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Brentor: An Earthwork Site on Western Dartmoor, Devon

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Aerial view of Brentor from the North East. Photo by Damian Grady 30-Mar-2004

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INTRODUCTION

Brentor is a conspicuous rocky outcrop on the western side of Dartmoor. The tor is a familiar landmark with the church of St Michael de Rupe built on its summit visible from many parts of west Devon and east Cornwall.

The church and the tor have become popular a visitor destination, the view from the summit being among the finest in Devon. The volcanic outcrop which forms the tor itself is an important geological feature and designated as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) on that basis. However, many visitors are unaware of an intriguing set of earthworks on the north and eastern slopes of the tor which have been interpreted in the past as components of an Iron Age hillfort with later additions.

Little previous archaeological work has been undertaken at Brentor with the result that most interpretations of the site are based on little real evidence. For this reason the Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) requested a large-scale earthwork survey in 2003 which would help improve understanding of the remains and act as an aid to management.

LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The volcanic outcrop that is Brentor rises from the relatively flat hinterland to the west of the Dartmoor upland (GR SX 710 804). It is the westernmost point within the National Park, the border for which runs along the Lydford to Tavistock road at the western foot of the tor. Six kms from Tavistock and 20 kms from Okehampton, today the site is isolated and highly rural, away from any major modern routes.

The tor was formed from Lower Carboniferous basaltic hyaloclastite, a result of submarine volcanism which probably built a small localised high-level hyaloclastite mound on the

Figure 1 *Brentor location map.*

Figure 2 *The tor and the church from the north.*

seafloor. There is some evidence of the effect of water-current reworking, carrying volcanic debris down slope for a considerable distance (SSS1 designation).

The tor appears conical in shape, with moderately steep sloping sides on the east and south while the northern slope is somewhat steeper. The western side is the steepest, the sloping ground interspersed with near vertical rock outcrops with drops of up to 10m. This isolated and highly conspicuous tor must have attracted the attention of people from the earliest of times, not least for its stunning views. From here the western escarpment of Dartmoor and parts of the central north moor can be viewed, from Sourton Tor in the north to Eylesbarrow in the south. Parts of the Tamar valley are visible to the south-west and Bodmin Moor and Kit Hill to the west. North, beyond the northern tip of Dartmoor, large areas of the low-lying Culm Measures can be seen and in the far distance, parts of Exmoor are visible. Plymouth Sound and the English Channel are clear to the south. The tor also has commanding views over lands in the near vicinity on all sides making it of high strategic value.

Perched on the summit of the outcrop is the small church of St Michael de Rupe (of the rock), surrounded by a small walled churchyard. This single-aisle church was founded in the 12th century and rebuilt in the 19th. It is constructed from stone sourced perhaps from quarries on the slopes of the tor itself. Despite the existence of the more conveniently sited Christchurch in nearby North Brentor village, built in 1856, and the later merging of the two parishes, St Michael's still functions as the main parish church of Brentor (Burton & Mathews 1990, 21).

THE WORK OF PREVIOUS WRITERS

Nearly all historical research into Brentor has focused on the church of St Michael de Rupe. The location of this church has fascinated Dartmoor writers since the 19th century though much of what has been written is rooted in folklore. However, according to a more reliable account by Cherry and Pevsner, there are records of the church before 1150 when it belonged to Tavistock Abbey. The abbey also established an annual fair on the tor in 1232, and a consecration of the church took place in 1319 by Bishop Stapledon. The building was drastically altered in 1889-90 at the expense of the landowner, the Duke of Bedford though some 13th- and possibly 12th-century fabric is still apparently visible (Cherry & Pevsner 1989, 210).

The earthworks had, until 2003 (see Greeves 2003), received little detailed attention from archaeologists other than passing comments in general commentaries about Dartmoor's archaeology. It is also apparent that some of what has been written about the earthworks was based on J. K. S. St Joseph's excellent and frequently published 1955 aerial photograph of the site (NMR 8275/42) which for some observers shows two convincing sets of apparently 1st millennium BC ramparts. It would seem that few have investigated or analysed the remains on the ground.

The earthworks were first depicted by the Ordnance Survey on the 1884 1st Edition 2,500 scale map, which shows only the lower wall-faced bank on the north and west sides though not annotated; none of the other earthworks were considered worthy of inclusion. For historic reasons within the Ordnance Survey organisation, the archaeological aspects of the site were not revised in the 20th century (N V Quinnell, pers comm), and on more recent editions the depiction remains as originally drawn in 1884. Curiously, and unlike other defensive earthworks around Dartmoor, the earthworks on Brentor received scant attention from 19th-century antiquarians and it was Baring-Gould who first mentioned the existence of ramparts, though only in passing:

> Brentor was fortified in a manner very similar to Whit Tor; the outer wall remains fairly perfect on the north side, but the inner wall has been much injured. In this instance it is not the summit but the base of the hill that has been defended. As there is a church on the summit, as also a churchyard and its wall, these have drawn their supplies from the circumvallation. Moreover it has been broken through to form a way up to the church.

Baring-Gould also refers to an event whereby a certain curate had a track constructed up to the church and '...in making it sad mischief was made of the inner wall of the fortress' (Baring-Gould 1900, 102-3).

William Crossing also made brief mention of the defences in his Guide to Dartmoor of 1912:

> Brent Tor has been fortified, the turf vallum being still in a good state of preservation (Crossing 1912, 161).

Next came a brief mention by Hoskins in 1954 in which he describes:

> an earthwork of unknown date or purpose runs around Brent Tor well below the summit in the form of a massive stone-faced bank (Hoskins 1954, 348)

St Joseph's aerial photograph has been published at least three times: first by DNPA in a book of Dartmoor aerial images in which the accompanying text (written by T Greeves) mentions briefly the prehistoric ramparts of apparently two periods (DNPA 1985, pl. 11). Griffith has also used the image in a compendium of Devon aerial photographs (Griffith 1988, 66) describing the earthwork elements thus:

> In the first millennium. BC ... earthwork ramparts running around the contour towards the base of the hill were constructed to provide the defences for a hillfort. These can be seen in the foreground.

More recently Aileen Fox in her summary of Devon's hillforts (1996, 23) described the defences as seen on the photograph:

> ...two close-set ramparts and ditches with an inturned entrance worn and spread. A third lined with stone facing lower down the slope appears to be a later property boundary.

In summary it seems that until now there has been some confusion over which elements could actually form part of a hillfort, if indeed that is what these earthworks represent.

In 2003 a first attempt at interpreting some of the more subtle earthworks on the tor, many of which had been ignored by previous observers, was published by Greeves (2003, 8-10). This consisted of a plane table survey of the area immediately north of the church on which was recorded a series of secondary enclosure banks and a number of small terrace type earthworks redolent of house platforms. One of these, near the summit, Greeves has argued could be an early precursor for the church and in his conclusion he proposes a Dark Age date for all the remains he recorded.

The earthworks at Brentor have, since 1976, been designated as a scheduled monument (Devon 988) though on what basis is unclear as no interpretation or date were offered on the record form.

THE SURVEY

It was clear that a thorough and accurate survey of all the earthworks on Brentor was needed to help understand this site better and to place future research on a firmer footing. In 2002, English Heritage was approached by the Dartmoor National Park Authority to undertake such a survey and work began in June 2003 to be completed in March-April 2004 by staff of the EH Exeter office.

FIELD EVIDENCE

(see Figure 8 for positions of all features mentioned in text)

The site

The tor comprises a more or less conical hill, rising from 302m above OD at the base of the outer rampart to 338m on the summit of the outcrop. The main outcrop runs approximately north-east to south-west along the crest of the hill with two peaks, on the southern of which the church is sited. Lesser exposures are visible elsewhere over much of the tor. The NW slopes of the tor are the steepest and there is little evidence of human activity on them as a result. Apart from the steeper upper slope, on which stands the church, the south-west and south sides are more gently inclined, and it is here that the majority of the earthworks survive.

The rampart

The rampart, consists of a substantial earth bank. The main element of this bank (a) is arc-shaped in plan and follows the contour, curving around the base on the northern and north-eastern side of the tor for a total of 216m.

From the interior the bank appears to comprise a low wall-bank, rising to approximately 1m above ground level with its internal face lined with stone in a style which is familiar over much of Dartmoor and west Devon and used for field boundaries of the late medieval and post-medieval period. From the outside however, the bank has a definite rampart-like appearance, and consists of a steep, apparently artificial, earthwork slope of up to 5m high and with an overall base width of 10m. At several points along the course of the rampart, some naturally deposited, earthfast boulders have survived *in-situ* and have been incorporated into the base of the earthwork and the wall-bank on top.

This rampart could never have been used to form a secure boundary to the tor as it was never completed, and extends along approximately only three-quarters of the eastern arc of the tor base. The remaining gap at the south-eastern terminal was filled at a later date by a wall-bank of much smaller proportions, being only 2m high by 5.7m wide (b). How soon this boundary was added after the builders of the rampart decided to abandon the project is not known but it was clearly designed to utilise the existing earthwork to create an enclosed field in conjunction with other field boundaries in the locale. This would have included the bank and ditch (c), now abandoned, which meets the rampart at right angles from the north-east, and, at the other end, the hedgebank (d) which extends from the rampart down to the road parallel with the footpath. Vestiges of a very ruined and spread stony bank are also

visible on the lip of the natural scarp on the south side of the tor (e). This is unlikely to be associated with defence and may also be a later field boundary.

The rampart has no external ditch. This presents something of a problem in interpretation because if, as it appears, this is an artificial earthwork, then the source of material to build it is not obvious. However, the area behind the bank on the interior does show signs of having been dug away, leaving a shallow quarry scarp of up to 1m deep and 10m wide (f) and this is likely to have provided one, though certainly not the only source. This disturbance can be traced along much of the area immediately behind the wall bank and is interspersed with some large naturally deposited boulders which have been worked around by the rampart builders and survive *in-situ*. For the later wall-bank which extends to the south-east (b), a particularly well-defined quarry scarp (g) of similar proportions is visible, which almost certainly provided the main source of earth for this entire length of bank.

It is possible that the builders took advantage of an existing natural scarp on which to place their rampart, which would have considerably eased the construction. This is suggested by the existence of a shallow slope (h) emerging from beneath the rampart at the south east terminal, where the addition of the later wall (b) marks a change of direction for the bank.

The entrance

At its north-west end the rampart curves inwards slightly to meet the present day footpath, which runs approximately west to east. This path is likely to be an original route into the enclosed area which entered via an opening in the bank at this point. The continuity of the main rampart may be traced on the south side of the track and takes the form of a moderate scarp surmounted by a length of low earth bank (j). After about 15m the scarp merges into a linear rock outcrop which becomes progressively steeper as it runs south-west. This natural feature, with its sheer drop on the north side, appears to take over as the main line of defence as no artificial banks exist south of this point on the western side of the tor.

On the western exterior of the opening are two parallel curving banks which butt against either side of the entrance at right angles. The northern bank (k) is uniformly curved, 37m long by 2m high. The inner bank (l) is 35m long by 1.5-2m high and straight, with a distinct kink on the western end. Together they form a passage leading up to the entrance opening. A short section of bank across the western opening of the passage (m) was clearly designed to restrict the width and provides a likely location for an outer gate.

Both the entrance banks appear to post-date the building phase of the main rampart as both are additions to the outside, though there is no way of knowing how much time elapsed between the two phases.

Beyond the main entrance to the east a shallow hollow way (n) marks the route into the enclosed area, occupied still by the footpath providing access to the summit of the tor and the church.

Figure 4
The double linear earthwork viewed from the south-east

Double linear earthwork

A series of linear earthworks within the area enclosed by the rampart, has been identified by some past researchers as an additional set of ramparts. The form of these earthworks however, is quite unlike a rampart as there are no banks and no ditches. What does survive is two parallel, steeply cut scarps with uneven sides and bottoms which extend obliquely across the slope from just to the east of the footpath, to follow a straight south-easterly course then turn south before merging and eventually blending in with the natural scarp at the southern lower slopes of the tor.

These features are most clearly defined at the northern tip. Here the upper, western sharply-cut scarp (p) is steep and has a drop of 2.3m. At the foot of the scarp, running parallel to it, there is a strip of ground approximately 5m wide, covered in amorphous pits and low mounds (q). To the east of this strip there is another scarp (r) which drops 2.8m down to an area of further mounds, which are mostly linear and run parallel to the scarp. As these features extend south-east there is a break in the earthworks where what appears to be an access route takes precedence. This has the form of a sunken area (s), with its axis set at right angles to the terrace and extending further into the interior of the enclosure. Curiously this apparent former entrance aligns at right angles with the southern terminal of the main rampart at the exact point where the rampart construction stops in favour of a hedgebank style construction.

South of this point only one scarp may be traced (t) which becomes more spread as it progresses even further southwards and the amorphous mounds continue along the slopes

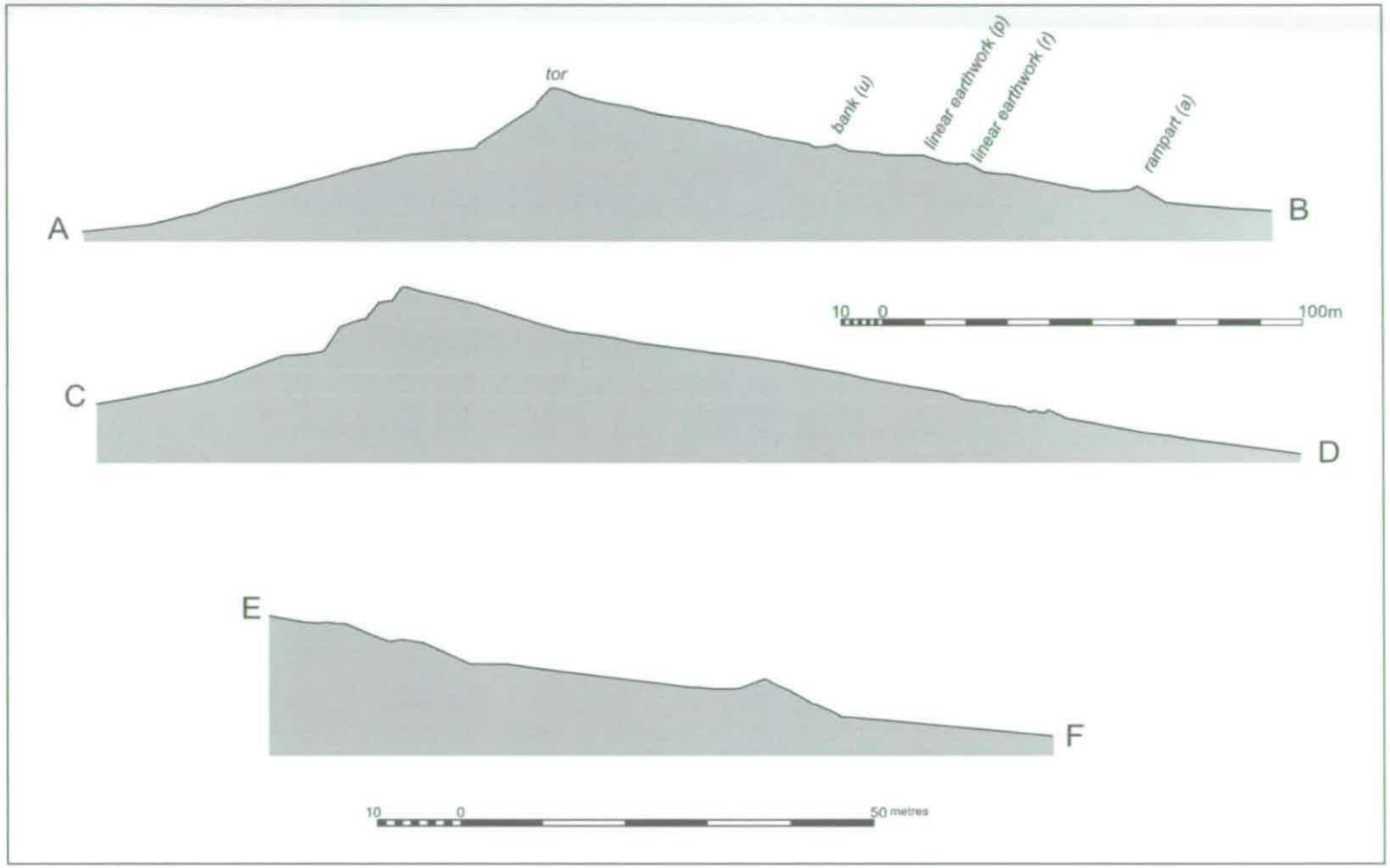

Figure 5 *Sectional views of Brentor showing the profiles of the ramparts and other earthworks.*

Figure 6
The lower enclosure bank (u) viewed from the south-east

and at the base of the scarp. The scarp eventually blends into the natural slope of the hillside as it rounds the southern slopes of the tor.

The Interior

Enclosure banks q and s

On the moderate slopes to the north and north-east of the churchyard is a series of banks, first noted in 1976 (SAM record form 6.4.1976), and other subtle earthworks which have been previously surveyed and discussed by Greeves (2003). The most notable elements are two curvilinear banks which partially enclose an area of the slope, and several rectangular hollows which Greeves has suggested could be building platforms.

The lower of the two banks (u) is sited just above the modern footpath and was built to enhance the lip of a natural slope. It is constructed of earth and stone with dimensions of approximately 4.4m wide by 1.3m high. The bank originates near the northern summit outcrop, descends the hill obliquely to the east, before curving back up the hill to the south and merging into the hillside beside the track. There are three narrow breaches in the bank, though all three appear to be the result of modern erosion. On the northern exterior of the bank a series of pits, cuttings and a small spoil mound indicate small-scale removal of stone in this area.

The upper bank (v) consists of a moderate scarp with a low back scarp of 0.2m high on the southern portion. The feature originates at the same point as the lower scarp (u), near the

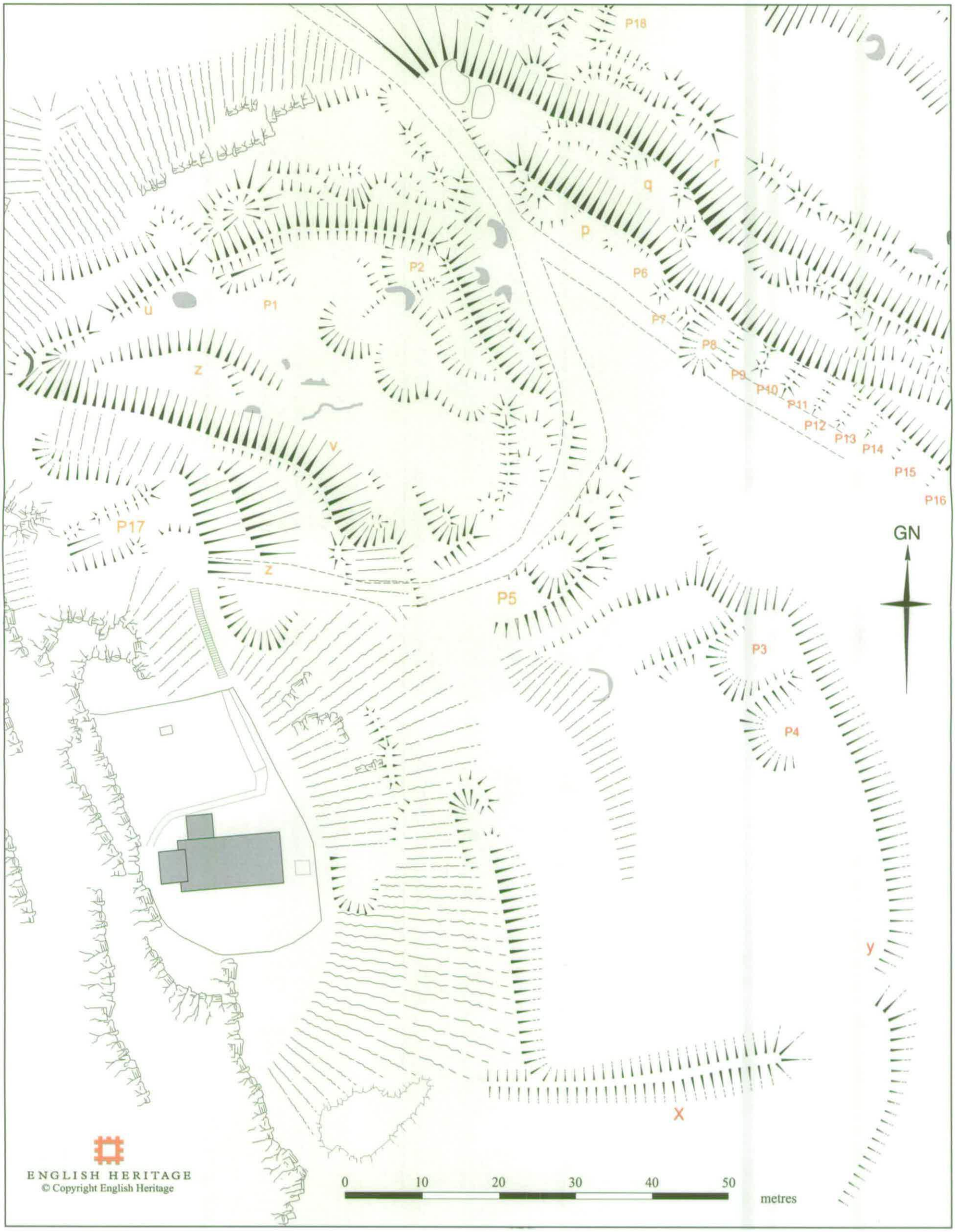

Figure 7 1:500 earthwork survey of the central area of the tor.

summit outcrop, creating a hairpin join between the two. It follows a straight east – west course for 40m before curving south to terminate at the path.

Together these banks form three sides of an enclosure with a partially terraced, though not level, interior. On the south side, a series of low, amorphous mounds (w) could be vestiges of a fourth side, though now eroded by the path. On Greeves' plan these features are interpreted as house platforms but the results from the present survey did not reveal the same degree of rectangularity.

Within the enclosed area is a series of smaller earthworks which Greeves has also suggested may be house platforms. What certainly appears to be a small number of artificial earthworks are however integrated with natural geological features making interpretation difficult. At least two of these (P1 and P2) do have an approximately rectangular outline and could be interpreted as hollows which may once have contained timber structures. Both are built against the back of the lower enclosure bank (u). P1 measures 7m by 4m and has a sloping interior and P2 is 5m by 3m and has an approximately level interior.

The southern enclosure

On the southern slopes of the tor, earthworks are much less apparent and the greater part of this area is devoid of artificial features. However, some extremely subtle earthworks are located to the east of the church outcrop, at the foot of the upper slope of the tor. The most notable of these is a low spread bank (x) of up to 7m wide but only 0.6m high, which runs from west to east down the slope. At its western end this bank is joined at right angles to a lynchet which runs south to north. To the east of the terminal of the bank is a further north to south oriented lynchet (y). This is an extremely slight and spread earthwork, following a curving course which after extending north for approximately 80m, turns sharply west and fades out upon meeting with a natural slope. Together these features may be interpreted as components of a four-sided though incomplete enclosure. Within the north-east corner of this area are two roughly rectangular hollows or platforms, cut into the slope (P3 and P4). They both measure approximately 7m by 10m maximum by 0.5m deep at the back west end and are candidates for building platforms.

Platforms

Placed centrally between the north and south enclosures on the south side of the church path is a series of five conjoined raised platforms, stepped against the slope (P5). The largest is the upper of the five which measures 7m by 5m. This and the platform immediately below are rectangular in plan while the lower three, all of which are smaller, have curved outlines. Together these earthworks form what may be interpreted as a base for a series of small attached timber structures as suggested by Greeves (2003, 8), or perhaps a single partitioned building with level floors within the partitions.

An array of short parallel banks (P6-16), identified by Greeves to the NE of these platforms may also be interpreted as the remains of structures or pens. Some of these may have been truncated by the linear scarp (m) but four banks survive intact, sitting on a low terrace at the SE end. The banks are very subtle, only up to 0.3m high, though most are less, by

0.5 - 2m wide. They are all approximately the same length (5m) though the truncated examples may have been longer. They are more or less evenly spaced at 4m apart, giving eleven or possibly twelve contiguous compartment in total, though each compartment seems rather small to have been associated with a permanent building. An alternative explanation could be that these are pens associated perhaps with the annual sheep fair which was held here from the 13th to 15th centuries.

At the northern foot of the church outcrop, near the summit of the tor, is a well-defined rectangular earthwork (P17). Greeves has suggested this could be evidence of a building which was the precursor to the present church. The remains consist of a bank and a parallel scarp which define two long sides of a flat bottom rectangular hollow. The internal dimensions are 15m by 6.5m. Of the two long sides that on the north is clearest and is up to 0.3m high by 2.5m wide. The western and southern sides of the 'building' are defined by the lip of the hollow, but no definite eastern end is visible. This earthwork certainly has the appearance of the foundation of a building though its date and function have to remain a source of speculation.

The outline of another possible building (P18) is visible at the foot of the lower linear scarp (o). This consists of a rectangular hollow of approximately 5m by 4m. If this was the site of a building then it is likely to post-date the linear scarp, given the extent of disturbance in the vicinity resulting from the scarps being cut. Another possibility is that the hollow is part of the disturbance and is coincidentally rectangular. A third and less likely possibility is that this is a building which pre-dates the scarp but has survived the disturbance associated with it.

Quarries

On the south side of the tor are several vertical quarried faces cut into the natural bedrock. They were clearly a source of building stone and probably provided material for the church in the 13th century as well as other building projects in the vicinity.

A quarry pit exists on the NW corner of the site, on the exterior of the entrance ramparts. It comprises a large, sub-rectangular hollow with gently sloping sides and an elongated earth spoil mound extending along the northern side. There is no visible outcropping or stone faces within the quarry. A raised trackway leads directly from the quarry opening to the nearby road, truncated by the modern hedge and was clearly used as a route for removing the product from this quarry.

DISCUSSION

It is worth reiterating the point made by most previous writers concerning Brentor which is, that one of its most striking characteristics is the location; a major, highly conspicuous landmark, visible from considerable distances on all sides, it would surely have been an important and, perhaps, sometimes revered place during most periods of the past. It is precisely the type of place we would anticipate prehistoric occupation, if not of the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC then certainly of the late 1st, during the Iron Age. As a location for an Iron Age defended site Brentor conforms quite well with what is known of other such sites around Dartmoor ie on strategically chosen summits surrounding the moor with commanding views over both the Dartmoor upland and the hinterland and lowlands of Devon. However, the geology and terrain of Brentor dictated a quite different approach to the method of construction.

The most likely candidate for Iron Age evidence is the lower bank or rampart. This substantial, curving earthwork enclosing the north and eastern sides of the tor, was clearly built to be used in conjunction with the natural defences formed by the near vertical outcrops on the western side.

The rampart consists only of a bank of moderate height, which may have strengthened an existing natural step on the hillside or possibly a linear outcrop or both. This is suggested by the fact that the interior height of the bank is so much less than the exterior and the fact that vestiges of a natural slope may be seen emerging from underneath the rampart where both its character and direction change on the SE side. Also, traces of outcropping are present in the base of the rampart.

If this were the case it would help account for two other anomalies regarding the earthwork. Firstly, its location at the bottom of the slope of the tor which is extremely unusual. Realistically the options for the builders of the rampart were quite limited regarding positioning. As the entire western slope of the tor is occupied by steep slopes and near vertical outcrops, only the eastern side is suitable for occupation but the shallow nature of the topsoil on the upper slope would have made construction of a substantial earthwork there impracticable. If there had been a natural feature lower down which could be artificially enhanced this would be the best place for the rampart, and requiring minimal effort in its construction.

The second anomaly is the apparent lack of a ditch on the exterior as would normally be present at defended earthwork sites and would not only have acted as part of the defences but would also mark the position of the source of material to build the bank. There is no evidence of a ditch having since been filled and it is certain that none existed. However, if the builders were strengthening a natural drop then less material would have been needed. One of the main reasons for the absence of a ditch could be the nature of the geology which probably inhibited any such penetration of the ground.

The rampart was never completed and a long section of the south-east side of the enclosure (b) was built in a different style which is that of an agricultural hedge bank with some stone facing. This bank represents a tradition used in this part of Devon from medieval times and

in many cases such boundaries are still maintained to the present day. It has to be assumed that this bank was added later and that the original rampart never formed a complete circuit in its own time. An apparent access route (s), consisting of a linear hollow leading up the slope to the west is positioned to coincide with the southern terminal of the early rampart though access was blocked off when the later wall bank was constructed. The southern arc of the tor has no serious defences at all either natural or artificial, though the natural escarpment here if surmounted by a palisade could have provided some security. Slight traces of a stone wall (e) may be traced on the SE side on the lip of the escarpment which may represent animal enclosures rather than defence.

If, as seems very probable, the ramparts represent an incomplete defended site of Iron Age date, then Brentor joins a growing corpus of such places on the peripheries of Dartmoor. Silvester and Quinnell (1993, 17) have already argued the case for Cranbrook, Hunters Tor, and Nattadon - all on the east side of Dartmoor. More recently East Hill, also on the eastern side of the moor, has been added to this list (EH 2004). One of Silvester and Quinnell's key observations at the sites they examined, was that ramparts visible from the main approaches to the hillfort and associated entrances were often the most complete sections. This is certainly the case at Brentor where the earthworks of the entrance appear complete enough to have been functional and the adjacent length of rampart is the most impressive portion at the whole site. If approached from the north or north-west then the artificial elements, coupled with the natural advantages of the location would certainly have provided some appearance of strength.

Analysis of what might have lain behind the failure to complete sites like Brentor lies outside the brief of this report but possible explanations include the idea that in a society where visible displays of strength were all important, the natural and artificial fortification of settlements was essential for communities to succeed. A project of this scale would depend on the resources available to such a community and construction would need to be prioritized. The entrances and main approaches were the favoured starting point at Brentor, perhaps because they were considered to be more important. Why the work was apparently never completed could depend on a number of factors, including perhaps the failure of the community to muster the necessary resources or perhaps a paradigm shift whereby the need for such defence, or the impression of strength, was no longer perceived as necessary. One intriguing possibility is that places like this were never intended to be anything other than a façade and that the ramparts did not need to be completed to be effective. Why this phenomenon should be so widespread on the peripheries of Dartmoor is harder to explain and would no doubt be a fruitful focus for further research.

There now has to be some doubt as to the authenticity of the so-called inner set of ramparts at Brentor (p & r) as identified by previous writers. These earthworks when examined on the ground do not conform to the usual appearance of defensive earthworks or ramparts. The earthworks cut the natural slope of the tor at an oblique angle. There is no bank, no ditch and the bottoms of the scarps are pitted and uneven. In their present form, they are unlikely candidates for ramparts but if they were then either their design was unconventional, or they too were never completed, or they have been severely robbed. The only 19th-century writer

to discuss these earthworks was Baring-Gould who describes them as 'an inner wall ...much injured' and in his anecdote regarding the building of the path he refers to the inner wall suffering as a result (Baring- Gould 1900). It is not clear however if this event occurred within his own memory, in which case he would certainly have remembered the true appearance, or if it was in a more distant past, in which case his statement regarding this having been an 'inner wall' was just an assumption. If this was the source of material for path building it would explain its existence to some extent, though not in full. It is possible that the process of removing material for the path has radically changed the form of existing earthworks, though the amount of material needed to metal the path does not seem commensurate with the amount removed. It is probable also that Baring-Gould assumed these scarps once continued north to connect to the entrance and that the path building incident was responsible for the removal of an entire section of both earthworks between the current terminal of p and r and the entrance (n). But the survey has revealed that the hollowed entrance (n) and the linear earthworks (p and r) are separate entities, despite the fact that their apparent alignment on aerial photographs would appear to argue otherwise.

If not ramparts then they remain as something of a puzzle. Alternative explanations are not easily identified but one possibility is that these slopes represent the remains left after the extraction of stone or other material. It is quite credible that exposed linear outcrops of rock were quarried for building stone as early as the 13th century when the medieval church was built. A slightly more remote possibility is that this was a source of manganese, an element which is known to outcrop in worthwhile quantities near the surface in this area: this would probably date them to the 19th century. Neither of these ideas fully explain their appearance which is straight with sharply cut scarps and the two running in parallel.

The earthworks recorded and discussed by Greeves to the north-east of the church, plus several additional elements recorded on the EH survey are difficult to interpret and very hard to date. Also, the geology adds confusion to the artificial remains and some of Greeves' depictions of the earthworks as 'foundations of single room structures' are perhaps a little optimistic, particularly those within the inner enclosure and it is not clear why he considered two slight scarps (z) to be remains of prehistoric ramparts. Unfortunately all these earthworks form a discrete area and their only relationship with the lower rampart (a) is that they are all contained within it; establishing a full relative chronology is therefore not possible on earthwork evidence. The relationship between the upper slope (p) and the alignment of rectangular earthworks (P6-16) could be helpful but is somewhat contradictory. P6 to 11 appear to have been cut by the scarp, however P12-16 which are intact are approximately the same size. It is unclear therefore whether these banks were built at the top of an existing scarp or preceded the scarp and were cut by it.

Unfortunately as the scarp is also undated (apart from Baring-Gould's possible 19th-century reference to it being damaged or further damaged to provide material for the path which is highly dubious) there is no way of establishing a relative date for either element.

It seems unlikely these remains are associated with any first millennium BC settlement which may have existed at Brentor. It is not common to find clear earthwork evidence of

settlement from defended sites of that period and when available they usually consist of levelled platforms capable of containing large circular buildings. The earthworks at Brentor suggest the possibility of small rectangular structures or animal pens.

Greeves' suggestion that these remains signify a Dark Age settlement is attractive but based on little evidence. As there is no documentation for any activity on Brentor, other than that associated with the church, it seems quite possible that if the earthworks do represent a settlement then it could have remote origins from a time when the written record of such places is uncommon. If a settlement of this size had existed in the later medieval period for example it is more likely to have been recorded. But the earthworks themselves appear rather more recent, particularly P6-16 which are more sharply defined than we might expect for house platforms over 1000 years old. The nearest comparative Dark Age site is perhaps Tintagel Island in Cornwall, a rocky outcrop with a series of earthworks which on excavation provided a 5th-6th century AD date (Morris 1995). At Tintagel, however, structures had stone foundation walls and the earthworks consisted of clear rectangular hollows which were immediately identifiable as building remains. The evidence at Brentor cannot be interpreted with such confidence.

Exactly how the enclosure banks (u & v) are associated with the other earthworks remains uncertain. The clearest of the platforms are outside the enclosure so some other activity may have been contained within it. They are perhaps a little too small with a steep interior to have been defensive and could alternatively represent remains of a stock enclosure. One possibility is that these enclosures represent vestiges of a boundary associated with the early church at Brentor. The study of churchyards in neighbouring Cornwall has revealed that deserted 1st millennium BC defended sites were frequently adopted for early-Christian churches, as were revered places and sacred sites (Preston-Jones 1994). The possibility that an early-medieval church, pre-dating the 13th-century stone structure existed here has been raised by Greeves who argued that an approximately rectangular earthwork (P17) to the north of the present church could have been its precursor.

One other possible explanation for the existence of at least some of this group of earthworks is that they are physical evidence of the three-day Michaelmas fair held between AD 1231 and 1550. If this fair had been held annually for over 300 years it is quite possible that some semi-permanent timber structures could have been erected, such as sheep pens, and that earthworks would have resulted from erosion within and around them. Such evidence is known from the hillfort at Yarnbury in Wiltshire where a bi-annual sheep fair, although more recent than the Brentor example, has left substantial earthwork evidence of sheepfolds (NMR SU 04 SW 6).

CONCLUSION

The EH survey has for the first time provided details of all the earthworks on the slopes of Brentor, complementing Greeves' initial investigation of the central area, and offering some alternative, though limited, explanations as to what they represent.

The earliest earthwork evidence present is the lower rampart with its passageway entrance, which was an attempt to create a strong (or strong looking) enclosure around the naturally prominent outcrop. Judging by evidence from elsewhere, it is of a late 1st millennium date though the ramparts were, for whatever reason, never completed. They were however, later included in a scheme of field enclosures with additional banks added to them during the medieval or post-medieval period. The group of earthworks on the north slopes of the tor may represent limited enclosures and some possible building platforms or pens for which a Dark Age date is possible though a medieval or later date seems more likely, perhaps associated with the sheep fair held here, though without excavated or documentary evidence it is not possible to be certain. The double linear cuttings which traverse the slope obliquely just above the rampart seem unlikely to have been defensive in nature, though alternative explanations are not easily found. They could represent the extraction of stone, or minerals probably in the 17th to 19th century. Quarrying also occurred around the peripheries of the slopes, probably also during the 19th century. Although the present church has probable origins in the 13th century there is a possibility the tor may have been a focus for religious activity for centuries before. It is however the last surviving structure representing at least 2000 years of human activity at Brentor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to Mr and Mrs Bickell, owners of Brentor, for allowing full access to the tor and surrounding fields to undertake the survey. The survey has been part-funded by the Dartmoor National Park Authority.

THE SURVEY

The earthwork survey of Brentor was carried out in June 2003 and March 2004 using dual frequency proportional GPS. A base station was established on the site for which national grid coordinates and heights were generated using data downloaded from OS active stations. The majority of archaeological and topographical detail was surveyed and logged using GPS rovers. Additional stations were established by GPS on the north-west side of the tor on which a total station theodolite was used to record detail and heights of the vertical outcrops. All data was downloaded into a Cad environment wherein the final earthwork plan was prepared.

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Brentor

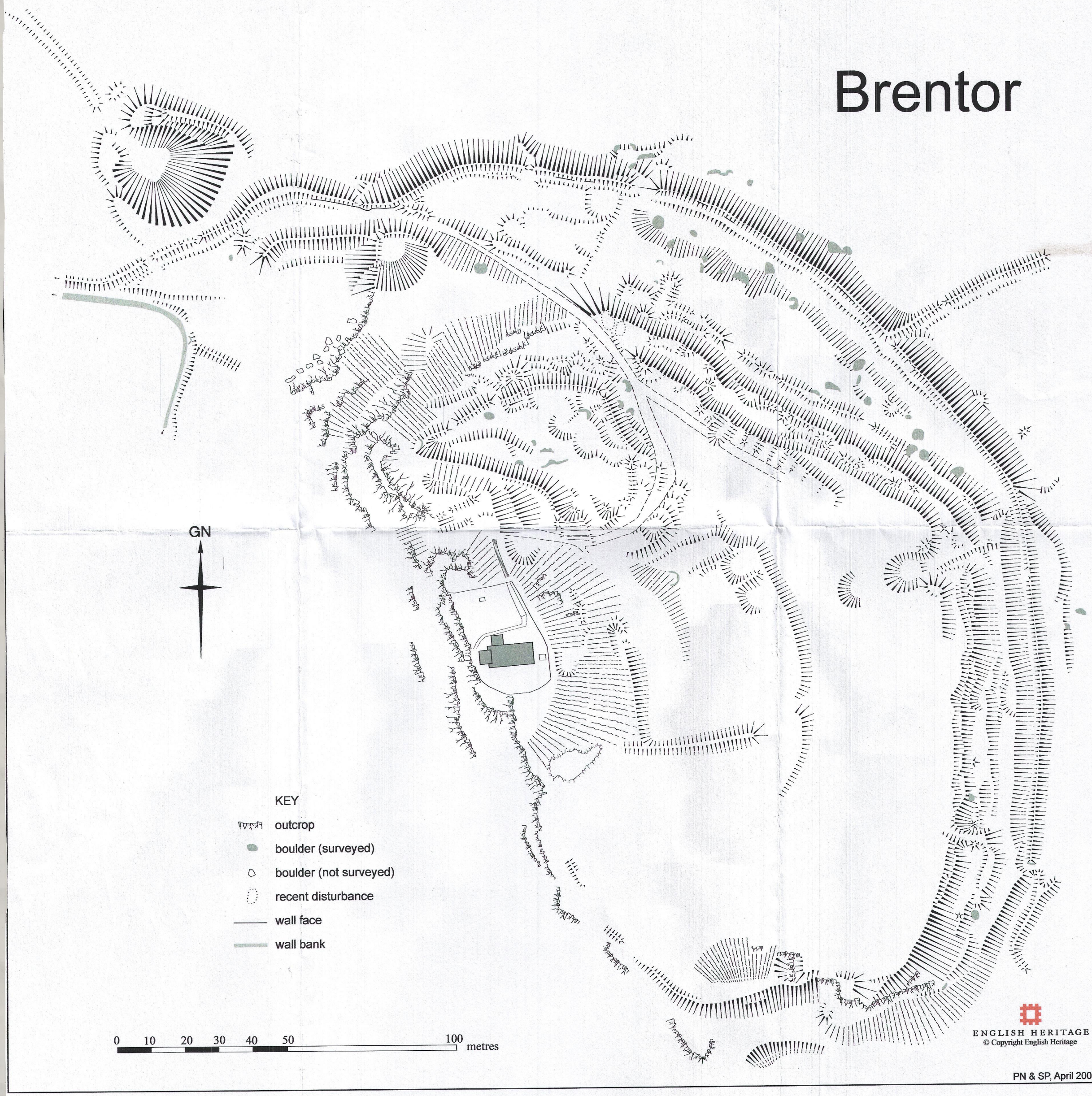

Figure 3 1:1000 earthwork survey of Brentor.

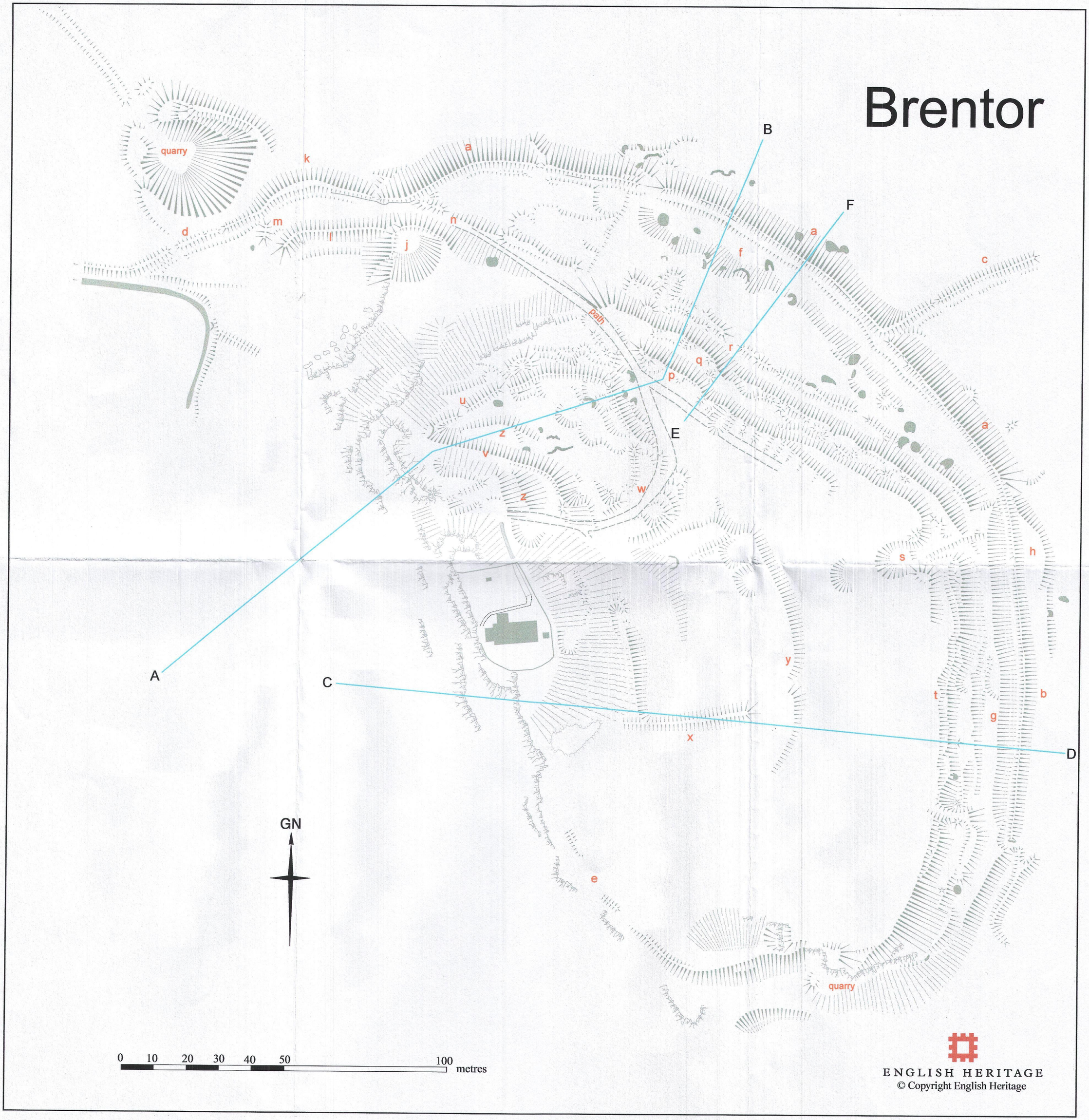

Figure 8 *1:1000 earthwork plan highlighting features mentioned in the text and section lines A-F.*

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