

Thornbury, Binsey: A Probable Defensive Enclosure associated with Saint Frideswide

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SUMMARY

A large sub-oval earthwork enclosure at Binsey, associated with St. Margaret's chapel and its graveyard, is identified with Thornbiri ('thorny fortress'), named in the late 12th-century Life of St. Frideswide as one of her places of refuge. It was regarded as a holy spot from the 12th century onwards, and the canons of St. Frideswide's may have maintained a cell there. Until 18th-century changes in the road-pattern it lay directly on the main route between Eynsham and Oxford. Excavations in 1987 identified a series of boundary features. A ditch on the N.W. side, its fill containing material dated by a radiocarbon determination to the Roman or sub-Roman period, was either preceded or succeeded by a revetted rampart. On the S.W. side, the earliest identified ditch had an early Anglo-Saxon potsherd stratified under its primary fill. The earthwork seems to have remained conspicuous until the early 18th century, and is still defined by an eroded bank and field-ditch. It remains uncertain whether the original enclosure is of Iron Age or post-Roman date; it may possibly belong to the series of small Iron Age forts on terrace-edge and island sites on the Thames gravels. The stratified sherd, however, suggests that the ditch was being kept clean at some date in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The legend of Frideswide at Binsey, and the fact that it was an old-established possession of her monastery by the early 12th century, suggest a possibility that the earthwork may have been used during her life as an ancillary monastic enclosure or retreat-house.

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HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

The early 12th-century Life of St. Frideswide relates how the princess, fleeing from the lecherous King Algar, hid at Bampton in 'a wood called Binsey', where she worked

miraculous cures on a blind girl of Bampton, a young man of Seacourt and a demoniac fisherman. Although Binsey is in fact near Oxford, and nowhere near Bampton, the reference to its neighbour Seacourt suggests that the author had access to older material associating Frideswide with miracles in and around Binsey.¹

When Robert of Cricklade, prior of St. Frideswide's, came to re-write the Life of his monastery's founder-saint around 1160, the confusion perturbed him.² In his own version he resolved it by inserting, between the first two miracles, a new chapter which transports Frideswide from Bampton to Binsey in time to cure the young man of Seacourt. Frideswide and her companions set out for Oxford, but when their boat reaches 'the possession called Binsey near the city' they decide to stay there for a further spell of solitude:

On that possession (*predium*) was a place (*locus*) entangled with various kinds of trees, called *Thornbiri* in the Saxon tongue because of the many different species of thorns there, lonely and most suitable for devotion. Here she straightway built an oratory, and many buildings well-suited to the needs of holy people. And since the branch of the river was some way away, and she felt it inconvenient for the sisters to go there to draw water, she obtained by her prayers a well which remains to this day, and performs healing works for many who drink from it [or who pray there]. Here she hoped to hide, here devote herself to sweet tranquillity and shun the crowds.³

Beyond the existence of some sort of traditional link between Frideswide and Binsey, it is impossible to say how much of this story is based on anything other than Prior Robert's imagination. There is, however, independent evidence that Binsey was regarded in the early 12th century as a holy place, appropriate for the religious life. The foundation narrative of Godstow nunnery recounts that in Henry I's reign there lived a lady of Winchester named Edith, wife of Sir William Lancelin. After her husband's death

a vision often came to her that she should go near the city called Oxford and wait there for a sign from the Almighty King, by which she would know how to do God's service. She came, as a vision commanded her, to Binsey, where she dwelt in prayer and lived a most holy life. One night she heard a voice which told her what to do: 'Edith', it said, 'arise, go without delay to the place [i.e. Godstow] where a light descends to earth from heaven, and establish nuns there to serve God.' Thus in truth was this Abbey first founded.⁴

Binsey is not mentioned in Æthelred II's charter for St. Frideswide's minster (1004), which does not, however, claim to list all properties.⁵ In Domesday Book (1086), the canons' 'four hides near Oxford', which never paid geld nor belonged to any hundred, probably included both Walton and Binsey; it is even possible that the 8 ac. of

¹ Blair, 'St. F.', 83-4, 98-9.

² Ibid. 80 for Robert's authorship of the second Life.

³ Ibid. 84-5, 110.

⁴ The narrative survives as a late 14th-century French verse version (P.R.O. E164/20, f. 1 of main text): '... Souent luy vient par avisiun/ Ke ele alast pres de la citee/ Que Oxenford fust apele./ E la demorast desk' ataunt/ Quele veit signe del Rey pusaunt/ Desk'ele eit oy en quele guise/ Estoit fere la Dieux service./ A Benseye est pus ale/ Cum en auisiun fut maunde./ Entes oraisuns iluske demora./ E mult seinte vie demena./ Une voiz oist par un nuit./ La quele dist quy fere luy estust./ 'Ediz', fet il, 'fus levez./ E saunz demorance yalez/ Au lu qu lumer desent/ Au tere del firmament./ E la fetes ordeynir/ Noucines a Dieu servir./ En ceste manere par verite/ Fust cest albeie primes trouve./ ...' This may well be a translation of an earlier Latin narrative. The Middle English version (*The English Register of Godstow Nunnery*, ed. A. Clark, i (E.E.T.S. orig. ser. cxxix, 1905), 26) is simply a translation of the French.

⁵ *Cart. Frid.* i, 2-9

'thorn-scrub' or 'spinney' (*spineti*), a rare item of Domesday terminology, represents the placename *Thornbiri*.⁶ Henry I's re-foundation charter (c.1122) includes 'the whole place (*locus*) called Binsey'; this text may have been tampered with, but 'the possession (*predium*) called Binsey' appears in the more reliable confirmation of Pope Honorius II (1124×30).⁷ Property returned to the canons by Roger of Salisbury in 1139 included the 'whole place (*locus*) called Binsey', and in the same year the burgesses of Oxford acknowledged that 'from the land which pertains to one hide in Walton and from the land which pertains to Binsey the said canons have yearly rent and service of their peasants and their hundred in all things'.⁸ In 1279 St. Frideswide's was said to have a hamlet (*hamelot*) called Binsey in the suburbs of Oxford, assessed at half a hide.⁹ The Priory's 15th-century cartulary asserts that 'the possession (*predium*) called Binsey, with the hundred and its other liberties, was given to the said monastery from the time when St. Frideswide was alive in the body', and lists the customary dues of the tenants as *sant* (sandgavel?), landgavel, ingavel, churchscot and tollsester.¹⁰

The impression conveyed by these texts is not only that Binsey was an ancient, presumably pre-Augustinian, possession of St. Frideswide's monastery, but also that the house's proprietorship of it was of a somewhat unusual character. The 'four hides near Oxford' are the only holding in the Oxfordshire Domesday which is claimed to be extra-hundredal, a claim evidently re-asserted in 1139 and again in the 15th-century cartulary passage.¹¹ The Binsey men seem to have been unique among the Priory's tenants in the exotic customary renders which they owed, notably churchscot with its connotations of ancient parochial jurisdiction. And the terms 'possession' (*predium*) and 'place' (*locus*), if commonplace enough in themselves, are not standard legal designations like *manerium*, *terra*, *hida* or *acra*: the persistence with which they are applied to Binsey is curious. There may be an implication that Binsey was a *special* place: small and part of a larger entity, yet worth mentioning because it had some significance of its own.

The original Binsey ('Byni's island') which gave the estate its name was presumably the small gravel outcrop on which the village now stands. Since Prior Robert attributes to Frideswide the chapel and holy well, both of which still exist, he clearly identified *Thornbiri* with the area around the chapel, as distinct from the village site (Fig. 1). Binsey chapel is mentioned in the cartulary texts of Henry I's foundation charter and later royal confirmations, but there are strong reasons to suspect a systematic interpolation;¹² an episcopal confirmation of 1203×6 may provide the first genuine charter reference.¹³ Nonetheless, the fact that Prior Robert could claim so ancient an origin for the chapel must mean that by c.1140–70 it had existed from beyond living memory. The absence of any references to it in the 12th-century charters may be precisely because it was bound so closely to its mother house as to be regarded as an extension of the Priory.

⁶ Domesday Book f. 157a. This was evidently the belief of the later medieval canons, who rubricated their transcript of the Domesday entries as 'faciens mentionem de Wynchendon' et Bunseye': *Cart.Frid.* ii, 206.

⁷ *Cart.Frid.* i, 11, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.* i, 18, 20; *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum* iii, No. 640.

⁹ *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 173.

¹⁰ *Cart.Frid.* ii, 18.

¹¹ Binsey was, however, said to be part of Northgate hundred (probably a 12th-century creation) at various times from the late 13th century onwards: see *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 265, 270; *Oxoniensia*, i (1936), 122.

¹² The suspicious fact is that although Binsey chapel is mentioned, along with immunity from episcopal visitation, in charters of Henry I and Matilda (*Cart.Frid.* i, 10, 23), both are conspicuously absent from the otherwise comprehensive lists in papal and episcopal confirmations of 1124×30, 1141, 1158, 1154×9 and c.1155×60 (*Ibid.* 13–15, 20–22, 27–9, 29–30, 31–2). It looks as though a shameless tamperer with royal charters has balked at falsifying papal bulls.

¹³ *Cart.Frid.* i, 46.

Binsey had no burial rights, bodies being taken to Oxford for burial as late as 1552.¹⁴ In 1341 the chapel was said to be attached to St. Edward's parish,¹⁵ which had absorbed St. Frideswide's parish in 1298 on the suppression of its altar in the Priory church (below, p.256); a direct parochial dependence on St. Frideswide's before 1298 is therefore likely. Although post-medieval sources generally speak of St. Margaret's chapel, a reference in 1323 to 'the chapel built at Binsey in honour of St. Frideswide and St. Margaret' makes this the only reliably-attested dedication to Oxford's patron saint.¹⁶

Whether the Priory ever had a monastic cell at Binsey is uncertain. Edith Lancelin, who must have stayed there soon before or soon after St. Frideswide's was re-founded c. 1122, may have lived as a recluse, but the narrative does not actually say so; it is equally possible that she chose Binsey because there was a cell of canons, or even nuns, which could house her. In the 17th century, Anthony Wood believed that the Augustinian canons

instituted and ordained it to be a cell or place of retirement . . . , and therein not only at some times enjoyed themselves in great repose and devotion, but also sent their stubborn monks to be punished for crimes committed against the prior or his brethren, and that commonly was either by inflicting on them confinement in a dark room or else by withdrawing from them their usual repast and the like. Here it was also that several preists appointed by the prior of St. Frideswid's had habitation, purposely to confesse and absolve pilgrims of all sorts that flocked hither to receive remedy for their maladies from the water of St. Margaret's Well.¹⁷

Given Wood's habit of extrapolating beyond his sources this should probably not be taken too seriously, though he may have seen documents now lost. Firmer evidence that Binsey was a place of resort for the community comes with the temporary seizure of St. Frideswide's by the Crown in 1374: the prior and one fellow-canon were allowed to retain as their dwelling a place near Oxford called Binsey chapel.¹⁸ There was no formal vicarage, and no medieval curates are recorded (with the possible exception of one 'Simon chaplain of Thornbury' mentioned in 1293); in 1423 a canon of St. Frideswide's served Binsey, and apparently lived there with one servant.¹⁹ These intimations that the canons controlled Binsey directly, and perhaps maintained a cell or rest-house there, reinforce the impression conveyed by the land-holding records that it was a place to which they ascribed special significance.

TOPOGRAPHY AND COMMUNICATIONS²⁰ (Fig. 1)

Much of Binsey township consists of poorly-drained alluvium, and human settlement has probably always concentrated on the three small gravel islands in the floodplain: Langney to the S., the area around Binsey village and Green, and the northernmost island on which the chapel stands. The edges of these islands have not been defined exactly, but the chapel probably marks the N. edge of an oval gravel outcrop encircled

¹⁴ *V.C.H.Oxon.* iv, 270-1.

¹⁵ *Inquisitiones Nonarum* (Rec.Comm., 1807), 142.

¹⁶ Lincoln Archives Office, Bishops' Reg. V, f.340. Pre-Victorian evidence for the dedication of Frilsham church (Berks.) to St. Frideswide has not been found.

¹⁷ Wood, *City*, ii, 42-3.

¹⁸ *Cal.Close Rolls 1374-7*, 48.

¹⁹ *V.C.H.Oxon.* iv, 271.

²⁰ See also *Ibid.* 268-9.

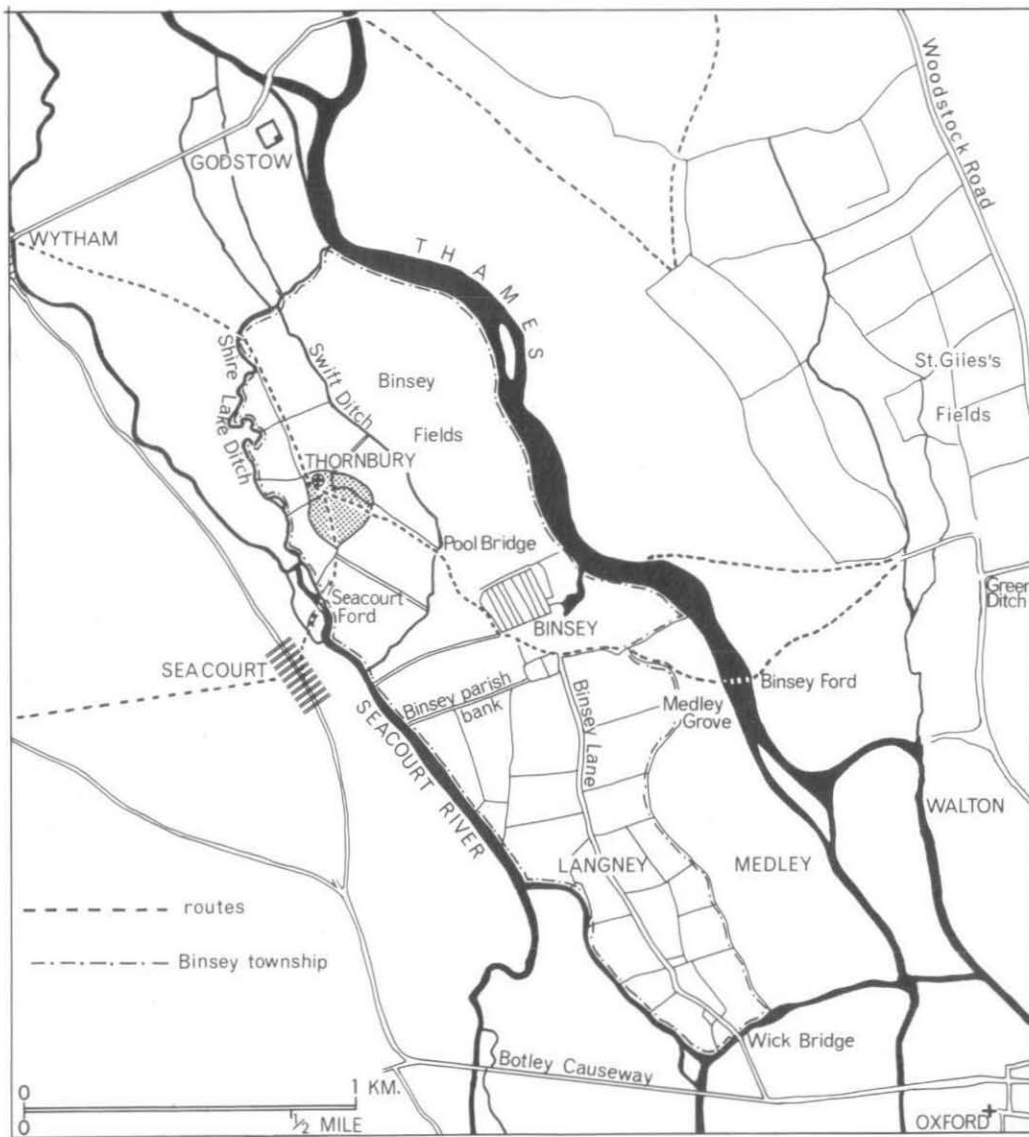


Fig. 1. Sketch-map of the environs of Thornbury, incorporating detail from the 18th-century maps (Christ Church Maps Binsey 1 and 2). The paths across Port Meadow are as shown on Cole's map of 1695 (Bodl. (E)70 Oxford (121)).

by the recently-discovered earthwork.²¹ Seen from the air, the land thus defined appears slightly raised above the old enclosures, bounded W. by Shire Lake Ditch and E. by Swift Ditch, which surround it.

Binsey Green is now approached from the Botley Road causeway (built in the 16th century) by a lane crossing a branch-stream at Wyke Bridge,²² or from North Oxford by a footpath across Port Meadow. From the Green a lane running north-westwards, laid out in 1821 to replace an earlier field-path,²³ provides the only access to St. Margaret's chapel. For modern visitors it is a place of almost perfect seclusion, disturbed only by the traffic on the western bypass.

In the middle ages Binsey may have been much less remote. Until the 18th century, the normal routes into Oxford from Eynsham and the Berkshire villages around the foot of Wytham Hill crossed the Seacourt and Shire Lake streams near the chapel. One came by the now-deserted village of Seacourt, which Anthony Wood believed to have been 'a thorough fare towne from Einsham and the western parts to Oxon (long before the other way by Botley was thought upon)', with a bridge at the crossing of the Seacourt stream indicated by stones 'lying in great abundance in the river'.²⁴ Thomas Hearne wrote of Seacourt in 1728: 'The highway passed through it, and so over the water through Binsey Ford, and so to Oxford. There is a hardway now to be seen, and at Binsey the said way (which comes over the . . . [Seacourt stream]) is called in one or two Places the King's Swarth.'²⁵ Prior Robert must have had this in mind when he pictured distraught suppliants from Seacourt crossing the river and beating on Frideswide's door at Binsey.²⁶

A more northerly route from Wytham was used by Hearne in 1716: 'From Wightham I went to Oxford by Binsey. But the Bridge, before we come to Binsey, being broke down lately by some Young Scholars . . . I was forced to be carried over upon a Man's Back. I stop'd in Binsey Church Yard on purpose to read the Inscriptions.'²⁷ This route appears on a map of 1792 (Fig. 2): a footpath runs north-westwards from Binsey Green, over Swift Ditch at Pool Bridge, into the graveyard, between the chapel and well, and across the N. boundary ditch of the graveyard by a small bridge; from there it continues northwards to meet Shire Lake Ditch (presumably where the bridge had been broken by the 'young scholars'), and its onwards direction is labelled 'to Wytham'. At one point S.E. of the chapel, this line is still marked by a hollow-way (Fig. 4).

The most direct line to Seacourt from Binsey Green would run due W., avoiding the chapel; but the road did not in fact follow it. In 1783, Thomas Warton described what he imagined to be a minor Roman road:²⁸

[It] perceptibly slants from the brow of Shotover-hill near Oxford, down its northern declivity; bisects Marston-lane, crosses the Charwell north of Holywell-church with a stone-pavement, is then called KING'S SWATH, or Way, goes over saint Giles's field, and Port-meadow, has an apparent trajectus over the Isis, now called Binsey-ford, being a few yards north of Medley-grove, runs through Binsey

²¹ Geological Survey Map 1", drift, sheet 236 (1972 edn.). The 1982 edition of this map shows the gravel island as much smaller, but observations of natural gravel at several points within the enclosed area indicate that the earlier map is more correct.

²² *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 284, 268.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Wood, *City*, i, 324-5 (with editorial note that 'the ruins of this bridge are still seen in the water, 1888').

²⁵ *Hearne's Collections*, ix (O.H.S. lxxv, 1914), 399.

²⁶ Blair, 'St. F.', 111.

²⁷ *Hearne's Collections*, v (O.H.S. xlii, 1901), 188-9.

²⁸ T. Warton, *Specimen of a History of Oxfordshire: Kiddington* (2nd edn., 1783), 57n.

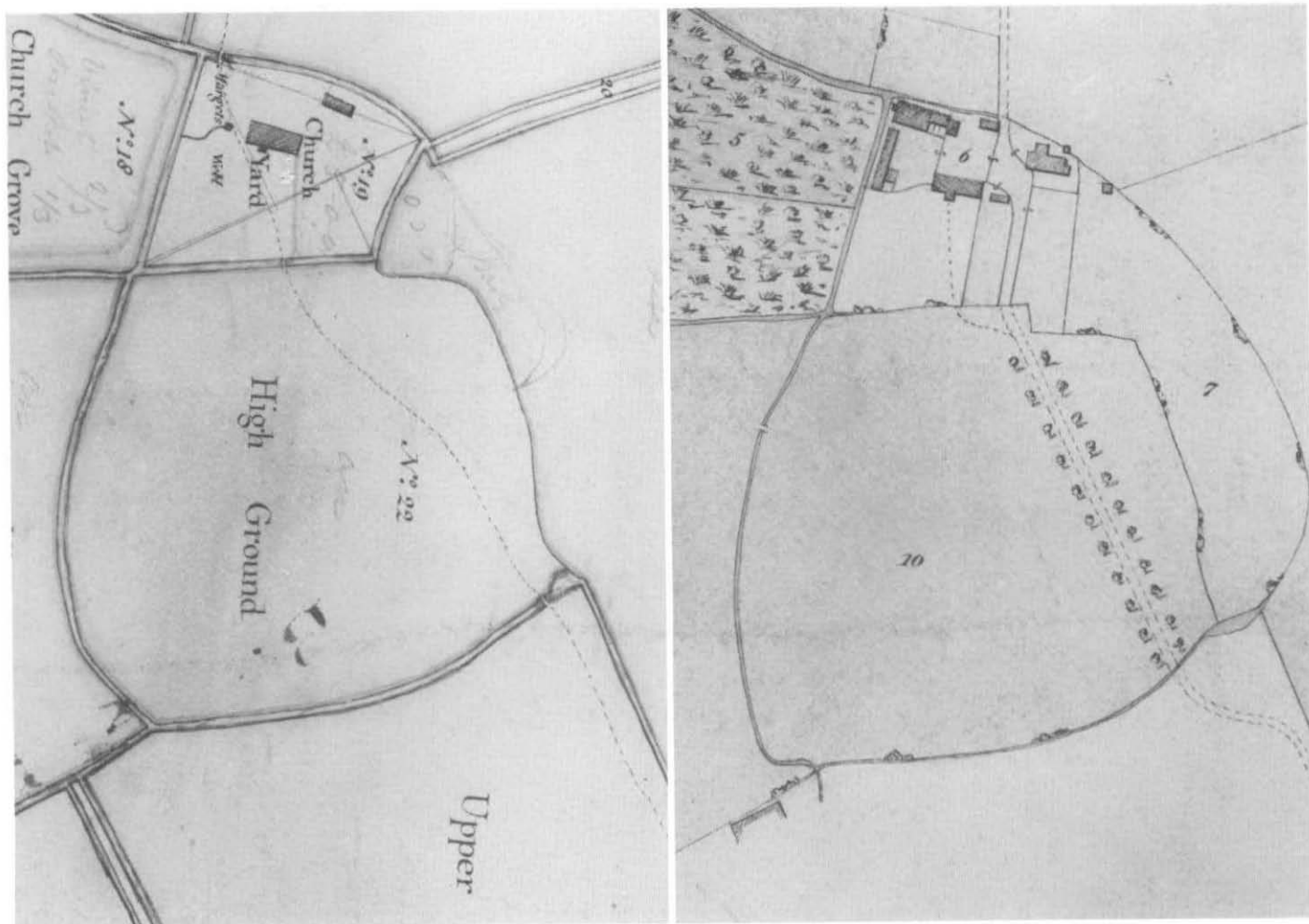


Fig. 2. Thornbury in 1792 and c.1850 (Christ Church Maps Binsey 2 and 5).

church-yard, in which are the signatures of large buildings, winds up the hill towards the left, where stood the antient village of Seckworth [i.e. Seacourt] ... ; and from thence either proceeds to Gloucester, or falls into the AKEMAN about Witney.

The only possible interpretation of this account is that the Seacourt road from Binsey Green was identical with the Wytham road as far as the graveyard, and then turned sharply south-westwards to enter Seacourt on its N.E. side. Archaeological support for this circuitous route comes from the excavations at Seacourt in 1958-9, which identified a track and sunken way fording the river and entering the village in exactly the position required. From there the road would have continued up Seacourt Hill to join the Eynsham coach-road 1 km. W. of Seacourt.²⁹

The road E. from Binsey Green across Port Meadow, which formed the main approach to Oxford via the Woodstock Road, seems to have continued as a through-route towards Shotover. It was evidently known both at Binsey and in St. Giles's Fields as the 'King's swath' (i.e. 'way' or 'track'), and may have been identical with the 'green ditch' (now St. Margaret's Road) which formed the N. boundary of the City liberty.³⁰

Far from being isolated, Binsey chapel stood at a junction of routes between Oxford, Wytham and Seacourt. The late medieval traveller from Oxford or Headington to Eynsham, Witney or Bampton would have passed the chapel and well (perhaps actually between them), and would have deviated from the shortest route in order to do so. This accords ill with Prior Robert's description of *Thornbiri* as *solitarius*; it may be that the road via the chapel was established in the 12th century or later as a consequence of the cult, replacing a more direct route from Seacourt to Binsey Green along 'Binsey parish bank'.³¹

THE CHAPEL AND WELL

The chapel and graveyard, together with the farmhouse to the N.E. and farm buildings to the N., occupy a rectilinear enclosure (Figs. 2-4) defined by wide boundary ditches (noted by Hearne in 1718).³² The site has all the appearance of a moated manor-house, and must surely represent the establishment of the later medieval canons. A 'court' with the chapel and well is pictured in the 15th-century metrical Life of St. Frideswide:³³

*Thre 3er with hir' felawes. heo bilevede there,
And to servy Ihesu Crist. a chapel heo let rewe.
Ther is 3ut a vair court. and a chirche vair and suete,
Avered in honour of hir'. and of S' Margarete.
.....
So sprong ther up awel vair welle. crer inou and clene.
That fond hem alle water inou3. that hi ne dorste no3t hem bymene.
That beside the chirche 3ut is. alute in the west side,
That mony mon hath bote ido. and that mony mon sech' wide.*

²⁹ M. Biddle, 'The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt, Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/2), 75, 77 n.35, 78 and n.44, Pl.IIA.

³⁰ For the crossing from Binsey to Port Meadow, and its use by Binsey commoners, see *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 281-2. The main medieval exit from the Meadow on the Oxford side was not, as now, at Walton Well Road, but at Brooman's well near the line of Green ditch (*Ibid.*). The names 'King's swath' and 'Green ditch' both suggest a track running along a grassy baulk.

³¹ So named on the early 18th-century map (Christ Church Maps Binsey 1).

³² *Hearne's Collections*, vi (O.H.S. xliii, 1902), 264; *Guilielmi Neubrigensis Historia*, ed. T. Hearne, iii (1719), 762.

³³ Bodl. MS Ashmole 43 ff.156^v-157.

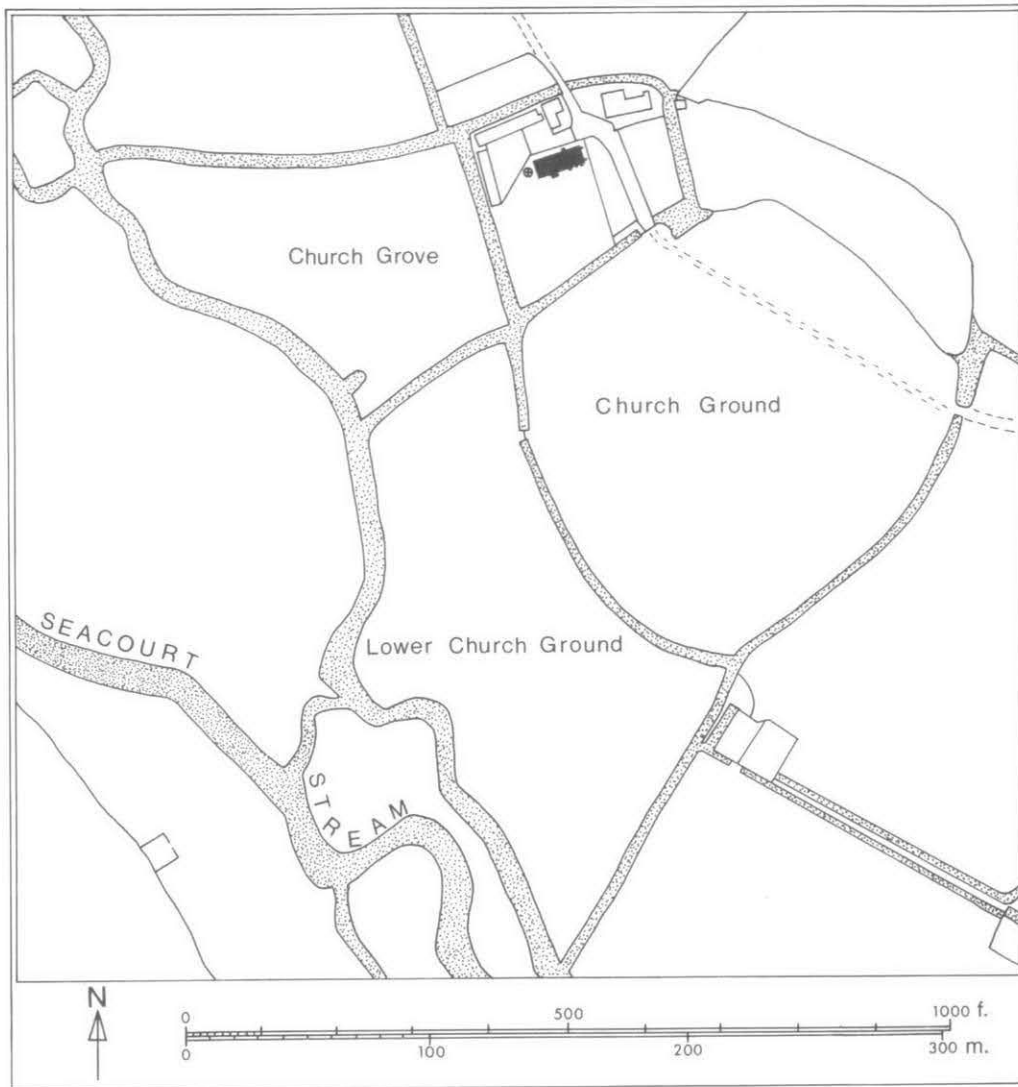


Fig. 3. Thornbury in the late 19th century (after O.S. 25" 1st edn.).

The chapel itself is a simple rectangular building, its earliest datable features the S. door and porch of c.1180–1200.³⁴ Irregularities in the external face of the N. wall suggest that the present square E. end may have replaced an apse, which implies a date rather earlier than the late 12th century for the oldest standing fabric. Fifteenth-century glass in the E. window may include fragmentary figures of St. Margaret and St. Frideswide.³⁵

³⁴ *R.C.H.M. Oxford*, 148; *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 271.

³⁵ Cf. P.A. Newton (ed.), *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi: the County of Oxford* (1979), 35–7.

Wood believed that the tabernacle in the S. wall of the chancel contained Frideswide's image, with the pavement before it worn hollow by 'those superstitious people that came sometimes barefoot to this place, using cringes and adorations on their knees'.³⁶

Wood also notes an 'old and small building joyning to the north side of the chapple', which 'doth [not resemble] (as formerly it did) a court'; in another place he describes it as a 'house with arched windowes and arched dore, joyning to Binsey Chapel, pulled downe July 1678'.³⁷ In 1718 Hearne wrote: 'tho' there be no Houses now by the Chapell, yet in those Times [i.e. Frideswide's] there were several I have heard of Foundations of Buildings which confirm this Assertion'.³⁸ Warton saw 'signatures of large buildings' in the churchyard in 1783 (above, p.10). The windowless N. wall of the chapel, with various joints and scars still visible in its outer face, suggests that buildings were indeed 'joined' to it. The traditions of the place, the residence there of regular canons, and Wood's use of the word 'court' (by which he probably meant 'courtyard' or 'cloister') all suggest the possibility of a simplified claustral layout, created perhaps in the 12th century.

The well is, as noted by Wood, 'at the west end of this chappel about three yards distant',³⁹ though now in a Victorian setting. According to Wood it was 'almost to the last frequented by superstitious people, and especially about 100 years before the dissolution. Soe much that they were forced to enclose it (as in old time before, they had defended it) with a little house of stone over it, with a lock and a dore to it'.⁴⁰ This building had 'on the front the picture of St. Margaret (or perhaps of St. Frideswyde)', and was pulled down in 1639; by Wood's time the well was 'overgrowne with nettles and other weeds and harbouring froggs snails and vermin'.⁴¹ Wood probably knew the characteristics of late Perpendicular architecture, so his description suggests that the well-house was indeed of the late 15th or early 16th century.

THE OVAL EARTHWORK ENCLOSURE (Figs. 2-4)

A large, roughly oval area defined by narrow drainage ditches, with Binsey chapel and graveyard on its N.W. perimeter, appears on estate maps of 1792 and c.1850 (Christ Church Maps Binsey 2 and 5) and on late 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps. On the S.W. and S.E. sides of the enclosure the ditches were filled in during the 1960s, but the boundary remains conspicuous as a spread and eroded bank now c.15-20 metres wide, standing well above the low-lying field on the S.W., with traces of a ditch around its outer side.

There are no clear remains of the bank on the N. and E. sides of the enclosure, and its position must be inferred from field-boundaries. Skirting the area around the N.E. are two curving ditch-lines, either of which may reflect the original perimeter. The outer ditch is rather more substantial, and connects the two straight field-ditches which drain into the Shire Lake ditch on the N.W. and the S.W. The 1792 map creates an unfortunate ambiguity (Fig. 2): the outer ditch is omitted from the scale drawing in ink,

³⁶ Wood, *City*, ii, 43; cf. *Ibid.* i, 578.

³⁷ *Ibid.* i, 329, 324n; cf. *ibid.* i, 577, 578 and ii, 42.

³⁸ *Gul. Neub.* op.cit. note 32, iii, 757-8.

³⁹ Wood, *City*, i, 323.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 328-9. Cf. *ibid.* 577: 'The inhabitants here will tell you that there have bin many miracles wrought at this well and people hung up their crutches.'

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 324n, 329.

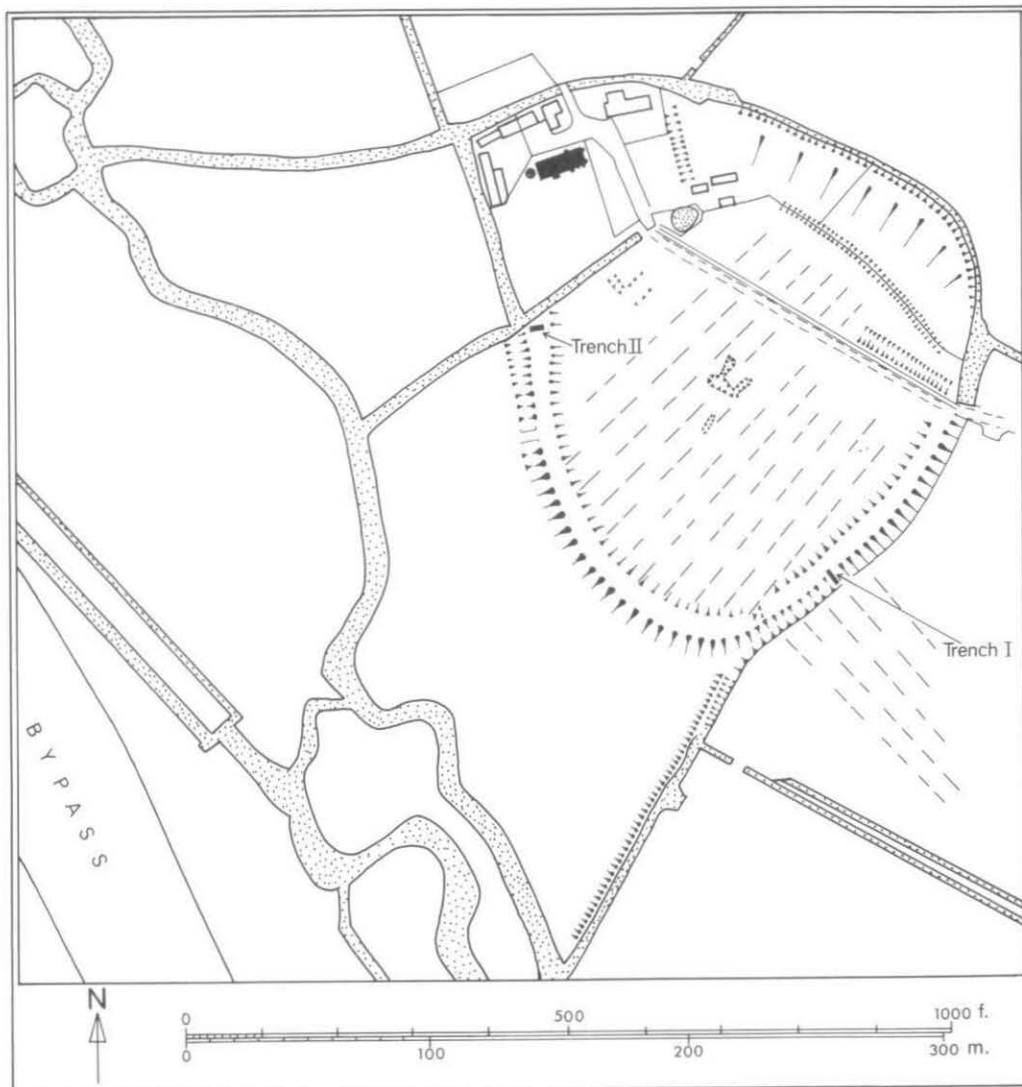


Fig. 4. Thornbury: earthworks as remaining in 1987.

but is indicated by a very sketchy pencil line. An early 19th-century copy of this map (Christ Church Map Binsey 3) also shows the ditch in pencil, but much more clearly and accurately, the area enclosed by it being labelled 'garden'. The only other boundary which the 1792 map treats in this way is the wall dividing the graveyard from the farm to its N.E. The ditch looks most unlike a 19th-century boundary, and if the pencil lines are intended to record changes after 1792 it is odd that none of the other new inclosures are shown in this way. It is therefore a reasonable hypothesis, though no more, that the ditch was omitted accidentally by the original surveyor and added as a correction.

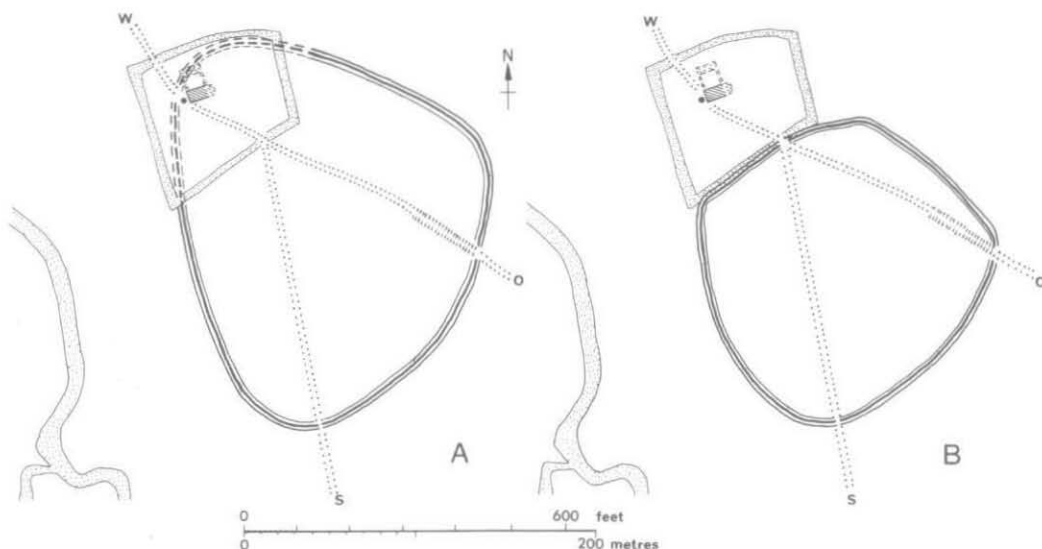


Fig. 5. Thornbury: alternative reconstructions of the early enclosure and routes leading into it. (W = Wytham, S = Seacourt, O = Oxford.)

This interpretation of the map evidence suggests the reconstruction shown in Fig. 5A: a large oval enclosure with the rectilinear moated area containing the chapel and farm superimposed on its N.W. sector, the original perimeter ditch having presumably been straightened out to form the N. and W. sides of the moat. Fig. 5B shows the alternative reconstruction, required if the 1792 map is accepted as reliable: a smaller oval excluding the chapel enclosure, which appears as a later addition to its N. side. Further excavation is needed to decide between these alternatives.

Ridge-and-furrow, crossed by the 1821 path to the chapel, occupies much of the interior. The hollow-way of the old road to Binsey Green only survives to the S.E., beyond the limits of the ridge-and-furrow (Fig. 4); the obliteration of the rest by ploughing had probably occurred by 1792, when the route was a mere footpath across the field (Fig. 2).

THE EXCAVATION

Trench I (Fig. 6)

A trench 7.5 by 1.5 m. was excavated at on the S.E. perimeter of the enclosure (see Fig. 4), bisecting the course of the field-ditch shown on the first edition of the 25" O.S. map. The outer edge of the present low bank proved to overlie a sequence of shallow, gravel-cut ditches, evidently moving progressively outwards from the interior of the enclosure, and a phase possibly involving a stone wall. Successive layers sloping down from the inner (N.W.) end of the trench are interpreted as bank material, and the existence of substantial, continuously eroding banks seems the most likely explanation for the outwards advance of the ditch line.

The first ditch contained fill layers of grey clayey gravel (L11c) and dark-grey silt (L11b). A grass-tempered sherd lay on the clean ditch floor under L11c, securely sealed by the clayey gravel; L11b contained a sandy sherd. A wedge of dark-grey silt (L9c), left isolated by the cutting of the second and third

ditches, is likely to have been part of the fill of the first ditch and identical with L11b, though it could also be interpreted as the fill of an independent re-cut. Layers of brown sandy gravel (L11a) and sticky brown clay (L5f) overlay L11b. A deposit of brown silty clay loam with manganese flecking (L5d) formed an ambiguous interface with L5f, but certainly overlay L11a-c. L16 was identical with L5d and may have been part of the same layer, though it could also be interpreted as old ground-surface (L5d being the same material redeposited). Bedded in L5d were two rows of small blocks of corallian ragstone rubble (F8, F12), running on the alignment of the ditch, which might have been the remains of a footing. A grass-tempered sherd was found among the stones of F8. Under L5d, a small patch of orange-brown subsoil (L13) survived on the inner (N.W.) lip of the ditch, showing that the natural surface of the gravel was intact at this end of the section. LL5d/16 and F8 were cut by a pit (F14), perhaps created by robbing of the footing, containing brown silty clay loam (L7) and several stone lumps, and were overlain by a layer of brown silt loam with c.40% gravel (L5c); one sandy sherd was found in F14, and bones (7 cattle, 1 sheep or goat) in L7.

TABLE 1: RADIOCARBON DETERMINATIONS

Site Reference	Harwell Reference	Years b.p.	Calibrated ranges (data of Stuiver & Reimer 1986)	
			68% confidence	95% confidence
L32	Har-8921	1740±90	AD 190-390	AD 80-530
L10c	Har-8922	220±60	—	—
L5a	Har-8923	960±70	AD 1000-1140	AD 900-1220
L3	Har-8935	590±90	AD 1290-1430	AD 1260-1470

The surviving stratigraphy left the order of the second and third ditches uncertain, but the outermost, which was evidently open into modern times, must be the later of the two. What is therefore interpreted as the second ditch cut L11b, L9c and L5f. It had fill layers (involving at least one re-cut) of grey silty gravel (L17), grey silt with preserved organic material (LL9a-b), and brown silty clay loam (L5e); there were bones in L9b (2 cattle, 1 pig) and 5e (1 horse, 3 probably cattle).

The third ditch, which cut L9c, contained fill layers of very dark-grey silt with preserved organic material (LL10c-b), and grey silt with c.3% gravel (L10a). L10c contained bones (2 of cattle and 5 of cattle or horse, mostly butchered or dog-gnawed), some lying on the bottom of the ditch; this material produced a radiocarbon date of AD 1670-1790 (Table 1), indicating that the third ditch remained open until the 18th century.

Over L5c, L9a, L5e and L10a were layers of brown clay with yellowish-brown mottling (L5b) and light-grey silty clay with c.3% gravel (L5a), possibly derived from the slighting and spreading-out of the bank in the 18th or 19th century. A bank of brown silt loam with c.50% gravel (L3), containing limestone rubble and large pebbles, overlay L5b, L5a and L7; it produced 3 sheep or goat and 2 dog bones. Calibrated radiocarbon dates were obtained from bone material in L5a (AD 900-1220) and L3 (AD 1260-1470) (Table 1). It is possible

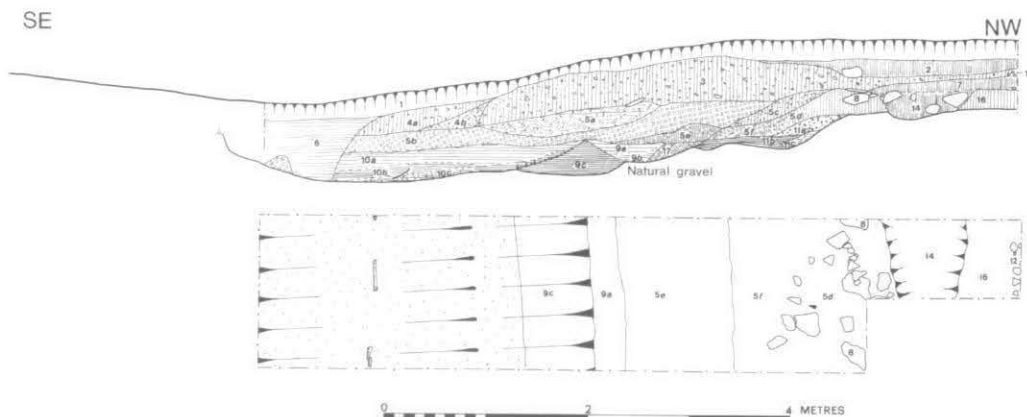


Fig. 6. Thornbury, Trench I, plan and S.W. section.

that the high proportion of rubble in this deposit represents the robbing of a substantial footing (i.e. F8) incorporated in the pre-existing bank.

Later layers (L2, L4a-b) contained modern pottery, as did a final re-digging of the boundary as a narrow field-ditch (F6). The topsoil (L1) post-dated the filling-in of this ditch during the 20th century.

Trench II (Fig. 7)

A trench 5.0 by 1.5 m. was excavated on the W. perimeter of the enclosure (see Fig. 4), bisecting the bank just inside the line of the late field-ditch. This revealed a sequence of boundary features comparable to those in Tr. I, except that the outermost and latest major ditch lay outside the trench area.

The earliest ditch was shallow, flat-bottomed, and cut the natural gravel. A straight baulk of gravel c.0.8 m. wide (F37), running transverse to the axis of the ditch, had been left standing proud from the ditch bottom; this is interpreted as a boundary between two work-gangs. On the E. side of the ditch, a layer of buff clay loam of ashy appearance with many flecks of charcoal and burnt daub (L42) may represent an old ground-surface. The ditch contained three successive fill-layers: redeposited gravel (L40) against the inner slope, perhaps the product of rapid erosion; dark blue-grey silt with c.6% gravel, flecks of burnt daub and organic material (L36); and sticky yellow-brown clay interspersed with small lenses of gravel and loam (L32), containing flecks of burnt daub and a group of bones (1 human humerus fragment; 11 bones and 3 teeth of horses, from at least two individuals aged 4+ years, all dog-gnawed; 1 cattle bone). The horse bones, which were a homogeneous group, produced a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 80-530 (Table 1).

A deposit of grey-brown clay with flecks of burnt daub (L41), overlying L42, formed an interface with L32. Bedded in L41 was a footing of corallian ragstone rubble (F38), surviving to a height of between one and three courses (Fig. 8). It was built mainly of small stones bonded with clean blue clay, but included two large blocks. At the core of the footing was a sub-rectangular void, the fill of which (L39) was identical with the underlying L42.

Unfortunately the relationship between the first ditch and the footing could not be established, since the interface between L32 and L41 left the sequence of these layers ambiguous. One possible interpretation is that L41 cut L32 - in other words, that the wall was built after the first ditch had silted up. But the reverse sequence is also possible: the first ditch could have been dug up against the face of an already-existing wall, removing all trace of older ditches associated with it. This is a major difficulty which can only be resolved by further excavation.

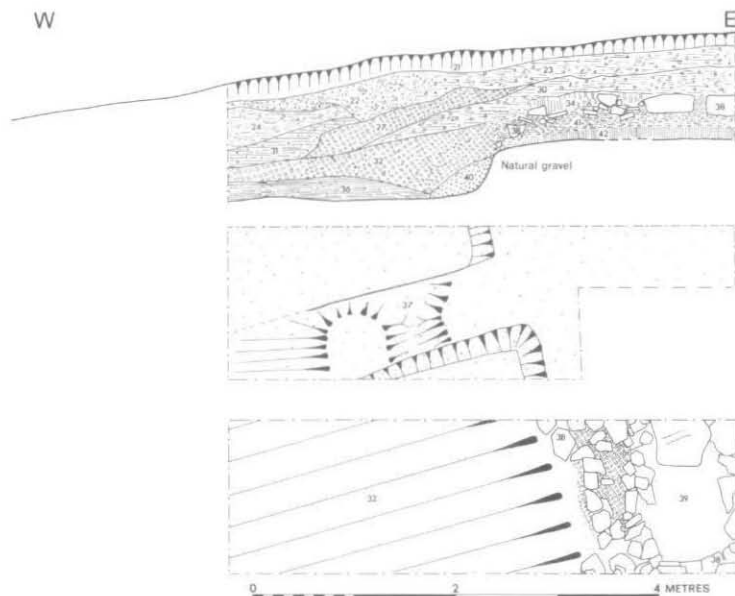


Fig. 7. Thornbury, Trench II, plans and N. section.

Over the footing F38 were a patch of ashy grey loam with burnt daub flecks (L34), a dump of rubble (F35), and then a slump-layer of red-brown silt loam containing gravelly patches and numerous lumps of burnt daub (L30), which also overlay L32. Two layers overlying the downwards slope of L30 are best ascribed to successive ditch phases: blue-grey clay with numerous red daub flecks (L27), and gravelly buff-grey clay silt (L31). A layer of red-brown silt loam containing many large lumps of burnt daub (L23), virtually identical with L30, overlay L30 and L27; cutting its surface was a post-hole (F26) of c.30 cm. diameter and c.20 cm. deep, with three packing-stones and a light-brown clay fill. L23 was truncated at its lower end by another probable ditch cut, with fills of brown clay silt (L24) and gravelly buff-yellow clay silt (L22); L24 produced a whetstone fragment. The topsoil (L21) contained modern pottery.

Interpretation of the excavated evidence

The potsherd sealed by the fill of the primary ditch in Tr. I (L11c) is probably 5th- or 6th-century (below, p.18); it is thus not wholly incompatible with the radiocarbon date-range from bones in the fill of the primary ditch in Tr. II (L32): AD 190–390 at 68 per cent confidence, or AD 80–530 at 95 per cent confidence. It is therefore a reasonable hypothesis that the ditch was dug, or was still being kept clean, in the sub-Roman or early Anglo-Saxon period, though the material in L11c provides little more than a *terminus post quem* for the silting-up of the ditch. But whereas the possible footing in Tr. I (F8) definitely post-dated the primary ditch, the relationship between the footing in Tr. II (F38) and the primary ditch there was ambiguous. It remains perfectly possible (assuming no connection between F8 and F38) that the rampart and ditch were both in origin Iron Age, the latter being scoured out in the early Anglo-Saxon period, or that an

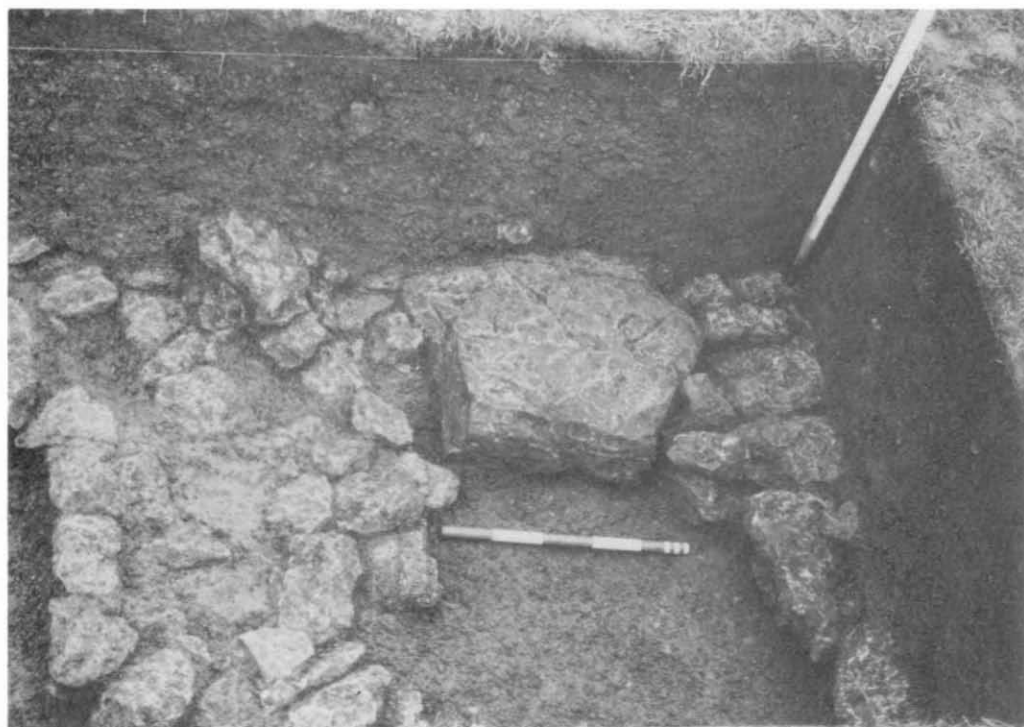


Fig. 8. Thornbury, Trench II: stone footing (F38), looking N.

early Anglo-Saxon ditch was dug against the face of an Iron Age rampart. Alternatively, F8 and F38 could both belong to a rampart post-dating the filling of the primary ditch. The likelihood of an Anglo-Saxon presence on the site is in all cases strong, and is strengthened by the fact that all four potsherds recovered are of that date.

The construction of the footing or revetment has some distinctive features. The portion of F38 within the area of Tr. II comprised a much-damaged outer face towards the ditch, and the four inner faces of the box-like cavity at the core of the wall. The outer face included five small stones in line, which were in-set in relation to the larger blocks surviving at the two sections and should probably therefore be interpreted as a second row from which larger facing-stones had been robbed away. Assuming that the inwards-facing skin of walling (mainly outside the trench area) was of similar width to that on the ditch side, the total thickness of the wall at its base would have been some 2.2m. The filling of the cavity (L39) was identical to the underlying layer (L42), and may have originated as turves cut from the ground-surface. Unless the cavity is an abnormality it must be concluded that this massive footing consisted of two parallel faces, linked by transverse walls set at *c.* 1.5m. centres, with the voids filled with earth or turves. There is no evidence that the stone facing continued to a significant height above ground-level (indeed, the general lack of rubble in later ditch-fills suggests that it did not); a timber-revetted bank on a stone footing is perhaps more likely.

Finally, the burnt daub spread through nearly all layers and features in Tr. II deserves comment. The material might derive from the firing of a timber-laced rampart, though the burning of scrub on an old ground-surface would have similar results.

THE POTTERY by MAUREEN MELLOR

Four early Saxon sherds were excavated. Two, from L11b and F14, were in predominantly sandy fabrics (fabric III); the other two, from L11c and F8, were grass-tempered (fabric IV) and possibly from one pot, with the same admixture of other detritus and laminated in the same way. The grass-tempered sherd in F8, from the shoulder of a large burnished storage-jar, was decorated with a raised band between two rows of small dots. A similar vessel with the same style of decoration was found in a sunken-feature building at Barrow Hills near Abingdon,⁴² though its fabric was predominantly sandy and it was exceptionally well-made, possibly being finished on a slow wheel. The Barrow Hills example came from what is believed to be the early focus of the site, possibly 5th-century; this context produced little or no organic-tempered material, however, and the Binsey sherd may be rather later, perhaps 6th century. Grass-tempered pottery is also reported from the nearby deserted village site of Seacourt.⁴³

CONCLUSIONS

The name recorded as *Thornbiri* comprises the elements *þorn* and *burh*, 'thorn' and 'fortified place';⁴⁴ it would be perverse to suggest that the 'thorn-grown fortress' was anything

⁴² No. 185, Fig. 16 from SFB F3307, Fabric 24; typescript at Oxford Archaeological Unit.

⁴³ Not published; pers. comm. M. Biddle. (These sherds have not been located among the Seacourt material in the Ashmolean. I am grateful to Arthur MacGregor for his help with this.)

⁴⁴ The final element is undoubtedly *burh* (Margaret Gelling, pers. comm. 1987); the etymology 'thorn-tree hill' proposed in *Place-Names Oxon.* i, 26 was based on the 1293 spelling *Thorneberg*, the earliest form then available.

other than the oval defensive enclosure identified in 1987–8. It remains to consider what the *burh* actually was, and what its discovery contributes to our understanding of St. Frideswide's legend.

The best local parallels for the shape and location of the enclosure are Iron Age, and while the stratigraphical and radiocarbon evidence does not especially support such a date, it certainly does not exclude it.⁴⁵ The long island of gravel within the floodplain immediately E. of Binsey church and adjacent to the present main stream of the river has revealed cropmarks of ring ditches, pit alignments and enclosures of Bronze Age, Iron Age and probably Roman date,⁴⁶ and fieldwalking by David Wilson has produced Iron Age and Roman pottery.⁴⁷ Small late Bronze Age to Iron Age valley forts, on both the floodplain and the terrace-edge, can almost be described as a feature of the Upper Thames basin, Thornbury being potentially the seventh such site to be identified.⁴⁸ The footing of 'box' construction would be appropriate in an Iron Age context: the forts at Cherbury and Bladon had stone revetments, in the case of Bladon with a soil infill.⁴⁹ The burnt material found distributed through all layers in Tr. II may be significant in this context: evidence of extensive burning on Iron Age defensive enclosures is common in southern England,⁵⁰ and has been identified locally at Bladon, Cherbury and Burroway.⁵¹ Burroway had a timber 'box' rampart with soil infill, fired during the burning episode, and a similar source is possible for the burnt clay at Binsey, where the absence of rubble in the ditch fills suggests that the rampart above foundation level was of timber rather than stone.

Alternatively, the fort could be sub-Roman or early Anglo-Saxon, and so far as it goes the very limited dating evidence supports this conclusion. The 5th- and early 6th-century colonisation of the Upper Thames must have involved the use of fortified places, and there seems a serious possibility that Thornbury was one of them.

Thus any religious occupation of the site may have involved re-using an already ancient fortress. It is worth notice in this context that *burh* has a well-attested secondary meaning of 'monastic enclosure'. Tetbury (*Tettan byrig*) occurs as *Tettan monasterium* in the late 7th century, and Westbury-on-Trym (*Uwestburg*) as *Westmynster* in 804.⁵² It seems likely that many *-burh* placenames denote monastic sites, especially those compounded with female names; an example not far afield is Bibury ('Beage's monastery?'), where five hides were leased to the thegn Leppa and his daughter Beage in 718×45.⁵³ The first element *þorn* would be apposite to this meaning if it denoted not a cover of undergrowth but an enclosing hedge, such as the 'great thorn hedge' which surrounded St. Wilfred's monastery at Oundle.⁵⁴

It could be argued that such parallels are made superfluous by the archaeological evidence, which suggests that the earthwork, whether Iron Age, sub-Roman or early

⁴⁵ This paragraph is based entirely on material supplied by George Lambrick, who has in preparation a more detailed discussion of valley-forts in the Upper Thames.

⁴⁶ P.P. Rhodes, 'New Archaeological Sites at Binsey and Port Meadow, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xiv (1949), 81–4.

⁴⁷ Pers.comm. D. Wilson esq.

⁴⁸ The others are Salmondsbury, Burroway, Cherbury, Cassington, Dyke Hills and ?Goring.

⁴⁹ R. Ainslie, 'Bladon Round Castle, 1987', *South Midlands Archaeology (CBA Group 9 Newsletter)*, xviii (1988), 94.

⁵⁰ R.J. Bradley, *The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain* (1984), 134–6.

⁵¹ G.H. Lambrick, 'Clanfield, Burroway', *South Midlands Archaeology (CBA Group 9 Newsletter)*, xiv (1984), 104–5; Ainslie op. cit. note 49.

⁵² For the examples in this sentence and the next, with others, see F.M. Stenton, 'The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society', in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (1970), 320–1.

⁵³ W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, i (1885), No. 166.

⁵⁴ Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*, ch. 67.

Anglo-Saxon, was at all events in existence before St. Frideswide's time. But the 'monastic' usage of the term is important as a reflection of the fact that Iron-Age and Dark-Age forts, like Roman walled enclosures, were places normally and naturally selected for the new monasteries of the 7th and 8th centuries. Many early English minsters were *burga* in the sense of being pre-Anglo-Saxon fortified places, such as the Iron Age hillforts enclosing minster churches at Aylesbury and Hanbury.⁵⁵ If Thornbury was still a conspicuous earthwork it would have been a prime candidate for monastic re-use, especially perhaps as a cell or retreat-house dependent on the main monastery at Oxford.⁵⁶

Finally, the possibility remains that the stratified material is residual, and that Thornbury was constructed at the outset as an Anglo-Saxon monastic enclosure. Since this category of site has received little archaeological notice it is hard to find close parallels, but enclosures of a similar general shape and size can be identified surrounding known minster churches.⁵⁷

From the written legends and traditions, centuries later than Frideswide's time, the existence of an early monastic settlement at Binsey can only be inferred as a tenuous possibility. The importance of the newly-discovered earthwork is that its evidence, so independent and so different, points in the same direction: Binsey chapel stands in just the kind of place that mid-Saxon monastic founders did in fact favour. Any further advances must be through archaeology, following the leads suggested by the scraps of pottery in the ditches and the 8th-century *sceat* found somewhere nearby.⁵⁸ An extensive excavation within the earthwork might add significantly to our knowledge of the Oxford region in both the Iron Age and the Anglo-Saxon period.

⁵⁵ For these and other examples see J. Blair, 'Minster Churches in the Landscape' in D. Hooke (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (1988), 41-7; D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: the Kingdom of the Hwicce* (1985), 219, 91.

⁵⁶ As argued by Blair, 'St. F.', 92.

⁵⁷ Cf. the examples illustrated in Blair, *op. cit.* note 55, Fig. 2.3. Other cases are Bampton, Oxon. (J. Blair in *South Midlands Archaeology*, xviii (1988), 90, Fig. 1) and Tetbury, Glos. (*V.C.H. Glos.* xi, 260).

⁵⁸ Blair, 'St. F.', 92.