



Historic England

MILTON ABBEY DEER PARK: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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Discovery, Innovation and Science in the Historic Environment



MILTON ABBEY DEER PARK, MILTON ABBAS, DORSET

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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SUMMARY

An archaeological investigation of a medieval park boundary at Milton Abbas was carried out in March 2020 by Historic England's Archaeological Investigation Team (South & West) at the request of the Listing Team in the South West Region. The objective was to determine the park's true extent and nature in order to inform amendments to the scheduled area. The investigation confirmed that the boundary extends beyond the current scheduling and that the surviving earthworks are consistent with those of a medieval park pale.

CONTRIBUTORS

The field visit was carried out by Nicky Smith and Mark Bowden. Mark Bowden, provided helpful information and editorial comment on this report. All photographs are by the author.

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INTRODUCTION

A brief field investigation of Milton Abbey Park was carried out in March 2020 at the request of Historic England's Listing Team in the South West Region, who had received an application to amend its scheduled area. The park is an old county scheduling, which was designated in 1974 and as a result there is no monument description. The current scheduled monument includes the interior, but differs from published evidence for the park, which indicates that part of it extends further to the south-east (Cantor & Wilson 1967, 175). In 1984, following a site visit, English Heritage's Heritage at Risk Project Officer reported that almost half the deer park had not been scheduled and that the eastern boundary of the scheduled area was 'entirely fictitious' (Champion 1984).

BACKGROUND

The suggestion that a medieval deer park exists in Milton Wood, centred at ST 8177202511, in an area shown as 'Milton Park' on historic maps, comes from Cantor and Wilson's work in Dorset. Although they were not able to find any contemporary documentary evidence, they believed it likely that Milton Abbey would have owned a deer park at Milton Abbas. They noted that the absence of documentary sources is not unusual and that they could find only a single reference to the deer park belonging to the neighbouring abbey at Cerne, also Benedictine. During a field visit to Milton Wood they discovered a park pale - 'a striking bank and ditch, measuring from 12-14ft [3.6-4.3m] wide and 3-4ft [0.9-1.0m] high, enclosing c145a [58ha]' south-east of the former abbey. They plotted the park pale earthworks onto a sketch map and noted them as 'one of the most completely preserved examples we have found'. Place-name evidence combined with the nature of the earthworks and their characteristic siting left them 'in no doubt that here was the medieval deer park of Milton Abbey' (Cantor & Wilson 1967, 171-3).

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

A field visit was carried out in March 2020 by Historic England's Archaeological Investigation Team (South and West). The earthwork boundary was followed

and found to be a substantial earthwork of consistent form and profile for the majority of its extent, comprising a linear bank flanked by internal and external ditches. It forms a complete circuit taking the course shown on Cantor and Wilson's sketch plan (blue line on Figure 1) and thus extends well beyond the current scheduled monument area (red on Figure 1). The interior of the park is mostly wooded and was not examined.



Figure 1: Scheduled ancient monument map, with letters referred to in the description below

Western boundary (E to A)

Running north uphill from the main forestry track which bisects it just north of E, the boundary consists of a sharply defined bank with inner and outer ditches. It is 0.8m high, with an inner ditch 0.3m deep, an outer ditch 0.5m deep and the overall width 8m. Flint inclusions are evident where the surface of the bank is disturbed. This line of the boundary is unbroken except for a gap where the main forestry road enters the park and a small breach opposite a field gate. The bank has also been disturbed in two places where trees have fallen.



Figure 2: Western boundary (E to A) looking south



Figure 3: Flint rubble in western bank (E to A)



Figure 4: Storm damage to western bank (E to A)

Western boundary (A to B)

At A a major forestry track cuts through the boundary, but the earthworks immediately resume continuing uphill on the same alignment and of the same form as previously. In this section the bank is more rounded and the ditches less sharply defined. B marks the north-west angle of the enclosure. Here its external ditch is cut by a hollow way leading towards a chalk pit.

North-eastern boundary (B to C)

The boundary earthwork turns to an east-west alignment. The earthworks become more substantial, the prominent bank continuing with external and internal ditches as before, but measuring 1.5m high internally and 0.8m externally. The external ditch is 0.8 deep and the internal ditch 0.3m deep, with an overall width of 8m for the banks and ditches. Midway along the north-eastern boundary chalk pits lie just outside the boundary, one adjacent to a gap in the earthworks. As it progresses eastwards the bank becomes increasingly angular in profile with a narrower top, though of the same form and dimensions as previously.



Figure 5: Hollow-way cutting external ditch at B continues uphill, while the park boundary turns to the right to run behind the ranging pole



Figure 6: Corner at B, external view with the hollow-way to the right



Figure 7: North-eastern section of park pale, viewed from the park interior



Figure 8: North-eastern boundary (B to C), exterior view

North-eastern boundary (C to D)

As the earthworks continue eastwards the valley side becomes steeper and this stretch of the boundary follows the break in slope of the natural ridge line. Here the internal ditch becomes a ledge only, with the bank and the external ditch continuing as previously. This part of the boundary includes a section which skirts a conifer plantation. Although supporting some mature conifers, it remains well preserved. It continues into a clear felled area, beyond the scheduled extent, where saplings on its bank form part of a new planting scheme.



Figure 9: Park pale within a conifer plantation beyond the scheduled area



Figure 10: Newly-planted saplings on the park pale beyond the scheduled area

At the south-east corner of the park the bank is 1.6m high internally and the total width of the boundary is 10.5m, with the external ditch 0.5m deep. A sub-rectangular feature, possibly a building platform, measuring 12m x 7m, sits inside this angle of the park boundary. Its form is unlike the irregular quarry pits seen elsewhere. From here, the boundary continues downhill, but its height diminishes to 1m as it heads downslope, cut again by a forestry road in the valley bottom.

South-western boundary (D to E)

The earthworks delimit the enclosure's south-western side, as depicted on the sketch plan by Cantor and Wilson. For much of this length they traverse relatively level ground rather than following a ridge, forming the boundary between woodland inside the park and arable fields outside. The bank supports outgrown hedgerow trees, some of which appear to have been laid originally. Minor quarry pits are visible just inside the park, but they do not impinge upon its boundary earthworks.



Figure 11: Southern boundary (D to E)



Figure 12: Badger sett on the southern boundary

This section of the boundary, although still substantial, is less well preserved than the other sections. The ditches are intermittent and the bank is diminished in places, measuring just 5.3m wide and 0.5m high at one point. Where present, the external ditch has been disturbed by its use as a field boundary and badger setts have damaged two areas.

The natural slope becomes steeper as the boundary approaches its westernmost point. It resumes a contour-following alignment and has eroded to the extent that the ditches no longer survive, with the bank becoming a 1m high scarp. This follows the natural break of slope and would be enough, with the addition of a pale, to prevent the egress of deer. From E, the park's westernmost angle, the boundary continues downslope to complete its circuit, with the bank resuming (1m high) flanked internally by a ledge and externally by a ditch.



Figure 13: Southern bank becomes a scarp on the steep valley side east of E

CONCLUSIONS

The eastern and south-eastern extent of the scheduled area is clearly incorrect and does not relate to any features visible on the ground. The reason why this extent was drawn is not clear. It may have been, as suggested by Champion (1984), due to mistakenly transcribing Cantor and Wilson's sketch plan of Winterborne Houghton deer park, which appears opposite that of Milton Abbey in their paper. Its outline is roughly similar to that of the scheduled area.

Interestingly, Houghton Park is not scheduled, though part of it is scheduled as 'earthwork south of Meriden Wood and adjoining round barrow' (1002439). As stated in Champion's report, Milton Park's boundary earthworks follow the course recorded by Cantor and Wilson (Cantor & Wilson 1967, 175).

The earthwork is consistent in form and plan with a medieval park pale or a medieval wood bank. The tradition of intensively managing woodland and using it as a self renewing resource developed in the early Middle Ages, when surveys and accounts of great religious houses show that coppice cycles, ranging from 4

to 28 years, were well understood (Steane 1984, 159). Coppiced trees had to be protected by substantial boundaries to prevent grazing deer entering and destroying young growth. Their meandering boundary earthworks often followed the natural topography and could be 10m wide overall, in contrast with the straight lengths, smaller size and steeper profile of later wood banks (Smith 1999, 38).

Medieval deer parks, intended primarily to contain deer rather than exclude them, needed equally large boundaries. They were enclosed, or partially enclosed, by a bank topped by a wooden paling fence. The main element of the boundary was paling not the earthwork, which in some cases could be relatively slight (eg Hoppit 2007, 152). The bank was generally broad with narrow ditches on either side. In early examples the ditch tended to be inside the bank to prevent the escape of deer. In common with wood enclosures, deer parks were also irregular in outline with characteristically sinuous boundaries. Two types of medieval park are defined by Rackham (1980, 157): 'wood pasture' consisting of pollarded trees in grassland and 'compartmental' with grassland separated from fenced coppice with standards. This indicates that the distinction between woodland enclosures and deer parks is not clear cut, since medieval parks could serve both purposes. The presence of ditches on either side of the bank in the case of Milton Park indicates that it may have served both purposes (see Winchester 2007, 174, 178), or that it changed use over time.

Deer parks formed one of the main hunting grounds of medieval England as well as being used for pasture and providing a source of wood and timber, though hunting often took place outside the park (Sykes 2007, 50-1). They were found in most areas of the country and by the 13th century they were an integral part of the manorial economy. Their peak was about 1300, when there were c3200 in England (Rackham 1980, 152). A park's size reflected its owner's wealth, but was typically c60ha. The earliest examples were small with rounded plans, while later examples tended to be larger and more irregular. The platform inside the north-eastern corner of the enclosed area, near D, if it is a building platform, might be the site of a lodge giving a good view over this end of the park. After 1350 economic decline caused the number of deer parks being

created to decrease dramatically and, although some were still being created in the 15th century, these were generally not as intensively managed or securely enclosed as their predecessors (Alexander 2018, 8).

The park at Milton may have been created in the 12th century and perhaps ceased to be managed for its original use before Milton Abbey was dissolved in 1539. It is also possible that it was an early post-medieval park relating to the post-Dissolution house, though documentary evidence would have been more likely to exist in this case. The surviving park pale is a well preserved example of its type and is particularly significant as comprising a relatively complete circuit.

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