An Archaeological Field Survey and Excavation at Robury Ring, Shropshire, 1989-90.

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the results of two short programmes of work undertaken at Robury Ring near Wentnor, Shropshire.

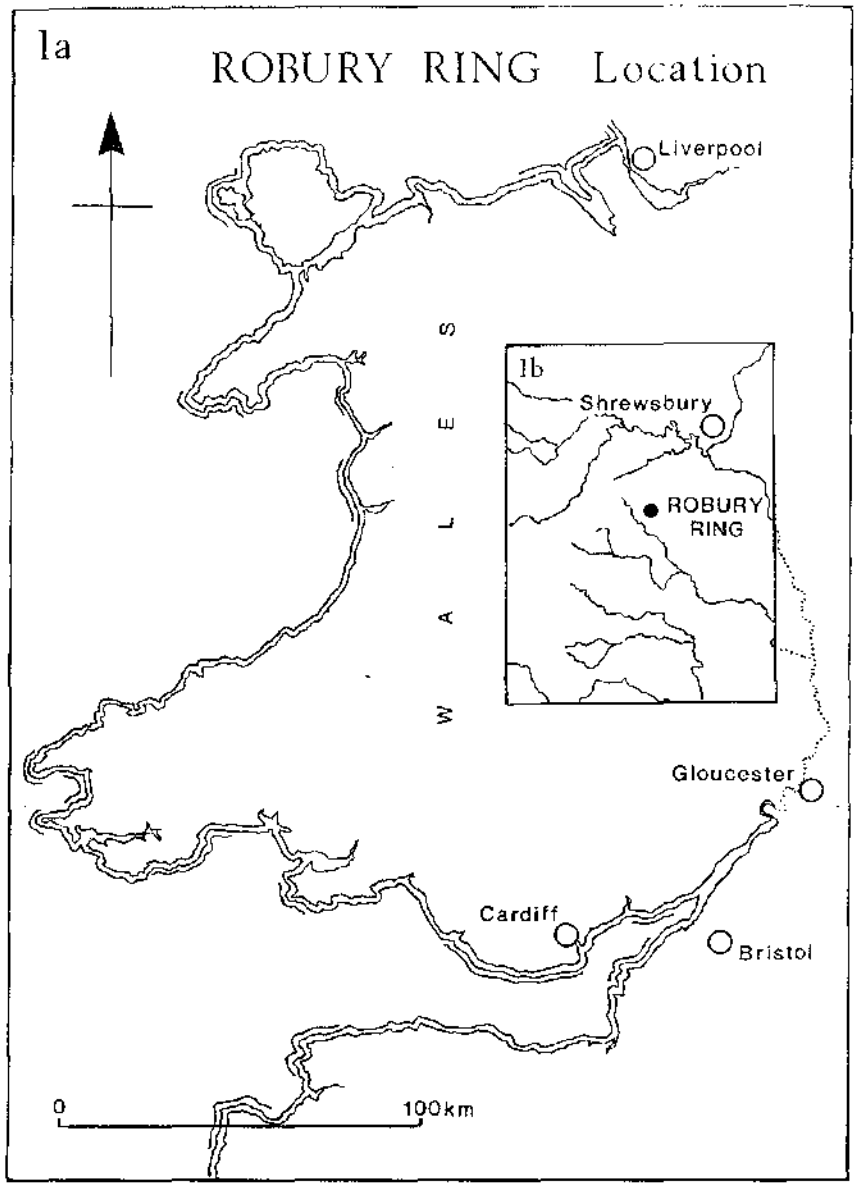
In July 1989, English Heritage commissioned Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to undertake a topographic and photographic survey of this Scheduled Ancient Monument with the aim of providing a detailed record of the monument and to assist with its management.

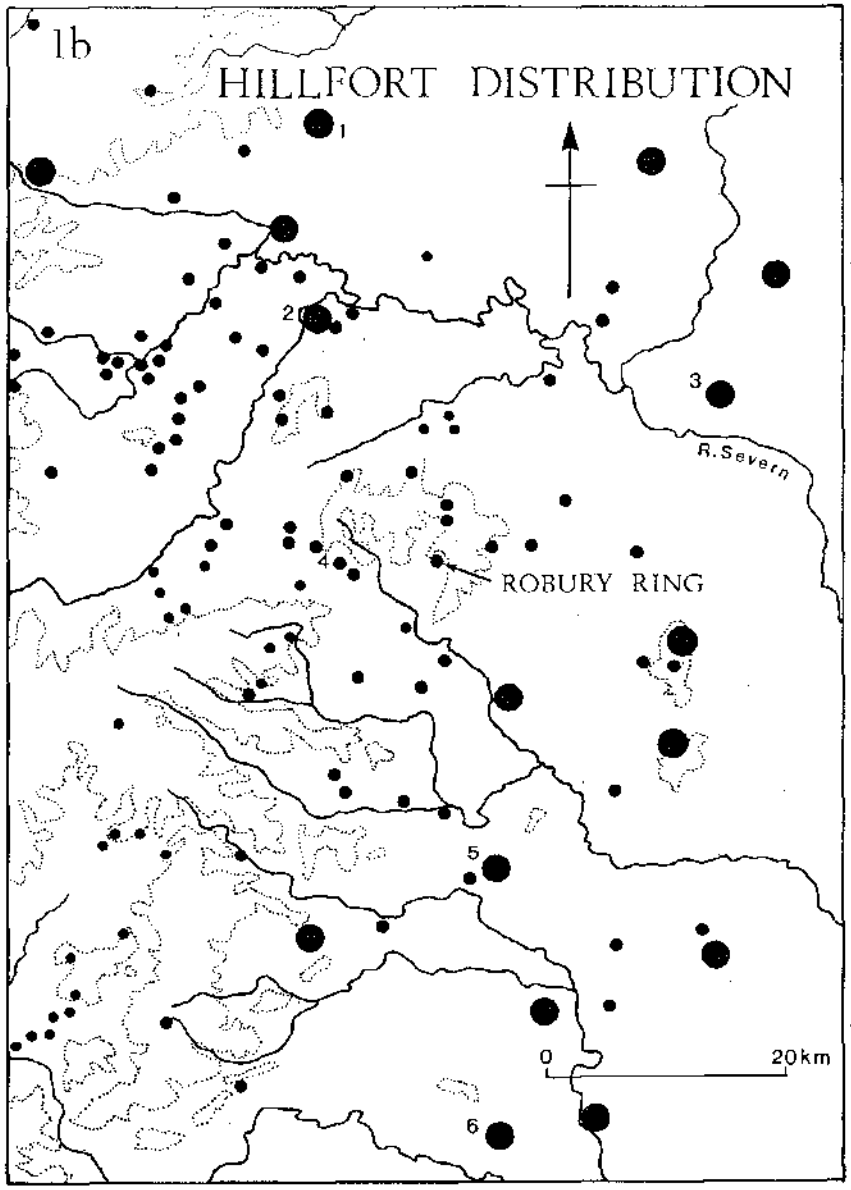
The survey was followed by a small excavation in March 1990, following the granting of consent for an application to erect a domestic extension to the eastern side of the farmhouse within the scheduled area of the monument.

THE FIELD SURVEY AND SITE DESCRIPTION

Robury Ring is located 21km to the southwest of Shrewsbury (Fig. 1a), and 1.5km east of Wentnor, Shropshire. It comprises a small, circular earthwork enclosure c.90m in diameter, on a slight spur of land occupying the lower, west-facing slopes of the Long Mynd. The monument is generally in very poor condition. It seems to have been originally surrounded by a double bank and ditch, very little of which are currently visible.

Typologically, it appears to belong to a class of small settlement enclosures of late prehistoric or Romano-British date; however, no dating evidence for the Robury enclosure had previously been obtained. The site has been considerably damaged and obscured by the construction of a farmhouse and other farm buildings over much of its interior, and by recent ploughing. The land surrounding the farm buildings was under pasture at the time of the survey. During the field survey a 1:200 plan was produced using





● Over 15 acres • Under 15 acres

1. Old Oswestry 2. The Breiddin 3. The Wrekin 4. The Roveries
5. Croft Ambrey 6. Credenhill Camp

Fig 1

an EDM. A simplified version of the plan showing the location of the excavation is given in Figure 2.

The surviving defences can best be seen on the northwest side where traces of the two banks and ditches are just visible, although some of the inner ditch is now occupied by a drainage channel. To the east and southeast the earthworks are just made visible by differential growth of grass and as very slight breaks in slope. The farmhouse appears to have been built on the southwestern corner of the inner ditch and rampart. It is clear that a certain amount of terracing and, consequently, disturbance had taken place during its construction. To the south the gradual, apparently natural slope appears broken in places, possibly indicating the line of former defences. To the northeast a barn and compound built in the 1970's have obscured or destroyed most of the inner rampart and possibly part of the inner ditch. A total of 0.38 hectares is enclosed by these defences. There is a possible hollow-way running northwest-southeast across the field to the southeast of the monument.

No records of previous archaeological excavations or discoveries apparently exist. The excavation of two post pits for electricity pylons in 1977 gave an opportunity to see something of the stratigraphy in the interior of the monument. The bulk of this appeared to have been of recent origin, although an earlier clay-soil horizon survived beneath the makeup and above the natural clay subsoil.

ROBURY RING General Plan

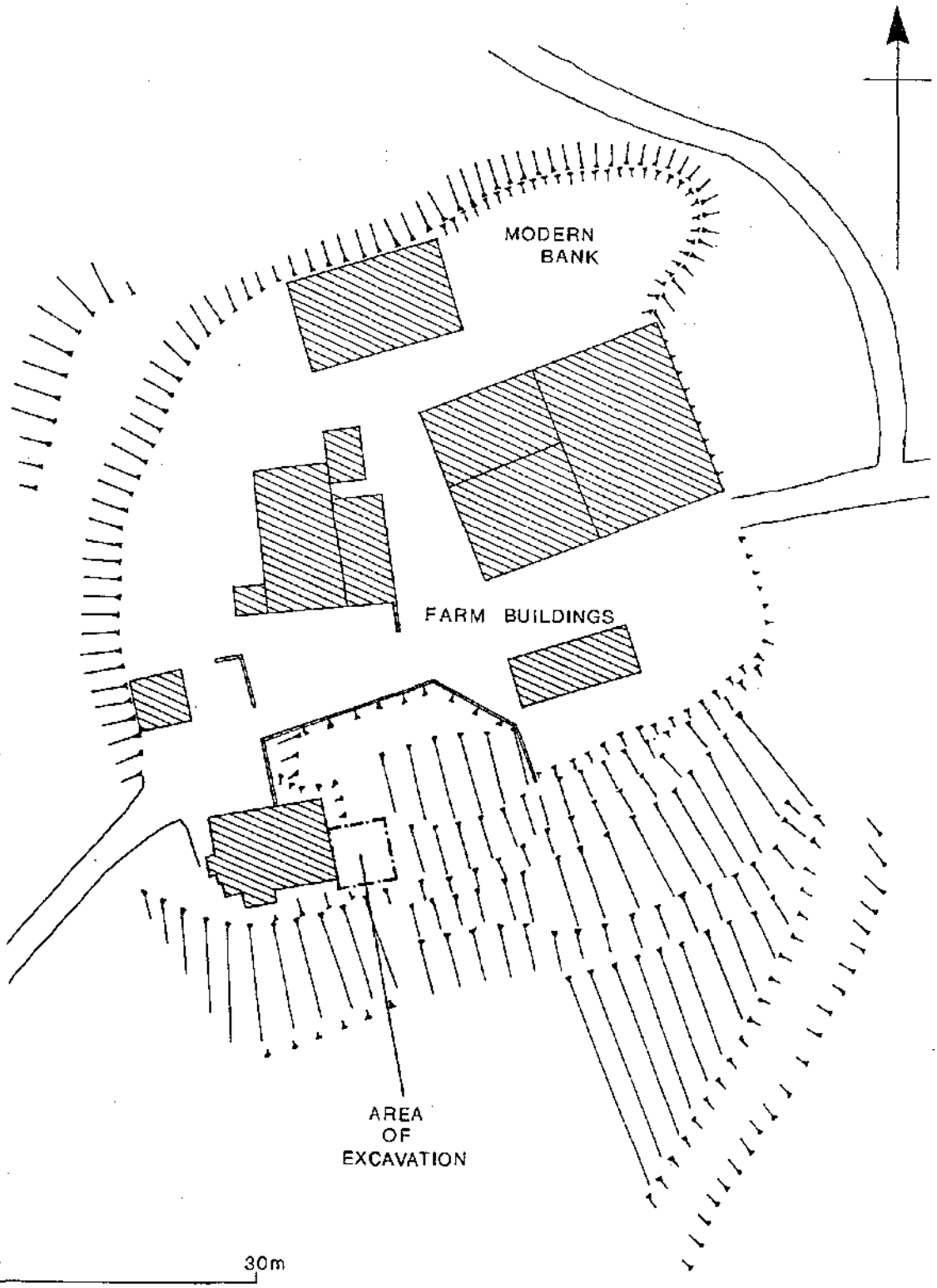


Fig 2

(Based on plan by L.Jones 1988)

THE EXCAVATION

A 7 x 7m area was threatened by the proposed farmhouse extension. This was located mainly within a small, grassed paddock adjacent to the eastern side of the present building. Before excavation a slight change in slope could be observed running east-west across the area, with the ground-level gradually dropping off to the south. The area immediately adjacent to the farmhouse had previously been cut away to produce the 'terrace' on which the existing building is set. The section resulting from this terracing was cleaned, and showed that the natural clay-gravel subsoil (1005), merging with a more compact boulder clay (1009), was less than 0.6m below the present ground surface.

It was decided to remove the overburden of topsoil (1001 and 1002) by hand using mattocks and shovels. The depth of this topsoil was considerably shallower over the southern two-thirds of the site where it overlay a ridge of blocky yellow clay (1003, Feature 1) up to 2m wide and 0.3m high (Fig.3). The northern limit of this clay was a well-defined, steep edge which appeared to correspond with the slight change of slope across the area. It is possible that Feature 1 represents the remnant of the inner rampart running along the top of this gentle scarp.

The apparent abrupt northern limit of Feature 1 may be interpreted as part of a series of cuts and levelling episodes designed to level the interior of the enclosure for the subsequent laying-out of farmyards and buildings. An alternative interpretation is that it represents the line of a retaining palisade. However, despite extensive cleaning of both the clay make-up of the possible rampart (1003) and the underlying clay gravel (1005), no structural features were identified. The only features associated with 1005 were a very shallow, and poorly-defined, curvilinear feature (Feature 3) running under the northern section of the trench, and a small, circular feature (Feature 2) 0.4m across and 0.07m deep. Both were filled with a clay silt containing flecks of charcoal. Feature 2 may be the truncated base of a post-hole. A soil sample was recovered from Feature 2 although the quantity of charcoal within it was too small to obtain a radiocarbon date.

ROBURY RING

Plan of Excavation

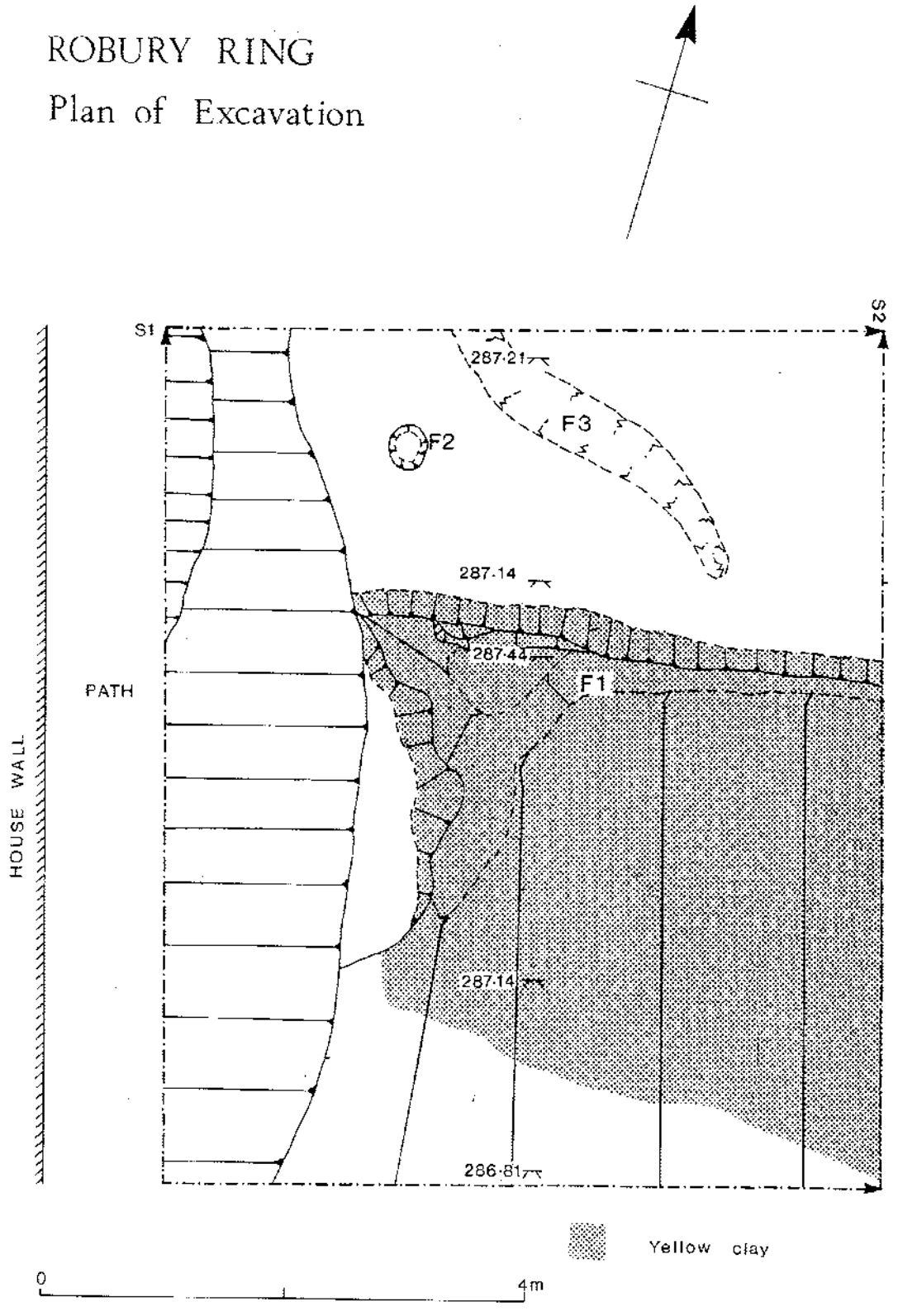
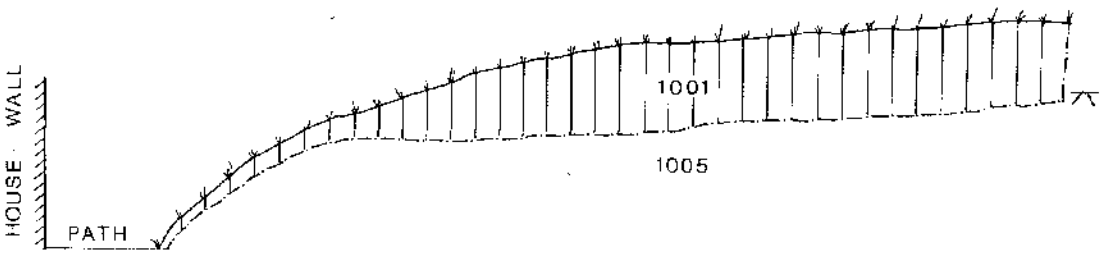


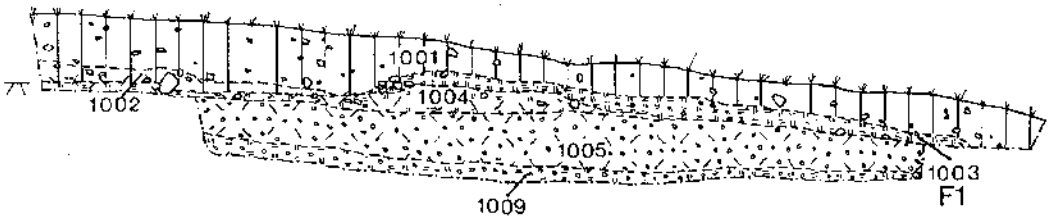
Fig 3

ROBURY RING

Section 1 South facing



Section 2 West facing



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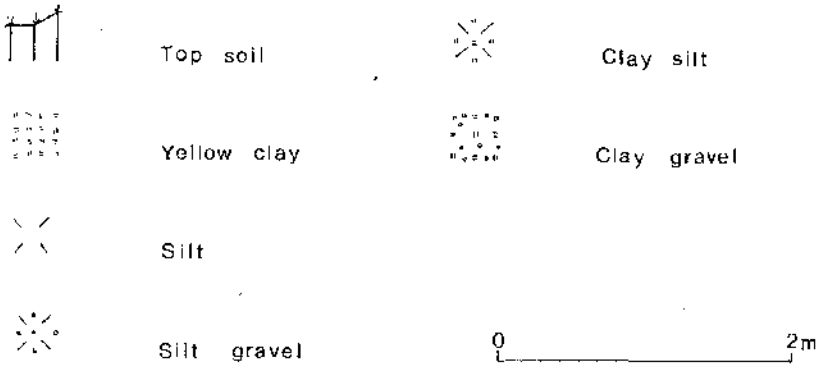

Fig 4

FINDS

Numerous modern items, including iron wire, and fragments of flowerpot and china, were recovered from the topsoil (1001) and are not catalogued in detail.

Pottery (by Ann Woodward)

Twenty plain, wall sherds, apparently belonging to the same vessel, were recovered from the base of the topsoil (1002) immediately overlying the clay gravel subsoil (1005) in the northeast corner of the trench. The sherds were, on average, 12mm thick and were soft and soapy in texture. The exterior and interior surfaces were buff with a pink tinge, while the core was a reduced light grey. The fabric was coarse and laminated with sparse grog inclusions and very occasional fragments of white rock, possibly limestone.

The softness and feel of the sherds immediately suggested a Bronze Age date and the reduced core is certainly typical of Bronze Age ceramics, as at Sharpstones Hill, Shrewsbury (Barker, Haldon and Jenks forthcoming). The thickness of the sherds also indicated a medium-sized cremation urn rather than an Iron Age storage jar.

Most Iron Age pottery from the Marches contains igneous inclusions. The main fabrics are characterized by fragments of Malvernian rock, Clee Hills dolerite or basalt. Typical assemblages derive from Sharpstones Hill, the Breiddin, Croft Ambrey, the Bromfield enclosure (ibid. and references there cited), and from the Berth hillfort (Morris forthcoming). Amongst the four Bronze Age assemblages known from Shropshire, granitic fabrics are also well represented. These occur at Bromfield - mainly Clee Hills dolerite (Stanford 1982), and at Sharpstones Hill - granitic inclusions from glacial drift (Barker, Haldon and Jenks forthcoming). However, at Bromfield one vessel (P40) was tempered with grog and small pebbles (Stanford 1982, 297), and at Sharpstones Hill the fabric of one Bronze Age vessel contained sparse large inclusions, possibly including limestone.

Therefore, on the grounds of sherd thickness, firing technique and fabric type it seems more likely that the Robury Ring sherds derive from a Bronze Age urn rather than from an Iron Age vessel, but in the absence of any featured sherds the case cannot be proven.

Flint

Four struck waste-flakes were recovered, three from, or immediately underlying, Feature 1 and one from the base of the topsoil.

DISCUSSION

This site appears to belong to a class of small, defended enclosures to be found throughout central Wales and the Marches (Fig. 1b; Ordnance Survey 1962; Savory 1976; Hogg 1979). In this region most investigations have focused on the larger hillforts and little is known about the date, internal layout or occupational history of sites comparable to Robury Ring.

The few sherds of pottery from Robury Ring suggest that occupation at the site may have begun in the Bronze Age. It is now widely accepted that many of the larger hillforts of Central Wales and the Marches have histories extending well back into this period. At the Breiddin, in Powis, 9th and 10th century B.C. radiocarbon dates have been obtained for the early rampart and for occupation layers associated with Bronze Age metalwork (Musson 1976). Early dates have also been obtained from Dinorben (Savory 1971) and Moel Y Gaer in Clwyd (Guilbert 1976, 317). Less evidence exists for early occupation at the smaller sites in the region although many may have had a similar early beginning. Savory (1976, 247-248) believes these to include the small promontory fort which overlooks the Roveries Camp in Shropshire (Forde-Johnstone 1962, 87) and Crowthers Camp, Guilsfield (Powis), near to which was found a Late Bronze Age hoard (Spurgeon 1972, 331). Stanford makes a comparison between a sherd found at Caynham Camp near Ludlow and the urns of Bronze Age type from Bromfield (Stanford 1971, 42). However, Savory points out that, in the Marches, bivallate and multivallate defences tend to replace single ramparts (Savory 1976, 258). The apparent double bank and ditch at Robury Ring suggests that the site may have had a fairly long history of occupation.

Unfortunately, very little can be said about the structure of the postulated rampart remnant recorded in the excavation as it appears to have been considerably eroded and possibly truncated. However, it is possible that the bank was never particularly substantial and that the natural slope to the south (Fig. 2) may have acted as the main defence on this side of the enclosure. A similar situation appears to have existed at Caer, Bayvil in Dyfed (Jones 1987) where on one side of the enclosure the defences appeared to have been enhanced by scarping the natural slope. In this

instance the bank itself may have been no more than about 2.5m wide and 1m high.

The excavation at Robury Ring provided no new information about the internal layout of the enclosure. Most of the interior lies under the various farm outbuildings and yards, although a certain amount of protection may have been provided by the dumping of modern rubble and topsoil, prior to the erection of these structures. The excavation of similar sites in northwest Wales, such as Castell Odo (Alcock 1960), and in southwest Wales, such as Walesland Rath (Wainwright 1971a), Tower Point (Wainwright 1971b) and Woodbarn Wiston (Vyner 1986), suggests that the defences may have enclosed single farmsteads. At Walesland Rath at least six round houses were recorded along with other timber buildings. Although the defences of these sites enclose similar areas to Robury Ring they are situated in very different environments (such as on promontories) and may be considerably later in date. For example, at Walesland Rath the occupation may have begun in the Late Iron Age and continued into the Roman period. Similar problems are encountered when making comparisons with other extensively, excavated sites further afield, such as at Gussage all Saints (Wainwright 1973) and Little Woodbury (Bersu 1940), which also appear to have been small, single homesteads with long and complex histories.

Even more problems are encountered when trying to relate Robury Ring to other sites in the region. The shortage of dates and excavated evidence from the smaller sites makes any attempt at an inter-site study prone to difficulty. Jones argues that the small, dispersed sites in Wales and the Marches are most frequent in those areas most suited to pastoralism, such as the Upper Severn Basin (1984, 25). Transhumance is a possible means of utilising the mountain pastures, with communities nucleated in lowland winter settlements and dispersing when moving to the upland summer pastures. Jones does not believe that this pattern fits too well for the hillforts of Wales and the Marches (1984, 17). However, on a local level, in northern Powis and Shropshire, the smaller enclosures do tend to be more common within the slightly higher central area (Fig.1b). Alternatively, this may be a reflection of a differing social structure between the upland and lowland areas.

It is clear that many questions concerning the occupational history, nature and regional context of the enclosure at Robury Ring remain. The information gained from the excavation was necessarily limited by its small size and the poor condition of the defences, although the good survival of prehistoric ceramic material is a promising factor. It is quite possible that any future work in the interior of the site may prove more productive and help to confirm the proposed early date of the settlement.

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