

# AN IRON AGE SQUARE ENCLOSURE AT ASTON UPON TRENT, DERBYSHIRE: A REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN 1967

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## SUMMARY

*ASTON UPON TRENT, DERBYSHIRE, SK 43252955. One of a small group of ditched enclosures, measuring 27 ft. square internally and with a small pit inside but off-centre, was probably an Iron Age square enclosure of east Yorkshire type. There was no surviving trace of mound or burial within the enclosure, and a few small sherds of Iron Age pottery from the filling of the ditch, together with the analogies of the enclosure plan, provide the only evidence of date.*

## LOCATION AND DISCOVERY

THE discovery of a great complex of sites at Aston upon Trent,  $6\frac{1}{4}$  miles south-east of Derby and  $11\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of Nottingham, was made from the air several years ago by Dr. J. K. S. St. Joseph of the Committee for Aerial Photography, University of Cambridge, and by Mr. J. Pickering of Hinckley. Their photographs show crop-marks extending over several arable fields between the minor road from Aston upon Trent to Shardlow, and the Trent and Mersey Canal, which at this point runs parallel to, and about half a mile north of the river Trent. Figure 1 includes a general map of the area showing most of the known crop-marks in relation to the local topography. Readily identifiable is a large cursus over 300 ft. wide and at least 5,700 ft. long, neither end of which has yet been located. Within and near it are single and double ring ditches of probably ploughed barrows, a large double-ditched circle with post-holes, probably a henge monument, and rectilinear ditched enclosures or field systems of presumably Iron Age or Romano-British date. A large double ring ditch at SK 422291, and a smaller ring ditch near it, were dug in 1965/66 by Mr. D. Reaney. The excavation report, Reaney 1968, states that the larger ring ditch was a

barrow containing a Bell Beaker, the first to be discovered in the Trent valley, while an enlargement of the structure may have provided for a later Necked Beaker burial. Beneath the barrow was an earlier Neolithic occupation level, which yielded important cereal and other botanical remains, together with sherds of carinated bowls of Grimston type. A radiocarbon date of  $2,750 \pm 150$  B.C. (corrected:  $2,890 \pm 150$  B.C.) BM-271, was obtained for the Neolithic occupation. These sites all lay within the cursus.

Further to the north-east, in the corner of the next field formed by the junction of the unmetalled road, Acre Lane, with the Aston-Shardlow road, is another group of sites. These lie at approximately 110 ft. O.D. They are prominent features on a photograph of the Aston upon Trent cursus published by St. Joseph in 1966. They consist of five or six small square enclosures lying in two groups within the cursus, a small circular site straddling the north ditch of the cursus, numerous pits, some possibly grouped, and two other ditches. St. Joseph noted the similarity between the Aston enclosures and the square barrow ditches identified in some number on the Yorkshire Wolds and recently studied afresh by Stead, in 1961 and 1965.

To test the comparison, the square enclosure at Aston nearest to Acre Lane, at SK 42352955, was selected, and a limited excavation was carried out at week-ends from October to December 1967.

### THE EXCAVATION

Proton magnetometer and resistivity meter traverses across the site were carried out by Dr. P. Strange and Mr. G. Cullingford of the University of Nottingham. The results were not very informative, but the resistivity meter seemed to indicate an anomaly in the approximate position of the ditch on the south side of the enclosure. As it happened, this was found to be caused by a large pit, Feature 1, a few feet to the south of the enclosure, and not by the enclosure itself.

The stratification of the upper levels of the site was broadly similar in all cuttings. The plough soil, Layer 1, was 9 in. thick, black in colour, and had some admixture of gravel. Beneath this was a layer of reddish-brown soil, Layer 2, with a considerable admixture of gravel and 1 ft. or more thick. Although this had clearly not been ploughed recently, modern artifacts came from this layer, and were probably deposited by burrowing animals. A few mole holes were observed, and part of the same field was said by the farmer to have once contained a rabbit warren. In some cuttings, a layer of reddish loam, Layer 3, up to 3 in. thick, overlay the dirty gravel subsoil of the site, Layer 4. The archaeological features, such as ditches and pits, were dug into layer 4, but their fillings were sometimes overlain by layer 3. In a few areas, the dirty gravel was removed. On the southern side of the site it was about 1 ft. thick, and lay upon clean yellow sand. On the northern side, Layer 4 thickened

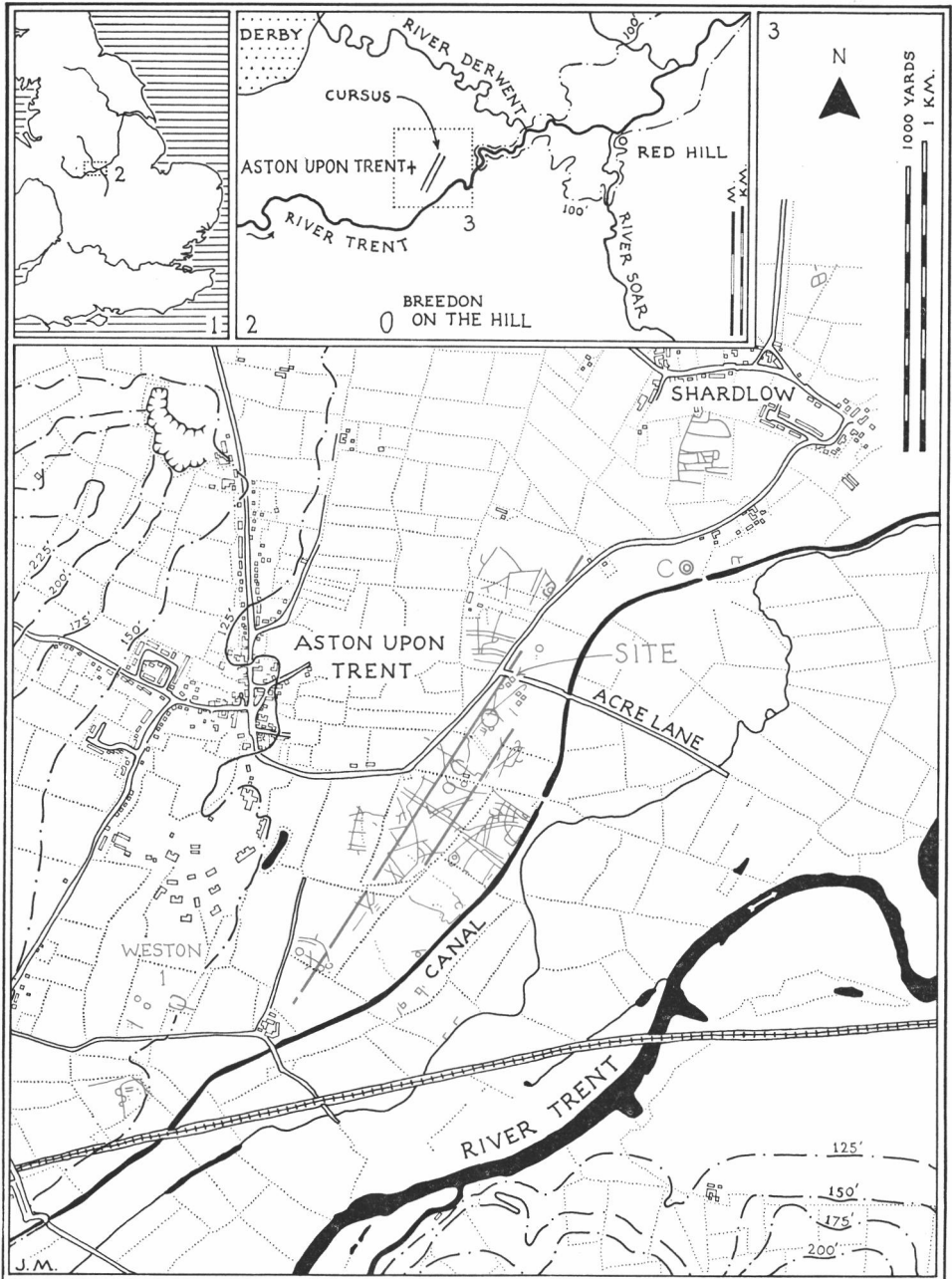


FIG. 1. Aston-upon-Trent: location and general map of crop-marks.

and its surface was more difficult to follow. It was difficult also to distinguish clearly the sides of the ditches, which were themselves partly filled with a similar but looser dirty gravel. Layer 4 contained no artifacts or other archaeological material.

i. *The enclosure ditch* (figs. 2 and 3)

All four sides of the enclosure ditch were satisfactorily located, and three corners were wholly or partly excavated. The ditch was 4-5 ft. wide at the gravel surface, and about 2 ft. deep. The profile was normally a rounded V-shape. The filling consisted of mainly fine light-brown soil with no evidence of stratification, with a small amount of dirty gravel forming a primary silting at the bottom. The few significant finds from the site, consisting of hand-made pottery sherds, all came from the upper half of the filling of the ditch. At the south corner, the ditch filling was sealed by a layer of fine reddish loam, Layer 3, which spread over the surface of the adjacent gravel for 2-4 ft. on each side. The layer varied from 1-3 in. in thickness; no archaeological material was found in it, and the layer seems to have been natural in origin.

The enclosure formed by the ditch was roughly square, but it had a marked irregularity at the north corner. The reason for this was not clear, but may relate to the thickening of Layer 2 at this point (plan, fig. 2, and section, fig. 3, C-D). Internally, the enclosure was about 27 ft. square; externally it measured about 36 ft. square. There was no trace of a bank or mound either inside or outside the ditch to represent the upcast from the ditch digging.

ii. *The interior*

Part of the interior was excavated, including an area at the centre of the square. At the precise centre was a small oval patch of the fine reddish loam of Layer 3. This, however, was only about 1 in. deep, and was probably not of archaeological significance. On the north-western side of the interior was an oval pit, about 2 ft. 6 in. by 3 ft. 6 in. in area at the level of the gravel surface, and 18 in. deep. This was filled with fine, light brown soil, similar to the ditch fillings. All but a very small part of the filling on the north side was removed. No finds were made.

iii. *External features* (fig. 2)

Two other features were located outside the enclosure in the initial trial cuttings. Neither was completely excavated, since this was beyond the intended scope of the present work.

- i. To the south of the enclosure was a pit, which would appear to be the northernmost of a row of five pits clearly seen on St. Joseph's photograph. The pit was 3 ft. deep, and was filled with light-brown and brown-black layers of soil, and some gravel. The section is shown in fig. 3, M-N. About one half of the pit was excavated. There were no finds or other evidence of date.

2. A ditch or pit was located to the south of the enclosure. The filling consisted of fine, light-brown soil. There were no finds or other evidence of date.

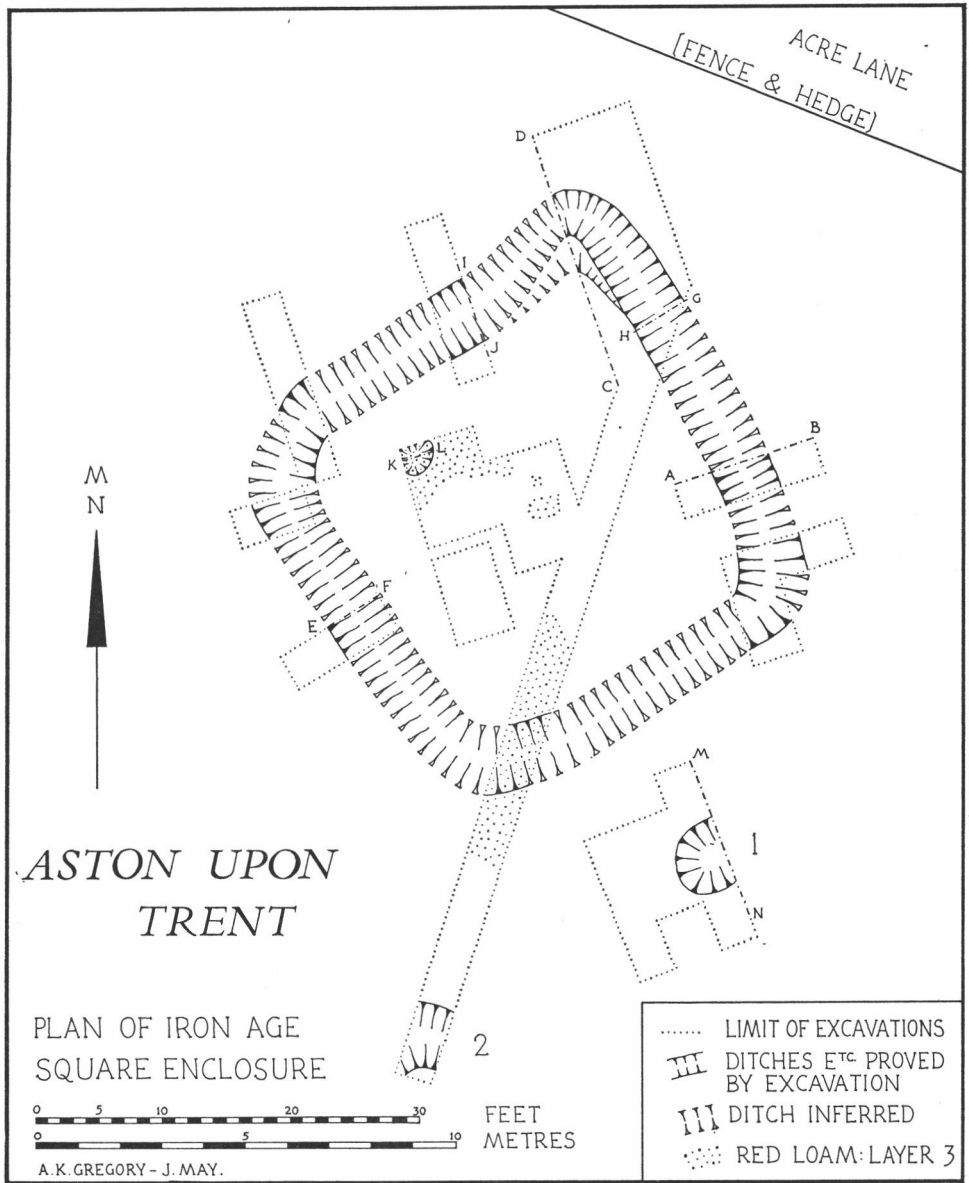


FIG. 2. Aston-upon-Trent: plan of Iron Age square enclosure and adjacent features.

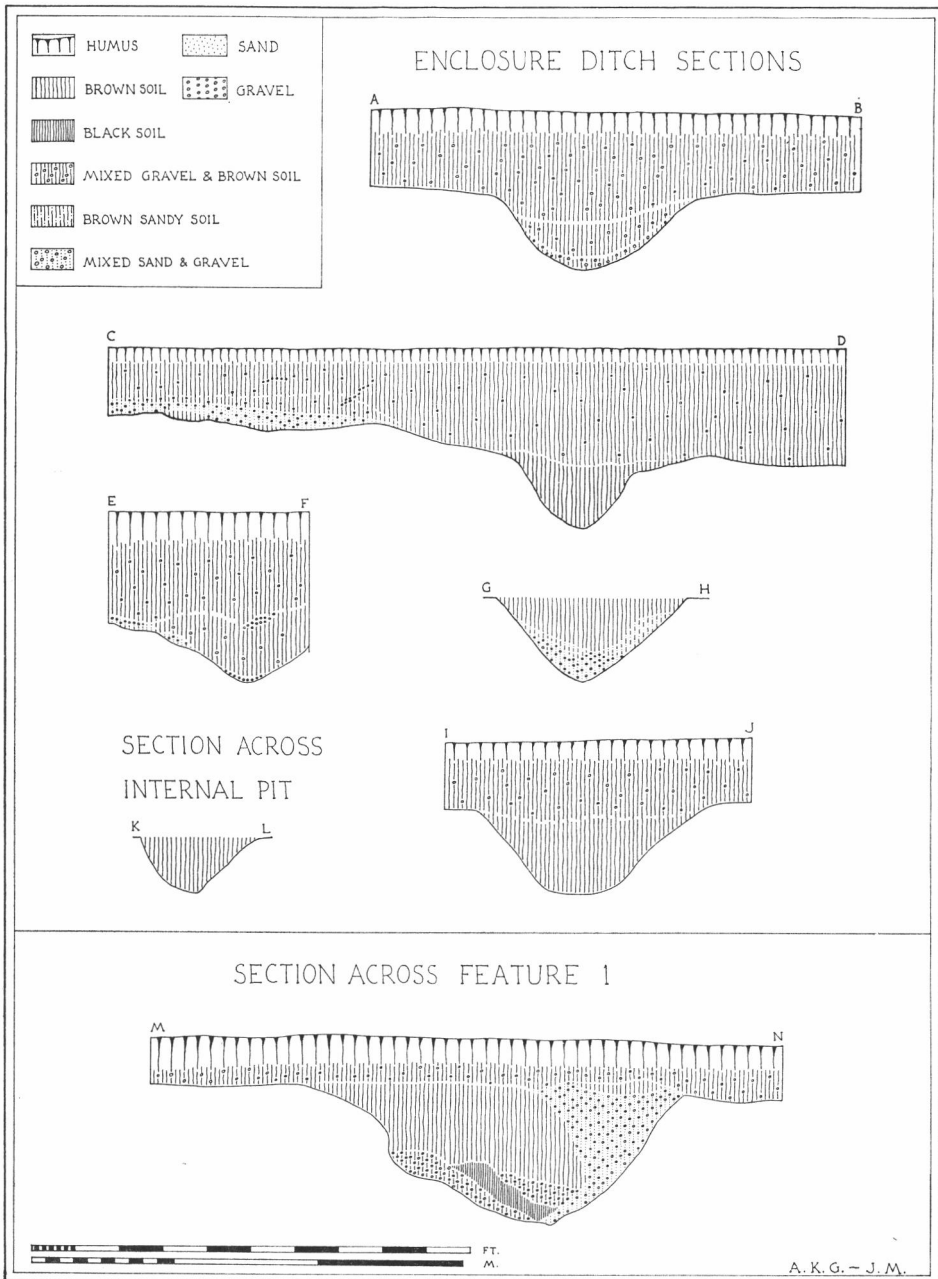


Fig. 3. Aston-upon-Trent: Iron Age enclosure, ditch sections.

## LIST OF FINDS

The letters after each item refer to the codes with which each find is marked. All finds, together with field plans, notebook and photographs, have been deposited in Derby Museum, accession no. 273.70.

## POTTERY (not illustrated)

- i. *Iron Age.* 18 sherds from probably four vessels were found in the upper filling of the enclosure ditch. All were hand-made. The only other sherd of pottery from this level was a small, abraded piece from the base of a jar in Derbyshire ware. All of the Iron Age sherds are small and are abraded to a greater or lesser degree. The fabrics are hard, coarse and gritty, although no. 2 is markedly less gritty than the others. In all cases the ware has a finely-crushed filler, which includes quartz. The average size of the sherds is about 2 cms. across; the largest are only 4.5 cms. across. All four vessels were probably large jars.
  1. Two sherds from one vessel; fabric brown-black, oxidized brick-red in patches externally. The larger sherd has flat finger or tool-smoothing marks in shallow vertical grooves externally, each about 1 cm. wide. Thickness 8.9 mm. (AC).
  2. Two sherds from one vessel. Fabric reduced internally, oxidized brick-red to buff externally. Thickness 10-15 mm. (AE).
  3. Three small sherds from one vessel. Fabric black, with thin oxidized layer externally. Thickness 8.9 mm. (AP).
  4. 11 small sherds, including a rim, from one vessel. Fabric grey, oxidized bright brick-red externally, and similarly over most but not all of the internal surface. Thickness 8-12 mm. The rim sherd, which is too small to draw, is plain and rounded, and was apparently straight and upright. Another sherd has possibly a strainer-hole about 2.5 mm. in diameter (AO).
- ii. *Romano-British.* Two or three sherds of Derbyshire ware from Layers 1 and 2, and a small sherd from the base of a jar in similar ware from the upper filling of the ditch, comprised the only Romano-British material from the site.
- iii. *Medieval.* Two sherds of green-glazed pottery, one part of a tubular handle from a jug, were the only medieval finds. Both were from superficial levels.
- iv. *Post-Medieval.* A small quantity of 19th- and 20th-century material from Layers 1 and 2 included pottery and china, iron and glass. None was kept.

## FLINT AND CHERT (fig. 4)

Ten pieces of worked flint were found, four in superficial levels and six in the filling of the ditch. All are unpatinated, and fractures are fresh. Cortex remains on five; three of these are small cores and on two the cortexes are worn smooth, suggesting the use of quite small flint pebbles. Three of the flakes show secondary working, two as scrapers and one as a notched scraper; none, however, was very skilfully made. A selection is illustrated.

*Layer 2*

- Small flake of brown-grey flint waste. Not illustrated (AB).
- Small flake of chert waste. Not illustrated (AH).
- 1. Notched scraper, made from rough outer flake, with part of the cortex remaining (AH).
- 2. Scraper made from a more carefully struck flake (AI).

*Ditch filling*

- Small outer flake of brown flint, with cortex remaining. Not illustrated. Upper filling of ditch (AJ).
- 4. Small end scraper, made from a rough flake, from lower part of ditch filling (AM).
- Small scrap of brown flint waste from lower part of ditch filling. Not illustrated (AM).
- Core of unpatinated black flint with extensive area of cortex. Not illustrated (AP).
- 5. Core of unpatinated brown-black flint. An area of cortex survives and part of an earlier flake surface with a heavy white patina, although it is not certain that the latter is man-made. The flat surface, fig. 4, no. 5b, represents the main striking platform, and the battered working edges, fig. 4, nos. 5a and 5c, show the inept way in which attempts have been made to strike flakes. Both working

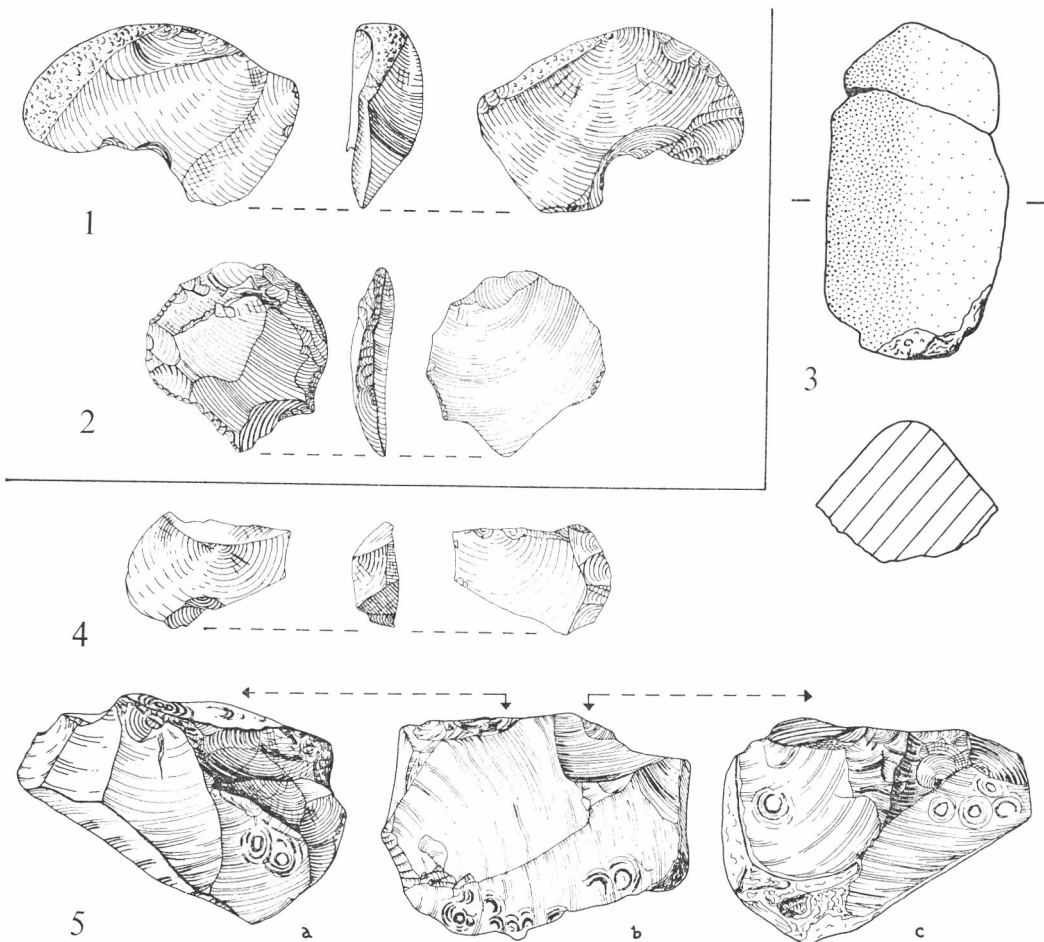


FIG. 4. Aston-upon-Trent: Iron Age enclosure, stone objects, scale 1:2.



faces have subsequently been used in an attempt to produce flakes from the former striking platform. All three surfaces show partly-formed conical fractures reaching into the depths of the flint, and points of percussion lie well back from the working edge.

These flints, unspectacular as they may seem, have nevertheless some interest. The implements, cores and waste, all show a roughness and lack of skill in manufacture, and there are indications that small nodules and cores were utilized. The group compares well in these respects with several collections from elsewhere in the Trent valley, such as that from Bassingfield, near Nottingham, in the University Museum. In contrast is the skill with which flint was worked in Neolithic and Bronze Age times in the adjacent upland region of Derbyshire, and in Lincolnshire. Two alternative conclusions seem possible. First, that the poor quality flints at Aston are survivals from periods earlier than the Iron Age and represent poverty, or small-scale settlement then in the Trent valley, or a shortage of flint. This view, however, would not be supported either by the evident size and importance of such a site as the Aston cursus complex, and presumably the wealth of its builders, or by the presence of good quality flint in upland Derbyshire nearby, much of which, it might be supposed, was brought in along the Trent valley. The second possibility is that the flintwork is contemporary with the enclosure and is of Iron Age date. Flint implements have frequently been found in association with Iron Age material at sites where other evidence of earlier occupation is lacking. For example, at West Harling, Norfolk (Clark and Fell, 1953). Detailed work, however, has yet to be done on flintworking in the Iron Age.

#### OTHER STONE (fig. 4)

3. A small fragment of sandstone whetstone from upper filling of enclosure ditch (AE).

Also from the upper filling of the ditch came a small piece of shale (AO) and nine burnt sandstone pebbles (AP, AU). Some of the pebbles were complete but others were fire-shattered; they may have been used as pot-boilers or cooking-stones.

#### BONE

A few small scraps of burnt bone came from the ditch filling at the east corner (AR). It is likely that unburnt bone would have decayed in the gravel soil.

#### BURNT WOOD

A few scraps of burnt wood came from the top of the natural gravel on the inner lip of the ditch (AT).

### THE DATE OF THE SITE

Three considerations contribute towards establishing a date for the site in the Iron Age.

- i. The pottery is fairly certainly of the Iron Age. It is sandier in texture than either the Ancaster-Breedon type of scored pottery (Kenyon, 1950), which is found mainly south of the river, or the softer coarse sherds found only a mile away at Weston upon Trent (see fig. 1 and Reaney, 1968, 70) in the filling of the ditch of a large rectangular enclosure. In this respect, the Aston sherds somewhat resemble the local Anglo-

Saxon wares. But harder, sandier pottery characterizes a phase of Iron Age settlement at Red Hill,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Aston. Excavations by Mr. E. Greenfield for the Ministry of Public Building and Works, yielded sherds in a similar fabric from angular jars with impressed finger ornament on their shoulders, broadly comparable with the pottery from West Harling. The same sandy texture is again seen in the quartz-filled pottery from the settlement site at Bassingfield, lower down the Trent valley near Nottingham, and now in the University Museum. The Bassingfield site also yielded sherds of scored pottery, rough flints and sandstone pebbles.

2. Romano-British pottery is to be found in small quantities in the superficial levels of the site, and in the fields along the gravel terrace at Aston, probably resulting from cultivation activities in that period. Had the enclosure ditch been dug in Roman or Medieval times, there would have been a fair chance of an occasional sherd finding its way into the lower filling of the ditch. One sherd of Roman pottery did, however, come from the upper filling of the ditch. By itself, it seems best explained as intrusive.
3. The closest parallels for the size and shape of the Aston enclosure lie in the Iron Age cemeteries of east Yorkshire. It may be noted that the smaller of the two barrows at Arras, excavated by Stead in 1959, failed to reveal either a burial or any trace of a mound. In this case, a patch of chalk some six or seven feet in diameter slightly to the west of centre was interpreted as a protected surface from which a mound had been relatively recently ploughed away. Stead supposed that an interment must have been on or above the old ground surface and that it had been removed by ploughing. In his discussion of the parallels to the British barrows, several examples in Champagne and west Germany were similarly noted to be without trace of burial for the same reason.

In Britain, outside Yorkshire, the only other excavated examples of square ditched enclosures like Aston are at Bardyke Field, Maxey (R.C.H.M., 1960; Simpson, 1963). Here three enclosures in a row, each roughly 24 ft. square, underlay a large rectangular enclosure which yielded mid-1st century A.D. pottery from the filling of its ditch. Like Aston and Arras, the Maxey enclosures yielded no evidence for burials.

At each of these sites the small square enclosures are within or near a Neolithic-Bronze Age cursus and barrow complex. In the East Riding too, St. Joseph (1964) recorded 43 possible square barrows near a henge monument at Burton Latimer. In the absence of completely reliable dating evidence at Aston upon Trent, it might be thought that the square enclosure was Neolithic or Bronze Age. There are, however, no close parallels known in the earlier periods for the size and shape of the Aston enclosure. The square ditch of Site I

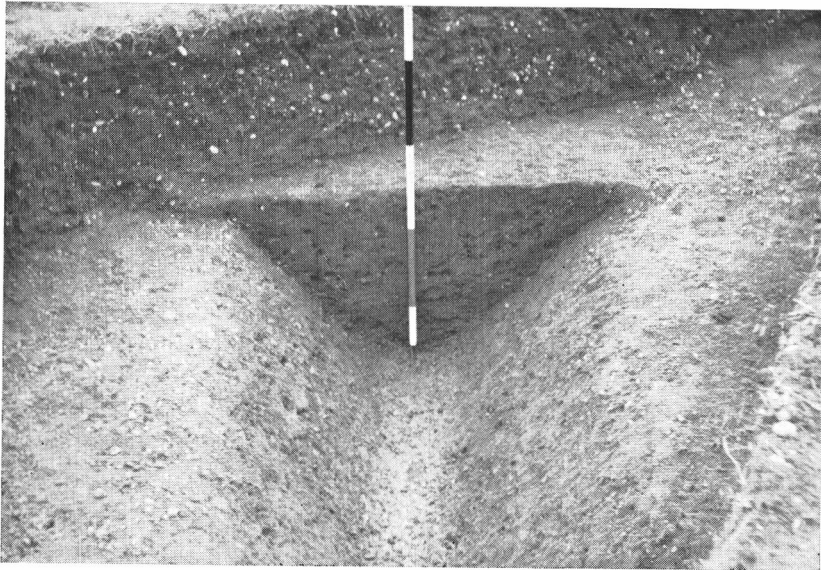
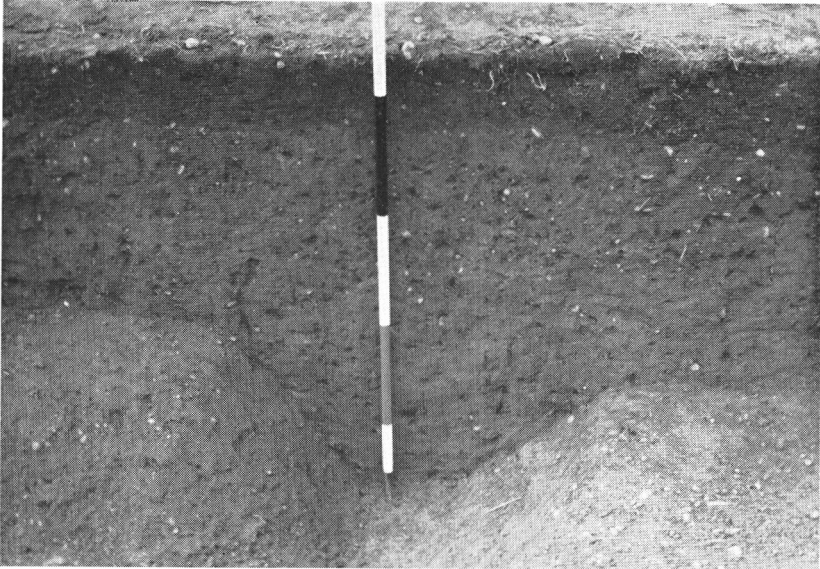
at Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire (Atkinson, Piggott and Sandars, 1951), was very much larger — over 90 ft. square — and enclosed a complicated henge structure. The enclosure on Windmill Hill (Smith, 1965, 30-3) is about 30 ft. square, with a very shallow ditch 6-14 in. deep from the weathered chalk surface, and at least one entrance. No reliable dating evidence was obtained from its excavation, and Smith assigns it only tentatively to the Neolithic period on the admittedly weak comparison with Neolithic rectangular mortuary enclosures. A Neolithic enclosure ditch was recently excavated at Fengate, Northamptonshire (Mahany, 1969, 156-7), but its size and shape, 148 ft. by 82 ft., precludes direct comparison.

### CONCLUSION

If the interpretation put forward above is correct, there arises the interesting possibility that the Iron Age small square enclosures were more widespread in eastern England than has hitherto been realized. In Yorkshire, Stead concurs with the long-held view that the La Tène cemeteries, beginning there as early as the 5th century B.C., but dating, in the case of those with square enclosures, mainly to the 3rd-2nd centuries B.C., represent a strong influx of La Tène culture from northern Gaul, probably as the result of immigration or invasion. In the east Midlands it is relevant to recall two well-known items of La Tène metalwork found in the vicinity of the Aston site. From Harborough Cave, Derbyshire, 16 miles from Aston, came the coral-mounted brooch so closely akin to the brooch from the Queen's Barrow at Arras; and from Red Hill, only  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Aston, came the famous bird-brooch, studied by Hawkes and Jacobsthal in 1945. Perhaps these brooches should be regarded less as stray items or bandits' loot (Fox, 1958, 9) than as further glimpses of a process which brought La Tène culture to the east Midlands and to Yorkshire alike. It remains to be seen whether aerial photography or chance discovery in these neglected areas of eastern and central England will yield evidence as clear and as strong as in Yorkshire.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Aston-upon-Trent: Iron Age square enclosure.  
a. Ditch at section C-D; b. Ditch at section G-H. Scales in feet.



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