



Ancient settlements

After spending much of her childhood exploring hill forts with her father, SUE CADE checks out some of the ancient encampments that can be visited in Devon.

My father was an outdoor type with a keen sense of history. Our weekend family walks usually took in churches, castles, reservoirs – and hill forts. Dad loved a good hill fort and it seems to have rubbed off on his offspring.

When I moved to Devon, I found I'd inadvertently chosen to live close to several hill forts, the nearest being Hembury Fort. I've spent many happy hours at the fort; walking three generations of dogs, marching the ramparts whilst in labour with my

ABOVE:
Blackbury Camp is covered by bluebells in May

first-born, and later taking the children for rambles; it's amazing how much creative play giant beech trees and mossy ramparts can inspire.

Interestingly, the term 'hill fort' has now been pronounced as misleading. Rather than being places of defence or combat, many were just communal gathering places. Some are not even on a hill – so do your homework before visiting if you're hoping for views. Most remain unspoilt and many can be visited, with or without your four-legged friend.

SEA VIEWS

A well-loved, much visited Iron Age hill fort on Woodbury Common, Woodbury Castle is deemed a military earthwork and offers views across Lyme Bay and towards the Exe Estuary.

The fort, which had been on Historic England's 'at risk' register, has recently been restored by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust.

There's a parking area right next to it, from where you can also access paths across Woodbury Common, a dog-walker's heaven.

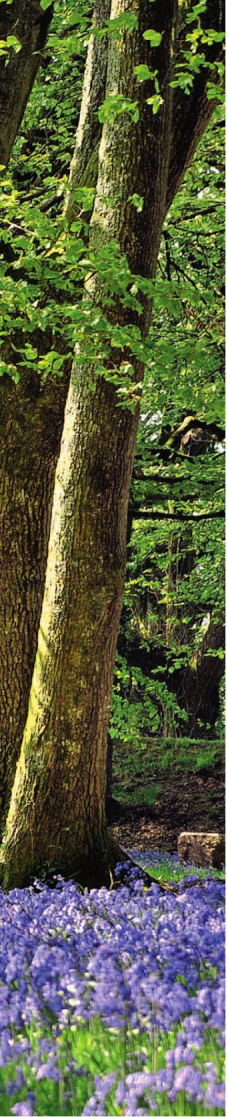


Photo: Alex Walton

ROCKY REMOTENESS

Dewerstone sits on a rocky outcrop on the South West edge of Dartmoor. This Iron Age hill fort has ramparts to the northern side and overlooks the River Plym. Dewerstone is etched in Dartmoor myths and legends; Dewer means ‘Devil’ and this is where the Devil, astride a giant black horse, gallops with his pack of black hounds and drives weary travellers to their death over the Dewerstone. If you’re visiting, make sure you leave before it gets dark.

NEOLITHIC CEREMONIES

Hembury Fort, just off the A373 above Honiton, dates back to the Neolithic period, and was either a settlement or a centre for ceremonial purposes. The circuit of defences indicate it was also used as a fort and there is evidence that the Roman army was based there in the 1st century AD. There is a limited public footpath, but a newly erected information sign indicates that visitors are welcome to walk around the site. Hembury means ‘high’, and the views from the top towards Dartmoor are stunning.

RIVER DART AND UPWARDS

Another Hembury, this one is not far from Buckfast, located on a promontory between the River Dart and the Holy Brook. An impressive earthwork, Hembury Castle was initially an Iron Age hill fort, with a Norman motte and bailey added later.

BELOW: Woodbury Castle has great views



Photo: Jake Newman

FORT FACTS

- 89 hill forts can be found in Devon
- The majority of hill forts are Iron Age, though some were constructed in the Bronze Age
- Some hill forts had underground caves to store and preserve food
- Agricultural animals were often kept within the walls for protection
- There are two Cadbury Castles; one in Devon, one in Somerset
- Hill fort inhabitants generally lived in wooden houses with straw roofs
- The largest hill forts had enclosures of over 30 acres within their ramparts
- A recently-created online atlas (hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk) lists over 4,000 hill forts in the UK
- There are 4,000 hill forts in the UK and Ireland, with 1,224 in England

Legend has it that the castle was captured by Danes, but local women allowed themselves to be seized and taken in. The sassy Devonshire maids killed their captors in the night and the castle was regained. Park at Hembury Woods by the River Dart and follow the paths to the castle – be warned, it’s a steep climb.

THE CADBURY DRAGON

According to legend, a dragon guards treasure by Cadbury Castle hill fort, and flies on occasion to Dolbury Hill at Killerton. The fort itself was used by Parliamentarian forces during the English Civil War, while Thomas Fairfax laid siege to Bickleigh Castle. It’s not a large hill fort, but visitors say it is unspoilt and has wonderful views on a clear day towards several other hill forts including

Stoke Hill, Cranmore Caslte and Posbury. A public footpath is signposted from Cadbury village and a well-marked trail leads steeply uphill, with a ten-minute walk taking you to the top.

BLUEBELL HEAVEN

Created during the 4th century BC, Blackbury Camp is found in Southleigh, just off the Seaton Road running from Putts Corner to the A3052. The fort is well kept, and an information display offers an historical insight. It has a simple layout, a long enclosure surrounded by a single bank and ditch. A car park right next to the camp enables easy access to the centre. If you can, visit in May when there’s a vast carpet of bluebells across the enclosure. A wonderful place for a picnic, and the nearby Blackbury Honey Farm is worth a visit, too.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

You can see Dumpdon Hill clearly to the right as you travel east on the A30 from the Blackdown Hills. This hill fort, situated above the Otter Valley, has a circular walk with a gentle climb up to a fenced wooded area at the top. There’s a mysterious atmosphere amongst the trees, and rumours of paganism, the occult and even the (unconfirmed) discovery of bodies in the 1970s. The walk is particularly pretty with wildflowers including red campion, and the fort is home to a friendly herd of cows in the summer. Allegedly Dumpdon was never finished, but even so, the views over the Devon countryside are spectacular. ♦