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A triangular earthwork at Beercroft, Charterhouse-on-Mendip

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The structure in 1919 (Evens collection, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery)

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Abstract

An earthwork in a field to the south of the Charterhouse Centre was surveyed by the Charterhouse Environs Research Team in spring 2002. If complete, this is a most unusual enclosure, being an isosceles triangular bank / lynchet enclosure, with no apparent entrance, and its narrow end against a mortared stone wall, which was still standing in 1919, but is now only a foundation. No parallel for this earthwork has been seen elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

This site could not have been surveyed without the kind permission of Somerset County Council, the owners, through the Charterhouse centre and Mendip AONB staff. Thanks also to Chris Richards for his most informative comments on the mines at the site.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) 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, Taunton.

Location



Fig 1: Location

The site lies some 285m SE of the Charterhouse Centre (the complex of buildings at top left of the image). It is at ST50405555, in the parish of Priddy in northern Somerset.

The site lies on the south-facing slope on the north side of Velvet Bottom, in an area only lightly affected by former mining, although the scoops and hollows of the quarry for an adjacent limekiln approach to within a metre of the edge of the short side of the earthwork, perhaps implying that it was recognised at the time of the quarrying.

Geology and Land Use

The site lies on the Black Rock Limestone of the Carboniferous Limestone series, and is constructed largely from the same. It is occasionally lightly grazed by sheep, it's use at the time of survey.

The site is open to public access from the adjacent Velvet Bottom bridleway.

Historical & archaeological context

There is no written record of the existence of this earthwork before CHERT's survey in 2002, although it was photographed in 1919.



Fig 2: The site (to left of picture) on 8 August 1919 (Evens collection, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery). This picture has been previously published in a horizontally reversed form.

The site lies on the left-hand side of the above photograph, running to a point at the ruined, but visible wall, the former parish boundary between Ubley and Charterhouse-on-Mendip. Incidentally, the still-standing ruin of the chimney at the top of the condensing flue from the Pattinson plant can be seen on the right centre of the picture.

The wall lies on the boundary of Ubley and Charterhouse from the earliest mention of Charterhouse, the foundation charter of 1181 (Russett 2003).

An intriguing reference to the area is made in a perambulation of Ubley manor from 1533 (SRO DD/S/HY 6 (170)):

‘.et a Culverpyttes usque ad horechyne...

And from Culverpyttes to ‘ad horechyne’ (this is perhaps Charterhouse mining rake)

Et a horechyne usque ad anguli cuiusdem claus’ voc’ Temple Crofte...

And from horechyne to the corner of a certain close called Temple Crofte

(later charters and the Ubley enclosure map call this point Beercroft Corner: it is the south-east corner of the field containing the earthwork, at ST50375563). Barry Lane has pointed out that there were Temple lands in Charterhouse in the medieval period (Lane 2008), and this may be part of that holding at some time.

Et abinde usque fontem voc kyngewelle...

And from there to the spring called kyngewelle

(the only spring in the vicinity and near the line today is the one that runs down into Blackmoor from behind the Roman fort at ST50335591: it may have migrated up the hill since the 16th century).

In the south-west corner of the current field, an old 'cupola' was depicted on a Charterhouse map in 1761 (SRO DD/STL 1) and earlier leases, such as that of 1686 (SRO DD/BR/lch 1/18) give some description of the 'cupola and several little houses' erected at the time. These have subsequently, at an unknown date, been completely destroyed by the winning of limestone to operate a limekiln, itself now only a grass-grown earthwork by the roadside at ST50325552.

In the northern edge of the field, an irregular earthwork enclosure that appears to post-date the (potentially medieval) field wall encloses a small area.

Across the boundary wall, the field beyond has been quarried (probably in the 19th century) to a depth of around 3-4m, removing any possible evidence of any structures relating to the earthwork on the east side of the boundary wall.

In 1761 (SRO DD/STL 1), the site lay outside of the Charterhouse enclosures, on the great Charterhouse Warren: the wall on the north edge of the modern field is the boundary wall of the warren. Even by 1842, the field was not enclosed, although by this time, it was part of the much smaller Minery Bottom (SRO DD/STL 3): the fence separating Velvet Bottom from the field appears to be a 20th century creation.

Survey objectives

The objectives of the survey were

To carry out an earthwork survey of this unusual site, to record and attempt to character it and its relationship to other structures in the area

To continue with training of CHERT in field recording.

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. This report was assembled using Libre Office 5 .

Results

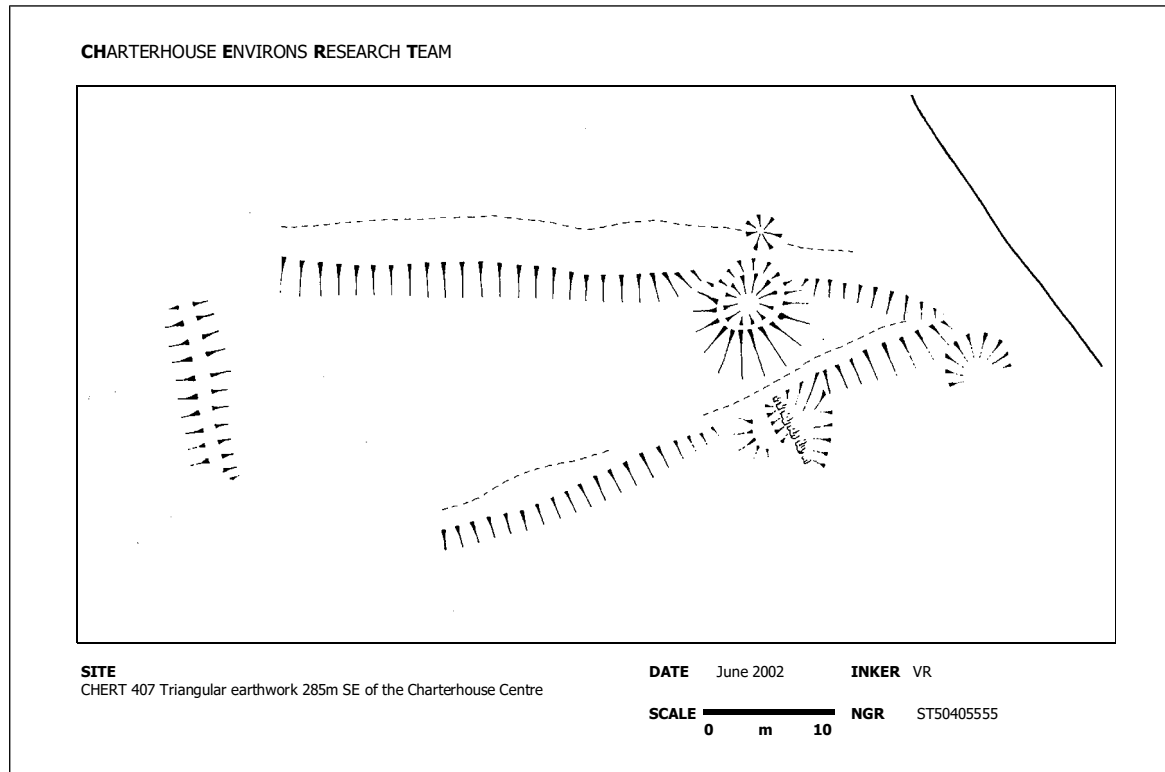


Fig 3: The earthwork survey: N is at top of the survey

Figure 3 above shows the complete triangular earthwork: the wall running up the right side of the picture from SSE to NNW is the line of the former Ubley / Charterhouse parish boundary.

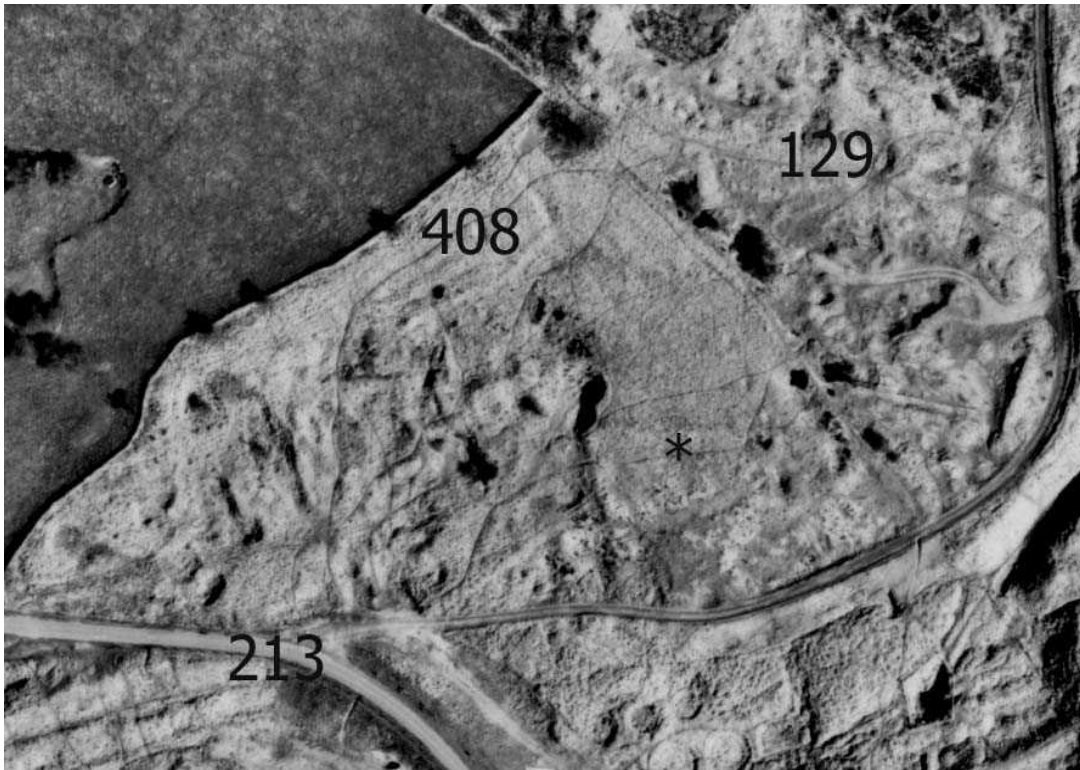


Fig 4 The site in 1971

The earthwork is about 62m long, and some 24m wide at its widest (western) end. What survives of this western end is a definite bank, up to 4m wide, but only about 0.5m high: the north and south sides are south-facing lynchets, both with a very slight bank on their uphill side. The north and south banks appear to meet without a gap at their eastern extremity: on the western edge, there may be an entrance at the south-west corner, although this may simply be the result of later quarrying damage. A possible slight double-lynchet trackway does appear on air photographs to approach the site from the south-west. Three prominent mining earthworks can be seen at the east end of the structure, two disturbing the structure itself.

The structure does not appear to bear any relationship to the other features in the field (see Fig 4 above).

Site 213 is the limekiln: the excavations to provide stone can be clearly seen to have covered some 45% of the field, while sites 126 and 408 are the

quarrying on the Ubley side of the wall, and the other enclosure in the modern field respectively. The site is marked with an asterisk.

The earthwork obviously pre-dates the quarrying to its west, which is itself probably 19th century in date: it is almost certainly later than the parish boundary, which it in turn respects, and which is probably 12th century at the latest. The site is also cut by what are probably post-medieval mines, so its dating is broad in the extreme: anything from 12th century to 18th. Chris Richards (*pers comm*) has remarked that the mining that has disturbed the site seems to have been for a vein of calcite, which is a very pure form of calcium carbonate, and can be burnt to produce a pure calcium oxide flux for steelmaking.

The question is surely what this earthwork is, or what purpose it serves. An extensive search of the agricultural literature provides no comparisons: many earthworks have been described as triangular when they are only approximately so: this earthwork is accurately laid out as such.

The site is not constrained to its unusual shape by any topographic feature, nor does it contain any other features that may indicate its purpose.

The earthwork may be agricultural. It lay in the area of Charterhouse Warren, which seems to have been of post-medieval (probably 17th century) origins (Russett 1989). Although there are known types of structure that are typical of warrens (buries – the archaeologists so-called ‘pillow mounds’- clappers, vermin traps and so on), none are triangular, especially not this size.

It also lies close to the great *shoot* on the road from Priddy to Charterhouse, where sheep returning from open grazing what is now Charterhouse Warren could be sorted before being allowed access to the enclosed lands around the Charterhouse Centre and Manor Farm. This practice dates back to at least the medieval period. There do not seem, however, to be any structures made for the handling and processing of sheep (folds, sheep houses, transhumance enclosures etc) that are likely to be triangular in plan.

Could the site be industrial in origin? Again, there do not seem to be any features from lead mining, quarrying or other likely industries in the area that are triangular.

The function of this site, then, is unclear. It is recommended that geophysical survey be carried out to attempt to identify any internal features.

Author: Vince Russett October 2010 (v2 February 2019)

Priddy, Triangular earthwork at Beercroft, Earthwork survey, YCCCART, 2019, Y10, v2 10

References

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