Herefordshire Archaeology
Conservation and Environmental Planning
Planning Services
Environment Directorate
Herefordshire Council

Investigations at Mere Hill, Aymestrey.

Herefordshire Archaeology Report No 2.

Report prepared by
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Contents

Herefordshire Archaeology is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

Investigations at Mere Hill, Aymestrey.

Herefordshire Archaeology Report No.2, August 2000.

Summary:

The earthwork enclosure, (HSM 303297, HSM 303298), is situated on the edge of a near vertical scarp slope approximately 225m above sea level (NGR: SO 4065 6555). It had been obscured by woodland and had not therefore been noted from the air or otherwise recorded. The enclosure is formed by a semi-circular earthen bank, (surviving to a height of 2m at its northern end, with narrow external ditch and is approximately 140m long and 75m wide. The earthworks decrease in height and clarity as they continue southwards.

The earthworks were surveyed using a plane table and a sample area was subjected to a Magnetometry survey. On the basis of the topographic and geophysical data, three trial trenches were excavated. Whilst all three trenches were excavated to bedrock, nothing of archaeological significance was encountered.

More detailed observations of the bank and ditch strongly suggest that the monument was never completed and that construction work was suddenly halted, possibly due to a mis-alignment of one section of the bank making the enclosure indefensible.

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Introduction

The earthwork enclosure at NGR: SO 4065 6555 was discovered by staff of Herefordshire Archaeology in July 1999.

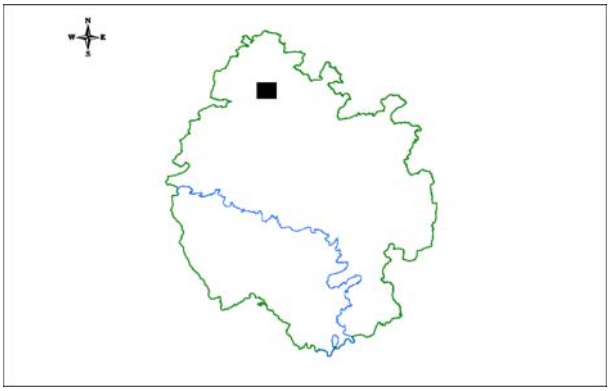

Figure 1: General Location

It is situated on the edge of a scarp slope approximately 225m above sea level overlooking the River Lugg some 2km. west of the village of Aymestrey. The enclosure is situated within dense coniferous woodland and is therefore not recognisable from the air. The enclosure is not located on the highest point of Mere Hill, but constructed on a level spur, the northern edge of which comprises a near vertical scarp slope affording natural defence from the north.

Two other Iron Age enclosures with substantial earthwork defences are known nearby. These are Pyon Wood Camp, (HSM 176), 2km to the north-east, and Croft Ambrey Fort, (HSM 177), 4 km east-by-north-east.

The monument is in plan a univallate 'D' shaped enclosure approximately 140m long, (east-west axis), and 75m wide, (north-south axis). The curving sides of the enclosure provide a landward defence, while the principal defence northwards was presumably the vertical and near-vertical scarp overlooking the river Lugg. The defensive bank survives to a maximum height of 2m at its north-eastern extremity, immediately above the scarp. Outside the bank is a 6m wide ditch with a slight and discontinuous counterscarp bank. An internal quarry ditch is also apparent. It was agreed with the foresters (Forest Enterprise) that archaeological survey, recording and limited research should be undertaken to gain a better understanding of the extent, purpose and character of construction of the enclosure.

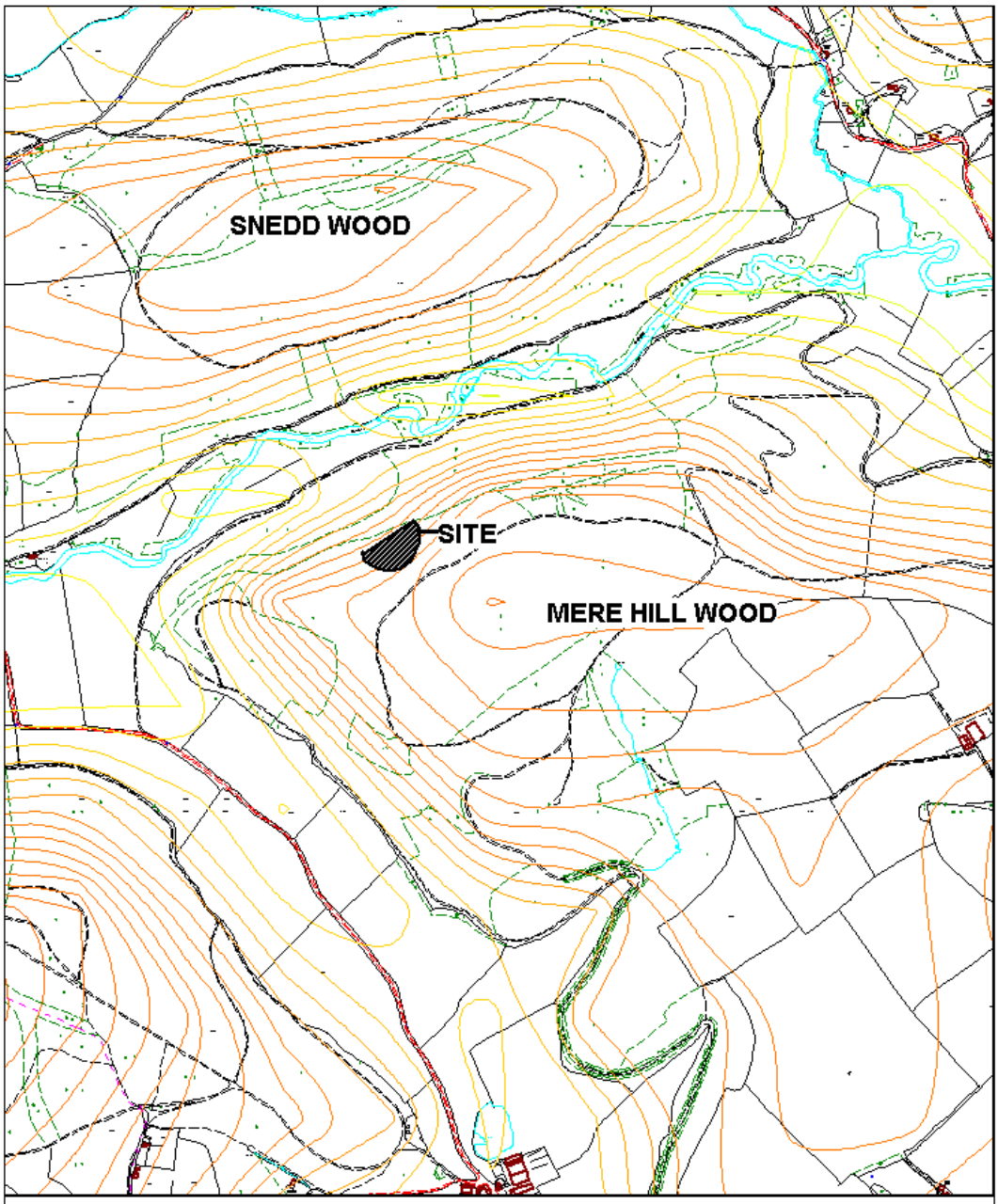

Figure 2: Site Location Plan

NORTH

SCALE 1:10000

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Method

The earthworks were surveyed using a plane table and alidade, and an overall site plan drawn at a scale of 1:500. (Figure 2). Due to the dense tree cover, a base line and reference points were put in by theodolite at regular intervals along felled corridors. It became apparent that the earthworks were most complete at the eastern end of the enclosure and it was initially presumed that the western half of the monument had been truncated by modern forestry ploughing. Within the enclosure a number of levelled areas were noted. These were generally semi-circular in appearance and ranged in diameter from 3m to 10m.

A rapid geophysical survey using a fluxgate gradiometer was conducted within a sample area along the level zone by the edge of the scarp. The survey data suggested considerable disturbance over the entire area. On the basis of the topographical and geophysical observations, it was decided to examine three areas by excavating trial trenches. Trench 1 was located close to the rampart in the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, approximately 15m south of the scarp edge. The trench measured 3m long by 1.5m wide and was positioned half over a levelled area. It was hoped that it would provide information concerning the construction of the levelled area and its purpose.

Trench 2 measured 5m square and was positioned approximately 8m south of the scarp edge equidistant from each terminal of the rampart. This trench was located at this point in order to explain an area of magnetic anomalies recorded during the magnetometer survey. Meanwhile, Trench 3 was located on the highest point within the enclosure and as with Trench 1, it measured 3m long and 1m wide. This area may well have been the optimum location for the building of structures within the enclosure and it was therefore hoped that structural and/or artefactual evidence would be forthcoming.

Results

The results from the excavations were surprising. All three trenches were excavated to bedrock (an average depth of 0.65m), but nothing of archaeological significance was encountered in any of them. Trench 1 established that the levelled area was created as a consequence of tree throw. Trench 2 was devoid of any features. The magnetic anomalies within Trench 3 were shown to be the result of modern arboricultural stump burning and re-planting. There was no indication within any of the trenches that there had been anything other than natural development of the soil profile, nor was there any trace suggesting that the enclosure was ever occupied.

More detailed observations of the bank and ditch were then made in an attempt to solve this conundrum. The results of this close examination have suggested an unusual interpretation. The rampart and external ditch survive to their greatest height at the north-east terminal. Here the rampart is 2m in height and the outside face is apparently revetted

with dry-stone walling. The ditch here is approximately 1.5m deep and runs right to the scarp edge, utilising a natural cleft in the hillside as its northern limit.

As the rampart is followed round to its western terminal the height can be seen to diminish gradually and the width fluctuates. At no other point along its length does the rampart have revetting. The defensive ditch also becomes less distinct as the circuit is followed from the north-eastern terminal with the counterscarp disappearing altogether approximately two thirds of the way round. Neither rampart nor ditch are any longer evident at the south-western corner of the enclosure and they only 're-appear' as scoops cutting the scarp edge at the western terminal.

On the ground, the rampart shows distinct inconsistencies at regular intervals along its length, and this became even clearer when planned in detail (see Figure 3). A series of definable equivalent lengths of bank and ditch can be seen to constitute the extant defences. Two considerable misalignments of these lengths are traceable along the rampart. The first occurs at the southern end of the most complete and revetted length. Here its southern end is met from the south by a lower and wider section of rampart. The crest of this latter section does not line up directly with the length to the north. Instead it curves to align straight towards the scarp edge as if the final length was going to intercept the scarp at the perpendicular. Rather than doing this however, the north-western terminal meets the scarp edge at an acute angle. From a defensive point of view this is disastrous, as a large portion of the interior of the enclosure can be seen from the scarp edge immediately to the east, outside the enclosure. The second misalignment occurs at approximately midway round the circuit. Here there is a noticeable step outwards of around 1.5m in the external face of the rampart. The ditch depth here is directly proportionate to the rampart height and disappears when the rampart is approximately 0.8m high.

The earthworks at the eastern terminal appear to represent the external ditch and internal quarry ditch but there is no evidence of a rampart here. It is suggested that close to this terminal an entranceway would have been constructed and this may go some way to explain the subtle earthworks which extend for approximately 30m to the south of the scarp edge. Certainly an entrance at this point would make sense from a defensive point of view as people wishing to enter the enclosure would have the scarp slope on one side of them and would be forced to approach uphill from a westerly direction. Between these earthworks and the rest of the circuit is an area of natural hillslope showing no trace of either rampart or ditch. This area shows no signs of more modern alteration or disturbance that could have removed these features. Indeed Forestry Commission staff confirmed that to their knowledge this area had never been mechanically ploughed or harvested.

When the rampart as a whole is looked at both in plan and across its profile it becomes clear that there is a change in angle, or height (or both) at regular intervals measuring approximately 17m. in length. This may suggest the intended construction of the enclosure by separate “gangs” building each section.

Discussion

The observations made so far indicate not only that the enclosure was never inhabited but that moreover it was never completed. If it had been completed, surely a number of these inconsistencies would have been rectified, in particular the misalignments. It is suggested that a number of individuals, perhaps a family group, were responsible for the construction of each of these 17m lengths of bank and ditch. Evidently, each length was constructed at a slightly different time, apparently in sequence and presumably by different groups. In this instance, it appears to have been the case that only the group which had constructed the north-eastern terminal had completed the task before the project as a whole was abandoned. The next group or gang, and subsequent groups responsible for the next lengths, had abandoned each task-length before it had been completed. It seems a strong possibility that the misalignment of the north-eastern terminal was the cause of the sudden abandonment of the project.

These initial investigations suggest therefore that the enclosure was never completed and is in a remarkably good state of preservation. Excavations at Croft Ambrey showed that the earliest construction phase in approximately 500 BC, consisted of a simple univallate enclosure only slightly larger than the example on Mere Hill. Both this Croft enclosure and that at Wapley Hill in the same geological formation nearby share consistencies in scarp-edge siting and form and at Mere Hill we may just be seeing the start of a process that culminated at the other two sites with massive multivallate defended enclosures.

Significance

It is the very incompleteness of the construction at Mere Hill, and the apparently remarkable detail in the surviving earthworks, that make it potentially so important. Further detailed survey should focus on the alignments and particular features (such as the dumps of material behind and on top of the third length of bank). Such study will provide valuable insights into the way in which this kind of monument was constructed and may shed light on the kinds of organisation involved in undertaking such a project.

Acknowledgements

Herefordshire Archaeology would like to thank Forest Enterprise and the Forestry Commission for their co-operation and information concerning the management history of the site.

We would also like to thank our group of volunteers for all their hard work under less than perfect conditions.

Archive

3 Sheets of site drawings
2 Sheets of inked drawings
2 Colour print films
2 Colour slide films
1 Black and white film
15 Context cards
1 Correspondence file
2 Sites & Monuments Record Forms (HSM 303297, HSM 303298)

This document.

Further Publication

A note on this fieldwork is to appear in CBA publication, West Midlands Archaeology, 43, for 2000. A full account of the work will appear in a subsequent publication.

Validation

Herefordshire Archaeology operates a validation system for its reports, to provide quality assurance and to comply with Best Value procedures.

This report has been checked for accuracy and clarity of statements of procedure and results.

Dr. K. Ray County Archaeologist.