

Mowsbury HillFort

Slight univallate hillfort and medieval moated site.

List Entry Summary

This monument is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as amended as it appears to the Secretary of State to be of national importance. This entry is a copy, the original is held by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Name: Mowsbury Hill: slight univallate hillfort and medieval moated site

List entry Number: 1015588

Location

The monument may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

District: Bedford

District Type: Unitary Authority

Parish: Ravensden

Date first scheduled: 24-Jun-1965

Date of most recent amendment: 11-Jul-1997

Slight univallate hillforts are defined as enclosures of various shapes, generally between 1ha and 10ha in size, situated on or close to hilltops and defined by a single line of earthworks, the scale of which is relatively small. They date to between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (eighth - fifth centuries BC), the majority being used for 150 to 200 years prior to their abandonment or reconstruction. Slight univallate hillforts have generally been interpreted as stock enclosures, redistribution centres, places of refuge and permanent settlements. The earthworks generally include a rampart, narrow level berm, external ditch and counterscarp bank, while access to the interior is usually provided by two entrances comprising either simple gaps in the earthwork or an inturned rampart. Postholes revealed by excavation indicate the occasional presence of portal gateways while more elaborate features like overlapping ramparts and outworks are limited to only a few examples. Internal features included timber or stone round houses; large storage pits and hearths; scattered postholes, stakeholes and gullies; and square or rectangular buildings supported by four to six posts, often represented by postholes, and interpreted as raised granaries. Slight univallate hillforts are rare with around 150 examples recorded nationally. Although on a national scale the number is low, in Devon they comprise one of the major classes of hillfort. In other areas where the distribution is relatively dense, for example, Wessex, Sussex, the Cotswolds and the Chilterns, hillforts belonging to a number of different classes occur within the same region. Examples are also recorded in eastern England, the Welsh Marches, central and southern England. In view of the rarity of slight univallate hillforts and their importance in understanding the transition between Bronze Age and Iron Age communities, all examples which survive comparatively well and have potential for the recovery of further archaeological remains are believed to be of national importance.

Although the slight univallate hillfort at Mowsbury Hill has been somewhat disturbed by medieval and modern activity, it remains one of the most interesting examples of its kind in the region. The perimeter defences (partly incorporated into the later medieval settlement) remain visible on the ground, and sample excavation has demonstrated the existence of well preserved deposits within the buried ditch and, most significantly, the rare survival of evidence for the timber construction of the rampart. The fort's interior will contain further buried remains, providing insights into the function of the hillfort and, as within the bank and ditch, containing dateable material illustrating period of construction and the duration of occupation. The medieval moated site within the ramparts of hillfort is one of around 6,000 sites of this general type known in England. The wide ditches which characterise this class of monument were often water-filled, partly or completely enclosing one or more islands which contained domestic or religious buildings. The majority of moated sites served as

prestigious aristocratic or seigneurial residences, with the moat acting as a status symbol rather than a means of military defence. Moated sites reached a peak of popularity between the mid 13th and 14th centuries with the greatest concentration of numbers in the central and eastern parts of England. They exhibit a high level of diversity in their forms and sizes, and are particularly important for the understanding of the distribution of wealth and status in the countryside. The moated site at Mowsbury Hill is an extremely well preserved example of this class of monument. Its largely undisturbed interior will retain buried evidence for the structures and other features related to the period of occupation. The ditches will also contain valuable artefactual evidence especially as the waterlogged silts provide conditions suitable for the preservation of organic objects. The fishponds are a characteristic feature of this class of the medieval settlement, used to maintain a sustainable food supply. They are a significant component of the site, providing an indication of both the diet and social standing of its inhabitants. The silts within the ponds and the buried connected channels will contain further artefacts, and (as with the main ditches) retain environmental evidence illustrating the appearance of the surrounding landscape during the period of occupation.

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Mowsbury Hill is located on the south eastern tip of a long spur of chalky boulder clay to the north of Bedford and the Ouse valley. Archaeological evidence gathered, to date, demonstrates that the hill has seen two major phases of occupation - a univallate hillfort constructed in the Iron Age, and a medieval moated site adapted from and sited within the earlier ramparts. The existence of the hillfort was first clearly identified in 1971, although fragments of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery had been reported from the site since the turn of the century and some authorities had previously suggested a prehistoric origin for the earthworks. Sample excavation in 1971-2 confirmed the presence of a large single ditch encircling the tip of the spur. This measured approximately 4.3m wide and 2m deep and had been completely infilled, incorporating material from the collapsed internal bank. Only a slight scarp remains along the southern side of the hill to mark the position of the bank, which had been supported by a timber framework of the Hollingbury type. This feature had been destroyed by fire leaving clear impressions of the timbers in the semi-fired clay which composed the bank. Pottery found in association with the rampart indicates a date of construction in the early Iron Age, and a limited period of occupation. With the addition of geophysical evidence from within the copse in 1972, the complete outline of the perimeter was established, forming a roughly oval plan measuring c.290m north west to south east by 200m transversely. The earthworks of the medieval settlement occupy the central and north western part of the hillfort. These include a rectangular moated enclosure orientated roughly east to west and measuring approximately 110m by 80m, the south eastern quarter of which is taken up by a second moated island. The northern arm of the larger enclosure is believed to have been adapted from the hillfort ditch. The southern arm, within the interior of the former fort, is much more substantial - measuring up to 15m in width and 2.5m deep

and flanked by a large external bank. The moats were supplied by a narrow leat which enters the site from the north east corner. A second leat branches from the centre of the northern arm and extends towards a pair of small fishponds located some 20m from the north east corner of the main island. The inner pond is also thought to have been sited within the line of the hillfort ditch. The medieval site has been identified with the Manor of Morinsbury, mentioned in various documents prior to 1465. The name may have been retained as 'Morsebury'- the title of a field owned by the Goswick family in the 16th century which included the area of earthworks and presumably devolved to the present name of Mowsbury Hill. All fences and fenceposts are excluded from the scheduling, although the ground beneath these items is included.

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