

VIII: Milton Street, Chester, 2016

Sample Excavation of a Civil War Ditch

by Leigh Dodd* with a contribution by Denise Druce

An archaeological evaluation ahead of the construction of a residential development at the junction of Milton Street and Charles Street, Chester (centred on SJ 4099 6673) during 2014 revealed evidence for a substantial ditch most probably related to the seventeenth-century Civil War defences of Chester. In June of 2016 a further trench was opened in order to excavate and record a sample of the ditch in greater detail. When combined with evidence recovered at Seller Street in 2002, the results suggest a line for the outworks to the east of the city different from that conjectured on the basis of documentary evidence.

The site and project

Leigh Dodd

The site lies to the north-east of Chester's historic core at the junction of Milton Street and Charles Street, to the north of the Shropshire Union canal, within the area known as Newtown (Ill VIII.1). The area developed from the mid-1800s around the railways and soon contained numerous streets of terraced housing and small industrial premises. It has seen considerable redevelopment in recent decades.

A watching brief had previously been undertaken during the removal of a disused building on the Milton Street site but with limited effectiveness and with no results of archaeological significance (Birmingham Archaeology 2008).

During July 2014, in response to a planning application submitted to Cheshire West and Chester Council by Watkin Jones Group to redevelop the site for residential purposes, an archaeological evaluation of the site was undertaken, comprising the excavation of four trial trenches (Dodd 2014). Evidence that an infilled ditch, or similarly substantial cut feature, lay buried beneath the site was encountered within one of the trenches and, although the full depth and width of the ditch was not established at that time, the route of the ditch through the northern half of the site from north-west to south-east could be postulated. The results of the trial trenching demonstrated also that the ditch contained well preserved

* Leigh J Dodd, Principal Archaeologist & Finds Specialist, Earthworks Archaeological Services, Acrefield, 2 Pitmans Lane, Hawarden, Flintshire CH5 3EE. Email leigh@earthworks.co.uk. The Society gratefully acknowledges a grant from Earthworks Archaeological Services towards the cost of publishing this report.

organic material (small fragments of wood and leather) and ceramic finds (pottery, clay tobacco pipes) dating to the second half of the seventeenth century; these immediately suggested a possible connection with Chester's Civil War outworks.

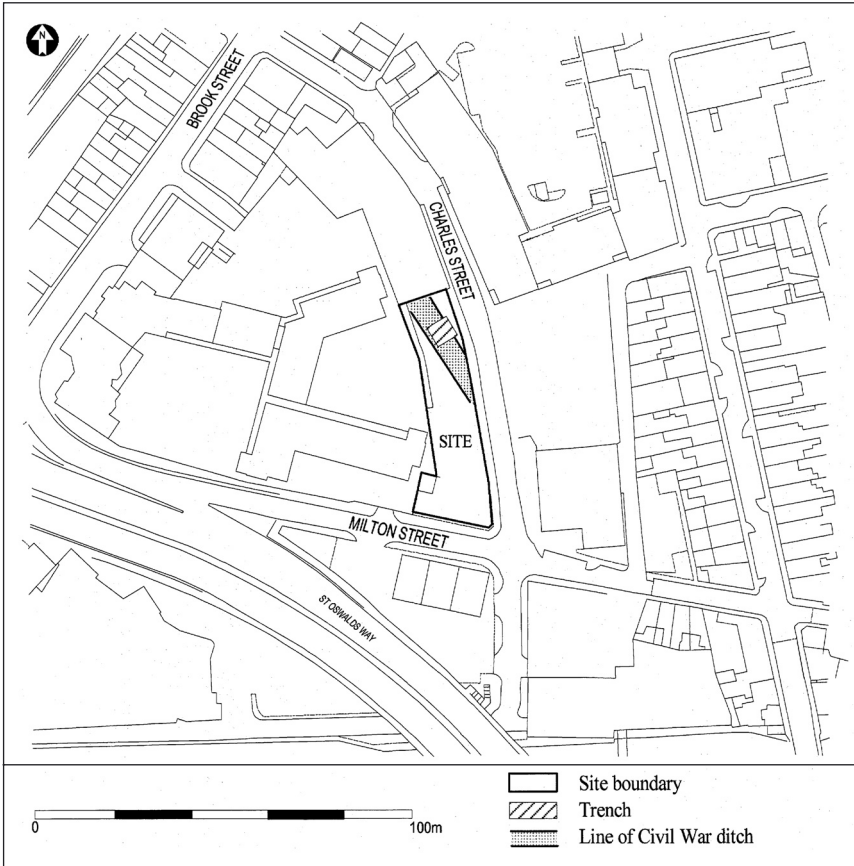
The foundations of the proposed development were to be piled rather than constructed in deep trenches, a method of support that would result in minimal damage to the underlying archaeology. Accordingly, a watching brief during the preliminary ground disturbance was considered to represent a reasonable way forward. However, given the nature and potential importance of the underlying archaeology, and following discussions with both the developer and Cheshire Archaeological Planning Advisory Service, it was agreed that this further phase of archaeological work would instead comprise the excavation of a single trench across the postulated ditch in order to retrieve additional information regarding its character, alignment, dimensions and date of construction; additionally, this approach would allow the retrieval of a securely stratified sample of the organic material within its fills. The results of this phase of work would be of value, therefore, in the future management of this important historic feature. Owing to the narrow, constricted working space afforded by the site, it was not possible to expose and record a full cross-section of the ditch; the full depth was, however, established. The results obtained during this phase of archaeological excavation, undertaken in June 2016, are summarised below.

The excavation

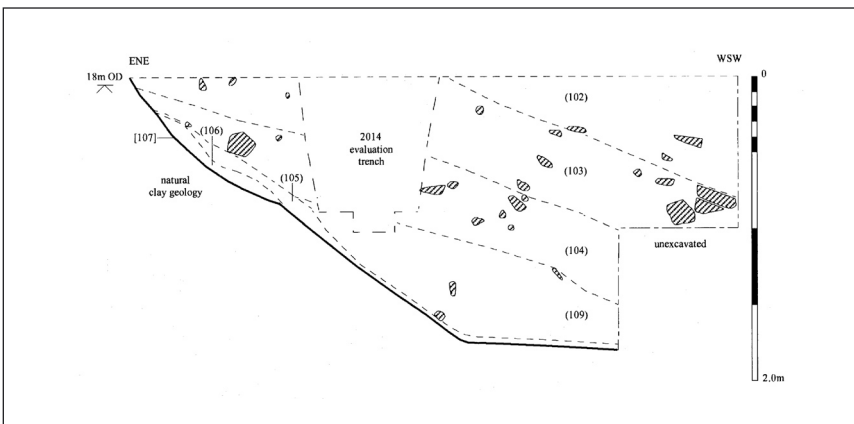
A single trench measuring *c* 5.5m x 6.0m was opened towards the northern end of the site (Ills VIII.1–.2); the trench was stepped for both access and health and safety purposes. The upper *c* 0.6m of modern deposits, comprising surfacing, (100), and brick rubble, (101), was removed by machine but all remaining excavation was undertaken manually.

At this location, the ditch [107] was shown to have a surviving depth of *c* 1.8m and measured over 4m wide. On the north-east side, the ditch was cut steeply into the underlying natural clay subsoil at an angle of approximately 45°, producing a smooth outer face (a counterscarp). Towards the bottom of the ditch was a sharp break in profile and the base of the ditch was notably flat. The steep, smooth slope of the counterscarp would have formed a formidable obstacle for any attacker – easy to slide into but difficult to get out of. The south-west edge of the ditch was not encountered owing to the constricted space available for safe excavation.

The ditch contained a sequence of deposits (Ill VIII.2), the stratigraphically earliest of which was a thin layer of buff-coloured silt, (106), that had formed up against the east slope of the ditch. Overlying this was a black, organically rich fill, (105), comprising a compressed layer of small, well preserved fragments of roundwood and twigs; a sample of this context was taken for palaeoenvironmental assessment (Druce 2017), the results of which are summarised below. Overlying (105) was the first of the more substantial bulk soils that had been deposited into the ditch; these comprised mostly grey-brown clay, (109), containing the occasional small fragment of red sandstone. Deposit (109) was sealed beneath a more stony deposit, (104), which, in turn, was sealed by a layer of brown clay-sand, (103), containing occasional fragments of sandstone. The uppermost fill deposit contained within the ditch was a layer of grey clay-sand, (102).



III VIII.1 Location of the site. (Scale 1/2000). Reproduced under OS licence 001080830



III VIII.2 Excavated section across ditch [107]. (Scale 1/50)

The finds from the ditch

Leigh Dodd

Introduction

The deposits contained within the ditch [107] produced a paucity of finds, primarily pottery and clay tobacco pipe, along with an almost complete leather shoe (in several pieces owing to the decay of the stitching). Table VIII.1 below summarises the number of these finds according to type and deposit (context) whence they were recovered (none of the finds has been illustrated).

Table VIII.1 Finds from ditch [107]: summary quantification by material, no sherds/fragments and context

Material Context	Blackware	Creamware	Post-medieval pottery				Yellow ware	Other finds	
			Midlands Purple	Mottled ware	Slipware	Stoneware		Clay tobacco pipe	Leather
(104)	12	1	1		1	2	1	16	1
(106)								1	
(109)	1			1				3	
<i>Total</i>	13	1	1	1	1	2	1	20	1

Discussion

The primary silting deposit, (106), produced a single clay pipe spur bowl dating to the period *c* 1640–70. This small pipe is both milled and burnished.

The first major deposit contained within the ditch, (109), produced a sherd from the base of a rounded, mottled ware cup, a sherd from a blackware jar, and three clay tobacco pipe bowls. The clay pipes are burnished and milled and comprise two spur bowls and one heel bowl, the latter stamped with initials GL within a serrated, circular border; the style of the initials and border suggest a Rainford origin. They can be dated to the period *c* 1640–70.

The majority of the finds were recovered from deposit (104). This context produced sherds from cups, bowls and jars in blackware, a sherd from a salt in slipware, a sherd from a jar in Midlands Purple ware, a sherd from a bowl in yellow ware, two sherds from a stoneware vessel, and a sherd from a jug in creamware. The presence of the creamware jug suggests that the ditch remained open, at least partially, into the second half of the eighteenth century. In addition to the pottery were fragments of clay tobacco pipe stem and a leather shoe (comprising the upper and sole). The shoe was of rounded toe type and of post-medieval date.

Palaeoenvironmental assessment

Denise Druce

Introduction

A single 10-litre sample taken from fill (105) of ditch [107] was processed using hand flotation. The results of the palaeoenvironmental assessment of the sample (Table VIII.2) confirmed the presence of a highly organic deposit containing waterlogged remains preserved under anoxic conditions, although no charred plant remains or charcoal fragments were observed in the sample.

Discussion

The fill contained abundant waterlogged seeds/fruits, including the seeds from plants of wet boggy ground, for instance sedge (*Carex* sp) and celery-leaved buttercup (*Ranunculus sceleratus*), aquatics, such as pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris* and *Potamogeton* sp), and plants of cultivated/waste ground, for example petty spurge (*Euphorbia peplus*) and nettle (*Urtica* sp); the latter is also indicative of woodland/fen environments, especially on nitrogen-rich soils (eg from animal manure: Stace 2010). Abundant well preserved buttercup (*Rumex* sp) perianths were also identified; the positive identification of common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) indicates local grassland conditions. The presence of nearby scrub is indicated by the recovery of bramble (*Rubus glandulosus*) seeds, tree buds and wood, which probably originate from woodland growing adjacent to the ditch. The deposit also contained abundant insect remains (including daphnia (water flea) eggs) and ostracods.

Table VIII.2 Palaeoenvironmental assessment results of fill (105) from ditch [107]

Sample vol (l)	Flot vol (ml)	Plant remains	Other palaeoenvironmental remains
10	1100	WPR (4), wood fragments (4), twigs (4), buds (3)	Ostracods (4), Insects and insect eggs (4), molluscs (2)

Quantification is based on a score of 1 to 4 where 1 = rare (one to five items), 2 = frequent (6–25), 3 = common (26–100), 4 = abundant (>100 items). WPR = waterlogged plant remains

Interpretation

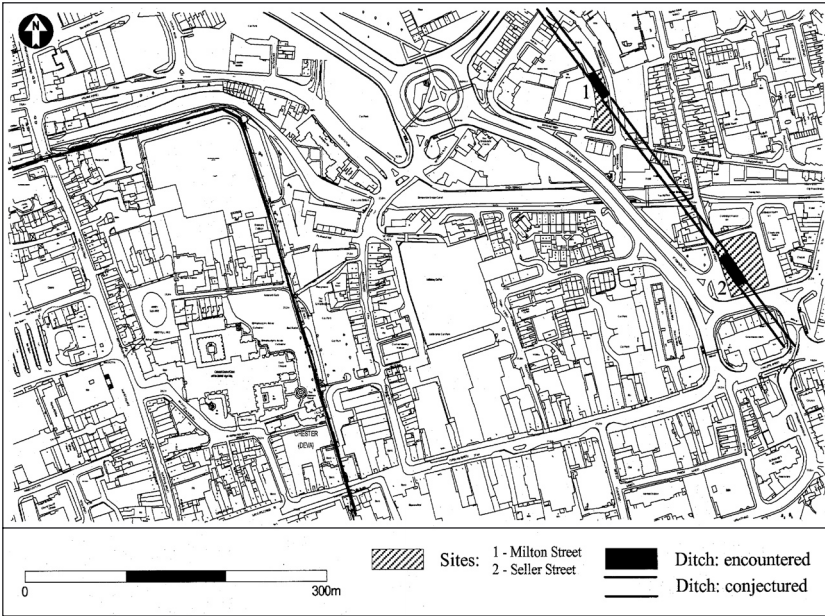
Leigh Dodd

The general location, size, form and date of the ditch strongly support its initial interpretation as part of Chester's Civil War outworks. Furthermore, archaeological excavation in advance of development at Seller Street during 2002 – approximately 200m to the south-east of the Milton Street site – also encountered a deep ditch that was interpreted in the same way (Earthworks *forthcoming*) and could well be part of the same feature and on the same alignment (Ill VIII.3). However, the excavation was necessarily very limited in its scope and it has to be conceded that the alignment was not accurately established.

Discussion

Historical background

Prior to the development of Chester's suburbs from the mid-1800s, the landscape surrounding the city was essentially rural in character. However, the nature of the land to the north and east of the city centre was to change dramatically following the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642. Chester was by inclination and tradition firmly Royalist, and its location and relations with Ireland and North Wales – both potential recruiting grounds for supporters and soldiers loyal to the king – ensured its role in the conflict. Much has been written about the Civil War and the part played by Cheshire (*see* specifically Dore 1966) but the most significant work to date from an archaeological perspective has been that produced by Simon Ward (1987). Ward's review of the evidence and detailed work on several sites both on the City Walls and the outworks have paved the way for more recent work (*see* Beckley & Campbell 2013, 57, fig 8) and provide a context in which the present discoveries can be considered. There is neither space nor necessity here to repeat in detail the origins and history of the Civil War or, indeed, the role of Chester in that conflict; for



III VIII.3 Location of Milton Street and Seller Street sites with possible line of ditch marked. (Scale 1/7500). Reproduced under OS licence 001080830

a succinct summary and chronology of dates, events and key persons involved, the reader is directed towards Ward's work (1987). To place the current discoveries into a local context the following key dates and actions will suffice.

January 1643–March 1644

Sir William Brereton (MP for Cheshire and a leading Parliamentarian) established his headquarters at Nantwich and gained control of much of the county except Chester. In response to this threat, early in 1643 the king sent Colonel Ellis, a professional soldier, to supervise the construction of defence works around the suburbs of Chester, the city having outgrown its medieval walls. Essentially, the defences comprised an earth bank (the curtain) and external ditch with a steep outer face (the counterscarp) and gentle inner face (the scarp). Bastions, angular strong points used as mounts for cannon, protruded from the curtain at regular intervals. The defences constructed in 1643 extended from the north wall of the city, close to the Water Tower, to a point north of Rock Lane before turning east to encompass land around Flookersbrook Hall. At this point the defences turned to the south for some distance before turning to the east again, finally extending to a point close to the River Dee at Boughton (*see* Ward 1987, fig 1).

March–November 1644

In order to restore the situation in Cheshire following the defeat of Royalist forces at Nantwich, the king sent his nephew, Prince Rupert, to Chester. Whilst at Chester, Prince Rupert reviewed the defences and ordered that they should be both shortened and strengthened. Following Prince Rupert's review, the outworks extending out to Flookersbrook Hall were abandoned and those to the north-east of the city were improved.

November 1644–September 1645

During this period, under the governorship of Lord Byron, Chester endured its first significant siege. However a force under Prince Maurice, Rupert's brother, succeeded in raising the siege on 19 February 1645. The northern defences were abandoned and demolished. Following Prince Maurice's withdrawal, Brereton immediately resumed the siege. Later in the year, during a respite, a fort was built by the Royalists in Handbridge to protect the Dee Bridge.

September 1645–February 1646

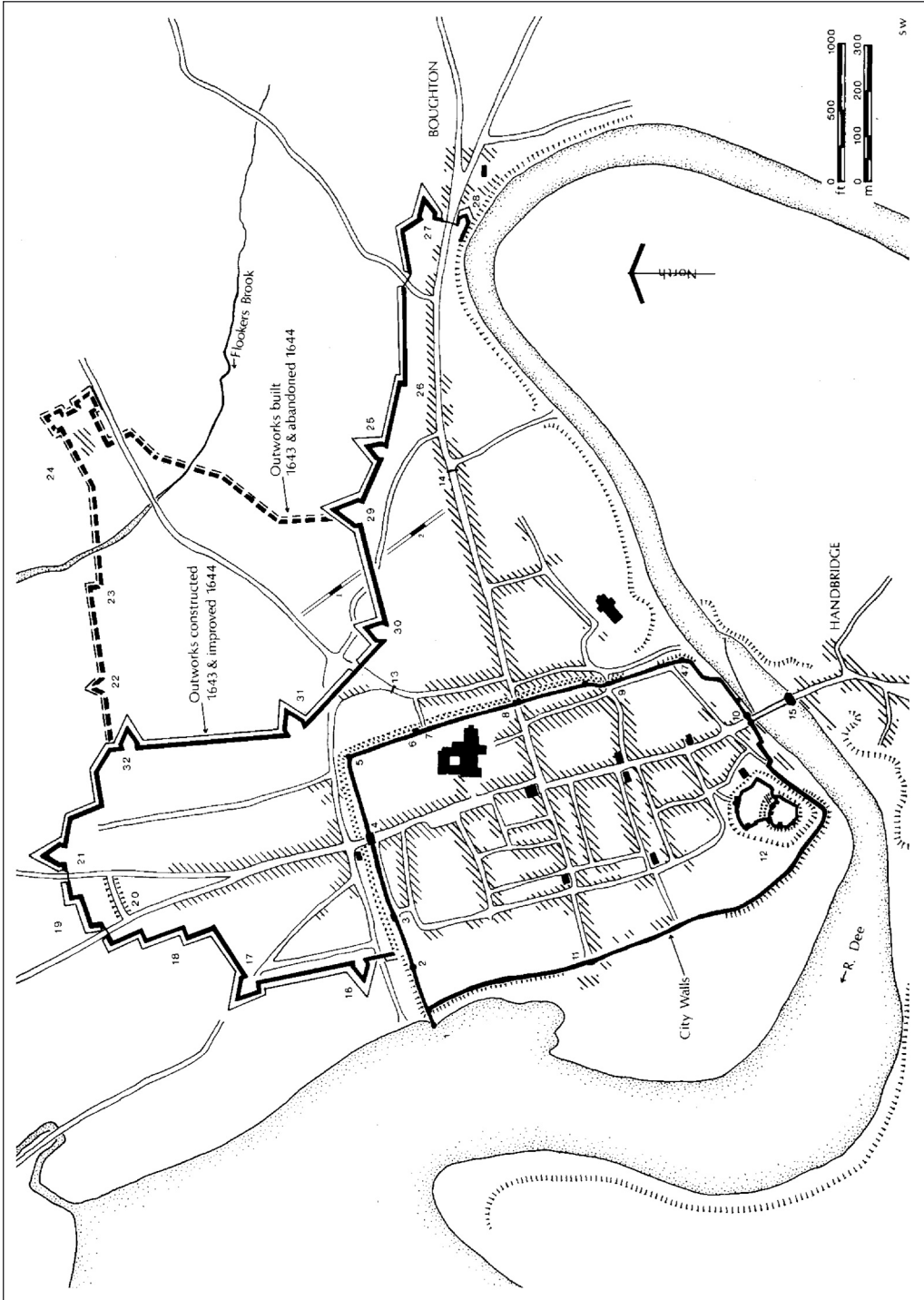
The Parliamentary forces resumed operations against Chester and on the night of 20 September successfully captured the eastern suburbs. On 24 September the king's forces were defeated at Rowton Moor. Brereton continued the pressure against Chester in October and by the end of the year the defenders held only the old City Walls and the fort in Handbridge. Following the collapse of the king's cause throughout the country, Lord Byron and the citizens of Chester surrendered on 3 February 1646.

The Milton Street and Seller Street ditches

This redevelopment provided a rare opportunity to examine a length of ditch that seems to have formed part of Chester's Civil War outworks. Although only a short length and, indeed, incomplete cross-section were accessible for excavation, in combination with the discoveries at Seller Street the results have nonetheless allowed part of the outworks to be plotted through this area of Chester with a degree of confidence that can only be achieved through archaeological excavation. The only other recent information is embodied in Ward's map (1987, 9, fig 1) but, like the earlier version produced by Morris (1923), it is based on William Cowper's map included in his *Account of the Siege of the City of Chester in the Year 1645* (1764) (Cheshire Record Office DCC/26), and its exact lines are conjectural. The archaeological discoveries are superimposed on the conjectural map in Ill VIII.4

The sections of ditch (Ill VIII.4, 1 and 2) can probably be related to the stretch of defensive outworks lying south-east of the Phoenix Tower Mount (31). Together with the Justing Croft Mount (30) and the Cock Pit Mount (29), the Phoenix Tower Mount was probably newly constructed in 1644 following the abandonment of the salient stretching out towards Flookersbrook Hall to the north-east. By 1645 this stretch of curtain, including the Phoenix Tower Mount, had been abandoned or lost to the besieging Parliamentarian forces and a new stretch of curtain was constructed extending out from the City Walls, beneath the Phoenix Tower, via Cowlane Gate (13) to the retained Justing Croft Mount. A raid by a body of Parliamentarian foot and horse on 20 September 1645, mounted from Boughton, successfully captured all of the mounts on the eastern side of the city and from then on, until the surrender, the Royalists held only the City Walls, along with Morgan's Mount to the north and the fort in Handbridge (Ward 1987, 11).

The ditch at Milton Street (Ill VIII.4, 1) runs further to the north-east than conjectured by Ward, while that found at Seller Street (Ill VIII.4, 2) is considerably nearer Foregate Street. If these ditches were part of the attested outer defences of 1643–4, then the accepted line of the latter, including the position of the mounts, clearly needs to be reconsidered. Alternatively it is conceivable that the Seller Street ditch was an adaptation of the line not recorded in



left: III VIII.4 Location of Milton Street (1) and Seller Street (2) ditches superimposed on conjectural plan of Civil War defences in 1643–4 (after Ward 1987, fig 1). 29 = Cock Pit Mount; 30 = Justing Croft Mount; 31 = Phoenix Tower Mount. (Scale 1/15,000). © Cheshire West and Chester Council. Reproduced by kind permission

the historical records. Perhaps after the capture of the outworks by the Parliamentarians in 1645, they cut their own defence line to the Bars (14) to protect the besieging forces in the suburbs.

Analysis of the organic material recovered from the ditch at Milton Street provides some insight into the environment surrounding the earthwork. It is possible that this context represented the vestigial remains of some form of revetment lining, although there was no evidence – such as woven wattlework or securing stakes – to confirm this interpretation and it may simply reflect vegetation (perhaps encouraged) growing adjacent to the ditch. Much of the bulk deposit encountered within the ditch can be confidently interpreted as the material through which the ditch was originally excavated and which once formed an associated defensive earth bank or curtain. This material, comprising mostly clay and fragments of sandstone from the local natural geology, was subsequently pushed back into the ditch in order to level the area, thus allowing the land to be put to more profitable and peaceable use.

Acknowledgements

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