

# THE EXCAVATION OF TWO RING DITCHES AT HERON'S HOUSE, BURGHFIELD

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## INTRODUCTION

The sites to be described were situated in the parish of Burghfield at grid references SU 66357010 and SU 66557015 and lay at a height of approximately 140 metres O.D. on the free-draining gravel of the Lower Kennet floodplain. The area was photographed in the mid-1960's and was first published by Gates (1975 : 31 and Map 10 — note incorrect eastings). By 1976 gravel extraction had already destroyed ring ditch A (Fig. 1) and was threatening ring ditches B and C. Small scale excavation of B was carried out by Julian Richards and in the following year C was excavated by Reading University students under the direction of Richard Bradley.

### *Ring Ditch B* (Fig. 2)

Where sectioned the ditch was of a U profile and was filled with mottled, gleyed, clayey soil. In three of the sections a layer of burnt material, charcoal (?hawthorn), and dark earth overlay the primary silting. This appeared to have derived from outside the enclosure and can best be interpreted as a clearance horizon. (For discussion see below).

The ditch enclosed a circular area approximately 16 metres in diameter, within which were 4 features:

*Feature 1* — A shallow scoop containing the partial (surviving) cremation of an infant (estimated age 6—8 years).

*Feature 2* — A similar feature containing a partial cremation.

*Feature 3* — An ants' grain store.

*Feature 4* — undated feature — possibly natural.

The only finds were 2 edge retouched flakes (unillustrated).

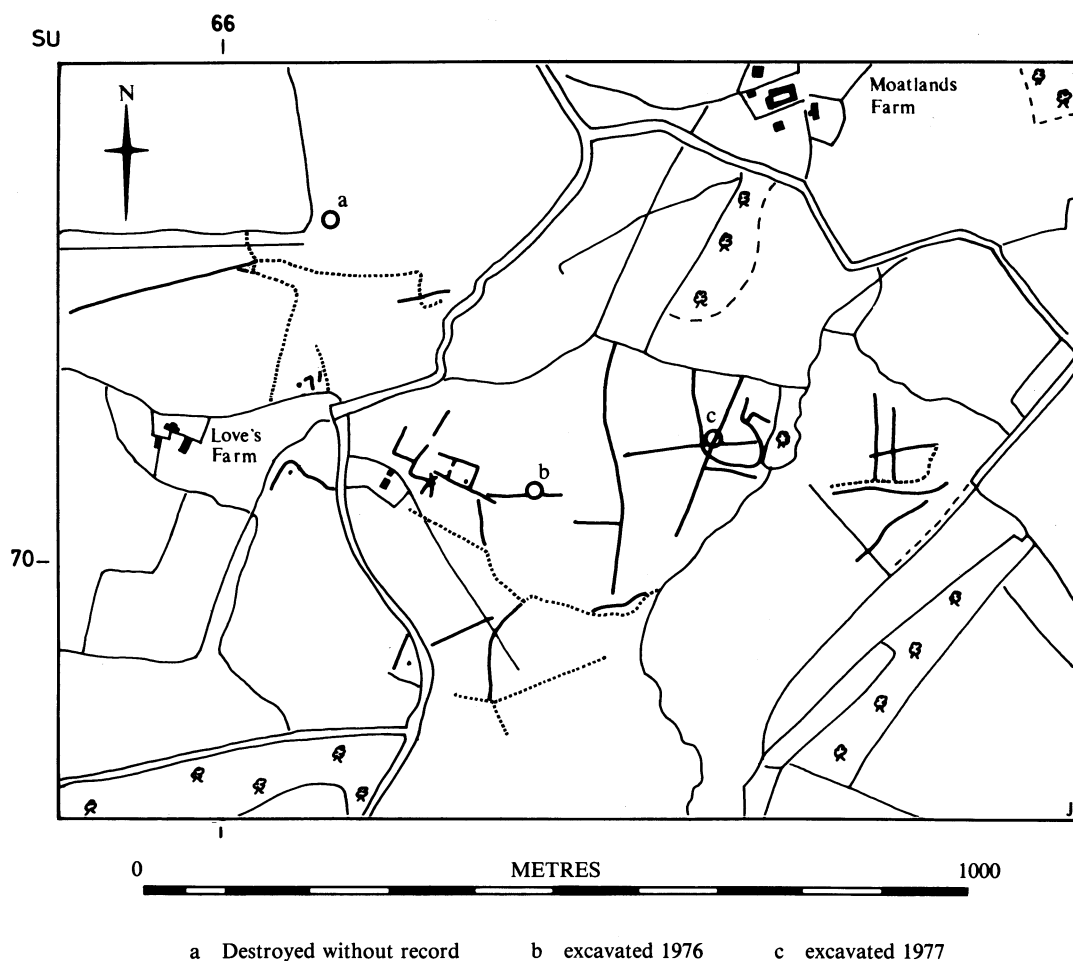
## INTERPRETATION

In view of the limited area examined and the methods of excavation, little can be concluded. The site appears to have had a sepulchral, rather than domestic function, although it cannot be regarded as a barrow of conventional type. Using the available ditch dimensions, it can be estimated that a mound with a 3 metre berm would have been less than 20 cm high. The ditch was of a single phase, but after an unknown interval the surrounding area had apparently been cleared by fire.

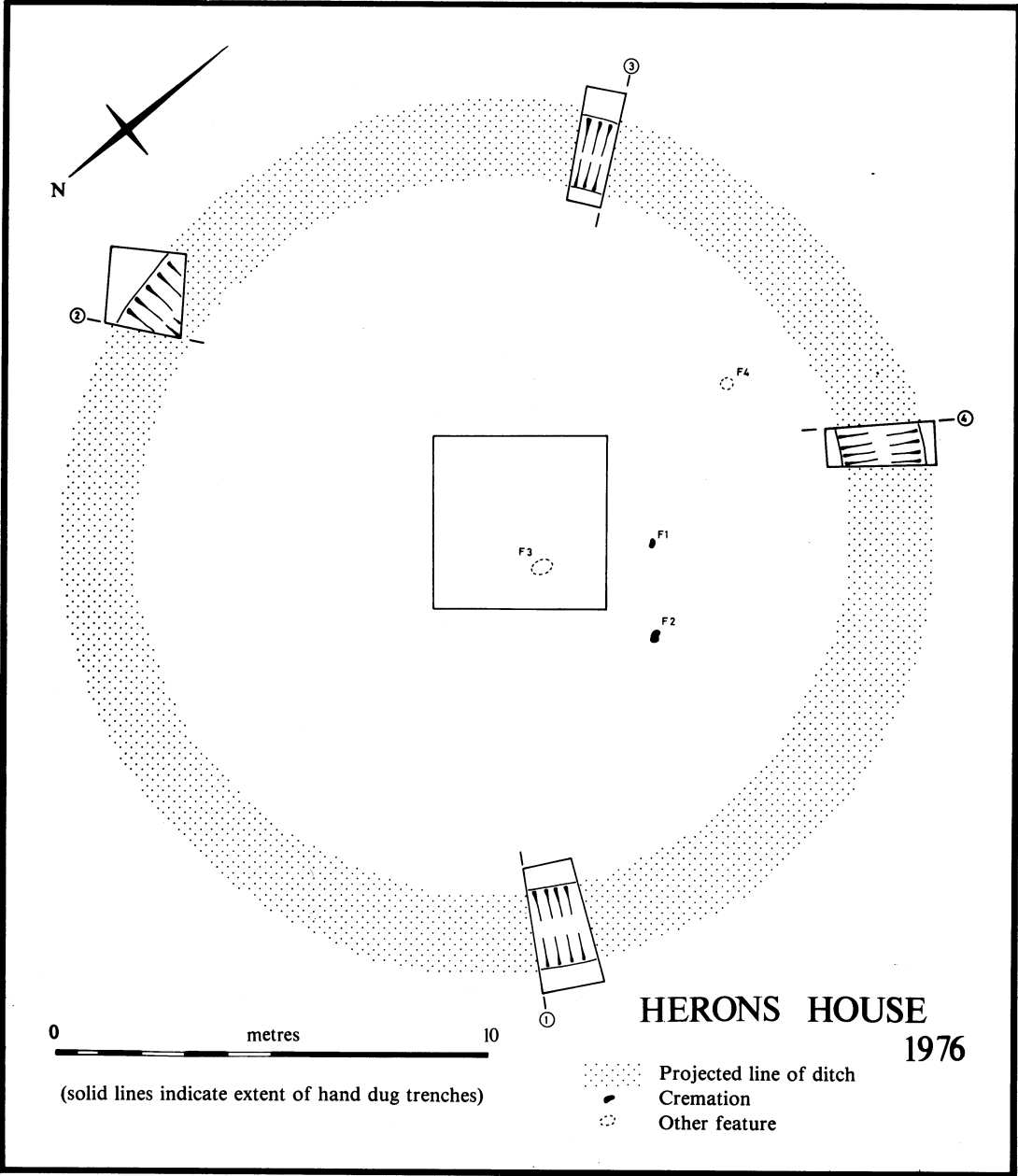
### *Ring Ditch C* (Fig. 3)

The ditch was of fairly abrupt U profile with a generally flat bottom and enclosed a circular area 10.7 metres in internal diameter. Its primary filling was of sticky, gleyed soil with gravel admixture. A more stoney soil layer had accumulated from the interior of the ring ditch and this was sealed in the area shown on Fig. 3 by a spread of charcoal. Apart from a land drain and an old hedge line 5 features were observed, 3 in stratigraphic relation to the ditch.

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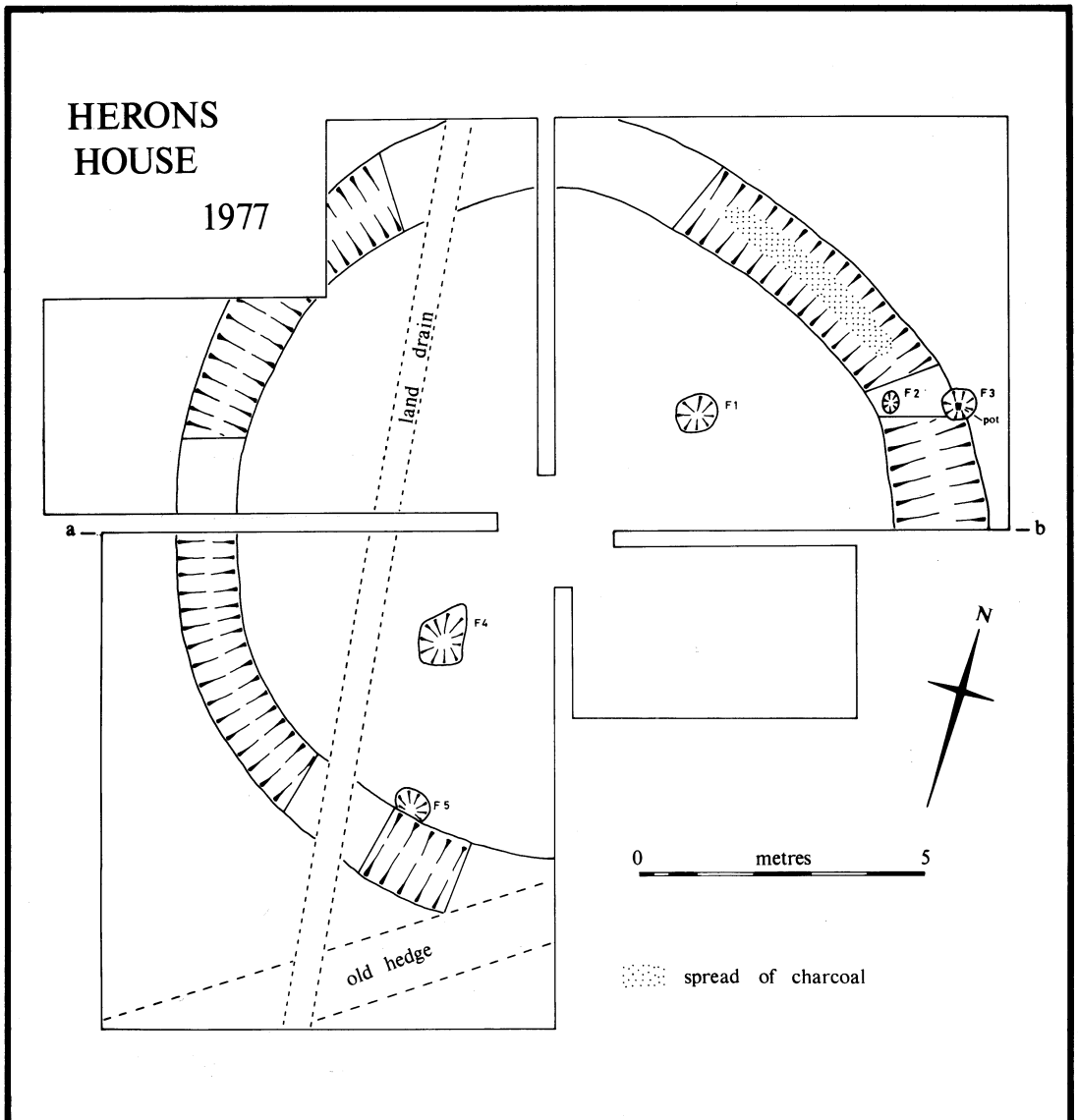


*Fig. 1. The location of the ring ditches and other crop marks.*



*Fig. 2. Ring ditch B: plan of the excavated area.*

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*Fig. 3. Ring ditch C: plan of the excavated area.*

- Feature 1* — Circular scoop containing single sherd of prehistoric pottery.
- Feature 2* — Oval pit containing 2 sherds of medieval pottery. Cut into secondary ditch filling.
- Feature 3* — Circular scoop cut into upper ditch filling. At the base of it was the majority of a bucket urn and a quantity of charcoal.
- Feature 4* — Irregular hollow — natural?
- Feature 5* — Shallow pit cut by ditch.

### EXCAVATED MATERIAL

Bucket urn (Fig. 4) with single pinched lug applied to the body. Probably complete to just below the rim. Buff externally, grey-black internally, hard body with scattered medium flint filler (Feature 3).

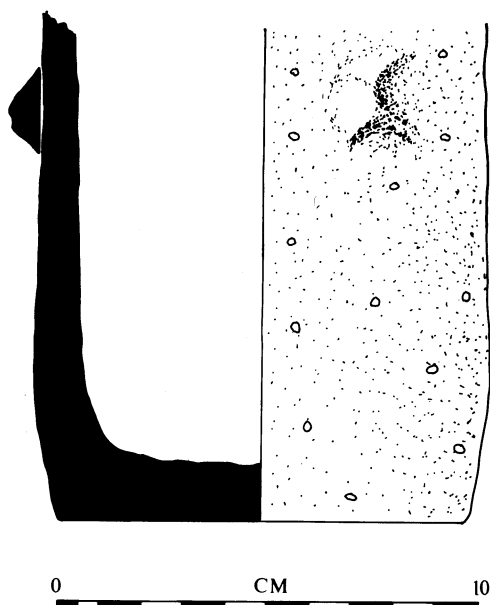


Fig. 4. Bucket urn from ring ditch C, F. 3.

This urn belongs to the Deverel Rimbury ceramic tradition and is dated by the associated charcoal which gave a C<sup>14</sup> determination of  $1110 \pm 100$ bc (Har 2754). This should be compared with the statistically indistinguishable date of  $1090 \pm 90$ bc (Har 2749) for the underlying clearance horizon.

In addition 2 prehistoric sherds, 23 sherds of 12th/13th century pottery, 40 worked flints and a horseshoe were also recovered.

### INTERPRETATION

As with Ring Ditch B, the enclosure was not substantial enough to represent a barrow of any pretensions, although there is some evidence that part of the ditch filling had accumulated from the interior. Any mound would have been destroyed by medieval agriculture, and no trace of a burial survived. Here again, the layer of charcoal in the ditch may result from land clearance around the site. The urn in F.3 raises problems of interpretation. It was not associated with human remains, but could have belonged to a secondary burial obliterated by the plough, although there is no reason to suggest a larger cemetery on this site.

### OTHER FEATURES

Many of the crop marks shown by Gates (1975 : 31 and map 10) were noted during excavation and topsoil stripping (Fig. 1).

The irregular feature east-south-east of Love's Farm was modern and the rectangular enclosure with internal division proved to be part of a post-medieval drainage system. The long, gently curving feature aligned approximately north-south between ring ditches B and C was almost certainly an old field boundary, and the features which cut ring ditch C were in fact a drain and a recent hedge line (Fig. 3). Other linear features appear as field boundaries on the 1841 Enclosure Map of Burghfield (Berkshire Record Office Q/RDc 63B) and are shown as broken lines on Fig. 1. Finally it is worth noting that a fourth ring ditch plotted on Gates' map 10 at SU 643695

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appears on the 1916 Ordnance Survey 6 inch sheet as the site of a fenced tree.

### DISCUSSION

Although a number of excavations have taken place, these are the first ring ditches to be published from the Berkshire gravels. These two examples are consistent with typological patterns described by Case (1963) and in both instances the earthworks are likely to have been burial sites. At present the dating evidence for ring ditches in this area extends from two sites at Englefield and Beenham, both of which have yielded late Neolithic pottery (unpublished; summaries in B.A.J. 61 : 99 and 100) to another site at Burghfield which contained a biconical urn (unpublished; summary in B.A.J. 65, 55; further details in Gates 1975 : 33).

There is no direct dating evidence for either of the enclosures at Heron's House, but the clearance horizon in ring ditch C did provide a radiocarbon date in the Middle Bronze Age. This can be taken as a *terminus ante quem* for the site. There is no reason to suppose that its ditch would have taken long to fill to this level, and the associated charcoals were from trees which would soon have colonised waste ground. The absence of large pieces of oak is important in this respect. While it is tempting to relate the sequence in the two ring ditches, the only firm connection is the similarity of the charcoal samples. There was no burial on one of the sites, but Burgess has argued that unaccompanied cremations like those from ring ditch B are most common in his phase iii of the Early Bronze Age (1976: ii). The siting of these cremations *west* of the centre has been recognised in ring ditches of that period in the Great Ouse Valley (Green 1974). It is also possible that the frequency of ring ditch burials in the Thames Valley had increased at a developed stage of the Early Bronze Age. The other dating evidence is for F 3 in ring ditch C. This feature contained part of a

bucket urn and has provided another radiocarbon date in the Middle Bronze Age. The vessel is a characteristic Deverel Rimbury form and is closely matched by finds from the unpublished urnfield at Sulham (Reading Museum). It is uncertain whether this vessel had originally been associated with a secondary burial but this does seem likely.

The main point of interest is the clearance horizon in both ring ditches. In each case there is evidence for a phase of burning on or close to the site after the primary filling had accumulated in the ditches. The radiocarbon date for F. 3 on ring ditch C suggests that little time elapsed between the period of clearance and any re-use of the earthwork. The environmental evidence suggests that secondary scrub woodland was being removed.

There is comparable evidence from three ring ditches in the Great Ouse Valley, where similar horizons have provided dates between  $1500 \pm 90\text{bc}$  (I.7148) and  $1290 \pm 90\text{bc}$  (I.7144) (Green 1974). Burnt layers have also been recorded on five other sites in the Thames and Kennet valleys. In Berkshire there are undated examples at Hampstead Marshall, Sulhampstead Abbots and Sonning (Berkshire Sites and Monuments Records PRN 2814; PRN 1866; unpublished excavation noted in B.A.J. 58 : 53); above the burnt layer at Sonning was a flint-gritted prehistoric sherd. At Abingdon, two ring ditches with similar evidence can be more closely dated (Parrington 1978: 6–10). Both of these enclosed cremations of the later Early Bronze Age (Wessex 2). The clearance horizon in F. 460 on that site was in a lower level of the ditch than two Middle Bronze Age cremations. Upstream at Mount Farm, Dorchester on Thames, another ring ditch contained a considerable layer of burning, which was earlier in date than occupation debris of the Late Bronze Age (Myres 1937). Finally two ring ditches at Standlake also produced evidence of burning, but this was probably connected with use of a Middle Bronze Age urnfield (Riley 1947).

The distribution is of interest, not least because it contrasts so clearly with the evidence from adjacent areas. The Middle Thames and Kennet valleys have seen only nine ring ditch excavations, but five of these have now included clearance layers, while in the Upper Thames Valley, where many more sites have been dug, only two show similar evidence. These sites were at Abingdon and Dorchester. There is no sign of similar features from Bronze Age barrows on the chalk, four of which have been recently examined (Richards forthcoming). The only related deposit was in the enclosure ditch at Rams Hill, and this has provided radio-carbon dates which again fall in the 11th century bc (Bradley and Ellison 1975: 38). It seems that this phenomenon is confined both chronologically and geologically.

It seems to be the Middle Thames and Lower Kennet valleys which show both intensive Later Bronze Age activity (cf Bradley et al 1981) and the majority of the clearance horizons so far noted. Their occurrence may be connected with greater pressures on the landscape. It was only in the Iron Age that the Upper Thames was really heavily settled and by this stage the Berkshire gravels may have been of less importance.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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