Welcome to Burrough Hill Country Park. The Park is part of the Ernest Cook Trust’s Little Dalby Estate and has, since 1970, been leased and managed by Leicestershire County Council for the enjoyment of the public as an open countryside space. The Park is also the location of one of Leicestershire’s finest prehistoric monuments, Burrough Hill Iron Age hillfort. Dating is not certain, but the hillfort was probably established in the 5th century BC, on the end of a high promontory approximately 200m above sea level. The natural steep slopes were enhanced with high stone and earth ramparts up to 6m high in places, defining a large internal area of c.5ha. This self-guided circular walk will guide you around the hillfort and tell you what we know so far about its history and archaeology.

Walk from the car park, following the signposted farm track to the hillfort earthworks.

1. The Eastern Ramparts of the Hillfort

Once through the gate at the end of the track, take a moment to admire the formidable eastern ramparts. They are larger here because the eastern side of the hillfort is the least naturally defended (and they also incorporate the main entrance). Excavation has shown that the ramparts were built of stone quarried from the large ditch that lies in front of the hillfort. The frontage would originally have been of dry-stone construction.

The impressive earthworks were admired by intrigued antiquarians from at least the 16th century. In 1722 the hillfort features in one of William Stukeley’s famous landscape drawings. Between 1935 and 1971 a series of small-scale excavations took place, and a major programme of investigation by University of Leicester took place between 2010-2014, all leading to our current understanding of life at the hillfort.

Location: Burrough Hill Country Park, Somerby Road, Burrough on the Hill, LE14 2QZ
Walk length: 1.2 miles / 1.9 km
Gradient: Moderate, farm track from Car Park and pasture inside the hillfort (the route can be muddy, so appropriate footwear is advised)
Parking: Yes, car park accessed from Somerby Road, toilets available, £2.50 charge.
NB: The Country Park is a working farm, please remember to close all gates.

Above: The main entrance to the hillfort today and what it might have looked like in the Iron Age. Artwork: Mike Codd
Follow the raised causeway to the main hillfort entrance.

2. The Main Entrance to the Hillfort

The main entrance was a cobbled-floored passageway created by an inward turn of the defences' drystone walls. Passage into the hillfort was also secured with massive wooden gates – now represented only by a set of large post holes at the inner end of the corridor – while a recessed chamber opening off of the passage may have functioned as a guard chamber. Such spaces have also been identified at hillforts in the Welsh Marches and in the Cotswolds, and as they often occur in pairs it seems likely that a second chamber also exists at Burrough Hill, waiting to be discovered on the unexcavated side of the main entrance.

The gateway was remodelled at least three times during the hillfort’s lifetime, each change serving to further monumentalise the approach to the site. Originally the entrance was a much simpler affair, probably an opening in the ramparts barred by a timber gate. The significant ‘saddle’ shape that can still be seen in the entrance earthworks suggest that the present inward turned gateway was built against the earlier structure, probably sometime between 370 and 230 BC. The corridor was later lengthened and the rampart widened to allow the construction of the ‘guard chamber’. These expanded ramparts were built on a framework of large boulders used to demarcate bays that were then filled with clay-bonded rubble and faced with drystone walling.

From the main entrance, follow the ramparts along the southern edge of the hillfort.

3. The Southern Ramparts

The southern ramparts are not as prominent, and have been subject to erosion and slippage over time, but they would probably not have been as high as those on the eastern side. The hillfort builders made use of the natural steep slopes to do much of the defensive work on the southern, western and northern sides. The defences on these sides of the hillfort also made use of a counterscarp bank (the shallow ditch & bank outside the ramparts), and the entire circuit may also have been topped with a timber palisade.

Continue along the rampart to the south-west corner and the Toposcope.

4. The Toposcope and the South-West Entrance

The south-west corner of the hillfort offers dramatic views across the local landscape and gives a sense of the commanding location that it occupies. On a clear day views across the landscape include Leicester to the west, Melton Mowbray to the north and the hills of Robin-a-Tiptoe and Billesdon Coplow to the south.

This corner of the hillfort was also the location of its second entrance. This gateway would have granted useful access to the natural springs that lie below the western side of the hill on which the monument sits. This must have been an original feature for the hillfort design, however excavations here showed that at some point during the Iron Age, the gap was blocked by a well-built drystone wall, reinforced with layers of earth and rubble. The similarity in building technique used for this blocking and the construction of walls of the entrance passage is striking. Could it be that this destructive act was carried out in parallel with the main gateway being monumentalised? And if so, why?
**Turning to face into the hillfort. You are now looking over one of the former excavation trenches**

### 5. Early Activity and Iron Age Rituals

Excavation in the south-west corner of the hillfort produced some remarkable archaeology relating to the hilltop’s earliest occupants. Human activity at Burrough Hill stretches back long before the construction of the hillfort. Concentrations of worked flints indicate that people used the promontory from at least the Mesolithic, when its high vantage point would have been invaluable to hunter-gatherers scouting for prey in the surrounding landscape.

By the late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age (c.2800 BC – 1500 BC) more permanent settlement had sprung up on the western edge of the promontory, focussed on a C-shaped enclosure which measured c.10m in diameter. In its entrance was a squared shallow feature cut into the bedrock – probably the footprint of a small structure – from which flint scrapers, an arrowhead, and flint-knapping debris were recovered. Towards the back of the enclosure was a small pit containing sherds of at least three beautifully decorated Beaker pots – similar fragments were also found in the enclosure ditch, hinting at broadly contemporary activity.

Iron Age activity here consisted of a large roundhouse and a scatter of associated pits that produced evidence of ritualised activity. One of the pits contained a fascinating group of domestic items and refuse, including pottery, bone, hearth waste, the remains of a dismantled clay oven, complete loom weights, and a virtually complete, but deliberately smashed rotary quern. Similar pieces of quernstone were also found in a layer blocking off the entrance of a neighbouring roundhouse, perhaps hinting at a ritual ‘closure’ of the building, which seems to have involved the removal, breakage, and disposal of its domestic trappings.

Another pit contained a deliberately buried group of bronze chariot fittings – by far the most dramatic example of a seemingly ritual deposit that we came across at the hillfort. The items were beautifully decorated with matching raised triskele motifs, and ‘lipped’ ornamentation on the terret rings (guiding rings for reins) that further hints of wide-reaching trade contacts, as stylistically similar items are also known from a series of late 3rd or early 2nd century ‘Arras Culture’ burials excavated in East Yorkshire. The chariot-fittings also provide compelling evidence that at least some of the site’s inhabitants were of sufficiently high social status to have access to such prestigious possessions. Yet despite the valuable archaeological evidence they supply, the reason or reasons for their burial remains unclear.
Walk a short distance along the western rampart until you reach a break in the bank.

6. Craftworking and gaming

Just inside the rampart at this point another roundhouse and pits were investigated that provided information on daily life at the hillfort. The roundhouse (similar to the one in the illustration) was another large structure with a burnt area in the probably indicating the location of its hearth. It had several nearby pits, all of which produced different artefacts. One produced an impressive range of iron objects, including a spearhead, two knives, hooks, and other tools, all of which had apparently entered the pit in a perfectly usable condition. Others produced evidence for different craft activities including metalworking, spinning and weaving, all hinting that the roundhouse occupants were largely self-sufficient.

Rare evidence for social aspects of Iron Age life were also found here: dice and gaming counters, which are very unusual discoveries for the region.

Walk into the northern interior of the hillfort, taking a short stop near the 1967 excavations

7. Excavating Pits (1967)

On a clear day, when the grass is low the marks of the 1967 excavation can still be seen in this approximate spot. The excavations were dug as 3ft square boxes known as the Mortimer Wheeler Box-Grid System, after the famous archaeologist who pioneered the method. Today, the boxes can be seen as slight depressions in the ground, and the grid-like shape of the excavation can be made out.

Continue northwards towards the break in the northern rampart

8. Investigating the Northern rampart (1971)

This break in the rampart was the location of an investigation in 1971 that cut a cross section through the bank and excavated part of the interior. This area was revisited in 2010, and an Iron Age roundhouse was uncovered, as well as multiple dumped layers containing Roman pottery, bone and other artefacts. It seems likely that this may have represented a midden area for Roman period occupation that was located in and around the northern part of the hillfort between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD.

Above: Two complete rotary quernstones discovered during pit excavations in the 1960s. Image: ULAS

Above: Reconstructed Iron Age Roundhouse similar to the ones that would have been occupied at Burrough Hill.

Below: Iron tools, including a sickle, part of a cauldron hanger and a spear head, clay loom weights, bone gaming pieces and a die. Images: ULAS.
Walking into the north east corner of the hillfort you will be heading towards an excavation area that produced distinctive evidence for the later occupation of the hillfort.

9. Late Iron Age and Roman Occupation

Further clues to human activity continuing at the hillfort into the Roman period came with closer examination of the roundhouses: while most of the buildings were of apparently mid-late Iron Age date (c.450 BC-AD 50), and showed every sign of being left undisturbed after their abandonment, excavations in the north east corner of the settlement told a very different story. Here we found evidence of much more intense and long-lived occupation, with multiple overlapping sequences of roundhouses, some of which appear to date from the later 1st century BC to mid-1st century AD.

The biggest surprise from this trench, however, was the discovery of a series of 3rd-4th century AD wall fragments. Although badly damaged by medieval ploughing, making it difficult to determine exactly what they once belonged to, the masonry seemed to have been part of a late Roman farm. Roman farmers may have also made use of the remains of the roundhouses and enclosures lying in the ditched annexe to the east of the hillfort. Probably dating to the Middle-Late Iron Age, the settlement is particularly interesting in the way that all of its buildings seem to have faced the same way, with their entrances facing northeast, and none of their footprints overlapping.

Although dating analysis is still on-going, it is tempting to wonder if these dwellings were only occupied for a short time during the life of the hillfort. But while none of the buildings seem to have been inhabited by the time of the Roman conquest, the large quantities of Roman pottery fragments recovered from the enclosure ditches suggests that the settlement may have ended its days as a centre for stock management.

Continue along eastern interior and out through the large break near the tree on the rampart.

10. The extramural settlement

As you walk over the pronounced ridge and furrow field you will also be passing over the remains of a settlement that existed outside the hillfort. Remains of two roundhouses and a small ditched enclosure were excavated here, all of which were revealed by geophysical survey as part of a large extra-mural settlement to the east of the hillfort.

The roundhouses were represented by circular eaves-drip gullies which would have helped define the building and help to keep water from the walls. Gaps in the circle indicate the buildings had north-east facing entrances. Both buildings produced assemblages of pottery, daub and animal bone; remains left behind by the Iron Age occupants. Various smaller gullies lay close to the roundhouses and were probably the remains of short fences or extra drainage features.

The small enclosure proved to be a two-phased structure, which also had a north east facing entrance. Dating evidence showed that it probably had Iron Age origins but the later phase of the enclosure’s use contained Roman pottery suggesting a Late Iron Age or Early Roman date for its demise. Roman pottery and a 3rd century coin were found in a ditch that formed part of a large enclosure to the north of the roundhouses. It seems that occupation outside the hillfort lasted for a long period of time, with at least some of it being contemporary with occupation inside the hillfort.

A scatter of pits lay adjacent to the roundhouses and were probably originally used to store grain. One of the pits still had a partial clay lining and contained preserved cereal grains. Others contained evidence of activities that were carried out nearby; Iron Age pottery and animal bone, a near complete quernstone, a spearhead and metalworking waste were all found in the pit fills.

Top: The excavation area in the north east corner of the hillfort, with the Roman wall footings running down the centre of the area.
Above: Left, excavating the Roman wall footing; right, excavating a Roman corn-drier
Below: Excavation of the extramural settlement looking towards the hillfort entrance. Images: ULAS.

Carry on to the gate and your walk is complete – we hope you enjoyed it and learnt more about the hillfort on the way!

If you would like to find out more, please visit:
https://ulasnews.com/tag/burrough-hill/
https://www.leicscountryparks.org.uk/burrough-hill-country-park/