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ARBURY CAMP, CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

**An Earthwork Survey
by
The Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of England**

REQUEST SURVEY

December 1995



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1. INTRODUCTION

In December 1995 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England carried out an analytical earthwork survey of the severely plough-damaged Iron Age fort known as Arbury Camp. The survey coincided with an evaluation of the sub-surface survival carried out by Cambridge Archaeological Unit, in advance of the proposed development of the site (Knight 1996). It also followed RCHME's investigation in 1994 of the nearby Iron Age hillfort of Wandlebury (RCHME 1996; forthcoming), and was intended to contribute to academic discussion of the sites, which have been linked on the grounds of their apparently similar plans. Arbury Camp is located at National Grid Reference TL 4449 6160, on the northern outskirts of Cambridge, and within the modern district of the city, though formerly in the parish of Impington. The fort has been the object of several archaeological investigations, which have shown that it was univallate and apparently almost perfectly circular, with an east-facing monumental gateway, but excavation has provided little evidence as to its function. The site is recorded in the National Monuments Record as TL 46 SW 4.

Arbury Camp is situated on a very slight natural rise in the underlying gravel terrace at a height of 12m above OD, in the hinterland of the prehistoric fen-edge. The western third of the site now lies under the embankment of the modern B1049. The remainder of the eastern side of the fort survived as a fairly substantial earthwork until the Second World War, when it was deliberately levelled for arable agriculture, which continues to the present.

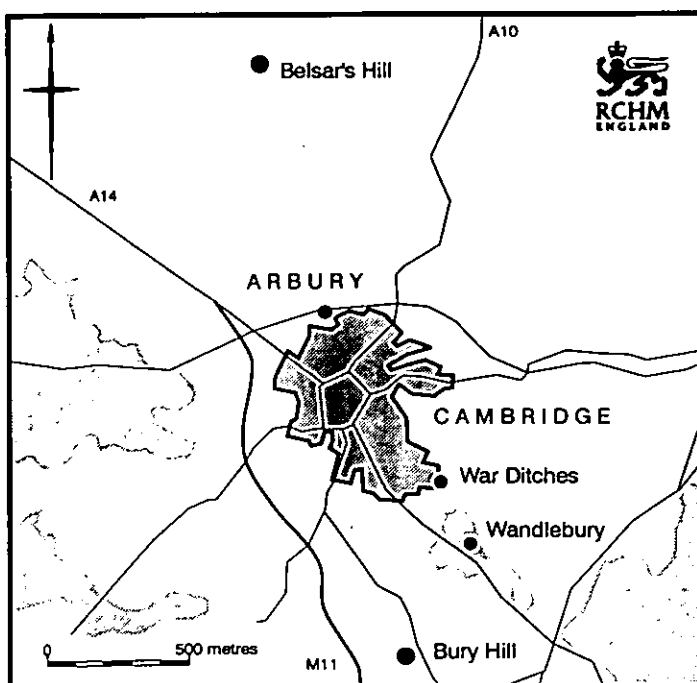


Figure 1:
Location map

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

The eastern section of the earthwork was recorded on the Ordnance Survey First Edition (surveyed 1886, published 1888) and Second Edition (revised 1901, published 1903) 25-inch maps (figure 2).

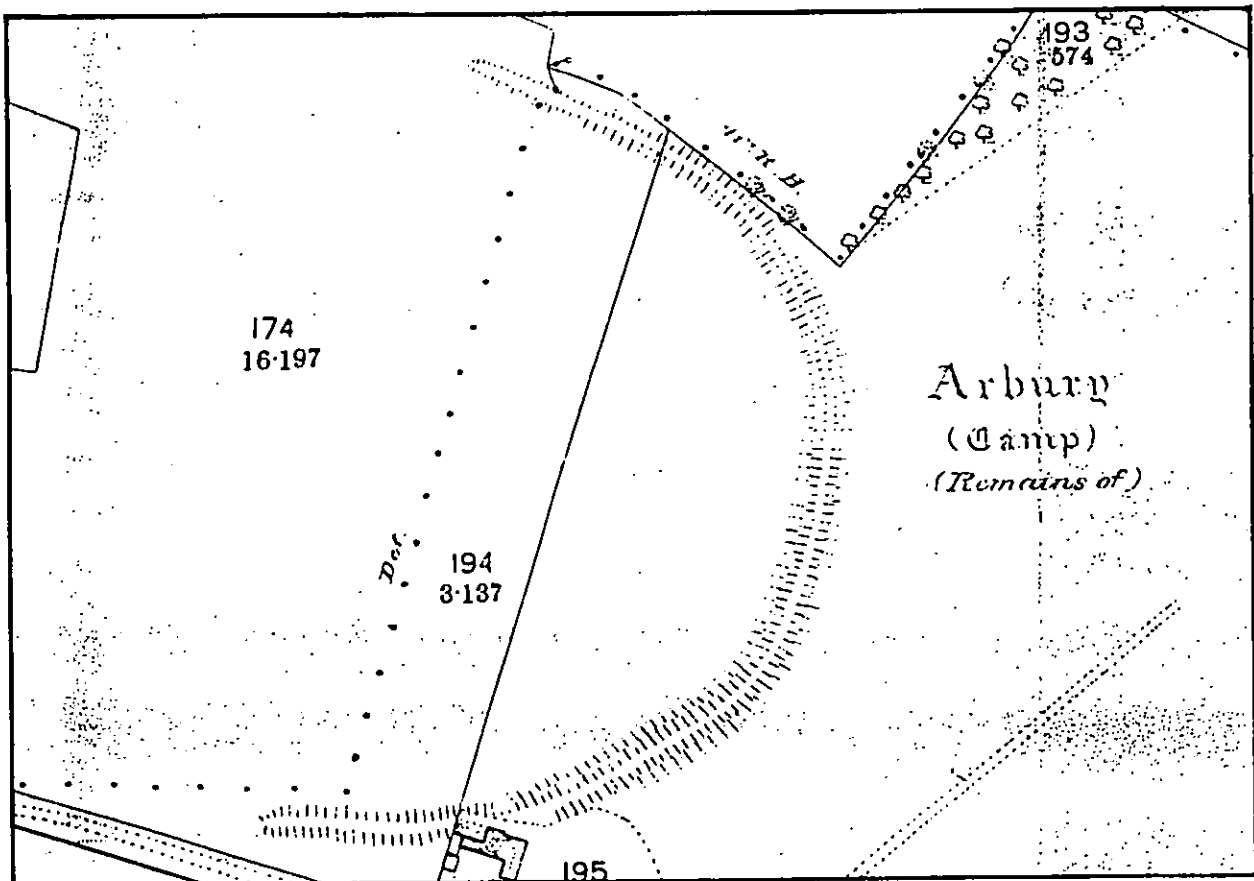


Figure 2: Ordnance Survey First Edition 25-inch map, surveyed 1886, published 1888

The earliest detailed consideration of the site, by McKenny-Hughes, discussed a range of possible origins and noted the presence of stray finds of late Roman coins in the vicinity, but concluded that the fort was probably of later prehistoric date (Hughes 1902). He went on to excavate three trenches across the eastern side of the earthwork (Hughes 1904), which recovered no dateable artefacts and apparently failed to expose the full profile of the ditch (Evans 1991, 3).

The Victoria County History (Salzman 1948, 24) cautiously accepted McKenny-Hughes' conclusion on the date but did not survey the earthwork.

In 1970, Cambridge University carried out a training excavation on the site, opening eight trenches across the eastern and north-eastern perimeter of the levelled earthwork, and a small area of the interior (Alexander and Trump 1970). Three trenches across the ditch showed it to be 8.0m wide on average with a U-shaped profile and depth ranging from 1.0m to 1.5m. Six small sherds of prehistoric pottery, thought to be Iron Age, were found in a humic layer 0.10m above the base of the ditch. The bank survived to a maximum of 7.5m wide and 0.4m high, and was thought to have been at most c.1m high originally. The former course of the western side of the fort was defined by augering and resistivity survey, though the geophysical techniques were unsuccessful in the interior.

Other than a single isolated gully, Alexander and Trump found no evidence for the pits and other minor features which McKenny-Hughes claimed to have found, and concluded that there had been no permanent occupation on the site in the Iron Age. Given the relatively unmassive size of the earthwork, Arbury Camp was interpreted as a stock enclosure rather than a defensive 'fort' as such. DL Clarke subsequently developed the theory that the enclosure may have served only as a winter base, associated with the exploitation of the grazing and other resources available in the Fens during the summer (Clarke 1972).

Alexander and Trump found eighty-four sherds of Romano-British pottery in the upper fill of the ditch, and suggested that there may have been a settlement in the area, but that Arbury Camp itself was probably already under arable agriculture at that time. A Medieval ploughsoil was also identified, and it was suggested that the Iron Age rampart bank may have been re-used as a headland.

In 1990, the Cambridge Archaeological Unit undertook an evaluation of the site in advance of its proposed development (Evans 1991; 1992), which broadly confirmed Alexander and Trump's conclusions. Field walking across the area recovered 496 sherds of pottery, of which only 0.8% were potentially Iron Age, 12% were Roman, and the remainder Post-Medieval. Within the Roman material, a distinction between a low-density spread of small abraded sherds and larger freshly broken pieces was interpreted as the product of two processes: manuring arable land and the straightforward disposal of domestic rubbish from a nearby settlement. Test pitting across a 2% sample of the interior found no trace of Iron Age domestic occupation. The nature of the subsoil rendered impractical phosphate analysis, which might have indicated whether or not the enclosure had been used for containing stock. The basal fills of the ditch were found to be waterlogged in places, and a large number of leather scraps were recovered, which was interpreted as circumstantial support for the stock enclosure theory. The most

significant result was the discovery of an east-facing entrance, with a free-standing monumental gate structure, almost unique in an Iron Age context. On the basis of this, Evans stressed the symbolic nature of the fort's architecture and the visual dominance of the monument over its low-lying surroundings.

Immediately prior to the RCHME survey in 1995, Cambridge Archaeological Unit carried out further work on the site, aimed primarily to define the course of the ditch in the proposed development area through machine trenching and augering (Knight 1996). The near-circular form of the enclosure and the partial sub-surface survival of the dump rampart were confirmed. The augering survey indicated the presence of pockets of waterlogging in the basal fills of the ditch, and macro-fossil assessment identified a range of grassland, wetland and aquatic plants.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE EARTHWORKS

For terms which appear in bold in the text, see RCHME earthwork plan surveyed at 1:1000 scale (figure 3). There is relatively good aerial photographic coverage of the site, which gives a good sense of the topographical location but adds no further detail to the earthworks of Arbury Camp itself.

The fort was univallate, with a single known east-facing **gateway**. In plan it was apparently almost perfectly circular with a diameter of 260m and an internal area of 5.1ha. The western third of the circuit lies beneath the embankment of the modern B1049 road, but most of the western side had already been levelled, certainly by 1886 (Ordnance Survey 1888) and probably by the end of the Medieval period. A section of its south-eastern side lies beneath a bus station (formerly part of Arbury Camp Farm). The surviving section has been almost levelled by modern ploughing and is now discontinuous, with a width of between 25m and 40m with a maximum height of 0.4m. The position of the gateway can be distinguished, though the breach is largely a result of the 1990 excavations. The earthwork suggests a slight outward turn in the southern terminal of the bank, though this is at odds with the excavated evidence and may be due to the distortion by ploughing. As mentioned above, excavation has shown that the bank originally had a basal width of up to 8.0m, and height of at least 1.0m. The ditch, of which no trace now survives on the surface, was on average 7.5m wide and 1.1m deep with a U-shaped profile and broad level base up to 4.0m wide.

The field immediately to the west of the modern B1049 was also investigated by RCHME, with the intention of identifying any surviving traces of the probable Medieval field system identified by Alexander and Trump's excavations, which was presumably also responsible for levelling the western section of Arbury Camp. The field is bisected from west to east by a bank up to 0.4m high which carried a track from at least 1806 until the diversion of the B1049 to its present course in the 1970's (Cambridge CRO a; Ordnance Survey 1972). This bank probably formed an earlier field boundary, since slight headlands were recorded on both sides of it. The surrounding pasture is heavily disturbed, and only to the south of the bank were minimal traces of ridge and furrow identified, the furrows approximately 6m apart and running on a north to south alignment.

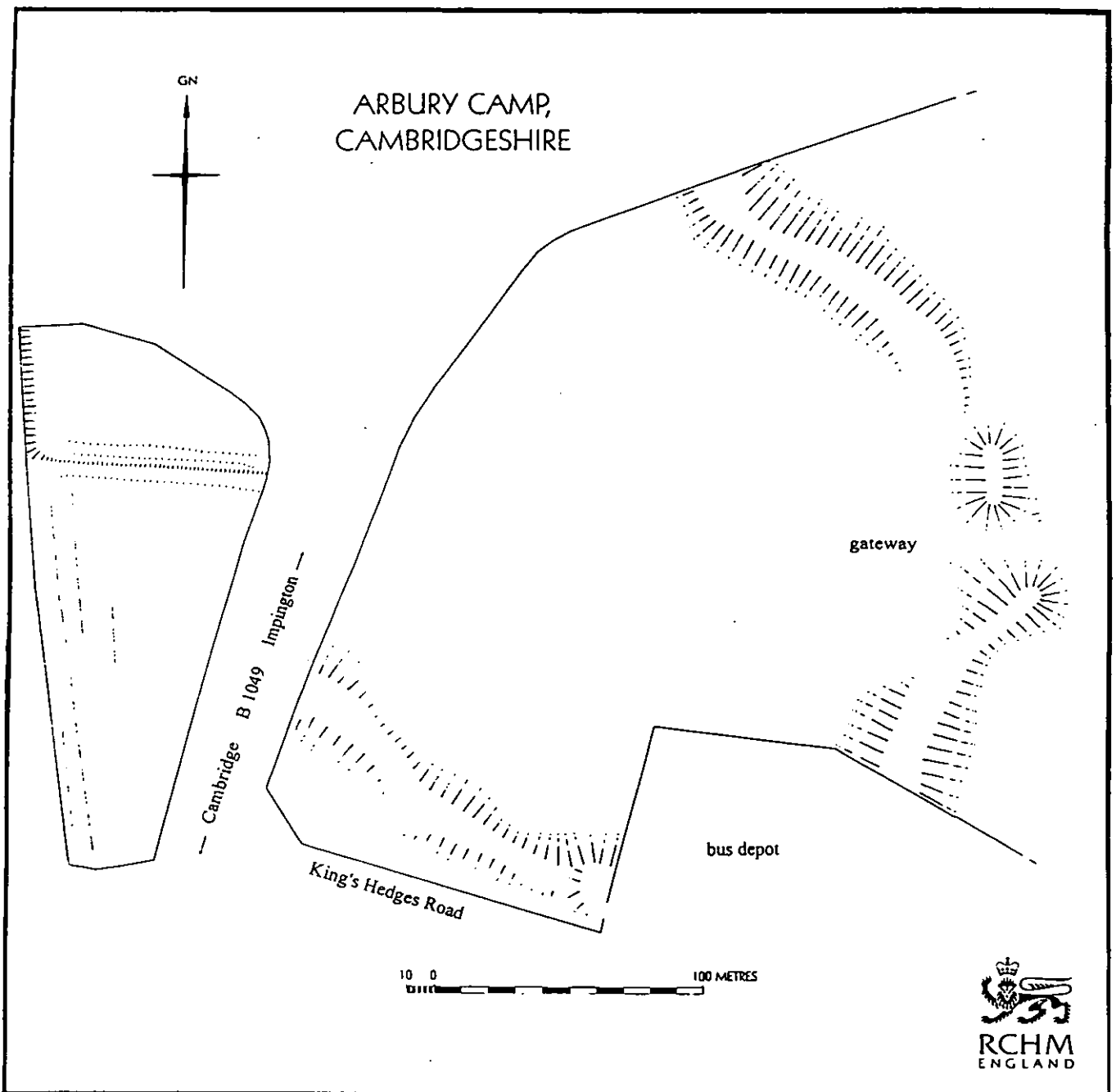


Figure 3: RCHME earthwork plan, surveyed at 1:1000 scale

4. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The RCHME survey of Arbury Camp has confirmed the partial survival of the rampart bank and, bearing in mind the poor preservation of the earthwork, does not contradict previous observations on its virtually circular form (Evans 1990, 33; 1991, 20). Although archaeological investigations have not as yet exposed a sufficiently large proportion of the plan to settle the question conclusively, it seems likely that there are a number of minor irregularities which may dispute the claim that the earthwork is identical to Wandlebury. However, the excavation evidence presently available and earlier plans by the Ordnance Survey certainly suggest that the diameter of the circle is close to that of the outer circuit of Wandlebury, dated to the Late Iron Age, to which a second bank and ditch were added internally, probably at the end of the first century BC (Gdaniec & French 1994; forthcoming). In addition, RCHME's survey of Wandlebury (RCHME 1996; forthcoming) identified a possible blocked gateway very slightly south of due east, which would correspond almost precisely to the position of the entrance at Arbury Camp discovered unexpectedly by Evans (1991; 1992). The fact that this broad breach through the bank was apparently not evident on the surface and was therefore not recorded by earlier earthwork surveys may be significant, possibly indicating that the gateway at Arbury was also blocked in antiquity. Alternatively, the re-use of the earthwork as a Medieval and later field boundary may have gradually brought about the infilling of the gateway. Though the dating evidence for the construction of Arbury Camp is very slight, the most likely period is now generally agreed to be the Late Iron Age, raising the possibility that it was closely contemporary with either the building of the initial circuit at Wandlebury or the addition of the second internal earthwork - in short, a lowland 'twin' of the hillfort.

Evans (1992) has suggested that this superficial similarity may indicate a functional link between the two sites: Wandlebury has abundant evidence for sustained occupation, while Arbury Camp may have been the focus for a brief seasonal or episodic activity. However, the nature of this activity remains unclear, given that the monument would seem to have been both unnecessarily elaborate architecture for a stock enclosure and surprisingly barren in artefactual terms for a 'ritual' monument. Evans also referred to a broader tradition of near-circular Iron Age monuments in the region, including enclosures such as Belsar's Hill (TL 423 703), Borough Fen (TL 191 073) and possibly the enigmatic War Ditches (TL 484 556); the tradition can perhaps be traced back to Late Bronze Age sites such as Mucking and Springfield Lyons in Essex and Stoke-by-

Nayland in Suffolk. Given that Arbury Camp is slightly irregular and does not display the perfect circularity which is evident at Wandlebury, it may be appropriate to consider it as a product of this more general cultural concern, rather than a direct link with Wandlebury.

The low-density spread of abraded pottery thought to be associated with manuring suggests that arable agriculture in the area began in the Roman period. However, there are two indications that the earthwork remained intact. Firstly, the Anglo-Saxon name Arbury ('earthen enclosure') would imply that the circuit was relatively complete at that time. Secondly, the parish boundary would precisely bisect the projected circle (nb not passing between the ends of the earthwork as it survived earlier this century); McKenny-Hughes (1902, 214) suggested that this section of the boundary was contemporary with inclosure in the early nineteenth century, but given the evidence that it follows furlong boundaries elsewhere, it is possible that it was established in the late Anglo-Saxon period. If so, it might be possible to infer that the whole circuit survived at that period, and that the western third was not deliberately levelled until later in the Medieval period. The slight traces of ridge and furrow recorded by RCHME to the west of Arbury Camp, together with the field pattern on the Parish inclosure map of 1806 (Cambridge CRO a) and the ploughsoil identified by Alexander and Trump, suggest the existence of Medieval ridge and furrow cultivation. This Medieval agriculture, which was tentatively dated by Alexander and Trump to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries AD, was probably responsible for levelling the western side of Arbury Camp.

5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The archaeological survey was carried out by Alastair Oswald and Paul Pattison. Ordnance Survey control and the details of the earthworks were surveyed using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The report was written by Alastair Oswald and edited by Paul Pattison. The plan was drawn up for publication by Trevor Pearson. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ (TL 46 SW 4).

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