INVESTIGATION OF A DITCH AND BANK AT FIN COP AT MONSAL HEAD, ASHFORD, DERBYSHIRE

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INTRODUCTION

During the course of a field survey of part of the Parish of Ashford, a clearly defined ditch and bank, apparently undisturbed, was noticed in one particular field between SK 17717099 and SK 17707094 (Fig. 1). Further investigation showed that the bank continued to the north to SK 17697114, where it met the edge of a very steep hillside which falls away to the River Wye below. This section, however, was much disturbed by stone quarries and ponds. Subsequently further traces of the ditch and bank, much reduced by ploughing, were found to the south-west at SK 176177082 (Fig. 2). The ditch and bank lie approximately 175m and 130m to the south, and down slope, from the outer edge of the main rampart of the later prehistoric (Iron Age) fort on the crest of Fin Cop (Preston 1954, 1–31; Hart 1981, 73–75). Nearby also is a known and recorded barrow dated to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (Rooke 1796, 328; Bateman 1848, 26; Derbyshire SMR 413). To the south-west of the undisturbed section of the feature, some areas showed slight evidence of the continuation of a similar earthwork, though much had disappeared completely, probably due to ploughing or perhaps deliberate levelling to facilitate cultivation. Where the feature is not visible the degree of slope is much less and the ground would therefore have been easier to cultivate. Some 260m down slope from the site is a superficially similar feature which, though ploughed out in parts, where better preserved is clearly the result of lead mining.

This newly identified ditch and bank, where surviving, follows the line of the main Fin Cop earthworks and runs from the precipitous slope on the north-east probably as far the slope on the west, thus enclosing an area similar in shape to the fort itself, though much larger. This suggests the possibility that the feature was an outwork to the fort (Fig. 2). However in the undisturbed area of the ditch and bank it could be seen that the latter had been erected on the down slope side of the ditch. This may suggest that alternative interpretations are more appropriate. In view of the particular configuration of the feature and its proximity to the Fin Cop hillfort, it was felt to be of sufficient interest to warrant further investigation to evaluate the following:

1 The original form of the earthworks.

2 The date of the feature.

3 The purpose of the ditch and bank and whether any connection with the Fin Cop hillfort could be ascertained.

Appropriate permission was obtained from Mr Shimwell and Mr Johnson (landowner and tenant respectively) and the excavation of a trial trench was undertaken in summer 1993.

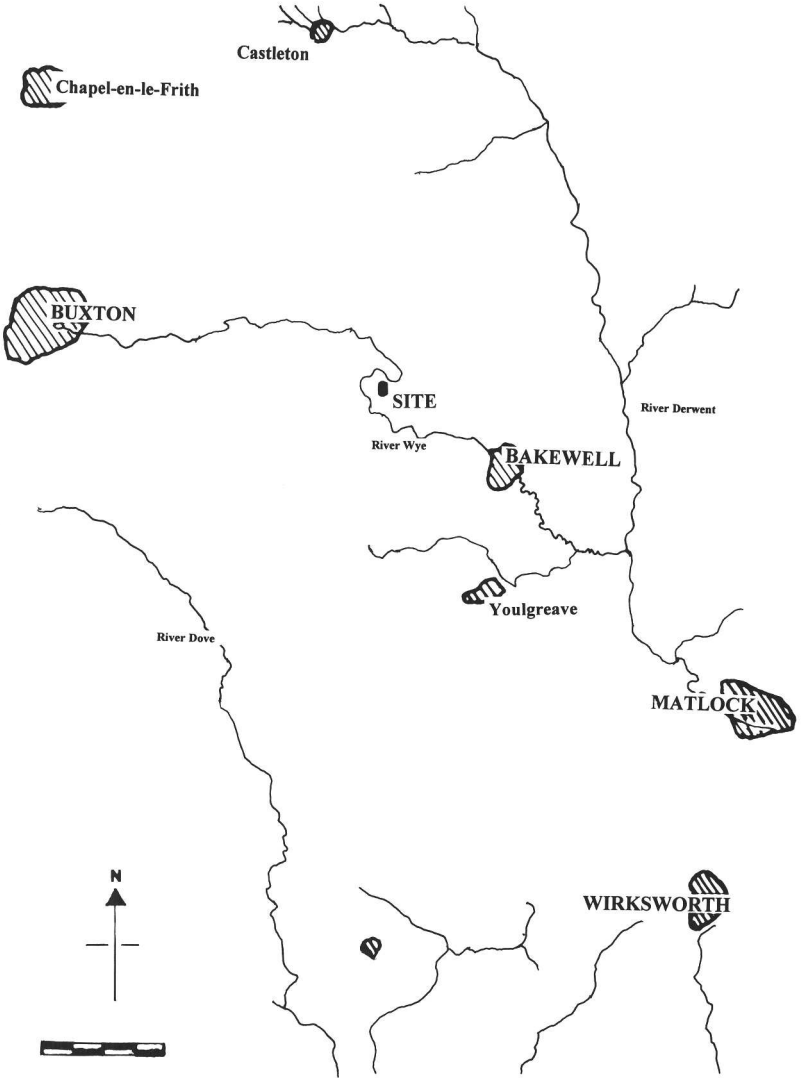

Fig. 1: Fin Cop ditch and bank: Site location.

A trench at SK 17717098, measuring 15.5m long by 1.5m wide, was dug at right angles to and across the undisturbed section of the feature (Fig. 3).

Topography and soils

The excavated trench at Fin Cop lies on Peak District Carboniferous Limestone and is at 303m OD on an east facing slope. The general area is defined on the north and west by a deep, steep-faced gorge through which flows the River Wye, and most fields have indications of ploughing since they were created in the 18th century.

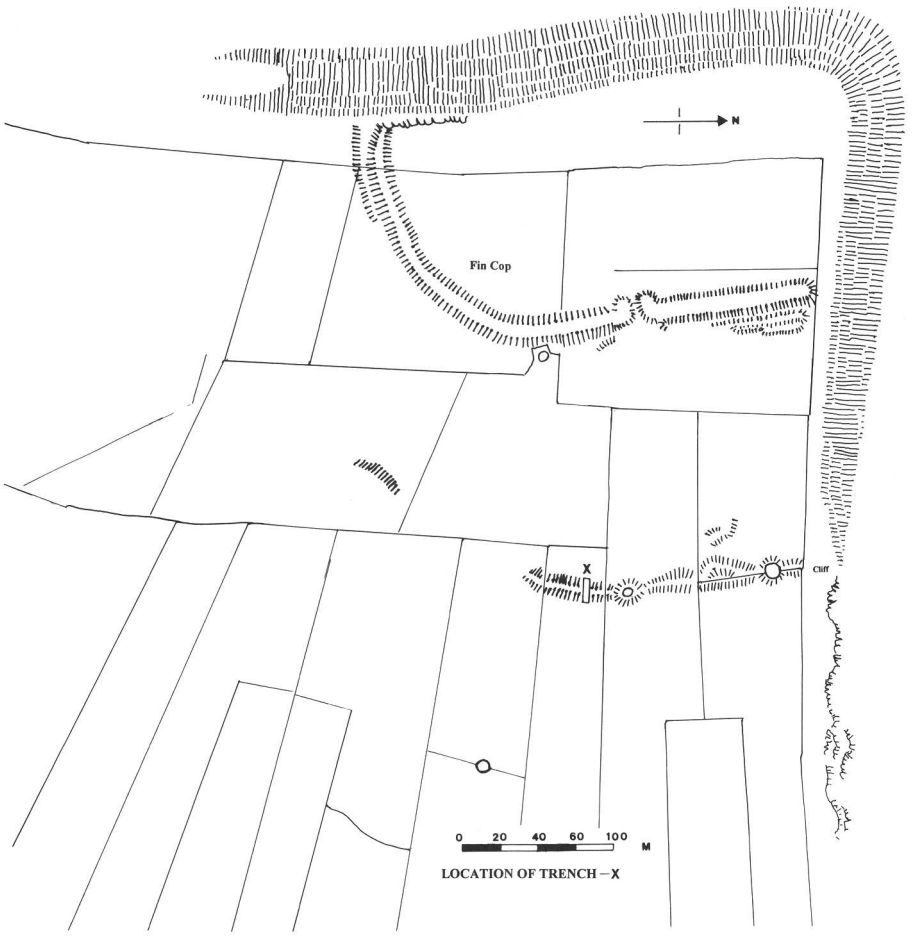

Fig. 2: Fin Cop ditch and bank: Location of excavation trench.

Historical context

Prior to the Ashford Enclosure Award, the area appears to have possessed Common Land status and presumably was used for pasture. The early 17th century Wm. Senior maps (NV Chatsworth 61V), drawn for the Cavendish family, define the area as 'Common Pasture', which subsequently was divided into fields by the Enclosure Award of 1767 (Derbyshire Record Office: DROQ/RY-7). No cartographic or documentary evidence is available concerning land ownership prior to the 17th century.

Little documentary evidence exists specifically concerning the excavated ditch and bank. The feature is not shown on the early 17th century Wm. Senior map, nor does any mention appear in the Enclosure Award or Maps. The ditches and banks of Fin Cop hillfort and the earthworks described here, however, were noticed by Hayman Rooke during his investigation of the barrow at Fin Cop. He records:

At about seventy two yards south east of the barrow is a work thrown up, with a ditch on the inside of the vallum which surrounds the top of the hill except on the north west side, where there

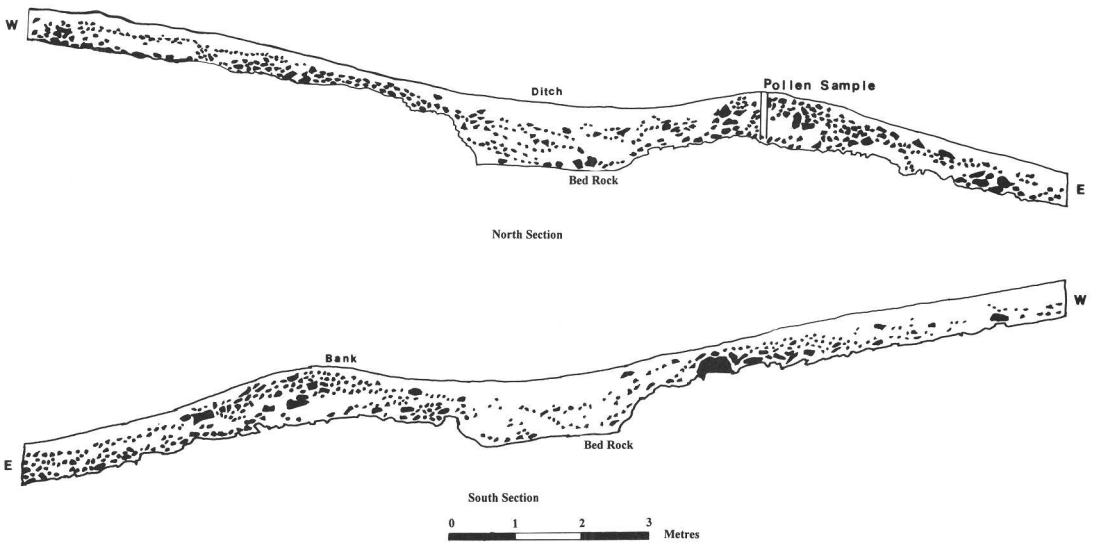

Fig. 3: Fin Cop ditch and bank: Excavated trench sections.

is a precipice fourteen yards from the barrow; at the distance of one hundred and sixty yards beyond this work is another ditch and vallum, where the ditch is on the outside (Rooke 1796, 328).

Hayman Rooke reverses the position of the bank and ditch both in the case of the earthworks of the hillfort itself and in the case of the ditch and bank described here. As far as the hillfort earthworks are concerned the ditch is clearly on the outside of the bank and not 'on the inside of the vallum', as Rooke has it. As far as the ditch and bank investigated (believed also to be referred to by Rooke) the ditch is certainly up-slope from the bank and would normally be considered to be on the inside of the bank. No explanation for the reversal of the bank and ditch positions in Rooke's paper is readily apparent. Perhaps it was the result of a simple transposition in his notes, particularly as the main point of his investigation was the barrow rather than the earthworks themselves.

It is also worth noting that Rooke apparently regarded the ditch and bank which forms the subject of this report as being contemporary with the hillfort earthworks when he says 'this elevated spot, thus secured by a double fence, may be the site of a British town or fortress. . .'.

THE EXCAVATION (Fig. 3)

The following is a summary of the excavation, full details of which are in the archive deposited at Sheffield City Museum, Weston Park, Sheffield.

The 1.5m wide excavation trench, at the ends away from the earthwork, revealed a layer of rich brown loam, 8 to 10cm in depth, beneath which was a subsoil of orange-brown clay loam, 12 to 14cm thick. Below the soils was pale grey, limestone bedrock eroded into typical limestone pavement.

Excavation of the ditch sides revealed that beneath this pavement lay a compacted layer of fragmented angular limestone and chert. In the original digging of the ditch this

layer had been partially retained up-slope to form a step, 40cm below the present surface and 58cm wide, extending along the ditch. The steep ditch sides dropped to a flat bottom formed by an unfractured layer of Monsal Dale Limestone. This unbroken layer of hard limestone had presumably formed a convenient level for the required depth of the original ditch and/or had proved to be a barrier, penetration of which was more trouble than it was worth. Within the natural strata immediately above the bedrock was a layer of black moist clay some 12cm thick. Chemical analysis showed that it was composed of a near equal mixture of eroded shale and limestone.

When fully excavated the ditch proved to have a width of 2.4m at the base and 3.6m at the top, and a depth of between 95cm and 1m from the present surface. Extending 1m from the edge of the ditch, on the up-slope side, a layer of loosely and randomly placed, eroded limestone pieces rested on the limestone pavement. This layer diminished in thickness from 30cm at the edge of the ditch to where it largely disappeared at a distance of 1m up-slope. The position and character of this layer could well suggest deliberate placement to contain upcast from the ditch, although there is the possibility that the layer is natural and results from the erosion of the limestone pavement in a geological situation where beds of variable materials occur together. No evidence was found of any connected up-slope palisade or similar construction. This is not conclusive in itself, of course, since the trench may not have been wide enough to reveal such a feature.

The bank had been raised on the down slope side of the ditch and was formed, in the main, by a simple dump construction from materials excavated from the ditch. There was some evidence, provided by the larger stones remaining on top of the bank and from the tumble both in the ditch and on the down slope side of the bank, to suggest that a cap of larger weathered pieces of limestone had been deliberately placed on top of the bank. These larger stones may have been acquired from surface clearance or from the original excavation higher up the ditch and been used to consolidate the bank and to increase its height. That these pieces of limestone were deliberately placed seems clear from the fact that they were not only much larger than the rest of the stones in the bank construction but they were heavily weathered and exhibited no fracture faces.

Before excavation the bank's width was 3.6m and the height 54cm above the level of the ditch. After excavation the height of the bank measured from the bottom of the ditch was 1.49m. However, having regard to the amount of tumble from the top of the bank, it is clear that the original height of the bank measured from the bottom of the ditch would have been appreciably greater. At the point where the ditch and bank was constructed there is a natural scarp in the slope of the land. Within the length of the trench (15.5m), the land level falls by 2.5m, thus enhancing the relative height of the bank. No signs of any tool marks were found on any of the stone excavated or on the bedrock at the bottom of the ditch, nor was there any evidence that the ditch had been recut.

A number of flint and chert artefacts were found during the excavation and some scattered fragments of charcoal.

Flint work

Detailed descriptions and distribution plans of the flint work recovered from the excavation are in the archive. Scattered throughout the trench, up-slope from the bank, were 13 worked pieces of flint, mostly debitage but including a fine scraper (Fig. 4: 12), a piece probably from a scraper (Fig. 4: 51) and a broken blade. The chert items were from

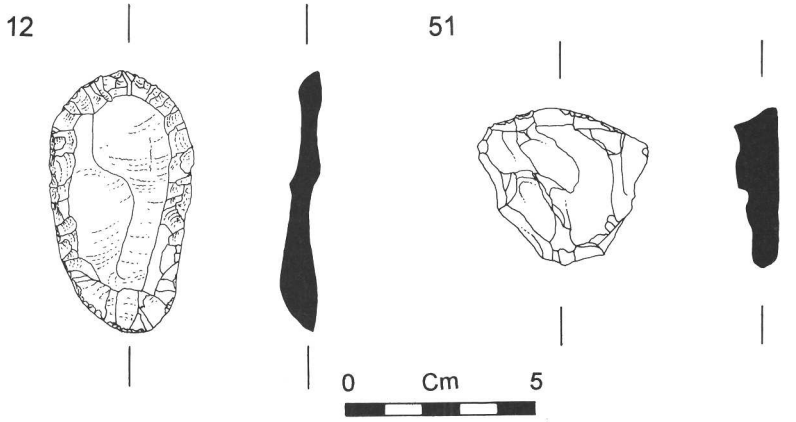

Fig. 4: Fin Cop ditch and bank: Selected flint artefacts from excavation.

the Carboniferous Limestone of the Peak District and the flint mainly from East Yorkshire or North Lincolnshire deposits. The small amount of flint work found makes precise interpretation difficult but, with the possible exception of one piece (broken blade), the assemblage would appear to be of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date (A. Myers *pers. comm.*). There was nothing to suggest that the lithics were other than residual from early activity on the site or that they had any direct relationship with the construction of the bank and ditch.

Pollen analysis

Samples of soil were taken from a sealed context in and under the bank. Examination showed that although Compositeae Lig (common herbs), Gramineae (grasses, various), *Plantago* (plantain), *Corylus* (hazel) and *Alnus* (alder) were present, none of the samples contained pollen in sufficient numbers or condition to be countable (F. Chambers *pers. comm.*). Though the pollen analysis is inconclusive, it may suggest a relatively open landscape at the time the ditch was built.

DISCUSSION

The lack of evidence and the simple construction of the bank and ditch makes it difficult to be sure of the purpose of the feature or of the time of its construction. However any form of lead mining can be discounted. Since we can be reasonably sure that the feature existed before 1796 (Rooke 1796, 328), it would seem that there are several possibilities.

It could be prehistoric and an outlying earthwork contemporary with Fin Cop hillfort. Alternatively, it could be a Medieval or earlier boundary marking either the edge of infield cultivation, or the boundary between different estates, which boundaries are common in the area (Hart 1981, 132).

Outlying hillfort earthwork

As has already been noted, the ditch itself encloses a relatively small area of land which is isolated by precipitous slopes on all sides and tends to follow closely the line taken by

the earthwork of Fin Cop hillfort. This coincidence of alignment could suggest that the two earthworks are related.

The feature lies almost exactly along the 300m contour line and occurs, in the main, at a point where the slope to the south tends to steepen somewhat and the slope to the east steepens substantially. This may suggest that a good defensive line was a consideration in its construction. As mentioned previously, the bank was erected on the down slope side of the ditch. The reason for this was not clear from the excavation. Possibly it was simply easier to form the bank on the down slope side during construction, which in itself may indicate that fortification was not the main purpose of the feature. On the other hand there may well have been a palisade erected on the up-slope side, in which case the position of the bank would serve to enhance the defensive nature of the earthwork.

The feature, therefore, may have had a defensive function, and/or may have been created as a corral to prevent livestock from straying further down the slope to the lower lying ground. However, its contemporaneity with the hillfort is not proven and there is also the possibility that it could be earlier in date. Enclosures on hilltops are known from the Neolithic (Mercer 1990, 28) and from the Bronze Age, during the second and first millennia BC (Cunliffe 1978, 17, 25).

Later boundary

From early times the construction of ditches to form permanent boundaries between estates and areas of land was a common practice. The fact that in this case the bank was constructed on the down slope side of the ditch may indicate that the feature was intended as a property boundary or as a defining limit to the Medieval open field system.

However, it does seem difficult to make a case for the use of the feature as a property boundary. There is no evidence to show that different ownership ever existed for the area to the west of the ditch and that to the east. All of the land lay within the township of Ashford and is likely to have done so throughout the Medieval period.

That the earthwork may be of Romano-British date also needs to be considered, but equally the topography seems to argue against this. Consideration was also given to the possibility that the ditch and bank formed a boundary marking the edge of the Medieval open field system. Comparisons of the early 17th century Wm. Senior maps, the Estate Map of 1752, and the modern Ordnance Survey maps, shows that the feature lies some 300m to the west of the outfield boundaries in an area which has been common land at least from the early 17th century until the Enclosure Award of 1767. Although there is no evidence to support a hypothesis that the open fields contracted down slope in later Medieval times, such a possibility cannot be entirely discounted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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