



Beacons of the Past – Hillforts in the Chilterns Landscape

The CCB has been awarded a £695,600 grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund towards a four year £895,866 project to discover and conserve the Chilterns Hillforts. This will entail employing a full-time Project Manager and a part time Landscape Heritage Officer.

Project Summary

This project will engage and inspire a large, diverse range of people to discover, conserve and enjoy the Chilterns' Iron Age hillforts and their prehistoric chalk landscapes.

Until now, these iconic features have not been studied in depth. Despite their proximity to visitor attractions, popular walking routes (including the ancient Ridgeway route) and urban areas, most are poorly understood, under-appreciated, and in need of conservation action.

The project will provide a springboard for community and public involvement through:

- Surveying and researching the known hillforts; searching for previously undiscovered prehistoric features in densely wooded areas using LiDAR technology
- Improving interpretation of the hillforts and their landscapes, encouraging people to visit and enjoy them
- Bringing the Iron Age to life through a programme of events and educational activities
- Undertaking practical works to improve the condition and accessibility of known and newly discovered sites

The heritage

The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a nationally protected landscape comprising a ridge of chalk hills stretching from Goring on Thames in South Oxfordshire to Hitchin in Hertfordshire, with an area of 833km². The Chilterns is one of the most visited landscapes in Europe with over 55 million visits per year, and over 10 million people within an hour's travel time.

This project focuses on the 22 Iron Age hillforts associated with the Chiltern Hills and their chalk landscape setting. These form one of the densest concentrations of hillforts in the country. Many (but not all) of the hillforts are on the edge of Chiltern escarpment and are visible from many miles away, making them an important aspect of the Chilterns' character. The best known hillfort in the Chilterns is Ivinghoe Beacon, located at the end of the Ridgeway, one of the oldest routes in Britain.

The project will create numerous opportunities for public participation through activities focussed on:

1. The hillforts, their purpose and relationship to life and society in the Iron Age.
2. The prehistoric landscape context of the hillforts and associated features within that wider landscape

1. The Hillforts of the Chilterns

Iron Age hillforts were constructed and used in Britain from around 1,000 BC until the arrival of the Romans in the first century AD. Of the 22 known hillforts 14 are in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire whilst 8 are in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. The functions of hillforts during the Iron Age included defence, habitation, communal storage of agricultural produce and being the focus of ceremonial activities. They were also the focus of activity in later periods including for religious activities. They are typically characterised in the current landscape by earthwork ramparts and ditches. While some hillfort sites are open grassland (e.g. Ivinghoe Beacon), many which once had an open aspect, are now covered in woodland and scrub (e.g. Pulpit Hill). The number of hillforts in the Chilterns is notable; they mark an important potential cultural boundary in the Iron Age between two distinct tribal areas.

2. Prehistoric monuments and features within the surrounding landscape

Clear associations exist between hillforts and other visible archaeological monuments within the Chilterns countryside, e.g. prehistoric burial mounds, ceremonial monuments, ancient routes, Iron Age dykes and boundary features. The relationships between hillforts and other prehistoric heritage and natural features, is important for understanding the Iron Age as a whole.

The Chiltern Hills are one of the most heavily wooded areas in the country, with woodland covering 23.5% of the area. Over half of Chiltern woodlands are ancient (continuously wooded for over 400 years) and there is considerable potential for the discovery of previously unrecorded heritage features and monuments within these woodlands. This could greatly enhance understanding of hillforts and their surrounding landscape.

Much of the potential for discovery of archaeological features and monuments within these woodlands relates to Roman and prehistoric times when the woodlands would have been less extensive. One example is an earthwork enclosure recently discovered in a woodland on the Chilterns scarp near Christmas Common in Oxfordshire that appears to be Iron Age in date and may be an unidentified hillfort.

What the Project will do

The project will reconnect people with the prehistory of the Chilterns, increase public awareness and appreciation of the special features of the landscape, and strengthen community 'ownership' and custodianship of the hillforts and their landscape setting. People will have the chance to:

- Visit and enjoy hillforts and their landscapes
- Participate in researching, discovering and conserving hillforts and other prehistoric sites
- Develop new skills, knowledge and interests
- Learn about the Chilterns in the Iron Age

Chilterns hillforts and their setting will be:

- Better managed
- In better condition

- Better interpreted and explained
- Identified / recorded
- More accessible
- Better understood

The 4-year project will employ a full-time Project Manager (project management & community lead) and a part-time Landscape Heritage Officer (LiDAR & archaeological lead) who will be hosted at the CCB's office in Chinnor.

The work will focus of three key areas:

1. Beacon of Discovery (Survey and Research)

Undertaking research and survey work on the hillforts and associated features in their wider setting.

A LiDAR survey will be commissioned for an area of approx. 1138km², the full extent of the AONB boundary. It is suspected that undiscovered hillforts or other prehistoric archaeology may be located in the more wooded areas of the Chilterns hills.

6-8 sites will be selected for archaeological investigation. These are expected to include known hillforts, associated monuments and new features identified by the LiDAR survey.

The project will provide the opportunity for volunteers to get trained up and help with ground-truthing and researching/identifying archaeological features on the ground.

2. Beacon of Learning (Engagement, Learning, Enjoyment and Awareness)

The project will engage a wide range of participants (e.g. age, background, level of skill) through improving the availability of information; written, illustrative and face-to-face interpretation including some Augmented Reality; and a range educational activities, guided walks, public events and an Artists in Residence programme.

3. Beacon of Protection (Practical Conservation and Enhancement)

5 hillforts have been identified for practical conservation / restoration / access work. These are:

- Cholesbury Camp, Bucks
- Desborough Castle, High Wycombe
- Seven ways Plain, Burnham
- Waulud's Bank, Luton
- Wilbury Hill, Letchworth Garden City near Hitchin

There will also be scope within the project to undertake practical works on up to 3 other sites identified by the LiDAR survey.

The project will work to increase awareness of heritage crime and to establish Heritage Watch schemes where particular issues are identified, and such schemes are considered appropriate.

Timescales

The recruitment process will start in December 2017 with interviews in January 2018 and it is expected the new staff will be in post by April 2018. The Lidar surveys will begin in the winter of 2018.

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