

Notes

A CORNELIAN INTAGLIO FROM BLACKTHORN HILL, NEAR BICESTER

The gem was found in the vicinity of Akeman Street at Blackthorn Hill to the east of Alchester by Mr. Bob Wyatt, who submitted it to the Ashmolean Museum where it is currently on loan (loan no. 434).¹ The stone is a cornelian of uneven colour which ranges from lemon yellow to orange; its shape is a rounded oval with flat upper and lower surfaces (shape F1) and it measures 12 × 10 × 2 mm. The top face with the intaglio exhibits considerable wear consistent with long use as a seal and contrasts with the underside, originally protected by the ring, which retains its original polish.

The device is a childlike figure in profile to the left (actual gem described) chasing a large bird. The *putto* has what appears to be a cloak over his shoulder (it can hardly be a wing). In his right hand he holds a tipped staff, which may be interpreted either as a spear or as a thyrsus. His left arm is extended towards the bird and above his hand is an arrangement of shallow grooves, probably a blundered rendering of his right arm. There is thus some ambiguity in the representation, with regard to whether he is a cupid or a satyr, although the best parallels suggest the former. There is likewise uncertainty as to the bird, partly because a chip on the left side of the gem has removed its head and neck. Its long legs and its wings (which are raised in alarm) are consistent with a member of the *Anserini* family, and the comparanda cited below suggest, indeed, that either a goose or a swan was intended. The drooping tail-feathers remind us of a cockerel, but this seems to suit the iconography less well and it can probably be explained by the somewhat schematic nature of the cutting. There is a ground line.

The colour of the stone and its shape, which approaches the circular, suggest an early date, and the style of cutting, which makes use of fairly large-headed drills with detailing added with short rounded grooves, is described as the 'flat bouterolle style' by



Fig. 1. Cornelian intaglio from Blackthorn Hill (scale 4:1). (Ph. R. Wilkins FSA, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).

¹ We were able to study it at the museum through the kindness of Mr. Arthur MacGregor FSA, and Mr. Robert Wilkins FSA provided us with a photograph (Fig. 1).

Dr. Maaskant-Kleibrink. The *floruit* of this style lies in the Augustan age, late in the 1st century B.C.²

The subject of Cupid as huntsman was popular on gemstones at this time. He is generally shown in identical stance to the figure on the Blackthorn Hill gem, likewise holding a spear, but loosing a hound from its leash.³ Cupid with a swan or goose looks like a variant of this type: presumably he must here be regarded as capturing the bird, though it is evident that he is not harming it. In the finest example of a gem paralleling the Blackthorn Hill example he certainly holds a thyrsus while over his shoulder is a net, described as a butterfly net (with which Cupid captured Psyche).⁴ The two other examples of the type known to us are more schematically cut, and there is no net or any indication that he carries anything other than a spear.⁵ Swans were sacred to Venus and geese to Priapus, so presumably the type of Cupid and these birds would have had reference to fecundity and to carnal love: the humour of a parody of the type on an intaglio in Vienna showing an elderly mime with a goose would thus have been evident to the owner.⁶ Cupid wrestling with a goose is the subject of a famous hellenistic statue and is the theme of a superb intaglio, now in Leningrad, approximately contemporary with our gem.⁷ A garnet set in a gold ring found at Colchester shows Cupid standing with his hand upon a Priapic herm and with a goose at his feet.⁸ Swans were also sacred to Apollo, and for this reason were widespread in Augustan art, for instance on Ara Pacis.⁹ However the nature of the motif under discussion hardly suggests so elevated a reference.

Other gems depict Cupid teasing a cockerel with a bunch of grapes. He holds neither a spear nor a thyrsus and the gems seem to be of Imperial date.¹⁰ Clearly the theme again has sexual overtones, but it is iconographically distinct from the type under discussion.

Whatever the original meaning of the intaglio, it is clear that it was quite old when it was lost, probably by a second or third generation descendant of the original owner. Republican and Augustan gems are most likely to have come to Britain with the invading legionaries in A.D. 43, and while more finds and above all material remains of structures would be necessary to prove the hypothesis, the gem best accords with the

² M. Maaskant-Kleibrink, *Cat. of Engraved Gems in the Royal Coin Cabinet, the Hague. The Greek, Etruscan and Roman Collections* (The Hague 1978), 179.

³ *Ibid.*, nos 384 and 385.

⁴ E. Brandt, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen. I. Staatliche Münzsammlung München*, i (Munich 1968), no. 590 (said to be 2nd century B.C., but likewise probably Augustan).

⁵ Maaskant-Kleibrink, *op. cit.* note 2, no. 382 (Augustan; similar cutting to the Blackthorn Hill gem and, indeed, ascribed to the flat *bouterolle* style); A. Krug, 'Antike Gemmen im Römisch-Germanischen Museum Köln', *BRGK* 61 (1980), 187, no. 74 (from Cologne, ascribed to the first half of the 1st century A.D.).

⁶ J.M.C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (London 1973), 259-64. For the gem which parodies the type, by showing an elderly mime-actor with a goose, see E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die Antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien*, ii (Munich 1979), no. 1101 (second or third quarter of the 1st century B.C.).

⁷ O. Neverov, *Antique Intaglios in the Hermitage Collection* (Leningrad 1976), no. 127. For the ancient statue, by Boethos, see M. Robertson, *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge 1975), 561 and pl. 175b.

⁸ M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites*, BAR, Brit. ser. 8 (Oxford 1974, 2nd edn. 1978), no. 112.

⁹ P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor 1988), 181-2 (for the swans on Ara Pacis) and 327 (for an altar from Arles).

¹⁰ E. Brandt, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen I. Staatliche Münzsammlung München*, iii (Munich 1972), no. 2545; P. Zazoff, *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen III. Hanover, Kestner-Museum* (Wiesbaden 1975), no. 815; G. Sena Chiesa, *Gemme di Luni* (Rome 1978), no. 73; Henig, *op. cit.* note 8, no. 142 (from Canterbury).

presence of a fort somewhere in the area.¹¹ Even if its significance as an antiquity from Roman Britain cannot be fully evaluated, it is undoubtedly the earliest intaglio from Oxfordshire, and a fine example of the minor arts of the Augustan age. It remains to comment on how it was lost. One of us (S. Hornby) has noted that the nature of the chip suggests damage occasioned when the stone was prized from its setting, presumably in antiquity. Had the ring in which it was set been stolen, and the stone discarded by the thief, or was it simply the case of a clumsy jeweller damaging the stone while he was re-setting it?

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¹¹ See Henig, 'Antique gems in Roman Britain', to be published in *Jewellery Studies*, 5 (forthcoming), where he discusses other Augustan gems from Roman Britain, and concludes that most of them were brought in by Roman soldiers around the time of the conquest.

A ?RADIATE BROOCH FROM LITTLE MILTON, OXFORDSHIRE

In 1990, a fragment of a bronze bow brooch found by a metal detector to the south of Little Milton, Oxon., was brought into the Ashmolean Museum for identification.¹

Description (Figs. 1-2): The fragment, consisting of the bow and foot of the brooch, is 62 mm. long, with a maximum width of 21 mm., and a thickness at the bow of approx. 3 mm. The head was probably semi-circular, but has been sheared off, possibly through ploughing. The foot is parallel-sided. The decoration consists of crudely executed ridges running vertically along the length of the bow and foot plate, and two pairs of unevenly formed roundels along the sides of the foot, which terminates in a fifth roundel. The upper pair of roundels is misshapen and could conceivably represent degenerate bird- or animal heads, as on some 'Bifrons type' brooches,² while the lower pair and the roundel at the foot are decorated with a crude ring and dot motif. In the centre of the foot is a lozenge-shaped field containing four dots, one in each corner. The brooch is in a relatively worn condition and there are no traces of gilding or enamelling.

A salient feature of the brooch is the massive casting sprue projecting from its bow. Further signs of miscasting are found on the back of the brooch: the catch plate was not finished and the pin lug was not perforated. The catch plate and lug are, furthermore, out of alignment with the axis of symmetry of the decoration, which suggests that the front and back halves of the mould slipped in the course of the casting process (Fig. 1). It also appears that the edges of the bow did not fill out properly during casting. The brooch was never finished and fitted with a pin, and could not have been worn. Analysis of the metal, using energy-dispersive X-ray fluorescence, reveals its chemical composition to be a leaded tin bronze with what is, for this period, a relatively high tin and silver content (Table 1).

¹ We are grateful to Mr. I. Malin for his permission to publish the Little Milton brooch (Ashmolean identification no. 525), and to the Ashmolean Museum for providing the photographic plates and illustrations. We would also like to thank Sonia Hawkes, Dafydd Kidd and Christopher Scull for their comments regarding the Little Milton brooch.

² For example, H. Kühn, *Die Germanischen Bügelfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit in der Rheinprovinz* (Bonn 1940), Taf. 32.109 and pp. 172-4; C. Lorren, 'Des Saxons en Basse Normandie au VI^e siècle?' in H.-J. Hässler (ed.), *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 2 (Heidelberg 1980), fig. 2.1, p. 235.

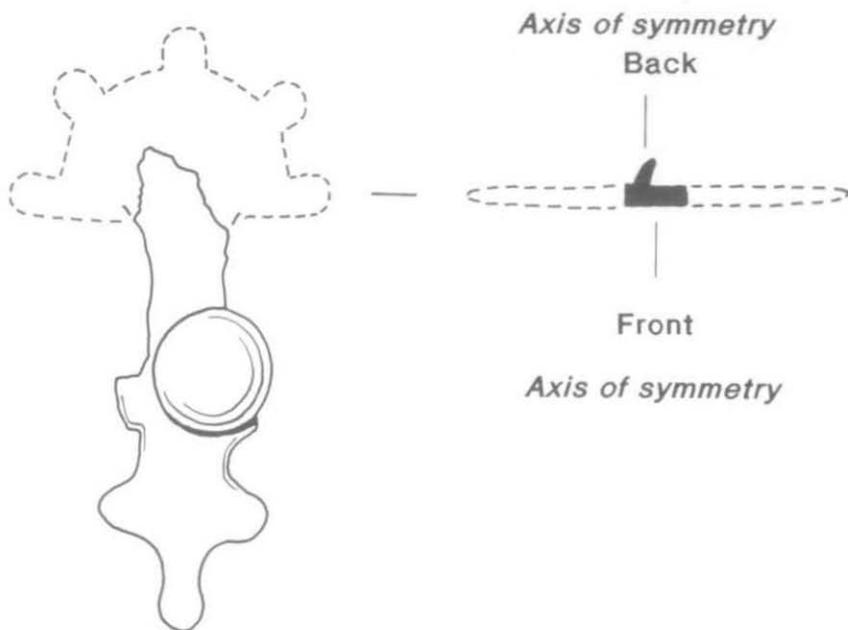


Fig. 1. (Scale 1:1).

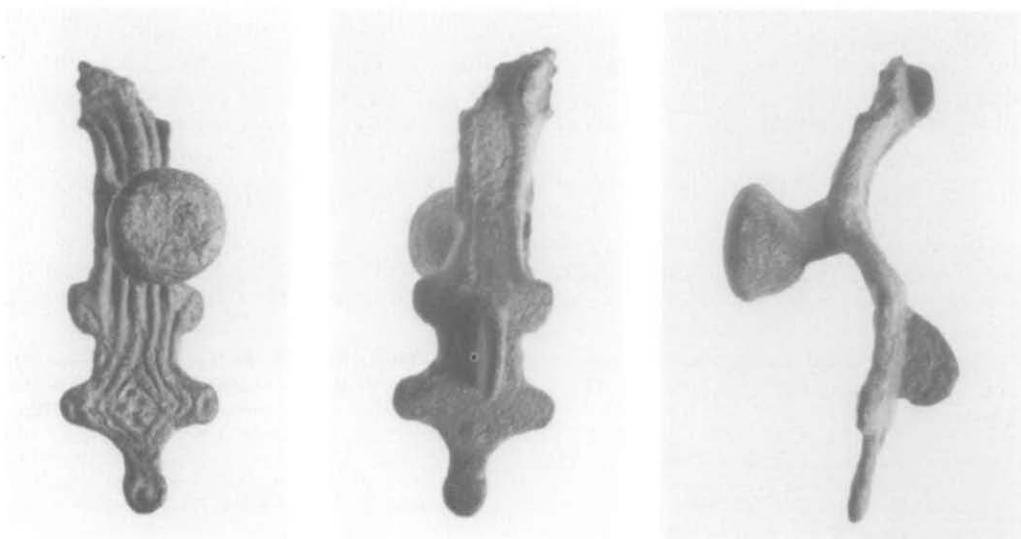


Fig. 2. (Scale 1:1). (Ph. Ashmolean Museum).

TABLE 1: CHEMICAL COMPOSITION OF LITTLE MILTON BROOCH

Iron: 0.5% Lead: 5.2% Silver: 1.3% Tin: 14.9%
 Nickel, Arsenic, Antimony: not detected

Discussion: The brooch belongs to the broad class of radiate brooches found across much of Europe in the second half of the 5th and 6th centuries, and similar brooches are recorded from sites as distant as south Russia, as well as the Elbe-Weser triangle.³ Its affinities are thus wide-ranging and difficult to localize. No exact parallels have been found, but the placement of the roundels and the decoration of the central lozenge-shaped field are most closely paralleled by 'Visigothic' brooches, particularly from sites in the Castilian plateau.⁴ No published examples of brooches with ribbing running down the full length of the foot have been found, although brooches with heavily ribbed bows are not uncommon.⁵

Whether the brooch derives from a settlement or burial is unknown. It was found in the vicinity of a Roman villa and no other Migration-Period finds have been reported from the site. Clearly, it was never functional as a brooch, although its somewhat worn condition could be the result of its having been carried in a bag or purse. It is interesting to speculate that this new find, if it is indeed an exotic piece, provides evidence for the importation of scrap bronze into Anglo-Saxon England. It is, however, more likely simply to represent a poorly-executed English copy of a continental brooch type.⁶ Metallurgical analysis of Migration-Period jewellery does not as yet enable a distinction to be made between the chemical compositions of continental and English copper alloys; it is, in any case, unlikely that the provenance of a single object can ever be established in this way since the chief source of bronze in both England and on the Continent was probably reused Roman metalwork. Further investigation of decorative technique may, however, help to elucidate the provenance of the growing number of apparent imports or copies being identified from Anglo-Saxon contexts.

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THE DESERTED MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT AT WRETCHWICK, AMBROSDEN, OXON., AND THE BICESTER RING ROAD

On the S.W. edge of the deserted settlement at Wretchwick, a small, rectangular ditched enclosure was sectioned in June 1988 in advance of road construction. The work was funded by English Heritage. Several sherds of pottery and clay tobacco-pipe stem at the base of the topsoil suggested the enclosure was no earlier than the 18th century, and may have enclosed ricks in an area of poor drainage. There are no dated comparable

³ J. Werner, *Katalog der Sammlung Diergardt*, Bd. 1 (Berlin 1961), Taf. 33.128; E. Grohne, *Mahndorf: Frühgeschichte des Bremischen Raums* (Bremen 1953), Abb. 43.b.; H. Zeiss, *Die Grabfunde aus dem Spanischen Westgotenreich* (Berlin 1934), 100; N. Åberg, *Die Franken und Westgoten in der Völkerwanderungszeit* (Uppsala 1922).

⁴ For example, brooches illustrated in: P. de Palol, *Arte Hispanica de la Epoca Visigoda* (Barcelona 1968), fig. 97; H. Schlunk and T. Hauschild, *Hispania Antiqua* (Mainz 1978), Taf. 52a. A pair of brooches in the Museo de Arqueológico, Barcelona (provenance unknown), while more elaborately decorated, exhibits a similarly decorated lozenge-shaped field in the centre of the foot plate. M. Almagro, *Memorias de los Museos Arqueológicos Provinciales* 9/10 (1948/9), pl. XI. 45.

⁵ e.g. H. Kühn, *Die Germanischen Bügelfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit*, III. Teil, Mitteldeutschland (Graz 1981), Taf. 41.257, 262; Åberg, op. cit. note 3, 215, Abb. 317 & 320.

⁶ Direct evidence of such copying is provided by the discovery in Geneva of a lead model used for casting an Anglian square-headed brooch. C. Bonnet and M. Martin, 'Bleimodell einer angelsächsischen Fibel aus Saint-Pierre in Genf', *Archéologie Suisse/Archäologie der Schweiz*, 5 (1982), 210-24.

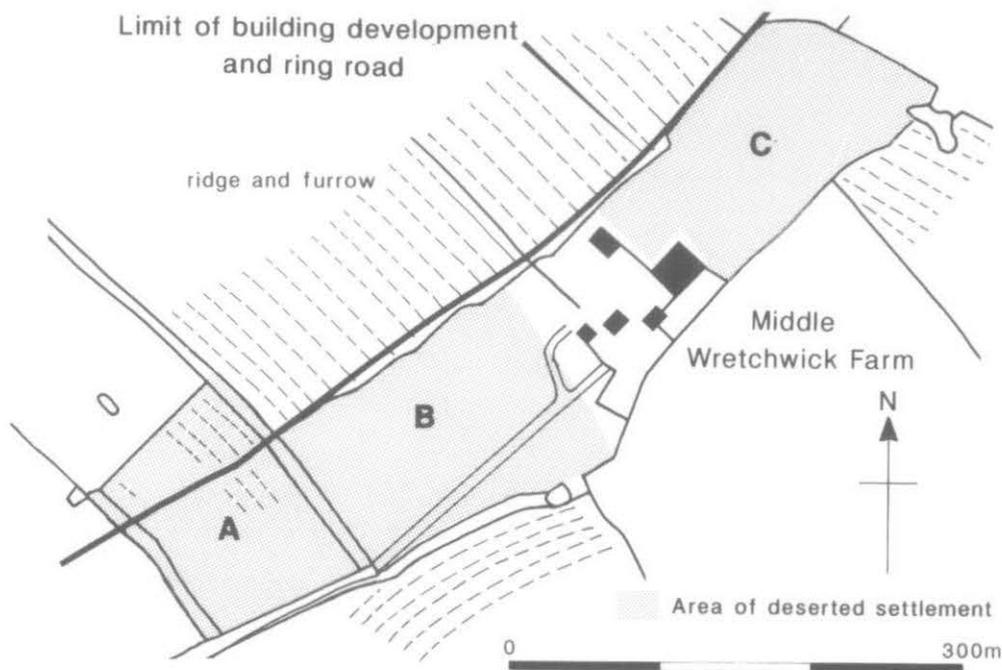


Fig. 1. Deserted settlement remains at Middle Wretchwick Farm, Ambrosden. Only areas B and C lie within the scheduled area (SAM Oxon. no 108).

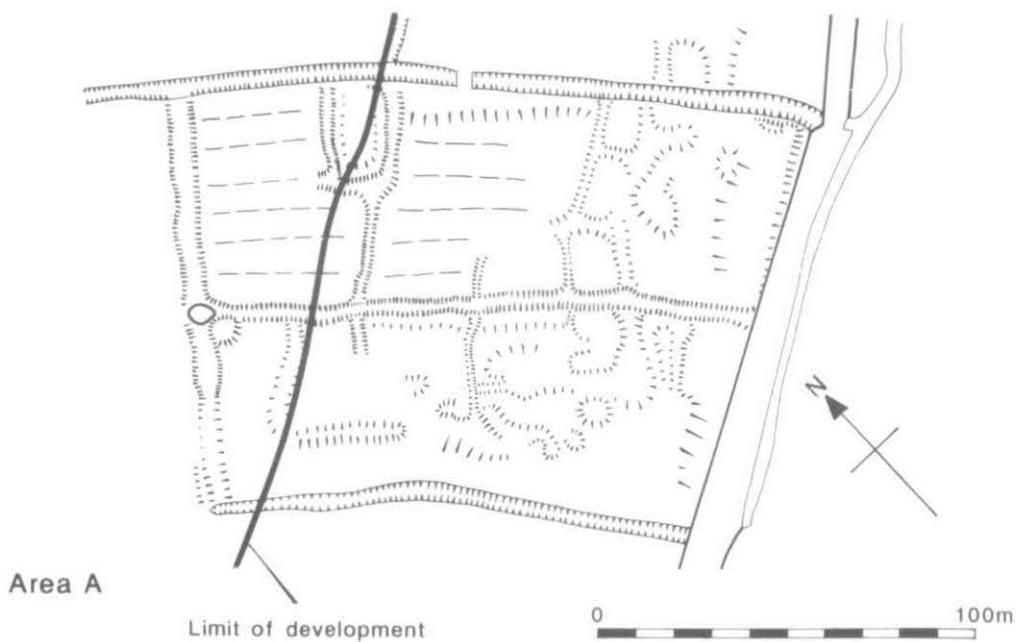


Fig. 2. Area A. Deserted settlement remains SW of the scheduled area. The ditched platform cutting ridge and furrow was post-medieval. Based on a survey by C.J. Bond.

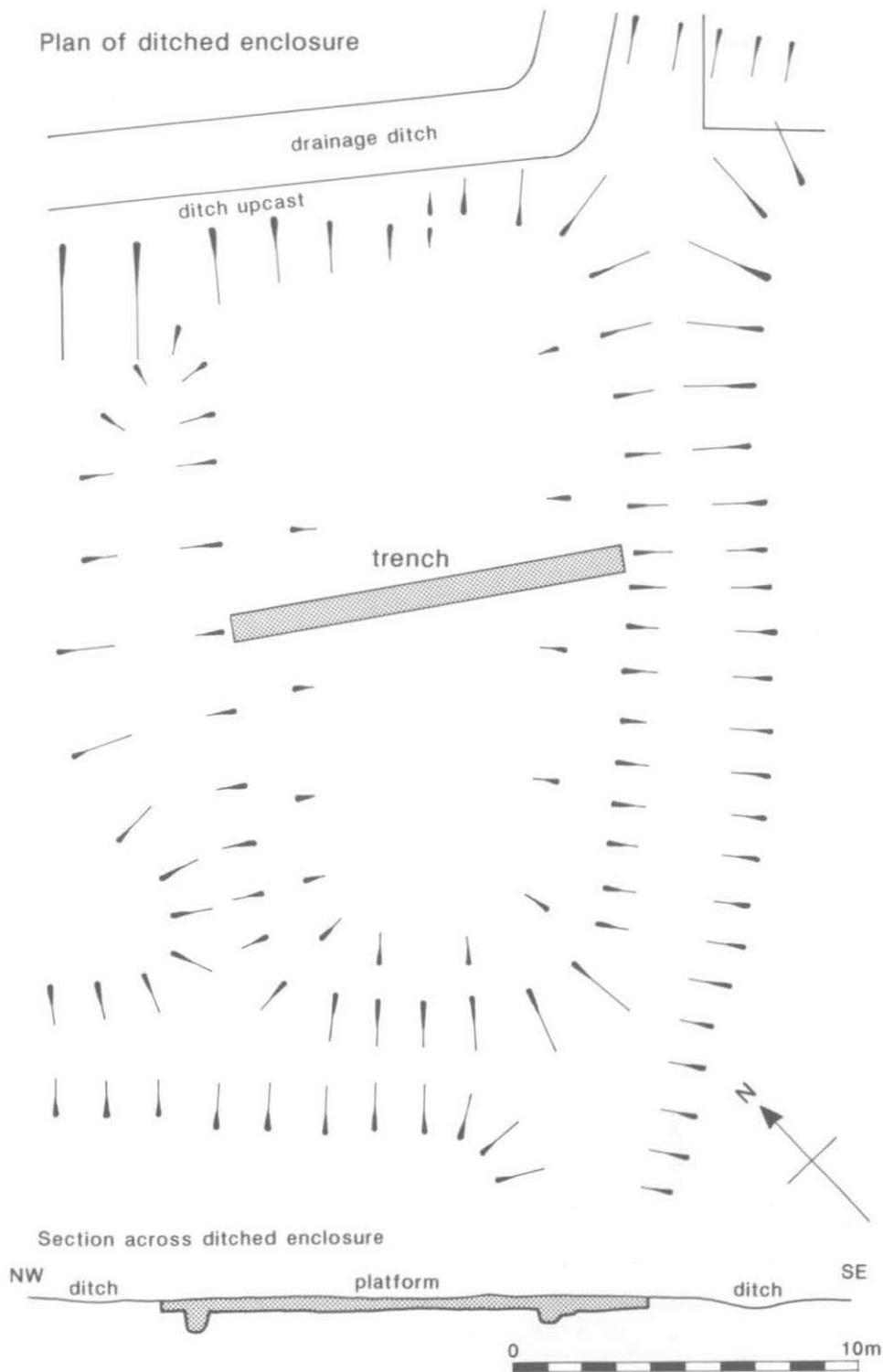


Fig. 3. Plan and section of the earthwork enclosure.

examples, but a similar feature may be associated with the post-medieval farm N.E. of Ardley House at Ardley, Oxon.¹

The ditched enclosure at Wretchwick lay in the path of the new Bicester ring road which passed along the W. edge of the scheduled area of the deserted medieval village, centred at SP 597214 (Fig. 1). The earthwork enclosure overlay ridge and furrow (Fig. 2) and was relatively slight, the S.E. ditch being only 0.3 m. deep. The N.W. ditch was wider and shallower, probably as a result of cattle trampling down the edge (Fig. 3). The ridge and furrow across the interior appears to have been levelled up with ditch upcast and there was a hint of some ditch upcast having been spread along the edges of the platform.

A section was excavated by hand to a depth of 0.4 m., revealing undisturbed natural clay beneath the topsoil. The identification of the natural subsoil was confirmed by two test pits 1.0 m. and 0.8 m. deep at either end of the trench. The ditches were not sectioned.

To the W. of Middle Wretchwick Farm, fieldwork in advance of the construction of the ring road had produced occasional sherds of medieval pottery which suggested that part of the medieval village may have lain beneath later ridge and furrow. Archaeological surveillance during road construction showed that the present hedge line marked the W. limit of the village tofts. Although several sherds of medieval pottery were collected after the topsoil had been stripped from the road line, none was earlier than the 13th century.

During the Middle Ages, Wretchwick lay within Bicester parish, situated on heavy wet clay 1.5 km. S.W. of the market town. Although in existence as an estate by 1086, Wretchwick is not named as a separate manor until 1194.² By 1274 it had been appropriated by Bicester Priory and gradual economic decline exacerbated by the Black Death in 1349 prompted the priory to begin enclosing untenanted messuages. Wretchwick never managed to recover and much of the manor had been divided into five leasehold estates by 1536. The pattern of the earthworks S.W. of the modern farm is distinctly more regular and rectilinear than that to the N.E., which Bond suggests may represent the core of the original settlement to which a planned extension had been added.³ Such an extension or regeneration of the village core may reflect the subsequent growth in prosperity and increased labour requirement as dairying became more important by the 16th century. However, the Davis map suggests that in 1797⁴ there was only a farm, and the deserted settlement and arable land to the S.W. of the village was enclosed in its present form by 1881.⁵

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¹ Fairey Air Survey Ltd, 26-6-1961, ref. 21-0-03. See also unpublished archaeological assessment by the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

² *V.C.H. Oxon.* vi (1959), 21.

³ C.J. Bond, 'Grassy Hummocks and Stone Foundations: Fieldwork and Deserted Medieval Settlements in the South-West Midlands, 1945-1985', in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds.), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England* (1989), 129-48.

⁴ R. Davis, *A New Map of the County of Oxfordshire* (1797), Sheet VII.

⁵ O.S. Map 1/2,500, Oxon. XXIII. 10 (1881).