands probably began in the later Neolithic period and intensified during the Bronze Age. Many of these pre-Iron Age fields doubtless continued to be ploughed in the Iron Age, their lynchets gradually growing larger. As a result, it is impossible to tell at a glance whether lynchets are of Iron Age or earlier origin. The President of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club cautiously observed that they must have originated 'at some very remote period'. In some cases, for example at Staw Hill and Mid Hill, it is simply the proximity of the fields to a hillfort that allows us to suggest they may have been cultivated in the Iron Age (*see* Fig 6.14A–B).

Terraces and lynchets are not the only visible signs of ancient agriculture. In the course of many years of exploring the Cheviots, archaeologists began to recognise faint traces of metre-wide cultivation ridges separated by slight furrows. From the air, under optimum lighting conditions, the closely spaced ridges give the ground a corduroy look, leading archaeologists to name this newly discovered form of cultivation 'cord rig' (Topping 1989). On the ground,



*Fig 6.11*  
*Extreme measures to*  
*capture on film the faint*  
*traces of Iron Age 'cord rig'*  
*cultivation near the hillfort*  
*on Wether Hill.*

the ridges are so ephemeral that they had previously been overlooked, or misinterpreted as artefacts of 18th- or 19th-century land improvement. Even now it takes an expert eye to recognise the surface traces, which can easily be mistaken for sheep trails or quad-bike tracks (Fig 6.11).

In some places, only very small patches of cord rig are identifiable, for example within and around the hillfort on Hayhope Knowe, where three separate tiny plots are identifiable. One plot may have been in use at the same time as the earthen rampart, but extends across a disused house platform and the circuit of palisade within the rampart. Elsewhere, for example on the Otterburn Ranges (see Fig 1.4), vast swathes of cord rig survive, covering entire hillsides. At Wether Hill and elsewhere, totally smooth areas, where the species of grass are noticeably different, are also identifiable (see Fig 2.32). These apparently represent areas where farmers deliberately filled in the furrows and allowed the plot to lie fallow.

Cord rig has now been discovered throughout the region, with examples as high as 420m above sea level. Careful excavation has shown that in some cases the ground was first broken with a simple plough or *ard*, after which the ridges were banked up by hand, probably using a tool like a large hoe or mattock. An ard has a small, pointed blade to break up the ground, but no ploughshare to turn the soil over, so the additional hand digging would have been essential to finish the job. The use of hand tools has given the ridges a slightly erratic line, distinguishing them from traces left by later ploughing. Crucially, radiocarbon analysis of tiny carbon fragments excavated from the bases of the shallow furrows suggests that cord rig cultivation was practiced throughout the Iron Age. The closest modern parallel is the so-called 'lazy bed' technique once used to grow potatoes and other crops in Ireland and parts of western Scotland. Offering deeper soil and better drainage, lazy beds are well suited to growing crops in upland areas.

### How later agriculture distorts the picture

Looking at the surviving examples of cultivation believed to be of prehistoric date, it would be easy to get the impression that all Iron Age arable farming took place on hilltops and remote valley sides. This may recall the discussion in Chapter 4, of the distribution of



hillforts surviving as earthworks. As with earthworks, most recognisable traces of prehistoric agriculture only survive in places that later agriculture never reached.

In the period between the desertion of Roman Iron Age settlements and the agricultural expansion of the Middle Ages, it seems likely that large expanses of arable land in the National Park's uplands were abandoned for a long period, perhaps almost 1,000 years, and reverted to pasture. When population levels rose again and the climate reached its optimum around the middle of the 13th century, people once more began to expand the limits of their farmland. On the plateau to the west of Mid Hill, medieval cultivation reached as high as 300m, possibly during the 13th century, although this is still well below the high-tide mark of prehistoric cultivation. Valley floors and gentle slopes easily accessible from medieval villages, where the land was most fertile and easy to plough, were the first to be reclaimed by medieval agriculture. Land which had been favoured for crops in prehistory was especially attractive to medieval farmers because the hard work of clearing the ground of trees and large stones had already been done, and here in many cases medieval ploughing eventually erased every trace of what had existed there before. On higher slopes, terraces and lynchets formed in prehistory were often reused, so that instead of being ploughed away they actually grew and acquired steeper profiles. All the 'cultivation terraces' marked on Ordnance Survey maps are, at least in their superficial form, products of medieval and later ploughing (Fig 6.12).

*Fig 6.12*  
Agricultural terraces overlooking the Bowmont Water in southern Scotland may have originated in prehistory, but the strip lynchets left by medieval and later ploughing have distorted their original size and shape.



*Fig 6.13  
Durham University's  
excavation in progress in  
1999, examining  
agricultural terraces on a  
slope below the hillfort on  
Brough Law. (Courtesy of  
Northumberland National  
Park Authority)*

Are these conclusions, which are all based on studies of surface remains, just speculation? Can we really know whether medieval cultivation terraces conceal lynchets whose origins lie in the Iron Age or even earlier? Between 1997 and 1999, a team from Durham University excavated a section across a series of terraces on the slope below the hillfort on Brough Law, in an attempt to establish their date once and for all (Frodsham and Waddington 2004; Fig 6.13). Predictably, little of the evidence was clear-cut, for countless seasons of ploughing had repeatedly stirred up the soil, moving artefacts and fragments of charcoal – crucial for radiocarbon dating – downwards as well as upwards through the

ploughsoil. But the excavation seems to have confirmed the impression gained from surface traces elsewhere, that ploughing may have begun in earnest in the Bronze Age, around 1600 BC, at least 1,000 years before most hillforts were constructed.

## What did the National Park look like in the Iron Age?

A pessimist might argue that an understanding of the nature and extent of prehistoric farming tells us little about how the Iron Age countryside would actually have looked. Agriculture took place for at least 2,000 years before the Roman invasion and we have no way of telling which fields were being cultivated at any one time, which were just lying fallow for a year or two, and which had been permanently abandoned hundreds of years before. Often, the only reason to link a hillfort with a specific area of farmed land is proximity (Fig 6.14). The evidence simply does not permit a snapshot of the countryside at a specific point in time, and probably never will.

An optimist, however, could draw a few important conclusions from the available evidence. Hillforts clearly lay within what we would recognise today as a farming landscape. It seems likely that even by the Iron Age, there was relatively little original wild-wood left. Scrub may have regenerated on abandoned fields, but the higher hills, including some occupied by hillforts, were probably among the last areas where the ancient wildwood survived the efforts of prehistoric farmers. Narrow, inaccessible valleys may also have been wooded: the valley of the Harthope Burn, for instance, where there are no hillforts and little other evidence of prehistoric settlement.

This observation must be placed alongside the picture that emerges from our understanding of hillfort defences and roundhouses. Each timber palisade or box rampart would have required dozens, or perhaps even hundreds, of young or mature oak trees, implying the existence of extensive woodland. Modern reconstructions of roundhouses have also led archaeologists to think more about how people would have obtained the necessary quantities of timber. Mature woodland may have been sufficiently plentiful on hilltops near the hillforts to permit initial construction work, but what would have happened when the time came to rebuild or refurbish the defences, as clearly happened in many cases? Did people

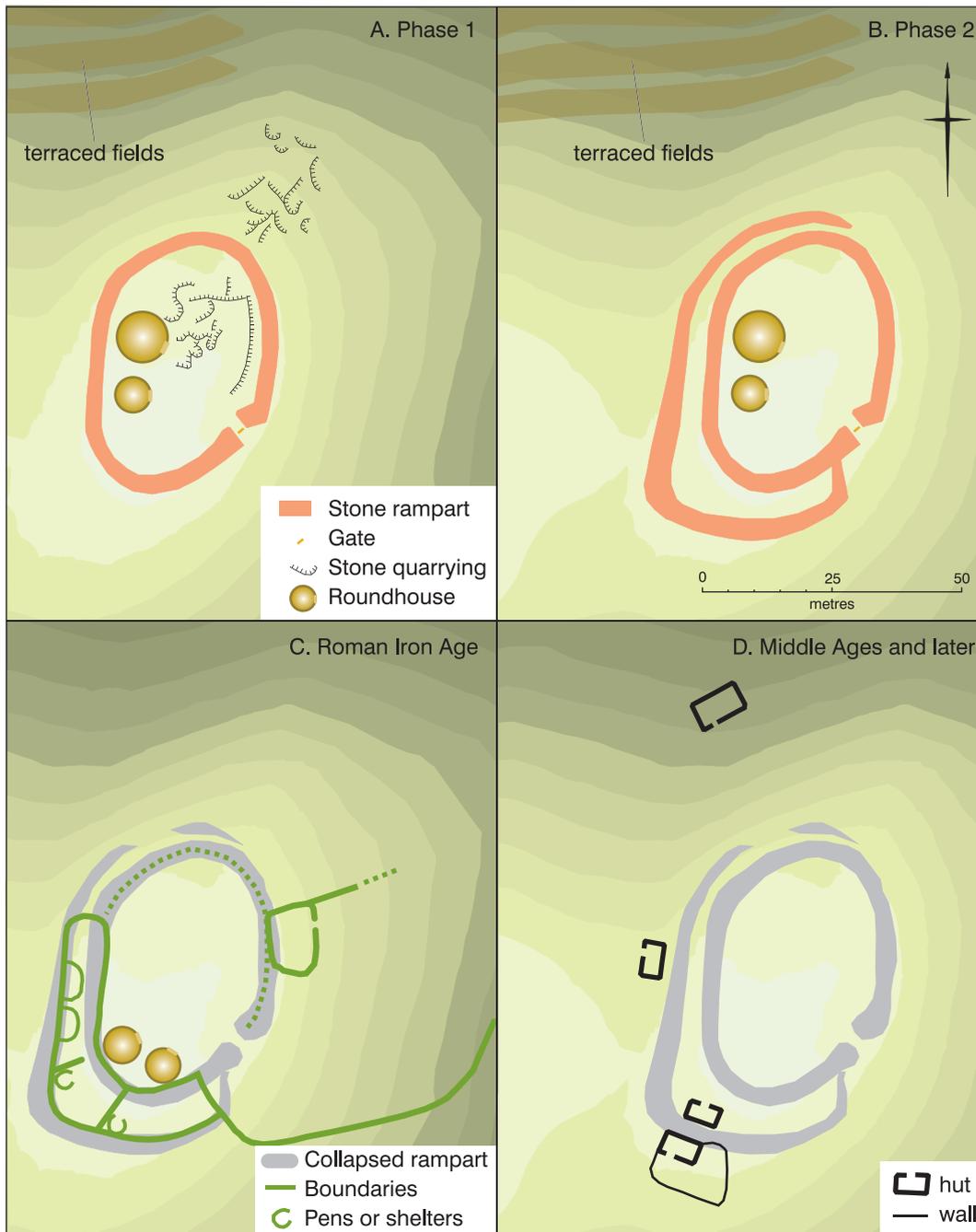


Fig 6.14  
*Staw Hill is one of several sites where land farmed at some point in prehistory lies close to a hillfort but far from any other traces of prehistoric settlement. In these cases, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the hillfort and the farmland were linked.*

have to travel further and further afield to find suitable trees, and use their oxen to drag the timber back?

It seems more likely that communities would have actively managed patches of woodland and conserved these important resources, by pollarding and coppicing the trees. Examples of veteran pollards and coppices are rare in Northumberland today, although many medieval examples survive elsewhere in Britain. Pollarding involves cutting through the tree's main trunk above the

height at which browsing deer, wild goats and domesticated livestock can reach the rash of new shoots which immediately spring up (Fig 6.15). This may have been the most effective method for managing oak and ash, which would have been suitable for building and which respond well to this drastic form of pruning. Hazel, the best material for walls and roof frames, is best coppiced – cut right down to ground level – in order to maximise the next crop of long straight stems.



*Fig 6.15*  
An ash tree, planted in the 19th century as part of a hedgeline, and pollarded in modern times.

As in the Middle Ages, it may have been necessary to protect the new shoots of coppiced woodlands within artificial barriers. Today, discarded trimmings from coppicing are often used to build so-called ‘dead hedges’ around the trees, but this is usually necessary only because ancient woodland boundaries have not been maintained. Traditionally, all cut material would have been put to use, for example as firewood, leaving almost no waste. For many centuries, hawthorn has been planted to create livestock-proof hedges. These trees respond well to coppicing and in addition can be ‘laid’ – partially cut through and bent almost to the ground – so that the thorny mature stems form a nearly impenetrable barrier to protect new shoots growing from the stump. Hedges may therefore have been planted to protect and shelter woodlands and fields and, if so, boundaries would have become more permanent and the Iron Age

countryside would have begun to look similar to parts of Northumberland today.

Woodland management, like other forms of farming, would have changed the appearance of the rural landscape from season to season. To work best and to avoid killing the tree, pollarding needs to be carried out in late autumn or winter, while the tree is dormant. Hazel is also best cut in late autumn and early winter, for in spring and summer the rising sap makes the wood brittle rather than bendy, and therefore unsuitable for wicker working. Another advantage of cutting hazel late in the year is that the new stems begin to regenerate immediately, reducing the risk of the stumps rotting and dying in winter. Straw, for roofing, would only have been available once the harvest was completed, shortly before the timber was ready for cutting. So it seems likely, given the demands on labour imposed by the agricultural cycle, that much of the woodland management as well as building work within the hillforts would have been carried out in the shortening days and deteriorating weather leading up to winter.

### How did hillforts fit into the social landscape?

Hillforts are often thought of as centres of political power, but identifying the territories over which that power stretched is often difficult. A territory might be defined as all the land which the occupants of a hillfort felt belonged to them, or – equally importantly – the land that other people accepted as belonging to them. Clearly there might be difference between these points of view, and various factors, including changes in population, new resource requirements and simple ambition, would have meant that the extent of territories needed to be renegotiated from time to time, whether by mutual agreement or not. The likelihood that territories did not remain static throughout the seven centuries of the Iron Age makes it all the more difficult to identify boundaries.

Territories seldom seem to have been defined entirely by artificial boundaries, suggesting that, as was the case within the ramparts, people were generally well aware of the limits of their spaces without needing to mark them out artificially. In some cases, fixed natural features such as streams or narrow valleys seem to have served as boundaries. Where such ready-made landmarks were not considered suitable, short banks or ditches, probably accompanied by

hedges or fences, were sometimes built to link the natural features. Archaeologists use the term 'cross-ridge dyke' to describe the typical form of earthworks that characteristically extend across a piece of high ground from one steep slope to another (Fig 6.16).

There are exceptions, where territorial boundaries were entirely artificial. The two palisaded enclosures on the slopes of High Knowes, for example, are encircled by a bank which probably once carried a hedge or fence and may have defined an area of farmland. A similar circuit, now visible only on aerial photographs, surrounds a small hillfort on Bleak Ridge, in the Tweed Valley. Yet these exceptions are of uncertain date and merely serve to prove the rule elsewhere.

In some cases, boundaries clearly relate to an individual hillfort. All the spurs that offer natural approaches to the impressive hillfort on Woden Law in Scotland (see Fig 1.4) are crossed by such boundaries; a section of one was unceremoniously flattened to allow the Roman road known as Dere

Street to pass. Recent research has discovered a single earthwork, similar in form, blocking the long spur offering the gentlest climb to the hillfort on Great Hetha.

Elsewhere, it is possible to detect wider patterns of land division. In the Breamish Valley, a series of cross-ridge dykes was built to supplement natural boundaries, carving up the landscape around the hillforts into small territorial units (Fig 6.17). The hillfort overlooking Middle Dean Burn sits astride one of the major boundaries. The Northumberland Archaeological Group's excavations on Wether Hill have shown that a cross-ridge dyke 100m southwest of the hillfort, which forms part of the wider network, was built at roughly the same time as the surviving stone-faced ramparts (see Fig 2.32). Use of the boundary seems to have outlived occupation of the hillfort by several centuries.

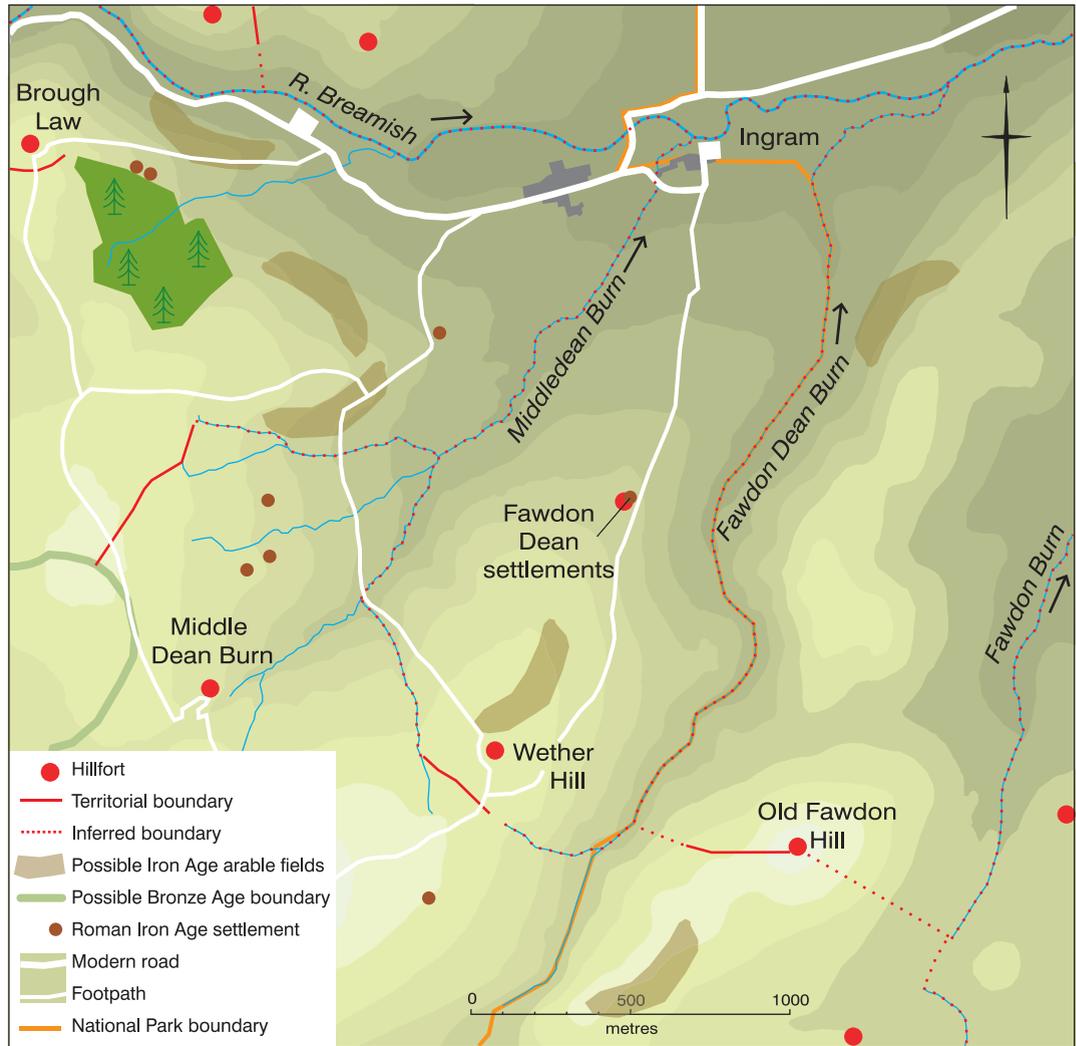
Where the distribution of hillforts is less dense, the pattern of land division is more minimal. Recent fieldwork has identified the faint remains of a single, short cross-ridge

Fig 6.16

*A cross-ridge dyke, with a characteristic central ditch between two banks, which may originally have been topped by hedges or palisades. Woden Law, site of one of the greatest hillforts in the Scottish borders, dominates the background.*



Fig 6.17  
 Hillforts and their possible territories in the Breamish Valley. (This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or criminal proceedings. English Heritage 100019088. 2006)



dyke midway along the ridge between the hillforts on Mid Hill and Staw Hill. The boundary lies a long way from the tracts of prehistoric ploughing overlooked by the hillforts, implying that it marked the limit of grazing land, or simply of ownership. On the Scottish side of the border, an identical earthwork occupies a similar position between the hillforts on Hayhope Knowe and Camp Tops. As more investigation is carried out, it is becoming increasingly clear that such boundary earthworks were common, and that many more must remain to be recognised.

Humans could of course have simply made their way around the ends of these earthworks, so the territorial boundaries must have been largely symbolic. As with the Ministry of Defence's 'Keep Out' signs which surround vast expanses of Northumberland's moorland today, it would have been possible for people to pass a barrier

without much effort, but harder for them to claim that they had not noticed it. Livestock, on the other hand, must regularly have strayed outside their owners' territories. On the basis of this evidence, it would be hard to argue that Iron Age communities were constantly at the throats of their neighbours. The impression is more of a world in which cooperation would be more productive than competition.

### Yeavinger Bell: the tribal capital?

Most discussions of hillforts in Northumberland begin with the giant enclosure on Yeavinger Bell. In terms of area (5.6ha, equivalent to about nine football pitches), it stands head and shoulders above any other hillfort in northern England. In terms of numbers of roundhouses, it is equally exceptional: a total of 125 have been

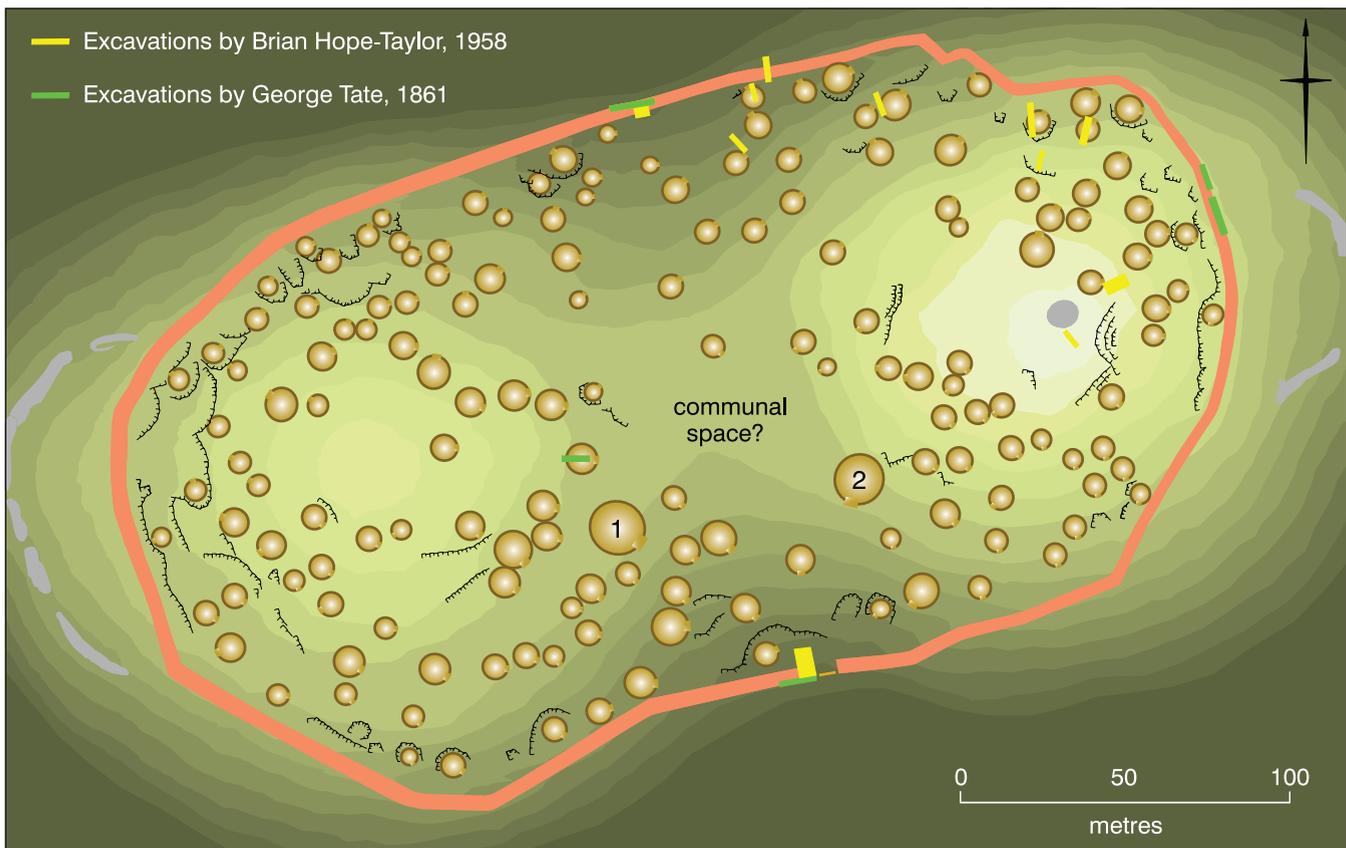
identified from surface traces and there may have been as many as 20 more (Oswald and Pearson 2005; Fig 6.18). If all these were occupied at the same time – which unfortunately cannot be demonstrated from surface traces – there may have been as many as 1,000 people living there.

Yeavinger Bell has often called the only true hillfort in Northumberland, and the tribal capital of the Votadini – in either case implying a centre of power which must have dominated the smaller hillforts. As mentioned in Chapter 4, we can point to what may have been the homes of two powerful figures in the community: perhaps rulers, druids or warriors. It is almost unique in Iron Age Britain to be able to identify, even tentatively, the residences of powerful individuals. The two roundhouse platforms, clearly larger than the others, dominate the hillfort's great southern gateway, one on either side and each with its entrance facing the gate (Fig 6.19; *see also* Fig 6.18). Did one roundhouse (or both) belong to a ruler of the Votadini? What can be inferred about the community's political structure from the fact that there are two houses? Was power shared between two individuals, for example a king and queen, each running a separate

household? Alternatively, perhaps the political standing of a warrior or druid was equal to that of a hereditary ruler.

Thus it may be that Yeavinger Bell was indeed the site of a tribal capital. But archaeologists are beginning to suspect that the contrast between this 'true hillfort' and the many smaller ones in Northumberland National Park may be more a matter of date than of power. Other hillforts of similar size in the region offer a model for the development of the settlement on Yeavinger Bell. Excavations at two other giants, Eildon Hill North and Traprain Law (respectively 38km west and 60km north-west of Yeavinger Bell), suggest that equally dense settlements there flourished in the late Bronze Age, probably at least 500 years before most of the other hillforts discussed in this book (the equally large site on Hownam Law has not yet been investigated to the same degree). The earthwork remains of a few of the Yeavinger Bell houses are superficially similar to excavated examples, from these two and elsewhere, which date to the Bronze Age. However, without more secure dating evidence, we simply do not know when Yeavinger Bell's occupation began or how long it continued: whether the community

*Fig 6.18*  
Roundhouses within the ramparts on Yeavinger Bell, indicating the two large buildings which may have housed the community's elite.





*Fig 6.19 (above)  
The site of one of the two large roundhouses which dominate the southern gateway of the hillfort on Yeavinger Bell.*



*Fig 6.20 (right)  
With its rich farmland and a wide variety of resources associated with its streams and marshes, the Milfield Plain may have been the territory on which the inhabitants of Yeavinger Bell depended.*

grew in size and importance to hold sway over smaller hillforts, or whether, by the time these smaller communities were established, its power and population had shrunk until it contained scarcely more round-houses than they did. It may even have been deserted by the Late Iron Age, the earliest time that we know for certain that the Votadini existed.

Regardless of its date, why did Yeavering Bell become so important? Some archaeologists believe that the hill itself may have been the key factor, for it commands an astonishing panorama. From its summit on a clear day, it is possible to see Eildon Hill North, and this may have been an important consideration. It is not difficult to imagine how clearly these two large settlements would have stood out in prehistory, especially by night in a landscape then largely free of light pollution, or when smoke was rising during feasts, or at more troubled times.

In addition, while Yeavering Bell is not the area's highest summit, it is – like all the

hills occupied by the larger hillforts – an eye-catching landform, identifiable at a great distance from certain directions. While hillforts on less distinctive summits were sited so that their ramparts stood out, Yeavering Bell's ramparts hung like an ornament around the shoulders of its immediately recognisable landform. Eildon Hill North is even easier to pick out because of its isolation and because it is one of the distinctive triple peaks of the Eildon Hills, named Trimontium by the Romans (*see* Fig 7.2). Such natural distinctiveness may explain, in part, why these sites were chosen over others which might have provided better terrain for settlement or easier access to arable land.

Because of its natural qualities, Yeavering Bell may have been accorded special importance long before the Iron Age. The part of the Milfield Plain directly overlooked by its hillfort was the site of several henge enclosures and a number of standing stones, all dating to the end of the Neolithic period,

*Fig 6.21*  
The distinctive profile of Yeavering Bell looms over the surrounding landscape.



perhaps as much as 2,000 years before the hillfort was built. On the eastern summit of Yeavinger Bell itself stood a burial cairn, probably dating to the early Bronze Age. All these more ancient monuments would have been imposing features when the hillfort was first built and may have contributed to the unique character of the place. If Iron Age people believed that reverence for Yeavinger Bell stretched back to an earlier time, this may help to explain why they chose it for such an extraordinarily impressive monument.

It may be that the hillfort, the Bronze Age cairn and the Neolithic monuments all owe their locations to another factor: the proximity of the Milfield Plain (Fig 6.20). Throughout prehistory, small settlements were probably scattered across the plain, exploiting its fertile alluvial soils and the spectrum of natural resources associated with its rivers and wetlands. From the plain,

the distinctive double summit of Yeavinger Bell is most clearly apparent (Fig 6.21). In short, this huge expanse of productive, low-lying land may have been the hillfort's 'territory'. This could account for the scarcity of arable fields near the hillfort. While there are agricultural terraces on the southern and south-eastern slopes of Yeavinger Bell, they are less extensive than those overlooked by some hillforts one-tenth its size. Perhaps the residents of Yeavinger Bell were above dirtying their hands with agricultural labour and were involved in more specialist craft or religious activities, relying for their food on the efforts of a scatter of undefended communities on the plain below. This suggests a more hierarchical society than the apparently egalitarian world of the smaller hillforts where extended families farmed their own land. Yet without the means to date occupation on Yeavinger Bell, we cannot be sure.

## The afterlife of hillforts

### When and why were hillforts deserted?

When trying to explain the desertion of settlements in any culture, it is tempting to look for an apocalyptic cause such as war, plague or environmental catastrophe. Thus it has been suggested that the Roman army, under the leadership of Agricola in AD 79, may have deliberately destroyed all the hillforts across a vast swathe of the border region to eradicate resistance by the northern tribes. The hillfort at Burnswark, in Dumfries, is surrounded by Roman camps and possible siege works, but this convincing evidence of Roman aggression seems to be unique. Lines of discontinuous earthworks surrounding the hillfort on Woden Law were interpreted as siege works when excavations took place there in the 1930s, but recent reappraisal of the surface remains suggests that they may actually pre-date the hillfort. Within Northumberland National Park, there is almost no evidence to support the idea of Roman aggression. Only at Humbleton Hill is there any sign that ramparts were deliberately demolished, and there is no proof that this was done by the Romans (Fig 7.1; *see also* Fig 6.1).

At the supposed capital of the Selgovi tribe on Eildon Hill North, a Roman watchtower and signal station were established on the summit. This was well placed to communicate with the legionary fortress at Newstead in the valley below, and has been seen as a sign of the establishment of Roman control over the native political system (Fig 7.2). No doubt the highly conspicuous signal station made it clear to the inhabitants of the region who was now in power. Then again, nearby roundhouses continued to be occupied and there is evidence of trade between the conquerors and the conquered. The Roman name for the site, Trimontium ('triple mountain'), owes nothing to any pre-Roman place name, suggesting that the native settlement on the hilltop may have been politically unimportant by the time of the occupation. In other words, the siting of the signal station had more to do with communication than with oppression. In fact, there is almost no

evidence that the native pattern of life was disrupted seriously or for a long period by the Roman invasion. Far from being rebellious, it seems likely that the tribes immediately north of Hadrian's Wall cooperated with the Romans and were therefore allowed a large measure of independence. Thus they may have served, consciously or otherwise, as a 'buffer state' between the Roman frontier and more hostile tribes further north.

If the invaders brought new strains of disease against which the tribespeople had little resistance, as the Spanish *conquistadores* did in South and Central America and 19th-century European settlers did in North America and Australia, there is no evidence of it. It is possible that environmental change played a role in the move away from hillforts, but, as so often in history, humans themselves may ultimately have been partly responsible. Increasingly intensive farming over the course of the Iron Age may have wiped out so much woodland that hilltop homes, which had once received adequate shelter from the wind and driving rain, became too inhospitable for occupation. Certainly, as described below, Roman Iron Age settlements that reoccupied the hillfort sites comprise smaller structures, built without the abundance of timber evident in the Iron Age roundhouses and palisaded settlements.

But, even if the Roman army, disease and environmental problems did play their parts, it would probably be a mistake to imagine that all hillforts came to an end overnight. Until we have better dating evidence from a greater number of sites, we will lack a secure understanding of the timescale involved, but it is almost certain that hillforts were abandoned piecemeal over the course of decades or centuries, for reasons that varied according to the specific circumstances of each site. Given the evidence for frequent refurbishment of the defences, it may be that some hillforts replaced others nearby, so that what appears to be the abandonment of two settlements is in fact the migration of one. Changes in local politics, which can be so difficult for archaeologists to detect, may have been among the most important factors.

## HILLFORTS

*Fig 7.1*

*The rampart on Humbleton Hill has been deliberately demolished. The line of large stones on the left of the picture is not the inner face of the wall, as its position behind the bank of smaller rubble might suggest, but the outer. The inner face is marked by the isolated line of less weathered stones on the right of the photograph. Evidently a concerted effort has been made to push the rampart down the slope.*



*Fig 7.2*

*The inscription on the monument marking the site of the Roman fortress at Newstead, in Scotland, refers to 'one hundred years of frontier warfare', but there is little evidence that the native inhabitants of the major hillfort on Eildon Hill North, visible in the background, were particularly rebellious.*



Because architectural fashion seems to have been more important than military necessity in the construction of hillforts, fashion may also have played a role in their abandonment. As with so many issues surrounding hillforts, archaeologists are not yet in a position to offer a conclusive answer.

## What happened next? Hillforts in the Roman Iron Age

In many cases, new settlements took root on the sites of old hillforts. This reoccupation turned many hillforts – in some cases, for the first time – into small settlements that can truly be called ‘villages’ (Fig 7.3). New perimeters were often built on top of the collapsed ramparts, reusing materials that had once formed the older defences. These perimeters have generally been overlooked until recently, for they are usually slight – clearly not substantial walls like the Iron Age defences – and difficult to distinguish from the remains of the underlying ramparts. In a few places, for instance on Mid Hill, the new perimeters were quite carefully constructed, with neatly-placed facing stones (*see* Fig 4.34). In many cases, however, they were little more than narrow bands of rubble or low earthen banks, footings for low stockades, or perhaps hedges in some cases. In some cases shallow pits can be distinguished alongside, where the Iron Age ramparts have been quarried for building materials. These perimeters would have been sufficient to keep out livestock and wild scavengers, but their purpose was certainly not defensive. There seems to have been no intention to convey even a superficial impression of military strength: the world had changed.

Within the perimeters, compounds and yards were constructed: clear evidence for a desire to distinguish private or specialised spaces in the settlement. This characteristic makes a striking contrast with Iron Age hillforts, where all the space within the ramparts had apparently been shared by the whole community. Most villages comprised one or more small clusters of circular buildings, each cluster focussing on a communal yard. Some larger settlements show clear signs of gradual unplanned expansion, with additional compounds, yards and individual buildings added to the original core. The site on Haystacks Hill in the Breamish Valley (which does not overlie a hillfort) is among the clearest and most impressive examples of this pattern.

The style of domestic architecture had changed significantly. The spacious, elegant and technically sophisticated Iron Age roundhouses were replaced by smaller buildings, which can perhaps be described with greater justification as ‘huts’ (Figs 7.4, 7.5 and 7.6). These later buildings were still roughly circular in plan, but with low walls predominantly of stone. Often, lines of upright stones set on edge seem to have been used to retain turf banks, which have now eroded away leaving the stones standing proud like sets of teeth. The low stone or turf walls and smaller building diameters suggest that large timbers, such as those required in most Iron Age roundhouses, may have become more difficult to obtain. Smaller roof-spans could have been covered in turf, giving the later buildings a lower and squatter profile, although it is likely that lighter materials like straw were still widely used. Unlike Iron Age roundhouses, which did not all have internal supports despite their greater diameters, central posts would have been needed to support the weight of soaking turves.

Most huts of the Roman Iron Age would have been cramped for more than three or four people, so the structure of family groups and the whole nature of everyday social interaction must have changed fundamentally too. The contrast with spacious Iron Age roundhouses is particularly striking at Ring Chesters, where a stone-and-turf-walled hut of the Roman Iron Age was built in the middle of a level circular platform quarried out, perhaps centuries before, for a timber roundhouse (*see* Fig 4.26C–D). The diameter of the later building is so much smaller that a long arc of the ring-groove foundation for the earlier timber wall is still discernible, well outside the footings of the later stone wall.

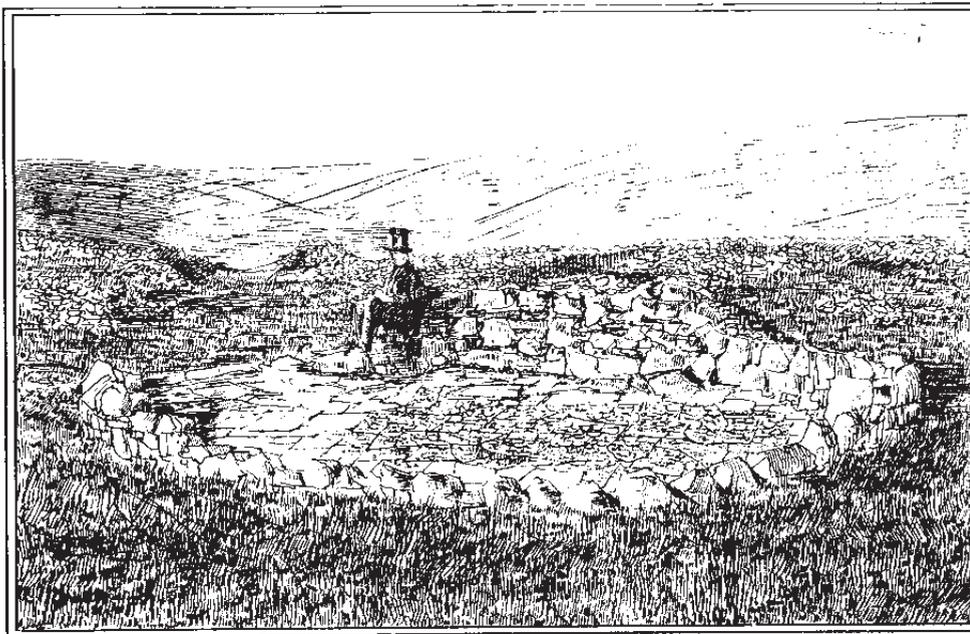
Livestock pens and small outbuildings can often be distinguished as well (Fig 7.7). Where there had been two or more circuits of rampart in the Iron Age, as at Castle Hill or Lordenshaws, the sheltered space between the two banks was often subdivided into small compartments, apparently to create livestock pens (*see* Figs 4.16D and 4.25E). Conjoining pens like these would have been ideal for many of the repetitive tasks of livestock farming, such as milking, shearing and branding.

Smaller settlements follow the same pattern. A small compound built directly on top of the bank defining the corral enclosure surrounding the hillfort on West Hill gives





*Fig 7.3 (opposite page)  
Alongside the smaller, stone-walled roundhouses of the Roman Iron Age, it is usually possible to detect rectangular structures, as well as livestock pens and other subdivisions of the space. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)*



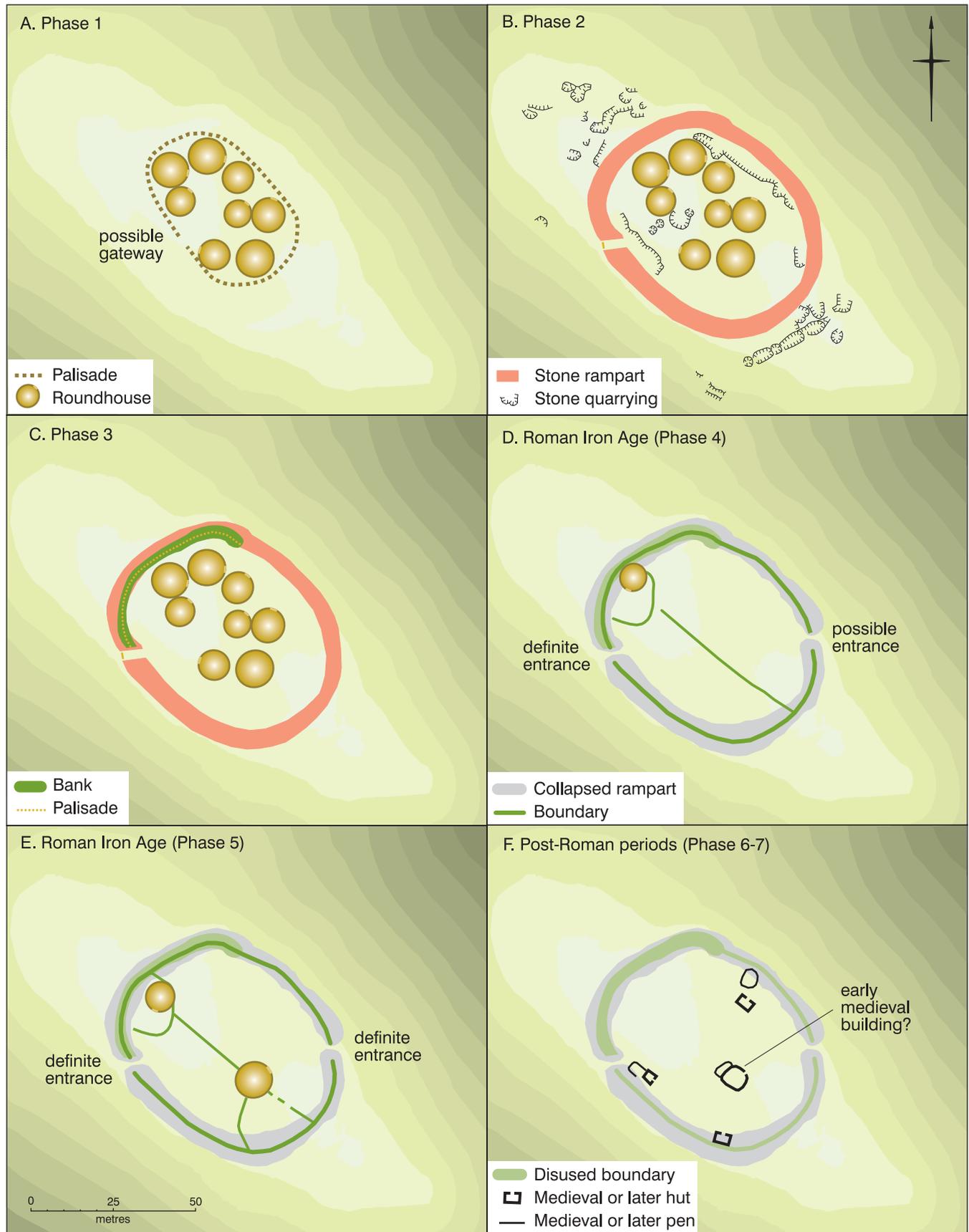
*Fig 7.4 (above left)  
Surveying a large and well-preserved Roman Iron Age hut on St Gregory's Hill.*

*Fig 7.5 (above right)  
Reconstruction of an Iron Age or large Roman Iron Age roundhouse at Brigantia, the archaeological visitor attraction near the Roman fort at Bremenium.*

*Fig 7.6 (left)  
Pencil sketch of the remains of one of the Roman Iron Age huts at Grieve's Ash, following mid-19th century excavations directed by George Tate on behalf of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club. (Tate 1863b)*



*Fig 7.7  
One of four small 'rooms', perhaps for storage, built into the Iron Age rampart on Lordenshaws in the Roman Iron Age. The upper walls and roof would presumably have been constructed of timber.*



the impression of having been designed as a unit from the outset. Circular huts of larger than average size, presumably houses, stood in a row along the rear boundary overlooking a shared yard, while the front half of the compound comprises two larger yards, each overlooked by its own hut, which may have been storerooms or workshops (see Fig 6.3).

The Roman Iron Age settlement within the hillfort on Mid Hill seems to have been equally carefully planned, though it does not give such a strong impression of close social relations. When the perimeter was neatly rebuilt, the interior of the hillfort was divided in two by a new boundary. Two houses were sited at opposite ends of this boundary, each within a small yard giving access into its own plot. The old Iron Age gateway provided access to the western half, and a new gap was constructed in the rampart to serve the eastern half. It is difficult to tell whether there was any gateway linking the two plots (Fig 7.8).

### When did this reoccupation happen?

George Jobey believed that Roman Iron Age occupation of the hillforts represented an unbroken continuation from the Iron Age (Jobey 1964; 1965). However, current research has discovered compelling evidence – over and above the striking architectural differences and inferred social changes – that a considerable time elapsed between the abandonment of the Iron Age settlements and the establishment of those of the Roman Iron Age. In every case where hillforts were reoccupied, careful study of surface traces indicates that the old rampart walls had long since tumbled into ruins by the time the new perimeters were built, or, where the Iron Age defences had been formed by earthen banks, the last remnants of any timber superstructures had long since rotted away.

Very few Roman Iron Age huts have yet been excavated. In some cases where excavation has taken place, Roman pottery dating from around the middle of the 2nd century AD has been recovered, occasionally along with glass beads or bracelets. Many Roman forts were rebuilt in stone at around this date. On the basis of this evidence, it has long been accepted that contact with the Roman world must have brought about abrupt and profound changes in the appearance of settlements and the nature of society. The ensuing period has often been called ‘Romano-British’ (although,

as noted in Chapter 1, this book uses the term ‘Roman Iron Age’, in part to emphasise that British and Roman cultures never fully fused in this region).

However, it pays to look more cautiously at the evidence underpinning this conventional wisdom about the importance of Roman influence. Most Roman pottery can be dated more accurately than Iron Age vessels, and has survived better in the ground. This pottery did not become available, except to the elite, until about AD 140, when Hadrian’s successor, Marcus Antoninus Pius, advanced to the line between the Forth and Clyde estuaries and built the so-called Antonine Wall, which remained the empire’s northern boundary for 40 years. During this time, when the entire National Park lay within the bounds of the Roman world, imported Roman pottery and other goods would for the first time have become generally available. Thus the discovery of 2nd century AD pottery should come as no surprise, but it does not necessarily allow us to date the origins of the buildings in which it is found. Other types of pottery, less recognisable and less easily datable, or non-ceramic containers, may have been in use when these buildings were first constructed.

Looking beyond Northumberland National Park, it has long been recognised that society underwent many fundamental changes prior to the Romans’ arrival, during the 1st century BC, a period conventionally called the Late Iron Age. These changes embraced many aspects of life, from agricultural technology and the range of crops, to styles of pottery and jewellery. People continued to live in roundhouses, but within new forms of settlement; tribal groups moved beyond their traditional territories; social relations seem to have broken down, only to be re-established along new lines. While these developments may have owed something to the increasing proximity of the Roman empire on the European mainland, they seem to have been driven above all by the Britons themselves. Julius Caesar’s eyewitness accounts of southern England in 55–54 BC document a society already in the midst of almost revolutionary change, a fact of which Caesar himself must have been largely unaware. Indeed, it has become widely accepted that many of the changes in architecture and material culture that followed Claudius’ invasion in AD 43 were the result of the British tribes’ pre-existing eagerness to adopt new fashions for their own ends.

*Fig 7.8 (opposite)  
The development of the hillfort on Mid Hill, where recent investigation has revealed several additional phases of activity. The neat division of the interior into two halves in the Roman Iron Age is remarkable.*

Could it be that many of the major changes in Northumberland conventionally assigned to the Roman Iron Age had actually begun 200 years earlier, in the Late Iron Age? If future research shows that villages here first began to develop in the Late Iron Age, this would have important consequences for the dating of hillforts, which appear to have been abandoned for some considerable time before they were resettled. For now, this idea must remain an intriguing speculation.

### How did the appearance of the landscape change?

It was in the same period as this widespread reoccupation of hillforts that exploitation of this landscape reached its most intense. Even by comparison with the Middle Ages, when the countryside of the National Park was far busier than it is today, the fringes of the Cheviots became almost crowded. Alongside the villages built atop the hilltop ruins, new forms of settlement broke out like a rash all over the landscape. Archaeologists have used various terms to distinguish these settlements in terms of their size and location – including ‘homesteads’, ‘enclosed settlements’ and ‘scooped enclosures’ (so called because they occupy oval depressions dug into sloping ground) – although such elaborate typology may be unnecessary, for they generally have the same basic characteristics as the villages built upon the hillforts. Almost all were enclosed by earthen banks, which may have carried hedges or timber palisades since they were generally much smaller than those of the Iron Age. Some banks were faced with upright stones, so that they resembled the walls of the houses they surrounded. These houses were smaller and laid out around little compounds, showing the same emphasis on the partition of space.

The trend towards private ownership in the settlements is also evident in the farming landscape. While most Iron Age fields seem to have been unenclosed, with no obvious physical link to the settlements they apparently supported, Roman Iron Age fields were enclosed by fences and hedgelines, which survive today as low earthen banks (see Fig 8.1C–D). Most of these boundary banks, if followed across country, eventually lead to a settlement. They are everywhere: there are few footpaths in the Cheviots on which you will not encounter several as you cross the landscape, though most are no more than ankle height.

In many cases, these Roman Iron Age boundaries enclosed areas that had been ploughed in prehistory, conveniently level and with soil that was deep and rich. A perimeter bank, which presumably once carried a hedge, skirted the eastern and southern sides of West Hill for over 800m until it converged with the channel of a minor stream, encompassing the sites of no fewer than eight separate settlements, most of them perhaps satellites of the large village on the site of the hillfort (Oswald 2004; Fig 7.9). An earlier boundary, similar in form but enclosing a smaller area, may be of Iron Age origin. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, it is possible to detect an ancient ‘territory’. The enclosing of arable fields with fences and hedges also suggests that livestock were a more important component of the economy than during the Iron Age, and that the risk of them straying into crops had to be addressed. We can infer that both society and economy had undergone fundamental changes in the period between the end of the hillforts and the return of settlers.

At Lordenshaws, West Hill, St Gregory’s Hill, Monday Cleugh and Chesters, new outermost perimeters were built around the hillforts, apparently to form large corrals for livestock (Fig 7.10; see Figs 4.25E and 6.3B). Like the village perimeters and field boundaries, these are revealed by low banks, also probably once topped by hedges or stockades. At Lordenshaws, West Hill and Chesters, the new enclosures completely encircled the hillfort ruins. At West Hill, St Gregory’s Hill and Chesters, there were single entrances approached by trackways from the lower ground, while at Lordenshaws three trackways entered the encircling corral from different directions.

At other hillforts, originally sited to make use of natural escarpments, corrals did not completely surround the hillfort, but occupied only the level ground, so that their perimeters returned to the line of the tumbled rampart at each end. At Monday Cleugh, the corral was a D-shaped enclosure in front of the Iron Age gateway, which remained in use as an entrance to the Roman Iron Age village. By this time, the gateway was approached by deeply eroded ‘hollow ways’ – tracks eroded by prolonged use until they take on the appearance of broad, shallow ditches – leading up the hillside. At St Gregory’s Hill, to achieve a similar layout, with the corral projecting out in front of the entrance to the village, the Iron Age gateway had to be moved; it was blocked and a new

entrance cut through the rubble of the old rampart further round the circuit (*see* Fig 8.1D). Here too a trackway, embanked on both sides, entered the corral directly opposite the gateway into the village. Tim Gates has suggested that the embankments on either side of these trackways, which were also presumably topped by hedges or fences like the embankment defining the corral itself, indicate that the land beyond the corral was set aside for growing crops, into which livestock could not be allowed to stray (Gates 1982). With their hedges or fences, the embanked trackways created narrow lanes along which livestock could be herded between the corral and expanses of open pasture beyond the arable fields.

At Mid Hill there is no network of field boundaries and trackways like those recorded at West Hill, St Gregory's Hill and other hillforts further down the valley of the College Burn. The Roman Iron Age settlement within the hillfort on Mid Hill was, to judge from the number of huts and boundaries dating to that period, smaller and less complex (*see* Fig 7.8E). The wall foundations of one hut partially overlap those of an earlier one (probably also dating from the Roman Iron Age), with the earlier wall-line as well preserved inside the later building as outside it. This suggests that activity in the later building was very light or infrequent, for otherwise all trace of the earlier wall would have been erased within the later hut. It therefore seems likely that, in the Roman Iron Age, Mid Hill was occupied only seasonally, perhaps by herders who drove their beasts to high pastures in the summer months. This contrasts with the sites overlooking the wide expanses of fertile ground near the mouth of the valley, which appear to have been permanently inhabited.

### Why were the hillforts reoccupied? The power of the past

What made people occupy the sites of hillforts that were, even by the 2nd century BC, ancient monuments? Various common-sense arguments can be put forward: that the tumbled Iron Age ramparts would have provided convenient materials for opportunist Roman Iron Age builders, for example, or that, in an already intensively settled landscape, a hilltop was as likely to be the site of a settlement as any other location. Neither of these arguments is entirely satisfactory. Regarding the first, stone is hardly scarce in Northumberland

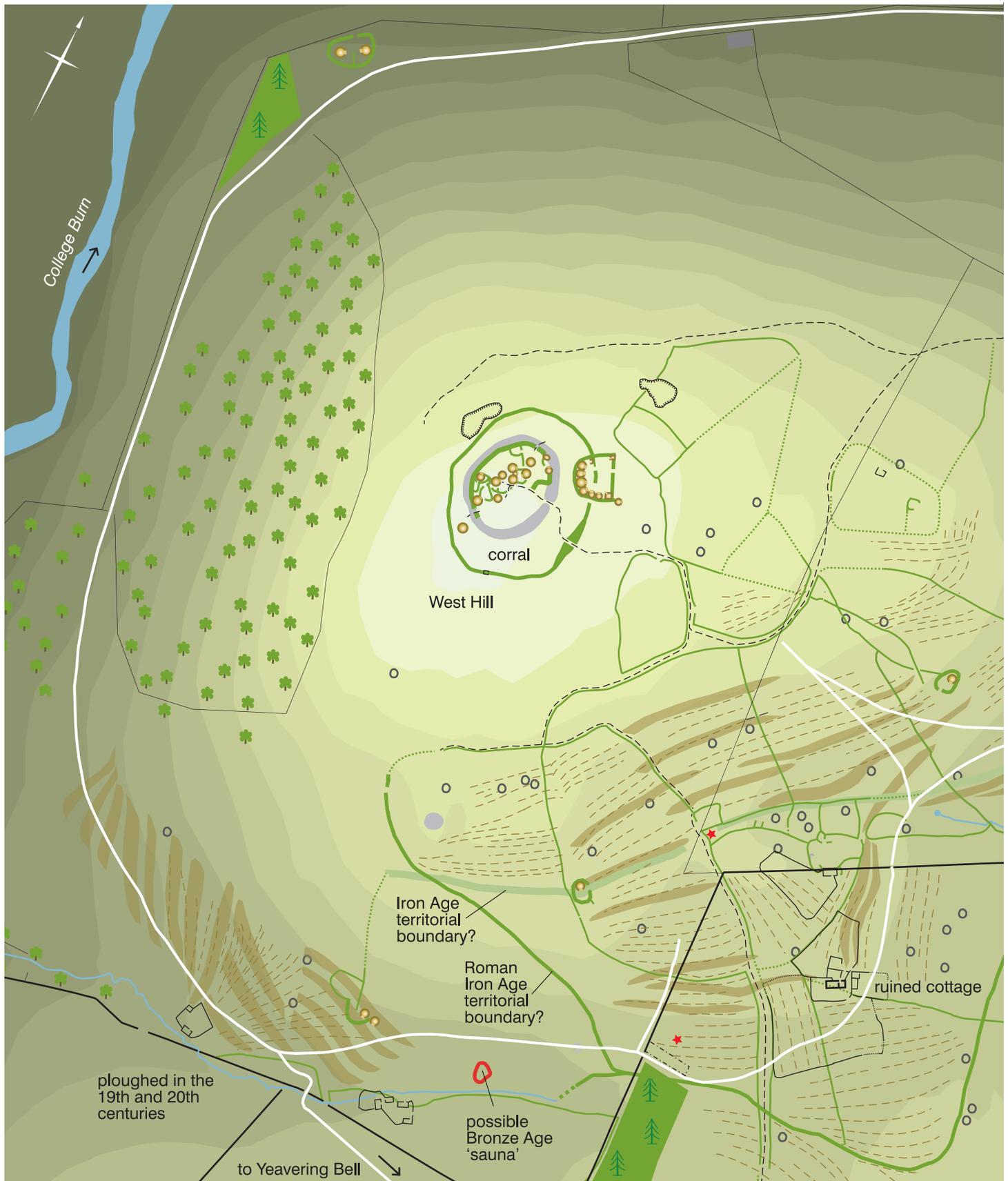
National Park, and the widespread ploughing evidently going on in the Roman Iron Age must have dragged boulders to the surface every year. In response to the second, it could be argued that hilltops were less desirable in some respects, making their reoccupation even more difficult to understand.

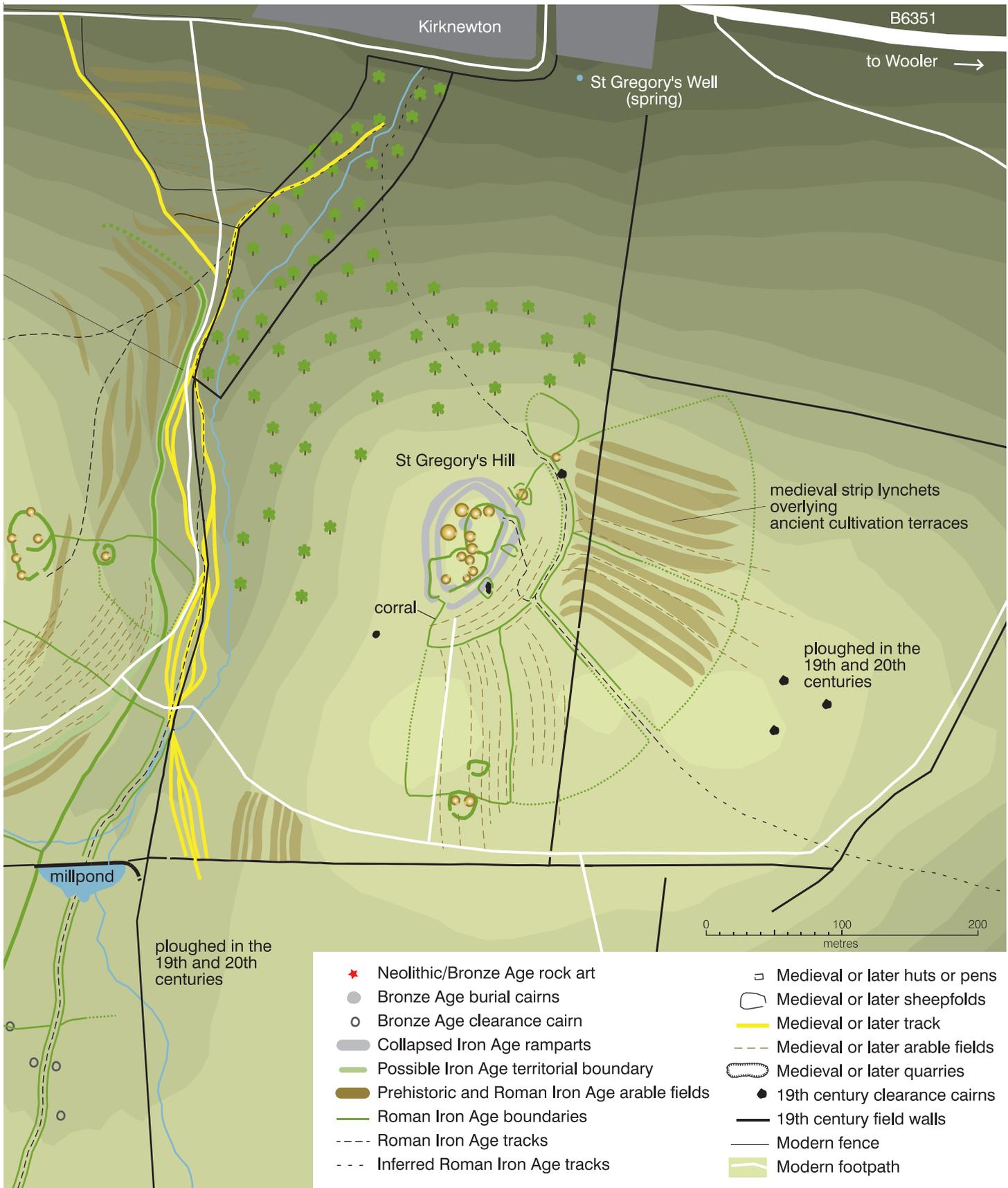
The locations and forms of most other settlements give the impression that shelter from the elements was a prime requirement. Most Roman Iron Age settlements in the hills were tucked into the lee of higher ground, and scooped enclosures were physically sunk into the ground, as though to create shelter where the lie of the land afforded little (Jobey 1962; Fig 7.11). Whether this reflects the worsening climate, the continued loss of woodlands that had once acted as wind-breaks, or the poorer quality of Roman Iron Age houses is uncertain. Broad gulleys found on the upslope sides of many settlements suggest that drainage had become a problem, due perhaps to increased rainfall or to increasing run-off from denuded slopes. It has also been suggested that settlements built against the faces of much older agricultural terraces were so sited to gain shelter from the terraces and from the crops growing on them (although most crops would have been harvested before the worst months of winter, and none would have withstood the heavy snowfalls to which the Cheviots are prone).

Why then were some people still prepared to brave the hilltops? At this point it may be worth considering why ordinary people today are so interested in Iron Age hillforts. Ancient monuments have a strong allure, evoking a sense of contact with an ancient way of life, alien and yet simultaneously timeless and unchanging. Being in an old house, particularly a country manor or a castle, can give rise to similar feelings of awe and privilege. It may have been similar for the inhabitants of the Cheviots in the Roman Iron Age. The Late Iron Age and the Roman Iron Age seem to have witnessed rapid and far-reaching change in every aspect of life, and perhaps living among the ruins of the past gave people a sense of stability and identity.

Yeavinger Bell, possible site of an old tribal capital, might be expected to have been a focus for any such ancient interest in heritage. In 1958, Brian Hope-Taylor, whose excavations of an Anglian royal palace on the river terrace below had made Yeavinger almost a household name, also carried out small-scale excavations on the

*Fig 7.9 (next page)*  
*All the land between the hillforts on West Hill and St Gregory's Hill has been investigated in detail, providing a unique opportunity to understand the interaction between settlements over many centuries.*









*Fig 7.10 (opposite)  
The Roman Iron Age village built within the ruined hillfort on St Gregory's Hill, surrounded by its livestock corral. The village was approached along a straight track with embankments and hedges on either side, apparently intended to prevent herded animals from straying into the crops on either side. (Drawing by Victor Ambrus, courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)*

*Fig 7.11  
A pair of Roman Iron Age 'scooped enclosures' overlooking the College Burn, as seen from the summit of West Hill. A medieval longhouse is clearly visible within the right-hand settlement. The scoops were dug into the slopes of earlier cultivation terraces, traces of which can be seen on either side of the settlement.*



*Fig 7.12  
The enigmatic enclosure – formed, unusually, by a ditch with an external embankment – surrounding the eastern summit of Yeavinger Bell.*

hilltop, to determine whether the Anglian builders had been active there too. Although this research was inconclusive, a small number of Roman artefacts were unearthed, including fragments of the high-quality ceramic tableware known as Samian, and some small-denomination coins dating to the late Roman period. Almost a century earlier, George Tate had also recovered artefacts which may well have been of Roman manufacture (Tate 1863a). Regrettably, the whereabouts of all these finds are now unknown. No detailed records were made of the contexts in which the artefacts were found, so we cannot be sure how to interpret their presence within the hillfort.

However, some intriguing observations arise from examination of surface traces (Oswald and Pearson 2005; Fig 7.12). A small, roughly circular enclosure built around the eastern summit cuts through several Iron Age roundhouse platforms, indicating that it post-dates them. The enclosure also overlies one of the quarries that may have provided material for the massive rampart surrounding both peaks. The enclosure's entrance lines up with a breach in the main rampart, created after the collapse of the rampart wall, apparently indicating that the enclosure was not built until after the rampart had been abandoned. But there is no evidence that the enclosure was ever occupied, which suggests that it may have had a ritual or symbolic function. There is a Bronze Age burial mound on the summit encircled by the enclosure; was this a shrine, perhaps revered as the resting place of a great leader of the past? Small-denomination coins, such as those unearthed by Brian Hope-Taylor, are among the commonest finds both at Roman temples and at the native shrines that remained in use after the conquest.

There is another striking anomaly. As already noted, Roman Iron Age settlements were superimposed on many smaller hillforts, but at Yeavinger Bell only a few features seem to have originated in the Roman Iron Age. The northern entrance may have been created in this period, for one of the photographs surviving from Hope-Taylor's excavations shows what seems to be the original rampart running across the gap. The two stone-built roundhouses flanking the original southern gateway, interpreted as guardhouses by Henry MacLauchlan and George Tate in the mid-19th century, probably belong to the Roman Iron Age (*see* Fig 4.27C). But there

is no other clear sign that the hillfort was occupied at all in this period. The rampart was not redefined with a new perimeter, nor was the interior subdivided by hedge-lines and fences, as at virtually every other reoccupied site. Of the 125 roundhouse platforms that can be identified inside, all are of the type generally accepted as being Iron Age or late Bronze Age; none are associated with the small, stone-walled huts built in later times.

Without further excavation, it is difficult to square this evidence with the discoveries of Roman artefacts. Perhaps these were left behind during brief, casual visits at some point in the Roman Iron Age, as Brian Hope-Taylor suggested. The Roman coins he mentions are just small change, and could have been dropped by local people who had traded with the Romans. Or perhaps those who lived on Yeavinger Bell chose – almost uniquely – to continue building their homes according to Iron Age traditions. If large timbers of the sort needed for spacious Iron Age roundhouses had become difficult to obtain, their continued use may have signalled the occupants' wealth, status and links with tradition, hinting that Yeavinger Bell may have remained a seat of power.

In either scenario, it seems that the hillfort on Yeavinger Bell was treated differently from many of its smaller cousins. Beyond the ramparts, life moved on: small settlements sprung up, trackways developed, fields were enclosed. But within the great hillfort, time seems to have stood still.

## Hillforts in the Middle Ages

Archaeologists consider the Cheviots one of Europe's best-preserved prehistoric landscapes, and Northumberland National Park contains an extraordinary wealth of prehistoric monuments. But this is a landscape just like any other, in the sense that each successive period has left its own mark upon the land and upon the monuments left by earlier inhabitants. Remains dating to the medieval period are in fact no less numerous or well preserved than those of prehistory and the Roman Iron Age, yet they have received far less attention and research.

The questions posed by medieval activity on the site of hillforts are similar to those raised by the Roman Iron Age settlements. First, what did the ancient monuments mean to the people who inhabited the landscape 1,500 years later? Second, what effect did medieval land use have on hillforts as

they appear today, which we need to take into account when we look at their remains?

As mentioned in Chapter 2, place names like Castle Hill and Ring Chesters may have originated in the Middle Ages, suggesting that people were curious about the hillforts and were developing their own ideas about what the banks of tumbled rubble might once have been. While Roman Iron Age people seem to have treated ruined hillforts as places of importance, as ancient relics to be respected, attitudes in the Middle Ages seem to have been very different.

Excavations at several hillforts on the Scottish side of the border, including The Dunion in the Borders, have demonstrated that there was some reoccupation of the prehistoric monuments, possibly by ruling elites, in the centuries following the departure of the Roman army. (This early medieval period has traditionally been called the Dark Ages, though archaeologists now recognise that society was actually very sophisticated in many respects.) While it has been suggested that reuse of hillforts was quite widespread in southern Scotland at this time, the possibility that this was also

the case a few miles away in Northumberland is discussed less often, partly because no distinctive post-Roman building or settlement style has so far been identified in a hillfort, through either surface survey or excavation. Yeavinger Bell, overlooking the excavated Anglian palace and with an enigmatic enclosure that post-dates the hillfort (see Fig 4.27C), is the one exception where the possibility of early medieval activity has been seriously considered and actively investigated, but even this promising site has provided only negative evidence. At this stage, therefore, it is unclear whether evidence for Dark Ages settlement within hillforts awaits discovery on the English side of the border, or whether the phenomenon is not as widespread as archaeologists on the Scottish side have believed.

There is no sign that hillforts, or any other prehistoric remains, were accorded any special treatment after the Norman Conquest. Although they are seldom found within hillforts, medieval longhouses were built on top of several Roman Iron Age settlements, especially the more sheltered scooped enclosures (see Fig 7.11).

*Fig 7.13*  
*Crudely built medieval or later livestock pens, overlying the rear of the rampart at South Middleton Dean. The stone used to build the pens was almost certainly 'robbed' from the rampart.*



In Northumberland National Park – indeed throughout Britain – there are examples of hillforts whose defences have been all but levelled by medieval ploughing. In some cases, as at Tosson Burgh, the low ridges (rigs) cultivated in the Middle Ages were only fitted around the steep-sided prehistoric banks and ditches because the earthworks were too difficult to plough over. Elsewhere, farmers evidently made a concerted effort to flatten out ancient earthworks to gain more land for agriculture (Fig 7.13). The slighter, more vulnerable banks and ditches of Roman Iron Age settlements were often almost entirely ploughed away, so that many can only be recognised today from the air, as cropmarks.

Even the massive rubble mounds of Bronze Age burial cairns and the seemingly immovable uprights of earlier stone circles fell prey to medieval farmers. Today it is difficult to imagine the stone circle at Hethpool as anything like circular, because so many of its stones have been broken up, or buried in pits to allow plough teams to pass by.

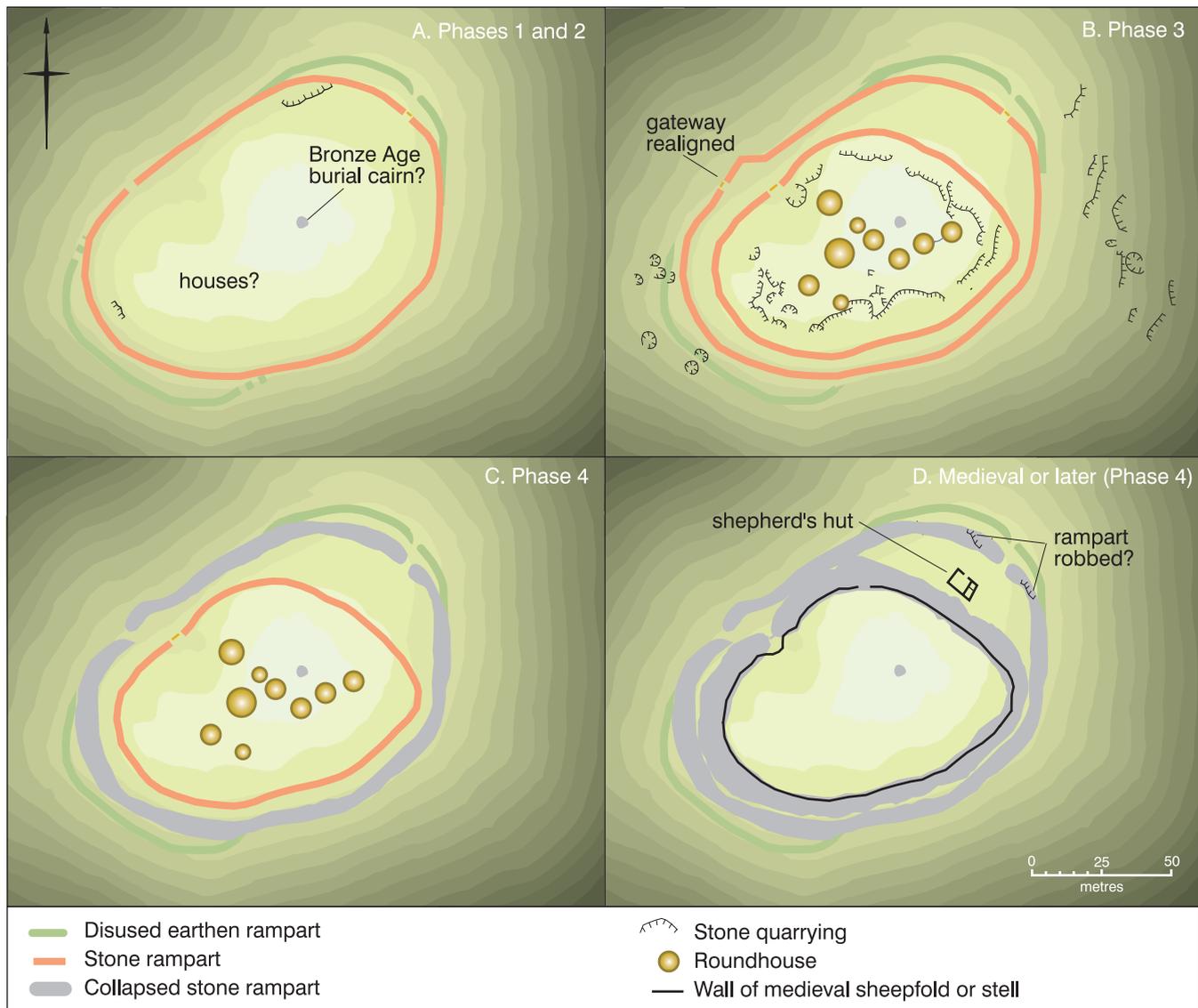
*Fig 7.14*  
A group of turf-built sheep pens, picked out by low evening sun.



## Recent centuries

As with hillforts, a range of factors led to the abandonment of many traditional small-holdings in northern England as the Middle Ages came to a close. Gradual climatic deterioration after about 1300, the decimation of rural populations by the Black Death later in that century, and insecurity caused by prolonged Anglo-Scottish conflict all played their parts. As Britain's wool industry began to take off, big landowners saw that they stood to make huge profits from rearing sheep. This contributed to the desertion of the English countryside as well as to the 'clearances' in Scotland.

The introduction of large numbers of sheep also prevented the regrowth of scrub that would eventually have become woodland. The absence of native trees across most of Northumberland National Park today is perhaps the most noticeable legacy of this intensive pastoral economy. Recent archaeological survey in central Scotland has also revealed traces of a



17th- and 18th-century land-improvement practice known as ‘tathing’ (also common in the Cheviots at that time), in which sheep were penned overnight in a field enclosed by low turf walls. Once the surface was thoroughly covered with manure, the field as well as the surrounding turf walls were ploughed in, to increase the ground’s fertility. Great swathes of land in the Cheviots retain faint traces of this practice, which would have further degraded the area’s Iron Age remains.

A range of building types accompanied the new farming regime. A *stell* (a local term derived from the Norse for an animal stall) was a roughly circular walled sheep-pen, many examples of which remain in use today. Rectangular enclosures with turf walls were also constructed (Fig 7.14). The

term *sheiling* is used to describe a variety of small buildings that provided basic accommodation for shepherds and sometimes shelter for their sheep as well. Even more basic and equally common were the tiny rectangular platforms for shelters or tents, defined by continuous lines of stone or slight earthen banks. These are difficult to date, but probably served as temporary accommodation for shepherds, or as lambing pens (Fig 7.15D). Having driven the flocks up from the lowlands, the shepherds would have lived in the hills throughout the summer to watch over their flocks. It is the occupants of these shelters who, we may imagine, related their observations, stories and beliefs to the succession of archaeologically minded mapmakers who visited the region from the early 18th century onwards.

Fig 7.15

*At some point in recent centuries, the inner rampart on Great Hetha was remodelled to form a stell, a walled sheep pen. Most stells were smaller than the one shown here, and circular.*

Fig 7.16  
 From the late 19th century until the 1960s, the hillfort known as *The Kettles*, on *Wooler Common*, was home to the town's golf club.  
 (Reproduced from the 1924 Ordnance Survey map)

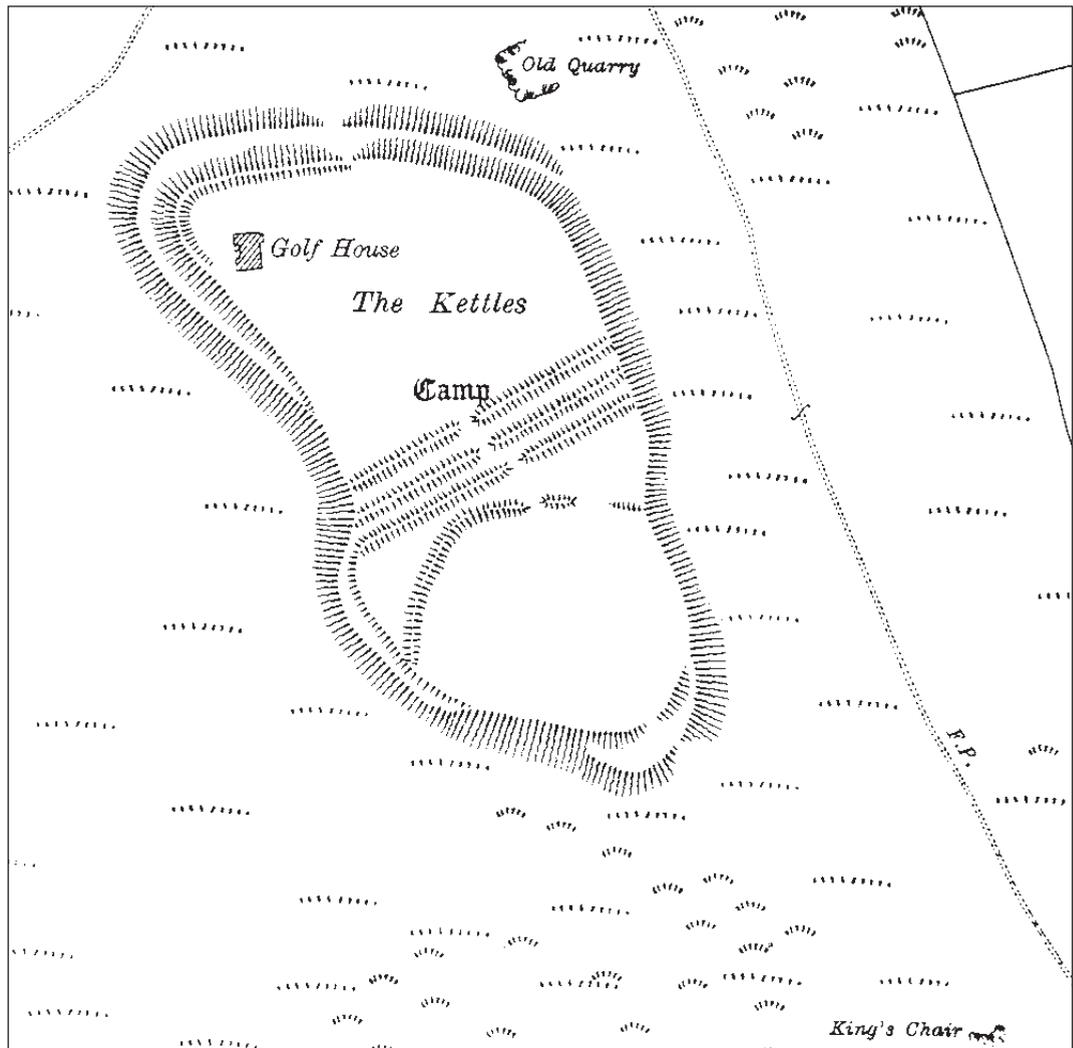


Fig 7.17  
 A *Second World War* pillbox within the ramparts on *Old Bewick Hill*, dramatically sited to overlook *Northumberland's* coastal plain. In a faint echo of the design and siting of hillforts, the pillbox was as much a symbol of resistance than a practical defence, for it was located too high above the plain for small arms to serve any purpose.



Hillforts continued to experience changes that reflected wider social developments. With the growth of a middle class from the Victorian era onwards, leisure

activities became more important. The *Kettles* hillfort was considered a suitable setting in the 19th century for a golf clubhouse (Fig 7.16). With improvements in transport, country holidays – in which healthy outdoor pursuits featured strongly – grew in popularity, giving rise to the first of the walkers' cairns from which so many hillforts suffer. Local amateur enthusiasts took up archaeological excavation as a hobby, contributing additional scars to the ancient remains. With the onset of the *Second World War*, the niceties of heritage conservation were put aside, and some hillforts and other ancient monuments once more played their part in defending the land (Fig 7.17).

## 8

# Hillforts today and tomorrow

### Managing the past for the future

One theme which emerges strongly from the preceding chapters is an impression of constant change: hillforts were built and underwent repairs, redesigns, expansions, contractions and even complete shifts in location (Fig 8.1). It is worth bearing in mind that the use of most hillforts appears to span only a few centuries, less than half the period we call the Iron Age, which itself accounts for well under a tenth of recorded human activity in this region. Change – rapid or slow, destructive or creative, brought about by humans or endured by them – is a continuous thread running through the story of our past. It is astonishing that so many hillforts have survived in such good condition for us to study and enjoy today.

Coming to terms with the sheer scale of our past – not just the vast time span but the immense physical effort, emotion and belief that people have invested in this land – can be a humbling experience. The understanding of our past weighs particularly heavily on those responsible for decisions that will inevitably affect the condition in which that heritage will be handed on to future generations (Fig 8.2). Together with local residents and visitors, Northumberland National Park Authority and English Heritage play key roles in reaching decisions about this region's rich archaeological heritage.

The two organisations have worked together to achieve a balance between the sometimes conflicting aims of archaeological research and of conservation. Visitors to the National Park often ask why we do not carry out more excavations. Unfortunately, by excavating a site in order to learn more about it, archaeologists inevitably damage that site, and may even destroy it completely. An excavation is therefore irreversible, an experiment we can never repeat. It is vital to ensure that excavation does not rob future visitors of the striking landmarks we enjoy today, or future archaeologists of the opportunity to test their theories, using the more sophisticated techniques that will inevitably be developed.

The decision to excavate is never taken without proper consideration of the advantages and disadvantages. The objective is always a strategy that will yield the greatest return with the smallest sacrifice. This is also why emphasis is placed on non-destructive forms of survey and investigation in the National Park (Fig 8.3). Analysis of surface remains yields volumes of new evidence and a more profound understanding of that evidence, without the slightest harm to the remains. If and when a decision is taken to dig, a preliminary investigation of surface traces permits excavators to target their trenches as effectively as possible, to maximise the chances of answering their questions with the minimum loss of the precious evidence.

A cautious approach does not mean that it is ever possible simply to do nothing. Indeed, that is not an option at all, for by washing our hands of our responsibility to play an active role in managing the process of change, we would merely allow more gradual and insidious threats to take control. Such threats are of three general types, discussed in the following sections: from animals, from plants and from natural forces.

### Damage by animals

Rabbits are believed to have been introduced by the Romans, and until recent times have been a valuable source of meat and fur. In many areas, they were actively farmed, with purpose-built warrens ensuring they were contained and concentrated. Unfortunately, rabbits living in the wild pose a great threat to archaeological remains, because artificial mounds and banks, where the earth is relatively soft and dry, are as attractive as the artificial warrens once built for them.

The damage caused by burrowing has been especially severe at some hillforts on the light, sandy soils of the Fell Sandstone Hills, including Harehaugh Camp (Figs 8.4 and 8.5). As part of the Discovering our Hillfort Heritage project, field survey and limited excavations were carried out at Harehaugh Camp to determine whether the burrowing was causing unacceptable

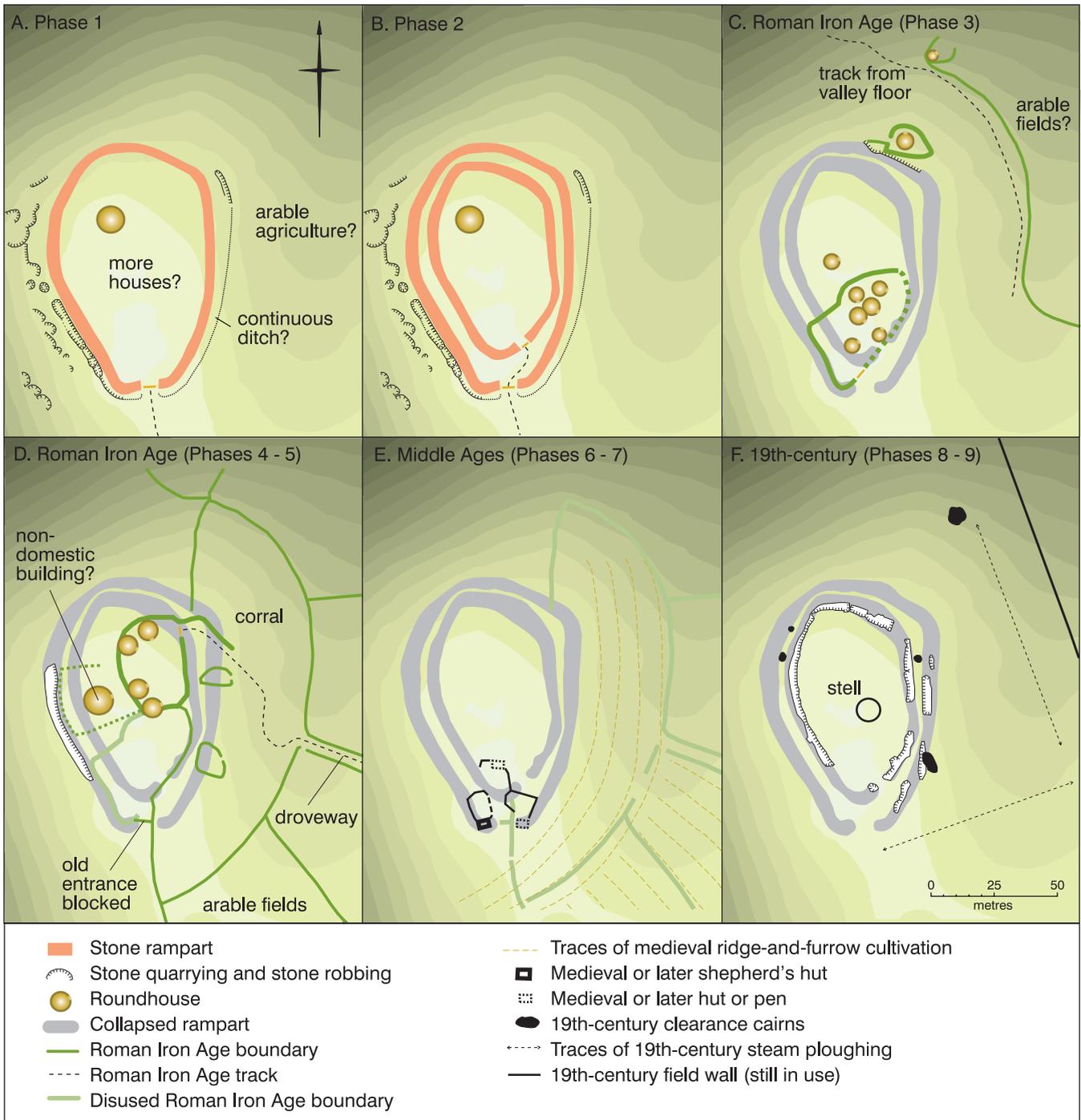


Fig 8.1  
The Iron Age hillfort on St Gregory's Hill has been subjected to continuous changes.

damage to archaeological deposits (Waddington *et al* 1998). The excavations confirmed that the rabbits' burrows had already caused serious harm and would in time completely disfigure the impressive outward appearance of the ramparts, as well as destroying the informative deposits beneath the surface. Measures are being taken at Harehaugh Camp and elsewhere to minimise such damage in future.

Sheep have supported the economy of the Cheviots for many centuries, and may seem unlikely villains, yet they are occasionally responsible for damaging hillforts and other ancient monuments (Fig 8.6). In search of shelter from driving rain and snow, they will often create ledges and overhangs by scraping into slopes, including the sides of hillfort ramparts (Fig 8.7). The Northumberland Archaeological Group's excavations



*Fig 8.2 (above left)  
Interactive displays like this one at the National Park visitor centre at Ingram encourage children to learn about and appreciate the historic environment.  
(Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)*

*Fig 8.3 (above right)  
English Heritage archaeologist surveying the hillfort at South Middleton Dean, in the course of the National Park's Discovering our Hillfort Heritage project.*



*Fig 8.4 (left)  
Rabbits have caused severe damage to the hillfort at Harehaugh Camp by burrowing into its soft, sandy ramparts, prompting the National Park Authority to launch a 'rescue excavation'.*



*Fig 8.5 (above)*  
Rabbit burrows in the ram-part at Castle Hill. The National Park Authority has taken measures to minimise the damage caused by rabbits, but the problem is not an easy one to solve. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

*Fig 8.6 (right middle)*  
Combining the best of the old and the new, modern shepherds play a vital role in Northumberland National Park. Sheep prevent the growth of scrub which would eventually grow into woodland, completely changing the character of the hills.



*Fig 8.7 (right bottom)*  
Seeking shelter from snow and biting winds, sheep often deepen natural scars with their hoofs and horns. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

*Fig 8.8 (opposite)*  
This aerial photograph, taken before the Second World War, shows an Iron Age settlement at Hetha Burn, then in open countryside. Much of the surrounding landscape is now obscured by dense conifer plantations. (RAF/CPE/SCOT/319 frame 3027 EH (NMR) RAF photography)



at the hillfort on Wether Hill were prompted by wear and tear inflicted by sheep. In combination with rabbits, sheep can cause very serious damage in just a few years.

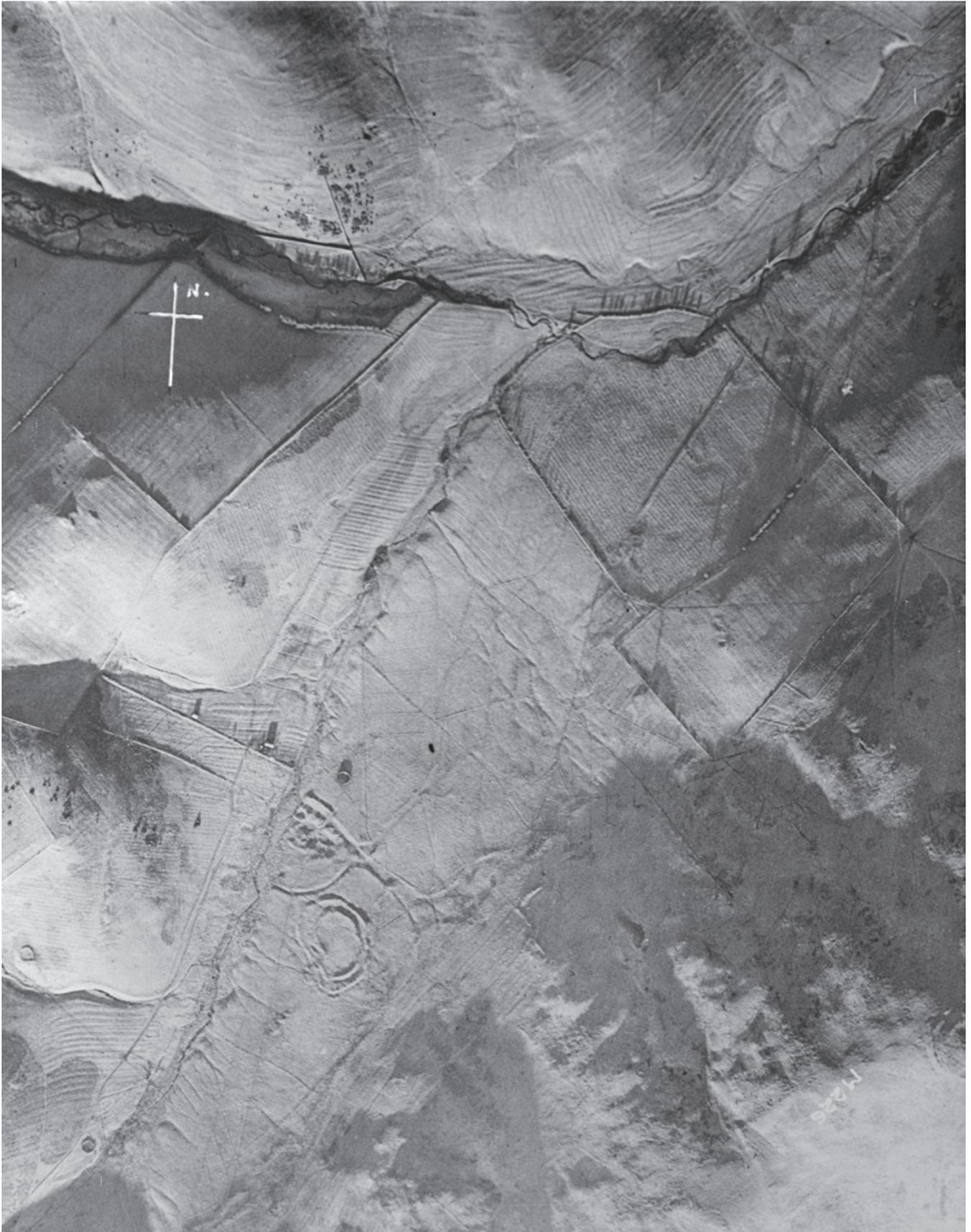
Even the humble earthworm plays a role in the condition of our monuments. It is not fully understood why earthworms are found in such small numbers in the soils of the Cheviots, but we must be thankful that they are. It is highly unlikely that the faint surface traces that allow us to understand so much about hillforts and their landscapes could survive if earthworms were present in normal numbers, constantly consuming and regurgitating the soil beneath the turf.

### The importance of ecology to archaeology

For earthworks on sandy soils, the matted roots of heather and turf form a tough protective shell, without which the banks and ditches would soon be reduced to amorphous spreads. However, the heather moorlands might long ago have been reclaimed for pasture if heather were not essential for the breeding of grouse, which feed upon the young shoots. Thus the breathtaking panoramas of purple flowers, which many visitors regard as a natural wonder, and upon which the survival of many archaeological monuments depends, require active management.

The hillfort on Fawcett Shank, above the valley of the College Burn, occupies a tiny clearing now besieged on all sides by massed armies of fir trees (see Fig 2.25). Sheep have been unable to reach the clearing for several decades, with the result that the ungrazed grass has grown into rough, rank clumps. Once this occurs, it is not long before silver birch and alder recolonise the ground. Left unchecked, tree roots would eat away at the layers of information long left hidden and intact beneath the turf. Furthermore, when mature trees are blown over by the wind, large chunks of potentially vital archaeological deposits are uprooted and lost forever (Fig 8.8).

Bracken will prove a hindrance to anyone who visits a hillfort in the summer months, for its chest-high fronds obscure all but the largest earthworks. Most of the investigations on which this book is based were carried out after winter snows had pressed the bracken flat but before spring brought new growth, simply to ensure that the slightest details could be recognised. But bracken's real damage is beneath the



surface, where dense, interwoven networks of thick roots can gnaw away at archaeological deposits, mixing them up and making their interpretation fiendishly difficult, if not completely impossible.

Traditionally, bracken was kept in check by driving flocks of sheep back and forth across it until the young stems were thoroughly crushed and the plants weakened. These days, with fewer sheep and such intensive forms of land management unaffordable, some farmers use chemical sprays to restrict the relentless spread of the plant.

### Climate change and the forces of nature

Erosion is not as serious a problem now as it was in prehistory, when over-farming led to the loss of vast quantities of soil from slopes

and hilltops. Yet on valley floors today, prolonged heavy rain has occasionally caused sudden alterations in the course of a stream which have produced dramatic changes in the appearance of the land (Fig 8.9). While this may not affect hillforts themselves, it may alter the landscapes in which they existed. At Hethpool, for example, the College Burn began to undercut the side of its channel so much that it was necessary to reroute the adjacent road, bringing it closer to the last remaining standing stones of the Neolithic stone circle. As the turf was removed to lay the foundations for the new road, archaeologists watched closely to see whether any buried stones or other deposits might be exposed. Fortunately there were none, but the incident demonstrated that, one day, the National Park Authority might be faced with a choice between losing one of the region's rare stone circles and fighting a costly and possibly unsuccessful battle against the forces of nature. Similar problems exist at certain other sites in the National Park, and sometimes, where the decay is effectively unstoppable, the decision will be taken to excavate in order to recover as much information as possible before it is lost forever.

### The visitor's responsibility in conservation

Many of the impacts discussed above are indirect products of human intervention in the natural world. We would like to conclude this book by pointing out what may already be obvious from earlier chapters: humans are the greatest threat to the survival of their own heritage. At the same time, they have the power to be saviours and champions of that heritage.

The damage people do is seldom malicious, or even conscious, although the self-styled 'night hawks' who recently targeted the hillfort on Yeavinger Bell with metal detectors are a despicable exception. In their greed to make a quick buck, these thieves robbed us all of a kind of wealth they clearly do not value: knowledge. Yeavinger Bell, along with all the other hillforts within the National Park and outside it, is protected under law as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

We will probably never know what the night hawks found, although it is unlikely to have been anything more than fragments of rusty iron and corroded bronze, or perhaps a few relatively worthless Roman coins like those

Fig 8.9

*In 2002, severe erosion caused by floods in the Breamish Valley exposed deep deposits of soil and gravel washed down from the hills by much earlier natural disasters.*





*Fig 8.10*  
RAF personnel assist in the dismantling of a modern cairn on Humbleton Hill in 2004. The continuous enlargement of the cairn by walkers had been leading to the gradual destruction of the Iron Age ramparts. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)

unearthed by Brian Hope-Taylor in 1958. Of what use could these have been to these raiders? Yet under the scrutiny of archaeological specialists and a battery of scientific techniques, they could have helped provide answers to many fascinating questions about the hillfort and the people who lived there.

By far the biggest threat comes from people who are simply unaware of the consequences of their actions. The little cairns that crown the summits of many hills are a good example. Many walkers, on recovering their breath at the top of a challenging hill, succumb to the urge to commemorate their achievement by adding a stone to the cairn. So far, so good, but where does that little stone come from? Often from the nearest plentiful supply of stones: the encircling rampart of an Iron Age hillfort. Given the many hundreds of walkers who visit some hillforts each year, such an innocent and apparently harmless act could ultimately be as damaging as the stone-robbing of the 18th and 19th centuries, when cartloads of rocks were removed for construction of the drystone walls that criss-cross today's landscape.

The authorities with a formal role in looking after the historic environment of Northumberland National Park must exercise careful judgement. Should walkers be allowed to continue adding to the cairns, so that they become distinctive features of the future landscape (as the 18th-century field walls have become for us), or should the National Park Authority intervene to preserve the hillforts? The dilemma is complicated by the fact that some of the cairns themselves should perhaps be treated

as historic monuments. Many are nearly two centuries old, some having been constructed by the Ordnance Survey to mark and protect trigonometrical stations. At some well-visited hillforts, including the one on Humbleton Hill, a decision has been taken to dismantle walkers' cairns (Fig 8.10). Fortunately, once removed, they have not been rebuilt. Of course, visitors can help to make such work unnecessary by leaving ancient monuments exactly as they find them.

## Understanding our past

Clearly, the survival of our heritage depends on us all (Fig 8.11). Many of the resources of the National Park Authority and of

*Fig 8.11*  
English Heritage archaeologist Al Oswald discusses the latest discoveries with passing members of a national long-distance walking group.





*Fig 8.12 (above left)  
The National Park Authority's archaeologist Paul Frodsham leads a guided walk around Yeavinger Bell hillfort. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)*

*Fig 8.13 (above right)  
Excavations supported by the National Park Authority provide opportunities for local people and students to contribute to the understanding of the region's rich past. (Courtesy of Northumberland National Park Authority)*

English Heritage are directed towards ensuring that today's enthusiasm and concern for our past lasts far into the future. Both organisations work to gather the most up-to-date information through documentary research, aerial photography, field survey, excavation, buildings recording and scientific analysis. It is also essential to make the results of this research accessible to visitors and local people, through publi-



cations, visitor centre displays, website features and events. The National Park Authority hosts meetings where farmers and others responsible for managing the landscape can mingle with academic experts; sets up archaeological displays like the one at the visitor centre in Ingram; conducts guided tours and publishes leaflets that allow people to discover hillforts and other ancient sites for themselves (Figs 8.12 and 8.13). To this end the National Park Authority and English Heritage have also worked together to bring you this book, which we hope will help you to understand, enjoy and value the unique historic environment of Northumberland National Park.

### Visiting hillforts safely

- Go prepared. Many hillforts are in wild, remote places where the weather can change rapidly, so always take warm and waterproof clothing, appropriate footwear and ample food and drink.
- Plan your route. All footpaths within Northumberland National Park are waymarked, but carry the appropriate Ordnance Survey *Outdoor Leisure* map with you. Even if you take a handheld GPS receiver, use the map too: the most direct route is not always the safest one.
- Take care of yourself. Accidents can happen, so tell someone where you are going and when you are due back. Take a first-aid kit and equipment appropriate for the terrain and weather conditions.
- Keep dogs under close control – if necessary on a lead – to protect livestock and wildlife. This is particularly important between April and June, when rare ground-nesting birds are at their most vulnerable.
- Respect the life of the countryside. Go carefully on country lanes; leave gates as you find them; light no fires; leave no litter.
- Respect our heritage. All the hillforts, and many other remains, in the National Park are protected under law as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Please look after these ancient sites, and leave turf and loose rubble undisturbed.

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Detailed accounts of research in Northumberland have mostly been published in one of two academic journals: *Archaeologia Aeliana* (which includes many of George Jobey's articles) and *Northern Archaeology* (which contains reports on some of the most recent excavations in Northumberland National Park). For full references to these, and for contact details for local archaeological groups, see Frodsham 2004.

Full illustrated reports on all the hillforts investigated in detail as part of the Discovering our Hillfort Heritage project are available through English Heritage's public archive, the National Monuments Record (01793 414600).

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# Index

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations.

## A

- aerial photography 22, **24**, 24–5, 25, 29, 34, 61
- Ages. *see also* Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman Iron Age, Stone Age
  - ages, definition of 33
- Agricola 101
- agriculture. *see also* livestock
  - arable 8, 73, 79, **89**, 89–91, **91**, 92
  - Bronze Age 38–9
  - deforestation 101, 116
  - enclosure 108
  - ground traces 89–91, **90**, **91**
  - Iron Age 41
  - land improvement 116–17
  - links with hillforts 92, **93**
  - medieval 91–2
  - post-medieval **37**, **111**, **120**
  - Stone Age 35
  - terraces 41, **42**, 92, **92**
- Aitchison, Walter de la 22, 24–5, 30
- Ancient Britons 12, **23**
- animals. *see also* livestock
  - damage caused by 119–20, **121**, **122**, **122**
  - wolves 51, **88**
- antiquarians 12, 13
- Antonine Wall 4, 107
- Archaeologia Aeliana* 27
- archaeological remains 1, **2**, **4**
- archaeology 9, 18, 29
- Armstrong, Captain Andrew 16, 16–17

## B

- Baldersburyhill 10–11
- Berwickshire Naturalists' Club 22, 90
- Black Death 116
- Blair Drummond 89
- Bleak Ridge 95
- bog bodies 82–3
- boundaries 76, 94, 94–6, **96**, 108
- Breamish Valley **42**, 95, **96**, **124**
- Breamish Valley Archaeology Project 30, 61, 65
- Bremenium (High Rochester) 21, **21**, **105**
- Brigantes, the 4
- Briton of the Interior*, A (Meyrick and Smith) 12
- Bronze Age
  - agriculture 38–9

- burial mounds 116
- cairns **38**, **39**, 39, **40**, 40–1
- defining 33
- settlement 34–5, **37**, 38–9, 41, 41–2
- Brough Law
  - aerial photograph **44**
  - agricultural terraces 92, **92**
  - blade find 43
  - construction date 44
  - houses 77
  - Jobey's survey **26**, **27**
  - map 1864 **19**
  - quarrying 47
  - ramparts and defences 45, **45**, 46–7, 77
  - Tate's survey 15
- Bruce, John Collingwood 20
- building platforms 39, 71, 72, 114
- buildings. *see* huts; roundhouses
- Burgess, Colin 27, 30
- burial customs 82–3
- burial mounds 18, **36**, 37, **38**, 39, **40**, 40–1, 100, 114, 116
- Burnswark 101
- Burnt Humbleton 77, 77

## C

- cairns **36**, 37, **38**, **39**, 39, **40**, 40–1, 100, 114, 125, **125**
- Camp Knowe 55
- Camp Tops 96
- carts 89
- Castle Hill **48**, **52**, 103, 115
- 'Celtic cowboys' 85, 89
- Celts 4, 5, 22, 69–70, 85, 89
- ceremonial monuments **34**, **35**, 35
- chariots 69, 89, **89**
- Chatton Park Hill 35
- Chesters 15, **82**, 89, 108
- Cheviot Hills 26, 30, 35
- Christianity 88
- circularity 57–8, 61
- Cissbury 6
- climate change 41, **41**, 109, 116, 124
- coins 114
- College Burn **24**, 35, **113**, 124
- context 29
- contour forts 55
- coppicing 93–4
- cord rigs **90**, 90–1
- Corionototae, the 4
- corrals 85, **87**, **88**, 108–9
- craft activities 79, **81**
- Craik Moor 45, 49, 51, **51**, **72**
- Crawford, O G S 22
- cropmarks 24

- cross-ridge dykes **95**, 95–6
- cup-and-ring marks 35, **35**, 37, 39

## D

- damage
  - caused by animals 119–20, **121**, **122**, **122**
  - caused by vegetation 122, **124**
  - caused by visitors 124–5, **125**
- Danebury 6
- Dark Ages, the 115
- Darwin, Charles 33
- dating 9, 44, 92, 101, 108
- defences *see* ramparts and defences
- Dere Street 13, 95
- Devil's Causeway 15
- diet 79, 81, 85, 89
- discoveries, archaeological 9
- Discovering our Hillfort Heritage project 119–20, **121**
- disease 101
- distribution 3, 7, 61, **63**, 65
- ditches 49, 72–3
- DNA analysis 9
- Dod Law 44
- Doddington Moor 44
- domestic waste 82
- Downman, E A 22, **24**, **28**
- dress 84
- Druids 82
- Dunion, The 115
- Durham University 30, 61, 92, **92**
- Dying Gaul*, The (sculpture) 84, **84**

## E

- earthworks 25, 30, 61
- earthworms 122
- ecology 122, 124
- Eildon Hill North 41–2, 97, 99, 101, **102**
- Ellenmas 88
- Ell's Knowe 27
- enclosed settlements 108
- enclosures 61, **64**, 65, **113**, 114, 115
- English Heritage **28**, 119, 126
- erosion 41, 124, **124**
- escarpments, exploitation of 55
- Ewartly Shank 82
- excavations 22, 24–5, 30, **30**, 32, 44, 119

## F

- farmsteads 1
- Fawcett Shank **25**, **53**, 122

- Fawdon Dean 61, **64**, 65
- Fell Sandstone Hills 35, 48
- Fenton Hill 44
- folklore 10, 33
- food preparation 79

## G

- Gates, Tim 29, 61, 109
- gateways
  - approaches 53
  - Castle Hill **52**
  - flanking stones 51–2, **53**
  - gates 53
  - guard chambers 53, 55
  - location 51
  - orientation 51, **51**, **53**
  - St Gregory's Hill 51, 65
  - significance 51
  - staggered 53
  - trackways 108–9
  - and warfare 69–70
  - West Hill **51**
  - Wether Hill 49, 51, 70
  - Yeavinger Bell 55, 55, 70
- geology 30
- geophysical surveys 9, 30, **32**
- Glastonbury 22, **23**, 75
- Glead's Clough 55, 65, **66**, 76, 76
- gods 82, **82**, 83
- GPS satellite mapping 4
- grave markers 10
- graves 9, 9–10, **36**, 39
- Great Hetha 18, 95, **117**
- Green Humbleton 77
- Greenwood, Christopher 17, 17
- Grieve's Ash 15, 78, **105**
- guard chambers 53, 55

## H

- hachures 19–20, **20**
- Hadrian, Emperor 1, 20
- Hadrian's Wall 1, 4, 10, 15, 20–2, **21**, 69
- Harehaugh Camp
  - burial mound 37
  - construction date 44
  - damage caused by rabbits 119–20, **121**
  - development **56**
  - use of topography 55
- Harehaugh Hill 37
- Harthope Burn 92
- Hayhope Knowe **42**, 43, 51, 67, 91, 96
- Haystacks Hill 103
- heather 73, 122
- hedges 94
- heritage, preservation of 119
- Hetha Burn 27, **123**

## HILLFORTS

- Hethpool 35, 37, 116, 124  
 High Knowes 41, 50, 51, 71, 79, 95  
 High Rochester (Bremenium) 21, 21, 105  
 hillforts. *see also* individual sites  
 appearance 45–9  
 centrality 85  
 defining 61, 65  
 desertion 101, 103, 116  
 development 49  
 early interpretation 10, 11  
 hidden 85, 86  
 highest 49  
 iconic status 6  
 and the landscape 1  
 links with farmed land 92, 93  
 medieval activity 114–16, 115  
 period of use 119  
 recent activity 116–18, 117, 118  
 reoccupation 101, 103, 106, 107–9, 112, 114  
 role 65, 67–9, 69–70  
 and the social landscape 94–6  
 southern 6, 8, 22, 47  
 strategic location 65  
 and topography 47–8, 55, 56, 57, 57–8, 61, 67  
 vulnerability 65, 67–8  
 homesteads 108  
 Hope-Taylor, Brian 55, 109, 114  
 Houseledge 39, 41  
 Hownam Rings 26, 27, 49  
 Hownam sequence 26–7, 49  
 human sacrifice 82–3  
 Humbleton Hill  
 aerial photograph 86  
 agriculture 41  
 development 54  
 gateway 53  
 MacLauchlan's survey 15, 15  
 ramparts demolished 101, 102  
 walkers' cairn 125, 125  
 Hutchinson, W 11  
 huts 103, 105, 107
- I**  
 Ingram visitor centre 121, 126  
 interaction, between settlements 110–11  
 Iron Age  
 agriculture 41  
 and cairns 40–1  
 climate change 41, 41  
 defining 1, 33  
 early excavation 22, 24–5  
 family life 77  
 landscape 92–4  
 Late 4, 107, 108  
 lifestyle 22, 23  
 metalworking 42–3  
 Roman *see* Roman Iron Age  
 settlement 41–2
- Iron Age people, appearance 83–4, 84  
 Iron Age, Roman. *see* Roman Iron Age  
 iron working 1, 42, 42–3
- J**  
 jewellery 41, 83, 84, 84  
 Jobey, George 25–7, 26, 29, 30, 79, 85, 107  
 Julius Agricola 1  
 Julius Caesar 6, 69, 89, 107
- K**  
 Kettles, The 55, 118, 118
- L**  
 land division 95–6, 96  
 landscape  
 and ecology 122, 124  
 exploitation of 108–9  
 hillforts in 1  
 human effect on 1, 30, 33  
 Iron Age 92–4  
 preservation 114  
 social 94–6  
 Stone Age 33–4, 34  
 landscape archaeology 29  
 Lindisfarne Gospels 4  
 Little Woodbury 22  
 livestock  
 cattle 79, 85, 87, 87  
 corrals 85, 87, 88, 108–9  
 goats 85, 87, 87  
 horses 89, 89  
 oxen 89  
 pens 2, 103, 104, 108, 116, 117, 117  
 products 81, 85, 87  
 rabbits 119–20, 121, 122  
 sheep 85, 87, 87, 116, 117, 120, 122, 122, 124  
 local knowledge, importance of 14  
 long barrows 37  
 Lordenshaws  
 burial mounds 38  
 development 44, 59  
 gateway 53  
 reoccupation 108  
 rock art 35  
 storage rooms 103, 105  
 surrounding area 36  
 Lubbock, John (later Lord Avebury) 18, 33  
 Lucretius 33  
 lynchets 90, 90, 91
- M**  
 MacLauchlan, Henry 13, 13, 14, 15, 15, 16, 17–18, 18, 19–20, 20, 22, 28, 53, 61  
 Maelmin Henge 34  
 Maiden Castle 6, 6  
 manor houses, moated 68  
 Marcus Antonius Pius 4, 107  
 Meare, Somerset 22  
 medieval remains 113, 114–16, 115  
 metalworking 42–3  
 Meyrick, Sir Samuel 12  
 Mid Hill  
 agricultural ground traces 90  
 boundaries 96  
 defences 41, 67, 72  
 development 106  
 gateway 53  
 medieval agriculture 91  
 quarrying 46  
 reoccupation 103, 109  
 roundhouses 76  
 Middle Dean Burn 85, 86, 95  
 Milfield Plain 34–5, 98, 99, 100  
 millstones 55, 79, 81  
 Monday Clough 19, 55, 57, 108  
 Mudge, Major-General 18
- N**  
 names 10–11  
 National Air Survey 24, 26  
 Newstead 101, 102  
 night hawks 124–5  
 Northumberland, Fourth Duke of 13, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21  
 Northumberland, Roman  
 conquest 1  
 Northumberland Archaeological Group 9, 9, 30, 30, 32, 95, 120, 122  
 Northumberland National Park 8, 26  
 Northumberland National Park Authority 119, 125, 125–6, 126  
 numbers 1, 3, 61, 63, 65
- O**  
 Old Bewick Hill 118  
 Old Fawdon Hill 49, 75, 75–6  
 Ordnance Survey 18–20, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 28  
 Otterburn Ranges 91
- P**  
 Park Law 55  
 past, weight of 119  
 peat bogs 33, 34, 41  
 'Pete Marsh' 82–3  
 Piggott, Margaret 26  
 Piggott, Stuart 85  
 pillboxes 118  
 pit-dwellings 22, 22  
 pits 46, 103  
 pollarding 93, 94, 94  
 pottery 8, 9, 79, 107  
*Pre-historic Times* (Lubbock) 18  
 prehistoric burials 9, 9–10  
 preservation 8  
 private ownership 108
- Q**  
 quarries 46, 47
- R**  
 radiocarbon dating 9, 44  
 ramparts and defences  
 box 48, 49, 51  
 Brough Law 45, 45, 46–7, 77  
 conspicuousness 67  
 as corrals 85, 87, 88  
 dating 44  
 decay 107  
 demolition 101, 102  
 ditches 49  
 double palisades 50, 51  
 earthen 42, 48, 48–9  
 evolution 26–7  
 flanking gateways 52  
 foundation trenches 49, 50, 51  
 Glead's Clough 66  
 Hayhope Knowe 67  
 medieval activity and 116  
 Mid Hill 41, 67, 72  
 refurbishment 101  
 Ring Chesters 20, 67  
 settlements 108  
 small size of 8  
 St Gregory's Hill 8  
 stone 43, 44, 45, 45–8, 46  
 storage rooms 103, 105  
 timber palisades 26, 32, 41, 49, 50, 51, 51, 65, 67  
 and topography 55, 57–8  
 Yeavinger Bell 11, 20, 85  
 religion 82, 82–3, 83, 88  
 Rescue Archaeology movement 25–6  
 Reynolds, Mark 29  
 Ring Chesters 10, 41, 115  
 development 60, 61  
 gateway 53  
 lynchets 90  
 ramparts 20, 67  
 reoccupation 44, 103  
 ritual offerings 82–3, 83  
 rock art 35, 35, 36, 37, 39  
 Roman Iron Age 1, 4, 8, 27, 45, 103, 107–8, 109, 112, 113, 114  
*Roman Wall, The* (Bruce) 20  
*see also* Hadrian's Wall  
 Romano-British. *see* Roman Iron Age  
 Romans. *see also* Hadrian's Wall  
 civilisation 33

- conquest 1  
 forts 10  
 frontier 4  
 invasion of Britain 69  
 occupation 1, 4, 101, 107  
 pottery 107  
 remains 101, 107, 114  
 signal station 101  
 roundhouses  
   building platforms 39, 71, 72, 114  
   comparison with huts 103  
   construction 72–3  
   ditch 71  
   doors 75  
   doorway orientation 77–8, 78  
   Fawdon Dean 64  
   floors 75  
   hearths 73, 75  
   height 71  
   interior divisions 78, 78–9  
   Jobey's analysis 26  
   life indoors 77–9, 78, 80  
   Lordenshaws 36  
   MacLauchlan recognises 22  
   proximity 76  
   reconstruction 71, 72, 75, 105  
   roofs 72–3, 74  
   storage space 73  
   strength 71–2  
   surface traces 8, 71, 72  
   thatch 72–3, 73, 74  
   turf bank 71, 73  
   usage 75–6  
   Yeavinger Bell 71, 71–2, 96–7, 97, 98  
 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 29–30, 49  
 Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England 29–30
- S**  
 St Gregory's Hill  
   development 120  
   gateways 51, 65  
   huts 105  
   quarrying 46  
   ramparts 8  
   Roman Iron Age settlement 108, 112  
   roundhouses 73  
   surrounding area 110–11  
   surveys 28
- vulnerability 65  
   sanitation 82  
   scooped enclosures 108, 109, 113  
   Second World War 118, 118  
   Selgovi, the 101  
   settlements 41–2, 76–7, 108–9, 109, 114  
     Bronze Age 34–5, 37, 38–9, 41, 41–2  
     Stone Age 34–5  
   sewage 82  
   sheilings 117  
   Simonside Hills 38  
   Sinkside Hill 45, 46  
   Smith, Charles 12  
   social change 33, 107–8, 108  
   social landscape 94–6  
   Society of Antiquities of Newcastle 21  
   soilmarks 24  
   South Middleton Dean 55, 57, 58, 121  
   South Shields 79  
   standing stones 99  
   Standrop Rigg 37, 39, 41  
   Staw Hill 65, 66, 77, 90, 93, 96  
   Steer, Kenneth 26, 29  
   stells 117, 117  
   Stone Age  
     agriculture 35  
     ceremonial monuments 34, 35, 35  
     defining 33  
     landscape 33–4, 34  
     lifestyle 37–8  
     rock art 35, 35, 36, 37, 39  
     settlement 34–5  
     standing stones 99  
     stone circles 16–17, 35, 35, 116, 124  
   stone robbing 125  
   stoneworking 43, 45  
   storage pits 22  
   Strabo 49, 83, 84  
   straw 73  
   sun worship 78  
   surveys  
     Armstrong's 16, 16–17  
     Downman's 22, 24, 28  
     English Heritage 28  
     Greenwood's 17, 17  
     MacLauchlan's 13, 15, 16, 17–18, 18, 28  
     non-destructive 119  
     Ordnance Survey 18–20, 19, 20, 28
- the Royal Commission 29–30  
   Tate's 15–16  
   Sussex 22  
   symbolism 69
- T**  
 tactics 69  
 Tate, George 15, 15–16, 16, 53, 55, 78, 89, 114  
 tathing 117  
 technological development 33  
 Threestoneburn 35, 35  
 timeline 2  
 tools 42, 43, 46, 79, 91  
 topography, exploitation of 47–8, 55, 56, 57, 57–8, 61, 67  
 Topping, Pete 30  
 torcs 83, 84, 84  
 Tosson Burgh 11, 116  
 transhumance 87–8  
 Traprain Law 42, 97  
 tribal politics 4  
 tribal territories 4, 6  
 Trimontium 101  
 turf 73
- V**  
 villages 76–7, 103, 108, 112  
 visitors  
   education 121, 125, 125–6, 126  
   guidance 126  
   responsibilities 124–5  
 Vodadini, the 4, 42, 97  
 votive offerings 41
- W**  
 warfare 65, 69–70, 89  
 water supplies 81  
 weapons 42, 43, 69, 69  
 Wessex 22  
 West Hill  
   archaeological remains 2, 4  
   Downman's survey 24  
   gateway 51  
   livestock pens 2  
   perimeter 67, 108  
   ramparts 45, 87  
   reoccupation 108  
   rock art 35, 37, 39  
   Roman Iron Age settlement 103, 107
- settlement 22  
   surrounding area 110–11  
 Wether Hill  
   archaeological remains 31  
   burial mounds 39, 40, 40–1  
   cord rig 90  
   cross-ridge dyke 95  
   damage 122  
   dating 44  
   development 40  
   excavation 30, 30, 32  
   gateway 49, 51, 70  
   graves 9, 9–10  
   palisade 32, 49  
   previous settlement 32  
   ramparts 46  
   settlement 41, 76  
   wicker working 72  
 Woden Law 95, 95, 101  
 woodland 34, 34, 41, 81, 92–4, 101, 122  
 wool 87
- Y**  
 Yeavinger Bell  
   artefacts 16  
   cairn 39, 39, 100, 114  
   ditched enclosure 113, 114, 115  
   evidence of reoccupation 109, 113, 114, 115  
   gateway 55, 55, 70  
   guard chambers 55  
   Hutchinson's interpretation 11  
   importance 96–7, 99–100  
   MacLauchlan's survey 15  
   millstone 55  
   natural distinctiveness 98, 99  
   night hawks raid 124–5  
   occupation 62  
   perimeter 67, 68  
   population 97  
   ramparts 11, 20, 85  
   roundhouse platforms 114  
   roundhouses 71, 71–2, 96–7, 97, 98  
   settlement 42, 76  
   surrounding area 61, 62, 96  
   Tate's survey 15, 15, 16  
   and topography 55  
   tours 126  
   vulnerability 67–8  
 Yetholm Loch 34, 73, 73  
 Yorkshire Wolds 82

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*Front cover*

*The hillfort on Yeavinger Bell, seen from the rampart on Great Hetha.*