



ENGLISH HERITAGE
DRF 2

Library Copy

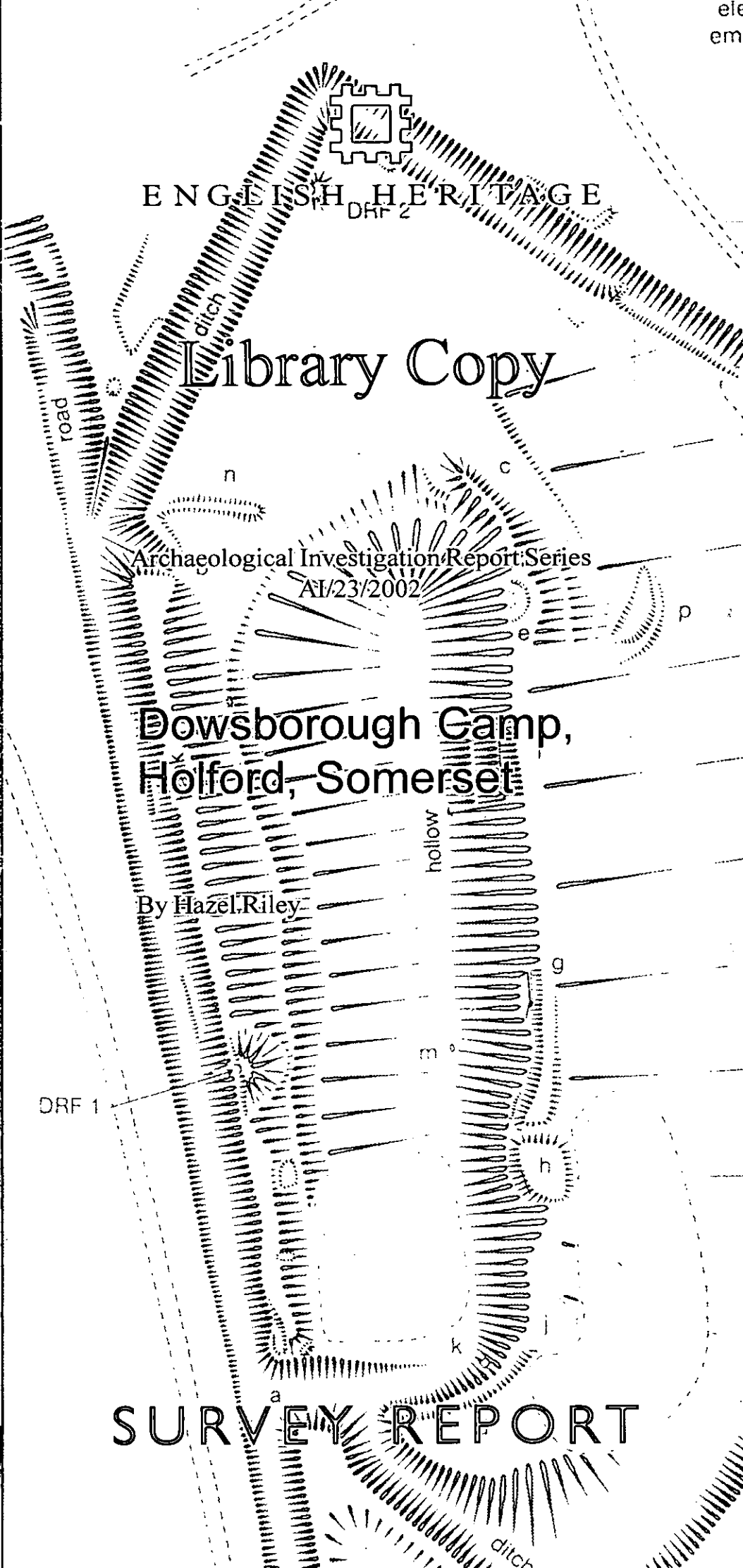
Archaeological Investigation Report Series
AI/23/2002

Dowsborough Camp,
Holford, Somerset

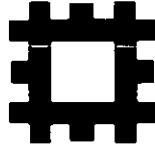
By Hazel Riley

DRF 1

SURVEY REPORT



Archaeological Investigation Report Series
AI/23/2002



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Dowsborough Camp, Holford, Somerset
An archaeological survey by English Heritage

County:	Somerset
District:	West Somerset
Parish:	Holford
OS map no:	ST 13 NE
NGR:	ST 16023912
SAM no:	24007
NMR no:	ST 13 NE 2
SMR no:	Somerset 33306
Surveyed:	January 2002
Report by:	Hazel Riley
Surveyors:	Hazel Riley & Elaine Jamieson

© Copyright English Heritage

Applications for reproduction should be made to English Heritage, NMR Services (01793 414 600)

English Heritage, 5 Malborough Court, Manaton Close, Matford, Exeter EX2 8PF

National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon, SN2 2GZ
Telephone: 01793 414 700

CONTENTS

Summary

INTRODUCTION

Location and geology
The survey

HISTORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

THE BARROW

THE HILLFORT EARTHWORKS

The entrances

THE INTERIOR

OTHER FEATURES

THE WOODLAND

DISCUSSION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

FIGURE LIST

Figure 1

Location map

Figure 2

Air photograph of Dowsborough Hill looking south
NMR 21136/02
© Copyright English Heritage

Figure 3

Dowsborough Camp: Ordnance Survey 1st edition, 1888
Somerset 49.5

Figure 4

The barrow in the north-western corner of Dowsborough Camp: English Heritage 1:200 scale earthwork plan

Figure 5

Dowsborough Camp: English Heritage 1: 1000 scale earthwork plan

Figure 6

Dowsborough Camp: section of the earthworks

Figure 7

Dowsborough Camp: surveying the earthworks

Summary

Dowsborough Camp is an Iron Age hillfort, enclosing an area of some 3 hectares. It comprises a rampart and ditch, with intermittent counterscarp bank. There seems to have been one original entrance. A Bronze Age barrow with a pronounced ditch lies in the north-west corner of the hillfort. The site also contains evidence of later use. Extraction or trial pits, possibly for copper ore, are scattered in and around the hillfort. Charcoal burning platforms also occur in the immediate area, and a possible structure associated with this industry was recorded in the interior. The woodland covering much of the hillfort has been managed for some 300 years. More recent features include slit trenches, probably dating from the Second World War.

INTRODUCTION

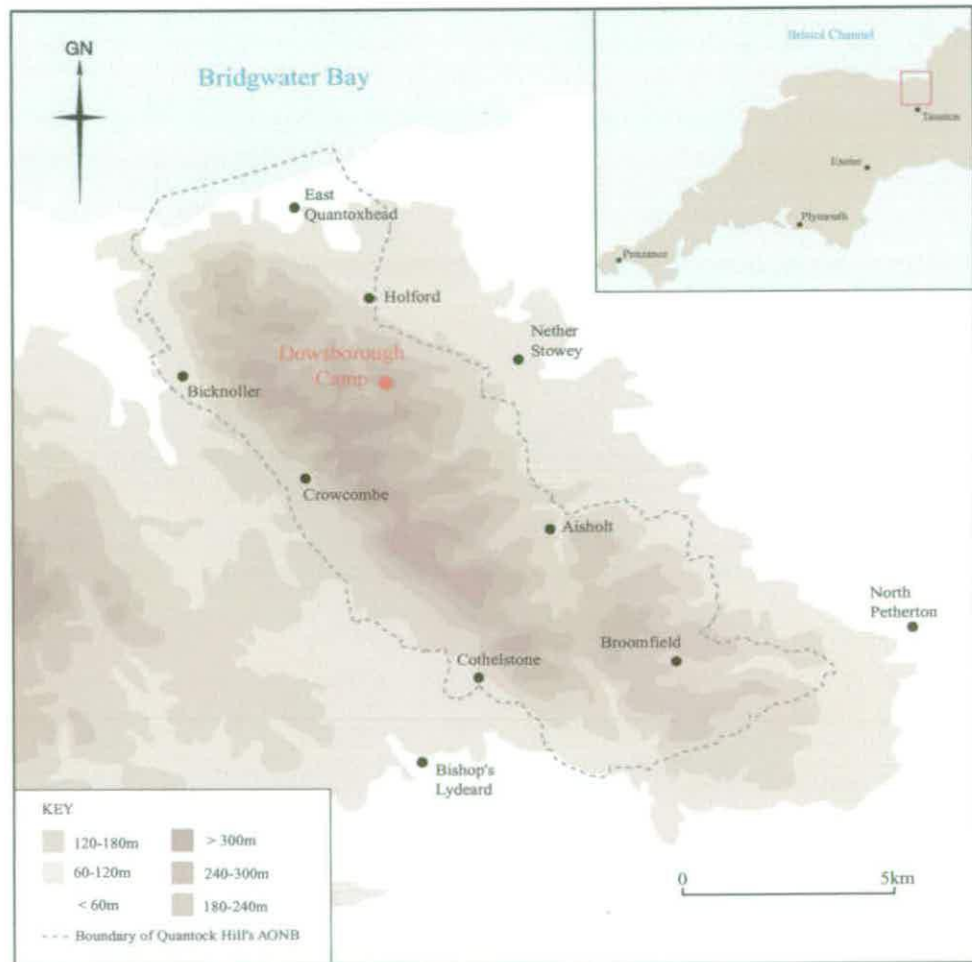


Fig. 1. Location map.

Location and Geology (Figs 1 and 2)

Dowsborough Camp lies towards the eastern edge of the Quantock Hills AONB, centred at ST 160 391. It encloses the summit of a domed hill, one of the most distinctive topographical features of this part of the commons. The site occupies one of the highest parts of the Quantock Hills, at an altitude of over 330m OD. The hill falls away steeply on all sides. The head of Holford Combe lies to the west and south, with Bincombe to the south-east. The northern and eastern sides form part of the eastern escarpment of the Quantock Hills. The hill is covered for the most part in coppiced sessile oak. A clear area on the north-western edge of the site affords views across the Bristol Channel to Wales. Before the woods were planted there would have been

views to the west towards Exmoor and the Brendon Hills, to the east across the Somerset Levels, and south to the Vale of Taunton.



Fig. 2. Air photograph of Dowsborough Hill looking south. NMR 21136/02. © Copyright English Heritage.

The hill is formed of the Devonian Hangman Grits which underlie most of the Quantock commons. On the eastern edge of the hills, the rocks are part of the Little Hangman series of sandstones (British Geological Survey, 1:50 000 series, sheet 295).

The survey

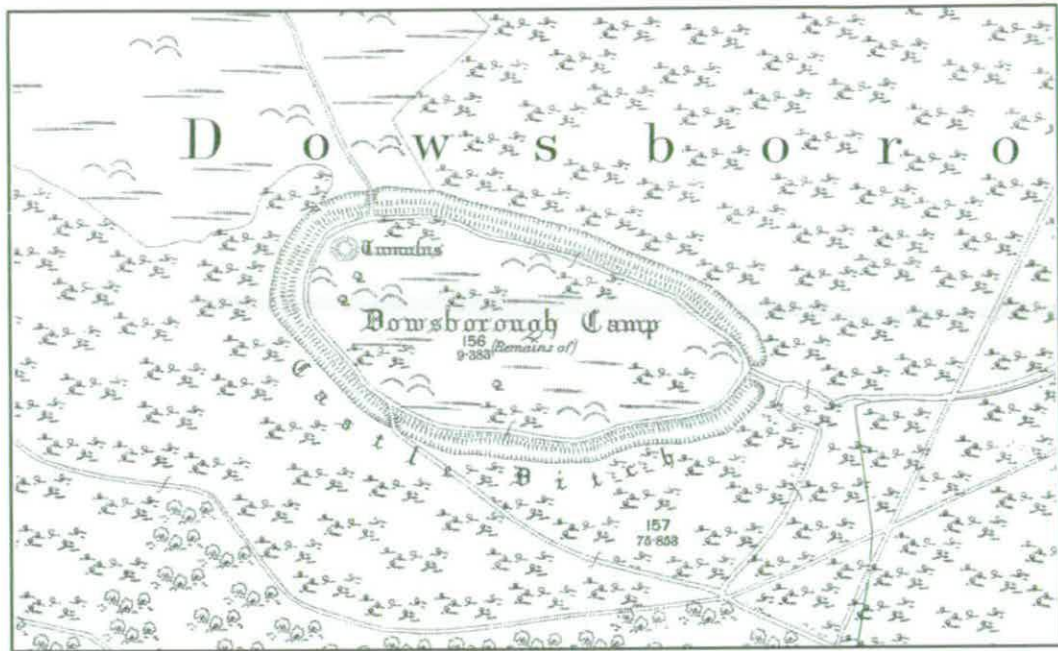
The earthwork survey was undertaken by the Exeter Office of English Heritage, as part of the archaeological survey of the Quantock Hills AONB. The survey was begun in September 2001, in order to record the position of consolidation work carried out on the northern ramparts by Somerset County Council and English Heritage. The survey work was completed in January 2002. The earthwork detail was recorded using a Leica 1610 total station theodolite and completed in the field using graphical methods (Fig 7). The site was located to the National Grid (OSGB36) using Leica single frequency differential GPS (Global Positioning System) equipment.

HISTORICAL SOURCES AND PREVIOUS WORK

Dowsborough Camp has long been a distinctive feature of this part of the Quantock Hills. It is also known as Danesborough Camp. Early maps show several versions of the names: Dansborough (Day and Masters 1782); Douseborough (Greenwood 1822); Dane's Barrow (tithe map 1839). The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map has the legend 'Castle Ditch' below the southern ramparts (Fig 3). Dowsborough had the tradition of a dragon tale attached to it, similar to that linked with Norton Fitzwarren, near Taunton. From this latter site, a fiery dragon emerged to devastate the adjacent lowlands (Allcroft 1908). There have been no recorded excavations on the site.

The hillfort is shown at a small scale on the Ordnance Survey surveyor's drawings of 1802 and the tithe map of 1839. The later Ordnance Survey depictions are at 1:2500 scale. (OS 1802; tithe map 1839; OS 1888).

Fig. 3. Dowsborough Camp: Ordnance Survey 1st edition, 1888, Somerset 49.5.



One of the most frequently noted aspects of Dowsborough Camp in the historical sources is the flagpole. This is mentioned in the latter part of the 19th century (Nichols 1873; Page 1890). On the occasion of the coronation of George V (1910), a tall pole was carried up to the hillfort from Stowey by nine horses (Lawrence 1952, 28). A sketch published in 1924 shows it clearly, standing high on the hill-top (Burrow 1924). The pole was still standing in 1952, but only a fragment remains now.

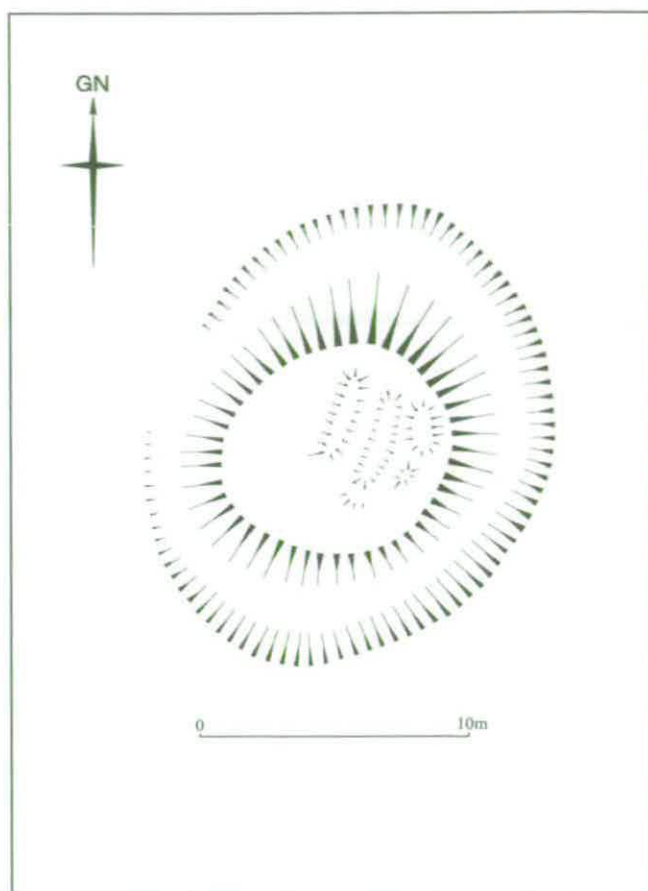
THE BARROW (Fig 4)

The earliest archaeological feature to survive on the hill is a large Bronze Age barrow in the north-western corner of the hillfort, at ST 1590 3915. It is a roughly circular, flat-topped mound, with an encircling ditch. The mound measures 12m in diameter and stands some 1.1m high. Some scrub oak has recently been cleared from the mound. The ditch is 1m wide at its base and 0.7m deep, and is well-defined, apart from on the western edge where a track encroaches on it. The southern part of the ditch is particularly sharp and has the appearance of being relatively recently re-cut or cleaned out. The top of the barrow has a small rectangular hollow in it, measuring some 4m x 0.6m and 0.2m deep, with associated stony mounds of spoil. The sharp appearance of this hollow suggests a recent origin, rather than antiquarian excavation. It could be associated with the use of the hillfort and its environs in the Second World War (below). A small slit trench lies just to the east of the barrow.

THE HILLFORT EARTHWORKS (Figs 5 and 6)

The earthworks enclose an area of some 3 hectares. The hillfort is an elongated oval in shape. The earthworks run roughly along the 325m contour, but the hill rises up to over 330m in the eastern part of the site. The earthworks comprise a rampart and external ditch, with an intermittent counterscarp bank, with an overall width of 20m. The rampart is 1 – 1.5m wide and 1.2m high. It is composed of earth and stone. The stone content is high, and much surface stone is visible just to the north of the eastern entrance and on the western side of the circuit. The ditch is 1m wide and 4.5m deep. The counterscarp bank is present for most of the circuit, being absent on the north-western angle and for some 50m on the northern side. The counterscarp bank is some 1m high and 1m wide.

Fig. 4. The barrow in the north-western corner of Dowsborough Camp: English Heritage 1:200 scale earthwork plan (reduced).



The entrances

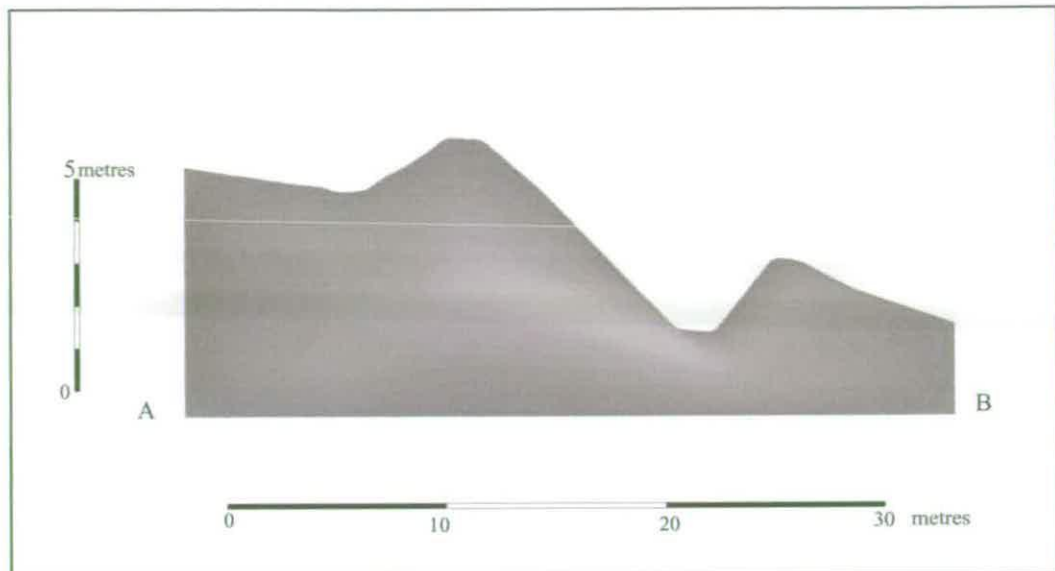
There are four well-defined breaches in the circuit. Of these, only one appears to be contemporary with the hillfort. The two breaches on the north-west side and that on the southern side all take recent tracks or paths across the earthworks, and clearly cut the prehistoric ramparts and ditch. The breach in the north-west angle is narrow and may have been formed when Dowsborough was used during the Second World War. The gaps carrying the well-used paths on the north and southern sides are both marked on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map (OS 1888; Fig 3). The gap at the eastern angle is the original entrance to the hillfort. It has been disturbed, but it appears to have been a simple gap through the earthworks with a quite pronounced inturn of the rampart as it approaches the entrance from the southern side. Both the northern and southern rampart terminals show a distinct rise in height at the entrance.

To the north of the entrance gap, the rampart has been disturbed by trial pits (below) and the ditch terminal has been infilled. The original northern rampart terminal may be seen in the two scarps immediately below the flagpole. The hollowed passage between the two large pits could be the vestiges of the original entrance passage, with stony spoil from the pit encroaching on it.

THE INTERIOR

A small sub-rectangular feature in the interior of the hillfort, set behind the southern rampart, may be the remains of a small shelter or building of some kind. The hollow is 6.6m long, 3.6m wide and is divided by a bank. An alternative explanation for this feature is that it is the remains of two conjoined trial pits.

Fig.6. Dowsborough Camp: section of the earthworks.



The area immediately behind the entrance contains three large circular hollows, with several smaller hollows or holes. The area is defined by a scarp, which runs for some 15m westwards from the rampart. The large hollows measure some 5m in diameter, are some 0.8m deep and are surrounded by a rim of stony material. Two are located behind the rampart terminals, the other lies a short distance away. They have been variously interpreted as a watch tower and fire beacon pits (Nichols 1873, 14); fire hearths (Page 1890, 291) and circular guardhouses (SMR record no 33306, source 8).

Similar features occur at the eastern entrance to the hillfort of Cadbury Congresbury in north Somerset (Fowler *et al* 1968), where they have been interpreted as late Roman or post-Roman additions to the entrance (Burrow 1981, 68). The examples at Dowsborough have the appearance of quarry pits, rather than collapsed structures, although the possibility exists that the features represent collapsed structures which have then been quarried into. If the latter is correct, then a case could be made for a late Roman or post-Roman phase of activity at Dowsborough.

In their present form they appear to represent the remains of extraction pits or trial pits, in this case for stone or for copper ore. The copper mine at Doddington is some 2km to the north-east. Such trial pits in or around prehistoric earthworks are common on Exmoor, for example at the Iron Age enclosure of Myrtleberry North, where ironstone was the sought after material. Ore prospectors or miners in the historic period looked for the earthwork remains of former mining, and sometimes mistakenly dug their trial pits into prehistoric earthworks.

A narrow, hollowed path or track which runs just behind the southern rampart is defined by the back of the rampart and a slight stony bank. It runs from the eastern entrance to the gap carrying a well-used path on the southern side. This path forms part of the track running right around the interior of the fort, behind the ramparts, which is marked on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map (OS 1888) (Fig 3).

OTHER FEATURES

A sub-circular hollow close to a very stony area just to the south of the hillfort is probably a trial pit. The stony scarp which runs for 40m could be associated with this activity, or it may be the remains of a track, associated with the charcoal burning platform at ST 1590 3900.

A concrete stance with an iron socket lies on the edge of the path, just inside the eastern entrance. This was the base for the flagpole (above). Part of an iron stay lies in the ditch close by and a section of a substantial wooden post just outside the entrance may be part of the flagpole itself.

Two V-shaped slit trenches lie to the south and west of the hillfort. A rather slight, linear hollow to the south-east of the barrow is probably also a slit trench. These features indicate that Dowsborough was used during the Second World War.

THE WOODLAND

The earthworks and interior are covered with sessile oak. Most of this has been coppiced at some time, but is now not managed. Some maiden trees also occur, these are mainly oak, with a few maiden beeches and some holly. A clear area lies on the north-west edge of the site, and here bracken, brambles, bilberries and scrub oak have the opportunity to regenerate.



Fig. 7. Dowsborough Camp: surveying the earthworks.

An early depiction appears to show the site as surrounded by woods, with the interior clear, although this may be a cartographic device (OS 1802). The tithe map of 1839 shows the whole of the site as woodland. It was a separate parcel of land, called Danesbarrow Coppice and managed as a copse or coppiced wood (tithe map 1839). The hillfort earthworks were presumably used as the boundaries for these blocks of coppiced woodland. By 1888 the interior is shown as a mixture of deciduous wood, brushwood, furze and rough pasture (OS 1888; Fig 3). In 1911 the greater part of the camp is described as covered with oak coppice (VCH 1911, 492). By 1924 it is described as overgrown with oak plantations and in 1973 the interior was said to be impenetrable - almost wholly overgrown with neglected oak coppice (Burrow 1924, 80; Burrow 1981, 227).

The *Victoria County History* account for the parish of Holford notes that by the late 17th century much of the former commons of Holford were being converted to woodland. Holford Edge, in Holford Combe, was coppiced by around 1727 and by 1764 Danesborough wood was planted (VCH 1985, 3). Some of the larger coppice stools measure some 2 – 2.5m in diameter. An average maiden oak is 1m in girth, a maiden beech which grows on the very edge of the ditch has a girth of 3.4m. These measurements suggest that the trees are perhaps some 200 – 250 years old, corroborating the date of the plantation from the historical sources.

DISCUSSION

The hillfort of Dowsborough occupies the highest point of the Quantock Hills, and dominates the surrounding landscape. Although it is now rendered invisible by the oak woods which clothe the hillside, it must have been a very impressive feature of the Iron Age landscape. Its importance is emphasised by the presence of two linear earthworks which were probably contemporary with the hillfort. These are Dead Woman's Ditch, which runs south for some 800m from the base of the hill which Dowsborough occupies, and a shorter length of bank and ditch on Higher Hare Knap, 1km to the west. Studies of Iron Age cultural material from Somerset suggest that the Quantock Hills was on the very edge of the territory occupied by the Dumnonii tribe, with the people known as the Durotriges to the east (Cunliffe 1982), indicating that Dowsborough occupied an important strategic position at this time.

Dowsborough is an exceptionally well-preserved hillfort. The possibility of a late Roman or post-Roman phase to the site adds to its importance. Long stretches of the earthworks survive, with little interference, bar a few paths. The interior, similarly, has remained undisturbed for many years. The planting of the woodland some 300 years ago may have disturbed archaeological deposits. Subsequent coppicing was non-intrusive, although fires, including charcoal burning, may have affected deposits.

Suggestions for future research include: the survey and recording of the linear earthworks on Higher Hare Knap and Dead Woman's Ditch; the investigation of possible late Roman/post-Roman occupation at Dowsborough; the history of the woodland, associated woodland industries and the copper mine at Doddington, and the role of Dowsborough during the Second World War.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The owner of the site kindly allowed the survey to take place and facilitated some of the documentary research; the Quantock Hills AONB Ranger Service provided information about the woods and cleared scrub oak from the barrow; Michael Calder helped with some of the fieldwork.

REFERENCES

Allcroft, H 1908 *Earthwork of England*
London

Burrow, E J 1924 *Ancient Earthworks and Camps of Somerset*
Cheltenham

Burrow, I 1981 *Hillfort and Hill-top Settlement in Somerset in the First to Eighth Centuries AD*
BAR British Series 91

Cunliffe, B 1982 Iron Age settlements and pottery 650 BC – 60 AD, in M Aston and I Burrow (eds) *The Archaeology of Somerset*, 53 - 61

Day, W and Masters, C H 1782 County Map of Somerset
Somerset Record Society, 76

Fowler, P J, Gardner, K S and Rahtz, P A 1970 *Cadbury Congresbury, Somerset, 1968. An Introductory Report*

Greenwood, C 1822 County Map of Somerset
Somerset Record Society, 76

Lawrence, B 1952 *Quantock Country*
London

Nichols, W L 1873 *The Quantocks and their Associations*
Bath

OS 1802 Ordnance Survey Surveyor's Drawings OSD No 43 pt 1 series

OS 1888 Ordnance Survey first edition map, Somerset sheet 49.5

Page, J L W 1890 *An Exploration of Exmoor and the Highlands of West Somerset*
London

VCH 1985 *A History of the County of Somerset, vol 5*

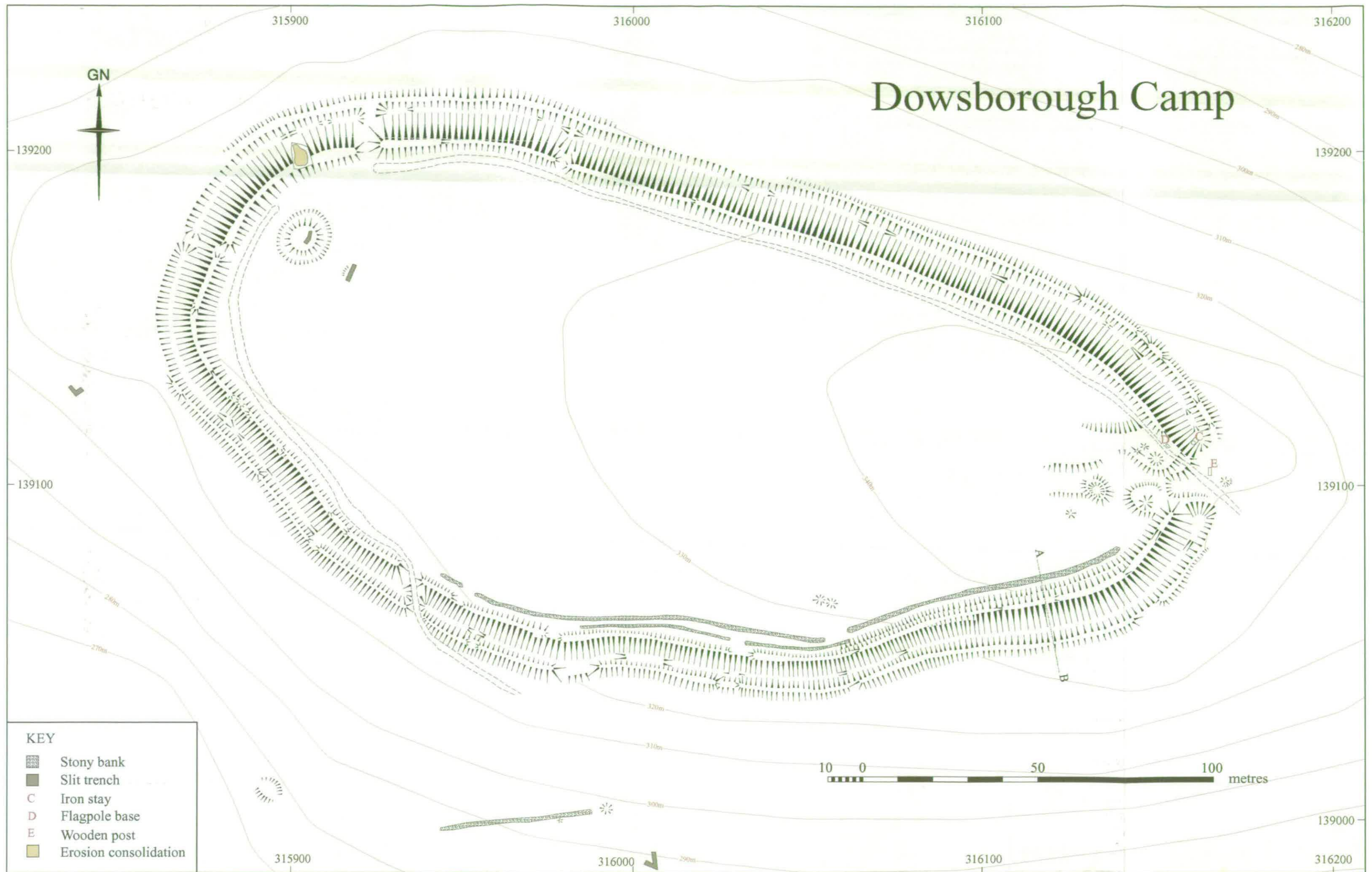


Fig. 5. Dowsborough Camp: English Heritage 1:1000 scale earthwork plan.


ENGLISH HERITAGE
NATIONAL
MONUMENTS
RECORD

*The National Monuments Record
is the public archive of English Heritage.
It contains all the information in this report - and more:
original photographs, plans old and new,
the results of all field surveys, indexes
of archaeological sites and historical buildings,
and complete coverage of England in
air photography.*

World Wide Web: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk>

National Monuments Record enquires: telephone 01793 414600

*National Monuments Record Centre, Great Western Village, Kemble Drive,
Swindon SN2 2GZ*

