

ALFRED'S CASTLE

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THE EARTHWORK of Alfred's Castle¹ is situated on a chalk elevation on Swinley Down, Ashbury Parish, in North Berkshire. It is an unexcavated site of *c.* 2.6 acres.

The site was mentioned first by Aubrey² who wrote that, in his time, the works were 'almost quite defaced by digging for the sarsden stones to build my Lord Craven's house in the park'. Lysons³ wrote of it:— 'On the west side of Ashdown Park, near the park wall, is a circular camp about 140 paces in diameter, with a single vallum, commonly called Alfred's Castle. Within the area there is an appearance very like the traces of a building.' In the mid-nineteenth century it was believed that Alfred's troops occupied it before the battle of Ashdown.⁴

It was first described, and a small plan was produced, in 1906. Peake then wrote:—⁵ 'The camp called 'Alfred's Castle' stands on an elevated part of Swinley Down, to the west of Ashdown Park commanding the two passes across the Downs from the Vale of White Horse to the Lambourn Valley. Its shape is an irregular circle, and it is much smaller than the other camps of this type, being only 140 paces in diameter. It is surrounded by a vallum, and the fosse outside is visible for more than half the circuit, being much deeper on the south side than elsewhere. The principal gateway is on the south-east, and was defended by a double rampart, part of which still exists. There is another gateway to the north-west, and a third, apparently, to the north-east, though perhaps this is due to the destruction of the vallum at this point in later times.'

Karslake⁶ noted its position as 'rather thrown back on the west', and wrote:— 'The *places fortes* remain in the 'castles' of Letcombe and Segsbury, Uffington and Alfred commanding the Ridgeway from any attack from the Berkshire Vale to the north, and may have been strong enough to prevent until a late date any invasions of the downland territory by the raiding band of Saxons who early ascended and settled along the waterway of the Thames.' Raven⁷ quotes as a reference for Ashbury that it is one of the sites claimed for the battle of Ashdown, in W. H. Stevenson's *Asser's Life of Alfred*, p. 234.

In 1929, Piggott⁸ visited the site and found, as he had hoped, that the rampart was originally faced with sarsen boulders like those at Uffington Castle. Several large sarsens were still *in situ*, and there were many more in the ditch. Potsherds (mostly of the Late Iron Age) were abundant. The use of sarsens at both Alfred's Castle and Uffington Castle was confirmed by Crawford and Piggott.⁹ Peake¹⁰ recorded that fragments of pottery (of the time of Cunobelin) were collected in

¹ 41/278823. O.S. maps; 1", 157; ½", 11; 6", 19SW.

² *Mon. Brit.*, 169.

³ *Mag. Brit.* i (1806), 214.

⁴ *T. Newbury D.F.C.* i (1870-71), 151.

⁵ *V.C.H. Berks.* i (1906), 253. Plan at pl. 253.

⁶ *Ant. Journ.* i (1921), 305-306 and 311.

⁷ *V.C.H. Berks.* iv (1924), 503.

⁸ *Antiquity* iii (1929), 352.

⁹ *P. Hants. F.C.* xi (1930), 38.

¹⁰ *Arch. of Berks.* (1931), 67-68 and 176.

PLATE I



Alfred's Castle from the north-west. (Photograph by the late Major G. W. G. Allen.
Reproduced by courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.)

Alfred's Castle, and were in the Piggott collection in Reading University (History Department) Museum. He adds that, from the quantity found, it seems to have been occupied right down to Roman times. Hawkes¹ quoted that the site had produced 'C as well as earlier pottery but to which phase its defences should be assigned is still doubtful'. Using these records, Wheeler included Alfred's Castle in his provisional map of Belgic defended sites.²

In 1934, Grinsell³ visited a 'barrow' a few yards to the north of Alfred's Castle. He described it as 'an oval mound of bowl shape, 18 yards across from north to south and 15 from east to west. This shapeless and burrowed mound is 2 feet high. It may not be a barrow.' He gave some pottery from Alfred's Castle and its immediate vicinity to Newbury Museum. In 1946, Underhill recorded that there were nine fragments of Early Iron Age pottery from the site in Newbury Museum;⁴ and later wrote⁵ of another fragment there, two small collections of Belgic pottery found in a small oval mound or barrow just north of Alfred's Castle, and a fragment of pottery (?Saxon) from the same mound found by Grinsell in May 1934.

Interest in the site has now been revived. Early in 1959 Mr. D. B. Connah, with members of the St. Bartholomew's School Archaeological Society, visited the site, and picked up a little surface pottery. These sherds fell into two groups. The wheel-turned ware looked Romano-British rather than Belgic, and the hand-made ware, which was gritted and lacked shape, might have been Iron Age 'A', but was too indeterminate to be sure.

I visited the site in May 1959. The features noted especially were these:—

(i) The position of the work is unlike those of the sites on the Ridgeway. It is away from the top of the Downs, but, being sited on chalk, is unlike the series of camps on the gravels and greensands of Berkshire, as, for example, those of Grimsbury Castle and Bussocks Wood. It is not in a commanding position, in relation to the Ridgeway, and is more like the type of site chosen in the Iron Age for a farmstead or village rather than for a cattle enclosure or hillfort.

(ii) The south-eastern entrance appears to be original; the other two gaps would have to be tested to prove that they were not later breaches of the rampart.

(iii) Sarsen stones could be seen at one point in the rampart seated on natural chalk. Whether they are revetting stones or a drystone wall build was not apparent. In addition to the earlier reports of the use of this stone in building Ashdown House, it was noted that the field boundary wall to the north-east of the camp, from top to bottom of the hill, was faced with these stones. The ragged appearance of the surviving ramparts suggests that they have been severely robbed for stone.

(iv) There are still traces of a structure of some sort inside the work which may be those of the building mentioned by Lysons.

¹ *Antiquity* v (1931), 92; *Arch. in England and Wales 1914-1931* (1932), 200.

² *Antiquity* vii (1933), provisional map of Belgic defended sites.

³ *Berks. Arch. Journ.* xl (1936), 30; *ibid.* xliii (1939), 137.

⁴ *Ibid.* xlii (1938), 21. (1937/3/92).

⁵ *Ibid.* xlix (1946), 50. (1938/4/259; 134, 125.25 and 144, 125.37).

(v) The size, and rather hexagonal shape of the work, is unlike that of any other Berkshire hill-fort.

During a visit to Reading University Museum, Dr. Slade showed me two fragments of pottery from the site, which appear to be the remains of the Piggott collection noted above. They are the rim of a carinated haematite bowl and a sherd of haematite, both of Iron Age Southern Second A date.

The present position, therefore, is that Alfred's Castle, and the ? barrow and its immediate vicinity, are credited with having produced unstratified pottery of Southern Second A, Southern First C, Romano-British and ? Saxon sherds. In both form, siting, and structure, the site is unusual in Berkshire. These indications alone suggest that there is more than one period of occupation there, and the structural form and the date of the defences are questions that can be determined only by excavation.

Moreover, in addition to these surface indications, the striking air photograph (Pl. 1),¹ taken by the late Major G. W. G. Allen, reinforces this view. The small univallate earthwork stands out boldly, this side of Ashdown House, together with its south-eastern entrance. The interior disturbance is not well seen. But the other outstanding feature is the dark crop mark of a ditch which encloses part of an area of very much greater extent than that included in the extant earthwork. This has not been traced on the ground. This newly observed feature may represent an Iron Age work of early date. Its relationship to the mapped earthwork is a problem which could only be solved by selective excavation.

A NEW PLAN OF ALFRED'S CASTLE

Peter Wood

In response to the quickened interest in this earthwork, a detailed survey has been carried out by students of the Geography Department, University of Reading. Their work consisted basically of level and chain traverses, and the contour lines which have been plotted on the plan (Fig. 1) show the Castle as occupying the summit of a minor ridge, of elevation of about 630 feet O.D., which is parallel to, but set well back, from the crest of the Berkshire Downs. The mapping scale of 1 : 300 (25 feet to 1 in.) was large enough to catch most of the internal detail, as well as the hexagonal defensive work of single rampart and external ditch. The top of the rampart encloses an area of 2.6 acres.

The Department's work does in the main corroborate the O.S. 1 : 2500 plan (*vide* Berks. XIX.9) except that the six sections of the rampart are rather more bowed than the Ordnance Survey allows. It is certainly significant that each of these sides, generally terminated by a sharp corner, is very nearly 185 feet in length, with the one exception of the north-eastern side, 300 feet long, which might, possibly, however, be considered as two sections divided by the north-eastern gap. The ditch, as mentioned above, is particularly prominent on the southerly flanks of the earthwork. The curious triangular bank outside the south-eastern gateway must be Peake's

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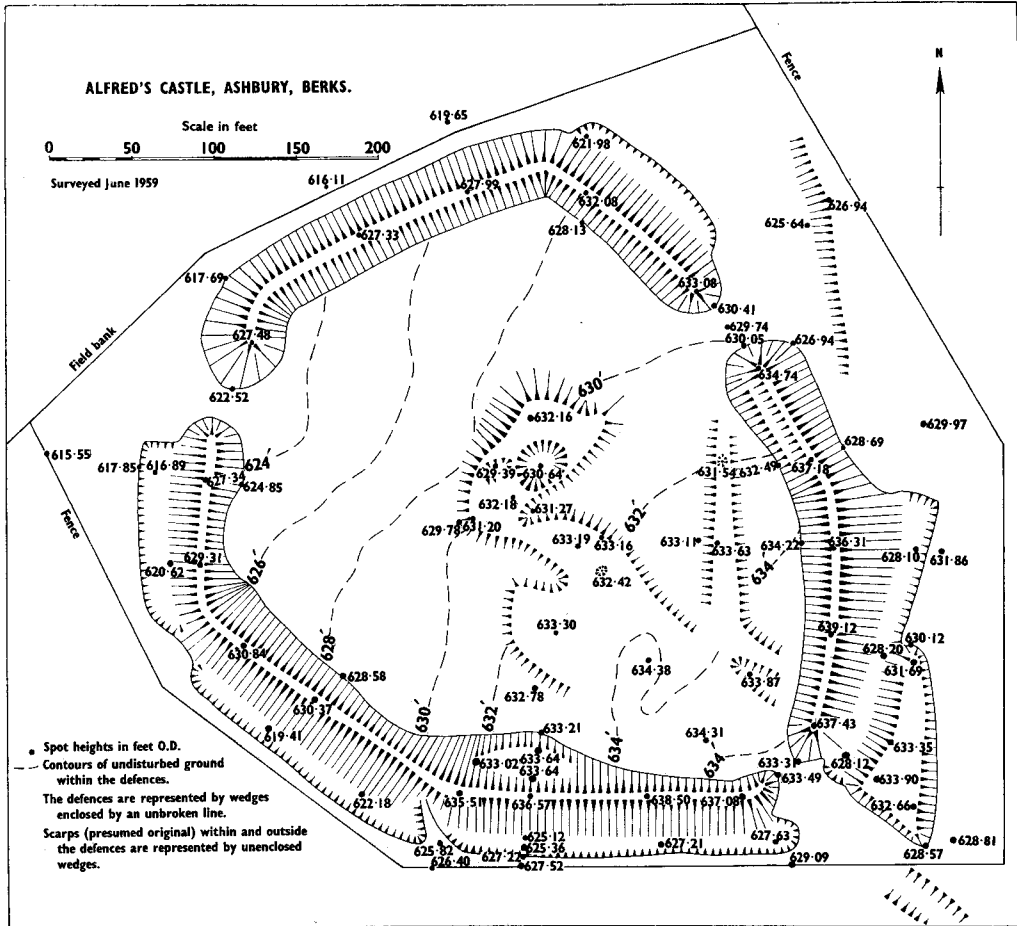


Fig. 1. Plan of Alfred's Castle

double rampart, though there is no sign of any extra defence on the western side of this entrance. The suggestion has been made that it might be a long barrow incorporated into the defences.¹

The dimensions of the main defences as they appear at the present time may be estimated from the spot heights included on the plan. At their greatest amplitude, the crest of the rampart is twelve feet above the silted-up ditch, and no doubt it was originally a good deal more, for the ditch today is quite shallow. The rampart has been much disturbed by burrowing animals and by the bushes which clothe its external slope in the east and west; and also by the removal of the sarsen facing, of which there is now little sign. Earth slipping has probably produced the two platforms on

¹ Another suggestion is that it might be part of a 'barbican' at the entrance, like those of other Iron Age 'A' earthworks, and might belong to the 'crop

mark' ditch phase which has survived ploughing. M.A.C.

the internal face of the rampart as well as contributing to the ramp at the southern corner of the enclosure.

Of the internal features marked on the plan, the raised ground which runs from opposite the south-eastern gate across the middle of the castle is most likely to bear some archaeological relationship with the defences. It is bounded by a fairly abrupt scarp, and stands twelve inches or so above the general ground level. Into its surface are hollowed three depressions, the northern pair being substantial features. There is also a ridge or causeway running between the north-east and south-east entrances, again with a pitted surface. All these irregularities are confined to the south-eastern part of the interior, and are no doubt connected with the traces of the building reported by Lysons.

The only external remains which might possibly be contemporary with the defences are the scarp opposite the north-eastern gap, and a slight sunken way coming up the slope to the south-eastern entrance. The dating problem has not been resolved at all by the surveying. Only one potsherd was found on the ground. It is of gritty ware, apparently Romano-British; and it is not comparable with the pieces mentioned for the Piggott collection in Reading University (History Department) Museum.

Alfred's Castle, with its strong defence of a small interior, was carefully laid out in regard both to its symmetrical disposition across the ridge of Swinley Down, and to the symmetrical arrangement of its sides. Several of the characteristics already noted are clearly portrayed on the air photograph (Pl. I), which was taken by Major Allen, looking south-eastwards towards Ashdown House. The only new feature shown there is the crop mark running away to the north from the north-westerly margins of Alfred's Castle: no sign of this exists on the ground, but it probably represents a former enclosure which might conceivably be related to the occupation of the Castle.