The Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland

Hillfort survey – notes for guidance

The collection of surveys for the Atlas is now finished but you can use this form and the accompanying Notes for Guidance for your own surveys. Please do not send your results to the Atlas. If you want to compare your results to those in the Atlas go to

https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk

These notes provide more information about how to fill in the Hillfort Survey form.

This original Atlas survey has three aims:

1. To gather information for the Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland project. The results will be made widely available.
2. To enable people to learn more about hillforts in a structured informed way, to encourage an understanding of the characteristics and details of hillforts and how they differ.
3. To record any damage/erosion occurring to hillforts (record at question 5.1).

Important: What is a hillfort? This is difficult to answer precisely although there are three criteria which come together to make a site a ‘hillfort’ – the scale of the enclosing works (ramparts/banks/walls and ditches, and entrances); the topographical position, not always on the top of a hill but often ‘prominent’ in the local landscape in some way; the enclosed area, very variable from region to region and also within regions. Hillforts are ‘enclosed sites’ but the problem is that there is a continuum of enclosures from small ditched farmsteads to massive monumental hillforts.

On the Atlas website (https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk) there is guidance on how to access a range of information about hillforts.

Important: Read through the questions and these notes before you start the survey. You might also find it useful to have an initial walk around the site to orientate yourself and then to go around again in more detail filling in the form.

Important: This survey does assume a certain amount of prior knowledge. You may find it more productive to do the survey with someone else so that you can discuss what you see and how you interpret it. It may be even better to visit with a group, perhaps a local archaeological society.

Some questions require you to give information by orientation (N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W, NW) so you will need to have a clear idea of what information to collect at each point as you walk around the hillfort.

You will not need any specialised equipment to carry out this survey other than:

1. A site plan (see paragraph below).
2. A compass to establish positions and quadrants.
3. A hand tape measure, preferably 30m. Some questions ask for measurements (in metres if possible). If you haven’t access to a tape, you can ‘pace out’ a measurement to give us an approximate dimension. Either try to get your paces as close to 1 metre as possible and indicate that you are using paces (not a metre tape). Alternatively, work out the length of your average pace and multiply this by the number of paces and convert to approx. metres.
Using a plan – it is up to you whether you want to reproduce information which is already available. Additional information and changes to existing planned information (e.g. a possible extra outer rampart) are important and useful. Question 2.15 asks for information any plan you use, if it is from a published article or book. It can be useful to annotate the plan with comments as you carry out the survey.

If you cannot get a published plan of the site then produce your own sketch plan.

Access and Health and Safety
The project and its host institutions bear no responsibility for any access or health and safety issues that may arise during your participation in this project.

Disclaimer: The Co-directors of this project and their institutions are not responsible for issues of access to sites and health and safety of participants in the survey. By taking part in this survey you are acknowledging that access and health and safety are your responsibility.

Before setting out it is worth consulting online sources for advice on local conditions and any other appropriate measures to ensure your safety.

Access
It is your responsibility to establish permission for access to a site; please do this before entering. If a site is not obviously on public land, or has a public right of way, then you should establish who the landowner is and get permission to visit. Note that legal requirements vary across Britain and Ireland. Some sites have mixed access, both public and private. Do not climb over fences or gates; use stiles and obvious entrances; close gates after use; respect wildlife and stock. Abusing access is likely to annoy the landowner and may make the visiting of sites more difficult for the rest of us - so please be sure.

The following offer useful information:
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Countryside/16328
http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/places_to_visit_home/access_to_the_countryside.htm

The Ramblers Association has a section on walking in general in a wide range of environments with subsections covering safety equipment, clothing, ticks and all sorts.
http://ramblers.org.uk/go-walking.aspx

Health and Safety
It is your responsibility to take health and safety precautions when visiting a site. Ramparts and ditches can be steep, muddy and dangerous underfoot so be careful and wear appropriate clothing and foot wear; a walking pole can be useful for support. It is a good idea to take a mobile phone in case of emergency, telling someone where you are going (especially if you are going alone), taking clothing, food, water and a hot drink in case you are out for longer than you initially expected. Never underestimate the variability of the weather at our latitudes.

Guidance on questions:
Use the comments boxes if you can’t fit anything into the formal reply boxes.
Section 2.

2.1-2.2. Some sites are known by different names. Please give us the principal one used in your sources and any others.

2.3. National Grid Reference, as accurate as possible (i.e. to at least six figures, eight if possible), as close as possible to the centre of the site.

2.4. Reference numbers – Most hillforts are well known and recorded so will probably appear in one or more of the monuments records which will assign each site a unique reference number. Other published catalogues/lists may also have unique numbers; if you supply any of these make sure you tell us where it is from.

2.5-2.6. Should be straightforward.

2.7. As accurate as you can get it, towards the centre of the enclosed area if altitude is variable across the site.

2.8. These are the most common locations for hillforts:
- Hill top – the ramparts may or may not approximately follow the contours around the top of a hill.
- Promontory – the ramparts cut off a promontory (coastal or inland); smaller examples are sometimes called ‘Cliff Castles’ if coastal.
- Valley bottom – low lying in a valley.
- Knoll/hillock – on an isolated small hill.
- Ridge – encloses the top of a ridge.
- Plateau/cliff-edge – cliff forms one side.
- Hillslope – on the slope of a hill. In this case please give the aspect (direction the slope faces, e.g. NW, SE)
- Lowland – low lying, not in a valley, perhaps surrounded by marsh.

Comments: anything relevant to topographic position, i.e. local ‘dominance’.

2.9. Maximum visibility/view.
This is current view. In the comments box you can comment on how you think the original view when the site was constructed and used may have been (e.g. to the SW the view is blocked by a building be without this it would be to the far horizon).

Use a compass to establish the quadrants, NE, SE, SW and NW. Tick the appropriate value for the maximum view for each quadrant.
This is somewhat subjective but the categories to apply are roughly:
- Long – far distant horizon
- Medium – view is blocked by hills, buildings, woodland from c. 1mile away
- Short – view is blocked at less than c.1 mile.

Comments: Please distinguish whether the view is blocked by topography or e.g. a power station!

2.10. Water source inside the enclosure and/or annex possibly contemporary with its use (i.e. not modern)

2.11. Comments on any water source nearby (not modern), e.g. half a mile from the River Exe; a spring is 200 metres outside the western rampart.
2.12. Current land category (use). Please indicate all that apply.

2.13. Anything pre-hillfort – e.g. two round barrows within the enclosure.

2.14. Anything post-hillfort – e.g. a church within the enclosure, includes buildings, pill boxes etc.

2.15. As stated above, it is important that you tell us which plan you are using, and if possible send us a copy of it.

2.16. Other sources of information – both ‘formal’ (HERs, NMRs, publications) and ‘informal’ (leaflets etc).

2.17. Annex – an extra enclosed area adjoining but external to the main enclosure and sharing a boundary (rampart), as shown in the diagram below.

Note: Sections 3 and 5 are for all sites; section 4 only applies to sites with an annex.

Section 3.

3.1 General overall shape – approximate description will suffice.

3.2 and 3.3. Dimensions. As indicated in the diagram, the maximum dimension and the dimension at 90 degrees to it. For:

- The enclosed area, inside the inner rampart.
- The whole site footprint, to the bank/ditch which is the furthest from the enclosed area.

3.4 -3.5. It can be difficult to differentiate between an original hillfort entrance and a subsequent (secondary) break through the rampart. Generally speaking (but by no means always) a secondary (especially relatively modern) break will be a simple break through the ramparts without any form of in- or out-turn, outworks or added complexity. Other pieces of information may suggest a secondary/modern break through a rampart, for example if it is particularly wide, if rampart structure shows within the section of a terminal end, and/or if the ditch appears to have continued across the rampart.
3.4. is the total number including original entrances, 3.5. is the number you consider are post-hillfort construction (i.e. ‘secondary’)

3.6. The common forms of hillfort entrance are shown in the diagram. For entrances that are not simple gaps (i.e. just a break through the rampart) record which quadrant they occur in next to list items.

Use the comments field if you think there is an entrance type not covered in the list, e.g. a blocked entrance or passage-type of entrance.

3.7. Enclosing works - note that we use the terms ‘rampart’ and ‘bank’ interchangeably (i.e. both imply a sloping face), whereas the term ‘wall’ indicates evidence for a vertical outer face (usually stone-built). They all form the enclosing works.

A ‘counterscarp bank’ could have resulted from cleaning out the outer most ditch – so is, therefore, often the outermost bank and smaller than the inner ones.
Record the maximum number of ramparts/banks/walls visible for each quadrant

3.8. The maximum number of ditches visible for each quadrant.

3.9. Rampart/bank/wall form.
Indicate whether the rampart/bank/wall is the same all the way around the circuit, and its form if it is.

If it isn’t then indicate form by quadrant. You can tick more than one so if there are stone faces (inner or outer rampart face) showing within an earthen bank then tick both Earthen Bank and Stone Wall.

Vitrification is burnt and melted stone.

Other burning refers to within the rampart/bank (not modern burning on the surface).

3.10. Bank/ditch combinations. As shown in the diagram, record how many of each form for each quadrant:

Bank/wall no ditch.
Bank (or wall) plus ditch.
Bank/ditch/bank – most likely to be the final set, this is to record a possible ‘counterscarp bank’, i.e. a final bank without an external ditch.

This is intended to show any variation in the enclosing works around the site and adds detail to the answers in 3.8 and 3.9.

3.11. Chevaux de Frise are obstacles embedded in the ground (usually upright stones), usually outside entrances, thought to obstruct access. Record presence by quadrant.

3.12. Record which of the internal features are present, also mark on a plan the position of features and send the plan to us.

Remember – you are only recording differences to the plan that you are using, there is no need to re-record what is already there.
Platforms are any sort of flat area, sometimes roughly circular terraces for roundhouses.

Quarry hollows are shallow, and sometimes wide, hollows inside the rampart.

Section 4.
Annex (see figure above)
4.1. The approximate shape.

4.2. – 4.4. Describe the ramparts ditches and entrances, e.g. two ditches to the east, one elsewhere; one entrance joining the main enclosure, one to exterior.

Section 5.
5.1. Any final comments including anything you couldn’t fit anywhere else, any damage/erosion to the hillfort, especially if it is recently inflicted.