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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological  
Society)

Volume LXXXII

for 1993



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Cambridge Archaeology Field Group: *Three Earthwork Surveys*  
(Vol. LXXXI, pp. 39-49)

Paul E. Firman was the author of the drawings for the report.  
The Field Group wishes to thank him, and also the late Kenneth Kenham  
for his contribution to the documentary research.

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# A Prehistoric Enclosure at Sawston, Cambridgeshire. A Survey by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

C.C. Taylor, P. Topping & A. Oswald

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The enclosure, almost certainly of late prehistoric date, is situated on the eastern edge of the River Cam in the parish of Sawston (TL47184949; Fig.1). It is badly plough-damaged and was first recognised on air photographs by one of the authors in 1980. Subsequently R.C.H.M.E. were asked by the County Archaeologist to make a detailed analytical survey of the site for management assessment purposes.

The enclosure lies in the extreme west of the parish on the southern edge of a low promontory of Lower Chalk at 20 m. above O.D. The promontory projects west into the flood plain of the River Cam and is thus surrounded by gravel and alluvium on all sides but the east. It stands some two to three metres above the river and the enclosure is thus in a locally commanding position and dominates the surrounding countryside. Part of the perimeter of the enclosure is now built over by an industrial complex which originated in the early eighteenth century when an ancient water-mill, also situated on the south side of the promontory, was extended and converted into a paper-mill. The complex has continued to expand ever since.<sup>1</sup>

The mill has for long been known as the Borough Mill and it was recognition of the significance of this name that led to the discovery of the enclosure. The earliest reference to the Borough Mill is in 1270,<sup>2</sup> though it is likely that one or both of the two mills

listed in Domesday Book as part of the holding of Roger Picot<sup>3</sup> stood on the site.<sup>4</sup> More important is that as early as 1270 the name Borough was applied not just to the mill but to the whole area of the promontory within the bend of the river.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that there was a hamlet known as The Borough or Bury situated in the area by at least the thirteenth century, though it is certain that by 1580 only the mill was there.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the existing woodland on the northern side of the promontory and some 450 m. from the mill is still called Borough Grove certainly supports the idea that the name was not related just to the mill itself. There is the possibility of an even earlier reference to the area, as opposed to just the mill, in 1236, when one William de Burgo held a tenement in Sawston. The editors of *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire*<sup>7</sup> suggested that this William might have originated from Peterborough, whence he took his name, and in turn gave it to the area under discussion here.

A more likely reason why this remote corner of Sawston parish should have acquired the name Borough is that there might once have been in the area some actual or presumed fortified site of early medieval or earlier date. It was this possibility that led one of the writers (C.C.T.) to examine available air

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1 *Victoria County History* (hereafter V.C.H.), *Cambridgeshire* Vol.6 (London 1978) p.256.

2 T.F. Teversham, *History of Sawston Part I* (Sawston 1942) pp.30,47.

3 A. Rumble, *Domesday Book Cambridgeshire* (Chichester 1981) 25.3.

4 Teversham, *op. cit.* p.30.

5 Teversham, *op. cit.* p.47.

6 Teversham, *op. cit.* pp.78-9; T.F. Teversham, *History of Sawston Part II* (Sawston 1947) pp.55,58-9.

7 P.H. Reaney, *Place-Names of Cambridgeshire, English Place-Names Society* Vol.XIX (Cambridge 1943) p.97.

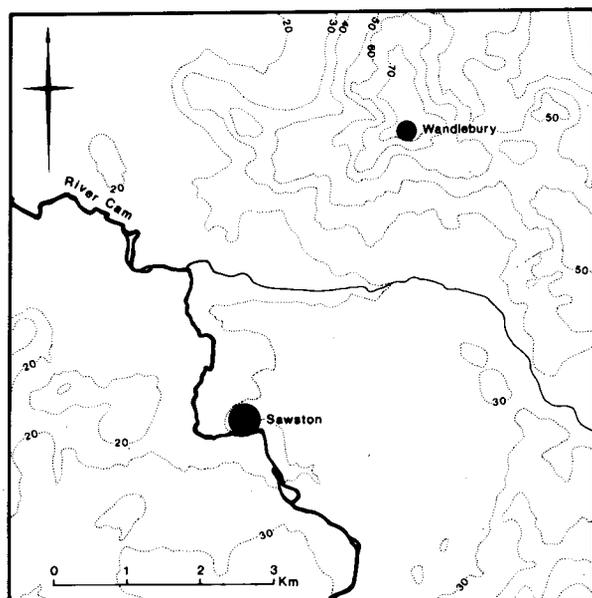


Figure 1. Late prehistoric enclosure, Sawston. Location. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)

photographs of the area. Nothing is visible on those taken by the R.A.F. in 1947, nor on those produced for O.S. map revision purposes in 1974. However, on photographs taken by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography in 1977 (RC8-CK127), parts of a large double-ditched and embanked enclosure can be seen encompassing the site of the original Borough Mill. Ground inspection confirmed the existence of the enclosure and indicated not only that it was defensive in character but that it might well have been a late prehistoric fort. In early 1993, staff of R.C.H.M.E. carried out a detailed survey of the site (Fig.2), which has revealed its form and its significance.

#### Form of the Site

The enclosure is ovoid in shape, its long axis roughly aligned east-northeast to west-southwest, and covers some eight hectares overall. Though heavily damaged by modern and, presumably, ancient agriculture, roughly three-quarters of the perimeter still survive as a slight earthwork. Only on its southern side, where several buildings and former buildings (shown on the Ordnance Survey first edition 25-inch plan of 1885, Sheets LIV.7 and LIV.11) have largely obliterated some 200 m. of its boundary, is the earthwork no longer visible.

On the northwest, a wide low bank still survives although the rest of the northern perimeter is now reduced to a single out-

ward-facing scarp up to 0.9 m. high. On the northeast, the earthwork boundary cuts through a coppice and here the scarp of the rampart is best preserved, surviving to a height of 1.1 m. and up to 6.4 m. wide. A slight parallel counterscarp 5.9 m. away and only 0.1 m. high might be the remains of the outer ditch.

On the east, the defences of the enclosure are spread to form a broad single bank 52 m. across and up to 1.4 m. high. No ditch is visible, though air photographs suggest that the defences here were at least bivallate if not multivallate in form and included two ditches and two ramparts. The photographs also record what might be a third, inner ditch, which, if not defensive, might have formed a quarry for rampart material. Both the field evidence and the air photographs suggest that there might have been an entrance in the centre of the eastern side. The air photographs show a clear break in the defences at this point, but the surviving earthworks have been so distorted by ploughing that they are now slightly askew of those to the north, giving the impression of a staggered entrance. Whatever its original form, if an entrance did once exist here it faced the easiest line of approach from the chalk promontory from the east.

In the southeast, the line of the defence is crossed by an access road to the industrial complex. To the south of the road, however, the rampart still just survives, 11.1 m. wide and up to 1.1 m. high on its outer face, preserved by a line of trees. These defences are poorly preserved owing to a variety of later activities, many of which have left surviving features. These include an elongated depression behind the line of the rampart scarp, apparently mapped on the first edition Ordnance Survey 25-inch map (1885) and perhaps a former water tank; some slight linear banks which were perhaps part of a former field system; two raised rectangular platforms which were possibly the sites of buildings; a series of quarry scoops; and a hollow-way. The last, as well as some of the quarries, are overlain by the remains of a railway siding leading to the site of the earlier mill.

The rest of the southern perimeter of the enclosure is now lost beneath a warehouse, an electricity transformer station, a reservoir and its adjacent buildings. It is also clear that alterations to the course of the river and to the mill race of the former paper-mill have obliterated part of the enclosure boundary. On the west only two scarps,

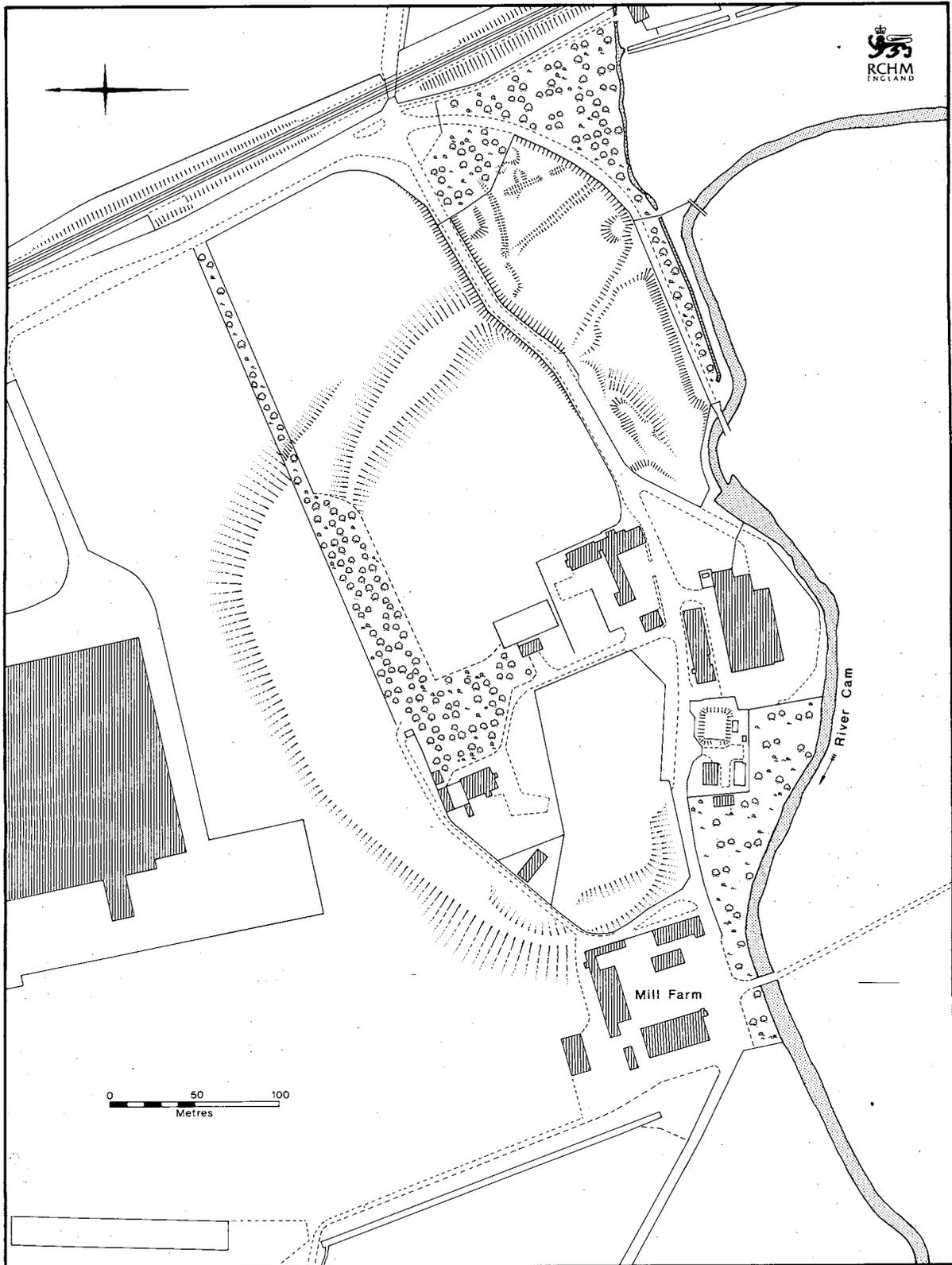


Figure 2. Late prehistoric enclosure, Sawston. Plan. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)

the outer one 7.3 m. wide and 0.5 m. high, the inner 8.4 m. across and 0.4 m. high, mark the perimeter. The interior of the enclosure contains no features that can be interpreted as original.

Four other pieces of archaeological evidence have been recorded from the site. A curious reference to the discovery of 'a number of gold coins and a diamond' made in 1785 when a garden was being laid out at the Mill House has limited relevance.<sup>8</sup> More significant, an unlocated geological test pit dug into the rampart of the enclosure in 1990 revealed that it consisted of a layer of chalk 0.8 m. deep, capped by 0.3 m. of clay. The existence of a chalk core is confirmed both by the evidence of the air photographs and by ground observation, especially on the north and east sides (Cambs SMR no. 9742).

In 1992, at the request of the County Council, a geophysical survey of the site was carried out by Countryside Planning and Management.<sup>9</sup> Two transects were laid across the northeast and northwest sides of the enclosure. That on the east recorded various features enclosed by two prominent ditch-like anomalies five metres or more wide and 30 m. apart, with another three-metre-wide anomaly between and parallel to them. These anomalies, which followed the line of the surface scarp, might represent the truncated remains of a double or triple-ditched defensive system. If the evidence relates to a bivallate ditch system, the existence of the central feature might point to the possibility of a construction trench for a timber box-rampart. Alternatively, if the anomalies are those of a multivallate system, then they would perhaps indicate a spacing of around ten metres between each ditch, providing ample space for intermediate ramparts. The northwestern transect also revealed a linear anomaly perhaps five metres wide, which could be a truncated base of an enclosing ditch. Beyond this lay another linear anomaly, three metres across, which might be the equivalent of the central anomaly on the northeast side. If this is so, then the geophysical evidence would suggest that an outer ditch, if it once existed here, no longer survives. An unusual linear anomaly was also recorded lying at right angles to the main line of the enclosure and aligned northwest to southeast. This might be interpreted as part of

an entrance on the west leading down onto the flood plain. If this interpretation is correct, then the feature would have some similarities to the elaborate eastern entrance recently excavated at Arbury Camp, north of Cambridge, where a platform-carrying tower has been suggested.<sup>10</sup> However, here at Sawston the evidence is far from clear, and the recorded features might equally be the remains of later disturbance. Both geophysical plots showed an extensive distribution of minor anomalies within the enclosure, comprising a series of linear features, a possible ring ditch and a series of pits. Some of these might be contemporary with the occupation of the enclosure. A field-walking programme over the northern part of the site in December 1992 produced only a single sherd of medieval pottery and some post-medieval debris.<sup>11</sup>

### Significance of the Site

On the evidence of its form and ground plan, the enclosure at The Borough, Sawston, would appear to be a fort of broadly later prehistoric date. As such it is one of only seven forts known in the county at present.<sup>12</sup> Its riverine location has strong similarities to other East Anglian forts. In Norfolk, five of the six known sites are located close to rivers,<sup>13</sup> and a similar pattern can be seen in Essex where the forts are situated along the line of the Lea/Stort/Cam rivers.<sup>14</sup>

The fort at The Borough covers an area of some eight hectares overall, making it the second largest in Cambridgeshire, larger than all but one fort in Norfolk and with only three of the 15 sites recorded in Essex being as large or larger.<sup>15</sup> In an East Anglian context, it is also unusual in having more than one defensive perimeter, the

8 Teversham, *op. cit.* (1947) p.145.

9 Royston Clark, pers. comm.

10 C. Evans, 'Commanding gestures in lowlands: the investigation of two Iron Age ringworks', *Fenland Research* 7 (1992) pp.16-25.

11 S. Bray & S. Leith, 'An archaeological evaluation at Sawston, Cambridgeshire', *Cambridgeshire County Council Report No. A7* (1993).

12 Timothy Malim, 'Stonca Camp, Wimblington, an Iron Age fort in the Fens', *Cambridge Archaeological Section Report* 71 (1992).

13 J.A. Davies, T. Gregory, A.J. Lawson, R. Rickett & A. Rogerson, 'The Iron Age forts of Norfolk', *East Anglian Archaeology* 54 (1991) pp.69-71.

14 S. Morris & D.G. Buckley, 'Excavations at Danbury Camp, Essex, 1974 and 1977', *Essex Archaeology and History* 10 (1978) pp.1-28.

15 Malim, *op. cit.*, pp.20-1, Table 1.

regional norm being the univallate type.

The question of the depth of the defences of The Borough is of particular interest. The air photographs suggest that the defences in the north and east were at least bivallate if not larger in form. The photographs and the topography would suggest that the defences might have been more substantial in this arc than in the south and west, where the natural slopes of the chalk promontory would have enhanced the artificial perimeter. However, there might also have been a less obvious motive behind the increased scale in the northern and eastern perimeter, which faces not only the easiest line of approach but also the fort at Wandlebury, no more than 4.25 km. to the northeast, and with which it is intervisible. It is possible that this aspect of the defences was increased in scale as a symbolic display of wealth and status,<sup>16</sup> visible in a direction from which there was a degree of competition, Wandlebury fort.

Only excavation can now reveal further information about the precise structural details and chronology of the fort at The Borough, Sawston.

### Survey Method

The survey was carried out by P. Topping and A. Oswald of R.C.H.M.E. using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral E.D.M., the data captured electronically on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module. These data were subsequently transferred to a microcomputer and a plot was obtained on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The archaeological features were then superimposed on an Ordnance Survey digitally-derived map base at 1:1250 scale.

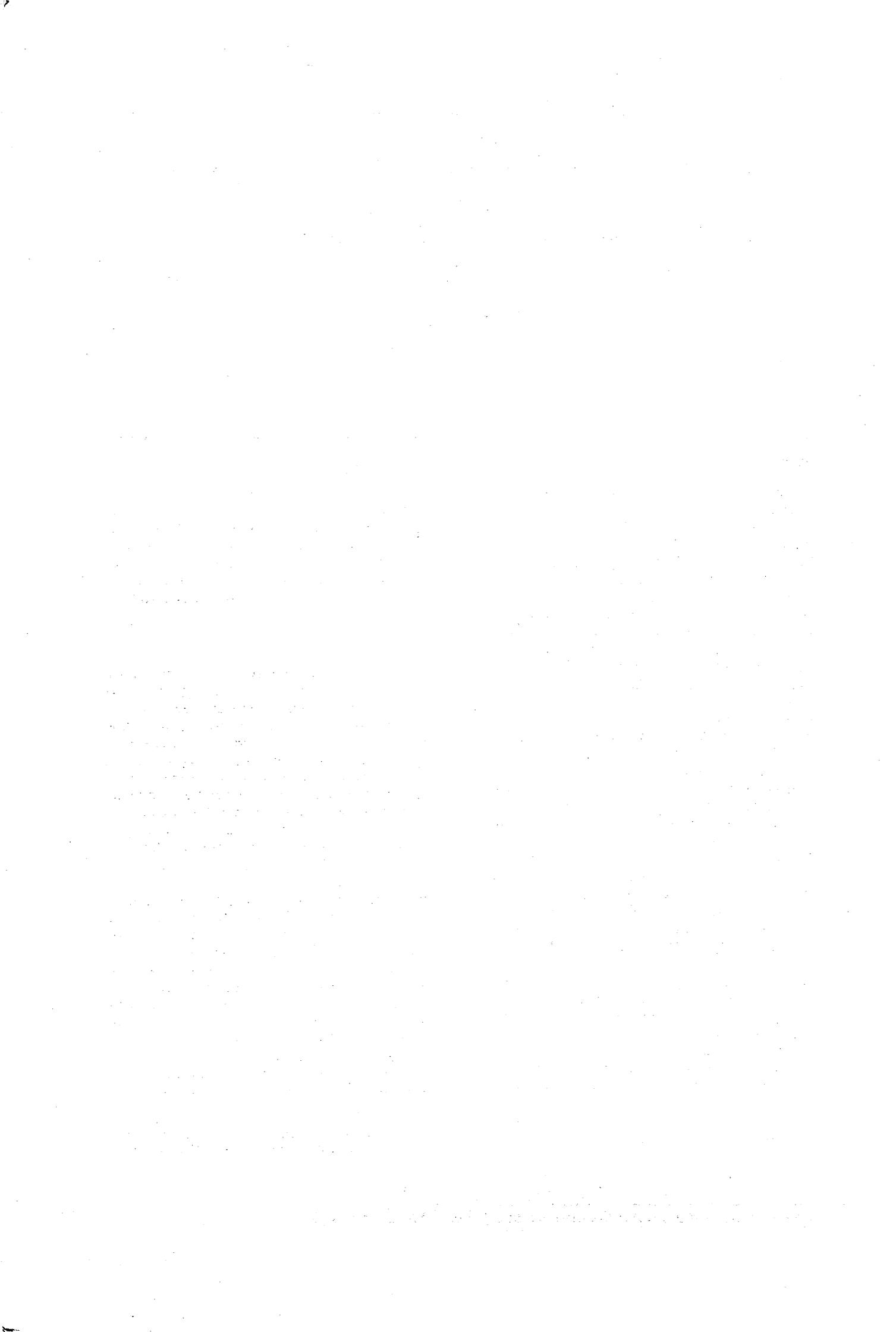
### Acknowledgments

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The complete site archive is now lodged with the National Monuments Record held by R.C.H.M.E. and this paper is published with financial assistance from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

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16 Mark Bowden & David McOmish, 'The required barrier', *Scottish Archaeological Review* 4 (1987) pp.76-84; Mark Bowden & David McOmish, 'Little boxes: more about hillforts', *Scottish Archaeological Review* 6 (1989) pp.12-16.



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