SECTION THREE

Excavations at Benfield Hill

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INTRODUCTION

During the construction of West Hove Golf Course in 1931, workmen digging a bunker discovered an Anglo-Saxon inhumation with a shield, spear and knife (Curwen 1931a) (Figs 1.1 and 3.1). The spearhead is Swanton’s type H3 which suggests a sixth-century date (Swanton 1973). No other finds were reported. It is possible that this was an isolated burial, although Martin Welch (1983: 20) has suggested that it is more likely to be part of a larger cemetery.

Recent discussions of Anglo-Saxon burials has supported the view that some cemeteries lay adjacent to settlement sites (Welch 1985: 17). An example in Sussex of this juxtaposition is Bishopstone near Seaford, where the unpublished cemetery lay immediately east of the settlement excavated by Martin Bell (1977). Welch (1985: 22) has summarised the location of settlements on the chalk downs as typically lying on ‘dipslope hilltops and spurs on the middle of existing field systems’, a description which could be applied to the location of the burial at Benfield Hill.

Fig. 3.1 Benfield Hill: Trench location plan.
The aim of the fieldwork was to determine whether further burials were likely to be disturbed by the construction of the Bypass or of the Hangleton Link Road which joined it from the south, and to locate a settlement, if present (Fig. 3.1). The edge of the Bypass runs 150m to the north of the findspot, and the link road passes 120m to the west. The area available for examination was limited by the continuing use of the golf course and no work was possible on the top of the ridge.

Trenches A to F were cut across the line of the link road at intervals of either 13m or 20m apart. The hillslope here was covered with Clay-with-Flints and no evidence of any archaeological activity was traced. Trench G was excavated through a lynchet and is discussed below. Trenches H to O were dug on the west side of the spur of Benfield Hill. It was necessary to adjust their length and spacing to avoid damage to the golf tees as the course remained in use at the time of fieldwork. Trenches P to T were cut on the eastern side of the spur. It was necessary to excavate these down the line of the slope, because of the difficulties of machining on the steep hillside. All trenches were dug using the back-actor of a tractor-based excavator fitted with a five-foot toothless bucket.

**Trenches A to F and H to T**

Few features were located in the other trenches excavated by machine and there was a paucity of finds, except for struck flint, in the topsoil removed by machine. Two shallow features found in Trenches L and R had irregular bases and may have been tree-root holes, although the latter contained fragments of Welsh slate indicating that it was of recent date.

**Lynchet section (Trench G)**

The boundary between the parishes of Hangleton and Portslade is marked by a lynchet about two metres high at the point at which it is crossed by the Bypass. Holmes (1988: 87) has suggested that the boundary marked the edge of a Roman estate worked from the villa at West Blatchington, which was subsequently adopted as a Medieval parish boundary. This hypothesis was examined by sectioning the lynchet by machine. The exposed face was cleaned up, recorded and then a length 3m long was selected and cut back 0.5m by hand and the position of all artefacts recorded.

The positive lynchet consists of three contexts with merging boundaries (Fig. 3.2). At the base was a dark brown soil containing few flints (Context 2524). It was overlain by a considerable deposit of light brown soil with many more flints (2523). The upper layer was a mid-brown worm-sorted topsoil (2522). At the back of the negative lynchet was a loose deposit comprising mainly angular chalk fragments which may have been formed from material rolling down the slope.

Worked and burnt flint, prehistoric and Roman pottery were found throughout the lynchet and showed no significant patterning. The lowest layer contained two sherds of later Medieval and one sherd of Anglo-Saxon pottery. This was overlain by a soil about 0.7m. thick which contained Saxon-Norman and Medieval pottery throughout its depth. The topsoil contained a small number of Post-Medieval finds, in addition to earlier material, but the low numbers do not suggest manuring and are probably derived from casual losses.

The Medieval pottery from layer 2523 is unlikely to be much earlier than about AD 1000, nor likely to be later than about 1250. The soil in this deposit forming the lynchet had developed over and buried the existing soil (2524) during the cultivation of the slopes to the west during this period. It
is likely that the land since about 1250 has remained pasture and worm-sorting of the upper layer has moved flints and some artefacts down through the profile. Slight ridge and furrow on the land to the west may also support this interpretation of land-use.

DISCUSSION

The lynchet sampled by Trench G is one of the few excavated during the Bypass project to have formed de novo during the Medieval period. There is no evidence to suggest that it marked the position of a Roman boundary as Holmes has suggested, for no earlier feature was found below the lynchet. The lynchet evidently developed against a newly defined boundary. Some 230m to the south of the section the lynchet and parish boundary turn sharply west before continuing south again (Fig. 3.1). It is very likely that this dog-leg was to accommodate an existing field. The boundary is likely to have been fitted into an agrarian landscape and the excavation suggests some elements of that landscape are likely to have been Saxo-Norman or later Medieval.