

A Stone Circle and Cairn Group on Mardon Down, Moretonhampstead, Devon

An Earthwork Survey

February 2017



Southwest Landscape Investigations



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Frontispiece. The large leaning slab of the stone circle.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Dartmoor Trust Archive for permission to reproduce figures 2, 3 and 8.

Summary

A survey of a cairn cemetery, stone circle and other prehistoric earthworks, located along the western ridge of Mardon Down, Dartmoor, was commissioned by Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) in January of 2017.

The survey is required, to:

- help improve understanding of the Mardon Down prehistoric cairn, stone circle and other earthworks
- inform future management decisions regarding the archaeological landscape on Mardon Down
- provide an accurate survey that will assist with the application for scheduled monument designation for the monuments concerned.

Work was completed in February 2017 after a moderately dry winter. Eight cairns, a large dilapidated stone circle, a probable pond earthwork and a military weapon pit were all surveyed at large scale (1:200) and are presented here as plans with profiles. A discussion of past research on Mardon Down is included, along with site descriptions for each of the surveys and some photographs. Suggestions as to future investigation, which might further enhance the understanding of the prehistoric and later earthworks within this important landscape, are included.

INTRODUCTION

Location and geology

Mardon Down comprises 170ha of common, open moorland within Moretonhampstead parish, 1.8km to the northeast of the town, and forms an outlier some 10km from the main moorland mass within Dartmoor National Park. The Down has two high ridges, east and west, separated by a peninsula of enclosed land associated with Combe Farm and Stacombe, which occupy a shallow valley that bisects the Down. The eastern ridge has a maximum height of 345m, while that to the west is 355m above OD. The summit is known for its uninterrupted views across eastern Dartmoor, the Culm measures to the north and towards Exeter to the east. Geologically, although the western portion of Mardon Down lies within the granite mass of Dartmoor, the eastern slopes are traversed by the granite/metamorphic contact zone.

Archaeology

The landscape of Mardon Down contains earthwork evidence from a long sequence of human involvement. The oldest upstanding monuments are the stone circle and round cairns on the summit ridge of the western peak, with origins in the early 2nd millennium BC, or possibly earlier; these features are the main focus of this report.

However, more subtle remains of parallel reaves, also of 2nd millennium date, run diagonally across the slopes though, unfortunately, at the time of survey these are disguised by large areas of gorse and bracken, so it has not been possible to record them in full. Much of the area to the east of the cairn alignment, contains ridge and furrow earthworks, dating perhaps from the medieval period, but these features were also densely vegetated at the time of survey.

In World War II, Mardon Down was used as a training area for, mainly American, allied forces, and many earthworks scattered over the Down are associated with this period including numerous slit trenches, mortar positions and building platforms. A large linear earthwork with steep embankments either side of the road at SX 77076 87872 is reputed to have been constructed for practicing the erection of a Bailey Bridge in preparation for the Normandy landings in 1944. It is among the most impressive earthworks remaining from this period on Dartmoor, but is yet to be properly recorded.

Past research

Although the summit monuments on Mardon have long been known about, the area has, so far, been poorly recorded or surveyed. The earliest record is from Jeremiah Milles, Dean of Exeter, in a letter to William Borlase of 1752, which is worth repeating here:

On a down called Merdon..I observed several stone barrows, and near them a druid circle of about 42 paces in diameter; in which there were near 70 stones, but not above 4 or 5 of them erect; the rest are either gone or almost buried in the ground. About 20 yards south of this I saw a smaller circle not above 8 paces in diameter, of which there remained 4 pretty large stones, and a larger lying flat at a small distance (Lukis 1883, cited in Fletcher et al. 1974, 164).

Although Milles' estimate for the original number of stones is questionable, his description of the monument's condition chimes with what is visible today, indicating that much spoliation had already occurred by the time of his visit. It is also interesting that he records the barrows as being of stone, though today, apart from vestiges of stone settings, they are completely turf-covered and stone is not particularly evident.

The existence of the stone circle was overlooked by several important Dartmoor writers, including Rowe (1896, 131), who noted several of the cairns at the northern end of the ridge but failed to mention the large circle to the south. He also noted the presence of 'tracklines' (reaves) 'two of which intersect' and these features are still visible in part today.

Surprisingly, the circle and cairns are also absent from R H Worth's extensive studies of Dartmoor antiquities (Spooner and Russell 1967) and although William Crossing, like Rowe, mentioned the cairns, he also made no reference to the larger circle (Le Messurier 1967, 268).

However, the circle was not completely overlooked in the early 20th century and a Chapman photograph of c.1912 shows the large slab, which is still standing today, with the title 'Giant's Grave' (DA11941)(Fig 2).

This large stone circle, did not enter the modern record of Dartmoor monuments until 1972 when rediscovered by LV Grinsell and surveyed by members of the OS archaeological survey team (Fletcher et al. 1974, 164, 166). Turner also listed the circle in his gazetteer of stone circles and mentions a north-south reave running through it (Turner 1990, 80). More recently, Butler has produced a survey drawing and description of the circle (Butler 1997, 148-50).

Of the eight known cairns on Mardon, only three received attention from antiquarian writers. These are the small kerbed cairn to the south of the large circle (MDV15158), which was noted by Milles and Rowe, and the slightly better preserved cairn circle on the northern end of the ridge (MDV8308) observed by both Rowe and Crossing, and appearing on the OS 25-inch map of 1884 as a hut circle. A Chapman photograph of c.1912 showing this monument, reveals that its condition has changed little in the past 100 years (DA11942)(Fig 3).

More often discussed is the 'Giant's Grave', a large and very despoiled cairn (MDV8309), which sits at the junction of the two hilltop footpaths. This was labelled on the OS 1st edition old series map of 1803, and 25-inch editions of 1884, as well as subsequent editions at smaller scales until the present day (OS Explorer OL28). Nineteenth century writers who noted this feature included Jones (1823, 3), Shortt (1841, 28), Crocker (1851, 25) and Rowe (1896, 131). None of the cairns have been subject to recorded excavations but Polwhele wrote of a cairn opened on 'Maredown' in the 18th century from which 'ashes, burnt bone, earthenware vessels, the fragments of an urn' were retrieved (Polwhele 1797). It is not known which of the cairns, if any, he was referring to.

Only the two cairns with retaining circles (MDV15158 and MDV8308) have been drawn in recent years by Butler (1997, 149-50), and an aerial photographic plot undertaken by the RCHME in the 1980's as part of the National Mapping Programme, recorded only three of the cairns (MDV8310; MDV8308; MDV12771).

The stone circle and several of the cairns were considered by English Heritage (now Historic England) for scheduling under the Monuments Protection Programme (MPP) in the early 2000's, but the programme was discontinued before approval for these sites was completed and these important monuments remain undesignated.

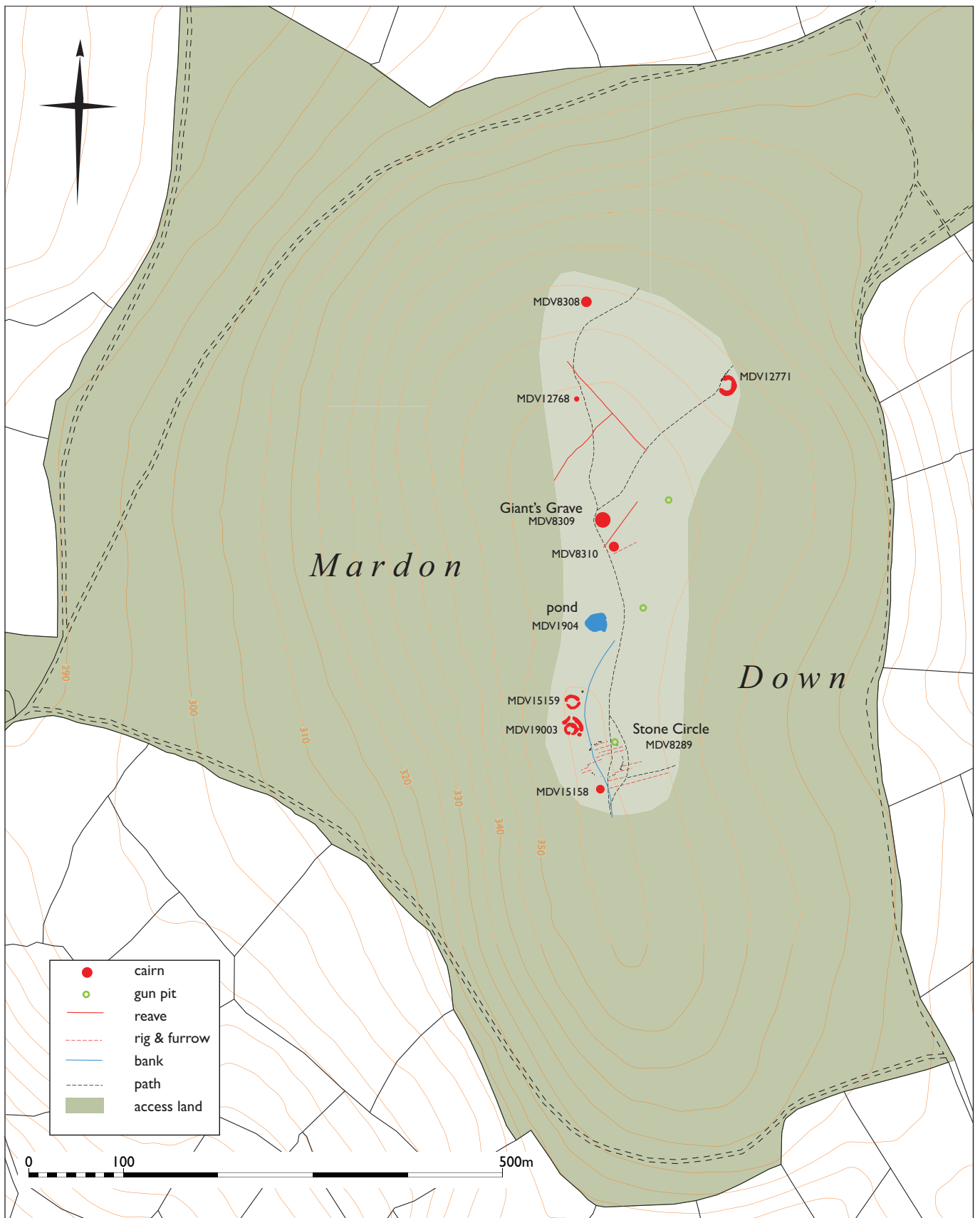


Figure 1 Map of Mardon Down showing the extent of the access land, and the limits of the survey. Includes OS height data: Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright and database right 2015. Open source data



Figure 2 Photograph by Chapman and Son showing the large leaning slab on the west side of the stone circle, c.1912.
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Figure 3 Photograph by Chapman and Son showing the cairn circle (MDV8308) in c.1912 on the northern end of the ridge looking northwest. © Copyright Dartmoor Trust Archive (Ref DA11942).

THE SURVEY

A survey of the stone circle and eight cairns distributed over the ridge was requested by Dartmoor National Park authority in January 2017 to assist with the process of further protection, in the absence of any previous accurate record, and to inform the future management of the monuments.

GPS base stations were established at two locations using OS coordinates, while all stones and earthworks were recorded using a GPS rover in RTK mode. After processing, data was downloaded into a CAD environment then taken into the field for annotation before final drawing in CAD.

The stone circle, all seven cairns and a curious hollow feature also on the ridge, were recorded at 1:200 scale. Some smaller features, including a small cairn, a section of reave, cultivation earthworks and two WWI weapons pits appear on the 1:2500 scale version only. However, this report is concerned mainly with the ridge top prehistoric monuments on Mardon Down.

Stone circle (MDV8289) SX 76761 87196 (Fig 4, 12, 13)

Near the southern summit of the ridge, the circle sits on flattish ground, which falls away only very slightly to the east. The modern path cuts through the circle from north to south, causing some erosion.

Judging by the stones that remain, the circle was quite regular with an internal diameter of 38m. This makes it the largest stone circle within Dartmoor National Park. Of the 20 surviving stones that appear to be arranged around the circumference, only three can truly be said to be *in situ* and upright, and of these the large slab on the northwest quadrant (see frontispiece & Fig 2), and another stone on the east side, are both leaning. A further 14 stones may be in their approximate original location, but are now leaning or completely fallen and earthfast. Two low turf mounds on the west side may also be disguising fallen slabs. Based on the space between surviving stones, the original total would have been nearer 60 than the 70 estimated by Milles, in which case about 40 stones are missing; some will have been robbed but others may be completely buried. The two large remaining stones stand to approximately 1m high but fallen examples demonstrate that most were shorter. A geophysical survey could certainly help establish the full extent and positions of any buried stones remaining on site.

The circle has been subject to a sequence of damaging activities, over many centuries. Apart from the probable robbing of stone, a phase of cultivation on the eastern slopes of the Down appears to have included the summit area occupied by the circle, where ridge and furrow cuts across the site. Although within the circumference of the circle the ridges have become more flattened, the bases of several parallel furrows remain visible. The ridges are clearer on the eastern exterior, including a substantial baulk. It may be that some of the stones on the eastern and western arc of the circle were removed to make way for the cultivation, although the survival of others runs counter to that idea. The former cultivated areas on Mardon Down are yet to be accurately surveyed but their character, as visible on 1m LiDAR images, is similar to areas of ridge and furrow elsewhere on Dartmoor, including Holne Moor and Okehampton Park. This includes the presence of baulks placed at intervals and following the same axis as the ridge and furrow, and probably representing the division between strips. The examples at Okehampton Park are associated with farms abandoned by 1450 AD (Allan 1994, 145; Newman 2011, 124), so a medieval date for the examples on Mardon Down is also possible.

A bank with a shallow ditch transects the western sector of the circle, running approximately north to south. The earthwork is 2.3m wide with an average height of 0.25m. The ditch, now silted, is more subtle but up to 1.5m wide. Although this feature is very clear as it approaches the circle and cuts through it, outside the circle it is mostly under dense gorse. It is, however, traceable 100m to the north near the hollow, pond-like feature at SX 76772 87326, which it appears to bypass to the east before fading out near the modern path. South of the circle the bank is crossed by the path, before heading south, but here also it is mostly obscured by gorse. It is visible on satellite photography, which shows it continuing south to the road, beyond which it is no longer traceable. The origin or purpose of this earthwork is not known, but it is likely to be post-medieval in date. It is certainly later than the ridge and furrow, which it transects within the area defined by the circle.

During WWI, training activity on Mardon Down included the installation of a number of sunken, circular earthworks, which may have housed heavy machine guns or other anti-aircraft weaponry. One of these has been

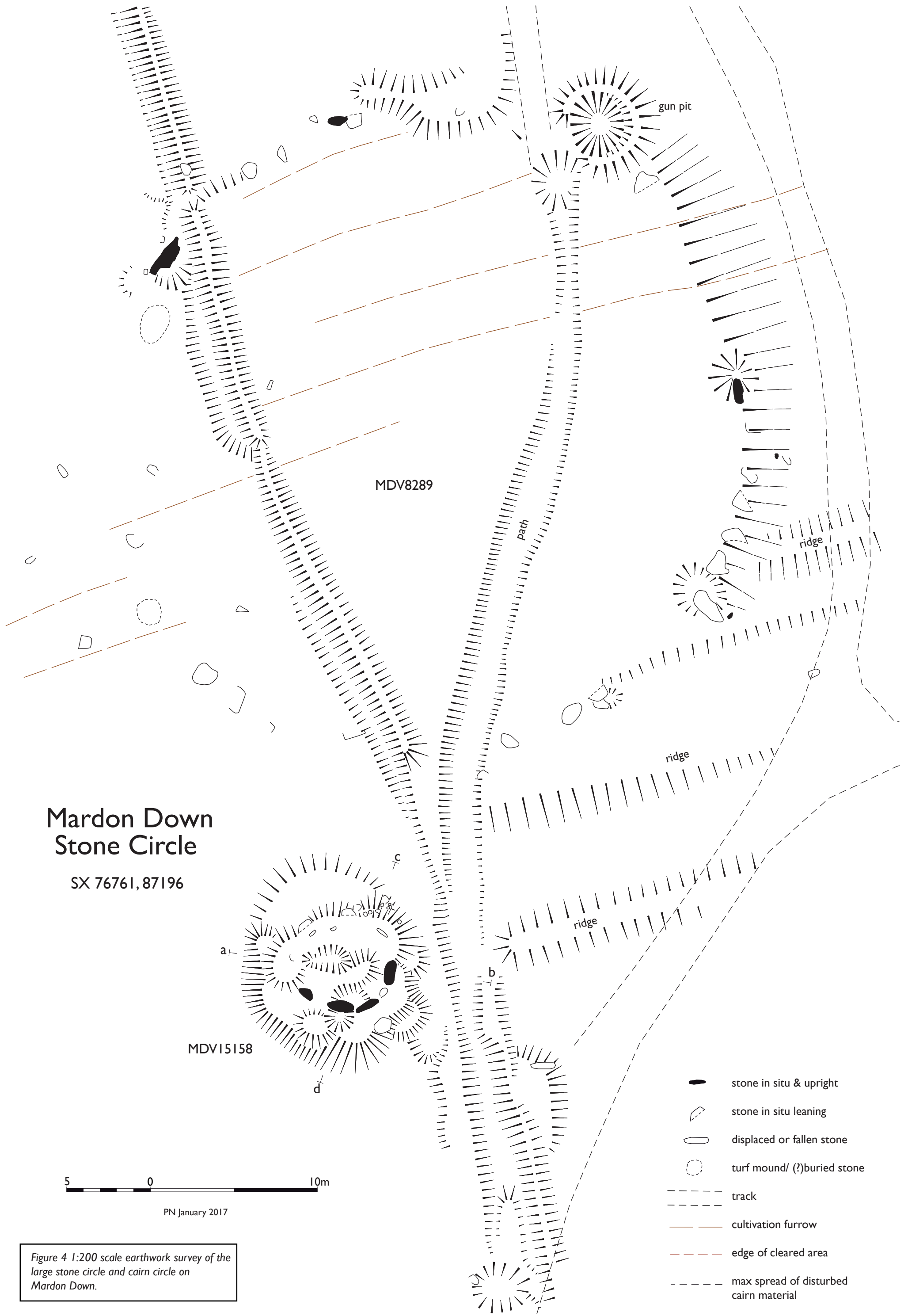


Figure 4 1:200 scale earthwork survey of the large stone circle and cairn circle on Mardon Down.

imposed into the north-eastern arc of the stone circle. The earthwork comprises a circular, flat bottomed pit of 4m diameter and 1m deep with an embanked circumference on all but the western, upslope arc. It is not known if any stones were removed when this pit was dug but it is unlikely. However, a substantial slab is visible, lying horizontal and buried in the eastern cut section of the pit; it is possible this was once a component of the circle.

Cairn (MDV 15158) SX 76756 87165 (Fig 4, 14)

This disturbed cairn with kerb circle is 8m south of the stone circle and is the smaller circle described by Milles in 1752 (Fletcher et al. 1974). Four boulders on the southern arc of the kerb are still *in situ*, which matches Milles' description, and the displaced flat stone he mentions is also still present to the south. The diameter of the kerb was 5.8m. Two fallen stones and one earthfast and buried, survive on the northern arc. The remainder are absent.

In its original form, the fabric of the cairn was probably contained within the kerb, but subsequent interventions have spread this material randomly to cover an area over 13m by 12m. However, much of the stony fabric remains within the circle, though turf covered, and a possible shallow excavation trench, 3m long by 1.6m wide in the central area, is also visible.

Cairn (MDV19003) SX 76723 87230 (Fig 5)

This earthwork, which sits 18m north of the stone circle, has in the past been recorded as a cairn. However, there has to be some uncertainty over this because, apart from its location (on a hilltop and associated with other prehistoric monuments), the layout of the surviving earthworks make it very difficult to interpret precisely.

The earthworks appear random but vestiges of what might have been a bank forming part of a perimeter runs around the northeast and west sides, although this is breached on the northern corner and cannot be traced along the southern side. The central area of the feature is slightly raised and embanked in places, with a natural granite outcrop on its western corner, which appears undisturbed. Some additional detached slabs of stone appear to be naturally placed moorstone and probably do not form part of a monument. The total spread of the earthworks is 24m at the broadest point, and the central mound is 0.4m high.

It is possible therefore that an inner mound or platform, which incorporated a natural outcrop, has become disturbed and misshapen, but was once surrounded by an outer bank, thus perhaps representing the earthworks of a sepulchral monument. However, insufficient evidence survives in an intact state to be certain.

Ring cairn (MDV15159) SX 76726 87245 (Fig 5, 17)

A probable ring cairn 43m north of the stone circle. The cairn comprises two, well defined, opposing arc shaped banks of up to 3m wide by 0.22m high, which together enclose an approximately circular area with a maximum diameter of 15.5m. The banks are breached at the eastern end by a 1.6m wide opening, where the terminals are evenly bull-nosed, suggesting this may be an original feature of the cairn. It is likely that this earthwork was once 'C' shaped in plan but the western arc has been disturbed making it difficult to establish whether this end was also open. A somewhat amorphous and spread central mound may also be an original feature but this too appears to have been disturbed.

Cairn (MDV8310) SX 76770 87423 (Fig 6, 16)

This cairn is located 15m south of 'Giants Grave' on the northern end of the summit ridge. It comprises a flat topped mound with an uneven circular footprint and a diameter of 10m at base and 0.45m high. An additional low earthwork attached to the base, flanks the northern and eastern sides of the mound. This is likely to be material that was dumped when an unrecorded excavation created a central trench across the top of the mound. The trench is 6m long by 3m wide and up to 0.29m deep. The date of this intervention is not known but it is tempting to equate it with the 18th century investigation mentioned by Polwhele.

A single small slab, apparently set upright, on the southwest arc of the mound survives. It is unlikely to have

Mardon Down Cairns

SX 76726, 87245

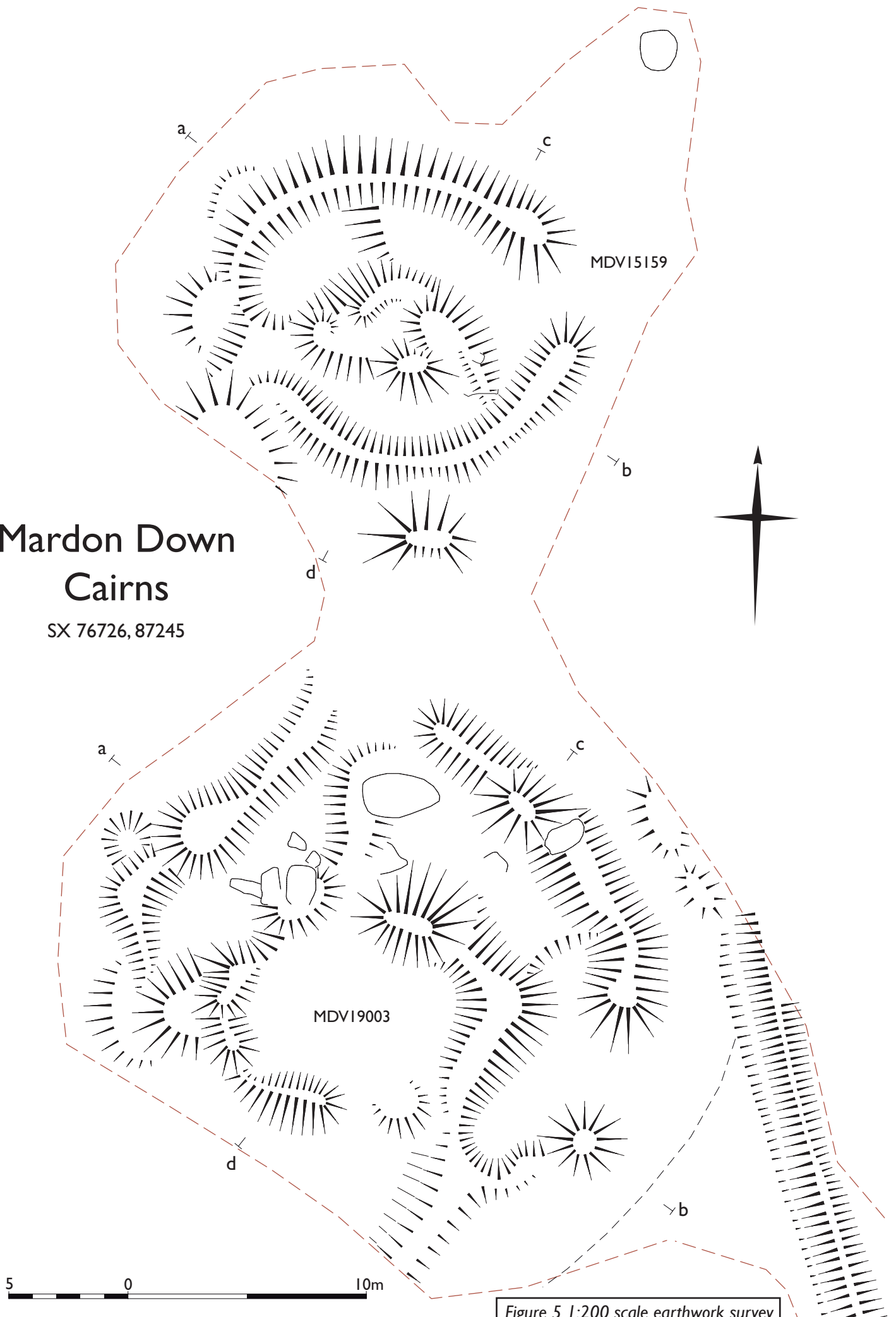


Figure 5 1:200 scale earthwork survey of disturbed cairns to the north of the stone circle. For key see Figure 4.

Mardon Down Giant's Grave

SX 76759, 87452

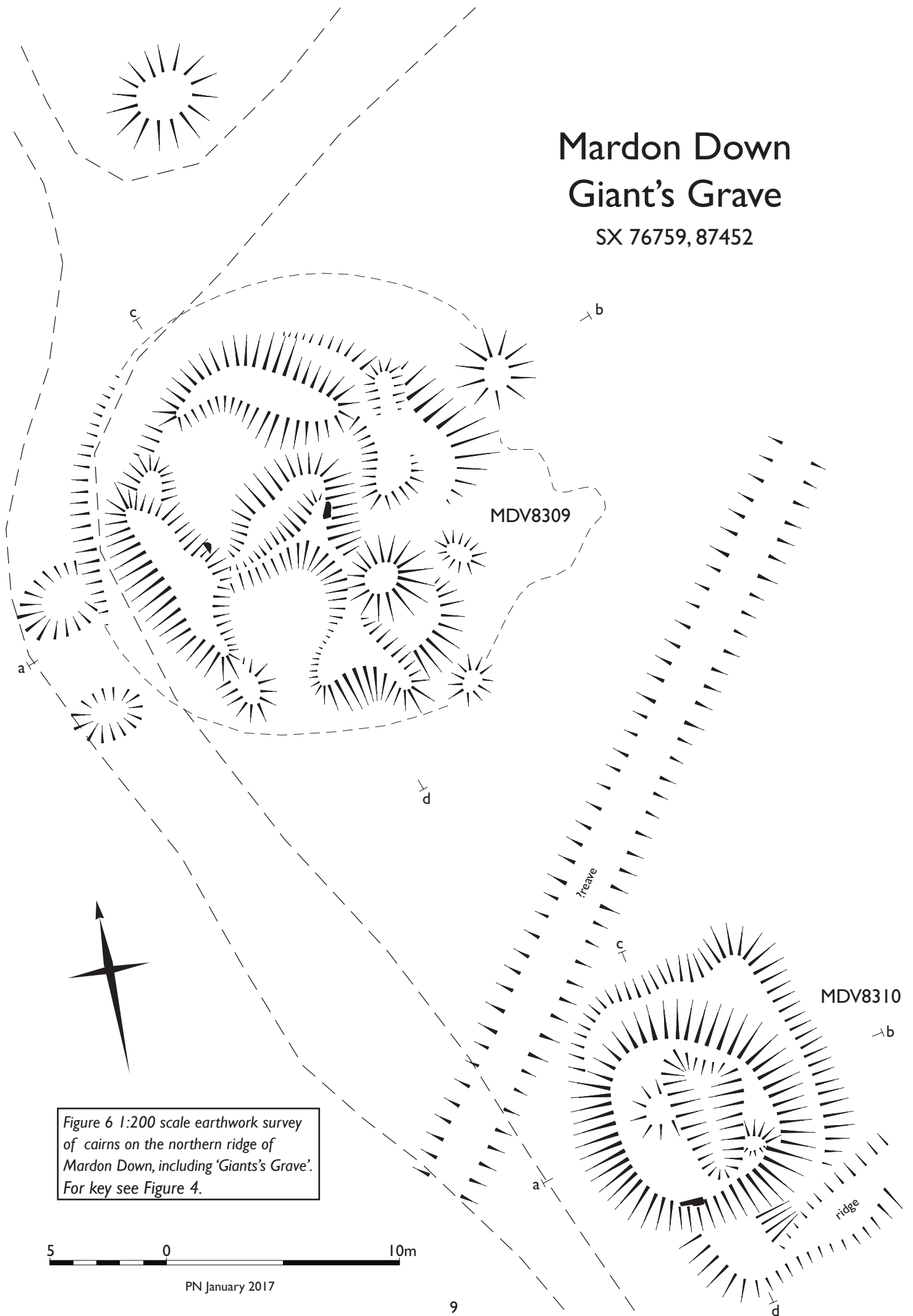


Figure 6 1:200 scale earthwork survey of cairns on the northern ridge of Mardon Down, including 'Giant's Grave'. For key see Figure 4.

5 0 10m

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been part of a stone setting or kerb, because the robbing of its counterparts, which are not present, would have disrupted the profile of the mound, which remains well defined.

Less than 1m to the north of the cairn is a spread, stony, linear earthwork which runs past it in a NNE to SSW alignment. It is 3.3m wide but only 0.2m high in the centre. This is very likely to be a reave, one of several known to exist on Mardon Down. Although this feature fades out to the west of the summit path, it can be traced for some distance down the eastern slope.

On the south side of the cairn, almost touching it, is another linear earthwork, but on a different alignment. It measures 3m wide and is certainly one of the medieval or later ridge and furrow earthworks, which cover much of the eastern flank of Mardon Down.

Cairn (MDV8309) SX 76759 87453 'Giants Grave' (Fig 6)

The name Giant's Grave appeared on the OS old series map of 1803, and it was marked on the 1884 1:25-inch county series at this location. It is the largest cairn in the group but also one of the most damaged. The spread of the cairn material is an approximate circle of 20m diameter, but the earthworks stand to a maximum height of 0.58m. Establishing the original form of the monument is impossible because all that survives is a random collection of hillocks, representing the aftermath of either digging or robbing, but it was most likely to have been an upstanding mound, rather than a more elaborate form. The remains are now completely turf covered, but two stones are visible and others certainly remain buried. It is not known if the cairn ever possessed a stone setting but, if so, it has been totally robbed. Several 19th-century writers claimed that the stone was 'stripped of its granite' to repair the roads (Rowe 1897, 131), though it is not recorded whether this was an assumption by these writers, or if the event was witnessed by them.

A small cairn recorded 8m to the north (MDV20069), with a diameter of 5m, is likely to be the result of dumping when the main cairn was despoiled.

Cairn circle (MDV8308) SX 76740 87685 (Fig 7, 15)

This monument was depicted on the OS 25-inch map of 1884, where it was referred to as a hut circle. In 1897 it was described by Rowe as being 30yds (27m) in circumference with nine stones standing, suggestive of a

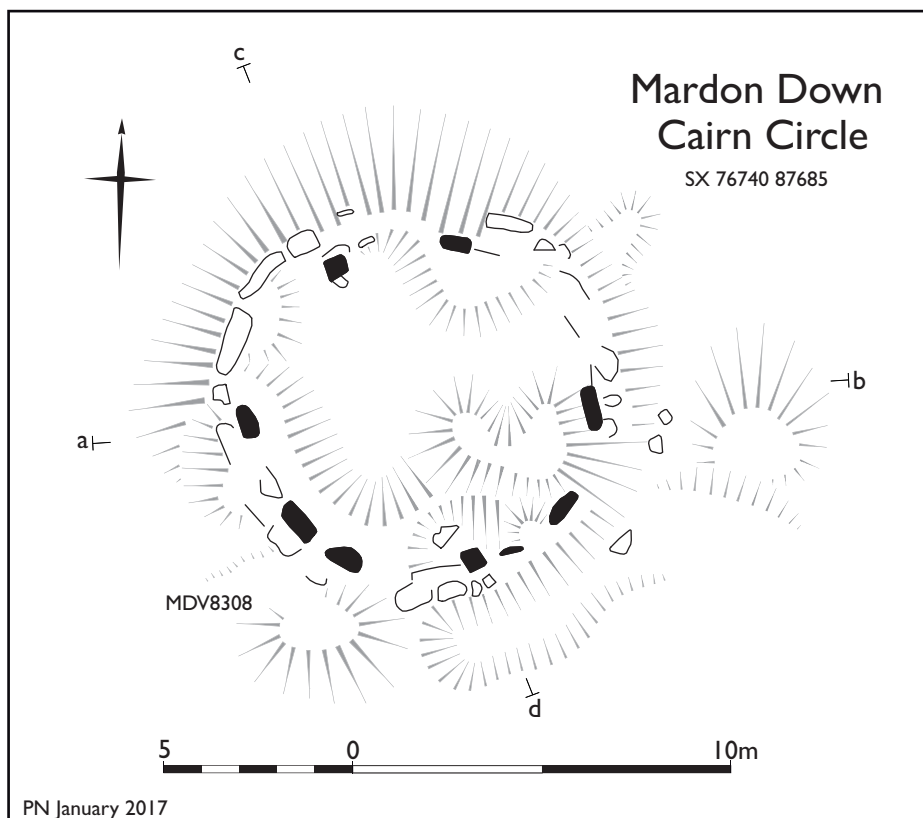


Figure 7 1:200 scale earthwork survey of the cairn circle on the northern upper slope of Mardon Down. For key see Figure 4.

'dilapidated cairn from which the greater part of the stones have been robbed' (Rowe 1897, 131). This more or less describes what remains today and a Chapman photograph of c.1912 (Fig 3), confirms that the condition of this monument has changed very little in the past century (DAI 1942).

The circle has a diameter of 8.5m and of the nine stones still *in situ*, two are upright, square-section posts, of which the tallest is 1.3m. The others consist of edge-set slabs and large blocks. It is likely that the circle had gaps between the stones, rather than forming a kerb with the stones touching, in which case the total number may have been about 20. Several large earthfast stones lie displaced outside the circle, and would have once formed part of it, especially on the northwest arc, where three stones appear to have fallen outwards. A number of smaller earthfast stones are scattered around, and probably represent remnants of the cairn. The cairn itself appears to have been comprehensively robbed, as noted by Rowe, and survives only as random, low hillocks within and outside the circle, with a maximum spread of 14m.

Ring cairn (MDVI2771) SX 76891 87596 (Fig 8)

A probable ring cairn lies 150m east of the summit ridge and therefore outside the supposed 'linear cairn cemetery' recorded in the Dartmoor HER (MDVI05916).

A curving stony bank forms an outline suggestive of an approximate circle, but it has been badly damaged on the north and northeast sides, while the western segment has been mostly effaced by a path that traverses it. The

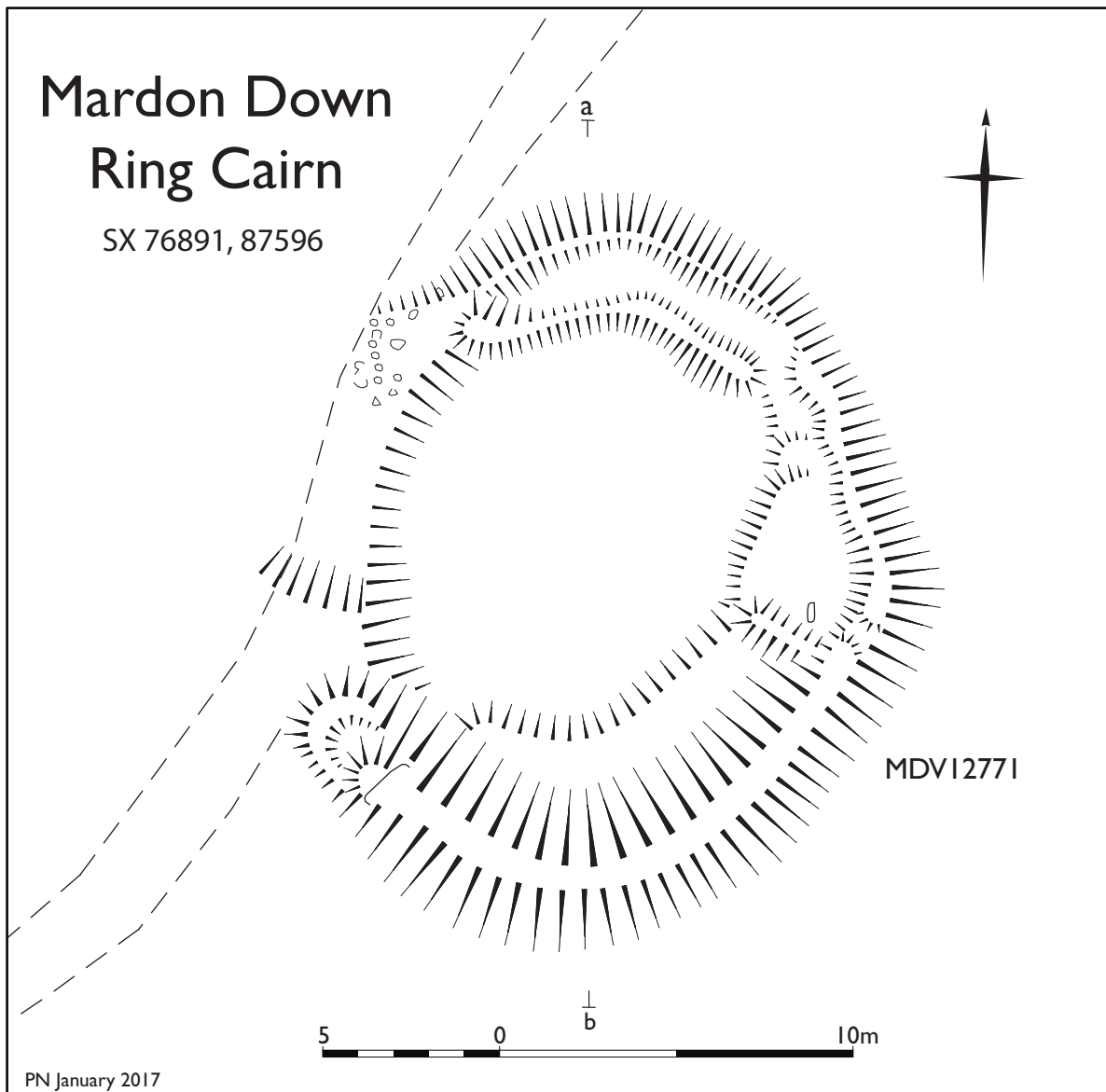


Figure 8 1:200 scale earthwork survey of the ring cairn to the east of Mardon Down ridge.



Figure 9 Photograph by Chapman and Son showing 'Black Pool, Mardon' in c.1912 looking west. © Copyright Dartmoor Trust Archive (Ref DA 11940).

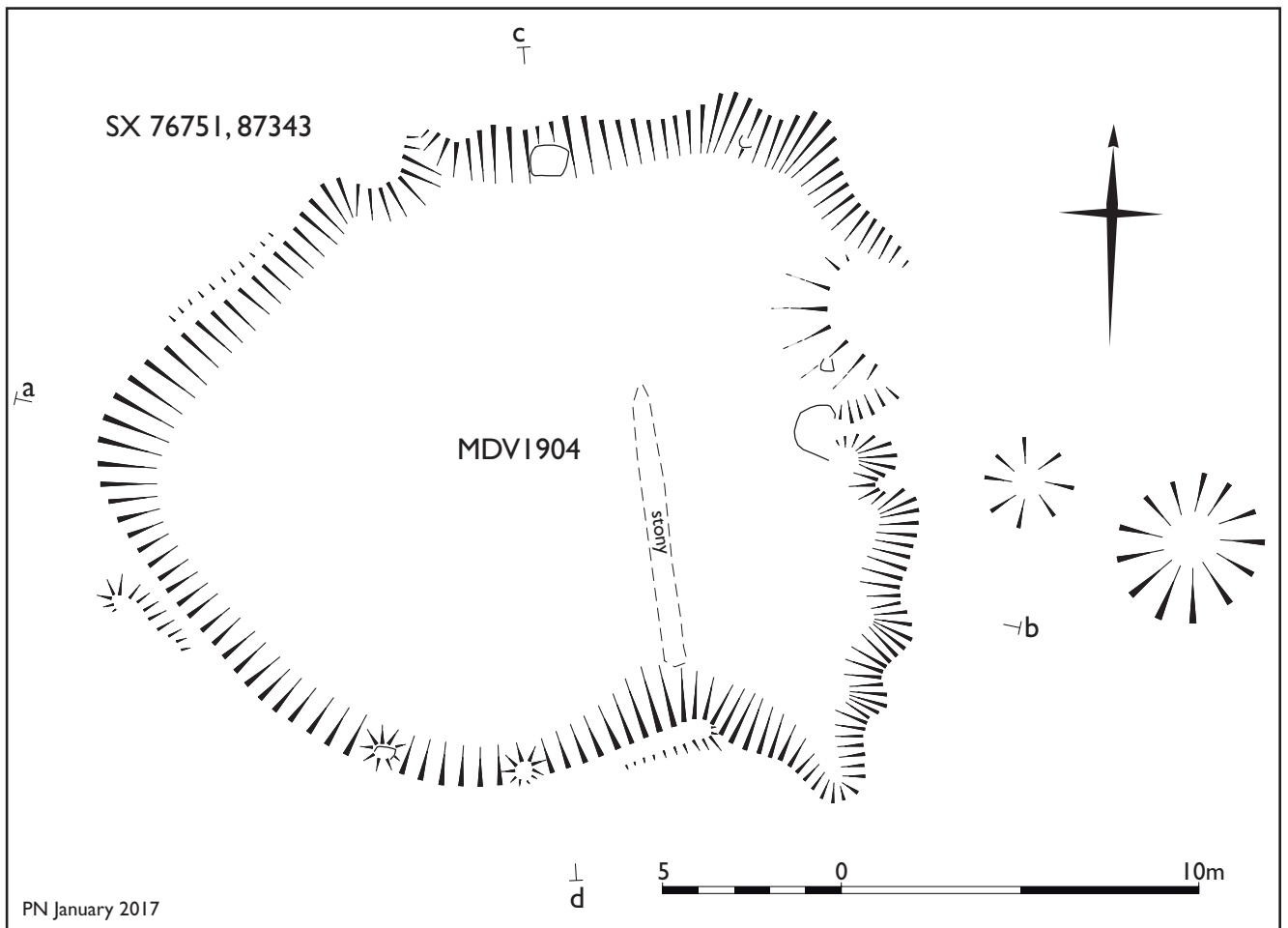


Figure 10 1:200 scale earthwork survey of the seasonal pond (Black Pool) on Mardon Down.

best preserved section is the southern segment, where the bank appears undisturbed. It is up to 5m wide at base with a rounded profile of 0.45m high. On the north and northeast segments, material has been removed leaving only the hollowed outline of the bank. Although turf covered today, this bank is certainly made up of stone, some of which is visible through erosion at the point where the track crosses it.

Cairn(?) (MDV12768) SX 76730 87581

A small circular mound of stones 102m south of the cairn circle (8308) just west of the path. The diameter is 4.7m, which is rather small for a sepulchral cairn, and more likely to be associated with clearance, perhaps of a date later than the larger cairns. However, if so, then it is the only recorded example in the vicinity and unusual for that reason.

Seasonal pond earthwork (MDV19004) SX 76751 87343 (Figs 9, 10, 18)

This hollowed earthwork is situated approximately midway between the stone circle and Giant's Grave on the summit ridge. It is recorded in the Dartmoor HER as a dew pond, which may have utilised an existing ring cairn (see HER entry). Its outline is depicted on the 1884 OS 1:25-inch map, and a Chapman photograph of c.1912, entitled *Black Pool, Mardon*, shows it filled with water (Fig 9).

The outline shape is uneven but reflects approximately what is depicted on the 1884 map, unevenly rounded on the western end. Its appearance, with small scarp edges, suggest it was hand dug and large boulders around the edge have been left *in situ*. The hollow measures 22m by 17m but is only 0.5m deep. An alignment of small stones in the base of the hollow may be a more recent addition. There is no indication as to where material removed from the hollow was dumped, or if it was removed from the Down.

Although this earthwork has certainly accumulated seasonal rainwater in the past, it cannot be confirmed for certain if that was its original purpose. Dewponds, despite the misnomer, always collected rainwater not dew, and were designed for watering cattle where no natural supply was present, which would be likely at this hilltop location. No evidence can be identified for this ever having been the site of a ring cairn, as recorded in the HER.

DISCUSSION and FURTHER RESEARCH

Mardon Down is rich in field archaeology, covering a time span of at least 4000 years. However, compared to areas of Dartmoor National Park within the main moorland zone, this outlier has attracted far less attention from archaeologists. Despite Jeremiah Milles' observations at the stone circle in the 1750s, it took 220 years for the circle to be noted again and for the significance of the circle and its associated cairn group as a ritual complex to be considered. The completion of this survey has, for the first time, established the extent and form of all the individual monuments in this group, as well as the importance of their group association, and will form a baseline for conservation and future research decisions. The significance of this group of cairns is comparable to others on Dartmoor at Hameldown, Western Beacon and Crownhill Down. However, only at Fernworthy is a similar close association between a hilltop stone circle and a cairn cemetery to be witnessed.

This survey has looked in detail at only a small portion of the available archaeological resource of Mardon Down, which covers an area of over 170ha in total. Other remains distributed over the Down, which have also never been considered as part of a landscape recording project, should now be seen as a priority for accurate recording and entry into the Dartmoor HER, which relies mainly on the unverified RCHME aerial photo plot, and contains a number of errors and missing items. Future investigations to throw further light on this area could include:

- A survey of prehistoric reaves, which have been recorded in part but are likely to be more extensive than has currently been surveyed
- a number of possible cairns on the eastern ridge which may also have potential for designation
- medieval cultivation has been previously noted on part of the Down but is known to extend over much larger areas than so far recorded, including much of the eastern ridge, visible on 1m LiDAR. Some has been recorded through aerial photo plotting as a prehistoric field system (probably incorrectly) though it has never been ground verified.

- World War two earthworks have not yet been considered in any survey, and subsequently have few entries in the HER. Apart from the large earthworks which formerly served for Bailey Bridge training, the Downs have extensive earthwork evidence of military activity including a tented camp, numerous clusters of slit trenches and other defensive earthworks. A series of gun or possible anti-aircraft pits encircles the summit of the hill
- A reappraisal of the 1947 RAF vertical APs would certainly be a first step in collating the WWII and other earthworks. These APs were used by the RCHME for the NMP survey in the 1980s, but WWII evidence was largely ignored
- LiDAR is currently available for only a portion of Mardon Down and at only 1m interval. As soon as 25cm LiDAR becomes available, the archaeology of this area will need to be re-examined.

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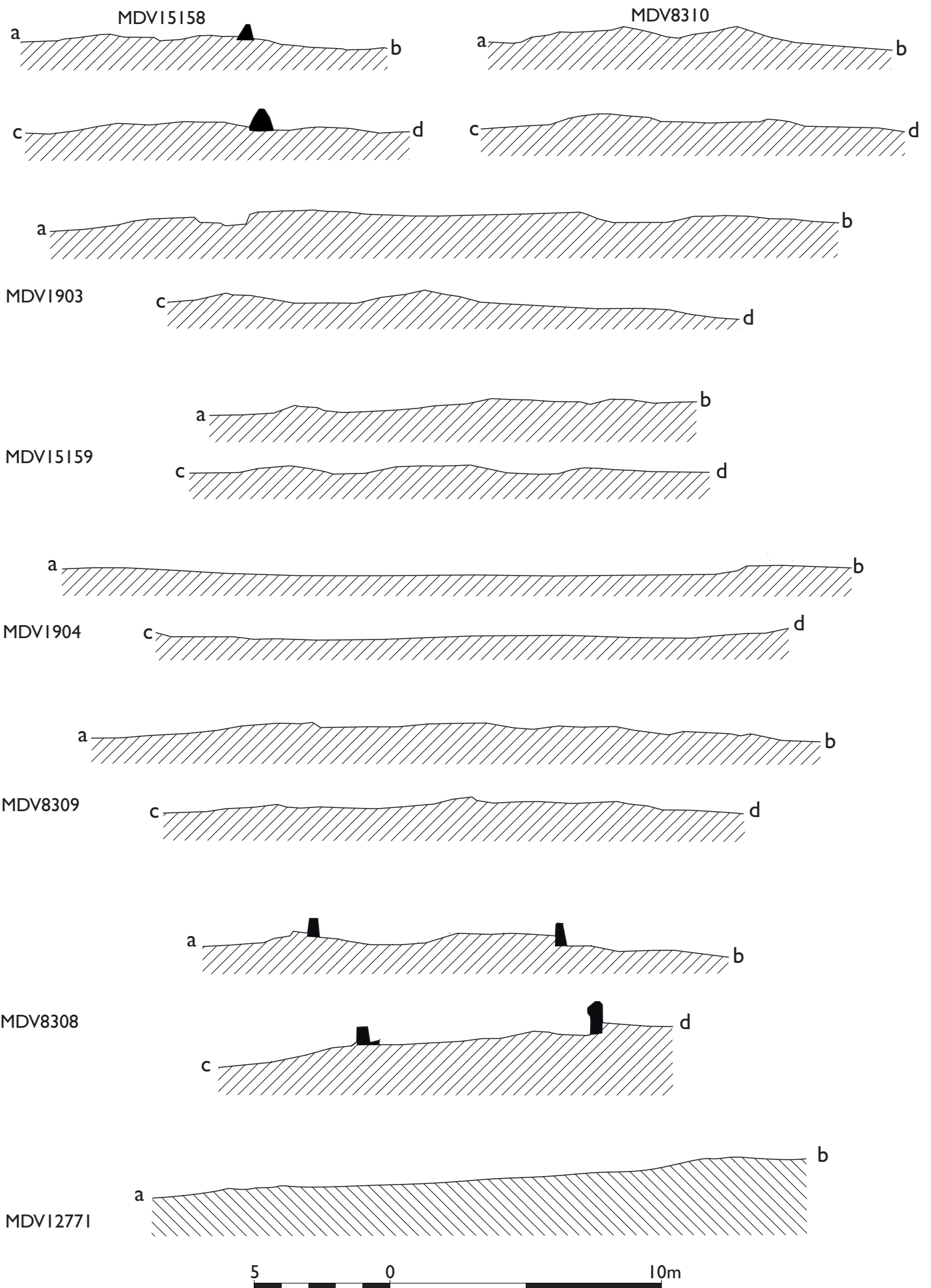


Figure 11 Profile views of surveyed earthworks on Mardon Down.



Figure 12 (above) Mardon Down stone circle and small cairn circle in the foreground. Looking north.



Figure 13 (left) Mardon Down stone circle. Stones on the eastern arc.

Figure 14 Small cairn (MDVI5158) with retaining circle south of the larger stone circle.





Figure 15 Cairn circle (MDV8308) on northern slope of Mardon Down. Looking southeast.

Figure 16 Cairn (MDV8310) south of Giant's Grave. A reave is visible in the foreground.



Figure 17 A ring cairn (MDV15159) near the stone circle on Mardon Down.



Figure 18 The hollowed earthwork of a seasonal pond on the summit ridge of Mardon Down (MDV19004).

