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A SECTION THROUGH THE BANK OF THE SOUTHERN-MOST CIRCLE
OF PRIDDY CIRCLES, MENDIP, SOMERSET
Recorded in June 2011

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The section is located across the southern side of the bank of the most southerly of the group of three circles, located to the south-west of the Castle of Comfort Inn (Scheduled Ancient Monument no.29037). Most of this circle lies in the north-east corner of a single field to the east of Harptree Lodge and survived as a well-defined earthwork surveyed in detail in 2008 (Jamieson and Jones for English Heritage). The section was exposed during unauthorized works that involved the levelling of some of the earthworks, in particular, a 10m long section of the bank and ditch adjacent to the stone wall defining the eastern boundary of the field. This wall crosses the earthwork, following the contour of bank and ditch, and the recorded section lies parallel to the wall and about 0.30m west of it (ST53985247). The recording was commissioned by English heritage.

The archaeological evidence of the recorded section.

Because of the circumstances of the archaeological exposure, nothing remained to be seen in plan, and the sequence of deposits described below is based entirely on the evidence of the standing section Fig 1.

The underlying geological stratum was a yellow brown compact clay (15) with a thin band of stonier clay above it in the southern part of the section (14), which appeared to be an element of the geology rather than an archaeological deposit. The bank was formed of the same clay (layers 3, 6 and 7),

probably quarried from the ditch to the south, and comprised a low mound 0.70m high with shallow sloping sides and an overall width at the base of 5.60m. This, however, was the present form of the bank following erosion and collapse over time, and the section showed evidence of this process and of the original form of the bank. In understanding this form, it is unfortunate that nothing remained to be seen in plan, as this may have confirmed what can only be suggested from the section.

A distinctive buried soil lay beneath the central part of the bank, being a compact blue-grey clay, with veins of ferric staining and a fairly consistent, thin iron pan along its base (layer 13). It was 50mm thick and formed a band up to 3.60m wide, with very distinct north and south limits, corresponding with changes in the composition of the bank above it.

The central part of the bank, layer 6, was a compact, yellow-brown clay with scattered limestone fragments and flecks. It lay above two layers, (11 and 12), which comprised the primary deposits of the bank, and appeared to have defined its original width, corresponding with the edges of the buried soil 13 upon which they lay. Layer 11 was a grey-brown, clayey loam with much angular limestone rubble in it (it could indeed be a layer of stones with clay); its northern edge was steep, coinciding with the sharp northern edge of the buried soil 13; its southern edge was more gentle. Layer 12 was similar, though with less apparent rubble and bands of re-deposited clay in it, and lay over the southern edge of the buried soil 13. The

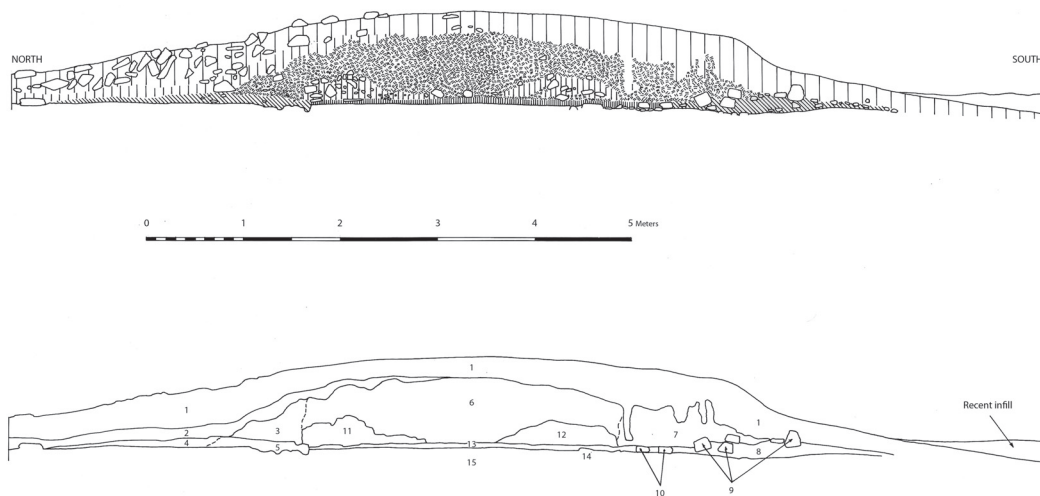


Fig. 1 Section through bank

dished hollow between and formed by the two layers was filled with the clay of the bank 6, which was a homogenous deposit up to 0.70m thick. Layers of clay further to the north and south (Fig 1, layers 3 and 7 respectively) were subtly different from layer 6, but no hard edges between these layers and the central layer could be defined. Layer 6, however, appeared to be the *in situ* bank; layers 3 and 7 the result of collapse or erosion. Along both sides of the bank there was evidence of some form of revetting or support for the clay.

Along the south, flat-laid stones (10) were embedded in the edge of the buried soil 13, lying immediately south of layer 12. South of these was a dark grey, clayey loam (8) which extended south to the ditch edge just over 2m away. Of varied thickness, this had random limestone rubble embedded in its surface, including stones up to 0.15m across, layer 9, covered by brown clay, layer 7, sloping down from the main part of the bank. The rubble could be from a collapsed revetting wall along the south, external side of the bank, the base of which remains *in situ* as the stones 10, with layer 7 the collapsed clay of the bank. Layer 8, therefore, represents the land surface contemporary with the bank, only sealed by its later collapse.

To the north a similar situation was observed, though without clear evidence of a collapsed stone revetting. The buried soil 13 ends abruptly at the northern limit of the bank as represented by layer 11. It is replaced by a grey brown clayey loam (5), extending northwards, which fills and overlies an

area of small shallow holes in the underlying clay, at least one of which appears to have been cut through the buried soil. In the absence of the stones of a collapsed wall on this side of the bank it may be that there was some form of wooden support for this side of the bank. Layer 5 was covered by a layer of orangey-brown clay, 3; this was visually and texturally distinct from the main clay deposit to the south (layer 6), but no hard edge between the two could be defined. It can be suggested, however, that layer 3 results from the collapse or erosion of this side of the bank.

Layer 5 continued north beyond the limits of the (collapsed) clay bank, with no clear visible change, though numbered as layer 4. Its northern limit was unclear, fading out between the clay subsoil and the overlying dark, humic soil (2) which overlies the northern edge of the eroded clay bank and is the same as the compact, very humic pastureland soil that covers the field. Along the edge of the drystone boundary wall, however, it has become sealed by stones fallen from the wall and a very loose, humic and root-filled topsoil, layer 1, which covers the whole of the bank adjacent to the wall.

The recorded section was extended southwards across the line of the ditch, to establish the thickness of the infill material that now obscured its line. The geological clay begins to fall away at about 2m south of what can be defined as the outer edge of the un-eroded bank (the stones of layer 10), this being the inner lip of the surrounding ditch. This suggested a berm between the two, nowhere apparent on the

survey of 2006, presumably because it became obscured by the collapse of the bank across it.

Comment

Excavation and cleaning of the standing section revealed a complex sequence of layers within and beneath the physical remains of the bank. These held evidence of the way in which the bank of the monument was constructed, and suggested that both sides may originally have been revetted, the outer edge at least with stone. The bank would originally, therefore, have been narrower than the earthwork seen today, with steeper or vertical sides, in appearance more like a broad wall with a flat top, rather than the present rounded, shallow bank. There also appears to have been a flat berm up to 2m wide between the bank and the inner lip of the surrounding ditch. The section also showed evidence of the later collapse and erosion of the bank's sides. The ancient soil buried by the bank

may contain significant evidence of the ancient environment, as may the later buried soils covered by the collapsed bank.

Careful cleaning of the standing section revealed all this complexity and wealth of information to have lain within the layers of earth and clay that make up the earthwork bank. A section can only, however, tell part of the story, and the systematic exposure of these layers in plan, in a controlled archaeological excavation would have confirmed and increased the understanding of the monument glimpsed in the section. Unfortunately, the destruction by machine of a length of up to 10m of the bank has meant the irreplaceable loss of this unique information, along with any associated artefacts and the story that they might have told.

A copy of the full report submitted to English Heritage can be found with the Field Archive of drawings and photographs in the Somerset Record Office.

RADIOCARBON DATING OF SOME LATE MEDIEVAL TIMBERS

John Rickard (SVBRG)

Introduction

The ability to precisely date a building structure is often the aspiration of building and architectural historians. Generally however researchers can only suggest a possible date range based on the similarity of features from buildings whose construction dates are known from documentary sources.

The emergence of dendrochronology, initially as a means of correlating astronomical occurrences with climatic changes, developed steadily from the early 20th century into a refined dating technique, offering the prospect of a precise date, even as to winter or summer, of the year in which a tree was felled. For building researchers this meant that, for the first time, roof structures, even down to the thatching laths, could be dated with precision; framing posts, beams, joists and panelling could be dealt with by the same method.

Previous dating programme

Between 1996 and 2004 the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group (SVBRG) obtained dates for fifty-three roof structures in a dendrochronology research programme to classify the development and use of differing forms of roof construction [1]. Roofs that had been constructed in oak were selected for examination because the standards compiled by and available to the dendrochronology laboratories, nationally and internationally, are for oak.

However, not every sample of oak will provide a growth sequence that can be matched; fast-grown oak often does not provide the fifty or so rings necessary for reliable correlation. The programme was able to establish dates for just over fifty houses representing around two-thirds of the houses/structures examined.