DIG PORLOCK: EARTHWORK SURVEYS ON PORLOCK ALLOTMENT

Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership

PROJECT REPORT

By Hazel Riley

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OASIS PROJECT NO: 151543

ABBREVIATIONS
DGPS Differential Global Positioning Sytem
EH English Heritage
ENPA Exmoor National Park Authority
ENP HER Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record
GPS Global Positioning System
NMP National Mapping Programme
NMR National Monuments Record
OSGB36 Ordnance Survey National Grid
OSTN02 Ordnance Survey transformation parameters for conversion of WGS84 coordinates to the Ordnance Survey National Grid coordinates
RCHME Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
RICS Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
UL University of Leicester

LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Four Bronze Age hut circles and hut platforms, a prehistoric enclosed settlement and an area of post-medieval peat cutting on Porlock Allotment, Exmoor National Park, were surveyed as part of the Dig Porlock project, run by the Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership Scheme. Dig Porlock aims to further our understanding of the moorland heritage through the active participation of the local community: volunteers and schools. The prehistoric remains on Porlock Allotment are extremely well preserved and two of the hut circles show evidence of formal 'closure' before they fell into disuse. The peat cutting dates from the post medieval period and was carried out before the construction of a railway trackbed in the 1850s.

INTRODUCTION

Several prehistoric monuments and an area of peat cutting on Porlock Allotment were investigated as part of the Dig Porlock project, an Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership project working with the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA). The prehistoric landscape on Porlock Allotment is extremely well preserved and the ground conditions after a cold winter meant that new details of already recorded sites were noted and recorded. As well as this archaeological survey and recording work, geophysical surveys and archaeological surveys of several sites were carried out on Porlock Allotment by Chris Carey Consulting and the University of Leicester. Fieldwork was carried out in April and May 2013 with the help of ENPA staff, local volunteers and students from the University of Leicester.

Location, topography and geology

All of the sites considered here lie on Porlock Allotment, a large block of heather dominated moorland encompassing the headwaters of Weir Water and within the parish of Porlock (Figs 1 and 2). The sites lie on spurs of land which slope gently down to the north and west from a height of 420m to 370m OD. The underlying geology consists of sandstones of the Hangman Sandstone Formation (bgs.ac.uk)

Site numbering

Each monument investigated was given a DP2013 number (1-15), these are shown on Figure 3. The monuments are cross referenced with the ENP HER numbers where possible.

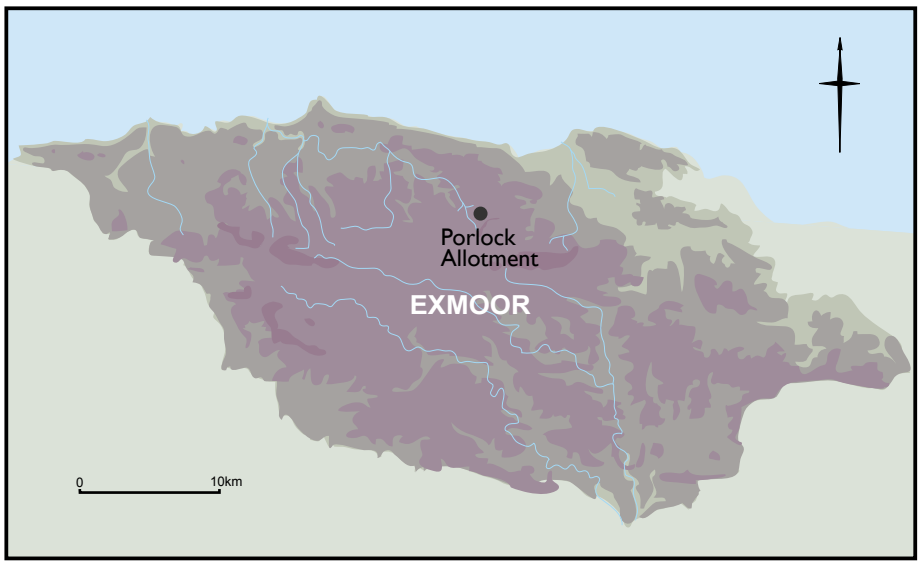

Fig 1: Location map

PREVIOUS SURVEY WORK

The RCHME carried out archaeological fieldwork across the area in the early 1990s (Quinnell and Dunn 1992; Riley and Wilson-North 2001; EH NMR records) and the EH NMP project for Exmoor mapped the archaeological and historic landscape features of the whole of the National Park from air photographs (Hegarty and Toms 2009).

THE SURVEY

All of the sites considered as part of this survey were located using DGPS. The sites were recorded and photographed with the aim of enhancing the ENP HER and surveying new detail which was visible on some of the monuments after a cold winter and spring had checked vegetation growth, ideal for archaeological survey (Fig 2).

Fig 2 Two of the hut circles on Porlock Allotment marked by volunteers, students and ENPA staff

Four prehistoric hut circles and platforms, a prehistoric enclosure and a prehistoric cairn were surveyed at large scale. Control points for these surveys were located with DGPS and the surveys were completed using graphical methods. Three new prehistoric sites: an upright stone, a cairn and a field bank were discovered, located with DGPS, and recorded as part of this project. Features associated with the known sites, such as field banks and stone settings, were also surveyed with DGPS. The peat cutting survey was carried out using DGPS to record the edges of former peat working areas.
The WGS 84 coordinates obtained by the GPS survey were transformed to the OS National Grid (OSGB36) using the OS02TN in Leica's GPS processing software. Observation times were based on those recommended by the OS and the RICS in order to obtain accurate heighting information (OS 2010; RICS 2010).

FUNERARY AND RITUAL MONUMENTS

Two stone settings, the Porlock stone circle and stone row, and several cairns are some of the earliest extant features of the prehistoric landscape preserved on Porlock Allotment, these features date from the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium BC. Two previously unrecorded prehistoric sites which form part of this late Neolithic/early Bronze Age landscape were discovered during fieldwork for this project. These are a small upright stone - this could well be a prehistoric standing stone – and a small cairn (Figs 4 and 5; DP2013 04; DP2013 12). The cairn close to a stone setting was surveyed at 1:100 scale. Several edge set and upright stones are visible in the mound, indicating a formal structure to the monument (Figs 6 and 7; DP2013 05).

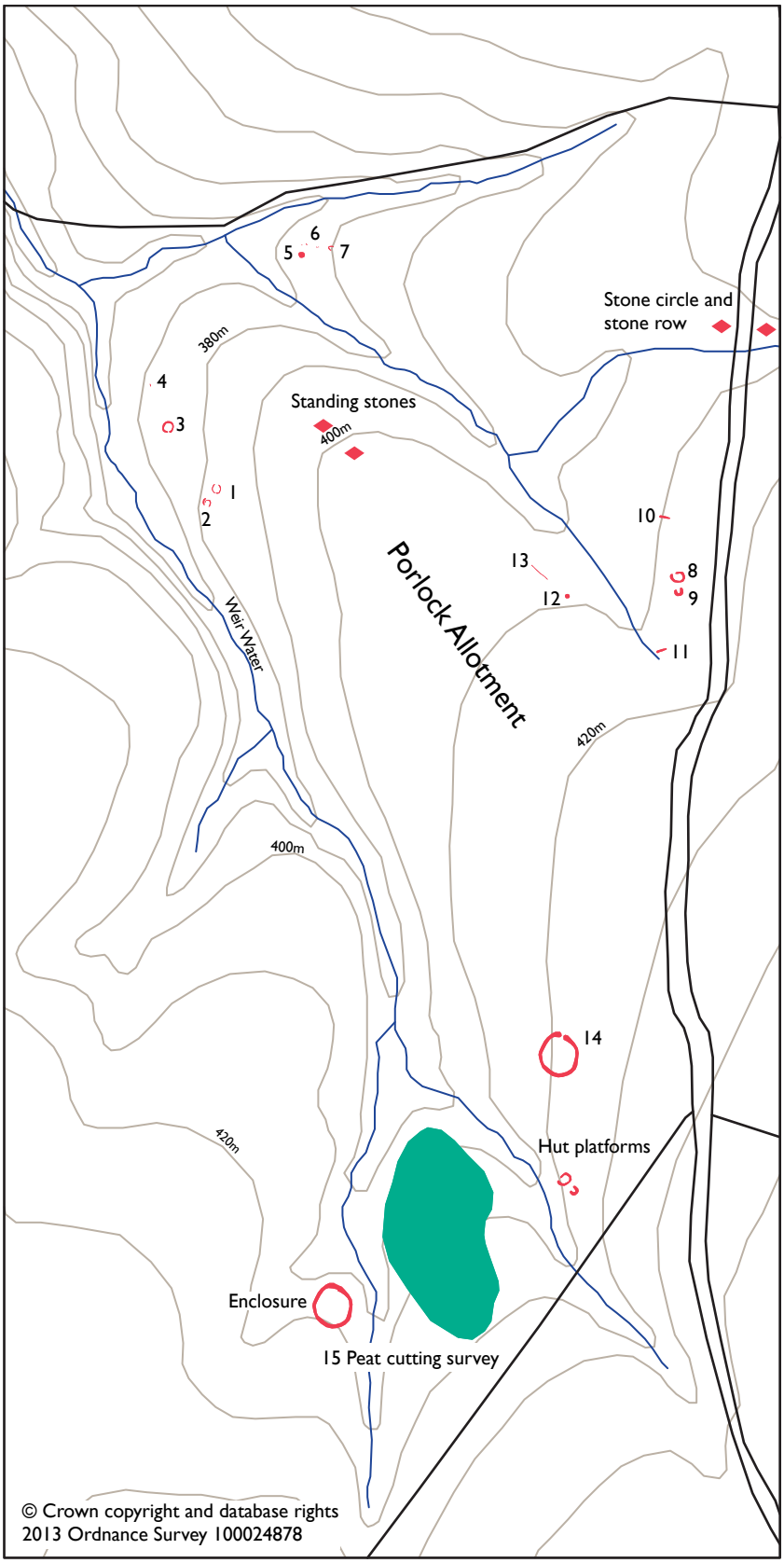

Fig 3 Map of the survey area with DP2013 numbers

Fig 4 Small prehistoric standing stone north of the hut circles on Porlock Allotment (DP2013 04)

Fig 5 (left) Small prehistoric cairn west of hut circles on Porlock Allotment (DP2013 12)

Fig 6 (below) Cairn on Porlock Allotment (DP2013 05)

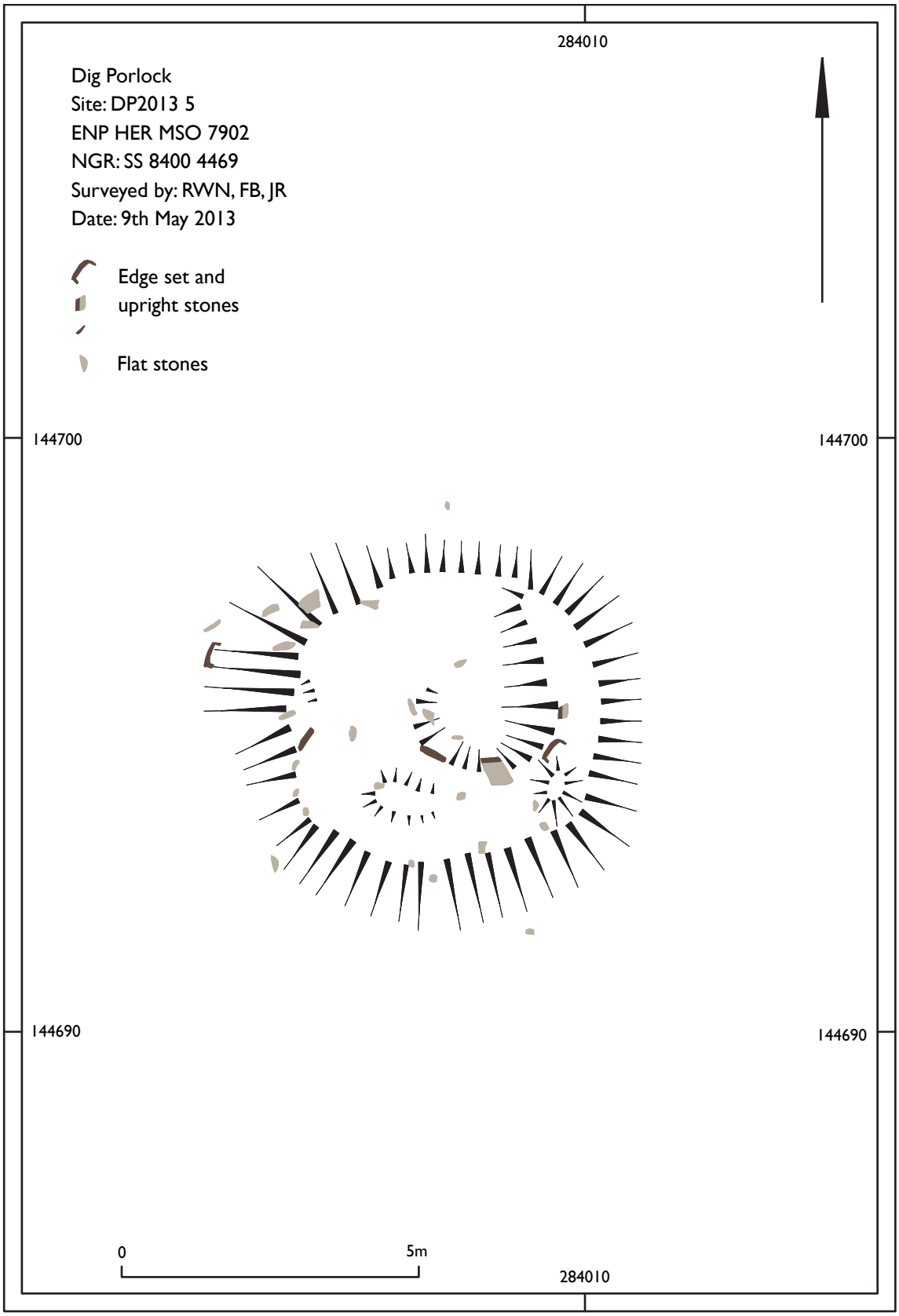

Fig 7 Plan of cairn on Porlock Allotment (1:100 scale)

PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT

There are five discrete prehistoric settlements on Porlock Allotment, three of these were surveyed for this part of the Dig Porlock project. The settlements are either groups of hut circles and hut platforms or enclosed settlements which have hut platforms within their earthwork enclosures. The hut circles and hut platforms on the spur in the west of this survey area are extremely well preserved. Two small mounds of stone inside and overlying part of DP2013 03 are clearly later in date than the use of the platform for a building (Figs 8 and 9). These are unlikely to be the remains of field clearance as there is no evidence for any prehistoric or later enclosure on this spur. Instead, they are more likely to mark the deliberate abandonment and sealing of the building, a process observed in extant Bronze Age field remains on Codsend Moors (Riley 2009) and in excavations of a Bronze age settlement in Cornwall (Nowakowski 1991). A similar feature is seen in the hut circle to the north where large upright stones block the entrance to the hut circle (Fig 10).

A characteristic feature of the hut circles and hut platforms on Porlock Allotment is that they have a close neighbour (Figs 8 and 12). Of the seven unenclosed hut circles and hut platforms only one, DP2013 03, is isolated.

There is evidence for prehistoric field boundaries on the east side Porlock Allotment. Two fragments of field banks are probably associated with the two hut circles by the road on the east of the study area (Fig 11). A slight bank discovered during the course of this survey project could also be part of this complex (DP2013 13). The field banks could be medieval or early post medieval field boundary, although there is little evidence of enclosure of this part of Porlock Allotment from this period and they seem more likely to be associated with the prehistoric settlement remains.

The enclosure to the SE of the survey area was surveyed at a scale of 1:500. This detailed survey recorded two hut platforms inside the enclosure and an original entrance gap through the bank and ditch (Fig 13). It also shows how, on the east side of the enclosure, the proposed Simonsbath-Porlock railway trackbed has filled or removed the enclosure ditch, leaving only part of the outward facing slope of the bank. A mound outside the entrance gap is probably also associated with the construction of the railway trackbed. Small depressions across the interior of the enclosure are the result of impacts during military training in the area in WWII.

The presence of these two enclosed settlements, which are both at a higher elevation than the hut circles and hut platforms, together with the evidence for the formal abandonment of two of the unenclosed hut circles leads to the suggestion that settlement on Porlock Allotment moved from the lower spurs to enclosed sites overlooking the head of Weir Water towards the end of the 2nd millennium BC.

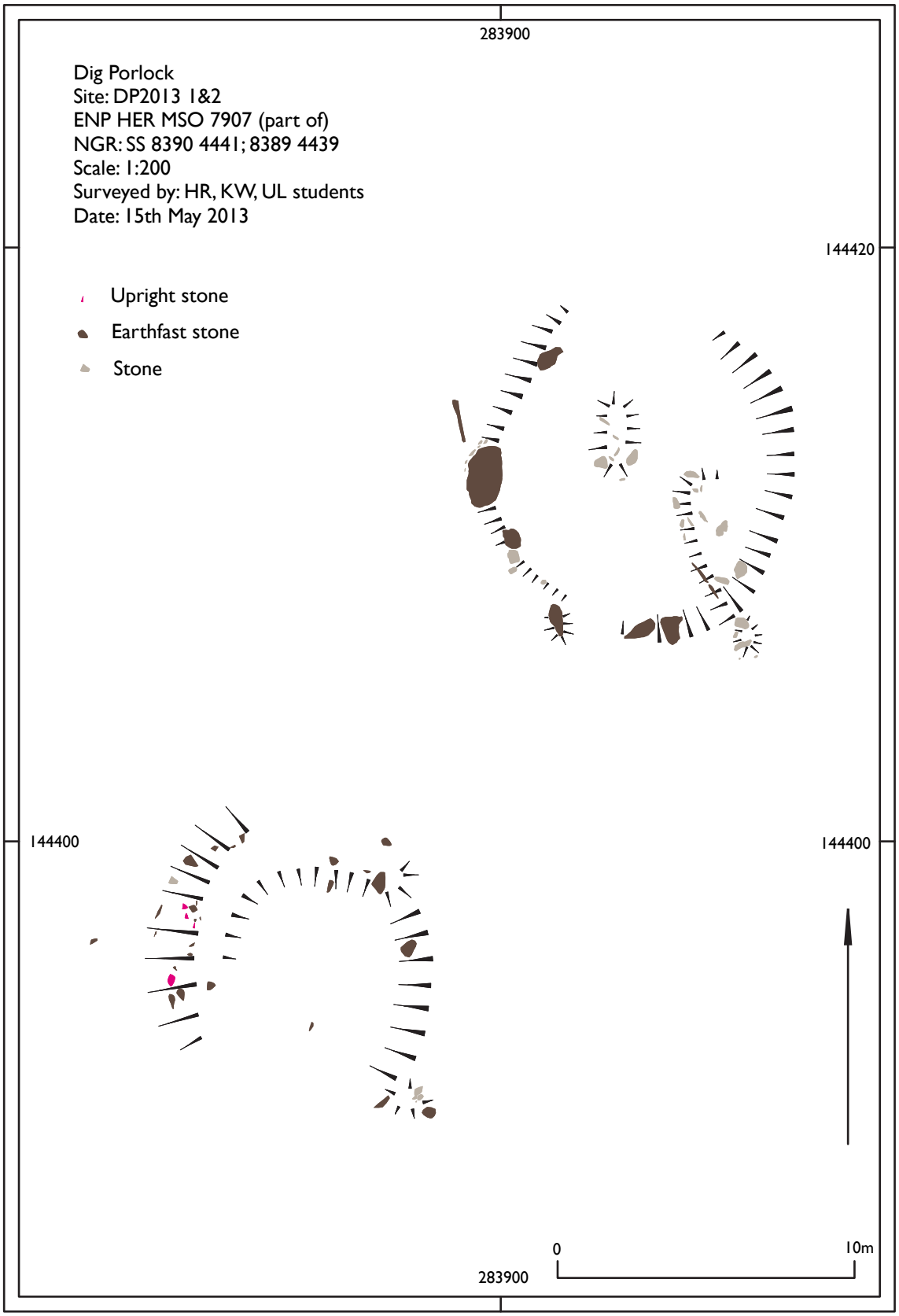

Fig 8 Plan of the hut platform and hut circle on west side of Porlock Allotment (1:200 scale)

Fig 9 The hut platform on the west side of Porlock Allotment (DP2013 01)

Fig 10 Blocked entrance to hut circle on west side of Porlock Allotment (DP2013 03)

Fig 11 Prehistoric field bank associated with the settlement on the east side of Porlock Allotment (DP2013 10)

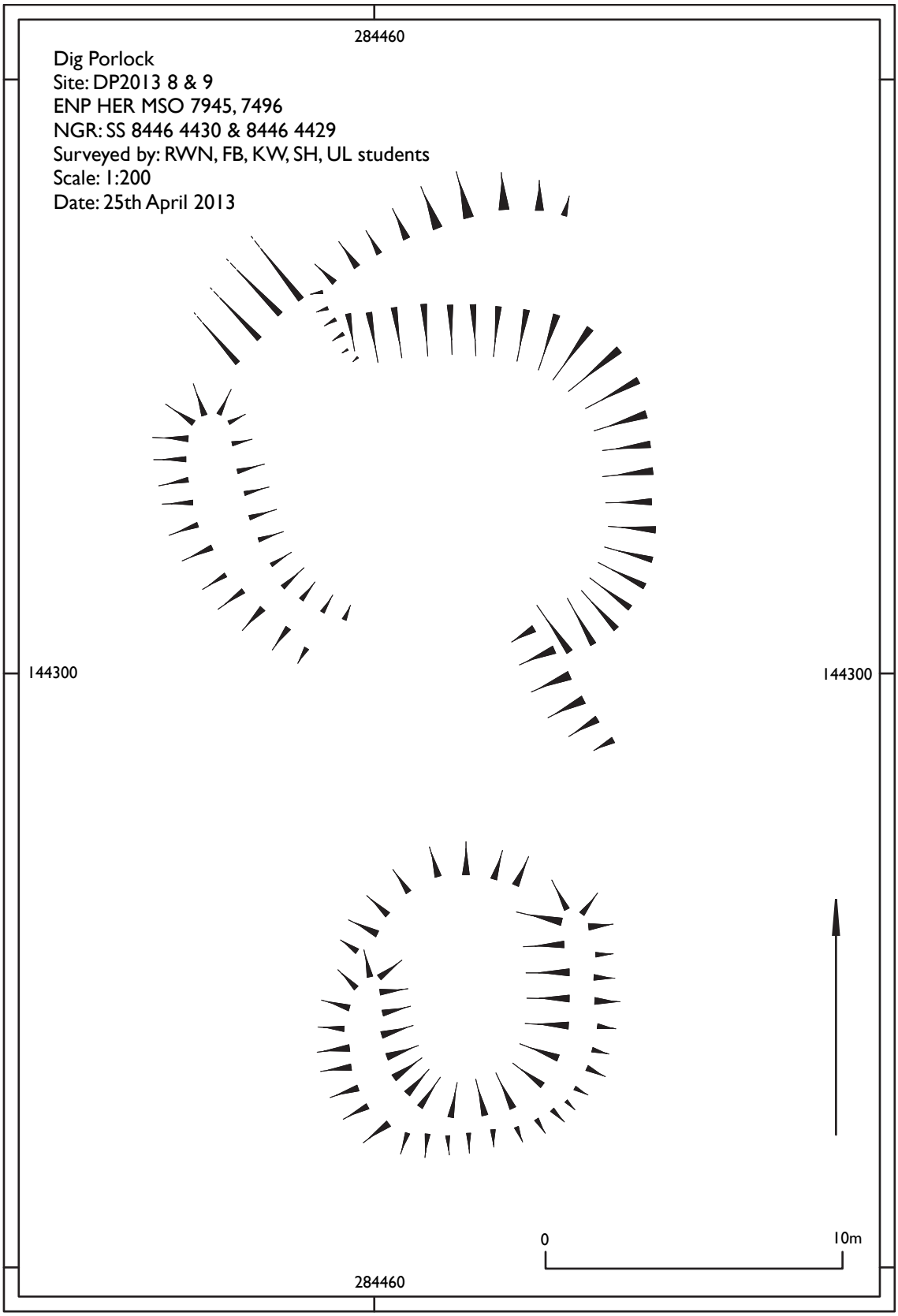

Fig 12 Plan of hut platforms on east side of Porlock Allotment (1:200 scale)

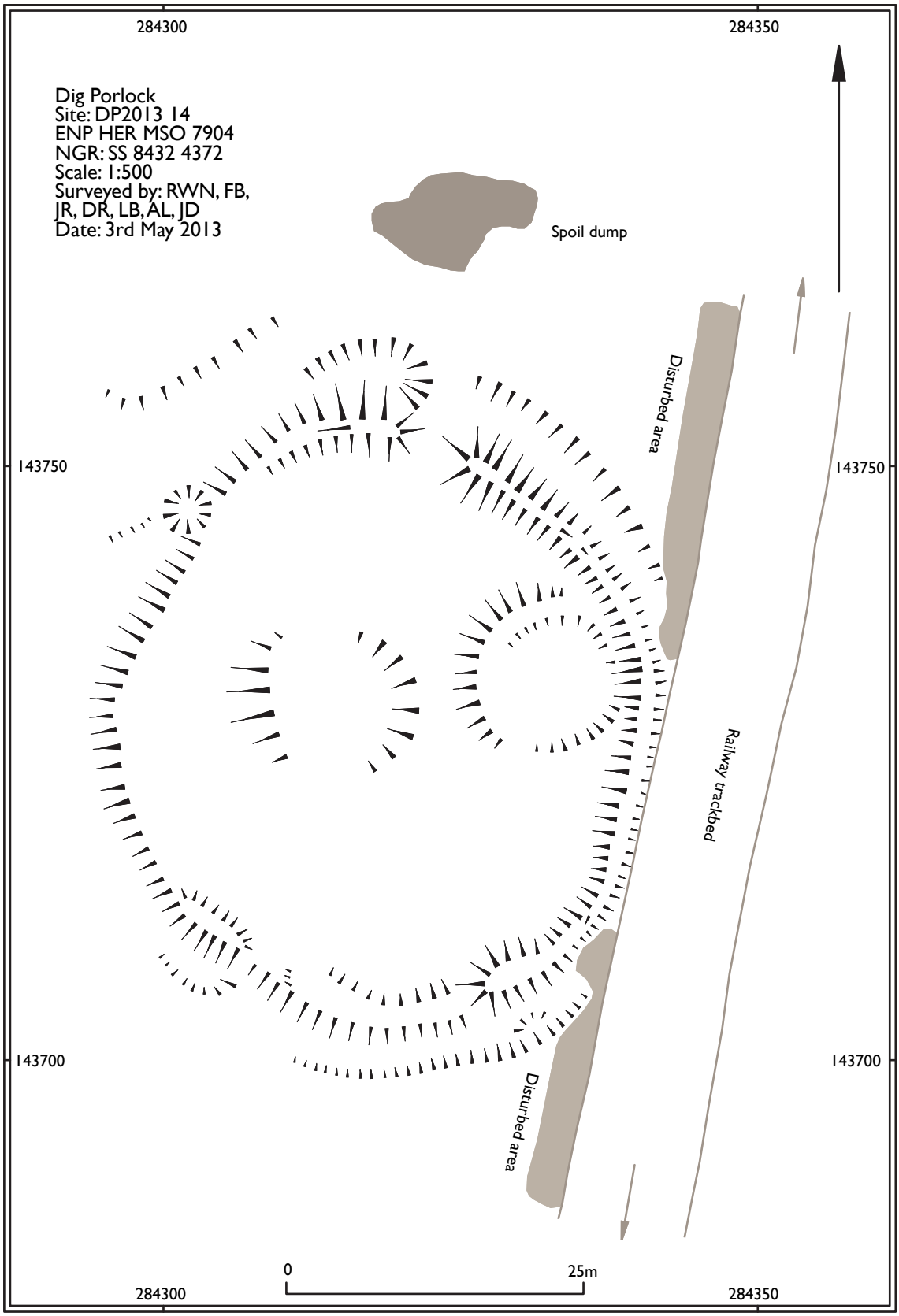

Fig 13 Plan of the enclosure to the SE of Porlock Alllotment (1:500 scale)

PEAT CUTTING

The spur between the headwater streams of Weir Water at the south of the study area contains a large area of peat cutting. The peat cutting covers an area of around 2.5 ha. In places the peat cutting areas are very clear and details of regular, rectangular working areas were surveyed (Figs 14 and 15). To the west of the area the edges of the cutting are indistinct where the peat becomes shallow. The trackbed of the proposed Simonsbath to Porlock railway has been built over some of the peat cutting, showing that peat cutting here took place before around 1850 (Orwin 1929, 146).

Historical evidence shows that peat cutting for domestic fuel took place on Exmoor from at least as early as the13th century when seven men from Withypool were fined for digging new turf pits in the Royal Forest (MacDermot 1973, 73). Peat cutting on the Commons bordering the Forest also has a long history. On Brendon Common rights of turbary are mentioned in the 17th and 18th centuries, for example (SRO DD\BW/2). Peat was still cut for domestic fuel on Brendon Common in the late 20th century (Burton 1989; records in Lyn and Exmoor Museum). The peat cutting on this part of Porlock Allotment dates from at least as early as the 18th century and probably represents a long phase of peat digging on this spur.

Fig 14 Peat cutting on Porlock allotment (DP2013 15)

SITE GAZETTEER

DP2013 1
ENP HER part of MSO 7907
NGR centred at SS 8390 4441
This is one of three very well preserved hut circles or platforms on a spur between the headwaters of Weir Water. DP2013 1 is one a pair. It is formed by a scarp 0.5m high on its east side and a scarp 0.6m high on it west side. The west scarp utilises a large earthfast boulder. Other smaller earthfast stones occur around the side of the platform. The platform is circular and measures 9m in diameter. A gap to the south may be the site of the entrance. Two stony mounds 0.3-0.4m high lie inside and across the SE edge

Fig 15 Plan of the peat cutting on Porlock Allotment (1:1000 scale)

of the platform. These clearly postdate the use of the platform for a building and could be the remains of a formal end to the use of this site. The site was surveyed at 1:200 scale for the Dig Porlock project.
Photograph: DP2013_01

DP2013 2 ENP HER part of MSO 7907 NGR centred at SS 8389 4439
This is one of three very well preserved hut circles or platforms on a spur between the headwaters of Weir Water. DP2013 2 is one a pair. It is formed by a scarp, 0.6m high on its north and east sides. A stony bank, containing several upright stones, 0.3m high, forms the west side. The south side is not clear. The platform thus formed measures 6.2m NS and 5.2m EW. A small mound of stone overlying the SE edge of platform could be the remains of a similar blocking feature to that observed in its neighbouring platform (DP2013 1). The site was surveyed at 1:200 scale for the Dig Porlock project. DP2013 1 & 2 were recorded by the RCHME in 1996 and the grid references accord with those obtained here. The ENP HER record mentions another hut circle in this locality but no such site was found during this survey. The ENP HER record also mentions a number of possible buildings or building platforms at SS 8402 4423 but no such sites were found during this survey.
Photograph: DP2013_02

DP2013 3
ENP HER part of MSO 7907
NGR centred at SS 8384 4449
This is the hut circle surveyed by the RCHME at 1:200 scale. It contains several upright stones and the large stones at the probable entrance to the south may be blocking features, like those observed in the other two huts on this spur.
Photograph: DP2013_03

DP2013 4
Not in the ENP HER
NGR SS 8362 4453
A small upright stone slab, 0.75m long, 0.3m high and 0.03m thick, oriented NS, was discovered during this survey. It could well be a prehistoric standing stone.
Photograph: DP2013_04

DP2013 5
ENP HER MSO 7902
NGR: SS 8400 4469
A small cairn on a spur between the headwaters of Weir Water. The cairn is a sub-circular mound, 6.5m NS, 7.5m EW and 0.7m high. The top of the mound has a hollow on its east side, with two small mounds to the south, suggesting that a recorded excavation has taken place. Several edge set and upright stones are visible in the mound, indicating a formal structure to the monument. The site was surveyed at 1:100 scale for the Dig Porlock project.
Photograph: DP2013_05

DP2013 6
ENP HER MSO 7911
NGR: SS 8402 4470
A stone setting consisting of two upright stone slabs, 21m to the NE of the cairn MSO 7902. A large, recumbent stone slab lies 12m to the east of the two stones at SS 8401 4470. It measures 2.2m long, 0.7m wide and 0.3m high and is an earthfast boulder. Some modern graffiti (20th century?) was noted on the north end: the letters 'R O'. A small stub of stone, 0.3x0.2x0.03m, 4.9m to the east of this stone slab, could be the remains of an upright stone.
Photograph: DP2013_06a-d

DP2013 7
Not in the ENP HER
NGR: SS 8404 4470
A rather amorphous peaty mound, 5m NS, 4.7m EW and 0.6m high. There are vehicle tracks on its north and south sides. This could be a small, mutilated cairn or barrow given its spatial association with the stone setting and the cairn (MSO 7902; 7911).
Photograph: DP2013_07

DP2013 8
ENP HER MSO 7945
NGR: SS 8446 4430
A well defined hut platform, formed by a scarp 0.4m high on the east side and a bank, 3m wide and 0.4m high on its west side. The level platform is 8m NS and 11m EW. A track runs through the western side of the platform and the possible entrance on NW side mentioned by the RCHME investigators is more likely to be the remains of this track rather than an original entrance gap. The site was surveyed at 1:200 scale for the Dig Porlock project.
Photograph: DP2013_08

DP2013 9
ENP HER MSO 7946
NGR: SS 8446 4429
A small hut platform, defined by a u-shaped bank 3m wide and 0.3m high. The north side of the monument is defined by a scarp 0.2m high. The level platform is 7m NS and 4m EW. Given its proximity to the hut platform MSO 7945, this is probably a prehistoric hut platform. The site was surveyed at 1:200 scale for the Dig Porlock project.
Photograph: DP2013_09

DP2013 10
Not in ENP HER
NGR: SS 8444 4437 to SS 8445 4437
A bank 13m long, 3m wide and 0.5m high, oriented EW, lies 72m to the north of the hut circle MSO 7945. This could be a fragmentary prehistoric field boundary, associated with the settlement MSO 7945 and 7946.
Photograph: DP2013_10

DP2013 11
Not in ENP HER
NGR: SS 8443 4421 to SS 8445 4422
A bank 12m long, 2.5m wide and 0.8m high, oriented EW, lies 73m to the south of the hut circle MSO 7946. This could be a fragmentary prehistoric field boundary, associated with the settlement MSO 7945 and 7946.
Photograph: DP2013_11

DP2013 12
Not in ENP HER
NGR: SS 84327 44282
A small circular stony mound, 5m in diameter and 0.6m high, overlooking the headwaters of Weir Water and opposite the prehistoric settlement MSO 7945 and 7946. This could be a small prehistoric cairn. It may be a medieval or early post medieval clearance cairn, although there is little evidence of enclosure of this part of Porlock Allotment from this period.
Photograph: DP2013_12

DP2013 13
Not in ENP HER
NGR: SS 84304 44303 to SS 84285 44320
A slight bank 26m long, 2.3m wide and 0.3m high, overlooking the headwaters of Weir Water and opposite the prehistoric settlement MSO 7945 and 7946. This could be a prehistoric field boundary. It could be a medieval or early post medieval field boundary, although there is little evidence of enclosure of this part of Porlock Allotment from this period.
Photograph: DP2013_13

DP2013 14
ENP HER MSO 7904
NGR: SS 8432 4372
The prehistoric enclosure by the railway trackbed on Porlock Allotment was surveyed at 1:500 scale as part of the Dig Porlock project. The enclosure is oval with internal dimensions 45m NS and 40m EW. The enclosure bank and ditch vary in form. The bank is not continuous. On the north side it is substantial, either side of a gap, which must be an original entrance. On the west side there is no bank, simply an outward facing scarp. On the south side of the enclosure, a well formed bank and ditch 30m long ends at a possible entrance gap on the SW side, although the outward facing rampart scarp is continuous, arguing against this being an entrance. On the SE side of the enclosure, the bank has a lumpy appearance, which might imply that this is how it was originally constructed or it may have been modified. On the east side of the enclosure the proposed Simonsbath-Porlock railway trackbed has filled or removed the enclosure ditch, leaving only part of the outward facing slope of the bank.
There are two platforms inside the enclosure. The east platform, set into the enclosure bank, is well formed, circular and 12m in diameter. The second platform in the centre of the enclosure is a rather poorly defined circular platform, 10m in diameter.
A disturbed, uneven mound with sharp sides outside the entrance gap is probably

associated with the construction of the railway trackbed. Small depressions across the interior of the enclosure are the result of impacts during military training in the area in WWII.

DP2012 15
ENP HER MMO 2525
NGR: SS 8417 4350
A large area of peat cutting on Porlock Allotment, surveyed at 1:1000 scale as part of the Dig Porlock project. At the south end the trackbed of the Simonsbath to Porlock railway has been constructed over peat cutting areas, indicating that the peat digging took place before the 1850s.
Photograph: DP2013_15

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Volunteers and students from the University of Leicester braved the cold spring weather to help with the survey work; Rob Wilson-North and Faye Balmond supervised the large scale surveys. Will Wake helped with organising the peat cutting survey fieldwork.

Dig Porlock survey volunteers

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Jenny Dennett
Stephen Hardy
Graham Haw
Ann Lowe
David Ringshaw
Jean Ringshaw
Margret Wildig
Kay Wright

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