

IRON AGE HILL FORTS IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

By B. B. SIMMONS

THE Ordnance Survey in compiling its map of Southern Britain in the Iron Age marked a group of five earthworks, lying in adjacent parishes and known as Camp Hill, Combs Farm, Old Ox, Fox Wood, and Burton Lodge. They all lie on the western extremity of the Keuper Marl and Waterstones and the scarp formed by this geological formation runs roughly from north-east to south-west. The earthworks are no more than eight miles apart on this line and only a maximum of three and a quarter miles separates any two of them. There is the possibility of a sixth earthworks, Lonely Grange, close to Old Ox, but its exact whereabouts is not now known.

Very few positive facts can be stated about these earthworks apart from location, and the only known attempts at excavation were made on the defences of Burton Lodge by the Peverel Research Group reported in 1950 and 1951,¹ and on the defences of Combs Farm by the Mansfield Archaeological Society in 1961 and 1962, the report for which is contained in this article. It is difficult to demonstrate that the five earthworks are related in any way whatsoever. Various people at various times have attempted to postulate the use of these constructions (the guesses range from iron age camps to medieval cattle pounds) but there has been little evidence to support their theories.

EXCAVATION AT COMBS FARM, FARNSFIELD, 1961-1962

This excavation was carried out from September 1961 to September 1962 at weekends, by members of the Mansfield Archaeological Society, and was an attempt to date and record the profile of the defences.

The site of Combs Farm lies $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles west-north-west from Southwell and $6\frac{3}{4}$ miles east-south-east from Mansfield. The spur on which the earthwork stands is of Keuper Marl and Waterstones, and the only ditch recognisable today cuts off about 8 acres of the north-easterly end of the spur (see Fig. 1). This ditch is now a

¹*Annual Report* of the Peverel Research Group (1950) and of the Peverel Archaeological Group (1951).

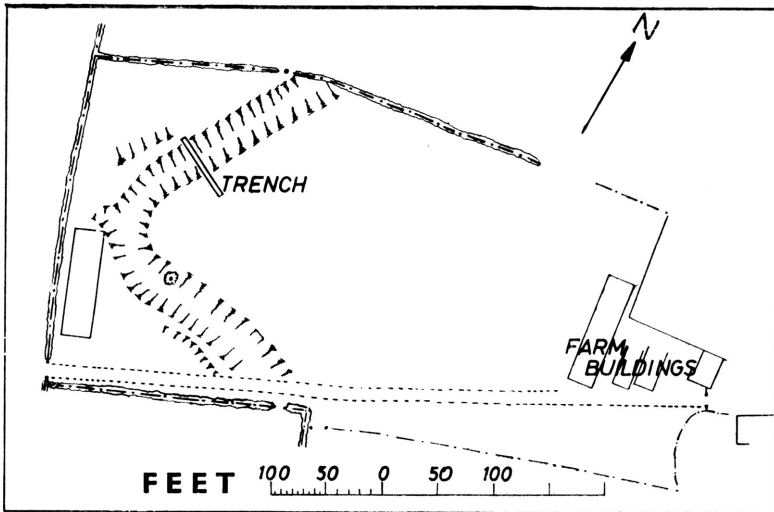


FIG. 1. Combs Farm, Farnsfield, showing surviving ditch and site of excavation.

depression varying from 2 to 4 ft. in depth and from 40 to 50 ft. in width, but there may be an outer ditch associated with it.

Although the line of the defences on the remaining sides has been obscured by ploughing, there are one or two features which may belong to them; only excavation will determine what they are. On the south side of the plateau, for example, there is a flat platform 4 ft. wide running along the length of the hill and just below the edge of the ridge. Again on the north side of the ridge there is a depression only 4 to 5 yds. in length, somewhat like part of a ditch. Both these features are in suitable positions for defensive features, and in line with subsidence cracks observed in two stone walls on the eastern side of the ridge. In 1801 W. Dickinson wrote that 'About 3 acres of ground are enclosed by a foss in a form nearly elliptical'.¹ This would more or less tie up with the area enclosed by these features. Dickinson also says that within this area there is a mound 40 yds. in diameter. This mound is still to be seen, adjacent to the main ditch.

A trench 52 ft. in length and 4 ft. wide was opened up initially, and was later extended to 62 ft. (Fig. 2). The rampart was made of Keuper Marl with local waterstones (skerry) forming either a core

¹W. Dickinson, *Antiquities, Historical, Architectural, Chorographical and Itinerary* (1801), p. 288.

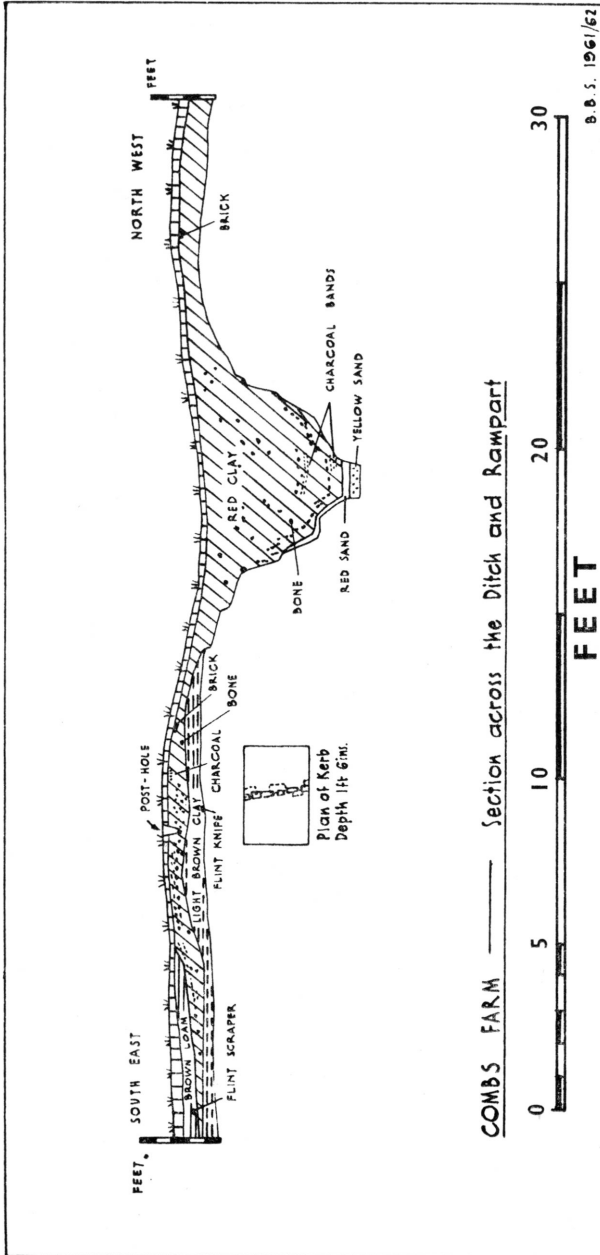


FIG. 2. Combs Farm, Farnsfield: section of rampart and ditch.

in the body of the mound or a facing on the south bank of the rampart. At the lowest point in the rampart there was a definite kerb made out of waterstones approximately 9 in. high and 6 ins. wide (Fig. 2, inset). This kerb lies directly above the point at which a portion of a flint knife was found. Below the Keuper Marl rampart was an unusually hard clay, light brown in colour and presumably beaten or puddled to this consistency. This layer contained minute fragments of charcoal which gave the clay a flecked appearance. The present height of the rampart in section is 2 ft. 8 in. but it would appear that ploughing has reduced it; there is clear evidence on the ridge-top of ridge and furrow as far as the inner lip of the ditch. Thus, by projecting to its limit the line of the red clay, which ploughing has cut off, one can assume that the rampart was originally constructed to a height of perhaps 4 ft.

The proportions and profile of the ditch itself are almost identical with those of the ditch at Burton Lodge, Combs Farm being slightly the deeper at 10 ft. From lip to lip the Combs Farm ditch is approximately 17 ft. and it has been cut through a layer of skerry, a layer of Keuper Marl and a second layer of skerry.

The filling of the ditch is almost entirely of red clay and it is difficult to determine whether there has been any primary silting or not. At a depth of 5 ft. a thin band of red sand was found, on average 3 in. in thickness and following the profile of the ditch to the slot at the bottom. This band of red sand could only be erosion from the skerry and, since it was quite clean and closely related to the waterstones, it must have occurred after the filling in of the ditch.

In the red clay filling very little was found except a random stone or a small amount of charcoal. At a depth of some 6 ft. was a saucer-shaped band, consisting of two layers of charcoal with a band of stones above, covering about half the width of the trench. The charcoal disintegrated almost as soon as it was exposed to the atmosphere; its distribution was intermittent and had no definite outline. At a depth of 2 ft. below this layer a second, narrower, band of charcoal was found. A band of skerry was seen to follow the inner line of the ditch which may have been the stone used to complete the rampart and had slipped or been pushed into the ditch.

The final feature worth noting is the unusual slot at the bottom of the ditch. This appeared to have been cut deliberately and for what purpose it is difficult to conjecture. It is far wider (a fraction

under 2 ft.) than the 'ankle-breaker' of the type familiar on Roman forts, but it would have been a serious obstacle to attackers.

The lack of dateable finds makes it impossible to say anything about the date of this rampart and ditch. Of the two flints found only one came from a sealed layer and this could have pre-dated the structure by some considerable time. A parallel can be drawn between Combs Farm and Burton Lodge and it is hoped in time and after further excavations, to produce more positive evidence about this site.

CAMP HILL, FARNSFIELD

This site is the most northerly of the five and in 1801 W. Dickinson¹ observed:

The ground, which is surrounded by the principal foss, rises very gradually from every part of the circumference to the center, but the whole elevation, within the trench does not appear to be more than would be formed by the soil dug up in order to make the ditches.

Both Dickinson and Major H. Rooke,² in 1788, produced similar drawings of the complex, but Rooke added that the whole area

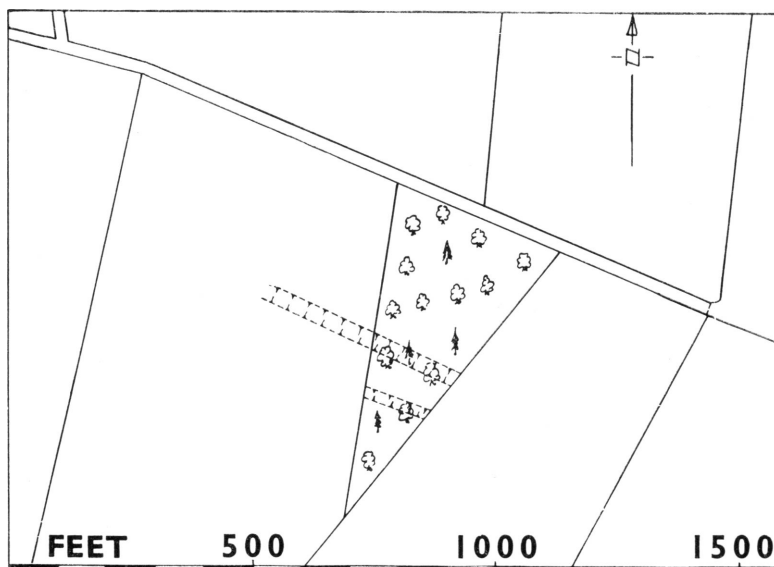


FIG. 3. Camp Hill, Farnsfield, showing lengths of ditch at SK 669578.

¹*Loc. cit.*, p. 288.

²Quoted in V.C.H., *Notts.*, p. 26.

covered about 40 acres. Since the middle of the 19th century the fields hereabouts have been ploughed extensively. The only portions of the ditches to be seen now (Fig. 3) are preserved in a small wood on the southern aspect of the hill, but a trace of the larger of the ditches can be seen for about 100 yds. in the field to the west of the wood. If these remaining features are representative of the whole then the original must have been of immense size for this part of the country, for the inner ditch is still 30 ft. wide and from 5 to 6 ft. deep and the outer or lower ditch is 12 ft. wide and 3 ft. deep.

The Victoria County History notes that in 1849 Roman remains were found near this spot. This reference is probably to the pig of lead weighing 184 lb. found in that year and now in the British Museum. In 1801 Dickinson¹ had denied that Camp Hill was of Roman origin because

diligent enquiry has enabled me to ascertain that no materials for building, no weapons for fighting, no trinkets for ornament, no urns for inhumation, no coins for traffick have ever been discovered here.

He also goes to great lengths to prove, mostly through 'Saxon etymology', that Camp Hill was of a later date than the Roman period. Nevertheless, in late 1960, a great number of Roman sherds were found on the surface of the hill over an area of about 50 acres and especially near the short length of ditches already mentioned. There were also five sherds identified as of Iron Age date by Mr. P. Rahtz, but not of Trent Valley A/B type. The Roman material contained several pieces of samian ware, including a fragment of a bowl recognisable as form 37 and late 2nd century in date; Nene Valley colour-coated ware with barbotine decoration; Derbyshire ware; hammer-headed mortaria and many other sherds of an indeterminate date comparable with those which occur regularly on the four other sites. There was also found on this site at this time a bronze brooch, type s(25)² and belonging to the 1st or 2nd century A.D.

One final feature of this site is a gravel band 16 ft. or thereabouts in width and 200 yds. in length running in a north-west, south-east direction on the south-west side of the hill. In 1799 and writing about Roman antiquities Rooke³ notes that a road passed very near

¹*Loc. cit.*, p. 289.

²British Museum, *Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1958), p. 18.

³Major H. Rooke, *The Ancient and Present State of Sherwood Forest* (1799), pp. 24 and 25.

this spot, 'This was the old road from Mansfield to Newark and formerly called The Street a proof of its having been a Roman road'. Even today a well-made farm track going east-west in a straight line over the hill and not more than 20 or 30 yds. from the gravel band at its nearest point, is known to the farm workers as the Roman road. Field walking in this vicinity has produced no building material which could possibly be related to the Roman or pre-Roman finds.

COMBS FARM, FARNSFIELD

The surface finds at Combs Farm were not included in the report of the excavation because at this stage it is not possible to prove any relationship between the two.

The surface finds at Combs Farm were made almost entirely in the field to the south of the main ditch, and compare with those found at Camp Hill except that no samian has, as yet, been discovered. In addition to pottery, many worked flints have been found both in this and adjoining fields. The flints for the most part are waste flakes with an occasional small scraper, but a finely polished greenstone axe-head was also found.

Mr. Adrian Oswald¹ reported finding here a Roman spearhead and Rooke² writing in 1785 said '..... here I found fragments of Roman bricks and tiles turned up in ploughing'. A large amount of what may be Roman tile fragments can still be picked up in the field. The Victoria County History records that several weapons were found at Combs Farm at the beginning of the 18th century and some ninety years later two small implements of war, resembling battle-axes but of a diminutive size, made of copper and cast in a mould, were found near the earthworks. The whereabouts of these weapons is unknown and one can only hazard a guess at their date.

OLD OX, OXTON

South of Combs Farm, one and a quarter miles away and situated on the Oxtan Ramper, a long ridge of Keuper Marl and Waterstones, is a structure known as Old Ox or Hodox. The summit of the ridge is no more than 200 to 300 yds. away from the earthworks and overlooks them; although the earthworks when viewed in plan (Fig. 4) might well be said to be defensive in purpose the vulnerable

¹Reference on Mr. C. W. Phillip's correspondent's Ordnance Survey map.

²V.C.H., *Notts.*, p. 291.

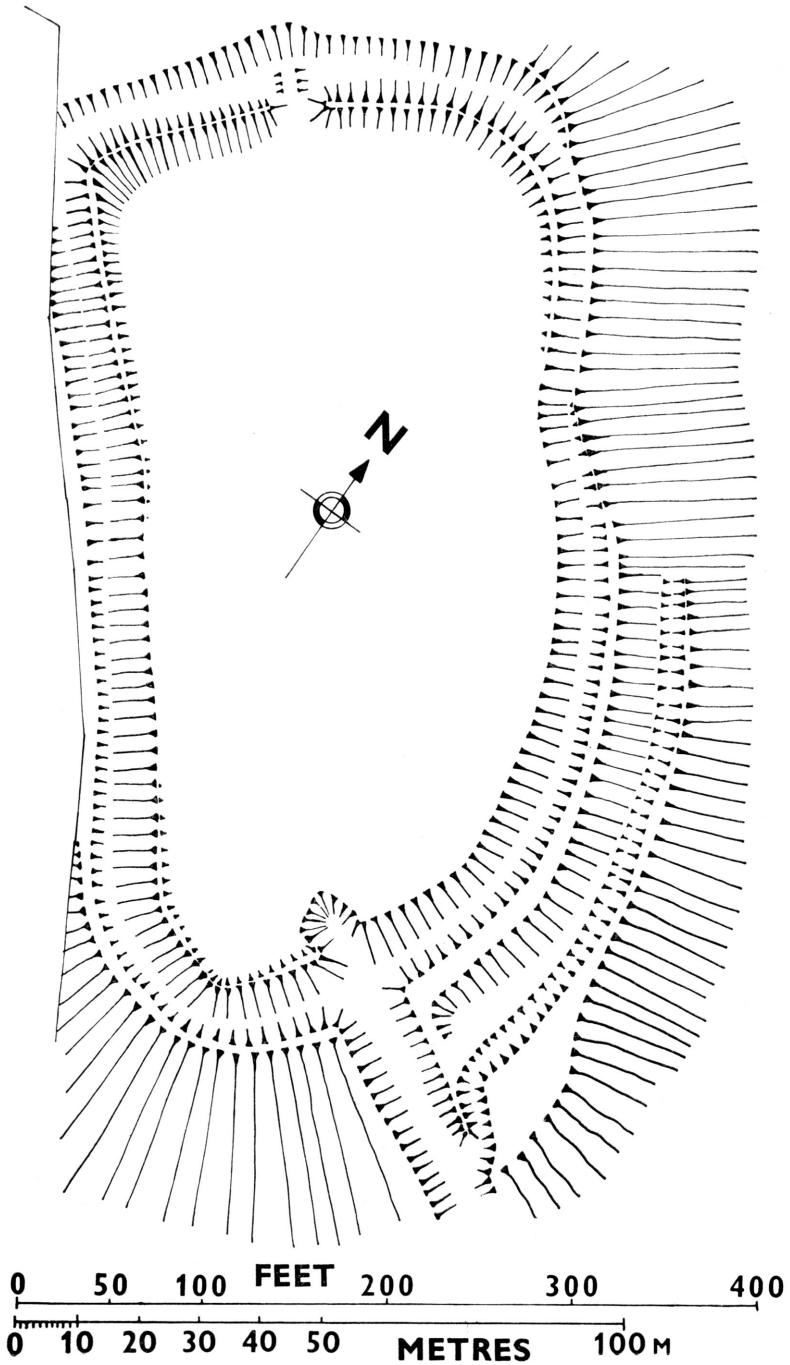


FIG. 4. Plan of Old Ox, Oxton.

position makes this hard to believe. The camp is surrounded by a double bank and a single ditch except on the east, where there is a triple bank and double ditch. Its strength is also augmented by the steep escarpment of the hill on the south and east. There is a well-defined entrance at the south-east.

Very little is known of Old Ox and varied assessments of its use have been made. These range from a deer enclosure to an Iron Age hill-slope fort. Much detailed work requires to be done on this site but a scatter of Romano-British pottery and worked flints in the field immediately to the south of the earthwork shows that there was some Roman and pre-Roman activity hereabouts. The pottery and flints found here are much the same as those found at Combs Farm. Three-quarters of a mile away from this spot in an easterly direction a much larger scatter of Romano-British pottery has been found. This is at Fallows Farm, Oxton, and may well prove to be the site of another of these enigmatic Nottinghamshire enclosures referred to in the Victoria County History¹ as Lonely Grange.

FOX WOOD, WOODBOROUGH

Oxton village lies in the valley to the south of the ridge on which Old Ox is situated. Fox Wood is the next earthworks going south and the parish boundary between Calverton and Woodborough runs through it. The earthworks themselves straddle a long ridge carrying a trackway which is also a parish boundary. As the present day name implies the area is wooded, and so thickly that little can be seen on the ground of the complexity of the site. Mr. Adrian Oswald says:²

The camp at Fox Wood is noted in the Victoria County History, but there is an extension of the earthworks to the east which is not shown. Here on ploughland the writer has found Iron Age and 3rd century Roman pottery.

Further finds here have been of hard grey Romano-British pottery (found in 1947 by Mr. H. Wildgoose) and in the spring of 1961 two sherds of Nene Valley colour-coated ware together with other Romano-British sherds. From the village of Calverton and three-quarters of a mile away from Fox Wood two coin hoards of the late 3rd century have recently been found.³

¹p. 298.

²*Transactions Thor. Soc.*, XLIII (1939), p. 15.

³*Transactions Thor. Soc.*, LXIV (1960), pp. 9-20.

Fox Wood has produced the least pre-Roman material, but this may be due to lack of adequate field work.

BURTON LODGE, BURTON JOYCE

The final site to be discussed is Burton Lodge, which lies partly in the parish of Burton Joyce and partly in the parish of Lambley.

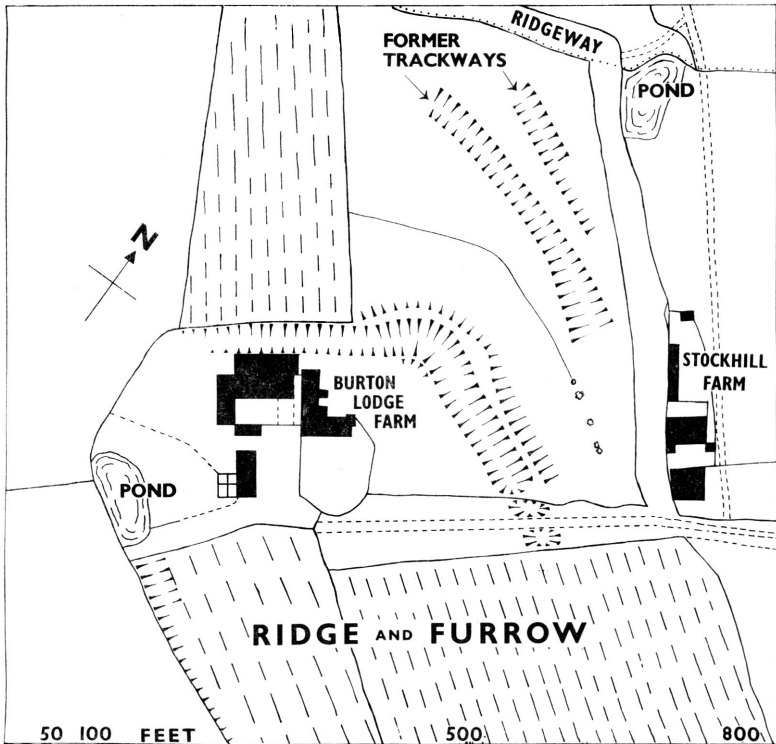


FIG. 5. Lodge Farm, Burton Joyce, showing surviving portions of the earthwork, with former tracks leading from the ridgeway down to the Trent Valley. South of the farmhouse, part of the ditch has been widened to make a pond; the south-east quarter of the ditch has been filled in.

The earthworks (Fig. 5) lie almost on the crest of a low range of hills, dividing the parishes already referred to. Southwards there is an unimpeded view across the Trent valley. The Victoria County History¹ refers to it as a 'Homestead Moat' and it remains today as a shallow depression around three sides of the present farm

¹P. 309.

buildings. The original enclosure would probably have been about $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres. Here, as at Fox Wood, the ridge carries a trackway which is used as a parish boundary for almost a mile; the trackway must be of considerable age and most probably contemporary with the earthwork. Burton Lodge is the only earthwork for which an excavation report is available (Fig. 6 below).¹

Pottery recovered from the lower levels of this section is certainly of Iron Age character, but has no distinctive features to allow a date to be suggested or parallels quoted.

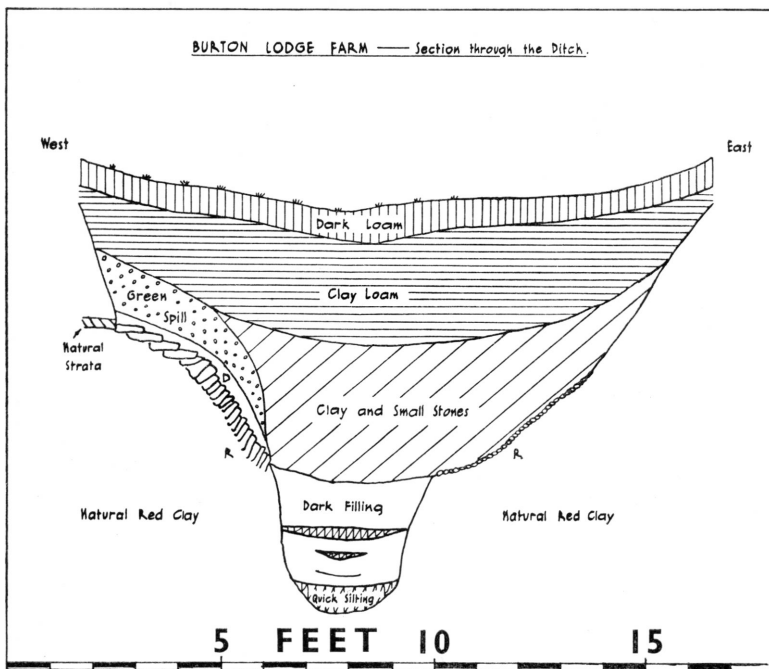


FIG. 6. Section of ditch at Burton Lodge Farm
(Peverel Archaeological Group 1951 Report).

From the bottom of the ditch to the base of the revetment the filling was of a marly clay, in which there were four discernible silting lines. Above this point the body of the ditch was filled with solidly compacted clay, mixed with many fragments of greenstone and the whole topped with a foot of loam. The most interesting feature

¹ *Annual Report* of the Peverel Research Group (1950) and of the Peverel Archaeological Group (1951).

here was a spill of greenish clay and very small stones, which from its position may represent a facing layer of greenstone from a now vanished rampart.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that can be reached are indecisive. We can be certain that there was activity on all the sites during the Roman and pre-Roman periods. What significance this has with regard to the structures is impossible to say. Are the earthworks of Iron Age date and if so did their occupiers with the gradual Romanisation of the countryside take to a different way of life? This is a question not likely to be answered without a great deal of research over the next few years.

Again, what connection is there between the sites? Burton Lodge and Combs Farm have some affinities, for slotted ditches on any sites other than Roman military ones are extremely rare and here we have two within a few miles of each other.

The questions one can ask are many and in most cases at the moment imponderable but with more excavations on the five sites the knowledge of Iron Age Nottinghamshire may be increased.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As supervisor of the Combs Farm excavations I am most grateful to those members who assisted in what turned out to be an arduous task. I am also more than indebted to the farmer, Mr. J. Collingham, who not only tolerated us but lent us timber and three farm workers to construct a most necessary cattle-proof fence.