

# **LIDDINGTON CASTLE**

**archaeological earthwork survey**



ENGLISH HERITAGE

**LIDDINGTON CASTLE**  
**archaeological earthwork survey**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION REPORT SERIES 4/2001

County: Wiltshire  
District: Swindon  
Parish: Liddington  
NGR: SU 209 797  
NMR No: SU 27 NW 4

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## INTRODUCTION

### Location and geology

Liddington Castle (NGR SU 209 797: NMR SU 27 NW 4) is a univallate hillfort, situated approximately 8 km to the south-east of Swindon (Fig 1) on the northern escarpment of the Wiltshire Downs. It occupies a good vantage point, overlooking the Vale of the White Horse to the north but also having views to the Cotswolds and parts of the counties of Wiltshire, Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Somerset. The hillfort was called Badbury Camp until the latter part of the eighteenth century (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 2-3, 56-7). The nineteenth-century pastoralist Richard Jefferies was a frequent visitor to the site; the first chapter of his book *The Story of My Heart* describes how he ‘used to resort to this entrenchment, now gazing at the vast prospect, and then lying down on the grass and speaking in his soul to the earth, the sun, the air and the distant sea far beyond sight’ (quoted by Osborn 1937, 517).

The hillfort is situated on the highest point of Liddington Hill. The OS trig pillar located on the east bank of the enclosure records a height of 277.57m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology of the area is Upper Chalk; during excavations this was encountered in the ‘lower parts of the deeper cuttings, as hard blocky material with flints. This is overlaid by clay with embedded flints of variable depth, occurring...as a stiff, orange clay with flints’ (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 21).

### Previous investigations and interventions

The natural resources of flint and chalk appear to have been utilised for many years. Several chalk pits appear on OS maps and the extent of quarrying is clear on aerial photographs (e.g. 106G/UK/1416/4105). Passmore noted the partial excavation of the interior of the hillfort itself for flints. This episode of flint quarrying continued for four years (1896-1900), during which time Passmore collected ‘everything of human manufacture which was found’ (1914, 576-7). These artefacts have been deposited in the Ashmolean Museum.

The site was also disturbed during the First World War when troops from Chiseldon Camp dug trenches on the northern slope of the hill. A grave, thought to be of Neolithic or Bronze Age date, was discovered. LF West (quoted in Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 6) describes the grave as containing the crouched skeleton of a young man whose skull had been fractured before death. Contained within the grave were part of the left molar bone of an ox and a few flint flakes. Additional finds were made during the same period of activity, including a quantity of Romano-British pottery.

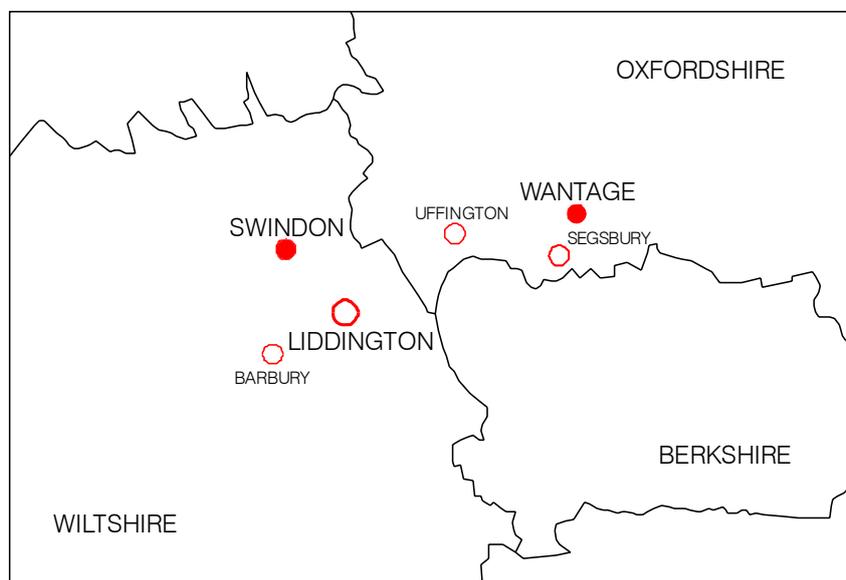
Some chance finds have been made, many of which are listed in the VCH for Wiltshire (Grinsell 1957, 81-2). Artefacts span from the Mesolithic (a perforated quartzite pebble) to the Anglo-Saxon (a spearhead). In addition, Crawford and Keiller noted a ‘long, flat’ mound on the south side of the camp opposite a space in the ramparts, which they listed as a possible pillow mound (1928, 19).

In the summer of 1976 the site was partly excavated following research carried out by a student of the University of Lamar, Texas, which suggested Liddington Castle to be the site of the battle of Mount Badon. The excavation found no evidence for the battle although a considerable amount of archaeological data was recovered. In particular the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age was well represented, suggesting a date for the hillfort as early as the seventh century BC (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 52).

In 1996 the Ancient Monuments Laboratory undertook a geophysical survey of the interior of the fort as part of their Wessex Hillforts Project. This revealed an extensive spread of pits, some curving ditches or gullies, and a large circular feature, possibly a timber building.

### **The present survey**

In 1999 English Heritage was asked to undertake an earthwork survey of Liddington Castle in advance of proposed repairs and consolidation of the earthworks, as part of the Countryside Agency's Ridgeway Heritage Project. The survey was intended to show the extent of erosion, as well as to improve the overall understanding of the site for academic purposes and for presentation to the public. This survey was undertaken in May-June 2000. Two aerial photographic sorties have also been flown in 2000 and aerial photographic transcription of the area around the hillfort is being undertaken as part of the National Mapping Programme.



*Fig 1. Location map*

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## DESCRIPTION

### Summary

Liddington Castle is a relatively small hillfort, comprising a bank, ditch and counterscarp. Colt Hoare described the site as:

‘situated on the northern point of a long range of hills, extending from Marlborough, over which there are still vestiges of a British track-way. Its form is oval, and its area comprehends seven acres and three-quarters [3.1ha]: the circumference of the ramparts is seven hundred and twenty-one yards [659m] and the height of rampart forty feet [12m]: it has only one entrance and that is placed towards the east, from which side it is the most accessible’ (1819, 38-9).

The interior of the hillfort contains several earthwork features. Some large depressions and some slighter scarps were recorded, although vegetation was high at the time of the present survey – more may remain to be discovered.

The area surrounding the hillfort exhibits numerous earthworks, including banks, ditches, barrows, settlement enclosures, field systems and trackways. Some of these are included on OS maps, whilst many more are noted from the NMR and aerial photographs. These include a linear ditch to the south of the fort known as the *Bican Dic* and the ‘trackway’ referred to by Colt Hoare, the *Herepath*. Noticeably, the landscape has been scarred by quarrying; the south-western part of the hillfort’s counterscarp is particularly affected.

### Entrances

This hillfort has a simple causewayed entrance on the east side, where there are several sarsen stones visible at the base of the rampart terminals; they may have been used to face the entrance. The entrance is approximately 3m wide, and scarps of the slightly hollowed track leading into the interior of the fort are visible. Hirst and Rahtz suggest that a possible ‘guard-house’ can be seen at this entrance (1996, 6). They may be referring to the slight triangular platform on the north side of the entrance, but the origin of this feature is obscure. Excavation demonstrated that the causeway is an original feature, ‘a chalk bridge interrupting the course of the ditch’ (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 35)

It has been suggested previously that the hillfort originally had two opposing entrances, with the western entrance having been blocked at some stage (Bradley and Ellison 1975, 185-7, 202). This possible blocked western entrance is now visible at (a) as a wide-topped section of rampart between two enlarged ‘terminals’. The ghost of one side of a trackway leading into the interior of the fort can be seen on the south side. The ditch is both narrower and shallower opposite the northern terminal, suggesting – if this marks the site of a causeway – a slightly oblique approach. The counterscarp is interrupted at this point. Additionally, several sarsen stones – largely absent from the rest of the circuit – are visible at this point in the rampart face.

## The ramparts

The defences are an apparently simple construction of an inner rampart, ditch and counterscarp. Hirst and Rahtz (1996, 29-30, 52) identify four main phases of rampart construction. The first, built in two 'sub-phases', had a timber rear revetment, perhaps surmounted by a palisade or platform. The second was a small dump rampart, its back slope faced with chalk blocks. The third was a more massive dump rampart with a front revetment of chalk blocks. These could all date to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) on the evidence of the pottery, though phases 2 and 3 might be later. The fourth phase is a slight heightening of the rampart dating to later in the Iron Age, or to some subsequent period. Hirst and Rahtz acknowledge that this phasing is not definitive, though the dating of the earliest phase seems secure. At the time of the present survey a line of chalk blocks, some of them apparently shaped, was exposed in an erosion scar high on the outer face of the rampart on the north side of the fort; this was presumably part of the phase 3 rampart.

The inner rampart top is generally narrow, while the counterscarp is broader. The inner rampart top has been modified at numerous points. The most substantial disturbances are as follows. Between **(b)** and **(c)** it has been almost entirely levelled. This is probably due to the quarrying activity which has all but destroyed the counterscarp in the same sector. The inner rampart is also seriously reduced at **(d)**, and paths have been punched through it at **(e)** and **(f)**. At **(g)** there is a substantial hollow in the rampart top, with some upcast to the west and a small subsidiary hole to the east. This lies immediately above a setting of concrete posts outside the counterscarp (described below) and shows as a dark spot on immediately post-Second World War air photographs (106G/UK/1416/4105-6). It is possible that this hollow and the concrete post structure are connected. The north-eastern ramparts have been particularly badly damaged, especially by erosion around the OS trig pillar where there has been a loss of 0.5m. Erosion has clearly been a factor for some time (see, e.g., aerial photograph OS 72225/553 taken in July 1972) and a former attempt to mend erosion scars is made evident by planks and wire mesh pegged into the outer rampart face immediately south of the east entrance.

The outer element, the counterscarp, also displays an uneven appearance in some places, partly due to disturbance, though the possibility that it is an unfinished work must be borne in mind. The 'lumpiness' characteristic of unfinished earthworks is apparent on the ground and is clearly demonstrated in oblique aerial photographs (e.g. NMR SU 2079/47; Fig 2). The counterscarp is very slight to the south of the east entrance and at **(h)** there is a distinct gap. This could conceivably be due to a track shown by Andrews and Dury (1773), though there is no corresponding break in the inner rampart and the path now runs along the ditch bottom to the east entrance. This trackway, which should have scored the ramparts deeply, is not certainly visible on the ground, and it is debatable whether its course is accurately depicted on the map. Between **(j)** and **(k)** the counterscarp has been almost destroyed by the quarrying which is also apparent on the natural slope below the fort in this sector. A platform on the outer side of the counterscarp at **(m)** is currently unexplained. Immediately to the east of this the path which breaks the inner rampart at **(e)** also breaks through the counterscarp, and the ditch has been partly filled here. Other irregularities in the counterscarp around the north and east sides of the fort can be attributed to quarrying

activity and vehicle tracks, but also possibly to its unfinished status, as suggested above.



*Fig 2. Liddington Castle from the east (NMR SU 2079/47)*

The following measurements are maximum recorded heights: top of rampart from ditch – 7.2m; top of rampart from interior – 2.9m; top of counterscarp from ditch – 3.3m; counterscarp to natural – 2.3m. The apparent discrepancy between the maximum height of the rampart given here and that recorded by Hoare (see above, p3) may be because Hoare measured the *slope* rather than the vertical distance.

Very few stones are visible in the ramparts except for the sarsens at the east entrance and the suggested blocked west entrance. There are numerous active erosion scars on the ramparts, revealing, as did the 1976 excavations, that the body of the rampart is composed of chalk and flint. In places the chalk is in large blocks and voids are visible.

## **The interior**

During the survey the interior was under high nettle and grass cover, limiting ground visibility. The most noticeable features were four large circular depressions. The approximate measurements of these are: 11m diameter and 1.55m depth (**n**); 6m diameter and 1m depth (**p**); 8m diameter and 1.4m depth (**q**); 6m diameter and 0.9m depth (**r**). These, plus additional circular features, are visible on aerial photographs, the earliest dating to 1933 (NMR SU 2079/15). These had been interpreted as wells, shafts or deep pits of prehistoric date (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 7) but this explanation is unsatisfactory because they are crisp, sharp earthworks that show little signs of erosion. In addition, (**p**) can be seen to cut a wide, shallow depression. The date of this depression is unknown. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that the holes are of relatively modern origin and may have been caused through military manoeuvres linked to the nearby Chiseldon Camp.

A group of slight hollows just to the north-east of the centre of the fort, none more than 0.3m deep, are part of the quarries noted by Passmore (1914, 576-7) and similar features elsewhere in the interior may also be the result of flint or chalk extraction. However, there is no spoil adjacent to any of these shallow depressions. One or two (e.g. **s**, **s**) might be hut circles; they resemble features interpreted as such at Barbury (SU 17 NW 8). A further survey might reveal additional possible huts, but it should be noted that the geophysical survey revealed relatively few features of this type.

A suggestion of an internal quarry scoop behind the rampart can be seen along the north side of the fort and, more tentatively, at some points on the south-east and south-west sides. No such feature was noted in the excavations (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 30, fig 13). A step, up to 0.4m high, at the foot of the inner rampart face, particularly visible in the south-eastern sector, may be a ploughing line; if so it is the only indicator that the interior of the fort has ever been cultivated.

Interestingly, no certain traces of the 1976 excavation trenches were found.

## **External features**

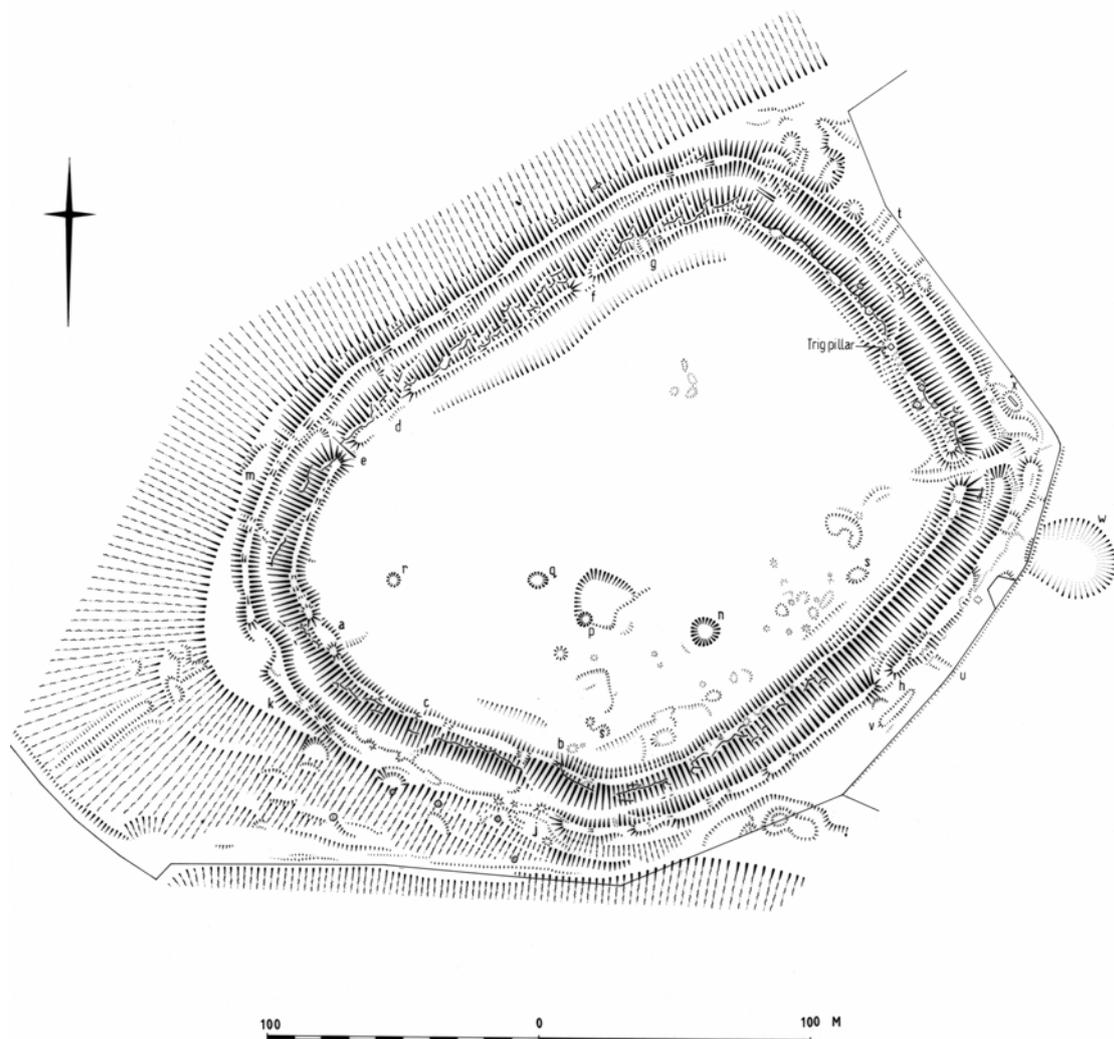
Two features of note are slight linear hollows which appear to be emerging from under the hillfort counterscarp (**t** and **u**). Neither is as much as 0.3m deep and there is no sign of them continuing into the adjacent field but they may, nevertheless, represent land divisions pre-dating the fort.

A more prominent feature is the linear hollow with very slight flanking mounds on the south-western slope of the hill, immediately below the blocked west entrance of the fort (SU 27 NW 140). The line of this feature is interrupted by quarries at its eastern end and, though there is no direct stratigraphic relationship, it is presumably earlier than, or contemporary with them. If it originally continued to the north-east there is now no sign of it, though it may have turned to the east, along the line of a slight terrace in the natural slope. At the south-western end it fades into the natural slope above the track which skirts this edge of the field. However, it can be seen on aerial

photographs (e.g. 106G/UK/1416/4105-6; NMR 18825/16) to continue across the field to the west. Its interpretation is discussed below.

The mound (SU 27 NW 45) noted by Crawford and Keiller is still extant (v) and is up to 0.4m high. It is discussed further below.

A large hollow (w), more than 0.5m deep, lies to the south-east of the fort in the adjacent field. This may be the remains of a chalk pit but its regular shape suggests the possibility that it might have been a dew pond.



*Fig 3. Survey plan, reduced from the 1:1000 scale archive drawing*

During the Second World War a large area of the downs to the south-east of Liddington Castle was used as a bombing decoy. The command post survives less than 1km to the north-east of the hillfort. Just outside the eastern entrance of the hillfort is a 'boiling oil fire tray' – a large metal trough filled with burning oil, flushed with water periodically to create violent bursts of flame, simulating explosions –

(Dobinson 1996, 48), now re-used as a water trough (x). This is clearly not in its original position. At the foot of the counterscarp on the northern side of the fort is a construction of three pairs of small concrete posts arranged in a rectangle 3.1m long by 0.75m wide. The posts are 0.15m high. Each post incorporates a length of copper sheet, presumably an electrical contact. This seems more likely to be a military than an agricultural construction. As noted above, this lies immediately below a substantial hollow cut into the inner rampart (g).

All other features within the surveyed area can be attributed to quarrying for flint and chalk.

### **The wider landscape**

As noted above, the area around Liddington Castle is rich in archaeological remains, though few of them are well preserved. There is a long barrow 1.5km to the east (SU 27 NW 43) and Neolithic pottery, flints and axe fragments have been found, some within the fort (SU 27 NW 8, 82). A number of round barrows are recorded by the OS (SU 27 NW 41, 42, 44, 48) and ring ditches suggest the presence of more (e.g. SU 27 NW 60, SU 28 SW 29; see also aerial photographs NMR SU 2079/37-8, 40-4, SU 2080/14). Two of these barrows were excavated by Passmore and shown to be of early Bronze Age date (1894). There are two enclosures seen as cropmarks, one rectilinear and one curvilinear, on the plateau to the north of the fort in close proximity to some of the ring ditches. The curvilinear enclosure, which is immediately below the hillfort at SU 206801, is double-ditched and measures some 170m east-west by 120m transversely (aerial photographs 106G/UK/1416/4105-6; RAF 58/3162/0118-0120; NMR SU 2080/6-8, 14). The rectilinear enclosure, at about SU 200798, is smaller (NMR SU 2079/37-8, 40-4). There is another pair of enclosures to the east of the fort at SU 215795, one square and the other circular; these are also cropmark sites (SU 27 NW 87 and 89). These latter enclosures are possibly associated with a field system, the fragmentary remains of which lie in the same area (SU 27 NW 55). The *Bican Dic*, though strictly undated, is thought to be of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date (SU 27 NW 54). It runs south for three miles from a point just to the south-west of Liddington Castle. A second linear ditch, thought to be of similar date, runs parallel to the *Bican Dic* and 300-500m east of it (SU 27 NW 58). Finds of Romano-British date are widespread in the area (e.g. SU 27 NW 5 and 61). Medieval and post-medieval activity is attested by the presence of ridge-and-furrow and strip lynchets on the north-facing slope of the hill just below the hillfort, surviving as earthworks (see aerial photographs FSL/71227/227064-5, NMR SU 2079/48, 53-4, for instance), and by the numerous chalk pits and flint quarries. Twentieth-century military activity is well attested on early aerial photographs (e.g. NMR SU 2079/16; SU 2179/8) but few of these features survive as earthworks (NMR SU 2079/33-5).

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## DISCUSSION

### Before the hillfort

There have been some discoveries of finds that predate the hillfort, including a Palaeolithic flint implement and a Mesolithic perforated quartzite pebble (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 57), but it is not until the Neolithic and the Bronze Age that a clearer picture of the people living within the landscape can begin to be seen with the barrows, enclosures, linear ditches and field system mentioned above.

The two ditched features (**t** and **u**), apparently running beneath the ramparts, may be indicators of earlier land divisions. The linear feature to the south-west (SU 27 NW 140) must also be considered here. Three possible interpretations can be suggested. First, it might be the remains of a linear ditch pre-dating the fort. Secondly, it could be a hollow way approaching the west entrance of the fort. Thirdly, it might be an inclined plane for transporting material from the quarries immediately above it and more generally on this side of the hill. The fact that it continues beyond the track edging the field in which the fort lies, and that it is shown on Colt Hoare's plan of the site (1819, pl VII no 2), probably rules out the third option. The second is perhaps unlikely on the grounds that surprisingly (and *pace* Crawford 1953, 65-6) trackways are not often found as earthworks approaching hillfort entrances. Linear ditches, on the other hand – and especially the junctions of linear ditches – are often overlain by hillforts. This interpretation is, therefore, preferred. It is at least possible that there is a junction of features **t** and **u**, together with this linear, underlying the fort. The western entrance of the fort lies approximately on the line of this linear which would have to have been backfilled. This could explain why the linear ditch is not visible immediately outside the fort. Alternatively, there is a slight suggestion, in the form of a narrow terrace, that the linear may have been turned to the south-east, skirting the flank of the hill. The interpretation of this feature as a pre-hillfort linear ditch tends to support the idea put forward by Bradley, that there is a deliberate relationship between some of the Ridgeway escarpment hillforts and earlier land divisions (Bradley and Ellison 1975, 187).

### The hillfort

Bradley has suggested that Liddington Castle is one of the earliest hillforts constructed in Wiltshire, one of a number of hilltop settlements defended in the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries on the north Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. While the timber-revetted phase 1 rampart is certainly of this date, the dump ramparts of phases 2-4 might date to the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, however (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 52). The first phase rampart at Uffington, about 11km to the north-east, has been dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and the second to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Lock and Gosden 1997a, 66); the dating of Segsbury, 18km to the east, may be similar (Lock and Gosden 1997b, 76), though further refinements of these datings are to be expected.

Liddington, both in terms of area and scale of the ramparts, is smaller than Barbury Castle, its neighbour 7km to the south-west, and closer in size to Uffington Castle. Segsbury is much larger in internal area but similar in terms of rampart size.

The fort was apparently built with opposing entrances, the western one subsequently blocked. This west entrance apparently had enlarged rampart terminals, but if these existed at the east entrance they have been lost to later use or erosion. Bradley tied the history of the entrances to the linear earthwork to the south, the *Bican Dic*, (Bradley and Ellison 1975, 185-7, 202) but this is an undated earthwork. It may be that the blocking of the west entrance, a feature seen on other hillforts, is related to some aspect of its ritual or cosmological significance (Hill 1996, 110) rather than to defensive considerations.

The ramparts of Liddington Castle are built largely of a series of straight lengths, rather than being curvilinear. This phenomenon has been noted at many hillforts and related to possible 'gang-working' practices. Here, however, the overall shape of the fort is sub-trapezoidal rather than sub-oval, and this seems to relate more to deliberate choice than to the 'accident' of gangs building in straight lengths. In this respect, too, Liddington may be similar to Uffington. The unfinished appearance of the counterscarp has been mentioned. This may be related to the apparent paucity of internal features. Neither earthwork survey nor geophysics has recovered evidence for extensive prehistoric occupation within the fort. Though the picture has been confused by the recent flint extraction and possibly by military activity, the interior of the fort may never have seen either prolonged or intensive occupation. A similar picture emerged at Uffington, though Segsbury (and possibly Barbury) were more heavily occupied (Lock and Gosden 1997b, 76).

None of the features in the surrounding area need necessarily be contemporary with the hillfort at Liddington, though the linear ditches might be contemporary with its earliest phase, and the enclosures and field system could also be of Iron Age date. It is notable that there are no indications that the field system came close to the hillfort.

### **Roman and later use of the site**

There is no unequivocal evidence of Roman occupation on the site; Roman pottery has been found in the interior of the site and in the vicinity, as noted above. This need suggest no more than ephemeral use, perhaps in an agricultural context. Nevertheless, excavations in the ditch terminals at the east entrance found a sherd of samian ware, a counter probably also made from samian ware, and two other undiagnostic sherds. Hirst and Rahtz (1996, 35) point out that the low stratigraphic position of these artefacts shows that the ditch terminals on either side of the causeway of the eastern entrance had been cleaned out during the Roman period, which suggests that there was some significant use of the site. It is at least possible that the large circular building revealed by geophysical survey is a Roman shrine or temple. Finds of possible Romano-British roof stones (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 53) might support this very tentative suggestion but only excavation could yield further information on this point.

The date of the next archaeologically visible period of use is the eleventh century, based upon the dating of pottery from the excavation (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 54). Again this is probably the result of an agricultural or pastoral use of the hill, and again may or may not have involved structures. As noted previously, there are cultivation

remains on the lower slopes of the hill but there is no clear evidence for ploughing within the fort itself.

Crawford and Keiller's interpretation of the mound (v) as a pillow mound is possibly correct (SU 27 NW 45). There is little to be learnt from the form of the feature itself, especially as it has been severely damaged by the passage of vehicles, but the area to the south and east of the fort is designated 'Liddinton Warren' on Andrews and Dury's map (1773), supporting the idea of rabbit breeding here. Otherwise, the post-medieval phase is represented only in the artefact collection, and it is unlikely that this represents any permanent reuse of the hillfort. It is more likely to be symptomatic of the attraction of the site for pipe smokers, pastoralists, perambulators and so forth, all of whom have left evidence for their presence (Hirst and Rahtz 1996, 54).

The last known non-agricultural use of the site was during the first half of the twentieth century when the hillfort was used as part of military manoeuvres associated with Chiseldon Camp (Bailey 1998). This included the construction of a rifle range at the foot of the hill, a hand bomb throwing range, and the activities of the Cycle Corps. There may also have been some activity at the fort during the Second World War in connection with the bombing decoy to the south-east; possible evidence for this is provided by feature (g) and the concrete post emplacement below it.

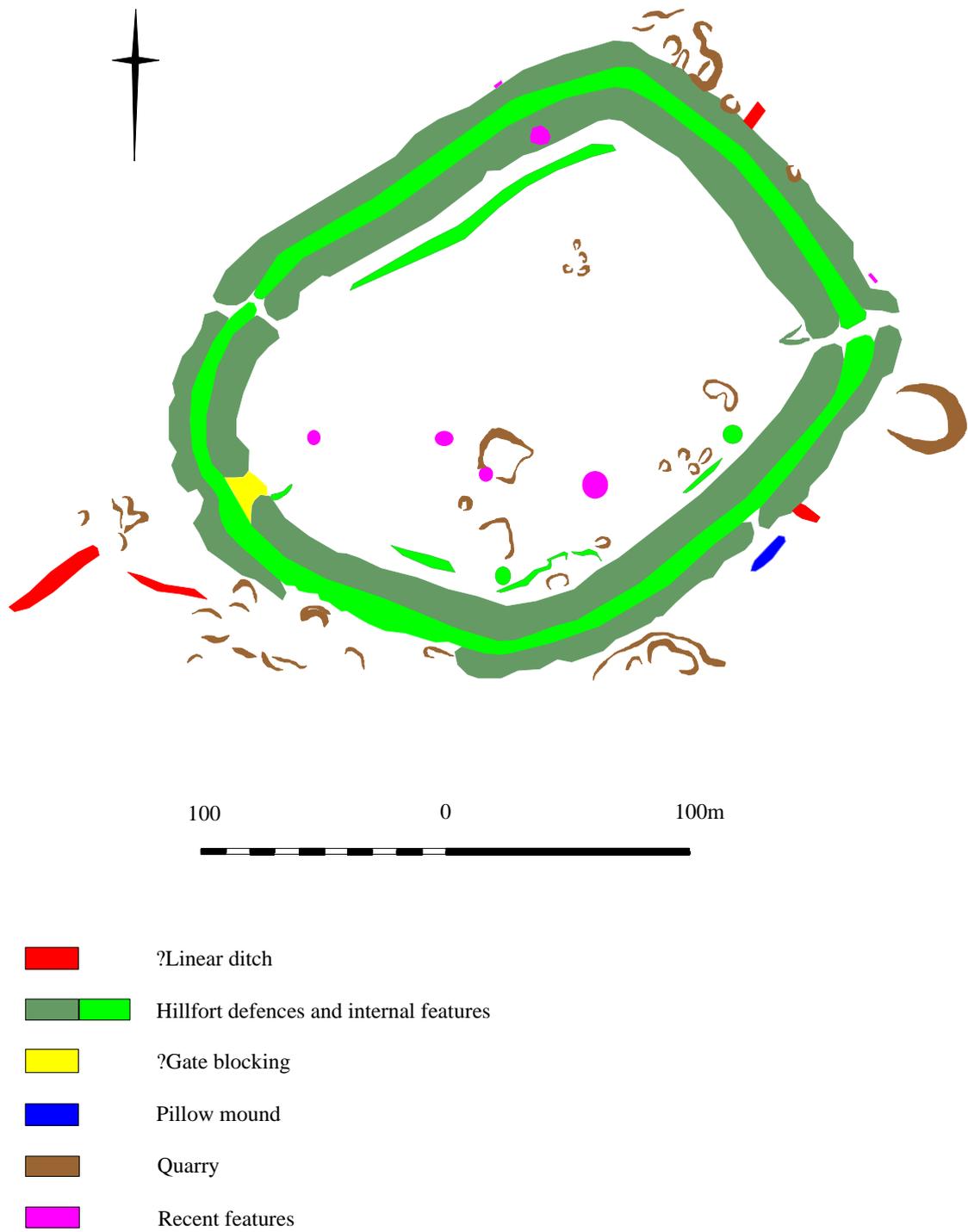


Fig 4. Interpretation drawing

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## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The divorced survey was undertaken at a scale of 1:1000. Control was established using a Wild-Leitz co-axial EDM with Key Terra Firma software to run a seven station closed traverse. Hard detail and the majority of the erosion scars were also supplied electronically as part of the control survey. All earthwork detail was supplied into the control plot using tape-and-offset methods and plane-table with Wild RK1 self-reducing alidade.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

English Heritage is grateful to Mr J Peploe, the landowner, for permission to undertake this survey. Andy Payne supplied information on the results of the geophysical survey. Damian Grady made the latest aerial photographs available and, with David Knight, discussed the transcription. David Field and Graeme Kirkham discussed various aspects of the site.

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## AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

The NMR holds a large number of aerial photographs of Liddington Castle. Those found most useful in the compilation of this report were:

### *Verticals*

106G/UK/1416/4105-6	14-April-1946
RAF/58/3612/0119-20	20-June-1960
FSL/71227/227064-5	26-October-1971

### *Obliques*

SU 2079/15	9-November-1933
SU 2079/16	15-May-1934
SU 2079/37-8, 40-4	12-August-1997
SU 2079/47-9	9-January-2000
SU 2079/53-4	9-January-2000
SU 2080/6-8	27-July-1995
SU 2080/14	10-April-1997
SU 2179/8	15-May-1934
NMR 18825/16 (not yet catalogued)	15-July-2000

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