

HILL TOP... A NARRATIVE



Figure 1: Drone eye view from the centre of Hill Top, clockwise - north, east, south, west (Gibson, 2019)

Archaeological evidence shows that the earliest settlement on Hill Top (Figure 1) occurred between 800 and 400 BC in either the Earliest or Early Iron Age periods. Whether this settlement was continuous thereafter is unknown, however, from

approximately 100 BC in the Late Iron Age period settlement remained continuous until the end of the Roman period in AD 409, or shortly after.

As far as is known from the archaeological evidence available, the Later Iron Age settlement consisted of two large enclosures (Figure 2); each large enough for two or three round houses with space to grow crops and graze livestock. The northeast



Figure 2: Iron Age Enclosures (Google Earth, 2019)

enclosure measures 61m by 55m and has an enclosed area of 3,350m², whilst the southwest enclosure measures 55m by 49m and has an enclosed area of 2,400m². However, as the smaller dimension of the second enclosure is a result of being cut by the field boundary and, as both enclosures share a common dimension of 55m, it is assessed that both enclosures would have been of a similar size. These compare with a late Iron Age enclosure that was discovered at Itter Crescent, Peterborough which measured 59m by 54m, had an enclosed area of 3,100m² and contained three roundhouses. A reconstruction by Jon Cane of the Itter Crescent Iron Age enclosure is provided at Figure 3 to give an example of how the enclosures on Hill Top may have looked.



Figure 3: Reconstruction of the Itter Crescent Iron Age settlement (Fairbairn *et al*, 2015: Figure 7)

The occupants of this settlement belonged to the Celtic tribe of *Catuvellauni*; and may well have belonged to a sub-tribe of dispersed settlements in the Sawtry, Alconbury Hill, Stukeleys, Godmanchester and Brampton areas. There is evidence of land management on Hill Top and throughout the local area, along with field systems and stock enclosures, suggesting a scale of arable and/or pastoral farming that allowed tribute to be made to the tribal hierarchy and for the trade of any surplus. Other evidence also indicates the Hill Top settlement engaged in a monetary, barter or trade in kind exchange system.

With the arrival of Roman occupation and administration in AD 43, little would have changed for the Celtic settlement; they would have continued living in their enclosed roundhouses, continued to work the land and instead of making tribute to the tribal hierarchy they would have made similar payments in tax to the administration. The one noticeable change that would have significant benefit to the settlement was the construction of the section of Ermine street that connected the two fledgling Roman towns of *Durovigutum* (Godmanchester) and *Durobrivae* (Water Newton). Two other Roman roads were constructed south of Hill Top; the first departed Ermine Street in the vicinity of the roundabout south of the Stukeleys through Alconbury on the north side of Alconbury Brook and on to Leicester, the second originated in Dorchester-on-Thames with its final section from Bedford joining Ermine Street opposite Alconbury Weald between the Boulevard and A14 roundabouts - fording or bridging Alconbury Brook and crossing the Leicester road in the process. During the remainder of the 1st and throughout the 2nd Centuries the settlement adopted a Roman lifestyle - becoming what is referred to as Romano-British. A rectangular wood building in the Roman style was built to the northeast of the enclosures. The archaeological evidence is not clear as to how substantial the building was, but it



Figure 4: Nene Valley Hunt Cup sherd
(©Sawtry History Society)

does show in the fine pottery wares (such as Figure 4) and small metal items of personal adornment and use that the occupants were of an elevated social status.

This building was replaced in the 2nd Century by a much more substantial building of high status that was probably a two-storey structure with a stone-walled first floor and timber panelled second floor. The upper walls and roof would have been supported by structural posts rising through the stone walls, and the roof itself covered with tiles known as *imbrices* and *tegulae* (Figure 5). It was heated, at least partially if not throughout, by a hypocaust system over which were tessellated (small cubes of limestone) floors and



Figure 5: Example of roof tiles (McComish, 2015: 13)



Figure 6: Example of wall hypocaust flue tiles (McComish, 2015: 12)

plastered walls - some of which was painted; a hypocaust system is a series of channels or flues (Figure 6) under the floor and in the walls through which hot air is drawn from an external fire chamber. Other surfaces

were faced in mortar and *opus signinum* (mortar mixed with broken tiles that gave a pink hue and gave the mortar mix waterproof qualities), and at least one window was glazed with decorated glass. The quantity of both fine and coarse pottery sherds, sherds of glassware, and both larger coarse limestone and finer coloured

tesserae show the building had clearly defined functional spaces; such as food preparation, entertainment and dining, private, and public. There is good evidence, in the form of glass sherds from a window-pane and several vessels (Figure 7), that a votive (religious) offering was made to a god to bring good fortune and protection to the building when it was built. The God must



Figure 7: Glass vessel and window sherds (©Sawtry History Society)

have taken notice as the evidence indicates the building remained in use until the site was abandoned.

There is also evidence for another building in the area of the four houses that currently front Vinegar Hill road. The location of this building reflects a shift in the concentration of occupational activity on the site in the 3rd Century from the original enclosed settlement to the Romano-British buildings that continued through the 4th Century until the site was abandoned. Associated with this shift in the focal area of occupation was an increase in occupational activity across more of the site towards Ermine Street, whilst in the 4th Century there occurred a significant increase in density of occupation activity across the entire site.

Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence is such that a number of occupational activities and building types can be interpreted on Hill Top - each of which have their merits and plausibility, and there is no reason to suggest a singular occupational activity throughout the near 400 years of Romano-British settlement:

- high status building materials and features such as hypocaust heating, painted plaster, *opus signinum*, window glazing and fine mosaics, and fine table and glass wares can indicate a villa complex, a *mansio* - a roadside travel stop for imperial officials, a commercial or administrative centre or a temple or shrine complex.
- the quantity, variety and type of small metal finds are also typical of those found in villas, *mansio* and temples, they are also items typically found at military sites.
- the quantity of coins, especially from the 4th Century, indicates a site of great wealth (villa), a site of monetary exchange (*mansio*, commercial or administrative, temple or shrine).
- the very high ratios of cattle bones can indicate a temple or shrine, or a military site.

A number of major Roman roads converge on Ermine Street immediately north of *Durobrivae* and immediately south of *Durovigutum* which channelled a significant volume of traffic along Ermine Street, which provided the Hill Top settlement direct access to a regular and numerous passing trade, and to the markets of *Durovigutum* and *Durobrivae*. Similarly, the Leicester and Bedford roads would have channelled a steady flow of traffic onto Ermine Street immediately south of Hill Top that the settlement would also have been able to benefit from. Romano-British buildings or structures on Hill Top would have been highly prominent in the landscape, with commanding views of Ermine Street to both the north and south, and of both the Leicester and Bedford roads to the south. Irrespective of the occupational activities

on Hill Top, its location on Alconbury Hill and proximity to the Roman roads is of great significance.

After the Romano-British settlement was abandoned in the early 5th Century there is no evidence of further settlement on Hill Top until construction of the four council houses fronting Vinegar Hill road in the 1940s. Hill Top, however, was and is used as farmland. There is limited evidence of Saxon activity, although it is believed that Hill Top fell within the fledgling manor listed in the Domesday Book. Archaeological evidence in the form of ridge-and-furrow show that Hill Top was regularly ploughed for arable farming during the medieval period, shortly after which, it changed use to pastoral farming and reverted to arable farming once again after 1978.

Bibliography

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