

# NAPOLEONIC MILITARY SITES AND A PREHISTORIC CEREMONIAL MONUMENT ON EAST HILL, OTTERY ST MARY, DEVON

In the Footsteps of Peter Orlando Hutchinson Project

By Hazel Riley



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ST MARY, DEVON  
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## CONTENTS

### ABBREVIATIONS

### LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### ABSTRACT

### INTRODUCTION

Location, topography and geology

Numbering of the sites

### PREVIOUS WORK: ANTIQUARIAN DESCRIPTIONS, MAP DEPICTIONS AND SURVEYS

### THE SURVEY

Survey method

Description of the earthworks

### INTERPRETATION AND DATING

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### REFERENCES

OASIS PROJECT NO: 127894

### ABBREVIATIONS

AONB Area of Outstanding National Beauty

EH English Heritage

HER Historic Environment Record

GPS Global Positioning System

NMR National Monuments Record

SAM Scheduled Ancient Monument

### FIGURE LIST AND IMAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Front cover: South redoubt earthworks (Hazel Riley)

Figure 1: Location map (based on OS 1st edition map)

Figure 2: Extract from OS map of 1806 (Searle 1806)

Figure 3: Extract from Ottery St Mary tithe map ([eastdevonaonb.org.uk](http://eastdevonaonb.org.uk))

Figure 4: Hutchinson's plan of 'Two barrows, Ottery East Hill' (Butler 2000, fig p 97)

Figure 5: Earthwork survey and profile of the north redoubt (1:250)

Figure 6: Earthwork survey and profile of the south redoubt (1:250)

Figure 7: Earthwork survey and profile of the prehistoric cairn (1:250)

Figure 8: South side of the prehistoric cairn (Hazel Riley)

Figure 9: The north redoubt (Hazel Riley)

Figure 10: The southeast corner of the south redoubt (Hazel Riley)

Figure 11: Hutchinson's map of 'Tumuli on Ottery East Hill' (Butler 2010, fig p 13)

## ABSTRACT

Detailed surveys of three earthworks on East Hill, Ottery St Mary, Devon have resulted in the re-interpretation of two of the sites as late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century earthwork redoubts. The third, previously interpreted as a round barrow, modified for tree planting, is interpreted as an embanked platform cairn.

## INTRODUCTION

The surveys on East Hill are part of the In the Footsteps of Peter Orlando Hutchinson project, run by the East Devon AONB and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Sid Vale Association (Keith Owen Fund), Devon County Council, East Devon District Council and Natural England. This project, building on the work of the recent Parishscapes project (East Devon AONB 2010), aims to raise awareness of landscape change, to help conserve and enhance historical features and to continue the legacy of volunteer study and involvement in landscape heritage ([www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk/IntheFootstepsofPeterOrlandoHutchinson](http://www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk/IntheFootstepsofPeterOrlandoHutchinson)). The three sites considered here are part of a suite of earthworks on East Hill which are now largely 'lost' in dense woodland and the work was carried out after the project volunteers carried out clearance, allowing detailed survey and interpretation work.

### Location, topography and geology

The sites lie at SY 1222 9407, SY 1232 9423 and SY 1248 9453 at c 240m OD on the edge of East Hill Strips, part of a narrow ridge forming the watershed between the Sid Vale and the Otter Valley. They lie on the western edge of the parish of Ottery St Mary and within East Devon AONB (Fig 1). The ridge top of East Hill, here marked by land above c 230m, is formed from the Upper Greensand sandstone rocks of Cretaceous age, capped by clay, silt, sand and gravel of the Quaternary Clay-With-Flints Formation (British Geological Survey [www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk)). The sites are now within woodland, planted in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; prior to this East Hill was common land, enclosed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

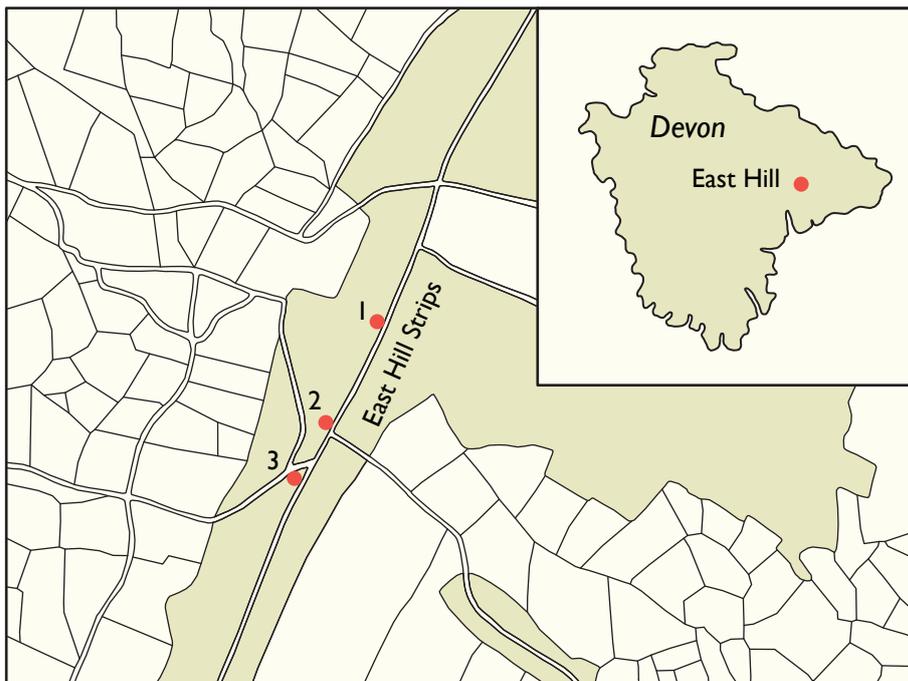


Fig 1 Location map  
1 Cairn  
2 North redoubt  
3 South redoubt

Hutchinson remarks on the view afforded from the ridge:

*'Tired and hot and thirsty, we sat on the slope of the hill to eat our sandwiches and admire the splendid view over the valley of the Otter and the country beyond. I never saw the colouring finer nor the distant view clearer. Every stranger ought to get to the top of Ottery East Hill, especially in the forenoon, to enjoy this view' (Butler 2010, 8).*

### **Numbering of the sites**

Northern redoubt

Hutchinson 1871 Tumulus H (map published in Butler 2010, 13)

Hutchinson 1880 19

Grinsell 1983 Round barrow Ottery St Mary 2

NMR SY 19 SW 4 (UID 449380)

Devon HER 10750

Southern redoubt

Hutchinson 1871 Tumulus G (map published in Butler 2010, 13)

Hutchinson 1880 18

Grinsell 1983 Round barrow Ottery St Mary 3

NMR SY 19 SW 5 (UID 449383)

Devon HER 10757

Prehistoric monument

Hutchinson 1880 20

Grinsell 1983 Round Barrow Ottery St Mary 1

NMR SY 19 SW 36 (UID 449493)

Devon HER 20256

EH SAM Heritage Asset List 1017773

### **PREVIOUS WORK: ANTIQUARIAN DESCRIPTIONS, MAP DEPICTIONS AND SURVEYS**

All three of the sites are depicted on the OS map of 1806, which also shows how the ridge was then open, unenclosed common land (Searle 1806) (Fig 2). The sites are shown on the tithe map of Ottery St Mary, dated 1843, where they are shown (in faint ink or pencil) as oval (north redoubt and prehistoric monument) and square (south redoubt) enclosures on recently enclosed land called simply 'Plot on East Hill' (Fig 3). On the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1854 Hutchinson took Mr Heineken and Mr Waterhouse to Ottery East Hill. He describes three barrows:

*'These barrows are cut into peculiar forms by the ditches made around them. The most southerly one is in the shape of a star with six points, like a fort or battery; the second is like a square but bounded by curved lines bowing inwards, and the most northerly towards Chineway Head is merely circular. These ditches are not likely to be ancient and perhaps were made at the time the barrows were planted with fir trees, some of which remain growing on them' (Butler 2000, 97).*



Fig 2 (top left) Extract from OS map of 1806 (Searle 1806)

Fig 3 (top right) Extract from Ottery St Mary tithe map



Fig 4 (left) Hutchinson's plan of 'Two barrows, Ottery East Hill' (Butler 2000,97)

Hutchinson also drew plans of the star-shaped and square monuments (Fig 4; Butler 2000, 97).

The earthworks are not depicted on the OS 1<sup>st</sup> edition map of 1889, but small pentagonal, rectangular and circular enclosures are shown at their locations, with a single conifer on the south redoubt, two conifers on the north redoubt and three on the prehistoric monument (Devon sheet 82 NW).

The north redoubt is described as probably a recent fortification in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a report of the Barrow Committee (Hutchinson 1880, 125). In 1977 RJ Silvester suggested that the barrow may have been used for the base of the feature, but it (the barrow) had been totally redesigned, with the steep ditch sides suggesting a fairly modern construction (Devon HER number MDV 10750). The OS Archaeology Division (1982) described the site as a sub-rectangular, flat-topped mound with concave sides and an enclosing ditch. The Investigator agreed with Hutchinson that the mound was a barrow, re-cut for ornamental purposes (NMR number SY 19 SW 4).

The south redoubt was described by the Barrow Committee as a large barrow with a star-shaped enclosure trenched into it, and trees planted on it c 1820 (Hutchinson 1880, 125). RJ Silvester, on a site visit in 1977, described the site as not a barrow but an ornamental mound with a steep-sided ditch and a lower bank beyond (Devon HER number MDV 10757). In 1982 the OS Investigator described the site as a ditched mound, shaped as a six-point star with a surrounding ditch and outer bank, agreeing

with Hutchinson that the mound was a barrow, subjected to ornamentation (NMR number SY 19 SW 5).

Pollard records the prehistoric monument as a ring ditch (1967, fig 1; 1971, fig 1). In 1982 the OS Investigator described the site as a tree covered, flattish mound with a bank around its edge and an external ditch and interprets it as a flat-topped round barrow with modification for ornamental purposes (NMR number SY 19 SW 36). The OS Archaeology Division surveyed all three of the earthworks at a scale of 1:2500 in 1982. These surveys, now published as line features on OS MasterMap, remained the most detailed records of the sites until the present study.

## **THE SURVEY**

### **Survey method**

The surveys were carried out in late March 2012 using an EDM to record the earthwork features at a scale of 1:250. Profiles across the sites were also recorded using the EDM. The surveys were completed in the field using graphical methods. The artificial slopes are shown by the archaeological convention of hachuring: the top of the slope is indicated by the flat end of the triangle, the bottom of the slope by the end of the line.

### **Description of the earthworks**

The northern redoubt (Figs 5 and 9)

The monument consists of a mound which is roughly square with elongated corners. From corner to corner the mound measures 250m NW/SE and 220m NE/SW and is 1m high. The mound is surrounded by a ditch, 1.4m wide and 0.5m deep, and slight bank, 1-1.6m wide and 0.25m high. The outer bank has been damaged by the car park to the SW and by the road to the east. The top of the mound is flat (Fig 9) and the mound constructed predominantly of earth and local flint. Several beeches and an oak tree grow on the edges of the mound; a tall Scots Pine grows on the SE corner. The pine is probably one of those recorded on the 19<sup>th</sup> century maps and described by Hutchinson.

The southern redoubt (Figs 6 and 10)

The southern redoubt also consists of a roughly square-shaped mound, but this one has protrusions on its north and south sides, as well as its corners (Fig 10). The mound measures 170m NW/SE and 180m NE/SW and is 1m high. The mound, like that to north, is made of earth and local flint. It is surrounded by a ditch, 1.2m wide and 0.6m deep, and an outer bank, 1.2m wide and 0.7m high. Both the outer bank and the ditch have been damaged by quarrying on the northern side of the site. The hollows on the east side of the redoubt are also the result of quarrying. The top of the mound is mostly flat, with slight earthworks on the west and south edges, and a small mound surrounding a Scots Pine tree. Several beech trees grow on the mound. The pine is probably one of those recorded on the 19<sup>th</sup> century maps and described by Hutchinson.

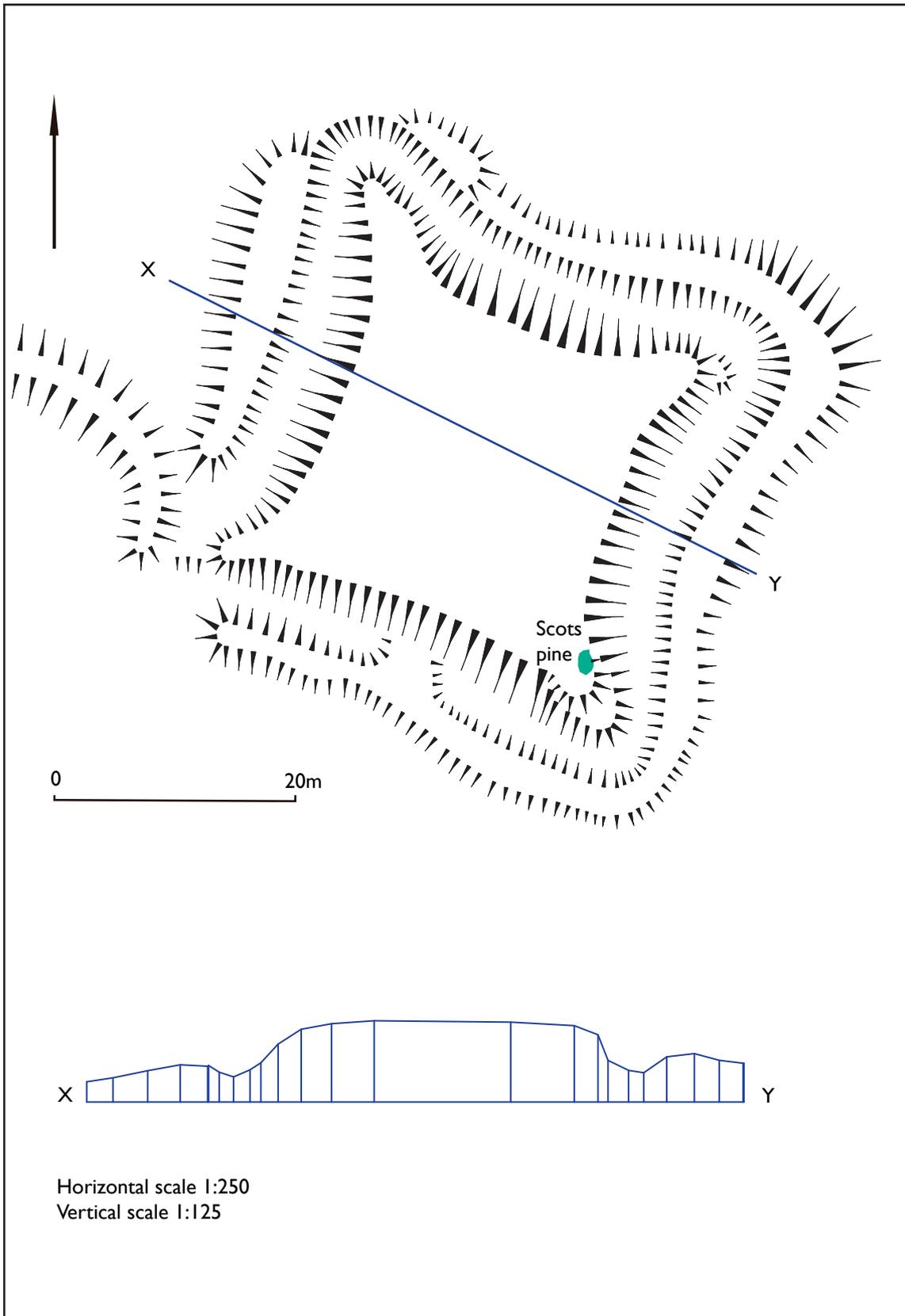


Fig 5 Earthwork survey and profile of the north redoubt (1:250)

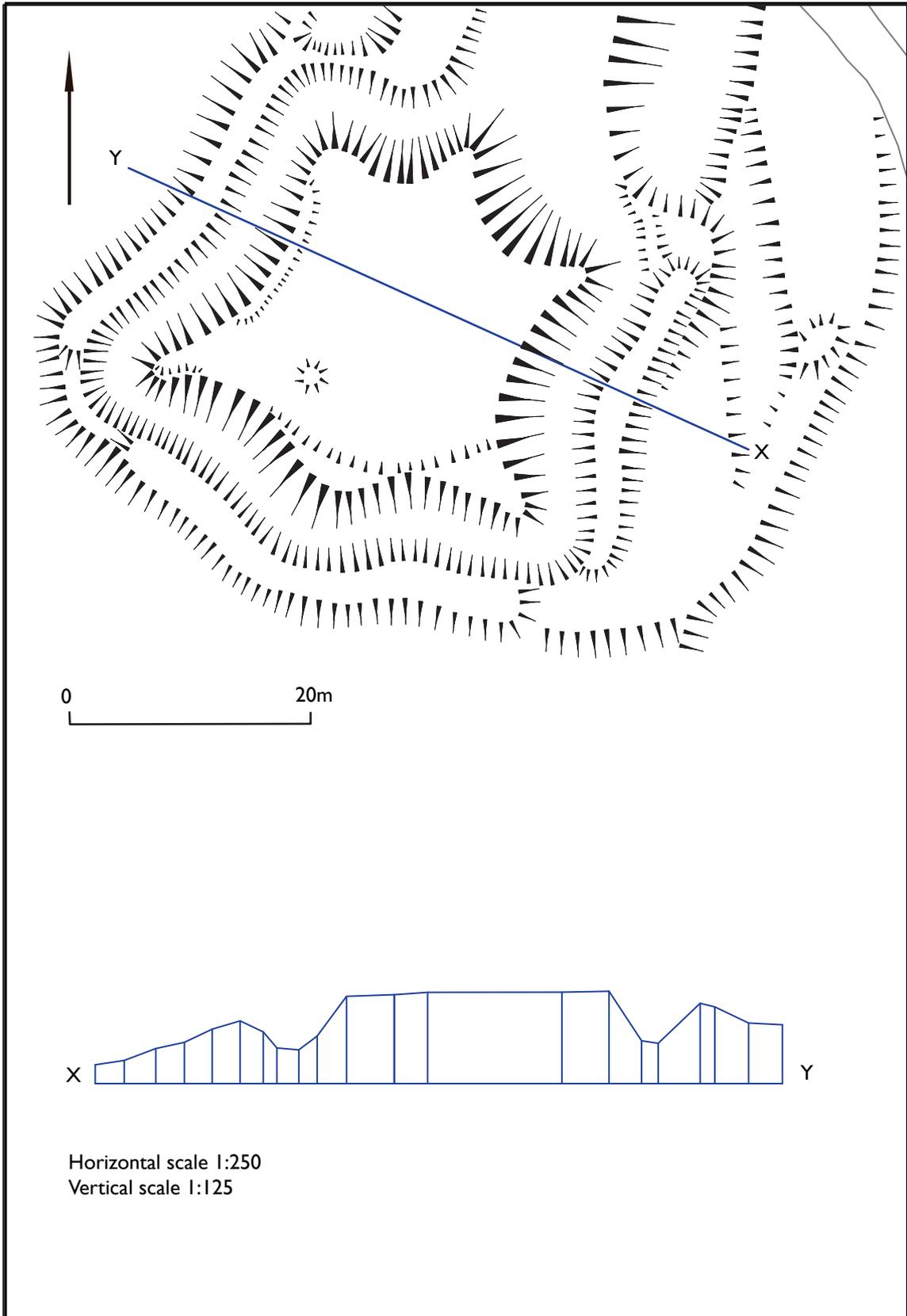


Fig 6 Earthwork survey and profile of the south redoubt (1:250)

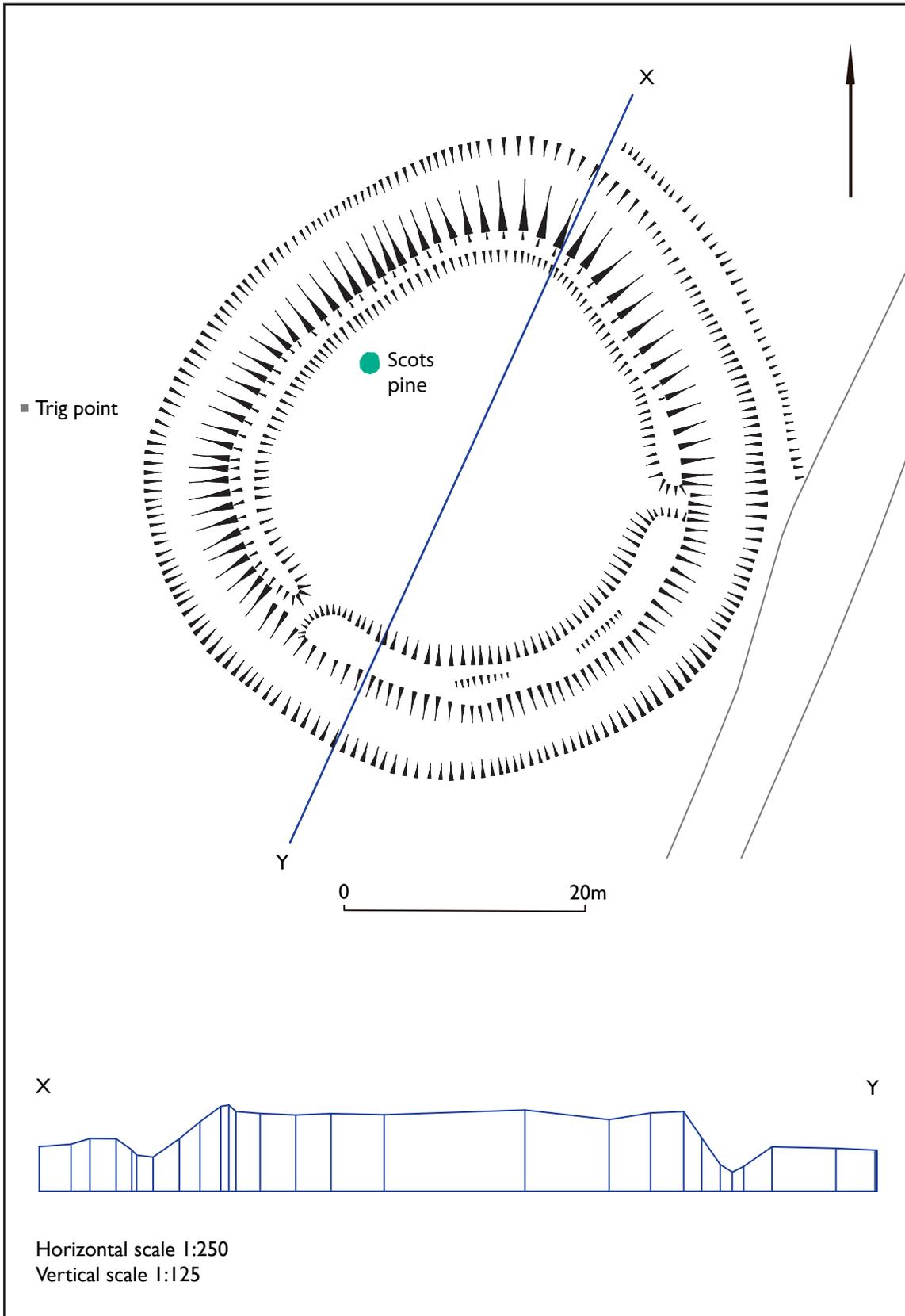


Fig 7 Earthwork survey of the prehistoric cairn (1:250)

The prehistoric monument (Figs 7 and 8)

The monument comprises an egg-shaped mound, made of earth and flint, which measures 230m N/S and 210m E/W. The mound is 0.75m high and is flat-topped (Fig 8). A narrow bank, 0.5m wide and 0.25m high runs around the northern edge of the mound. To the south the bank is 1.2m wide and 0.2m high. The ditch surrounding the mound is 1.3m wide and 0.6m deep; a very slight outer bank, 1.2m wide and 0.2m high, is visible on the west side of the ditch. Trees grow on the monument, mostly recently planted beech. A Scots Pine is growing on the west side of the mound, this is probably one of those recorded on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century maps and described by Hutchinson.

Fig 8 The south side of the cairn



## INTERPRETATION AND DATING

The previous interpretation of the north and south redoubts as modified barrow mounds is brought into question by these surveys. Both mounds bear little resemblance to prehistoric burial mounds, whatever modification may have occurred. It is argued here that the earthworks were constructed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of military training and were redoubts: standings for gun platforms.

There are several strands of evidence which support this. The mounds resemble those in Crowthorne Woods, Berkshire, which are well documented. There, an arc of six redoubts was built in 1792 during military manoeuvres in the area. The published plans of two of these are very similar to the East Hill sites, although the East Hill sites are somewhat smaller (Smith 1995, figs 4 and 5). In the same area as the six redoubts, 34 small circular mounds were noted; an excavation of one of the mounds recovered early 19<sup>th</sup>-century pottery and was interpreted as part of a military field kitchen (Manning 1964).

Hutchinson was aware that military training had taken place on East Hill, in 1871 he wrote that:



*Fig 9 The north redoubt*



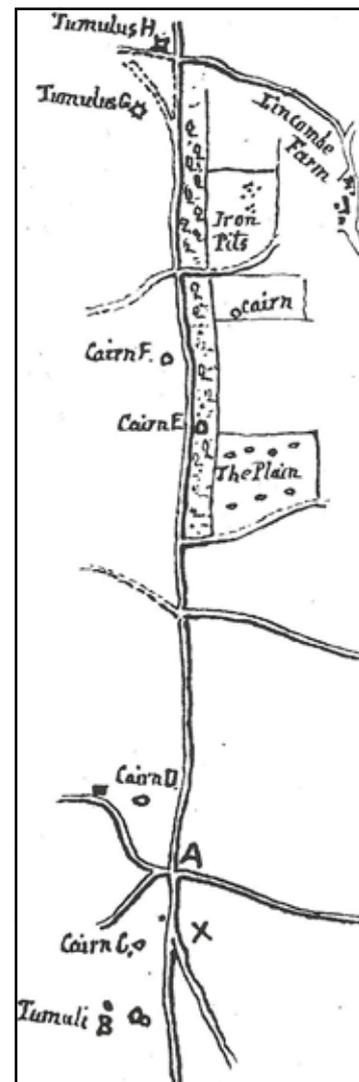
*Fig 10 The southeast corner of the south redoubt*

*'a large grass field called 'The Plain' was pointed out to us, on which the soldiers at one period used to exercise. We walked over this and remarked seven low mounds rather oval in figure. At first we thought they might be tumuli, but from their form and from the order in which they are placed, being three on the south side and four on the north, we gave up the idea'*  
*(Butler 2010, 13).*

Hutchinson showed these mounds on a map, which also shows the north and south redoubt as Tumulus H and Tumulus G (Figure 11, published in Butler 2010, 13). By 1982 there was no sign of the mounds in this field (SY 1185 9266), which had been recently ploughed (NMR SY 19 SW 39).

*Fig 11 Hutchinson's map of Tumuli on Ottery East Hill (Butler 2000, 13)*

There is documentary evidence for the presence of troops in the area in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fear of invasion from France together with civil unrest in England led to the construction of 200 new barracks in England, to accommodate regular and militia troops. Twenty of these barracks were in Devon, and in 1803 work began on the Ottery St Mary barracks (Breihan 1990). The exact location of the building is not clear, but present day place names Barrack Road and Barrack Farm, together with Barrack Field on the Tithes Apportionment, suggest the barracks were to the W of the town (C Wakefield pers comm). The barracks at Ottery St Mary, timber buildings arranged in quadrangles, accommodated 29 officers and 576 rank and file infantry troops. They were occupied first by the Somerset Militia, then by the Buckinghamshire, Worcester and Bedford Militias. Cavalry troops were stationed separately to the infantry, and in Honiton the barracks held a single troop of cavalry – four officers and 76 rank and file soldiers. This building had a bad reputation: it was called 'a very bad barracks' in 1814, due to the poor condition of the building as well as to the story of an officer murdering girl who visited his quarters (Breihan 1990, 153). The barrack buildings were abandoned by about 1816 when the size of the army was substantially reduced.



Hutchinson linked earthworks at Woodbury Castle, Aylesbeare Common and Venn St Ottery with General Simcoe's troops who had a camp on Woodbury Common between 1798 and 1803 (Butler 2000, 124, 154-155; 2010, 52-53; VCH 1906, 590-591) but it seems that these earthworks on East Hill are the only examples of redoubts in the area. They were used for training: temporary fieldworks - the sites for a gun

platform. The gun platforms were made of timber and the guns were probably moved in and out of the redoubts using temporary ramps. After the troops left Ottery and Honiton in 1816, the fieldworks lay undisturbed and unrecognised on East Hill until Hutchinson began his investigations. Sites of a similar period which were built for actual defence often underwent several phases of use and rebuilding. On Rame Head, southeast Cornwall, the redoubts on Makers Heights began as fieldworks in the 1790s but some were replaced with substantial stone batteries as the need to protect Plymouth and Devonport grew throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pye and Woodward 1996).

The prehistoric monument has previously been interpreted as a round barrow modified by tree planting. The narrow bank to the north of the mound may well be a later modification for tree planting, but the monument bears a resemblance to the rimmed or embanked platform cairns described in other parts of South West England (for example Bodmin Moor, Johnson and Rose 1994, fig 25, no 3; the Quantock Hills, Riley 2006, fig 2.17). A cairn some 100m to the south of this site was excavated in 1966 (Pollard 1967). No human remains were found but two pits with stone covers containing wood charcoal were found under the cairn. This may reflect the use of distinct spaces and/or monuments in the landscape for different parts of the funerary rites, with cremation and disposal of the pyre material being as important as interment of the human remains and marked by its own distinct monument. Recent work in South West England puts these monuments in the earlier part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Quinnell 1994; 1997). The linear barrow cemetery on East Hill forms part of the important prehistoric landscape of the East Devon heathlands (Jones and Quinnell 2008). The possibility that the monument was also used as a readymade fieldwork for a redoubt by the Ottery St Mary militia must also be considered.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Phil Planel and volunteers undertook clearance of the sites prior to the surveys; Chris Wakefield told me about the Ottery St Mary Barracks; Phil and Chris helped with the fieldwork.

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