

# ST JOHN'S CAMP ALIAS FERN HILL: A FORGOTTEN WEST MIDDLESEX EARTHWORK

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## SUMMARY

*An aerial photograph taken in the summer of 1949 shows a small circular cropmark enclosure situated close to Hatton Cross, Heathrow. Documentary evidence suggests that the enclosure, which lay only 1,100m SE of the better known 'Caesar's Camp', was referred to as St John's Camp and later, Fern Hill. Although undated, it appears to have survived as a recognisable earthwork until the close of the 18th century; its site now lies partly beneath an aircraft hangar erected in the early nineteen-fifties. The study demonstrates that, despite the lack of recent, systematic, archaeologically-orientated aerial survey in historic west Middlesex, examination of maps, surveys and other documentary sources can provide valuable information as to the early settlement of the area.*

Compared with the wealth and clarity of the cropmark evidence recorded from the gravel terraces of the upper Thames valley (eg Benson & Miles 1974), that available for Greater London is less immediately impressive. To the west of the capital, for instance, the unresponsive nature of the deep brickearth deposits which mantle large areas of the gravels, the diminishing acreage of agricultural land given over to suitable crops, and the presence of Heathrow Airport with its attendant limitations on private, low-level flying, render the discovery of new sites by means of aerial survey all but impossible (Longley 1976; Cotton 1986). As a result, such sites are often only discovered as they are being destroyed—usually in the context of mineral extraction.

In the absence of systematic aerial survey,

therefore, study of early maps and ground surveys can be especially useful in pinpointing new or 'lost' sites. The best known west Middlesex monument to be thus recorded is 'Shakesbury' or 'Shasbury' Hill, a sub-rectangular enclosure on Hounslow Heath visited and drawn by William Stukeley in 1723 and christened, like others about London, 'Caesar's Camp' (Stukeley 1776, 2).<sup>1</sup> However, a further, less well known site, situated a bare 1,100 metres south-east of Caesar's Camp, also survived as an upstanding earthwork long enough to have attracted the attention of early map-makers and surveyors.

This site, known variously as 'St John's Camp' and later, 'Fern Hill', appears to have slipped quietly from the record by the latter part of the 18th century. Fortunately (if unusually) for students of the region, it was one of a number of local sites recorded from the air as a cropmark in the summer of 1949; shortly thereafter it disappeared beneath airport buildings.

## LOCATION

Fern Hill lies in the south of what is today the London Borough of Hillingdon (TQ 0910 7563) (Fig 1). Historically, however, it lay north-west of the hamlet of Hatton just within the parish of Harmondsworth, Middlesex, and marked the point at which the boundaries of the parishes of Harmondsworth and Harlington, in Elthorne Hundred, met that of East Bedfont, in Spelthorne Hundred (VCH 1962). Here the geology comprises 'Taplow' or Third Terrace river gravels,

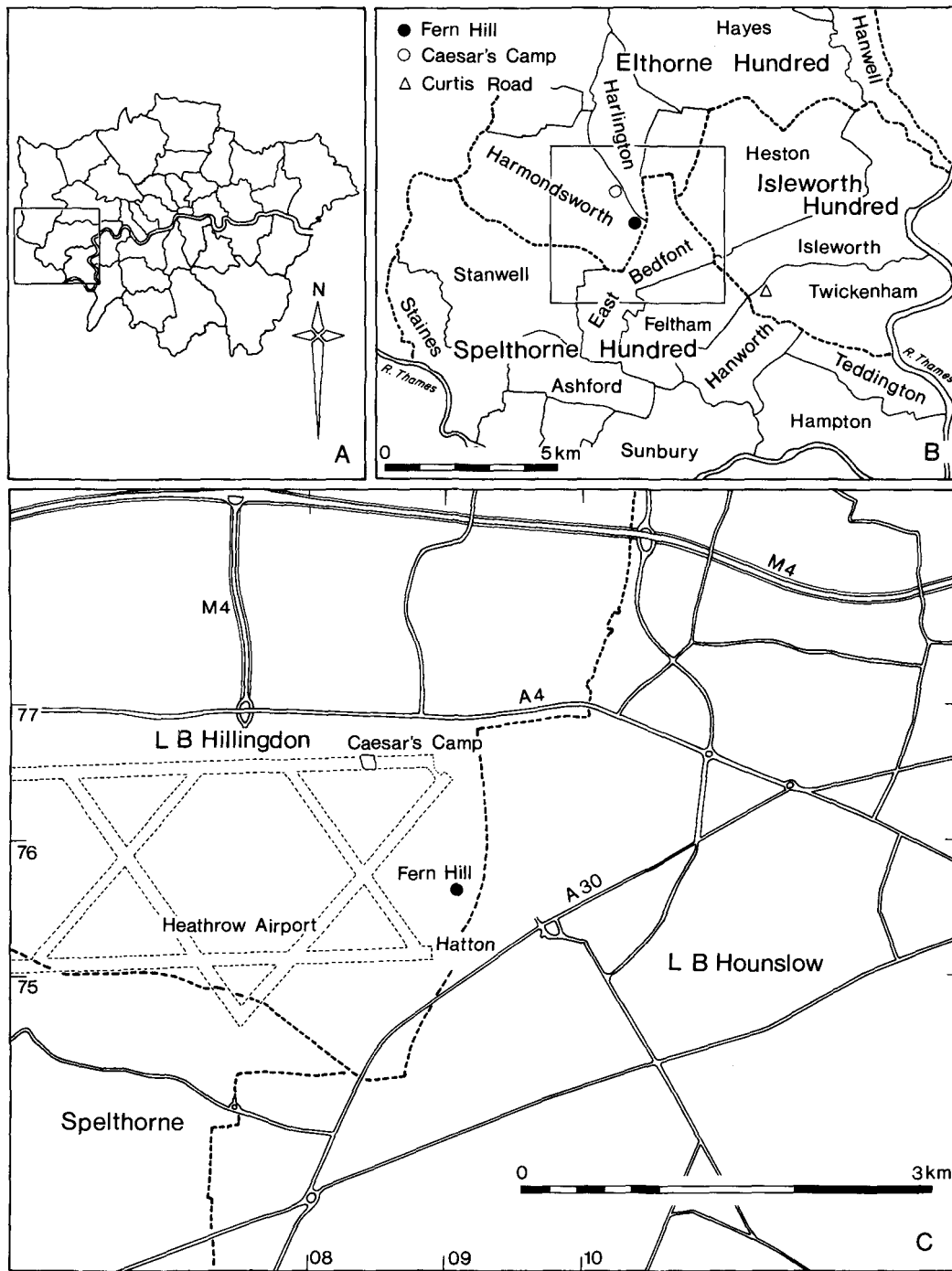


Fig 1. Site location. (The parish boundaries shown are those of the 1860s.)

with a remnant capping of brickearth (Gibbard 1985, 46, 59). The river Crane, which marks the western boundary of Cranford parish south of the Bath Road, flows north to south 1,500 metres to the east.

The locality once formed part of Hounslow Heath, an unremittingly flat expanse which may originally have been approximately coterminous with the Taplow gravels; by 1545 the Heath was estimated to comprise 4,293 acres 1 rood of unenclosed land and to extend across 14 parishes from Harmondsworth in the north-west to Hampton in the south-east (VCH 1962, 94). In the 17th and 18th centuries in particular, the Heath had an unenviable reputation for the highwaymen and footpads who took advantage of its 'lonely commons, thick furze bushes, thorns and wide extent' (Berkeley 1865, 212; Williams 1986). Much of the area is now covered by Heathrow Airport and post-war housing developments; open land is given over

to market gardening, recreation and mineral extraction.

## DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

The position of Fern Hill on the common lands of the Heath explains the general paucity of relevant documentary evidence attached to it. The two earliest references to the site known to the writer are somewhat indirect, and both stem from its close proximity to Caesar's Camp. The earlier of the two is a marginal note against 'Hovnslow Heathe' on a 1635 survey of Isleworth Hundred by Moses Glover which records that:

In this Heathe hath many campes bin pitched, As well by K. Iohn as others formerly: As appeareth by our Native Histories; Whereof the forme of two yet in parte Remayneth not ferr beyond this river [*ie* the Crane], by the name of Shakesbury Hills.<sup>2</sup>



Fig 2. Portion of Homanns' map of London and Middlesex (c. 1710) showing 'St John Camp' (Fern Hill) and 'Shaesburg Court' (Caesar's Camp).

Later in the same century a memorandum added by the celebrated antiquary John Aubrey to his sketch plan and description of ‘a Roman camp ... on the north end of Hounslow Heath’ (ie Caesar’s Camp)<sup>3</sup> records that ‘about a mile from the above mentioned camp, is another campe, which see. Go to Hatton elmes and enquire for it’ (Aubrey, 294–5).

The connection with King John recorded by Glover appears to have survived in a garbled form into the earlier part of the following century, for a map of London and Middlesex of c. 1710 by Johann Baptist Homanns (GLRO AA 157) shows the site as ‘St. John Camp’ (Fig 2). (Caesar’s Camp is depicted as ‘Shaesburg Court’.) Bowles’ *New and Correct Map of Thirty Miles round London* of c. 1740 (GLRO AA4.152), meanwhile, incorporates substantially the same information, but renders the names as ‘St Johns Camp’ and ‘Sheasbury Court’, respectively.

The link with King or Saint John was later severed by Jean Rocque, for his *Topographical Map of the County of Middlesex*, issued in 1754, adopted the bald descriptive name ‘Fern Hill’ (Fig 3). (Caesar’s Camp is marked as ‘Shasbury Hill’.) Both sites were mapped again in the summer of 1784 by Major General William Roy, during the trigonometric survey of a base-line across Hounslow Heath from Hampton Hill to Heathrow (Roy 1785). As had Homanns, Bowles and Rocque before him, Roy depicted them as rectangular enclosures of roughly equal size. While retaining the name Fern Hill, he rendered Rocque’s ‘Shasbury Hill’ as ‘Schapsbury Hill’—a spelling subsequently retained in the Harmondsworth enclosure map of 1819.

By this time, as Rocque’s name for it would suggest, Fern Hill had probably become overgrown and was thus difficult to locate on the ground. Unlike the more substantial remains of



Fig 3. Portion of Rocque’s *Topographical Map of the County of Middlesex* (1754) showing ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘Shasbury Hill’ (Caesar’s Camp).

Caesar's Camp to the north-west, therefore, it was not mentioned by Lysons (1800), and was omitted from the 1819 enclosure map referred to above.

Although the site itself was apparently forgotten, the boundaries established in the area at the time of enclosure proved influential and survived intact until—and in some cases beyond—the construction of Heathrow Airport in 1944 (see below). The site lay within two 30-acre plots of wasteland which were sold in order to finance the enclosure proceedings at public auction on the 16th June 1806 (GLRO MDR 1907/3/637); these were purchased by John Lidgold and John Cooper. The area of the latter's parcel contained

the majority of the site and was shown as orchard on the 1869 6" Ordnance Survey map. The orchard was finally grubbed up at the outbreak of the Second World War (Philip Sherwood pers. comm.), though the enclosure boundaries in the area round Fern Hill appear from the 1949 air photograph to have survived relatively unscathed until the construction of airport buildings in the early 1950s.

### THE AIR PHOTOGRAPH

Examination of the 1949 air photograph referred to earlier (HAS UK/49/219 Neg no 58329)



*Fig 4. Fern Hill from the air, July 1949. (North is at the top of the photograph.) By permission of Aerofilms Ltd.*

reveals that Fern Hill was not, as the early maps and surveys suggest, rectangular in plan, but more nearly circular (Fig 4). It appears to have measured some 70–80 metres in diameter (Caesar's Camp measured *c.* 120 × 114 metres overall by comparison), with a narrow entrance on its north-western side, at which point the ditch terminals appear to have been expanded. A number of faint internal features are also just discernible. (The field boundaries visible on the photograph are those established at the time of enclosure.)

Other cropmarks lie beyond the enclosure, particularly to the south and north-east. Two sinuous but fainter linear marks running immediately south-south-west remain unexplained, but seem unlikely to have been associated with the enclosure itself.

The site forms part of a now all but lost multi-period landscape whose complexity is hinted at by cropmarks visible on a number of ageing aerial photographs, and by the results of field survey and excavation (Fig 5). Recent work, for instance, has demonstrated that this area of

third terrace gravels has been exploited since at least the Neolithic. Notable elements within the local landscape include the newly-identified neolithic cursus to the north of Park Road, Stanwell (O'Connell 1986), a possible linear barrow cemetery on the terrace edge at West Bedfont to the south-east (Longley 1976) and the large, probably later bronze age double-ditched circular enclosure at Mayfield Farm, East Bedfont (Cotton *et al* 1988).

## DATE

In the absence of excavation, the date of the Fern Hill enclosure is difficult to ascertain, though some inferences can be drawn. It must pre-date Glover's 1635 survey of Isleworth Hundred, for instance, while its position immediately adjacent to the Harmondsworth parish boundary suggests that—like Caesar's Camp to the north-west—it was used as a convenient landmark in an otherwise flat landscape when these bounds were formalised. It is reasonable to

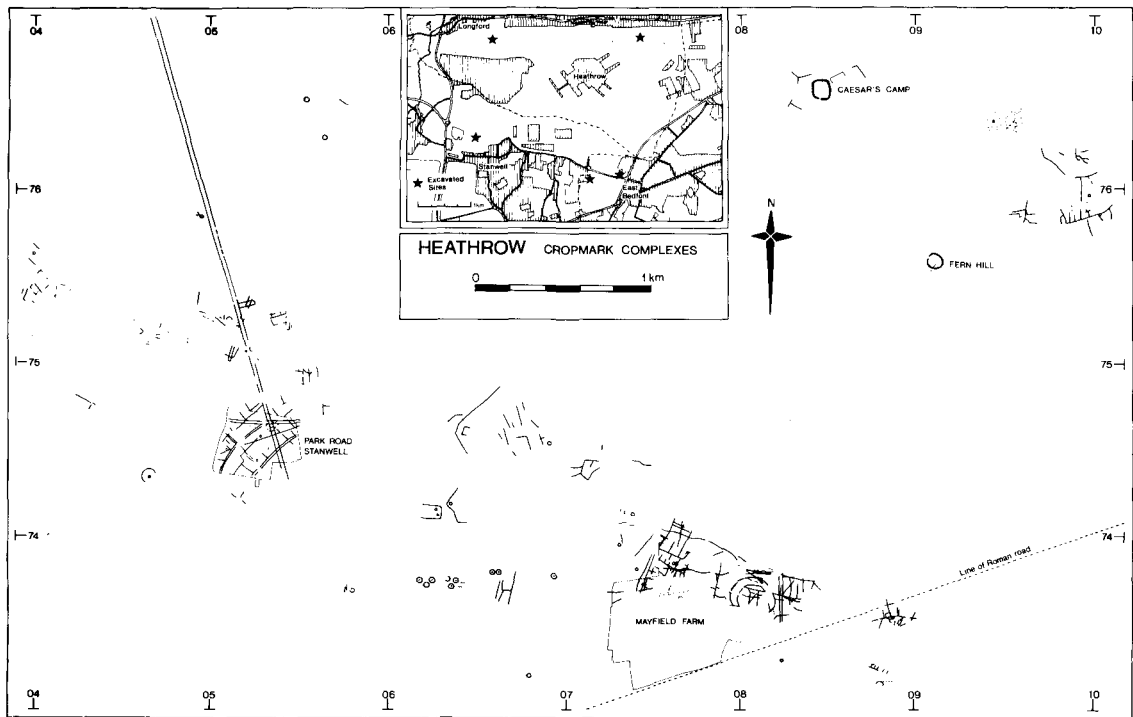


Fig 5. Cropmark complexes in the vicinity of Heathrow Airport (after Longley 1976 and Bird *et al* (1983), with additions). (The position of the Caesar's Camp earthwork has been taken from Ordnance Survey maps.)

assume that this had occurred by the mid to late Saxon period, if not earlier (Bonney 1972).<sup>4</sup> The use of earthworks—particularly barrows—as landmarks for parish and estate boundaries is well documented (eg Gelling 1978, 191–214; Aston 1985, 39–43), and other local examples can be cited (see note 3).

Morphologically, the enclosure finds its best parallels among the many small later prehistoric enclosures recorded up and down the Thames valley. A number are known from the locality, although only two—the impressively-fortified Caesar's Camp (Grimes 1961) and the slighter rectilinear enclosure on Staines Moor (Brown 1972)—have been excavated. Closest in terms of size and shape, however, are the undated earthwork enclosures at Wyke Green, Osterley (VCH 1911, 4) and Curtis Road, Hounslow (see note 3).

## CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of any recent, systematic, archaeologically-orientated aerial survey in historic west Middlesex, examination of available maps, surveys and other documentary sources can provide valuable information as to the early settlement of the region. When such a study can be combined with the limited aerial photographic evidence that already exists, as here, the results can be as satisfying in their own modest way as those obtained from other, better served, areas of the country.

However, the continuing erosion of the past through the agency of mineral extraction and other large scale development makes the recording of what remains in the area a matter of urgency. If the legacy of the region's early map makers, surveyors and fieldworkers is to be properly utilised and understood, therefore, no future opportunity to examine the buried heritage round Heathrow should be missed. This will require the cooperation of archaeologists and those responsible for initiating and controlling development projects, and the formulation and adoption of sound, 'heritage friendly', planning policies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Other 'Caesar's Camps' in the London area include those on Wimbledon Common (Whimster 1931, 116–7); Greenfield Common, Laleham near Staines (Crawford 1933); Kingsbury (Vulliamy 1930, 210); St Pancras (Celoria & Spencer 1968); and Keston (Jessup 1930, 158–9).

<sup>2</sup> The 1635 place-name Shakesbury (subsequently Shaesbury (c. 1710), Shasbury (1754) and Schapsbury (1784; 1819)) may derive from the OE *sceaceres byrig*, 'the robbers fort'. However, Margaret Gelling (pers comm) notes that in other *sceacere* place-names, the -r- has a high survival rate, giving modern Shaker-, Shacker-, or Sugar- names (cf Shackerley and Shakerley, Lancashire), 'the robbers wood' (Ekwall 1960, 413)). In this instance though Gelling is inclined to accept that the -r- may have disappeared by dissimilation caused by the -r- of *byrig* to give 'Shakesbury'. An earlier spelling of the place-name would allow more certainty. If indeed Caesar's Camp was known as 'the robbers camp' in the medieval period, Hounslow Heath presumably acquired its dubious reputation earlier than is usually thought.

<sup>3</sup> Legg, annotator of Aubrey's *Monumenta Britannica* (p 294), assumes, wrongly, that the camp seen by Aubrey 'on the north end of Hounslow Heath' is the same as the earthwork whose site lay between Curtis Road and the railway sidings to the south of the modern Hounslow Heath (TQ 127737), more than three miles to the south-east. (Situated in Twickenham parish and described as a circular camp 200ft in diameter, this was visible as 'the slightest depression in the ground' in the early years of this century (VCH 1911, 4); it is distinct from a further site, described as a 'castell', lying on the east bank of the Crane, which is shown by Ralph Treswell the younger on 'A *plott of the whole mannor of Sion*' dated April 1607). However, Aubrey's reference to 'King[s] Arbour' (which lay on the Bath Road three and a half miles to the north-west of Curtis Road), together with the close agreement in the shape (rectangular) and dimensions of his 'Roman camp' (132 × 90 paces) with those of Caesar's Camp (c. 120 × 114m), makes it clear that it is the latter which is being referred to here. Like Caesar's Camp and Fern Hill, the Curtis



Road earthwork also lay on a parish boundary—in this case that separating Twickenham from Isleworth.<sup>4</sup> Neither earthwork is referred to in the probably late 14th century (*temp* Richard II) manorial bounds of Harmondsworth, appended to a much earlier charter of Offa (see Gelling 1979, 99–101). However, work on these manorial bounds by John Mills suggests that Caesar's Camp and Fern Hill probably lay between the *viam bruere* (the 'heath road'—which can be identified as the modern Bath Road) and *le aldrenehawe*, literally translated as 'the alder valley hedge'—the latter running down to the *badyndyche*, plausibly identified as the Longford River.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

GLRO Greater London Record Office  
HAS Hunting Air Surveys

#### MAP SOURCES

T Bowles *A new and correct map of thirty miles round London*, c. 1740  
M Glover *Map of Isleworth Hundred* 1635  
J B Homanns *Accurater Grundriss v: Gegend der Koenigl: Gross-Britannischen Haupt und Residentz, Stadt London (Nürnberg) c. 1710*  
J Rocque *Topographical map of the County of Middlesex*, 1754  
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