

# GRIM'S DITCH IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND HERTFORDSHIRE

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*Past work on the Chiltern stretches of Grim's Ditch is recalled, with particular reference to the dykes on the Pitstone hills. The discovery, in 1980, of crop marks related to two further stretches of ditch is described. A section dug through one of them is illustrated, and evidence bearing on the second ditch is discussed. Comparison is made with a length of Grim's Ditch at Hastoe, Hertfordshire, excavated in 1973, a section of which is here published for the first time.*

## Introduction

It was during fieldwork for the Viatores' study of Roman roads in the Chilterns that R. W. Bagshawe first recognised the significance of the earthworks on the Pitstone hills, at that time unrecorded. He alerted James Dyer; and the result was the publication, in *Records of Buckinghamshire*, of "Pitstone Hill - A Study in Field Archaeology" by J. F. Dyer and A. J. Hales (Dyer & Hales, 1962), to be followed in the next year by Dyer's "The Chiltern Grim's Ditch" (Dyer, 1963).

These surveys sought to establish that the two broken lengths of Grim's Ditch already identified (the first near Great Hampden, the second from King's Ash to the outskirts of Berkhamsted) were continued by a further arc of ditch-and-bank in the area between Aldbury and Ivinghoe Beacon, thence extending the system further north-east along the Chilterns. Earlier work on the Chiltern Grim's Ditch by Dr. O. G. S. Crawford (Crawford, 1931) had included a mention of the stretch of dyke by that name on Berkhamsted Common as part of the series of earthworks: this was disputed by James Dyer, who thought it later.

Little further work was done on Grim's Ditch until Easter, 1973, when a party led by two archaeology graduates from Sheffield University, N. J. Davis and R. Whinney, obtained permission to cut a section through that part of the ditch which runs through Hastoe,

near Cholesbury, Bucks. (SP 9190 0882). A short report of the excavation appeared in *Rec. Bucks.* XIX part 3, 1973, p. 345, but no diagram was published. The scope of the excavation was limited by the amount of time allowed by the owner of the property and the findings were not surprisingly inconclusive: nevertheless, the shape of the section was established and the form of construction surmised. A small piece of poorly fired shaly Iron Age pottery, of a type made locally over a long period, was found in the top few centimetres of the bank core, giving a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the bank above.

A further small excavation was done the same year near Shootersway in Berkhamsted (SP 972 081), the ditch in this case being roughly similar in shape and dimensions to that at Hastoe. Four small pieces of Iron Age pottery were found, but of a different type.

In 1976 James Dyer contributed a report to CBA Group 9, in which he referred to the need for further work on the Pitstone hills. What follows should be seen as no more than a footnote to the studies already made, in the light of further evidence which has emerged recently: and it should be read in conjunction with Dyer's 1962 article referred to above, which includes much valuable detail here omitted.

Few firm conclusions are drawn in this present report, but one or two suggestions are made for future thought and action.

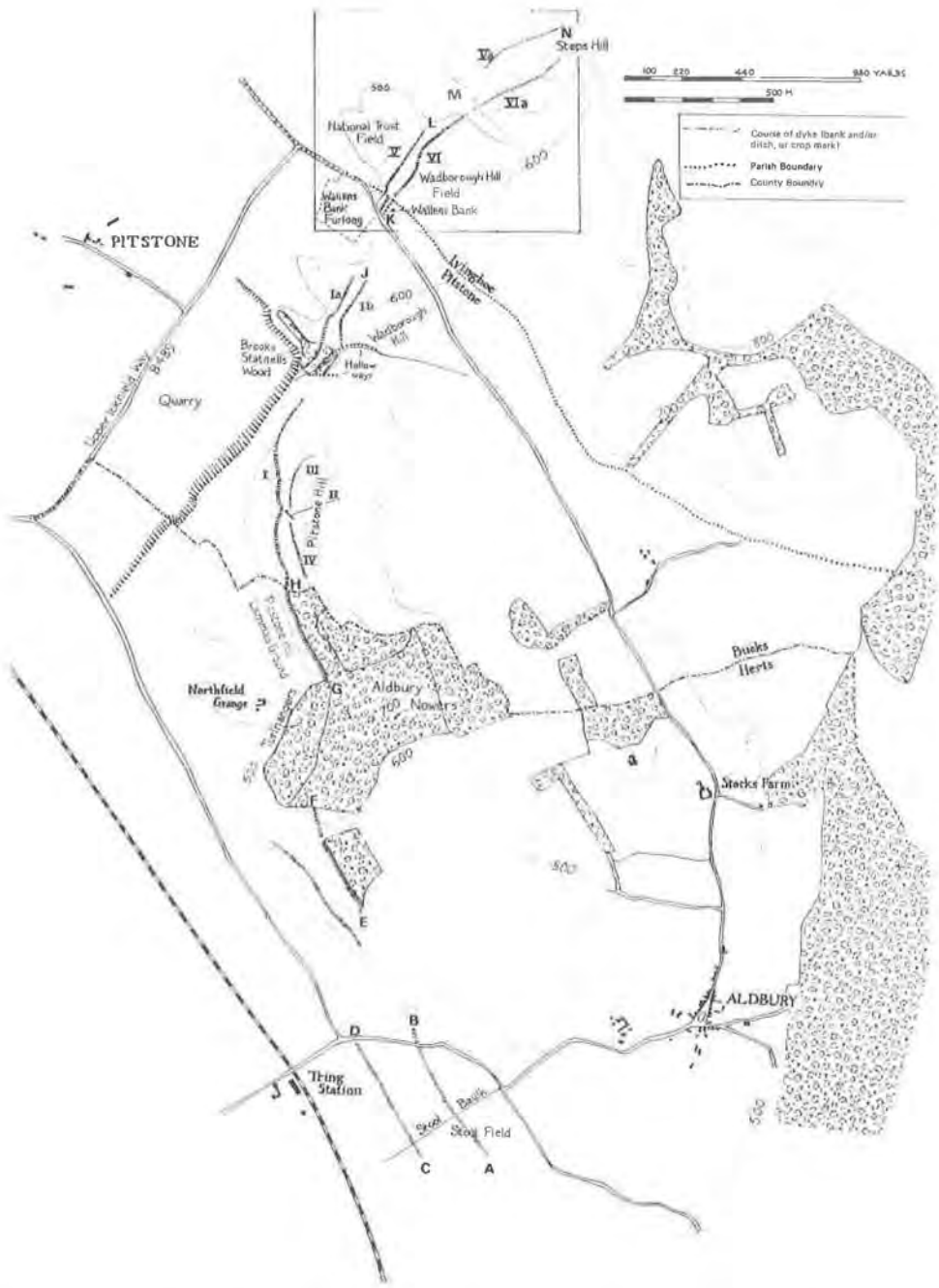


Fig. 1. Grim's Ditch between Aldbury and Ivinghoe. The newly discovered lengths are at the top.

With Mr. Dyer's permission his terminology has been adopted throughout, except for the name of the small hill referred to by him as the "Citadel" which is herein referred to by its local name, "Wadborough Hill".

I should like to thank Mr. Dyer and Mr. Bagshawe, both of whom have been consulted before this report is submitted; the excavators of the Hastoe section, for permission to include their hitherto unpublished sectional diagram; and the members of the Pitstone Local History Society who worked on the most recently discovered length of ditch. I am grateful to Mr. Michael Farley, who inspected the site of the excavation and gave advice. In particular I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. John Chenevix Trench, who has not only been a constructive critic but has provided the maps on which this article is based.

#### *The Pitstone Hills Reviewed*

The areas of Aldbury, Pitstone and Ivinghoe parishes to which this article relates are identified in Figure 1; it does not show the site of the Hastoe excavation, to which further reference is made below. The lengths of dyke referred to by Dyer and Hales form the basis of Figure 1, to which other recently identified features have been added. Discussion of the dykes is here generally limited to these specific features.

In his *Antiquity* paper of 1963, p. 47, James Dyer refers to a cropmark to the south-east of the road from Aldbury to Tring Station (SP 956 123) which he saw as the beginning of the run of Grim's Ditch via Pitstone Hill to Steps Hill. In fact this shows, not only as a cropmark and in aerial photographs, but as a distinct bank, particularly in light snow or after ploughing, and it is paralleled by another bank some 160 m. nearer Tring Station (Fig. 1, A-B, C-D). The banks stretch two-thirds of the way across the big field known as Stool Field; both Station Road and Stool Baulk, which once divided Upper and Lower Stool Fields and runs at right-angles to these banks, rise and fall slightly as they cross the first of them.

The banks were incorporated in the Aldbury open field system, but survive where virtually all traces of other boundaries or headlands have been ploughed out, indicating their original massive size. A third, partly curving, bank further west can also be seen. The precise relationship between these banks and the lengths of dyke which are next described is not clear; but, by being seen to go a considerable way across open low ground, the banks in the Aldbury valley are an unusual and perhaps significant feature when most of the existing stretches of Grim's Ditch run at a higher level.

The only lengths of dyke in Aldbury designated "Grim's Ditch" on the most recent Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map are those marked E-F and G-H. It is unfortunate that the routing of the Ridgeway Path past Aldbury Nowers and across the hills has inevitably brought a great deal more foot traffic: the Aldbury section in particular has suffered, as the path runs for considerable distances along the bank instead of in the ditch. In the past few years, much erosion has taken place and the dyke is far less impressive than it was some years ago.

Between F and G, Dyer did not record any earthwork through Aldbury Nowers. Shortly after leaving F, however, the path through the woods runs along the upper edge of a stretch of shallow ditch, and a similar shallow ditch lies some 12 to 14 m. downhill. The upper ditch appears to lie on the boundary between the Nowers on the east and Turlhangers on the west (not distinguished from the Nowers on Dyer's map). The lower ditch takes a roughly parallel course along the shoulder of the hill. As the course of these shallow ditches at their southern extremity diverges from the trend of the dyke, it is questionable whether they are part of the dyke system, and they are omitted from Figure 1.

Above Northfield Grange the upper ditch emerges from the wood and becomes more pronounced in depth: it is once more designated Grim's Ditch by the Ordnance Survey

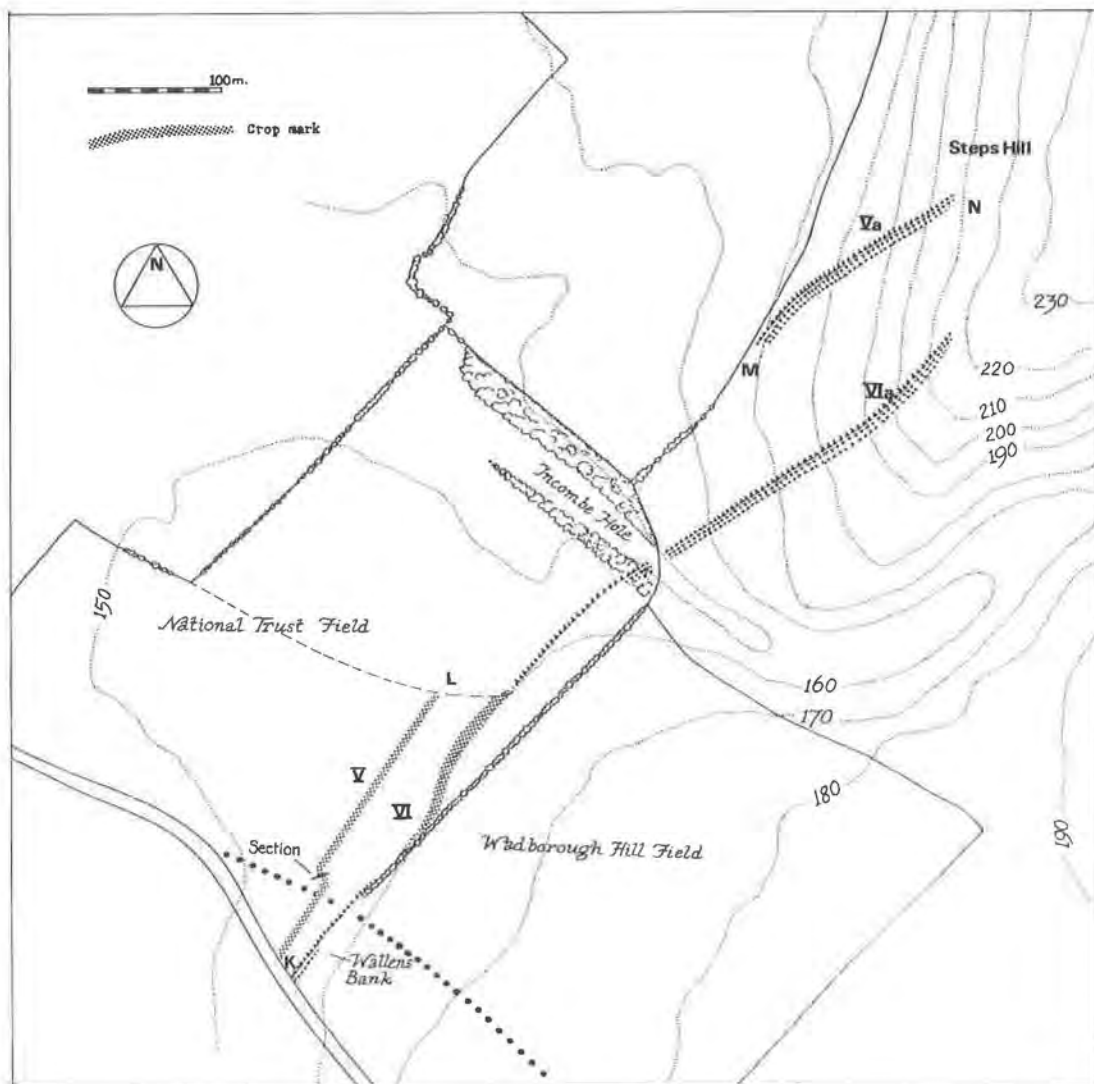


Fig. 2. Newly discovered lengths of Grims Ditch in Pitstone and Ivinghoe.

from this point to the parish boundary. The lower parallel ditch disappears without trace in the scrub of Pitstone Hill Lammas Ground.

Because of scrub clearance on the Pitstone hills during the winter of 1979–80, many of the earthworks there are clearer than for many decades and the course of the dykes is easy to follow. At point J, Dyer notes that the ditches have faded out; this is doubtless because Wadborough Hill was under the plough until the last war. He sees them reappearing on Steps Hill to the north-east, dying out finally near the top of the hill at N. As will be seen below however, the discovery of a new length of one ditch (K–L), and the signs of a second, complicate rather than simplify the possible course of a continuous length of parallel dykes.

#### *Newly Discovered Lengths of Ditch Cropmarks*

The very dry spring of 1980 followed a long, wet autumn in the previous year. In early May, 1980, some unusual cropmarks were noticed on fields belonging to Pitstone Green Farm, and these appeared in two widely separated areas where nothing similar had previously been noticed by the farmer, Mr. J. S. Hawkins, who had worked the area all his life.

Firstly, long straight lines of stronger corn growing on low, heavy ground in the Aylesbury Vale proved on investigation to overlie the chalk drains installed by Mr. Hawkins's great-grandfather, c. 1850. The better-drained environment for the newly sown winter wheat had promoted stronger growth during the autumn rains, when the rest of the field was waterlogged.

The second set of cropmarks appeared on the free-draining chalk of the field known now as National Trust Field, above the spring-line (Fig. 1, K–L, and Fig. 2). First noticed here was a long almost straight line about 2 m. wide, of dark green wheat, some 12 to 15 cm. taller than that in the rest of the field. Another, much wider, cropmark was visible

between the one first noticed and the hedge which separates National Trust Field from Wadborough Hill Field to the south-east. The cause of the first of these two hillside cropmarks proved on exploration to be a deep ditch (henceforth Dyke V to conform with Mr. Dyer's sequence), the more fertile contents of which contained a reservoir of nourishment for the wheat in the spring, when the rest of the crop was languishing in the drought on very shallow topsoil. The wider cropmark, although not then excavated, was assumed to have a similar cause.

The hillside cropmarks reappeared in the subsequent spring, but there was no sign of them in 1982. Their course is shown in detail in Figure 2. Almost on the line of the parish boundary, the cropmark of Dyke V made a Z-bend and changed direction slightly, suggesting that two gangs working from opposite directions might have met at this point. The cropmark ran for 220 m. across the field, disappeared in ploughed ground and then reappeared eventually on a different alignment as a scrub-filled ditch (Va) running up the hillside beyond (Fig. 2, M–N).

#### *Excavation of Dyke V*

The width, position and direction of the cropmarks was surveyed and recorded, and a section was cut across Dyke V. The trench was very narrow so as to disturb the growing wheat as little as possible – just wide enough to excavate and record the section accurately (Fig. 3). The ditch proved to have been cut in solid chalk; there was no evidence that it had been recut and no obvious turf line before refill. Tightly packed against both sides was a layer of chalk fragments interspersed with some greyish soil, the inference being that these had perhaps originally been held in position by grass or weeds. Larger pieces of chalk up to 20 cm. in length filled the bottom centre of the ditch, the lowest of these being almost on the bottom of the ditch, which was gently curved, not sharply V-shaped.

The uphill edge of the ditch was less clearly

defined than the downhill, suggesting that the bank associated with the ditch would have been on the lower, northern side, as is the case with other Chiltern ditches in this area. There was no trace at all on the surface of such a bank. Figure 3 shows the make-up of the remainder of the fill, two distinct trace lines of chalk fragments indicating where unusual amounts of bank material had slipped or washed into the ditch.

The only finds were a length of longbone, fractured in the excavation trenching, and a small piece of antler burr.

#### *Investigation of Dyke VI*

The dyke lying roughly parallel to the south of Dyke V (discussed above) has been given a different number from Dyke V rather than differentiating between them as (a) and (b) as James Dyer has done in other instances,

because of the disparate nature of the two dykes in question.

The parish map of Pitstone, 1810, shows that the present Aldbury/Ivinghoe road crosses and therefore postdates the strips in the furlong known then as Wallens Bank Furlong, within the old boundaries of which the corner of the present National Trust Field lies. The hedgerow separating National Trust Field from Wadborough Hill Field in this corner, between the road and the parish boundary, is raised upon a bank nearly 2 m. high: this is part of the old boundary of Wallens Bank Furlong, and the bank is presumably Wallens Bank itself, consisting, in all probability, of the original bank associated with Grim's Ditch. The hedge on it is not ancient. The name Wallens Bank is an interesting one and further investigation is being carried out into this and other field names in the area.

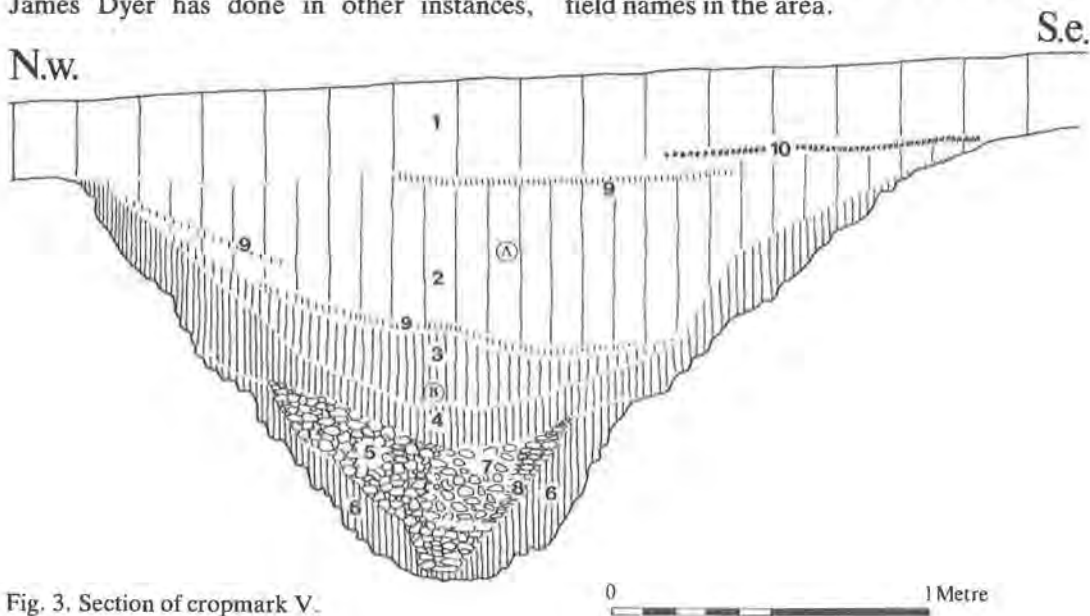


Fig. 3. Section of cropmark V.

#### KEY

1 Topsoil. 2 Chalk/marl infill, very scarce chalk fragments. 3 Fill now contains fragmented chalk. 4 Fragmented chalk with some marl. 5 Well packed loose chalk, one or two pieces up to 20 cm. max. 6 Tightly packed fragmented chalk and marl. 7 Loosely packed chalk with air spaces. 8 Smaller chalk, bedded flat. 9 Trace of chalk fragments. 10 Small fragments of charcoal. A Bone, fractured in trenching. B Small piece of antler burr.

On the Ivinghoe side of the parish boundary, the big bank peters out and is replaced by an unremarkable hedge. The wider cropmark of Dyke VI referred to above could be seen to enter National Trust Field about 110 m. from the road on a north-easterly course, after which it took a broad S-turn and ran across the field roughly parallel to Dyke V: this second cropmark, some 4.5 m. wide, could conceivably be identified as a continuation of Dyer's Dyke Ib, although it may be seen to associate more happily with Dyke Ia.

Halfway across National Trust Field, the cropmark of Dyke VI was translated into a hedge-bordered lynchet. When the latter reaches the edge of the field, a scrub-filled ditch plunges steeply down the side of the coombe which runs in from the north-west. On the hillside ahead, this ditch reappears associated with a low bank.

As there was then no opportunity to excavate a section across Dyke VI, it was explored by probing. The existence of a ditch cut in the chalk was confirmed, although its actual dimensions remained in doubt. A rough estimate was made of a ditch width of 6.75 m. and an over-all dyke width of c. 16.6m.\*

#### *Aerial Survey*

It was later discovered that, by a stroke of good fortune, Hunting Survey carried out a vertical aerial survey of the whole of Hertfordshire during the week of the excavation in National Trust Field, and the northernmost shot of one of their runs (HSL Herts 80 4 16.5.80 Run 95 1885) takes in the whole of the Chiltern edge from the Aldbury boundary via Pitstone to Ivinghoe Beacon. The line of the newly discovered ditch, Dyke V, shows up sharply (including the excavated section) as does the cropmark of Dyke VI to the southeast of it. Comparison of the cropmarks of Dykes V and

\* *The presence of a ditch, 6.35 m. wide and 2.80 m. deep (from the present ground surface) has now been confirmed by excavation. It is hoped to publish a report in due course.*

VI shows the former to be of almost mathematical precisions, whereas the latter follows a meandering course, the narrow, sharp line of Dyke V contrasting with the wider, more blurred outline of Dyke VI.

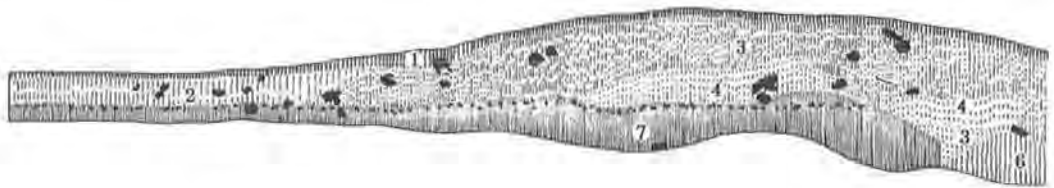
One possible explanation for the sharply defined cropmark of the newly excavated ditch is that the ditch may have remained exposed for a comparatively short time. When National Trust Field and Wadborough Hill Field to the south-east were first taken into arable cultivation – at whatever period that may have been – Dyke V may have been deliberately filled and levelled, while the bank associated with Dyke VI remained for part of its length as a field boundary. The ditch on the uphill side of such a bank would fill only gradually with plough drift, during which time the exposed edge of the ditch would inevitably erode and widen considerably.

#### *The Hastoe Grim's Ditch Compared*

Comparison between the ditch of Dyke V and the Hastoe Grim's Ditch (Figure 4) shows that the latter was deeper, was cut at a shallower angle and had a definitely V-shaped bottom. It was smooth-sided, whereas Dyke V had roughly hewn, rather lumpy sides, but it is difficult to contrast ditches cut in such very different materials.

Davis and Whinney estimated that Grim's Ditch at Hastoe was originally about 3.5 m. wide and 2 m. deep, with a bank of similar height but much greater spread, the over-all width of the whole earthwork being just over 13 m, Dyke V was 2.5 m. wide and 1.3 m. deep.

The bank at Hastoe probably had a turf core mixed with topsoil from the line of the ditch about to be excavated, upon which was heaped sticky brick-earth which occurs naturally some 30 cm. below ground level in that area. A narrow berm originally separated ditch and bank, and a shallow trench in the brick-earth was found at the exposed edge of the ditch. It has been surmised that it could have been the foundation trench for a



GRIMS DITCH, TRING - 1973

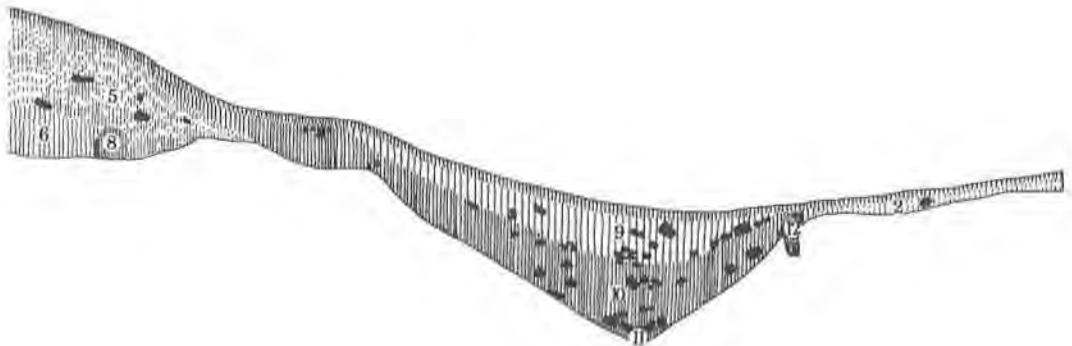


Fig. 4. Section of Grim's Ditch at Hastoe, near Tring, looking north-east. Davis and Whinney, 1978.

- 1 Organic humus. 2 Orange-brown brick-earth. 3 Brick-earth with large flints; bright red; stiff texture. 4 Weathered brick-earth with flints; light yellow; sandy. 5 Weathered brick-earth with flints; streaks of gingerly sand. 6 Red-brown sandy brick-earth. 7 Grey with broken flint; old ground surface. 8 Grey weathered turf - marking out bank? 9 Ditch fill; dirty grey clay-brick-earth; flints. 10 Ditch fill; grey clay/brick-earth; flints. 11 Primary ditch silt; very fine; grey. 12 Grey clay/brick-earth soil - palisade trench?



palisade, although no post holes were seen in the section excavated. opposed to plan.

#### *Conclusion*

The identification and exploration of a new length of ditch within the area already surveyed and discussed by James Dyer and Anthony Hales has complicated rather than simplified the issue. The course of the new ditch, confirmed by the aerial photograph, does not link happily with hitherto recorded lengths nearby; nor does its straight course accord with the curving line of the ditch which it appears to duplicate. It is hard to believe that Dykes V and VI were contemporary. Exploration of Dyke VI may clarify their differences and similarities in section as

The apparent correction of the line of Dyke V near the parish boundary between Ivinghoe and Pitstone raises the question of a possible connection between parish boundaries and ditch alignments. It may be thought that Dyke VI similarly takes a broad realignment at this point: if so, implications arise concerning the dating of both ditches and parish boundaries.

Finally, the existence of Dyke V prompts an added vigilance throughout the Chilterns where stretches of boundary ditch occur, are suspected or could be expected, to see whether duplication can be found elsewhere.

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