



ENGLISH HERITAGE

DRF 2

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AI/26/2002

Orchard Wood  
Hillfort, Orchard  
Portman, Somerset

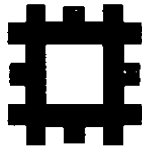
Hazel Riley

DRF 1

SURVEY REPORT



Archaeological Investigation Report Series  
AI/26/2002



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Orchard Wood Hillfort, Orchard Portman,  
Somerset

An archaeological survey by English Heritage

County:	Somerset
District:	Taunton Deane
Parish:	Orchard Portman
OS map no:	ST 22 NW
NGR:	ST 2498 2035
NMR no:	ST 22 NW 73
SMR no:	11658
Surveyed:	February 2002
Report by:	Hazel Riley
Surveyors:	H Riley, M Fletcher, E Jamieson, P Newman, S Probert
Illustrations:	Elaine Jamieson

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### Summary

Orchard Wood hillfort is a univallate hillfort on the north-eastern edge of the Blackdown Hills AONB. Remarkably, the site remained undiscovered until 1986. The interior contains many small pits which represent the remains of iron ore trial or extraction pits. The discovery of a new hillfort represents a significant addition to the Iron Age landscape of south-west Somerset.

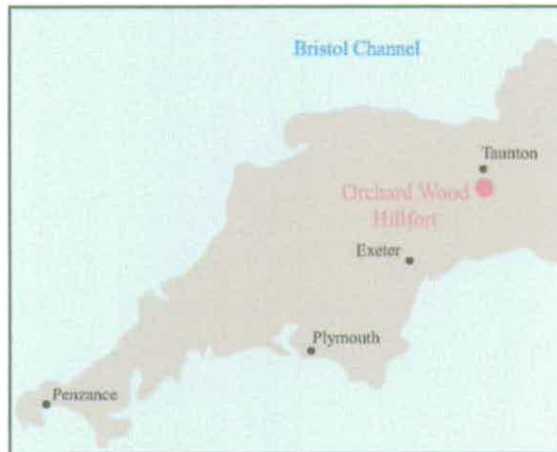


Fig. 1. General location map

## INTRODUCTION

### Location (Figures 1 and 2)

The site occupies the crest of the hill known as Orchard Wood, and is centred at ST 2498 2035. The hill is an outlier of the north-eastern escarpment of the Blackdown Hills. It is formed of Triassic and Permian Upper Marls, capped with Rhaetic Beds of limestones, shales and marls (Geological map sheet 311, Wellington). Unusually, the site shuns the summit of the hill, but occupies the northern end of the hilltop, at an altitude of 110m. The hill offers commanding views across the Vale of Taunton towards the Brendon Hills, the Quantock Hills and the Somerset Levels.

Orchard Wood is leased to the Forestry Commission, and the present survey was undertaken to establish the location and extent of the site, and to aid its management.

### Survey methodology

The site was surveyed in February 2002 by English Heritage staff from Archaeological Investigation (Exeter) and the Monuments and Countryside Protection Programmes. The archaeological detail was recorded using a Leica 1610 total station theodolite. The site was located to the national grid (OSTN97) by differential GPS. Points common to both the EDM and GPS surveys were located around the base of the hill. The survey was completed in the field using graphical techniques.

## HISTORY AND PREVIOUS WORK

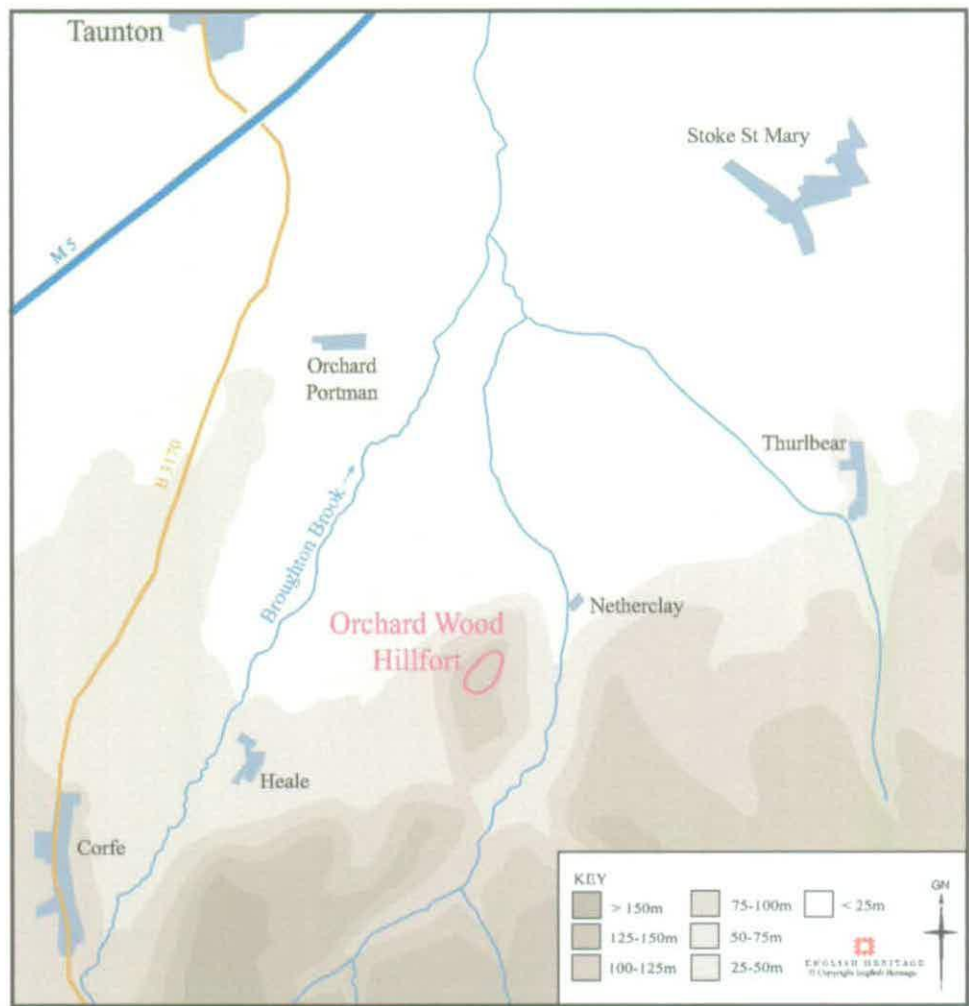
C F Clements discovered the site in 1986 (*Proc Somer Archaeol Nat Hist Soc* 1986, **130**, 147 – 148). Unusually, there is no depiction of the earthworks on the Ordnance Survey first edition map (OS 1888, Fig 3) and no mention of the site in the obvious historical sources. Orchard Wood lies on the southern edge of the parish of Orchard Portman. The parish has formed the core of the Orchard Portman estates for many centuries. A Saxon charter mentions 'Orcherd Cumbe' - the combe on the southern side of Orchard Wood. By 1135, Elfric de Orchard was the Bishop of Winchester's tenant on the estate. In later years the estate became a largely independent manor, in the hands of the de Orchards and latterly the Portman family (Mayberry 1986, 8).



The Tudor mansion at Orchard Portman faced south towards the Blackdown Hills and Orchard Wood would have formed a significant part of the view from this house. The hill was not, however, within the park. The Portmans acquired the neighbouring manor and park of Staple Fitzpaine in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the park, of medieval origin, lay close to that village. A new house was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this faced east and was the centrepiece of an elaborate scheme illustrated by Kips (1707/8). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Portman family were spending most of their time at their properties in London and Dorset, with the consequence that Orchard Portman fell into some disrepair. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sporting potential of their Somerset estates was realised by the family, but the houses at Orchard Portman were demolished in the early part of that century (Mayberry 1986).

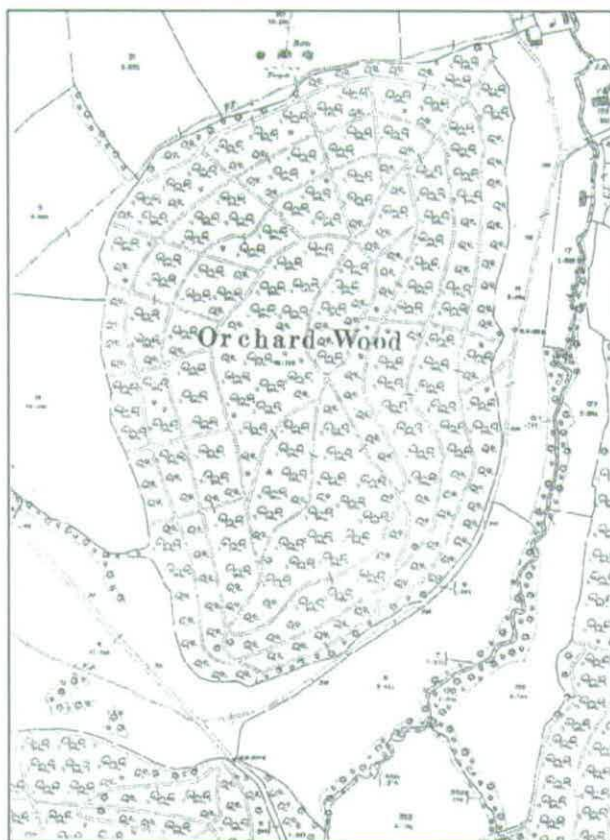
Orchard Wood is marked as woodland on the Ordnance Survey map of 1802. This map shows the hill surrounded by small fields – the enclosed remnants of strip cultivation (OS 1802). The current woodland comprises a mixture of coniferous and deciduous trees (Figs 6 and 7). The interior of the site and most of the earthworks are dominated by mature conifers. Some of the trial pits have conifers planted in them. The deciduous trees are a mix of ash/hazel scrub with some unmanaged coppice stools. The latter could be 100 - 200 years old. There does not seem to be an ornamental aspect to the tree planting. The wood contains a good mix of flora indicating well-established woodland, including bluebells, dog's mercury, violets, wood anemones and foetid iris.

Fig. 2. Location of the hillfort in Orchard Wood





The hill on which Orchard Wood lies is a distinct topographic feature. It forms a natural barrier to communication between the villages of Heale to the west and Netherclay and Thurlbear to the east (Fig 2). Today it is very much at the end of the road: its isolated location at the end of a lane, combined with the later history of the Portman estates, account for the fact that the hillfort was discovered only recently.



*Fig. 3. Orchard Wood: Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1888, Somerset 80.5*

#### **THE HILLFORT EARTHWORKS (Figures 4 and 5)**

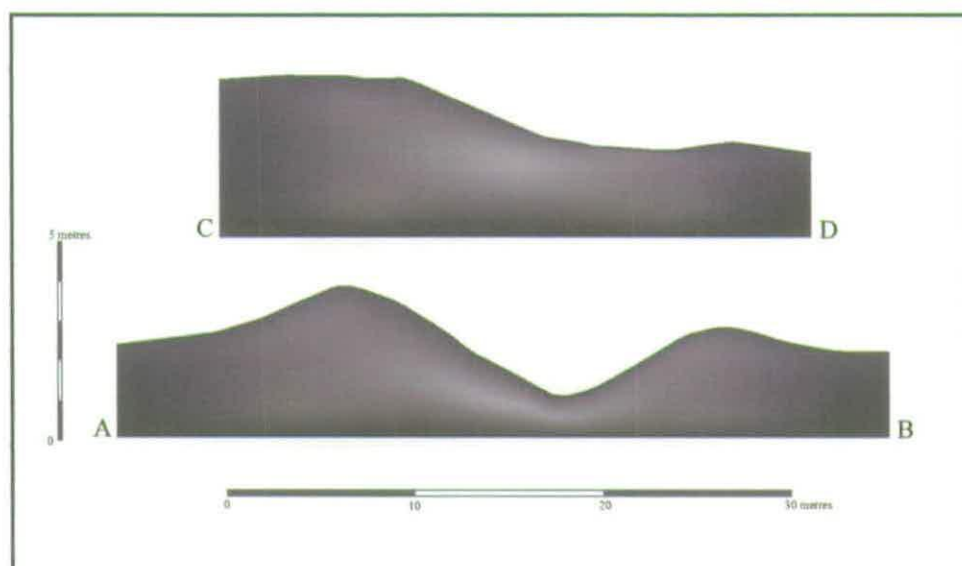
The hillfort is oval in shape. It measures 190m NE-SW and 100m NW-SE. The earthworks enclose an area of c 1.9 hectares. Along the southern section of the hillfort the earthworks comprise a rampart and ditch, with intermittent counterscarp bank. To the south of this, the hill rises up gently to its summit. The northern part of the site is defined by a scarp with a short length of ditch at its northern end. Here, the natural topography is used to good effect, as the hill falls away steeply to the north, west and east. The earthworks on the southern section of the site, where the natural topography is weakest for defence, are impressive (Fig 6). The rampart is 2m wide, 1.8m high, and the ditch 3.5m deep. The counterscarp bank is 2m wide and 1.5m high. The scarp defining the northern section of the site is some 3m high and represents a significant steepening of the natural slope of the hillside. The ditch at the north-eastern end of the site is 4m wide and 1m deep. The ditch here has been used as a forest ride (below) and the boggy ground and thick vegetation obscure detail in this area.

#### *The entrance*

The original entrance was probably on the eastern side of the hillfort, where the rampart and ditch end. The scarp bifurcates, forming a relatively level passage-way, 2 - 5m wide and 40m long, leading behind the scarp and into the interior of the site. Like much of the rest of the hillfort, this area is obscured by dense vegetation and by some later quarrying (below). The entrance leads downslope in the direction of an area of quarrying some 200m to the east.



*Fig. 5. Orchard Wood hillfort: sections across the earthworks*



#### OTHER FEATURES

The hillfort earthworks and the interior are studded with numerous small pits. Where a relationship can be observed, the pits all cut into the hillfort earthworks. The pits are sub-rectangular in shape, some of the larger pits have associated spoil mounds (Fig 7). An average pit is 5m long, 3m wide and 1m deep. The pits have the appearance of trial pits or small extraction pits, probably for iron ore. Such trial pits in or around prehistoric earthworks are common on Exmoor, for example at Myrtleberry North, where ironstone was the sought after material. Ore prospectors or miners in the historic period looked for the earthwork remains of former mining, and sometimes mistakenly dug their trial pits into prehistoric earthworks. Ironstone was mined on the Blackdown Hills in the Roman and early medieval periods (Griffith and Weddell 1996). The possibility also exists that clay or stone was being dug from these pits. If they do represent trial pits for iron ore then they were unsuccessful, as the ironstone seems to occur in the upper levels of Upper Greensand, which is not present in Orchard Wood (Geological map sheet 311, Wellington). The distribution of the pits across the site – they are scattered somewhat randomly – suggests that ironstone was being prospected for, rather than systematically extracted.

*Fig. 6. Orchard Wood hillfort: the western rampart (H Riley, EH)*





*Fig. 7 Orchard  
Wood hillfort: trial  
pit  
(H Riley, EH)*



The hill is also criss-crossed by numerous rides or tracks, many of which relate to the pattern shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1888 (Fig 3), and which probably date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century use of the estate for sport. The layout is quite elaborate and is unlike divisions within coppice woodland. Unfortunately the tithe map for Orchard Portman does not contain any detail as to the land use (tithe map 1837). The network of tracks and rides could have some form of ornamental origin, but the later history of the estate (above) argues against this.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The difference in the form of the earthworks between the southern and northern sections of the enclosure may best be explained by its topographic location on the edge, rather than on the summit of the hill. The earthworks do not seem to have been slighted by ploughing or affected by tree planting or woodland management. The earthworks do not exhibit the characteristic features of unfinished hillforts, such as isolated stretches of rampart and ditch. The combination of part rampart and ditch, part single scarp, is not uncommon at prehistoric enclosed sites in west Somerset. At Mounsey Castle, the northern portion of the hillfort is mainly defined by a single scarp. At Timberscombe, the south-eastern portion of the enclosure is defined by a single scarp (Riley and Wilson-North 2001). At both of these sites the configuration of the earthworks is best explained by the local topography.

The new hillfort at Orchard Wood is a significant addition to Iron Age studies in south-west Somerset. The site is well preserved, with little disturbance apart from the woodland and trial pits. The hill, despite being part of the Orchard Portman estates and within sight of the house, does not seem to have been formally landscaped. The discovery of such a substantial earthwork site in the 1980s highlights the potential of the wooded northern edge of the Blackdown Hills AONB for further archaeological investigation.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Keith Childs, Dave Hooley, John Salvatore, John Schofield and Matt Wright contributed a great deal to the survey work. Jan Grove and Steve Minton helped to set up the project and information was supplied by the Somerset SMR, the Somerset Local Studies Library and the Somerset Record Office.



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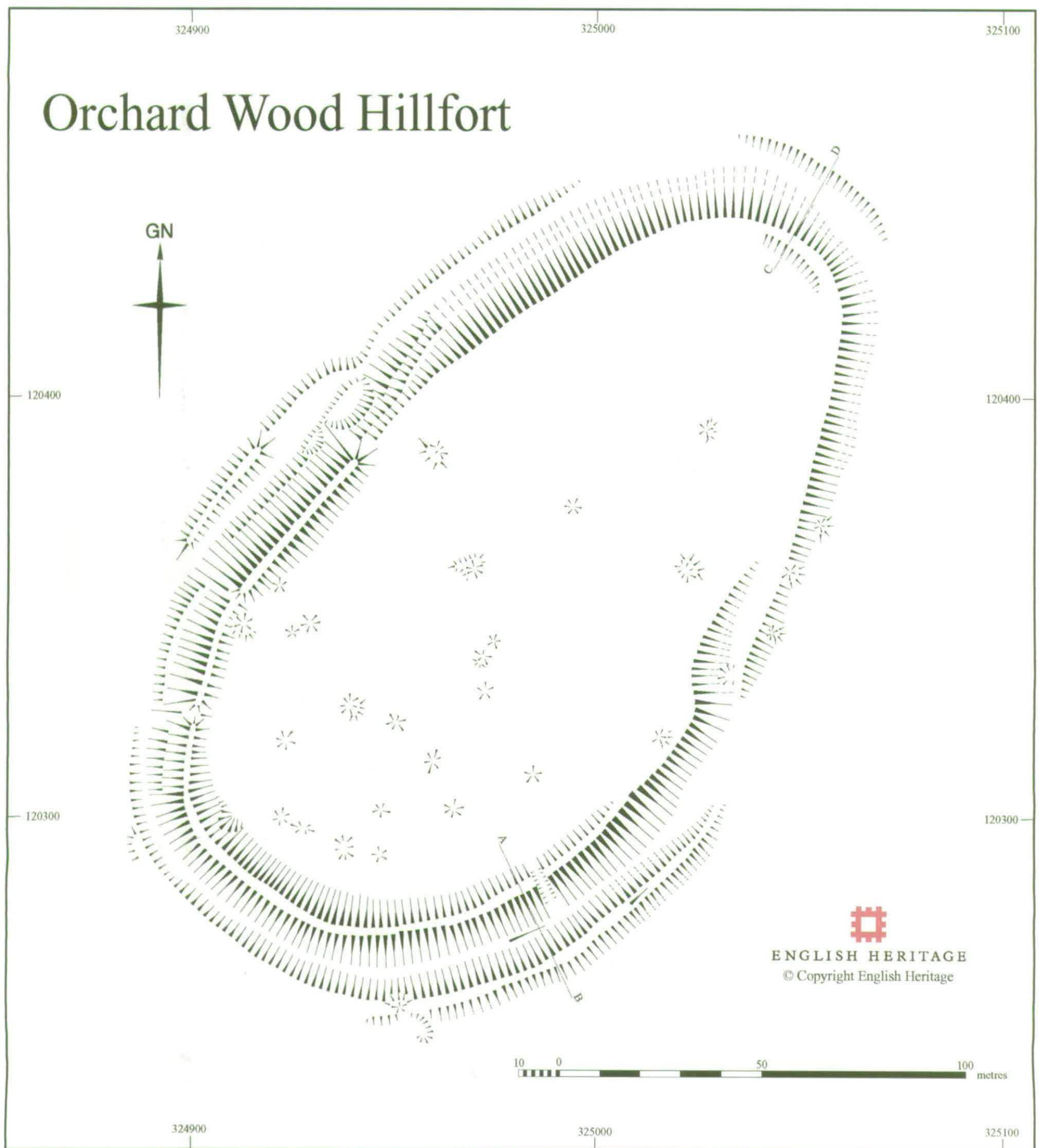


Fig. 4. Orchard Wood hillfort: English Heritage 1:1000 scale earthwork plan.





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