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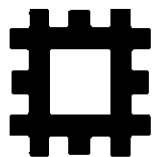
The 'Trendle'
Hillslope Enclosure
and the Bicknoller
Cross-ridge Dyke,
Bicknoller, Somerset

Phil Newman

DRF 1

SURVEY REPORT

Archaeological Investigation Report Series
AI/27/2002



ENGLISH HERITAGE

The 'Trendle' Hillslope Enclosure and the
Bicknoller Cross-ridge Dyke, Bicknoller,
Somerset

An archaeological survey by English Heritage

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Parish:	Bicknoller
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Summary

The Trendle is a small hillside enclosure of probable late-prehistoric date, located on the western side of the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Somerset on an unusually steep, west facing slope. The site was surveyed by staff from the English Heritage Exeter office in March 2002, using GPS, from which an earthwork plan was produced together with digital ground modelling and contour surveys to help illustrate the steep nature of the terrain.

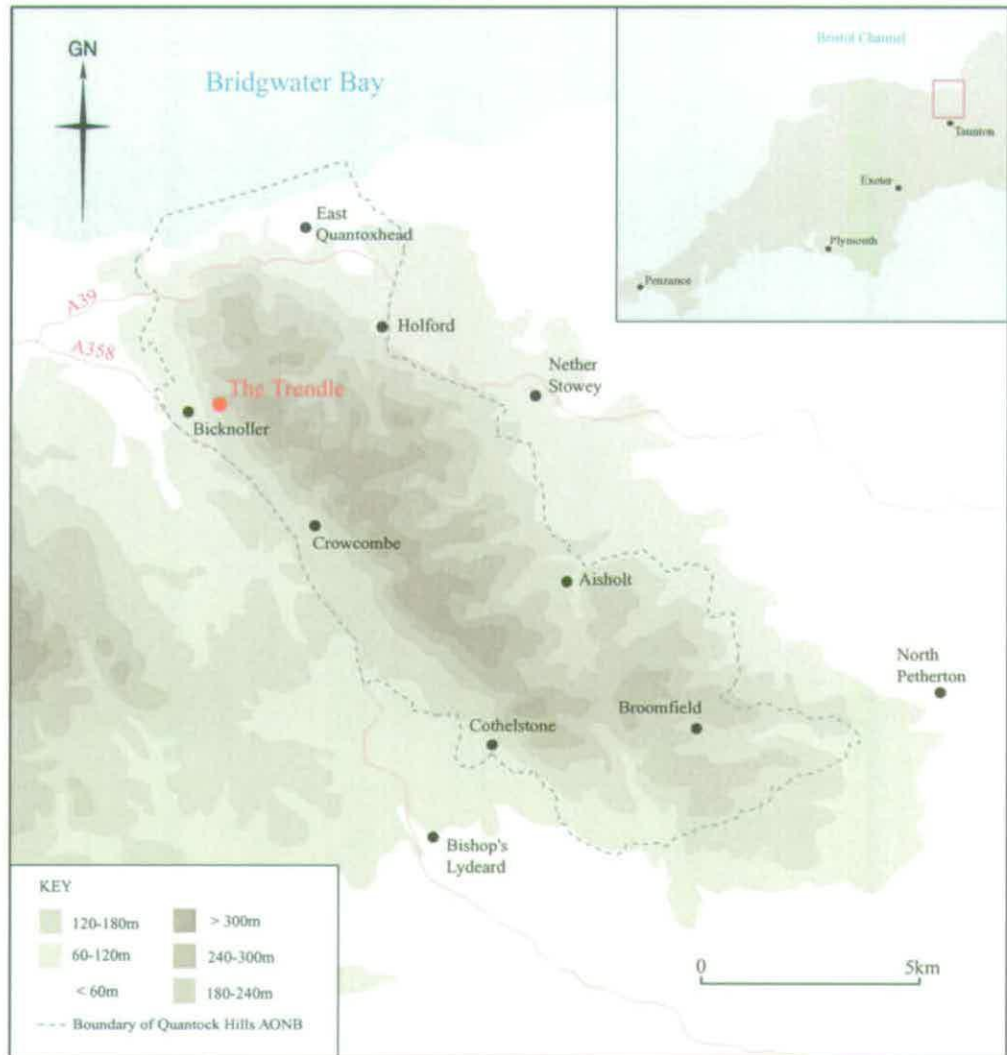


Fig. 1. Location of the Trendle in the Quantock Hills AONB.

INTRODUCTION

The Trendle is sited on the steeply-sloping, west-facing hillside of Bicknoller Hill in the north-western corner of the Quantock Hills at ST 1182 3903. The hill rises steeply from the relatively flat plain which separates the Quantocks from the Brendon Hills at around 100m OD, to the rounded plateau of the summit ridge at 300m OD. The site has extensive views over the plain to the west, north-west and south-west; an area which contains several modern settlements. Minehead



Fig. 2. The enclosure and the cross-ridge dyke.

THE 'TRENDLE'

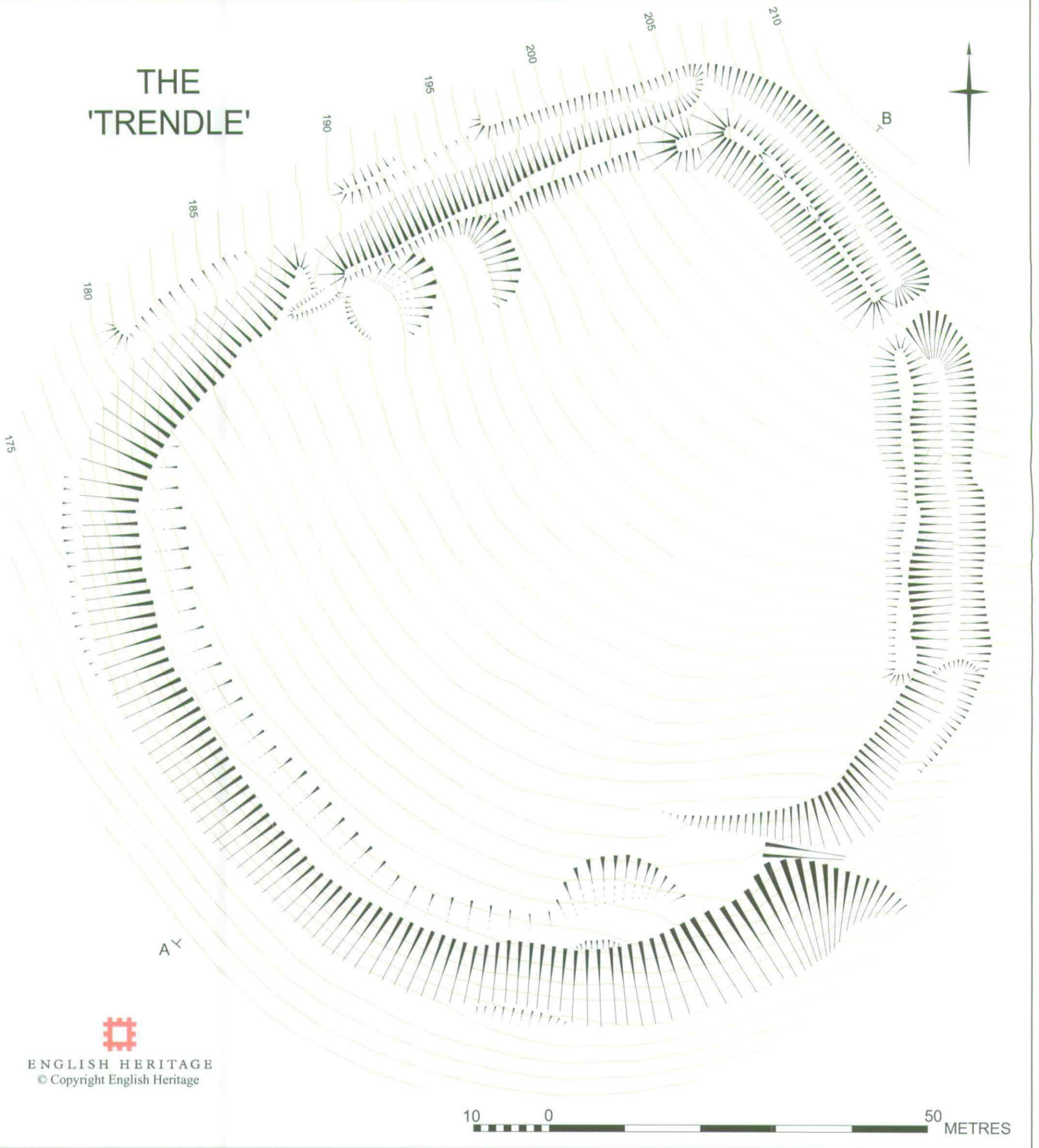


Fig. 3. English Heritage 1:500 scale earthwork plan of the enclosure.

*Plate. 1. Aerial view
of the Trendle.
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is visible to the north-west and south Wales can be seen on a clear day. To the east however, the view is obscured by the steepness of Bicknoller Hill on whose lower slopes the Trendle is located, on a spur protruding from the main hillslope at a height between 175 and 210m above OD. A second earthwork in the form of a cross-ridge dyke and bank is sited to the north-west at ST 1219 3964 at a height of 283m above OD and is considered likely to be an outwork associated with the same period as the occupation of the Trendle.

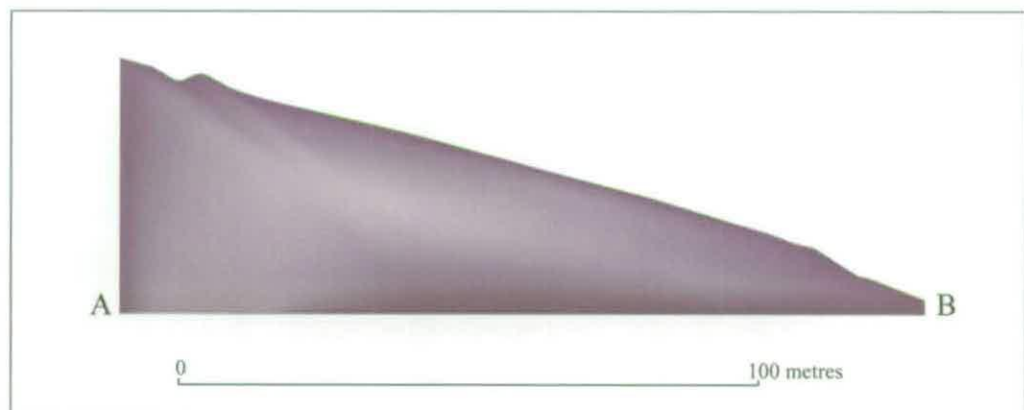
No recorded archaeological work has taken place at the Trendle though the earthworks have been surveyed previously by Ordnance Survey (1888). Brief descriptions have appeared in J. Burrow (1924, 102); VCH (1911, 506); and I. Burrow (1981, 249).

THE EARTHWORKS

The Trendle

The enclosure is sub-circular in shape, wider on the lower south-western end and narrowing to an angular corner at the northern point. The total enclosed area is 0.72ha. The defences may be described as two sections of distinctly different appearance, each of which has been built to take advantage of the steep slope, creating an upstanding rampart. The upper portion at the north-eastern end comprises a single bank with external ditch, while the lower parts of the circuit, consist only of an artificial scarp which serves to exaggerate the steepness of the natural hillslope.

The strongest portion of the bank is a 73m-long section, interrupted by a single entrance,



*Fig. 4. Enclosure
profile AB.*

which runs from the northernmost tip of the enclosure and follows a curving course down the east side, where the ditch continues for a further 13m beyond the terminal of the bank. At its highest point the bank stands to 1.3m above the bottom of the ditch and measures 9m across. It is constructed from earth and small stone rubble and is likely to have been built only from materials resulting from the excavation of the ditch. Near the eastern terminal the bank is of slighter proportions standing only to approximately 0.4m high. The maximum depth of the ditch below exterior ground level is 2.5m, and it is up to 8m wide.

A further section of bank with a slight ditch runs west downslope from the northern point. The bank here is of lesser proportions and the ditch is much shallower with a maximum depth of only 0.4m diminishing to virtually nothing at the western extremity. There is a distinct western terminal on the bank and like that on the eastern side its proportions are much diminished near the terminal. A small breach in the bank at this point is unlikely to be an original entrance and appears to be a result of later disturbance. There is some indication of later strengthening of the larger bank at the northern point where it overlies the lower bank to the west; a change in levels along the top of the bank is emphasised by the bull-nosed appearance of the higher bank and the lower section apparently runs beneath it.

Beyond the southern terminals of the bank and ditch section, the defensive circuit on the lower slope continues as a steep scarp of up to 5m high. There is no bank and no external ditch,

nor would they have been needed, as the creation of the scarp by strengthening the natural slope has created a formidable obstacle to any aggressors facing the bank from below. On the interior however, at the top of the defensive earthwork, there is a shallow quarry scarp from where material has been removed, perhaps to provide level standing behind a palisade which may once have surmounted the edge of the defensive scarp. At the foot of the main defensive earthwork is a narrow band of level ground caused by the steepening of the slope which then falls away and is absorbed back into the natural slope of the hillside.

There are two openings in the perimeter likely to have been part of the original construction phase. On the north-eastern side, the bank and ditch both have clear terminals creating a narrow causeway across the ditch and an opening in the bank. This is almost certainly an original feature and is well positioned to provide access to the upper slopes of Bicknoller Hill. A second likely entrance on the south-east side

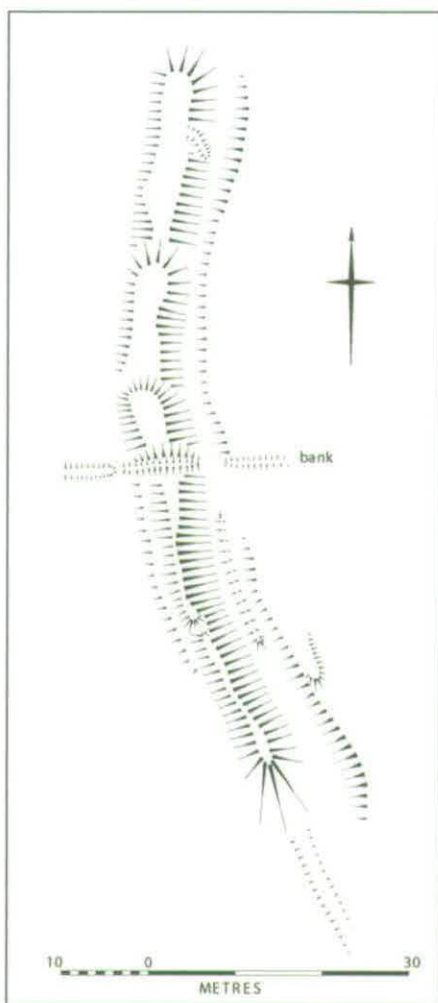


Fig. 5. English Heritage 1:500 scale earthwork survey of the cross-ridge dyke (reduced).

Fig. 6. Digital ground model showing view from the south.



comprises an inturn of the ditch earthwork where it meets the scarp of the southern section, creating a narrow, obliquely-sloping ramp across the defences.

The remainder of the interior is mostly featureless other than apparently natural undulations and two circular features adjacent to the northern section of bank. These shallow earthworks, both approximately 10m diameter, have roughly level floors and either could be considered candidates for hut platforms. Substantial platforms such as these would certainly have been necessary for any form of habitation in this extraordinarily steep enclosure where the height falls from 206m OD to 169m (37m total) over a distance of 100m.

The cross-ridge dyke

Three hundred and eighty-seven metres north-east of the Trendle at an altitude some 80m above it, an 88m-long, slightly curved, bank and ditch cross the neck of the spur which forms the summit of Bicknoller Hill. It does not extend down the steeper slopes of the hill. The area has been subject to ploughing, probably during the late-medieval or early post-medieval period and the earthwork has a flattened appearance as a result. A disused field boundary also traverses the earthwork at 90 degrees. The bank stands to a maximum of 1.1m high. Only a slight trace of the ditch survives on the eastern side.

DISCUSSION

No recorded excavations have taken place at the Trendle so dating and an understanding of function have to remain a matter for supposition. However, it is generally accepted that hillslope enclosures of this type in the Westcountry date from the late 1st-millennium BC or pre-Roman Iron Age, though little data on this class or size of site has been gained through excavation so accurate dates are not as yet forthcoming. As to function it seems reasonable to suggest that hillslope enclosures such as this would provide settlement foci and stock enclosure for small groups, possibly family groups, who exercised some control over grazing and other natural resources in the immediate locality. That the Trendle was designed partly with defence in mind there is little doubt judging by the strength of the earthworks. There is a lack of many surviving hut platforms, which would have been essential for occupation on this slope, but similar sites recorded on nearby Exmoor often have only one platform, such as at Bagley and Roborough.

In many ways the Trendle is an unremarkable example of this class of earthwork but its curious location on an unusually steep slope makes it very different. Burrow (1981, 249) described the site as 'the most classically located of the hillslope enclosures' but the extreme gradient of the interior makes it very untypical. Day to day life must have been awkward and uncomfortable for the occupants and for that reason the idea that occupation was permanent must be questioned. The defences, although strong, were not particularly effective; while an aggressor approaching uphill from the west would have had been at a disadvantage, from the east, the site is easily overlooked from the hill above and visibility from the interior is limited.

One important element in the location of the site is its visibility from the valley below and beyond; even in its present condition the earthwork is a noticeable and impressive landmark. Perhaps therefore the builders of the Trendle were more concerned with creating a visible presence in the landscape than with the practicalities of occupying and defending such a site which explains why they chose to build it here rather than the more suitable location nearer the summit of Bicknoller Hill.

Any association of the Trendle and the cross-ridge dyke which runs across the neck of Bicknoller Hill has to be speculation. Such an occurrence is not uncommon though at other examples such as Staddon, Myrtleberry and Bats Castle, all on nearby Exmoor, the outwork is much closer to the enclosure (Riley & Wilson-North 2001). If the dyke and the enclosure were contemporaneous then the dyke could also be interpreted as a visible marker as to territorial ownership, so positioned because the enclosure itself is not visible when approached from the east.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to staff of the National Trust, owners of the Trendle, for permission to undertake the survey and for allowing vehicular access.

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