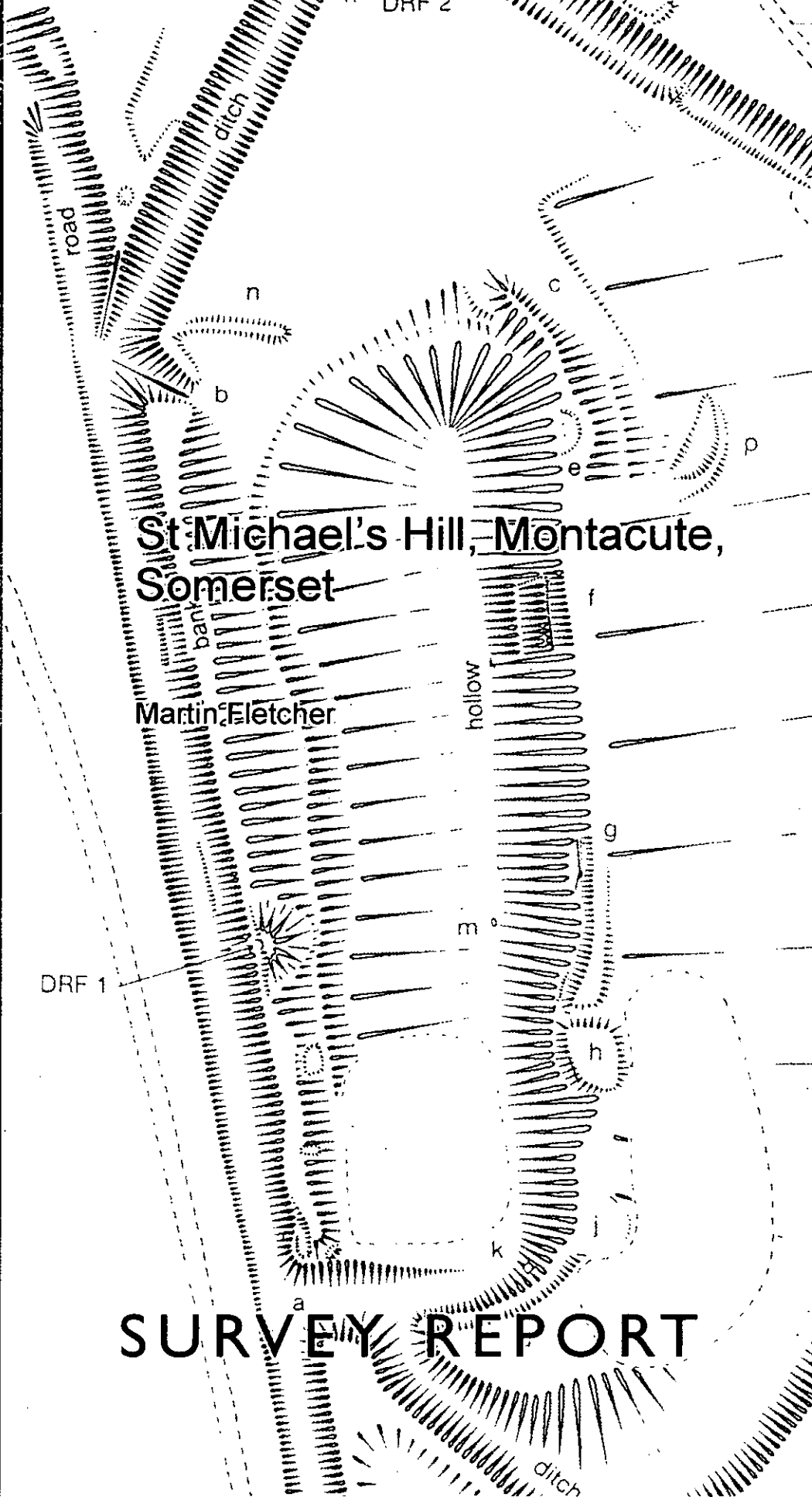




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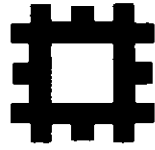


St. Michael's Hill, Montacute,
Somerset

Martin Fletcher

DRF 1

SURVEY REPORT



ENGLISH HERITAGE

St Michael's Hill, Montacute, Somerset
An archaeological survey by English Heritage

County:	Somerset
District:	South Somerset
Parish:	Montacute
OS Map No:	ST 41 NE
NGR:	ST 4935 1699
NMR No:	ST 41 NE 7
RSM No:	24041
Surveyed:	April 2000
Report by:	Martin Fletcher
Surveyors:	M. Fletcher, S. Probert

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Summary

St Michael's Hill is an isolated natural knoll that has been artificially sculpted to create impressive earthworks. The occupation of this prominent landform dates from at least the 11th century and the principal feature is a substantial motte carved from the upper part of the knoll. This conical mound is flanked on the western side by a strong bank and ditch, and it is almost completely enclosed by a broad terrace at its base. The origin and function of the terrace are unclear but it may have been created to support an annular bailey. A substantial horseshoe-shaped bailey, situated on the south-eastern side of the knoll, has a deep outer ditch and a partial inner bank which cuts across the line of the broad terrace. This bailey exhibits the typical form and layout of an 11th century earthwork however, because it is constructed on a very steep slope, only a very small percentage of the interior is level - an area now confined to four relatively narrow contour-following terraces.

Documentary sources indicate that a castle stood on the summit in the 11th century but that it had lost its military significance by 1102. The first fortification was probably constructed of timber but part or parts were apparently rebuilt in stone. A chapel (which may once have been part of the castle) was still in use in the 14th century. In 1630 a building described as 'a fine piece of work with arched work and roof, all overlaid with stone' stood on the summit; a tall circular 18th century folly tower now occupies the top. The defensive earthworks were almost certainly modified or enhanced when the knoll was developed as an ornamental prospect associated with the nearby Montacute House - a 16th century mansion extensively refashioned in 1787.

The earthworks were surveyed and investigated in April 2000 by staff from the English Heritage Office at Exeter on behalf of The National Trust.

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

St Michael's Hill stands 139m above OD on undulating ground in the shadow of both Ham Hill and Hedgecock Hill. Its position, apparently partially obscured by Ham Hill, suggests that it had both a limited impact and significance as a prominent feature in the landscape.

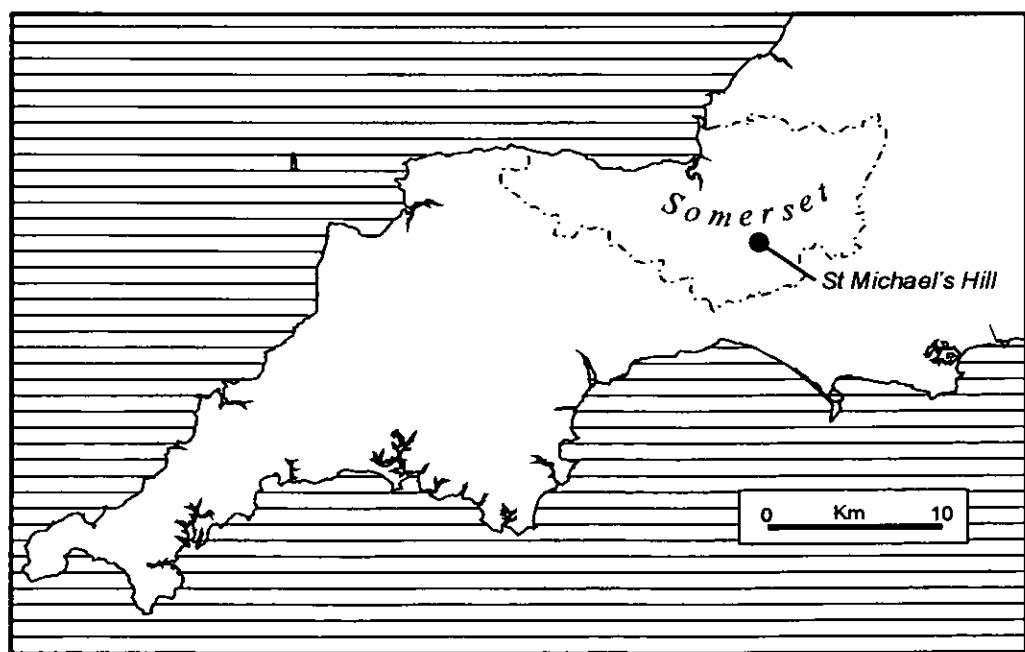


Fig. 1 Location.

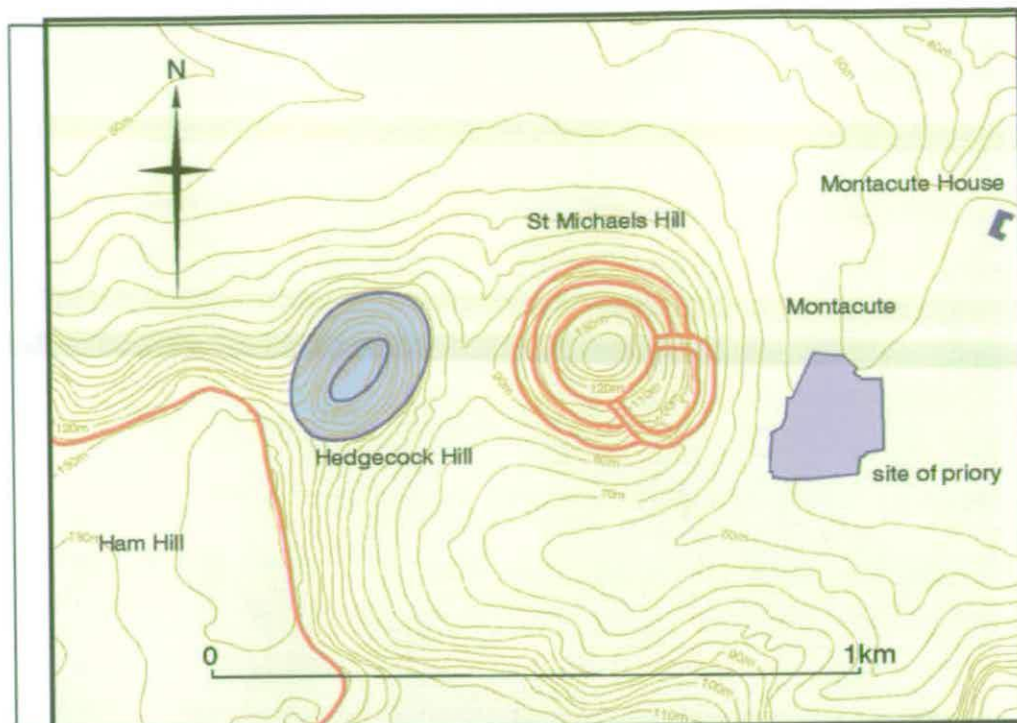


Fig. 2. St Michael's Hill, location.

However this is certainly not the case given that from the top of the folly tower on its summit distant panoramic vistas are visible in almost every direction. Glastonbury Tor, with the church tower on its summit, 22 kilometres away to the north across the Somerset Levels serves as a reminder that St Michael's Hill must also be visible from a great distance. This would especially be the case if the castle was painted white - there is evidence that stone castles, such as Corfe Castle in Dorset were whitewashed at some period in their history

The geology of the area is Yeovil Sands with the plateau outcrop of Ham stone to the west. The isolated St Michael's Hill presumably has a core of resistant rock.. The very fertile soil on the slopes is cretaceous Jurassic siltstone and sandstone; there are few stones apparent on the surface.

The knoll is cloaked by deciduous trees, most of which are no more than fifty years old. Stukley's drawing of the area dated 1723 depicts a bare rounded hilltop emerging from a dense plantation of mature trees growing on the lower slopes (nothing is depicted on the summit). An 18th century engraving of Montacute depicts a tree-covered knoll with a large flagpole on its summit (Adkins & Adkins 1992,87). Intense badger activity has caused damage to parts of the earthwork and also to the steep slopes, especially where the natural and artificial scarps meet (fig. 3).

In its original form, before it was so extensively remodelled, St Michael's Hill might have resembled the profile of the tree-covered Hedgecock Hill located some 350m to the west (fig 4). This fairly conical hill, which is linked to Ham Hill, is roughly similar in both area and height to its neighbour but it is largely undisturbed by earthworks or any kind of fortification. The few evident earthworks include some cultivation terraces, a perimeter boundary ditch plus outer bank and also minor stone quarrying on its top. Burrowing animals have also caused extensive damage here especially on the northern slopes.

the priory lands in 1102 (Renn 1973, 248). Leland (1964, 157) states that part of the castle was taken down to make the priory.

The priory was dissolved in 1539 and its lands were incorporated into the Montacute estate in 1608 (VCH 1972, 212). The newly erected Montacute House had in 1598 become the new focus for the area. A building on St Michael's Hill was described in 1630 as 'a fine piece of work with arched work and roof, all overlaid with stone' (VCH 1972, 215).

DESCRIPTION OF THE EARTHWORKS

The extant earthworks on the knoll can, for convenience, be divided into seven separate elements (see plan) (fig5):

1. A substantial oval motte surmounted by an 18th century stone folly.
2. A strong ditch and rampart encompassing the western side of the motte.
3. A broad terrace which almost completely encloses the upper part of the knoll.
4. The steep slopes which front the broad terrace
5. The bailey earthworks
6. The perimeter bank and ditches
7. The linear hollow ways and tracks occupying the foot of the knoll.

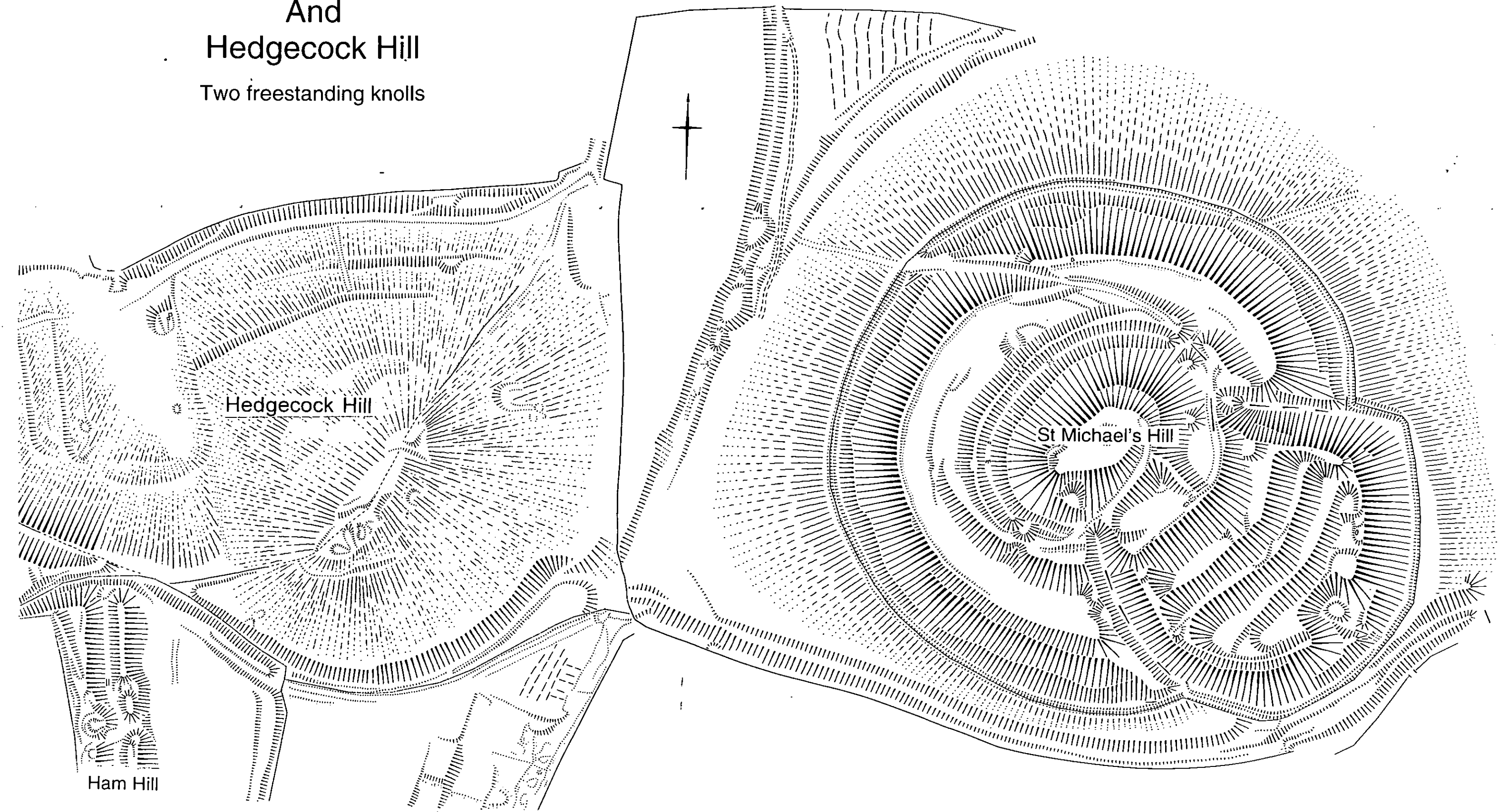
The motte

The conical motte occupies a position of great natural strength. It stands up to 21.5m high and has precipitously steep slopes. Its south-eastern side has been extensively disturbed and damaged partly by burrowing animals and the wide path to the summit and partly by a broad level stance (named 'Bower' on the 1782 map) (fig6). The Bower is cut by a narrow earthen ramp oriented on a NW-SE axis and the footings of a narrow wall lie along the front edge of this scooped and bisected stance. The Bower was perhaps created as viewpoint - probably part of a 17th/18th century ornamental walk.

The level sub-oval shaped summit of the motte measures a maximum 52m (NE-SW) by 26m. The upper slopes on its northern side lie on a fairly shallow gradient which suggests that this part might have been built up when the summit was levelled. There is no evidence of a bank around the perimeter of the top or any trace of footings; a tall circular folly enclosed by a slight and rather ragged 0.4m high sub-circular mound now stands off-centre. This folly tower which is 4.3m in overall diameter and constructed of Ham stone has a 1760 date stone over the doorway. A 2m long section of its foundation wall (adjacent to the doorway) two courses high incorporates chamfered blocks and may comprise remnants of an earlier structure. Internally, forming part of the floor, is an expanse of what appears to be an uncut stone slab. On the western side of the tower the line of an infilled trench some 9m long and 0.1m deep marks the course of the underground part of the tower lightning conductor. This trench, archaeologically excavated in 1989, revealed evidence of a masonry wall and a layer of spread rubble - possibly demolition material (Adkins & Adkins 1989, 125). Cut into the south-western side of the summit is a curvilinear trench with an associated upcast bank; this is possibly a stone robbing trench. Nearby two uncut slabs of Ham stone protrude from the slope. A few rough blocks of Ham stone lie at the foot of the motte where they presumably came to rest after tumbling from the top.

St Michael's Hill And Hedgecock Hill

Two freestanding knolls



10 0 100 metres

Two level stances with pronounced front scarps lie at the foot of the north-eastern side of the motte; their origin and function are not clear.

The ditch and rampart on the western side of the motte

A substantial ditch and rampart form a strong barrier at the foot of the western side of the motte. The ditch is, on average, 2.6m deep and its earthen rampart is some 3.5m high with a 2.2m wide top. Within the arc of this defensive work the lower motte slope has been scarped to enhance the ditch.

The rounded north-eastern terminal of this earthwork is isolated from the adjacent level terrace by a deep ditch which cuts across its line. A similar layout occurs at the south-western terminal, except that the ditch which cuts across its line has been more or less infilled. The two rampart terminals are each now partly obscured by a similar, gently sloping, earthen ramp. These ramps may have been built when a circular walk was created around the motte.

The function and origin of the two terraces, which occupy the line of the ditch and rampart at the base of the motte (on the north-east and south sides) are unknown. These two gently sloping terraces each measure approximately 26m by 14m and are fronted by steep and prominent scarps.

The broad terrace

The broad terrace located approximately half way up the knoll (at 105m above OD) encircles approximately 75% of its circumference; the earthworks of the eastern bailey occupy the remaining 25% of the circumference. This terrace was apparently created partly by excavation into the side of the knoll and partly by the dumping of the spoil on the natural slopes below, a process resembling the creation of positive and negative lynchets. It ranges in width from about 19m to 32m and this includes the vestiges of a 3.8 m wide, 0.4m high earthen bank which is visible around the majority of its outer lip. If the western ditch and rampart earthworks post-date this terrace then the level area would have been wider still. There are traces of minor linear scarping and a large shallow depression on this level terrace but there is no evidence of structures.

The steep slopes which front the broad terrace

Steep slopes fall away from the edge of the broad terrace; how much of this slope represents the original profile of the knoll and how much is composed of dumped spoil from the terrace above is difficult to deduce. A marked change of slope on the lower fringe may however denote the emergence of the natural slope although this in turn may have been scarped to augment the size of the outer ditch.

A well-worn footpath, widened to form a track, ascends the steep slope on the north-western side of the knoll on a gentle gradient. It is depicted on the 1782 map as the only access to the summit.

The bailey earthworks

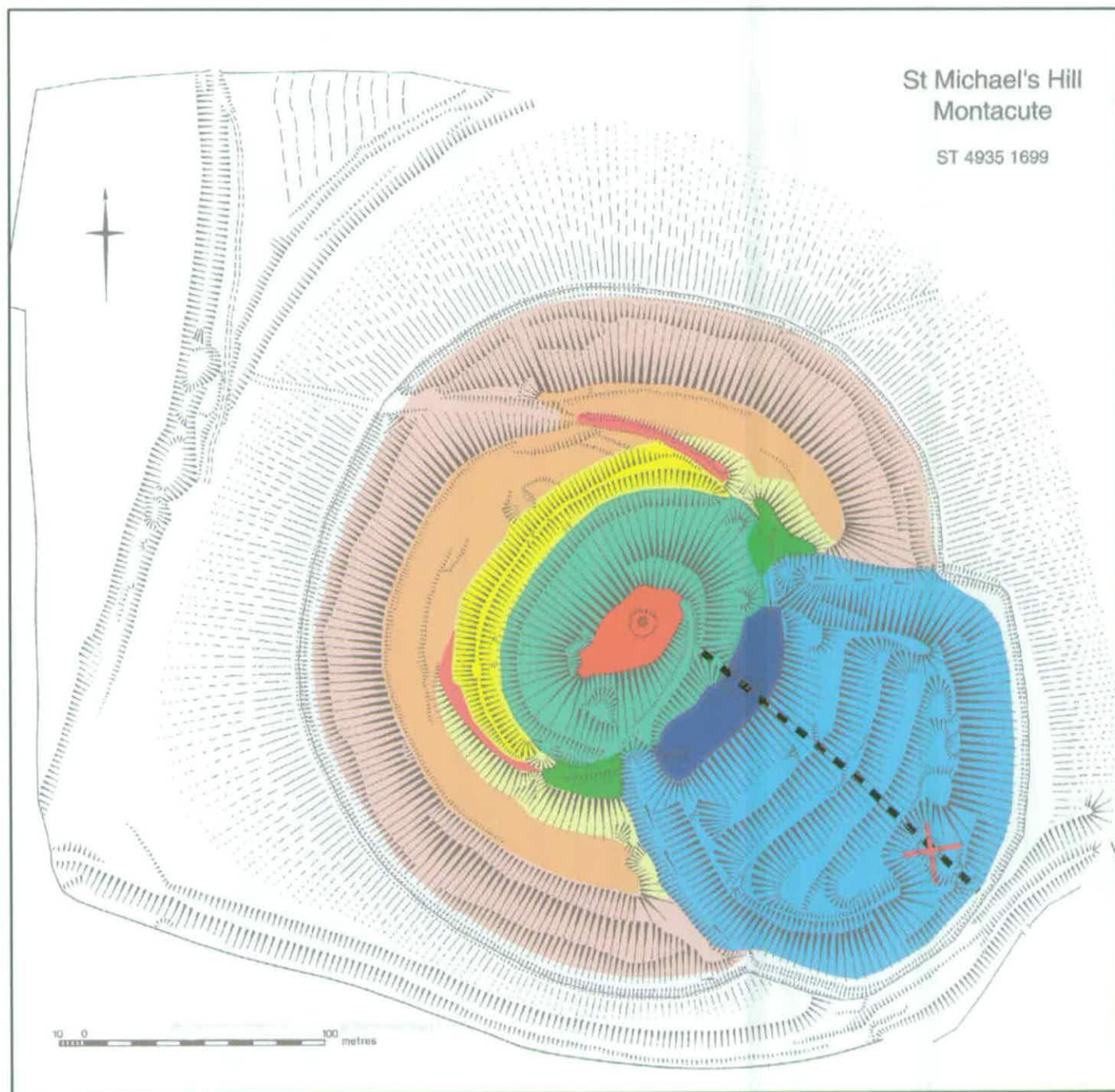
A substantial earthwork in the shape and form of a Norman bailey lies on the extremely steep south-eastern side of the knoll. The two terminals of its ditch are cut into the side of the knoll and they also apparently lie across the line of the broad terrace. The precise relationship of the ditch to the knoll is unclear because broad footpaths and dense vegetation covers the area.

St Michael's Hill
Montacute

ST 4935 1699

- KEY
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|---|--|
| 1 | summit of motte | 1 | motte | 2 | strong ditch and bank on western side of motte |
| 3 | broad terrace | 4 | outer slopes | 5 | bailey earthworks |
| access ramp | wide terrace | sloping terrace | | | |
| other artificial slopes | (?) | | | | site of gatehouse |
| - - - - - | | | | | conjectured line of timber/earthen ramp |

Fig. 5. Proposed development of the earthworks on St Michael's Hill.



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The bailey ditch is a maximum 20m wide at its top, 9m deep and 2m wide at its bottom; there is no significant outer slope to the ditch on the downhill side. Internally the bailey has a broad earthen bank on the northern and southern sides but elsewhere the bank appears to have been either refashioned and/or effaced. The interior, which lies on the steep hillside, measures approximately 125m (NE-SW) by 105m and consists of a complex series of narrow terraces. These terraces measure from 3m to 9m in width and some have rounded out-turned ends; they are separated by steep scarps which range from 3.1m to 11.7m in height.

The position of the bailey entrance is not obvious. There is a pronounced sub-square depression in the lower (eastern) side opposite the motte; this has previously been interpreted as a quarry. Although disturbed and excavated in places this fairly uniform depression may mark the comprehensively robbed site of a stone gatehouse or tower. The origin and function of the large square platform and scoops to the north of this depression are unknown.

Vestiges of distinct 'bulges' are discernible in the central part of the two upper narrow terraces; these coincide with the orientation of the narrow earthen ramp that cuts across the Bower. Combined, these earthworks hint at the former presence of a linear (timber ?) structure which might have linked the squarish depression at the foot of the bailey with the summit of the knoll thus bisecting the interior.

A well-used footpath affords entry to the bailey ditch from the south.

The perimeter banks and ditches.

A slight ditch and bank completely encloses the earthworks on the knoll; it is most probably a medieval or later boundary work. The ditch is on average 0.6m deep although it is enhanced by the steep slopes of the knoll. The low outer bank, now visible mostly as a field hedge is 1.1m high; beyond is a 3m wide terrace with vestiges of a slight depression visible in places which suggests that it is a silted outer ditch.

The fringe slopes

The lower natural slopes of the knoll, which lie beyond the perimeter earthworks and are largely undisturbed. Two substantial hollow ways cross the low-lying ground which is under permanent pasture. The southern hollow way is depicted and described as a 'coach road' on the 1782 map; the other route skirts the western side as a well-defined hollow way now interrupted by two or three small ponds. In their present form neither appear to be associated with, or afford access to, St Michael's Hill. Two broad lynchets as well as traces of ridge and furrow lie on the north-western fringe of the knoll.

DISCUSSION

The following model, derived from the results of the new survey, is tentatively offered as an interpretation for the development of the earthworks on St Michael's Hill. In the 11th century the upper part of the knoll was sculpted to form a conical motte; the summit was levelled and spoil was used to uplift the upper north-eastern side of the top. The reason why the knoll was so extensively cut back to form the motte with such a wide terrace at its foot is open to debate. Perhaps the terrace was the preferred site for the first bailey or possibly there was an optimum size for a defensible motte; alternatively the size of this motte might have been predetermined thus necessitating such an extensive refashioning of the knoll. At Castle Neroche (Somerset)

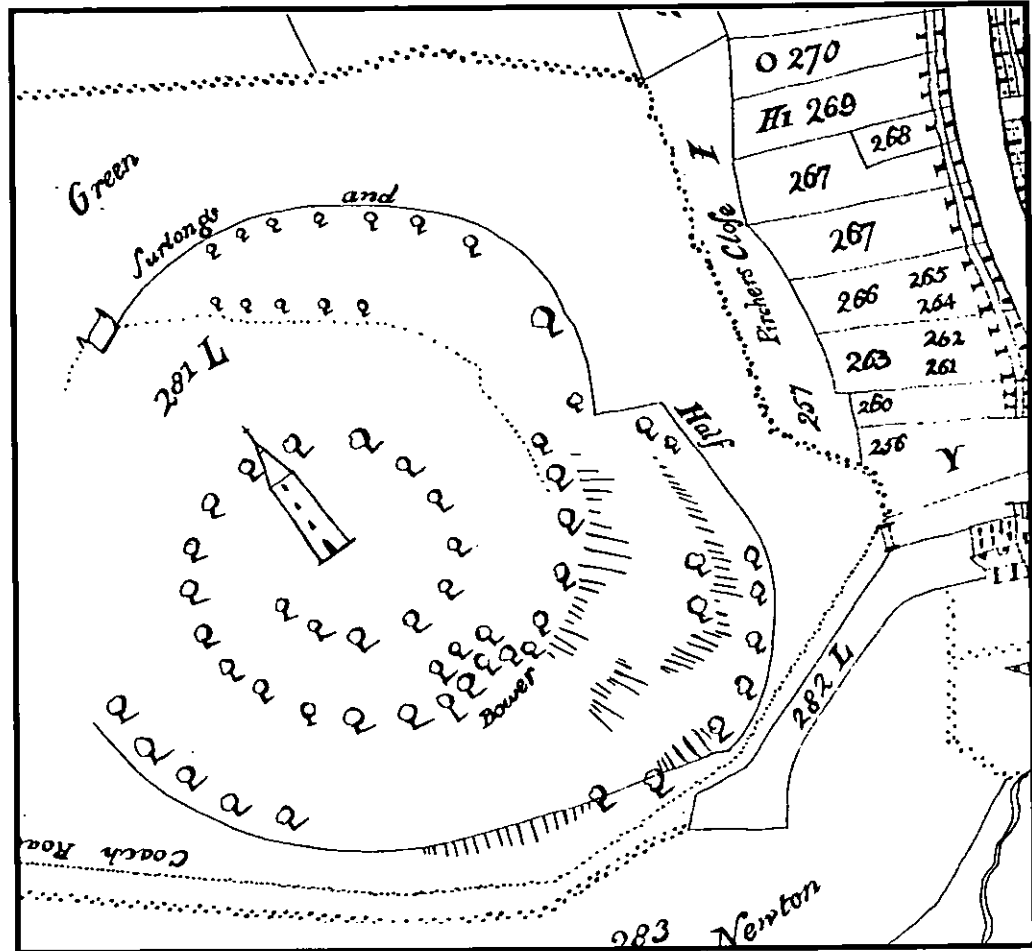


Fig. 6. 1782 map of the Manor of Montacute.

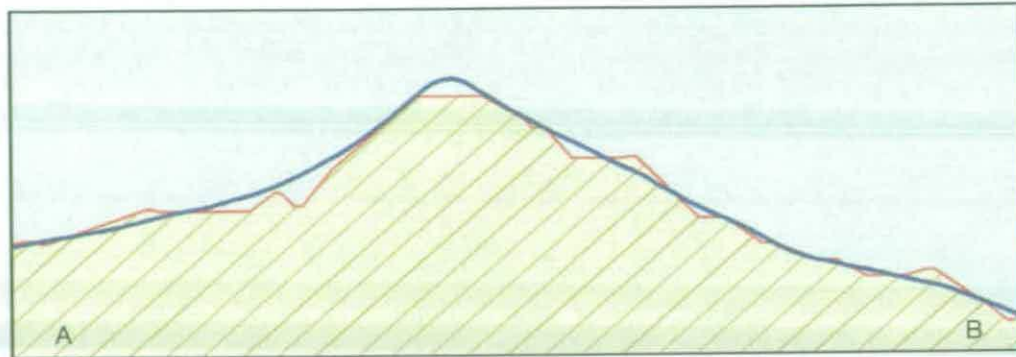
(Higham & Barker 1992) the 12th century conical motte was created from the side of a high natural escarpment by the excavation of a deep, wide curvilinear ditch. The south-eastern quadrant of this ditch isolated a fragment of the escarpment which apparently extended beyond the required area of the motte; this surviving part of the original face of the escarpment appears to have a limited tactical or functional use.

Burrow (1924, 120) describes the broad terrace at the foot of the St Michael's Hill motte as 'a lower bailey or base court formed by a plateau running all round the hill'. Its construction represents a considerable feat of engineering with the positive effect of rendering the lower slopes of the knoll much steeper but the negative effect of apparently weakening the defensive position of the motte. However the presence of an annular, or pen-annular, bailey with a strong palisade built upon the earthen bank which fronts the steep outer slopes would have created an impressive barrier.

The strong ditch and rampart on the western side of the motte has been interpreted as part of a ringwork but this seems most unlikely given that its centre would have been filled by the upper part of the knoll.

The date of the construction of the bailey on the south-eastern side is unknown but, conjecturally, it post-dates the broad terrace. It may have been built in response to, or as a result of, a military attack perhaps as a deliberate effort to reduce the vulnerability of the site. This motte and bailey configuration is similar to other 11th century defensive earthworks; for

Fig. 7. Profile of the earthworks on St Michael's Hill, section A-B (Fig. 8). Vertical scale x2. Red line indicates current profile; blue line represents conjectured profile before modification.



example Hen Domen (Powys) and Sandal Castle (Yorkshire) each have a strong motte with a horseshoe-shaped bailey extending from one side. Both have a substantial rampart and ditch around the motte similar to that to St Michael's Hill except that at both sites this rampart and ditch also extends around the bailey to form a second line of defence (Higham and Barker 1992, 299). The very real puzzle about the St Michael's Hill bailey is the fact that it is built on an extremely steep gradient hard against the slope of the motte. This siting might perhaps have been dictated either by the presence of a topographical feature such as a slight spur or spring line, or possibly by the need to link up with the adjacent lowland routes and the settlement. Whatever the reason for its location only approximately 25% of the interior is now level and even this limited flat space is divided into four narrow terraces. These linear terraces are hardly suitable for structures or corrals but they may represent a subsequent refashioning of the space. Perhaps ornamental landscape features or cultivation terraces (in response to the pressure on the land in the post-medieval period) were created from the slope. The interior of the bailey is described as 'vineyards' on the 1825 Parish Map (Prior 1999) but whether there were vines here or simply that the area resembled a vineyard is not clear. The fact that a broad level terrace, up to 30m across could be created elsewhere on the knoll clearly demonstrates that such a wide, flat area could have once existed. The absence of a level interior to the bailey would seem to be illogical, especially when compared to other sites of similar origin and function in the south-west of England. The earthworks at Trematon Castle (Cornwall), Okehampton Castle (Devon), Loddiswell (Devon) and Castle Neroche (Somerset) are each constructed such that the interior of the bailey is almost completely flat.

The defensive earthworks at Hen Domen and Stafford Castle were, it has been suggested, fortified by the addition of impressive timber structures including tall gatehouses, towers and high palisades (as depicted in Higham and Barker 1992, 291, 337). Perhaps similar formidable timber structures were added to the earthworks at St Michael's Hill to create a strong and effective bailey.

Prior (1999) suggests that an entrance, or entrances, may have existed at the points the bailey ditch joins the side of the motte. Here the two gently sloping terraces and their approach ramps afford easy access to the interior and the summit. The principal entrance to the site however may once have been located in the centre of the south-west side of the bailey, where the large symmetrical depression may mark the position of a gatehouse or tower now completely robbed of its stone foundations. This siting conforms to the conventional position

for a Norman gatehouse - often positioned in the bailey earthworks immediately opposite the motte.

This large symmetrical depression may once have been physically linked to the alignment of slight earthwork 'bulges' visible on the upper terraces and also with the pronounced 'ramp' on the Bower. It may not be unreasonable to speculate that some form of earth/timber ramp linked the foot of the site to the summit subsequent to the creation of the narrow terraces. Such a structure may have been built to afford direct access to the summit or alternatively it could possibly have been used to convey stone from castle ruins for use in the buildings of the Priory or the settlement located just to the south-east of the knoll.

Access to the knoll in the 18th century (1782 map) was via a footpath on the northern side; this route is still in use although it has been widened as a track for forestry vehicles. The original access to the motte is unlikely to have been via this path because of the apparent absence of any defensive earthworks to cover this approach. The new survey indicates that this northern path once bifurcated when it reached the broad terrace thus offering a circular walk around the mount via the two earthen ramps and appropriately placed timber bridges. The 1782 map also depicts a somewhat stylised spiral of trees around the hill from the Bower to the summit; there is no earthwork evidence on the very steep, tree-covered slopes for a path on this alignment.

The minor ditch, bank and outer terrace/ditch which encircles the base of the knoll is probably a boundary work rather than a defensive feature.

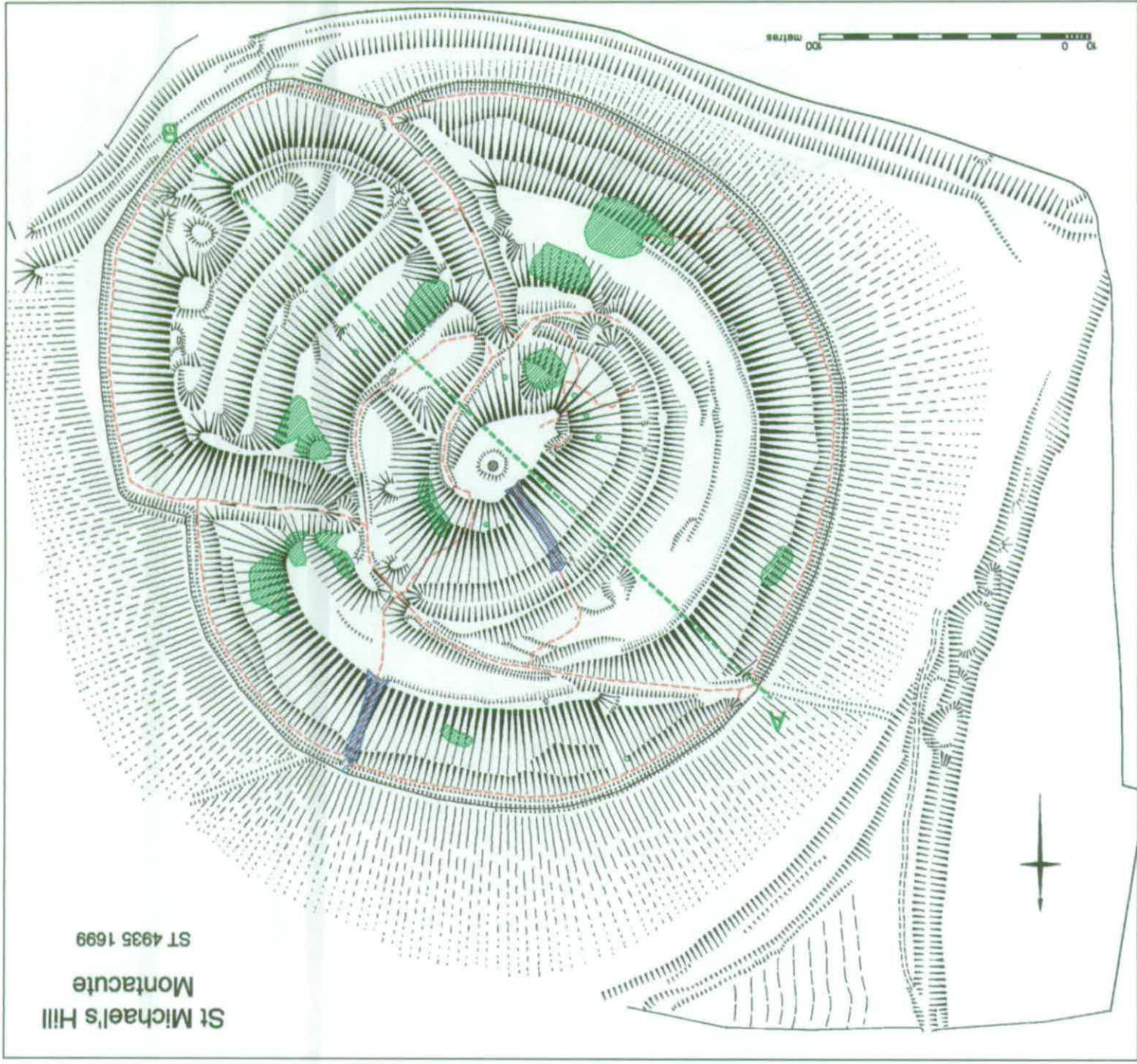
The profile of St Michael's Hill is visible from Montacute House and its gardens which are located on low-lying ground to the north-east. The knoll was most probably landscaped to create an ornamental prospect visible from the house either in the 17th or 18th centuries. Walks and vistas were probably also established on the knoll, this grand scheme was crowned by the addition of an 18th century stone tower on the summit.

CONCLUSION

This new survey of St Michael's Hill reveals an ordered, almost aesthetic, symmetry to the earthworks. If the knoll was originally a conical hill with steep slopes and few naturally occurring terraces, faults or depressions then the creation of the earthworks visible today represent an impressive achievement in both planning and constructional terms. The documentary evidence reveals that St Michael's Hill had a military and sacred importance from at least the early 11th century; this would explain why such an immense effort was expended to re-model and fortify the knoll. It is now difficult to reconcile the historical account of a strongly defended stone castle with the present pastoral setting which has more to do with display and ornament than with defence.

SURVEY DETAILS

St Michael's Hill was surveyed in February and March 2000. A Leica T1610 electronic theodolite was used to establish three ring traverses at various levels around the knoll; these traverses were tied by an overarching linear traverse.. The control framework was linked to the extensive RCHME Ham Hill survey undertaken in 1996.



KEY

- active burrowing
- area of extensive wear
- footpath

Fig. 8. Map showing footpaths and damage on St Michael's Hill.

St Michael's Hill
 Montacute
 ST 4935 1699

The survey was completed using graphical survey methods and the result was hand drawn. Some earthwork features were shrouded in dense vegetation and others have been badly damaged by burrowing animals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Maps

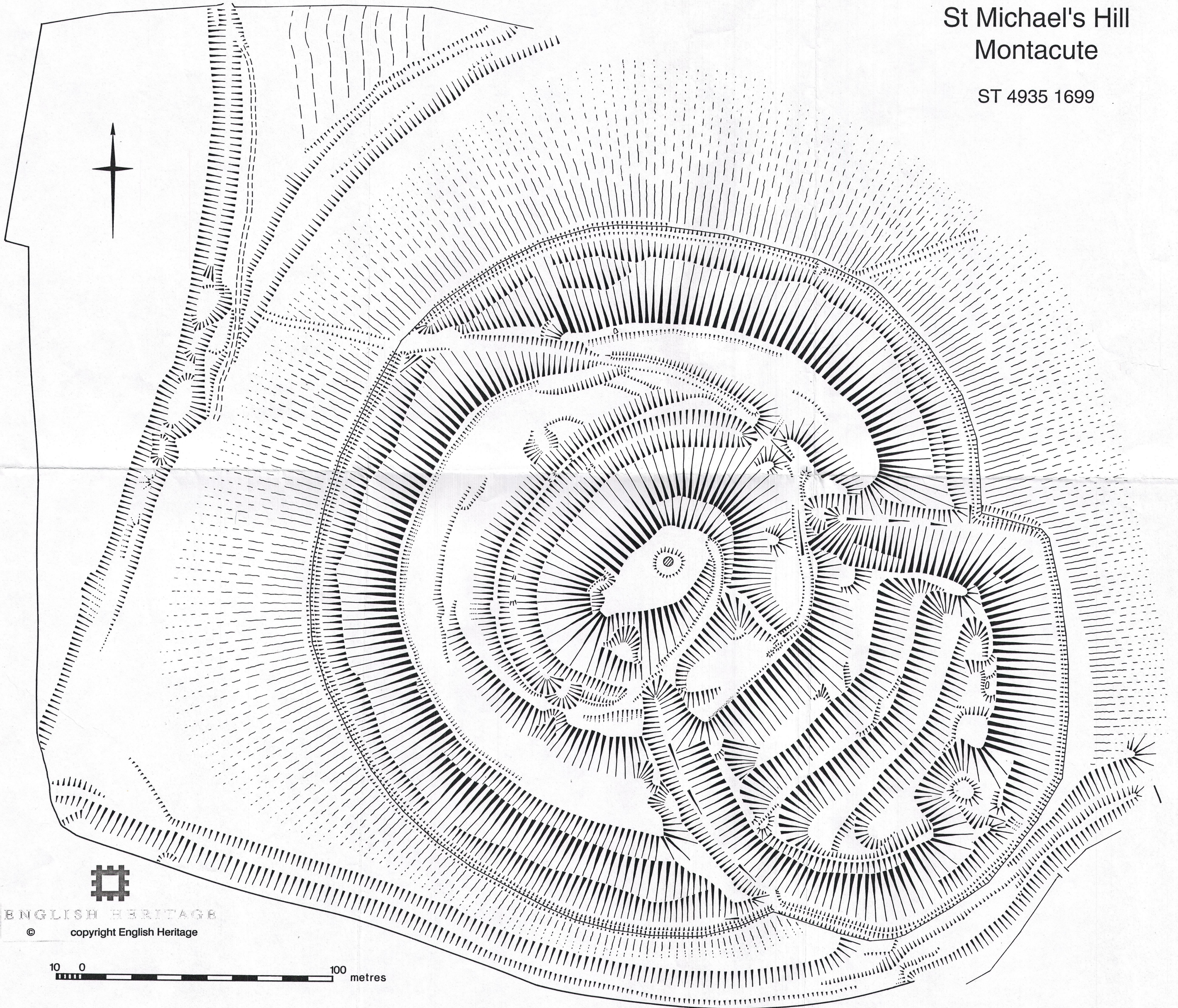
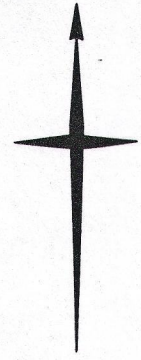
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- Geological Survey of Great Britain, Yeovil Sheet* 312
- Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale plans* 1st and 2nd editions 1886 and 1904

Drawings

- St Michael's Hill, Montacute* 1723 William Stukeley

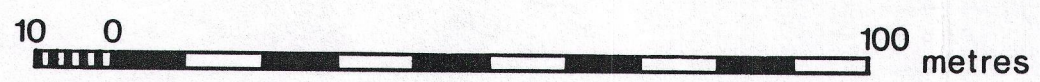
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