

Helsby Promontory Fort: A late Bronze Age promontory fort

SIX PREHISTORIC HILLTOP ENCLOSURES, or 'hillforts', dominate the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. All have long and complex histories that began in the Neolithic or early Bronze Age with the ritual burial of the dead, perhaps associated with seasonal festivals, fires and feasts.

The hilltops were probably first enclosed in the late Bronze Age to mark them out as special places. By the Early Iron Age these enclosures had become increasingly defensive, possibly to protect and regulate important goods such as grain and livestock. Many 'hillforts' were abandoned as society changed in the Late Iron Age. Yet, even today, they remain an atmospheric and essential part of the British landscape.

Overlooking the Mersey

The hillfort at Helsby sits on a prominent outlier of the main sandstone ridge with broad views over Wales and the Mersey estuary. Protected by sheer cliffs to the north and northwest, seven acres of the hilltop were enclosed by a curved, stone-faced defensive rampart and parallel external scarp bank around 1000 BC, in the late Bronze Age. Aerial photographs and ground surveys suggest there may also have been a ditch between the rampart and the outer bank. The only entrance seems to have been at the southwest corner of the hill where a long inturned bank runs parallel to the cliff edge. The ramparts also partially enclose a sandstone ledge on the northern flank of the hill.



◀ **Daily Bread?**
*Kneeling women
mill barley flour with
stone saddle querns*



▶ **Mersey View**
*Helsby Hillfort
overlooks the Welsh
hills and the broad
marshes of the Mersey estuary*

ON THE HILL: Theme 1

Grain storage, processing and distribution

FARMING WAS THE MAINSTAY of Britain's Iron Age economy, involving both crops and livestock at well above subsistence level.

Emmer wheat and naked barley were popular until around 1000 BC as they grow well on light, easily worked soils such as those along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. But as heavier soils, like those of the Cheshire Plain, were brought into cultivation, they were gradually replaced by spelt wheat and hulled barley. Rye, oats and bread wheat reached Britain towards the end of the Iron Age. Burnt emmer and spelt wheat and oats have been recovered from the hillforts at Helsby, Eddisbury and Beeston. Cereals were an important part of most people's diets, and stone querns for grinding corn to make the daily bread are often found at hillforts.

Another common find from the interior of hillforts are so-called 'four-posters'. These small, rectangular arrangements of post-holes are often interpreted as raised granaries. Corn was more than just food. Surplus grain was both a valuable resource and a tradeable commodity. Among their many roles, hillforts probably served as secure places to protect this surplus from raids by neighbouring communities.

"Some early hillforts or hill settlements might have played a role in centralised storage, and had a larger sphere of influence than other sites."

Richard Bradley, *Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain*, 1984

"Because of its relative complexity Helsby is potentially the most important site in Cheshire (and could be expected to yield valuable information on its structural sequence)."

J Forde-Johnston, *The Iron Age Hillforts of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 1965

Clues to the Past

Ritual fires may have illuminated the hilltop long before the hillfort was built. Charcoal from beneath the ramparts has been radiocarbon dated to the Neolithic, roughly 6,000 years ago. A Neolithic polished stone axe and a leaf-shaped flint arrowhead have also been found on the northern slopes. Similar evidence suggests that grain was being stored or processed on the hilltop during the Iron Age.

Pollen samples from the ramparts confirm that the Iron Age summit was covered in open heathland dominated by heather, bilberry and crowsberry. More tantalising still is the discovery on the hilltop of a Roman bronze sestertius of the emperor Tiberius minted in Rome in AD22. Could there have been early links between Helsby Hill and the Roman Empire before the Romans invaded Britain?



Roman Coin

A Roman bronze sestertius of the emperor Tiberius found on Helsby Hill

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To learn more about the work of the Sandstone Ridge Trust and its partners, visit

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The Archaeology of Helsby Hill



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