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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF EARTHWORKS ON CASTLE HILL, MOTTISTONE, ISLE OF WIGHT

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ABSTRACT

A sub-rectangular earthwork on Castle Hill was surveyed. Parallels with similar earthwork types on the mainland suggest that it served a late prehistoric stock keeping function, although neither date nor purpose can be positively stated. Such stock enclosures can date from any period from the Bronze Age through to the medieval, and one should not be too hasty to assign a date that is merely in keeping with current fashions. Nevertheless, there are a number of holloways leading out on to the Castle Hill and Mottistone Common area that suggest long-term pastoral grazing regimes in the vicinity. These seem to date from the prehistoric period onwards, and they give good reasons for suggesting that a prominent earthwork within this area would perform a stock keeping function. On balance, the most likely date for the Castle Hill earthwork is Iron Age or Romano-British.

The storms of 1987 and 1991 seem to have caused considerable damage to the earthworks, both from thrown trees, and by their subsequent removal from site. The survey recognised serious damage to parts of the site. Despite this, the overall shape of the earthworks seems to have survived in a recognisable form, and a possible eastern entrance may have been identified.

INTRODUCTION

The National Trust office of the Isle of Wight requested C K Currie of CKC Archaeology to undertake a measured survey of a rectangular earthwork on Castle Hill (NGR: SZ 4088 8407), 0.5km NE of the village of Mottistone (MPP Scheduled Monument no 22063). Until recently this earthwork had been covered by a conifer plantation, but following extensive tree falls in the storms of 1987 and 1991, this has been recently removed. The purpose of this survey was to take advantage of the cleared ground to make an accurate plan, and to assess the damage caused both by the uprooting of trees and their subsequent removal. The survey was carried out in April 1999.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Castle Hill lies to the east of Mottistone Common within the narrow Greensand belt that runs parallel with the SW coast of the Isle of Wight. The hill is approximately 145m above Ordnance Datum. It overlooks the village of Mottistone, 500m to the SW, and is approximately 1.75km from the low sea cliffs near Sudmoor Point (Fig. 1). The name 'castle' seems to derive from the sub-rectangular earthwork on its northern slope close to its summit. An estate map of *c.* 1815 refers to this area as 'Castle Sand Hill' (IOWRO 86/21). At the time of the tithe map and award (1838/39) the area had been merged into a large enclosure of nearly 27 acres called Long Stone Bottom (IOWRO JER/T/171, 173). The land use was then given as a mixture of 'furze' and pasture, possibly denoting rough grazing.

An earthwork is first shown on the earliest large scale Ordnance Survey maps. On the OS 6″ map of 1862 (sheet 94) a three sided earthwork is shown marked in the Gothic script as 'Castle Hill'. This is the first time that this particular version of the name is used, and it continues to be used for the earthwork thereafter. On this map the east side of the earthwork is omitted, its place being taken by a field boundary (Fig. 2). At that time the area appears to be shown as rough grazing similar to that available on the adjoining Mottistone Common. This land use seems to have continued

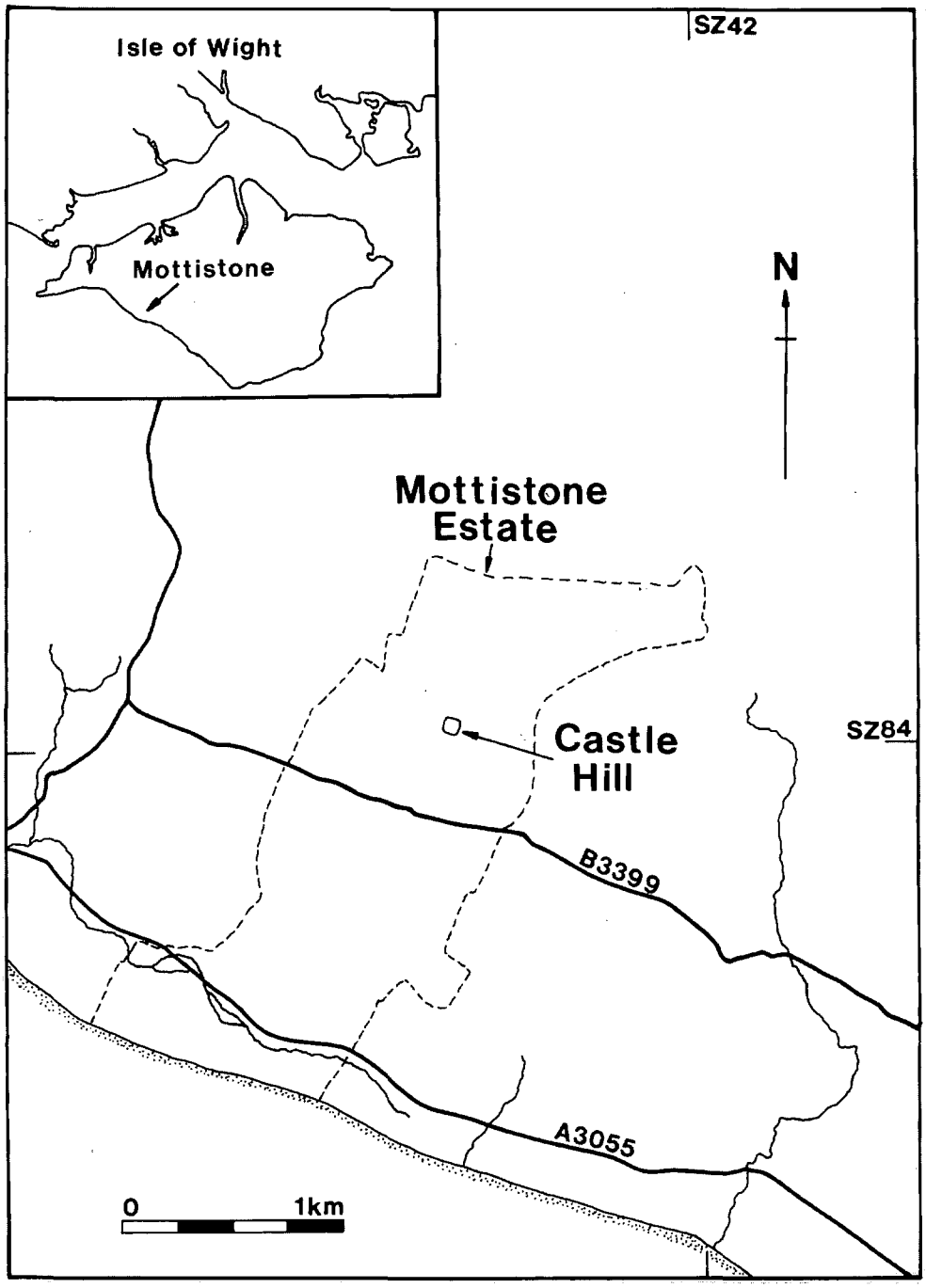

Fig. 1 Location map

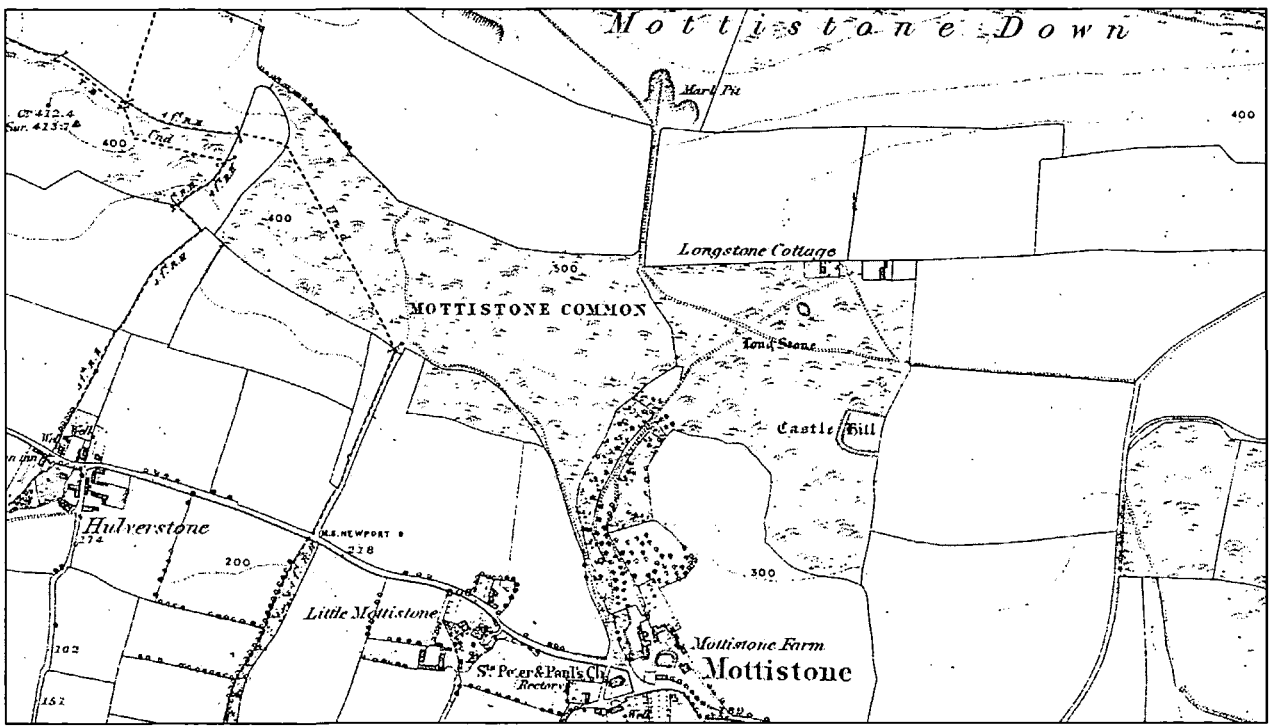

Fig. 2 Castle Hill as shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6" map of 1862 (sheet 94). Note survey only shows three sides to enclosure with field boundary on line of fourth (east) side.

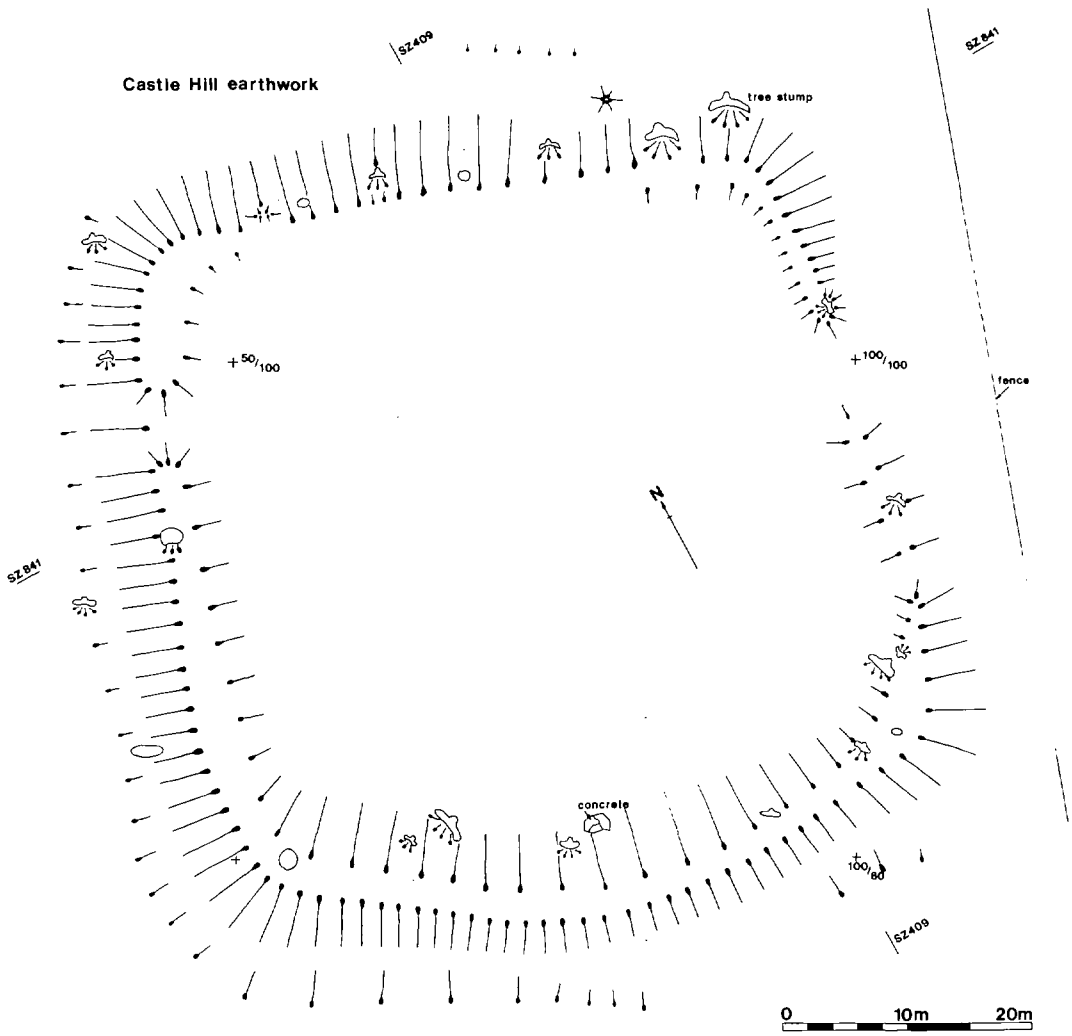

Fig. 3 Earthwork survey of Castle Hill, April 1999, showing position of tree stumps left *in situ* to rot, and damage caused to the earthworks by storm-blown trees. Stumps depicted as marked stump in top right corner. Note possible entrance on east side not marked in 1862.

into the early part of the 20th century, as shown on the 1909 OS 6″ plan (sheet 94SW). Air photographs in the National Monument Record Centre still seem to show the area as an open heathland type as late as January 1st 1930 (Photo ref. NMR SZ 4084/1-2).

Shortly after this the area was converted to conifer plantation woodland. The land was leased by the Seely family to the Forestry Commission for 999 years in 1929, and planting must have begun soon after. In 1987 and 1991 two storms devastated many plantations on the South Coast of England, including Castle Hill. This eventually led to a decision by the National Trust to bring the land back in hand, and convert it to heathland rough grazing, as it had probably been for many

centuries previously. Prehistoric features on Mottistone Common, such as the Long Stone, suggest that the area may have been cleared as early as 3000 BC.

From air photographs in the Isle of Wight Archaeological Centre and elsewhere, it would seem that the removal of trees had possibly begun soon after the storm. Photographs dated January 1989 (IOWAC 89B1-20/21) show that the southern slope of the hill had already been cleared by this time. Trees, many shown in a fallen state, still existed over the main part of the earthwork at this time. A visit by Frank Basford of the Isle of Wight Archaeological Centre on January 31, 1989, records that trees had been cleared up to 'the edge of the southern bank which has tree stumps and brushwood lying on its surface' (County SMR Record Number 256). The remainder of the trees within the earthwork were removed between November 1997 and January 1998. The cut tree stumps have been left to rot *in situ*.

THE SURVEY

Details of the survey strategy, together with an assessment of its accuracy is given in the archive report (Currie 1999a) to which the reader is referred.

The earthwork (Fig. 3) was found to be sub-rectangular, with three roughly straight sides, and a curving southern bank. It is aligned on an approximate ESE-WNW axis. Its maximum dimensions are 71m N-S and 68m E-W including external ditches. The maximum length for the north bank is 58m, the east bank is 58m, the south bank is 65m and the west bank is 63m. There are slight traces of a ditch on the west and south sides. This is between 4 and 7m wide, and up to 0.6m deep in places. It is difficult to trace the full length of this ditch on the south side.

There are gaps near the north ends of the west and east banks. That in the west bank seems to have been caused by vehicle tracks, which are still clearly visible as wheel ruts. That on the east side is less obviously caused by vehicles or other modern intrusion, but this bank is the most heavily damaged. In the middle section, this bank is very low, being barely 0.8m high in places, although at the north end, beyond the gap in the bank, it is well preserved, and up to 1.6m high and 6m wide (Fig. 4). There are a number of areas on the east bank that have been damaged by fallen trees. Four tree throws are still clearly visible on the east bank, and have been marked on the survey by the position of the surviving stump and the root hole.

The north side of the earthwork comprises a lynchet-like bank without a clear drop back into the interior of the earthwork. This is the only bank to demonstrate this tendency, although there are some faint traces of an internal drop on the two corners with the east and west banks. There are at least six thrown trees and two stumps on the bank, making it the worst damaged bank on the site. Three particularly large trees have been thrown near the NE corner, causing considerable damage to this part of the bank. This is coupled with some serious animal disturbance throwing up minor subsidiary earthworks from their burrowings. Where the bank is well-preserved, towards its west end, it is over 2m high, and over 6m wide.

To the north of this bank, the Ordnance Survey 1975 plan shows a further scarp bank below the main bank. Thrown trees are concentrated at the west end of this feature, obliterating it completely. The faint trace of a scarp can be discerned in line with the middle portion of the north bank, but this seems to have been caused by soil creep, rather than a man-made earthwork.

The west bank is generally well-preserved. It has only one thrown tree on the bank itself, with four in the ditch on its west side. The bank is at its highest at the north end, being up to 1.8m high and 9m wide here. About 12m from the NW corner the bank has been interrupted by the wheel ruts of motorised vehicles causing a distinctive gap to be formed. Beyond this the bank is up to 1.6m above the western ditch, dropping about 0.4m into the interior of the earthwork. The ditch itself is shallow, being seldom deeper than 0.6m, and 6m wide. In places it is ephemeral, but it is possible to trace it the full length of the west side.

The south bank is slightly different from the others, in that it is curving outwards towards its centre, making it the longest of the four banks. In

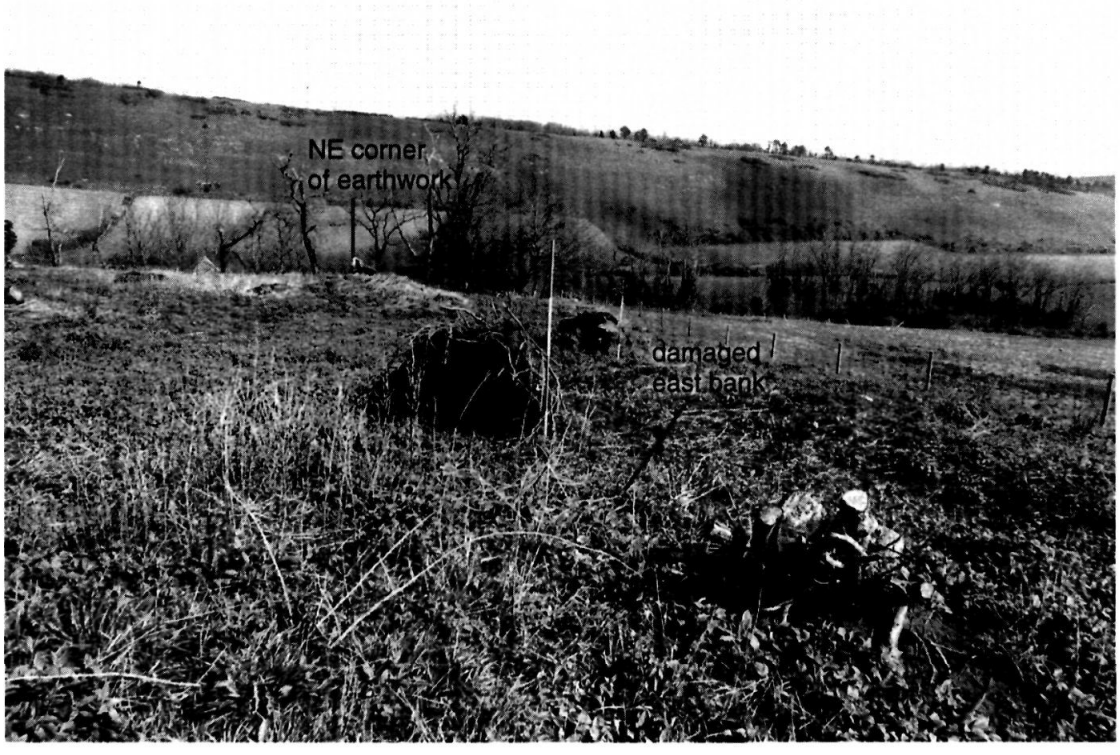

Fig. 4 Photograph taken during survey of east side of earthworks from south bank looking NNE. Conjectured entrance just beyond third stump. Bank can be clearly seen beyond, but note bank below (to south of) the third stump is extremely faint, resulting in it not being shown in 1862, although the NE and SE returns are quite obvious (*cf.* Fig. 3).

places it survives to over 1.6m high and 11m wide, and is of fairly uniform height throughout. It drops about 0.5m into the interior of the earthwork, but this may be exaggerated by the ground sloping in that direction naturally. There are seven thrown trees or stumps on this bank, causing some severe, but mainly localised, damage. Fortunately most of this damage is to the lower inside edge of the bank, leaving the higher profile on the south side largely untouched. There are slight traces of a ditch on the south side of the bank, but this is mostly ephemeral. It is not possible to trace it the full length of this side. Where the ditch does survive, it is mainly 6–7m broad and less than 0.5m deep. There are a number of heavy tree throws on the line of the ditch near the SE corner of the earthwork that makes the original nature of the earthworks here difficult to assess.

DISCUSSION

The earthworks in relation to recent damage

Surveying the position of the thrown trees and stumps on the earthworks has made it possible to see where the most damage has been caused. Comparing the present survey with that shown on the 1975 revision OS 25″ map also enables an assessment of damage to be made.

One has to question the precise accuracy of the OS drawing. Possibly because of the small scale, the earthworks have been simplified. Alternatively there have been changes that have been caused by events since the OS drawing was made. The OS drawing agrees with the present survey in showing the east bank as the lesser of the four banks. Although the middle portion of

this bank appears to have been damaged by thrown trees and their subsequent removal, it is possible that the earthwork here was always of slighter dimensions. It is notable that the earthworks drawn on late 19th and early 20th century OS maps fail to show a bank here at all. Instead, it would seem that the field boundary followed the line of this bank.

Perhaps the most important difference between this survey and the 1975 OS drawing is the absence of a gap near the NE corner. From present observations, it would seem that the bank has been completely levelled for a distance of between 5 and 6m. There is little trace of there having been a bank here. This is unlike the gap on the west side, where traces of the original bank can be still seen under the later wheel ruts. Although the 1975 OS drawing shows a continuous eastern bank, one has to question the accuracy of this depiction based on the OS Field Investigator's comments made in 1967.

Here it is stated that there are 'No signs of an entrance except for a gap midway in E. side but this may be later trenching' (County SMR Record Number 256). These comments were made before the 1975 drawing was made. Do they suggest that the drawing was made, as is likely, many years before 1975, and not subsequently revised? Alternatively, do they suggest the drawing is not accurate, or a simplified version? Whatever the answer it would seem a gap existed before 1967, and is not the work of more recent activity. In the circumstances, one has to consider that it might be an original entrance. Certainly all the holloways leading on to Mottistone Common come from a southerly or easterly direction, suggesting that historic access to these Greensand hills was from that direction.

Another feature shown on the OS drawing that needs discussion is the scarp bank shown below the north bank of the earthwork. There is very little trace of this feature today. Although this could be the result of tree damage, where this alignment has survived relatively unmolested, only the faintest feature can be discerned. It is this author's opinion that this is caused by downslope soil creep, and not by a man-made feature, although it is not impossible that recent damage could have removed the greater part of this former bank.

The north bank of the earthwork also requires some discussion. It is the only bank that does not have a noticeable drop into the centre of the enclosure. One has to ask if this was original, or have traces of the inner bank been eroded by time? The 1975 OS drawing shows no inner drop to the bank. This survey has shown the faintest traces on the two corners, but this should be expected as both the east and west banks had drops into the enclosure.

The other question concerns the ditch. On the south side, the OS drawing shows this as continuous. Today it is difficult to trace this the full length of the south bank. This is possibly the result of a path cutting across the ditch at the point it apparently vanishes. It would seem that possible erosion by walkers has destroyed the vestiges of a slight feature. Further, heavy tree throw damage in the SE corner of this ditch has made this section difficult to make out. It would seem, therefore, that damage to this section of the earthwork has occurred since 1975, both as the result of damage by trees, and by erosion from walkers.

The planting of trees on Castle Hill has caused serious damage to the earthworks. According to the OS Field Investigator's report of 1967, the earthworks were 'Planted with trees in State Forest, but well preserved' (County SMR Record Number 256). This statement was made before trees were blown over, and subsequently cleared. Even without the storm damage of 1987, it is difficult to imagine that the trees could have been removed from the earthwork without causing much damage. One only has to inspect the gap in the west bank to conclude that this has been caused by Forestry vehicles gaining access to and from the site.

There are 20 serious holes gouged out of the earthworks by thrown trees. Some of these cover as much as 9 square metres of bank, making a total damaged area between 100 and 130 square metres. Considering the banks cover a total length of about 200m, with an average width of 8m, the obvious damage covers about 8% of the earthworks. This may not sound much, but there is also the damage caused by the access of vehicles (a further 50 square metres) and subsequent animal burrows within the loosened soil that increases the total to about 12%. One also has to consider the unseen damage to the underground stratigraphy

by tree roots. This could add another 30–40% of the site, possibly giving a final total of over 50% of the entire site damaged, directly or indirectly, from conifer planting on this Scheduled Ancient Monument. Without recourse to trail excavation to test these calculations, such figures can only be estimated. However, excavation is not recommended, as this would only destroy the archaeological stratigraphy further.

It is now a standard recommendation that forestry plantations should not be made on ancient earthworks. By today's standards, the planting on Castle Hill would not have been allowed. However, it is encouraging that the overall form of the earthwork can still be largely discerned, despite the extensive devastation has been caused as a result of these plantings. Since the tree cover has been removed the National Trust have made a good job of restoring the original heathland habitat, and have made Castle Hill visible and accessible to the public once more.

The site type

The *Vectis Report*, a survey of archaeological sites on the Isle of Wight, suggests that the earthwork enclosure on Castle Hill is of Iron Age date (Basford 1980, 121). This is based largely on the earthwork type. This is a sub-rectangular enclosure on the north-facing slope of a hill just below the summit. It is enclosed in a bank of reasonable proportions, with a ditch on the south and west sides. Such a situation is not ideally suited to defence, but allows some semblance of this function. It is coupled with possible shelter from prevailing southerly winds, although again this is not perfectly situated in this respect. The earthworks therefore suggest they are either an enclosed farmstead or a stock enclosure. Neither suggestion fits the site perfectly. Lack of any substantial finds within the earthworks prevents them from being put forward too readily as a settlement site.

The Iron Age date is generally given for earthworks of these proportions, often on limited evidence. Similar earthworks, with little evidence of human settlement within, have been identified in the New Forest, and elsewhere on the mainland, that have often been accorded medieval date as stock enclosures. One, in the New Forest, bears the apt name, Castle Piece, suggesting that the 'Castle' name was frequently given to such earthworks (Williams-Freeman 1915, 367). It is possibly the hill-top location of Castle Hill that suggests the Iron Age date, because of its distant similarity to a hill-fort.

Cunliffe (1975, 174–75) has suggested that rectangular enclosures, often sited on or near hill-tops, can be equated with late prehistoric stock keeping. Where such earthworks have been studied, they are found to range in date from the Late Bronze Age through to the Romano-British period. Examples are cited on Portsdown and Ladle Hills in Hampshire, and on Harrow and Bow Hills in Sussex. However, these are often associated with other prehistoric earthworks, such as linear earthworks thought to be related to ranch boundaries, features seemingly lacking at Castle Hill. A good excavated example, dating from the Iron Age and accorded a stock keeping function, was recorded at Blagden Copse, Hurstbourne Tarrant, Hampshire, although this is further complicated by having the ditch on the inside of the bank (Stead 1968). Fowler (1983, 192–93) discusses the difficulty in proving these rectangular enclosures were intended for stock keeping, but suggests that, until further evidence is forthcoming, it often offers the best available explanation.

It would seem that on balance the earthworks on Castle Hill best fit an Iron Age pastoral function. Nevertheless, it is worth citing the case of an earthwork enclosure close to the highest ground of Ashtead Common, Surrey. This earthwork comprises a rounded triangular shaped bank with external ditch. Its situation, on high ground on marginal common land, is very similar to Castle Hill, as is its mode of construction. The earliest references to this site referred to it as a 'camp'. Later on it was designated a stock enclosure of late prehistoric date, but most recently it has been suggested that it is medieval. None of these suggestions are based on any concrete evidence, and the medieval date may well have been put forward on account that it is becoming currently fashionable to allocate such features to this period. That the enclosure stands within 100m of a Roman villa and tile kiln site seems to have been entirely overlooked in the search for a 'fashionable' answer. In reality, the feature could be of any date ranging from the

prehistoric to the medieval, including the Romano-British (Currie 1999b).

It is perhaps of some interest that there are a number of sites in the former Mottistone parish that could be related to the Castle Hill earthwork. A late Iron Age or native Roman-British settlement was found eroding from the cliffs in the 1930s (Hookey 1951). This could be taken to demonstrate the type of native pastoral presence in the vicinity that might account for the Castle Hill earthwork. Also present leading on to Mottistone Common are a large number of holloways, most of which are thought to have been associated with stock management. Some of these seem to be a considerable antiquity, and are suspected of being of prehistoric origin. They can demonstrate the presence of pastoral land management in the immediate vicinity of the earthwork (Currie 1999c). These holloways show that stock grazing was carried out adjoining Castle Hill possibly from the prehistoric period through to the 19th century. In the circumstances, there is no reason why the Castle Hill earthwork could not be late prehistoric, Romano-British or medieval in origin. It is only on balance that an Iron Age (or Romano-British) date has been favoured.

ARCHIVE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archive for this work has been deposited with the Archaeological Advisers at the Estates Advisory Office, currently at 33 Sheep Street, Cirencester, Glos, GL7 IRQ. Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the Isle of Wight County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and the National Monuments Record in Swindon, Wiltshire.

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