Historic England

Banjo Enclosures

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Banjo enclosures (a type of archaeological site of the British Middle Iron Age of circa 400 BC to roughly AD 43) and describes their common forms and characteristics, including prominent examples of sites. A summary of the academic interest in the asset type is included which outlines the research which has been undertaken for Banjo enclosures. A brief chronology is contained within the text as well as a summary of the associations between Banjo enclosures and other classes of monument. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

This document has been prepared by David McOmish and edited by Pete Herring and Joe Flatman. It is one of a series of 41 documents. This edition published by Historic England July 2018.

Please refer to this document as:
Historic England 2018 *Banjo Enclosures: Introductions to Heritage Assets*. Swindon. Historic England.

HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/scheduling-selection/ihas-archaeology/

Front cover
Banjo enclosure, Whitchurch, Warwickshire.

Introduction

Banjo enclosures are, perhaps, one of the most distinctive types of enclosure known in the British landscape. They are relatively small in area, predominantly sub-circular in outline and are notably furnished with a single, markedly elongated, entrance passageway; this funnelled approach giving the ground plan the appearance of a banjo or frying pan (Figure 1).

As a class of enclosure they are poorly understood and dated, but fieldwork suggests that they originated during the middle centuries of the 1st millennium BC with a very small number continuing in use through to the Roman Conquest. Artefactual evidence from a number of sites, however, indicates a more intense usage between 100 BC and AD 43. Recent studies of banjo enclosures suggest that most, if not all, were settlement sites, perhaps of high status.

They were first categorised in Wessex and appear to concentrate in discrete clusters in some areas of Hampshire, Dorset, and Wiltshire. More recently, a number have been recorded in the upper Thames Valley and the Cotswolds in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. Away from these foci, banjo enclosures occur less frequently with isolated examples scattered across southern and central England and across west Wales.

They are often confused with other classes of enclosures, particularly small examples of roughly round or square plan with antennae ditches extending from their entranceways, but these lack the lengthened entrance passageway apparent in banjos.

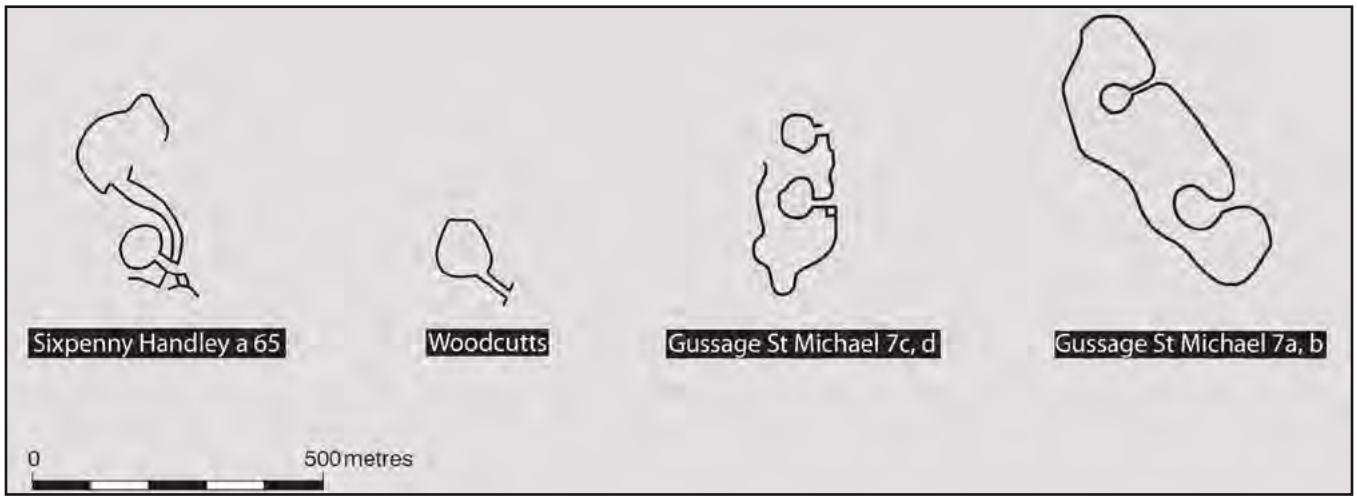


Figure 1
This comparative plan of banjo enclosures underlines the morphological similarity between a range of sites on Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire. All are less than 1 ha in area and they frequently occur in pairs, sometimes set within larger compounds. Gussage St Michael 7d is interesting in that there is a small rectilinear enclosure close to the entrance funnel – a commonly observed trait at a number of banjo enclosures. © RCHME

Very few banjo enclosures survive in earthwork form; the majority are known from aerial photography and can be seen as crop- or soilmarks. They are usually found on hill slopes, valley sides or at the heads of now dry valleys and occur as isolated sites, as pairs, and occasionally in larger groups – banjo landscapes. The results of fieldwork at sites in Wiltshire and Dorset suggest that those individual enclosures grouped in multiple arrangements were contemporary with each other.

1 History of Research

Banjo enclosures were first defined as a distinctive class in the late 1960s following excavations at Bramdean, Hampshire. When first classified, only about 30 examples could be listed, but over the last two decades many more have been identified from fieldwork and aerial photography and now in excess of 200 are known.

A small number of banjo enclosures have been excavated in Oxfordshire, and Wiltshire but the most extensively examined are those at Micheldever Wood, Hampshire and Nettlebank Copse, Hampshire. Other complexes of banjo enclosures in Oxfordshire and close to the Dorset/ Wiltshire border have also been examined by detailed field survey in recent years and the most up-to-date resumé has been provided by Lang (see Further Reading).

2 Description

Banjos are relatively small enclosures, predominantly sub-circular in outline but a great variety of shape and form exists. The defining characteristic, the elongated entrance passageway, is a universal feature (Figure 2). Often, particularly so in examples with irregularly-shaped enclosure boundaries, the passageway and 'front' of the enclosure are better defined than the remainder of the circuit, illustrating a concern with the main approach to the enclosure and a desire, perhaps, to create a more impressive and monumental façade.

The central enclosed element is usually in the region of 0.2 to 0.5 ha in area but occasionally larger examples close to 1 ha have been noted. Some enclosures are defined by a bank with external ditch but the majority, for example Church End Ring, Wiltshire, reverse this sequence and there are hints that the larger the enclosure,the more likely it is to be furnished with an internal ditch and external bank (Figure 3).

Figure 2
Two banjo enclosures near Ardley, Oxfordshire. Two banjo enclosures (the upper less visible) connected by a linear ditch are apparent. The lower example has been damaged by construction of a new road.

The enclosure boundaries are, regardless, well-defined with sharp V-shaped ditches evident flanked by spread earthen ramparts sometimes as high as 0.7m. In a number of examples, the bank is less well-preserved and the suspicion is that it may well have been crowned by a timber stockade or a hedge. Excavations on the central platform areas of these sites produce evidence for a range of associated features including pits and postholes probably related to domestic structures; storage pits are frequently found.

The approach to the entrance of the main enclosure comprises an elongated trackway flanked on either side by a bank and ditch boundary which is contiguous with, and constructed in the same manner as, the earthwork bounding the main enclosure. The entrance passages often appear cambered in cross-section and, in areas where flint is common, they are paved with flint nodules.

The funnel entrances were clearly part of the original constructional intent but in a number of instances the physical relationship between the two suggests that the main enclosure may well have been constructed first: at Church End Ring, Wiltshire, for example, the enclosure could only have been entered by way of steep ledge, such is the height difference between the entrance passage and the enclosure. These trackways range in length from about 25m to over 90m, are almost always longer than the diameter of the enclosure, and range from about 5m to 10m wide. Although the sides are generally more or less parallel, on some sites the passageway widens with distance from the central enclosure. Some trackways are straight, others are slightly curved. On occasion, air photographic evidence indicates a ditch cutting across the trackway at the entrance to the central enclosure, perhaps forming part of a gateway structure.

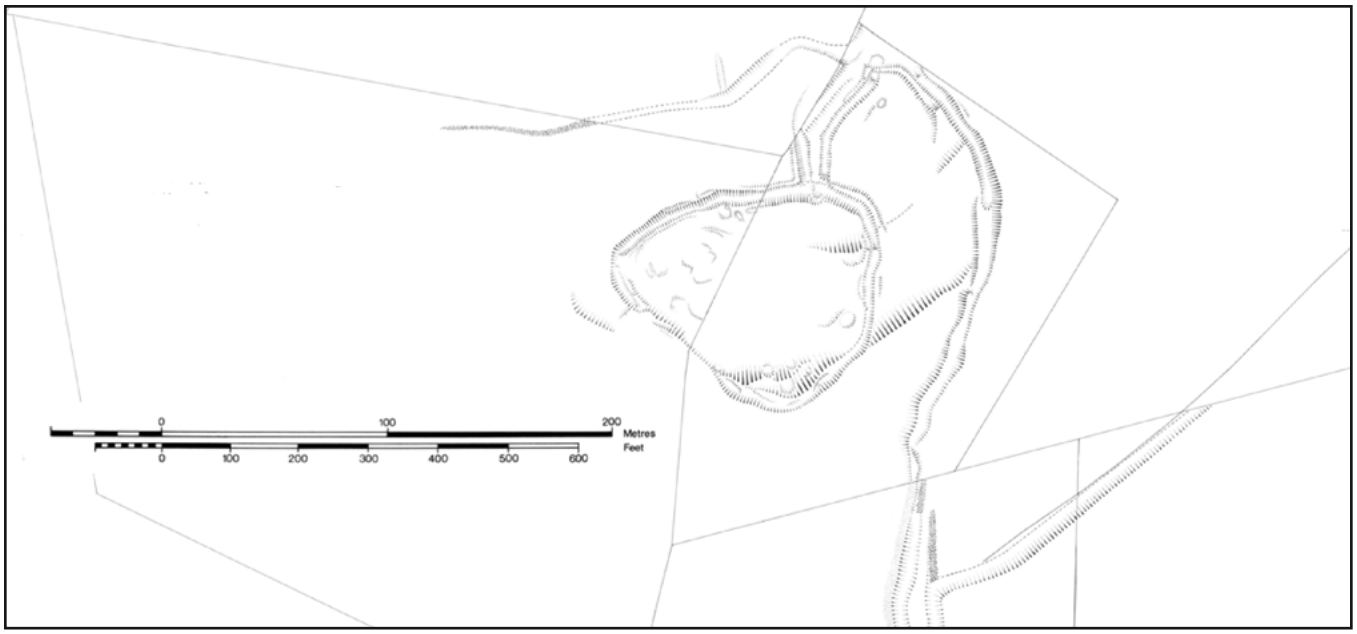


Figure 3
The enclosure complex at Church End Ring, Wiltshire, lies in close association with a complex of linear ditches and contemporary settlement. Church End Ring is clearly multi-period, overlying coaxial fields and an earlier open settlement. Pottery found during the survey suggests a Late Iron Age date for the main (enclosed) phase of occupation. © RCHME

Passageways occasionally appear to 'flare out' at their furthest extension and it is clear from field evidence that they are often connected with additional lengths of ditch or link up with a linear boundary of some kind (various classes). These 'antennae' ditches sometimes extend in either direction from the passageway and can cover large distances; in all cases, however, when combined they form impressive funnel-like entrances. At Blagdon Copse, Hampshire, excavation undertaken in the outer entrance at the junction of the trackway and a linear ditch, showed that both were contemporary and, therefore, were original features.

Occasionally, additional paddocks or small enclosures are located close to the banjo enclosure and were clearly part of the initial design. In a number of examples (Figure 1, Gussage St Michael 7c) small compounds can be seen at the junction of the passageway and inter-connected linear earthworks. These small ditched elements always lie on the inner side close to the apex and are defined by narrow, well-defined, ditches.

It is apparent that, frequently, the linear earthworks conjoined with the entrance passageways extend away from the banjo enclosure and loop round to form an external compound or outer enclosure; these can cover extensive areas and examples on Cranborne Chase or in Oxfordshire may be as large as 5 ha (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Aerial photograph of the banjo complex at Gussage St Michael, Dorset. The two banjo enclosures, showing as buried ditches, are set within a larger, and irregular, compound superimposed upon a regular accreted field system. Clusters of pits are visible, most densely within the enclosures but outside too, indicating that settlement (or other activities) took place here as well.

In summary, it is apparent that there are a variety of forms for banjo enclosures: simple banjo enclosures comprising a central enclosure, elongated entrance trackway, with antennae ditches or a connected linear boundary of some kind and others enclosed within a larger, outer, compound; banjo enclosures with ancillary enclosures; paddocks; banjo enclosure and ancillary paddocks set within a compound.

The functions of banjo enclosures, the ancillary enclosures and the outer compounds are disputed. When first identified, banjo enclosures were interpreted as stock corrals, the funnel-like entrances and trackways being related to stock control, the main enclosure being for stock containment. The cambered flint-metalled surface noted at a number of earthwork sites perhaps argues against their use as animal compounds.

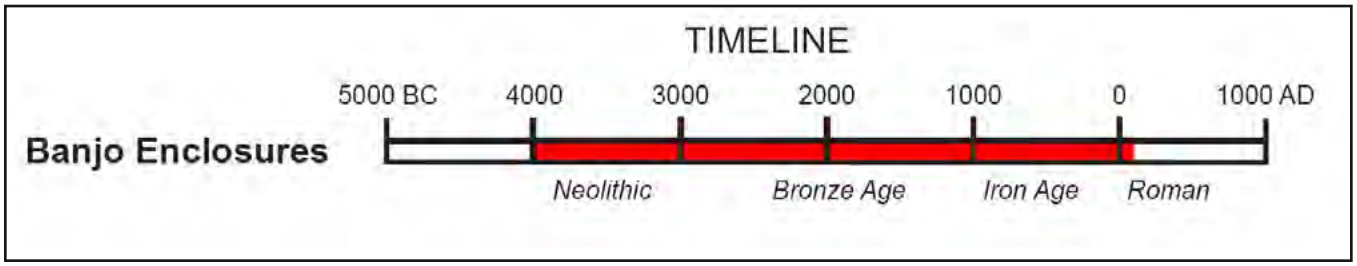
Additionally, all excavated banjo enclosures have produced evidence of intensive occupation within the central enclosure and since this appears to be similar with the evidence from other enclosed settlements of the same date, many are now thought to be occupation sites, possibly of high status.

3 Chronology

As noted above, fieldwork suggests banjos originated during the mid-1st millennium BC and continued in use through to the Roman Conquest, with apparently more intensive use between 100 BC and AD 43. The artefactual evidence recovered from banjo sites is comparable to that from other Middle to Late Iron Age settlements and includes pottery, worked bone, bronze and iron tools and ornaments, worked stone, shale objects, animal bones, and carbonized plant and vegetable remains.

In one or two important locations, significant amounts of imported Late Iron Age pottery has been recovered during excavation, including Dressel 1 amphorae fragments, suggesting that these sites could have been engaged in significant trade activity with the continent.

Figure 5
This aerial photograph taken just after the First World War shows one of the banjo enclosures at Hamshill Ditches, Wiltshire, surviving in pristine condition. This is the southernmost of a pair of enclosures – the other lies in the wood to the north – again, set within a larger compound which is connected to the entrance funnels. The enclosures are small and contain enough internal space for one round house and a few storage pits but the antennae entrances are metalled with flint and unsuitable for cattle.



4 Associations

Banjo enclosures are associated with a fairly wide range of other classes of monuments, often by direct stratigraphic relationships between the earthworks forming the trackway, antennae, paddocks, or compound of the banjo enclosure and earthworks forming equally distinctive components of other monuments.

Coaxial and regular accreted fields are found in frequent juxtaposition with banjo enclosures; superimposed, and thus later, on the Lambourn Downs but underlying enclosures on some Wiltshire sites. It is notable, also, that on a number of occasions the enclosures are accompanied by spreads of open settlement and, furthermore, in Wessex and the upper Thames Valley, banjo enclosures are often associated with linear boundaries of various classes, sometimes multiple in arrangement (Thickthorn Down, Dorset) and most of them probably of Late Iron Age date. Trackways have also been recognized.

Square barrows and rich cremations in flat graves of Late Iron Age date occur infrequently in close proximity to banjo enclosures, particularly those in central Hampshire, as at Blagdon Copse.

Throughout the distribution of banjo enclosures, examples are known in close association with a range of other classes of enclosure, many of them of Iron Age or early Roman date. Likewise, a strong association between banjo enclosures and Roman villas has been noted in Hampshire, as at Bramdean.

5 Further Reading

Richard Hingley, 'The Archaeology of Settlement and the Social Significance of Space', Scottish Archaeological Review 3 (1984), 22-6, examined a number of sites in the Upper Thames Valley and was one of the first attempts to provide detail on the functions of these complex sites.

Good accounts of banjo enclosure excavations are Peter Fasham, A Banjo Enclosure in Micheldever Wood (1987), and B T Perry, 'Excavations at Bramdean, Hampshire, 1983 and 1984, with Some Further Discussion of the 'Banjo' Syndrome', Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society 42 (1986), 35-42.

Helen Winton, 'Possible Iron Age 'Banjo' Enclosures on the Lambourn Downs', Oxoniensia 68 (2003), 15-26, records some examples recently discovered by aerial photography and provides a detailed commentary on the evidence more generally.

The most detailed discussion of banjo enclosures is that undertaken by Alexander Lang, Defining banjo enclosures: A Lang, Investigations, Interpretations, and Understanding in the Iron Age of Southern Britain, PPS online, 2016.

Mark Corney discusses the possible high status of banjo enclosures and describes associated land use in, 'Multiple ditch systems and Late Iron Age settlement in central Wessex' in M Bowden, D Mackay and P Topping (eds), From Cornwall to Caithness: Some aspects of British Field archaeology (1989), 111-128, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, 209.

Banjo enclosures and their relationship with wider settlement patterns is examined by Tom Moore 'Beyond the oppida: polyfocal complexes and Late Iron Age societies in Southern Britain', Oxford Journal of Archaeology, 31.4 (2012), 319-417

6 Where to Get Advice

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HEAG198
Publication date: v1.0 May 2011 © English Heritage
Reissue date: v1.1 October 2018 © Historic England
Design: Historic England and APS

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