

# Hillforts • Hillforts • Hillforts

**BACAS contributed more to the Hillfort Atlas Project than any other local society**

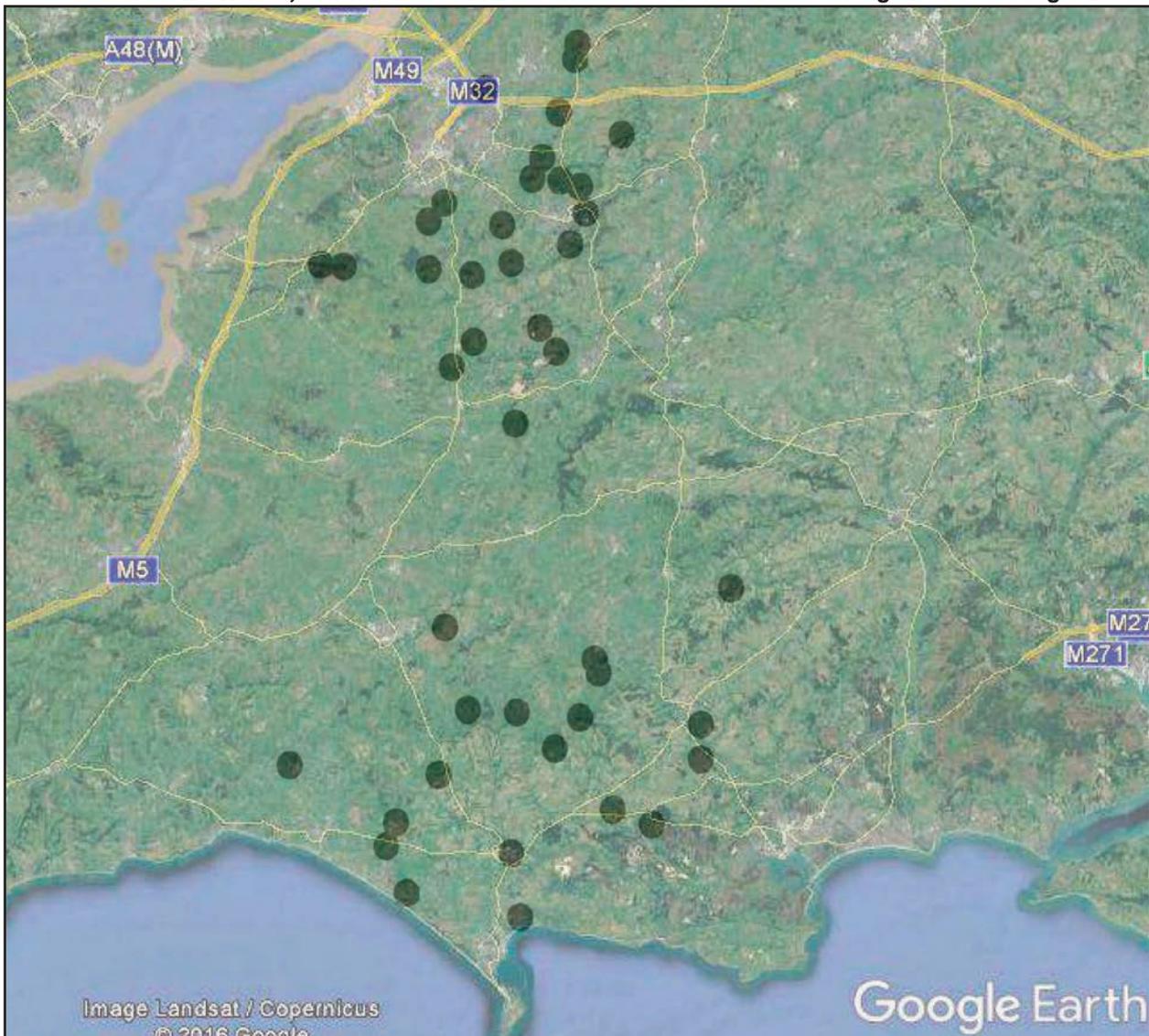
In 2013, Oxford University started to lead a national team to research, list and describe all the hillforts in the UK. Volunteers were requested to help by visiting hillfort sites and provide details to be recorded in the Atlas: layout of ramparts; area; dimensions; views, and the state they are now in. There was great enthusiasm at first but few societies stayed the course or reported on the hillforts in their region. BACAS was one exception, we managed to produce reports on over 40 hillforts, including one non-existent site first described in the 1780's!

**John Oswin** BACAS was still fresh from its exploits surveying the whole of Solsbury Hill, but the Atlas Project required more rudimentary surveys without the geophysics. There was a 'Thomas Team', which investigated plenty of sites around Bath, and an 'Oswin Team', which strayed further afield and included a number of the Dorset sites. Figure 1 shows the locations of the sites visited.

The surveying was not always straightforward. Many hillforts are at least partially open for public access, but a number are entirely on private land, and the landowners had to be found and contacted before they could be studied. The Dorset survey was meant to begin with 'A for Abbotsbury', but it was so foggy there, we had to postpone. Many of the big hillforts are utterly spectacular, but the smaller ones were much more intriguing, and a few of these gems are mentioned in this article.

**Figure 1**

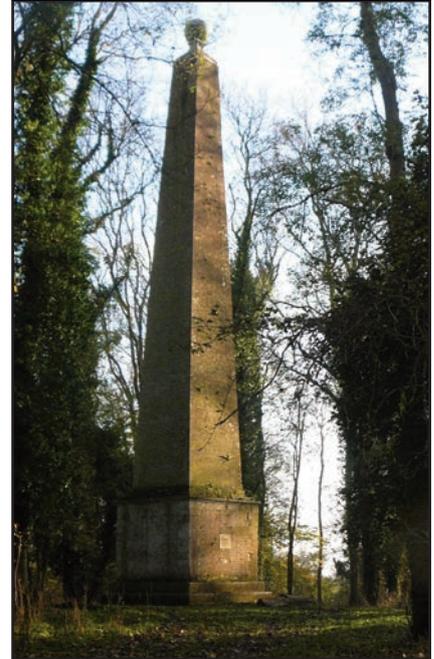
**The sites we visited, scattered around Bath and across Dorset. Acknowledgements to Google Earth.**



**Weatherby Castle** is a multivallate hillfort on a chalk spur close to Milborne St Andrew, Dorset (SY 8071 9624). It looks a fine prominent example from the south (*Figure 2*), but this view is from down in a valley, and its summit barely peeps above the surrounding hills. It is nonetheless in a good strategic spot overlooking the Milbourne Stream, at a point where the river valley is joined by a dry valley which gives easy access to the chalk lands of central Dorset. The outer rampart encloses a good wide flat space ideal for running livestock within the protected area, and it is not far down to the stream for water. The inner rampart is generally high, steep and impressive, enclosing a flat area now well wooded. It is crowned by an 18<sup>th</sup> Century obelisk (*Figure 3*) raised to the Clavell family – not part of the original design! Some modern tracks have caused damage, but generally it is in good condition. A footpath runs through parts of the fort, making it reasonably accessible.



**Figure 2**  
Under the trees, Weatherby Castle looks formidable from below but is barely visible from outside its valley.



**Figure 3**  
In amongst the trees; the Weatherby surprise!

Not far away is **Dungeon Hill** (ST 6899 0741). It is a small (3.6 ha) univallate hillfort, not even covering the whole hilltop, on an outlier of the chalk, just protruding into Blackmore Vale near Buckland Newton. Roman material has been recovered from inside the enclosure. A footpath runs around the base, but it takes a little climb 'off-piste' to see its peculiarity: if you can't go over the ramparts, go through them! Someone has built a pair of brick arches through the east and the west ramparts (*Figure 4*). These would allow wagon access to and across the interior, while maintaining the walk round the ramparts. I guess this was part of some 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial venture, but what the industry was or who built them I have been unable to establish.

**Figures 4a and 4b**  
Walk-through ramparts! (a) The western arch on Dungeon Hill, (b) looking through the eastern edge to the western arch. Who put them there and why is still a mystery.



**Spettisbury Rings** is another fine, simple univallate hillfort overlooking the Stour Valley in Dorset (ST 9149 0196). It looks across to the grander Badbury Rings, but itself is almost invisible from below. Spettisbury too has had 19th Century interference, when a railway line was cut along the valley at its base, so its eastern rampart is replaced by a precipitous drop onto the track (now a cycle way). However, it was during the cutting that a number of skeletons were found. From the associated grave goods, these were presumed to be Durotrigian warriors killed in one of Vespasian's attacks on oppida following the AD43 Roman invasion, but no follow-up work was ever done and the remains are now lost.

Nearer home, **Small Down Camp** up above Evercreech is a delight (ST 666 406). There is no footpath through it. It was subject to excavation by St George Gray in 1909 although this added little to hillfort studies. There is a steep approach from the north (*Figure 5*), but a long ridge continues to the south, with the land falling away steeply to east and west. There is a line of round barrows along the highest part, which dominate Evercreech– perhaps there is a good Bronze Age settlement below the present village. On a clear day, the view is stunning, eastwards to Cley Hill and also Bratton Hillfort and Westbury White Horse. To the West, you can see all the way to the Quantock Hills and Hinkley Point on the Somerset coast (*Figure 6*).



**Figure 5 above**  
**The double northern rampart of Small Down Camp.**

**Figure 6 right**

**You can see far and wide from Small Down Knoll, all the way west to the Quantocks (pictured here in the distance) but also eastward to Cley Hill and to the Westbury White Horse.**

Bath motorists heading for the motorway but avoiding the A46 will have seen **Freezing Hill** looming above them after the Lansdown ridge. The hill is also known for its distinctive line of beech trees known as 'The Caterpillar' visible from miles away, even South Wales. At ST 7200 7148 is a single ditch bank, clearly visible along its southern edge as a scar at the top of the hillside, then it just ends unexpectedly abruptly (*Figure 7*). There are signs further along of scarping and of field systems on the southern slopes. The site certainly commands one of the few easy ascents onto the Cotswolds. It gives a strong impression of being started but never finished.

I do not presume that these hillforts were necessarily for military purposes. Certainly most of them command strategic views or routes, which could also suggest they were central political, social and/or economic places in the landscape. Some are poorly defended and many have no signs of occupation. We do not really know the extent of their uses or why so much effort was spent on them, but they are certainly spectacular. The Hillfort Atlas research is now complete and is due for publication in 2017. However, there is still much to be enjoyed and learnt from visiting and researching any accessible hillforts. The reward is well worth the effort. BACAS already has an archive of over 40 such sites, and any further contributions would be welcome.

### **End notes**

- Grid references and information have been taken from Historic England, Pastscape website (<http://www.pastscape.org.uk/default.aspx>)

- Hillfort Atlas Project: currently (January 2017) is at <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/hillforts-atlas.html>