

SCARBOROUGH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AN EARTHWORK SURVEY OF  
CASTLE HILL, BROMPTON

By  
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Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society  
Site Report 46  
2016

# AN EARTHWORK SURVEY OF CASTLE HILL BROMPTON NORTH YORKSHIRE

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NGR SE 9454 8214

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Geology, topography and land use
3. Historical & archaeological background
4. Survey methodology
5. Description and interpretation of the earthworks
6. Conclusion
7. Acknowledgements
8. References

## List of text figures

1. Extract from the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey County Series map of Brompton published in 1891-2
2. The 2016 survey showing main features mentioned in the text
3. View looking south-east towards the mound and possible building

Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society  
Report 46

First published September 2016 by the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society  
c/o The Street, 12 Lower Clark Street, Scarborough, YO12 7PW

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## **1. Introduction**

In April 2016 members of the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society (Chris Evans, Chris Hall and Trevor Pearson) undertook an analytical earthwork survey of a pasture field forming part of Castle Hill on the east side of the village of Brompton-by-Sawdon, near Scarborough at NGR SE 9454 8214. The survey was undertaken to further our understanding of a range of earthworks visible in the field. This work followed on from a geophysical and topographic survey undertaken in 2014 on behalf of Brompton Local History Society by geophiz.biz (Lyll 2014) and sponsored by Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society.

## **2. Geology, Topography and land-use**

Castle Hill is a natural spur formed by limestone bedrock and gravel which falls away steeply from the spur on its south and west sides but on the north and east it is far less pronounced as it merges into the general south-facing dip slope of the Tabular Hills. The hill would probably have formed quite a distinctive landmark when viewed from the lower ground to the west and south before the expansion of the village of Brompton. It lies at the north end of a route leading across the Vale of Pickering (Ings Road) which connects Brompton with Sherburn on the south side of the Vale. The field occupies the south-west part of Castle Hill. The rest of the hilltop is now divided between private properties fronting Hungate to the east and High Street (A170) to the north. Buildings existed on the north side of the spur by 1850 whilst the rest of this development took place in the late 19th or early 20th century. A mill pond fed by a spring lies at the south-west foot of the hill while a disused gravel pit - now part of a garden - eats into part of the south side of the hill. The west side and south-west sides of the hill are tree covered while the field itself is completely open apart from two small brick buildings close to the west boundary which were built as ammunition stores for the Home Guard during the Second World War and which are now used for sheltering livestock.

## **3. Historical and Archaeological Background**

As a village settlement Brompton dates back to at least the 11th century as it is recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086 as part of the Royal manor of Falsgrave. The earliest published description of Castle Hill comes from the Scarborough historian Thomas Hinderwell writing towards the end of the 18th century. In his *History of Scarborough* published in 1798 he notes a local tradition that the Brompton had been the residence of 'Northumbrian Kings' and in connection with this mentions the foundations of an 'ancient building' visible on Castle Hill (Hinderwell 1798, 303). While any connection with the kings of Northumbria is likely to be spurious, Hinderwell's brief reference to Castle Hill suggests the existence of more obvious and substantial building remains than exist today.

Castle Hill receives passing reference in several local guidebooks in the 19th and 20th centuries but these sources do not add any substantial new information. There is also a curious story about the murder of a young lady at the castle during the Crusades (Brierley 1896). Published in a literary magazine toward the end of the 19th century, the story tells of how the daughter of the lord of Brompton castle was mistakenly killed by her lover newly returned from the Crusades as she climbed out of a window at the castle. The author of the Brompton article gives no indication of the origin of this story and it is most certainly fictitious, but he does say about the castle that 'all traces of the structure appear to have been removed from its site' (Brierley 1896, 63).

Large scale Ordnance survey mapping at 1:2500 scale published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries show a series of linear and sub-rectangular earthworks in the field which broadly match those recorded in the present survey (Ordnance Survey 1891-2; 1928) indicating that the site has not undergone any substantial change in the last 80-100 years. The 1891-2 survey also shows an artificial slope curving around the west and north sides of the garden of the property to the north of the field (then called Hill House) suggesting earthwork remains were not then confined to the

present survey area although the same map shows no earthworks in any of the other plots on the hill top (Figure 1).

The first detailed analysis of the layout and development of medieval Brompton was published by local historian John Rushton in two volumes of the Transactions of the Scarborough and District Archaeological Society (Rushton 1963 and 1964). Rushton speculated that Castle Hill may indicate the site of one of the two manors mentioned in the Domesday survey which was held by the Vescy family in the 14th century. He notes that the site had not been excavated and speculated that Castle Close - the site of the present survey - probably only represented part of the original castle site (Rushton 1964, 28).



Figure 1. Extract from the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey County Series map of Brompton published in 1891-2

The site was given statutory protection as a scheduled ancient monument in November 1959 (Scheduled Monument number 1021268) and the accompanying description (amended in 2004) identifies the site as a fortified medieval manor which includes the remains of two possible buildings (accessed in August 2016 at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1021268>). One possible building, measuring 22m by 20m, towards the north of the site is indicated by a rectangular 'raised and levelled area' with stonework protruding along the east edge. The second is situated 'in the south-east area' and represented by an irregular rectangle measuring 15m by 7m standing up to 1m above the surrounding area and presumed to indicate the site of a substantial building. The description also mentions a raised area 25m long and 4m wide connecting the two possible buildings with further slight earthworks to the west.

The 2014 geophysical and topographic survey discovered that more archaeological remains survive on the site than are visible on the surface. The survey indicated the survival of a possible boundary bank or ditch curving around the crest of slope on the west side of the hill with a rectilinear arrangement of possible structures across the east half of the site - most of which

equate to surviving earthworks. The survey also noted the location of two possible refuse pits indicated by circular geophysical anomalies.

#### **4. Survey Methodology**

The survey was undertaken using a Trimble R10 GNSS rover receiver linked to a temporary on-site base receiver positioned fixed on to the Ordnance Survey grid in real time using a subscription service to access data from the Ordnance Survey GNSS base station network (OS Net). The resulting survey was plotted out using Trimble Business Centre software at a scale of 1:500 and minor amendments to the plot were subsequently made back in the field by hand tapes.

#### **5. Description and Interpretation of the earthworks**

The 2016 survey was undertaken with a differential survey-grade Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) receiver and encompassed the extent of the earthworks but did not extend as far as the fence line on the west and south of the site as overhanging trees blocked satellite reception. However no features of archaeological interest were noted in this area apart from the two brick buildings dating from the Second World War as noted above.

The west side and south sides of the field are dominated by a steep scarp forming the crest of Castle Hill. About half way along the west side of the slope there is a notable break in the slope which almost certainly indicates a route on to the summit of Castle Hill and which forms a hollow way extending 10m to the east beyond the crest of the slope. In the other direction there are no visible traces that the route continued as far as the present entrance to the field at the north-west corner where a second slight hollow way heads into the field.

To the south of the break, the west-facing scarp appears to be an entirely natural slope but to the north the slope looks to have been cut back to make it steeper and straighter. The slope loses height toward the north boundary of the site where a short length of bank continues the alignment northwards below the stone field wall into the adjacent garden.

The geophysical survey detected a linear anomaly aligned along the crest of the west facing slope which was interpreted as a ditch and bank forming an addition to the natural defences. This feature may be indicated on the surface by two short scarps aligned along the crest of the west-facing slope to the south of the break described above.

The route on to the summit of Castle Hill described above opens out into a possible yard defined by a slight scarp on the north side immediately north of which is a shallow rectangular depression measuring 12m x 5m that probably indicates the site of a building. A gap toward the south-west corner of the depression may indicate the location of an entrance which would have given access to and from the yard. On the east the yard is crossed by a later bank while a much slighter and more spread bank further to the east may indicate the original east and north-east side of the yard. The survey also noted several shallow depressions to the north of the suggested building which could indicate the location of other much smaller structures. The Historic England scheduling description referred to above identified a much larger building in this area measuring 22m by 20m but this is not how the earthwork evidence is interpreted by the present survey.

On the south edge of the suggested yard is a prominent L-shaped bank with a high mound at its west end. The L-shaped bank could represent two sides of a building as noted in the Historic England scheduling description referred to above. The building would have been located just above the steep edge of Castle Hill but the other two sides of the suggested building have left no surface traces. Two crescent-shaped scarps in this area could indicate that some of the ground here has been disturbed by surface quarrying. The much higher mound could well be a later feature as it appears to overlie both the L-shaped bank and the bank described below which crosses the yard. The origin of the mound is not clear.

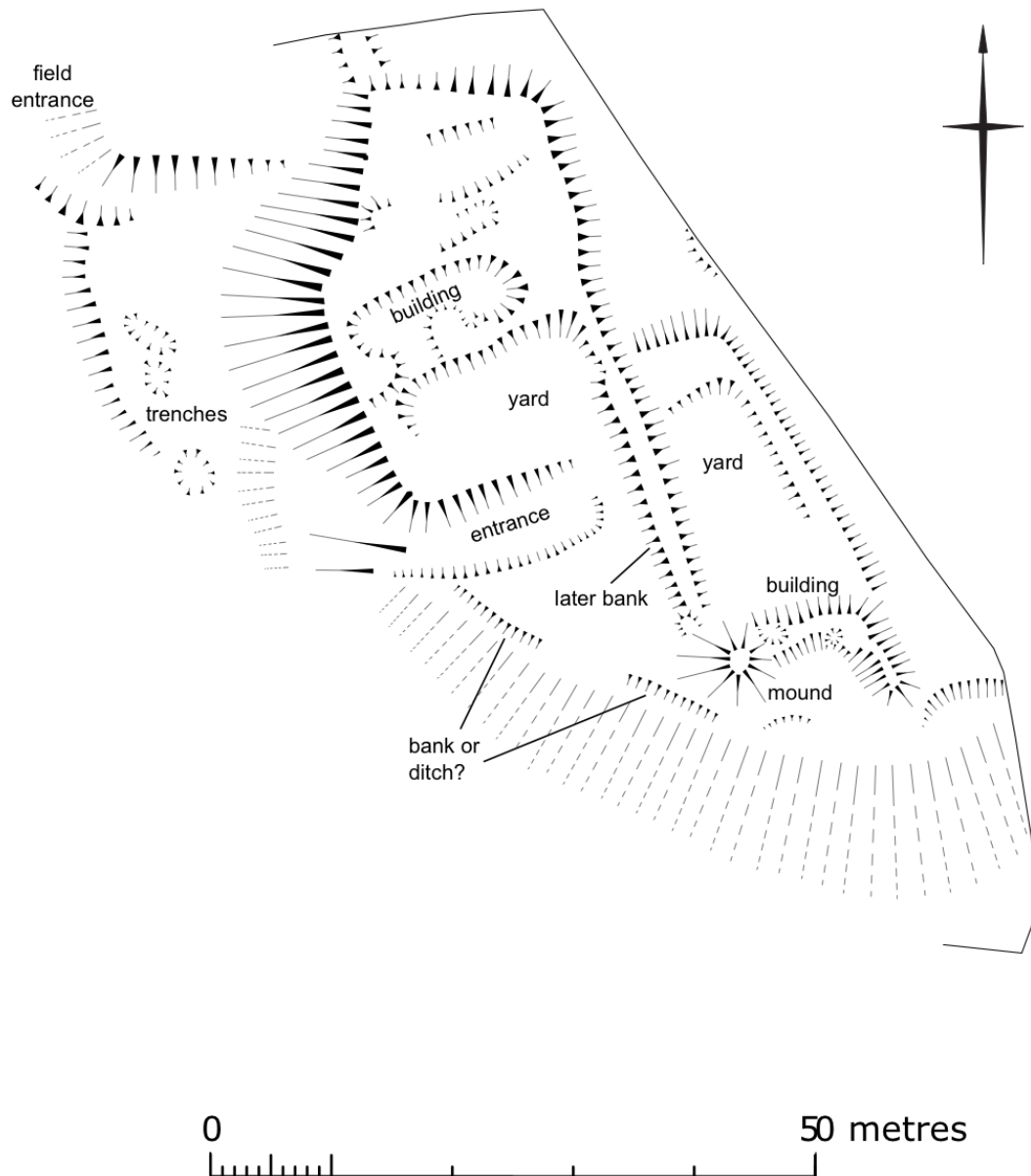


Figure 2. The 2016 survey showing main features mentioned in the text

The later bank which crosses the yard is a fairly prominent feature. It continues as far as the north side of the yard while a prominent east facing scarp continues the alignment of the bank for another 20m further north before turning to the west. The most likely explanation is that this feature is a sub-division of the hill top that post-dates the house and its associated yard but predates the earliest made boundaries as depicted on 19th-century Ordnance Survey mapping.

The survey recorded three slight sub-rectangular depressions on the low ground to the south of the field entrance. They could well be in-filled practice trenches from the Second World War when the field was used by the Home Guard.



*Figure 3. View looking south-east towards the mound and possible building. The bank crossing the yard can be seen extending from the camera position to the mound*

## **6. Conclusion**

The survey has helped to define the likely extent of structural remains within the field suggesting the existence of a small rectangular building with an associated yard to its south and a route leading into the yard from the west. The survey also recorded a possible second building further to the south though this is not necessarily the same date as the building and yard to the north. The north-south bank overlying the yard suggests a later arrangement of field boundaries presumably after the yard had fallen into disuse. There is no evidence to securely date either of the two possible buildings though a medieval or early post-medieval date seem the most likely. There is no firm evidence from the earthworks to support the identification of the site as a fortified manor house or as a castle. The nature of what survives suggests a much more humble, perhaps agricultural complex with the yard used for livestock. However this is not to discount the possibility that more impressive buildings stood elsewhere on the hilltop and have now been lost. Indeed Hinderwell's reference to the 'ancient foundations of a building' visible on Castle Hill at the end of the 18th century could be evidence for this as it is difficult to imagine his description applying to the earthworks we see today in the field. Indeed, the observation that a bank at the north of the site continues into the garden of the property to the north suggests that the site was originally more extensive.

The bank and ditch detected by the geophysical survey on the crest of the main west-facing slope suggests the hill may have been fortified at some point but this feature is not apparent in the earthworks apart from two slight scarps aligned above the crest of the slope. Perhaps of more significance, the survey noted that part of the crest of the slope seems to have been artificially steepened which could have been for defensive purposes though the question of when this

occurred remains unanswered. However, given its prominent location looking out over the Vale, there is the possibility that hill was defended long before the medieval period.

The work in 2014 and 2016 has highlighted the archaeological potential of the site but basic questions about the date and nature of the site remain unanswered. Realistically, the only way to advance understanding is through archaeological excavation targeted at features revealed by the work in 2014 and 2016 and more widely across the hilltop to determine if the site was once more extensive. Within the field permission will be needed from Historic England before any excavation takes place as this area is site a scheduled ancient monument but possible targets include:

- the location of the two possible buildings
- the prominent mound towards the south of the site
- the possible bank and/or ditch along the crest of the west slope
- the later bank crossing the possible yard

Limited excavation will clarify the state of preservation and date range of archaeological deposits surviving on the site and may give a much clearer picture about the part Brompton Castle Hill has played in the development of the village.

## 7. Acknowledgements

The survey was undertaken by Chris Evans, Chris Hall and Trevor Pearson. Stephen Gandolfi assisted with the later amendments to the survey plot. The farmer Mr Ashley Mudd, tenant of the Cayley Settled Estates is thanked for permitting access to the site. Chris Evans supplied the link to Harwood Brierley's description of Brompton which includes the story about the murder at the castle. Chris Evans is also thanked for supplying the extract of the 1891-2 Ordnance Survey map of Brompton and for taking the photograph used in Figure 3. The GNSS survey equipment was loaned to Trevor Pearson in his professional capacity with Historic England.

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