



Self-guided walk to the early history of Borough Hill Daventry

Please follow the Government guidance with respect to limiting the spread of Coronavirus, including the social distancing advice or restrictions in force at the time you do this walk. Also be aware that if you climb stiles or open gates many other people will have done so before you. You may need to use a sanitiser on your hands and wash clothing after the walk. Please keep dogs under control and follow advice on cleaning them after a walk.

Welcome to Borough Hill. It is a British Heritage protected site managed by Daventry DC. This walk has been produced by the museum service at Daventry Town Council. Some of the artifacts excavated from the hill are in the museum collection.

The walk starts from the car park at the main entrance to the hill and will take you between one and two hours to complete. Go through the open pedestrian "squeeze" entry at the far end (south) of the car park. The walk goes anti clockwise around the hill. A reasonably flat and sometimes gravelled path goes right around the hill and the walk can be completed without leaving the path although there are optional diversions (directions are in the yellow boxes).

A bit about the natural history.

Now walk to your left from the squeeze until you are between the white building on your left (north) and the first of the big trees on skyline ahead of you (south). There is a broad trodden grass path to follow. Read the introduction as you go but watch your step.

Borough Hill is an acid grassland and as such is nutrient deficient and heath like. On it there are badger sets and rabbit warrens and foxes hunt it. In the winter you can see the mouse and field vole runs and burrows in the grass stems. Birds include the blue (listen for them hammering the trees in the spring) and green woodpeckers (bright green with a

swooping wave like flight), buzzards hunt the area and rarely you may see a red kite scavenging. There are also carrion crows, jackdaws and rooks and recently short eared owls hunting for the mice and voles at dusk. It is a nationally important site for skylarks, which you can see rising vertically from the grass whilst singing a warning call. These are ground nesting birds and between April to September please keep to defined paths so as not to disturb the nests of what is now a declining species. The trees are most probably a plantation to be seen as a landscape feature from Norton Hall. There is a huge variety of insects including dung beetles and dragon flies. Stoats and weasels are seen up here probably after the rabbits. And many different types of wildflower and a huge variety of insects.

Borough Hill started life in the Jurassic period 150 to 200 million years ago. But there were no land dinosaurs because it was then in the ocean and was close to the equator in the tropics. Sand, sediment, and shells eventually formed the sandstone and some limestones now known as Northamptonshire Sand. This makes up the base of Borough Hill. If you look at the rock it contains fossils of sea shells, particularly belemnites and sometimes ammonites.



Belemnites from Borough Hill

Moving on 146 million years and Borough Hill has travelled north to where it is today and became surrounded by the newer rocks forming the UK. Then there were 2 million years of ice ages coming and going, alternately depositing clay on the hill and then removing it. At the same time pre humans (*Homo erectus*) were moving in and out of the area in the warmer periods. An Acheulian hand axe dating to approx. 500,000 years ago has been found in the hill together with another stone tool. It's likely the hill would have been bare grassland or tundra for some or even most of that time.

Move up the grass path towards the highest point

You are now on the line of the Bronze Age ditched enclosure and the later Iron Age hill fort ramparts. However, at this point they have been ploughed out and nothing remains. On your left, the white building is the first BBC transmitting station built on the hill in 1925 and transmitted the first national radio programmes. There are later buildings some of which you can see but the station as a whole closed down in 1992. Shortly afterwards the Hill was opened to the public.

The obvious remains on the hill belong to the Iron Age (2600 years ago) when there were two stages of hill fort. The first contour fort possibly following a Bronze Age enclosure built sometime between 4400 years ago and the start of the iron age. None of the Bronze Age earthworks remain as it was re developed in the Iron Age 2500 years ago. In the Bronze Age a bank followed the same course as the later Iron Age earthworks some of which can still be seen. The Bronze Age enclosure is not thought to have been a fort more likely its enclosed animal pastures and homes or was a meeting place for the surrounding area.

Continue walking up the path and you will see a small track to your right which goes up a bank and then down into a ditch (besides the supports for the mast). Turn left and walk down the ditch to the east. Take care as this area is difficult to walk through being uneven and with lots of rabbit holes. Or if you prefer, just carry on the original path to your left.



The most original example of the Iron Age fortifications is on the south which you are now walking through. This gives some idea of the layout of the bank and ditch though much reduced and messed about by the BBC and rabbits. Excavation shows the original ditch that you are in was 12 feet deep and the banks were likely to have been higher by a similar amount. As you walk along try to imagine the bank being higher and the ditch deeper. In the Iron Age there were at least two other banks and ditches that can no longer be seen. There would also have been a palisade fence along the top of the inner most bank. These would have originally circled the whole of the hill on the path you will follow.

This picture of a fort in Norfolk gives some idea of the scale of the original banks.



Follow the footpath through the ditch. This footpath saved the earthworks from being ploughed out as it was once a route over the hill to Norton/Flore. As you emerge back onto the main path the earthworks have been ploughed out again.

Stop and look south east then towards the bank of trees in front of you.



In the distance to the south east you will see the Heygates feed mill (and the Northampton lift tower too). One mile beyond it (7 miles away) is Kislingbury. Where on June the 11th 1645 Parliamentary forces arrived after a stop in Northampton. They and the Royalists on the hill would both have been able to see each other's fires and track movements as the armies moved together.



Overnight on the 12th June King Charles got reports of these movements and in the morning came to the hill. He may have well stood at this spot to look at the Parliamentary forces who had been reinforced overnight by Oliver Cromwell's troops.

As a result, he prepared to leave Daventry for Newark via Market Harborough and Melton Mowbray and left at 5am on the 13th. Or more properly started to leave as it would take time for the army to follow on in all 10,000 men decamped overnight. Baggage trains followed.

As you walk toward the trees there was some earlier history of the hill which hasn't left any remains for you to see.

Around 10000 years ago (8000 BC) the Mesolithic period started in this area and flint tools from this time have been found in areas close to the Hill, at Flore, Boughton, Bramptons, These belonged to hunter gatherer groups who most probably hunted the hill for the next few thousand years, or maybe looked out over the low land searching for game. At this time there would have been elks, bears and wolves on or around the hill and beavers in the rivers and early on possibly only 2 or 3 thousand humans in the country. That is why not much evidence of them is found.

The next phase was the Neolithic (4000 ish BC) when agriculture began to be introduced. It was at this time the forests began to be cleared. Two stone hand axes of this age possibly from people clearing the wood on the hill were found when the BBC foundations were dug. There are stone tools in the virtual museum collection if you want to go and see them.

You should now have reached the trees. You can take two paths one through the trees or one on the track above trees. The track through is uneven. Carry on until the end of the trees.



Some of the Iron Age bank and ditch are to your left and right on the woodland path (right if you are on the grassland) and they follow round the hill as a small bank from near to the end of the woods. In the centre of the woodland path looking left you can see some of the remnants of at least two banks and ditches of the contour hill fort. Look down into the woods and you will get some idea of how difficult it would have been to attack these defences. You now have some idea of the scale of the Iron Age fort. As at most only 2-300 people would have lived here it could not have been defended against an attack by armies. If it was attacked more people might have come in from outside or possibly, and more likely, small raiding parties were hindered by the defences and defenders inside would move towards them. This all changed later when the contour fort was abandoned, and a new small and more heavily embanked fort was created where the golf club now is. More of this when you reach it.

In the centre of the wood you will see the rabbit and badger diggings. Also, if it is summer you can easily see the wood is a plantation made up of alternating sweet chestnut, oak, sycamore and conifers. It seems likely that it was planted as a feature to be seen from the old Norton Hall (now demolished but somewhat to the south of the village seen through the trees down the hill to your right). Tree ring counts show it was planted around about 1900, so it may be to mark the start of the last century.

As you leave the wood there is a spring (Spelwell) which may have been the original hill fort's water supply as it is within the ramparts. It is also thought that somewhere along this stretch there was the original entrance.

Some archaeological work done when the BBC buildings were erected and later by CLASP show that it was this side of the hill where some Iron Age roundhouses were built. Understandable if you are on the hill with a cold westerly wind blowing.

As you emerge from the wood look up the hill to your left - just below the crest of the hill there were originally 18 roman or earlier grave barrows. Pottery and bronze vessels were found in the barrows which were excavated by Baker in 1823. Records are poor but some possible cremation remains were found. Some of the contents may be in the museum but are unattributed. Others may be in the British museum.

As you look up remember that in 1650 5000 of the royalist foot soldiers were camped on the hill probably with some of the 5000 or so cavalry although many of these would be camped round and about Welton, Norton and especially Staverton plus all the camp followers, baggage train, pack horses, carts etc. A population 15 times larger than the town itself. The hill would no doubt be covered with cooking fires and personal latrines.

The ramparts of the hill were said to have been reinforced, growing crops would be trampled as troops moved about, troops and others from the hill would be foraging for food, taking livestock to slaughter, removing stored crops and the overwintering store stock. The cavalry were allegedly rustling horses to be sent to Oxford and some left the hill to take them there.

All this would leave a local population without food after the troops had moved on.

Continue to follow the trodden path around the Hill until you reach the abandoned brick buildings. As you walk along look to the north east.

An ice sheet melted the ice stopped just north of Watford village and stayed there for a long time. If you stood here and looked north east, you would have seen a wall of ice several hundred feet high with water gushing out of it carrying boulders and silt. These left a wall of debris between the existing hills of Northamptonshire sand. As the ice melted back

the water was trapped by this wall acting as a dam across the hills. Eventually the water built up in a large meltwater lake before the dam burst and the force of water scoured out a big valley now known as Watford Gap. This is why we can also see the A5, M1, railway and canal at Watford all making use of the natural cutting.

The brick buildings are on the site of the "GEE" station that guided bombing raids into Germany in the second World War. Originally a Nissan hut it was replaced by the existing brick buildings. This was a "master station" communicating with other "slave" stations. The transmitter was the large building, the small block was where the power supply came in and the open topped building housed the emergency generators. It was the first experimental GEE station operating housing an aircraft navigation system that operated from 1942 to guide RAF bomber aircraft to their targets. The Daventry station was the master station of the eastern system. The first guided raid was for 200 bombers targeting Essen on the 8/9 March 1942.

On the 15th of December 1944 USAF B-17G Flying Fortress of the 305th Bomb Group, 422nd Bombardment Squadron based at Chelveston was returning from a bombing mission over the marshalling yards at Kassel in Germany. Badly damaged and disoriented by low cloud or fog it crashed into one of the GEE stations masts. All of the crew on board were killed but there was one survivor who had bailed out just before the crash. There is a memorial to them at the Daventry War Memorial. After the war the system was used to help navigate passenger planes.

Once you reach the brick buildings you will see a gate that leads to a footpath through the golf course. You can go through but it is private land and you need to keep to the footpath.

A second later Iron Age Hill Fort was more heavily defended than the large contour fort lies entirely within the golf club and it is difficult to distinguish the earth works from the bunkers etc. The east and west banks survive, and the West Bank is visible on the course. Some of the eastern bank can be seen on your right at the Norton road end of the hollow way. Apart from the banks there is very little known about the Iron Age occupation of the hill. There is some thought that the smaller northern fort might have been created because the larger fort was harder to defend. This could have happened at the time of the Roman invasion when larger armies could attack the forts, but this is no more than guesswork.

The footpath leads to a hollow way that is modern - since the First World War, allowing cars and trucks to reach the farm that was on this site. Other earthworks on the east belong to a farm built in the 1800's probably at the time the fields were enclosed.

After the Roman invasion the hill was occupied by the Romans and either a villa or temple built on the North West slope in the golf course. A mosaic floor survives and is on display in our virtual museum as are some other artifacts of the occupation of the hill. Metal fittings were found including a door latch and razor on display in the British Museum. There were also a lot of pottery finds on the site but only some are held at Daventry. The building was remodelled and enlarged at least once but its exact dates aren't known although the pottery is said to be dated between 100 to 350 ish which is more or less the whole of the time of Roman governance of Britain. Nothing remains to be seen on the ground as it was all back filled in the 1850's.

If you went into the golf club return up the foot path and back through the gate. Once back on the public path carry on round on the now metaled foot path.

On your right was a Bronze or Iron Age barrow just inside the middle of the fence to the golf course. There might be some remains of this, or it could just be a bunker! After the end of Roman rule Saxon settlers (invaders) used the hill as a burial place and up to three burials have been found. One in a barrow and one in the "villa"

remains. Jewellery and weapons were found with these but their whereabouts is unknown. Another possible burial was found in the northern fort in 1823 in a cist with a spear, but no detailed record exists. There is some speculation that at least one of the burials dated back to the late 400's in the first years of Saxon invasion.

Somewhere on the hill war axes dating to 900 to 1000 have been found. At this time Watling Street was the boundary of the Danelaw (held by Northmen commonly called Vikings) and Saxon Mercia. The boundary was fixed by treaty at the time of Alfred the Great King of Wessex and father in law to the Mercian Lord and Guthrum the Danish war band leader. There is no record of there being any occupation or use of the hill in Viking times. However, Northampton was a major Viking centre and given how the hill overlooks the area it's possible the Northmen decided to occupy it as a lookout post, or the Saxons were up here keeping them under observation? As Charles did with the Parliamentarians 750 years later. However, war axes were used by both Saxons and Danes so it could be either side up here.

Carry on walking round the path.

As you walk the contour fort banks continue along the hedgerow to your right. There are two footpaths through the hedge where you can see the remnants of the bank. The first of the paths may partly follow the drover's way down to the town along which livestock was driven to the grazing on the hill from the burgage plots in the middle ages. The path may have followed the existing footpath through Southbrook to the edge of the fishponds and into town. The hill was used for agriculture through the Middle Ages, probably for common grazing. By the time of enclosure in 1802 it was certainly common grazing pasture.

After this time the hill was also Daventry's horse racecourse. It's not known for sure when this started or where the course was, but races were run from 1724 to 1742 "around the earthworks". So possibly it was a very long course along the path you have walked.

As you walk you will see the triangular ish shaped concrete anchor bases that held the stays for the aerial masts of the BBC. You may also see the bases themselves. The central dimple held a ball bearing on which the whole weight of the mast and aerials were carried.



Carry on walking round the path. Opposite the tree on the right on your left will see a concrete path going up the slope to the top of the hill. Walk up this and turn right at the top and head towards the concrete cable anchor (large concrete truncated pyramid).

You will be able to see the remains of hedgerows. The hill became private farmland when the open fields of Daventry were enclosed. The hedges on your left now containing trees are what are left of the hedges planted when the fields were first created on the hill between 1802 and 1804. The land was ploughed and, in the wars, extensively cultivated. The ploughing has long since removed any trace of the inner earthworks from the surface. Also, just beyond the hedgerow to the left were 16 burial mounds. Some remains from these are in the museum, but the mounds are no longer visible.



Stop at the cable anchor and in the West you can see the northern Malvern Hills (and the lights of Worcester if its dark) Clee Hill, the Clent Hills near Kidderminster and the Lickey Hill with the taller buildings of Coventry in front of them. Sometimes with the sun in the east you can see the tops of Birmingham's tower blocks above the hills. Then there are the cement works at Rugby and the hills of Charnwood Forest and Loughborough. To the East are the wind turbines at Peterborough and the far horizon are the hills at the start of the fens. Not visible from here but to the south are Woburn Hills.

Walk down the wide concrete path to the Arqiva Buildings

You are on the path BBC engineers used to get to the equipment on the hill.

About 70 metres along on your right, if the grass is short, you may see what looks like a manhole. This was the entrance to the cold war Royal Observer Corp observation post build in the cold war. The underground chamber extends under the path.

As you look down to the West you can see the town laid out below. In the Civil War the King and his officers were billeted in Daventry itself centred around the Church. The slopes down to the town would have been grass land and no doubt the encampment covered them with people going back and forth. And most probably the animal drove ways up and down the hill. It would have been teeming with people back and forth and smoke, horses tethered to pegs on the hill and surrounding areas, tents, fires, baggage train etc

On your right the hedge continues to follow the hill fort banks until it goes up to pass under the white building on your right at the point where the hedge suddenly dips down the slope.

Carry on walking round the path past the building through the gate and back to the car park.

On your right, just outside the building there was once a



Bronze Age barrow (burial). Not long-ago traces of this could be seen however if they still exist, they are now hidden by the grass. Bronze Age axe heads have been found on the hill and are in the Town Council museum collection, it is likely that they came from this or other barrows.

On the left you will see the eight large bases for the two masts that used to hold an aerial array between them.

Keep on the path and then the grass track and turn right around the back of the switching building to the car park.

On the entry road to the site you passed the water company cottages for the Daventry supply reservoir that provide the water pressure for the town. In Georgian times there was once a cistern on the north of the hill illegally piping water down to part of the town. This was regularised when the landowner took legal action 1706. The course of the pipes is not known for sure but went down the "Red Way". This was at the time of common grazing on the hill. The cisterns were most probably some way down the slope on the spring lines.

If you enjoyed this walk there are also self-guided walks available for the town of Daventry and a lot more about the history of both the hill and town in the museum.

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Daventry Museum Opening times.

Open Tuesday–Friday 09:30–13:30

MJA v. 4 combined 5 1st Saturday of the month 10:00-16:00

Free Entry