

AN EARTHWORK AT TOTTINGWORTH, HEATHFIELD

by Mark Gardiner

A section excavated across the ditch of an oval-shaped enclosure at Tottingworth, Heathfield recovered medieval pottery dated to the 13th or 14th century, and squared pieces of stone apparently from a building. The documentary evidence for the site does not allow the identification of a tenant sufficiently wealthy to have constructed the earthwork and masonry buildings. The enclosure can best be categorised as a poorly defended ringwork.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article it was suggested that the earthwork at Tottingworth in Heathfield might be of Iron Age date.¹ In April 1992 the Field Archaeology Unit (Institute of Archaeology), with a grant from East Sussex County Council, examined this site further and a small excavation was undertaken with the aim of determining its date.

The earthworks, which now lie mostly within the grounds of Oak Hall School near Heathfield in East Sussex (TQ 614224), are situated on a south-west facing slope near a col between the hills of Tottingworth and Broad Oak. The bank and ditch have been almost entirely levelled, though they can still be traced with difficulty. The destruction of the upstanding remains had occurred before 1901 when the Geologists' Association visited the site and reported that a former owner has become so annoyed by the visitors who had come to visit the monument, that he had attempted to eradicate it.² It is possible, however, that the earthworks had been levelled when the landscaped grounds of Tottingworth Park were created in the 19th century. The only part of the bank which still survives to near its original height is a short length adjoining the drive (Fig. 1, *a*). This was evidently preserved because an old beech tree which stood upon it was retained within the park landscape.

A bank with external ditch encloses an oval-shaped area. The long axis of the enclosure is aligned nearly north–south and the whole measures about 40 metres by 30 metres. A possible second ditch may be traced on the north side (Fig. 1, *b*), beyond which the land falls sharply away. South of the drive, at the point marked *c* upon the plan, the line of the bank appears to have been hidden by a dump of soil, which may have been deposited when the earthworks were levelled. The only feature apparent within the enclosure is a slight platform marked *d* on the plan.

THE EXCAVATION

A trench measuring 7 metres long by 1 metre wide was excavated by hand on the south side of the earthwork, at a point at which the ground drops away to the south (Figs. 1e; 2). It was hoped that some evidence for the tail of the bank and the infilled ditch might be found. After removing the topsoil, the ditch was located further north than expected. The fills were excavated by hand until undisturbed rock was reached. Two successive ditch cuts were recorded. The first (7) had a gently sloping north side and a more sharply sloping southern face. The earliest fill (10) was a slightly laminated silt, which had probably formed from the gradual inwashing of soil. The succeeding layer (9) contained a concentration of stone near the base and decreasing proportions higher in the fill. Layer 8 contained a number of red sandstone squared blocks and sherds from a single medieval jug. It was apparent from the proximity of joining pieces that the jug was not highly fragmented when cast into the ditch.

At a later date the ditch had been recut (4) with an almost vertical north face, but a slightly sloping opposite side. Sediment (6) had accumulated in the angle of the north face and then the ditch had filled up with a mixed soil (5). Later layers (2, 3) may have been formed from downwashed material from the bank. Layer 2 contained a notable quantity of angular fragments of stone.

A small feature (11) was found above the north side of the ditch. This may have been a post setting.

THE FINDS

Pottery was found in layers 8 and 9. A number of sherds of pottery, all from a single jug, were found in layer 8 (Fig. 3, 1). The fabric has an orange-red core and faces, is slightly soft with a rather rough feel and is tempered with about 2% sub-rounded

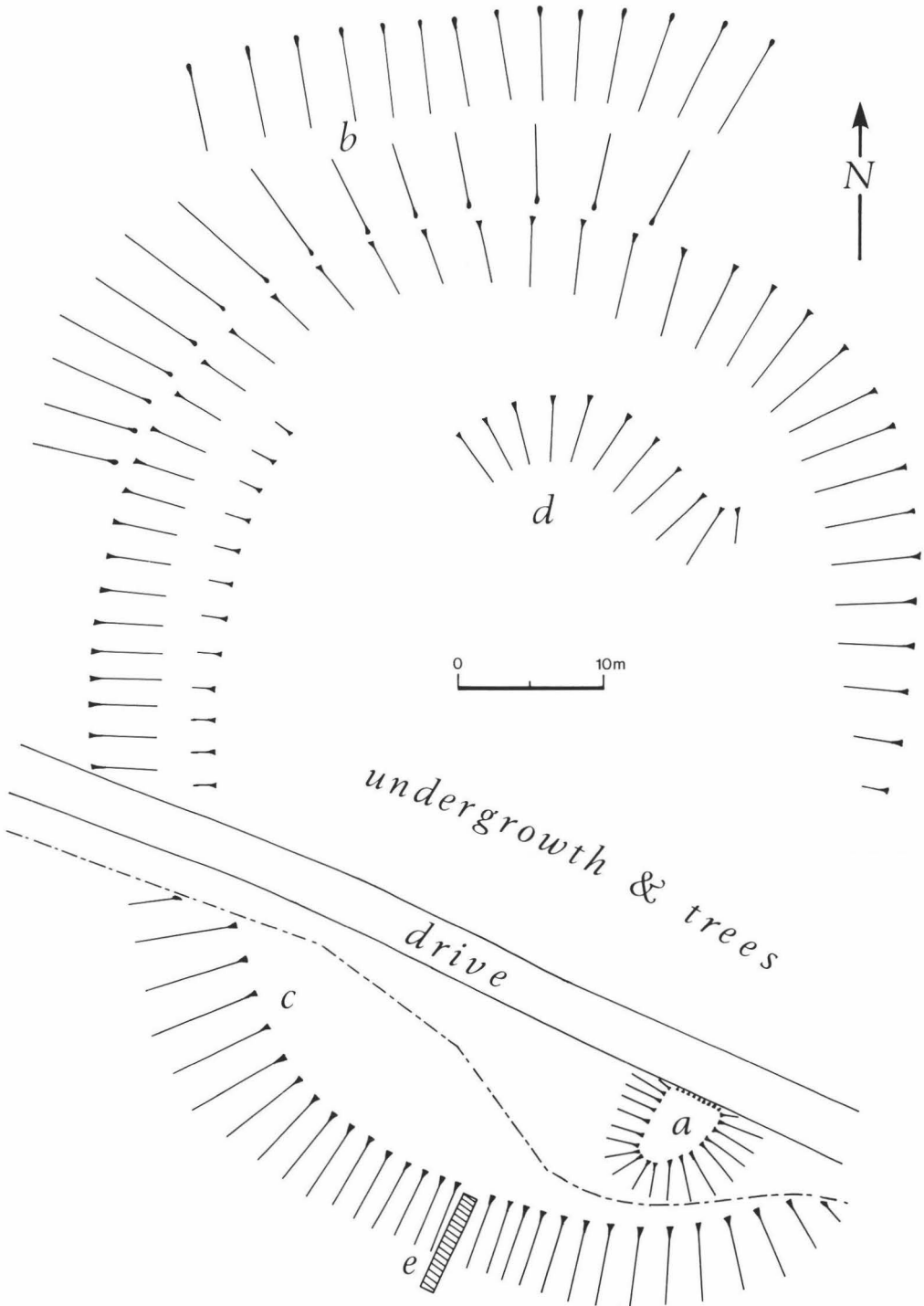


Fig. 1. Plan of the earthworks at Tottingworth (a: part of surviving bank, b: possible second ditch, c: dumped soil concealing original line of bank, d: platform within enclosure, e: excavated trench).

Section

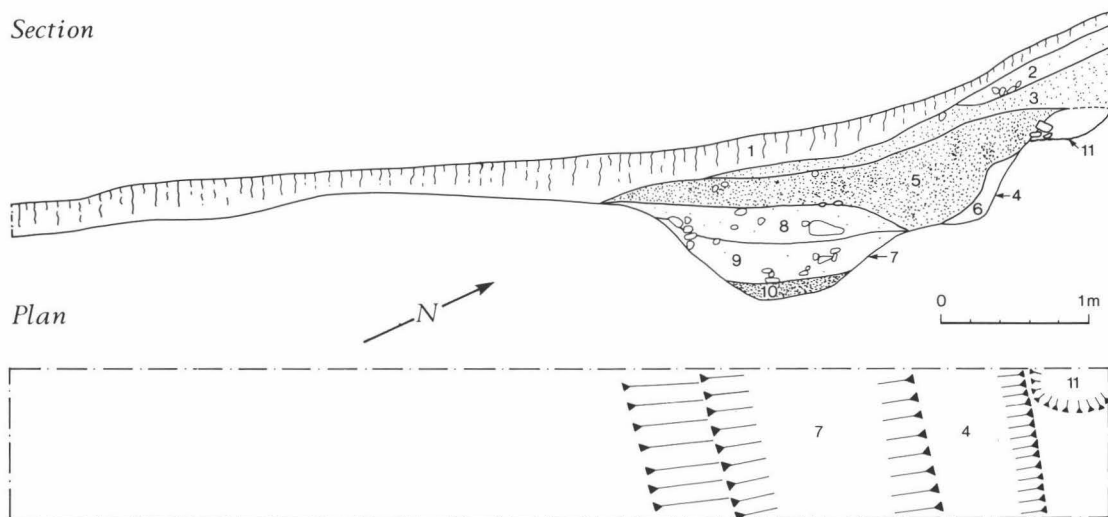


Fig. 2. Plan and section of excavation: 1 Topsoil, 2 light yellow silty clay, 3 light yellow-brown silty clay, 4 ditch cut, 5 light grey-brown silt clay with 2-5% light grey mottles, 6 light yellow-brown silty clay, 7 ditch cut, 8 mid grey silty clay with 40% brown mottles, 9 light grey silty clay with 5% yellow-orange mottles, 10 light grey silt with 40% orange mottles, 11 cut of feature.

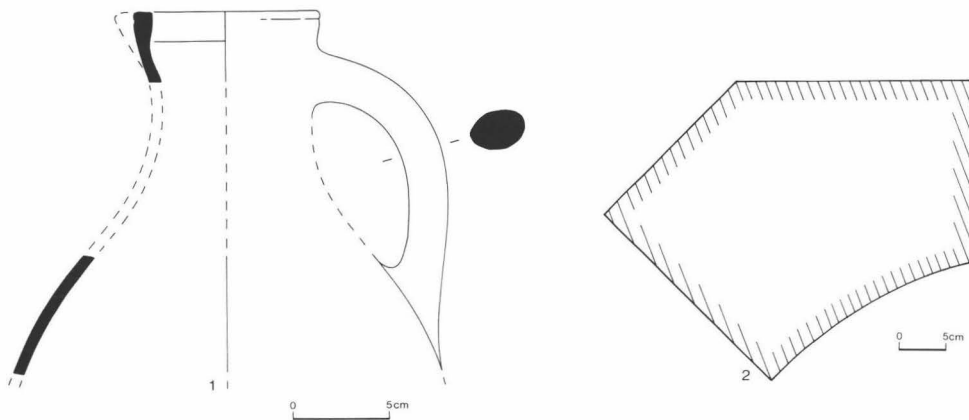


Fig. 3. 1 Medieval jug ($\times \frac{1}{4}$), 2 moulded stone ($\times \frac{1}{5}$).

translucent quartz grains. The exterior has a light green glaze and though most sherds are decorated with bands of lightly incised horizontal combing between which are set a zig-zag pattern, the complete pattern cannot be ascertained. From layer 9 two small further sherds in the same fabric were found and a single sherd with an orange-red face and core with a soft fabric and coarse feel tempered with 2-5% angular multi-coloured flint. The likely date range for these pieces is from the 13th to 14th century.

A moulded stone was found in layer 8 (Fig. 3, 2), the outer faces meet at about 135 degrees, suggesting that it is part of an octagonal structure. The radius of the inner curved face is about 450 mm. The narrow radius and the octagonal outer faces suggest that this piece could have formed part of a chimney.

THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The tenement of Tottingworth formed part of a holding called Basok's Fee and was held of the

bishop of Chichester's manor of Bishopstone by military service. It may formerly have been an undifferentiated portion of the major Wealden outlier of that manor.³ The earliest reference to Tottingworth is a confirmatory grant by Robert de Basok to Reinbert de Milkhurst of the land of Milkhurst and the demesne of Tottingworth, which formerly had been held by Reinbert's father and brother respectively. The tenement of Milkhurst lay to the east of Tottingworth. Though the charter is undated and the text only survives as a later copy, it may be attributed to the period 1215–50 when Robert de Basok issued and served as a witness for other deeds.⁴

Tottingworth, though it had been part of the demesne, was peripheral to the main holdings of the Basok family which lay in Sedlescombe.⁵ During the 1220s lands at Sedlescombe were relinquished in a series of sales and leases to the abbeys of Battle and Robertsbridge. It is possible that the grant of the demesne of Tottingworth is a reflection both of the peripheral nature of this holding and perhaps also the difficulties which necessitated the sales of the Sedlescombe lands.⁶

By 1310 the quarter fee of Basok at Tottingworth was among the property of which Stephen de Burgherst died seised; his son-in-law, Walter de Paveley, was in possession in 1320. A rental of the manor of Burghersh of c. 1290 includes two tenants Adam and Richard de Milkhurst who might have held land there.⁷ The former appears among the contributors to the 1296 subsidy, but the amount for which he was assessed does not suggest that he was particularly wealthy.⁸ The names of tenants at Tottingworth are not known before the 16th century. When the manor of Burgherst was sold to William Wybarne by Anthony Rous in 1538 he retained Tottingworth which was then held by William Roberts.⁹ In 1588 Thomas Packham granted 300 acres of land at Tottingworth to John Elpheck and John Collen. Three years later Elpheck granted 15 acres on the north side of this holding including 'one piece thereof called the Mote of Tottingworth' to William Wenmer. This is the first reference specifically to the earthwork.¹⁰ Wenmer built a house and barn on his holding, the site of which seems to be remembered in the later name, 'Old House Field'. A map of the early 18th century shows 'Moat Plat' and an outline of the earthwork.¹¹

DISCUSSION

Although described in post-medieval sources as a moat, the slope of the land is such that the ditch could never have held water. Tottingworth might be categorised as a ringwork, though the small size of the ditch at the point excavated barely justifies this title. The excavated section, however, lies where the ground falls most steeply and the site here required little additional defence. Sections on the north side might reveal more substantial ditches. The defensive capacity of the site was limited for it lies on a hillslope, overlooked by the higher ground on the north-east. The Tottingworth earthwork probably should be regarded as the type of site for which the appearance of a defensive enclosure was more important than any capacity to engage in warfare.¹²

The discovery of moulded stone, possibly from a chimney, securely stratified within the ditch, is of particular interest. During this period stone was used within the Weald only for the structure of ecclesiastical buildings and a few manorial buildings. The hall of the archbishop's palace at Mayfield, the Robertsbridge abbey grange at Park Farm in Salehurst, John of Gaunt's manor house at Crowhurst and the gatehouse and curtain wall at the manor house at Glottenham are some examples of stone-built structures in this area.¹³ The documentary record does not allow the identification of a tenant wealthy enough to construct the ringwork and the stone buildings which it possibly contained. The Milkhurst family were major free tenants, holding about 100 acres at Milkhurst and 250 acres of land including woodland at Tottingworth, insufficient, without other sources of wealth, to produce an adequate income to engage on a major programme of building.¹⁴ Furthermore, moated sites elsewhere in the Weald generally enclosed manorial dwellings and Tottingworth was not of that status.¹⁵

The work discussed here has established a probable date for the Tottingworth earthworks, but the documentary evidence does not provide a satisfactory context for their construction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Christopher Whittick made available his calendar of Battle Abbey deeds at the Henry E. Huntington Library and greatly improved the text. I would also like to acknowledge the receipt of a Margary grant for the purchase of a microfilm of Lincoln's Inn Library, MS Hale 87.

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Notes

- ¹ M. F. Gardiner, 'The Archaeology of the Weald—a Survey and a Review', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **128** (1990), 46. The idea that the site is pre-Roman is of long standing: C. Dawson, 'Excursion to Heathfield and Brightling', *Proc. Geologists' Assoc.* **17** (1902), 171–5; A. H. Allcroft, *Earthwork of England* (1908), 45.
- ² Dawson, *ibid.*
- ³ P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice) C134/16 (2) says that Tottingworth was held for a quarter of a knight's fee. P.R.O. SC11/658 states that it was for three-quarters of a fee.
- ⁴ E(ast) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice) ASH 206, ff. 37v.–38r. For Robert de Basok, see also Lincoln's Inn Library Hale MS 87, ff. 54r., 56v–58v., 60v.; Historical Manuscripts Commission. *Report of the Manuscripts of Lord De L'Isle and Dudley, preserved at Penshurst Place* (Historical Manuscripts Commission 77) **1**, 71, 111; L. F. Salzman (ed.), *An Abstract of Feet of Fines Relating to the County of Sussex from 2 Richard II to 33 Henry III* (Sussex Record Society 2 (1902)), 108–9; Henry E. Huntington Library (San Marino, California) BA 34/1143, /1171, 36/1232, 37/656, /1128, /1271, 40/851, /1252, /1375, 42/777.
- ⁵ Robert de Basok was also known as Robert de Sedlescombe. His status in the area is also reflected in his apparently unsuccessful claim to the advowson of Sedlescombe, *Curia Regis Rolls* **12**, nos. 936, 1200.
- ⁶ See note 4 above. On the decline of the family generally, R. A. McKinley, *The Surnames of Sussex* (English Surnames Series 5 (1988)), 68–9. Oxford.
- ⁷ A namesake of Walter de Paveley, perhaps his son, was said, perhaps erroneously, to hold Burgherst in 1379/80, W(est) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice) Ep VI/1/3, f. 155v. Centre for Kentish Studies (formerly Kent Archives Office) U386/M18. The rent list is not identified as that of the manor of Burgherst, though the locative names of the tenants clearly allow it to be recognised as such.
- ⁸ W. Hudson (ed.), *The Three Earliest Subsidies for the County of Sussex in the Years 1296, 1327, 1332* (Suss. Rec. Soc. **10** (1910)), 10.
- ⁹ D. N. Steward, 'The Descent of the Manor of Burghersh', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **128** (1990), 263; E.S.R.O. AMS 5692/1, f. 72r.
- ¹⁰ E.S.R.O. SAS/D72; D77.
- ¹¹ E.S.R.O. SAS/D77; SAS Acc. 1178.
- ¹² C. Coulson, 'Structural Symbolism in Medieval Architecture', *Jnl. of the British Arch. Assoc.* **132** (1979), 73–90.
- ¹³ J. H. Parker, *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England*, **2** (1853), 290–3; M. F. Gardiner, G. Jones and D. Martin, 'The Excavations of a Medieval Aisled Hall at Park Farm, Salehurst, East Sussex', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **129** (1991), 81–97; *V.C.H. Sussex* vol. 9, 77–8; D. Martin, 'Three Moated Sites in North-East Sussex. Part 1: Glottenham', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **127** (1989), 89–122.
- ¹⁴ On the area of these tenements, see E.S.R.O. SAS/HB511 and B.L. Add. Roll 31265, m. 3r.
- ¹⁵ E.g. Martin, *op. cit.*; D. Martin, 'Three Moated Sites in North-East Sussex. Part 2: Hawksden and Bodiam', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **128** (1990), 89–116.