

THE IRON AGE PROMONTORY FORT AT WILLAPARK, BOSCASTLE

SX 09125 91252

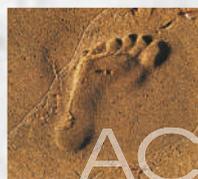
An archaeological survey

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On behalf of:
The National Trust

Document No: ACD417/2/0

Date: October 2013



AC archaeology

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Summary

Earthworks and topographic features at Willapark, near Boscastle, Cornwall (SX 09125 91252) have been surveyed and photographically recorded as part of the Unlocking our Coastal Heritage project.

In addition to an earthwork rampart, suggestive of a small iron age promontory fort, a number of scattered earthworks had been previously identified within the peninsula through aerial reconnaissance and other means but without ground verification. A terrestrial survey was therefore necessary for interpretation and future management of the site by the National Trust, who requested the survey. A 1:1000 scale GPS survey of the earthworks was carried out in March 2012 with additional fieldwork in September 2012 following removal of impenetrable scrub. This was annotated in the field to produce a digital hachured plan which has been supplemented by topographical and height data provided from rectified aerial photography and LiDAR

The results of the survey show that construction of the earthwork rampart, comprising a bank and ditch which cuts across the neck of the headland, may have been abandoned before completion, as the southern end becomes progressively shallower before fading to become imperceivable near the summit of the slope. It is also likely that the existing rampart has origins as a geological feature, later modified to form a bank and ditch.

Earthwork cuttings recorded on the northern slope of the promontory have potential as platforms for round houses, perhaps contemporary with the incomplete rampart. However, some are heavily silted with sloping bases and may also be explained as earth slumping on the steep slope. At least one cutting is likely to have origins as an extractive pit of unknown date.

A series of mounds near the southeast end of the peninsula have been recorded as barrows but are probably best explained as pillow mounds in which rabbits were farmed in the post-medieval period.

The site and its various features are considered within a wider context of archaeological research at Cornish cliff castles.

1. INTRODUCTION (Figs 1-4)

1.1 Background to the survey

The new survey of Willapark has been undertaken at the request of the National Trust, who own and manage the site, as a part of the *Unlocking our Coastal Heritage* project. The aim is to improve the visitor experience along the South-West Coast Path as part of a Sustainable Rural Tourism theme, funded by European grant aid through the Rural Development Agency (RDPE). This is one of a number of archaeological sites selected on the basis that funded research will further aid their conservation, enhancement and future management. The chosen sites are all adjacent to the South West Coast Path (SWCP) and are either currently at risk of being irreparably damaged or lost, or could be made more accessible to the public. Willapark is also a significant geological and heritage feature within the Cornwall AONB, Pentire Point to Widemouth section (Figs 1 and 2).

The survey will act as a means to fully record evidence of past human intervention within the designated area, including some previously unrecorded features, and offer up-to-date interpretation of the site and its context. This data will in turn be used to inform future management

of the heritage assets and assist with public enjoyment of the site. Willapark is a frequent detour for walkers passing along the (SWCP) seeking the view from the summit, few of whom may realise they are entering a prehistoric site when they do so.

1.2 Location, topography, geology and vegetation

Willapark (SX 09125 91252) comprises a rock promontory made up of mudstones and siltstones from the Boscastle formation (British Geological Survey online 2012). It protrudes west-northwest from the coastal cliffs of north Cornwall, just to the southwest of the small serpentine inlet that forms the mouth of the River Valency and contains the harbour and village of Boscastle.

The extent of the promontory from the base of its northwest cliffs to the neck of land by which it is attached to the mainland on the southeast, is approximately 300m and the width at sea level is approximately 245m. The highest point is 98m aOD (Fig. 3). On the south corner an additional small peninsula of slightly lowered land extends for 125m. This peninsula is defined on the east side by a narrow cove known as Western Blackapit, while on the north side of the main promontory a much larger inlet takes the name of Eastern Blackapit. The space between these two coves forms the neck of the promontory.

The central and most accessible portion of Willapark is a narrow strip of land which rises gently from the eastern end and forms a plateau at the western summit. This ridge accommodates one of the modern footpaths that lead to the stone-built Coastguard lookout station. The latter sits on a flatish outcrop on the summit. The edge of the ridge and plateau is defined on the south and western sides by vertical cliffs with sheer drops of up to 30m, then very steep slopes leading down further craggy outcrops to the water's edge. These two flanks of the promontory are not accessible. The northern side comprises a very steep slope with a rise of 90m over a distance of 170m (gradient =1:1.8). Although this area is accessible, extreme caution is required, especially near the bottom of the main slope which steepens into a precipitous scarp terminating with near vertical outcrops.

Vegetation is varied but includes some grassland with heath species including heather and gorse but several areas are affected by scrub plants including bramble and blackthorn. The combination of these latter two and gorse has made certain areas impenetrable, including the whole of the upper ridge of the southern peninsula and patches of ground on the main promontory.

2 SURVEY METHODOLOGY (Fig. 4)

2.1 Pre-survey reconnaissance has included inspection of the Ordnance Survey (OS) 1-inch Old Series map (1813), OS 25-inch maps (1884, 1907, 1979), 2006 ortho-rectified aerial photographs and a digital ground model derived from 2007 LiDAR data. A number of undulations were observed on these sources which could be confirmed as evidence of human intervention or dismissed as geology or variable vegetation upon field reconnaissance. Several of these features had been observed by previous researchers though none had been ground verified (see section 3 below).

2.2 A 1:1000 scale survey of the earthworks was carried out in March 2012 with additional fieldwork in September 2012 following removal of impenetrable scrub. The survey was undertaken using dual-frequency GPS with a base station sited nearby on Forrabury Stitches. All archaeological features were recorded using this method and the resulting data downloaded onto a computer and processed to produce an AutoCad plan, which was later annotated in the field. For the finished illustration (Fig. 4), some components of the natural topography were also recorded with the GPS,

but the cliff top and bottom was digitized from 2006 ortho-rectified aerial photographs and the contours generated from 2009 LiDAR data (Courtesy of Channel Coastal Observatory).

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 A total of five monuments are currently recorded on the Cornwall & Scilly Historic Environment Record. Details of these, along with cross references to the National Monuments record and the National Trust Historic Buildings, Sites and Monuments Record is presented in Table 1 below.

CHER No.	NT HBSMR No.	NMR No.	Grid Ref (SX)	Type
56819			0929 9122	Hollow/ Extractive Pit
56820			0921 9119	Bronze Age barrow
60603	90035;	432078	092- 912-	Willapark Iron Age Cliff Castle/ Promontory Fort
56818			0918 9128	Hollow/ Extractive Pit
165783			093- 912-	Pillow Mound (Early Med)
170085	95351		0932 9113	Boundary (Iron Age 800BC to 42AD)

Table 1: known monuments within the survey area. C&SHER = Cornwall & Scilly Historic Environment Record, NTHBSMR = National Trust Historic Buildings, Sites and Monuments Record, and NMR = National Monument Record.

3.2 Surprisingly, both the promontory fort and the adjacent well-preserved medieval field system known as Forrabury Stitches (outside the current study area) have been paid little attention by archaeologists beyond recognition of their existence. Although some Cornish promontory forts have been examined in detail and collective overviews of the type have been attempted (see section 5 below), Willapark features little in such discussions. The only survey of the site so far is the OS 25-inch plan of the promontory, first surveyed for the 1884 edition. This was revised slightly on the 1979 edition but was the only archaeological feature to be depicted.

3.3 Several additional amorphous earthworks have been identified at various times from aerial photographs but until now, ground verification has not been attempted.

4. THE SURVEY (Fig. 4; Plates 1-4)

4.1 The rampart (Plates 1-2)

The major archaeological feature of Willapark is a cross-dyke bank and ditch or rampart which runs northeast to southwest across the steep northern slope of the promontory. This feature alone has led to Willapark being categorized as a promontory fort or cliff castle of the Iron Age, a type of which several others exist along the north Cornwall coast, notably The Rumps (Polzeath) and Trelvague Head (Newquay).

The rampart does not follow the shortest or easiest route across the neck of the promontory, as might be expected, which would commence from the innermost point of Eastern Blackapit, but its northernmost point is halfway along the inlet, terminating abruptly at the clifftop. The terrain it crosses is therefore far steeper than the more obvious choice of route, just a few metres to the east. Given that the inlet has eroded imperceptibly in the 128 years since the OS map of 1884 was surveyed, it seems unlikely that it has been subject to extensive coastal erosion since the rampart was constructed. It would appear therefore that the rampart's position further along the inlet was a deliberate choice.

The rampart comprises a single linear ditch with a parallel bank on the seaward side. The ditch has a rounded profile, probably silted, and is up to 9.3m wide by 0.81m deep. The very spread bank is up to 5m wide and 0.7m high. Both bank and ditch are at their strongest on the northeast end, near where the feature terminates abruptly at the cliff top. Nearer the summit of the slope the ditch becomes much slighter and the bank is barely visible, suggesting that this section was never completed. It was clearly intended for the ditch to connect in some way with cliffs on the southwest side of the promontory to provide a secure barrier. However, the area between the northern modern pathway and the summit, where the continuation of the rampart should lie, contains only a natural ridge which falls away into a gentle slope on the eastern side and where an artificial bank or ditch are both absent. This natural ridge does, however, follow approximately the axis of the rampart.

It has been alleged that the breach in the rampart through which the footpath traverses it, is the original entrance although no evidence is available to prove this. Indeed the sharp cut through of the sunken path and the abrupt squared terminal on the bank where met by the path would suggest the opposite and that this is a later breach.

4.2 Cliff Castle interior earthworks (Plate 3)

Of the accessible area on the promontory, which is delimited by the rampart and totals 1.95ha, the majority lies on the steep northern slope, severely limiting the nature of any past activities or the design and size of former structures contained within it. However, a number of earthworks on the upper portion of the slope have been identified by previous aerial surveys (see section 3 above). These comprise a series of terraced cuttings on the upper section of the slope (a-e) and a probable quarry or extractive pit (f).

Four earthwork cuttings, terraced into the slope may represent the location of former circular timber structures although their alternative origin as geological features or soil slumping should not be dismissed.

Three of the cuttings (a-c) are located in a cluster approximately 30m northwest of the rampart and just below the footpath (centred on SX 0918 9123). Each is defined by a curved scarp on the upslope side with a drop of between 1.3m and 1.5m forming the edge of an approximately circular stance. The lower sides of each stance are represented by only a slight break of slope, thereafter the natural gradient of the slope takes over. Each has probably been much reduced in size by soil build up and they are not level, with gradients of between 0.7m and 1m which would represent substantial slumping or silting but they could originally have had cleared or rock-cut level areas of 7.5 to 8m diameter, enough to support moderately-sized timber structures.

A fourth cutting (d) is located 40m northwest of a-c (SX 09129125) and has a back scarp of 1.7m and an overall measurement of 11m. The break of slope on the lower side forms into an apparent spoil heap of material excavated from the cutting but blends subtly back into the natural gradient at its lowest point. The clear area of the terrace could have been up to 7m diameter.

A further earthwork (e), which may represent the former location of human activity or a structure is sited on the lip of the north-facing precipice and looking out to sea (SX 0909 9130). The position is naturally slightly level, about 17m below the summit of the promontory and defined on the eastern side by large earthfast boulders. The cutting is formed by a 1m-deep semicircular scoop, with the open end facing the steep slope down to the sea. It has a maximum diameter of 8m. A nearby terrace, 3.5m to the southeast, also has a deliberately cut appearance and could be associated with this platform.

The most clearly-defined earthwork (f) within the cliff castle is less likely to have supported a structure due to the steep gradient of its interior and is probably a former extractive pit or quarry, as yet undated. It is located just to the west of platform d and comprises an open-ended cutting 16m long by 12m leading into the slope. The perimeter of the cutting is defined by a 1.3m-high scarp and it has an uneven interior made up of smaller scarps.

4.3 Mounds (Plate 4)

Four mounds are sited to the east and therefore outside the limits of the cliff castle. Three of the mounds have been previously recorded as barrows but later it was suggested they may be pillow mounds. A fourth mound appears to be previously unrecorded.

The mounds are divisible into two pairs, one pair on each side of the ridge. Of those on the southwest side (centred on SX 0918 9111) one (g) has the appropriate footprint for a pillow mound, being elongated with parallel sides and rounded ends. It is 10.3m long by up to 0.7m high. It is, however, located on a substantial slope and has no sign of a surrounding drainage ditch. Nearby, another mound (h) with a maximum base measurement of 11m by up to 2.4m high and with a flat top appears to be a sub-circular spoil mound set against the slope, which may have resulted from digging near the base of the outcrop.

To the northwest of the ridge, on similarly sloping ground, the other two mounds (centred on SX 0921 9118) are also unlikely to be barrows though both have potential as former pillow mounds. One (j) has a conventional elongated pillow mound form and is 15.5m long by 0.8m to 1m high. The second (k) is more circular in form with an approximate diameter of 10.3m by 1m – 1.2m high.

4.4 'Ancient' boundary

An agricultural boundary hedge runs in an approximately straight line between the two inlets of Eastern and Western Blackapit, separating the rough, sloping ground of Willapark from that of the improved, formerly cultivated ground of Forrabury Stitches. The current barrier, a Cornish hedge with battered sides, squared tops and herringbone pattern faces, appears to be a later addition but for much of its length sits atop an earlier earthen bank, similar to those which mark the divisions of the Stitches and certainly had origins as a component of the strip field system. Only the southern 40m of the boundary deviates from the earlier line to link up with the clifftop at Western Blackapit. The stone hedge was probably added later as a stock-proof barrier to prevent livestock grazed on Willapark straying into cultivated areas of the Stitches.

4.5 Concrete bases

Two concrete bases which acted as fixtures for iron structures are located just south of the lookout station. The largest is approximately 1.3m square. A further iron fixture is located in the edge of the upper outcrop near the lookout. Their purpose is unknown but oral or documentary evidence could shine some light on these features.

4.7 Quarry

Adjoining the boundary wall on the southern, inland end of the peninsula is a 25m-long linear cutting, oriented approximately north to south with a vertical rock face on the east side and a bank of spoil on the west. It was partly covered by vegetation at the time of survey. This is likely to be a small quarry from which stone was cut from an exposed outcrop, possibly to supply stone for the nearby field wall.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Research Context

Cliff castles make up a distinctive category of archaeological site, whose location and morphology is dependent on the equally distinctive fretwork nature of the coastlines where they are located. Apart from Cornwall, they exist in Devon, Scotland, Wales and Brittany in northern France. In an early summary of Cornish cliff castles, Cotton defined them thus:

a fortified site at which on two sides at least sea-cliffs and the sea serve as natural defences... The artificial defences consist of banks and ditches which are drawn across the neck of the peninsula, either in straight lines or in horseshoe shaped form... These defences may be univallate... simple multivallate or complex vallate. (Cotton 1959)

This author considered that cliff castles were originally occupied during the iron age though many were re-occupied during the Viking period and some as late as the medieval period. At the time of the publication only one Cornish univallate example had been excavated, at Maen near Sennen (Crofts 1955, 114).

Although since then several Cornish cliff castles have been investigated individually, as a group the research has been somewhat fragmented and no focussed study has been undertaken in the west of England. Several small excavations were carried out in the first half of the 20th century around West Penwith at Maen (Crofts 1955) and Gurnard's Head (Gordon 1940). Other small-scale excavations and surveys have been undertaken in recent decades by the Cornish Archaeology unit, always in mitigation of damage. Nevertheless the cumulative results of these and other investigations have provided baseline information that may be helpful in the interpretation of the others such as Willapark, although many assumptions have to be made in the process.

Traditionally cliff castles have either been seen as defensible fortress retreats used in times of conflict, or as coastal trade centres needing protection against raiders. Despite their distinctiveness, some authors have also considered that there is no reason to suspect their intended function varied in any way from the many other forms of Iron Age defended sites, including hillforts and hillslope enclosures. Indeed a general shortage of these latter forms in Cornwall may suggest that cliff castles or promontory forts, as they are also known, were the major defended form in that period and in this region (Todd 1987, 163).

Willapark is unusual in that the peninsula has little useful ground within it due to the steepness of the slopes and the underlying geology; only the northeast side can be accessed safely but still the gradient renders it difficult to imagine what structures may have existed there and to what purpose the area was put. In his general musings on the topic, regarding several cliff castles, Adam Sharpe posed the question, who in their right mind would retreat to these places? He cites examples and 'in each of these cases... the ramparts enclose areas of little more than rocky outcrop' (Sharpe 1992, 65-8). Peter Herring also paid attention to the sloping nature of many interiors but considered the most striking feature of these monuments is their vulnerability, often overlooked by rising ground, with unsubstantial defences and vulnerable to siege. He suggests instead they existed simply to provide 'adequate security to people and goods', probably on a seasonal basis (Herring 1994, 53).

5.2 The defences

Willapark has not been subjected to any recorded archaeological investigation. Its status as a cliff castle or promontory fort of probable Iron Age date has been established solely on the earthwork evidence of the incomplete bank and ditch.

The shallow soils and underlying geology of the Cornish coastline would have seriously hampered the digging of substantial ditches. Instead, rampart builders often relied on natural features such as gullies, ridges and fissures in the outcrops, reinforced deepening them or adding to them. Such is the case at The Rumps cliff castle, St Minver where excavation revealed that a stone revetted bank provided the strength with only a shallow ditch in front (Brooks 1974). At Gurnard's Head a broad natural hollow was also strengthened by a simple revetted bank (Gordon 1940).

Unfortunately at Willapark, the silting of the ditch prevents an accurate assessment of its method of construction. But even at its strongest point the ditch is shallow and spread and its depth is uneven over its surviving length, being deeper at the lower, northern end but becoming narrower and shallower as it progresses uphill, fading to nothing approximately half way up the slope. From this point too, the artificial bank, which is so clear lower down the slope, diminishes into a low ridge nearer the top, clearly of geological origin, with a natural slope on its eastern side in place of the ditch. It appears that the effort to built the rampart on the lower section was not carried through near the top of the slope and the terrain survives with no sign of human intervention. As has been observed above, the rampart does not follow the most obvious course for this promontory and it may be that this natural ridge so notable at the top of the slope, was utilised; earth from the eastern side of the ridge was excavated to reinforce it and to form a shallow ditch. This could explain the unevenness in the depth of the ditch.

Excavations at the Rumps in the 1960s revealed that much strength in the defences was derived from timber structures, evident through post holes cut into the bedrock (Brooks, 1974). The earthworks at Willapark may look unassuming and possibly even incomplete but these apparent weaknesses may have been compensated for by timber additions which would only be detectable through excavation.

5.3 The Interior

The shallow earthwork stances on the steep slopes of Willapark seem like improbable bases for structures. The current sloping angle of their interiors makes them appear as particularly unlikely candidates. However, hut circles excavated at the Rumps had a comparable sloping profile prior to excavation and following the removal of accumulated topsoil and silt the platforms when revealed were approximately level having been cut into the bedrock beneath. Although the slope is very much steeper at Willapark, these features may have similar potential. However, the practicalities of residing in a round house situated on such a slope must be open to question.

5.4 Later use – the (?)pillow mounds

Pillow mounds or buries are the field evidence of rabbit farming or warrening and in the post-medieval period and later they were a common use of waste ground unsuited to other forms of farming. The best assemblage of pillow mounds in south-west Britain is on Dartmoor in Devon, where twenty warrens of various sizes exist and most are believed to date from the 17th to 20th centuries. Although commercial warrens have large numbers of pillow mounds (up to 112 on Dartmoor) smaller clusters and isolated examples have also been recorded. Although the mounds at Willapark are small and somewhat indistinct, lacking drainage ditches, their location on a peninsula of very low grade and marginal ground is fairly typical. However, it is unlikely that the Cornish Hedge boundary delineating the peninsula from the cultivated lands of Forrabury Stitches was rabbit proof as the stone hedge appears to be constructed on an earlier earthen boundary,

which would enable rabbits to burrow beneath the stone. Early archaeologists frequently mistook pillow mounds for barrows and indeed the examples at Willapark have previously been recorded thus. Unfortunately no certainty can be arrived at as to the true purpose of these mounds without further investigation.

6. ARCHIVE

- 6.1 The paper and digital archive are currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ. They will be deposited with the National Trust.
- 6.2 The OASIS (Online AccesS to the Index of Archaeological InvestigationS) number for this project is 152399.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project was commissioned by the National Trust, and managed for them by Jim Parry and by Tanya James for AC archaeology. The survey was carried out by Phil Newman who also prepared the written report and the illustrations.

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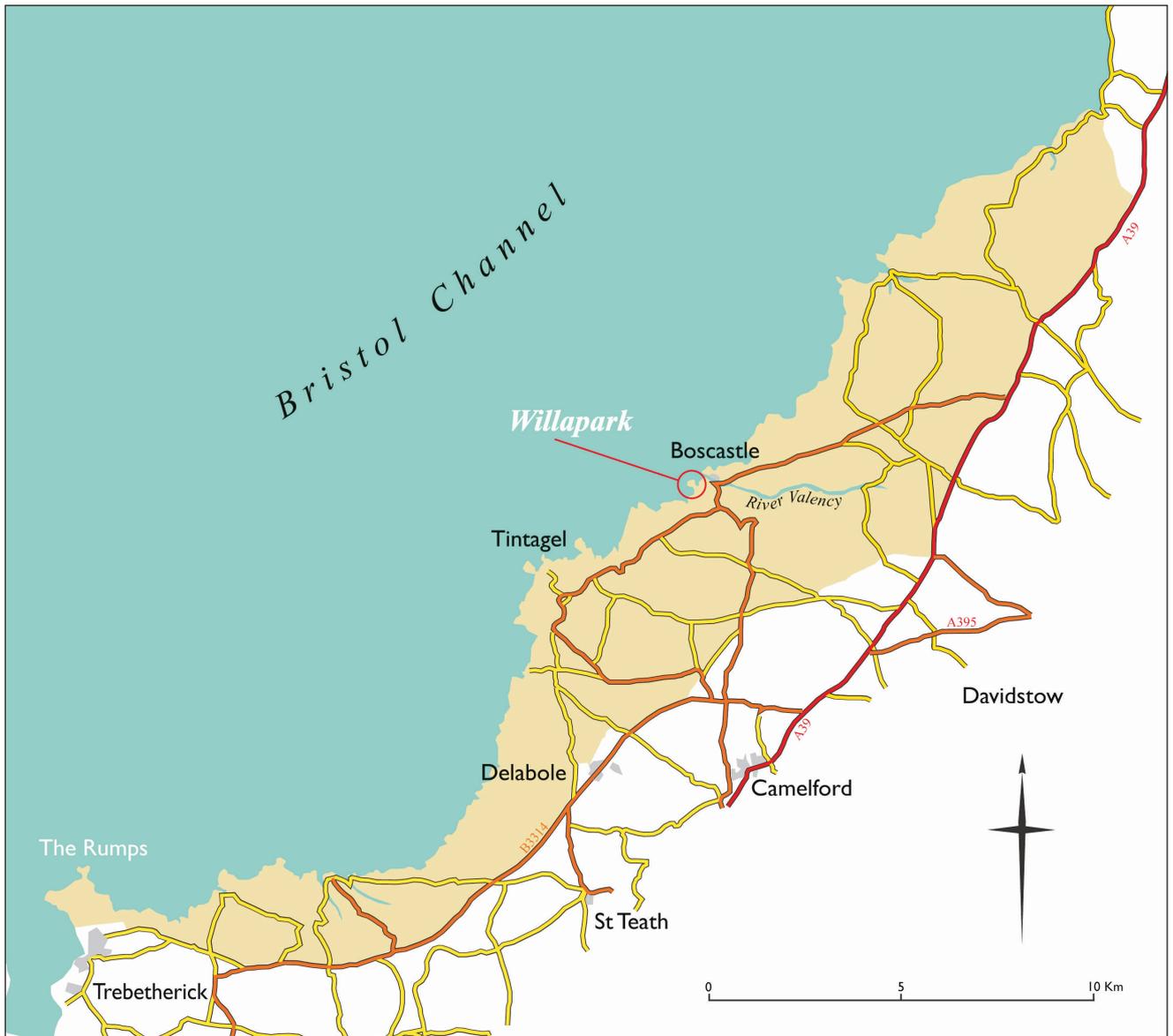
PROJECT

Willapark, Boscastle, Cornwall

TITLE

Fig. 1: Location of Willapark
on the North Cornwall Coast





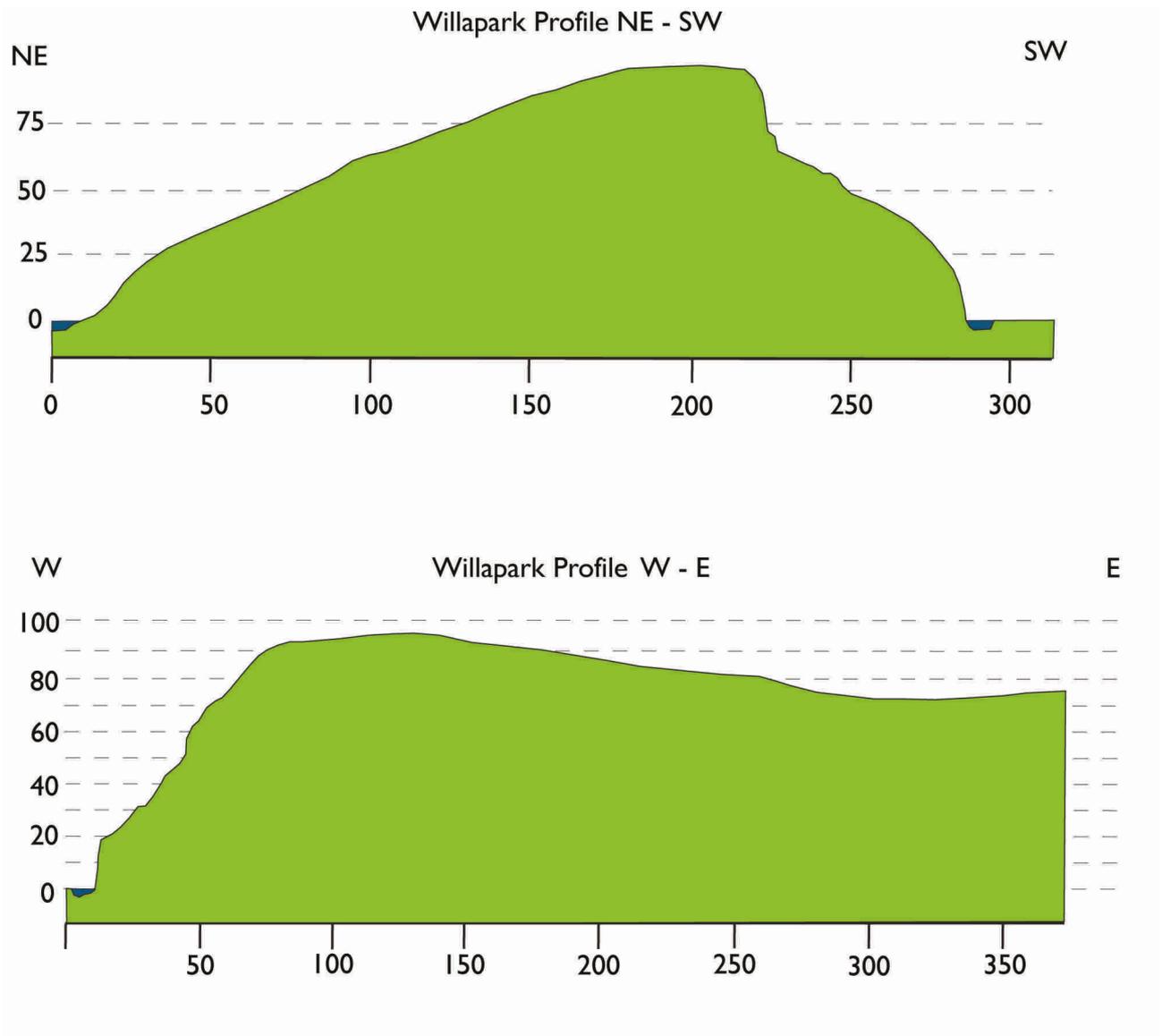
PROJECT

Willapark, Boscastle, Cornwall

TITLE

Fig. 2: The location of Willapark within the Cornwall AONB, Pentire Point to Widemouth section





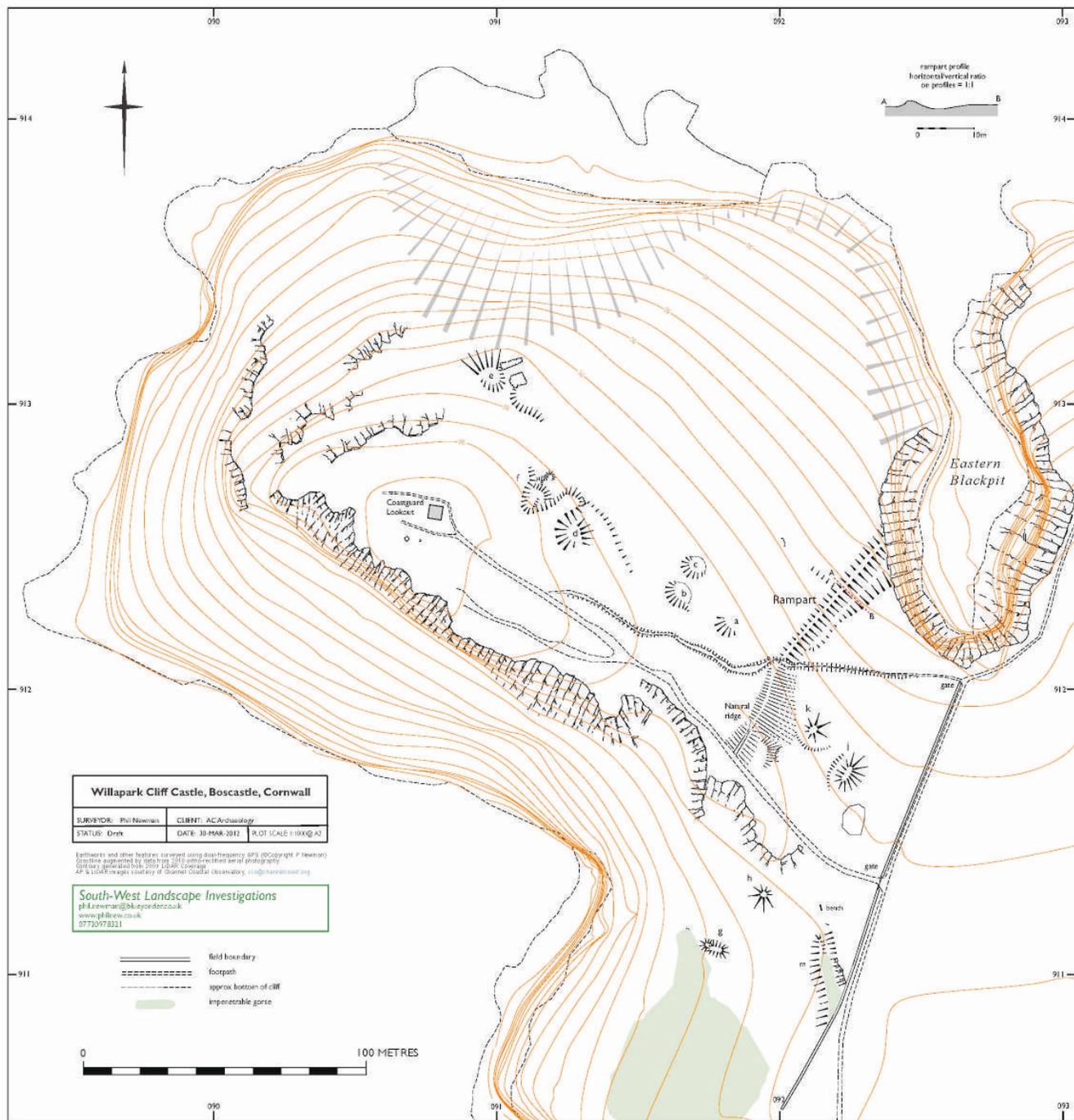
PROJECT

Willapark, Boscastle, Cornwall

TITLE

Fig. 3: Profiles of the promontory at Willapark. Generated from 2009 LiDAR Coverage





PROJECT

Willapark, Boscastle, Cornwall

TITLE

Fig. 4: 1:1000 scale earthwork survey of Willapark, Boscastle. Earthworks and other features surveyed using dual-frequency GPS. Coastline augmented by data from 2010 ortho-rectified aerial photography. Contours generated from 2009 LiDAR Coverage.



Plate 1: Willapark Headland showing Eastern Blackapit in the foreground, with the rampart and natural ridge beyond, viewed from the east.



Plate 2: The northern section of the rampart, viewed from the southeast. 2m scale.

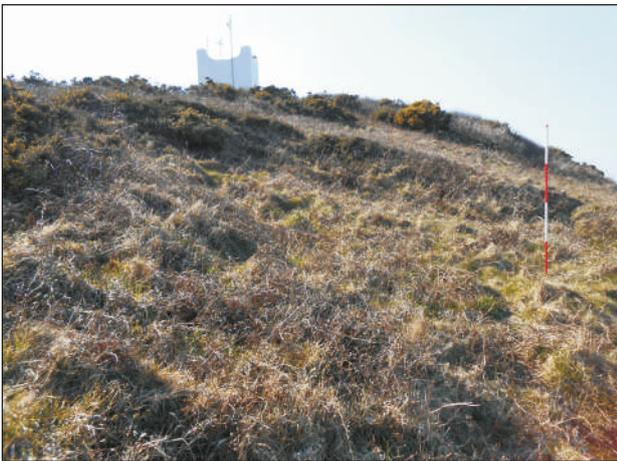


Plate 3: Earthwork platform e, viewed from the southeast. 2m scale.



Plate 4: Mound h, viewed from the southwest. 2m scale.

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