Dorset’s hillforts, a visitor’s guide
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*Top Badbury Rings*

*Above Yellowhammer*

*Right Common spotted orchid*

*Left Hod Hill*
This guide introduces you to the Iron Age hillforts of Dorset. Many were built more than 2,000 years ago and all are significant landmarks. It is easy to understand why our ancestors chose these places in which to live and to defend themselves.

Now the hillforts are home to very special nature and wildlife, and all have untold stories from an archaeological perspective. Enjoy and explore these landscapes, all year round.

*Right* Evening light on ramparts, Hambledon Hill.
The Iron Age hillfort is one of the most impressive earthworks of the Wessex landscape. It reflects the organisational and engineering skill, as well as the defensive mastery of its maker. Theories differ as to why they were built. They may have been created as a defence against hostile neighbours or as a status symbol for a local chief. But what is certain is that the construction of these massive earthworks demanded a co-ordinated physical effort by a large number of people.

Some hillforts had a single bank (termed rampart) and ditch, known as univallate. Those with two or more banks and ditches are described as multivallate hillforts. The gateways to hillforts were the weakest part of the defence and they were often defended by complicated earthworks. This was to force hostile warriors to weave between ramparts before reaching the gates.

The hillforts featured in this guide were built about 2,500 years ago and lived in until the Roman conquest in AD 44. It is through archaeological research and investigation that we learn about them. What knowledge we have comes from chance finds, excavations, surveys, and comparisons with other hillforts. The only things that usually survive in the ground are durable artefacts made of pottery, metal, stone, bone and shell. There are also clues as to where people lived. Inside the inner ramparts you will see circular hollows terraced into the hillslope, thought to be the remains of Iron Age roundhouses.

There is evidence, too, that many of these prominent sites were used by people long before the hillforts were constructed. This can be seen in the form of burial mounds such as the Neolithic long barrow within Hambledon Hill dating back to before 3,500 BC. Similarly, Bronze Age burial mounds found within Pilsdon Pen, Eggardon Hill and Badbury Rings date from 2,300-1,500 BC. After the Iron Age, some hillforts were used as bases and camps by the Roman army.

We imagine that hillforts were of strategic significance enabling the occupants to control trackways. Some hillforts, such as Coney’s Castle and Lambert’s Castle, Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill, may have been built in pairs for this purpose. To get a feel for what these places would have been like, imagine these hill tops as they were then, crowded with people and their livestock. The entrances through the massive defences were linked by tracks lined with thatched roundhouses; the small circular areas of levelled ground inside the ramparts show their position. People with a wide range of skills and occupations would have lived there. Some hillforts became, in effect, small towns. However, the beliefs, legends and stories of their occupants have been lost because theirs was an oral tradition.

Winter, when the vegetation is short and there is a touch of frost on the ground, is an ideal time to see the footprint of the roundhouses on these sites, especially at Hod Hill and Hambledon Hill. Survey and excavation has enabled us to understand how food was grown locally. Aerial photographs of the areas around Badbury Rings, Eggardon Hill, Hod Hill and Pilsdon Pen show traces of field systems and farmsteads, revealing how much of the land was cultivated 2,000 years ago.

We can guess that many generations lived in these hillforts during the 600 years or so that they were occupied; some settlements may even have been built, abandoned and then re-used. We are never likely to know the names of these people, although we do know that in Dorset the local tribe was called the Durotriges, and in neighbouring Devon, the Dumnonii. The hillforts and the Cerne Abbas Giant are legally protected scheduled ancient monuments (SM).
The places in this guide are home to a wide range of wildlife. The profile of hillforts with their steep ramparts and ditches mean that they have never been intensively farmed. These landscapes have, by virtue of their formation, position and isolation, evolved into outstanding habitats supporting rare wildflowers, butterflies, bats and birds. They are our living textbooks, detailing the natural and cultural footprint of our ancestors and past generations over thousands of years.

**Chalk downland**
Hillforts in this group include Badbury Rings, Eggardon Hill, Hod Hill and Hambledon Hill. The chalk soils on the steep rampart slopes are thin and infertile and provide ideal conditions for fine grasses, sedges and a wonderful variety of flowering plants. Typical flowers, in order of flowering from May to September, include cowslip, milkwort, horseshoe vetch, rockrose, fairy flax, kidney vetch, thyme, dropwort, small scabious, clustered bellflower, knapweed, devil’s bit scabious, betony and saw-wort. There are also large populations of orchids including the common spotted, fragrant, autumn lady’s tresses and pyramidal with smaller numbers of early purple and bee orchid. These plants support many butterflies including marsh fritillary, which lays its eggs on devil’s bit scabious, and the Adonis blue, which prefers to lay its eggs on horseshoe vetch. Other significant butterflies are chalkhill blue, brown argus, dingy skipper, grizzled skipper and green hairstreak.

**Acid heathland**
The hillforts of Coney’s Castle, Lambert’s Castle, Lewesdon Hill and Pilsdon Pen are built on the acid greensand hills of West Dorset. The ramparts, where they are not wooded, support dwarf shrub species such as ling, bell heather, western gorse, bilberry, tormentil, heath bedstraw, milkwort, catsear, sheep’s bit and local climbing corydals. Coney’s Castle is particularly striking for bluebells at the beginning of May. At the foot of these steep hills, gault clay forms a waterproof layer and a spring line where bog pimpernel, bog asphodel, lousewort, lesser skullcap, sundew and the occasional heath spotted orchid grow.

**Species**
A wide variety of birds can be seen at each site. Buzzards, kestrels and ravens fly overhead. Woodpeckers and willow warblers can be seen in the woodland. Lambert’s Castle is known for meadow pipits, stonechat and yellowhammers. Mammals include badgers, bats, dormice, foxes, roe deer, stoats and weasels. Badbury Rings is noted for its ground nesting birds, such as corn bunting and skylark.
In managing hillforts, the goal is to strike a balance that protects the buried archaeology, makes place for nature to thrive, and provides a welcome to visitors. The hillforts’ steep ramparts and deep ditches mean that they tend not to have been intensively farmed. As a result, rare species of invertebrates and plants can still be found. Hillforts are of high archaeological and conservational interest, all are scheduled ancient monuments and most are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Nature Reserve (NNR). Many also sit within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (DAONB).

**Grazing**

Grasslands on hillforts have long supported grazing animals. The different patterns of foraging by sheep and cattle are the key to sustaining species-rich grassland. Cattle forage across the hill, whilst sheep graze on the steeper slopes encouraging a short, tight turf. Grazing limits the unwanted spread of trees and scrub, and stops vigorous grasses smothering the finer grasses and wildflowers. The tight grassland cover binds the soil together, protecting the archaeological remains from weathering and water erosion.

**Scrub management**

Scrub is made up of a variety of attractive shrubs including gorse, hawthorn, spindle and wayfaring tree, all home to many kinds of insects, birds and small animals. Work is needed to keep scrub at various heights and to stop trees from taking over. Bracken and scrub cutting is an important part of the active management of our sites and is undertaken by selective cutting during the year.

**Walkers welcome**

The hillforts offer a host of walking routes, each one unique across a range of prominent terrains. While the walks are suitable for all, some feature a steep assent. Routes are outlined in this guide, but to find out more, visit the individual site websites. Please leave only footprints, take only memories.

**Dog walking**

Dogs are welcome if kept under control at all times, to minimise disturbance of ground nesting birds, grazing cattle and sheep. Please always clean up after your dog, to protect the fragile soils, flora and fauna, and the wellbeing of livestock.
Coney’s Castle
A hidden gem, with an extraordinary bluebell carpet in the spring.

How to get there
By road: from Lambert’s Castle continue along the B3165 for 300m. Turn left to Fishpond’s Bottom. At Fishpond’s take the third turning to Wootton Fitzpaine. This road passes through the centre of Coney’s Castle. Car park (SY372976) is on the left, just before the road cuts through the hillfort.

Ancient form and natural beauty
Coney’s Castle is one of the smaller hillforts looked after by the National Trust. Defences along the western edge were light due to the extremely steep natural slope, and the east, north and south sides are composed of steep ditches and ramparts. Much of the inner rampart has disappeared due to cultivation and ploughing. A special feature of this hillfort is the majestic woodland with many fine, ancient, gnarled oak and beech trees.

Coney’s Castle is unusual as it is now divided by a minor road, and is split into two areas, with the southern enclosure being a quarter of the size of the northern one.

Tune into nature
This is a tranquil place to walk and experience nature in tune with the elements. The bluebell carpet, widespread throughout the site, is to be enjoyed in spring. It’s an ideal location for a short walk with views across the Marshwood Vale to the east, and Devon to the west.
Lambert’s Castle
Layers of history in a landscape.

How to get there
By road: A35 eastbound from Axminster, bear left onto B3165 at Raymonds Hill, signed Marshwood. Continue for about 3 miles then bear right onto Lambert’s Track to small National Trust car park (SY365987).

Both Iron Age hillfort and Victorian fair
The hillfort sits at the centre of a surprisingly complex landscape, for its variety of habitats and for its patchwork of ancient field boundaries, registered common, plantation woodland and agriculturally improved land.

In the storm of January 1990 a tree was blown over. Its roots tore up the ground exposing a stone-faced rampart, allowing us to glimpse its construction.

We have a good knowledge of the historical uses of the hillfort in the last 300 years. It was the site of a fair from 1709 to 1954 following a grant by Queen Anne. The earthwork remains of market stalls and a fair house can be seen, as well as the brick and stone livestock stalls built into the rampart in the south-west corner. While the fair existed there was a horse-racing track in use adjacent to the hillfort.

You can also see the sites of two 1840s cottages, with their gardens including crab apple trees and ridges where potatoes have been planted. In 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars, an Admiralty telegraph relay station was located here to send messages warning of a French invasion, as part of a chain between Plymouth and London.

What to do
Walks with stunning views of countryside
A relatively level site offering sweeping views across the Marshwood Vale and out to sea. It’s a great location for easy walking with family and friends. See how many other forts you can spot looking east. Look for nectar-loving insects on the purple pink flowers of the bell heather in summer.
From 1964 to 1971, Peter Gelling of Birmingham University and a team of volunteers excavated here each summer. They uncovered and recorded the remains of 14 roundhouses near the centre of the hillfort.

Thomas Gerard, in the early 17th century, wrote that a lodge on Pilsdon Pen was a significant local landmark. This lodge was probably occupied by a rabbit keeper and from medieval times. Pilsdon’s long mounds of earth, known as pillow mounds, were built as part of a warren to farm rabbits.

**What to do**

**Walk**

Ideal for short walks, with panoramic distant views. See if you can spot Golden Cap and the sea to the south, Hardy Monument to the east, Dartmoor and the Quantocks to the west and the Polden and Mendip hills to the north. Three long distance walks traverse the hillfort, the Jubilee trail, the Monarch’s Way and the Wessex Ridgeway. Look out for the small heath butterfly on the wing from May to October.

A long history

Pilsdon Pen has a long history of occupation. Flint tools over 10,000 years old and two Bronze Age burial mounds confirm that the site was used long before the hillfort was built.

How to get there

By road: three miles south-west of Broadwindsor on B3164. Parking: lay-by at bottom of hillfort (SY414009).

Above Pilsdon Pen

Above right Small heath butterfly on fern

Right Rampart with hawthorn Top right Reconstruction of Pilsdon Pen, with cottage and rabbit warren in medieval time, summer
Lewesdon Hill

The highest, quietest and most remote place in the county.

How to get there
By road: 5 miles west of Beaminster, near the village of Broadwindsor off B3164. Parking: Parking in Broadwindsor village. No car park.

An Iron Age settlement
It is thought that there was some kind of settlement on Lewesdon Hill in the Iron Age, possibly a place of refuge for people in times of threat. The site was protected from invaders by the steep natural slope on one side, and a man-made ditch and rampart on the flatter side of the hill.

Woodland wildlife
This ancient woodland has magnificent beech and oak trees, some over 200 years old. It is a great place for woodland birds including the green and great spotted woodpeckers, nuthatch and tree creeper. You might glimpse roe deer at dusk. Dead trees and fallen wood are excellent habitats for wildlife including fungi, ferns, beetles, bats and birds.

What to do

Woodland wander
A place to walk on the wild side, enjoy bluebells in the spring, and spot shy birds such as the great spotted woodpecker and tree creeper.

Above Wooded Lewesdon Hill

Above Tree creeper
Left Beech trees in winter, Lewesdon Hill
Eggardon Hill
Sweeping views across the Marshwood Vale to the Jurassic Coast.

How to get there
By road: from Dorchester take the A35 towards Bridport, following the Roman road. After 3 miles the main road leaves the old route and drops down into Winterbourne Abbas. The Roman road still exists as a minor road, so take this road and after another 3 miles you’ll see the hillfort at a crossroads. Turn left here towards Askerswell and continue for 200m.
Parking: park in lay-by (SYS5941), cross the road and take the footpath towards the southern ramparts.

Ancient landmark
As an archaeological site its ramparts are very well preserved. The Trust’s southern section, unlike the northern section, has escaped ploughing. A landslip is believed to have occurred when the fort was still in use as there is evidence of the ramparts being partially rebuilt, and this forms part of its interest. George Rybot excavated the Bronze Age barrow, which lies against the inner rampart, in 1965. The two trenches can still be found today. He unearthed pottery and the cremated remains of an adult and child buried between 3,000 and 3,500 years ago.

Apart from being a fine viewpoint the hillfort is itself a prominent landmark, especially from the coast and within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Through its elevated position it has a connection with smuggling, having been once owned by farmer and smuggler Isaac Gulliver. He is said to have planted a copse of trees in an octagonal enclosure as a landmark for boats landing contraband between Abbotsbury and Golden Cap. The octagonal bank still remains.

What to do
Walk with nature
Ideal location for short walks, and the best place to enjoy a summer sunset. Watch out for orchids in spring, Adonis blue butterfly in early summer, and autumn gentian.

Above Sunset at Eggardon Hill
Cerne Giant

Remarkable and most outlandish male figure sculpted into the chalk hillside above Cerne Abbas village.

How to get there
By road: signposted just off the A352, 8 miles north of Dorchester and 10 miles south of Sherborne.

Perceptions
The Giant is one of three ancient giant figures cut into the English chalk downlands. The other two are the Long Man of Wilmington in East Sussex and the Uffington White Horse in Berkshire. It is, perhaps, the most famous and controversial of the three, with its chalk outline sculpted into the hillside above Cerne Abbas representing a naked, sexually aroused, club-wielding man.

People like to speculate on his origins. Old drawings and photographs show that his shape has changed over time. It may date to the Roman or prehistoric periods but could also be a 17th century cartoon.

Chalking the Giant
During the Second World War the giant was covered to prevent him being used as a landmark. Since then he has been visible, and the white lines are re-chalked roughly on a 10-year cycle by staff and volunteers.

What to do
The Giant is best viewed from the Giant Viewing Point parking on the A352 road. Alternatively you can walk up Giant’s Hill and around the perimeter fence which protects the Giant. Try and spot a marsh fritillary butterfly in May, and look out for wildflowers in summer. Then drop down to explore the village.
As you look around the hillfort you will see five entrances through the ramparts. Two are Iron Age, two Roman and one Medieval. Traces of the Iron Age village are clearest in the south-east corner which has never been ploughed.

The Romans on Hod

The Roman fort had three gates, each with a watchtower. There was a fourth tower in the south-east corner. There were platforms at the east and south gates for artillery. Excavation of the barrack blocks revealed that a legionary detachment of 600 men and a cavalry unit of 250 were garrisoned here. During excavations a large hut, possibly that of the chief, was found to be surrounded by Roman ballista bolts. These spear-like missiles were fired from a machine resembling a crossbow on wheels.

How to get there

By road: from Blandford Forum take the A350 and beyond Stourpaine village turn left to Child Okeford. From Shaftesbury take the A350 and beyond Stepleton House turn right to Child Okeford. Parking: after turning off the A350 the private car park for Hod Hill can be found on the left after half a mile (ST853112).

Rich cultural history

Hod Hill is one of the largest hillforts in Dorset and is 22 hectares in size. It is nationally important because it was reused as a military base by the conquering Roman army. The earthworks from both periods are still visible today.

Take a circuit walk of the ramparts

Perched high above a meander on the River Stour, this superb hillfort has the greatest views over rural Dorset. The carpet of cowslips nodding in the breeze in early spring is unmissable. Good location for butterflies, including Adonis blue, grizzled skipper and marsh fritillary.
How to get there
By road: next to Child Okeford village on a minor road off the A350. Parking: A small unsigned roadside lay-by with parking space for four cars, south-east of the village. Alternatively, park in the village itself and follow one of the numerous footpaths up to Hambledon Hill.

Imagine life on the hill
Hambledon Hill includes archaeology dating back to the time of the earliest British farmers. Over 5,500 years ago, high on the central spine of the hillfort, was built a Neolithic long burial mound. 1,000 years later, several Bronze Age round burial mounds were created. The Iron Age hillfort itself was not built for another 1,000 years. Explore the ramparts, ditches and terraces and you’ll be retracing the footsteps of people who lived, feasted, fought and were buried on this extraordinary site.

Take in the view from the top
From the summit of the hillfort you can see across three counties - Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire - getting a real sense of Hambledon’s prehistoric strategic importance and why it’s considered one of the finest Iron Age hillforts in Dorset.

Spot wildlife in the air
A national nature reserve, the hillfort is home to an impressive 28 species of butterfly including the Adonis blue, dark green fritillary and green hairstreak have been recorded on Hambledon Hill. Bird watchers might spot blackcaps, buzzards, chiff chaffs, kestrels, meadow pipits, skylarks, white-throats, and willow warblers.

Explore nature at your feet
This chalk grassland site is home to at least five species of orchids including the early purple, bee, pyramidal, common spotted and autumn lady’s tresses. Keep an eye out for brown hares and glow worms too.
Badbury Rings

Rich in cultural history, flora and fauna, the rings sit 100 metres above sea level and offer sweeping views across Dorset.

How to get there

By road: from Blandford: Take the B3082 towards Wimborne. Badbury Rings pay and display car park is approximately 6 miles from Blandford on your left, opposite the turning for Sturminster Marshall.

From Wimborne: take the B3082 towards Blandford. Badbury Rings pay and display car park is approximately 4 miles from Wimborne on your right, opposite the turning for Sturminster Marshall.

Holding secrets from our past

Badbury Rings has three rings of ramparts and ditches; each may have been constructed at different times during the Iron Age. The outer rampart is a slighter earthwork and could have been constructed much later.

Excavation by National Trust archaeologists in 2004 found flint tools dating from the early Neolithic period, revealing that people lived here over 6,000 years ago, long before the hillfort was first built.

Above Buttercups at Badbury Rings

In AD 44, the roundhouses were abandoned when the Roman army captured this place. It was a landmark, and a Roman crossroads was created to the north and a temple built to the south. Here, local gods were worshipped for over 400 years. The hillfort was occupied again when the Roman army left Britain. It was a key location to guard against Saxon raiders from the north and east in the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Allowance must be made for the effects of 2,000 years of erosion and silting. The ditches would have been far deeper and the ramparts much higher than they are today. Imagine large timber gateways at the entrances.

Walk in tune with nature

A walk at Badbury Rings reveals the rich history, flora and fauna of this ancient landscape.

The chalk grassland habitat is home to many nationally rare species such as the greater butterfly orchid, fragrant orchid and frog orchid. It also supports many different butterflies including the scarce Adonis blue, chalkhill blue, the dingy skipper and the grizzled skipper. Badbury Rings is an important feeding and breeding site for red listed ground nesting birds such as the skylark and corn bunting.

Tune into the bluebells in spring followed by the orchids. See if you can spot a chalkhill blue butterfly or a grizzled skipper on a sunny summers day, or a glow worm at twilight in midsummer.

Above Frog orchid Top right Corn bunting Right Badbury Rings, rampart
Illustrations


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Dorset’s hillforts give visitors an opportunity to step back in time and imagine the lives and livelihoods of our ancestors. Often standing in prominent isolation in the landscape, you can get a sense of their positional power whilst enjoying panoramic views across the countryside.

Hillforts are special places to visit, where you can experience and observe nature throughout the seasons. We hope this guide will inspire you to explore and enjoy them.

Above Ramparts on Hambledon Hill seen from the air