

# WESTBURY CAMP, SOMERSET A LATE-PREHISTORIC HILLFORT ON THE MENDIP HILLS

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT

Elaine Jamieson



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## A late-prehistoric hillfort on the Mendip Hills

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### Summary

A large-scale survey of Westbury Camp was undertaken as part of the English Heritage archaeological survey of the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in January 2007. Westbury Camp is a univallate hillfort of late prehistoric date comprising a sub-rectangular enclosure defined by an earth and stone rampart with an outer ditch and bank on two sides. A single gap entrance is located towards the north-eastern corner of the hillfort and a Bronze Age barrow was identified towards its centre. The simple form of the enclosure and entrance, the modest size of the rampart, and the earthwork evidence for a box rampart construction all suggest Westbury Camp dates from the earliest period of hillfort construction.

### INTRODUCTION

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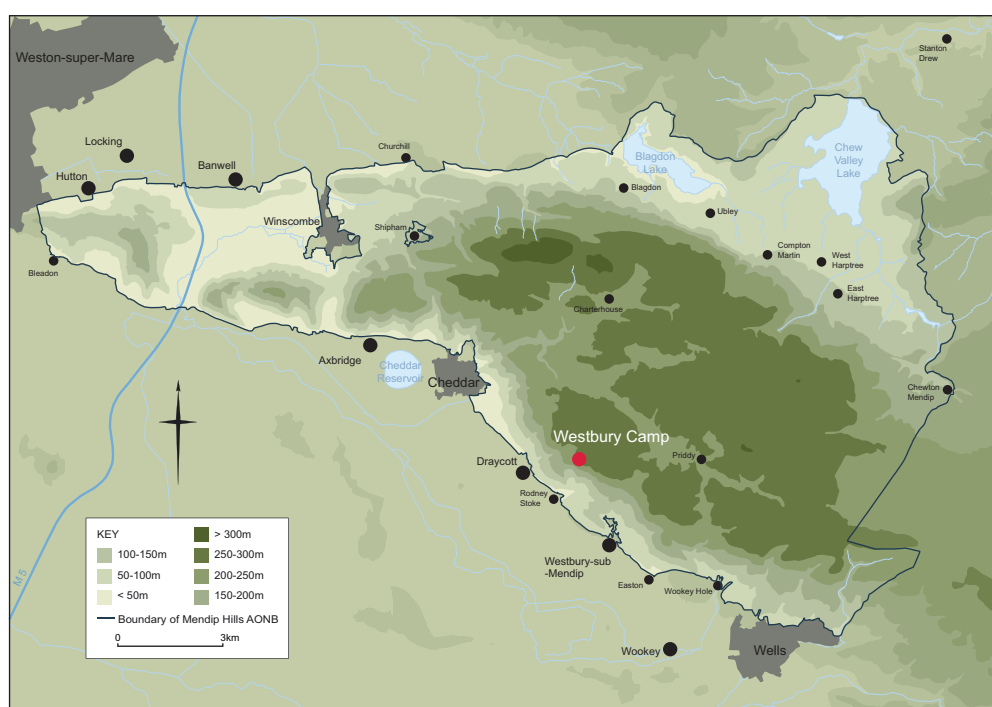


Figure 1. Location plan.

### Location and geology

The earthwork remains of Westbury Camp, also known as Stoke Camp, lie towards the southern boundary of the Mendip Hills AONB. The hillfort is located on the southern edge of the main Mendip Hills plateau, approximately 1km northeast of Rodney Stoke (centred ST 4920 5114), at about 260m above OD (Fig. 1). The monument sits on a short spur and lies within an enclosed area of limestone grassland. Westbury Camp encloses the highest point of the spur with the ground falling sharply southwards towards the Levels and the Moors. The ground also drops northwards into a steep combe which runs southwest-northeast up onto the limestone plateau (Fig. 2). In clear weather the site commands impressive views southwards towards the Polden Hills and Glastonbury

Tor, with the Quantock Hills, Exmoor and Bridgwater Bay visible to the north and west.

Westbury Camp lies on Burrington Oolite of the Carboniferous series (British Geological Survey Wells, sheet 280). Parallel ribs of natural limestone outcropping run from east to west across the lower half of the enclosure and have been utilised in the construction of the rampart.

The survey

Westbury Camp was surveyed at 1:500 scale in January 2007 by staff from the Archaeological Survey and Investigation and Archaeological Graphics sections of English Heritage.

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*Figure 2. Westbury Camp: map showing topographic setting (right). Looking northwest from the interior of the enclosure (left).*



## HISTORICAL SOURCES

Westbury Camp is not depicted on the Ordnance Survey first edition 2500 scale map of 1885 but does appear on the second edition map of 1903, at which time it is labelled as 'Camp' (Fig. 3). The second edition map shows the hillfort as lying within an area of improved pasture with a band of limestone outcropping crossing its south-eastern corner. Several quarries are also depicted on the map to the east and northwest of the enclosure but the barrow towards its centre does not appear. Other barrows or 'tumuli' are marked to the north and northeast of Westbury Camp as are two field banks which run north and north-eastwards from the enclosure (see below) (OS 1885; 1903).

A plan of Westbury Camp was published by Tratman in the Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society in 1926. He also produced a brief description of the site in which he refers to the monument as a 'hill camp'. The small burial mound at the centre of the enclosure would appear to have been first identified by Tratman (Tratman 1926).

The site does not appear in E.J. Burrow's *Ancient Earthworks and Camps of Somerset* published in 1924 but is included in I. Burrow's *Hillfort and Hill-top Settlement in Somerset in the First to Eighth Centuries A.D.* (Burrow 1924; Burrow 1981). Burrow classifies the monument as a hill-slope enclosure and repeats the Ordnance Survey Field Investigators comment that the rampart may have been surmounted by a dry stone wall (Burrow 1981).

There have been no recorded archaeological excavations at Westbury Camp and no known finds have been recovered from the site.

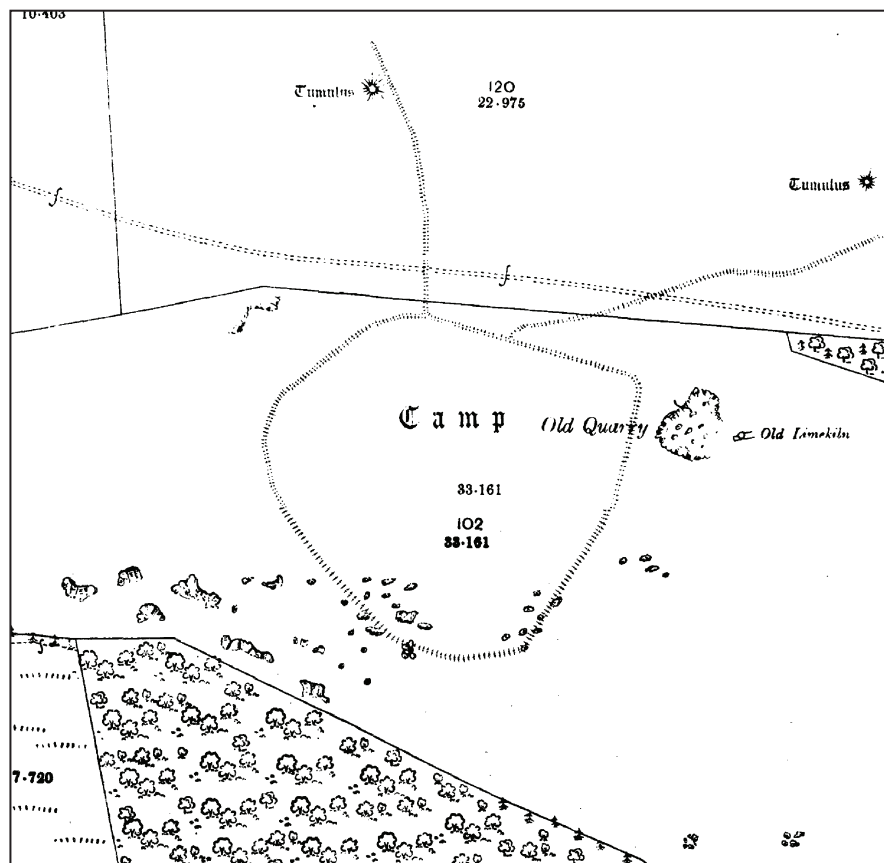


Figure 3. Westbury Camp: reproduced from the Ordnance Survey second edition map of 1903.

## WESTBURY CAMP: THE EARTHWORKS (Fig. 4)

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### Introduction

Westbury Camp (ST 45 SE 31) is a univallate hillfort of late-prehistoric date, with the rampart enclosing an area of approximately 2.5 hectares. The monument forms part of the Butterfly Conservation's Stoke Camp Nature Reserve.

### The enclosure

The enclosure is sub-rectangular in form and is orientated northeast-southwest, measuring c 163m northwest-southeast and c 161m northeast-southwest between rampart tops. The enclosure comprises a stone and earth rampart with an outer ditch on the north and east sides, the bank and ditch having a maximum overall width of c 12.3m. The grass-covered rampart is relatively well preserved along most of its length although it has suffered significant damage from later quarrying along its northern side (Fig. 5). The site sits within an area of late-18<sup>th</sup>-century agricultural improvement and the smoothed nature of the ramparts would suggest the site has suffered some plough damage.



Figure 5. Westbury Camp:  
the north rampart and  
ditch.

The eastern side of the enclosure comprises a rampart and ditch, the rampart being most substantial towards the south-eastern corner where it stands a maximum of c 1.3m high and is c 7.4m wide. The ditch is most substantial towards the enclosure's entrance where it survives to c 0.5m deep and c 5.7m wide. Along much of this side a berm, c 1.7m wide, can be traced separating the ditch and rampart. A counterscarp bank, a maximum of c 0.2m high and c 4.1m wide, was also recorded with the bank splaying outwards and terminating towards the south-eastern corner of the enclosure.

The northern side of the enclosure again comprises a ditch and bank with the slight remains of a counterscarp bank associated with the ditch. The rampart stands to a maximum of c 1m high and





c 8.1m wide and the ditch no more than c 0.2m deep and c 4.9m wide. The counterscarp bank, c 5m wide and c 0.1m high, can be seen to splay outwards towards the north-western corner of the enclosure where it would appear to terminate.

The western and southern sides of the enclosure comprise a rampart standing between c 0.6m-1.6m high and c 6.5m- 4.3m wide. On the western side a berm, c 1.6m wide, was recorded stretching for c 36m from the north-western corner. There is clear evidence at the south-eastern corner that the natural topography was used to maximise the impression of height on the rampart.



*Figure 6. Westbury Camp: the east rampart and ditch looking north towards the entrance.*

#### The entrance

There is one original entrance to the enclosure (Fig. 6). This takes the form of a simple gap located on the eastern side of the hillfort, c 23m from the north-eastern corner. The entrance is defined by two well-formed terminals to the ditch which, although disturbed by later quarrying, are still clearly visible and form a causeway c 4.9m wide. There are well-defined, regular terminals to the main rampart which thicken and turn inwards slightly forming an entrance gap c 3.6m wide.

#### The interior

The northern half of the interior is relatively level, only rising slightly towards the north-western corner, before dropping steeply to the south-west. There are few features within the enclosure which may be related to the hillfort phase of the site. A slight curvilinear scarp, c 0.1m high, was recorded in the north-eastern corner of the interior, adjacent to the entrance. It is possible that this scarp defines the lower edge of a building platform related to the late-prehistoric occupation of the site, or alternatively, may be related to later quarrying and disturbance.

Two earth and stone mounds were also recorded within the interior. The largest of these is located towards the centre of the enclosure and takes the form of a low, grass-covered mound standing c 0.4m high and measuring c 9.8m north-south by c 8.5m east-west. The size and location of this

feature suggests it may represent the remains of a small round barrow of Bronze Age date. There is a concentration of round barrows in this area, stretching along the southern edge of the plateau, the closest of which lies c 190m to the north. The second mound is located c 42m to the north-east and measures c 4.5m north-south by c 4.6m east-west, standing c 0.1m high. It is possible that this feature is related to later quarrying activity or is a clearance cairn.

#### Other features

The remains of two field banks, postdating the enclosure, were recorded during fieldwork. The most obvious of these runs for c 117m northwest-southeast across the interior of the hillfort and overlies its western rampart. This feature takes the form of a low, stony bank c 4.8m wide and standing a maximum of c 0.2m high. Evidence of a feature cutting through the eastern rampart of the enclosure in line with this bank may suggest it originally continued eastwards and has since been destroyed. Alternatively, the bank may have originally ended at this point with the line of the boundary carrying on eastwards as a simple hedge or fence.

The slight remains of a second field bank were recorded to the north of the enclosure. This takes the form of a spread, grass-covered bank, c 4.4m wide and c 0.1m high, running northeast-southwest and abutting the northern side of the enclosure. The bank clearly post-dates the hillfort as it can be seen to overlie the ditch and counterscarp bank as well as part of the main rampart. This feature is recorded on the Ordnance Survey second edition 2500 scale map of 1903 continuing for c 240m across the adjacent field (Fig. 3). Recent aerial photography and lidar (light detection and ranging) images indicate that this section of the feature has since been completely destroyed by later agriculture. The Ordnance Survey second edition map also depicts a second field bank running approximately north-south and abutting the north-western corner of the enclosure. This feature survives as a spread, low scarp and aerial photographs suggest it carried on northwards for c 147m before turning westwards and formed part of a more extensive field system.



Figure 7. Westbury Camp: the remains of the limekiln adjacent to the southern rampart.

There were numerous quarry scoops recorded both adjacent to, and cutting into, the rampart of the hillfort. The majority are located along the northern rampart and can be seen to predate the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century enclosure wall which forms the northern boundary of the survey area. A probable quarry scoop was also recorded towards the centre of the interior. The largest of these quarries was located to the east of the entrance and measures c 36m east-west and c 37m north-south. The Ordnance Survey first edition 2500 scale map of 1885 records a limekiln at the eastern end of this quarry. By the second edition map of 1903 the feature was recorded

as 'old limekiln', suggesting it had gone out of use by this time. A second limekiln, not marked on either Ordnance Survey map, was recorded adjacent to the southern rampart, c 60m from the south-eastern corner of the enclosure (Fig. 7) This survives as a section of curved, stone walling surrounded by quarry scoops and rubble.



## DISCUSSION

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### Interpretation

Westbury Camp has been described by various commentators as a hill camp (Tratman 1926), a hill-slope enclosure (Burrow 1981), an unfinished hillfort (Somerset Historic Environment Record 24269) and a univallate hillfort (National Monuments Record ST 45 SE 31). The recent survey work has helped confirm the monument's status as a univallate hillfort. Hillforts are traditionally distinguishable from other contemporary sites on the basis of their topographic position, their large internal area (usually greater than 2ha) and their strong encircling boundary (McOmish et al 2002). It can be argued that the topographic setting of Westbury Camp is a defensive one. It occupies the highest ground, on a short spur, and has good visibility and control over the main approaches to the site. It also dominates the Levels and Moors below and the steep combe to its west, suggesting it was strategically placed to control routes around and across the Mendip plateau. The topographic setting of Westbury Camp can be likened to that of Shoulsbury Castle, Exmoor, classified as falling into the hill-slope category of hillforts (Jamieson 2006). Westbury Camp's size, at c 2.5ha, also distinguishes it from the smaller hill-slope enclosures such as Longbottom Camp (Shipham) which encloses an area of only c 0.36ha (Hunter 2007). There is little to suggest that the hillfort was unfinished. The circuit, although not as substantial as sites such as Dolebury Camp, is complete and the outward splay of the ditch's counterscarp bank at both ends would indicate an intentional termination of the ditch and bank at these points.

There are several factors which suggest Westbury Camp may date from the earliest period of hillfort construction. The simple univallate form of the enclosure and the modest size of the rampart are both indicative of early enclosures. The simple gap entrance to the hillfort is also suggestive of an early date as entrances had a tendency to become more elaborate and complex as the Iron Age progressed (Cunliffe 1991). The existence of a berm, and the relatively narrow bank (c 4.7m), may indicate a box rampart construction. This method involved the erection of a timber frame or 'box' using vertical timber stakes which was then in-filled with earth and stone. This form of construction would suggest a date of no later than the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC for the creation of the hillfort, with the possibility that the site may even pre-date the conventional beginning of the Iron Age.

The modest size of the rampart may also suggest an early abandonment of the site. Excavated sites such as Cadbury Castle have shown that hillfort ramparts were often remodelled and enlarged in the mid to late Iron Age, often undergoing several phases of alterations and rebuilding (Barrett et al 2000). Initial timber-framed construction was often followed by glaciais or dump construction where successive dumps of soil created a continuous slope from rampart top to ditch bottom. The existence of a berm at Westbury Camp indicates this form of construction was not employed. The abandonment by the middle of the first millennium BC of early enclosures in Wessex has been noted by Cunliffe who suggests that the phenomenon must be viewed as a major threshold in the socio-economic development of the area (Cunliffe 1993).

The apparently deliberate construction of a ditch and counterscarp bank on only two sides of the enclosure is also worthy of note. The northern and eastern approaches to the site are over relatively level ground, making them the least defensible sides of the hillfort. The construction of

an outer ditch and bank beyond the northern and eastern rampart may have served to strengthen the enclosure's defences on these vulnerable sides. We must be cautious however at attributing a purely defensive explanation to the form of hillforts. Westbury Camp was most easily approached from the north and east with the entrance gateway located towards the northern end of the east side. The construction of an outer ditch and bank along these sides could have served to make the enclosure appear more impressive to approaching visitors (Fig. 8). The orientation of the entrance, facing due east, may also have been influenced by more than simply practical or topographic factors. The construction of an east-facing entrance may have had some symbolic significance in the later-prehistoric period and this trend in hillfort construction has been likened to roundhouse entrances, which also show a pattern of orientation to the east (Bowden 2005; Oswald et al 2006).



Figure 8. Westbury Camp: reconstruction of the entrance based on evidence from field survey.

Within the area of the Mendip Hills AONB, Westbury Camp is the only recorded prehistoric enclosure which lies along the southern escarpment. This is in contrast to the concentration of sites which lie towards the northern boundary which include Dolebury Camp (ST 45 NE 3), Banwell Camp (ST 45 NW 6) and Burlledge Hillfort (ST 55 NE 4), as well as the hill-slope enclosures of Longbottom Camp (ST 45 NE 12), Rewberrow Camp (ST 45 NE 13) and Burrington Camp (ST 45 NE 43). This distribution is partly an illusion of the boundary of the study area and all the sites mentioned are quite different to one another. What they do have in common is their topographic setting; they are all either located on the plateau edge or above the main gorges and combs which give access to the high plateau. Without further research however the relationship between all these sites and Westbury Camp cannot be known for certain or indeed whether they were all strictly contemporary. We must also remember that Westbury Camp was part of a much wider



landscape including a series of late-prehistoric sites which ring the Levels and Moors and dominate the higher ground to the south and west. These include Ruborough Camp, on the eastern edge of the Quantock Hills; Brent Knoll, an impressive contour fort which rises out of the Levels and Moors; and the 'Lake Villages' of Glastonbury and Meare. Maesbury Castle is a contour hillfort which lies outside the AONB boundary, 12km to the south-east of Westbury Camp, and is also located on the southern edge of the limestone plateau. Again, without clear dating evidence for all these sites the relationship between them must remain open to question.

The survey has uncovered little in the way of evidence for the interior arrangement of the site. Without clear archaeological evidence for buildings it is uncertain whether the site functioned as a settlement or had another, possibly agricultural, purpose. It is also possible that the site may represent seasonal settlement and it has been suggested that hillforts could have formed part of a transhumant pattern of life in the later-prehistoric period (Bowden 2005). Hillforts may also have functioned as meeting places where fairs, festivals or ritual activities took place, or possibly centres for craft activities or manufacture (Riley 2006).

As mentioned above, an extensive medieval and post-medieval landscape has been identified in the immediate vicinity of Westbury Camp. The deserted settlement sites of Stoke Woods and Rodney Stokes both lie within 250m of the hillfort to the east and west (Brown forthcoming). A third possible deserted farmstead also lies on the slopes below Westbury Camp and all these sites have the remains of medieval and post-medieval field systems associated with them. This continuity of settlement may be attributed to economic factors, with sites which were well placed in the landscape continuing to be used. The earthwork evidence does indeed suggest that the hillfort itself was re-used and formed part of a later agricultural landscape. Westbury Camp's location, on the boundary of what was once enclosed land and open heathland, must also have been significant as it allowed the exploitation of the heathland for fuel and grazing.

#### Conclusion

Westbury Camp is a sub-rectangular hillfort defined by relatively modest ramparts and an outer ditch and bank on two sides. The outer ditch and bank suggests the enclosure may have been constructed with display in mind; the ditch and bank employed to give an initial impression of strength when approaching. The monument probably dates from the early part of the Iron Age or possibly the end of the Bronze Age and may have been in use for a comparatively short period of time. The site could have functioned as a location for permanent or seasonal settlement and may have been a centre for agricultural production. Alternatively, it could have been a place of refuge for the local community or a meeting place where trade or ritual activities took place. The close proximity of the site to a substantial number of Bronze Age barrows, including one within the rampart, would suggest that this was an area of considerable importance for many centuries. That the area also had economic importance is emphasised by the concentration of deserted farmsteads and fields close to the monument.

The prehistoric earthworks of Westbury Camp are well preserved and form the only monument of its kind on the southern escarpment of the Mendip Hills AONB. As such, it is an important survival and the earthwork evidence helps give us a tentative insight into life on this part of the Mendip Hills in the later-prehistoric period.

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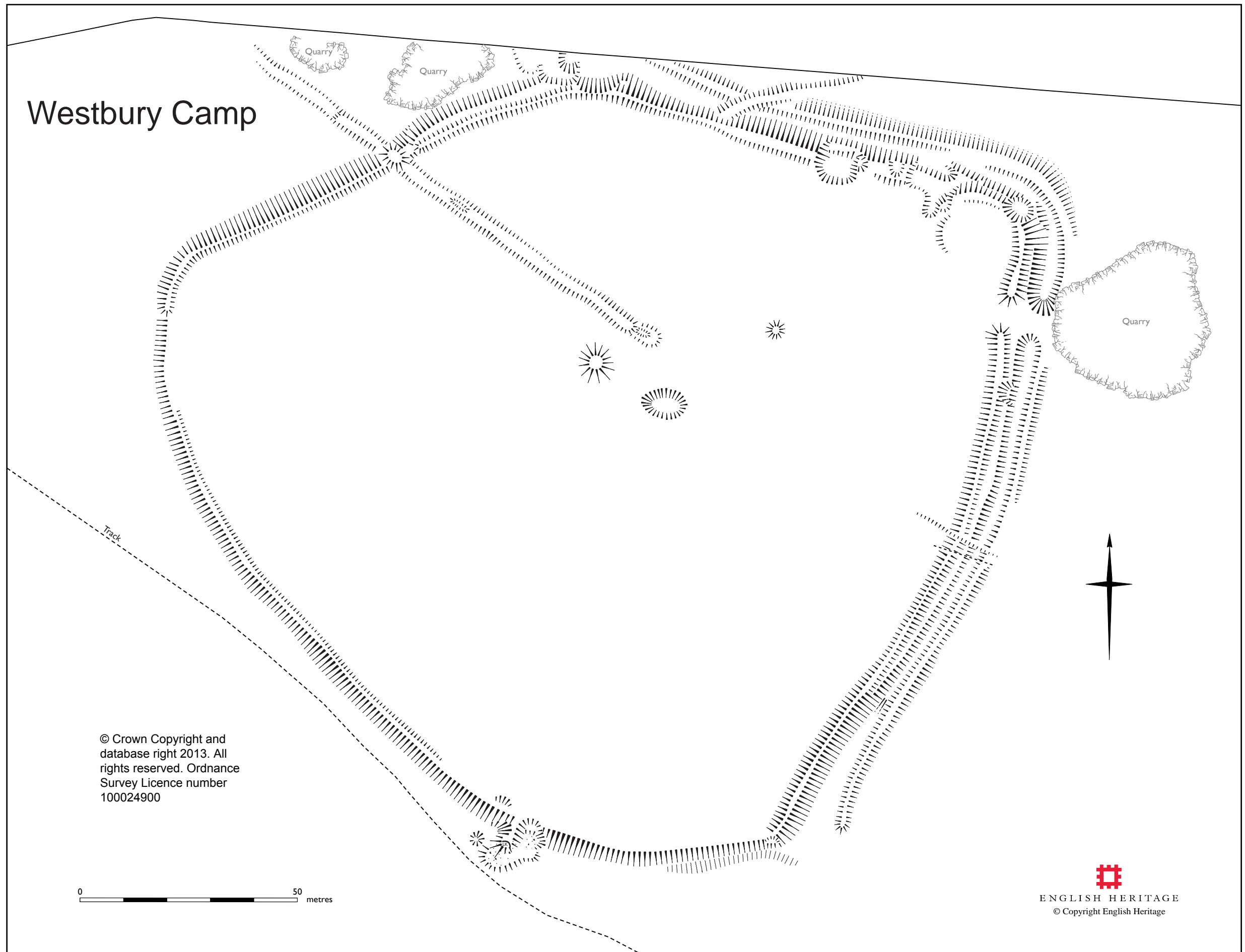


Figure 4. Westbury Camp: English Heritage 1:1000 scale survey (reduced).