The Excavation of Cherbury Camp, 1939

an interim report

By J. S. P. Bradford

During the summer of 1939 the preliminary excavation of Cherbury Camp[1] in the Vale of the White Horse was begun, and lasted for a period of five weeks. This had been intended, but for the outbreak of war, to form the basis of further examination of the interior and defences in the following year, but since the evidence from the past season's work involved a partial reconsideration of Iron Age B influence in this area, it was thought best to incorporate the results in an interim report. Gratitude is due to the many subscribers who so generously responded to an appeal for funds,[2] to Mr. M. Hornby, of Pusey House, the owner of the site, who facilitated and encouraged the work in every way, and to Dr. W. J. Arkell, who first drew my attention to the real significance of the geological features of the site and its setting.

In derivation, Cherbury would at first sight appear to be related to Charney, about a mile to the south, but this suggestion is not without difficulties. Huntingford would dissociate them. In *Berks. Arch. Journ.*, 1935, p. 12, he says of Cherbury : ' the first element, whatever it may mean, may be the same as in Charwell (Oxon.) and Chirbury (Salop).' He cites, as an early form of the name, Chereburk (1272). Moreover, in his opinion the modern suffix ' -ey ' in Charney does not represent O.E. ' -ig ' (' island ') but O.E. ' ea ' (' water ') and Charney is thus the equivalent of Cernwater, although the earliest form known to him is Ceornei (821) and D. B. has Cernei (*B.A.J.*, 1934, p. 109).

However, Fägensten (*Place-Names of Dorset*, 1932, p. 75) quoting, among other early forms of Charborough, Chereberge (1212), Chernebrug (1219), considers the meaning to be ' the barrow (O.E. " beorg ") by the river Cherne.' This analogy is far more in accord with the situation at Cherbury. Certain of the early forms of Charborough so closely resemble Cherbury and its earliest known form that it still appears that the stream running past it was the Cern

[1] Position : 1-in. O.S. Sheet 94, 5th ed. Coordinates : E. 1,041,000 N. 1,324,000

[2] As an Advisory Committee, Mrs. O. Brogan, Miss M. V. Taylor, Mr. E. T. Leeds, Mr. D. B. Harden, and Mr. J. N. L. Myres contributed in many ways, with their constant cooperation and advice.

(or a Cern), in which case the big island on which Charney now stands may well have been called the Chern island.

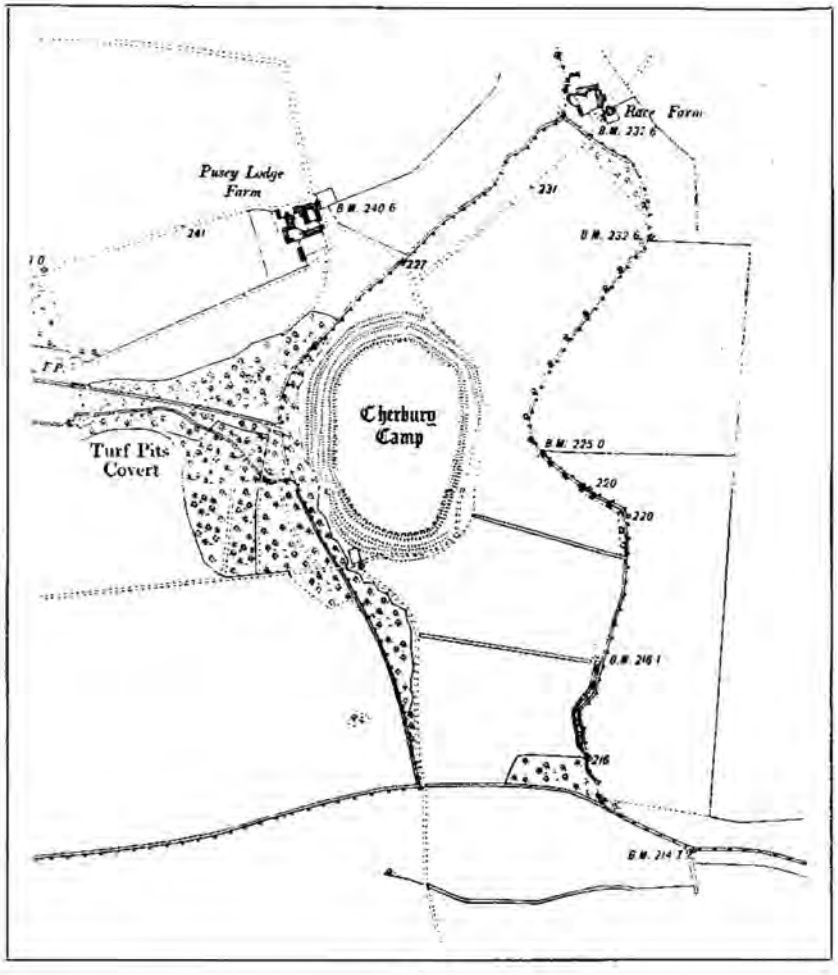


FIG. 4

MAP OF CHERBURY CAMP. Scale 6 ins. = 1 mile.

The parallel lines indicate existing streams ; the buried entrance lies midway along the E. sector.

Reproduced from the O.S. 6-in. Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

In its present form (PLATE IV, A, FIG. 4), the earthwork encloses an oval area of 9.364 acres, having a maximum diameter of approximately 1000 feet

from north to south. Lying on the extreme fringe of the southern slopes of the Corallian beds, where they dip beneath the heavy clays of the Vale, the site to-day commands a fine prospect towards the northern scarp of the Berkshire Downs, but while in occupation must have been almost hidden by its surrounding fenland scrub, and the damp and difficult woodland to the south.[1] The deliberate exploitation of such an environment for defence recalls the analogous setting of Gadbury Bank (*V.C.H. Worcs.*, I, 188) and of Salmonsbury.

In a very brief analysis of the effect of geological environment on settlement in and around the Upper Thames basin, emphasis has already been laid[2] on the importance of the North Berkshire Corallian ridge, basically composed of two sands and two limestones, as a corridor of reasonably light soils and woodland tending to canalise primitive settlement between two belts of heavy clay to the north and south.[3] Gentle southward slopes of Coral Rag and oolites, well suited to occupation, are drained by small streams towards the Ock ; whilst in the north the abrupt escarpment of Lower Calcareous grit overlooking the Upper Thames valley maintains a constant average of over 250 feet and frequently exceeds 300 feet. In general, the tectonic structure is manifested in an almost uniform plateau undulated in gentle folds, though west of Faringdon this is intersected by the valleys of the Ray and Cole.

The complexity of the Corallian stratigraphy is well illustrated in its variety within a half-mile radius of the site. In the direction of Pusey and Buckland the Pusey Flags provide an important surface rock, while a small quarry half-a-mile to the north shows 3 feet of pisolite. An island of Highworth grit and clay lies to the south-west and a tongue of Lower Calcareous grit almost reaches the Camp from the north. The western and southern ramparts cling to an irregular outlier of this bed.

In spite of these internal variations, the contrast is, above all, between the drier strata of limestones and sands collectively, and the valley clays and alluvium. Indeed the character of the site is primarily determined by the zones of alluvial silt which cover the approaches to the Camp[4] from the south, west and north, still traced by three small streams with wide marshy banks. The most obvious link with the bulk of the main ridge is the narrow bridge of Coral Rag towards Race farm, and on this the alignment of the entrance roadway was perhaps directed. Though at first sight apparently stranded in the midst of flat arable

[1] For further details of the topography, see *V.C.H. Berks.*, I, 262, and *Oxoniensia*, IV, 196–7.

[2] *Oxoniensia*, IV, 3–6.

[3] Arkell, *Proc. Geol. Assoc.*, L, 488 ff. ; *Phil. Trans. Royal Soc.*, CCXVI B, 67.

[4] Compare the influence of the Gault, ' virtually impassable save where deliberately cleared and metalled,' on the siting of the NE. entrance at Oldbury, Kent (*Arch. Cant.*, LI, 148).

fields, the true significance of Cherbury's apparent vulnerability becomes clear in the light of the millions of upturned snail-shells[1] which whiten the surfaces of these fields to the south and east, and the very real obstacle of the marshy waste which hemmed it in on three sides reveals the truly strategic choice of an inherently defensible site.

Situated barely four miles W. of the Noah's Ark site at Frilford (*Oxoniensia*, IV, 1 ff.) along the Corallian ridge, Cherbury, as a multiple Iron Age earthwork in the constructional tradition of Western Iron Age B groups, offered a potential comparative check on the affinities of the surprisingly vigorous AB culture represented there (*ibid.*, 17, 21–24). Both Frilford and East and West Cassington[2] seemed to indicate a distinct though perhaps relatively backward AB group on the periphery of areas more intensively under Iron Age B influences. Therefore the excavation of Cherbury was designed to provide data from a presumably contemporary fortified settlement to supplement the evidence already obtained from open village sites whose integral AB identity had already been established. In the course of excavation special attention was devoted to the entrance, which might perhaps roughly epitomize the history of an apparently one-period structure, and also to the lavish and practised use of stone for defensive positions.

The Nature of the Defences[3]

Though well preserved on the north and south, and especially impressive in their massive regularity on the west, the two outer ramparts of the eastern defences have been largely ploughed out, and, as exploratory trenches confirmed, thrown forward into the ditches. Furthermore, in the interior of the Camp, recent cultivation has in places shaved 5–10 ft. from the tail of the innermost rampart. Certain indications suggestive of a fourth rampart at the NW. corner proved to represent no more than a slight counterscarp at this point.

In general, broad, fairly shallow ditches had been dictated by the local peculiarities of the site. On the south side the innermost ditch showed only 4 or 5 feet of silt. At the entrance the maximum depth was about 5 ft. 10 ins. and, on the north, about the same. Thick water-laid silt was stratified at the bottom of the southern sector, which gradually tailed off towards the east; while in a normal winter, on the west, there is still standing water in all the ditches, in spite of local drainage.

[1] Cp. *Oxoniensia*, IV, 196–7. These have been shown to belong by an overwhelming majority to species peculiar to damp and boggy places; in effect a 'marsh assemblage.' At a very moderate estimate there must be more than 500 million on the surface alone.

[2] See the map of Cassington sites, FIG. 1, p. 3 above.

[3] Draft site plans were prepared, but, in the circumstances, it seemed best to await the final results before publication.

On the southern and south-eastern sectors the body of the rampart was mainly composed of sandy material, scooped from behind the tail and dumped along the fringe of the oval geological peninsula, with a dry stone revetment-wall (PLATE V, A) as an additional support and facing for the exterior. Such a technique was dictated by the nature and extent of the alluvial silt of the formerly marshy tract. This sandy yellow tip, though for the most part barren, yielded scattered sherds of Iron Age A2 ware of rather featureless profile, possibly indicating the existence of an earlier open-village site.[1] On the north and north-west and by the entrance the composition of the ramparts was adapted to the available material, and proved to be of tightly packed oolitic rubble, here easily obtained from the ditch.

It seems probable that the revetment-wall was originally partly jacketed with turf. Nine or ten well laid courses of thin oolite slabs[2] were still in position, though the fallen débris in front suggests that it probably once stood at least two feet higher. Exploratory trenches confirmed its existence along the whole circumference of the innermost rampart, and at the SE. corner a segment 80 ft. in length was stripped for fuller examination. A straight joint (PLATE V, B) was plainly visible, perhaps indicating gang or 'piece' work in its execution. The outer defences were tested for similar revetment work, but showed no traces of it. The crest of the innermost rampart, though carefully investigated on the north-west, where it was best preserved, gave no indications of post-holes or other timber structures, but further excavation will be necessary to establish this point conclusively.

Pottery from the silt and rapid silt of the innermost ditch, though fairly sparse, was almost entirely of blunt, internally bevelled, somewhat everted rim-forms of Iron Age AB ware, relatively homogeneous in composition and already familiar in their full range of fabrics among the Frilford-Cassington series, accompanied by sherds of late A2 ware, already in the final stages of degeneration.

THE ENTRANCE

Both on the north and south the ramparts had been pierced, but. as was anticipated, trial trenches proved these pseudo-entrances to be the product of subsequent agricultural activity. The plan and construction of the original gateway, half-way along the eastern sector, were, however, far from clear. An accumulation of ploughed soil from the interior had obscured the roadway,

[1] These forms do not seem to antedate greatly the material from the ditch, and in fact could conceivably be derived from the occupation-débris of one of the building gangs.

[2] Compare the closely related treatment of stone in rampart revetments at Leckhampton, *Trans. Brist. Glouc. Arch. Soc.*, XLVII, 81; Minchinhampton, *ibid.*, LIX, 295; in the outer rampart at Bredon, *Arch. Journal*, 1938, pl. XI; and at Rainsborough Camp, *V.C.H. Northants.*, II, 400.

and a fan-shaped spread had obliterated the details of the external approaches. To meet these difficulties a grid system of excavation on the basis of units of 100 sq. ft. was laid down extending up to the boundary of interior cultivation and designed to locate the limits of the causeway between the butt ends of the ditches. These were satisfactorily established within the area of 2,545 sq. ft. which was finally cleared and examined.

The original roadway was composed of a shallow layer of small stones thrown down to form a surface. This, however, had been easily worn away in the centre and ruts had been impressed in the oolite, suggesting a possible wheel-gauge of five feet or a little less. At least one remetalling with similar material had been necessitated by the thick mud which quickly resulted from the passage of vehicles over an inadequate surface. A little Romano-British coarse ware was actually embedded in this upper level, but in itself would not establish continuity of occupation into this period. The earlier stratum of the roadway was not especially productive, though it yielded a fair quantity of Iron Age sherds of A2 and not very distinguished AB wares. Once within the threshold of the gateway the lightly metalled road was replaced by a heavily cobbled street (PLATE IV, B), while well-laid dry-stone walling,[1] still remaining up to twelve courses and similar in technical construction to the revetment-wall, lined the innermost rampart on both sides. The external approaches to the entrance were examined for post-holes, but none was found. The gate post-holes themselves were situated at the outer extremity of the parallel lining wall; that on the right of the entrance,[2] set in sandy yellow make-up, was 4 ft. 10 ins. in depth, 3 ft. in diameter, and possessed two lesser post-holes for additional supports (PLATE V, C). That on the left (PLATE IV, B) had been cut to the same dimensions, and had a satellite post-hole behind it, only a little smaller in size, possibly containing a buttressing timber ; it was provided, like the others, with systematic stone packing.

Any slightly raised causeway aligned on the flanking walls and entrance roadway would have been disintegrated by the plough, but, in spite of the more obvious geological advantages of the belt of oolite linking the peninsula with the main ridge towards Race Farm, the claims of the salient formed by the somewhat raised ground protruding into the former marsh, almost opposite the entrance, should not be overlooked as an alternative approach route ; and indeed a distinctive stone spread is noticeable close to the inward bend of the small stream at this point.

[1] The revetment walls lining the NE. and NW. side entrance at Bredon Hill and also the inner entrance in Period II were rendered in a closely similar fashion (*Arch. Journal*, 1938, pp. 42 f., 58).

[2] From among the fallen debris of the superficial courses of the wall at this point was obtained a sherd with tooled pendent swags and impressed circlet decoration of a type characteristic of the Cassington-Frilford AB complex.

Since the interior of the camp was under wheat in 1939, it was not possible to examine the roadway for huts lining the street, but it is noteworthy that the occupation material from the 430 sq. ft. cleared within the gateway was relatively small for an occupation at all intense or long-lived, even if the cultural equipment of this marsh refuge were meagre.

Date and Significance of the Site

Recent excavation and survey in NW. France and in Wessex[1] has gone far to show that the origin and development of Early Iron Age multiple defences in Britain was mainly confined to not much more than a century before the Roman Conquest. Probability therefore points to a relatively late date for sites of this nature far from the primary centres of diffusion in SW. England.

The preliminary excavations could, of necessity, only tell an incomplete story, but though close dating is as yet hazardous, ceramic evidence, which it is only possible to outline below, helped largely to place it in proper perspective against the contemporary social setting.

Though there are stray survivals of the more angular A2 forms (*v. supra*, p.17), and a few sherds with debased haematite coating, such local archaisms also continued to occur up to a late date at Stanlake, Dorchester (Allen's Pit), and Cassington. The full series at present properly begins with decadent A2 types of situliform pedigree in the usual range of fabrics. Their slackened shoulders and lack of decoration are perfectly in accord with other contemporary local material from Hatford, Radley and Frilford. These were associated in the infilling of the innermost ditch with plain AB wares. Probably dispersed over this area during the first century B.C., the latter become increasingly important numerically. The examples from Cherbury are of rather crude execution, but the dominant form among them, the modified ' flower-pot,' though less prominent than in the Frilford–Cassington group, is typical of the Iron Age B contribution to the hybrid Iron Age AB cultures.

While it is unlikely that B ceramic influence in this area was uniform in effect or necessarily continuously exerted, the decorative motif of the pendent swag[2] and stamped circlet nevertheless reoccurs with little variation in the Frilford–Cassington–Cherbury complex. Undoubtedly derived from Armorican sources, the stamped circlet in this association is a suggestive ' type fossil.'[3]

[1] R. E. M. Wheeler, *Antiquity*, XIII (1939), 58 f.

[2] Among decorated sherds showing Iron Age B ceramic influence from a multiple camp near Warham, Norfolk (*Antiq. Journ.*, XIII, 399 f.), one, no. 11, p. 411, would perhaps make better sense if inverted and treated as a tooled pendent swag of this type.

[3] C. F. C. Hawkes, *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, LXXX, 255 f.

One of the most readily assimilated elements of this alien influence, and here most probably absorbed indirectly through a SW. medium, it can hardly have found popular expression locally much, if at all, before the last two or three decades prior to the Roman Conquest.

It was not unexpected that at Cherbury Iron Age A and B cultures should have fused thus. Indeed, the survival of a mixed AB culture in the Upper Thames valley up to, and in some cases (cp. Frilford) into, the period of Romanization is now beyond doubt. On this site, as at Frilford, it is very little, if at all, affected by Iron Age C fashions.[1] In general, the available ceramic evidence is consistent with a date in the first or second decade of the first century A.D. for the construction of the defences, and there is nothing at present that need lead one to assign them to an earlier date.

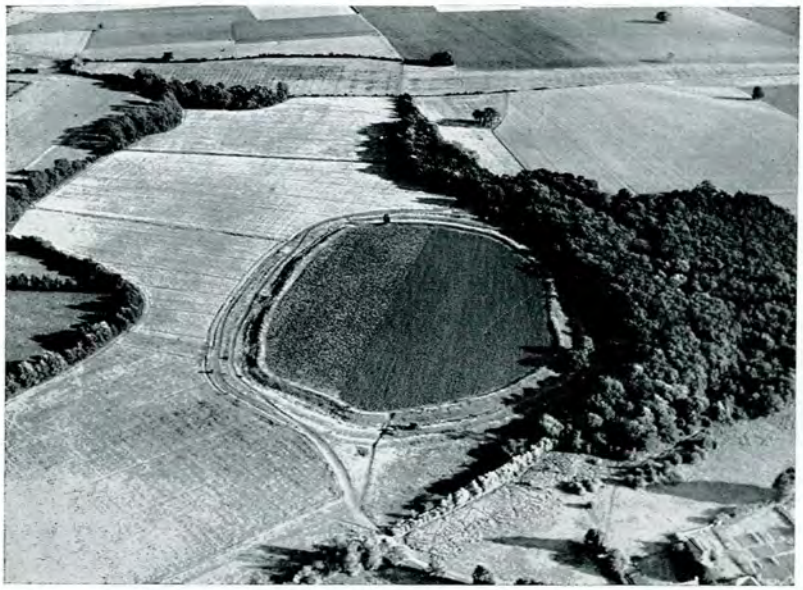
As a product of the late AB phase of the Iron Age cultures of the Upper Thames basin, Cherbury combines many of their composite and elusive qualities. While employing simple ' dump ' construction for the ramparts,[2] which corresponds to similar technique of the late A2 period in Wessex exemplified at Maiden Castle, the free use of stone here is primarily developed from Cotswold Iron Age B influences. The treatment of revetment walling at Salmonsbury and Bredon alone calls for comparison. Ceramically the fusion of traditions is equally evident, and the composite AB culture evolved is parallel to its more developed earlier counterparts in Hampshire and Wiltshire–Berkshire.[3] Thence it may have derived certain important characteristics of its expression somewhat before it received the more obvious south-western stylistic motifs, especially the distinctively intrusive swag and circlet decoration which should be capable of further profitable analysis.

The importance of Cherbury Camp lies as much in its technical construction and unique location, as in the absence of any comparable example of true multiple hill-fort construction, as distinct from open village, in well over 600 square miles (cp. distribution map, *Oxoniensia*, IV, 4) where excavations under modern conditions have been begun. Yet without further examination of the interior for hut-sites, it is still uncertain, at this stage, whether it should properly be regarded as an independent, rather impoverished, fortified fastness, or as a passing effort of local defence for open village sites in this area—that is, a temporary Iron Age AB group refuge in acquired multiple-rampart technique.

[1] A gold coin of Cunobeline (Abingdon Museum) found near Cherbury and strays from Garford, Hanney, Abingdon and Wantage point to little more than a limited measure of late economic penetration. See *Berks. Arch. Journ.*, XLII, 75 ff.; XLIII, 38 ff.

[2] Cp. the inner rampart at the Caburn, *S.A.C.*, LXXX, 246.

[3] The evident affinities of the plain AB wares at Frilford, etc., with those at Southcote, Theale and Yarnbury were observed in *Oxoniensia*, IV, 16, 21–3. These in turn are linked with parallel forms both from Meon Hill and Worthy Down, and are indirectly related to such primary centres as the Cissbury groups.



A *Ph. G. W. G. Allen*

Ph. J. S. P. Bradford

B

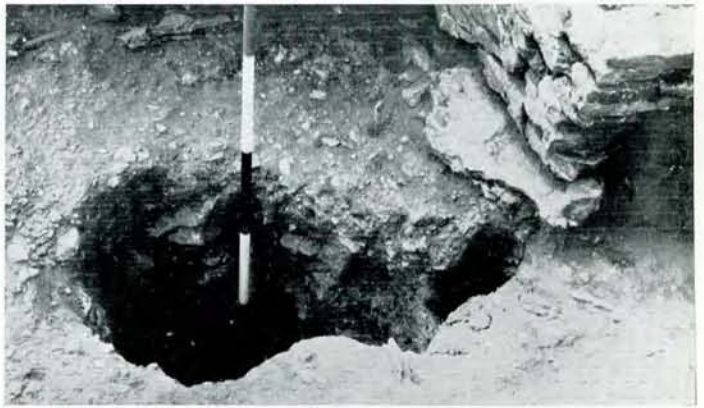
CHERBURY CAMP, BERKS.

A. Air-view of the Camp (p. 14).

B. The E. entrance to the Camp with S. gate post-hole : in the foreground, cobbled roadway (p. 18).

A

B



C

CHERBURY CAMP, BERKS.

A. The revetment-wall of innermost rampart, SE. sector (p. 17).
B. Close-up of portion of revetment-wall, showing straight joint (p. 17).
C. North post-holes of gateway (p. 18).

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