THE EXCAVATION

Description of Hardings Field

The moated site at Hardings Field lies back from the main High Street in Chalgrove, 250 metres to the north-west of St Mary's Church and adjacent to Frogmore Lane. It is situated in the floodplain of the natural stream which flows through the village.

The site was under pasture when discovered and the rich grass and flora,156 together with the good preservation of the earthworks, and documentary evidence,157 suggest that it has not been ploughed since the manor buildings were demolished. The topsoil, which was up to 0.25 m. deep in places, was a very dark grey (l0YR 3/l)158 silt loam derived from the underlying alluvium. Later excavation across the moat revealed lenses of gravel, flints and chalk drift overlying the Gault clay. The site, which had a maximum elevation of 66.67 metres OD (218.73 ft.) before topsoil stripping, was, like the rest of the village, prone to flooding in winter.

The site consisted of two moated islands (Fig. 5) and can be classed as an A2b site under the RCHM scheme for West Cambridgeshire, that is, a medieval moat, with attached enclosure, of more than one acre.159 The smaller island to the west was rectangular, some 30 m. by 45 m., and 0.l5 hectares (0.37 acres) in area. There was a slight internal bank around all four sides but no other internal features. At its south-eastern corner was the stub of a possible bridge abutment. To the east was the large triangular island 125 m. by 75 m. by 95 m. which contained a number of interior earthworks, including a platform in its north-eastern corner approximately 25 m. by 30m.160 This island had an area of 0.56 hectares (1.38 acres).

Two of the arms of the moats formed the north-eastern and south-eastern boundaries of Hardings Field and the latter contained an open ditch on its eastern side. The other boundary arm had largely silted up but was still wet. The other arms of the moat within the field were marked as earthworks up to 0.7 m. deep and were normally dry.161

At first it appeared that the stream had been diverted to feed the moats, but the juxtaposition of the modern watercourse and the moats suggests that this was unlikely. A more plausible theory is that the curving western arm of the larger moat marks the position of the medieval stream course, which was deepened and widened. Only the north-eastern and south-eastern moated arms of the large island and the north-western and south-western arms of the small island are man-made. There was some environmental evidence to support this. In the curving arm of the moat (F275 and F277) were found the remains of a species of non-marine mollusca which requires relatively clean, well- oxygenated water in which to live.162 When the manor was demolished in l485, or possibly even when it ceased to be the seigneurial seat c. l450, the moats may have failed to have been maintained and become choked with weeds causing them to silt up. The environmental evidence again suggests that the moats may have been kept weeded in order to prevent this from happening during the life of the manor. There was no evidence to suggest that the two islands were not contemporary, although the smaller rectangular moat may have been a later addition.

The Objectives of the Excavation

Until recently little archaeological investigation of moated sites had taken place. Often such work as was carried out consisted of small trenches or sections across the moats themselves. As late as 1974 only 30 sites in England had seen reasonably complete excavation of the main moated enclosure and in less than a third of these cases had the island been completely stripped.163 The Moated Sites Research Group therefore recommended that priority should be given where possible to total area excavation of moated sites, whether of one enclosure or several, concentrating on those aspects which have until now received the least attention. Areas specified were agricultural buildings, gardens, bridges and water control, particularly in those parts of the country where little excavation on moated sites had taken place.164

In addition to the above the ideal site for excavation would be clear of all buildings on the islands and within the immediate vicinity. The moat should not have been subject to post-demolition scouring. There should be at least one independent type of evidence to corroborate that from the excavation.165

In Oxfordshire only four of the known moated sites other than Hardings Field have been investigated by varying degrees of excavation (see p). None of those sites has been investigated by large-scale open-area excavation or by the stripping of an entire enclosure. Hardings Field, Chalgrove, presented the Oxford Archaeological Unit with its first opportunity to excavate in open-area a complete moated site which appeared to satisfy all of the criteria put forward by the Moated Sites Research Group. The field containing the two moated enclosures was under pasture and free of buildings and had not been ploughed in living memory. The moat within the field survived as shallow earthworks and for the most part had not been recut. Subsequent investigations showed that there was good documentary material relating to the site. In addition, a second moated site within the village, Manor Farm, has provided valuable documentary information and provides an opportunity to compare two contemporary moated manors.

R.A. Chambers's initial trial trenches revealed that up to 0.6 m. of stratification survived at the north end of the larger moated island, and the topsoil stripping of the field by the County Council indicated the presence of both domestic and agricultural buildings. The initial objectives of the l977 excavation by R.A. Chambers were to reveal the nature of the surviving evidence and to try to provide a chronological sequence for the site.

The seven month season of work which began in May l978 was expected to be the last opportunity for excavation before the site was to be destroyed. The main aims of this excavation were, therefore, to obtain a complete plan and dating evidence for the buildings of the latest and most complete phase of occupation; to excavate the associated farm buildings; to determine if the small rectangular enclosure contained any evidence of occupation or structures; to try to elucidate the various phases of alterations to the manor house and its relationship to the moats and to obtain further dating evidence for the earliest use of the site and the excavation of the moats.

As a result of the l978 excavations the Department of the Environment decided to schedule the site and preserve it by burial. The objectives of the l979 excavations

were tailored to this end and consisted of trying to bring the excavation down to the same phase over most of the area of the site and completing the excavation of the farm buildings. At the request of the Department of the Environment the stone walls, which on the Manor building were extant up to 0.5 m. in places, were made flush with the top of the surrounding stratigraphy.

Method of Excavation and Survival of Evidence

Initially excavation had consisted of small-scale mechanical trenching (Trenches I to IX) which had developed into a small area excavation with the expansion of trench IA. Owing to the lack of funding at the time it was not possible to strip the topsoil archaeologically and instead this was done by the County Council under very wet conditions. Consequently some loss of stratigraphy occurred on the edges of the moated islands. It is possible that this was why no structures were recovered from the smaller rectangular island, although trenching prior to stripping suggested that there was no occupation here. The topsoil that was removed was dumped in five spoil heaps, three of which were located on the larger moated island, one on the smaller rectangular island and the other to the south of the two moats. Two of the three spoil heaps on the larger island were later moved by a drot to the south of the moats during the subsequent excavations in 1978-79. The third spoil heap was left in position as this covered a building which had already been investigated by R.A. Chambers and it was felt that it would be uneconomical to move it. Similarly the need to economise on machining meant that the spoil heap on the rectangular moated island was left in place as there was no evidence of surviving structures on the exposed area. Another consequence of the method of topsoil stripping was that much of the site was covered by a compacted layer of topsoil which had been redeposited as the machines pushed the earth into spoil heaps. Before the l978 season of excavations could begin, as well as moving the spoil heaps, this layer had to be machined off using a JCB 3C.

On the smaller island a trench (XXV) 26 m. by 4 m. was machined in spits down to the natural alluvium without encountering any features or finds. After machining had taken place on the larger island the foundations of the final phase of buildings were then revealed together with a layer of general demolition debris, still mixed to some extent with topsoil. Owing to the pressure of time this was removed as one layer, the finds being recorded in a 5 m. grid. After the removal of this layer some parts of the site were still covered by demolition debris and this was removed as individual archaeological layers.

Three machine trenches (X, XI to XIII) were cut across the moats within the field and these provided complete sections of the moat profiles but were devoid of finds other than molluscs. It was not possible to machine across the moat where it formed the field boundary since it was being used as a drainage ditch and was full of water. It was possible, however, to obtain partial sections through these by hand-dug trenches (XIX, XXIV), and these provided some material evidence.

As well as the trenches through the moats a number of other trenches (XXVIII, XX, XXVI) were excavated by hand through to natural. The majority of these were dug in an attempt to obtain more dating evidence for the earliest occupation of the site and they also provided useful sections in areas where total area excavation was

not possible. These were particularly helpful in defining the edges of the moat upcast which in plan could not easily be distinguished from the natural alluvium.

The small area of the field to the south of the moated islands had failed to reveal any features during R.A. Chambers's watching brief of the topsoil stripping. A further attempt to locate features by a resistivity survey also failed to produce any evidence of archaeological features.166 Similarly the field to the north of the site which had also been under pasture and which was built on during l976 did not produce any archaeological evidence during the watching brief.167

Although the site was prone to flooding, and excavation was halted by this on a number of occasions, there was no evidence for the survival of waterlogged material except in the bottom of the moats. The explanation for this would seem to be that it is a relatively recent phenomenon owing to the construction 400 m. downstream of an overshot watermill in the 18th century. Pollen also failed to survive; however, bone preservation was good.