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Iron Age Hillforts in their Landscape Contexts: a Fresh Look at the Field Evidence in the Northumberland Cheviots

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SUMMARY

Between 1998 and 2004, English Heritage carried out analytical field surveys of eleven Iron Age hillforts and their environs, as a key component of Northumberland National Park Authority's Discovering our hillfort heritage project. In 1997, independent archaeologist Tim Gates had carried out a systematic programme of aerial photography and reconnaissance of all forty-two hillforts within the bounds of the National Park, including all those investigated on the ground. Both these strands of research were intended to assist the conservation of the monuments and their presentation to visitors by the National Park Authority. All the hillforts examined on the ground had been investigated to some degree previously, but the new field surveys demonstrate that the analysis of ephemeral earthworks, which might be overlooked or dismissed as unimportant, can lead to fundamental advances in the understanding of individual sites. Rapid field observations of other hillforts, on both sides of the Border, confirm that some of the observations may have wider validity. Arguably the most important conclusions are that evidence for multiple phases of construction can often be detected through field survey, and that many sites underwent profound changes when they were re-occupied, apparently after a lengthy hiatus, in the late Iron Age or Roman Iron Age. In addition, both the field and aerial surveys have identified a wealth of previously unrecorded remains in the environs of the hillforts, which collectively allow a much improved appreciation of their landscape contexts.

INTRODUCTION

GEORGE JOBEY'S PUBLISHED ANALYSES of Iron Age hillforts and settlements of the Roman Iron Age collectively provided a benchmark for all subsequent studies of these types of monument in northern Northumberland (Jobey 1960; 1962a; 1964; 1965; 1966). (In parenthesis, it should immediately be stated that throughout this report, the term 'Roman Iron Age' is preferred to the conventional term 'Romano-British,' but the conventional term 'hillfort' is retained, notwithstanding the emerging consensus that the term is, in many respects, profoundly flawed.) It seemed for many years that Jobey's perceptive observations and large-scale plans, based on rapid surveys he undertook in the late 1950s and early 1960s, must mark the culmination of the long tradition of field survey in Northumberland stretching back to Henry MacLauchlan in the 1850s and '60s. It was not without justification that Jobey was called 'a one-man Royal Commission', for, taken as a whole, his corpus of work effectively counterbalanced the production of the equally important Roxburghshire inventory, begun by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical

Monuments of Scotland in the 1930s and eventually published in two volumes (RCAHMS 1956). Like Jobey's publications, this inventory was based on a prolonged campaign of field survey coupled with targeted excavations, of which the most influential was undoubtedly that at Hownam Rings (C. M. Piggott 1948). In Northumberland and Roxburghshire alike, these field surveys have seldom been surpassed, in part because they have seemed to offer such lean pickings for later field archaeologists, and they remain unlikely to be rivalled in terms of sheer breadth of coverage in the foreseeable future.

However, over the past fifty years there have certainly been significant advances in understanding on a number of other fronts. Above all, perhaps, the move towards 'post-processual' theoretical approaches has prompted fundamental re-evaluations of the nature of Iron Age monuments and society. In terms of fieldwork, surveys of individual sites, mostly in Northumberland National Park, have filled in some of the blanks in Jobey's corpus of published plans (for example: Topping 1989–90; 1993; 1999; Blood 1995; Waddington, Blood and Crow 1998). Several small-scale excavations have allowed aspects of his models to be fleshed out and have led points of detail to be called into question (Smith 1988–89; Waddington et al 1998; Topping 2004; Frodsham and Waddington 2004). There has also been a broadening of focus away from the level of individual monuments, notably through the multi-period landscape survey carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) in the mid 1980s (Topping forthcoming; see also Topping 1989). Since 1977, virtually continuous aerial reconnaissance and survey by Tim Gates, and analyses based thereon, have made an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the wider landscape (aspects of which are reported in Gates 1983; 2000; 2004).

In 1998, Northumberland National Park Authority initiated a six-year project called *Discovering Our Hillfort Heritage*, funded primarily by the European Union through the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Tweed Forum, English Heritage and the National Park Authority (Frodsham 2000). English Heritage's Archaeological Survey and Investigation Team took responsibility for delivering a major component of the project: a series of eleven detailed analytical field surveys of hillforts. These were, in order of date investigated, on Yeavinger Bell, West Hill (Kirknewton), Fawcett Shank, Castle Hill (Alnham), Great Hetha, Glead's Cleugh, Mid Hill, St Gregory's Hill, Ring Chesters, Staw Hill and Middleton Dean. Each field survey was coupled with analysis of all the aerial photography, historic cartography and earlier research pertaining to each site (fig. 1). The selection of this sample was dictated primarily by specific conservation requirements and in most cases by the National Park Authority's need to reach management agreements with individual landowners and to interpret the sites for visitors. Detailed surveys were also undertaken of an enigmatic enclosure with some hillfort-like characteristics, and presumed to be of later prehistoric origin, at Hethpool Bell, of an enclosed settlement at South Heddon, which would normally be assigned to the Roman Iron Age, and of a trio of so-called 'scooped enclosures' near the hillfort on Ring Chesters, also presumably of broadly Roman Iron Age date. A few years earlier, members of the same English Heritage team had carried out an analytical survey of the hillfort on Humbleton Hill, to investigate (and ultimately refute) a suggestion that the outer enclosure there might be of Neolithic origin. The detailed field surveys were followed in 2005 to 2006 by a phase of rapid field examinations of key sites on both sides of the Border. In April and May 1997, as another major component of the *Discovering our hillfort heritage* project, Tim Gates had taken new colour and black and white oblique aerial photographs of all the hillforts within the bounds of the National Park,

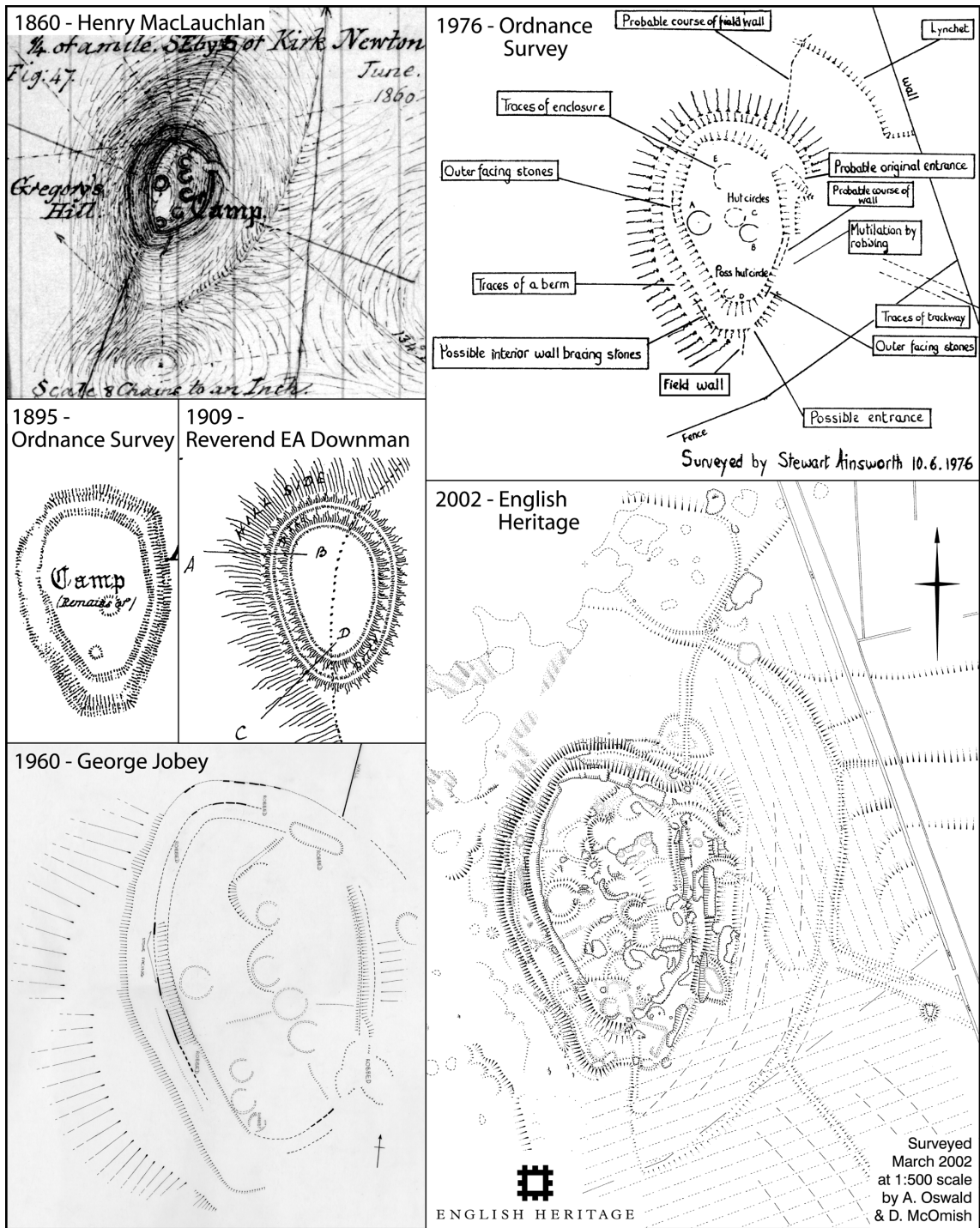


Fig. 1 St Gregory's Hill was subjected to no fewer than five large-scale analytical surveys in the 150 years prior to English Heritage's investigation in 2002. 1860 — Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle; 1895 — reproduced from the 1895 Ordnance Survey map, Northumberland XIX. 1-2; 1909 — extract from British Library Add. MS. 9320, f. 53; 1960 — courtesy of Liz Gray and Ian Jobey; 1976 — © NMR; 2002 — © English Heritage.

and the results of these two complementary strands of research were shared continuously to mutual benefit. The Discovering our hillfort heritage project also acted as an umbrella for small-scale excavations by the University of Durham and the Northumberland Archaeological Group, whose findings are not dealt with here (for summaries, see Topping 2004; Frodsham and Waddington 2004).

The first hillfort targeted for re-examination through aerial and field survey was that on Yeavinger Bell, frequently referred to as 'the only true hillfort in Northumberland' and a possible candidate for the 'tribal capital' of the Votadini. The results of this work have already been discussed in some detail (Oswald and Pearson 2005) and, given the anomalous nature of the Yeavinger hillfort, it seems appropriate to deal primarily here with the other, much smaller, hilltop enclosures that have conventionally been classified as hillforts. Full reports on the individual sites have already been produced and are available through English Heritage's public archive, the National Monuments Record (see also Oswald 2004).

A synthesis has also been published for a non-academic readership, as well as a paper that draws heavily on specific observations and ideas presented in the original English Heritage reports (Oswald, Ainsworth and Pearson 2006; Frodsham, Hedley and Young 2007). The present article offers an opportunity to present a broader synthesis of the fresh data and measure it against the benchmark offered by George Jobey's observations and theories.

THE SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The primary aim in carrying out the new field surveys was identical to that of George Jobey: to improve understanding through production of metrically accurate plans, yet plans in which the subjective interpretations of an experienced archaeological surveyor are deeply embedded, rather than plans that are objective but analytically sterile. For this reason, the fundamental principles of observation and inference, handed down essentially intact from the time of MacLauchlan or even earlier, also remained unchanged. However, expectations have changed somewhat and dramatic advances in surveying technology since the 1960s — above all the recent development of the differential Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite mapping equipment that was used to some degree in all the English Heritage investigations — have undoubtedly permitted a significant change in approach (fig. 2; see also Ainsworth and Thomason 2003, 19–20). Jobey's surveys were restricted to the immediate environs of the monuments themselves not only by the parameters of his research agenda and the time available to him, but also by the limitations of his surveying equipment (a plane table), this in turn limited by the shoestring budget on which he operated. Nearly fifty years on, it is possible to capture a high level of detail over areas of unprecedented size, without suffering unacceptable loss of time or metrical accuracy as a consequence. The English Heritage surveys, which were carried out at Level 3 standard (as defined in Ainsworth, Bowden and McOmish 2007), recorded individual stones (where appropriate), with sub-centimetre accuracy, while generating, in the same operation, plans of the hillforts at scales of 1:1,000 or 1:500 and plans of as much of the surrounding landscape as was deemed necessary to understand the context of the hillfort (in some cases up to 1km²), for reproduction at an appropriate scale (usually the Ordnance Survey's basic mapping scale of 1:2,500). The GPS equipment also generates three-dimensional data that can be used to model both natural topography and artificial earthworks. This is essentially a by-product of the analytical survey, but can be used to good effect to demonstrate, for example, how micro-topography influences the precise

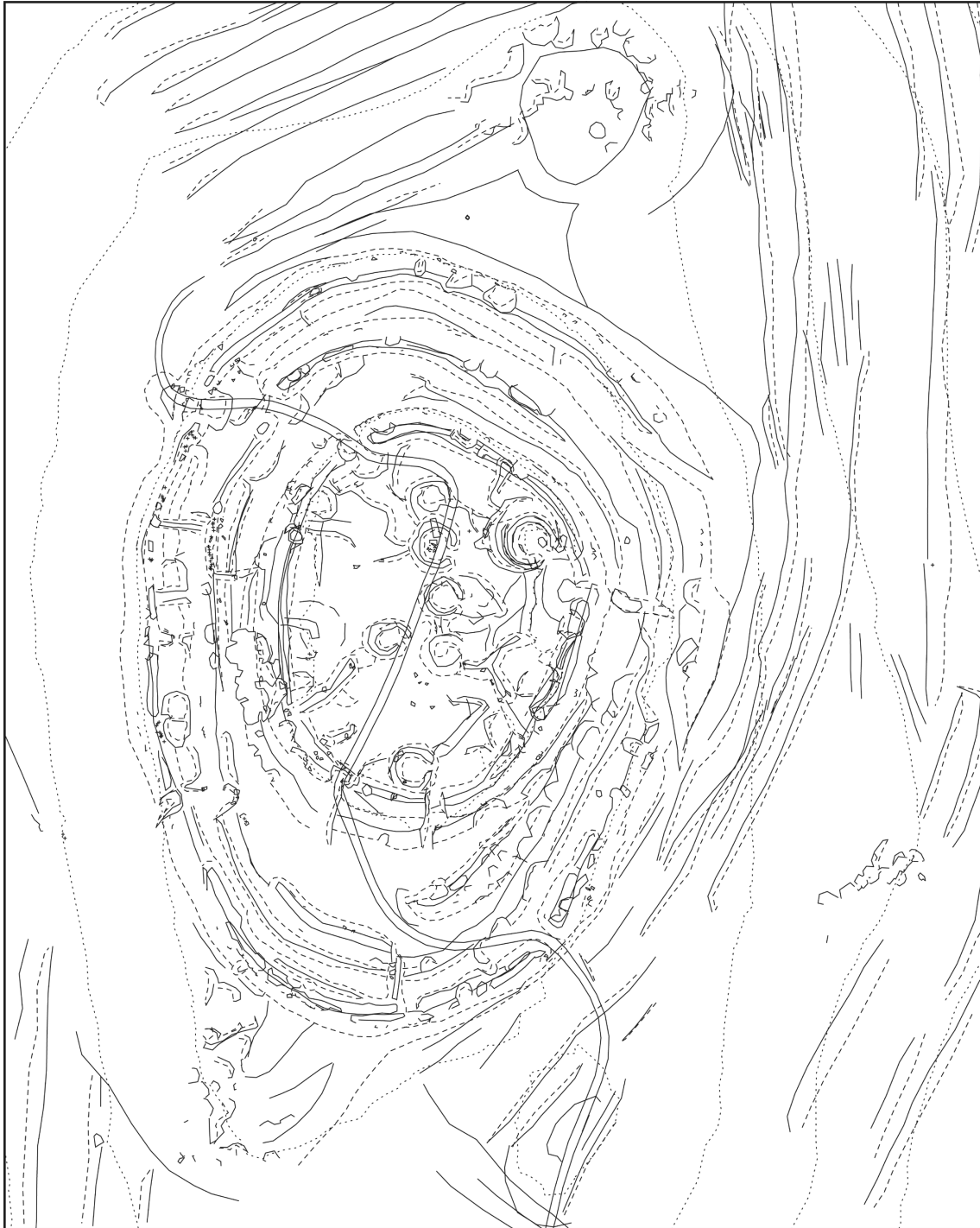


Fig. 2. Extract from the AutoCAD© plot derived from English Heritage's survey of Ring Chesters using survey-grade GPS, showing points and lines used to record different types of feature (original in colour and with named layers). Note that the features themselves were first identified through old-fashioned visual examination of the ground surface. Compare this with fig. 13.

form of earthworks (see Oswald and Pearson 2005, figs. 36 and 37). It also offers the potential to bring to wider attention remote sites that may be physically difficult to access. Information pertinent to the management of the monuments, including areas of active and past burrowing, gorse and bracken encroachment, modern disturbance and footpaths, was also routinely recorded. Thus, each survey produced a digital plan containing numerous different layers of information. Despite the exemplary quality of Tim Gates' new aerial photographs, it was found (not for the first time) that slight earthworks and stratigraphic relationships were almost always more easily decipherable on the ground (figs. 3, 4 and 5). As a result, perhaps the most important contributions of the new photography in research terms were the revelation of parch-marked features within settlements and relevant earthworks at considerable distances from them. Examination of historic aerial photography, almost all at smaller scales than the images captured by Tim Gates, generally contributed its most useful information to the understanding of post-Second World War land management. The exception to this rule was the investigation of the hillfort on Fawcett Shank, where earthworks in the environs of the monument, clearly visible on post-war vertical photography (RAF 1948), have been all but destroyed by subsequent afforestation. In this instance, study of the aerial photographs was the only way to recover information about the archaeological landscape within which the hillfort once stood. In other cases, the detailed field surveys were sufficiently extensive to provide a level of analysis intermediate between the site-specific work of Jobey (and most subsequent surveyors and excavators) and the broad-brush recording practised by the RCHME and Tim Gates (for example, Gates 2000). The usefulness of this approach to the study of an individual monument had already been demonstrated by the Northumberland Archaeology Group's investigation of the hillfort on Wether Hill, overlooking the Brearnish Valley, although the field survey of the landscape context of that monument evolved in parallel with the excavations (McOmish 1999; Topping 2004).

CONSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCES

There are very few hillforts in the region where the constructional sequence has been dated accurately, either on artefactual evidence or by scientific dating techniques. Arguably the most important conclusions to arise from the English Heritage investigations concern the identification of relative constructional sequences from the earthwork remains. Margaret Piggott's 1948 excavations at Hownam Rings suggested that, there, successive palisaded enclosures were replaced in the 2nd century B.C. by a single stone-built circuit, which was in turn replaced by a larger multivallate hillfort in the late 1st century B.C. (C. M. Piggott 1948). This model — the so-called 'Hownam sequence' or 'Hownam succession' — dominated thinking about hillfort defences at the time of Jobey's research (and for many years after) and he pointed to surface evidence for a similar sequence at various other sites, though, significantly, without ever whole-heartedly embracing the theory.

In the late 1970s, excavations at Broxmouth and Dryburn Bridge in south-eastern Scotland began to prompt a re-evaluation of the Hownam sequence. At these sites, the development of the defences was apparently not such a straightforward sequence: contraction occurred, as well as expansion, and earthen defences were sometimes replaced in timber (Hill 1982; Dunwell 2007). Strat Halliday of the RCAHMS has argued (in lectures) that Piggott's interpretation of the evidence at Hownam Rings was coloured by her determination to prove the validity in northern England of Christopher Hawkes' famous 'Iron Age A-B-C' sequence, and

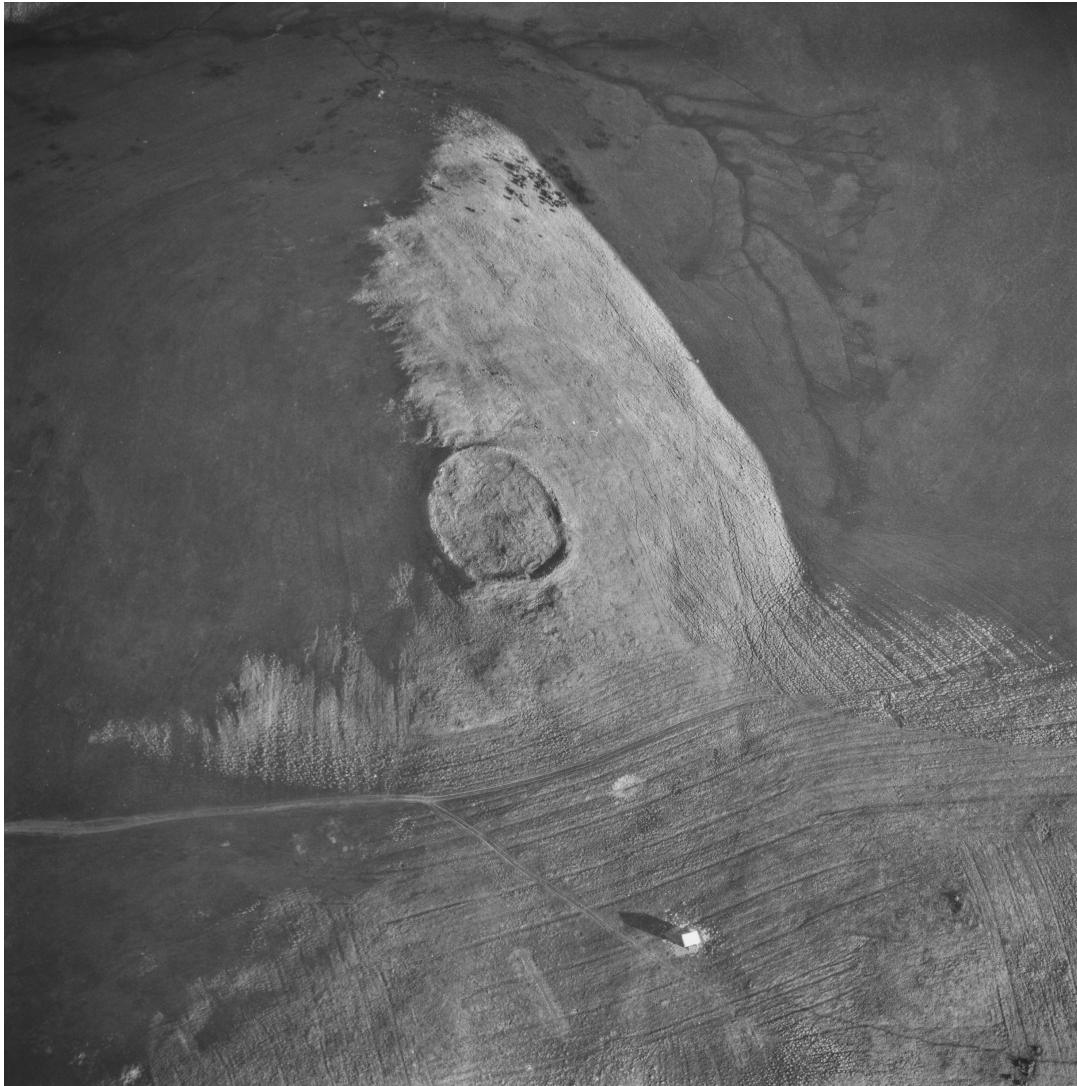


Fig. 3 Mid Hill and its environs; note the swathes of broad ridge and furrow, presumably of medieval origin, overlain and subdivided by narrower low rigs that are presumably of post-medieval date. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

that more careful and prolonged analysis of the earthwork evidence points to a different constructional sequence from that which she proposed. The actual siting of her trenches, in view of the reappraisal of the earthworks, seems to have been inappropriate to answer the questions posed about the development of the defences. Today, we have almost arrived at the point where the Hownam sequence has been entirely cast aside and a new paradigm has become established, based on a total denial of incremental growth and a dismissal of the

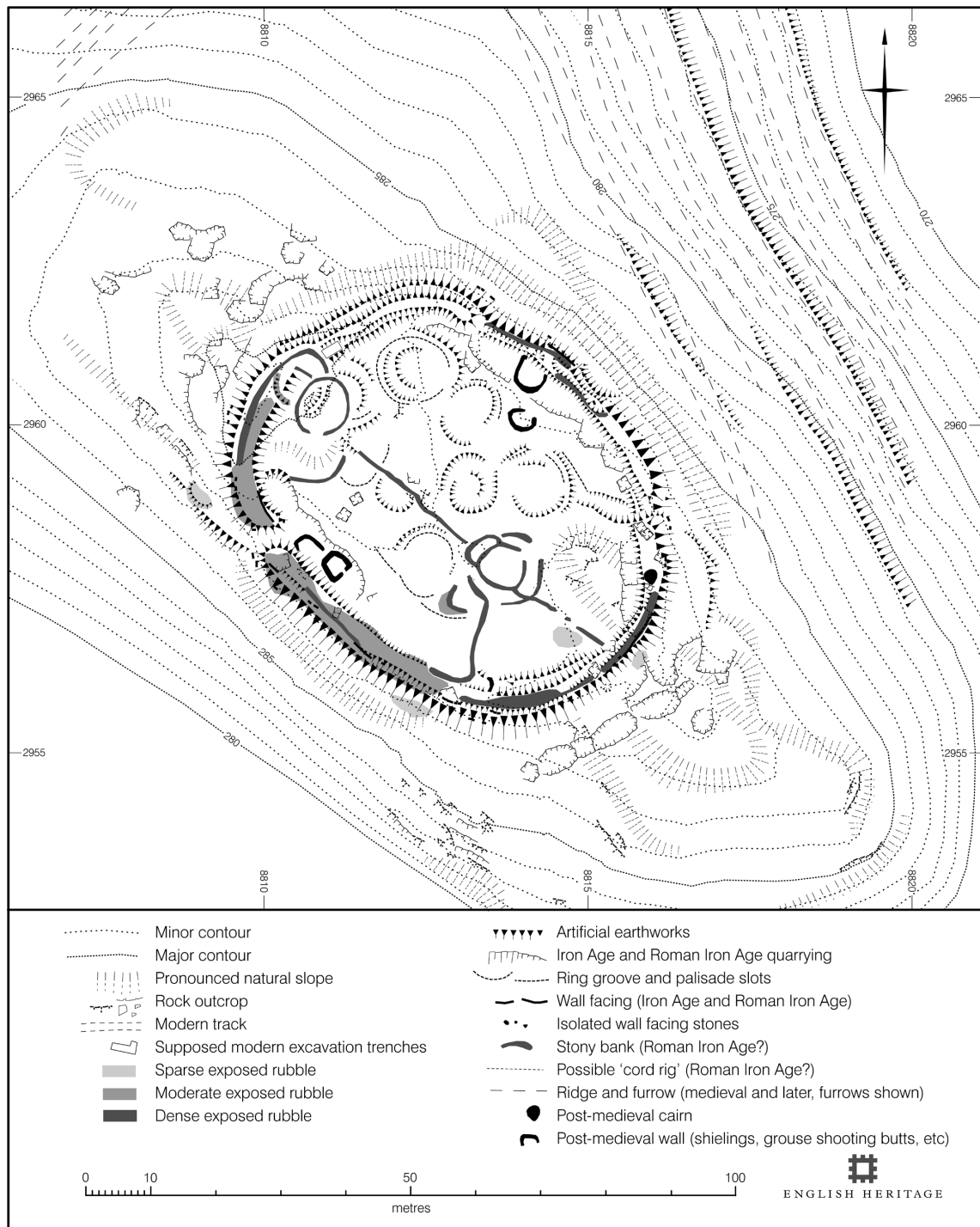


Fig. 4 English Heritage's earthwork plan of Mid Hill, drawn up from a survey-grade GPS plot essentially similar to fig. 2. The key applies to all the large-scale analytical earthwork surveys in this article. © English Heritage.

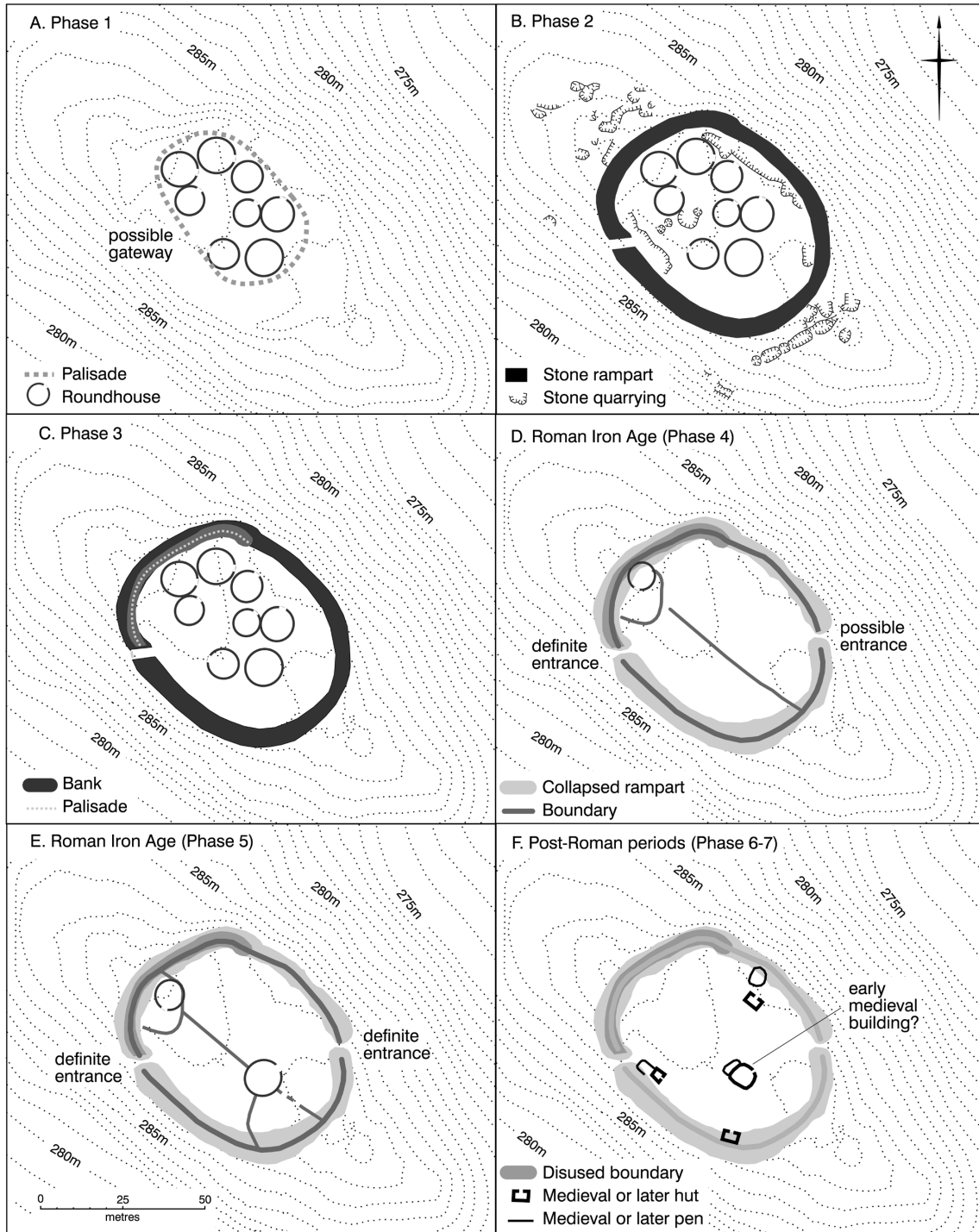


Fig. 5 Schematic conjectural phase plan of Mid Hill, based on stratigraphic relationships observed on the surface.

potential chronological significance of building materials. Yet, as George Jobey observed in one of his Rhind lectures delivered in April 1982 (manuscript held by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries), we should take care not 'to throw the baby out with the bath water', for many hillforts in the Cheviots still conform more closely to the Hownam sequence than they deviate from it. At Wether Hill, for example, which is now amongst the best understood hillforts in the region, field survey and excavation confirms the transition from an unenclosed settlement to a palisaded enclosure to an earthen rampart enclosing a larger area, while radiocarbon determinations from the excavations, if taken at face value, would seem to indicate that the earthen rampart (the outer) was supplemented by a stone one (the inner) perhaps a century later (Topping and McOmish 2000, 7–8).

The new evidence provided by the English Heritage investigations points to many and varied modifications of hillfort defences, but, again, some of the fundamental tenets of the Hownam sequence appear to hold good: it remains the case that it is not possible, on the basis of field survey, to point to a single instance where a free-standing timber palisade of classic form stratigraphically post-dates a stone or earthen rampart. In a few cases, such as the region's highest hillfort, at 457 m on the summit of Craik Moor in Roxburghshire, it can be argued that the stone rampart and one or more free-standing timber palisades may well have been in contemporary use, but in most cases the palisades are definitely earlier. Furthermore, where more than one constructional phase is evident, stone walls are often the final incarnation of the defences. These sequences are usually only detectable through field survey where circuits are not precisely concentric, in other words, where a stratigraphic relationship is visible on the surface. Therefore, it must be assumed that more constructional phases exist, but are not identifiable through field survey; this point represents an important caveat to the following discussion. On West Hill, for example, Jobey identified an earthwork which he interpreted as a palisade trench; this is actually eccentric to the stone-built circuit of the hillfort and overlain by it, a point not made explicit by his published plan (Jobey 1964, fig. 8; see figs. 19 and 20). However, there is some doubt over whether his interpretation of the feature as a palisade trench is correct: it could reasonably be interpreted as a proper ditch, and there is some evidence for an equally degraded internal bank. At Mid Hill, overlooking a tributary of the College Valley, the stone-built circuit also appears to post-date a probable palisaded enclosure of approximately half the area, which has not previously been recognised and appears to have enclosed a tight cluster of ring-groove house sites (see figs. 4 and 5). This phase of the settlement is comparable in form to the palisaded sites at Ell's Knowe and Steer Rigg, though the attribution of the former to around the 6th or 7th centuries B.C. is insecure on the published evidence (Burgess 1979). Too little of the possible palisade at Mid Hill can be traced to confirm whether its entrance faced in the same direction as the later gateway, as at Wether Hill, but this seems likely, perhaps implying some degree of continuity between these constructional episodes. Indeed, there is no sign that the extent of the cluster of ring-groove houses expanded in accordance with the expansion of the defences, hinting that they might have remained in continuous use while the extent and building material of the defences changed. This is demonstrably not the case at Wether Hill, where a number of ring-groove houses overlie the palisades, testifying to expansion of the settlement accompanying the expansion of the defences (Topping 2004). In summary, the transition from timber palisade to ramparts in earth or stone envisaged by the Hownam sequence may well remain valid, though whether this transition occurred at a single well-defined chronological horizon throughout the region remains open to question, as Jobey was always careful to stress.

On the other hand, the subsequent change envisaged by the Hownam sequence, from univallate stone to multivallate earthen ramparts enclosing a larger area, no longer seems tenable and indeed in many cases the opposite seems to have happened. The availability of raw materials may have been an important factor in explaining local variation; for example, stone is usually more plentiful in the main massif of the Cheviots than it is on the foothills and on the Fell Sandstone hills. Of the sample under discussion, many of the latest incarnations of hillfort defences are stone-built walls, often enclosing small, near-circular areas and often relatively well-preserved by the virtue of the fact that they come late within the sequence on that particular site. At Ring Chesters, for example, overlooking the valley of the Elsdon Burn, when the bivallate earthen defences were supplemented by a smaller, circular, stone-built circuit, a stretch of the inner of the earlier circuits seems to have been deliberately razed, suggesting that it went out of use, at least as a maintained defensive perimeter, when the new rampart was built (see figs. 13 and 14). Opposed entrances through the earthen defences, staggered in both cases, were replaced by a single gateway through the stone circuit, implying a major change in access, but it might be inferred from a slight deflection in the line of the inner stone-built wall that a timber roundhouse in the interior continued to be used. A contraction to a stone-built, or at least stone-faced, circuit is perhaps also the most plausible interpretation of the complex sequences at Lordenshaws, Wether Hill and Harehaugh (Topping 1993; 2004; Waddington et al 1998). The hillfort on Great Hetha has previously been interpreted as a single phase monument, with the space between the rampart circuits created by their divergent lines serving as a corral for livestock (Jobey 1965, 42–3; see figs. 8 and 9). On the evidence of the recent survey, it can be re-interpreted as a multi-phase monument, with stone-built ramparts in its two latest phases, and the latest phase of all is again the smallest and closest to a circle. On the other hand, the plan of the badly mutilated hillfort on St Gregory's Hill, in the shadow of Yeavinger Bell, offers circumstantial evidence that the inner of the two stone-built circuits was squeezed into the space available within the outer and that the two continued in contemporary use for some time thereafter. There is clear evidence, both in plan and from the stratigraphic relationship of the inner wall to the outer, that the inner stone rampart on Humbleton Hill was a later addition, leaving the adjacent stretch of the outer wall as something akin to a hornwork (see figs. 22 and 23).

Some hillforts retained earthen ramparts throughout their use, though it is difficult without excavation to distinguish dump ramparts from timber-faced box ramparts, a distinction which may or may not prove to be significant. At Glead's Cleugh, near Akeld, the deliberate erasure of the earthen rampart (apart from a small fragment), and its subsequent replacement further out along the spur, was followed by the encroachment of ring-groove houses onto the line of the levelled rampart (figs. 6 and 7). The development of the hillfort on Castle Hill, Alnham, is still more complex (see figs. 15 and 16). Only at Mid Hill is there clear evidence for a stone-built or stone-faced rampart being superseded by what might be either an earthen dump rampart or a box rampart. Even then, this is restricted to an enlargement of the rampart on the side facing the plateau, the natural approach to the hillfort, and may have been carried out as late as the Roman Iron Age. The recognition of remodelling of the defences, apparently dating to the late Iron Age or Roman Iron Age, has now been widely recognized elsewhere, with important consequences for the understanding of the development of hillforts, as discussed further below.

As touched upon above, an important strand in Jobey's thinking, partly inherited from earlier fieldworkers, was the interpretation of spaces between ramparts as corrals for penning

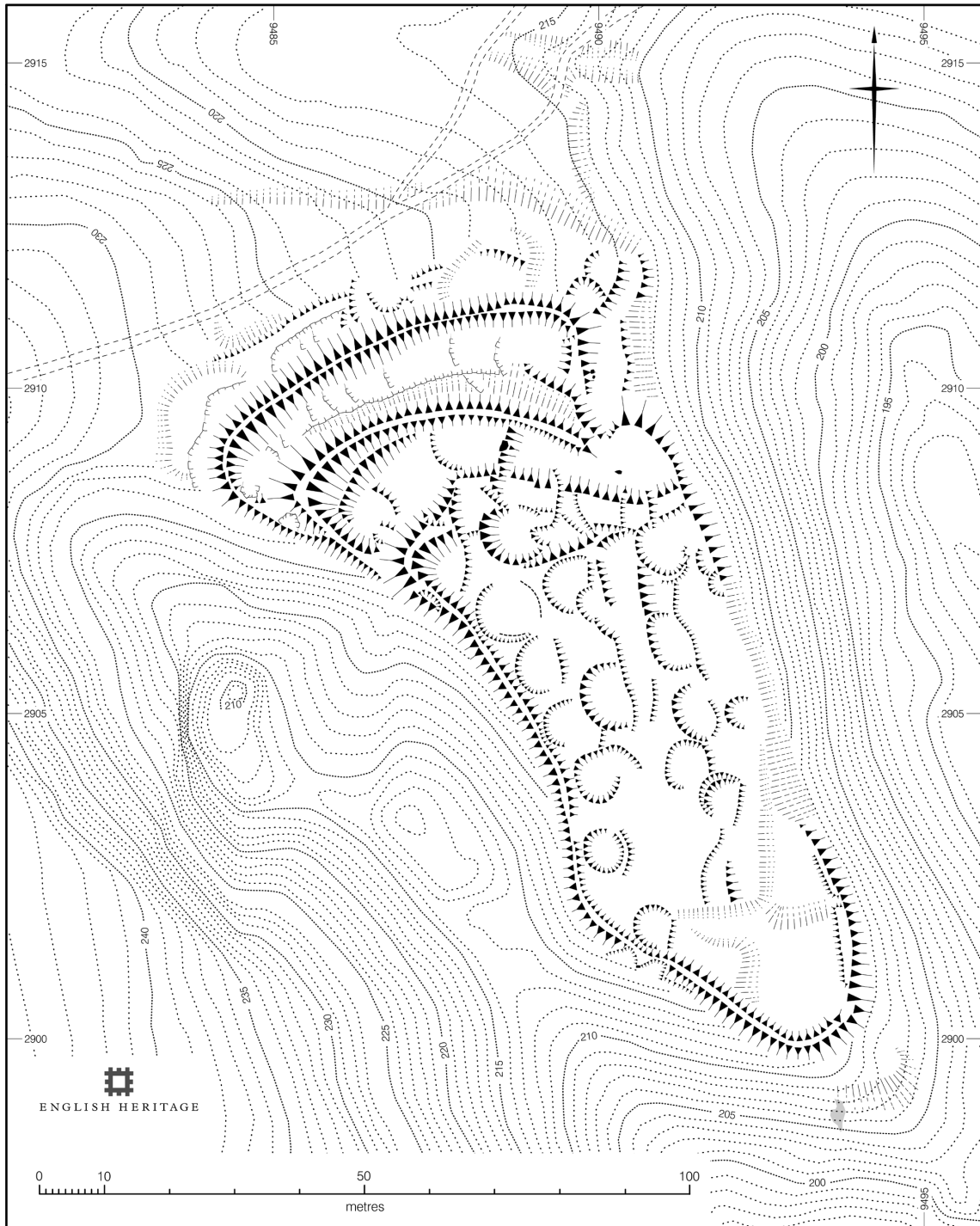


Fig. 6 The hillfort on Gleads Cleugh; survey-grade GPS allowed rapid ground modelling of its remarkable natural setting. © English Heritage.

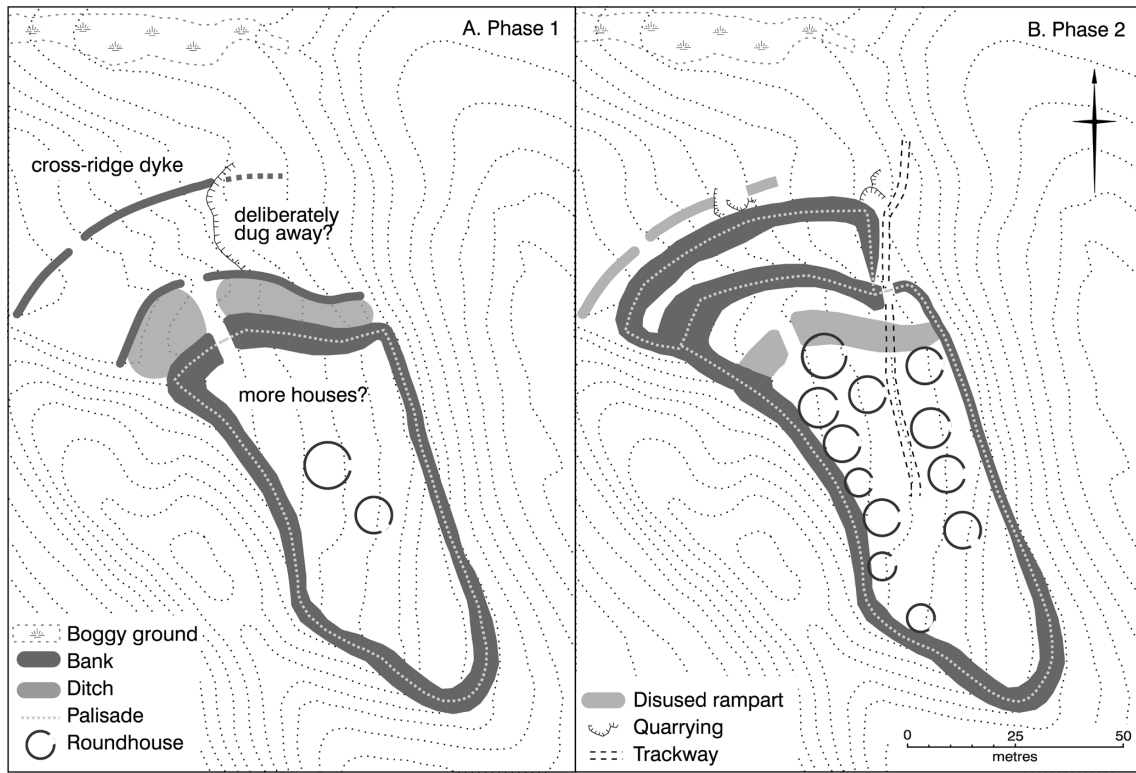


Fig. 7 The eventual multivallate form of the hillfort on Glead's Cleugh appears to be the product of two or more developmental stages.

cattle. This interpretation was bound up with Stuart Piggott's engaging picture of 'footloose Celtic cowboys' and the concept that Irish epic literature of the late first millennium AD could serve as a straightforward model for the interpretation of the Iron Age (Piggott 1958, 25; Jackson 1964). Most of the 'spaces' interpreted as livestock corrals seem to be products of successive constructional phases and are therefore, in a sense, illusory. Great Hetha has already been mentioned in this context (figs. 8 and 9). Similarly, at Yeavinger Bell, detailed examination of the so-called 'annexes' at the east and west ends of the hill, which Jobey also interpreted as livestock corrals, has shown them to be fossilized remnants of an earlier and larger circuit (Oswald and Pearson 2005, 113). There is still a valid argument in some cases for the identification of corrals, characterized by an outer enclosure which is widely separated from the inner circuit and which shows a markedly different constructional technique, but, as discussed below, there is now a strong case for attributing almost all the bona fide corrals to the late Iron Age or Roman Iron Age. One exception may be the enclosure, whose form has been clarified by Tim Gates' recent aerial survey, which surrounds both the palisaded sites investigated by Jobey at High Knowes Alnham (see fig. 12). While Jobey's excavations suggest that the palisaded sites may belong to an earlier chronological horizon than most other

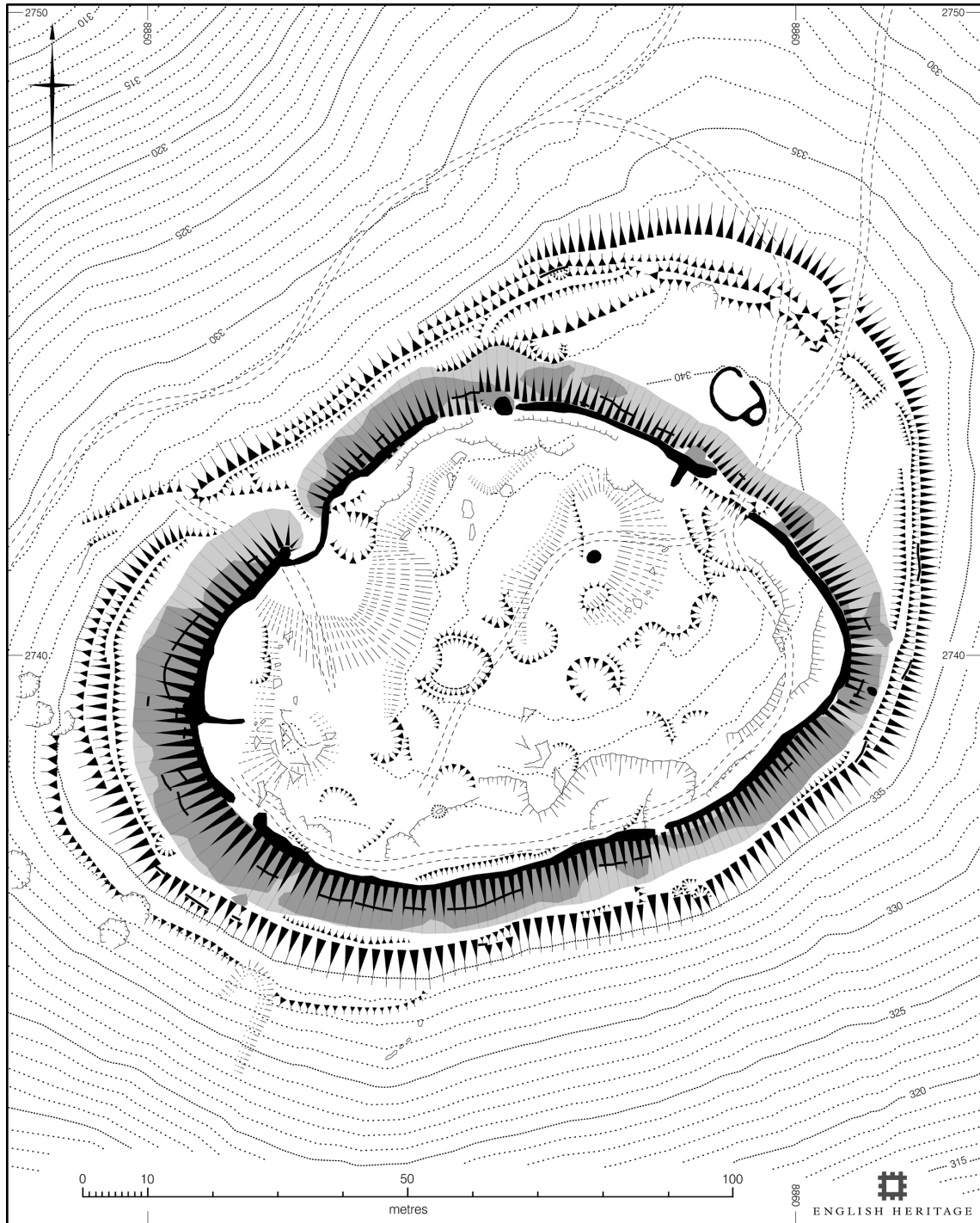


Fig. 8 The hillfort on Great Hetha. Detailed ground modelling of the hilltop using survey-grade GPS allowed the creation of a 3-dimensional representation, potentially facilitating wider access to this remote site. © English Heritage.

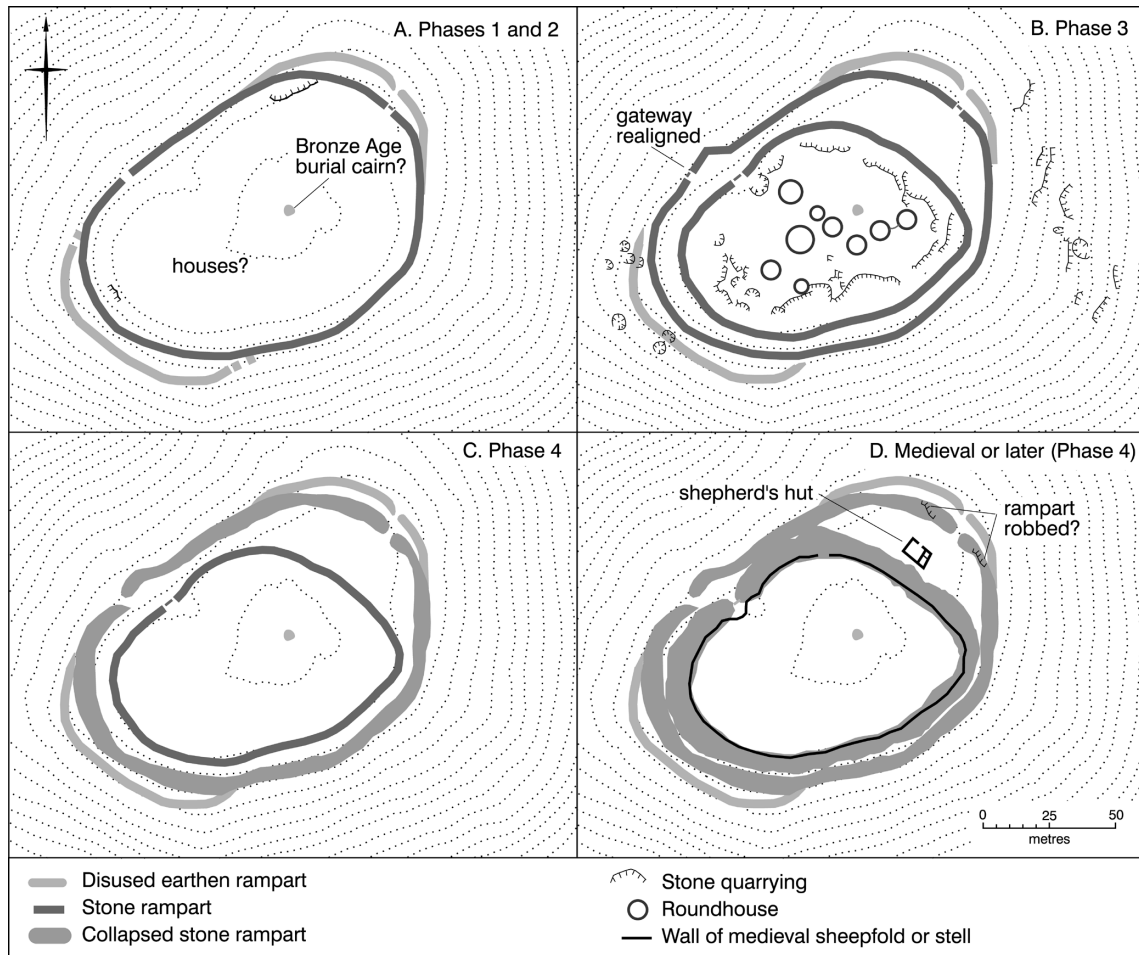


Fig. 9 The hillfort on Great Hetha. Note that the space between the inner and outer circuits, previously interpreted as a corral for livestock, is in effect illusory, a product of the hillfort's contraction over time.

hillforts, Gates (pers. comm.) regards the surrounding enclosure as being potentially of more recent date, possibly even a medieval deer park.

In summary, the new surveys illustrate the potential for the recognition of multiple phases of construction from the earthwork evidence alone. Even though it is a virtual certainty that more episodes of construction and modification are present than the surface traces reveal, painstaking analytical earthwork survey can take us a good deal further towards an understanding of the complex developmental sequences revealed by excavation than has generally been supposed.

THE DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES OF HILLFORTS

Since the declaration in 1986 that the hillfort was 'the ultimate defensive weapon of European prehistory' (Avery 1986, 216), there has been a swing, as post-processual theoretical approaches have gained in strength, towards interpreting hillfort ramparts as to some degree architectural displays, symbolic of the wealth, power or social isolation of the community (Cunliffe 1984, 30; Bowden and McOmish 1987; 1989; Hill 1995, 53). The new surveys in Northumberland National Park have repeatedly thrown up evidence which would support a similar re-appraisal of the design of hillforts in the Cheviots. In terms of siting, there are several hillforts, such as those at Glead's Cleugh and nearby Monday Cleugh, which occupy landforms directly overlooked by higher ground literally within a stone's throw, and certainly well within the most conservative estimates of the deadly range of a slingshot (fig. 10). The hillfort on St Gregory's Hill makes good defensive use of steep natural scarps on two sides, but its original entrance (blocked and replaced in the late Iron Age or Roman Iron Age) faced towards nearby hillocks that stand several metres higher than the ground occupied by the hillfort. Such examples, which make little sense defensively, at least from a modern point of view, could be taken to show that defence was not always the primary consideration and therefore that local Iron Age society was not as permeated by internecine warfare as has often been suggested.

A critical examination of the form of certain hillfort defences may lead to the same conclusion. Some, like the broad stone-built walls of the hillforts on Brough Law, which stand even today to a maximum height of more than a metre, were clearly defensible. A close examination of the quality of the drystone walling, particularly where exposed by Tate's excavations in the 19th century, with good joint work and thin slivers of stone used to pack out the cracks, cannot fail to conjure an image of impregnability. Elsewhere, the defences were not true walls, but terraces with vertical outer faces, perhaps with raised parapets along their front edges. These terrace-like ramparts seem to have been built on sloping ground, initially as walls standing perhaps 2 m high, with the space behind the wall filled in with smaller material dug from quarries immediately upslope, thus reducing the labour involved (the so-called 'downward method' of construction). This design must have placed great pressure on what was effectively a façade and apparently invariably led to its collapse, the material spilling downslope to create the broad, but low, spreads of rubble we see today (fig. 11). Nevertheless, in their original form, 2 m-high façades would potentially have been defensible. The sheer size of the stones used, particularly around the gateways, is impressive, for it must be remembered that these were quarried, shaped and transported to their final locations (though usually from outcrops nearby, and often within the perimeter, as in the case of Brough Law). At Glead's Cleugh, and Mid Hill, amongst others, the gateways were sited adjacent to steep natural scarps, constricting the approach in a way that would have prevented a massed attack. More often, however, the entrance faced directly onto the most obvious natural approach, either a plateau or the gentlest slope.

In other cases, it is more difficult to imagine how the so-called defences could have been actively defended in practice. For example, while closely-spaced double palisades such as that at High Knowes (fig. 12) may have allowed the creation of a raised platform between the two lines — effectively an empty box rampart — single lines of palisade can only have acted as solid barriers which would have given defenders no real advantage over attackers on the outside. The same applies to hedges. The low banks that form the first, bivallate phase of the



Fig. 10 The hillfort on Glead's Cleugh in its wider context; note the Bronze Age cairnfield at the top of the picture, which occupies a plateau more than 10m higher than the interior of the hillfort. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

defences at Ring Chesters are difficult to interpret as utilitarian barriers at all unless they were surmounted by some form of superstructure, such as hedges or palisades (see figs. 13 and 14). Yet if a single line of palisade was difficult to defend actively, a widely spaced double line can only have created a no-man's land between those within and those without, ensuring mutual ignorance of the other's actions. Though, as is often pointed out, palisades or hedges could have been effective against predators such as wolves, modern data suggests that even in



Fig. 11 The hillfort on Great Hetha in its wider context; note the massive volume of rubble, presumably all quarried from outcrops within the ramparts. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

remote areas, wolf attacks are extremely rare, (rabies being the usual cause), and that healthy wolves shun humans where sufficient other prey and wilderness habitat are available (Linnell 2002). The rare exceptions prove the rule. In Uttar Pradesh, between October 1996 and April 1997, non-rabid wolves were blamed for attacking as many as seventy-four children playing alone or relieving themselves on the outskirts of villages. Subsequent analysis concluded that (apart from the Indian government's provision of compensation for animal attacks), the high population density in the region, which had forced the wolves to become habituated to



Fig. 12 The palisaded circuits of High Knowes 'A' parallel each other so precisely that it seems likely that they formed an 'empty' box rampart. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

humans, and the 3:2 ratio of humans to livestock were the most important contributory factors. In the Cheviots, such circumstances are hard to envisage at any stage in the region's history.

In terms of the plan of the circuits, true contour hillforts whose irregular plans are direct reflections of the landforms they occupy, typified by The Kettles overlooking Wooler Common, are in the minority. Many forts, and particularly those with stone-built ramparts, appear to be circular, though not in a modern, precisely geometrical sense, but rather in the way that

stone circles were designed to appear circular to those who encountered them on the ground (Barnatt and Moir 1984, 204). There is often a pronounced flattening of the curve on either side of the gateway, a characteristic that can be interpreted, depending on one's stance, as a practical device to increase the structural strength of the terminals of the wall, as a means of allowing additional defenders to overlook the approach, or as a way of increasing the visual impressiveness of the façade, or perhaps all of these. In terms of their Iron Age function, it has long been accepted, if only implicitly, that the circular plan is a natural defensive device. This is a questionable assumption, for though it is obviously possible to point to examples of circular defensive structures throughout history, it is equally possible to point to circular structures with very different functions. For instance, the circular perimeters of the hillforts were well-suited to their re-use as stells, the traditional circular sheepfolds of the medieval and post-medieval periods in the Borders, a modification that occurred at Fawcett Shank (see fig. 25), Sinkside Hill and elsewhere. The assumption that circularity was a defensive characteristic is also rather undermined by the existence of square and rectangular enclosures which may be broadly of late Iron Age date, such as the multivallate hillforts at Manside Cross, Ewesley Fell, or some of the numerous enclosures formed either by a single bank and ditch, or a single stone wall, such as the final phase of West Brandon, County Durham and East Brunton (Jobey 1962b; Tyne & Wear Museums report in preparation). Jobey dated the stone-built phases of these enclosures, most of which have been identified through aerial survey, to the 2nd century A.D. or later, based on the discovery of Roman pottery of that date in lower levels, whilst keeping open the possibility of an earlier, pre-Roman, origin for underlying timber-built phases where these were present (Jobey 1960; 1970). On South Heddon Moor, one example surviving in earthwork form was provisionally interpreted by Jobey as a medieval moated site, largely on the evidence of a series of medieval longhouses within it. However, a new analytical survey by English Heritage shows that the perimeter is overlain by field boundaries associated with a settlement of typical late Iron Age or Roman Iron Age form, pointing to an earlier, perhaps Iron Age, date for the square enclosure. In the absence of any compelling evidence for a sudden development in military technology, there seems little to explain the striking difference in the plan forms of these enclosures except the vagaries of fashion.

Ground modelling demonstrates that even where hillforts do occupy the highest ground, their ramparts do not always follow either the contours or the steepest slopes as might be expected if they were intended to make the best use of the topography militarily. Instead, there is a tendency for the circuits to tilt, as it were, across the contours, which invariably has the effect of making the defences more visible from a specific direction. This orientation is usually towards a low-lying area favourable for settlement or agriculture, or towards a pass or plateau that might be interpreted as an important through-route or as the easiest approach to the hillfort itself. The pattern is most striking where the tilt also has the effect of leaving one sector of the perimeter more vulnerable than it would be otherwise. At Ring Chesters, for example, the defences of both constructional episodes appear formidable when seen from the lower ground and the pass to the north-west, not only because they enhance the steep natural slope on that side but also because the circuits lie lower down the contours. Yet on the south, where the ground is relatively level and the perimeter was consequently more vulnerable, there is no evidence that the rampart was stronger than on the north-west; on the contrary, this was the weakest section in both constructional phases (figs. 13 and 14). On nearby Mid Hill, the design of the stone-built rampart seems to make more defensive sense, in that the

weakest stretch of the rampart is afforded some protection by steep natural slopes. Yet the rampart on that side is diminutive in the extreme, standing only 0.3m high; the quantity of tumbled rubble gives no indication that it can ever have been much more than twice that height. This contrasts with the size of the rampart facing the natural approach across the adjoining plateau, which, in its eventual form, accentuated a natural slope so that it stood at least 2 m high. As a whole, the circuit is strikingly visible when seen in profile from further away, particularly from the floor of the College Valley. The enlargement of one particular stretch of the defensive perimeter, apparently to enhance its visual impact from a specific aspect, is seen at numerous sites: Staw Hill, also overlooking the College Valley, and Castle Hill, Alnham (see figs. 15 and 16), to name but two. Clearly, such so-called defences were not designed to withstand any form of siege or concerted attack.

Taking all the locational and constructional evidence into account, there are good grounds for thinking that architectural display and symbolism were deeply embedded in the design of the defences of hillforts and other Iron Age enclosed settlements (in so far as these two types can be distinguished). A circular circuit, almost always with a single gateway, might be interpreted as a symbolic model of an individual roundhouse, a phenomenon which is well attested in the ethnographic record (Oliver 1975; 1987; Guidoni 1987). The parallel can be extended to the enclosed areas, for the apparent total absence of physically defined boundaries within roundhouses applies equally to hillfort interiors, at least during the early and middle Iron Age (Ferrell 1997, 234). The well-attested importance of the doorway of the roundhouse may be paralleled by the architectural emphasis on the hillfort gateway. Such symbolism may well have been an expression of, and a foundation for, the spiritual well-being and appropriate behaviour of the inhabitants, as is so often the case in the ethnographic record where there are patterns in the form of the vernacular architecture (Oliver 1975; 1987; Guidoni 1987; Oswald 1997). It is tempting to interpret the architectural display evident in ramparts, which is usually broadly directed towards nearby routes, prime farmland or other hillforts, and most specifically towards anyone approaching the gateway, as the community's way of expressing pride and 'putting the neighbours in their place', just as occurs today (Frodsham et al 2007).

However, in itself, the identification of such symbolic display does not allow us further to infer that Iron Age society exclusively comprised farmers, who led peaceful and generally cooperative existences, permeated by fashion-conscious pettiness, just like ourselves. Indeed, as J. D. Hill has pointed out, it is precisely the back-projection of comfortable, familiar, and anachronistic, modern values that allowed the study of the Iron Age to linger in the doldrums for many decades (J. D. Hill 1993; 1994; 1995). Keeley (1996) has argued that archaeologists have consistently underestimated the importance of inter-communal violence, observing that non-state societies where organized aggression is wholly absent are extremely rare. However, the mode of conflict is culturally embedded and our failure to find evidence of modern military efficiency and 'common sense' in the locations and designs of hillforts does not mean that conflict did not take place, simply that our expectations concerning the nature of the evidence are wrong (Armit 2007). Hill has warned specifically against back-projection of a homogenized 'Celtic' model of society. Yet, ironically, the emphasis on superficial architectural trappings of strength seen in the Cheviot hillforts, particularly at and in front of gateways, might accord very well with something akin to the highly ritualized contests between individual champions portrayed in the heroic literature of Celtic Ireland, in which fearsome personal appearance, weaponry, behaviour and language were as likely as actual combat to win a

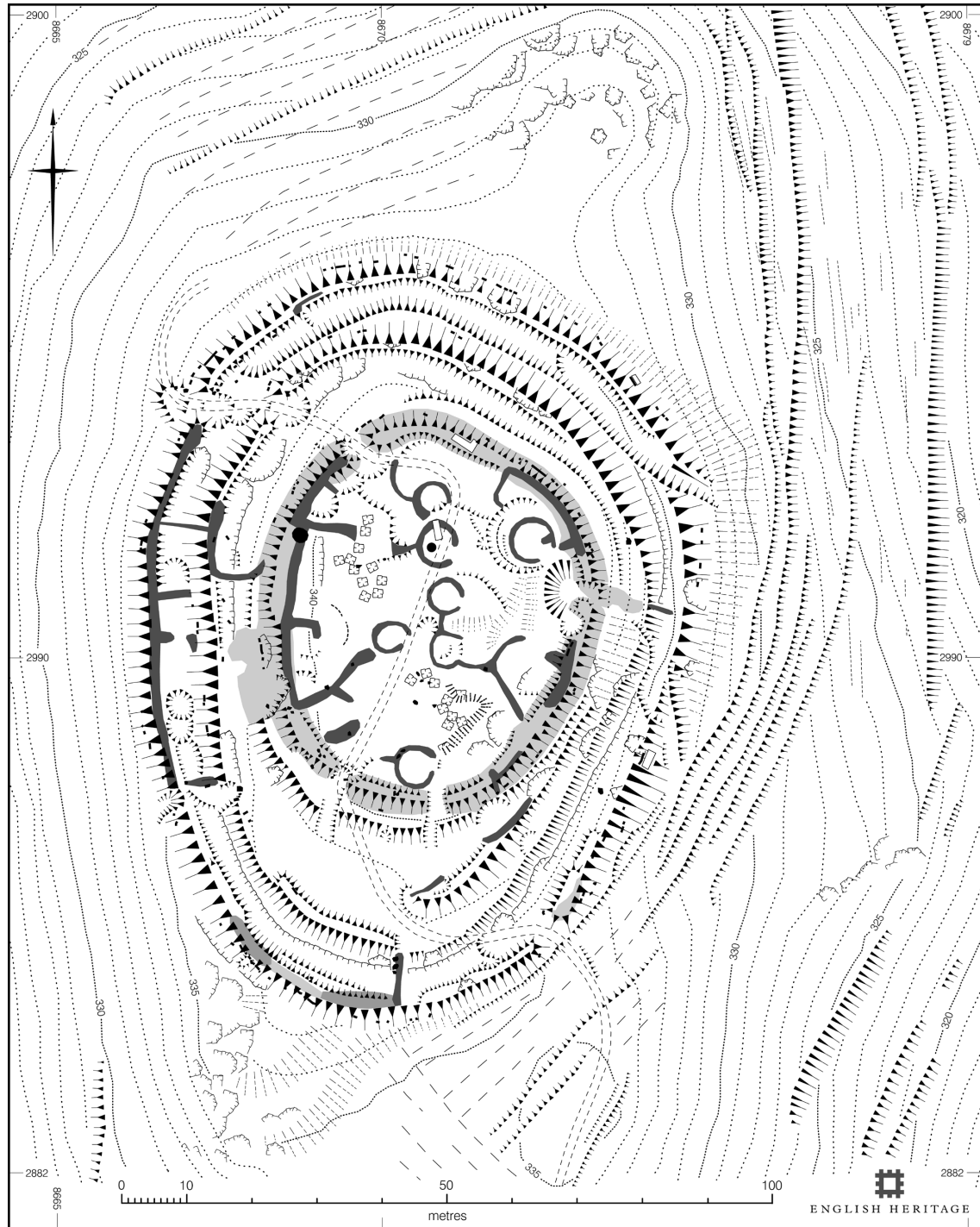


Fig. 13 The southern ramparts of Ring Chesters are more diminutive than the plan might suggest, now standing barely 0.5 m high. The circular arrangement of stones within the central roundhouse almost certainly represents the site of a triangulation station used by both MacLauchlan and the Ordnance Survey in 1860. © English Heritage.

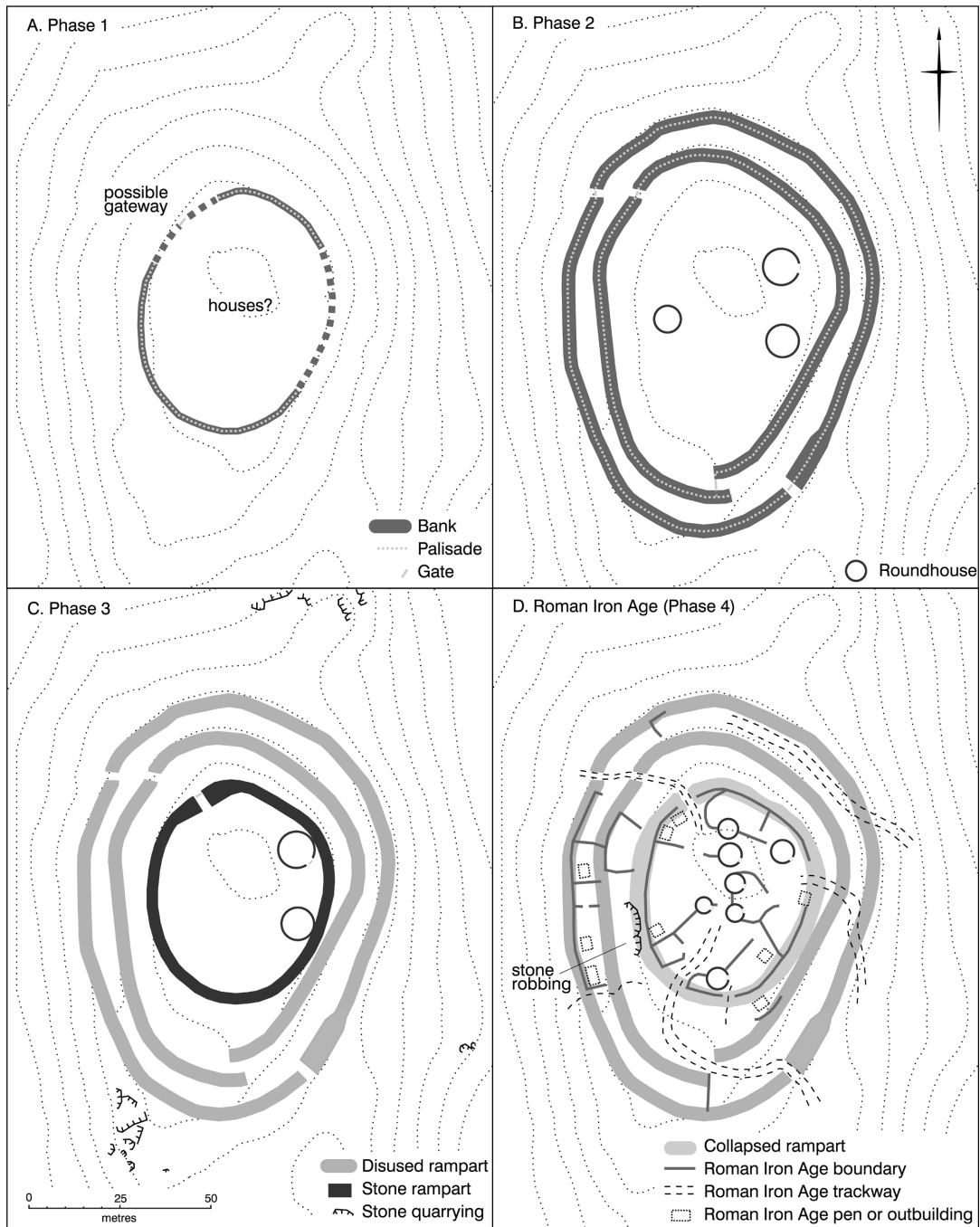


Fig. 14 Like many other hillforts, settlement within Ring Chesters could not be likened to a village until the Roman Iron Age.

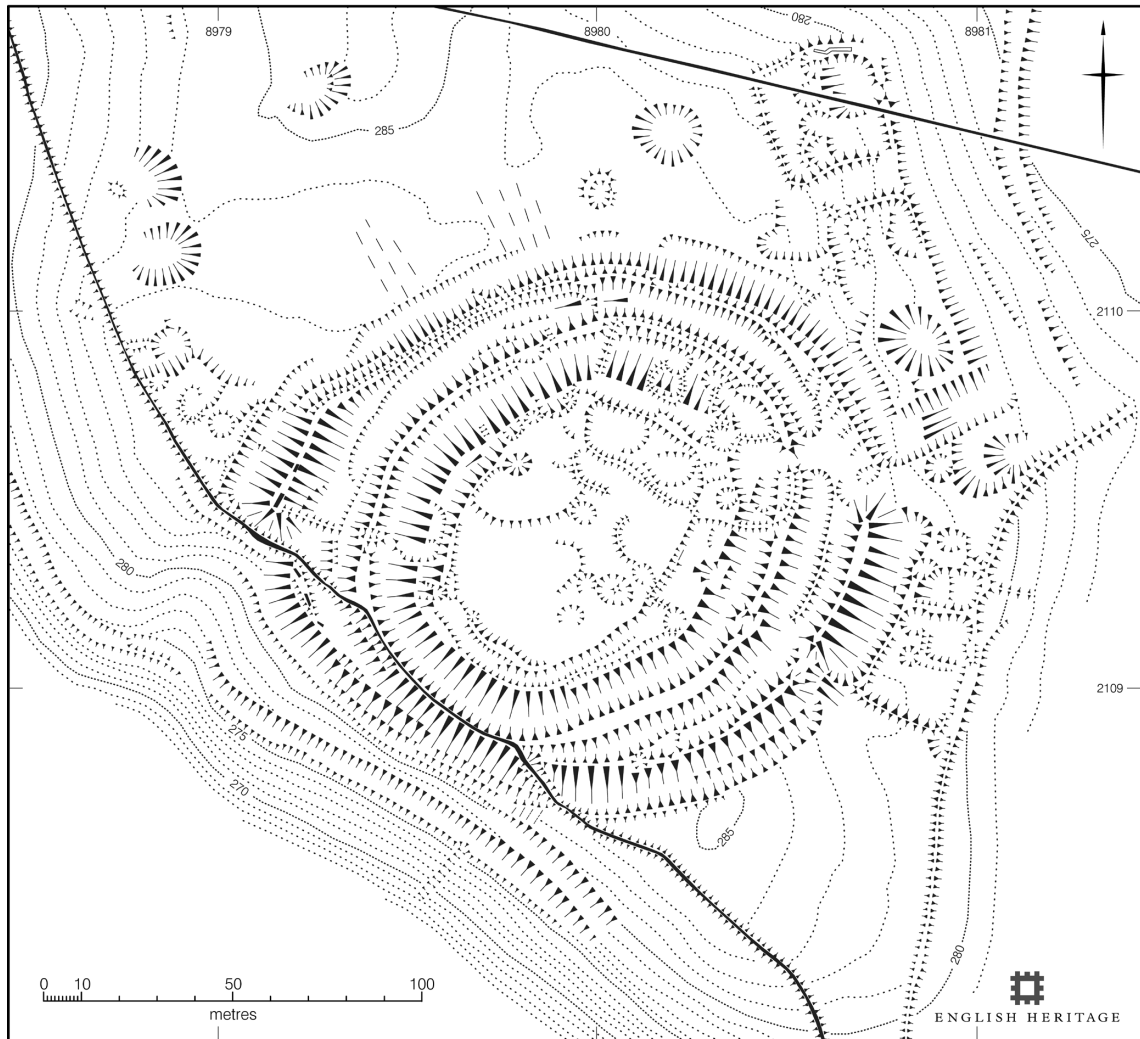


Fig. 15 Castle Hill, Alnham. The enlargement of specific stretches of the ramparts (whether of 'dump' or 'box' construction is uncertain) is a notable feature of the defences. © English Heritage.

battle. Ian Armit has, most recently, drawn the analogy between the hillfort and Maori pā, where conflict, in the form of aggressive ritualized displays, often took place on level ground in front of the gateway (Armit 2007; Vayda 1960). The visual impressiveness of a hillfort's defences, particularly seen from directly in front of the gateway and from intensively used parts of the surrounding land, may have been perceived as an integral aspect of their defensive strength and the military prowess and/or spiritual condition of the inhabitants. In this context, the markedly different scales of specific sections of the ramparts at sites like Castle Hill Alnham and Mid Hill may have been intended to dominate an 'arena' outside the

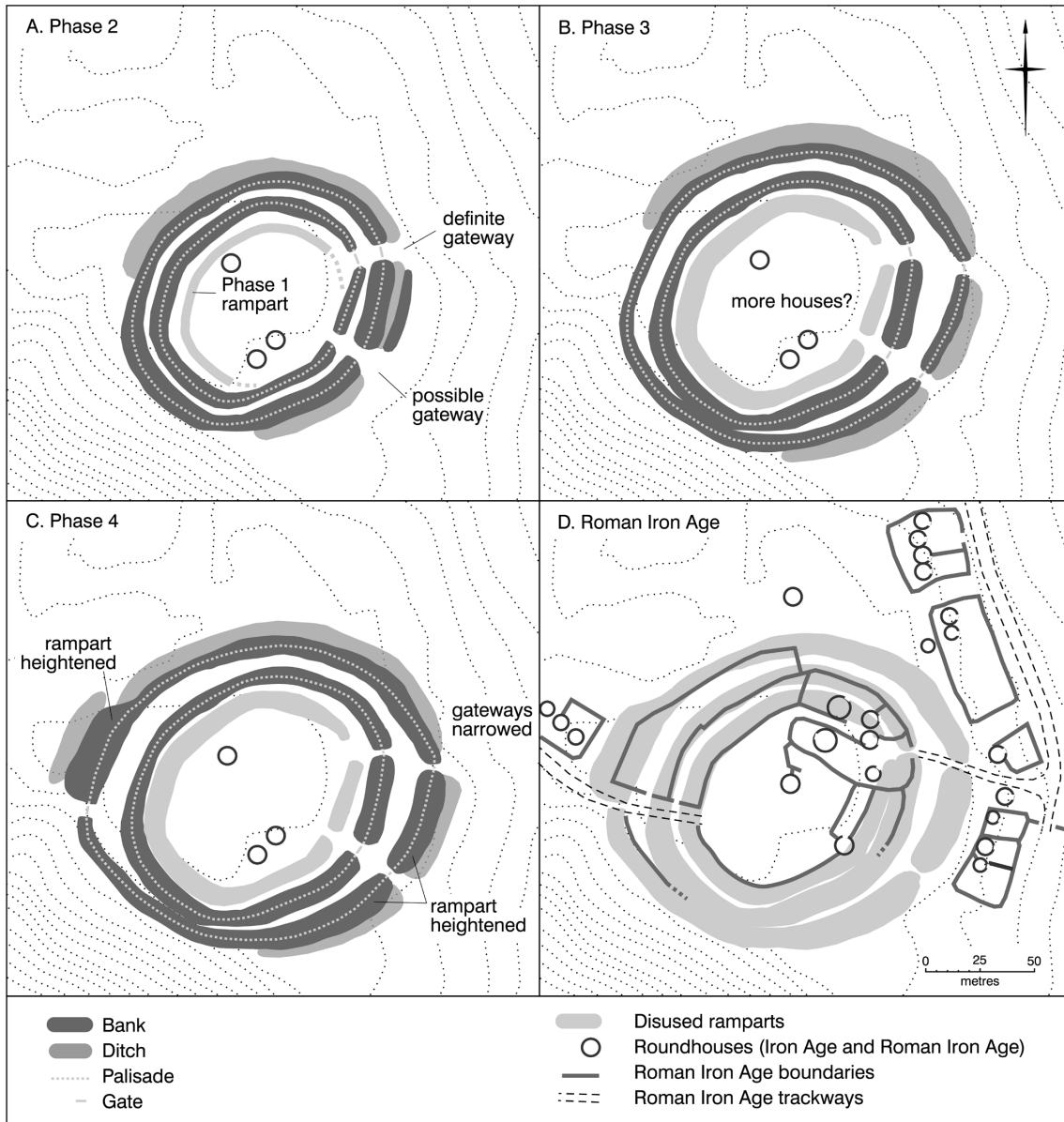


Fig. 16 Like many of its stone-built counterparts in the Cheviots, at Castle Hill, Alnham, the intervals between the ramparts appear to have been converted into linear pens in the Roman Iron Age.

hillfort, rather to protect the interior (figs. 15 and 16). If so, it might be expected that each small community would have more profound motivations to vie with its neighbours than merely 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

SETTLEMENT REMAINS

The image of the hillfort as a defended village is an attractive one and one that is perhaps not always too far from the truth, for example at sites like Wether Hill and Mid Hill. Yeavinger Bell, with its tally of 125 house platforms, some with traces of ring-grooves for timber roundhouses, stands head and shoulders above every other hillfort in the Northumberland National Park. Along with the hillforts on Traprain Law, Eildon Hill North, Hownam Law and Woden Law, it is one of a handful of sites that can be seen as a 'proto-town' like some of the hillforts of southern England (Hogg 1943, 138; Cunliffe 1991, 528–40; Ferrell 1995; 1997, 231). The problem in trying to gauge the nature of the settlement at all these sites boils down, as so often, to the current ignorance of chronology. At sites like Mid Hill, it is tempting to assume that all the roundhouses could have been in contemporary occupation, given that the ring-grooves seem to form a cohesive group and do not overlap each other. In parenthesis, however, it is perhaps worth observing that the arcs are sometimes so close that it is difficult to see how buildings with wide overhanging eaves, as they are now conventionally reconstructed, could have stood at the same time. The assumption of contemporaneity is less justified in considering the larger sites, where there is little discernible pattern to the distribution of the house sites. Excavations at Eildon Hill North sampled four house platforms, indistinguishable from each other in terms of their superficial earthworks, of which two dated to the late Bronze Age and one to the Roman Iron Age; in terms of settlement, there was apparently a lengthy hiatus in between (Owen 1992). The limited excavated evidence available for Traprain Law suggests a similar settlement record (Armit et al 2002). It is entirely possible that the same is true of Yeavinger Bell, which is superficially so similar in other ways and has yielded a few Roman artefacts from small and widely separated excavation trenches (Hope-Taylor 1977; Oswald and Pearson 2003). The possibility of the re-use of earlier building platforms potentially makes any patterning even more unintelligible. In other words, it is impossible to tell how densely these large sites were occupied at any point in their use; whether they were ever approached the complexity of 'proto-towns' remains a moot point.

At the other end of the scale, in the interiors of smaller hillforts like that on West Hill, it is possible to argue that settlement remains of the Roman Iron Age and later might have masked earlier ring-grooves. At many other sites, however, this argument simply cannot be put forward. At Staw Hill, for example, two ring-grooves can be detected and two more might conceivably have been concealed by stone-founded buildings of the Roman Iron Age (figs. 17 and 18). But there is nowhere else in the interior where the surface is either level enough (much of it is rock barely concealed by a thin layer of turf), or sufficiently disturbed by later activity, to admit the possibility of more buildings. Despite the considerable effort involved in constructing the stone-built rampart and later in appending an outer rampart to it, the absolute maximum number of roundhouses in the interior is only four, and possibly only two. The construction of the defences of Ring Chesters would arguably have been even more demanding, yet only one certain and two possible ring-groove roundhouses can be identified; it is difficult to see where more than one or two others, at most, might have escaped detection (see figs. 13 and 14).

In short, the interpretation of such settlements as even defended villages would be pushing the definition of the term village. These hillforts are perhaps better interpreted as the defended homesteads of single extended families, though it is possible that the inhabitants were able to call on the labour of people living outside the walls. It follows that hillfort

defences may have been, in part, symbols of power or status, which would fit well with the observations already made concerning the visual qualities of the monuments.

RE-USE OF HILLFORTS IN THE LATE IRON AGE / ROMAN IRON AGE

The widespread presence within hillforts of stone-founded roundhouses, dating to what has usually been referred to as the Romano-British period, has long been noted. Amongst the new field surveys reported here, the change from timber to stone is demonstrated most graphically by a house within the circuit on the north-east at Ring Chesters, as first recorded by Jobey (1965, fig. 4), where a stone-founded building sits eccentrically on the rock-cut platform created to support an earlier ring-groove roundhouse (see figs. 13 and 14). Traces of the ring-groove survive, although overlooked by Jobey, allowing a good estimate of its area, and thus direct comparison with the stone-founded building. The timber building, 9 m in internal diameter, would have had a floor space of around 65 m², while the later building, 5.5 m in internal diameter would have had a floor space of only 26 m². Jobey argued that in general, stone-founded roundhouses were built no earlier the 2nd century A.D., based on the discovery of Roman pottery beneath the paved floors of a small number of geographically isolated examples in the North Tyne valley (Jobey 1973; 1977). More recent excavations, at the Dunion and at Fawdon Dean for example, have suggested that at least some stone-founded roundhouses may date as early as to the 1st century B.C., that is, to the late Iron Age (Rideout 1992; Frodsham and Waddington 2004). Such a development might fit well with the wider pattern of change that characterizes the late Iron Age. The possibility remains that most stone-founded roundhouses are of later origin, dating to the Roman Iron Age, and some even to the post-Roman period: excavation of one that overlies the Iron Age rampart at Wether Hill has raised the possibility that its occupation may have continued into the 5th century (Topping and McOmish 2000, 8). However, without excavation (and probably even with it), it is difficult to distinguish late Iron Age and Roman Iron Age structures and the two periods are here generally bracketed together. In spite of the striking change in building material and the markedly smaller size of most stone-founded roundhouses, Jobey interpreted their presence within hillforts as evidence of continuity of occupation. However, the English Heritage surveys repeatedly encountered evidence that points rather more clearly to a prolonged hiatus in the settlement record before their re-occupation: discontinuity.

At West Hill for example, a short section of the outer circuit, interpreted by Jobey as an Iron Age corral, makes use of rubble tumbled from the collapsed stone-built inner circuit, which is the latest incarnation of the hillfort defences (figs. 19 and 20; Jobey 1964, fig 8; Oswald 2004). For the most part, the corral boundary is formed by an earth bank less than 0.5 m high revetted in places by large stones set on edge, a form characteristic of field banks belonging to the late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age. This can never have constituted much of a barrier in itself and was probably intended to carry a hedge. In addition, a narrow rubble bank not more than 0.2 m high was built directly on top of the broad rubble spread of the collapsed stone-built rampart (and therefore understandably escaped the notice of Jobey). It is uncertain whether this extended around the whole circuit or just far enough to enclose the main concentration of stone-founded houses of the late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age, to which it was linked at several points by similar low banks, some of which Jobey recognised. These clearly mark the lines of internal divisions within the settlement — fences or hedgelines — while the perimeter rubble bank may have provided footings for a slightly more substantial barrier,

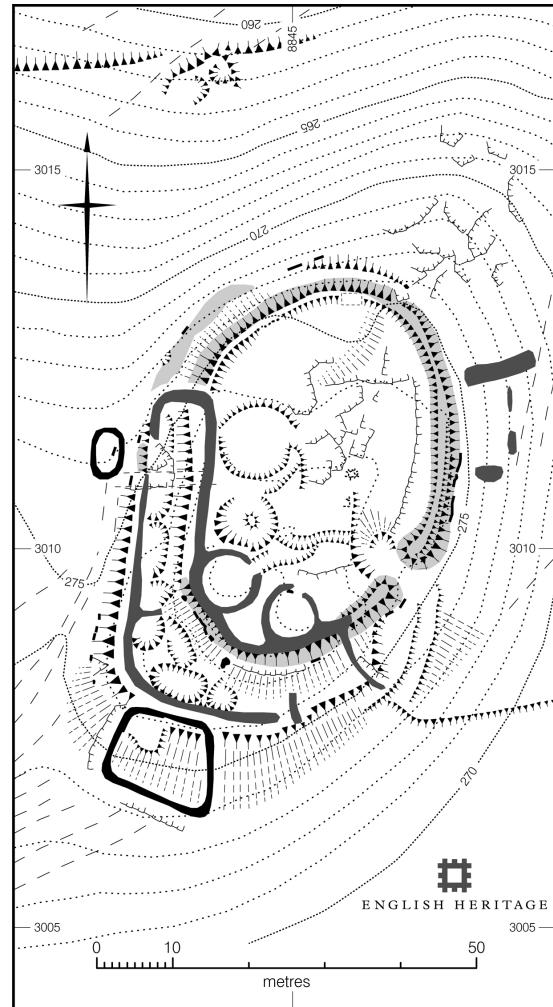


Fig. 17 The interior of the diminutive hillfort on Staw Hill, whose measures only 1,075m² (0.27 acre), yet its ramparts are visually impressive, especially seen from the saddle to the south-west and the valley bottoms on the other sides. © English Heritage.

such as a low, or crudely built, palisade. It is not possible to demonstrate whether this rebuild was precisely contemporary with the construction of the outer corral, but it seems safe to infer that they were in contemporary use for some time. The most important point is that both were built at a time when the hillfort proper was already in ruins, and indeed seemingly not greatly different in condition from today. Jobey's purpose in publishing his survey was to demonstrate that the hillfort predated the D-shaped enclosed settlement, of undoubted Roman Iron Age date, which overlies the circuit of the outer corral on the north-east of the hillfort. The settlement was later put forward as a possible example of a 3rd- or 4th-century form (Burgess 1984, 172). It can now be seen that while Jobey's observation of that stratigraphic relationship was essentially correct (although it is possible that the D-shaped enclosure itself underwent an expansion), the constructional sequence was more extended than he believed.

Furthermore, the construction of the barrier built to enclose the late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age settlement at West Hill would seem to have been strikingly flimsy and slight by com-

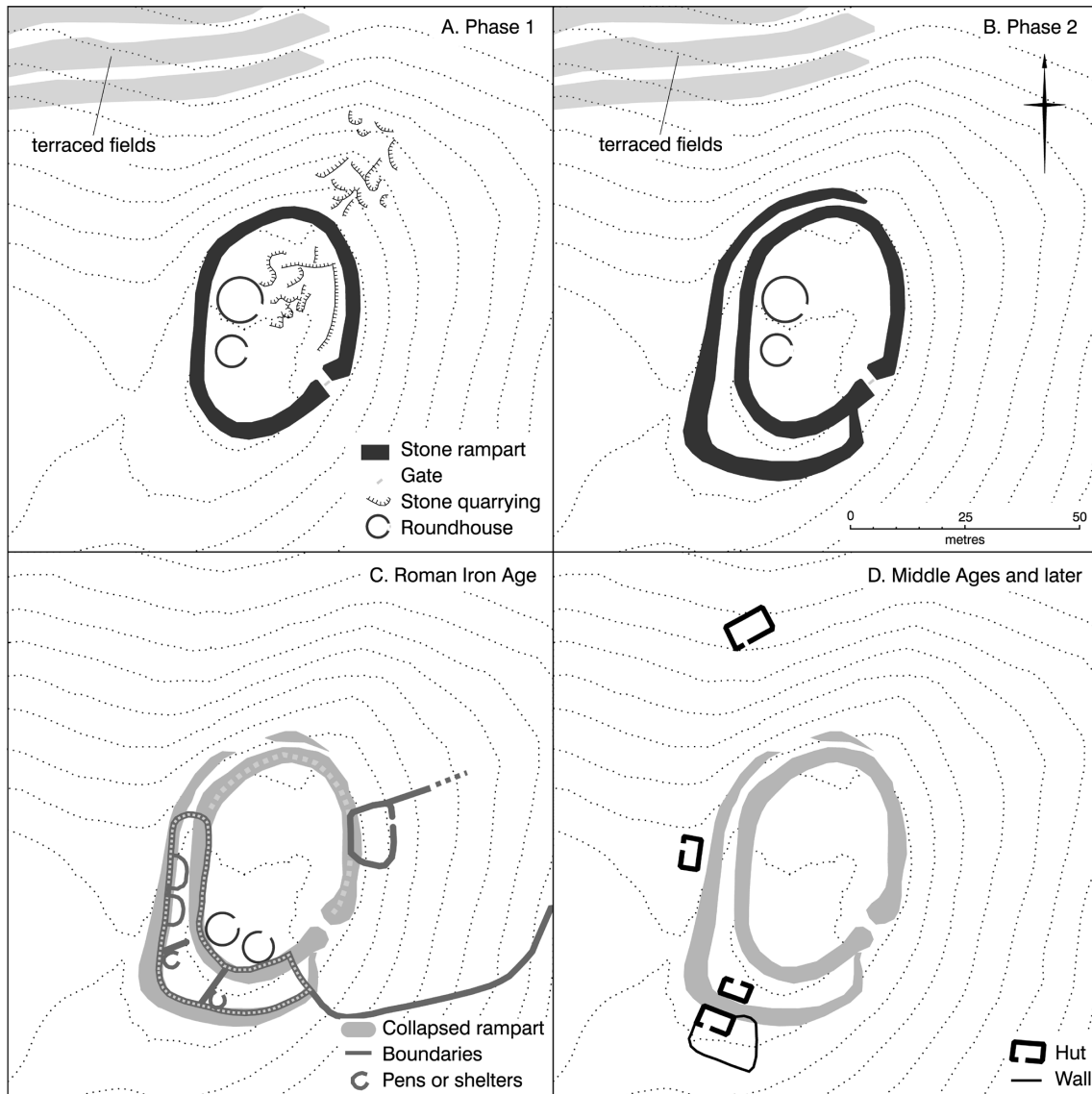


Fig. 18 At Staw Hill, only two Iron Age roundhouse sites can be identified with confidence; the overall total of four roundhouses is markedly fewer than the seven identified by the Ordnance Survey in 1860.

parison with the stone-built rampart that had preceded it. It is doubtful whether the perimeter could have served a defensive function at all: it is more suggestive of a barrier built to keep out livestock (in the case of West Hill, presumably those in the corral). This observation holds good for almost all the sites where rebuilt perimeters can be recognised: Ring Chesters, St Gregory's Hill, Castle Hill (Alnham), Monday Cleugh, and doubtless many others, if

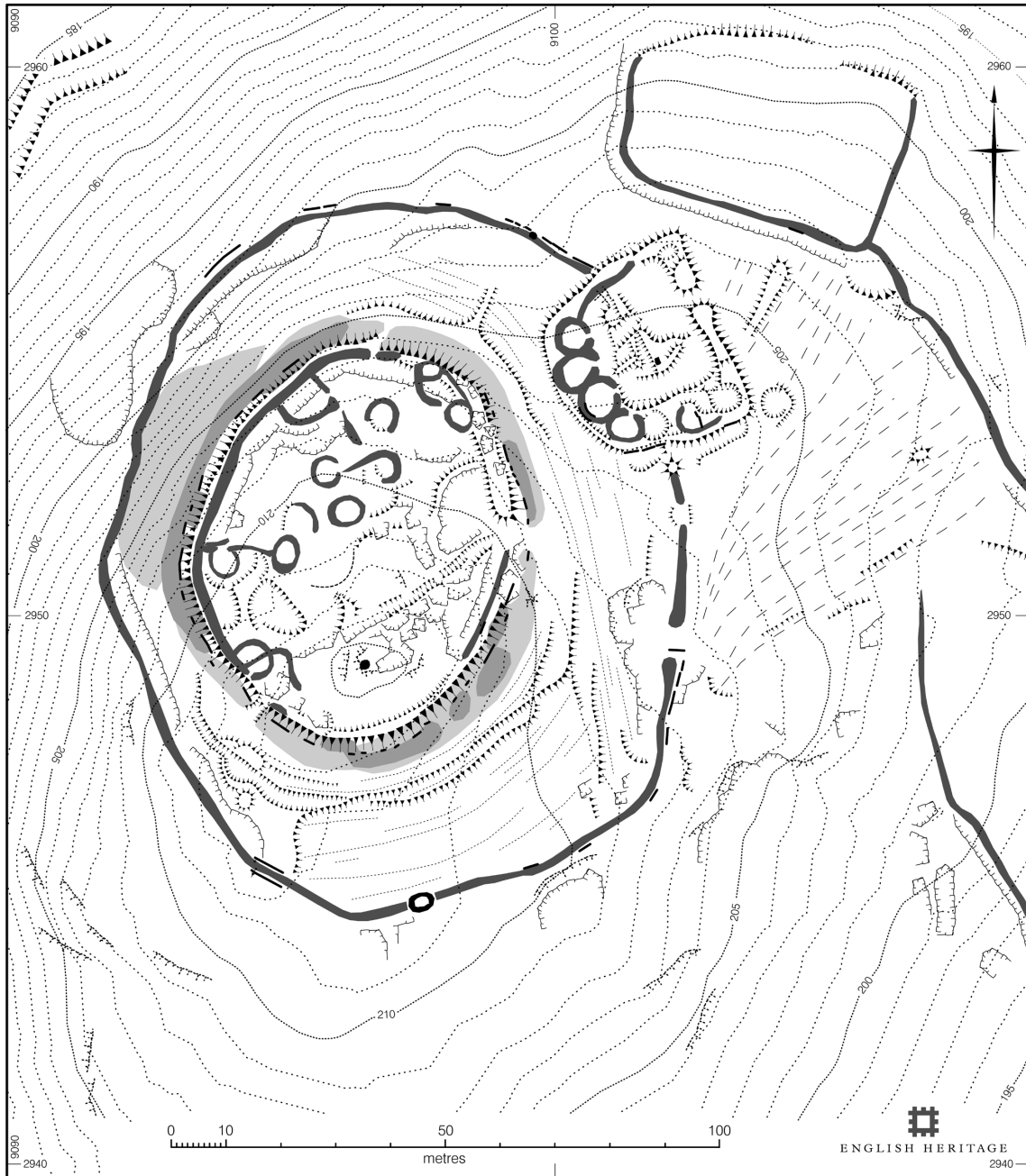
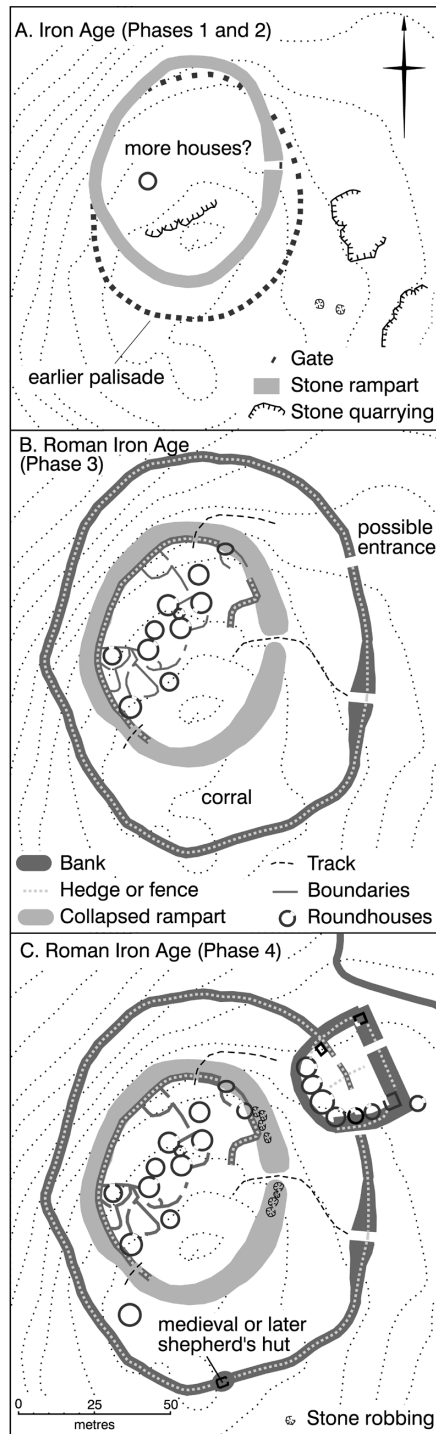


Fig. 19 At West Hill, the incorporation of rubble tumbled from the western side of the Iron Age rampart and used to construct a short section of the outer enclosure is key to understanding the chronological development of the site. © English Heritage.



subjected to close scrutiny. The exception that proves this rule is at Mid Hill, where the quality of construction is markedly higher, with carefully selected and placed facing stones — albeit only a single course — used to define a low bank not much narrower than the tumbled Iron Age rampart, this time overlying the entire circuit (see figs. 4 and 5). Here, though, the sparse re-occupation of the hillfort has an air of careful planning that is at odds with the evidently organic and generally more intensive development of most other settlements of the late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age, as discussed below.

At Ring Chesters, as at West Hill, Castle Hill (Alnham), Lordenshaws, St Gregory's Hill and elsewhere, single stone-founded houses and pairs of houses overlook small enclosures suggestive of yards and pens. Where more than one line of Iron Age rampart exists, as at Staw Hill, Ewe Hill (overlooking the Breamish Valley) and some of the sites named above, the interval between the ramparts was favoured for the construction of small conjoined enclosures, suggestive of small pens. Linear arrangements of pens immediately suggest the management of livestock: sheering or milking sheep, for example. With such explicit social and functional zoning, in this phase of their use, hillforts can be interpreted as villages with far greater justification than in their Iron Age incarnations.

It has been argued that the Roman army may at some stage, perhaps in the 3rd century A.D., have been responsible for deliberately razing hillfort defences across a great swathe of the land north of Hadrian's Wall (Burgess 1984, 172). Only in one instance — at Humbleton Hill — is there any firm evidence to support the idea that a rampart was deliberately demolished (figs. 21 and 22). There, the rubble spread that represents the remains of the inner circuit lies wholly in front of the outer face of the wall, leaving both the outer and, more unusually, the inner

Fig. 20. West Hill: the ephemeral bank and ditch here interpreted as an earlier palisade may actually represent a degraded rampart, or perhaps one that was deliberately levelled prior to the construction of the stone circuit.

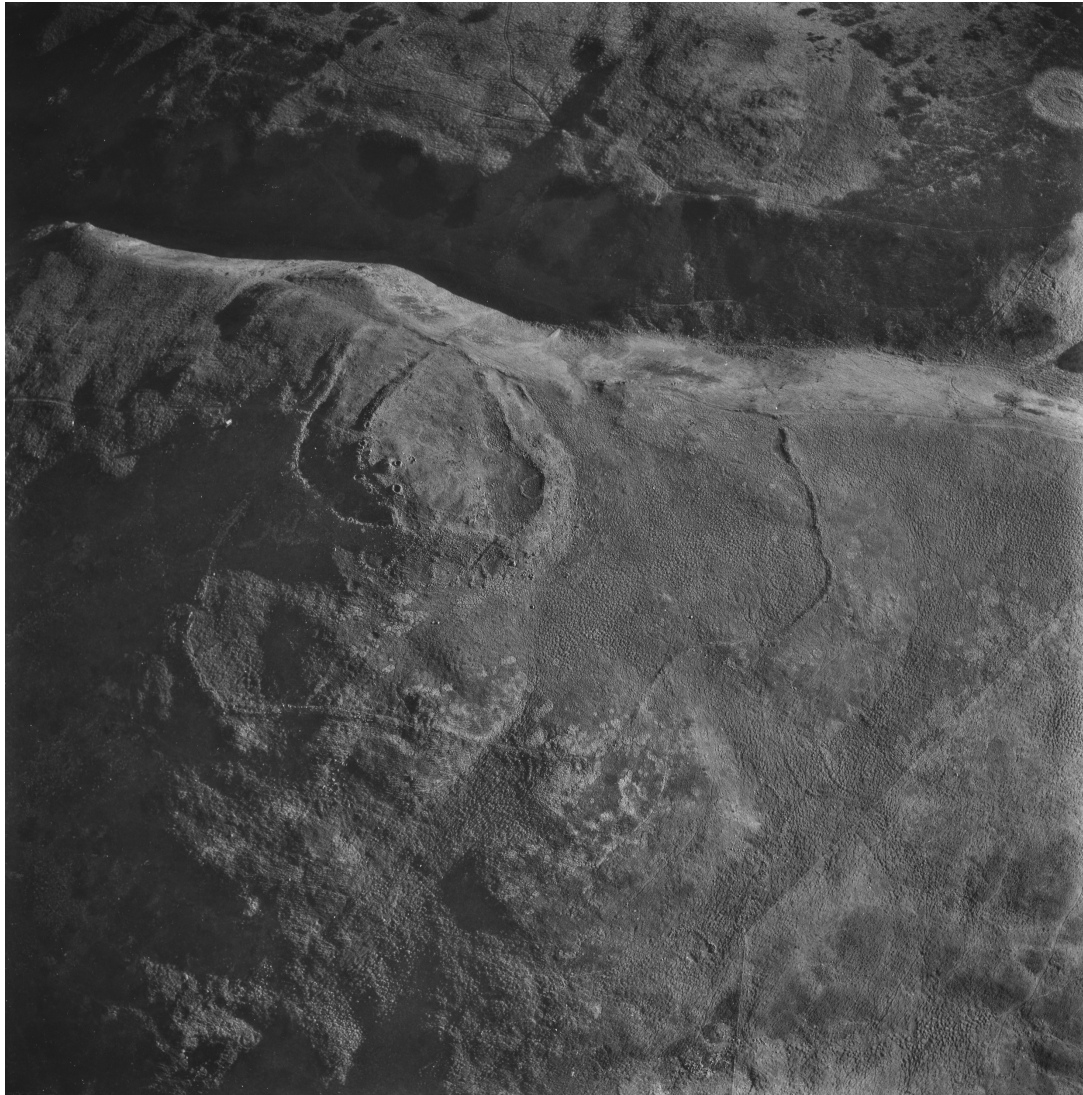


Fig. 21 In many cases, dramatic landforms, like the echoing ravine adjacent to the hillfort on Humbleton Hill, were utilised in designing the plan of the defensive circuit. Given the apparently partly symbolic nature of Iron Age ramparts, it seems likely that this choice had an aesthetic as well as a functional component. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

lines of facing stones prominently exposed. This must result from the deliberate displacement of the whole rampart. It is perhaps more tempting to link this anomalous act not with the Roman army but with a more recent event in the site's history: the battle of Homildon, fought in 1402. However, nothing of what is known about the circumstances of that battle would suggest that there was time or justification for remodelling the hillfort defences in this way.

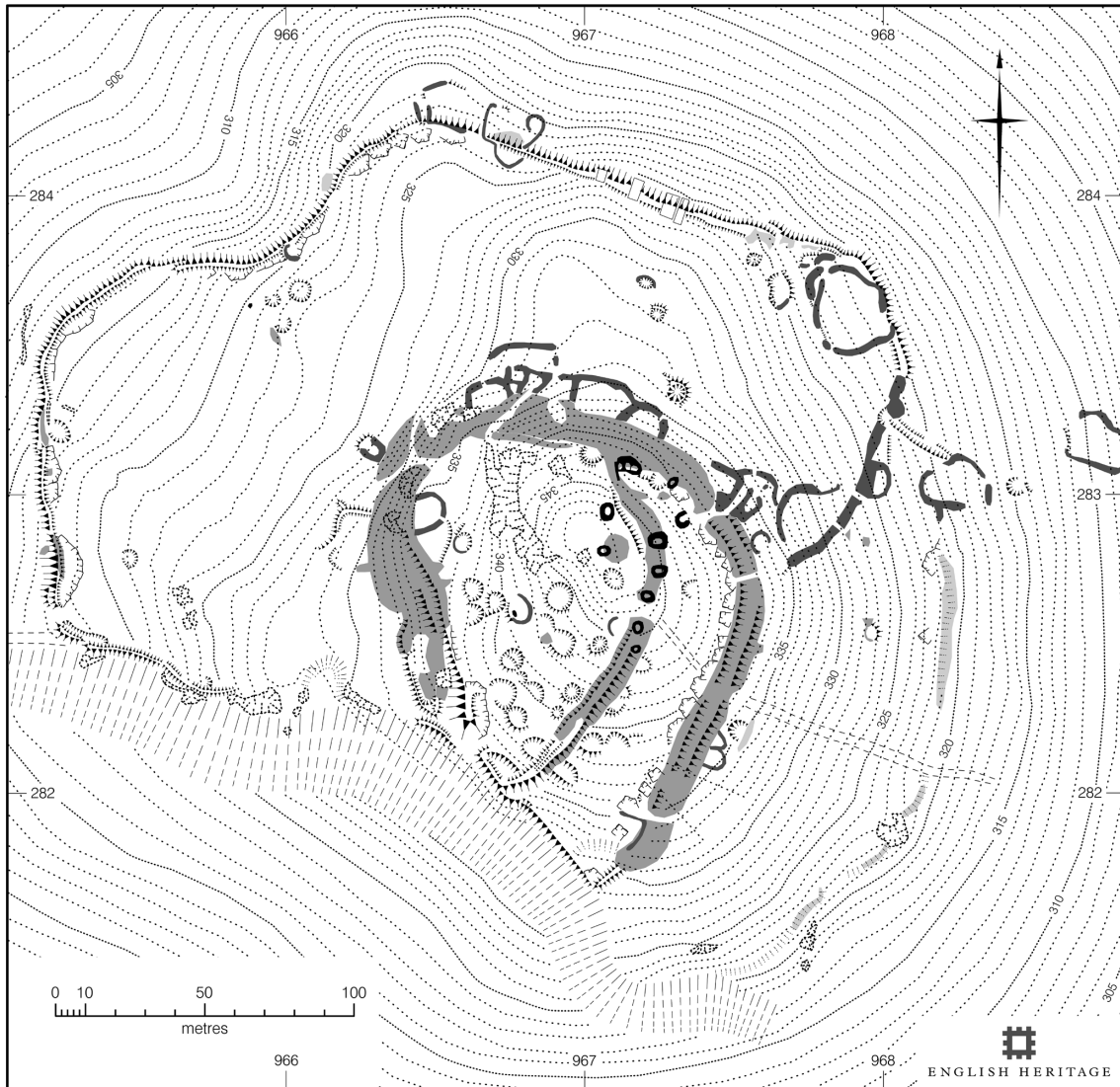


Fig. 22 Few hillforts in the Cheviots — that on Yeavinger Bell being a notable exception — have seen as much modern modification as that on Humbleton Hill. © English Heritage.

Elsewhere, it seems more likely that Iron Age ramparts may have collapsed naturally and that this process, once started, rapidly led to total downfall. If indeed it occurred at approximately the same date at so many different sites, the reasons for this remain unclear. Yet it is difficult to argue that re-occupation, where this occurred, happened soon after. Fundamental changes are evident in the settlement remains: the reduction in house size and the adoption of a new construction technique, the clear existence of social modules expressed through physical subdivisions of internal spaces, evidence for economic changes. It therefore seems far more

reasonable to infer that a long period — centuries, perhaps — had elapsed between the collapse of the ramparts and the re-occupation of the ruins.

The obvious next question to ask is why people returned to live in places that had long been abandoned. From a determinist point of view, or what might be regarded as 'common sense' (which is, of course, implicitly anachronistic), it could be argued that settlement was dense throughout the landscape, and that the ready availability of building stone may have been an important incentive to re-occupy the hillforts. Needless, to say, both these points are valid, to some extent. Yet at a time when the form and location in the landscape of most settlements suggests that the majority of people were concerned to find shelter from the elements, the decision to re-occupy hilltops that cannot have been much less bare and inhospitable than they are today is a striking departure from the norm. Could it be that, as ancient monuments, presumably with an established mythological past or other cultural value attached to them, hillforts had acquired a special status that made people favour them for re-occupation? There is some evidence to support this. The Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age village, as we may now call it, on the summit of West Hill lies within a landscape that is entirely covered with contemporary field systems, trackways and minor settlements. Yet the village itself appears isolated from this busy landscape. Where many of the smaller settlements dotted around the landscape are closely tied into the patterns of field boundaries, the village on the summit is not. The nearest Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age field boundary bank, misinterpreted by Jobey as a 'late dyke', does not intersect with the corral, or outer enclosure, around the village, and is ditched on the outside, like a medieval 'head dyke', leaving the hillfort isolated. Another significant point may be the special treatment afforded to Northumberland's greatest hillfort, Yeavinger Bell, in the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age, which has been discussed at some length elsewhere (Oswald and Pearson 2005). Along with a number of the region's other large hillforts that may be regarded as candidates for tribal centres, either of the late Iron Age or earlier, such as Woden law, Hownam Law and Eildon Hill North, the absence of settlements with stone-founded buildings is striking. Such settlements are present on the slopes of Yeavinger Bell, but not on its summit. Eildon Hill North was probably occupied in the 2nd century, and perhaps the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D., yet the stone-founded roundhouses conventionally accepted as being of this date are absent (Owen 1992). Artefacts of later Roman Iron Age date — a few coins and pieces of terra sigillata, have also been recovered from Yeavinger Bell, though not enough, or from sufficiently secure contexts, to safely infer widespread continued occupation or even regular activity. If occupation of the summit did continue into the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age, it would seem that the inhabitants built their houses conservatively in timber and disdained the subdivision of space exemplified elsewhere by the creation of yards and enclosures. It is perhaps easier to accept that in terms of settlement, people avoided the summit of this particular hill.

THE TERRITORIES AND ECONOMIES OF HILLFORTS

The plane table employed by Jobey effectively restricted his surveys to the immediate environs of each hillfort. At the opposite end of the scale, the aerial surveys undertaken by Tim Gates do not generally permit the identification of the finest detail that is discernible on the ground, often including — crucially — stratigraphic relationships. The new surveys by English Heritage offer a fulcrum to these opposing scales of research and offer new insights into the hillforts and the wider landscapes of which they and other monuments form parts.

Over the past two decades or so, field survey and excavation have encountered widespread examples of so-called cord rig, seemingly mostly of late Iron Age and Roman Iron Age date (Topping 1989). Analytical field survey also first demonstrated that certain lynched fields could be attributed to a broadly prehistoric context, in contrast to the true cultivation terraces or strip lynchets, which are undoubtedly medieval, at least in the forms now visible on the surface (Topping 1981). More recently, excavation of a series of strip lynchets on the hillside east of Brough Law convincingly demonstrated that stratified within the medieval terrace was a smaller lynchet apparently in use by the late Bronze Age, although the date at which the cultivation originated remains uncertain (Frodsham and Waddington 2004, 179–82). Clearly, this evidence for early arable agriculture makes Piggott's concept of the 'Celtic Cowboy' seem less tenable. Another pillar of his theory has collapsed with the rejection of the idea that concentric circuits formed cattle corrals, at least during the Iron Age, as described above. Several of the English Heritage investigations recorded lynchets lying cheek by jowl with hillforts; at sites such as Mid Hill and Staw Hill, it is not possible to point to other nearby settlements, earlier than those of the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age period, with which the cultivation might have been associated. Yet this may simply reflect the relative difficulty of identifying settlements of other periods, either of the Bronze Age or the Iron Age, especially if these were unenclosed, in areas later subject to ploughing. As Tim Gates (2000, 13) has rightly pointed out, there remains not a single example of a hillfort that can be linked unambiguously with a tract of arable cultivation.

The new investigations recorded numerous instances of early lynchets directly overlain by medieval strip lynchets, which are in turn overlain, in some cases, by narrow post-medieval low rigs, of a type discussed further below. However, these relationships are essentially unhelpful in advancing understanding of the early lynchets. The best dating evidence comes from the surveys of the landscapes surrounding the hillforts on West Hill and St Gregory's Hill (fig. 23). At West Hill, a number of lynchets of pre-medieval origin incorporate clearance cairns. The accumulation of one of these cairns seems to have been responsible for preserving in situ a cup-marked boulder (the first on andesite to be recorded in the region), which could be dated on stylistic grounds to the late Neolithic, rather than the early Bronze Age (Oswald 2000). All the loose stone except the boulder itself seems to have been removed, probably in the early 18th century to provide material for a nearby field wall. The relationship between the boulder and the clearance cairn seems to offer an admittedly imprecise terminus post quem of the late Neolithic for the genesis of the lynchet. The evidence for a terminus ante quem is stronger and more precise. It has long been recognised that many so-called scooped enclosures and other small settlements typical of the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age period shelter in the lee of lynchets and in some cases are physically cut into their sides. The largest examples of Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age scooped enclosures recorded by English Heritage in the course of the project, on the north-western flank of the hill occupied by Ring Chesters, are a good illustration of that relationship (fig. 24, though the relationship is clearer still from the detailed English Heritage survey, which is not reproduced here). Here, however, one of the enclosures lacks any evidence for stone-founded roundhouses, suggesting either that it was in contemporary use but served a non-domestic function, or that it contained timber roundhouses. If this second possibility could be proved, since the timber roundhouses would presumably be earlier, the dates of the underlying lynchets would be pushed back correspondingly. It has been argued that cultivation would have continued on the lynchets outside the enclosures and that the crops could have afforded some additional shelter to the

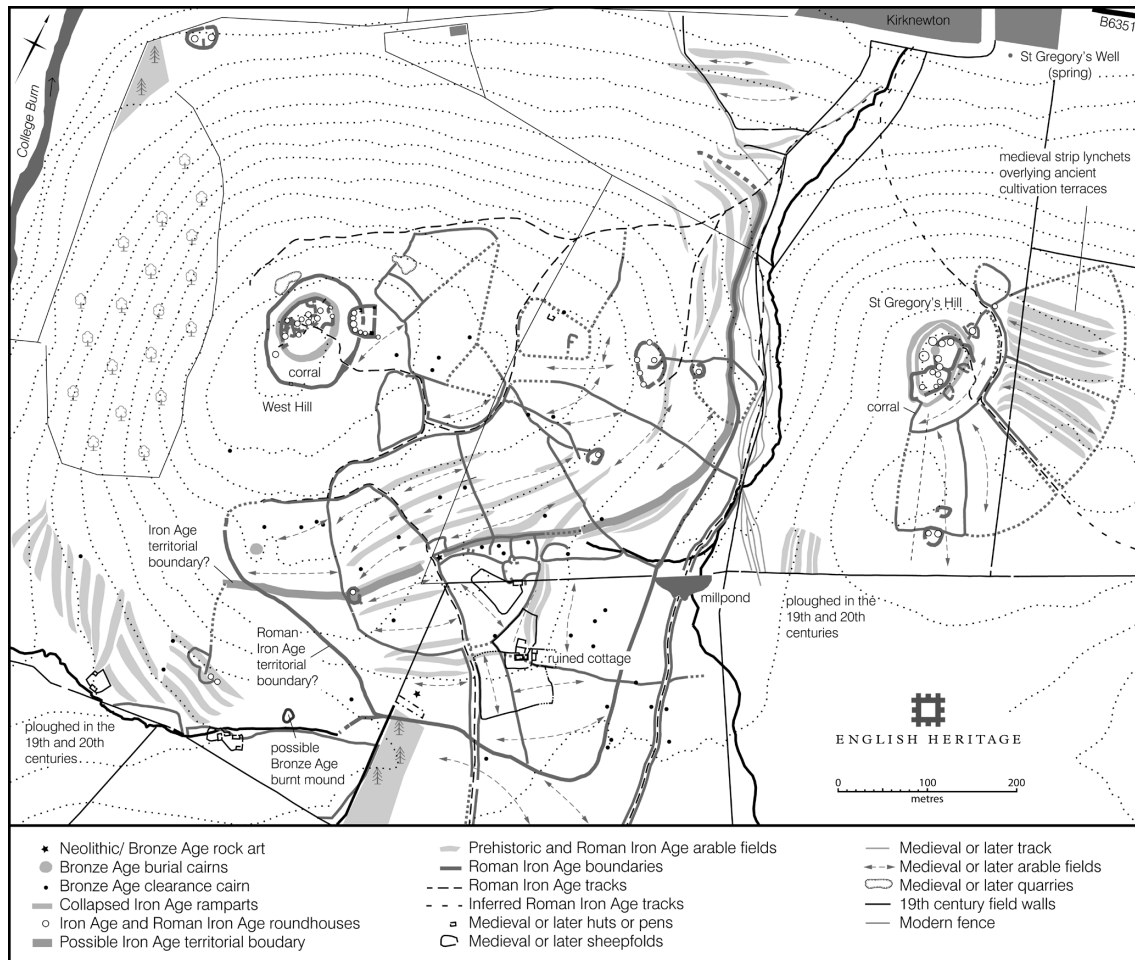


Fig. 23 The setting of the neighbouring hillforts on West Hill and St Gregory's Hill landscape is now one of the most intensively studied multi-period historic landscapes in the Northumberland National Park. © English Heritage.

settlements (Burgess 1984; 1985). At West Hill, however, many of the numerous field boundary banks (presumably former hedgelines) associated with the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age settlements were evidently laid out after the lynchets had developed to a considerable size. The Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age field pattern itself shows evidence of considerable chronological depth, so it is a reasonably secure assumption that the lynchets came into existence well before the end of the Iron Age. Similarly, at St Gregory's Hill, a corral boundary contemporary with the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age occupation of the site overlies a substantial lynchet, though the form of this was later modified further by medieval ploughing. The fact that at West Hill the field banks cut across the lynchets at right angles also suggests that there must have been a major re-organisation of the field pattern when the



Fig. 24 Ring Chesters in its wider context. Note the three 'scooped enclosures' in the background and the intervening traces of at least three successive episodes of ploughing. (photograph ©Tim Gates)

boundaries were laid out. Indeed, at West Hill there is no evidence detectable through surface survey of differential development of the pre-existing lynchets on either side of the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age field boundaries. It could be inferred from this that arable cultivation on the lynchets may have ceased altogether, either at the time the boundaries were laid out or before. This could be seen as an echo of the settlement evidence on the hilltop, where it would

seem that there was a lengthy hiatus between the collapse of the Iron Age rampart and the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age re-occupation.

On the other hand, the landscape around West Hill contains several examples of trackways embanked (that is, probably hedged originally) on both sides, which are attributable to the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age on the evidence of their relationships to settlements and other field boundaries. Tim Gates (1982, 30) has concluded that this form of trackway is indicative of the management of livestock amongst arable in-fields or hay meadows and this is borne out by the observation that at West Hill the most intensively used tracks appear to have given access to the high and presumably unenclosed pastures on the flanks of the Newton Tors.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LATER LAND-USE FOR HILLFORTS

The Cheviots have often been referred to as 'one of the best preserved prehistoric landscapes in Europe'. While it is undoubtedly true that the region's early remains are unusually conspicuous, to over-emphasise the excellence of their preservation is to run the risk of becoming blinkered to the effects of later land-use. No hillfort or other early monument in the Cheviots has been left entirely untouched by later activity and it does a disservice to the landscape's long history of human exploitation to relegate such activity to a footnote.

Clearly, it is less easy to overlook later land-use where its effects have been pronounced, such as, for example, the conversion of tumbled Iron Age ramparts into post-medieval or later stells, as mentioned above, a modification accompanied by the blocking of the ancient entrances with narrow inward-curving arcs of walling. These enclosures are often found in conjunction with the construction of shepherds' shelters, whether large well-built cottages like those at Sinkside Hill, or the low footings of bothies little bigger than a two-man tent, like those at Great Hetha and Fawcett Shank (fig. 25). In passing, it may be noted that until English Heritage investigated the enclosure on Fawcett Shank as part of the Discovering Our Hillfort Heritage project, no accurate large-scale survey of it was available and its interpretation as a hillfort remained insecure.

Medieval ridge and furrow, where well developed, can be almost as impressive as the ramparts themselves. At Lanternside Camp, near Holystone, for example, medieval ploughing was evidently responsible for beginning the process of levelling that culminated with the construction of Campville house on the line of the Iron Age rampart, after which point the fort itself was usually known by that name. The intensive stone robbing for post-medieval field walls can have equally dramatic effects, as for example at Prendwick Chesters, overlooking the upper reaches of the Breamish Valley or on St Gregory's Hill, where some of the robbing pits were subsequently filled in again with masses of smaller stones, dragged to the surface by steam ploughing and cleared off the fields, reportedly by Italian prisoners of war (figs. 26 and 27). However, part of the purpose of this publication has been to demonstrate the value of taking account of apparently minor details in achieving a better understanding of the life-histories of field monuments; three examples will suffice.

As many of Tim Gates' aerial photographs illustrate, traces of slight ridge and furrow are widespread in the Cheviots, extending to the highest and most remote hilltops. Some of this is identical in form to the 18th-century low rig identified in Menstrie Glen in central Scotland, which appears to have been associated with the practice of tathing, that is, penning sheep for short periods within strip fields defined by low turf-built walls (RCAHMS 2001). The furrows that defined these strips and, more rarely, fragments of the turf walls, are identifiable on the

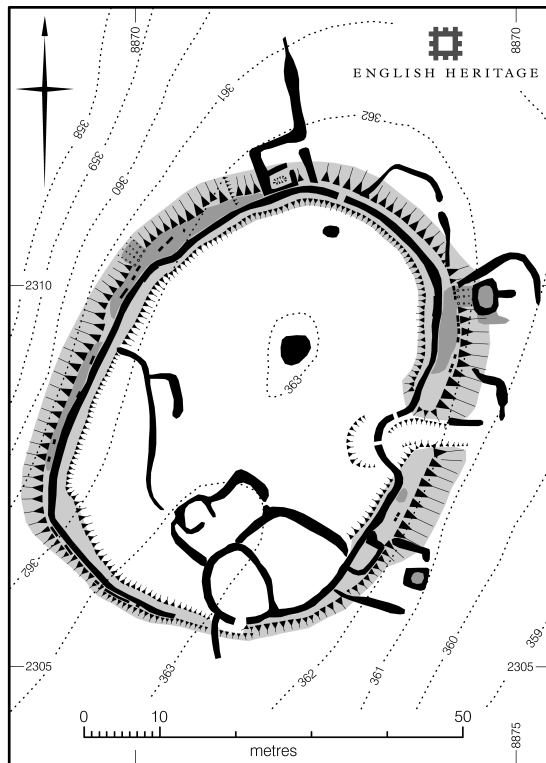


Fig. 25 Prior to the English heritage investigation of the hillfort on Fawcett Shank, it remained uncertain whether the remains generally represented a hillfort, in part due to the extensive modifications made by shepherds in the post-medieval period. © English Heritage.

north-western side of Hartside Hill in the upper reaches of the Breamish Valley and on the western flank of the hill occupied by Ring Chesters. Elsewhere, the ploughing is less distinctive and more difficult to date, though in some cases, for example outside the hillfort on Mid Hill (see fig. 3), the narrow ridges overlie broad ridge and furrow (which in turn overlies earlier lynchets), supporting the assumption of a post-medieval date.

Ploughing within hillforts is not common, but the first recognition of a slight furrow should immediately prompt the field investigator to re-examine the faintest earthworks with a keener eye. Post-medieval ploughing within the ramparts on Hownam Law is relatively easy to distinguish in places, but the natural gradient is steep enough that many of the house platforms also survive as prominent earthworks. At Great Tosson, on the other hand, while the fact that the hill is located in the midst of swathes of well-developed post-medieval ridge and furrow should immediately alert the field investigator in advance to the possibility that similar cultivation impinged on the hillfort, the ridges within the rampart are ephemeral enough to require careful scrutiny. Due to the gentleness of the natural gradient and the sandiness of the soil, the dozen or so hut platforms were presumably never particularly massive or sharply-defined earthworks and they have consequently been reduced to the slightest of scarps by the agriculture.

Similarly, at West Hill, two swathes of closely spaced furrows within the outer circuit, or Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age corral, have potentially masked traces of earlier activity. Here, however, while both medieval and post-medieval ridge and furrow are widespread in the

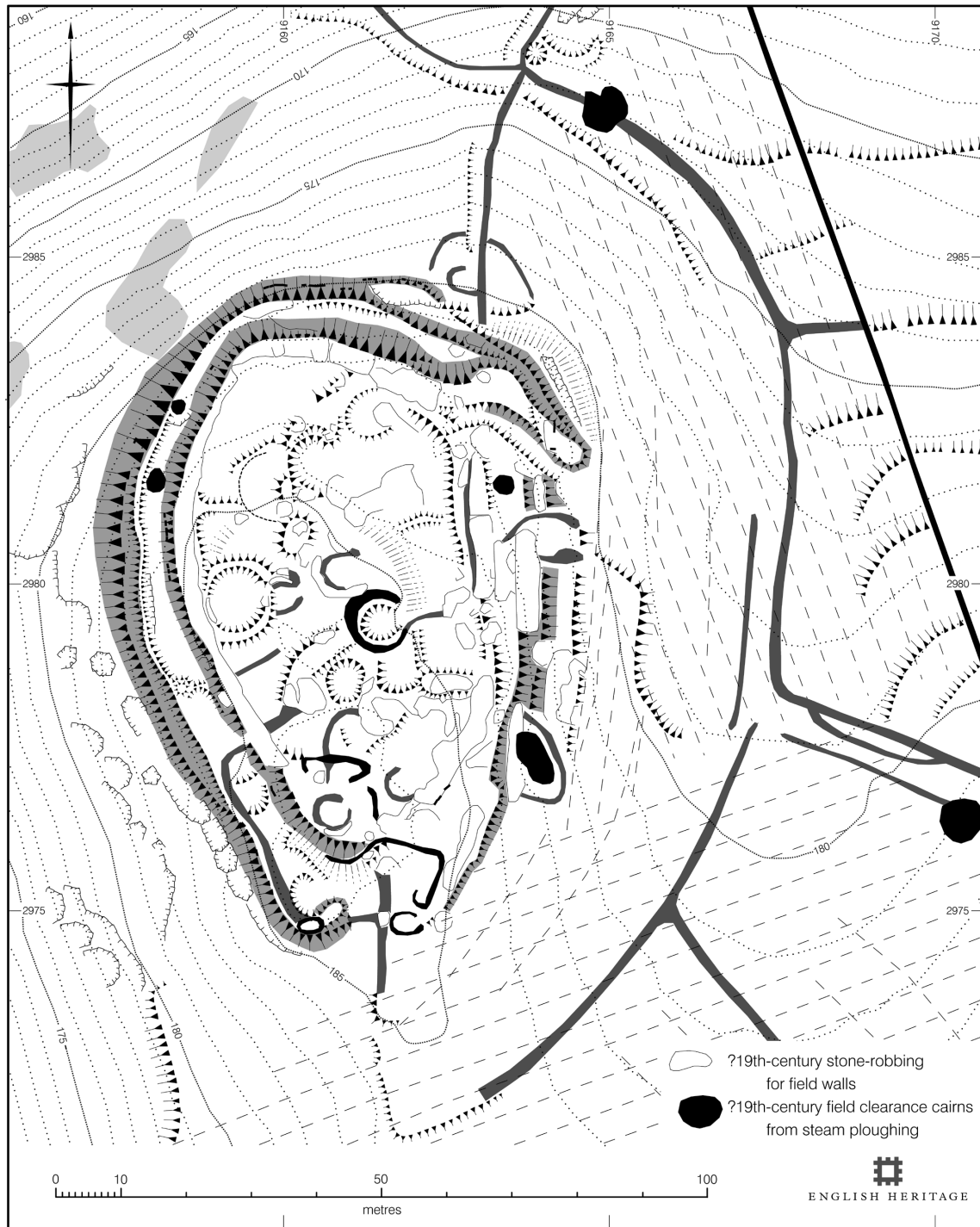


Fig. 26 The hillfort on St Gregory's Hill, Kirknewton. Stone robbing to obtain material for local field walls, presumably in the late 18th or early 19th centuries, has been so intensive that some early buildings can only be discerned as 'negative features'. © English Heritage.

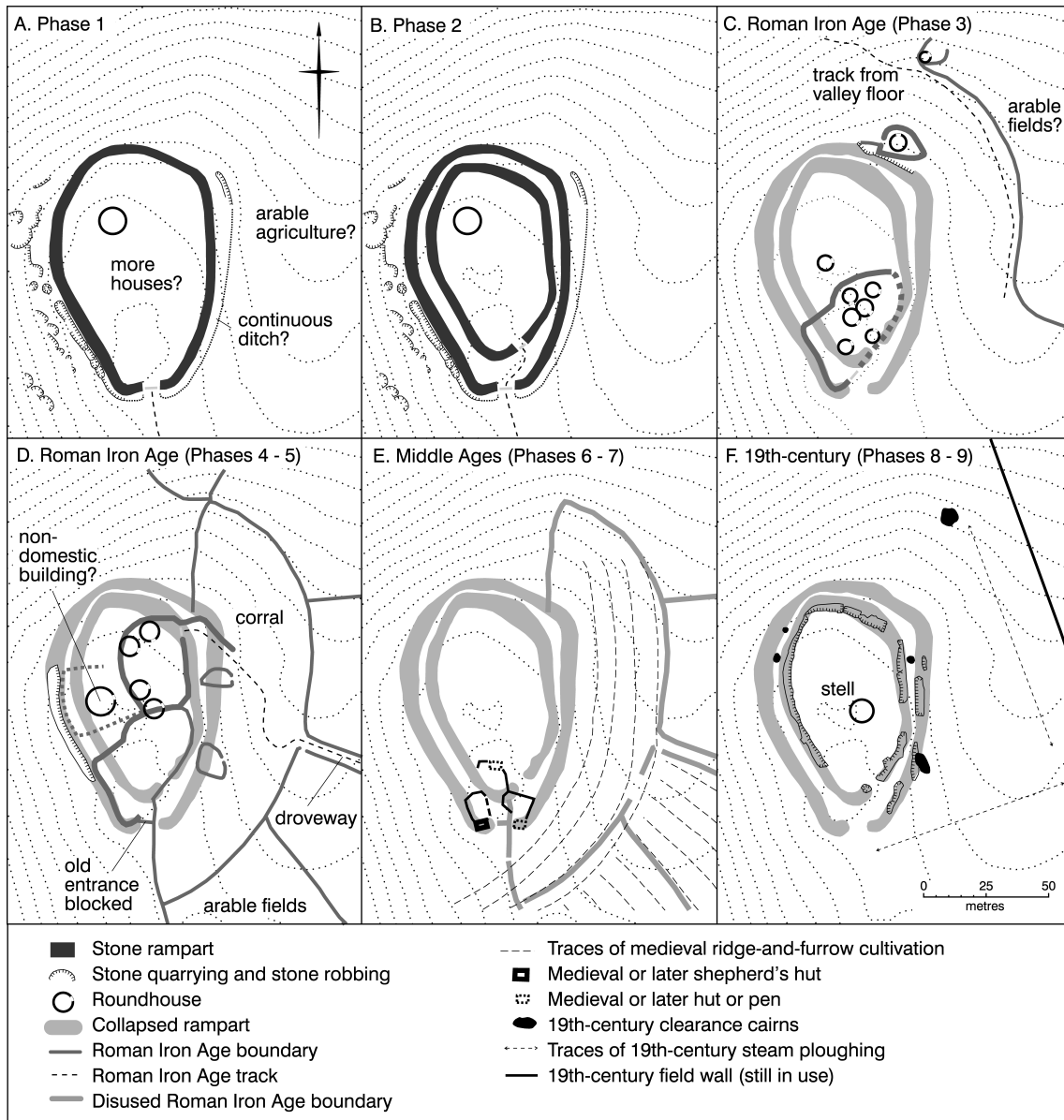


Fig. 27 George Jobey considered the hillfort on St Gregory's Hill to be too badly mutilated to warrant publication (compare with fig. 1). Yet more prolonged, detailed analysis by English Heritage (the field survey took two people working with independent survey-grade GPS receivers more than a week) has allowed a much advanced understanding of the development of the site.

surrounding landscape, there is nothing else directly comparable to this very narrow ploughing in the immediate vicinity of the hillfort. At first sight, the width of the ridges (about 1m) makes the cultivation appear very similar to so-called 'cord rig' cultivation, which might have extended well into the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age, and thus suggests that corral enclosures might also have functioned as arable fields. However, its superficial characteristics may well be misleading, for casting the net of the investigation wider reveals that the steep and bracken covered north-eastern flank of the hill has been subjected to ploughing of similar appearance, apparently to improve the quality of the pasture. Alternatively, the ploughing within the outer circuit may be a small vegetable plot associated with the seasonal occupation of an adjacent bothy built on a mound overlying the outer circuit, perhaps the temporary abode of a local shepherd in the 19th century. Two plots of similar size and appearance, both associated with small bothies, have been identified in a sheltered dell just below the summit of Staw Hill and at the southern foot of the hill occupied by Ring Chesters, the latter previously interpreted as an example of cord rig overlying an earlier cultivation terrace (Gates 2000, 17).

Cairns, built by walkers from the 19th century onwards, pose an awkward question for those tasked with managing and conserving hillforts, for it is arguable that they should be treated as the latest episode in the sequence of modifications experienced by hillforts. In the case of certain other types of relatively modern remains, it is certainly possible to argue for their retention. On Ring Chesters, for example, a roughly circular arrangement, 1.5 m in diameter, of flat stones embedded in the turf is surrounded by a series of stones set on edge; there are clear signs that the feature has been disturbed. Understandably, since this lies within one of the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age houses and is lent the appearance of antiquity by the signs of disturbance, the feature has been interpreted as a prehistoric hearth (English Heritage 1994). However, detailed survey on the ground shows that it lies too far off-centre within the building to have held a fire without risking the destruction of the roof. Furthermore, examination of the plans of the hillfort made by MacLauchlan and the Ordnance Survey in 1860 reveal that this was the point used by both to set up their theodolites (MacLauchlan 1867; Ordnance Survey 1866). As such a marker, the feature may well have been subject to repeated re-excitation by the Ordnance Survey up until the time of the establishment of the National Grid. In passing, it is interesting to note that the Ordnance Survey sometimes constructed annular earthworks around their triangulation points, particularly where there was a risk of the marker being dislodged by ploughing. In this instance, it is possible that the penannular bank of the Late Iron Age/Roman Iron Age roundhouse was deliberately singled out for its resemblance to such earthworks, though it seems highly unlikely that there was any perceived risk of plough damage.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, the hillforts of the Cheviots have been subjected to so many field and aerial surveys by so many accomplished archaeologists that at first impression there would seem to be very limited scope for further advances in understanding based on application of the same techniques. Yet this has proved to be far from the truth. The English Heritage investigations have employed a contextual approach to the study of the monuments themselves, in which patterns observed in the wider landscape have coloured the investigators' expectations in analysing traces within the monument that might otherwise be disregarded. This dialectic

approach has led to a number of significant improvements in understanding, of individual sites, of some of the wider issues pertinent to hillforts, and of the whole development of this archaeologically outstanding landscape.

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