



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC132

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90072)

Taken into State care: 1962 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CHESTERS HILL FORT



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CHESTERS HILL FORT

SYNOPSIS

The Chesters is an outstandingly well-preserved earthwork fort of probable Iron-Age date. At least six lines of grass-covered ramparts and ditches enclose an area measuring about 115m by 45m. The full extent of the fort is 280m by 150m. The two entrances are impressively defended, particularly the main, eastern one. The interior contains the surface traces of numerous circular house foundations. These vary in size, and some overlie the innermost ramparts indicating a multi-phase occupation.

The fort has never been archaeologically investigated, but by analogy with other sites (eg, Broxmouth, Dunbar, and **Castlelaw**, Midlothian) it was probably built in the first millennium BC, with occupation continuing into the first millennium AD. Recent archaeological survey work in the vicinity has shown that the fort lies at the heart of a rich prehistoric landscape.

The Chesters was briefly re-occupied during World War II as an observation post in the defence of RAF Drem.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1st millennium BC / early 1st Millennium AD – probable construction and occupation of the fort by local tribes.
- 1923 – the fort is designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument.
- 1939-45 – the fort is used as an observation post and anti-aircraft gun-emplacement in the defence of nearby RAF Drem.
- 1962 – the fort is entrusted into state care.
- 1976 – one of the WWII gun-emplacements, being badly damaged by cattle and hens, is excavated and removed, allowing a glimpse at the constructional nature of the rampart it sat upon.

Archaeological Overview:

- The removal of one of the WWII gun-emplacements, situated near the main, east entrance to the fort, in 1976 gave an opportunity of examining the partial section through the rampart. There was no sign of revetting within the bank and no tip lines were visible.
- The fort interior contains the surface traces of numerous circular house platforms, which vary in size. Some lie over the ramparts, indicating a lengthy period of occupation.
- The fort sits in a landscape rich in prehistoric features, including pit alignments (of which at least eight are known from aerial photography), settlements, enclosures and ring ditches. The two-phase enclosures - at Foster Law, 200m to the north, and Sixpence Strip, 300m to the west, have been surveyed

geophysically. However, neither has been substantively excavated and it is not known whether they are contemporary with the occupation of the Chesters, or belong to a period when the fort was unoccupied.

- Archaeologists believe that the fort was built in several phases, the first of which may date from early in the first millennium BC, as at **Edinburgh Castle Rock**. Its most spectacular features seem most likely to belong to the second half of the first millennium BC, and the house scoops and stances probably reflect a relatively late phase of settlement in the first centuries AD, at a time when some parts of Scotland were controlled by the Romans.
- The outstandingly impressive physical remains, coupled with the fact that the fort has barely been investigated archaeologically, give the property outstanding archaeological potential.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The Chesters is one of the most visually impressive prehistoric forts in Scotland. The area enclosed by the various ramparts and ditches measures about 115m by 45m, whilst the overall extent of the fort is 280m by 150m.
- The fort has several lines (at least six are discernible) of impressive ramparts, and two complex gateway defences, one at the east side and the other at the NW. The two innermost ramparts have a maximum height of 5m, and are best preserved on the NW side. The outer ramparts survive to a height of 3.5m. When in use, the ramparts may have been timber-laced or lined with upright timbers, at least near the entrances. The present grassy appearance of the fort thus gives only a muted impression of what it would have looked like when occupied.
- The NW entrance gateway is a masterpiece of over-elaboration, designed as much to impress as to serve a defensive function. It probably reflects more than one period of construction. The eastern entrance gateway, whilst simpler, would doubtless have been equally impressive.
- The fort straddles a low ridge. When occupied, it would have dominated its immediate surroundings to north, east and west in a most striking way. However, just a stone's throw, literally, to its south, is a natural bluff some 15m higher than the fort's summit, thus calling into question the defensive capability of the fort.

Social Overview:

- The fort is reached up a track off a minor road and is not a conspicuous feature in the landscape, except close up.
- The fort is not all that well-known or visited. It was, however, included in an Archaeological Motor Trail, established in the 1980s by the former East Lothian District Council. Whilst it has meaning for specialists, it can be a somewhat obscure attraction to others. The fort is popular with local walkers. Several guided tours take place each year.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is not known what use, if any, the builders and inhabitants of the fort in prehistory made of the place for spiritual purposes.
- Today, the fort seems to have little or no spiritual association or use.

Aesthetic Overview

- The fort sits at the northern edge of the Garleton Hills. To the south the view is completely obscured by higher ground, giving the fort a sense of enclosure. To the north there are fine views over the low-lying coastal plain towards the waters of the Firth of Forth.
- From a distance, the fort seems just another grassy hillock. Only when nearing it do the visually stunning dimensions of its ramparts and ditches become fully apparent, creating an element of surprise.
- The close proximity of the residential property known as Dalvreck, formerly a small farmhouse, seems not to detract from the fort's setting; on the contrary it helps to provide a suitable modern contrast to the prehistoric remains beside it.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the fort first begun and what was its history of occupation? Did it mirror that at other SE Scotland hill-forts that have been excavated (eg, Broxmouth), or did it follow a different path?
- What was the chronological relationship between the fort and the surrounding settlements and pit alignments? Were the fort and settlements part of a single social system, or did they represent alternative patterns of settlement in the area, with the settlements occupied at a time when the fort was not, and vice versa?
- What was the relationship, if any, between the inhabitants of the fort and the Romans? If it had a similar history to Broxmouth, then the fortifications fell out of use before the Roman incursions.
- Did the fort's interior have a hierarchy of space? Were certain areas used for specific purposes (eg, metal-working, storage, keeping animals)?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The fort is remarkably well-preserved, with a series of impressive ramparts and ditches and impressive entrance gateways.
- The archaeological potential of the fort is immense, containing information that could well revolutionise our understanding of the later Iron Age period in southern Scotland, and of the interaction between the native inhabitants and the Romans in the early centuries AD.
- The fort sits at the centre of a landscape rich in remains of settlements and field boundaries that are most likely to be roughly contemporary with it.

- The fort and its immediate surroundings, therefore, represent a treasure house of information relevant to our understanding of social systems in SE Scotland, and more widely in Britain and the continent, during the first millennium BC and the first half of the first millennium AD.

Associated Properties:

(other related sites locally): Traprain Law; North Berwick Law; Foster Law, Sixpence Strip, and other local settlements and pit alignments.

(other hill forts and settlements in the region): **Castlelaw Fort; Edinburgh Castle Rock; Edin's Hall Fort and Broch**, Greencastle; **Holyrood Park**; Traprain Law.

Keywords:

fort; hill fort; rampart; gateway; ditch

Selected Bibliography:

Armit, I., *Scotland's Hidden History* (Tempus, Stroud, 1998)

RCAHMS., *Eighth Report with Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of East Lothian* (HMSO, Edinburgh, 1924)