

EXCAVATIONS AT DESBOROUGH CASTLE, HIGH WYCOMBE, 1987

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with contributions by M. E. Farley, B. Hurman, G. Coles, P. Sadler and C. Saunders.

Trial trenches close to a medieval ringwork showed the existence of substantial outer defences forming a bailey around the castle. These defences were apparently built in the early to mid twelfth century and it is suggested that they were directly connected with the Anarchy. Late Neolithic/Bronze Age, 'Belgic' and Roman material was also found. The evidence for a prehistoric hillfort is discussed, as is the identification of the hill as a hundred meeting place.

Introduction

Desborough Castle lies in the parish of High Wycombe (SU 84719332) (Figs. 1-2). Known locally as 'The Roundabout', it is a particularly well-preserved medieval ringwork consisting of a single bank and ditch enclosing an area of c.0.40 ha. with its entrance on the east side. The castle is situated on slightly sloping ground at the north-east end of a prominent spur of the Chilterns which projects into the Wye valley. To the north, the steep hillside down to the river provides a natural protection. On the south side, however, the hill rises gradually above the castle, and its defences are noticeably stronger on this side.

The castle lies nowadays in open grassland. Approximately 50 m to the north, a shallow lynchet runs parallel to the castle defences. To the west it turns and runs south for a short distance before petering out. Further south a distinct bank running around the hillside is visible in Castlefield Wood and this is probably the continuation of the lynchet parallel to Spearing Road. To the east the course of the lynchet is interrupted by Rutland Avenue but beyond that it seems that Booker Lane represents its line. Again, modern building has obliterated its exact course to the south but the houses along Booker Lane are situated on top of a bank. In 1908 Allcroft was able to observe the line of a ditch (as a cropmark in a cornfield)

running across the hillside south of the castle (Allcroft 1908, 442 n), and in 1930, Williams-Freeman reported: 'This lane [Booker Lane] turns south and faint signs of the bank and ditch can be seen leaving it to go along the south side of the camp where it is not however discernible.' (Williams-Freeman, report dated 12 March 1930, file CAS 0018, Buckinghamshire County Museum) No trace of this earthwork is now visible.

The lynchet follows the contour of the hill and has been interpreted as the traces of the defences of a prehistoric hillfort or of an outer bailey for the medieval castle. In 1968 C. Saunders, for Buckinghamshire County Museum, cut two trenches across the lynchet north-west of the ringwork. His section drawing and interpretation are reproduced here (Fig. 3). He demonstrated that the lynchet was the ploughed out remains of a primary rampart and ditch (Fig. 3, Bank A, Ditch A) and that a second bank and ditch (Fig. 3, Bank B, Ditch B) had been constructed over the silting of the original ditch. Unfortunately no evidence was recovered for the date of the construction of those features. One sherd of flint-gritted pottery, 'probably Iron Age', was found in a patch of burnt material south of Bank A (Fig. 3A, 1).

There has been little archaeological work on the Castle and the surrounding earthworks. The

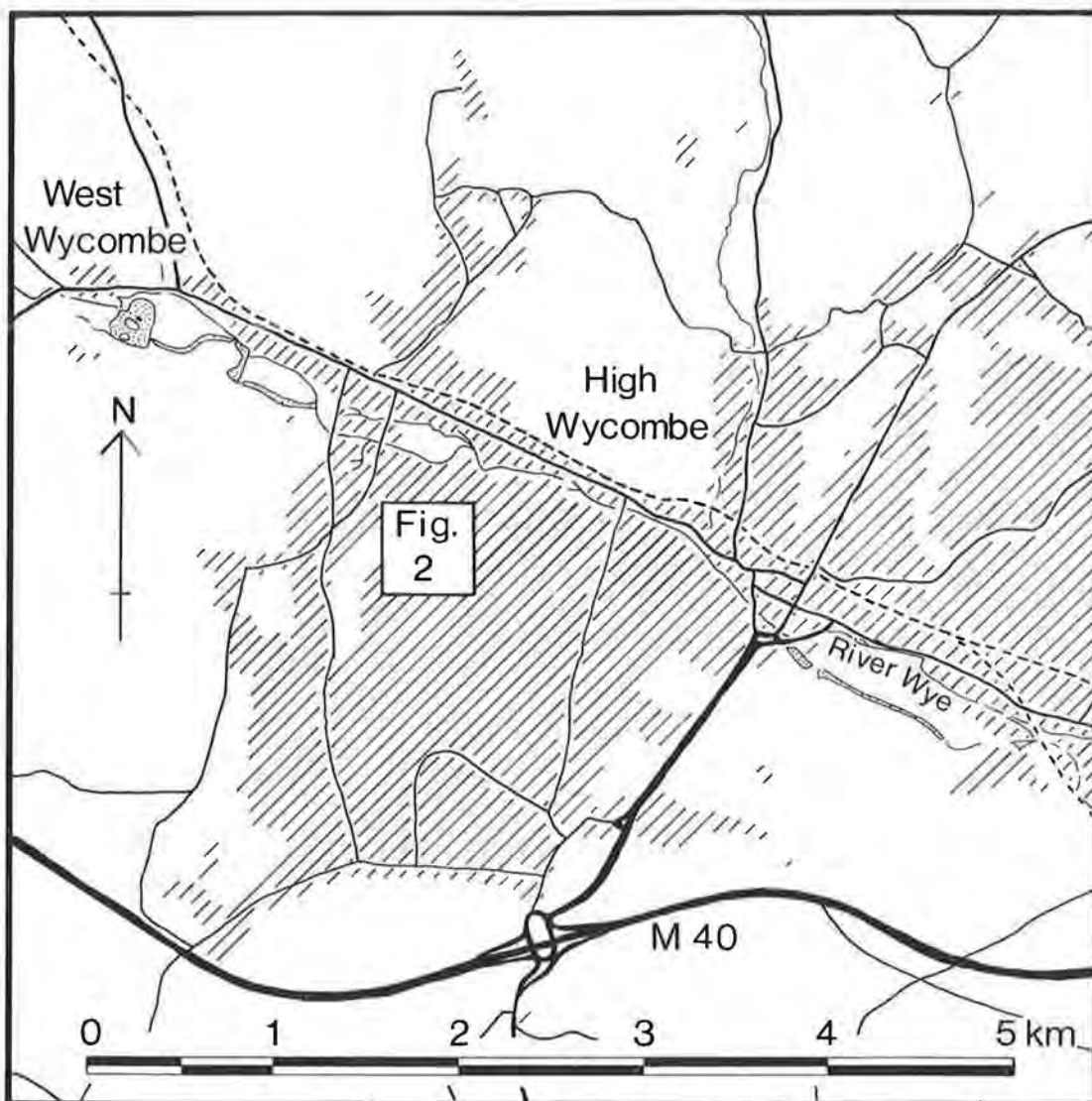


Fig. 1. Location of Desborough Castle, High Wycombe.

records in the County Museum (CAS 0018) show a series of chance finds in the area which include a bronze coin of Philip II of Macedon, several Roman coins, and, from the Castle itself, Roman roof tiles and medieval roof tiles and pottery. Delafield reported, 'In the innermost part . . . many foundations with broken tiles, bricks, mortar and rubbish being now to be found', and, 'in the year 1743, the wood that grew on it being cut down, there was dug up an entire stone window-frame of the fashion . . .

of those in ancient stone buildings' (Delafield MSS, quoted in Langley 1793, 3)

In the eighteenth century Langley recorded, 'before the western entrance is a half-moon with two apertures for greater security' (Langley 1793, 3). However, this earthwork is not readily identifiable today.

A large mound, originally *c.*24 m in diameter, on the western edge of the Castle ditch

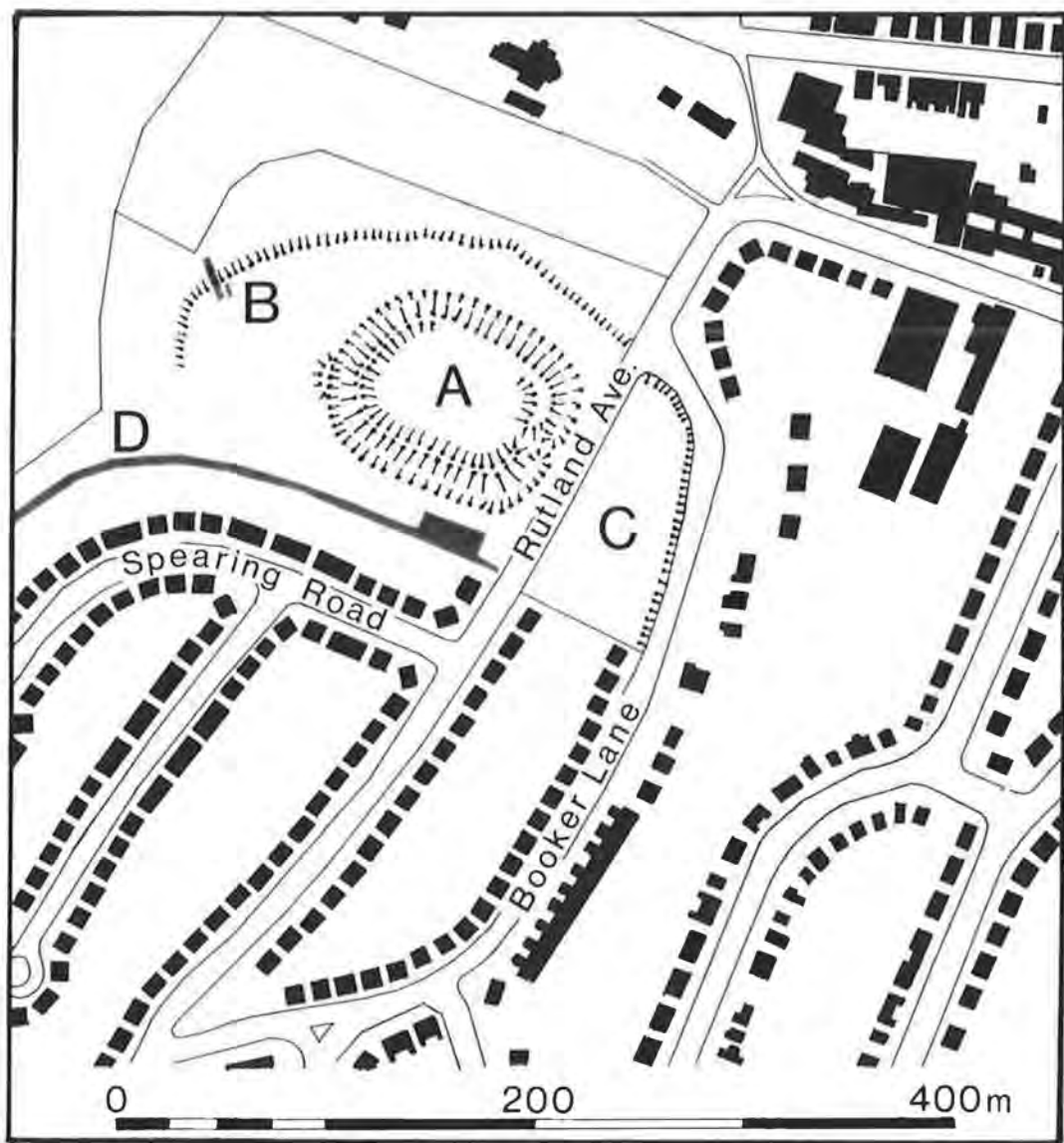


Fig. 2. Location of: A. Desborough Castle; B. 1968 Excavations; C. 1987 Excavations; D. 1987 Watching Brief.

has in the past been interpreted as a barrow, half of which has been removed by the ditch of the Castle. This is considered further below.

Historical References

The name 'Desborough Castle' is not recorded before Delafield's account in the eighteenth century (above). Indeed there are few

written records which refer to the castle before that. It lay within the manor of West Wycombe, which at Domesday was in the possession of the Bishop of Winchester, and remained so until 1551 (Morris 1978, 144a).

The 'castle' is mentioned occasionally in the manorial rent rolls—in 1350 'John atte Castel'

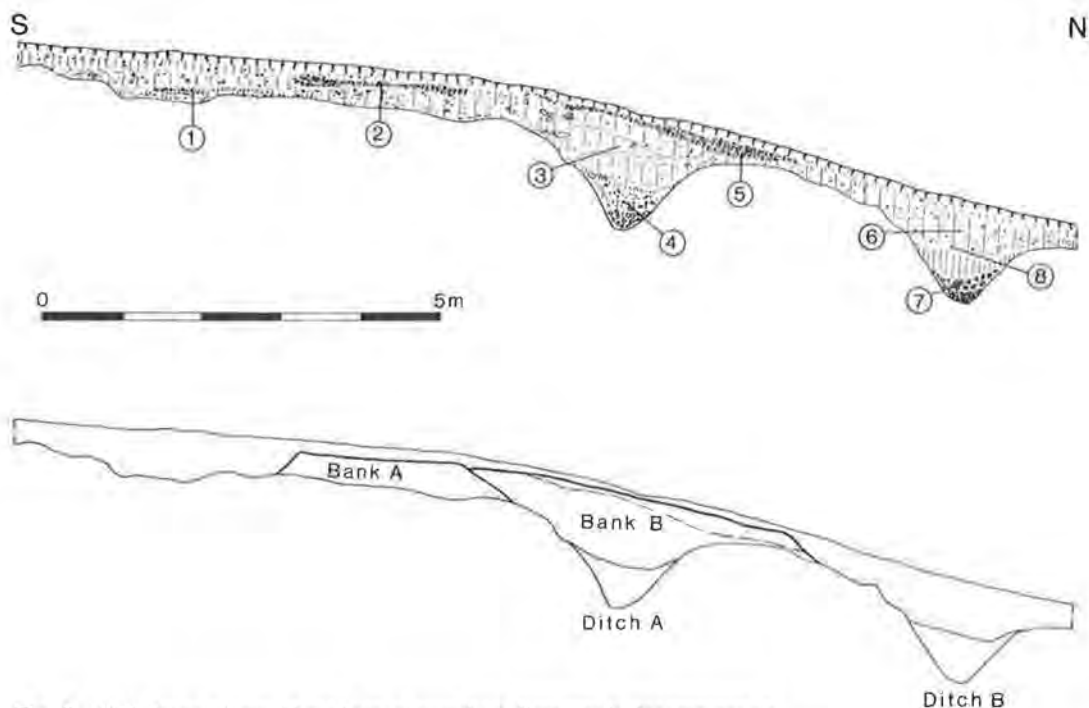


Fig. 3. 1968 Excavations. West face of trench: a. Section; b. Interpretation.

died from the pestilence—and there are references to associated place-names: Chastleye, Castle Field and Castel Garden (VCH III, 135).

Desborough and the Saxon Hundred

Although there is no evidence that the castle was known as 'Desborough' in the medieval period, Desborough was the name of the Saxon Hundred which covered the area of south and West Buckinghamshire and the site has been identified as the hundred meeting place. Browne Willis referred to a field of twenty acres of arable land about a mile to the west of High Wycombe, which gave its name to the Hundred (Ashford 1960, 31). The Castle stood in a field known, before the building of the housing estate, as 'Desborough Field'. This field had an area of approximately 20 acres, and was presumably the one to which Browne Willis referred (Downs 1878, 248)

The origin of the name 'Desborough' is uncertain. On the basis of its Saxon origins Mawer and Stenton suggested it was derived from the Old English for 'pennyroyal', meaning 'the hill

where the pennyroyal grows'. The hill on which the castle stands is in fact an unlikely habitat for pennyroyal which prefers light, well-drained soils (K. Rowland, BCM, pers. comm.)

Margaret Gelling, however, writes: 'The etymology given for Desborough is perfectly feasible, but the failure of the plant-name *dweorg-dwostle* to appear in any other place-name is worrying. The only other possibility is that Desborough is a triple compound, "dust-hill barrow". The word *dust* is rare in place-names but it is evidenced. If this were correct, *beorg* would be likely to mean "tumulus" rather than "hill". If it refers to a natural eminence, a *beorg* should be a relatively small, smoothly-rounded hill. The hill on which Desborough Castle sits could not be described as such. However the mound which has been identified as a barrow would fulfil the description.

There are occasional references in the medieval period which mention the name Desborough: in 1389, tenements called 'Dustleburgh' (VCH III, 135); 1237, a burgess of High

Wycombe was Richard de Dusteberg (Downs 1878, 256); 1241, Andrew Dustleberwe occurs at Little Missenden (Downs 1878, 257). Dusteburgh Meadow is found in the West Wycombe manorial rolls (VCH II, 135).

The Excavation

The area containing the ringwork and the lynchet was scheduled in 1933 (Bucks. Monument No. 27). In 1987 Scheduled Monument Consent was granted to Wycombe District Council for the upgrading of the dirt road which ran along the south edge of the scheduled area behind the properties in Spearing Road (Fig. 2). A condition of the Consent was the maintenance of a watching brief during construction work. This was carried out by the writer during April and May 1987.

A separate application for Scheduled Monument consent was made by Wycombe District Council to allow the construction of houses on the open space east of Rutland Avenue, within the area enclosed by the outer earthwork along Booker Lane and directly outside the presumed entrance to the Castle itself. In order to determine the extent and importance of the archaeological deposits in the area of the proposed development, the Buckinghamshire County Museum was asked to carry out an assessment excavation. This took place in May and June 1987 and was funded by Wycombe District Council. This report includes both the results of that excavation and the observations made during the watching brief. It has been compiled from the site archive, which is lodged at the Buckinghamshire County Museum, CAS 0018, where the finds are also deposited.

Subsequent to the excavation, Scheduled Monument Consent for the housing development was refused by the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Geology

The site lies close to the 120 m contour on a Drift deposit of clay with flints which overlies the solid Upper Chalk in this area. Excavation proved the clay with flints to be of variable thickness (between 0.10 m and 1.75 m or more).

The area immediately around the castle is open grassland, while the ringwork itself is covered with beech trees with an occasional oak. A quarter of a mile to the west is a large wood of beech. Immediately before the construction of the housing estate the area was under pasture, but the land had previously been used for arable crops (Allcroft 1908, 442a), and Saunders' excavations showed that there had been extensive ploughing over the centuries (Saunders 1971, 26 and Fig. 3, above).

1987 Excavations

The assessment took the form of five trenches. All were initially hand-dug but trenches B and E were later extended by use of a JCB mechanical excavator. The area sampled, c.295 m², represented about 5% of the proposed development site.

The location of the trenches is shown in Figs. 4–5. In the descriptions, context numbers are given in brackets.

Trench A

Designed to cut across the postulated bank and ditch, this trench showed that, in this area, the construction of the road and pavement had cut into the lynchet along Booker Lane and truncated the deposits. It was however possible to interpret the surviving material with some confidence. A series of modern layers (003-008) dumped over the 1930s turfline (004), extending along the edge of the lynchets, and spread across the centre of the field (Fig. 5 and also see below, Trench D) were removed. Beneath this dump was a substantial deposit of ploughsoils (002, 009-012) which deepened from west to east from 0.50 m to 0.80 m. Inverse to this deepening of the ploughsoil, the surface of the underlying clay with flints slopes down to the east, a fact which accentuated the build up of material above. Plainly the ploughsoil had built up against a pre-existing landscape feature, which is presumably the same bank as found by Saunders in 1968. A small deposit of redeposited clay with flints (013) was found at the west end of the trench at the base of the ploughsoil. This had been cut through but its position must imply that it is the ploughed-out remnant of a bank built of material derived from an

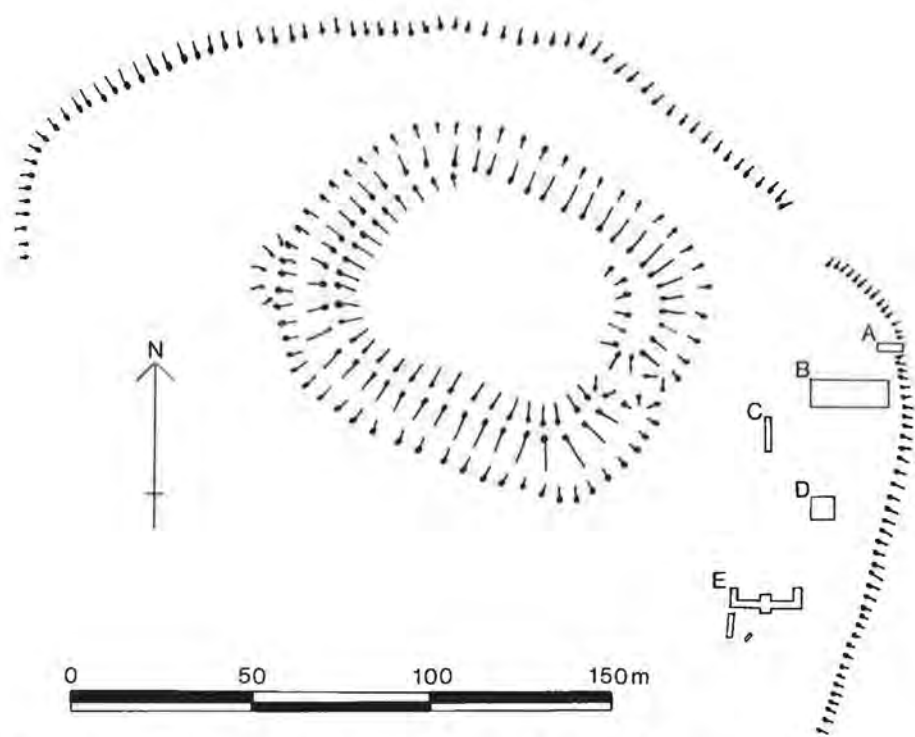


Fig. 4. Location of 1987 trenches in relation to Desborough Castle and lynchet.

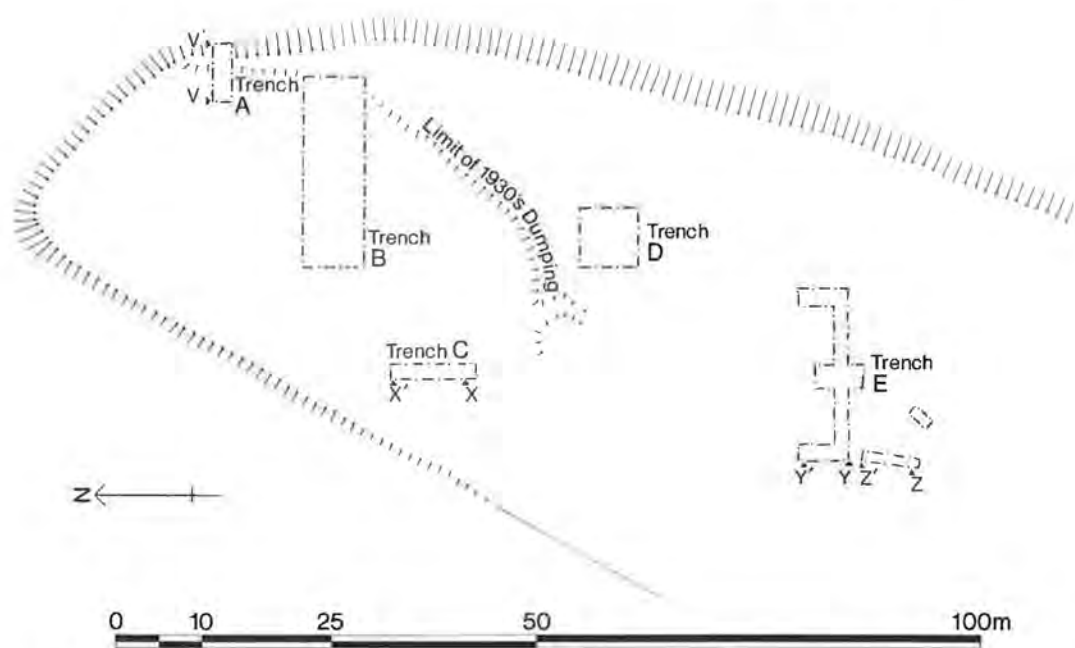


Fig. 5. Location of sections.

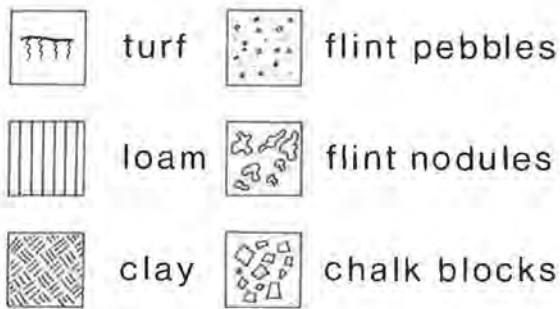


Fig. 6. Key to sections.

external ditch. A small area of 'buried soil' survived under the 'bank' and column samples for pollen analysis were taken through this and the overlying ploughsoils (Fig. 17.). Unfortunately there proved to have been considerable post-depositional mixing within the soils, and the results were thus of no help in interpreting the deposits (Palynological Report below).

The artefacts recovered from the ploughsoils (009-012) were almost wholly medieval pottery, mostly small and abraded sherds. A few flint flakes and scaps of burnt flint have been dated to the Later Neolithic/Bronze Age. No dating evidence was recovered from beneath the 'bank' remnant.

The lynchet along Booker Lane was subsequently resurveyed and the results of this seem to demonstrate that the lynchet had been cut back more in this area than in other places along its course (this may be seen on Fig. 5). If 013 was the remains of a bank, it may well survive better elsewhere along the line of Booker Lane.

Trench B

Dug originally as 7 m square, this trench was extended 15 m to the east by machine. The stratigraphic sequence was simple. Beneath the modern turf was a ploughsoil which directly overlay the clay with flints. No archaeological features had been cut into this. The ploughsoil (201-203) displayed the same characteristics as that in Trench A: from a depth of 0.10 m at the west end it thickened to 0.75 m. The same landscape feature as in Trench A was apparently impeding the natural movement of the ploughsoil down the hillside to the east.

Finds were scarce from the ploughsoil but a scatter of flintwork was recovered from the hand-dug part of the trench.

Trench C (Figs. 8 & 9)

Situated immediately outside the probable entrance to the castle, the trench contained a single large ditch, 415. Originally 5 m wide it ran east from the direction of the castle, before turning to run north, parallel to the defences. It had been recut (420), apparently after the original ditch had completely silted up. The recut was narrower and shallower than the original ditch but followed the same line. The fills of 420, (416 and 426), were dark grey, almost black, implying a high organic content in their make-up. The earlier ditch was filled with clean silts, except 418-423, which was a dump of rough flints, perhaps derived from a demolished wall or redundant yard surface.

The finds from the ditch fills were exclusively medieval. That the ditch was a part of the castle

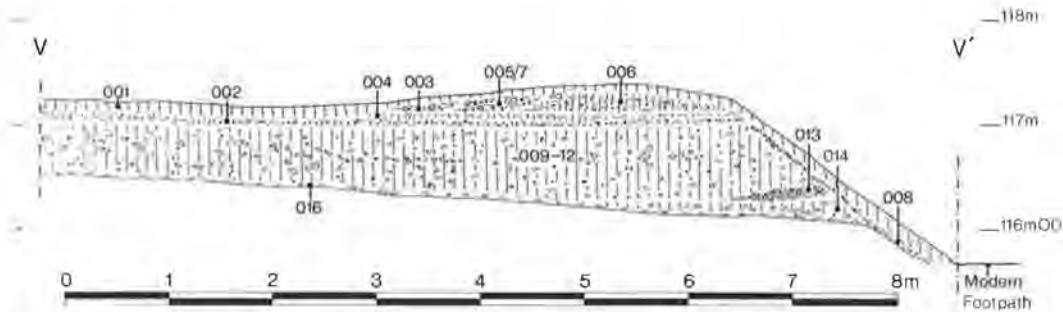


Fig. 7. Trench A: north section.

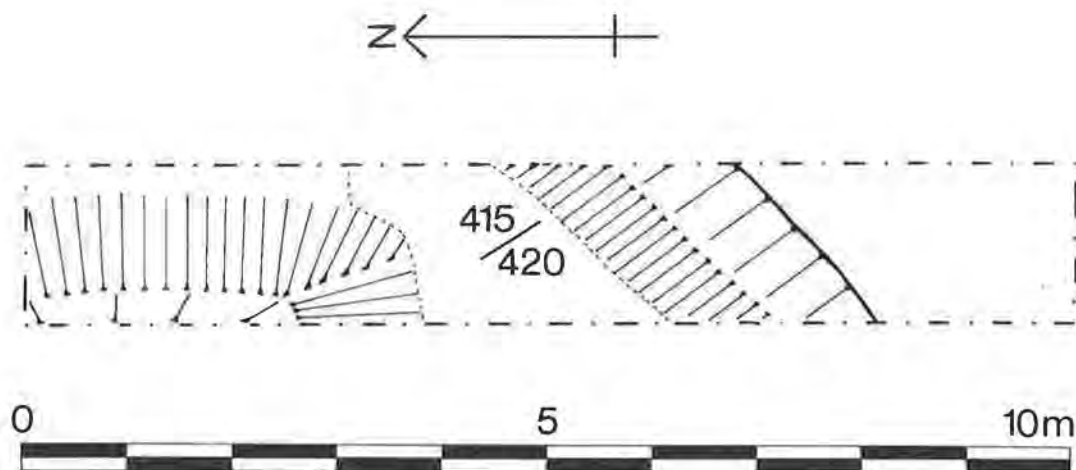


Fig. 8. Trench C: plan showing excavated features.

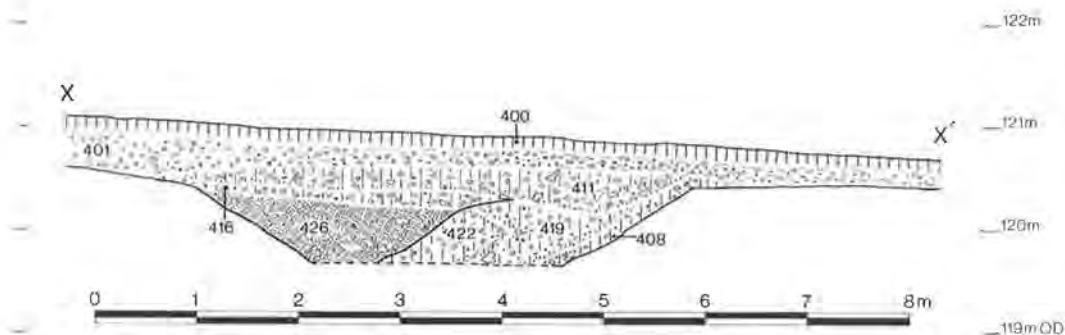


Fig. 9. Trench C: west section.

defences seems certain—it may have formed a protective hornwork just outside the entrance to the castle.

Trench D

A 7 m square, this trench demonstrated the depth of dumping (see Trench A also) over the middle of the field. A 0.30 m deep deposit of modern rubbish sealed the postholes of a simple farm building shown on the 1925 OS map. A single posthole (653) was found sealed by the ploughsoil, in the north-east corner of the trench, but no finds came from its fill.

Trench E (Figs. 10–12)

Originally dug as a long narrow trench, this trench was extended on discovery of a large feature (815) at its west end, the extensions

(Fig. 10, C & D) being dug to determine its size and form. Two sections (Fig. 10, A & B, 11 and 12, $y'-y$, $z'-z$) were dug by hand through the feature, which showed it to be linear, c.12 m wide, and at least 2.75 m deep. It was not possible to excavate to the bottom because of safety considerations. The northern edge was irregular, because of erosion of the chalk into which it had been cut. At the top the sides sloped gently while further down they became almost vertical. The lowest excavated fills were generally made up of eroded chalk and clay (839–841, 842–844). Above these was a very loose dump of flint nodules (840), sealed by orange brown clay (836). The dumping of 840 marked a change in function of the feature. It was now apparently used as a domestic rubbish dump, represented in the fills by 833, 845, 832–

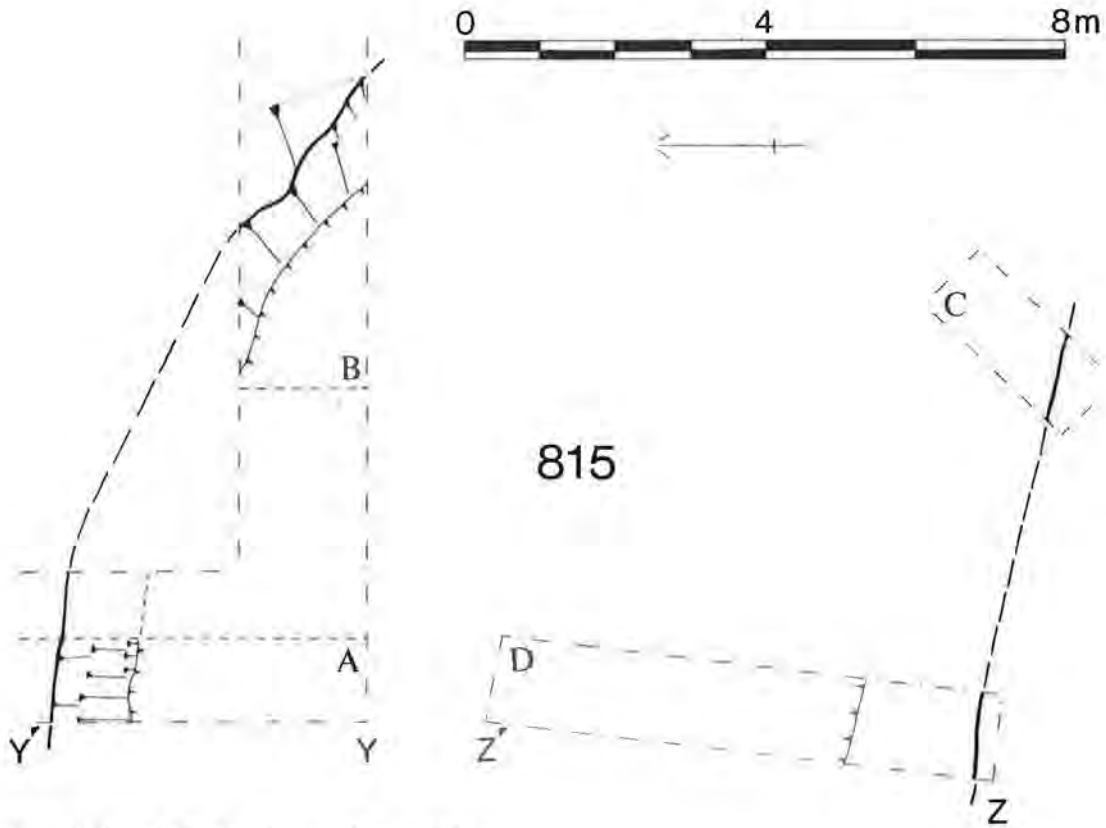


Fig. 10. Trench E: plan showing feature 815.

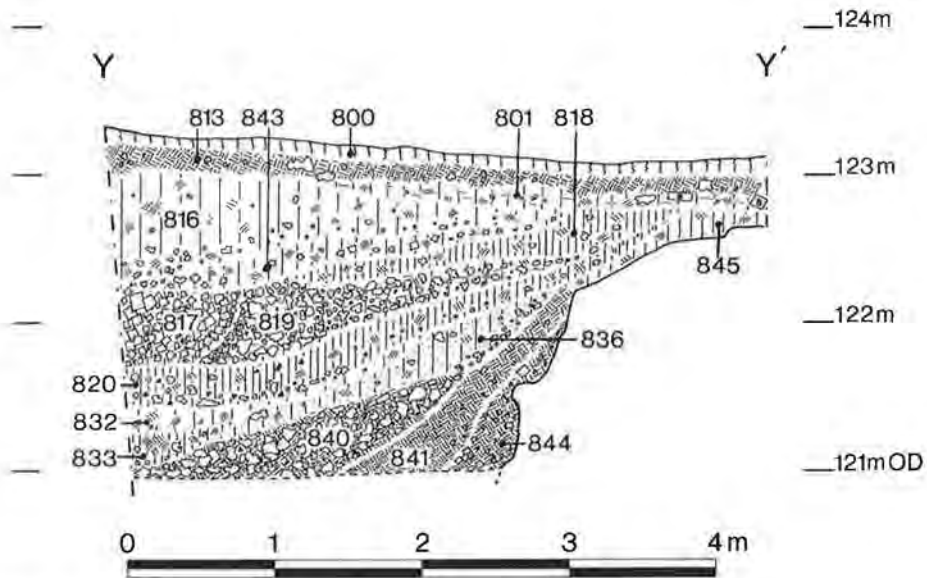


Fig. 11. Trench E: west section.

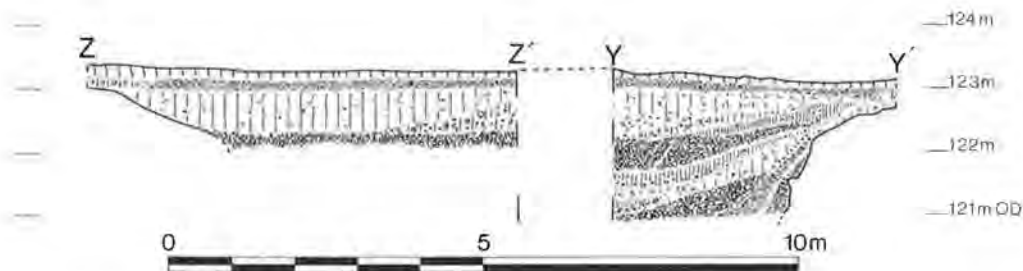


Fig. 12. Trench E: composite west section across feature 815.

838, and 837, and especially 820–831, a dark grey layer packed with pottery, bone and charcoal, a deposit from a kitchen—the pots were of cooking/storage type and the bones were derived from the preparation of carcasses rather than food debris (Bone report, below). Above this 815 appears to have been deliberately slighted. A second thick layer of clean flints was deposited (819–835) and then a large amount of redeposited chalk (817–830) in the form of small irregular blocks. This chalk appears to have been dumped from the northern side (815). The void in the top of 815 created by the settling of its fills was deliberately infilled with clay (816–829). Despite the size of the feature, no trace of an earthwork now remains above ground because of dumping associated with the building of the housing estate to the south which has filled in any irregularities in the surface of the field. It was probably 815 which was visible as a cropmark to Allcroft and Williams Freeman in the early part of this century.

The likeliest interpretation of 815 is that it was a massive ditch, acting as an external line of defence for the castle on its tactically weakest side. The flint nodules (819–835) and chalk blocks (817–830) would then represent part of the bank to the north of the ditch. Other explanations for a feature of such size and form are difficult to find.

Most of the pottery recovered from the fill of 815 was medieval. The presence of Roman pottery and tile, a 'Belgic'/Roman brooch, and 'Belgic' pottery in association with the medieval pottery was a surprise. It does not appear that this is an earlier feature reused in the medieval

period, although the possibility cannot be ruled out completely.

Watching Brief (Fig. 2)

Along much of the line of the new road the reduction in level was not deep enough to affect any archaeological features that may exist. Only occasionally was the clay with flints subsoil exposed. No features were visible in these small areas. The digging of a pipe trench in the area immediately south of the castle was also watched, but no archaeological features were visible in the trench sides

The Finds

Within the finds reports, figures in brackets refer to trench, context number, special find number and context date (if applicable).

The Flints by Michael Farley

The excavation recovered 83 struck flints (470 g) and 24 fire-crazed flints (380 g). There were no cores or bifacial pieces. It was noticeable that a substantial proportion of the struck flakes (68.7%) retained some cortex. This is likely to reflect the relatively small size of the nodules available for knapping, and taken alongside the relatively poor quality of the flint suggest that surface nodules were being utilised.

Of the struck pieces, 10 flakes showed edge flaking. In the majority of cases this was simple edge damage due to the piece having been utilized. Only 4 showed even the simplest deliberate retouch, namely a spurred piece (Healy 1985, 202), with edge retouch also (E, 800, SF7049); a spurred piece of burin (C, 419, SF7120); and two scrapers, one a snapped blade with retouch along the break and one edge (D,

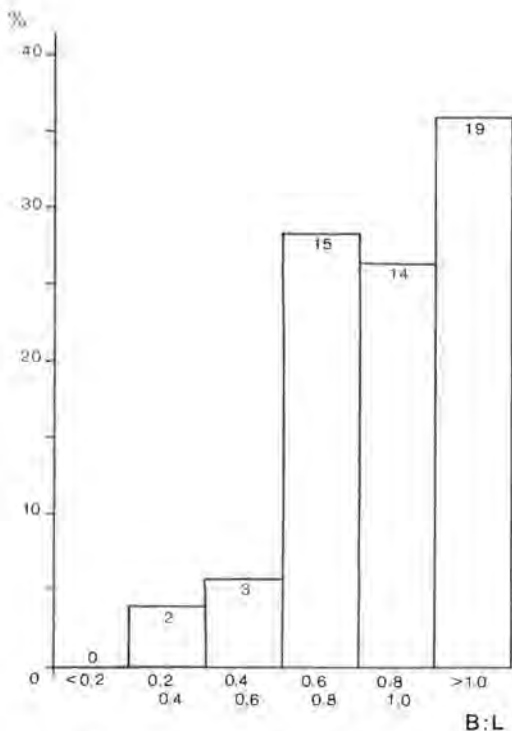


Fig. 13. Flints: Breadth:Length ratio.

600, SF7012), the other retouched along one edge with signs of utilisation on the other (B, 201, SF7034). Each tool came from a different trench.

Such simple tools are not diagnostic of date. However, calculation of the breadth:length ratio of the 53 intact flakes (Fig. 13), shows a distribution which fits within Southern English Later Neolithic-Bronze Age assemblages (Pitts 1978, 187). It also compares closely with the only other published Chilterns group presumed to be of this date, at Chalfont St Giles (Smithson 1984). It should be noted however that the Desborough assemblage is really too small for totally reliable comparison.

Struck flints are a common occurrence in arable land across the Chilterns. A small proportion of such flints may be plough-strikes. However as tools are invariably also present in such assemblages, even if in small quantities, it does appear that the majority represent genuine

knapping waste and that the Chilterns were heavily utilized from the Later Neolithic period onwards, in a manner not yet clearly understood.

The density of flints recovered from the excavated area at Desborough, c.45 per 100 m² is not great, but sufficient to suggest more than a passing presence. It is tempting to relate the flintwork to the presumed prehistoric earthwork but clearly this equation must await further work on the site in future.

The Metal Objects

Only objects which came from medieval contexts or, if from other contexts, were identifiable as medieval or earlier, are catalogued here.

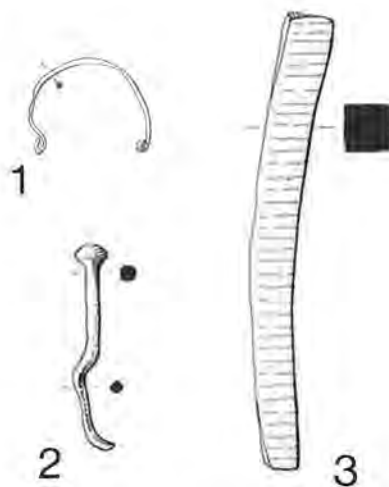


Fig. 14. The metal finds. 1. Copper Alloy (1:3). 2-3. Iron (1:3).

Copper Alloy (Fig. 14, 1)

1. Pennannular brooch, Fowler (1960) Type C, with terminals coiled and twisted at right angles to plane of ring. One terminal damaged, pin missing. No decoration. Original diameter difficult to determine as brooch splayed to 25 mm. Occurs in contexts from first century BC to Saxon graves, but a typical Belgic type (Fowler 1960, 165-6), (E, 829, SF7077, med/post-med.)

Iron (Fig. 14, 2-3)

2. Swivel fitting. Slight traces of white metal coating. L=86 mm. (E, 834, SF7141, twelfth-century.) (Fig. 14, 2.)
3. Hammer head. Mason's/farrier's hammer. Narrow

rectangular head at one end, tapering to form blunt pick at other. Hole through centre not visible due to corrosion. L=198 mm. (E, 820, SF7078, twelfth-century.) (Fig. 14, 3.)

4. ?Knife blade fragment, at junction of blade and tang. (A, 010, SF7106, med/post med.) Not illustrated
5. Horse-shoe nail-head and part of shaft. T-shaped head, L=20 mm. Head width=shaft width. Medieval (Clark, J.), (A, 011, SF7116, med/post-med.) Not illustrated.
6. Horse-shoe nail. T-shaped, L=25 mm. Length of nail=35 mm. (A, 011, med/post-med.) Not illustrated.
7. Horse-shoe fragment. 'Norman' type (Clark, J.) 3 nail holes running on one side, countersunk ovals. Lobate profile. (Type 11, mid-thirteenth century.) (D, 636, SF7127, med/post-med.) Not illustrated.
8. Wedge-shaped object, tapering to narrow blunt point. ?Chisel end, L=37 mm, W=10 mm, T=8 mm, (C, 419, SF7118, twelfth-century.) Not illustrated.
9. Wedge-shaped object, constant width but tapering in thickness. L=37 mm, W=10 mm, T=8 mm. (C, 423, SF7131, twelfth-century.) Not illustrated.
10. Bar, tapering. (E, 820, SF7112, twelfth-century.) Not illustrated.

The Pottery by Barbara Hurman

Introduction

There were 1088 sherds of pottery, plus one almost complete saggy based pot (Fig. 16, 19) recovered from the excavation.

The late post-medieval, nineteenth and twentieth-century sherds from the topsoil account for 41% of the total; the remainder was made up of 57% medieval and 2% 'Belgic' and Roman sherds.

The medieval stratified groups and the small amount of residual 'Belgic' and Romano-British sherds are discussed in the following report with illustrations. Context numbers are shown in brackets.

Method of Analysis

The 1088 sherds were divided into periods, and then into rims, bases, handles and body sherds, and then counted. The results were recorded and decoration and potting technique noted.

The 'Belgic' and Romano-British Pottery

These sherds came from Trench C and Trench E (820 to 840). Most were fragments of uncertain form, the exception being the illustrated pieces (830, 831, 840 : Fig. 15, 1-4) and

the large piece of Oxford Mortarium rim (832 : Fig. 15, 5). 14 sherds were in a grogged soapy fabric (RF1), 7 were grey or oxidized sandy wares (RF2), and one was the mortarium rim in fine sandy fabric (RF3).

The Medieval Pottery (Fig. 16, 1-23)

The medieval sherds were retrieved from the ploughsoil in Trench A (009-012), and from the ditches in Trench C (415 and 420) and Trench E (815).

Fabrics

The medieval fabrics were examined using a $\times 10$ hand lens, 6 fabrics were defined.

Fabric 1: sandy, abundant close-packed rounded quartz grains. (MF1)

Fabric 1a: as fabric 1, but with loose sand. (MF1a)

Fabric 2: as fabric 1, but occasionally small pieces of flint grog, angular quartz or calcareous inclusions. (MF2)

Fabric 3: sandy, abundant quartz grog both round and angular, often opaque, with flint, grog, quartzite and occasional calcareous inclusions, which were clearly visible on the surfaces. The core was a distinctive purply-brown. (MF3)

Fabric 4: Oxford Medieval Ware, sandy fabric. (MF4)

Fabric 5: Fine calcareous inclusions, surface vesicular. (MF5)

MF1-2 are the same except for the occasional inclusion. The majority of the pots were of this fabric. The sherds had variable surface colouring of grey, white, red-brown and black and some appeared to have a 'slip' coating. Surface colour variation is a familiar feature in pottery of this period, being a result of the kiln firing. The fabrics were often hard-fired and some sherds had a pimply feel. Decoration consisted of rim thumbing and shallow combing. Both these fabrics, and their decoration of combing and rim thumbing are apparently similar to the pottery from Low Farm, Fulmer (Farley 1982, 67) although no direct comparison has been made. A tentative mid twelfth to early thirteenth-century date was suggested there (Farley, *ibid.*). Similar decoration was also

Table 1. Distribution of pottery by period.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Trench A</i>	<i>Trench B</i>	<i>Trench C</i>	<i>Trench D</i>	<i>Trench E</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Pot by period</i>
Post-medieval	55	39	3	200	148	445	40.9
Medieval	66	—	93	2	459	620	57.0
Belgic & Roman	—	—	11	—	11	22	2.0
Unidentified	—	—	—	—	1	1	0.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>121</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>202</i>	<i>619</i>	<i>1088</i>	
<i>% Pot in Trenches</i>	11.1	3.6	9.8	18.6	56.9		100

(N.B. Excludes one almost complete medieval saggy based pot.)

Table 2. Distribution of medieval pottery by fabric

<i>Fabric</i>	<i>Trench A</i>	<i>Trench B</i>	<i>Trench C</i>	<i>Trench D</i>	<i>Trench E</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
MF1	3	—	23	—	381	407	65.8
MF1a	62	—	61	—	18	141	22.8
MF2	—	—	5	—	21	26	4.2
MF3	—	—	4	—	38	42	6.8
MF4	1	—	—	—	—	1	0.2
MF5	—	—	—	—	1	1	0.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>459</i>	<i>618</i>	
<i>%</i>	10.7	—	15.0	—	74.3		100

found in mid to late twelfth-century contexts at Missenden Abbey (Hurman, in Collard and Yeoman, forthcoming).

MF1a was quartz filled, like MF1 and 2, but with loose sand; sometimes sherds were oxidized, but again surface colours were variable. Some appeared to have a worn slip coating. Worn combing was visible on one small sherd (012), not illustrated.

MF3 was the most interesting, as it is not only an unfamiliar fabric but the forms of the pottery with stabbed decoration are unknown in southern Buckinghamshire.

Generally the surfaces were oxidized giving a rich red-brown finish. An occasional sherd was

black; in others the exteriors were red-brown and the interior brown-grey.

Decoration was either stabbed squares (Fig. 16, nos. 6, 13) or deep combing (Fig. 16, no. 15). A rim of uncertain diameter and form appeared to have a thick slip finish, as well as the stabbed squares and an unusual pattern on the rim (Fig. 16, no. 6). One very small piece with remains of a handle (Fig. 16, no. 5) also had the stabbed pattern; the type of handle was uncertain.

The other illustrated sherds in this fabric are a shallow dish (Fig. 16, 10) which is a good example of a twelfth-century form (derived from a Late Saxon type) which continued into the thirteenth century (Jope 1947, 56), a large

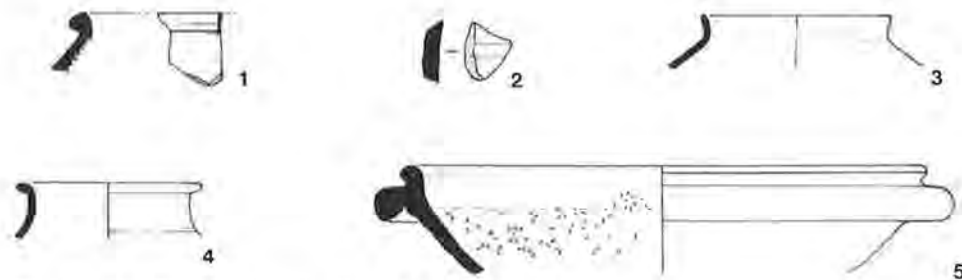


Fig. 15. The Roman pottery. (1/4 scale)

piece of base with combed decoration, of uncertain form (Fig. 16, 15) and a pot with rim thumbing (Fig. 16, 18). Not illustrated are a small unidentifiable rim fragment (830), and a worn flat-topped everted rim (830).

This square, stabbed decoration is a common Saxo-Norman trait over south-east England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Similar decoration occurred at Staines, Middlesex (Jones 1982, 208), in the north of Buckinghamshire on a jug from Warrington (Mynard 1971, 33) and on jug body sherds of thirteenth-century 'A' ware from a medieval kiln site at Olney Hyde (Mynard 1984, 67, 70).

MF4 was represented by one sherd of an Oxford type, an early sandy tripod pitcher (Oxford fabric Y, Oxford Medieval Ware) with worn yellow-green glaze (011) (Fig. 16, 2) (Haldon 1977, 117)

MF5 Only one sherd of this fabric was found, with vesicular surfaces, the remaining inclusions being calcareous (834).

The Catalogue

Fig. 15, 1-5: 'Belgic' and Romano-British Pottery.

1. RF1. Jar. Everted bead rim, fired hard, ext/int grey black, fractured int surface (831).
2. RF1. Sherd, ext orange, int and core worn, buff grey, some burnish remaining (830).
3. RF2. Jar. Slightly everted rim, fired hard, surfaces buff grey, worn core buff (830).
4. RF2. Cordoned beaker. Everted rim, fired hard, ext/int grey/brown, core orange, some burnishing (840).
5. RF3. Mortarium, Oxford type M22 (832).

Fig. 16, 1-23: Medieval Pottery.

1. MF1. Worn sherd, shallow combed dec, ext/int red/grey/buff, core grey (011).

2. MF4. Worn sherd, glazed with applied dec strip, fired hard, sandy, worn surfaces, ext pale yellow green glaze, orange buff surfaces, core grey (011).
3. MF1. Slightly everted rim, int of rim finger dec, hard fired, ext/int/core buff. Surfaces look grey, perhaps slip? 160 mm. diam. (011).
4. MF1. Everted rim, slight fingering on outer edge of rim, fired hard, int/ext buff, grey, orange/red, core grey (418).
5. MF3. Fragment of handle stump, fired hard, ext/int oxidized core purple brown (419).
6. MF3. Uncertain form, square stabbed dec. Slightly everted rim. Fired hard, ext/int orange brown, core grey brown/mauve. Slip finish giving sherd smooth feel on otherwise very coarse fabric.
7. MF1. Slightly everted, rounded rim. Fired hard, ext/int orange buff, core grey (830).
8. MF1. Slightly everted rim, finger dec on top. Fired hard, ext/int buff/grey core (830).
9. MF2. Everted rim, finger dec on top. Fired hard, ext/int buff orange grey, core buff (831).
10. MF3. Shallow dish. Upright, flat-topped rim, oblique 'twig' dec on rim top. Fired hard, ext/int orange/brown, core grey (831).
11. MF2. Sherd. Shallow, combed dec. Fired hard, ext bright orange, core buff grey (831).
12. MF2. Bevelled rim, irregular shallow fingering on top of rim. Fired hard. (837). (Sagging base, not drawn, has a scored line, probably same vessel).
13. MF3. Sherd. Stabbed square dec. Fired hard, ext orange/brown, int dark buff, core grey (820).
14. MF1. Sherd, shallow combed dec. Fired hard. Int/ext orange/brown, core grey (820).
15. MF3. Base, uncertain form. Some visible limestone inclusions, deep combed dec, int/ext oxidized, core purple brown (820).
16. MF1. Sherd shallow combed dec. Fired hard, ext buff/grey, int grey, core grey (820).
17. MF1. Slightly everted, flat topped rim with groove on ext of rim. Fired hard, int/ext dark grey, core light grey. 260mm diam. (820).
18. MF3. Slightly everted rim, fingered dec ext rim. Fired hard, ext orange/buff/grey, int orange, core grey (820).
19. MF1. Large saggy based pot, fingered dec top of rim, ext buff/grey/orange, int grey, core grey (820).
20. MF1. Everted rim, groove on top. Fired hard, ext grey-black/buff, int grey/buff, core light grey. 300mm diam. (820).

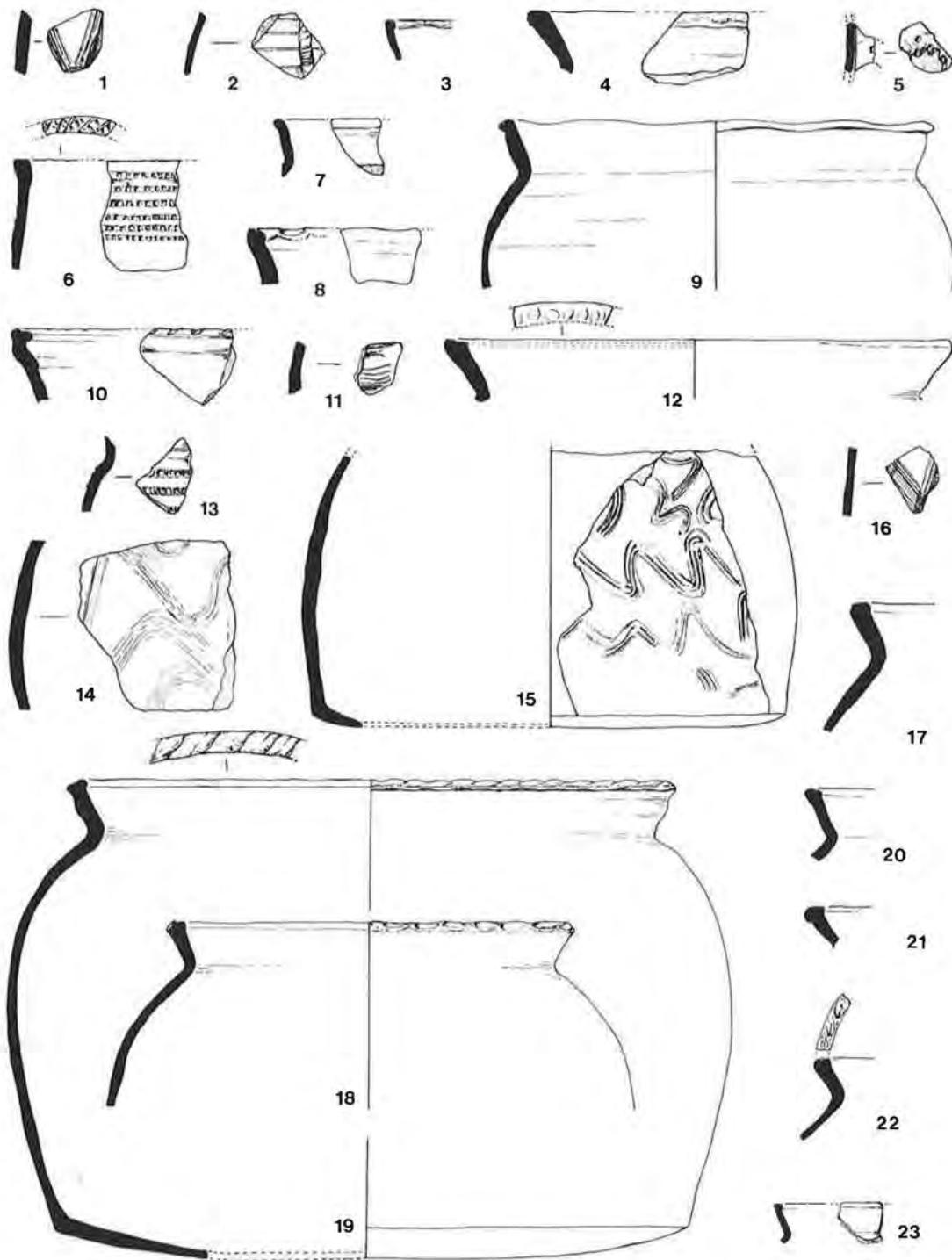


Fig. 16. The Medieval pottery. ($\frac{1}{4}$ scale)

21. MF1. Rounded rim. Ext grey, int oxidized, core grey (820).
22. MF1. Everted rim, fingered dec. Ext black, some sooting, int buff/black/grey, core grey. 220mm diam. (820).
23. MF1. Everted, flat topped rim. Fired hard, ext/int red/grey-white, core dark grey (842).

Discussion

'Belgic' and Romano-British Pottery

Three of the 'Belgic' forms illustrated could be of pre-conquest date on the basis of fabric and form (Fig. 15, 1, 2, 3) but could continue into the years following the conquest. The form of no. 4 is found in the first and second centuries, while no. 5, the Oxford mortarium type M22, is of third/fourth-century date (Young 1977).

Medieval Pottery

The stabbed decoration is common in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, continuing into the thirteenth century. However, the absence of Saxo-Norman shelly wares of St Neots type, and the early medieval shelly wares present, for example, at Bourbon Street, Aylesbury (Farley 1974), and Walton Street, Aylesbury (Farley 1976) suggest an early twelfth-century starting date for this pottery assemblage. It has been suggested however, that the Late Saxon fabrics of South Buckinghamshire may have been sandy rather than shelly (M. E. Farley, pers. comm., and 1988.)

Both MF1 and 2, and the related pottery form, with rim thumbing, combed decoration and saggy bases are characteristically twelfth-century. The absence of applied-strip storage jars reinforces the identification of the pottery from the excavation as a twelfth-century group. Although the square cooking pot form can continue well into the later thirteenth century, the absence of jugs from the group suggests the closing date was no later than the mid thirteenth century. However, it must be remembered that the pottery was from restricted trenches outside the castle proper.

Roman Tile

Tegula fragments with flanges were recovered from the medieval ditch fill (418) and

(820) (3 pieces), one imbrex fragment from (830), and a small fragment of relief patterned flue tile from (426). 23 other fragments have been tentatively identified as pieces of Roman building material, but their small size makes it difficult to be certain about this classification. Roman tegula and imbrex fragments have been collected in the past from the Castle itself. (BCM Acc. No. 305. 79.)

Clay Pipes

15 fragments of clay pipe were found, 13 of which were stem pieces. The other 2 were decorated bowls. One (001, SF7050) has a leaf decoration in relief; the other (201, SF7011) was of particular interest, being a basket weave pattern with a dark purple-brown slip/glaze. The decoration is known in London, and is commonly found on nineteenth-century pipes (Oswald 1975, 111, (17), but this particular finish is not (F. Grew, Museum of London, pers. comm.).

The Bone by P. Sadler

167 bone fragments were recovered from the two medieval ditches. 99 bones were identified, several of which were reconstructed from fragments. The bones were in a fairly good condition for material from this type of feature and only two of the three bones from layer (829) (the latest period) showed signs of damage by plant roots.

There were also two small-size ribs and a small unidentified fragment.

The ageing data on these few bones is obviously sparse and must be treated with caution as they can be affected by factors such as nutrition and castration.

Three estimates based on dental evidence and two based on epiphyseal fusion data show cattle aged approximately 1½ years, more than 1½ years, less than 2½ years, between 1½ and 4 years and more than 3 years (Grigson 1982).

There was no evidence for epiphyseal fusion on the sheep bones, but four mandibles gave ages of (2) 1-2 years, and 4-6 years (Grant 1982). 1-2 years is not a common age at which to

Table 3. Number of fragments of identified bone.

	<i>Bone Size</i>		<i>Teeth</i>	<i>Chop</i>	<i>Lt. Cut</i>	<i>Burnt</i>	<i>Path</i>	<i>Gnaw</i>
	<i>over 50%</i>	<i>less than 50%</i>						
<i>Cattle</i>								
Mature		1		1	1		1	
Poss Mat.	2	12						
Immature	1	2	4					
<i>Sheep</i>								
Mature	7		9					3
Poss Mat.	1	20						
Immature	2							
<i>Pig</i>								
Mature	1		7			1		1
Poss Mat.	2	7						
Immature	4	2						
<i>Red Deer</i>								
Mature			1					
<i>Roe Deer</i>								
Mature	1	1						
Immature	1							
<i>Goose</i>								
Poss Mat.		1						
<i>Dom. Fowl</i>								
Mature	5	1					2	
Immature	2	2						
<i>Total</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>

Table 4. Parts of the Body represented in the main domestic animals.

	<i>Number of Fragments</i>					
	<i>Head</i>	<i>Body</i>	<i>Foot</i>	<i>Rib</i>	<i>Vert.</i>	<i>Indet.</i>
Cattle	12	9	1	9	1	22
Sheep	29	6	4	7	2	23
Pig	11	10	2		1	

kill sheep in this period. They may have been victims of disease, or ewes dying during their first lambing. 4-6 years is a common age of death when wool is of importance.

Pig teeth suggested 2 animals aged 6 months and about 3 years. The last animal was a female

and may have been used for breeding. A radius was from an animal less than 1 year and an ulna from an animal less than 3 years old (Bull and Payne 1982).

The red deer tooth was from an animal about 2-2½ years old (Nahlik 1959). If roe deer

mature at roughly the same rate as wild goat, then there was an animal of over 4 years and another less than 2–3 years. (Noddle 1974).

Two sheep horn cores were unfortunately not quite complete but their shape and size suggest male/castrates.

Three bones were pathological. A cattle mandibular condyle had a pit on the articular surface and the medial part was tilted upwards. A domestic fowl tarsometatarsus was 'swollen' just under the proximal articular surface. This was probably caused by an infection. Another fowl tarsometatarsus had small areas of extra bone growth down the shaft but the cause is unknown.

Measurements

As described by von den Driesch (1976). All are in mm.

Cattle	Humerus	Bd 88	BT est. 67
Sheep	Horn cores	m41 39.5	m42 21.1 (not quite the base of the horn core). m41 29.5 m42 17.7 m43 est. 80
Roe deer	Radius	GL 161	Bp 35.9 BFP 24.4 Bd 24.0 BFD est. 22.9
	Ulna	DPA 22.9	BPC 14.4
Dom. fowl	Radius	GL 60.9	
	Ulna	GL 70.7	SC 4.6 Bp 8.7 Dp 13.9 Bp 13.6
	Femur		
	Tarsom/t	GL 79.2	Bp 15.9* BFP 14.1 SC 8.0 Bd 15.8 Spur 15.1
	Scapula	Dic 12.6	
	Carpom/c	GL 40.9	L 37.7 Bp 12.5 Did 7.7

* Slightly large because it was pathological.

Discussion

70% of the identified remains were from the head and feet indicating that the main food refuse was disposed of elsewhere and that it was mainly the bones discarded before cooking which found their way into the ditches. Care must be taken in considering this fact as 18% of the identified cattle bones, 23% of the sheep and 30% of the pig bones were loose teeth. This is not unusual in collections from ditches and reflects the difficult conditions the bone has endured prior to recovery. Two fragments of bone and four cattle teeth all from the left maxilla seemed to fit together and suggest that

the bone was whole when it arrived in the ditch and that subsequent actions destroyed it. If loose teeth are removed from the calculations the head and feet remains are still 61% of the total.

The presence of deer bones is particularly interesting. 'Venison was no ordinary meat; it was a special dish for feasts and the honouring of guests. It was beyond price . . .' (Rackham 1986, 125). After the conquest, red deer were protected by law, and they were used to feed the King and his court (Rackham 1980, 180). The likeliest source for the red deer at Desborough is the Royal Forest of Bernwood. Roe deer were even less common than red deer in the medieval period, and were also protected until the fourteenth century (Whitehead 1964, 210), and the hunting of deer confined to the nobility. The presence of roe and fallow deer at Low Farm, Fulmer was marked as notable (Farley 1982, 67).

The Palynological Samples by Geraint Coles

Introduction

The aims of the investigation were to determine (i) the environment before the deposit of the possible clay rampart (013) from the soil buried beneath it, (ii) the source of the sediments within 013 and (iii) the environment during the deposition of the sediments (ploughwash?). Although the results of the analysis were inconclusive, the report is here included in its entirety as evidence of this kind for South Buckinghamshire has never been considered in print previously.

Location of the Samples (Fig. 17)

Two columns of sediment were sampled for palynological investigation. Samples were taken at 0.05 m intervals from the freshly cleaned face of the trench.

Column Sample I: CSI: Cut through the body of sediment behind the postulated rampart. Samples were taken from context (009–012), the 'ploughsoil'; the overlying contexts, (002 and 004, respectively a 'worm-sorted' horizon and an overlying 1930s turfline; and context

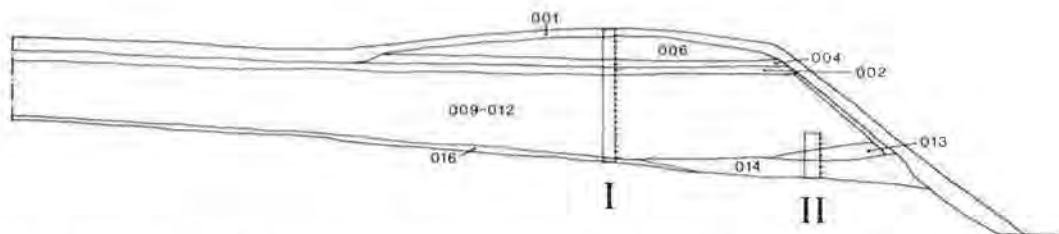


Fig. 17. Trench A: location of Palynological samples, I & II. Divisions at 0.05 m intervals.

005–007, post-1930s dump deposits. A single sample of context 001, the modern topsoil, was also examined for comparative purposes (see Table 5 for location of samples).

Column Sample II: CSII: Cut through the postulated 'tail' of the rampart, the presumed pre-rampart soil horizon and overlying sediments. Samples were taken from context 014, the presumed pre-rampart buried soil; context 013, the rampart 'tail'; and from the overlying context 009–012, the post rampart 'ploughsoil' (see Table 6 for location of samples).

Palynological Methods

The palynological samples were processed according to the methods given in Hunt (1985). This involves the disaggregation of the sediment in potassium hydroxide, repeated sieving on a 7 micron sieve to remove clays, and swirling on a clock glass to remove silts and sands. The palynological residues were mounted in glycerine jelly. Each sample was scanned until a total of 150 (or more) determinate grains had been recorded.

The Results

The results of the analysis are illustrated by the pollen diagram shown in Fig. 18. The pollen sum for the diagram is based on the sum of Total Land Pollen and Spores (Σ TLPS=100%) excluding indeterminate (degraded) grains. Percentage frequencies of indeterminate (degraded) grains are given as a percentage of Σ TLPS. The results from each sample column are described below.

Column Sample One

The pollen and spore assemblages from Column Sample I are very similar to those from

Column Sample 2. Again the assemblages are dominated by Gramineae (22 to 35%) and *Pteridium* (28 to 67%), with low frequencies (0.5 to 2%) of arboreal taxa, including Coryloid type. *Quercus*, *Betula* and a single record of *Tilia* (Lime, 0.5%).

The herb taxa recorded were also similar to Column Sample 2. Persistent records of *Ranunculus* type (0.5 to 4%), *Sinapis* type (Cabbage family, 0.5 to 2%), Umbelliferae (0.5 to 2%), *Rumex* type ('Sorrels', 0.5 to 1%), *Urtica* type (Nettles, 0.5 to 2.5%), Compositae Liguliflorae (0.5 to 14%) and *Carduus* type (0.5 to 11%) were recorded. Sporadic low frequency (less than 1%) occurrences of other herb taxa were noted. The herb taxa again suggest open, disturbed, ground conditions.

The palynological assemblages from the post-rampart ploughsoil (samples A to O) in Sample Column 1 are almost identical in composition with those from the upper and (in part) stratigraphically congruent samples in Sample Column 2 (samples G, H, I) This may suggest that the assemblages result from similar processes and/or original depositional environment.

The 1930s turfline and its underlying worm sorted horizon (004) (which may imply a period of some stability of vegetation cover at the site prior to its burial) were marked by the presence of increased *Pinus* frequencies, slightly increased Compositae Liguliflorae frequencies and lower frequencies of *Pteridium*. Relatively high levels of *Pinus* (5%) were also recorded in the modern soil; however, the overall composition of the samples from the buried (1930 s) soil (004) (samples Q and P) and the modern soil (sample W) were not radically different

from those observed lower in the same sequence.

Table 5. Column Sample 1: Location of palynological samples.

Column Sample 1	Contexts	Interpretation
1.15 m		
CSI/W		
1.10 m	001	Modern topsoil
1.05 m		
CSI/U		
1.00 m		
CSI/T		
0.95 m	005-007	Post-1930s dump deposits
CSI/S		
0.90 m		
CSI/R		
0.85 m		
CSI/Q	004	1930s turfline
0.80 m		
CSI/P	002	Worm sorted horizon
0.75 m		
CSI/O		
0.70 m		
CSI/N		
0.65 m		
CSI/M		
0.60 m		
CSI/L		
0.55 m		
CSI/K	009-012	Post-rampart ploughsoil
0.50 m		
CSI/J		
0.45 m		
CSI/I		
0.40 m		
CSI/H		
0.35 m		
CSI/G		
0.30 m		
CSI/F		
0.25 m		
CSI/E		
0.20 m		
CSI/D		
0.15 m		
CSI/C		
0.10 m		
CSI/B		
0.05 m		
CSI/A		
0.00 m	016	Clay with flints

The pollen and spore assemblages were again poorly preserved throughout, with relatively high frequencies of degraded and indeterminate grains (up to 82% as a percentage of Σ TLPS in one case) suggesting that the assemblages had undergone extended weathering. Again the relative homogeneity of the assemblages suggested that they were mixed.

Column Sample Two

The pollen and spore assemblages in Column Sample Two are dominated by *Gramineae* (Grasses, 27 to 47%) and *Pteridium* (bracken, 33 to 51%). Low, but relatively persistent, frequencies of several arboreal taxa were present, including Coryloid type (probably Hazel, 2%), *Quercus* (Oak, 2%), *Ulmus* (Elm, 1%). The pollen of other arboreal taxa such as *Betula* (Birch) and *Alnus* (Alder) were present sporadically in low frequencies (0.5 to 1%).

A wide range of herb taxa were recorded. Persistent records of *Ranunculus* type ('Buttercups', 0.5 to 2%), Umbelliferae (Carrot family, 0.5 to 1%), Compositae Liguliflorae (Daisy family, 0.5 to 9%), *Carduus* type ('Thistles', 0.5 to 4.5%) and *Cirsium* ('Thistles', 0.5 to 3%) were recorded. Sporadic low frequency (less than 1%) occurrences of other herb taxa were also noted. The taxa in general suggest a relatively treeless and open landscape. The dominance of taxa with a preference for open and disturbed ground conditions may possibly reflect arable rather than pastoral land use in the area immediately adjacent to the site.

Only two trends through the section may be noted; a slight gradual decrease in the frequency of *Gramineae* pollen and a corresponding gradual increase in the frequency of *Pteridium* spores.

No abrupt changes in the frequencies of taxa were observed at the junctions of the various contexts with the possible exception of a marked decrease in the frequency of Compositae Liguliflorae type at the top of the buried soil horizon (context 014). Given the extremely poor preservation state of many of the grains in this class and the inferred resistance of this taxon to weathering (see Havinga 1984), it

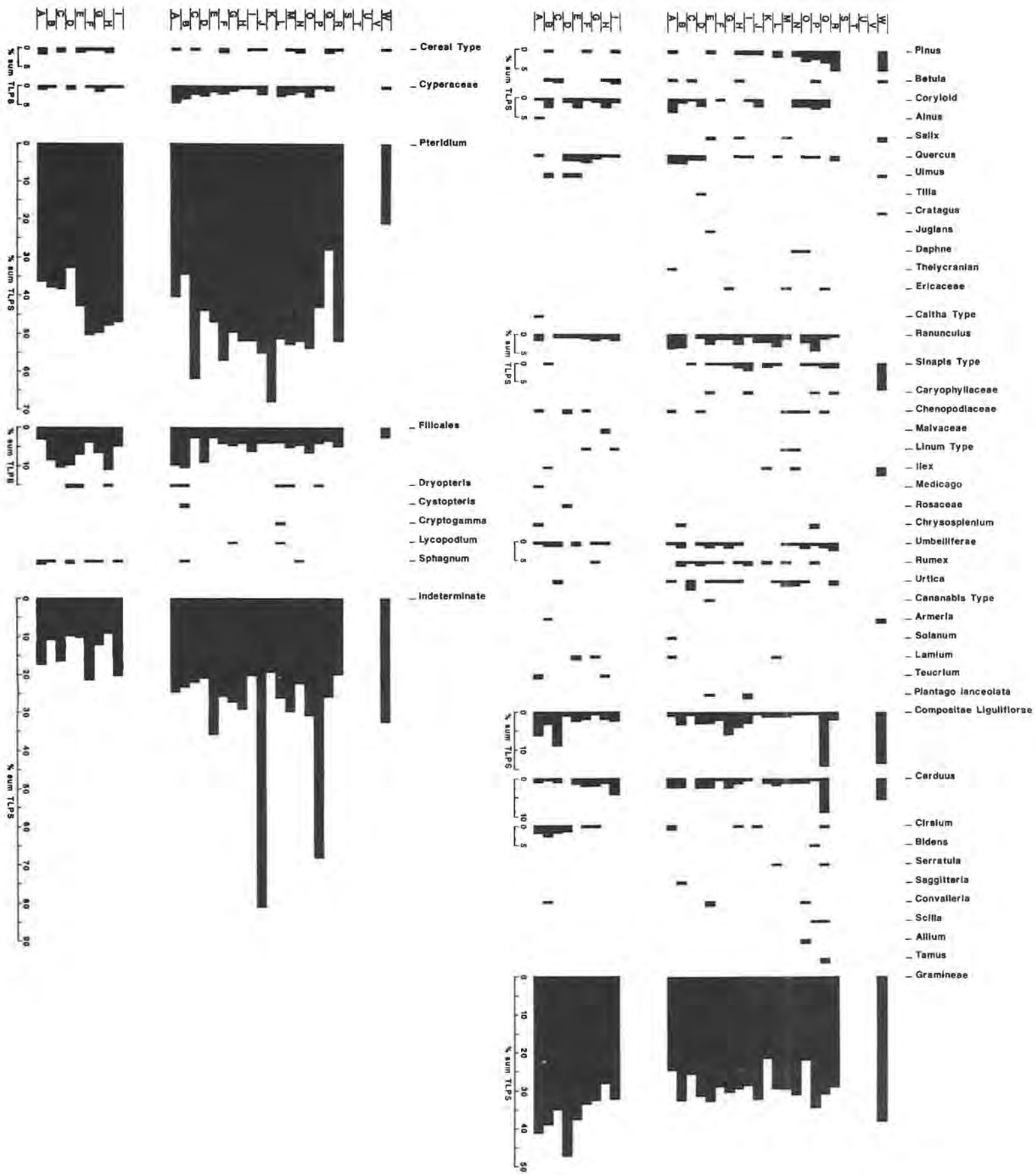


Fig. 18. Trench A: Pollen diagram.

Table 6. Column Sample 2: Location of palynological samples.

Column sample II	Contexts	Interpretation
0.45 m	CSII/I	
0.40 m	CSII/H	
0.35 m	009-012	Post-rampart ploughsoil
	CSII/G	
0.30 m	CSII/F	
0.25 m	_____	
	CSII/E	
0.20 m	013	Rampart tail
	CSII/D	
0.15 m	_____	
	CSII/C	
0.10 m	CSII/B	Pre-rampart buried soil
0.05 m	CSII/A	
0.00 m	_____	
	016	Clay with flints

would appear possible that this may reflect the persistence of previously weathered material in this horizon.

The poor preservation of the pollen and spore assemblages throughout this Column Sample and their relative homogeneity would indicate that this material has been subject to considerable post-depositional weathering and mixing. The relatively high frequency of degraded and indeterminate taxa throughout the section would appear to support this view.

Discussion

The uniformity of the pollen and spore assemblages through the sampled profiles makes their interpretation in terms of the palaeoecology of the site difficult. The absence of abrupt changes at the boundaries of the archaeological contexts, in particular where the postulated rampart tail sediments overlie the buried soil, suggest that the pollen and spore assemblages have become mixed (Dimbleby 1985, 11-17). The action of earthworms and other burrowing soil organisms in carrying soil pollen both up and down the soil profile has been

demonstrated by several investigators (Ray 1959; Dimbleby 1961; Walch, Rowley and Norton 1970) and would appear to explain the relative homogeneity of the palynological record at Desborough Castle.

The patterning of certain taxa may also be interpreted to reflect post-depositional modification of the pollen and spore assemblage rather than changes in any hypothetical vegetation community. The gradual increase in the frequency of *Pinus* at the transition from the ploughwash (contexts 009-012) to the worm sorted horizon (context 002) and the buried 1930s turfline (context 004) has been noted. While it may be argued this reflects the gradual buildup of ploughwash during the last two hundred years in parallel with the increasing frequencies of *Pinus* pollen recorded following its establishment in plantations and parklands (see for examples Rackham 1980), the presence of *Pinus* grains through the full depth of the section and in archaeological contexts from which they may have been expected to be absent makes this improbable. Further, the distribution of *Pinus* pollen is similar to that observed in *Lycopodium* spores by Dimbleby (Jewell and Dimbleby 1966; Dimbleby 1985, 66) at the experimental earthwork at Overton Down, Wiltshire, where spores were added to the surface of a biologically active soil which was then buried. Subsequent investigation demonstrated the gradual movement, presumably by earthworms, of *Lycopodium* spores both down and up the profile.

The overall composition of the pollen and spore assemblages may also reflect post-depositional events rather than vegetation composition. The presence of relatively high frequencies of *Pteridium*, Filicales, Compositae Liguliflorae and *Carduus* type grains may reflect alterations in the composition of the assemblage by post-depositional weathering since all these taxa have been noted as particularly resistant to weathering. Conversely the low frequencies of arboreal taxa may reflect their generally poor resistance to weathering (Sangster and Dale 1964; Havinga 1971, 1984). Evidence that the composition of the palynological assemblages are influenced by weather-

ing is provided by the slight differences between the uppermost sample, reflecting recent deposition and/or poorly weathered material, and the lower more fully homogenized and weathered material.

In consequence it cannot be assumed that the palynological record at Desborough Castle relates only to relatively recent phases of land use since it may also contain durable, weathering resistant, elements inherited from previous phases of land use or natural vegetation.

Although an original aim of the analysis had been to ascertain the possible source of the sediments used in the rampart make-up deposits through the analysis of recycled pre-Quaternary palynomorphs, no identifiable microfossils were observed and hence it has not proved possible to indicate the source of the sediments on palynological grounds.

Conclusions

The palynological record from Desborough Castle has been interpreted as reflecting a biologically active site where the pollen and spore assemblages have become mixed as the result of the activities of earthworms and other burrowing soil fauna. The inferred presence of burrowing soil organisms, especially earthworms, throughout the formation of the site may be taken to indicate that soils of relatively low acidity, probably circumneutral or mildly alkaline, persisted on the site throughout this period.

Further, it would appear that the pollen and spore assemblages are differentially weathered and cannot be related to any single phase of land use at the site because of the persistence of weathering resistant taxa. In consequence any interpretation of the pollen and spore record in terms of changing vegetation and/or land use would be of dubious value.

In consequence it is concluded that the palynological record from Desborough Castle may not be taken as a reliable indicator of the past environment of the site.

Acknowledgements

My [GC] thanks to Dr R. Tipping who critically reviewed an earlier draft of this paper.

Discussion

The results of the excavation demonstrate amply the difficulties of the interpretation of features within narrow trenches. It is with that caveat that the following discussion must be viewed.

The Prehistoric Occupation

The presence of Late Neolithic/Bronze Age flintwork and the place-name evidence support the identification of the mound on the west side of the castle as a barrow.

A Prehistoric Hillfort?

The excavations proved that the lynchet along Booker Lane was caused by the presence of a significant landscape feature. That this was the same feature discovered by Saunders west of the castle seems to be certain, i.e. the remains of a substantial rampart along the contour of the hill. The presence of layer 013, the redeposited clay, despite its small size, may be confirmation of the existence of the rampart in this area. As mentioned earlier, resurvey of the lynchet showed that it had apparently been cut back further in the area of the trench than elsewhere along the lane and so better evidence may well exist further along the lynchet. The date of this rampart and its associated ditch remains unproved. On the grounds of its form and the size of postulated area enclosed (c. 10 ha) it seems most likely to be Late Bronze Age or Iron Age.

In recent years a distinct category of hilltop enclosure has been identified, characteristically large (more than 6 ha), lightly occupied and with defences of comparatively slight rampart and ditch, dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition (Cunliffe 1984, 30). Their function was essentially as stock enclosures, perhaps in seasonal use (Bedwin 1984, 48). At Seaford Head (Sussex), a hillfort on clay-with-flints, Bedwin remarked on the water-logging which would have made the site unusable as a stock enclosure from October to April (Bedwin

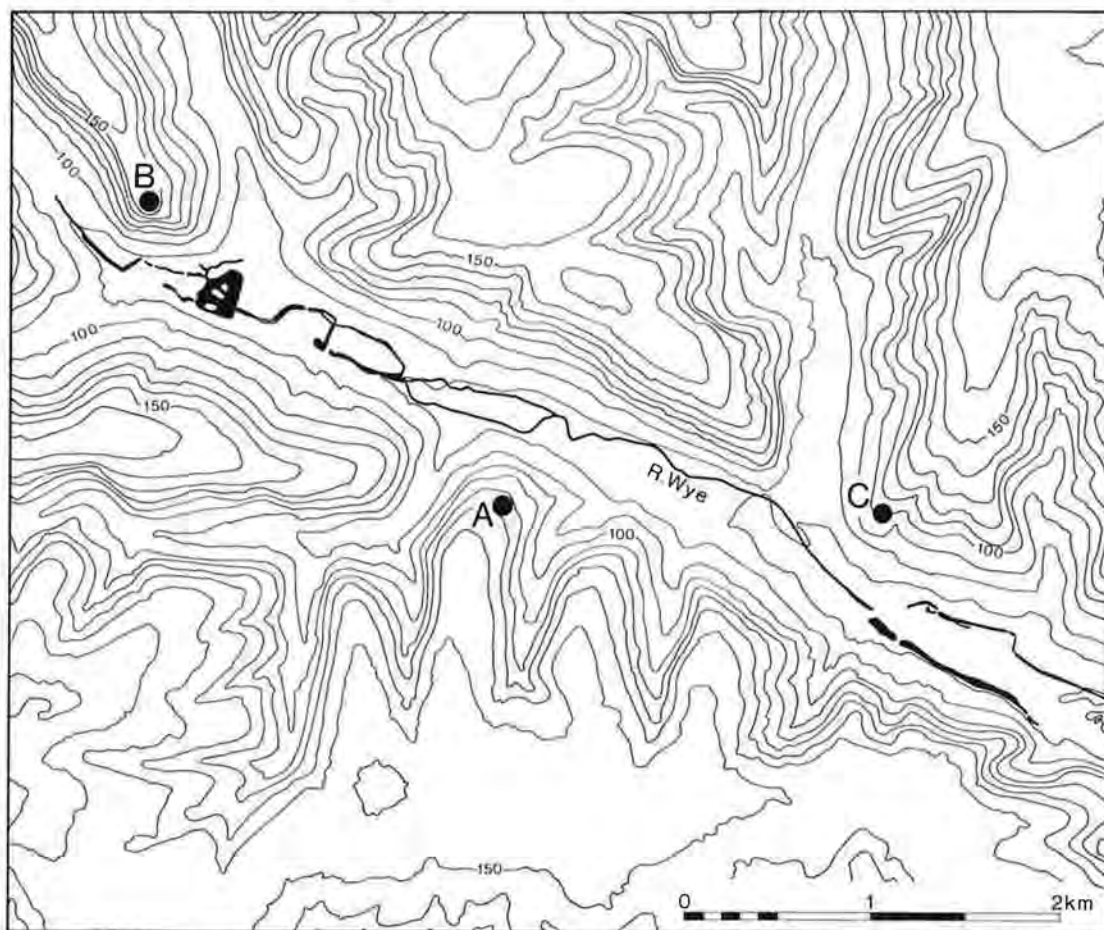


Fig. 19. Location of: A. Desborough Castle; B. Church Hill, West Wycombe; C. Castle Hill, High Wycombe.

1984, 48). Absence of features of such a date at Desborough is not an argument against this interpretation. The small area sampled in the excavation may have been the site of an activity which left no trace; the clay-with-flints precludes the digging of subsoil features such as storage pits—they would rapidly become wells—and even substantial features may have been destroyed by erosion or ploughing on the exposed hilltop.

If this early date is accepted then the chronological relationship with the hillfort on Church Hill, West Wycombe (Figure 19) would be successive: West Wycombe has been placed in

Saunders's Phase 2 (fifth-century BC on) (Saunders 1971).

The Roman Material

The presence of 'Belgic' and Romano-British pottery, tile and metalwork adds to the growing evidence for Roman activity along the Wye valley and it seems likely the area was densely settled in this period. However the context in which the material was found (medieval ditch fills) means there can be no certainty of its original source. It could have derived from a Roman settlement on the hilltop—the existence of such settlements (perhaps early in date) in the Wycombe area has been postulated

(Cauvain 1978) or, equally, the material could have been introduced to the site during the occupation of the castle.

The Meeting Place of the Saxon Hundred

As mentioned earlier, Desborough gave its name to a Saxon hundred, and it has been suggested that the hillfort was the meeting place. Many hundreds met on or around tumuli, whether pre-existing barrows or special constructions (Adkins and Petchey 1984, 246). In this context the mound visible on the west side of the castle may be relevant, as the site of the hundred mound. The place-name evidence suggests a pre-existing mound, or barrow (*beorg*) rather than a special construction (*-hlaw*) (M. Gelling, pers. comm.). If it was the hundred mound then the partial obliteration by the castle assumes a symbolic significance.

Desborough Castle

The ringwork castle form is often seen as dating to the years soon after 1066, being the rapidly established fortified centres of the Norman aristocracy (Alcock and King 1969, 97), although the tradition continued into the twelfth century and many were built during the Anarchy (Renn 1973, 48). In this context the absence of any late eleventh-century pottery forms from the excavations is notable. If Desborough Castle were an immediate post-conquest construction, the presence of some pottery from this period might be expected, at least in the residual material recovered from the ploughsoil. It may, however, be that the date for pottery of the types commonly dated to the twelfth century needs to be pushed back. However, without excavation within the castle defences little further can be inferred. Whatever the date of construction of the castle, it seems most likely that the digging of the ditches, (420) and (815), belongs to the early to mid twelfth century. The relationship between the castle, the ditches (420, 815) and the outer earthwork remains unsolved. If the lynchet were the remains of a prehistoric hillfort, then presumably the bank would still have been upstanding at the time of the castle's construction. However it would have formed no great defensive barrier; even when dug the ditch was only 2 m across. The recut of the ditch observed by

Saunders may have marked the reuse of the hillfort enclosure as an outer bailey for the castle. If so then the construction of 815 and 420 may be seen as a specific defensive measure taken to protect the vulnerable uphill side of the castle, and to create a further inner bailey around it.

The specific date of these measures, if not the ringwork also, may be identified as the years of the Anarchy of King Stephen's reign (1135–54). The manor of West Wycombe belonged to the Bishop of Winchester, Henry de Blois, Stephen's brother, and, apart from a short period, his greatest ally (Poole 1955). Henry de Blois is known to have constructed at least seven castles in 1138, including ringworks at Merdon and Downton; the latter also possesses baileys (Renn 1973).

It is known, too, that Stephen himself was 'apud Wycumbam in obsidione' at some stage of the campaigns during the Civil War (Renn 1968, 350). It seems most likely that the object of his siege was the motte on Castle Hill, High Wycombe, which lay in the Honour of Wallingford, the domain of Brian Fitz Count, one of Matilda's leading supporters after 1139. Was the construction of the defences (815 and 420), or even Desborough Castle itself, directly connected with Stephen's campaigns in the area? Siege castles were frequently built during the Anarchy (e.g. Arundel, Ludlow, Ely, Lincoln, Oxford and Faringdon (Renn 1973, 48), and Stephen tended to establish a temporary earthen castle to contain his garrison and secure a base when besieging (Rowley 1983, 34). Desborough Castle is ideally situated strategically to control the Wye Valley and the road west to Oxford and Wallingford, and to observe Castle Hill in High Wycombe (Figure 19). The complexity of the defences at Desborough is unparalleled locally (Cathcart King 1983). The construction of the Castle is very unlikely to postdate Stephen's reign.

The occupation of the ringwork continued apparently through the twelfth century. The ditch (420) was redug, and a castle at West Wycombe is mentioned in the Winchester Pipe Roll in 1210–11, presumably Desborough (Renn 1973, 350). On the basis of the pottery

evidence, occupation did not extend far into the thirteenth century. The high status of the Castle's occupants is evidenced by the animals represented in the food remains found in the ditch fills and the possible substantial buildings within the ringwork. The outer defences were finally sleighted deliberately and backfilled to enable the use of the area as an arable field until this century.

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