



Photograph by N. McCord, The University of Newcastle upon Tyne

OUTCHESTER FROM THE SOUTH-EAST

VIII.—AN EXCAVATION AT OUTCHESTER, NORTHUMBERLAND

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Introduction

In April, 1961, the authors directed an excavation at Outchester on behalf of the Ministry of Public Building and Works. They are grateful to Mr. John Sutherland, the landowner, for permission to excavate, to the Ministry for financing the excavation, to Mr. George Jobey for making a survey of the site, and to Messrs. J. Tait, K. Poad, D. Carlyle and A. Dowson for their invaluable assistance.

The site of the excavation (figs. 1 and 2) lies about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile west of the farm at Outchester, on the west bank of the Waren Burn (grid reference NU/147334). It consists of a slight plateau, enclosed on the south and south-west by a low bank and ditch, and contains a tall conical-shaped stone building, known locally as "the Old Ducket" but more probably a one-time windmill. North of the plateau there is ridge and furrow, and south of it an enclosure with a low earth mound about it (plate XIV and fig. 3).

The object of the excavation was to discover whether this site, hitherto called a "camp", represented the missing village of Outchester. Its timing was determined by the landlord's wish to level the field for ploughing.

Documentary Evidence

Most of the documentary evidence is set out in the Northumberland County History,¹ and from this it appears that there was certainly a vill of Outchester in the second

¹ For all the documentary evidence, with the exception of note 2, see the *Northumberland County History*, Vol. I (1893), pp. 198-209.

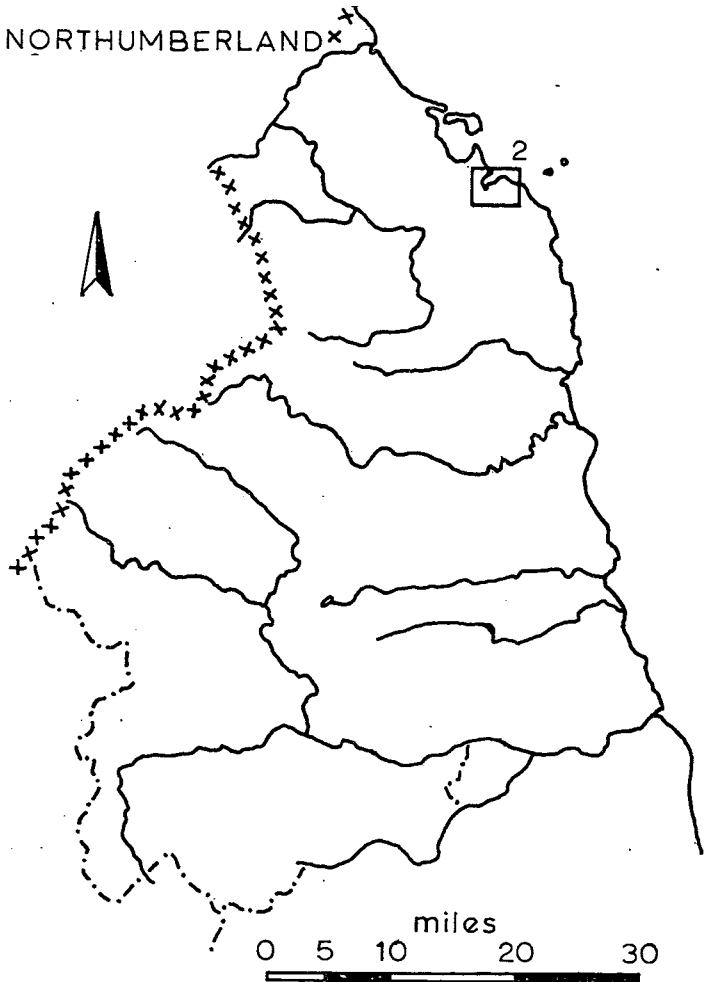


FIG. 1: SHOWING LOCATION OF PLAN OF TOWNSHIP IN FIG. 2.

half of the twelfth century, that the lord of the manor and nine other men contributed to the lay subsidy of 1296, and that in the fifteenth century the village comprised two rows of houses, "the North-rawe" and "the South-rawe", and

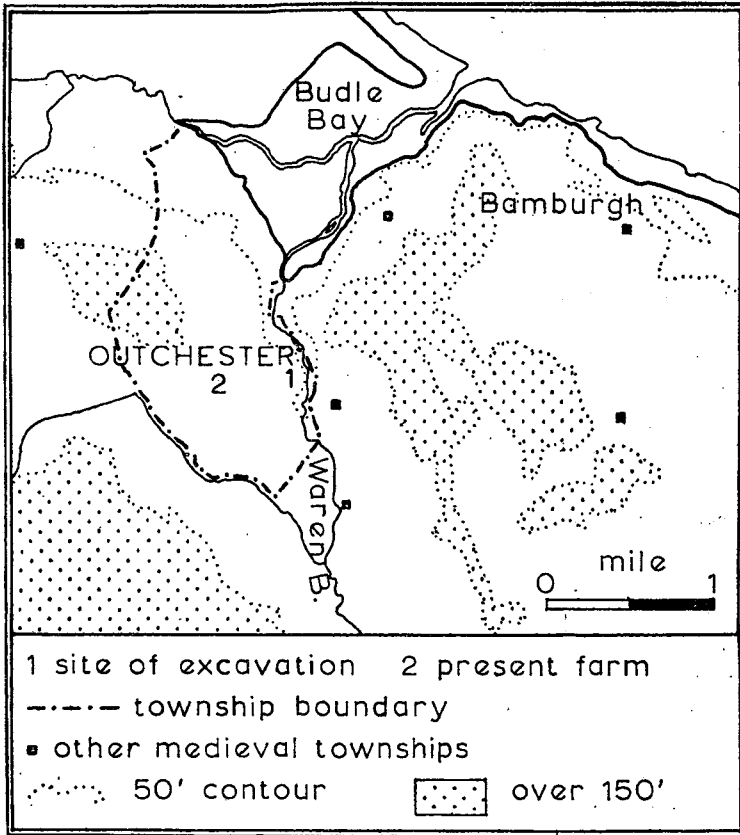


FIG. 2 (FOR LOCATION SEE FIG. 1).

the manor house with tower attached. While the vill—as distinct from the manor and township—was apparently still in existence in 1577, its inhabitants had been reduced to one gentleman, John Horsley, by 1580. A certain Thomas Jackson of Berwick, having a mortgage on the lands of Sir Valentine Browne at Outchester, had expelled all twelve tenants and put the land to pasture, “and so yt remaines to this day”.²

² *Calendar of Border Papers*, Vol. I, p. 17.

It is not clear where this vill lay within the township, although the following comment may be thought to imply the site of the excavation: "The north and east sides [of the 'camp'] have been occupied by a farm house and buildings, which were removed about thirty-eight years since. The name of the ground is Camp Field, the appellation Outchester being now transferred to the new farm house situated some distance to the westward."

The Excavation

Trench I (fig. 4) was laid out across a low rectangular platform and over the ditch in the hope of confirming the existence of a building, and of obtaining some dating material from the ditch filling.

The ditch, which was some 40 feet wide between the crests of the inner and outer mounds, had a rounded bottom 8 feet below the top of the inner mound. It had been dug into the sandy subsoil, and almost all the upcast piled into a mound along its inner edge, with a stone kerb to prevent its sliding back. Subsequently the ditch had become partially silted up with a mixture of sand and clay. Some fragments of eighteenth-century glass bottles, and one piece of nineteenth-century tortoiseshell-glazed cooking bowl were found near the top of this ditch filling.

In the northern half of the trench the subsoil was covered by 3 feet of dark clayey soil and small stones, and it was this level which had created the slight platform visible before excavation began. In this layer were found three tiny fragments of medieval pottery.

At the point where the clay platform rode over the inner tail of the bank a shallow trench had been dug for a stone wall. Parallel to this wall and 9 feet to the north was another, joined to the first by a wall showing only in the east section. These walls were 3 feet wide, two to three courses high and roughly mortared, and they were covered by a layer of debris, 1 to 2 feet in depth, and containing stones, mortar, bricks, tiles and fragments of window-glass.

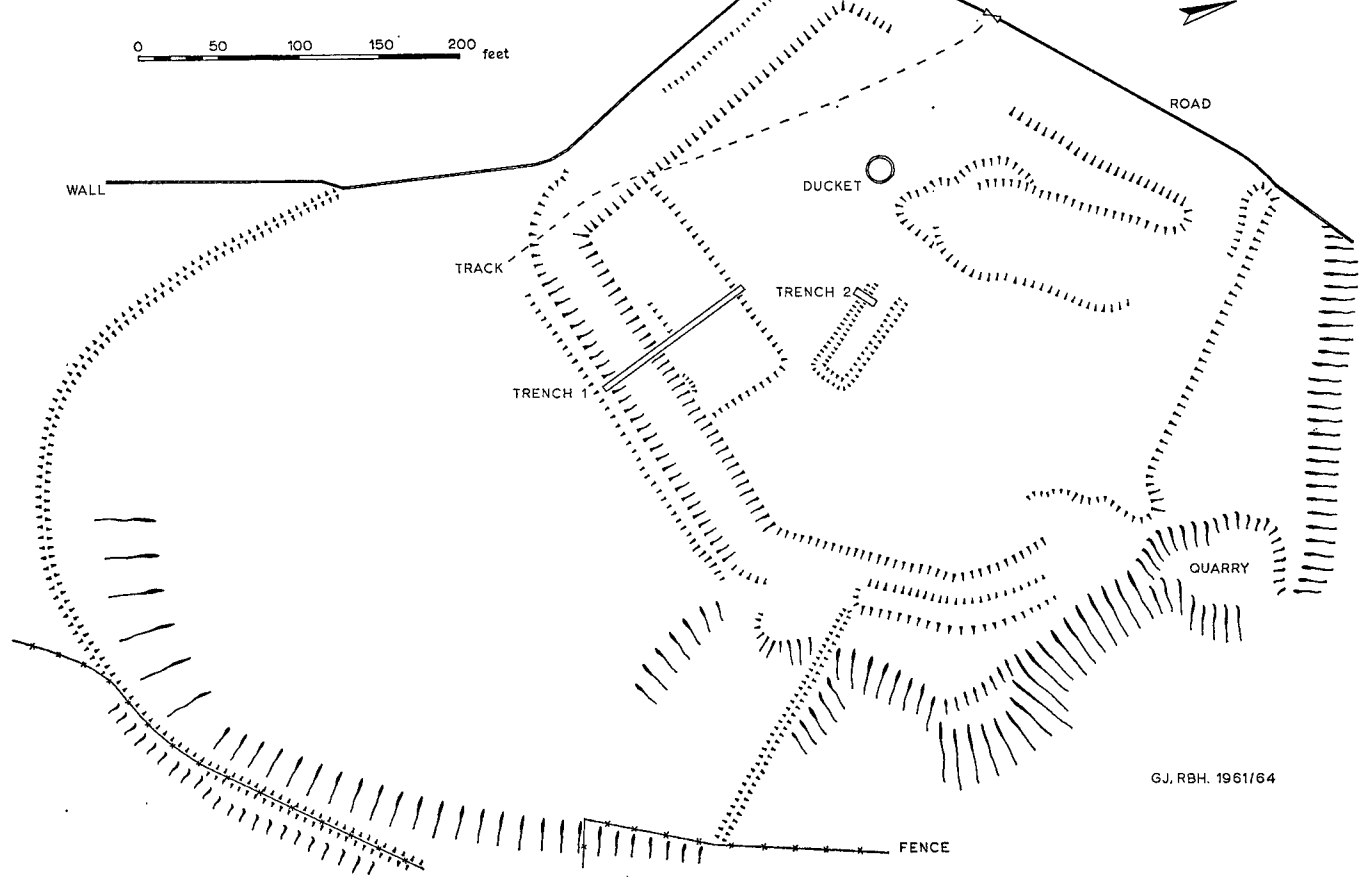
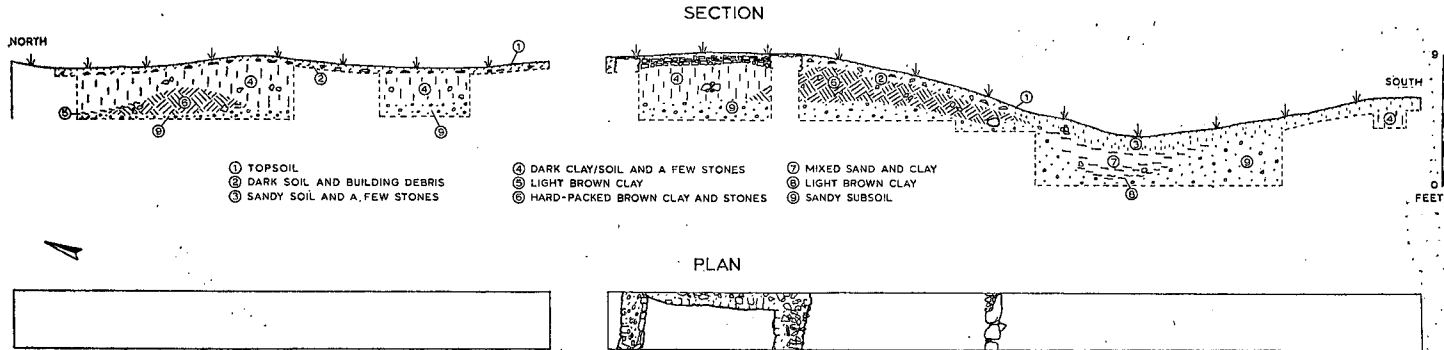


FIG. 3

OUTCHESTER

TRENCH 1



RBH, NMCC, KP,
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FIG. 4

Trench II was designed to discover if the parallel hollows south-east of the ducket were robber trenches marking the position of another building. Over the subsoil there was a spread of stones in clay, and above this a 2 foot layer of dark brown soil and stones, which was immediately beneath a layer of burnt lime. The wall, which had been built above the traces of lime burning, remained only in the north section, but the evidence of stone robbing showed that it had once run southwards across the line of the trench. West of this wall there was a firm spread of small stones in dark soil against a stone kerb.

Discussion

It would appear that there had been a maximum of three, but possibly only two, phases of occupation. There can be no doubt as to the relative chronology of the various features—the ditch and mound were first, the clay platform next, and the stone building last—and it is perfectly possible that each represents a separate phase. On the other hand, as nothing was found to date this first phase it is conceivable that the first and second phases are really one, the clay platform being laid immediately after the ditch and mound were finished some time in the fourteenth century. Against this it could be suggested that the presence of the medieval pottery in the clay platform was accidental, and that the platform had been put here to level up the ground and create a floor for the stone building, which was probably erected in the eighteenth century. This last explanation is probably the least satisfactory, in that it was more usual to construct at least part of the walls before making the floor of a building.

If this last interpretation is discarded, two possibilities remain with regard to the two earlier features—either the clay platform indicates medieval use of a pre-existing univallate enclosure of unknown date, or platform and enclosure were roughly contemporary, and both medieval. The lack of dating evidence from the ditch makes it impossible to arrive at a firm conclusion, but it is worth noting that other

ditched enclosures containing rectangular buildings exist in Northumberland, and it has been suggested these were moated homesteads,³ a type of medieval settlement more common in the midlands and south of England. The stone buildings of the final phase of occupation at Outchester were probably the remains of the farm recorded in the County History.

Conclusion

Inspection of the "camp" at Outchester from the air and on the ground did not reveal the two rows of houses of the fifteenth-century vill. The exploratory excavation may be considered to have produced evidence for some sort of medieval occupation, perhaps in the form of a moated homestead, but the case for this being the site of the medieval village of Outchester cannot be regarded as proved.

SMALL FINDS

Eric Parsons

With the exception of three fragments of medieval pottery and six modern sherds of nineteenth-century date, the finds consist mainly of pieces from five or more glass bottles of late seventeenth/early eighteenth-century type, together with a small quantity of window-glass of uncertain date.

Of the three medieval sherds, an abraded body fragment from a thin (4 mm.) walled cooking pot in dark grey gritty fabric, fired to buff inside, has pronounced external rilling, which suggests a date within the first half of the thirteenth century. A thicker (8 mm.) and smoother fragment with grey core, buff surfaces and medium-sized grit is possibly from a later part of the same period. The third sherd (10 mm.), in dark grey fabric with overall external green glaze, forms part of a large jug/jar of the fourteenth century.

³ George Jobey, *Further Notes on Rectilinear Earthworks in Northumberland: Some Medieval and Later Settlements*, (*A.A.*⁴, XXXIX, 87-102).