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## Chapter 6 Old Grassland on Overton Down: land-use history over 4000years

### Introduction: the field archaeology

#### 4.F The site of the Experimental Earthwork, Overton Down (Pls. 4.00, 4.00; figs. 3.00, 4.00)

Excavation here was not part of the Fyfod project nor was it carried out to address questions about the local landscape. Nevertheless, preparation of the ground for the construction of the earthwork in 1960 involved stripping overburden down to the surface of the Upper Chalk, and on five subsequent occasions (1962, 1964, 1968, 1976 and 1992) a proper archaeological excavation of the earthwork has been conducted (Jewell 1963, Bell *et al.* 1996). Although that has been done for other purposes, quite a large area has been excavated down to subsoil surface. No archaeological features were visible on the site before work began, however, and none have so far been found during the excavations. A small amount of archaeological material has nevertheless been recorded. Its relevance to Fyfod lies in the fact that the earthwork itself lies within the field archaeology of Overton Down, a point that was appreciated from the beginning (Fowler in Jewell 1963, 64-66). It was concluded there that 'the earthwork ... is sited near the edge of successive arable fields ['Celtic' and medieval] which, though separated in time by a millennium, ended along approximately the same ill-defined line.'

*[NB the following detail, taken from publications, is OK as far as it goes but there is a fair chance that it can be supplemented in the immediate future. Some certainly, all possibly, of these sherds actually exist, and I should be able to examine them myself. The 1992 material is coming to me mid-May, the rest earlier]*

The following data are extracted from Jewell 1963, Dimbleby and Jewell 1966 and Bell *et al.* 1996, amplified by subsequent examination of much of the material

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**1960:** six sherds were found during the digging of the earthwork's ditch but are not otherwise contextualised. Of four identified, two of coarse flint-tempered fabric are LBA?, 1 grog-tempered and burnished is EIA?, and one of BB1 fabric is RB.

**1962, 1964:** no archaeological finds are recorded in Jewell and Dimbleby 1966

**1968:** 'archaeological object' is one of the symbols on the published section (Bell *et al.* 1996, fig. 4.4) but not a single one was found in the earthwork proper. The sole such object was a sherd of thick, probably grog-tempered RB pottery at the bottom of the topsoil immediately beyond the outer lip of the ditch. That context is equivalent to bottom of layer 1/top of layer 2 on OD XI (*below* Chap 5, p.00). In view of the 'excavation' results from 1976 and 1992, the 1968 and earlier excavations were, from an archaeological point of view, almost certainly defective.

**1976:** 8 'archaeological objects' were recorded but are otherwise unidentified. Seven were under the bank: four clustered on the interface between the old (1960) land surface and the base of the turf stack, and three were in the flinty layer 2 at the base of the old topsoil. The eighth was in a turf overhanging the inside edge of the ditch i.e. it had been in the 1960 topsoil on the berm.

**1992:** archaeological 'finds' came 'principally from the ditch and the stone accumulation at the base of the soil south of the ditch' (layer 2). They included 13 struck flints; one piece of RB pottery and, at the bottom of the topsoil almost 2 m. outside the ditch's outer lip, a piece of tile; 3 pieces of prehistoric pottery, respectively in the base of the profile outside the outer ditch edge, near the bottom of the ditch, and in the turf stack; and two bones, one calcined and one unburnt, from a turf within the turf stack.

Two subsoil features were examined and interpreted as tree-holes, not solution features. That under the berm was covered by an old land surface and contained 'a mollusc assemblage indicating shaded conditions.' An analogy with the hole under the lynchet in FL I is drawn (*above* p. 00; Bell *et al.* 1996, 76-77, 140). All three such features, though natural, are likely to be among the earliest items in the landscape discussed in this report, belonging to a woodland phase before the downs were significantly cleared of tree-cover. They predated all other structures and, judging by the absence of the otherwise apparently ubiquitous flint flakes from their fillings, human activity as represented by worked flints.

Overall, the ground disturbance involved in constructing and monitoring the experimental earthwork has resulted in virtually no archaeological damage - an amazing feat given the nature of its general situation - and, consequently, no significant addition to knowledge about the archaeology of the area. It suggests a low level of non-occupational activity on the spot the earthwork occupies. The artefacts recorded incidentally in conducting the experiment can be best explained by infrequent, or largely non-domestic, manuring of a lightly-used, perhaps locally marginal, area - in effect an interpretation similar to that initially suggested at the beginning of the Fyfod survey. The area, located as far as one can see on earthwork evidence between structural remains of field systems, may indeed have been retained as a patch of pasture in the increasingly organised landscapes from the 2nd millennium BC onwards.

OD X/XI