

'CRANE'S FORT', CONKSURRY, YOULGREAVE, DERBYSHIRE: A NEWLY DISCOVERED HILLFORT

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, Preston remarked that the hillforts of the Peak District tend to be found in the shale and sandstone districts; the only one situated on carboniferous limestone was Fin Cop (1954: 5). On this basis, he was able to assert that the hillforts of the Peak 'mostly avoid the limestone' (1954: 1). Not long afterwards, Rivet claimed: 'we can be confident that the distribution of hillforts and similar defended enclosures is reasonably complete' (1958: 13). However, over the last ten years, field-walking in the carboniferous limestone country of the Peak has identified an Iron Age settlement of major proportions (Harborough Rocks: Makepeace, 1990), and at least ten small enclosures, all probably dateable to the late-Bronze Age/pre-Roman Iron Age, and has thus indicated the potential for significant expansion of our understanding of the Peak in these periods (Fig. 1). Detail is still lacking (Hart, 1981: 73); our knowledge of the date and distribution of these monuments, and of the people of the Iron Age Peak, remains fragmentary. Only two hillforts — Ball Cross (Stanley, 1954) and Mam Tor (Coombs and Thompson, 1979) — have been excavated, and these have produced more questions than answers in respect of the chronology and the form of the defences of all such structures. However, as more work is done, the general picture becomes clearer. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the discovery of another major hillfort in the limestone country, whose existence has long been suspected, but which has only recently been confirmed by field-survey.

The possibility of a hillfort-site at Conksbury was first suggested by Professor Kenneth Cameron in his etymological study of the name Conksbury: 'perhaps Crane's fortification' (1959: 107). It was subsequently assumed that the fort was concealed either by the earthworks of the medieval village of Conksbury (Makepeace, 1962) or by the linear embanked enclosures of the adjacent Meadow Place Grange Farm (a monastic grange belonging to Leicester Abbey: North Derbyshire Archaeological Trust Sites and Monuments Record, site no. 3351; Hart, 1981: 155) (Fig. 2). However, after an investigation in March 1989, GAM was able to establish the precise location of the hillfort, an identification confirmed by a detailed site-survey conducted by GAM, CRH and A. G. Makepeace in the spring of the same year.

THE SITE

Conksbury hillfort is situated to the north-east of Meadow Place Grange Farm, between Lathkill Dale and Greaves Hollow, at 233 metres O.D. (SK20386592). Its rampart is sub-rectangular in plan, and encloses an area of 9.71 acres (3.929 ha) (Fig. 2). The fort is carefully sited to take advantage of a long narrow limestone ridge, having a precipitous dale to the north, and steep slopes to the south (Figs 2, 3). Both dales provide a continuous supply of spring waters, the best sources being those in Greaves Hollow, near a possible south-western entrance to the fort.

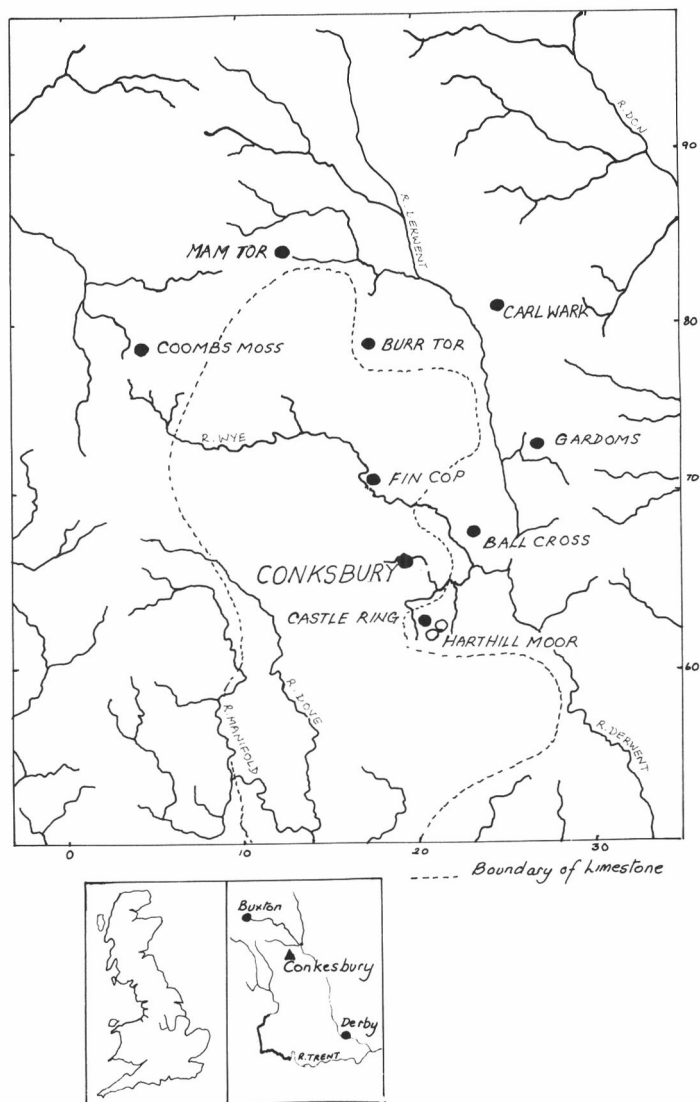


Fig. 1 'Crane's Fort', Conksbury: General location and other defended sites.

The ramparts (Figs 3, 4)

The ramparts are of univallate form, and are currently hidden by 'enclosure' walls. Their northern and southern lines, running parallel to the crest of the ridge, consist of low walls, in size now on average 0.8 metre high and 6.0 metres wide, reinforcing the naturally steep slope of the dales. The eastern and western alignments, cutting across the ridge, are much more substantial, being especially stronger and wider at the south-western angle. The ramparts appear to have been built of excavated limestone blocks, with a rubble infill. Traces of external ditches are slight, but this is probably due to extensive long-term farming of these hilltops.

The western rampart has been damaged in places by historically attested stone-robbing for

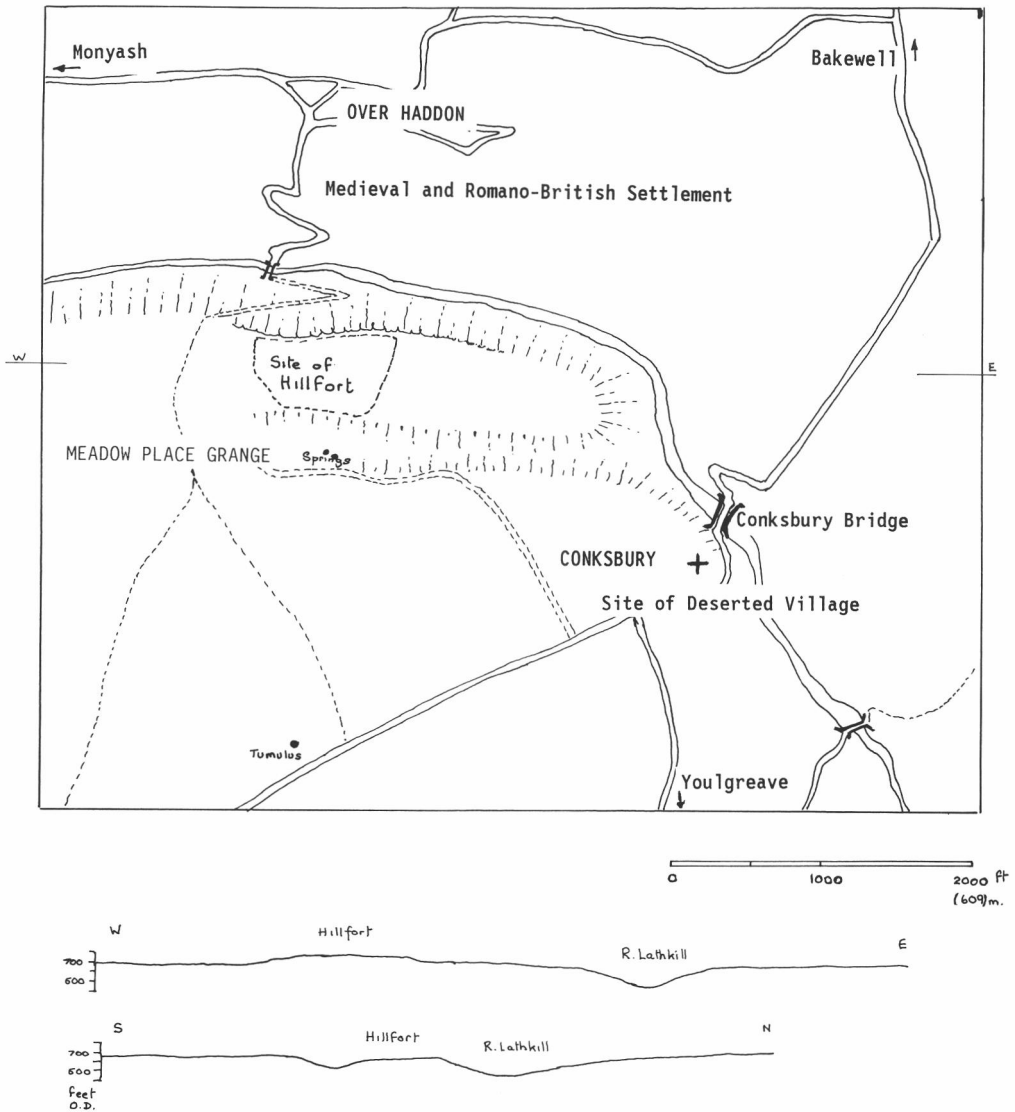


Fig. 2 'Crane's Fort', Conksbury: Environs and sections.

material for lime kilns and for the 'enclosure' walls. However, it still attains a height of 1.5 metres above the exterior level, and is on average 9.0 metres wide at its base. The farm gateway in its northern quarter may have been the site of an original entrance, though it is arguable that such an entrance-way might be better located at the south-west corner, where the rampart is higher. Regrettably this area is now pitted by stone quarries. In any case, a western gate from the fort would probably have been desirable to provide access to the high plateau of the White Peak.

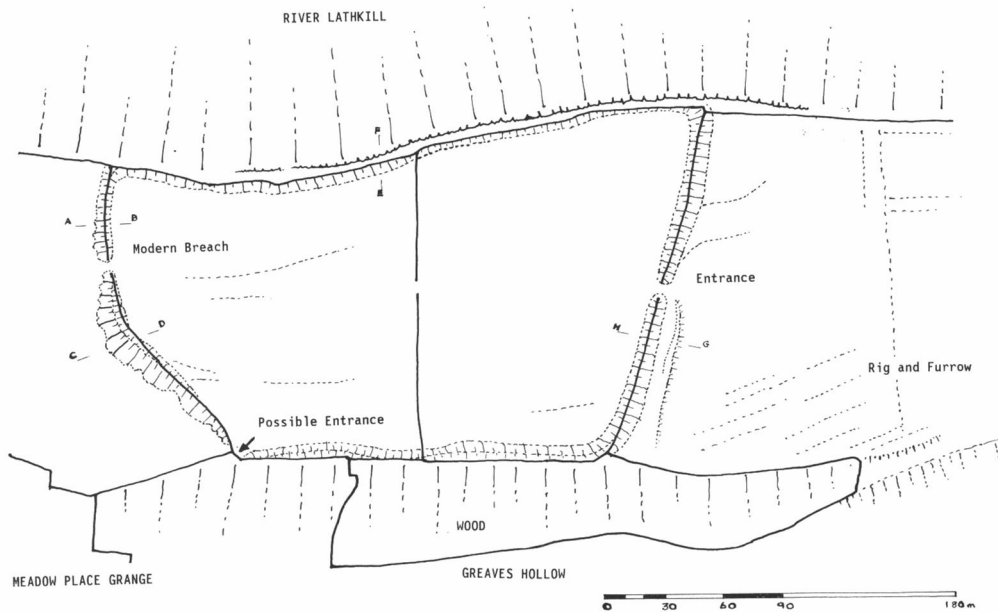


Fig. 3 'Crane's Fort', Conksbury: Site plan.

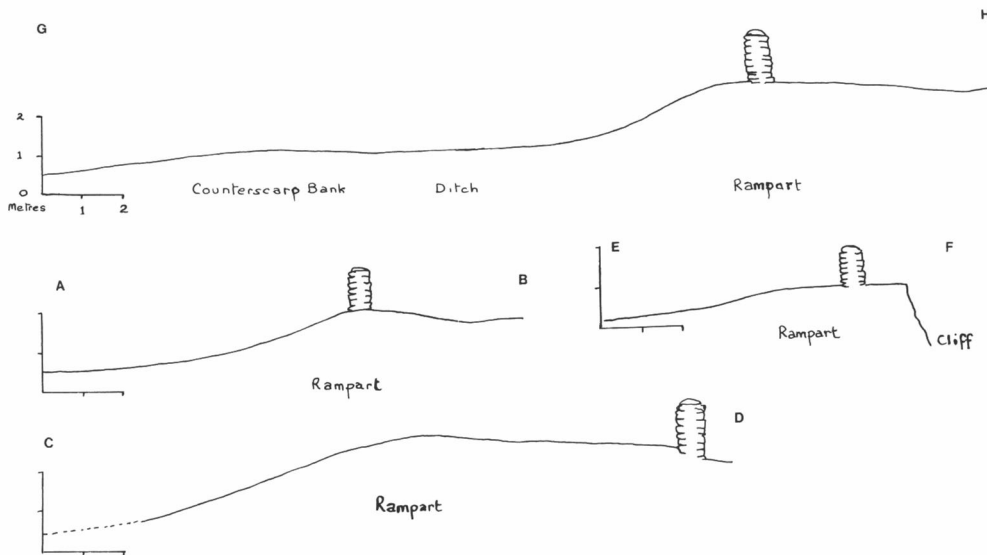


Fig. 4 'Crane's Fort', Conksbury: Rampart sections.

The eastern rampart, across the narrower part of the ridge, is fronted by a quarry ditch with traces of a counter-scarp bank; near its centre it is cut by a slightly in-turned narrow entrance-way. Though much reduced in height, due to agricultural activity, the rampart is still 1.5 metres high and 10.0 metres broad. The flattish ditch is 5.0 metres wide; the counter-scarp bank averages 5.0 metres in breadth.

DISCUSSION

The interior and immediate vicinity of this strongly sited fort have been extensively levelled by many centuries of agrarian activity; undoubtedly other significant features, such as ditches, pits and structures, remain to be discovered.

The recent identification of prehistoric stone defensive walls at Gardom's Edge in the parish of Baslow and Bubnell (SK272730), of smaller enclosures on Cratcliffe Rocks, Harthill Moor (Hart, 1981: 72-81), and now of the Conksbury hillfort — all on the eastern flanks of the Peak — suggests areas of ancient territorial conflict. It may be postulated that the late prehistoric peoples occupying the East Moors (the gritstone and shale landscapes) were in search of new lands, very likely with an eye to the more fertile limestone country of the White Peak: the difference in productivity between these regions is still evident in modern agricultural returns, and is discernible in the historical and archaeological evidence (Hart, 1981: 73).

The newly discovered hillforts are not only fairly large, but their surviving defences remain substantial in height and width. However, despite this, and despite a relatively high level of aerial investigation (there have been several commercial mappings, and a series of low level archaeological prospections — largely by D. N. Riley and C. R. Hart), these monuments have surprisingly eluded identification. It seems, therefore, that it is only through topographical and documentary studies — not least a review of place names — coupled with first-hand knowledge of the region and confirmed by methodological field-walking, that further discoveries are likely to be made. Already, new surveys have recognised detail concerning phasing and methods of construction of the defences of hillforts in the north-west area of the Peak, as well as on the East Moors (Hart and Makepeace, forthcoming). One may say with some confidence that the re-surveying of the known hillforts currently in progress will result in a more informed understanding of the late prehistoric dark ages of the Peak.

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