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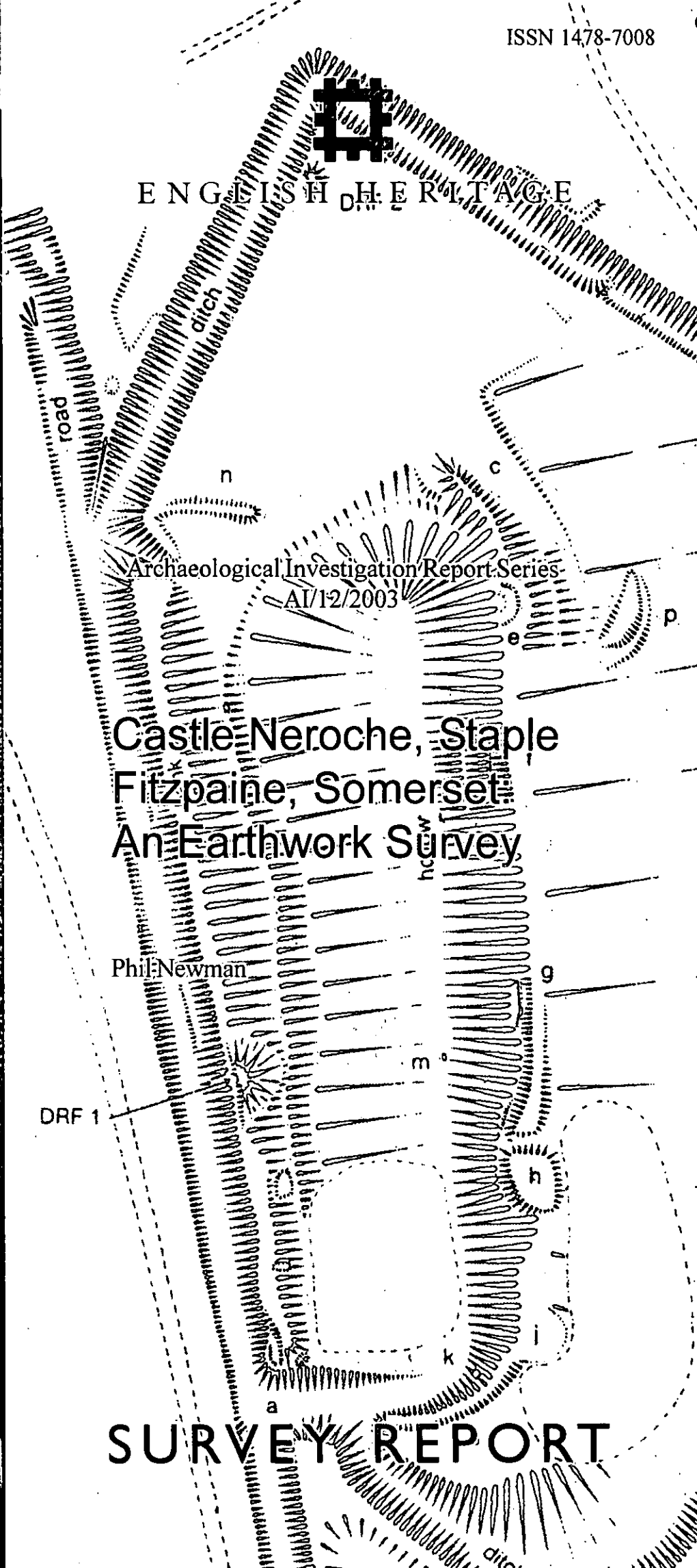
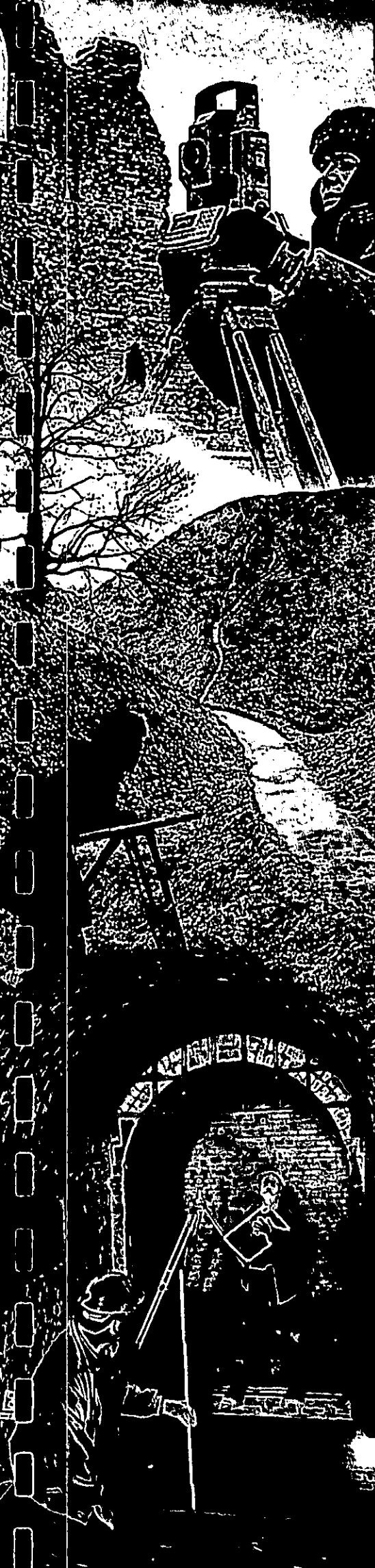
Archaeological Investigation Report Series
AI/12/2003

Castle Neroche, Staple Fitzpaine, Somerset An Earthwork Survey

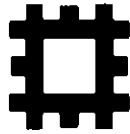
Phil Newman

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SURVEY REPORT



Archaeological Investigation Report Series
AI/12/2002



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Castle Neroche, Staple Fitzpaine,
Somerset:
An Earthwork Survey by English Heritage

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District:	South Somerset
Parish:	Staple Fitzpaine/ Curland
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Summary

Castle Neroche is a complex defended earthwork site, situated in the north-eastern sector of the Blackdown Hills AONB in Somerset. The earthworks comprise a series of banks and ditches and a motte. Occupation of the site is undocumented but 20th-century excavations have identified 11th- and 12th-century occupation, with at least four phases of construction, though failed to establish its earliest origins. The character of parts of the earthworks are highly suggestive of a substantial prehistoric phase, though no excavated material has been identified to confirm this.

The English Heritage survey was undertaken at the request of the Forestry Commission, who manage the site, as an aid to future conservation of the earthworks. The detailed analysis which this survey has also facilitated has enabled a radical re-evaluation of the remains and new interpretations are presented. These ideas are not claimed to be definitive, but merely alternative options which will hopefully stimulate further debate and encourage and help steer future research.

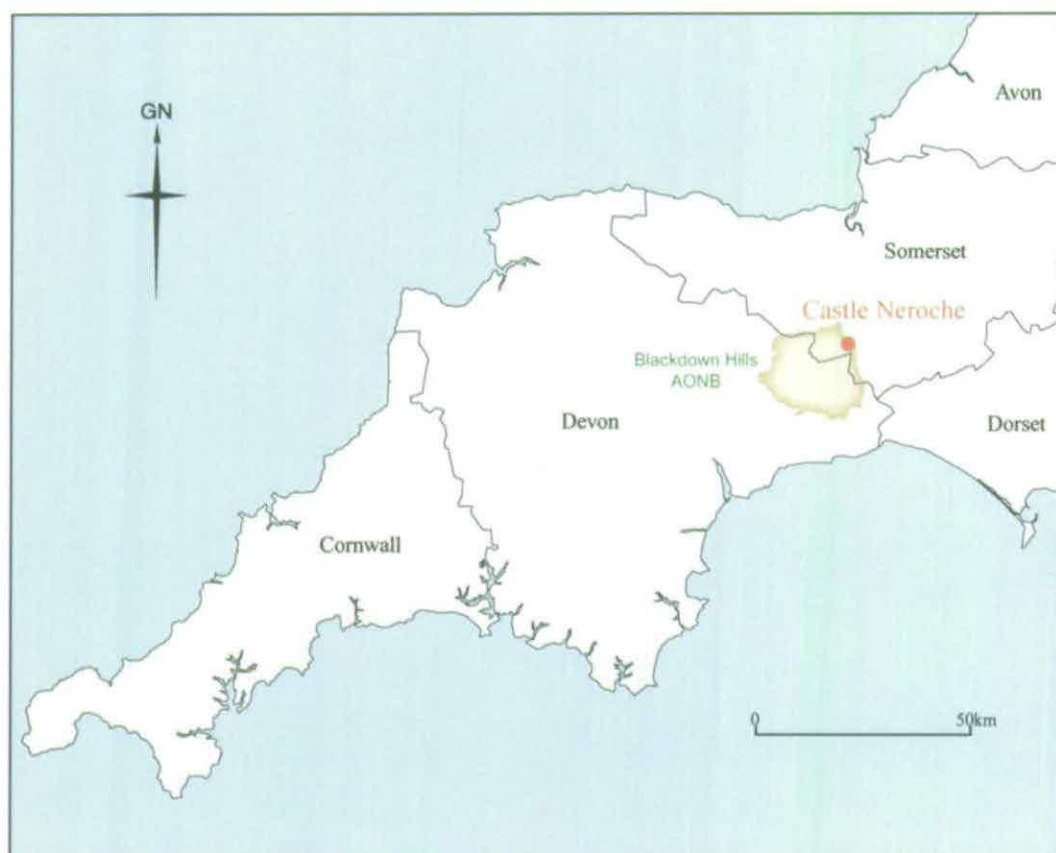


Fig. 1. Castle Neroche: location in the South-West peninsula.

INTRODUCTION

Location (Figs 1, 2 and 5)

Castle Neroche is located within the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) (Fig. 2), which straddles the Devon and Somerset border. It is situated on the north-east corner of the AONB on the Somerset side and within the parish of Staple Fitzpaine. The site is extremely remote being in an area dominated by small isolated settlements. It is some 6km to the nearest village of any size and the nearest conurbation at Ilminster is 9km to the east while Taunton is approximately 10km NNW. No major roads come close to the site which today is accessed by narrow lanes, making it seem very isolated.

Topographically the earthworks are located on the edge of a steep natural escarpment which

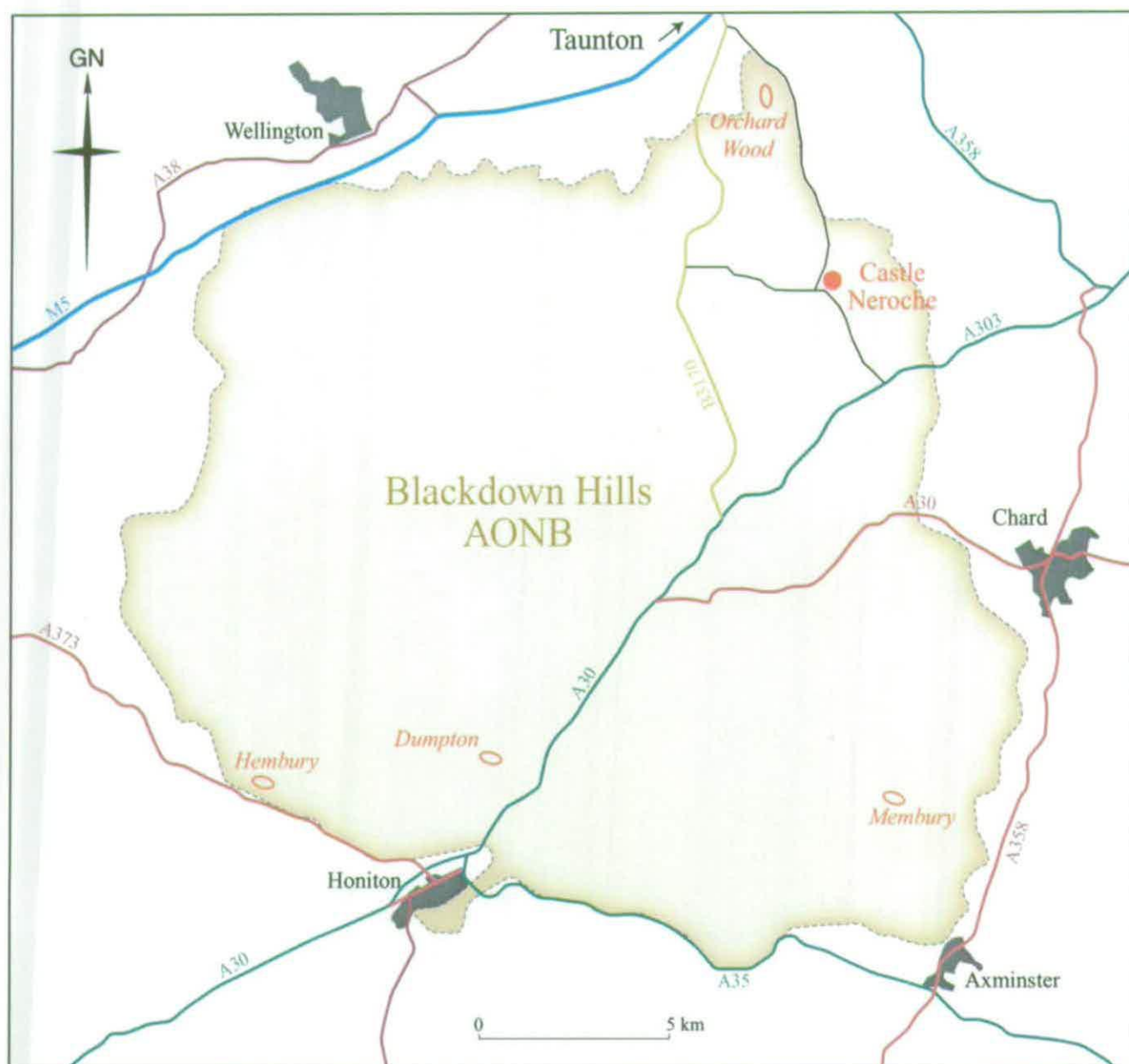


Fig. 2. Castle Neroche. Location within the Blackdown Hills AONB. Also showing other important earthwork sites.

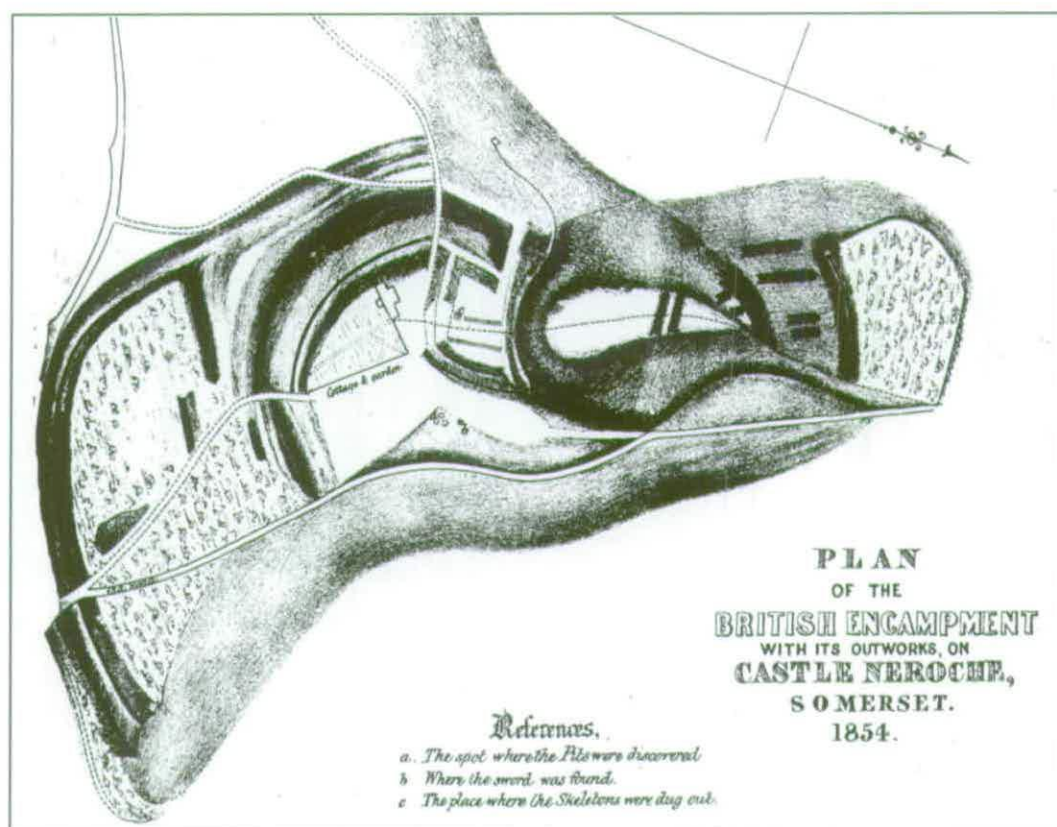
forms the upper northern shelf of the Blackdown Hills, overlooking central Somerset, the Vale of Taunton, the western Levels and the Quantock Hills. The site itself is formed by the conjunction of two escarpments, both concave in plan (Fig. 5), which forms a ridge of land with a graded upper surface extending into the lower ground to the north. The height of the motte above OD is 270m.

The current owners of the earthworks are the Forestry Commission (FC) who manage the area as mature woodland and some of the trees appear to be several hundred years old. Much of the site is accessible by the public though the central area of the earthworks is occupied by a working farm.

The work of previous writers

Scholarly attention was first directed towards the earthworks at Castle Neroche by the Rev. F. Warre, in 1854 (Warre 1854, 29-48). This paper was essentially a description of the site accompanied by a competently drafted plan, depicting a number of the main features (Fig. 3). Warre also mentioned a quantity of finds which had been recorded in the recent past, including burials within timber coffins, iron arrowheads, an iron sword and sherds of pottery. However, apart from the latter, it is clear that he had not witnessed the discovery of these finds himself, and it is not recorded what

Fig. 3. Rev. Warre's plan of Castle Neroche 1854.



became of them. He was utterly convinced the site was 'British' ie pre-Roman although, ironically, he apologises for using what he felt were anachronistic terms borrowed from knowledge of medieval stone castles when describing the earthworks, ie outer and inner 'bailey' and 'keep'. Clearly he had noted the similarities but the idea that earthwork fortifications on this scale were anything other than pre-Roman was a concept of the future.

A more detailed and accurate 25-inch scale survey of the earthworks was undertaken by the Ordnance Survey in 1886 (Fig. 4), on which the positions of the finds mentioned by Warre are annotated.

The first recorded excavations at Castle Neroche took place in 1903, directed by H. St George Gray on behalf of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. The excavations were conducted without the benefit of the debates which were to come later as to the nature and chronology of motte and bailey castles; the work taking place eight years before the publication of Ella Armitage's seminal work on the subject (Armitage 1911). The concept of a 'motte' had in fact still not been established and Gray refers to this feature at Neroche by its local name of 'The Beacon'. Gray's main objective was to establish a period for the site, which, based on the knowledge of the time could, as he explained, have been anything from 'Stone Age' through Roman, post-Roman and Norman. Seven trenches were cut: the most significant of these was a 71ft by 12ft section straddling all three of the south-west ramparts. Other trenches were cut on and around the motte, aimed at establishing if this was a natural or artificial feature. Although Gray was to some extent testing widely held assumptions of the time that the site was Roman or pre-Roman, he admits to being surprised by his pottery and metalwork finds which unambiguously provided a medieval date for the Beacon at least. He was less sure about a date or general period for the ramparts due to the paucity of finds, but was satisfied that because no finds of earlier date came from anywhere on the site, that as a whole it was medieval. He went on to speculate as to the possibilities of its origins being within the Anarchy during the reign of King Stephen. Evidence of Gray's excavation is still very visible

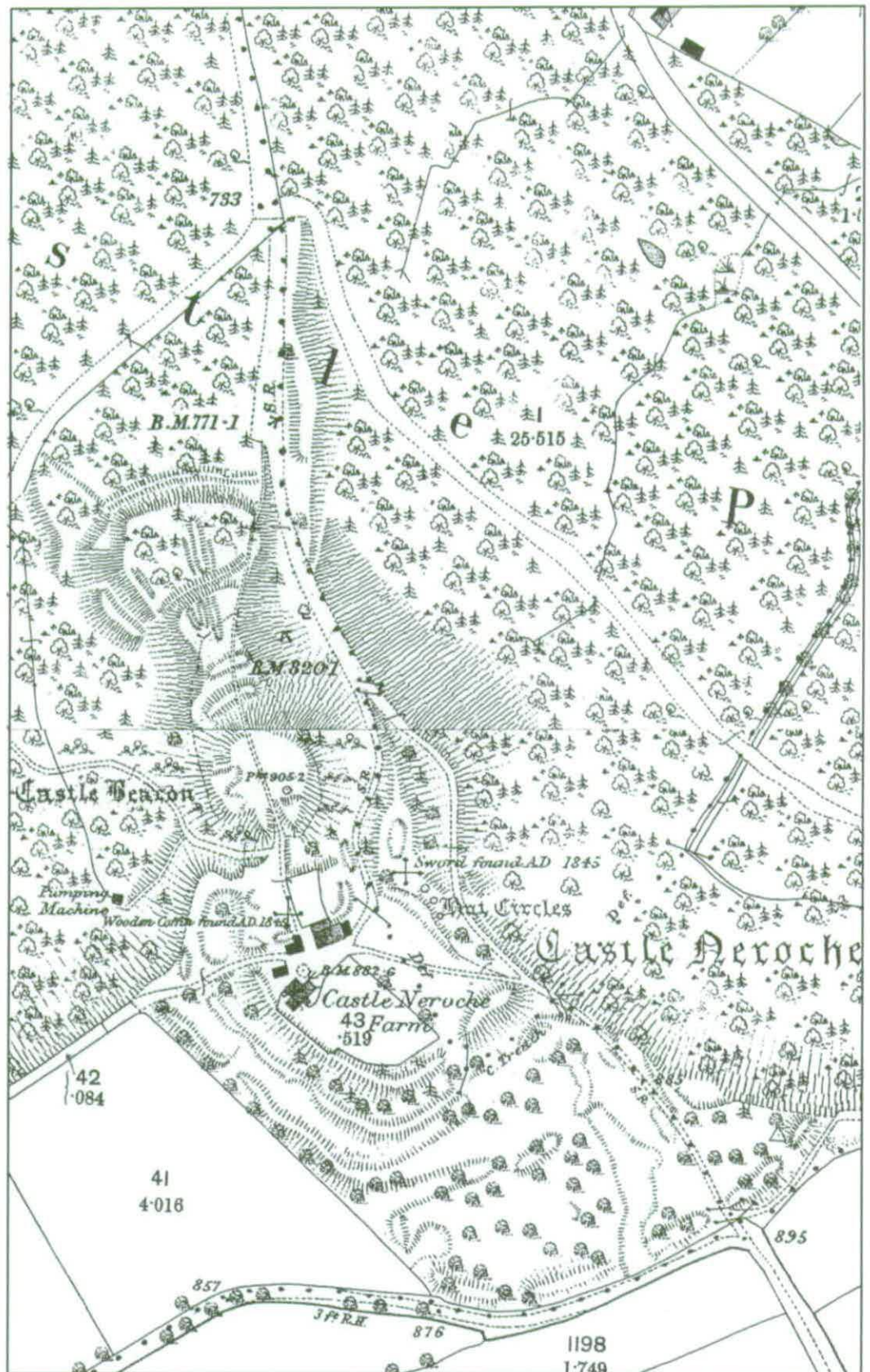
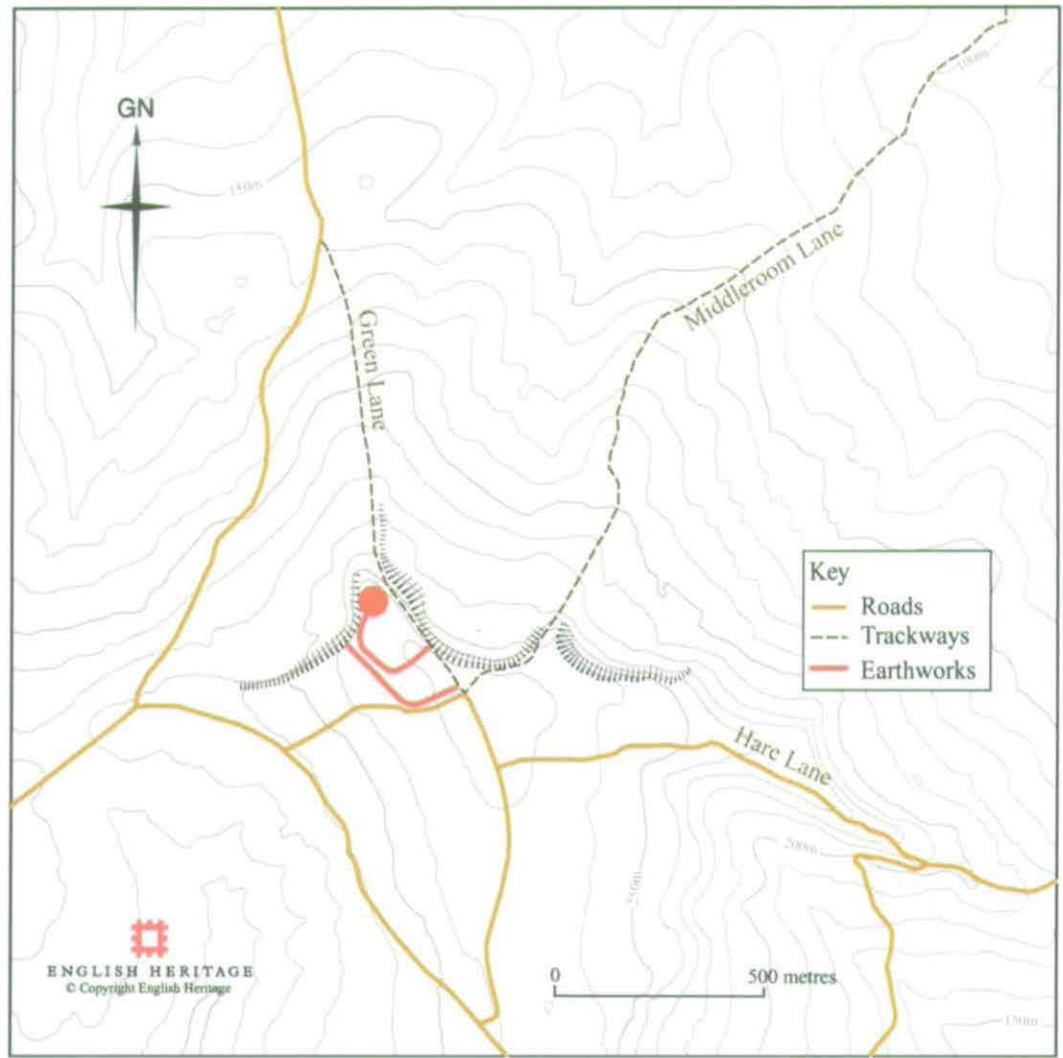


Fig. 4. First edition 25-inch OS plan of Castle Neroche 1886 (2 sheets combined).

especially his Cutting 1 which was never backfilled. This is surprising considering his statement in the same report that 'The filling in of all excavations should be properly attended to, otherwise the undesigned heaps of material thrown out from the diggings would not only prove to be a hindrance to future explorers, but a puzzle to them' (Gray 1903, 31).

Fig. 5 . Map showing topography in the locality of Castle Neroche. Note the steep escarpment and positions of lanes and trackways.



The second major campaign of excavation was carried out by Brian K. Davison between 1961 and 1964 (Davison 1971, 16-58). With the advantages of developments in the understanding of stratigraphy and greater knowledge of the ceramics it was possible for Davison, not only to establish a more precise period for some aspects of the site but also to begin to understand phasing of the various elements of the earthworks. Many more trenches were dug and a minimum of four phases postulated as a result of interpretation. Period 1 consisted solely of the outer rampart enclosing part of the plateau; no date was established for this. Period 2 was evident as a strong, partial 'ringwork' within the earlier enclosure, with a small, possibly unfinished outwork to the south. In Period 3 the inner ramparts were raised to their present height and a motte was built over the northern section of the 'ringwork' by remodelling the natural scarps of the ridge. A small inner bailey was constructed abutting the south of the motte and an outer line of defence comprising a bank and ditch was added. Period 4 involved the construction of a masonry shell keep around the summit of the motte with a small raised tower and probably the abandonment of the bailey as part of the defences. Davison suggested a construction date for the first phase of medieval defences, ie Period 2, as c.1067-9, on the basis of North-French type pottery finds and the fact that a revolt which was taking place in the Westcountry at that time would necessitate the building of such a fortress. Unfortunately no documentation is available to confirm this. For Period 3 he struggled to pin down a date; the finds of this phase could not be closely dated and once again documentation in any form referring to the site specifically is completely absent. However, information from documentation which alluded to

events and people in Somerset generally at that time pointed to a late 11th to early 12th-century date. Finds of glazed pottery associated with Period 4 suggested a 12th-century date for the stone shell keep on the motte, which Davison suspected would place its construction and occupation within the Anarchy period. Although a credible site chronology had been established, the total lack of documentary reference or closely dateable finds has meant that an absolute chronology for all but Period 2 is lacking for Castle Neroche within Davison's scheme and the date of abandonment is lost to us.

This too was very much an investigation of its time, with little analysis or discussion of the problems posed by the earthworks or how the site relates to its environs. Some of Davison's interpretations of the site were based on a somewhat flawed and inaccurate earthwork depiction (Davison 1972, 18), which followed very loosely the 1st edition OS 25-inch map, with additions. This plan and the phasing from this work has frequently been cited by writers wishing to make a case for the development of Norman castles within pre-Norman (ie early-medieval not prehistoric) earthworks.

A brief description of the earthworks together with a plan and sketched impressions was published by Burrow in 1924 and an imaginative artistic impression of the castle was drafted by M. Aston (Dunning 1995, 34) but it appears to take little heed of any potential chronological relationships between separate features or details established through excavation, having all the known elements present in one phase. This is still in use on the FC site interpretation board.

As no large-scale analytical earthwork survey had previously been attempted at this important site, such a project was long overdue. The present report is an attempt to address this shortfall in the data.

THE EARTHWORKS (Fig. 6)

The construction of earthworks at Neroche relied heavily on the existing topography of the area before any work commenced and the motte in particular is a result of re-sculpting of a natural geological feature. The castle is situated on an angular spur of land, formed by the junction of two steep, curving escarpments which form the northern plateau edge of the Blackdown Hills. The two scarps, one facing NE the other NW, merge together to form a graded ridge which loses height as it progresses northward and would once have formed a narrow slope of gentle gradient leading up from the lands below to the north (Fig. 5). The site was not built onto a rounded promontory or knoll as depicted by Davison (1972) and most recent writers.

In many ways some elements of the site defy description using conventional terminology. The term 'ringwork' has been applied to the pre-motte and bailey phase though this is hardly appropriate given that morphologically it is far from ring-shaped and one complete side is defined by an escarpment which apparently had no artificial rampart. For the same reason 'enclosure' seems incorrect for the surviving remains, although if it is assumed that a timber palisade surmounted both the rampart and the escarpment then this is partly correct.

The earthworks comprise eight main elements (*for annotation see Fig. 8*):

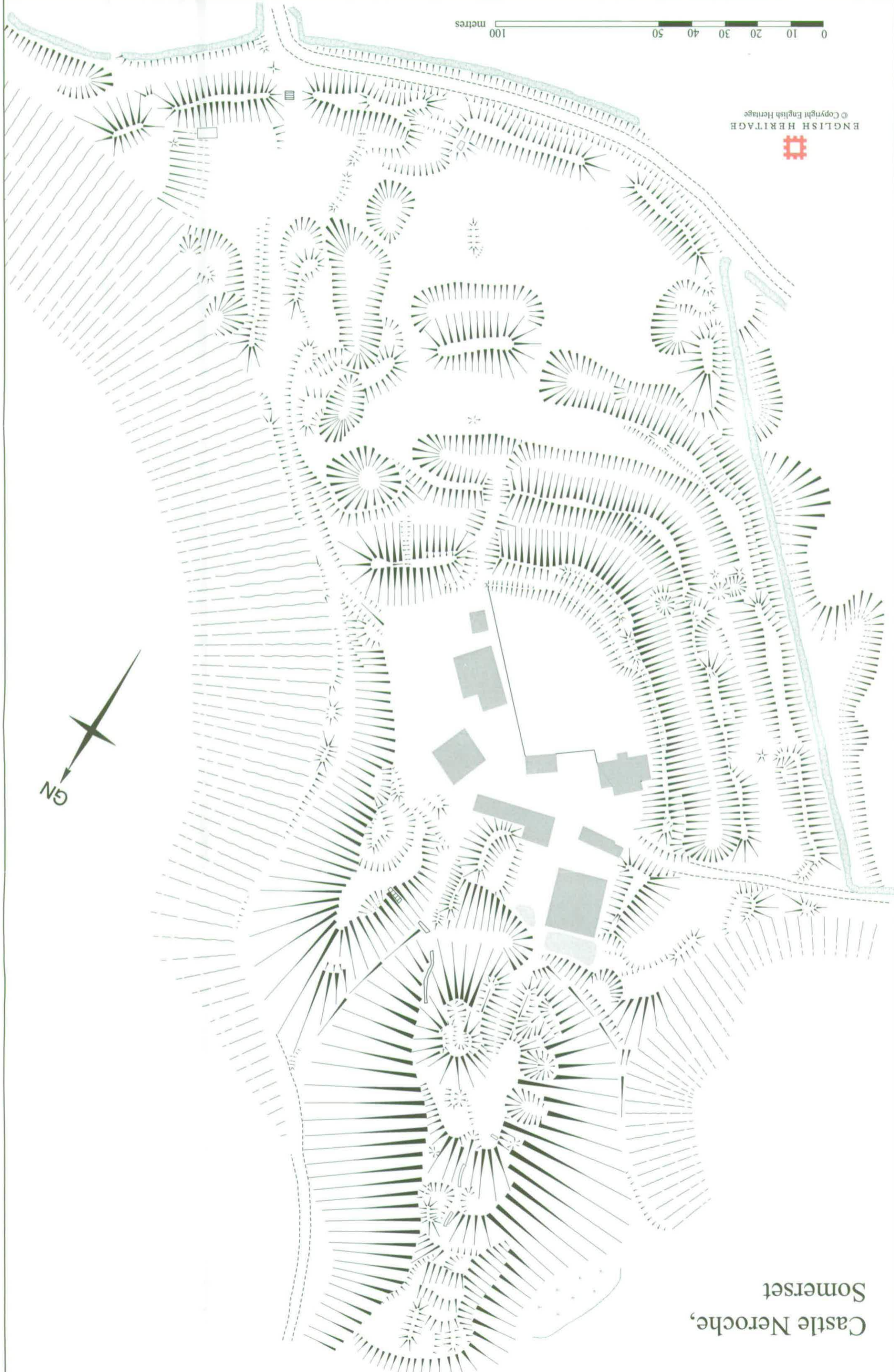
- A. An outer enclosure – bank and ditch
- B. An inner enclosure – bank and ditch, later adapted to form a bailey
- C. A secondary rampart – bank and ditch surrounding the inner enclosure
- D. An outwork – a short bank and ditch between the secondary rampart and outer enclosure
- E. An inner bailey or 'barbican' – bank
- F. A motte – a mound with a ditch to the south and a bank and ditch on the north side
- G. An area of low earthworks to the north of the motte
- H. An upper mound on the summit of the motte

Castle Neroche, Somerset

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0 10 20 30 40 50 100 metres



The outer enclosure (A)

The outermost enclosure, is believed by previous writers to be the earliest surviving element, though its exact date and position within the site chronology have yet to be established. It consists of a simple, single earth and stone bank, with vestiges of a ditch now mostly disguised by a road and other disturbance. The bank was probably once continuous, excepting entrances, and runs for 400m commencing on the summit of a small rise at the top of the eastern escarpment. It follows a gently curving course for 180m, then turns sharply north-west on a virtually straight alignment to meet the top edge of the north-facing escarpment. It effectively captures the top of the ridge and creates an enclosed area of 3.37ha. The bank measures between 16m at its widest point and 12m at its narrowest, and survives to a maximum height of 4.3m. There is a notable contrast in the profile of the bank at the south-east end, which is much sharper and represents the highest section, compared with the straight section along the western side, which is generally lower and more spread.

There is a number of breaches in the bank. Three of these (b, d & e) are a result of sand quarrying and a fourth (f) was created when the modern farm entrance was cut through. A vestigial mound (g) of soil to the north of the farm road at the edge of the steep escarpment, represents the current terminal of the bank. Two of the breaches (a and c) have potential as entrances contemporary with one or more periods of occupation. Both face south on the curving section of the bank. The bull-nosed terminals of the banks at (c) have the appearance of original features, but the opening is fairly narrow measuring only 4.5m at ground level. It opens onto the road below, which now occupies the former ditch. The south side of the ditch survives as a stepped hedge-bank but there is no evidence for a causeway across to it which might be expected to show as a rise in the lane. Neither is there any continuation of an entrance in the form of a trackway or hollow way in the field, although this could of course have been ploughed out. The excavation of a trench within this opening by Davison failed to produce any evidence as to its original purpose or date (Davison 1972, 19).

The second candidate, 100m to the east (a) is far better positioned. It has a 5.6m wide opening and is defined by high rounded terminals. Its alignment with the lane makes it well placed to have been a continuation of any route which mounted the escarpment through the earthworks to continue northwards. A route from Chard to Taunton once passed through this opening and it is suggested that it may have done so since earliest times (see discussion below).

The ditch survives as a recognisable earthwork only along the outside of the short south-eastern section of bank, between the road and the eastern escarpment, delineated on the south side by a hedge-bank. This stretch of the ditch is currently occupied by a footpath or bridleway, and there is potential for the original profile and other deposits to survive beneath this. To the west of the breach (c) a modern tarmac road occupies the bottom of the ditch, with the hedge-bank and raised level of the field continuing on the south side marking the outer lip. Beyond the bend in the rampart, in an adjacent field to the west of the site, a somewhat amorphous and shallow hollow along the full length of the boundary probably marks further evidence for the outer ditch. It has been eroded and reshaped by sand quarrying and agricultural activity and therefore is not immediately recognisable as a rampart ditch.

The inner ramparts

Within the outer enclosure is what has been characterised by Davison (1972) as the earthwork components of a medieval castle. This comprises a bi-vallate outer bailey, believed to have started life as a 'ringwork'; a small inner bailey or barbican at the foot of the motte, now badly destroyed; a length of what Davison described as an 'advance work' or outwork, between the outer bailey and the, outer enclosure and a motte.

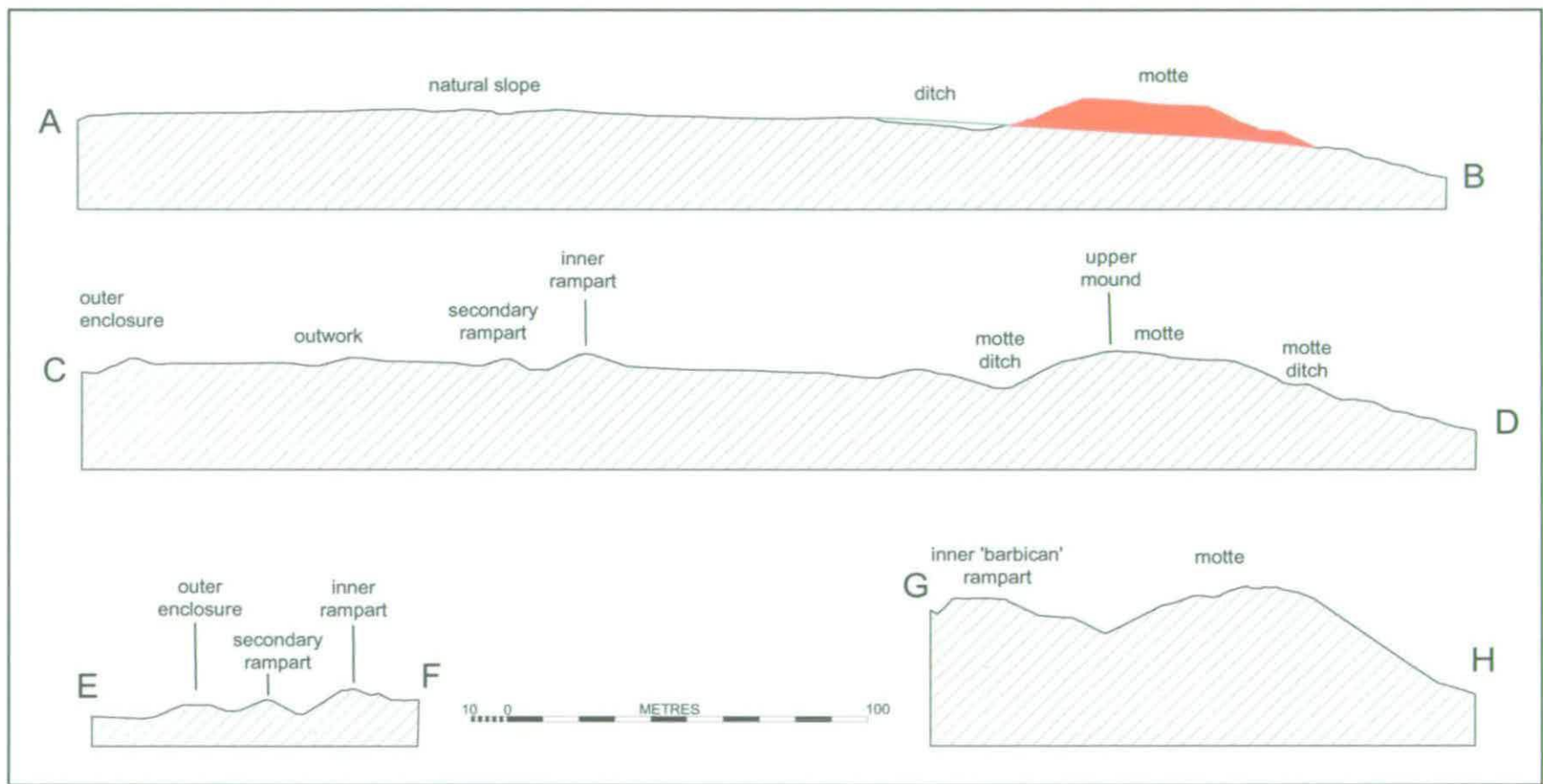


Fig. 7. Section drawing showing: (A-B) relationship of motte to natural ground (motte artifact shown in red; old ground surface shown in green); (C-D) profile of the ramparts and motte north to south; (E-F) profile across the ramparts west to east; (G-H) height relationship between motte and inner bailey or 'barbican' earthworks. For positions see Fig. 8)

The inner enclosure or bailey (B)

The bailey ramparts represent the strongest defensive element at Castle Neroche and consist of two parallel banks (B & C) with ditches, which enclose an area of 0.83ha at the tip of the plateau laid out in a similar way to the outer rampart, with no bank on the eastern side where the steep escarpment provided the necessary strength. On the north-western side however, the ramparts curve inwards towards the motte. The inner bank is the stronger of the two. It has a sharply-defined angular profile with steep sides and has a maximum height from the bottom of the silted ditch of 7m. The bank has a maximum width of 24.6m from the bottom of the ditch to the inner base. A secondary smaller bank of up to 1.5m wide by 0.5m high runs along the crest of the main bank which is particularly visible along the western side. The rampart has no surviving association with the motte which is separated from it by the deep motte ditch. Any relationship between these features has been further confused by the west end of the bank having been sharply cut back to accommodate modern farm buildings, resulting in the current precipitous northern terminal.

A ditch runs around the foot of the rampart exterior. At the eastern end of the ditch a large sand quarry (h) and a trackway have effaced any association the ditch may have had with the edge of the escarpment. At the northern end the profile of the ditch has been lost due to its use as a slurry pit. However, the northern point of this ditch has been separated from the motte ditch by a flat-topped bank (j) linking the base of the rampart to the top of the natural escarpment to the west. This is likely to be a recent feature, probably associated with the slurry pit, and hollowing on the north side of this bank shows the true profile and depth of the ditch where the cutting of the motte ditch has sectioned it. The motte ditch (k) in its present form has therefore clearly cut through the rampart and ditch, which may once have joined the foot of the motte.

A garden enclosure, associated with Castle Neroche Farm, in the form of hedge bank runs around part of the interior of the rampart. On the west side it mounts the bank to run north along the crest.

The secondary ramparts (C)

The secondary rampart and ditch run parallel with the inner enclosure or bailey on the exterior but are of lesser proportions. The bank has a more spread and rounded profile than its inner counterpart measuring only 18m at base and the depth of the ditch from the top of the bank is generally very much shallower at only 3m. At the eastern end of the bank its appearance has been altered by a large quarry pit (h), but what does survive suggests that the bank deviated to the south at this point and did not continue to the escarpment edge. The ditch however, appears to fade out before meeting the sand quarry and a small patch of apparently undisturbed ground survives between the terminal of the ditch and the pit. Although the quarry has destroyed much earthwork evidence in this vicinity, it is notable that a bank, which is easily dismissed as spoil, existed on the north side of the quarry pit sloping into the inner ditch. However, spoil is not present at any of the other quarry pits, the sand having little if any overburden, and this feature could be a remnant of the defences.

The ditch here is very shallow, at as little as 0.3m in depth, which strongly suggests it was never completed. Along the western side of the rampart, towards the northern end, the ditch is more virtual than actual, its depth being artificially enhanced by the closeness of the outer rampart which runs parallel close by.

There are two main breaches which traverse both banks and both ditches but neither seem likely to be the position of an original entrance. The modern farm access road, after cutting through the outer enclosure (A) continues through both lines of the inner defences (B & C). The resultant

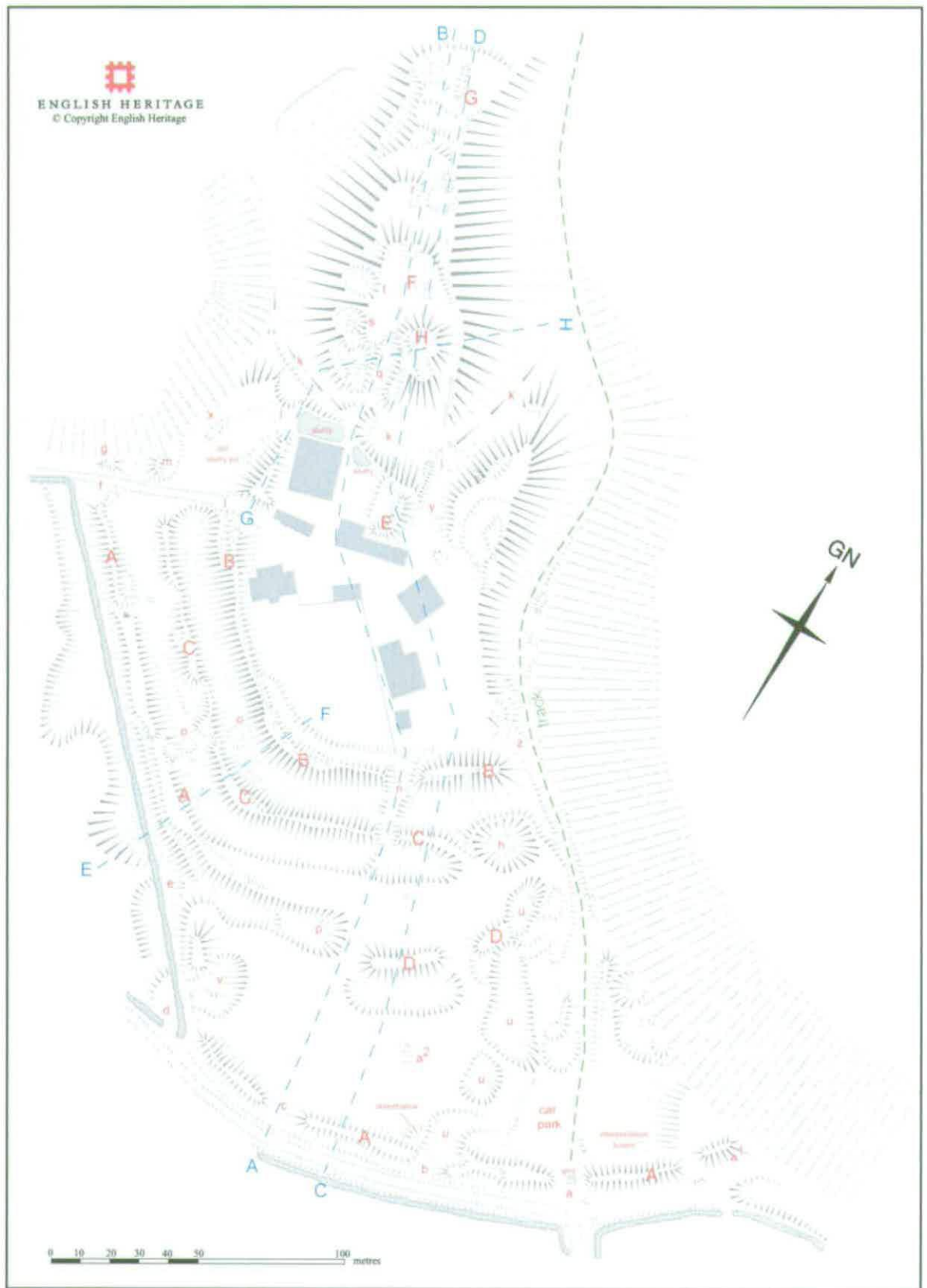


Fig. 8. EH earthwork plan with annotations (red) and section lines (blue).

cutting through the large rampart (l) has precipitous sides and is wide enough only for a vehicle track at 2.25m. A causeway has been constructed across the inner ditch to bear the track. The middle rampart has also been cut sharply on the north side though to the south it has been removed well back from the track; north of the breach this rampart survives only as a vestigial bank which meets with the edge of the natural escarpment (m). A further short section of bank survives

running along the lip of the escarpment (x). It is a low spread bank of up to 0.8m high with rounded ends and could have been a possible continuation of the secondary rampart though it now stands isolated from any other section of earthwork.

A second set of cuts (n) through the defences occur along the southern side and are likely to have formed an earlier entrance to the farm, via a lane marked on Warre's plan of 1854, though now disused. The two cuttings, which have slightly different axis and are therefore not aligned, have steep sides and earth removed from them has been used to create a banked causeway across the inner ditches. No made-up causeway exists across the outer ditch. Results from the excavations support the idea that these breaches were a modern intervention (Davison 1972).

An area of disturbance which straddles both ditches and the outer rampart on the west side is the remains of Gray's 71ft trench (Cutting 1; Gray 1903, 33), apparently never backfilled (o).

The outwork (D)

Two sections of a low bank, with ditch, are located near the southern end of the site, roughly halfway between the inner and outer sets of ramparts. Between the two there is a narrow breach defined by well-rounded terminals on the banks. The western section of bank is 37m long and 18.5m wide at the base of the silted ditch, and 1.1m high, giving a low, spread appearance. The 0.8m-deep silted ditch to the south runs for the full length and also has rounded terminals. The eastern section is set at a slight angle to that on the west and its eastern end has been effaced by sand quarrying; evidence of an associated shallow ditch is just about perceivable. Davison (1972) believed that this set of features never continued west of the current terminal, and a linear hollow which is so located was probably a result of sand extraction (p) (Davison 1971).

The inner bailey or 'barbican' (E)

An earthwork which has been described by Davison (1972) as a small inner bailey or 'barbican' sits at the foot of the motte to the south of the motte ditch and would once have enclosed a roughly rectangular area of approximately 0.1ha. It has suffered a considerable degree of destruction in the 19th and 20th centuries to accommodate farm buildings and the centre section on the south side has been completely removed. The most important surviving part is on the east side where a bank of 11m wide by 2.5m-high touches the edge of the motte ditch to run south then south-east before terminating at the wall of a farm building. On the west side this bank is visible only as a short stubb which extends for approximately 5m from the main inner rampart, near the farm entrance. Thus the eastern boundary of this inner bailey shared the large rampart of the outer bailey.

The motte (F)

The motte has frequently been depicted as a classic 'pudding basin' shape mound, placed on top of a rounded and precipitous natural promontory with a fully circumferential ditch (Davison 1972, Fig. 2; Kenyon 1990,30; Adkins 1992, 36; Dunning 1995, 9; Barker & Higham 1992, 49). These depictions are based on the OS 1:2500 first-edition map of 1886 (Fig. 4) which has been altered with inappropriate additions in most later illustrations. This is extremely misleading as the motte is in fact a remodelling of the sloping narrow ridge which has been artificially heightened over a reasonably small area to create a raised mound (Fig. 7). It maintains, and blends in with, the profile of much of the natural topography in that the long escarpment sides of the ridge still exist as the lower sides of the motte. The depiction was corrected on the OS plan by N.V. Quinnell during resurvey in 1962 (OS card ST 21 NE 8) and published on subsequent editions. Ironically the correct

morphology had also been noted to some extent on Warre's plan of 1854 (Fig. 3); presumably this was because a motte was a concept of the future and his surveyor would have had no preconception of what a motte 'should' look like, so planned it as he observed it.

A massive ditch (k) was cut across the neck of the ridge to form the south and east flanks of the motte and the excavated material was piled up onto the ridge to form a flat-topped summit mound. The height of the flat surface of the motte above the surviving natural ground to the south east (Fig. 7) is approximately 2.9m and a smaller upper mound (H) on the south corner – a probable later addition – adds a further 3m to the height. The depth of the ditch gives the illusion of greater height on the south-east and south-west sides of the motte and effectively divorces it from the defensive elements of the ramparts to the south.

On the summit of the motte a raised (H) mound with a base diameter of 28m has been identified by Davison as a later addition which accommodated a stone tower associated with a 'shell keep' all contained within the space of the motte summit (Davison 1971,). The mound is a fairly regular flattened cone with a height of 3m. The summit has been partly hollowed by past archaeological excavations.

A linear hollow (q) of 9.6m wide by approximately 2m deep runs from the top of the motte to the base of the ditch on the south side, and its alignment continues as what appears to be a slight causeway running across the ditch and into the bailey. This hollow was previously considered by Davison (1972) to be a later quarry, but it has a moderate bank running down both sides and must surely be a candidate for an access route to the motte from the bailey.

At the foot of the northern side of the artificial portion of the motte, a linear earthwork extends east-west between the edges of the two natural scarps (r). It comprises a hollow with a bank on the northern side and the whole feature has been bisected by the modern footpath. An excavation trench cut through here by Gray in 1903, established that this was once a defensive ditch of up to 10ft (3m) deep and that the apparent causeway occupied by the footpath is a modern feature. The west side of the ditch has become silted giving the appearance of a terrace; to the east the upcast from Gray's excavations have left the earthwork in a rather disturbed state.

Two large sand extraction pits (s and t), each of approximately 10m diameter, recorded by Warre in 1854 lie just below the summit of the motte on the east side. Warre considered these to be about 100 years old, though based only on anecdotal evidence (Warre 1854, 47).

Earthworks on the north side of the motte (G)

Below the artificial slopes of the motte on the north side a series of terraces and linear earthworks have been recorded, first by Warre in 1854, followed by the OS in the 1880s. When Quinnell re-surveyed the site for the OS in 1962 he dismissed these earthworks as a combination of field banks and natural features (OS card ST 21 NE 8) but elements have not yet been included in any published discussion of Castle Neroche. Much of the lower part of this area is currently under dense vegetation and cannot be surveyed, however, that which is visible is suggestive of either terraced banks or building platforms. What purpose they would have served positioned outside the defences and in what period might be better understood when the dense vegetation is cleared.

Pillow mound

Just within the outer enclosure at the south end is a low, linear earth mound 10m long by 3m wide with rounded terminals, and a slight ditch on the west side (a²). This is recorded on the OS map as a pillow mound which it strongly resembles. No warrening activity is documented here and the mound may be the result of some other unknown activity.

Sand quarries

Several sections of the defensive earthworks have been damaged by sand extraction quarries. Their date is not known for certain but it is notable that there were less of them on Warre's 1854 plan. The largest of these (u) cuts right through the outer enclosure and extends for 111m north to the ditch of the outer bailey. It has been transected by raised footpaths in more recent times. At the northern end of this trench a separate circular pit has completely effaced a section of the rampart ditch. Further damage has occurred on the south-west corner of the outer rampart where an elliptical (v) pit and a linear trench (p) have been dug to extract sand.

DISCUSSION

The location

Previous writers have rightly observed that Castle Neroche is located so as to overlook much of central Somerset including the Vale of Taunton, the south quarter of the Quantock Hills and the western side of the Somerset Levels, giving it major strategic importance. It is situated on the very northern edge of the Blackdowns plateau, which falls away steeply below. This commanding view of the area to the north would undoubtedly have contributed to the decision to build the post-conquest fortification here, especially within the context of rebellion as documented in 1067-8. Viewed from below this prominent landmark would have provided a formidable reminder to those in the low country to the north just who was in control. It is notable also that good views to the south across what is essentially a plateau are gained from the top of the south-east corner of the outer enclosure, where its course deliberately follows a rise in the ground (a¹), though today this is partly obscured by trees.

This commanding position may also have been an important factor in the choice of this site in earlier times. However, perhaps of equal or greater importance when attempting to identify origins, is its position on what was probably the only natural route to provide a means of easy ascent up the escarpment from the north. Although other routes were adopted later, the gentle gradient of this natural ramp is an obvious choice for a primary route and could have developed into a major trackway for foot traffic with origins probably in prehistory.

The eastern escarpment of the Blackdowns is approached by Hare Lane, another probable early track which takes advantage of a similar graded spur in the escarpment (Fig. 5). Hare Lane and the Castle Neroche track converge only 160m from the outer ramparts, so the site is ideally positioned to give access to these routes. Its significance as a meeting place for travellers approaching from at least three points of the compass cannot be underestimated, with all the implications of trade, politics, social and economic factors coming into play.

One hundred and fifty metres east of the outer earthworks a steep and deeply-cut hollow way also gives access up the escarpment though not with such ease as the castle track. The origins of this route are obscure but the existence of a more arduous alternative route so close to the other suggest that the earlier route was not available or restricted for a period of time. A likely episode for this was when the medieval castle took on its strategic importance after the conquest and access was halted by the motte being built across the route.

The development of wheeled vehicles probably led to the need for the slightly easier gradient of a built track and this may have been the origin of the current route which runs up the eastern escarpment of the castle and through the outer earthworks. In later times this would develop into a major link between Chard and Taunton, which included the section through the ramparts, still in use in 1821 (Davison 1972). Though the track through the earthworks was not adopted for the modern road its alignment with the roads still in use is quite clear on maps (Fig. 5). The track remains in use today as a bridlepath.

The earthworks

The major revelation from Davison's excavations at Castle Neroche was the idea that the motte came fairly late in the sequence, built over part of an earlier 'ringwork' to form a motte and bailey configuration. During this same phase the remaining section of the bailey rampart (formerly the 'ringwork') was heightened and an inner bailey was built at the foot of the motte. A second line of defence, between the main bailey rampart and the outer rampart, together with the earlier enclosure beneath the bailey were not conclusively dated by Davison.

An analysis of the earthwork survey has provided the opportunity to revise the story of the site as a whole and has enabled excavated material to be looked at in a new light thus offering further possibilities for interpretation. Davison's work was undertaken within a research framework which focused on medieval fortifications. Although he had an open mind as to the possibility of earlier elements at the site, the lack of excavated prehistoric evidence left him with little to say about the earlier periods. In more recent times the concept of multi-period re-use of large defensive earthworks of prehistoric origin is more widely accepted even when less obvious. Given the paucity of evidence to provide *any* date from the ramparts, it is now not unreasonable to speculate on a prehistoric origin for the outer enclosure (A), the earlier phase for the inner enclosure (B), the secondary rampart (C) and the outwork (D).

The lack of dateable excavated material from the outer enclosure (A) was frustrating for Davison and somewhat hampered his interpretation, though he was prepared to place this element of the site before the Norman Conquest within his sequence, favouring a Dark Age date. Nevertheless, within the Westcountry context the origins for Castle Neroche as a whole are far more likely to be prehistoric, ie Iron Age/Romano-British (RB), than post-Roman or early medieval, though later re-use within those periods is highly likely. Clifftop or edge-of-plateau sites are a well-known category of late-prehistoric or RB enclosure and that at Castle Neroche would fall easily within Burrow's Group II classification, ie sited at clifftops or plateaux edges and utilising natural slopes as part of their defence (Burrow 1981). Though not listed in the gazetteer of his Somerset study, Burrow does postulate an Iron Age or early post-Roman origin for Castle Neroche on the basis of place name evidence (Burrow 1981, 54). Similar siting may be observed elsewhere in Somerset at Clifton Camp overlooking the Avon Gorge, and Taps Coombe. In all cases, including Castle Neroche it is likely that a portion of the site has been lost to erosion of the plateau or cliff edge.

There are few examples of earthworks of this size and complexity (excluding the post-Conquest elements) known to have been constructed after the Iron Age/RB periods in the South-West, the possible exception being High Peak in East Devon where the case for post-Roman construction is based on lack of earlier evidence from limited excavations which provided exclusively Dark Age material (Pollard 1966). Re-occupation of hillforts and hillslope enclosures in the post-Roman period was, contrastingly, commonplace; prime examples in Somerset with excavated evidence include South Cadbury, and Cadbury Congressbury.

The inner enclosure (B), which makes up Davison's Period 2 'ringwork' and Period 3 bailey, is, despite excavation by Davison and Gray, still of uncertain origin. The fact that the rampart was heightened apparently at the same time as the motte was constructed in the 11th century, was established by stratified finds but the dating of its initial construction to the immediate post-Conquest period is based only on the assumption that it was contemporary with the earliest ceramic evidence from elsewhere on the site. However, there was no stratified association between these finds and the earlier phase of the earthwork. There is no reason therefore why this earthwork should not potentially be prehistoric in origin, as its appearance would suggest, and possibly the primary element of the site. As a mid 11th-century ringwork type castle this earthwork would have been exceedingly large

Fig. 9. Interpretation showing some possible elements of the prehistoric phases and probable original appearance of the natural escarpments.



Fig. 10. Interpretation showing possible elements of the medieval phases and showing the position of the motte in relation to the original natural escarpments.



at approximately 3.7ha, for the late prehistoric period however, its size and layout would be nothing out of the ordinary.

It is intriguing that in its earliest form the inner enclosure took on the 'C'-shaped layout which excluded a strip of ground on the north-west side at the top of the escarpment rather than using the extremely steep natural slope as a defensive element itself, as both the outer lines of defence (A & C) did, capturing and controlling the entire spur of land. An explanation for this could be that this area was deliberately left open to allow access around the outside of the enclosure to enable through traffic, having ascended the escarpment to the north, to bypass the enclosure on the western side without having to enter, the latter being ideally positioned to command the routeway without blocking it. This does not accord with the strictly military and strategic purpose to be expected in a fortification of the immediate post-Conquest period and suggests the site may be better understood as a focus for a community which was so positioned to provide access to a variety of routes and networks.

The secondary bank and ditch (C) which surrounds and runs parallel with the primary inner rampart (B) apparently terminates before it reaches the quarry pit (h) at its eastern end and there is an area of almost 10m of undisturbed ground between the rounded ditch terminal and the quarry pit. The ditch is particularly shallow at this point surviving to only 0.3m deep. The bank of the rampart also appears to deviate slightly before meeting this quarry leaving a further short distance of apparently undisturbed ground between the easternmost traces of the bank and the quarry. This deviation in its alignment, coupled with the position of the ditch terminal and the unexplained section of bank on the north side of the quarry pit at the foot of the inner ditch (see description of secondary rampart above) points to something a little more complex occurring on this section of rampart, possibly associated with an entrance (see below).

This rampart is poorly represented at its northern end between the modern farm track and the north-west escarpment (m), where the bank is low and disturbed and not generally on a commensurate scale with the southern sections, but a low isolated section of bank (x) appears to be a continuation of it running parallel with the top of the escarpment.

Davison was unable to assign a date to this line of the defences but assumed it to be contemporary with the main bailey earthworks. Given that the main conclusions of the earthwork survey favour prehistoric origins for the rampart elements of the site generally it seems likely that these features would also fit within such a scheme, contemporary or later perhaps than the postulated primary hilltop enclosure (B). The addition of further lines of defence (both A & C may be later than B) which also controlled access to the area more tightly, implies either an increased need for security or a desire for a more visible presence in the landscape to raise its status. This rampart was not strengthened when the inner defensive line (B) was heightened in the 11th century AD, hence its lesser proportions.

A second line of defence on this scale is not something possessed by many motte and bailey castles though other examples exist at Sandal and Hen Domen. In the case of Castle Neroche, given the massive proportions of the main bailey ramparts and the existence of the outer enclosure (A), a second line of defence would seem rather unnecessary. If put to use in the 11th century then it is probably only because the earthworks already existed.

The linear hollow in the south-west exterior of the bailey (p) has previously been dismissed as a sand quarry. Its position and alignment however, do give it the appearance of an additional third ditch suggesting it may represent an attempt at adapting the outer enclosure into a third concentric line of defence. Counter to this is the fact that no bank accompanies the hollow and it seems that a sand quarry remains as the most likely explanation.

Although at least one likely entrance (a) into the outer enclosure (A) can be suggested with some confidence, a satisfactory position for entrances into the castle bailey (B), as it was in Davison's Period 3 - the primary enclosure in earlier times - has proved illusive. If an entrance had been placed within any of the sections which survive today, unless filled in a later phase, its position would be obvious. However, none of the current breaches resemble the type of earthwork feature we would expect to have housed a strong entrance. Perhaps therefore the entrance was placed within a section of the defences which does not survive so well or at all.

One possible position for an entrance to the bailey or inner enclosure could be the south-east corner (z) where the rampart meets the natural escarpment and where the modern trackway cuts through. This would have been a weak point on the defences where the height and continuity of the artificial rampart was replaced by a sharp corner and a lowering in height as the course of the palisade adopted the lip of the natural escarpment. A gatehouse could have helped counter such a weakness. An entrance in this position would help explain some of the incongruities in the secondary ditch and bank in this vicinity and it would have been correctly aligned to have used the same approach route as that through the outer enclosure (a). As to an entrance into the earlier phase of enclosure B, another likely position would be on the north end, overlooking the approach from below but any evidence would be buried beneath the later motte.

The surviving section of what Davison refers to as an 'advance work' (D), consists of a wide, spread bank with a shallow external ditch and an opening through the bank and ditch, suggestive of an entrance. It cannot now be known if the eastern end of this earthwork ever reached the escarpment edge because sand quarrying has effaced this area, but there is no association with any other element of the defences and the position is something of an anomaly. Excavation of the 'entrance' on this feature was uninformative leaving Davison to conclude that this never became a defensible earthwork and was likely to have been incomplete. Interestingly Warre (1854) only depicts the western section of the bank. This is despite the fact that the sand pit (u), which is assumed to have destroyed much of the eastern section, was also not present on his plan though others were, and could therefore have been dug between 1854 and 1886 when the OS plan was surveyed. It is possible that some of the earthwork remains of D were too slight to catch Warre's eye.

One possible interpretation for these elements could be that they made up an outwork associated with the suggested earlier prehistoric phase. Hilltop enclosures with sections of external linear outwork detached from the main defences on the uphill side are a well-known category of late prehistoric earthwork, other examples in the South West include Myrtlebury, Voley and Staddon. In these cases the outworks are often interpreted as mainly of a symbolic nature designed to be an outer boundary visible to those approaching the site along flat or downward sloping hill tops. At many of the known examples the outwork is some distance from the main enclosure, up to 150m at Myrtlebury for example, though at both Staddon and Voley on Exmoor an outwork is similarly positioned to that at Neroche which is only 25m from the main earthwork. However, it is difficult to reconcile this idea with the fact that a very small amount of medieval pottery was excavated from the upper layers of the bank, near the entrance.

The 11th-century motte, although massive in appearance, was relatively simple to create by digging a deep curving ditch (k) across the neck of the spur and piling the resulting earth on top of the natural ridge. The effect of doing this however was to separate the motte from the rampart earthworks on the west side by some distance. If the bailey and motte were in use contemporaneously, then this considerable gap needed to be bridged at some point by a timber palisade. A further problem would be to establish continuity of the palisade along the edge of the natural scarp on the east side where no artificial earthwork exists and where the digging of the ditch has left a large

narrow, flat-topped spur protruding to the north. The palisade would either have to follow the lip of the spur, giving it a rather curious ground plan, or it followed some other course which is not evident from surviving earthworks.

With these problems in mind it is tempting to suggest that the motte ditch only reached its eventual proportions in Davison's Period 4 when excavated evidence indicates occupation focused on the motte. This is partly countered by the fact that there are vestiges of what may be the eastern inner bailey bank overlying the slope of the ditch (i), but more convincing evidence for the late cutting of the ditch can be seen where it has cut through and sectioned the ditch associated with the inner rampart on north-west side (j). Here a hollowed section of the rampart ditch is visible demonstrating the later date for the cutting of the present motte ditch (k). Under these circumstances it seems very likely that the entrance to the motte in this late phase was via the short causeway at the apex of the ditch then up the embanked hollow on the south side of the motte (q). Whether occupation of the 'barbican' or bailey continued during this period cannot be established from the earthworks, though Davison's excavation results suggest not. If the motte ditch was cut to its full depth and width in the final phase of occupation then one result is that earthwork evidence for the layout in its earliest phase is now lost to us. The precise relationship between the motte and other contemporary earthwork elements continues to be one of the enduring puzzles of the motte and bailey episode at Castle Neroche.

The construction of a prominent motte at Castle Neroche, represents a radical contrast of emphasis for the site between its earliest and latest uses. Though it may be inconspicuous today, in its heyday the motte and any timber or stone building which surmounted it would have been highly visible from much of the land to the north, set in a landscape with few large-scale man made structures, especially if at that time its immediate environs was free of trees. The role of the place therefore changed from one of security for the occupants and their livestock as well as their means of controlling an area including its routes and trade, to one where control is exercised partly by the symbolism of a powerful structure which is looked up to by those on the outside.

A suggested revised chronology for the earthworks based on the survey would place all three sets of ramparts, including the inner enclosure (B) in its earliest form, within the late prehistoric period ie Iron Age or Romano-British. Specific details within that period are more difficult to pin down but it seems likely the inner rampart may have come first to be followed by the secondary rampart (C) and the outer enclosure (A). It would seem logical for a concentric arrangement of earthworks to be the result of expansion rather than contraction and the resulting layout is quite a common form within the Iron Age of the South West, good examples being Clovelly Dykes, Denbury and Milber Down. An example of very similar layout and proportions exists at Wasteberry Camp in North Devon which also has a similar topographical location, sited on the edge of a ravine. If the 'outwork' (D) could be placed within the prehistoric period with more confidence then it would certainly be early, contemporary with the primary, inner enclosure. Although there is every possibility the site may have been re-used in the post-Roman and pre-Conquest periods, earthwork evidence for this is not forthcoming. We can be sure however, that the strengthening of the main inner rampart together with the addition of a motte (F) and an inner bailey or barbican (E) were works of the immediate post-Conquest period, datable by Davison's finds. Later occupation of the site, also revealed through excavation, appears to have been limited to the summit of the motte where an upper mound (H) and a hollowed approach up the motte provide earthwork evidence of this phase. It was also probably during this last phase that the massive motte ditch reached its final proportions.

CONCLUSION

Decisive analysis of the earthworks at Castle Neroche has proved extremely difficult because many crucial elements and relationships have either been quarried away or destroyed to make way for farm buildings. It is also often difficult to work around the evidence from excavations, the conclusions from which may sometimes disagree with those of earthwork survey. Although the results of the survey have not directly conflicted with those of the excavation the analysis of these two sources of data combined has provided different conclusions regarding the origin and dating of some elements of the site.

Topography was certainly crucial in the choice of location though the reasons behind this choice may have changed from one of security and defence of a community to one of visible symbol of control over the community. A strong argument can now be put forward for several elements of the site having prehistoric origins, though a refined sequence for these earthworks is not yet possible. The banks and ditches of the three lines of defence would be freely accepted as of a type known in the 1st-millennium BC, had excavated evidence provided some finds of that date, rather than the overwhelming quantity of medieval pottery. In this case however, the dearth of excavated items does not provide sufficient grounds to be dismissive of the idea. Firstly because no modern excavation has explored the bottoms of any of the heavily silted ditches where much diagnostic material is most likely to have been found. Secondly, there has been no serious attempt to explore the interiors of the inner or outer enclosures. It is also the case that some earthwork elements previously assumed to be medieval, were only thought so because of the presence of medieval finds excavated elsewhere on the site; no direct association between the finds and the earthworks was identified.

Complicated and massive ramparts of the type witnessed here seem excessive for an 11th/12th century castle which was apparently occupied for only short periods of time and was not important enough to have any surviving documentation. It may be that the medieval castle took the form that it did because the defences already existed and could be adapted; the end result being dictated by an existing layout. Had it been built from scratch then a more modest castle may have resulted.

Future excavations could usefully focus on establishing the earliest origin of the ramparts by examining the bottoms of the ditches in more detail. Undisturbed areas of the interior of both inner and outer enclosures may also prove informative and there may be a role for geophysical investigation in doing so. The positions of the entrances of all periods remains the biggest enigma.

Castle Neroche clearly has much more to it than has previously been revealed but there is still much work to be done.

THE SURVEY

The survey was carried out using a Wildt TC1610 total station theodolite. Three ring traverses of 22, 8 and 7 stations respectively were linked by two common points and three single station open spurs were used to pick up additional detail. Data was captured and downloaded onto a computer and calculated using a Bowditch correction. Heights were recorded throughout, enabling ground models and section drawings to be produced. An attempt at geo-referencing the site using GPS generated NG coordinates had to be abandoned due to the removal of crucial marker pegs by members of the public. At the time of survey much of the site was covered by undergrowth, including scrub and brambles while openings in the tree canopy have allowed large stands of bracken, nettles and knotweed to flourish.

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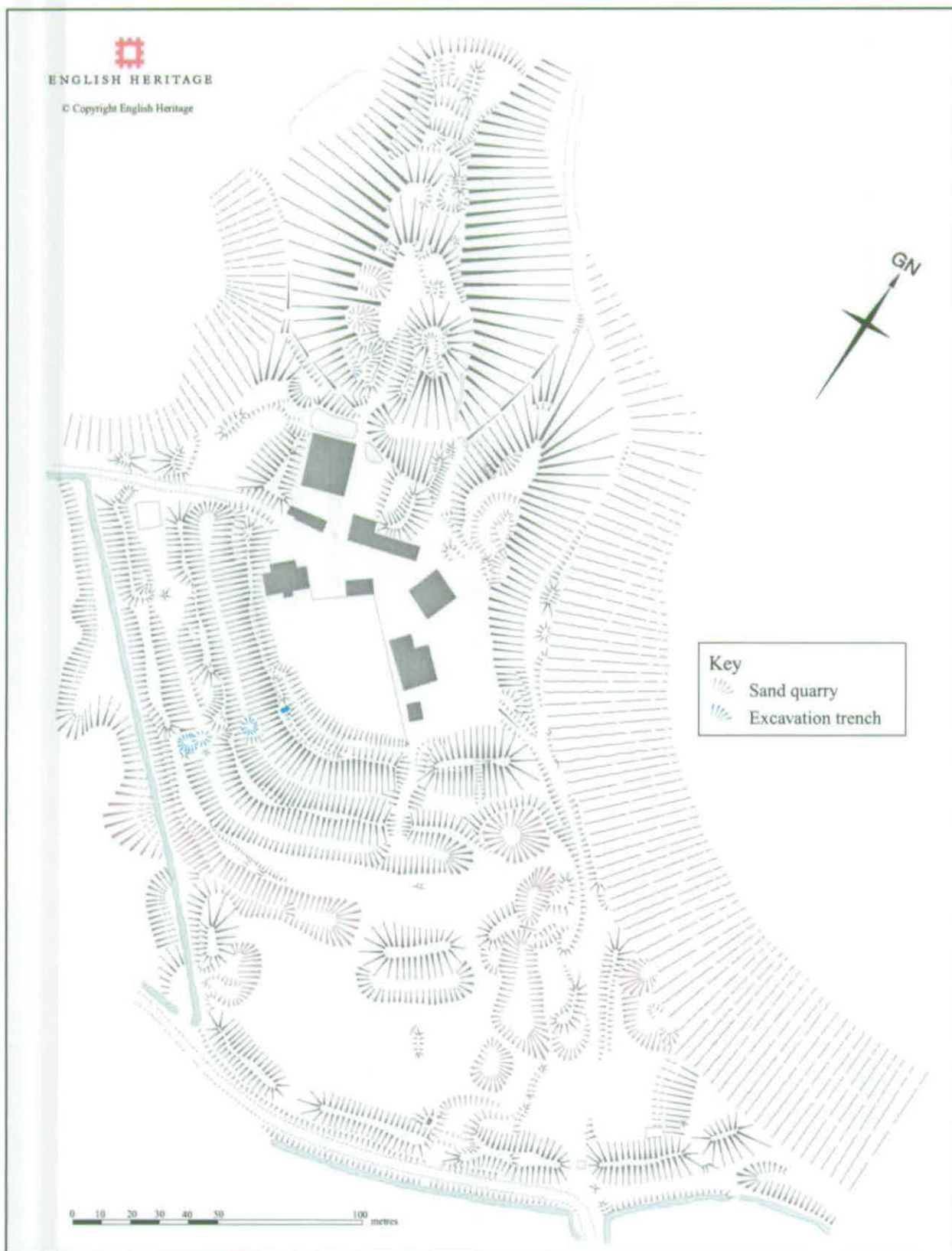


Fig. 11. EH earthwork survey showing the position of sand quarry pits and archaeological excavation trenches.

Plate 1. The outer enclosure earthwork (A) where it meets the eastern escarpment. Looking west.



Plate 2. The green lane which runs over the position of the outer ditch. Deposits may survive beneath.



Plate 3. The massive bank and ditch of the inner enclosure or bailey (B) . View accross the south-west corner.



Plate 4. The rampart of the inner enclosure (B) and the filled in ditch north of the modern farm track.



Plate 5. The motte viewed from the spur of land on the eastern escarpment edge.



Plate 6. The motte ditch (k) on the south-east side and the natural spur of land to the right.



Plate 7. The motte ditch (k) on the south-west side looking SW showing the cut through terminal of the rampart ditch.



Plate 8. The summit of the motte viewed from the north showing the cross rampart and ditch (r).





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