# The South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and its Significance

By Richard Bradley

## INTRODUCTION

THE South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch (fig. 1), which runs from the River Thames at Mongewell to the crest of the Chilterns, has been considered in several previous papers; even so its nature has not yet been fully explored nor its distinctive features defined. Part of the reason for this is that this earthwork has usually been taken to be part of an overall system including a variety of other dykes and discussion has always been confined to the group as a whole. This is legitimate if the grouping is one based closely upon the characteristics of each potential member. Unfortunately here the process has sometimes become either question-begging or arbitrary.

This difficulty has been partly verbal. The Oxford region includes a bewildering diversity of linear earthworks all sharing the name 'Grim's Ditch'. Though this may reflect only the speculations of earlier antiquarians it has induced a willingness automatically to take these earthworks together as a single system. To try to avoid this type of confusion here it may be well to list the earthworks usually considered with the South Oxfordshire Ditch and to propose alternative names for those to which further reference will be made.

Hughes,[1] following Crawford,[2] assigned the South Oxfordshire (Mongewell) Ditch to an early Saxon origin in Cuthwulf's expedition of 571, together with the Streatley Ditches on the west bank of the Thames, and those of the Chiltern Grim's Ditches near Berkhamstead, Prince's Risborough and Tring. Wheeler[3] adopted this grouping but related these earthworks, the Middlesex (Pinner) Ditch and the 'Faestendic' near Bexley to settlement of the Thames Basin in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. Dyer[4] concerned himself only with the Chiltern earthworks and so omitted the Mongewell Ditch from his survey though in that area he added to those already mentioned earthworks near

[1] M. Hughes, *Antiquity*, v, 291 ff.
[2] O. G. S. Crawford, ibid., 161 ff.
[3] R. E. M. Wheeler, *Ant. J.*, xiv, 254 ff.
[4] J. Dyer, *Antiquity*, xxxvii, 46 ff.

Pitstone and Dunstable. He favoured a context for these dykes in the pre-Roman Iron Age. Finally Money[5] proposed a narrower interpretation which linked the Mongewell and Streatley Ditches as a continuous barrier against movement up the entire Thames Valley. Like the Victoria County History[6] he saw the Mongewell Ditch as continuing eastwards to Henley and so cutting off the area of land inside the wide bend of the Thames between there and Wallingford.

Before any of these views are further considered the field evidence for the nature of the Mongewell Ditch itself must be examined. Next the narrower interpretations will be considered and then the validity of the groupings adopted in the three main papers will be examined. Finally the dating evidence for each earthwork will be examined critically and a tentative context for the dyke will be suggested.

FIELD EVIDENCE

Much of the discussion of the nature of this earthwork must depend upon its true line and so it is necessary at the outset to consider the accepted ends to the dyke (FIGS 2, 3). To the west it is usually taken to end at the lake in Mongewell Park which probably perpetuates an earlier backwater of the Thames. It is possible, however, that the line in fact skirted this to the north and ran on to the east bank of the river itself, though the position is complicated by a system of park earthworks in the same area. If this is the case, then the earthwork may form at least the nucleus of a continuous bank running between the lake at 61458798 and the river bank at 60908823. The only dating evidence available is that this earthwork is probably earlier than an 18th century ha-ha which meets it north of Carmel College and is certainly cut by a ditch secondary to this feature. On the other hand to the west a ditch appears inside this bank and its use or reuse as a park boundary is not unlikely. The matter cannot be simply settled because of dense undergrowth on the site.

There are two possible views of its eastern limit. The more ambitious takes the earthwork as far as Henley. This is based largely upon two pieces of documentary evidence, a 13th century reference to a 'Grim's Ditch' in Henley, and the account of Dr. Plot in 1677 who mentions that he had been told of a continuation of the line eastwards beyond Nuffield. Neither is really satisfactory. The first tells merely of the existence of some form of earthwork somewhere in Henley. We have already pointed out the indiscriminate use of the name Grim's Ditch and to equate the two earthworks, one of which we cannot even find, would be to fall into a trap we have been at pains to expose. Nor is Dr. Plot such a valuable guide for he never claims to have traced the

[5] J. Money, *Trans. Newbury Field Club*, IV, 96. *VCH Berks* I, 274.
[6] *VCH Oxon.*, I, 367 passim and II, 339 ff.

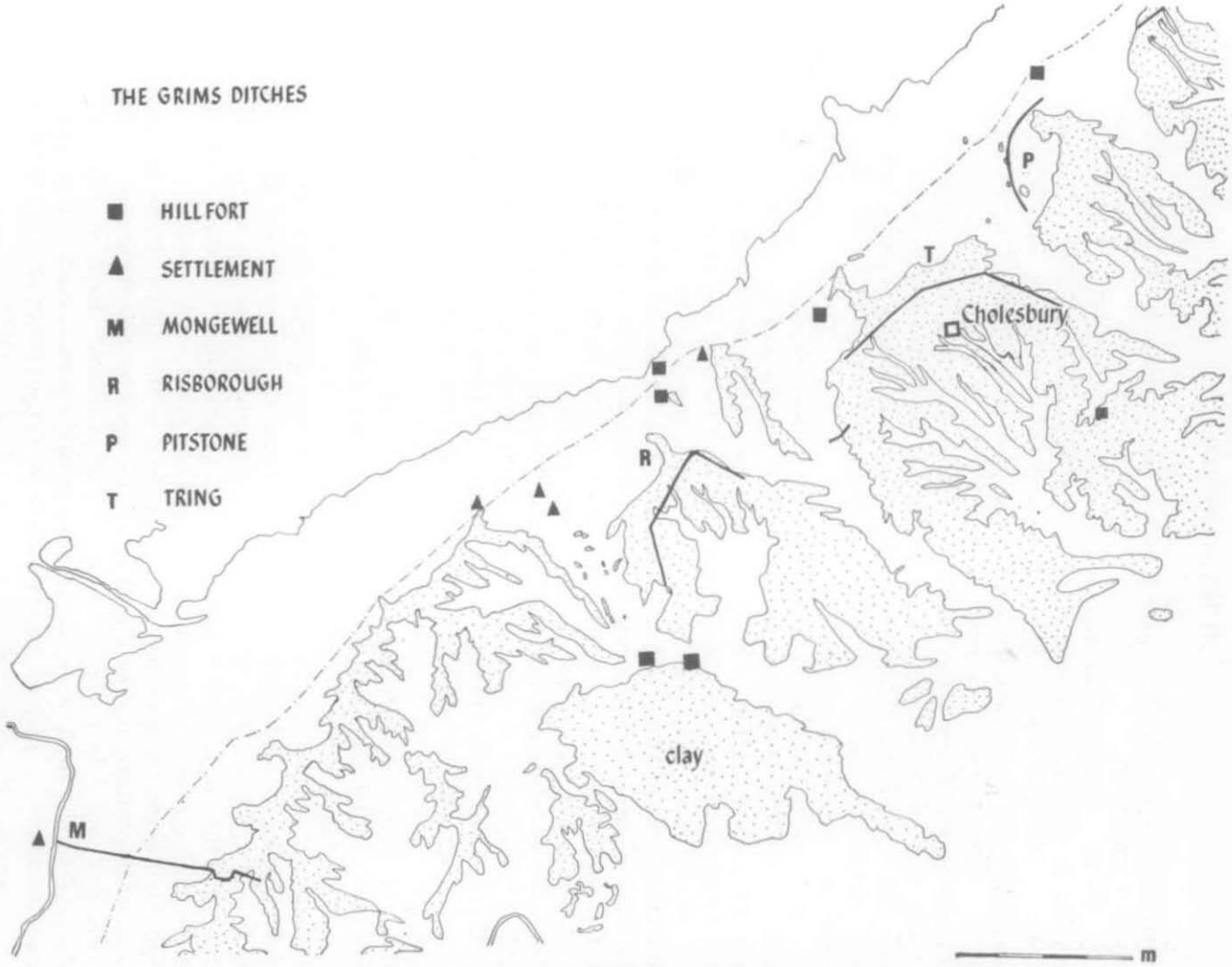


FIG. 1
The South Oxfordshire and Chiltern Grim's Ditches in relation to Iron Age occupation sites, the Icknield Way and surface geology.

earthwork beyond Nuffield himself and so we are left with hearsay evidence three centuries old.

On the other hand an attempt was made to give the line of the 'missing' section in the *Victoria County History*. This is scarcely reliable. The Ditch runs the first three miles between Mongewell and the Chiltern ridge in a single alignment and even when it turns there it never truly departs from its dependence upon straight alignments. The 'remaining' five miles given in the *Victoria County History* scrupulously avoid such practices; they include seven bends, three of them through acute angles, and take all of seven miles in doing so. The truth is that this account simply uses stray lengths of parish boundary to join together various spurious earthworks denounced by Crawford as the remains of a relatively recent road.

Even so the earthwork is traceable for a short distance east from where Crawford left it at Hayden farm. In fact it maintains its alignment for a further 250 yards before it is lost and it seems more than likely that it originally ended at the end of a steep north-south valley at about this point (68378678).

In the same way some modifications are necessary to the accepted line of the dyke between Mongewell and Nuffield. The break in the line given by the Ordnance Survey between 62238783 and 62358781 is not a true one and the same applies to that given between 64198737 and 64228736 while a more convincing gap occurs to the east between 64258735 and 64378734. At Nuffield the earthwork leaves its straight alignment and turns to the south through three sides of a square. Purely as a term of convenience this feature will be referred to in this paper as a 'salient'. Only the south side of this feature and a short length of its east side have still escaped levelling by the plough but its line throughout was clearly mapped in the 19th century. On the other hand what seems to be a similar feature at 658872 is merely the enclosure bank for a wood and is secondary to the dyke.

The claims of five shorter breaks in the line to be regarded as original 'entrances' should also be considered before any general discussion of the ditch is offered. Taking these from west to east, the first is the so-called Cart Gap at 63038770. This break has been particularly noted in a recent discussion of the line of the Icknield Way[7] but is not an ancient feature. On the other hand the break at which the accepted line of the track crosses the dyke at 63608758 is almost certainly an original feature though its claims are now somewhat confused by the metalling of the track at this point and by disturbances caused in particular by the laying of mains. Even so a holloway does still survive in the overgrown east verge of the present road. Though this has always been confidently asserted to be an original entrance, the metalling

7 'Viatores', *Roman Roads in the South East Midlands*, London, 1964, 54.

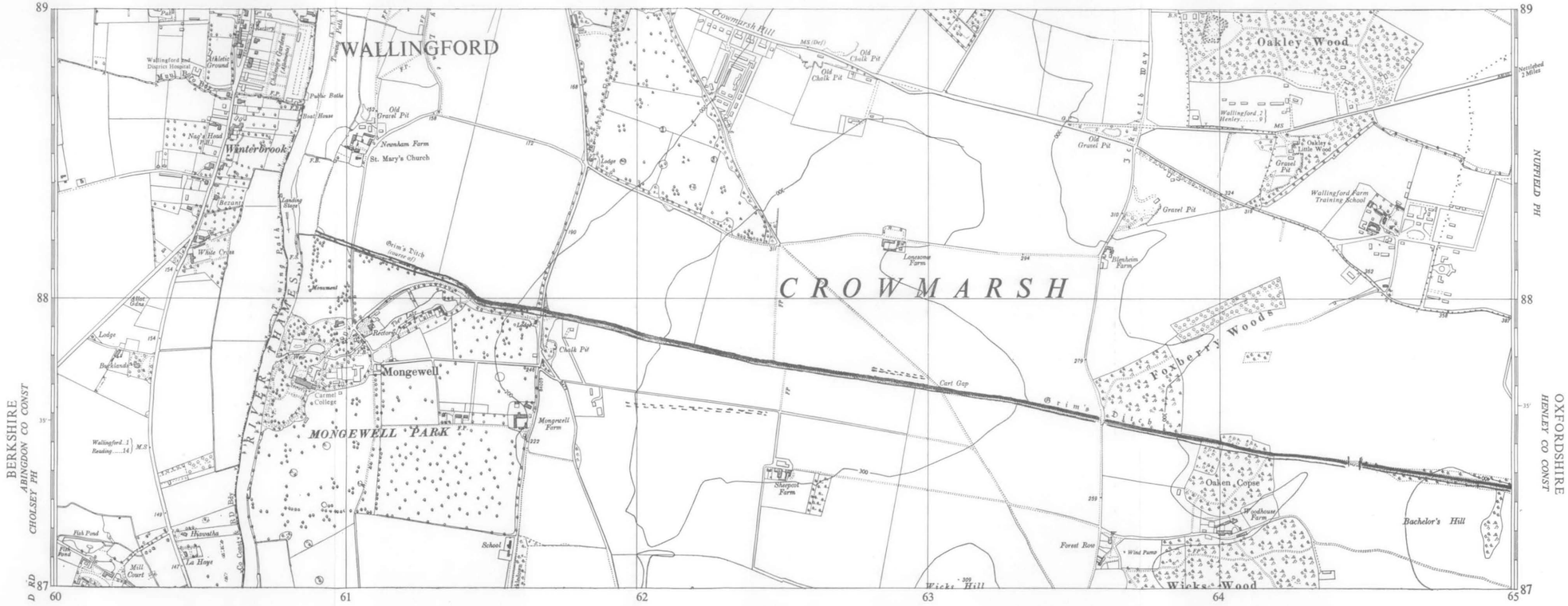


FIG. 2

The detailed course of the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch. Base map reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, Crown Copyright reserved.

of the central trackway really puts the matter beyond absolute proof. Similarly the gap at 65808720 is very likely to be an original feature though the nature of the ground suggests that this was left to accommodate a stream or area of marsh rather than a trackway. Crawford recorded another original entrance in the south west corner of the 'salient' at Nuffield. Ploughing since the date of his paper makes further comment on this impossible. Finally a gap occurs at the point where the line reverts to an east-west alignment at 67498725. Here the east side of the salient runs on to the north a few yards beyond the end of the dyke running on to Hayden farm while the latter stops about 20 yards short of it. The dyke faces unambiguously south.

Its predilection for straight alignments has already been seen and so have its probable ends to east and west. The actual line selected between Mongewell and the Icknield Way follows relatively high ground and appears to be 'false crested' when viewed from the area to the south. Thus it would be a visible barrier to movement over the lower ground between the Thames and the Chiltern escarpment. To the east the line seems to be more of a boundary following very approximately the line of a marked valley which runs between the trackway and the crest of the ridge at Nuffield. At different points the dyke occupies either side and even the bottom of this valley. The 'salient' at Nuffield itself occupies the level crest of the ridge and to the east the dyke takes up an alignment to the north of that initially adopted probably to skirt the head of a north-south valley at 678868. A slight wavering from the straight alignment occurs at several points between Mongewell and Nuffield and can best be explained if we infer sighting points on the prominent crests at 62108785 and 66658707. In this case the variations in the line would be at the only points from which even these prominent positions could not be seen.

In geological terms the dyke shows a preference for no one type of subsoil. Thus it runs indifferently across belts of chalk, valley and plateau gravel and clay with flints. This latter is of the greater significance since the ditch appears to be blocking or controlling a line of communication upon the Chiltern clayland which would be unthinkable without some degree of land clearance, and unnecessary without a corresponding degree of settlement. The dyke, blocking as it does movement both along the Chilterns and along the Icknield Way, argues a focal area to the north east.

Despite these general considerations there is little that can be said of the structure of the dyke. As it survives the rampart may stand up to 10 feet above the bottom of the ditch but for most of its length its original profile is a matter for speculation. Fortunately it has been twice sectioned. In 1925 Leeds[8] recorded that a section at 63438762 'had revealed a ditch continuing the

[8] *Report of the Congress of Archaeological Societies*, London, 1925, 26.

slope of the exposed rampart to a depth equal to a height of 13 feet vertical to the top of the rampart'. Whether this account implies an originally continuous glacis slope is uncertain and could hardly be otherwise without excavation also of the rampart. Secondly, a section through the denuded rampart at 620878 was recorded in 1959.[9] Here the disturbed material of the rampart had spread over a width of 30 feet and showed no trace of any revettment or other structure. Neither in this section nor in a partial section exposed by erosion at 66048715 was there any trace of a turf line and the nature of the underlying topsoil in each case suggested earlier ploughing.

Finally, a crop mark perhaps of a second ditch was seen from the ground running parallel to the main earthwork a short distance to its north at a point a little west of Cart Gap. More recent crops have not been suitable for showing such features and this demands further investigation. Similarly traces of a ploughed-down ditch apparently facing south have been noted between 61908762 and 62428760 running parallel to the main earthwork and 210 yards to its south. Its nature too is uncertain.

NARROWER INTERPRETATIONS

It has already been argued that the dyke never extended as far east as Henley. It need only be added that since it also faces south it can hardly be interpreted as forming a huge promontory fort with the help of the river. The area this would enclose is in any case notably barren of finds of any date save along the Thames itself.

The view, originally Plot's, that the Mongewell and Streatley Ditches together form a barrier against movement up the Thames valley is hardly more satisfactory. In the first place the two systems face in opposite directions and this is certainly not merely for ease of construction where spoil is thrown on the downhill side of the ditch.

In the same way it must be remembered that the two dykes meet the river at points fully five miles apart and that between them lies the important river crossing at Streatley. If we also bear in mind the river crossing at Pangbourne, commanded by the fort at Bozedown, we are left with no barrier at all. Simply by crossing the river at Streatley both earthworks can be avoided. Again the two main earthworks are typologically distinct. The course of the Mongewell Ditch is rigidly rectilinear, that of the Streatley dykes is erratic. The ditch of the main Streatley dyke is notably wider than that at Mongewell. The former most resemble the Froxfield Entrenchments in Hampshire for which a post-Roman date is favoured.[10]

[9] H. Case and D. Sturdy, *Oxoniensia*, XXIV (1959), 99.

[10] J. P. Williams Freeman, *Field Archaeology as Illustrated by Hampshire*, London, 1915, 286 ff. and 374 ff.

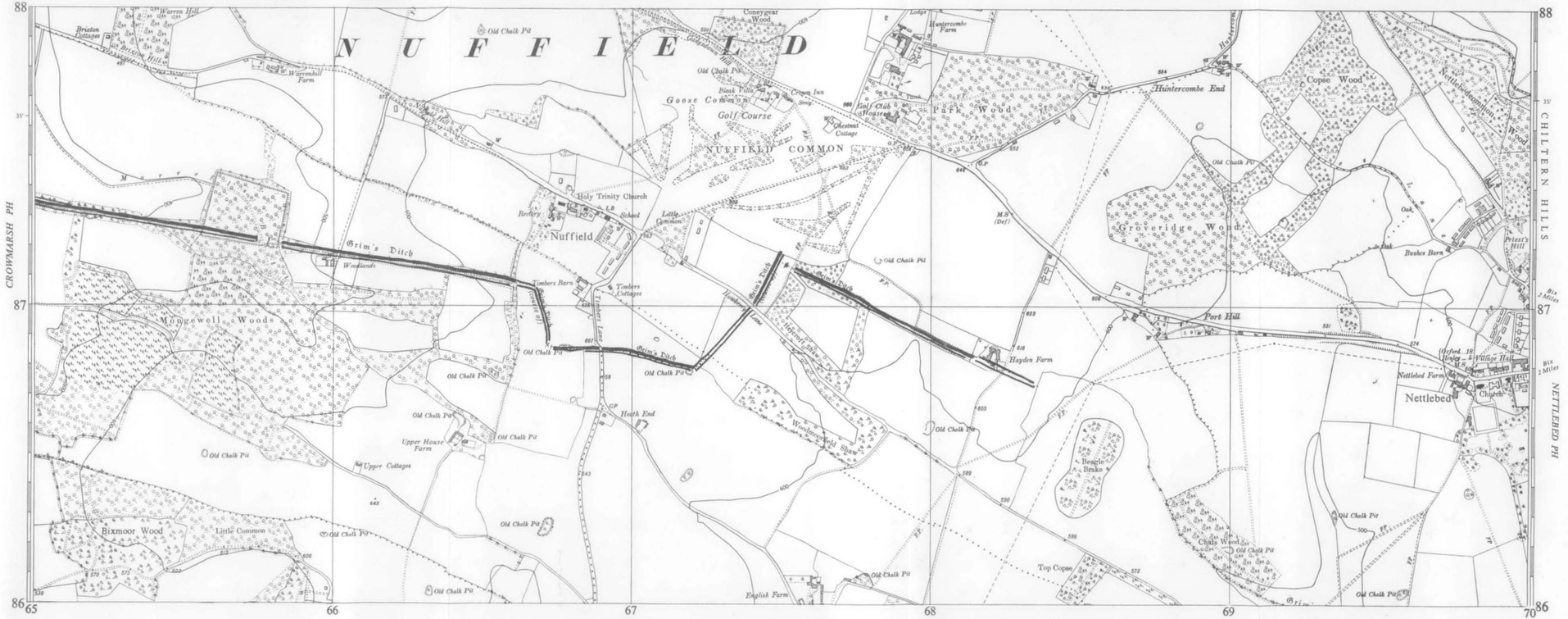


FIG. 3
The detailed course of the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch. Base map reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, Crown Copyright reserved.

In fact O'Neill[11] advanced a highly plausible explanation for the Streatley Ditches that in no way involves the Mongewell example. He argued that the former were boundaries of the 5th or 6th centuries A.D. covering the Silchester area from an approach from the north. They controlled the ridgeway south-east from Aldworth and the Roman road south from Dorchester. Thus they were to be grouped with the earthworks on Greenham and Cookham Commons near Newbury[12] and the Grims Bank complex at Padworth.[13] In fact Grims Bank itself controls the Silchester to Dorchester road further to the south.

There is now one piece of field evidence to support this dating and this restrictive interpretation. Though the Roman road between Streatley and Padworth seems entirely to have disappeared a plausible sighting station for a new alignment would be the area of higher ground between Streatley and Basildon. If we produce the known Britwell to Streatley alignment southwards for only ¾ mile it meets one of the Streatley Ditches at a change in its line. Though much disturbed by holloways radiating from this point there seems to have been an original entrance where the road and earthwork would meet. This would only be explicable by the prior existence of the road, and as O'Neill remarks an earthwork controlling an important road in this way would be unlikely to be of an early date.

O'Neill's interpretation of course omits the Mongewell Ditch as irrelevant. One further piece of evidence, however, should be introduced if only to be dismissed. A note appended to a map in Reading Museum records the finding in 1937 of '16 ?Anglo Saxon skeletons' on the line of the earthwork at 62078784. Unfortunately, the vicinity of the find spot is so densely overgrown that this cemetery can no longer be precisely located. Nor do we know the true relationship of the cemetery and the dyke or the evidence, if any, from which the skeletons were dated. This being so it may even be that the skeletons were dated by the finder's *a priori* assumption of the age of the dyke.

### WIDER INTERPRETATIONS

Each of these interpretations is closely wedded to the grouping of dykes initially adopted. Therefore, if the argument in the previous section is accepted that the Streatley Ditches are distinct from that at Mongewell, and thus that the latter is probably not Saxon, the arguments of Hughes and Wheeler already lose some of their force. Dyer has argued that the Berkhamstead Ditch included by both of them is typologically distinct from and later than the other Chiltern dykes. Similarly he has urged the same pre-

[11] B. St.J. O'Neill, *Antiquity*, XVIII, 113 ff.
[12] B. St.J. O'Neill and H. Peake, *Arch. J.*, C, 177 ff.
[13] B. St.J. O'Neill, *Antiquity*, XVII, 188 ff. cf. R. Gilyard Beer, *Berks A.J.*, LIV, 56 ff.

Roman date for the Tring and Prince's Risborough Ditches as he has for the newly discovered earthworks at Pitstone. In the same way unpublished excavation has shown the Pinner Ditch, particularly relied upon by Wheeler, to be of a pre-Roman date.[14] Finally, Dyer has argued that Hughes took the Tring and Prince's Risborough Ditches as facing the wrong way and so argued from a layout viewed inside out. It is submitted that so little survives of their original materials that the arguments cannot remain intact.

The third view, that of Dyer, requires more attention. As mentioned earlier he confines his attention to the Chiltern Ditches though he gives no reason for the exclusion of the Mongewell example. We must therefore repair the omission by examining the characteristics of these earthworks to decide whether the connection made by Crawford and Wheeler was a valid one. The field characteristics of the Mongewell Ditch have already been discussed at length and so we need only comment on the Chiltern dykes.

Like the Mongewell Ditch it is hard to regard these as other than boundary earthworks. Indeed, at certain points the rampart is placed on the downhill side of the ditch simply for ease of construction. In the same way they do not end at impassable natural barriers; in fact the Mongewell Ditch ends at the point where it emerges briefly from the heavier clay.

Just as it has been argued that the Mongewell Ditch is best explained in a context where the clayland of the Chilterns was settled, the ditches treated by Dyer seem to enclose the very areas occupied. All of them enclose wide areas almost wholly of clay and all but one of them run entirely upon clay. It is impossible not to agree with Wheeler that while their lines are only explicable in detail by the contours, their existence is only explicable by surface geology.

Dyer lays emphasis on the roughly scallop-shaped area which each of the Chiltern Ditches encloses but perhaps does not lay enough weight on the fact that at least the principal dykes, those at Tring and Prince's Risborough, are composed entirely of straight alignments, most of them a full two miles in length. Other similarities on a lesser scale can also be shown. The short length of earthwork north of Great Missenden seems on a small scale to cut off movement up one side of a former river valley, just as we have seen with the Mongewell example. Again, at Great Hampden on the Prince's Risborough Ditch a gap accepted as an original feature occurs in a right angle bend in the line. This type of ' entrance ' is reminiscent of two of the original gaps noted in the Mongewell Ditch at Nuffield. More doubtfully the Pitstone dyke is supplemented for a length by a second dyke running parallel at a distance.

[14] Unpublished excavation by members of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society under the aegis of Professor W. F. Grimes. To avoid anticipating the excavator's conclusions no further discussion of this earthwork will be offered here.

This is similar to the curious features noted on both sides of the Mongewell Ditch.

It is submitted that almost every one of these shared features is absent on the remaining dykes adopted by Wheeler and Crawford. These features argue a common origin for these dykes, and a distinct origin for most if not all of the others.

DATING AND CONTEXT

If the argument that links the Mongewell and the Chiltern Ditches is accepted then we must consider the evidence for the dating of each element within the group, or, in a loose sense, system.

Apart from the possibly Saxon skeletons at Mongewell the only find recorded from the Oxfordshire Ditch is a coin of Allen's British A, dateable to the beginning of the 1st century B.C.[15] Unfortunately, nothing is known of the context of this find and so as evidence it is tempting but inadmissible. Nor are any finds recorded from useful contexts on the Chiltern Ditches. Dyer refers to surface sherds of ' Iron Age Second A ' on the line of one earthwork at Aldbury Nowers, but in that position they are no help as dating evidence.

The direct dating for the Chiltern Ditches otherwise rests on the relations of two earthworks to early roads. In the first case a short length of earthwork at Gryme's Dell is cut by the agger of a Roman road. Unfortunately this earthwork has been traced only for a very short distance and is not an integral part of the system as we know it at present. The second case is more complicated. Dyer tells us that one of the newly discovered earthworks at Pitstone is cut by a ' late Iron Age holloway '. Clearly this is crucial not only to any general dating but also to the vexed question of cultural context. However, one wonders if the evidence is not a little vaguer than his paper implies; indeed, this dating for the trackway is presented as a hypothesis in the main report on the site.[16] More generally the track is presented as a length of the ' Romanised Icknield Way '[17] but the evidence for this too is open to some debate. What is clear is that the holloway is in an integral relationship with a complex of lynchets in the vicinity. In this way even if we suspend judgment on the evidence for Roman engineering of an earlier land route we may safely infer that the track will not be of a post Roman date. Otherwise the only direct dating evidence for any of these ditches is this same earthwork's avoidance of a group of conspicuous flint mines.

We can, to some extent, make up for the lack of direct dating evidence by considering carefully the affinities of these earthworks. In particular in-

[15] D. F. Allen in S. S. Frere (ed.), *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain*, London, 1961, 175.
[16] J. Dyer, *Rec. Bucks.*, XVII, 49 ff.
[17] ' Viatores ', op. cit., 56 ff.

vestigation of the Chichester Entrenchments[18] since Dyer wrote in 1963 has provided detailed material on typology from which a little cautious progress can be made.

Dyer drew a distinction between curving contour dykes of pre-Belgic origin and specifically ' Belgic ' rectilinear earthworks. In fact, it now seems that the relationship of earthwork to contours is the relevant criterion alone. Thus the earliest phase at Chichester is represented by a ' contour dyke ' which makes striking use of straight alignments. In any case it is equally arguable that the Chiltern dykes which are true ' contour dykes ' are distinct from more curved dykes in their use of lengthy straight alignments. If it is really this use of straight alignments which is the characteristic of the system, we can see parallels at Colchester[19] and Chichester in the century up to the Roman invasion.

The curious ' salient ' at Mongewell is identical in all but scale with an arrangement previously thought to be unique in the earliest layout at Chichester. This, too, has an entrance in one corner and may have covered the junction of two trackways, just as Crawford suggested of the Mongewell example. Again a distinctive feature of the Iron Age layouts at Chichester, Colchester and Prae Wood[20] is the siting of entrances in right angle bends in the earthwork. This feature has already been noted in the Chiltern system at Great Hampden. In fact the repeated use of such angles is a distinctive feature of the layout at Chichester. A final Iron Age characteristic found at Chichester, Colchester, Pitstone and possibly Mongewell may be the use of parallel dykes with an interval of open ground between them.

If we can now accept that there is some body of evidence to favour a context for all these dykes in the later part of the pre-Roman Iron Age, we should turn to the final question of cultural context.

Dyer favours a context for the Chiltern dykes in the pre-Belgic Iron Age and sees the hillforts outside the layouts to their north as a reaction to a stronger rival to the south and as an attempt to win control over the natural corridor represented by the Icknield Way. Conversely, some connection must have existed between the dykes and those forts on the south-facing spurs of the Chilterns. This interpretation cannot be extended as it stands to cover the twelve miles of country between Mongewell and Prince's Risborough simply because the only forts within this region are ones related purely to the Thames valley to the south. It may therefore be of profit to look closer at the merits of this interpretation.

[18] Publication by the writer forthcoming in the final report on the excavation of the Roman site at Fishbourne.

[19] C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull, *Camulodunum*, Oxford, 1947, Pl. I.

[20] R. E. M. Wheeler, *Verulamium—a Belgic and Two Roman Cities*, Oxford, 1936, Pl. XI.

There is no real need to relate the forts to the north of the Chiltern system to the existence of the dykes themselves. Their siting on the line of the Icknield Way is perfectly explicable by that factor alone. In the same way there is no need like Dyer to see only Boddington, Bulpit Hill and Ivinghoe Beacon as forts directly concerned with a threat from the south. Ivinghoe is earlier than the other two forts and to place emphasis on these three less because of their own characteristics than because of their proximity to the three main dykes is surely in one way to beg the question. If we are to take these on their own merits as each at some time dominating an area of settlement their spacing would be better related to the distinct blocks of high ground created by the main north-south rivers. This arrangement could be paralleled in Sussex.[21]

In the same way almost all of the forts in the area south of the Chiltern escarpment can be related simply to the lighter soils of the valleys of the main rivers. In fact two of them, Desborough Castle and Church Hill, are some way outside the area of the dykes in the Wye valley. Otherwise only Cholesbury, to which further reference will be made, is in real proximity to the dykes.

It seems to be the case that while the forts are occupying either the chalk about the Icknield Way or the gravel of the valleys, the dykes are enclosing distinct areas of heavy clay where these sites are absent. The clue comes when Dyer compares the Chiltern Ditches to Dray's Ditches to the north-east.[22] These are early Iron Age territorial boundaries related to the pattern of hill forts and running between belts of clay to either side of the Icknield Way. The Chiltern Ditches really present the opposite picture. The interpretation of Dray's Ditches depends on taking the claylands as an impassable barrier, while the former enclose large areas of the heavier soil and rarely leave it for lighter gravel or chalk. Surely in fact the dykes and the hill forts represent two distinct settlement patterns which in their nature are all but mutually exclusive. This Dyer does not sufficiently recognize when he takes the relation of dykes to contours as the determining factor in their layout. In the same way the Chiltern forts largely control movement along the Icknield Way and so to the areas to the north-east and south-west. The 'scallops' enclosed by the Chiltern Ditches on the other hand are left open to an approach northwards from the Thames valley on to the heavier soils. The Mongewell Ditch controls this at the one point where all movement is easy and where the two approaches impinge upon one another.

It has been argued that both the Mongewell Ditch and the Chiltern

[21] E. C. Curwen, *Archaeology of Sussex*, 2nd ed., London, 1954, 236–7. Can we add to the forts considered there the clifftop sites at Castle Hill, Seaford Head and Belle Tout?

[22] J. Dyer, *Ant. J.*, XLI, 32 ff.

Ditches are above all boundaries. It is a curious rivalry that provokes large forts from one party and meagre boundary earthworks of this sort from the other. Surely a more convincing picture emerges if we here distinguish, with Professor Clark, light soils cleared for tillage and for sheep, and clays bearing forest for raising pigs and cattle, which Strabo specifically mentions for Britain towards the end of the Iron Age.[23] If we do indeed have two adjacent and yet mutually exclusive settlement patterns in the Chilterns the dykes can excellently fulfil their function as boundaries. In this case they would fit a context which the second form of settlement was started on the clays of a region whose lighter soils alone had been used and one in which the two patterns then continue side by side.

The conscious avoidance of occupied areas hints at small-scale immigration rather than aggressive invasion. The same may be said of the boundary character of the dykes and the deliberately limited area that each dyke encloses. Thus we may have reservations at the idea of the dykes as one overall system, all contemporary and part of a unified design. Their limited nature may equally be some explanation of the absence of further dykes between Mongewell and Prince's Risborough. Another reason is probably the relatively small area of available clayland between these points.

Argument from the nature of the dykes cannot satisfactorily take us further. However, it has been argued that though a pre-Roman date is demanded, the context urged by Dyer is open to question. It was suggested that the Mongewell and Chiltern Ditches are typologically related to other linear earthworks of the latter part of the Iron Age and that the ' contour ' nature of the Chiltern earthworks might argue a relatively early date within this range. It is no longer narrowly maintained that dykes of this period must always be associated with oppida; their purpose is as much territorial as defensive. Perhaps the Grim's Ditches near Woodstock are some illustration of this.[24]

As Dyer made clear the mature tribal pattern of the period provides no obvious context. He rightly rejects the view that the Chiltern Ditches are the product of late Catuvellaunian expansion, a view that can hardly encompass the Mongewell Ditch and which would do violence to the nature of the dykes discussed above. One other context does now suggest itself.

Professor Hawkes has recently suggested[25] that the first ' Belgic ' immigration is reflected not by the classic materials from Aylesford and Swarling but by early waves of imported Gallo-Belgic coinage of the 2nd century B.C. The

[23] Strabo, *Geog.*, IV, 5, 2; cited by J. G. D. Clark in *Antiquity*, XXI (1947), 122-36.
[24] D. B. Harden, *Oxoniensia*, II (1937), 74 ff. and N. Thomas, *Oxoniensia*, XXII (1957), 11 ff.
[25] C. F. C. Hawkes, *Antiquity*, XLII (1968), 6 ff.

distribution of the first two waves at any rate, Gallo-Belgic A and B, centres upon the Thames and suggests some penetration into the hinterland including the Chilterns. There they are found in the very area occupied by the dykes and devoid of hillforts and other early settlement sites.

However, this raises still further problems. Professor Hawkes points out that these settlers cannot be represented only by coins but that it is possible that other material they were using is indistinguishable from that of strictly indigenous character. At present we have almost solely coins from this area and no other means of recognizing the intrusive occupation sites that might be associated with the Chiltern and the Mongewell Ditches.

On the other hand we need not end on a note of total despair. The fort at Cholesbury[26] has already been mentioned as anomalous both in its siting on the claylands and in its proximity to the Tring Ditch. The excavation (1932) obtained no finds from the defences, but showed their form to be essentially similar to those of the much larger Belgic fort at Wheathampstead: two sloped ramparts with a V-shaped ditch between. Though the second phase on the site is recognizably Belgic the earliest pottery was described as of La Tene II character, not necessarily earlier than the 2nd century B.C. In date it could even be little if at all earlier than 'Belgic' types, but was considered to be 'entirely non-Belgic' and to represent a 'pre-Belgic and distinctively native tradition'. In the light of the new views summarized above, can this site provide the starting point for further investigation of the whole complex of dykes both on the Chilterns and in South Oxfordshire?

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[26] D. Kimball, *J. Brit. Arch. Assn.*, XXXIX, 187 ff. The discussion of the pottery is that of Hawkes at p. 196 ff; defences, p. 201, note 1. One coin of Gallo Belgic B is known from Cholesbury.