

## II: The Archaeology of Burton Point

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### Abstract

This work presents the results of a documentary investigation and three archaeological field surveys carried out on Burton Point in Wirral between 2005 and 2006 by the University of Chester. These studies focus on the remains of what is thought to be an Iron Age promontory hillfort currently scheduled as an ancient monument. The survey results are analysed and discussed in depth within a broader investigation and comparative study of Burton Point in its local, regional context and in terms of its position within the Irish Sea basin and Atlantic façade.

### Introduction

**B**urton Point is a red sandstone headland overlooking the estuary of the River Dee on the south west coast of the Wirral Peninsula (Phillips and Phillips 2002, 5). It is situated approximately one kilometre south-west of the town of Burton and stands at a height of 25m OD, facing the coastline of Wales (Ill. II.1).

The southern tip of the promontory is defended by a ditch and rampart (SMR 9/1, NMR No 25695). This earthwork cuts off the end of the promontory and is considered to be of Iron Age construction perhaps the remains of a promontory hillfort (Matthews 2000–1, 8).

The cliffs at Burton Point were once lapped by the Dee before a new channel was established in the eighteenth century running along the Welsh shoreline. As a result, large tracts of land around the estuary have been reclaimed and the site is now inland. The cliffs at Burton Point appear to have suffered extensive erosion (Longley 1987, 109) and there are clear signs of quarrying on a large scale. As a result, the original size of the enclosure remains unclear.

The earthwork first appears on the 1875 6' map and has been scheduled as an ancient monument since 1913 (Kaye 1974). The site was last evaluated in some detail in 1978 in order to re-assess its importance (Brown, Hawkins & Wagstaff 1978). This evaluation, which made parallels between Burton Point and other promontory forts on the Manx and Irish seaboard, resulted in an amendment being made to the schedule entry in 1979 to include a wider area to the immediate north of the promontory (Newton 1995).



III. II.1: Burton Point viewed from the west with ditch and rampart centre right (Photograph by author)

Between May 2005 and May 2006, three field surveys were conducted on the site by Nathaniel Jepson, Ray Carpenter, Steve Crane, Dr Sarah Semple, Alex Turner and the author, members of the University of Chester History and Archaeology Department. The first conducted the ground survey, which included not only the ditch and rampart within the scheduled area, but also a large tract of land to the north. A contour survey was then undertaken encompassing the scheduled area in order that a two and three-dimensional model of the monument could be produced. Finally, a geophysical survey was conducted over an area lying approximately 150 metres to the north of the monument to search for signs of settlement or activity that may be associated with the earthwork.

This fieldwork has produced an innovative and interesting range of results — these are set in context within this paper by means of both a review of existing knowledge and published accounts of the site, and a discussion of the wider context of this monument in terms of its geography and relationship to the Dee, Welsh coast and Irish seaboard.

### Literary Survey: Burton Point through the Ages

Burton Point today is quiet, tranquil and unoccupied. It is situated on private land and has received little attention in recent years. Prior to 1737, however, when the base of the promontory was lapped by the Dee, the site was a significant and important landmark with activity spanning from the Neolithic period to the eighteenth century.

### *Geology*

The cliffs on Burton Point are made up of Sandstones of Permo-Triassic Age (Phillips and Phillips 2002, 5), formed when Britain was an arid desert. They show evidence of wind and

sea erosion and mark the ancient coastline of the Dee Estuary. The area can be divided into three sections; the lowest level, consists of alluvial material from the silting up of the Estuary, the middle and main section comprises permo-triassic sandstones that form the cliffs, and the third level which is a thin layer of boulder clay or till on the cliff top.

The Rampart, ditch and fort interior are composed of fine-grained, predominantly sandy material with small stones and boulders of varying composition and size, indicating glacial origin.

### *Burton Point in Prehistory*

The Mesolithic Period, which lasted from around 8,500–4,300 BC, is characterised by the scatterings of flint tools and implements thought to have been deposited by hunter-gatherer groups (Brown 2004, 27). During the early part of this period, the Irish Sea was to a large degree an extensive plain (Brassil 1991, 47). This would have been drained by the emerging Dee, Clwyd and Conwy rivers, which at that time would have been little more than riverines banked on each side by extensive woodland (Aldhouse-Green *et al.* 2000, 24). This means that during this period Burton Point would have been some four miles inland from the forest-banked river.

Although no direct evidence of Mesolithic activity has been found at Burton Point itself, there have been other Mesolithic discoveries in the area. At Greasby and Thurstaston further along the Wirral, for example, two obliquely-blunted stone tool assemblages have been excavated (Cowell 1991, 21–60).

The Neolithic period is signified by the development of agriculture, monument building and the development of pottery manufacture (Burnham 1995, 6). Evidence for monuments on the Wirral is scarce. Sites such as the Bridestones in Cheshire (Longley 1987) and Gop Cairn on the other side of the estuary (Brown 2004, 37), however, are believed to be of this tradition.

Several Neolithic artefacts have been discovered on the Wirral. On Burton Point itself, both a barbed and tanged and a transverse arrowhead have been discovered (Longley 1987/SMR Nos 32 & 2877) as well as a polished stone hand axe (Longley 1987/SMR No 35). The hand axe is an unusual and rare find in this area and is known to have originated from Graig Lwyd on Penmaenmawr further west along the Welsh coast in Snowdonia. A similar unpolished hand axe also from Graig Lwyd was found in Gop Cave near Prestatyn (Brown 2004, 39) across the estuary. Graig Lwyd axes have been discovered in other parts of the region and research has shown that items such as these were being exchanged along well-established and complex trade routes (Morgan and Morgan 2004, 28–29).

No evidence of Bronze Age activity has been found at Burton Point itself, although a large amount has been discovered elsewhere in the region. Excavations at Brook House Farm near Bruen Stapleford (Fairburn *et al.* 2002, 9–57) and Irby on the Wirral (Nevell 2003, 1–21) for example, have revealed evidence of late Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements.

There also appears to have developed at this time trade into north-east Wales and the north-west from Ireland. A vast amount of bronze and gold artefacts have been discovered in and

around the Clwydian range from this period. The copper within the Bronze axe-heads discovered at Moel Arthur, and Craig-yr-Wolf near Eryrys were found by metallurgical analysis to contain significant amounts of antimony that is known to have originated from one single source in Ireland. A metallurgical investigation of the various gold items in the area revealed the inclusion of approximately five percent of copper alloy, typical of the gold working traditions in Britain and Ireland at that time (Brown 2004, 53–54).

During this period, the natural advantages of hills and promontories in the landscape began to be utilised as defensive or strategic positions. Sites like Beeston Castle in Cheshire (Longley 1987) have revealed evidence for this early occupation. It is possible, therefore, and highly likely, given its topographical advantage on the Dee coast, that Burton Point was also occupied during this period and that the ditch and rampart were added to the promontory later in the Iron Age. The evidence for Iron Age activity on Burton Point is discussed in some depth below.

At Meols at the end of the Wirral Peninsula over 3,000 objects have been recovered dating from the Mesolithic to post-Medieval. These objects included Iron Age artefacts, a substantial number of Roman coins, decorated metalwork and Brooches from the fifth and sixth centuries AD. This evidence suggests that from the middle Iron Age to the fifteenth century AD, Meols acted as a regional market (Griffiths & Philpott 2003). A Roman brooch dated AD 43–409 (SMR No 59), has also been found at Burton Point, making it entirely possible, due to its coastal situation, that the site played some role in the distribution and transportation of goods similarly to Meols.

### *The Township of Burton*

The earliest documentary reference to the township of Burton is in the Domesday Book of 1086 AD (Williams & Martin 1992, 717). There is evidence, however, to suggest that the area around Burton Point has been occupied for much longer. The name Burton derives from the Old English *Burh-tun*, — meaning ‘farmstead near a fortification’ (Dodgson 1972, 211–212). The fortification in the title may well refer to the promontory fort on Burton Point, which itself is further evidence of even earlier occupation and activity on the site, strengthening the argument for the promontory fort being of prehistoric date.

Situated in the village of Burton is ‘Hampston’s Well’, which, it is claimed, served the people of Burton as a water source right into the nineteenth century (Jones 1984, 208). Intriguingly, the earliest documentary evidence calls this ‘Patrick’s Well’ (Cullen 1984, 55). Early Christian missionaries sanctified wells and named them after Christian saints, like St Winifred’s Well in Holywell, or ‘St Patrick’s Well’ in Old Kilpatrick in Dumbartonshire. If this is the case at Burton, some Irish missionary/ecclesiastical influence might be at play with the well representing early Christian religious activity.

### *Burton Point as a Port*

Burton Point is known to have served as an element of the Port of Chester (which included Burton Point and Flint within its boundaries) from circa 1200 to 1500 AD (Booth 1984, 10) and in 1231–34 the medieval hospital of St Andrew was founded at Denhall, less than a kilometre north of Burton Point for the help of the poor, shipwrecked and travellers to and

from Ireland (Newton 1995 — NMR 23645). In 1399 Richard II used Burton Point as an embarkation point to launch an expedition to Ireland with an army of veteran archers recruited from Cheshire (R.S.B.1938, 68). Although other ports were developed and used further along the Wirral Peninsula at Parkgate and Neston (Gruffydd 1984, 39), the port at Burton Point continued operating until the eighteenth century. In the Burton Manor Court Book entries from between 1599 and 1650 record the fishing rights of local cottagers, referred to as ‘fishrooms’ and located at ‘Burton Head’ (Morris 1984, 74). John Leland, who wrote a description of the Wirral in 1537 describes Burton Point (which was then known as Burton Hedde) as being the place from which a ferry service ran to and from the Welsh side of the estuary (Toulmin Smith 1906, 91). A letter (author unknown) dated 1707, written to the commissioners of Customs for the port of Chester, makes requests for the landing and discharging of goods at Burton Point ‘so that ships might lay better sheltered than at Parkgate’ (J.H.E.B. 1922, 94–5) (Ill. II.2).

### *Canalisation of the Dee*

On 20 April 1733 the first sod was cut from what was to become a ten-mile long channel running along the Welsh side of the estuary from Connah’s Quay to Chester. This enormous undertaking was conducted in order to make the navigation of the Dee safer and to improve the flow of trade into the city (Simpson 1908, 91). The river was diverted into the New Cut in 1737 and enabled vessels of 250 to 300 tons displacement to reach Chester.

### *History of Quarrying at Burton Point*

After his military triumphs in North Wales in 1277, Edward I set about building a series of castles to consolidate his subjugation of the Welsh (Gruffydd 1984, 29). In the same year orders were made for the quarrying of shaped sandstone blocks from Burton Point for the building of Flint Castle on the other side of the estuary. Edward is known to have supervised the building of this castle whilst residing in Shotwick Castle further along the shore from Burton Point towards Chester (W.F.I. 1952, 7–8). In a letter written by Liverpool merchants dated 23 June 1715, addressed to the Mayor and Council of Liverpool, permission is requested to bouy out the channel and blow up rocks at Burton Point (referred to again as Burton Head) in order to remove the stones along the shore and build a convenient storehouse for the keeping of goods. It is possible but unclear whether this storehouse was to be situated on Burton Point itself. The cop or causeway, which presently runs from Burton Point to Connah’s Quay was built in 1877 (Peate & Heatley 1984, 184) and materials for this venture almost certainly would have come from the site. Records show that between 1871 and 1886 the River Dee Co Rock Quarry agreed to the quarrying and removal of 50,000 cubic yards of sandstone from Burton Point (Anon. 1871–1886). This latest and probably last period of quarrying on the site was most likely conducted within the area referred to as the ‘Old Quarry’ on maps from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### *Skeletons Discovered at Burton Point — circa 1878*

In Sulley’s ‘One Hundred of Wirral,’ reference is made to the discovery of 29 skeletons on Burton Point (Sulley 1889, 170). The discovery is said to have occurred within the rampart on the Point in December 1878 whilst repairs were being carried out to the cop that runs from Burton Point to Connah’s Quay, which had been breached during heavy storms. The entry goes on to say that the skeletons were laid on an east-west alignment, suggesting



III. II.2: Collins' Map of 1689 showing the Dee passing 'Burton Head' prior to the re-routing of the river along the Welsh coast (Cheshire Records Office)

Christian burial practices. Several possible explanations are put forward for the discovery, which included men killed in battle with the Welsh and lepers brought from the Hospice of St Andrew a kilometre north along the coast at Denhall. Interestingly, Sulley's entry regarding the skeletons is mentioned in connection with the ditch and rampart, which was considered at that time to be of Civil War origin. He refers to the ditch as the 'entrenchment' and the enclosure as the 'battery' (Sulley is very keen, however, to point out that this view was purely traditional, there being no historical evidence whatsoever for the claim. He also in a footnote demonstrates the weakness in the traditional view by recounting how on several occasions during his study he had been informed by some locals that the skeletons

were those of Vikings and that they all stood at between six and eight feet in height!). The idea of death in battle was ruled out due to the lack of any record of arms or ornaments within the graves or any sign of injury on the skeletal remains. A Dr Russell from Neston examined the bones and concluded that the remains were those of shipwreck victims, although how he arrived at this conclusion is unclear.

Gamlin takes the story further (1897, 234) by claiming that the skeletons were found on an extensive platform and that they were buried 1–2 metres below the surface. Local tradition has it that there was, in fact, 50 or 60 skeletons found and they were coffined, but no evidence exists to support this. The bodies have since been attributed to a famous shipwreck on the Dee on 10 August 1637. An entry in the Burton parish register in this year attests to the incident (Beazley 1908, 22). Another explanation for the burials could be the result of plague. Bubonic Plague made its way into Cheshire in 1349 and its swift impact would leave no trace on the bones (Booth 1984, 12). Bubonic Plague is also known to have hit the area in 1603. At Shotwick, a short distance from Burton Point, an entry in the parish register for that year records that plague was prevalent there from midsummer till September (Shrewsbury 1971, 399–400). Plague burials would go some way to explaining why the bodies might have been segregated and placed in unconsecrated ground.

### *Field Survey Results*

An evaluation of Burton Point in 1978 (Brown, Hawkins & Wagstaff 1978) describes what appears to be the only previous field survey to be conducted on the site and focuses entirely on the area of the scheduled monument. During this latest study, therefore, it was decided that a wider area of the promontory and its hinterland should be covered in order to detect signs of settlement or activity that might be associated with the fort.

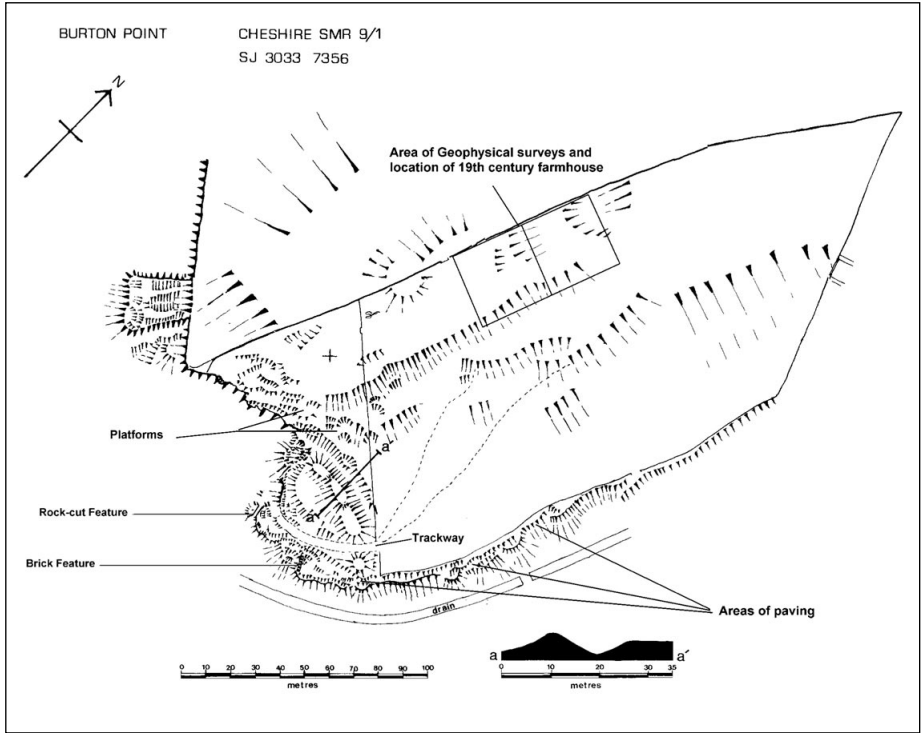
### *Ground Survey*

#### *Methodology*

The ground survey (III. II.3) was completed over a two-week period in June 2005. The first stage of the survey was to lay out a ten-metre grid system covering not only the scheduled area of the monument, which includes the area of the ditch, rampart and enclosure as well as some higher ground to the north, but also a wide hinterland which included the cliff edges and the large quarried area beyond to the west, approximately thirty metres extra to the north of the scheduled area and approximately one hundred and fifty metres extra to the east, the extremity of which is defined by the railway track. Each ten-metre square was marked by a peg, which enabled tape measures to be fixed accordingly. Once the grid system was in place, features within each ten-metre square were carefully and methodically measured in and recorded on a plan at a scale of 1:100.

#### *Rock Cut Feature*

This feature is situated on the eastern extremity of the south-facing cliffs. It is 1 metre wide at the present ground level by 1.5 metres at the shoulder. It appears to have been deliberately cut as a pathway and runs from the high ground to the north to what would have been the waters edge at high tide. At present, the deepest section of the cut stands at a height of 1.5 metres. The floor of the pathway, however, is composed of a thick deposit of sand from the silting up of the Dee, so the true extent of the cut may be obscured.



III. II.3: Ground survey of Burton Point, 2005 (Illustration by author)

**Sandstone Wall Feature**

This feature (III. II.4) is situated a further 25 metres east of the rock-cut pathway, and stands in a bay-shaped area. The large blocks that make up the feature appear to have been hewn from sandstone from the immediate surroundings and have been cut in various shapes and sizes to fit the profile of the bedrock surfaces. The largest of these blocks is 1 metre in length, 0.25 metres in depth and 0.35 metres wide. The blocks are held in place by mortar to form a wall and the whole feature runs on a north-south alignment for a length of 2.5 metres.

**Major Trackway**

This metalled thoroughfare curves in an arc from the high hinterland to the east of the promontory and leads down to the cliff face and shoreline to the west, truncating the rampart at its eastern end. South of the main track above the sandstone wall are the remains of a stretch of paving stones running on an east-west alignment along the edge of the cliff for a distance of approximately 35 metres. A similar stretch of paving lies further to the east. In both areas the slabs are almost completely buried under a layer of earth and have only been exposed due to erosion.

**Ditch and Rampart**

The ditch and rampart currently runs between the high ground to the north and the cliffs to the south in an arc of approximately 60 metres from east to west (III. II.5). It comprises of large irregular sandstone blocks and a mixture of sand and soil. The earthwork has been





III. II.4: Sandstone wall feature (Photograph by author)

badly ploughed in places and is overrun with rabbit and badger activity. The interior is overgrown with trees — mainly Sycamore and none more than a hundred years old. The bank now stands to a height of 3.5 metres from the base of the ditch and is composed of fine-grained sand and small sandstone boulders. The ditch is currently 2 metres in depth and was probably originally substantially deeper, suggesting that it was constructed for defence rather than simply to define the enclosure, although an element of display may also have been involved.

#### *Platforms*

On the higher ground to the north of the ditch and rampart lie a multitude of semi-circular platforms. These features range in size from 5 to 15 metres in width and appear to be in no particular pattern or order of distribution.

#### *Discussion*

The rock-cut pathway, sandstone wall feature and paving remains are evidence of activity on Burton Point before the Dee was diverted. The pathway was probably cut to allow easy access to the shore and possibly to aid in the loading and unloading of cargo. It seems likely that this pathway was originally situated in the middle of a wide of bay extending further the west but which has since been quarried away.

The sandstone wall feature could be the remains of a wall or building foundation and may have been incorporated within some sort of quayside, the extent of which may have spanned



III. II.5: Ditch and rampart viewed from the east (Photograph by author)

the whole bay area. This feature could also be related to the 17th or 18th century storehouses and fishrooms mentioned above.

The major trackway first appears on maps from 1875. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when it was first introduced on the site, but it was suggested in the 1978 evaluation (Brown, Hawkins & Wagstaff 1978) that location where the trackway truncates the rampart might have been the original entrance into the fort. Without further investigation, however, this remains purely speculative. It is also possible that the track was constructed for droving or quarrying purposes, or may be associated with the farmhouse. Amongst the cobbles and paving stones that compose the major trackway is evidence of recent repair and maintenance, making interpretation difficult.

The paved surface above the bay area appears to predate the main track and may be the remains of a platform. It is clear from the quantity of slabs at the bottom of the bay area that this area of paving extended considerably further south into the bay and may be associated with the brick feature and activity in the bay area. It is not known if the stretch of paving to the east is contemporary with that in the west but it is almost certainly related to Burton Point during its last years as a port or harbour.

At first glance many of the semi-circular platforms look like they may have been home to structures. It is, however, more likely that they are either quarry scoops or natural geology. A large depression approximately 125 metres north of the ditch and rampart and to the south of the drystone wall, which runs in a south-west north-east alignment from the promontory

to the railway track, was detected whilst conducting the survey. Early maps show this to be the site of what appears to be a farmhouse and out-building. This complex first appears on the 1899 6' map of the area enclosed by a wall or fence. The buildings appear again on the 6' map of 1913 minus the enclosure, suggesting that the buildings may have fallen out of use for some reason by this time. When the ground survey was super-imposed over the 1899 map, the site of the farmhouse and the area of depression corresponded. The presence of this farmhouse may explain the remains of a gate entrance now incorporated into the drystone wall. It would also explain the presence of various bricks and floor tiles either embedded in the wall or scattered within a small radius of the feature.

The ditch and rampart are discussed in more detail in relation to the contour survey.

### *Contour Survey*

After examining the results of the ground survey it was decided that a contour survey should be conducted of the scheduled area. The aim of this survey was to produce both a two and three-dimensional model of the monument without the obstruction caused by trees and foliage that crown the promontory at present.

### *Methodology*

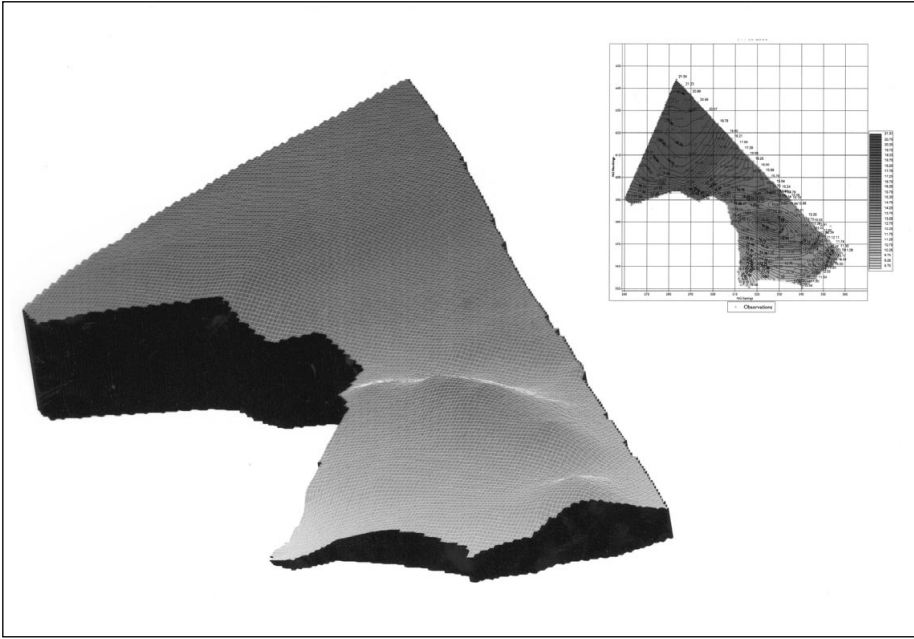
The survey was achieved with the use of an Total Station and staff. The Total Station was set up in two locations within the scheduled area. The first was on the highest point of the remaining rampart. The staff was then placed at a multitude of points around the Total Station and readings were taken. Readings from the first location recorded all the area inside the enclosure, the rampart and ditch and the cliff edges to the west and south. The second location was established on the higher ground to north and readings from this point were again taken and the remaining parts of the scheduled area were recorded. GPS readings were also taken during this survey in order to tie the results into the Ordnance Survey grid system.

### *Results*

The results (III. II.6) display the Total Station anchor points and the spot height readings on the 2-D model and the definition of the monuments remains on the 3-D model. The contours are graded in grayscale and when super-imposed over the ground survey clearly define the monument. These models also successfully highlight the bay-shaped area including the site of the sandstone wall feature.

### *Discussion*

These models serve as a visual aid when attempting to understand the monument. Viewing the area without the trees and foliage gives us a partial insight into how the immediate landscape may have looked during occupation. Fort defences were constructed in various ways. The defence at Burton Point closely resembles a Glacis style rampart. Defences of this type are usually triangular in cross-section and at their most basic consist of a dump of material excavated, from the ditch with the slope running continuously from the top of the rampart into the centre of the ditch (Forde-Johnston 1976, 15/218). The defences at Burton Point are remarkably similar. Glacis-style defences first make an appearance around 350 BC (Dyer 1992, 19). One advantage to building a rampart of this type is that they do not require elaborate timber-lacing or stone-work for support and would, therefore,



III. II.6: Contour survey results — 2 and 3 dimensional models (Image by Carpenter & Crane 2005)

be simple to construct. The depth of ditch suggests that it was defensive, although prestige may be an additional motive for construction.

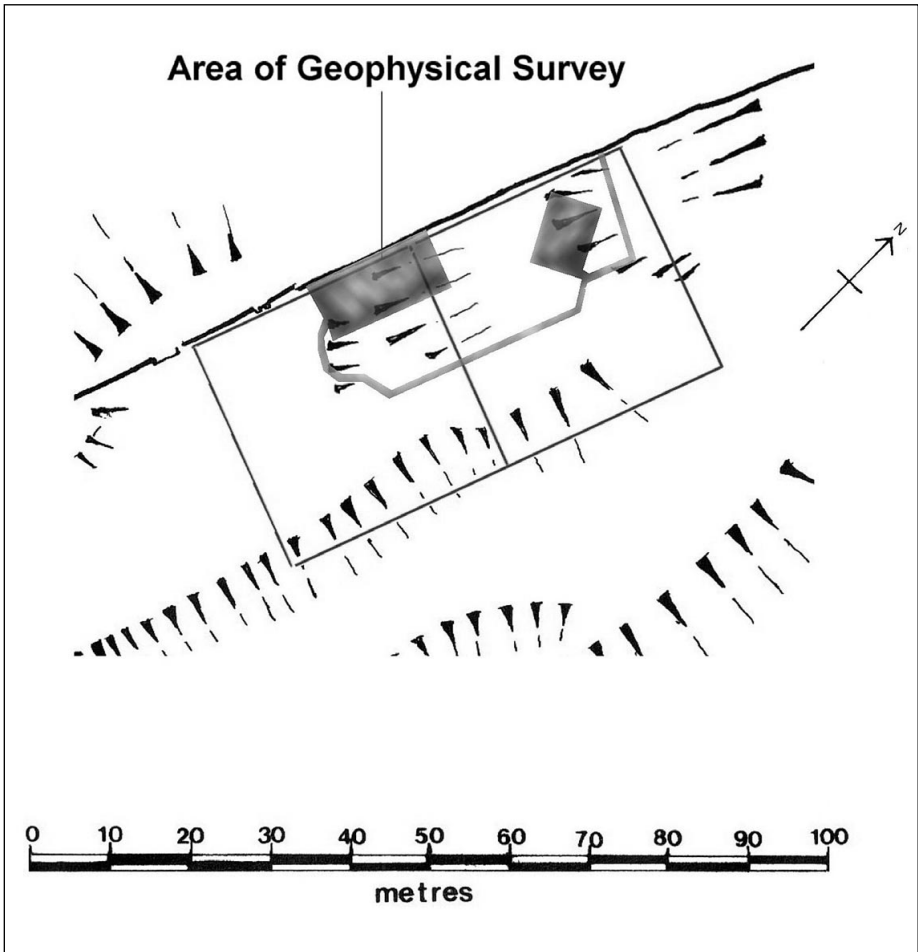
Due to the erosion and truncation of the remaining enclosure, it is almost impossible to establish what kind of structures may have occupied this area. Excavations at Moel y Gaer, Rhosesmor, situated across the estuary, overlooking Burton Point, revealed the remains of circular and four-post structures (Guilbert 1975; 1976). The circular structures are interpreted roundhouses. It is difficult, however, to establish exactly the function of the four post-structures but they are generally considered to have been used as storage units for grain or other things.

### *Geophysical Survey*

Unfortunately, a geophysical investigation of the scheduled area was not possible due to interference from trees and tightly knit roots. It was decided, therefore, that a survey should be conducted over the area of depression to the north where the farmhouse is shown on the 1899 6' map. There were two reasons for choosing this location; the first was because the plateau appears at first glance to be an ideal location to establish a settlement, which is probably why the site was chosen for the farmhouse. It was hoped, therefore, that signs of continuity of settlement would be detected. The second reason was that the ruins of the farmhouse would serve as a contrast when analysing the results.

### *Methodology*

Two techniques were employed in the geophysical survey, gradiometry and resistivity. For the gradiometry survey two thirty metre square grids were located on the open high ground



Ill. II.7: Areas of geophysical surveys with nineteenth century farmhouse outlined (Illustration by author)

over the area of depression and supposed farmhouse location and readings were taken at 1m x 1m intervals (Ill. II.7). This grid utilised as its northern extremity the drystone wall, which runs from the south-west to the north-east across the summit of the Point towards the township of Burton. The two thirty metre square grids were then positioned side-by-side creating a sixty-metre length along the wall by thirty metres running down the slope to the south-east. Readings were then taken along each thirty-metre strip starting from the wall and running down the slope and then returning uphill in a concertina effect until the full sixty-metre length had been recorded.

As this was a trial, only one of the thirty metre square grids was utilised for the resistivity survey. Like the gradiometry survey, readings were taken at 1m x 1m intervals working down the slope from the drystone wall and then returning along the next thirty-metre strip to the summit in the same concertina fashion. However, unlike the gradiometer, resistivity readings are taken at each one-metre point along each thirty-metre strip.

### *Results and Discussion*

The results of the geophysical surveys were both revealing and surprising. The gradiometry results (Ill. II.8a) showed what appears to be interference from the drystone wall to the north as well as disturbance in the centre and east of the image. These areas of disturbance seem to correspond with the enclosed area of the farmhouse represented on the map. Intriguingly, another feature was detected from this survey that does not seem to correspond with the outline of the farmhouse. This feature could possibly be the remains of an enclosure and may predate the farmhouse considerably (Ill. II.8b).

Readings from the resistivity survey produced similar results. The high resistance at the centre and north-east of the image seems to correspond with the farmhouse and are most likely to be the remains of foundations and demolition. The two areas of low resistance at the south of the image, however, appear to follow the profile of the enclosure feature (Ill. II.9). This feature could have been used for cattle or may indicate settlement and its angle suggests that it could predate the drystone wall to the north. It would be premature, however, to suggest a prehistoric date for this feature.

## **Burton Point and the Iron Age North-West**

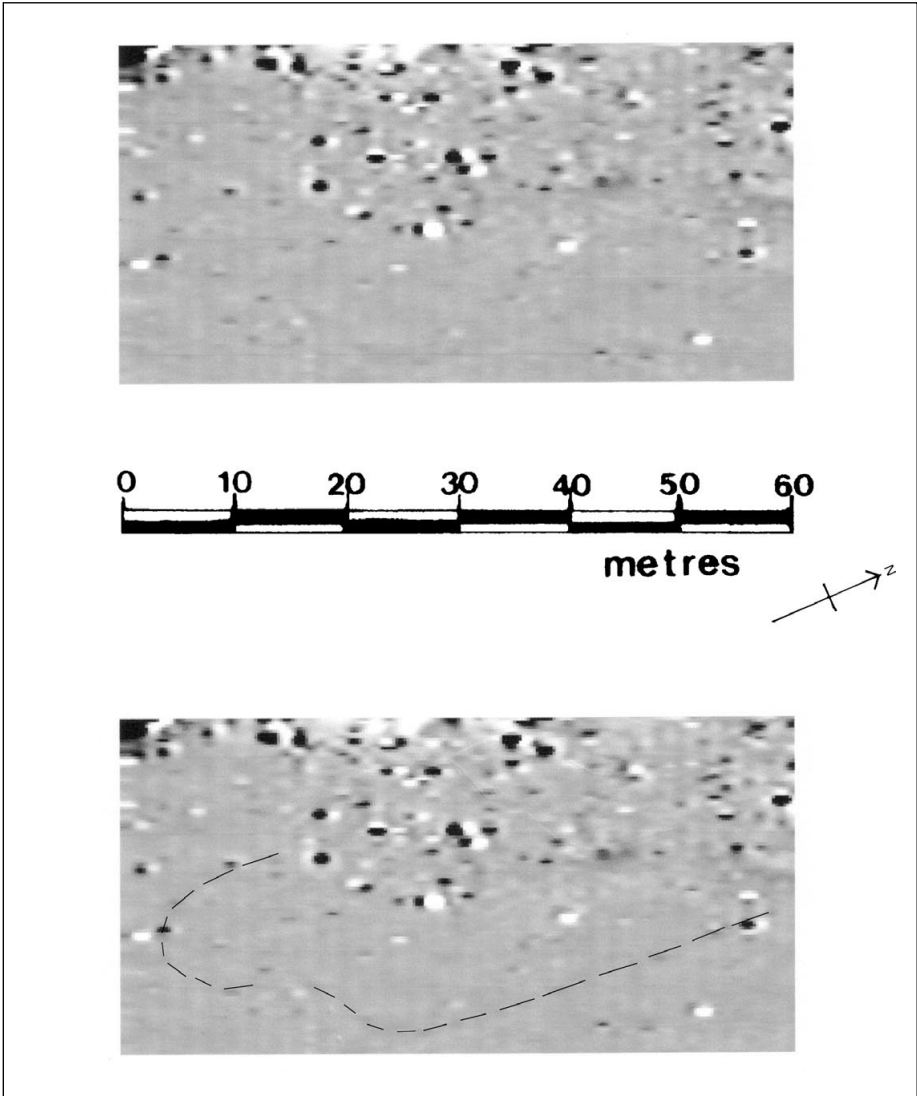
### *Environment*

The North-West of England has been the subject of an intensive palaeoecological investigation in recent years in the form of the North-West Wetlands Survey (Cowell & Innes 1994). The new pollen sequences being produced from this survey suggest that major woodland clearances of upland areas continued by the Bronze Age to the mid-Iron Age, whilst the clearance of lowland areas appear to have occurred in the latter part of the Iron Age (Dark 2000, 56–7). Results from Knowsley Park in Merseyside, for example, indicated that clearances began in the late Iron Age or Early Romano-British period, but that the landscape remained substantially wooded with no indication of cereal production (Cowell & Innes 1994).

### *Hillforts*

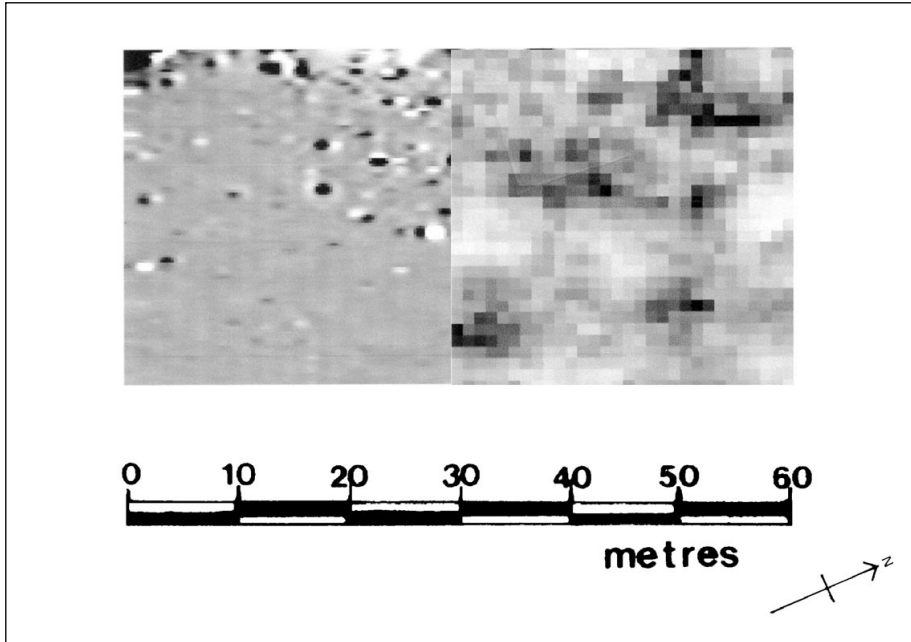
There are a large number of hillforts of known Iron Age date in the Cheshire and North Wales region as well as a high density further south into Shropshire. They are of varying shapes and sizes. They are also situated at various altitudes and in varying topographically advantageous locations. Their exact individual roles are largely unknown but are likely to have been diverse and complex. Beyond Moel y Gaer, on the Clwydian hills are the remains of six heavily defended and dominating hillforts including Foel Fenlli and Moel Arthur (Burnham 1995, 50–52). To the east of Burton Point lies Helsby Hill. The geology and situation of this site is similar to that at Burton Point, being on a promontory and overlooking an estuary. Its height and interior size, however, makes Helsby more akin to forts like Moel Hiraddug at the north end of the Clwydians rather than low single farmstead promontory forts like that at Burton Point. The only univallate fort of similar size and layout in the local region is Kelsborrow (Longley 1987, 108). This fort, however, is situated inland and shares no other similarities.

In spite of the number of hillforts in the area, Burton Point does manage to stand out as being unusual to the north-west. Its size, coastal situation and isolation on the Wirral makes the site unique. In fact, single farmstead coastal promontory forts of this type are more



III. II.8: a) Top. Gradiometry survey results (Image produced by Alex Turner, 2006) b) Bottom. Gradiometry survey detailing possible enclosure (Image by Alex Turner, 2006)

commonly found across the Irish Sea. Both Ireland and the Isle of Man are rich in this type of settlement, with Ireland believed to be home to some 250 (Raftery 1994, 48), like that at Drumanagh in Co Dublin for example, and Cronk ny Merriu in the Isle of Man. Close ny Chollagh, another Manx fort, however, comes closest to resembling Burton Point in all aspects. Here, excavations in the 1950's (Gelling 1957, 571–75/ 1958, 85–100) revealed the remains of four roundhouses of which two on the seaward side, were well preserved. It was thought, however, that only one hut was occupied at any one time. Other discoveries included the remains of a six-foot wall, which was built along the cliff edge, and a La Tene III brooch of Colchester type.



III. II.9: Gradiometry and resistivity survey results combined (Images by Alex Turner, 2006)

### *Economy, Society and Culture*

The traditional view of the north-west is one of an economic and technological backwater outside of the social and political developments of southern Britain (Cunliffe 1978, 59). The main reasons for this assumption are the alleged paucity of any archaeological evidence and the lack of tribal coinage in the region (Higham 1993, 29). Because the local population appear to have produced little in the way of material culture such as pottery or other durable goods, no social or economic value has been attributed to the north-west during this period. It was considered, therefore, that the region was occupied by egalitarian societies who were involved principally in agriculture (Dark 2000, 34). Communities in Britain's highland areas in the Iron Age were thought to differ greatly to those in the south-east. Settlements appear to be generally sparser and therefore it was thought that greater emphasis was put on pastoral activity (Cunliffe 1978, 57).

However, the egalitarian hypothesis is problematic. Conclusions based on models of the south-east, where a richer and more varied amount of Iron Age material evidence have been discovered are not necessarily universally applied. In addition, models like this only allow the durable material culture to represent the wealth of a population, which, Keith Matthews points out (2000–1, 32), is a peculiarly modern Western perspective. In Cheshire another fact is evidence for specialised activities, most notably the production of salt (Morgan and Morgan 2004, 137–8).

A socio-economic model of the Iron Age of North-West England put forward recently by Matthews (2000–1, 1–51) disputes the traditional egalitarian model, relying instead on an evaluation of the region on its own terms. According to Matthews, the region saw the



development of international trade as early as the late Bronze Age, an exchange system based on the export of salt and possibly other more perishable commodities. Matthews suggests that long-distance trade in the west began in the early Iron Age, operating and developing via an *Emporium* at Meols and through Liverpool Bay (Griffiths & Philpott 2003). The strongest evidence to support Matthews' model comes from a number of exotic finds of Iron Age date discovered on the coastline around Meols, particularly in the area of Dove Point. These finds include a small gold Celtic British Coin from the first century BC; two swan's neck pins; three Carthaginian silver coins from North Africa and two from the Coriosolites tribe, who are known to have inhabited what is now Brittany in France. In addition to these is a silver coin of Tigranes II of Armenia who ruled from 20 BC to 6 BC. Coins of the type found at Meols have also been discovered at a number of other coastal sites along the west of Britain. Matthews suggests therefore, that Meols, may be just one of a number of small trading ports stretching from Cornwall to Ayr.

Salt is known to have been produced in the areas around Middlewich and Nantwich in Cheshire and Droitwich in Shropshire where the rich deposits of natural brine form. Evidence for this comes in the form of 'Briquetage' or 'Very Coarse Pottery' (known as Cheshire and Droitwich VCP), discovered during excavations. VCP are the remains of salt containers. These containers were funnel-shaped in order to facilitate the evaporation of the water from the brine. Clay from the Middlewich and Nantwich area is known was used to produce Cheshire VCP and its distribution suggests that Cheshire salt was being traded to the Midlands, along the Welsh Marches and as far away as Anglesey and the Llyn Peninsula. VCP has also been discovered during excavations at Brook House Farm near Bruen Stapleford (Fairburn *et al.* 2002, 9–57) and Irby on the Wirral (Nevell 2003, 1–21), together with pottery of late Bronze Age date. Interestingly, excavations at salt producing areas within Cheshire have recovered a surprisingly little VCP in comparison to coastal sites. This implies that the finished salt was transported and distributed in the containers in which it was evaporated (Morgan and Morgan 2004, 139). There is evidence that salt production was taking place in the area on a large scale from as early as the late Bronze Age, and continued through the Iron Age and into the Romano-British period. An early type of Cheshire VCP was discovered in a Bronze Age context at Beeston Castle. Intriguingly, there has yet been no trace of salt production activity in Ireland (Raftery 1994, 126–7) and although no Very Coarse Pottery has been discovered there either, it remains possible that the finished product was being distributed to Ireland from the Cheshire area. Based on this evidence and in contrast to the egalitarian hypothesis, Matthews concludes that the Iron Age of the north-west was home to a developing economic elite who traded with foreign merchants at Meols. However, this long-distance trade, suggests Matthews, was secondary in importance to the export of salt. (Matthews 2000–1, 37).

Hillforts like Burton Point may have played an important role in this trade. In fact, the distribution of hillforts around the Dee and Mersey estuaries, in contrast to their almost total absence north of the Mersey might imply some kind of strategic network (Harding 2004, 46). The hillforts in and around the Dee and Mersey are mirrored on a smaller scale by the three known hillforts of Skelmore Heads, Castle Head and Warton Crag, around Morecombe Bay. All of these forts suggest communities controlling access to and from the Irish Sea routes, in the Dee-Mersey region it was the salt trade, while in the Morecombe

Bay area it may have been access to both arable resources and upland pastures (Harding 2004, 47). There is other evidence for cultural and trade links between Wales, the North-West and Ireland, the Isle of Man throughout this period. La Tene style weaponry and artefacts, which characterise the Iron Age are found in the area. A large number of these discoveries is known to have come from Ireland. Two sword fragments, a triskele plaque and a shield boss, all of La Tene style, have been discovered at Moel Hiraddug near Prestatyn. (Brown 2004, 79–82).

### **Conclusion**

Without excavation of the remaining ditch and rampart and the surviving internal area it is impossible to establish precisely when and for how long the site was in occupation. It is likely, however, taking into account the evidence for other prehistoric settlements in the area, that the fort was constructed sometime after 300 BC and probably consisted of a single farmstead similar to promontory forts found in Ireland and the Isle of Man. The sites location between Meols to the north and mid-Cheshire to the south suggests that the site may have played some role in the salt trade and the occupants could have been involved in a foreign exchange network.

From a heritage perspective, Burton Point has a great deal of educational and historical value as a promontory hillfort and as a port. The site has great potential for further research, not just from the archaeological, but also from the historical and historical geographer's perspective. Although more enclosed prehistoric settlements have been discovered recently in the area, Burton Point is unique in being the only known promontory fort of any kind to be discovered on the Wirral peninsula.

Further work on the site might also include a keyhole investigation of the enclosure detected during the geophysical survey in order to establish its date. Although the monument is no longer being eroded by the Dee since its diversion in the 18th century, it does however continue to deteriorate rapidly due to environmental elements and badger and rabbit activity. For these reasons more effort should be made to monopolise on this research.

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