SHORTER NOTICES

EXCAVATIONS AT BRANCASTER, 1985

by Susan Flack and Tony Gregory

Introduction

The Roman fort at Brancaster is situated between the present villages of Brancaster and Brancaster Staithe and has been identified as the *Branodunum* of the *Notitia Dignitatum* which lists its garrison as the *Equites Dalmatae Branodunensis*. Stone robbing (Hinchliffe and Green 1985, App. 3) and agricultural operations have destroyed all visible remains of the fort's structures and defences. Aerial photographs, however, have revealed some internal buildings, structures and roadways covering an area of 23 ha.

Details of the fort plan have also been revealed by Dr. St. Joseph's excavation (1936, 444-460). The fort is square in plan, 175 m east-west and 178 m north-south, the ramparts enclosing an area of 2.6 ha. The rounded corners have internal square turrets contemporary with the construction of both wall and rampart. The east gate has been examined but its poor state of preservation makes interpretation difficult.

Previous excavation of the fort has been limited to investigation of the much denuded defences (Warner 1851, 9-16; St. Joseph 1936, 444-460) and only minimal investigation of the fort interior, perhaps due to the unimpressive character of the remains. St. Joseph's trenches are shown on Fig. 1 as 1935-A and 1935-B to distinguish them from the trenches which are the subject of this report, 1985-A, -B and -C. Trench 1935A revealed the ditch completely filled, at the bottom of a massive hollow, 4 m deep from the surface of the interior of the fort and 50 m wide, with the fort wall built towards the top of its east slope. West to east profiles across this hollow (Fig. 1, drawn with an exaggerated vertical scale) along the lines of all three cuttings across the west defences demonstrate the way in which what is presumably a natural hollow (or, if artificial, a feature of an earlier date) was used as part of the west defences of the fort. The need to maintain a standard berm between the wall and the inner lip of the ditch, together with the obvious wisdom of siting the ditch at the base of the hollow, led to the location of the wall on the slope, rather than at its crest.

The construction of the north-south road, Cross Lane, with a bank along its eastern edge has led to a distortion of the profile of the hollow. Otherwise the western lip of the hollow might be expected to lie along the line of the road. The relationship between this hollow and the supposed quarry ditch, whose untraced eastern edge must lie very close to the west edge of Cross Lane, is unknown.

More recent fieldwork within and outside the defences has produced finds illustrating the length of occupation of the site and the damage resulting from cultivation (Hinchliffe and Green 1985, App. 4). In 1984 the fort and two adjoining fields were acquired by the National Trust, who have removed the fort from cultivation, thus reducing the risk of further damage.

Geology

The geology of this section of the North Norfolk coastal plain generally consists of Pleistocene gravels and loams amenable to the development of crop marks. To the south above 75 ft OD

chalk outcrops. The subsoil encountered in the 1985 excavations was sand with numerous angular flint fragments.

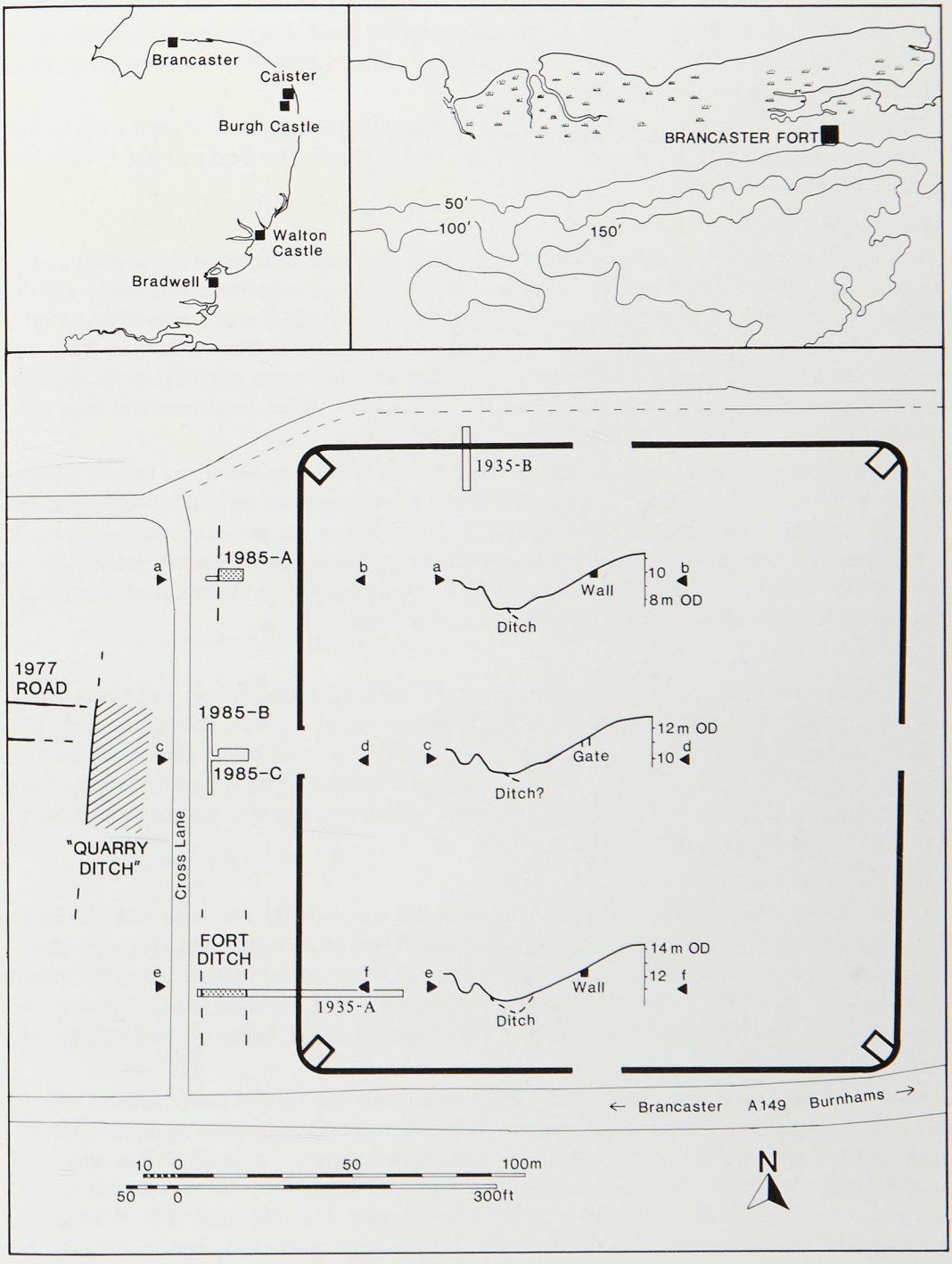

Fig. 1
Site location and topography: location of cuttings and profiles of defences (1:2,000).

The Excavation

The excavation was financed by the National Trust to establish the amount of damage likely to be caused to undisturbed archaeological deposits by planting a screen of trees along the western field boundary. Susan Flack directed the excavation for the Norfolk Archaeological Unit during the last two weeks of July 1985 with MSC Community Programme labour supervised by Piers Millington-Wallace and Graham Joyce.

Three cuttings were opened; A between the west gate and the north west corner of the fort on the line of the ditch; B across the expected line of a road from the west gate and C eastward from B towards the west gate.

Cutting A (Fig. 2)

Cutting A was excavated by hand, 10.5 m by 1 m, and later widened at the eastern end to 3 m over a length of 7 m. The excavation was stepped for reasons of time and safety and the bottom of the trench as excavated was 2 m wide. The topsoil (*200*) was removed to reveal a yellow orange brown sandy loam (*201/2, 203* and *204*) with small flint inclusions. This was removed in 15 cm spits and gradually became sandier and then more gravelly. At the eastern end of the trench, at the limit of excavation, large blocks of chalk, sandstone and flint were revealed in *204*. Time did not permit their full examination.

The lip of a substantial feature was uncovered 2.5 m from the west end of the trench, sloping sharply to the base of a double-profiled gulley (*206*). The natural sand then fell away less sharply at the bottom of the broad shallow ditch *207*, 2.2 m below the present ground surface. It is not clear how the gulley and ditch relate. Perhaps it is most likely that the gulley was an integral part of the ditch: the flints in its fill (*205*) would simply be the result of weathering from the steep side of the ditch, rather than a distinct feature fill.

Cutting B

Cutting B measured 20 m by 1 m running parallel with the fort defences and Cross Lane, and was intended to reveal remains of the road running out of the west gate of the fort. The topsoil, averaging 60 cm in depth, was removed by hand but no evidence of any human activity was discovered and only the natural sandy subsoil was revealed along the entire length of the cutting. No remains, intact or disturbed, of a road surface nor any side ditches (which might have been more likely to survive) were found.

Cutting C (Fig. 3)

Cutting C was excavated by hand in 15 cm spits and was initially 1 m wide and 8 m long, being later extended to 2.8 m by 11 m. Throughout the length of the trench a sandy grey-yellow-brown layer *401* was encountered with medium to small flints. At the eastern end of the trench at the limit of excavation large blocks of flint, sandstone and chalk were found. Towards the east end of the trench a darker, clayey, layer *405*, began to appear below *401* but was not excavated to any substantial degree.

At the western end of the trench, gully *407* was cut into the natural sandy subsoil sloping down at an approximate angle of 45 degrees from west to east and rising again at a similar angle to a flat sand surface 1 m below the present ground surface. The gully, 2.9 m wide, 1.7 m deep, and of sharp V-section, had a main fill of sand-loam (*403*); this was in fact the fill of a recut, the original fill (*404*) surviving only on the west side. The main fills of the gully, *403* and *404*, cannot be related to the ditch fill, but the uppermost, *402*, dips to the east and appears to interleave with the ditch fill *405*, showing that at least at that level the fills are contemporary.

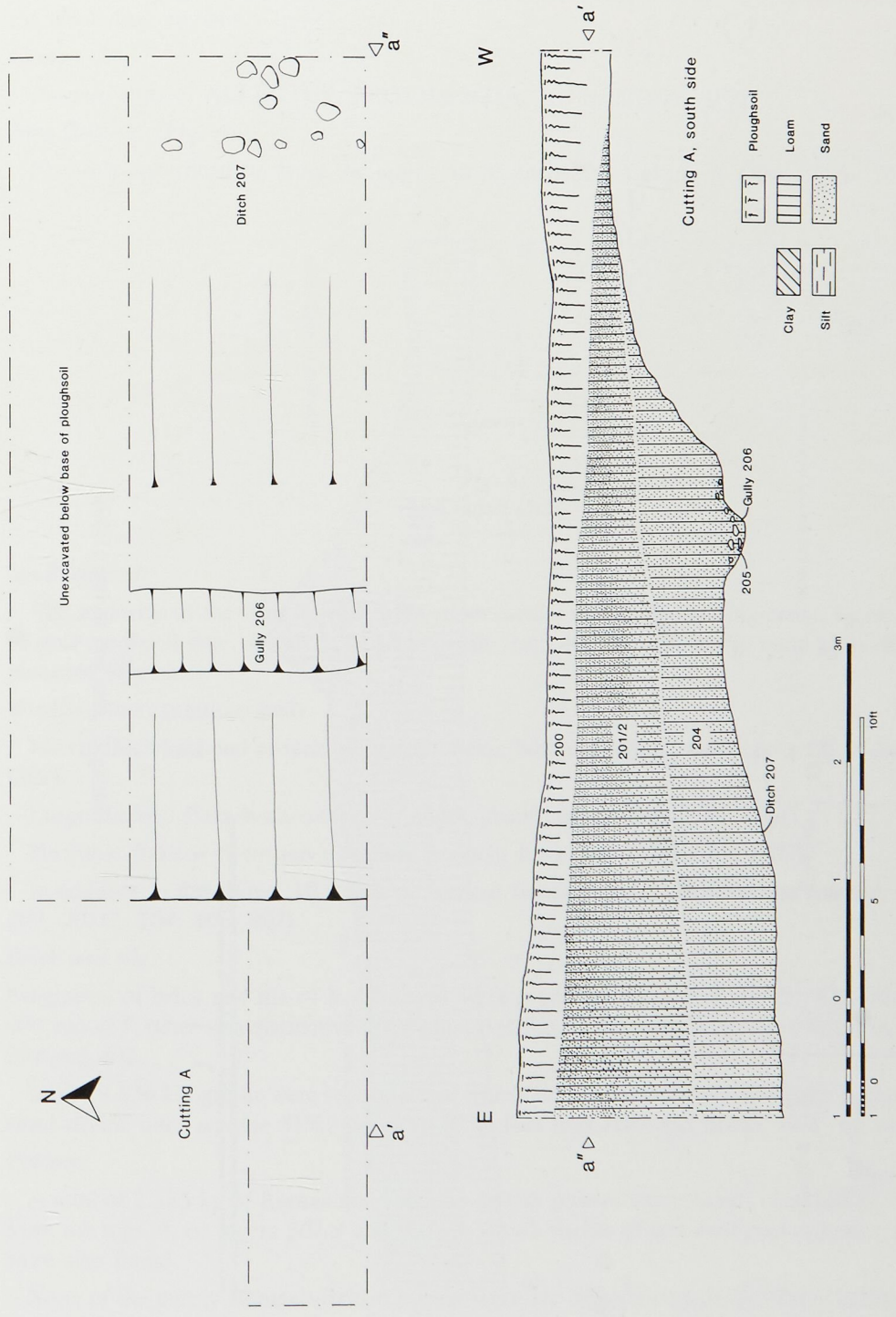

Fig. 2
Cutting A, plan and section (1:50).

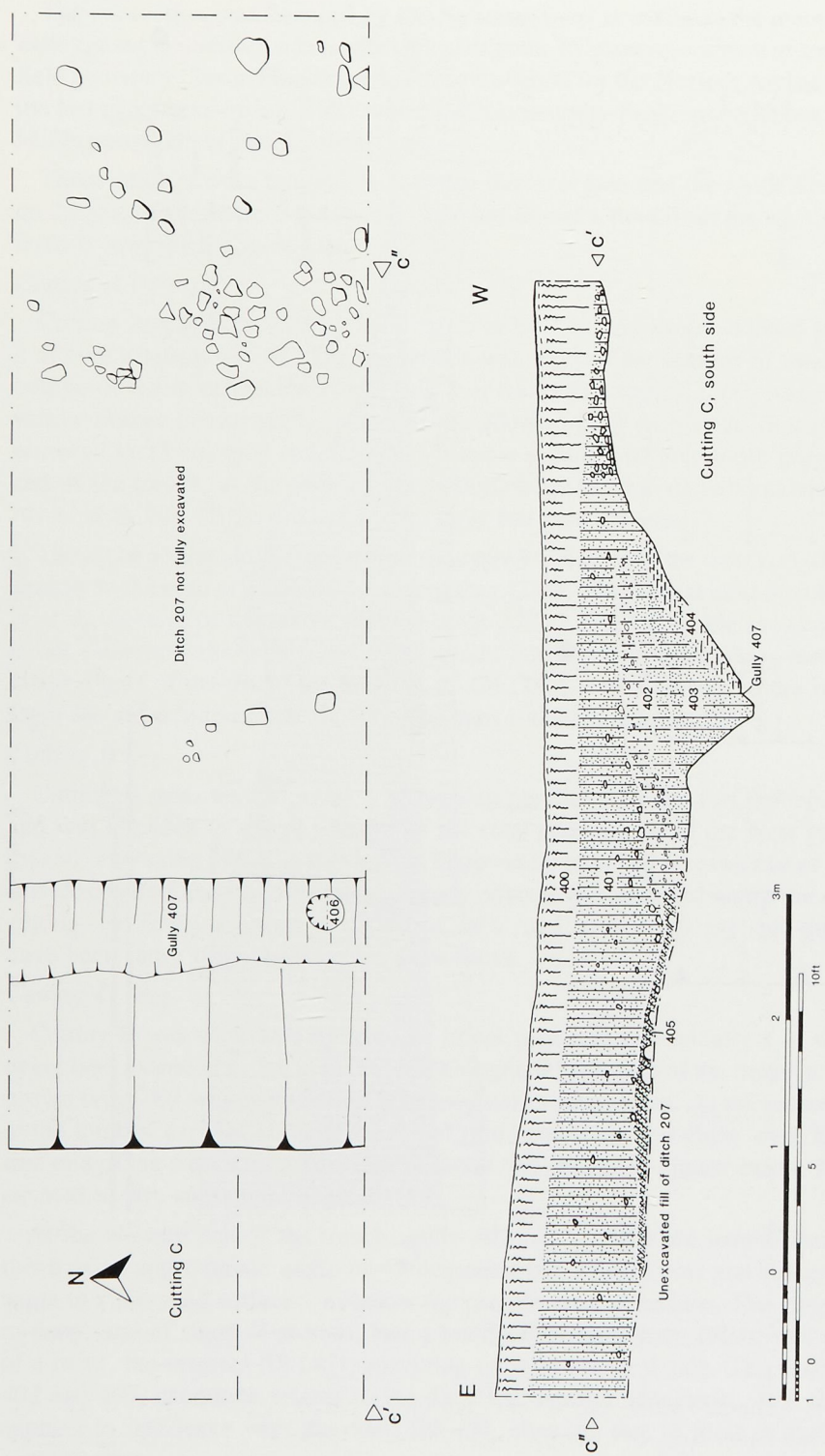

Fig. 3
Cutting C, plan and section (1:50).

Finds

Finds descriptions are followed by the number of the context in which they were found and the small find number.

Coin:

Antoninianus of ALLECTUS, PROVIDENTIA, 'C' mint (401, SF3).

Iron Objects: (Fig. 4)

Probable spearhead tip from the upper fill of ditch 207, Cutting A (204, SF2).

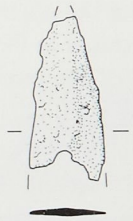

Fig. 4
Iron object (1:2).

Unillustrated:

The majority of the iron objects were either small, unidentifiable fragments, or obviously of post-medieval date. Fourteen small hobnails from *403*, the fill of the recut gully *407*, are probably Roman.

Worked flints: (unillustrated)

Microlithic blade and broken microlithic flake, both mesolithic, from upper fill of ditch *207* (*201*).

Large thermal flake with retouch at edges, from topsoil, cutting C (*400*).

Neolithic flake with invasive shallow retouch, from fill of ditch *207* (*403*).

In addition to the above, 10 struck or worked flakes with no characteristic features (layers *200, 201/2, 204, 400, 402*).

Brick and tile:

Fragments of brick and tile of Roman type were found in layers *200, 201/2, 400, 401, 403, 404* and *405*; other less distinctive fragments, possibly of the same date, were found in *201/2, 204* and *402*.

In all 19.036 kilograms were recovered, of which 10.256 were characteristically Roman. The latter divide into: *tegulae* 51%, *imbrices* 10%, flue tiles 20% and bricks 19%, by weight.

Pottery:

A total of 2.185 kg of Roman and Romano-British pottery were found, of which 52% came from the topsoil, or layers *201/2* and *401*, in which sherds of late medieval and later pottery were also found.

None of the purely Romano-British assemblages are large enough to be of any real use, but show no marked divergences from the pottery found in 1977. Detailed analysis of the pottery is held in the site archive and is not published here.

Conclusions

The main purpose of the excavation, to establish whether tree planting would damage undisturbed archaeological deposits of Roman date, was fulfilled. Only over the ditch itself would deep deposits be encountered, and these contained late medieval pottery up to a metre deep. There would therefore be little risk of Roman deposits being damaged.

The secondary aim, to investigate the west ditch, was less satisfactorily accomplished. Its presence, dug into the bottom of a substantial, presumably natural, hollow was established, but a clear misalignment is obvious between the exposure in the 1935 trench A and the west lip in the 1985 cutting A. The misalignment springs from the assumption that the ditch runs parallel to the wall, which is clearly not the case for the alignment between the two exposures. It must be concluded either that the ditch is not parallel to the wall, or that it is, and is offset between 1935-A and 1985-A, perhaps in the area of the west gate.

There is clearly no evidence in cutting B for a road leading west from the gate. The ditched roadway excavated in 1977 heads roughly for the west gate, but is on a different alignment from the fort, and is assumed to belong to a second-century layout, which clearly predates the construction of the fort (Hinchliffe and Sparey Green 1985, 19 and 178-180). While this road may have continued for a few years it went out of use probably in the second half of the third century AD when the 'quarry ditch' (Phase 6, 3401 in the 1977 excavations) was dug west of the fort. If any roadway connected the 1977 road with the fort in its early years it was apparently neither ditched nor metalled.

This poses questions about the fort ditch, which was traced opposite the west gate. We might expect a causeway to be left when the fort was built to allow access from the gate to the road to the west. If the ditch traced in Cutting C is a real continuation of that seen further north and south then such access would have been impossible. The simplest, and so by far the most appealing theory is that ditch *207* in Cutting C is actually a later removal of such a causeway, possibly contemporary with the 'quarry ditch'. This could only be tested by large scale excavation.

The gullies *206* and *407*, on the west lip of the fort ditch, are poorly understood. They may be the same feature, filled at the same time as the ditch, in which case this might well be an ancillary part of the defensive system, added when the hypothetical west gate causeway was dug away in the second half of the third century AD, or a later boundary dug on the west edge of the earthwork remains of the partly-filled ditch.

The detailed dating of the ditch filling is impossible from the evidence currently available. The concentrations of stone are presumably derived from the fort wall, but shed no additional light on its history.

The finds from gullies *206* and *407* and from the lowest excavated fill of the ditch *207*, layers *204, 402* and *405* are entirely of Roman date, and overwhelmingly of the third and fourth centuries as are those from the 1977 excavations. Only in the upper metre of fill (layers *200, 201/2, 400* and *401*) was later pottery found, indicating a Post-Medieval date for the final levelling of the ditch. The main excavated fills, *204, 402, 405* and the gully fills must date to the late Roman, Saxon or Early Medieval periods, but more precise dating is impossible.

There are still many unsolved problems relating to the history of the defences of the Saxon Shore Fort at Brancaster. It would require a major excavation of the ditch, gate and wall in order to proceed any further with them.

March 1988

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hinchliffe, J. and Sparey Green, C. J., 1985 *Excavations at Brancaster, 1974 and 1977* (East Anglian Archaeol., 23).

St. Joseph, J. K. S., 1936 'The Roman fort at Brancaster' *Antiq. J.*, 16, 444-460.

Warner, J. L., 1851 'Notices of the original structure of the Roman fortifications at Brancaster (The Ancient Branodunum), Norfolk' in *Memoirs illustrative of the History and Antiquities of Norfolk and the City of Norwich*, communicated to the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, held at Norwich, July, 1847 (London), 9-16.

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from the National Trust.

A GROUP OF GOLD-PLATED ROMAN COINS[1] FROM WOODCOCK HALL

by Robin A. Brown

On 20th September, 1973, a group of four gold-plated bronze coins was found at the Woodcock Hall Roman settlement site, Saham Toney. The four coins, stuck together one on top of another, were at first mistaken for a rather battered screw-top from a soft drinks bottle. Closer examination showed that the 'bottle top' comprised the following:

1. Diocletian, AE post-reform radiate ('antoninianus')
2. Maximianus, AE post-reform radiate
3. Galerius, AE post-reform radiate
4. Constantine I, AE 3

(see Fig. 1 and Pls. I-IV)

The coins adhered together on account of having been individually wrapped in cloth, the fragmentary remains of which were preserved and later subjected to specialist examination. Two, and probably all four, coins are counterfeit, probably cast.

The group of coins is of interest for the following reasons:

a. Gold-plated coins are rare, and the purpose behind this treatment is open to speculation.
b. The selection of these coins in relation to the particular emperors together with the reverse designs and the mints represented, is unusual.
c. Post-reform radiates are rare in this country, and three together is particularly unusual.
d. The survival of the cloth fragments and their interpretation.

Gold-plated coins

Gold-plated coins have been found in this country and other parts of the Roman Empire, but rarely. This, in itself, would suggest that the Woodcock Hall group is of especial interest.

The first question to ask is whether such coins were meant to deceive other individuals. Was gilding an attempt on the part of a forger to pass off bronze coins as *aurei* or *solidi*? Gold coins of this particular period would not have resembled any of the coins in this group, and even the weights would have been different (a *solidus* of Constantine I would have had a theoretical weight of 4.55 grams). If these coins were designed to be passed off as genuine the recipient would have had to be quite ignorant of the appearance and weight of the authentic item — not an impossible supposition, but somehow hardly a credible possibility.