

# Knowle Wood, Bickleigh Dartmoor National Park, Devon

An archaeological survey

February 2019



Southwest Landscape Investigations



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SX 5331 6407

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Dartmoor HER No: MDV125834  
OASIS Ref: southwes2-362498

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## Summary

A topographical survey of archaeological features was undertaken on and around the summit of Knowle Wood in Bickleigh parish, Devon, near Shaugh Bridge, at the request of the Dartmoor National Park Authority historic environment team. The survey was undertaken in January and February 2019, to provide a basic plan and interpretation of the archaeological features, whose existence had been confirmed only the previous year. The site, for which a full description and plan has been produced, consists of tumbled stony ramparts, which partly encircle the summit of the hill, and a short section of an apparent inner rampart on the summit. A possible entrance on the west side was also noted. The evidence is evaluated in the context of other stony, hilltop enclosures on Dartmoor, the Westcountry and mainland Britain as a whole, considering the evidence for either a Neolithic or Iron Age origin. Evidence of a medieval or post-medieval woodland industry, in the form of charcoal burning hearths was also recorded as part of this survey.

## Topography and geology

The site lies within Knowle Wood on a prominent, tree-covered hill whose curving north and eastern base has been carved by the meandering of the River Meavy, above which its steep flanks rise 50m to a height of 150m above OD. On the western side, the summit rises 20m from a pinch in a ridge of land that extends down from Leebeer, and on the south, the steep, even, gradient can be followed all the way down to Grenofen. The summit

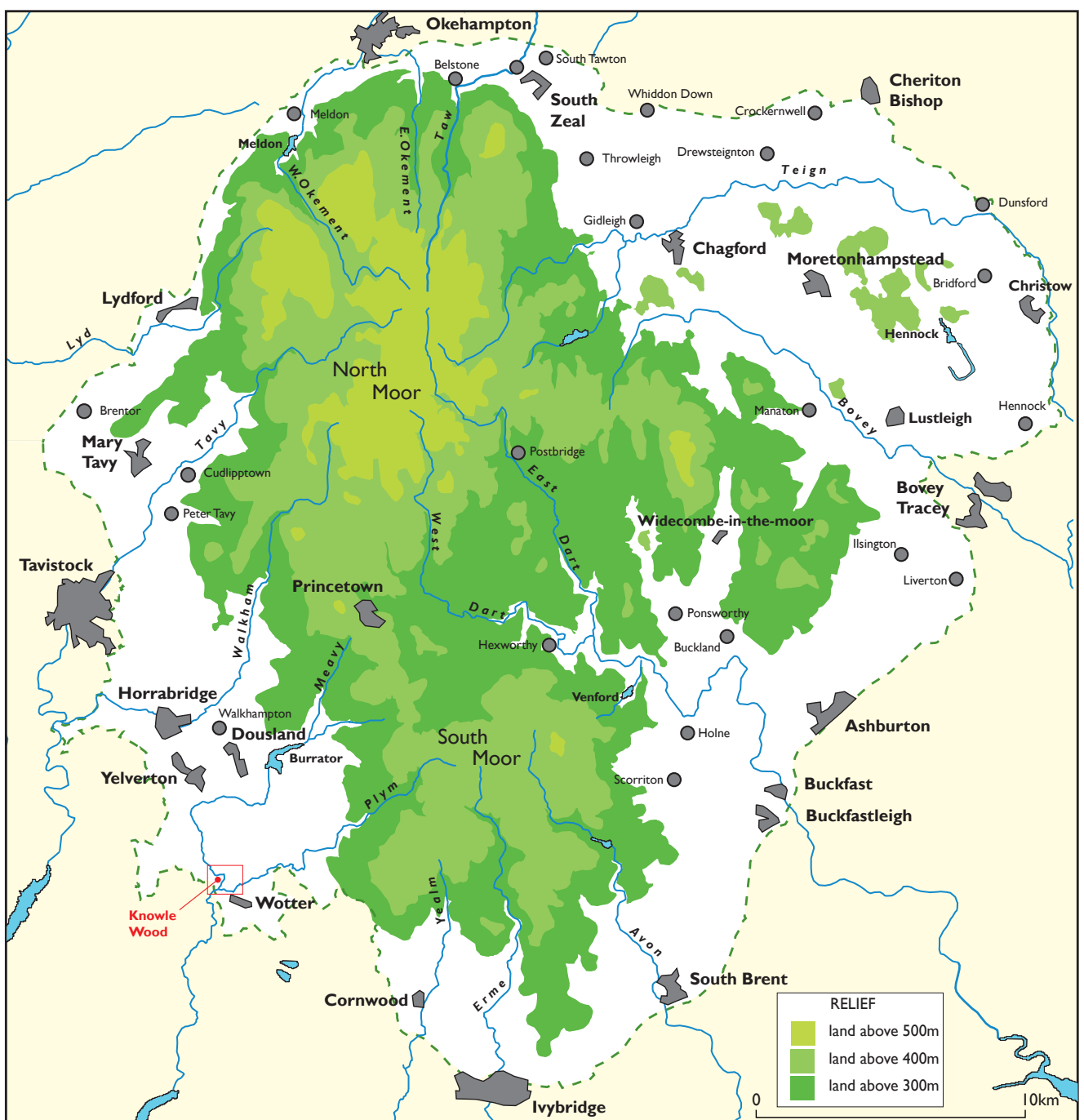


Figure 1 Location map showing Knowle Wood within the context of Dartmoor National Park.

is defined by a small and comparatively level plateau, which although edged with small outcrops and strewn with clitter, has some clear patches of ground. It is on and around this summit that the stony ramparts are located, while the plateau gradually falls away into steep slopes on all sides. To the NE of this plateau, a narrow spur descends slightly onto two very pronounced granite outcrops protruding 50m from the hilltop, and below which a precipitous drop falls away to the river below.

Geologically, the site lies within the SW lobe of the Dartmoor granite intrusion, which forms the western most projection of the granite mass. It lies south of the Calisham Down to Cornwood fault, on the very margin between the granite and the metamorphic aureole (Durrance and Laming 1982, 93-5). The granite is of a coarse form known as Wigford Down type, which has notably smaller feldspar megacrysts compared to the richer granites of the main Dartmoor mass (Knox and Jackson, 1990, 247). The flanks of the hill, particularly the upper flanks, are extremely stony, including some very large granite boulders and several *in-situ* outcrops. It was the morphology of the hilltop and its granite strewn slopes and summit that both dictated and constrained the shape and method of construction of any human interventions that have occurred here.

The hill is completely covered by mature trees, and there is very little underbrush. The great majority of the trees are deciduous species, though on the lower, southern flank there is also a patch of conifer plantation. Without this tree covering in times past, vistas from the hilltop would have extended for many kilometers to the south and north-west along the Meavy valley, but to east and west, the higher ground of Dewerstone and Leebeer would have limited the visibility.

### Archaeological and historical context

The summit of Knowle Wood lies only 390m due north of Shaugh Bridge, where the waters of two mature moorland rivers, the Plym and the Meavy, combine. On the opposite, similarly steep, eastern slope of the Meavy is Dewerstone Wood on an elongated steep-sided peninsula formed by the confluence of these two rivers. This peninsula, apart from possessing fascinating geological formations and numerous granite quarries, is topped with

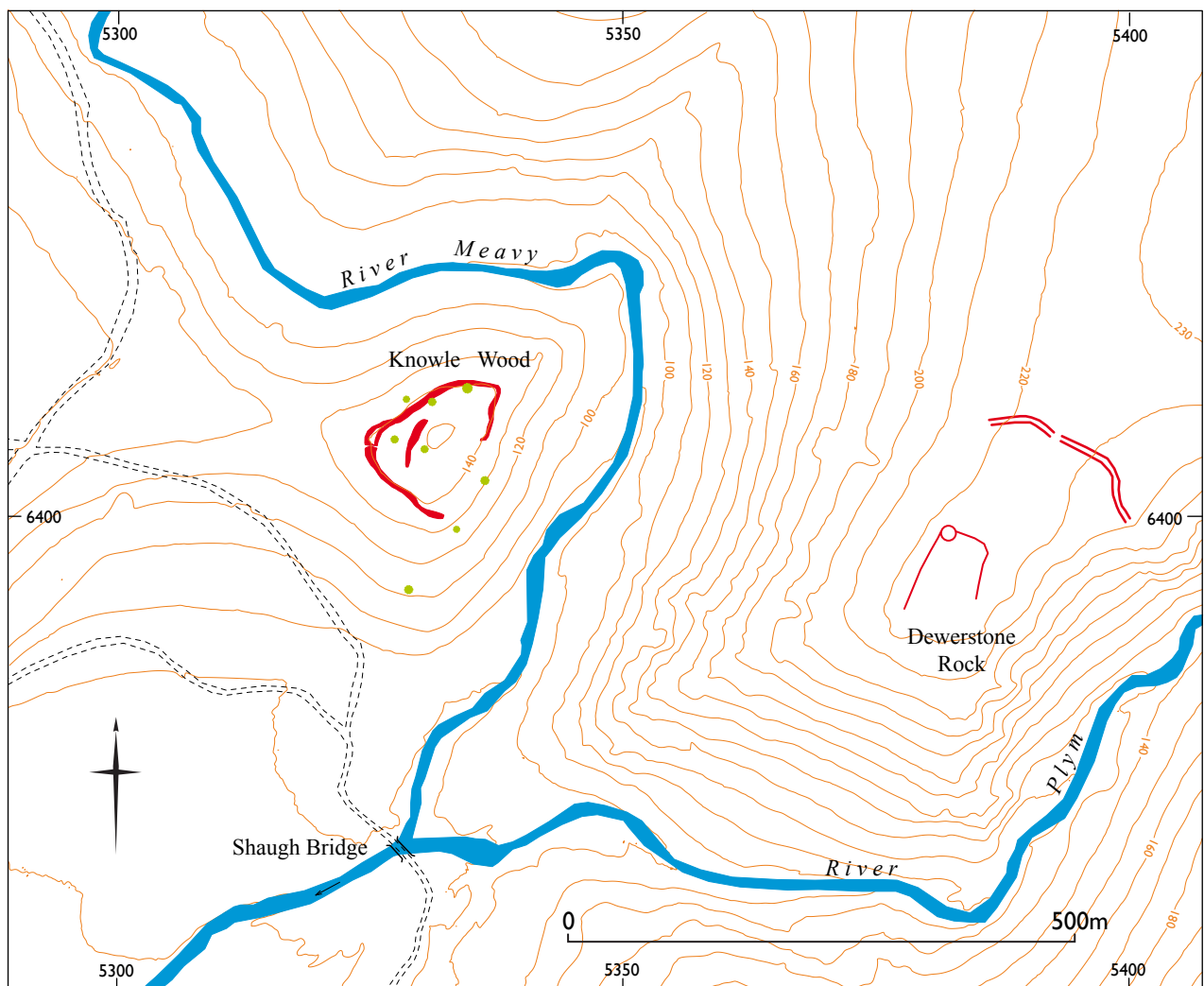


Figure 2 Topographic map showing Knowle Wood and immediate locality, including the Dewerstone enclosure on the opposite side of the Meavy valley. The map includes newly recorded charcoal hearths within Knowle Wood. Contours from OS open sources. © Crown copyright and database right (2019).

remains of a prehistoric enclosure, lying in open moorland at approximately 220m above OD, which is often assumed to have Neolithic origins, but was also occupied in the 2nd millennium BC (Oswald 1994, 9).

Knowle Wood, which is encircled by the river on the north and east sides, was isolated from the enclosed land to the west by a single enclosure wall, which runs up from Grenofen to the river just west of Leebeer. Whilst fields on the ridge to the west of the hill have been cleared of stone, the steepness of the slopes on the hill itself, rendered the land unsuitable for most economic activity other than stone working or timber harvesting. There is no evidence of the former activity, despite the close proximity of quarries on the slopes of Dewerstone, but there is good evidence for woodland based industries. The earliest document available, which specifically mentions 'Knowle Great Wood' is a sale document of 1760 (PWDRO 70/177) and by the time the Bickleigh Tithe map was prepared in 1840, the then owner, Sir Ralph Lopez, had the land registered for 'timber and coppice'. As the ownership passed through various hands in the late 19th and early 20th century, management of the wood seems to have changed very little. More recently Knowle Wood has been in the ownership of the Forestry Commission, and it is perhaps during that period that a small patch of conifers was planted on the south slope. At the time of this report (February 2019), the ownership is again in private hands.

The archaeological features have not been depicted on any OS or other map until now, and discovery through aerial photography has been prevented by tree coverage. With the availability of LiDAR, remote images of the archaeological features became available for the first time (Fig. 4).

## **Methodology**

The survey methodology is compliant with Historic England's Level 3 recording standard, i.e. 'An accurately located, measured survey (map based or divorced) at an appropriate scale, designed to represent adequately the form and complexity of the monument' (Historic England 2017, 23-4).

Data-capture was via a total station theodolite. A closed traverse of 12 stations was established, from which detail of the enclosure was recorded. Reference to the OS grid was established from two points just outside the woodland, where map-grade GPS was effective to an accuracy of approximately 0.25m.

This survey is concerned only with the upper portion of the hill contained within Knowle Wood, which includes the ramparts at the summit. Although the slopes surrounding the summit were perused, the lower slopes, riverside and other areas covered by the wood were not included.

## **DESCRIPTION**

### **The inner (upper) rampart**

The summit plateau is longer than it is broad. It has an approximately level crest, extending for 38m NE to SW, before the increase in gradient where it meets the upper hillside flanks. Although the NW to SE summit profile, is slightly more rounded, as a whole the hilltop may be described as a very usable space.

On the western edge of the summit are the remains of the inner rampart (a), which strengthened a natural break in the slope, by dumping manageable sized boulders along the edge of the summit crest to form a bank. The bank also incorporates some much larger boulders, which may have been natural *in situ*, or were also pushed over from the summit. All of this stone would have had origins as clitter and its movement contributed to the partial clearance of the summit. The stony bank is very spread, up to 11m, with a drop in height of up to 3m, and its original rampart profile, if it had one, does not survive. The overall length of the surviving section is just under 50m. At its northern end the bank follows the contour but as it heads south it crosses it before terminating.

Just north of the centre of this rampart, a very shallow E-W transverse cutting (b) breaks the continuity of the slope and has the appearance of an entrance opening, for which use it is correctly aligned to have been used in conjunction with a similar opening through the outer rampart (see below). However, this feature is very subtle, making it difficult to be certain of its true origin, but although it may have been a route across the bank used by woodland workers, that would seem unnecessary given the ease of access down the slope to the north and south of the feature.

While this appears to be the only section of the inner rampart to survive, or more likely it was the only section completed to this level, the break in the slope which it enhanced, is traceable again as it rounds the northern curve of the summit. This slope has a number of larger boulders randomly scattered along it, though it is hard

Figure 3 Ordnance Survey 25-inch map of 1885, shows Knowle Wood and surrounding area but the fortifications on the hilltop are not depicted.

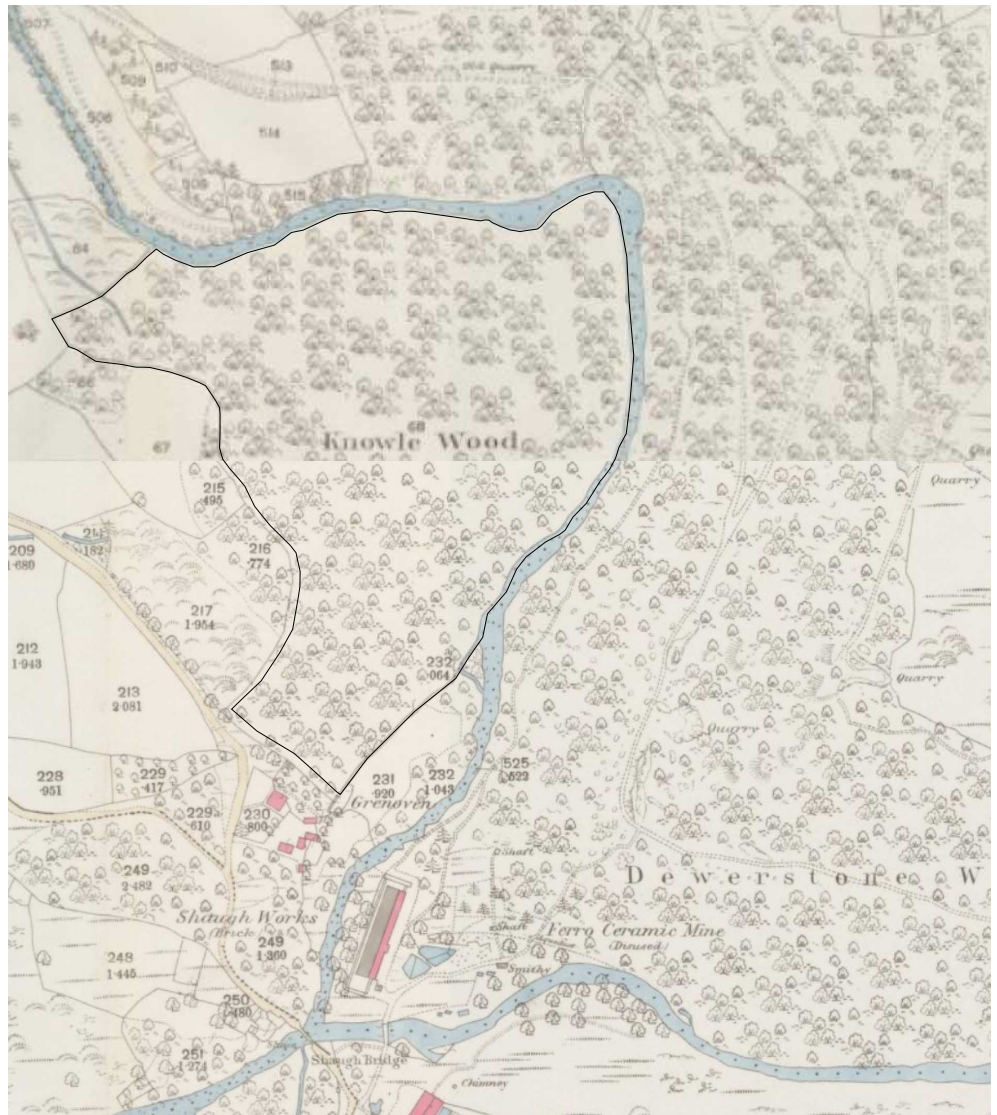
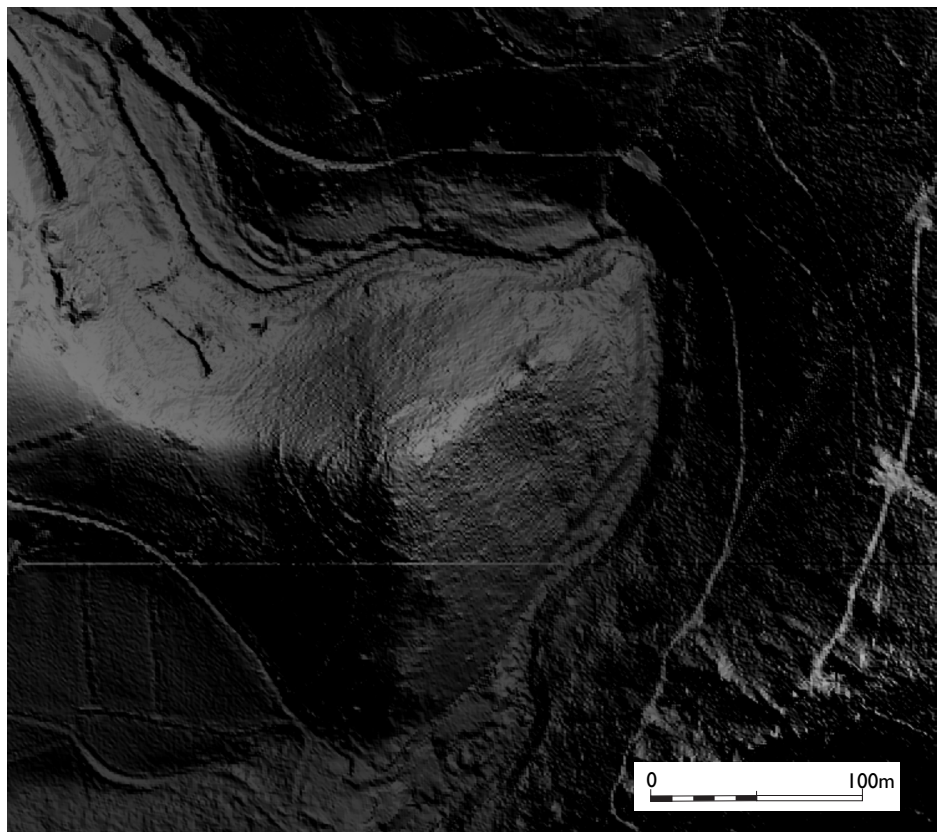


Figure 4 Digital terrain model based on 1m LiDAR data, on which the inner and outer ramparts, several charcoal hearths and the natural spur on the NE are visible. (Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.)



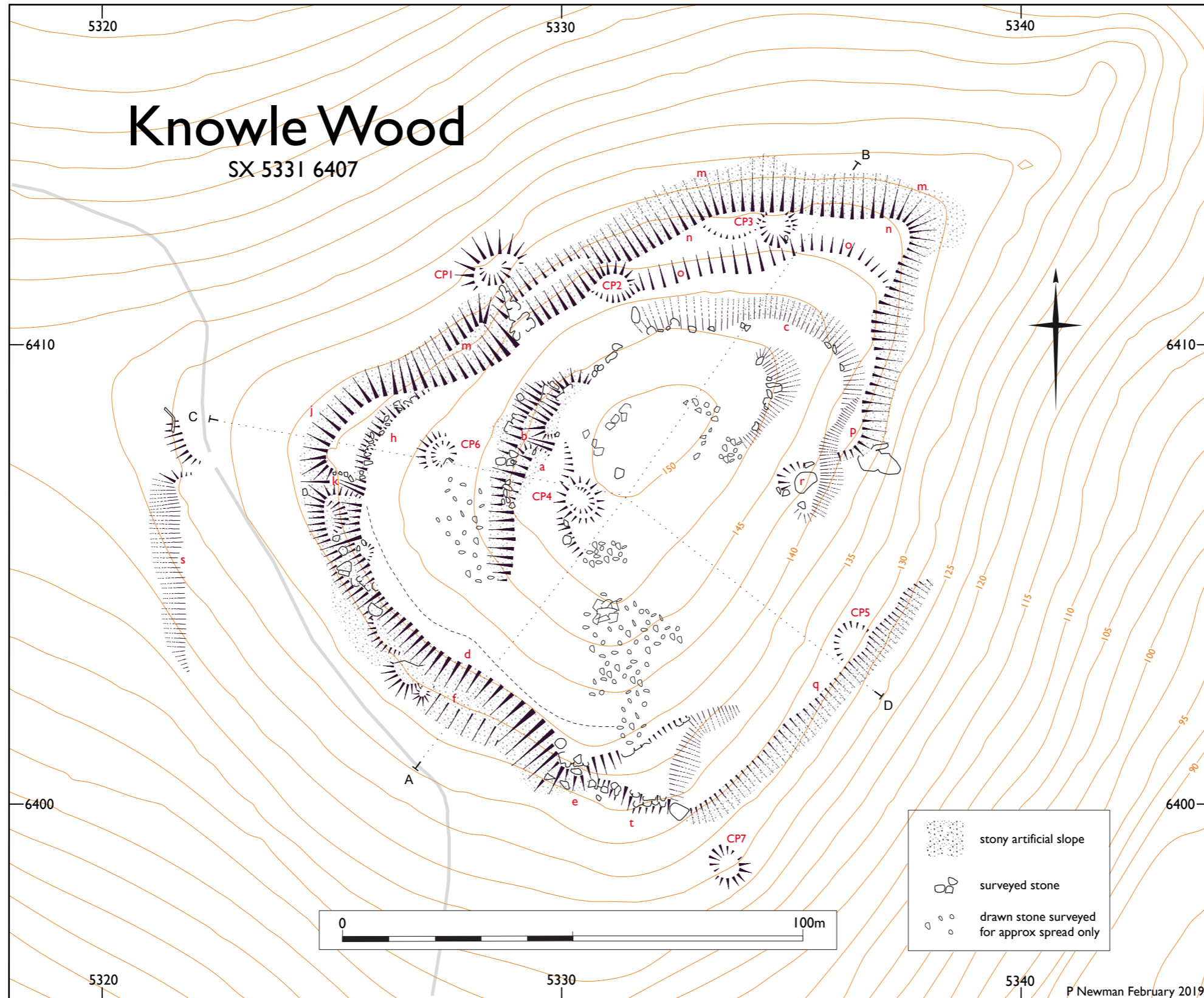


Figure 5 1:1000 scale survey of the Knowle Wood ramparts. (Contours derived from public sector LiDAR data under the Open Government Licence v3.0).



to discern whether they were deposited naturally or by human intervention. However, a 25m central section of this slope (c) has a covering of smaller boulders similar to those used in the other section, which appear to have been deposited through human effort rather than natural forces, and may represent an incomplete attempt to fortify an additional stretch of this natural scarp. Although this scarp continues around to the east side of the hill, before blending in with the main slope of the hillside, there is no convincing evidence for any further artificial fortification of the hilltop on the east, south-east and south sectors.

### **The outer (lower) rampart**

Although incomplete on the eastern side, the outer rampart was designed to surround the summit and enclose the more gently sloping land of the hilltop, directly below the summit. On average, the outer rampart is 35m out from the summit plateau and 9m lower, though slightly less on the NW side, and forms a continuous boundary for almost 290m along the south, west and north sides. A notable gap extends along the steep eastern side, where for 90m, no trace of the rampart survives. If projected across this gap, the rampart circuit would enclose approximately 0.9ha with a total perimeter of 381m, but it seems unlikely the missing section ever existed in any permanent form.

The construction method for this outer rampart was identical to that of the inner, where manageable boulders have been dumped to form a bank of stone, which enhances the gradient of the slope, but the character of this 'dump rampart' varies around the circuit. There is no surviving evidence that the rampart was ever an upstanding feature though it may have tumbled and eroded over time and its original profile was lost long ago. However, the gathering of stone on the interior to construct it, and the build up of the rampart itself, has created a shelf of cleared ground (d).

#### *The south and west side and the entrance*

The strongest section runs from a crumbled outcrop near the southern corner (e) and extends around the south and west sides, then curves around to the NW side. Of this, the SW portion (f), is constructed mostly from easily moveable boulders, with one or two larger examples interspersed. As the rampart runs NW, several larger, *in-situ*, naturally deposited boulders have been incorporated. The artificial scarp is approximately 10m wide, and drops about 3m, although loose stone has spread further down the slope.

As the bank rounds the western side, it splits into two, creating an upper (h) and lower (j) scarp with a level platform between the two. At the point of the split there is also a clear entrance opening, traversing east to west through the rampart (k). This opening was certainly used in more recent times by woodland industries as it is the only means of access to the hilltop for horses or wheeled vehicles, but it has likely origins as an original feature of the prehistoric phase, with rounded terminals and a sunken corridor. The existence of the adjacent split-level rampart and the space it has created between them, suggest further strengthening, typical of entrances on fortified sites.

The upper scarp (h), whose inner edge is a continuation of the main rampart extending up from the south, is the more slight of the two, with a spread of 4.2m and a drop of 1.6m. This is an earthwork scarp, containing some moderately sized earthfast stones, which are probably *in-situ* and naturally deposited, or possibly, formed part of a disturbed revetment, though they now appear to be somewhat randomly placed.

The lower of these two scarps (j) is of dump construction, made up of small to medium stones and boulders, all of a manageable size. It has a spread of 6m and a drop of 2.2m. The southern end forms a rounded terminal to allow for the corridor of the entrance but as the bank sweeps around to the NW side, the two scarps rejoin, where the gradient of the hillside notably increases. Between the two, is a level, tapering platform of 22m by 6.5m at the southern end. This could be interpreted as an extremely small and primitive barbican.

South of the entrance corridor (k) the rampart is spread to approximately the same width as that of the combined two slopes h and j, but has no evidence of a similar separation or platform.

#### *The north and east flank*

Along the NW flank of the hill (m), the gradient is considerably steeper than that to the south, and although the rubble of the rampart is still visible, it lies almost flat onto the slope, with no defined scarp, other than that dictated by the slope of the hillside. On the interior however, it is much better defined by a flattish ledge marking the top of the artificial part of the bank (n). This was further enhanced when the builders gathered up the stone and earth to construct it from the slope immediately adjacent on the interior, giving the area just within the

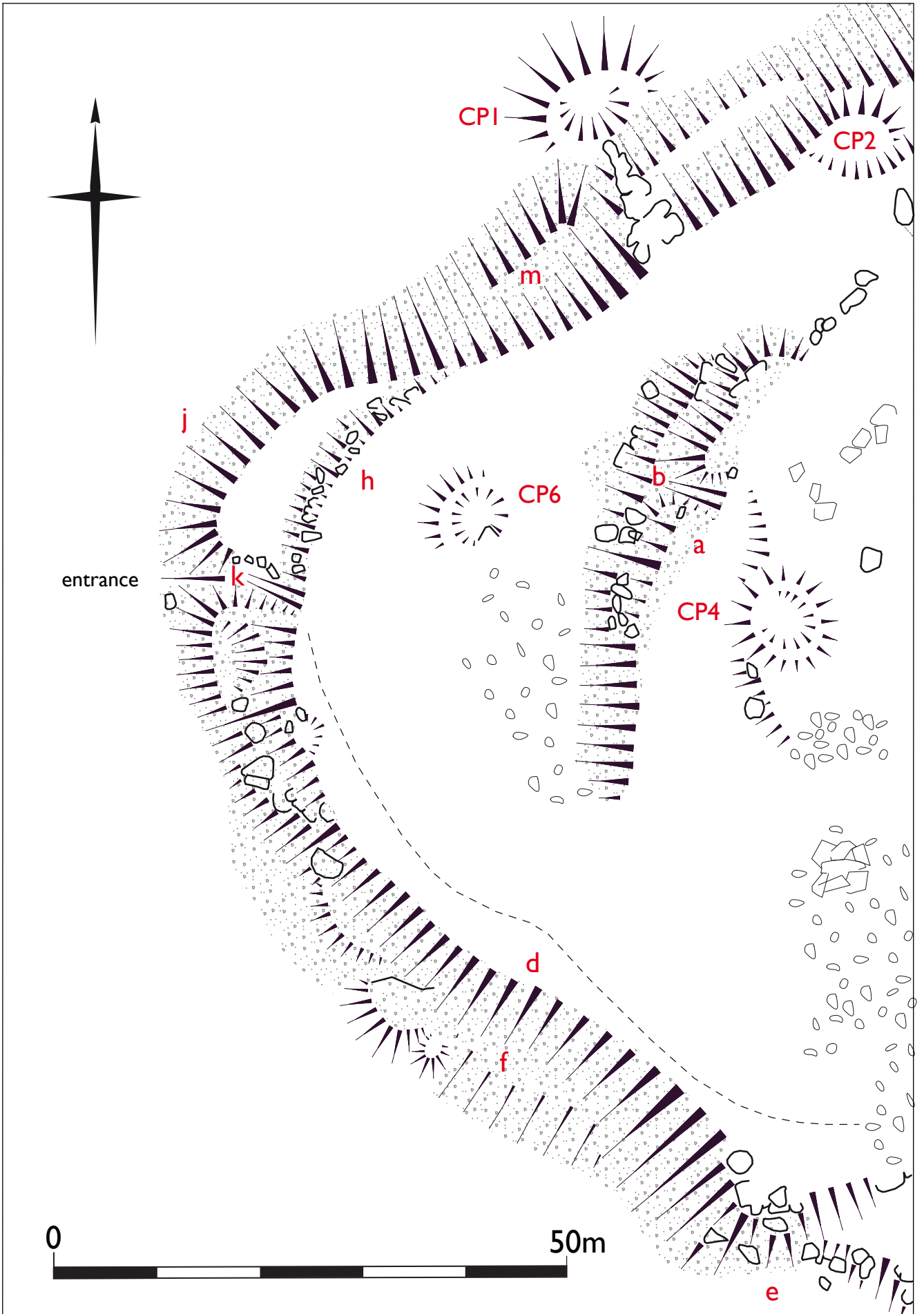


Figure 6 1:500 survey window showing the probable entrance and surviving sections of rampart on the western side.

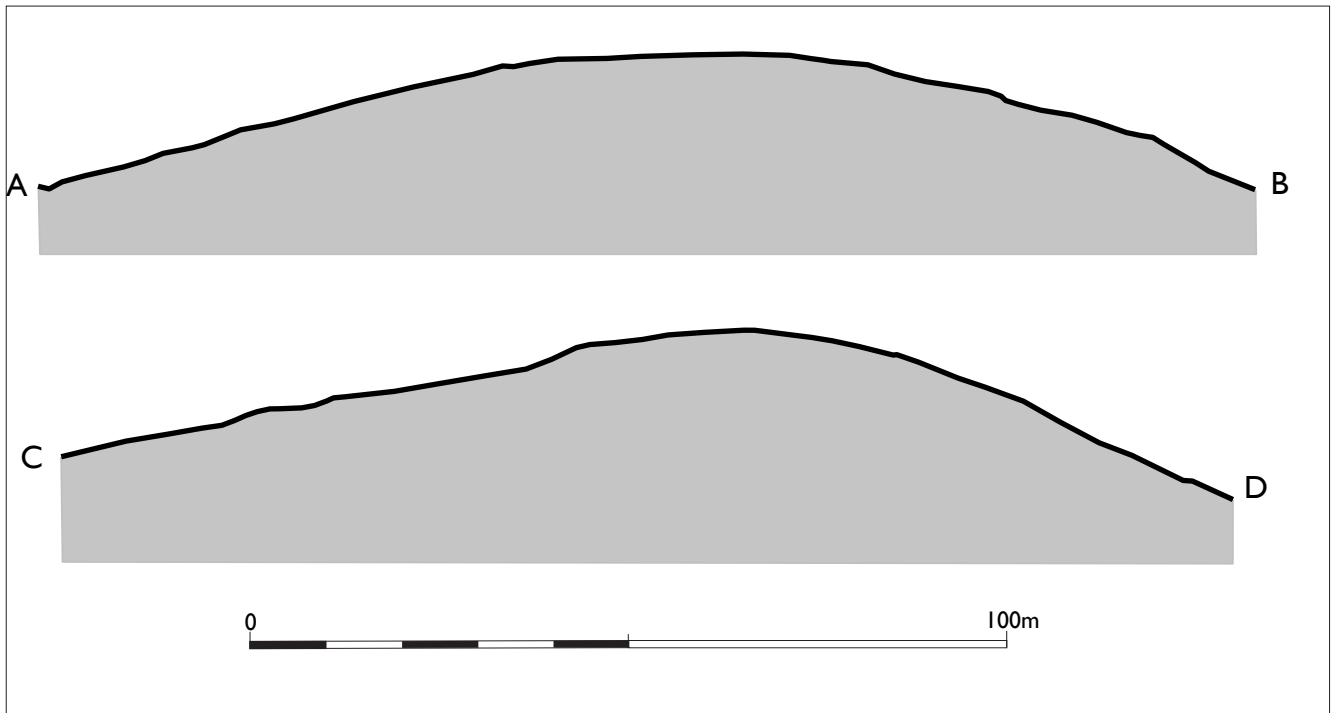


Figure 7 Profiles of the hilltop and ramparts.

rampart a terraced appearance with a back scarp (o) on the south side. This continues along the NW side before a slight change in direction, then a sharp turn south to follow the eastern side of the hill, before fading out 53m to the south (p).

### Other earthworks

The SE flank of the hill represents the steepest slope of the entire site, dropping 65m to the river over a horizontal distance of only 130m and this may explain the absence of a stone rampart along a large part of it (see discussion below). However, a linear feature (q) does run along this flank further down the slope, cutting across the contours to meet up approximately with the southern corner of the rampart. This is a ledge of up to 1m wide, probably a track, the formation of which caused the dumping of some stone on the downslope side, which has spread slightly. The slight proportions and location make this an improbable component of the hilltop defences and is more likely to have been an access track used by woodland workers in the pursuit of timber and charcoal. The location of two hearth platforms nearby adds some weight to this.

On the eastern side of the site, near the southern fade-out point of the outer rampart (r), a particularly large boulder sits, surrounded by a hollow on the upslope side. This hollow, together with what appears to be some dumped material below, suggest that at some time, an attempt was made to uncover and possibly dislodge this boulder, though for what purpose and when, is open to speculation.

Thirty metres west of the entrance, on the edge of the wood, a linear outcrop (s) set into a natural scarp, extends for 55m north to south. It is unlikely to have served as part of the defences, but may be illustrative of the type of natural features utilised for the building of the outer rampart above. A cutting through this feature provided access to the hilltop when approaching from the ridge on the west.

### Charcoal hearths

Evidence for the exploitation of the woodland resources is visible in the form of wood charcoal burning platforms, where cut, hardwood timber from the surrounding woodland was burned in covered mounds known as meilers. Seven earthwork examples (CPI-7) of these platforms have been identified on and around the hilltop and another (not surveyed) survives further down the southern slope (SX 53287 6392); others may yet be recorded within the wood as a whole. These mostly comprise circular terraces cut into the slope, where surplus material cut to form the platform is dumped on the downslope side to form a crescent mound, though one on the comparatively level ground of the summit (CP4), is simply a ring of earth. All the hearths are of similar diameters of between 5.5 and 6m. The best examples (CPI) lies at the foot of the NW rampart, which has a particularly large built-up mound below it.

Although this industry was usually supplied through coppicing, as inferred from the 1840 Tithe apportionment, today the evidence of contemporary coppicing stools in Knowle Wood is limited. However, one example is still clinging to life near the bottom of the hill on the south side. Others may survive elsewhere in the wood.

## Discussion

In the context of southwest England, stone built hilltop enclosures are not unusual, but most examples so far recorded in Devon and Cornwall have been assigned to the Neolithic period under the category of 'tor enclosure'. This statement needs to be qualified in that it refers only to hilltop sites and tor enclosures and does not include the many enclosed domestic sites, found on the Dartmoor uplands, such as Grimspound, Ryder's Rings and the excavated example at Shaugh Moor, which are all believed to have predominantly 2nd millennium BC origins. Within Dartmoor National Park, only two other sites, Dewerstone and Whittor, share the characteristic of stony ramparts of the type witnessed at Knowle Wood. Although no dateable archaeological evidence from either site to confirm Neolithic origins has yet been retrieved, these sites, both occupying elevated locations, with substantive stony enclosures or ramparts, have been considered to be part of a group of westcountry sites that includes Carn Brea, Helman Tor, Trencrom, Rough Tor and Stowe's Pound in Cornwall.

Both Carn Brea and Helman Tor have produced archaeologically excavated evidence for the Neolithic origins of their stony ramparts dated to between 4,000 and 3,500BC (Mercer 1981, 1997). Although Trencrom Hill has produced some evidence of a Neolithic presence, the ramparts have not been dated and the hilltop enclosure is also believed to have had both Bronze Age and Iron Age phases of occupation. What all three have in common is that the ramparts were wholly or partly constructed from blocks and slabs of granite set into the ground, lengthwise or upright to form permanent structures. Dump type ramparts are present on a more massive scale at the undated sites of Stowe's Pound and Rough Tor, which also has some orthostatic walls, but all the Cornish sites, as well as Dewerstone and Whittor in Devon, enclose substantial areas of their associated tors and incorporate many outcrops fitting well the description of tor enclosure.

Dump ramparts of the type witnessed at Knowle Wood, exist at Gardom's Edge in Derbyshire, which has also been associated with this group of Neolithic sites (Oswald 2001), but are more common as a construction technique for hillforts of the Iron Age. Examples are not numerous in the west of England, but this may be because few iron age defended sites exist in the areas of Devon and Cornwall where the geology dictated this type of construction, namely upland Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. Even on Dartmoor's peripheries, hillforts such as Holne Chase and Hembury along with those in the Teign Valley survive primarily as earthwork banks and ditches. Only Hunter's Tor, a multi-phase hilltop site on eastern Dartmoor, has evidence of a low stone-built rampart, together with earthwork defences. Further afield, in the highland regions of Wales and Scotland, stone-built ramparts, often on a massive scale, are fairly commonplace, but nearer to Dartmoor is Worlebury, at Weston Super Mare, where a combination of ditches and high stony banks form the defences on this enormous site.

The building method used at Knowle Wood appears to have been dump construction, whereby mostly surface stone was gathered and randomly placed into linear banks, rather than digging ditches to supply material for the banks or constructing solid walls. This would have incorporated a timber palisade to form the main barrier, although firmly fixing this to the rocky terrain with its shallow soil could have made the digging of post holes difficult.

The outer rampart follows the contour approximately, though dips slightly at the northern end, suggesting that, for at least part of it, an existing natural feature of the hilltop topography was followed in its creation. Vestiges of this underlying natural feature are visible along the southern corner where a number of *in-situ* boulders protrude from a drop in the hillslope (t). This is visible also near the entrance on the western corner, described above, where the rampart splits. The inner rampart (a) was sited to enhance the natural slope at the edge of the summit on the western side and evidence suggest it may have been the builders' intention to continue this around part of the north side. Where the slope is particularly steep, on the northwest, north and east sides, the stone of the outer rampart is very spread, probably due to the forces of gravity, as the stones gradually work their way downwards but where the gradient is more gentle, on the west side near the entrance, the ramparts still have form. Although occasional stones appear to be positioned suggesting a built structure, they are very few and probably coincidental. The rounded character of the available granite would not have been suitable to build strong coursed walls and there is no real evidence on the surface that these ramparts were built as walls.

It is notable that the outer rampart has an incomplete circuit and that the inner rampart fortifies only the western side of the summit. This, apparently incomplete appearance, is not uncommon for Iron Age hillforts, and has

been recognised at five similar locations around Dartmoor at Cranbrook, Nattadon Tor, Hunter's Tor (Silvester & Quinnell 1993, 17-32), Brentor and East Hill (Newman 2011, 96-98), but is also on Exmoor and at many sites elsewhere in Britain. This anomaly has been discussed widely (Piggot 1931; Feacham 1971) and a number of explanations proposed, including failure to complete the project on the part of the community that built it due to lack of resources. In the case of Knowle Wood, a more appealing theory would be one of prioritising the building of sections of the structure that are most visible to those who approach the site, to create the impression of a powerful and successful community within.

The topography of Knowle Wood dictates the only sensible direction from which to approach the site with ease is along the ridge from the west. Hence the entrance and strongest section of the outer rampart is sited on the west side. For those approaching along this ridge, the flanks were also visible, so the stone fortifications continued around the NW and SW sides. It is also possible, though quite arduous, to ascend the NW and SW slopes on foot, but if attempted, the dumped stone rampart, topped with a palisade, would give the impression of strength as one approaches. Approaching from the east would have been very difficult on the steep rocky gradient, and it is unlikely that any fortifications on the summit would not have been visible until almost at the top, where a more basic palisade would have sufficed, which may explain the absence of stone fortifications here.

In a similar vein, the inner rampart (a) would only be visible to those approaching along the ridge to the west. Although the vista is currently obscured by trees, it seems likely that if viewed from the west, it was not possible to determine that this feature did not extend further than it actually does at both ends, especially when topped by a palisade, giving the illusion of a more complete stone structure. So, assuming the timber components were fully installed, the occupants of the site would probably not have considered the ramparts to be incomplete.

If this was, or was intended to be, a small hillfort, there is a puzzling lack of earthwork evidence for dwellings or round houses. Although the summit is referred to above as a plateau, much of it is sufficiently sloping to require level platforms on which to construct enduring timber roundhouses, and these platforms would have been more necessary on the sloping ground near the outer rampart. None have been identified. Also, although much stone has been cleared from the interior, during construction, there is still a covering of moderate to large boulders taking up much of the interior space. On the basis of this evidence alone, it is difficult to envisage anything beyond a small number of less enduring structures, leaving no earthwork traces within the available space.

## **Conclusion**

This survey has resulted in the first accurate plan of the archaeological features on the hilltop at Knowle Wood. The methodology has enabled separation of features arising from the natural physical landscape and those resulting from human intervention, confirming the existence of two layers of defences in the form of stony ramparts. Although bearing some similarity with a group of west country sites believed to have Neolithic (5th-4th millennium BC) origins, the results from the survey strongly suggest that the stony ramparts, as surviving, are more likely to have origins in the 1st millennium BC, and may be added to a group of Iron Age defended hilltop sites, or hillforts, that are located around the peripheries of Dartmoor National Park. Although having an appearance of incompleteness, suggesting premature abandonment of the site before the defences were effective, it seems more likely that only those parts visible from the approaches were ever fortified with masonry ramparts to offer a facade of strength. Timber palisades alone may have sufficed for other parts of the defensive circuit. However, a lack of earthwork evidence for domestic structures on the interior could infer the site was never permanently occupied, although remains of non-enduring structures with no surface evidence may remain beneath the surface. Geophysical survey of the cleared areas may be helpful in establishing this as a future aim.

The survey has also contributed to the knowledge of the more recent woodland charcoal industry located in Dartmoor's wooded landscape, which is known to exist in other areas of the national park and despite several localised studies (Berry, 2005; Holley 2006), has never been quantified or researched in detail.

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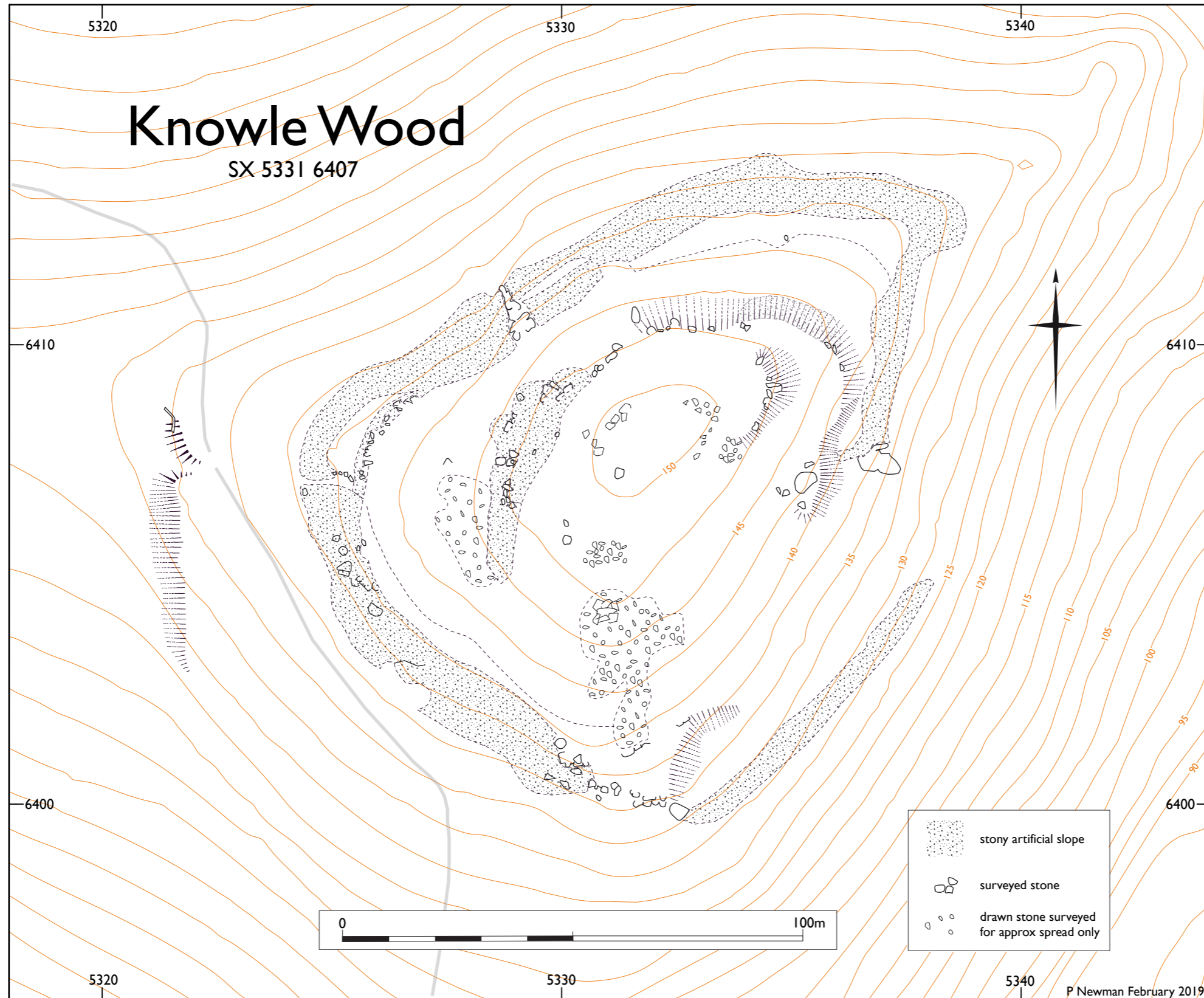


Figure 8 1:1000 scale survey of the Knowle Wood ramparts showing only the stony spread without the slope depiction. (Contours derived from public sector LiDAR data under the Open Government Licence v3.0).



Figure 9 The south-west outer rampart, (f) showing the stone-free area (d) to the left of the pole.

Figure 10 The northern side of the entrance, showing the platform on the right hand side of the frame.



Figure 11 The entrance (k) looking north showing the two separate levels of the outer rampart; h is to the right, and j is to the left. The platform is in the centre of the frame beyond the line of boulders.





Figure 12 The inner rampart. (a).

Figure 13 The outer rampart near the northern corner (m).



Figure 14 Charcoal burning platform (CP3) on the northern interior of the outer rampart.