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THE DORSET CURSUS

David McOmish and Cathy Tuck

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SURVEY REPORT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION SERIES

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ENGLISH HERITAGE

**THE DORSET CURSUS**  
**DORSET**

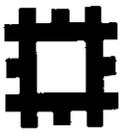
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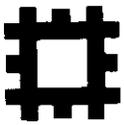
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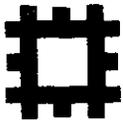


14. Funeral games at the Stonehenge Greater Cursus © David Alexovich

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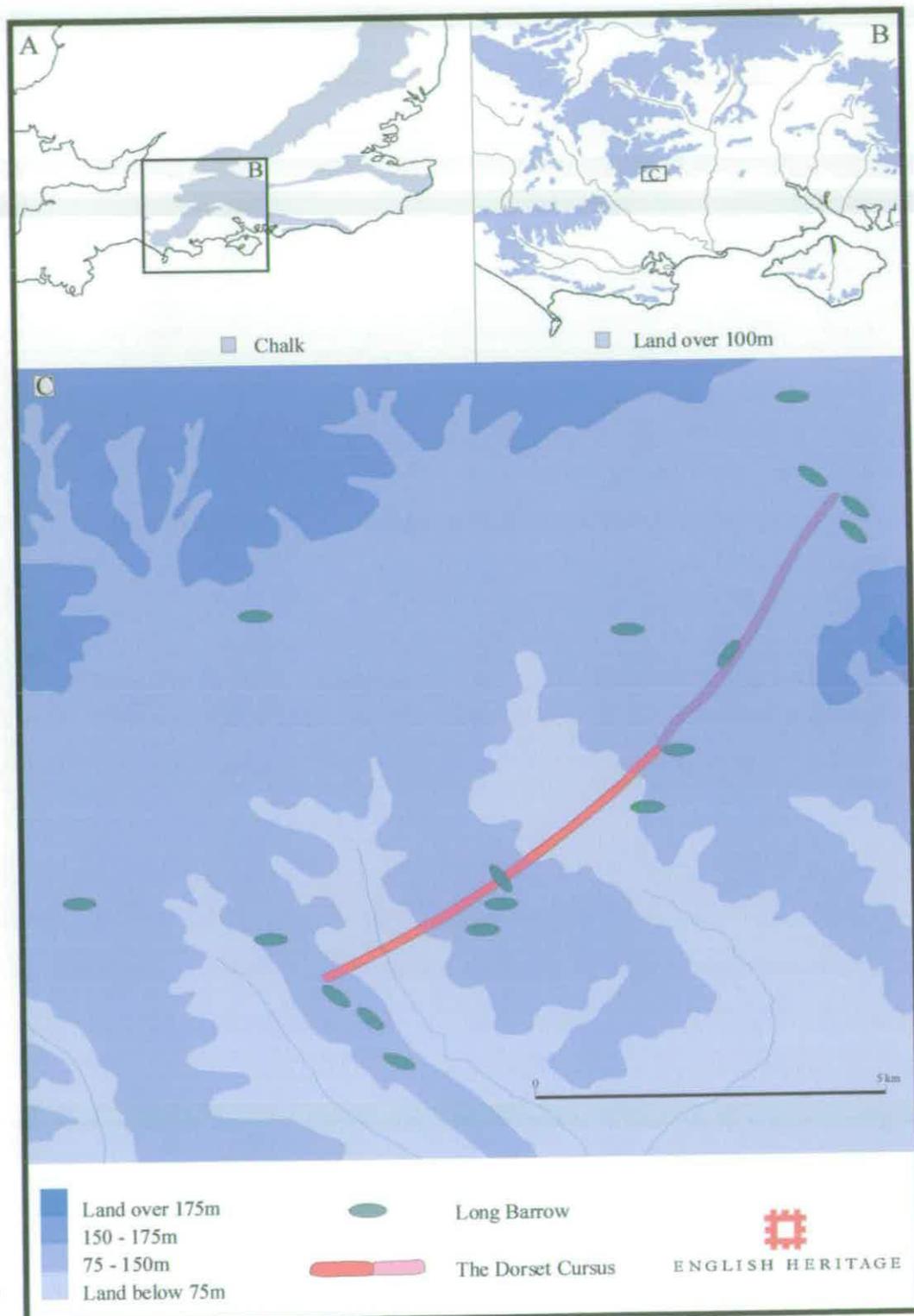


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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY

*During the autumn of 2000, English Heritage investigated two segments of the enclosure known as the Dorset Cursus, the largest enclosure of its type in the British Isles. The Dorset Cursus lies in an area broadly known as the Cranborne Chase. As defined in a legal sense the Chase covers in excess of 290,000 hectares incorporating parts of Wiltshire and Hampshire but mainly lying in the north-eastern parishes of Dorset. The Cursus lies in a smaller part, the Inner Chase, covering some 16000 hectares. It extends from a terminal on Pentridge Down on the Wiltshire/Dorset border for a distance of close to 9.75km in a south-easterly direction to a pronounced end point on Thickthorn Down, 2km to the south-east of the village of Chettle. On closer inspection, however, it is apparent that the Cursus is, in fact, composed of two conjoined segments: the earlier and southern arm extending for a distance of nearly 6km from Thickthorn Down to a terminal on Bottlebush Down and; a north-eastern extension from here leading to the end point on Pentridge Down some 4km distant. Very little of the monument now survives as an earthwork and survey focussed on two components of the complex, namely, the two terminals, Thickthorn and Pentridge, centred respectively at ST 9695 1240 and SU 0400 1919. The analytical field survey was undertaken as part of the first phase of work associated with the Cursus Enclosures and Bank Barrows: Britain and Beyond project (CEBAB). The aim of this is to 'better the understanding of the nature of the specific monument type' (Exploring Our Past, 1998, 35), in particular cursus enclosures, but also bank barrows which present an obviously shared morphology. The project is aimed at providing an academic overview of these allied monument classes and addresses a variety of related issues including monument condition, vulnerability, management and protection. Ultimately, the project will support the work of the Monuments Protection Programme by providing data which will help to define and refine constraint areas for scheduling and future management.*

The principal monuments under review here, apart from the terminals of the Dorset Cursus include three long barrows, a bank barrow, as well as six round barrows, including two newly discovered examples. In addition, there are the remains of a triple-ditched linear earthwork at the Thickthorn terminal and a further, recent, field boundary. At the northern end there are the badly plough-damaged remains of a later prehistoric linear earthwork and associated fields. All of the monuments within the survey areas are protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments and are listed in the National Monuments Record as follows: on Thickthorn Down – the Cursus LIN 41, long barrows ST 91 SE 21 & 23, round barrows ST 91 SE 19 & 221, field bank ST 91 SE 22, multiple ditch system ST 91 SE 41; on Pentridge Down – the Cursus LIN 41, bank barrow SU 01 NW 40, round barrows SU 01 NW 41, 209 & 239, linear earthwork LIN 76 (Fig 1).



**Figure 1:**  
*Dorset Cursus location.*



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## 2. GEOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND USE

The geology of the Chase is dominated by chalk, in the main middle chalk, but there are outcrops of higher chalk especially on the ridge to the south-east of the cursus, along its northern section in the vicinity of Pentridge. In this area there are notable high points at Penbury Knoll and Pentridge Knoll itself. In general, however, the cursus lies on gently undulating ground avoiding high points, indeed, almost deliberately ignoring them in favour of the lower terrain. Some of the higher points in the Chase are capped by small deposits of clay-with-flints and these areas, with their good sources of raw material, were the focus of activity throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Ages.

The springline sits at 75m above OD and all of the main watercourses drain south-eastwards towards the Hampshire Basin. The Cursus cuts across at least three river valleys: (from the north) these are the River Crane, the Allen and the Gussage Valleys. The River Crane is especially important as it provides access (?and a linkage) to the important group of ceremonial remains at Knowlton. All are, in effect, winterbournes, in that they only flow during the wetter seasons and their incorporation within the line of the cursus is significant, as will be discussed below. These river valleys host substantial deposits of river gravels covered in a thick build-up of alluvium, and in the case of the Gussage valley, there are significant layers of peat surviving (this peat may have begun to form in the Early Bronze Age – info. Martin Green). This uniformity in geological source is matched to a certain extent by the topographical indistinctiveness of the landscape in which the Cursus was built. This consists mainly of low broad chalk ridges aligned roughly north-west to south-east. These ridges are more gently marked on the southern stretches of the cursus where they reach a summit width of close to a maximum of 3km. The sides of these ridges slope gently down to narrow river valleys but they have been heavily scalloped by the sapping back of tributary streams which, in turn, feed the main river valleys. The maximum height achieved by one of the chalk ridges is on Gussage Hill where an altitude of 110m is reached.

To the north of Gussage Hill, the line of the Cursus although following on a similar alignment to the southern section, traverses a markedly different sort of chalk landscape. In this case, the local topography is dominated by the pronounced outcropping of Upper Chalk above Pentridge in the vicinity of Penbury Knoll (dominating the line of the Cursus at 185m above OD) and Blackbush Down a short distance to the east of the Cursus. Along this section the dominant ridge-like topography is less evident. Instead, the Cursus cuts across the hogback of low knoll flanked on the east by the Crane valley before rising to a terminal on the gently south-east facing slopes of Martin Down.



The Cursus, as it stands at present, is composed of two sections, and it is noticeable that the two parts both cover different sorts of topographical ranges as outlined above. The southern Cursus has been very deliberately placed perpendicularly to the main axis of slope so that its line rarely crosses obliquely across the contour. In contrast, the northern stretch lies predominantly on downland that gently tilts towards the higher land flanking it on the east, and in particular, provides good views of the high points on Bokerley Down, Penbury Knoll and Blackbush Down.

In his examination of the environmental history of the Cranborne Chase (Barrett et al 1991), Fisher pointed out the importance of soils in determining and charting the impact of human activity on these Downs. In particular, emphasising the significance of the easily worked and fertile, loessic deposits for early farming communities. The extent of this loess is contentious (contra Barrett et al 1991, 16) but it does form a component of colluvial deposits uncovered in the local river valleys (although dating of the cultivation is fraught with difficulties). The chalk downland is very typically covered with brown rendzinas whereas patches of clay-with-flints are dominated by paleoargillic brown earths.

Environmental sampling makes it very clear that both segments of the Cursus enclosure were built in what was a continuously wooded landscape. The density of the canopy varied a great deal with only a very few small-scale clearings such as the area around the Thicket long barrow at the southern end of the Cursus. Other areas of lighter cover would have existed around earlier monuments, including long barrows, themselves constructed in open spaces carved out from the woodland. Land snail data allied with pollen analysis confirms that the building of the Cursus enclosure cut a swathe through ancient woodland with clear-felling along its entire path. Although trees were cleared from the site and vegetation kept away from its edges, dense woodland existed nearby and regeneration in the clearings took place soon after construction (Green 2000, 45). This has great significance in terms of the 'function' of the Cursus enclosure and will be further discussed below.

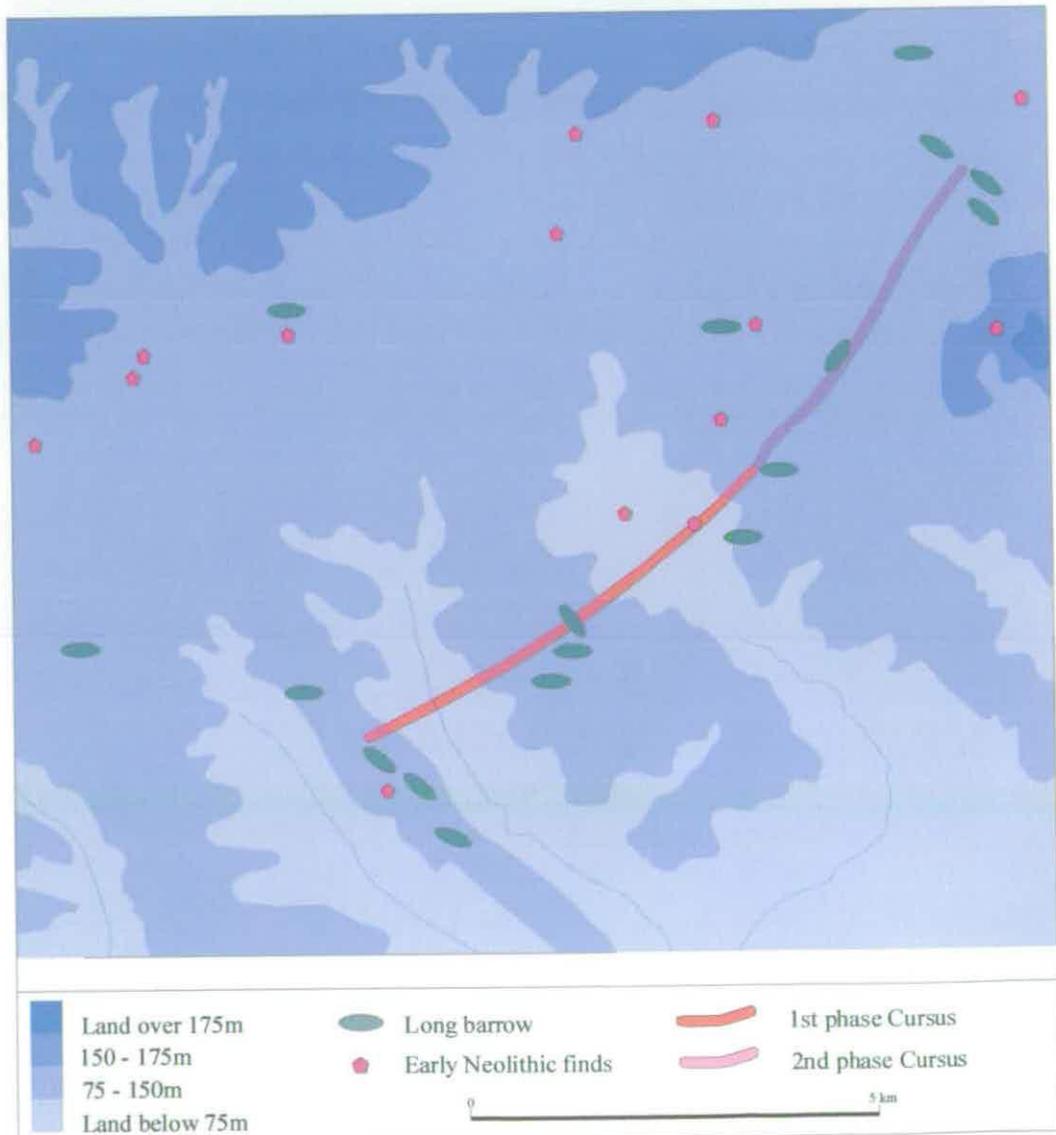
### *Monumental Associations – The Dorset Cursus in its Landscape*

Both segments of the Dorset Cursus are intimately associated with earlier monuments or activity and, indeed, form the focus for a wide range of later connections. The relationship between the Cursus enclosure(s) and the river valleys is also an interesting and significant one and will be discussed in much the same terms.



Mesolithic activity indicated by worked lithics and a scatter of pits were found underneath the Thickthorn Down long barrow (Bradley and Entwistle 1985) and further evidence of Mesolithic activity was uncovered close to the Bottlebush Down terminal of the southern Cursus. It would seem, therefore, that the two terminals to this first phase Cursus enclosure were already known and potential significant places in the landscape before the construction of the later enclosure.

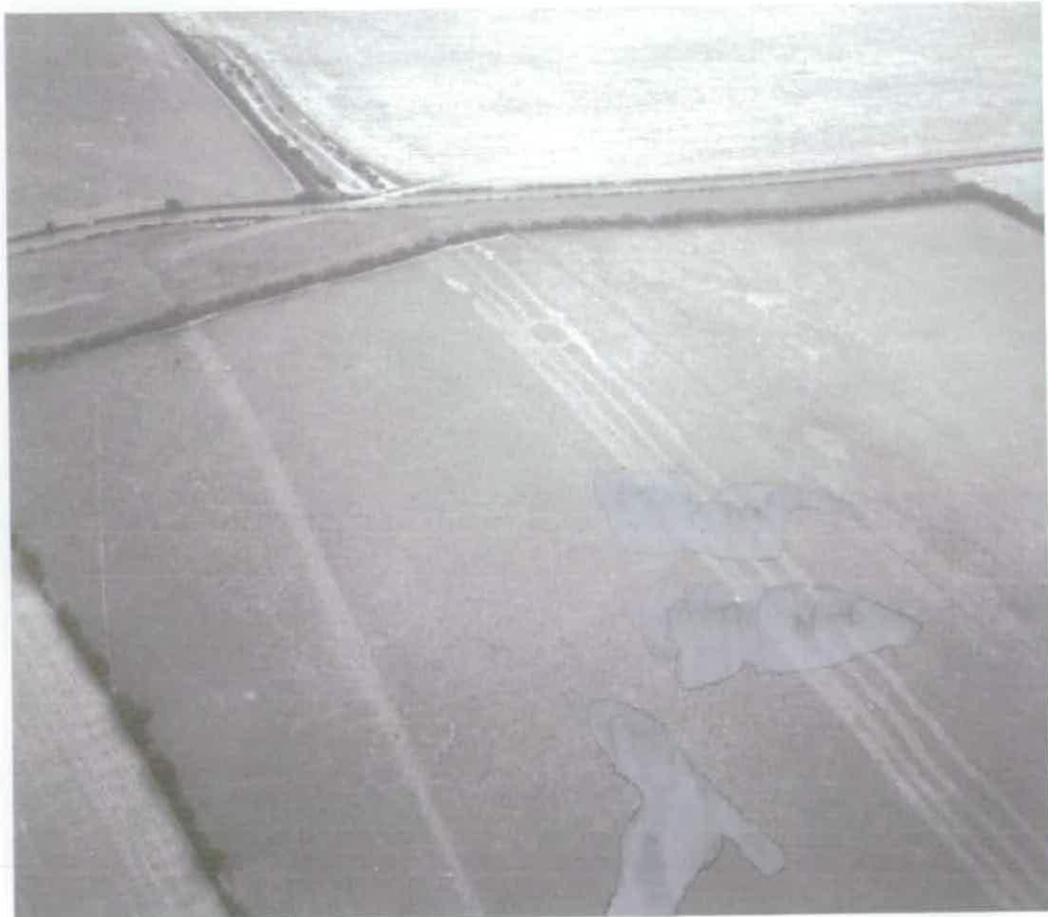
The two elements of the Dorset Cursus were built in an environment already punctuated by significant monumental complexes; with major agglomerations at either terminal. At the south, on Thickthorn Down, there are at least two earlier, long barrows (ST 91 SE 21 & 23) – both overlying spreads of earlier, though still Neolithic, ceramics and lithics (Fig 2; Plate 1). The terminal of the Cursus has been badly affected by wear-and-tear from



**Figure 2:**  
*The location of the Dorset Cursus and its relationship to local topography. Earlier Neolithic long barrows are shown as is the known distribution of lithics scatters. The full phase Cursus is clearly linked to major burial components of the earlier landscape.*



nearby hollow ways and ploughing has cut-back the base of the mound scarps. The end of the Cursus appears to have been deliberately aligned on the adjacent long barrows and this cluster of earthworks has been augmented by the accretion of two (possibly three) round barrows (ST 91 SE 19). At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, a triple ditch system (ST 91 SE 41) incorporated the northern arm of the Cursus along its line.



**Plate 1:**

*The Thickthorn Down Terminal of the Dorset Cursus. Only the final portion of the Cursus enclosure survives as an earthwork, the remainder shows here as a parchmark in pasture. The line of the multiple ditch system approaches from top centre and runs alongside the ditch of the Cursus. Three lines of ditch are discernible and the innermost partly overlies the ditch of the Cursus thus implying that the earlier monument did not survive as a recognisable earthwork when the later linear features were created. The long barrow nearest to the Cursus terminal (ST 91 SW 21) can be seen top left.*

The southern Cursus is very deliberately aligned on the Gussage Hill long barrow which is prominently skylined and sits transversely within it. Beyond this, to the north-east, one other long barrow (SU 01 NW 47), within Salisbury Plantation to the east of the Oakley Down cemetery, has been longitudinally incorporated in the northern Cursus boundary. Other important, near contemporary, monuments such as the Wyke Down Henge (Green 2000) lie in fairly close proximity to the Cursus and numerous round barrows proliferate along the course of both enclosures, with notable concentrations close to the terminal of the first phase Cursus on Bottlebush Down (SU 01 NW 30, 35, 72 & 73).



However, one of the densest concentrations of monuments occurs at the northern terminal of the cursus on Pentridge Down (Plate 2).



**Plate 2:**  
*The Pentridge Down terminal of the Dorset Cursus. The line of the Cursus is clearly indicated by the soilmark as is the course of the Grim's Ditch immediately below it. Faint traces can also be seen of the double-lynchet trackway cutting across the Cursus. The long/bank barrow (SU 01 NW 40) survives as an earthwork adjacent to the terminal and the line of the Bokerley Dyke snakes across the bottom of the frame.*

Here, the earliest monuments are the three long barrows that lie in close proximity to the Cursus terminal. The northernmost of these (SU 01 NW 39) consists now of a much plough-reduced mound some 30m in length aligned roughly north-south, and flanked by side ditches, now visible only as dark streaks of soil. The mound was excavated by Colt Hoare (1812, 235) and produced evidence of a rich 7<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxon burial, undoubtedly a secondary interment. Colt Hoare's work is significant in that it also revealed evidence for a ring of sarsen stones surrounding the mound; possibly evidence of an encircling stone circle but more likely the plough-disturbed remnants of a formerly internal stone chamber.

The long barrow which lies closest to the cursus terminal (SU 01 NW 40) is larger, aligned roughly north-west to south-east and has again been badly damaged by ploughing. Immediately to the south-east and sharing the same alignment a 'tail' has been added and combined, the monuments clearly resemble a bank barrow and recall the similar constructional histories conjectured at Long Bredy, Broadmayne and Maiden Castle, each of which consisted of an early long barrow subsequently lengthened. Three round barrows (SU 01 NW 41, 209 & 210) lie close to the south-east of the bank barrow



and another possible example was noted during the survey. To the south, on a gentle north-facing slope that overlooks the cursus terminal complex, there is another long barrow (SU 01 NW 42). This is the largest monument in the Pentridge Down cluster and consists of a wedge-shaped mound 80m in length, aligned on a north-west to south-east axis and with a raised southern 'business' end 2.5m above ground level. The sides of the burial mound have been disturbed by digging, possibly small-scale attempts at quarrying but ploughing hasn't encroached too heavily on the barrow and, consequently, both side ditches are relatively well preserved. In close association with this there is at least one round barrow (SU 01 NW 211) and a small square enclosure (SU 01 NW 212).

The terminal of the cursus itself (LIN 41) is now poorly preserved due to the impact of continuous cultivation. The enclosure bank does not survive well and the ditch is largely absent also. It is apparent, however, that this process of diminution has a long history as there are traces of a pre-medieval field system (SU 01 NW 44) lying across the line of the cursus enclosure. These fields are aligned on a stretch of linear earthwork known as the Grim's Ditch (LIN 76) possibly of Bronze Age origin and certainly pre-dating the Bokerley Ditch which it closely mirrors for a distance of 4km.

### 3. PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

The earliest documented investigations were those of William Cunnington and Sir Richard Colt Hoare who during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century carried out fieldwork in Wiltshire and Dorset (1810). Colt Hoare depicts many of the monuments recorded at the northern terminal of the cursus (shown on his *Vindocladia* station) and, in addition, he carried out excavations on a number of the burial mounds in the surrounding area, including the long barrow (SU 01 NW 39) which lies to the north of the cursus. Significantly, he noted a similarity between the Pentridge to Gussage Cow Down section of the Cursus and the broad track north of Stonehenge (i.e. the Stonehenge Greater Cursus). The line of the Cursus depicted on Colt Hoare's *Vindocladia* follows a

markedly sinuous as it extends towards its northern terminal on Pentridge Down – no terminal earthworks are shown, however, and the earthwork extends to the north beyond its current terminal (Fig 3). Colt Hoare shared Stukeley's conviction that cursūs were ancient British race-courses and noted that the stretch that approaches Gussage Cow Down would have been eminently suited to this sort of activity. Other ground observations led to the conclusion that the settlement earthworks on Gussage Cow Down overlay the Cursus and that it was associated with earlier burial mounds.

Significantly, Colt Hoare stated his concern at damage being done to the monument, principally through the act of cultivation, noting that areas previously in pasture were now being ploughed up for the first time in living memory. He was scathing of the



**Figure 3:**  
Excerpt from Colt-Hoare's map of the Vindocladia Station, showing the southern line of the Cursus. No terminal is shown on this map, presumably already having succumbed to the effects of cultivation.



local farming community for their acts of vandalism.

... on revisiting this spot [Gussage Cow Down] in the autumn of 1817, did I notice the encroachments of the plough on this memorable, and till lately, well preserved monument of early antiquity. A new farm has been created in the valley, and the lines of the Cursus cut across and levelled; thus interrupting a course which, within the last few years, was perfectly distinguishable from beginning to end.

Colt Hoare 1821, 33

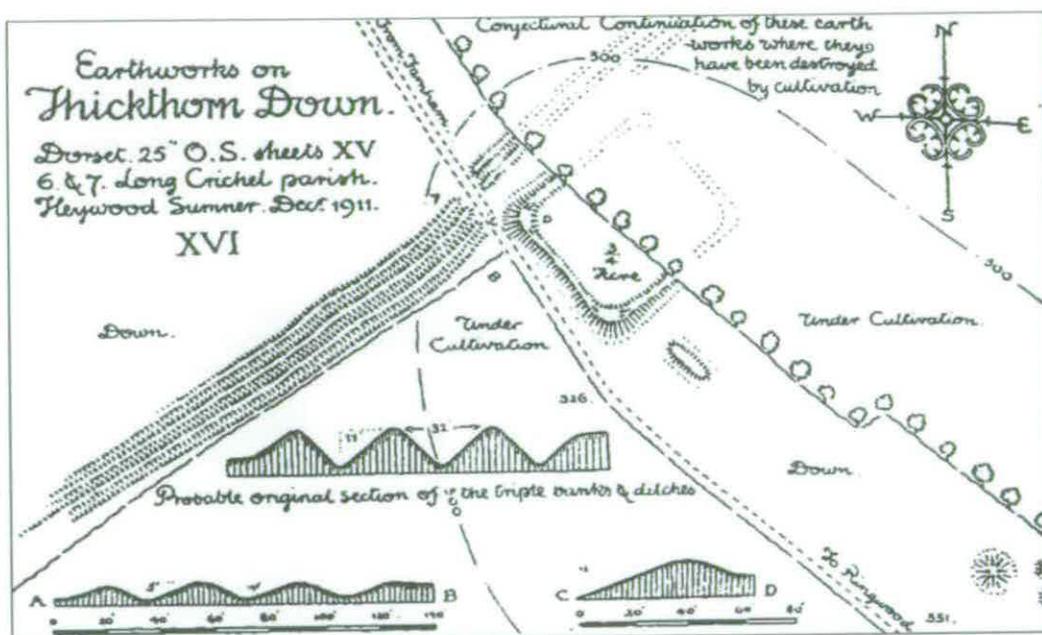


Figure 4:  
Sumner's plan of  
Thickthorn Down with his  
(incorrect) conjectural  
interpretation of the Cursus  
terminal.

In his account of *The Ancient Earthworks of Cranborne Chase* Sumner (1913) presented a radically different interpretation for the southern terminal of the Cursus and its associated earthworks (Fig 4). At this time, he was clearly unaware of the existence of the Cursus on Thickthorn Down and, instead, viewed the enlarged terminal as being the surviving elements of a square enclosure with heightened corners for defensive reasons, largely destroyed on the north by ploughing; the camp would have provided a suitable fighting platform. Sumner believed the flanking 'entrenchments' may also have served a defensive function or been associated with cattle corralling and that they pre-date the construction of the enclosure. His survey of the terminal complex includes the long barrow closest to the terminal as well as the course south-westwards of the linear earthworks. He has shown the Thickthorn Down long barrow as a large circular ditched bowl barrow accompanied by two smaller round examples to the east.

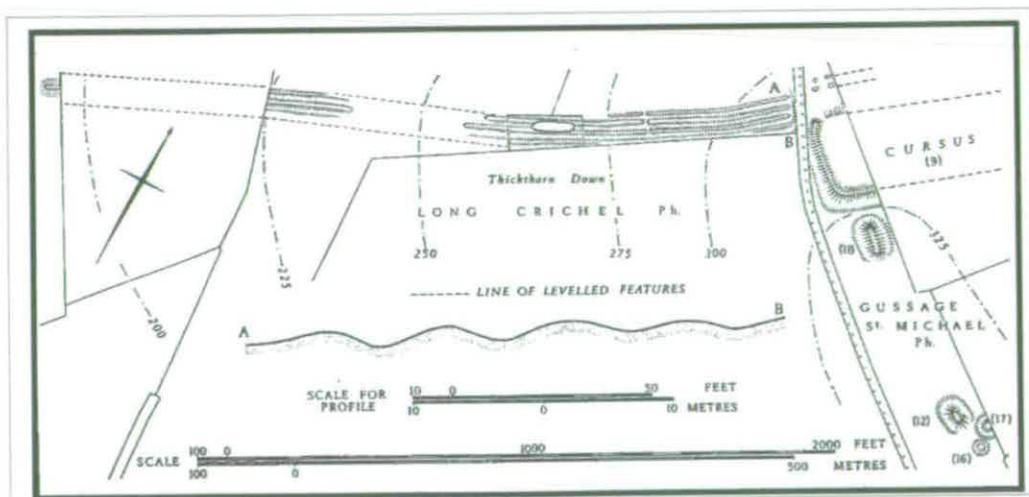


In their assessment of the Bokerley Dyke, Crawford and Keiller (1928) included a commentary on the associated earthworks flanking the linear ditch on Pentridge Down. Much was made of the impact of cultivation on the Downs including ploughing of Iron Age, Romano-British and medieval date and the effect on monument preservation was discussed. Amongst the monuments recorded are the tail of the bank barrow (here classified as a long barrow), the round barrows to the south-east and the linear earthwork, Grim's Ditch, lying to the east of the bank barrow.

Perhaps the most significant of these early contributions is that by Atkinson (1955). In this work the terminals on Thickthorn and Pentridge were positively identified for the first time and an extensive commentary on the physical remains of the Cursus, based on ground survey and aerial photographs, was provided. A number of important points were made not only about the Cursus itself but also about its relationship to earlier (and later) features. Interestingly, Atkinson was the first to note that the north-western side of the enclosure was less well constructed and that there were two possible entrance gaps close to the terminal on Pentridge Down. The incorporation of earlier long barrows was commented upon and interpreted as being ritually determined as well as providing a sighting-mark for the alignment of the Cursus. Atkinson noted further that the long barrow adjacent to the Pentridge terminal of the Cursus was of 'more than ordinary length' and that it was divided into two unequal parts. By probing he found that the side ditches are continuous and so concluded that the monument was only one barrow of exceptional length (*ibid*, 8).

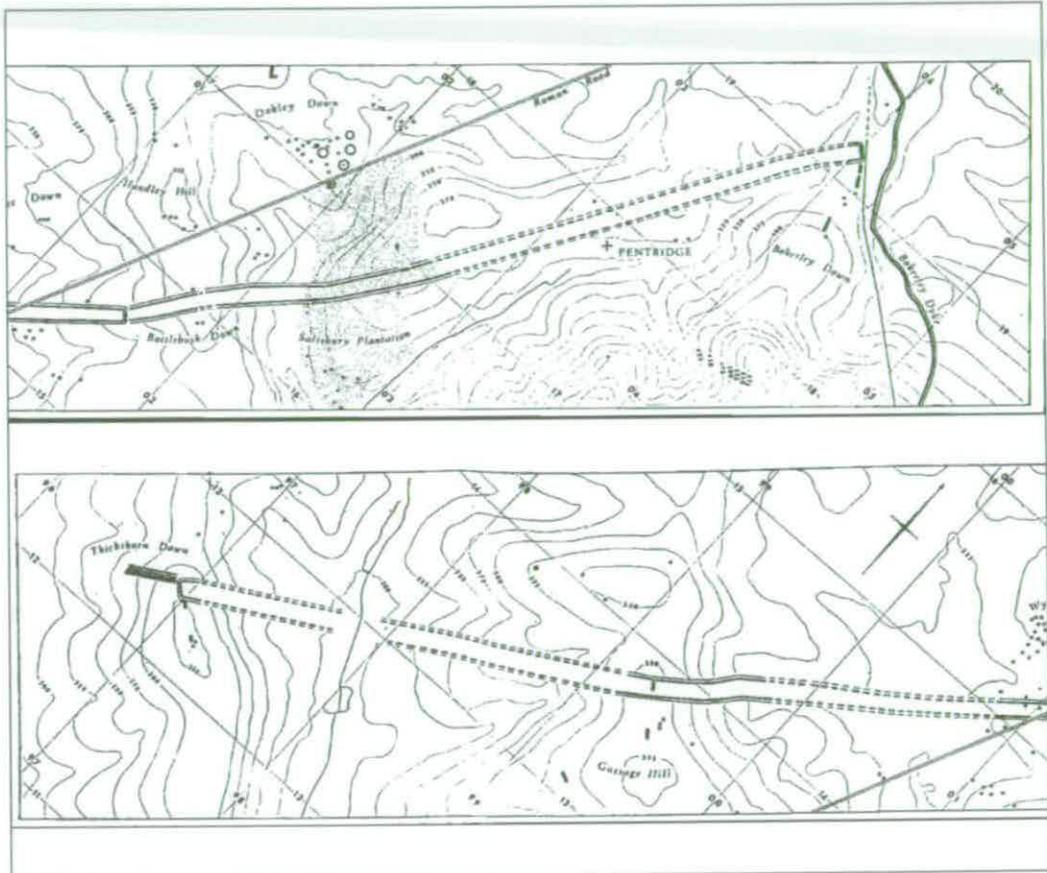
The RCHM survey (1975) built on the work of Atkinson and confirmed that the Dorset Cursus was indeed built in two stages. The commentary provided by fieldwork relates largely to the monument condition and there are inventorial details for the major associated structures such as long and bowl barrows, settlement components as well as 'Celtic' fields. Detailed plans are reproduced of the Thickthorn terminal and its interface

**Figure 5:**  
RCHM plan of 1975  
showing the extent of  
the multiple ditch  
system extending to  
the south-west from  
the Cursus terminal.



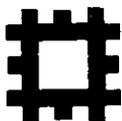


with the multiple ditch system and profiles across the Cursus terminal and at other points along its course are shown (Fig 5). The overall plan of the Dorset Cursus (ibid, opp p25) was the most detailed plan to date of the monument in its landscape setting and with associated features such as burial mounds, linear earthworks and the Roman Road from Old Sarum to Badbury Rings (Fig 6).



**Figure 6:**  
*The RCHM plan of 1975 was the first to illustrate the complete layout of the Dorset Cursus and all of the associated monuments.*

The Dorset Cursus and its related monuments including long and bank barrows as well as later round barrows have formed the focal point of many research projects and publications undertaken during the past 30 years. In a number of influential papers during the 1980s, Bradley provided a detailed analysis on the monuments at Pentridge (1983) as well as a re-assessment of the long barrow on Thickthorn Down (with Entwistle 1985). In *The Dorset Cursus: the archaeology of the enigmatic* (1986), building on the results of then current fieldwork, he sought to provide a fresh insight into the methods of construction and the chronology of the Cursus. This ground-breaking work was the first attempt to clarify the potential purpose or functions of the enclosure and explore its landscape setting, monumental associations and possible astronomical alignments.



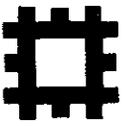
Although *the archaeology of the Bokerley Dyke* (RCHME 1990) was explicitly concerned with an investigation of that linear boundary, elements of the Dorset Cursus, long and round barrows as well as later landscape features, including other, minor, linear earthworks were assessed. As a result, discussion of the Dyke on Pentridge Down also touched upon the long (bank) barrow close to the Cursus terminal as well as the nearby round barrows and the linear ditch Pentridge 17, better known as the Grim's Ditch, with Bowen noting that the linear bounded earlier fields to its west (ibid, 29). In addition, *Area Plan 2*, includes a summary of the main earthworks close to the Thickthorn Down terminal, paying particular attention to the multiple ditch system here.

The single-most detailed publication on the archaeology of the Dorset Cursus is *Landscape, monuments and society* (Barrett, Bradley and Green 1991). This book sought to provide a detailed narrative of landscape development in the Cranborne Chase covering the Mesolithic through to the Late Iron Age. As part of this work major re-assessments of the environmental setting of the Cursus and related monuments were undertaken and excavation across the enclosure boundary was carried out at a number of locales. This not only furnished the excavators with a wide range of material culture but it also provided a series of radiocarbon dates for the construction of the Cursus amongst other sites. This work stressed the complex nature of the archaeological remains in the Chase and gave a clear indication of the intensity of land use in a period stretching over several millennia.

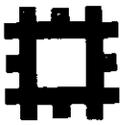
In *Phenomenology of Landscape*, Tilley argues that the cursus was constructed as a ritual passageway to be walked and experienced in a linear fashion from a start point on Pentridge Down. The enclosure boundary was designed to control movement along the path and to act as a block to '...less structured encounters with close by barrows...' (1994, 199). It is argued that as the participants moved along the course of the Cursus, significant monuments and landmarks were visible and became symbolically integrated with it and were linked to rituals dealing with initiation rites, as well as themes of death and rebirth.

*'...It may have operated as a linear conduit through which both bodies and bones were being moved between the barrows in the central part of the Chase and Hambledon Hill. Bodies were perhaps being taken out of Cranborne Chase to a death island of the setting sun immediately beyond its margins to the west, and being allowed to decompose, with selected bones being returned to the barrows in the central arena of the Chase itself. The pollution of death was thus being removed and dry, clean and ritually pure bones returned.'*

Tilley 1994, 200



Johnston (1999) whilst accepting the plausibility of processional routes linking important burial sites and other locales, challenges the view that the Dorset Cursus is a conduit for these activities. Instead, he argues that the Cursus was built in order to bring about an end to the use of this particular processional route with the earthworks constructed as a means of commemorating its pathway.



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#### 4. DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE EARTHWORKS

##### Summary

The results of the survey will be presented in two parts, each dealing with the investigations at the opposing terminals, firstly, Thickthorn Down (on the south-west) then Pentridge Down (on the north-east). The earliest identifiable components in those segments of the Dorset Cursus investigated as part of this most recent assessment are the long barrows. Two lie in close proximity to the southern terminal on Thickthorn Down and a further three can be seen at the northern limit of the Cursus of Pentridge Down. The two long barrows on Thickthorn Down are small, almost oval, examples with a very distinctive morphology; they lack the wedge-shaped profile with the raised 'business' end and are accompanied by side ditches that also encircle the western end of the burial mound, leading Ashbee to argue that these mounds belong to a regionally distinctive 'Cranborne Chase type' (Ashbee 1984, 15). Kinnes also noted the distinct regional nature of this form of long barrow ditch with only one outlier known at present from the Fenlands (1992, 65).

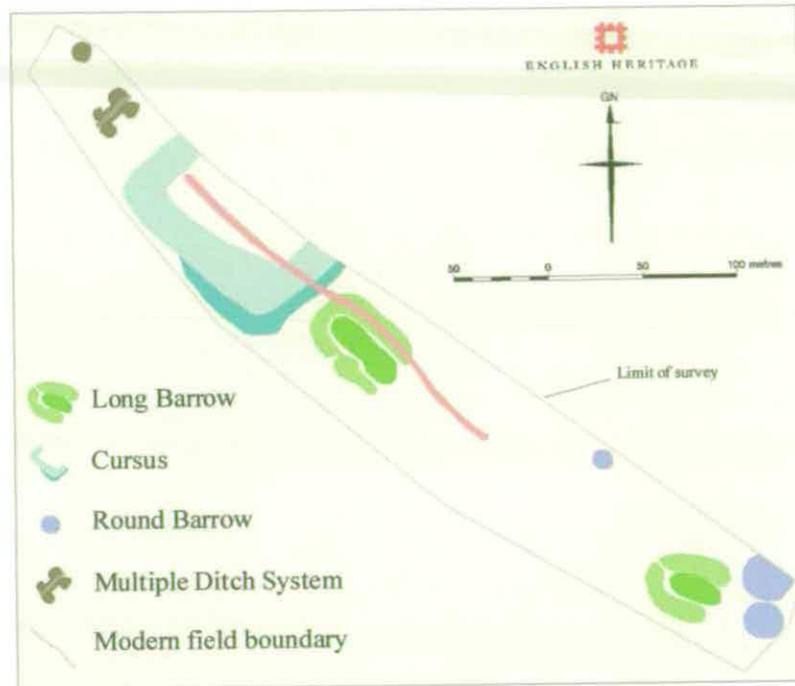
Those long barrows on Pentridge Down display a greater degree of variability. The most intriguing of these is the mound lying to the north of the cursus terminal which may also have been associated with a setting of stones, possibly part of a circle or, more likely, an integrated chamber. The long barrow closest to the cursus terminal is larger and more typically wedge-shaped but is accompanied on the south-east by an embanked extension, giving it a more elongated morphology resembling the bank barrows surviving on the South Dorset Ridgeway. A third long barrow lies a further 200m to the south; this is the largest long barrow on Pentridge Down, one of the largest and best preserved on the Cranborne Chase, and is aligned on the barrow nearest to the cursus terminal (if not the terminal itself). At least one round barrow lies adjacent to this long barrow but in the intervening space between it and the long barrow at the cursus terminal there are three, possibly four, round mounds.

Slight traces of pre-medieval field system were noted throughout the area of survey; lynchets and an integrated double-lynchet trackway were observed lying across and obliquely to the Cursus. These fields clearly took their axial cue from a pre-existing linear earthwork, known as the Grim's Ditch, which extends on a north-west to south-east course, just to the east of the Cursus terminal.



## The Monuments

### Thickthorn Down (Fig 7)



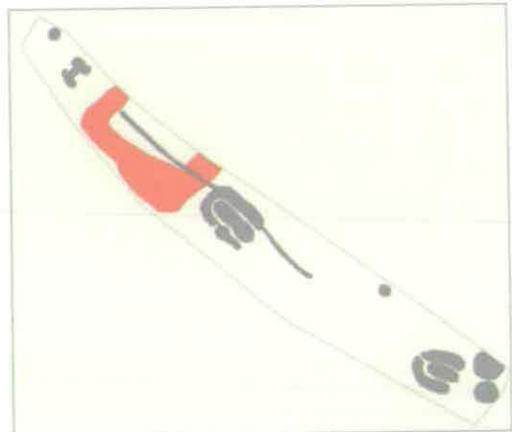
**Figure 8:**  
*Schematic plan of the earthwork components on Thickthorn Down.*

### Cursus Terminal

NGR: ST 9695 1240. NMR: LIN 41

This cursus terminal sits on a ridge overlooking the Gussage valley to the north-east and the lower-lying Thickthorn Down to the west at a height of 95m above Ordnance Datum. The ridge at this point slopes gently to the north-west and, so, from the cursus terminal there are extensive views in all directions but with a closer horizon to the south-east.

The enclosure has been placed in such a way that the interior tilts to the north-west affording extensive views of the southern reaches of Cranborne Chase. This tilting aspect mirrors that at the northern terminal (with its views to the Pentridge Knoll) and with a (approximately) similar direction of view. The view of the terminal from the south-west, the approach from





Thickthorn Down, would also have been impressive and its placement would have ensured its maximum visual impact.



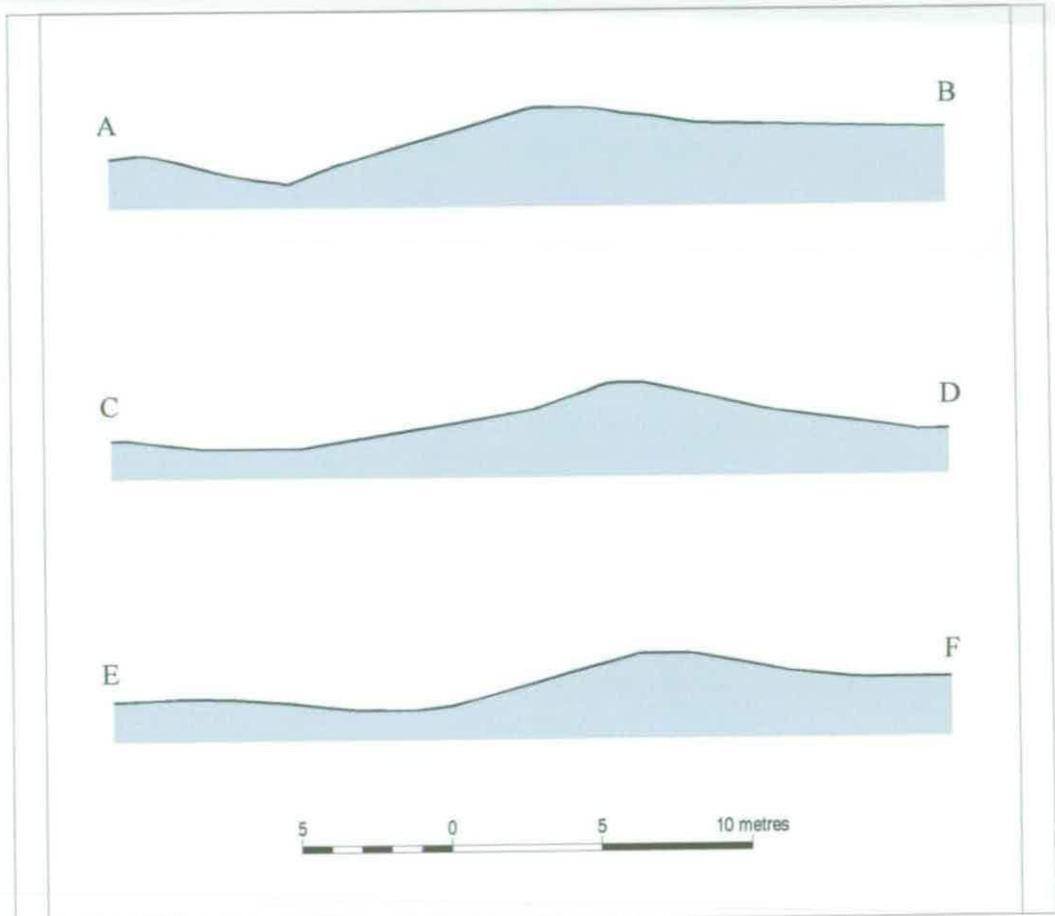
**Plate 3:**  
*View of the cursus terminal bank on Thickthorn Down looking south. The external ditch has been damaged by vehicular traffic and the crest of the nearby long barrow (ST 91 SE 21) can be seen top left.*

The survey area encompassed a small strip of grassland at the southern end of the Dorset Cursus, some 20-70m in width (Plate 3). Within this area approximately 40m of the southern terminal of the cursus survives. This has, clearly, been under plough until fairly recently (judging by the state of the vegetation) and consequently, the cursus terminal appears much worn down by cultivation. Perhaps, the most noticeable aspect of this terminal is that it isn't 'squared-off' in a regular fashion; the asymmetricality might result from later damage since medieval and post-medieval trackways about the terminal on the south, partly overlying the ditch. Irregular plough encroachment may also have had an effect, but nonetheless, the asymmetry does seem to be an original feature. The terminal is 85m wide from centre of bank to centre of bank and so is markedly wider than the, later, northern terminal. It does share a common characteristic, however, in the way that it has been given a greater monumentality than the rest of the monument; a monumentality which must have ensured that it stood out from the remainder of the enclosure, making it appear, almost like a 'stand alone' structure. An earlier archaeological survey suggested that it might have, in fact, been a free-standing long barrow subsequently incorporated into the line of the cursus.

The cursus enclosure consists of a bank with an external ditch; ploughing has removed the ditch on the north-western flank and for a short stretch close to the fence on the south-east. Along the lateral lengths the bank reaches a width of 17m and stands to a



height of 0.4m above ground level; it is not particularly flat-topped (this is surprising since this might be expected due to over-ploughing), and the bank has a rounded cross-section up to 3m wide at its summit. The ditch along the south-eastern section is shallow and survives to a depth of 0.3m; its basal width of 3m has been considerably foreshortened by the effects of cultivation.



**Figure 9:**  
*Profiles across the cursus  
terminal bank on  
Thickthorn Down.*

The earthwork remains at the terminal are much more substantial than at any other point on the enclosure and consist of an engorged bank with an accompanying external ditch (Fig 9). The original profile of the ditch is now unascertainable given the encroachment by more recent tracks, but there are sufficient indications to suggest that the end-ditch was of similarly significant stature. Currently, it has a basal width of 5-8m and survives to a depth of 3m below the crest of the bank. The terminal bank now consists of a sharply defined ridge approximately 10m wide and standing to a height, at best, of 0.7m. It is roughly C-shaped with a straight side, 75m in length, with raised terminals at either end. That on the north is the more pronounced of the two and raises the bank to a height of 2m above ground level. This bank appears to have been placed on top of a broader berm,

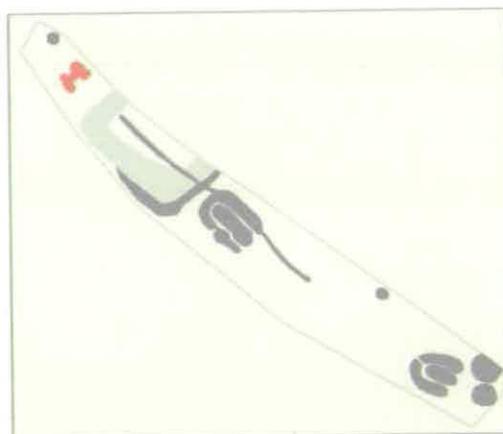


traces of which can be seen around the southern corner of the enclosure. Here, there is a ledge 5m wide (not resulting from ploughing or any other later damage) on the external face of the earthwork; internally, the bank gives way to a break in slope which if part of the original cursus enclosure embankment would have given the boundary an overall width of 22m. The apparent break in slope has been created by modern ploughing with the cursus terminal being used as a headland within a medieval or post-medieval (or possibly earlier – ST 91 SE 20) field system. Later hollow ways cut through the cursus enclosure on the north and emanate from the southern apex of the ditch.

#### Multiple Ditch System

NGR: ST 9620 1210 (centre). NMR: ST 91 SE 41

The heavily truncated remains of a multiple ditch system lie alongside the cursus enclosure on the north-west side but there is no surface indication that there was a physical connection. Instead, the ditch system flanks the enclosure and runs parallel to it for a distance of at least 200m; only a short stretch, 30m in extent, was noted during the survey, and this has been extensively damaged by ploughing, as well as wear-and-tear from traffic associated with the hollow ways that traverse the area. Further to the south-west the ditch system is defined by quadruple banks with medial ditches but within the survey area only two intermittent lengths of bank with a medial ditch could be identified; a small round mound 20m to the north-west may be the remains of another, severely damaged, embankment. The double bank and ditch lies 25m to the north-west of the cursus enclosure and has been bisected by a recent trackway and consequently survives as paired, isolated mounds. From these it is possible to suggest that the bank to the south may have had an overall width of 8-10m, but its neighbour to the north was narrower at 6m. Both stand to a height of 0.3m above ground level and the associated ditch is 3m wide to a shallow depth of 0.3m.

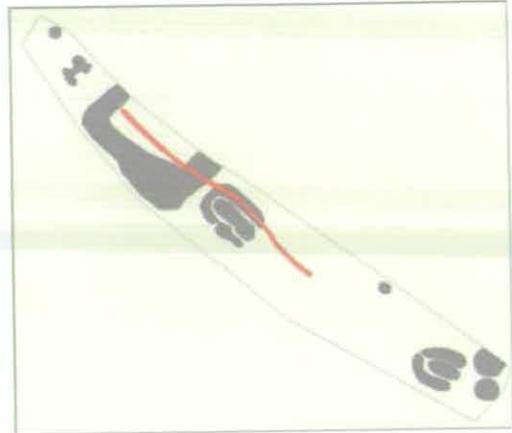




#### Field Boundary

NGR: ST 9709 1233. NMR: ST 91 SE 22

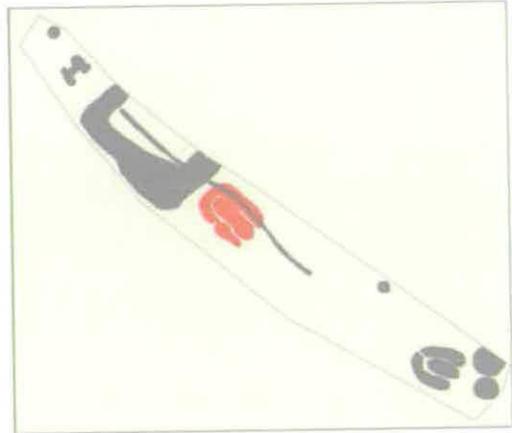
The low, but sharply defined remains of a field boundary cuts across the interior of the cursus enclosure and extends for a distance of, at least, 200m extending across the ditch of the long barrow closest to the cursus (ST 91 SE 21). It is aligned (roughly) north-west to south-east and dog-legs sharply to the south-west 50m from its intersection with the long barrow ditch. The boundary consists of a narrow bank 3m wide and standing to a height of 0.3m.



#### Long Barrow (Plate 4)

NGR: ST 9703 1238. NMR: ST 91 SE 21

This short long barrow lies 15m to the south of the cursus enclosure terminal and is of the very distinctive 'Cranborne Chase' type having a ditch that encircles one end of the barrow mound. The mound itself is 43m in length, parallel-sided, 12-15m wide, with rounded terminals and stands to a height of 2.3m above ground level. It is separated from the ditch by a berm 1-2m wide. The



**Plate 4:**  
*View of the long barrow  
ST 91 SE 21, looking  
looking north-west. The  
earthwork remains of the  
Cursus terminal can be  
seen immediately to the  
right of the barrow  
mound.*



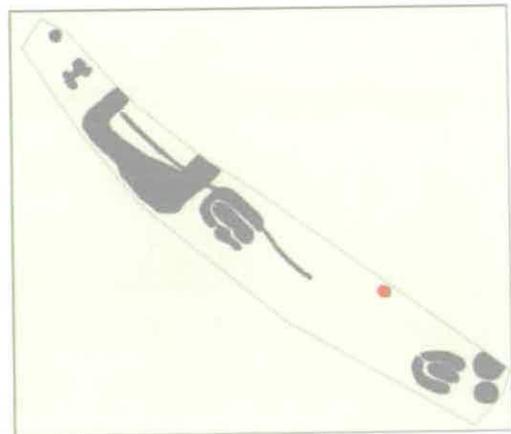
south-eastern end (?the business end) is slightly higher and wider and there is a break in slope 1-2m above the mound base. It is aligned on a north-east to south-west axis, mirroring that of the cursus enclosure; and it is suggested that the cursus enclosure is aligned on this long barrow.

The ditch is U-shaped but does not encircle the south-eastern end of the barrow. It is not complete and there is a marked interruption midway along the south-western section. The ditch has been over-ploughed and now has a soft, shallow profile, 0.3m deep. It is up to 9m wide narrowing to a basal width of 2m in places with damage, suggestive of a mound collapse, close to its southern terminal.

#### Round Barrow/Clearance Cairn

NGR: ST 9720 1230. NMR: ST 91 SE 221

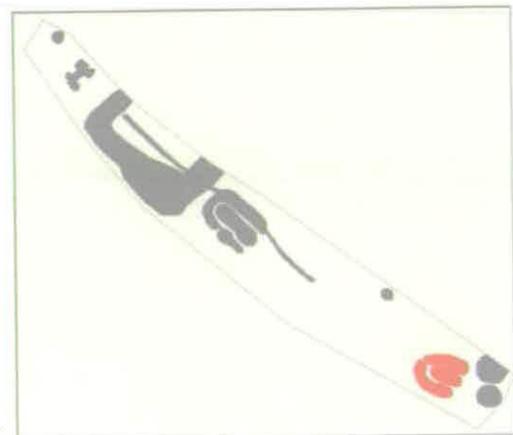
Possible round barrow/clearance cairn noted during the course of the survey. It sits approximately 100m to the south-east of long barrow (ST 91 SE 21) and consists of a simple, circular, flint and chalk mound 10m in diameter and 0.2m high, with no trace of a surrounding ditch.



#### Long Barrow (Fig 10)

NGR: ST 9719 1225. NMR: ST 91 SE 23

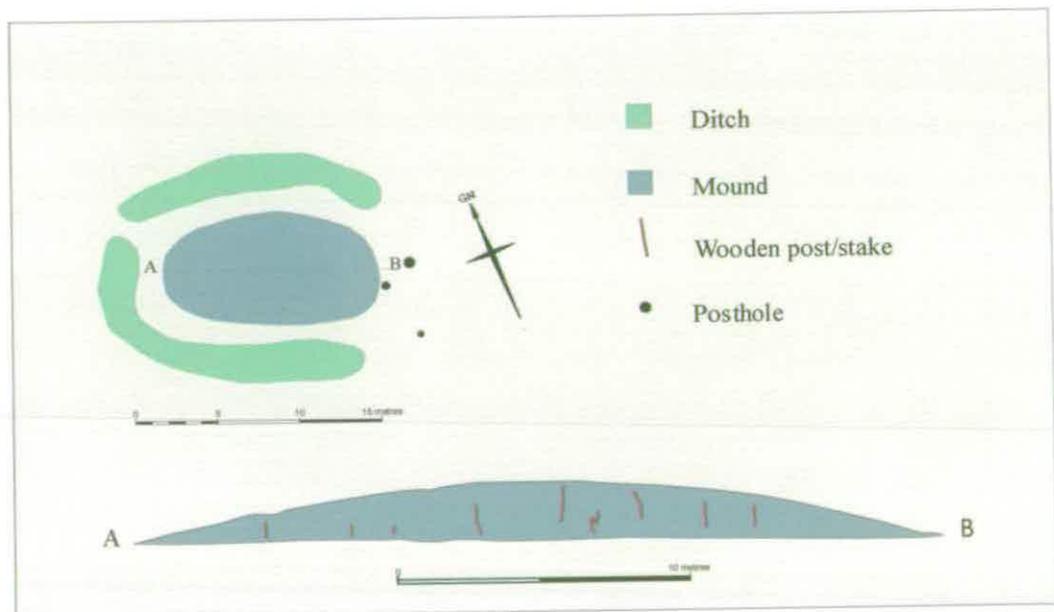
This long barrow lies 160m to the south-east of ST 91 SE 21 and shares a similar morphology; the barrow mound is enclosed by a U-shaped ditch. The short oval mound is on a slightly different alignment than its near neighbour, being more east to west in orientation. It is also shorter with a length of 23m and maximum width of 13m and stands to a height of 2.5m with a narrow berm, at





best 1.0m wide separating it from the enclosing ditch. The ditch encircles all but the south-east facing end of the mound but is broken by a short interruption on the north-west. It ranges in width from 7-10m and to a shallow depth of 0.2m, with deeper sections close to the ditch terminals. Slight breaks in slope can be seen on the outer faces of the ditch and this may relate to a phase of re-cutting or derive from later cultivation.

This barrow was excavated (and completely reconstructed) in 1933 (Drew and Piggott 1936) and it was suggested that a turf-built mortuary structure preceded the mound. Subsequent re-assessment by Bradley and Entwistle (1985) suggests that the barrow mound was constructed in a series of bays, possibly defined by rows of hurdles. No human remains were found in a primary context either within the mound or in the side ditches. Their place may have been taken by a series of intentional deposits of pottery and animal bone in the barrow ditch. An analysis of their distribution (Thomas 1986) draws attention to the continued use of the site for intentional deposits throughout the Neolithic period. A radiocarbon date of  $3210 \pm 45$  bc (uncalibrated) was obtained from a red deer antler pick found on the land-surface beneath the mound.



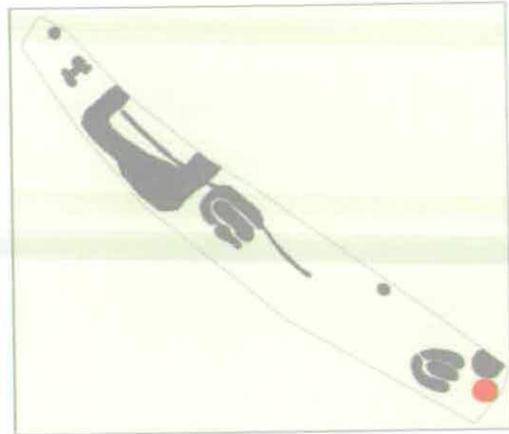
**Figure 10:** Schematic plan and section of the Thickthorn Down long barrow (after Bradley et al 1991). The wooden posts may relate to a series of bays, part of the original process of mound construction.



#### Round Barrow

NGR: ST 9722 1224. NMR: ST 91 SE 19

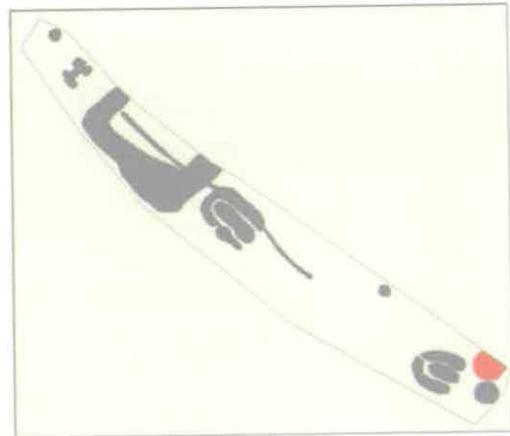
Bowl barrow lies 15m to the south-east of the Thickthorn long barrow. The circular mound has a basal diameter of 12m narrowing to a flattened top 7m wide and stands to a height of 0.2m above ground level. Much of the barrow mound has been severely damaged by antiquarian investigations and recent rabbit damage. The surrounding ditch is shallow, 0.1m deep and 3m wide and it, too, has been affected by recent activity with an interruption on the northern arc.



#### Round Barrow

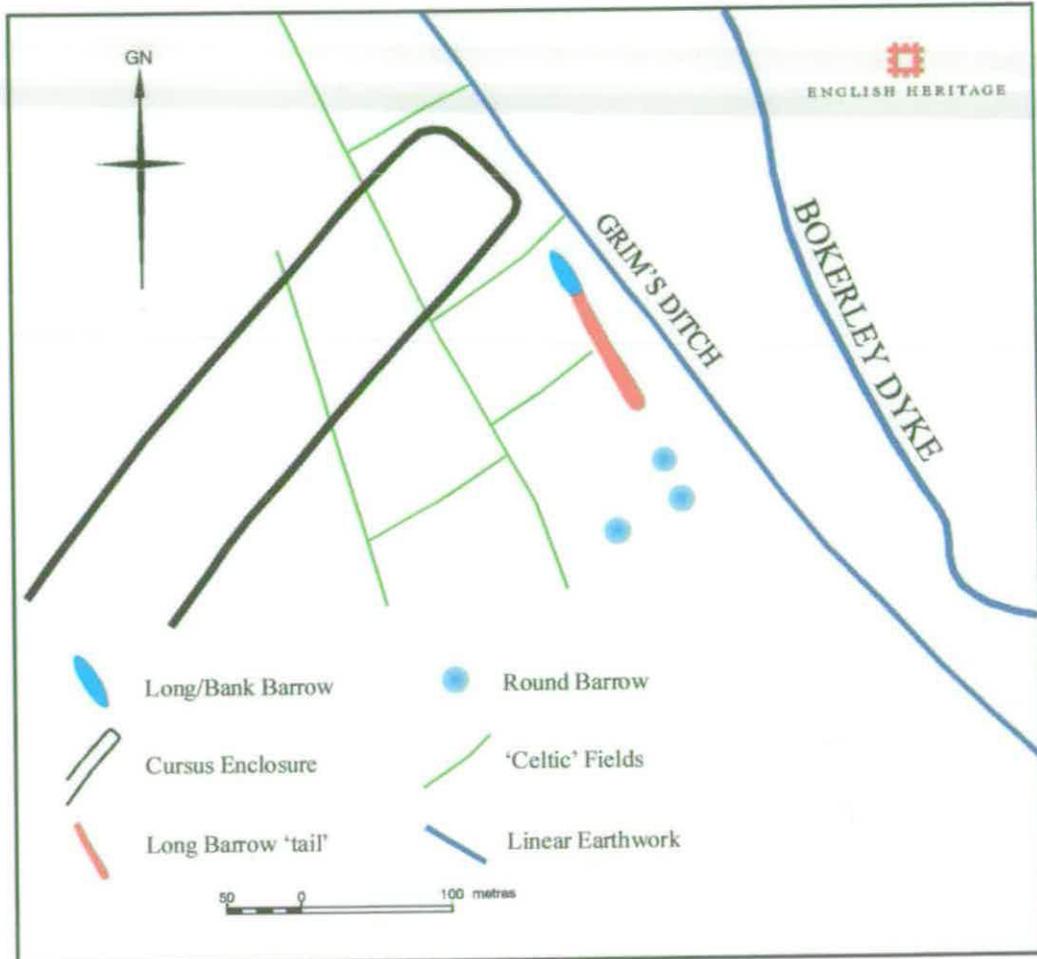
NGR: ST 9722 1226. NMR: ST 91 SE 163

This bowl barrow lies adjacent, and to the north of ST 91 SE 19. It consists of a heavily mutilated circular mound 17m in diameter at its base; its northern arc truncated by the modern fenceline. The mound which stands to a height of 0.3m is flat-topped and 8m wide. It is enclosed by a narrow ditch 2-3m wide and 0.2m deep which has been erased along the south-western arc, close to its intersection with the neighbouring barrow.





## Pentridge Down (Fig 11)

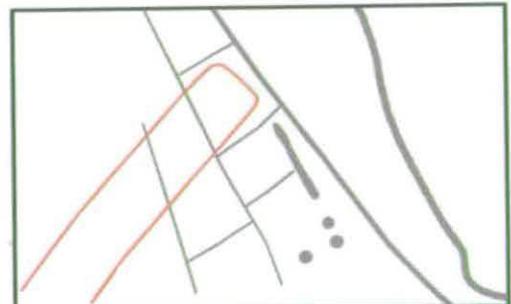


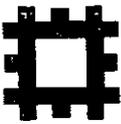
**Figure 12:**  
*Schematic plan of the  
earthwork components on  
Pentridge Down.*

### The Cursus Terminal

NGR: SU 0400 1920. NMR: LIN41

A length of approximately 180m of the northern terminal of the cursus was examined. The embanked terminal sits at a point where the ground, which is gently shelving to the west, flattens out before dropping off to the east on Martin's Down. Thus, the (notably square-ended) terminal of the enclosure has been carefully placed so as to be





visible from all areas except those to the east; this is a deliberate placement. Upon closer investigation, it becomes apparent that the alignment of the cursus enclosure, north-east to south-west, sits uncomfortably with the natural lie of the land with its main east-west tilt. Best views of the cursus terminal are gained from the higher land to the south and the south-west; in close proximity from the nearby ridge of Bokerley Down but more generally further afield to the south on Pentridge Down. The positioning seems planned also to afford good views along the length of the cursus interior when close to the terminal.

The main component of the cursus enclosure is the squared terminal 70m in width (from centre of bank to centre of bank), defined by a bank 20m wide, now heavily plough eroded and standing to a height of 0.2m above ditch bottom. The bank is best seen along the south side and at the terminal where it is slightly narrower but better preserved surviving to a height of 0.4m above ground level. (This mirrors the increased terminal monumentality seen at the Thickthorn end of the Dorset Cursus; the southern terminal of Rudston 'A'). The bank is largely defined now by a spread band of chalk with flint which incorporated struck flint of later Neolithic date. On the northern side, the bank is absent and the enclosure is defined by a shallow lynchet some 0.3m high. The lack of a bank here is likely to be the result of differential ploughing after the abandonment of the cursus but it is possible that, in its original state, the bank along this section was less well developed; recalling the asymmetrical cross-section noted at the southern end of the Rudston 'A' cursus.

Traces of a shallow external ditch are present along the northern flank and around the terminal. It is flat-bottomed in profile and generally, survives to a depth of 0.2m, reaching a width, at the base, of 10m. At the terminal the ditch is narrower but deeper, reaching a depth of 0.4m in places. A 100m length of ditch flanks the southern side of the enclosure and it is probable that this formed part of the enclosure boundary. With a basal width of 7m it is narrower than any other part of the ditch but, again, this may be due to the effects of later cultivation since it is clear that this part of the cursus enclosure has been incorporated within a 'Celtic' field system. The north-eastern extension of this ditch may have been interrupted by the construction of the long/bank barrow.

Although no pronounced earthworks could be seen within the enclosure, the ground was generally cambered along the main axis of the cursus; this had again been severely reduced in height by ploughing.



## Bank Barrow

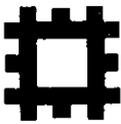
NGR: SU 0406 1914. NMR: SU 01 NW 40



There are two component parts to this 'monument'; a long barrow and a 'tail' to the south-east. The monument has an overall length of 165m and is aligned north-west to south-east along a ridge which separates the Woodyates Ridge from Martin Down to the east. The barrow sits on level ground, mirroring the main axis of this ridge, and is highly visible from all directions. It is a conspicuous monument best seen when approaching from the south, along the line of the cursus or from higher areas to the south.

The long barrow can now be seen to consist of a mound 33m in length, slightly more prominent on the south-east (?the business end), but there are indications that it may have been longer; there is a low spread bank extending the line of the mound for a further 30m to the north-west, effectively taking it up to the edge of the cursus enclosure ditch. This extension is 16m wide with a rounded terminal and stands to a height of 0.2m above ground level. It may be a ploughed down segment of the original barrow mound or, alternatively, it could be a later addition to a barrow core – a much-shortened version of what can be seen to the south.

The main barrow mound stands to a height of 1.8m above ground level on the western flank but it displays a markedly asymmetrical cross-section. A well-defined berm 1-3m wide survives on the eastern side some 0.9m above ground surface. The berm may have been created by later damage but the origin of this is uncertain. The barrow looks undamaged along this section and it may be that the berm is part of the original constructional intent. There is also a strong possibility that the alterations seen along the flank result from later re-building or re-modelling perhaps at the same time as the tail(s) was added. The stepped, asymmetrical, profile does recall those seen at the Long Bredy and Broadmayne bank barrows. At Pentridge, it looks very much as if a broad raised platform had been prepared, 15m wide at its base and narrowing to a flat-topped summit 7m across; thereafter, a small mound was placed rather eccentrically on top of this. It creates an unusual visual dynamic; the barrow has a different 'look' depending which flank is being viewed. It is a much less prominent monument when viewed from the north-east. But when viewed from the south-west it becomes a strong feature on the horizon on approach from the lower-lying ground. Unsurprisingly, there is a revelatory aspect moving towards it along the line of the cursus before ascending the step in the topography some 150m from the barrow itself. The barrow would have been openly visible along much of the length of the cursus close to its northern end and, indeed,



the line of the enclosure seems to deviate to a more easterly alignment some 300m to the south of the terminal. This does suggest that the barrow is earlier than the cursus.

Traces of heavily plough-eroded side ditches can be seen flanking either side of the barrow mound. That to the south is less well preserved and now survives to a depth of no more than 0.2m for a distance of 70m. Later ploughing using the line of the ditch as a boundary has created a slight negative lynchet outside it and so the ditch now appears embanked.

The ditch along the north-eastern flank is better defined and survives to a depth of 0.4m at best. It is 6m wide, at its widest point, and extends for a distance of 54m with notably rounded terminals. There is a marked change in direction some 22m from its northern terminal and this deviation corresponds to the point where the plough-damaged mound/mound extension emerges.

The tail extends to the south-east for a distance of 80m. It only very generally extends the main axis of the long barrow, sitting, instead, on a more southerly alignment. The tail mound is enclosed by a plough step 0.2m high which is best seen on the south-west facing flank and around both terminals. In these areas this creates a berm 2-5m wide between the lynchet and the mound; elsewhere, this berm has been eroded by plough encroachment. The tail consists now of an oblong mound 80m in length with flattened terminals. It stands to a height of 1.2m above ground and is 12-14m wide at the base narrowing to a flat-topped summit some 5-9m across. At some stage, another elongated mound has been placed on top of this initial component. This mound, 48m in length, 7m wide at its base and standing to a height of 0.5m does not sit centrally on top of the earlier feature. Instead, like the long barrow heightening above, the secondary mound lies along the south-west face of the tail. The berm to the north-east varies between 1 and 3m in width. Interestingly, the mound does extend for the full length of the tail but is of a length comparable to that of the long barrow at its fullest extent. Once again, the heightening and its placement must have something to do with the importance of variable lateral views of the monument (or views from it).

The tail is separated from the long barrow by a distance of 18m; there are now no surface indications that they were joined. In addition, the remains of a shallow side ditch can be seen along the north-eastern flank of the tail, now heavily ploughed but surviving to a depth of 0.3m and width of 2.5m. The gap between the two has been heavily quarried in part and detritus from recent cultivation has also been dumped here. Furthermore, both the long bank and the tail terminals appear to be well rounded and relatively untouched and, additionally, aerial photographs show that the line of the ditch is interrupted opposite the gap.

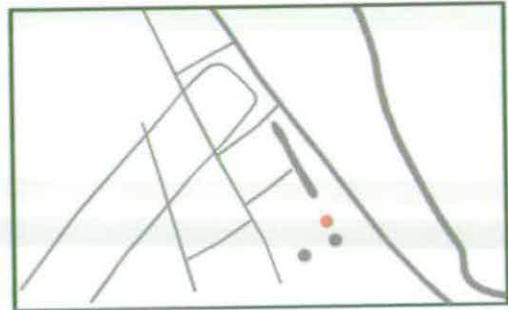


#### Round Barrow

NGR: SU 0415 1900. NMR SU 01 NW 41

This cone-shaped round barrow lies 15m to the south-east of the long barrow tail. The intervening space has been quarried and digging has partially eaten into the base of

the mound on the north-west; ploughing has cut into the mound on the south-west so that it is now sub-rectangular in outline 14-16m wide at its base with a narrower crest 5m in diameter. It is a prominent mound with no trace of a surrounding ditch, standing to a height of 1.5m. A narrow ledge 1-2m wide, approximately 1m below the crest of the barrow, encircles all but the south-eastern arc and may result from recent damage to the monument either from ploughing, antiquarian digging or activities related to the local diggings. There are good views to and from this barrow but with an obviously restricted vista to the north-west (view blocked by the tail of the long barrow).

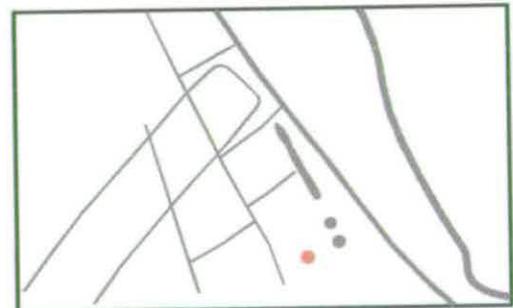


#### Round Barrow

NMR: SU 0412 1895. NMR: SU 01 NW 209

This very low and heavily over-ploughed barrow has a basal diameter of 16m narrowing to a crest, 9m wide. It stands to a height of 0.5m with no surrounding ditch and is being actively erased through continued cultivation.

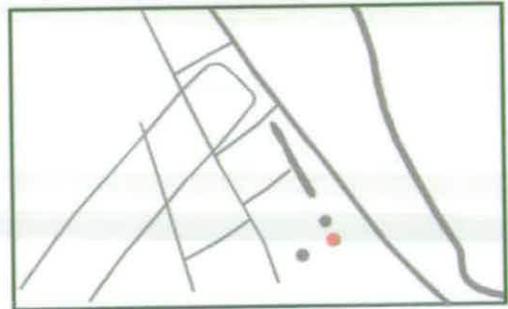
It sits on the north-east edge of the natural ridge that traverses the area and provides particularly good views to the north and east. Likewise, from here the barrow would have formed a prominent marker, though it would have been visible from most directions.





#### Round Barrow

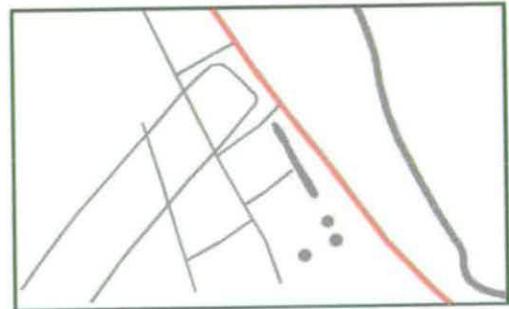
NGR: SU 0418 1890. NMR: SU 01 NW 239.



The partial remains of this newly discovered round barrow lie 15m to the south-east of SU 01 NW 209. Only a narrow arcing scarp now survives the rest having been obliterated by continued cultivation. The scarp stands to a height of 0.2m and faces north-east; from here the natural slope tails off to the north-east and the barrow would have formed a prominent feature on the skyline when viewed from this area.

#### Linear Earthwork

NGR: SU 0410 1945 (centre). NMR: LIN 76.

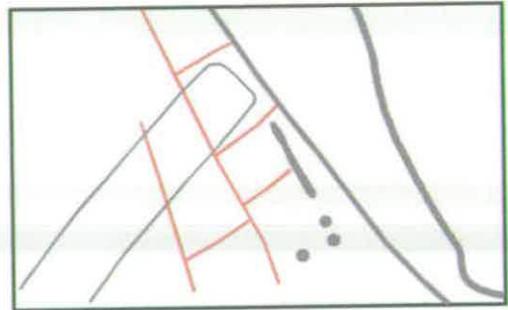


During the course of the survey a 400m length of the Grim's Ditch was recorded. This consists of a single, shallow, ditch with a U-shaped profile 15-20m wide narrowing to a base width of 5-8m. Over-ploughing has softened the earthwork to a greater extent and it now survives to a depth, at best, of 0.4m. No trace of an accompanying bank was noted though one survives (on the south-west) elsewhere along better-preserved sections. The ditch follows a straight course and is aligned north-west to south-east, set slightly obliquely to the main axis of the ridge, running close to but not parallel with the Bokerley Dyke. Dating is problematic. It has been excavated (RCHME 1990, 37) but without resolving dating issues; Bowen did consider it, however, to pre-date the larger Bokerley Dyke, and so is possibly of Mid - Late Bronze Age date.



### 'Celtic' Field System

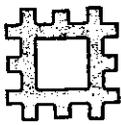
NGR: SU 041 189 (centre). NMR: SU 01 NW 44



Slight traces of 'Celtic' field lynchets scar the entire area of the survey and form part of a system which covers at least 1 sq. km.

These fields don't take their axial cue from the Cursus enclosure but seem better aligned on the long barrow and its tail (SU 01 NW 40). There are clear indications on a number of aerial photographs (e.g. Bradley 1983, 18, plate 3) that it was the Grim's Ditch that formed a spinal component in the local layout of fields. The most prominent element of the field system within the surveyed area is the large lynchet which lies 90m to the south-west of the long barrow, and shares its alignment. This lynchet faces south-west and is positioned just above the break of slope standing to a height of nearly 2.5m. A slight break along its line makes the slope appear concave suggesting that it is composed of an upper positive and a lower negative lynchet. Alternatively, the substantial nature of the lynchet suggests that it was a double-lynchet track-way before ploughing eroded its profile. A number of lynchets spring perpendicularly from this, but these are much slighter surviving to a height, at best, of 0.2m, often appearing as spreads of chalky soil rather than upstanding earthworks. The pattern is very fragmentary so it is difficult to assess the average size of field but assuming that the long barrow and its tail formed a boundary to a field, these may have been as long as 90m. If so, this field system (or, at least, those fields in close proximity to the Cursus enclosure) is likely to be of Romano-British date.

Traces of 'Celtic' fields about the Grim's Ditch and smaller lengths of linear scarping, presumably field lynchets, lie in the area between the long barrow and linear earthwork. No fields were noted on the surface beyond the linear earthwork but aerial photographs (ibid.) show that the field system continued into this area and probably extended up to (and beyond – there are 'Celtic' fields to the east of Bokerley on Martin Down – SU 01 NW 4) the Bokerley Dyke.

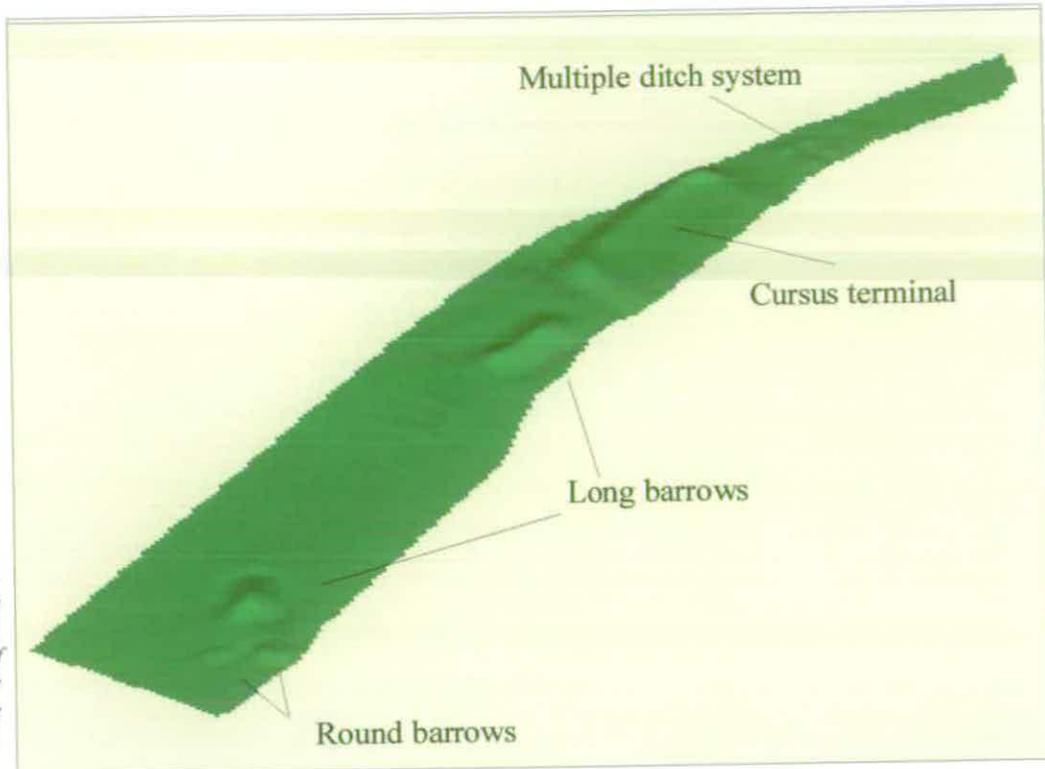


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## 5. DISCUSSION

The Dorset Cursus is the largest and most monumentalised enclosure of its type in the British Isles and has been constructed in two parts: a south-western section from Thickthorn to Bottlebush Down and a segment extending from Bottlebush Down, north-east towards Pentridge Down. Along its entire length the coupled monument consists of parallel ditches set approximately 90m apart, accompanied by internal banks with each end closed off by a pronounced terminal. The whole effect is thus of an elongated oblong enclosure but one without any obvious entrance gaps. The ditches are now heavily silted up but survive to a width of 3m, and in those areas surveyed, do not exceed a depth of 1m. The flanking banks are of a similarly low stature. The evidence from excavation points to a much more substantially defined structure with ditches 3m wide (though slighter shallower sections have been recorded) and 2m deep hinting that the associated banks would have stood to an height perhaps as much as 2m above ground level. This gives the impression of a very different monument originally, contrasting with its present day inconspicuousness. In its final form the Dorset Cursus must have presented an imposing sight acting as a highly focal enclosure in an increasingly open environment; a point reinforced when considering Startin's estimate for a labour force equivalent to 450,000 worker hours for construction (1982). Bradley tempers this somewhat, though, with his assertion that the monuments could have been built using smaller groups of people, perhaps as few as four individuals over a longer period of time. Citing earlier earth-moving experiments carried out by Erasmus it has been estimated that several metres of drystone wall, roughly 2.0m high and 0.4m wide, could be constructed by one person in a day (Bradley 1991, 46).

One significant constructional detail to note is that the developed monument's terminals on Thickthorn Down and Pentridge Down appear to have been built, in their final form, on a much grander scale than the rest of the enclosure. They are larger earthworks and so have survived to a much better extent, but it is clear that this excessive monumentality was part of the original intent. The engorged terminals suggest that these points must have been of special importance; perhaps they were regarded as 'weak' points in the enclosure that needed reinforcing or points where access was especially prohibited. Access to the Cursus interior must have been a major issue anyway, as survey has so far found only two possible entrance gaps through the boundary. Their enlarged and heightened nature ensure that they would have provided prominent viewing platforms for events not only within the enclosure but also in a wide sweep of the surrounding area, vegetation permitting (fig 13). Both terminals tilt in a south-westerly direction. At the north-eastern limit (Pentridge) this restricts views in a wide arc to the north-east recalling the specific topographical profiles noted at many causewayed enclosures (Barber et al 2001).



**Figure 13:**  
*Digital terrain model of the Thickthorn Down terminal. Note the enlarged nature of the Cursus terminal and its close association with a long barrow.*

It is also possible that the terminals were enlarged to mimic nearby (and earlier) monuments such as long barrows. The Cursus has been built in an environment already heavily demarcated with important earlier monuments, principally long barrows. Two are physically incorporated within the line of the enclosure; one on Gussage Cow Down and set perpendicularly across the line of the Cursus so that it forms a very focal blocking point when viewed from the south-west, and a second, placed longitudinally within the north-western bank in Salisbury Plantation. There is, however, also good evidence for earlier settlement activity in the form of lithic scatters of Mesolithic and Early Neolithic date. The earliest material is predominantly found on the patches of clay-with-flints within the Cranborne Chase and there are significant findspots along the line of the Cursus (Entwistle and Bowden 1991, 23). It is notable that beyond the evidence of the monuments, Earlier Neolithic activity is not well represented in the region but concentrations of material have been recovered from levels below the Thickthorn long barrow (Drew and Piggott 1936) and Wor Barrow (Pitt-Rivers 1898).

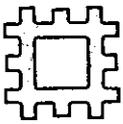
It is presumed that the long barrows predate the construction of any part of the Cursus enclosure and the available dates, in theory, support this. Basal deposits below the Thickthorn Down long barrow have been dated to 4220-3810 BC (5160±45 BP BM-2355; OXCAL v.2.18); nearby Wor Barrow dates to 3900-3100 BC (4740±130 BP BM-2284R; OXCAL v.2.18) and both predate the construction of the Cursus whose earliest dates are 3650-3000 BC (4575±77 BP OxA 625, OXCAL v.2.18). Both



terminals are closely associated with these elongated burial mounds. On Thickthorn Down, the two long barrows are of a distinctive regional form, the so-called 'Cranborne Chase' type. The defining characteristics are shared by both barrows here, specifically, small oval-shaped mounds without any obvious 'business end' and an encircling ditch open at the eastern end. One of this type lies east of and adjacent to the Cursus terminal and shares a similar axial layout. The nearby long barrow lying some 230m to the south-east, and known as the Thickthorn Down long barrow, is smaller and placed on a more east-west alignment, and an extension of the longitudinal mound axis to the north-west, suggests that it has a focus on the Cursus terminal rather than the (presumably) contemporary long barrow. This raises a number of possibilities. Firstly, that alignment is independent of the existence of any other significant monuments. Secondly, that the furthest east long barrow was built first, before any of the other monuments here or, at least before the Thickthorn Down barrow had been constructed.

The Thickthorn Down terminal of the Cursus is excessively monumentalised. This has undoubtedly been a major factor in its ability to withstand the impact of subsequent wear-and-tear and the encroachment of cultivation. On the ground its outline now strongly resembles that of a long barrow. It has an elongated profile, wedge-shaped with a pronounced eastern end and is aligned roughly east-west. Survey evidence would suggest that at some stage the terminal underwent a re-configuration that saw a smaller primary earthwork increased in size and given mound-like proportions. The terminal is noticeably not 'squared-off', instead the line of the end earthwork sits at an angle to the arms of the enclosure, with hints that at some stage it was widened on the east not only to enhance its profile but also to bring its alignment to face towards the Thickthorn Down long barrow.

On Pentridge Down there are at least three long barrows in close association with the Cursus terminal. One of these, that sitting closest to the terminal, has been augmented by the addition of a linear embanked 'tail'. This recalls the configuration observed at a number of other similar sites, particularly those in Dorset at Broadmayne, Long Bredy and Maiden Castle (Bradley 1983). The sequence of events on Pentridge Down is by no means clear. It would be assumed that the long barrow is the earliest monument in the sequence here but there is no categorical dating available and there remains an unfounded suspicion that the long barrow is secondary to the Cursus and is indeed, focused upon it. The long barrow has been badly affected by cultivation with a small section at the north-western limit of the mound now destroyed. Only small lengths of the accompanying ditch survive and linear scarps along its flanks may also attest to the impact of ploughing. However, the mound still displays a markedly asymmetrical cross-section with a sharper face looking south-westwards towards the cursus and the landscape beyond. On the north-facing flank a pronounced ledge is evident, possibly a more recent plough step but plausibly deriving from alterations when the tail was added.

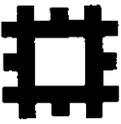


The long barrow is separated by a short distance from its tail and this gap has been exaggerated by later activity presumably relating to intensive arable cultivation around the monuments. The appendage is lower in height than the core barrow with a flatter top and steeper, shorter sides. It has been heavily disturbed by subsequent activities but there is a suggestion that a short stretch has been heightened with slight indications of a subsidiary bank placed on top of the main earthwork. Interestingly, this enhancement mirrors that seen on the contiguous long barrow and the whole effect is of a monument built and then given further definition to maximise its visual impact. The monument would also have provided a well-positioned viewing platform for a substantial length of the Cursus and a wide swathe of the encompassing downland. What is obvious, however, is that this tail has been added after the construction of the Cursus. Normally, the earthwork extension is added to the western end of the pre-existing burial mound but here, given the lack of space due to the construction of the Cursus, the tail extends to the east.

The new monument with an overall length of 165m is very carefully aligned on the Cursus terminal which is 'squared-off' in comparison to that on Thickthorn Down. It is similar, however, in that the scale of construction at the terminal dwarfs the remainder of the main enclosure boundary. The terminal bank, though now widely spread due the continued effects of cultivation, stands proud of the surrounding terrain and the ditch immediately behind it still retains an almost 'pond-like' profile. The point of termination has also been carefully chosen to maximise its visual impact when viewed from the south. It lies just at that location where the gently south-west facing slope levels off and it is at this break of slope that the best views of the surrounding area, and a good stretch of the Cursus, would also have been available.

Approximately 180m of the Cursus enclosure was surveyed on Pentridge Down but this is in a very degraded condition due to the effects of prolonged cultivation. All surface indications of the external ditch have been erased apart from that at the terminal and for a short stretch on the north-western flank. Many authors have noted that the northern line of the Cursus is less regularly laid out than its southern counterpart, leading to the suggestion that it was established by a series of off-sets taken from the southern arm (Atkinson 1955, 3). But it is noteworthy that the bank is better preserved on the north-west indicating perhaps that it was, originally, of a more massive construction. But again, this may be the result of later and different rates of attrition across the monument.

Generally, the Cursus appears to follow a fairly straight course but on closer inspection there are clearly markedly irregular sections, especially in those areas where local topography hindered sight-lines and the laying out of long sections of enclosure. Indeed, at one point on Gussage Cow Down, the line of the enclosure changes direction twice over a distance of 250m apparently in an attempt to bring two disparate elements



together. Bradley suggests, alternatively, that the line of the Cursus, which was intended to incorporate the pre-existing long barrow on Gussage Cow Down, drifted off course in the lee of a hill where the barrow could not be seen. Thus a change of direction was needed to enclose the barrow within the Cursus (Bradley 1991, 47). Tilley has countered by suggesting that the dog-leg in the line is deliberate in order to hide the view of the barrow until the latest possible moment, thus 'surprising' groups of people walking along the interior (1994, 188).

### *The Function of the Dorset Cursus*

The term 'cursus' was first coined by the antiquarian William Stukeley in his work on Salisbury Plain and in particular on his observances at the elongated linear enclosure straddling Stonehenge bottom to the north of the circle. Stukeley characterised the enclosure as

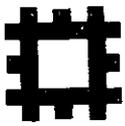
*'[resembling] a course suitable for the racing of chariots by the ancient Britons'*

Stukeley 1740, 41

and a similar classification of 'British trackway' was given to the Dorset Cursus on early Ordnance Survey maps. The work of ET Leeds (1934) and OGS Crawford (1935) were instrumental in confirming the early date of these monuments but utilitarian interpretations were still favoured until the middle stages of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and, Atkinson's considerations of the Dorset Cursus (1955). At this time he reached the conclusion that the Cursus served as an arena for some form of ritual procession which may have been associated with the cult of the dead. In more recent years, Loveday's work (1985), has been instrumental in confirming the role of cursūs, and has also shown the link between these and other elongated Neolithic monuments such as long mortuary enclosures and bank barrows. Loveday's definition of cursūs remains valid

*'elongated parallel sided sites normally totally enclosed by their defining ditch or pits, but on very rare occasions having one open end....they may possess either internal banks or more rarely an axial mound'*

ibid, 33



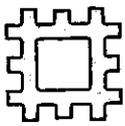
Current orthodox interpretations see the Dorset Cursus as a ritual pathway constructed as a processional route across the landscape. For Bradley (1991), and more recently, Tilley (1994), the linkages between movement along the linear monument, local topography and pre-existing burial mounds underpin this interpretation. There is no doubt, however, that the layout of the Dorset Cursus is carefully choreographed to incorporate significant landmarks both humanly constructed and natural in origin. This design is manifest in the layout which starts and ends at places intimately juxtaposed with earlier burial mounds, and which includes along its length, at least two other significant monuments to the dead. Barrett *et al* (1991) note that the landscape setting of the Cursus, as it cuts across river valleys, seems to usurp the natural lie of the land but argue further that the enclosure acts as a linear boundary separating the higher land of the Cranborne Chase and South Wiltshire to the north-west from the lower slopes elsewhere. However, there are only a very few points on the ground where this geomorphological margin is apparent and it seems unlikely that in a fairly heavily wooded environment, the builders would have been aware of the regional topographical setting. Instead, this interpretation seems to be derived from observations of recent, and detailed, cartographic sources.

It does seem, however, that the line of the Cursus is aligned on the midwinter sunset and views south-west along its line would have provided the viewer with an awe-inspiring interplay between the declining sun and the Gussage Cow Down long barrow and the Thicket Down terminal. In both cases, the sun, as it set, would have appeared to 'rest' for a short time on both of these earthworks.

If, indeed, used as a processional route the course of the Cursus would have provided a stern test for many of the participants and also non-participating observers. If the following assertions are accepted :-

- A) that physical processions were accommodated within the enclosure boundary
- B) that these processions may have in some sense deliberately entwined in a symbolic sense, pre-existing burial monuments with prominent natural features such as hilltops and palaeo-channels and been viewable by a wider collection of individuals outside the enclosure
- C) the processions would have taken place to coincide with the mid-winter solstice

then a number of problems arise concerning the nature of the procession. The first of these concerns the boundary itself. A bank at least 2m high would have seriously truncated views into the interior so that at only a very few places would it be possible to look inside and witness events; these are the high points close to the Pentridge Down terminal and the higher chalk ridges on and near Pentridge Knoll. From here activities within the interior would have formed a very distant spectacle and it seems reasonable



to speculate, therefore, that any internal processions and views of them were deliberately closed off in what must have been a fairly restricted space. This may also have been an attempt to maintain an exclusivity for the activities within the enclosure.

In addition, to complete the procession, it would have been necessary to ford a number of rivers and streams. At least three major watercourses are included within the Dorset Cursus all of which are now winterbournes and would have been flowing at the mid-winter point. Even allowing for a lower water table 5,000 years ago, it becomes apparent that each of these channels would have presented significant interruptions to those moving along the course of the Cursus. The association between cursūs and waterways is well established and Brophy (1999) notes that there is often a deliberate link between the two, with suggestions that the flow of a river is a metaphor for movement along the enclosure. It is plausible, too, that activities within the enclosure may have involved the water itself, perhaps as repositories for special deposits. Waterways are often seen as sacred and liminal zones; points of contact with the spirit world and as a result flowing water (and springlines) are often metaphorically linked to notions of new life and re-birth. This is potentially significant given the association of the Dorset Cursus with earlier burial monuments and the mid-winter solstice.

Johnston (1999) has stated that it is plausible that the building of the Dorset Cursus actually brought an end to physical processions across this particular stretch of downland. Through the acts of enclosing this sacred space by building the massive structure, earlier ancestral processional routes were permanently demarcated and inscribed in the landscape.

Nonetheless, the Dorset Cursus is, in its final phase, an extended passageway or narrow linear path through the landscape deliberately designed to incorporate earlier burial monuments and other significant places not marked by fixed monuments and all underscored by the specific astronomical alignment of mid-winter sunset, a significant turning point in the astronomical year. A journey along its course would have proven to be arduous, crossing river valleys and streams, marshy areas and steep-sided valleys. Rather than being seen as evidence of a public ritual, whatever took place within its boundary was closed off to non-participants apart from a very few places along its course; this visual exclusion was ensured not only by the strength of the enclosing boundary but also by the fact that it was built through woodland which was heavy in places. Clearance along the line of the Cursus occurred at a much later date. The engorged terminals and associated earlier monuments stressed the importance of these places, perhaps as start and end points, but also as viewing platforms for short stretches along the line of the enclosure. With this in mind, a more prosaic interpretation can be aired here: that the Dorset Cursus was indeed a processional route but one with a start point on Pentridge Down and an end on Thickthorn Down and that the participants were engaged in a



rights-of-passage trial (Fig 14). The exact nature this must remain unascertainable but it would have required a certain physical fortitude and it was legitimised through the careful integration of the ancestral world represented by the pre-existing burial mounds amongst other things. Rather than effective viewing points from outside of the enclosure, high points such Pentridge Knoll and Blackbush Down become significant points of reference from within its line and this acknowledgement of the physical world was significant as it is clear that the Cursus linked diverse elements in the landscape; water, ancestors, astronomical alignments, into one multi-faceted arena. The theme of religious or ceremonial passage was briefly mentioned by Atkinson (1955, 9) when recalling the ancient Roman festival of the Lupercalia:

*'...in which young men, armed with whips cut from the hides of sacrificial goats, ran race along a course marked out with stones, striking at the by-standers as they passed...'*

Atkinson 1955, 9



**Figure 14:**  
*Competitors at a funeral game  
at the Stonehenge Greater  
Cursus.* © David Alexovich

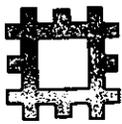


### *Later Developments*

The process of monumental accretion that continued after the construction of the Cursus enclosure is, perhaps, seen most vividly on Pentridge Down where one of the long barrows was 'converted' by the addition of an elongated earthwork into a bank barrow. The term 'bank barrow' was coined by Crawford (1938) drawing upon evidence from the then recently excavated long mound at Maiden Castle, survey in Dorset at Long Bredy and Broadmayne and close continental analogues from the Schleswig-Holstein area of Germany. The added tail on Pentridge Down accentuates the main axis of the long barrow away from the Cursus terminal, thus seemingly post-dating it, but at the same time it replicates the distinctive linearity of the earlier enclosure. The combined monuments have been damaged by later cultivation and a small section at the north-western end has been destroyed. Other slighter scarps and ledges scar the sides of the bank barrow but it is plausible that rather than damage these features relate to the use of the mound or later alterations. The barrow provides an excellent viewing platform for the terminal of the Cursus and the surrounding area that included at least two other long barrows, one of which may have been associated with a setting of sarsens, and a possible long mortuary enclosure.

Each terminal complex has been further embellished by the construction of later burial mounds - round barrows. On Pentridge Down, a small group lies immediately to the south-east of the bank barrow, with one 'tacked' on to its end. At least three other round barrows are known in this group but only one example survives, the others having succumbed to ploughing. One other potential addition to this group was noted but, again, this has been so heavily frayed by cultivation that only a small scarp was observable. What is immediately apparent is a complete absence of round barrows adjacent to the Cursus terminal. This absence may also be due to later activities but no round barrows show either on the ground or from aerial photographs. It would seem, therefore, that there was a deliberate decision to make the bank and nearby long barrows a focus for later burial activity rather than the Cursus enclosure.

This pattern is replicated to a certain degree at the Thickthorn terminal though close to it, at least one ring ditch overlies the northern line of the Cursus. However, there are no round barrows on or at the terminal, instead, two mounds lie 250m to the east deliberately well away from the Cursus and in closer association with the long barrow here.

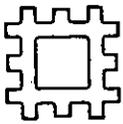


### *Later Prehistoric Activity*

Later prehistoric and Romano-British activity is well represented at or close to both Cursus terminals. A number of later prehistoric settlements have been identified on the line of, or close to, the Cursus, suggesting that its course was largely infilled and ignored. However, on Thickthorn Down, a multiple ditch system consisting of at least three ditches with accompanying banks have incorporated the northern line of the Cursus boundary. Only very fragmentary remains survive at the point where the two monuments elide with two short lengths of heavily damaged bank and a medial ditch visible. Later tracks and paths have caused much damage here so it is no longer possible to observe the exact relationship between the Cursus and the closest contiguous section of linear boundary. To the north both components have been over-ploughed but the multiple ditch system can be seen to extend alongside the Cursus for a distance of at least 200m before. Beyond this the linear boundary is not visible but on closer inspection of the available aerial photographs it appears that the southernmost bank of the multiple ditch system overlies the ditch of the Cursus. If this is the case, it would imply that the ditch had been largely infilled (either deliberately or as a result of heavy and prolonged natural silting) by the time the later linear earthwork was constructed. To the south-west of the Cursus terminal the linear continues as a quadruple banked/triple ditched monument for some 200m, thereafter it reverts to a single linear ditch and its course can be followed for at least 1 km to the south-west.

Harding (1960) cut a trench across the multiple ditch system close to its intersection with the Cursus terminal in the hope of finding dating evidence and a reasoning behind their construction. These excavations, prompted by Bowen's work as part of RCHM's Dorset Inventory series, provided much detail on the constructional design of the earthworks, showing the simple dump build profile of the banks without any apparent superstructure such as a stockade or fenceline. The ditches proved to be steep-sided with a narrow V-shaped profile and in the opinion of the excavator, unsuited for use as a track way for either humans or animals. Unfortunately, no conclusive dating evidence was forthcoming from these excavations but it was presumed that the linears belonged to a later prehistoric or Romano-British phase of activity (*ibid*, 112-3). With the dismissal of the track way theory, Harding sought to characterise them as having a social purpose as boundaries, perhaps between tribal groupings, or as performing a military function as a barrier or line of defence.

These themes were revisited by Barrett and Corney (1991) who linked the linear ditch systems with known settlement complexes of Late Iron Age date, in particular those on Gussage Hill close to the midpoint of the Dorset Cursus. These settlements consisting of small ditched enclosures and extensive spreads of open settlement were certainly in use before the Roman invasion of AD43 and are '...characteristic of major administrative

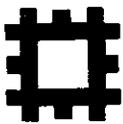


and political centres of 'oppida' (ibid, 240). The associated linear ditch systems may have acted as a political/social barrier defining a tribal (sub-Durotrigian) entity, whose political authority resided in the Gussage settlement complex (ibid, 242).

A similar history of intensive later land use is apparent at the Pentridge terminal where there are traces of linear earthworks and 'Celtic' fields. The linear earthwork, sometimes known as the Grim's Ditch, extends for several kilometres across the section of the chalk downland often in fairly close association with the much larger Bokerley Dyke (RCHME 1990). In general, however, the smaller, slighter Grim's Ditch follows a less sinuous course than its neighbour and appears to have been constructed in a series of straight lengths. One of these passes close to the Cursus terminal and the adjacent monuments and, indeed, the linear seems to be aligned on the cluster of burial mounds here rather than the terminal itself.

This association of linear earthworks with earlier monuments, such as burial mounds and settlements is frequently observed on the chalk downland and suggests deliberate attempts to integrate linears within the pre-existing monumental landscape. The builders of the linear earthworks were possibly seeking legitimacy for their own demarcation of the landscape by associating it with the earlier signs of occupation (EH in press).

The remains of an extensive pre-medieval field system were noted overlying the Pentridge Down terminal, part of a layout covering an area of at least 1 sq. km. The construction and use of these fields slighted the remains of the earlier enclosure and had, indeed, largely ignored the pre-existing banks and ditches. This is unusual as it might be expected that the presence of substantial earthworks would have provided a skeleton upon which to develop the later fields. By ignoring the underlying components it may seem that there is a deliberate attempt to ignore the earlier landscape features but it is more likely that by the time the fields were being laid out, the Cursus enclosure was no longer visible, to any great degree, on the surface. Instead, the fields appear to be aligned on the nearby Grim's Ditch and are laid out on a north-west to south-east (15° west of north) axis. The small area of fields recorded here is undated but with a field size up to 0.75 hectares, it is likely that they belong to the later prehistoric/Romano-British period. These fields, which slice across the line of the Cursus at an oblique angle and are articulated along a well-defined double-lynchet track way, are not visible to the north-east of Grim's Ditch in the narrow strip between it and the Bokerley Dyke. Other traces of 'Celtic' fields can be seen further to the north-east beyond Bokerley Dyke, elements of which have been truncated by the linear earthwork and thus pre-date it. The origin of these fields may lie in the middle of the second millennium BC and it is plausible that this early field system may have once extended further to the south-west, over-ploughing the abandoned Cursus enclosure and acting as a template for the development of later fields.



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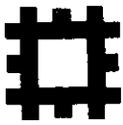
## 6. METHODOLOGY

The field investigation was undertaken by David McOmish and David Went (Pentridge Down); Louise Barker, Moraig Brown, David Field, David McOmish and Cathy Tuck (Thickthorn Down) between July and December 2000. The measured survey of the long barrows, cursus, bank barrow, and associated monuments was carried out entirely digitally by using a Leica T805 Electronic Theodolite with integral Electromagnetic Distance Measurement (EDM) from a baseline traverse of two stations. Other additional survey information on Thickthorn Down was recorded using Trimble GPS downloaded via Trimble Geomatics Office software. The resulting plans were plotted at 1:1000 scale via Key TerraFirma, AutoCAD and CorelDraw software.

The hand drawn archive plan and CAD-based drawings were prepared using CorelDraw 9 software by David McOmish. The report was researched and written by David McOmish, commented upon by Cathy Tuck and edited by Peter Topping.

The site archive and copies of this report have been deposited in the archive of English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, Great Western Village, Kemble Drive, Swindon, SN2 2GZ (under record nos NMR LIN 41; 76. ST 91 SE 21; 23; 19; 22 and 41. SU 01 NW 40; 41; 209 & new number here). Any further enquiries should be directed here.

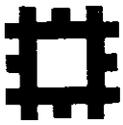
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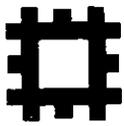
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