



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

### Welcome to Borough Hill.

It is a British Heritage protected site managed by West Northamptonshire Council. 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 pedestrian gate at the front left of the car park onto the trodden down path. The walk goes anti clockwise around the hill. A reasonably flat and sometimes gravelled or concrete path goes right around the hill and the walk can be completed without leaving the path although there are optional diversions. **Please keep dogs on leads in the skylark breeding season.**

Borough Hill is an acid grass land and as such is nutrient deficient and heath like. On it there are badger sets and rabbit warrens and foxes. In the winter you can see the mouse and field vole runs amongst the grass stems. Birds include the blue woodpecker, buzzards, short eared owls and red kites hunting the area. There are also carrion crows, jackdaws and rooks. It is a nationally important site for skylark breeding. You can see these rising vertically from the grass whilst singing a warning call. They 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 a plantation, probably there to be seen as a landscape feature from the now demolished Norton Hall. There is a huge variety of insects including dung beetles and dragon flies. Stoats and weasels are seen up here too, probably after the rabbits.

**Borough Hill** started life in the Jurassic period 150 to 200 million years ago. It was then in the ocean and was close to the equator. 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 become 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.

Now walk from the gate up the path until you are between the white building on your left (north) and the first of the big trees on skyline on the right of you (south).

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 eroded and nothing remains. On your left, the white building is the first national BBC transmitting station, built on the hill in 1925. There were later buildings some

of which you can see but the station closed down in 1992. Shortly afterwards the Hill was opened to the public.

The obvious remains on the hill belong to the Iron Age when there were two stages of hill fort. The first contour fort possibly following a Bronze Age enclosure. 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 it 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 past the transmitter building 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. If you prefer just carry on the original path to your left.



The most original example of the Iron Age fortifications is to the south, you are now walking through them. 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 than now 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. The second bank follows the line of the fence of the lower field and the third bank would be in the field. There would also have been a palisade fence along the top of the inner most bank. Originally these would probably have circled the whole of the hill on the path you will follow.

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 you can just see them curve to be parallel to the eastern fence but most have been ploughed out again.



Head towards the bank of trees in front of you.

On your left up the hill, to the front of the large 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 your left a path goes up to the building if you want to look for yourself.



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 and

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, 6000 year old, stone hand axes, possibly from people clearing the wood on the hill, were found when the BBC foundations were dug. There are stone tools in the 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. Take care in the wood, the path is uneven with tree roots crossing it as well as rabbit holes. Carry on until the end of the trees.



Some of the Iron Age banks and ditches are to your left and right on the woodland path 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. Early on 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 large armies started to be formed - 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.

At the beginning 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 of a fallen tree suggest this may have been planted as a millennium wood in 1900.

As you leave the wood there is a spring, the 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.

Surveys show that in the curve of the "new" plantation there were Iron Age roundhouses. Understandable if you are on the hill with a cold westerly wind blowing. Another survey also shows roundhouses to the north of the "BBC" buildings above you. The site was occupied for several centuries so there may be other house site elsewhere on the hill.

As you emerge from the wood look up the hill to your left - just below the crest of the hill there were originally 18 (possibly more) roman 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.

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.

The last ice age was about 18000 years ago and left a layer of clay on the hill that is still here making the Hill 660 feet high. At the end of this ice age, as the 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 very 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. At this time there was probably still a small ice cap on Borough Hill.

The brick buildings ahead are on the site of the "GEE" station, originally Nissan huts but later bricked over leaving the equipment inside in place. This was 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 and the first ever GEE station to be built. The first guided raid was for 200 bombers targeting Essen on the 8/9 March 1942. 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 this, but it is private land, and you need to keep to the footpath.

A second, later, Iron Age Hill Fort, which was more heavily defended than the large contour fort, lies entirely within the golf club (and the contour fort). The west, south and north banks survive and the east bank is visible in the wood as well as the banks towards the centre. 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 within the larger fort that was harder to defend. It appears to date from 2/300 BC. The footpath leads to a hollow way that is a modern track (After the First World War), allowing cars and trucks to reach the farm that was on this site. Other earthworks on the east by the monkey puzzle tree belong to a farm built in the 1800's 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 Northwest slope in the golf course. This is approximately where the white marker post is. A restored part of its mosaic floor survives in the Daventry Museum. Metal fittings were found when it was excavated including a door latch and razor and are on display in the British Museum. There were also a lot of pottery finds from the site some of which are in Daventry Museum. 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 continue round on the now metalled foot path.

On your right was a Bronze or Iron Age barrow just inside the middle of the fence to the golf course. 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 that Mercians or Northmen decided to occupy it as a lookout post? However, war axes were used by both Saxons and Danes.

Continue 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/ditch. The first of the paths seem to follow the drovers way down to the town along which livestock was driven to the grazing on the hill from the burghage plots in the Middle Ages. The path may pass 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. Earlier, in 1645 some of Charles I troops were camped on the hill before marching to the battle of Naseby. Nothing is known of this encampment as it only lasted for a week or so. You can download a separate walk on this era.

Continue walking round the path. On your left will see a concrete path (a workers path from the BBC days) going up the slope to the top of the hill. Walk up this you will see why the Hill is so impressive. You can see from Peterborough in the East to the Malvern foothills in the West. Follow the grass track over the crest to your right. If you stay on the lower path look to your left.

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.

The hill became private farmland when the open fields of Daventry were enclosed. The hedges, 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.

Continue walking along but at the large concrete mast anchor follow the concrete path and 12 steps past the black metal post you will find the observation post remains. Then retrace and rejoin the grass path past the BBC building through the gate and back to the car park.

The observation post is hidden in the grass and looks like a manhole. Underneath was a chamber where observers stayed. Their purpose being to emerge if there was war to observe where bombs had dropped.

Once retraced to the grass track heading towards the building on your right the hedge continues to follow the hill fort banks until it goes up to pass under the BBC building on your left from the point where the hedge suddenly dips down the slope.

On the entry road to the site, you passed BBC managers houses and behind them the underground supply reservoir that provides 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, one including the Civil War role of the hill, another covering the wider town area 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

1st Saturday of the month 10:00-16:00

### **Free Entry**

<http://daventrymuseum.org.uk/>