
BURY CASTLE, BROMPTON REGIS,
SOMERSET

SS 92'NW 7

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

Exmoor Project/Request Survey
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Bury Castle, Brompton Regis, Somerset

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Summary

A new earthwork survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME), shows that Bury Castle consists of an enclosure of presumed Iron Age date with a small motte incorporated into its ramparts. Documentary sources together with the archaeological evidence, suggest that the castle was built during the Anarchy.

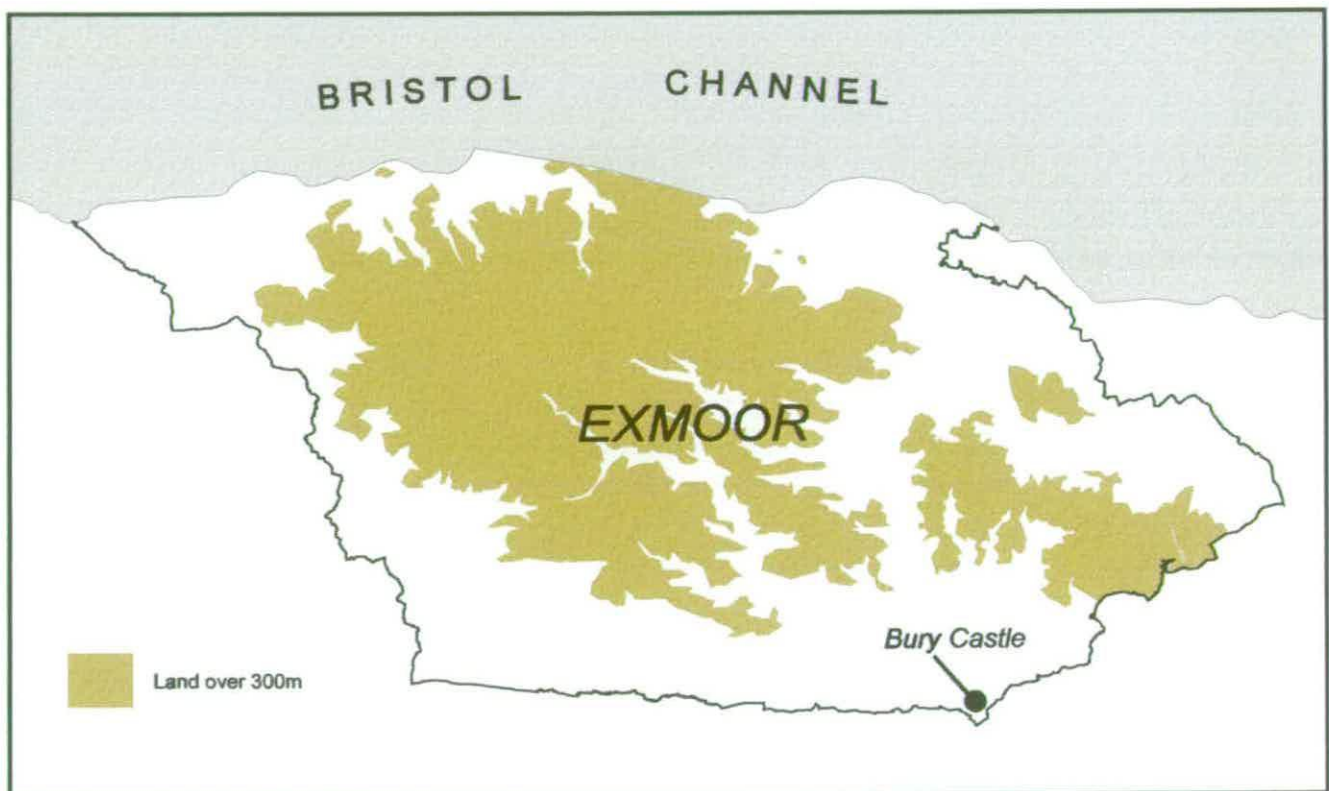


Fig. 1. Location of Bury Castle.

INTRODUCTION & TOPOGRAPHY

Bury Castle lies between a forestry plantation and enclosed fields on a narrow spur tapering roughly north-south between the valleys of the Rivers Exe and Haddeo. It therefore dominates these valleys, and the crossing point of the Exe at Hele Bridge. The site lies away from major settlement, Dulverton being some 2 kms to the east-north-east.

In June 1996 the site was surveyed by the Exeter Office of the RCHME at the request of the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA), and as part of RCHME's Exmoor Project (Fig. 2). Tree clearance and other works have recently been carried out on the site by the owner at the request of ENPA.

HISTORY

The medieval castle is apparently undocumented. However, Dunning (1995, 15) has set out the early ownership of these estates from Domesday when they were owned by the king himself to the de Say family in the late 12th century. The de Says were related by marriage to 'the powerful and treacherous' Geoffery de Mandeville, Earl of Essex. He argues that 'the builder of Bury Castle is unknown, but the elder William de Say, brother-in-law of one of the leading protagonists in the civil war of Stephen's reign, is a likely candidate'. This would suggest that the castle was constructed before 1144, the year of William de Say's death.

The site is mentioned by Allcroft (1908, 136-7), and in the VCH (1911, 482-3), the latter

identifying the site as a 'mount and base court' and observing the unusual relative proportion of the two elements. In 1965 the OS Archaeology Division surveyor confirmed the interpretation of a motte and bailey (NMR no: SS 92 NW 7) but the English Heritage (EH) warden has suggested the possible reuse of an Iron Age fortification; an observation that is confirmed by the present survey.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

The Iron Age enclosure

The prehistoric element consists of a strongly defended oval enclosure measuring 85 m south-west to north-east by 58 m. It is defended by a substantial bank, over 4 m high on the north-eastern side where it is most massive, with an outer ditch; there is some evidence for an external counterscarp (see profile - Fig. 5). The entrance

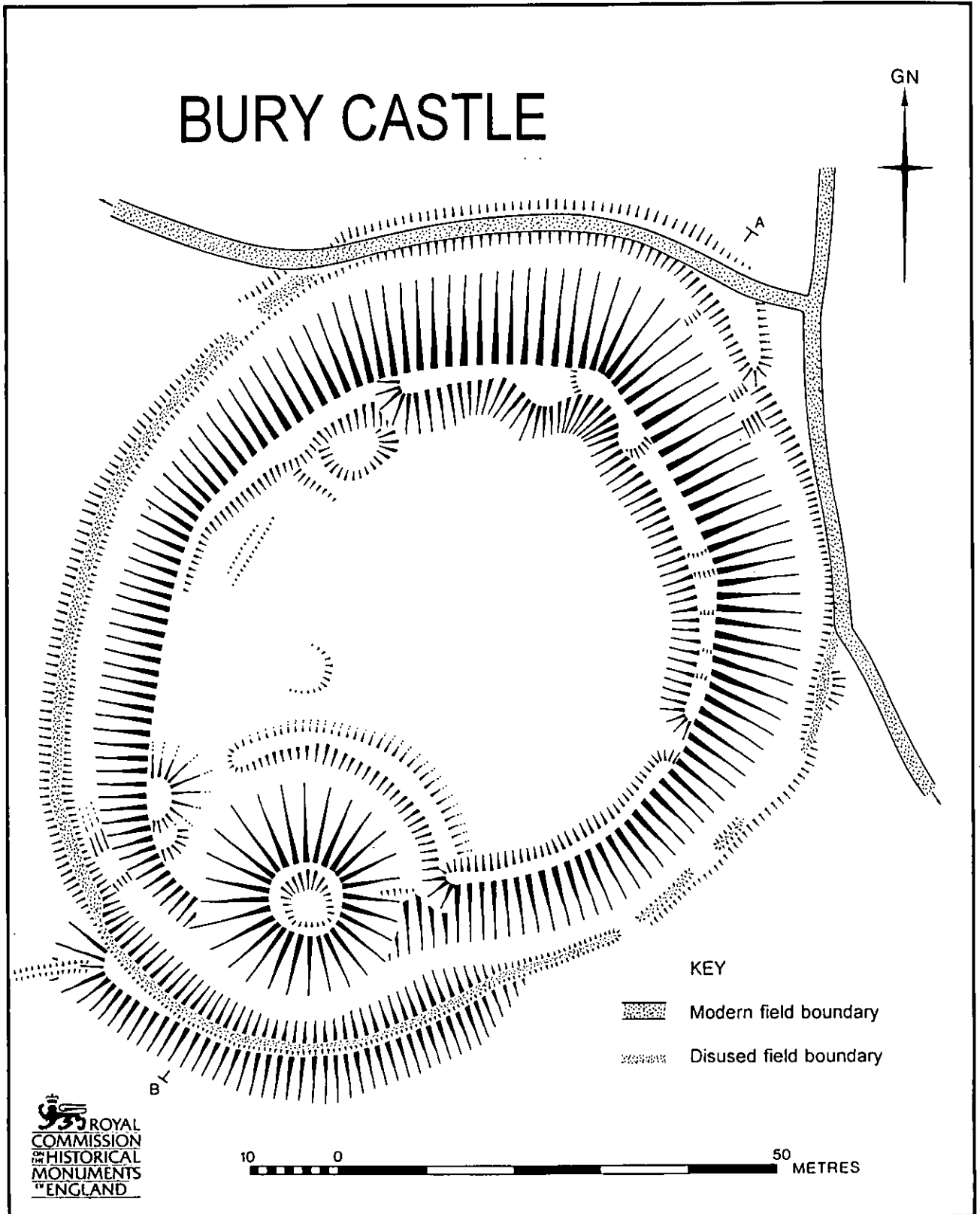


Fig.2. Bury Castle. RCHME earthwork survey.

into the enclosure is not visible, it is unlikely to have been lost beneath the castle mound and it is therefore most likely that it was blocked as part of this refortification in the medieval period (see below).

The prehistoric earthworks are generally well defined, although the outer lip of the ditch has been altered by the construction of a disused field bank on it. The field bank is still present on the northern and eastern parts, although elsewhere it is now only visible as a slight, though sharply defined scarp.

Vehicle access has caused some disturbance to the ditch itself, with a sharpening of the base of the main rampart scarp.

The medieval castle

The medieval castle comprises a very small motte, 23 m in diameter, placed on the Iron Age ramparts at the south-western end of the enclosure. The motte is encircled by a ditch, 6 m wide, which on the northern side is rock-cut; on the south the Iron Age ditch has been recut, and is further strengthened by a large counterscarp bank. The motte itself forms a very unusual construction: it has been built on the earlier ramparts, and its summit therefore slopes from north to south. This indicates that the entrance into the Iron Age enclosure cannot lie beneath the castle mound.

The Iron Age enclosure formed the castle bailey. At its northern end the strong rampart has at least two platforms cut into its inner side. There is no trace of an entrance into the bailey, and it

must be assumed that a timber bridge or ramp would have given access to the interior. Higham (*pers comm*) confirms this as the most likely scenario.

Subsequent use

By the late 18th century Bury Castle formed part of the Pixton Park estates, and several of the large beech trees on the north-eastern ramparts, which were felled as a result of disease in 1996, yielded tree ring counts suggesting a planting date shortly after 1800. This would coincide with the elaborate improvements to the parkland at Pixton and its environs undertaken by the second Earl of Carnarvon (Watson 1995). It is not clear whether the site merely fell within the area of the planting scheme, or if a more explicit use of the earthworks was intended: they are certainly visible from various drives which were being worked on at this time, and the main approach to the estate passed below the castle earthworks.

Bury Castle lies on the edge of an existing field system, and it seems from both the surviving and abandoned boundaries that it formerly lay within this system. Indeed the remains of a field bank on the counterscarp of the main earthwork show that it was bounded off and treated as a single parcel.

Although there is no known archaeological investigation of the site, the motte has a sub-rectangular depression 5 m across in its summit, which may be the result of an undocumented excavation.

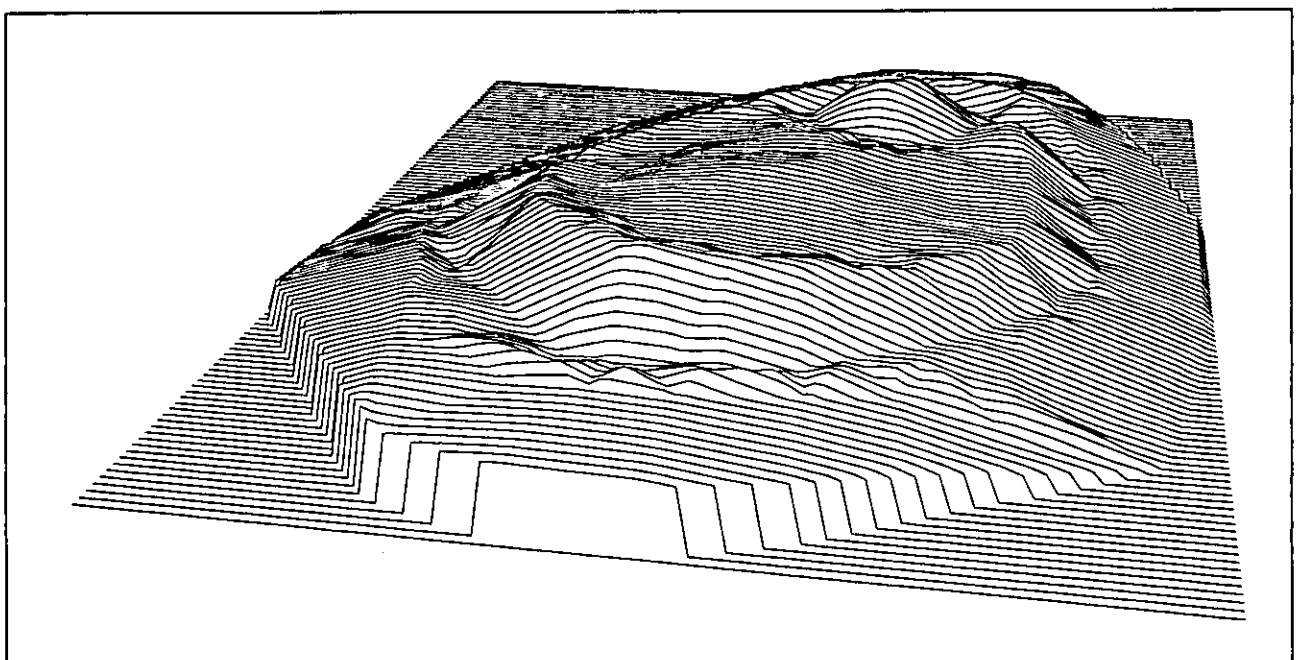


Fig. 3. Bury Castle. Digital terrain model.

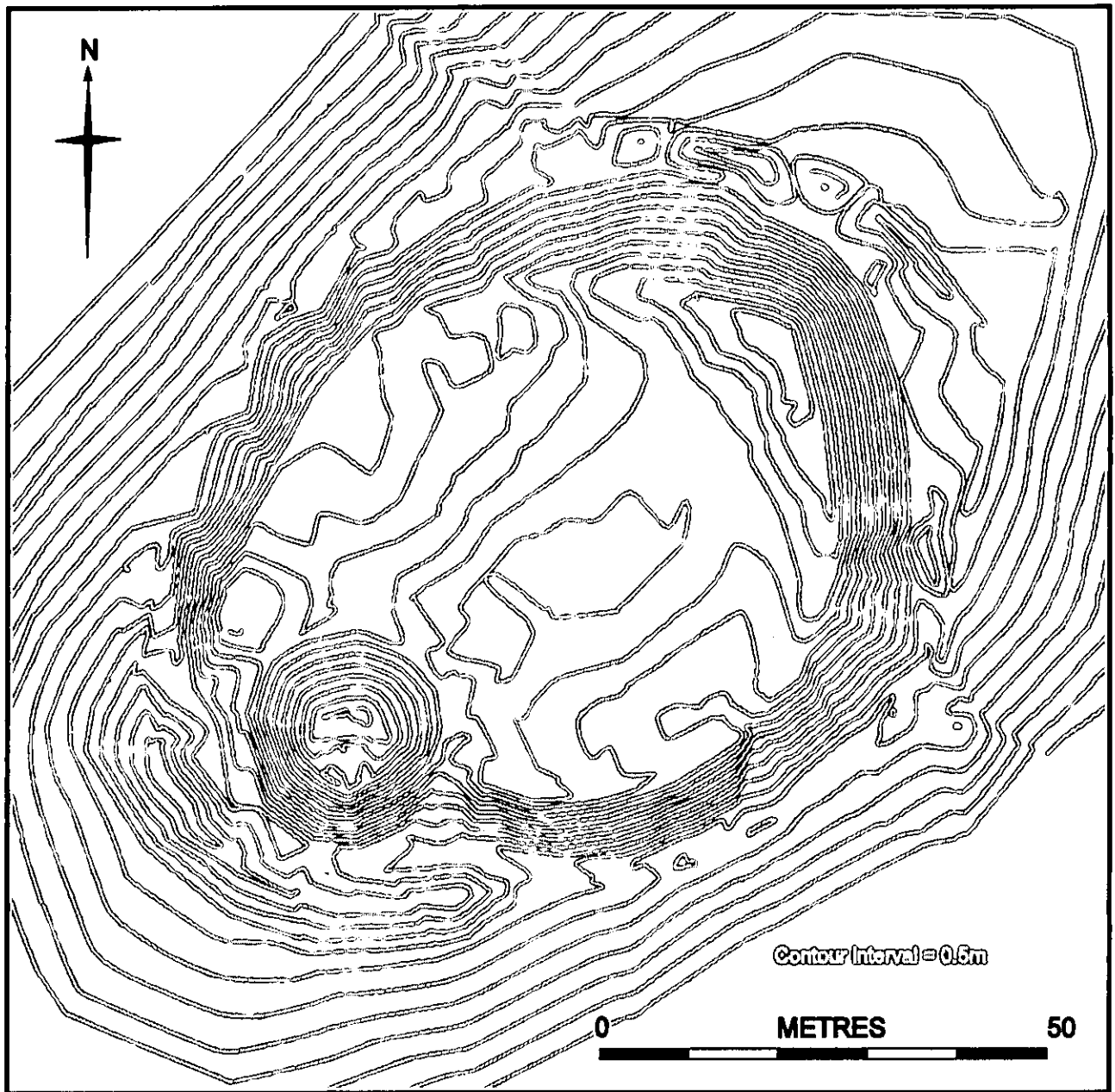


Fig. 4. Bury Castle. Contour survey.

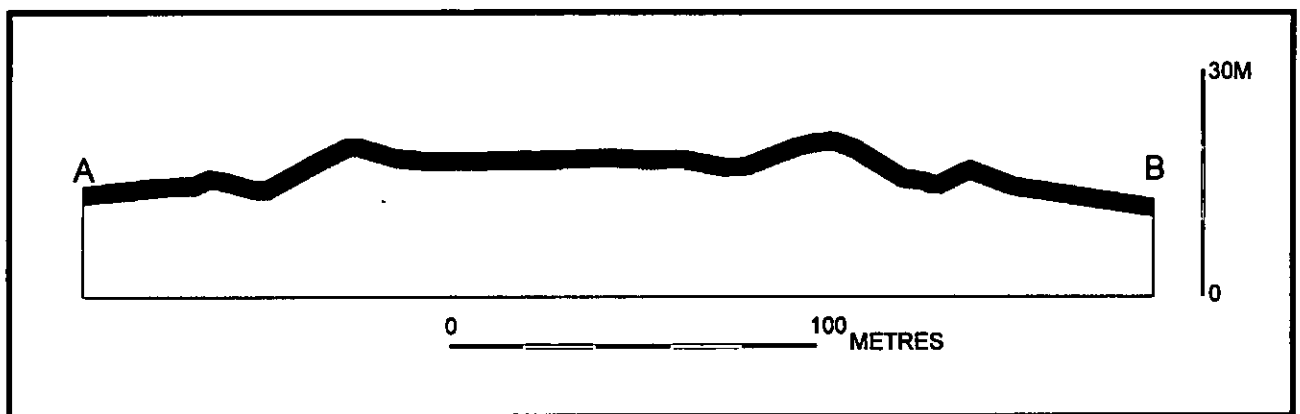


Fig.5. Bury Castle. Profile A-B.

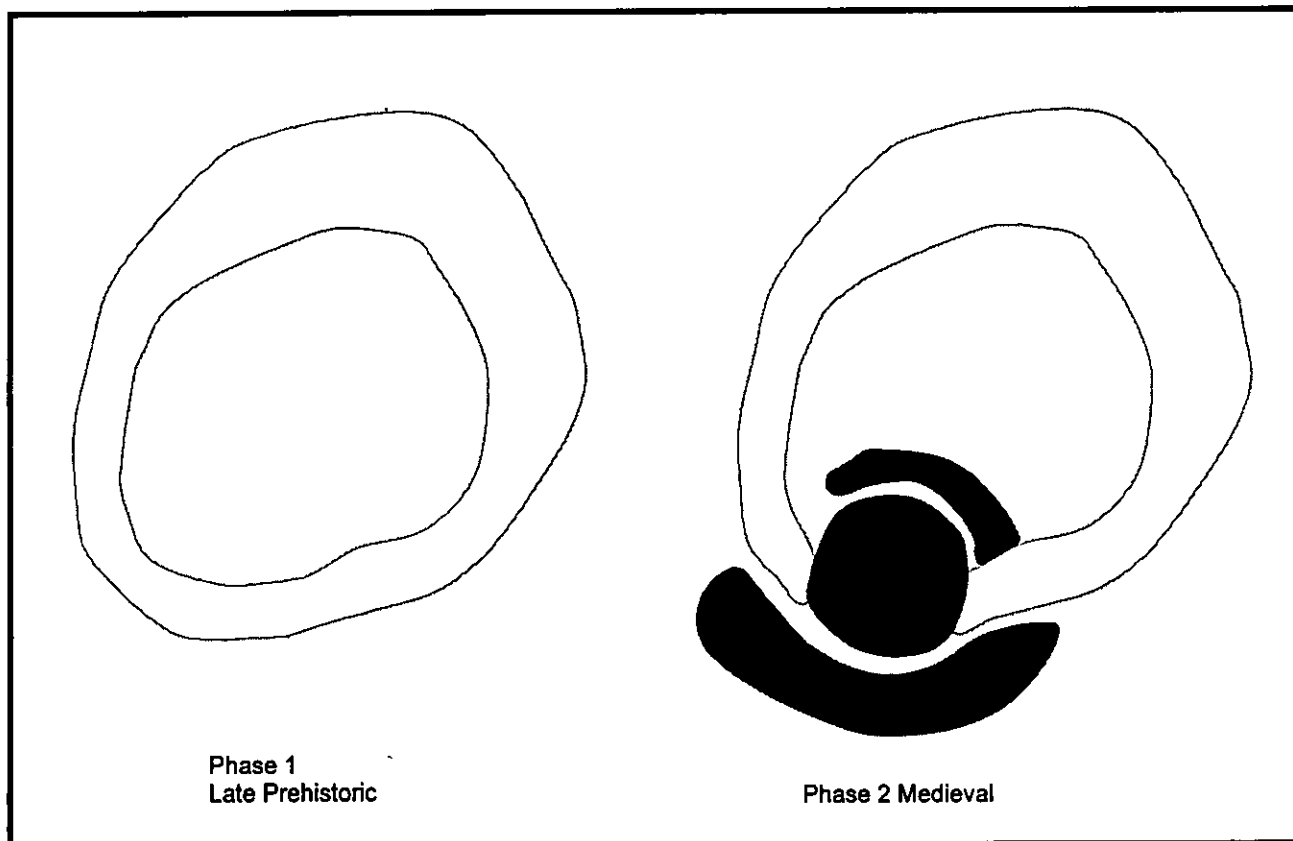


Fig. 6. Bury Castle. Phase diagram.

Conclusions

Bury Castle forms an exceptionally well preserved earthwork. It can be confidently interpreted as two phase, firstly on stratigraphic grounds and secondly because of the unusual relative sizes of the motte and the enclosure.

Its importance is increased because of this relatively uncommon combination of a small Iron Age enclosure and a minor motte, and the close integration of the medieval phase with the earlier earthworks.

The absence of a clearly defined entrance suggests that another more contrived means of access was achieved. Excavation or geophysical survey could be used to confirm the presence and whereabouts of an entrance ramp and gatehouse. The presence of slight platforms cut into the inner face of the ramparts would also benefit from such further work. These slight earthworks also indicate the potential of surviving sub-surface archaeological information within the enclosure.

Dunning's suggestion that the castle was constructed during the Anarchy is supported by the field evidence. The motte is exceptionally small, only 23 m in diameter, compared with Bampton (55 m) and Holwell Castle, Parracombe (41 m). The absence of an obvious entrance into the bailey also suggests that the castle was only intended for temporary occupation. Furthermore, given Dunning's suggestion that the castle was

built before 1144 - the date of William de Say's death - the proximity of Bampton Castle may be significant. It is a possibility, currently unproven, that Bury Castle was constructed around 1136 during Robert of Bampton's rebellion against King Stephen (Higham and Hamlin 1990). Bury Castle may not have been directly involved in that episode, but the unsettled local circumstances may have lead to its construction.

METHOD

The site was surveyed at 1:500 scale in June 1996 by Hazel Riley & Rob Wilson-North, assisted by Phil Marter. The earthworks were recorded using a Leica TC 1610 electronic theodolite; the digital data was processed using Trimmap survey software. The digital survey method facilitated the plotting of a contour plan (Fig. 4) and profile across the whole earthwork complex (Fig. 5). Further processing by Trimmap's Digital Terrain Modelling module produced a perspective view or ground model of the earthworks to aid visual display and interpretation (Fig. 3).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Phil Newman prepared the report and illustrations. The authors are grateful to Bob Dunning of VCH and Bob Higham of Exeter University for their useful comments and advice, especially over the local historical context of the castle. Thanks are

also due to Veryan Heal of the Exmoor National Park Authority. Mr N Goschen, the owner of Bury Castle kindly gave permission for the survey to take place.

Plans and further copies of this report are available from the National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon, SN2 2GZ.

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

NMR No: SS 92 NW 7
SMR No: 33369
SAM No: Somer 342
NGR: SS 938 269
County: Somerset
District: West Somerset
Parish: Brompton Regis