

CPAT Report No 1181

**Heldre Hill, Long Mountain,
Montgomeryshire**

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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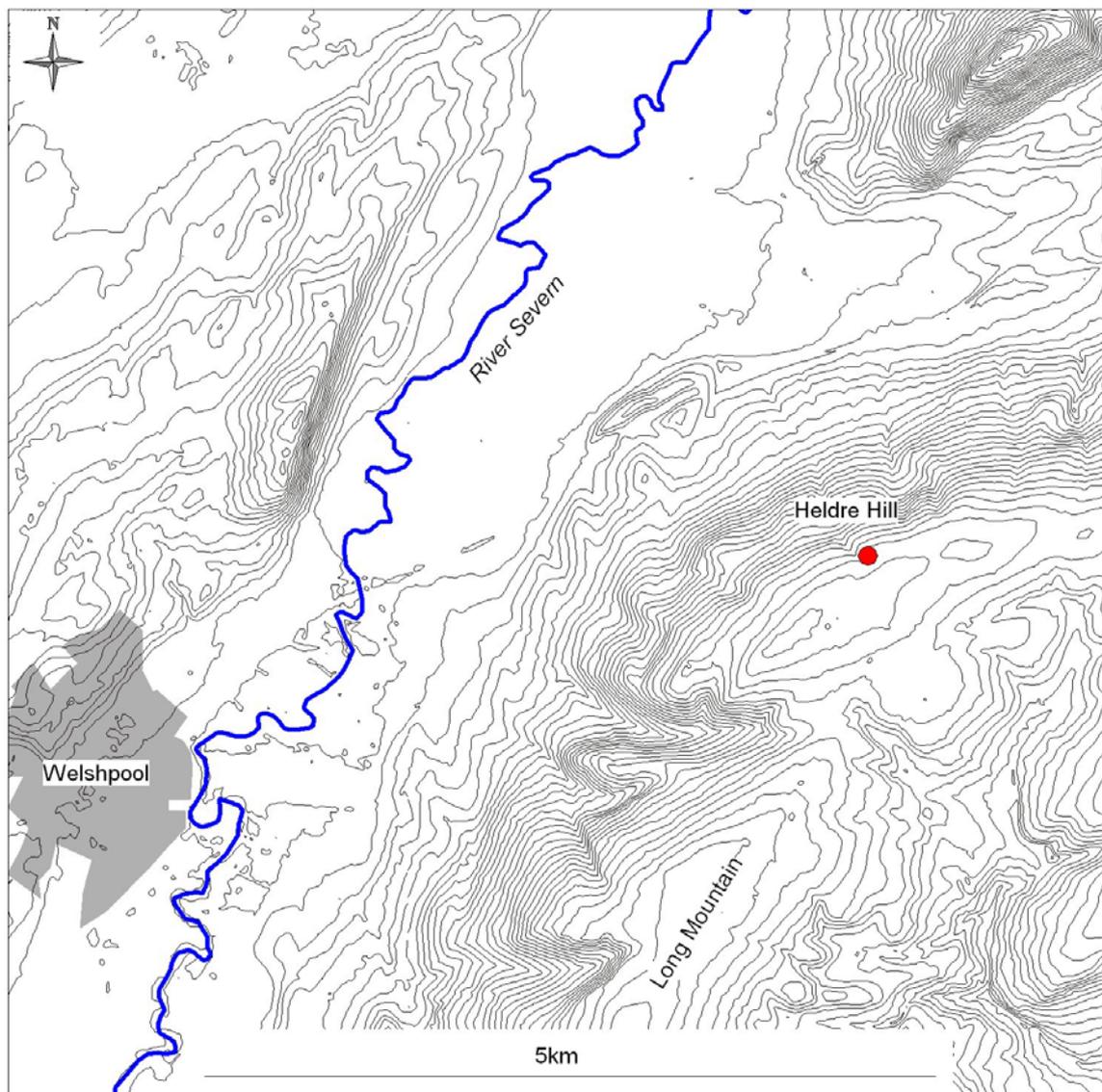
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The origins of this small project are mundane. In March 2012 one of the writers was walking his dog on Heldre Hill, an open-access but enclosed area on Long Mountain overlooking the flood plain of the River Severn north of Welshpool, and came across a small and apparently incomplete rectilinear earthwork which suggested, at least in his mind, an unfinished Roman fortlet. An examination of the Historic Environment Record (HER) revealed that though the earthwork had been registered in the past, its position had been wrongly recorded and the written statement appended to that of a post-medieval farmholding lying some distance to the north. The true location of the site can now be determined as SJ 2814 0908.
- 1.2 In November 2012 Cadw provided a small grant to enable the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) to conduct a geophysical survey of the ground around the earthwork, in the hope that further portions of the site might be identified. The opportunity has also been taken to clarify the records for features on this part of Long Mountain.



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Fig. 1 Heldre Hill location

2 THE EARTHWORK

- 2.1 The earthwork has been known for some time. It was visited by the Trust's field team in 1978 and this may have been the first observation of it. Neither the HER nor Coflein record any other field observations and the Royal Commission were unable to locate it in 1994 because they had only the inaccurate national grid reference (see 1.1 above) then available. The site was photographed from the air by Chris Musson in 1980 and intermittently again in late years, one image being reproduced here (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The Heldre Hill earthwork from the air in 1983. Copyright CPAT 83-c-0497

- 2.2 The earthwork consists of one complete and two partial sides of a small enclosure. Only the dimensions of the south-west side can be gauged. From ditch lip to ditch lip it is about 46m wide, from bank crest to crest about 32m and internally the width from bank base to bank base is 26m. The south-east is incomplete. On the crest of the bank it runs for about 19m, gradually fading from a substantial earthwork to nothing. A gap of about 4m separates this from a low mound, the former perhaps signalling an entrance with only the butt-end of the bank beyond, although this interpretation is open to question. On the north-west side the bank and ditch barely curve around before fading out. On the complete south-west side a low spread of material constitutes a slight outer bank, which is also present on the south-east side but merges with the earthworks of a 'field' boundary (see 2.3 below). At its most pronounced on the south-west side the bank of the enclosure is 1.04m above the ditch bottom.
- 2.3 Running up from the south-west is a low field bank which adopts a very slight curve as it rises from the lip of a dingle and then follows a straight course edging along the side of the enclosure and fading out in line with the north-east terminal of the enclosure bank. The bank does not run down the steep sides of the dingle, but it resumed on the far side as a short stretch of bank that links to the field boundary running along the southern edge of the dingle.
- 2.4 The position of the enclosure is potentially significant. Heldre Hill is a broad faintly domed ridge, the crest being some 150m or more to the south of the earthwork which lies on very gently sloping ground with the break of slope giving way to the drop into the Severn valley a short distance to the north. To the south-west as already noted is a dingle or wooded valley, steep-sided and moderately deep though becoming deeper further down the hillside, and

conversely shallowing out to almost level ground a short distance to the south. The enclosure is set back from the dingle but only by 30m or so of gently sloping ground, and the impression that is gained is that the enclosure was positioned to take advantage of this natural feature.

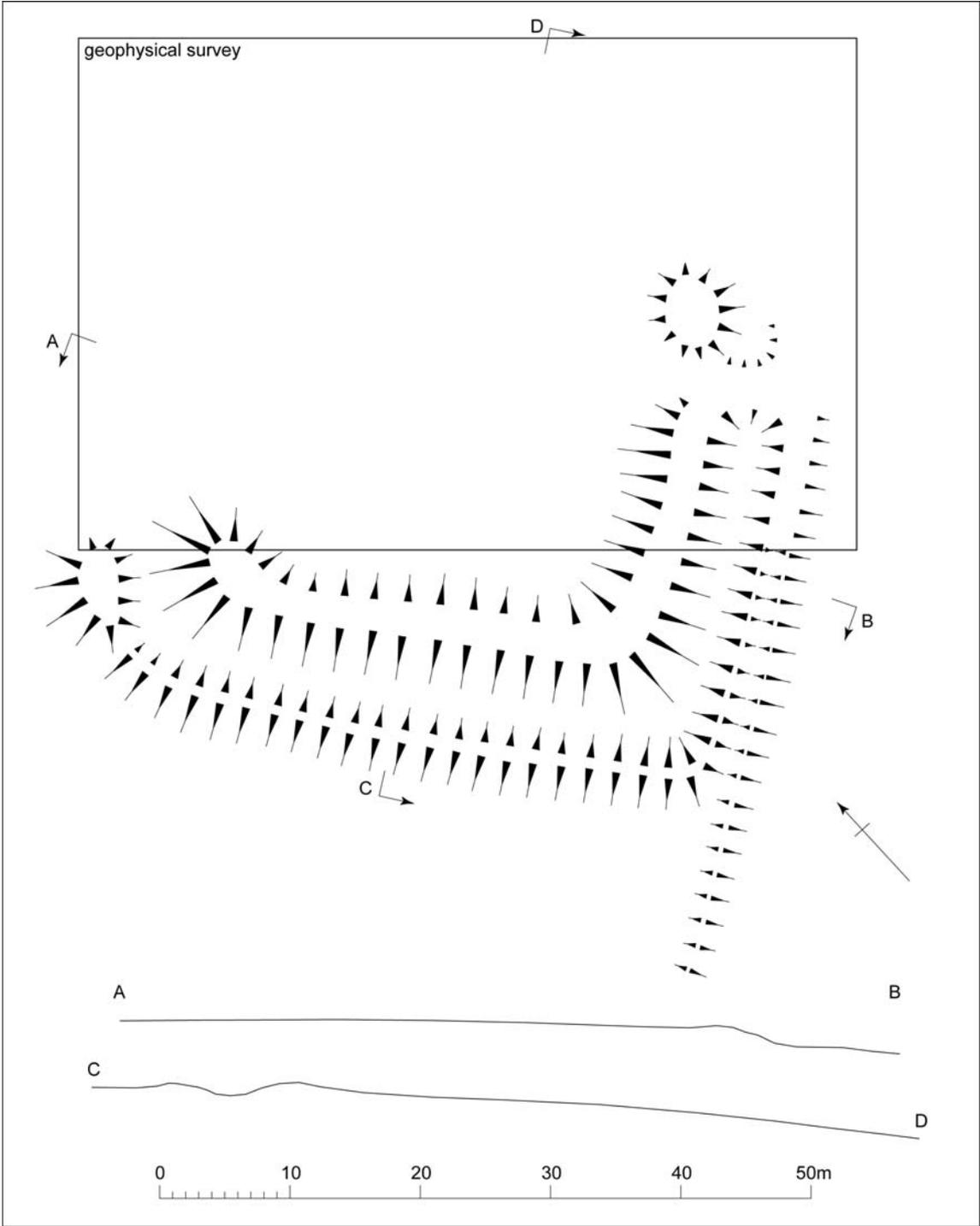


Fig. 3 Ground survey of Heldre Hill.

3 THE SURVEY

- 3.1 The geophysics element of the survey was carried out with a Bartington 601 magnetic gradiometer and the general methodology employed was the same as that used on a range of geophysical surveys carried out by CPAT in the past (see Hankinson 2007). This was originally developed from the methods used by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust in their survey of Roman fort environs (Silvester, Hopewell and Grant, 2005).

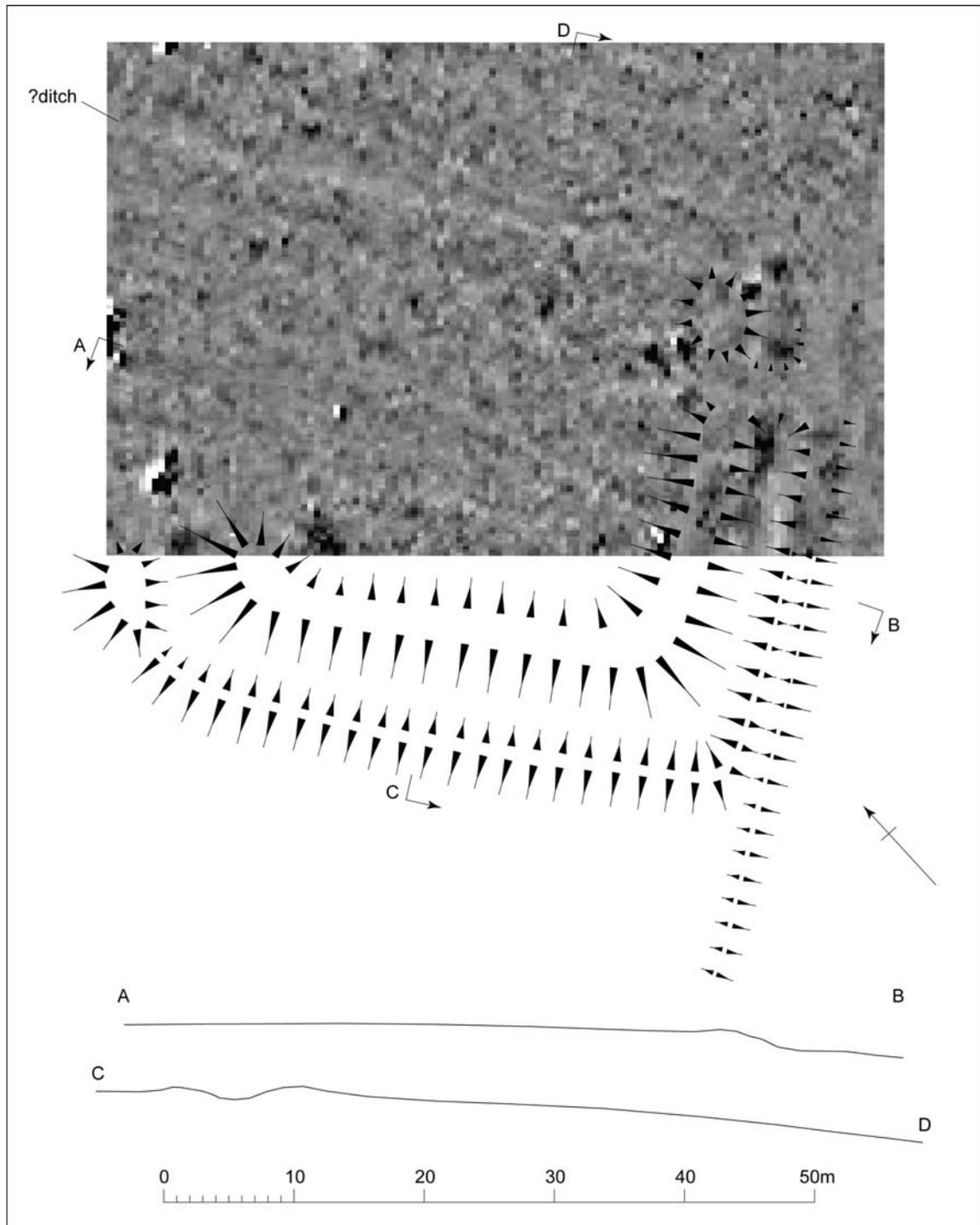


Fig. 4 Ground survey of Heldre Hill superimposed on the geophysical survey .

- 3.2 The survey comprised readings taken over a block of six grids, each 20m square, which were combined using Archeosurveyor software to provide a greyscale image of the results. The readings in each grid were taken along traverses 0.5m apart and the speed of each traverse was controlled such that readings were taken every 0.25m, giving a total of 3200 readings per 20m grid. The grids were laid out and located in relation to local field boundaries by a total station survey, and this was then related to the Ordnance Survey mapping as a best fit which enabled the co-ordinates of fixed points on the geophysical survey grid to be determined. The survey was then registered to the Ordnance Survey National Grid.
- 3.3 The opportunity was also taken to carry out a total station survey of the visible earthwork (Fig. 2), to provide a record of both its current extent and topographical nature, and to allow this to be combined with the geophysics. The prominence of the bank and ditch which defines the south-west part of the monument is such that it was difficult to carry out an accurate gradiometer survey on this section of the monument, and it was concluded in the field that it was better to concentrate the geophysics on the level areas to the north-east where the earthworks were postulated to have been levelled by subsequent activity.
- 3.4 As far as can be determined, the only evidence of a ditch seen in the geophysics results is from the partial infill of the north-east ends of the ditch on both the north-west and south-east sides of the earthwork. No infilled ditch could be identified on the north-east side of the monument, although there did appear to be traces of a linear bank, about 1.5m wide, running approximately north-west/south-east and showing as a lighter band on the geophysics plot.
- 3.5 This may, however, be related to the extant field bank that runs along the south-eastern edge of the enclosure. Given the lack of suitable evidence and the fact that the gradiometer was able to record traces of sub-surface features in the local soils, the implication is that the visible ditch does not extend further to the north-east as a sub-surface feature on either its north-west or south-east sides. It appears to confirm what is apparent from the surface traces, that the earthwork represents a feature that was left unfinished, rather than having been constructed as a complete rectilinear enclosure, part of which was subsequently levelled out by later agrarian activity.

4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1 Regrettably, the geophysical survey has thrown no new light on the origins and function of the enclosure on Heldre Hill, though it does appear to confirm the existing supposition that its construction was never completed.
- 4.2 The first issue that needs to be addressed is the relationship with the field boundary running up to the enclosure from the south-west. There is no useful stratigraphical link between the two, and the slight merging of the field bank and the enclosure's outer bank on the south-east side is undoubtedly a function of the slightness of the earthworks at that point. More critical is the fact that both enclosure bank and field bank fade out at the same point, almost as though they were being constructed in parallel, and now no longer explicable in terms of later degradation. The geophysics identification of a bank running off to the north-west (and incidentally visible on the aerial photograph Fig. 2) could confirm that the field defined by the field bank was more complete than it now appears and that originally it was created as an extension, short-lived, of the farm that lay on the far side of the dingle, that the earthwork enclosure was simply a marker for the layout of the field and that probably its presence was an advantage for sheltering stock. It is not possible to dismiss entirely the possibility of contemporary constructions and the enclosure as a stock pound of post-medieval date, but it seems inherently unlikely.

- 4.3 The location of the enclosure is surely significant. It is not set on the crest of the ridge but well forward of it. From the crest better views would be obtained to the south, but much of the eastern side of the Severn plain would be obscured. From the existing location only the bottom of the slope on to the plain is invisible, and there are panoramic views over the entire Severn valley to Llanymynech and beyond, with the whole of the Breidden and its hillfort visible.
- 4.4 The greatest stumbling block to the identification of a Roman fortlet is arguably its incompleteness, for the size is reasonably typical, the location is a perfect one with superb views to the west and the putative, though disputed, presence of an early military road, from Wroxeter to Forden Gaer running along the spine of Long Mountain, only a few hundred metres away. But it is difficult to envisage any circumstances under which the construction of a fortlet might be abandoned before the work was finished, for a fortlet of this size was hardly an onerous and long-term task. There is then no conclusive answer, and it is difficult to suggest what further technique might resolve the problem – perhaps only a trench through the bank in the hope of finding datable environmental material beneath it, and this of course would provide only a *terminus post quem*.

5 HELDRE HILL – THE WIDER CONTEXT

- 5.1 Archaeologically Heldre Hill is best known for the two Knaps barrows (PRN 128 and 129) in the eastern part of the open-access area, which were thrown up not on the highest point of the ridge (at 367m OD) but five hundred metres to the east on slightly lower ground. Both barrows are scheduled (as Mg 213).
- 5.2 There is also a fine house platform (at SJ 2908 0953), 17m long and sufficiently wide to have accommodated two buildings, set into the slope where the ground starts to fall away into the Severn Valley.
- 5.3 Tucked into the north-western corner of the open access area and well below the ridge crest is a ruined cottage set on a platform and known as the Middle House Dingle site. This has been recorded several times, various PRNs have been allocated, and so have several national grid references, some of which are misleading. The most useful record is PRN 8239 which carries the correct NGR. However, the description is inadequate and is difficult to correlate with the features on the ground; it is possible even that another site is being described. A better description is provided under PRN 37220 which appears to be mapped in the wrong place, but this is the result of having only a six-figure grid reference. However, this record could also be misleading for while the description of the building is fine, the record also alludes to a second house site, PRN 4505.
- 5.4 This second site, PRN 4505, was not located during fieldwork by one of the writers, but his search was not exhaustive. However, the given grid reference for PRN 4505 puts it in the next field over and to the west of the main dingle. It is also quite specific in terming this Clod Hall. The conclusion was that PRN 4505 should remain as a separate farmstead in a different field, until this is proved otherwise.
- 5.5 Unfortunately other parts of the record for PRN 37220 also mislead. It refers to the Heldre Hill farmstead as PRN 4253. This is wholly incorrect. 4253 as we have seen is the number originally attributed to the earthwork enclosure that forms the subject of this paper. The brief HER description makes this clear. But a further description in the HER under 4253 is remarkable only for its stupidity. It classes the site as a farmstead, describes the building as 4505 and a platform house as 37220.

- 5.6 PRN 37223 is a duplicate. It is the same building as that described under PRN 37220, but does not give the same degree of detail. The NGR of 37223 is incorrect, despite being an eight-figure reference. There is no building at this point.
- 5.7 PRN 37222 is a small platform above and to the south of the features noted above. The description is fine but the NGR is incorrect. It should be SJ 27931 09291.
- 5.8 Because of all the confusion within these records, the enclosure containing 8239 has largely been overlooked. This is a D-shaped enclosure defined by a bank with thorn trees on it, very clear on the aerial photographs. From 8239 a holloway runs down the hill and is further worn down by a stream. I assume this is what is remarked on at the end of the first paragraph of record 37220. At the bottom of the open-access hill just above the enclosed ground is a long run of small quarry hollows with intermittent traces of access tracks around them. These seem to have avoided mention in any of the records.

6 SOURCES

Hankinson, R, 2007. *Geophysical surveys of Defended Enclosures in Montgomeryshire*, CPAT Report 895

Silvester, R, Hopewell, D and Grant, I, 2005. *Roman Fort Environs in Powys I*, CPAT Report No 702.

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