HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC132
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90072)
Taken into State care:	1962 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2021

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CHESTERS HILL FORT

We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600
www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at www.historicenvironment.scot

Cover Image: Oblique Aerial 2016, showing the topmost central oval area of the Fort with outlines of circular structures visible. © Crown Copyright: HES.

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CHESTERS HILL FORT

Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

CONTENTS

1. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Chesters Hill Fort[1] is an Iron Age fort with extensive and well-preserved defences. Its oval plan is formed via a series of ramparts and ditches (up to six at any one point); none of which are continuous for the entire circuit. The complexity of these earthworks suggest modification and elaboration over time. This long history is reinforced by traces of circular houses in the enclosed interior: some of these clearly post-date the innermost defensive line. Recent surveys have revealed traces of earlier structures on the site and in its surrounding landscape.

To date (2021), the site has not been subject to significant archaeological excavation,[2] but its earliest phase is thought to be around 2500 years old.

The site was scheduled in 1923,[3] and taken into State care in 1962 via Guardianship agreement.

The fort is located one mile south of Drem in East Lothian and is reached by a short path from a small parking area. Access to the fort is waymarked and requires crossing a high wooden stile.[4] The site is unstaffed and free to visit throughout the year, with annual visitor numbers estimated to be around 1,150.[5] Information is provided via on-site interpretation boards.

[1] The Property in Care (PIC) is legally defined as 'Chesters Hill Fort' within the 2014 Scheme of Delegation for PICs, however the site is more commonly referred to as 'The Chesters' or 'The Chesters at Drem'.
[2] Known excavation of the site is limited to four small trenches, excavated in 2017 to accommodate fence posts (Murray 2017), and that associated with the removal of Second World War constructions in 1976 (Yates 1976).
[3] Scheduled as SM90072 'The Chesters fort, Drem'. For full scheduling description, see: https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90072 (Accessed: 20 April 2022).
[4] Prior to visiting, please check access information at: https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/chesters-hill-fort/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022).
[5] Estimated figures for 2019-20, courtesy of HES.

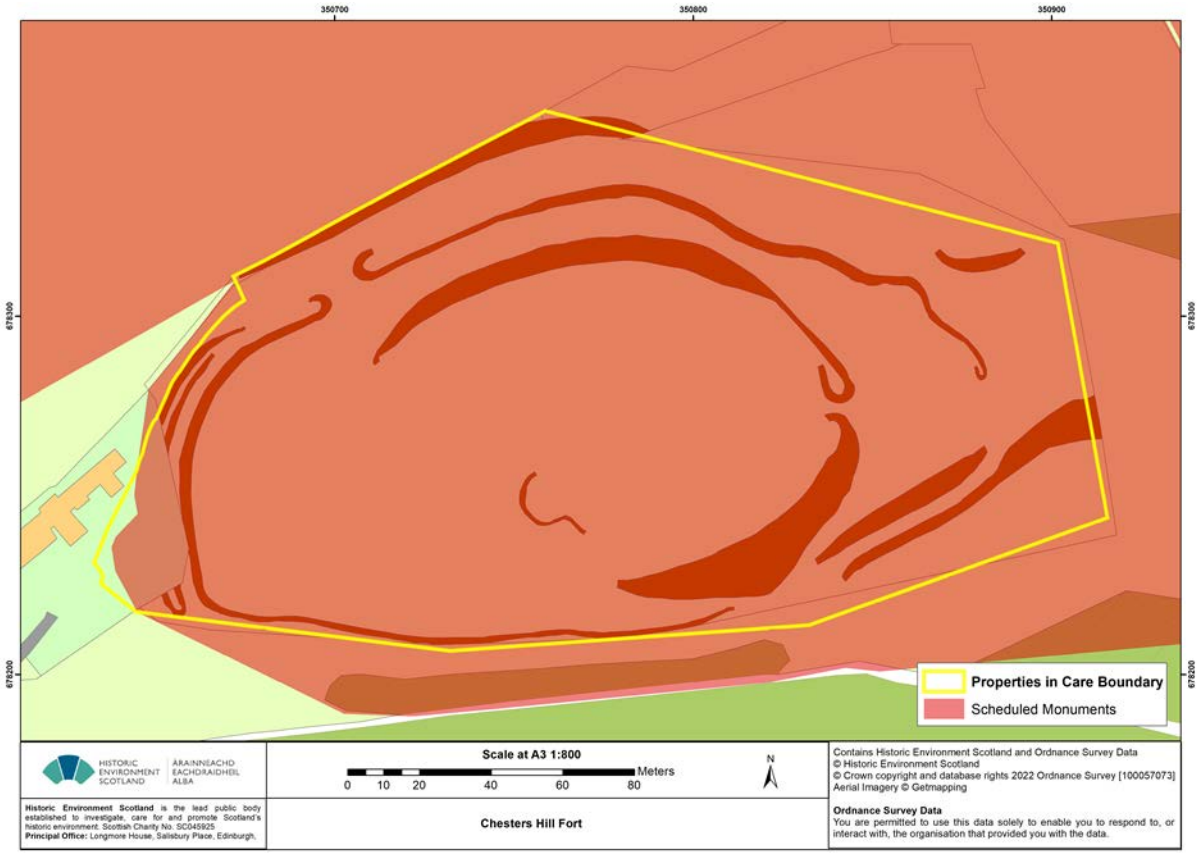

Figure 1: Chesters Hill Fort Scheduled area and Property in Care (PIC) boundary, with Dalvreck, Palisaded Enclosure And Pit Alignment (SM5824) adjacent to the north. Image for illustrative purposes only.

1.2 Statement of Significance

The Chesters is of national importance as a particularly elaborate, well-preserved and easily accessible Iron Age fort. Remarkably for such a well-known and accessible site, there is no record of any significant excavation having taken place there. Current understanding of the Chesters has therefore relied upon the interpretation of visible surface features, recently supplemented by sub-surface information obtained through geophysical investigation in 2012 and 2019. The absence of excavation indicates an extremely high potential for the survival of intact archaeological deposits.

With up to six separate lines of enclosure, in the form of ramparts with intervening ditches, and two entrances, the outer works are among the most complex known in Scotland and seem out of proportion to the modest space enclosed. The unusual plan of the outer defences lends support to the idea – a major theme of Iron Age studies – that such 'forts' were not simply defensive strongholds, but also served as communal gathering places for a range of different social functions. Indeed, the fact that the Chesters is overlooked by higher ground, less than 100 metres to the south, calls into question whether the site was intended to be physically defensible to any degree at all.

The plan suggests several phases of construction of ditches and ramparts. Though the sequence is unproven by excavation, the innermost rampart seems earliest; the next

outward rampart may be contemporary with it, while the four outermost ramparts appear to be later, and are much more irregular on plan. Two entrances pierce the defences. Within the oval interior, and partly overlying the innermost rampart, are the traces of several circular houses.

Recent geophysical survey has confirmed and provided additional detail of a series of additional structures, which probably pre-date the main fort. Under the eastern defences a substantial, circular, double-ditched enclosure is clearly earlier. Part of a series of pit-defined linear features, appears to run up to and possibly under the fort's defences. This may represent a system of early Iron Age land division, perhaps associated with the pre-fort remains. The emerging potential to explore the relationship between a significant Iron Age settlement and its surrounding agricultural landscape, as it changed over time, is a particular feature of the importance of the Chesters.

The significance of the Chesters lies as much in its archaeological setting and potential as in what can be observed and has already been discovered. To date (2021), the lack of any significant archaeological excavation limits understanding of the sequence of construction, occupation and use. Further investigation could support advances in understanding, both of the site's history and also about Iron Age society.

Key aspects of the Chesters' significance include the following:

- It is an excellent example of an Iron Age enclosed settlement, normally referred to as a 'fort' but whose functions probably extended beyond the defensive.
- Its elaborate multiple boundary features and entrances have been cited in support of the suggestion that here, and at hillforts more generally, such boundaries were not primarily, defensive.
- The proximity of higher ground overlooking the site poses a challenge for traditional interpretation of the site as a fort but may also offer an insight into understanding the role of such sites.
- It is highly likely to contain deposits and structural evidence relating to earlier use of the site and to its subsequent development.
- It holds substantial unexplored potential to produce evidence of human occupation and other activities in the spaces within and between the boundaries. (Investigations to date have consisted almost entirely of non-intrusive survey activity, largely focussed on the enclosing features.)
- Traces of land division have been discerned (through aerial and geophysical survey) in the surrounding area, apparently in direct relationship with the Chesters and with other Iron Age settlements nearby. This offers the potential to explore the relationship between these sites and their Iron Age landscape setting. This is an extremely rare feature: in most cases such evidence has vanished or been obscured by landscape change over two millennia of agriculture and other human activity.
- The Chesters is relatively accessible, to be visited and appreciated as a fine field monument.

Figure 2: Aerial view from the north-east, showing the higher ground which overlooks the Chesters from the south. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The following pages give a fuller background and go on to discuss the various aspects of significance.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Descriptive overview

The site is usually referred to as 'The Chesters' or 'The Chesters at Drem' to distinguish it from several other sites also called 'Chesters'.[6] Chesters derives from *castra*, a Latin word meaning a fort or camp.

It is located on the crest of a low ridge, which runs from west to east; it is overlooked by a parallel, higher ridge situated less than 100m to the south. The bedrock is close to the surface, thinly covered with a sandy, stony soil which is prone to erosion by livestock, rabbits and the feet of visitors. The site also suffers from the growth of gorse, which must be regularly cut back.

The central area of the fort is an oval of about 0.5 hectares, measuring 110 metres east-west by 50 metres. The innermost rampart, which encloses this space, is partly overlain by (and therefore earlier than) the fragmentary traces of several circular houses, and in places is almost entirely levelled relative to the interior. The second rampart is concentric with the first, with a broad and possibly deep ditch between the two. This rampart is more substantial in terms of thickness and height. Outside this are at least four further ramparts, all of lesser stature. None of these makes an uninterrupted circuit around the site: there are three lines to the north and only one to the south, while at both the east and the west ends there are four lines. These expansions flank what appear to be the two original entrances and seem designed to require anyone entering the fort to take a twisting route, thus exposing first one flank and then the other to a defender within. It is not clear if this elaboration of the eastern and western entrances is (a) a relatively late development, or (b) the result of modifying an earlier defensive circuit. The recent detection by geophysical survey of what appears to be a circular double-ditched enclosure underlying the eastern defences does not resolve the question: superficially it might make explanation (a) seem more probable, but there is always the possibility of an even longer sequence of construction and reconstruction than previously envisaged.

[6] For example, Chesters fort in the neighbouring parish of Bolton, or the rather better-known Chesters Roman Fort on Hadrian's Wall, which is maintained by English Heritage.

Figure 3: Showing detail of ramparts looking south. © Historic Environment Scotland.

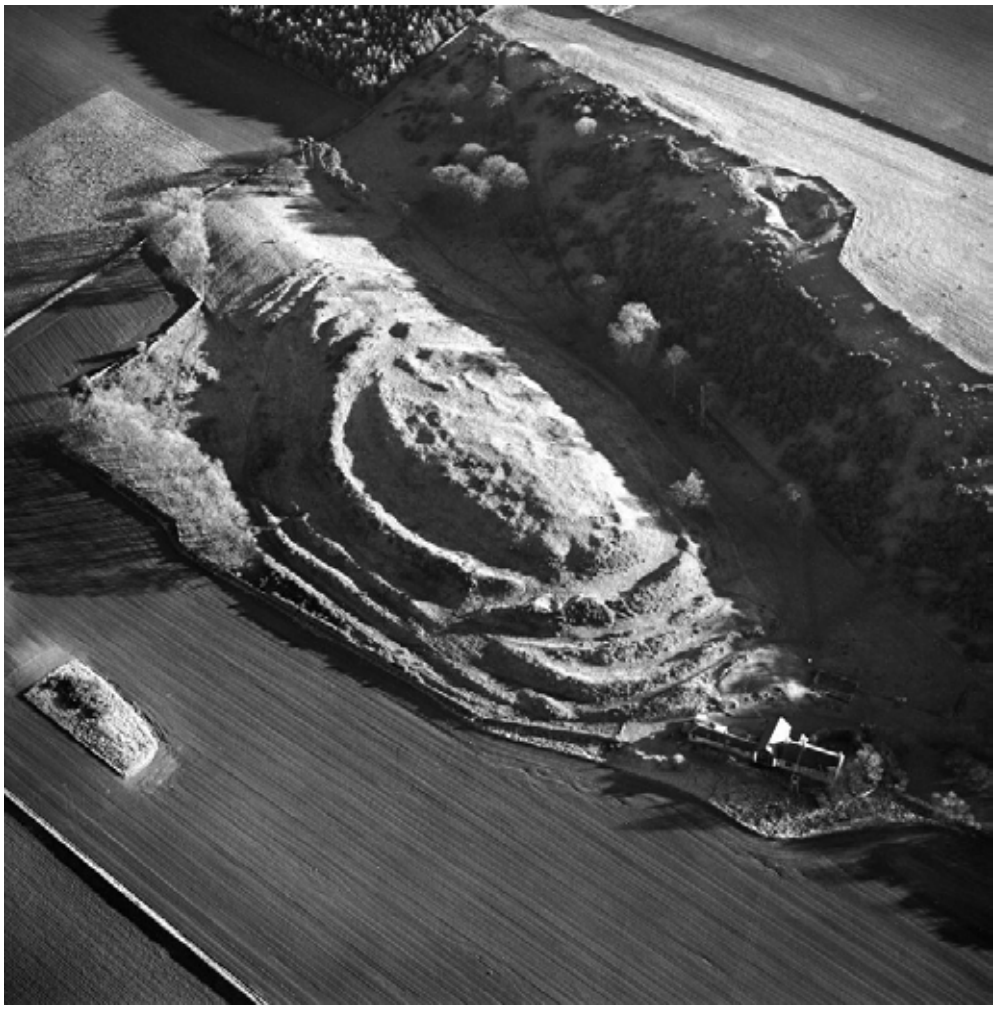

Figure 4: Oblique aerial view from the west-north-west, with low-angle light showing the irregular interior, including remains of circular houses. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The surface of the enclosed space has many irregularities. Some of these appear to be the remains of the wall-footings of circular houses, which are concentrated just inside, and partly overlying, the innermost rampart. Other irregularities may relate to a much more recent event, the construction of a Second World War observation post and gun-emplacement, built to protect a nearby airfield. The upstanding remains of these features were removed in 1976.[7]

Figure 5: Aerial view from the west-north-west in 1973, showing four WW2 huts and gun-emplacement, which were removed in 1976. © HES (John Dewar Collection).

A large boulder (see Fig 8), perhaps a glacial erratic, is embedded in the soil on the crest of the ridge just outside the eastern defences towards the east, as the ridge begins to dip towards the surrounding fields.

Although invisible to the visitor, important evidence has been located by geophysical surveys, completed in 2012 and 2019. A near-circular, double-ditched enclosure,

[7] Yates 1976.

possibly a palisaded settlement measuring about 40 metres in interior diameter, has been detected underneath the earthwork defences at the eastern end of the site. Potentially even more significant, in terms of understanding the Iron Age, are the traces of several linear features defined by pits: these are also visible on aerial photographs and run for considerable distances over an area of about 5 kilometres square which includes a number of other Iron Age settlements. These features are currently interpreted as Iron Age land divisions.

Figure 6: Oblique aerial view from north-east in 1978, showing cropmarks: an oval enclosure on rise to the north of the Chesters (top right) and a pit alignment running across the lower left foreground, both features appearing paler than the overlying crop. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The southern end of one pit alignment runs up to and apparently under the northern ramparts of the Chesters, suggesting the alignments may be earlier than the fort and thus hinting at an earlier settlement whose remains may be concealed beneath it. A less

distinct linear feature has been located running towards the fort from the east, with the large boulder positioned exactly on its line.[8]

No significant artefactual finds are recorded, and there is no record of any extensive excavation having taken place.

Access to the site is by a short path from the parking area and leads to a gate, beyond which it crosses a grazed field to a tall wooden stile over a stock-proof electrified fence. There is no alternative route for visitor access. The steep path up onto the fort from the stile is not surfaced and suffers slightly from erosion due to visitor footfall. An interpretation panel is set just beyond the first gate, which is as far as visitors who are unable to cross the stile can proceed. A slight, informal path (not managed by HES) has begun to develop leading steeply up from the first gate to the hilltop to the south of fort. This has been formed by visitors seeking a view across the fort. This path climbs up beside a substantial rabbit-proof fence surrounding a large area cleared of scrub and gorse, which once housed a sizeable rabbit colony. This is part of an ongoing programme of work to control rabbit activity which has a detrimental impact on the ramparts.

2.1.2 Antiquarian and archaeological activity – surveying and interpreting

The earliest known map depiction of the site is as a symbol of concentric circles on the Armstrongs' Map of 1773.[9] It is interesting to note that the Chesters does not appear on General Roy's map of 1752-5, given Roy's interest in antiquities: this may be due to the site's secluded position as viewed from the main routeways of the time.[10] It appears on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map as 'British Fort' with the overlying settlement remains marked 'Pictish houses' – possibly suggesting that the latter were already, at that date, regarded as later than the defences.[11]

The first published description of the site is that by the Reverend William Ritchie, written around 1833 and published in 1835 (reproduced at Appendix 2 here): this is a relatively detailed account of what the writer terms a 'Pictish town' and suggests that the foundations visible within the interior were much clearer in the mid-19th century than they are today.[12] The site was illustrated (as Drem Hill Fort) in Christian Maclagan's *The Hill Forts, Stone Circles and Other Structural Remains of Ancient Scotland* published in 1875[13].

[8] Armit et al 2013.
[9] Armstrong and Armstrong 1773.
[10] Roy Military Survey of Scotland: Lowlands, 1752-5, accessible via National Library of Scotland (NLS) at: https://maps.nls.uk/geo/roy/#zoom=12&lat=55.9933&lon=-2.7804&layers=1&point=0,0 (Accessed: 20 April 2022).
[11] Six-inch first edition OS map 1854, Sheet 5, Haddingtonshire, accessible via NLS at: https://maps.nls.uk/view/228777841 (Accessed 20 April 2022).
[12] NSA 1835, vol ii, p 50 (The date is sometimes cited as 1845, but this is for the final volume in the NSA).
[13] Maclagan 1875.

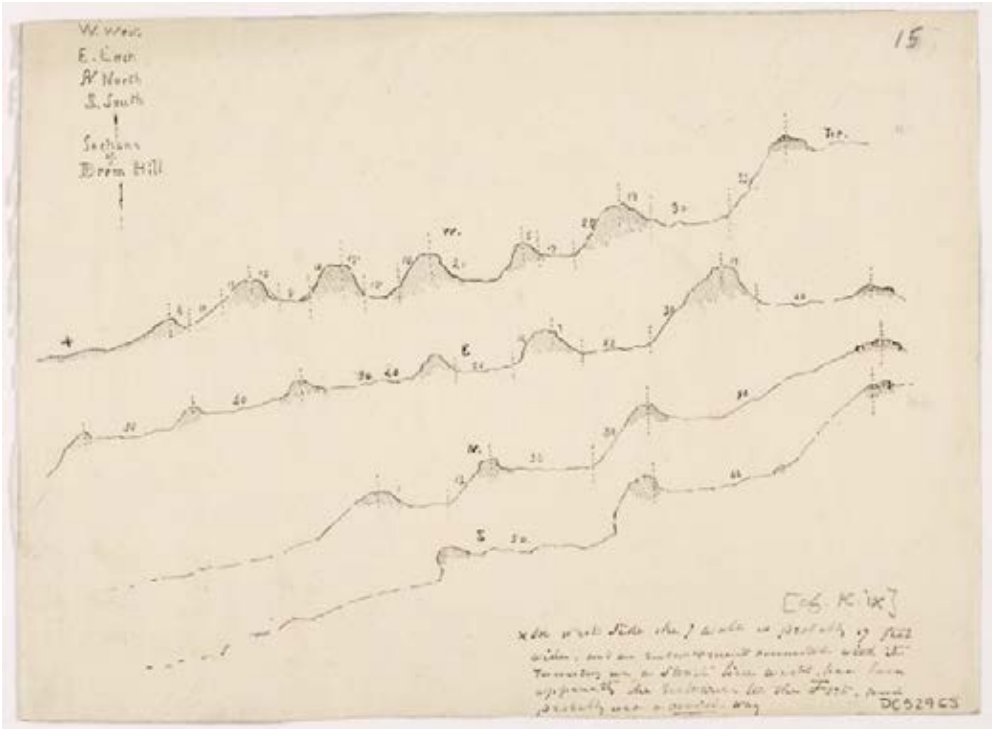

Figure 7: Profile drawings across the ditches and ramparts of the fort, with measurements and annotations. By unknown hand, c. 1850 – possibly Christian Maclagan, whose publication The Hill Forts, Stone Circles and Other Structural Remains of Ancient Scotland included a revised partial version of this drawing, as plate IX. © Courtesy of HES (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection). Reproduced with kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Figure 8: Watercolour of Chesters fort emphasising profile of ramparts. By unknown hand, c. 1850 – possibly Christian Maclagan, whose publication The Hill Forts, Stone Circles and Other Structural Remains of Ancient Scotland included a revised version as plate VII. © Courtesy of HES (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection) Reproduced with kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

In 1893 Cunningham and Coles surveyed the earthworks, the former publishing a plan, cross-sections and short description.[14]

A more accurate and detailed survey was made by RCAHMS in 1914, and their plan and description[15] provided the basis for subsequent depictions, with revisions made in 1956.[16]

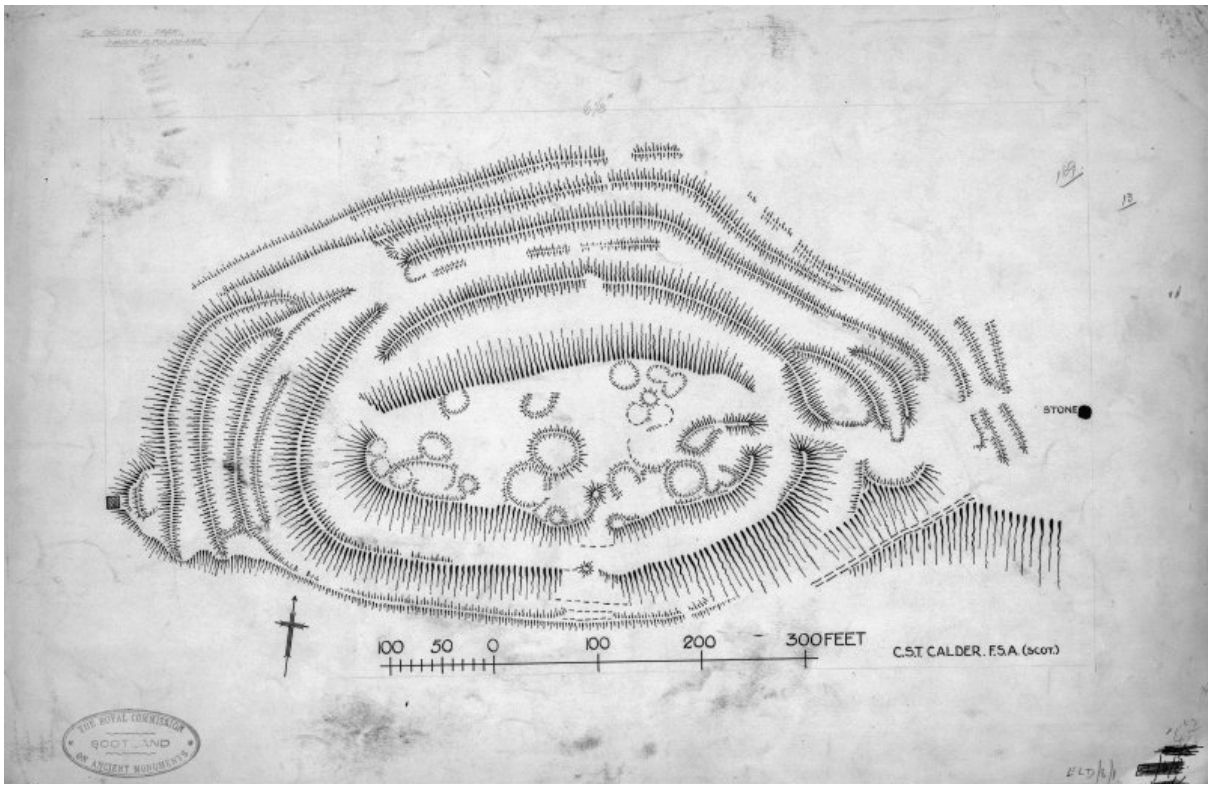

Figure 9: Plan of Chesters, Drem, c. 1920, RCAHMS. Plan shows ramparts, circular structures, entrances and position of boulder to east. Publication drawing; plan of fort, Chesters, Drem. | Canmore © Crown Copyright: HES.

In 1975 Roger Mercer re-surveyed the site for DoE:PSA (a predecessor body to HES). A new and more detailed contour survey was carried out, over several seasons, by Connolly and Cook in 2010-2014.

It is noteworthy that, while the Chesters is mentioned in several discussions of the Iron Age in southern Scotland written in the latter part of the 20th century, this is often simply as a passing note, perhaps with a photograph and reference to its being overlooked by adjacent higher ground. This is to some extent understandable: its small enclosed area and lack of any excavation evidence have in effect reduced its value to a curiosity, and one which was hard to accommodate in grand theories based on larger hillforts and models of inter-group conflict. In more recent years, it has acquired almost iconic importance for proponents of the increasingly favoured view that such forts are more about status than about defence:

[14] Cunningham 1896.
[15] RCAHMS 1924.
[16] RCAHMS unpublished survey.

> The Chesters, sitting amid a heavily settlement and extensively cultivated landscape… is a prime example of a defensively ineffectual fort… The adjacent high ridge, as well as making a fine platform from which to view the multiple ramparts, would have been an eminently suitable place from which to rain down missiles on the fort's defenders. Yet the investment of labour represented by its ramparts must have been spent to some purpose; in this case presumably to glorification of the fort's inhabitants.[17]

2.1.3 Excavation

Remarkably, the Chesters seems to have escaped the attentions of early antiquarians or more recent archaeologists: certainly, there are no records of any significant excavation. In 1976 the removal of gun-emplacements and an observation post, which had been erected on the site during the Second World War, allowed a brief glimpse below the turf. Though 'no attempt was made to excavate any more than necessary', 'vestigial traces' of walls which may have belonged to a hut circle were found in the centre of the interior. The examination of a partial section of the innermost rampart on the north side of the east entrance, was afforded during the same programme of work, but revealed no structural evidence. [18]

2.1.4 Conservation and other work since 1962

Since coming into State care in 1962, the Chesters has been managed in as low-key and non-disruptive a manner as possible: the only significant works being the removal of wartime structures in 1976 and the renewal of fencing. Light grazing by livestock has been the preferred management regime, combined with occasional cutting of gorse.

The friable, stony nature of the soil has led to repeated episodes of surface erosion under the feet of animals and visitors. Another issue is the rapid spread of gorse, which shelters colonies of rabbits that burrow into the ramparts. This contributes to surface damage of the rampart especially if livestock walk over areas of rampart where rabbit burrows proliferate, as their hooves can break into the burrows. These persistent issues have been addressed by the occasional filling of erosion scars, cutting of gorse, and rabbit control. A detailed survey of this erosion and its changing impact over time was undertaken between 2010-14, with a view to establishing a more effective long-term management regime.[19] New rabbit-proof fencing was installed in 2017/18[20] and scrub and gorse were cleared from an area to the south of the fort which formerly provided shelter for a large rabbit colony.

[17] Armit 1997, 59.
[18] Yates 1976.
[19] Connolly and Cook 2010-14.
[20] See Murray 2017.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of the upstanding remains visible at the Chesters is exceptionally high, for what its constructional details, physical fabric, location and setting can tell us about life during the Iron Age, and particularly about how communities came together to undertake major construction projects. The site's value in this respect is enhanced by the high potential for the survival of archaeological deposits and structural evidence relating to the fort's construction, use and modification over time, including its apparent continuing use as a settlement after the ramparts and ditches ceased to be maintained.

Even without excavation, it is possible on surface evidence alone to suggest a sequence of construction, commencing with the innermost rampart and, probably contemporaneous, the broad inner ditch and the second rampart. This seems to have been followed, perhaps after some time, by the addition of a series of ramparts of lesser stature, most numerous at the opposed east and west ends of the site, which would have served to render entrance into the site impressive to a degree out of proportion to the overall size of the enclosed area. A final phase, of what may have been a sizeable unenclosed settlement of circular houses partly overlying the now-decayed innermost rampart, completes the sequence, as far as it can be determined from surface remains alone. The phenomenon of a relatively small enclosed area surrounded by a succession of out-of-proportion boundary features is shared with other sites in East Lothian, most notably the excavated, and now removed, hillfort at Broxmouth near Dunbar.[21]

The site's value has recently been further enhanced by the discovery, through non-intrusive survey techniques, of convincing evidence of settlement in the same location which pre-dates the fort as it appears today, and also of potential connections, in the form of land divisions stretching out into the surrounding area, with other enclosed sites in the vicinity. One of these newly-discovered features seem to align on a previously overlooked feature of the site: a large boulder, likely a glacial erratic, which is set on the ridge-crest a short distance to the east of the fort. It remains to be established whether this is fortuitous or deliberate.

[21] Armit and Mackenzie 2013.

Figure 10: View from east showing large boulder outside the eastern rampart and looking up towards the Fort. © Historic Environment Scotland.

The site has escaped any significant excavation by early antiquarians or by more recent archaeologists. While this must limit the extent of our present knowledge about many aspects – for example its precise date and its detailed similarities and differences compared with other Iron Age sites in the area – it means that the Chesters is essentially an outstandingly well-preserved time-capsule.

In short, the visible and potential evidential value of the Chesters is hard to over-state. It survives archaeologically intact, protected by law and represents a hugely important 'archaeological reserve' for future research.[22]

2.3 Historical values

2.3.1 Early historical background – Roman and Welsh sources

The Chesters lies within a sizeable geographical area, roughly corresponding to modern Northumberland, Scottish Borders and the Lothians, which Roman literary sources record as having been the territory of a tribe (or group of tribes) known to the Romans

[22] 'Archaeological reserve' is a term used in Article 4i of the 1992 Valletta Convention (The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (revised)) (Council of Europe 1992) to refer to sites and areas which are known to have archaeological potential but which are better preserved for future research rather than being subjected to destructive investigation in the short term. It equates, approximately, to scheduled monuments under Scottish heritage legislation as this presently operates, with a strong presumption against excavation unless an exceptional case exists.

as the Votadini (sometimes Otadini). They were a British or Brythonic grouping, speaking a language closely akin to early Welsh.

There is some evidence that the Votadini, if not active allies of Rome, had at least reached a stable accommodation with the Roman occupying forces during their episodic presence in Scotland from the late 1st century AD to the late 4th century. It seems reasonable to assume that the Votadini were an already well-established and powerful grouping before the Romans appeared.

It has been suggested that the chief settlement of the Votadini was at nearby Traprain Law.[23] An impressive hoard of late Roman silver found at Traprain has been characterised as a gift or bribe in return for continued cooperation with Rome. However, there are other possibilities, including that the hill was a sacred place and the hoard a votive deposit – although there are also more 'mundane' Roman artefacts from the site.[24]

The Votadini re-appear under the name Gododdin in the early Welsh epic poem *Y Gododdin.* The poem (best regarded as series of poetical laments rather than a single narrative composition) deals with the prelude to, and the Battle of Catraeth in c.AD 600[25]. Their chief fortress at this date was at Din Eidyn – probably the rock on which **Edinburgh Castle**[26] now sits – rather than at Traprain. A generation later, after a siege of Din Eidyn in c.AD 638, independence was lost to the aggressively expanding Northumbrian kingdom of Bernicia.[27] (It is possible that Din Eidyn was also the principal tribal stronghold in earlier times, with Traprain an important, but subsidiary, power-centre.)

However fascinating, the extremely fragmentary Roman literary evidence and the early Welsh epics cast little detailed light on the society and economy in which the Chesters was created and occupied, and in which it may be regarded as being a centre of considerable, but secondary, importance.

2.3.2 The place of the Chesters in the archaeological narrative

The primary historical importance of the Chesters consists in its ability to contribute to evidence-based narratives about how society in what is now south-east Scotland may have operated, and changed, during the early to middle Iron Age. It also offers evidence

[23] Armit 1997, 102-3: '…Traprain Law remains the best, perhaps the only, candidate for a pre-Roman tribal "capital" in the traditional sense.'
[24] Breeze 1996, 112-4.
[25] Research carried out by Nicholas Evans in relation to the early history of Edinburgh castle includes a summary of the 7th century context which may provide a relevant introduction here: https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=ab142e79-dc69-466a-bb61-aaa000f3461d (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

[26] Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022).
[27] Aneirin 1998 – a new translation by Gillian Clarke is due to be published in May 2021.

to support considerations of how that society related to its own heritage, in respect of re-using sites which had seen use in earlier times.

Scotland's hillforts have been the subject of much study and excavation. Attempts to understand them have given rise to numerous theories about their genesis, purpose, context and relationships to each other and to other Iron Age structures. Forts seem to demand consideration in a wider geographical context, since enclosures of broadly similar character occur throughout the majority of the British Isles and continental Europe. [28]

Archaeological narratives which prevailed from the start of the last century until the 1970s linked the development of Scotland's hillforts (along with the brochs and duns of the far north and west) to the arrival of successive waves of settlers arriving from further south, moving at least partly in response to Roman expansionism on the Continent. This supposed process (which became known as 'diffusion') was deemed to have led to a 'Celtic' culture, based largely on pastoralism. Hillfort excavations in Scotland were few in number and limited in extent, and narratives were largely based on the comparison of site plans.

Based on a very small number of small-scale excavations, elaborate systems of development were drawn up, hypothesising how one type of defensive enclosure gave rise to the next, on the unproven assumption that these changes were almost synchronous across large areas (although with developments in Scotland always following after those of southern Britain) and that there was a single logical sequence of development across the whole country.[29] Some aspects of the construction and abandonment of hillforts were explicitly linked to the influence of the Roman army after its first appearance in Scotland in the late 70's AD: this assumption is already apparent in the earliest account of the Chesters, written around 1833.[30]

These ideas were largely abandoned once increasing evidence began to emerge in the late 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s (including from the nearby Broxmouth hillfort[31]) that many Scottish hillforts had begun to be constructed long before the dates required for such explanations, and also that the sequence of enclosure boundaries varied markedly from site to site and over time. The idea that Scotland's hillforts were ever expanded to become hilltop towns,[32] as may have been the case in the late centuries BC in southern Britain and on the near Continent, has also been abandoned, with the prevailing view being that, for most of their existence, hillforts functioned primarily as domestic and agricultural enclosures.[33]

[28] Harding 2012.
[29] The assumed general sequence was: palisaded settlement then single-ditched fort then multiple ditched fort then undefended settlement. Illustrated in Armit 1997, 51 and elsewhere.
[30] NSA 1835 – text reproduced at Appendix 2 below.
[31] Armit and Mackenzie 2013.
[32] As suggested by Childe 1935 and later developed by Feachem 1966, 77-82. The latter introduced the term 'oppidum' to describe the largest hillforts in Scotland, adopting the word for a town from Julius Caesar's account of his conquests in Gaul.
[33] Harding 2012, 87.

Most recent studies have tended to emphasise the role of both hillforts and less heavily-defended enclosures,[34] as central places or regional centres within their own territories, and to concentrate upon their detailed structure and possible functions within a local context, rather than considering them as elements of wider systems. The detailed differences between hillforts have been emphasised more than the similarities, and the emphasis has been on trying to understand the histories of individual sites. At the same time, high-level hypotheses have emerged, including the arrangement of daily activities within houses and settlements according to cosmological principles. Such generalised theories are hard to either substantiate or refute with existing techniques.

Research into long-distance contacts and the large-scale movements of people have not been favoured in recent decades, due to their association with 'discredited diffusionism'. As the authors of one recent excavation report put it:

> Celticism and the 'big picture' narratives that might link the … community to some kind of Europe-wide Celtic continuum have become almost taboo for many Iron Age archaeologists.[35]

Despite the current lack of enthusiasm for such themes amongst researchers of the Iron Age, the influence on hillfort construction and use of the inter-regional exchange of ideas (and even of people) remains a valid field of inquiry. It remains to be seen whether recent advances in scientific methods, in particular the increasing use of ancestral DNA analysis of human remains, will drive a swing of the pendulum of fashion in research back towards larger geographical perspectives and reconsideration of the possibilities of population movement and long-range contact as opposed to (or at least combined with) indigenous development and local invention. That said, one of the defining features of the Scottish Iron Age is likely to stand in the way of such research – the near-total absence of human remains surviving from the early and middle Iron Age.

The Chesters, with its distinctive landscape setting and its undoubted potential for the survival of a wide range of types of physical evidence, has frequently been cited in the development of past and current theories about forts and about Iron Age settlement more widely, and continues to represent an extremely important research resource as new ways of understanding Scotland's Iron Age 'special places' are developed. This is demonstrated by the recent results of geophysical survey in the surrounding area, which offer the promise of integrating the Chesters and other surrounding enclosed sites into a coherent Iron Age landscape – another form of 'big picture'.[36]

---

[34] Two important excavations of enclosed (but not ramparted) Iron Age sites in East Lothian are St Germains (Alexander et al 1999) and Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007) – the sequences in both cases, apparently like the Chesters, ended with unenclosed settlements of circular houses.

[35] Armit and Mackenzie 2013, 13.

[36] A pioneering project attempting to set the nearby Traprain Law into its landscape context was published by Haselgrove 2009 and offers a template for development in this regard.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

2.4.1 Architecture and design

Architectural value is difficult to ascribe to prehistoric earthwork monuments such as the Chesters, and especially so in the absence of any evidence from excavation. There seems little doubt that each phase of enclosure would have taken place as part of a clear overall plan, and almost certainly under some form of hierarchical supervision rather than as an egalitarian community enterprise. However, the variety of details present on hillforts, and the variability within even short sections of enclosure revealed by excavations on other hillfort sites, tends to suggest that a large degree of adaptability was allowable within the overall 'design concept'.

2.4.2 Construction

No details are currently available of the methods of construction used in creating the ramparts and houses at the Chesters. Little information of use in this regard was gathered during the monitoring of minor episodes of planned sub-surface work,[37] however, such evidence is almost certainly contained within the site.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The Chesters is a pleasant, grassy site, with a short approach on foot. The outlook to the north is over the East Lothian plain towards the Firth of Forth coastline, across the rectilinear fields of the late 18th-century 'improved' farming landscape with small clumps of mature woodland. North Berwick Law is prominent towards the north-east, and Arthur's Seat is visible to the west, both locations with Iron Age forts. From the higher ground to the south, as well as a better view of the fort, there is a much wider view, including the summit of nearby Traprain Law, which is not visible from the Chesters itself.

The Chesters is included in the area of Kilduff and Garleton hills identified by East Lothian Council as the Garleton Hills Special Landscape Area[38]. The designation notes this area as: a highly prominent landmark and uniquely iconic volcanic landform in the heart of East Lothian with a coherent area of important prehistoric settlement. The area also includes the Hopetoun Monument, a distinctive 19th century circular tower visible for many miles around.

With its irregular interior space and multiple ramparts, the Chesters can be hard to appreciate at ground level. It is at its most photogenic from the air, and a selection of

[37] Yates 1976; Murray 2017.
[38] Available to download at: https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/downloads/file/27912/special_landscape_areas_spg_-_part_2 (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

aerial views of various dates have been published, with many more held in the National Record of the Historic Environment[39].

2.6 Natural heritage values

The land immediately around the Chesters is not currently (2021) covered by national designations for the protection of species or habitats, geological features or landscape qualities.[40] However, the area is locally identified as a Special Landscape Area by East Lothian Council, see above.

Visitors approach the site along a short path. To the south of the site the grass-covered, stony hill which overlooks it bears some mature mixed woodland and a great deal of gorse. A variety of typical farmland birds are usually audible or visible, for example skylarks *Alaudia arvensis.* Stonechats *Saxicola rubicola* are locally resident in summer, singing from the top of gorse bushes, while wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes* are present all year round. Common buzzards *Buteo buteo* are frequently seen overhead. The only wild mammals regularly seen on site – all too regularly – are rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus.*

2.7 Contemporary/use values

To date (2021) there has not been a formal assessment of the value of Chesters to contemporary communities, of either geography or interest. The following paragraphs are therefore based on readily available sources, and informal on-site observations.

The value of the Chesters for contemporary local communities lies in its interesting history and relative ease of access. However, the rabbit-proof protective fencing limits access to the site at certain times of the year to those who are able to cross the high stile.

The site is valued by local communities as an element of the area's heritage, which is particularly rich in Iron Age sites, although local heritage promotion focusses more on historical aspects.[41]

---

[39] Accessible at: https://canmore.org.uk/site/56280/drem-the-chesters (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

[40] SNH protected area map accessed online 14 February 2021.

[41] The nearby village of Athelstaneford, is remembered as the site of a battle fought in AD 832 when a joint Scottish/Pictish raiding party, led by Oenghus II mac Fergus, was caught, while returning from a foray deep into Northumbria, by a force led by Athelstan. Tradition has it that Oenghus prayed to St Andrew for help. The appearance in the sky of a saltire, the sign of St Andrew, inspired Oenghus to victory, and led to the adoption of St Andrew as Scotland's patron saint. (It is perhaps because this battle took place in what was then part of Northumbria that it enjoys the unusual attribute of being commemorated by the name of the loser, the Northumbrian Athelstan.) Today the Flag Heritage Centre https://scottishflagtrust.com/the-flag-heritage-centre/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022) is located in the village, while the Saltire Trail is a signposted driving route which links places of historic interest in the area. (Note that this battle is erroneously dated in some sources, due to a confusion with the earlier Oenghus I mac Fergus.)

Images of the site (generally aerial views) have frequently been used in archaeological guides and reference works but tend not to feature in general guidebooks.

On-site interpretation is currently (2021) provided by a simple interpretation panel set on the approach path at a point where there is a good view of the site, and before the stile is reached.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are many unanswered questions surrounding hillforts, despite over a century of excavation, study and theorising. A deeper understanding of the individual history and use(s) of the Chesters would contribute to a fuller understanding of the wider phenomenon of hillforts, of which Scotland has several hundred.

Many of the questions below are generic, and could be asked about any fort:

- What was the nature of occupation on the site before the visible fort was constructed?
- How large was the 'territory' around the Chesters: did its extent change over time?
- How did the site relate to the pit alignments detected running between it and other Iron Age settlements in the vicinity? Did it sit within a comprehensively apportioned and 'owned' agricultural landscape?
- Why was a construction, which appears to be a fort, built in a location closely overlooked by higher ground, and thus defensively compromised?
- What was the purpose of the enclosing earthworks – were they intended as defences against attack, or were they more in the nature of boundaries which controlled access to a special place?
- What was the sequence and construction method of the earthworks – were there two or more phases?
- Is there evidence of boundaries, such as palisades, still to be discovered?
- What activities took place within the enclosed area: was it occupied for extended periods of time or only for occasional /season use? How did use vary over time? Were specialised activities/industries undertaken on site? And in particular, was the Chesters occupied during the Roman presence in southern Scotland?
- When were the boundaries of the Chesters abandoned, or at least why did the maintenance and replacement of the earthworks cease? Did this mark a major change in society?
- What was the character and duration of the post-enclosure settlement indicated by the circular house foundations?
- Was the site re-occupied at any period after the Iron Age and, if so, when and for what purpose(s)?

- Is there any significance to the name Chesters, often associated with Roman sites. When did the name originate for this site, and was this linked to Antiquarian study?
- What can be learned about the wartime use of the site to enhance later history of the site?

Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

4.1 Associated properties managed by HES

- **Edin's Hall** (fort, broch and settlement, Scottish Borders)
- **Castlelaw** (fort and souterrain, Midlothian)
- **Caterthuns (Brown and White)** (forts, Angus)
- **Holyrood Park** (fort, City of Edinburgh)
- **Edinburgh Castle** (castle on probable site of Din Eidyn, City of Edinburgh)

4.2 Other associated sites

Sites listed below are not in State care: visitors should pay attention to local signage and requests, and observe the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.[42]

- Traprain Law (fort, East Lothian) – possibly the 'capital' of the Votadini
- North Berwick Law (fort, East Lothian) – a fine view, but fort is poorly preserved
- White Castle (fort, East Lothian) – a fine example of a small fort, like the Chesters not in a particularly elevated location
- Eildon Hill North (fort, Scottish Borders) – major hilltop enclosure, with traces of many circular house foundation and a landmark in Roman times (there is some evidence that the enclosure may be pre-Iron Age)

5. KEYWORDS

The Chesters; Drem; Iron Age; hillfort; fort; rampart; ditch; roundhouse; enclosure; pit alignment; Votadini; Gododdin; East Lothian.

[42] Available at: https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, D., Watkins, T., Gleeson, A., Hunter, F., Sheridan, A., and Thoms, J. (1999), 'St Germains, Tranent, East Lothian: the excavation of Early Bronze Age remains and Iron Age enclosed and unenclosed settlements', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland,* 128: 203-254.

Aneirin (1998), *Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem*. Edited and translated by A. O. H. Jarman. Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Pres - The Welsh Classics, 3.

Armit, I. (1997), *Celtic Scotland*. London: BT Batsford / Historic Scotland. (New edition issued 2007.)

Armit, I. and Mackenzie, J. (2013), *An Inherited Place: Broxmouth Hillfort and the South-East Scottish Iron Age*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Armit, I., Gaffney, C., Sparrow, T. and Pope-Carter, F. (2013), *Dynamics of an Iron Age Landscape: Geophysical and Topographic Survey at the Chesters, Drem, 2012*. Unpublished Data Structure Report, by Bradford University for Historic Scotland. (Accessed courtesy of HES.)

Armstrong, A. and Armstrong M. (1773), *Map of the Three Lothians*. London (Thomas Kitchin).

Baldwin, J. (1997), *Edinburgh, Lothian and the Borders, Exploring Scotland's Heritage Series*. Edinburgh: HMSO, 192 no. 101.

Breeze, D. J. (1996), *Roman Scotland*. London: BT Batsford / Historic Scotland.

Childe, V. G. (1935), *The Prehistory of Scotland*. London: Kegan Paul.

Clarke, G. (2021), *The Gododdin: Lament for the Fallen.* London: Faber and Faber. (Expected to appear in print 6 May 2021.)

Connolly, D. and Cook, M. (2010 – 2014), 'The Chesters', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, 11 (2010), 59; 12 (2011), 63; 13 (2012), 67; 14 (2013), 68 and 15 (2014), 63.

Council of Europe (1992), *The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (revised version)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available online at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/143 (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

Cunningham, J. H. (1896), 'Notes on the 'Chesters,' a Fort near Drem', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 30 (1895-6): 267-269.

Dunwell, A. (1999), 'Edin's Hall fort, broch and settlement, Berwickshire (Scottish Borders): recent fieldwork and new perceptions', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 129 (1999): 303-57.

Dunwell, A. (2007), *Cist burials and an Iron Age settlement at Dryburn Bridge, Innerwick, East Lothian*. Edinburgh: Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports, 24.

Feachem, R. W. (1966), 'The Hill-Forts of Northern Britain', in Rivet, A. L. F. (ed) (1966), *The Iron Age in Northern Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 59-88.

Harding, D. W. (2004), *The Iron Age in Northern Britain.* Abingdon: Routledge. (Revised edition published 2017.)

Harding, D. W. (2012), *Iron Age Hillforts in Britain and Beyond*. Oxford: OUP.

Haselgrove, C. (2009), *The Traprain Law Environs Project: Fieldwork and Excavations 2000-4*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Lock, G. and Ralston, I. (2017), *Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland*. [ONLINE] Available at: https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

Murray, D. (2017), 'The Chesters Hillfort, Evaluation', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, 18, 73.

Maclagan, C. (1875), *The Hill Forts, Stone Circles and Other Structural Remains of Ancient Scotland.*

NLS, Ordnance Survey 6-inch (1st ed.) (1854), Haddingtonshire 5. Available at National Library of Scotland: https://maps.nls.uk/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

NSA (1835), *New Statistical Account of Scotland, ii, Haddingtonshire.* Edinburgh.

Ovenden, S. (2020), 'Chesters Hill Fort, Geophysical Survey', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, 20, 60-61.

RCAHMS (1924), *Eighth Report with Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of East Lothian*. Edinburgh: HMSO, 9-10; no. 13; Fig 47.

Roy, W. (1755), Military Survey of Scotland: Lowlands. Available at National Library of Scotland: https://maps.nls.uk/ (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

Yates, M. (1976), 'The Chesters Fort', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland,* 1976, 32-33.

Note: Footnotes throughout the text offer page numbers where appropriate. If no page number is given, this indicates that reference is being made to the general thrust of the publication cited rather than a specific point of detail.

Further Resources

Canmore ID: 56280
Site Number: NT57NW 1
NGR: NT 50760 78260

Canmore entry: https://canmore.org.uk/site/56280/drem-the-chesters

Scheduling Description: SM90072, details accessible at:
https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90072

Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland entry:
http://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/records/SC3872.html

Further information on Iron Age Scotland is to be found at
https://scarf.scot/national/iron-age-panel-report/

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: TIMELINE

Iron Age

Mid-1st millennium BC	Possible palisaded settlement to east of summit, associated with linear land divisions
Mid-late 1st mill'm BC	Fort constructed, followed later by addition of outer ramparts
Late 1st mill'm BC	Settlement of circular houses extends over part or all of the interior
Medieval?	Rectangular foundations within interior (described 1833[43], no longer clearly visible)

Modern

1773	Site mapped by Armstrong and Armstrong.
1845	First written description, as a 'Pictish town' (See Appendix 2).
1853	Appears as 'British Camp' and 'Picts Houses' on Ordnance Survey 1st edition map.
1895	First detailed earthwork survey by Coles and Cunningham.
1914	RCAHMS plan (published 1924).
1923	Site Scheduled.
1940	Establishment of Second World War observation post, including four brick-built huts.
1956	New description by RCAHMS.
1962	Site enters State care via Guardianship Agreement.
1975	New earthwork survey (Mercer).
1976	Removal of wartime remains and surface remedial work (Yates for DoE:PSA).
1994	Scheduling amended.
2010-14	Earthwork survey to assess erosion (Rampart Scotland: Connolly & Cook).
2012	Geophysical survey of parts of surrounding landscape (Bradford for HS).

[43] NSA 1835 – text reproduced at Appendix 2 below.

2017 Small-scale excavation associated with installation of rabbit-proof fence (Kirkdale Archaeology for HES; Murray, 2017).

2019 Geophysical survey of interior and rampart sections (Rose Geophysical Consultants for HES; Ovenden, 2020).

APPENDIX 2: DESCRIPTION OF THE CHESTERS AROUND 1833

(Contributed by the Reverend William Ritchie to the New Statistical Account of Scotland)[44]

> On the barony of Drem are the remains of a Pictish town, [45] situated on the top of a low hill, of a conical form, which is almost level on the summit, and which contains about two acres of land. The houses, the foundations of which are still obvious, had been built round the sides of the summit in regular rows, and the greater part in a conical form.[46] In the centre are the foundations of oblong houses of larger dimensions.[47] The conical houses are generally twelve feet in diameter within the walls. The town had been strongly fortified, — first by a deep circumvallation, and higher up the sides of the hill by three ramparts quite perpendicular;[48] from the top of one rampart to the bottom of the higher there is a level space of eighteen feet, from whence the inhabitants could defend themselves with great advantage from their assailants. On the west side of the hill, looking towards Edinburgh, are three deep trenches in succession, before coming to the first circumvallation. These out-works appear to have been raised on account of a small Roman station in that direction, about half a mile from the Pictish town; for several Roman implements have been found there, and two years ago a large urn of superior workmanship, containing calcined bones, was found in the same spot.[49] The name of the farmstead is commonly called Captain-Head, which is evidently a corruption for Camptown Head.[50] The urn is in the possession of Mr David Skirving, farmer, of Camptown Head. The lands belong to the Earl of Hopetoun.

[44] NSA, volume ii, Haddingtonshire, Parish of Athelstaneford, 50. (NSA appeared in instalments up to 1845, this volume being one of the earliest to appear, in 1835.)
[45] It was common at this date to ascribe all 'native' (that is, non-Roman) settlements either to British or to Pictish origins.
[46] The assertion of conical form was presumably deduced from the circular plan, since only the foundations survived.
[47] Only very fragmentary traces of these lager rectangular foundations survive; they may represent houses of a rather later date, possibly medieval.
[48] 'Quite perpendicular' is probably the writer's interpretation of how the ramparts would have appeared when first constructed. It seems unlikely that any were still 'quite perpendicular' in the 1830s.
[49] These artefacts appear to have been lost – from the description, they seem more likely to have been of Bronze Age than of Roman date.
[50] The modern spelling is Camptoun Head.