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**ENCLOSURES ON WOLSTONBURY HILL,
PYECOMBE, WEST SUSSEX**

**An Earthwork Survey by
The Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of England**

REQUEST SURVEY

November 1993



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1. INTRODUCTION

In November 1993 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England surveyed the earthwork enclosure interpreted as a hillfort or henge, which lies on the summit of Wolstonbury Hill. The project was carried out at the request of English Heritage for management purposes. Wolstonbury Hill lies in the parish of Pyecombe in the Mid Sussex district of West Sussex, at National Grid Reference TQ 2840 1382.

The site sits in a prominent location at the northern end of a chalk spur capped by clay with flints, which projects from the main Douth Downs escarpment and rises to a maximum height of 225m above OD. The RCHME survey recorded the survival of at least three phases of enclosure on the hilltop, a multi-period field system, and a round barrow, all of which have been disturbed by the pits and spoil heaps of recent flint diggings. The site is under the management of the National Trust and preserved under typical downland pasture; it is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (W SUSX 33) and recorded in the National Monuments Record as TQ 21 SE 01.

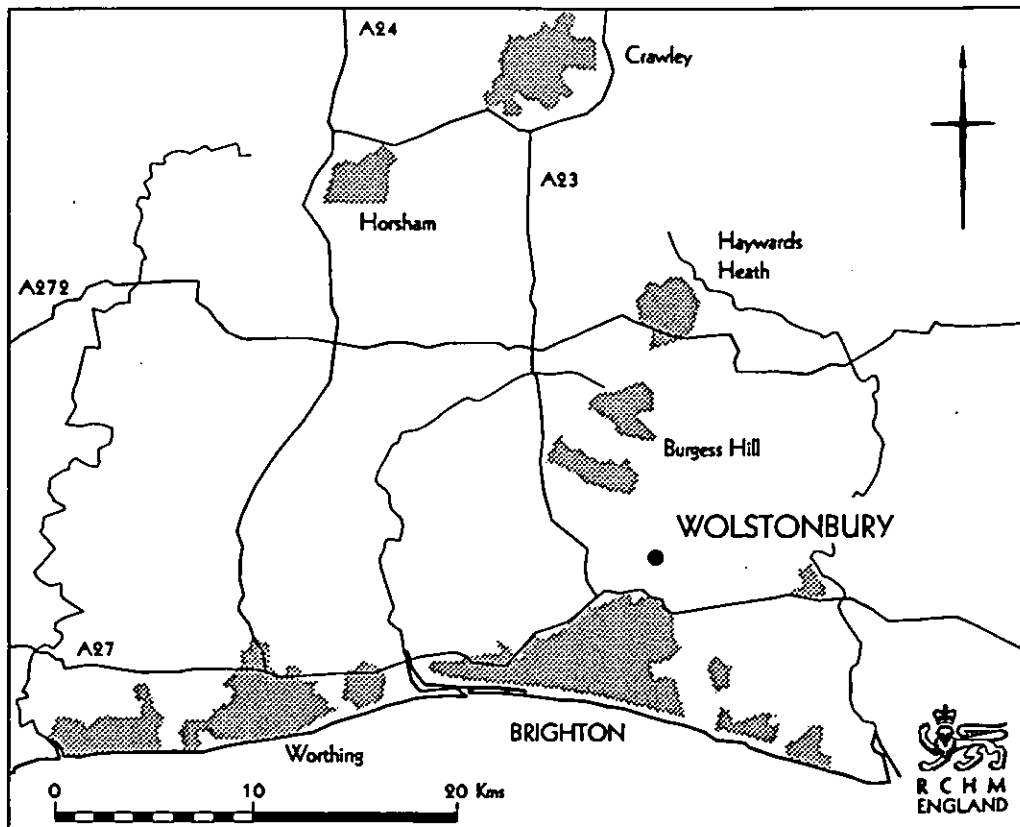


Figure 1: Location map

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

In 1929, EC Curwen surveyed Wolstonbury, identifying two phases of enclosure, the main outer ramparts overlying a slighter elongated oval earthwork (A on figure 1). He excavated a number of small trenches along the course of this inner enclosure and found sherds of apparently Early/Middle Iron Age (La Tene I) pottery which caused him to reject his initial hypothesis that it might be of Neolithic date. He also trenched the main ramparts on the south-western side of the hilltop, dating their construction to the fourth to third centuries BC, but noting that the enclosure displays an unusual morphology in that the rampart appears to survive only on the outside of the ditch. Superficially, this resembles a number of the large Wessex henges, such as Durrington Walls (Wainwright and Longworth 1971), Marden (Wainwright 1971) and Mount Pleasant (Wainwright 1979). Curwen's excavations recovered a single sherd of Food Vessel from the upper levels of the primary silts of the main ditch. This has led to the suggestion (for example Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 69-70) that the enclosure may date to the Early Bronze Age and belong to a class of henge monuments best known on the Wiltshire chalklands.

Numerous finds of flintwork of Neolithic date have come from the hilltop, pointing to extensive activity there (Butler 1992, 232). In addition, there are references to finds of Roman material from within the enclosure and a number of Saxon burials were discovered nearby c.1765 (Curwen 1930, 237). Immediately to the north of the site at the foot of the escarpment, excavations in 1934 and 1950 (Holleyman 1935, 35-45; Woodward 1950-3, 131-4) revealed a Romano-British settlement associated with field system (NMR TQ 21 SE 26).

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE EARTHWORKS

For letters which appear in bold in the text, see RCHME earthwork plan surveyed at 1:1000 scale (Figure 1). There is relatively good aerial photographic coverage of the site.

The earthwork complex is dominated by the oval circuit of the main outer earthwork, which encloses an area of 2.2ha. The rampart now survives as a ditch which varies between 2.0m and 5.0m in width and is up to 1.2m deep where best preserved along the southern section. The external bank is correspondingly well preserved in this area, standing to a height of 1.5m above the ground surface and ranging from 2.0m to 5.0m wide. None of the apparent interruptions in the circuit is original and, as Curwen noted, it seems likely that any entrance would have been located within the area of the south-eastern quadrant of the hillfort, which has been heavily disturbed. Indeed, interwoven with the debris of the Post-Medieval quarrying, the slight and intermittent remains of a scarp **C** can be seen extending the line of the enclosure circuit in a shallow loop from the north. In doing so, it slightly resembles an external hornwork, a feature commonly associated with univallate hillfort entrances. Importantly, very denuded traces of an internal bank were also observed, thus disputing frequent earlier claims to its absence. It survives mainly on the inner lip of the ditch on the south facing side, and consists of low spreads of material 2.0m-4.0m wide and up to 0.2m high.

The inner enclosure **A**, first noted by Curwen, is also oval but more elongated and c.1.5ha in area. The earthwork is best preserved on its western side, where it survives as a low rampart 3.0m wide and 0.4m high, with an external ditch 2.5m wide and up to 0.4m deep. At the southern end of this stretch, it has clearly been truncated by the ditch of the outer enclosure.

The newly discovered length of possible rampart **B** is best preserved on its western side where it survives predominantly as a curvilinear lynchet, which extends for 100m and stands to a maximum height of 0.5m. Although no definite relationship between it and the other two lines of enclosure can be established, its alignment does suggest that it would have been truncated by the inner enclosure. It seems reasonable to speculate that this third and possibly earliest phase of enclosure at Wolstonbury may be of Neolithic date.

Traces of ridge and furrow cultivation can be seen on the spur neck immediately to the south of the enclosure, and this has partially destroyed a round barrow (NMR TQ 21 SE 12) which now survives as a low sub-circular mound **D** some 6m in diameter, standing to a height of 0.4m. To the west of this and encircling the western slopes of the hill are the partial remains of a 'Celtic' field system **E**. This is defined by a series of parallel lynchets 0.3m high and it is possible that the field system extended across the entire hilltop including the interior of the hillfort. The large scarp which extends in a wide arc from the south side of the hillfort may be part of this field system and it is possible that the putative earliest enclosure scarp **B** may also be part of it.

The entire area of the hilltop is pitted with the remains of surface flint quarrying which was in progress by 1765 and had ceased by 1862. Much of the nineteenth century work was carried out by inmates of the Hurstpierpoint workhouse (Curwen 1930, 239). An apparent crude morphological dichotomy is evident in that both rectilinear and sub-circular types exist; in each case, pits survive to a maximum depth of 1.5m and range in diameter from 1.5m to 6.0m.

4. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Much of the speculation on the age and function of the main enclosure at Wolstonbury rests on its unusual morphology. The often cited comparison with 'giant' Wessex henge-enclosures (Harding 1987, 31) is a tenuous one since all the others occupy low-lying positions; the other analogy frequently mentioned - Rybury - is a Neolithic causewayed enclosure (Bonney 1964, 185). Wolstonbury is small compared with the Wessex henge-enclosure monuments. Marden, for example, encloses 14ha, and Marden, which is one of the smallest henge-enclosures, is double the size of Wolstonbury. All have numerous entrances and, when excavated, the enclosing ditches are frequently in excess of 3m in depth, containing abundant artefactual assemblages, whose pottery components are dominated by Grooved Ware. Curwen's excavations of the main enclosure at Wolstonbury showed it to be defined by a shallow ditch 1.0m deep with few finds, indicating a monument which contrasts greatly with the suggested comparisons. Its stratigraphic relationship with the two inner enclosures, one of which is potentially of sixth century BC date, would suggest that the Food Vessel is indeed residual as suspected by Curwen, and that we should perhaps view the enclosure as an unusual example of Iron Age date. The positioning of the hillfort deserves comment since it has clearly been placed in such a location so as to maximise not only its own visibility but also to provide unimpeded views to other important first millennium BC sites. From the hilltop, clear views can be seen of the hillforts of Cissbury (TQ 139 080), Chanctonbury Ring (TQ 139 120), Devil's Dyke (TQ 260 111) and to the north a number of sites in the Weald. The positioning of Wolstonbury was not a chance one and the Iron Age enclosure clearly had some special significance beyond that of purely settlement (McOmish and Oswald forthcoming).

In summary, it would seem that the recent re-classification of Wolstonbury as a potential henge site is premature. The weight of direct and corroborative evidence suggests otherwise and although no clear period analogies can be found, Wolstonbury is still best seen as an unusual enclosure of first millennium BC date. However, RCHME survey has revealed one potentially earlier element of enclosure and it is intended to investigate this possibility further, possibly with geoprospection techniques, at a later date.

5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The archaeological survey was carried out by David McOmish and Alastair Oswald. Control points and hard detail were surveyed using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The details of the earthwork plan were supplied at 1:1000 scale with Fibron tapes using normal graphical methods. The report was researched and written by David McOmish. The plan was drawn up for publication by Alastair Oswald. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ (TQ 21 SE 01).

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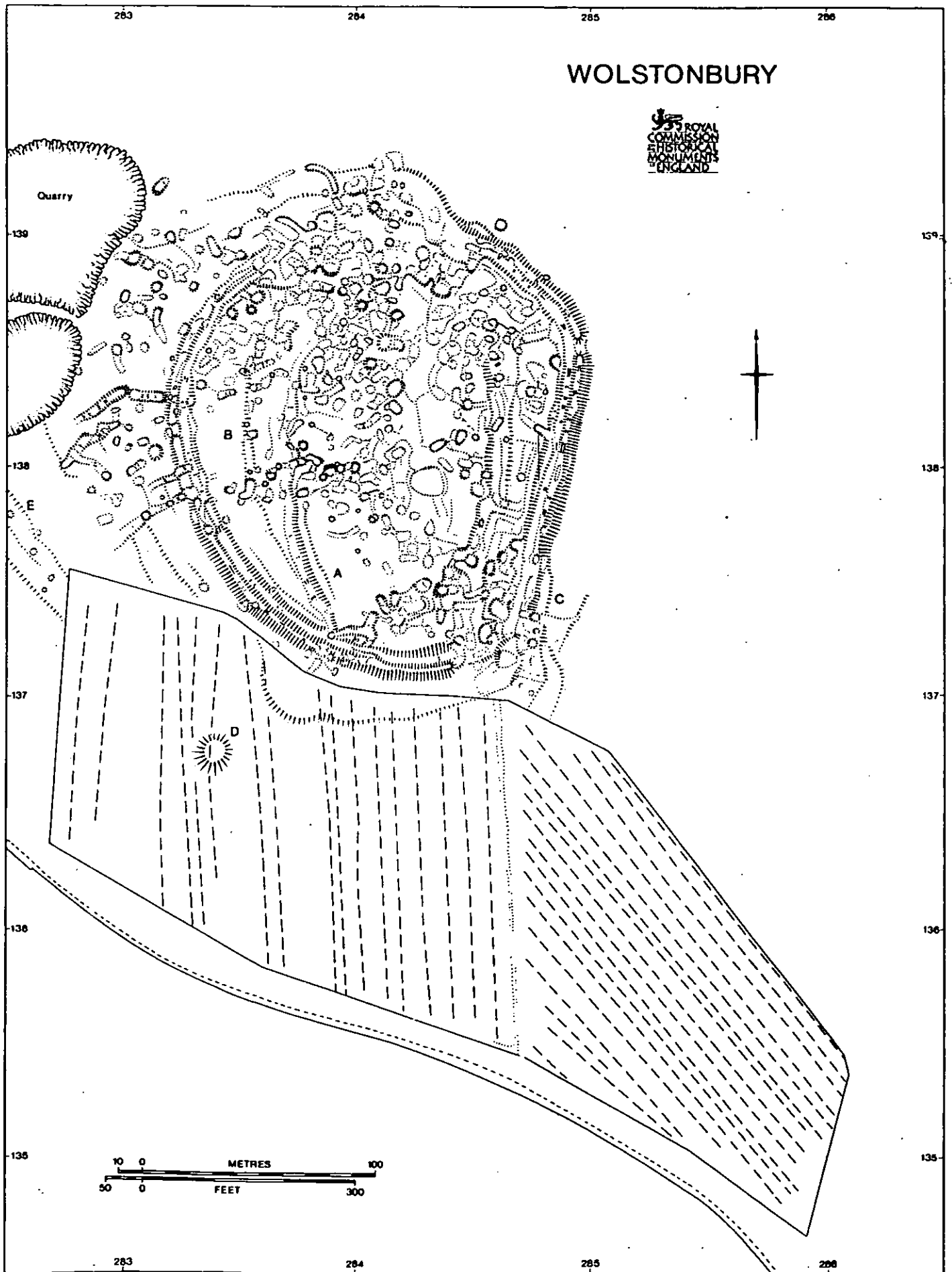


Figure 2: RCHME earthwork plan (reduced, surveyed at 1:1000 scale)



