

AN IRON AGE HILLFORT AT BRILL?

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Iron Age pottery from Brill is illustrated, and a watching brief described. It is suggested that an earthwork adjacent to the Parish church might be the bank of a hillfort.

The village of Brill has a history of more than local interest. It has also been well served by active local historians such as F. W. Bateson (Bateson 1966), and the late Ian Rodger. Michael Reed has reasonably argued that the village had a regional role as the focus of an ancient 'multiple estate' (Reed 1979, 74-6). Nevertheless from the viewpoint of the archaeologist interested in understanding its topography there remain many outstanding problems.

The place name Brill, formed from British and Old English words both meaning 'hill', indicates its natural prominence in the landscape. The earliest firm evidence at present available for utilization of the piece of land which was eventually to become the village, consists of a solitary mesolithic flint, a back-garden find. Early Iron Age pottery has been discovered in circumstances to be described later and there are in the vicinity, although not immediately within the present village envelope, Romano-British settlements of imprecisely defined character. In all probability there will one day prove to be early to middle Saxon occupation, and Late Saxon occupation is evidenced by the documentary reference to construction of a house at Brill by Edward the Confessor. This royal house was substantially enhanced over the ensuing centuries by various monarchs before passing out of royal hands in 1337 (summarized in Allen Brown *et al.* 1963, 902-3). The royal presence may have been further demonstrated by the construction of an earthwork castle. Bateson (1966, 5 and plate II)

reproduces part of a New College map of 1590, showing a large mound adjoining the church on the west and lying behind the buildings fronting Church Street and High Street, and clearly marked 'Castell hill'.

Through a happy combination of resources and need, many of the medieval inhabitants of Brill (and, for a period, of the adjoining village of Boarstall) turned their hand to clay crafts, producing enormous quantities of pottery, tile, and later brick. This industry, which was certainly under way in the early thirteenth century, continued until the late nineteenth century and has been well documented elsewhere (for a recent summary of reference see Yeoman 1988). The landscape of Brill on its northern side is dominated by clay pits, mostly deriving from the later phases of this industry, and many kilns have been discovered as a result of building work in the village. Topographical evidence should also be available from the activities of soldiers garrisoned here during the Civil War (Johnson 1963, 83).

Given this wealth of information, much of it well supported by documentary evidence, it is surprising that an understanding of the historical topography of Brill still presents many unresolved problems. Moreover, it is frustrating that all of the investigative archaeological work which has been carried out has been on a very small scale, and frequently in the middle of sites under development, conditions not conducive to effective research.

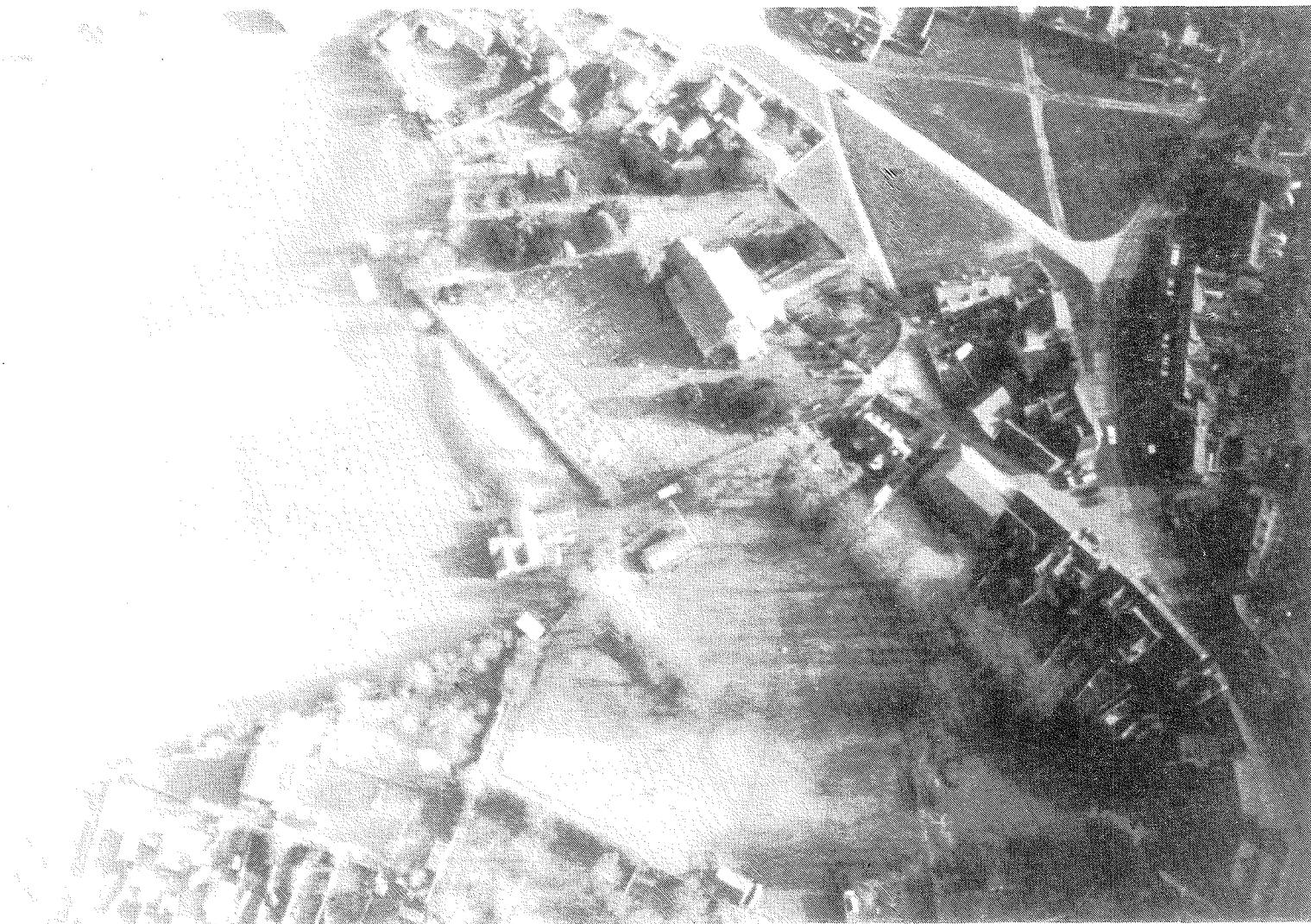


Plate III. Aerial view of church at Brill, with earthwork cut by churchyard wall.



Plate IV. Ground view of eastern part of earthwork looking south-west, with All Saints church behind, cricket pavilion to the right.

The Church Close Earthworks

One obvious piece of visible archaeology exists, an understanding of which might provide a useful reference point for future research, namely the remains of a substantial east-west earthwork which lies immediately to the north of the parish church of All Saints.

The best surviving part of this earthwork (Fig. 1) extends over a length of about 110m and lies partly in Church Close, with a western section lying in an adjoining field to the west of a trackway. In 1977 its bank averaged 2.5m in height and 14.0m in width (Ordnance Survey records). The line of a waterfilled ditch is visible on its north side to the west of the track, and its continuation is just visible for a short length on the east. However, its course some 60m further to the west is clear on the ground, and a further 80m length to the east is marked by the break of slope. The whole forms a gentle arc some 250m long.

Both bank and ditch have in recent years received unwelcome attention, particularly in c.1973 when part of the eastern length of the bank was removed by machine and pushed into the ditch in order to improve the adjoining cricket field. Previously, in about 1949 the churchyard had also been extended in a northerly direction, up to the bank itself. An attempt to have the bank and ditch scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1969 failed, but it eventually received that protection in 1986.

During the 1973 episode, several people including Ian Rodger and Mary Prosser, collected finds from the disturbed soil and passed them to the Museum, and more were collected when the cricket pavilion was extended southwards in 1976. The finds were of several periods but included sherds of early Iron Age pottery.

In 1987 Scheduled Monument Consent was given for a further small extension to the cricket pavilion on its west side, on the presumed course of the backfilled ditch, and the writer carried out a watching brief on behalf of English Heritage in September of that year.

The Watching Brief

The footings trench for the extension was hand-dug in two sections at the north-west corner of the cricket pavillion, a northern trench (A) and a southern one (B), to a maximum width of 0.4m and a depth of 1.20m. Total length was less than 4.0m. Observation in this confined space was difficult.

In the northernmost trench (A) a natural vertical sequence consisting of 0.5m of mid-brown loam, and giving way to 0.3m of tabular ironstone, resting on yellow sand, was observed. At the southern end of the trench, a cut was observed both in plan and section dipping south, which is interpreted as indicating the northern margin of the ditch which accompanied the earthwork on its north side. The section of the southern trench (B) nearer to the bank consisted entirely of homogeneous dark brown silty loam, all of it apparently fill. A small sondage to a depth of 1.65m failed to reach undisturbed natural.

Stratified finds were sparse and consisted of the items listed below. Depths below ground level are given rather than contexts as the width of the trench precluded reliable stratigraphic attribution.

Ref. No.	Type	Depth (m)	Trench
202	Sherd	0.60	A
206	Sherd	0.80	A
200	Bone	0.90	B
201	Sherd	1.15	B
205	Sherd	1.15	A
203	Charcoal	1.25	A
207	Sherd	1.45	B

All the sherds present were small, but all apart from 202 are clearly from hand-built vessels. Only 201 can be fairly confidently ascribed to a period and that is Iron Age. None from the watching brief are illustratable.

Iron Age Pottery (Fig. 2)

The pottery described below is a selection of that collected from or adjacent to the earthwork prior to the watching brief (see above). All are from handmade vessels.

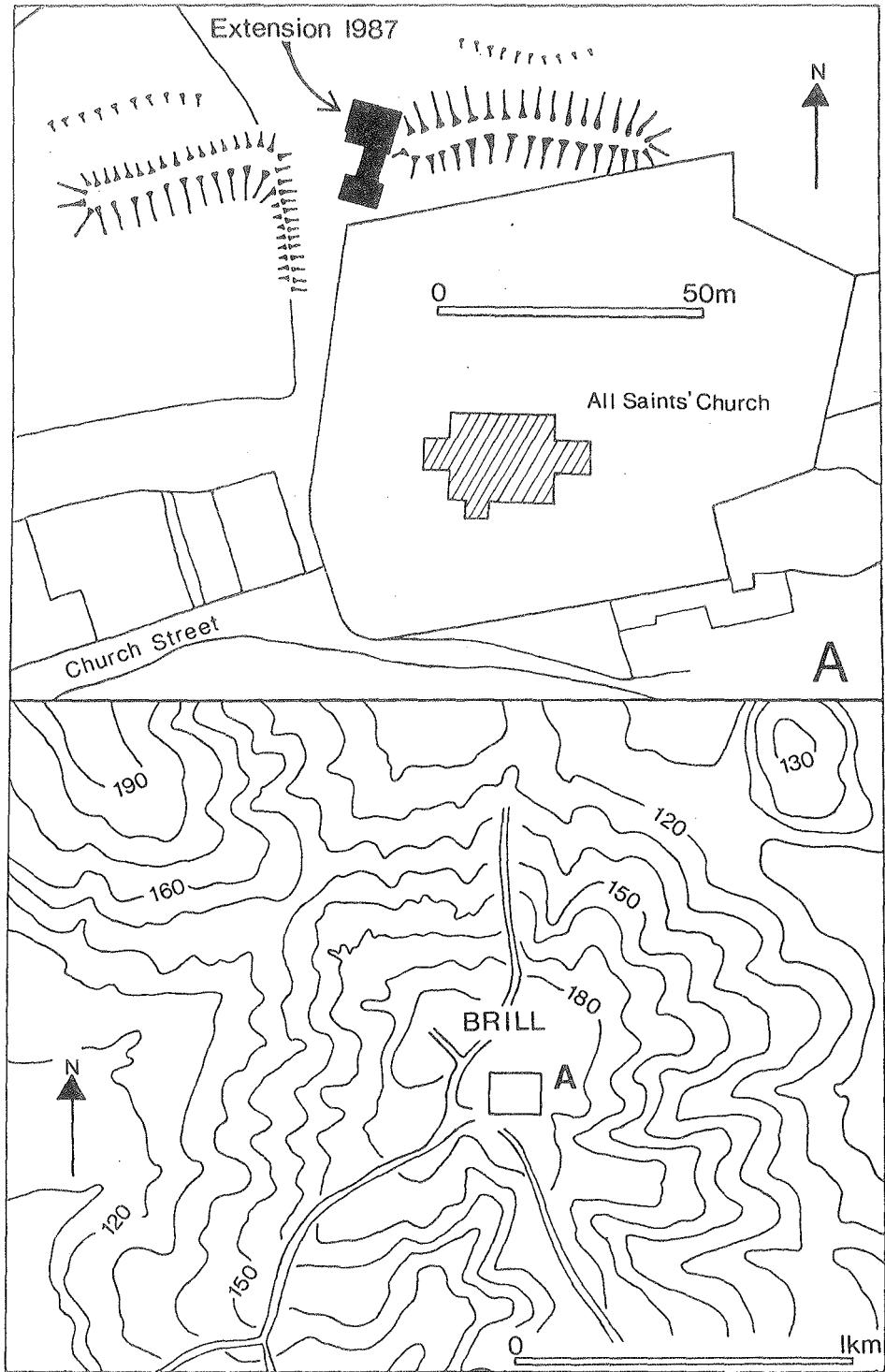


Fig. 1. Location of the earthwork and of the watching brief at Brill.

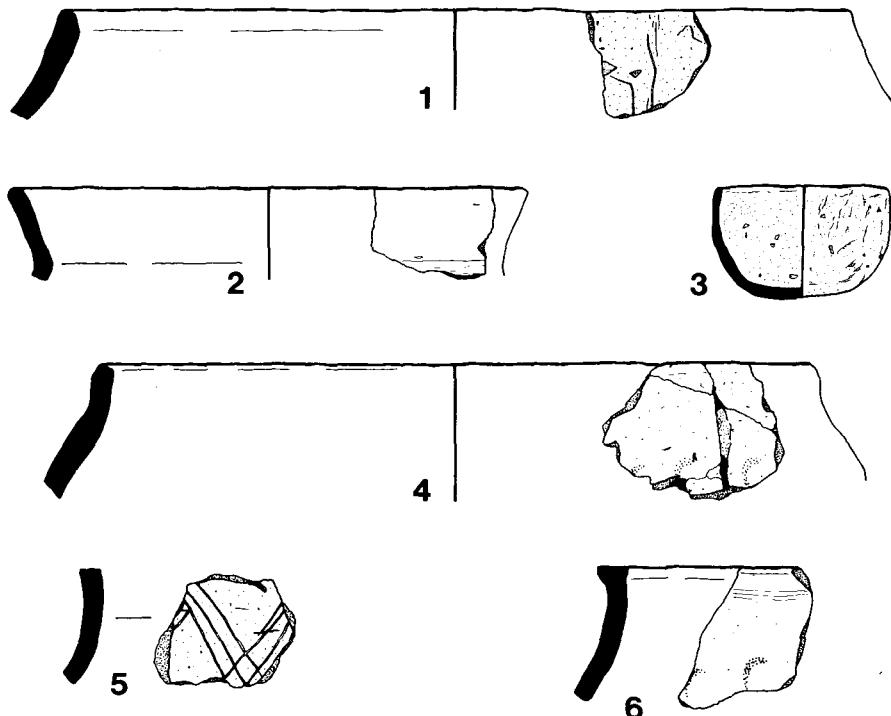


Fig. 2. Iron Age pottery from Brill (1/3 scale).

1. Rim, traces of vegetable wiping ext. Shelly inclusions up to 4mm, dark ext. and int. Collected by Mr I. Rodger. Acc. no. 121.73.
2. Rim, burnished ext. and int: dark ext. and int., fine quartz inclusions up to 1mm: traces of coil building. Collected by Mr I. Rodger. Acc. no. 294.1980.
3. Complete cup, formed by thumbing: Pink/black ext. A range of inclusions, including shell (?fossil), up to 3mm calcite, ironstone and a chert-like material. From footings of sports pavilion extension 1976. Collected by Mrs M. Prosser. Acc. no. 304.76.
4. Rim (broken into 5 pieces). Fingertip decoration on shoulder: dark grey-black ext. and int.: shell inclusions up to 4mm. From footings of sports pavilion extension. Collected by Mrs M. Prosser. Acc. no. 211.76.
5. Body sherd ?from bowl, burnished ext. and int. Incised parallel groove decoration. Shelly inclusions up to 2mm. Collected by Mr I. Rodger. Acc. no. 121.73.
6. Rim, burnished ext. and on top of rim, broad finger impressions on lower neck: dark ext. and int. Calcareous inclusions up to 1mm. Collected by Mrs M. Prosser. Acc. no. 211.76.

A satisfactory chronology for Late Bronze/Iron Age ceramic remains to be established for central Buckinghamshire. However, three simple divisions seen elsewhere appear to be reasonably established: an early tradition

represented best by Chinnor (Richardson 1951) which includes substantial coarse-fabric vessels often flint-tempered, with fine burnished wares, particularly bowls, some decorated; a long-lived group of relatively globular forms with simple rims often with fine temper, seen for example at Woodham, Bucks, with a single associated radiocarbon date of 330+80bc (Farley *et al.* 1984); and a later predominantly grog-tempered tradition represented by Bierton (Knight 1986). The Brill group would fit best with the earlier tradition although it would be unwise to attempt further refinement at this stage.

The Date of the Earthwork

The earthwork appears to have been first noted in print by Lipscomb (1847, 104) who observes 'no vestiges of the royal residence are now to be traced, unless in some embankments north and west of the church, still called the King's field, though scarcely remembered under that name.' Hadrian Allcroft recorded it in his important national survey of earthworks

(1908, 471) and, unaware perhaps of the royal attribution, considered that it might form part of a moated homestead. The Royal Commission proposed that the earthwork, along with another line of defence 'further down the hill', which has not subsequently been located on the ground, were constructed during the Civil War (RCHM 1912, 67) and VCH proposes a date of about 1644 when Brill was garrisoned for parliament (VCH 1925, 15). This view is supported by Bateson (1966, 11–12) who suggests that the apparent castle mound depicted on the map of 1590 may also have been incorporated.

Neither a medieval nor a Civil War origin for the earthwork is out of the question. If the mound noted on the 1590 map by Bateson were a motte, then it might have been accompanied by a bailey of which the surviving earthwork could form a part. However it has to be said that not the slightest trace of a mound survives and it is possible that its depiction was a product of artistic licence. On the other hand Henry II is recorded to have employed a master digger to superintend construction of a bank and ditch around the king's chamber (Allen Brown *et al.* 1963, 62) and, although perhaps rather substantial, this in turn provides another possible context for earthmoving. As a defensive work, the bank certainly lies some distance south from the naturally defensive position of the hill scarp which lies c. 270m to the north. However, if it were a Civil War defence, the church building could have been used to good effect. It may therefore seem perverse to suggest that the earthwork may, in origin at least, be of Iron Age date.

There are only two pieces of evidence in favour of this view, one positive, the other negative. The positive evidence is the presence of a considerable quantity of early Iron Age ceramic, including a complete cup, from the

bank or its immediate vicinity, and of a few sherds likely to be prehistoric in date, from the fill of the accompanying ditch. The negative evidence is the *absence* of material of a later date from the apparent ditch observed in the watching brief. It is hard to imagine that should the bank and ditch be medieval in date, the ditch would not have included much ceramic in its fill, since every back garden in Brill is littered with medieval ceramic. Even were it to be Civil War in date, the ditch's backfill might be expected to have included residual medieval ceramic, as proved to be the case during the 1985 excavation of a Civil War work at the Prebendal, Aylesbury.

Obviously the footings trench excavation was extremely limited in extent and the risk of over-interpreting the evidence must be borne in mind. However, the possibility that the earthwork may be Iron Age in date and of a sufficient scale to form part of a hillfort should be given serious consideration. The curving arc of the remaining earthwork would give an enclosure with a diameter in the region of 300m. On the east its line may be defined by a fairly steep scarp to the east of Brill House but at present there is little to go on to the south and west. It would not be unreasonable for such an earthwork to be refurbished or adapted within the historic period.

At the least it is hoped that the publication of Iron Age ceramic from Brill will provide a new strand of chronology for an interesting and complex village. It is to be hoped that one day further investigations will be possible.

Acknowledgements

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