

Cynuit (878) and the Case for Countisbury Hillfort (Wind Hill) near Lynmouth Bay, Exmoor

By Anon

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Devon History groups say that “early accurate mentions of the Vikings in Devon date to 836 AD; King Egbert of Wessex [King of Wessex from 802 to 839 AD] fought with ‘35 shiploads of Vikings at Carhampton’ [four miles from Minehead] near Somerset’s north coast, and won.” Further, “this was recorded in The Anglo Saxon Chronicle (ASC), and that there was great slaughter...the Vikings had been visiting the South West for the previous 30 years.”

“By 878 [AD], the Vikings were at Countisbury [sic] in North Devon, in the old records spelt *Arx Cynuit* [referring to the Viking siege of an Anglo-Saxon fort]”. “The Anglo Saxons were in the camp which Vikings blockaded; Anglo Saxons attacked them early one morning, and drove them out... no Anglo Saxon graves have so far been found in Devon containing grave goods similar to finds in Somerset.”

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 878 AD states: *And the same winter the brother of Hingwar and of Halfdene came with twenty-three ships to Devonshire in Wessex; and he was there slain, and with him eight hundred and forty men of his army: and there was taken the war-flag which they called the Raven.*<sup>1</sup>-- *The ASC*; Giles, J.A. (1914).

According to The National Trust (2014), Countisbury Camp at Wind Hill (260m), near the A39 on Countisbury Hill (SS 7395 4930) and a few minutes walk from Lynmouth Bay, is one of several places on the north Exmoor Coast with “a claim to the site of the Battle of Cynuit [*arx Cynuit* ]” during the Viking invasions of 877-8 (NT record 100256 / MNA108011). This significant but understated battle with the Vikings’ *Great Heathen Army*<sup>2</sup> was reported by Aethelweard (the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, 975-983), and by the medieval Bishop and Welsh chronicler Asser (Asserius Menevensis, d. c. 910).<sup>3</sup> The defeat of the Danes at the arx Cynuit certainly foreshadowed a turn of events for the West Saxons.

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1 James, J. (2013)

2 In 865, *a great heathen force came into English land* ; The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

3 Exmoor National Park HER MEM25099 - *Battle of Cynuit*

Why should the Danes attack the arx Cynuit? The name may be interpreted as a defensive fort and civitas, taking its name from the person who owned it; a British chieftain, and not named after a hill or a river. The illustrated Saxon manuscripts show that the hall in which the local lord dwelt, the ladies' bower (chambers), the chapel and other buildings dependent on the hall, were enclosed in a stockade and its gates closed at night (Armitage, E.S., 1912, p.11). Wind Hill is regarded as "a significant, promontory hillfort." <sup>4</sup>

Arx Cynuit stockade may have been a burh, and there are innumerable place-names in England ending in borough or bury. The stockade may have borne the name of an early occupier of Countisbury, for the original signification of an Anglo-Saxon fortification *burh*, was *arx* in Old English Latin; a castellum, mons, a castle for defence (Ibid). Asser says the arx Cynuit was "unprepared", but he implies that there were enough Wessex forces to slay 840 or 1200 Danes, kill their leader, and capture their banner †.

The stockade on Wind Hill may have been the arx or burh of Cynuit; Cynuit's Hillfort. Asser would have known Countisbury Hill as a conspicuous landmark which, he says in his "Life Of King Alfred" (c.974), "I myself have seen". He would have seen Countisbury Hill from sailing up the Bristol Channel from St Davids, and Countisbury would have been long familiar to the Welsh. Notably, Asser also says that the arx Cynuit can only be approached from the eastern side. On north Devon coastal maps, it appears the approach to Countisbury Hill is only accessible from the eastern side.

In the mid-9th century, an invading Viking army coalesced in Anglo-Saxon England. *Arx Cynuit* is significant, because after King Alfred fled to Somerset after much of Wessex was overrun in 878 <sup>5</sup>, the Vikings were defeated and an important Dane was killed there. Moreover, the victory at Cynuit rallied King Alfred's Wessex army to defeat the Vikings at Edington and save Wessex, that same year <sup>6</sup>. The West Saxon victory at the arx Cynuit should not be under-estimated, for it was vital for the survival of Wessex, spurring King Alfred's forces on to victory over the Danes at Edington, Wiltshire (alt. Battle of Ethandun) during the May of 878 (Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred*, pp. 26-27). Edington can be considered an epoch-making event.

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4 Pitcher, S. (2023).

5 South West Heritage Trust, 2023

6 *The Cynuit Factor*. Hubbard, 2022

The approximate location of a battle between the Saxons and Danes at Countisbury Castle in 878 has been estimated from documentary evidence.<sup>7</sup> According to chronicles and lore, a Viking force under Ubba -brother of the Viking chiefs Ivar the Boneless and Halfdan Ragnarsson- had come to *Devon* from Dyfed in southwest Wales to conquer England. And they were slaughtered<sup>8</sup> at dawn by surprise during their siege of the arx Cynuit. Doubtless, set on conquest and encountering an occupied Anglo-Saxon hillfort along Alfred's chain of defences, the Danes should have attacked it. Yet they overstretched themselves, for at Edington later in 878, the Danes were brought to peace and agreed to leave the land. Some of them stayed as peaceful settlers (Garmonsway. *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. p. 76).

Contemporary accounts read as if the Vikings dawdled and overslept at Cynuit,<sup>9</sup> and that this decisive Anglo-Saxon victory -achieved by someone other than King Alfred- started a sequence of events that ultimately saved England from Viking domination in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. Considering the evidence and normally reliable authorities: Countisbury Camp (Wind Hill) by Lynmouth is the plausible site of Arx Cynuit<sup>10</sup>. The area contains late prehistoric and medieval settlement, and Wind Hill is the largest Iron Age promontory fort in England<sup>11</sup>. However, the exact Arx Cynuit has not yet been established beyond doubt.

It's known that Vikings voyaged through the English Channel and round to the Bristol Channel, raiding Watchet (*Weced* in the Burghal Hidage) several times<sup>12</sup>, and probably Lynmouth and Lynton in North Devon. Daws Castle sea cliff *burh* at Watchet, was built and fortified during 878, on the site of an earlier settlement as part of Alfred's chain of coastal defences against persistent Viking raids from the Bristol Channel (Adkins & Adkins, 1992). By winter 877, only the kingdom of Wessex remained to be conquered, and so the Dane King Guthrum (835 - c. 890) launched a lightning strike into West Saxony, probably allied with the Viking force in Devon which was annihilated at *Arx Cynuit* in 878. By tradition, that same destroyed force was led by a brother of Ivar the Boneless (d. 873) and Halfdan. Several sources identify this man to be Ubba or *Ubbi*, a.k.a Hubba the Dane<sup>13</sup>.

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7 [www.exmoorher.co.uk/Monument/MEM25099](http://www.exmoorher.co.uk/Monument/MEM25099)

8 Stephen J. Murray; early medieval history

9 *Vita Alfredi* §54; *From DOT to Domesday*, "A History of Britain" by Stephen J. Murray

10 [www.exmoorher.co.uk/Monument/MDE1236](http://www.exmoorher.co.uk/Monument/MDE1236)

11 Balmond. Exmoor National Park PALS Report, 2015

12 Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 902-24 AD

13 Ubba Ragnarsson alt. Ubba Lothbroksson

Guthrum (835 - c. 890 AD), King of East Anglia in the late 9th century, was one of the leaders of the Viking Summer Army that arrived in Reading during April 871, to join forces with the Great Heathen Army (*mycel here*) which ravaged England between 865-878 (Butler, Historic UK online, 2023). Rather than a single Viking unit, by 878 this Great Army was closer to a coalition of field armies numbering several thousand warriors and civilians, drawn from different regions and intent on the conquest and settlement of all England, which they ultimately failed to do.

Alfred's victory on a date between 6 and 12 May 878, resulted in a verbal peace treaty at Wedmore or Chippenham later the same year. Primary sources locate that battle at "Eðandun". The Vikings "swore in addition that they would leave [Alfred's] kingdom immediately, and Guthrum, their king, promised to accept Christianity and to receive baptism at King Alfred's hand; all of which he and his men fulfilled as they had promised..."<sup>14</sup> Guthrum became Alfred's adopted son and was later called Athelstan (Downham, 2007). The formal, written "Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum"<sup>15</sup> of c.880 (in The British Library), dividing up the kingdoms (Danelaw), seems to have followed some years later. These victories supposedly transformed Alfred into a successful war-leader (Smyth, P., 1996; *King Alfred the Great*).

There have been several claims to the arx Cynuit site; Countisbury's Iron Age promontory hillfort scheduled monument at Wind Hill (SS7449) and Old Burrow, have a strong case. Wind Hill was obviously accessible and worth defending, because it had a coastal hillfort stronghold since the Iron Age kingdom of the Dumnonii Celts (Pitcher, S., p.6). We cannot know from here how the Vikings reached Wind Hill, though Robert Higham in his "Making Anglo Saxon Devon" (2008, p. 64), claims Countisbury near Lynmouth as the "location of the Viking siege led by Ubba, one of the commanders of the Great Heathen Army that invaded Anglo-Saxon England in the 860s." W.G. Hoskins, in "A New Survey of England - Devon" (1954), states that "the precise scene of the battle was the earthwork, about [one mile] W. of the village, on the high neck of land between the Lyn gorge and the sea." This locates the battle of Cynuit near the present B3234 by Countisbury Hill.

Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record MDE1236, also notes that "Countisbury Castle near Lynton is one of the proposed locations for a battle with the

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14 Asser (ed.1983), "Life of King Alfred", pp. 84-85

15 [www.bl.uk/collection-items/treaty-between-alfred-and-guthrum](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/treaty-between-alfred-and-guthrum)

Danes in AD 878, at 'Cynuit' [or Cynwit], which is mentioned in documentary evidence, and future investigations at that site may settle the arguments".<sup>16</sup> Contemporary written information is vague, conflicting, oddly spelt, or absent. Physical remains and clues to Britain's Iron Age earthworks and medieval battlefields have eroded, or been wiped out by centuries of human activity, and by thoughtless vandalism. And yet, over the centuries, the mystery has not prevented districts or tourism from staking their own claims.

Another candidate, Somerset's Iron Age univallate hillfort at Cannington Camp (alt. Cynwit Castle) in the Parrett estuary near Comwich, is strongly proposed in books, by Somerset bloggers and on Wikipedia (James, J., 2013). More pretenders to Cynuit include Northam Parish, Appledore, Bideford, and Castle Hill near Beaford and Great Torrington. Yet more suggestions for the arx Cynuit include Old Burrow at Countisbury, and Congresbury on the Mendip Hills of North Somerset.

Any claim to Arx Cynuit has to be supported by direct and indirect evidence, preferably with some good geophys, extant features and a few sound arguments. We just do not know.<sup>17</sup> Devon and Dartmoor Heritage Gateway (HER) states that "Bloody Corner at Northam near Bideford is a later tradition associated with interpretations. Kenwith Castle was proposed in the 17th century as the site of the battle of Cynuit, because of the similarity of the name." Antiquarians posited that a cairn of stones on the banks of northwest Devon's river Torridge, washed away before 1630, was 'Ubbe The Dane's burial mound'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1906, human remains were reportedly found under the road at Appledore's Bloody Corner (HER No.: MDV11743). Without further evidence, there is no concrete information about the age or nature of this find, thus it may be mere fantasy. Among all these claims, Countisbury Hill still lingers as the most plausible (Rogers, I., 1938; *A Concise History of Bideford*).

Author J.J. Alexander -in *Arx Cynuit. Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*- also considers the Countisbury site to be the historical Cynuit (1933, p.310-313, 351-352). Countisbury Hill's earthwork defences close to Lynmouth Bay is a protected monument

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16 SDE93444 Article in serial: Alexander, J.J. (1933). *The Beginnings of Ilfracombe. Transactions of the Devonshire Association*. 65. P.211.

17 Bideford Archive online

18 HER Number: MDV11743. Devon & Dartmoor Historic Environment Record, 2023.

and -at around 260m high- it does look like a strong coastal defence position. Although it's difficult to believe the Vikings landed near Lynmouth or rowed up the narrow, rocky Lyn rivers to Countisbury: their refined art of portaging, carrying and parking their light narrow boats overland<sup>19</sup>, was one of their dogged methods of overcoming obstacles. It's not known how they reached Cynuit, yet those Viking forces intent on the conquest and settlement of England would have been singularly determined, and well-practiced.

Both Stenton, F.M. (OUP, 1947) and Keynes and Lappidge (1983) believe Cynuit to be Countisbury Hillfort or Castle. The problems with Countisbury Hill are the apparent physical impossibilities for a landing at that location, and that the peace agreement of 878 between King Alfred and King Guthrum relates to Wedmore in Somerset. Further, Countisbury (*Contesberia* or *Contesberie* in Domesday records), sounds nothing like Cynuit or Cynuit, yet for that matter neither does Cannington, the other leading favourite.

To throw in more confusion, the closest phonetic match seems to be Cynwyd in Wales, a small extant settlement in the Edeirnion area of Denbighshire. And there, the elevation runs between 160-180 metres, but the evidence and mention of Devonshire seem to discount Cynwyd in Wales. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions some big names in Viking and English history: the Ragnarssons. "...The same winter [877-878], [Ubba], the brother of Ivar [Ingwær, Ingvar; Old Norse: Ívarr] 'The Boneless', and Healfdene [Halfdan], was in the kingdom of Wessex in Devonshire with 23 ships". These were the famed sons of Ragnar Lodbrok alt. Lothbrok, named in Norse sagas<sup>20</sup>.

The common theme is that West Saxon forces led by Odda a.k.a. *Oddune* the 'Alderman of Devon', defeated the Viking army led by Ubba [*dux of the Fresians*], a brother of the Viking chiefs Ivar the Boneless and Halfdan Ragnarsson. And there, Ubba's Raven banner was captured. The raven banner -Old Norse: *hrafnsmerki*- was a symbolic totem of Norse expansion towards the west in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the personal banner of a specific Viking chieftain or leader.

The Anglo-Saxons probably believed these banners projected the evil powers of pagan idols, right up until 1066. Such a war-flag (*guðfan*) they called "Raven" appears to symbolise Odin, often depicted with the all-seeing ravens named Huginn and Muninn (Hrafnhildur Bodvarsdottir, 1976, p. 112). Vikings -and their Norman descendents under

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19 The Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, 2023.

20 [www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Ragnar-Lothbrok/](http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Ragnar-Lothbrok/)

William the Conqueror- apparently sought to improve their chances and frighten their enemies by invoking the power of the Allfather, Raven God of War.

The Anglo-Norman Geffrei Gaimar's *Estorie des Engles* <sup>21</sup>, mentions the Raven Banner at Cynuit in 878 AD. Moreover, it's even depicted on The Bayeux Tapestry. Lukman states "the Raven was Ubbe's banner (*gumfanun* in Anglo-Norman); he was the brother of Iware (Ívarr) and was buried by the Danes in a very big mound in Devonshire called "Ubbelawe" (Lukman, N. 1958, pp. 141-142).

Gaimar places *Ubbe's hlæw* -an Old English word for a burial-mound- in Yorkshire, while Anglo-Saxon sources put it in Devon during 878 (the Clerk of Oxford blog online, 2023). Asser, and Aethelweard -who died 920 or 922, and was the younger son of King Alfred the Great and Ealhswith- provide further information which also discounts Wales; "Ubba had *come from Dyfed* where he had slaughtered many Christians". Asser gives details of the English defences at a fort he calls Cynuit, most likely Countisbury hillfort.

The Historic Environment Record (HER) for Exmoor National Park nominates the Countisbury Castle battlefield earthworks, in its article "MEM25099 - Battle of Cynuit". The Countisbury Monument is also a designated heritage asset (Historic England Project Number: 7172). Aethelweard (Ethelward; author of a Latin version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) also refers to the siege of a fort, and names Odda [*Oddune*] -the ninth-century high-ranking royal official or ealdorman of Devon- as the English leader. Curiously, Aethelweard assigns victory to the Danes (Whitelock, D. (Ed.), 1961. *The ASC*, p. 49). Conversely, Welsh chronicler Asser reports the English victory in his hagiographic *Life of King Alfred* (c. 974) Ch. 54; "The Danes Defeated at Cynuit" <sup>22</sup> in the next two paragraphs:

† "After slaughtering many of the Christians there, he (Ubba) met an unhappy death with 1,200 men, at the hands of the king's thegns and in front of the stronghold at Cynuit. For many of the king's thegns, with their followers, had shut themselves up for safety inside this stronghold. And when the Vikings saw that the stronghold was unprepared and altogether unfortified (except for ramparts thrown up in our fashion), they made no attempt

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<sup>21</sup> *History of the English People*, written c.1140

<sup>22</sup> § 19, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*. Cook, Albert S., 1906.

to storm it, since by the lie of the land that place is very secure from every direction except the east, as I myself have seen.” Asser seems to be describing the features of Wind Hill.

[Asser] “Instead they began to besiege it, thinking that those men would soon give way, forced by hunger, thirst and the siege, since there is no water near the stronghold. But it did not turn out as they thought. For the Christians, long before they were liable to suffer want in any way, were divinely inspired and, judging it much better to gain either victory or death, burst out unexpectedly at dawn against the Vikings and, by virtue of their aggressiveness, from the very outset they overwhelmed the enemy in large part, together with their king, a few escaping by flight to the ships.” From *Asser’s Life Of King Alfred* (c. 974); translated from the text of Stevenson’s Edition, by Albert S. Cook, 1906.

To wrap this up: reliable chroniclers describe an important battle between the victorious Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings led by a famed Ragnarsson brother who was killed in 878, at a place called Cynuit or Cynwit. The modern scholarly consensus is that Wind Hill was the site of *Arx Cynuit* in 878 AD (National Trust, 2014 et al). The Anglo-Saxon victory helped to save England from Viking domination, yet we don’t yet know for sure where it took place. Nor -apart from Iron Age fort earthworks, vague chronicles and reliable authorities- is there much physical evidence available, anywhere. In our southwest tourist region though, not a lot of claimants would be too fussy about tenuous links.

Among the many contenders for *Arx Cynuit* are Old Burrow near Countisbury, Cannington Camp (James, 2013), Northam Parish, Bideford, Appledore, and Castle Hill near Beaford and Great Torrington. Yet another suggestion is Congresbury, but that’s on the Mendip Hills of North Somerset, not Devon. Cannington Camp may one day prove itself to be the historical *Arx Cynuit*, but even so, while archaeology develops and other sites are being nominated: Countisbury Fort at Wind Hill (SS 7395 4930) is the more plausible site according to available evidence and the scholarly consensus.

JPH, 2023

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<a href="http://www.exmoorher.co.uk/monument/MDE1236">www.exmoorher.co.uk/monument/MDE1236</a>	MDE1236 - <i>Countisbury Castle or Wind Hill Promontory Fort</i>	Accessed 12.02.2023
<a href="http://www.exmoorher.co.uk/">www.exmoorher.co.uk/</a>	MEM25099 - Battle of Cynwit,	Accessed 12.02.2023

Monument/MEM25099

Countisbury (Monument)

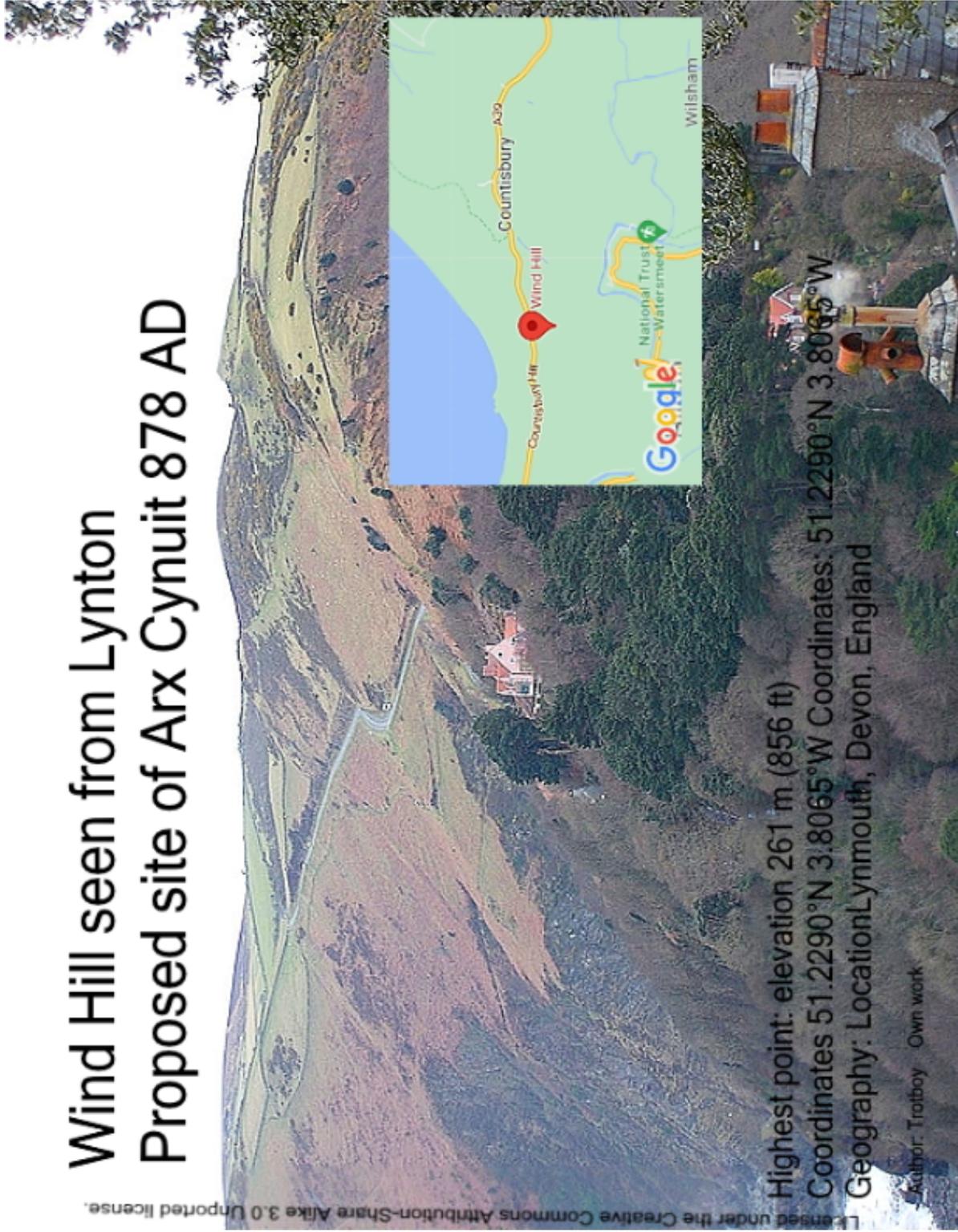
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*Bloody Corner, Northam*

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Photos attached at pp. 12-14

1. Wind Hill Iron Age enclosure or "spur" hill fort, nr Lynmouth; enormous earthworks defending the spur are at a lower level to the east.

# Wind Hill seen from Lynton Proposed site of Arx Cynuit 878 AD



Highest point: elevation 261 m (856 ft)

Coordinates 51.2290°N 3.8065°W Coordinates: 51.2290°N 3.8065°W

Geography: LocationLynton, Devon, England

Author: Traitboy Own work

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

2. Track up Wind Hill at Countisbury | East of Lynmouth      51.2290°N 3.8065°W | 261 m  
(856 ft)



[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Track\\_up\\_Wind\\_Hill.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Track_up_Wind_Hill.jpg)

3. Old Burrow, near Countisbury, the site of a ruined Roman fortress, is another possible site of Arx Cynuit. Stone, DJF (2017). *Mutually Assured Construction: Æthelflæd's Burhs, Landscapes of Defence and the Physical Legacy of the Unification of England, 899-1016* (PhD thesis). University of Exeter. Hdl:10871/30082  
Historic England; Scheduled Monument List Entry Number: 1020809 Brendon and Countisbury Parish.



File: Countisbury, Old Burrow [Exmoor] - geograph.org.uk - 601216.jpg      Author: Martin Bodman 2007  
Location 51° 13' 48" N, 3° 44' 10" W      Attribution-ShareAlike: Creative Commons CC BY-SA 2.0

#### 4. Anglo Saxon Burh History Medieval Settlement



# Anglo Saxon Burh

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/illustration/anglo-saxon-burh-history-medieval-settlement-secondary>

A burh (burg) was a fortification built to protect people and land from invasions. Some Anglo Saxon burhs became towns, such as Exeter.