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## **Brackenbury Ditches**

by E. S. Lindley  
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## BRACKENBURY DITCHES

On a spur of the Cotswold scarp in Nibley parish, just outside Wotton-under-Edge and overlooking Bournestream, lies an important British camp now called Brackenburg. This was visited by the Society in 1932, but a brief report of the account then given by Mr Baddeley is the only account of it in these Transactions: fuller accounts have been recorded elsewhere.

The site has for generations been well wooded, a century ago part of it cleared for cultivation, and the whole since afforested and worked for timber. So now the accumulation of leafmould, rotting stumps, trees, undergrowth, and rank grass have made exploration with the spade practically useless: in fact, it does not seem ever to have been attempted, and my probing with rod and with augers has not encouraged me to try. The woods have also concealed it, so that it is hardly known, although second only to Uleybury among the scarp camps.

The camp covers an area of about 8 acres in the form of a blunt triangle, (FIG. 1) the sides protected by accentuating the scarp, with more extensive works across the 200 yards of neck of the promontory, a quarter of the total perimeter. The N.W. face was crowned with a slight breastwork, and the natural slope was accentuated for about 12 feet of height, ending in a ditch now up to 4 feet deep, after which the natural slope remained: at the W. end the ditch fades out into a broad natural berm, and no extra defence was provided. Along the S. face the natural slope is steeper, and there is no breastwork: the natural slope is increased to about 1 : 2 for 12-16 feet of height, and then there is a berm of about 10 feet without ditch.

The stronger defences of the level neck of the plateau at the N.E. have a total width varying from 130 to 220 feet: a cross-section of the latter width is shown, (FIG. 1). The inner rampart is now only 7 feet high, with a top width of only 3 feet and base of 54 feet: the narrow top suggests that the outer face was reveted and has slipped. Outside this rampart comes a 10-foot berm, then a ditch still 6-7 feet deep, 40 feet wide at top and

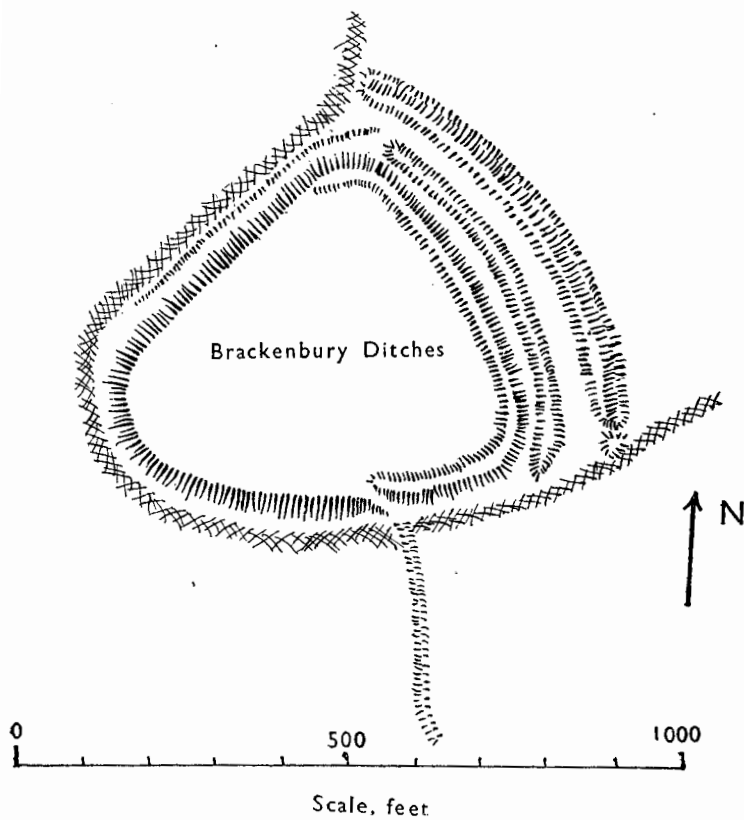
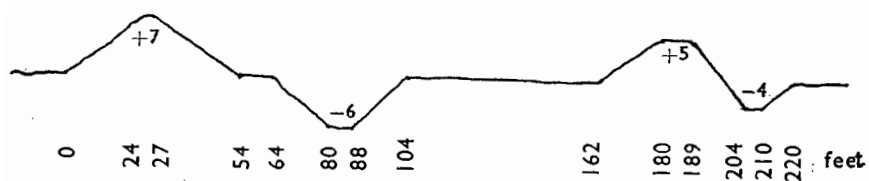


Fig. 1

8 feet wide at bottom. Then there is a 60-foot berm and an outer rampart 5 feet high and ditch 4 feet deep.

The 'front door' is of a simple but effective design. The outer ditch and rampart are crossed at the s. end by causeway and gap near the edge of the scarp, with an unbroken inner ditch and rampart to face. Access is then along the berm for nearly half the length of the s. face, where the invader would be under fire from a continuation of the inner rampart on his right and undefended side. Entry to the inner perimeter is then on a diagonal course and through a gap, with the inner rampart turned inward still to defend it.

From this gap a slight sunk way not mentioned in any of the accounts, some 2 feet deep, runs straight down the slope in a direct line for the spring, mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon charter: the path does not show in the meadow below, and has been obliterated by the ploughing of a terrace and lynchet just above it: the spring is still marked on O.S. maps, though more recently captured underground and piped to supply the local farm and houses.

The map seems to suggest a second entrance at the N.E. corner: a path entering the camp there has slightly filled the ditches and worn the ramparts, but was not part of the original design.

The camp is mentioned, but without any description or details, by Leland *c.* 1538, by John Smyth of Nibley *c.* 1630, and by Rudder 1779: Atkins 1712 and Rudge 1803 do not mention it: Camden 1789 only quotes Rudder, and Fosbrooke 1807 only quotes Smyth.

Thos. John Lloyd Baker in 1821<sup>1</sup> gives only a slight account, referring to the thick wood, and suggesting the northern entrance which I doubt. The fullest account is that of G. F. Playne 1877<sup>2</sup>. Witts 1883<sup>3</sup> gives a description which seems to be largely based on Playne, while Burrow 1919<sup>4</sup> seems largely to follow Witts.

<sup>1</sup> *Archaeologia*. Vol. XIX.

<sup>2</sup> *Trans. Cotteswold Field Club*, Vol. VI.

<sup>3</sup> *Archaeological Handbook of Gloucestershire*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ancient Entrenchments and Camps of Gloucestershire*.

Pritchard in 1905<sup>1</sup> reports the finding two years before of a fine Bronze Age tanged dagger, which is not known to have been preserved: a fragment of bronze saw had also been found, but not thought worth keeping. The dagger was some 8½ in. long, of which 5 in. was the blade with prominent ribs on two sides, and four parallel (*sic*) lines all joining at the point: one rivet at the end of the tang. These were found by a keeper, stopping rabbit holes 'on the camp'.

Baddeley pronounces the camp with traces of 'pit dwellings' as distinctly Iron Age, in spite of the finds of bronze: their presence can be accounted for in several ways, and there is no evidence of earlier occupation, though the saw does suggest it slightly. I note that Baddeley had not seen the camp before I showed it to him about 1930, and not any pits. There is nothing to suggest later occupation, as at Sodbury, where Witts shortly after publication of his Handbook found that the known Roman camp had been made inside a larger earlier work<sup>2</sup>.

The view from Brackenbury covers a wide range of Severn crossings. To the north, Drakestone masks Arlingham, but Purton is in view, and from there the river and the valley camps as far as Clifton and Kings Weston are in view if the weather allows: along the scarp, camps can be seen as far as Dyrham, and perhaps Lansdown: inland only Uleybury is clearly visible in spite of Lloyd Baker's statement to the contrary: the Minchinhampton earthworks are masked by the Nymphsfield ridge, but smoke signals could probably be seen over it.

Access from inland must have been by track down the Wotton ridge now marked as Roman Road, and then down the n.w. arm of the ridge. If the track which is surmised down Waterley Bottom existed in spite of wood and swamp, it would at the end face such a steep scarp that the only easier way up Spuncombe Bottom would be taken to the ridge, and it would be far easier to follow the ridge from the start.

There are no sepulchral remains with any relation to the

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, Vol. xxix.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, Vol. viii, p. 74.

camp: the nearest is a levelled 'tumulus' two miles off in the angle of the Wotton and the Dursley roads: and on Simondshall Farm what may be a pair of tumuli, or as Crawford suggests, the ends of a Long Barrow with the middle removed. The few barrows on Tor Hill are two miles still further off, as Tyley Bottom intervenes. Stinchcombe Hill has not even so much, and inland one has to go as far for more barrows.

Playne speaks of some 600 small pits all over the Westridge plateau, but none within the camp: he figures one as an 8-10 foot circle, one half of which is a depression then about a foot deep, with an equal mound in the other half: he calls this a British town with refuge camp, and suggests the functions of these pit dwellings and of the other pits which he describes. Witts and Burrow in some degree repeat this, but the earlier writers had not mentioned them. So populous a town is obviously impossible, even if a large number of them had been of shape that could be storage pits. Similar pits at Rodborough were visited and discussed by the Society in 1880, and Sir John Maclean differed from the general view and did not consider them of great antiquity.

In 1925 Miss Willmore (Mrs Crooke)<sup>1</sup> sectioned one on Westridge and found the mound to show some 6 in. humus on a foot of reddish-brown earth and then apparently undisturbed earth: all the layers were barren. She pronounced them definitely not pit-dwellings, and suggested tree falls. I have now not been able to find any sign of these at Westridge. Description of one of the 'bunkers' at Rodborough as having the mound on the inside of the curve of the depression seemed to support that suggestion. There too sectioning showed the outside of the mound to be mould, and the inside small stones: in one was found an apparent posthole containing decayed wood, a few flints, some burnt stones and pottery: otherwise the 'bunkers' were barren.

In 1937 Mrs Clifford<sup>2</sup> worked at Rodborough, rejected any idea of human origin, and suggested that they were due to

<sup>1</sup> *Bristol Univ. Spel. Soc.*, 1925, p. 293.

<sup>2</sup> *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, Vol. LIX, p. 288.

solifluxion. In 1945 Thomas Hay<sup>1</sup> rejected this suggestion because they were on nearly level ground, and faced all ways instead of down any slight slope there might be: he also rejected the tree-fall theory, because then they would have been away from the prevailing wind: he suggests that they were a collection of dwellings, and cooking places, and burials of men not distinguished enough to be given a barrow.

However, the controversy has been settled by Mrs Clifford<sup>2</sup> showing the site to a geologist-specialist with experience of the phenomenon in Iceland: he points out that it is not a matter of mere slip down hill, but expansion-heaving such as bursts pipes, and that the 'bunkers' are typical solifluxion. In short, human agency is ruled out by the impossible number of 'towns' and of bunkers in them: also digging would have left sub-soil on top of a doubled turf-line. Tree falls are ruled out, as Mr Hay contends, by their not being mostly in agreement with the prevailing wind: also, when some were bull-dozed there was no trace even of staining by rotten wood. Remains only solifluxion: though it is difficult for a layman to understand how this produced the effects observed, we have the emphatic verdict of the specialist whom Mrs Clifford consulted.

Playne also speaks of several large pits at Westridge, 70-100 feet diameter and apparently 7-10 feet deep though by then filled with stones and the stools of trees: a young farmer whose family have farmed here for several generations has heard that about Playne's time the land was divided among small tenants for a term of years, for clearance and cultivation. It is now a young plantation, and I can find no sign of the pits. Playne also describes five or six pits 20-30 feet diameter and then 7 feet deep, and a number of the smaller pits, all just under the edge of the escarpment: he assigns them their roles in his British town. Of these too I can find no trace in the area that he asserts.

I have however found a long line of small irregular pits just under the scarp running eastward from the camp: these can be explained as slight slippings of the scarp edge, and there is no

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, Vol. LXVI, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> Verbal communication.

other explanation that fits. At the east end of this line there is a conical circular pit about 40 feet across and 5 feet deep, with the spoil tipped down the slope: in this there are loose stones reddened by fire. All these are unlikely to be ancient, and their purposes cannot be guessed.

The width of the defences across the eastern neck suggests that, whatever the period of building the original camp, it was still maintained when invaders with slings came here: but the width is much less than for example at Maiden Castle, so that it is probably to be ascribed to the Middle Iron Age of say 100 B.C. Though no signs of habitation have been found, the sunk way to water supply shows that it was inhabited: and I guess that the degree to which it is worn down means something like fifty years of use.

A curious problem arises over the naming of this camp. 'Brackenbury Ditches' appears first only in the O.S. maps based on surveys of about 1880: before that it was 'Blackenbury Ditches' in maps based on surveys of about 1830, the copper plates for which are still used for geological maps: this is also the name used by Witts in 1883, and in various notes and articles even as late as Burrow's book in 1919.

Still earlier it had an entirely different name. John Smyth *c.* 1630<sup>1</sup> calls it Becketisbury and comments on the possible significance: Leland *c.* 1538 and Rudder 1779 have the same name: mention of land about here called 'Beckedescombe' in a land charter of *c.* 1250<sup>2</sup> gives this some support. When I was given the papers of the late Mr Vincent Perkins, I found among them a note in which he contests the modern name, asserts that 'Becketisbury' is the only name known to local people, and claims support of the 'old histories'. Actually these are only Smyth and Rudder, and the name 'Becketisbury' is not now current locally.

Bounds in a Saxon charter of A.D. 940<sup>3</sup> suggest even older support for the modern name: part of the parish boundary in this runs up the *Ealden Brac Weg*, which I identify with the sunken way from the camp to its spring.

E. S. LINDLEY

<sup>1</sup> *The Hundred of Berkeley*, pp. 77 and 397.

<sup>2</sup> *Catalogue of the Muniments on Berkeley Castle*, No. 406.

<sup>3</sup> Grundy, *Saxon Charters*, p. 383 (B764, K1137).