

A Rectilinear Enclosure at Maulden Firs, Barton

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WHILST digging Barrow No. 4 on Galley Hill, Streatley during August 1962, a number of cropmarks were observed in a field to the north of the hill. One of the marks showed as a small oval enclosure, close to the plantation known as Maulden Firs. A much larger crop-mark close by suggested a ditched camp of some kind. Both of these sites lie in a field known as Mauldens in Barton parish belonging to Mr R. F. Farr of Barton Hill Farm. Permission was given in August 1963 for excavations to determine the nature of the larger cropmark, but due to the unprecedented lateness of the harvest, it was not possible to carry out this examination, and the small oval shaped enclosure was examined instead. (Nat. Grid Ref. TL094275).

The site, which lies on chalk, was approximately located from observations made the previous year. This was followed by a proton magnetometer survey by Dr Martin Aitken of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology at Oxford. The survey revealed the oval ditch plan with considerable clarity and accuracy. Trenches were laid out on a modified quadrant system to cover the main features revealed by the magnetometer. An additional larger trench was cut on the north-west side where more marked anomalies had appeared; and the northern section was extended eastwards to investigate a minimum anomaly.

Excavation shewed an oval ditch plan with internal measurements of 71 feet by 45 feet. The ditch varied in width from 5 feet to 8 feet, and in depth from 2 feet to 3 feet. The filling was fairly uniform throughout. Chalk rubble at the bottom was covered by loose grey-brown soil, and a layer of more compact orange coloured earth which contained very many snail shells. A humic layer above contained varying scatters of chalk rubble, especially on the eastern side of the enclosure, suggesting that an outer bank had been ploughed away from that side. The bottom of the ditch was flat on the western side of the site, but 'U' shaped on the south and east. The lower sides of the chalk ditches were very weathered, making it often difficult to determine their exact shape.

The enclosure appears to be without an entrance gap. The magnetometer survey suggested a possible break on the northern side, but the excavation showed that although the ditch contracted to its narrowest width, five feet, it did not terminate. It seems likely that an entrance bridge of planks may have provided access at this point. A search for post holes to hold such a structure in position proved fruitless, although it is worth noting that the magnetometer shewed a reverse anomaly at this point. Similarly, an examination of the inner and outer edges of the ditch for traces of a palisade also proved negative. The interior area had been so closely ploughed, only 7 inches topsoil remaining above the chalk,

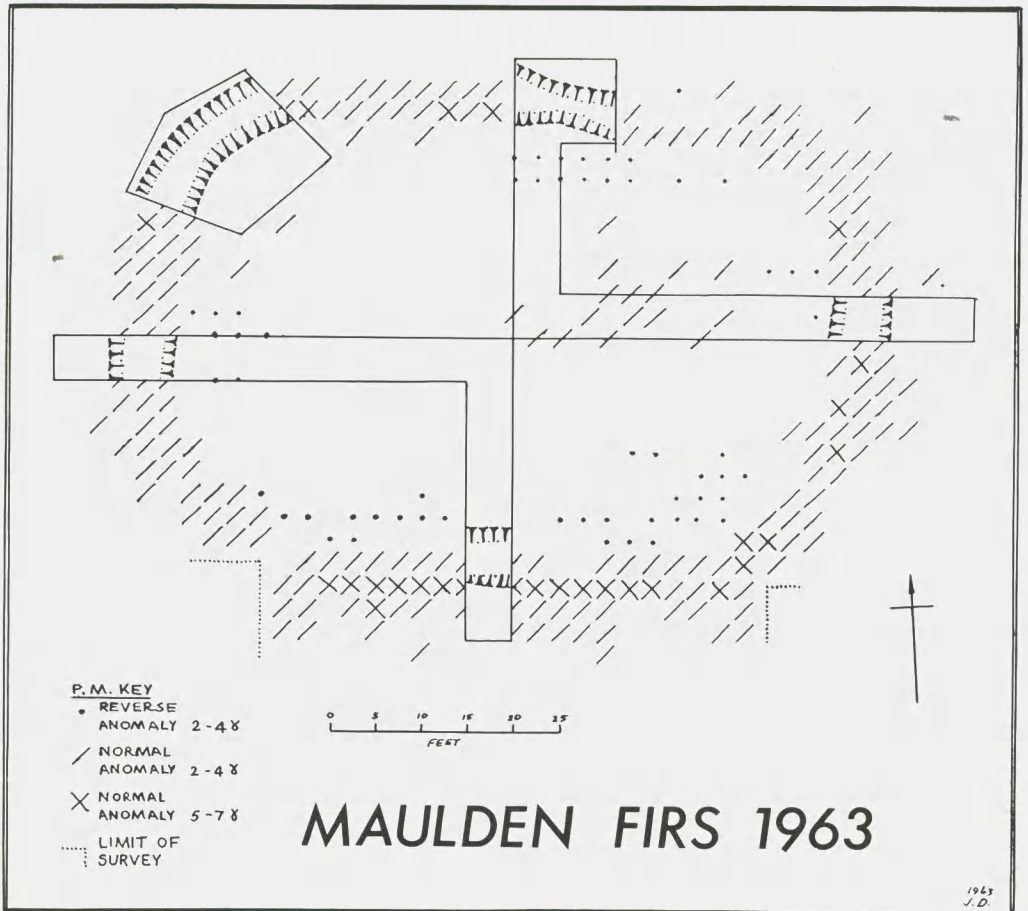


Fig 1. Plan of Rectilinear Enclosure at Maulden Firs showing results of Proton Magnetometer survey and excavation.

that all traces of surface features had been destroyed. An area of possible disturbance east of the centre of the site proved to have been caused by tree root holes.

Eight small sherds of pottery were the total finds from the site. Of these two from a depth of 1 foot below the humus are of Early Iron Age character being closely paralleled by material from Dray's Ditches. The other six sherds lay on the chalk surface inside the enclosure. Two appear to be Early Iron Age, the rest Belgic.

From these limited finds it would be unwise to try and date the site rigidly. An origin fairly early in the Iron Age suggests itself, with the ditches slowly silting up into the Roman era. The final destruction of a possible external bank by ploughing must have taken place in relatively recent times.

As to the purpose of the site, lack of habitation and domestic refuse suggests a cattle or sheep pound, and its proximity to the Icknield Way may connect it with animal round-ups prior to trading. Mrs M. A. Cotton has recently drawn our attention to the large number of rectilinear enclosures dating from Neolithic to medieval times to be found in Britain and France, and the site described above would fit conveniently into her series.¹ Her only Bedfordshire example at Wyboston was of Belgic date, with deep 'V' shaped ditches and later additions and alterations.² This was unlike the majority of enclosures and our own site which seem to have had a single period of occupation.

The writer would like to acknowledge the generosity and help of the land owner Mr R. F. Farr throughout the excavation, and Mr L. A. Speed who provided transport for equipment. Mr John Fossey acted as assistant director, and to him and all the volunteer diggers who cannot be named individually, our thanks are offered. We are particularly indebted to Dr Martin Aitken and his assistants for providing what we believe to have been the first magnometer survey of a Bedfordshire site.

¹*Berks. A.J.* 59, (1961) 14ff.

²*C.A.S. L* (1956) 75.