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Four enclosures on Broadfield Down, North Somerset

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Earthwork bank of Bickley 1 enclosure, Cleeve

Page Contents

- 3 Abstract Introduction
- 5 Site location Land use and geology
- 6 The earthwork surveys
- 12 Discussion
- 14 Lessons
- 15 Recommendations for further work
- 16 References Acknowledgements
- 18 Appendix 1: Penannular enclosures on Broadfield Down

Most of the northern edge (of Broadfield Down) is now heavily wooded making fieldwork difficult so there may yet be other settlement sites to emerge *Keith Gardner, 1977*

Abstract

Work in the woodlands on the western end of Broadfield Down has so far identified ten enclosures which share a number of similar features, and which may potentially have been occupied in the post-Roman period. The work has some implications for studies of that period, and may also have some implications for targeting new technologies, such as lidar surveys. 'NSHER' refers to an entry in the North Somerset Historic Environment Record.

Introduction

In the 19th century, antiquarians reported that the archaeology of Broadfield Down was exciting and varied (e.g. Rev Preb Scarth 1888), and that it would repay academic study. Today the land unit is so ignored on the one hand, and so dominated by the presence of Bristol International Airport on the other, that it has fallen out of popular consciousness altogether as a land-unit (to the extent that officers at the Environment Agency actually rang North Somerset in 2006 to ask if the upland possessed a name!)

The Down is bounded on the ground roughly by the A370 between Congresbury and Barrow Gurney, on the north by Barrow Gurney village and the open valley in which Winford lies, to the east by Winford parish, and to the south by the Wrington Vale and the Wrington – Congresbury road. There is a small outlier knoll to the west of Congresbury which is crowned by the visually unexciting but internationally important hill fort of Cadbury (Rahtz et al. 1992), and the former site of the Roman temple at Henley Wood (Watts & Leach 1998).

There has of late years been much speculation about the implications of Cadbury Congresbury and its like sites, with their post-Roman occupation, evidence of long-distance trade and so on, largely dividing scholars of the period into two camps.

There is the camp that plumps for a more-or-less traditional 'dark age quickly' scenario (Faulkner 2004; Reece 1988), who see the ending of the Roman military occupation as leading quickly to what would in the 1980s have been hailed as 'systems collapse', with towns and villas being deserted by the last half of the fourth century AD, and the loss of the monetary economy being followed by social and economic chaos.

Another group (Dark 1994; Harris 2003) sees in the post-Roman evidence for long-term trade that the west of England saw itself to be part of a western European organisation, still based on the Roman model, but now taking its lead from, and engaging in trade with, Byzantium (the 'late antiquity' model).

While for the sake of space, this is a gross oversimplification of the points of view of these two groups, it does raise the importance of examining the settings and environs of such post-Roman sites, and the South Cadbury Project is examining the environs of South Cadbury hill-fort, another of these post-Roman sites in south Somerset (e.g. Davey 2004).

Burrow looked at the environs of Cadbury Congresbury, first for his doctoral thesis (Burrow 1981), and at greater length for the final publication (Rahtz et al 1992). His conclusion, using the currently deeply unfashionable Thiessen polygon analysis of territories of the known large post-Roman settlements in the area, was that the west end of Broadfield Down was almost certainly within the territory based on Cadbury.

Within that boundary, he was aware of the existence of three small 'hill fort' type enclosures (Tap's Combe; Cleeve Toot and Backwell), and that they were penannular enclosures, with banks that terminated at a cliff or steep break of slope which formed the rest of the enclosure. He was also aware of a further enclosure (Cleeve Combe) which was of a more 'traditional' type, being an complete circuit with entrance, set back from the edge of a cliff.

In the 1980s, Broomhead reported further enclosures in Congresbury (Broomhead, in prep). Of these, two described in his entries in the Avon SMR as 'alleged', are almost certainly the result of incorrect repeated entries within the Avon SMR, and can be eliminated from the total; one (Woodlands) is of similar type to Cleeve Combe (although badly damaged by World War Two activity nearby) and the fourth (Rhodyate Lodge) is very slight and possibly a post-medieval landscaping feature, although this interpretation could be open to question as the monument has not yet been seen at the optimum state of vegetation in mid-winter.

A former enclosure at Backwell, almost certainly destroyed by quarrying during the 20th century, has been left out of this discussion since it's various descriptions are hopelessly contradictory and in the absence of new information, these cannot now be resolved (Burrow 1981: 263).

By the kind permission of Mrs Mary Campbell and the Vincent Wildlife Trust (per Dr Laurent duVerge), YCCCART have been able in the last two years to find and survey four more enclosures in the woodlands on the western end of Broadfield Down, three of which are of the 'cliff-castle' type (see below) and with the help of Mr David Ridley and Mr Keith Gardner, have identified potentially one further enclosure at Chelvey (which is immediately beside the road at Chelvey Batch!), and the possibility of three others from air photograph evidence at Butcombe, Backwell Common and Clapton in Gordano.

The earthworks surveyed by YCCCART have some intriguing features, which is why it was thought worthwhile to discuss the whole group together. Please note that all these sites are on private land and are *not* open to the public.

Sites location

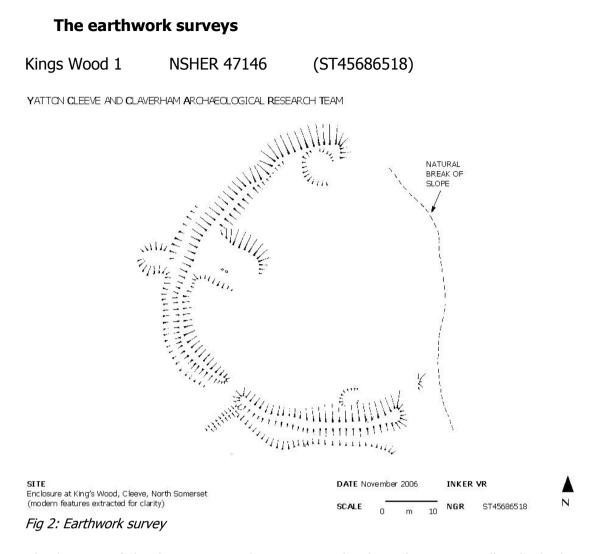


Fig 1: The enclosure locations

The enclosures here discussed lie along the western edge of Broadfield Down in the parishes of Congresbury, Cleeve and Brockley, in North Somerset, 12km south-west of Bristol.

Land-use and geology

The sites all lie on the western end of the limestone upland of Broadfield Down, on the Clifton Down Limestones. They are all in deciduous or evergreen woodland.



The largest of the four surveyed, Kings Wood 1 (Fig 3), is in woodland which forms a closed nature reserve. It is a D-shaped penannular enclosure, about 80m x 90m, unfortunately damaged by two ancient public tracks which meet within the enclosure, both worn to the natural stone and below. Stone has been quarried from the interior as well (see below), and these two effects have probably destroyed about 20% of the interior of the feature.

The enclosure banks are entirely of stone rubble, with indications in one or two places of dry-stone faces once having existed. On the northern tip of the enclosure, where it faces agricultural ground, the feature is largely a 2m high lynchet, with little or no obvious internal bank or external ditch. The bank on the western side of the enclosure then gains in size as it runs up the hill slope, and an external ditch is detectable from around 12m up the slope. The bank grows in size until it turns to cross the hill slope, where in its original state it would have been quite impressive. Today it survives as a bank a maximum of a metre high, and several metres wide, where it has tumbled internally, with an external ditch. The last tip of the southern bank has survived to the north of the landscaped hollow-way. At one point, one of the many systems of stone field banks in the wood has run up to and terminated over the ditch of the enclosure.

Inside the enclosure's northern tip is the clear platform of a circular building some 9m across, possibly (if the modern hollow-way marks the original entrance) fulfilling some look-out function. Two other possible round houses were noted, one against the south bank of the enclosure, and a third (too slight to survey accurately) in the central southwest of the enclosure.

Against the west bank of the enclosure is a rectangular platform with a flat area of about 14m x 9m, with two small orthostats on it. Despite careful searching, there was no other obvious trace of a building on this platform.

The (roughly) N-S path is a public right of way, possibly of medieval or earlier origin (there is a pronounced 'causeway' on its line outside of the wood). It is just possible that the point where it enters the enclosure may have been an original entrance (there is a not dissimilar positioning of a track entering the larger enclosure at Cleeve Toot). It seems to have once been less deep than it is today – an earlier, shallower and wider track can be seen for a few metres to the S of the path junction. It then seems to have been enhanced at some time by piling a bank on its eastern side (which can be seen clearly to overlay the bank of the enclosure), on top of which stones (almost certainly quarried in the interior of the enclosure) have been placed for effect, something likely to have been done during the craze for 'gothick' landscaping the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The second path is eroded to bare rock at a depth of about 0.8m through it's whole course in the enclosure, and has completely worn away the bank where it crosses it.

The site was surveyed by YCCCART during the (long) winter and spring of 2006.

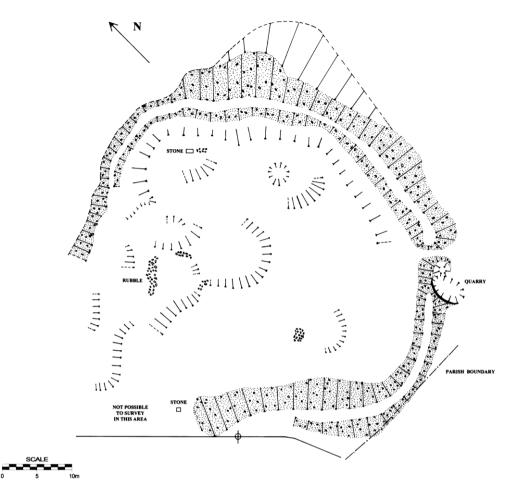


Fig 3: Earthwork survey

This enclosure was noted by Davies in the 1930s (Davies, unpub.), but relocated independently by Mrs Mary Campbell, who invited YCCCART to clear and record the site. There had been a previous clearance of the area for wildlife reasons some years earlier, and the resulting piles of logs that were still on the site were a significant obstacle to survey. In the intervening years, the site had become very overgrown, largely with bramble, and several weeks of work were necessary to clear the bramble sufficiently for the survey, carried out in two seasons in 2005, to take place.

The feature is a penannular ring constructed entirely of stone rubble, 60m x 60m, although the slight flaring of both north and south terminals of the bank makes it look more oval in plan. The W side of the enclosure is absent, but the terminals meet a local steep break of slope. A long apron of stones on the NE side of the enclosure is the result of bank collapse down the steep slope. The north and east sides of the enclosure have an internal ditch, which does not appear to continue onto the higher south side. An 'entrance' at the south-east side of the enclosure may be a recent phenomenon, as it has a small

quarry working of unknown date next to it, which has partially destroyed the bank in that area.

Adjacent to the quarry structure, careful cleaning of the surface of the bank has shown that it originally seems to have been of faced dry stone wall construction, probably about 2m thick.

Internally, a number of circular and sub circular earthwork scoops and platforms can be seen, mostly 8 - 10m across, which may well be the sites of buildings or other structures, some of which appear to have stone spreads as part of their structures.

On the south side of the ring, the construction of a reservoir in the 1960s (M. Campbell, pers comm) meant that some modern stone and concrete rubble lay on top of the structure for part of its length.

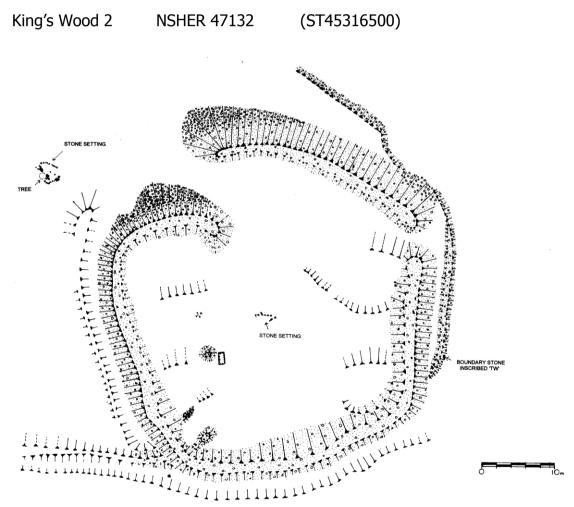


Fig 4: Earthwork survey

This enclosure, introduced to us by Mr David Ridley of Goblin Combe Farm, Cleeve, is located in mature woodland, in a closed Nature Reserve. It is pentagonal, rather than round, and is the exception of the group also in that it is not penannular, the whole interior being enclosed.

The banks are of stone rubble, with the largest at the northern side, facing the steep slope. There is an entrance at the NW corner of the enclosure, from which a clear double-lynchet track way can be seen running away to the NW. The entrance has an inturned S side, which has clear evidence of once having had dry stone facing. The west bank (up to 6m wide in places and up to 1m high) then runs up the hill, with a substantial ditch and counter-bank beyond, to the SW corner, where an abrupt turn to the south bank (which is much the same size) has a more obvious ditch to its south. The east bank has no visible ditch, and there is a gap at the NE corner of the main enclosure, which may not be original.

The east bank also has a smaller stone bank, no more than 2-3m wide, running parallel to it down the hill, which bank then turns and runs along, and to the north of, the north bank. It is attached to some further earthworks to the north, but it was not possible to survey these due to the vegetation, and they will be recorded subsequently. (This bank has in it a small, postmedieval boundary stone inscribed 'TW' set in it, one of a number that once marked the edge of the woodland in the vicinity).

Within the enclosure, the platform of a round building 6-7m across can be detected in the SE corner; a second, not so clear, but at least 7m x 8m is in the NE corner; a potential third round structure is close to the SW corner is represented by two slightly curving lynchets, and a rectangular platform at least 12m x 7m sits immediately to the south of, and above, the entrance.

An intriguing pair of low stone parallel bank structures are located in the SW corner. It was unclear at survey whether these represented a U-shaped structure set out on top of the bank, or two independent features marking another building. If the former, this might be a parallel for the structure at Cadbury, built over the banks of the 5th / 6th century phase (Burrow 1981: Fig 11) – only excavation would determine if this were the case, but it is an intriguing possibility.

One of the stone banks that run through the woods runs up to the SW corner of the enclosure, and fills the ditch, presumably to use the south bank and ditch as part of the field system. A small area to the SW of the enclosure, connected to it by a large lynchet appears to be the remains of a small terraced field, possibly 50m long and 20 wide, but this was not surveyed in detail.

Two settings of small stones (a circular one 3-4m across outside the entrance, and a rather strange apparently triangular setting almost exactly at the centre) occur. That outside the entrance is of some age, since an ash tree

probably at least 100 years old has grown over it, but it still may have a mundane explanation (perhaps a budding child antiquary's work in the Victorian period!).

The archaeology is completed by the remains of what is clearly a miner's trial hole, complete with neat spoil heap.

The entrance to the enclosure appears to have been blocked at some stage, and it is tempting to draw parallels with the entrance at Cadbury Tickenham hill fort, some 7.5km to the north (Burrow 1981: 191).

The survey was carried out by YCCCART during the winter and spring of 2006.

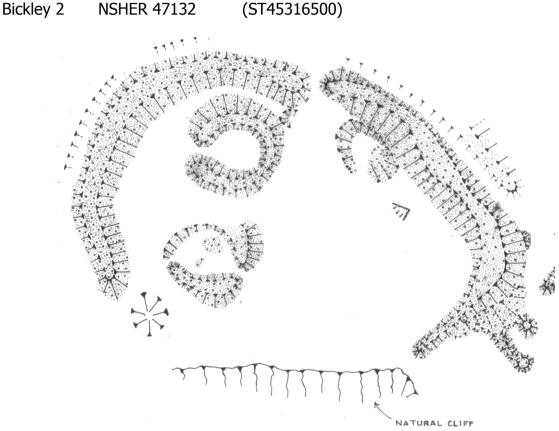


Fig 5: Earthwork survey

This, the smallest of the four structures, at 50m x 40m, is also a penannular D-shaped rubble stone enclosure terminating at a natural cliff. It is in mature woodland.

The north side of the enclosure is made up by a steep natural slope, although neither end of the enclosure bank completely reaches it today, with slight (3-4m) gaps between the terminals and the cliff. There is a traceable ditch all around the outside of the bank, with an apparent entrance at the centre of the southern, uphill side, and a counterbank outside the western ditch. At the north-western end of the enclosure, one of the stony banks in the wood peters out just before it reaches the enclosure, and a slight bulge in the enclosure bank opposite forms a funnel shaped opening with it. Beyond this, and on the exterior of the bank are two low parallel banks. It is not clear what the function of this structure is, but it may be a *shoot* and pen for sorting sheep (although it bears some resemblance to the U-shaped earthwork in the SW corner of King's Wood 2).



Fig 6: Rubble of a stone roundhouse, Bickley 2

In the interior of the enclosure, the remains of two large stone structures 10m across are almost certainly the remains of roundhouses: it is even possible that the more northerly, where far less remains, pre-dated and was replaced by the southern, possibly utilising some of its material. A third circular structure, a hollow around 5m across, is attached to the inside of the southern bank next to the possible entrance.

This survey was carried out by YCCCART in the spring and autumn of 2005.

Discussion

Apart from mostly being completely unknown before being discovered by YCCCART, the first question is whether these earthworks are, in fact, a unitary phenomenon. Looking at the details for all those where they are known (Appendix 1), there are a number of linking factors that suggest that they are. For example, while Tap's Combe is penannular and D-shaped, it has no evidence of round houses, while Cleeve Toot, also is D-shaped and penannular, but does have round houses (*pace* Burrow 1981: 242). Round houses are also present at Bickley 1, which is also penannular, but round and with an internal ditch: they are also in Kings Wood 2, but this is enclosed and with an external ditch. Similar 'mix and match' comparisons can also be made with the other known and surveyed sites. Each can have exceptions, however: Chelvey Batch appears to be partly constructed of soil, and King's Wood 2 has an inturned entrance, but both have other features connecting them to the group.

The distribution of the enclosures appears to be highly constrained, to the lower slopes of the western end of Broadfield Down. They are also within a narrow height range, from 55m AOD – 90m AOD, roughly 160-270 feet above sea level, narrowed to 55-80m if Cleeve Toot is excluded.

There also appear to be only three size classes (see appendix 1) to the structures (figures include the banks and ditches, explaining why they do not agree with Burrow's measurements). This was felt to be justified since there do not appear to any topographical reasons why the structures could not have varied from their sizes (apart from the existence of handy cliffs for many of them!). The classes are c 1.5Ha (Tap's Combe and Cleeve Toot), around 0.5Ha (Kings Wood 1) and c 0.25 Ha (the rest – Cleeve Combe has an earthwork attached to the north of it on the OS digital data: if this is not included in the area assessment, this site also is close to 0.25Ha in size). It is very hard not to see a settlement hierarchy in these figures. There also appears to be a tendency to occur in pairs, with those of the southern group further apart than the more northerly.

The sites all appear to be the right size, shape and positions to be farmsteads, perhaps associated with the exploitation of the grazing on Broadfield Down nearby. A guess would make them sheep farms, but excavation and faunal study is all that will make that clear. The size of the enclosure banks and ditches are sufficient (with superstructures, such as timber palisades) to 'keep the kids in and the wolves out'.

Dating is problematic. No cultural artefacts have been found at any of the sites, despite intense attention to the sites while surveying in ideal conditions in the winter. All soil disturbances on the sites by animals, tree throw and mining were also examined unsuccessfully.

One possible clue to their age is given by the fact that Bickley 1 lies exactly against the parish boundary between Congresbury and Cleeve (formerly Yatton). It seems unlikely that the boundary came first: the highly visible bank in what was probably woodland at the time the boundary was formalised (in the early medieval period) would have made a good marker for

the boundary. This is today marked in the wood by a modern decayed fence line, which runs right over the southern edge of the enclosure. Other relationships with landscape features do not help in dating. At least three of the structures (Bickley 1, Bickley 2 and Kings Wood 2) have elements of the extensive field system banks within the woodland appearing to approach the enclosures and fill their ditches to attach to the banks, implying the enclosures are earlier.

In normal circumstances, one would be inclined to date the field systems loosely as 'prehistoric', but in the absence of any evidence, this is perhaps assuming too much.

So two real potential dates exist for the structures. Conventional wisdom would date these structures as originating in the pre-Roman iron age, with associated field systems and structures such as the ones mentioned above dividing up the (presumably) unwooded upland for such farming.

A second, perhaps more controversial dating, would be to see them as elements of the setting of contemporary 5th – 6th century Cadbury Congresbury. It seems strange, otherwise, that there are so many of these enclosures within such a short distance of Cadbury and (as yet) very few or no similar enclosures anywhere else on Broadfield Down. This is not a new suggestion: Burrow suggested possible Irish connections in the early 1980s, but of course, the academic environment of the time was conducive to such speculation. Since the first draft of this article was written, another of these penannular enclosures has been found on the northern, wooded slopes of Mendip, close to Dolebury hill fort in Churchill.

There is then the possibility that the sites may have been founded in the late prehistoric or Roman periods and simply went on being used into the 6th or 7th century AD, similar to Trethurgy in Cornwall (Quinell 2004).

Whichever, it must be said the existence of these structures may have implications for the understanding of the history and past management of King's Wood, and of future management strategies for the wood, since these enclosures could not have functioned in woodland environments.

Lessons

One lesson that was apparent from the very start of the study of these sites was that by and large, archaeologists 'don't do woodland'. Despite some scrappy notes written 70 years ago, and despite the large size and obviously archaeological nature of these sites, most are entirely new to the literature, although two were well-known to local people who were happy to show them to us. This is presumably due to the fact that first stage surveys are almost always led by air photograph searches, and as a profession, we tend to ignore

woodland as unworkable territory. It is to be hoped that the advent of 'second return' lidar surveys, quite capable of penetrating leaf cover and developing digital terrain models accurate to 5cm or less in all three dimensions, will change this in the future.

A second lesson was the existence of valuable information in sources that archaeologists do not normally trawl. For example, Keith Gardner was able to draw on the experience of individuals with hunting rights in various areas, who were very familiar with the ground, and could recognise archaeological sites like our enclosures. Similarly, we would not have known of Davies' records of Bickley 1 in the 1930s without Chris Richards' encyclopaedic knowledge of the archaeological contents of the North Somerset Museum.

Future work

Assuming permissions are forthcoming, the aims for future years must be

- 1 To finish surveying the group
- 2 To secure lidar surveys of the woods, including second return data that would clearly model the structures under the trees.
- 3 To carry out geophysical surveys where possible. This will be horrendously difficult, since it is likely that in King's Wood at least, the amount of iron in the soil and mining disturbance will make magnetic survey impossible. Tap's Combe could potentially be subjected to resistance survey, since it's interior is largely open.
- 4 To continue work comparing these structures with possible analogous sites elsewhere (?Cornwall ?Ireland ?upland Wales)
- 5 To prepare a more detailed research agenda, including, potentially, research excavation to recover dating, economic and other evidence, but this is something for the medium term, and would need the involvement of a University Archaeology Department and significant scientific and funding input.

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Campbell for giving their time to show us the sites they knew about. Chris Richards kindly gave access to the Davies MS notes. Keith Gardner has willingly given much time to discuss the sites and share his incredible depth of knowledge about archaeology locally and generally. This section cannot pass without YCCCART's warmest thanks to our member Mary Campbell for the excellent coffee and home-made biscuits.

Finally, Vince would like to thank the members of YCCCART for their hard work, dedication and willingness to struggle with weather, ticks, slippery rocks, and endless episodes of untangling measuring tapes which have wrapped themselves fondly around the foliage in the woods.

Author

Vince Russett 2007

Note

This report represents the state of knowledge in 2007: significant further findings and surveys have been made since then, and work continues. Further reports will be uploaded to the YCCCART web site in due course

Appendix 1:

Enclosures at the western end of Broadfield Down (so far known).

	Name	NGR	Size (m) ('E-W' first)	Area (Ha)	Height over OD	Aspect	Shape	Current Land use	Notes
00339	Cleeve Toot	ST46266570	160 x 120	1.54	65-90	N	Penannular; D-shaped above cliff	Wood	Contains 'round houses'
00342	Tap's Combe	ST47806709	170 x 105	1.36	70-80	SSE	Penannular; D-shaped above cliff	Pasture	Interior apparently featureless
47146	Kings Wood 1*	ST45686518	c80 x c90	0.63	65-75	NE	Closed; Circular above cliff	Wood	Contains 'round houses' and large rectangular platform
00338	Cleeve Combe	ST46296589	70 x 70	0.38	75-80	?	Closed; Subrectangular	Wood	?Outwork to N Contains 'round houses'
47131	Bickley 1*	ST44986495	60 x 60	0.28	70	W	Penannular; Circular above cliff	Wood	Contains 'round houses'
47132	Bickley 2*	ST45316500	50 x 40	0.21	80	N	Penannular; D-shaped above cliff	Wood	Contains 'round houses'

47147	Kings Wood 2*	ST45846515	c40 x c50	0.2	75-80	?	Closed; Subrectangular above cliff	Wood	Inturned entrance; Contains `round houses' and large rectangular platform
47331	Chelvey Batch*	ST47636709	c50 x c50	0.20	55-70	W	Penannular; Circular above `cliff'	Wood	Bank largely earthen not stone
42928	Woodlands*	ST44836432	50m long	?0.2	55-60	NW-SW	?Circular on hill spur	Wood	Badly damaged by WW2 activity; bank stone
00392	Rhodyate Lodge	ST44756465	?	?	55-60	NW-SW	?Circular on hill spur	Wood	Stone banks, no interior features seen
00303	Rhodyate S	ST44736479	Almost certainly spurious; detail in Avon SMR clearly describes 47131						
00393	Rhodyate N	ST44746481	Almost certainly spurious; detail in Avon SMR clearly describes 00339						

* New record in the archaeological literature