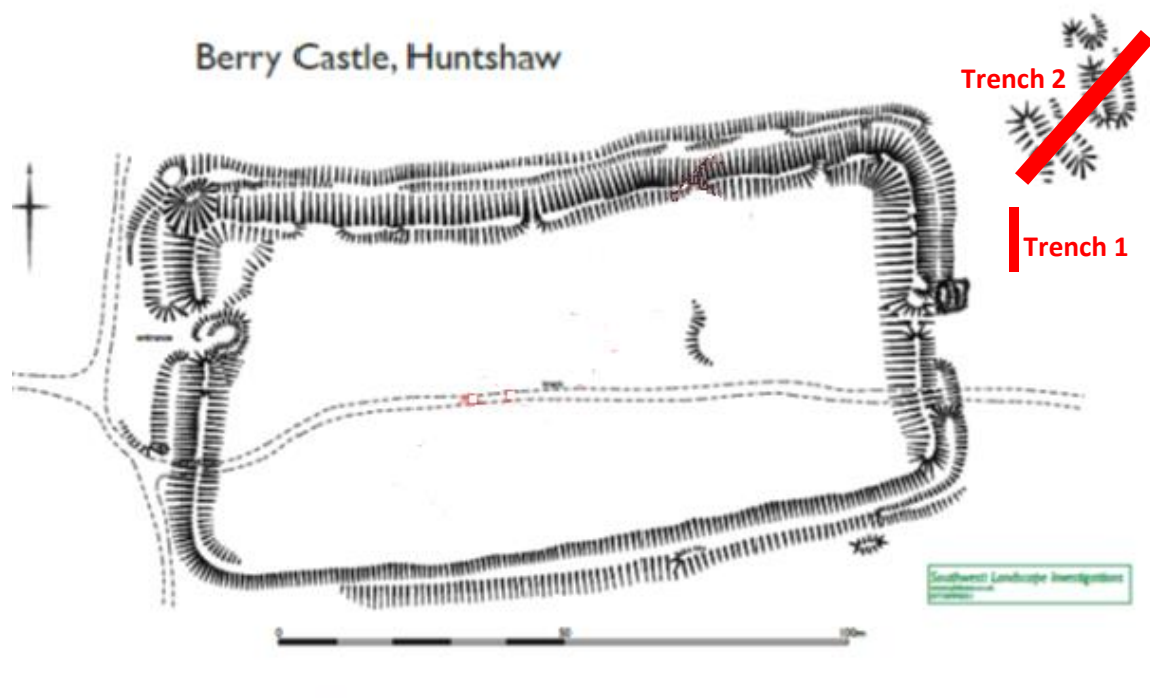


The Friends of Berry Castle

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

In July 2018 The Friends of Berry Castle carried out their first archaeological excavation of the site. The excavation was conducted over eight days and consisted of investigating two features to the east of the enclosure beyond the scheduled area. One of the features resembled two linear banks to which no reference had been made in previous research. The other feature had been identified on a magnetometry survey as two parallel linear features suggestive of a track extending from the main enclosure. See the highlighted areas on the diagram below for the precise locations of the dig.



The weather was good with mainly dry and sunny days. Professional supervision and support were provided by the North Devon Archaeology Society (NDAS) who arranged for a qualified archaeologist to be on site throughout. Volunteers came from NDAS, the Friends of Berry Castle and locally from the Torrington and Bideford area. Some were experienced diggers while others were new to practical archaeology. A daily log of activity was maintained as is standard practice. Prior to start of the dig, Chris Preece, chair of NDAS and lead archaeologist, reviewed previous research on Berry Castle and surveyed the site. He then supervised a small mechanical digger removing the topsoil in the two areas where trenches were put in.

Aims of the excavation

The aims of the excavation were twofold. Firstly, to determine whether the linear features (the possible banks) were associated with the main enclosure and secondly to find evidence of occupation of the site during the Iron Age. Two trenches were excavated. The longest trench (Trench 2) was orientated in an east/west direction and extended over the two "banks". This trench was located within an area with trees and shrubs which caused some access issues as well as an unexpected wasps' nest! The other trench (Trench 1) was orientated in a north/south direction and was in the open making it much easier to work on.



Trench 2 looking to the East



Trench 1 looking to the north

The Process of excavation

As with any archaeological dig, the first task involved cleaning back the topsoil, straightening the edges of the sections and defining the



Diggers at work

alignment of each trench. For those of you who are not familiar with an archaeological excavation, these preliminary activities are an important part of creating a 'good trench'. Archaeologists, whether professional or amateur, apply meticulous attention to detail. At the next stage the earth from each trench was carefully trowelled back layer by layer. As one would expect, the nature of the soil changed as the excavation proceeded. Each

distinct layer in an excavated trench is called a *context* and each context is given its own number which is important when post excavation analysis is done. Excavation continued in both trenches until the natural (or original) base was reached at which point work on that part of the trench ceased.

All soil removed from the trench was sieved so that very small finds such as pottery sherds were not missed. The sieved soil was then placed alongside the trench on what is known as a spoil heap. Even the spoil got attention as a metal detector was passed over it at regular intervals in order to identify pieces of metal that had been missed.

Each context (or layer) of interest was cleaned by precise trowelling and then photographed for later analysis and for the archives. Two areas of Trench 2 were of interest, so these parts were sectioned off with string and examined in more detail. Unfortunately, despite painstaking trowelling and sieving, both areas proved to be of no significance. Trench 1 produced a series of stones that had the appearance of having been placed there by man (as opposed to a natural occurrence) so these were drawn to a 1:20 scale. Drawing to plan is thought to be more accurate than photography in these situations. Two large stones in the south east corner of trench 1 were exposed by extending a section of the trench to the east. The trench was also extended to the west by one metre in order to investigate an apparent stone alignment. Again, neither of these features proved to be of any significance.



Drawing a plan of Trench 1

As the dig progressed, and with persisting dry weather, the soil became very dry and difficult to work with. A portable sprayer was therefore used to moisten the areas of the trenches that we were still working on. Towards the end of the dig aerial photographs of the trenches were taken using a drone. Finally, a levelling machine was used to record the levels of key parts of the trenches.

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Open Day

On day five we held an Open Day and invited the public to visit the site. Around 20 visitors were shown around the trenches and were told about some of the basics of excavation and other aspects of archaeology. Guided tours of the whole site were also conducted for those who had not been to the site before. County archaeologist, Bill Horner, visited the site on day six of the dig.

The Finds

Regrettably no evidence of Iron Age occupation was found. This has been an ongoing feature of Iron Age enclosures in north Devon although recently some pottery was found at an excavation of Clovelly Dykes. The only find throughout the excavation was a lead bullet from the First World War. It is documented that the Canadian "sawdust army" was stationed in Huntshaw Woods in 1918. Their role was to fell trees and prepare the wood to be sent to the Front. It is assumed that the bullet was fired either for target practice or for shooting wild animals for food. Negotiations for storing and displaying the bullet are currently taking place with the Barnstaple museum.

Conclusion

After eight days of excavation we found no evidence of Iron Age occupation and no evidence that the banks on the eastern edge of the enclosure were associated with the main site. Of course, that does not mean that Berry Castle was not occupied during the Iron Age nor that the banks were connected to the main site. It just means that we have not yet found the evidence we were looking for. It was an enjoyable week where many people came together on a quest for answers to the many questions that Berry Castle throws up. New friends were made and, in some cases, old acquaintances were reunited. We are now considering follow up excavation in 2019.