

Ravensburgh Castle Hillfort Project Interim Report No 2

Project Outline and Topographical Surveys of Ravensburgh Castle Hillfort, Hexton, Hertfordshire, 2015 - 2016

Ian Brown



Ravensburgh Castle - western ramparts

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Frontispiece: Ravensburgh Castle bowl

Courtesy North Herts Museums Service

Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford

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1. Location of Ravensburgh Castle and overall character of the defences

Ravensburgh Castle Hillfort (GR: TL09952950) is located c. 10km west of Hitchin and 1.2km south-west of Hexton village, on the borders of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire (Figure 1). The Icknield Way lies 1.5 km to the south. The hillfort, at circa 6.6 ha, is the largest in eastern England and the Chilterns. It is situated on the Upper Cretaceous Chalk sequence and lies on the western half of a plateau surrounded by steep-sided dry valleys, except on the east. The ramparts are still impressive, their height extenuated by the steepness of the slopes below. The fine main gate, with substantial hollow way, is located at the north-western corner above the northern extremity of the steep Claypit Hole, with a second entrance at the south-eastern corner (Figure 2). The whole site was planted with trees c. 1908, and its present wooded character within the landscape is seen well from the air (Figure 3). Before this time, the site was Chiltern chalk downland (Figure 4). There have been episodes of tree removal, predominantly in the south-east sector as a result of major windblow, but accompanied by subsequent regeneration. The earliest reference to Ravensburgh appears to be by Francis Taverner in 1640 and William Stukeley visited the site in 1724.

2. Past Work

Selected excavations in the southern half of the site were led by John Moss-Eccardt and James Dyer in 1964 and James Dyer between 1970 and 1975, with no excavation report. Small, and inconclusive, 'diggings' took place in the 1940's.

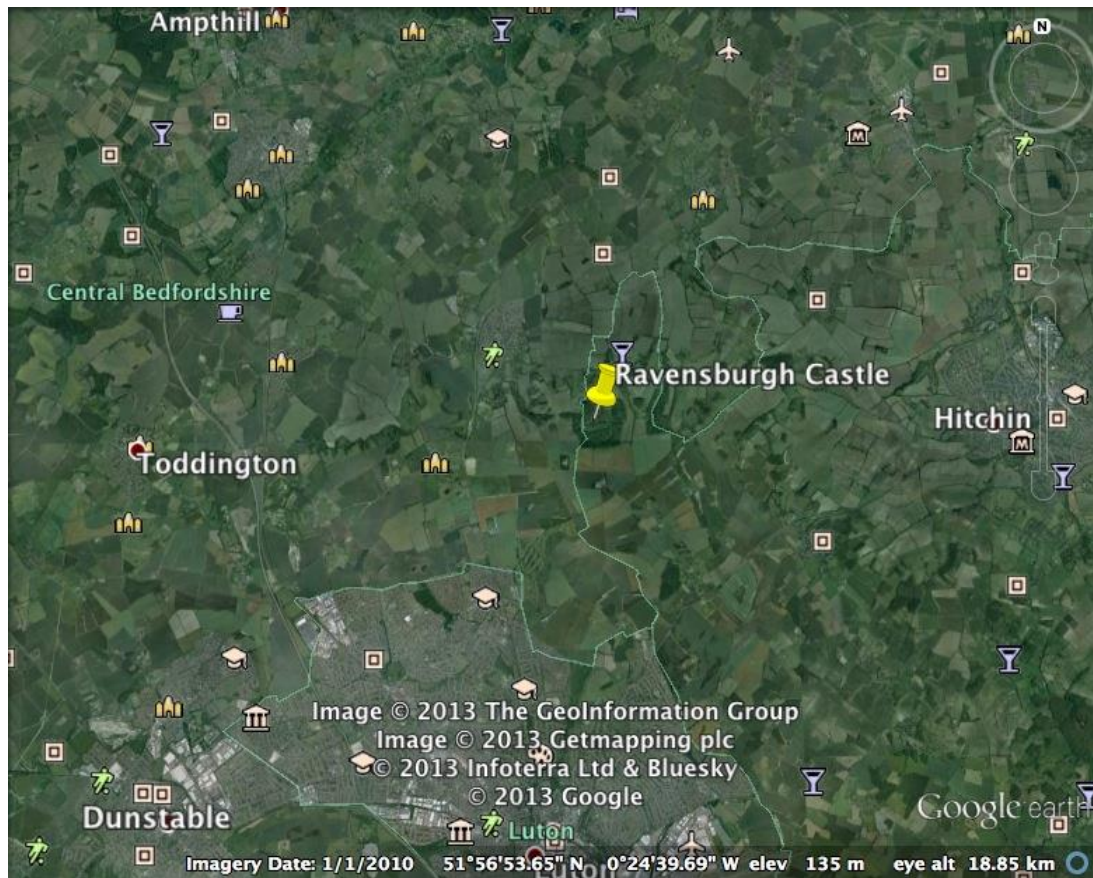


Figure 1 Location of Ravensburgh Castle Hillfort

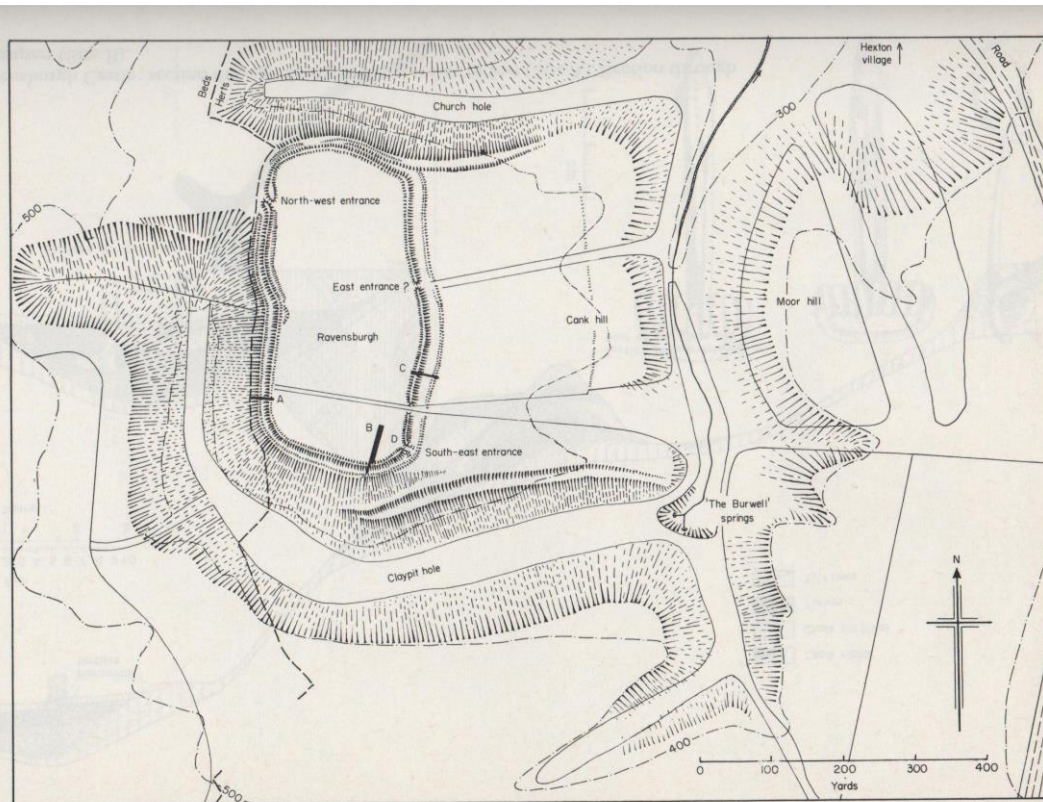


FIG. 1. Ravensburgh Castle: general site plan.

Figure 2 Plan of Ravensburgh Castle and surrounds by James Dyer 1976

3. Ravensburgh Castle Hillfort Project

The initiative for the present project resulted from an enquiry by James Dyer to the Hillfort Study Group in 2009 for assistance with the production of a report on the excavations outlined above. The present author, the Chair of the study group, subsequently met with Dr Dyer with a view to begin a programme of work, which eventually began in 2012. The landowner, Mr Patrick Cooper, of Hexton Manor, was also contacted, kindly giving his support to the project, as did English Heritage (now Historic England). After Dr Dyer's untimely death in 2012, the project received support from the Executors of his estate, and continues.

The project has seven aims:

1. To locate the whereabouts of notes, plans and photographs from the excavations and other relevant information on the site.
2. To ascertain the whereabouts of the finds from the excavations.
3. To produce reports on the pottery, bone and other finds from the excavations.
4. To undertake a complete topographical survey of the hillfort.
5. To undertake selected geophysical surveys where feasible,
6. To investigate the possibility of LiDar and other survey techniques.
7. To complete a report on the 1964-1975 excavations.

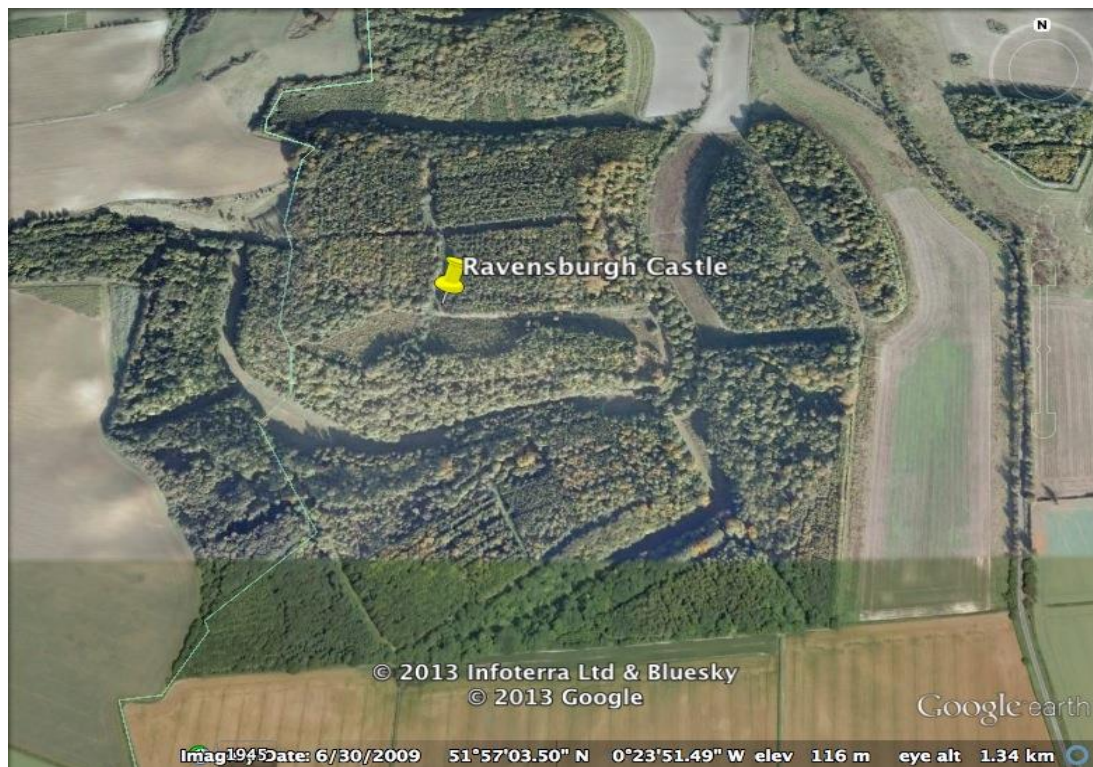


Figure 3 Wooded nature of the site and environs from the air



Figure 4 The ramparts and interior clear of trees c. 1900

Source: James Dyer

4. Work completed during the 2015-16 season

The first interim report on the project (Brown 2015) outlined topographical and geophysical surveys undertaken from 2013-2015. During the 2015-16 season progress has been made on the following:

- * Sorting of pottery and bone.
- * Continuation of the topographical survey of the south-western, southern and south-eastern ramparts 2015-2016.
- * Initial topographical survey of the eastern ramparts 2016.
- * Surveys of possible additional gates through the south and eastern ramparts.
- * Further analysis of the geophysical survey of the south-eastern sector of the hillfort undertaken in 2015.

4. 1 Sorting of the pottery and bone

Over forty boxes of pottery and bone were recovered from the excavations. Although each piece had been meticulously numbered, there had been no attempt at sorting bone from pottery as Figure 5 shows. During the 2015-16 season this task has been completed by Lisa Brown and the bone is now with Clare Randall for ultimate analysis. Finance is being sought to enable both the pottery and bone to be analysed. It is also envisaged that assistance will be available from a doctorate student of the University of Reading, with possible further analyses.



Figure 5 Selection of pottery and bone from 1970's excavations
4.2 Interim results of topographical surveys 2015-2016

Topographical surveys of the earthworks began in 2013 covering the western defences to south of the north-western entrance. In 2014 the upper western defences to the north-western entrance, the entrance area itself and the main ramparts at the north-western apex of the site were surveyed by Geodolite 506 Total Station. In July 2015 the south-eastern ramparts were surveyed at the apex of the site together with outside banks. In July 2016 the remaining section of ramparts on the south-west, a remaining section from the south-eastern entrance to the present access path into the site, lower sections of the eastern ramparts and possible unrecorded entrances investigated (general view Figure 6 and Figure 7).



Figure 6 The southern ramparts and south-east entrance to eastern ramparts

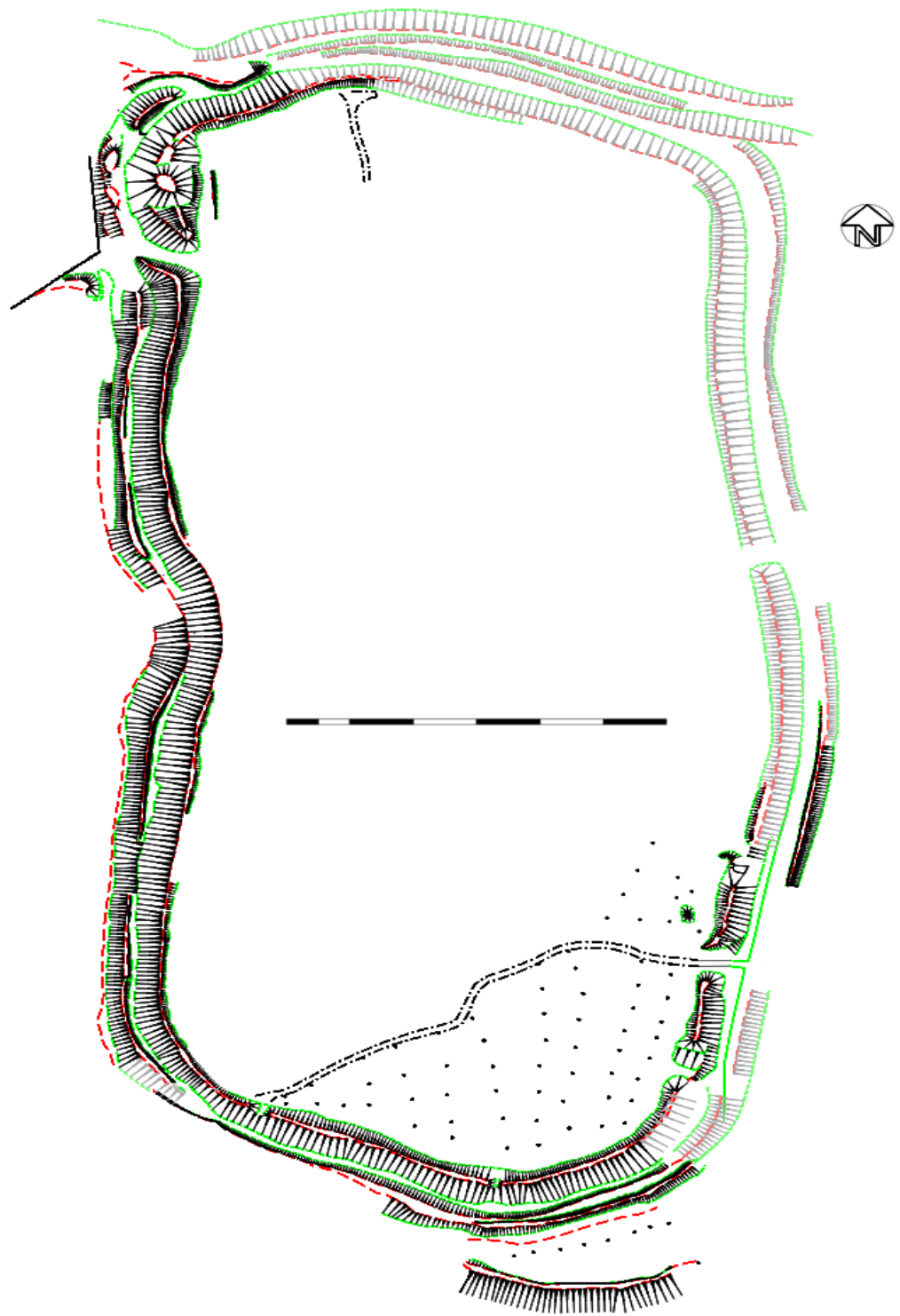


Figure 7 Topographical surveys 2013-2016 –areas highlighted

Ian Brooks - EAS

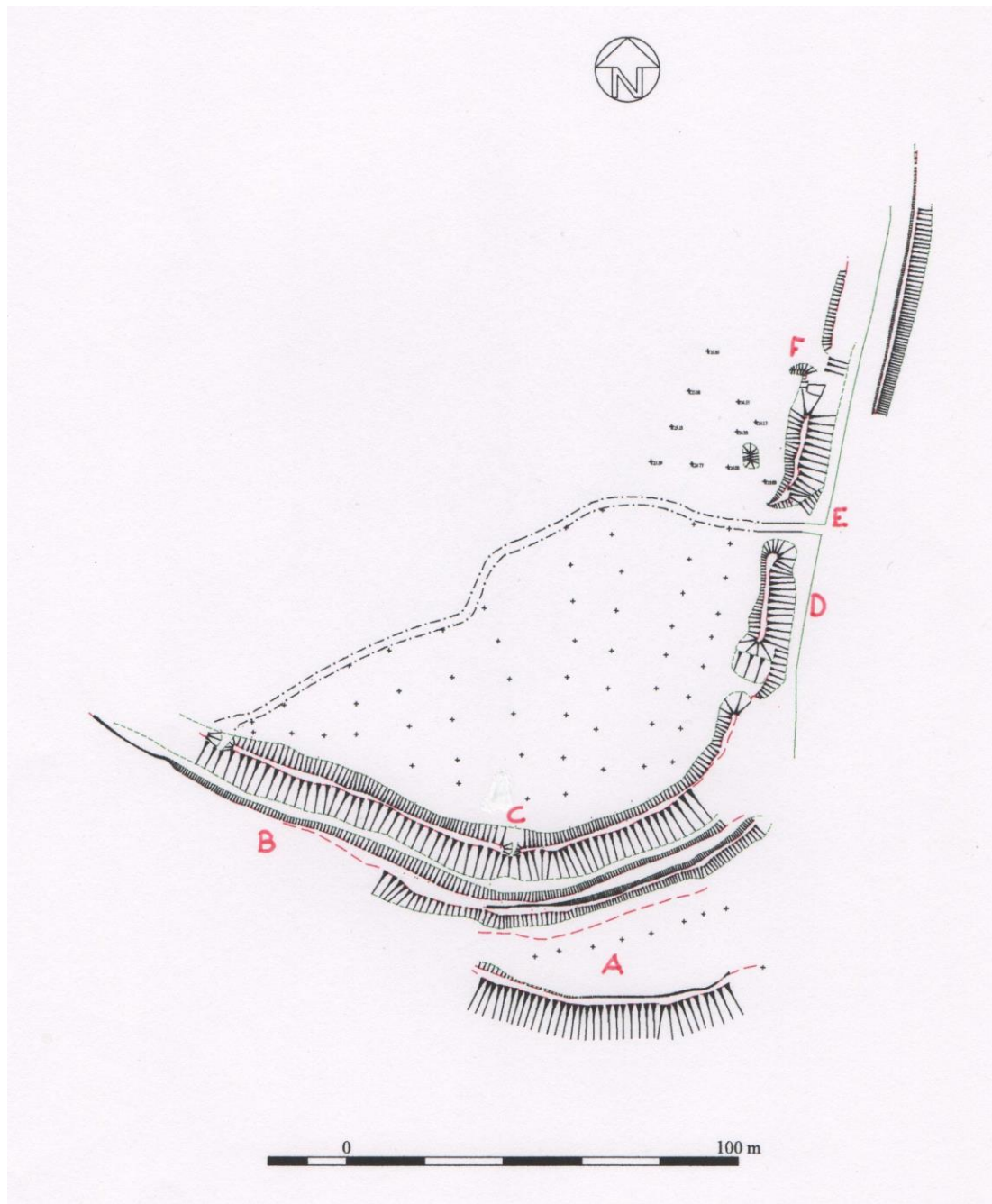


Figure 8 Site of topographical surveys 2015-16

Ian Brooks - EAS

4.2.1 Topographical survey south-eastern apex 2015

Banks and ditches at the south-east apex

Because of dense vegetation cover on the lower south-western quadrant of the hillfort (removed during 2016) topographical survey in July 2015 was confined to the south-eastern apex (A on Figure 8). The inner bank, medial ditch and second bank are clearly shown, with possible discontinuous berm between the ditch and outer bank (Figure 9). A further and very slight, discontinuous, ditch and counterscarp bank may be in evidence in part as further north. Here both banks are considerably lower than the western ramparts to the north, with slopes less for a considerable section before

dropping sharply to the deep combe of Claypit Hole on the south-west below.



Figure 9 The main and second bank and medial ditch at the south-eastern apex

Investigation of additional ramparts

The 1st Ed. Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map shows possible additional banks outside the main mapped area to the north-east of the site and to the south-west, but not on later editions, and these are again shown on Dyer's plan of 1976 (Figure 2). These areas were briefly investigated during 2013 and 2015. Termed 'lynchets' by Dyer, those extending from the site to the north-east appear to form an extenuation of the second northern rampart for an estimated 150m-200m before fading out. To the south-west they appear to be additional banks and ditches.

As a result of these observations a section of an outer bank was surveyed in 2016 (southern bank as A on Figure 8; photo Figure 10). This appears to continue from a point nearly joining the outer rampart then running eastwards. A deep ditch and possible further outer banks may be in evidence, but have yet to be detailed. It is possible that these features are late Bronze Age linear dykes, perhaps akin to those on other downland sites in Hampshire and Wiltshire; from valley bottom to hillfort top as at Quarley Hill and at Woolbury in Hampshire and Chiselbury and Sidbury Camp and Casterley Camp in Wiltshire, the latter appearing to form the focus for three linear earthworks. These, perhaps similar, features at Ravensburgh will be surveyed in detail and, if they do prove to be such linear boundaries, will be extremely important in further analysis of the function of Ravensburgh Castle, which is looking at present, to be of a pastoral nature.



Figure 10 Significant banks and ditches downslope outside the main enclosure at the south-eastern apex

4.2.2 Topographical survey of remaining south-western ramparts and remaining south-eastern ramparts 2016

During spring 2016, the remaining dense vegetation covering the south-western ramparts and ditch was removed by the landowner financed by Historic England. This enabled topographical surveys to be completed here in July 2016 (B-C, D on Figures 8 and 11). Whilst the western ramparts further to the north appear to be little more than an intermittent scarp to the irrelatively flat/slightly sloping interior of the hillfort interior, this section appears to show the highest outer face of the inner rampart on the western side at c. 3-5m from top of the bank to ditch bottom as seen. The short section of ramparts past the south-east entrance to the access part on the east was also surveyed. From the south-east apex a short stretch of the ditch requires survey in the 2017 season, but from here the ditch appears missing and this continues northwards past the access track and along the eastern side of the fort; probably a buried feature.



Figure 11 High inner bank, ditch and second bank on south-west

4.2.3 Topographical survey of eastern ramparts 2016

The inner bank continues as a notable feature along the eastern side of the fort and remains to be surveyed. As stated, an outer ditch appears missing and is almost certainly a buried feature. This is corroborated by a second outer bank which now exists as a very slight, but definite, feature running along the whole of the eastern side of the fort, and separated from the inner bank by this buried ditch. It is possible that a third bank or counterscarp also runs along the eastern side, separated from the perhaps medial bank by a ditch. This requires investigation.



Figure 12 Second and outer bank and ditch on east

4.2.4 Investigation and topographical survey of possible unrecorded entrances 2016

The following possible unrecorded entrances were surveyed and investigated:

- * Possible postern entrance through inner bank of lower south-western ramparts.
- * Possible original entrance where present access track enters hillfort on south-eastern side, just above apex.
- * Possible original entrance through main eastern bank.

Possible postern entrance through inner bank of south-western ramparts

A marked break in the inner rampart on the south-west side could possibly mark the site of a small postern entrance (C on Figure 8; photo Figure 13). Small postern entrances, sometimes called ‘sally-ports’ in medieval castles, are a feature of a small number of hillforts, especially in Wales. Here access is given away from the main entrances, sometimes to a specific feature, as to a possible ‘shrine’ below the impressive Pen y corddyn Mawr near Abergele on the north Wales coast. At Ravensburgh, access to the Burrell spring below the southern ramparts may be a possibility, but further work is required here. Signs of small chalk lining along a possible passage can be seen. An entrance gap c. 1.5m wide is a possibility.



Figure 13 Possible site of postern gate through main south-western ramparts

Possible original entrance where present access track enters hillfort on south-eastern side, just above apex

The northern ‘terminal’ of the present access gap shows a marked inturn into the site (E on Figure 8). This feature possibly suggests that the gap may be the site of an earlier entrance. If so its relationship to the present south-eastern entrance to the site is interesting.

Possible original entrance through main eastern bank

There appears to be a marked gap through the eastern ramparts at F on Figure 8. Whether this is the site of an earlier entrance, the vestiges of earlier excavation or modern disturbance is, at present, unclear and will be investigated further.

5. Project to date

To sum up, the following work has been undertaken so far 2013-2016:

- Locating papers and artefacts emanating from the excavations 1964, 1970-75.
- Topographical earthwork and geophysical surveys, to put the present nature and condition of the site in context.

- Initial sorting and investigation of pottery, bone and other material from the excavations.
- Photographic record as work proceeds.

The 2017 season will concentrate on the remaining northern and eastern ramparts and banks outside of the fort. Finance is being actively sought for this future work and the completion of the excavation report or monograph of the past excavations.

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The surveys

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Also many thanks to Ian Brooks of Engineering Archaeological Services for continuing topographical and geophysical surveys, Lisa Brown and Calre Randall for expert analysis, Joshua Murphy for valued on-site assistance and Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews for continued support.

