Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series No 4

A BURNT MOUND ON BRENDON COMMON, EXMOOR

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This report series includes interim reports, policy documents and other information relating to the historic environment of Exmoor National Park.

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FRONT COVER:
looking east down Hoccombe Combe with the location of the burnt mound in the foreground

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK

A BURNT MOUND ON BRENDON COMMON, EXMOOR

SUMMARY

A burnt mound was found in 2009 within Hoccombe Combe on Brendon Common. It is the first example of this class of field monument to be identified within Exmoor National Park. This report describes the burnt mound in detail and presents the results of an earthwork survey of the site. A geophysical survey was also conducted, which is reported on separately (see Carey 2010).

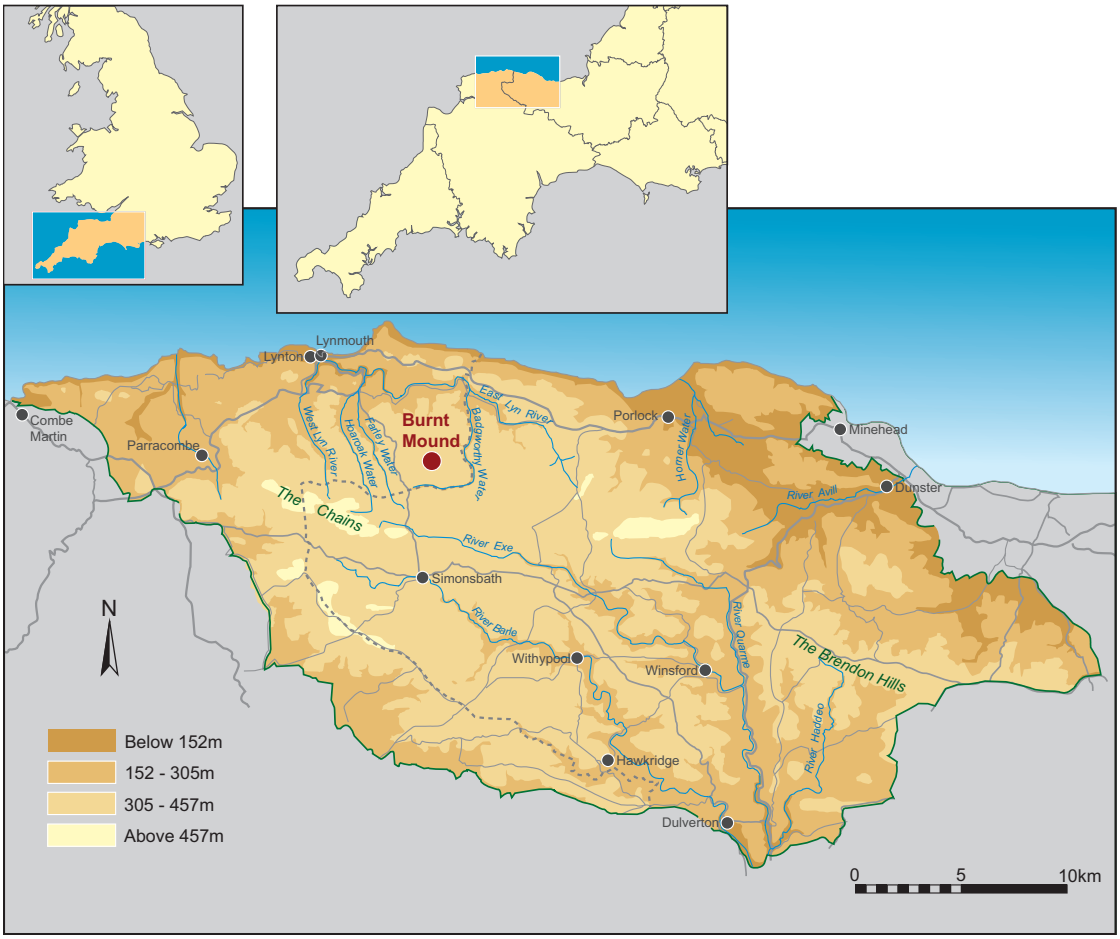

Fig 1 The location of the burnt mound (drawn by John Hodgson)

A NOTE ON BURNT MOUNDS

Burnt mounds occur across the British Isles. There are over 5,000 in Eire where they are called 'fulachta fiadh' and there are significant numbers in Scotland, Wales and England, though in the latter they are mainly found through large scale development-related activities in the lowlands. However, targeted local surveys in the English uplands have also revealed significant numbers of sites (eg Nixon 1990 for Cumbria; White 2002, 30-1 for the Yorkshire Dales).

Lively debate about the purpose of burnt mounds has occupied archaeologists' energies for many years, and there are a suite of possible explanations as to their function: sweat houses (Barfield and Hodder1987), cooking places, breweries (Wilkins 2011, reporting on research by B Quinn and D Moore), tanneries, dying places. An invaluable collection of papers on the subject, despite being over 20 years old, was published as a result of a conference at Trinity College, Dublin in 1988, entitled *Burnt Offerings – International Contributions to Burnt Mound Archaeology* (Buckley V ed. 1990).

Despite our inability to conclusively identify their purpose, burnt mounds have features that enable their relatively easy classification as field monuments: they are nearly always horseshoe or 'u' shaped and they are found close to water. On excavation, they are found to be composed mainly of burnt stones and within the arc of the 'u' shape there tends to be a pit or 'trough' lined with timber or clay. Nearby is often found a hearth. Burnt mounds vary in date with Irish examples ranging from the Bronze Age to early medieval period. In England they tend to be Bronze Age with some Iron Age examples. Burnt mounds are found alone or sometimes they occur in groups; they are found close to contemporary settlement, and in contrast have sometimes been described as occupying liminal locations. Despite their common features, they do display considerable variation in size and detailed form and this may suggest that within the classification individual sites served different purposes; it is also possible that individual sites were used for several different activities through time.

In Devon burnt mounds have been identified in recent years through excavations carried out as part of development and infrastructure projects (see Gent 2007). As such they are relatively poorly preserved and do not survive as upstanding monuments. The Brendon Common example, in contrast, is a well preserved, intact monument and this makes it of particular significance.

INTRODUCTION

On 6 November 2009 a 'u'-shaped mound was discovered by chance in the remote valley of Hoccombe Combe (sometimes known as 'Badgworthy Combe') on Brendon Common. The feature was immediately interpreted as a burnt mound because of its streamside location and morphology (see below).

Following the discovery of the mound, a programme of systematic fieldwork and recording was carried out which included earthwork survey and aerial photography. Subsequently, geophysical surveys were carried out to confirm the interpretation of the burnt mound and to attempt to identify other elements of the site which were not visible as upstanding archaeological features (see reports in Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record).

SITE DESCRIPTION

Topography and setting

Brendon Common lies on the northern side of Exmoor and is bisected by the modern road leading from Simonsbath northwards towards Lynmouth. It is an area of open moorland, providing a massive catchment for streams flowing northwards from Exmoor. These comprise a series of north flowing streams such as Farley Water and Hoaroak Water on the western part of the Common, whilst to the east, several tributary streams, including Hoccombe Water, Hoccombe Combe and Lank Combe run eastwards towards Badgworthy Water. The area is especially rich in early prehistoric activity with sites ranging from the Late Mesolithic to the Bronze Age (see Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record; Riley and Wilson-North 2001, 31).

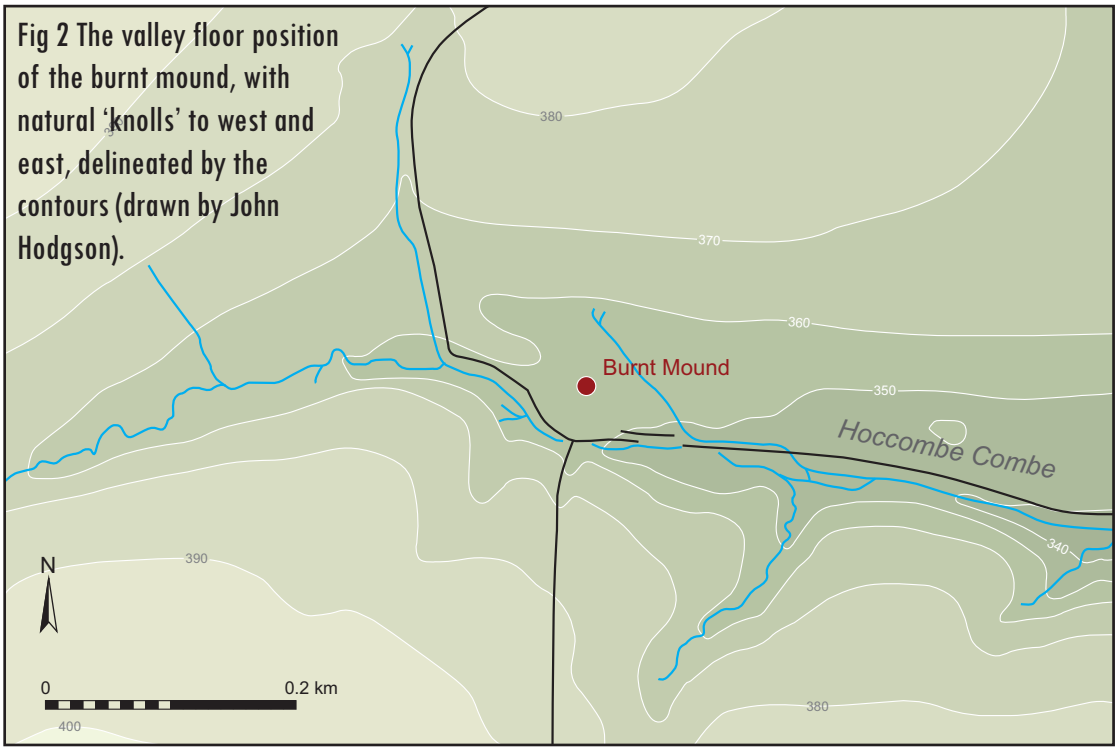

Fig 2 The valley floor position of the burnt mound, with natural 'knolls' to west and east, delineated by the contours (drawn by John Hodgson).

The burnt mound lies within the deeply incised Hoccombe Combe, and occupies remote, predominantly heather moorland with molinia grassland, bracken and bilberry. The immediate setting of the burnt mound is on the valley floor some 20 metres from the north side of the stream. At this point, the stream lies on the south side of the valley and is close to the steep and impressive north-facing valley slope. The burnt mound lies on a reasonably level, wet area and has a feeling of isolation caused by the deep combe combined with two prominent 'knolls', one lying 50 metres to the west of the burnt mound and the other some 200 metres to the east. Both of these features restrict the views up and down the valley.

The mound itself is on wet ground with shallow peat, and around it the peat drains out in the form of shallow channels or streamlets. One of these lies some 2 metres east of the mound itself, and the immediate availability of this water may have caused the creation of the mound at this point.

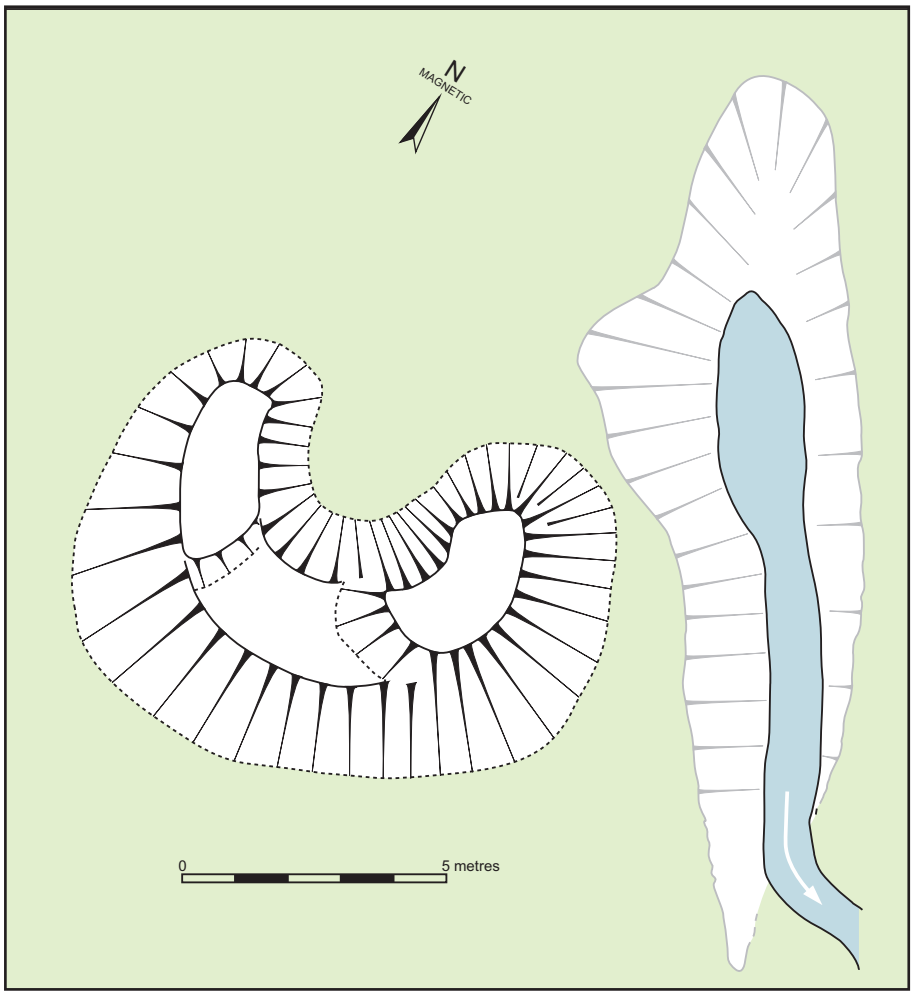

Fig 3 The burnt mound; large scale earthwork survey (redrawn for publication by John Hodgson)

The Burnt Mound (SS 7783 4448)

The burnt mound comprises a well preserved horseshoe or 'u'-shaped earthwork, some 10 m across (west to east) by 8 m (north to south). It averages around 1 m high but at its highest reaches some 1.6 m. The earthwork is well defined and apparently undisturbed, so that the uneven nature of the top of the mound and the 'recess' within its northern side, appear to be original, and not the result of later disturbance. The mound is turf and vegetation covered and its composition is unknown. However, probing of the surface indicates a high stone content. Geophysical survey has indicated that the mound contains burnt, *ex situ* material and there are also several 'heating events' which may tentatively be interpreted as hearths (Carey 2010).

Fig 4 Looking eastwards along Hoccombe Combe with the burnt mound in the foreground during geophysical survey work

Fig 5 Air photograph taken by Damian Grady in March 2010, showing the setting of the burnt mound within Hoccombe Combe (© English Heritage; 26645 046)

CONCLUSION

The discovery of the horseshoe-shaped mound in its isolated waterside location is a significant find both for Exmoor and for Devon. The initial interpretation as a burnt mound is borne out by the earthwork survey, and has been further refined by geophysical survey (see Carey 2010). Together these have produced a series of features consistent with the general morphology of a burnt mound: the location, form and shape of the mound, redeposited heated material and 'in-situ' heating events (Power 1990, 13-17).

The mound does not lie close to known contemporary prehistoric settlement although a number of barrows and stone settings lie within 2 kms. The immediate topography seems relevant to the siting of the mound: the valley location is remote but also restricted by the two knolls to west and east of the mound. This situation creates obstructed views to north, west and south, and restricts the local aspect eastwards, whilst allowing further views east to the distant hills. This local area has been reconnoitred and has not revealed other archaeological features, but it is considered that extensive geophysical survey here would be valuable. There is an implication that the area was wooded when the mound was in use in order for abundant fuel supplies to be available. However, palaeo-ecological sampling would be required to further explore this hypothesis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The burnt mound was discovered in November 2009 and surveyed at 1:500 scale by Rob Wilson-North. Geophysical survey was carried out by Chris Carey. John Hodgson produced the illustrations; aerial photographs of the site were taken by Damian Grady (English Heritage); ground photographs by Rob Wilson-North.

Thanks are due to Christina Williams who brought about the circumstances in which the mound was discovered. Special thanks are owed to the Directors of the Badgworthy Land Company, and to Hugh Thomas, for kindly allowing the surveys to take place.

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