

The fort in the (former) forest – Archaeological dowsing at Berry Castle

Nigel Twinn (July 2016)

The pine plantations overlooking Huntshaw Mill near Torrington are hardly comparable with the tropical rainforest. Yet, here in darkest north Devon, an ancient tranche of the built environment has recently reappeared – after a long period of abandonment and neglect.

Like many of its contemporaries, in the decades following WWII Berry Castle ‘Iron Age Hill Fort’ was overplanted with fir trees as part of the drive for national self sufficiency – at least as far as wood was concerned. The comprehensive nature of the desecration of the archaeology – with larch planted in, amongst and over every square metre of the site – makes the random flourishing of invasive mangroves at places like Angkor seem little more than a trivial nuisance.

However, with the larches removed down to stump level as part of the disease management programme, and the surrounding undergrowth largely cleared, for the first time in many years both archaeologists and dowsers have regained unimpeded access to a virtually virgin site of great historical interest.

The Devon Dowsers and the Tamar Dowsers were present to support the first Open Day of the Friends of Berry Castle (FoB). While there were plenty of passing punters willing to have a go at dowsing – some for the first time – and plenty of us willing to give them a steer in a positive direction – the core of the day’s action was in what we were able to dowse for ourselves.

Having been tipped off in advance that there would be the presentation of a hot-off-the-press geophysical survey, I was keen to get some flags in the ground before I became distracted by interested bystanders and, more importantly, before any of us had seen the output from the geophys.

Annie Holland and myself took it upon ourselves to find the etheric imprint of a round house or hut circle (and I had found at least one during a brief recce a few weeks earlier). We had no idea at this stage whether the stone base of the structure had been robbed out by subsequent development, or whether some of the original foundations lay several feet down under a tsunami of pine needles. Having found what purported to be a hut with relative ease, we then doubled up the process by flagging up both the inside and the outside walls of the dwelling. In fact, the most difficult part of this process lay not in the dowsing, but in finding places to insert the marker flags, such was the density of the natural stone layer just a few inches below ground level.

With the event about to open to the public, we marked out a second, larger ring imprint a couple of metres away. I subsequently discovered that this second hut circle was situated both plumb centre on the largest energy line to cross the site and also on the widest ‘Watkins’ ley traversing the Castle. The plot thickened a bit further later in the day when I asked a couple of novices to see if they could find a hut circle from scratch and, slightly embarrassingly, they did so – and much closer to where I had voiced my original dowsing request. I was forced to the conclusion that ‘the universe’ had directed

me to the most interesting nearby roundhouse, rather than to the one that was technically the closest. Hmm.

Towards the end of the afternoon, one of the archaeologists (who had admitted to some initial scepticism towards dowsing to us – seemingly because we didn't 'know how it worked') made a world-premiere presentation of the recently derived and much anticipated geophysical results. Much to his surprise, 'our' two hut circles appeared on the plan (to the extent that you can see anything meaningful on such pixelated output). He was very pleased; we were very pleased; and I was most pleased that we had made an amenable local professional friend, if not actually yet a full convert.

To add further weight to the 'co-incidence' of our findings, Devon Dowser Peter Mullen had dowsed the whole site from his home, prior to the event. Again the two hut imprints showed up clearly on his remotely dowsed map.

Another member of FoB had brought his drone to the event and was busily engaged in taking aerial shots and video flypasts of the exhibitors and the visitors. I am hoping he will send me a couple of still images from his footage, so that we can attempt a more academic verification of our findings.

The rest of the day was spent teaching those attending as individuals or in groups. As ever, most picked up the arcane art quite quickly, and some of them clearly had lot more natural talent for divining than I will ever generate. The sight of me attempting to teach a platoon or army cadets to dowse en masse engendered some amusement amongst my colleagues (although to be fair several of them did actually pick it up OK). Their Commander later mentioned to me that he thought it would be a useful survival skill to teach his troops and mentally logged it away for further consideration. Founder of the BSD, and retired Royal Engineer, Colonel A H Bell, might have been proud of me!

For the record, Berry earthworks dowse as never having been a Castle and, although on a Hill, were never a 'Fort' as such. At its prime it was a stockaded settlement of 15-20 dwellings, with defences primarily to keep domestic animals in and wild ones out. It had never been attacked, and no one had been killed there. We dowsed a few crematory graves just inside the enclosure, but these may well have predated the erection of the stone banks and timber fencing.

There was also the dowsable outline of a straight-sided, broadly rectangular, substantially wooden building, occupied from the 9th century onwards. However, that needed more time and would have to be re-dowsed another day.

Many thanks to Ann White of FoB for inviting us to their inaugural event, and to Clinton Estates for allowing all of us permissive access. Thanks, too, to Pete & Jenny Bousfield for the loan of their gazebo – for which we were extremely grateful on an unseasonably sunny and humid day in this part of the world.