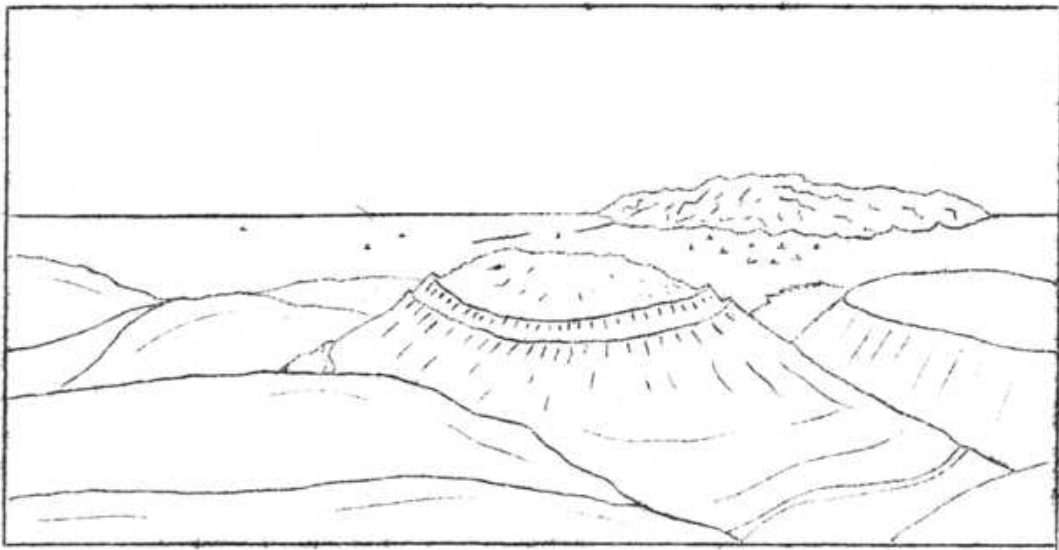


**HILLFORT STUDY GROUP**  
**HILLFORTS IN DORSET**

**A GUIDE TO THE SITES VISITED  
DURING  
THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE  
AT  
DORCHESTER, DORSET**

**APRIL 29 - MAY 1  
1966**



**Chalbury**  
(after C. Warne Ancient Dorset, (1872), Plate IV)

## **Itinerary of Hillforts**

Rowlsbury, Stoke Wake

Hambledon Hill, Child Okeford

Hod Hill, Stourpaine

Buzbury Rings, Tarrant Keyneston

Badbury Rings, Shapwick

Spettisbury Rings, Spettisbury

Poundbury, Dorchester

Pilsdon Pen, Pilsdon

Eggardon, Askerswell and Powerstock

Abbotsbury Castle, Abbotsbury and Puncknowle

Chalbury, Bincombe

Maiden Castle, Winterbourne St. Martin

## INTRODUCTION

The following brief descriptions of thirteen hill-forts are designed mainly to draw attention to the most interesting features still visible. Each account has been confined to one side of quarto, leading to some imbalance in the presentation to the disadvantage of the more complex sites but leaving a blank side of paper for further notes *in situ*. The accounts are arranged in the order in which the sites will be visited, and, in the interests of brevity, an attempt has been made to standardise their layout by using the same format in each case under the following headings (not repeated in the text):

NAME of hill-fort, parish(es) Type of defences

NGR; modern O.S. 6 in. map no.; internal and overall acreages

GEOLOGY: maximum height above O.D.

MODERN LOCATION and APPROACH

DESCRIPTION; general; defences; entrance(s); interior features; excavation; dating evidence; location of finds where relevant

REFERENCES            Initials of writer

No attempt has been made to give a complete bibliography for each site, but the references quoted give a reasonably full guide to other sources. Three main abbreviations are used:

*Dorset I.*: R.C.H.M., Dorset I West (H.M.S.O., 1952)

*Dorset Procs.*: Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society.  
*Wessex from the Air*: Crawford, O.G.S., and Keiller, A., *Wessex from the Air* (Oxford, 10/28)

All the sites appear on the O.S. *Map of Britain in the Iron Age* and are independently described in some detail, from which the accounts here occasionally differ, in N. Thomas, *A Guide to Prehistoric England* (Batsford, 1960), 98-109. Those in west Dorset are described and illustrated in *Dorset I*, and the remainder will be receiving even fuller publication in the Commission's forthcoming Dorset Inventories.

Much of the material contained in this guide has been provided by D. J. Bonney, and P. Gelling supplied the information about Pilsdon. The several descriptions are initialled but only to indicate the immediate source since most of the sites are controversial in one way or another and the accounts contain many points of interpretation resulting from personal assessment during fieldwork. A general debt is owed to the Salisbury office of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) for the use of unpublished material. My Director readily agreed to the typing and duplicating of this guide within the Dept. of Extra-Mural Studies. It is a pleasure to thank also those private owners who kindly gave permission for their hill-forts to be visited.

One final, and personal, point: in studying hill-forts, we shall be seeing the most impressive and least destructible of Wessex earthworks. All but three have nevertheless been damaged significantly, and the interiors of seven have been cultivated, with what archaeological loss the unploughed sites can but suggest. Even so it is worth remembering that these relatively well-preserved earthworks give little idea of the wholesale destruction wrought on their less obvious counter-parts during the last 25 years of continually extending, and increasingly deep, cultivation.

Department of Extra-Mural Studies,  
University of Bristol. *ii.IV.66.*

P. J. FOWLER

**ROWLSBURY, Stoke Wake**

Bivallate

ST/787058; ST 70 NE; 4.5 acres and 11 acres  
Middle Chalk; 780 ft. above O.D.

7 miles W of Blandford beside the minor road from Stoke Wake to Bulbarrow Hill

The hill-fort is prominently sited on a spur joined by a narrow neck to the main Chalk escarpment, here rising to 900 ft. above O.D. on Bulbarrow Hill.

It is of at least two main phases and comprises an apparently original, pear shaped inner enclosure, defined by a single bank and ditch, to which has been added an outer enclosure similarly defined. On the N and SE, because of the steep fall of the ground the ramparts of the two enclosures adjoin but on the S and along the N side, where the ground slopes gently, they are separated by a space up to 70 ft. across.

The entrance, which faces E up the spur, consists of a gap through the inner rampart flanked by the out-turned ends of the bank and protected by a barbican apparently added to the outer rampart, but now badly mutilated by tracks and other diggings. A cross dyke 500 ft E of the fort is probably related to it.

Within the S half of the interior are slight depressions, probably the remains of occupation. Sherds in trenches dug during army manoeuvres in 1951 in the rearward slope of the inner rampart include Iron Age 'A' and Iron Age 'C' wares.

*Dorset Procs.* , LXXVI (1954), 94

D.J.B.

ST/845126; ST 81 SW; 31 acres and 56 acres  
Upper Chalk 620 ft. above O.D.

4.5 miles NW of Blandford, approached by minor road leading SW from Child Okeford. A track leads off it to the SW entrance.

The hill is part of the Dorset Chalk escarpment but isolated from it, together with Hod Hill, by the valleys of the Stour and the Iwerne. The fort occupies the whole of the long, narrow, steep-sided N spur of the hill and is defined by two main ramparts, for most of their circuit produced by scarping the steep natural slope. A continuous quarry area immediately inside the inner rampart provided cover and ease of movement for the defenders in addition to material for the defences. At the S end of the fort, where slopes are gentler, the defences are of normal bank and ditch type.

There are three entrances: the northern, a simple gap on a steep slope, is now largely destroyed by quarrying;

the south-western, carefully sited on a local rise in ground level and approached from the E along the shoulder of the slope consists of a terraced ramp within a long horn-work;

the south-eastern, which faces on to a steep coombe, is closely integrated with the outworks across the neck of the spur.

Occupation remains are chiefly in the form of hut platforms - just over 200 are visible altogether, - levelled into the often considerable slopes within the fort. They vary in diameter from 15 ft. to 45 ft. The lack of hut circles even on nearly level ground and of storage-pits is in marked contrast to Hod Hill.

Though unexcavated, the earthworks show three major phases in their structural development. An initial, univallate fort enclosed some 12 acres of the N end of the spur, the remains of its rampart being visible on the spur top. This fort was later extended S along the spur to take in a further 8 acres with more massive, but still univallate defences, of which a fragment still survives. Finally, it was enlarged to its present size, and additional entrances were built, and, on the E side, the second defences were abandoned and others built further down the slope. Out-works were added at the SE and modified more than once in an attempt to strengthen this most vulnerable point.

## **HOD HILL, Stourpaine**

Bivallate

ST/857106; ST 81 SE; 54 acres and 76 acres  
Upper Chalk; 470 ft. above O.D.

3 miles NW of Blandford, approached from the N off the minor road linking A.350 and A.357

The hill-fort occupies the whole of the top of the hill, which is an isolated part of the Dorset Chalk escarpment. The defences are bivallate on the N, E and S but univallate on the W where they are compensated by the steep fall to the R.Stour. On the N side an unfinished outwork, with no access from the interior, extends the defences to dominate a natural shelf in the hillside. An almost continuous line of quarry pits, to provide additional material for the defences in the Iron Age 'A/B' and 'C' phases, lies behind the inner rampart except along most of the W side.

Both the Iron Age entrances at NE and SW have inturned arms: the former the Steepleton Gate, was found to be an insertion across the original Iron Age 'A' ditch, its hornwork being a late, Iron Age 'C', addition; the latter, though unexcavated appears to have an unfinished outwork.

The interior of the hill-fort was formerly covered with Iron Age occupation remains in the form of hut-circles, some with annexes and 'yards', 'working platforms', storage-pits, mounds and boundary banks. These remains are still clearly visible in the SE corner of the fort where 7.5 acres have survived unploughed. Here at least 50 huts, not all contemporary, and 100 pits may be detected. A count of hut sites visible on air photographs indicates a reasonable minimum of 200 for the whole hill-fort (cf Hambleton). A Roman fort, used for "not more than twenty years from A.D.431 and garrisoned by a detachment of legionaries and a cavalry unit, occupies the NW corner of the hill-fort.

From 1951-8, the late Professor Sir Ian Richmond directed excavations for the British Museum. These indicated a sequence of defences on their present line from a late Iron Age 'A' boxed rampart to the Iron Age 'C' remains now to be seen. The tested occupation remains extend from an Iron Age 'A/B' phase down to the storming of the fort by the Romans in c.43 A.D.

Boyd-Dawkins, W. *Arch.J.* LVII (1900), 52-68  
Brailsford, J. W. *Hod Hill, I* (British Museum, 1962)  
Richmond, I.A. *Hod Hill, II* (forthcoming)

D.J.B.

**BUZBURY RINGS**, Tarrant Keyneston

Multivallate

ST/918059; ST 90 NW 2 acres (inner enclosure) and 12 acres  
Upper Chalk; 350 ft. above O.D.

2 miles ESE of Blandford, cut by B.3032

Sited at the head of a re-entrant on ground beginning to slope E, Buzbury is probably not a defensive enclosure in a military sense, its 'multivallation' almost certainly accidentally deriving from different structural phases rather than from a deliberate attempt to give protection in depth. It has been suggested, however, as an easterly example of a 'hill-slope fort', and certainly it is positioned off the highest ground hereabouts (but cf. Spettisbury).

The site is now badly mutilated by hollow-ways and the modern road, by a golf course on the E and modern ploughing on the W, but its low and complex earthworks represent an outer, kidney-shaped enclosure with two banks and a medial ditch on the S; an intermediate bank on the S and W; and an inner, roughly circular enclosure surrounded by a bank 4 ft. high and 30 ft. wide. No original entrance is certain, though it was probably on the SE near a semi-circular outer earthwork identified by earlier writers as a 'circus'.

The inner enclosure contains numerous hut circles, now under plough but as clearly visible from the air as they were formerly from the ground. The whole site is closely related to linear ditches (secondarily trackways?) and 'Celtic' fields, and several other small angular enclosures were clearly visible as soil marks in fields to the E during aerial photography (April, 1966).

Two small trial excavations (1957) produced no firm dating evidence, but numerous surface finds indicate occupation during Iron Age and Romano-British times. Finds from the make-up of the inner enclosure's bank (sectioned during road-widening, 1963-4) suggested it was scraped-up after the 2nd century A.D. 3rd-4th century sherds had previously been collected from the interior. The middle and outer earthworks may well, therefore, be Iron Age structures, the inner enclosure being a Romano-British addition after early Romano-British occupation. Throughout, the site was most probably a small, enclosed agricultural settlement which never became a hill-fort proper.

*Wessex from the Air*, 64-5

Radley, J. R., *Dorset Procs.*, LXXXVI (1964), 112-4

P.J.F.



**BADBURY RINGS, Shapwick**

Multivallate

ST 964030; ST 90 SE; c. 17 acres and 50 acres

Upper Chalk, capped with Reading Beds inside the hill-fort; 320 ft. above O.D.

3.5 miles NW of Wimborne Minster on E of B.3082

Standing 2 miles E of the R. Stour, the hill-fort encloses a low hill rising out of the undulating Chalk plain, and forms a landmark accentuated by its prominent clump of pine trees, visible for many miles.

The defences consist of a double line of massive ramparts, surrounded by a lesser outer rampart and ditch. A berm, separating this outer defence from the other two, averages c.50 ft. across except where it swings out to enclose a barbican formed by the middle rampart outside the W entrance. Access through this barbican was originally by way of a gap through its SW corner: the break in the centre of its W side, giving a direct approach to the inturned entrance through the inner rampart, is a later insertion. On the E of the hill-fort is a second entrance, a simple gap through the ramparts though the inner has inturned ends and the outer gap is off line with the other two. The interior is thickly overgrown, with little evidence of occupation features. Shallow quarrying is visible behind the inner rampart

Visible N and W of the hillfort are:

- i. six round barrows, three close together in a straight line beside but not parallel to the ....
- ii. Roman road from *Sorviodvnm* to *Dvrnovaria*, excellently preserved particularly N of the hill-fort, whose outer ditch is slightly overlain by the *agger*;
- iii. the slight and disturbed remains of a Romano-British settlement immediately S of the road W of the hill-fort.

*Wessex from the Air*, 58-61

Fowler, P. J., *Ant. J.*, XLV (1965), 22-52

P.J.F.

**SPETTISBURY RINGS, Spettisbury**

Univallate

ST/915020; ST 90 SW; 5 acres and 8 acres  
Upper Chalk; 250 ft. above O.D.

3.5 miles SE of Blandford immediately S of the A.350 to Poole, and overlooking the village which gives it its name.

The hill-fort is sited on a sheltered slope at the N end of a prominent spur overlooking an important crossing-point of the R.Stour, 300 yds. to the E. At the SW, its rampart reaches the summit of the spur and provides a wide field of view except immediately to the SW where there is 'dead ground' within 70 yds. The entrance is a gap on the W with the ends of the bank slightly everted. A disturbed earthen pile into which the eastern arm runs probably represents the remains of a horn-work. The interior has been much ploughed and the only visible earthwork remains of part of the 'open fields', of Crawford Magna.

The irregular nature of the rampart which rises in a series of steps westward from the railway cutting, changing from a scarp to a massive bank suggests strongly that the final strengthening of the defences was never completed. The ditch has been largely filled in, entirely so on the N, and its flat bottom ploughed. During the construction of the railway cutting in 1857 along the E side of the fort a mass grave containing at least 120

skeletons was exposed within the filling of the ditch. Associated finds of the late pre-Roman Iron Age together with the violent end met by two of the individuals, suggest strongly that the grave is of victims of the advancing Roman army and that it may be compared with the 'war cemetery' at Maiden Castle. The incompleting of the defences is, presumably, to be connected with this event.

Gresham, C. A. *Arch. A.* XCVI (1939), 114-31  
Hawkes, O. F. C. *Arch.J.*, XCVII (1940), 112-4  
Brailsford, J. W. *P.P.S.*, XXIV (1958), 106, 112

D.J.B.

**POUNDBURY**, Dorchester

Bivallate

SY/683912; SY 69 SE; 14 acres and 20 acres  
Chalk; 310 ft. above O.D.

On the NW outskirts of Dorchester just N of the minor road to Bradford Peverell.

The hill-fort lies on a bluff sloping NE and overlooking the R.Frome. There is a single original entrance on the E. A number of later gaps are of uncertain date.

Test excavations by Miss K. M. Richardson in 1939 have shown that the hillfort was originally a univallate work of the Iron Age 'A' phase with a vertical, timber palisade at the front of its rampart. This defence was remodelled at some time in the 'C' phase on the *glacis* principle. The bank was heightened with spoil from an internal quarry-ditch and provided with a limestone-revetted crest, and an outer bank of simple dump construction with an external ditch was added.

Trial cuttings over a wide area of the interior revealed nothing to suggest settled occupation. The Iron Age 'B' phase was not represented.

Richardson, K. M., *Ant.Jour.*, XX (1940), 429-448

*Dorset Procs.*, LXXXVI (1964), 106-7

D.J.B.

*ST/412013; ST 40 SW*; c. 8 acres and 20 acres  
Undifferentiated Head; 909 ft. above O.D.

7 miles W of Beaminster, approached by minor road from Broadwindsor

On three sides the hill-fort derives considerable strength from the steep slope of the Pen, but on the NW the approach is level. At the SE corner there are only slight remains of defences but otherwise the defended area is enclosed by at least two ramparts with associated ditches.

Behind the main defences at the NW end of the fort are much slighter remains of earlier defences. In the centre of the fort is a square enclosure bounded by low banks, which are probably not older than the 17th. century; and adjacent to it on the NE is a long mound, which is possibly a long barrow. In the SE quarter of the interior are two probable round barrows and some pillow mounds.

Excavation has been in progress during 1964-5. It has been organized by Mr. and Mrs. M. Pinney, of Bettiscombe, the owners of the site, and carried out by the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Birmingham University in conjunction with the Dorset Natural History and Archaeology Society.

In 1964, most of the work was devoted to the remains of defences inside the principal defences at the NW end. It was shown that whereas these were substantially completed SW of the entrance through them, to the NE of this entrance they been little more than begun.

At the same time, attempts were made to find an occupation deposit, and as part of this work a trench was dug, parallel to the SW rampart and past the entrance through it. Immediately inside this entrance, a stretch of metalled roadway was uncovered and, to the SE, evidence of occupation occurred. Two areas of this last were uncovered in 1965. Portions of the perimeter of three circular huts were identified. From one of these areas a trench was dug across the nearest of the four low mounds which demarcate a rectangle in the middle of the fort, and beneath it lay some sleeper trenches apparently belonging to a building of rectilinear plan.

It is proposed to continue the excavation in September 1966.

*Dorset I*, 179-80 and Pl.71

Gelling, P., *Dorset Procs.*, LXXVII (1964), 102

P.G.

SY/541947; SY 59 SW; 20 acres and 36 acres

Pleistocene clay and sand over Upper Greensand; 800 ft. above O.D.

10 miles WNW of Dorchester, 1.5 miles N of A.35 by minor road.

The hill-fort lies astride a narrow, steep-sided ridge, its exact position apparently being determined by a wish to enclose a SW widening of the ridge-top. Except to the E, the view is extensive and includes several other hill-forts.

The defences consist basically of three banks with two ditches between them, though many complexities occur. On the S, for example, an Iron Age land-slip occurred after the defences had been built resulting in a confusion of earthworks among which, however, is clear evidence of an attempt to redig the inner ditch. Below, a new outer bank covered the length of ruined defences.

The two entrances lie to NW and SE, facing outwards along the ridge-top. Both enforce a diagonal approach to the inner rampart, and both incorporate an extra outer bank and ditch. At the NW, this seems to be an addition; on the SE it may well be an originally separate cross-dyke. In its final form, this latter entrance incorporated inturns through the outer rampart and an E-W double-embanked ditch across the otherwise open area between outer and inner defences.

The N half of the interior in Powerstock parish has been ploughed, but probably contained features similar to those still visible in the unploughed Askerswell half. These are:

- i. two round barrows;
- ii. several small irregular mounds;
- iii. a roughly rectangular arrangement of low banks, apparently dividing the hill-fort interior in a purposeful manner and perhaps of Iron Age date;
- iv. numerous depressions, superficially similar to the remains of rather large storage pits and hitherto accepted as such. Current excavations have however, led Mr. G. Rybot to suggest that they represent quarry pits for the extraction of iron ore from the underlying Greensand.
- v. the parish boundary bank between Askerswell and Powerstock;
- vi. several small earthwork circles, apparently sheep pens;
- vii. a modern octagonal earthwork enclosure.

SY 555866; SY 58 NE; c.4.5 acres and 10 acres

Upper Greensand, Clay-with-Flints in centre; 700 ft. above O.D.

1.5 miles NW of Abbotsbury, by way of minor road N off B.3157

Lying at the W end of a long coastal ridge, the triangular-shaped hill-fort is in a superb position above the W end of Chesil Beach. Steep slopes fall all around except on the SE where three banks and two ditches, replacing a slight inner bank and ditch (cf. Pilsdon), bar the only easy approach. These may incorporate an earlier, separate cross-dyke (cf. Eggardon), and the same applies to the extreme W end. For the rest of the perimeter, the defences consist of two banks and a medial ditch, with indications of a quarry ditch behind, and stonework in the inner bank. The only original entrance is on the E, immediately below and N of the large earthworks facing out along the ridge.

The interior is unploughed. The absence of pits (cf. Hambledon) is noteworthy, but present are:

- i. a round barrow at the highest point;
- ii. a compact cluster of ten embanked hut platforms, each c.20 ft. in diameter and all lying off the highest ground on a slight NE slope
- iii. a small rectangular enclosure in the W corner of the hill-fort, using the angle formed by the turn in the inner rampart. It is clearly later than the rampart since its ditch cuts through the rampart top (cf. Roman fort on Hod Hill). Although this earthwork could be of any date after the Iron Age it could, for example, have been a relatively sheltered sheep pen in post-medieval times, it has been suggested as a Roman signal station. The form and position of the enclosure make the idea plausible: a single cutting could probably settle the issue one way or the other.

**CHALBURY**, Bincombe

Univallate

SY/694838; SY 68 SE; 8.5 acres and 13 acres  
Lower Purbeck Limestone and Portland Sands; 380 ft. above O.D.

4 miles S of Dorchester, approached by a minor road leading off A.354 to Weymouth. A track on the SW gives access to the interior.

The hill-fort occupies a prominent knoll S of the Ridgeway with wide views S over Weymouth Bay and the Isle of Portland (see cover). Small-scale excavations by Miss M. Whitley in 1939 suggested that the fort belongs to two phases of Iron Age A. The defences remained on the same line but were built in an irregular way, partly reflecting the help given by the natural situation. Much rampart material was derived from an internal quarry ditch or scoops. Where excavated, the rampart was found to be 'boxed' between limestone revetment walls with a berm between it and the rock-cut ditch. There is a simple entrance on the SE.

In the interior are at least 30 artificial platforms, roughly circular in plan, and several storage-pits. The only complete structure excavated was defined by limestone footings 33 ft. in diameter and set in a quarried area. Though no entrance or permanent hearth was found, it produced abundant evidence of occupation.

On the E side of the hill are well-developed medieval strip lynchets.

Whitley, M., *Ant.J.XXIII* (1943), 98-121

D.J.B.

**MAIDEN CASTLE**, Winterborne St. Martin

Multivallate

SY/670885; SY 68 NE; 47 acres and 110 acres  
Upper Chalk; 444 ft. above O.D.

1.5 miles SW of Dorchester, from which it is approached by a track leading off the Weymouth road (A.354)

Excavation by R. E. M. Wheeler showed that the hill-fort has a complex history of several structural and cultural phases spanning, perhaps, four centuries and ending with its conquest by the Romans c.43 A.D.

The first Iron Age 'A' fort (? c.350 B.C.) on the E knoll of the ridge and consisted of a single 'boxed' rampart and ditch enclosing about 16 acres. There were two entrances, single on the W, double on the E, the former later covered by triangular enclosures flanking tunnel-like entrances. Internal features included storage-pits and post-holes. The original W defences are clearly visible today.

The second Iron Age 'A' fort (? c.200 B.C.), with ramparts of *glacis* type, was built to take in the area we see today. The W entrance was made double.

The first Iron Age 'B' alterations (? c.150 B.C.). The main rampart and ditch were greatly enlarged, the former from a quarry-ditch inside it, and a counterscarp-bank built. Additional lines of defence were also constructed, two on the S, one on the N, and a horn-work added to the E gate. Extensive signs of occupation were found within the internal quarry-ditch.

Later Iron Age 'B' alterations (? c.75 B.C.), the last of a major structural nature, involved building the additional lines of defence up to the same massive scale as the inner line and the erection of the complex entrances we see today. Numerous storage-pits, some stone-lined, and several circular huts are contemporary with this phase.

Iron Age 'C' phase. Within the century preceding the Conquest, the main rampart was refurbished and streets at the E end re-metalled. Circular huts of this phase were found both within the interior and in an open area among the defences at the E entrance where the final 'war-cemetery' was dug.

Wheeler, R. E. M., Maiden Castle (1943)

D.J.B.