



Historic England

# Enclosed Prehistoric Settlements

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to enclosed prehistoric settlements, the earliest identifiable farming communities in England, including pounds and tor enclosures; ringworks; hilltop enclosures; and small embanked enclosures. A description of each of these is contained within the text followed by a brief chronology. There are close associations between all of these settlement forms and a range of monuments, some earlier, others contemporary or later in date. The strongest relationships are between the enclosed settlements and different forms of prehistoric cultivation including coaxial, regular and irregular accreted field systems. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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## Front cover

Thwing, East Riding of Yorkshire. The concentric circles of enclosure are evident as is the faint trace of the central house.

# Introduction

This asset description will look at a range of sites that are of fundamental significance in terms of describing and understanding the earliest identifiable farming communities in England. Indeed, many of the sites discussed here are the earliest surviving evidence we have for enclosed 'settlements'.

Four main categories of site will be considered: pounds and tor enclosures; ringworks; hilltop enclosures; and small embanked enclosures. Their geographical distribution is varied but the majority are found in a broad swathe of countryside that stretches along the eastern seaboard of England, south and west across the chalk downland of Kent, Sussex and Wiltshire, and incorporating the uplands of Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor in the south-west of the country.

Although form and composition vary greatly from region to region, and may well be determined by the availability of different sorts of building materials, the group is certainly afforded a strong coherence by the range of dates from the sites: they are rare survivals and belong to the middle and later centuries of the second millennium BC (the Bronze Age), post-dating many of the ceremonial monuments such as henges but pre-dating Iron Age hillforts and later settlements.

# 1 History of Research

Important and early research was undertaken at Grimspound (Figure 1) on Dartmoor where an accurate survey, confirming the layout and extent of the enclosure, but not the dating sequence, had been completed by 1829. Further work at Grimspound (and a range of other, similar, sites) was undertaken by the Dartmoor Exploration Committee towards the end of the 19th century. However, it was not until the work of Andrew Fleming and John Collis in the 1970s that the full chronological range of these

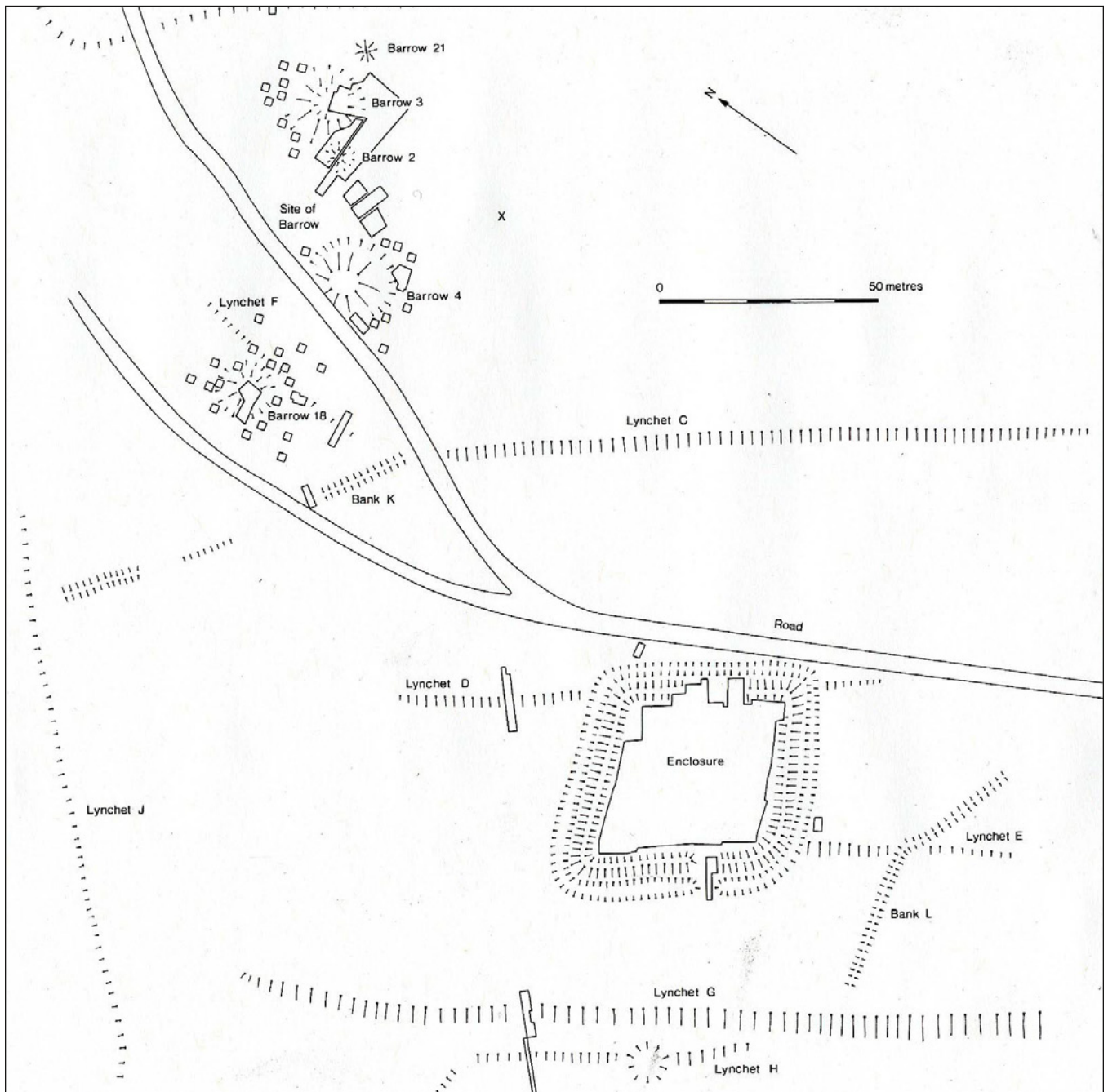
enclosures was established: they were clearly closely contemporary with land divisions that were built in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Subsequently, detailed investigation by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) and Cornwall Archaeological Unit at a number of sites on the moorlands of south-western England have added detail on the form and landscape settings of many enclosed prehistoric settlements.



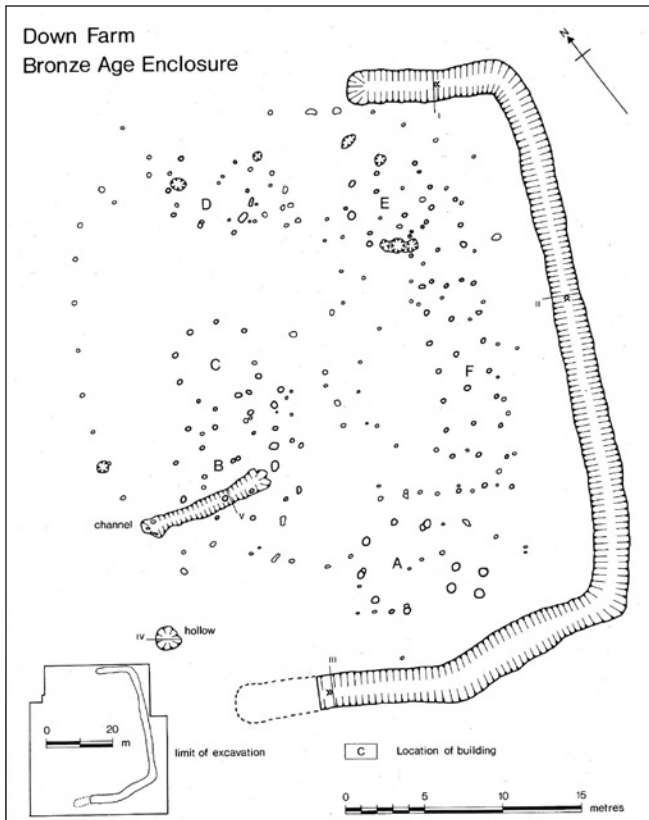
**Figure 1**  
Grimspound, Dartmoor, Devon, Middle Bronze Age enclosure and hut enclosures. The site was largely investigated during the 19th century and much of what can be seen on the ground today is a result of reconstruction work at that time.

Work undertaken by Pitt Rivers on his estate on Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire, in the second half of the 19th century did, in contrast, establish the early (i.e. pre-Roman) dates for sites such as Angle Ditch and South Lodge. Interestingly, this work also exposed the connection between these enclosed settlements and near contemporary fields and round barrows. The extent of this connection was further realised in Piggott's assessment of settlement enclosures, fields and trackways on the

Marlborough Downs. Here, the full date range of the enclosures was established and their Bronze Age ancestry confirmed. This model was more recently tested by Barrett, Bradley and Green during their re-analysis of Pitt Rivers' work on Cranborne Chase. Re-excavation and survey at South Lodge (Figure 2) and Down Farm (Figure 3), for example, indicated that the enclosures were the final episodes of activity at sites which had witnessed long sequences of occupation.

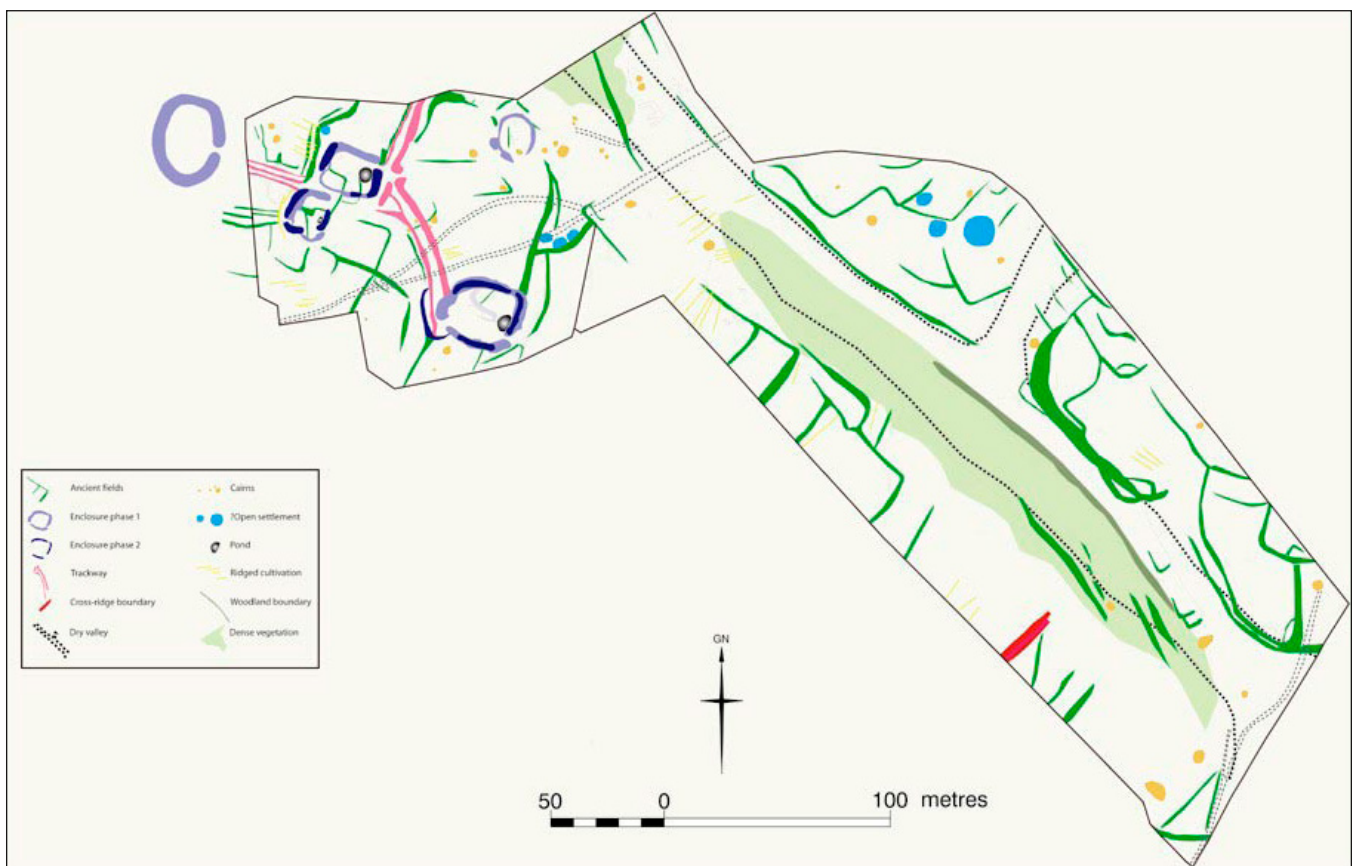


**Figure 2**  
South Lodge Camp, Wiltshire. This survey plan outlines the areas of recent excavation and makes it clear that the enclosure overlies earlier fields.



**Figure 3**  
Down Farm, Dorset. The excavated enclosure consists of a reversed C-shaped ditch and fenceline within which there are the remains of several structures including a rectangular hall.

English Heritage (now Historic England) survey work in Sussex and Wiltshire has revealed the complexity of occupation at early enclosures. At Plumpton Plain, East Sussex (Figure 4), for example, it has been shown that there are five enclosures, as well as open settlement, and each of the enclosures has been constructed on top of a pre-existing irregular accreted field system.



**Figure 4**  
Plumpton Plain, East Sussex. Recent survey work shows that the complex included a range of enclosed and open settlements as well as trackways, clearance cairns and fields.

# 2 Description

## Pounds and Tor Enclosures

These enclosures are found exclusively on the upland moors of south-west England, specifically, Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. They consist, predominantly, of unditched univallate enclosures, i.e. defined by a single bank, and normally broken by only one major entrance: examples do exist where multiple perforations puncture the enclosure boundary and, so, resemble causewayed enclosures.

Pounds and tor enclosures are normally located on high points close to, or encircling, prominent rock outcrops. These are striking locations and the fusion of the natural and built environments was clearly deliberate and an attempt to imbue these enclosures with added significance. Even with those examples that don't occupy the highest points, there was a drive to select a location that afforded good views to and from the enclosure.

At Roughtor on Bodmin Moor, Cornwall, the enclosure consists of irregular and interrupted lines of rubble and upright stones, linking natural rock outcrops so that a completely enclosed circuit is defined. Within the interior there are a number of hut platforms. The same pattern is evident at the tor enclosure at Stowe's Pound, Cornwall, where a smaller enclosure, occupying the highest point in the local landscape, is attached to a much larger, and slighter, compound, which is flanked by additional stone ramparts.

On Dartmoor, pounds such as Rider's Rings (Figure 5) or Dean Moor occupy, again, prominent locations, this time on gently sloping hillsides or close to watersheds. The former consists of what is, effectively, a double enclosure: a

sub-rectangular unit with an elongated annexe attached to the north-east. A number of small circular stone-built structures can be seen within the former but the internal structures within the extension are larger irregular compounds resembling stock yards or corrals.



**Figure 5**  
An Aerial photograph showing the complex Bronze age settlement, Rider's Rings, Devon.

These pounds vary dramatically in extent and scale with the largest examples covering as much as 15 ha in area: all enclose ancillary structures such as stone-built huts, sometimes as many as 30 but normally between 5 and 10. The enclosure boundaries frequently display constructional complexity with stone rubble cores faced internally and externally with large granite boulders, some of which have been 'dressed' in a rudimentary fashion.

Entrances are, ordinarily, unelaborate affairs consisting of simple gaps in the enclosing boundary. On occasion, as at Roughtor on Bodmin Moor, multiple entrances are apparent but one

or two are more commonly observed. Excavation at a number of sites suggests that the entrances were furnished with simple timber gates but in a number of cases, such as Shaugh Moor on Dartmoor, no entrance into the enclosure was observed implying that access was gained by way of a stile, ladders or superstructure built over the wall.

## Ringworks

These very distinctive forms of enclosure are easily confused with henges and circular mottes, but their excessive monumentality, restricted geographical distribution, artefactual as well as monumental associations allow a certain amount of confidence in assigning sites to the category. Like tor enclosures, they show a marked topographical preference for conical hilltops or edges of spurs and although only a small number are currently known – perhaps as

few as 20 with a notable concentration around Springfield Lyons in Essex – it is likely that others have been incorrectly identified as other sorts of monuments. They date exclusively from the 11th to 8th centuries BC and have a restricted distribution, clustering on the eastern side of the country close to major riverine networks such as the Thames.

The defining characteristic is a precisely circular boundary comprising a bank and external ditch. Scale does vary dramatically, though, with Mucking North Ring, Essex, enclosing an area of only 40m in diameter: Thrapston, Northamptonshire, in contrast, has an internal diameter of over 120m. The majority of sites, however, enclose less than 1 ha in area.

Excavation reveals that the associated ditches are significant features: wide, straight-sided and flat-bottomed to a depth of nearly 4m at Thwing, East Riding of Yorkshire (Figure 6). The associated



**Figure 6**  
Thwing, East Riding of Yorkshire. The concentric circles of enclosure are evident as is the faint trace of the central house.



ramparts, again on the basis of excavation at Springfield Lyons, Essex, were substantial structures, vertically-faced and flat-topped soil and turf banks, perhaps 3m high and supported by timber framework.

A number of the ringworks are furnished with multiple entrances. The boundary at Springfield Lyons, Essex, for example, was broken by five gaps but only one of these appears to have been used as the main entrance as it was embellished by a monumental timber gateway.

The interior of the enclosures typically hosted a small number of circular post-built structures occasionally dominated by one large house, the entrance of which faced the main approach through the ramparts. This pattern is seen at all of the excavated sites; the house at Springfield Lyons was placed centrally and had a diameter of

nearly 10m, whilst those at Thwing and at Mucking North Ring (Figure 7) were slightly larger at about 12m. Other notable internal features included additional storage structures and lines of fencing or stockades: at Mucking North Ring, the timber barrier was clearly designed to act as a 'screen' for the houses.

Artefacts are plentiful at ringworks and often include items that can be regarded as being of a special nature including fine pottery and metalwork. There is clear evidence from a number of sites, such as Mucking North Ring, Springfield Lyons, Carshalton, Surrey and Highstead, Kent to suggest that bronze metalworking took place at or near the enclosure and, frequently, there are dumps of broken pottery, flint and stone in the ditch terminals close to the entrances. These are rarely discovered activities and have led many to suggest that ringworks were high status centres.



**Figure 7**  
Mucking North Ring, Essex. Reconstruction drawing of the North Ring showing the enclosure boundary and internal structures.

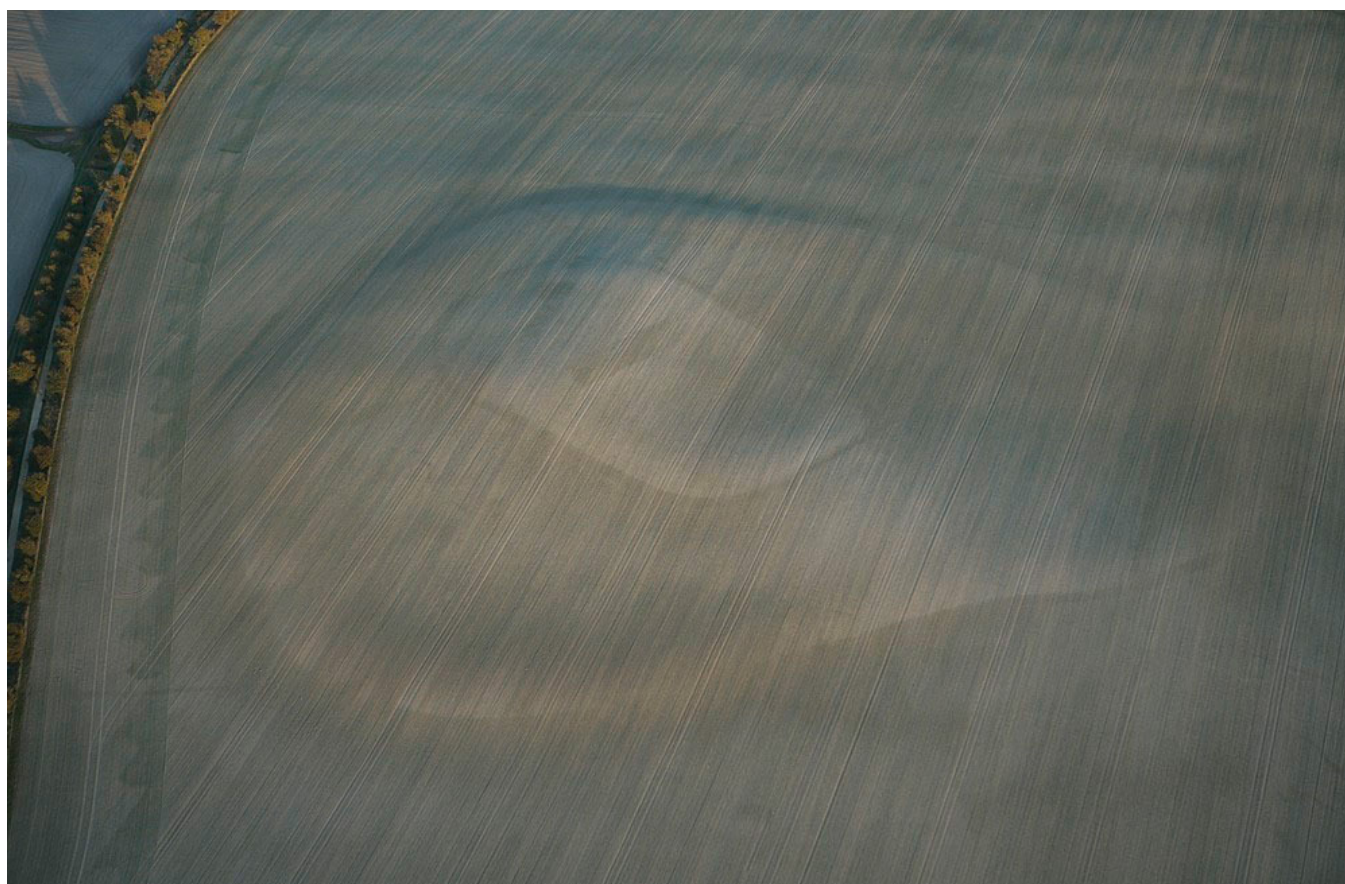
## Hilltop Enclosures

Again only a very small number of these types of site is known – fewer than 10 have currently been identified - and the best known (and the name by which this form of enclosure is widely known) is Ram's Hill, Berkshire (Figure 8). They are found exclusively in prominent locations such as tops of hills or in spur-edge locations – but always with good views to, and from, the enclosure. In this regard, they strongly resemble hillforts and the separation between the two, on strictly morphological grounds alone, is problematical.

More detailed data, such as artefactual associations, is required to convincingly establish date and assign form. The earliest dates for construction and occupation lie in the 13th century BC and extend well into the 9th century BC.

The enclosures comprise rampart and an external ditch but many sites show clear evidence of having been enclosed by boundaries that were subject to frequent alteration. At Ram's Hill, Berkshire, the enclosure covering just over 1 ha in area, comprised at least three main phases which commenced with the construction of a high soil bank set back from a wide and deep ditch. Subsequently, this rampart was strengthened by the addition of a timber frame, and a succeeding phase saw it demolished and replaced with a massive, free-standing, timber stockade.

Although Ram's Hill is a small enclosure, others cover much larger areas and a number, such as Norton Fitzwarren, Somerset, and Hog Cliff Hill, Dorset, extend across 5 ha. Entrances, as far as can be gauged from the small number of excavated examples, are formal causeways across the bank and ditch embellished by timber



**Figure 8**  
Ram's Hill, Berkshire. Ploughing has almost removed every trace of the enclosure complex here but the faint remains of the Bronze Age elements can be seen at the centre of the larger enclosure.



Enclosure form varied markedly. The most commonly observed are sub-circular or elongated examples as at Kingley Vale, West Sussex, or Plumpton Plain, East Sussex, and these enclosures (and most others in this sub-group) comprise simple embankments enclosing the settlement space. External ditches are occasionally observed but for the majority, the enclosure bank is the dominant feature: indeed, it is apparent that in a number of places, such as South Lodge, Wiltshire, the ditch once dug was deliberately backfilled.

The enclosure banks are simple affairs consisting of soil and turf scraped up into a rough heap. At Plumpton Plain, large quantities of struck and fire-cracked flints within the banks suggests that they were constructed upon, and disturbed, pre-existing settlement. Where the slope allows, it is clear that the settlement compounds have been terraced into the hillside so that one side, usually that on the downhill, is more prominent. They are small enclosures, the largest of which rarely exceed 0.5 ha in area.

These small embanked enclosures are, ordinarily, furnished with a single entrance, comprising an unsophisticated gap through the bank and the interior of the enclosure is usually dominated by one large house and ancillary structures. At Plumpton Plain, within each compound, house

size varied between 5m and 10m in diameter and consisted of the main house, a smaller post-built circular structure (perhaps for storage) adjacent to it and, close to the entrance, a shallow circular depression, probably a pond. Large quantities of burnt stone and flint are found in close association with these sites and at South Lodge this material was clearly part of a dispersed burnt mound.

Often, these enclosures were grouped in small clusters consisting of, perhaps, 3 or 4 individual units, as on Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire or the Marlborough Downs. In all cases, where observable, the small embanked enclosures overlie earlier coaxial or regular and irregular accreted fields, but it is evident, too, through the build-up of ploughsoil, that cultivation has continued after the construction of the enclosure boundary. These boundaries are evidently the final phase of activity at many of these sites and overlie, earlier, open settlements.

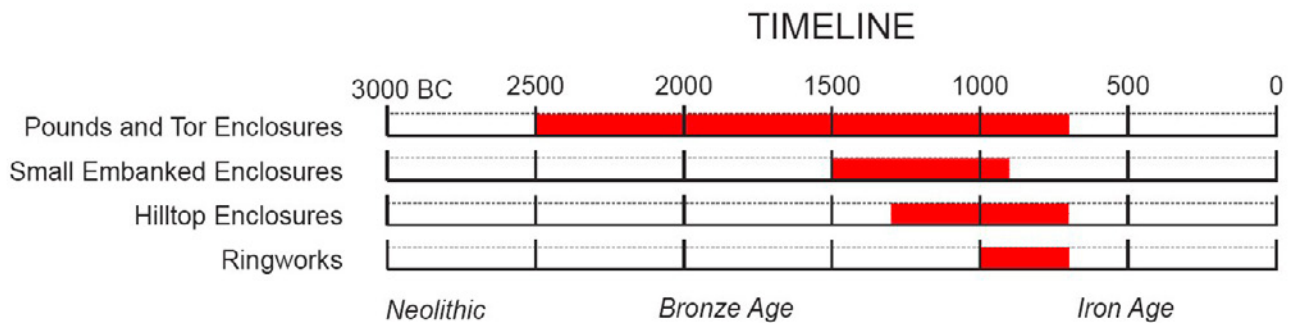
Excavation repeatedly reveals pits and postholes, as well as artefact scatters beneath the banks and cut by the ditches. In addition, there is a strong correlation between these sorts of enclosure complexes and round barrows, either in cemeteries or as isolated monuments.

# 3 Chronology

Surprisingly, for such a superficially disparate and geographically disconnected group of monuments, there is a strong chronological coherence. The earliest enclosed elements are the pounds and tor enclosures located on the uplands of the south-west but even here firm dating evidence for all elements is lacking. It is likely, however, based on the form of enclosure and construction techniques, that many of the pounds and tor enclosures are of Neolithic date: they are certainly in use throughout the Bronze Age. Small embanked enclosures such as South Lodge and Itford Hill have complex histories but the available

radiocarbon dating indicates that they were being constructed as early as 1500 BC and continued in use, often in altered form for at least 500 years.

The earliest hilltop sites are broadly contemporary with small embanked enclosures but they have a much longer date span with occupation extending to the end of the Bronze Age and, on occasion, overlapping with hillforts. Ringworks are the most tightly defined, chronologically, with a distinct horizon at the start of the 1st millennium BC.



# 4 Associations

There are close associations between all of these settlement forms and a range of monuments, some earlier, others contemporary or later in date. The strongest relationships are between the enclosed settlements and different forms of prehistoric cultivation including coaxial, regular and irregular accreted field systems: this relationship is particularly noticeable on chalkland sites and where surface preservation is good. The enclosures on Marlborough Downs, for example, are superimposed upon early coaxial fields and may well indicate a shift in the emphasis of land use from arable to pasture. Those on Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire, likewise post-date coaxial fields but here there is a possibility that other ploughing was contemporary with the enclosure complex.

Other sites are closely co-located with cairns and areas of field clearance. Indeed, individual cairns and those which are part of a larger cairnfield, are occasionally observed either overlying enclosure boundaries or being slighted by them.

The association between small embanked enclosures and round barrows has been well documented. In the vast majority of cases the barrows are earlier than the enclosures, often, by several centuries and the re-use of the burial mound clearly had a symbolic function. Other, smaller, slighter round barrows were also constructed alongside the earlier mounds and these were contemporary with the occupation at the adjacent settlement

# 5 Further Reading

Unfortunately, there is no single text that provides a comprehensive commentary on enclosed prehistoric settlements. An excellent introduction, including analysis of the basic forms of settlement encountered and their wider settings, can be found in Bob Bewley's *Prehistoric Settlements* (2003).

The field evidence from Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire, is discussed in detail by John Barrett, Richard Bradley and Martin Green in *Landscape, Monuments and Society* (1991). Likewise, much of the best discussion of tor enclosures and pounds is contained within Nicholas Johnson and Peter Rose *Bodmin Moor: An Archaeological Survey, Vol 1* (1994), but Andrew Fleming *The Dartmoor Reaves. Investigating Prehistoric Land Divisions* (revised edn, 2007) gives an excellent account of their general date and landscape associations.

More determined researchers may well find back issues of the [Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society](#) fruitful as they contain earlier excavation reports on important sites on the chalklands of Wessex and the South Downs. Particularly influential are Burstow and Holleyman's report on the enclosure complex at Itford Hill (*Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 23 (1957), 167-212) and Plumpton Plain (*Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 1 (1935), 1-59) as well as Mrs Piggott's work on the Marlborough Downs (*Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 8 (1947), 48-61).

Useful background information on ringworks and hilltop enclosures is contained within Barry Cunliffe *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (4th edition, 2005).

Again, more detailed information can be found in academic publications such as Richard Bradley and Anne Ellison *Ram's Hill: A Bronze Age Defended Enclosure and its landscape* (1975) with revised dating for the hilltop enclosure published by Stuart Needham and Janet Ambers, 'Redating Rams Hill and Reconsidering Bronze Age Enclosure', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 60 (1994), 225-43.

A definitive assessment of ringworks is not yet available but resumés (respectively) can be found in Manby, Moorhouse and Ottaway *The Archaeology of Yorkshire* (2003); Bond, *Excavation at North Ring, Mucking, Essex: A Late Bronze Age enclosure* (1988); and Brown and Medlycott, *The Neolithic and Bronze Age Enclosures at Springfield Lyons, Essex* (2013). An assessment of the Mucking South Rings complex is covered in Evans et al, *Lives in Land – Mucking Excavations* (2015). At the time of writing, Thwing remains unpublished.

# 6 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk) noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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# 7 Acknowledgments

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