

A Ringwork and Bailey at Biggleswade, Bedfordshire

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with a note by J. K. St Joseph

A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN ringwork and bailey on the west bank of the river Ivel about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile west of Biggleswade (TL 184445) was observed from the air as a cropmark by Dr J. K. St Joseph in 1954, and photographed by him then and in subsequent summers. The photographs indicate that the ringwork and bailey, which has several unusual details, is only one of many archaeological features on the gravel 'island' between the Ivel and a tributary stream. St Joseph's description of the complex, a part of which is reprinted below, appeared with a photograph and interpretation diagram in *Antiquity* XL, June 1966, 142-4. The main site recently narrowly escaped destruction by road construction when the line of the Biggleswade A.1 by-pass impinged upon it. It is now further threatened in the long term by gravel quarrying and has been scheduled as an ancient monument by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. The purpose of the present note is to add to St Joseph's account the result of a brief trial excavation to establish the date of the monument undertaken under the auspices of the Archaeology Department of Queen's University, Belfast, as part of a programme of research on ringworks; and to provide a plan (fig 1) of the surface indications on the north part of the site where, after harvest in 1962, thicker stubble indicated the general position of the cropmarks, and slight hollows rarely more than 1 ft. below the general level of the field showed the position of the main ditches.

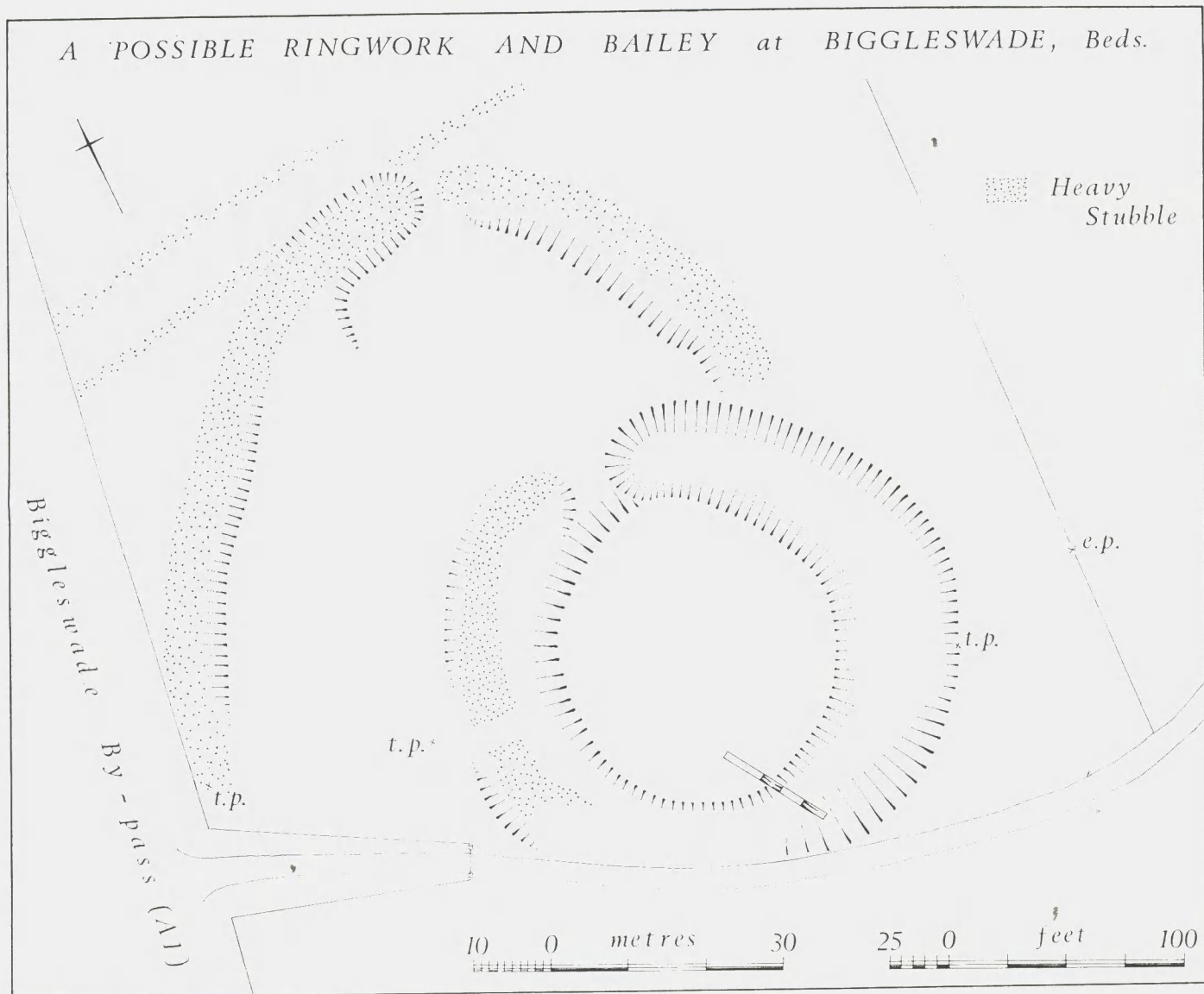
Dr St Joseph has kindly allowed us to draw on his description of the site in *Antiquity*, and we are also grateful for permission to reproduce two air photos,¹ Plates 1 and 2. Plate 1 shows the site before road construction obscured many of the features, and indicates clearly the gravel islands, 650 ft by 900 ft, 'picked out in the photograph by the differential colouring of the crop, which at the date of photography (13 July 1957) had begun, as it ripened, to turn colour only over the higher and better drained gravel. The present course of the river Ivel lies 350 ft. east of the island; a small stream visible on the photograph flows in a curving course a little to the west. Thus, under natural conditions this gravel island would have been surrounded by a flat alluvial plain liable to flood, with

the Ivel to the east, and a streamlet to the west, giving added protection. This is the kind of site likely to attract settlers in any age, and in fact the crop marks suggest a long history of occupation.

The most prominent features on the photograph, as on the ground, are the two broad, closely spaced, concentric, circular ditches 150 ft or more in diameter, to which two outer, less regularly shaped enclosures are attached. The ditch system can still be traced on the surface though the relief has been much smoothed by long-continued ploughing. These remains show strong resemblance to a motte and bailey defensive enclosure; on some photographs the line of a rampart accompanying the ditch of the 'bailey' can be distinguished. The entrance to the ringwork seems to have been from the right-hand 'bailey' (pl 1), at a point where two circular ditches unite to form one broad feature. However, the curious subdivision of these ditches, particularly marked in the outer ditch, which appears partitioned into a series of compartments, and the fine parallel striations within the right-hand bailey, are not easy to explain. On some photographs the 'subdivisions', which must be narrow baulks of firm ground, appear so regularly spaced that there can be no doubt that they are a primary feature of the design. Gang-work, with the construction left unfinished, is hardly the explanation; here interpretation can proceed but so far—full knowledge can only come from digging. No archaeological feature is marked at this point on the maps of the Ordnance Survey,² and all record of the site has evidently long been lost, for the eighteenth century large-scale county maps are equally uninformative.³ Considered as a castle site, the position is a good one from which to command this reach of the Ivel and a crossing of the river near Biggleswade. Before the Domesday Survey, Biggleswade Manor was held by Archbishop Stigand, but by the time of the Survey it belonged to Ralph de Lisle who held it of the king in chief.⁴ There seems no record hitherto of a castle at Biggleswade.

The northern part of the castle site was under corn in 1962 and the crop-marks were readily visible from the raised A.1 causeway for most of the summer. The remarkable features of the site

Fig. 1.



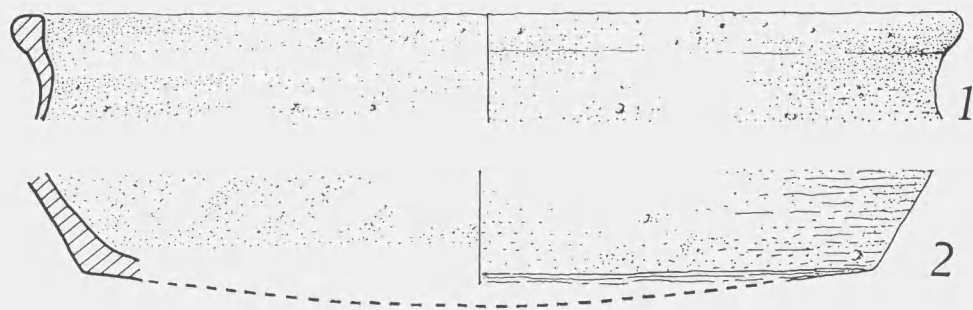


Fig 2.

led to a brief excavation and survey by a team then engaged on a rescue excavation for the Ministry of Public Building and Works at Eaton Socon, with the strictly limited aim of establishing the date of the site, and the state of preservation of structures, if any, within it. It did not attempt to solve any of the problems of interpretation posed in Dr St Joseph's note.

The plan (fig 1) was restricted to the part of the site north of the farm road which cuts it; the field to the south was under plough, and only vague soil marks were visible. In the northern part the general position of the ditches was fixed. Dr St Joseph's suggestion of the position of the entrance from northern 'bailey' into the 'ringwork' is supported by the gap in the hollow representing the ringwork ditch at this point; and an entrance into the northern 'bailey' itself may be suggested by a similar gap, to the north, in the hollow representing the 'bailey' ditch. The area within the ringwork' is a low domed platform, and this, together with the cropmarks within it, suggest, as Dr St Joseph implicitly indicates, that the monument is a ringwork and bailey, rather than a motte and bailey. Ringworks and their derivatives seem increasingly to be a feature of the Norman military scene both in England and in Normandy, and the systematic excavation of this remarkable apparently skeletal example could well answer a number of the problems they pose.

The 1962 excavation consisted of one superficial 48 ft by 3 ft trench cut obliquely across the line of the ringwork ditches (fig 1) and on to the edge of the ringwork platform. It revealed the top of two ditches, not apparently quite on the line of those on the air photos, with an interspace between them. The interspace was covered with a layer, from 6 ins to 12 ins deep, of gravelly yellow-grey soil with charcoal, pottery and considerable amounts of burnt daub and clay. It looked much like a destruction layer derived from timber and daub buildings. The excavation was suspended at this juncture, since the relation of the trench to

the crop-mark features was not clear; the presence of timber structures and the cultural milieu of the monument had been established; and further excavation on such a limited scale was likely to destroy more than it could reveal and was therefore unjustified on a site which was not then threatened.

The finds were few; some decaying wood in the outer ditch suggested that, though perhaps never recorded as an ancient monument, the ditches must long have been deeper, and have only relatively recently been levelled. The eight sherds of pottery from the interspace between the ditches were all in thin sandy fabric, though one (fig 2, 1) contained much rounded quartz-like grit which protruded from the surface to give a very harsh feel. All the sherds probably come from cooking pots, perhaps of medium size. Some of the fabrics are similar to the 'early medieval' wares recently defined by Hurst,⁵ and the form of the rim (fig 2, 1) could be paralleled amongst these wares. Such wares are normally found in the Ouse valley in association with shell-filled fabrics of 'St Neots' and 'developed St Neots' type. The Great Paxton assemblage⁶ indicates that sandy fabrics begin to appear in the area in the later eleventh century. If the Eaton Socon Castle assemblage⁷ is truly dateable to years immediately after 1144, then such fabrics form a considerable, though not overwhelming, proportion of those current in the area in the mid-twelfth century. A rather different series of wares and fabrics succeed in the late twelfth and thirteenth century. The preferred date of the Biggleswade sherds is probably somewhere in the early twelfth century, but the apparent anomaly remains that the little assemblage contains no developed St Neots ware, though from the heartland of that type. An explanation may lie in the proximity of Biggleswade to the east Bedfordshire sands; subsequent work may well show that in a restricted area the entirely suitable local sands were preferred as tempering material to the (probably fossil) shell otherwise used in the Ouse clay vale.⁸

The trial excavation has shown that the ring-work and bailey at Biggleswade almost certainly dates from the century following the Norman Conquest and that it contained wattle-and-daub clad timber structures associated with ditched defences. It may well be a member of the considerable local

group of anarchy castles.⁹ The site potentially contains the answers to many problems associated with ringworks and mottes, and if it is to be destroyed even in the distant future its prior excavation in a leisured and systematic manner seems entirely desirable.

REFERENCES

- ¹Published by kind permission of the University of Cambridge Committee for Aerial Photography.
- ²Ordnance Survey maps, Scale 6 in to 1 mile, Sheet TL148E.
- ³W. Gordon, *Map of the County of Bedford*, 1736, Scale 1 in to 1 mile; T. Jefferys, *County of Bedford*, c 1765, Scale 2 in to 1 mile.
- ⁴*V.C.H. Bedfordshire*, II (1908), 210.
- ⁵*Med. Archaeol.* V, 1961, 259.
- ⁶*Proc. Camb. Ant. Soc.*, XXXV, 1935, 102-3, and XLIX, 1955, 51, n 2.
- ⁷*Proc. Camb. Ant. Soc.*, LVII, 1965, 70-2.
- ⁸*Dark Age Britain* (Ed. D. B. Harden), London, 1956, 254-5.
- ⁹*J. Brit. Archaeol. Ass.* 3rd series, XXVII, 1964, 89-91.