BIRDLIP CAMP, COWLEY, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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Archaeological Field Survey Report

BIRDLIP CAMP, COWLEY GLOUCESTERSHIRE

by Paul Pattison

ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND

BIRDLIP CAMP, COWLEY, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

NMR NUMBER SO 91 NW 10

INDUSTRY AND ENCLOSURE IN THE NEOLITHIC

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1. INTRODUCTION

In March 1996 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England surveyed the earthworks of a Neolithic enclosure in Peak Plantation, near Birdlip in Gloucestershire, as part of the project to record Industry and Enclosure in the Neolithic Period, a national survey seeking to produce a corpus of flint mines and enclosures in England. The project was the responsibility of staff of the Archaeological Field Office in Cambridge.

The enclosure at Peak Plantation occupies land which, in the 18th and 19th centuries, was known as *Shearmans, Sharman's or Shermans Peak* (GRO). In the late 19th century antiquarians gave the name *Birdlip Camp* to the earthworks. This name perpetuated until Tim Darvill's excavation in the early 1980's, when he called it *The Peak Camp*. This account reverts to the late 19th century *Birdlip Camp*.

The enclosure lies in the parish of Cowley in the Cheltenham district of Gloucestershire, at National Grid Reference SO 9243 1502. It occupies a lofty limestone promontory, now thickly wooded, on the edge of the Cotswold escarpment overlooking the valley of the Severn. The promontory slopes gently towards the north-west and the area occupied by the enclosure, at around 270m above O.D., would have commanded extensive views before the establishment of Peak Plantation between 1882 and 1900: the prominent location was underscored by the presence of a triangulation pillar (Ordnance Survey 1884 and 1902). The enclosure is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is recorded in the National Monuments Record as SO 91 NW 10.

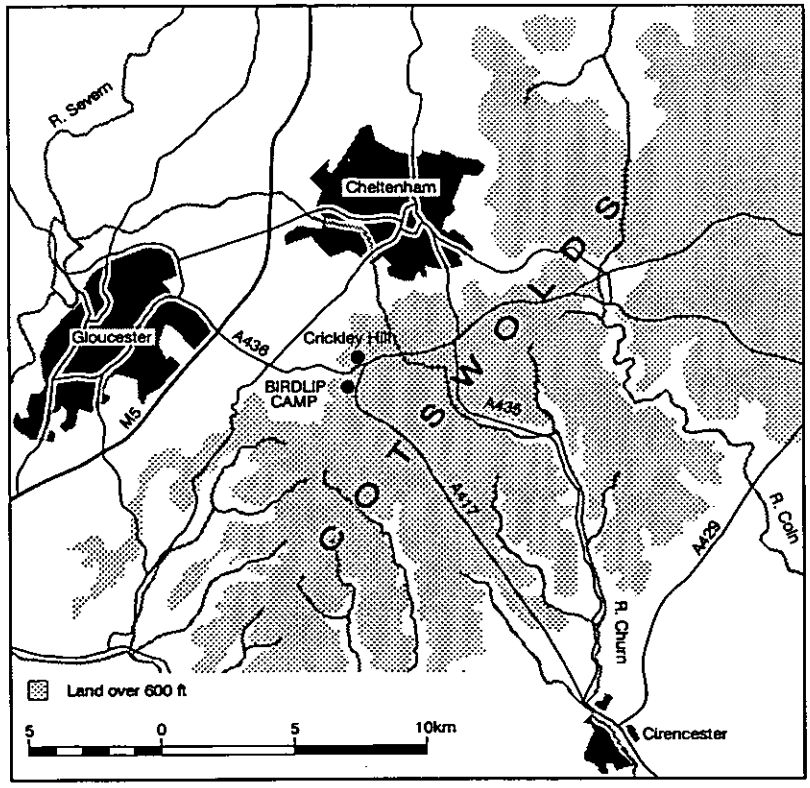

Figure 1: Birdlip Camp, location map

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Aubrey (Fowles 1982, 332, 522) noted the existence of earthworks on Birdlip Hill but the first description of the site dates to the later 19th century when Playne (1876, 210 no. 15) noted:

"*On Birdlip Hill, immediately above the large quarries, the remains of an earthwork can be traced, although nearly levelled by cultivation of the soil. It runs in a curved line, enclosing on the point of the hill a small area of less than an acre, but the protected part was once larger before the escarpment was quarried for stone.*"

Four years later, Witts (1880, 206) referred to a mound and ditch, "*now nearly obliterated*", running in a curved line across the hill, but subsequently wrote a fuller account:

"*(Birdlip Camp) occupies a projecting ridge of the Cotswolds on Birdlip Hill.....The present area is one acre, defended by a mound and ditch running on a curved line, with each end resting on the escarpment. Originally this camp must have been larger, the quarrying operations having interfered with the extent of the defended area, and the mounds being nearly obliterated by the action of the plough. A great number of flint arrowheads have been found in the immediate neighbourhood.*"

(Witts 1883)

The first accurate depiction of the earthwork dates to 1900 (Ordnance Survey 1902) and in 1972 it was classified by their field surveyor as "*a minor and unclassifiable bank -dubious promontory fort*" (NMR SO 91 NW 10).

Subsequently, the RCHME were generally uncertain about the date and interpretation of the site, noting the enclosure as "*an alleged hillfort whose existence is dubious*" (RCHME 1976, 39), but locating a second bank to the north-west of the first:

"*...now in woodland, depends for its authenticity on a cross-ridge bank of uncertain origin, perhaps wholly or partly natural. The situation would, however, be very suitable for a promontory enclosure, cutting off some 3 acres at the tip of a steep-sided spur.....Some 90 yds to the N.W. another broad, low and irregular bank spans most of the ridge.....it also is of uncertain origin and possibly natural.....In the 19th century a number of flint arrowheads were found about 200 yds N.W. of the first bank.*" (this would be close to the tip of the spur)

(RCHME 1976, xxix, xxxii-xxxiii)

There are two recorded finds of flints in the vicinity of the enclosure: in 1919 two leaf-shaped arrowheads and many other flints were found towards the western tip of the promontory by a Mr. Bearup, sometime proprietor of the Royal George Hotel in Birdlip (NMR SO 91 NW 9); arrowheads and flakes are recorded in the possession of the same person in 1923 (NMR SO 91 SW 1) although these are possibly duplicate references to a single find.

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Trial excavations by Tim Darvill

In November 1980 and July 1981 small-scale trial excavations were undertaken on the site, comprising a section across the outer earthwork and a small trench beyond the inner earthwork, where flints had been revealed by an uprooted tree (Darvill 1981, 1982) (Fig 2).

The section (site I) revealed a single, rock-cut ditch, with an internal bank of limestone rubble, reduced to a height not exceeding 0.3m. The ditch had undergone a series of recuts and four phases were recognised. For the first three phases each successive ditch followed a slightly different alignment, each phase displaced a little further eastward, with the result that each new ditch partly cut away the preceding one, while each new bank partly covered the preceding ditch. The fourth phase cut directly down into the fill of the third. At its greatest the ditch was c. 3.5m wide and c. 1.5m deep.

Darvill's trench co-incidentally seems to have encountered a causeway which itself had been successively cut away by the ditch recuts so that the bedrock forming it was little more than 0.3m high.

In all of the ditch phases other than the first were sealed deposits containing pottery "*comparing favourably with those (forms) traditionally referred to as `Abingdon' types but which, in fact, form part of a widespread straight-sided bowl tradition present over much of southern and western England*" (Darvill 1982, 23), together with worked flint and animal bone.

The second trench (site II) was located towards the western end of the promontory, quite close to an old quarry edge. Some 0.3m of soil overlay bedrock which was cut by only one feature, a U-shaped ditch or gulley, aligned east to west along the axis of the promontory. The northern edge of this gulley lay beyond the confines of the trench so that its width was not determined although it was up to c. 0.7m deep, becoming shallower to the west. In the base of the ditch were the remains of a hearth with a series of dark humic fills containing sealed assemblages of pottery similar to that found in site I, flintwork and a large quantity of bone. The flintwork, essentially of a narrow blade industry, also included six leaf-shaped arrowheads and a flake from a polished axe of Group VI (Lake District) (MckClough and Cummins 1988, 154 Glos no. 125). A single shale object, subsequently described as a pendant (Darvill 1984, 98) was found near the base of the ditch fill.

At the eastern end of the trench the ditch was sealed by a "platform" c. 0.25m thick of broken and packed limestone containing abraded and fragmented cultural debris and elsewhere by a layer of burnt stones. Both were apparently stratigraphically associated but interpretation was restricted by the size of the trench. It is, however, perhaps likely that this platform was made up of spoil from the nearby quarry.

The excavations have not yet been fully published but some information has occurred in print about the finds. Apparently, the animal bone comprised 52% cattle, 28% pig and 20% sheep and there were butchery cuts on some bones (Darvill 1987a, 51, 1987b, 7). Shellfish

remains occurred in the final ditch recut (1987b, 48) and only one cereal grain was recovered (1984, 91).

C14 determinations

Six C14 determinations were obtained from material recovered during Darvill's excavations (Darvill 1986a, 1987b, 178), five of which came from the phase I ditch in site I. They are:

OxA-416	*4630±110 uncal BP*
OxA-417	*4660± 80 uncal BP*
OxA-444	*4790± 80 uncal BP*
OxA-445	*4670± 90 uncal BP*
OxA-446	*4810± 90 uncal BP*

The two latter derived from bone and tooth of the same mandible and four dates came from the middle of the fill (layers 18 and 19) in charcoal spreads above a massive deposit of rubble which probably represents the collapse of the bank at a fairly advanced stage of filling. They were pooled to suggest a mean of 4700±45 uncal BP which Darvill suggested represented the end of the archaeologically definable phase II rampart construction and use.

The sixth date (**OxA-638**) of 4290±80 uncal BP was obtained from material somewhere in the phase IV recut. Although it is statistically distinguishable from the other group of dates and Darvill suggested that it may represent continued use or re-use in the late Neolithic, no late Neolithic pottery was recovered during the excavations.

No evidence has come to light for activity on the spur end after the mid-3rd millenium bc.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE EARTHWORKS

For names and letters which appear in bold in the text, see RCHME earthwork plan surveyed at 1:1000 scale (Fig 2).

The Neolithic enclosure

The enclosure comprises two concentric earthworks, some 55m apart, cutting across the axis of the promontory: an outer bank with slight external ditch, and an inner bank. The area presently enclosed by these earthworks, approximately 1 ha (2.54 acres) tapers from a width of 95m on the south-east to only 15m on the north-west but limestone quarrying has certainly narrowed the promontory along its northern and southern sides. The enclosed area was, therefore, once larger.

Both banks are now very broad, low and spread, probably the result of sustained ploughing as noted by Witts (1880, 206). A pathway meandering along the northern fringe of the site has truncated both of them, but very slight banks continue to the edge of the promontory. The 1981-2 excavations revealed that the outer bank was composed of small fragmented limestone rubble, and surface indications are that this applies also to the inner bank. The outer bank is the better defined, particularly its outer side. The inner bank was only tentatively identified as a man-made feature (RCHME 1976, 39) and Darvill makes no mention of it. It does, however, appear to be genuine, surviving as a very slight feature, its slopes blending gradually into the natural fall of the ground.

The interior is covered with light woodland and undergrowth but despite this there appears to be no internal features visible on the ground surface. However, the two earthworks define a more level area on the general slope of the promontory: south-east of the outer bank the ground starts to rise again and north-west of the inner bank it starts to fall to another smaller level area before the tip of the promontory: this is clear on Darvill's contour survey (Darvill 1982, Fig. 2).

Of the ditch revealed beyond the outer bank in 1981-2 there are only slight traces, no more than 0.2m in depth, and it is obscured by the modern path and a tumbled limestone field wall, shown as a fence on Darvill's plan (Darvill 1982 Fig 2). There are slight traces of what might be a causeway across the ditch at a, with a corresponding shallow depression in the top of the bank. Although this is a very slight feature, and partially obscured by a modern pathway, it can be very tentatively linked to the denuded causeway located by Darvill in his site I ditch section further to the north. However, without further excavation it is difficult to say whether the earthwork is truly causewayed in the sense applied to some Neolithic enclosures.

The quarries (Fig 2)

There has been extensive limestone quarrying on and around the enclosure: mounds of quarry spoil lie immediately east of the outer earthwork and beyond these in the woodland is a large expanse of quarry pits and spoil tips. Much of the southern side of the promontory is cut by a single large quarry which has left a high vertical face in excess of 10m in height,

the eastern edge of which is continuous with a scarp b, the eroded edge of smaller scale workings extending around the northern side of the promontory. Beyond the survey area, east of b, the ground level is reduced several metres by quarrying until the very tip of the promontory at NGR SO 9223 1512. Here a cross-promontory ditch, 10.0m long and 0.7m deep, might be taken as another Neolithic feature but it is in fact the result of quarrying as evidenced by cut limestone bedrock exposed in the base of its northern end and the spoil tips immediately to the west.

It is unknown when quarrying operations first started on the promontory but stone was certainly being taken by the mid-18th century. One, *'at the top of Birdlip Hill'*, was being worked by Henry Arkell in 1828 and closed in 1908 (Jurica A R V 1984, 197). The quarries are shown disused in 1882 (Ordnance Survey 1884).

4. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The Neolithic enclosure

Prior to Darvill's excavations in 1980 and 1981, Birdlip Camp was an undated and undiagnostic earthwork: his work demonstrated the Neolithic date of the enclosure beyond any doubt, through the specific range of finds encountered, their contexts and the radiocarbon determinations.

Subsequently, Darvill (1982) went on to describe the site as a "*promontory-sited causewayed enclosure*" and he has also remarked that "*the range of finds suggest that it was... a settlement*" (Darvill 1987, 44). The presence of some leaf-shaped arrowheads prompted a comparison with the attack and sacking of the nearby enclosure on Crickley Hill (Darvill 1987b, 66).

The small scale of the excavations and the lack of published data on both the features and finds make detailed discussion of Birdlip Camp impossible. However, the evidence for causeways is very slight indeed and in any case excavations elsewhere have shown single sites often have evidence for causeways and continuous ditches in successive phases (Dixon 1988). At present it is not possible to determine the former extent of the enclosure but Darvill's statement that "*assuming only a modest loss of hilltop area through quarrying it is quite possible that the enclosure earthworks formed a complete elliptical or oval circuit...*" (Darvill 1982) is misleading. The topography of the hill has probably always been that of a narrow promontory with steeply sloping sides; a massive amount of land would have been needed for a complete oval or elliptical circuit and there has certainly not been *that* much quarrying. Perhaps more likely is a similar situation to Crickley Hill, where it is envisaged that the gently curving cross promontory earthworks returned more sharply along the scarp edges (Dixon 1988, 76) (Fig 3). It is equally likely that the earthworks at Birdlip Camp simply cut off the end of the promontory, as do a small number of other Neolithic enclosures e.g. Hembury in Devon (Liddell 1935); Sarup in Denmark (Andersen 1988).

Comparison with Crickley Hill is useful, the site being visible only a kilometre across the valley to the north. Both sites have almost identical topographical locations on west-facing promontories, probably deliberately placed to look far out across the Severn Valley and possibly designed to be seen from a great distance. They may also have co-existed at some time. The enclosure at Crickley Hill exhibited a complex developmental sequence of many phases, interspersed with periods of abandonment. Initially it was probably univallate, becoming bivallate, then reverting to a single bank and ditch with a defensive capability which was finally attacked and burned (Dixon 1988). As at Birdlip Camp, there was clear evidence for several phases of ditch recut, each displaced from and deliberately respecting the previous one. We can only speculate whether or not Birdlip Camp was at any stage univallate.

The function(s) of neolithic enclosures, causewayed or otherwise, has been a subject of debate for many years. Both survey and excavation has revealed their widely differing locations and forms, and evidence of many different types of activity within. Each site may

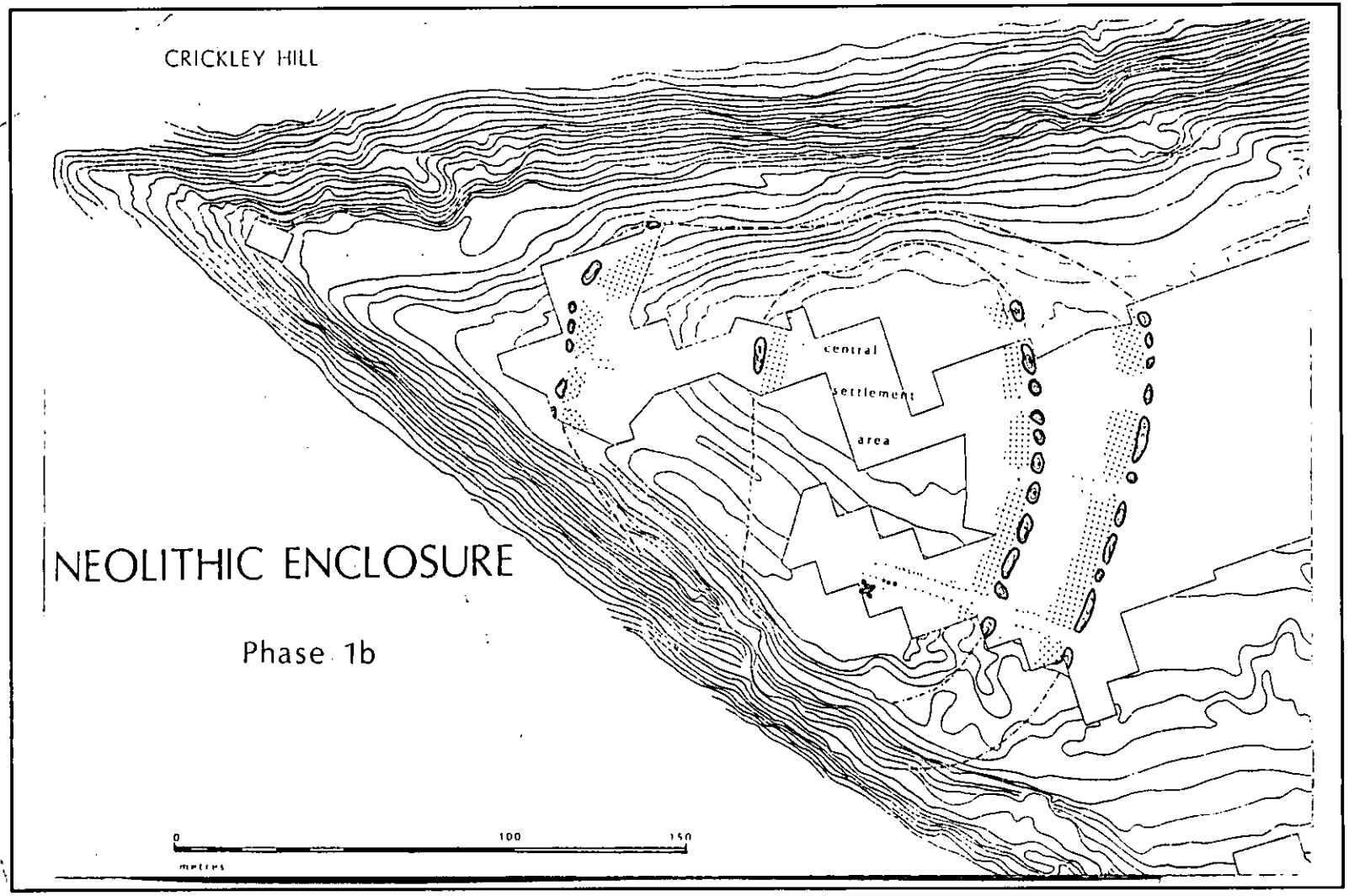

Figure 3 The Neolithic Enclosure on Crickley Hill (Dixon 1988)

have witnessed many and various communal activities, which perhaps also changed over time. Interpretations include possible centres of cult or ritual activity connected with the dead (Smith 1971; Drewett 1977; Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 41-3), and both domestic settlement and defensive roles (Mercer 1974; 1980; Dixon 1988; Hedges and Buckley 1978). Evans (1988) has suggested that the importance of causewayed enclosures may be in the very act of their creation and re-creation, events which periodically re-affirmed the communal identity of geographically and socially scattered groups. There are also contrasting models which envisage causewayed enclosures as either peripheral to normal social activity, or central to several major settlements (Drewett 1975; 1978). Whittle (1996, 274) views them as defining special space within which an ordered progression of rituals took place.

Birdlip Camp lies at the western end of the Thames Valley group of neolithic enclosures as defined by Palmer (1976). The Cotswold region is well known for its long barrows of the Cotswold Severn group, including those which, like Birdlip Camp and Crickley Hill, are situated prominently on the Cotswold edge (including The Crippetts and West Tump nearby). At present, although it is not possible to determine the functions and regional context of Birdlip Camp, the very proximity of Crickley Hill is of considerable interest and we can at least speculate that they were at some time inter-related. Only further excavations can resolve these points.

5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The archaeological survey of Birdlip Camp was carried out by Paul Pattison and David Field. Control points and hard detail were surveyed using a Wild TC1600 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The details of the plan were supplied at 1:1000 scale with Fibron tapes using normal graphical methods. The historical and archaeological background was researched by Martin Barber, and the CAD based interpretative drawings were produced by Trevor Pearson and Paul Pattison using AutoCad, CorelDraw and CorelVentura software. The report has been written by Paul Pattison and edited by Peter Topping.

The site archive and a copy of this report have been deposited in the archive of the RCHME at the National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ (under record no SO 91 NW 10), to where further enquiries should be directed.

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DC/E88/13	Terrier and valuation of the Manor of Cowley 1782
DC/E88/14	Particulars of Cowley Manor, 1802
DC/E88/27	Plan of Cowley Estate, with book of reference, 1859
DC/E88/26	Outline map of the parish, marking boundaries related to perambulation of the bounds, 1857
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