

## Ros Castle Iron Age Hillfort, Chillingham

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Ros Castle, at NU 0811 2532 in Chillingham parish, is a univallate fort which occupies the summit area of a hill, 316 metres above mean sea level, at the south end of an undulating ridge forming a part of the cuesta of Fell Sandstone extending north-south. The views are extensive, overlooking the valley of the Till to the Cheviot Hills to the west, and the coastal plain to the east. To the south, there is a drop to a saddle some 60m below the summit; this is occupied by the modern road and a series of hollowways across the sandstone ridge from east to west indicating a route of some antiquity. On all sides except the south and south-east the slopes descend to a broad natural terrace about 15-20m below the hill top.

The site is crossed by a wall delineating the east boundary of Chillingham Park. The greater part of the fort falls within the park, and is covered by dense, mature heather, and some bracken, a condition which impairs close examination of the archaeological details. This sector, being in private hands and not open to the public, has suffered no great depredations in recent times. This contrasts with that part east of the park wall which is owned and administered by the National Trust. The Trust encourages public access to the hill top and this has created some severe erosion problems. It was to address this problem that a plan of the fort at 1:500 scale was prepared by the Newcastle office of RCHME as an aid to the management of the site at the request of the Trust with a view to minimising damage. This plan is reproduced here at reduced scale (fig. 1).

The fort is ovoid in shape, measuring internally 170m north-south by a maximum of 90m transversely towards the north end. The area enclosed is about 1.28 hectares (3.16 acres) in extent. The single rampart is a highly visible feature on the landscape when approached or viewed from a distance. It follows what is in effect a false crest between 4.4 and 8.8m below the summit proper. It survives either as a bank, 0.3 to 0.4m high internally, or as an outward facing scarp which stands 2.4 to 4.0m above a terrace or ditch. A noteworthy feature of the fort is the strength and visual impressiveness of the original entrance in the east in comparison with the rest of the fort: the entrance will be described separately.

At least ten stones, from 0.6 to 1.2m long, suggestive of an outer face, protrude from the outward-facing scarp to a maximum height of 0.45m: these are positioned about 1.0 to 1.5m below the top of the bank or scarp to make best use of the natural contours of the hill. In only one place is more than a single course visible.

Only three possible inner facing stones are visible, and these are slabs set on edge on the east side. They measure respectively 0.7m long, 0.1m high and 0.05m thick, 0.75 by 0.25 by 0.15m, and, next to the path breaking through the rampart, 0.4m by 0.17 by 0.08m. At the latter point, where erosion has exposed the rubble wall core, and also 15m to the north, the survival of opposing outer and inner faces suggest a width here of approximately 3.0m and 2.2m respectively, but this takes no account of outward displacement of the stones.

For most of the circuit the external ditch is represented by a fairly smooth and regular terrace, 1.0m to 2.5m wide, except where slumping has obscured it. In those places where it survives as a ditch with a distinct counterscarp, the ends are quite sharp, giving the impression of linear scoops. These ditched sections tend to occur in those areas where the natural slopes are less steep, though not exclusively so. At the southern extremity, just west of the park wall where the hill-slopes flatten out, the counterscarp is 1.0m high, although elsewhere it is a mere 0.1m to 0.3m high (save at the entrance).

On the south-east side two massive exposures of rock have been integrated into the defences. Between these, where the slopes are particularly steep, the rampart and the ditch have disappeared. This could be a result of slumping, or there may have been later quarrying here.

Immediately inside the defences and around most of the periphery of the fort there is a series of quarry scoops which create a level area of varying width behind the defences. The accumulation of hill-wash has smoothed some of these scoops, and would account for the apparent absence of a rear scarp bank to the rampart in places. They are presumably contemporary with the fort, but in the southern arc, to the east of the junction of the defences with the park wall, the quarries are much deeper (up to 1.5m) and sharper than elsewhere. They have encroached upon the rampart in places and some at least are clearly later; they may be associated with the construction of the park wall or its later extension in c. 1800.

No trace of hut platforms can be seen in the interior, but the vegetation over much of the fort is so dense that identification would be difficult. Exposed in an area of erosion immediately to the north-west of the entrance are five slabs in a line 0.95m long, 0.05m wide and not more than 0.1m high. It is unclear what purpose these served, or indeed whether they are a natural formation.

The entrance, which is very strongly defended for a univallate fort, occurs on the east side at the easiest point

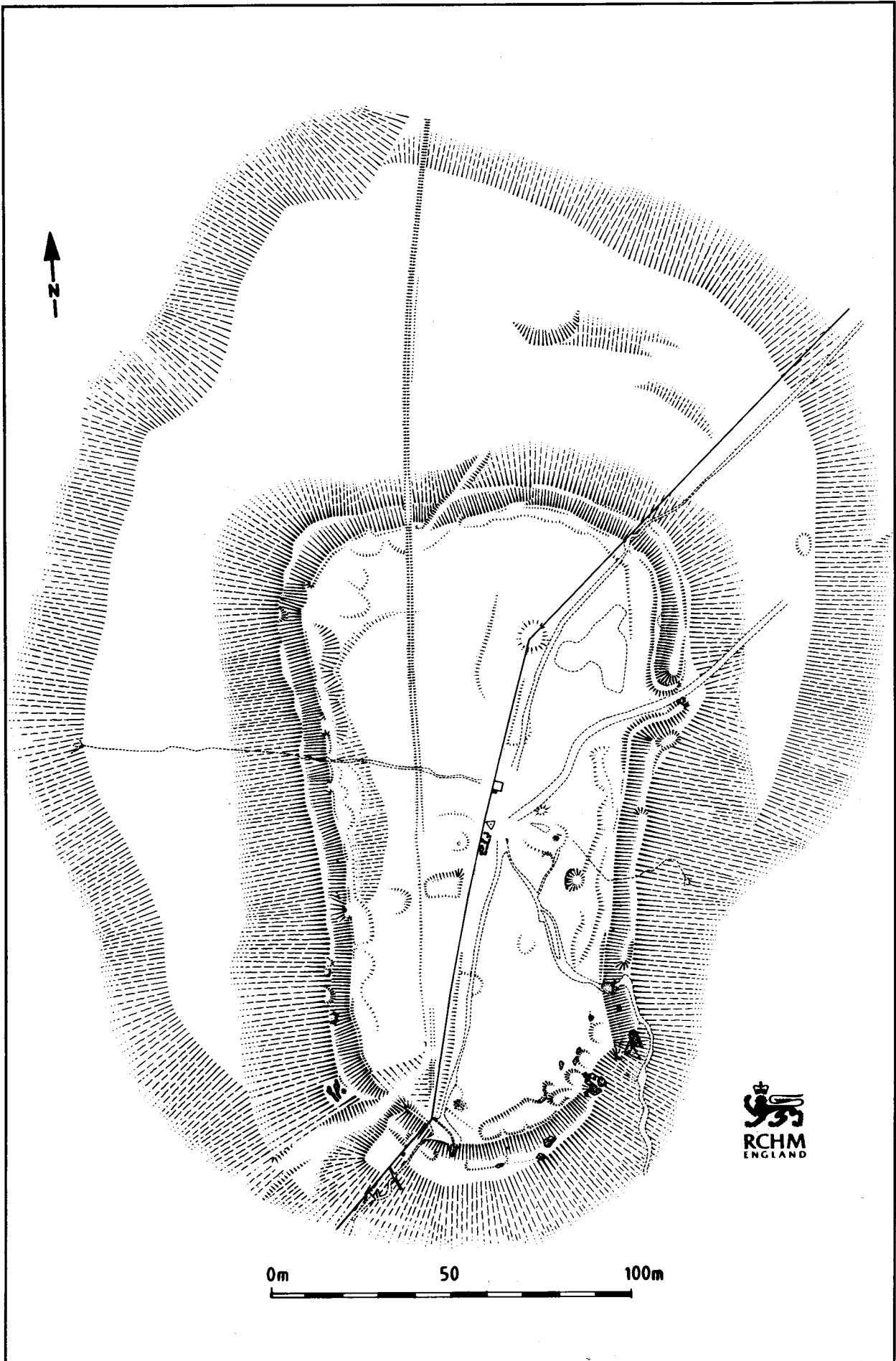


Fig. 1. The Ros Castle Survey.

of access. It is unusual in that the ends are everted, the south wing being longer and curved so that the approach into the fort, up a fairly steep incline, would be angled from the north-east. On either side of the passage the bank survives to a maximum height of 1.0m. At the end of the longer south wing is a group of stones, one of which appears to be *in situ* and a part of the lining for the passage. The ditch at either side of the entrance is in good condition, some 3.3 to 4.0m below the summit of the rampart bank. That on the north side deepens gradually as it approaches the entrance and terminates on the wing wall. There is evidence for a slight bank outside it, not more than 0.2m high. This is the only place where such an outer bank as opposed to a scarp has been identified. On the opposite side of the gate, the ditch, in effect a linear scoop 7.0m long and 1.0m deep, follows the flanking wall for a short distance before ending abruptly. It continues southwards for a short distance as a less pronounced feature before terminating.

Everted entrances in univallate forts are uncommon. Forde-Johnstone (1976, 69, 230-3) cites several examples in the south of England and Wales with out-turned entrances, notable Crickley Hill in Gloucestershire. Weatherby Castle, Dorset, (RCHME 1970, 180) also provides a useful parallel. In both cases one wing predominates and is curving as at Ros Castle, but only at Crickley Hill does the outer ditch follow the out-turn. In Northumberland, the north-west entrance to the outer defences of Blawearie fort, 3.5km to the south of Ros Castle, turn outwards at the ends of the ditch (Hope-Dodds, 1935, 302, fig 16), and a similar arrangement occurs at the north-east gate to Blackbrough Fort, Roxburgh (RCAHMS, 1956, 162, no 302), but in both examples the outward projection is much less pronounced than that at Ros Castle.

In the northern extremity of the fort a later hollow-way ascends from the natural terrace diagonally into the interior cutting across the terrace and rampart. In the south arc there is another more pronounced break, cutting through the defences some 1.4m below the level of the ditch, which is 3.0m below the summit of the rampart bank at this point. MacLauchlan (1864) shows on his survey of 'Ross Castle' of 1858 a spring inside the fort and a stream issuing from it through this cut, but there is now no trace of either feature. It may be that it represents a second entrance, but this can neither be verified nor disproved: the relationship between defences and the break is not distinct.

A survey of Chillingham Park dated 1799 shows the park boundary at Ros Castle and a proposed eastward extension. The latter is the present park wall, 1.9m high, which crosses fort albeit on a slightly different line to that proposed. A somewhat inaccurate Estate Map, dated to c1820 but undoubtedly post-1801 (NRO; Chillingham Papers no 82) shows the new boundary only, as does the Tithe Map of 1840. The earlier boundary, crossing the fort from north to south, survives as a heather-covered bank, 0.3m in maximum height, which fades as it approaches the existing park wall where presumably it was more thoroughly robbed.

Craster (1935, 232-3) mentions three carved stones in the vicinity of the fort. These probably represent markers for the post-1799 extension to Chillingham Park. Only two of these stones could be found: one at NU 0807 2523, and another at NU 0841 2563 (not included on plan).

The Ordnance Survey first edition six inch map of 1860 shows the triangulation point to the west of the park wall. At this point there is a small depression, 0.2m deep, which may well be its site. The present pillar, now damaged, is to the east of the wall.

In 1549 a list of beacons includes an example at 'Rosse Castell'. On January 31st 1804 the beacon was fired in error, triggering the famed 'False Alarm' (Dixon, 1895, 15, 34-6). MacLauchlan (1864) shows on his survey a beacon to the east of the wall, in approximately the same position as the present modern cairn which is superimposed on a slight rise in the ground. This may be the remains of the beacon stance.

## Acknowledgements

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