

Surprising results on Solsbury Hill

Geophysics survey reveals extensive Iron Age settlement

Rick Buettner

As a long term resident of Batheaston, I have spent quite a bit of time wandering around Solsbury Hill. Finally my curiosity got the better of me, and I approached John Oswin about a possible geophysics project to find out more about this striking Iron Age hilltop site just northeast of Bath. I had done some preliminary research that seemed to indicate that very little investigative archaeology had been done on Solsbury.

The flat top of the hill and what remains of the ramparts (*see Figure 1*) is owned by the National Trust and used by the Batheaston Freeholders for grazing. The Freeholders own the steep slopes just under the edge of the hilltop, down to where the land begins to level a bit more. It is also a scheduled monument. The project required permission from the various parties and a Section 42 License from English Heritage.

Solsbury Hill is first mentioned by Collinson in 1791 (Collinson 1791: 99) as Salisbury Hill. He says the Antiquaries claim there was a temple to Bladud on the top, and the visible remains were a Saxon fort used in the siege of Bath in 577 AD. At that time barley was grown on the summit, and the hilltop was cultivated until the 1950s. Evans found Neolithic flint and correctly identified pottery finds as Iron Age during a visit in 1862 (Evans 1866: 240, 243). Collins and Cantrell visited the quarries active on the hillside in the early 1900s where they found a great many Iron Age artefacts (Collins and Cantrell 1909: all). W.E. Falconer correctly dated the Iron Age material found by Collins and himself where the quarries cut into the rampart and ditch on the northwest corner of the site (Falconer 1935: 183,210).

The only actual excavating was done by W.A. Dowden in the 1950s. He opened a few small trenches on the northwest corner of the site and found a good deal more Iron Age material (Dowden 1957: 18, 29). He also speculated that the habitation of the site had only been on the northern edge because the trenches he placed further in from the rampart had yielded fewer finds (Dowden 1957: 23). The main occupation of the site seems firmly dated from Early Iron Age to Middle Iron Age (Dowden 1962: 182).

This rampart survives today, along most of the northern end of the hilltop. The other visible features are the Medieval field system terraces with marker stones and a portion of the ditch on the south end of the hilltop. The hilltop is turf-covered Great Oolite similar to the hilltops around Bath and to the north. The sides of the hilltop are subject to landslips and slumping, possibly brought on by small scale quarrying of the stone. There were two small late Victorian working quarries, mentioned

Figure 1
Little Solsbury from the northeast. The medieval field terraces are prominent on the hilltop. The north-east corner was a separate precinct in the Iron Age. Geological slumping is visible around the sides. Copyright reserved Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography.



above, which supplied stone for the lining of Chilcombe Bottom Reservoir in the valley between Solsbury Hill and Charmy Down, the next hilltop to the north.

From the hilltop, you can see to the Salisbury Plain, Alfred's Tower, the Mendip transmitter and the Cherhill White Horse as well as the Avon Valley and Bath. With steep slopes just below the hilltop on all sides, there are good natural defenses. Several springs are found around the sides of the hill just down from the hilltop.

With all permissions in place, we started work in April 2012. Early in April, the Environment Agency announced the entire country was having a drought. The next day it started raining and continued to do so until the end of the summer. To say the conditions were occasionally challenging would be an understatement. Solsbury is exposed and open to the weather, but our small army of volunteers wasn't deterred. Work continued through April, and we returned in September and October to finish on Halloween.

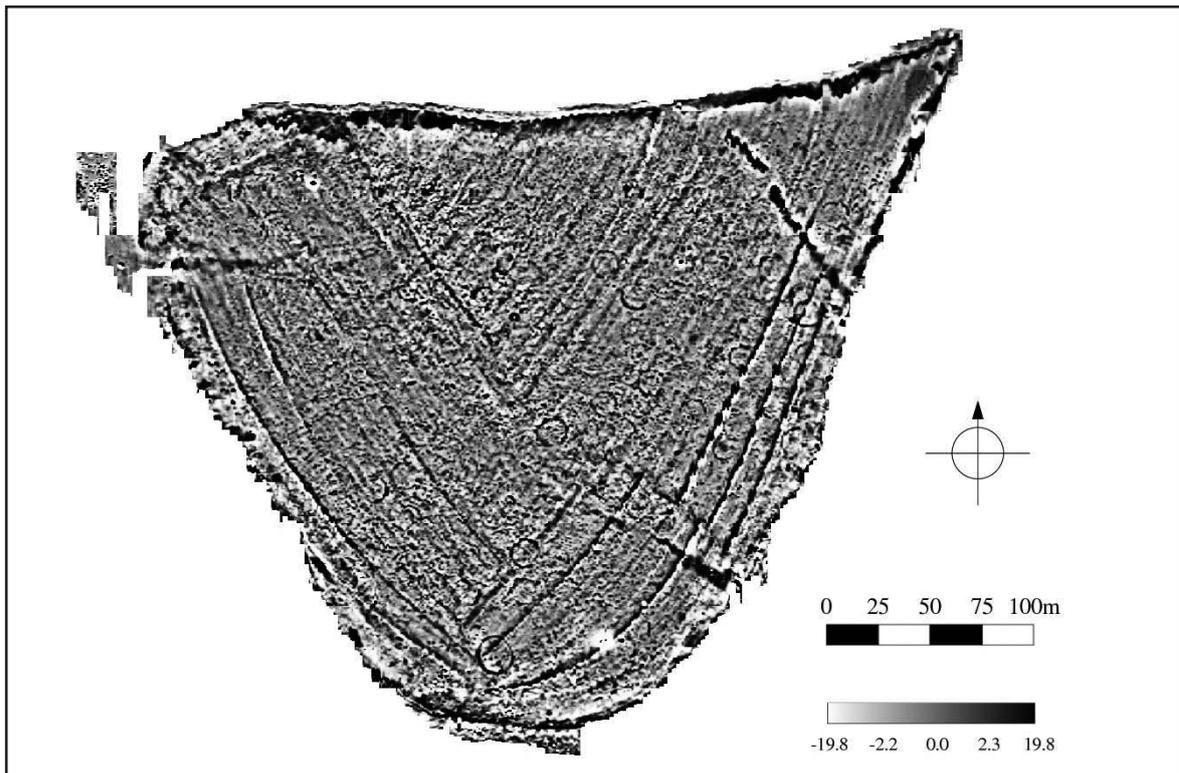
The autumn sessions were enlivened by the presence of 30-40 curious cows. The site is around 20 acres and required 250 grid squares to cover the entire hilltop. The Magnetometry survey went quickly and was finished in three weeks in April. The results were so good that, at the urging of the National Trust, we applied for an extension to the license to return in the autumn to finish, which unfortunately required re-laying at least half of the grids again. We also managed to cover the site with Magnetic Susceptibility and used Ground Penetrating Radar and the 1m Resistance Bar on a few of the more interesting areas. The results were described by the National Trust as "spectacular".

Results

The Magnetometry survey results (see Figure 2) were very lively. The Medieval field terraces and plough lines dominate the picture, but many older features show through. There is an inner ditch running around the entire hilltop, and an unexpected ditch with an entrance gap cuts off the northeast corner, marking an unusual precinct with no roundhouse circles, but many postholes or similar features. There are other interesting lines and an area that is possibly a dewpond.

Figure 2

Magnetometry results. This represents over 250 20m grid squares. The site occupies around 20 acres. The large number of round house signs was a surprise. The ellipsoid structure at the southern (bottom) end is quite large and unusual.



The main area of the hilltop shows signs of over thirty roundhouses and many partial curves of earlier roundhouses. There is a particularly strong roundhouse signal in the south centre of the hill. There is also a feature near the southern tip of the hilltop, which may be a large roundhouse, or possibly a barrow. There appears to be a ring of roundhouses around the centre of the hilltop. Many of the roundhouse features show postholes, and the plateau has numerous pits or postholes.

The main entrance at the northwest corner shows a pathway leading to the centre of the hilltop, and there is an obvious row of large postholes leading south from this entrance just inside the ditch (see Figure 4). There is a suggestion of a similar row going north, but this is more difficult to see, due to ploughing and quarrying interference. Possible postholes are visible near the edge, in places where enough of the hilltop remains after slumping and quarrying.

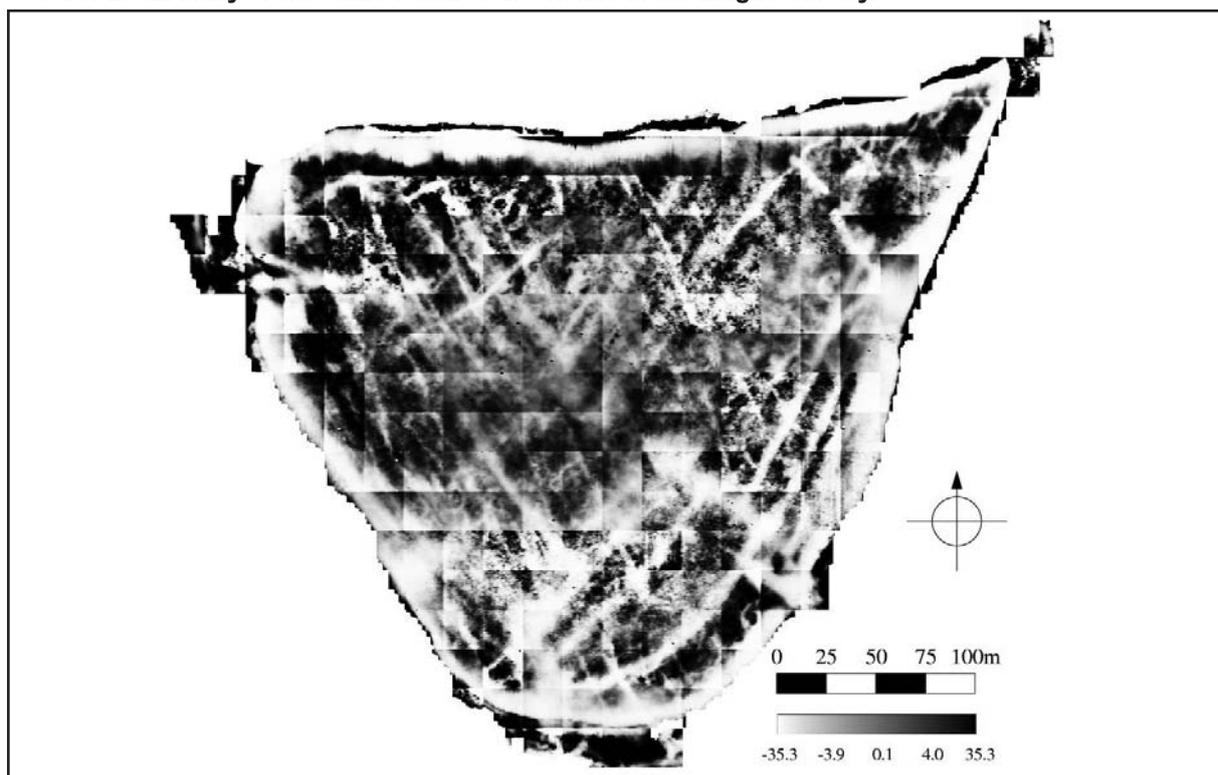
On the Batheaston side, the entrance has usually been thought to be more modern, but there is a well defined pathway toward the centre of the hill and the prominent roundhouse there. This pathway has enough depth, over 0.5m as opposed to a general soil depth of 10-20cm away from the ditches, to suggest that this entrance was possibly in use in the Iron Age. The southern end of the hill is the only place where the inner ditch is visible on the ground today, and this shows in the Magnetometry survey results. There are also two apparent linear features in the northwest quarter that are not part of the newer field system.

The resistance results (see Figure 3) support the magnetometry very well. While there aren't as many circular structures visible, several do show through the Medieval field patterns. There are partial circles on the southwest side of the hill. The inner ditch shows around the entire hilltop, and the northeast corner precinct ditch is prominent. The pathways into the centre from both entrances and the linear features in the northwest corner are more prominent than on the magnetometry. There is a possible guard house just south of the northwest entrance, and there are also pits and unusual circular features near the south centre of the hilltop.

There is the suggestion of an entrance at the south end of the hill, which is possible to see on the ground today. This is the closest point on the hilltop to the River Avon, so there may well have been at least an informal entrance here as well. The resistance results are complicated by ground conditions at

Figure 3

Resistance results. The outside squares were done in April, the interior squares in September and October 2012. Many of the same features are visible in the magnetometry.



the times of the surveying. The hilltop was quite wet for the original work, dry for our September sessions and wet again for the October days. The dry squares, quite visible in a band around the centre of the hill, appear more granular, and the wet squares, more smooth. Nonetheless, many pre-Medieval features show through.

The Magnetic Susceptibility results show strong signs of human activity, particularly in the inner ditch, which has the highest readings. This would be consistent with remains washing downhill from the higher centre of the hilltop toward the ditch. Readings are higher inside the rampart, with very low readings outside on steep hillside and flatter areas further away from the precipice outside the rampart. We were able to obtain readings outside the rampart, but the northern end had very few readings due to the steepness of the slope and the tree cover at the bottom.

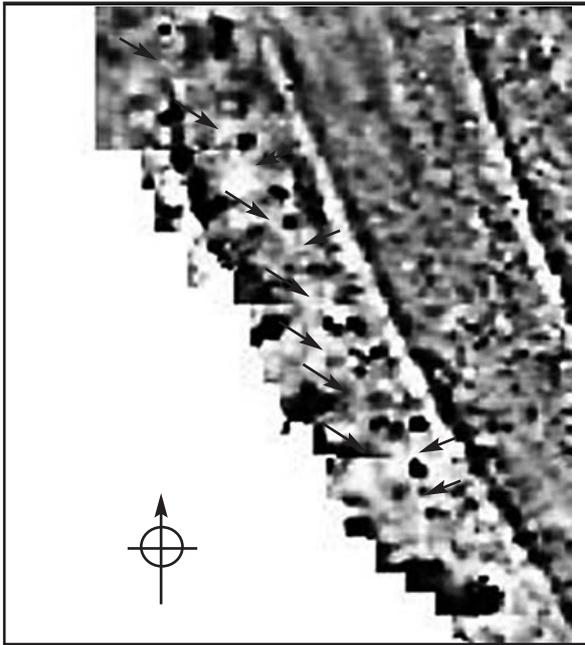


Figure 4
A row of large postholes can be seen in the magnetometry results (indicated by arrows) just inside the ditch on the south side of the entrance.

The GPR and 1m Bar Resistance did not turn up any unusual results, but they showed the depth of the ditches on the northern end and the northeast corner. There were also some small features of possible interest in the ditches. We were lucky to have a contour survey done by Chris Ellis using a loaned Wessex Archaeology precision GPS unit, and Tim Lunt has generated a viewshed with all the visible hillforts in the area.

I am now putting together the final report with this wealth of material. I would hope that the National Trust will contemplate the report and realise that there is more to be done on Solsbury Hill. For our part, there will be a new geophysics project this spring moving down the southern slope where we hope to find Bronze Age features.

Bibliography

- Collinson, John and Rack, Edmund, 1791. *'The history and antiquities of the county of Somerset.'* Vol. 1, pp. 99-110.
- Evans, John. *'On a discovery of Flint Arrowheads and Other Stone Implements at Little Salisbury Hill, near Bath.'* Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London, Vol. 4 (1866), pp. 240-243. Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3014291>
- W. G. Collins and T. C. Cantrill, 1909. *'Solisbury Hill Camp, near Bath.'* The Antiquary, Vol. 5, pp. 326-331, 419-425, 451-456.
- Falconer, J.P.E., and Adams, S.B., 1935. *'Recent finds at Solsbury Hill Camp near Bath'* University of Bristol Speleological Society Proceedings, Vol. 4 (3), 183-222.
- W.A. Dowden *'Little Solsbury Hill Camp. Report on the excavations of 1955 and 1956'* UBSS Proc. Vol. 8 (1) 1957 18-29.
- W.A. Dowden *'Little Solsbury Hill Camp. Report on the excavations of 1958'* UBSS Proc. Vol. 9 (3) 1962 177-182.

Acknowledgements

Many BACAS members have been involved with this project. I would like to particularly thank John Oswin, without whom none of this would have happened. Bob Whitaker, Robin Holley and Ceri Lambdin all helped with the organisation of the project. Vince Simmonds, Tim Lunt, John Samways, Janet Pryke and Chris Ellis have all contributed to the data. Solsbury Hill is a splendid place, but it is exposed to all sorts of weather. Those who did the work on the ground were a hardy bunch and were there in all conditions getting this large site finished. 44 volunteers, too many to list here, spent a total of 30 days on the hilltop. Martin Papworth of the National Trust was extremely helpful and encouraging. Hugh Beamish and others at English Heritage all helped greatly with the Section 42 License. Richard Sermon at BANES has helped with encouragement and historical documents. The Batheaston Freeholders were also very supportive of this project. Thanks again to all of you.