

# ASHTEAD COMMON, LEATHERHEAD, SURREY SURVEY AND INVESTIGATION OF AN EARTHWORK ENCLOSURE

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ENGLISH HERITAGE

**ASHTED COMMON  
LEATHERHEAD  
SURREY**

**AN EARTHWORK ENCLOSURE**

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# **CONTENTS**

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INTRODUCTION	1
PREVIOUS WORK	3
ENGLISH HERITAGE SURVEY	5
DISCUSSION	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

## INTRODUCTION

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In April 2006, at the request of Richard Massey, Ancient Monument Inspector for Surrey, analytical earthwork survey of a large earthwork enclosure on Ashtead Common, Surrey, was undertaken. Ashtead Common comprises about 210 ha, and is known locally as Ashtead Forest. The larger part of Ashtead, Epsom and Thorncroft Commons was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1955, and Ashtead Common was declared a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 1995. It is managed by the Corporation of the City of London. The site lies at TQ 1762 6002 (NMR No. TQ 16 SE 16; SAM No. Surrey 26), on land owned by the Corporation of London, and is currently the subject of intensive land management including scrub clearance. In tandem with this David Bird, Surrey County Archaeologist, has initiated a programme of archaeological research on the enclosure and nearby villa complex; the English Heritage survey forms an important component in this programme. As well as providing strategic support for regional casework priorities and providing new information on what is clearly a very complex monument, the results of the survey will feed directly into the Corporation of London's management plan for Ashtead Common.

Bird comments that Ashtead is a key site for the Roman period in Surrey but little interpretive material is currently available. The Surrey County Council initiated programme of work here seeks to provide a better understanding of the villa and enclosure complex and to improve future management. The project is an important link in the research programme of the Roman Studies Group of Surrey Archaeological Society as part of the development of the Surrey Archaeological Research Framework. It also brings together specialists from a number of institutions such as the Museum of London, Leatherhead Museum, and Royal Holloway College, University of London and will form part of on-going research into the history and development of Ashtead Common (Bird 2006, unpub. PD).

The enclosure covers an internal area of approximately 1.45ha and consists, superficially, of a single bank with external ditch flanked by, in places, a pronounced counterscarp bank. It is roughly trapezoidal in outline but with notably rounded corners and a long axis, a maximum 174m in length, on an approximately east-west alignment. It is widest on the west at 120m and narrows to the east with a width of 60m, and here, there are the clear surface indications of more recent activity. There is one potential entrance close to the south-eastern apex of the enclosure and this consists of a simple gap through its perimeter. The enclosure sits in a very prominent location on a local ridge of London Clay at a height of 85m above Ordnance Datum (OD). It does not occupy the highest point on the ridge, instead it is placed slightly

to the south-east of the summit, nonetheless, in a prominent location. The tilt of the land here is such that the highly visible enclosure interior faces south-east and would have been easily viewable from the nearby Roman villa and industrial complex, and, indeed, the surrounding area. The Rye, a tributary of the River Mole, flows to the south of the Ashtead ridge and there are numerous other springs and ponds in the surrounding area.

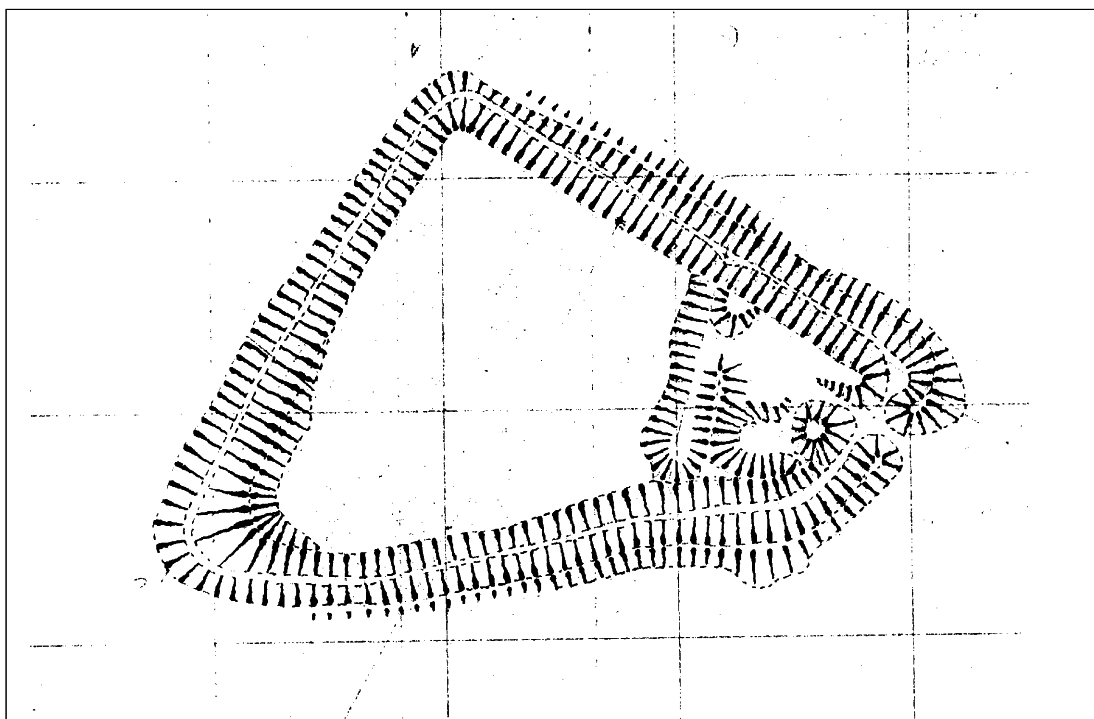


## PREVIOUS WORK

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A manor of Ashtead is mentioned in the Domesday Book and recorded as *Stede* – meaning place or site. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon for *aesc stede* – place of the ash trees – and the manor was held by Thorgils from Earl Harold before 1066. Following the Conquest it passed to the Canons of Bayeux who held it from the bishop of that place. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the manor had been divided between Great and Little Ashtead and each, thereafter, followed a complex line of descent to the present day (see Currie 1999 for fuller details).

No previous detailed archaeological investigation has taken place on the enclosure at Ashtead Common. A plan of the earthworks at a scale of 25 inches to 1 mile drawn by Downman between 1889 and 1905, as well as the early Ordnance Survey depictions (at 1:2500 scale) show only the outline of the enclosure. Likewise, that of Clinch and Montgomery (1912). Their Victoria County History account of the site noted that the enclosure was ‘*a curious work which can hardly be placed in Class F (Homestead moats).*’ (ibid., 319). The most recent survey of the enclosure was undertaken by Hampton and Crickman in 1964 and this depicts additional detail including the presence of a short length of internal bank at the northern apex as well as the internal sub-division and hollows at the southern angle of the enclosure (Fig 1).



**Figure 1.** 1964 survey of the enclosure at the scale of 1:1250 by Hampton and Crickman.  
© Hampton

Evidence for prehistoric activity on claylands is not easily forthcoming but much recent research is showing that, rather than being avoided by prehistoric communities, areas of clay were indeed heavily utilised. It is noteworthy, therefore, that two possible prehistoric sites have been found to date on Ashtead Common. The first is indicated by a small quantity of coarse pottery sherds found together with some fire-cracked flint on the south slope of Ashtead Ridge near the site of the later Roman bath house (SMR No. 2998). Further afield, on the west side of the possible Roman road extending from Stane Street to the villa, a small amount of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age pottery, along with quantities of fire-cracked flint, were found. These are very typical indications of the existence of small-scale settlement of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.

A desk-based assessment of the archaeological and historical landscape at Ashtead (and Epsom) Common was undertaken by Currie in the late 1990s (Currie 1999). Although no new survey work was carried out at this time, Currie's methodology included an appraisal of the documentary history of the estate alongside more general reconnaissance of significant archaeological and landscape features. Currie noted that the earthwork enclosure had, at various times, been suggested as a prehistoric or medieval feature, but that its coincidental location close to the villa was ignored. As a result, Currie speculated that the enclosure may equally be of Romano-British date and, furthermore, that it may have served to house horses or oxen used in the Roman industrial processes on site.



## **ENGLISH HERITAGE SURVEY**

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The enclosure is trapezoidal in outline with relatively straight sides and rounded corners, and covers an internal area of approximately 1.45 hectares (Fig 2). It is situated on the summit and south-east facing slope of a locally eminent ridge at 85m above OD, and the most prominent component is a wide and spread ditch varying between 7m and 10m in width narrowing to a basal extent of 1-2m. It is markedly irregular in outline and profile, with numerous slight steps and other minor interruptions along its course. The most significant of these lies at the midpoint on the western flank and appears to be a well-rounded terminal. The ditch does extend to the north of this and the terminal may, therefore, represent an episode of ditch re-cutting. On closer examination it is apparent also that the ditch is composed of a number of conjoined straighter sections. This can be seen on the southern perimeter where ditch segments up to 40m in length can be seen. Although not immediately apparent on the plan, this gives the enclosure a much more polygonal morphology.



***Plate 1. The line of the ditch (looking south) on the south side of the enclosure.  
David McOmish May 2006***

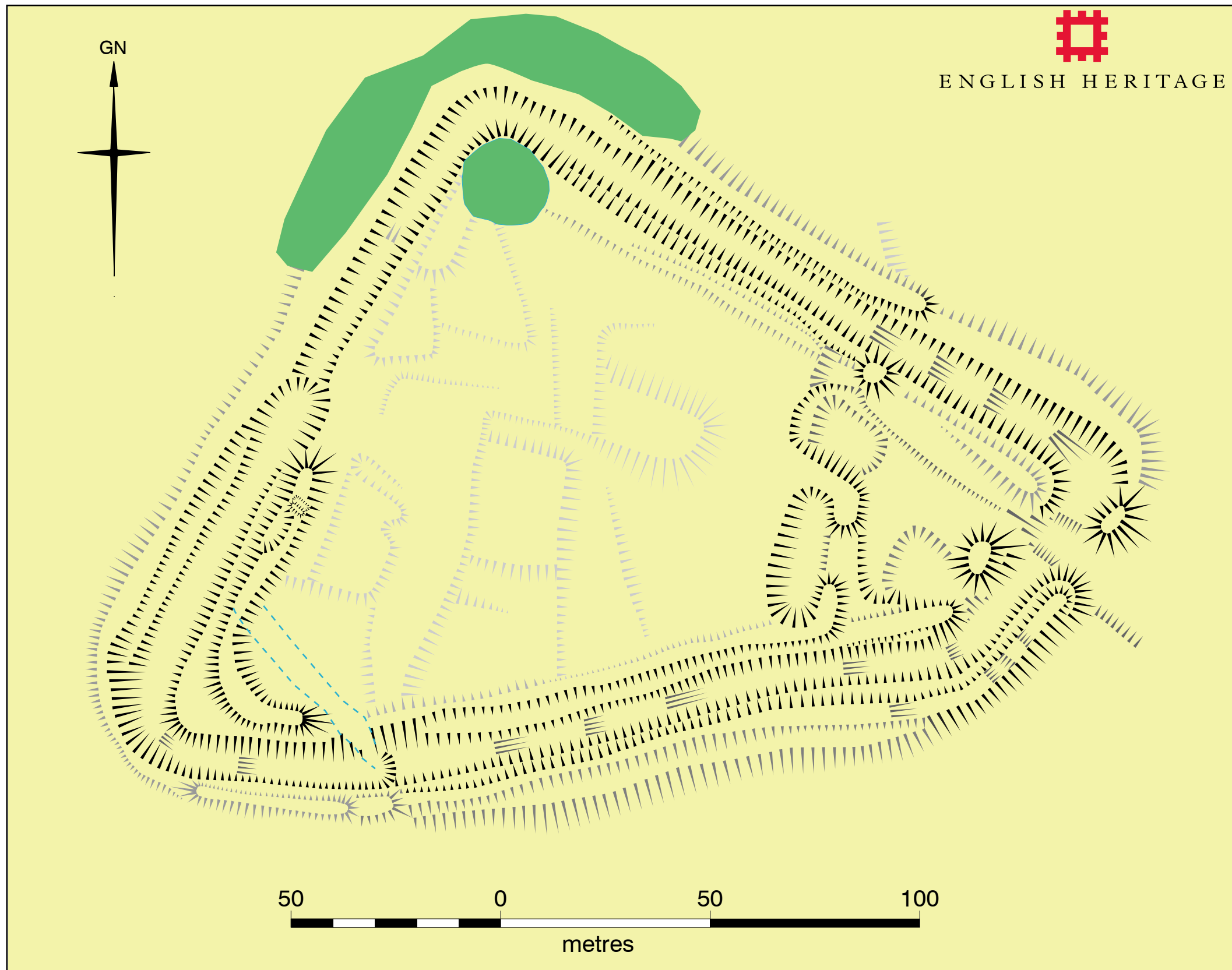


Figure 2. English Heritage's 2006 survey of the enclosure (1:500 scale)

The ditch is flanked externally on all sides by a wide and largely eroded bank. In places this counterscarp is broad and substantial in character, 12.0m wide at its base and to a height of 0.5m, particularly on the western façade, and is a continuous feature apart from a single break close to the south-eastern corner (Plate 1). Elsewhere, it is less well preserved, lower and more spread on the west, sharper but narrower on the north, and has clearly suffered damage at various stages in the past. A more complex pattern is evident with the counterscarp bank on the south side. Here, the bank is separated from the ditch by a narrow berm and is further embellished on the south by a wide and in places well preserved external terraced scarp. This scarp and the counterscarp bank converge close to the south-eastern corner of the enclosure but the relationship between the two is unclear.

A less well defined, fragmentary, inner rampart can also be seen on all but the eastern flank and gives the appearance of having been heavily disturbed and eroded. It is noticeable, however, that the bank although following the inner edge of the ditch for most of its circuit, deviates from it in a number of places. This can be seen clearly at the south-western apex where the bank bifurcates from the ditch edge and follows a more curvilinear route than the angular ditch corner. The implications of this are that the two features are not contemporary and it may well be that the inner rampart is secondary to the construction of the ditch or was rebuilt in those particular areas



**Plate 2. The internal bank on the western flank is now low and spread and may well have been rebuilt on at least one occasion. David McOmish May 2006**

The inner bank is best observed along the wider western extent of the site and here it reaches a basal width of 13.0m and a height of 0.4m (Plate 2). On the north and south sections, the bank is a very ephemeral feature consisting, in places of no more than a slight scarp or denuded bank some 0.15m in height at best. Along these sections, it would appear that later activity has severely eroded the inner rampart. The inner rampart is particularly well preserved at the narrower eastern end of the enclosure and here it is 11.0m wide at its base rising to a height of 1.5m above exterior ground level. The pronounced character of the inner rampart in this area may well relate to later re-building or re-fashioning of a pre-existing boundary, and occurs close to the one convincing entrance into the enclosure.

This entrance consists of a simple gap through the counterscarp bank 3.7m wide at a point where the counterscarp is wider and higher. Slight traces of a corresponding causeway across the ditch are evident and a gap 3.5m wide can be seen on the inner rampart at this point. This gap is not entirely convincing as it is clear that an underlying scarp extends across the opening through the inner bank and must have impeded access when in use. This entrance leads directly into an area of more recent activity. Midway along the western side of the enclosure the pronounced inner rampart terminal is matched externally by a similarly well defined break in the line of the ditch, and may point to the location of an unfinished or blocked entrance.

There is good surviving evidence for an internal sub-division close to the south-eastern apex of the enclosure, and here there are a number of banks and hollows that appear to post-date the construction of the enclosure ditch (Plate 3). The most pronounced of these is a deep and elongated rectangular hollow aligned roughly north to south, 22.0m in length and up to 9.6m wide to a depth of 1.0m. It has been terraced into the hillside on the west but is defined on the east by a well preserved embankment, wide and low 7.1m in width and 0.3m high. This bank is broken by what appears to be an entrance way 5.9m wide but on the south it is evidently connected to the internal boundary earthwork of the main enclosure. The opening leads east into a sunken area covering 31.6m east to west and 38.0m north to south, itself defined on the north and south by low and narrow banks and on the east by the entrance to the main enclosure. Within the sunken area there is a large sub-rectangular depression 12.0m by 12.8m in area, situated adjacently to the main enclosure entrance. At least one other sub-rectangular recessed platform is apparent here located immediately to the north of the elongated depression and enclosed by the bank on the west. The disposition of the banks, hollowed features and recessed platforms indicates that they are likely to be contemporary and are secondary to the main ditched enclosure boundary.





***Plate 3. Hollowed internal area close to the entrance to the enclosure. It postdates the enclosure boundary and may well belong to a medieval phase of activity at the site. David McOmish May 2006***

Elsewhere within the interior, particularly in the western half, there are a number of linear features, some of which are suggestive of field lynchets, building platforms and hollows. A number of the latter may well prove to be tree throw hollows. A number of linear scarps, at best 0.15m in height, define irregularly shaped platforms and ledges. The most pronounced of these occupies a central position within the enclosure and consists of a levelled terrace 21.7m in length and 19.7m wide. To the south and separated from it by a shallow and narrow ditch/linear hollow, there are at least two compartments aligned on an approximately north – south alignment. Between these and the western edge of the enclosure there are several other paddocks defined by low scarps, but these are more irregular in shape and haphazardly arranged than the central block.

Survey, in this instance, was confined to the enclosure and its internal area. However, brief reconnaissance in the immediately surrounding area revealed the very slight traces of other linear scarps and ridges that appear to be field-like in character. Two lynchets emanate from the enclosure boundary itself; one leads from the entrance on the south-east, the other, at an obtuse angle from the north-facing flank of the enclosure. It was not possible to assess the chronological relationship between these linear features and the enclosure.

Less than 200m to the north-east of the enclosure is a major villa complex incorporating a detached bathhouse and approach road. There is a tile-manufacturing complex adjacent to this with the remains of tile clamps and associated debris and clay pits (Lowther 1927; 1929; 1930; 1959; Hampton 1977). A Roman period field system has been suggested in the area between the enclosure and the villa complex but it is apparent that this is not aligned with the Roman period approach road (Blair 1976; Bird *et al* 1980, 235 & Fig 2).

## DISCUSSION

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The enclosure is clearly a very complex and multi-period construction. At a number of points on its circuit there is evidence of re-working and re-building of both the slight inner rampart and the external counterscarp bank, alongside substantial re-cutting of the medial ditch. This is perhaps seen most clearly on the western flank of the enclosure where there are strong/prominent indications of an enlarged bank and a widened ditch. Therefore, the original morphology of the enclosure is difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, it is safe to speculate that it comprised a well-formed ditch with prominent external bank simply because of the absence of any significant inner bank or rampart. It is evident that the counterscarp achieves much greater dimensions than the recorded inner rampart, and it may well be that this is due to the destructive impact of later activity. Alternatively, and more likely, the inner rampart never attained significant dimensions and was always a slight feature. In its present state it appears to belong to a late phase of activity at the site perhaps connected with the inner enclosure close to the eastern entrance. The inner rampart closely mirrors the course of the ditch but in a number of places, it deviates markedly from the inner edge of the ditch. This is most noticeable at the south-western corner where the ditch and inner rampart follow different courses and suggest that the bank here probably post-dates the construction of the ditch.

The ditch is much more angular in its setting out, the corners in particular display this characteristic, but it is a wide and well preserved feature. It is generally flat-bottomed with a shallow U-shaped profile but there are frequent undulations along its base. In addition to this it is apparent, particularly on the southern side, and to a lesser extent on the north, that the ditch has been constructed in a series of short and straight lengths each varying between 30m and 40m in extent. This patterning is evident at a wide range of other enclosures of varying dates and points to a segmented construction technique. It may well be that each straight segment, for instance, represented the work of one particular group (or gang) of workers. Conversely, the enclosure ditch may have been excavated in a piecemeal and sequential fashion, each segment representing an individual and separate undertaking.

The original construction date of the enclosure is unknown. The most recent Ordnance Survey revision of the site suggested a medieval date for it, but it is of a scale and morphology that mark it as being different from many other contemporary sites. Its landscape location, too, is unusual for a post-Roman enclosure, and its (near) ridge-top position give it a prominence more frequently associated with later prehistoric sites (Lowther 1930). However, analogues for later prehistoric (and indeed Roman



period) enclosures with this particular form and scale are not readily forthcoming. Until better dating evidence is secured, a post-Roman date for the enclosure is the safest assumption. It should, however, be anticipated that the enclosure may well re-use or be positioned on top of earlier landscape features, perhaps a pre-existing enclosure of prehistoric or Roman date as Currie (1999) has suggested.

The earthwork complex that occupies the eastern apex of the enclosure is clearly later in date. In a number of places, particularly on the south, scarps associated with the complex overlie the enclosure boundary. Indeed, the slight inner rampart on this stretch appears to be connected to the internal arrangement, arguing, again, that the internal rampart is a later feature and probably part of a more recent episode of refurbishment. The earthwork complex is dominated by a shallow rectilinear hollow, occasionally classified as a pond and a feature that may well have been referred to in the past as a moat. A manorial map of the Common dating to 1638 records fieldnames here such as *Woodfield* and *Moatefield*, and it may well be that the latter refers to the internal earthwork complex within the enclosure on Ashtead Common. At this time it was clearly not in occupation and the placename probably refers to a site that may well have already been regarded as ancient in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century – the term *moate* being a contemporary generic description of a ditched enclosure. The rectilinear hollow is, however, unlikely ever to have held water or been part of a complete enclosure. Instead, it may well have been associated with deer or stock management and been used as an animal pen or pound. It is embanked on the south and is linked, by way of a simple causewayed gap, to a hollowed out area, or crew-yard adjacent to the main enclosure entrance.

Elsewhere within the interior the various lynchets, scarps, and platforms may well be connected to this more recent activity. These features are all very slight but they clearly share a similar alignment with the stock yard at the eastern end of the enclosure. Likewise, the construction of a substantial inner rampart at the south-western corner of the enclosure may belong to this phase of re-use.

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