ISSN 1478-7008

ENGLISH HERITAGE

Hunter's Tor Hillfort, Lustleigh, Devon: an Earthwork Survey

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SURVEY REPORT

Archaeological Investigation Report Series AI/09/2005

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an Earthwork Survey

ISSN 1478-7008
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County:	Devon
District:	Teignbridge
Parish:	Lustleigh
NGR:	SX 7615 8243
NMR No:	SX 78 SE 2
Devon SMR No:	SX 78 SE 2
SAM No:	DV 279
Date of survey:	August 2004
Surveyed by:	B Moore and P Newman
Report author:	Ben Moore
Illustrations by:	Ben Moore

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A 1:1000 survey of the earthworks on Lustleigh Cleave, has been completed by the English Heritage Archaeological Investigation (EH, AI) team based at Exeter. A hillfort of probable Iron Age date sits within an agricultural landscape which has apparently been exploited from the Bronze Age through to the post-medieval period. The largest area of agricultural earthworks is likely to be of prehistoric date and can be seen to reuse the earlier defensive earthworks. Evidence of earlier agriculture can be seen in the form of banks running under the ramparts. The hillfort has two distinct phases, the first comprising two concentric sub-circular earthwork enclosures. A section of the rampart from the outermost enclosure was reused as part of a second phase earthwork which sits between the two earlier ones, clearly overlying both. South of the fort are the remains of a post-medieval field system.

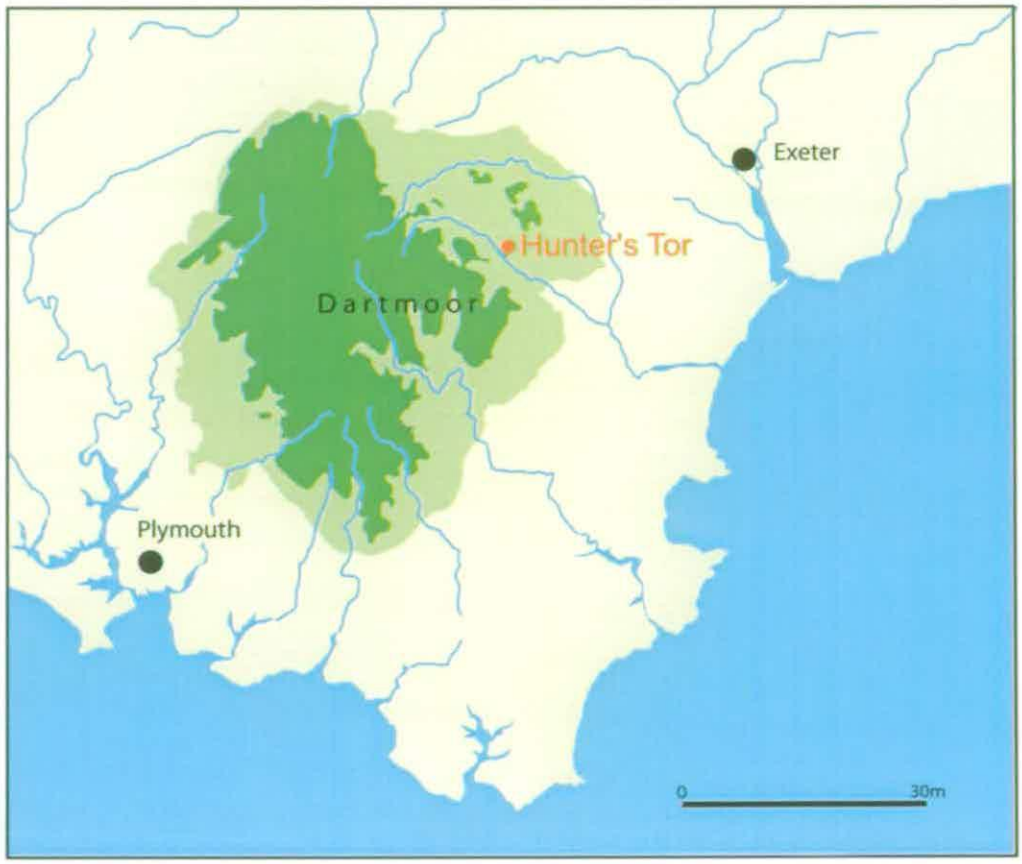

Figure 1. The location of Hunter's Tor in South Devon and within Dartmoor National Park.

Location and Geology

The earthworks are situated near the summit of Hunter's Tor at the northern end of the ridge of Lustleigh Cleave on western Dartmoor in Devon at around 324m OD and are centred at SX 7615 8240. The granite tor, from which the site takes its name, is to the north east of the earthworks and beyond this the hill slopes fairly steeply down to Peck Farm. To the south west of the tor the hill is at its steepest, where it falls away into the valley formed by the River Bovey on its way south east towards Bovey Tracey. This situation gives the site wide-ranging views to the north and west. South of the tor the land slopes more gently and evidence of cultivation is clear. Some of the ground around and including the earthworks is

used as grazing for sheep but the area to the west of the fort has an almost impenetrable covering of gorse. However, gorse has recently been cleared from the western portion of the main earthworks, allowing better access and enabling a more complete survey.

The Tor is formed of coarse granite with abundant K-feldspar megacrysts (British Geological Survey 1:50 000 series, sheet 338) as is much of the underlying surrounding moorland.

Figure2. The locality of Hunter's Tor, showing also the position of the Teign Valley Hillforts.

The Survey

The survey was undertaken by staff of the English Heritage (EH) Exeter Office at the request of the EH Inspector and Dartmoor National Park following vegetation clearance by the commoners association. The site was subject to an initial field reconnaissance in June 2004 and the majority of fieldwork took place in August of that year, followed by return visits in the winter months after bracken had died back. The earthworks were surveyed at a scale of 1:500 using dual-frequency GPS with graphical completion in the field. The site was located to the national grid via Trimble's OSTN02 transformation in its TGO GPS processing software.

Sources and Previous Work

The 1st edition 25-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) map of 1886 roughly depicts the major elements of the hillfort and the Victoria County History of Devon describes the remains as as 'difficult to find amongst the scattered boulders of granite' (VCH 1906, 597). The rampart to the south east is described as widening 'into a broad shallow platform'. Three hut circles within the central area are also mentioned, as well as a ditch to drain them but these features were not identified during the current survey. The 1956 revision has slightly more detail including previously unrecorded scarps to the north east.

The first large-scale survey of Hunter's Tor was carried out by N.V. Quinnell in the early eighties and appears in Silvester and Quinnell's study of 'Unfinished Hillforts of the Devon Moors' (1993, 17-31). However, their interpretation and understanding of the earthworks differs somewhat from this report, as will be discussed below.

Site Description

The earthworks on Hunter's Tor may be divided into five main elements on the basis of the survey (Fig 4), which may be described as follows: (A & B) a prehistoric field system; (C, D & E) two or more phases of hillfort construction; (F) an area of post-medieval agriculture. Relationships between some of these aspects are presently obscured by dense vegetation, particularly gorse, and some ambiguity may be resolved, if and when these areas are cleared.

Early Field Banks

The most obvious earthworks on the highest point of Hunter's Tor are the banks and ditches of the ramparts. However, these do not appear to be the earliest. Running from north west to south east are three slightly curving, fragmentary, linear banks (j, Fig. 3). Two run under the inner ramparts on either side of the hillfort entrance, the southernmost reappearing between the inner and central rampart alongside another similar bank further south. Fragments of two of the banks can be seen north of the inner rampart and a stony bank south of the outer rampart entrance (q) may also be the continuation of one of these features.

The two best-preserved sections are those within the inner rampart (j). They run in parallel for approximately 62m and are approximately 20m apart. Along with the other more fragmentary sections, they are, at most, 0.3m in height and 4m wide.

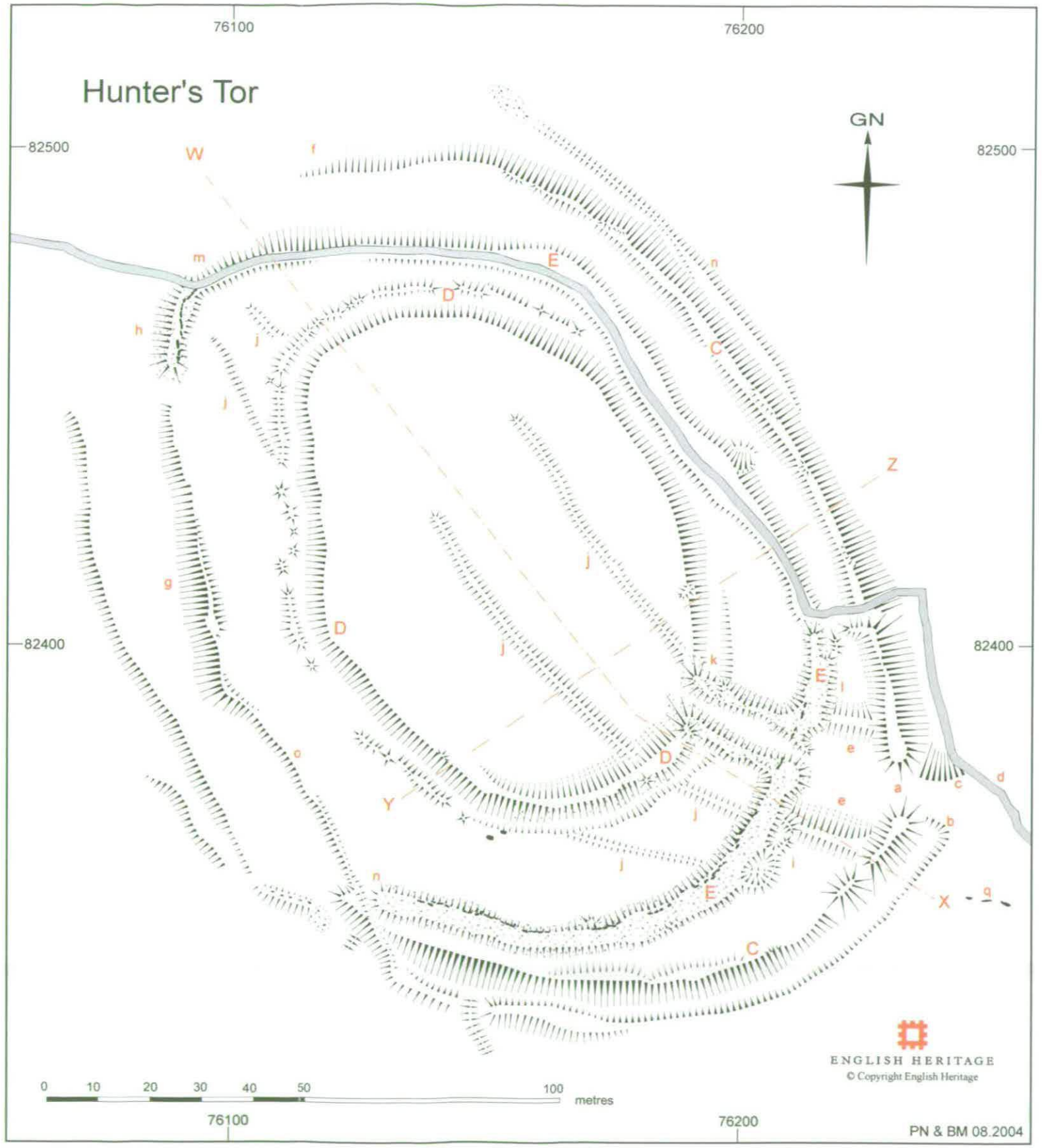

Figure 3 English Heritage 1:1000 earthwork survey

Another more extensive area of field system survives to the east and south of the hillfort (B1 and B2). The full extent of its survival is unclear due to the dense vegetation but some recent clearance has shown it to be extensive with parallel banks running along the contours of the Cleave to the west. South of the fort this system consists of parallel banks running north west to south east, spaced at 20m intervals. These are divided into smaller irregular enclosures by banks running east to west and north east to south west. Uneven mounds are situated at some of the resulting intersections. The banks in both areas are made up of small angular stones, are approximately 0.3m high and have similar characteristics to banks found elsewhere on Dartmoor which date from the 2nd millennium BC and usually referred to as reaves.

A probable continuation of this system (B3 Fig. 4)) can be seen south east of the post-medieval fields (F) with banks of a similar size and construction.

The Hillfort (Fig.3)

The earthworks that make up the hillfort can be seen as three separate elements. The inner, central and outer ramparts. The inner and outer earthworks, although uneven in shape, are approximately concentric and of a similar style of construction. The central rampart is offset to the south west and is of a stonier make up. The entrances of all three however, are aligned.

The Outer Rampart (C)

The outer rampart, consisting of a bank and a ditch, although no longer forming a complete circuit, is perhaps the most imposing. To the north of the entrance the bank reaches a height of 2m from the bottom of the ditch and elsewhere, is up to 1.8m high. As would be expected, the earthworks on either side of the entrance are the strongest. The banks widen to form two club-ended terminals creating platforms over 3m wide on either side of the entrance (a). To the south, an external, 4m-wide ditch is preserved (b) which ends in a rounded terminal, creating a 7m-wide causeway between it and the terminal of the ditch to the north of the entrance (c). This northern section of the ditch has become obscured by a relatively modern wall (d). The entranceway between the two banks is narrower, around 3m wide. Inside the outer rampart entrance, running parallel on either side of the walkway are two wide banks set back from the terminals around 1m in height which leave a 14m-wide area between them (e).

The rampart extending to the north from the entrance continues as a strong scarp until petering out at the most northerly point of the hillfort (f). A shallow plough scarp (n) adjacent to the foot of the rampart marks the limit of more recent agricultural use of the field to the east. Any trace of a ditch along this section would have been effaced by medieval and post-medieval ploughing. What is likely to be another section of the outer rampart is a 62m-long scarp on the west side of the monument (g). A maximum of 1.8m high, this is of markedly different appearance to the scarps north and south of it and to which it is adjoined, but similar in dimensions and construction to other parts of the outer rampart to the north and south. If the rampart had originally formed a complete circuit, which included this section of bank, then the area enclosed would have been 1.7ha.

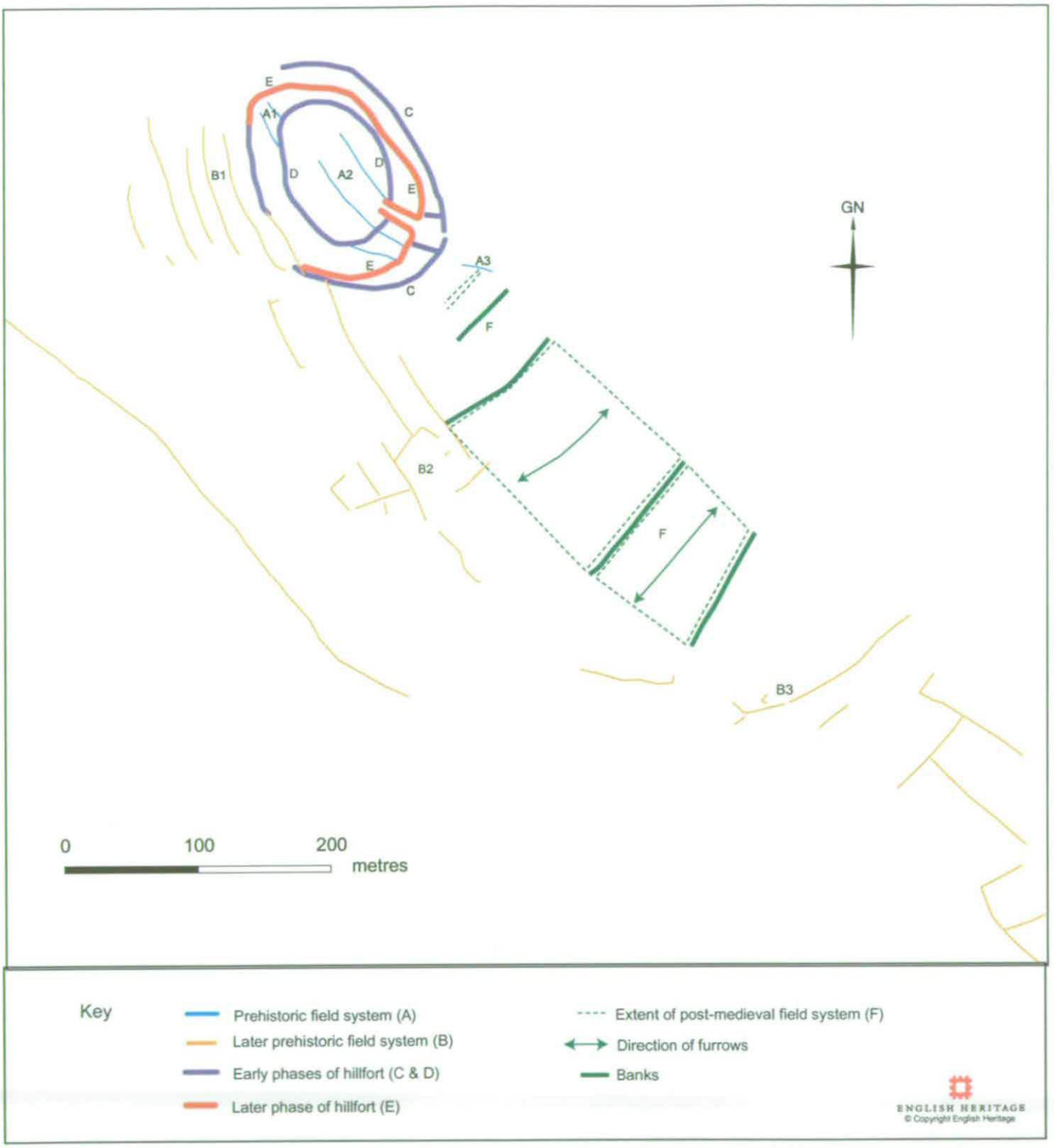

Figure 4. The archaeological landscape of Hunter's Tor with interpretation.

The Inner Rampart (D)

The inner rampart encloses an area of 0.6ha and has a maximum diameter of 96m. It consists for the most part of a moderate scarp of 4m wide on average. Although uneven, the enclosed area is relatively flat and clear of stones. To the south of the inner entrance there is evidence of both an inner and outer ditch although both fade abruptly before the scarp turns and heads northwards. There are however linear and circular mounds of material up to

14m long by 3m wide following the outside of the scarp on the western and northern arc of the circuit, representing vestiges of a bank.

The Central Rampart (E)

The central rampart sits at odds with the other two enclosures; although between them, it is not concentric and it is constructed using a different style and materials. The most obvious difference is in the percentage and size of the stones used, especially in the construction of its elaborate entrance and at section (h) to the north west. In these areas there are double rows of parallel, edge-set stones running along the top of the scarp, which probably formed facings.

The banks that form the two sides of the entrance of the central rampart turn inwards and project approximately 24m beyond the backs of the ramparts at right angles. This has left a corridor of between 3 and 5m in width although erosion is likely to have narrowed this over time.

Immediately to the south of the entrance on the outer face of the scarp are two depressions cut into the rampart (i). They are both approximately 7m in diameter and are irregular in shape. These may be the hut circles referred to by VCH although they are more likely to be quarrying pits from where stone has been robbed as the internal surfaces are concave and uneven.

A modern dry-stone wall (d) runs along the top of the central rampart from south east to north west. This is constructed from the same granite as parts of the hillfort certainly reusing some stone from the monument.

Later Field Systems (Fig. 4)

To the west of the hillfort, on the moderately sloping hillside are five curvilinear stony banks (B1), forming slight lynchets, running in parallel north to south at around 15m apart and following the contours of the Cleave. They are visible for about 100m but are obscured by vegetation to the north and south. They are *c.*0.7m in height and up to 2m wide and although curving, remain *c.*12m apart in the section that is visible.

The most widespread and obvious evidence of agriculture on Lustleigh Cleave can be seen to the south of the hillfort (F). Here, large field boundary banks and pronounced narrow ridging continue south east for around 270m before appearing to stop at a particularly impressive terminal bank. North of this the field system is divided by a further three banks between 2.7 and 3.5m wide and approximately 0.5m in height. These run parallel from north

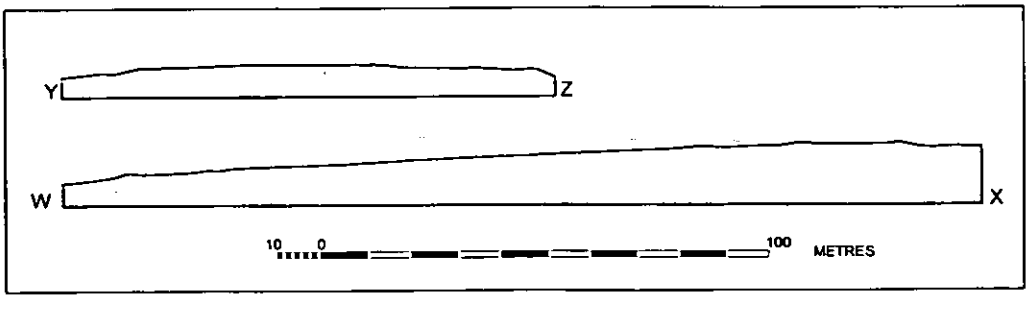

Figure 5. Profiles across the upper surface of the hillfort. See Fig 3 for positions.

east to south west on the flattish summit crest creating fields, from the north, c.39, 89 and 67m wide. The fields do not appear to continue to the south west and, to the north east any evidence has been destroyed by modern agriculture. The ridging within these fields is regular and around 2.7m apart.

Discussion

Although the earthworks on Hunter's Tor can be divided into distinctive categories, the chronological relationships between them are less easily defined.

The linear features running through the middle of the hillfort earthworks (j) seemingly predate all phases of the fort. They run underneath the scarps and are cut by the ditches of all three elements of the defences. The fact that two of them run either side of the hillfort entrance is likely to be coincidental. Apart from a short linear section of stones to the east of the hillfort entrance (q) these three banks do not appear to align with any visible features outside the fort and it would seem likely that they are part of an early field system. These banks are most likely to be Bronze Age but all that can be said with conviction is that they are prehistoric and predate all phases of the hillfort. As has already been noted, the earthworks of the hillfort itself can be divided into at least two phases. The evidence suggests that the inner and outer ramparts may be the earliest and possibly contemporary, while the central defences are a later addition. The inner rampart is the only one to survive as a complete circuit and is concentric to the outer rampart which is more fragmentary. The central rampart sits uncomfortably between the two and overlays part of the inner rampart. The entrances of all three however, are in alignment and it is here that the best chance of understanding the chronology of the fort exists. It is perhaps the most complicated area of earthworks on the site but as many aspects converge at this point relationships can be noted. The in-turning sections of the central rampart entrance are clearly overlaying the scarps of the inner defences (k) and before they turn they can be seen to overlie the two parallel banks that form part of the outer rampart entrance (l). The central rampart terminates to the north east where it makes a sharp southward turn (m) to incorporate a section of the earlier outer rampart (g). The difference in construction is particularly noticeable at this point. The stony central rampart with its edge-set stones terminates overlying the rounded outer rampart, which continues south for another 68m. The sudden change in direction to reuse the outer rampart suggests a labour saving rather than defensive decision and this in turn implies that the strength and effectiveness of the north-western section of the fort was not considered as important as the south-east side. The positioning of the elaborate entrance to the south east would perhaps suggest that the structure was designed to give an impression of strength to those approaching from along the ridge to the south rather than serving as a serious defence.

The southern segments of both the outer and central ramparts terminate about 100m from the entrance leaving a 42m gap before the defences resume. Where they terminate, the central rampart meets the outer rampart ditch (n). The terminal here is regular and rounded and does not appear 'unfinished'. This perhaps supports the idea of display over defence. However it should be noted that the slopes to the north and west would provide some

natural protection from any threats from these directions perhaps making substantial artificial defences unnecessary.

There is no physical relationship between the inner and outer ramparts. However, they are roughly concentric, of a similar construction and of a type that would suggest that they are roughly contemporary, probably of late 1st millennium BC in date. The construction and shape of the central rampart and the incorporation of the in-turned entrance into the earlier rampart suggest that this too is of this period.

The incomplete nature of the ramparts has resulted in various interpretations in the past. Sylvester and Quinnell see all three circuits as being unfinished and that work stopped when either the danger that instigated their construction was no longer present or the builders were prevented from completing the work. This is possible but the multi-phase nature of the hillfort makes this unlikely. If this were the case it would seem more probable that only one unfinished and abandoned phase would be present. The fact that all three ramparts are 'unfinished' may indicate that they were never meant to be completed. As Sylvester and Quinnell point out, the entrance seems to have been the most important feature and, if the fort were more for show than defence, there would have been no need for a complete circuit. The apparently slight construction of the inner rampart may be explained as representing a structure which was mainly built from timber, where the built earthwork element was perhaps of secondary importance.

Like several similar sites in the West Country, Hunter's Tor hillfort is likely to have been built as a place of security for the livestock and resources of a small group, possibly an extended family. Although its builders attempted through at least two phases of construction to offer an impressive outward appearance to those who approached the site from the south, the defences would have offered little resistance to a band of determined human aggressors but could have provided ample protection against lesser dangers. The term 'hillfort' is perhaps overstating the true purpose of this lightly defended settlement.

There is a number of sites on and around Dartmoor where comparative data may be found to place Hunter's Tor in context. The setting and location of Hunter's Tor on a hilltop which is away from the Dartmoor upland but overlooking it is very similar to several other hillforts on the peripheries of Dartmoor; notably Wooston, Cranbrook and Prestonbury in the Teign valley to the north (Fig. 2) and Hembury, and Holne Chase near Ashburton. All of these are of earthwork construction with, in some cases, substantial ramparts consisting of banks with ditches and containing little if any stone. Although mostly of slighter construction than the above examples, the inner and outer ramparts at Hunter's Tor may be placed within this group which, based on current knowledge, would put these remains firmly within the late 1st millennium BC or pre-Roman Iron Age. The central rampart with is stone facing and earth/rubble construction and no discernable ditch is very different and in the context of Dartmoor is more akin to the enclosed settlements of the Bronze Age up to 1000 years earlier. However, it is quite clearly the latest element of the hillfort, overlying both the inner and outer earthworks so a date in the Iron Age following the earlier phases would be more likely. The tradition of building enclosures of stone around Dartmoor and in Devon in this

period is rare, though possibly one other example does exist at Borro Wood near Ashburton. This hillslope enclosure although undated is also assumed to be late 1st millennium and was constructed using rubble-filled walls with an outer stone facing and no ditch. Elsewhere in Britain, this tradition is more common in Wales for example and closer on Bodmin Moor.

The parallel linears that run roughly north to south on the west side of the hillfort (B1) are difficult to interpret. The furthest east (o) is the only one that can be confidently added to the site's chronology because it appears to overlie both the outer and central ramparts, though this perhaps is only in its most recent form. Sylvester and Quinnell interpret this feature as an earlier lynchet being reused in the construction of the hillfort and at its northern extremity it appears to be on the same alignment as the south-facing terminal of the outer rampart (h). But at its southern end it can be seen running over the top of the hillfort defences (p) so contrary to the former view it seems more likely to be part of a later field system and the outer rampart has been adapted to form a bank.

There is no direct evidence that the other parallel linears (B2) are related but these could be part of the same prehistoric field system preserved further south. The similar construction and alignment with (o) does suggest that they may be contemporary and looked at as a whole, B1,2 and 3 appear to be part of one system. Although at one location, discussed above, the evidence would dictate that these banks are later than the hillfort, they could also be contemporary and their appearance certainly suggests they are prehistoric. Another explanation could be that the majority of these field banks are much earlier than the hillfort, contemporary, with the 2nd millennium BC reaves found elsewhere on Dartmoor, of which they have a striking resemblance. In which case the stratigraphic relationship of (o) and the ramparts could be an anomaly caused by reuse of the field bank after abandonment of the hillfort. However, the lack of many other physical relationships makes this impossible to prove. The largest surviving area of agricultural earthworks in area (F), comprising straight earthen banks defining areas of ridge and furrow, is indicative of post-medieval field systems. Evidence of earlier farming has been destroyed by this activity.

Conclusion

The new survey and interpretation has helped clarify some of the points brought to light by the work of Sylvester and Quinnell. However, the areas of Hunter's Tor that remain enigmatic are those where relationships are obscured by vegetation such as the agricultural earthworks to the south and west of the hillfort. The fort itself, although seemingly complex is perhaps now the best understood area. More work is needed however if we are to understand the surrounding area, its relationship with the fort and with the landscape of this area of Dartmoor as a whole. This work will hopefully take place when the appropriate areas have been cleared, allowing further survey and understanding.

Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to Mrs Bridget Brown and her family at Peck's Farm for allowing vehicular access to the site and for their support and encouragement. To Mr Van Moerson of Foxworthy for arranging clearance of the site and to Andy Crabb of EH for requesting the survey. The field survey was carried out by Phil Newman of the EH Exeter AI team, and Ben

Moore while on a one year EPPIC placement. The latter also drafted the report and prepared all illustrations.

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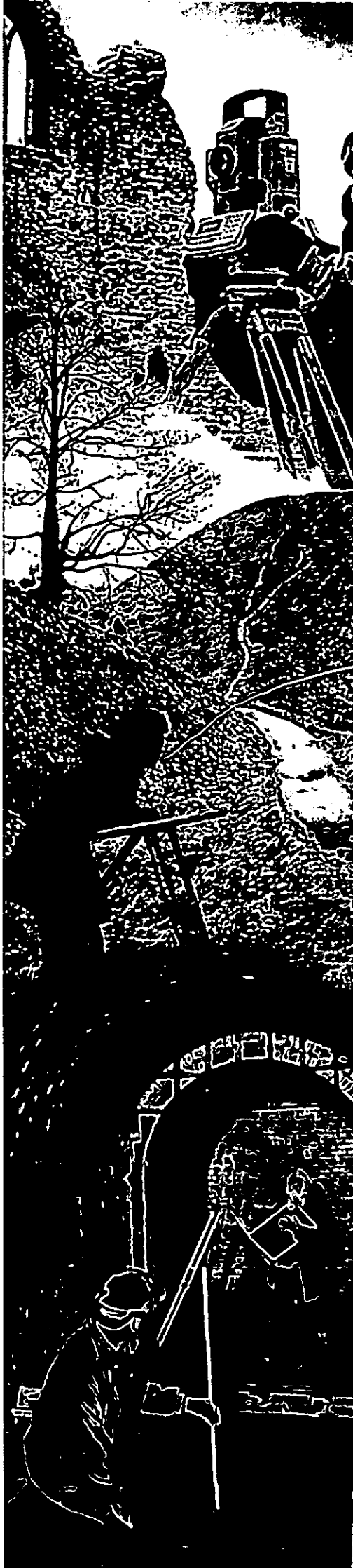

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