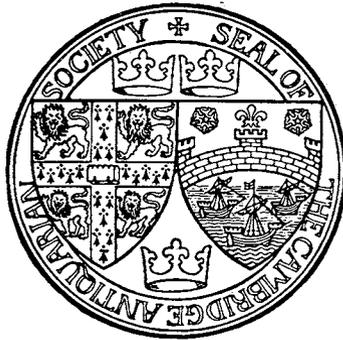


PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVII

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AN IRON AGE AND ROMAN CROP-MARK SITE AT GIRTON  
THE FIELD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESCUE GROUP (F.A.R.G.)<sup>1</sup> and P. W. CROFT

INTRODUCTION

A three week excavation was carried out in 1975 on behalf of the Cambridge-shire Archaeological Committee in order to investigate crop marks apparent on an aerial photograph taken by the Cambridge University Department of Aerial Photography (Plate 1), in advance of the Cambridge Northern Bypass construction (TL 423613). Permission to excavate was kindly granted by the landowners, the Animal Research Council, and gratitude must be expressed for funds provided by the Crowther-Beynon Fund (administered by the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology), Girton Parish Council, Girton Womens' Institute, and also for one private donation. From the outset of the excavation the help of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society Rescue Group, and also Mrs Odette Wylie, has been invaluable and a debt of thanks is also due to Alison Taylor, the County Archaeological Field Officer, for her sustained help and interest in all aspects of the enterprise.

The site is about 300 metres north of Girton College, and is situated above the 15-metre contour on the extreme northern tip of the area of pleistocene and recent gravels which cap the gault clay in this locality. The frequently convoluted surface of the gravels beneath the topsoil presented difficulties in distinguishing between natural and man-made features, and the modern usage of the land as permanent pasture has meant that the aerial photograph almost certainly shows less of the archaeological features than would have been visible under an arable crop.

THE FEATURES

Exploration of the site commenced by reference to the aerial photograph which provided the chief line of evidence for the location of features. A magnetometer survey had previously been carried out in the area by J. Harrowdine but failed to reveal anything not already known from the photograph.

(a) *The Ring Features*

These features (Plate 1) comprise two adjacent, almost circular crop-marks of unequal size. The smaller and more southerly one, approximately 10 metres in diameter, was investigated as it was directly threatened by the bypass. A trench was cut across it and subsequently extended to cover the northwest quadrant of the area of the cropmark (Fig. 1, viii). This area was stripped down



Plate I: Crop-mark site at Girton.

to the natural gravel and revealed two irregular shallow depressions about 8cm. deep of average diameter 20cm. containing charcoal flecks. There was no trace of the large feature of circular form suggested by the aerial photograph and artefacts found were two sherds of very abraded pottery, possibly Roman, and two flint flakes. Apart from these only a sparse scatter of reddened fire-heated flints was noted.

(b) *The Y-shaped feature*

This feature measures about 10 metres long, bifurcating about mid-way along its length into two arms which extend to partially enclose a semi-circular

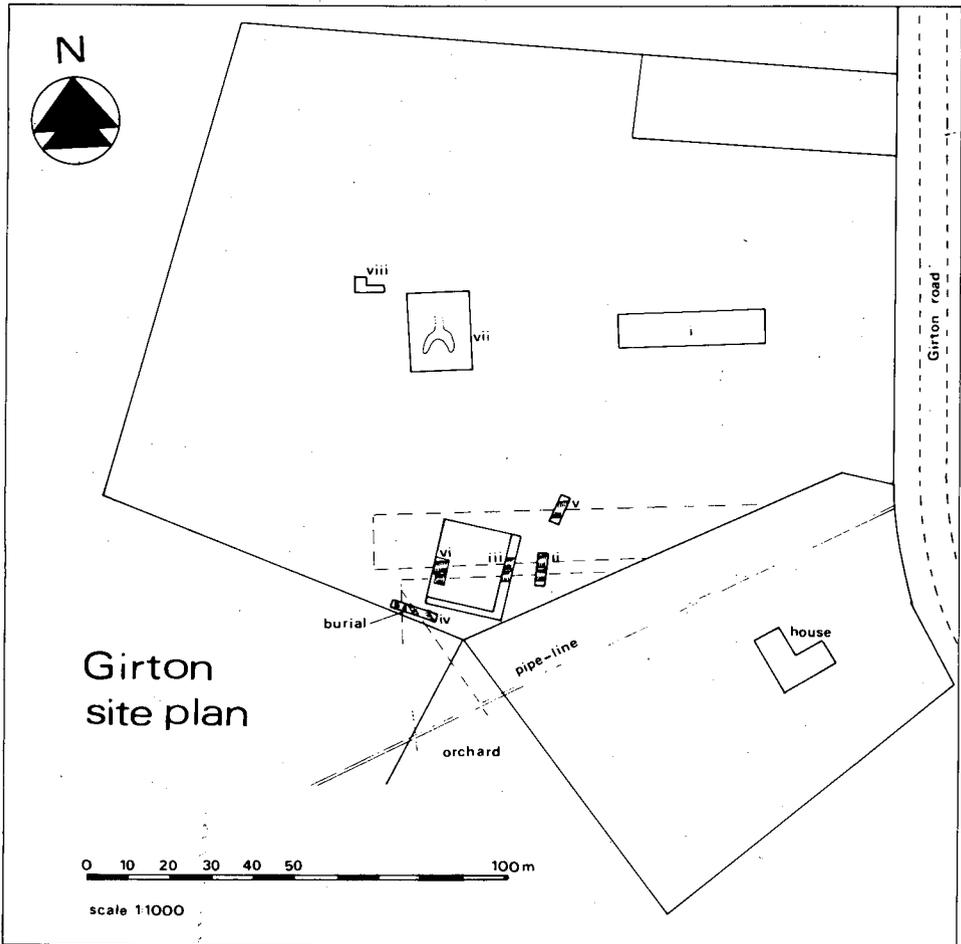


Fig. 1. Girton excavations, 1975.

area. The area above this feature was machine-stripped and cleaned off by hand to reveal a patch of what appeared to be quick-lime coinciding with the extent of the feature as shown on the photograph (Fig. 1 vii). A trench was cut through the extremity of one of the arms, the section of which showed that the lime deposit was over 1 metre deep. No finds were recorded from this trench. The evidence is consistent with the interpretation of this feature as a pit made for the disposal of the bodies of diseased farm animals, probably in the quite recent past. The initial cleaning of the area above the feature by hand produced a very mixed selection of potsherds which relate to the Roman, Medieval and post-Medieval periods, indicating an area of disturbed topsoil above the lime.

### (c) *The Ditches*

The ditches relate to two separate but adjacent enclosures which could possibly form part of a larger enclosure network. The aerial photograph and the evidence of a nearby machine-cut section (in a pipeline trench) show that the ditches continue beyond the site. An area was machine stripped in order to examine the northern corner of this enclosure system, but due to anomalies in the results of the magnetometer survey the corners of the enclosures could not be found (Fig. 1, iii). Outside this main machine-stripped area three small hand sections were cut across the ditches (Fig. 1, ii, iv, v).

The northern enclosure, 14 metres wide and at least 95 metres long, was bounded by a shallow ditch approximately 2.3m. wide and cut into the natural gravel to a depth of 0.4m. It seems to have been recut on at least two occasions (Fig. 2, Layers 3 and 6).

The southern enclosure was bounded by a much larger ditch about 3.4m. wide cut 1.2m. into the gravel. The profile of this ditch was a well-formed V-shape and there are indications of one large recutting. (Fig. 2, Layers 2 and 4).

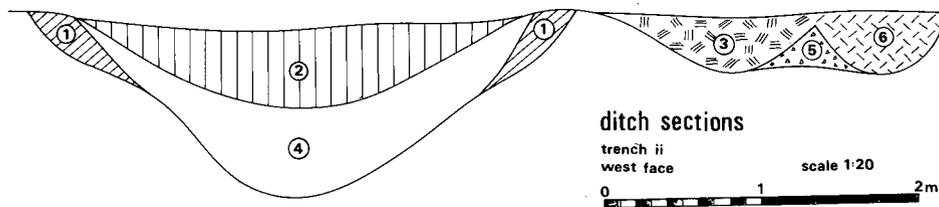


Fig. 2. Section through enclosure ditches, Girton.

The distance between the parallel ditches of these two contiguous rectangular enclosures seems to be no greater than about 50cms.

The dating is difficult due to the paucity of finds. The primary fill of the larger ditch has produced no more than half a dozen small potsherds of which

at least two are typically Iron Age. One of these, a brownish-black, burnished, finely grit-tempered rim sherd, closely resembles the finer pottery found at Wandlebury.<sup>2</sup> One sherd is of typical grey Roman fabric, but there are indications that it may have come from a Belgic form of vessel, in which case it may best be attributed to the latter half of the first century A.D. or slightly later. Another Roman sherd, a rim fragment of grey ware, could also be placed in the early Roman period.

The fill of the ditch recut contained five sherds of very abraded pottery that appeared to be of later Roman date, and also a considerable number of domestic animal bones, some of which showed evidence of butchering. In unstratified levels above the fill of the recut ditch there was an inscribed rimsherd from a Roman mortarium.

The smaller ditch surrounding the northern enclosure yielded a quantity of typical Iron Age pottery with a fine hard black fabric comparable to that of pottery found on local Iron Age sites, particularly New Addenbrookes.<sup>3</sup> A single sherd with fine grey Roman fabric could be part of a vessel of characteristically Belgic form. In this ditch also occurred several undatable Roman sherds. Despite clear indications of recutting in this ditch, the exact limits of the recuts were indeterminate. The bulk of the Iron Age pottery came from the lowest levels of the ditch, and it therefore seems that it was first cut in the Iron Age and at least one of the recuttings occurred at some time in the Roman period.

On the evidence of the pottery, therefore, the ditch of the northern enclosure could have first been cut at an earlier date than that of the southern enclosure.

Another small ditch, diverging from the course of the western boundary of the southern enclosure and penetrating into the interior, was visible on the aerial photograph. This ditch was located and sectioned (Fig. 1, iv) showing it to be about 1.8m. wide and cut into the gravel to a depth of 70cms. The sides were gently sloping, and the bottom slightly rounded; it gave no indication of ever having been recut. About a dozen sherds of coarse, shell-tempered pottery with buff exterior and black interior surfaces came from this ditch and seem to form a distinct pottery group unparalleled in any other feature on the site. This pottery has a fabric very similar to that discovered in a badly recorded 'occupation ditch' at Shelford<sup>4</sup> and seems to be of Iron Age date. This small ditch also contained a quantity of pot boilers. The evidence of the section indicates that the ditch, which lacks Roman pottery, was already silted up when the large southern enclosure ditch was first cut, placing the smaller ditch in an earlier period of activity on the site.

The lowest fill of this small, earlier, ditch contained an exceptional sherd of heavily shell-tempered coarse pottery, the only local parallel for which is a large sherd from a Bronze Age urn found at the site of a ploughed-out barrow at Melbourn.<sup>5</sup> The only other evidence of Bronze Age activity in this immediate

locality is a flint barbed and tanged arrowhead found in an unstratified context during the excavation.

A flexed inhumation had been placed in a shallow gravel pit just over 50cms deep. The pit cut into the fill and side of the larger boundary ditch, and was near the angle of this ditch and the smaller older ditch which diverges from it (Fig. 1, iv). The date of the skeleton is problematic as it was accompanied by no grave goods or dating evidence, but the gravel pit was cut from the same level as the top of the ditch and must therefore post-date the final silting. Mr. C. B. Denston, who kindly examined the skeleton, reported that it belonged to a female, about 5ft 2in tall, aged 20-25 years at death. There were no indications of the cause of death, and the only obvious evidence of any ill health was a large abscess on the upper jaw.

#### CONCLUSION

The small scale of the excavations and the paucity of dating evidence make the exact nature and extent of the enclosure complex of which the bulk of the site seems to be a part uncertain, and the features revealed cannot be exactly dated. However on the basis of the existing evidence it is suggested that, of the two ditched enclosures investigated, the northern was first used during the Iron Age and its ditch was subsequently recut in the Roman period. The small ditch which intrudes into the area of the southern enclosure also seems likely to have been cut and infilled during the Iron Age. Possibly the southern enclosure itself should be attributed to early Roman times and need not relate to any earlier period. There is insufficient evidence to indicate continuous use of the site from the Iron Age into the Roman period, or even to suggest a more precise date than the late Roman period for the final abandonment of the enclosures. The inhumation must post-date this phase of silting. The Y-shaped lime filled feature was probably a disposal pit of no great antiquity, and no conclusions can be drawn about the ring features.

Examination of the pottery<sup>6</sup> (mainly in terms of the fabric, as the fragmentary nature of the sherds has largely precluded the possibility of reconstructing pottery forms) has not provided firm conclusions for the date and history of any features on the site.

There was possibly a Roman dwelling on or near the site of the Girton Anglo-Saxon cemetery which is only about 300 metres away. Occupation of this dwelling is suggested from at least the second half of the second century A.D. through to the fourth century by Hollingsworth and O'Reilly,<sup>7</sup> and if such a dwelling existed it could relate to the system of enclosure ditches, part of which has been uncovered on the present site.

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2. Hartley, B. R., The Wandlebury Iron Age Hill-fort excavations 1955-6, PCAS 1957, 1-27.
3. Cra'ster, M. D., New Addenbrookes Iron Age Site, Long Road, Cambridge, PCAS 1969, 21-8.
4. Museum of Arch. and Eth. Records.
5. Museum of Arch. and Eth. 59.223.
6. Thanks are due to Mrs M. Woudhuysen, Dr B. Hope-Taylor, Dr J. Alexander, Dr D. Trump, and Miss M. Cra'ster for comments and advice on the pottery, and especially to the latter for making available comparative material from the university collections.
7. Hollingsworth, E. J. and O'Reilly, M. M., The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Girton College, Cambridge (1925).



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