

# STEEP HOLM - A BRIEF SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

by Stan and Joan Rendell

## Introduction

Steep Holm could be classified as the mid-channel visual and archaeological upland link between the Welsh and English levels of the Severn Estuary. The island's Carboniferous and Oolitic Limestone rises 79m above mean sea level 9km offshore from Weston-super-Mare and 5km from the tip of Brean Down.

Since 1978 the 20ha of Steep Holm have been the subject of research and archaeological fieldwork by the present writers. Carried out on behalf of the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust which owns the island, the work is a sequel to a survey of the island's field boundaries by Dr. David Thackray and ourselves in 1977 (Rendell and Rendell 1981). Financial help for that study, part of a multi-disciplinary project organised by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, was provided by the Maltwood Fund for Archaeological Research in Somerset; and further grants for subsequent archaeological investigation were also obtained from that fund. Small scale excavation on the site of the twelfth century Augustinian priory of 'St. Michael of Stepholm' is accompanied by extensive background research and general archaeological surveillance of the entire island, all of which has facilitated publication of the first full chronological history of Steep Holm (Rendell and Rendell 1993).

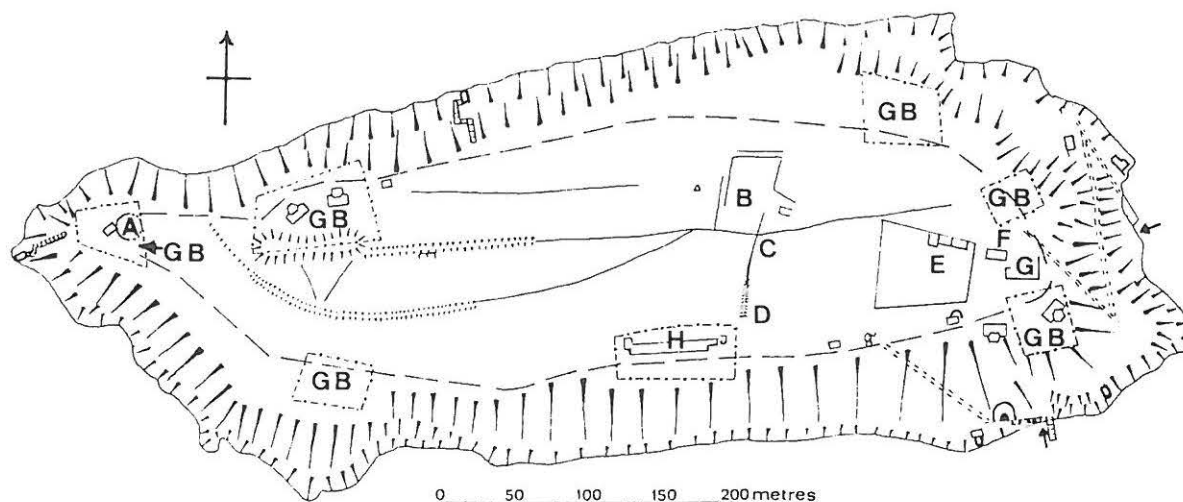
When the writers began their research into archives in 1976, details of the island's past were meagre and sometimes inaccurate, despite a survey by the Bristol Naturalists' Society (Matthews 1938) which brought together most of the information known at that time, and gave some account of minor excavations on the priory site in

the 1930s. Steep Holm's known history then began with a legendary connection with St. Gildas (Williams 1901), followed by a Viking presence (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle AD 914), while charters discovered at Berkeley Castle (Jeayes 1892) provided documentary proof of the existence of an island priory in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Military works in Victorian times had severely damaged ancient features and changed the contours of Steep Holm with the construction of six batteries for ten 7-ton cannon, each with attendant ammunition stores, a barracks with underground water storage tank, and a wide roadway cutting into the perimeter of the plateau.

In the great emergency of the Second World War, hastily erected and extensive structures further intruded upon the archaeological features of the island, with four new coastal gun emplacements, four low-level searchlight posts, generator stations, a battery observation post, and more than thirty Nissen huts being built to house over 200 men - with two huts immediately adjacent to the priory site. To serve these fortifications, a now dismantled iron pier, still extant stone quay, and diesel winch operated railway were built.

## The field boundaries

With thick scrub and alexanders covering the whole of the raised plateau in the centre of Steep Holm the outlines of former field boundaries and lynchets are traceable only with difficulty. The island is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, which precludes all but the most necessary disturbance of vegetation. Nevertheless, a number of features were plotted in 1977 (Figure 13). Without excavation it was not



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|------------------------|--------------------|
| A. Signal station      | F. 1776 tenement   |
| B. Possible Roman Site | G. Priory site     |
| C-D. Raised bank       | GB. Gun batteries  |
| E. 1870 farmhouse      | H. Barracks        |
| --- Perimeter path     | .... Railway track |

Figure 13. Map of Steep Holm.

possible to assign firm dates, although roughly comparable boundary lines were discovered later, as sketched by the Reverend John Skinner (1832), and by John Strachey (c. 1730). With no indication of husbandry during the four centuries previous to Strachey, it may be inferred that some of the boundaries can be dated to the time of the Augustinian canons. Other features could be centuries earlier, and some were evidently modified for other uses.

#### Ramparts and a circular feature

A low north/south bank (Figure 13, CD) which was recorded during the 1977 fieldwork measures approximately 1.5m high, and 2.5m wide; it runs almost 20m up the south slope of the plateau towards the dorsum, where it deteriorates into stone scatter, before continuing northwards in much reduced form, being almost eliminated by

nineteenth century farming. Not shown on the plan are traces of other north/south evenly spaced banks or ramparts which the writers located in later fieldwork when the plateau was less overgrown. In 1832, several embankments of this kind were clearly indicated on the Reverend John Skinner's sketches. At the west end of the island the raised banks are shown by him in association with another feature, a substantial curving wall or bank, enclosing an oval shaped area measuring "20 paces by 18" (Figure 14). In view of the known Viking connections with Steep Holm he concluded that the combined works were probably a "Danish Beacon and Fort", and the Reverend David Williams, who also visited Steep Holm in the 1830s, similarly considered the banks to have defensive purposes, describing them as "outliers to the encampment as at Worlebury, on Weston Hill".

Subsequently, in the Victorian military occupation, the circular feature was partly destroyed, partly buried, and well camouflaged by the construction of ammunition stores in the centre, but remnants of the curving stone walled bank were rediscovered and plotted in the fieldwork of 1977 (Figure 15). Historian John Strachey, writing a hundred years before the Reverend Skinner, described a "Circular Enclosure of Like Loose Stones at ye Western poynt, whither a Watchtower or Tumulus is very uncertain". Visiting archaeologists who, at the writers' request, have studied the remnants, have been equally uncertain regarding its date, although there are no doubts on the antiquity of the feature. For reasons set out below we believe that it was a Roman signal station.

### The Augustinian Priory site

A deed of AD 1260 by the Bishop of Bath and Wells effectively closed Steep Holm's medieval priory, and in the mid-nineteenth century (with no identifiable remains above ground) its earlier ecclesiastical existence was known only from a reference in Dugdale's 'Baronage' (1675). But Victorian fortification work in the 1860s revealed the site, and F.A. Knight (1902) wrote that "the foundations of the Priory were in great part laid bare", with the 'Garden Battery' being built on what was thought to be the monastic garth.

In the 1930s, digging alongside waist high ruined walls north of Garden Battery, the Bristol Naturalists' Society made the first serious attempt to explore the priory remains, but without any major result. During the subsequent military occupation a galvanised water pipe was laid diagonally across the east end of the site, to serve Nissen huts erected to the north and south. More damage was caused by a well-worn footpath crossing the area in the 1970s, while beneath thick scrub the ground was littered with miscellaneous debris. The site was cleared and

surveyed in 1977, and since then a small team has undertaken the archaeological programme on an annual basis (interim reports Rendell and Rendell 1979-87).

The roughly built ruined walls visible in the 1930s, and still with interior whitelimed plaster adhering, had been almost completely demolished in the 1940s, with only remnants of lower courses remaining when the current project started. Two of these narrow walls were laid across the site without foundations, above medieval midden, accumulated debris, and a mass of infill material which could only have come from a nearby large-scale construction operation. Dating evidence from beneath these walls included eighteenth century slipware. Linking walls rested partly upon the remaining lower courses of the substantial north and south walls of the former priory. Using the medieval footings as a plinth, the later builders had followed almost the same alignment. Pottery, coin, and clay pipe evidence showed that the narrow walls were the residue of temporary stone 'huts' constructed to house the navvies who had built the 1860s fortifications. Collapsed stones, debris, and the midden of a post priory occupation had been levelled with infill material from surrounding works, and covered with floors of thin mortar mixed with small rubble.

At the east end of the priory site, in view of the wartime damage, and the 1930s excavations by the Bristol Naturalists' Society, it was decided to limit present work to examining and back filling existing open trenches, and sieving old spoil heaps. This produced sufficient new evidence to justify excavation of the west end of the site which had been less disturbed by wartime activity. The east end was levelled to the surviving tops of the Victorian walls, and grassed.

Excavation at the west end of the site produced an outline plan of both Victorian and medieval walls (Figure 16) the original priory building being of

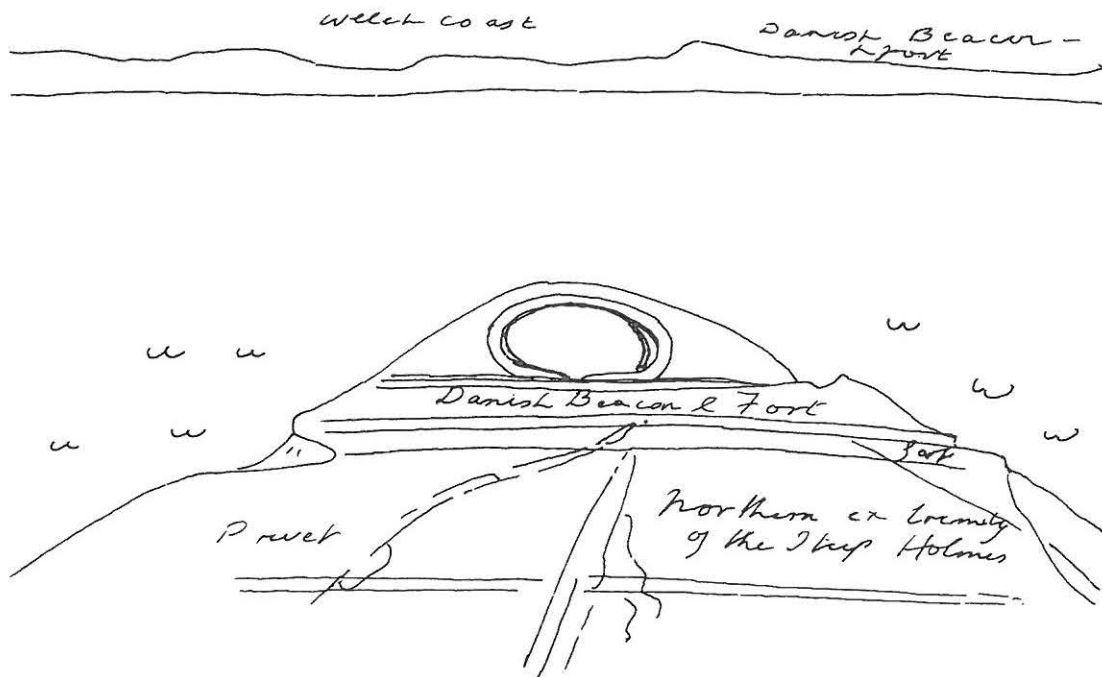


Figure 14. Sketch of western (not northern as stated on the written legend) end of Steep Holm after Reverend J. Skinner, 1832, showing raised banks and oval feature at the far extremity.

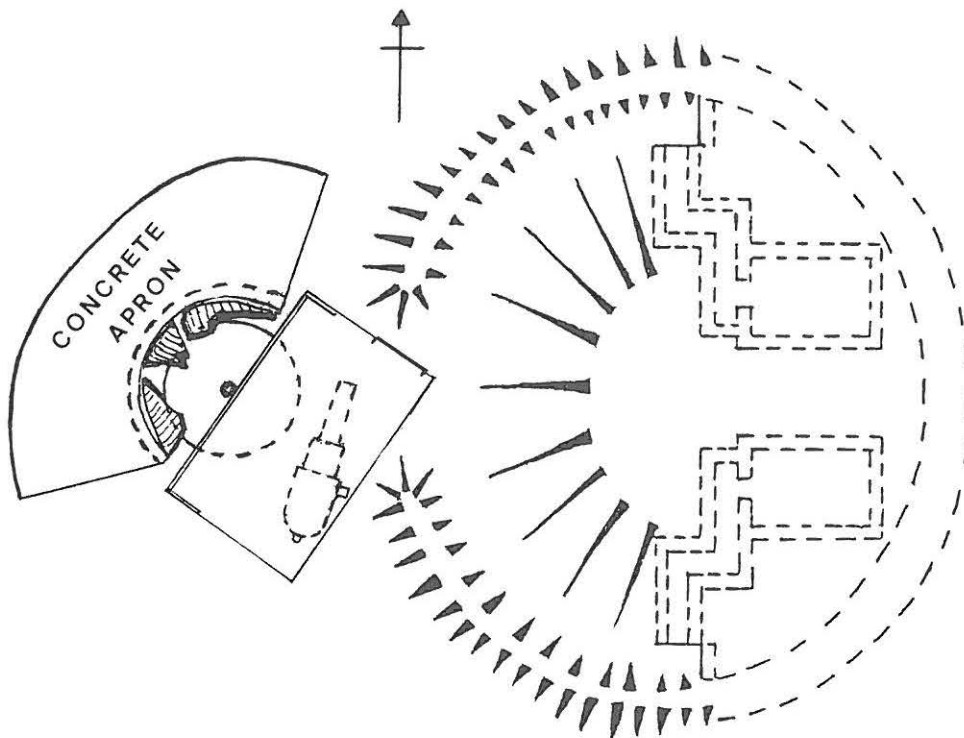


Figure 15. Plan of oval feature showing incorporated Victorian ammunition stores hidden below mound of rubble; and with intrusive Second World War battery observation post overlapping Victorian gun site.



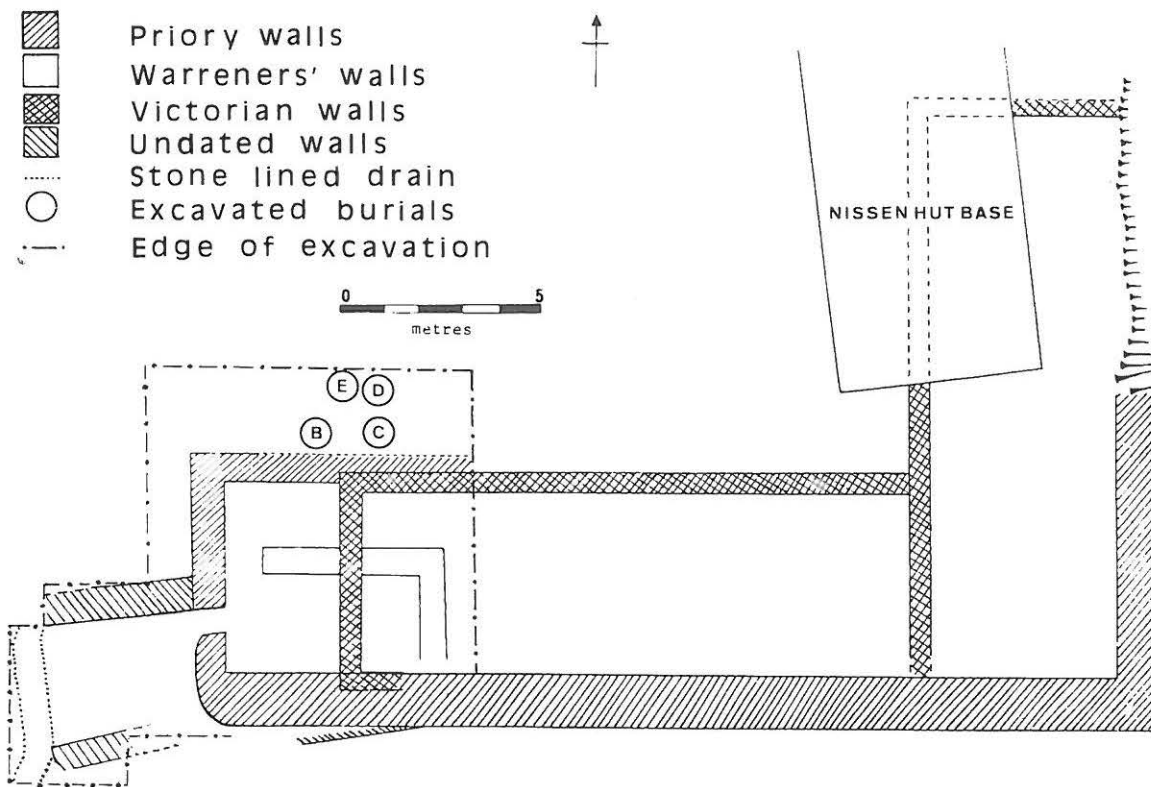


Figure 16. Plan of priory site.

random Carboniferous Limestone blocks, roughly dressed with a claw hammer. The roof was of Pennant Sandstone slabs drilled for pegs or nails. Wood does not survive in the dry limestone soil, but many nails have been recorded. Lead glazed pottery ridge tiles capped the roof. There was no evidence of floor tiles, and few identifiable decorative features. Sloping bedrock had been cut away in the northwest corner to provide a level floor, and a base on which to build, while a thickening spread of packed stones and soil built up the height towards the south and east. As anticipated, there were few artifacts associated with the priory inmates, but tiny sherds from a twelfth to thirteenth century French polychrome wine jug were particularly distinctive.

### Priory Cemetery

In 1867 part of a thirteenth century Blue Lias tombstone carved with an incised floreated cross was unearthed by Victorian navvies building ammunition stores for a gun battery 50m north of the priory site. This was incorporated into the attendant side arms store, and although there is no record of any associated grave, this is presumed to have marked the burial of a former prior or patron. During the current project a small part of the priory cemetery immediately north of the priory was located and excavated. One skeleton (B) was in much disturbed state; two others (C and D) were still *in situ*, divided by a ridge of bedrock which had been chipped away to provide sufficient depth for burial; the fourth (E) had been

disarranged at the time of inhumation of (D), the lower bones having been removed and carefully placed alongside (D). These were all unmarked shroud inhumations lying east/west.

The skeletons were not lifted as it is the policy of the Kenneth Allsop Memorial Trust not to unnecessarily disturb human remains, but evidence of osteo-arthritis was noted, and other data established before this area was backfilled.

### **Coney Warreners**

Within the south west corner of the building are medieval walls which include re-cut Blue Lias blocks, and which post-date the closure of the priory. Built virtually on the bedrock, these walls form a separate room which, from building details and pottery evidence, appears to be of fourteenth century construction. With associated midden material also containing quantities of rabbit bones, the writers concluded that this room related to warreners in the employ of the Lords Berkeley, who held the island as a coney warren for more than a century after the priory closed, and who, from archival evidence, are known to have carried out a certain amount of rebuilding on the site in AD 1315. An additional room built outside the south west corner of the priory building also appears to have been used by warreners. A section of stone lined drain 70cm wide associated with this room awaits further excavation.

### **Eighteenth century tenement**

A tenement was erected just to the north west of the priory site in 1776 for fishermen who stayed on Steep Holm during the winter months tending nets off East Beach. Close observation of the ruins shows that this structure was built from materials robbed from the priory, including Pennant Sandstone roofing tiles used as bonding pieces.

Current evaluation has shown that in the 1860s it was this tenement which was mistaken for 'one chamber of the priory' when being renovated as a temporary home for the foreman of works - and it was here (not in the priory itself) that 'many skeletons were found lying side by side divided by dwarf walls' as written by Knight (1902). The tenement, built without foundations, lies in the area now identified as the cemetery, and the 'dwarf walls' were bedrock divisions left between graves. Shattered fragments of the skeletons, which had been shovelled into a pit alongside the priory south wall, were unearthed in 1978.

### **Iron Age and Roman finds**

Unexpectedly early material, including Iron Age La Tène III brooches, was discovered in the Victorian infill on the priory site. First to fourth century AD use of Steep Holm is confirmed by flue tile, pre-Conquest decorated Arretine ware (Boon 1987), and sherds of mortaria, black burnished, Samian and Castor ware, coins and engraved glass.

A potter's stamp on a large fragment of globular amphora found within the circular feature at Steep Holm's west end dates this find to AD 90-140 (Frere 1983). At the opposite end of the island the handle of a similar amphora, Samian ware, and other Roman artefacts have been retrieved from above East Beach where there is constant movement of loose scree.

With field walking on the island plateau also producing Roman artifacts, including fragments of flue and roofing tile, there is sufficient proof of Roman occupation of the island over several centuries: but for what purpose?

### **A Roman signal station**

In view of Steep Holm's strategic position in the middle of the Bristol Channel, and with the evidence pointing to something more than a peasant-type of occupation during the

first to fourth centuries, the writers suggest that a military signal station is perhaps the most likely explanation for Roman use of the island.

The probable signal station site is the circular feature at Steep Holm's western extremity, commanding extensive views both of the Channel, and of the English and Welsh coasts. It was severely damaged by the Victorian and Second World War fortification builders, and ammunition stores now stand in the central area, where the signal station tower would have been situated. What remains of the perimeter walling, which is not typically Roman in construction, could have been an adapted earlier feature, although near parallels in plan may be found in the series of small circular Roman fortlets along the Gask ridge in Perthshire (Collingwood and Richmond 1969). In 1818 the Reverend Skinner recorded finding 'fragments of Roman pottery' in the walled area of Steep Holm's circular feature. Here too was discovered the large fragment of Dressel 20 amphora neck and handle stamped D.I.A and made in the Beatis region of Southern Spain AD 90-140 (Callender 1965).

It is suggested that living quarters for the garrison were possibly in a now much overgrown area near the centre of the plateau (Figure 13 B) where fragments of Roman building materials have been found.

### A Celtic pagan carved stone head

A carved stone head found in 1991 among loose scree in the sycamore wood above East Beach (Figure 17) is the subject of a specialist report by Dr. Miranda Green (1993). The head, which is carved in relief at one end of a short block of Jurassic Limestone, is typically pagan Celtic, with pear-shaped face, deep-set asymmetric eye-holes, long narrow nose and deep hollow for the open mouth, and is assigned to the Roman period, or slightly earlier, in view of the evidence



Figure 17. Terry Gore holding the carved stone head found by him in June, 1991.

now presented for Roman activity on Steep Holm. Its presence on the island may perhaps be explained by Celtic soldiery venerating the life-giving springs of water trickling from fissures in the cliff faces, while the almost triangular section of the tapering stone block could suggest its incorporation into a small shrine.

### Flints

With some disparity of opinion between specialists, flint evidence obtained from the priory site needs reappraisal. Primarily, however, this consists of several hundred flakes of flint (and fewer of Greensand Chert) spread through much of the infill material over the west end of the priory site, and often

associated with finds from the rabbit warrening period. Some are waste flakes, a small proportion are flint tools showing signs of use, or of re-touching. Few are typically prehistoric, but two of these have been assigned tentatively to the Mesolithic period, with the others being Neolithic or slightly later.

### Conclusion

Despite grievous damage to the archaeological resource by two military occupations, the current project has extended back the known history of Steep Holm to include the Roman era, with hints of prehistoric activity. The dimensions of the priory building have been plotted for the first time, and part of its cemetery located. Previously unsuspected tenures of the priory site have been proved, and new data gleaned on those who lived there.

Environmentally, there is now the possibility that at least some of the rare flora which survives on the island could have been introduced during the Roman era rather than by the Augustinian canons, as previously surmised. The limited excavation of the priory is drawing to a close, with one small final area to be linked with an extant path around the site, so providing better access. Archaeological landscaping and conservation will complete the project.

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