

HISTORIC LANDSCAPE SURVEY OF LUNDY: AN INTRODUCTION

By

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An historic landscape survey of Lundy is scheduled to be undertaken by National Trust staff and volunteers over four years, beginning with a two week season from April 21st to 5th May 1990. This forms part of a wider initiative within the National Trust, designed to provide continuous coverage of Trust properties as well as assisting with the development of management plans (Thackray 1986). Detailed large-scale archaeological survey has already been undertaken in a number of other areas, for example at West Penwith and on neolithic stone axe factory sites in Cumbria.

The objective of the project is to produce a detailed, measured survey of all man-made landscape features on the island, ranging from evidence of prehistoric and medieval occupation to the industrial remains and other historical survivals of the more recent past. Existing records will be incorporated where appropriate, but the majority of the survey will be the product of new measurement by EDM (electronic distance measuring) theodolite survey and detailed large-scale drawings. The EDM operates by means of an infra-red beam reflected from a target back to the instrument allowing considerable accuracy (a few millimetres per kilometre) in the measurement of distances and angles.

Two short seasons of survey have already been undertaken: in 1988 a survey of the Marisco Castle and surrounding earthworks, and in 1989, the establishment of fixed control points around the island on which the new survey will be based. The results of the castle survey are presented in fig. 1 and provide an example of the information such survey methods are likely to produce for other parts of the island over the next four years. The plan affords comparison with that presented by Dunmore (1982, 155). Of particular interest is the additional detail available for earthworks south of the castle keep as well as structural remains within the curtain wall. The track leading to Benson's Cave is clearly visible as are the three terrace-structures above the southern cliff-edge. That a survey of upstanding remains for a monument as well-known as the castle can produce detail previously unrecorded by either survey or geophysical prospecting (Bartlett 1980), demonstrates the potential of such an investigation for other sites on the island. That this can be achieved entirely by non-destructive methods is a further justification for the work to be undertaken.

Much is already known of Lundy's archaeological and historical evidence, sufficient to demonstrate the high quality of survival on the island. The new survey is expected to add detail to known sites of interest as well as making some new discoveries. For the first time a comprehensive and detailed record of the whole island will be made to a consistent standard. This should yield the maximum amount of historical information, and also provide the level of detail appropriate to the quality of the landscape for future management and conservation purposes. Interim statements and results of the survey will appear in subsequent editions of the *Lundy Field Society Annual Report*.

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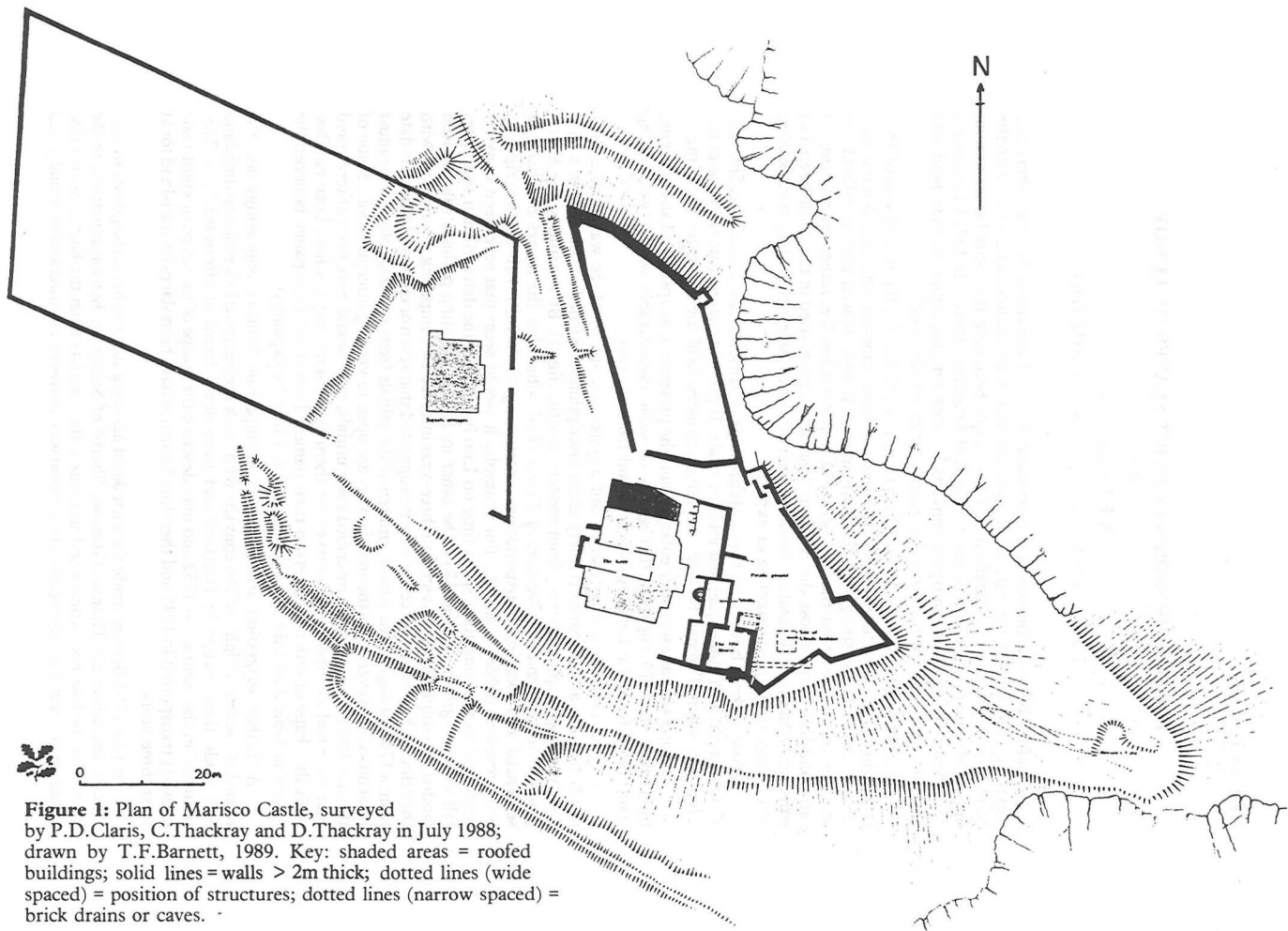


Figure 1: Plan of Marisco Castle, surveyed by P.D.Claris, C.Thackray and D.Thackray in July 1988; drawn by T.F.Barnett, 1989. Key: shaded areas = roofed buildings; solid lines = walls > 2m thick; dotted lines (wide spaced) = position of structures; dotted lines (narrow spaced) = brick drains or cavae.

THOMAS BENSON'S CONVICT SLAVES ON LUNDY

By

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Thomas Benson, the son of a prominent Bideford merchant, became Sheriff of Devon in 1746 and MP for Barnstaple soon afterwards. He traded successfully with the New World, the ports of Bideford and Barnstaple becoming the focus for an annual import of more than a million pounds weight of American tobacco. In 1747 he secured a government contract to transport convicts to work on plantations in Maryland and Virginia, thus providing a profitable return cargo for his vessels.

In 1748 Benson leased Lundy Island from Lord Gower for the annual sum of £60. It provided the opportunity to offload tobacco from America, and repackage it into smaller amounts for smuggling to the mainland. It also allowed him to offload the convicts, having received the £20 per-head transportation fee, rather than having to carry and feed them across the Atlantic. Convicts were housed in the castle keep and employed building walls and enclosures. Other tasks may have included the repackaging of tobacco, either for smuggling or export.

Below the keep but within the castle grounds is Benson's Cave, 17m long, 5m wide and 5m high, artificially quarried into the shale. It probably dates from the time of the Civil War when Thomas Bushell, a mining engineer, held the island for the King.

The original cave was later enlarged and the presence of a capstain on an engraving by Grosse in 1775 suggests that goods of some considerable weight were being transported from the Landing Beach to and from the cave.

During 1960 the author carried out a systematic survey of the walls and ceiling inside the cave and discovered thirty-eight inscriptions scratched or chiselled in a style and typography quite distinct from modern graffiti (fig. 1). By consulting the *Exeter Quarter Sessions* and the *Registers of Exeter Gaol* (which list the names of prisoners sentenced and awaiting transportation), interesting similarities with the inscriptions were revealed (tables 1 and 2). For example, it would seem that seventeen convicts sentenced to transportation spent time on Lundy and that the dates of their sentences fall into two groups, one in 1749, the other in 1752, suggesting perhaps that Benson landed two shiploads of convicts at a three-year interval. By comparing inscriptions with the relevant historical sources, it may be suggested that seven or eight of the initials date from a 1749 passage to the island, and ten of the initials from a 1752 shipload. One must remember, however, that the inscriptions are open to varying interpretation. Some of the convicts may never have inscribed their initials, most would have been illiterate and may have had the inscriptions carved for them, while some may not have been familiar with the shape or order of letters in their names. Thus some discrepancy between the names in table 2 and the inscriptions in fig. 1 may be explained.

A further suggestion arises from the comparison between engravings and the record of "seven or eight (of the convicts who) took the longboat belonging to the island and made their escape to Hartland and were never heard of afterwards"(1). This occurred in the summer of 1752 and may describe the escape of the seven or eight male convicts transported in 1949 and therefore known to have been slaves on the island for at least three years.

In July 1752 Benson made the mistake of allowing three of his houseguests to visit Lundy, including Sir Thomas Gunson, Sheriff of Somerset. Benson remarked to the effect that he had been contracted to remove the convicts from the kingdom and that Lundy was beyond recognised limits. Benson was, however, exposed and eventually fled