Who lived there and when?

Danebury was a defended hilltop enclosure, one of a number across Wessex, known as hill forts where people lived in the Iron Age, protected by the man-made ramparts, ditches and massive gates. The term hill fort suggests that sites like Danebury were built solely for defence and there is no doubt that the ditches, banks and gates could provide strong defences. However they were also places which showed status and where surplus crops could be stored and traded. The Iron Age people at Danebury were probably from the tribe known as the Atrebates whose tribal capital was Silchester. These people, who were sometimes referred to as Celts, lived at Danebury from around 550 BC until around 100 BC. It is known as the Iron Age because it is the period in history when people discovered how to use iron to make tools and weapons. During that period around 300/400 people lived at Danebury at any one time over a period of several hundred years. The Iron Age began in Britain around 700 BC and ended at the Roman invasion of AD43. However, by this point Danebury had been abandoned for over a hundred years.

How was Danebury defended?

From the top of the hill fort, the people who lived here would have a very good view of the surrounding area. They would be able to see a rival tribe planning to attack them! As you walk up the hill to the entrance, you can see the remains of the gates of Danebury. The hill fort could easily be defended from the top of the gates and ramparts, by throwing stones from slingshots at the attacking force as they ran up the hill. The gates were staggered so the enemy would have to zigzag backwards and forwards to attack the entrance. A store of 11,000 slingshot stones were found stockpiled near the entrance. We know that there were battles at Danebury because archaeologists have discovered that the East gates had been burnt down but these battles were with other rival tribes rather than with the Romans.

This is what Danebury may have looked like in the Iron Age
What was life like in the Iron Age?

The people lived in roundhouses made of mud, straw and wood. You cannot see the roundhouses today because the materials they were made from have rotted away but archaeologists have looked at the marks in the ground left behind and worked out where they were situated. Roundhouses were between 6m and 9m in diameter and had a wide door but no windows. There was often a fire in the centre but no chimney so they would have been very smoky! Animals were grazed and crops were grown in the fields around the hill fort. Some of the people lived and worked in smaller farmsteads in the surrounding countryside. The people at Danebury discovered that if they dug pits in the chalky ground and filled them with grain, once sealed in the grain would remain fresh over the winter. Danebury has thousands of these grain pits in the area surrounded by the ramparts.

What kind of society was it?

The Celts had a hierarchical society, which means that there was a chieftain, nobles, druids, craftsmen and farmers. The druids acted as teachers, priests and doctors. We know about this because some Romans such as Tacitus and Julius Caesar described life in Celtic society. There was no written language at Danebury, and generally we have to rely on what the Greeks and Romans said about their Celtic neighbours. Towards the centre of the enclosure, at the highest point, archaeologists found a group of shrines that the Iron Age people may have worshipped in. They worshipped many different gods, mostly associated with the natural world around them. Some of the grain pits at Danebury contain the bones of selected animals and in some cases humans. Archaeologists believe that these were deliberately placed as a sacrifice to the gods.

How do we know this?

Danebury hill fort is the most extensively excavated hill fort in Europe. In 1969 an archaeologist called Professor Barry Cunliffe began excavating with a team at Danebury. He did this every summer for twenty years. Much of what we know about the Iron Age people of Britain comes from what Professor Cunliffe and his team discovered at Danebury even though only 57% of the site was excavated. The objects recovered from the excavation can be dated by comparison with other sites and by radiocarbon dating. This gives a date for organic material (bone and charcoal) by measuring the decay in radioactive carbon or C14. Many of the artefacts discovered at Danebury are now on display at the Museum of the Iron Age in Andover.

Suggestions of further learning and discussion

1) Would you rather be a Roman or a Celt? Why?
2) What do you think Iron Age people ate?
3) The Celts had no recorded language. How do we know about them today?
4) Why did Iron Age people choose to live in hill forts?
5) How did they construct their houses?

For more information on the Iron Age please contact the Museum of the Iron Age on 01264 366283. For more information on any of the Countryside sites run by Hampshire County Council please contact 01962 860948 or email: CentralSitesEducation@hants.gov.uk