

Sharpenhoe Clappers: Iron Age fort or rabbit warren?

HISTORIC LANDSCAPE REPORT / July 2014

**Buckinghamshire
Archaeological
Society**



The BAS Active
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Hillforts Project

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Sharpenhoe Clappers



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Review, Report and photographs by Pauline Hey and Nigel Wilson.
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1 THE SITE

1.1 Location

Sharpenhoe Clappers is five miles due north of Luton in Bedfordshire, half a mile west of the main A6 trunk road. The small town of Barton-le-Clay is a mile to the north-east.

1.2 Topography

The Clappers, also described locally as The Hill, is a steep sided spur rising between 140 to 150 metres above sea level, which forms part of the irregular north-facing escarpment to the south of Sharpenhoe Village. Its Ordnance Survey national grid reference is TL 066 302.

The top of the promontory is both sloping and undulating in parts. The soils on the Clappers are free-draining deposits of middle and lower chalk. The hill is covered by beech woods, other tree species, and areas of dense scrub.

Immediately to the south of The Clappers is a higher hill rising to the height of 155 metres above sea level with a flat top and partially embanked sides. This is partly sheep pasture with some arable. The Clappers overlooks a broad portion of central Bedfordshire looking north to Flitwick and east to Barton-Le-Clay.

1.3 Water sources

There is no spring that can be identified on The Clappers although, given the dense scrub, there might be temporary surface gullies replenished by rainfall. A field name to the immediate south, below the ramparts, was called Pond Fire Knoll and may contain a man-made pond but this is so overgrown it cannot be confirmed. A ready supply of clay is available in the vicinity, hence the name Barton-Le-Clay.

Springs can be identified nearby but these are further south at Watergutter Hole below the escarpment. The hillside to the south is largely sheep pasture.

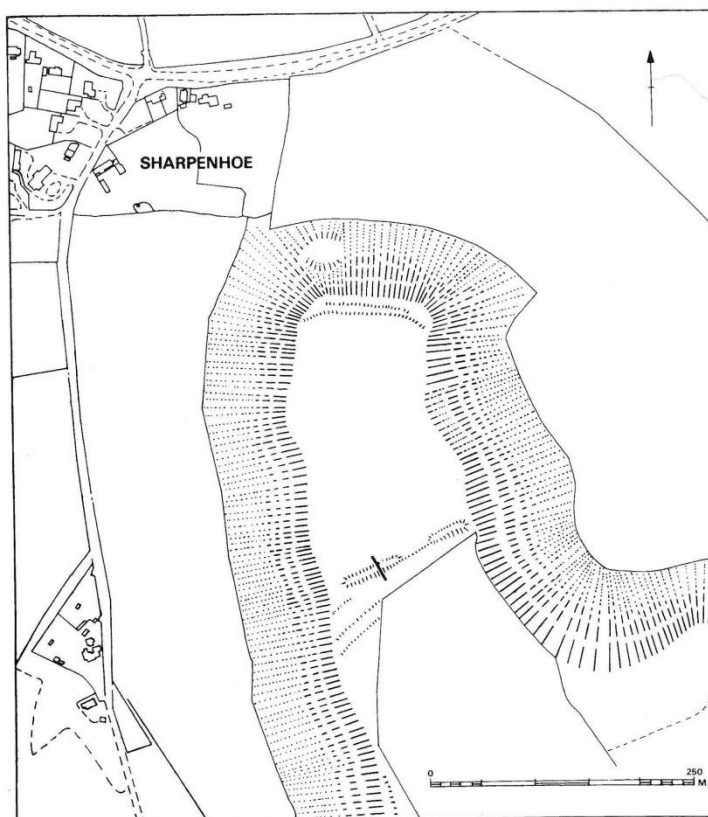


Figure 1:
A map of
Sharpenhoe
Clappers.

2 THE HISTORIC CONTEXT

The known history of The Clappers is that prior to enclosure in the mid-nineteenth century it was part of an extensive grazing down, probably used for sheep. Since enclosure it has been turned into beech woods, presumably because there was no other practical alternative given the shallow soil and steep slopes, making ploughing unfeasible. The shortage of water supplies would have required the constant and costly maintenance of any sheep population.

After the Great War the Clappers was transferred to the National Trust as a memorial.

In 1874 the Clappers was defined as an Iron Age camp because it had what seemed to be a rampart built across a narrow hill promontory with an accompanying wide, flat-bottomed ditch.

3 THE 1979 EXCAVATION

The only other evidence for the origin of the earthworks derives from an archaeological dig conducted in 1979. The report on this excavation, written by Brian Dix, was published in 1983.¹ The report includes a diagrammatic map of the site (reproduced here as Figure 1). The excavation trench was cut across the earthbank which crosses the promontory from east to west. This is marked on the map (see Figure 2).

The report concluded that the name and economic purpose of The Clappers was due to extensive rabbit warrens being farmed there between the medieval period and the early seventeenth century.

During the excavation some sherds of Romano-British origin and fragments of Iron Age vessels had been identified, suggesting some occupation in earlier times but any evidence had been obscured or destroyed by later works when the rabbit warrens were built.

During the excavation the possibility of a ceremonial entrance was identified but this could not be confirmed by geophysical survey because the site was too disturbed by the digging of rabbit warrens.

The main Neolithic and later settlement in the area seems to be to the south and east towards Hexton and Barton-le-Clay along what is known as the Icknield Way.

Ravensburgh Castle is two miles to the east, while Dray's Ditches, 2½ miles to the south-east on Warden Hill, may be a pre-Roman territorial boundary running east to west.

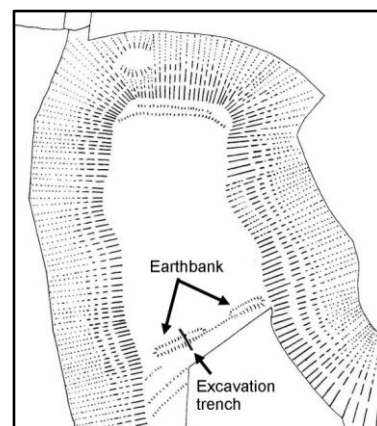


Figure 2: The 1979 excavation site.



Figure 3: Remains of the excavation site from the south.

The excavation found only fleeting evidence of Iron Age activity on the site, little to suggest Iron Age people were there in sufficient density to constitute a settlement. The site may have had some relevance as hill grazing in the summer months, with perhaps suitable enclosures to support this, but no evidence to suggest an Iron Age hill-fort.

4 THE 2014 REVIEW OF THE SITE

4.1 On the ground

The Clappers was examined by Pauline Hey and Nigel Wilson on the morning of 28 July 2014. The aim of their review was to identify any features which might confirm The Clappers as an Iron Age fort or settlement. A copy of the 1979 map (figure 1) was used to assess the site. This shows the position of the excavation trench.

A deep gully cuts across the neck of the promontory. This may be a natural feature rather than the product of any ancient digging. It falls extensively to the east mirroring the fall of ground on The Clappers itself. On the northern slope of this gully there is a substantial bank which peters out to the east but the excavation found this to be largely a medieval rabbit warren. The site of the excavation is apparent and can be readily identified by the stump of the tree they had to have cut down (see Figure 3).

Beech trees have become established along the top of this embankment and their shallow root systems have added to its height. Extensive root systems are a distinctive feature of the site.

Above the embankment the ground to the west levels off but there is a gradual decline to the east side of the promontory. The extensive woodland obscures any habitation platforms that might exist but the undulating nature of what can be seen suggests that nothing significant of that nature ever existed.

During a perambulation of The Clappers paths were noted along the sides of the hill, suggesting ditches filled with slipped soil, but these were slight and could just have easily been the product of erosion, sheep-walks and recent public activity.



Figure 4: The earthbank seen from the west.



Figure 5: The World War I Monument, with the excavation site in the background.

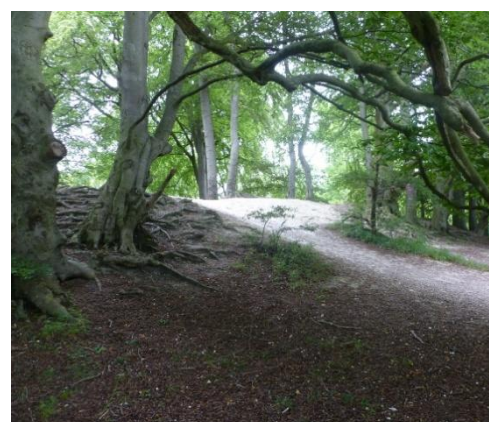


Figure 6: The earthbank from the south.

Beech trees had been planted right up to the edge of the hill-top, their root systems forming their own embankments. There was no evidence whatsoever of the wood-banks which are traditional to the region.

There was no defined enclosed area other than the rabbit warren. There is also no evidence today of rabbit activity. This suggests that the soil, being undisturbed chalk, is too hard for animals to burrow. The presence of ancient drainage ditches, given that there is no water supply, suggests that at times of heavy rain the soil becomes quickly waterlogged, with extensive water run-off.

4.2 Documentary record

A lantern slide of The Clappers² drawn between 1815 and 1820 from the north shows no flattening at the top or ditches with ramparts cut into the sides (see Figure 7).

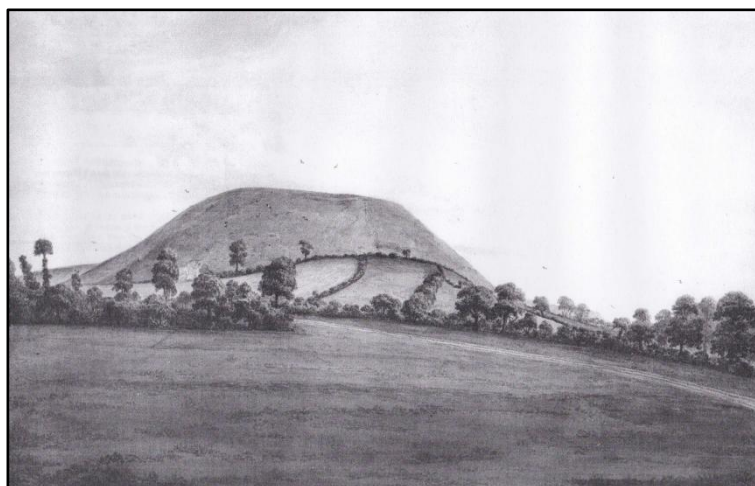


Figure 7: An early 19th-century view of Sharpenhoe Clappers.

4.3 Conclusions from the 2014 assessment

The extensive and often dense vegetation across the site prevents a clear analysis. However the 1820 lantern slide (see Figure 7), which shows a hilltop bare without trees or scrub, does not suggest any prehistoric fortification.

There is no evidence of ditches and embankments cut into the sides of the hill. There is no evidence that a wood bank ever existed, though at the edge of the hill-top beech-tree root systems have created a semblance of such a bank. The extensive spread of some beech root systems (see Figure 8) suggest very shallow soils across the hill-top to the west although soils might be deeper on the east where the vegetation is dense.



Figure 8: Extensive shallow root systems.

The hill-top undulates significantly with little evidence of settlement platforms. The neighbouring hill-top to the south is more suitable as a defensive habitation site than the promontory itself. None of the characteristics identified as features of an Iron Age hill-fort – enclosing features such as ramparts, ditches, banks and entrances, a prominent position in the local landscape, and an internal enclosure - apply to The Clappers.

Finally the 1979 excavation identified the embankment as a medieval rabbit warren with slight evidence of Iron Age and later habitation in the original soil level. The fact that some archaeological evidence suggests an Iron Age embankment might be reassuring, but no surface evidence can be found to qualify The Clappers as an Iron Age fort.

REFERENCES

1. Brian Dix, 'An Excavation at Sharpenhoe Clappers, Streatley, Bedfordshire', in *Journal of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council*, Number 16 (1983).
2. Thomas Fisher Slide 120 (circa 1815 to 1820) in the archives of the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service in Bedford, reproduced in Stephen Coleman, *Streatley with Sharpenhoe* (Bedford County Planning Department Conservation Section, 1987).

APPENDIX:

The 1979 Excavation: Notes on the report by Brian Dix

Wooded area defined on the south side by earthwork approximately 33 metres long by 6-8 metres wide.

Undulating bank begins 36 metres to the west to the other side of the promontory where it dips down the hillside. This is between 0.7 and 2 metres tall and between 10 and 13 metres wide. The total length is 58 metres with a wide hollowed area visible in places to the south.

An excavation trench was dug across the western end of the embankment on the south side 20.3 metres from the eastern end of the bank. A cutting 26.3 metres long and 3 metres wide was made.

The bank stood 1.6 metres high where excavated. There was modern soil creep down the slope. There were also tree roots and rabbit holes in abundance. The bank comprised layers of soil and chalk rubble containing medieval pottery shards resting on an original surface of buried soil with both Romano-British and Iron Age fragments of pottery. This old surface was covered to the breadth of 12 metres. Some of the chalk deposits had been quarried from the southern edge of the embankment. The northern side of the bank had been revetted by timber posts which were later removed after the construction. Remains of a post and rail fence was found along the top of the embankment. Two trenches parallel with each other had been dug at right angles to the direction of the slope. These are 1.5 metres across, flat bottomed 0.8 metres wide and between 1.2 and 1.3 metres deep. These are outside the area defined by the rabbit warren and may have been dug for drainage purposes.

Another trench was identified on a different alignment to the presumed drainage channels. This possessed a U-shaped profile half a metre deep. Some early Iron Age pottery was found in the infill. Large post-holes were identified in this ditch suggesting that heavy timber had been removed.

A pit of possible Iron Age origin approximately 4.5 metres wide was identified some 3 metres south of the palisade trench. Iron Age pottery was found in the infill.

The Conclusions of the Excavation

The embankment is of medieval or later date.

This sealed some deposits of Romano-British origin.

A palisade trench beneath the old soil level contained Iron Age pottery.

To one side of the palisade trench were two large post pits which seem to have held massive timbers. This was possibly a ceremonial gateway between 4 and 5 metres in width. The surrounding soils were sufficiently disturbed to prevent an accurate geophysical assessment. The suggestion is

that a ditch extended to the east from next to the bank but not aligned with it. There was no sign of any substantial ramparts along the entire 36-metre width of the promontory.

The entire embankment is of a similar and single build covering some previous features.

The name origin of The Clappers lies in the Middle English word `clapere' meaning `warren'. Rabbits were a significant source of protein and fur from the twelfth century through to around the early seventeenth century when the opening of both North America and Siberia to the fur trade provided more varied, abundant and luxurious supplies.

There is strong evidence that for most of the last thousand years The Clappers functioned as a rabbit warren. An existing minor Iron Age earthwork had been adapted in the medieval period to create the warren. There is no evidence to suggest a developed Iron Age `camp' on this site but there is some substance to the suggestion for Iron Age settlement at this location.

Nigel Wilson / 31 July 2014