

## Excavations at New House Farm, Billington, 1997-1999

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### SUMMARY

*In order to elaborate on brief investigations carried out in the 1950's the Manshead Archaeological Society obtained permission from the landowner, Mr W Edwins, to excavate in an orchard on the hilltop at New House Farm, Billington. Seven trenches were excavated between 1997-99, giving an area excavation of c. 70 square metres. A palimpsest of medieval to post medieval occupation evidence was revealed adjacent to and partially overlying Romano-British features and two late Roman period burials, one within a recut Roman ditch and the other cut into the edge of a large Iron Age defensive ditch. The ditch had been filled with burnt material and destruction debris from some undatable but catastrophic event on the site in the later prehistoric period.*

### BACKGROUND

In The Manshead Magazine No 2, January 1959, C L Matthews reported:

“The Ordnance Survey are producing an Iron Age map of the British Isles and the Society have called their attention to a hitherto unrecorded site that occupied the crest of Billington Hill. This shows as a single rampart earthwork, and the Dunstable Rover Scouts (which included P Pratt and C L Matthews) carried out an excavation there some years ago, which produced Iron Age pottery. In an endeavour to find a little more information some members of the Society spent a weekend during August on this site and a few trial cuts were made, with the permission of Mr Day, the owner of the land. The upper soil on this hilltop is gravel (quite a change from our usual digging in chalksoil) and a large area of the site had been much disturbed in the past by gravel digging. All of the cuts taken showed evidence of gravel digging and a feature of the spoil heaps was that they contained nothing later than the Roman period. Whether they were in fact Roman gravel workings it is too early to say, and we will have to carry out much more work on the site before we can prove or disprove this. We did find ample evidence to prove that the site had been in long occupation during the Iron Age. A great amount of pottery was found and one flint hammer. Among the sherds were hand

made pots with flattened rims reinforced with crushed flint, and one piece carried an applied band in the Bronze Age tradition. This perhaps suggests an occupation that commenced at a very early period in the Iron Age. Other sherds show a continuity of this occupation. There were samples of Iron Age A,B, pottery, i.e. burnished wares with bead rims and sherds decorated with a curvilinear pattern. The Belgae were represented by coarsely combed pottery (probably early) and later types with finer combing. The latest pottery was a few Roman ‘pie dishes’ associated with fragments of Castor ware. The hilltop at Billington appears to have a history very akin to Puddle Hill”

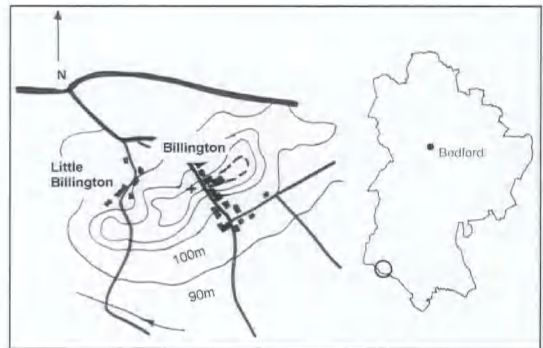


Figure 1 Site location

A plan of the 1958 excavation was not published with the report. However, a sketch plan of the site (at SP944227) dated 1954 was forwarded to the Ordnance Survey by C L Matthews (location illustrated by a dashed line in Fig 1). This shows extant earthworks to the south and east of the site, in places up to 12 feet (4m) high and 45 feet (15m) wide, apparently the features bulldozed in 1959. A neighbouring farmer recalls seeing only the upcast from gravel pits being bulldozed at this time.

Bedfordshire County Council's Historic Environment Record includes a note by an Ordnance Survey archaeological surveyor that the “banks of the earthwork were bulldozed in 1959, although the ground presents an uneven appearance, no recognisable features apparent. Site on level ground at NE

end of short ridge". Previously F G Gurney, a local amateur archaeologist, had noted that "the small ploughed field on top of the hill...is called Al(d)bury. This goes to confirm my impression that there is a line of earthwork on the brow of the hill along the southern hedgerow. The gravel which here lies on the hill top, used to be dug in some quantity and many human bones thrown out...They occur not so much in the gravel as in a shallow bed of deep black soil on the surface" (Gurney 1915).

In 1984 Simco summarised C L Matthew's report and suggested that the Iron Age site showed some re-use in the Roman period. The excavation archive (which may not be complete) held in the Manshead Society HQ consists of a limited number of sherds (not the great quantity reported) of mid to late Iron Age & Roman date.

Prior to the commencement of the 1997 orchard excavation at New House Farm (Warren 1998) a survey of the visible earthworks on the hillslope was carried out by the Society (Fig 2) and a small test pit dug to ascertain the depth of surviving archaeological deposits on one of the visible building platforms. The apparent evidence of other medieval building platforms (and possible hut hollows) on the hillslope should also be noted. Evidence of Medieval cultiva-

tion, in the form of ridge & furrow, can be seen on the lower slopes of the field.

### TOPOGRAPHY

The hill spur at 131m OD dominates the landscape, with lower lying fields at 90m OD to the north and 85m OD to the south, draining to the Ouzel Brook. The geology is predominantly gault clay with deposits of sandy gravels along the hilltop overlain by calcareous clayey soils (Horne, 2000).

### EXCAVATION

The initial excavations, (trenches A-C) carried out in 1997 at SP94222265, were across part of an identified building house platform on the hilltop (Fig 3) (Warren 1998). This revealed little structural evidence, apart from some rough circles of stones set about large lumps of chalk clunch, interpreted as post pads, with medieval sherds amongst the stones and seemingly unrelated postholes. Slight signs of internal floors and partitions were indicated by lines of yellow coloured clay on the gravel covered grey gault clay of the house platform. Where the platform sloped into a gully to the south of the trench (above the line of the Roman and Iron Age ditches) a tumble of sandstone boulders with pegtile was found

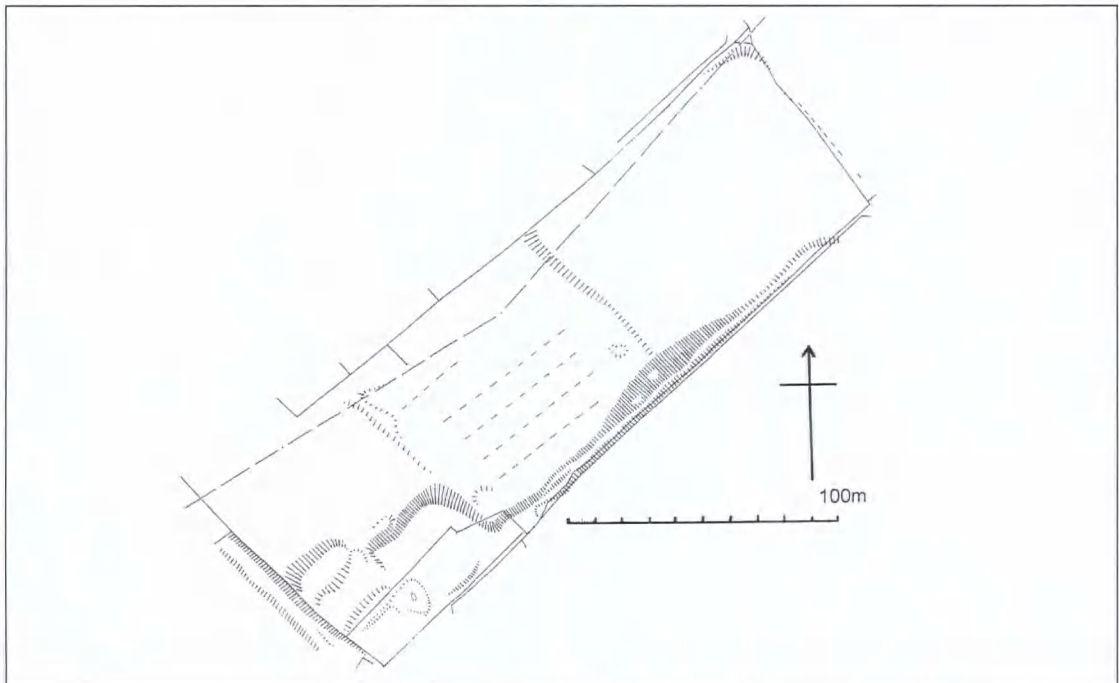


Figure 2 Survey of visible earthworks north of hill (1997)

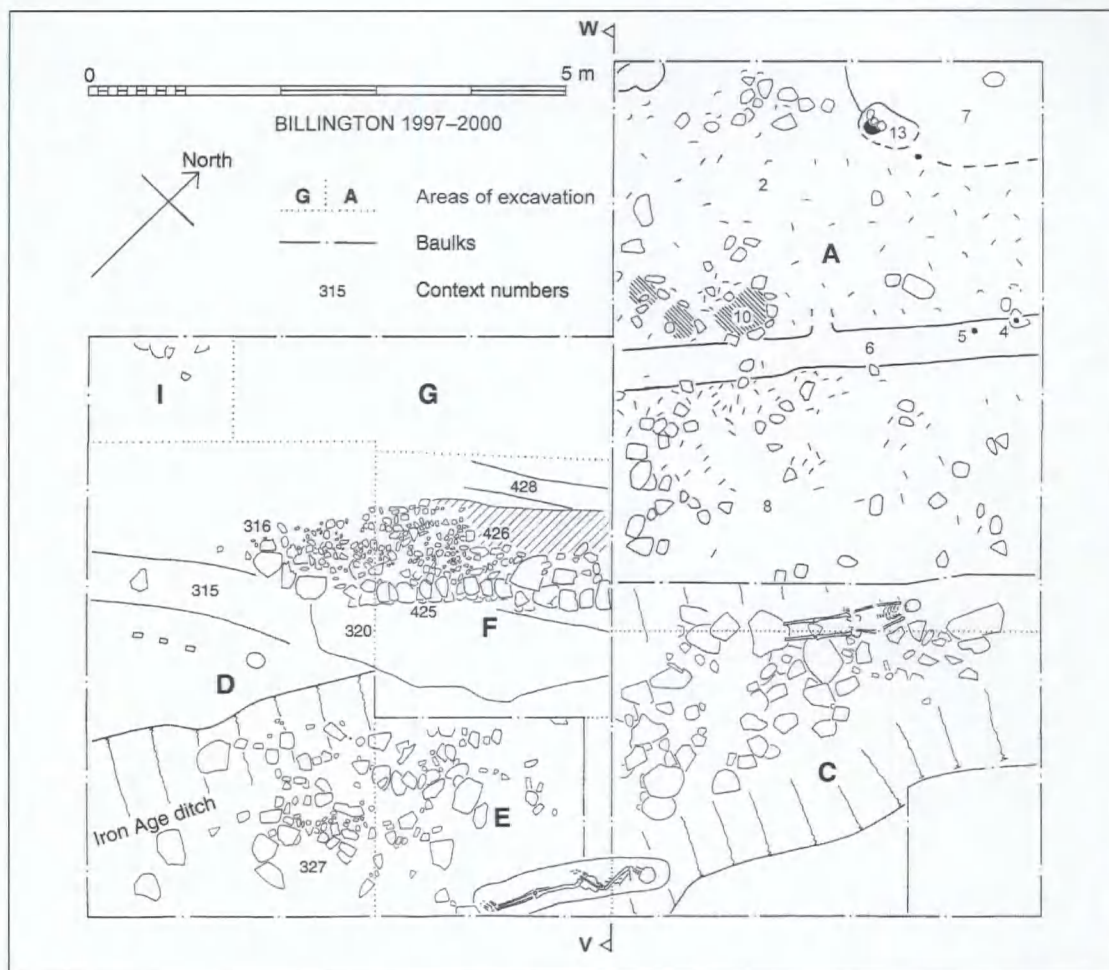


Figure 3 Plan of excavated areas

suggesting demolition material from the major building on the site. The latest datable finds within the loam filled gully [08] were potsherds, glassware fragments and pipebowls dating to the late 17C-early 18C. A quantity of medieval sherds, medieval metalwork finds, including a decorated Buckle plate, perhaps of C15-C16 date, and residual Saxon, Roman and Iron Age sherds were also found in the same deposit.

In trench C, sloping down to the north (from the rampart side of the ditch) was a deposit of 18C-19C building material - brick, tile and plaster - with potsherds and other material. This may indicate an attempt to make up the ground surface within the gully which leads to a hilltop pond some 20m to the east.

Excavation of the upper fill of the Iron Age ditch

revealed an inhumation burial, cut into a burnt clay deposit (Fig 3) at the ditch edge. The skeleton, lying on its right side and face down, was of a mature adult male: it showed no evidence of traumatic death and may have ended up in a contorted position due to having been rolled into the grave or buried while the body was still in rigor mortis (Isaac, 1999). A further ditch, of Roman date was identified in section cut inside the northern edge of the earlier and larger Iron Age ditch (Fig 4). Within the black silty fill of the Roman ditch a second inhumation burial was found. The incomplete skeleton was of a mature adult female (less feet bones) laid out with head to the east. There were no grave goods with either of the inhumations. The evidence suggests that the ditch burials were probably of late Roman date (Isaac, 1999).

In trench C, the ditch fill below the female grave was excavated, revealing a deposit of grey clay and charcoal above large blocks of sandstone at 1.5m DBS (Depth Below Surface). Some evidence for a slumped gravel bank or rampart was observed, in section, in the southern end of the trench. Finds of Roman sherds in soil above the gravel, suggest any earthworks (on this side of the hill) were removed in antiquity.

In trench D (Fig 3) in the upper fill of the large Iron Age ditch running east-west through the site, a roughly circular setting of stones [327] suggested something more than the random stone tumble found elsewhere along the ditch. This stone setting was filled by a loam deposit containing Romano-British sherds. Adjacent to [327] and partly covering the ditch was a flint, stone and burnt clay surface on which late Iron Age/early Romano-British sherds were found. A sawn antler fragment was found at the ditch edge and Iron Age sherds were found in the lower ditch fill at 1.25m DBS. Fragments of burnt timber were also found amongst the black charcoal laden deposits in the ditch fill.

In trenches F and G a deposit of chalk, flint and peg tile was noted (at 0.15m DBS) and medieval sherds were found in the loam below. This overlay a fragmentary cobbled surface [426] set in clay loam (with medieval sherd finds). Below this was a shallow truncated beam slot [428] cut into the clay at 0.4m DBS. The cobbled surface abutted a 2.4m long drystone foundation wall [425] constructed from sandstone boulders and standing 0.4m (four courses) high.

The drystone wall appears to have been robbed out away from the surviving remnant, appearing as stone tumble to the east on a solid clay and gravel surface overlying the northern Roman/ Iron Age

ditch edge and to the west as stone tumble [316] and as a robber trench [315]. To the south of the drystone wall a sandy clay deposit containing medieval sherds and mesolithic blade fragments overlay the end of the Roman re-cut ditch identified in 1997.

### THE INHUMATION BURIALS

The two excavated skeletons were sent to the University of Bradford for analysis. The report concludes that the "adult male (skeleton 1- height 1.733m) suffered from a condition known as DISH (Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis-typically shown by ossification of spinal ligaments-or the conversion of soft tissue to bone) which is characterised by large flowing spinal osteophytes and extra-spinal enthesopathies. He also suffered from osteoarthritis of the neck and degenerative joint disease to the shoulders. Evidence suggests that Billington 001 was a bone former, certainly the changes in his spine suggest he may have had a hard life and a lot of heavy use of the spine. The osteoarthritis in the neck would have made it painful to use his neck and probably limited his mobility. He had poor dental health and suffered from caries, abscess, periodontal disease and had lost several teeth before death. During his life he had fractured the 5th metacarpal on his right hand; this had healed with slight deformity which may suggest that it was not kept motionless during healing. Billington 002 was a mature female who also suffered from poor dental health. The proximal fibula had been fractured but had healed well with little deformity, and perhaps had been kept motionless during the healing process. 002 also suffered from OA to the lower back and degenerative changes to both shoulders. In summary, both individuals were past the 4th decade of life and had not lived a life free from disease or trauma' (Isaac 1999).

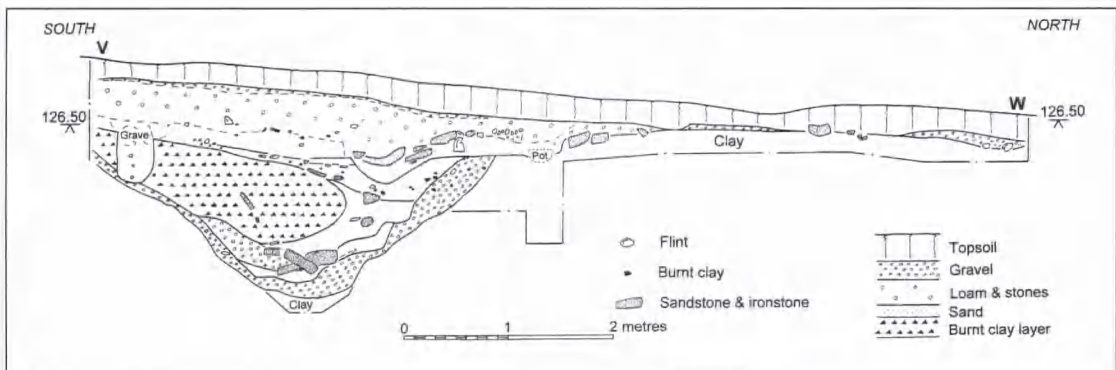


Figure 4 Section through Iron Age and Roman ditch

## DISCUSSION

Sections of the Iron Age ditch were completely excavated in 1999. This revealed burnt clay and an ashy deposit with charcoal, overlying large sandstone boulders at the base of a cleanly scoured ditch. The evidence suggests a violent destructive event following the scouring of the ditch which included the burning and slighting of the enclosure (or hill fort's) defences. If the destruction was caused by the Roman army, a date close to the invasion in 43AD could be suggested. However, finds of late Iron Age-early RB pottery on the surface of the filled in ditch may well indicate the destruction of the site occurred in the later pre-Roman Iron Age. However, the way adjacent areas of the short length of ditch excavated contained quite different (almost segregated) destruction deposits: large boulders with ash, burnt clay with smaller stones; ash, charcoal and boulders; charcoal, ash and sand, hints at the possibility of ritualistic deposition of material. This may even represent deliberate demolition and clearance by the site's Iron Age occupiers. The use of large sandstone boulders, presumably as construction materials on the site in the prehistoric period - perhaps as rampart foundations, or drystone walling/ facing - should also be noted.

Roman activity on the site was indicated by a possible circular stone feature [327] set into the Iron Age ditch fill adjacent to a metalled surface, the recut ditch running along the northern side of the Iron Age ditch and the later ditch burials. Residual late Iron Age and Roman coarseware sherds were found across the site. Residual Saxon sherds, including a stamped fragment of mid-Saxon Ipswich ware, were similarly distributed. Saxo-Norman potsherds, in the form of shelly St. Neot's type wares indicate re-occupation of the site, perhaps commencing in the 11C. However, identifiable forms suggest that these were mainly of developed St Neot's type wares and

probably of 12C-13C date. This dating fits well with the other medieval coarseware sherd finds: sandy local wares and green glazed (Brill/Boarstall) wares many of which were redeposited within sealed contexts (below a floor and within a wall) following some late medieval restructuring (or rebuilding) on the site.

The main building appears to have been abandoned and demolished in the late 17C-early 18C. Some slight evidence for later, flimsier, structures was also noted; but these may have only been agricultural buildings. Once again, the use (and probable re-use) of sandstone as a drystone wall foundation for a later medieval timber framed building should be noted. Similar, sandstone foundations can be seen supporting c.19C brick buildings, in the modern village.

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