

A survey of earthworks at Castle Hill and Chessington Park

D FIELD

Apart from passing references by Brayley (1878, 148-9) the earliest description of the earthworks at Castle Hill, Chessington is by Johnson & Wright (1903, 80-1) who describe them as 'roughly elliptical with one end slightly narrower than the other' and graphically describe their difficult examination of the monument amongst the tangled white thorn, hazel and white rose '... its shape, perhaps, more than its location suggesting its purpose as a prehistoric animal enclosure'. The Victoria County History (Malden 1905, 199, 263; 1912, 392-4) includes the site amongst ancient earthworks and notes the discovery of a Roman coin nearby, and also provides a small plan, while more recently the site has been compared to the moated manor house at Pachenesham (Renn 1982, 41). The early Ordnance Survey editions portray the monument as a kidney-shaped mound, but a local survey by W C Woodhouse in 1959, attached to the Archaeological Record Cards (RCHME National Archaeological Record, Southampton) shows the monument with squared ends. A survey of the monument was initially carried out by the writer and I West with the help of members of the Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society in 1978 but never completed due to the removal of reference pegs by local children.

In the spring of 1988 Kingston Council leased the land from Merton College, Oxford, their intention being to use the open space to link the pathways along the Hogsmill and Bonesgate streams with those of the Horton Country Park. Laying paths across the monument required Scheduled Monument consent and occasioned the present survey at 1/500 which took place over three days in March 1988. This paper is divided into three sections, the Castle Hill enclosure earthworks, the adjacent pond bay, both of which have been surveyed, and Chessington Park, now mostly farmland and part of the wider landscape.

The enclosure (figs 1, 2)

The enclosure is situated on the southern spur of a low knoll, itself forming a bluff that runs sharply down to the floodplain of the Bonesgate stream, here no more than 2.5m wide. Both bluff and floodplain are of London clay and consequently badly drained with local patches remaining waterlogged in winter.

The enclosure consists of a ditch with internal earthen bank which is sub-rectangular in plan, the sides all slightly curving, with the northern end slightly wider than the southern. Orientated NNE, it measures some 90 × 30 metres inside the bank; the whole monument measuring 115 × 74m. Large oaks up to 2.5m girth cover the monument on the bank and ditch as well as the interior, while the ground flora includes both woodland and meadow plants: - bluebell, cuckoo pint, hurt, celandine, old man's beard, dog rose, white and dead nettle, milkweed, dog violet, cleves, buttercup, foxglove and daffodil were all present. No vetch was noted on the monument even though it is plentiful in the adjacent wood indicating perhaps that ploughing has taken place around the monument up to the edge of the ditch. There is little perceived evidence of ploughing on the earthwork itself; the flora supports this and it is shown as woodland on an estate map of 1796. It may be that the rounded profile and well silted ditches are a result of slumping and weathering.

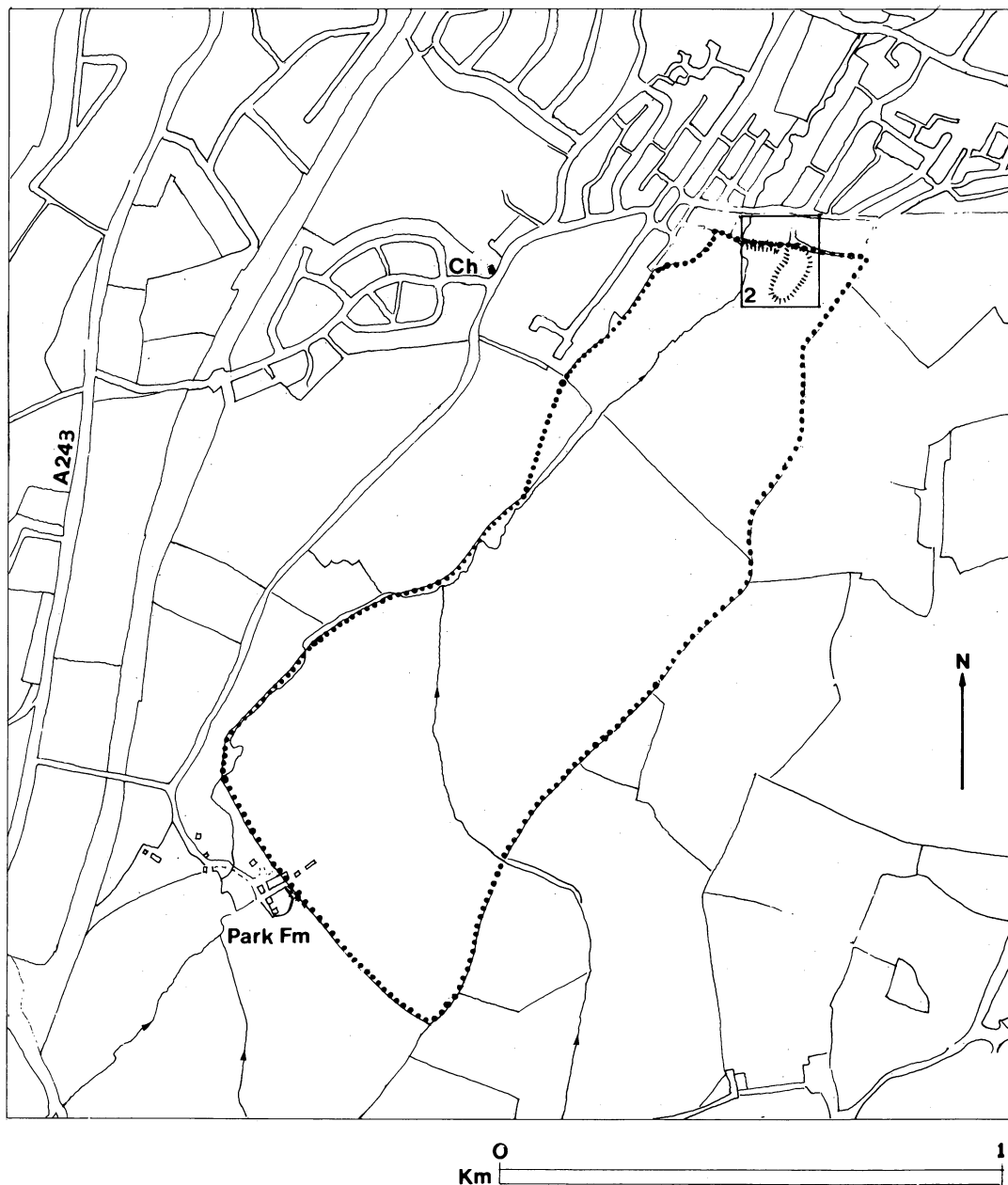


Fig 1. Chessington with the boundary of the medieval deer park outlined.

The features within the enclosure (fig 2, A-D)

A) the ditch – presently wide and shallow but presumably much silted, is present in the east, varying between 10 and 15m wide though the bank plunges continuously and it is impossible to determine where bank ends and ditch begins. It often contains standing water in winter and is 0.5m below the surrounding land surface and 2.2m below the top of the bank. It can be traced curving round the southern corner, but is cut through by a modern

drainage ditch. At the north eastern corner piles of modern rubble obscure the course and along the northern edge any traces have been obliterated by the accessway to the modern houses. No ditch is present in the west, but it may be that the stream ran closer to the earthwork than at present.

B) the bank – presumably a clay dump and derived from the ditch, is 3 to 4m wide at the top spreading to c10m at the base, and 1m high above the ground surface of the interior. As might be expected it is more prominent, some 2.3m high in the north where there is no advantage of natural height, but in the west apart from a possible fragment it is missing. Slumping on the bluff slopes may account for this, the bank having slumped naturally.

C) the entrance – in the north-east the bank narrows and diverts slightly into the interior. Here two spurs or buttresses some 7m apart project into the ditch. The bank is much lower at this point, only 0.6m above the interior ground surface, but it rises to high points 20m in either direction and it may be that this was to facilitate the superstructure of a gateway. No gap in the bank or causeway through the ditch is present, but attention is drawn to the entrances in illustrations of early castles by D Turner (1987, 226, 228) and Lowther's illustration of the bridge across the ditch at Pachenesham (Renn 1982, 18) (see below).

D) the interior – features are very shallow and in places barely perceptible. Assessment is hampered by the vegetation, and at the time of the survey from fallen trees and debris from the great storm of October 1987. A narrow scoop little more than 1m wide runs parallel to the east bank for some 60m. This may be some consolidating feature at the tail of the bank, but since it does not follow the bank round to the north and south ends it could more plausibly be interpreted as representing the line of some building resting in the lee of the bank. An L-shaped feature in the south-west corner may signify the presence of a building. A series of other low, linear scarps in the west and centre of the interior are mostly orientated north-south and may also represent constructions.

In recent years writers have favoured a medieval date for the site. Renn compared it with the defended early manor house site at Pachenesham (Renn 1982, 41) noting that such curved moats on sloping ground may be earlier than squared examples, while Turner (1987, 226) notes it among a list of earthworks claimed as possible lesser castles. The name Castle Hill first occurs on the Enclosure Award dated 1825 but it is not clear whether this was a name given by local people or coined by the Commissioners. Certainly earlier maps by Nicholas Lane in 1623 and 1625 (Lambert 1930; SRO PH 4, 5) and by an unknown surveyor of about 1733 (St Mary's Chessington, parish chest) do not mention it.

If medieval, its position within the landscape needs to be considered for it was clearly a construction of some importance and yet was not afforded a central position close to the church, nor to the perhaps later manor house of Friern which was the centre of the open field system. Instead it was situated close to the edge of the parish on the opposite bank of the Bonesgate stream at the northern end of a separate estate kept by Merton College, Oxford as a hunting park.

The pond bay (fig 2, E)

The pond bay consists of an earthen bank some 2.5m high, 6m wide at the top sloping to 18m at the base. To the east of centre the height is reduced and this may represent the site of some milling activity. Originally intended to stretch right across the floodplain, it is now breached at either end but still measures 65m in length. To the north of the bank a low straight bank (F) some 0.4m high and 2m wide stretches for 40m in a northerly direction at right-angles to the dam and together with a small mound 5m × 5m × 0.5m high in the angle of the low bank and the pond bay, may also be connected with the milling process.

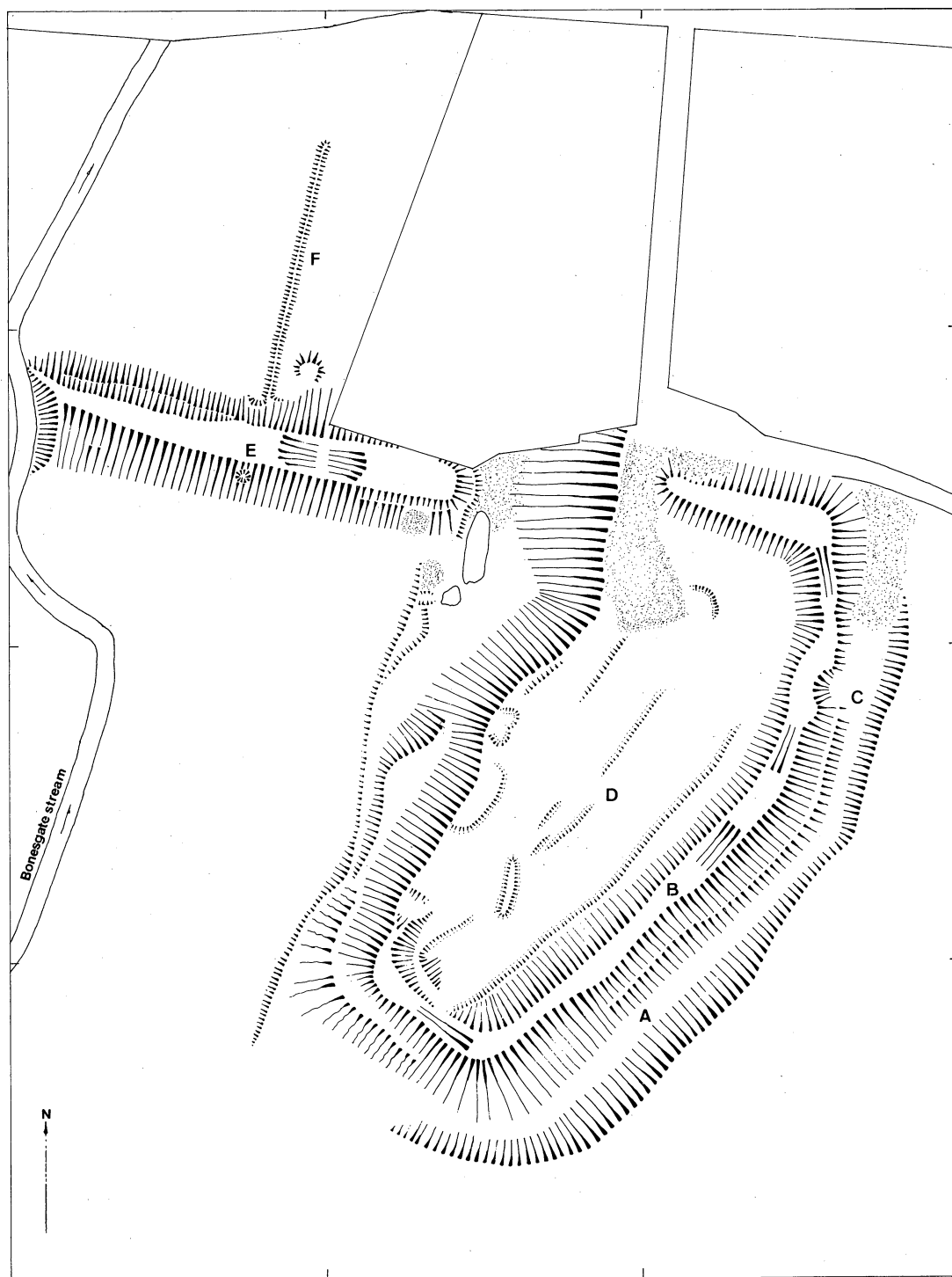


Fig 2. Earthworks at Castle Hill: A) ditch, B) bank, C) entrance, D) interior, E) pond bay, F) pond-related bank.

Scale: The margin is marked in a 50m grid

The bay would pond a considerable head of water back upstream for some 150m, enough for most purposes during the winter, but if the water table was similar to today it would probably not be too effective during the summer. Domesday Book records $\frac{1}{2}$ mill at Chessington (Morris 1975, 19–24) held then by Robert of Watteville from Richard of Tonbridge. Whether the Domesday mill was that presently being considered or whether it was on the same site cannot be answered from the surface indications. A watermill is mentioned in 1617 (Manning & Bray 1809, 684) as one of the appurtenances of Friern Manor, Chessington but this is likely to have been downstream on Friern land and is not shown (or highlighted in other ways) on estate maps produced soon thereafter in 1620, 1623 and c 1733 (SRO '210/9 PH 4, 5; St Mary's, Chessington, parish chest) and 1796. The present course of the stream through the western end of the bay is shown on the 1620 map with the area of the pond as meadow and the bay was therefore out of use well before that date.

The park

In common with other medieval deer parks in Surrey, Chessington Park enclosed land some distance from the open fields, in this case adjacent to the parish boundary. The extent of the park is most clearly seen on Nicolas Lane's map of Merton College land at Chessington dated 1620 (SRO PH 4; Lambert 1933, 38) and the boundary can be easily traced with little modification through the Enclosure map and early Ordnance Survey editions to the modern day. No original bank or ditch can be traced though a field boundary bank survives for some stretches. In the east the boundary coincides with the parish and manorial boundaries and it is impossible to determine which the slight bank and ditch here belong to. The park was probably fenced from the 13th century when the Warden and Scholars of Merton College, Oxford, claimed a park on their land at Chessington by charter of Henry III (Briggs 1935; Malden 1912, 263–6). Certainly the park was fenced in 1486 for a lease of that date stated that John Lawrence of Chessington was to keep all manorial buildings in repair '*... preter sepes parc de Chessington et palyng dicti manerii*' (Ross 1947, 47).

Aside from its primary purpose of providing venison the provision of timber may have been a quite important resource. Besides taking seven hares and six rabbits from the park, Roger de Spotton, who from place-name evidence probably lived adjacent to the park, was accused in 28 Edward I of entering 'with force of arms and cutting down trees for timber' (Briggs 1935). During the early 17th century, as Lambert (1933, 38) observed, the park was mostly woodland, divided into four parcels, presumably for coppicing purposes.

Conclusion

The dating of the earthwork on the northern edge of Chessington Park is still in doubt, but the similarity of the early medieval site at Pachenesham to hunting lodges at Writtle and Alice Holt have been noted (Renn 1982) and in turn, of Pachenesham to the Castle Hill enclosure. Shirley (1867, 21) attributes the construction of lodges to the later 15th and earlier 16th centuries but they seem to have developed much earlier. A hunting lodge was present at Clarendon, Wiltshire by 1072 (James & Robinson 1988, 2), at Kings Court Palace, Morcombe, Dorset where the moated and embanked site adjacent to a stream was begun in 1199 (RCHM 1972, 51–2), at King's Cliffe, in existence by the 12th century, Silverstone and John of Gaunt's Castle in Daventry, all in Northamptonshire (RCHM 1975, 60; 1981, 68; 1982, 132). The restricted surface indication from the Chessington earthworks does not rule out such a function but on the contrary when seen in conjunction with other evidence makes it rather more likely.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Pat McKenna and Julie Wileman who helped with the survey and to the latter for commenting on the flora. Mark Alexander very helpfully took care of all matters of administration while Tracey Seeds typed various drafts of this article.

REFERENCES

- Brayley, E W, & Walford, E, 1878 *A topographical history of the county of Surrey*, Vol 4
 Briggs, H M, 1935 *Surrey Manorial Accounts*, Surrey Record Soc, 37
 James, T B, & Robinson, A M, 1988 *Clarendon Park*, Soc Antiq Res Vol, 45
 Johnson W, & Wright W, 1903 *Neolithic man in north-east Surrey*
 Lambert, H, 1933 Some account of the Surrey Manors held by Merton College and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in the 17th Century, *SyAC*, 41, 34-49
 Malden, H E (ed), 1905, 1912 *The Victoria history of the county of Surrey*, Vols 2, 4
 Manning, O, & Bray W, 1809 *History and antiquities of the county of Surrey*, Vol 2
 Morris, J (ed) 1975 Domesday Book 3, Surrey, trans S Wood
 Renn, D, 1982 Pachenesham, Leatherhead: the excavation of the medieval moated site known as 'The Mounts', *SyAC*, 74, 1-46
 RCHM, 1972 *An inventory of the historical monuments in the county of Dorset*, vol 4, North Dorset
 —, 1975 *An inventory of the historical monuments in the county of Northampton*, vol 1, archaeological sites in north-east Northamptonshire
 —, 1981 *ibid* vol 3, archaeological sites in north-west Northamptonshire
 —, 1982 *ibid* vol 4; archaeological sites in south-west Northamptonshire
 Ross, K N, 1947 *A history of Malden*
 Turner, D J, 1987 Archaeology of Surrey 1066 to 1540, in *The archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (eds J Bird & D G Bird), 223-62
 Shirley, E P, 1867 *Some account of English deer parks*