

6 Chimney-pot sherd in red-pink ware with blue-grey core, patches of green glaze. Probably thirteenth century, compare Dunning 1970, fig 11, 1. Medieval chimney-pots are not common, this is the second one found south of the river in Bedford.

Not illustrated, a piece of Romano-British kiln-bar of an inch square cross section and 3in long, brown with blue core. Similar to types from Mile Road, Bedford.

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An Earthwork at Newnham Priory, Bedford

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SUMMARY

The rescue excavation in advance of road widening of an earthwork at TL 069495 within the precinct of Newnham Priory (founded C.1166) showed that an elongated mound aligned north-south had originally been more circular in shape. It was probably the last visible part, to the north of the River Ouse New Cut, of the monastic complex of ditches, banks, mounds and fishponds which appear on early maps of the area.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1971 the Technical Services Division of Bedford Corporation requested the second writer to examine an earthwork within the precinct of Newnham Priory, immediately south of Barker's Lane, in the path of a road-widening scheme that required its destruction. This long, much overgrown and considerably eroded mound was oriented north-south and lay within existing allotment holdings.

The site of the Augustinian canons' house at Newnham has its precinct limits represented by Barker's Lane on the north, Newnham Avenue on the west, the main river on the south and a length of upstanding post-Dissolution wall on the east: building has encroached on the western side. The only visible remains of the priory are some of its earthworks: today these are less complete than

they were at the turn of the century. The site is diagonally bisected by an embankment supporting what originally was the Bedford and Cambridge branch of the London and North Western Railway and, parallel with it, an artificial channel, the Great Ouse New Cut. The two are contemporary in construction, and the railway was opened in 1862.¹ South of this the priory earthworks have been only partly levelled, but to the north the only feature visible at the time of excavation was the oblong mound here discussed. This is on the site of a circular mound shown on early maps of the full set of earthworks, and for this reason its systematic investigation was required.

The earthwork was partly excavated archaeologically, recorded, and its mechanical destruction was overseen by the writers and Mr A. Cooper, with further records being made. The Bedford Archaeological Society, under whose auspices the operation was carried out, wishes to record its appreciation to the Borough Council for an exemplary execution of its archaeological duties in bringing to its notice the threat to the earthwork, and in financing both the investigation and subsequent publication in this Journal.

THE EXCAVATION (Fig 9)

Method: A small trial trench 1.25m wide was dug by hand through the middle of the east side of the earthwork as far as its central long axis, and

vertically to a depth of 0.30m below the surrounding modern ground surface. This was then extended horizontally northwards by the mechanical removal of the north-east quadrant of the earthwork, and the original trench was deepened to about 1.40m. The south and west sections of the quadrant were drawn. The remainder of the mound was removed mechanically, quadrant by quadrant, enabling the north-south and the east-west section-drawings to be completed and its entire structure to be examined.

The Earthwork: The original mound was made of hard, compact pebbly orange clay 5 piled up about 1.9m above the present ground surface. It was about 12.0m long and 8.0m wide, with sloping sides and a fairly flat top. This material contained no finds at all. It was largely homogenous apart from an area of fine yellow and orange gravel within the pebbly clay about 1.0m below the present ground surface. This may represent a ground surface predating the mound, but lacked any evidence of humus upon it and may be therefore another layer of redeposited material.

Over the top of the pebbly clay mound were a number of irregular and varying tip layers, of orange gravel 4, yellow sand and gravel 13,14, dark brown earth and pebble 2 and yellow gravel 3,15. These were insubstantial apart from 13 which had been tipped against the south side of the pebbly clay mound, thus elongating its plan. This gravel was followed down by excavation to a depth of 1.80m below the modern ground surface at the south end of the earthwork, and no bottom was seen to it. This may suggest that the build-up of ground here is so thick that no original ground surface could be seen in the excavation: or that the monastic ground surface and other features had been disturbed by gravel digging, the waste products of which had been scattered on and around the mound.

Over the whole area of the composite mound was a thick layer of dark brown earth 1 containing much rubbish of Victorian and later dates, including bottles, broken glass, tile, slate, china, ash, cinders, etc. The surrounding allotments topsoil contained similar material.

Two pits had been cut into the mound. The later 7 contained material of the kind mentioned above, had a diameter of about 2.2m, sloping sides and a depth of about 1.0m into the mound. Its bottom cut the second pit, whose fill was mixed light-brown pebbly earth 8, fine dark soil 9 and brown earth and gravel 10, yellow gravel 11 and

orange gravel 12. Its sides were almost vertically cut into the pebbly clay, and it was seen in excavation to a depth of 2.50m into the mound. It contained no finds apart from a few animal bones.

No other features were seen in the mound.

DISCUSSION

The lack of finds from the compacted clayey mound prevents the provision of a definite context for it. It had no local reputation of antiquity, and its superficially battered appearance might also have helped it escape notice had it not figured as a circular feature in the *Victoria County History* plan of the priory earthworks.²

Local traditions associated it with a variety of fairly recent events. The latest, the spreading of municipal rubbish over the area at the turn of the century had clearly built up the surrounding ground level but had only added an irregular skin to a pre-existing mound whose material was uncontaminated by it. There are local memories of earlier gravel extraction from this area in the last century: one tale had the mound consisting of the residue from gravel sifting, and there certainly was an accumulation of poor quality gravel extending the compacted clay mound to the south; another version, unconfirmed by this excavation, explained the mound as a reburial earthwork for the bones of canons disturbed when gravel was extracted nearby the presumed vicinity of the claustral buildings. It had also been associated as a spoil heap with the digging of the New Cut c. 1860 and the creation of the railway embankment beside it; however, a single well-defined earthwork, with such stratigraphy, far away from the river bank, does not seem consistent with this explanation.

If these contexts appear unsatisfactory, there remains that of Newnham Priory. This house of Augustinian canons was founded about 1166, being a transference from Bedford itself of the canons of St Paul. It seems most likely that this mound was the last surviving earthwork north of the New Cut, given that excavation has satisfactorily explained the discrepancy between its modern oblong appearance and circular record on earlier maps. The account of the earthwork in the *Victoria County History* suggested that the mound under discussion had the function of a watchtower at the corner of the main enclosures, before the precinct was extended out to the east in the late monastic or early post Dissolution period.

The earlier of the two pits may be relevant in this context but by itself does not admit a specific

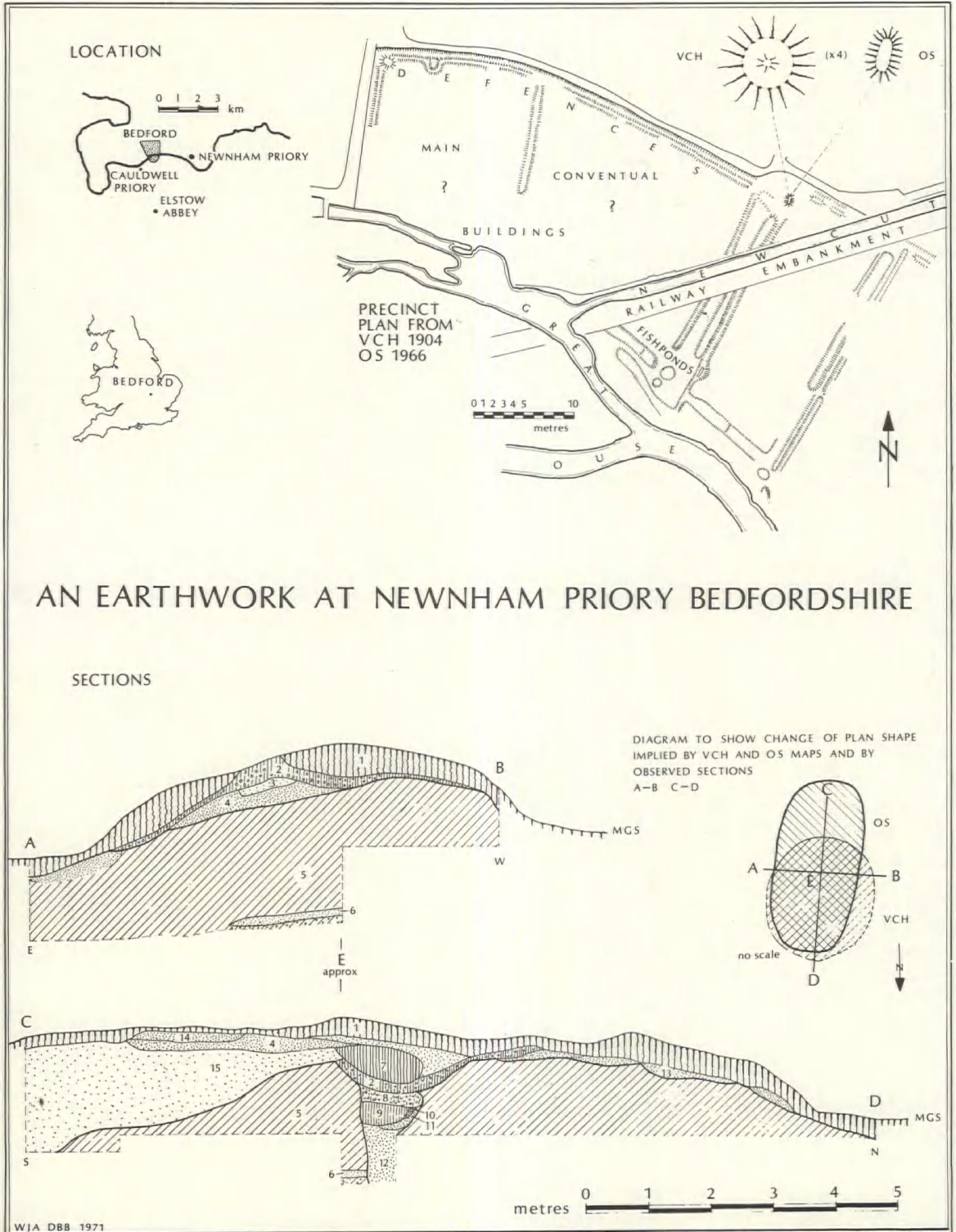


Fig 9 Location and precinct plans of Newnham Priory, with sections through earthwork. North of the Railway Embankment the earthworks are based on *VCH*: south of it they are taken from *O.S.* 1/1250 sheet TL 0649SE.(by courtesy).

structural interpretation.

Since the publication of the plan in the *Victoria County History*, The Newnham Priory earthworks have steadily disappeared under the invasion of the precinct by gravel digging, rubbish tipping, allotment cultivation and redevelopment. A discussion of the full site is beyond the scope of this note, and belongs more properly with a full survey of monastic earthworks and other medieval moated sites in Bedfordshire.³ Indeed the whole of the Priory area, on gravels adjacent to the river, is likely to contain archaeological evidence.⁴

NOTES

- 1 Information from Bedfordshire County Record Office, and from the Assistant Solicitor, Bedford Corporation.
- 2 *VCH Beds* 1 (1904) 303-5.
- 3 The *VCH* and Beauchamp Wadmore: *Earthworks of Bedfordshire* (1920) between them cover many sites. The latter however deliberately does not include several earthwork complexes, including that under discussion, and, on matters of interpretation, necessarily reflects the state of knowledge at its date of publication.
- 4 *Beds Archaeologist* 2 (1959) 16 - 19.

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