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RECENT WORK ON THE EARTHWORKS AT ISFIELD, EAST SUSSEX

by Mark Gardiner

Dredging of the stream beside earthworks at Isfield produced pottery, tile and leatherwork. The spoil was sampled and it is suggested that it had accumulated in the ditch around the medieval manor house of Isfield. Finds suggest a date range of 12th to middle 13th century.

The earthworks lying on the end of the tongue of land to the west of Isfield church (Fig. 1) were first described by Montgomerie (1934). During Spring 1991 the National Rivers Authority dredged a length of the Isfield Mill Stream close to the confluence with the River Ouse. The stream passes to the south of the earthworks and in cleaning the water course archaeological deposits connected with the site were disturbed. Mr David Knight, who works locally, noticed medieval pottery and water-logged leather on the surface of the dredged material and reported his discovery to the Sussex Archaeological Society. The Isfield earthworks have been scheduled as an Ancient Monument and it was decided in consultation with the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission that the soil from the stream bed should be examined by the Field Archaeology Unit (Institute of Archaeology, University College London) and then removed from the scheduled area.

The spoil had been dug from the stream bed by dragline and then deposited in a band along the north bank of the stream. The dragline had been worked obliquely to the line of the bank so that the spoil was not dumped directly opposite the place from which it had been extracted. The finds appear to have come from the length of stream which runs on the line of a former ditch and archaeological work was concentrated in this area. Initially five one-metre wide trenches (Fig. 1, A–E) were excavated by hand through the spoil at ten-metre intervals. Two further trenches (F, H) were then dug in the areas with the greatest number of finds.

Removal of the spoil in the area of Trench E showed that the dragline had also cut into the archaeological deposits on the bank above the stream. Soil had been removed to create a ramp to allow the machine to cross a ditch. A band up to 0.5 metres deep below the ground had been dug out and when this was cleaned up two layers containing medieval pottery (E2, E3) were recorded below the topsoil. At the equivalent point on the west side of the ditch a similar machine cut had been made. Here a larger area (G) was cleaned up and examined. No evidence of archaeological features or stratified deposits were found there.

Historical Evidence

The earthworks probably lay within the demesne of Isfield manor. Certainly in the late 18th century the land was part of the estate of Isfield Place. The field names Lower, Middle and Upper Court Fields to the south and east of the site were presumably named when the manorial buildings lay within the earthworks (East Sussex Record Office FIG 798).

Isfield was held of the manor of South Malling for suit of court. From at least 1171 Isfield was in the possession of Hugh de Folkington I who died *c.* 1214 leaving a widow, Eggeline and a son, Hugh (Round 1930, 104; Salzmann 1902, no. 137). Hugh de Folkington II died a few years later in 1217 and his lands were inherited by an infant son, also called Hugh. During the minority of the heir the manor was held by Ralph de Willington, who as Budgen has shown, had a close, but uncertain relationship with the family (Du Boulay 1966, 371; Budgen 1921, 120–1). Hugh III seems to have died without heir for the manor came to Olympia, daughter of his brother Geoffrey de Folkington. She married John de la Warr before 1243 and the manor subsequently descended with the de la Warr family (Salzmann 1902, no. 411; Du Boulay 1966, 371–2).

Discussion

There is a clear contrast between the age of the pottery and leatherwork, which are discussed

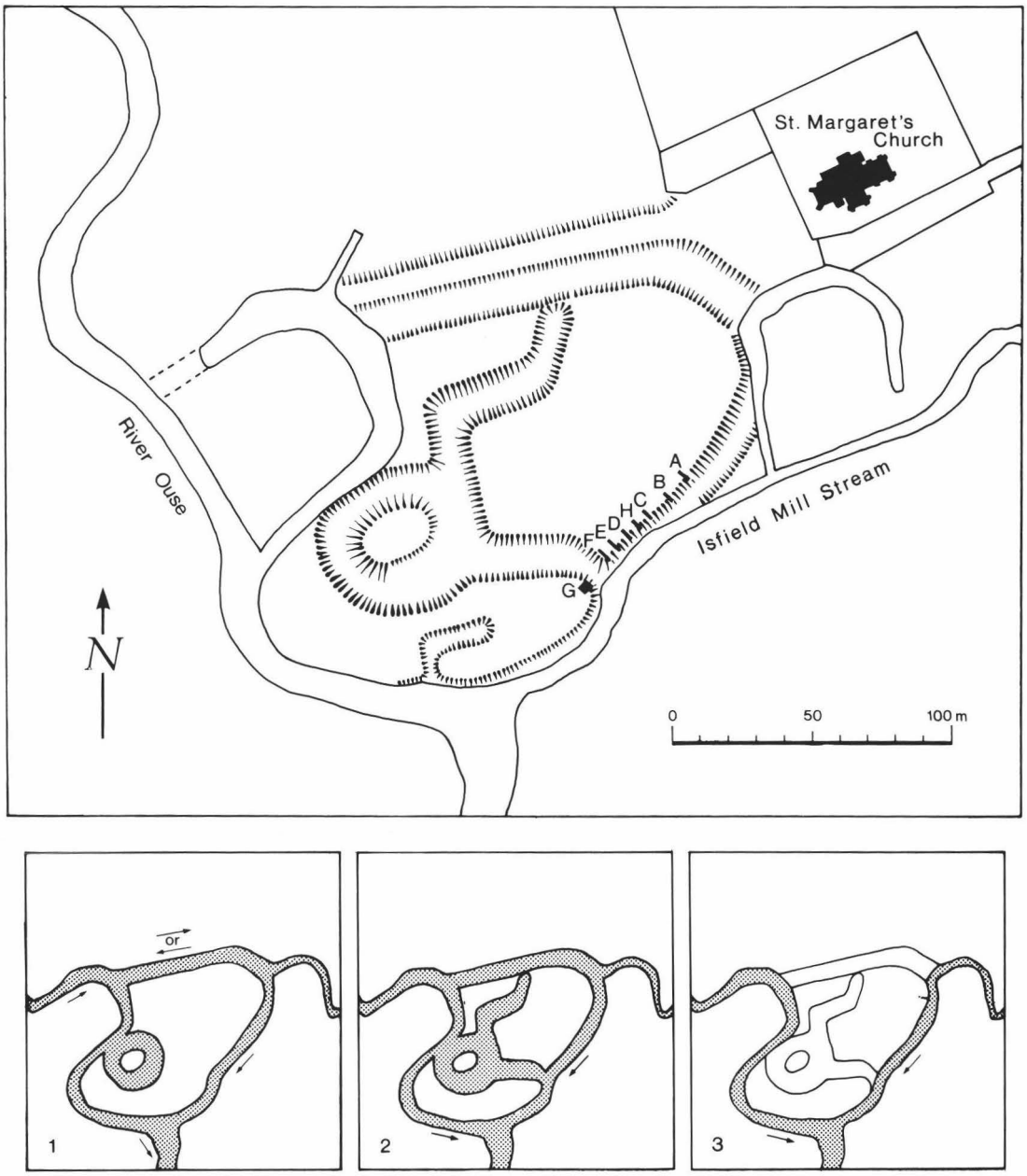

Fig. 1. Earthworks at Isfield, East Sussex and an interpretation of their development. The water-filled channels at each stage (1–3) are shown by tone.

below. The finds were not only unstratified, but coming from the course of a stream may have been moved some distance before being buried. The leatherwork is more likely to have been moved downstream, but pottery, being of greater density, may have become buried in mud at the base of the stream at the point of deposition. It is the pottery, therefore, that provides a more reliable date for the earthworks.

The historic evidence suggests that the earthworks represent the site of the manorial buildings. The finds of pottery indicate a period of occupation from the 12th to the middle of the 13th century, though it should be stressed that only a small quantity of material from one area of the site has been examined. If it is representative of the whole, it suggests that the manor house must have been subsequently moved to a new location, perhaps to the site of Isfield Place, though no medieval work apparently survives above ground there (Nairn and Pevsner 1965, 545).

The surviving earthworks are of some complexity, but a possible sequence of development may be suggested. The courses of the River Ouse and the Isfield Mill Stream were improved in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by making new channels to bypass meanders. Previously the Isfield Mill Stream had flowed around a meander to the east of the earthworks and then along the south side (Fig. 1, 3). At an earlier date it seems likely that the stream must have also flowed along the ditch on the north side of the earthworks to join the River Ouse. Alternatively, the River Ouse may have flowed eastwards along the north ditch to a confluence with the Stream just south-west of the church (Fig. 1, 1). The earthworks which link the north ditch and central circular ditch seem to be a later modification, as Montgomerie observed (Fig. 1, 2).

Montgomerie described the earthworks as a motte-and-bailey castle, though this is not strictly accurate. The 'motte' is barely raised above the level of the surrounding land and though the earthworks clearly do reflect in form the pattern of a motte and bailey, the defensive quality of the site was essentially derived from the water-filled ditches. It is better to term this a moated site and place it in the category of enclosures which imitated the defences of castles and expressed the social pretensions of their occupants (Le Patourel and Roberts 1978, 51). If the dating of the site suggested above is correct, then this may be an early example of a moated site. Certainly it seems to resemble more closely in its defensive form the castles it was attempting to imitate than later moats.

Finds

Pottery (Fig. 2)

Only the pottery found in the excavated trenches was quantified; although a considerable quantity was also found on the surface of the spoil by David Knight. He has made this material available for study and some of the pieces are illustrated here.

The pottery was sorted into fabrics using a hand lens where necessary:

Fabric A—brown-red or light brown surfaces and grey core, rough feel, jagged sometimes slightly laminar fracture with a temper of fine, sub-angular multi-coloured flint grit < 1 mm. and occasional shell and other chalk inclusions.

Fabric B—oxidised surface and reduced core, rough, sandy feel, jagged fracture, tempered with copious medium or coarse sand-size quartz and sub-rounded and sub-angular flint < 1.5 mm.

Fabric C—oxidised or reduced surface with reduced core, rough fracture with a temper of copious grey and translucent sub-rounded and sub-angular medium to coarse sand-size quartz and occasional sub-angular flint.

Fabric D—brown-red exterior and grey or grey-brown core, rough feel with angular and sub-angular flint < 1.5 mm.

Fabric E—hard-fired earthenwares described by Streeten (1985, 114–16).

Fabric F—dark grey or grey-brown surfaces and dark grey core, hard fabric with temper of sub-rounded translucent quartz sand 0.25 mm. across.

Fabric G—this fabric is described by Gardiner (1991) as Fabric DA.

The assemblage is largely unstratified, although the clearance of the machine-dug cut at the base of trench E allowed the recovery of some stratified material. The pottery cannot, therefore, support a detailed interpretation.

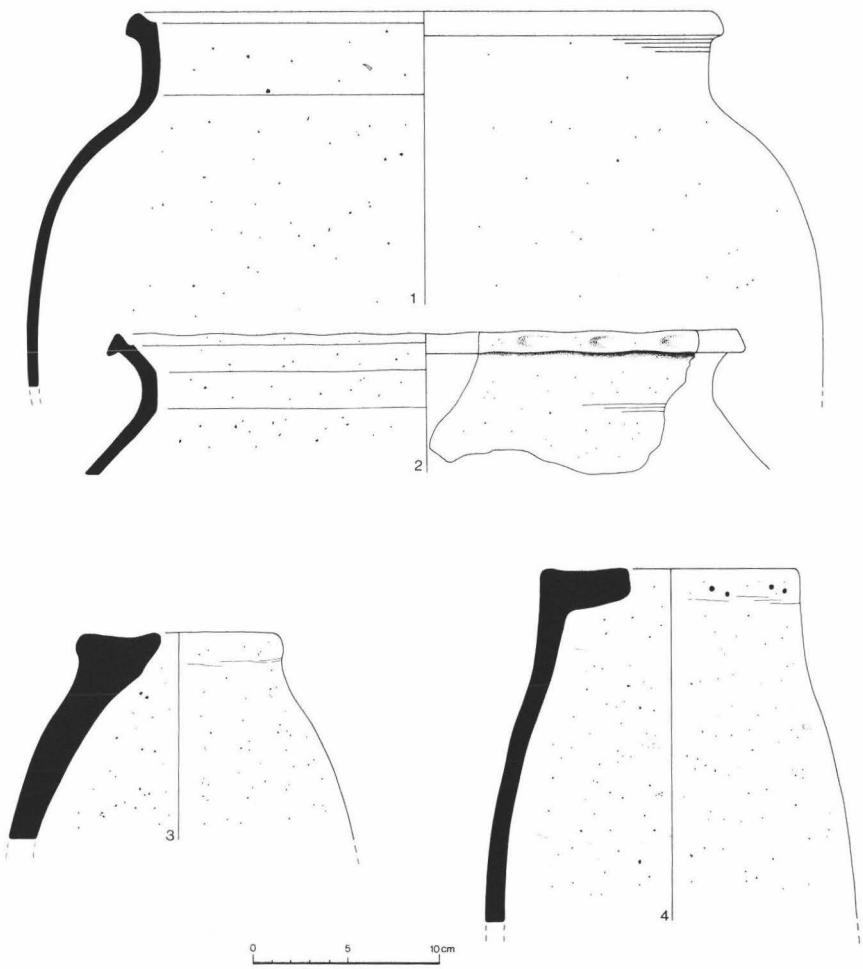

Fig. 2. Pottery and chimney pots from Isfield (x$\frac{1}{4}$).

The large size of many of the pieces of pottery and number of joining sherds suggests that they were discarded shortly after breakage. The number of conjoining pieces with old breaks also substantiates the view that the pottery has not been moved far since deposition in the Isfield Mill Stream. The pottery forms are utilitarian and comprise almost entirely cooking and storage vessels with very few jugs. There are no finer sandy wares from the site and Rye Ware, though found nearby at Michelham Priory and Lewes Friary, is entirely absent here (Barton and Holden 1967, 7; Gardiner in prep.).

Fabric A which forms the greater part of the assemblage is not closely datable and could have been in use at any time from the 12th to 14th centuries. It may be significant that there are no finer sandy wares indicating, perhaps, that deposition had ceased before the later 13th century. A substantial proportion of the sherds have facetting on the rim, a typical Saxo-Norman decoration. A further indicator of an early date is the presence of three sherds of Fabric G, which has been found in excavations in the Adur Valley (Gardiner 1990, 253). This fabric has been found in Bramber village and in

the excavations at Bramber Castle, both of which were established in the late 11th century. It is uncertain how late in the 12th century this type continued in production.

A tentative date range suggested for the pottery is the 12th to mid-13th century. Details of the distribution of pottery is given on fiche, p. 56.

1. Large coil-built pot with sooting on exterior suggesting it was a cooking vessel. Fabric D. Surface find.
2. Wheel-turned rim and hand-made body with dimples on the outer face of the rim. Fabric A. Surface find.

Chimney Pots

A substantial number of sherds from chimney pots were found on the surface of the dredged material and in the trenches dug through it. The pots are of usual 'Sussex-type', except that a number have a bulging profile (Fig. 2, 4) and a conical inner surface (Fig. 2, 3). Pots with these characteristics have been found previously in Lewes and this may represent a local variant of the type (Dunning 1961, Fig. 5.2, nos. 1, 2, 4).

Two fabrics were distinguished, which seem to correspond to those at Pevensey (Dulley 1967, 229).

Fabric Y—brown-red surfaces and core, rough texture and jagged fracture with a temper of fine, sub-angular multi-coloured flint grit <2 mm. and usually <1 mm., occasional shell and other chalk inclusions.

Fabric Z—similar to fabric C above.

A total of 30 pieces of chimney pot were found in the excavated trenches with a total weight of 2.6 kg. representing an estimated vessel equivalent of 0.93.

3. Chimney pot with vent at top and conical inner surface. Fabric Y. Trench D.
4. Chimney pot with vent at top. The sides towards the top and the top face are stabbed. Fabric Y. Context E2.

Tile

Peg tile was found in all the trenches excavated and a sample was collected. Two surviving widths were found among the tile from the surface of the spoil and they measured 166 mm. and 175 mm. The tiles are generally poorly made and many had warped during drying or subsequent firing. A considerable number of tiles had been over-fired producing a reduced, rather hard surface. Splashes or drips of green glaze are common on the tiles, but as these occur equally on the sanded and upper surfaces, and sometimes on both, it seems that the glaze had not been applied intentionally.

A single bonnet hip tile and a few fragments of hearth or oven tiles were recovered. The latter were in a coarse sandy reduced fabric about 22 mm. thick and, unusually, were not pricked on the underside (Holden 1963, 145–7).

Leatherwork (Fig. 3)

The comments on the shoe fragments are based on information kindly provided by June Swann.

5. Upper (a), rand and part of sole (b) of a quarter shoe. The quarter shoe became the usual pattern after 1500, though it is found less commonly at an earlier date. The shoe seems likely to come from either the mid-15th century or the period 1550–70. By the latter date turnshoes were often made without rands and with uppers of comparatively thin leather. The earlier date therefore seems more likely. Trench A.
6. Part of a girl's or small woman's ten-button boot which has been machine sewn. Scalloped button holes are most common from the 1880s to about 1920, though this piece may be from about 1890 as the number tends to increase with the height of the leg in the later 1890s. Surface find.
7. A button-hole piece from shoe, possibly hand sewn. Though hand sewing tends to die out in the 1860s, button boots are most common from this period onwards. Surface find.
8. Glove with separate thumb (b) and part of one finger (d). A circular piece of leather (c) found with the glove may be a gusset. The utilitarian form of this type of glove is likely to have changed little over a considerable period of time and therefore cannot be dated by its shape. Surface find.
9. (Not illustrated.) Fragment of undecorated lined knife scabbard. Surface find.

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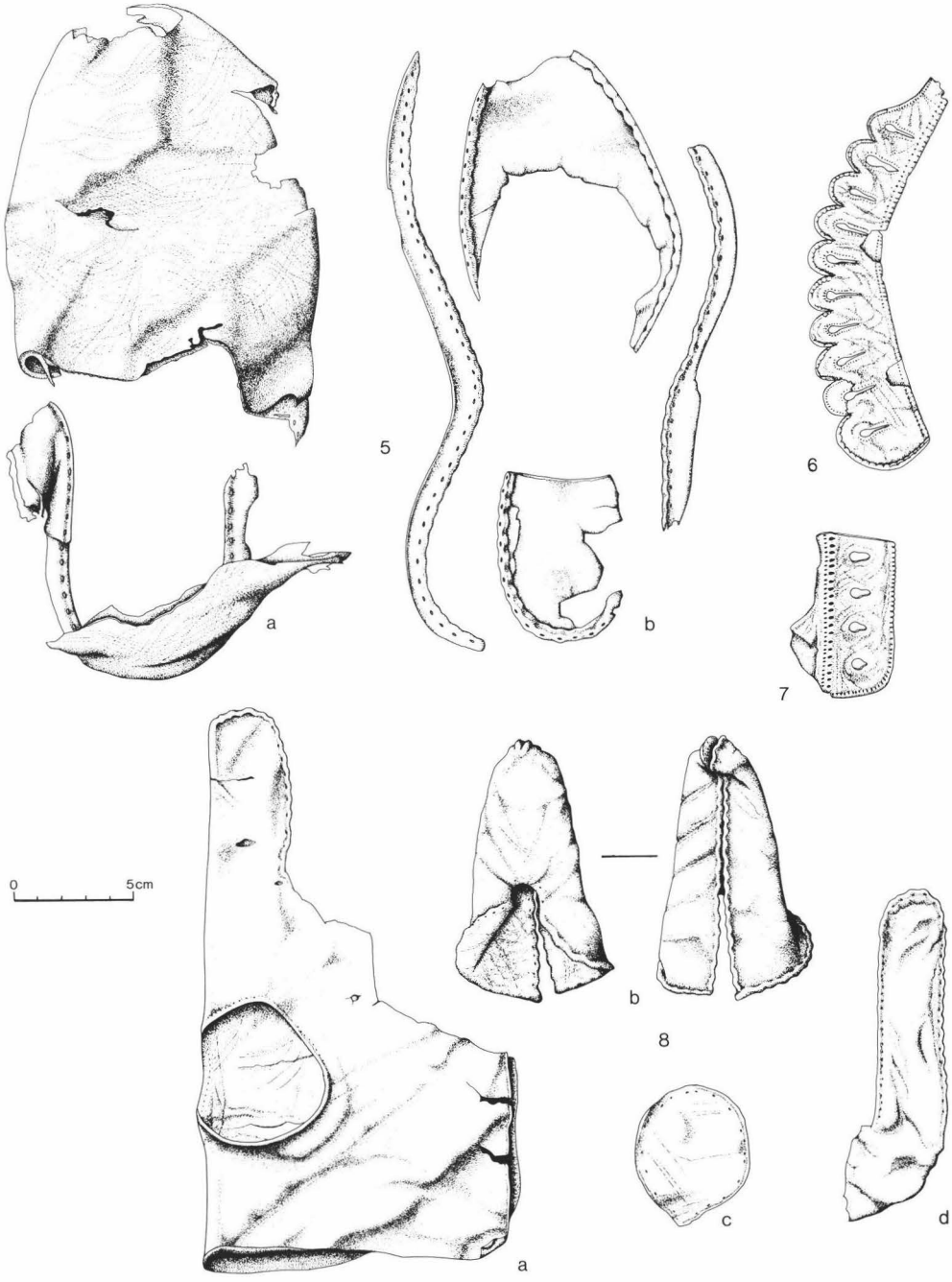

Fig. 3. Leatherwork from Isfield (x⅓).

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