

CHAPTER 5

EXCAVATION: Site OD X/XI **2000 BC-AD 100 on Overton Down** (figs. 2.00, 3.00 and 5.00-5.00)

Summary

The initial aim was to test the hypothesis that 'Celtic' fields overlay a former settlement hinted at by a curved lynchet first illustrated by Crawford and Keiller 1928, Pl. XIX. Excavation began as a single cutting through a long lynchet (ODX1/A/^\wedge) apparently across the northern part of the presumed settlement. That first cutting intersected the arc of a circular foundation-trench of an Early Iron Age timber structure. Excavation of a settlement in its own right developed, examining four EIA structural complexes and numerous other features, including several 'ritual' pits, bounded by an enclosing ditch. The EIA settlement was preceded by Beaker and EBA burials, and MBA/LBA agrarian activity including fields and a possible building. It was overlain by ard-marks, the first such (observed) occurrence of the phenomenon on Chalk. The 2000-year-long prehistoric sequence, and the nature of its various components, added a new precision to the basic questions being addressed about local land-use and land-use succession, and its usefulness was enhanced by being linked to activity early in the Roman period and indeed, indirectly, over the most recent two thousand years as a whole.

The structure of this chapter is as follows (fig. 5.00 shows the location of the identifiers specified):

- i. Introduction; and the excavation and its enumeration (WP disc file no.: 5edfyf1)
 - ii. Excavation of and under the lynchet across Site X/XI:
Areas/cuttings X/2, XI/A, X/B, N and M, X/B West and XI/C
(5edfyf2a and 2b)
 - iii. Excavation (Site OD/XI/A) within the enclosed settlement:
Areas East, East 2, East 3 and South 1 (5edfyf3a, 3b and 3c)
 - iv. Excavation (Site OD/X) of and outside the perimeter of the enclosed settlement: X/3, X/4, XI/A East 4, X/14, X/5, X/1; plus all other perimeter cuttings (5edfyf4a and 4b)
 - v. Interpretation (5edfyf5)
- INTRODUCTION

The particular area of the excavation has already been described in its context of the field archaeology of Overton Down (Chaps. 2 and 3 *above* pp. 00, 00). The essential point here was that a curved scarp or lynchet existed in a rectilinear field system at this point on a 3° south-westerly slope just below the brow of the highest ridge-line of Overton Down. This was first illustrated, but not remarked, by Crawford (Crawford and Keiller 1928, 124-5, Pl. XIX, fig. 24, here reproduced as Pl. ££; *cf. also* Pls. 5.00, 5.00).

Crawford was principally concerned to demonstrate that this area of `old grassland` had once been cultivated, arguably in two phases. He proposed that slighter earthworks, called by him `parallel ribs`, represented `the "lands" of the ancient ploughing`, anticipating by half a century the recognition in northern Britain of `cord rig` (Topping 1989). Crawford's interpretation was that the `ribs` or ridges of cultivation were the marks of (at latest) Romano-British cultivation within prehistoric `Celtic` fields.

Detailed re-examination of this area in the context of the new Fyfield/Overton survey around 1960 led to the hypothesis that, whatever the date of Crawford's `ribs`, the curved lynchet which they respected might be a key to a somewhat longer, local sequence than Crawford imagined. This anomalous lynchet could plausibly be explained as having accumulated on the outside of the curved perimeter of an enclosure, by implication one earlier than the lynchet. If a settlement indeed existed and could be dated, then the particular fields over its interior and a conjectural perimeter had to be later than it. The basic research attraction was, therefore, the possibility of establishing by excavation a *terminus post quem* for at least some `Celtic` fields within the study area. Although that objective was met on OD XI, interpretation of the excavated evidence has ironically eventually led to an exactly opposite suggestion too (*below* p.00). We also wanted to test Crawford's interpretation of the `lands` as Romano-British which, with the recognition by the early 1960s of a marked phase of medieval activity on the Downs, we believed to be erroneous (*above* p. 00 and *below* p. 00).

As discussed above (Chap 1), a major thrust of the whole project was to date 'Celtic' fields while exploiting their presence horizontally to establish at least the elements of a sequential landscape history. Hence the earlier excavation at Wroughton Copse, Chap 7 *below*, attempting to provide a *terminus ante quem* for a field system on Fyfield Down by dating an enclosure overlying a 'Celtic' field lynchet. Fieldwork on Overton Down seemed to provide a rarely-identified opportunity to `sandwich` such fields between two settlements, one earlier, the other later, not vertically on the same spot but in a large-scale horizontal stratigraphy across a landscape. The decision to begin a trial excavation on OD XI, fields on top of a settlement, was therefore followed by the later decision to excavate OD XII (Chap. 6), a settlement on top of fields.

At neither settlement was it originally the intention to excavate a settlement *per se*. The aim in mind was merely to do enough to date each settlement: at ODX/XI to provide a *terminus post quem* for the fields, at ODXII to provide a *terminus ante quem* by which fields had gone out of use. It was a great pity in many respects that the minimalist intention was not adhered to, especially as the key information was gained on each site in a matter of hours. Here and in Chap. 6, we pursue our policy stated *above* (p. 00) of giving priority to the publication of such excavated evidence as seems relevant to our primary aims. Chapter 5 then is not a full, conventional excavation report, but the materials of such are readily and freely accessible in the NMR (*above* p. 00).

THE EXCAVATION and its ENUMERATION

The two `Sites` of this chapter`s title, OD X and OD XI, were part of the same archaeological complex. It was simply subdivided into two for identification purposes: OD X was the excavation code for cuttings immediately outside and concerned with the perimeter of an hypothesised, and quickly confirmed, enclosed settlement; OD XI, by far the larger undertaking, was the code for all excavations inside the settlement perimeter.

For OD X, the original intention was simply to test whether or not a curved lynchet in a rectilinear field system (Pl. LL) was reflecting the former presence of a curving settlement boundary, specifically a ditch. Initially, only two cuttings (ODX/1 and 4) were envisaged but, precisely because they were successful in locating a ditch, their number grew as the ditch was pursued around the adjacent landscape.

OD XI was itself subdivided. XI/A began as the first cutting through a lynchet across the settlement. It eventually embraced the largest part of the settlement area excavated, made up essentially of three contiguous 50 ft. squares in line NW-SE across the sites (cutting XI/A/East, East 2 and 3, with a sliver along the S side of East 4). A separate 50 ft. square close by on the south was labelled South 1 (fig. 5. **).

XI/B was the area immediately south of XI/A, though the excavation in it turned out to be small and entirely around the junction of three lynchets. Very limited in size, it nevertheless produced crucial dating evidence and what is interpreted as the earliest timber structure on the site (*below* p. 00).

XI/C was a single cutting yet further south, again through a lynchet (fig. 5. ^^)

The excavation began, in the manner of the early 1960s, with trenches dug by hand primarily to produce sections. It developed into an examination by area on a proto-open-plan basis once it was realised that settlement remains and ard-marks were extensive and that there was essentially no merit in keeping standing sections above the Chalk surface. Traditional hand-digging, especially for the removal of tons of turf, became a severe constraint, so a driver and machine with back-bucket was hired to remove turf and topsoil to a `safe` level above layer 2.