

FIELDS IN KING'S WOOD, TYLERS GREEN

MILES GREEN

King's Wood, which is owned by Chepping Wycombe Parish Council, occupies 183 acres of Tylers Green, and is both Ancient Woodland and Village Green. LiDAR views have unexpectedly revealed many field boundaries, some still of a very considerable size. The wood is based on arable-friendly chalk rather than clay and a review of all the historical evidence available points to a Roman or earlier origin for the fields. Evidence of Romano-British and prehistoric activity close to the wood, as well as in the wider neighbourhood, suggests the distinct possibility that the field boundaries may be a prehistoric survival, unique in definition and extent in the Chilterns.

INTRODUCTION

King's Wood sits at the top end of the Micklefield valley, one and a half miles north-east of the centre of High Wycombe, surrounded by Tylers Green, Micklefield, Totteridge and Hazlemere (Fig. 1). Its 183 acres have been owned by Chepping Wycombe Parish Council since 1922, when after narrowly avoiding clear-felling it was purchased for £850 with the help of public subscription. Long before the Conquest, it was a part of Wycombe Heath, 4,000 acres of common heath and woodland, and its rights of common were not finally extinguished until 1976 when registration as Village Green was confirmed. It was declared to be Ancient Woodland in 1995.

A few years ago, I opened an account of its long history with the confident declaration that it has been woodland for as far back as records will take us. My confidence was based on the general view that early farmers would have chosen the lighter, well-drained, more easily tilled chalk soils of the valleys rather than the thick clay and steep slopes that are characteristic of all the neighbouring woods, such as the formerly adjacent St John's Wood, Common Wood and Penn Wood. I wrongly assumed that King's Wood had the same geology and it was only after finding what seemed to be field boundaries on LiDAR maps that a belated check of the geological map showed King's Wood sitting on soft white chalk with many flints (Fig. 2). You do indeed see chalk in King's Wood on the paths where water erosion has taken place and in fallen tree roots. There are a good many pits and a particularly large and deep quarry which may have been used initially to extract chalk in the past to

marl acidic clay elsewhere and thus make it more fertile. There are currently no streams and some of the pits may have been used to collect water for irrigation.

LiDAR IMAGES

LiDAR (Light detection and ranging) technology provides what is in effect an aerial photograph looking through the tree and vegetation cover to see the ground below. It bounces pulses of laser light from an aeroplane off the ground at set intervals and it measures distance to the ground by measuring with a sensor the time taken to return the light. Differences in laser return times and wavelengths can then be used to make digital 3-D representations of the ground surface. The LiDAR images initially used for this investigation were taken some ten years ago as part of investigations of areas in the Thames Valley that might be liable to flooding.¹ The images can be viewed from different directions to obtain the clearest representation of the ground surface.

The LiDAR map reveals that there were indeed fields in King's Wood, and many of them (Fig. 3). The lines on the map are 'lynchets', marking the edge of a sharp change of slope, created mostly by movement of the soil downhill due to long term ploughing between boundaries, with perhaps also a deliberate element of levelling. This could be done by selecting land with a comparatively gentle gradient and cutting in to the higher land to create a back wall, then pushing the removed earth across to the lower lying area to create a level surface. Depending on the topography, this might leave one or both of the other sides as a

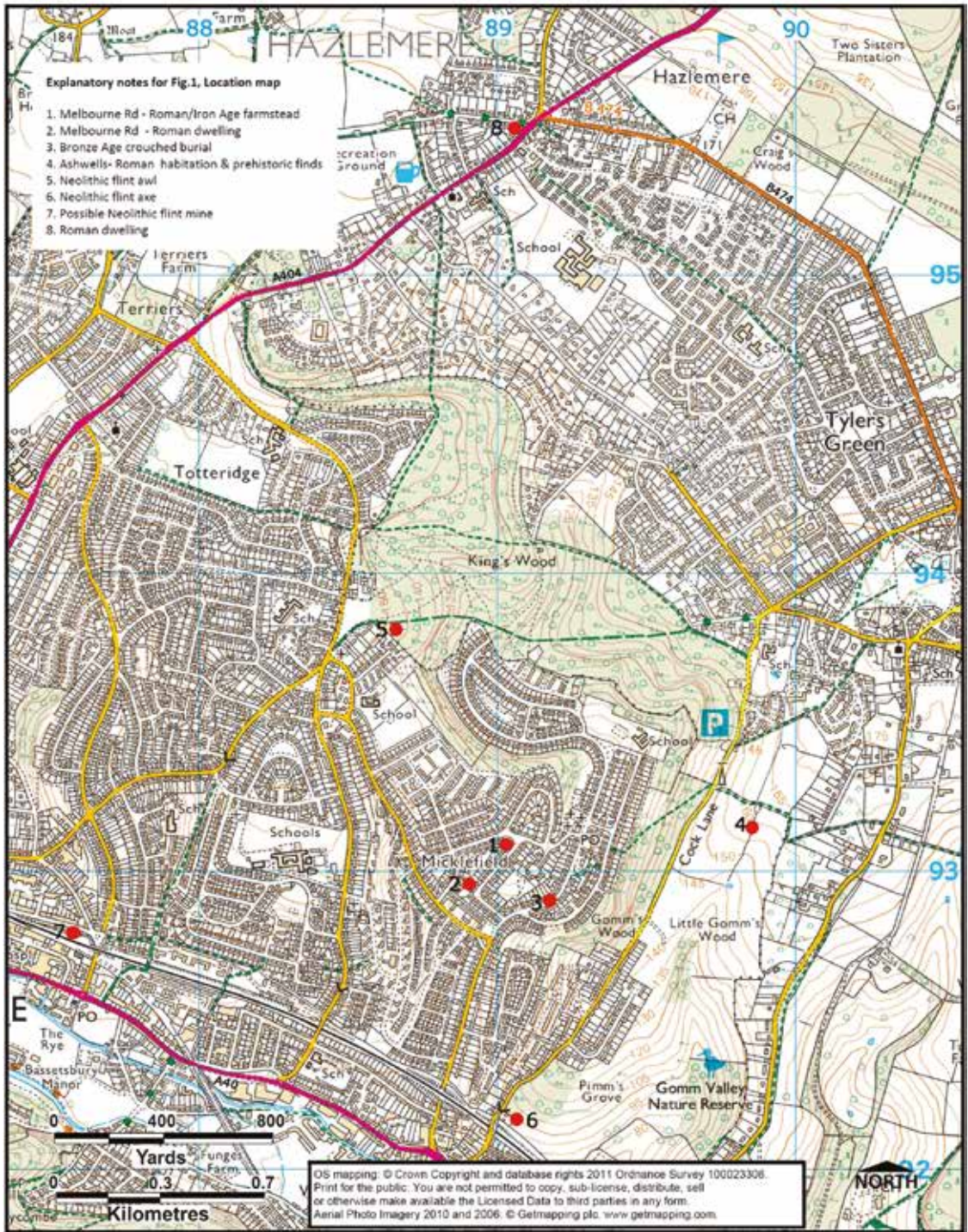


FIGURE 1 Location map



FIGURE 2 Geological map of King's Wood (outlined in red). *Brown* – clay with flints; *Green* – soft white chalk with many flints; *yellow* – pebbly clay with sand

wall. That might be what we see on the LiDAR images, which often seem to show squares which have three strong sides and a weaker/absent fourth.²

Where there is not much of a slope, such as at the Totteridge edge of the wood, we should not expect to find surviving lynchets of any size, if at all, but this does not necessarily mean that these areas were not cultivated. There are faint traces of boundaries in the more heavily used and flatter parts of the wood which have been eroded by the passage of feet. We should also bear in mind that what we see today is not what farmers many years ago would have seen, because if you clear Chiltern valley sides of trees for farming you increase the risk of lateral movement and soil run-off with rain. This means that the thin soil that we see today would have been considerably thicker and would have better supported agriculture.

The immediate question arising is what period do these fields belong to?

SAXON HISTORY

The earliest relevant reference to the Chilterns was in c.716, when a priest called Stephen refers in his biography of St Wilfrid, to Caedwalla taking temporary refuge with his followers in 'deserta Ciltine', the deserts or wastes of Chiltern, before claiming the West Saxon kingdom in AD685. The Roman villa-centred rural economy of the Chilterns appears to have collapsed as a result of a major Anglo-Saxon incursion in the fifth century AD and there is scant archaeological evidence of cemeteries and settlements in the heartland of the Chilterns, particularly in this early Saxon period. With comparatively few people, the likelihood is that much arable and cleared woodland reverted back to nature with cultivation probably confined to the valleys.³

The Chronicles of St Albans tell us that Abbot Leofstan, just before the Conquest, in order 'to provide safer roads, cut back the dark woods which extend from the margin of Chiltern (*a limbo*

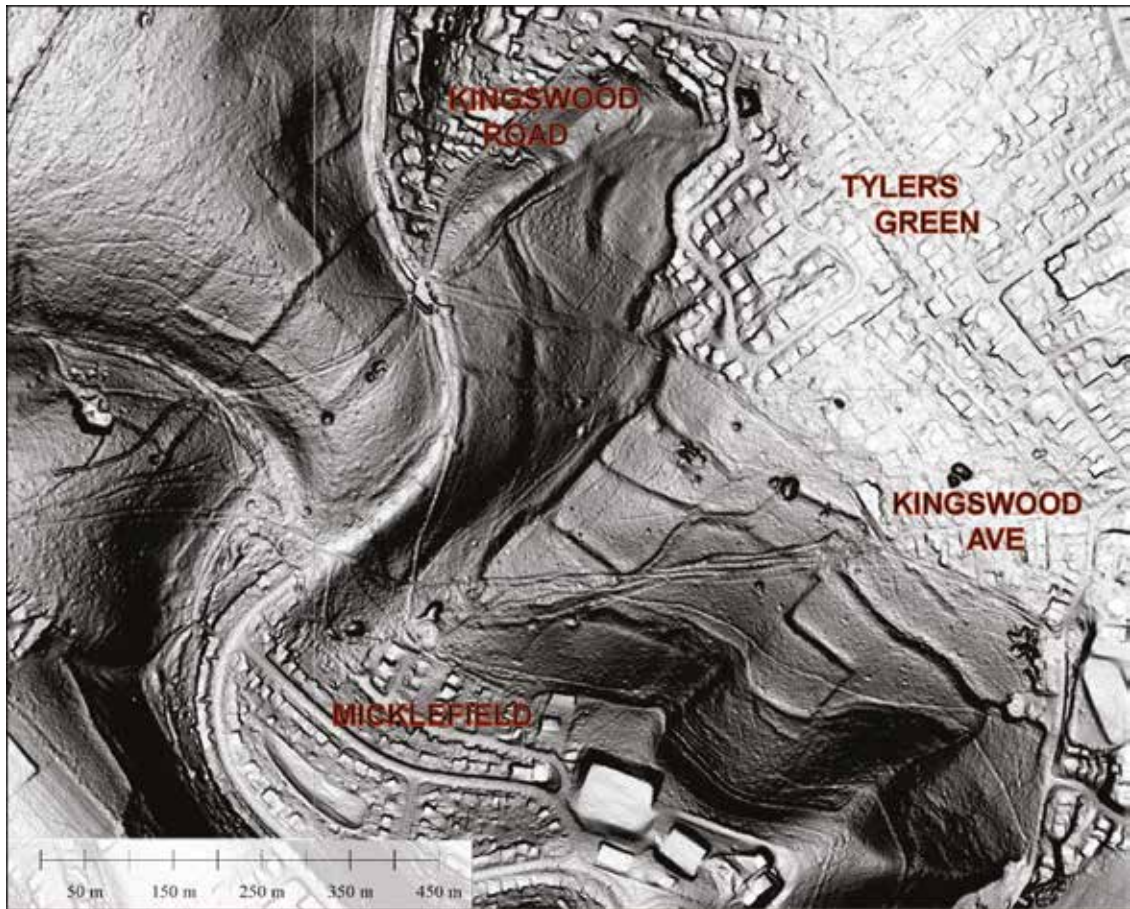


FIGURE 3 LiDAR map of King's Wood (by John Gover)

Ciltriae) almost to London....for at that time there abounded through the whole of Chiltern extensive, thick and abundant woods'.⁴ Oliver Rackham supported this view, concluding that in 1086, 'one of the largest wooded areas in England extended from the Chiltern escarpment down the dip slope almost to the gates of London.'⁵ He said that the Chiltern plateau was the second largest wooded area in England, 40 miles by 25, immediately north of London.⁶

The southern boundary of the wood is marked by a bank, still very steep in places. Since the bank is also the southern boundary of Wycombe Heath of which King's Wood was a part and, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, was in active use from the Saxon period onwards as a part of the common heath and as an enclosed wood pasture to keep

pigs, deer and cattle, it has not been considered as part of this investigation of field boundaries within the wood.⁷

DOMESDAY BOOK EVIDENCE

Domesday Book in 1086 confirms the view that the Chilterns, at the time of the Conquest, 20 years earlier, had a relatively small population with correspondingly few plough teams, but with sufficient woodland to feed many pigs, indicating substantial woodland. The entry for Wycombe shows that in the 20 years following the Norman Conquest, Wycombe had more than doubled its pre-Conquest value to become the second most populous manor in Bucks with six water mills, woodland for 500 pigs and rapidly expanded arable

land. Later records show that the rapid expansion of agricultural land was up the south-facing slope of the main Wycombe valley, which suggests that south-facing side valleys like Micklefield, and by extension, King's Wood at its north end, were not ploughed during the Saxon period.⁸

MEDIEVAL EVIDENCE AND BASSETSBURY MANOR

King's Wood and the neighbouring St John's Wood to its north were in the same ownership until 1203, when the manor of Wycombe was divided between two lords, Alan Basset and Robert Vipont. Therefore, when we see a lynchet following the contours and ignoring the boundary between the woods, it suggests that the lynchets preceded that date.⁹ In 1224, an agreement between the two lords and the commoners permitted the lords to keep parts of the common heath near Hazlemere which they had enclosed, but confirmed the continuation of the commoners' rights unimpaired with special regard to pannage for pigs in the adjoining woods of Wycombe and of Penn.¹⁰ King's Wood was held by Bassetsbury Manor.

There is no mention in the Bassetsbury manorial records of any fields in King's Wood. It is all about trees, such as in 1541 when 'ten hundred beche trees of the best and biggest in a wood or grove called Kynges woode' were sold for £25.¹¹ Nor is there any reference to fields in the records of two Inquiries into rights of common on Wycombe Heath in 1576 and 1666. The commoners claimed that both St John's Wood and King's Wood were used as common by the surrounding inhabitants and that 'they had always taken underwood.... thorns, bushes, holly and hazel...and had dug chalk in King's Wood.'¹²

Thus, all the historical evidence we can muster suggests that it is unlikely that the King's Wood fields were being tilled during or after the Saxon period and so supports a Roman (AD43–410) or earlier origin for the fields.

A REVISED ASSESSMENT OF THE EXTENT OF ROMANO-BRITISH FARMING

A recent Exeter University research programme attempted to reconstruct the landscape history of Britannia from Roman times through to the eighth century by means of a quantitative analysis of three

sets of data gathered from all over England and Wales. They used pollen analysis which reveals the relative importance of cereals, grasses and woodland species at different times, and they also examined the make-up of assemblages of bones for sheep, cattle and swine found at excavation sites. A third set of data looked at the extent to which the Romano-British orientation of ditches and field boundaries could still be found in the eighth century. Unfortunately there were no sites in the Chilterns providing data, but their conclusions are still very relevant when considering the likelihood of Romano-British use of the King's Wood fields.

They found no evidence to support the long-held view of a Roman province largely covered by vast swathes of forest and wood, with only limited areas cleared for grazing and arable farming. Indeed, they claim that there is now mounting evidence that the population of the Roman province may have reached substantially higher levels than it was to attain until well after the Norman Conquest and that over those four centuries there had developed an intensive, market-oriented agrarian economy that profoundly impacted on the landscape. They accept that the fifth century was indisputably a period of chaos and upheaval during which the population declined drastically and the commercial economy ceased to function with a decline in farming activity, more especially of arable cultivation, although it would seem that a grazing and livestock economy continued right through into medieval times. They also found that there was a substantial survival in some form of Romano-British fields.¹³

WYCOMBE, A ROMAN PLACE-NAME

When reviewing specific evidence for Romano-British activity we start with the encouraging realisation that, according to leading place-name specialists, Wycombe is a Roman place-name, since it is believed to derive from *wicum*, the dative plural of OE *wic*, a word borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons from Latin *vicus*, either directly or through the medium of British speech, and one of many terms for a settlement. It might have been used by the earliest English-speaking people in Britain to refer to actual Romano-British settlements or to Roman administrative units which is one of the meanings of Latin *vicus*. It was the term for the smallest unit of self-government in

the Roman provinces. The places accorded this status varied greatly and it is likely to have been the status of many small towns and also likely to denote the central settlement of a later parish. The more general meaning of *wic* as a settlement or dairy farm developed in the succeeding centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period. Later misunderstanding assumed that the name Wycombe derived from the river Wye running through an OE *cumb*, 'valley'.¹⁴

ROMAN AND CELTIC FIELDS

Keith Branigan proposed that the Roman Chiltern villa estates, which were evenly spaced at intervals of about two miles, farmed 500-600 acres of arable and pasture in addition to extensive tracts of woodland. Their ox-driven plough teams could plough some 200 acres in a season with the arable on the hillside chalk valleys rather than in the main valley bottoms, which were too damp for agriculture and were used for pasture.

Branigan suggests that judging from Romano-British fields elsewhere, those on the Chiltern farms would have been roughly oblong areas delineated by small banks and ditches and ploughed one-way, rather than the cross-ploughing of the earlier small, square, so-called 'Celtic' fields, which can date from the Bronze Age (c.2000-600BC), as well as the Iron Age (c. 600BC-Roman arrival in AD43). These Celtic fields were typically 1 acre (64m x 64m), the amount which could then be ploughed in one day. He pointed out that the one-way ploughing of longer, narrower fields would have been more efficient in two respects. First, the same amount of land could be ploughed more quickly and, second, the same area produced more crops because the only headlands were along the two narrow ends of the fields. The Romano-British farmer would have had a better plough available than his Belgic predecessor.¹⁵

Elsewhere in Bucks, traces of narrow rectilinear fields have been revealed and one-way plough marks have been found at Latimer and Gadebridge (Herts) villas. However, little direct evidence for Roman field systems in the Chilterns has been found up to the present, except the small irregular fields recorded at Ashridge (Herts), and traces of Iron Age and Romano-British field systems around the West Wycombe hillfort and in West Wycombe Park, both of which are discussed below.

KING'S WOOD FIELDS

The size of the fields varies considerably (Fig. 4). The two largest are rectangular and about 3½ acres. Six fields, the majority, are squarish with between 2 and 2½ acres and sides around a norm of about 100m. The two smallest are ½-acre and ¾-acre squares. The direction of slope within each field is consistent. The position of one field corner is decided by where it meets a path between Kingswood Avenue and Micklefield. This would seem to confirm that the path was there when the field was laid out thus indirectly suggesting settlement in both Tylers Green and Micklefield at that time.

All the straight-edged field boundaries have the same NE/SW alignment, taking their direction from and incorporating parts of the longer, sinuous lynchets which presumably preceded them. These sinuous lynchets were created by ploughing along the contours to form strip lynchets, narrow flights of terraces on the steeper slopes (Figs 5 & 6). There is some evidence for more terracing than has been shown on the map, on the south-facing Tylers Green side of the wood.

A combination of strip lynchets with squarish fields where the slopes were not too steep seems to have occupied much of the wood. The slopes of all the fields in the eastern half of the wood are south-facing and therefore more sunny and productive, and all the fields benefit from the protection against bitter north winds by the relatively higher ground to the north.

The two smallest fields could have been used as livestock enclosures or perhaps for settlement as was proposed for small enclosures at Ashridge (see discussion below), although no evidence has yet been found for settlement in King's Wood. The two largest fields are the expected Roman oblong, but many of the lynchet banks are still very considerable and must be the product of immense labour over a long period. They are not the small banks and ditches predicted by Branigan for Romano-British fields. The majority of the fields are squarish, but much bigger than the one acre usually expected of Celtic fields.

The Wycombe valley was part of an important early route linking the Thames at Bourne End with the Upper Icknield Way at Princes Risborough, thus encouraging early settlement, evidence of which is provided by the Iron Age hillforts at

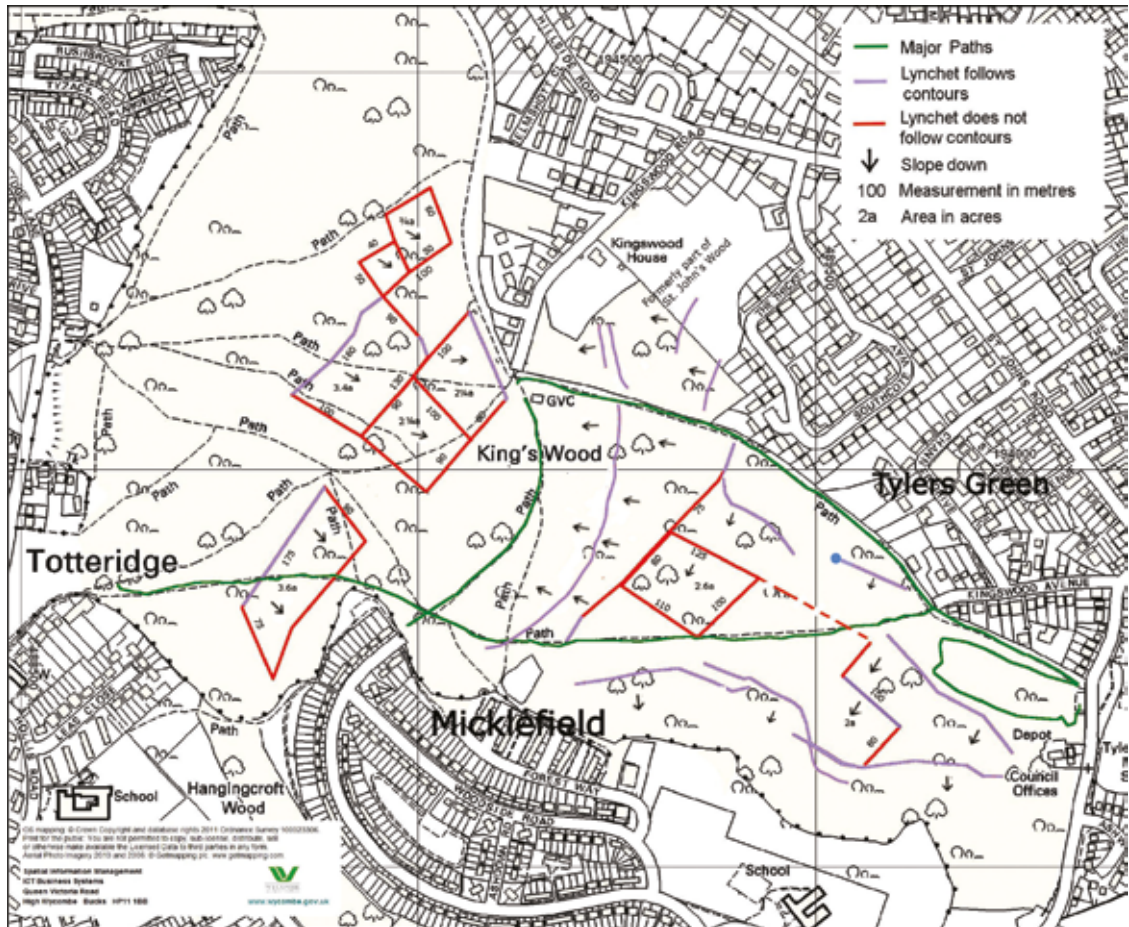


FIGURE 4 Map of King's Wood fields (based on original by Graham Bradshaw)

Desborough Castle in High Wycombe and at West Wycombe. There is evidence of Bronze Age settlement at both hillforts, but more significantly there is an early Bronze Age crouched burial in the Micklefield valley close to King's Wood.¹⁶ Middle to late Iron Age pottery sherds, as well as Neolithic flints were also found nearby at Ashwells.¹⁷

Again, very little evidence survives of so-called Celtic fields in the Chilterns. It is likely, in Branigan's view, that many Romano-British villas were based on the estates of late Iron Age tribal aristocracy. The extent to which continuity of ownership saw the retention of traditional native ways of farming is still debated, but he says we should certainly not expect rapid change in the farming regime or methods following the Roman

invasion. The innate conservatism of farmers and constraints of soils and topography were sufficient to ensure that changes would be slow and gradual.¹⁸ Oliver Rackham has the same view: 'Country planning seems to have continued the regular, but not rigid, field grids of the Iron Age...changing them involved hard work'.¹⁹ The evidence from Micklefield of Celtic cross-ploughing followed by Romano-British farming on the same site supports these views (see below).

Oliver Rackham describes Celtic fields as 'small, squarish, irregular or semi-regular...although often of less than an acre they may be surrounded by great banks, the product of immense labour'. He observed that some Celtic fields seem to be fitted into what had originally been the reave systems



FIGURE 5 and 6 Two contrasting but effective ways of illustrating the unusual topography of the wood. The colours of the LiDAR map follow the rainbow spectrum from red (high ground) to blue (low)

of Bronze Age planned countryside (see further discussion below). He noted that the steeper Celtic fields tend to be narrow and to follow the contours to form the flights of terraces marked as ‘Strip Lynchets’ on maps. He found that whilst lynchets are not necessarily prehistoric, both Celtic fields and strip lynchets are mostly earlier than the Celtic period (that is, Iron Age). Some appear to be of Neolithic origin and they were in use throughout the Bronze Age.²⁰

ROMANO-BRITISH AND EARLIER EVIDENCE CLOSE TO KING’S WOOD

There is evidence of a long and active Roman and earlier presence in areas close to the wood:

- **A lesser Roman Road** has been proposed, following the general line of the A40 along the main Wycombe valley, a section of which can still clearly be seen in Wycombe Abbey School in High Wycombe (Fig. 7).²¹
- **The well-known villa on the Rye** at Holywell Mead in the Wycombe valley bottom, and more recent evidence of rectilinear parch marks seen

on aerial photographs 60m NW of the excavated villa, which suggest a second villa.²²

- **Micklefield:** A farmstead half way up the valley on the same ground as an Iron Age predecessor, with evidence of another Roman-British habitation site and a Bronze Age burial close by (all discussed below).
- **Ashwells, Tylers Green:** Evidence of limited Romano-British occupation as well as a Bronze Age and Neolithic presence (all discussed below).
- **In King’s Wood itself** – A possible Neolithic flint awl.
- **Near the railway line** – A Neolithic flint axe in a field next to Cock Lane and a possible Neolithic flint mine by the railway.

Micklefield

In 1977, Stanley and Pauline Cauvain were finding Romano-British pottery sherds in the back garden of their house in Melbourne Road, Micklefield (Fig. 8, site 4), which stands on a small plateau overlooking the now dry river valley. Removal of the topsoil in limited areas of the garden revealed a ‘floor’ of packed flints about 15cm thick and of an

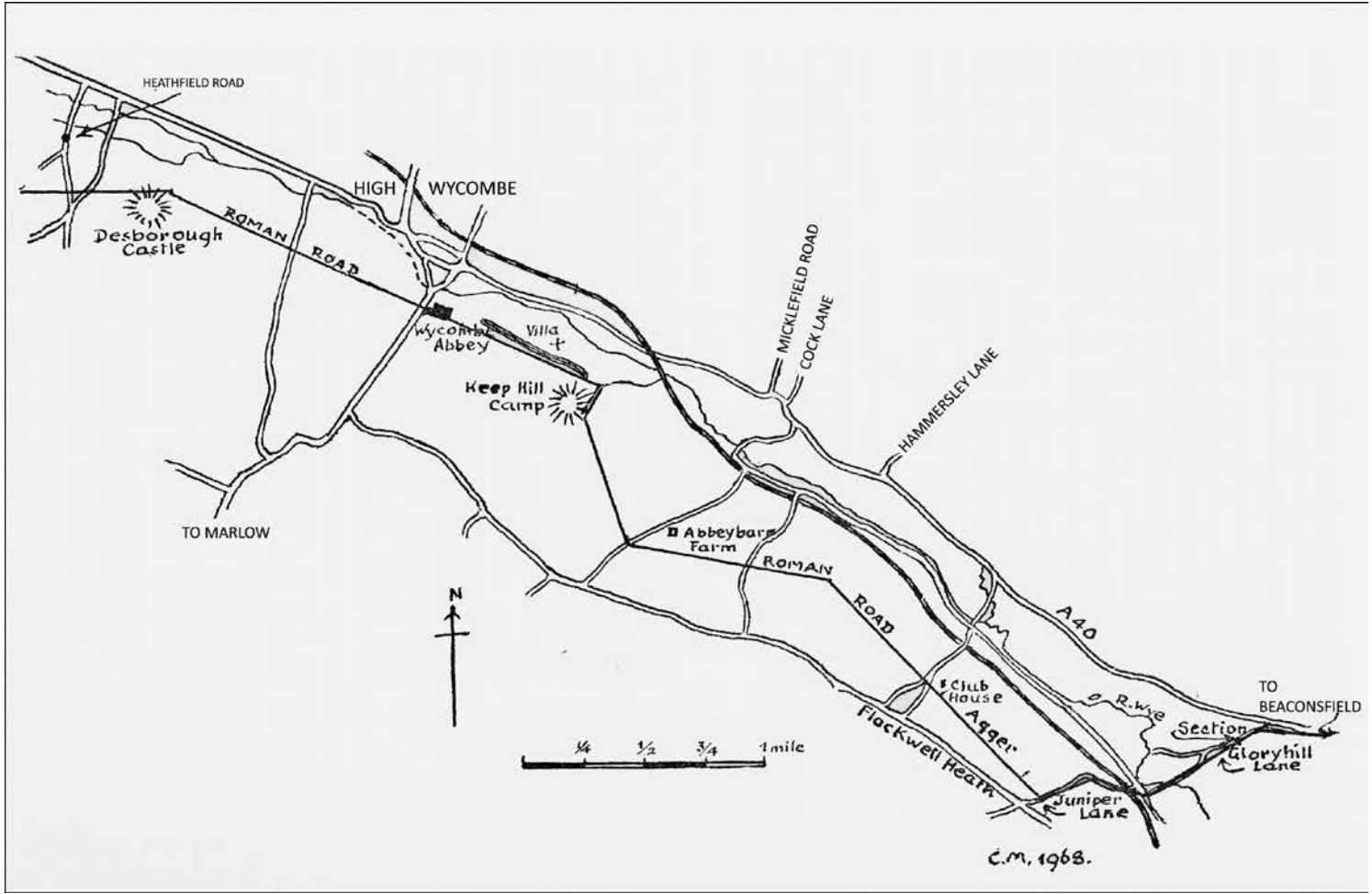


FIGURE 7 Route of proposed Roman road [Records 18.5 (1970), 372]

even thickness and composition, on and in which were a few late first or early second-century sherds of Romano-British pottery, a coin of the same period, occasional nails, metal scraps and animal bones. Beneath the flint floor was a thin layer of soil on a natural surface which had grooves indicating ploughing in two directions, roughly at right angles, using a heavy tool. In another garden in the same road, 100m to the south-west, pottery sherds of much the same period have also been found, but together with a coin dated AD307, some 200 years later than the pottery.

The Cauvains concluded that the 'floor' was a yard or hard standing for an undiscovered building of the early Romano-British period and that the ploughed ground below it was late pre-Roman or early Roman Iron Age. They later revised this dating for the ploughed ground to middle or late Iron Age and this is entirely in line with Branigan's prediction that one should expect to find continuity between Iron Age and Romano-British farming activity. The villa on the Rye at High Wycombe, 2km away (Fig. 8, site 2), is thought to have been built in AD150–170 and to have survived for nearly two centuries. The two Micklefield sites would therefore appear to pre-date the villa by some thirty to fifty years. There is no evidence for agricultural activity at the villa and the Cauvains proposed that either there was an earlier Romanized settlement at Micklefield which later moved to a more substantial site in the main valley, or that it was a dependant farmstead, as could also have been the site at Deangarden Rise, one mile south on the other side of the Wycombe valley (Fig. 8, site 3) where pottery of a similar date has been found.²³

Further evidence of a pre-Roman presence in Micklefield is the discovery in 1931 of the skeleton of a man buried in a crouching position in an oval grave cut about 4½ft deep in the chalk rock (Fig. 9). There were no associated objects other than a few flints, but it is thought likely to be an Early Bronze Age burial (c.1800BC) and was on the slope of the hill below Gomm's Wood above the Micklefield Road (then Micklefield Lane – the present housing estate was being built in the 1930s) and therefore overlooked the two Melbourne Road sites about 300m away across the valley bottom.²⁴ It was exhumed by Francis Colmer with specialist advice.²⁵

A 5.4 x 3.2cm Neolithic flint flake trimmed, it is thought, as an awl, was found at the top end of

the Micklefield valley in the south-western corner of the wood (Fig. 10).²⁶ This is the only relevant archaeological evidence recorded for King's Wood itself, but no concerted efforts have yet been made to search for such evidence. A Neolithic flint axe was found in a field next to Cock Lane just north of the railway line.²⁷ On a grander scale, a possible Neolithic flint mine was discovered when the railway was being built in c.1897.²⁸

Ashwells

We should also note that in the two fields to the east of Cock Lane and immediately south of the currently proposed Ashwells building site, with a commanding view down into the Wycombe valley, the Cauvains and I found widely spread evidence of Romano-British occupation as well as over 100 Neolithic to Late Bronze Age (4000BC to 701BC) flint flakes, and some Bronze and Iron Age pottery sherds. The fields are only 1km to the east of Micklefield and still connected by a definitive path down the side of the valley to meet the Micklefield Road at the valley bottom close to the crouched burial site. The 79 pottery sherds, many of a similar fabric to those from Micklefield, two tegulae and fragments of two querns, suggested a probably limited Romano-British occupation in the first or second centuries AD and so, like the Micklefield sites, slightly preceding the villa on the Rye.²⁹

Further Roman and earlier evidence in the neighbourhood

- **West Wycombe cemetery** – where 16 burials were found just north of the river Wye and adjacent to the old road. Skeletons were eventually dated to the fourth century AD³⁰ Hints of a nearby settlement were noted and a second late Roman cemetery was discovered at 40 Church Lane, West Wycombe.³¹ One would expect to find a separate cemetery for High Wycombe, perhaps associated with its hillfort, but nothing has been found so far.
- **West Wycombe fields** – An English Heritage survey of West Wycombe hillfort and Park suggested that much of the pre-medieval field system noted during the survey may be in part contemporary with occupation of the hillfort. Traces of a grid-like 'Celtic' field system were noted to the north, south and east of the fort.

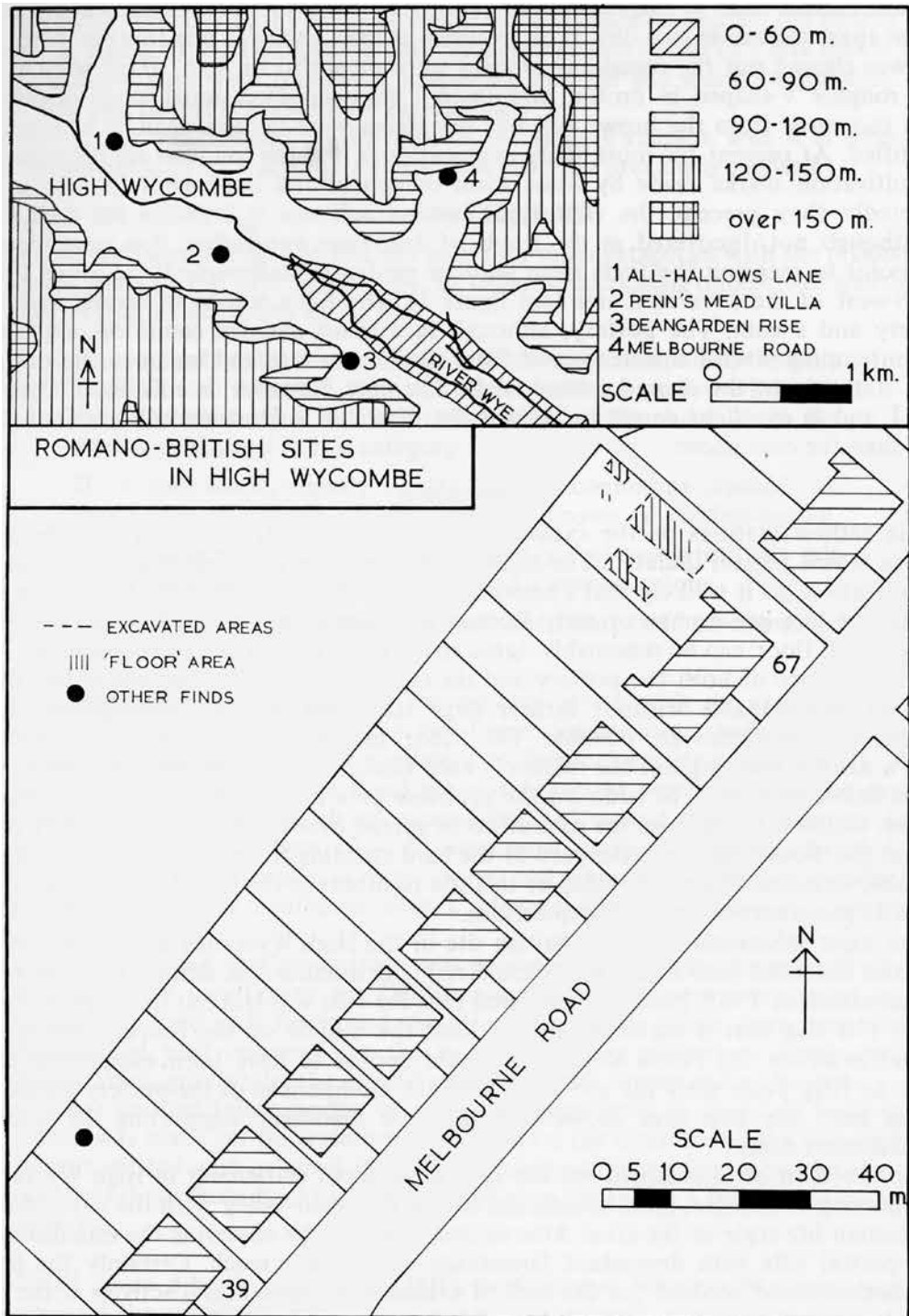


FIGURE 8 Romano-British sites in and near Micklefield [*Records* 20 (1978), 529]



FIGURE 9 Bronze Age crouched burial at Micklefield – Water colour by Francis Colmer (© Bucks County Museum)

These ancient fields, described as ‘paddocks’, survive as slight and fragmentary earthworks in a fragile state and uncertain size of approximately at least 45-60m².³² The survey concludes that on analogy with other areas of better-dated ‘Celtic’ fields on the Berkshire and Wiltshire chalklands, this would suggest a Romano-British date.

In the Park itself, on the summit of the ridge to the east of the Druid’s Hut, the survey found a fragmentary series of lynchets which is thought may be the remains of a ‘Celtic’ field system (Fig. 11), the earliest phases of which may be of prehistoric or Romano-British origin. They have been heavily over-ploughed and are consequently now very slight, but two low banks 12m wide which lie to the north of Druid’s Hut, indicate that the system was laid out here on a roughly north-south axis. The average field width is close to 85m and with a length of up to nearly 100m they are close to the size of some of the King’s Wood fields, although with very wide banks much reduced in height by later deep ploughing. No other traces of clearly



FIGURE 10 Possible Neolithic awl found in King’s Wood (from the collections of Buckinghamshire County Museum, AYBCM:1994.7.7)

identifiable ‘Celtic’ field system have been noted in the wider parkland.

The ‘Celtic’ fields noted throughout the surveyed areas do not share a similar alignment and rather than belonging to a much larger coaxial layout of fields, they are assumed to be compact groups of fields whose layout was heavily dictated by the prevailing lie of the land.³³ Thirty late Iron Age coins and other coins and metalwork found in adjoining fields suggests that the hillfort may have been an important centre for trade or ritual activity in the area.³⁴

- **Common Wood, Penn**, where 1st to 3rd-century pottery, coins and a brooch were found in an earthwork enclosure, providing evidence of a Romano-British settlement, perhaps seasonal, as well as evidence of an iron-smelting industry perhaps connected with the Romano-British villa estate at Mantles Green, Amersham. The nearby road-names ‘Penn Street’, ‘Clay Street’ and ‘Old Street’, suggest a lesser Roman road between the Mantles Green villa and Beaconsfield.³⁵
- **Coleman’s Wood, Holmer Green**, where

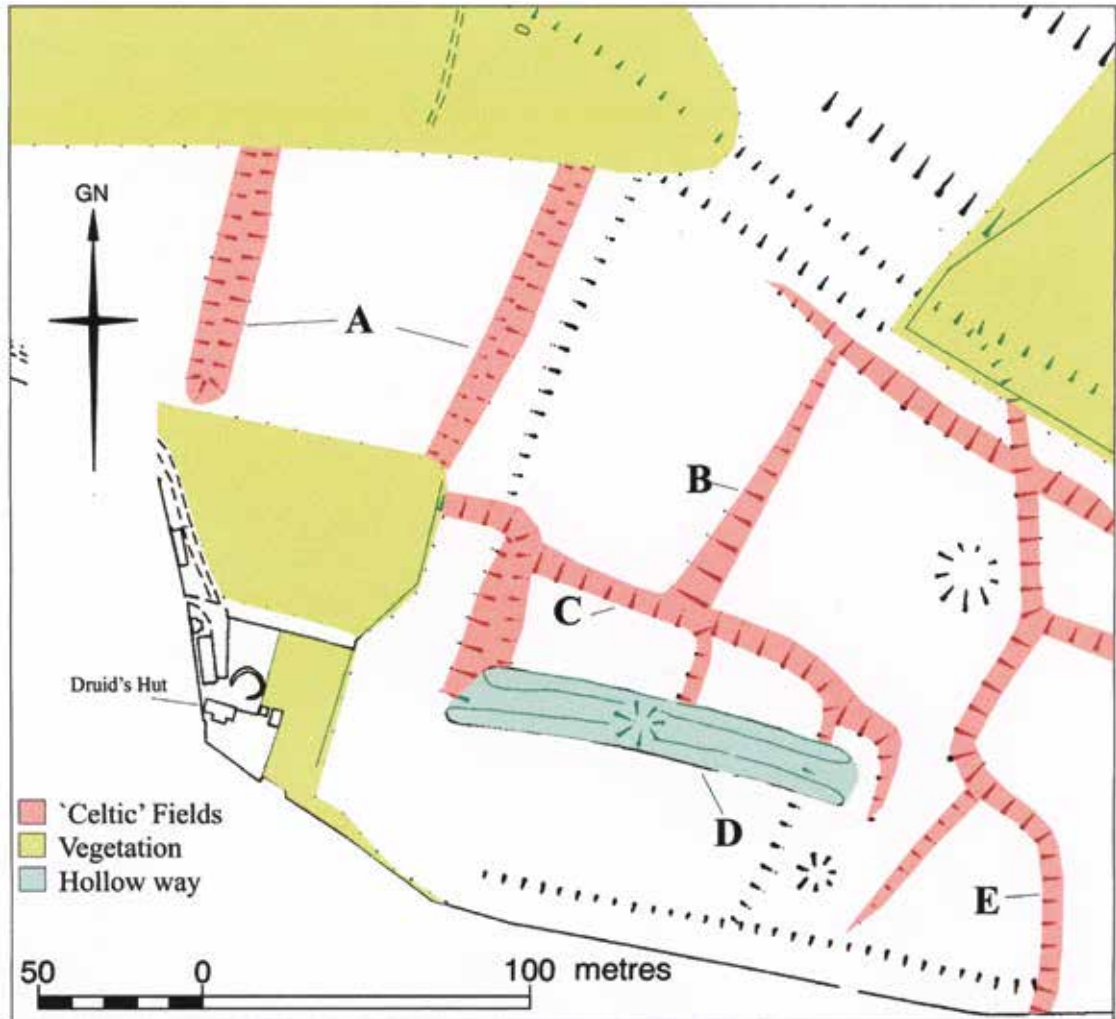


FIGURE 11 West Wycombe Park, sketch of Celtic fields (English Heritage Earthwork Survey – see fn.32)

pottery, from mid-1st century BC to early 2nd century AD, found in a wood on a hillside slope over-looking Little Missenden about 1km from the Misbourne river, points to the presence nearby of a high-class Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British farmstead or villa working large areas of the landscape. It was noted that whilst valley bottom settlement was usual, settlement on higher ground had been found in Milton Keynes.³⁶

- A possible house at Hazlemere crossroads.³⁷ Metal detectorists have found Roman coins in several places in and around Wycombe.

Ashridge Estate

An archaeological survey was carried out by the National Trust in 2010 of a survey area which lies between and is only a few miles from two major Roman roads, Akeman Street and Watling Street. Although the stony clay of the Chiltern ridge was marginal land, settlements and cultivation were observed, perhaps encouraged by increasing population and the possibility of selling the agricultural surplus to nearby towns.

Pottery provided evidence that a patchwork of small regular fields across Ivinghoe and Pitstone commons was late Iron Age or Early

Romano-British. The Roman sites include nine small enclosures within, or as part of a wider field system, which it is thought represent continual usage from the Iron Age into the Roman period. These enclosures are small, mostly about half an acre or less and are thought to have been used for settlement and as livestock enclosures. There are also scattered remnants of an extensive early field system comprising earthwork banks and ditches, and strip lynchets created by ploughing along the contour. The principal alignment of the field system appears to be NE/SW, the same as in King's Wood, perhaps respecting the line of the ridge.³⁸

Part of a Bronze Age planned countryside?

We have already noted Rackham's observation that both Celtic fields and strip lynchets are mostly earlier than the Iron Age, and that some appear to be of Neolithic origin and they were in use throughout the Bronze Age. He found that some Celtic fields seem to be fitted into what had originally been the reave systems of Bronze Age planned countryside.³⁹

Painstaking work by E.J. Bull to compile the necessary maps of roads and tracks in Buckinghamshire found that their preferred orientation is overwhelmingly either parallel or at right angles to the Icknield Way which runs broadly NE to SW to Salisbury Plain and has been in use at least since Neolithic times (Fig. 12). These preferred orientations are twice as numerous as those in all other directions put together. The map illustrating his proposal is centred on Aylesbury, but includes the Chilterns down to Chesham, Great Missenden and Prestwood. He noted that this preferred alignment was exceptionally clear in the Chilterns where there is a greater survival of relevant roads and tracks.⁴⁰

Bull's work followed earlier studies by Oliver Rackham and others who found an unmistakably planned pattern of parallel, but not straight, main axes of low stony banks known as 'reaves', running for miles across Dartmoor, typically about 100yds apart, intersected by cross walls at intervals. He noted that similar evidence of this Bronze Age reave-type field system had been found in many areas and regions of Britain, including Berkshire and Essex and that in north-east Suffolk, the 25 square mile landscape of The Saints is an exact reproduction in hedges of the Dartmoor reaves. Rackham observed that this tells a story of country

planning on a gigantic scale, of an organisation able to parcel out tens of square miles as it pleased and which set its rules of geometry above the practicalities of dealing with gorges and bogs. Thus the lines can finish on one side of a valley and then reappear on the other side on the same alignment. They ignore rivers and streams which suggests that they predate wheeled transport (*i.e.* before c.1700BC). They seem to have been invented in the Neolithic period, and were in full use in the Bronze Age and lasted for some 3,000 years.⁴¹

There are some 30 regions or areas where planned landscapes have been shown to exist and Bull concluded that Buckinghamshire provides yet another example and that it pre-dates Roman roads and the early Iron Age Grims Ditch. He noted that the long thin parishes of the Chiltern escarpment follow this preferred alignment. Bull did not look at field systems, but remarked that this discovery had major implications for them and that in most cases the alignment of field furlongs and their associate balks and headlands followed the preferred alignment.

In lowland areas these early boundaries have generally been overlaid by millennia of farming, but they are still clearly visible where cultivation was later abandoned, such as on moors and uplands. One such area where ancient landscapes have been strikingly preserved is on Salisbury Plain, as a result of occupation by the army for the last century. The absence of deep ploughing has left areas of Bronze Age fields about 3,500 years old, "cloaking the downs like a chequer board of small rectangular paddocks," according to David McOmish of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England.

"Remarkably, the fields share a common axis of alignment NE to SW, which in many instances ignores the topography," he reports in *British Archaeology*. Since this makes the fields more difficult to plough, there must have been some important motive: the alignment faces the midwinter sunrise (SE), like Salisbury Plain's most famous monument, Stonehenge. McOmish says, "The opening up of the landscape was presumably regarded as being legitimised by this alignment and its association with important earlier communal monuments."

A few centuries later, enclosures began to appear: Roger Thomas of English Heritage, writing in the same journal, argues that this

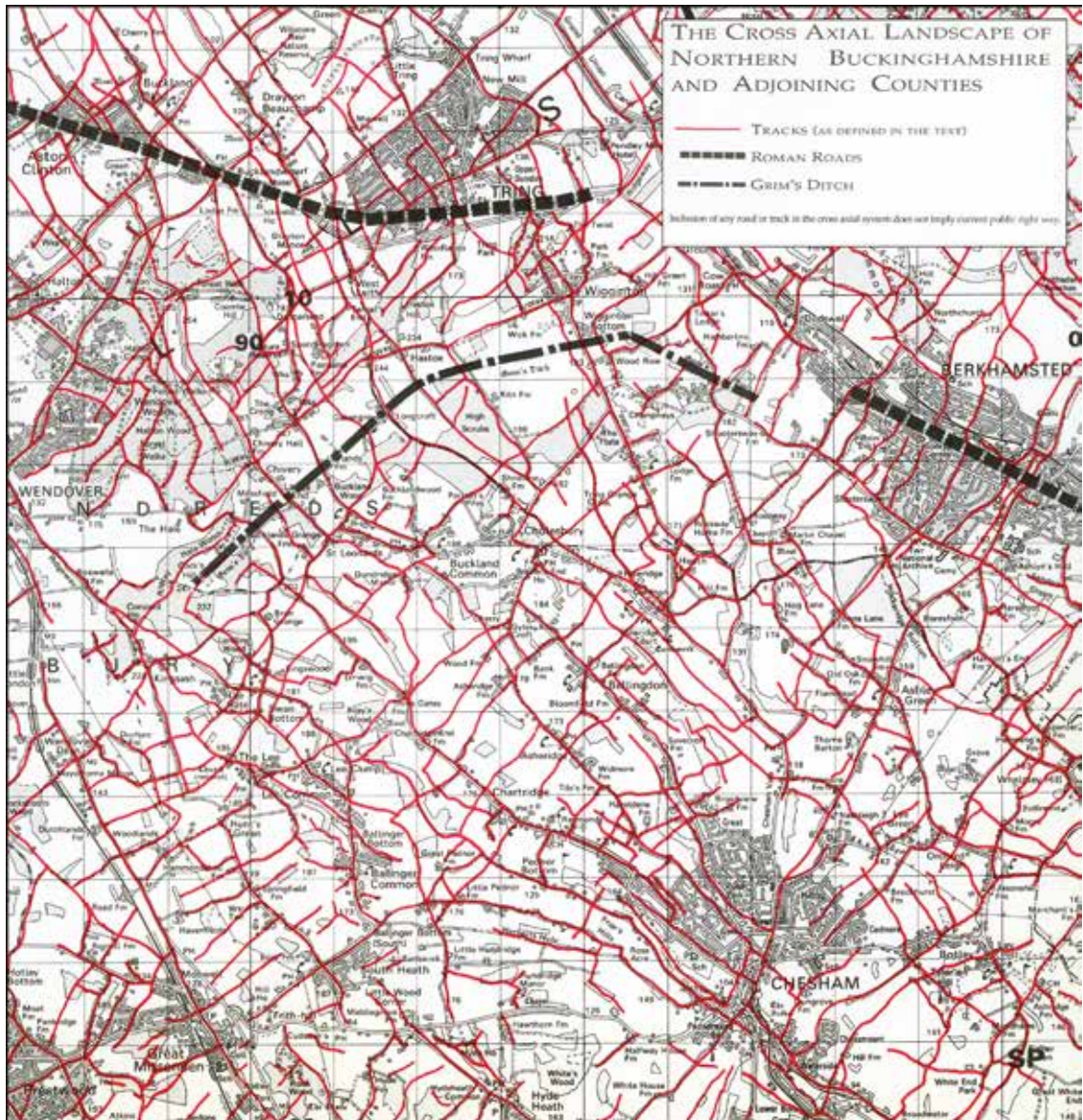


FIGURE 12 Biaxial map of roads and tracks in Bucks [Extract from much larger map by E.J. Bull in *Records* 35 (1993)]

marks the beginning of individual property rights: “People dug deep ditches and piled the soil up in banks around their settlements, or surrounded them with palisades.” This was sometimes on an enormous scale and Thomas believes that the “sudden and startling change” reflects the emergence throughout Britain of the concept of land

as a form of property, following the intensification of agriculture, the introduction of new crops such as hulled barley and spelt wheat, and a move to exploit heavier soils. Such developments would accord with rapid population growth and pressure on resources.⁴²

More recently, an overall review of the landscape

history of the Icknield Belt, the area of interaction between the Chilterns and the Vale around Aylesbury has found that this landscape was indeed framed by the co-axial trackways described by E.J. Bull, which had originated in the Later Bronze Age and were aligned NW-SE and at right angles to the Icknield Way. They also found that it was the Later Bronze Age which saw the first large-scale dividing up of land and construction of settlements, but suggest that in this particular area it was more likely to have been an organic process rather than the product of a grand plan. They propose that the co-axial landscape could be the product of the drove-ways resulting from the movement of herds and flocks up and down between the Vale and the Chiltern hills where they were pastured in the summer, with settlements established alongside these routes, although they acknowledge that elsewhere a deliberate act of planning is clear. Each one of the 'strip parishes' running from the Vale up into the Chilterns has one of the co-axial trackways as its spine.

Their findings highlight the intensity of Roman rural settlement, which mainly followed the earlier co-axial pattern, and which archaeological evidence confirms reached a distinct peak in the 1st and 2nd centuries when the Roman roads were being built. They found a mixed story of widespread desertion of Romano-British settlements after the Romans left, but with some re-use of existing places by the early Saxon population.⁴³

We can fairly claim that, as on Salisbury Plain, King's Wood's fields have survived because they have never been deep ploughed, indeed that they have apparently not been ploughed at all, at least since the Romans departed. We can also note that the fields are orientated in the same NE/SW directions as the fields on Salisbury Plain, the fields on the Ashridge estate and the roads and tracks shown on E.J. Bull's map, and that they continue the same alignment across a valley. However, the limited extent of the King's Wood fields does not allow us to share the claim that "the alignment in many instances ignores the topography", because it is the strip lynchets which dictate the alignment of the fields and they are following the contours.

CONCLUSIONS

The entire wood is unexpectedly based on chalk close to the surface, not on the underlying clay with flints which is typical of Chiltern woods.

Chalk was the preferred soil for the earliest farmers from the Neolithic period onwards, as it is lighter, well-drained and more easily tilled.

LiDAR maps reveal the straight-edged lynchet boundaries of some ten fields, all of which are orientated NE/SW taking their direction from, and incorporating, the longer, sinuous strip lynchets created on the slopes above them by ploughing along the contours. There is a uniform direction of slope within each field. On the Tylers Green side of the wood the fields are all south-facing. It is probable that there were more fields in the flatter parts of the wood where smaller earth boundary banks have since been eroded by weather and the passage of feet.

All the historical evidence available – two Saxon references, Domesday Book, medieval and later manorial records, indicates that it is very unlikely the fields were being tilled during or after the Saxon period and so supports a Roman or earlier origin for the fields.

We have seen that the Exeter University Research programme found that after nearly four centuries of Roman rule the population was booming and there had developed an intensive, market-oriented agrarian economy that profoundly impacted on the landscape. They accept that the fifth century was indisputably a period of chaos and upheaval during which the population declined drastically and the commercial economy ceased to function with a decline in farming activity, more especially of arable cultivation. Alqassar & Kidd's recent Aylesbury Vale landscape review supports these conclusions.

There is clear evidence of an active Romano-British presence near the wood. There was a farmstead in the Micklefield valley only 600m from King's Wood with another dwelling nearby, and limited occupation at nearby Ashwells. Wycombe is a Roman place-name and there is a proposed Roman road broadly following the line of the A40, with two villas on the Rye beside a fast-flowing stream. Further afield there is ample evidence of Romano-British occupation at West Wycombe, Common Wood in Penn, Hazlemere, and Coleman Wood in Holmer Green. The National Trust excavations at Ashridge found an early field system with a similar NE/SW orientation as in King's Wood, with strip lynchets and earthwork banks and ditches, thought to have been continually in use from the Iron Age into the Roman period.

King's Wood's two largest fields, each some 3½ acres, are the expected rectangular shape of Roman fields, but their lynchet boundaries are much bigger than the small banks predicted by Keith Branigan. The other seven fields are squarish, as expected for prehistoric Celtic fields, but five of them are 2 to 2½ acres, at least twice the expected 1 acre. There are two smaller fields, one of ¾ acre and the other of ½ acre.

One of the Mickelfield sites produced evidence of earlier two-way ploughing immediately preceding the Roman period, dateable to a middle or late Iron Age period. This confirms the expected continuity of Roman villas based on their Iron Age predecessor's estates, and indeed based on their field patterns – 'changing them involved hard work', observed Oliver Rackham. Ashwells also provided evidence of middle or late Iron Age activity. All of which encourages the idea of Iron Age followed by Roman use of the fields.

The possibility of a still earlier date for the fields is raised by an early Bronze Age (c.1800BC) crouched burial in the Mickelfield valley, close to the farmstead, and the knowledge that the two Iron Age hillforts at Wycombe and West Wycombe were both preceded by Bronze Age settlement.

The 'Celtic' fields which English Heritage surveyed in the West Wycombe Park and which they assessed as pre-historic or Roman, are close to the size of some of the King's Wood fields.⁴³ Oliver Rackham has found that whilst lynchets are not necessarily prehistoric, both Celtic fields and strip lynchets are mostly earlier than the Celtic period (that is, Iron Age). He found that some appear to be of Neolithic origin and were in use throughout the Bronze Age. He describes Celtic fields as 'surrounded by great banks, the product of immense labour,' which is a fair description of the King's Wood banks, and observed that some Celtic fields seem to be fitted into what had originally been the reave systems of Bronze Age planned countryside. This raises the possibility that the King's Wood fields could be evidence of the Bronze Age planned countryside at a time when land first began to be thought of as a form of property, a concept first proposed by Oliver Rackham and others and followed up for Buckinghamshire by E.J. Bull. The King's Wood fields do indeed have the predicted NE/SW alignment, although this is not significant in itself since that alignment is anyway dictated by the contours.

The field boundaries have survived because they have not been ploughed since the Romans departed. Without any specific archaeological evidence such as coins, pottery or other artefacts, it is not possible to assign firm dates to the fields, but a reasonable hypothesis would seem to be that tilling started with south-facing Neolithic strip lynchets on the eastern, Tylers Green side, later expanded by the addition of the straight-edged fields, perhaps in the Bronze Age as part of a wider planned countryside and used continuously into the Roman period. The fields on the western side of the wood are not south-facing and mostly a different shape and could have been a later addition. When the Romans left, the fields were abandoned and within a generation or two they became a woodland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks are due to my neighbours, Russell and Chris Read, who in 2010 joined forces with me to spend 18 months walking the wood and investigating its history. In particular they put me in touch with Graham Bradshaw who taught himself how to interpret the data to produce a wide variety of LiDAR maps as well as to use GPS to accurately position the newly discovered fields on OS maps.

Thanks to Peter Strutt for invaluable help in amending the Location, Field & LiDAR maps; to Eddie Morton for providing and adapting photographs of several maps and sketches; to Lyndsay Knott of WDC for the licence to use the OS location map; to Melanie Czapski of the Bucks County Museum for the crouched burial watercolour; to Julia Wise, the Historic Environment Record Officer, for useful advice; to John Gover for his excellent more recent LiDAR map; to Brett Thorn of the County Museum for the photograph of the possible awl.

Visits and advice were received from several knowledgeable colleagues – Mike Farley, our former County Archaeologist; John Morris, manager of the Chiltern Woodlands Project; Stanley Cauvain, an archaeologist with much local and county experience; Yvonne Edwards, Chair of the Chess Valley Archaeological & Historical Society, who conducted the investigation of the Common Wood enclosure; Gary Marshall, Archaeologist for the National Trust Thames and Solent Region, who carried out the Ashridge investigation.

NOTES

1. Graham Bradshaw, a Totteridge resident, was our essential LiDAR expert and produced many LiDAR maps as well as accurately positioning the fields on OS maps using GPS
2. This suggestion was made by Yvonne Edwards, Chair of the Chess Valley Archaeological & Historical Society
3. Michael Farley, 'Conquest to Conquest; The Anglo-Saxon Chilterns', in Keith Branigan (ed.), *The Archaeology of the Chilterns from the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest* (1994), 118, 119, 134
4. Leslie W. Hepple & Alison M. Doggett, *The Chilterns* (1994), 114
5. Hepple & Doggett, *op. cit.*, 114, quoting Oliver Rackham, *Ancient Woodland* (1980), 123
6. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (1986), 78
7. John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, 'Wycombe Heath and its 'Charter'', *Records* **36** (1994), 148–9
8. L.J. Ashford, *The history of the Borough of High Wycombe* (1960), 5–8
9. The open area around Kingswood House, immediately east of Kingswood Road, is a surviving part of St John's Wood – see Fig. 4
10. Ashford, *op. cit.*, 6, 7, 14. The name King's Wood could date from a generation later when Henry III (1216–72) held it in his own hands as part of Bassetsbury manor for some years. The name St John's Wood must be from 1312, when it passed into the ownership of the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem.
11. St George's Chapel Archive, SGC XV.15.6. A detailed account of the ownership of the Manor of Bassetsbury is given in 'A history of Buckinghamshire', *VCH* (1925), 123–4
12. John Chenevix Trench & Miles Green, 'Wycombe Heath and its 'Charter'', *Records* **36** (1994), 148–9
13. Review by Michael Ghirelli of Stephen Rippon, Chris Smart, & Ben Pears, *The Fields of Britannia* (2015), in *Records* **57** (2017), 225–6
14. Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past* (1988), 67–71. Gelling took a particular interest in Chiltern place-names and made a special study of those containing *wicham* and *wic*
15. Keith Branigan, *Town and Country. Verulamium and the Roman Chilterns* (1972), 81; and *The Roman Chilterns* (2001), 56
16. J.F. Head, 'An important early valley route through the Chilterns', *Records* **19.4** (1974), 422–8. Also J.F. Head, *Early Man in South Buckinghamshire* (1955), 54
17. Pauline Cauvain, Stanley Cauvain & Miles Green, 'Prehistoric Romano-British and fourteenth-century activity at Ashwell, Tylers Green, Bucks', *Records* **31** (1989), 111. The Neolithic period is c.3000–2000BC
18. Keith Branigan, *The Roman Chilterns* (2001), 54
19. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (1986), 155
20. Oliver Rackham, *op. cit.*, 158–9
21. C. Morris, G.H. Hargreaves, R.P.F. Parker, 'A Roman road through South Buckinghamshire', *Records* **18.5** (1970), 372
22. David M.R. Green, 'A potential new Roman Villa at the Rye, High Wycombe', *Records* **52** (2012), 209–12
23. S. & P. Cauvain, 'A Romano-British site at Micklefield, High Wycombe', *Records* **20** (1978), 528–34. The site location is given as SU88989307. Early 1st/2nd-century pottery was also found at Deangarden Rise (GR SU88419165) in 1973 during the building of a housing estate – (Bucks Historic Environment Record [HER] No. 0055300000 – MBC1812). Another possible Roman habitation site on the Cauvains' site plan is at All-Hallows Lane (now Castle Street) near the town centre (Fig. 7, site 1), but concerns a Roman well and tessellated pavement with no suggestion of farming
24. J.F. Head, *Early Man in South Buckinghamshire* (1955), 54, 156. Recorded on Bucks HER card 0612 with the estimated location as SU892929 which is very close to where the Ashwells footpath joins Micklefield Road
25. Francis Colmer's excellent watercolour of the skeleton and grave is now in the care of the Bucks County Museum. He noted on the back that "it was on the hillside several feet below the surface, on the building estate in Micklefield Lane, High Wycombe. They may possibly belong to the Early Bronze Age, circ. 1800BC. There was no appearance of a tumuli. The internment seems to have been 'en plein terre'. Photographs and a detailed account were published in the Bucks Free Press – and a large

- photograph was placed in Luton Museum, being similar to those found at the Five Knolls, Dunstable Downs”
26. Bucks HER 0595200000. Location SU88700 93800
 27. Bucks HER 0009100000. Location SU 89050 92150
 28. Bucks HER 0037700000. Location SU 87442 92871
 29. Bucks HER 0508201000 & 0508205001. These two records relate to two fields but are confusingly entitled ‘Little Gomms Wood’ (which is actually the eastern field) and ‘Gomms Wood’ (which is the western field)
 30. Michael Farley & Richard Wright, ‘An early Romano-British inhumation cemetery at West Wycombe, Bucks’, *Records* **21** (1979), 81–9, and *Records* **23**, 129
 31. Simon Carlyle, ‘Roman burials at 40 Church Lane, West Wycombe’, *Records* **52** (2012), 83–94
 32. This is presumably an error, confusing square metres with metres square. Thus the largest field would be 60m x 60m = 3,600m²
 33. D. McOmish, C. Tuck & D. Went, ‘West Wycombe Park, Buckinghamshire Part II’, *The Earthwork Surveys*. English Heritage Archaeological Investigation Series, unpub. rep. (2001), 67–8, 91–2
 34. Michael Farley, ‘Later prehistoric settlement in central and southern Buckinghamshire’, in R. Holgate (ed.) *Chiltern Archaeology: Recent work* (1995). The Book Castle (Dunstable)
 35. Yvonne Edwards, ‘Excavation of an Earthwork in Common Wood, Penn, and discovery of a Romano-British Settlement’, *Records* **48** (2008), 37–53
 36. Chess Valley Archaeological & Historical Society, ‘Late Iron Age/Early, Roman transition in the Chilterns. What ditches can tell us’, *Records* **54** (2014), 61–73
 37. Bucks HER 0119300000, location SU 89100 95500
 38. Information provided by Gary Marshall, Archaeologist for the National Trust Thames and Solent Region
 39. See fn.20
 40. E.J. Bull, ‘The bi-axial landscape of prehistoric Buckinghamshire’, *Records* **35** (1993), 11–18
 41. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, 156–8
 42. An article in *The Times* of 29 Jun 1998, by Norman Hammond, Archaeology Correspondent, quoting two articles in *British Archaeology* **34** (May 1998): Roger Thomas, ‘When land first became private property’, 8–9; and David McOmish, ‘Landscapes preserved by the men of war’, 12–13
 43. Eliza Alqassar and Sandy Kidd, ‘Joining the dots: research into the landscape history of the Icknield Belt around Aylesbury’, *Records* **58.1** (2018), 1–22
 44. Hepple & Doggett, *op. cit.*, 33. The only ‘Celtic’ fields illustrated are on Pitstone Hill, described in the caption as ‘the outlines of prehistoric *rectangular* fields’. There seems to be some uncertainty about the expected shape of a Celtic field