

# Iron Age hillforts

## Location

Hillforts were Iron Age settlements that were usually built on top of a hill. There were over 4000 hillforts in Britain during the Iron Age. Their hilltop position gave the tribes a good view of approaching attackers. They were built all over Britain, with large clusters around south and south-west England, the west coast of Wales and Scotland and the Welsh marshes and Scottish border regions.



Image from: Getty Images/Heritage Images

Artist's impression of Old Oswestry hillfort, Shropshire, England

## Structure

Hillforts were built for defence. They were usually built on flat land at the top of a hill. They were defended from attacks by bandits or other tribes by ditches, wooden fences and ramparts. Ramparts are banks made from earth, wood or stone.

## Warfare

During the Iron Age, fighting was common between different tribes. The development and use of iron meant that more people had strong, sharp weapons, like swords and spears. Tribes started to attack neighbouring tribes in the hope of gaining more land and wealth. Life in a hillfort was dangerous. Skulls found in a pit in Danebury hillfort in the south of England show evidence of sword and spear injuries. Archaeologists believe that these bodies were thrown into the pit after a fierce battle.



## Everyday life

Many people would have lived inside a hillfort. The walls of their roundhouses were made from wattle and daub and the roofs were made from wood and thatch. Hillforts were also used as gathering spaces for trading and festivals.

## Examples of hillforts

The buildings and fences of the hillforts have perished over time, but the outlines of many hillforts can still be seen. Of the thousands of hillforts that have been identified in Britain, Danebury hillfort in the south of England has been the most thoroughly investigated. The largest is Maiden Castle hillfort in Dorset, which covers 45 acres, an area equivalent to 50 football pitches.



Image from: Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

Danebury hillfort



Maiden Castle hillfort



1. What was a hillfort?

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2. How many hillforts were built in Britain during the Iron Age?

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3. What was important about the location of a hillfort?

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4. How would ditches, wooden fences and ramparts stop attacks from other tribes?

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5. How do historians know that Danebury hillfort was a dangerous place to live?

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6. Why do you think there aren't there any fences or buildings on hillforts today?

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7. How big is the largest hillfort at Maiden Castle?

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