

A Ring Ditch at Radwell Quarry

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SUMMARY

In 1983 a small excavation was undertaken of a double ring ditch at Radwell, Felmersham. The limited scope of the excavations and the poor preservation of the site meant that the results were inconclusive.

INTRODUCTION

In February 1983 a small scale excavation was undertaken by the Field Team attached to the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council to investigate an unusual crop mark site of a double ring ditch prior to its destruction by gravel extraction. Manpower from a Community Enterprise Programme was used.

The archive and finds have been deposited with Bedford Museum.

The site lay 1 km north of the hamlet of Radwell, in the parish of Felmersham, close to the River Ouse. The aerial photograph (plate 1) showed a number of archaeological features, including various enclosures, a pit alignment and the ring ditch. No surface signs were evident of any of the features, and no finds were produced from field-walking of the area. Unlike the previous excavation at Radwell quarry, in 1972 and 1975, where mechanical graders were used to strip the topsoil and subsoil (Hall 1973, Hall and Woodward 1977), the methods of topsoil stripping employed by the 1983 sub-contractors immediately in advance of archaeological investigation was helpful. This, together with adverse weather, meant that it was not possible to recognise many of the archaeological features in the partially exposed gravel and thus no complete plan of the site could be made. A watching brief demonstrated how limited the information gathered under these conditions could be. Excavation was restricted to the ring ditch, and was designed to try to answer certain specific questions about date and function. A cruciform trench, dug by hand from topsoil, was placed to locate the feature from plotted aerial photographs, and two further trenches were opened by mechanical methods: one to check the position of the inner ditch, and the other to expose a large area over the centre of the

ring ditch in order to locate any possible surviving burial.

NATURAL TOPOGRAPHY

The features were originally located on rising ground that sloped gently up to the river. Deposition of alluvium and build up of plough soil was uneven over the site, varying from almost none at the northern end, to over 50 cm at the base of the slope at the southern end of the trench. This resulted in the modern ground surface being level, with about 30 cm of plough soil lying on the subsoil. Archaeological features were found dug under the subsoil, and sealed by it, and cut both from within and through it. The subsoil consisted of alluvial deposits that had been heavily ploughed, with artefacts, charcoal and stones being mixed throughout.

THE RING DITCH

The ditches forming the ring were sealed by the subsoil, and cut into the natural gravel. Six lengths of the ditches were excavated, sufficient to enable the location of the centre of the feature. The inner ditch 1 (Figs 1 and 2) had an external diameter of 31 m, was 3 m wide and between 90 cm and 1.10 m deep. The lower deposits were a loamy gravel, the upper layer being a dark, grey-brown loam with few pebbles, and flecks of charcoal. The general appearance of this and all the ditch fills was very similar to the overlying subsoil.

The outer ditch, 2 (Figs 1 and 2), had a radius in the north of 23 m, where it followed closely the line of the inner ditch around the northern half. It then split off from the circle in the southern part, continuing as two straight, converging lines. Exactly where they end is not clear. Examination of the aerial photograph (Plate 1) makes the outer ditch appear to form an open horseshoe around the inner ditch, although in another published photograph (Field 1974, Pl VIII B) it appears to be closed at the southern end, to describe a large oval around the circular ditch 1. Ditch 2 had very similar fill to 1, but was narrower and shallower. The southern section of ditch 2, where excavated, was very much

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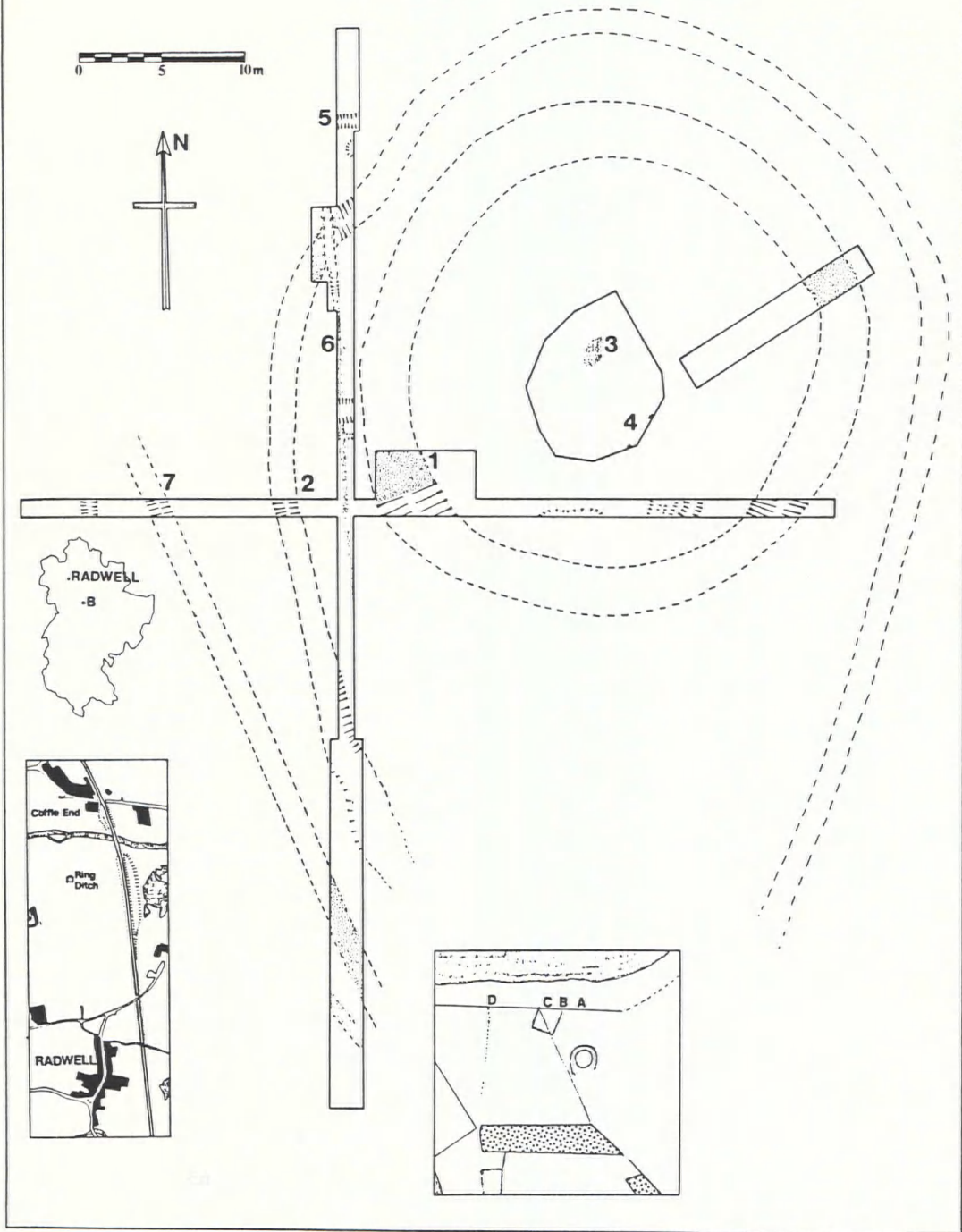


Fig 1 Plan of site; inset shows location of site

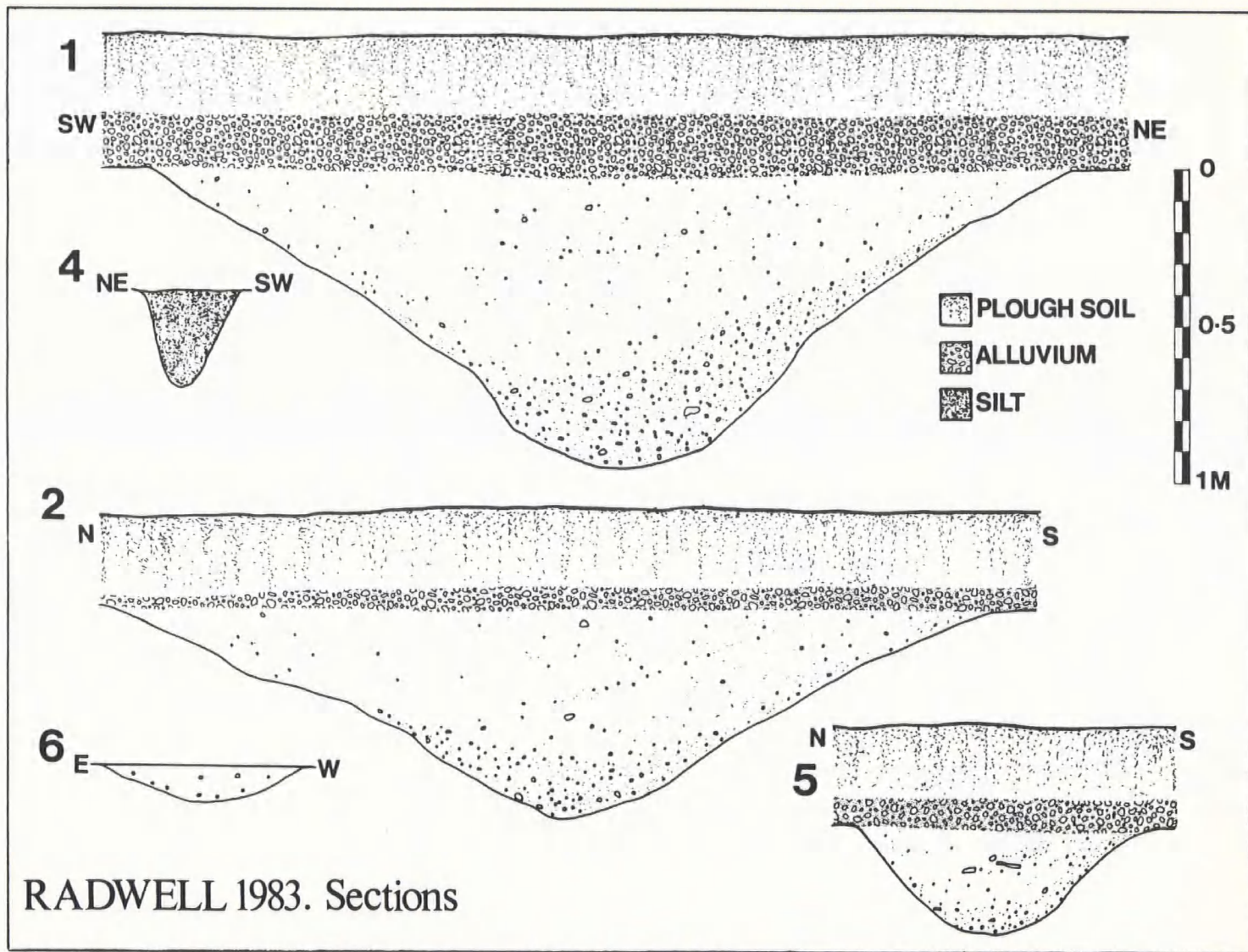


Fig 2 Sections

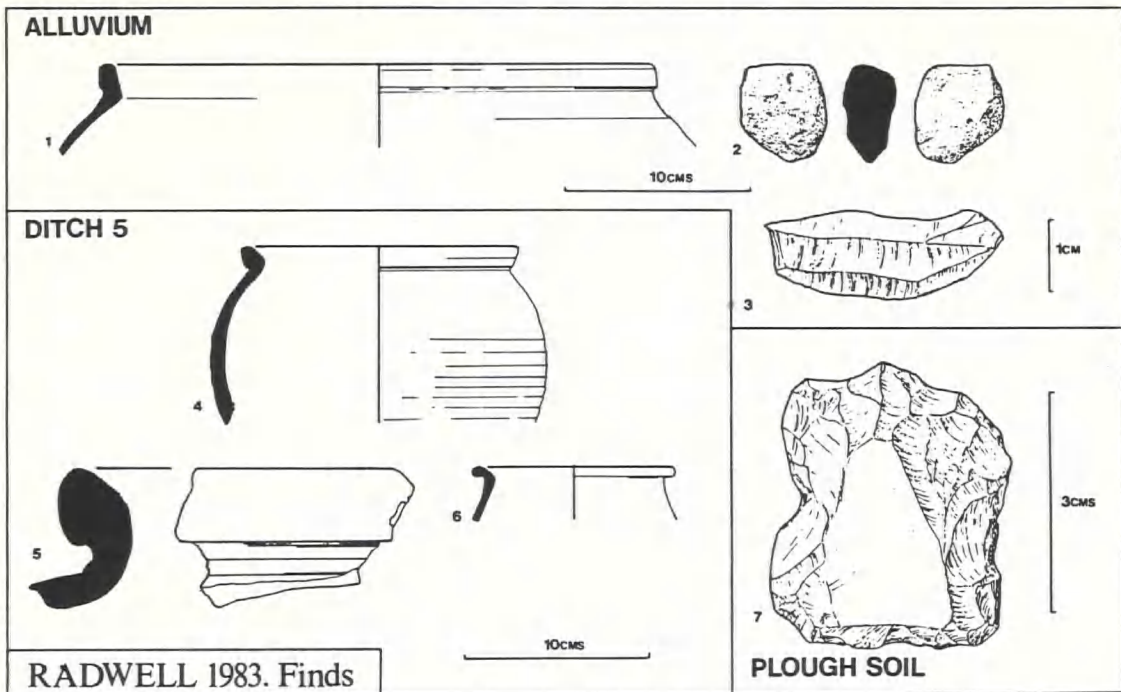


Fig 3 Finds
Scales as marked

shallower and seemed about to disappear completely as it reached the bottom of the slope. It may therefore represent more of a terrace of the slope on this side than a proper ditch, and was possibly dug to give any central mound a more dramatic appearance from the south when looking towards the river.

No evidence of a mound survived, although small patches of grey silty soil accumulated in natural dips in the gravel surface may have represented an old ground surface. Without any connecting stratigraphy it was not possible to demonstrate that the two ditches were contemporary, although the absence of any finds in the outer ditch, the similarities of the fills and the shape and size all suggest that they must be of broadly the same date.

The central area of the ring ditch was rather unproductive, but there was a discolouration in the gravel at the centre, where the interment might be expected, 3 (Fig 1), which produced small flecks of charcoal. This proved to contain no finds at all, and was only about 3 cm deep at the most. Close to the discoloured gravel were two post or stake holes, 4 (Figs 1 and 2); these were about 30 cm wide and 30 cm deep, and were filled with a grey silt. Again

the relationship of these with the ring ditch cannot be demonstrated because of the lack of any connecting stratigraphy.

LATER FEATURES

Overlying the ring ditch were a number of later features. The only one with a direct relationship with the earlier features was a narrow gully, 6 (Figs 1 and 2), which was cut into the upper fill of ditch 2. This gully produced one body sherd of Roman pottery (see 3, d, below). A number of small ditches and gullies were excavated, only two of which were datable. The first was a small ditch, 5 (Figs 1 and 2) with a loamy gravel fill, containing a number of sherds of Roman pottery, and out from below ploughed alluvium. The only other datable feature was a late field boundary ditch, 7 (Fig 1), cut from the plough soil.

The remaining features were without any finds. One small gully, filled with dark grey silt, 8 (Fig 1), was sealed by the subsoil. Another irregular cut, filled with silt showed up in the early plough soil, 9 (Fig 1), whilst a ditch filled with unused loamy deposits (Fig 1), was cut through it. The difficulty of

distinguishing the content of the ditches from the subsoil has already been discussed, and it was only when the ditch was cut from the top of it that the relationship could be easily seen, when the fill had a larger proportion of loam in it than the earlier deposits.

OTHER FEATURES

A watching brief was kept on the field as it was stripped and, in spite of the ground conditions, four other find spots were recorded (Fig 1). Features A, B and C were exposed in the cutting of a roadway for the quarry, but were all rather indistinct. Possibly B may have represented the ditch of the rectangular enclosure shown in the aerial photograph (Pl 1a). D was part of a pit alignment, and consisted of two pits cut into the gravel. The first was 1.5 metres wide tapering to 50 cms at the bottom, and was 1.5 metres deep, the second survived to only a few centimetres. The fill consisted of a silty grey-black loam with many flecks of charcoal. No evidence of posts or post-packing was observed in either.

FINDS

FLINT

A number of flints was found although none was in a stratified context.

- (a) (Fig 3,7) a scraper with retouch all round the circumference giving the tool a 'waisted' appearance. The working face forms an angle of 40° to the horizontal. Found in topsoil.
- (b) (Not illustrated) two waste flakes found in topsoil.
- (c) (Not illustrated) end of a blade with 4 parallel flake scars, possibly a broken tang, found in subsoil.
- (d) (Fig 3,3) broken blade, with parallel flake scars, found in subsoil.
- (e) (Not illustrated) waste flake, found in subsoil.

POTTERY

Prehistoric:

- (a) (Fig 3,2) rim sherd from a hand made vessel, very abraded, buff outer surface with a grey core showing many shell inclusions. Not enough survives to estimate either the shape or the size of the vessel, although it must have come from a pot with a thickened rim. Found in subsoil close to the centre of the ditch.
- (b) (Not illustrated) body sherd of dark brown, hand made pot with a flaky, vassicular fabric. Found in upper fill of Ditch 1.
- (c) (Not illustrated) body sherds of two hand made vessels, a buff coloured pot with a dark grey core and a vassicular fabric with very fine flint grits, and a thin walled dark grey vessel with a very soft fabric filled with grog and very fine quartz grits. Found in A, a shallow pit north of the site.
- (d) (Not illustrated) body sherd of a well made, hand made vessel. Dark grey fabric with small quartz grits, surface is hard and smooth, possibly late Iron Age? Found in B, a shallow ditch north of the site.

Roman

A number of Roman coarseware sherds were found throughout the modern and early plough soils.

- (a) (Fig 3,5) Rim sherd from a very large storage vessel. Buff outer surface grey core with no visible grits. Ditch 5.
- (b) (Fig 3,4) Rim and body sherds, pale buff, very light, 'corky' fabric, partially blackened on the outside. Ditch 5.
- (c) (Fig 3,6) Rim sherd of white, hard fabric, with very small flint grits. Ditch 5.
- (d) (Not illustrated) Body sherd of hard, white, smooth fabric. Gully 6.
- (e) (Not illustrated) Body sherds found with a sherd of hard, white fabric with a dark brown colour coat. Found in C (a small pit, north of the site).

Other

A scatter of post medieval pottery was found in the plough soil and subsoil.

DISCUSSION

The state of preservation of the ring did not allow for any close investigation into date or function. Being built on a small natural mound meant that the centre has been particularly vulnerable to ploughing. Perhaps the most likely sequence of building is a round barrow with a central interment, followed by engrandisement, perhaps marking secondary use at some later date.

Although the pattern of land use was obviously quite complex throughout the prehistoric and Roman period this limited excavation could not answer any questions concerning its development. Nor can the important question of when the heavy alluvial deposits were laid down in the Ouse valley be answered with any certainty, due to the continual ploughing of the site, including modern deep ploughing which has mixed up the deposits and truncated many of the features.

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