

**YCCCART 2019 / Y7**

**A cliff base enclosure at Cheddar Head – is this the *Falda Latronum*  
of the 1181 perambulation of Charterhouse-on-Mendip?**

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*The enclosure in winter 1987*

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## **Abstract**

*Herbert Balch, in his 'Mendip: Cheddar, its Gorge and Caves' mentions that there had once existed a low semi-circular earthwork at the foot of a small cliff opposite Cheddar Head Farm, but that it had been destroyed by the 1930s (or at least, badly damaged: Balch added '...'.a few insignificant pieces remain..').*

*He interpreted this earthwork as being the 'Falda Latronum' (Thieves Fold) recorded in the 1181 perambulation of Charterhouse somewhere in this area.*

*Although there are only faint traces of the earthwork on air photographs, investigation on the ground in 1987 showed the earthwork was still in existence, and a survey was made at that time.*

## **Acknowledgements**

This site could not have been surveyed without the kind permission of the then landowner, who has asked to remain anonymous.

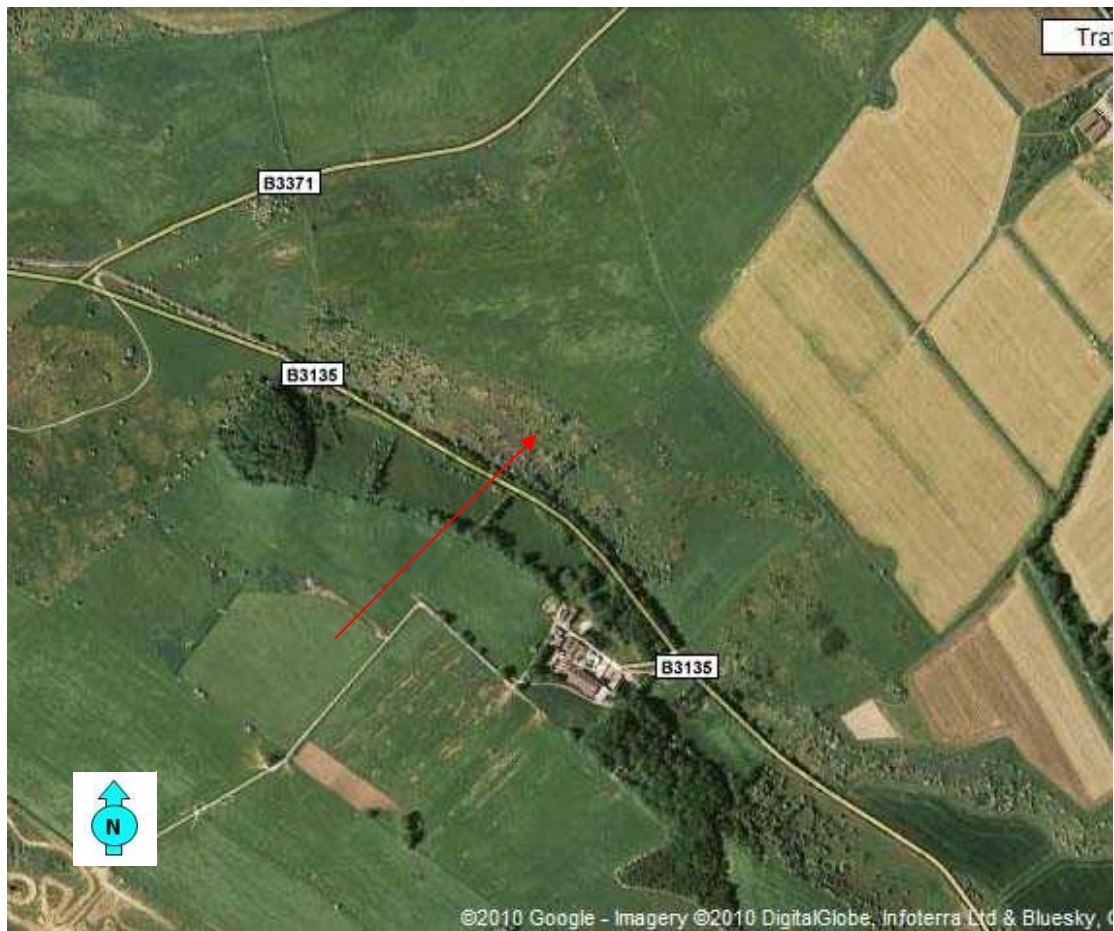
## **Introduction**

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

The objective of the Community Archaeology teams is to carry out archaeological fieldwork, for the purpose of recording, and better understanding of, the heritage of northern Somerset.

References beginning SRO refer to documents in the Somerset Record Office (now the Somerset Heritage Centre), Taunton.

## Location



*Fig 1: Location: the structure itself is now (2019) very overgrown and not visible here*

The site lies 370m north of Cheddar Head Farm (the buildings in the low centre of the figure), in the parish of Priddy, in Somerset, at ST50245308. It is on the northern side of the road running from Cheddar Gorge to Priddy, in a steep area where there are a few small south-east facing cliffs.

## Geology and Land Use

The area is of Carboniferous Limestone, and was and is, under permanent unimproved pasture. This site is on private land, and there is no public access.

## Historical & archaeological context

This site was uncritically described by Balch in his *Mendip: Cheddar, its Gorge and Caves* in 1947, where he described it simply as '*..on the slope opposite Cheddar Head Farm, at the foot of some rocks..*', (Balch 1947: 70) and attributes a vague local legend about sheep-stealers to it. He oddly describes it as having been destroyed. Further discussion of this historic source is in the Discussion section below. Otherwise, this structure has not previously been recorded anywhere.

It is interesting that the local story should associate the structure with sheep, since similar structures are known on Mendip and elsewhere to be associated with the management of sheep, as lambing areas or temporary shelters (see Ward 1997, for example).

The site is visible on the 1946 air photographs (Fig 2 below).



Fig 2: The site in 1946 (Cheddar Head Farm low centre)

## **Survey objectives**

The initial survey was a field observation exercise, to establish whether anything remained of the enclosure described by Balch in 1947. When it was established that there was, it was surveyed in the hope that similar examples could be found in the literature, to establish the likely date and nature of the structure.

## **Methodology**

The survey of the site was carried out by tape and offset methods, recorded in pencil on drawing film in the field, then subsequently transcribed to neat copy in the office. It was then scanned using an Epson 2450 photo scanner in 2008. The location was established from the 1946 RAF air photographs. This report was assembled using Libre Office Writer 5.

## Results



*Fig 3: Photograph April 1987: the site in its cliff base context*

The survey was carried out by VR in April 1987, and reported to the Somerset SMR (now HER) (Russett 1988: 188). The survey itself (Fig 4) has never been published before.

The site consists of an earthen bank, with a core of large unworked boulders of the local Carboniferous Limestone, none of which appears to be earth fast other than its inclusion in the bank.

The bank is D-shaped in plan, with areas to its south-west and south-east where the boulder core is far more pronounced. It is about 17m across, and about 0.5 – 0.8m high, running out from the base of the low (5m high) cliff at one end, to a possible small entrance on the south-west. At the southern side of the structure, there is less stone in the feature, which is merely a south-east facing lynchet about 0.3m high. It then rises to a stony bank again, before becoming a small inward (south-west facing) lynchet at the northern end. There do not appear to be any visible internal features.

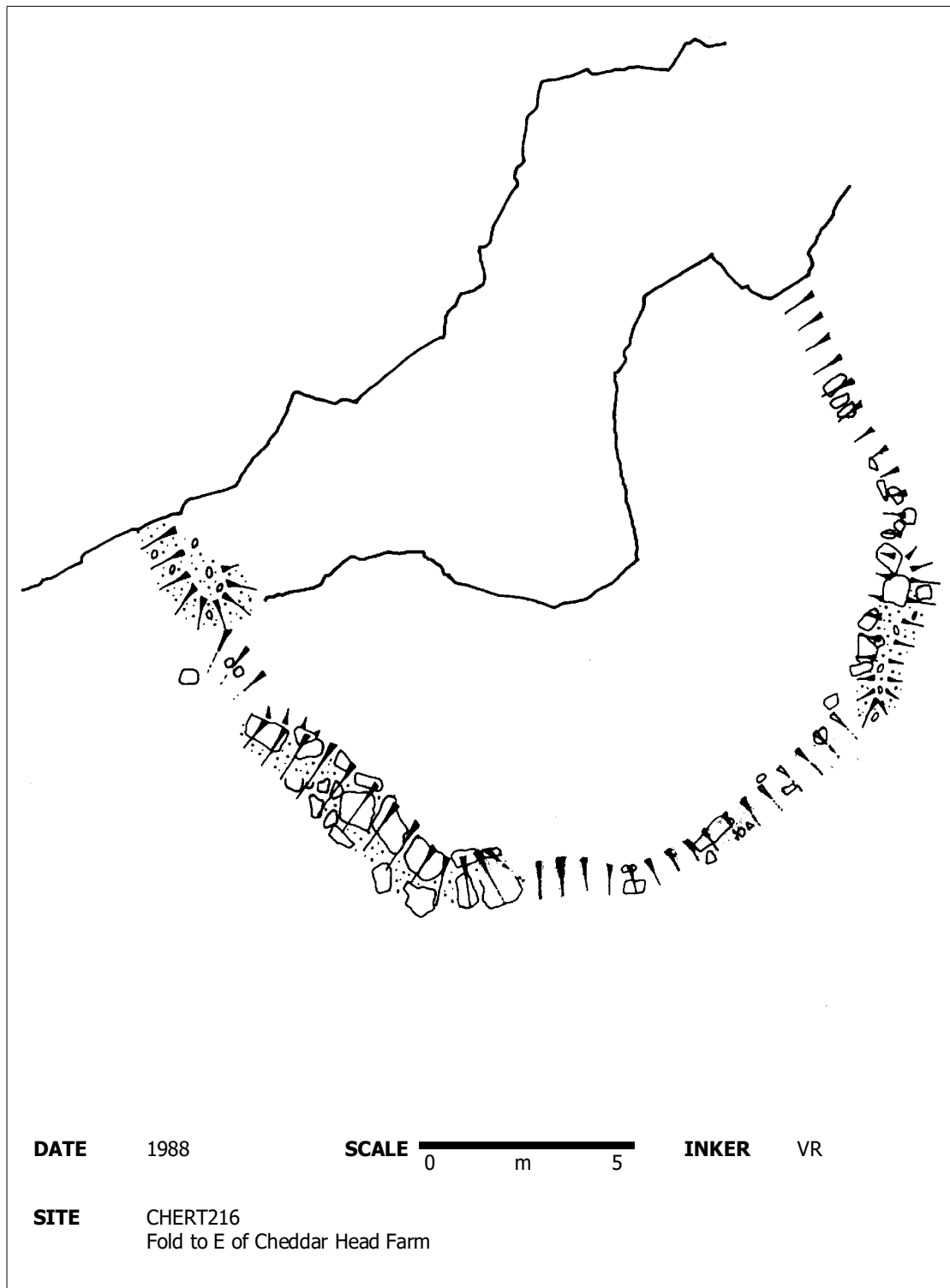


Figure 4: The 1987 survey: N to top of the survey

The discussion of this site revolves around 3 questions:

- Is this the site recorded as destroyed by Balch in 1947?



- Is this the *Falda Latronum* of 1181, as Balch suggests?
- What is the purpose and date of this earthwork?

Balch's book (Balch 1947) is typical of his romantic and lyrical style, and his description of the site of the enclosure

*..on the slope opposite Cheddar Head Farm, at the foot of some rocks..*

is unclear, to say the least. The description fits the site found in 1987, however, and on the balance of probability, this likely is the site Balch describes, with its tale of a band of sheep-stealers who lived there. Why he then went on to describe it as having been almost totally destroyed is a mystery, unless perhaps the remains were once more prominent, or had internal features, which had been removed since Balch first saw the site.

He also suggested that this site was the *Falda Latronum* of the 1181 charter of Charterhouse. The perambulation in the charter certainly describes a line in this area, where the markers are described as

From **Sgaldaberga** to **stanam et Banam**

And from there **to petra perforata**, through the middle of **a pit** (or pond).

From the **perforata** to **Schinindeclive**

then through **the valley** to **faldam Latronum**.

And then to **Kingdunes West ende**.

Discussion in Russett 2003 identified all five points, assuming that Balch had been correct to assign the structure the subject of this report as the 1181 perambulation site 11. The description of the approach from Sun Cliff, on the modern Cheddar / Rodney Stoke boundary at ST 50455247 is indeed *'..through the valley..'* (*per vallem*), and the road in the valley bottom is too recent (dating from the Cheddar Enclosure Act of 1800) to have formed a useful line for the boundary. It is not therefore inconceivable that the site could be on the 1181 boundary. It is not a particularly robust site today, however, and whether it could have survived since the 12<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps debatable.

As to the purpose and dating of the structure: this, too is hard to explain. With its unsophisticated structure, there is nothing intrinsic to date this earthwork. Presumably agricultural in nature, it's small size implies that it may perhaps be a temporary sheep-pound, perhaps once enhanced with a ring of hurdles or fence footed in the bank. These structures must at one time have

been common on Mendip, given the former pre-eminence of sheep-farming, and discussion with colleagues in Wales (Ward, *in e-mail*) suggests that such structures are not unknown in the Black Mountains (see, e.g. Ward 1997: 99), where they are of medieval or early post-medieval date.

A sharp watch should be kept for further examples on Mendip, since they will obviously only occur in such environments as this, perhaps on a slope and among rocks, where arable farming and 'agricultural tidying' has never happened.

**Author:** Vince Russett October 2010 (v2 February 2019)

## References

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