

# Archaeologists urge public to head for the hillforts

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Tap o' Noth hillfort, Aberdeenshire.

Archaeologists are encouraging members of the public to get involved in a major project to map all the hillforts across Britain and Ireland.

The research team from Oxford and Edinburgh universities, in collaboration with University College Cork, is aiming to create the first online database listing information on around 5,000 hillforts.

Called 'An Atlas of Hillforts in Britain and Ireland', the final database will be a freely available resource for the public to find out more about their local monuments which, according to the scholars, have been the

subject of very little research until now.

The vast scale of the [project](#) means that the researchers will rely on volunteers to identify and record the characteristics of thousands of forts. They are seeking information not only about the upstanding, well-preserved forts but also the sites where only cropmarks and remnants indicate where forts once stood.

From today, members of the public can start to feed information about the characteristics of their local hillfort into online forms on the [project website](#).

Details such as the style and number of ramparts, ditches or entrances will help build up a complete picture of the regional variations and patterns. One big question that the researchers want to examine is how hillforts were used, and whether their purpose varied greatly across different regions of Britain and Ireland.

The four-year project is being funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The database will eventually be freely searchable by region and by various hillfort characteristics, and be linked to Google Earth/Maps so that each fort can be seen within its landscape setting. The aim is to produce both an online searchable atlas and a paper atlas showing and analysing the different characteristics and regional variations.

Gary Lock, Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oxford and co-director of the project, said: 'There is huge variety in where the hillforts were sited and the materials used to construct them. Hillforts in the upland areas are often stone-built, while those in lowland areas are often made of timber and earth.

'Some were constructed in prominent positions on the very top of hills,

while others were on slopes or not even on hills at all. We want to shed new light on why they were created and how they were used.'

Co-director Ian Ralston, Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, said: 'We are keen to see what the citizen science approach will reveal. We hope that the public, including archaeological societies, will get behind this project as it should lead to the discovery of new sites and new information about sites that are considered to be well-known.

'We expect the results of this project to change our vision of these iconic [monuments](#).'

Hillforts are one of the most prominent and obvious types of prehistoric monument and yet, according to the researchers, relatively little is known about how their individual characteristics vary, both nationally and regionally. Most hillforts were built from about 700 BC, although some were constructed earlier. In most of England, they were used primarily until the Romans arrived in the middle of the first century AD, but they continued to be used for much longer in other parts of Britain and Ireland.

Despite the name, there is very limited evidence to suggest that hillforts had a military purpose. It is believed they were more commonly used as settlements that were occupied for short periods and could have been meeting places for dispersed communities to gather for religious activities and festivals, and market days.

Hillforts across Britain and Ireland vary hugely in size – one of the biggest is Ham Hill in Somerset with an enclosed area of over 80 hectares. Much smaller examples, with enclosed spaces of below one hectare, are in Argyll or parts of west Wales.

Maiden Castle in Dorset can claim to be one of the most complex Iron Age hillforts in Europe, with huge multiple ramparts. However, other sites are enclosed very differently, like the Late Bronze Age Class 2 forts in Ireland, which have widely spaced banks.

Provided by Oxford University

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