# PERBOROUGH CASTLE AND ITS FIELD SYSTEM

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THE HILL-FORT of Perborough Castle (national grid reference SU 522779) and the nearby "Celtic" fields, lying in Compton parish, Berkshire, were surveyed by students of the Geography Department, Reading University, in 1961–2. Cordial thanks are due to Mr. W. J. Simmons for allowing the work to proceed on his land, and to Mrs. M. A. Cotton and Mr. H. C. Bowen for their advice on archaeological aspects. The Research Board, Reading University, kindly contributed to publication costs.

The hill-fort occupies ground sloping from 490 ft. to 445 ft. O.D., and looks eastwards over the wide valley of the upper Pang, here a small stream flowing south down the dip-slope of the Berkshire Downs. Deep dry valleys are entrenched to the north and the south of the hill-fort, forming a spur which is thus bounded on three sides by steep slopes almost two hundred feet in height. To the west the ground is more or less level at 500 ft. O.D., continuing the flat top of the spur with little topographical break. The local Upper Chalk is there capped by a lightly wooded patch of clay-with-flints, on Cow Down.

The position of Perborough Castle, on the shoulder of the spur, gives oversight of the crossing of two early routeways. One, the Pang valley-Churn gap line, breaches the main escarpment of the Berkshire Downs further to the north, and leads eventually to the Vale of White Horse. The other, sometimes called the West Ridgeway, runs between the Thames crossings near Streatley and the Kennet crossing near Newbury. Like other hill-forts in central Berkshire, notably Blewburton[1] and Grimsbury,[2] Perborough Castle is sited in close relationship with important lines of movement transverse to the main grain of the country. The way up to the Castle from the Pang valley uses the side of a minor re-entrant which cuts into Cow Down and which is itself divided into two shallow combes separated by the surviving patch of woodland.

Two groups of features have been investigated on the ground, aided by the available air photographs and planned where possible. These features are the Castle itself, the interior hollows and a suspected inner enclosure (fig. 1); and the nearby early fields and boundary banks (fig. 2).

## THE HILL-FORT

The defences of the Castle are best preserved on the north, where they consist of a bank and ditch (of greatest amplitude some ten feet) and a counterscarp. They are particularly clear in a triangular patch of scrub on the north-east. On the east, overlooking the Pang valley, the only indication today is provided by a scarp about twelve feet in height, which seems to perpetuate the defence line. Elsewhere

[1] Collins: *B.A.J.*, 50, pp. 4–29; 53 pp. 21–64.

[2] Wood: *B.A.J.*, 57 pp. 74–82; 60 p. 49

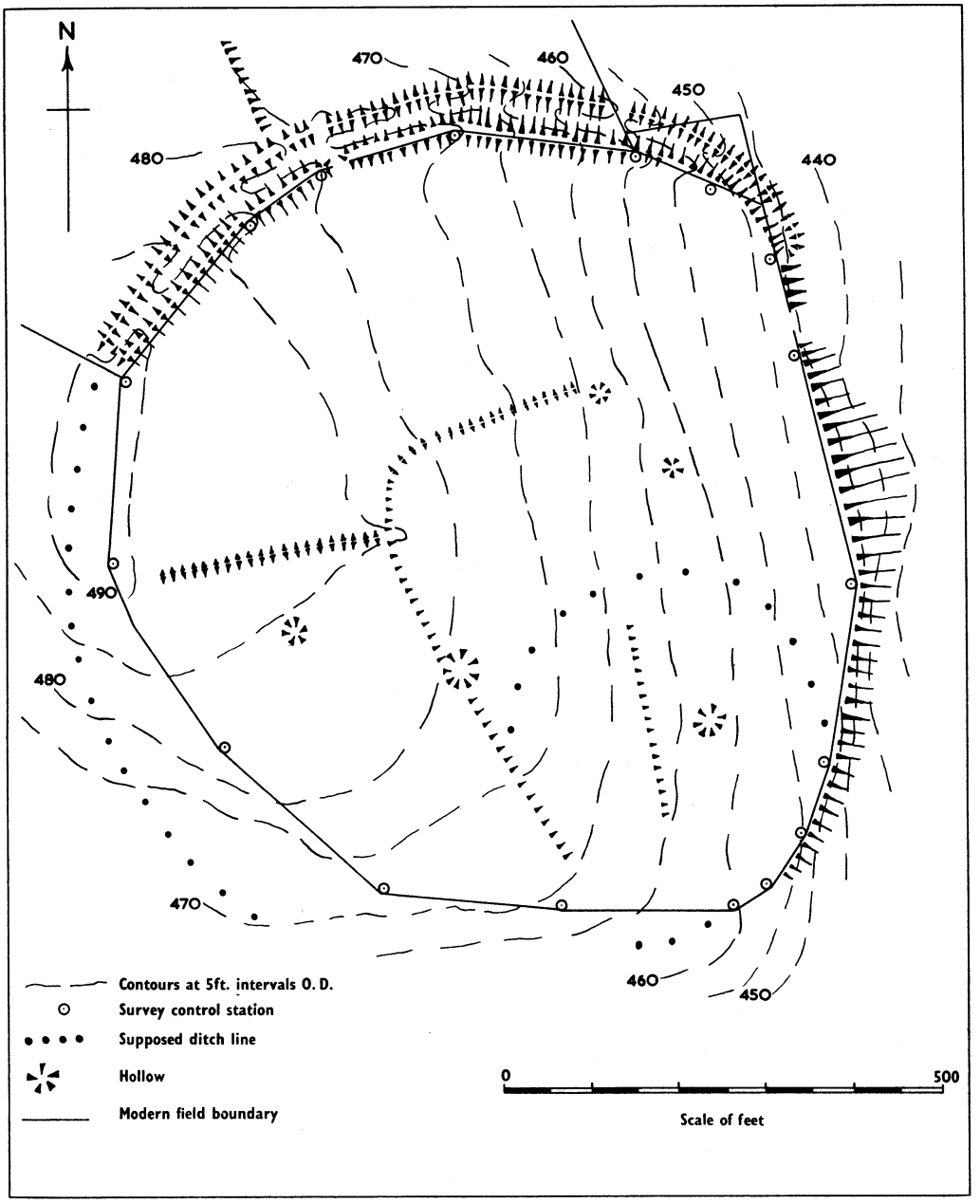


Fig. 1. Perborough Castle, newly surveyed

the defences have been almost completely razed. Presumably the bank has been ploughed into the ditch, leaving no trace in the air photographs and virtually none on the ground. A possible line might be suggested by the modern fencing and the low scarps along which it runs, but the fence is too straight, and the scarps are only the

marks of the ploughing to the fence which finally destroyed the defences. Very slight differences of surface level outside the fence were recorded by survey, suggesting the line of the lost ditch as represented in fig. 1. This line is also to be preferred in that it gives a truer oval plan for the earthwork. The area enclosed is rather more than fifteen acres. Near the south-western perimeter lies a large sarsen, reminiscent of the boulders which provided an external facing for the ramparts at Uffington Castle and Alfred's Castle.[1] But sarsens, although a pair may be seen in Compton village serving as roadside bollards, are not common in this vicinity, unlike the western Berkshire Downs where Ashdown is an obvious source of supply for rampart facing.

The only existing entrance at Perborough which is likely to be contemporary with the hill-fort is on the north, facing the way up from the Pang valley and from the well at 400 ft. near Cow Down Barn (fig. 2). The other modern gap in the defences faces directly down the steep valley side on the east, and is less likely to be original. Since the defences are certainly preserved only for one third of the perimeter, and doubtfully preserved for a further quarter, original entrances elsewhere may have been lost.

The internal features, too, are mainly in a degraded condition. The interior of the earthwork, after a long period of neglect, was deep-ploughed in the Second World War, and has been cultivated fairly continuously since then. Hewett wrote in 1844 that the stone foundations of houses could be augered "everywhere" in Perborough Castle, and talked of elevated ridges and depressions which might disclose the sides of the original habitations.[2] Since he went on to say that these features occurred all over Cow Down as well as within the earthwork, it is probable that he was referring at least in part to the "Celtic" field boundaries which, conspicuously preserved outside the rampart, can also be detected as low banks and scarps in the interior. These can best be discussed in the general account of the field system which follows on p. 57.

Of the five circular hollows inside the rampart,[3] the largest is fifty feet across and eight feet deep. They are not natural subsidences. Hewett believed them to be contemporary with the Castle, lined to store water or grain. In fact, since similar hollows occur (as Hewett knew) some distance away along the spur, they are unlikely to be connected with the site when occupied as a hill-fort. They are probably marl pits, though in view of the long disuse of the interior prior to the Second World War they are apparently not very modern.

The air photographs examined give a faint hint of a small oval enclosure, banked and ditched, in the south-eastern corner of the main rampart. When the ground is clear of crops, the point can be discerned where the bank of this suspected inner enclosure appears to spring from the main rampart on the east. With an area of about three acres and an entrance apparently on the north, the suspected enclosure lies in the more steeply sloping lower half of the main hill-fort. Though this is not the most strategic site for an initial settlement, it gains some shelter from westerly

[1] Piggott: *Antiquity*, 3 (1929) p. 352.
[2] William Hewett: *History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Compton, Berks.* Reading, 1844, p. 71.
[3] The O.S. shows only the southern three on the 25″ sheet Berkshire XXVII. 7, 1912 edition.

winds. Two possible relationships suggest themselves. The first possibility is of a Bronze Age enclosure taken in by an Early Iron Age earthwork, on the analogy of Rams Hill, Berkshire, though there the Middle Bronze Age enclosure lies centrally within the Early Iron Age rampart[1]. The second possibility, which is perhaps more plausible since the two defences apparently coincide for some distance, is of an embanked homestead subsequently incorporated in an enlarged fortification. Altogether, however, the evidence of the suspected inner enclosure is to date insufficient to warrant more than a dubious representation on the plan, and indeed a third possibility exists, that these signs are no more than of mutilated "Celtic" fields.

Excavation which would help the dating of Perborough Castle has never been undertaken. The pottery finds consist of about fifty surface sherds of the Early Iron and Romano-British periods. Ten of these were picked up on the eastern side of the earthwork in the course of the surveying. The remainder had been collected by Capt. P. D. R. Williams-Hunt in 1935 and 1939, and are now housed in Reading Museum.[2] Except for a fragment of a base from the eastern side, these came from the site of the ploughed out defences on the south.

Mrs. Cotton has very kindly examined the pottery and reports on it as follows:

"In the Williams-Hunt collection:

(1) Some 30 odd hand-made sherds, of no special form, are made mainly of a dull red paste containing medium calcined flints, but with no noteworthy surface treatment.

(2) Two sherds, in the same ware as (1), are from the shoulders of jars. One with a rounded shoulder is decorated with hollows of finger-tip impressions. The other with a rather sharper carination has a decoration of finger-nail impressions. These sherds, and (1), may be assigned to the Southern Second A culture.

(3) The basal fragment from the east side, and one sherd from the south, are of a different fabric. Harder and less gritty, the paste is of a finer texture and is dark brown in colour with a dark brown smoothed surface. The flat base forms an angle with its wall which, in conjunction with the fabric, suggests that it might be from a saucepan pot, and might, therefore, possibly be ascribed to the Southern Second B culture.

(4) Four sherds are of very hard wheel-turned ware, and include a rim fragment from an everted rim jar and a shoulder sherd from a bead-rimmed bowl. These are Romano-British.

"Of the 1961–2 discoveries, three sherds resemble the thick gritty red ware of (1). The remainder were of a brown or black paste with a fine grit, and some showed smoothed surfaces. No forms or decorations occurred, save one scored line, but they seem nearer to the Southern Second B ware of (3).

"Stray Romano-British sherds are a common feature on the surface of the downs, especially in the vicinity of field systems. Those from Perborough Castle need bear no relation to the use of the hill-fort.

[1] S. Piggott and C. M. Piggott: *Antiquaries Journ.* 20 (1940) pp. 467–70.

[2] Accession no. 89: 61. Underhill, *B.A.J.* 49 (1946) p. 51.

"The absence of Southern First A material, whilst it does not preclude a settlement earlier than the hill-fort, is consonant with the findings so far in Berkshire hill-forts (see p. 35). No cordoned haematite bowl sherds have been found so far, as in Blewburton IA (see p. 33). The Southern Second A material suggests comparison with Blewburton IIA (see p. 33), and, on analogy, a possible date for fortification of *c.* 300 B.C. Without excavation, it is not possible to postulate a re-fortification of the main rampart, as in Blewburton III (see p. 34), but the few sherds of pottery ascribed to the Southern Second B culture do raise the possibility of further analogies with that site. At Perborough, however, the indications of a suspected enclosure again suggest a possible two-period usage, though the earlier need not necessarily be of Iron Age date. Again, as at Blewburton, there does not seem to be any Belgic material. Insofar as one can use these mostly nondescript sherds as indications of the use of Perborough Castle, such evidence as there is suggests possible relations with the known sequence at Blewburton."

### THE NEARBY FIELDS

There are clear signs that the "Celtic" fields associated with Perborough Castle have vestiges of cultivated strip fields as neighbours on the slopes of the Cow Down spur. The long, regular and parallel scarps in the north (and perhaps the west) of fig. 2 are of the type which accompany strip lynchets, though here they are insignificant in height, and intermediate risers have apparently been ploughed away. One oblique air photograph, already published for Perborough,[1] illustrates the ends of the westerly pair, and indicates a meeting with adjacent "Celtic" fields which is not apparent on the ground.

About a hundred yards to the east of the Castle is a prominent scarp, at a little above 400 ft. O.D., which has in the past been accepted as an agricultural feature. In reality it seems to be the edge of a natural terrace. It is duplicated by a scarp at similar altitude on the far side of the Pang valley, and its origin is perhaps to be connected with the formation of the Churn gap through the Berkshire Downs.

Whilst dismissing the foregoing scarps, one is left with a considerable assemblage of remains which fit together as a coherent system of "Celtic" fields. They are concentrated (or best preserved) in the two shallow combes and particularly the intervening woodland, on Cow Down. The normal arrangement here is of regular lynchets running with the contours, and of cross-contour banks. These contain the fragmentary outlines of about forty fields. In some cases the complete field outlines have survived, each about an acre in extent and short-oblong in shape, though one or two are five-sided. The layout of these fields accords closely with the lie of the land. One or two of the lynchets, on the steeper slopes, are still today six or seven feet in height. The field surfaces are distinctly levelled, where ancient ploughing gave impetus to soil movement.[2]

An idea of the structure of the lynchets can be readily obtained on the long, angled scarp to the south of Perborough Castle, which is a lynchet standing twelve

[1] By the late G. W. G. Allen, in *Oxoniensia*, 15 (1950) pl. 4 (following p. 123).

[2] H. C. Bowen: *Ancient Fields*, London, 1961, is the standard work on the formation and dating of 'Celtic' fields.

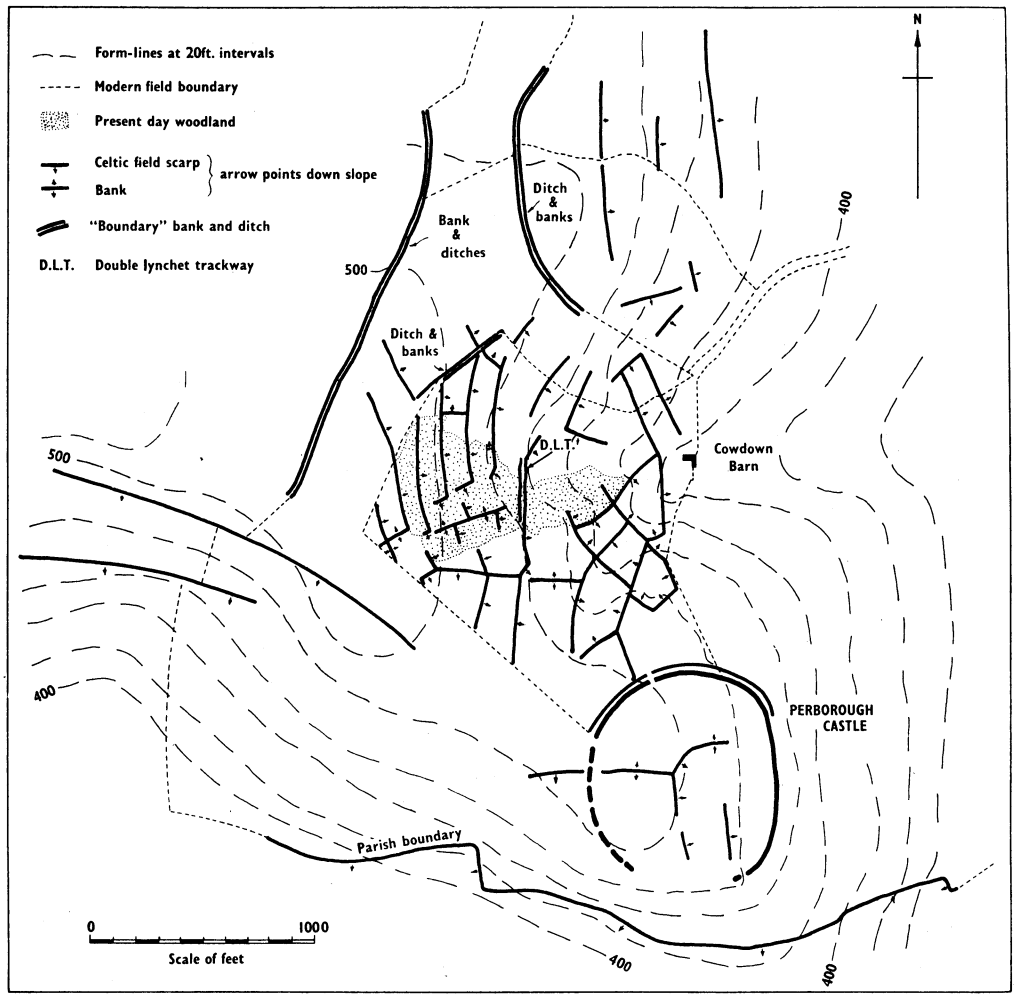


Fig. 2. The early field system on Cow Down

or more feet in height. Its face has been conveniently eroded at one point, making it easy to clean a representative section. Five feet of accumulation in successive layers indicate the large scale and protracted movement of plough-soil and flints from the ground above. The accumulation lies on top of undisturbed chalk and a buried turf line which marks the pre-lynchet land surface. The lower seven feet of the scarp have been formed by cultivation cutting back into the solid chalk and producing an almost vertical face for the back of the field below. It is of particular interest that this unusually massive lynchet, which delimits the "Celtic" field system on the south, was perpetuated as a boundary in medieval times, for it was taken over as the limit of Compton hundred and still marks the boundary of Compton parish, as well as forming an important estate boundary.

On the north of the field system are further linear features, three separate lines of much degraded banks and ditches, which appear to have a positive association

with the fields. The north-westerly is a bank between two ditches. Though it runs across the spur on the western, open approach to Perborough Castle, it does not seem substantial enough to have been a defensive cross-spur dyke; but, if it is indeed contemporary, it may mark the limit on this side of the block of land tilled by the Cow Down farmers. The other two lines each consist of a ditch between banks. They are not true hollow-ways, but could well be discontinuous sections of access track. Crossing the woodland between the 460 ft. and 480 ft. form-lines on fig. 2 is a well-developed double lynchet trackway which is roughly on course to connect the outlying fields with the northern entrance of the hill-fort.

The Cow Down group of fields was studied by P. P. Rhodes,[1] who estimated its extent from air photographs as 160 acres. The present survey has been concentrated on those lynchets which can still be verified on the ground. This qualification decreases the extent to about 80 acres, and excludes a large area indicated by Rhodes on the north-west. The dating of the system is a matter of conjecture. The obvious attribution would be to the period of occupation of Perborough Castle, and it is here that the "Celtic" field remnants within and just beyond the ramparts may be helpful. Rhodes commented that field lynchets "appear to pass *under* the defences" and therefore antedated the rampart. In fact, the position appears to be that the isolated scarp coming in from due west is indeed continued across the interior. It would be unusual for ploughing of the type that produces "Celtic" fields to be undertaken within an occupied hill-fort, and a case could be made for this western lynchet and those within the rampart to be earlier than the main fortification. On the north, however, a second lynchet, this time belonging to the principal group, turns on the counterscarp outside the earthwork ditch, and in thus respecting the defences is clearly not earlier than them. The answer is perhaps connected with the suspected inner enclosure, with arable plots submerged (like itself) by an enlargement of the earthwork and the setting out of new fields. But, with the earthwork evidence so badly obliterated on the west, it is fruitless to carry this conjecture further.

## THE SURVEYING METHODS EMPLOYED

The survey had dual objectives: to produce a finished plan, and to give practical experience to students. Manpower was plentiful, and a variety of methods was used. The work was divided into two parts, although parts of the control network were common to both. A detailed survey was made of the ramparts and the interior on a scale of 1/1250, with contours at 5 feet intervals. A more rapid survey was made of the "Celtic" fields on a scale of 1/2500 with form-lines at 20 feet intervals. The following account is given as a guide to readers of the *Journal* who may wish to undertake similar work.

### *The Castle area*

Horizontal control was established by a traverse, using plane table and chain, around a closed circuit marked by pegs at seventeen points around the ramparts.

[1] *Oxoniensia* 15 (1950) pp. 22 and 25.

Form-lines were drawn over most of the area at 20 feet intervals, using the 25 feet form-lines on the Ordnance Survey 1/25,000 map as a guide. However, on Cow Down, more detailed work was attempted. From the control pegs of the traverse a rough line of levelling was run around the perimeter of the area. Markers were left at vertical intervals of 10 feet, and from these markers contours were surveyed as far as the edge of the wood. Methods similar to those in the last section were used in some cases, and a level and staff were used to locate the other contours. Some of the distance measurement in the plane surveying of these contours had to be done by pacing, so only form-line accuracy is claimed for them. Alternate form-lines at 20 feet intervals only are included in fig. 2 because of the relatively small scale of the plan.

The methods described are all practicable and are capable of producing adequate and fairly rapid results. With the possible exception of the tacheometry, none of the instruments or techniques is complicated, and the work described could have been carried out by a minimum party of two people, although a third member would be of great assistance. Some improvisation might be necessary on a more wooded site, but no high order of skill is needed to produce an adequate plan.