

The Early Iron Age Camp called Grimsbury Castle, near Hermitage, Berks

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GRIMSBURY Castle, four miles north-east of Newbury (national grid reference SU/513723), bears in the toponymic element "Grim" a name which is common enough in southern England for a prehistoric earthwork, though the term "Castle" seems to be a post-Saxon addition.¹ The site has been mentioned in writing for at least a hundred and twenty years—as well it might, for it is a remarkably well-preserved camp.² Yet, beyond a conventionalised description of its defences and the information that iron spearheads (thought to be of Roman date) have been found nearby, little has been said of its cultural affinities. My thanks are due to Dr. Gerald Palmer, on whose land Grimsbury Castle is situated, for drawing attention to the need for exploration; for his invitation to excavate; and for his unstinted help in every way.³ I am also particularly anxious to thank Mrs. M. A. Cotton (who has written a Note for inclusion with this report) and Mr. A. L. F. Rivet for their suggestions about the interpretation of the archaeological data.

The Castle occupies the highest point in the triangle of Tertiary plateaus which lies between the Thames, the Kennet and the Berkshire Downs (fig. 1). The downland chalk dips southwards under a cover of sands, clays and gravels, comprising a district of flat-topped ridges separated by broad valleys. Above the soft clays which overlie the chalk, pervious Lower Bagshot sands outcrop,⁴ giving the steep sides of this ridge-and-valley country. Very often the plateau surfaces are covered by Pleistocene gravels. The junction between clays and sands or gravels is marked by a wet and rushy spring-line whose indented nature is due to gulleying below the springs. The gravel surfaces have generally been colonised by bracken and heather, while the hanging slopes are clothed with deciduous scrub; and there has recently been much coniferous planting on the ridge tops. Altogether the Tertiary triangle is a very different landscape from the nearby chalk country, recalling rather the heath-clad Greensand hills of Surrey. The dominant feature in this landscape is the narrow, arc-shaped ridge, capped with gravel, which lies to the west and south of the River Pang. Its highest point is at the northern tip where Grimsbury Castle stands at 518 ft.; and it falls thence to 425 ft. on Bucklebury Common, four miles to the south-east.

¹The place-name Grimsbury also occurs near Banbury; *vide* M. Gelling: *Place Names of Oxfordshire*, Volume II. Cambridge (1954), p. 413, 433.

²References are listed in H. Peake: *The Archaeology of Berkshire*, London (1931), pp. 199–200.

³It is also a pleasure to record my gratitude to Dr. Palmer's staff, for many kindnesses; and to the many members of Reading University who co-operated in the trenching. Equipment was kindly loaned by the Director of Reading Museum.

⁴H. J. O. White: *The Geology of the Country around Hungerford and Newbury*, London (1907), p. 71.

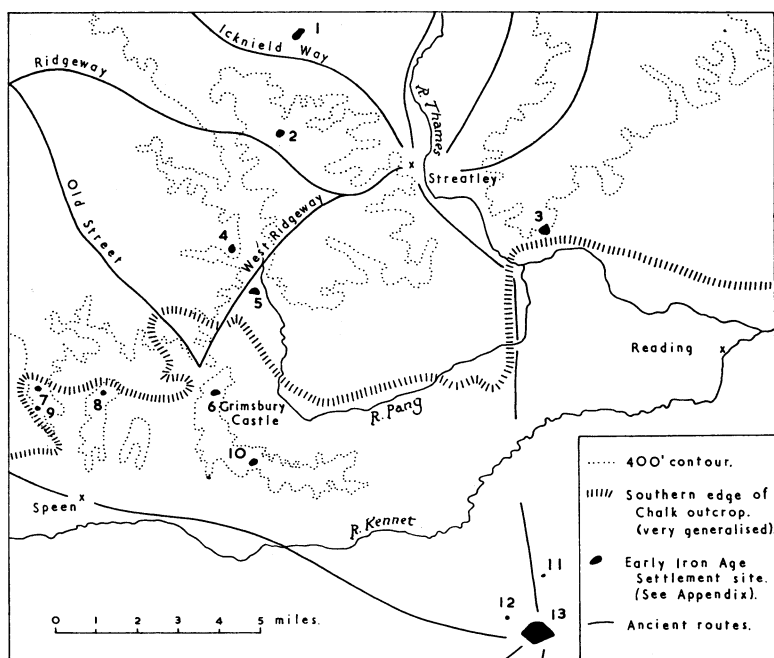


Fig. 1—Early Iron Age settlement in C. Berkshire.

Evidences of Early Iron Age settlement in the Thames-Kennet interfluvium are noticeably lacking to the east of Grimsbury Castle, though across the two rivers lie respectively Bozodown and Silchester, both apparently very large enclosures in that period. There are also a number of forts and settlements to the north and west of Grimsbury Castle. Many of them are downland sites, of which Blewbury and Lowbury Hill have been excavated. Others, at Bussock Wood, Ramsbury and Borough Hill are, like Grimsbury Castle, Caesar's Camp (Easthampstead), Hascombe and Holmbury (in Surrey), on sands and gravels. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of sites in the Hermitage area; and their characteristics are indicated in the appended table (p. 82).

Grimsbury Castle is a contour hillfort on a promontory site. Its earthwork encloses about eight acres of plateau surface. In plan (fig. 2) it is roughly triangular, with apices to the north, south-west and south-east. Its defence is univallate, with a marked counterscarp bank which roughly follows the contours of the end of the ridge. Except on the south-west, the sides of the camp lie approximately on the break of slope between the plateau surface and the valleyside bluffs. There is an even closer coincidence between the line of the defences and the geological junction of London Clay and Lower

THE EARLY IRON AGE CAMP CALLED GRIMSBURY CASTLE



PLATE Ia—Trench A, looking E. from the interior.

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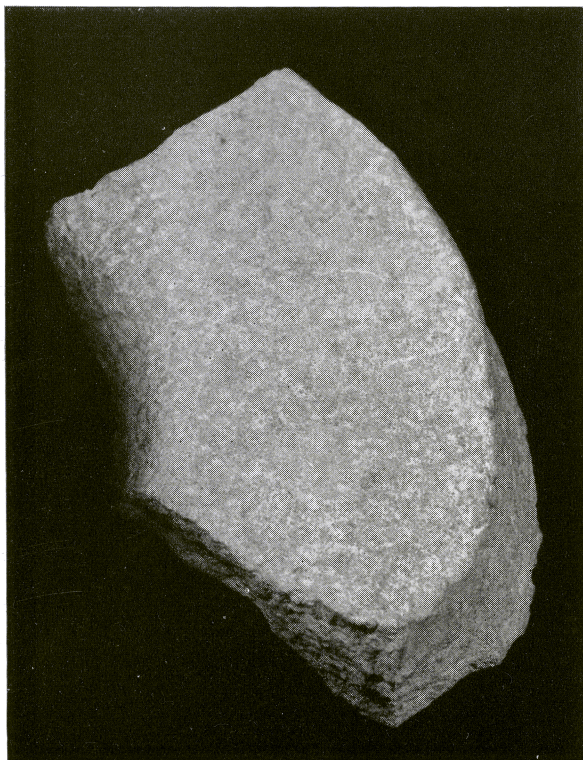


PLATE Ib—Quernstone from the ditch (Scale 1/2)

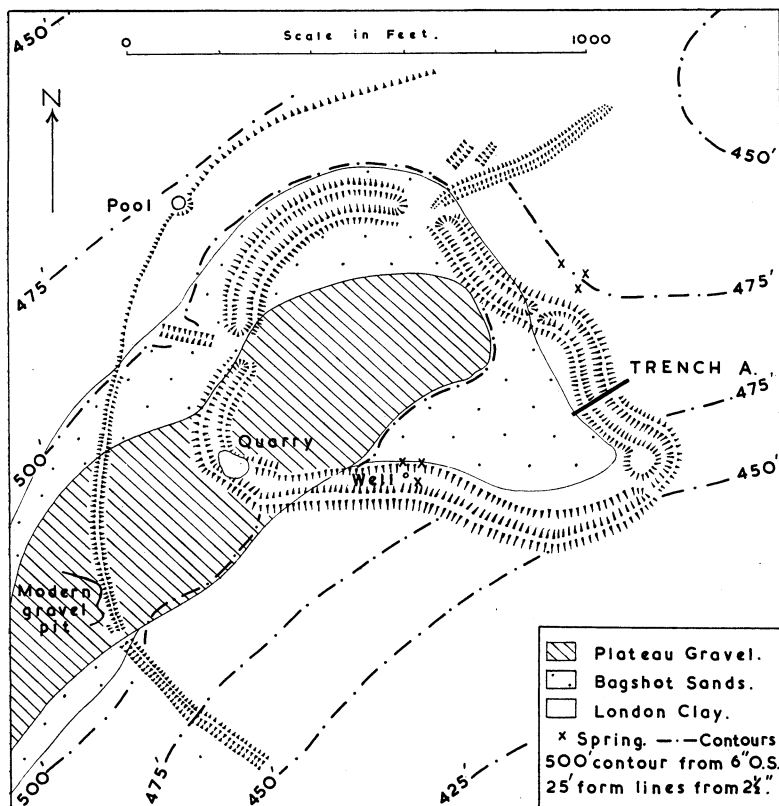


Fig. 2—Grimsbury Castle (*Crown copyright reserved*)

Bagshot Sands, at least as this is shown on the 6" Geological sheet compiled in 1889 by F. J. Bennett. However, the geological boundaries hereabouts have been masked and complicated by the downhill slumping of material which is such a great feature of the Tertiary plateaus area.

Three possibly original entrances to the interior of the Castle remain, two of them with auxiliary outworks.

(1) The best preserved is in the centre of the west side, and is slightly incurved, with an access about fifteen yards wide and traces of a hollow way leading downhill. Sixty and more yards to the west is an outer earthwork which appears as a terrace at its northern end, as a bank in the middle, and as a bank and ditch further south.

(2) The gateway at the northern apex is wider, with a twenty-four yard access. It is used by a modern road, which runs parallel to the

original hollow way coming uphill from the north. There is a system of associated banks which appear to have had a defensive significance.

(3) Some way along the north-eastern side, a portion of undug ground on the line of the perimeter ditch leads to the nearby springs. It is possible that there was a minor entrance here.

The easiest approach to the camp is northwards along the ridge towards the south-west corner, and here the defence is strongest.¹ The western approach is also fairly easy, and a slight declivity (as picked out by the 500 ft. contour) leads towards the western gateway. The defence is again reinforced by the outer earthwork, here about 100 yds. outside the counterscarp bank. On the north-eastern side, the defences consist only of two banks and an intermediate ditch, but at the south-eastern corner, the inner bank is knotted into an elevated mound. On the south side, overlooking the most precipitous slope, the constructions are particularly weak. The inner bank is replaced by a scarped slope, the ditch becomes broad and shallow, and it is often soggy underfoot, for it coincides with the spring-line.²

THE SECTION (fig. 3)

The five-foot wide Trench A was cut in June 1957 across the line of the defences on the north-eastern side. Here the inner and counterscarp banks and the ditch are particularly well-preserved. They are unobscured by any complicating contemporary or more recent works, and an opening in the otherwise dense tree cover along the ramparts allowed a straight section to be cut (Plate 1a). It soon became obvious that the layers of the banks and of the ditch-fill were remarkably ill-defined, and their junction with the undisturbed rock beneath was not easy to detect. It was therefore felt very worthwhile to explore the sub-surface geology, in order to make sure that the trench was everywhere taken down to natural layers; and also to attempt to provide evidence for the source of the rampart tips. It was often extremely difficult to draw the boundaries of the horizons in fig. 3: indeed a textural difference noted with the point of the trowel sometimes provided the only guide.

The section supposedly lay entirely in London Clay, and the basic geological layer (17) was presumably one of the beds in this formation, a plastic grey clay flecked with iron stains.³ Beneath the inner bank, the grey clay is overlain by bands of silver sand (15) and stiff clay of medium brown colour (11). The surface of the grey clay dips northwards at the edge of the plateau, where it is covered by a

¹The gaps in the defences on this quarter are not contemporary.

²It includes a well, reputed never to dry. *Vict. Hist. Berks.*, Vol. 1, pp. 257-8.

³An augur boring through this layer in the bottom of the ditch revealed a total thickness of London Clay at the plateau edge of 12ft., overlying a band of dark yellow sand of the type found at the basement of the London Clay.

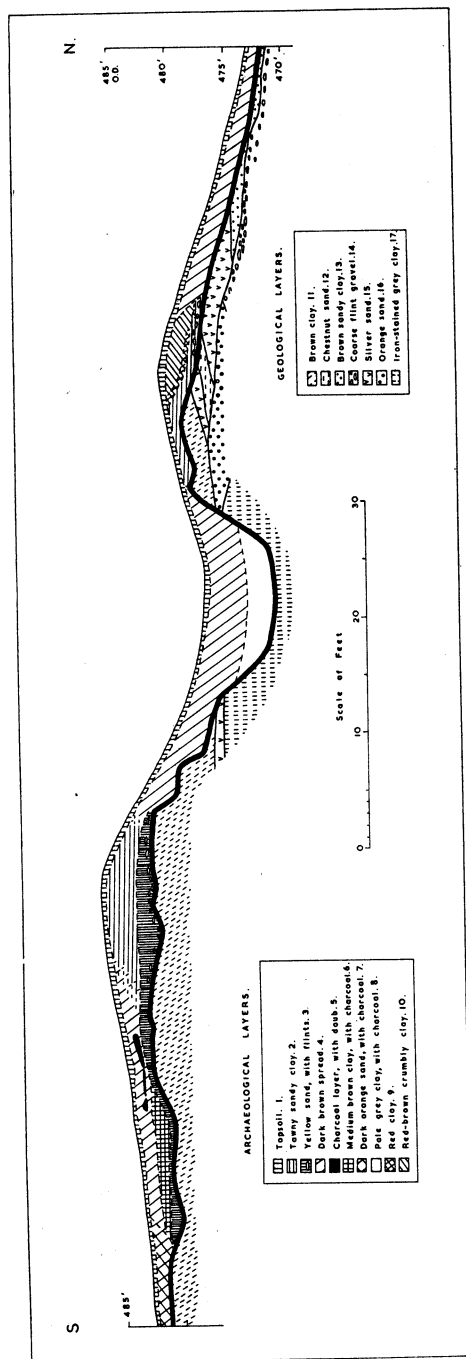


Fig. 3—Grimsbury Castle, trench A (N. face)

veritable welter of layers sandwiched between it and the heel of the counterscarp bank. The silver sand is here represented by two bands interleaved with chestnut-coloured sand (12). The wedges and lenses of clay, gravel and sand (13, 14, 16) must represent slumps and washes of material from the plateau.

The *inner bank* is mainly composed of tawny sandy clay (2). It lies on top of a horizontal layer of yellow sand in which flints occur deep down (3). Though the latter may be a leached soil or podsolised layer, it is not undisturbed for it contained a worked flint, subsequently fire-cracked and calcined.

The layers of the *counterscarp bank* consist of tips of at least three materials. Sandy clay of tawny colour, as in the inner bank but with flints at the down-slope end (2), is overlain by a lens of red clay (9), which enfolds a pocket of red-brown crumbly clay (10). The dark brown clay loam (4) represents bank slip.

The *ditch filling* has, under the upper silt or bank spread (4), a primary silt of pale grey clay, exhibiting the gleyed features of a waterlogged deposit and containing oak charcoals (8).¹

In the *interior* of the camp, the bank spread overlay a medium brown, stiff clay, flecked with charcoal (6). This, like the bank spread and the horizontal sandy layer, has been truncated by a horizon of dark orange sand, again sporadically containing charcoal (7). Finally, in the inner bank spread, is an interrupted layer some 12 ft. long altogether, composed of daub, brick fragments and the charred remains of oak, ash, willow, hazel and wild cherry wood (5).

FINDS

Most of the very few finds, including 'pot-boilers', sling pebbles and worked flints, are of no direct significance in attempting to date the defences. For example, a flint blade, dated by Mr. J. Wymer to the mesolithic or (less likely) the secondary neolithic period, was found in layer 10, in the outer bank. Together with the material forming the rampart it might well have been brought in from some distance.

The only dateable objects came from the ditch filling, as follows:

1. Three minute sherds were all the pottery obtained from Trench A. They lay isolated from one another about 24 in. above the bottom of the ditch. Mr. S. S. Frere, to whom they were submitted for examination, suggests that they might be placed centrally or fairly late in the Early Iron Age, for they are in the sandy Wessex Iron Age A tradition, and not to be connected with the Iron Age pottery of the chalklands to the north and west of Grimsbury.
2. From 10 in. above the ditch bottom came a portion of a beehive quern (plate 1b). It is manufactured from Upper Greensand which

¹The charcoals were identified by Dr. G. W. Dimbleby.

Professor P. Allen assigns to the country west of Reading, for example the Devizes district. It is very similar in type to some of the quern stones illustrated by S. E. Winbolt from Holmbury and Hascombe camps.¹

CONCLUSIONS

The defences of Grimsbury Castle at the point where they have been examined are decidedly contour, in the sense that the ten-foot deep ditch was dug along the exact break of slope between ridge top and valley side. The banks, at present crowning the original ground surface by six feet or less, appear to have lost the topmost two feet of their summits. However, they are sufficiently preserved to warrant the suggestion that they were constructed of material both tipped from the ditch and scraped from the surface outside the defences. They are of simple dump construction, and show no evidence of timber-lacing: the irregularities in the surface of the brown clay (11) probably result from the decay of large tree roots. The disturbance of the ground in the interior was not apparently connected with the formation of occupation floors. The curious step-like arrangement of inner side of the ditch probably resulted from soil movements during the construction of the rampart.²

Grimsbury Castle is certainly not to be equated with the forts of the Berkshire Downs like Blewburton and Uffington Castle, nor with the simply-defended enclosures of Bozodown and Perborough Castle. This was a camp presumably of short occupation (judging from the unusual meagreness of pottery recovered), an emergency refuge for a scattered population rather than a permanent settlement or livestock pen. The Early Iron Age culture of the Tertiary plateaus was very different from that of north-western Berkshire.³ Rather it seems to have been an extension of the culture known for the Wealden sand and clay area of central Surrey, which lay on the fringes of the main Early Iron Age distributions of southern England.⁴ In general terms, the structural features and the quern and pottery fragments at Grimsbury are all consistent with a date in the third or second century B.C., rather than later. The Roman spearheads found here many years ago are not representative of the time when the Castle is thus thought to have been occupied. On the contrary it might be seen, with the adjacent and similar earthworks

¹*Surrey Archaeological Collections*, XXXVIII (1930), pp. 156-70; and XL (1932), pp. 78-96. For Upper Greensand querns, see A. Pitt-Rivers: *Report on Excavations in the Pen Pitts, near Penselwood, Somerset*, London (1884), pp. 5, 13.

²Compare the section at the nearby Ramsbury earthwork, reported by N. Hadcock: *Trans. Newbury Distr. F.C.*, IX (1949-50), Nos. 2-4, pp. 24-5. But see also J. B. Ward Perkins: "Excavations on the Iron Age Hill-Fort of Oldbury, near Ightham, Kent". *Archæologia*, XC (1944), p. 138.

³J. S. P. Bradford and R. G. Goodchild: "Excavations at Frilford, Berks., 1937-8". *Oxoniensia*, IV (1939), pp. 15-17.

⁴S. S. Frere: "An Iron Age Site at West Clandon". *Surrey Archaeological Journal*, CI (1944), p. 56.

on Borough Hill and in Bussock Wood, as a frontier work against the wealthy and assertive hill town dwellers of the chalklands to the north-west.

Mrs. M. Aylwin Cotton has supplied me with the following note on analogous Early Iron Age hill forts:—

“The present section through the defences on the north-eastern side of Grimsbury Castle has shown that, in this place, it has a univallate defence of simple dump construction with a marked counterscarp bank. Insofar as dating evidence goes, the few pottery sherds are suggestive of an Ultimate Iron Age A culture. Both on structure and culture therefore it is analagous to Oldbury I, Kent, which Ward Perkins says was constructed by a non-Belgic Wealden people at some date within the first half of the first century A.D.¹ It thus falls into line with a number of other camps which are similarly situated on gravel, greensand or loamy soils, as opposed to those of the Chalk Downlands. Besides the Wealden examples, there are these more westerly ones, as Grimsbury and Bussocks, and a series to the north of the Lower Thames Estuary. Two of these, Ambresbury Banks and Loughton Camp in Epping Forest, have produced a similar structure and sparsity of occupation material, but the finds were again of similar character.

For the camps of this type, it is suggested that, like Oldbury I, they were refuges of those Southern Second B peoples, against the First Belgic Invasion. Though the evidence at Grimsbury is as yet very slender, it is consistent with such a picture. Whilst in South Essex the camps may have been built in the second century B.C. against the initial arrival of these First Belgae, in South Berkshire whether these people built their hillforts on these gravel and sandy subsoils against Third B or C peoples has not at present been shown.

There is however a second feature to be considered. At Grimsbury Castle the defences appear to have been strengthened by the addition of an outer bank on the side of easiest access. Excavation here should show whether, as at Oldbury II, there was a partial refortification or remodelling of the defences. There is a good case for further excavation at Grimsbury Castle in which the additional defence could be sectioned to show its structure, the entrance gaps tested for causeways and some exploration of the interior might be made for occupation material, although, in these refuges, this has so far proved hard to find.”

¹*Arch. XC* (1944), 153. For a list of the hillforts of south-eastern England see pp. 166–170. Map at Pl. XXIV. In terms of current thought, however, this culture, typified by foot-ring bowls of the Cissbury-Wealden culture, is that of Hawkes's Southern Second B (cf. *Antiquity* xxxiii (1959), 170–182), and the construction could have been a response to the first impact of the Southern First C peoples in the second century B.C., rather than to that of the Catuvellaunian advance into Kent in the early first century A.D. Oldbury II could be attributed to this later event.

Appendix. Known and supposed Early Iron Age Sites near Hermitage.

Name	Parish	Size (approx. acres)	Geology	Phase	Excavation References
1 Blewburton	Aston Upthorpe, Blewbury (Bks.)	7	Chalk	A & AB	Collins: <i>Berks. A.J.</i> (L) 4-29
2 Lowbury	Aston Upthorpe, (Berks)	?	Chalk	A & B	Atkinson: <i>Romano-British Site on Lowbury Hill</i> , 25
3 Bozodown	Whitchurch (Oxon.)	60	Chalk, plateau gravel	?A	Wood: <i>Oxon. (XIX)</i> 8-13
4 Perborough Castle	Compton (Berks.)	10	Chalk		
5 Park Wood	Hampstead Norris (Berks.)	?	Chalk		
6 Grimsbury Castle	Hermitage (Berks.)	8	London clay, Bagshot sand, plateau gravel	A	
7 Borough Hill	Boxford (Berks.)	1	Reading beds	A & B	
8 Boxford Common	Boxford (Berks.)	$\frac{1}{2}$	Plateau gravel		
9 Bussock Wood	Chieveley (Berks.)	10	London clay, Bagshot beds		
10 Ramsbury	Thatcham (Berks.)	8	Plateau gravel	?	Hadcock: <i>T. Newbury F.C.</i> (1949-50) 24-5
11 Pickling Yard	Mortimer West End (Hants.)	1	Bagshot beds, plateau gravel		
12 Frith Wood	Mortimer West End (Hants.)	1	Bagshot beds		
13 Silchester	Silchester (Hants.)	90	Bagshot beds, plateau gravel	C	Boon: <i>Roman Silchester</i> , p. 52
14 Caesar's Camp	Easthampstead (Berks.)	20	Barton sand, plateau gravel	A & C	