

## **Analytical surveys of Holmbury and Hascombe hillforts**

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*Analytical survey of the two Middle Iron Age hillforts located on the greensand ridge of western Surrey at Holmbury and Hascombe after vegetation clearance has added detail to pre-existing knowledge of their morphology and will serve as a baseline against which any further damage can be assessed.*

### **Geology and topography**

Both Hascombe and Holmbury Hills lie on the Hythe Beds of the Lower Greensand which, between Guildford and Dorking, form a ridge higher than the chalk of the North Downs: the gentle, north-facing dip-slope above the valleys of the Bramley Wey and the Tillingbourne contrasts with the abrupt drop of over 150m to the clays of the Low Weald (fig 1). Hythe Beds contain both soft sandstone and harder bands of chert, which resist erosion and cap most high points. This greensand ridge carries an acid, infertile podzol that supports heathland vegetation with heathers, heaths, gorse and bracken predominating. In some areas stands of conifers have been planted, and occasional oak, whitebeam and rowan (mountain ash) survive, while cessation of use for grazing has allowed birch to become pervasive. Bilberries, locally known as hurts, are widespread and have given the name Hurtwood to the area.

Holmbury Hill is a south-facing spur on the scarp slope of the greensand ridge with an elevation of 261m OD and extensive views westwards towards Blackdown, at the western edge of the Weald Basin, and southwards to the South Downs and the English Channel. To the north the view encompasses a considerable stretch of the North Downs, and beyond that to the Chilterns, but to the east Leith Hill which, at 295m OD is higher, obstructs the view. The hillfort (TQ 104 430) encompasses the highest point of the eastern portion of the spur, which lies just within its western rampart, although the western portion of the high ground is outside the enclosure.

Hascombe Hill is situated at the southern end of a ridge, some 1400m long, which extends southwards from the main greensand ridge and bounds the western side of the Bramley Wey valley. This flat-topped ridge, a notable landform within its locality, has extensive views to the east and south, and to the north can be seen the long, level silhouette of the Hog's Back – part of the North Downs. The view eastwards, back along the scarp slope of the greensand, includes Holmbury and Leith Hills, while that southwards encompasses both the ridge representing the watershed between the south-flowing river Arun and the north-flowing river Wey, and the chalk of the South Downs. However, the view to the west is blocked by the high ground of Holloways Heath. The hillfort itself (TQ 004 386) occupies the high point at the end of the ridge, at 198m OD, but a small knoll lies to its south-east, separated from the summit by a shallow valley.

### **Analytical survey and interpretation of Holmbury hillfort**

Following clearance of the interior and partial clearance of the surrounding slopes, the visible earthworks were surveyed over the winters of 2005/6, 2006/7 and 2007/8. A framework of control points was provided (by David Field and Graham Brown, English Heritage) using a Trimble 5600 Geodimeter EDM and offsets from tapes placed between these points were used to complete the survey. Some areas, particularly on the south-western and western slopes, could not be subjected to detailed survey because of remaining rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) growth and the presence of fallen trees; it is acknowledged that regrowth of birch saplings and the presence of opportunistic herbaceous plant growth in the interior will have prevented recognition of fine detail.

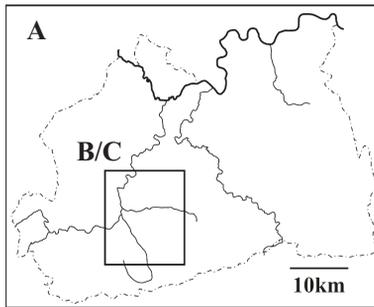
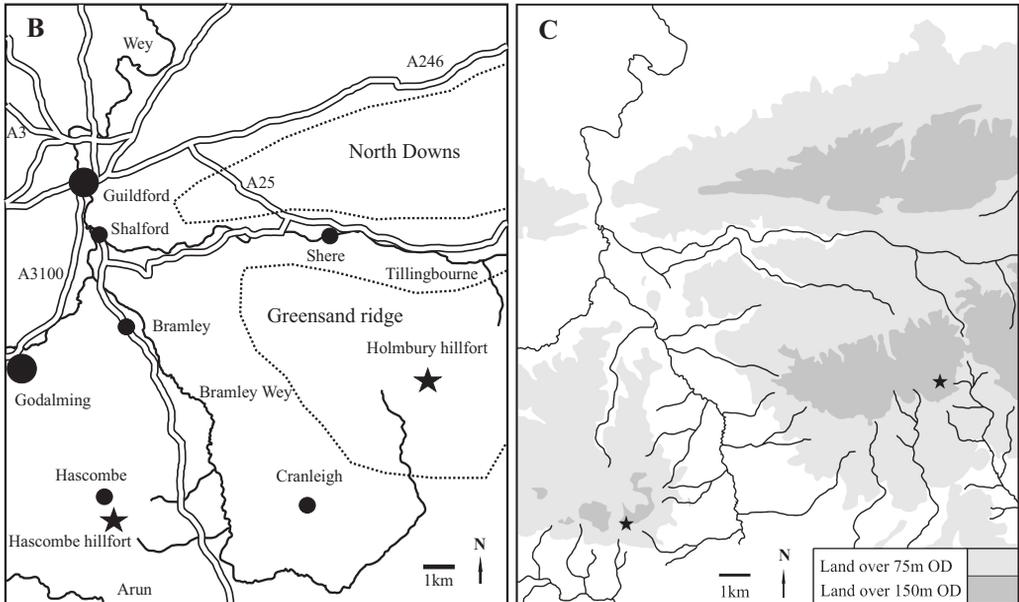


Fig 1 Holmbury and Hascombe hillforts. A–B: location maps; the dotted line on B shows land over 100m OD. C: topographical position of the hillforts (stars). The watercourses are shown in their present positions although they will have altered over time.



The survey results are shown in figure 2 and depict an enclosure measuring *c* 200m north–south and 150m east–west: a full analysis is in the archive report (Hooker & English 2008). The letters in the following description refer to figure 2.

The northern and western sides of the enclosure face relatively flat land, while those to the south and east were positioned at the top and along the sides of steep scarp slopes; these different aspects were addressed by very different types of boundary. On the western side natural variations in ground level have been utilised so that two substantial banks and ditches were created with less labour than would otherwise have been necessary. The inner bank (a) rises only slightly above the level of the land enclosed, although the height of the rampart is visually exaggerated from within the enclosure by the natural slope down towards the east. A modern path runs along the top of this rampart. The inner ditch (b) has been dug into a natural downward fold; on the outer edge of this ditch a terrace apparently half-way up the outer bank (c) is, in effect, a berm on the natural land surface between the inner ditch and the outer bank. This was clearly shown when a section was excavated across the western boundary (Thompson 1979, fig 10); the widths of the various features in the published section drawing were exaggerated because the trench was set diagonally across the complex. For most of its length the western side was completed by the addition of an outer ditch (d), again taking advantage of the natural downward fold. For the southern portion, which addresses level ground to the north of the modern entrance, a third, outer, bank (e) was constructed, but this does not continue along the steep scarp slope to its south.

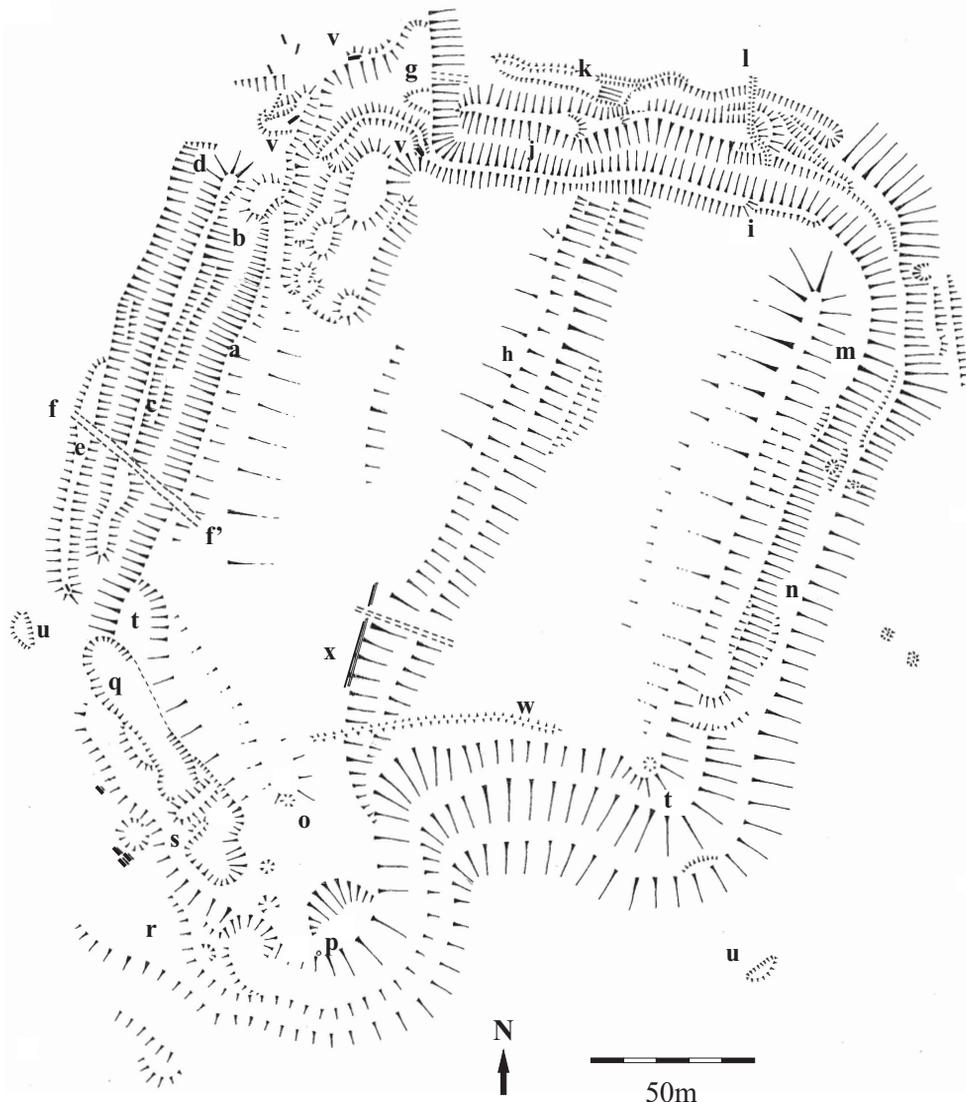


Fig 2 Holmbury and Hascombe hillforts. Survey of Holmbury hillfort.

At the north-western corner, the line of the earthworks has been damaged extensively by quarrying and, although some original structure may remain, it is not possible to identify this with any certainty. In addition to the quarrying, a modern bridle path (f-f') enters from the west to join the path along the top of the inner bank. This, and the 'causeway' (g) discussed below, will be further considered when the question of the position of an entrance into the enclosure is addressed.

The northern boundary of the enclosure comprises two substantial banks and ditches. Both banks heighten in stages towards the west; while it is not possible from this work to say whether these represent different phases of construction, the aim may have been to carry the line of the rampart over the variation in natural ground level caused by the central scarp (h). The inner bank has only a single change in height (i) well to the east of the central scarp,

but the outer bank is stepped at four points along its length. The full width of the inner ditch (j) cuts through the hard stratum of rock underlying the central scarp but the outer ditch narrows at this point to form a pinch point (k). However, to the west of the central scarp a further stratum of chert is visible on the surface as a remnant of a north/south scarp (g). Neither of the ditches cuts through this hard stratum and the outer bank terminates at its foot. To the west the inner bank is disturbed by quarrying. Despite these ramparts, the lower eastern portion of the enclosure is easily overlooked from higher ground to the north.

The minor bank (l) crossing the outer bank and ditch and other lengths running parallel to and outside the outer ditch represent the boundary between Blackheath and Wotton Hundreds and Shere and Ockley manors and parishes. This arrangement represents an intrusion by Wotton Hundred into Blackheath; the situation is further complicated by the existence of small areas of Cranleigh and Ewhurst parishes (both in Blackheath Hundred) and Ockham parish (Woking Hundred) set against the hundredal boundary between Wotton and Blackheath (Malden 1902; Blair 1991, fig 6). The reason for this configuration is uncertain but is likely to be a recognition of the hillfort as a place of importance in the Late Saxon landscape.

At the north-eastern corner the earthworks turn to a position on top of a steep scarp slope. Again taking advantage of a natural stratum of hard rock, the inner bank now appears as a relatively minor construction with, outside it, a flat terrace (m) that has as its outer edge a vertical rock-cut face. This face, exposed when a root plate pulled away from it after strong winds felled a large tree (Hooker & English 2008), may exemplify the type of construction on the eastern and southern boundaries of the enclosure. There are slight indications of a ditch below this cut at its northern end, but any suggestion of the presence of ditches on this and the southern side must remain speculative. Below the cut, a path runs along a broad terrace (n) and there is little evidence of an outer bank. At the edge of the path a slope enhanced beyond the natural land surface may result from erosion products masking a further vertical cut. It is worth noting that, despite the extensive quarrying of this stratum of hard rock to the north, and the relatively good track leading down towards Holmbury St Mary, damage to the eastern boundary of the enclosure is minor.

The southern part of the hillfort is located right on the edge of the scarp slope with its eastern portion forming a south-east-facing bowl, while the western half, where a chert band has resisted erosion, juts out towards the Weald. The hillfort limits are marked by three earthworks, the exact nature of which has been masked by slippage of sand. They may comprise lines of bank and ditch, or be a succession of cut faces and terraces – without excavation it is not possible to draw firm conclusions but the latter suggestion seems most likely. Although bands of chert occur frequently within the Upper Greensand the degree to which they form an isolated ‘nose’ (o) here, overlooking the Weald to the west, south and east seems unusual for this part of Surrey. Below the tip of the ‘nose’ there is a spring (p), possibly resulting from a perched water table. This band of chert has been quarried extensively, particularly from its western exposure where the Stone Pit (q) has destroyed much of the original construction. However, all three of the terraces can be traced around and below the ‘nose’ and along the south-west flank of the hill, the lowest until it becomes lost in dense rhododendron which, together with the steepness of the scarp, prevented survey. The upper terrace appears to continue round the south-western corner and to be joined by the track from Deacon’s Gate (r) to provide access for carts along the edge of the Stone Pit. A small extension from that track into the southern portion of the Stone Pit (s) may have provided a turning point for the carts. As well as the Stone Pit numerous small quarries are located on this portion of the hill. All the terracing on this aspect occurs below the top of the natural slope; unless the Stone Pit has destroyed a further line of earthworks, on the south-west corner there would have been a steep drop of c 4–5m between the interior of the hillfort and the first terrace.

At both the south-western and south-eastern corners of the enclosure, widened and flattened areas are located (t–t). At the former, this is above the uppermost terrace and would have given a wide view to the west and south, and at the latter it is on the second, middle terrace with a view to the south and east. In addition, small crescentic terraces have been

cut into the hillside (u–u), outside and below the enclosure earthworks, at the south-western and south-eastern corners of the hill. From this non-invasive survey it is not possible to say whether these features are contemporary with the hillfort.

The dominant feature of the interior of the hillfort is the central scarp (h). The hillfort was constructed across a band of chert, running north–south and resulting in the ground level of the western half lying *c* 6m above that of the eastern half. Although clearly a natural feature in origin, the sharp break in slope observed along the entire length of the scarp raises the possibility that it may have been enhanced artificially. Any such enhancement may be contemporary with the hillfort but is more likely to have resulted from later ploughing of the flat eastern portion of its interior. Its presence is likely to have been inconvenient in terms of utilisation of the space within the enclosure and, as has already been noted, renders the western portion of the interior visible from outside the ramparts. However, it does create a small, high spur jutting out over the Low Weald at the southern extreme of the hillfort and, particularly since the higher spur of Leith Hill to the immediate east was not used, this feature, which results in an easily recognisable skyline when viewed from the south, may have been important in the selection of this site.

Evidence of relatively recent military activity exists in a number of slit trenches cut into the earthworks of the hillfort and on the slopes below them (v–v). A slight bank can be traced from west to east towards the southern side of the interior (w) and is of unknown, but probably relatively recent, origin. A narrow ditch (x) was cut on either side of the main path across the centre of the interior at the turn of the millennium in an attempt to prevent walkers diverting from an eroding slope of loose rock and causing a wider area of damage.

Outside the area of the detailed survey and to the north of the hillfort a flat area, bounded to the east and west by high ridges, abuts the northern ramparts of the enclosure. At its low point is a pool of water, artificially lined in its present form, but shown on 19th century maps including the OS 25-inch surveyed in 1871, and possibly ancient in origin. From the ridge to the east of this bowl there is uninterrupted visibility into the lower, eastern portion of the interior of the hillfort, and from anywhere within the bowl the central scarp appears, wrongly, to mark the western boundary of the enclosure. This bowl, some 100m wide x 200m long, contains another pond at its northern end, from where the ground drops away, abruptly at first, and then gently down the dip-slope. The far northern end has been damaged extensively by quarrying and it is not possible to judge the likelihood of this pond having existed prior to its present, embanked, state.

### **Analytical survey and interpretation of Hascombe hillfort**

The survey took place over the winter of 2008/9 following clearance of vegetation from most of the interior of the enclosure. Some areas – particularly the south-eastern portion of the interior, which had not been cleared of dense vegetation and portions of the slopes covered by wind-felled trees and subsequent opportunistic regeneration – could not be subjected to detailed survey. It is acknowledged that this will have prevented recognition of fine detail in those areas. A framework of control points was provided (by David and Audrey Graham), using a Topcon GTS-212 total station, and offsets from tapes placed between these points were used to survey the earthworks of the hillfort and the location of these points checked using a Garmin eTrex personal navigator. The wider context was surveyed using a combination of tapes laid by compass from fixed points marked on relevant large-scale OS maps and point location using a Garmin eTrex personal navigator. The area between the knoll and the hillfort, where earthworks on the slopes had been created to join these two parts, is tree covered and the survey involved over-long tape traverses – it is recognised that some accuracy was lost in this area.

The letters in the following description refer to those on figure 3 and a full analysis has also been reported. The earthworks bound a roughly trapezoidal enclosure with the long axis lying north-east/south-west, and having internal dimensions of *c* 220 x 120m.

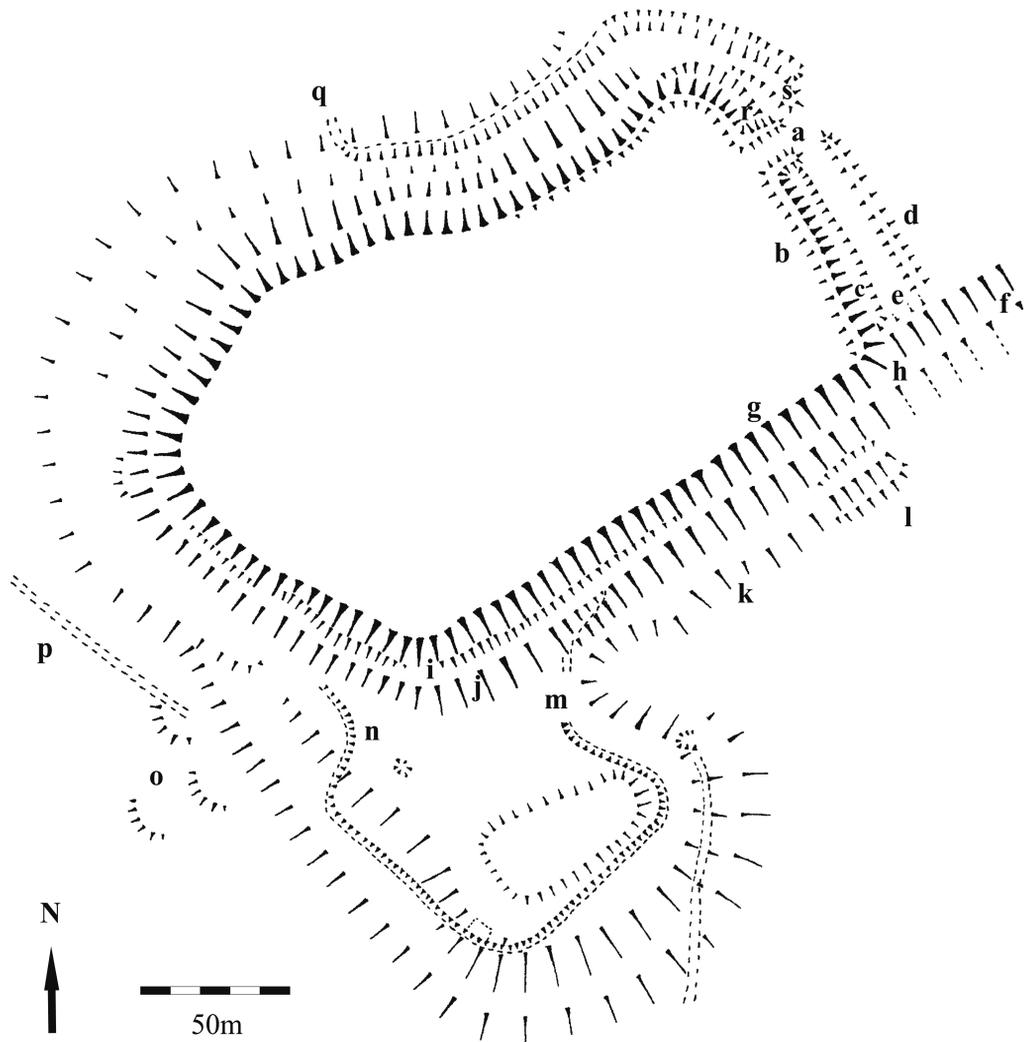


Fig 3 Holmbury and Hascombe hillforts. Survey of Hascombe hillfort.

The position of the enclosure is governed by the shape of the end of the ridge, except where the north-eastern arm of the earthworks cuts at right angles across the length of the ridge. This arm contains the entrance (a), which is set off-centre towards the north-west, and has short out-turned banks on either side. There is considerable disturbance in this area due mainly to the excavations in the 1970s (Thompson 1979). To the south-east of the entrance the ramparts comprise a major bank (b) and external ditch (c). The origin of a further slight bank set back towards the north-east (d) is uncertain and it may not be contemporary with the main enclosure.

The area between the ditch and this outer bank is low lying and bounded towards the south-east by a natural stratum of hard rock, effectively forming a bowl (e) that is frequently water-filled. This band of hard rock has been cut into on its outer side to form a continuation of the track around the hillfort towards the north-east (f). On top of the inner rampart at its eastern corner is a dog's grave dated 2008.

No inner bank can now be seen along either the south-eastern, south-western or north-western arms of the hillfort but a steep slope (g), probably representing an artificial

enhancement of the natural slope, descends to a wide trackway (h). In places an increase in the degree of incline between this inner scarp and the inner side of the trackway (i) represents the top of a rock-cut ditch, the presence of which has been proven by excavation (Winbolt 1932). Below the trackway is a steep slope (j) that could be interpreted as a rock-cut scarp where exposed by the root plates of fallen trees, and below that a further scarp (k) that appears man-made but could possibly be of natural origin.

Just south-west of the corner this lower scarp has been overlain by two cut terraces about 20m long, the lower of which has a slightly curved profile (l). These terraces, each some 3–5m wide, have been cut into the hill-slope and appear relatively recent in origin. The broad, flat trackway continues along the south-eastern flank of the hill but diverting from it, downhill, is a lesser path (m), which leads to the shoulder of ground between the end of the ridge bearing the hillfort and the detached knoll to its south.

A path from the detached knoll (n) joins the main track close to the southern corner, and between the start and end of this path there is only one cut scarp, that immediately below the main track. As the low ground between these two high points drops away to the south-western flank of the hill, the two lower scarps, both of which are visible on the outer slopes of the knoll, are again found below the main track cut into the steep flanks of the end of the ridge.

Below these scarps three crescentic platforms have been cut into the side of the hill (o), each about 15m wide x 3–5m deep. There is no obvious approach to these platforms; one possible explanation for their presence would be that they provided small flat areas for the planting of specimen trees. Although nothing of note survived on them at the time of the survey, decorative planting on the knoll is described below. A further path terraced into the slope approaches the top of the ridge along the south-western flank of the ridge but its full route could not be traced (p). Another crescentic platform was located immediately below the western corner of the hillfort; in this area only one cut scarp could be found below the main trackway. It may be that the second scarp never existed or exposure of this quadrant to the erosive forces of wind and rain may have destroyed it.

The north-western arm of the enclosure is also bounded by a steep scarp leading down to the trackway and again there are signs that the material from banks has been used to infill a ditch, although this side has not been subjected to archaeological investigation to prove this. Below the trackway a total of three cut scarps can be traced along the side of the ridge, although at the northern end of this arm an apparently more recent rock-cut path masks portions of the lower two scarps. A total examination of this side of the hill was not possible because of heavy cover by rhododendron and fallen beech trees, so minor features may therefore have been overlooked.

At the northern corner of the hillfort the nature of the original earthworks has been masked by those of paths that mainly relate to 19th century landscaping. The path that climbs the western flank of the ridge from Hascombe village divides as it approaches the entrance of the hillfort. One branch becomes the track overlying the infilled ditch and circumnavigates the hillfort; the other branch leads into a rock-cut terrace way that runs westwards part-way along the northern slope and then turns northwards to take a steep route to the bottom of the hill (q).

The inner bank of the hillfort survives at the northern corner and outside it the ditch also survives along the north-eastern arm (r) to a point where it is terminated by the out-turned bank on the north side of the entrance. Outside this ditch there is a bank that may represent the remnants of an original outer bank to the hillfort (s).

The knoll to the south of the hillfort has already been mentioned and the rock-cut terrace way and scarps surrounding it described. On the steep northern slope there are a number of small quarries, presumably exploiting strata of the harder cherty sandstone, which is the only usable building stone available locally. There are no tracks approaching these quarries that could have been used by a horse and cart; it seems likely that, as observed at Holmbury Hill (Hooker & English 2008), the stone was simply rolled down the hill.

The top of the knoll is surrounded by a low bank enclosing an area not dissimilar in shape and orientation to that of the main hillfort. Whether this is a coincidence governed by the topography of the knoll or whether the similarity results from a conscious and deliberate mimicry is hard to say. Joseph Godman, who purchased the Park Hatch estate including the site of Hascombe hillfort in 1814, displayed the fashionable antiquarian interest of the period and collected worked flints from the hill (*VCH* 3, 102). Perhaps this enclosure was his homage to the past monument beside it. Both the summit of the knoll, within the enclosure, and the area between it and the hillfort, carry a number of specimen trees including yew and *Wellingtonia gigantea*. This latter tree was first introduced to Britain *c* 1854 and features in many planting schemes of the period. The summit of the knoll – with its spectacular views, steep sides particularly to the north where there is evidence of spring sapping, and its exotic foliage – would have provided a notable feature both to view from Park Hatch and to visit.

## Discussion

The similarities between Hascombe and Holmbury hillforts are manifold. One characteristic that is overwhelmingly apparent, even if difficult to fully quantify, is the skilled use of the natural topography within and outside the enclosures both to minimise the labour needed for their construction and to use significant places in the landscape to their best advantage. Far from being refuges hastily constructed in response to a Caesarian attack (Thompson 1979), these were carefully planned and highly visible statements within their local environment.

Both hillforts are now known to date to the Middle Iron Age with the ridge at Hascombe having been used during the Late Bronze Age (Seager Thomas 2010). The clear concern expressed by their topographical position is visibility over, and from, the Low Weald – the latter indicated by selection of positions with distinctive profiles and enhanced by cutting exposures of greensand facing into the sun. A role as ‘frontier posts’ for exploitation of Wealden resources, timber, iron and grazing, possibly on a seasonal basis, has been suggested (Hanworth 1987). Possible links between Wealden hillforts and iron production in the Middle Iron Age has recently been discussed (Lea & English 2015); both Hascombe and Holmbury hillforts may have fulfilled roles in that relationship.

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