

Higher Castles,
Broomfield, Somerset.
An Iron-Age Hill-slope
Enclosure

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SURVEY REPORT



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HIGHER CASTLES, BROOMFIELD, SOMERSET

An Iron Age Hill-slope Enclosure

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INTRODUCTION

Summary

The Iron Age hillslope enclosure known as Higher Castles or Broomfield Camp was the subject of a large scale earthwork survey, undertaken by English Heritage as part of their archaeological survey of the Quantock Hills AONB. The survey suggests that this sub-rectangular enclosure has a further enclosure to the north and east, and that this also dates from the later prehistoric period.

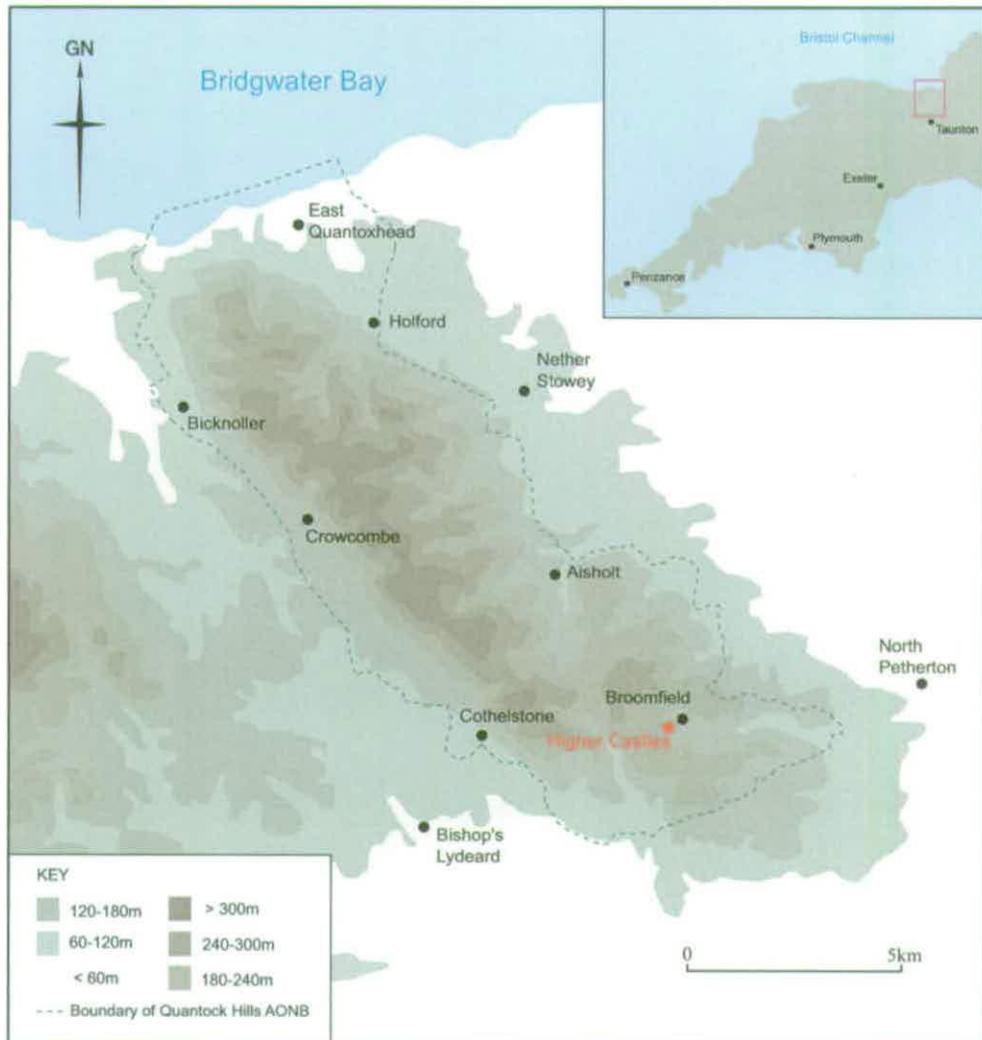


Figure 1.
Location map.

Location

Higher Castles (also known as Broomfield Camp) lies on the southwest edge of the Quantock Hills AONB, some 7km northwest of Taunton and 1km west of Broomfield, at ST 2160 3200 (Fig. 1).

The survey

The survey was undertaken as part of the English Heritage archaeological survey of the Quantock Hills AONB. The survey was carried out by the Archaeological Investigation team

based at the Exeter Office of English Heritage during May 2004. The earthworks were recorded at a scale of 1:1000 and profiles of the earthworks were measured.

Geology, topography and land-use

Higher Castles lies on Morte slates, part of the Devonian series (British Geological Survey Taunton, sheet 295). The site lies on a small spur of land between two combes, at a height of 230m OD, with extensive views across the Vale of Taunton to the Brendon Hills and the Blackdown Hills. The ground falls away steeply to the south, with gentler slopes down to the combes on the western and eastern sides of the site. The land to the north rises very gradually.

Higher Castles lies in the southern corner of a large field which is currently used for a silage crop. At its southern edge is a plantation of coniferous woodland. The site has been subject to ploughing over many years, as indicated by the tithe award of 1838 when it was under arable (SRO 1838).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The tithe award for Broomfield parish gives the name 'Castles' for both of the fields which the site occupies (SRO 1838, parcel numbers 620, 621). However, it was not until c 1950 that an archaeological site was recognised here, when Dr H W Catling identified a site from air photographs (Pytches 1964, 188). According to Grinsell, the site was also recognised by Anthony Locke at about the same time (1970, 91). An exploratory excavation was carried out by King's College, Taunton, Archaeological Society on the 17th and 18th of May, 1964. A section 50 feet long was dug close to the western angle of the enclosure. This revealed a U-shaped ditch over 8 feet deep and 12 feet wide cut into the solid rock outside the bank. Part of the ditch fill was composed of loose rocks, which the excavators interpreted as tumble from a wall which originally stood on top of, or in front of, the bank. Two pieces of Iron Age pottery were found in the ditch; further unstratified finds of pottery and charcoal were also noted. The excavation was published as a short note in 1964, but no plans or sections were included in this publication (Pytches 1964). The Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division surveyed the earthworks of the enclosure in October 1964 at a scale of 1:2500 (NMR ST 23 SW 4). Ian Burrow located the original excavation plan and section at Taunton College, and these were subsequently redrawn and published by Dennison (1987). This publication states that the site was excavated in the 1950s and in 1964. However, the excavation referred to in the 1950s was of a medieval site near Broomfield church (Dennison 1987, 207; Catling 1950).

At various times during the historic period most of the earthworks have been used as field boundaries, most likely in this part of the country to have been thick stockproof hedges. The tithe map shows both enclosures used as fields; by the time of the 1st edition map the northeast and southwest sides of the inner enclosure have had the field boundaries removed (Figs. 2 and 3) (SRO 1838; OS 1887). In 1964 a hedge stood along the southwest side, a hedge on the northwest side had been removed recently (Pytches 1964, 189). Hedges were removed from the northeast and southeast sides of the outer enclosure about 12-15 years ago (Mr White, pers comm.); its south side is still used as a field boundary.

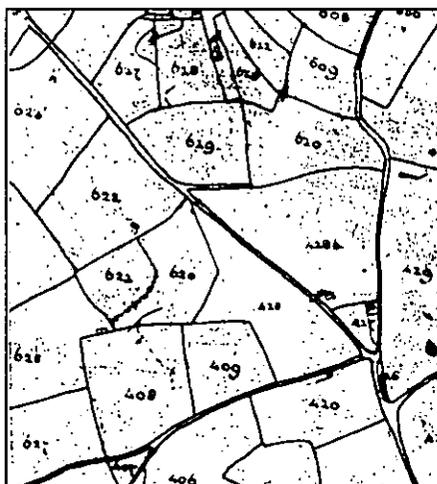


Figure 2. Higher Castles: tithe map, 1838 (reproduced with permission of Somerset Archive and Record Services)

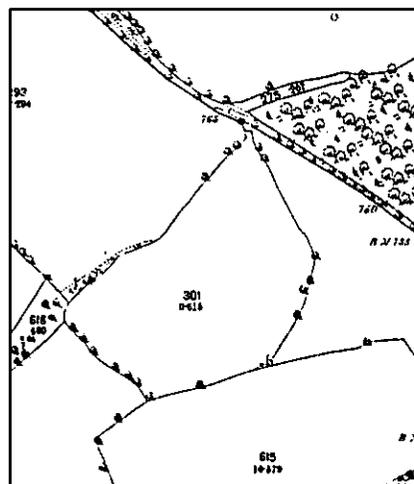


Figure 3. Higher Castles: OS 1st edition map, 1887 (Somerset sheets 60.7, 11).

HIGHER CASTLES: THE EARTHWORKS (Figures 4 and 5)

The inner enclosure

The enclosure is sub-rectangular in shape. It is oriented northeast-southwest and the interior measures 100m northeast-southwest and 90m northwest-southeast, enclosing an area of c 0.9ha. The earthworks are best preserved on the southwest side of the enclosure. Here the earthworks comprise a steep scarp, 3m high, backed by a bank 1.5m wide and 0.4m high. Ploughing over a number of years has cut into the bank along this side. An external ditch with a counterscarp bank runs for some 24m. The ditch is 0.5m deep, 3m wide, the counterscarp bank is 3m wide and 1m high. A short length of bank and ditch running at right angles to the base of the main scarp is the remains of a field boundary (OS 1887). As the natural scarp on this side becomes steeper, the ditch ends and a pronounced ledge, some 7m wide, lies between the foot of the enclosure scarp and the edge of the natural scarp.

The northwest side of the enclosure is defined by a strong, steep scarp some 1.3 - 3m high. It is backed by an internal bank running northeast from the eastern angle for some 35m. Ploughing has not encroached onto this section of the bank as much as it has on the southwest side. The bank is 2.5m wide and 0.7m high. A break in the bank immediately to the north of the hedge which runs up over the enclosure by the eastern angle marks the position of the 1964 excavation of the ditch and bank (Dennison 1987, fig. 2). The rest of the northwest side is defined by a single scarp, the plough runs right to the top of this scarp on this side. This probably explains the absence of a bank on this side of the enclosure.

The northeast and southwest sides of the enclosure are defined by a rather spread bank, 3m wide and 0.5m high. The bank is intermittent on the southwest side. Traces of a ditch are discernible around the eastern angle.

The whole of the interior of the enclosure has been ploughed. The interior of the enclosure slopes gently towards the southwest. A scarp defines a level area just behind the southwest side of the enclosure. This scarp may be a natural scarp or it may be a quarry scarp for bank material: ploughing has made it difficult to distinguish between the two. The level area so formed, however, provides a possible area for settlement or other activity. A further potential area for settlement is behind the eastern angle of the enclosure, where the ground is quite level. A very slight curvilinear scarp behind the bank on the northwest side of the enclosure may be the result of disturbance due to the 1964 excavations and subsequent ploughing of the area.

The original entrance to the enclosure is difficult to ascertain. It may have been at the southern angle, where a ploughed over terminal can be discerned.

The outer enclosure

A further enclosure lies on the eastern side of the sub-rectangular enclosure. This is approximately kidney-shaped and encloses an area of c 1.3ha. All of the earthworks of this enclosure have been ploughed over. The best preserved earthworks are on the northwest

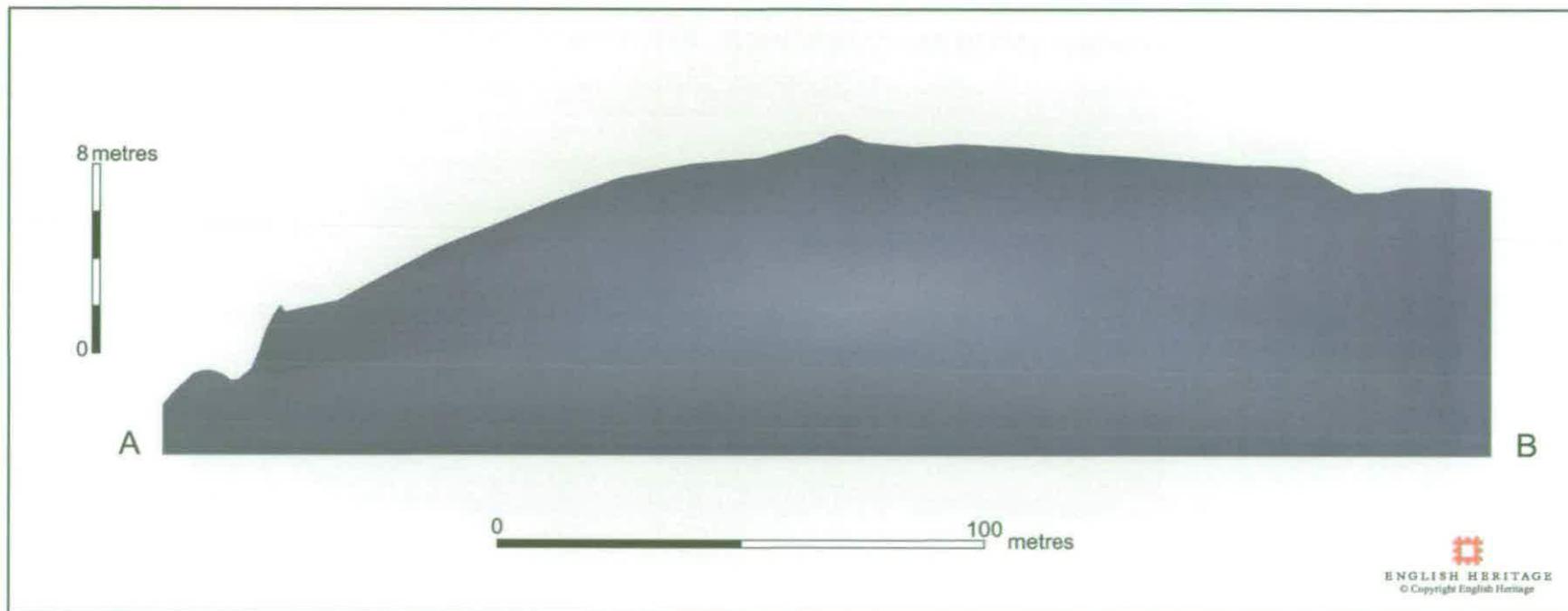


Figure 5. Higher Castles: earthwork profiles

and northeast sides. The northwest side is defined by a strong scarp, 0.8m high, backed by a slight bank, 3.5m wide and 0.4m high. Traces of an external ditch are just visible. The northeast side is defined by a ploughed over bank with an external ditch. The bank is 3.5m wide and 0.2m high, the ditch is 1m deep and 6m wide. The south side of this enclosure is defined by a single scarp, some 1 - 2m high. The eastern end of this scarp has been ploughed over, its western end forms a present day field boundary.

The best site for an entrance into the outer enclosure lies just to the south of the centre of the northeast side, where two terminals in the bank are discernible.

Interpretation

The main enclosure has been recognised as an Iron Age hillslope enclosure since its discovery and subsequent excavation in the 1950s and 1960s. Elements of the outer enclosure have also been recognised. The plan published by Dennison of the 1964 excavations shows part of the northwest side of the outer enclosure. Grinsell suggests that the northeast element is a possible outwork associated with the inner enclosure (Grinsell 1970, 91; 1976, 19). Outworks, often isolated, sometimes multiple, are common features of similar sites, for example on Exmoor (Riley and Wilson-North 2001). The detailed earthwork survey and measured profiles (Figs. 4 and 5) suggest that the earthworks of the outer enclosure are coherent. The plan and profiles show that the earthworks of the inner and outer enclosures are of a similar morphology in terms of size. Even where the earthworks are largely ploughed over, they survive as substantial features in the landscape, suggesting an early date (Fig. 6). They do not resemble ploughed over field boundaries. The strong bank and ditch on the northeast side may well have functioned as an outwork which was then linked to the inner enclosure at a later date. Equally, the outer enclosure may have been constructed in a single episode.



Figure 6. Higher Castles: looking northwest across the northeast bank of the inner enclosure

The date range for the construction and occupation of hill-slope and hilltop enclosures in the southwest peninsula is a large one, spanning the period from the later Bronze Age to the post-Roman period (Ellis 1989; Burrow 1981). Recent work by the South Quantocks Archaeological Survey project has shown that a similar enclosure at Vollis Hill 3km to the southwest of Higher Castles, now only visible as a cropmark, had its origins in the early/middle Bronze Age (K Wilkinson, pers comm).

The area was certainly favourable for settlement in the 1st millennium BC, as evidenced by the hillfort of Ruborough Camp 2km to the northeast, the linear earthwork on Cothelstone Hill 2.5km to the northwest (Riley 2003; 2004) and the plethora of cropmark sites identified over recent years from air photographs in the arable fields to the south and southwest (records in Somerset HER).

It is not known when the enclosures were abandoned. The settlement of Woods, only 400m to the south, at the head of a combe, which had Higher Castles as part of its holding in 1838 (SRO 1838), was in existence by the early 14th century, when Thoma atte Wode was wealthy enough to pay tax (Dickinson 1889, 162). Broomfield is a documented medieval settlement, and recorded as a Domesday manor (Catling 1950; Jamieson 2003).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

Higher Castles represents a good example of a hillslope enclosure with an associated outer enclosure. The evidence from a very small excavation of part of the enclosure earthworks indicates that it was occupied at sometime during the later part of the 1st millennium BC. The inner enclosure was probably a farmstead, the home of an extended family unit. The outer enclosure may have functioned as a stock enclosure. As well, such strong earthwork features made a statement about the importance of this site in the landscape at this time (Fig. 7). The proximity of Higher Castles to the medieval settlements of Woods and Broomfield suggests that it could represent an important site for the study of transition between the late Roman and the early medieval period in the area.

Geophysical survey of both the inner and outer enclosures would help to clarify the function of the site; fieldwalking when the site is next under plough should add to our knowledge of the chronology of the site.



Figure 7. Higher Castles and its surrounding landscape. Foreground: Higher Castles; middle: Cothelstone Hill (NMR 21351/05).

METHODOLOGY

The site was subject to an initial field reconnaissance in April 2004. The substantial nature of elements of the outer enclosure was noted, as was the survival of a length of ditch on the southwest side of the inner enclosure. The site was therefore surveyed at a scale of 1:1000 using a Trimble 5600 series EDM, with graphical completion in the field. The site was located to the national grid using Trimble differential GPS via Trimble's OSTN02 transformation in its TGO GPS processing software. Profiles were measured using the EDM and plotted via KeyTerra-Firma survey software in an Autocad environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The owner of the land kindly allowed the survey to take place; staff at the Somerset Historic Environment Record, Somerset Local Studies Library and the Somerset Archive and Record Services helped with site records and historical material.

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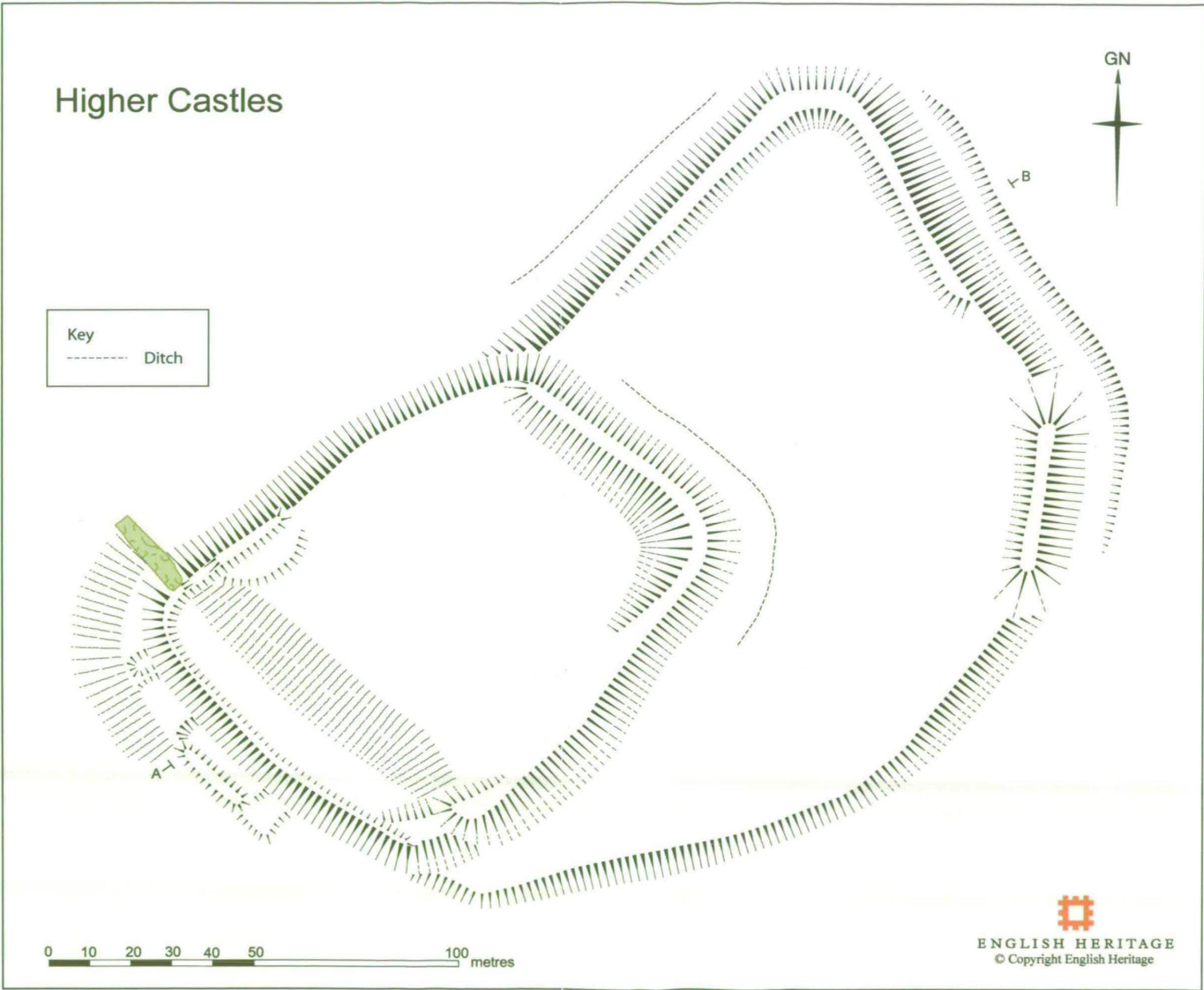


Figure 4. English Heritage earthwork survey (1:1000 scale).



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