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Helman Tor, Lanlivery, Cornwall

SX 06 SE 33

a new survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical
Monuments of England



Helman Tor, Lanlivery, Cornwall: a new survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

by H Riley

NMR No: SX 06 SE 33

Cornwall SMR No: SX 06 SE 38

SAM No: Cornwall 991

SUMMARY

A Neolithic tor enclosure on Helman Tor was surveyed by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) in March 1995. Granite outcrops are important elements of the enclosure, which has an annexe on its western side. The interior contains terraces and cleared, level areas, indicating possible settlement sites. Helman Tor is one of only two firmly dated tor enclosures in Cornwall and it, together with Carn Brea, form the basis for the study of this recently recognised monument class

INTRODUCTION

The enclosure on Helman Tor was surveyed at a scale of 1:1000 in March 1995 by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME). The survey was carried out for the Neolithic Enclosures and Industries Project, which aims to provide a corpus of all known Neolithic enclosures and flint mining sites in England.

Helman Tor lies some 5km south of Bodmin and, at 200m OD, is a prominent feature in a landscape otherwise formed of small fields and unenclosed, rough grazing land (Figure 1). It comprises a rounded hill, crowned by several eroded granite outcrops. The hill is part of the St Austell or Hensbarrow granite boss (Edmond et al 1975) and it affords an excellent vantage point, with views over Bodmin Moor to the northeast and over the extensive china clay works on Hensbarrow Down to the south and west. The hill is a scheduled ancient monument (SAM Cornwall 991) and the enclosure occupies approximately 1ha of the upper part.

A megalithic tomb, Lesquit Quoit, lies 1.5km to the northeast of Helman Tor (Pool 1961). Excavation in advance of a pipe trench close to the site revealed some features which may have been associated with the (now destroyed) mound of this burial chamber (Miles and Trudgian 1976). A henge at Castilly, some 2.5km west of the tor, has been described in detail (Bousfield and Bousfield 1954) and partially excavated (Thomas 1964). Finds from surface collection at Bodwen Farm, 1km to the southeast, range in date from Neolithic to Medieval, and field monuments include an Iron Age round and two pillow mounds (Harris 1977), and a stone axe of Group XVI origin was found at Crift Farm, 1.4km to the south (Mercer 1981, 190).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Modern ploughing in the environs of Helman Tor has frequently produced quantities of flint flakes and implements, particularly on the eastern side. Two greenstone axes (one of which is now lost, the other in Truro County Museum) have been found in the vicinity of the tor. In 1920 a partially polished flint axe found on Helman Tor was given to Truro County

Museum (Mercer 1981, 190).

In 1977 Helman Tor was scheduled (above) and in 1982 four acres of the scheduled area were cleared of vegetation. The Cornwall Committee for Rescue Archaeology (CCRA) undertook a survey of the area for the DOE at this time. The western slopes were surveyed at 1:1000 scale, and a Bronze Age settlement and associated field system was recorded. The enclosure itself was surveyed in considerable detail at a scale of 1:500 (Johnson and Rose 1984). In 1986 these plans were used by Mercer as the basis for a 1:200 site plan, prior to limited excavations requested by English Heritage. Two areas were examined: on the western side of the hill a trench was dug across the ditch to the east of the wall, and on the eastern side part of the terrace by the putative entrance was excavated (Mercer 1986a, figure 2).

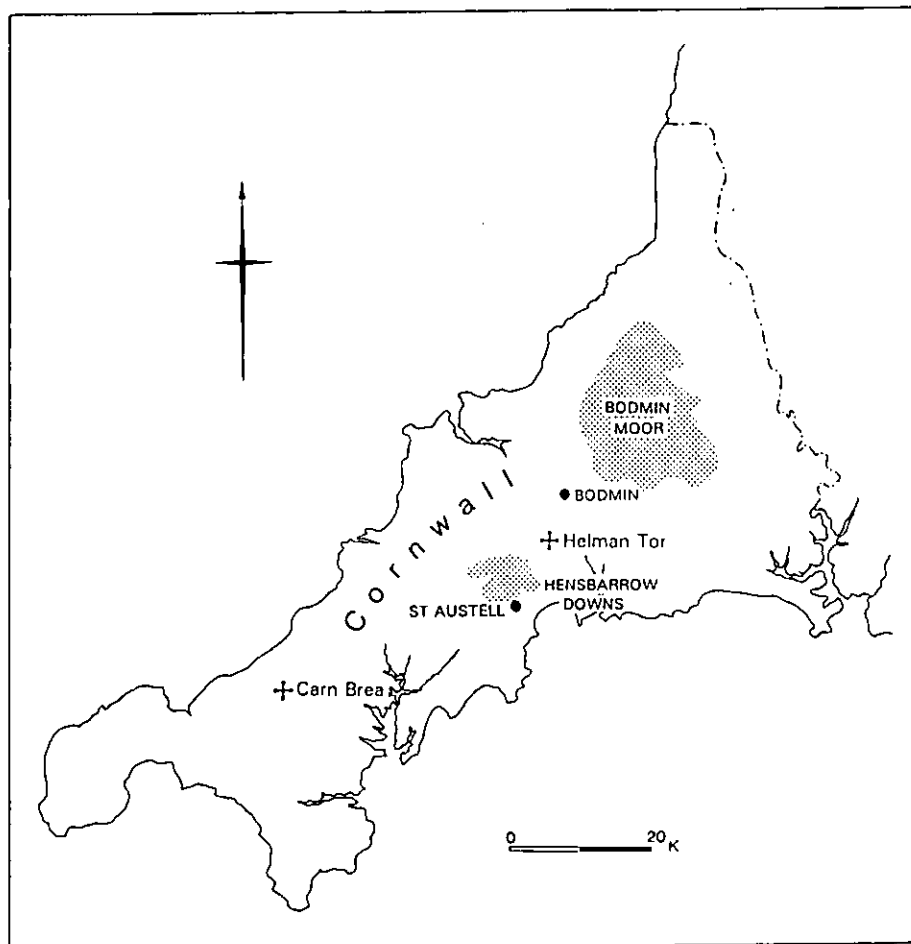


Figure 1: Location map

THE ENCLOSURE ON HELMAN TOR: DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

The 1995 RCHME survey (Figure 2) had two main aims. The first was to provide a metrically accurate plan of the enclosure to a consistent standard for inclusion in the corpus of Neolithic sites mentioned above. The second was to interpret the field evidence. This work necessarily

draws upon the work of the CCRA, and their help and co-operation during this project is gratefully acknowledged.

The enclosure

The enclosure on Helman Tor is ovoid in shape and measures approximately 190m north-south and 100m east-west. It comprises three elements. The first element, on the eastern side, is a steep, stony scarp containing some orthostats, which links together individual granite outcrops. This scarp is up to 1.3m high at its northern end, where it is cut by a later track. To the south it utilises the natural break of slope and becomes difficult to define. The second element, the southern end of the enclosure, comprises a stony scarp with a small stone component, incorporating several earthfast boulders. The third element, the definition of the western side of the enclosure, is problematical. A well-built field wall, utilising a break of slope on the western edge of the tor, links the principal granite outcrops at the northern and southern ends of the hill. The wall stands 1.55-1.7m high, its outer face comprises up to six courses of granite boulders. It is built on outcropping granite in places and it also incorporates some large granite outcrops. Several animal tracks and footpaths breach this wall. A well-defined ditch is evident on most of its eastern side. Mercer's excavations established that this ditch was post medieval, and the form of the wall suggests that it is a similarly recent structure, perhaps, as Mercer suggests, built as a control against stock moving across the hill (Mercer 1986a, 3). The ditch could have been dug to provide material for the wall, or to lower the approach to the eastern wall face if it was, indeed, a barrier to stock. The wall may well have been built on an earlier feature, and thus could form the western side of the enclosure (Mercer 1986a, 3).

A stony scarp, 0.5-0.9m high, runs for approximately 220m along a break of slope some 15-30m west of the post medieval field wall. The morphology and location of this scarp suggest that it forms an outer enclosure or annexe, similar to that at Carn Brea (Mercer 1981). A short length of turf-covered, stony bank downslope of the ruinous boulder wall may be part of the Bronze Age field system on the western slopes of Helman Tor.

The interior

Four slight, ruinous boulder walls lie at the northern end of the relatively level area inside the putative annexe, they probably represent the remains of field plots. A ruinous stony bank, southwest of one of the principal granite outcrops and visible on an aerial photograph (NLAP 7661) may be part of a further sub-division.

A slight, turf-covered bank runs north-south inside the northern part of the enclosure. Aerial photographs dating from 1946 (NLAP 269/1) and the CCRA survey (Johnson and Rose 1984) both indicate that this bank is continuous at its northern end. The 1995 RCHME survey shows that it has been breached, presumably as a result of Mercer's excavations. The latter probably also caused the small depression visible close to the top of the rampart in this area. A spread, stony bank running up to a natural outcrop may also be part of internal sub-divisions. The area around the southern side of the enclosure has been subject to quarrying and stone splitting, although the small stony bank linking two outcrops on the eastern edge of the enclosure is probably a prehistoric feature.

The detailed survey by the CCRA defined several stone-free areas, located on both sloping

and level ground. This interpretation was further refined by Mercer (1986a). The 1995 RCHME survey has mapped the granite outcrops of the hill, together with an indication of the general topography of the site. The areas best suited for settlement are thus those level areas between the outcrops, most notably those areas north of the southern rampart and the terraces formed by the banks west of the eastern rampart. Some possible settlement sites, defined by slight but distinctive circular and ovoid stone-free depressions, are indicated on the plan. There are several concentrations of small stones which appear to have been deliberately placed across the interior, perhaps indicating clearance.

Entrances

A gap in the southern side of the enclosure, now used by a modern track, is the obvious entrance to the enclosure, utilising the easy southern approach. The gap in the eastern side, close to its northern end, has been disturbed by a later track, but it may also have been an original entrance gap. The breaches in the post medieval wall on the western side of the enclosure all appear to be recent in origin. The building of this wall would probably have obscured any original entrance features on this side. There are no obvious entrance gaps in the outer enclosure, although its ruinous state may be the cause of this.

The environs

A Bronze Age field system and settlement lies on the western slopes of Helman Tor (Johnson and Rose 1984). The vegetation on these slopes was very dense at the time of the current survey, consequently it was not possible to examine these features. Similarly, the reasonably level ground of the southern approach to Helman Tor was masked by thick gorse and was thus not investigated, although some stone splitting and stone extraction pits were noted.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

That Helman Tor is a hilltop enclosure of Neolithic origin is undisputed. The excavations undertaken by Mercer (1986a) confirmed initial observations by Silvester that Helman Tor fell into the category of site he defined as a "tor enclosure" (Silvester 1979, 189). Helman Tor and Carn Brea are the only two of these sites which have positive, excavated evidence to date them to the earlier Neolithic period. Mercer's excavations of the area immediately behind the eastern enclosure scarp showed evidence of earlier Neolithic structures and artefact assemblages, with parallels in the excavated evidence at Carn Brea (Mercer 1981, 1986a).

The morphology of the enclosure on Helman Tor has parallels with both the Neolithic enclosure at Carn Brea, and with other, undated tor enclosures in the south-west peninsula. The enclosure utilises or links isolated granite outcrops, as do other tor enclosures such as those in Cornwall noted by Mercer (1986b) as potential Neolithic sites: Roughtor, Trencrom Hill, Stowe's Pound and Carn Galva. The form of the enclosure wall, a stony scarp, with some orthostats visible, but lacking definite facing stones differs to the more rampart-like structures of, for example, the enclosure wall on the eastern summit of Carn Brea (Mercer 1981, 48), but compares with those smaller sites with very ruinous enclosure walls such as Tregarrick Tor (SS 27 SW 49).

The situation of Helman Tor, on the edge of Hensbarrow Downs, at 200m OD, compares with Trencrom Hill at 180m OD on the edge of the Lelant Downs in West Penwith, and with Berry Down (Silvester 1979, 189) and Tregarrick Tor on the southern edge of Bodmin Moor, at approximately 300m OD.

The presence of terraces, defined by both natural and artificial scarps at the northern and southern ends of the enclosure is paralleled at Carn Brea (Mercer 1981, fig 3) and at De Lank (NMR SX 17 NW 95). The excavations at Helman Tor proved that a terraced area close to the northeastern edge of the enclosure was occupied during the earlier Neolithic period.

The lack of entrance gaps at Helman Tor may be partly explained by the building of the western wall in the post medieval period, and by the ruinous state of the outer enclosure or annexe. The presence of several small entrance gaps at sites such as Carn Brea, Stowe's Pound and Roughtor is cited as evidence for their Neolithic origins (Johnson and Rose 1994, 46-8). The presence of an outer enclosure or annexe is also suggestive of Neolithic origins, again parallels may be drawn with Carn Brea and Stowe's Pound.

METHOD

The survey was carried out at 1:1000 scale by H Riley and M Brown using a Leica TC1610 electronic theodolite and EDM to supply local control and most archaeological detail. The survey was completed in the field using fibron tapes by normal graphical methods. The archive report was written by H Riley and edited by M Fletcher. Archive plans and illustrations for this report were prepared by P Newman. Completed field plans and reports have been deposited in the National Monuments Record, from where copies may be obtained:


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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the owner, Mr Girdler, for allowing access to the site and the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (formerly the CCRA), for providing copies of their survey plans.

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 ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND				
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PROJECT NAME Neolithic Enclosure & Industry	DISTRICT RESTORMEL	DATE OF SURVEY March 1995	ASSOCIATED PLANS	NAR No. SX 06 SE 33
SITE NAME HELMAN TOR	PARISH LANLIVERY	SURVEYOR(S) HR, MB		SAM No. Cornwall 991
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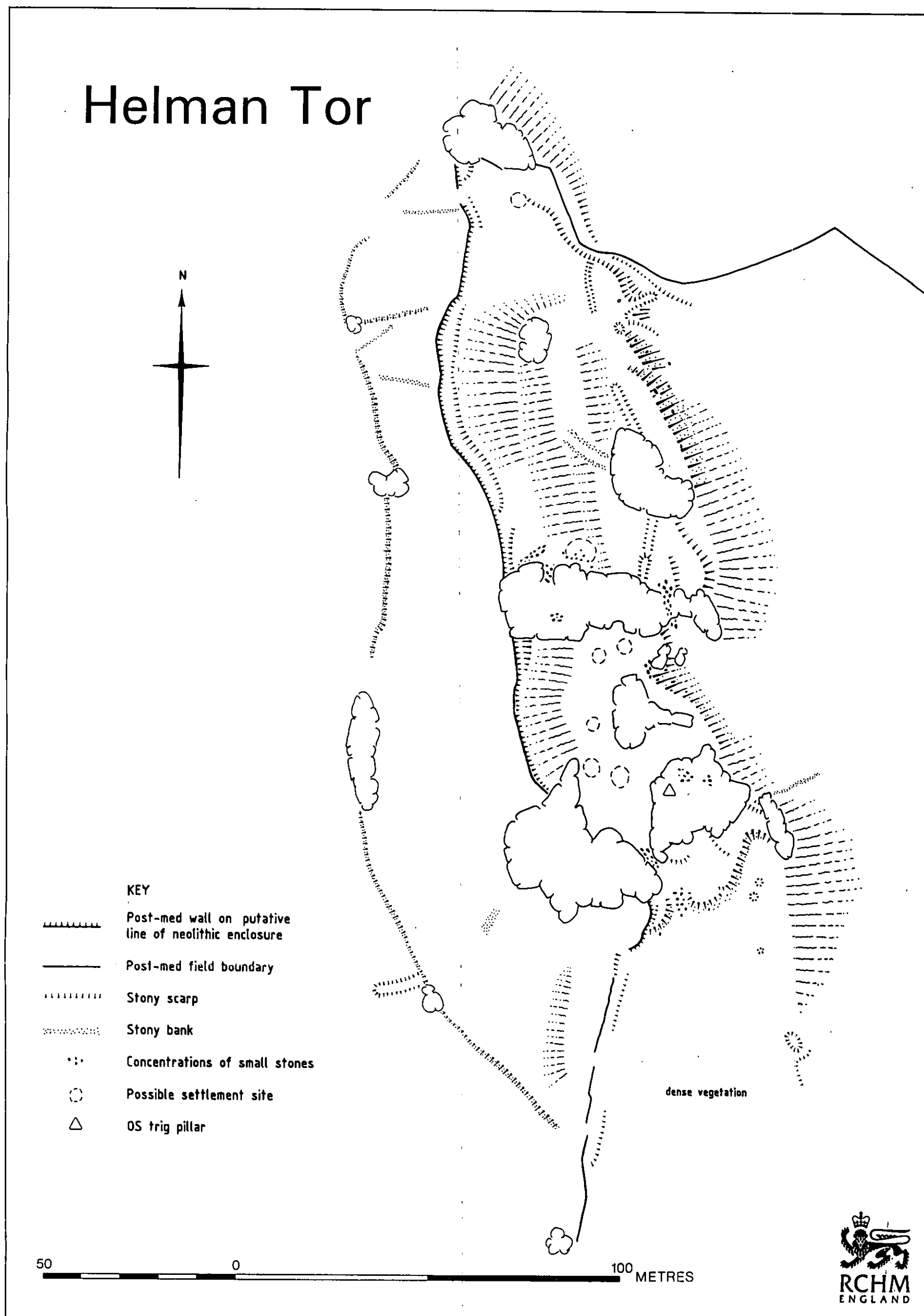


Figure 2: Helman Tor, 1:1000 survey