

Castle Neroche: The Second World War military reuse of a multiphase fortification.

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Background

Castle Neroche is thought to have had four main phases of development, the Iron Age, as a hill fort, the post-conquest Norman period when it was developed first as a ringwork within the fort and then later as a motte and bailey and the Anarchy period when it was refortified with a keep on the motte.ⁱ

Less well known is its role during the Second World War, as the centre of a secret communications network that covered parts of Somerset, Devon and Dorset. The high ground of Castle Neroche proved ideal for wireless communication over long distances.

Auxiliary Units was a secret organisation set up in the summer of 1940 to operate behind the lines in case of a German invasion.ⁱⁱ There were two elements. An Operational branch who were groups of saboteurs and the Special Duties branch which consisted of groups of spies with couriers. As the war progressed, they were provided with wireless sets, with one or more civilian operators, commonly from professions such as the clergy or medicine, who might be expected to continue in their work after an invasion. As each group of spies fed their information back to an operator, so each network of wireless operators fed their information back to a central hub, known as the Zero station. Each Zero station consisted of an above ground hut, with an underground bunker known as an Operational Base at most sites. The hut was commonly referred to as a Met hut, as the standard explanation for their presence was routine meteorological recording. From here intelligence would be passed by to army headquarters. As well as the civilian personnel, there was an Intelligence Officer for each area. Also under the Special Duties umbrella was Auxiliary Units Signals, which included all the Royal Signals personnel who set up and maintained the network and Auxiliary Units ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) who provide female operators for some of Zero stations.

It appears that construction of the wireless network in Somerset was a late addition, most likely being constructed in 1942. Sgt Alf Ellis, Royal Signals, recorded a visit to BSM (Buckland St Mary) on 15th July 1942 "for inspection of site" in his diary.ⁱⁱⁱ On 13th August 1942, Commander Beatrice Temple, in charge of all ATS personnel in Auxiliary Units, recorded in her diary a visit to Buckland St Mary, and comments on Subaltern Kitty Hills, one of the ATS operators, in relation to this, indicating that the site was in operation with 2 or 3 ATS staff.^{iv} At a number of sites, the ATS operators were removed to be replaced by Royal Signals soldiers.^v The Castle Neroche site was one such site, with Lance Corporal Arthur Gabbitas being stationed at the site during 1943. He records that the underground Operational Base (OB) was in the Castle ramparts and that the men were billeted at Castle farm which was within the ramparts, with Mr and Mrs Gent. There was also an above ground hut, known as a Met hut, for day to day use as a wireless station, with the OB only being used for exercises or following an invasion. He referred to the site both as Castle Neroche and Buckland St Mary.^{vi vii} His surviving pass was dated 25th June 1943, suggesting he moved to the site around this date.^{viii} Also mentioned as operators at this site were Corporal J Mackie, Sig. H C Norris and Sig. Albert E Leaverland. Their telephone number was Buckland St Mary 228. The men maintained the outstations in this network, known as Chirnside, including 1) Bewley Down, 2) Widworthy, Puriton, Edgarley, Puckington. They also provided links to Osterley 1 and 2 in Lyme Regis and Bridport because intervening hills meant that the links to Osterley Zero were poor. There were wireless links to the Golding zero station at Hestercombe and Auxiliary Units Headquarters at

Coleshill House. These links are known from a map compiled in July 1944 by Major RMA Jones, commander of Auxiliary Units Signals.^{ix} This indicates that the site remained operational until this point, others stations being known to have closed down before this. The site was visited in the immediate post war period as a child by David Hunt who recalled a hut within a barbed wire compound, with telegraph poles and wires running to the hut.^x

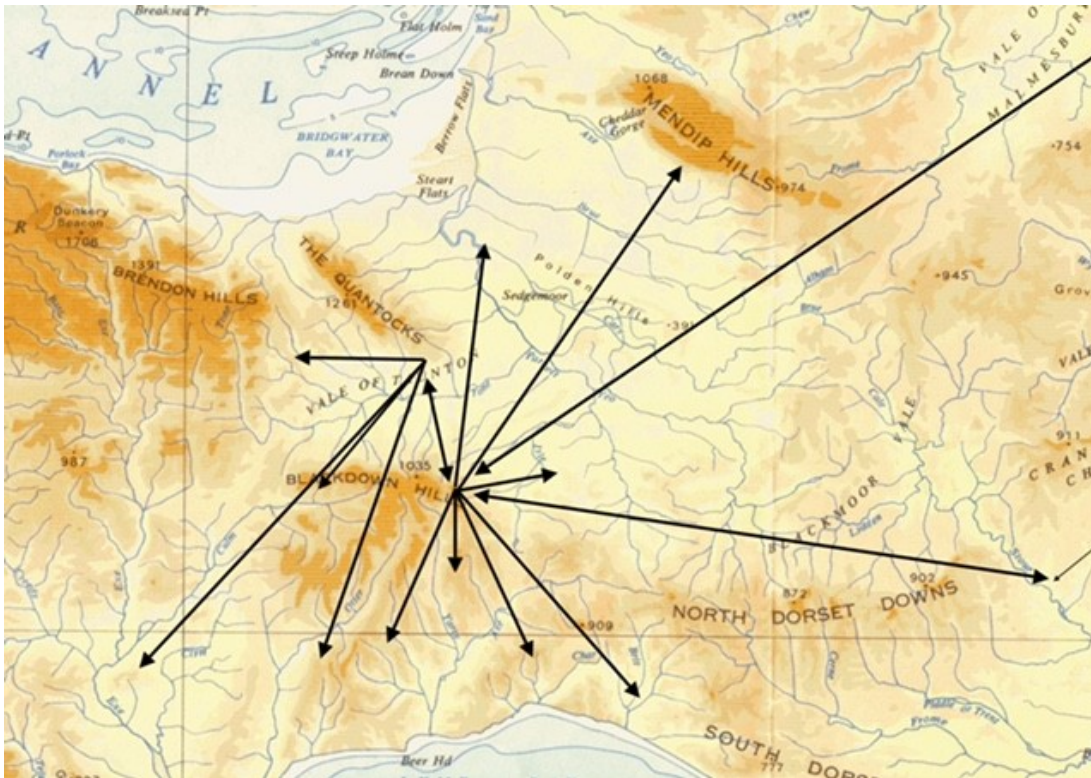


Fig 1: Map indicating the approximate locations of wireless links from Castle Neroche. The link heading off the map to the northeast is to Coleshill House

Investigation

On 9th March 2017, the site was visited by CART members W Ward, C Perry and M Allen. This followed a previous visit by David Hunt in 2008 recorded on the Somerset HER.^{xi xii} At that time, a local resident identified the location of the OB as in the area of a large hole, marked as (h) on the English Heritage survey plan fig 2.^{xiii} The site is a scheduled monument and therefore investigation was confined to walking the site and surveying with tapes. Photographs were taken. Alignments were recorded with the iPhone compass app.

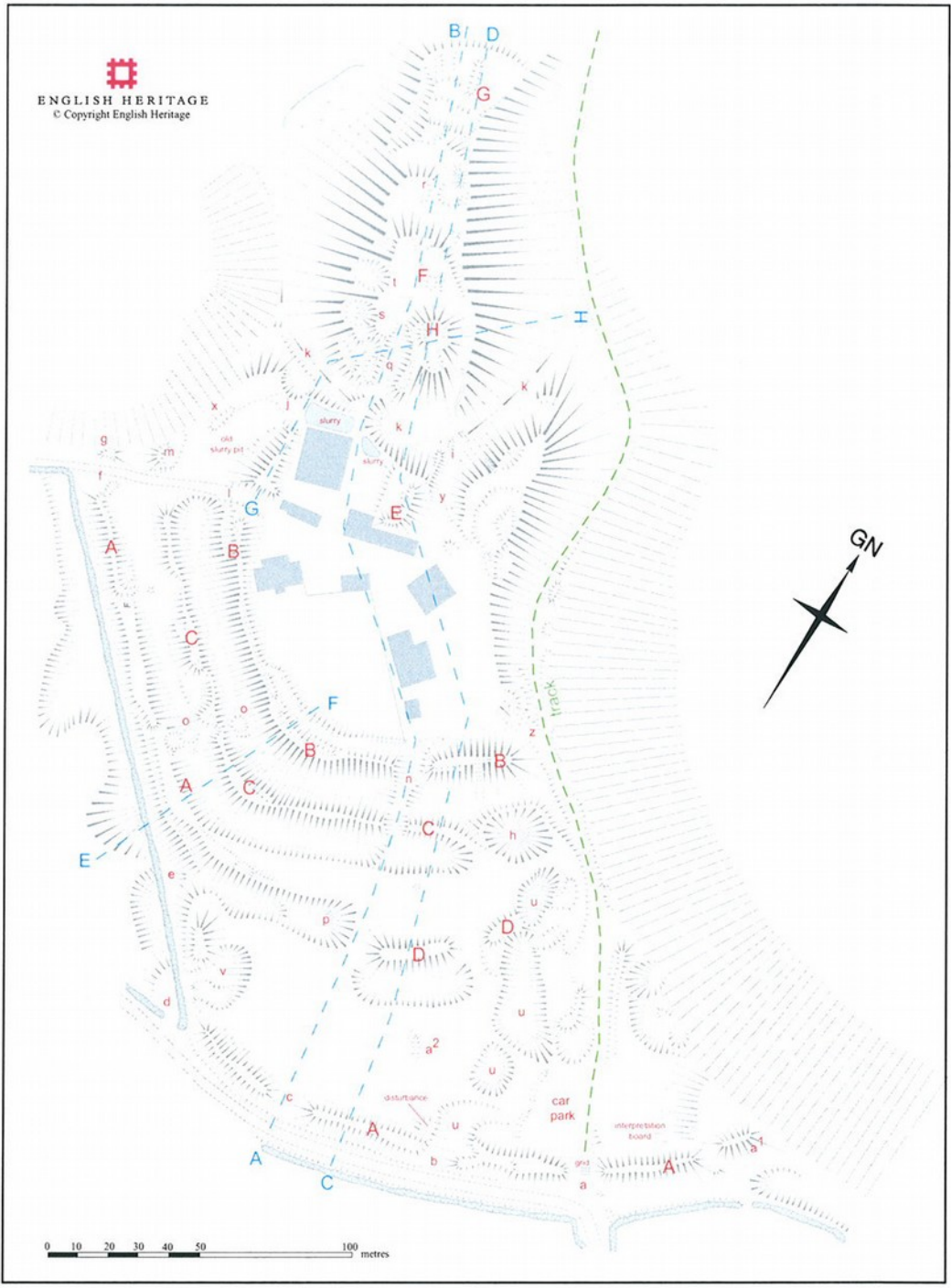


Fig 2: English Heritage annotated plan of Castle Neroche based on geophysical survey (English Heritage via C Webster)

Findings

Structure 1 (Concrete base)

NGR ST 2733 1568. The base was measured to be 6.1m (20 feet) x 3.05m (10 feet). The long edge was aligned at 48 degrees (approximately northeast). There were two upright wooden blocks attached to the base by metal brackets and bolts of modern construction. On the edge of the base the remains of mortar was seen consistent with bricks being attached. The width of the mortar was 11 cm with the imprint of ends at 23 cm intervals. This was found on the southwest edge and northwest edge. At the centre of the northeast edge two small rectangular depressions were found in the concrete. A search was made for evidence of a step which might indicate an entrance, but none was seen. A small piece of stiff multi strand bare wire with Verde Gris was found on the bank adjacent to the hut base. (Fig 2). This was left at the site after recording.



Structure 1. Looking southeast towards perimeter bank. (W Ward)



Structure 1. Piece of wire found on bank immediately behind (W Ward)

Structure 2 (Hole and rubble)

NGR ST 27244 15740. This structure was a large excavation hole with a steep south face and lower north face with a more gradual gradient. There was evidence of forestry works with cut stumps, of small trees and a large spread of wood chips concentrated in the northern quadrant. There was a small (60cm) mound in the centre of the depression composed of loose rubble. On the south face there was a spread of loose building rubble. Most was comprised of fragments of concrete aggregate blocks. Other items identified included a complete aggregate block, two fragments of earthenware pipe, two metal brake shoes and a smooth concrete multi angle piece that appeared to be ridge end from a sloped roof.



Structure 2. Looking southeast with rubble debris visible on the steep bank (W Ward)

Structure 3) Buried glazed pipe

While studying the south edge of structure h, a small hole was noted on the ground approximately 60cm back from the edge. Clearance of loose leaf litter revealed the hole to have been created by soil being washed away into an open joint between two glazed earthenware pipes. Only the very top edge could be seen, but enough was visible to indicate that the two sections were aligned in a southeast direction. The south face of structure h was examined to see if the pipe run extend to emerge here, but no evidence was found.



Structure 3. Open joint between two glazed pipes at base of small hole. (W Ward)

Structure 4 (Aerial tree)

NGR ST 27245 15715. The tree at 21.3m on the alignment south of structure 2 was found to have a long groove in the bark extending from close to the base to at least half way up on the southeast side. This groove ran around the scars of lateral branches that have fallen. At approximately 1m from the ground, the path of the groove changed and could be faintly followed curving around to the northeast while dropping in height to emerge between two large roots. Clearing loose leaves at this location revealed a length of wire protruding from the bark. At irregular intervals, fragments of wire could be seen protruding from the groove. At the lower locations, it could be seen that the wire consisted of two copper wires, one enclosed in white insulation and the other in black insulation of a plastic nature. These two wires were then enclosed in a slightly greasy white sleeve with this surrounded by a black outer sleeve. A length of this wire could be seen hanging across a small branch growing from the trunk midway up the tree. A search of other trees and stumps of mature trees in the surrounding area did not reveal any other wires.



Structure 4. Aerial tree. A groove is visible running up the bark with protruding wire fragments at intervals.

Interpretation and discussion

The investigation identified four areas probably associated with the presence of Auxiliary Units Signals at Castle Neroche.

Structure 1 is a concrete base with evidence around the edge of a structure built on it and thus is most likely to be a hut base. This is supported by a large shadow consistent with a single storey building in this position visible on the 1946/7 RAF air photo of the site.^{xiv} The size is smaller than the control station at Ousden (5.8 x13m) and Met hut at Vollis Hill (9.1x 3.7m), but similar in size to the surviving Met hut base at the Bloreng (5x3.3m).^{xv xvi xvii} The mortar patterns around the edge indicate either a brick structure or a structure with a brick base. The holes may represent securing holes for door bolts. The piece of wire, most likely copper based on the verde gris appearance, may have been associated with the hut and its position would be consistent with being discarded, either while the hut was in use or during demolition. The wire is curled around at one end suggesting it was connected to a terminal. It seems highly likely that this represents the remaining hut base for an Auxiliary Units Met Hut. This is one of only a handful of such sites with extant remains.

Structure 2 is a large excavated hole. Analysis of historic mapping indicates that this hole was not present in 1854^{xviii}, but was present and of similar outline by 1903.^{xix} Aggregate blocks and earthenware pipes are building components of Auxiliary Units Operational Bases, though none of the remains are diagnostic of an OB. The vehicle brake shoes were of post war design and may indicate dumping at the site. The concrete ridge end suggests material from a building other than an OB. It is possible that the OB was built in the existing excavation, a technique used at other Auxiliary Units sites.

Structure 3 are two glazed pipes in situ, joined end to end. In the context they almost certainly represent part of the ventilation system for an OB. They are a standard feature of most OBs and typically there are series of pipes radiating from the OB. As the some are likely to open in the direction of the prevailing to assist a through flow of fresh air and others to provide exhaust ventilation for the generator that equipped the OB for zero stations. As the pipe runs tend to be straight, the OB is likely to have been located at one end of the run or the other, either in Structure 2 or buried between structures 2 and 4.

Structure 4 is an aerial tree associated with an OB. The groove running up the tree with protruding wire is diagnostic. The aerial feeder wire is placed in a v-shaped notch with the bark, with the tip of the v removed, replaced to conceal it. As the tree subsequently grows, the groove in the bark widens. The wire trapped in the bark gradually stretches until it breaks. The broken ends then protrude as the tree continues to grow. Based on other zero station sites, such as that at Norwich in Sussex, it is likely that there would be multiple aerial trees on the site.

Further investigation

The scheduled monument status of the site restricts further investigation to non-invasive methods. The hut base could be recorded in greater detail with drawing and more detailed measurements. Aerials would have been required for the wireless sets and remains of these may be identifiable with a metal detector survey or magnetometer survey of the immediate surroundings, including mature trees.

A magnetometer survey of the flat area between structures 2 and 4 is likely to identify the course of the ventilation pipe system which appears to be quite shallow. If the OB remains buried between these structures the magnetometer survey might detect the buried iron as a major anomaly.

Typically the entrance shaft would be built from aggregate blocks and would be 2 feet square. The main chamber would be around 6.5m long with Zero stations appearing to conform to a common plan.^{xx} At a number of other Zero station sites, the shaft was reduced in height by one or two courses and capped with concrete, sometimes shuttered with corrugated iron. The escape tunnel was normally built from 2 foot diameter concrete pipe sections and might also be detectable. The survey may possibly detect the aerial feeder wire running to the base of the aerial tree. Alternatively the wire may be traced with a metal detector survey. This might also detect wire running up other trees or in the tree stumps. The remaining wire would provide a positive control for this technique.

The nature of aerials concealed in trees has not been recorded. It is likely that lateral aerials were run along the upper side of branches. This could be investigated by climbing the tree or from a mechanical hoist if this could be brought in without causing damage to the site.

The men were billeted in the nearby farm and it is possible that structures in the farmyard were built for or reused as workshops for servicing the wireless equipment, or parking the vehicles required for their work. This farm area has not been studied with WW2 activity in mind.

- i Castle Neroche: a motte and bailey castle and earlier defences above Castle Plantation
Historic England List entry Number: 1008252
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1008252>
- ii The Last Ditch, David Lampe, Cassell 1968
- iii Alf Ellis Diary, transcript and copy of original, British Resistance Archive (BRA)
- iv Beatrice Temple Diary, Transcript and photocopy of handwritten copy, BRA
- v National Archives, WO
- vi Arthur Gabbitas, personal communications
- vii Arthur Gabbitas, Audio Interview 29463, Imperial War Museum
- viii Arthur Gabbitas, photocopy of pass, BRA
- ix National Archives WO (Jones map)
- x David Hunt, personal communication
- xi Somerset HER 28026: Second World War Auxilliary Unit Special Duties radio station (Chirnside 0), Castle Neroche <http://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/record/28026>
- xii Somerset HER 44544: Second World War Auxiliary Unit Special Duties radio hut, Castle Neroche <http://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/record/44544>
- xiii Newman, P., 2003, Castle Neroche, Staple Fitzpaine, Somerset; An Earthwork Survey (Unpublished English Heritage Archaeological Investigation Report Series AI/12/2003)
- xiv Somerset HER mapping <http://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/#>
- xv Churchill's Most Secret Special Duties Branch, Simak & Pye
- xvi Defence of Britain site report S0012679
- xvii William Ward, unpublished survey
- xviii Warre, Rev. F., 1854, 'Castle Neroche' *Somerset Archaeol. & Nature Hist.* 5, 29-48
https://archive.org/details/proceedings05some_0
- xix Gray H. St George, 'Excavations at Castle Neroche, Somerset, 1903, *Somerset Archaeol. & Nature Hist.* 49, 23-53
https://ia802509.us.archive.org/21/items/proceedings49some_0/proceedings49some_0.pdf
- xx Norwich Zero Station, unpublished report, E Simak & A Pye, BRA