

# IRON AGE SITE AT BEDFONT

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IMMEDIATELY to the south of London Airport a series of cropmarks covering some 80 acres has been revealed by aerial photography (see Fig. 2). The major cropmark of two concentric circles (TQ 080737) straddles the A.30, but the portion on the east of the road was already being covered by a housing estate when a photograph was first published by the Ordnance Survey in 1966<sup>1</sup>. At that time it was suggested that the feature was a Neolithic causewayed camp, perhaps having in mind the nearby one at Stanwell excavated in 1960<sup>2</sup>. However, the views of the Ordnance Survey have changed and the current feeling is that it might be a henge monument.

To the west of the concentric circle, a large number of other cropmarks including ring and boundary ditches, have been detected on various aerial photographs, their general composition suggesting Iron Age/Romano-British occupation. Some of the westernmost cropmarks (two boundary ditches, a ring ditch and some possible pits) have been enclosed within the compound of Esso's West London Terminal, while the remainder lie on adjoining farm land. Until recently the latter has been heavily threatened—Shellmex had plans to build an oil terminal on part of the farm and the Victoria-Heathrow overground rail link was aligned to go across the centre of it. Presumably if these proposals had been realised, then the remaining dismembered pieces of farm land would have been given over to housing and other purposes.

In 1972 Esso propose to erect two more oil storage tanks, the bunds<sup>3</sup> of which are expected to destroy much of the remaining features in their compound. The London and Middlesex Archaeological Society therefore decided to launch a full-time rescue excavation under the direction of the author for three weeks last summer, but as the results have proved so interesting, work is being continued on alternate weekends with the intention of another full-time period in 1972.

As only a comparatively small area has, so far, been opened and with many of the features at the

moment being in a state of partial excavation, this account of the site must necessarily be lacking in many respects.

## Nearby Excavations

Two miles to the north-east lies the site of Caesar's Camp, Heathrow (TQ 085766) which was excavated by Professor Grimes in 1944<sup>4</sup> as part of the Ministry of Works scheme to investigate historic monuments threatened by wartime defence works. The Camp turned out to be an Iron Age village of a quadrangular shape containing eleven hut circles and the now famous temple; it was defended with a ditch 20ft. wide by 8ft. deep. Besides the eleven huts which were not all contemporary, there were four "occupation areas" and a number of minor features, including two Neolithic pits containing Peterborough ware.

In 1969 further work at the west end of the Airport (some two miles to the north-west) was carried out by Roy Canham of the London Museum in advance of runway extensions for Jumbo jets<sup>5</sup>. He found a number of segmented ditches, boundary ditches and pits, the majority belonging to the Iron Age/Romano-British periods. He has suggested that the indications are of a number of small hut clusters scattered over the Airport site at half-mile intervals.

## Terrain

The cropmarks at Bedfont lie on the southern edge of the gravel plateau of Hounslow Heath facing a large loop of the Thames three to four miles away. For the area, it is a commanding situation with the ground falling 15ft. over a distance of a third of a mile. The natural is river gravel overlaid by a foot or so of light brown brickearth. In some places there are sand pockets in the gravel.

## Features

Because of deep ploughing and the time element it was decided to strip the two foot overburden by machine to within a few inches of the natural gravel to reveal any feature. As already indicated, the features which are all marked on Fig. 3 are in various stages of excavation and therefore it is not always possible to be precise concerning dimensions,

1. *Antiquity* 40 (June 1966) 145 and plate 25.
2. As yet unpublished.
3. A large excavated area around oil storage tanks designed to retain any large scale leakage.
4. *Archaeology* 1 (1948) 4-78; *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain*, ed. by S.S. Frere (1958) 25-28.
5. In preparation for publication.

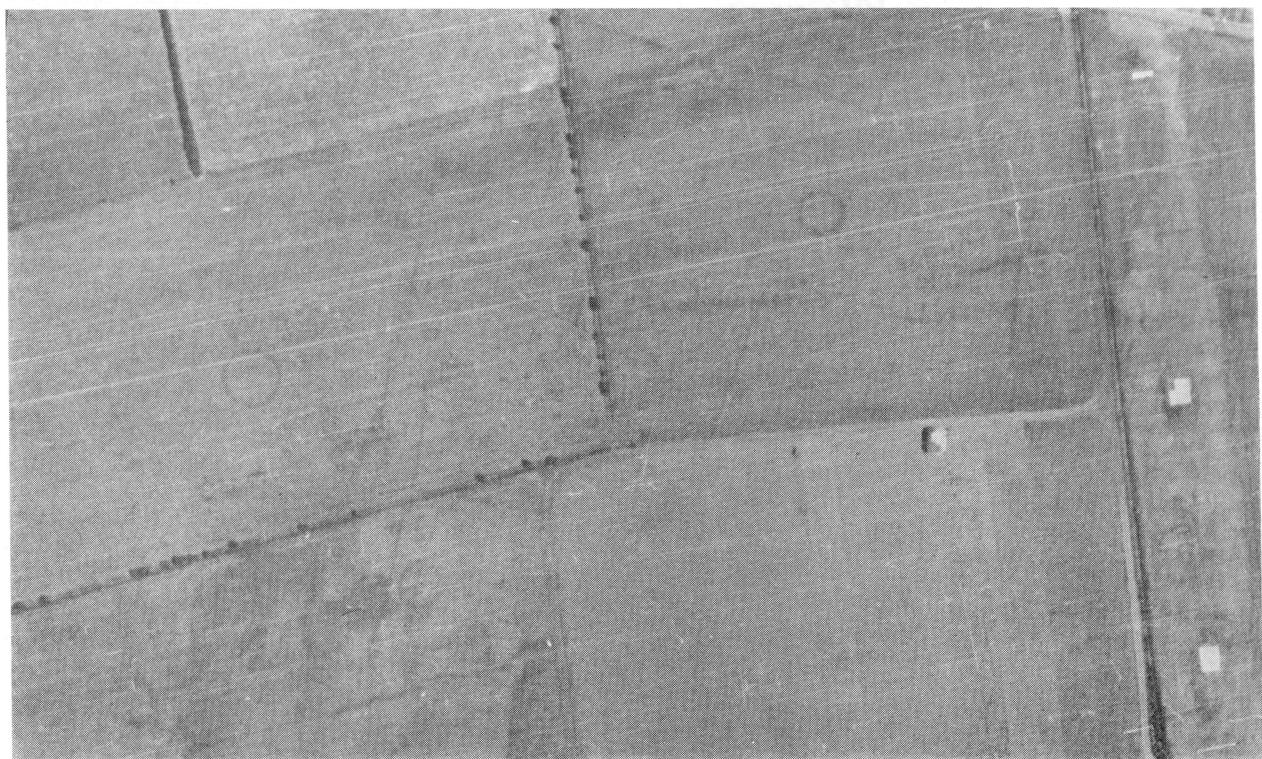
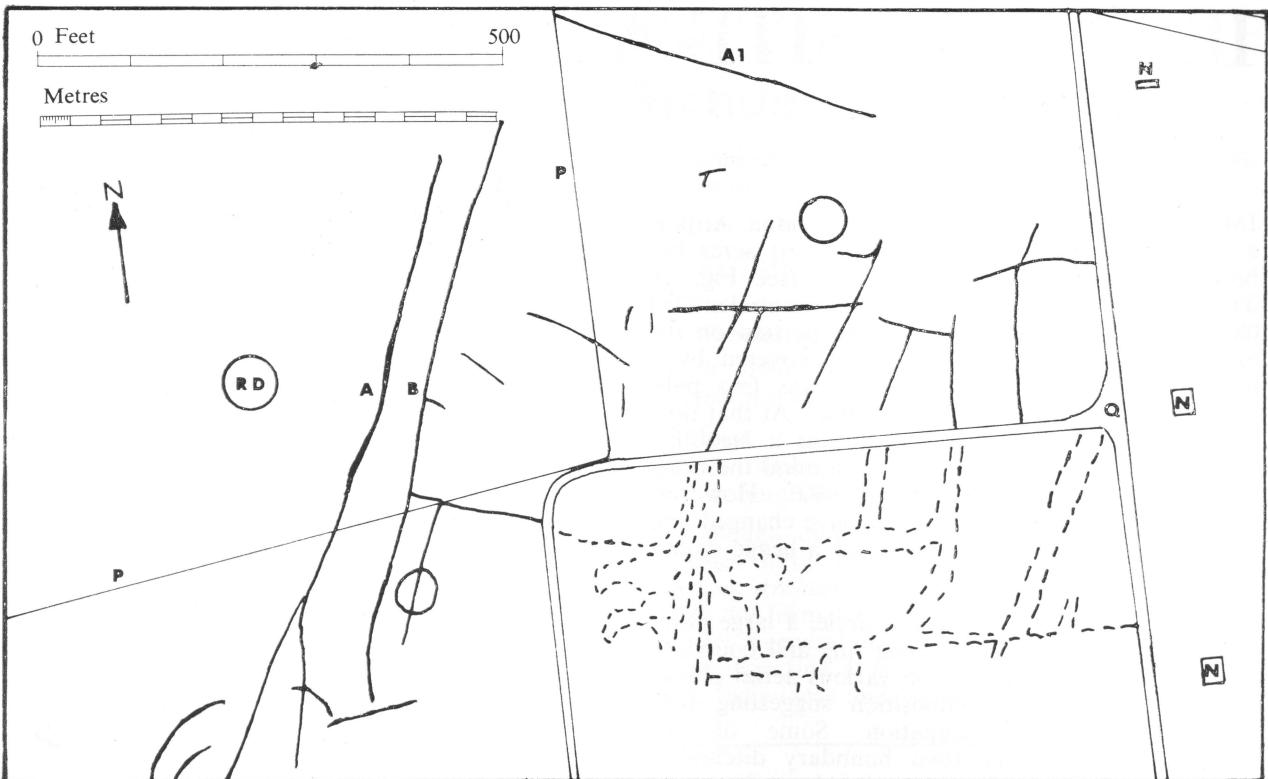


Fig. 1. The plan shows most of the cropmarks discernible on the aerial photograph below, with the dotted lines being features obtained from another photograph. Ditches A and B have been located during the excavation (see Fig. 3); ditch A1 appears to join up with A. Two segments of the ring ditch (RD) have been located.

A large storm drain carrying water from London Airport crosses the site and three of its inspection points (N) show clearly. Some of the farm tracks are also shown (Q), together with the ditch (P) which approximates with the present perimeter of the Esso Compound.

fills and ditches. The period which has been allocated to each feature must be regarded at tentative.

### Ring Ditch

This showed up very well in the aerial photograph as an unbroken circle of about 60ft. in diameter and appeared to be clear of the oil tanks which were later erected nearby. However, ground examination showed that the eastern third now lies under a fire access road whilst the western part has been dug away in the construction of a two and a half foot deep bund. Nevertheless it was possible to obtain

Fig. 2. This aerial photograph taken in 1946, shows a quantity of cropmarks; the scale is 1:2,500. On the right hand side may be seen part of the two concentric ditches which are now thought to be a henge monument. To the left there are various ring and boundary ditches.

(Photo: Aerofilms Ltd.)



two angled sections in the embankment of the road, each with a mutilated segment of ditch about 5ft. long.

This ditch has a flat 18ins. wide bottom with flaring sides. The north segment has one spot where there is a causeway rising to about 8ins. from the ditch bottom and reminiscent of the "two working parties" theory for such features.

Once dug out by the original builders, the ditch then had a palisade erected along its middle with some of the recently excavated gravel tamped down around the posts; it is noticeable that a number of large pebbles appear in the post holes. The remainder of the fill was silt, the upper layer having a certain amount of gravel in it, perhaps as result of ploughing. There were no finds from the ditch to date the feature but, presumably, it enclosed a barrow.

### Ditch A (I.A.)

This U-shaped ditch running in a north-easterly direction is about 15ft. wide and 4ft. deep and is broken in one place at least by a causeway; it was easily identifiable as the western of the two boundary ditches shown on the aerial photograph to be in the Esso compound. Along its eastern edge there is the remains of a mound except for the short stretch south of the causeway. Here the ditch fill

contains a large quantity of gravel as if it had been deliberately back filled from its inner edge. In general the ditch fill is a brownish-grey silt containing Iron Age pottery.

The causeway which is slightly lower than the natural on either side, would normally indicate an entrance but at the moment the interior features do not seem to support such a hypothesis.

The feature is possibly defensive in its nature and, from the aerial photograph, it appears to have the same character as Ditch A1 (see Fig. 2) and probably joined up with it. If the ditch continued down the east side of the cropmarks, then it has probably been destroyed by the storm water drain.

#### Ditch B (R.B.)

This is 5ft. wide and 2ft. deep having as its fill brickearth with some gravel. A very rough recut of the ditch contained two wheel-turned wall sherds, seemingly Roman.

#### Ditch J (R.B.)

This ditch has straight edges with near-vertical sides and runs parallel to Ditches A and B; it is 5ft. wide by 2ft. deep. Its primary fill of grey silt contains some Roman pottery, possibly 2nd century A.D. in date.

#### Ditch G (R.B.)

The alignment of this ditch is the same as the other three mentioned. Although only 2ft. wide and 2ft. deep, it has the same characteristics as Ditch J.

This ditch does not emerge into the large area cleared to the east and so must either terminate or turn north-west to join up with Ditch J. Ditch G contains 2nd century A.D. Roman pottery, much of it being in large fragments. The ditch fill which contains charcoal, gives the impression of having served as a rubbish pit once its original use had been forsaken.

#### Hut Circle 1 (I.A.)

The hut has a diameter of 32ft. inside its ditch with an entrance gap of 13ft., with the ditch itself being 3ft. wide; these dimensions are comparable with those of the Heathrow huts. Another similarity is that the ditch's terminals have been dug deeper—perhaps to act as sumps. Again, as at Heathrow, there is a lack of structural post holes which suggest low solid walls of turf or somesuch. The design of the hut ensured that the entrance was away from the prevailing wind.

In the centre there is a roughly circular shallow gulley 5ft. in diameter within which the gravel is much darker. This would seem to be the fireplace with the gulley being eaten out by drips from the edge of the chimney hole in the roof.

Some Iron Age pottery has been recovered from the ditch together with a Constantinian coin, which, presumably, has been carried down by a burrowing

animal; such a hole has recently appeared in the section of Ditch J.

#### Hut Circles 2, 3 and 4 (I.A.)

The ditches of all three huts disappear under the spoil heap but all are of a slighter nature than Hut 1. None of these huts have as yet been excavated.

#### Ditch E (I.A.)

This ditch is only one foot wide and has a post hole at regular intervals along it. It may represent a palisade acting as a windbreak for Hut 1.

#### Ditch D (R.B.)

This lies along the line of an earlier and slighter ditch which came from the west and turned up the line of Ditch C. The ditch contains Iron Age and Roman pottery but there is no dating evidence for the first phase.

#### Ditch C (I.A.)

A very large post hole prevents Ditch C (in its second phase) from joining Ditch D, but the reason for this is obscure. The ditch is the same size as Ditch D and like it has no dating evidence for the first phase; the secondary fill is brickearth containing Iron Age pottery.

#### Pit 1

It appears to be a rubbish pit and is 1ft. 6ins. deep.

#### Pit 2

This pit is only 4ins. deep. Among its contents are two pieces of very well burnt daub which give the impression of rough bricks or even firebars from a kiln. One has three adjoining faces giving it a thickness of 2½ins. Both contain pieces of gravel but in neither is there any sign of wattling.

#### Pit 3 (R.B.)

This is basically not so much a pit as a low round mound of black soil and gravel overlying Ditch E; it contains early Roman pottery. In its lower layers a possibly circular pit is appearing.

#### Pit 4 (I.A.)

This pit is at least 5ft. deep with roughly vertical sides and may turn out to be a well. It has been filled with much rubbish material including a large amount of reddish burnt daub and a broken iron fibula.

#### Discussion

With the excavation still continuing it is obviously far too early to come to much by way of conclusions. However, comparison with other sites does suggest some interesting ideas.

The evidence to date indicates that there was a large defended Iron Age settlement situated on the edge of the gravel plateau for strategic reasons. Its size is not clear but assuming a quadrangular shape to enclose the majority of cropmarks (see Fig. 1), a conservative estimate of the area would be 11 acres; the Heathrow settlement is only three acres. Comparisons in size can also be made with hill forts; for example, Caesar's Camp, Wimbledon

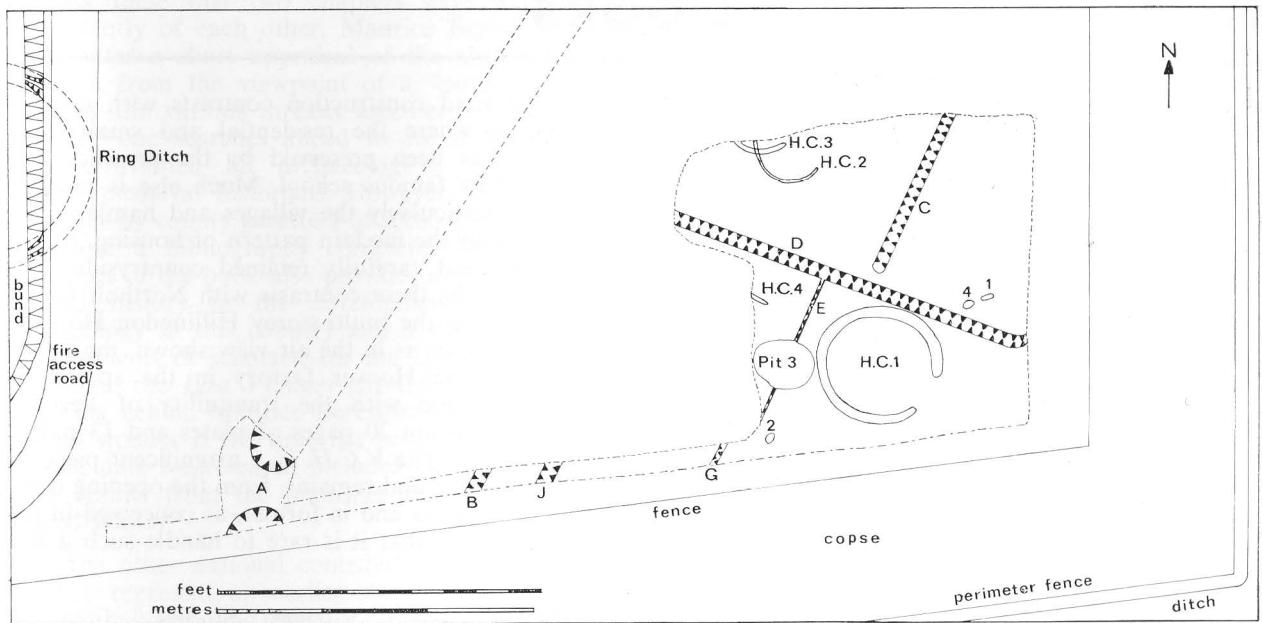


Fig. 3. A simplified plan showing the main features excavated so far.

Common has 12 acres, Maiden Castle 45 acres and Hod Hill 55 acres. However, Bedfont is not a hill fort in the true sense, and the quantity of Belgic pottery found suggests that it may be more appropriate to use the term *oppidum*. Comparisons with hut densities at Heathrow and Hod Hill<sup>6</sup> suggest a figure of about 80 huts for Bedfont.

Whilst the site may have been abandoned for a while, it was certainly occupied for the greater part of the Roman period, but apparently on a less intense scale.

#### The Future

The site is obviously a most important one, not only as it should give a thorough insight to a large Iron Age settlement so close to London, but also because there is a continuing occupation, perhaps after a gap, during the Roman period. Week-end digging (see *Current Excavations*) and another full time season in 1972 should be able to recover most

of the plan of that part of the settlement lying within the Esso compound, excepting the part in which the copse of camouflage trees has been planted.

The next step, if permission can be obtained, would be to investigate the remainder of the settlement (about nine-tenths) lying under the fields of the adjoining farm. Although there is no direct danger to this land at the moment, the threat of exploitation must be considered to be always present. If such a threat materialised, there would undoubtedly be neither enough time or resources to adequately investigate the area. Therefore it will be most important to see if a way can be found which would allow excavation to take place.

#### Acknowledgments

First of all on behalf of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society I should like to express my appreciation of the assistance given by the Esso Petroleum Company. Not only have they kindly given permission for us to work on a security and safety conscious site, but they have also made available a number of facilities including their canteen. I am also deeply indebted to Roy Canham who has given so much of his time, particularly with the preliminaries of the excavation. In addition I would also thank Pamela Greenwood and Dick Thorpe for being supervisors; the 50-odd volunteers who have done so much; the Department of the Environment for a welcome grant; and Wandsworth Historical Society for the loan of equipment.

6. Ian Richmond *Hod Hill*. Vol. 2 (1968) figs. 2 and 3.

## RESCUE

A major public meeting of RESCUE will be held in the Senate House, University of London, on Saturday, 15th January, 1972. It will consist of a business meeting for all subscribers of RESCUE at 2.0 p.m. and a public meeting at 3.30 p.m.