CHAPTER 10

THE LINEAR EARTHWORKS

EARLIER PERCEPTIONS

Long noted by antiquarians, these extended raised mounds have been variously interpreted, not only as defences, but also as the foundations of military roads; indeed it is not always clear if Stukeley’s *Long-bank* and *Grimesdike* running south towards Winchester actually was what we now understand to be the road (Horsley 1732, 458; Stukeley 1776, 179). Perhaps the earliest useful reference was from Beeke’s observations of what we now call Grim’s Bank:

> There is a remarkable foss about a mile and half from Silchester on the north-west, which begins about a quarter of a mile to the south of Ufton Church, and runs strait through the whole of the parish of Ufton, Padworth, and Aldermaston, excepting where interrupted in two or three places by boggy valleys of very small extent. The ditch is on that side of the mound most distant from Silchester. The common people call it Grimmers-Dike. (Beeke 1806, 185)

By his era the earthworks were generally being interpreted as defensive earthworks, but confusion did occasionally occur. The great surveyor of the environs of the town, Maclauchlan himself, was caught out. In his work he described three earthworks: two leading southwards, with a third to the north. In retrospect the latter was the Roman road north to Dorchester-on-Thames leading directly out from the North Gate (Maclauchlan 1851, 232–3). He ventured to suppose that they must have been Iron Age, for the simple reason that they were neither straight nor paved, and only seemed to have had a ditch on one side.

These earthworks then remained neglected for a century. Joyce and the Antiquaries left them alone and paid them no attention.

When Cyril Fox wrote an article on dykes in Britain examining three major earthwork systems and finding them all to be post-Roman; he began to wonder if all the great dyke systems in Britain might be the same (Fox 1929, 150). This was rapidly followed up by the journal *Antiquity*’s founder and editor, O.G.S. Crawford, attempting to solicit research and articles on this topic, particularly examining the linear earthworks surrounding the Roman towns of Chichester, Silchester and Colchester (Crawford 1929).

Karslake discussed them in the context of his own ideas about the nature of the defensive circuits of *Calleva*. He interpreted Grim’s Bank as too long to be an effective defensive work, so more likely to ‘facilitate the collection of *portoria* or customs dues by preventing merchants coming to *Calleva* from the north, from avoiding the town by any circuitous route. Thus these traders were compelled to follow the defined routes, which led to entrances where duties were collected’ (Karslake 1933, 208).

The first actual fieldwork to try to resolve matters was conducted by O’Neil, focusing on Grim’s Bank to the north. Like Beeke, he noted the apparent discontinuities in the earthwork, such as where it passed over Padworth Gully, but he tested this absence of evidence with an excavation trench which failed to find any positive proof of its existence there. Because of these gaps he interpreted the bank as a demarcation rather than defensive line (O’Neil 1943, 192). He hypothesised a post-Roman date because he saw the dyke as blocking the Silchester to Dorchester-on-Thames road, and there is certainly a curious arrangement where the road passes through and various dykes intrude. He interpreted the earthwork as a frontier line in the context of Britons and Saxons, marking off a Romano-British enclave holding out until Silchester was
finally abandoned (O’Neil 1944). His views were generally followed by others, such as Boon (1974, 78–9, 245) and more recently Yorke (1995, 27).

At an earlier date Karslake had wondered if the parish boundaries of Mortimer West End and Silchester made up the territrium or an outer defence of Calleva (Karslake 1933). The idea was revived by Biddle (1976, 334–5) imagining long-term continuity in these boundaries as at Winchester and the Chilcomb estate. However, this has been questioned by Dickenson (1977), and, as Astill pointed out, Grim’s Bank is not the parish boundary in any case (Astill 1980, 65).

So Grim’s Bank was side-lined as a post-Roman feature, and rare mentions of the linears to the south of Silchester generally assumed that they were Later Iron Age, post-dating the creation of Calleva in the late first century B.C., but pre-dating the Roman town. Boon’s phasing above (pp. 302–4, FIG. 9.1) wove them into his historical narrative with the Frith, Rampier Copse enclosure and Flex Ditch being small enclosures relating to Tincomarus; the Dicker’s Farm Dyke relating to his expulsion and the take-over by Eppillus and Verica; and the Oldhouse Lane Dyke relating to the conquest by Epaticcus; and this is where things were left.

FIG. 10.1 shows the evidence for the various linear earthworks around Silchester. Conventionally these are divided into two groups: those to the north-west, made up primarily of Grim’s Bank; and the linears to the south and possibly east.

The earthworks are mainly known from standing remains, and much of them lies well beyond the core survey area of the geophysics, but it is inappropriate to talk about the defences of Silchester without discussion of the dyke system around it. The LiDAR data have revealed additional information to the south.

THE EVIDENCE

The evidence is discussed dividing it into the two main areas: Grim’s Bank to the north-west and the linears to the south.

GRIM’S BANK

HISTORY OF INTERVENTIONS

pre-1943 Section of the northern stretch by O’Neil (1943, 195).
pre-1943 Section where it might have been in Padworth Gully by O’Neil (1943, 191).
1952 Section of the southern stretch by Gilyard Beer (1954–55).
1978 Section by Berkshire Archaeological Unit (Astill 1980).
2005 Auger transect and sections by Oxford Archaeology (O.A. 2005a; b).

DESCRIPTION AND DATING EVIDENCE

The discontinuous earthwork is shown in FIG. 10.1, which is derived from a combination of O’Neil (1943, 189) and the location of trenches from Astill (1980, 58), with the Oxford Archaeology 2005 trench added on. Various sections have been scheduled (SAM 1005374-6, 100538). The reality of one of the gaps was tested by O’Neil’s first trench, which confirmed that the bank and ditch did not exist in the gap created by Padworth Gully. The various trenches showed the width of the bank and ditch to be as follows:

- 1943 trench: 4.8 m bank, 7.8 m ditch, 2.5 m berm, one post-hole interpreted as a revetment.
- 1952 trench: 7.8 m bank, 7.7 m ditch, the line was possibly marked out in turf first.
- 1978 trench: 4.7 m bank, 9.6 m ditch, the line was possibly marked out in turf first.
- 2005 trenches: c. 7.5 m bank; 6.0–7.0 m ditch which was 1.35 m deep, burning first.

The dating of the monument remains ambiguous. There is no direct dating evidence, though since O’Neil’s excavation the Bank has tended to have been thought of as post-Roman. However, evidence from the pollen from Astill’s excavation raised the question whether it did not originate
much earlier in the Late Iron Age or Roman period. The evidence rests on Shedden’s analysis of the pollen record from Layers 16 and 17L representing the old land surface under the bank. The pollen suggested the land was:

… open, with a high proportion of non-cereal grasses (Gramineae) and weeds of pasture lands such as aster and plantain, which suggests the area was used for rough grazing (no cereals were recognised). There were also areas of hazel scrub, while the wind-borne pollen of trees suggests that the more regional environment was one in which sporadic stands of trees grew on valley slopes. (Shedden in Astill 1980, 62)

FIG. 10.1. Linear earthworks near Silchester.
The pollen from the Basilica and Amphitheatre suggested pine recolonisation of the landscape in the post-Roman period, but this was absent from the soil under Grim’s Bank. He also reconstructed the Roman landscape as being predominantly open, with heathland, pasture and arable; but again, the absence of cereals and arable weeds in the sample sealed by the Bank suggests it might be Later Iron Age in date instead when the land was more pasture or wooded (Fulford 1989c, 159; Fulford and Timby 2000, 532–3).

The Oxford Archaeology augering and excavation trench involved significant environmental sampling, though not with very positive results. However, there was evidence that the ground had been cleared by fire before construction of the bank and potential evidence to suggest there had been tree cover (O.A. 2005a, 11). The ditch profile also implied it had filled up relatively rapidly, hence the lack of peaty organic remains which might otherwise have been possible to date.

CONCLUSION

The Grim’s Bank earthwork cannot be dated with certainty, but the pollen is suggestive of a Later Iron Age date.

THE OTHER LINEAR EARTHWORKS

HISTORY OF INTERVENTIONS (EARTHWORKS AND RELATED SITES)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Cable cutting through Oldhouse Lane Dyke (Frere et al. 1989, 316).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993–4</td>
<td>Electricity cable revealing LIA sites and cutting southern stretch of Oldhouse Lane Dyke and the Bramley Frith enclosure, SAS Ltd (Brading 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Little London Road LIA-ER site, TVAS (Moore 2011).</td>
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DESCRIPTION AND DATING EVIDENCE

The remains are shown in fig. 10.2. This brings together both the upstanding remains, which are largely scheduled, and results from the 1 m resolution LiDAR. The dykes have a broadly north-east to south-west orientation, and in the two remaining upstanding areas of Dicker’s Farm and Oldhouse Lane Dyke, the ditch can be seen to be on the south-eastern side, so these are ostensibly protecting access on to the higher ground to the west of Calleva. LiDAR adds a number of potential additional elements to the system.

Byes Lane Dyke

Towards the southern end of Byes Lane Dyke (SAM 1008727; bank c. 8 m wide, ditch c. 7 m wide) there is a break where the Silchester Brook turns 90 degrees and passes through the earthwork. At this point, an earthwork perpendicular to this, just as substantial, runs off south-east into Bridle’s Copse (SAM 1008728; bank c. 10 m wide, ditch c. 12 m wide). Within the wood it then turns sharply to run in a close to south-easterly direction, though here the bank is a lot less substantial. These were known before, but the Schedule description makes clear that to the south there was an impenetrable conifer plantation. However, that has not defeated the LiDAR which shows the earthwork bifurcating here with a new, similarly less substantial earthwork running off south into Gold Oak Copse, the two lesser extensions branching at almost 90 degrees. To one side of this new extension there appears to be a small enclosure (fig. 10.2).

These two slightly lesser earthworks, at right-angles to each other, appear to capture within their fork a spur of slightly higher ground. Within this fork, just north of Little London, an electricity cable cut through a large number of Later Iron Age and Early Roman features in 1993–4, all broadly similarly aligned north-east to south-west or at right-angles to that, so potentially related (Brading 2011, 119). This correlation provides circumstantial evidence that these major
boundaries were formed in or by the Later Iron Age rather than being Roman or post-Roman.
Not far away to the west the LiDAR also picked up two pairs of small enclosures under the forest canopy. There is no independent evidence for the date of these. Two are in Bentley Green Copse, and two are in King’s Hogsty Copse.

Oldhouse Lane Dyke
There have been two sections across the Oldhouse Lane Dyke (SAM 1011956; bank c. 9–17 m wide, ditch to the east).
The Dyke was sectioned c. 1988 at its northern end within LP 7468 when a water-pipe was cut through it (SU 6376 6160). At this point the bank was c. 9 m wide and surviving 0.4 m high with the post-pipe of a possible palisade revetment noted. There was a ditch c. 4 m wide on the eastern side (Frere et al. 1989, 316; Fulford 1989b, 7).
Then, in 1993–4, the electricity cable from Little London continuing east along the spur of higher ground cut through the projected line of the Oldhouse Lane Dyke at Froglane Farm. This confirmed its southerly extension beyond the scheduled section. Its survival was slight here and there was no dating material found (Brading 2011, 120, feature 414).

Latchmere Green
Continuing east, on the high-point of the spur, between the Silchester Brook and a stream to the south, there is Latchmere Green. A Late Iron Age Mirror Burial was discovered by a detectorist in 1994, comprising the urned remains of an adult and child, probably dating to the early first century A.D. (Fulford and Creighton 1998). The area was already well known for having a scatter of Later Iron Age and Roman pottery from Corney’s fieldwalking (Corney 1984, 283–4), and metal-detecting had recovered a Gaulish Iron Age coin from the area (a bronze au rameau ascribed to the Nervii: Scheers 1977, 19 classe IV nos 735–48). The electricity cable also sectioned a range of features along the southern edge of the slope of the spur (Brading
and disturbed cremated human bone close to where the Roman road forks off to Chichester. The settlement of this spur clearly predates the Roman road and gaining a greater understanding of it would add to understanding the origins of the oppidum of Calleva.

Bramley Frith Wood enclosure

Just to the east of Latchmere Heath is the Bramley Frith Wood enclosure (Hants HER 24010) (fig. 10.3). This rectangular enclosure (SU 642 602) was thought to be a Later Iron Age or Roman site (Berkshire Archaeological Services 2001). It shows clearly on the LiDAR survey as being a rectangular enclosure, with the only complete side being c. 140 m long. The majority survives within the woodlands, but part of it presumably projects north into a field where it is ploughed out. In 1993–4 the electricity cable watching-brief did not find any evidence of the enclosure ditch just to the north of the copse. What was observed was a V-shaped ditch on alignment with a projection north from another earthwork and ditch within the wood that cut through the enclosure at a different angle. It contained a range of Roman material from Silchester ware through to Oxfordshire red colour-coat and CBM was seen (Hants HER 42781, though assumed within the wood to be medieval or early post-medieval). The rectangular enclosure remains undated (Brading 2011, 120).

Just off the illustration to the south-east of this enclosure, and the earliest evidence of settlement in the area, is the Iron Age fort at Bullsdown Camp, a small multivallate hillfort, just to the east of the present village of Bramley (Hants HER 20768, SAM 1001944).

Three Ashes

At the eastern end of the spur that Latchmere Green sits on is a cropmark site at Three Ashes; the cropmark shows a series of rectilinear enclosures at the junction of two lanes. Fieldwalking produced a small amount of Silchester ware, so the site may have earlier origins, but later third- to fourth-century material predominates. The site has also produced CBM suggesting structures here (Boon 1974, 244; Corney 1984, 280–1, fig. 80).

Flex Ditch

Flex Ditch (SAM 1008725) is a 30 m wide ditch about 5.5 m deep, with a bank on the northern side; it cuts off a spur at the narrowest point, but the spread bank on the northern side hardly makes it defensive. Crawford on his 1931 OS record card likened it to the St Albans ‘type’ of defence, in terms of its size.

On this cut-off spur a Late Iron Age site has been excavated just off Little London Road by TVAS (Moore 2011). This comprised a rectilinear enclosure on the west side of the road which matched up with cropmarks on the east, and several ditches suggestive of field-systems. There was an entrance to the enclosure on the northern side facing Flex Ditch. The pottery dated predominantly from the mid- to late first century B.C. through to the later first century A.D., with a small scatter of later material in the subsoil. There was smithing waste as well, though the
enclosure was largely devoid of features, suggesting it was more to do with stock management. A watching-brief of a sewer trench going off from here to the west-south-west suggested occupation was confined to the higher plateau. Timby’s analysis of the ceramics noted the presence of a particular handmade calcareous fabric which was not present in the earliest levels of the Basilica excavation, suggesting this site might start fractionally earlier. It was interpreted that this site had gone out of occupation as Silchester itself had gradually developed.

Dicker’s Farm Dyke

Running south, then south-west from Rampier Copse is the Dicker’s Farm Dyke. The standing remains of this feature have never quite met up with the Byes Lane Dyke, though it has often been thought that these two did meet, providing a dual line of defence alongside Oldhouse Lane Dyke (Boon 1974, 40). However, the LiDAR suggests another possibility. There are faint traces of the Byes Lane Dyke continuing on its own course mid-way between the Dicker’s Farm and Oldhouse Lane Dykes. These are indicated on the plan, but one segment of the possible remains is certainly a removed field-boundary, so whether it is a modern artefact of enclosed landscape or the field-boundary was tracing an earlier division can only be tested with excavation.

To the north-east

There is a feature that can be seen in the LiDAR potentially forming a new linear earthwork continuing to the north-east, but it could also be a road (FIG. 10.4). The direction it heads in would be perfect for a Silchester to Verulamium road, evidence for which has often been suggested (not least the Silchester road coming out of Verulamium through King Harry Lane cemetery), but no trace of it has been found so close to Silchester itself (see p. 404).

A bit further to the north-east, off our maps but along the projected line for this road or bank, the trajectory would pass through Mortimer. The site of Mortimer Hill Farm was developed recently for housing, and in 2003 excavations there showed a 22 m wide droveway which
would have been almost parallel to this feature, but about 100 m to the north-west of where the projected line would pass. The site revealed first- and second-century material, including cremations (Taylor 2011).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be argued that the linear earthworks are all Later Iron Age, from both the pollen evidence associated with Grim's Bank and the possible, though more tenuous, association of Later Iron Age sites with the linears to the south of the city. However, the evidence is by no means unequivocal.

INTERPRETATION

The dating evidence for all the linear earthworks to the north-west and south of the town is even flimsier than that for the Inner and Outer Earthworks, so it is probably better not to attempt to create any kind of sequence associated with them, but we can try to start to interpret them.

CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS OF OTHER DYKE SYSTEMS

Wessex is an area where linear earthworks were not a new phenomenon by the Late Iron Age. Their appearance in the early first millennium B.C. represented a change in land use. Broadly, the picture of the British landscape in later prehistory was largely of open fields with the evidence from sites suggesting intensive mixed farming taking place. Linear earthworks were nothing new; in many areas they had originated in the early first millennium B.C., cutting across Bronze Age co-axial field-systems. On Salisbury Plain many of these ran up from river valleys onto the chalk plateaux creating blocks of land with multiple ecological zones, often containing an open settlement, hence leading them sometimes to be called ‘ranch boundaries’ (Bradley et al. 1994, 130–1; McOmish et al. 2002; Sharples 2010, 43–52); sometimes where these major earthworks converged on the tops of hills, hillforts emerged (Bradley 2007, 242–3). The Silchester earthworks differ from these as they go along the hillside rather than running up from the valley, so they represent a different phenomenon.

Another group of earthworks seems to date to the Late Iron Age and might represent territorial boundaries. Recently work has taken place on a number of linears in Oxfordshire. Sauber has sampled Ave Ditch (Oxon.), which he considered dated to the later Middle Iron Age (Sauber 2005, 21–4). The dating is not unproblematic, but there was a mid-Iron Age terminus post quem and a mid-Roman terminus ante quem. In his discussion he focused on seeing the boundary as territorial, between the Catuvellauni and Dobunni, along with the North Oxfordshire Grim’s Ditch, and complementing the Southern Grim’s Ditch (Oxon.) which separated the Catuvelaunian from the Atrebates, all protecting Catuvellaunian territory, a theme also picked up on by Cunliffe (Sauber 2005, 32; Cunliffe 2005, 192). The dating evidence for both sections of the Grim’s Ditch could indeed be Later Iron Age. A section on the southern stretch had a terminus post quem derived from fragments of saucepan pot, thought to be third to first century B.C. (Hinchliffe 1975, 133–5); while Copeland considered the northern section to date to the first quarter of the first century A.D. (Copeland 1988, 287). However, rather than seeing the North Oxfordshire Grim’s Ditch as a boundary Copeland saw it as a territorial oppidum containing within it sites such as North Leigh (later to become a large courtyard villa), which would make for a nascent oppidum in a liminal location. Oxford Archaeology, in their report on their trench through Grim’s Bank, noted its similarity to the Grim’s Ditches and the Ave Ditch (O.A. 2005a, 14).

Further afield, to the south-west, Bokerley Dyke, which had evolved from the Bronze Age, has been considered as a boundary between the Atrebates and Durotriges (Darvill et al. 2002, 377; Bowen 1990).

Finally there are the dyke systems which Cunliffe classified as territorial oppida, the earthworks which seem to relate in some way to Later Iron Age centres of power at Chichester, Verulamium, Camulodunum and Calleva (Cunliffe 1991, 154). These tended to be far more discontinuous and
more monumental. For Crummy, building upon Hawkes’ many years of work on *Camulodunum*, the dykes were all about defence:

> It is generally assumed that the dykes were anti-chariot devices and certainly they would have been very effective against such vehicles … Unlike hillforts which were comparatively small, *Camulodunum* was too large to besiege easily and open enough to allow the attacked to escape if needs be. Its open, unstructured layout was its strength. It was built like an obstacle-course with different lines of defence, each giving those under attack time to retreat and regroup or flee. (Hawkes and Crummy 1995, 162)

Bradley, considering the Chichester entrenchments, noted that they did not particularly protect the Roman town but were focused on a broader landscape to the west, Fishbourne and Selsey. He thought that while theatrical descriptions of chariot warfare were easy to evoke, management of cattle in a large landscape might be a more likely explanation. He drew some specific parallels between the entrances of this and other entrenchments dating to the Later Iron Age (Bradley in Cunliffe 1971, 30–4).

Later still, Niblett and Thompson at *Verulamium* noted how the linear ditches, along the edge of the high ground, created a physical boundary separating the settlement on the plateaux tops from the valley where cemeteries, smithing and the St Michael’s ceremonial enclosure could be found. They noted how the ditches were often kept clean, suggesting that the banks were continually renewed, as happened at the Folly Lane enclosure. Visibility and perception of those moving along the valley bottom was important. ‘It appears that the *Verlamion* dyke system is less overtly defensive that the Colchester system (which was earlier in origin and covered a larger area) and combined with the pre-existing linear boundaries to control all movements in the landscape whether peaceful or warlike’ (Niblett and Thompson 2005, 39).

**THE SILCHESTER DYKES**

In the Late Iron Age we know there were clusters of settlement or at least enclosures and burials at Latchmere Green, Little London Road on the promontory cut off by Flex Ditch, and just possibly at Three Ashes, as well as *Calleva* itself; in addition there are the undated, seemingly empty enclosures from the Frith and Rampier Copse as well as various undated small ones revealed by LiDAR in Pamber Forest. The broad spread of Iron Age sites, of which only *Calleva*, Latchmere Green and Three Ashes continue into the Roman period, is reminiscent of the polyfocal way that *Verulamium* and *Camulodunum* developed, with multiple Iron Age foci later coalescing around a smaller number of sites; and all framed within a set of linear earthworks which do not entirely make sense to our eyes.

However, Grim’s Bank still stands out. Could it be a boundary of the polity of Commios and his descendant to the south-east and the Tascovian dynasty to the north and Dobunni to the north-west, with Silchester being created in a liminal location? Strabo famously stated that in the Augustan period the British readily bore moderate taxes on imports to and from Gaul (Strabo 4.5), so the concept of *portoria* between polities within Britain itself which has been used to interpret some of these long linear boundaries is by no means impossible, especially if people were coming from afar to trade with new ‘foreigners’ at *Calleva*, with their new dietary and material cultural desires.

While the dating evidence remains inconclusive, making a Later Iron Age date likely but not yet certain, it is also worth bearing in mind a rather different possibility. The multiple lines all appear to have their ditches on the south-east side, and fig. 10.1 suggests it is quite possible that there were four roughly parallel earthworks about 200–250 m apart, which are protecting Silchester Common rather than Silchester Roman Town. A wild card would be that they could relate to the reconquest of the British breakaway empire of Carausius and Allectus, with the arrival in a.d. 296 of the fleet and army of Asclepiodotus, avoiding Allectus’ fleet off the Isle of White in the fog and landing in Southampton Water, and from there moving inland, forcing the rebel forces to retreat until the final battle saw Allectus killed, which Joyce and many since have imagined took place in the vicinity of Silchester (Joyce 1881b, 364; Kempthorne 1914–16, 33;
Frere 1967, 381; Boon 1974, 71). The linears are not massive and could have been constructed to defend a force encamped outside the town up on the common from Asclepiodotus’ forces arriving from the south. Such a late date is not unthinkable. The Oldhouse Lane Dyke looks as if it crosses several features rectilinear to the South-East Enclosure (see p. 258, Exterior 23), suggesting it is late, though unexcavated intersections of features observed in geophysical evidence can be very problematic to sequence. The intersection of these features would be an ideal location to excavate to obtain a sequence if not dating material as well.