

BURRINGTON CAMP, NORTH SOMERSET: A LATE PREHISTORIC ENCLOSURE ON THE MENDIP HILLS ANALYTICAL EARTHWORK SURVEY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT

Elaine Jamieson



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SUMMARY

A survey of Burrington Camp was undertaken as part of the English Heritage survey and investigation of the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in February 2007. Burrington Camp is a multi-phase prehistoric hill slope enclosure. The initial phase of construction comprised an L-shaped bank and ditch defining a spur at the west end of Burrington Ham. A sub-rectangular enclosure was later constructed within the earlier bank and ditch; this was defined by an internal quarry ditch which provided material for the enlargement of the original rampart and the creation of an outer bank on the remaining two sides. The later phase also involved the creation of an entrance through the original bank and ditch towards the north-eastern corner of the enclosure.

CONTRIBUTORS

Survey and interpretation of the site was undertaken by the author with Marcus Jecock, Graham Brown and Hazel Riley. Mark Bowden commented on an early draft of the text.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

English Heritage is grateful to Sir David Wills for allowing access to the site to Les Davis of the Mendip Hills AONB Service for his assistance.

ARCHIVE LOCATION

The archive is deposited at the NMR, Swindon.

DATE OF INVESTIGATION

February 2007

CONTACT DETAILS

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BURRINGTON CAMP, NORTH SOMERSET. A late-prehistoric enclosure on the Mendip Hills

Elaine Jamieson

Summary

A large-scale survey of Burrington Camp was undertaken as part of the English Heritage archaeological survey of the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in February 2007. Burrington Camp is a multi-phase hill-slope enclosure of late prehistoric date. The initial phase of construction comprised an L-shaped bank and ditch which defined a spur at the western end of Burrington Ham. A sub-rectangular enclosure was later constructed within the earlier bank and ditch. This was defined by an internal quarry ditch which provided material for the enlargement of the original rampart and the creation of an outer bank on the remaining two sides. The later phase also involved the construction of an entrance through the original bank and ditch towards the north-eastern corner of the enclosure.

INTRODUCTION

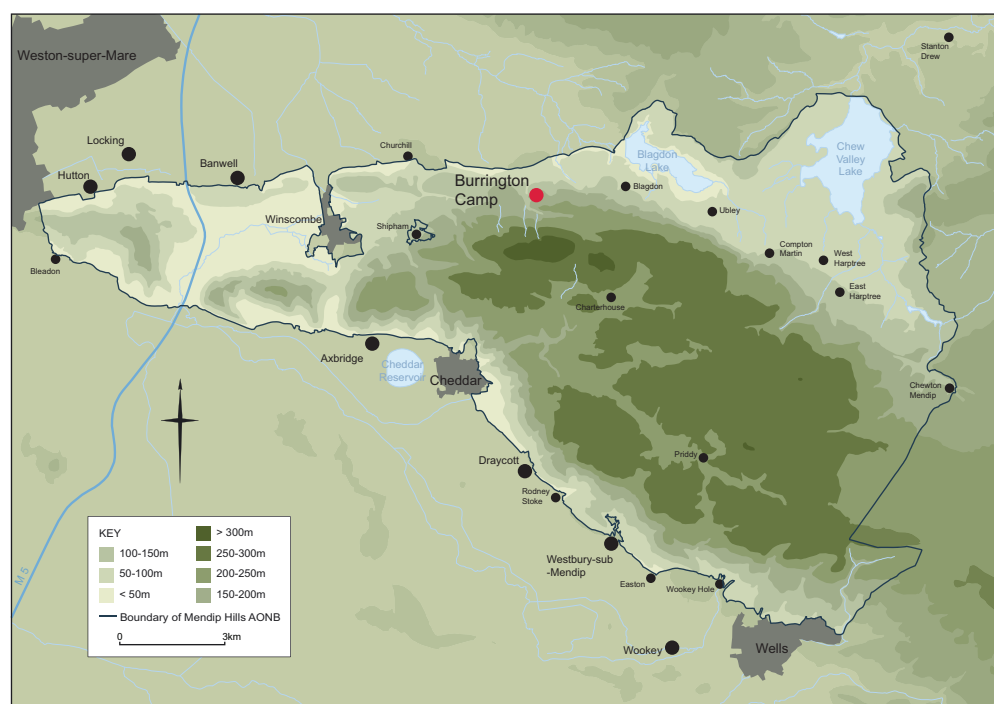


Figure 1. Location plan.

Location and geology

The earthwork remains of Burrington Camp lie towards the northern boundary of the Mendip Hills AONB (Fig. 1). The monument is situated on the northern edge of the main limestone plateau, approximately 0.4km southwest of the village of Burrington (centred ST 4782 5878), at about 165m above OD. The site sits at the north-western end of Burrington Ham, on a short limestone spur, within an area of rough grassland and scrub. North of Burrington Camp the limestone plateau falls steeply through deciduous woodland to the spring-line settlements of Burrington and Rickford

in North Somerset. The southern and western extents of Burrington Ham are defined by the near vertical limestone gorge of Burrington Combe which carves its way through the edge of the plateau and up onto higher ground (Fig. 2). The highest point of Burrington Ham lies 140m to the southeast of the enclosure and takes the form of a limestone outcrop, rising to about 185m above OD, located at the western end of a narrow ridge. Looking northwards from Burrington Camp there are impressive views out over the Yeo Valley to Broadfield Down. The Bristol Channel lies to the northwest with the southern coast of Wales visible on a clear day.

Burrington Camp lies mainly on Clifton Down Limestone, with the southern rampart overlying Burrington Oolite and the northern ditch overlying calcite-mudstone (“chinastone”). All form part of the Clifton Down Group of the Carboniferous period (British Geological Survey Wells, sheet 280).

The survey

Burrington Camp was surveyed at 1:500 scale in February 2007 by staff from the Exeter and York offices of the Archaeological Survey and Investigation section of English Heritage. The site was surveyed as part of the English Heritage Mendip Hills AONB project.

Figure 2. Burrington Camp: map showing topographic setting (right). Air photograph of Burrington Camp looking southwest (NMR ST 475812 29-MAR-1969)(left).



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS WORK

One of the earliest descriptions of Burrington Camp dates from the early 18th century and was produced by John Strachey, a distinguished geologist and antiquarian of the day. The description reads as follows: 'On the rampart behind two ditches on the Ham is a camp or entrenchment of 150 paces square said to be British but rather Saxon because its reported to be in opposition to Dolbery or Danesbury in Churchil. This work on the combe is overlooked by a rude rock called the Castle and to the west of this intrenchment is a precipice'. A small sketch of Burrington camp was drawn in the margin showing three concentric rectangles with entrances on three sides (Williams 1987, 61).

A more accurate depiction of the enclosure appears on the Ordnance Survey (OS) first edition map of 1885 (Fig. 3). The map indicates that the areas of Burrington Ham to the east and north of the site were more open at this time, depicting them as areas of grassland. The OS first edition map also shows the location of quarries and limekilns to the west of the site in Burrington Combe (OS 1885).

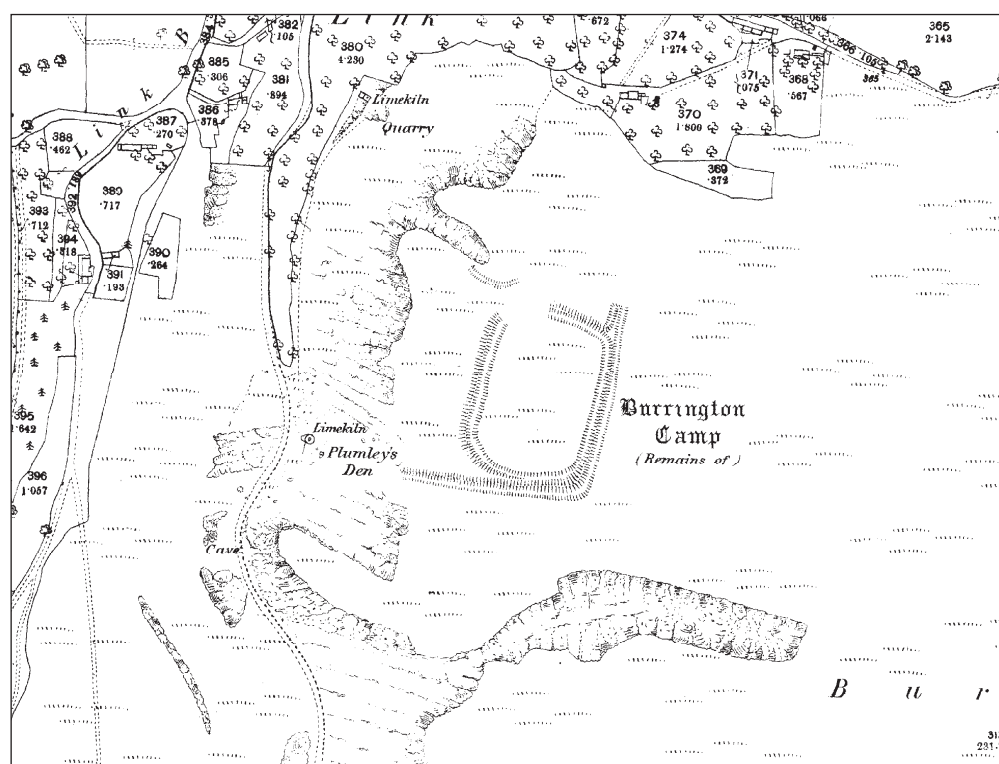


Figure 3. Burrington Camp: reproduced from the Ordnance Survey first edition map of 1885.

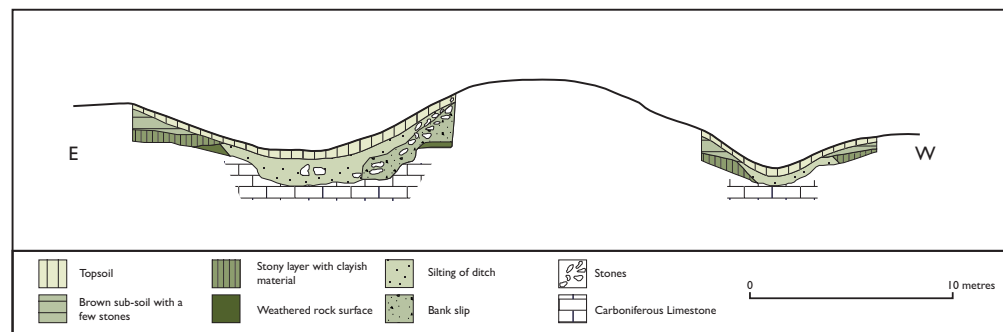
Burrington Camp is included in Allcroft's *Earthwork of England* (1908) in which he describes the site as: 'a very curious work, apparently a hybrid between the military and the ritual methods of construction'. His reasoning for this is the existence of an inner ditch or 'fosse' which he infers indicates similarities with ritual sites. He quotes the Rev. Collinson from the late 18th century who suggests the site to be 'Druidical', and to have some connection with the stone circles at Stanton Drew. Allcroft produced what must be viewed as a sketch plan of the site, somewhat inaccurate in form and scale, which depicts the main elements of the monument (Allcroft 1908, 582-4).

A brief description and plan of the site were included in the *Victoria County History* (VCH) for Somerset published in 1911. A rampart walk and breastwork were identified along the southern and

the eastern sides of the monument, the rampart walk being less distinct along the latter (VCH 1911, 483-4). Burrow (1924) also refers to a 'kind of platform' along the inner sides of the rampart on the east and south sides. Burrow's plan of the site would appear to be based on the one published by Allcroft (above), giving the site a more oval form than is really the case. Burrow also claims to have found a number of leaf-shaped arrowheads at the site, made not from flint but from limestone, one of which is on display in Wells museum (Burrow 1924, 68-9).

An accurate earthwork survey of Burrington Camp at 1:500 scale was produced by JH Crickmay, R Clove and J Lowndes in June of 1949. This plan was reproduced by EK Tratman in his article on Burrington Camp published in 1962-3 (Tratman 1962-3, 16-21). This article reported the results of the archaeological excavations undertaken at the site by members of the Bristol University Spelaeological Society in 1948 and 1960. The 1948 excavations took the form of a trench through the inner and outer ditches, extending into the bank, on the eastern side of the enclosure. The only find recorded during this work was a crudely-shaped small slab of Old Red Sandstone thought to represent a possible pot cover. In 1960 the earlier cuttings were tidied up and extended part way through the bank on both sides (Fig. 4). This work identified no structural features relating to the bank; it was of dump construction created from material excavated from both ditches. The outer ditch was flat bottomed and cut into the natural limestone with stone from the cutting piled onto the outer face of the bank. The inner ditch was shallower and did not cut the underlying rock. Both ditches had silted significantly with the outer ditch c 1.8m deeper when originally constructed. Excavations showed evidence of a berm between the edge of the ditch and the bank. No finds were recorded. The campaign of work in 1960 also involved a series of trial pits, each 4ft (1.2m) square, dug in the interior of the enclosure in an attempt to find dateable material. A total of 15 trial pits were excavated and 'not a single ancient object was found'.

Figure 4. Burrington Camp: Section through eastern rampart (after Tratman 1962-3, fig. 4).



The site is briefly mentioned by LV Grinsell in *The Archaeology of Wessex* (1958), where he describes Burrington Camp as a small univallate hillfort (Grinsell 1958, 165). In *Hillfort and Hill-top Settlement in Somerset in the First to Eighth Century A.D.* (1981) Burrow also classes Burrington Camp as a hillfort, although he does highlight the weak defensive position of the site. He describes the enclosure as consisting of: 'a roughly rectangular enclosure defined by a bank with an outer ditch and an inner quarry ditch'. He also records the location of a spring, outside the enclosure towards the north-eastern corner (Burrow 1981, 244-6).

The Ordnance Survey Archaeological Division revised the original first edition survey plan at 1:2500 scale in 1966 (NMR ST 45 NE 43).

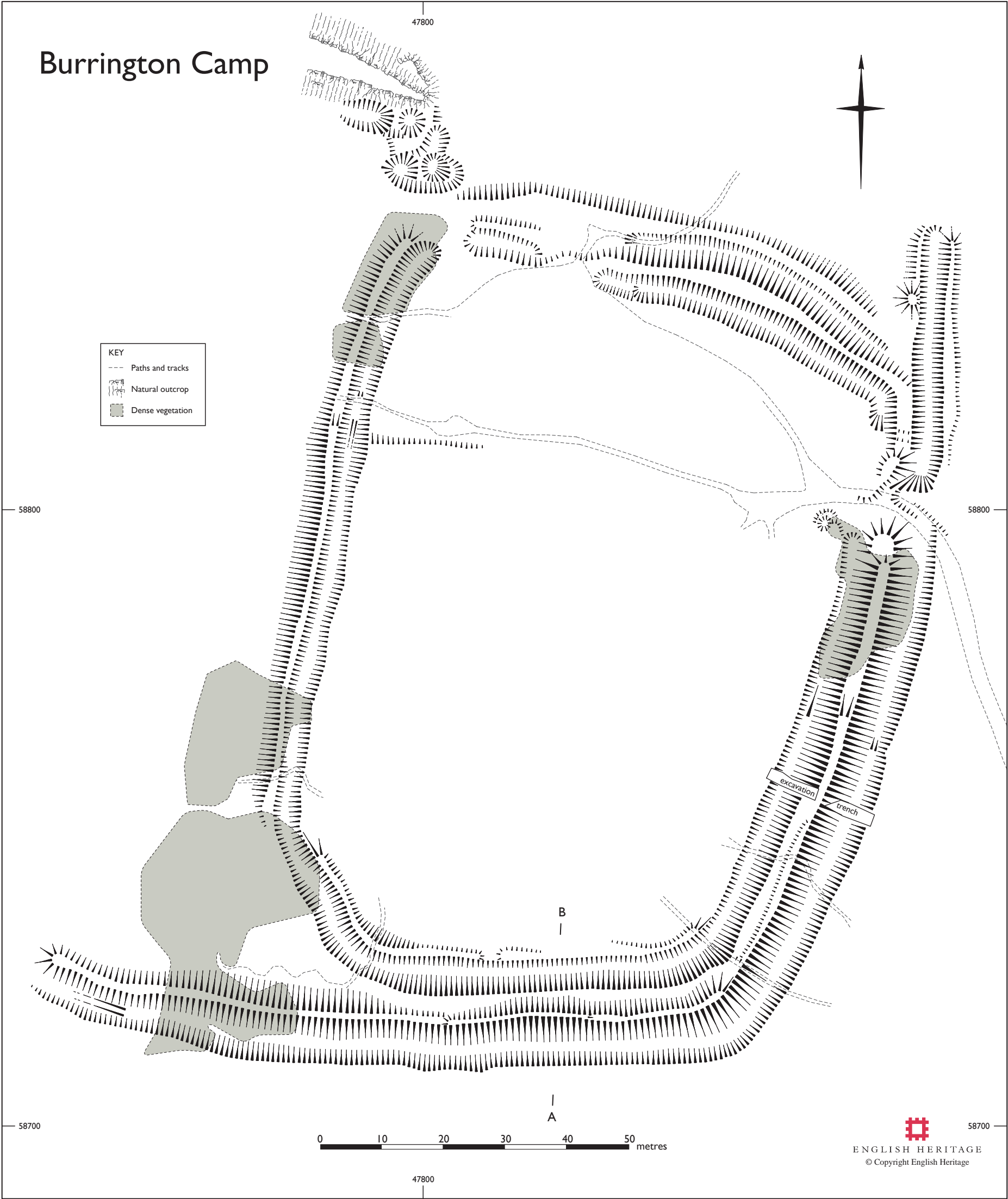


Figure 5. Burrington Camp: English Heritage 1:500 scale survey (reduced).

BURRINGTON CAMP: THE EARTHWORKS (Figs. 5 & 7)

Introduction

Burrington Camp is a multi-phase site incorporating an L-shaped bank and ditch within which lies a sub-rectangular enclosure formed by an internal quarry ditch with an outer bank along two sides.

The L-shaped bank and ditch

The L-shaped bank and ditch is a substantial earthwork running from west to east for c 116m before turning northwards and continuing for a further c 130m. The grass and scrub-covered bank and ditch has an overall width of between 9.8-11.4m, with the bank standing a maximum of 2.3m high and the rock-cut ditch 1.2m deep (Fig. 6). The western limit of the bank ends in a well-defined terminal, standing 1m high, which curves slightly northwards, with the ditch fading as the ground begins to drop steeply into the gorge below. The northern extent of the monument also ends with a well-defined terminal to the bank and ditch, with the ditch 0.7m deep and the bank, much slighter at this point, standing only 0.3m high. Towards the northern end there is also evidence of a counterscarp bank associated with the ditch which runs southwards for c 40m from the northern terminal of the ditch and stands a maximum of 0.2m high.



Figure 6. Burrington Camp: the southern and eastern rampart and outer ditch.

The inner enclosure

The inner enclosure is formed by a sub-rectangular ditch, orientated northeast-southwest, with an outer bank on the northern and eastern sides. The feature has been constructed in the angle of the L-shaped linear earthwork (above), which forms the outer bank and ditch on the eastern and southern sides. The enclosure measures 76m southeast-northwest by 110m northeast-southwest internally, with the earthworks enclosing an area of c 0.8ha. The grass and bracken-covered ditch and bank are relatively well preserved along much of their length, although large sections of the western side are covered in dense vegetation.

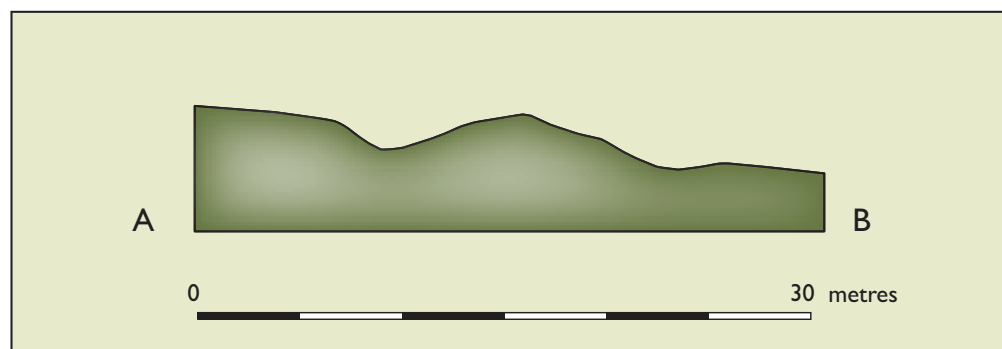
The western side of the enclosure comprises a ditch and outer bank, the ditch being most substantial

towards the south-western corner of the monument where it survives to 1.1m deep. The grass-covered stone and earthen outer bank runs almost the entire length of the western side and stands a maximum of 1.3m high. The height of the outer bank drops to 0.7m some 32m from the north-western corner before continuing northwards and then terminating on the corner. There is also a well-defined terminal to the ditch at this point creating a gap in the circuit.

The northern side of the enclosure is formed, in part, by a substantial bank with an internal and external ditch running for c 48m from the north-eastern corner of the monument. The grass-covered earth and stone bank stands a maximum of 1.2m high, with the internal ditch a maximum of 0.9m deep. The external ditch is very slight and is a maximum of 0.3m deep with a counterscarp bank on the downhill side. The counterscarp bank, which stands a maximum of 0.5m high, runs the whole length of the northern side. A short length of ditch and bank, 12.5m long, runs eastwards from the north-western corner, terminating 9.2m short of the bank and double ditch. The ditch is a maximum of 0.4m deep, with the bank measuring no more than 0.2m in height. This feature forms the eastern side of the north-western corner gap in the circuit. The northern side of the circuit is difficult to interpret and has evidently been disturbed and altered over time. The earthwork remains would suggest that there may have been two gaps in the circuit along this side, one of which was later blocked. Alternatively, the breaks in the rampart may indicate that the enclosure was never completed, the short section of ditch and bank towards the north-western corner representing a setting-out phase. Evidence for later quarrying was recorded in this area which may be responsible for some of the disturbance.

The eastern side of the enclosure is formed by a ditch constructed against the western side of the L-shaped bank and ditch (above). The steep-sided ditch is a maximum of 4.7m wide and 1.5m deep. Towards the northern end of the east side there is a substantial gap in the circuit forming a causeway over the internal ditch 15m wide. The southern, uphill side of the enclosure is formed by a ditch and very slight internal bank. This side is also constructed hard against the inner face of the L-shaped bank and ditch. The ditch is 5m wide and a maximum of 1.7m deep, with the internal bank standing a maximum of 0.2m high.

Figure 7. Burrington Camp: section through southern rampart.



The entrance

The bank and double ditch is crossed by a trackway c 15m from the north-eastern corner of the enclosure. Earthwork evidence suggests that this is not an original entrance gap in the L-shaped linear feature. On the southern side of the gap the terminal of the bank is relatively well-formed and regular, but the terminal of its associated ditch is less convincing. The bank and ditch have been clearly disturbed on the northern side and the slight remains of the bank are visible crossing the gap.

It is probable that material from the bank was used to infill the ditch, creating the causeway. The gap in the inner quarry ditch at this location would appear to be original. The terminals to the ditch on both sides of the gap are well constructed and show no signs of disturbance. This would suggest that the eastern entrance was created during the second phase of construction. The causeway crossing the inner ditch is 15m wide but the corresponding gap in the outer ditch and bank is little more than 4m wide, possibly indicating a more complex entrance arrangement than is discernible today.

Towards the north-western corner of the enclosure two gaps in the circuit may also represent entrances to the enclosure but later disturbance has made these difficult to interpret.

The interior

The interior of the enclosure is covered in rough grassland and bracken, dropping c 13m from the southeast to the northwest (Fig. 8). There are few features within the enclosure which may be related to the earliest phase of the site, or indeed to its subsequent use. A possible structure was recorded adjacent to the entrance on the eastern side of the enclosure. This feature takes the form of a shallow sub-circular pit, 2.2m in diameter, with a bank of stones on two sides. It is possible that this feature represents a small building or animal pen, or may simply be a small prospecting pit.



Figure 8. Burrington Camp: the interior looking northeast.

Other features

The earthwork remains of Tratman's trenches were recorded crossing the eastern side of the enclosure, 37m from its south-eastern corner. The two trenches are 8m long and 1.8m wide and cross, at right angles, the internal and external ditches and the majority of the enclosure bank.

There are several trackways which cross the site, the most substantial of which enters the site through the eastern entrance mentioned above. The majority of these tracks are slight footpaths or sheep tracks and are relatively modern in date.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation

The recent survey has clearly shown for the first time that Burrington Camp represents a multi-phase monument. The earliest phase of construction almost certainly dates from the early part of the Iron Age, or possibly the later Bronze Age, and takes the form of an L-shaped ditch and bank. This earthwork feature cuts off a small spur and utilised the natural topography to create a monument which has affinity with a promontory fort. Material from the substantial rock-cut ditch was thrown up to create a bank which, through exploiting the natural qualities of the site, defined an area of approximately 1.5ha. The interior was most probably accessed from the east, round the northern end of the linear earthwork. Although the bank is less impressive at this point, possibly due to later disturbance, the ditch has a short section of outer bank which may add strength to the suggestion that this was the main approach.

The second phase of construction defined an almost complete circuit. An inner quarry ditch was dug and the material used to enlarge the original rampart on the southern and eastern sides, with a low inner bank also created on the southern side. On the northern and western sides the material from the quarry ditch was thrown outwards to form an outer bank, with a short section of outer ditch also created along the northern side. This second phase of activity created a sub-rectangular



Figure 9. Burrington
Camp: air photograph
(NMR ST 4758896
07-MAR-1979).

enclosure defining an area of c 0.8ha, with an entrance cut through the original L-shaped bank and ditch on the eastern side allowing access to the interior. The creation of an internal quarry ditch to obtain material to enlarge the rampart, as opposed to enlarging the outer ditch, may have been undertaken, in part, for practical reasons as Tratman's excavations showed that the outer ditch was rock-cut (Tratman 1962-3). The construction of an inner and outer ditch along the northern boundary of the enclosure may reflect this side's greater vulnerability, or alternatively, could be related to its close proximity to the entrance and therefore a greater desire for display.

The remodelling of the enclosure and enlargement of its defences may indicate a change in the use or status of the site, or possibly a phase of reoccupation after a period of abandonment. The remodelling can not be considered as having been undertaken for entirely defensive reasons however, as the internal ditch and external bank along the western side of the enclosure demonstrates. The western rampart may have been constructed for purely practical reasons such as to provide shelter, or alternatively, it may have had a more symbolic function such as a visible barrier. Indeed the construction of an enclosure bounded on all sides by earthworks may reflect wider social and cultural developments at this time, indicating possible changes in ideas about control, order and the definition of space. Collis (1996) suggests boundaries can be used to denote status, either in the form of display to outsiders by the society to which they belong, or as a demonstration of a distinct group or set of individuals within that society (Collis 1996, 90). Hill (1996) relates the physical and symbolic importance of the boundary to the elaboration and orientation of the entrance; with non-hillfort enclosure entrances in Wessex predominantly orientated to the east (Hill 1996, 102-3, 9). The very deliberate construction of an entrance through the original rampart on the eastern side of Burrington Camp would appear to reflect this trend, indicating more than simply functional factors may have dictated its siting.

Grinsell (1958) and Burrow (1981) both categorised Burrington Camp as a hillfort. This interpretation must be called into question however, as the earthworks occupy a poor position defensively and define a relatively small internal area. Although Burrington Camp occupies the end of a steep-sided spur, commanding the valley below and the gorge to its west, it is dominated by higher ground to the southeast, compromising control over its main approaches. There are many hillforts which are overlooked however, and it has been suggested that an outward display of strength through architecture may have been regarded as a defensive tool equal to that of topographic setting (Oswald *et al* 2006, 68). The ramparts of Burrington Camp are relatively substantial, standing to a maximum of 2.3m high, but hill-slope enclosures, such as Plainsfield Camp on the eastern edge of the Quantock Hills, have ramparts of similar dimensions (Jamieson 2002). Indeed, its topographic setting and small internal area would suggest that Burrington Camp has more in common with the hill-slope category of enclosure than with hillforts. Late-prehistoric enclosures located on hill-slopes are common in the southwest, with nearly 50 recorded as upstanding earthworks on Exmoor alone (Riley & Wilson-North 2001, 65). The Exmoor examples tend to be under 1ha in area with other examples on the Mendip Hills, such as Longbottom Camp and Rewberrow Camp, under 0.5ha (Hunter 2006).

The survey has uncovered little in the way of evidence for the interior arrangement of the site. Tratman's trial-pit excavations (above) uncovered no evidence for occupation, making it uncertain whether the monument functioned as a settlement or had some other use. There have been few modern excavations at such sites making the precise dating of hill-slope enclosures unclear, though

they are thought to date anywhere from the later Bronze Age through to the Romano-British period. Hill-slope enclosures may represent individual farmsteads or hamlets, with some Exmoor examples such as Bagley containing a single hut circle, and could have been occupied on a seasonal or permanent basis (Riley & Wilson-North 2001, 73-75). Alternatively, they could have been used for stock management, or may have formed a centre for the local community. Some sites possibly had a more symbolic role, with enclosures often located in prominent locations and visible from a great distance. The striking natural topography of Burrington Combe may have resulted in the surrounding landscape accruing special significance in the prehistoric period. The caves and rock shelters within the gorge may also have been viewed as special places, drawing people to the area. Archaeological deposits have been discovered within these caves and shelters dating from the Upper Palaeolithic period through to the Iron Age. The popular story that Augustus Montague Toplady wrote the hymn *Rock of Ages* while sheltering from a storm in Burrington Combe may indicate the ritual and spiritual feelings evoked by such a landscape as late as the 18th century.

The wider landscape setting of Burrington Camp is also significant. It forms part of an apparent concentration of sites along the northern edge of the Mendip Hills escarpment. These sites include the impressive hillfort of Dolebury Camp located 2.5km to the west of Burrington Camp, though not visible from it. Further to the west lies Banwell Camp, and 10km to the east is Burledge Hillfort. The hill-slope enclosures of Longbottom Camp and Rewberrow Camp are also located towards the northern edge of the Mendip plateau, less than 3km to the southwest of Burrington Camp. This distribution is partly a factor of the boundary of the study area, with the sites mentioned differing quite considerably from each other. 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 combes which give access to the high plateau. Looking beyond the Mendip Hills, Cadbury Hill Camp or Cadbury Congresbury lies 7km to the northwest of Burrington Camp. To the east of Cadbury Hill Camp a series of defended settlements or hill-slope enclosures have been recorded along the northern edge of Broadfield Down. Cleeve Toot Camp and Tap's Combe Camp are similar in both size and topographic setting to Burrington Camp, situated on limestone spurs overlooking steep gorges. Without further research, however, the relationship between all these sites and Burrington Camp can not be known for certain or indeed whether they are all strictly contemporary.

Conclusion

Burrington Camp is a multi-phase monument of hill-slope enclosure type. The earliest phase of construction took the form of an L-shaped bank and ditch which utilised the natural topography to define an area of c 1.5ha. This first phase probably dates from the later Bronze Age or early Iron Age. The second phase of rampart construction involved the creation of a sub-rectangular enclosure within the ramparts of the earlier monument. This enclosure was defined by an internal quarry ditch, material from which was used to enlarge the original rampart and create an outer bank along the remaining two sides. The second phase also involved the creation of a new entrance through the original rampart, towards the northern end of the east side, with this later work again probably early or middle Iron Age in date. The site could have functioned as an individual farmstead or possibly had some other agricultural use, such as a stock enclosure. The location of the site suggests that as well as functioning in a practical way, a degree of symbolic significance may have been attached to the monument.

The prehistoric earthworks of Burrington Camp are well preserved and form the only example of a multi-phase hill-slope enclosure within the Mendip Hills AONB. As such, it is an important survival and would benefit from a programme of scrub and bracken management to ensure the monument does not suffer future damage.

METHODOLOGY

The site was surveyed using a Trimble 5600 total station EDM and the survey data processed using Trimble Geosite Software. Trimble differential GPS (Global Positioning System) equipment was used to locate the survey data to the Ordnance Survey National Grid. The GPS data was processed using Trimble's Geomatics Office software and located to the National Grid using Trimble's OSTN02 transformation. The survey plot was completed in the field using graphical survey methods. A digital hachured plan of the survey was produced using AutoCAD software and completed using Adobe Illustrator software. The earthworks were recorded at 1:500 scale.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The owner of the land, Sir David Wills, kindly allowed the survey to take place; Les Davis (Mendip Hills AONB Service) assisted with access to the site. The author is grateful to Marcus Jecock, Graham Brown and Hazel Riley who helped with the survey work and the interpretation of the site.

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