Albion Archaeology's Tour of Mowsbury Hillfort

Archaeological and Historical Significance

The site is **scheduled ancient monument** because it is both an **early Iron Age hillfort** and also a **medieval moated site**. The 'slight univallate hillfort' had a single line of defence (bank and ditch). It is visible as a roughly oval plateau, *c.*160m across, occupying the crest of Mowsbury Hill. The site was re-occupied in the Roman period. In the Middle Ages the hillfort was partially modified to form a moat around a manor house that once belonged to the 15th-century manor of Morinsbury.

Natural Environment Significance

Part of the Site is both a **County Wildlife Site** and a **Local Nature Reserve** because it contains **UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats** (neutral lowland grassland, traditional orchards, lowland broadleaf woodland) and **Priority Species** (small heath butterfly and viviparous lizard) identified by the. It also has a **high landscape value**, according to the Bedford Borough Landscape Character Assessment.

The key features of the site are:

1. Courtyard meadow (medieval moated enclosure)
The outer enclosure of the medieval manor site manor is now an important wildlife habitat comprising lowland meadow on Boulder Clay. It has many wildflowers (including Bee Orchid, *Ophrys apifera*) and insects. There are a number of large ant hills on the meadow. This area is cut and cleared regularly but is under constant threat from encroaching scrub and brambles from the surrounding areas.

2. Inner island of the medieval moat (may have been the site of the actual manor house)
Now densely overgrown, this is completely surrounded by a deep moat with no causeway across it. The inner moat often contains standing water, despite being on the top of a hill!

3. Outer moat (medieval)
This is fed by a leat from the west and always has water in it. These ponds and seasonally boggy areas offer a diversity of conditions for wildlife, especially amphibians. The causeway across the moat is probably a later alteration.

4. Exotic ornamental trees
The large trees were probably planted before 1926 for ornamental reasons and are historically significant as relics of past human influence on the landscape.

5. Old orchard (east)
The various old fruit trees were originally planted before 1926. Some replanting has been done to replace the lost trees (but this is subject to scheduled monument consent). Mature orchards are important wildlife habitats, as well as part of our horticultural heritage.

6. Old orchard (south)
Here the trees are mostly *Prunus* (damson?) suckers growing from the rootstock of dead plum cultivars, but various other fruit varieties are also present, particularly at the western end of the area. Again, these were mostly planted before 1926 and are important for heritage and wildlife.

7. Southern moat embankment (medieval)
The 'strong' southern moat (*c.*10m wide and 2m deep) is emphasised by a high embankment on the outer (southern) berm, the top of which is higher than the ground level on islands. It was clearly not defensive, but a prominent vantage point with views to and from the surrounding countryside.

8. Western rampart of the Iron Age hillfort
The best-preserved part of the rampart, was probably always the largest as it cuts off the hillfort from the rest of the promontory. It has been altered by later activity. Note fired clay in the burrows!
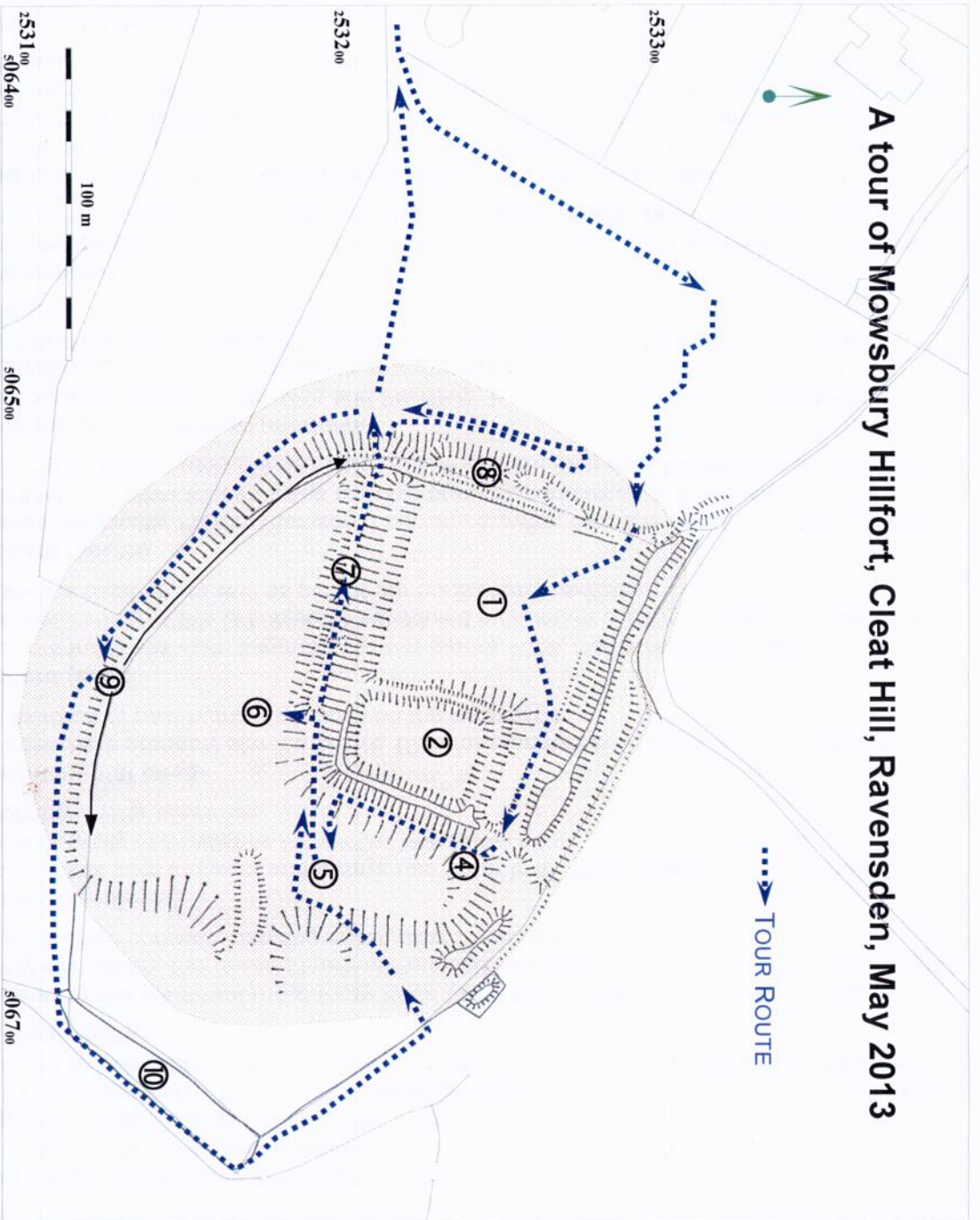
9. Iron Age hillfort rampart and probable site of Dring's 1971 excavation
Elsewhere the rampart is very slight and no ditch can be seen. However, in 1971 a small trial excavation led by G. J. Dring reportedly found a ditch *c.*4.3m wide and 2m deep and evidence for a clay and timber rampart that had been destroyed by fire. Sadly the results were never fully written up and the excavation archive is lost. A small clearing in the scrub marks the likely site of the dig,

10. Historic boundary and hedgerow
A row of large, mature trees located on the east of the site are remnants of a former field boundary.

A tour of Mowsbury Hillfort, Cleat Hill, Ravensden, May 2013

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① Courtyard meadow (medieval moated enclosure)

② Inner island of the medieval moat

③ Outer moat (medieval)

④ Exotic ornamental trees

⑤ Old orchard (east)

⑥ Old orchard (south)

⑦ Southern moat embankment

⑧ Western rampart of the Iron Age hillfort

⑨ Iron Age hillfort rampart and probable site of Dring's 1971 excavation

⑩ Historic boundary and hedgerow

Approximate extent of the Iron Age hillfort

100 m

2531 00
5064 00

2532 00

2533 00

5065 00

5067 00

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