



# Worlebury's Iron Age Hillfort

Worlebury Camp sits in a commanding position on the great limestone hill to the north of Weston-super-Mare. Several footpaths lead up to the hillfort and it is open to everybody.

At present large areas of the hillfort are hidden by trees, although when it was built just over two thousand years ago the site would have been largely clear of trees, like Brean Down to the south and Sand Point to the north. A central glade and the ramparts are cleared at intervals by North Somerset Council and volunteer groups.

The most obvious feature today is the great series of ramparts and ditches at the eastern end. The pathway leading through the middle of them is not the main entrance but the result of many centuries of erosion by visitors to the site since it was abandoned.



*The ramparts of the hillfort and the modern path © Weston Museum*

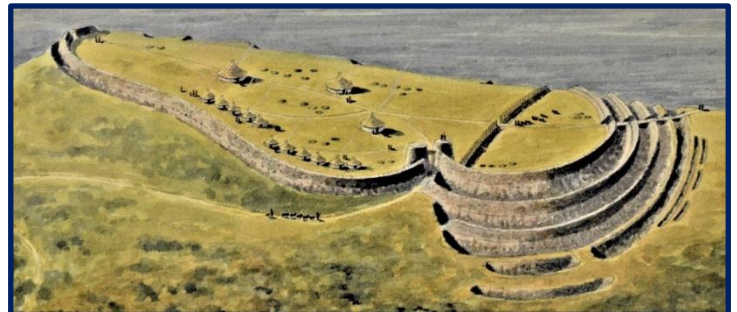
The main entrance lay on the south side. This is less frequently visited today as the original approach from sea level has disappeared beneath Victorian housing. If you do explore the southern defences you will be amazed by the amount of stone that was moved for their construction.

There were also entrances to the north east and the west. On the north side, steep cliffs create a natural defensive barrier.

Another striking feature is the large number of sizeable pits. These were dug deep into the bedrock by the people who lived in the hillfort.

## The History of the Hillfort

Worlebury is one of many hillforts built during the Iron Age, the period which came before the Roman occupation of Britain from AD 43 onwards. Other famous local examples include Congresbury, Banwell and Dolebury, but Worlebury's stone construction and coastal position make it very rare.



*An artist's impression of how the hillfort may have looked © Weston Museum*

The hilltop location and the defensive ramparts though, are typical. It is thought that the defences of some hillforts were largely for display but the fate of Worlebury's inhabitants (described below) is a reminder of the violent times that they lived in. There are different views about whether hillforts were permanently occupied.

The hill extends about three miles inland, is level on top and the southern slopes are mostly gentle. The users of the hillfort found these areas ideal for farming and probably made settlements there as well.

The site was abandoned shortly after the arrival of the Romans. The land continued to be used for agriculture and there would have been very few trees. Its appearance began to change in 1823 when the Lord of the Manor John Hugh Smyth-Pigott decided to plant trees to establish a game reserve.

Soon the outline of the hillfort became blurred by the vegetation. Much of the timber was felled during the First World War but it has since regrown and the result is Weston Woods as we see them today.

## Rediscovering Worlebury

From the late 1700s onwards there was growing interest in the ruins of the past. In 1851, a major excavation took place under the direction of Reverend Francis Warre.

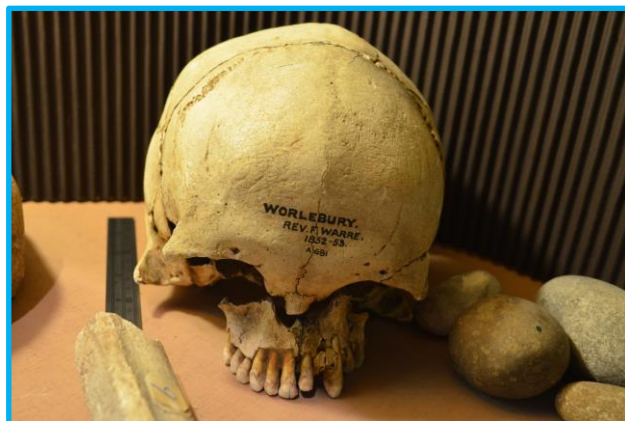


*Some of the pits as they appear today © Tom Simpson*

The pits (93 in all!) were the focus of attention and they produced much of interest. They were originally dug to store grain both for food and also as seed for the following year's crop. They would have been hard work to dig as they are formed in the solid rock. Remains of grain were found and also some clues as to the way it was stored.

One pit in particular contained a number of personal items such as spindle whorls (tools used for spinning yarn), glass beads and other tools. It was thought that this pit might have been sited beneath a structure such as a house or workshop.

Most dramatically, the remains of eighteen individuals were found, many buried in the pits. From the injuries inflicted on the bodies it seems that they died a violent death. Perhaps they were the victims of a massacre by the invading Romans. But it is equally possible that they were involved in a conflict with members of another pre-Roman tribe.



*A skull uncovered at the hillfort © Weston Museum*

We are at the very beginning of British recorded history here and it is unlikely that we shall ever know for sure.

In 1881, Charles Dymond re-examined Warre's finds and organised a detailed survey of the site. His findings were published in a richly illustrated book in 1886 (revised 1902). His survey was one of the earliest ever made of a hillfort and was carried out to a very high standard.

Modern archaeologists, however, would probably not agree with all of Dymond's conclusions, as many advances in technique and understanding have been made since his time. A new study in the light of what we know now would be very welcome.

Many of the items discovered all those years ago are now on display in Weston Museum – definitely worth a visit!



Weston-super-Mare  
Town Council