

# Milber Down Camp

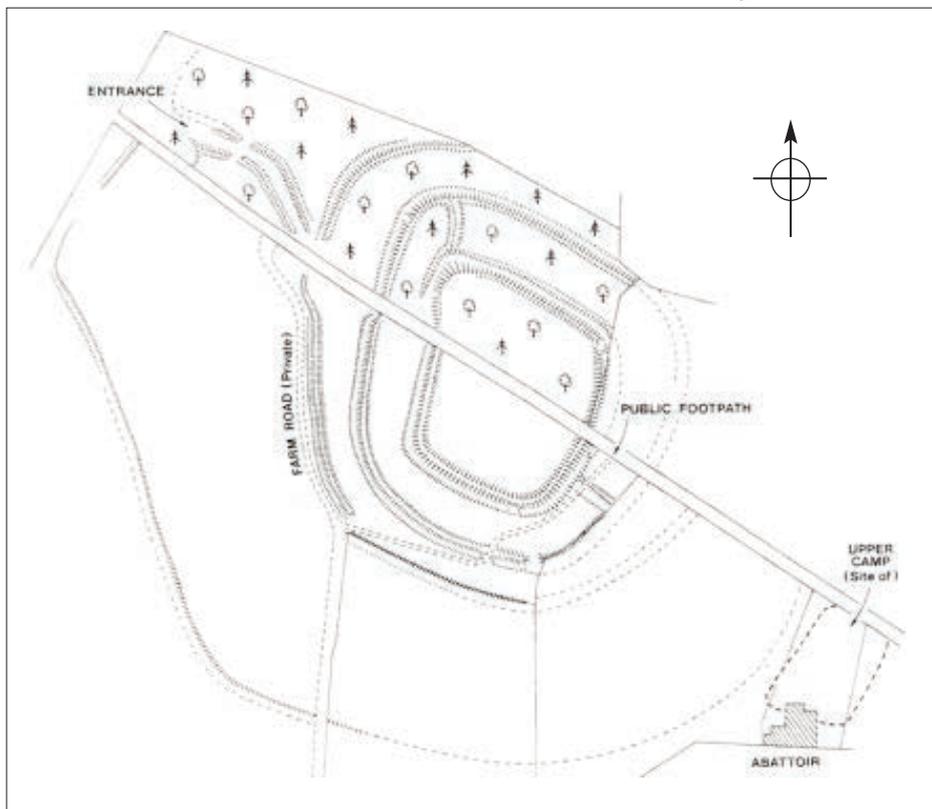
**Milber Down Camp is a multiple enclosure fort at Newton Abbot**  
**Darren Baker**

In 2012 and 2013, research was undertaken to establish whether a modern, non-intrusive survey could contribute to current understanding of Milber Down Camp in Devon. The project had two facets; to 'look in' at the monument itself and to 'look out' at the wider world in which it existed. The project utilised documentary research, aerial photography, LiDAR, geophysical survey, topographical survey and evaluation of the excavation undertaken in the late 1930s. This is a short account of the geophysical survey.

Milber Down Camp is an Iron Age multiple enclosure fort situated on upland at the head of the Teign Estuary, a kilometre South-East of the Devon market town of Newton Abbot. The site lies on a North-West facing hill slope, overlooking the Aller Vale and commanding impressive views across the town to Dartmoor. Multiple enclosure forts are most common to the lowlands of Devon, Eastern Cornwall (Cunliffe 1991, pp252) and South and Mid Wales (Silvester 2007, pp9). The ramparts are smaller in scale than the hill forts of Wessex and are widely spaced to provide multiple enclosures. Many are situated on level ground or on hill slopes overlooked by higher ground. The sites are predominantly located near the coast and situated close to rivers and estuaries with entrances generally aligned toward the closest water source. Milber Camp lies on gently sloping ground, 35m below the crest of the hill. The site consists of a sub rectangular, banked and ditched enclosure of 1.25ha with two concentric earthworks forming wide berms of up to 27m in width. An embanked entrance lies to the North-West with a fourth, less substantial and wider spaced earthwork which arcs from the entrance around to the South-West (*see Figure 1*).

The site was excavated in 1937 by the Devon Archaeological Exploration Society, the focus of which was to examine the construction of the ramparts on the western side (Cottrill 1937, pp3). A series of small trenches targeted areas just inside the bank of the central enclosure at locations deemed to offer protection from the prevailing weather and likely to yield evidence of structures (Cottrill 1937, pp4). No prehistoric structures were located. Five circular depressions were noted North of the road in the second enclosure, but following limited excavation they were not thought

to be of prehistoric origin. Finds included pottery, largely South West Decorated Ware and coarse plain wares, predominantly derived from the second ditch and from a gully behind the central enclosure to the East. Other finds included fragments of a corn drying oven, large amounts of charcoal, a slate spindle whorl, iron slag and part of an iron



**Figure 1**  
**Survey of Milber Down Camp undertaken by Royal Commission for Historic Monuments (now Historic England). Reproduced in Griffith F. and Wilkes E. (2011)** The outer, fourth rampart is indicated as a ditch and dotted line to the south.



**Figure 2**  
**Bronze figures found during the 1937 excavation. Photo © author, with permission of Torquay Museum.**

dagger pommel. In the closing hours of the excavation, a worker was tasked with widening a section of trench in order to locate a missing rim from a fragment of pottery. He returned with a bronze ball, a bronze bird with detachable wings, a bronze stag and a bronze duck (see Figure 2). The figures were seemingly deposited together on a horizon of soil derived from the decomposition of organic matter, 70cm from the base of the ditch. They are suggested as 1st Century AD in date, influenced by the Roman world but of Celtic origin and deposited following the abandonment of the camp.

In 1938 excavation (Fox et al 1949) centred upon a ploughed out rectilinear earthwork situated on the periphery of the (outer) fourth rampart, known as the Upper Camp or Little Milber, which now lies under abattoir buildings (see Figure 1). The excavation yielded native pottery of mid 1st Century AD date and some provincial Roman material. Post holes and gullies indicated the possibility that rectangular wooden buildings existed (Fox et al 1949, 63). Occupation of the main camp was estimated to have begun sometime in 1st Century BC before abandonment early in the 1st Century AD. The upper camp was likely to have been occupied from the mid 1st Century AD. No pottery of Roman date was found during the excavation of the main camp.

Observations from LiDAR, geophysics and aerial photography, together with existing excavation records indicate that the monument may overlie earlier features. The finds assemblage held at Torquay Museum certainly includes worked flint from earlier periods. Enclosures have previously been identified by aerial photography on the lower slopes of the estuary and a possible unidentified enclosure was located from the LiDAR survey: it is likely that the monument did not exist in isolation. Analysis of field names listed in the Tithe Apportionment also indicates possible early occupation sites in the locality. Perhaps the most intriguing of these is a group of fields named 'Fire Berry' lying



**Figure 3**  
**The position of Fire Berry field names in relation to Milber Down Camp**  
**Map © Edina Digimap**  
**Insert map:**  
**Detail from Coffinswell Tithe Map, with permission of Devon Heritage Centre.**

on the same ridge as Milber Camp 1.5km to the South East (*see Figure 3*).

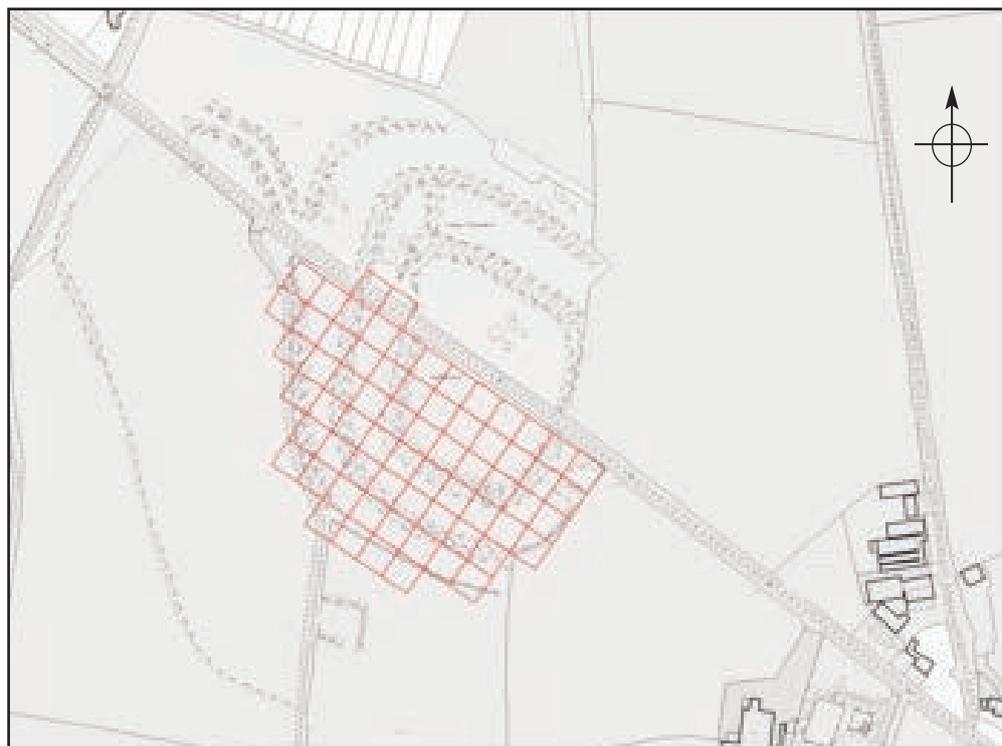
The name suggests former settlement with associated burning activity, perhaps industrial or vitrification (pers comm. Paul Martin). Suggesting contemporaneity between the elements in this estuarine environment is obviously problematic on current dating evidence, but further fieldwork and survey may serve to highlight that Milber held a specialised purpose within a larger network of settlements. The primary intention was to use geophysics to target the field to the East, within which aerial photography has highlighted multiple features. Instead, as the main camp itself had not been the subject of geophysical survey and time was limited, survey was carried out there to assist in establishing how the interior of the monument was organised. Although structures had not been located during excavation, a section of the innermost western ditch revealed a sequence of ditch cleaning followed by silting before two separate deposition horizons of pottery. This may suggest that the central enclosure was occupied for a period before the outer enclosures were constructed. A number of explanations have been put forward for use of the multiple enclosures, but it is thought that the containment and organisation of stock was the primary motivation for construction (Fox 1964, pp141). If structures within the monument could be identified by geophysical survey, a differentiation in distribution between the enclosures might further illuminate how they were used.

The gradiometer survey of the Southern, open half of the monument was undertaken over three days in late September 2012. With one modern entrance through the central three enclosures and bracken growth extending the height of the ramparts, a line of sight from which to extend the grid from enclosure to enclosure was noticeably lacking. However, a feat of Pythagorean geometry from John Oswin of BACAS succeeded in establishing a single grid pattern for all three of the central enclosures (*see Figure 4*).

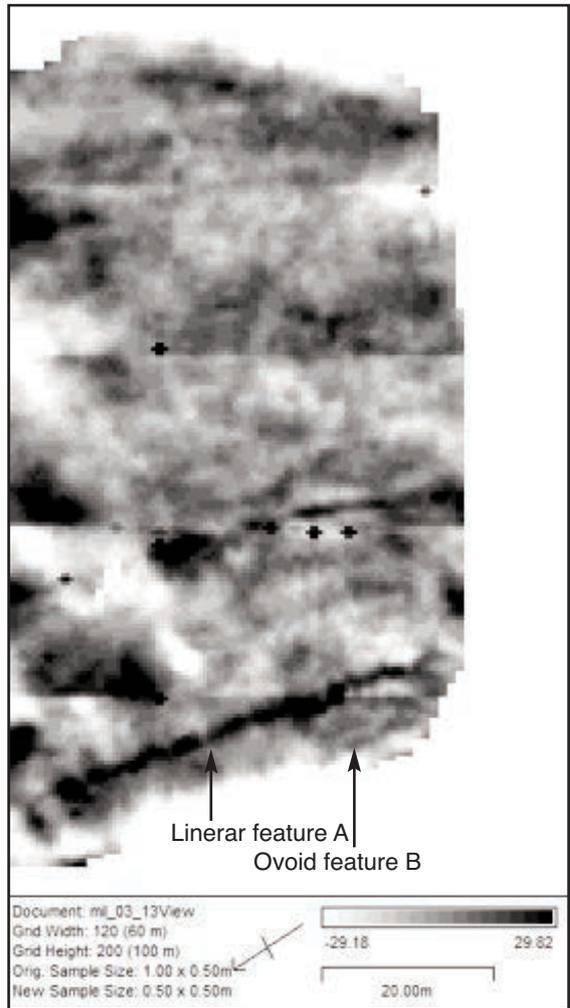
It became very clear when uploading the data on the first day that agricultural disturbance evident from the LiDAR data would dominate the results (*see Figure 5*).

The gradiometer survey indicated that the central enclosure has been heavily cultivated, removing any obvious sign of occupation or coherent structures (*see Figure 6*).

The Western end of the central enclosure has a lower concentration of agricultural damage, likely due to the practicalities of turning plough machinery when close to the bank of the monument. The enclosure has numerous high ferrous readings, which may be metal debris derived from casual loss during agricultural



**Figure 4**  
The grid system  
used to ensure  
an integrated  
geophysical  
survey. Map ©  
Edina Digimap.



and leisure activity (a campsite once occupied the area). The underlying geology may also be influencing the result: bands of hard gravel had obviously been encountered during the construction of the Iron Age camp, limiting the depth of the ditches in some areas. The outer two enclosures also show signs of disturbance due to high ferrous material in the topsoil, especially to the East along the line of the modern permissive path where higher footfall occurs. These pathways are visible on LiDAR (*see Figure 5*) and on the gradiometer plot. An old iron fence runs along the edge of the third enclosure, much of this has broken down and probably dispersed into the immediate area, accounting for the high ferrous readings. Linear features running parallel with the ditches, visible in quieter areas to the West, could be derived from ditch clearing.

As time was short, resistivity and radar was only used over a test grid. The gradiometer highlighted one potential feature in grid 11 (*see Figure 6*) so this was chosen as the target. Although the single grid survey was inconclusive, it served to indicate that further wider resistivity survey could provide more information than magnetometry. A resistivity survey of the central enclosure was undertaken in October 2012 and March 2013, the latter was undertaken in rain, thunder, hail and snow! The most prominent feature (*see Figure 7*) is a linear running North – South (A) in the Western part of the central enclosure. This is not visible on the gradiometer plot. A similar, less prominent linear feature is located 20m to the East. A shallow, linear hollow is visible on the ground in the second enclosure and can be seen on the earliest aerial photography but not on the Tithe map or other early cartographic sources. In 1980 (Moxon-Browne), during a watching brief, a gully was noted crossing the road behind the projected line of the Western inner rampart. It is a possible that the feature in the resistivity plot is related to the same gully. Given the appearance, a modern origin is probable. In the South-West corner, is a possible partial ovoid feature (B) measuring 15m in diameter, which appears to underlie material eroded from the bank. This may represent a small internal enclosure or ring ditch. The trenches of the 1937 excavation fell either side of this feature and no archaeological evidence was found (Fox et al 1949, pp34). It must be strongly stated that, given the wet conditions and the very ephemeral nature of the feature, caution should be exercised when assigning such positive interpretations.

The geophysical survey was not as successful as was hoped or as valuable as some of other methodologies employed during the project. However, the results suggest that a resistivity survey could potentially be used to investigate the outer fourth enclosure and the field to the East. The interior should also be resurveyed under drier conditions. A gradiometer survey of the Fire Berry fields might give an insight into the wider landscape use.

Thanks are due to BACAS for the loan of their geophysics equipment. Heartfelt thanks to John Oswin and Gill Vickery for making the whole survey possible and for being such wonderful company. Thanks too to Jane Gozzi and Pete Jackson for putting up with my slave-driving antics during the resistivity survey and then foolishly agreeing to come back and do it all again - in the snow. Thanks are due to the landowner Mike Bateson and family, who were an absolute pleasure to work with and allowed the project to happen.

## References

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### Figure 5 above left

**LiDAR image of Milber Down Camp showing ploughed out features around the Camp.**

**Image: © Environment Agency.**

### Figure 6 far left

**The gradiometer results (refer to Figure 4 for position within the Camp), indicating the readings referred to in the text. Anomaly in Grid 11 is circled.**

### Figure 7 left

**Resistivity plot of the interior enclosure. Linear feature to bottom of the image.**