

The Devil's Churchyard. An Iron Age Enclosure at Checkenden, Oxon., 1979-81.

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with contributions by CLAIRE HALPIN and BOB WILSON

SUMMARY

In 1979 an earthwork enclosure known as The Devil's Churchyard was cleared of trees and undergrowth. The enclosure and associated boundary ditches have since been dated by excavation to the mid to late Iron Age.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit is indebted to the site owner Mr Michael G. Reade for informing the Unit of the tree-replanting scheme and for allowing excavation to take place. The project was funded by the Department of the Environment. The original earthwork survey was undertaken by two in-service trainees, Carlos Urrejola and Heather Bird. The four trenches were excavated by members of the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group. The topographical sections were surveyed by Mrs. Cynthia Graham-Kerr and Mr. David Richards. The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit is grateful to Mrs. Graham-Kerr for organising and supervising the work undertaken by the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group. Mrs. J. M. Chambers kindly typed out the text. Mr. John Callow compiled Figs. 1 and 2.

SITUATION

The site is on the north-western edge of the Chilterns, some 150 m. above sea level (Nat. Grid., centred SU 6525 8400). It lies on sloping ground and faces north-west, near the top of a ridge separating two dry, west-facing valleys. Today the nearest water source is a semi-active spring line 0.4 km. to the north.

Locally the subsoil comprises plateau drift¹ which caps the clay-with-flints and chalk bedrock. The plateau drift is chiefly a mixture of clays and flints, and reaches to a depth in excess of 2 m. at the southern end of the site.

THE EARTHWORKS (Fig. 1)

The principal, heart-shaped enclosure A has an internal area of 0.43 ha. (1.05 acres). To

¹ 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.

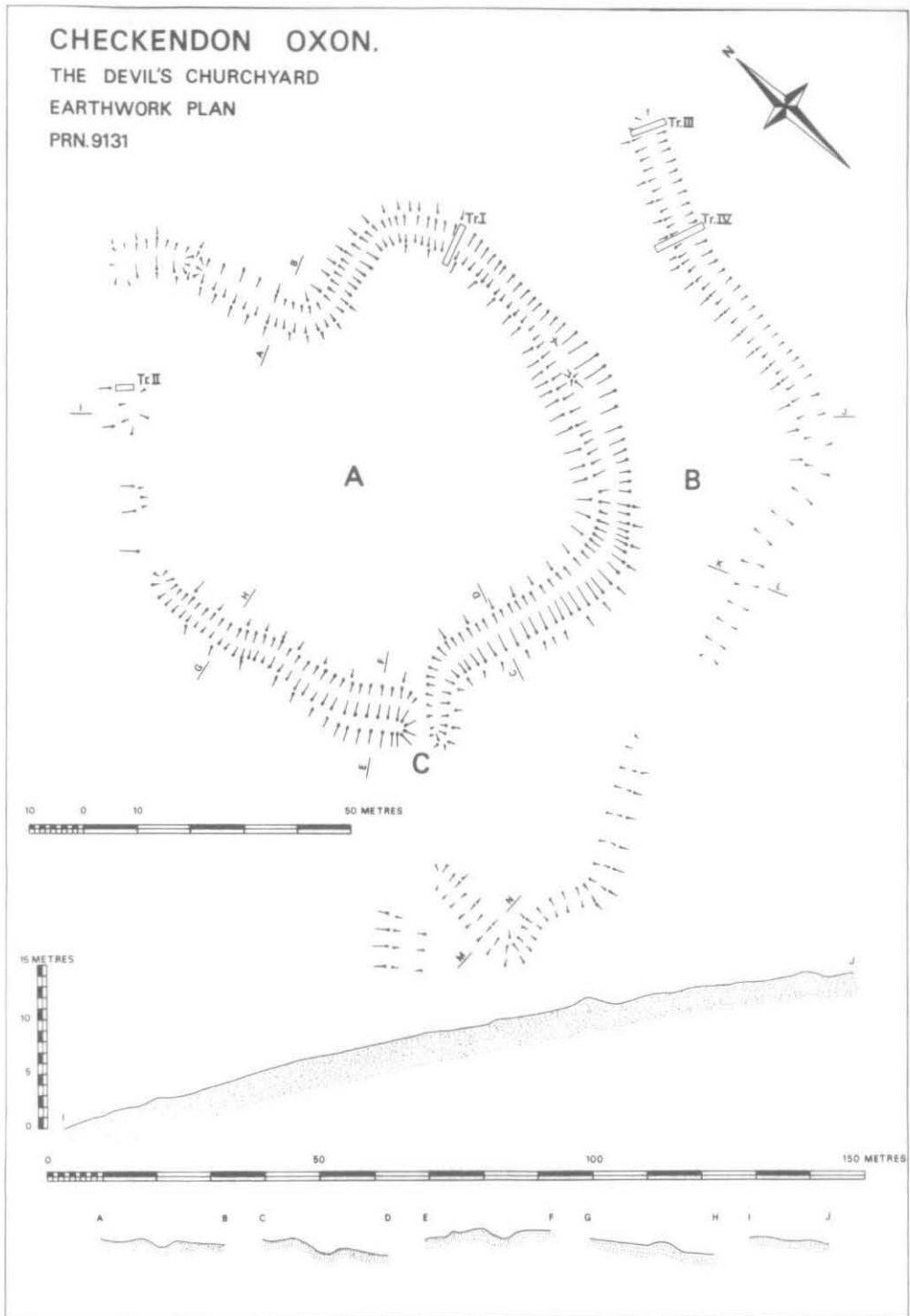


Fig. 1. The earthworks.

the east and south of this, a curvilinear ditch encloses an irregular corridor *B* averaging 20 m. wide. Remains of low banks survive on either side of each boundary ditch. The banks are generally no higher than 0.5 m., except that which forms the north-western side of a causewayed entrance *C* on the south-west side of the principal enclosure. The south-east side of the entrance is bounded by an out-turned ditch. The corridor boundary *B* turns in sharply towards the causeway *C* as if to form an entrance. To the south-west of the causeway a short length of poorly-preserved ditch and bank suggests a further boundary.

A recent ash plantation has resulted in the obliteration of the earthworks forming the north-west side of the principal enclosure *A*.

THE EXCAVATION²

Four sections, Trenches I-IV, were excavated to establish the occupation date and to discover more about the character of the enclosure boundaries. During the excavation of a similarly dated Iron Age site at Hailey Wood, on the same soil-type as the Devil's Churchyard, some difficulty was experienced in recovering archaeological information. Therefore no attempt was made to excavate trial trenches within the central enclosure at Checkenden. Trenches I and II provided sections across the principal enclosure boundary. Trenches III and IV provided sections across the curvilinear earthwork (Figs. 1 and 2).

Trench I sectioned the north-eastern edge of the central enclosure *A*. This revealed a **V**-sectioned ditch originally some 2 m. deep by 3 m. wide. The flint and clay infilling provided several fragments of pottery, animal bone (some burnt), a Millstone Grit quern fragment, charcoal and once-removed burnt soil. A buried topsoil was observed beneath the flint and clay of the inner and outer banks. Trench II confirmed that the **V**-sectioned boundary ditch continued round the north-west side of the enclosure, where it had been cut into the solid chalk bedrock. Here an unknown depth of pre-enclosure topsoil and subsoil had been bulldozed away and the original dimensions of the ditch could not be recorded. Several heat-crazed flint nodules and some animal bone were recovered from the clay of the ditch filling.

Trenches III and IV sectioned the boundary which formed the corridor *B*. In both trenches the boundary ditch presented a similar profile and dimensions to that of the central ringwork *A* in Trenches I and II. In Trench III the ditch cut or had been cut by an unidentified broad, shallow feature. The ditch filling in Trench III contained several small fragments of pottery, animal bone, wood charcoal, burnt clay and a possible Greensand quern fragment. Trench IV also provided some burnt flint pebbles and three struck flint flakes.

INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The site comprised a heart-shaped ring-work with a second boundary enclosing a corridor of land to the south and east. Both the ring-work and the corridor may once have possessed entrances at a common point *C* (Fig. 1) which is also the focus for the

² The finds and excavation records will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services under P.R.N. 8, 131.

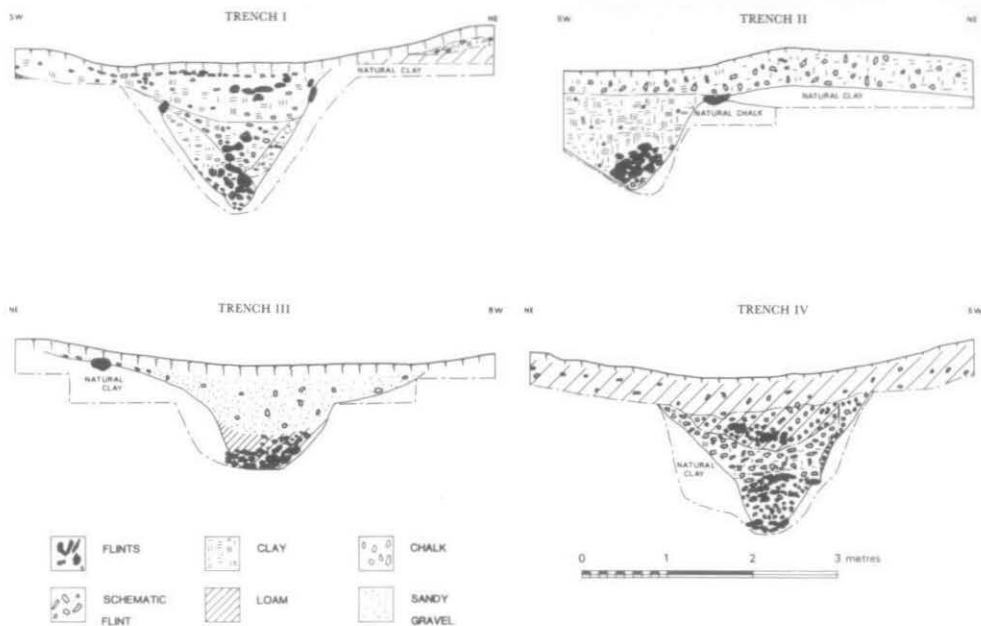


Fig. 2. The sections

remains of a third boundary ditch. Whether the central enclosure *A* possessed a second entrance to the north-west is not known. It is also not certain why the bank and ditch to the west of the causeway *C* is much more substantial than the remainder of the earthworks. Might this represent an abandoned attempt at a more substantial fortified enclosure? The present owner believes the causeway to have been constructed for timber haulage earlier this century. However, the arrangement of the ditches suggests that the causeway, although perhaps since modified, formed an integral part of the Iron Age site.

Spoil was dumped on either side of the enclosure ditches, and it is unlikely that the banks were an important construction feature. Excavation did not indicate whether the banks carried hedges or fences. The general character of the boundaries suggest enclosures for the retention or exclusion of livestock and to afford protection from the larger wild animals. The irregular shape of the principal enclosure *A* and of the corridor boundary suggests the piece-meal expansion of a small primary enclosure. Both the central enclosure and the corridor boundary ditches provided mid-late Iron Age pottery sherds. None of the pottery could be closely dated.

In 1971 Saunders³ showed the majority of known Iron Age sites in the Chilterns to be concentrated in a band along the western edge, to which Checkenden must now be added. Next to nothing is known about the management of the Iron Age landscape surrounding these settlements and it is not known whether the prehistoric field systems recorded to the south-west on the Berkshire Downs extended onto the heavier clays of the Chiltern ridge in Oxfordshire.

The altitude of many of these settlements places them at a considerable distance

³ C. Saunders, 'The Pre-Belgic Iron Age in the Central and Western Chilterns', *Arch. Journ.* cxxvii (1971), 2, Fig. 1.

from spring-lines. In 1972 a small enclosed Iron Age settlement was discovered in Hailey Wood, Lewknor⁴ at a similar altitude to the Devil's Churchyard. Because of the general lack of domestic debris the excavator suggested a brief, seasonal occupation perhaps for late summer woodland grazing. The size and relative abundance of domestic refuse in the ditches at Checkenden suggests that the Devil's Churchyard may have been occupied for a major part of each year, if not permanently.

THE FINDS

Accepting the limited nature of the excavation, the finds section has been kept brief. None of the finds required illustration.

Worked Flint by CLAIRE HALPIN

All four trenches yielded worked flint. The collection consists of 3 non-cortical struck flint flakes, 3 blades and 3 fragments, some exhibiting various degrees of patination. The pieces vary in size up to a large blade 31 by 68 mm. None of the pieces shows any positive evidence of retouching, and some exhibit heavy edge damage. Since there are no diagnostic features present within this collection, it cannot be dated. The mixed character of the material suggests that the pieces may be from more than one industry.

Stone

Several fragments of Millstone Grit, possibly from a quernstone. Trench I, L3.

Large, c. 20 cm., fragment, identified by Philip Powell of the University Museum, Oxford, as probably Lower Greensand. One face ground flat and smooth, probably from a quern. Trench III, L24.

Pottery

The assemblage, all from Trenches I and III, comprised 41 small, abraded sherds of which many were pea-sized fragments. All may have been body sherds except for one rim fragment, possibly from a situlate jar, with stabbed cable decoration on the lip. None of the remaining 40 fragments was decorated, and there were no distinctive forms. Four pieces were from poorly-burnished vessels, three exhibited exterior burnishing (Trench III, L22), and one appeared to derive from a bowl burnished on the inside (Trench I, topfill). There was no evidence that any of the vessels represented had been wheel-thrown. All had sandy fabrics, some with occasional larger flint inclusions. Some sherds appeared to have been tempered with grog, but these inclusions were rounded and more likely to be specks of hematite occurring naturally within the clay. The majority of the vessels were thick-walled, c. 10 mm. There were no distinctive late Iron Age fabrics. The fabrics present in this assemblage are common in the Thames valley and have been found nearby at Heath Farm, Great Milton⁵ and Hailey Wood, Lewknor.⁶ Sandied fabrics appear to be an early Iron Age introduction in the Chilterns, to the west of Checkenden at Chinnor⁷ and Lewknor,⁸ and to the east at Edlesborough⁹ and Puddlehill Houghton Regis.¹⁰ The assemblage as a whole need not be any earlier than the mid Iron Age, except that the rim sherd from the possible situlate jar reflects the shape and decoration of earlier Iron Age jars discovered at Puddlehill. None of the pottery need be any later than the 1st century B.C.

⁴ R.A. Chambers, 'An Iron Age Enclosure at Hailey Wood, Lewknor', *Oxoniensia*, xxxviii (1973), 168-73.

⁵ T. Rowley, 'Excavations at an Iron Age Village at Heath Farm', *Oxoniensia*, xxxviii (1973), 35-9.

⁶ Chambers op. cit. note 4.

⁷ P. Crossley-Holland, *Oxoniensia*, vii (1942), 108-9; Richardson and Young, *Ant. Jnl.* xxxi (1951), 132-48: a settlement possibly deserted around the mid 3rd century B.C.

⁸ Chambers op. cit. note 4; *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 100-1.

⁹ J.F. Head and C.M. Piggott, 'An Iron Age Site at Bedlow, Bucks.' *Records of Buckinghamshire*, xiv (1946), 189-209.

¹⁰ C.L. Mathews, *Occupation Sites on a Chiltern Ridge*, British Archaeological Reports, No. 29 (1976), Part I, 55-7. Fig. 18; 63-4, Fig. 20, 142, Fig. 96, No. 26.

Animal Bone by BOB WILSON

Animal bones were recovered from the Iron Age ditch fills in Trenches I-III. The bones were moderately preserved but fragmented by recent breakage. Identified bones were 10 of cattle, including 7 teeth and one each of sheep, pig and dog. There were 36 unidentified fragments, including 3 which had been burnt. Remains of a cattle pelvis are probably from a female. Excavations at Mingies Ditch, Hardwick with Yelford, Oxon.¹¹ have shown that cattle and horse bones are relatively abundant at the periphery of the site. Thus the debris from the trenches excavated at Checkenden may not be a representative site sample. Excavations within the enclosure might have yielded an abundance of sheep bones.

The Society is grateful to the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for a grant towards the publication of this paper

¹¹ B. Wilson, in preparation.