
HOLNE CHASE CASTLE, HOLNE,
DEVONSHIRE

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

Request Survey

May 1996



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Holne Chase Castle, Holne, Devonshire

by H Riley

SUMMARY

Holne Chase Castle, a small, univallate Iron Age hillfort, was surveyed by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) in March 1996. The survey has recorded the well-preserved earthworks in detail for the first time, and identified the probable sites of antiquarian excavations together with some internal features. The large scale plan has allowed a discussion of the morphology of the hillfort.

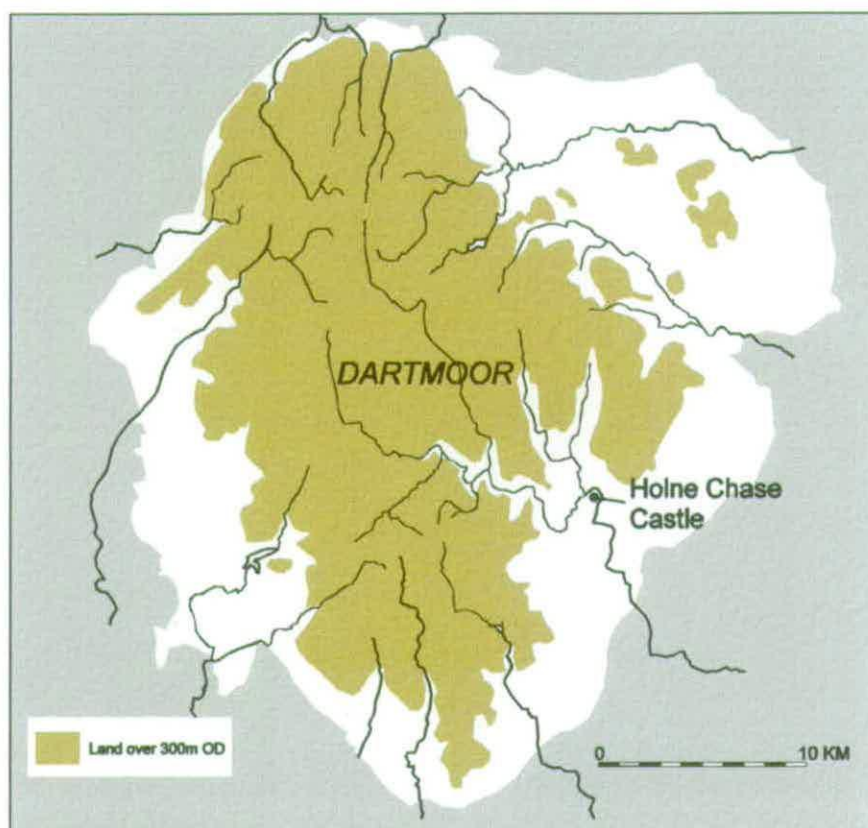


Fig. 1 Holne Chase Castle: location map.

INTRODUCTION

Holne Chase Castle lies at the southeastern edge of Dartmoor, on a steep sided promontory high above the River Dart (Fig 1). It is a univallate hillfort, enclosing an area of *c* 1 ha, with two entrances.

HISTORY

The hillfort lies in Chase Wood on land which was acquired at the time of the Norman Conquest by Sheriff Baldwin and William de Falaise. The property remained in possession of descendants of these families until 1885, when the whole estate was sold by the Bouchier Wrey family to the Dawsons (Anon 1977). The name Holne

Chase is recorded in the Tithe Award of 1839 in the area which is now called Chase Wood (DRO 1839). None of the unpublished maps or plans consulted in 1996 at the Devon Record Office showed either the hillfort or the woodland associated with it.

Chase Wood has probably been woodland for many years. The name "Holne" means "place abounding in holly" (Gover *et al* 1969, 301-2) and oak coppice is mentioned in connection with the iron currency bars found in 1870 (Amery 1906, 371). The hillside does not seem to have been enclosed in the recent past, and the steep slopes above the Dart valley exclude most agricultural activities. To the south of the hillfort

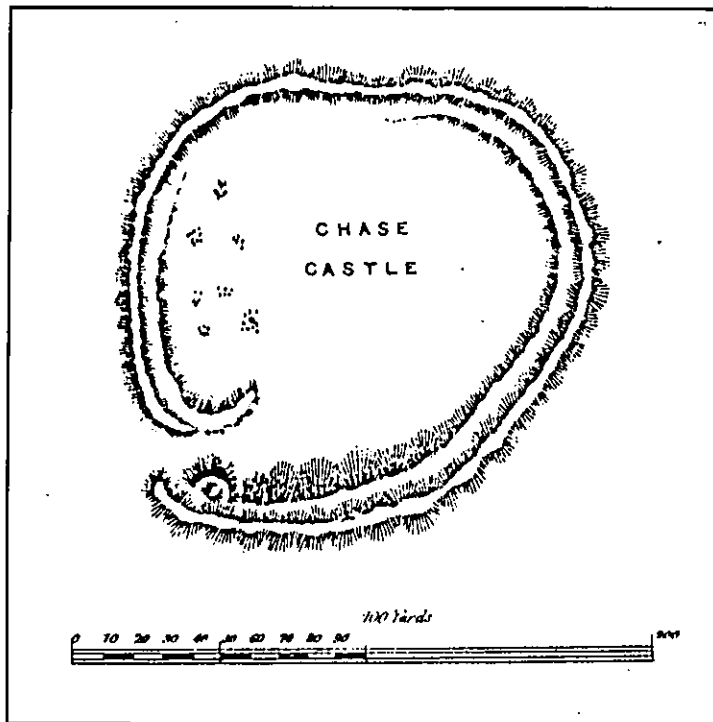


Fig 2a. Plan of Holne Chase Castle. (Amery 1873).

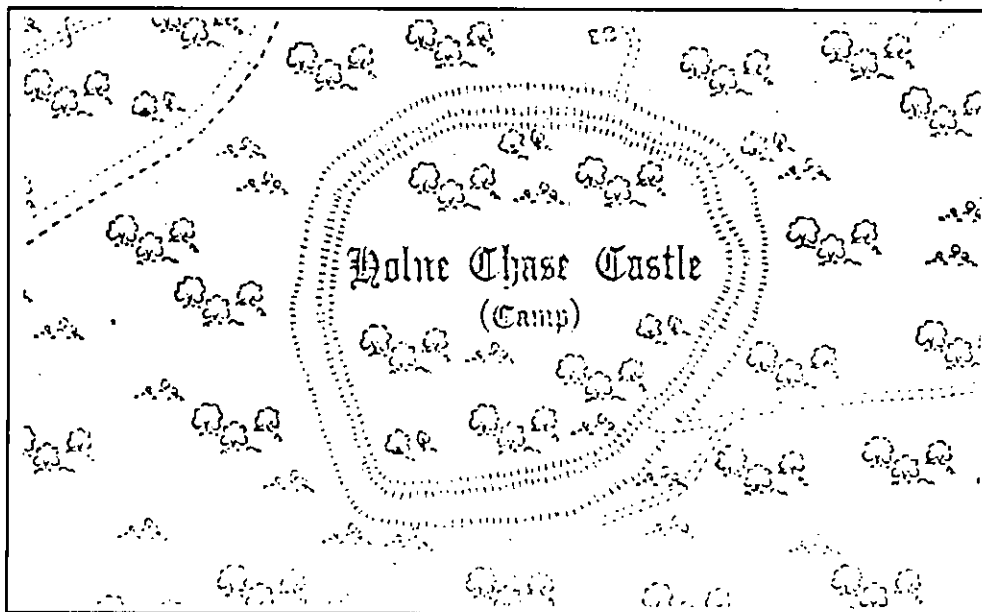


Fig 2b. Holne Chase Castle. (Ordnance Survey 1905, surveyed 1884).

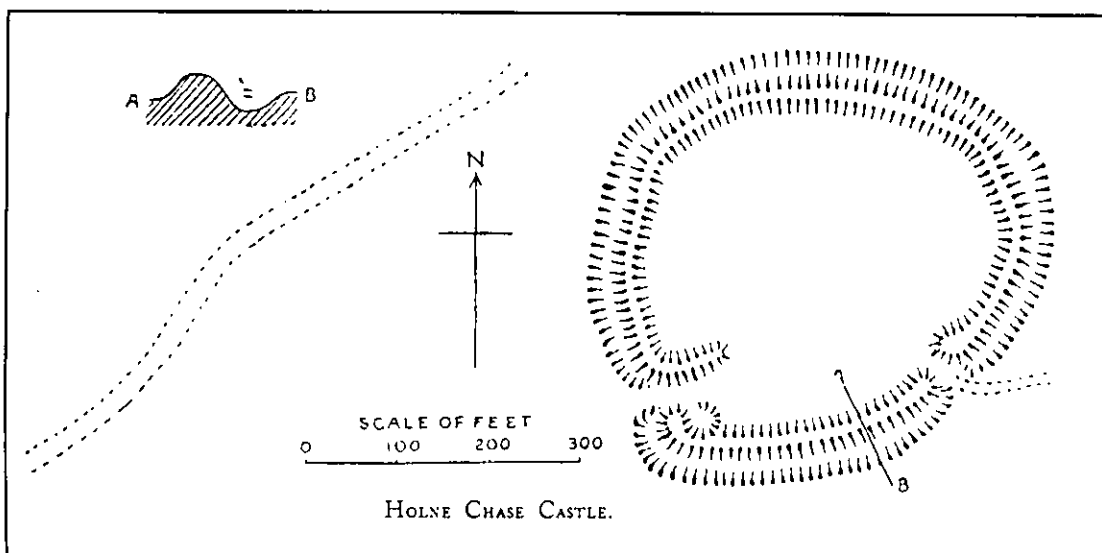


Fig 2c. Holne Chase Castle. (Wall 1906)

there is evidence for mineral extraction in the form of shafts and spoil heaps at the probable site of Hazel Copper Mine, recorded in the 18th century (Donn 1765). At least two large platforms, most likely for charcoal burning, were noted west of the hillfort in very dense woodland.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Holne Chase Castle is first depicted and described by Amery (1873). His plan (Fig 2a) shows the southwestern entrance in some detail and the earthworks are fully described and discussed. Amery also notes a find of several iron bars which he then interpreted as unfinished weapons. Later depictions of the site on the Ordnance Survey 1st and 2nd Edition 25" maps (Ordnance Survey 1886, 1905) omit the entrances (Fig 2b). In 1905 the base of an "earthen jar" was found at Holne Chase Castle (Amery 1905).

The discovery and interpretation of the iron bars is re-assessed by Amery in 1906. In 1870 Sir Bouchier Wrey's gamekeeper found about 12 flat iron bars in rock clitter some 50 yards west of the hillfort. Most of the bars were broken, but a few were carried back to the house at Holne Park where the gardener used them as supports under a cucumber frame. Amery rescued them and eventually the iron fragments were identified as Iron Age currency bars (Amery 1906).

The site is discussed and planned in the Victoria County History volume (Fig 2c), where the entrances are shown in some detail (Wall 1906). A survey plan by Allcroft (1908) depicts the southwestern entrance and the account concentrates on speculations as to the presence of a guard tower. The Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division plan of the site made in 1960 represents a significant improvement on all previous depictions (NMR No. SX 77 SW 14, illustration card). There have been no recorded excavations on the site (RCHME Excavations Index), although there is some evidence of unrecorded, antiquarian excavations.

TOPOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The geology of the site consists of Carboniferous slates, limestones and grits which form part of the metamorphic aureole surrounding the Dartmoor granite massif (Geological Survey 1977).

The hillfort lies at a height of 150m OD on a promontory above the valley of the River Dart, which is surrounded on three sides by the river. The ground falls away very steeply to the west, north and south of the site, but the defences make no use of the natural topography of its setting. The site is within Chase Wood, a mixed broad-leaved woodland, with some coniferous planting and large areas of rhododendrons. Holne Chase Castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Devon 251), Chase Wood is a SSSI and lies within the Dartmoor National Park.

THE HILLFORT EARTHWORKS: DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

Holne Chase Castle was surveyed at 1:1000 scale by the Exeter Office of the RCHME at the request of the Dartmoor National Park Authority (Fig 4). The survey was carried out at the end of the winter, when the vegetation was at its lowest, and shortly after initial clearance of the rhododendrons which had masked a large proportion of the hillfort defences and interior. The earthworks are well-preserved, due in part to restricted access to the site and Holne Chase Castle is a good example of a small, univallate hillfort.

The defences

The defences form an oval-shaped enclosure of approximately 1 ha in area. They comprise a rampart and ditch, with an external bank present around the southwestern entrance and in the western section of the defences. The rampart is absent for part of the northwestern sector. Amery's plan of 1873 (Fig 2a) does not show a rampart here although the abundant surface stone, the nearby stone heaps, and the irregular form of the northern rampart terminal indicate

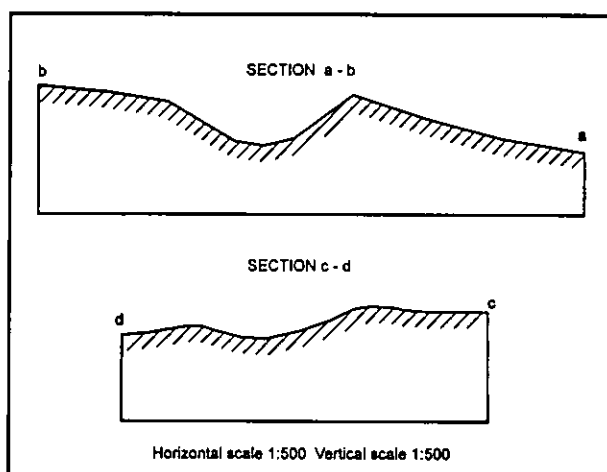


Fig 3. Profiles across the defences. 1:500 scale.

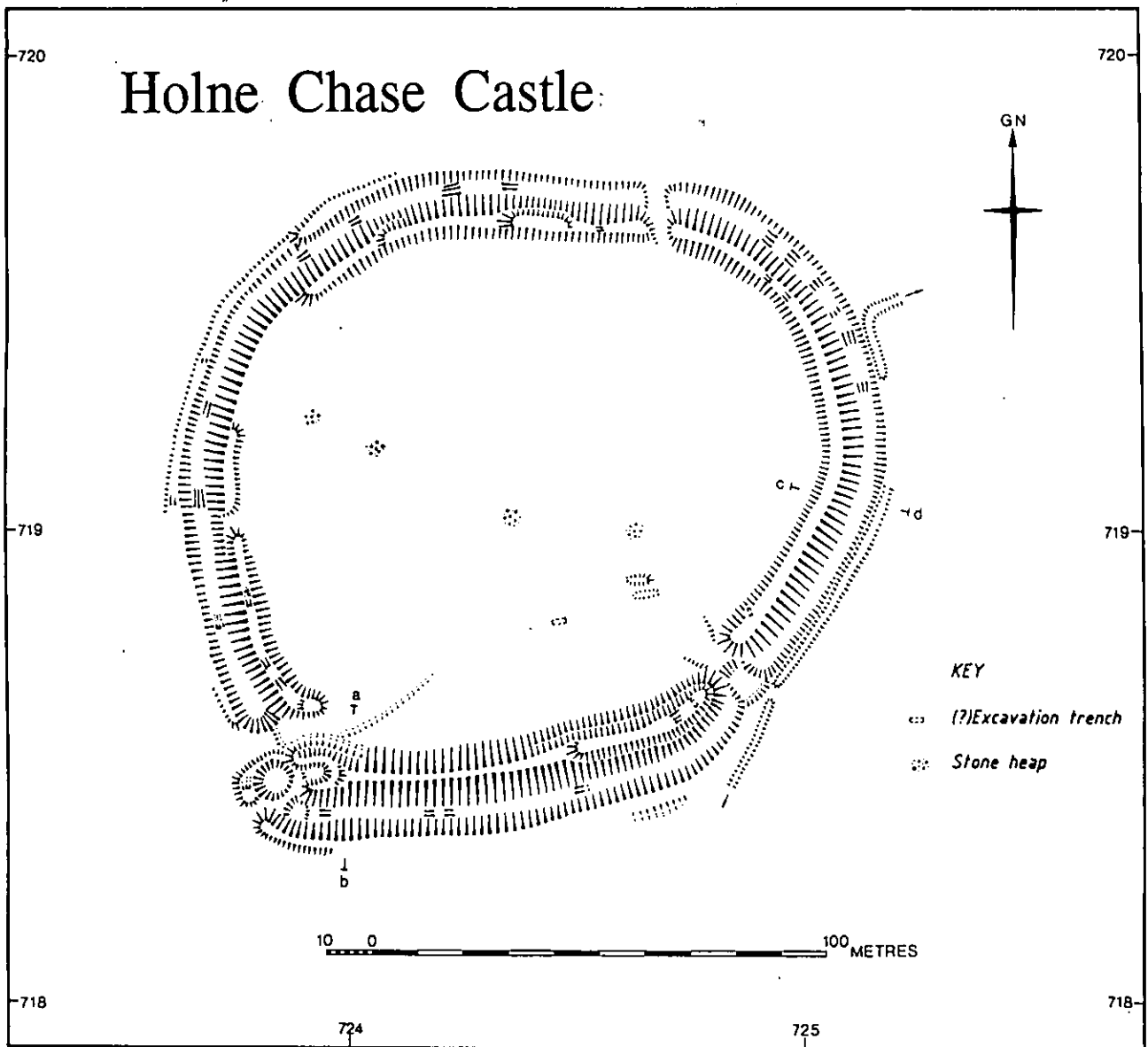


Fig 4. Holne Chase Castle: RCHME earthwork survey. 1:1000 scale.

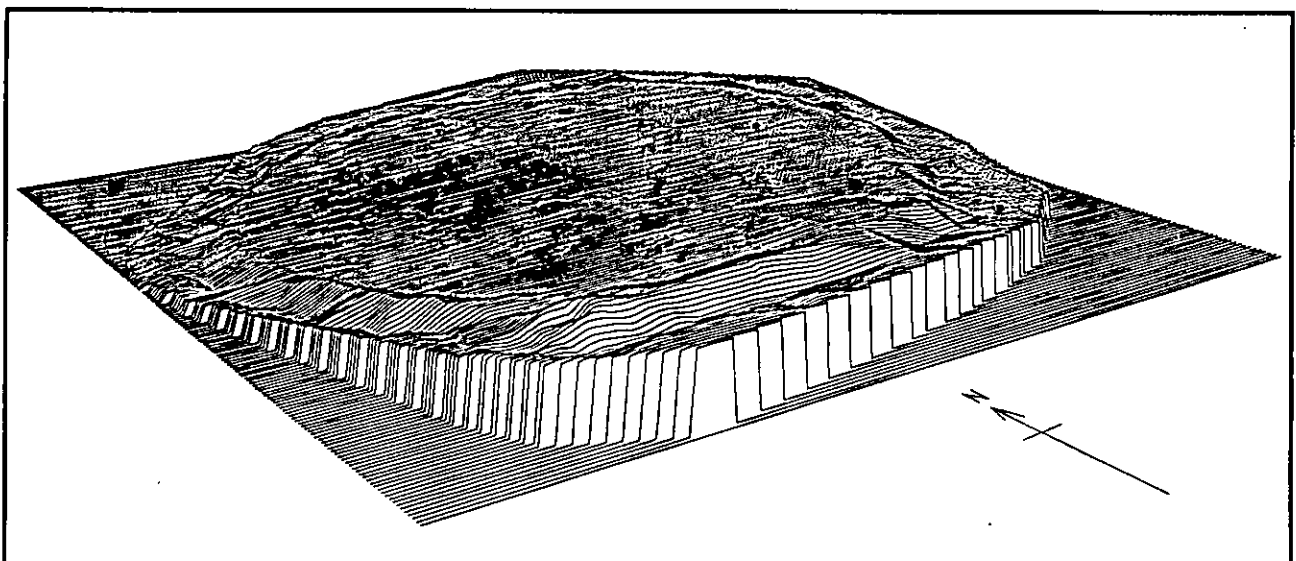


Fig 5. Holne Chase Castle. Digital terrain model.

that the original rampart may have been removed by quarrying. The defences are uniform in character for much of the circuit, with the exception of the southern side between the two entrances, which is much more massive in construction as it defends the most vulnerable approach from the south. This section appears to be offset from the rest of the circuit. The average total width of the defensive circuit is 15m, this increases to 20m along the southern section, where the rampart stands 4m high and the ditch is 4m deep (Fig 3). The hollows in the ditch bottom and the raised portions along the rampart top are probably the result of the original "gang" construction of the earthwork.

The entrances

The defences are breached in three places. The small gap close to the north-east angle is a later breach, caused by a modern track which crosses the interior. The gap to the southeast is an original entrance which is utilised by the track. The entrance comprises a simple passage, 5m wide, through the defences. The rampart and ditch become more massive as they approach this entrance, and the southwestern rampart turns in at this point. Two slight scarps, the result of erosion from the track, flank the passage in the hillfort interior. The entrance in the southwest angle is similar to that to the southeast, but it has been disturbed by quarrying for stone or mineral prospecting, which gives it the impression of

being more complex than it actually is. The entrance comprises a passage, 5m long, through the defences. To the northwest the ditch ends in a simple terminal, and the rampart, which is very stony at this point, turns in sharply. To the south the rampart terminal thickens noticeably. Both it and the ditch have been disturbed by later quarrying. Two circular holes have been dug into the ditch and rampart terminals, a further depression in the ditch may also be the result of this quarrying. The counterscarp has also been modified by this activity. A slight scarp running from the entrance into the interior is probably the result of erosion.

The interior

Although clearance of the rhododendrons had been undertaken over much of the interior, the ground conditions meant that some of the interior was obscured (Fig 6). Several features, however, were located as conditions allowed. These were four roughly circular heaps of stone and two rectangular depressions, one with an associated spoil heap. The stone heaps were noted in the 19th century (Amery 1873). They may be associated with stone removal from the site. There is much surface stone over parts of the hillfort, particularly around the defences on the northern side. The rectangular depressions may be the remains of unrecorded excavation trenches; two similar depressions lie in the rampart on either side of the southeast entrance.

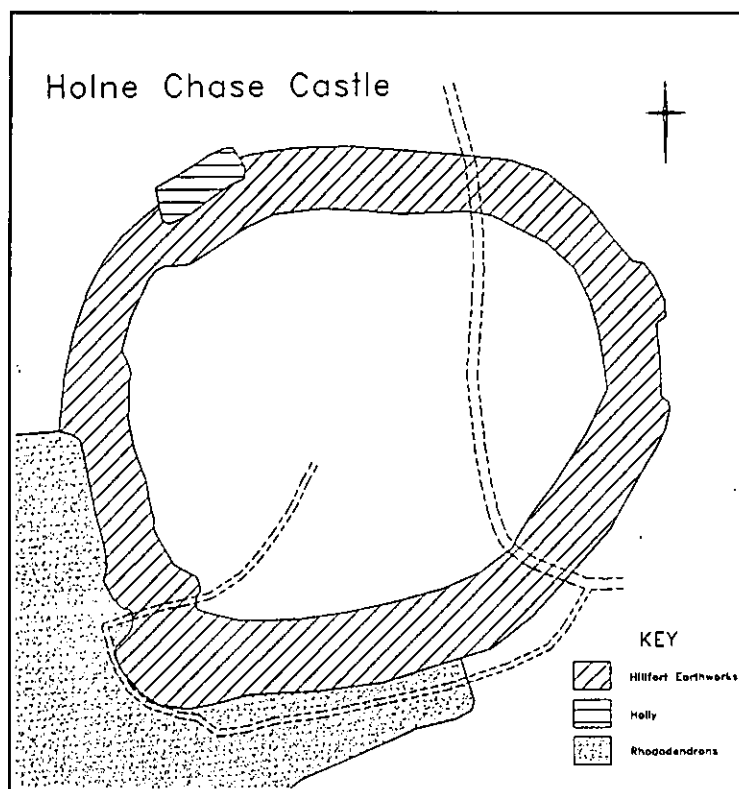


Fig 6. Holne Chase Castle. Vegetation and land-use plan. Unmarked areas represent broad-leaved woodland.

Other features

A woodland bank runs up to the southeast entrance from the south, then follows the outer edge of the hillfort ditch in the eastern side before turning to run to the east. No reference to this could be found in the published or unpublished sources consulted.

CONCLUSIONS

This large scale earthwork survey has enabled the morphology of the defences and entrances to be analysed in detail. The similarity of the two entrances and the massive construction and offset position of the southern section have been revealed. Later activity on and around the site includes stone quarrying, charcoal burning, mineral extraction and antiquarian excavations. At some time a woodland bank was constructed close to the hillfort ditch.

The digital survey method has facilitated the production of a ground model which affords a perspective view of the site despite the heavily wooded nature of the landscape (Fig 5).

METHOD

The site was surveyed using a Leica 1610 electronic theodolite. The data was processed and plotted using Trimmap and Autocad software. The survey was fixed to the Ordnance Survey National Grid using Leica single frequency global positioning system (GPS) equipment. The data was processed and transformed using Leica processing and transformation programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Simon Probert assisted with the fieldwork and Philip Newman prepared the illustrations and the finished report. Devon SMR, the Devon Record Office and West-Country Studies Library provided information about the hillfort and the owner kindly allowed access to the site. The Dartmoor National Park Authority contributed towards the cost of the survey. Completed field plans and reports have been deposited in the National Monuments Record, from where copies may be obtained:

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