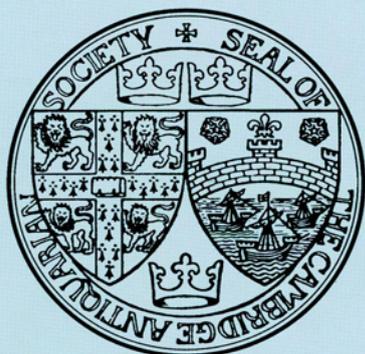

Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCVII
for 2008



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Iron Age Ditches and an Anglo-Saxon Building near the Mile Ditches, Bassingbourn, TL 3294 4335

Tom Phillips

With Paul Blinkhorn and Chris Faine

Illustrations by Crane Begg and Gillian Greer

Excavation by CAM ARC in 2007 of approximately half a hectare of land at Bassingbourn Village College, south Cambridgeshire provides the first evidence for Iron Age settlement in the parish and makes a notable contribution to current understanding of this period in the area. The work revealed a series of parallel Iron Age ditches, perhaps representing a wide track or droveway, set within a landscape of known prehistoric and Roman routes, boundaries and monuments. Subsequent Anglo-Saxon activity included a sunken-featured building relating to the re-establishment of settlement in the post-Roman period, the core of which may lie further west.

Bassingbourn

Bassingbourn lies in a landscape of gently rolling hills and chalk grassland 3km to the north-west of Royston, Hertfordshire (Fig. 1). The surrounding area has a distinctive pattern of rectilinear fields and lanes, the origins of which have recently been explored (Hesse 2000). Development of the local landscape was influenced by the presence of ancient roads, interspersed with monuments including the enigmatic Mile Ditches (Crawford 1936).

The name *Bassingbourn*, meaning the stream of Bassa's people, indicates a pre-Conquest origin: although no prehistoric or Roman settlements have yet been found here, thirteen ring ditches noted elsewhere within the parish have been interpreted as representing ploughed-out Bronze Age barrows (Reaney 1943, 52; Taylor 1997, 19). Taylor (1997, 19) suggested that Bassingbourn High Street might be one of a series of parallel east to west prehistoric trackways within the Icknield Way zone. These include Ashwell Street to the south of the recent excavation and the Icknield Way itself, further south again. The Roman road of Ermine Street, approximately 1.5km to the east of the village, runs north to south and crosses the Icknield Way at Royston.

South of the village is an abundance of prehistoric activity. On Therfield Heath, an area of higher land approximately 3km distant, are several Bronze Age

round barrows and a long barrow, the only known example in Hertfordshire. Of particular interest is a set of three parallel ditches known as the Mile Ditches, which commence near an upstanding round barrow on Therfield Heath and run towards Bassingbourn's Wellhead Springs (Burleigh 1980), from which a brook runs northwards approximately 150m to the west of the subject site. The banks associated with the Mile Ditches were once visible, but were levelled during the Second World War. The earthworks were investigated during road widening in 1978 and were found to be a maximum of 3.50m wide and 1.20m deep (the narrowest being c. 2.00m wide and 0.75m deep), with distances of 5–8m between them (Burleigh 1980). The precise date of their construction is not known although they evidently silted up during the Roman period; amongst the finds recovered in 1978, a horse mandible was radiocarbon dated to the 2nd century BC. The Mile Ditches are the westernmost in a sequence of five boundaries in the vicinity of the Icknield Way, which they either run up to or across at right angles (Malim *et al* 1997, figs 1 and 2). The dating of the other four boundaries remains a matter for debate – they were clearly significant in the Anglo-Saxon period but have possible origins in prehistory, forming dykes across the chalk uplands that may have served functions as defensive barriers, land boundaries and routes, associated with earlier sacred places (Malim *et al* 1997, 27). Notably, the Mile Ditches appear to be the only examples with a bank on the west as well as the east, the others only having banks to the east (Malim *et al* 1997, 106).

Between Ashwell Street and the Icknield Way, following the same alignment as the roads, are a set of 'camps' thought to be Iron Age (Crawford 1936). These include Arbury Banks, south of the village of Ashwell; Limlow Hill, west of the Mile Ditches; Hoy's Farm, south of Bassingbourn and Burlow Hill to the east of Royston. The evidence for these comes mainly from aerial photography and no excavation has yet taken place.

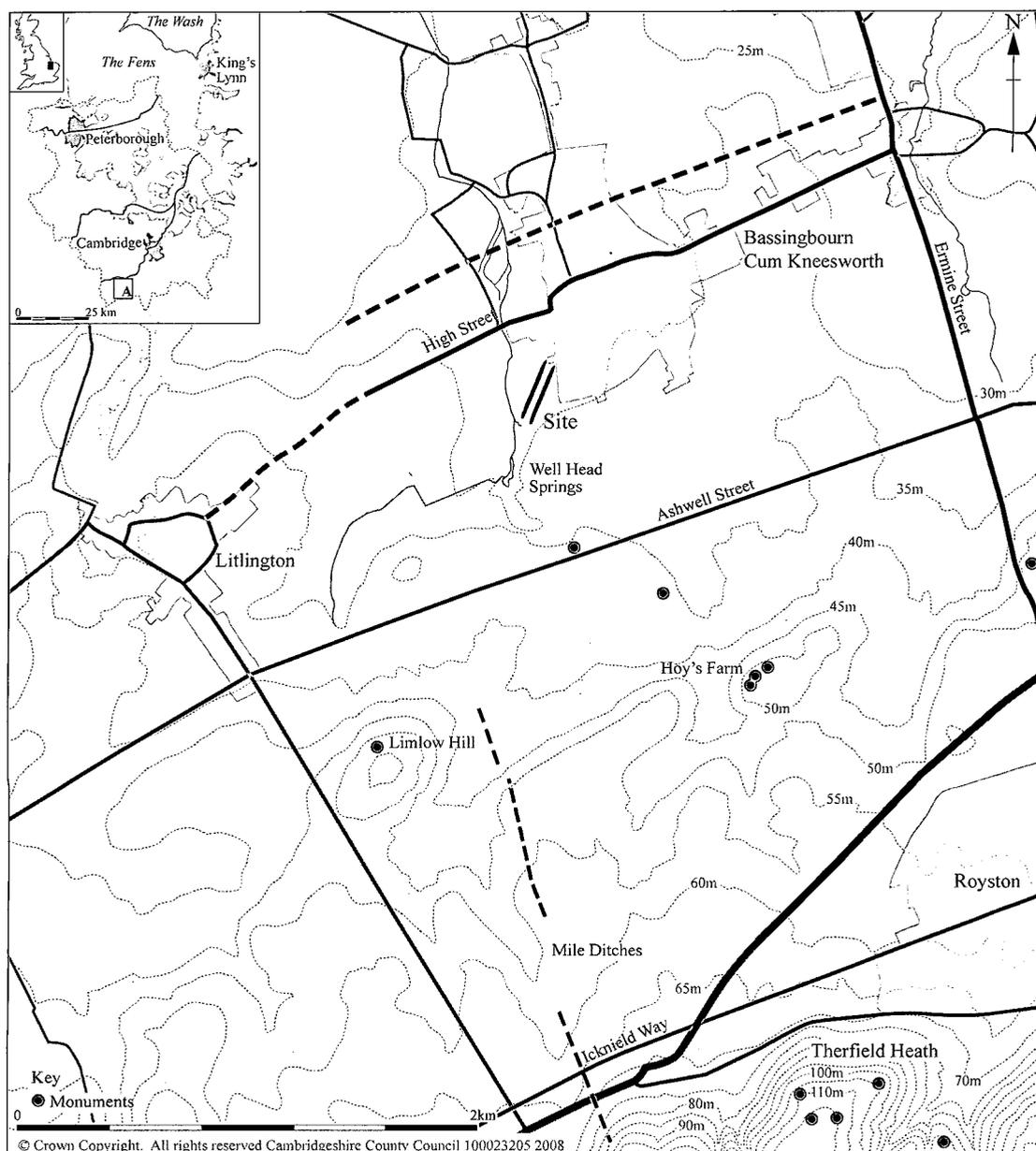


Figure 1. Site location, showing local topography, ancient routes and monuments.

Iron Age

The newly discovered ditches at Bassingbourn Village College were recorded over a distance of 70m within the excavation, while their south-westerly course was traced for a further 160m through geophysical survey (Fig. 2). To the extreme south-west is a hint that the ditches narrow into a funnel, a feature which aids livestock management and is therefore common in droveways. An alternative interpretation is that the ditches defined some other form of repeated but shifting boundary, perhaps akin to the Mile Ditches themselves.

The excavated sequence of ten linear ditches, all orientated north-north-east to south-south-west, lay in two groups – three to the west and the remainder

to the east (Fig. 2). While their size and form varied considerably, indicating occasional widening and narrowing of the space between them, their strict alignment remained the same. Some were wide and shallow, whilst others were narrow or wide and deep with sharp v-shaped profiles. Widths ranged from 0.39 to 2.00m and depths from 0.18 to 1.00m, the largest therefore being of similar scale to the smallest of the Mile Ditches. Distances between any two sets of flanking ditches varied from 13m to 26.5m, making the intervening space relatively wide compared to known contemporary droveways. The ditch fills were very similar throughout being a reddish brown or greyish brown sandy silt. Dating evidence was scarce, although Iron Age pottery was retrieved. A notable find from one of the southern ditches (ditch 3)

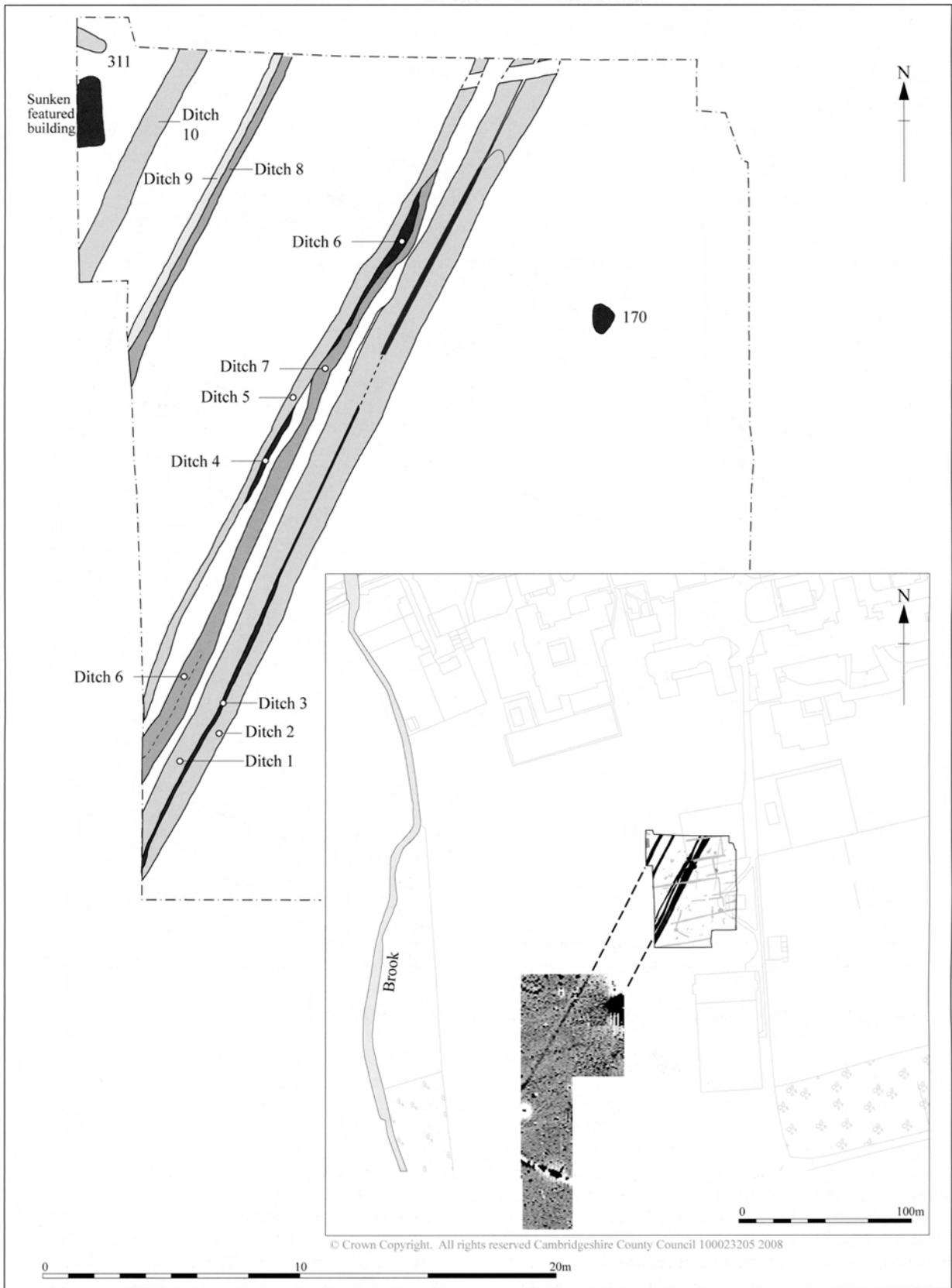


Figure 2. Site plan of Iron Age ditches and Anglo-Saxon features, with insert showing the results of geophysical survey.

was a complete red deer antler which had been deliberately placed within its fill. This had evidently been naturally shed and would have been highly valued in prehistoric times.

In the north-western corner of the site a short section of another ditch lay within the excavated area (311), aligned perpendicular to the other ditches. A cow skull had been deliberately placed upright near the base of and facing the ditch terminal. Cranial suture closure indicates an adult animal, around 7–9 years of age, while metrical analysis of the horn cores suggests a beast of similar morphology to those from contemporary sites.

Although only a small quantity of Iron Age pottery was recovered (11 sherds, 171g) it includes fragments of two vessels likely to be of Middle Iron Age date. The first, from ditch 5, consists of eight sherds, including a piece of the rim from an ovoid jar with fragments of vertical scratches on the body in a manner typical of the Scored Ware tradition (Elsdon 1992). Scored ware, which is commonly found on Middle to Late Iron Age sites in the south-east midlands, particularly Northamptonshire, is thought to be of Middle Iron Age date, ie. 5th/4th to 1st centuries BC (Knight 2002, 124–6). The second vessel is represented by a rimsherd from a large jar found in ditch 2. The top of the rim bead is decorated with fingertipping, with nail marks visible in the centre of each impression. Fingertip decoration occurs on both Early and Middle Iron Age pottery in Cambridgeshire. It would appear therefore that there was certainly human presence at the site during the Middle Iron Age, with a possible origin in the Early Iron Age.

Anglo-Saxon

A sunken-featured building lay in the north-western corner of the site, to the west of the earlier ditches. Aligned north to south it was 5.5m in length and 0.35m deep, with vertical sides, with a probable width of approximately 3m. Opposing post-holes were located in the middle of each short side; a common form of building in this period (Tipper 2004, 1). Its two fills contained no dateable finds, although the uppermost was cut by a pit containing Early to Middle Saxon pottery and animal bone, dominated by cattle with smaller proportions of sheep/goat. The assemblage contains a high proportion of fragments showing signs of butchery. The only other contemporary feature was a circular pit (170), which lay some distance to the east. This had vertical sides and was 1.3m deep, possibly serving as a well.

A small group of fourteen sherds of Early to Middle Saxon pottery came from these features (443g). The dating of Early Saxon hand-built pottery is entirely reliant on the presence of decorated sherds: it seems that the Anglo-Saxons generally stopped decorating hand-built pottery around the beginning of the 7th century (Myres 1977, 1), but it cannot be said that an assemblage which produced only plain sherds is of 7th-century date. Usually, decorated hand-built

pottery only comprises around 3 to 4 per cent of domestic assemblages, as was the case at sites such as West Stow, Suffolk (West 1985) and Mucking, Essex (Hamerow 1993). All of the Bassingbourn pottery is undecorated apart from a single sherd from the rim and shoulders of a jar with corrugated and burnished shoulders. The vessel is difficult to date other than to within the broad Early Saxon period (AD 450 to 650), but it does have some similarities with a class of decoration (that of linear design on the neck and shoulders) which Myres (1977) saw as dating to the earlier part of the Early Saxon period.

Discussion

The Iron Age ditches evidently led towards the adjacent spring and this, combined with the fact that their course does not conform to other local alignments, may suggest that they represent a track linking fields or enclosures rather than a major routeway. The presence of the Mile Ditches to the south-west is, however, clearly significant. These formed an important multi-ditched territorial boundary and the presence of what may have been a substantial droveway or other boundary so close to them may suggest an association.

Deliberate deposition of animal remains is a common theme throughout prehistory and into the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods, providing evidence of ritual or symbolic activity. Many authors have discussed the possible meaning of such deposition (e.g. Wait 1985; Hill 1995). Both examples of placed animal bone at Bassingbourn come from ditches; in such contexts the deposits may be signifying change or transition, and/or marking out settlement or other boundaries. During the Iron Age such rituals often appear to be linked to water and river cults, as well as ancestor worship associated with earlier prehistoric sites (Bryant 2000, 17).

Deer antlers are common at early prehistoric monumental sites such as Maumbury Rings, Dorset (Bradley 1975) but are also found on settlement sites dating as late as the Anglo-Saxon period. The vast majority of red deer remains in the Iron Age are recovered from such deposits, with relatively few deriving from domestic contexts (Hambelton 1999). Local examples, ranging in date from the Late Neolithic to the Early Saxon periods, include those found at Babraham Road, Cambridge (Hinman 2001) and Love's Farm, St Neots (Hinman in prep. a). Deliberate inhumations of cattle remains (particularly skulls) are relatively common on Iron Age sites, particularly in the Thames valley (Mulville *et al.* forthcoming). A spectacular example of numerous cattle and horses of Late Iron Age to Early/Middle Roman date buried nose to tail was recently found in a ditch at Haddenham (Phillips and Grassam 2006). There is a growing corpus of examples of cattle skulls placed in Iron Age ditch terminals or junctions, such as those found at Landbeach, Limes Farm (Sealey *et al.* in prep).

The discovery of the Anglo-Saxon building is notable in the context of understanding the development of settlement in the parish. Although its north to south orientation is not exceptional, an east to west alignment is much more common. At Bloodmoor Hill in Suffolk, for example, only one out of 38 such buildings was definitely orientated north to south (Dickens, Mortimer and Tipper 2006). Similarly, at West Stow, of the 69 sunken-featured buildings, only one was orientated north to south (West 1985).

Conclusion

Despite their small scale, the excavations at Bassingbourn contribute new information to the study of this important landscape. An association between the 'droveway' and the Mile Ditches, a significant territorial boundary, remains a possibility. The evident ritual behaviour at the site is perhaps linked to its location, close to springs and earlier prehistoric monuments.

Acknowledgements

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