

CRICKLEY HILL

The hillfort at Crickley Hill, just outside Gloucester, continues to provide surprises. When excavations first began, from 1969 onwards, the prominent rampart was found to be multi-period, with radiocarbon dates from the 8th to the 5th centuries B.C. The enclosed settlements, too, were complex: at first the principal dwellings were large and rectangular; after a major fire, a new layout was adopted, using round houses. This settlement was destroyed in the same manner as its predecessor, and the hillfort was then abandoned.

In the last couple of years excavations have been directed towards the southernmost part of the seven-acre site. Here, tucked in behind the collapsed rampart, about 200 metres from the Iron Age entrance, Philip Dixon and his team found a huddle of sub-circular houses, cut into shallow scoops in the sloping hillside. Though their walls included drystone masonry, the amount of stone debris was comparatively slight, and it is likely that the walls of the buildings were of clay, on a low stone base. Each dwelling contained a well-built hearth at its centre, and measured about 6-8 metres on its longer axis. Six scoops have so far been excavated, and five contained dwellings; surface indications suggest that as many as thirty scoops remain to be investigated. The buildings contained many scraps of very worn coarse pottery. Beneath the floors of two of them were found abraded sherds of Roman pottery, possibly of 4th century date.

About 300 metres west of the scooped houses at the very end of the hill, overlooking the Severn, Ermine Street, and Roman Gloucester, another distinctive stone-built hearth was found inside a remarkable large rectangular building. This was entered by a substantial stone porch, and had a laid cobble floor; its walls rested on pad-stones and were presumably timber-framed. Grass-tempered pottery and two minissima coins suggested a late-Roman or post-Roman date, similar to that of the hamlet behind the ruined Iron Age walls.

At the centre of the Iron Age hillfort the excavations have revealed several phases of Neolithic banks and ditches, enclosing at least two distinct settlements the first within a causewayed camp (see CA No. 56). After the destruction of the final Neolithic village (CA No. 76), the site was left to decay, and the ditches silted up. Shallow recuts in the tops of their fill show a notional recreation of the enclosure, at a date before the construction of the Iron Age hillfort. The new enclosure may have been intended to surround a mysterious Long Mound, which was built in a natural hollow at the southern side of the burnt Neolithic settlement. The mound is a complex construction. Its base was a compacted layer of small stones and earth, and its body is composed of fine top-soil, about 300 tons of which must have been collected to produce a monument nearly 100 metres long and 3 metres broad. In its first phase, the Long Mound contained at least three parallel fences along its long axis, with other cross fence

lines dividing the area into segments and providing short buttressing fences to the outside edge of the Mound. After a rebuilding the fences were abandoned, but the positions of their more important fence posts were preserved by large flat slabs, which were laid above the former postholes. Other slabs lay above small collections of butchered bones. At the eastern end of the mound, slabs and cobbles lay against a large shallow post setting on the Mound's axis. It seems likely that this was a marker or totem. At the other end, the 1983 season revealed a remarkable circle, about 10 metres in diameter, with a cobbled floor and an edge marked out by small upright slabs. At the centre of the circle a very large slab, broken by burning, was surrounded by tiny fragments of burnt bone. This was clearly a place of sacrifices, but until the archaeologists finish their work in this area its date remains uncertain, - but it was stratified between a point in the Neolithic and the Late Bronze Age hillfort. The excavation of the circle is due to be finished in August 1984, and the excavators are confident that the 16th season of digging will provide as many surprises as its predecessors.

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