
EMBURY BEACON, HARTLAND,

DEVONSHIRE

An archaeological survey by the Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of England

Request Survey

May 1997



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Embury Beacon, Devon

An archaeological survey by The Royal Commission On The Historical Monuments Of England.

by M. Fletcher and S. Probert.

Summary

A large scale survey of the Embury Beacon earthworks was undertaken by The Royal Commission On The Historical Monuments Of England (RCHME) Exeter Office for The National Trust in February 1997. The purpose of the survey was to provide a detailed plan to assist both in the management of the site which is slowly being destroyed by coastal erosion and also in the planning of a limited excavation. The earthwork morphology has been interpreted as a promontory fort of Iron Age date: IA pottery was recovered during an excavation in the 1970's. However the headland on which it lies was once far more extensive than it is today and consequently the function and original size of the site may have been different to that perceived by various authorities over the past century. The dimensions of the surviving elements indicate that the site could once have been an impressive double enclosure earthwork and its headland position suggests that it could have had a maritime function. A tumulus and an alleged beacon site are associated with the earthworks.



Fig. 1. Embury Beacon. Location.

LOCATION

The site is located near South Hole in the parish of Hartland, Devon and is centred at SS21671948. The interior of the earthworks lie at 154m (500ft) above OD on the crest of a prominent coastal headland which is slowly but inexorably crumbling into the sea. The earthworks were apparently built on a summit area and the surviving inland slopes fall gently away to the S and SE. Whether the term Embury Beacon originally described the prominent

headland, a fire beacon or the earthworks themselves is not known but modern usage refers to the latter.

The headland affords extensive panoramic vistas in all directions : inland for some 5.5 kms to a range of hills up to 222m in height, many with barrows on the summits; across the Bristol Channel towards the Welsh coast (80kms to the North); to Lundy Island (25kms to the north) and southwards along the Cornish coast towards Tintagel Island (30 kms distant).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

The site is depicted on all the editions of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale plans: it was last surveyed in 1977 by an Investigator of the Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey (NMR No. SS 21 NW 5).

This cartographic record indicates the rate of cliff erosion over a period of ninety years. The earthworks were recorded and depicted in A History Of The County Of Devon (VCH 1906,576) and they were discussed and illustrated by Hadrian Allcroft (1908,54). Aspects of the site, including an internal barrow and a multivallate hornwork entrance on the outer rampart, were noted by Forde-Johnston (1976) Partial archaeological excavation, principally in the area immediately threatened by erosion, was undertaken in 1972/73; nine trenches were opened and a contour plan was produced (Jefferies 1974,136). It has been photographed



Fig. 2. A view of the inner rampart and ditch from the mound, showing the extensive erosion of the bank



Fig. 3. A view of the northern cliff-face topped by the earthwork showing the friable nature of the strata.

from the air notably in 1945 (RAF APs); in 1973 (Jefferies 1974,146) and in 1986 (Griffith 1986,44).

In addition to the enclosure earthworks (NMR No. SS 21 NW 5), a tumulus and beacon site have been recorded in the area (NMR Nos: SS 21 NW 9 and 14) The origin of the name Embury Parlour shown on the OS plans across the south part of the site is not clear. The earthworks are scheduled as an IA Promontory Fort (Devon 169) and the site is listed as a multivallate hillfort in a coastal location (Hogg 1979,191).

GEOLOGY AND VEGETATION

The complex geology and the soils of the area have been described at length (Jefferies 1974, 138,154). The site lies on the Culm Measures of the Carboniferous series (Durrance and Laming 1985,53) and the earthworks are apparently composed of a predominantly clay soil with sandstone and fragments of slate; a few large stones are visible in the cliff edge sections.

The landscape is characterised by undulating pasture fields with wooded valleys and high coastal cliffs which are subject to ongoing erosion by the sea. For much of the 20th century the area formed part of a cliff-top open grazing regime and it was covered by gorse and bramble (OS 2nd Edition 1905 and 1981 edition). The site was cleared of vegetation in 1995/6 and the earthworks, now under rough grassland, were fenced off from the close-cropped pasture to the east in 1996. At some time the area between the ramparts has been ploughed.

Access to the site for the coastal path is now via stiles and there is also a gated vehicular route.

THE EARTHWORKS

The defences

These comprise three elements :

- The inner rampart.
- The outer rampart.
- The outwork.

The inner rampart.

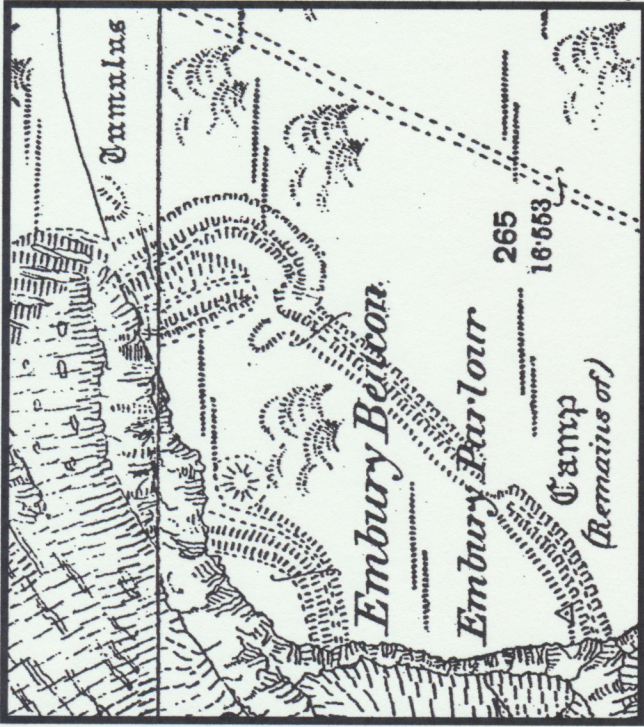
Little now exists of this rampart save for a 32m long fragment of the outer scarp which survives to a maximum height of 2.0m. It has narrow and deep cracks along its length indicating that it too will soon fall into the sea after its inner scarp and part of the interior which were depicted on the

1886 edition and to a lesser extent on the 1981 edition of the OS 1:2500 scale plans. The outer ditch, which is silted but well-defined is now up to 1.6m in depth. A pronounced rise in the floor of the ditch at the cliff edge at the west end suggests the existence of a ditch terminal which would indicate a causeway, however, no such feature is depicted on the early OS plans. The outline of an infilled excavation trench cut in 1972/3 across the rampart and ditch can still be traced.

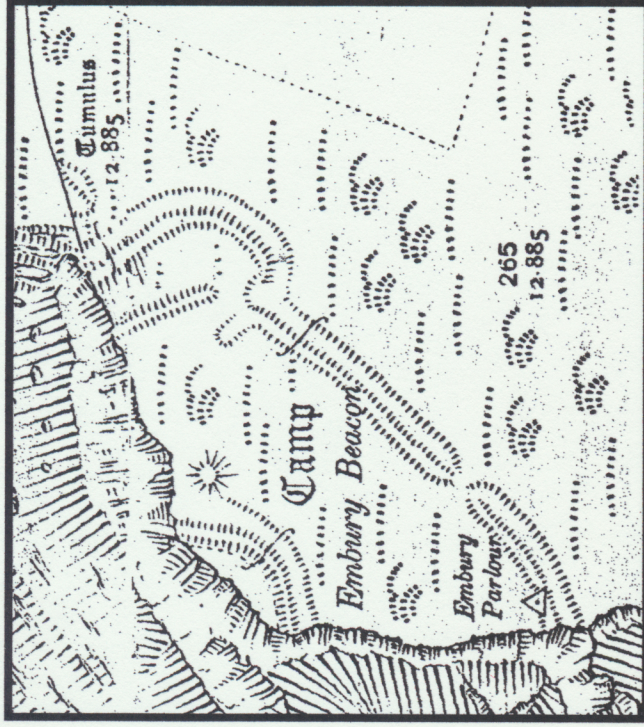
The remains of the mound (NMR No.SS 21 NW 14) located to the east of the inner rampart is now visible as an amorphous gorse-covered rise up to 0.4m high. Only the southern half survives and this is gradually eroding as the cliff edge retreats. It was identified in 1906 as a three foot high circular mound and described as 'a defence to an entrance at this point' (VCH 1906,576). It is depicted as a circular mound at SS 21661952 on the OS 1st Edition plan dated 1886 (but it is not described). Russell (1955,277) suggested that it was the site of a fire beacon. Grinsell (1970,120) was uncertain about the origin and function of the mound which he lists as 13 paces in diameter and 2ft high. It was measured as 14.0 m in diameter and 0.6m in 1977 (OS Field Investigator). The 1973 excavation of the mound and its immediate environs is interpreted as 'a short piece of a barbican rampart and an associated ditch' (Jefferies 1974,141). This appears to support the observations noted in the VCH.

The outer rampart

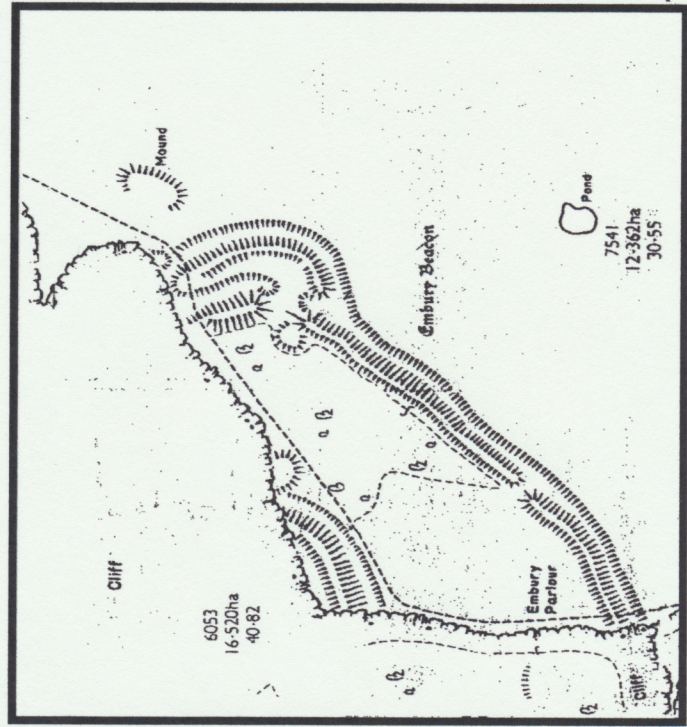
The turf-covered outer rampart is generally well preserved and clearly defined; it has a maximum height of 2.8m (measured from the bottom of the external ditch) and 1.6m internally. There are five raised areas located along the top, which might indicate dumping, and the slopes have been superficially disturbed by shallow diggings and redundant animal burrows. There is a pronounced narrow shelf (or terrace) at the foot of the inner slope which is almost certainly the remains of a ploughing headland. The RCHME survey highlights the two major changes of direction in its line : one towards the present southern end and a second, at a greater angle, near its current northern end. The rampart probably follows the line of the crest of the summit area but there is no obvious topographical reason for these marked deviations from a gradual curvilinear course. No identifiable traces of the four excavation trenches dug in 1973



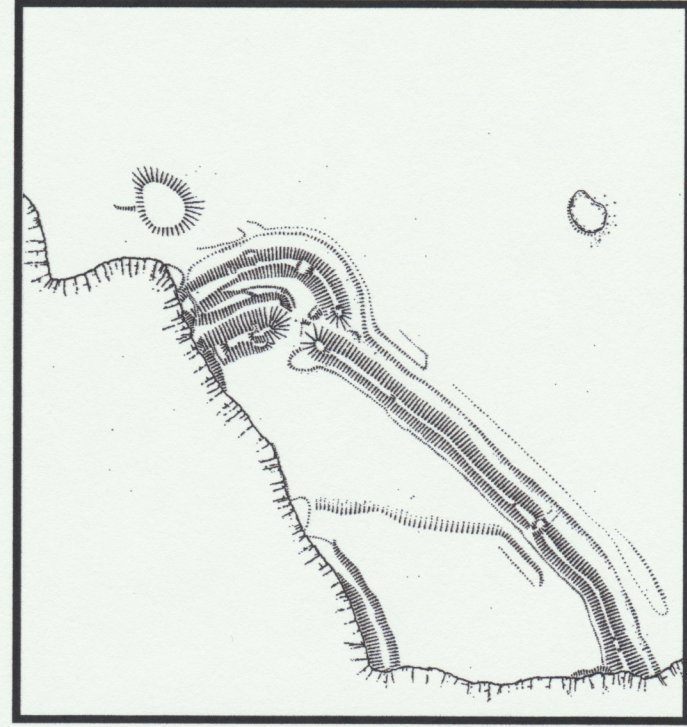
1886



1906



1981



1997

Fig. 4. Surveys of Embury Beacon from 1886 to present day, demonstrating progressive erosion of cliff edge

against the foot of the inner face (Jefferies 1974,138) were identified during the 1997 survey. The wide outer ditch has been ploughed and consequently is heavily denuded and silted; it is now on average 0.4m deep except where it is untouched by the plough behind the univallate curvilinear work to the NE, here it survives to a depth of 0.9m. The rather crude gap in the rampart located towards the southern end was opened before 1886 (OS.1st edition) and most of the early maps depict a causeway interrupting the ditch. Only a very slight 'raised way' is now visible across the silted ditch and this was probably caused by spoil pushed from the gap. The floor of the gap runs fairly steeply up into the interior which indicates that the rampart was built along a slope.

The other entrance, which is fronted by a univallate outwork, is sited at the apex of the angle in the outer rampart. The rampart to the north has been heavily mutilated. The gap itself is now rather ragged and the opposing entrance terminals have raised crests. A low 'spur' located on the inner south side of the entrance may be a plough-spread spoil mound. The outer ditch terminal to the north is well defined but the southern ditch terminal has been damaged.

The outwork

This univallate curvilinear work comprises a substantial rampart up to 2.6m high externally with an outer ditch which has been ploughed and silted such that it is now only 0.3m deep. The rampart has been damaged by desultory digging and there is no trace of access via a contemporary entrance gap anywhere along its length. The enclosed space appears to be the natural ground surface although to the north the area is confused and obscured by a combination of linear scarps, the erosion caused by the cliff path and the slumping at the cliff edge. The excavator noted that 'this work appears to terminate near the cliff edge and no trace of it could be found in the cleaned cliff edge section' (Jefferies 1974,136).

This outwork springs from a point south of the entrance and here a significant gap occurs where the two ramparts might be expected to link together. This gap is occupied by the ditch of the outer rampart and for this reason it seems most unlikely that the two ramparts were ever linked. There is evidence of extensive mutilation in this gap perhaps because it was adapted as a means of access to the entrance and the interior at some time.

THE AREA ENCLOSED BY THE DEFENCES

The inner enclosure

Since the excavations in 1972/3 (Jefferies 1974,136) the last vestiges of the inner enclosure have fallen into the sea.

The outer enclosure

The broad, relatively level enclosed area between the two ramparts has at some time been under the plough. It is on average 50.5m wide and it is featureless save for a low linear bank some 20.0m long with a maximum height of 0.6m which lies parallel to the outer rampart (opposite the south gap). Springing from this bank is an indistinct and amorphous scarp some 0.3m high which extends diagonally across the interior and appears to run under the mound located on the cliff edge.

THE IMMEDIATE ENVIRONS

At the SW end of the earthworks, beyond the outer ditch, there is an indistinct and spread linear bank a maximum 0.3m high; to its NE a perceptible scarp runs parallel to the outer ditch towards the end of the curvilinear outwork. Both features have been ploughed down

The ground slopes gently away from the earthworks to the SE in close-cropped pasture. A pond with a spoil bank on two sides is located on the hillslope. It is not depicted on the pre-1981 OS editions. A buried pipe terminating under twin manhole covers now conveys water from a nearby spring.

THE TUMULUS.

The mound (NMR No: SS 21 NW 9) located at SS 21771957 and described as a tumulus on the OS 1st Edition plan dated 1886 is situated beyond the fringe of the outer rampart. An adjacent field hedge, removed before 1981 (OS 1:2500 dated 1981), which is now traceable as a broad low bank with a ditch on the south side, appears to run under this mound. Consequently the mound may have been part of this hedge although the OS surveyor in 1886 appears to be unequivocal in his interpretation of the somewhat deformed mound. The VCH (1906,577) refers to it simply as a mound with the implication that it is part of the earthworks. Grinsell (1970,120) was uncertain whether it was a round barrow or alternatively whether it was associated with the promontory fort. He

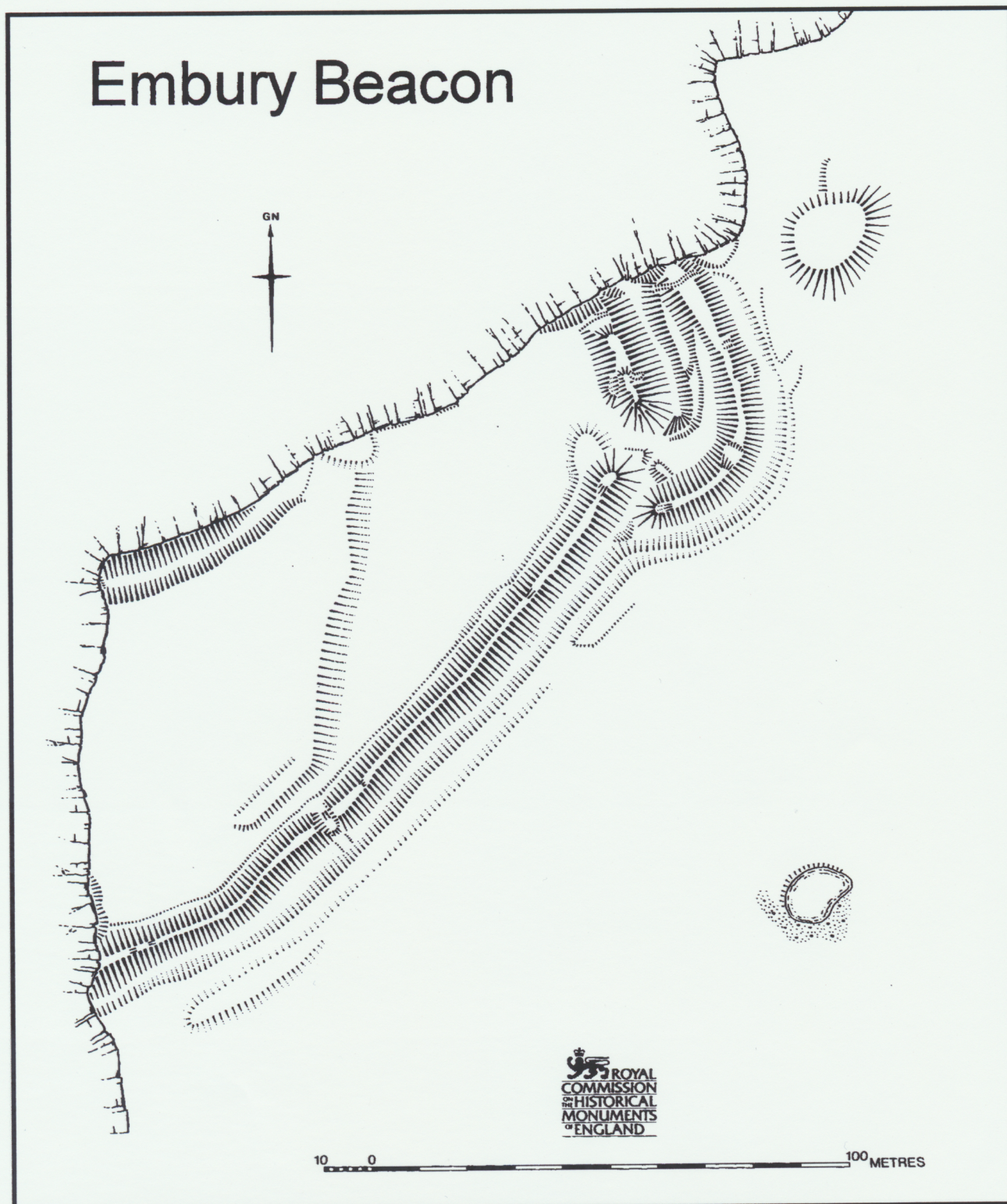


Fig. 5. RCHME earthwork survey of Embury Beacon. Surveyed at 1:500 scale.

lists it as 20 paces in diameter and 3 ft high with no evidence of a ditch. In 1977 the dimensions were given as 24.0m NE/SW by 12.0m and 1.0m high on the SW side (OS Investigator). This turf-covered ploughed-down somewhat amorphous mound now measures a maximum 26.0m (NE-SW) by 20.0 and up to 1.1m in height on the down slope side; there is no indication of a ditch or surface stone. Forde-Johnston (1976,105) lists

examples of other earthworks with barrows in close proximity such as at Trevelgue Head in Cornwall and Abbotsbury in Dorset.

DISCUSSION

The cartographic evidence of the past ninety years indicates that the NW part of the cliff edge has receded by a maximum 200m, whereas the cliff faces on the extreme north and the west sides

of the earthwork have hardly moved at all. Hadrian Allcroft (1908,54) noted that some portion of the earthworks must have been lost because there was no visible means of access to the inner enclosure. The erosion of this part of the coastline over the past centuries has clearly effaced part of this earthwork but exactly how much is impossible to estimate. Jefferies (1974,153) considered the rate of erosion which could have taken place since the earthworks were constructed and, based on the calculations of others, he reasoned that three-quarters of the site could have been lost; he suggests that the fort was originally nearer in shape to a semi-circle. Hadrian Allcroft (1908,55) stated that the earthworks may not in fact represent a promontory fort but may be the surviving elements of a contour fort.

Inferences about the inner enclosure based on the available evidence must be aired with caution but some points can be postulated. The early OS maps depict a curvilinear inner rampart with an adjacent mound which appears to impinge into the rampart ditch; no entrance gap in the rampart is shown. The interpretation of the excavated evidence appears to confirm the earlier observation that this was part of a defence to an entrance. If these interpretations are correct then they demonstrate just how much of the inner rampart was lost if both an entrance and an outwork were once extant. The inner rampart appears to have been quite substantial so it could have formed a "strong citadel" as noted by Jefferies (1974,154).

The significance of the linear bank and scarp within the outer enclosure, and their relationship to the mound at the cliff-edge which is not noted by Jefferies, are unclear. They appear to represent an earlier phase in the development of the site but they are doubtfully part of a pre-existing field system or a sub-division in the earthwork. Their form is reminiscent of an outwork; if this proves to be the case then the entrance to the inner enclosure could have been situated not in the east but rather in the west quadrant of the rampart, the areas now effaced by erosion. Perhaps only excavation will explain their origin and function.

The outer rampart has suffered much disturbance, some quite invasive. The gap located towards the southern end is a simple break, cut perhaps for access to the interior in the early 19th century. The origin and function of the northern entrance positioned as it is in the shadow of the outwork is a puzzle. Whilst it is reminiscent of the

average IA simple entrance in terms of size, raised ends to the rampart terminals and a fine causewayed approach, there is no clear line of access from the outside. The obvious explanation is that the outwork was built later to block this point of access in favour of another elsewhere; whether this was the gap near the southern end seems very doubtful. Jefferies (1974,136) offers an alternative explanation noting 'that the outwork appears to terminate before the cliff-edge and that the profile of the outwork rampart is flattened on the inside suggesting that an entrance causeway ran along this berm and out at the terminal of the rampart'. This theory should probably be regarded as a relatively recent solution because the original design would not have worked in this way. A completely different theory to explain this phenomenon could be that because the original entrance had been lost through cliff erosion the present (northern) entrance was cut, somewhat crudely, at a later date. The outwork might be interpreted as an enhancement of the defence of the original (lost) entrance and not a hornwork for the present entrance: the hillslope may have been fairly gentle to the north thus necessitating an extra line of defence. The outwork was probably never linked to the main rampart at the southern end because of the presence of the rampart ditch. If this is a fact then clearly the outwork would be of a later date perhaps intended to block the entrance altogether. An additional factor which would have enhanced the earthworks is the presence of a possible outer linear bank or scarp which lies beyond the ditch of the outer rampart. This was identified during the 1997 survey and it also shows clearly on the ground terrain model. The function and date of this very slight linear work are unclear but it may represent a proto-rampart or setting out bank rather than a simple counterscarp. The intention might have been for this linear to link into the south end of the outwork thus creating a bivallate work. What is certain is that the outer rampart is not a lightly defended cattle enclosure as suggested by Jefferies (1974,153) but is a rather strong barrier. The earthworks were constructed on one of the highest headlands in the locality in an exposed and windswept position.

CONCLUSION

The evidence casts doubt on the interpretation of this site as an IA promontory fort. The concept of a promontory site may have arisen from the idea of a Cornish cliff castle utilising the precipitous cliffs as

the last line of defence or a defined exclusive area. The friable nature of the sub-strata suggests that there was unlikely to have been a promontory, or even an outcrop, of resistant rock here but rather that the coast has been the subject of wholesale erosion to such an extent that this headland may have once been a substantial feature of the landscape. Perhaps this headland was in fact large enough to accommodate a multiple enclosure fort of a type similar to Clovelly Dykes (NMR No. SS 32 SW 1) located 10 kms to the NE. The univallate enclosure of Iron Age date known as Windbury (SS 22 NE 4) which is a cliff edge site also being eroded by the sea lies 10 kms to the north of Embury Beacon. The only similarity between the two earthworks is that they have spectacular views both inland and across the Bristol Channel and, in the case of the latter, over the broad expanse of Barnstaple Bay. The siting of these two earthworks might have as much to do with a maritime function, perhaps in terms of signalling, as a purely defensive role. The Satellite Earth Station at Morwenstow which is visible on high ground 7kms to the south is reminder of the importance of early warning and communication, if this earthwork did prove to be an IA strong point perhaps used or reused as a signal station then the name Embury Beacon would have a unique significance.

METHODOLOGY

The earthworks and the immediate environs were surveyed using a Lecia single frequency GPS. The data was downloaded to a PC for plotting and the resultant plot was returned to the field for amplification using graphic survey methods.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Trust commissioned this work and contributed towards the cost of the survey; we are grateful to the National Trust Archaeologist Shirley Blaylock for her help and support. Philip Newman drew the illustrations and prepared this report. The archive is held at the NMRC, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ. The plan and the report are RCHME copyright.

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Fig. 6. Embury Beacon contour plan. Contour interval: 25cms.

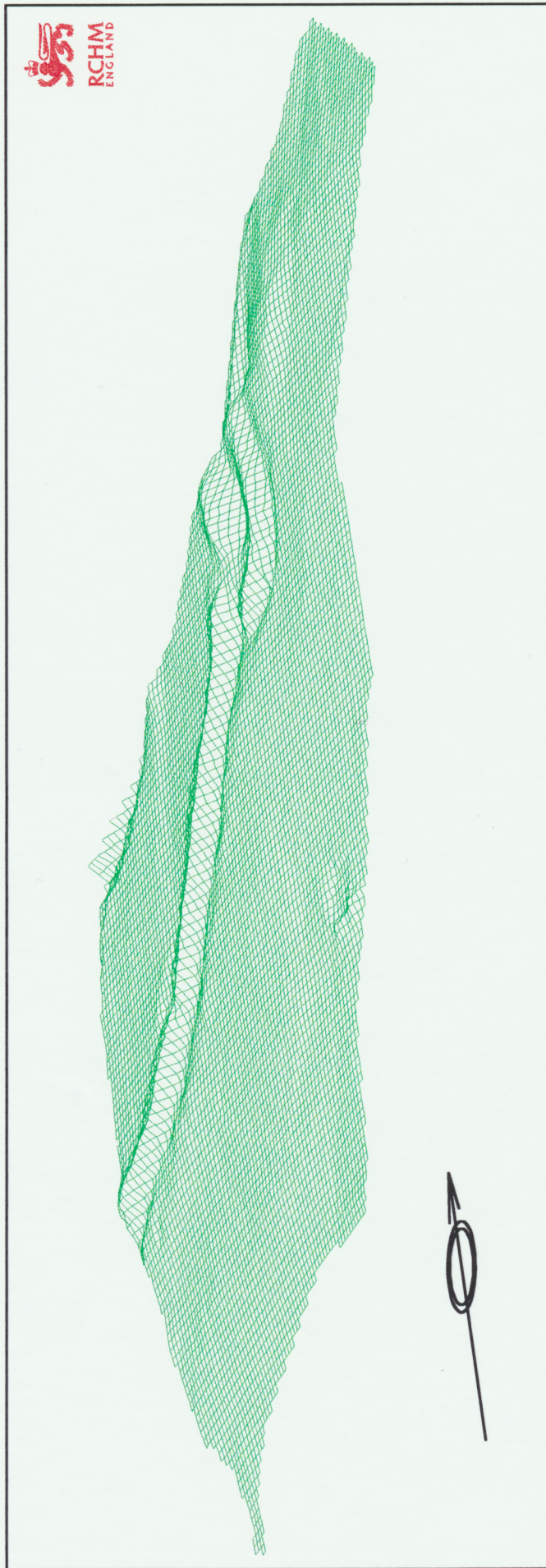


Fig. 7. Embury Beacon digital terrain model. View from SE.

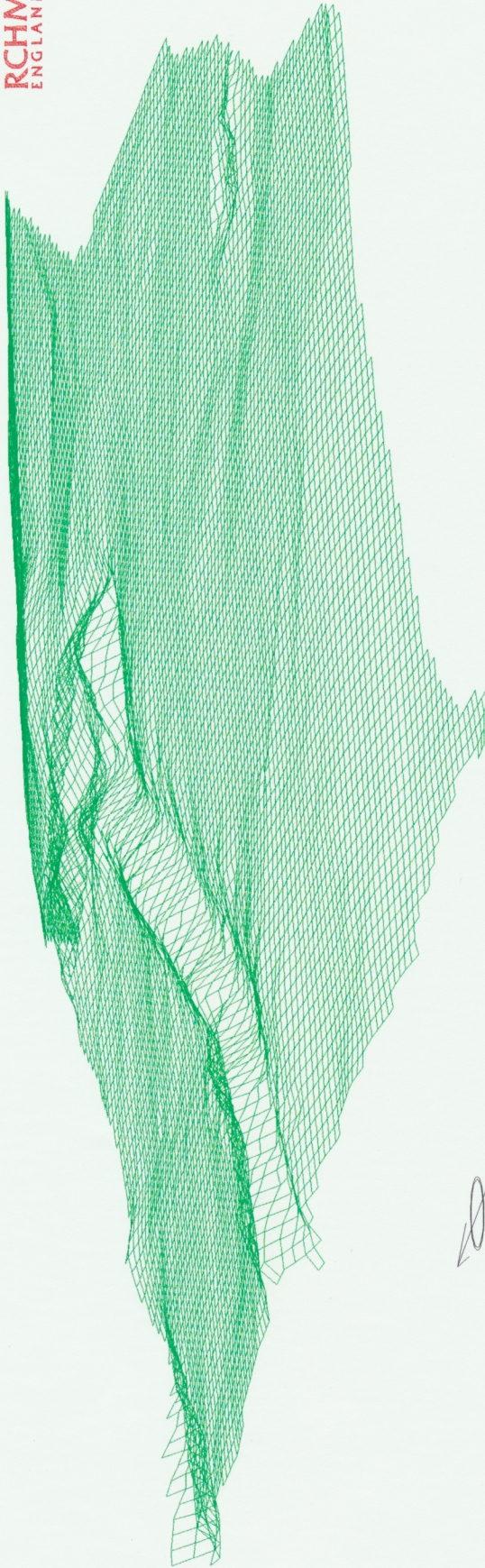


Fig. 8. Embury Beacon digital terrain model. View from SW.

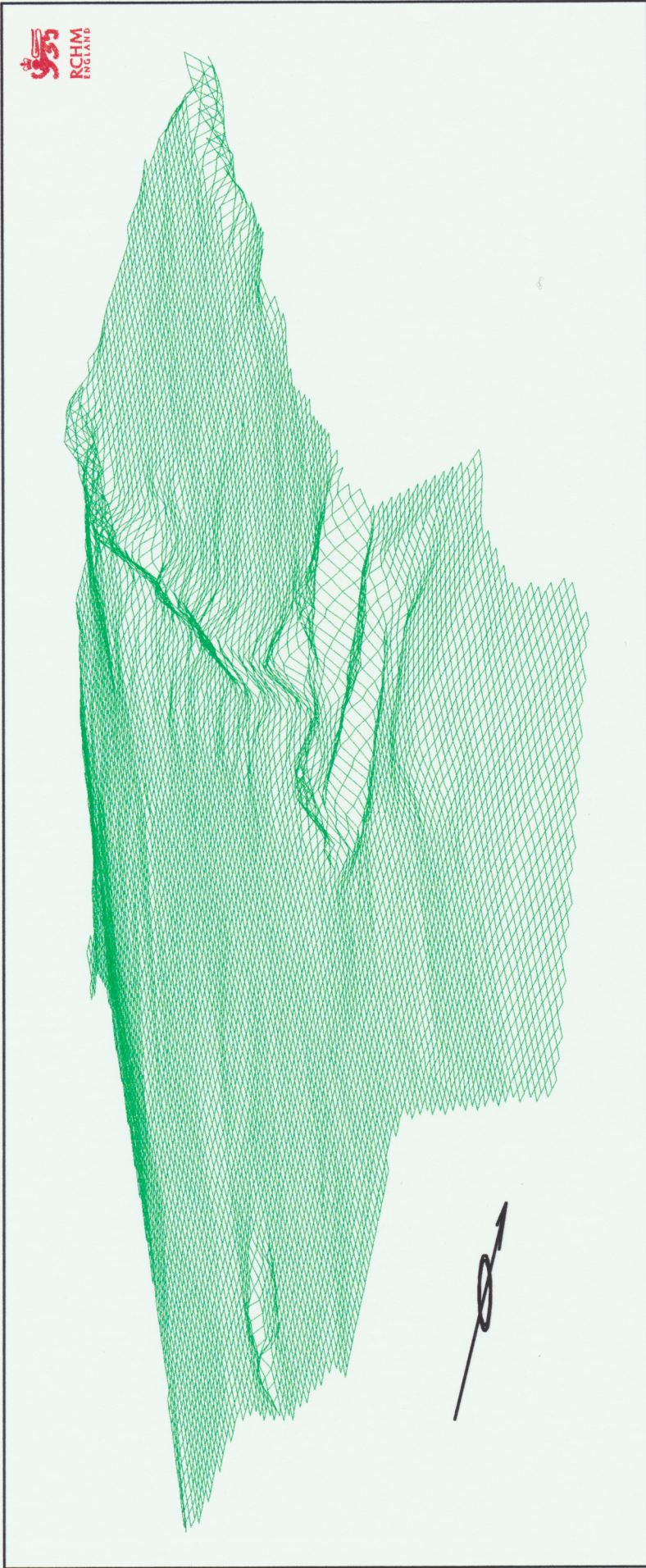


Fig. 9. Embury Beacon digital terrain model. View from NE.