

HILLFORTS IN TIMES OF WAR: LOST CULTURAL SPACES

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 marked a change in the function of prehistoric hillforts in Britain. The use of beacon fires on hilltop sites as signalling devices to militia during times of conflict became obsolete during the early Victorian era when more sophisticated warfare developed. Tracing the evolution of use from prehistoric defence, to nineteenth-century 'beaconmania', and twenty-first century royal commemoration, the paper considers the functions of hillforts in the context of military change. I argue that the decline in the defensive function of hilltop sites since the eighteenth century has contributed towards creating a more depersonalised perception of the relationship between archaeology and war. Although hillforts have retained their role as sites that facilitate communication and social interaction, the increasing distance between the public and the militia in Britain has significantly reduced their national significance. Changes in the relationship between the military and the landscape, such as increasing independence from local resources, and the changing nature of warfare, calls for a reconsideration of the ways in which the historic nature and function of defensive sites in Britain are represented.

The paper suggests that the changing role of hillforts over the last two hundred years - from being central points of communication in the landscape to heritage of a feudal past - could potentially result in the misrepresentation of defence in their contemporary depiction; an implication heightened by public detachment from war during times of peace. Focusing on Beacon Hill Wood in Somerset and Beacon Ring Hillfort in Wales, the paper suggests that more imaginative representations of how hillforts were used during times of past conflict could offer new insights into how such sites could function during times of future conflict.

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