SOME RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS FROM NORFOLK

Settlement earthworks at Hilgay and the ring ditches in the silt fens (Fig. 1, Plate I)

by R. J. Silvester

Forty years ago, routine examination of R.A.F. aerial photographs led the late Roy Rainbird Clarke to a small group of earthworks on the eastern edge of Hilgay which, with Southery, occupies the largest of the fenland islands in west Norfolk. Since then the site (Norfolk SMR No. 4455) has gone largely unnoticed, apart from additional aerial photography taken by the Norfolk Museums Service (Pl. I). In the spring of 1987, the Fenland Project's field survey focused on the island (see Silvester 1987, 10) and included a quick appraisal of the site, followed later in the year by a measured survey. Much of the fen around Hilgay has been converted from fen and pasture to arable during the last twenty years but, by chance, the two fields containing the site have remained under grass, ensuring a rare survival of settlement earthworks in west Norfolk. In the writer's view one aspect of the earthwork complex is of particular interest, and a short description is appropriate here in order to establish the background.

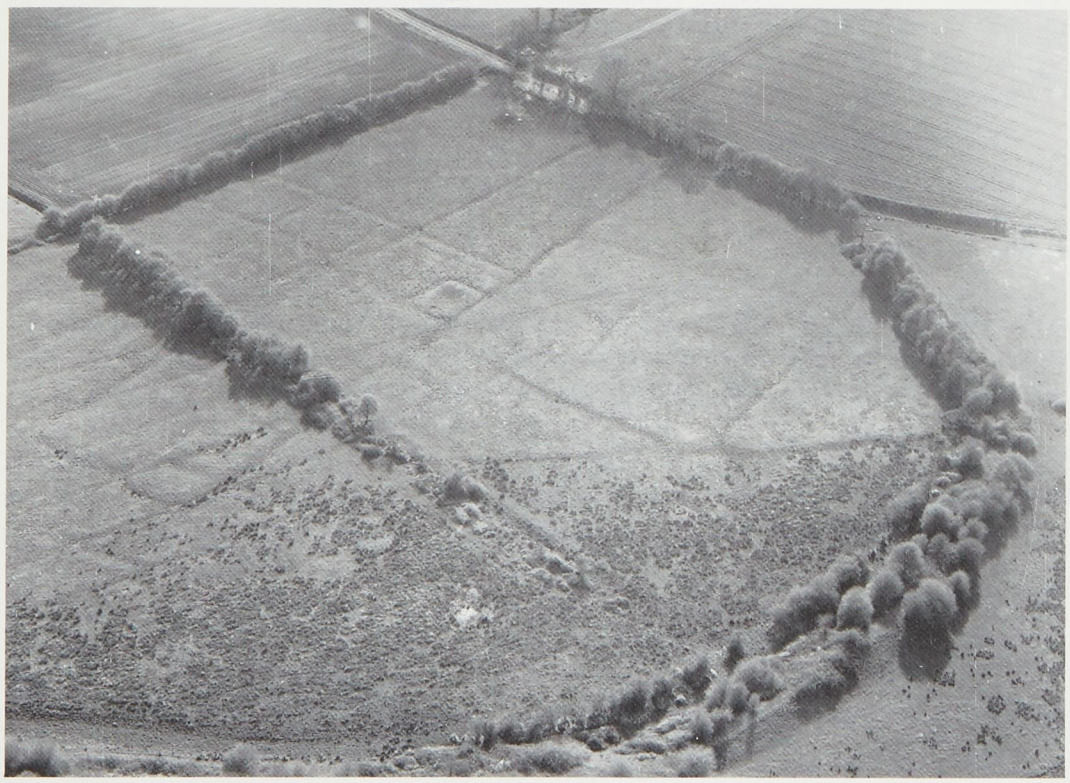

Plate I

The earthworks at Hilgay from the north-east. In the more easterly field these are scarred by parallel drainage gullies of relatively modern date. Photograph D. A. Edwards (26 April 1984). *Copyright Norfolk Archaeological Unit*. Archive No. TL6497/C/AWK10.

The site lies close to the River Wissey at the foot of the island and spreads across a ledge that slopes imperceptibly to the peat levels. Bisected by a relatively modern hedge and ditch, the earthworks consist of several straight gullies which meet or cross at right-angles to form rectilinear enclosures and paddocks. The relief of these features is neither sharp nor dramatic. Most are shallow, generally no more than 0.3 m deep and in many places the edges of these gullies have been poached by cattle, giving an exaggerated impression of width. The focus of the settlement is two enclosures, one large and rectangular, the other smaller in area and square (Fig. 1, 1 and 2 respectively); both have raised platforms in their north-east corners. The platforms, with internal measurements of *c.* 17 m by 12 m and *c.* 14 m by 8 m, are at most 40 cm above their surrounding ditches and between 18-25 cm above the adjacent ground level. East of the rectangular enclosure is another, detached enclosure, the northern half raised above the southern half (3). Beyond the enclosures are two small, ditched circles, the more northerly with a slightly raised interior. The two circles have diameters of 13 m by 12 m (4) and 9 m by 8 m (5), with ditches between 1-2 m in width.

From the surface evidence we can interpret these earthworks as the remains of a small farmstead with contiguous paddocks or small fields, the platforms presumably being the sites for buildings raised above ground that was prone to seasonal dampness. Rainbird Clarke tentatively attributed a Romano-British date to the earthworks and this is born out by the finds from molehills. Thirty metres south of the main rectangular enclosure some 35 sherds of pottery, dated to the later 3rd/4th centuries AD (D. Gurney: pers. comm.), have been retrieved from molehills on a mounded area, perhaps a midden. Elsewhere the moles have been less considerate, but a Roman date for the whole complex seems reasonable: the morphology of the earthworks weighs against a prehistoric origin, while the low-lying position, on land that would almost certainly have been inundated by the advancing peat fen in the Middle Ages, argues against a post-Roman date.

This is one of several small Roman farmsteads around the fringes of the island (Silvester: in prep.) and, even though its enclosure system may once have extended further to the west and south, it is the only settlement preserved in three-dimensional form. Fifty years ago the earthworks of Romano-British settlements were a notable feature of the Wash fenlands (Phillips 1970), but today only a few isolated fragments survive in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire. In west Norfolk, too, the change from pasture to arable has taken its toll: only a single field on the large settlement above the Little Ouse River near Hockwold village is still under grass, while the earthworks in Welney Washes have largely disappeared although some traces of a contemporary field system survive.

The overall significance of the site can be assessed both in terms of its preservation and also its potential for the survival of waterlogged deposits that could add an extra dimension to our understanding of the contemporary environment and the local economy. But of more interest here are the two small ditched circles. Around the inland limits of the silt fens, ring ditches, recorded as crop- or soilmarks, are not uncommon. First recognised many years ago (Riley 1945; 1946), these ring ditches were distinguished by the absence of causeways, their overall size (between 9-17 m in diameter), the narrowness of their ditches (*c.*0.3 m) and their tendency to occur in groups of up to thirty or more. The most recent count has defined forty sites, many on the Cambridgeshire silts, but spreading into the adjacent lands of Lincolnshire and Norfolk (Wilson 1978, 43). Smaller circles with diameters of around 3-4 m and ditches generally less than 0.5 m in width have been excavated on Iron Age and Romano-British settlements in low-lying situations on the western edge of the fens, three or four at Fengate on the outskirts of Peterborough (Pryor 1983, 127) and three at Maxey on the Welland gravels (Pryor and French

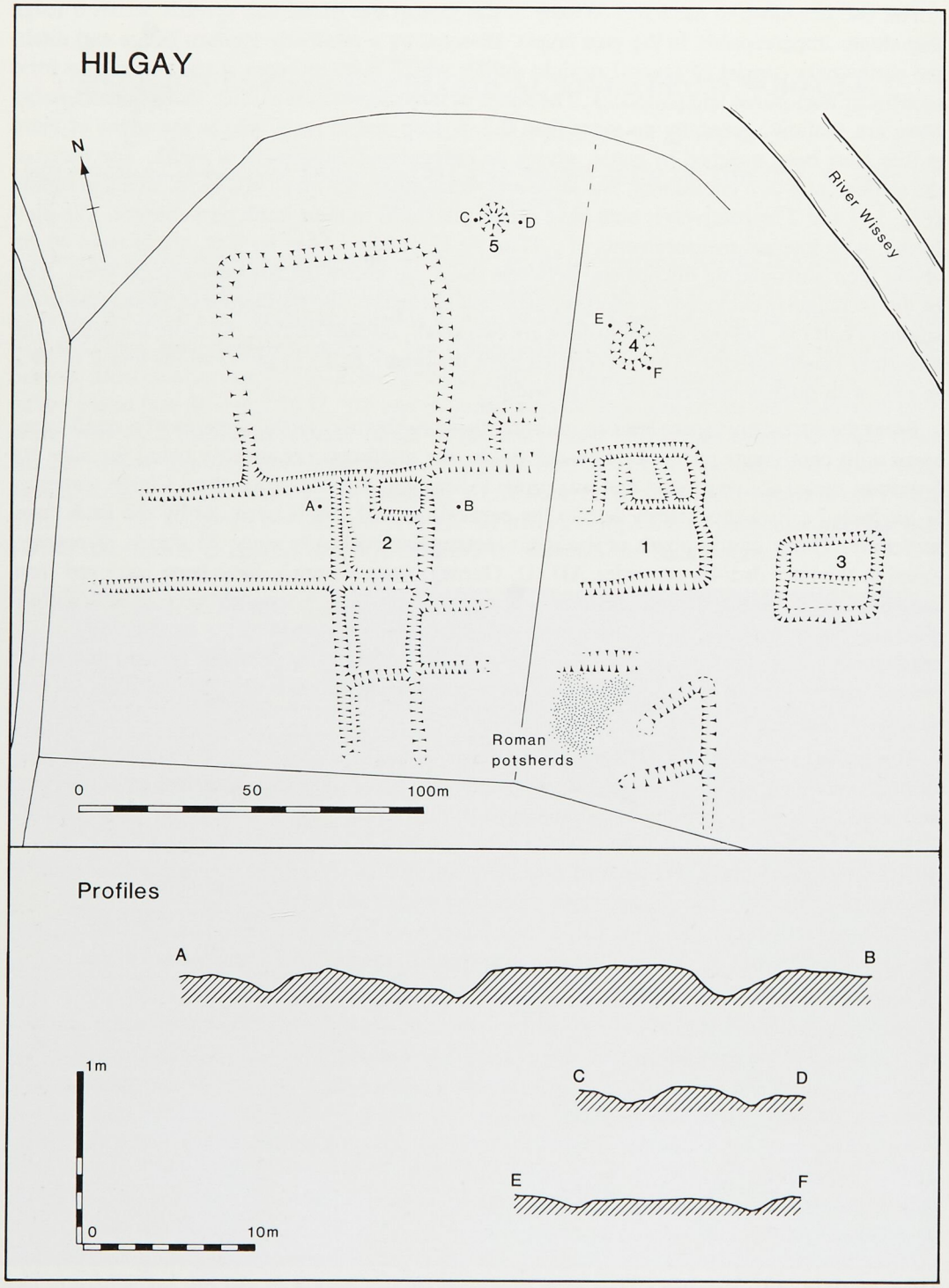

Fig. 1
Plan and profiles of the earthworks on the east side of Hilgay island.

1985, 230). A similar feature, but with a narrow causeway, was excavated at Denver near Downham Market, in 1960 but has only recently been published (Gurney 1986, 102).

The Hilgay circles have features in common with both of the groups. In terms of their numbers and their diameter of circle/width of ditch ratio they are not dissimilar to the excavated examples in the western fens, while the overall size is more akin to the circles on the silts.

David Wilson (1978, 43) noted that few of the ring-ditch groups have been observed more than once, for such narrow ditches appear only under ideal conditions. It seems likely, therefore, that the present pattern (as published in Wilson 1978, Fig. 4) is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the original distribution and, indeed, there is growing evidence that this is the case. Conventionally the densest distribution is along the Old Croft River, which forms the boundary between Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, south of Wisbech, but it is now apparent that there are further small groups of circles close to the Fen Causeway, the Roman road that ran from the upland edge near Downham Market across the fens to Peterborough. This occupies a strip of high silt that bisects the Norfolk peat fens. Several circles show as a group on an oblique aerial photograph of Hill Farm, west of Nordelph, while a number of circles in a field north of the Fen Causeway, were seen from the air during the drought of 1976 by a member of the family that farms Nordelph Farm, one kilometre further east. Reports of individual circles, visible after ploughing, have come from two other farmers in the locality, and in one case this was verified by the writer, although the circle proved to be in excess of 30 m in diameter. The excavated site at Denver is at the eastern end of the Fen Causeway and reinforces the extended distribution pattern away from the Old Croft River. Taken together, the evidence points to a tradition of digging ditched circles in several regions of the fens.

Opinion appears to be divided on the date of the siltland circles. Riley (1946, 151) noted that their distribution was very similar to that of Romano-British settlements but stopped short of claiming a precise association. More specifically, Hall (1978, 27) has concluded that at least one group of circles in Elm (Cambs.), though on dry ground in the Roman period would have been inundated by the fen in the Middle Ages. Wilson on the other hand has favoured a medieval date, arguing that in a number of places circles lie neatly within the medieval strip fields but take little account of Roman features (Wilson, 45). This medieval attribution has been accepted by Lawson (Lawson *et al.* 1981, 30).

A close examination of the evidence from the Norfolk Fens favours a Roman origin. At Hilgay and along the Old Croft River in Upwell and Welney where circles lie in close proximity to Roman settlements the land was also farmed in medieval times, but the same cannot be claimed for the sites along the Fen Causeway: for instance at Hill Farm, Nordelph the circles are adjacent to enclosures producing quantities of Roman pottery, but on land which was probably not used again until the 18th or 19th century. And, if a medieval origin is postulated it is curious that no ring-ditches have been recorded further north on the low silts reclaimed during the Middle Ages in the Norfolk Marshland.

Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss entirely the possibility that some are medieval in origin. Wilson has pointed out examples that do appear to overlie features of Roman date (1978, 45), but as at Denver (Gurney, 102), several phases of Roman occupation could account for such occurrences. In North Wootton, north of King's Lynn several small sub-circular platforms surrounded by unbroken ditches have been recorded in pasture. These lie in reclaimed marshland and in the writer's view are almost certainly medieval or later in date (for an alternative view see J. Smallwood in the Bulletin of the Norfolk Research Committee, No. 31 (March 1984), 3). In fact, there is no persuasive reason why the ditched circles in the

fens should all be of the same period. Most are probably of Roman origin, but some could well be later.

The difference in appearance between the narrow-ditched circles on the siltlands and the rather wider ditches of the Hilgay earthworks does not necessarily presage a different function. While the spoil from a wide ditch can be thrown into the centre to provide a higher and drier platform, the amount of material from a ditch no more than 0.3 m wide is negligible. The value of a slightly raised platform in a place such as Hilgay close to the contemporary fen and probably with a high water table is obvious. On the silt a narrow ditch to drain surface water might have been sufficient. Such ditches would fill up quickly with silt and humic material and it would be as easy to dig a new ditch as to clean out the old one — hence the multiplicity of circles, frequently overlapping, on some sites.

It is widely assumed that these ring-ditches had some agricultural use and a more precise identification of the siltland circles as stack-stands has been argued by a few writers (Hall, 27; Lawson *et al.*, 30), an interpretation also adopted for the Fengate, Maxey and Denver circles, referred to above. Further afield, a similar interpretation has been afforded groups of ditched circular earthworks, of slightly different form and of post-medieval origin, that are found in another 'marginal' environment, the uplands of northern England (Ramm, *et al.*, 1970, 54).

Whether hay and straw were the only products to be protected in this way is an open question. On the moors of south-west England peat cut for fuel continued to be dried and protected from stock on ditched platforms until the Second World War (Christie and Rose 1987, 184). Peat was an equally vital source of fuel for the Roman and medieval communities of the fenlands and a similar method of storage cannot be ruled out. On the other hand the soil from a ditch might have been thrown up to provide a protective cover over some crop. A few months ago the writer came across a small ring-ditch on a smallholding in Southery, just to the south of Hilgay — the soil from it had been heaped over seed potatoes stored in the centre to provide temporary protection from frost. In general, however, such temporary structures would not leave a visible soilmark, the earth being thrown back into the ditch fairly quickly.

We should remember that such simple features might have had a variety of uses on an early farm and there is no reason why they should be restricted in their date range. Rather they may be a general solution to the damp conditions prevalent in certain environments. What is evident is that virtually none survive as earthworks in the Fens and this enhances the potential importance of the site at Hilgay.

Acknowledgements

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A bird-shaped brooch from Stoke Holy Cross (Fig. 2)

by Sue Margeson

A fine, cast copper alloy brooch in the form of a bird was brought in to the Castle Museum for identification. It is in private possession.

Description

The bird is shown in profile. There are engraved contour lines around the body and foot. There is a round eye and the beak terminates in a lobe. The spiral wing and the fan-shaped tail are also engraved. On the reverse are the lug and catch-plate; a fragment of the pin survives, made of copper alloy wire, looped into the lug.

Discussion

The tendril-like terminal on the beak is characteristic of the Ringerike style, as is the spiral wing. The Ringerike style flourished in Anglo-Scandinavian areas in England in the first half of the 11th century.

Several bird-shaped brooches are known from Scandinavia. An example made of lead, and very similar to that from Stoke Holy Cross, was excavated in Lund, Sweden, and is dated to 1020-50 (Mårtensson 1976, figs. 265 and 266). A more elaborate silver bird-shaped, with openwork decoration, comes from Gresli in Norway (Graham-Campbell 1980, cat. No. 150), though this is Urnes style and probably of slightly later date.

The brooch from Stoke Holy Cross is another important addition to the corpus of Anglo-Scandinavian metalwork found in Norfolk.

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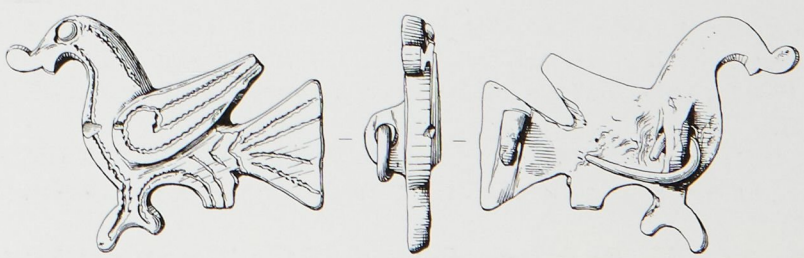

Fig. 2
Brooch from Stoke Holy Cross. Scale 1:1. *Drawing by Sue White.*