

CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

Eddisbury

Archaeological Assessment



2003



ENGLISH HERITAGE

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EDDISBURY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Mike Shaw & Jo Clark

1 SUMMARY

Strictly speaking Eddisbury does not qualify, and never has qualified, as a town. However, it is included in the survey of Cheshire's Historic Towns because it was the site of a *burh* (a defended centre) in the early 10th century. Such sites were often created as, or grew into, trading centres and are therefore an important example of early urbanism in Cheshire.

The *burh* occupied the Iron Age hill fort known as 'Castle Ditches', which is located towards the northern end of the Mid Cheshire Ridge. Watling Street, the Roman road that connected Chester with Manchester and beyond, passes immediately below the fort. During the medieval period Eddisbury was the site of a hunting lodge.

1.1 Topography And Geology

Eddisbury Hill, the site of the hillfort and *burh*, lies c 16km east of Chester and 0.5km west of Delamere on the Mid-Cheshire Ridge at 150m AOD, rising to 158m AOD in the north-west.

The underlying geology comprises Keuper Waterstones (Geological Survey of Great Britain, 1965); and the soils in this area are typical brown sands, which are suited to both arable and grassland and are graded class 2 (Furness, 1978, 73).

The A556 to Northwich runs 1km to the south of Eddisbury Hill and the B5152 runs 0.5km east of Eddisbury Hill to Frodsham.

1.2 Administrative Unit

Eddisbury was included in the parish of Delamere, which was created from the last remaining part of the Delamere Forest, that was enclosed in 1812 and no tithes were payable on this land (Dunn 1987, 27). It lay in Eddisbury Hundred, which was in existence by 1180-1200, and Frodsham Deanery (ibid 14).

Today Eddisbury lies within the Civil Parish of Delamere and the Borough of Vale Royal.

1.4 Place Name

Eddisbury is first recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 914 as *Eades byrig* – meaning Ead's stronghold. The place name also occurs as *Edesberie* (1086), *Edersbury* (1387) and *Edusbury* (1468) (Dodgson 1971, 213).

2 SOURCES

2.1 Historical

Sources include the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Varley's excavation report in the Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (1950), a brief description in Ormerod's *History of County Palatine and City of Chester* (1882), and 19th-century trade directories.

2.2 Cartographic

Eddisbury is marked on Saxton's map of Cheshire (1577) as the 'Chamber in the Forest' and on Speed's map of Cheshire (1610) as the 'Chamber Olim [once] Edesbury'. The chamber depicted by these maps refers to a medieval hunting lodge. The only maps to show Eddisbury in detail before the OS First Edition 6": 1mile map of 1874 are the plans of the Enclosure Award dated to 1816-19, upon which the 'Chamber in the Forest' and associated buildings are depicted.

2.3 Archaeological

Two records from the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR) are located within Eddisbury, which are identified in Figure 1. Throughout this document, where sites and finds have been identified from the CSMR, the relevant reference has been provided. The present survey has not identified any new records.

Eddisbury hillfort and *burh* were subject to extensive excavation by W J Varley from 1935-8. The results of this work and a discussion of the background to the site, including documentary evidence, are contained in the excavation report (Varley 1950). However, the archive and finds from the work have been largely lost but what little remains of this, has been deposited with the National Monuments Record (pers comm Adrian Havercroft). The site was the subject of a detailed earthwork survey in 1987 by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments (Cocroft et al 1989)

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

3.1 Prehistoric

A large number of important finds and sites are known in the vicinity of Eddisbury and it was obviously an area of some importance from at least the Neolithic period. Within a 2.5km radius at least ten stone axes of Neolithic to Bronze Age date (CSMR 834, 842, 843, 910, 2680/0/1) have been discovered, as well as a number of Bronze Age burial mounds (CSMR 835, 923).

From the Iron Age period the chief monuments, apart from the hillfort, are two promontory forts, at Kelsbarrow (CSMR 833) 3km south-west, and Oakmere (CSMR 848), 2.75km south-east.

Evidence of settlement on Eddisbury itself comes from Varley's 1930s excavations. He distinguished three phases of prehistoric activity, all dated to the Iron Age: Phase 1 a defensive palisade; Phase 2 construction of the original hillfort as a small

univallate (single-bank and ditched) enclosure around the eastern side of the hill; and Phase 3, an enlarged bivallate (double bank and ditched) enclosure (Varley 1950, 52).

Varley's interpretations and dating have been challenged. Palisaded enclosures are now recognised as Late Bronze Age, perhaps 9th-8th century, rather than Iron Age in date and recently it has been suggested that he was wrong to suggest that there was a univallate phase to the hillfort (Cocroft *et al* 1989). Nevertheless it is clear that Eddisbury, as the largest hillfort in Cheshire, potentially represents an important regional Iron Age centre.

In 1976 the OS recorded that the inner rampart on the north-east side was 15m wide, 6m high internally, 4m high internally with an inner ditch 10m wide and 0.5m deep. The outer rampart is 16m wide, 2m high internally and 5.5m high externally with no external ditch (OS Record Card SJ56NE1; CSMR 866/1).

Much of the site has been damaged by ploughing, with traces of ridge and furrow evident in the interior of the fort.

3.2 Roman

The hillfort lay close to the Roman road system: Watling Street (CSMR 844) passes around 100m to the south and this meets the road that connected Chester and Middlewich (CSMR 1017) 2km to the west.

Varley's excavations of the hillfort revealed that the Romans 'had made a thorough job of the dismantling of Eddisbury. The south-eastern section was blocked and sealed, every ditch filled up, and the ramparts levelled to within a foot or so of their foundations' (Varley 1950, 57).

3.3 Early Medieval

Varley's excavations uncovered evidence of perhaps two phases of re-occupation of the site before the refurbishment of its defences. A series of circular sunken-floored huts with stone kerbs were found to have been built over the ruined inner rampart, and Varley suggested a date of the 4th to 6th century AD for this activity, which precedes the construction of the *burh*.

The excavations revealed a further hut, said to be of 'wattle and daub' and apparently oval in shape, within the upper silts of the inner ditch, for which Varley suggested a later, 6th to 8th century date, based on the recovery of an annular clay loom weight from the floor of the hut (Varley 1950, 12.).

3.3.1 The *Burh*

Evidence for the foundation of a *burh* or fortification at Eddisbury comes from both documentary and archaeological evidence. Documentary reference to the *burh* is contained in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:

'In this year, God granting, Aethelflaed, lady of the Mercians, went with all the Mercians to Tamworth and built the burgh there in the early summer; and therefore the following Lammas (August 1) that at Stafford. Then in the year after this, that at Eddisbury, in the early summer; and afterwards in the same year, towards the end of Autumn, that at Warwick'. (Varley 1950, 2)

Varley's excavations demonstrated that the rebuilt portions of the inner and outer ramparts of the hillfort were later than the 'Dark Age' huts over which they lie and although no associated artefacts were recovered, the only suitable context for such a rebuilding is the construction of the Aethelflaedan *burgh*, which was recorded in the Mercian Register (Varley 1950, 61).

The foundation of the *burgh* at Eddisbury in 914 can be seen as part of a scheme for the protection of the Kingdom of Mercia by Aethelflaed, lady of the Mercians. Its purpose was to protect Mercia from the Northumbrian Danes based at York. Raiders might approach from the east along Watling Street or from the River Mersey to the north. This phase of *burgh* foundation by Aethelflaeda saw the construction of fortresses at Bridgnorth in 912, Tamworth and Stafford in 913, Warwick as well as Eddisbury in 914, and Chirbury and Runcorn in 915. It can be seen that many of these fortifications were founded at centres which were either already proto-urban centres or were soon to become such. However, it is unlikely that this had ever been the intention at Eddisbury and certainly there is no evidence of any long-lasting occupation of the site. Occupation presumably lasted as long as necessary to carry out the refurbishment of the defences (assuming these were completed) and whilst it was strategically important. Higham (1988, 204) has argued that once Derby was captured in 917 and certainly once the *burgh* at Manchester had been founded in 919 the *burgh* at Eddisbury would have become obsolete.

Higham has also pointed out that there is a second Eddisbury in Cheshire, near Rainow (Higham 1988, 202; 1993, 111). However, the archaeological evidence and the strategic position of the Delamere Eddisbury leaves little doubt that this is the Eddisbury to which the Chronicle refers.

3.3.2 Domesday

In the Domesday Survey (1086), Eddisbury was described as waste both before and after the Conquest:

The same Earl (Earl Hugh) [holds] Edesberie. Godwin held it as a free man. There [are] 2 hides that pay geld. The land is for 6 ploughs. It was and is waste. This land is 1 league long and as much wide.
(Harris and Thacker 1987, 346)

3.4 Medieval

3.4.1 The Manor

At Domesday Eddisbury was part of the lands of the Earl of Chester and was incorporated into the extensive Forest of Delamere, which by the 14th century

stretched from the River Gowy in the west to the River Weaver in the east and from Frodsham in the north to Beeston in the south.

3.4.2 The Chamber in the Forest

Eddisbury lay in the heart of the Forest of Delamere and was from the 14th century the site of a forest lodge, known as 'the Chamber in the Forest'. The lodge was the residence of the chief keepers of the forest, the Done family and their descendants, the Ardernes, until the enclosure of the Forest of Delamere in 1812. There are a number of references to repairs and rebuilding of the forest lodge from the 15th to 17th centuries (Varley 1950, 63-67).

Varley's excavations uncovered the remains of the forest lodge buildings and he has suggested a sequence of occupation from 1350 to 1800 (Varley 1950, 67, Fig 18). The lodge was confined to a small area at the south-east corner of the fort, described on the OS First Edition 6": 1 mile map as 'Merrick's Hill or the Chamber' (John Merrick was the last tenant of the lodge). This and the earlier enclosure award map also show the outline of the lodge buildings.

The hillfort has been subject to quarrying, as identified on the OS 6": 1 mile map of 1874. This is then identified as an 'Old Quarry' on the OS 25": 1 mile map and as 'disused' on the modern OS map.

3.5 Post Medieval

The Chamber in the Forest was abandoned after the enclosure award of 1819. Eddisbury Hill Farm immediately east of the fort was already in existence at this time for it is shown on the Enclosure Map but Old Pale Farm, which lies immediately west of the earthworks dates from between 1819 and 1874, when it appears on the First Edition OS map.

4 PLAN COMPONENTS

EARLY MEDIEVAL c 450-1066 (Figure 2)

COM 1 - Burh?

MEDIEVAL c 1066-1540 (Figure 2)

COM 2 - Chamber in the Forest

4.1 Early Medieval (Figure 2)

Although activity can be traced back to the Neolithic period, and that the size and complexity of the Iron Age hillfort suggest that it was potentially a regional centre, the plan components commence with the early medieval *burh*. However, the *burh* is thought to have occupied the full extent of the Iron Age hillfort, and therefore the hillfort and *burh* are both depicted as **COM 1**.

There is no evidence that there was any settlement on Eddisbury Hill immediately prior to the creation of the *burh* in AD 914. Presumably the positioning of the *burh* here was due to its strategic location and the existence of fortifications which could be refurbished with relative ease. However, the duration of the *burh* is likely to have been short, with suggestions that it was obsolete c AD 919.

4.2 Medieval (Figure 2)

After the *burh*, the site appears to have fallen out of use until the establishment of the *Chamber in the Forest* (hunting lodge) in the Forest of Delamere, which persisted into the post medieval period. The lodge was located on a separate spur at the east end of the hillfort and is identified as **COM 2**.

5 HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

5.1 Above-Ground Remains

Eddisbury hillfort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 25692). The defences of the hillfort and *burh* are well preserved. However, the site has obviously been affected by plough damage (denuding of banks etc.), which may have had an adverse effect upon any surviving features within the hillfort/*burh*. Also a quarry was sited within the hillfort, which will have had an adverse effect upon any archaeology in this area of the site. The foundations of the 'Chamber in the Forest' at the east end of the site survived as ruins before Varley's excavations, and the plans of the buildings are depicted on the Enclosure Award and OS First Edition maps. This area is now rough grassland.

5.2 Below-Ground Remains

Varley's excavations have demonstrated good survival of the fort's defences. Features can be expected to survive in the interior below the plough levels. The extent to which the buildings of the Chamber in the Forest survive after Varley's excavations is unknown. He makes no mention of the removal of the buildings to examine earlier levels, so their foundations may survive.

6 PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

6.1 Introduction

The research priorities for Eddisbury focus upon the early medieval period and its use as a *burh*.

6.2 Iron Age

- Establish the nature and extent of Iron Age activity at Eddisbury
- Examine the relationship of the hillfort with the surrounding landscape
- Examine Varley's archive and reassess his interpretation of the site

6.3 Roman

- Examine evidence of Roman reuse of the site
- Establish whether there is evidence of Roman destruction of the defences as Varley suggests.

6.4 Early Medieval

- Establish the nature and extent of early medieval settlement predating the creation of the *burh*
- Establish the nature and extent of the *burh*.
- Establish the function of the *burh*.
- Examine whether there is any evidence of internal features
- Establish the nature of its defences
- Establish for how long was it in use
- Establish whether it was a short-lived garrison or if there is any evidence of it having other functions (industrial etc)

6.5 Medieval

- Examine the foundation of the Chamber in the Forest and its development

6.6 Post Medieval

- Establish when the Chamber fell into disuse

7 SOURCES

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7.2 Maps

(CRO – Cheshire Record Office)

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Enclosure Award 1819 (CRO QDE 1/23)

Ordnance Survey First Edition 6": 1mile Map Sheet 40, surveyed 1874

Plan of Delamere forest 1817 (CRO DTM 94)

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8 ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Eddisbury and the Surrounding Area

Figure 2: The Development of Eddisbury

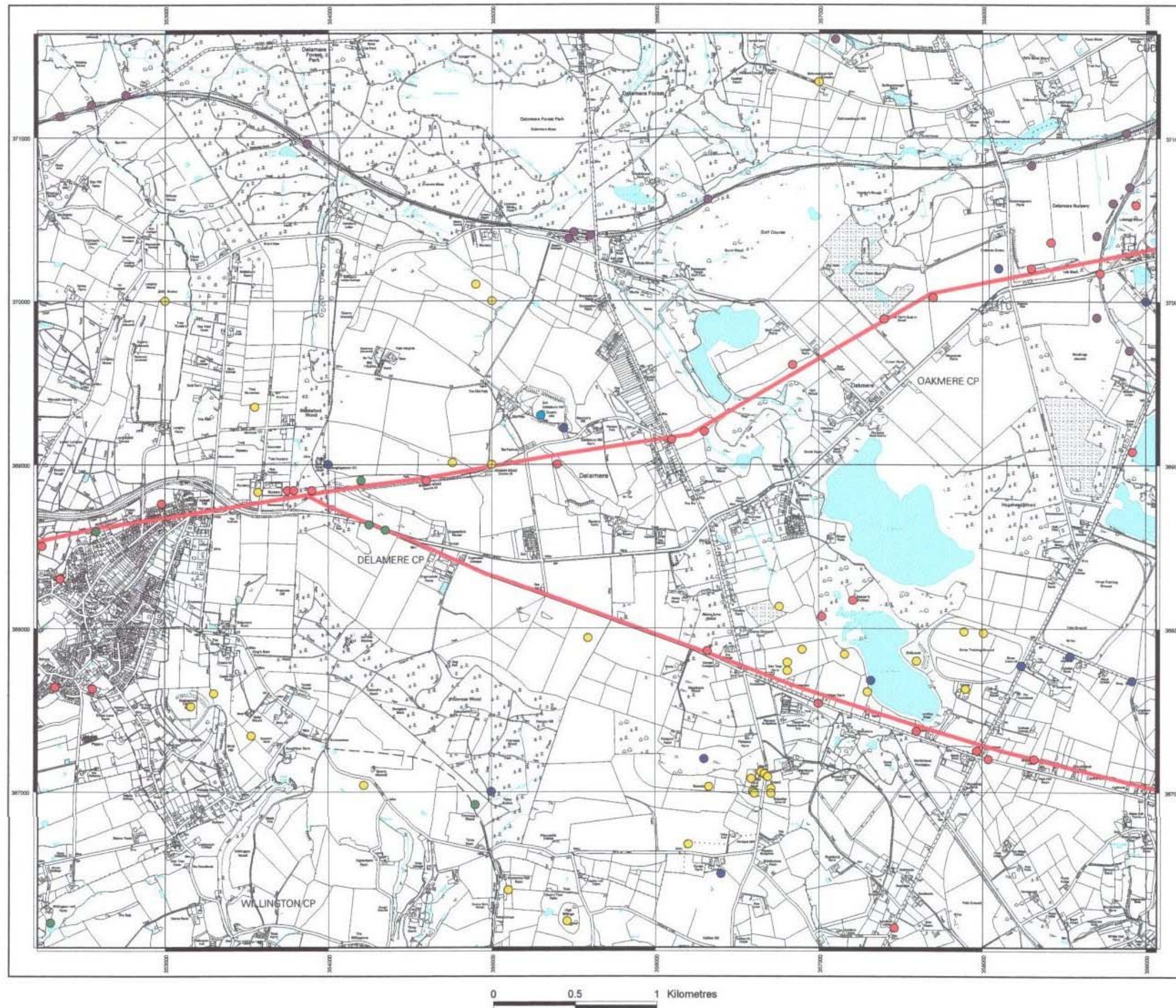


Figure 1
Eddisbury and the
Surrounding Area

Sites and Monuments

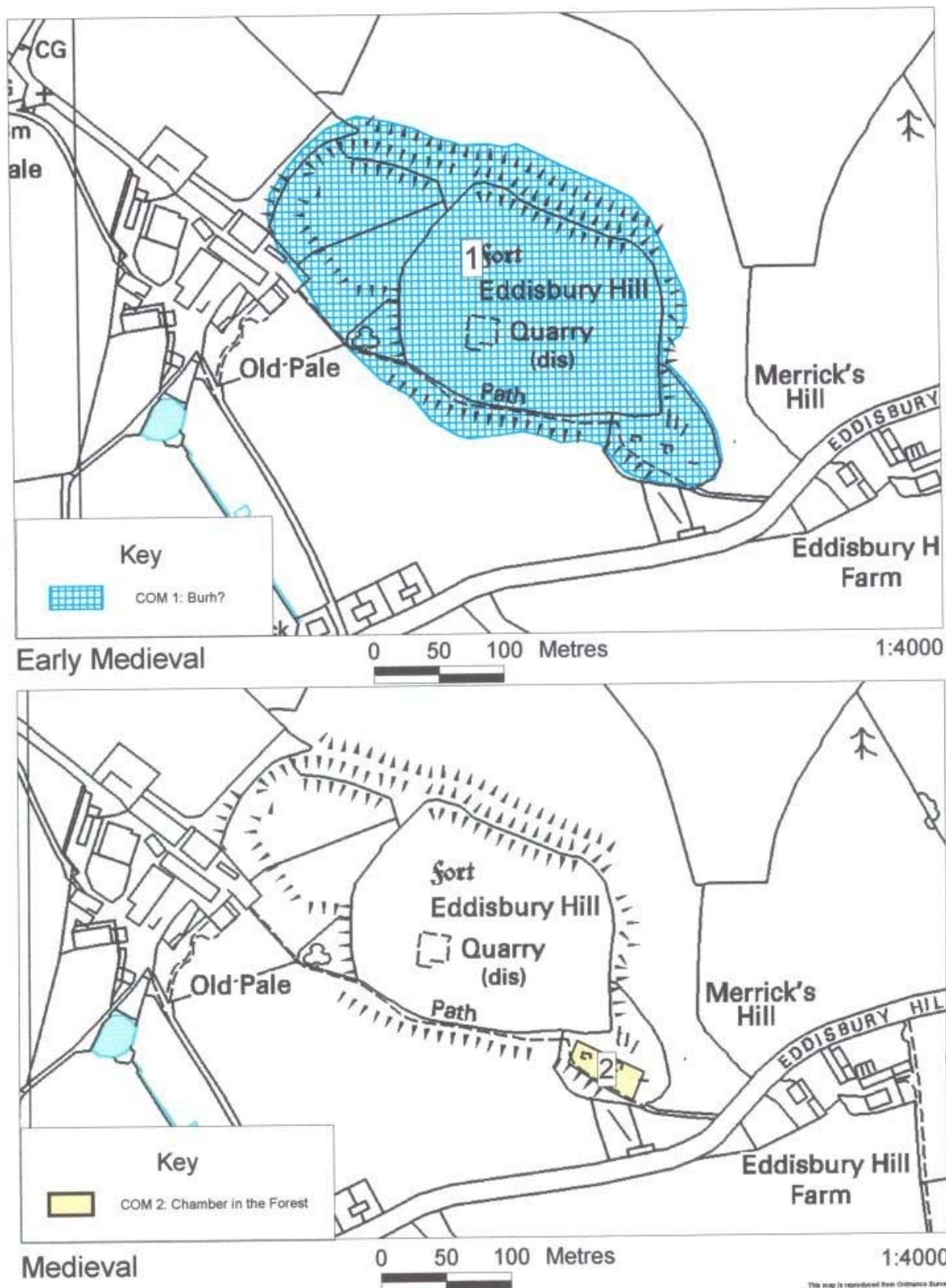
- Prehistoric
- Romano-British
- Early Medieval
- Medieval
- Post Medieval
- Modern

 Roman Road

1:22000

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Figure 2: The Development of Eddisbury



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