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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCII  
for 2003



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Summaries of papers presented at the Spring Conference

9 March 2001, Lady Mitchell Hall, Cambridge: *Ely – archaeology, architecture, and historical perspectives*

THE CONDUIT: *local history and archaeology organisations and events*

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**Volume XCII  
for 2003**

Editor Alison Taylor

**Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 2003**

ISSN 0309-3606



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## Editorial

These Proceedings have a more strongly archaeological bias than normal, though still reflecting only a minute portion of archaeological discoveries in Cambridgeshire, as the 'Fieldwork' section makes clear. This bias does mean we can afford a very substantial volume, because the reports attract grant-aid, but rest assured that there is no intention to ignore local history and architecture in the future. 'Fieldwork in Cambridgeshire 2002' was in itself rather problematic this year, as the County Council decided they could neither grant-aid it as in previous years nor supply data in a publishable format. With help from the excavating units and a County Council list we think we have constructed a reasonable record, but are aware there could be gaps.

Including *Conduit* as part of the *Proceedings* was well received last year, and was far cheaper than separate publications, so we have continued with this format, which was only possible thanks to considerable work by Sue Oosthuizen and Vicky Faupel. This catalogue of future events, accounts of our Annual Conference plus the huge amount of work in *Fieldwork in Cambridgeshire* give an impressive picture of lively and productive work routinely carried out in Cambridgeshire by amateurs and professionals alike.

*Alison Taylor*

## Joyce Pullinger

Last year saw the sudden death of Joyce Pullinger, who will be long remembered in Cambridge Antiquarian Society. She was active in its affairs for 26 years and, almost single-handedly over that period maintained its reputation for carrying out and publishing field research in and around Cambridge. In the days before full-time archaeologists were employed in local units she saved and published much evidence that would otherwise have been destroyed. She may well prove to have been the last of those who, troubled by the wholesale destruction of archaeological sites equipped themselves to locate, excavate and publish unrestricted by governmental restrictions or the need for formal qualifications.

She was born at Middleton St. George Co. Durham, the youngest of the four children. At the outbreak of war she went first to relations in Kelso and then to the Hunmanby Hall School. Allergies forced her to abandon a proposed career in nursing, and in 1948 she married John Pullinger, withdrawing from a course of study at the Froebel College, in Bedford.

It was only after 1960 that the care of a large family (she had eight children) allowed her to develop a career in archaeology. The skills she developed and the results she obtained show it to have been much more than a hobby or part-time interest. Her achievements fall into two periods, between 1961 and '87 in and around Cambridge and 1987-2002 in Gwent. When living at Orwell and in Cambridge she was an active member of the Society, attending courses on Landscape Studies and showing, in the University's Field Archaeology Training Excavations, a marked aptitude for fieldwork. This was especially noted in the 1960-65 excavations between Castle Street and Shelly Row inside the walled Roman settlement. Here she made a major contribution by organising around her other members of the Society and excavating the 2nd - 3rd century shrine. She found herself especially attracted to ceramics and under the guidance of Rex Hull, Curator of Colchester Museum and a leading authority on Roman pottery, she became adept at its interpretation and dating. Her outstanding achievement however came when development east of Castle Street, still within the Roman walls, took place. Here only limited research had been possible before the destruction of the existing buildings and the construction of the new. Voluntarily for over two years Joyce carried out the essential daily watching brief and the negotiating with building contractors which enabled her to locate and test-evaluate, with the help of the Society's field group, evidence of Roman occupation. The results were published by the Society in 2000 in our joint volume on Roman Cambridge. In the years before 1987 she became increasingly involved in the affairs of the Society, serving on its council and as a vice-president. She also undertook various local projects, most notably at Teversham with Pat White, and on sites to be destroyed by the M11 motorway. Nationally she was elected to the Council for British Archaeology and was active in the Roman Pottery Research Group.

When she and her husband moved in 1987 to Stroath near Chepstow there was no diminution in her concern for archaeological rescue work. She and John, whose surveying and photographic skills had long supported her, were founder-members of the (Forest of) Dean Archaeological Group, and located, excavated and arranged the scheduling and preservation of a previously unknown megalithic tomb and other sites.

As one with whom she worked closely for many years I had many opportunities to observe her ability and dedication. She continued the tradition of those who, like Cyril Fox forty years earlier, demonstrated when they came to be field archaeologists in their thirties and forties that they could contribute as much if not more than those with longer service but less local knowledge. Her achievements should long be an inspiration to those, who like the present Cambridge Archaeological Field Group, wish to carry out field research in ways and in areas beyond the remit of professional units.

*John Alexander*

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# Sir Robert Cotton and the Round Hill, Conington

Christopher Taylor

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*This paper explores the archaeology and history of the enigmatic Round Hill at Conington in Huntingdonshire. It concludes that it was the site of a detached lodge or belvedere built a little before 1600 by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton.*

## Introduction

There is an old rhyme, the origin of which is unknown, which goes:

'Glatton Round Hill  
Yaxley Stone Mill  
And Whittlesey Mere  
Are the three wonders of Huntingdonshire'  
(Tebbutt 1947a, 131; 1984, 41)

There is little doubt that Whittlesey Mere, which extended to some 1570 acres (650ha) before it was drained in 1852, was a wonder of the county (Camden 1789, 500; Wells 1860, 135–6; VCH 1936, 185–7; Darby 1956, 26, 118, 227–8). Yaxley Stone Windmill stood just south-west of Yaxley village alongside the present A15 between Yaxley and Norman Cross. It was presumably well known because of its unusual building material and its situation on the main road south from Peterborough. A tower mill of at least 17th-century date, although much rebuilt, it was recorded in 1926 before demolition in 1935 (RCHME 1926, Yaxley (17); Tebbutt 1947b, 32–3; 1984, 41).

But what was Glatton Round Hill that made it a wonder? Today it is visible as one of a line of tree-covered knolls and spurs that occupy the high ground just to the west of the A1 between Alconbury Hill and Stilton (CUCAP BEL 99, 100). It lies within Conington parish, hence its name Conington Round Hill on OS maps, which is used in this paper. It is closer to the village of Glatton, only 1km to the north, than to Conington village which is 2km to the east, near the fen-edge (Fig 1). However, it is what lies beneath the tree cover that, presumably, made it one of the wonders of Huntingdonshire. For, hidden by the copse which reflects its shape is an unusual moated site. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to unravel its history.

## Background

There have been a number of cartographic depictions of Conington Round Hill but fewer attempts at explaining it. The name Round Hill is given to the spur on Jeffrey's map of Huntingdonshire of 1768, suggesting a then known importance or significance, although neither wood nor moat is shown. The first modern survey was carried out at some time between 1808 and 1824 by the Ordnance Survey (OS 1824) who depicted the wood, a water-filled ditch and an interior circular trackway and named it Round Hill. The tithe map of 1842 (HRO 2196/10A) shows the site as two wooded areas, the eastern one called the Round Hill Plantation and the western one Coffin Close, presumably because of its shape. The 'moat' on the north-east and south sides of The Plantation is coloured blue indicating that it was water-filled. On an estate map of 1847 (HRO TLR 379/A) the whole site is shown as a simple wooded feature. The first detailed survey was in the 1880s for the First Edition 1:2500 OS map (OS 1889; Fig 2) where it was given the attribution 'Moat', which all subsequent Ordnance Survey maps have followed. In 1926 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England published another survey, together with the first detailed description, but made no attempt to interpret the site (RCHME 1926, Conington (7); Fig 3). Nor did the contemporary description by the Victoria County History add anything, being largely a summary of the Royal Commission's account (VCH 1926, 296). The later Victoria County History volume covering the parochial history of Conington was more informative, if somewhat circumspect, suggesting that perhaps 'the earthwork may have been thrown up in connection with a house which Sir Robert Cotton may have proposed building but afterwards abandoned' (VCH 1936, 145–6). This perceptive statement was later repeated with more certainty by Pevsner (1968a, 231–2) and later still by the Cambridgeshire Gardens Trust (2000, 144). The idea was rejected by Bigmore (1979, 102–3) who, while puzzled by the location and by the lack of medieval documentation, suggested that it was likely to be either a 13th-century manorial site, or an early 12th-century siege castle.



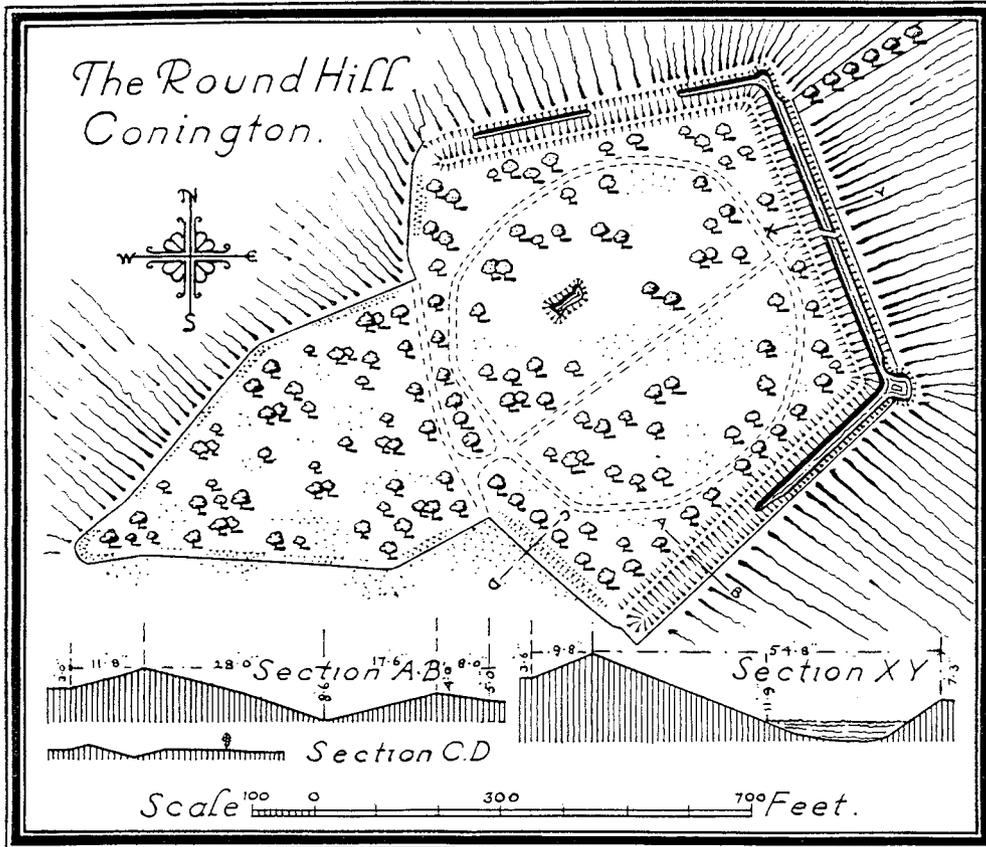


Figure 3. Round Hill, Conington: Plan by Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1926

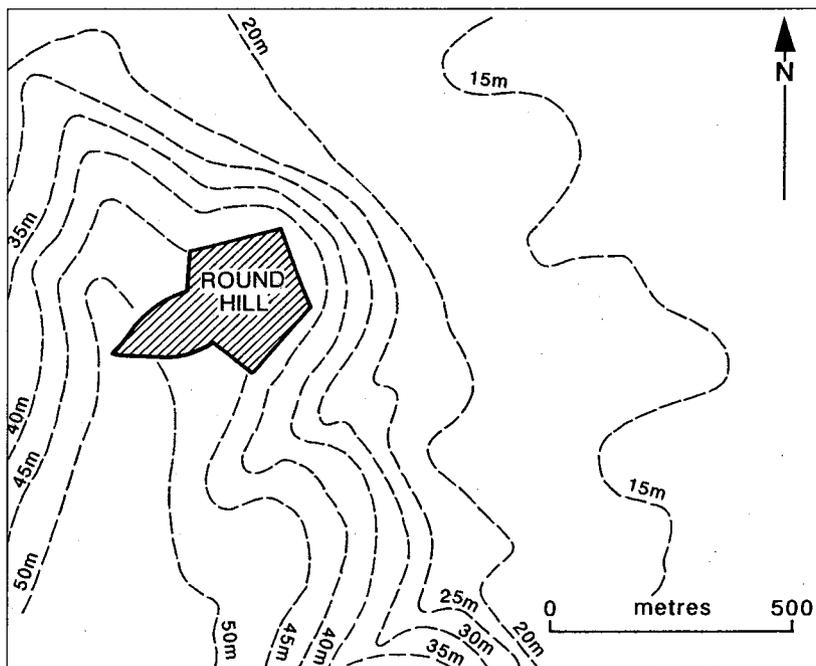


Figure 4. Round Hill, Conington: Contour plan of site

### Description (Figs 5, 6)

The site at Round Hill covers some 6.25ha (15 acres) and comprises two linked parts: a pentagonal or five-sided area facing north-east and enclosed on three sides by a deep ditch and inner bank, with a smaller, tongue-shaped projection to the south-west. The principal bank and ditch of the north-eastern part, hereafter called the Pentagon, is of massive proportions. On the north-east, overlooking the steep north-eastern slope of the spur, the bank is 11m wide overall, 2m high from the inside and with a flat top or walkway 4.5m across. It is, in fact, a terrace rather than a bank. Its outer face falls precipitously into the outer water-filled ditch, 5m deep below the terrace top, 4m across the bottom and 2.5m deep below a low 3m-wide outer bank (Fig 5 a-b). At the northern and south-eastern corners of the Pentagon the ditch opens out to form small pools. These are animal drinking ponds and may be connected with the 19th-century deer park on the hillside beneath (see below).

The terrace way and ditch along the north-western and south-eastern sides of the Pentagon, while still of considerable size, decline in magnitude towards their western and south-western ends as the slopes of the spur diminish. Thus, near the western end of the south-eastern side (Fig 5 c-d) the main terrace is still 11m wide overall but only 0.5m high from the inside and with a flat top now 5m across. The ditch is only 3m deep below the terrace and 1.75m deep below the small outer bank. Both terrace way and ditch termi-

nate abruptly and the small 0.25m high bank and slight inner ditch that delineate the western and south-western sides of the Pentagon have no connection with them. This small bank and ditch continues around the tongue-shaped projection, hereafter called the Tongue, although recent trackways and a deeper modern drain and its upcast on the edge of the woodland have mutilated them in many places.

All of the above features were noted by the Royal Commission in 1926. However, apart from a small and perhaps fairly recent pond near the centre of the Pentagon, no details of the interior of the site have been recorded hitherto. Yet there are a number of features here that can be assigned to three separate periods of activity. The earliest is ridge and furrow which underlies the entire site and must be the result of ploughing of the area in medieval times. The boundary terraces, banks and ditches all lie over or cut through this ridge and furrow which can be interpreted as fragments of two abutting furlongs. The south-western section is part of a furlong with ridges 7m to 10m across, running north-east to south-west and which occupies all of the interior of the Tongue and the south-western part of the Pentagon. The north-eastern part of the Pentagon is occupied by slightly narrower ridge and furrow extending north-west to south-east. The now ploughed-out continuation of this furlong to the south-east is visible on aerial photographs, as is the pattern of interlocked furlongs to the north, east and south-east of the site (CUCAP RC8 EF, 164; BEL 99, 100). These confirm that the

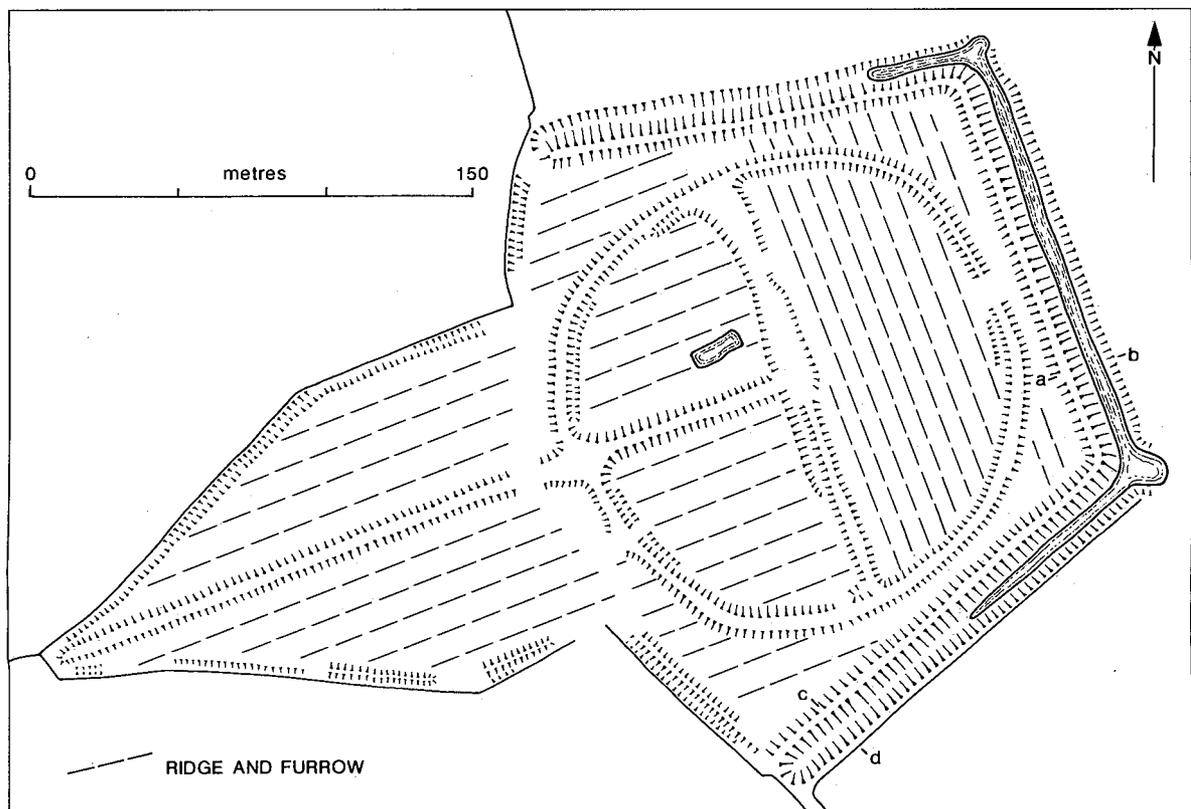


Figure 5. Round Hill, Conington: Plan. The letters a-b and c-d denote the position of profiles illustrated on Figure 6

whole area beneath and adjacent to Round Hill was under cultivation in medieval times, even though by the late 16th century it was open grassland (VCH 1936, plate facing 144).

At the junction of the two surviving furlongs within the Pentagon is part of a broad rounded ridge some 8m across. This is a headland at the end of the north-east to south-west furlong which has also been reused as part of the second period of activity on the site. It belongs to a group of tracks or drives which everywhere else overlie the ridge and furrow. These tracks comprise the following. The central ridge of the block of ridge and furrow which extends across the Tongue has been heightened and widened to create a raised drive 8m across and with a 5m wide flat top. This was an entrance drive from the western apex of the Tongue into the Pentagon. There it meets a circular trackway some 160m in diameter which occupies the centre of the Pentagon and which also overlies the ridge and furrow. The overall form of this trackway is shown on the 1824, 1889, and later maps and on the Royal Commission plan of 1926. But it also survives on the ground as a constructed feature comprising a slightly raised 5m wide track defined on its outer circumference by a low scarp 0.25m high and on its inner edge by a similar scarp or shallow ditch 0.25m deep. The interior of the circle defined by this track is divided into three parts by the raised entrance track from the Tongue, which continues towards the centre of the circle, and by the remains of the headland between the furlongs which bisects the circle. In the middle of the circle are a number of other features, not all of which can be understood but which must relate to a third period of activity. The raised approach drive from the Tongue and most of the adjacent ridge and furrow are all truncated by a later north-west to south-east scarp that extends across the diameter of the circle. To the south-east it forms the south-western side of a shallow elongated depression some 4m wide,

the other side of which, also a low scarp, cuts into the side of the headland. This may be a later track. To the north-west of the centre of the circle the first scarp curves back north-westwards and merges with the inner side of the circular track. In the centre of the circle and extending north-west to the circular track is an area of flat ground, the creation of which has destroyed the northern part of the headland.

These complex features may be interpreted as follows. Two adjacent furlongs of ridge and furrow were overlain by the Tongue and the Pentagon. Within them a circular drive, a raised approach drive and another raised track, the last also overlying an earlier headland, were created, forming a pattern of two quarters and one half spaces within the circle. Later, further activity damaged parts of the drives and the ridge and furrow in the centre of the circle. The significance of this sequence of activity will become clear when the function and date of the site is discussed. However, of particular importance is the fact that the relationship between the ridge and furrow and the later Tongue and Pentagon enclosures with their interior features is more than merely stratigraphical. The whole site is arranged so that its long axis is on the same alignment as the cultivation ridges in the south-western furlong. Thus the south-western approach drive across the Tongue and the south-western half of the circle is not only on top of an earlier ridge but is central to and parallel with the surviving ridge and furrow. Likewise the earlier headland between the furlongs, reused as a later drive, exactly bisects the circular trackway. That is the form and alignment of the medieval ridge and furrow controls the alignment and the internal arrangements of the site. In particular, it ensures that the site faces north-east rather than east-north-east which, given the topography of the spur, would seem more logical. This is an extraordinary situation which will also be discussed below.

The present tree-cover on the Round Hill is of little

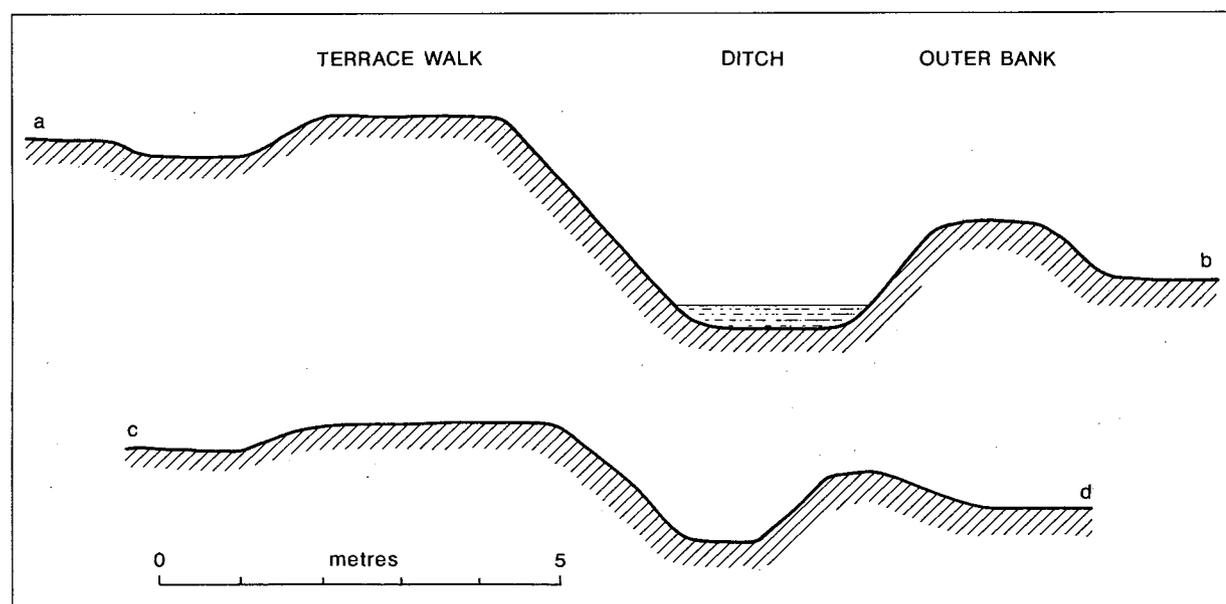


Figure 6. Round Hill, Conington: Profiles across terraceway

significance. Although the site has been covered in trees since at least the early 19th century (OS 1824), only a few mature trees, mainly beech and probably less than 150 years old, survive. Most of the present vegetation is secondary growth resulting from a lack of management and comprises brambles, hazels and beech underwood.

### Date

The fact that William Camden on his journey through Huntingdonshire in the early 1580s did not record the Round Hill, although he visited Bruce's Castle, the ancient manor house site at Conington, might suggest that the Round Hill moat did not exist at that time (Camden 1586, 248). However, the principal evidence for the date, and indeed function, of the Round Hill is contained on two maps, one of about 1595 of the parish of Conington and the other of 1613 of the parish of Glatton (VCH 1936, plates facing 144 and 176; HRO TLR404; Figs 7, 8). The 1595 map was probably commissioned by Robert Cotton the then owner of Conington. It shows that, apart from the fenland at the extreme eastern end, the whole parish was already enclosed. But, while most of the enclosed fields are shown as hedged and are given individual names, those at the western end of the parish, around Round Hill, together with four large areas north, north-east and south of the village, have single names written across the internal field boundaries which are not shown as hedged. The Round Hill area has 'Cunnington Downe' across it and a number of isolated trees. In addition there are four carefully drawn groups of sheep, two of which are accompanied by a figure holding a crook and with a dog. Elsewhere is another shepherd and dog and a figure on horseback as well as two small buildings, presumably sheep cots. The implication of this is that the map is depicting a landscape in the process of enclosure. The fields shown on Conington Down and those to the north and to the south of the village, which also have sheep, shepherds, dogs and sheep cots within them, were

either new or intended, while all of the rest belong to an earlier period of enclosure. These 'new' fields on the Down are virtually the same as they were depicted in the 19th century and, except for some hedgerow removal, as they are today. This indicates that the enclosure here was indeed implemented in about 1595. However, the Round Hill site is not depicted, except in one important detail. The central circular track is shown as a round field boundary of almost exactly its existing dimensions. The fact that it too includes within it part of one of the groups of sheep presumably means that it, like the adjacent fields, was being created at the time that the map was made.

The second map, of Glatton of 1613, contains the arms of Sir Robert Cotton in its top right-hand corner. As Cotton purchased the manor of Glatton in 1611 and in 1613 was engaged in a dispute with the tenants there, it is likely that this map was also made for Cotton (Manning 1990, 279–80). It shows the whole parish of Glatton, the village and its open fields. Beyond the parish boundary nothing is shown but lettering indicating the land of adjacent parishes, except at one point. Immediately south-west of Glatton village one of the new Conington fields and part of another are shown and named as Conington Downe. More interestingly, at their southern edge and correctly placed, is the northern three-quarters of the completed Round Hill site (Fig 7). To show it the cartographer has had to break across the border of the map, perhaps because it was important that it was included.

This depiction of the Round Hill presumably indicates that it was constructed between 1595 and 1613. It adds much to the understanding of the site and confirms most of the ground evidence but also poses problems. The map shows the Tongue with its central drive continuing into the Pentagon. The drive, coloured brown on the original map, is defined by pecked lines, suggesting that it had no firm boundaries. The Tongue itself is edged by two lines of trees but no planting is shown within it. On the original map this interior is coloured green, presumably to indicate grass. The north-west and south-east sides of

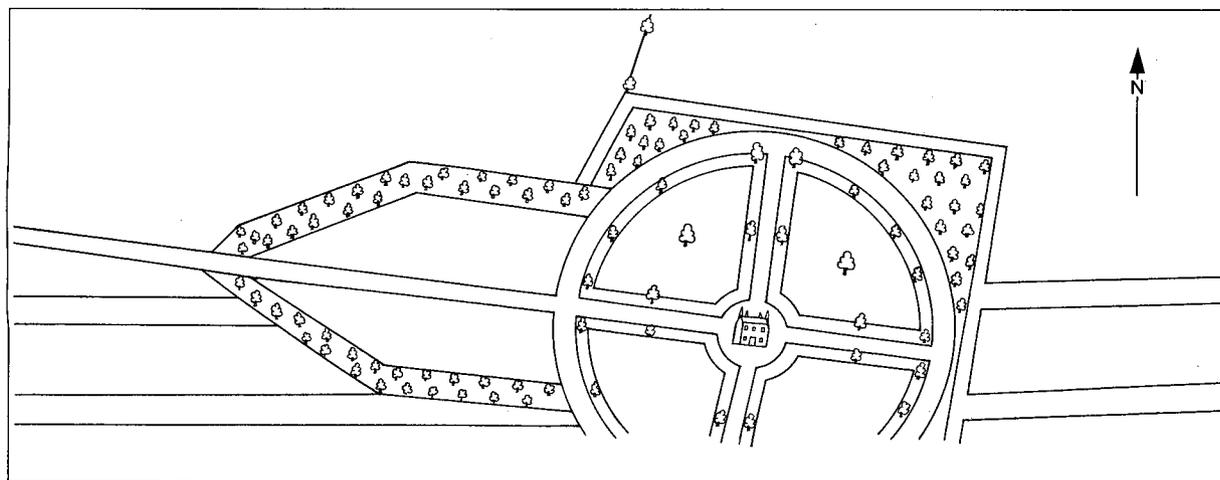


Figure 7. Round Hill, Conington: Redrawn from 1613 plan (HRO TLR404)

the Pentagon are shown at right angles to its north-eastern side and not splayed as they actually are. These sides are defined by a double line, presumably the terrace as they are also coloured brown. However these brown lines are shown also on the western side where the terrace does not exist and never could have existed. Within the Pentagon there is the circular track, again coloured brown, with, beyond, clumps of trees in the triangular corners. The inner side of the circle and the outer edges of four intersecting brown tracks across the circle are shown as green strips, presumably hedges, and there are isolated trees along the tracks and within two of the otherwise empty quarters formed by the intersection.

However, the most remarkable feature is in the centre of the circle where a small building is shown. There are problems with the exact interpretation of this building. On the published version of the map (VCH 1936, plate facing 176) the reduction and reproduction process has made it impossible to discern any details. Further, since 1936 the bottom edge of the original map has become stained and buckled. Thus, although this original is more than four times the size of the published one, it remains difficult to make out details of the building. The fact that, even on the original map the building is shown less than 1.5cm across also makes interpretation problematic.

The south-east side of the building is shown in elevation. It appears to be square on plan and, to judge from both the map and the ground, was quite small, being no more than 15m across and probably less. It is coloured grey, possibly indicating that it was built of stone. Of three storeys, each separated by a string course, it has a parapet around a flat roof. It is three bays wide with a central ground-floor door opening. The left-hand, southern, corner appears to have a full-

height rounded turret surmounted by a pinnacle. Three more pinnacles, apparently on the other corners, might indicate further turrets.

Despite its detail, the 1613 map does not match the archaeological evidence in two respects. The first is that the existing earthwork is more irregular than the site depicted on the map. For example, the circle is not perfectly round, the central drive is slightly off-centre and the Pentagon is far from a perfect shape. Secondly, on the ground only three tracks meet at the centre of the circle. There is no eastern trackway and the ridge and furrow there indicates that it could never have existed. What survives therefore is less symmetrical than that which is shown on the map.

**The curious case of the fossil 'fish'**

There is one other piece of evidence that bears on both the date and the function of the Round Hill. This is Sir Robert Cotton's fossil 'fish'. Almost all writings on Cotton's life and his library mention the existence in his eclectic collection of antiquities of a fossil fish which he had found at Conington. It was alleged to have been 'near xx feet long, as was then conjectured' (Dugdale 1772, 172). In fact it may not have been a fish at all. While fossil fish do occur in the Oxford Clay of Huntingdonshire, these are normally less than a metre in length. Further, they are normally found as disarticulated bones and are only revealed by careful preparation. It is more likely that the 'fish' was a marine reptile commonly found in the brick-pits of the Peterborough district (Martill & Hudson 1991, 30-1, 192-7, 226). But it is where and when this 'fish' was discovered that is important for this paper. The VCH

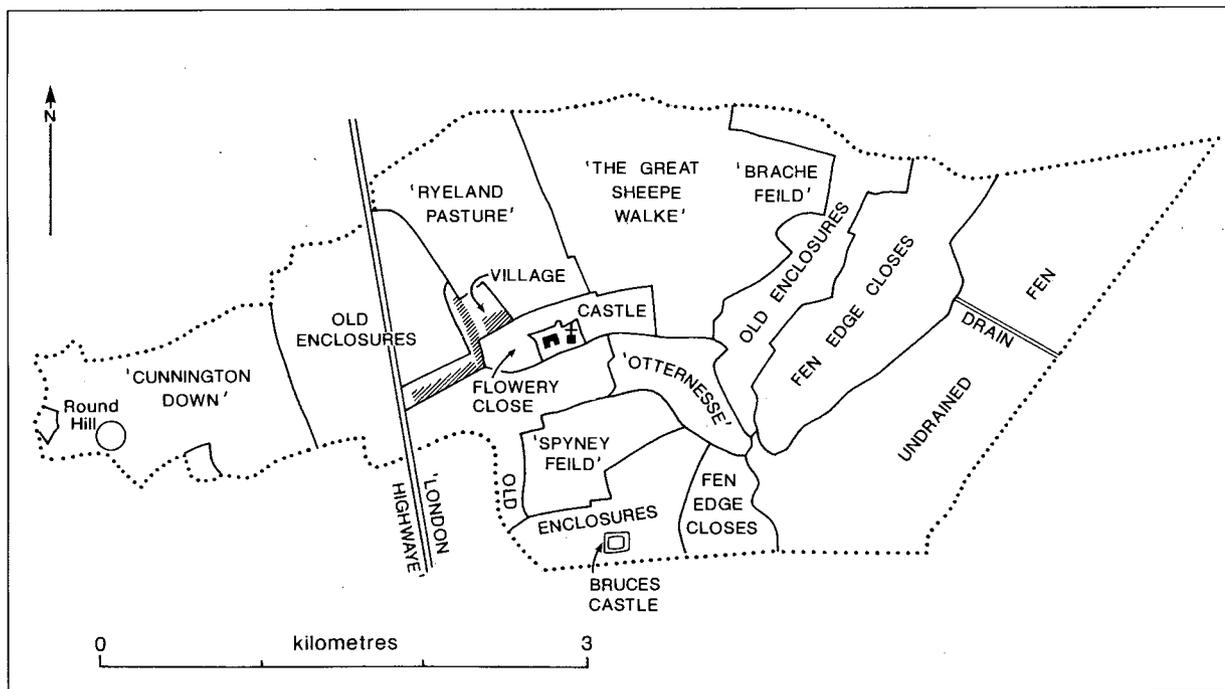


Figure 8. Round Hill, Conington: Parish of Conington, based on plan of 1595

(1936, 144) assumed that it came from the edge of the fens, east of Conington village. However, Dugdale, writing in the 1660s (1772, 172), said that it came from 'the skirt of Conington down ... where, upon making of a pool, ... Sir Robert Cotton ... found a skeleton of a large sea-fish', and that the discovery was 'made of late years'. In the early 18th century Stukeley (1776, *Iter v*, 81), having actually climbed the Round Hill, wrote 'Upon this hill Sir Robert Cotton, digging the foundations of a house, found the skeleton of a fish'. Regardless of which of these versions is correct, they both seem to be recording a tradition of work on Round Hill, involving digging and organised by Sir Robert Cotton.

### The purpose of Round Hill

All of the foregoing indicates that at some time between 1595 and 1613 Sir Robert Cotton, owner of the manor of Conington, created an elaborate arrangement of water-filled ditches, terrace walks, drives and tree-plantings around a small building. This was all set on a high hill overlooking the village and fields of Conington and with wide views across the adjacent fens. Despite its symmetrical layout and its trees and paths, it can hardly be called a garden. Rather it was the setting for the building, a place for viewing the landscape and a way of appreciating the wealth, power and status of the owner of much of that landscape. Also, perhaps, it was a place for pleasure and picnics, recreation and rest and solitude and secrecy. It was approached not apparently directly from Conington to the east, a mere 2.75km distant, but by a circuitous route via Glatton village and the old Bullock Road, a distance of some 8km (HRO TLR404). On entering the Tongue, the visitor would have moved along a raised drive with undulating lawns on both sides. No views would have been possible because of the trees around the perimeter. On reaching the Pentagon the visitor could have continued between low hedges along the raised drive or turned left or right on to the similarly hedged circular track, eventually reaching the central building by the hedged cross-drives. Again, no distant views were possible except perhaps glimpses at the northern and southern ends of these cross-drives or from the roof of the building. The trees in the outer triangles would have formed an enclosed background to the presumed undulating lawns in the interior. Only by walking along the boundary terraces above the water-filled ditches would the really spectacular views have been achieved. Certainly the principal view would have been towards the north-east rather than east-north-east across Conington village, Castle and church, an apparent misalignment of some ten degrees.

The central building would no doubt have been for viewing, shelter, eating or dalliance. It may have been a substantial stone building perhaps similar to the near contemporary Triangular Lodge, Rushton (1594–7), Lyveden New Beild (1590–4), the now lost

banqueting house or lodge at Holdenby (1580–5), all in Northamptonshire (Pevsner 1961, 400–2, 300–1; Summerson 1966, plate 84) or the slightly later Wothorpe Lodge, near Stamford (c 1623) (Girouard 1978, 108–9; Taylor 1996). All of these are geographically close to Conington. Other buildings, further afield but perhaps nearer in terms of architecture as well as function, include Carlton Biggin, North Yorkshire (1577), Westwood Park, Worcestershire (1598–1600) and especially Sherborne Castle, Dorset (1594) (inf S Wrathmell; Pevsner 1968b, 286–7; 1972, 388–9; RCHME 1952, Castleton (5)).

Despite the comments by Stukeley (1776, *Iter v*, 181) concerning the digging of foundations on Round Hill, the lack of any other contemporary or later information on the building, together with the fact that there is no evidence on the ground for any former structure, raises the possibility that the building may have been an insubstantial one. A plastered and painted timber-framed building similar to the mid 16th-century Banqueting House at Nonsuch Palace, Surrey, or the near contemporary hunting lodge at Chingford, Essex, or even a canvas structure like the Banqueting House at Whitehall of 1591 or the Palace at the Field of the Cloth of Gold of 1520 is possible (Biddle 1961, 11–13; RCHME 1921, Chingford (5); Thurley 1993, 46–8; *Cal State Pap* 1869).

The earthworks on Round Hill are more difficult to parallel. The nearest, geographically and functionally but not in shape, is the moated site at Croydon, Cambridgeshire, also set on high ground and with fine views across the valley of the Ashwell Cam. Unlike that at the Round Hill the moat at Croydon is exactly square with walkways or terraces along two sides and with prospect mounds at each corner. The original building within it, known as Croydon Tower, was demolished without record in the 1950s, but it appears to have been a square three-storey brick structure of early 17th-century date, perhaps a banqueting house (RCHME 1968, Croydon (7), (14); VCH 1982, 33, 37).

The Round Hill thus becomes explicable as a late 16th-century setting for a detached lodge, banqueting house or belvedere, situated some distance from the house of its owner. Such a function is by no means unique at this period nor indeed earlier or later. It is a good example of a form of structure the origins of which are before the 12th century and successors of which continued to be erected in the 19th century.

### Sir Robert Cotton

There is no doubt that the Round Hill was laid out by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631), country gentleman, politician, historian and antiquary, who is best known for the large collection of manuscripts that he made during his lifetime and which was the first major acquisition of the new British Museum in 1753. Cotton is also notable as one of the members of the first, and short-lived, Society of Antiquaries (Wright 1958; 1997).

There is no full modern biography of Cotton and, until recently, most of what was known of his early years at Conington was largely recycled from the account by the Reverend Smith in his *Catalogue of the Cotton Manuscripts of 1696* (Tite 1984, 25–40). It is from this source that the erroneous idea that Cotton disliked rural life originated. Detailed local studies, more recent research, the 1595 and 1613 maps and the examination of the Conington estate papers in the Huntingdonshire Record Office have all shed new light on Cotton's activities before he began his career in politics early in the reign of James I (Fig 8).

Robert Cotton was born at nearby Denton in 1571. Despite the exalted ancestors that he later claimed, by the 16th century his family were modest landowners. His great-great-grandfather Thomas Cotton I (d 1505) had been left Conington by his great-uncle in 1460. Thomas enlarged this estate by the subsequent purchase of Denton. His son, Thomas II (d 1517) and his grandson Thomas III (1515–1574) acquired small pieces of land and various advowsons, mainly in Huntingdonshire, and the latter bought parts of three manors in Woodwalton in 1568 as well as acquiring former monastic land in Conington itself (VCH 1936, 147–8, 153, 236–8; Wright 1958, 191–2). Even so, on the death of Thomas Cotton IV, in 1592, the Cotton lands were still less than 7000 acres in total (2900ha). Although at the time of Robert Cotton's birth the family were living at Denton, because of 'the incommodiousness' of the ancient Conington seat, Bruce's Castle, his father seems to have already begun building a new house, Conington Castle, within the village of Conington (Probert, 1881; CRO 588 DR/Z1). Small though this estate was, Thomas Cotton IV had certainly worked hard on improving it. The surviving Conington Court Rolls for 1560–81 (HRO CON 1/5/4–9), although mainly concerned with manorial administration, show a marked increase in business after 1579. This perhaps reflects Thomas Cotton IV's interest in his land. More importantly the 1595 map shows that the parish of Conington had been largely enclosed by that date, almost certainly by Thomas IV (VCH 1936, 144 n1). Robert Cotton continued this work by ruthless estate management, further enclosure and increased rents. It may have been the profits from all of this that enabled him to purchase his prestigiously located London home with its well known garden, to finance his political activities and to further his manuscript collection. These profits presumably also paid for the improvements to Conington Castle and its landscape and perhaps the construction of Round Hill.

Cotton inherited Conington on the death of his father in 1592 and seems to have begun work on the estate almost immediately. What he achieved in some eight to ten years is well documented, most of it remarkably on the 1595 map, which seems to have been made either during or just before most of the 'improvements' (Fig 8). His work can be divided into two, the alterations to his house at Conington and its immediate surroundings and the changes to the wider estate. One of his first achievements was the comple-

tion of the building or rebuilding of Conington Castle which his father or perhaps his grandfather had begun. What remained of this house was pulled down without record in the 1950s. The Royal Commission's account of 1926, while adequate for its time, leaves much to be desired in terms of a plan, date and sequence of development (RCHME 1926, Conington (4)). However, with the aid of the 1595 map, and a series of 18th and 19th-century engravings (VCH 1936, plates opp 145–7), it is possible to reconstruct the overall arrangement of the house and its surroundings.

Conington Castle was a typical late 16th-century country house of brick with a U-shaped plan. The two south-east-facing wings enclosed a courtyard with an outer courtyard beyond. To the sides of the house were walled garden compartments, that to the north-east surrounding the medieval parish church. This church contained, and still contains, monuments to Cotton's immediate ancestors and, more significantly, two cenotaph monuments of about 1600 displaying shields of arms of Anglo-Saxon, French and Scottish kings as well as those of an Emperor of Germany, medieval Scottish princes and English nobles. These were all intended to demonstrate the descent of David, Prince of Scotland and Earl of Huntingdon (?1142–1219) whom Cotton believed was his direct ancestor (RCHME 1926, Conington (1); VCH 1936, 150; Pevsner 1968a, 233; Mirrlees 1962, 166). The church was thus intended to be both a monument and a mausoleum to Cotton's family and alleged forebears and its position next to his new house and within his garden has an added significance (Heathcote 1876, plates opp 27, 28).

On the north-west side of the house the formal garden there was bounded by a raised terrace or walkway probably similar to those that survive at Leighton Bromswold of about 1616 and those at Childerley of about 1550 (Brown & Taylor 1977, 85–9; RCHME 1968, Childerley (4)). At the corners of the Conington terrace were circular stone summerhouses in which Cotton kept his collection of Roman antiquities that he and his former teacher William Camden had made on a visit to Hadrian's Wall in 1590 (Hepple 1999; 2001; Mirrlees 1962, 83–5; Tite 1984, 40; Wright 1958, 177). To the west of the house and gardens was a large field called Flowery Close which contained five avenues of trees intersecting each other at right angles.

A last feature relating to the house and gardens which Cotton also created was a new approach drive from the main London Road, now the A1. This was the presently disused drive with its 19th-century lodge at the western end. On the 1595 map it is shown as the only road into the village from the west and lined by five houses or cottages with a farmstead at its north-east end. However the map also shows the boundaries of the new drive superimposed on the earlier road, leaving the houses within the boundaries of the drive. This presumably means that the houses were about to be removed. This is the cartographic evidence for another of Cotton's activities in the 1590s, depopulation.

After the 1607 Midlands Revolt against enclosure, a number of landlords were prosecuted and Cotton was among them. At the hearing the jury reported that 'about twelve years last past and since [Cotton] . . . destroyed seven houses of husbandry with the barns stables and outhouses' displacing some forty to fifty people. The farmstead and the five houses along Cotton's new drive may have been six of these. Cotton's defence was that one house had blown down in a gale and that another abutted on to his terrace and garden (Bigmore 1979, 125, 143; Manning 1990, 278). The latter building could have been another farmstead shown on the 1595 map, standing just outside the western edge of the Flowery Close. This lay at the end of one of the avenues, at the other end of which was one of Cotton's summerhouses on his garden terrace. Certainly this farmstead is not shown on any later maps.

This depopulation was not concerned merely with the visual improvement of the landscape of Conington. Much more importantly it was part of the enclosure of what remained of the open field arable and wastes of the parish. As noted above, Cotton's father probably enclosed the bulk of the open fields in Conington and Cotton himself completed the process in the mid 1590s. This was a period during which enclosure was by no means uncommon in Huntingdonshire and so Cotton was doing no more than many of his contemporaries (Gay 1904, 235). For the removal of the seven houses at Conington also involved the conversion to pasture of 208 acres (85ha) of arable (Bigmore 1979, 125). In 1619 Cotton and his son Thomas received a pardon for the earlier enclosure of 800 acres (330ha) of 'land, formerly arable' in Conington (HRO CON 3/1/1/13). It was presumably this land that Thomas Cotton was prosecuted over in 1636 when he claimed that his father had actually converted the 800 acres (330ha) of arable to pasture in 1596–7 (Manning 1990, 278). It was the establishment of these new enclosures that led to a boundary dispute with the farmers of the still open fields of Glatton to the north, over which judgement was given in October 1596 (HRO CON 3/1/1/10). The land involved in this enclosure can be seen on the 1595 map. Round Hill and its surrounding area Conington Down is one piece, while Spyney Feild, Otternesse, The Great Sheepe Walke, Ryelande Pasture and Brache Feild to the south and north of the village are the others. The disputed boundary may well have been just to the north of the Round Hill where the 1595 map shows the boundaries of Cotton's new enclosures at variance with the existing parish boundary and extending into Glatton. Certainly by 1636 the whole of Conington parish was one large sheep walk (Manning 1990, 278).

Like many of his neighbours, Cotton was also interested in maximising the profits on the fenland he owned by draining and reclaiming. He created closes along the fen edge east of the village, perhaps some of those shown there on the 1595 map. Certainly one of his tenants sued him in 1598 for failing to drain several enclosed pastures by carrying the water away in 'a

great Loade and ditch' as the terms of the lease required (Darby 1956, 20; 1983, 50; Manning 1990, 278). This lode is probably the ditch shown on the 1595 map as extending from the fen-edge closes, across the open fenland to the Monks' Lode in Sawtry. Cotton was also involved in the unsuccessful attempts at larger scale drainage. He was a member of the Commission of Sewers, although not apparently a regular attender at meetings. And after the ill-fated 1600 General Drainage Act, he was one of the 'undertakers' who hoped to organise and run a corporation to drain the fens (Darby 1956, 29–30; Mirrlees 1962, 316–17, 319–20). It was presumably this interest that led to his acquisition of a number of maps of the fenland (VCH 1936, 292 no 2, 303 no 78).

With all of this work achieved Cotton, still in his twenties, could mix with his landed neighbours on an equal footing. He was soon engaged in all of the activities that would have been expected of him as a country gentleman. He became a JP in 1601 and although he was an MP for the Isle of Wight in the same year, he finally represented his own county in Parliament in 1604. In 1603 he acquired a knighthood and thereafter called himself Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, an allusion to his ancestry. He became a baronet in 1611 (Sharpe 1979, 151–2; Hasler 1981, 663; DNB 1887, 308–15; Cockayne 1900, 45–6).

By this time Cotton had become involved in the Court and London politics. Conington began to play a less important role in his life which is, from here on, well documented (DNB 1887, 308–15; Sharpe 1979; Mirrlees 1962; Tite 1984, 25–45). Even so he still returned to Conington and participated in local affairs and the management of his estate. The surviving Conington accounts and rentals of 1603–12 are actually in Cotton's own hand (HRO CON 4/2/1/1). He also continued to bring friends and colleagues to stay. In 1603 both Ben Jonson and William Camden visited Conington and Jonson described it as one of his favourite 'country havens' (Sharpe 1979, 200). At about the same time Cotton brought the lawyer and poet John Davies to see the moated Bruce's Castle, the supposed seat of Cotton's ancestors (Mirrlees 1962, 50). Cotton's continuing interest in his garden at Conington is revealed by a letter written to Cotton, then in London, by John Watts, rector of Conington in about 1613. Watts was working on the Cotton orchard at Conington and he suggests planting fresh varieties of apples there. He outlines the possibilities in a way that indicates Cotton's detailed knowledge (Mirrlees 1962, 311). As late as 1611 Cotton purchased the adjoining manors of Glatton and Holme and in the same year he bought the Lordship of Norman Cross Hundred which brought him additional fishing rights on Whittlesea Mere as well as the profits from the hundred court. And in 1613 he was involved in a bitter dispute with his new tenants at Glatton and he was also appointed Commissioner for the sale of the crown manor of Weybridge in Alconbury (Mirrlees 1962, 236–7; Manning 1990, 278–83).

It is perhaps worthwhile at this point to look at Cotton's achievements in Huntingdonshire and to

establish what might have lain behind them. For the work at Conington exhibited a combination of astute and even ruthless estate management for profit, detailed antiquarian research at both a local and a national level, a desire for status and position, again at both local and national levels and a sustained attempt to enhance the visual appearance of his home and its surroundings. None of these interests were unusual in members of his class in the late 16th and early 17th centuries and many of Cotton's contemporaries had similar aims and achievements. Even his enthusiasm for history and antiquities was not uncommon. Most of his fellow-members of the Society of Antiquaries were similarly preoccupied. Manning (1990, 279–87) suggests that Cotton's interest in studying ancient manorial records may have been at least partly because he realised how antiquarianism 'could be put to use for extracting profit ... as well as serving scholarship'. Certainly his later successes in London were at least partly the result of his realisation of 'the political usefulness of antiquarian studies' (Sharpe 1979, 42–5).

However, while all of this is undoubtedly true, what emerges from this examination of Cotton's early life is his obsession with his family origins and its links with Conington through the de Brus family and especially through Robert the Bruce, king of Scotland (1306–29). There are at least three known family pedigrees in his hand, as well as his own copies of many deeds relating to his ancestors as far back as the 13th century. There are also notes on the history of Conington and its land including a plan of Bruce's Castle, all by him (CRO 588 DR/Z4; 588 DR/F38). That is, his interest in his origins and in his lands were more than merely scholarly or economic. His collection of records, together with Conington Castle, its garden, the church and its monuments, perhaps even the Round Hill site itself, all demonstrate his interest in where he had come from, what he and his forebears had achieved, particularly at Conington, and his desire to display them to his contemporaries.

The Round Hill would have provided a place for pleasure and have impressed visitors. It also would have enabled all to view the modern, profitable farmland below and to appreciate it as the latest success in the long association of the Cottons with Conington. In this context it is necessary to return to the archaeology of the Round Hill and to look again at the ridge and furrow within it. As already noted, this ridge and furrow governs the alignment of the site and so forces it to face north-east rather than east-north-east across the steepest part of the spur. This latter alignment would have been much more logical in that the principal view from the main part of the terrace would have then been directly across the parish towards Conington village, the Castle and the church. Further, the ridge and furrow was left intact within the site and was thus apparently meant to be seen by visitors to it. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that, in an age where symbolic meanings were displayed and disguised in literature, heraldry, painting, architecture and gardens, that the incorporation of the medieval ridge and furrow was intended to represent the final

triumph of Cotton as a successful sheep farmer over the earlier poor ploughmen? That is, the victory of profitable pastoralism over uneconomic arable. Or was it all merely a convenience of construction?

The years around 1615 saw the end of Cotton's active engagement with Conington. His son, Sir Thomas Cotton, took over most of the estate management and proved to be at least as efficient as Sir Robert. Both father and son had begun the draining and enclosure of Holme Fen soon after the purchase of the manor there, although whether it was completed is uncertain (Lindley 1982, 83–6; VCH 1936, plate opp 290). But it was probably Thomas who finally drained and enclosed all of the 820 acres (340ha) of open fenland in Conington that had been completed by 1636 (VCH 1936, 144; Manning 1990, 287).

Although there is no direct evidence, Sir Robert probably continued to visit Conington until his death in 1631, but whether he still rode up to Round Hill to view what he had achieved is unknown. He was certainly buried in the church at Conington near his monument, surrounded by his forebears and the arms of his ancestors, within his garden and in the centre of his estate.

#### The later history of the Round Hill

How long Sir Robert Cotton's lodge survived on Round Hill is not clear. If it was the timber-framed or even the flimsy canvas structure suggested earlier, it probably soon collapsed or rotted away. Certainly when Stukeley visited Round Hill in about 1722 there was nothing there. He records the tradition of the fossil 'fish' being found during the digging of foundations, but only describes the remarkable view, including that of Whittlesey Mere, from it (Stukeley 1776, Iter v, 81). This might suggest that the Round Hill building was perhaps abandoned in the later 17th century.

Sir Thomas Cotton lived at Conington until his death in 1662. But his son, Sir John (d 1702), did not and indeed allowed Conington Castle to become ruinous. It was so when Stukeley saw it in 1722: 'I was concerned to see a stately old house . . . lie in dismal ruins, the *lares* deserted and the genius of the place fled a poor cottage or two seems to be the whole town.' (Stukeley 1776, Iter v, 81). Sir John Cotton's grandson, another Sir John (d 1731), pulled down much of the house and converted the rest into a farmhouse (Camden 1798, 154). The Roman antiquities in the garden were given to Trinity College, Cambridge and are now in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Anon 1883). When, in 1754, the last of the Cottons died, Conington was sold to Sir John Heathcote, son of a wealthy London merchant. Sir John's grandson, another John (d 1838), lived there from 1795 and was the first of the family to do so. He restored the Castle, created new gardens and revived the estate. His son, John Moyer Heathcote (d 1892), was a great agricultural improver. It was he who was responsible for the drainage of Whittlesey

Mere in 1852 as well as for updating the Castle and the church (VCH 1936, 145, 148; Colvin 1995, 133–4).

It was probably soon after 1795 that the Round Hill area was altered, presumably by John Heathcote. The principal addition to the landscape was the establishment of a small deer park of 48 acres (20ha) in the field which slopes down from the north-eastern edge of Round Hill as far as the Sawtry to Glatton road (Shirley 1867, 113; OS 1889; Fig 9). On the Tithe Map of 1842 (HRO 2196/10A) this area was divided into two parcels, both pasture and both called Deer Park. By 1847 (HRO TLR 379/A) improvements, presumably by John Moyer Heathcote, who succeeded to the Conington lands in 1838, had taken place. The deer park, so named on the 1847 map, was then a single parcel of land, bounded by a continuous belt of trees. In the centre was a circular copse with a wedge-shaped clearing on its western side, presumably a wind shelter. A single building stood in the north-west corner of the park against the Round Hill terrace and there were a group of buildings in the north-east corner close to the Sawtry to Glatton road. By 1889 (OS) further changes had been made, again presumably by John Moyer Heathcote. The circular wind shelter had been removed and a new route to the Round Hill established, a track which ran across the deer park from the road to the edge of the site. A foot-bridge giving access from this track across the ditch on to the old terrace walkway had been constructed. The track also led to a group of buildings and yards arranged lengthways along the outer edge of the

ditch, on the site of the building depicted in 1847 (Figs 2, 9). A building is shown here on the 1824 OS map and probably existed in 1808 (Harley 1970). The 1889 buildings were almost certainly the stables, pens and paddocks for deer, together with a deer-keeper's cottage. They had been abandoned by 1912 when they were ruinous and had gone by 1926 (sketch in HRO; RCHME 1926, 62). A few fragments of 18th or 19th-century brick and some slate remain on the ground today.

Within the Round Hill the features attributed earlier to the third period of activity there are also probably the work of the Heathcotes in the late 18th or 19th century. By 1808 and still in 1889 carriage access on to the hill was from the north, from Glatton, and then on to the circular drive from an entrance in the north-west corner of the Pentagon. The flattened area in the centre, the curving scarp to the north-west and other scarps in the area suggest that carriages were turned here and perhaps indicate that the Heathcotes were again using Round Hill as a place of recreation and as a viewing platform, now with grazing deer in the foreground (Heathcote 1876, facing frontpiece).

#### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that the enigmatic earthworks on Round Hill, Conington, were the elaborate formal surrounds for a lodge or belvedere constructed in the late 16th century by Sir Robert Cotton.

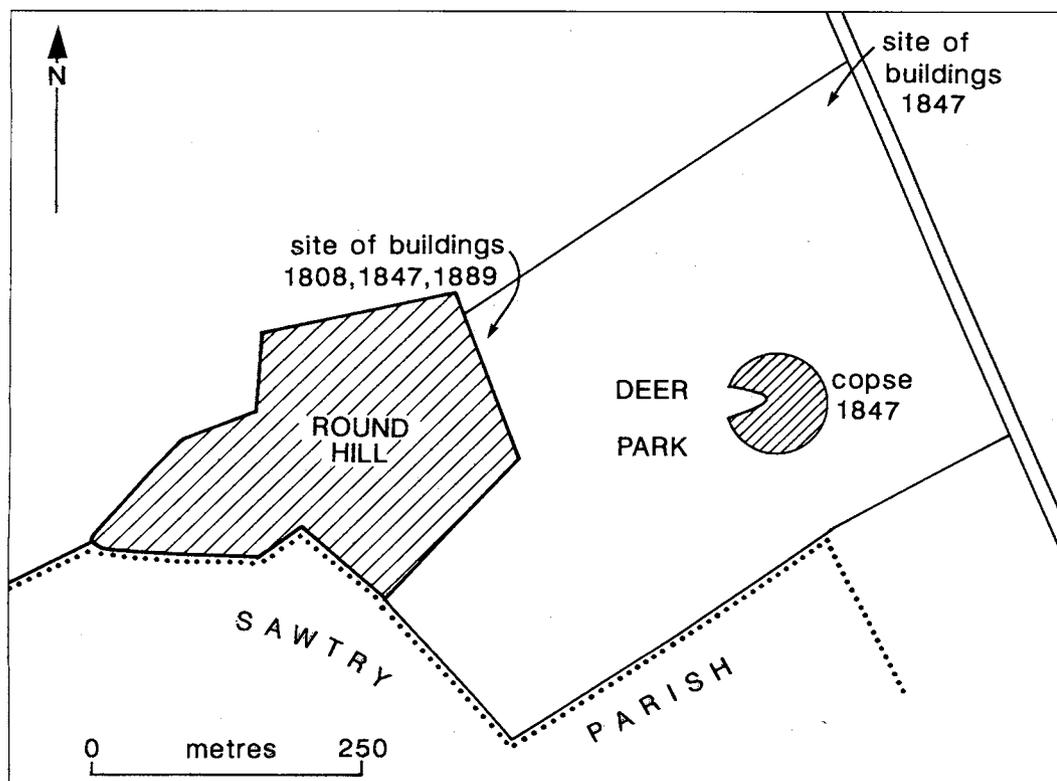


Figure 9. Round Hill, Conington: 19th-century deer park

However, one problem remains over the building that appears to have stood within the earthworks. Apart from the tradition recorded by Stukeley over a century later that Cotton had dug the foundations for a house here, contradicted by Dugdale writing only fifty years or so after the alleged event, there is no record of the existence of this remarkable building other than on the 1613 map. No contemporary or later reference to it has been noted and no architect has either claimed it or been credited with it. No plan or detailed drawing has been found. It may be that it was indeed a flimsy structure of wood or canvas and that it soon disappeared. But an alternative explanation is that the Round Hill lodge was projected, perhaps started but never finished, and that the building on the 1613 map depicts a hope rather than a reality, as the VCH suggested (1936, 145–6). The lack of any evidence on the ground for the fourth drive within the Pentagon supports this idea. That is not even the surrounding earthworks were completed as intended.

Explaining difficulties in interpretation by postulating that sites are 'unfinished' is a not entirely unknown methodological device, at least among archaeologists, even though such explanations are philosophically unsatisfactory. On the other hand, unfinished or abandoned contemporary projects are recorded (eg Brown & Taylor 1972; RCHME 1982, Newbottle (5)). Perhaps the only way to solve this problem would be to carry out an excavation in the centre of the Round Hill whereby the former existence of the building might be ascertained. But, unfinished or not, the Round Hill is an important site both for garden history and for the life of Robert Cotton. At the end of this paper, as at the beginning, the Round Hill remains one of the 'wonders of Huntingdonshire'.

### Acknowledgements

The writer would like to thank Dr Nigel Cross for advice on the palaeontology of the Oxford Clay, Dr Twigs Way for information on the deer park and Alexandra Ault for acting as minder and assistant when he was carrying out the fieldwork for this paper with a broken leg. The line-drawings are by Phillip Judge.

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## Proceedings Volume XCII, 2003

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