An Excavation of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch at North Leigh

By David Fine

INTRODUCTION

THE North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch encloses an area of twenty-two square miles north-west of Oxford, and is a discontinuous bank and ditch which has been recognized as an earthwork, crop mark or field boundary (the maximum known lengths of the Ditch are shown on FIG. 1). It bears some comparison both in construction, shape and date to the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch,[1] although the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch is generally more massive.

Following excavations by Haverfield (FIG. 1, E),[2] and fieldwork by Crawford,[3] excavations have centred upon the north-east sector with work by Harden upon the ditch itself (FIG. 1, A to E),[4] supported by excavations of the associated earthworks at Callow Hill (FIG. 1, F to H).[5] The last two references indicate a late Iron Age, immediately pre-Roman date for the ditch's construction with its disuse concurrent with Roman occupation of the area. This disproves Crawford's hypothesis[6] that the ditch was immediately post-Roman. At FIG. 1, E, Akeman Street crosses over the pre-existing ditch[7] whilst at Sites A and D occupation material immediately prior to the bank's construction was excavated. Harden concluded that the ditch's function was an anti-Roman defensive one,[8] whilst Harding suggested that the ditch's function was also defensive, but in a guerilla warfare context as a barrier to wheeled and mounted forces of neighbouring communities.[9]

Though this hypothesis is quite reasonable, the present known evidence also allows the theory that the ditch's function was boundary and political, and any small gaps could be interpreted as control points for the flow of goods and livestock. Due to the relatively large area enclosed, this latter theory would seem to be more plausible, although until further work is done both within the enclosed area and at the possible entrances (one is shown for the field survey map west of the excavation) any statements must be based upon surmise.

With this in mind, it is possible to suppose that a site such as Callow Hill may be a settlement site associated with the ditch, especially as they have similar earthworks[10] —with the settlement within the two north-south linear earthworks where there has

[1] J. Hinchliffe, 'Excavations at Grim's Ditch, Mongewell, 1974', *Oxoniensia*, XL (1975), 122–35; R. Bradley, 'The South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and its Significance', *Oxoniensia*, XXXII (1968), 1–13.
[2] F. S. Haverfield, communication to *Proc. Soc. Ant.*, XVII (1899), 333–5.
[3] O. G. S. Crawford, 'The North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch', *Antiquity*, IV, No. 15 (1930), 303.
[4] D. B. Harden, 'Excavations at Grim's Dyke, North Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, II (1937), 74–92.
[5] N. Thomas, 'Excavations at Callow Hill, Glympton and Stonesfield', *Oxoniensia*, XXII (1957), 11–54.
[6] Crawford, *op. cit.* note 3, 307.
[7] Harden, *op. cit.* note 4, 91.
[8] *Ibid.*, 91.
[9] D. W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972), 58.
[10] N. Thomas, *op. cit.* note 5, 11–44.

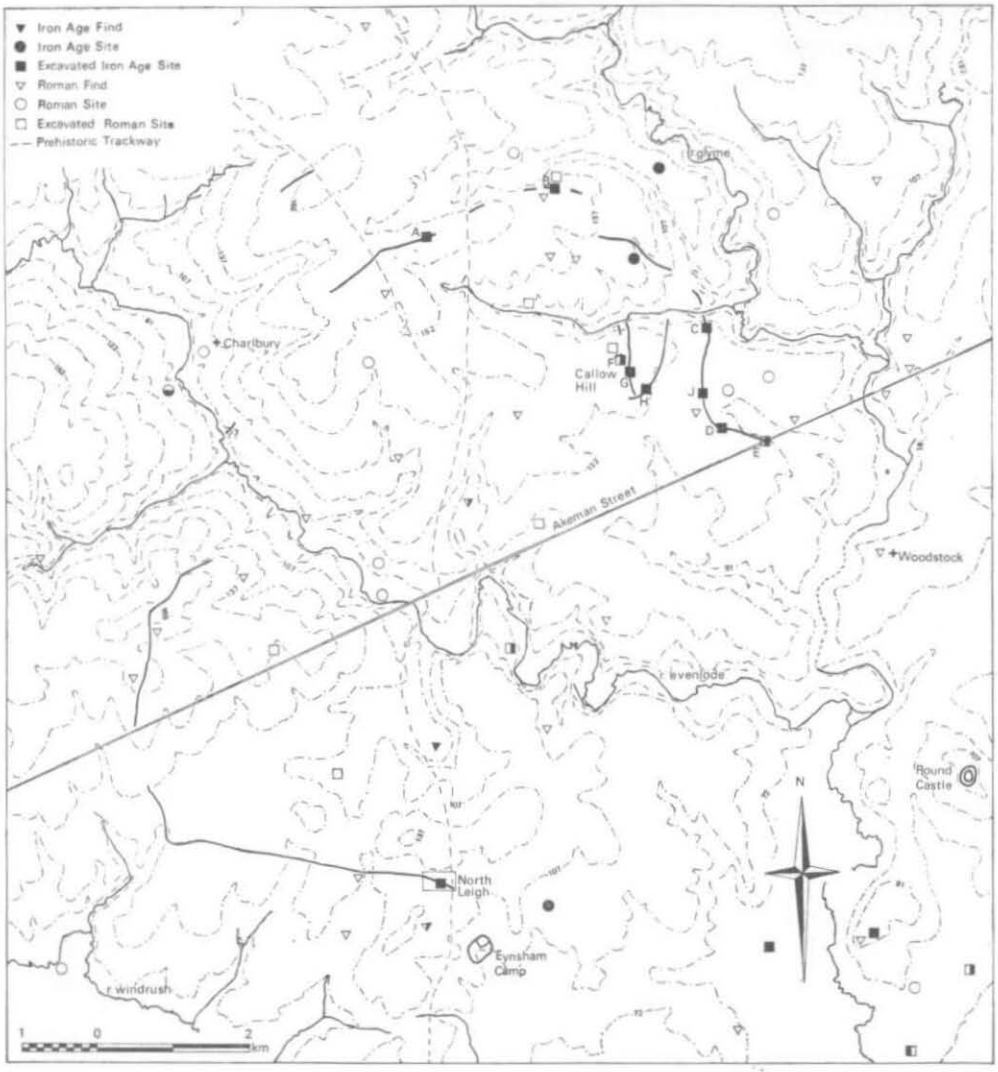

FIG. 1

been no excavation to date. It can also be seen that south of the Evenlode, the ditch does not follow any contours, and this is evidence of a boundary rather than defensive function. This was particularly evident within the area to be described, investigated in 1975, where the ditch runs along a clay valley, ignoring the limestone ridge to the north. Thus it can be postulated, and postulated only, that the ditch between the Evenlode and Glyme (which form the three sides of a triangle), and south of the Evenlode, is of different phases, if not dates, with the ditch south of the Evenlode possibly being constructed later as the area became more settled, and the original defensive purpose or alignment of the northern stretches became unnecessary. However, until further fieldwork is done, these ideas must remain unsubstantiated.

This is shown by the distribution of Iron Age and Roman finds and sites shown on FIG. 1 which appears to show no conclusive patterns in relation to the ditch and emphasizes the need to carry out further fieldwork in order to locate possible settlement sites of the ditch's builders.

THE EXCAVATION (OCCM PRN 10,627)

The Ditch at SP 38021240 has been cut at right angles by a feeder watermain from the recently constructed North Leigh reservoir to the Witney-Woodstock road. An excavation was undertaken by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit precisely along the pipeline prior to construction. The purpose of the excavation was to compare the ditch and bank construction with the previous excavations mentioned above, and the watching brief by M. Aston at FIG. 1, J (PRN 8910, 1972) where the ditch and bank profile concurred with the excavations of Harden and Thomas. As the excavation had the relative rarity of an Iron Age linear earthwork on clay, environmental evidence might have been recovered from waterlogged strata.

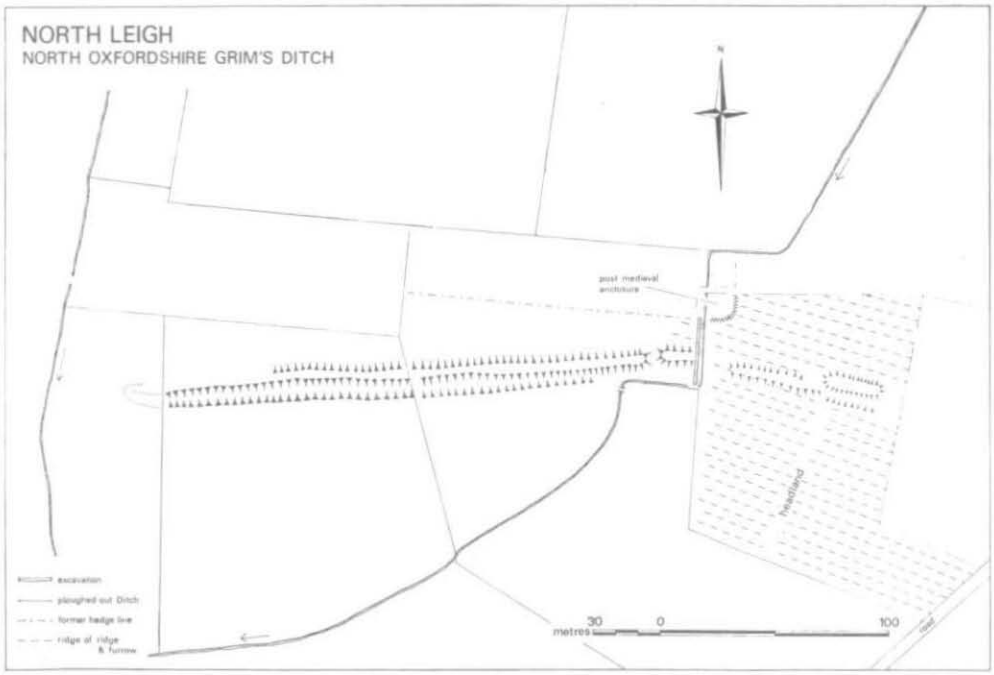

FIG. 2

Unfortunately, because of the complete absence of artefacts and ditch-associated features during excavation, as well as because the soil was too acidic for environmental remains (which would have had no chronological context anyway), the excavation provided little detailed evidence. Previous excavators have experienced a similar though less absolute lack of finds, and this may add weight to the comparison between the shape and composition of the banks and ditches found in the

previous excavations and in the present one. Also it would tend slightly to substantiate the theory of an unmanned boundary or guerilla warfare function, although the excavated area was very small.

The bank and ditch followed a similar profile to those previously excavated with a 1·5 m.–2·0 m. deep ditch whose upcast provided the material for a bank of the dump or mound type, separated from the ditch by a berm of about 4 m.

The details of individual layers are described (FIG. 3). Complete excavation of the ditch was made impossible by the presence of a culverted field stream running

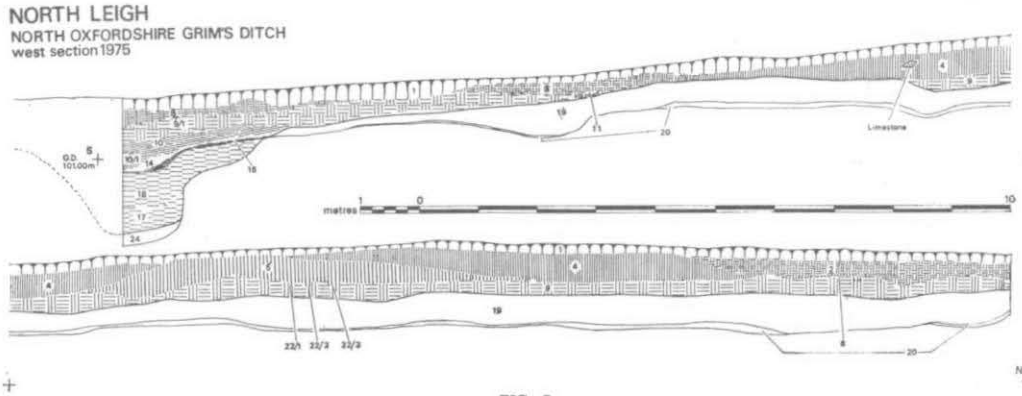

FIG. 3

LAYER DESCRIPTIONS

1, Turf and topsoil. 2, Medium brown clay subsoil. 3, Light brown clay subsoil. 4, Homogeneous yellow clay; bank material. 5, Dark brown clay soil; core of bank probably old ground surface over ditch. 6, Thin and irregular deposit of charcoal and burnt material, similar to 11, whose significance cannot be assessed due to the small area exposed. 8, Blue and yellow homogeneous clay, probably associated with the twentieth-century culverting of field stream. 9, Orange brown friable clay soil; old ground surface prior to bank construction. 9/1, Dark brown clay soil; up cast from nineteenth-century recut of field stream. 10, Medium grey clay, waterlogged and humic; silting up of ditch. 10/1, Dark grey clay, waterlogged and humic; silting up of ditch. 11, Thin and irregular deposit of charcoal and burnt material, whose significance cannot be assessed due to the small area exposed. 14, Bright yellow friable clay; silting of ditch. 15, Black friable clay, with humic content; silting of ditch. 16, Medium to dark grey/brown clay; possible secondary fill of the ditch. 17, Medium grey clay; possible primary fill of the ditch with 'slumping' of edges. 19, Homogeneous yellow clay; natural Oxford clay. 20, Blue/black clay with some pebbles; possible jurassic turf line. 22/1, 22/2, 22/3, Possible 'spade' marks, associated with deturfing of old ground surface prior to bank's construction.

along the ditch line at the point of excavation. However, the ditch profile was noted during the pipeline's construction and appears as a dashed line at the southern end of the section. Due to the lack of datable material any phases are difficult to place in a precise chronological order, but there are some features in the adjacent fields which help to place the phases found in the excavation (see field survey, FIG. 2).

The first phase above the natural Oxford clay (together with a possible jurassic turf line (FIG. 3, layers 19, 20 and 24)) would appear to be an old ground surface (layer 9) cut by the ditch whose upcast was used to produce a bank (layers 4 and 5). There was no turf line immediately above the old ground surface, and possible 'spade' marks (features 22/1, 22/2, 22/3) filled with material from the first deposition of the bank (layer 5), may result from cutting the sods, perhaps for use as a turf revetting for the bank. There was no evidence for palisade trenches etc., although these may have been ploughed out after the ditch fell into disuse, particularly along the top of the bank (see below). A fairly rapid refill of the lower part of the ditch

under dry conditions appears to have followed (layers 16 and 17), with no evidence for recuts. Thus the section is comparable to the sections excavated by Harden and Thomas and would suggest a short active first phase for the ditch. Since layers 16 and 17 were constantly waterlogged from the later field stream, evidence concerning the method of backfilling was missing. By comparison with sites five or more miles distant, the bank and ditch would appear to be of a late Iron Age construction.

In Roman times the immediate area seems to have been relatively unoccupied, as Roman artefacts have been found in surrounding areas, yet none have been found within the area shown on the field survey map. This statement should be conditioned by the need to do further fieldwalking, but the land itself is heavy clay and of a marginal nature.

The next phase was a probable change of the ditch from a dry to wet state, and the gradual silting up of the upper part of the ditch (FIG. 3, layers 10, 10/1, 14 and 15). This may be associated with the medieval ridge and furrow (PRN 10,628), which used the bank to the east of the excavation as a field boundary (FIG. 2), and may include the re-routing of a field stream into the ditch to cause the silting mentioned above. Medieval and post-medieval ploughing has removed the top of the bank to the areas immediately north and south (FIG. 3, layers 2 and 3) where several depressions at the bottom of layers 2 and 3 may represent ploughed out ridge and furrow. It is interesting to note that there are only limited traces of ridge and furrow in the field where the excavation took place whilst in the field to the east, the ridge and furrow is quite pronounced with a difference between ridge top and furrow bottom of over 30 cm. The easterly field has not been ploughed in living memory, whilst the westerly field was ploughed until 1950. The final phase would appear to be a recutting of the field stream associated with the enclosure period and is represented by a brick culvert to the west (probably early 19th-century and shown by the bridge symbol on the field survey, FIG. 2), and layer 9. Lastly the culvert immediately to the south of the excavation is post-1900, and layer 8 may be the spoil from this last operation prior to the insertion of the watermain.

CONCLUSION

The excavation at North Leigh provides a comparison to the features found by Harden, Haverfield and Thomas, although the lack of artefacts makes the link tenuous. Very little can be said from this excavation except about the date and form of Grim's Ditch. To obtain further information about its function, further work should concentrate upon the twenty-two square miles that it encloses, although any threatened ditch sections should be examined, with particular note to possible openings. Until this is accomplished no substantive statements concerning the area in the late Iron Age can be made.[11]

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[11] My thanks go to Mr. G. J. Webb, Common Farm, North Leigh, who allowed us to excavate: also to members of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, particularly R. A. Chambers, J. Christie, T. G. Hassall, D. Harrison, W. Lee, P. S. Page, M. Robinson, P. Roberts and C. Rollo.

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