

YARBURY - NITON'S CASTLE? REALITY OR ROMANTICISM? -

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Abstract: Eight kilometres long and no more than 0.6km wide, the 'Undercliff' is a linear zone of coastal instability on the southern coast of the Isle of Wight. Set at the foot of an inland cliff, this unusual terrain has long offered a climatically sheltered environment attractive to human settlement.

This paper examines the surprising incidence of 'castle' and related place-names where the Undercliff forms the coastal boundary of the parish of Niton. For several hundred years, place-names and field names within this parish have offered allusion to one or more possible defended positions that now merit further investigation.

This study reviews pertinent coastal sites and place-names, both above and below the inland cliff-line of the Undercliff. It also considers some comparable mainland place-names where 'castle' and 'burh/bury' names identify ramparted or embanked enclosures of prehistoric or pre-medieval date. After reviewing disparate archaeological evidence recorded in the Isle of Wight Historic and Environment Record (IWHER) and other sources, this study discusses whether allusions to a 'missing castle' in this coastal parish could concern past recognition of pre-medieval earthworks. Of the nine place-named sites identified in this study, attention focusses on the East Cliff plateau where the field names of 'Yarbury', 'Brockenbury' and 'Bulwarks Common' are associated with features now detected by aerial photography and LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) imagery.

Keywords: Yarbury, place-names, hillforts, Isle of Wight, Iron Age.

Introduction

This research focuses on the parish of Niton on the southern tip of the Isle of Wight (Fig. 1). Shortly after moving to Niton, I was told a story about a 'castle' that had once existed by the Niton Undercliff around St Catherine's Lighthouse. I started researching whether this was founded in local oral tradition passed down through the generations or merely an echo from a more romantic age, when 19th-century antiquarians mused about our ancient ancestors?

I quickly realised that there had not been a broad analysis of whether a defended position from any period had ever existed in the Niton landscape. I identified that it was probably the local place-names that were the main drivers fuelling the local beliefs that a castle was once situated somewhere along the shoreline. However, the topography of the landscape on the East Cliff Plateau above, with its dramatic and panoramic views over the

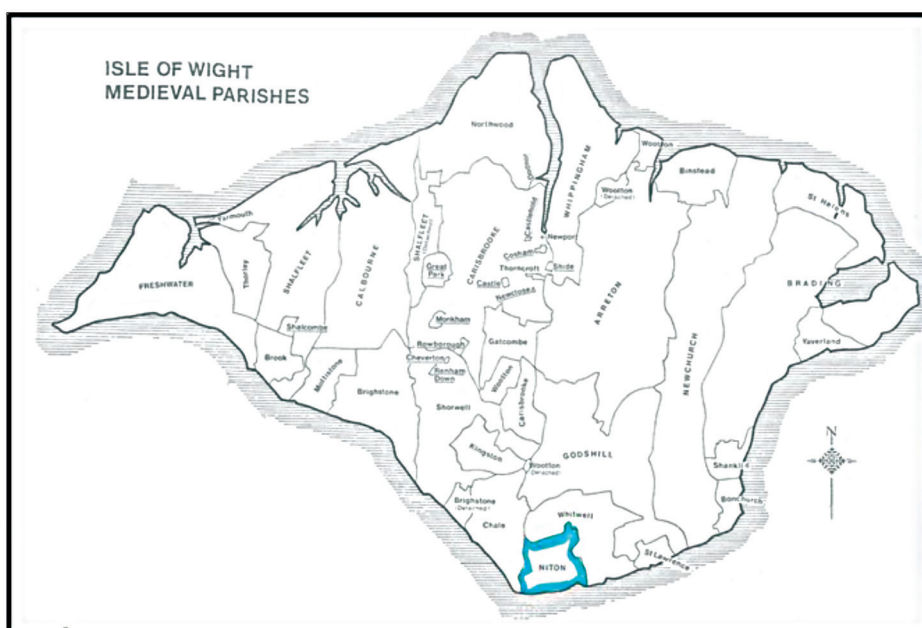
Undercliff 'castle' sites, as well as the English Channel and the Eastern Yar Valley, suggested a better location for a defended position than on the lower lying coastline. Further research revealed other place-names near and surrounding the East Cliff plateau that suggested a possible defended position.

I started to research whether this large promontory plateau of some 35 hectares could have been the location of a pre-medieval defended site hidden in plain sight. Was it a reality or romanticism? This paper is a summary of my findings, with the full report being deposited with the Isle of Wight Historic Environment Record (IWHER), held by the IW County Archaeology Service.

Antiquarian observations and musings

Antiquarian writings were early attempts to make sense of the known archaeology, place names, and broad ancient references that may (or may not) be connected to the Niton landscape.

Fig. 1: Medieval parishes of the Isle of Wight, with the Parish of Niton highlighted in blue



The theory that the Isle of Wight was the 'Ictis' mentioned by Diodorus Siculus as being the centre of the tin trade was formerly adopted by many antiquarians. When John Albin visited Niton Undercliff in 1795 he was shown a large mound called the 'Old Castle', likely to be the mound located near Castlehaven and was told by locals that it was from here that tin was traded. Albin's account seems to mark the first point at which the fanciful story of the tin trade and a castle at Niton are connected in print.

In the mid-1800s, the Rev Edmund Kell (1866) also re-visited the tin trade story, speculating that Puckaster Cove had served as a Roman harbour. Adams (1884) connected Yarbury, a field system with enclosures on top of the East Cliff, above Puckaster, to the tin trade. The Island's ancient tin trade and the 'Ictis question' have now been discredited for many decades (Cunliffe, 1983, Tomalin, 2022).

Other accounts of a castle in Niton Parish include Albin's (1795) suggestion that an ancient earthwork on the northern boundary of the parish called 'Bury' may have been a large barrow with a much larger base than any others found on the downs in the southern counties, along with the 'Old Castle' (on the Undercliff shoreline), would provide some means of defence against invasion, land-based or seawards.

Adams (1884) also describes this earthwork to the north of the parish 'called Bury' (and the 'Old Castle') and notes that the place-name "Bury" means "byrig", a walled or fortified place. It seems

that this might befit the former rectangular beacon enclosure formerly visible close to the Bronze Age burial mound that Dunning (1932) excavated on the Niton down portion of the crest of St Catherine's Hill (Tomalin and Marshall, 2016, 146, fig.4). Whilst speculative and perhaps romantic, the work of the antiquarians provides some useful points of reference in the Niton landscape for this research to focus on.

Methodology

Desk and internet-based resources were initially consulted to extract data. Where possible, fieldwork conducted on the sites of interest. Landowner permission was gained to field-walk some of the accessible slopes and field systems on the East Cliff Plateau. Whilst the limitations of the fieldwalking results are recognised, they did provide an indication of datable human activity in each area. A more detailed analysis of some of these finds will form part of my ongoing research of the East Cliff plateau. This research will be the first time that the Niton land and seascapes have been considered together for the survival of an ancient defended position, using existing knowledge, aerial photographs (APs), LiDAR, maps, topographical and fieldwalking evidence, to provide:

- a An initial point of reference for future study
- b Some initial tentative conclusions on what past references to castles might mean in the Niton landscape.
- c Some proposals for further research.

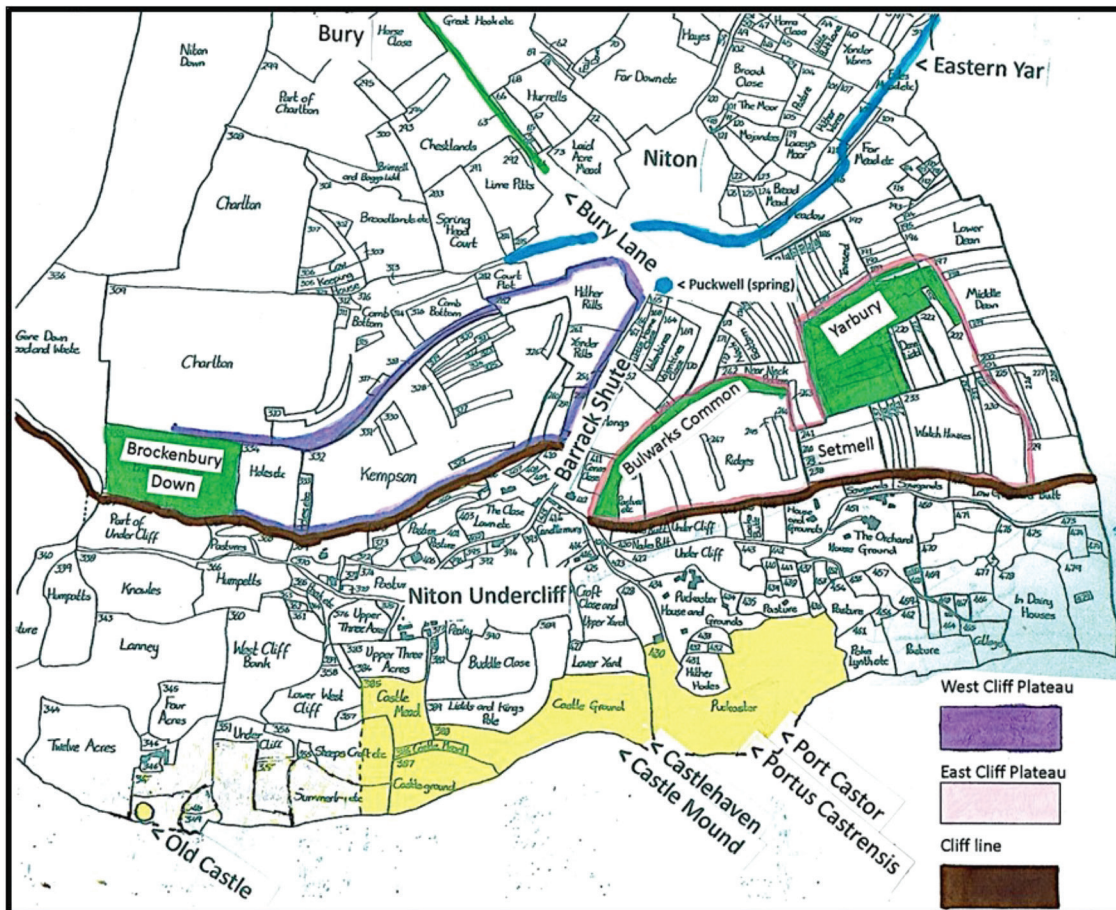


Fig.2: 1840 tithe map of Niton Parish showing the castle names along the Niton Undercliff coastline (yellow) and the place names on the West and East Cliff plateaux (green)



Fig. 3: Gardner map (1793) of the East Cliff Plateau

Potential place-name evidence for defended sites in Niton Parish

Nine local place-names emerged with the potential to indicate defended positions in the landscape. These have been grouped into four areas: The East Cliff, the Undercliff coastline, the West Cliff, and Niton Down:

East Cliff

The East Cliff plateau is 'divided' topographically into two sections, each of which contains a defended place-name:

1 Bulwarks Common: This is a steeply sloping field surrounding the western and northern part of the East Cliff plateau promontory area, closest to Barracks Shute. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'bulwark' as 'A substantial defended work of earth, or other material; a rampart, a fortification'. There are Iron Age hillforts in the Cotswolds and Monmouthshire known as 'The Bulwarks' (M.P., RCHME 1976)

The 1793 Gardner map (Fig. 3) shows a linear feature running from an enclosure/field in Ridges (**A** on map), above Bulwarks Common, across Yarbury (**B** on map) and forming the southern boundary of the fields called Yarbury), down its eastern slope and across the field below to join a lynchet (**C** on map). There would appear to be a double linear feature (**D** on the map) below Bulwarks Common. The ramp on the slope of Bulwarks Common (**E** on the map) is also shown on the 1830s Map of Niton Estate. The IWHER records flint debitage and a small number of Neolithic and Late Bronze Age tools on the Bulwarks Common side of the East Cliff Plateau, whilst the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) records

a small amount of Roman coinage on this section of the East Cliff plateau.

2 Yarbury: This comprises the steeply sloping field forming a continuous escarpment on the northern edge of the East Cliff plateau (and part of its eastern side) as well as fields on the plateau itself. This place-name might be interpreted as *fortified place by the River Yar* which rises and runs near to the base of its northern slope). 'Bury' may be derived from the Old English (OE) word 'Byrig', or 'Burh', meaning 'fort or fortified place' (O.E.D.).

The 1793 Gardner map (Fig.3) shows a 'ladder-shaped' enclosure on the northern edge of the East Cliff plateau section called 'Yarbury'. The smaller of 2 cloth maps traced from the 1840 plan of Niton (1859) shows one of the sections of the Yarbury enclosures with intact banks on two of its four sides, which can also be seen on an 1856 map of Niton Common and Head Down. The IWHER records these enclosures and flint debitage and tools from in and around the Yarbury area of the East Cliff Plateau, whilst the PAS records Iron Age and Roman coinage across the same.

Topographical Considerations of the East Cliff

Strategically, the area on top of the East Cliff plateau would better support the siting of a defended structure than on the Undercliff below it. This higher area has been used for defended purposes in the past, including the placement of a 'watch' as part of a medieval beacon warning system. In more recent times, the Royal Observer Corps was also stationed on the East Cliff during WW2 and the Cold War (Wood, 1976).

The East Cliff Plateau provides panoramic views over the English Channel, Barrack Shute (a gap in the cliff

-line) and inland, Puckaster Bay, Castlehaven Bay and Reeth Bay. Its vantage over land, seascapes and Barrack Shute provides a potential strategically important position for defence.

Bronze Age round barrows would have been visible from the East Cliff on the periphery of the landscape, situated on the eastern and northern boundaries of the parish. The viewshed to the west has the Rew Down barrow cluster near Ventnor on the horizon. Further research is required to ascertain whether there is a visual relationship between the East Cliff plateau and the archaeological features within the wider landscape.

A block of strip fields on the edge of the East Cliff between Watch House and Ridges is called 'Setmell' on the 1840 Tithe map (Fig. 2) and overlooks Puckaster. This name may be associated with a former landowner or user, but the etymology of the place name could suggest something else.

In OE (OET), 'set' may be related to 'setl' meaning 'residence, seat, throne', whilst 'mel/l' may mean 'dust' or be related to 'mylen' meaning 'mill; building or machinery'. In Middle English (MEC), 'set' may be related to 'setel' meaning 'a place for sitting, a seat; a special chair reserved for the holder of a position of authority or special dignity', whilst 'mel/l' may be related to 'mēl' meaning 'A fixed time, period of time; an occasion'. If this is the case, 'Setmell' may suggest a meeting place. Further research is required to define a more accurate meaning of 'Setmell'.

Undercliff coastline

Niton Undercliff offers over 1.5km of continuous place-names along its coastline that suggest defended position meanings:

3. *Puckaster*: This is a field adjoining Castle Ground and Puckaster Cove, and sits to the east of Castlehaven and Castle Mound. Kökeritz (1940) says that this place-name had been 'Latinised' in the past to 'Port Castor' and 'Portus Castrensis', but states that these are "preposterous etymologies". He believed the etymology of Puckaster is likely to be from OE 'pūca' meaning 'goblin' and suggests that the second part of the name comes from 'torr' meaning 'high rock, hill' or 'steort', a 'tail, piece of land, promontory' and that the Latinisation of the name is incorrect. Whilst Kökeritz was correct in challenging the 'tin trade' musings of the antiquarians and a castle connection to it, he may have missed the opportunity to consider Puckaster as an indicator of a possible defended site on the cliffs above the site.

4. *Castlehaven*: This is a small harbour situated between Puckaster and Castle Mound. The Oxford English Dictionary describes 'haven' as 'to shelter, protect; to provide with a place of safety or refuge... harbour', deriving from the OE word 'hæfen' (BTASD). Again, it is possible that this Undercliff place-name is an indicator of a cliff-top defended position on the plateau above Castlehaven. However, historic mapping shows that the name Castlehaven only appeared during the late 1800s but this may be because the site was not large enough at the time to be recorded on earlier maps and will require further documentary research.

5. *Castle Mound*: This mound of earth is on the coastal cliff edge, beside Castlehaven harbour. It has been thought locally that this might have been the Motte of a Norman castle but archaeological work on the mound has not provided any physical evidence of this, nor is there any reference to one in medieval records. IWHER 640 records that the site is represented, but not named, on the 1898 and 1908 Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, and is shown as a site of antiquity on the 1939 OS map but does not appear on the 1947 OS map, concluding that it is a 'Probable Non-Antiquity'. The mound was cut into on its northern side in 1989 but the spoil did not contain any archaeological material. Archaeologists visited the site again in 1991 when domestic farm animal bones were found on the eroded western side of the mound, in a context of sandy material, suggesting that the mound was possibly made from spoil with no other archaeological material nearby. A site visit by the author in 2024 to the beach below the exposed southern face of the mound showed that it had suffered from recent erosion, but no finds were present on the shoreline.

6. *Castle Mead and Castle Ground*: These two names are located next to Castlehaven and Puckaster on the coastline. Mead is an OE word meaning, 'Meadow' (mæd), whilst 'Ground' might suggest, 'ground that belongs to or is by the castle'. No archaeological or documentary evidence has been found to show that a defended structure has been built in these fields so, one might speculate that their names originate from the name of the cove and the fanciful attribution of the 'Castle Mound'.

The IWHER records that Roman pottery has been found near this area. Trott and Tomalin's (2003) work on *The Maritime Role on the Island of Vectis* shows that there were Iron Age sites at St Catherine's Point and along the Undercliff, describing the significance of the pottery being traded on and off the Island with the mainland and the continent. There is a raised earthwork platform recorded to the east of St Catherine's but its date and purpose are unknown. Tomalin has commented that ditches were exposed in the cliff face (pers. comm. 2024), but information about the excavation results at this site was not available prior to the publication of this paper.

7. *Old Castle*: 'Old Castle' is shown on the 1759 Blatt's & 1759 Andrew's maps on the western side of St Catherine's Lighthouse. This might suggest that the 'Castle' place-name once extended even further around the Undercliff coastline, although Adams (1856) believed the 'Old Castle' was situated a 'little west of the cove' suggesting perhaps 'Castle Mound' might have been interchangeable with the 'Old Castle' name. The 25" OS map of Niton Undercliff (1862) shows a mound in the approximate 'Old Castle' position shown on earlier maps. This is represented in the same way as Castle Mound at Castlehaven. However, there are no references or archaeological finds to support a castle being located here in this position. A site visit in 2024 revealed that only the northern edge of a mound was present, the rest no doubt lost to the sea. No evidence of finds was seen protruding from the cliff

edge, but the IWHER does record finds in this general area. It includes Iron Age, Roman and medieval pottery, bone and shells.

Currie (2001) suggests that archaeological finds provide considerable evidence to show that there was a farmstead with continuous Late Iron Age to Roman occupation at St. Catherine's Point and that such settlements were probably common along the Undercliff.

A geophysical survey of the area in 2006 showed suggestions of pits, ditches and potential buried remains, mostly by the cliff edge, but there was some suspicion that the soil was not conducive to this type of survey (Lyne, 2007).

Tomalin (2022), when discussing the importance of the Island's role in maritime trade, commerce, communication and productivity during Late Iron Age and Roman times, draws attention to the variety of Roman wares that were found around St. Catherine's including East Gaulish Samian ware, Rhenish beakers, Malvern ware, Nene Valley beakers, Spanish and Mediterranean amphora, New Forest and Hampshire pottery. He speculates that some of these wares may have arrived with military cargoes, noting a single military tile as '*a tantalising suspicion that this site may have fulfilled a coastal military function*', although he does go on to note the impossibility of a landing place on the cliffs and rocks at this location.

Tomalin's maps (2022) suggest that St. Catherine's Point may have accommodated an Iron Age coastal community. If sizeable communities did exist at St. Catherine's Point and along the Undercliff, then some form of defended position would make sense, as indeed the place-names suggest.

In summary, there are no PAS records of finds along the coastline where 'castle' place names are present. However, the IWHER and archaeological reports of the Undercliff coastline around St. Catherine's Point suggest that there may have been significant productive sites located there during Iron Age and Roman times, and these were engaging with the outside world through trade and commerce. Site visits revealed no obvious stable topography or raised vantage point along the base of Niton Undercliff and its sea-level coastline that would indicate a suitable position in which to locate a defended structure. Indeed, a location at the base of the Undercliff would give limited visibility/protection against seaward attack and would be blind to potential landward attacks because of the cliff line. It is possible that such a structure on the Undercliff could have been completely lost to the sea, leaving only associated place-names along its coastline, though there is no archaeological or archival evidence to support this. This being the case, the 'castle' place-names along the coast may just be a destination point for those arriving by sea, referring directly to a prominent defended structure located nearby in the landscape, above the topographical limitations of the sea-level Undercliff.

West Cliff

8. Brokenbury/s Down: This is a sloping field located on the edge of the West Cliff (suggesting it was once part of a hill now eroded on its seaward side), beside

the western edge of the Niton parish boundary. The 'Brocken' element of the place-name Brokenhurst in Hampshire is suggested to mean 'broken up (Watts, 2004) whilst suffix 'Bury' suggests a meaning of '(at the) fortified place'. Brokenbury Down has similar southern views seawards to the East Cliff Plateau sites but has an advantage as it has a viewshed westwards towards 'the back of the Wight'; Castle Hill near Mottistone (Currie, 2003), the possible Iron Age enclosure on Tennyson Down (Bowden *et al.*, 2015), and onwards on a clear day to Hengistbury Head hillfort on the mainland, and beyond.

The place name, prominent location and viewshed, coupled with an interesting nearby ditch and surrounding archaeology are to be covered separately in a detailed research paper.

Niton Down

9. Bury Lane: This lane descends from Niton Down towards Pan Lane and the centre of the village. It is broadly orientated towards the neck of land between Yarbury and Bulwarks Common and starts beside land that is called 'Bury' on the 1815 Alderman Mew map. Oscroft (2015) states that '*Byrig/Burh*' (Bury)...is almost invariably applied to prehistoric camps'. 'Kökeritz (1940) agrees that the name means 'fort, fortified place' and it was recorded in the Royal Survey of 1608 as 'Upper Burege'. There is no visible evidence of a defended structure being situated on this land, nor is one recorded on the IWHER. On the 1830s Dawes map, Bury has been renamed as 'Horse Close' and 'New Ground' and these names are retained on the 1840 Niton tithe map.

In the absence of a defended structure in the fields called Bury, one might speculate that they were named after the lane, rather than the other way round. If this were the case, then the place-name Bury Lane and its orientation towards the East Cliff plateau may suggest the presence of a defended structure elsewhere in the landscape.

The IWHER shows a possible round barrow identified from Aerial Photographs (APs) in the fields once called Bury as well as flint implements and debitage nearby. The PAS records several Roman coins in the vicinity of Bury Lane.

Other locations for defended sites in Niton parish

This initial research has shown that there are more 'castle-related' names in the local landscape than have been previously considered. Three possible scenarios for the location of a defended structure in Niton parish are suggested by the place-name evidence

- a) A cliff-top location on the East Cliff;
- b) A location somewhere on the Undercliff with defence-related place-names;
- c) A location further seaward than the existing Undercliff coastline which has since been eroded away.

The Bulwarks Common and Yarbury place-name areas on the clifftop, run in a staggered parallel, to the 'castle' place-names along the Undercliff coastline below suggesting that there could be a relationship between the land use of the higher plateau and the place-names of the shoreline below. Only the eastern slope of the East Cliff plateau is

without a defended structure place-name. Tithe maps also show the field names called 'Watch Houses' immediately to the south of Yarbury, along the cliff edge, which is covered in some detail in a separate paper by Thurbin (2023) about beacons in Niton's landscape.

The archaeological and topographic evidence suggests that the focus of a search for a pre-medieval defended position should be on the seaward-facing cliffs above the Niton Undercliff. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will focus on the Bulwarks Common and Yarbury areas of the East Cliff promontory plateau, with other areas discussed in the full report to be deposited with the IWHER.

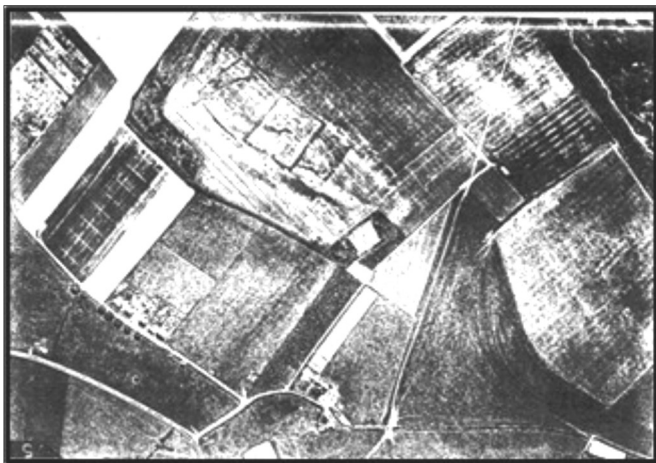


Fig. 4: East Cliff AP taken by O.G.S. Crawford in 1924

East Cliff Yarbury

O.G.S. Crawford, the pioneer of aerial photography with the Ordnance Survey, photographed Yarbury from the air in 1924 (Fig. 4) providing evidence of the Yarbury enclosures on the East Cliff plateau in their most intact form before severe agricultural erosion.

In his book *Wessex from the Air* (1928), Crawford describes a segment of the photograph that focuses on Yarbury's enclosures, stating:

'This photograph is published rather as a warning than as a discovery. The two rectangular enclosures have a remarkable resemblance to a Roman camp with an annexe. Nevertheless, there are some minor features which should put one on one's guard. The corners are not rounded, and the ditch fails to be continued round one. Three of the four sides of the smaller enclosure have no break, whereas if it were a Roman camp there should be some signs of entrances; nor are there any traces of traverses.'

Crawford is correct about being cautious in interpreting this single photograph of Yarbury, yet enlarging the enclosure areas even further would seem to reveal some unnoticed features.

Contrary to Crawford's interpretation of his AP, the central pronounced square enclosure does appear to have entrances on the northern and southern sides of its boundary. The northern opening is

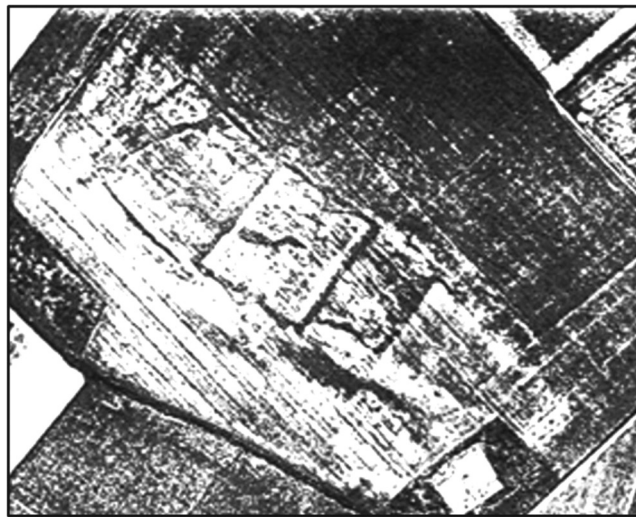


Fig. 5: Close up of the rectilinear enclosures on the Yarbury plateau (photo enhanced)

turned in, perhaps with a 'clavícula' arrangement projecting outside of the enclosure (Fig 5). The smaller southern entrance would also seem to have a similar feature inside the enclosure. Similar features, as described and illustrated by Jones (2012) are often associated with Roman encampments.

Whilst Crawford highlights that the corners of the central enclosure are not rounded, as one might find in Augustan examples, it is worth noting that not all Roman encampments were of 'playing card' design, especially where the local topography was used to advantage.

Crawford also pointed out that this central enclosure may have been altered in the past, 'to serve some different purpose' and the appearance of the central enclosure certainly seems to be more symmetrical and defined than the adjacent wider system of enclosures on the site. The alteration/reuse of ancient defended positions is well documented such as the introduction of a Roman fort within Hod Hill Hillfort (Stuart & Russell, 2017). Thurbin's paper on the Niton Beacon (2023) speculates that this central enclosure may have been re-used for the siting of a later beacon because of its intervisibility with other known beacon points on the Island.

The enclosures conjoin to create an irregular 'ladder-shaped' feature that traverses the width of the northern edge of the Yarbury plateau, extending down its western slope. Ladder-shaped and linear enclosures from the Iron Age are present in other locations in the UK such as in Yorkshire (Giles, 2007). The northern sections of the enclosures would be on the lee side of the plateau giving the area some protection from the wind. On the eastern side of Yarbury, there are parallel linear features running along the slope and also a linear depression running along the slope of the northern side of Yarbury below the enclosures. This being said, caution should be exercised in case they are the remnants of field divisions.

Other APs also provide useful data. The Luftwaffe WW2 APs (c.1943) were taken from a great height making it difficult to see Yarbury's features in detail, although the linear features on the slopes of Yarbury

and parts of the banked enclosures recorded by Crawford can just be seen in places, as can the ramp on Bulwark Common.

The linear feature on the northern slopes of Yarbury can be seen on the OS APs (1969), with an extended line of vegetation on the eastern slope of Yarbury merging into a narrow linear feature at the end. There are also some soil marks suggesting the location of the banked enclosures recorded by Crawford. The Aerofilm APs (1993) show part of these enclosures as dark green crop marks as well as a linear feature on the northern and eastern slopes of Yarbury.

The LiDAR results for the East Cliff plateau area have yielded some interesting features that would seem to corroborate what can be seen from the APs and on the ground. Barrack Shute is perhaps the most accessible southern route from the sea towards any settlements on the East and West Cliffs and the beginning of the Eastern Yar Valley. A defended position on the East Cliff above it would certainly give a strategic advantage over an attacking force.

The view of the plateau from its northern, landward-facing aspect, reveals the two land masses covering nearly 35 hectares rising above the village of Niton and the Eastern Yar, (Fig. 6). The elevated position of the East Cliff plateau gives it a good vantage across the Eastern Yar valley. If linear defences were present on its slopes, they would provide some protection from landward attack.

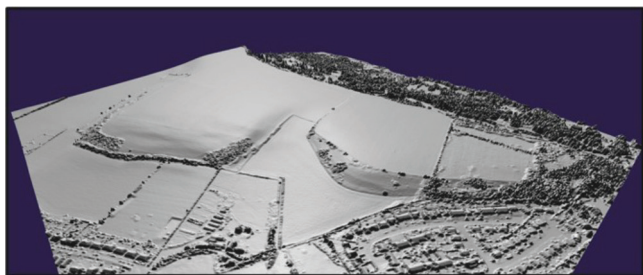


Fig. 6: LiDAR of northern view of the East Cliff plateau showing Yarbury and Bulwarks Common side by side

The LiDAR results of Yarbury show interesting linear features on its slopes as indicated by the white arrows in Fig. 7. The red arrows point out the east-west linear feature that divides the Yarbury fields from the Watch House fields. This can be seen on some old maps and extends across from the eastern slopes of Yarbury into the field above Bulwarks

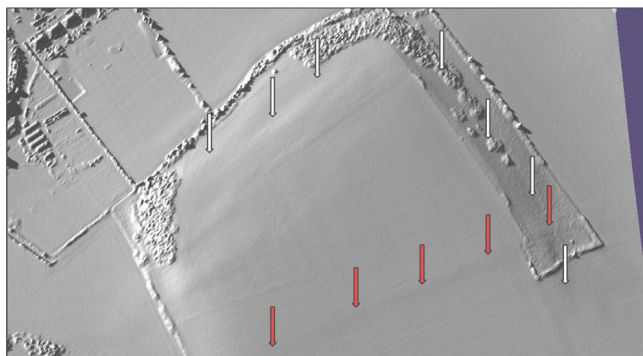


Fig. 7: LiDAR of the Yarbury section of East Cliff plateau showing linear features.

Common. On the Gardner map (1793) it culminates into what appears to be a rectangular enclosure.

Site visits revealed that despite being extensively ploughed, it is still just possible to see some slightly raised areas where the banks of the Yarbury enclosures once stood, as well as a linear feature on its eastern slope. This side of the plateau would perhaps be its weakest point defended as its slope is much shallower closer towards the cliff edge than elsewhere around the plateau. At this point, LiDAR shows that there is a double linear feature, with another linear feature from the steeper part of the eastern slope rising up to join it (Fig. 8). Whilst their positioning might seem suitable as part of a defended feature, caution must be exercised in case they are the remnants of earlier field divisions.

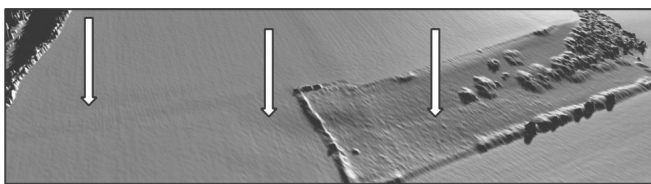


Fig. 8 LiDAR of the linear features on the eastern slope of Yarbury

The raised linear feature that rises up from the bottom of the eastern slope and crosses the plateau to culminate in ridges above Bulwarks Common, could suggest that it once formed part of the Yarbury enclosure's defences.

Another secondary source of information about the Yarbury enclosures is an early 19th-century model referred to by Crawford (1928) as in the possession of Miss E Leith of Lower Niton and studied by Hubert Poole who then described it to him in a letter. This is now on display in the Dinosaur Isle Museum in Sandown (Fig. 9). Although it was repaired and repainted in the early 2000s and, as a result, may have lost some of the Yarbury enclosure details described by Poole, it does agree with LiDAR and fieldwalking evidence.



Fig. 9: Section of the model showing the East Cliff plateau.

Bulwarks Common

Crawford's 1924 AP shows linear features running along the slope of Bulwarks Common (Fig.10) and the ramp that cuts through it. The Alderman Mew

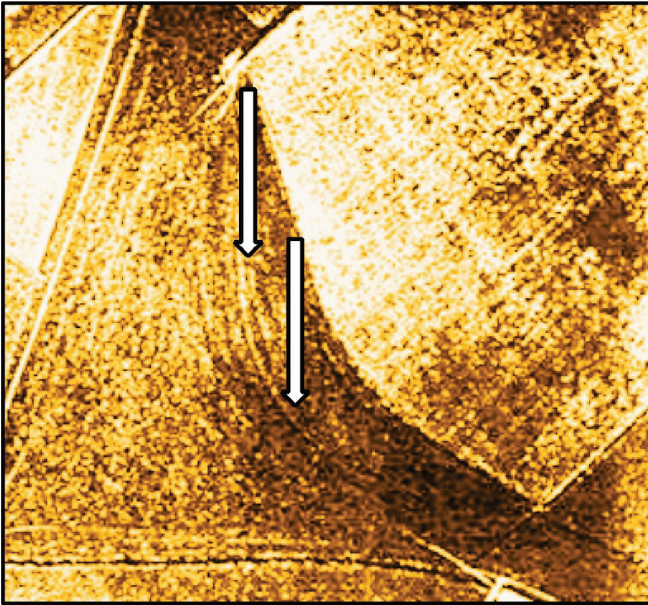


Fig. 10: Crawford AP (1924) (enhanced) showing the linear features

Map (1815) and Niton Tithe Map (1840) did not show any strip farming on its slopes to suggest causation. While Crawford focused in 1928 on the Yarbury enclosures seen in 1924, he did not show or comment on the features on Bulwarks Common beside it.

A 1946 RAF AP (5373 3G/TUD/UK 162 F/12) shows the slope of Bulwarks Common, with a linear feature running along it and a ramp cutting across it to the plateau.

The 1969 OS APs (167, 180, 182) of the East Cliff plateau show the ramp on the side of Bulwarks Common with a square-like feature/rounded right-angles at the top (Fig. 10). It is difficult to tell if these are just the remnants of a stock enclosure, crop/vegetation marks or perhaps an entrance of some description.

The same 1969 OS APs show linear features on the slopes of Bulwark Common, as do the 1986 CUCAP APs (RCT8-IT 273 and RCT8-IT 274-5). The 1971 BKS APs (152466-152688, 152664, 152718, 152714 + 152666) show the ramp crossing the slope of Bulwarks Common. There are some markings in the field called 'Ridges' on the plateau above the slopes of Bulwarks Common that are possibly geological or old field systems. There is a double linear feature running at the base of the slope of Bulwarks Common with lines of vegetation running intermittently around the slope suggesting perhaps soil disturbance beneath. The Aerofilm APs (687-1145) show square markings that are possibly remnants of field systems or enclosures in Ridges above Bulwarks Common. The ramp on Bulwarks Common's slope can be seen. There is a linear feature at the base of Bulwarks Common's slope and another line of vegetation on a bend in the slope, suggesting ground disturbance beneath.

A closer look at Bulwarks Common on the LiDAR data appears to show linear features across its bank (Fig. 12). The earth ramp that links the public footpath to the top of the plateau can also just be seen cutting through the trees, to the right of the LiDAR picture, marked by a red arrow.



Fig. 11: Angular features at the top of the ramp of Bulwarks Common

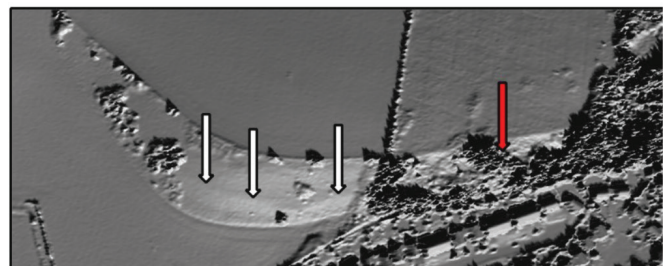


Fig. 12: LiDAR of the slope of Bulwarks Common. The white arrows show the linear feature. The red arrow points to the location of the ramp.

Fieldwalking

Fieldwalking results of the available sections of the East Cliff plateau are interesting. The flint finds were numerous and are likely to date from the Mesolithic to the Early Bronze Age. There were some intensive areas of debitage across the site and a large number of rounded beach pebbles, possibly used as slingshots, were found across the plateau. A small number of pottery sherds, mostly post-medieval, were present with butchered animal bone and fragments of oyster shells, suggesting possible domestic waste from middens or the use of night soil. Some of the linear features shown on the APs and LiDAR data, including the ramp rising up the side of Bulwarks Common can still be seen on the ground.

The AP, LiDAR and fieldwalking results show linear features across the slopes of the Yarbury area, the eastern side of the plateau and Bulwarks Common. Without invasive archaeology or geophysical survey, it is not yet possible to determine with certainty whether these features are geological, or human-made.

West Cliff: Brokenbury Down

There is a possibility that Brokenbury may also have been a pre-medieval defended position. Nearby archaeological evidence suggests pre-medieval occupation in the area, and the place name 'Brokenbury' may indicate a 'broken fort', having been lost to erosion. Had occupation at Brokenbury been concurrent to that at Yarbury, then they may have complimented each other in terms of viewshed and defence across the southern coastline and inland. A full analysis of the archaeology of this site with references will be submitted to the IWHER as part of the complete report.

Hillforts on the Isle of Wight

If Yarbury/Bulwarks Common on the East Cliff and Brockenbury on the West Cliff were pre-medieval defended positions, then they might be regarded as promontory or cliff hillforts. A review of the literature on British prehistoric hillforts/defended structures shows that there are limited or no references and analysis of such structures on the Isle of Wight. Harding (1976, 2012), Avery (1993) and Cunliffe (1995) do not show any such sites on the Island. However, Tomalin (2022) discusses four of the currently known Iron Age hillforts and ramparted enclosures on the Island but does not include the sites at Bonchurch (Historic England Research Records - Monument Number 460949) and Tennyson Down (Bowden, Jamieson and Winton, 2015) which are suggested to be Iron Age and are mentioned later in this paper.

Maddison (2019) includes the hillforts of the Isle of Wight in the distribution maps of hillforts and their features in Britain and Ireland, as do Lock & Ralston (2022) but do not offer a specific analysis of them. The Atlas of Hillforts in Britain and Ireland website shows four possible hillforts sites at Castle Hill, Brighstone; Chillerton Down; Bonchurch, and; Yaverland. The source of this information appears to have been drawn from Wrench's unpublished essay on 'Evidence of Hillforts in the Isle of Wight', (2012). Castle Hill, near Mottistone, is described by Brown (2021) as likely to be a Bronze Age or Iron Age 'defended enclosure...rather than a true hillfort... [but] its unusual shape may belie something different'.

Wrench states (2012) that this site is assumed to be of Iron Age date but that no datable evidence has yet been produced by these earthworks. The research being conducted by IWNHAS at the time of writing may bring clarity as to its age and purpose.

The earthwork on Chillerton Down was described by Dunning (1947). It was shown as a large univallate fort on a distribution map by Forde-Johnston (1976) and included as a promontory or pastoral fort in other publications (Bradley 1971; Hogg 1979; Basford 1980; Cunliffe 2005; Payne *et al* 2006; Waller 2006; OS map of Ancient Britain 2016). Brown (2021) notes that the Chillerton earthwork is unfinished and suggests that a distinctive island population perhaps operated with different structures. Tomalin (2022) says that the date of this unfinished Iron Age earthwork is uncertain and that only one fragment of Vectis Ware

pottery has been found within the hillfort suggesting that it was 'neither completed or permanently occupied'. Trott & Tomalin (2003) postulate that leading up to the Roman conquest, the Island may have been divided into two polities; the west (and the Chillerton site) under the Durotriges and the east (and the Yaverland site) under the Atrebates.

It is possible that the large ditch at Yaverland, revealed by the Time Team excavations in 2001, may have extended all the way around the hilltop but further archaeological research is needed to prove this conclusively.

Of the fourth potential location at Bonchurch, Wrench (2012) says the remains of these earthworks have been suggested to be an Iron Age promontory fort by Historic England that has suffered erosion by the sea and speculates that they may have once extended considerably out to sea. Wrench also says, *'Whether there were other such sites that have already been lost to the sea around the south coast of the Isle of Wight is not possible to say, but there may have been. They would have overlooked, and possibly controlled, coastal and cross-Channel sea-trade routes around the island'*.

The Yarbury/Bulwarks Common and Brockenbury sites are located on cliffs facing the English Channel, as is the enclosure on Tennyson Down. After earthwork analysis on the latter, Bowden, Jamieson and Winton (2015) say that,

'While the possibility that this is a Neolithic enclosure cannot be ruled out, it is more likely to be a later prehistoric feature, probably of late Bronze Age or Iron Age date'.

This enclosure is in the viewshed of the Brockenbury site and is worthy of inclusion in future research into viewsheds between known and purported hillfort (and defended enclosure sites) on the Island. Indeed, further research into the validity of such sites is long overdue. This paper has revealed a possible location for one, possibly two pre-medieval defended sites in the Niton area which will be researched further as part of the wider discussions of such sites on the Island.

Summary

The paper has sought to provide an initial point of reference for potential locations of pre-medieval defended sites within the parish of Niton, identifying nine possible place-names which have potential as indicators of such sites.

The sites of the place-names along the coastline of Niton Undercliff and on Niton Down have no suitable topographic advantages and no archaeological evidence pointing to the direct presence of a former defended site within them at these sea-level locations. These can now be dismissed as indicators of defended sites. Instead, two other place-name locations on the cliff top, Yarbury and Bulwarks Common, have suitable topographic viewsheds, features and a body of archaeological evidence suggesting they could have been possible defended sites in pre-medieval times.

It is possible then, that the line of defended site related place-names along the Niton Undercliff coastline are a reference to the Yarbury/Bulwarks

Common sites above them on the East Cliff plateau, their names perhaps suggesting a destination point for those arriving by sea, a recognition of the most dominating structure in the area. These place-names along the coastline could also be connected to the Brockenbury site on the West Cliff.

It is the East Cliff plateau with its archaeological, topographic advantages and place-name evidence that currently offers the strongest indication that a pre-medieval defended structure, in the form of a coastal promontory hillfort, stood on this site, rather than along the coastline beneath it.

Yarbury has at least three enclosures, identified in Crawford's 1924 AP but not fully investigated. Magnification of Crawford's AP suggests the central square enclosure may have north and south entrances and possible internal features across all the enclosures. This AP, along with later APs and LiDAR, show linear features that might be defended in nature running along Yarbury's slopes and the eastern flank of the East Cliff plateau. Its strategic position, Neolithic to Late Bronze Age flint fieldwalking finds, together with Iron Age and Roman coins on the slopes and the plateau, and the topographic evidence from the secondary source of the 19th Century model, also strengthen the case for a defended position at this site.

The slope of Bulwarks Common is shown to have at least one linear feature and a ramp, and Neolithic to Late Bronze Age flints and Roman coins on the plateau above it. The APs and LiDAR evidence show at least one linear feature running along its slope.

It is suggested that the East Cliff Plateau, containing Yarbury and Bulwarks Common, could be the location for a pre-medieval fortification site, with the nearby Brockenbury Down on the West Cliff remaining of interest to the wider subject.

It is proposed that the evidence researched so far shows that the East Cliff could be the location of a promontory hillfort, in use during the Iron Age, and perhaps later. It is further proposed that for the ease of reference as a hillfort in the landscape, future discussions about the East Cliff site should refer to it as 'Yarbury', that being, 'the fort by the Yar'.

Future recommendations

There are important archaeological questions to be answered by future archaeological fieldwork at the Yarbury and Brockenbury sites in Niton:

The date of the Yarbury enclosures remains uncertain. Further archaeological investigation should focus on defining the date, extent, forms, use, and phasing of these enclosures. The function of the Yarbury enclosures is suggested to be a defended one, however possible trading sea traffic associated with 'castle' place-name sites on the Niton Undercliff and the Iron Age communities along the coastline, should be investigated.

The East Cliff plateau, as far as is permissible and accessible, should be geophysically surveyed to ascertain the extent of any sub-surface remains.

Initial inspection of the surface finds suggests that the East Cliff plateau was occupied or used earlier, in the Mesolithic/Neolithic to Late Bronze Age periods. This should be investigated by further

detailed analysis of those finds.

The slopes of Yarbury and Bulwarks Common require archaeological fieldwork investigation to ascertain their date, function, survival of earthworks and any associated remains;

The potential for a 'lost' defended site on the West Cliff at Brockenbury should continue to be considered in future research to determine its possibility;

Historic England should be asked to undertake a programme of aerial photography and airborne laser scanning (LiDAR) over all of the sites on the East and West Cliffs of Niton over a period of time. The results should be assessed to identify the surviving features and landscape changes of the earthworks in response to the threat of agricultural and coastal erosion.

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