



Weston - Super - Mare
Local History Trail
No. 5 - Price 25p.

Weston Woods and Worlebury Camp



An artist's impression of a typical dwelling

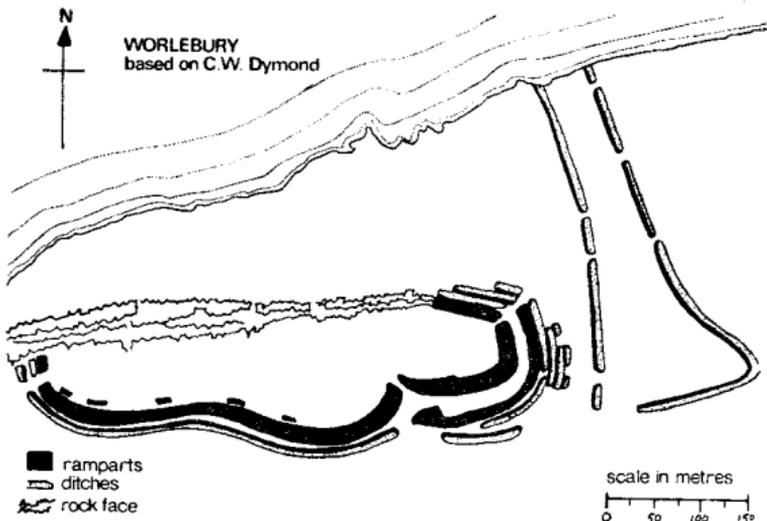
Worlebury had people living on it long before Weston-super-Mare existed. Today the fine woods make it difficult to appreciate the extensive views and plunging landfall which made the hill so valuable to prehistoric man as a defensive site. With the building of the hilltop fortifications during the Iron Age, Worlebury became the most westerly of a string of forts stretching along the north edge of the Mendip Hills, its size (10½ acres) second only to that of Dolebury (18 acres). While the woods, the work of man in more recent times, make the prehistoric character of the site more difficult to interpret, they give an air of charm and mystery to the hill which is lacking on the bare slopes of Brean Down or Sand Point.

Worlebury Hill, stretching east for 2½ miles from the village of Worle to the Bristol Channel, is almost an island in the surrounding flatlands, a hill of carboniferous limestone separated from the main mass of Mendip. Limestone is a sedimentary rock, formed millions of years ago as part of the sea bed by the deposition of countless fossils of early

marine creatures. Later changes of sea level exposed the limestone of the Mendip Hills, and the shifting of other nearby rock masses forced the limestone layers, originally horizontal, into ridges and dips. The middle of the layer nearest the coast (where Weston is today) sank, and was covered by a deep layer of mud and clay; the edges of the coastal layer rose, forming Worlebury and Brean Down. The gentle north slope of Brean Down and south slope of Worlebury were originally part of the horizontal limestone layer, while the steep south slope of Brean Down and north slope of Worlebury were its vertical edges. To the south and east of Worlebury the limestone, which is grey and pink, with many overtones of colour due to the presence of minerals, merges into the pinkish Dolomitic Conglomerate. Lead, calamine, iron ore and other minerals are present in both kinds of rock, and have been mined at various times in the past. Numerous springs, some with medical properties due to the presence of minerals, formerly emerged around the lower slopes of the permeable limestone mass. Caves, also characteristic of limestone formations, can be seen on the hill, and are often revealed by quarrying: these sometimes yield exciting evidence of life during the last Ice Age. Teeth and bones of mammoth, woolly rhinoceros and giant Irish Deer have all been found.

Melting of the giant ice-sheets about 10,000 years ago caused the sea level to rise, cutting a new shoreline about 25 ft above the present one. No evidence of human activity at the end of the Ice Age (the period known in human terms as the Middle Stone Age) has been found on the hill. The people of that time were fishermen and hunters in the marshes, and would have preferred low-lying land. Sea level had by then sunk once more to below the modern level, so much of Weston Bay would have been exposed.

During the New Stone Age, from 3000 BC, the hillslopes were a favoured place of occupation. Flints have been picked up, including the fine leaf-shaped arrowheads shaped by men of the New Stone Age, and also stone axes, one from Cornwall. Finds dating from the Bronze Age (1800-550 BC) include several barbed arrowheads, and bronze spears and axes, mainly from the Worle end of the hill. Bronze Age burial urns have been dug up, appropriately, in Ashcombe Cemetery.

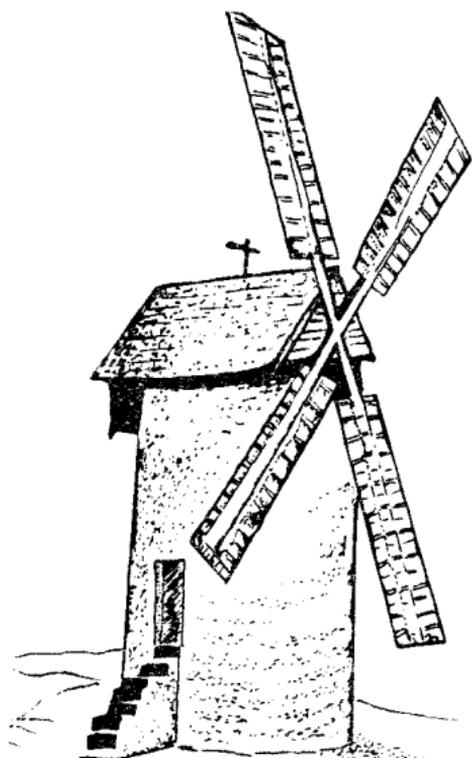


The hill top came into its own with the dawning of the Iron Age (about 550 BC). The Early Iron Age was a comparatively peaceful era which saw many small scale wanderings by the different tribes which occupied Britain. The development of arable and pastoral farming had made possible a settled way of life, in orderly and permanent communities, unlike the life of nomadic hunters. A tribe of settlers, sailing up the Bristol Channel, would have appreciated the promontory of Worlebury for its strategic position: the easily defended hill top with its panoramic views protected many fertile acres on the lower slopes. The seaward tip was settled first, and the early colonists would have needed only fences to keep out marauding wolves. The great stone ramparts of the hillfort which survive in ruins today were built some time after 300 BC during the warlike Late Iron Age, a bloodthirsty era which has left many beautifully decorated swords and other weapons of war to be discovered by archaeologists. The new ramparts enclosed more of the hill top, a total of over 10 acres. The vulnerable eastern end of the hillfort was extended in a narrow tongue to leave room for a second outer defence wall built around three sides. The inhabitants of the fort were members of the Dobunni tribe which occupied the Avon area, and whose centre was near Gloucester. Shortly before the Roman invasion of 43 AD the tribe was split by political disagreement, and the southern half, under a chief whose name appears as CORIO on his coins, continued to oppose Rome.

Life in the hillfort came to an abrupt and violent end in the first century AD, perhaps at the hands of Roman invaders who reached this area then. Bodies have been discovered flung hastily into pits after being severely wounded, one skull having seven sword cuts. After this the hill top was deserted for a time, while the Romano-British population lived on the lower slopes, in the area now occupied by Park Place, Royal Crescent and the Technical College. Pottery and coins have also been found in Roslyn Avenue, Milton. Finds from the hillfort, including fragments of bronze and beads, suggest that there may have been a shrine here, as was customary on hill tops. But from 340-390 AD the main religious observances would probably have taken place at the temple on Brean Down.

The gradual abandonment of Britain by the Romans led, during the fourth and fifth centuries, to troubled times. A hoard of Roman coins buried on the hill in the fifth century was never reclaimed by its owner. Hillforts were often re-occupied and re-fortified at the end of the Roman era, but it is not known if this was the case here. The ensuing 'Dark Ages' have left little evidence for archaeologists. The Rev. Skinner, writing in 1826, describes an earth work of unknown date at the top of Monks Steps (an ancient stairway of more than 200 stone steps linking Kewstoke Church with Kewstoke's subsidiary hamlet of Milton, and now owned by the National Trust). A chamber 19 ft by 12 ft, with sides faced with well-built masonry and almost entirely underground, was discovered here during the last century. It was believed then to have been the cell of the legendary local hermit St. Kew; its real origin is still unknown and finds in it include a 'Saxon knife, fifteenth century spur and sword-hilt of the Great Civil War'. Little else is known of the Saxons, who had settled in this area in the sixth and

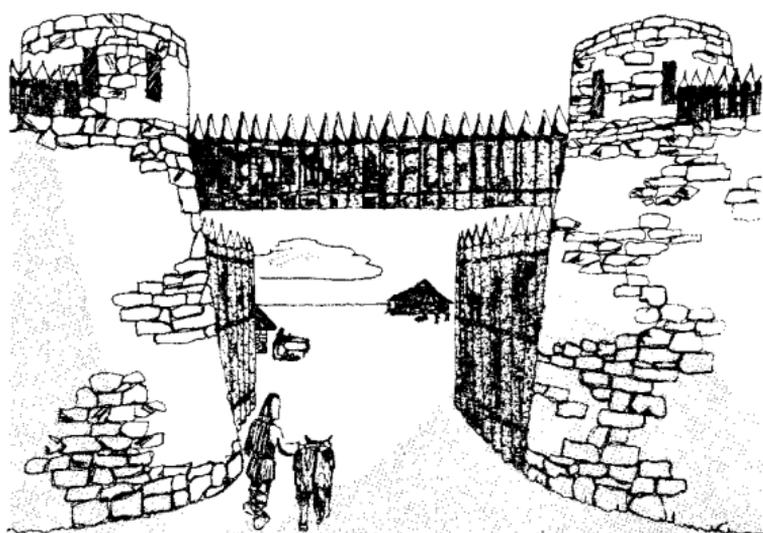
seventh centuries, although the three main villages on the hill's lower slopes, Weston, Worle and Kewstoke, are thought to be of Saxon origin. All three have churches containing architectural features dating between 1120 and 1150, soon after the Norman Conquest (see the guides available in each church for details).



Worle Mill

In medieval times the hill was common land divided between the parishes just named. Activity during this period was concentrated at the landward end of the hill, and great quantities of medieval pottery have recently been found in Ebdon Road, Worle. The establishment of Woodspring Priory in 1210 at Middle Hope, across the Sand Bay marshes, confirmed the importance of Worle and the routes running through it. Ancient paths converge at the windmill on the hill top above Worle, suggesting that this may be a traditional mill site; a mill is first mentioned here in 1760 and the present building was a working mill until the 1870s.

The east end of Worle Hill achieved national importance in 1566 when the first discoveries in Britain of calamine (a zinc ore) were made here by German prospectors on land belonging to Sir Henry Wallop. Mining rights were leased by the new Society of Mineral and Battery Works, which



An artist's impression of the main gateway

'set Tenne or Twelve persons straungers and Englishe on worke to moyne and search for Calamine, which the Countrymen ther do reporte, and gott 20: or 30: tonnes of the said stone.' The ore was found in veins up to 3 ft thick, and the 'gruffy ground,' the landscape created by lead and calamine mining, still covers large areas of the hill, chiefly above Milton and near Worlebury Camp. Calamine was required to blend with copper in order to produce brass, an alloy which was increasingly in demand in sixteenth century England for both military and industrial purposes. In 1565 the Society of Mineral and Battery Works was granted rights to mine calamine and manufacture brass and brass wire by new methods (in fact their skills had been learnt in Germany, then the acknowledged centre of European metal working).

The company thought of establishing its brass foundry in Bristol, but difficulties there led them to seek a site elsewhere. They eventually began work at Tintern Abbey on the River Wye, where calamine from Worlebury was taken by water. It seems that the production of brass was still only experimental, and did not proceed well. In 1582 the company leased its rights to four partners who included John Brode, a London goldsmith, and work recommenced at a new brass-mill at Isleworth in Middlesex. The Worlebury mines seems to have been reopened, and we read that 'the oar, or earth . . . is brought out of Somerset shire from Mendip hills, the most from Worley hill.' Other Mendip mines were developed. Broadfield Down above Wrington was a major source in the seventeenth century, and deposits on the main Mendip range began to be worked at the same time. But the Worlebury mines seem to have worked into the last century, at least intermittently, and John Rutter speaks of them as if they are still in operation in 1829.

We gain few glimpses of the everyday activities such as furze-cutting (to collect bedding for animals) and grazing stock, so important to the local fishermen, farmers, shepherds and miners. Large rectangular mounds of earth found on the site of the Prince Consort Gardens may have been 'pillow mounds' — artificial warrens for rabbit breeding. Fishing was the main occupation, with fine catches of salmon stranded by the tide in nets slung between stakes along the causeway to Birnbeck Island. Picwinner Cairn, to the west of the Water Tower on the hill top, is an interesting survival associated with the fishermen: tradition records that fishermen crossing the hill on their way to Birnbeck would throw a stone onto this cairn for luck as they passed, while chanting:

Picwinner, Picwinner
Pick me me a good dinner.

The cairn may have been the base for a signal beacon at one time, although some suggest that it commemorates St. Winna, Bishop of Wessex in 660 AD.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the attention of the fashionable world was turned towards such watering places as Weston-super-Mare, and Worlebury received its fair share of Romantics and antiquarian clergymen. George Bennett, with the Romantic over-enthusiasm of the times, wrote in 1804: 'from the great height of this encampment, the sea and the circumjacent country, for many miles,

appear to the eye of the spectator as in a map; and the **tout ensemble** is at once wild, grand, awful, and terrific.' The historian Collinson, George Cumberland, and the Rev. Skinner all made their contributions to research during the period of the Napoleonic Wars, and in the succeeding years of the nineteenth century countless sketchers and painters followed in their footsteps to revel in the atmosphere of this picturesque location. The true interest and importance of the hill's ancient remains were first fully recognised by Weston's Victorian visitors.

The Lord of the Manor, John Pigott, began a process of enhancing this romantic hillside when he moved to enclose all the common lands of the village between 1810 and 1815, to release land for building and to rationalise local farming. In 1812 all the stock, including at least 1000 sheep, was driven off the hill, which was enclosed with a wall. William Dalley of Bristol was given the tender to find, raise, and haul stone to build the wall, which was to be 5 ft 6 ins high, 2 ft wide at the base and 14 ins at the top; he was paid £1 5s. (125p) per rope, a rope being 20 ft, and 24 bushels of stone lime were used to each rope. Much of this wall can still be seen around the hill, with the distinctive 'hen and chicken' pattern of large and small stones along the top. The villagers were forbidden the use of their former common lands, and the hill became a game reserve for the Pigott family. Roads were set out as public rights of way, and the village school children were pressed into service a few years later to plant acorns all over the hill, the genesis of the present woods. It is said that the new Lord of the Manor, John Hugh Smyth-Pigott, got the idea of creating the woods after visiting the famous novelist Sir Walter Scott at his home at Abbotsford, during a tour of Scotland: Scott was an enthusiast for tree-planting and his eloquence converted his West Country visitor. Gate lodges housed gamekeepers to prevent poaching. They do not seem to have prevented the use of the hill by local smugglers who operated well into the middle of the century. The hill's valuable resources were still being exploited: lead was mined near Christchurch until 1845, and yellow ochre in Hazeldene Road until the 1920s. The woods were opened to the public later in the nineteenth century, when the Smyth-Pigotts were ceasing to live at Weston.

From the middle of the nineteenth century the two main threats to the hill have been quarrying and urban expansion. Limestone was a fashionable and popular building material, and immense quantities of stone and lime products were devoured by Weston and the other towns to which they were exported. As the limestone quarries ate into the hill, so the limestone houses advanced up its lower slopes. In the late 1850s mansions began to be built along the north side of a former woodland track, now South Road. Fortunately the Smyth-Pigotts resisted the temptation to exploit the potential of their desirable hillside to the full extent, and damage was largely contained until this century. In 1936 the Borough Council was offered 396 acres of the woods for £10,000 but declined the deal. A few months later the land was sold for £19,500 to a syndicate, which opened up the broad road from the east to the Water Tower, intending to build along its length. Finally the Council was shamed into buying under 300 acres for £22,500, together with a section of the Jackson-Barstow estate at Ashcombe. but building at

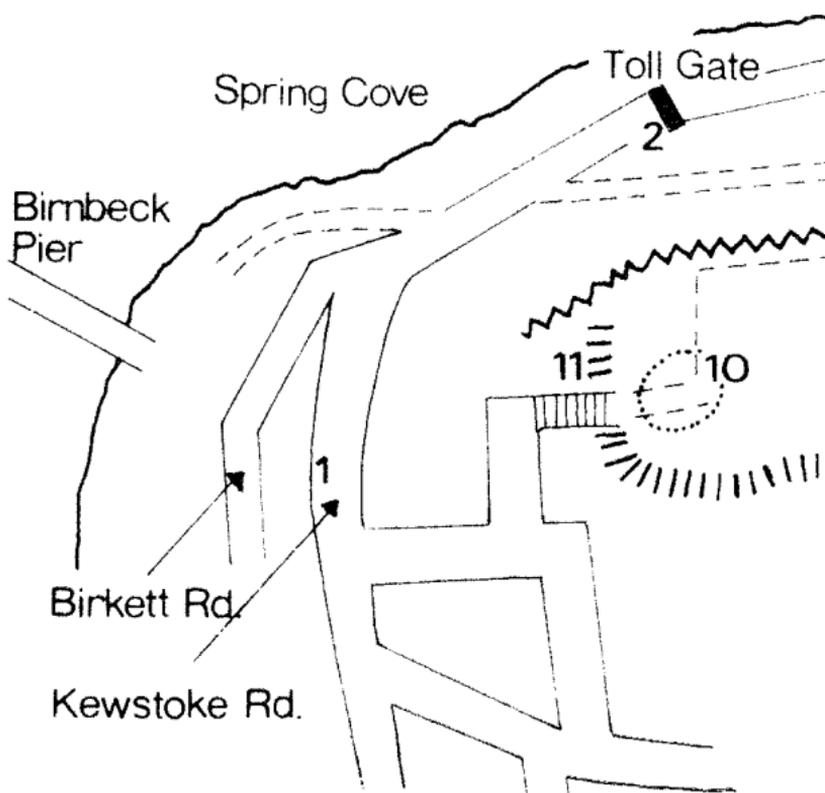
the hilltop suburb of Worlebury could not be halted, and the dwindling acreage of woodland has continued to be eroded ever since, while the east end of the hill has been eaten away by intensive quarrying.

THE TRAIL

The trail begins and ends above the Prince Consort Gardens in Kewstoke Road (Point 1) and takes approximately 1½ hours to complete. Reach the Gardens by taking 100 or 103 bus from any point along the sea front, or by 102 bus to South Road from the Railway Station or Plantation. Cars can be parked above the Gardens in Kewstoke Road or in the car park in nearby South Road. The route may be muddy and slippery underfoot in wet weather, and involves covering some rough ground, as well as climbing a steep hillslope. At certain of the Points in the trail there are waymarks inscribed LHT and the Point Number; these are fixed to trees at a height of about 6 ft, and are mentioned in this text.

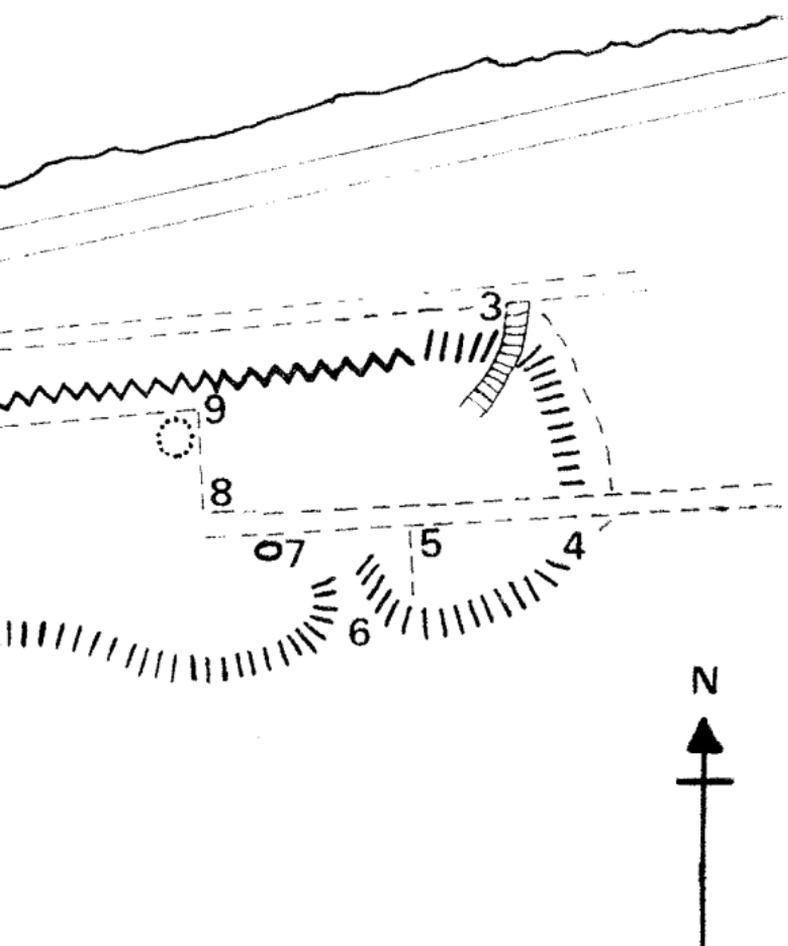
Walk north, with the Gardens on your left, and cross over the junction with Birkett Road. To seaward is Birnbeck Island, the main fishery of village Weston. The natural causeway joining it to the mainland is visible at low tide.

THE TRAIL



and this is where the nets were strung between stakes set along its length; the strong currents have claimed many lives. A 'gull-yeller' was paid to live in a hut on the island to shout his loudest and scare away sea gulls from the catch. In 1867 the island was also linked to the mainland by the magnificent pier, one of only a handful surviving that were built by Eugenius Birch (1818-1884), the doyen of pier builders during their golden age in Victorian England. The only pier in the country connecting an island to the mainland, this is also one of the least spoilt piers around our shores; one can still admire the system of girders and struts which Birch used between the upright columns to harness stress and tension and so create a stable structure. A seat runs along the length of the deck, incorporated into the main structure, and in the railing of its back is the pipe which supplied gas for the ornamental lamps along the deck. The buildings on the island include a magnificent dining hall of 1898, which replaced an earlier pavilion destroyed by fire. Steamers plied between here and other Bristol Channel ports, bringing thousands of visitors to Weston every summer, especially from the Welsh ports such as Cardiff, Barry and Newport. The last steamer called in 1979.

Walk on towards the beginning of the path running uphill into the woods on the right. Below you on the left is Spring Cove, the site of the Dripping Well Cavern, 'a



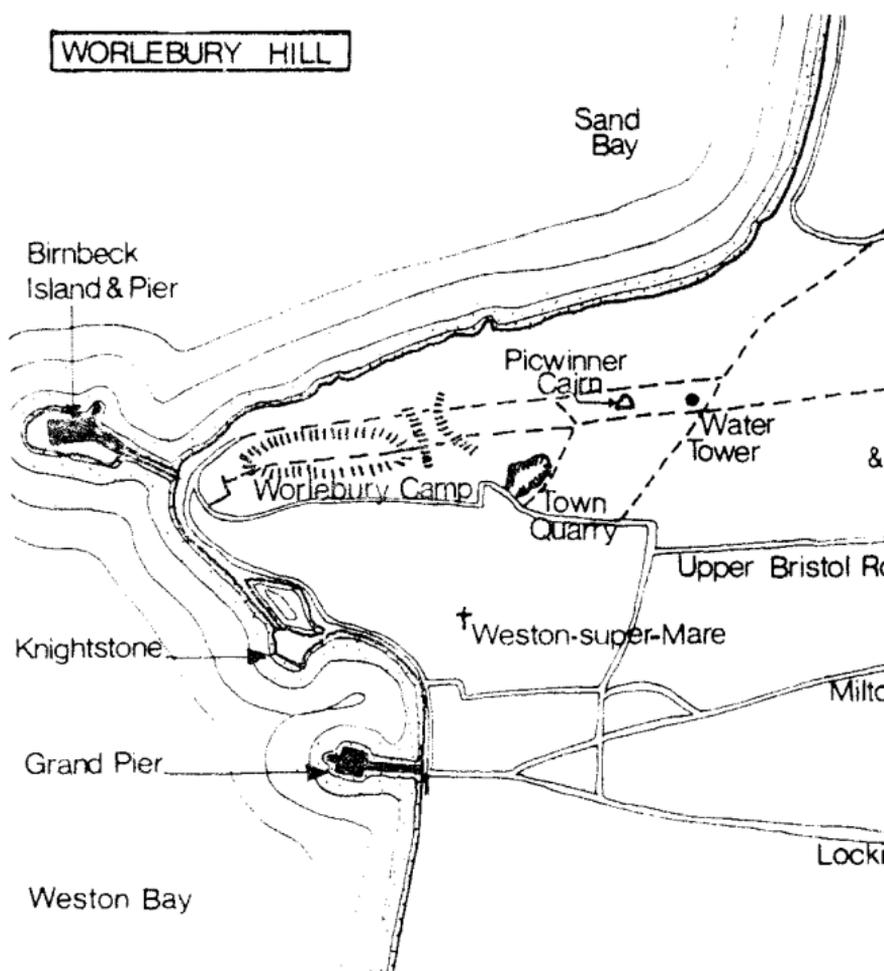
solemn place, high vaulted, with water pure and cold, dripping from the roof into a crystal pool below.' It was destroyed in a landslide in 1861. Springs such as this, seeping through the permeable limestone of the hill, provided the water supply in prehistoric times. The main road ahead is the Toll Road to Kewstoke, cut in 1848 along the line of an existing path on the instructions of John Hugh Smyth-Pigott to provide a scenic route. On the right of the road, in the angle between it and the path uphill (Point 2), is the site of one of the original gamekeeper's lodges; later in the last century, when the woods were fully opened to the public, this became a tea-garden, hence the layout of terraces, lawns, and battlements.

Walk up the path to the right into the woods. This is the fishermen's path which was used by men from the surrounding villages and hamlets to reach Birnbeck Island since medieval times. In the 1820s it was widened into a carriage road, and this is when the lodge was built at the seaward end. On your right a small cut was made into the rock, and the stone was used to bank up the path on the lower slope on the left. Above the path on the right can be seen the steep scarp slope which forms part of the natural defences of the fort. Near the bottom of the path on the left is some new building: it is a pity the ugly breeze-block walls have been allowed to spoil this otherwise charming path.

Walk on, and turn right and climb the steps marked 'Steps to Encampment.' Stop at the point where the steps turn to the right near the top (Point 3). The steps lead on through the original 11 ft wide north-east entrance to the fort, at the point where the towering ramparts joined the natural wall formed by the northern cliffs of the hill. The banks of loose stones you see above you would have been 15 ft high drystone walls, probably with wooden palisades on top, flanked by deep V-sectioned trenches.

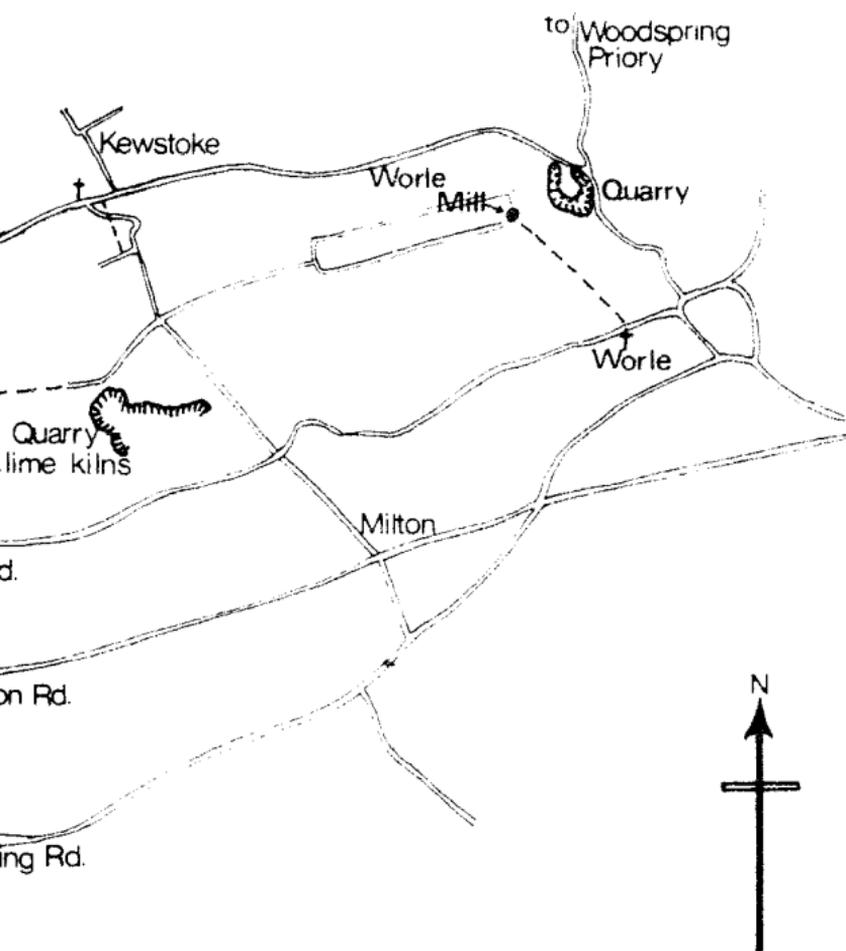
Leave the steps and follow the path running uphill to the left of the ramparts and ditches. Stop when you come to the main path on the top of the hill. The Iron Age people were efficient farmers, and a mixed farming economy could support a large population. A visitor in 1818, writing before the woods were planted, describes the entire southern slopes and top of the hill (including the area which is now the golf course) as being covered with the small fields characteristic of such a Celtic or Ancient British settlement. There was a large enclosure for livestock covering part of the north and top of the hill, the limits of which, in the form of banks and ditches, are still visible farther along the main path to the left. It seems probable that in peacetime only the local chief and his family occupied the fort; everyone else was scattered along the hillslopes (as pit burials above Grove Park and in Stafford Place, and burial urns found at Ashcombe Cemetery, confirm), although able to take refuge in the fort in time of trouble.

Turn right along the hill top path and walk into the fort. The break in the trees caused by the ramparts and ditches reveals fine views of Weston Bay and the River Axe to the left. This pathway is Victorian and there was no opening in the walls here in Iron Age times. Starting from the outside there were first four rock-cut ditches to deter horsemen and provide stone for the main ramparts. Then, inside, are the two main ramparts and ditches (Point 4). The stones are



easily handled singly, but in the mass they represent years of work for an enormous labour force. A great effort of imagination is needed to see the ramparts in their original form, as high and almost as well built as the walls of a medieval city, and manned by sentries looking down over the hill slopes. **Please remember that the hillfort is a scheduled Ancient Monument, and that it is an offence to disturb the ground in any way. The use of metal detectors is not allowed.**

Continue along the path. You now enter the Iron Age fort proper. Inside the ramparts is a comparatively level area which would, of course, have been treeless. This is the highest part of the fort and is often referred to in the excavation report as the 'annexe' or 'garrison,' being the most heavily defended section. Sheep and cattle were kept here at night, and herded through the gate in the morning to their pastures. The sheep were the small hardy Soay breed; the cattle, important for ploughing, were also small (*bos longifrons* type). There were also goats and pigs, and perhaps a few Exmoor ponies. In the distance beyond a ditch the thatched roofs of the round houses would have



been visible, together with other smaller buildings for livestock and the roofs of the granary pits.

Walk on approximately 100 yds until you reach a long ditch running away sharply to the left, indicated by a waymark saying 'LHT Point 5' on a tree to the left of the path just beyond a holly bush. This rock-cut ditch probably marks the eastern boundary of the original, smaller fort, before it was necessary for the fortifications to be extended.

Turn left and make your way along the ditch. Climb onto the stone ramparts at the end. The bend in the line of the walls to your right is the site of the original main entrance to the fort (Point 6), from which a path would have given access to farmland on the lower slopes and around the bay. The 13 ft wide gap is now blocked by the debris of the collapsed watch-towers which once flanked it. Great wooden gates manned by sentries in guard chambers would have closed the entrance in former times, and the towers would have housed watchmen and slingers. The development of the slingshot as a weapon made it easy to arm large numbers quickly: previously, with weapons only for hand-to-hand fighting, a massively fortified site such as a

hillfort would have been of little use, but with the slingshot an all-out attack could be resisted all the better from a fortified position. Beach pebbles were carefully selected for slingstones, and large quantities have been found in the fort.

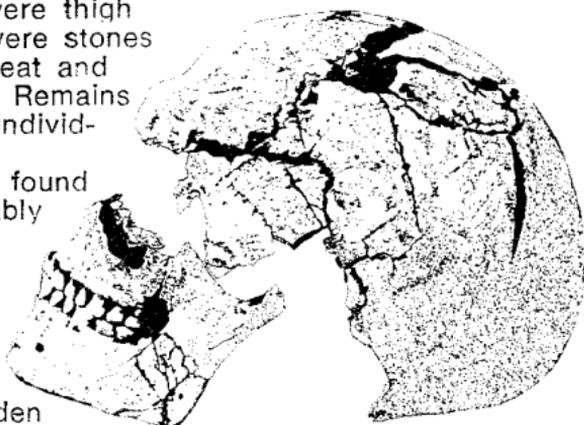
Retrace your steps along the ditch, rejoin the central path, and turn left. You now enter the area of the original small settlement on the western tip of the hilltop. The fort contains large numbers of pits cut into the rock. In 1851



Iron Age arrow head

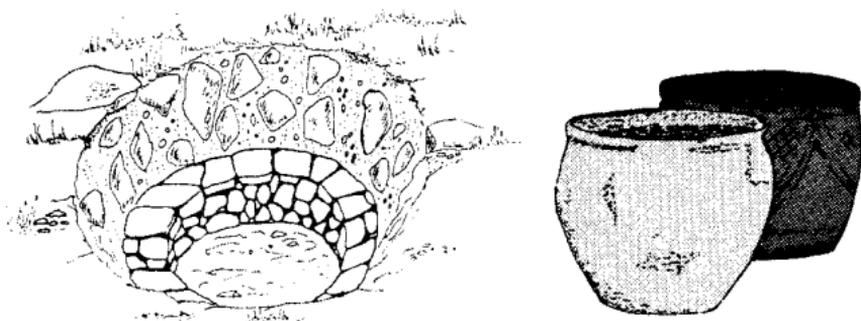
the Rev. Francis Warre started excavating and dug out more than eighty, most of which can still be seen among the later mine workings. The Iron Age pits are about 6 ft deep and 6 ft across, and squarish in shape following the natural joints of the rock. Sophisticated archaeological techniques were unknown in Warre's day, and his well-meaning excavations have made it impossible for modern archaeologists to recover vital evidence. Much of what is known about life in the fort has been conjectured from evidence provided by other sites. Most of the pits would have been used for storing grain. After a pit had been dug stones might be placed round its walls. When the pit had been filled with grain, the top was sealed with clay to make it airtight. Sometimes a wicker lining was placed around the sides, but experiments have shown that grain would keep well without this lining. Burnt wood fragments found in the excavations suggest that some of the 'pit-granaries' also had thatched roofs. These elaborate precautions to protect the grain indicate the importance of the harvest in a simple farming society. One of the Worlebury pits had a piece of wood placed as a divider to keep the wheat and barley separate.

Walk on approximately 50 yds to the pit indicated by another waymark fixed to a tree ('LHT Point 7'). This is the third pit from the cross-ditch on the left of the path, and is the only one on Warre's plan that can be definitely identified. It was partly lined with drystone masonry, and three skeletons were found in it, including one with a gashed skull and severe thigh wound. Underneath were stones and a quantity of wheat and barley at the bottom. Remains of at least eighteen individuals, some severely wounded, have been found flung into pits, probably after the last great attack on the fort. Other finds, which can be seen at Woodspring Museum, Weston, include pottery, worked wooden objects, worked flint, a bone comb, a decorated bone fragment (possibly from a bridle or a knife handle), a bronze ring, iron spear-heads and spiral rings, and a blue glass bead.



A skull with 7 sword cuts

Continue on the central path for approximately 50 yds and turn right down the smaller track indicated by a waymark on a tree to the right ('LHT Point 8'). Follow this zig-zag track until you reach the north side of the fort (Point 9). The track brings you to a convenient viewpoint from which to look out over Sand Bay. A dramatic and precipitous cliff-face forms the perfect natural defence along this whole side of the fort. pierced in places by landslides and water erosion. Turn left and follow the cliff-top path until you see a small grassy clearing and a bench through the trees to your left after 200 yds (Point 10). Enter the clearing. Other hillforts appear



A storage pit and cooking pots

to have been planned, with granaries and huts in orderly rows, but it is difficult to read any conscious plan in the random layout here. It is possible, however, that near here was the site of the chieftain's house. We have no certain information about types of houses from the excavations. It seems likely that they were round, and made of stone, timber, or 'wattle and daub' (walls of wickerwork made weatherproof with packed mud and dung). The ready availability of stone suggests stone walls, with timbers used to support a thatch roof. When George Cumberland mapped the fort in 1805 he plotted three large circles which he called 'foundations of building,' one about 50 ft in diameter. In 1829 John Rutter refers to 'several curious circles difficult to explain, about 28 or 30 ft in diameter . . . composed of separate stones, surrounded by a slight shallow excavation or ditch.' These circles can no longer be found, but the dotted circles on the plan indicate their approximate positions. If they were originally large circular huts, used as communal living accommodation, this would be consistent with other types of Celtic settlement. The interiors would be partitioned for sleeping, storage and working areas. In the



Jewellery, a toe ring and a knife handle

winter the men might be repairing the plough and making tools while the women spun wool and wove material for clothes. There would be a hearth and bread oven in the middle, and the small doorway was usually on the south-east side, allowing little light to enter. Although dim and smoky, such houses were waterproof and snug. In summer cooking was probably done out of doors. The daily chores of looking after the livestock, preparing food, and attending to the crops of wheat, barley, and Celtic Beans in due season — ploughing, planting, weeding, haymaking, reaping, and threshing — would take up most of the time. Yet time was found to build and maintain the great walls, no doubt a source of pride and the subject of competition among the chieftains, as well as a safeguard for their homes.

Turn right along the central path and walk to the top of the steps. Here is the west tip of the fort, with another fine seaview that reveals Steep and Flat Holms. This is the third and last of the original entrances to the fort (Point 11), and would have been used for descending to the beach, fetching fresh water, fishing, and gathering shellfish and slinostones. **Descend the steps to Camp Road and turn right to Prince Consort Gardens.** Within a few minutes you have left the Iron Age hillfort and are back in Victorian Weston.

Some of the finds excavated in the fort are displayed in the Woodspring Museum, Burlington Street, Weston-super-Mare, and are described in an illustrated brochure published by the Museum.

This Trail is published by the Arkwright Society, c/o Tawney House, Matlock, Derbyshire, and Weston Civic Society. Copies are obtainable from Weston Civic Society, c/o Mr. M. J. Taylor, 9 Albert Road, Weston-super-Mare, price 25p (plus suitable postage).

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- No. 3 THE TOWN CENTRE
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