

# PAST

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PREHISTORIC SOCIETY



## Old Oswestry Hillfort, Shropshire

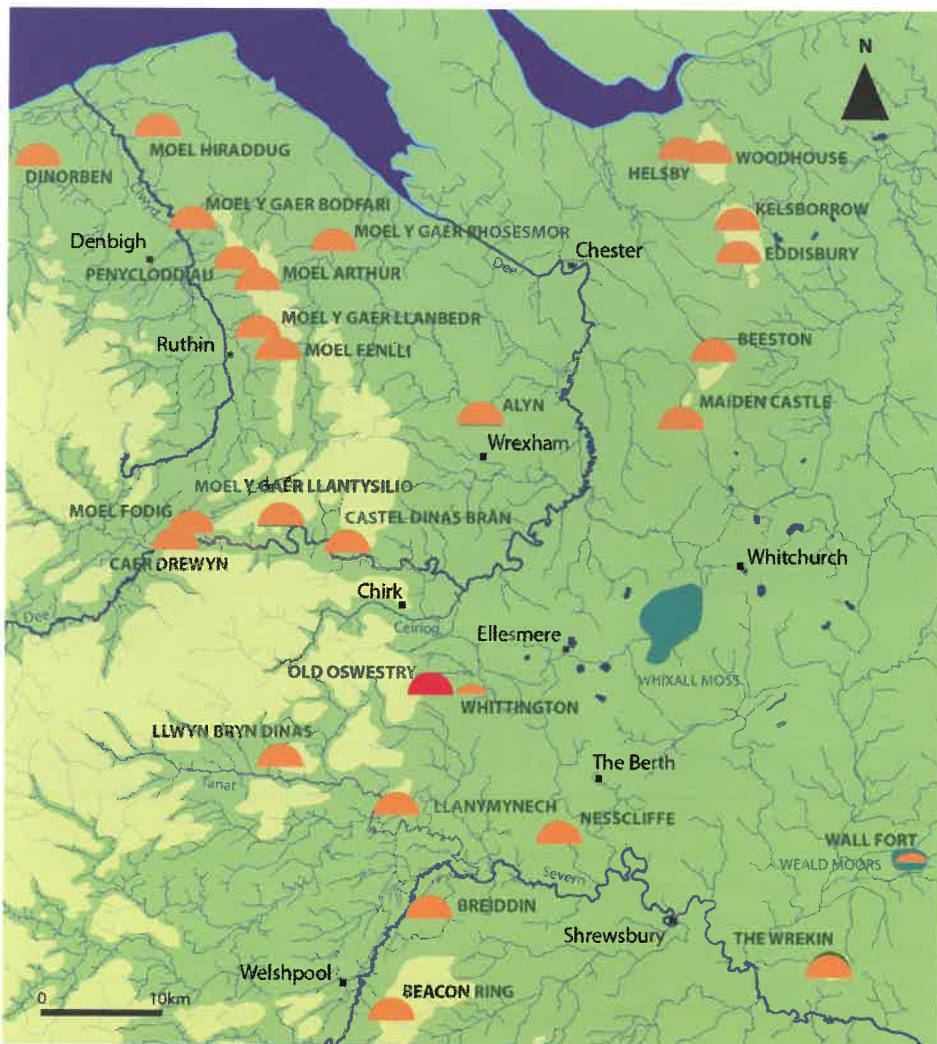
Old Oswestry multi-vallate enclosure is located just to the north of the present town, on an easily accessible glacial mound situated at the juncture of the Midland Plain and the Welsh hills, and midway between the Dee and Severn river valleys. Described by Sir Cyril Fox as “the outstanding work of Early Iron Age type on the Marches of Wales”, its distinctive features have been used to illustrate many a publication on hillforts and for syntheses of the Iron Age, particularly emphasising the monumental scale and extremely unusual, if not unique, western ramparts which incorporate five or six cells or ‘ponds’. In 1946 Lord Harlech gave it to the nation to be held in guardianship, and the oak

and ash trees that had covered its earthworks for hundreds of years were cut down.

Until the 2020s, however, the only archaeological excavation of Old Oswestry was undertaken by Bill Varley and Brian St John O’Neil in 1939–40. Although geophysical prospection was undertaken within the interior by Arnold Aspinall in the 1970s, and the results of Varley’s excavations were published by Gwilym Hughes in 1996, the only other field study was a detailed topographical and earthwork survey completed by a Royal Commission/English Heritage team led by Nicki Smith in 2010.

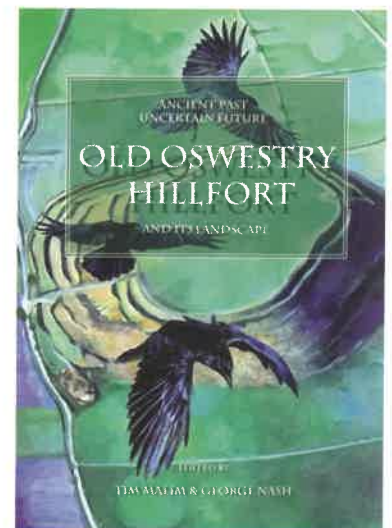


*Aerial image of Old Oswestry viewed from the north (photo Alastair Reid 2014)*



Left: Location map with surrounding hillforts (© Caroline Malim)

Below: Old Oswestry book cover (Archaeopress)



## A threatened monument

In 2014 however, a stimulus to a fresh campaign of investigation was brought about by a threat that emerged from the Shropshire Local Plan to include residential housing that would occupy a large area around the south-eastern flank of the monument, greatly changing the existing rural and historic setting for the hillfort. This Society, many other archaeologists and thousands of local residents objected to the proposals, resulting in only one site being allocated (and recently, despite continued objections, this has been granted permission). Amongst local council proponents of the housing development one of the arguments put forward was that Old Oswestry could not be very important because there had been no investigations at the site since 1940. This ill-conceived argument provided a challenge, but also an opportunity to raise public involvement with the monument.

Following several seminars and 'hillfort hug' events which attracted hundreds of people to show their support for protecting the monument and its environs, a book was published, *Ancient Past Uncertain Future: Old Oswestry Hillfort and its Landscape*. This brought together research from several different contributors, examining the concept and design, historic context and cultural heritage of the hillfort and its landscape from prehistoric to contemporary times. Amongst many other aspects the book explores the

variability in number and construction of the hillfort ramparts, its five-sided interior arrangement, inter-visibility with other hillforts and potential social relationships, hypothetical functions and symbolism, myth and folklore, ancient route-ways and potential boundaries. The book also includes details of a large stone found near the western entrance with the head and torso of a horse created in bas relief.

## New research

A community group was formed, Oswestry Heritage Gateway, to help with managing and promoting the hillfort and surrounding landscape, so that the socio-economic benefits of this iconic monument might be better appreciated by local policy makers and others. Volunteers assisted English Heritage in scrub management, in an endeavour to clear the western complex of cells, commonly described as 'ponds', of invasive vegetation. As part of this an auger survey was undertaken in 2018 through each 'pond' so that the upper fills could be radiocarbon dated to see if they were relatively recent deposits that could be cleaned out. The uppermost 300–500 mm were found to have accumulated from the 17th century onwards, but more importantly lower deposits were detected in three of these 'ponds' that had organic-rich fills, separated from those above by mineral deposition. Unfortunately, due to covid, these cores are at Historic England's laboratory still awaiting analysis and

radiocarbon dating, but hopefully results will be forthcoming later this year. It is possible that the cores may contain palaeoenvironmental evidence dating back to the Iron Age.

Following this initial investigation, a campaign of non-intrusive survey and intrusive targeted excavation was planned, with small-scale grant funding provided by the Prehistoric Society, the Society of Antiquaries of London, and the Shropshire Archaeology and History Society. Photogrammetric UAV and magnetometer surveys were undertaken, the former covering the monument in its entirety, and the latter the interior only (see end links for 3D model and geophysical survey report). This confirmed and complemented existing aerial and LiDAR imagery which show many buried linear features within the plateau enclosed by the earthworks. The majority of these are from WW1 practice trenches and related features, which are also known from the fields east of the monument where the housing will be built. A large military camp at Park Hall used the hillfort and intervening fields for training purposes, including live fire exercises, and the consequent harm to buried remains within the interior is likely to have been significant. Nonetheless Varley's excavations in 1940 had discovered well-preserved roundhouses at two locations adjacent to the uppermost bank, and his trenches through the earthwork ramparts allowed him to suggest a phased sequence of events, a chronological model that can now be tested independently through the application of new techniques.

## 2021–2022 excavations

Two short seasons of excavation with a small team of volunteers were completed in September 2021 and 2022. The main aim of this work was to retrieve viable samples for scientific dating in three locations, and to assess the accuracy, and preservation after 80 years, of Varley's findings. The inner and outer banks were targeted, as these represented the beginning and end of the monument according to Varley's phasing. To minimise disturbance at the innermost (highest) rampart Trench 1 was aligned adjacent to the visible depression caused by Varley's backfilled Trench A, and an area was also opened behind the rampart (Trench 3), partially over Varley's trench extension where a roundhouse had been located. For the lower (outer) and considerably more massive bank, an erosion scar and desire path through the rampart was cut back (Trench 2) to obtain a full profile of the bank, and an auger was used in the ditch beneath to retrieve cores for sampling.

Due to the commitment and endurance of the volunteers, and some good weather, all the research aims were achieved. The lower bank was of glacis construction as described by Varley, c.4 m wide by 1.5 m high, with some tip lines evident but overall comprising a relatively homogenous mix of clays, gravels and cobbles. At the rear heel of the bank two lines of stones were found which might represent a kerb or a slot for a palisade. The front of the bank fell steeply into the ditch below, which the auger survey showed was c.1.5 m deeper than its current level of fill, making the full height from base of ditch to top of bank 7.7 m over a horizontal distance of 10 m. Four samples for Optically Stimulated Luminescence

(OSL) dating were taken from the bank profile, and a further seven from the ditch fill sequence.

The first 1.4 m of ditch infill had six OSL sequential age ranges, with age increasing the deeper the samples, suggesting the upper fill accumulation had occurred over the past c.300 years. The lowest sample at c.1.5–1.6 m depth had an age range that covered a wide period from Early–Late Bronze Age. The four OSL age ranges for the bank included wide variations from the beginning of the 5th millennium BC to the middle of the 1st millennium AD.

The results from Trench 1 through the upper bank confirmed much of Varley's record, with a c.3 m wide original rampart constructed with a heavily compacted small stone rubble and clay core, faced by stones on the outside, and with large stones forming the rear, presumably to hold the bank in position. A secondary phase of small stones and pebbles in a compact clay matrix was found overlying the original bank for a distance of c.4.5 m, but with a stony tail extending a further 2 m into the interior where a line of kerb stones marked the inside edge of the enlarged bank. Three OSL samples were taken through the bank material, but the resultant age range spans the Bronze and Iron Ages. Two daub samples from the bank makeup gave tighter OSL date ranges, however, with the sample from the original bank 708–148 BC, and the other (from the rear of the secondary bank material) 292 BC–AD 438. Two roundwood charcoal samples from this secondary bank were also radiocarbon dated, giving date ranges from the 4th–1st centuries BC.

Behind the bank a small area (Trench 3) was opened to locate Varley's roundhouse, and despite the surprisingly deep overburden containing bits of exploded munitions, a thin clay surface and several large postholes were found at about 0.5 m below the current ground surface. The postholes were up to 0.8 m in diameter and c.0.4 m in depth with large stones as part of the fill. Charcoal was retrieved from some of these features and from the clay (trample?) surface between the postholes. Oak was frequently represented accompanied by shrubby taxa of elder, hazel and plum-type wood along



Section through outer bank (Trench 2) with steep drop to ditch below, looking south-west (photo Tim Malim; scales in 0.5 m divisions)



Left: Section through inner bank (Trench 1), looking north (photo Tim Malim; scale in 0.2 m divisions). Right: Postholes in Trench 3 (photo Rob Speak; scales in 0.2m divisions)

with wet-loving woody species of purging buckthorn and poplar/ willow. The charred plant macrofossils predominantly consisted of cereal caryopses of wheat, and cereal chaff was present in the form of glume wheat spikelet forks and glume bases within the trampled surface. The weed seed assemblage and low frequencies of chaff, however, suggest that the cereal crop was relatively 'clean' when brought to the site, with most processing having been completed elsewhere. Four radiocarbon dates were obtained from seeds and a piece of roundwood, which suggest occupation of the roundhouse was during the late 4th to early 3rd centuries BC.

In conclusion, the investigations have achieved their project aims, and Bayesian modelling of the dates will hopefully refine our understanding of some of the main events at the hillfort. The wide age ranges given by the OSL samples through the banks are disappointing but could easily be attributed to the nature of construction, with rapid digging and dumping of material providing an erratic opportunity for individual grains to be exposed to sunlight before being buried. What was more surprising was the good preservation found within the roundhouse, and the relatively rich palaeoenvironmental evidence and radiocarbon dates obtained from it. The depth of overburden suggests other Iron Age features could remain hidden from non-intrusive survey, and despite WW1 disturbance over parts of the monument, there is clear potential for continued survival of prehistoric remains in other parts. Full publication is planned in the next year, together with some artefact studies to reassess Varley's original ceramic assemblage, and also analysis of two rare, decorated bronze fittings within English Heritage's collection from the site. Any identification and possible parallels for these items would be much appreciated.



Copper-alloy artefacts in the English Heritage collection (photos Tim Malim; scale in cms)

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Links

3D model of hillfort: <https://skfb.ly/6Xtxl>

Geophysical survey report download: <http://oldoswestryhillfort.co.uk/press-release/old-oswestry-geophysical-investigations-2021/>