Cardiff’s Celtic Hillfort
Digging Caerau

The CAER Heritage Project
Cardiff is Europe’s youngest capital city and its history is dominated by its maritime and industrial heritage. But nestled deep in one of its suburbs, surrounded by houses, is one of the most important, yet little understood, prehistoric monuments in the region – Caerau Hillfort. Since 2011, archaeologists from Cardiff University have teamed up with local community organisation ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely), Cardiff West Communities First, local residents and the local schools to start the Caerau And Ely Rediscovering (CAER) Heritage Project, to explore Cardiff’s prehistoric past and put local people at the heart of cutting-edge archaeological research.
Aerial view of Cardiff showing Caerau hillfort.
Enclosing an area of more than 5 hectares (7 football pitches), Caerau Hillfort, is by far the largest Iron Age hillfort in south Glamorgan. It occupies the western tip of an extensive ridge of land that is now cut through by the West Cardiff M4 link road (A4232), and it is surrounded on three sides by the housing estates of the west Cardiff suburbs of Caerau and Ely. The ramparts of the hillfort are hidden beneath woodland, a fact that means many people, even those living in the shadow of the great monument, don’t even realise it is there. The interior of the hillfort is now largely pasture, but in its north-east corner is a medieval ringwork castle adjacent to a 13th century church and graveyard – St Mary’s. The church was still in use up to the 1970s, but it is now a ruin – it is often the focal point for visitors on the hill and a passionate local group, the Friends of St Mary’s, are striving to protect it from further decay and destruction.

Despite being the largest and one of the most important prehistoric sites in southeast Wales, until the establishment of the CAER Heritage Project, the hillfort at Caerau had largely been overlooked by archaeologists so little was known about who lived there, how long it was occupied or even what it was used for. One significant aim of the CAER Heritage Project then is to find out about the people who lived in Caerau more than 2,000 years ago and discover what their everyday lives were like.
LiDAR - aerial laser scanning technology

An aerial photo of Caerau hillfort showing the distinctive triangular shape of the interior used as pasture for horses today. The hillfort ramparts are covered in trees now.

New technology can help us ‘see’ the ground surface beneath them. Using data produced by aerial laser scanning (LiDAR) we can create a 3D model of Caerau Hillfort.

Processing of the LiDAR data creates a ‘bare-earth’ digital model, bringing the hillfort to life by revealing the magnificent man-made ramparts and ditches hidden beneath the woodland.

What is a hillfort?

Most Iron Age people lived in small open settlements next to their fields, but some lived in large settlements like hillforts, which were enclosed by huge banks and ditches. However, these ramparts did not just reflect military might. The construction of boundary earthworks relates to the status, prestige and identity of the community that built them, rather than merely functioning as a defensive circuit. The greatest of them, such as at Caerau, were vast in scale and unprecedented in the effort invested to create them.

Huge ramparts at the hillfort of Maiden Castle, Dorset. Photo: Niall Sharples.

Roman rule ends
Cwm George early medieval hillfort built (near Dinas Powys)
Norman Invasion
Caerau ringwork built
St. Mary’s Church built (c.1260)
Ely Brewery, Papermill & racecourse established (c.1860)

EARLY MEDIEVAL
MIDDLE AGES
POST MEDIEVAL

AD410
AD1066
AD1536
AD1900
Community Focussed

From its outset, the CAER Heritage project has been committed to involving local people in all aspects of our cutting-edge research at Caerau, particularly those people from the communities of Caerau and Ely.

The housing estates that surround the hillfort are home to more than 25,000 people – the largest social housing estates in Wales. They were originally developed during the 1920s as ‘Homes for Heroes’ mainly for people returning from the Great War, but also for those needing re-housing from the overcrowded inner city areas of Cardiff. Despite strong community ties, the people that live in these areas are now burdened by significant social and economic challenges, particularly high unemployment and limited educational progression.

The CAER Heritage Project’s key objectives have been to use history and archaeology to develop educational opportunities and to challenge stigmas and marginalisation associated with these communities. After all, the presence of a magnificent Iron Age hillfort in this area reveals that in prehistory Caerau and Ely were the location of a significant power centre which must have dominated the Cardiff region. The project aims to celebrate that legacy, which in local place names, at least, still lives on today – the Caerau housing estate acquired its name from the hillfort (Caerau means forts in Welsh) and local street names reflect that rich heritage including ‘Hillfort Close, Roman Way and Heritage Drive’.

“The project’s really important because it gives people a sense of belonging and the past”

– local resident
“Lots of people in the area are struggling to get work, losing that get-up-and-go, but to be able to come up here and be involved in something – be part of something and part of something with other people – is really important. It helps build skills, and build confidence back up, and after all, none of this could have been achieved without local people.”

– Dave, Community Development Worker, ACE

“I’ve been inspired to go and learn more about archaeology and history and go on more digs.”

– local resident
First Steps - Community Research and Time Team

Funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) Connected Communities Programme, the first phase of the project involved community participants in a variety of co-produced projects, including geophysical survey of the hillfort, heritage themed community artwork, museum exhibitions produced by local school pupils, adult learners’ courses, and the creation of heritage trails. This culminated in April 2012 with exploratory excavations of the hillfort by Channel Four’s Time Team with local community members and school children as key participants in the programme, which aired nationally across the UK in January 2013. This was a really important contribution to our research and provided some tantalising clues about the occupants of Caerau in the past.

In particular, Time Team helped complete a geophysical survey of about two thirds of the interior of the hillfort which showed it was crammed full of roundhouses, pits and enclosure ditches dating from the Iron Age, Roman and Medieval periods. Of particular importance was the recovery of a small pottery vessel – a remarkable high-shouldered bowl – that could be dated to sometime between 700 and 500 BC (the Early Iron Age) and may be when the hillfort was first constructed.
Detail from the Time Team geophysical survey showing a row of Iron Age roundhouses on the southern side of the hillfort.

Early Iron Age high-shouldered bowl
In December 2012 we secured a further grant from the AHRC’s Community Heritage Development Awards to expand the project. This second phase of the project, known as ‘Digging Caerau’, was designed to use large-scale excavations of the hillfort to provide a focus for continuing educational and aspirational opportunities for the local community.

Building on now established partnerships and trust, local community members, schools and academic researchers have been working together to provide a cutting edge interpretation of the site. This has provided opportunities for local people to be involved in all stages of the archaeological process from survey to excavation to post-exavigation analysis.

“We were enthused, inspired and wanted to do more.”
The course allowed for the forming of a small community on the hillfort again.

“Training & Learning”

A key part of the work has been to engage local school children and adults in their shared history. More than 60 school children from three local secondary schools (Glyn Derw, Mary Immaculate and Fitzalan) were involved in the excavations, helping to dig up and discover the traces of their Iron Age ancestors.

More than 40 people enrolled on three accredited Adult Learners’ courses linked to the excavations. These allowed local adults to get a taste of archaeology and help develop skills and knowledge. The courses have included a training excavation at St Fagans National History Museum, participation in a major excavation at Caerau Hillfort and a hands-on course helping to analyse and process the finds after the dig had been completed.

“The best thing about the course was experiencing an archaeological dig, getting hands-on and fully involved in my local history.”

“HOME IS WHERE THE HEARTH IS…”

CAERAU HILLFORT POTTERY FINDS…

“I couldn’t imagine anything better than having the opportunity to engage and discover my local history.”
During June and July 2013 we opened up three trenches to explore the lives of the people who lived on Caerau hill more than 2,000 years ago. Our trenches were concentrated into the south-eastern area of the hillfort and designed to more fully explore some of the features Time Team revealed in 2012.

The interior of the hillfort has been ploughed in the past. Such deep ploughing has destroyed some of the archaeology and churned up lots of finds from all periods. These finds are out of context and all mixed together, but they can still tell us something about the lives of the previous occupants of the hill. For example, amongst the ploughsoil finds this year was a saddle quern (an Iron Age grinding stone for grinding cereals to make flour) and lots of flint tools such as scrapers and arrowheads dating back to the Neolithic and Bronze Age. We also found an iron medieval arrowhead and a lead musketball, probably dating to the 17th century about the time of the Civil War and the Battle of St Fagans. All these finds tell us people have been living and visiting the hill from the Neolithic (Stone Age) through to modern times.
Ploughsoil finds

Iron Age people lived in roundhouses made of timber stakes or posts inter-woven with wattle and daub and covered by thatched conical roofs. Sometimes they had ditches or gullies dug around them to catch rainwater dripping from their roofs. Time Team’s geophysical survey appeared to show just such a house on the southern side of the hillfort, so we opened a trench over this feature to date it and recover remains that could tell us about the daily lives of its occupants.

However, rather than just one house, we actually uncovered the remains of four houses! Two of the houses (CS1 and CS2) were surrounded by drip gullies, and were large, almost 15 m in diameter. They were probably occupied at the same time - perhaps one was for eating and sleeping and the other for working or keeping animals. The other two houses (CS3 and CS4) were defined by curving arcs of postholes representing the places where the posts that made up the house walls would have been set. One of these postholes had been cut through the drip gully of CS1 which meant it had to have been built after CS1 had been abandoned. Pottery recovered from the gully fills and postholes of CS1-4 suggests most of the occupation dates to the Middle Iron Age (400-100BC).
Farming and the daily bread

What was life like for these Iron Age occupants of Caerau? The majority of Iron Age people were farmers and our work is beginning to shed new light on their daily lives and routines. We took many samples of the archaeological deposits (soils) at Caerau and we use water to wash these soil samples through very fine-mesh sieves to capture the small burnt grains and seeds of foods grown and eaten by the Iron Age occupants. So far we’ve identified spelt wheat, barley and oats, which must have been grown in the fields surrounding the hillfort. After harvest, these grains would have been ground to a flour using quernstones for making bread – daily back-breaking work for some members of the household!

We’ve also recovered a small but significant collection of animal bones which indicates that the Iron Age occupants of Caerau were keeping cattle, sheep, pigs and horses. Many of the cattle bones are from older animals suggesting that they weren’t just bred for meat, but perhaps kept for their milk and to help pull the ploughs.
Weapons and warriors

Although most Iron Age people were farmers they would undoubtedly have engaged in warfare from time-to-time. However it was likely that it would just have been small-scale raiding parties rather than larger scale conflict. Classical depictions of Celtic warriors often show them with helmets, oval shaped shields and long slashing swords made of iron. However, these would have been prized possessions and we rarely find them at hillforts. It appears that the most common weapon would actually have been the more modest sling – huge stockpiles of slingstones (smooth, round, river-pebbles) have been found near the gates of some hillforts such as Danebury in Hampshire. At Caerau we found more than 20 such stones suggesting that the Iron Age occupants collected ammunition for hunting, herding and warfare.

Photo: Marcus Brittain.
Ramparts & Roadways

We also had the opportunity this year to examine the inner rampart that surrounds and defines the site to help us date the construction and abandonment of the hillfort. By placing a small cutting through the rampart on the southern side of the hillfort we could see that it actually consisted of two phases – a primary and secondary rampart. These phases were separated by thick layer of soil which had presumably formed over a considerable period of time.

The primary rampart was probably constructed in the Early Iron Age (600BC), but at some point had been levelled probably in the 1st or 2nd century AD. Subsequently, after a considerable period of time, a secondary rampart was constructed that was likely to by late Roman or even post-Roman in date. This clearly indicates a major reconstruction of the hillfort boundary at this time and it is interesting to consider whether the whole inner circuit of the hillfort was re-defended in this period. If it was then it suggests that Caerau may have been a large and important centre in the immediate post-Roman period. This would be a major discovery, which would challenge our understanding of post Roman occupation of south Wales.

Section through the hillfort boundaries showing the different soil layers. The primary, Iron Age, rampart is shown in green, with lighter green showing where it had been ‘levelled’. Above it is a brown soil, representing a turf layer. The secondary rampart (shown in grey) is built upon that turf layer at some point in the Roman or post-Roman period.
An unexpected discovery was a metalled surface – a stone-built path or road – running concentrically with the hillfort boundary, laid probably in the 1st century AD or later. Was this built just to prevent people getting muddy feet when walking between occupation areas or did it help define areas within the settlement much like a modern road in a village or town? In either case, it certainly suggests some considerable organisation and planning of the settlement within the interior of the hillfort.
Later Iron Age settlement

An absence of pottery from the 1st century BC suggests intensive occupation of the hillfort may have ceased by this time. However, by the 1st century AD, around the time of the Roman conquest of south Wales, our excavations identified that a small oval ditch possibly enclosing a farmstead which had been set up within the interior of the hillfort. This enclosure was defined by a ditch that contained lots of broken pottery and other domestic debris dating to this period. Two postholes either side of the entrance gap must have represented the posts of a gate into the enclosed area.

A glimpse of the personality of the inhabitants was provided by the discovery of a glass bead of Iron Age date and an enamelled disc brooch of Roman date. Both these objects indicate that individuals were concerned with their appearance and that life in the past was a little more colourful that we sometimes think. The glass bead needs further analysis, but is similar to types manufactured at Meare in Somerset, so may suggest links with communities living the other side of the Bristol Channel.
Traditionally it has been thought that when the Romans conquered the Cardiff area Caerau hillfort was abandoned and fell from use. Yet one of the many exciting things about our excavations this year is that we also uncovered a Roman story on the hilltop. Dating to the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD, we excavated a deep circular pit full of iron-working debris and Roman pottery. This clearly indicates that people were indeed living on the hilltop during the Roman period. However, the pottery assemblage is dominated by kitchen wares (coarse ware bowls and jars) with no fine table wares or amphorae. This may suggest that by this time the community living at Caerau were either relatively impoverished or perhaps they were actively rejecting some parts of Roman culture.
What did Caerau Hillfort look like in the Iron Age?

This reconstruction drawing by CAER volunteer Penni Bestic gives a flavour of what it must have been like.

What can you see?...
More than 1,000 local people visited the excavations while they were in progress and 120 more were directly involved in the archaeological work, many coming back every day. The visitors and volunteers represented a diverse cross-section of the local community with all ages and genders represented from primary and secondary school children, 6th formers, young people excluded from education, long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities and other health issues, retired people, and working parents.

The excavations produced over 90 metal, glass and stone artefacts, 2 kg of bone and over 2,000 sherd of pottery. All of this material has begun to be cleaned, conserved, marked and sorted by local people before it is analysed by specialists who will help piece together more of the story of this exciting prehistoric place. The aim is to publish the excavation report as soon as possible and make the results available to the public via the internet.

The benefits of the excavations have been various ranging from heightening awareness of the area to developing skills and raising aspirations to go to university. Most important of all, the process of digging a site and the new friendships and social and professional connections that it creates are almost as interesting as the archaeology that we are trying to uncover. The CAER project has always been about more than archaeology, it’s always been focussed on the communities of Caerau and Ely who live in the shadow of that hillfort. Communities with great warmth, spirit and talent but which are all too often labelled, stereotyped and underestimated.

Caerau and Ely are great places full of great people. The rest of the world needs to take notice of this and celebrate these communities and their amazing heritage. As a local resident pointed out at the start, our time on earth might be just a split second compared to the history of this place, but let’s make the best of that time and put Caerau hillfort back where it belongs. As a place that is central to the identity, history and cultural life of the Cardiff area...just as it was in the Iron Age!
This booklet is dedicated in thanks to the fantastic residents of Caerau and Ely whose warmth, talent and support have made the CAER Project possible. Special thanks go out to all the local residents who participated in or visited the excavations and many other activities.

We are particularly indebted to Dave Horton and all his colleagues at Action in Caerau and Ely and Cardiff West Communities First for their continued support and encouragement.

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The area within the interior of the hillfort that that were investigated this year are privately owned and we are very grateful to Mr Ralph David of Penylan Farm for permission to carry out the investigations.

The wooded boundary earthworks of the hillfort are owned by Cardiff Council and our thanks are extended to Nicola Hutchinson and her colleagues at Cardiff Council Park Services for allowing us to extend Trench 3 into this area.

The area is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Scheduled Monument Consent was granted by Cadw and we are grateful to Jon Berry and his colleagues at Cadw for their continuing support.

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