

The largest hillfort in the Chilterns, Ravensburgh Castle, lies on private land, hidden beneath a plantation of trees. It is southwest of Hexton, in the northwestern part of North Hertfordshire district and the county boundary with Bedfordshire follows the outer edge of its western ramparts. Before the trees were planted about 1908, it was a prominent and impressive site, surrounded on three sides by steep-sided valleys.

Francis Taverner wrote the first surviving description about 1640 in an unpublished history of Hexton, now in the British Library. He said that it had a treble rampart, although it is not clear what he meant: there are two banks and two ditches, except on the east, where there is a single bank and ditch. Eighty-four years later, William Stukeley visited the site and drew it from the west, confirming that there are only two ramparts on that side. He thought that the earthwork was Roman in date.



Ravensburgh appears on the early nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey sketches made about 1802 and has always appeared on their published maps, and Robert Clutterbuck published a plan in 1817. Quarrying inside the earthworks at an unknown date made the interior uneven before the trees were planted. Three rides in the woodland existed by 1940 but they are now overgrown.

In November 1940, Percival Westell, curator of Letchworth Museum, began digging a series of trial pits at the site. He started with two by the northwest entrance, by a higher part of the rampart known as The Keep. A week later, he dug three alongside the northernmost of the rides. Finally, he dug a trench down to bedrock in March 1941 just inside the southeastern entrance; the chalk was found 1.4 m below the surface. Unfortunately, whatever records Westell may have kept have not survived, apart from his plan of the site. No finds from his excavations made their way to Letchworth Museum, either.

John Moss-Eccardt of Letchworth Museum began more excavations in 1964, assisted by James Dyer, a lecturer at Putteridgebury College of Education, and his students. They dug a trench across the western ramparts, establishing that the site had seen three separate periods of construction, between the Early Iron Age (about 850-400 BC) and the Late Iron Age (about 100 BC-AD43). James Dyer returned to the site in 1970 and again every year between 1972 and 1975. Since 2013, Ian Brown of the University of Oxford has been working on the site. He has all the finds, Moss-Eccardt's and James Dyer's records, and is organising surveys.

The first phase consisted of chalk rubble packed between parallel timber palisades, with a flat-bottomed ditch on the outside. Long after the ditch had silted up, a new V-shaped ditch was dug and the chalk piled on top of the degraded first rampart as well as outside the ditch to create a counterscarp bank. At the same time, a second entrance was added to the settlement, near the southeastern corner. The outer ditch on the west side was added later, although its date is not known.

Geophysical survey inside the southeastern entrance in 2015 showed traces of at least two roundhouses and a small enclosure with an inturned entrance. Another, outside the northwest entrance in 2018, revealed a hitherto unknown Bronze Age round barrow, long since levelled but recognisable from the ring ditch that formed a quarry for the mound material. Recent surveys by Lidar (a technique for recording often subtle changes in the land surface) show that as well as the enclosed area, there are outer earthworks to the east running away from the northeastern and southeastern corners of the hillfort. It is unknown if they are contemporary with it and, if so, with what phase.

Analysis of the finds is ongoing and only interim reports are so far available. Nevertheless, Ravensburgh is one of very few sites in Hertfordshire with pottery from the Middle Iron Age (about 400-100 BC) as well as both earlier and later material. Although James Dyer thought that most of the pottery dated from his first construction phase, there is a lot of material from the first century BC through to the Roman Conquest in AD 43. There are also Neolithic and Bronze Age finds, pointing to the long use of the hilltop.

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