Hunsbury Hill, Northampton, Northants

The Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland Hillfort survey (v2 October 2013)

Important information:
This form must be used with the accompanying Notes for Guidance which are downloadable from the Project website (http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/hillforts-atlas.html**). Please read the notes before attempting to fill in this form.**
Once completed this form can be either posted or emailed to us, alternatively you can transcribe the information into the web-based form and submit electronically – see the Notes for details.

Access to sites and Health and Safety:
The project and its host Institutions bear no responsibility for any access or health and safety issues that may arise during your participation in this project.

Disclaimer:
The Co-directors of this project and their institutions are not responsible for issues of access to sites and health and safety of participants in the survey. By taking part in this survey you are acknowledging that access and health and safety are your responsibility.

Section 1.

Introductory comments
Thank you for taking part in this survey, by doing so you are agreeing that all information provided can be used and published by the project. You will remain anonymous unless you indicate here that you want to be named on the project website:

1.1. YES – Name to be used: C.L.A.S.P.
(this site was surveyed by Gren Hatton and Jim Aveling)

Basic information about you

1.2. Your name: Community Landscape Archaeology Survey Project (CLASP)

1.3. Contact phone number: c/o G.W. Hatton, 01788 822411

1.4. email address: c/o ghatton@toucansurf.com

1.5. Did you visit this site as part of an archaeological society/group, if so which one:
See answers to 1.1 and 1.2 above

Section 2.

Basic information about the site

2.1. Name of the site:	Hunsbury Hill
2.2. Alternative name of the site:	(previously known as Danes Camp in the 1800s)
2.3. National Grid Reference:	SP7383 5836
2.4. Any known reference numbers:	NA Vol 25/1994, pp 5-35; Tingle & Jackson, 2004 (see http://www.jwaller.co.uk/nas/Hunsbury_Hillfort.htm), Baker 1891; Dryden 1885; Elsdon 1976; Fell 1936; George 1917; Ingle 1993-4; Jackson 1993-4; RCHME 1985.
2.5. Current county/Unitary authority:	Northamptonshire County Council
2.6. When did you visit the site (month/year):	21 January 2015

Landscape setting of the site

2.7. Altitude (metres): 109m OD

2.8. Topographic position: [you can tick more than 1]

HILL TOP	X
COASTAL PROMONTORY	.
INLAND PROMONTORY	X
VALLEY BOTTOM	.
KNOLL/HILLOCK	.
OUTCROP	.
RIDGE	.
PLATEAU/CLIFF-EDGE	.
HILLSLOPE	.
LOWLAND (E.G. MARSH)	.
OTHER	.
Comments on topographic position:	The site commands views along the R. Nene, and should probably be considered together with the sites at Thrapston and Irthlingborough – between them, these three sites could have controlled traffic along about 50km of the river. The other main aspect of the site is its proximity to large supplies of a sandstone very rich in iron.
ASPECT (if slope)	.

2.9. Maximum visibility/view:

NE: [tick 1 only]	
LONG	X (6.5km)
MEDIUM	.
SHORT	.
SE: [tick 1 only]	
LONG	X (6.5km)
MEDIUM	.
SHORT	.
SW: [tick 1 only]	

LONG	X (5km)
MEDIUM	.
SHORT	.
NW: [tick 1 only]	
LONG	X (6.5km)
MEDIUM	.
SHORT	.
Comments:	Longer views to north (18km) and west (10km, to the Iron Age and Roman site at Whitehall Farm Nether Heyford). See also the 8-point viewshed diagram in the Appendices.

2.10. Water source inside: [you can tick more than 1]

SPRING	.
STREAM	.
POOL	.
CISTERN	.
OTHER (details):	No internal stream or spring is evident – the site may perhaps have made use of wells? The river Nene is rather too far away to have served as a regular water source.

2.11. Water source nearby: The R. Nene at its nearest is 1.2km away

2.12. Current land category (over whole site footprint) (you can tick more than 1)

WOODLAND	X
COMMERCIAL FORESTRY PLANTATION	.
PARKLAND	X
PASTURE (GRAZED)	.
ARABLE	.
SCRUB/BRACKEN	.
ROCKY OUTCROPS	.
HEATHER/MOORLAND	.
HEATH	.
BUILT-UP	X
Comments:	A detailed commentary on the current state of the site is included in Section 5.

2.13. Pre-hillfort activity: No evidence of such at the Hunsbury Hill site; but note that there was a Neolithic causwayed enclosure at nearby Briar Hill, about 950m due north of the Hunsbury Hill site. The Briar Hill site may perhaps still have served as a lookout point over the river Nene in the Iron Age?

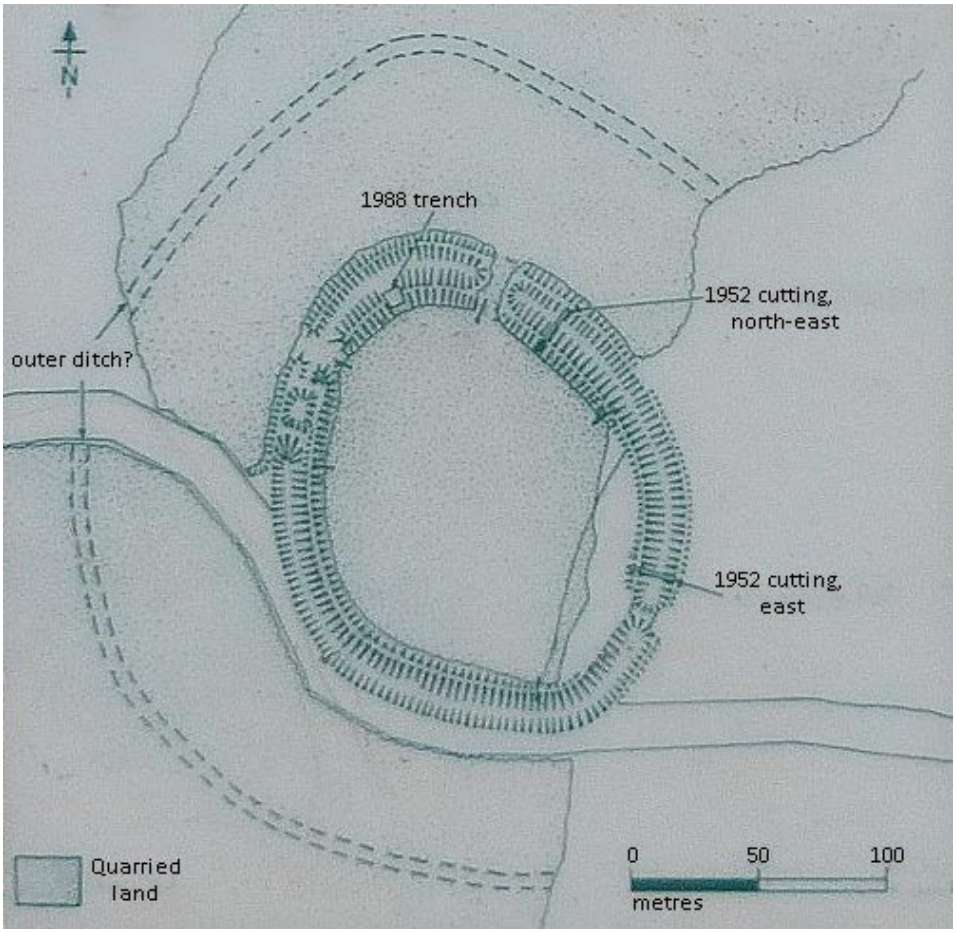
2.14. Post-hillfort activity: Ironstone mining in the mid-late 1800s; and both previously and subsequently the site was used as farmland; Hunsbury Hill is now a country park.

Surface morphology of the site

Note (see the Notes for guidance document): from this section onwards we are assuming that you are working with a plan of the site. If it is a published plan then we do not expect you to record every item, only those which are different/additional to the plan you are working with. If you are drawing your own plan you can annotate details on it.

2.15. Which plan are you using:

The plan below, based on archaeological surveys, is provided at the site on a signboard.



2.16. Have you used any other sources of information (tick any that apply):

HER	X
NMR	.
PUBLISHED SOURCE (details):	NA Vol 25/1994, pp 5-35; Tingle & Jackson, 2004 (see http://www.jwaller.co.uk/nas/Hunsbury_Hillfort.htm), Baker 1891; Dryden 1885; Elsdon 1976; Fell 1936; George 1917; Ingle 1993-4; Jackson 1993-4; RCHME 1985
OTHER (details):	NCC geological map.

2.17. Is there an annex (see diagram in Notes for Guidance):

YES	.
NO	X

Note: Sections 3 and 5 are for every site, section 4 only applies to sites with an annex.

Section 3. Enclosed area

3.1 General overall shape of enclosed area: [you can tick more than 1]

CIRCULAR	.
SUB-CIRCULAR/OVAL	X
RECTANGULAR	.
SUB-RECTANGULAR	.
POLYGONAL	X
IRREGULAR	X
COMPLEX (MORE THAN ONE ENCLOSURE)	.

Comments: It seems likely that the original construction may have been slightly polygonal.

3.2. Maximum dimensions of internal area (see diagram in Notes for Guidance):

1. 120m SW to NE.
2. 155m SE to NW.

Comments: Measurements taken from the plan, to the inside of the internal banks.

3.3. Maximum dimensions of whole site footprint (see diagram in Notes for Guidance):

1. 175m SW to NE.
2. 195m SE to NW.

Comments: Measurements taken from plan, to the outside of the external banks.

Entrances

The artist's impression below, based on archaeological surveys, is shown on a signboard.

3.4. Number of breaks/entrances through the rampart by position: [give a number for each]

N .
NE ?
E .
SE X
S .
SW .
W .
NW X.

Comments: The two major breaks shown in the NW of the plan appear to be associated with an original main gatewayed entrance. The gap to NE is probably a relatively recent break in the circuit. The gap to the SE has been interpreted by archaeologists as an original secondary entrance – see artist's impression sketch above.

3.5. How many are apparently secondary breaks: [give a number for each]

N .
NE .
E .
SE 1
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

Comments: See also above explanation.

3.6. (see diagram in Notes for Guidance):
For each entrance that is not a simple gap, is it most like any of the following (e.g. in-turned), if so record which position it is in:
IN-TURNED: [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

OUT-TURNED: [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

BOTH (IN- AND OUT-TURNED): [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .

S .
SW .
W .
NW .

HORNWORK: [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

OVER-LAPPING: [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

OUTWORKS: [you can tick more than 1]

N .
NE .
E .
SE .
S .
SW .
W .
NW .

Comments: .

OTHER FORMS:

Comments: See the artist's impression and related comments above.

Enclosing works - ramparts/banks/walls and ditches

3.7. Number of ramparts/banks/walls per quadrant:

NE: .
SE: .
SW: .
NW: .
Comments: See the artist's impression and related comments above.

3.8. Number of DITCHES per quadrant:

NE: .
SE: .
SW: .
NW: .
Comments: See the artist's impression and related comments above.

3.9. Form of rampart/bank/wall

Same all the way around:

Y	X
N	.

If yes: [tick one only]

EARTHEN BANK	X, box structure, revetted and supported by timber.
STONE WALL	.
BOTH	.
PALISADING	X
VITRIFICATION	X
OTHER BURNING	.
Comments:	See more detailed comments in the Appendices.

If NO then by quadrant:

NE: [you can tick more than 1]

EARTHEN BANK	.
STONE WALL	.
BOTH	.
PALISADING	.
VITRIFICATION	.
OTHER BURNING	.
Comments:	.

SE: [you can tick more than 1]

EARTHEN BANK	.
STONE WALL	.
BOTH	.
PALISADING	.
VITRIFICATION	.
OTHER BURNING	.
Comments:	.

SW: [you can tick more than 1]

EARTHEN BANK	.
STONE WALL	.
BOTH	.
PALISADING	.
VITRIFICATION	.

OTHER BURNING .
Comments: .

NW: [you can tick more than 1]

EARTHEN BANK .
STONE WALL .
BOTH .
PALISADING .
VITRIFICATION .
OTHER BURNING .
Comments: .

3.10. For each quadrant how many of each of the bank/wall/ditch combinations are there (see diagram in Notes for Guidance):

NE:

BANK/WALL (NO DITCH) .
BANK/DITCH .
BANK/DITCH/BANK .
OTHER .
Comments: .

SE:

BANK/WALL (NO DITCH) .
BANK/DITCH .
BANK/DITCH/BANK .
OTHER .
Comments: .

SW:

BANK/WALL (NO DITCH) .
BANK/DITCH .
BANK/DITCH/BANK .
OTHER .
Comments: .

NW:

BANK/WALL (NO DITCH) .
BANK/DITCH .
BANK/DITCH/BANK .
OTHER .
Comments: .

3.11. Chevaux de Frise (tick if YES, you can tick more than 1]

NE .
SE .
SW .
NW .
Comments: .

Interior features

3.12. Tick all that are present, mark where on the plan and send to us: [you can tick more than 1]

NO APPARENT FEATURES .
STONE STRUCTURES .
PLATFORMS .
QUARRY HOLLOWS .
PITS .
OTHER .
Comments: For details of archaeological findings, see Section 5 and the Appendices.

Section 4.

If the site has an annex (see notes for definition of an annex), continue here with information about the annex, otherwise go to section 5 below:

4.1. Shape of the annex [tick only 1]

LOBATE .
CONCENTRIC .
CIRCULAR .
SUB-CIRCULAR .
RECTANGULAR .
SUB-RECTANGULAR .
POLYGONAL .
IRREGULAR .
OTHER .

4.2. Number of annex ramparts: .

4.3. Number of annex ditches: .

4.4. Number of annex entrances: .

4.5. Comments on the annex:

Section 5.

5.1. Any general comments (including comments on erosion/damage, especially if recent):

[The following text, which summarises the history of the site and comments on recent and ongoing damage to it, is taken directly from an archaeological report that has been made directly available via the Internet, at http://www.jwaller.co.uk/nas/Hunsbury_Hillfort.htm.]

A new survey to assess the condition of both the interior and the surviving rampart of the hillfort at Hunsbury was partially completed in the early months of 2004. This is summarised here while a full interim report has been circulated and is available from the NAS. The work to date has been financed under a project called CREATE IT, a scheme organised by the Parkinson's Disease Society, and funded by the Millennium Commission. English Heritage has provided additional funding which will allow the project to continue over a longer period.

Iron Age hillforts are common in many parts of Britain and there are at least six in Northamptonshire. The internal rampart at Hunsbury however appears to have been burnt down and vitrified, and such forts are rare in England. During the period between 1880 and 1886, ironstone quarrying began within the hill fort at Hunsbury. An attempt had been made to have the hillfort protected under the new Ancient Monuments Act of 1882, but this failed because of the likely cost of compensating the landowner and therefore quarrying proceeded. Removal of the topsoil revealed as many as 300 pits measuring between 5 and 10 feet (1.5 - 3 metres) in diameter and up 7 feet (1.8 metres) in depth. As Thomas George, the curator of Northampton Museum, observed in 1887:

> *"They were full of black mould and in them were found the numerous artefacts that now comprise one of the finest collections, I believe, of Prehistoric antiquities in England"*

An attempt was made by the chairman of the quarry company to recover as much of the material as possible and an illustrated catalogue of the finds was published. This included a vast array of bronze brooches, pottery, glass, iron weapons and tools as well as approximately 159 querns, all of which were deposited in Northampton Museum.

Today the hillfort is part of a country park, surrounded by a housing development Although the site is owned by Northampton Borough Council and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, it is currently not in a good condition. The banks, some of which were undercut by the 19th Century quarrying, have become badly eroded in parts. The bank and ditch are covered by shrubs and trees, the roots of which continue to damage what is left of the archaeological deposits, as do numerous rabbits.

SITE HISTORY

The following is a brief history of the development of the site over the past 2500 years.

- The earliest defences were probably constructed between the 7th and 4th centuries BC; they consisted of the deep surrounding ditch that still exists today as well as an internal bank or rampart.
- The earliest rampart was a box structure, revetted and supported by timberwork. At some stage this structure was set on fire and burnt down.
- Probably in the later Iron Age period (around the 3rd or 2nd Century BC) the internal bank was rebuilt in a more simple form (glacis style).
- The site was abandoned around the end of the 1st Millennium BC and before the Roman occupation began. Its subsequent history is uncertain, although Anglo-Saxon pottery has been

found in the hillfort and it could have been re-occupied for a period in this phase.

- During the late 19' century, much of the interior of the fort was quarried for ironstone and this destroyed many internal features. Parts of the inner edge of the rampart was also destroyed at this time.
- In 1952 Professor Atkinson directed the excavation of two trenches across the bank and ditch. This clearly revealed the two phases of the rampart close to the eastern entrance.
- In the early 1970's the hillfort was taken out of agricultural use and incorporated into parkland. This accelerated erosion by footpaths etc, and encouraged scrub growth.
- By 1988 erosion of the rampart was severe in the north-west sector and an excavation directed by Dennis Jackson was carried out at this point. Radiocarbon dates were obtained from the excavation as well as details of the early structure.
- After 1988, the hillfort became a conservation area and vegetation was no longer controlled.
- Ten years later in 1998, erosion of the rampart was severe in a number of areas, and a new survey was commissioned, but its suggestions for protecting the earthworks have not been followed up.

THE 1998 SURVEY

The survey carried out in 1998 by RPS Clouston covered the whole of the defences and not just the internal rampart. Each of the elements were discussed in detail. The variety of remedial work presented was all costed and the following is a list of their main options:

A section of the rampart damaged by trees and rabbits

- Control the rabbits by fencing around the damaged areas as well as the main access points to the top of the rampart.
- Encourage access to non-damaged sensitive areas by creating new pathways, and fencing off the main access points to damaged areas.
- Change the vegetation cover by replacing the existing shrubs with grass.
- Build a bank, 10 m wide, to support the internal rampart.
- Accept that damage will continue and excavate the remaining areas of archaeological significance.

THE 2004 SURVEY

The 2004 survey began by re-examining the state of the hillfort and reconsidering the possibilities for remedial work with an additional option: backfilling the quarried area with sterile waste. Much of the surviving rampart at Hunsbury is perched above a quarry face, and the original aim of the study was to form a committee to look into the feasibility of filling the quarried area with sterile waste. It was felt that this would make it easier to preserve the remaining rampart and perhaps improve the environment around the hillfort.

After due consideration it was decided that although backfilling parts of the quarry was a practical proposition, there were other aspects that needed to be considered. Not least of these was the cost, particularly after it was considered that parts of the rampart are now so badly eroded that it is probably not worth trying to preserve it. Other factors taken into consideration were the fact that

the ironstone quarrying is now part of the history of the site and that the evidence for this should also be preserved. Another factor was the amount of work now needed to control the spread of vegetation
Evaluating the Interior of the Fort and preserving the Rampart

As the project developed it became clear that many of the problems were interlinked. In consequence it was decided to evaluate the surviving archaeology of the hillfort in order to suggest the most effective ways of preserving them. The following work has been undertaken to date. A first step in this scheme was to locate the precise edge of the quarried area within the interior of the fort, and geophysics and trial trenching achieved this

THE INTERIOR

Geophysical Survey by Northamptonshire Archaeology

Northamptonshire Archaeology, to locate the quarry edge carried out a geophysical survey in March 2004. The results of the survey are held in archive (the survey covered three 20 metre squares with readings every 1m). The survey revealed a possible edge to the quarry as well as anomalies which could represent archaeological features however both of these elements required to be confirmed by trial trenching.

Trial Trenching by members of the NAS

Between 19th and 21st March 2004, three trial trenches were excavated within the hillfort interior. Three trial trenches were excavated within the hillfort by volunteers from the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society, directed by Dr Martin Tingle, primarily to confirm the position of the quarry edge. Three parallel trenches were excavated, from an area assumed to be unquarried, with the intention of locating the quarry edge and determining the nature of any surviving archaeological remains. They were each 80cm wide and varied in length from 8 metres to 15 metres. Trench 1 revealed a group of 3 large pits while in Trenches 2 & 3 other less substantial features were encountered. Comparing the results of the trial trenching with the location of the quarry edge that was assumed from nineteenth century records, it appears that the surviving area is larger than had been previously imagined. The trenching has revealed that there is between 25 to 35cm of plough soil above the natural bedrock of ironstone grits or silty clay, and that no Iron Age levels survive in the area of the trenches. There is no evidence that overburden was dumped on the unquarried area during the quarrying .

One of the pits in Trench 1 - it was from similar pits that a large assemblage of Iron Age metalwork was recovered during 19th Century quarrying.

Finds from the trial trenches included Iron Age pottery dating from the 3rd to the 1st centuries BC together with a single sherd of possible Saxon pottery. In addition, two quern fragments and a loom weight fragment were also recovered, together with an iron object of unknown date, which could be a spearhead.

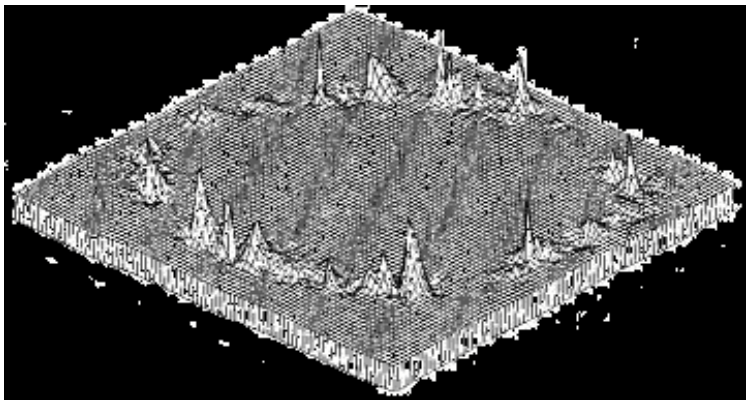
Several large pits were exposed in Trench 1, but overall the density of features revealed in the

trenches is low. Parts of the unquarried area seem likely to have suffered from plough erosion as the present ground surface slopes down towards the edge of the old quarry. If this is so shallow archaeological features may have been lost in this area.

Geophysical Survey by EAS Ltd

A second geophysical survey was carried out surveying the whole of the surviving area at the east end of the hillfort. EAS LTD undertook the work with readings taken every 25cms. The results of the second geophysical survey, in conjunction with the trial trenching, show that the edge of the quarry is further to the west (on average 10 metres) along most of its line than originally envisaged by the R.C.H.M. The evidence from the trial trenching however suggests the bulge eastwards (shown by the geophysical survey) at the south end of the line is probably misleading. The survey is comprehensive and has revealed a number of pits together with one and possibly two circular structures. Over large areas however the magnetic anomalies are too dense to define individual features.

THE RAMPART



Geophysical survey results revealing the extent and intensity of the rampart burning

Geophysical Survey by EAS Ltd

A geophysical and contour survey has been undertaken around the whole of the rampart. This has shown that layers of burning and probable destruction by fire, occur around most if not all of the circuit.

Three trial cuts along the inner face

As part of the survey three narrow trenches (Cuts 1-3) were cut back mechanically to the old quarry face, one each on to the north-east, south and west sides. The purpose was to assess the ramparts present surviving height and its nature or phase. The maximum surviving height of the rampart in the trenches dug in 1952 and 1988 was 1.8m.

There is no evidence of any of the layers from the Phase 2 rampart surviving in the area of the trenches excavated on the north-east and south sides of the fort. The homogeneous nature of the make-up suggests the surviving rampart is probably part of the core of the Phase 1 structure. It seems likely that this is true of the whole of the north and south sections.

There are clearly two phases of rampart shown in the east section excavated near the entrance in 1952, but there is no evidence that this reconstruction phase continued right round the hillfort. Possible Phase 2 layers survive in the north-west and west sections, but these are being badly eroded.

The condition and preservation of the Rampart in early 2004

An environmental survey has been carried out to assess the damage being caused to the rampart

by erosion, rabbits and the vegetation, The survey illustrates how the various problems are interlinked and considers the best approach with limited finance may be to gradually change the conditions

The condition of the rampart, and the vegetation cover, varies around the circuit and it is suggested that it may be an advantage to treat individual sections differently. If money were available, however, it would be better to employ tree surgeons and contractors to prune and manage the trees and bushes over the whole of the defences as a first stage.

Comment: Most of the options presented by the survey in 1998 could prove very expensive and all areas are treated equally. It is suggested by the new survey that the rampart on the east side is under little threat and on the north-east and north-west it is probably too eroded to be worth preserving. In the near future, it may be preferable to carry out the measures recommended for the preservation of the rampart on the south and west sides of the fort.

Future excavation of the Rampart

There are certain areas of the rampart which are difficult to preserve but where excavation may provide valuable new evidence. In the short term the following four locations are worth considering for excavation:

- The most obvious area for rescue excavation is the north-west section, where erosion is severe, but where Phase 2 layers survive. The excavation of these layers along the inner edge of the rampart may provide burnt timbers for scientific dating, as well as provide evidence in helping to understand the stratigraphy.
- In the same area, and adjacent to the north-east entrance, there is a 5 m wide stretch of rampart with no vegetation to hinder an excavation. The surviving rampart here is very low but there is an opportunity to examine the old ground surface and record any post holes beneath it
- The section badly damaged by rabbits on the north-east side may warrant a rescue excavation. This work could put the large blocks of vitreous material into context.
- Just south of the old entrance, on the west side, there is a deep wide rut through the rampart made by motor cycles. A partial excavation through the inner edge of the rampart here could be informative and discourage the cyclists

In the longer term it is probably important to learn more about the vitrification of the fort. In this context Mr Peter Crewe of the Hillfort Study Group has suggested the excavation of a 20m wide section through the rampart, and this could be associated with a planned reconstruction of a section of the rampart. This trench could be positioned in the north-west or west sectors where Phase 2 layers survive, but are being lost to erosion.

Further work on the Interior and Exterior of the Defences

Several large pits were revealed by the earlier trenching in the interior, and it is possible that the excavation of a group of pits, at some stage, could provide invaluable environmental evidence, and may help to put some of the finds from the hillfort into context.

What was thought to be a substantial outer ditch was located at several points during earlier quarrying and it is likely that its presence could be established by a geophysical survey in the unquarried area. If contemporary an outer enclosure could have been used for corralling stock, although it is could be unrelated to Iron Age activity. Confirming the presence of this ditch could be

a priority in any future programme. A limited geophysical survey in 1998 located a ditch to the east of the defences and it has been suggested that a larger area remains unquarried to the south of the fort.

A Management Plan

Ideally the archaeological work needs to be carried out under a management plan in which all aspects are discussed, and a plan of action agreed by interested parties. The question of public access and vandalism needs to be solved with cars being driven into the fort and dumped at frequent intervals

Display Boards

A new display and information board has been erected on the site.

Acknowledgements: thanks are due to Graham Cadman, Andy Chapman and Robert Moore for their help and advice in preparing this study.

5.2 Comments relating to the location, nature and possible purpose of the Hunsbury Hill site

As stated above (Section 2.8), the Hunsbury Hill site commands views along the R. Nene (see the viewshed diagram in the Appendices for more details), and this site should probably be considered together with the sites at Thrapston and Irthlingborough – between them, these three sites could have monitored and controlled traffic along about 50km of the river.

At the Thrapston and Irthlingborough sites it is noticeable that there is no significant viewshed in any direction except along the course of the R. Nene; indeed, both these sites would have been wide open to a surprise attack from the surrounding landscape. This suggests, perhaps, that those two sites – and perhaps the Hunsbury Hill site also – were initially established within what would have been "friendly" territory on **both** sides of the river, and that one of their main initial functions would have been to monitor and control riverine traffic through the territory.

The other main aspect of the Hunsbury Hill site is its proximity to large supplies of a stratum of Northants Sand and Ironstone that is extremely rich in iron. As an example, the present surveyors compared a stone sample from Hunsbury with a sample from the Castle Yard site near Farthingstone – the Hunsbury sample appears to have a much higher iron content (however, this was an unscientific test, since only one sample from each site was compared, and since original quarrying at both sites would have removed all the richest ores long ago).

From the nature and quantity of the remains discovered during quarrying operations in the 1800s, it seems likely that the Hunsbury site was a significant source of smelted iron and other iron products. The relatively small and compact internal area of this site (1.6ha, sufficient to house a population of no more than about 50-70 individuals), together with the huge number of large pits within the site (about 300), and the extremely deep and wide protective ditches (which are typically still 20m wide from bank-top to bank-top, and about 5-8m in depth), all combine to suggest that this site may have housed a relatively small but highly specialised community, whose activities probably included manufacture of iron and trading along the river. The strong defences perhaps imply that this site may at one time have served as a form of "protected storehouse" for valuable metal trade goods – and such an explanation might also help to explain the burning of the defences somewhere in the Middle Iron Age and their subsequent reconstruction around the 3C/2C BC.

It may also be relevant to consider this site in relation to the Castle Dykes / Castle Yard complex near Farthingstone; the Castle Yard site is located directly alongside the so-called Great Way, leading from the west of the county and heading towards the heart of modern Northampton, perhaps with its terminus at Hunsbury Hill(?). Movement of manufactured iron wares from Castle Yard along this route to Hunsbury, giving access to the valuable River Nene trade route, would support the speculation suggested in the previous paragraph regarding the possible function and purpose of the Hunsbury Hill site.

6. Appendices:

Viewshed diagram

Diagram showing Hunsbury Hill in relation to the earlier Neolithic causwayed enclosure at Briar Hill and a later “Wooton Hill” type LIA enclosure

Geological map showing Hunsbury Hill and Briar Hill

Site photographs

Viewshed diagram for Hunsbury Hill and Briar Hill, Northampton

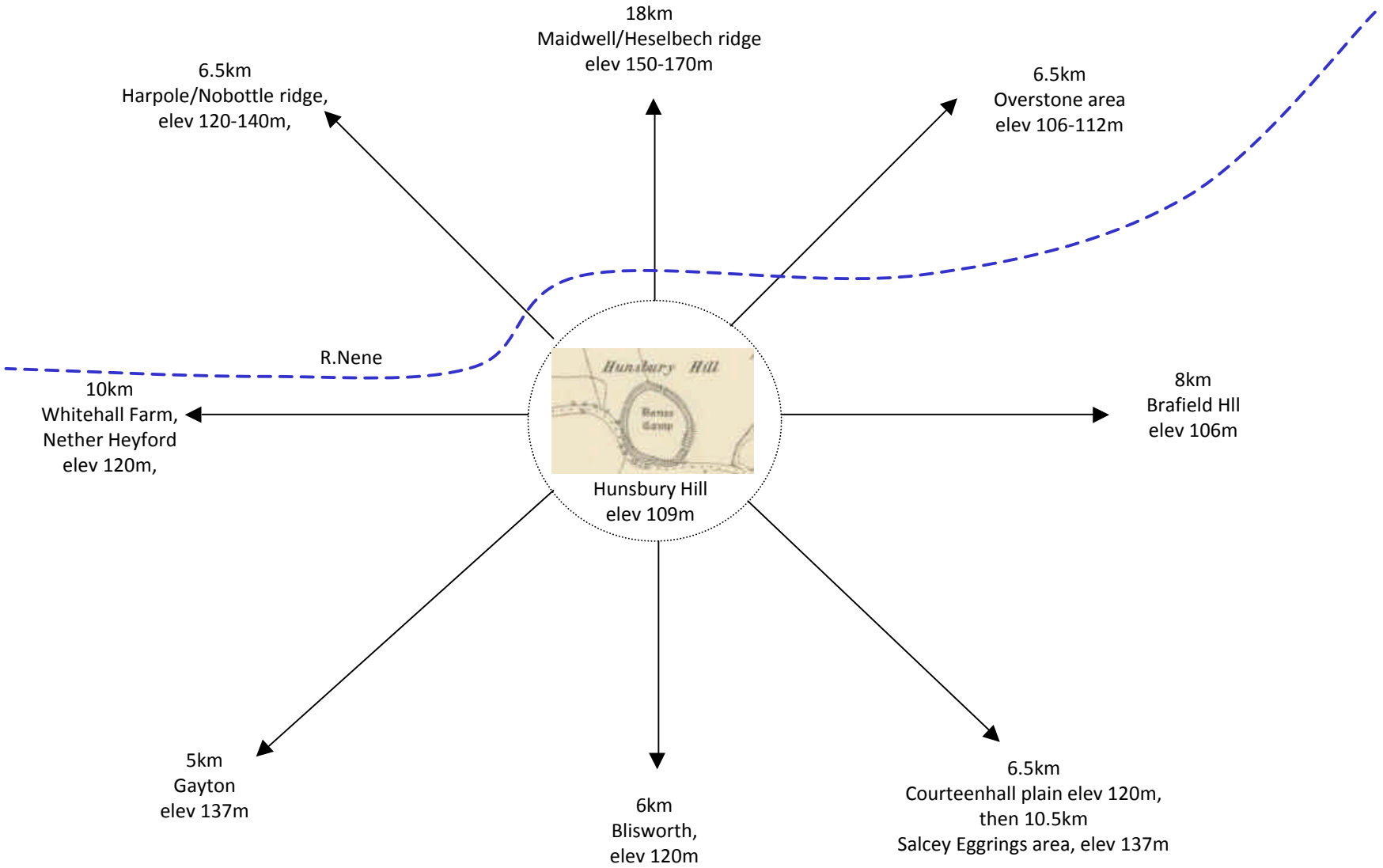


Diagram showing Hunsbury Hill in relation to an earlier Neolithic causwayed enclosure at Briar Hill and a later "Wooton Hill" type LIA enclosure (from "Sites in Northampton", RCHME 1985)

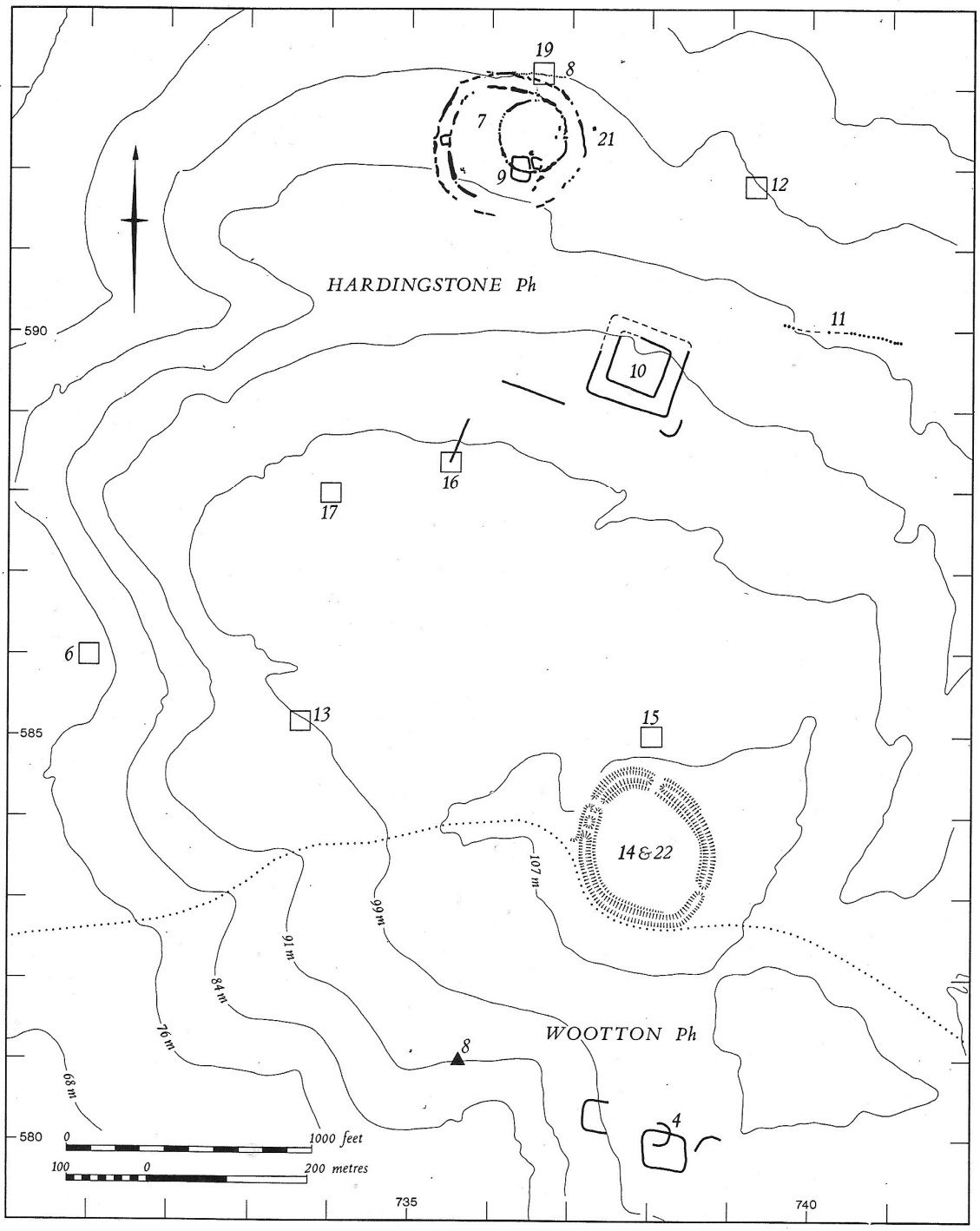
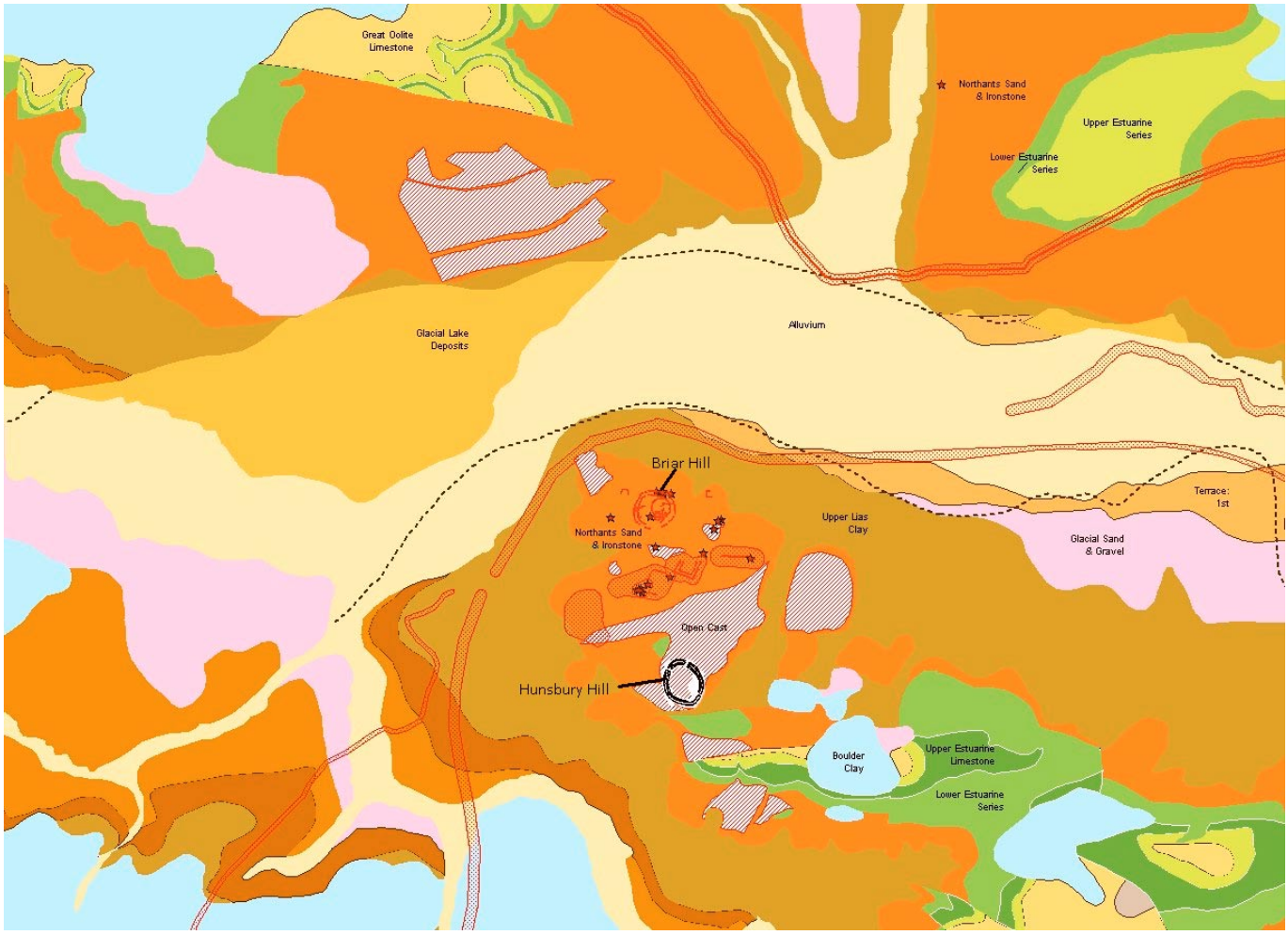


Fig. 3 HARDINGSTONE (6) Enclosure; (7) Neolithic causewayed enclosure; (8) Pit alignment; (9) Iron Age settlement; (10) Iron Age enclosure; (11) Pit alignment; (12) Iron Age settlement; (13) Iron Age ditch; (14) Iron Age hill fort; (15) Roman kiln; (16) Roman settlement and kiln; (17, 19) Roman settlements; (21, 22) Saxon settlements. WOOTTON (4) Ring ditches and enclosures; (8) Roman villa.

Geological map showing Hunsbury Hill and Briar Hill



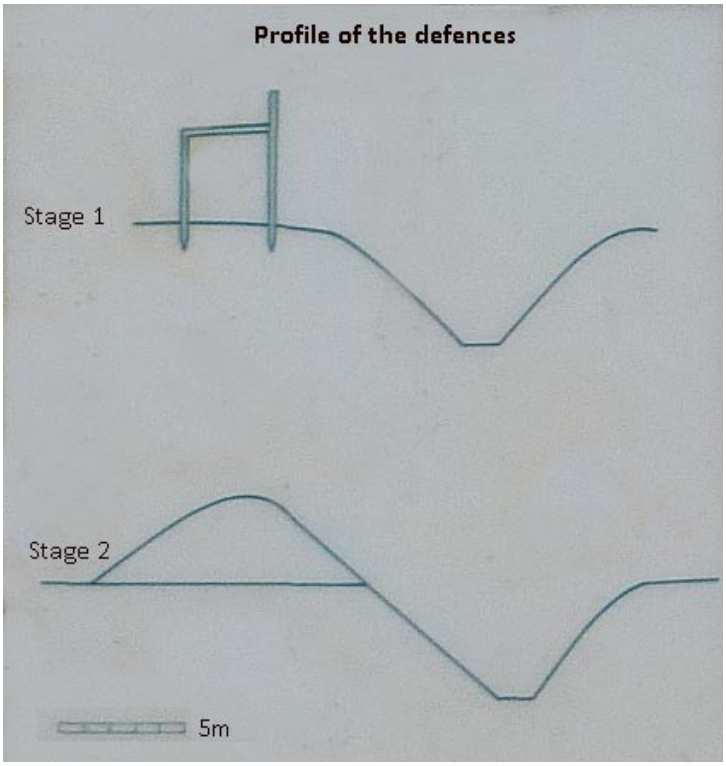
The Hunsbury Hill and Briar Hill sites are both located on an outcrop of Northants Sand & Ironstone that is particularly rich in iron.

It is noteworthy that, as for many of the other Iron Age hillfort sites in Northamptonshire, the Hunsbury Hill site lies close to an outcrop of Upper Lias Clay; in the Iron Age this clay land would have been too heavy to plough, and would therefore probably have remained substantially as woodland, thus providing a ready source of timber for iron-smelting.

Site photographs:

Introductory summary:

The Defences



In the first phase, a very deep surrounding ditch was dug, which still exists today, with an internal wall or bank. The wall was built of clay or rubble reinforced at the back with stout timber posts. The whole was linked together and strengthened by further posts and horizontal timbers built into the body of the wall. At some stage the timbers in the wall were subjected to an intense fire. The reason for this is unknown.

In the second phase, about 250BC, the ditch was re-cut and a new internal bank was built. This appears to have been of simple form, and incorporated the remains of the earlier wall. In both phases there could have been a walkway and a possible stockade on top of the wall or bank.

The Interior

Much of the area was quarried for ironstone in the 1880s, which reduced the ground level by several metres. When standing inside the hillfort today, only the high ground at the east side remains untouched by quarrying -- elsewhere the impression that is given of being surrounded by a high bank is misleading, as much of this height is in fact an eroded quarry face.

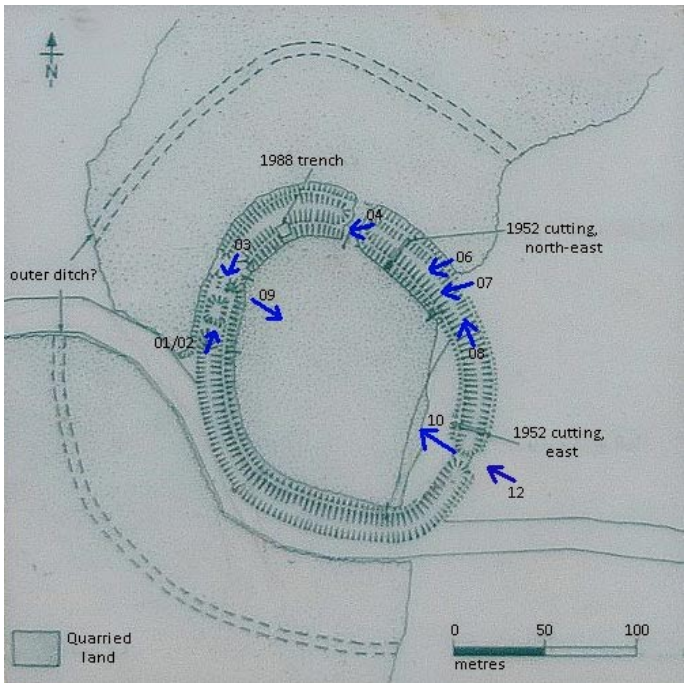


Diagram showing photograph locations


1-2: the depth of the ditch, viewed from above, is only apparent when the human figure is included.


3-4: the depth of the ditch is more evident in these photographs.


6-7: the ditch on the north-east side.

8: the ditch on the north-east side. Tree-roots are actually the only things that are keeping some parts of the ditch walls in place!

9: The interior looking south-eastward from the north-west.

10: The interior looking north-westward from the south-east.

12: This illustrates the extent to which C19 open-cast quarrying has reduced the level of the ground surface both inside and outside the ditch and its banks.