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Early military occupation and use of the heathlands

Christopher Tilley and Karolína Pauknerová

A limited series of excavations and a survey of a part of Aylesbeare common down-slope to the north of the Bronze Age summit cairns was undertaken in 2009, centred on SY 0500 9050 (Figure 11.2). Work was undertaken here because of the presence of archaeological features revealed in a roughly rectangular area that had been topsoil-scraped a few years previously. This was on northwest-sloping ground running down to an amphitheatre-shaped marshy area immediately below it and measured approximately 50 m × 20 m. The scraped material had been piled up in a bank running along the edge of the wetland. At the far southeastern end of the scrape part of a structure composed of large pebbles had been revealed (Figure 11.3). Within the remainder of the scrape subsequent vegetation growth revealed the base, or part of the base, of five circular structures forming a NW–SE row running along the contours of the hill slope (Figure 11.4). Subsequent fieldwork established that this row of circular features continued to the northwest, where the land had not been scraped, and that they were just discernible in the dense heathland cover of gorse and heather as circular ditches surrounding level platforms about 5 m in diameter. This tallied with the diameters of the five structures in the scraped area (4–5 m in diameter) and it was clear that all but a basal fragment of the ditch, only a few centimetres deep, had been removed.

A ground-walking survey of the area up-slope from the scrape and to its east that had been recently swaled revealed the presence of two large circular structures consisting of a low bank with an external ditch and a very low, irregularly shaped mound within the southern circle (Figure 11.4). Back in 1937 George Carter had carried out a series of archaeological excavations on Aylesbeare Common, including part of the summit area in the vicinity of the Bronze Age pebble cairns, and had
discovered a series of spectacular pebble platforms that we now interpret as being of Middle Bronze Age date (discussed in Chapter 6). In the same publication Carter reported on the excavation of a small barrow in the bog to the north of the summit area. He describes it thus:

Aylesbeare No. 6. On the edge of the bog in the great natural amphitheatre, below the hill on which these mounds are situated [here Carter is referring to the prehistoric pebble platforms that he excavated that were covered by low mounds] is a low earthen mound about 16ft in diameter, surrounded by a shallow trench. Its surface was not paved. It had been erected over ashy earth, at the base of which was a red pebble lying on water-bearing ground. The mound was apparently erected over a fire sanctifying a spring.

(Carter 1938: 94)

Carter believed this mound to be prehistoric in date, in common with the pebble pavements he had excavated near to the summit of
Figure 11.2  GPS survey map of Aylesbeare Common by Hazel Riley showing prehistoric cairns, low mounds and late eighteenth-century military structures (Source: author)
Figure 11.3  The rectangular structure exposed in the scrape (Source: author)

Figure 11.4  The circular structures exposed in the scrape (Source: author)
Aylesbeare Common to the north and in the vicinity of the Pebble cairns.

Extensive field walking failed to locate any of the pebble platforms that Carter had found (he left behind only an annotated map with their locations that was unfortunately left unnumbered) (Figure 11.5) but the barrow he described was still visible, with Carter’s excavation trench, left unfilled, running through its middle.

In the same report that Carter had published about the barrow in the bog he briefly mentions another group of sites as follows: ‘Aylesbeare No. 22 was one of a group of six mounds very similar to No. 6 [the bog barrow], but standing on the hill side. It is a flat unpaved mound, roughly hexagonal in plan, surrounded by a trench, oval in plan, and by a very low

Figure 11.5 Part of Carter’s annotated 1906 6-inch Ordnance Survey map of Aylesbeare Common showing the places he excavated in 1937 (Source: Carter archive)
bank of earth whose outer edge is circular. The axes of the mound measure 13ft. 9ins and 11ft. 9ins. Another mound of the group is hemispherical in cross section’ (94). He goes on to report that ‘the upper portion consisted of barrow earth, below which at the centre stood a great cairn of stones, encased in alternating layers of clay and ash …. No charcoal or flint was found in the digging. The surrounding ditch was examined. It was found that it and the others of the group were provided with a drain for water at the lowest point. The drain was paved and in and under the paving was much charcoal.’ He published no photographs but in the somewhat chaotic archive of unpublished manuscripts, correspondence and photographs belonging to him there are a number of photographs labelled on the back as ‘Simcoe’s circular tent’ and ‘Simcoe’s flagstaff’ (Figure 11.6 and Figure 11.7). The precise location is unknown and Carter appears to have written nothing further about these structures.

Figure 11.6  Carter’s photograph of ‘Simcoe’s tent structure’ from 1937, one of his sites numbered Aylesbeare no. 22 (Source: Carter archive)
The local antiquary P.O. Hutchinson visited this area of Aylesbeare Common on 31 May 1861 with Mr Heineken for an ‘antiquarian expedition’. He records in his diary:

We then examined a number of very curious pits on the open heath, of which we had before heard but never seen. They are called ‘Soldiers pits’ tradition says they were made by soldiers once encamped on this hill. We mean to come another day expressly to examine them.

On 14 June 1861 they did so:

Started with Mr Heineken to examine the ‘Soldiers Pits’ on Aylesbeare Hill. They lie some 300 to 400 yards north east of the two tumuli planted with fir trees on the top of the hill between Newton Poppleford and the Half House. They consist mostly of pits dug in the ground and the east used to make walls. The pits were evidently reduced. A gap or door appears in each. They are 6 feet by 8 feet, and 6 feet by 12 feet and some larger. They are mostly extended like a street in two parallel rows for more than half a mile. These are also several circular trenches. Perhaps these
were gutters cut around tents to prevent the wet getting into them. We also found two ridges in the form of circles. One we measured was 60 feet across. The other was larger, between one of these and a long square pit we found some parapets made of pebbles found on the hills. We had been told that many patches of products existed in different places. Some had been destroyed by the men cutting turf. Round a bottom, on the north, there are many curious earthworks. There is also a tumulus in the bottom. That all these were pits where soldiers made camp fires, as tradition says must be incorrect. If they are not the remains of an ancient village, some suppose that may have been made about 1799, when a French invasion was expected, or in 1803, when Lieut. Gen Simcoe had his forces on Woodbury Hill and perhaps a portion of them here. The following fancy sketch [Figure 11.8] may give some idea of their position.

(Hutchinson 1870–81)

Figure 11.8  Hutchinson’s 1861 sketch map of the soldier’s pits on Aylesbeare Common
The ‘soldiers pits’ are visible on 1947 RAF aerial photographs as two parallel rows of structures, not too dissimilar to Hutchinson’s depiction. We decided to excavate across the middle of the destroyed structures in the scrape and the pebble structure that had been uncovered as a salvage exercise. In connection with this we took a trial trench across one of the preserved circular structures on the same line as the others and investigated a low mound discovered in field walking 11.7 m distant to the south of the SE end of the scraped area within a low circular bank (Figure 11.9).

The excavated structures

1. The circular structures

Five shallow circular ditches (I, II, III, A, B) had been exposed by the machine scraping (see Figure 11.3 and Figure 11.9). The circular ditches were on average 5.6 m in diameter (measured to the outside side of the ditches) and during excavation parts of them were visible because of the vegetation that grew in them. These features form a group, the average distance between them about 4.6 m (see Figure 11.10). This structure was simply a levelled feature in the natural surrounded by a cut ditch (see Figure 11.11 and Figure 11.12). There were no finds.

Interpretation

Features I–III and A and B are very similar in size and morphology to the undamaged feature C. All of them have a similar diameter, in average 5.5 m. from the outer edge of the surrounding ditches. All of them have a circular shape and C a slightly (0.2 m) elevated centre. They are all surrounded by ditches. There were no finds with which to date the structures or their use: no artefacts or fire residues.

The excavated structures confirm Hutchinson’s 1861 account, cited above, of the soldiers’ pits on Aylesbeare Common, that they were arranged in rows, just above the marshy ground below. The pavements formed the base of circular ‘bell tents’ used by the British Army at the time (Haythornwaite 1979: 149), with the surrounding ditches channeling away rain-water from the interior. The bell tent is ‘a round tent, with perpendicular walls, one or two feet high, and a conical roof, supported by a central pole and short stay-ropes [see Figure 11.6]; the diameter of its base is 14 ft. [i.e. 4.27 m], its height 10 ft., and the area of its base 154 square feet. It cubes about 512 ft., and is presumed to be capable of sheltering on the march from twelve to fifteen men. It weighs when dry
65 or 70 lbs. The covering is of linen canvas of fair quality, although it has occasionally been made of cotton canvas’ (Evans 1873) (Figure 11.13).

Francis Galton, speaking of this tent, says: ‘It is so peculiarly objectionable, as to make it a matter of surprise that it was ever invented and
**Figure 11.10** Circular ditch A and circular ditch B: profiles

**Figure 11.11** Feature C: profile

**Figure 11.12** Feature C: section (Source: author)
used. It is difficult to pitch, it requires many tent-peg, it has ropes radiat-
ing all around it, over which men and horses stumble, and it is incommo-
dious and ugly’ (Galton 1867: 154, quoted in Evans 1873).

2. The bog barrow (SY 05661 90249)

This structure (134 m OD) is situated just below a gentle east-facing slope on the edge of an extensive boggy area of wetland heath. It is just below and c. 30 m to the east of the end of the topsoil-scraped area with circular features discussed above. It is a round mound surrounded by a circular ditch with an irregular bottom. The mound is perfectly circular and 6 m in diameter and 0.5 m high in the middle. The surrounding silted ditch was 0.9–1 m wide and 0.3–0.5 m deep. In the centre Carter’s 1937 square section was 0.8 m × 0.8 m wide; he also cut a shallow section across the surface of the mound in an easterly direction but did not finish it (Figure 11.14).

In 2010 surface vegetation was removed from the entire mound and the SE quarter was excavated. The surface layer consisted of turfs and roots and a red-brown humic soil and contained a modern bullet casing.

The remainder of the material (context 3) was very compact and hard. It had brownish-grey colour and was a mixture of soil, grit and very small pebbles, with a few lenses of white and red sand and black soil. There were no artefacts in context 3. Near to the base of the mound differently coloured material appeared (context 4). It was soft, very fine-grained and black with small flakes of charcoal (that were all plotted) and covered the entire quadrant. Underneath was the natural surface. Charcoal was the only find material (Figure 11.15 and Figure 11.16). We

Figure 11.14  Photograph of the deturfed bog barrow with Carter’s 1937 trench in the middle (Source: author)

Figure 11.15  Profile of the Bog Barrow showing the position of Carter’s trench. (1) Vegetation cover; (2) Carter’s 1937 trench; (3) very compact hard material of brownish-grey colour, a mixture of soil, grit and very small pebbles, with a few lenses of white and red sand and black soil; (4) soft very fine-grained material of black colour with small flecks of charcoal; (5) old land surface; (6) cut of ditch; (7) fill of ditch (Source: author)
Figure 11.16  Section of the Bog Barrow seen from the south while taking environmental samples. The two differently coloured layers of contexts 2 and 4 (see Figure 11.15) are clearly visible. To the right the receding part of the profile is part of Carter’s trench in the centre of the mound (Source: author)
also found part of a pit. Carter had drawn this in his section. Its edge was inlaid with small pebbles (Figure 11.17).

Following the excavation the mound was restored and Carter’s trench infilled. Thirty charcoal samples were analysed by Dana Challinor (Challinor, Appendix 15). She reports that the vast majority were of oak, much of it from fairly small-diameter roundwood. Two samples contained some heather/ling and one a quantity of alder/hazel. Four of the charcoal samples were submitted for radiocarbon dating, two from the ditch and two from the base of the mound. The results were consistent: all were from around AD 1800 (Table 11.1). This accords very well with the dates given by Hutchinson, 1799 or 1803, for the construction of the soldiers’ pits on Aylesbeare Common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material dated</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Lab. number</th>
<th>Date B.P.</th>
<th>2 sigma calibrated date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corylus avellana</td>
<td>Base of ditch</td>
<td>BETA 292812</td>
<td>150±30</td>
<td>AD 1660 to 1890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quercus r-w, 8 years</td>
<td>Base of ditch</td>
<td>BETA 292813</td>
<td>160±30</td>
<td>AD 1660 to 1710 and AD 1710 to 1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quercus r-w, 5 years</td>
<td>Base of mound</td>
<td>BETA 292814</td>
<td>190±30</td>
<td>AD 1650 to 1730 and AD 1810 to 1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quercus r-w, 9 years</td>
<td>Base of mound</td>
<td>BETA 292815</td>
<td>70±30</td>
<td>AD 1690 to 1730 and AD 1810 to 1920</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11.17 Part of a pit from Carter’s section; the grey part was recognized in the side of Carter’s trench. The position is marked by the letter ‘x’ (Source: author)
Interpretation

It seems possible that the mound with its surrounding ditch was just another tent base constructed by Simcoe’s militia and that the central pit inlaid with pebbles supported a pole. If this was a tent base its purpose remains enigmatic. Why did Simcoe’s troops dig a tent base with surrounding ditch on the edge of a bog in very wet ground (as we were excavating the surrounding ditch was constantly filling with water and was clearly situated on a spring line)? All the other structures of similar size and shape are located higher up on the sheltered hill slope, a short distance from but not actually in the bog.

3. The pebble structure in the scrape

This had been partly exposed and damaged by the machine-stripping operations and was excavated in 2009. It proved to be a flat rectangular pavement composed of large pebbles, 7.3 m long and 2.3 m wide, levelled into the hill slope. Down-slope there was an adjoining area of pebbles measuring 1 m square. The pavement is composed of pebbles of various sizes, some laid flat, others vertically, creating a relatively smooth and stable level surface that was comfortable to walk across (Figure 11.18). This was interpreted as a house floor with an entrance on the down-slope side. The pavement was sectioned along the up-slope edge. This showed that the

Figure 11.18  Photograph of rectangular structure in the topsoil-scraped area fully exposed (Source: author)
pebbles used to construct it were large, 10–18 cm in length and set 6 cm deep into the underlying soil, the colour and composition of which did not differ from the natural surface. There were no artefacts or charcoal. Most pebbles were set vertically but some of the very large ones flat or horizontally. On Hutchinson’s 1861 plan he mentions ‘officers’ tents’ at the eastern end of the middle of two rows of the soldiers’ pits (see Figure 11.8). It may be that the officers at Aylesbeare did not live in tents at all but in a much more substantial rectangular house with a well-laid pebble floor.

4. Structures found underneath a low irregular mound to the southwest of the scrape

Another pavement was discovered 11.7 m directly up-slope from the rectangular house pavement described above. The presence of some feature here was indicated by a low (0.2 m high) and very irregularly shaped mound approximately 2–3 m in diameter just visible on the surface. This mound was enclosed by a low irregular circle (see Figure 11.23 and discussion below). Excavation revealed beneath and beyond the extent of the mound a pebble pavement. It was situated on ground sloping to the ESE and had a rhomboidal shape with long sides of 5.85 and 5.3 m and short sides of 3.45 and 3.1 m. At the east side a paved path adjoined it. This was 0.85 m wide and ran straight ESE for 5 m down the hill slope in the direction of the bog below. Its direction then turned slightly towards

Figure 11.19 Plan of the rectangular structure (Source: author)
the SE. Excavation did not continue after this point. The path was very well preserved for the most part, but 1 m from the point at which it turned direction from running ESE to SE the surface pebble structure was very different from the rest. The pebbles here were random in size and not well laid. It might have been repaired here or built by a different person who was unskilled. There were two pebble gullies running across the path to divert rain-water, one where it was connected to the rhomboidal pavement, the other 3 m distant down-slope.

The upper rhomboid-shaped pavement was at least one third destroyed, hence the irregularity of its form The whole structure comprised pebbles and had edgings of large pebbles on the sides that were preserved. There was also a depression that we interpreted as another water gully running across the shorter dimension, where some of the pebbles were noticeably smaller than the rest and carefully chosen to construct the shallow sides and base of the gully. Most of the structure was composed of pebbles of between 8–15 cm in size laid vertically, contrasting significantly with the larger pebbles used for the edging, which were laid flat or horizontally. This was documented only by a sketch plan, photographs and section drawings (Figure 11.20, Figure 11.21 and Figure 11.24).

Following their exposure both the rhomboidal-shaped pavement and the path were sectioned. These sections did not reveal any artefacts or dateable material. In both cases the pebbles were set in soil whose colour and composition was the same as the natural.

5. Large circular structures to the south of the scrape

Following swaling of the area two large circular structures were located by ground survey and subsequently plotted as part of the GPS survey of the area. They consist of a low bank with slight traces of an external ditch (Figure 11.22 and Figure 11.23) situated on a gentle N–S slope. The GPS survey revealed that both were somewhat irregular in shape. The northern circle has an internal diameter of 16 m W–E and 13 m N–S. The southern circle situated immediately above it on the hill slope 2.5 m distant from it has the same W–E and N–S internal dimensions. Entrance ways into either circle were unclear on the ground and the small gaps marked on the GPS plan are probably damaged areas of the banks rather than entrances. A small section 1 m wide was dug across the middle of bank and ditch of the northern circle on the eastern side. The ditch was U-shaped, 1 m wide and 0.15 m deep, while the bank was also 1 m wide and 0.18 m high (Figure 11.24). The material from the ditch had simply been scraped up to form the bank and was of a uniform light grey colour, containing
Figure 11.20 Sketch plan of the rhomboid pavement and path (Source: author)
only a few small pebbles. There were no finds or dateable material. The northern circle enclosed the irregularly shaped mound (marked on Figure 11.23) under which the rhomboidal pebble pavement discussed above was discovered. The bank ran over the path leading away from it. Thus the circles, both of similar form and morphology, are, we presume, contemporary and post-date the construction of the path. Without further excavation their purpose and date remain obscure but they are in all probability of Second World War date, part of the Exeter airfield decoy structures located on Aylesbeare Common (see Chapter 14).

Discussion and conclusions

The radiocarbon dates for the mound in the bog, similar in size and morphology to the other circular structures, indicate a date of around AD 1800.
There can be little doubt that these circular structures were part of a line of bell tents as discussed above. There is an interesting difference between the example (or examples) of the bell tent structures that Carter excavated in 1937 that had pebble floors and the one that we trial-trenched and the barrow in the bog that did not. One possibility is that those that Carter excavated are examples of the officers’ tents that Hutchinson refers to in his diary. Another is that the original pebble floors were removed and the pebbles taken away for building work. Hutchinson’s account refers to ‘parapets of pebbles’ during his 1861 site visit and that ‘we had been told that many patches of products existed in different places. Some had been destroyed by the men cutting turf.’ What is probably meant by this is that local labourers were digging both turf for burning and pebbles for building work and piling them up ready to cart away. The soldiers’ pits, if they were all originally paved with pebbles, would have provided a readily exploitable source easy to locate on the hill slope.

On the 1840 tithe map of Aylesbeare parish no buildings are marked in this area and so it is likely that the rectangular house base at the end of the scraped area and the pebble structure with a path leading off it post-date 1840. They might also be contemporary with and related to the row of bell tents. The rhomboidal shaped pavement area and the

**Figure 11.22** The circular structures marked with flags seen from the southwest (Source: author)
Figure 11.23  Plan of the circles (Source: author)

Figure 11.24  Profile of the bank and ditch of the northern circle showing the underlying path from the rhomboid pavement (Source: author)
path leading off it, both with their drainage gullies, are entirely typical of surviving examples of farmyards and paths in the area of the East Devon Pebblebed heathlands from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Chapter 13). The two irregular circles still remain enigmatic. One possibility is that they are the two circles ‘in the form of ridges’ that Hutchinson mentions in his diary. The one he measured was 60 feet in diameter (18 m), that is, the same approximate size.

General Simcoe (1752–1806), a gifted and strategic commander, had been appointed the first lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada in 1791 and founded the town of York (now Toronto) the following year. During almost all the eighteenth century Britain was at war with France, but following the French Revolution in 1789 the ruling classes in Britain were increasingly worried about the development of revolutionary tendencies among the populace. This was a time of social unrest and bread riots in the wake of rural destitution. In 1793 Britain had declared war against France and the Napoleonic wars began. Simcoe returned to his native Devon from Canada in 1798, being appointed to command the forces of the west of England because of the very real threat of a French invasion. He had particular responsibility for Somerset and Devon. From 1799 he spent a considerable period of time in his new house at Budleigh Salterton. Perched high up on the side of a hill, from here it was possible for him to watch for any French ships approaching from the west or east along the English Channel.

Woodbury Castle was occupied by Simcoe’s troops on an intermittent basis between 1798 and 1803 (Wall 1906; Todd 2005: 211) and it is probable that this occupation resulted in damage to the hillfort interior on the southern side at this time where guns were located on the ramparts. They also made use of Castle Farm in the hillfort interior (now demolished), which had a series of fields (eighteenth-century improved land: see Chapter 10) on the southern side. The field banks now contain a modern pine plantation.

During June 1799 Simcoe arranged a spectacular review of his troops at Woodbury Castle. This included 139 pieces of artillery with horses, 734 cavalry and 2,748 infantry (Fryer and Dracott 1998: 211). Simcoe’s review must have been political since there were bread riots at the time in Honiton, Ottery St Mary and other towns across the southwest. At least some of his troops, including contingents from Honiton and Ottery St Mary, were probably temporarily stationed on Aylesbeare Common in a line of bell tents. Such cramped and miserable living conditions could not be sustained indefinitely. The encampment on Aylesbeare was almost certainly relatively short-lived since a temporary
peace was made with France in October 1801 before a new outbreak of hostilities.

The account of the British Army bell tents discussed earlier in this chapter is interesting not only in describing the miserable living conditions but also in that these tents were regularly used by the British Army on the move and could be erected very quickly. Military manoeuvres took place elsewhere with temporary camps of bell tents for the men taking part in them (Smith 1995).

Simcoe’s troops would have been, for the most part, farm labourer ‘volunteers’ forced into military service. The troops were stationed on Aylesbeare Common because it was barren land and of no agricultural value and so would produce little hostility among local landowners. They pitched their tents in the lee of the hill in a sheltered position away from the prevailing southwesterly wind and rain. The marshy ground with a spring line directly below the line of bell tents would have provided a ready water supply. Aylesbeare Common was an ideal location for an encampment in another respect. From the summit of the hill to the south of the tent line the sea could be seen and any approaching French ships observed. To the north the site was only a short distance from the main turnpike road to London (the current A30), along which any invading army was likely to march.