

An Iron Age Enclosure at Hailey Wood, Lewknor

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SUMMARY

In March 1972 a previously unknown enclosure was found during clearing operations at Hailey Wood for the new Christmas Common diversion road (SU 739967). Subsequent excavation¹ revealed two shallow linear ditches to the north and south of the ring work. Within the enclosure a pit and several patches of burnt material were found, along with a large stone that lay approximately at the centre. Pottery evidence indicated a Late Iron Age date.

SITUATION

THE site is situated 820 ft. above sea level on the southern edge of the Chiltern escarpment ridge and overlooks the head of the Turville Valley (see Site 13, Fig. 1, p. 147). One mile to the north-west the land drops 400 ft. to the Chiltern Plateau where evidence of Iron Age settlement has been discovered at Watlington², Chinnor,³ Lewknor,⁴ and at Heath Farm (M.40, site 3, pp. 23-40).

The subsoil consists of Plateau Drift⁵ with Sarsen⁶ which caps the Clay-with-Flints and Chalk bedrock to a depth of over 6 m. below the site.

As the site lay within a heavily overgrown conifer plantation only three prominent features were visible. Two low concentric banks some 5-6 m. apart encircled an approximately central low mound. This mound later proved to be a large sarsen boulder (F3, Fig. 1) covered by turf. Any lesser features remained unnoticed in the undergrowth and were destroyed by the road before they could be accurately surveyed. During the plantation clearance the low concentric banks were also levelled leaving a shallow, almost circular, line of dark topsoil which represented the ditch, the upcast from which formed the banks (F4, Fig. 1).

¹ I am again indebted to Mr. A. Boarder who discovered the site and carried out a major portion of the excavation and recording. I am also very grateful to Mr. T. Champion of Southampton University for general advice, especially on the pottery, and also to Mr. J. Hazelden of the Soil Survey of England and Wales who gave both time and advice on geological aspects. Mrs. J. M. Chambers kindly typed out the text.

² H. J. Case, *Oxoniensia*, xxiii (1958), 139-41. This was a burial of the first half of the 1st century A.D.

³ P. Crossley-Holland, *Oxoniensia*, vii (1942), 108-9. Richardson and Young, *Ant. J.*, xxxi (1951), 132-48. A settlement possibly deserted around the mid 3rd century B.C.

⁴ *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 100-1. The Knapp, Lewknor, produced evidence of Early Iron Age settlement with pottery similar to that from Chinnor (3, above). See also C. Saunders, 'The Pre-Belgic Iron Age in the Central and Western Chilterns', *Arch. J.*, cxxviii (1971), 1-30.

⁵ J. L. Loveday, 'Plateau Deposits of the Southern Chiltern Hills', *Proc. Geol. Assn.*, 73 (1962), 83.

⁶ R. J. Small *et al.*, *The Sarsen Stones of the Marlborough Downs and Their Geomorphological Implications*. Southampton Research Series in Geography, No. 4, June 1967.

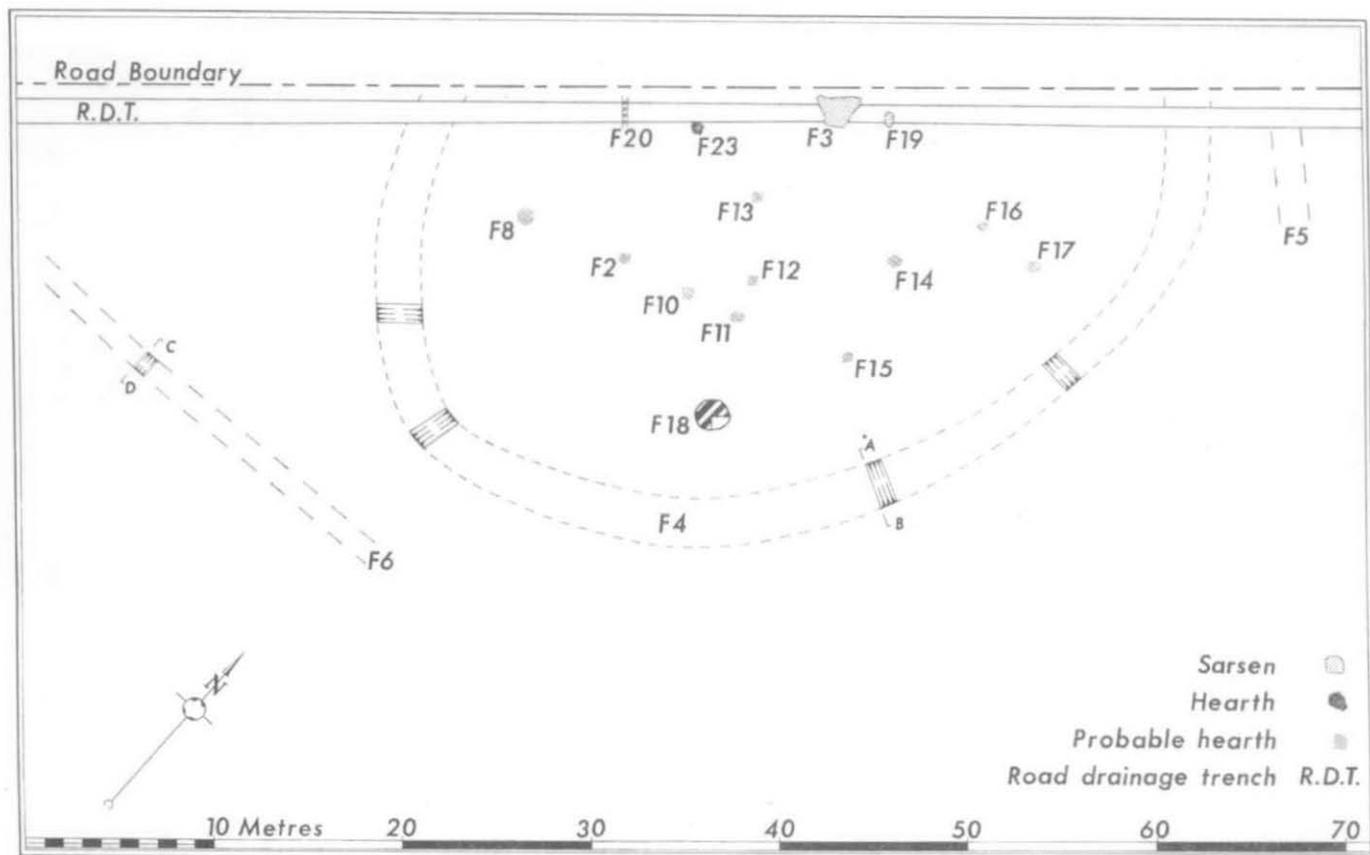


FIG. 1
Hailey Wood (Site 14) : Site plan.

THE EXCAVATION

This site merited a more thorough investigation than the pressure of motor-way archaeology unfortunately allowed. After clearance of the plantation, some 2,400 sq. m. of subsoil were mechanically stripped to reveal any submerged features, removing between 20 and 30 cm. of topsoil. This revealed that to the north of the circular enclosure lay a shallow linear ditch 1.8 m. wide (F5), the fill of which had no occupation material. It is not known if this ditch continued northwards. A second linear ditch (F6, Fig. 1, Section, Fig. 2), slightly deeper at 50 cm. than F5, ran approximately E.-W. but tailed off and ended at the centre of the new diversion road. The enclosure measured approximately 41 m. N.-S. internally. The ditch was V-sectioned (Section A-B, Fig. 2), and 1-1.2 m. deep in each of the four sections cut. The fill was of flint-laden red-brown loamy clay that gradually changed to brown loam nearer the top. Except for a single sherd of pottery from the ditch bottom, every section appeared sterile and the impression was that it had filled naturally.

The site lay below the hill crest and the surface of the subsoil over the last two millennia had drifted downhill. Consequently, after removing several centimetres of what appeared to be the subsoil surface, within the ditched enclosure eleven shallow patches of burnt material (F7-17) and one large pit (F18) were revealed.

F7-17 were all between 50-100 cm. in diameter, 10-20 cm. deep and contained a high proportion of charcoal, some ash, small burnt sarsen fragments

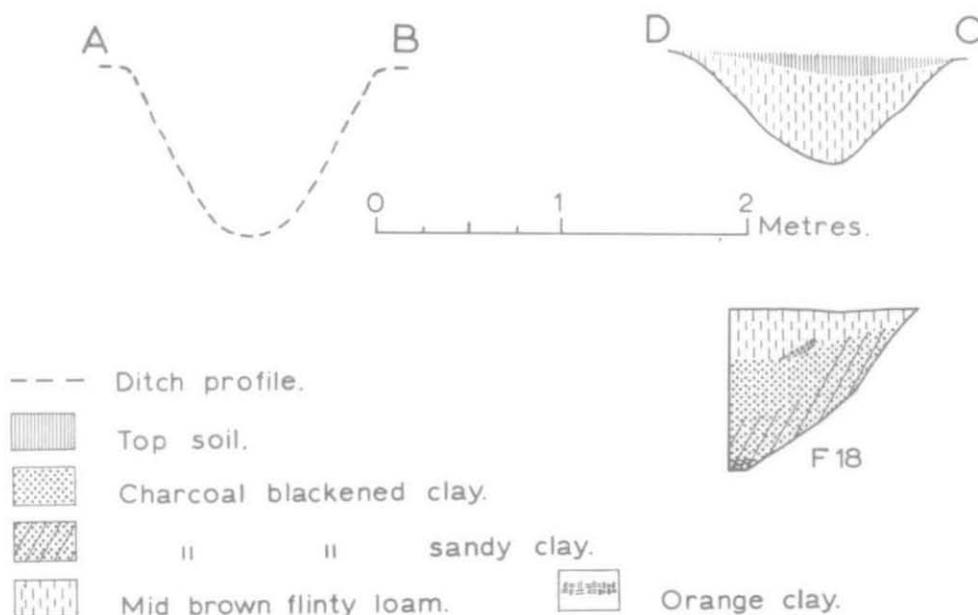


FIG. 2

Hailey Wood (Site 14) : Section drawings.

and some pottery, usually with sherds from several very incomplete vessels represented in each feature. F9 contained the most pottery, 78 sherds, many of which were almost certainly from one vessel.

F18 was a large pit, 2 m. in diameter by 1 m. deep, underneath 10 cm. of subsoil surface drift. Only one quadrant was excavated (FIG. 2), which revealed the fill as mainly charcoal with some burnt stone and clay. From this a quantity of pottery and a few fragments of a horse jaw including one tooth in a friable state were recovered. F23, a small hearth, showed as a heavily burnt patch on which lay several sherds of pottery. The large sarsen (F3) to the centre of the enclosure was deeply embedded in the subsoil and appeared typical of those that occur naturally along this ridge, as did a 1 m. long ovoid sarsen boulder, F19, exposed by the roadway drainage trench, lying on its side on the subsoil.

A narrow linear soil-filled trough (F20) some 25 cm. deep was emptied. Along the bottom four post-holes, each some 7 × 10 cm. and almost rectangular, had been set in line with about 65 cm. between centres. Two other small post-holes were also located (P5-6). The difficulty of detecting further features was hampered by the irregular darkening of the subsoil by tree root disturbance.

FINDS

THE POTTERY

Several sherds of Iron Age and two of Medieval pottery lay scattered over the site underneath the topsoil. The remainder of the pottery recovered represented many Iron Age vessels, and where their forms were visible they were mainly globular and ovoid jars and bowls. The vessels appeared to have borne little decoration and of those that did, four small sherds bore incised, combed lines (FIG. 3, no. 1). This pottery is comparable to the bulk of the later phase from Heath Farm (M.40, site 3, pp. 35-39), though the wares found at Hailey Wood were slightly coarser and more heavily gritted. The later phase at Heath Farm may have lasted into the 1st century A.D.

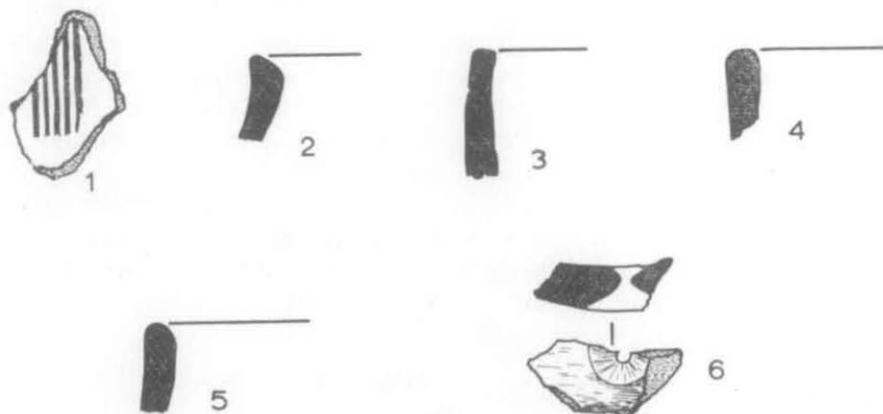


FIG. 3
Pottery. (1/4).

Descriptions (FIG. 3)

- 1). Body sherd. Coarse sandy fabric. Outer face dark brown, rough, with incised combed decoration; inner face rough and black; section black. From F18.
- 2). Rim sherd. Gritty, coarse sandy fabric. Outer and inner faces black and rough; Section black. From F18.
- 3). Rim sherd. Soft, coarse sandy fabric. Outer face grey/black and moderately smooth; inner face grey/black, rough and irregular; section grey/black. From F18.
- 4). Rim sherd. Sandy fabric. Outer face moderately smooth and black; inner face rough and black; section black. From F18.
- 5). Rim sherd. Coarse sandy fabric. Outer face brown/grey and slightly burnished; inner face dark grey and rough; section grey. From F18.
- 6). Body sherd. Coarse sandy fabric. Outer face moderately smooth, hard and black, 1 mm. thick over a 1 mm. thickness of soft, red fabric which results from the firing; inner face black, hard and moderately rough; section dark grey. From F18.

A hole had been drilled through this sherd after firing, cut two-thirds from the exterior and one-third from the interior. The vessel must have been wide mouthed, i.e. a cup or bowl, to allow drilling from the inside, perhaps to take a plug, or for suspension.

INTERPRETATION

This enclosure (F4) is irregular in shape and size and the ditch showed a lack of uniformity in digging similar to those excavated at Stanton Harcourt,⁷ and it may in fact be ovoid.⁸

Whether this enclosure is the south end of a complex centred further north is not known. It is unusually large for both circular or less regularly planned building enclosures.⁹ That the upcast was thrown to either side of the ditch is also unusual¹⁰ and probably indicates hasty construction. From the low profile of the large sarsen, and its off-centre position, any association between it and the enclosure is doubtful.

The twelve small patches of burnt material (F7-17), and F23, suggest open fires and the lack of extensive heat discoloration of F7-17 indicates that these were small and short-lived. The large pit (F18) may originally have been a storage pit, later filled with rubbish.

The enclosure ditch contained no occupational debris, which indicates that the occupation produced only small quantities of refuse, no more than enough to fill F18, and that the total occupation time was short. This brevity is understandable as the site is geographically unattractive lying almost 400 ft. above the water table and nearly 1 mile from the spring line. The woodland may at this time have contained beech and oak¹¹ as this was certainly so in 1279.¹² This evidence collectively suggests that the enclosure may have been for the infrequent seasonal use of livestock, especially swineherds bringing pigs up from the settlements on the plain to feed on the mast during late summer and autumn, similar to the later Saxon custom. The randomly placed fires may have been located

⁷ A. Hamlin, *Oxoniensia*, xxviii (1963), 1-19.

⁸ A. Williams, *Oxoniensia*, xvi (1951), 5-22.

⁹ W. P. D. Stebbing, *Arch. Cant.*, xlvi (1934), 207-8. Here a hearth and hut were found within a circular ditched enclosure of comparable size.

¹⁰ H. J. Case, *Oxoniensia*, xxviii (1963), 19-53.

¹¹ A. G. Tansley, *Britain's Green Mantle* (1949).

¹² V.C.H., *Oxon.*, viii, 106.

in or to the exterior of the huts or shelters employed and of these there are no remains. Each fire may also represent a new shelter, with rebuildings in a position away from previous shelters decayed beyond repair. The size of the enclosure suggests that it enclosed more than one structure.

The shallow trough with four stake-holes along its bottom (F20) may represent part of a hut or a fence line, whilst the linear ditch (F6) may or may not be contemporary with the enclosure. Ditch F5 may have been earlier or later but in all probability was comparatively modern in date.

It is important to note that ditched enclosures of one form or another constituted a common denominator of Iron Age settlement in the Upper Thames Basin.¹³ The function of an enclosure ditch of such meagre proportions was obviously not for defence against martial forces. Such a ditch would, in conjunction with a fence or filled with thorn bush and brambles, have afforded safeguard against beasts or intruders at night. Whether the Hailey Wood enclosure was dug intentionally for such protection, or considering its size, originally planned as a paddock for the night time protection of livestock, is so far unanswerable.

¹³ D. W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972), 11-21.