

A MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT SITE AT FILLINGTON WOOD, WEST WYCOMBE

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Excavation of a circular Chiltern earthwork enclosure revealed at least two medieval flint buildings, including a kiln or oven area. Further features, including a shaft containing human remains, a circular flint structure and a possible field boundary, were located outside the area of the earthwork. There was sufficient unstratified Roman pottery to hint at the existence of earlier occupation. The results of the excavations are described briefly, and discussed in relation to other medieval sites in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns.

Introduction

The site was located by R.F. Parker in 1966, during field survey associated with the construction of the new A40 between Stokenchurch and West Wycombe. The main feature is a circular earthwork, 60 metres in diameter, cut by the road known as Old Dashwood Hill (NGR SU 798948).

Between 1967 and 1974, the enclosure was excavated by the Archaeological Group of the Marlow and Mill End Evening Institute, under the direction of R.F. Parker. A number of flint footings were located, associated with pottery of medieval date. An earlier phase of occupation was suggested by the presence of Romano-British pottery. Two preliminary reports were issued (Parker 1972, Boarder 1975), copies of which were deposited together with the excavation archive, at Bucks County Museum (CAS 0186).

In April 1992, a new survey of the enclosure was prepared, the intent being to publish a summary of the 1967-74 excavations. The survey relocated the original trenches and forms the basis for Figures 2 and 3. This report has been compiled by Paul Struth, with reference to original material kindly supplied by the excavators.

Situation

The site lies on a promontory of the Chilterns (175m OD), approximately two miles west of the village of West Wycombe, in an area of beech woodland (Fig.1). The underlying geology is chalk, here capped by a deposit of clay-with-flints.

The enclosure comprises a single ditch circuit, with no obvious entrance. Traces of an internal bank are preserved on the southern approach, standing 1.60 metres above the bottom of the ditch. Although situated prominently, the enclosure does not follow the contours but faces southwards, the ground level rising c.3 metres along the S-N axis. The circuit is interrupted by Old Dashwood Hill, originally constructed as a turnpike, and north of the road the enclosure is poorly preserved. Prior to the construction of the turnpike, the main route from Wycombe to Stokenchurch ran through a hollow way, the remains of which are still to be seen to the north of the site.

A lynchet, running E-W, abuts the south-western side of the enclosure and forms a right angle with a similar earthwork some 90 metres beyond (Fig.2). It appears to describe a rectangular paddock or close. Although the encl-

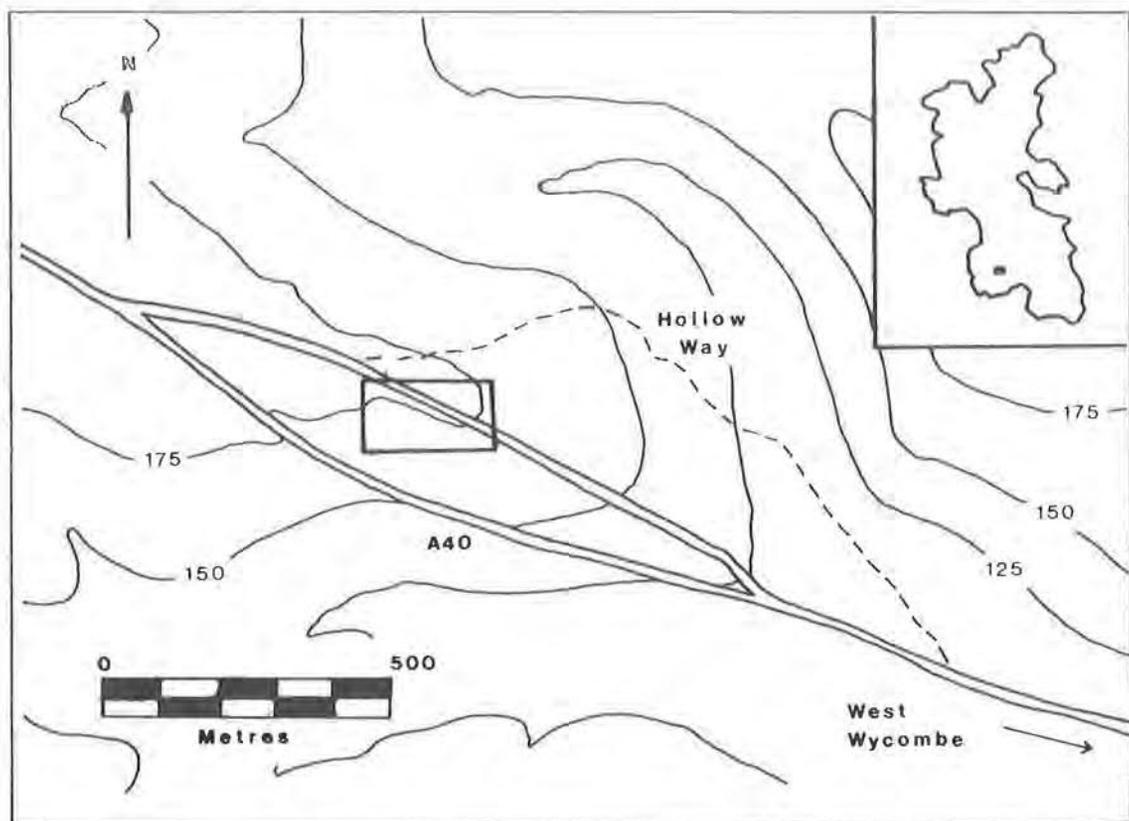


Figure 1. Fillington Wood, West Wycombe: location.

sure could not be shown to cut the lynchet, their relative positions suggest that the former might postdate the layout of the field.

The Excavations

Between 1967-74, a number of trenches were opened in the area south of the road, the intention being to section the bank and ditch and investigate the interior of the site (Fig.3). Excavation was concentrated upon an area of raised ground at the centre of the enclosure, suspected to cover the remains of medieval structures. The location and alignment of the trenches was largely determined by the position of standing trees, and tree roots were a problem frequently encountered during the course of the excavation. Trial trenches outside the enclosure revealed two further features of presumed medieval date.

The results are summarised under five headings:

- | <i>Internal features:</i> | <i>External features:</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| a) The enclosure ditch. | d) The shaft. |
| b) The terrace. | e) The dovecote. |
| c) The kitchen area. | |

For further details the reader is referred to the preliminary reports.

a) The Enclosure Ditch

The enclosure ditch was investigated at four points on its circuit, and was found to have a U-shaped profile. The bank had been constructed from the spoil of the ditch, and was revetted with flint. Finds from the ditch consisted largely of medieval pottery, with some peg-hole tile.

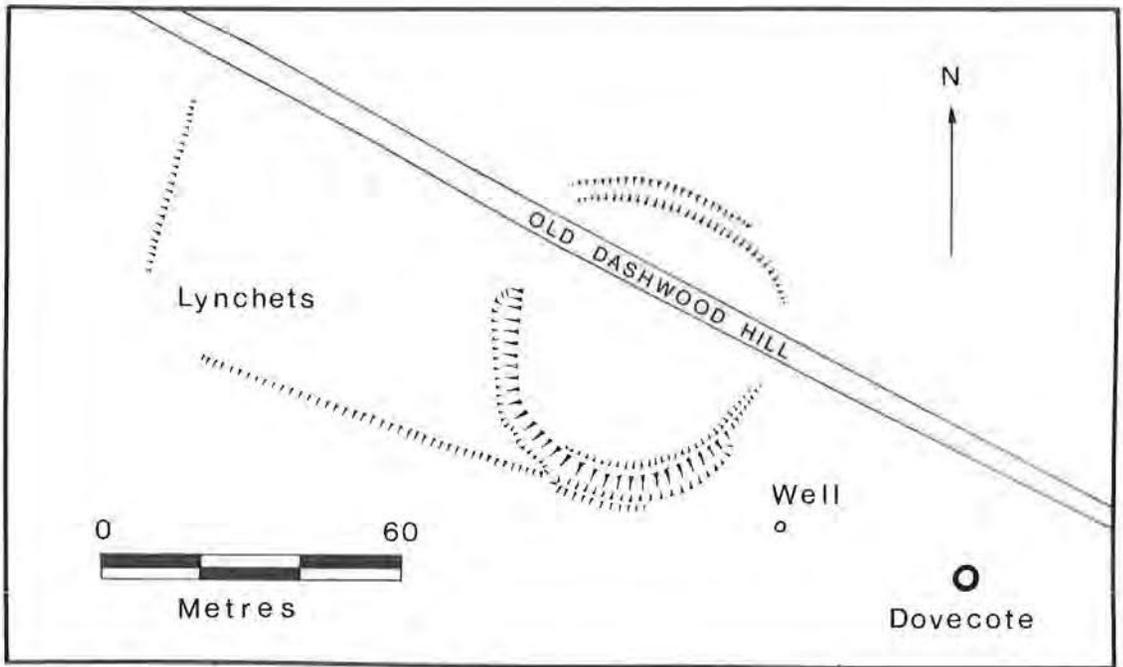


Figure 2. The medieval site at Fillington Wood.

b) The Terrace

Initial excavations within the interior of the enclosure (1967–8) revealed a medieval surface which apparently extended over much of the southern half of the enclosure. Interpreted as a yard, the surface consisted of packed flint resting directly on top of the clay subsoil and was associated with more than one hundred sherds of medieval pottery of twelfth/thirteenth-century date.

During 1968, excavation was extended northwards to section the area of raised ground in the centre of the enclosure (Fig.3, B). An apparently natural rise in the subsoil had been artificially enhanced by a revetment of flint to form a terrace. This terrace was found to support a flint wall running E–W across the site.

The terrace was occupied by a rectangular building with flint footings, approximately 5 × 7 metres, of which only the lower courses were preserved. The roof appears to have consisted of peg tile, large quantities of which sealed a

floor surface associated with twelfth/thirteenth century sherds. Unfortunately, only part of the building could be excavated, the remainder having been disturbed by the construction of the turnpike. Spoil from these works, which contained clay pipes and other late material, was found to have overlaid the medieval horizon.

Two other features were associated with the building.

To the west, and overlying the flint walls, a thick layer (100mm) of charcoal and ash was uncovered. Associated finds included fragments of iron (nails and two horseshoes) and sherds of brown-glazed pottery (sixteenth century). The horseshoes had plain edges, as opposed to the wavy-edged form characteristic of the early medieval period (Goodall 1981, 61). The deposit seemed to be related to a circular hollow and may represent activity, such as charcoal burning, after the abandonment of the buildings.

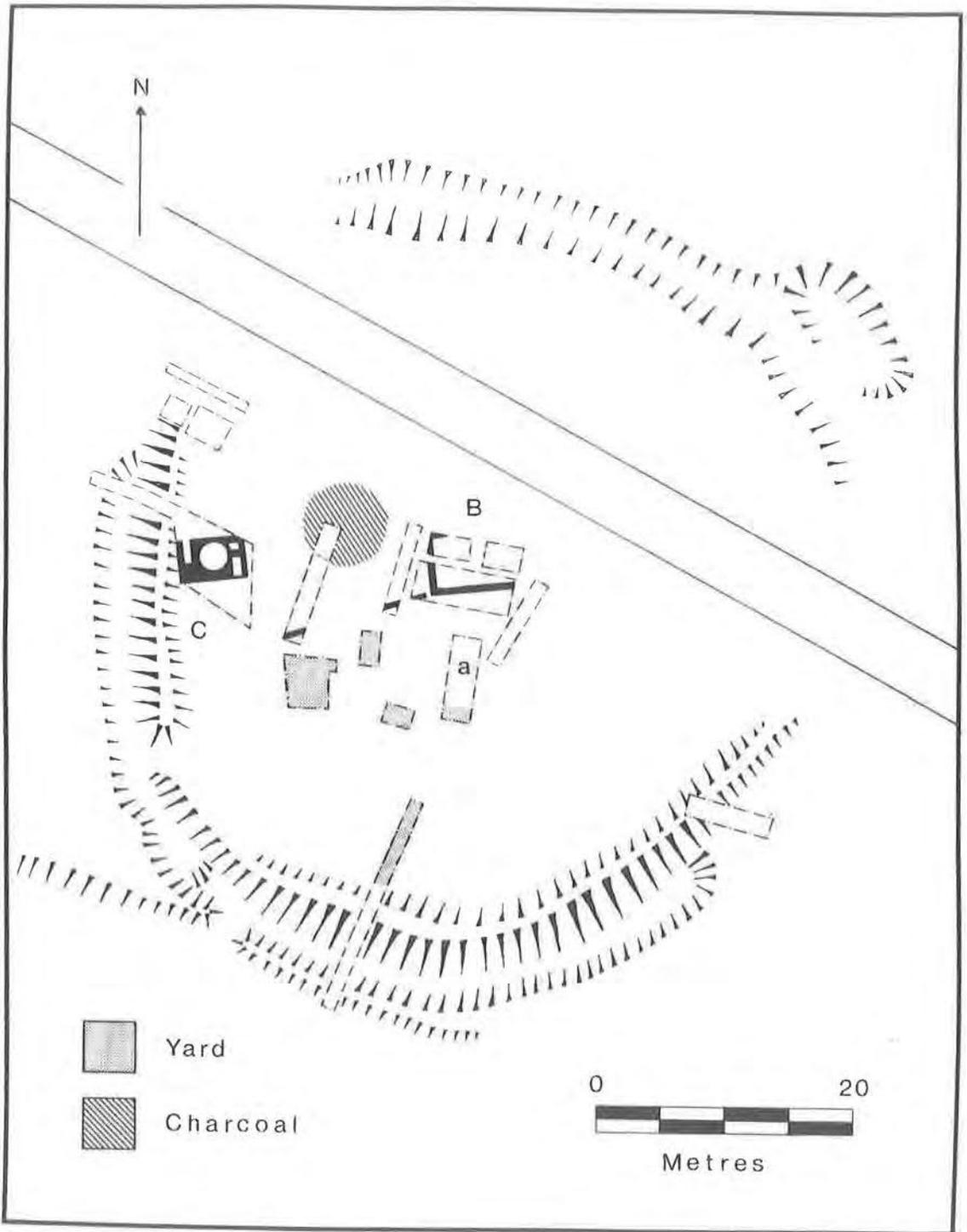


Figure 3. The excavations: flint structures in black.

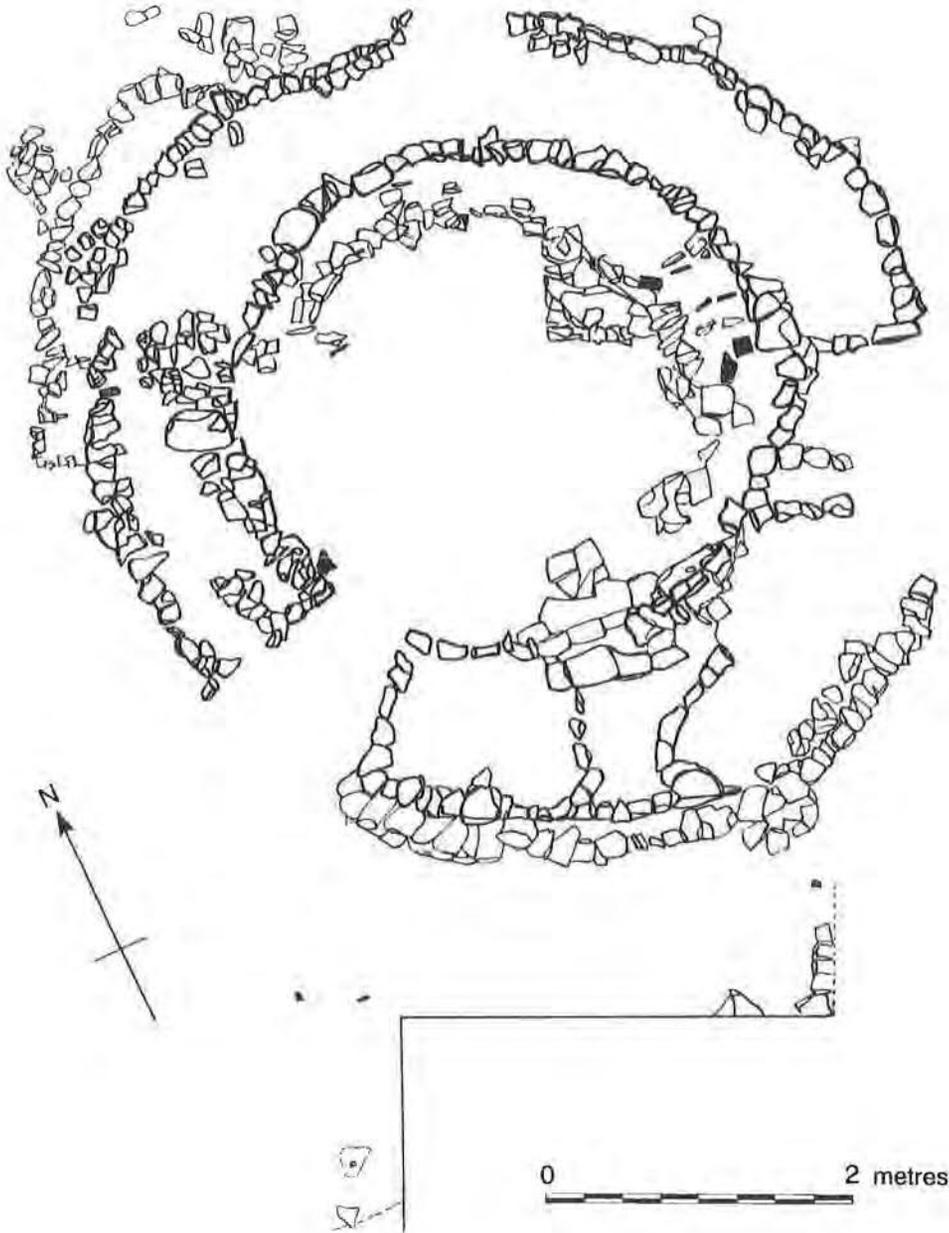


Figure 4. Plan of the dovecote, by Brenda Easterbrook.

To the south east, immediately below the terrace wall, a surface depression was found to conceal a rectangular, flint lined trench (Fig.3, a). This acted as a natural reservoir, holding water throughout the dry summer of 1969, and may have served such a function during the medieval period. The trench contained over 50 sherds of medieval pottery and peg tile.

c) *The Kitchen Area*

In 1970 the excavations were extended to include a mound on the western side of the enclosure (Fig.3, C). Discovery of a layer of collapsed flint and roofing tile quickly confirmed the existence of another structure in this area. The building was rectangular, oriented E-W and measured $6 \times 3.4\text{m}$ externally; it was preserved to a maximum height of 0.6m.

The principal feature of the building was a large circular structure (internal diameter 2.2m), probably a kiln or oven, although no flue was identified. The interior was filled with layers of charcoal and medieval pottery of twelfth/thirteenth century date.

To the west of the kiln or oven, but still within the rectangular building, was a tile-lined trench. The latter measured $1.5 \times 0.45\text{m}$ and had been subjected to intense heat at the north (outer) end. The deposit recorded *in situ* consisted of charcoal and broken peg tile. The tile walls of the trench were laid flat and bonded by mortar.

The plan of the building might suggest several phases of construction/use, with the circular kiln/oven representing a separate element. Unfortunately, the excavators were unable to determine whether this had been inserted into an earlier building, or whether it represented the primary structure.

The authors would prefer to see the area as a detached kitchen block. However it does not match well other excavated examples of kitchens and it is difficult to conceive of the building as a closed structure, since external access would have been required. A more plausible reconstruction would involve an open air flint 'platform', into which the various

cooking facilities were set. The roofing tiles which were recovered could either have been used to cap the oven, or they may have formed part of a free standing canopy erected over the structure (cf. Clarke 1984, fig.69).

d) *The Shaft*

A shallow depression approximately 15 metres south east of the main enclosure (Fig.2) was found to conceal a circular shaft, cut into the chalk. The shaft was 1.5m in diameter and contained a fill of clay and flint; it was excavated to a depth of 11.7 metres below the surrounding ground level, at which point it was decided to backfill the excavation for safety reasons.

The shaft contained a number of unusual features, which are described in order of increasing depth.

At 2.7m, the sides of the shaft were pierced by five sockets, circular holes 80mm in diameter. The function of these is unknown, but they may be related to some sort of wooden platform or superstructure.

Below 6m the fill was found to contain the bones of animals (small rodents and domestic animals, mainly dogs), either as a result of refuse disposal or accidents.

At 9.2m these were accompanied by human skeletal remains. In total, the partial remains of four individuals were recovered. Two of these were examined on behalf of HM Coroner, and identified as adult males approximately 19 and 25 years of age. The cause of death was not determined.

Pottery and other small finds were notably uncommon, but peg tile and a base sherd from an early fourteenth-century glazed pitcher were recovered from the fill below the human remains. These demonstrate that the shaft was open in the medieval period, and its construction is therefore likely to be associated with the enclosure.

Excavation ceased at a depth of 11.7 metres, when a large sarsen rock was en-

countered. This formed part of the fill, the shaft evidently continuing to a greater depth.

Two possible interpretations for the shaft were considered – a well for drinking water or a dene hole. A dene hole, or 'chalk well', is a shaft sunk to extract chalk in areas like Fillington, where the chalk was capped by a layer of clay-with-flints. The chalk was then used to lime adjoining fields (Farley 1979). Although chalk wells in the Chilterns are first recorded at a relatively late date by Ellis (1733) examples in Kent have been demonstrated to have a medieval origin.

However, the depth of the Fillington shaft poses difficulties. The chalk is a mere 1.4m below the surface at this point and, if the feature had been excavated as a chalk well, one would have expected to encounter a bell shaped chamber within a few metres. Moreover, there is good documentary evidence that chalk wells were only sunk to a depth of 'about 20 feet from the surface'; if chalk had not been reached by this time, the excavators abandoned the enterprise (Board of Agriculture 1813). Therefore, the most likely interpretation of the Fillington shaft is as a well for drinking water. The existence of a 'reservoir' within the enclosure has already been noted and it seems likely that some division of the water supply may have been intended, that from the well being reserved for human consumption while the 'reservoir' functioned as a trough for livestock.

e) The Dovecote

Approximately 50 metres south east of the main enclosure (Fig.2), a circular flint structure was uncovered. The walls were 1.2m thick and preserved to a maximum height of 0.75m. They describe an area with an internal diameter of c.3m. A section was cut through the wall on the SW side. The structure was loosely mortared. There was some evidence of internal stepping near the base.

A series of nesting boxes was built into the flint structure of the interior. These were usually built from tabular flint, four flints defining the opening. At least five relatively in-

tact boxes were recorded but surviving pieces of tabular flint showed where others had been present. The spacing between the boxes was irregular both in vertical and horizontal plane. Some were as close as 0.20m. One at least incorporated a flat roof tile at its base. The aperture of the boxes measured approx $0.15 \times 0.15\text{m}$, but opened into a larger box offset to the entrance, dimensions approx $0.35 \times 0.20\text{m}$.

Some iron fittings were found in the interior including a door bolt. A considerable amount of tile was also recovered, some of which was partially glazed. This may have come in part from the nesting boxes but perhaps also from a collapsed roof. The general form of the dove-cote is comparable to an example at Englishcombe, Somerset (Hurst 1957, 169). It is interesting to note that much Roman pottery was recovered during the excavation of this structure.

The Pottery

A little over 600 pottery sherds, most in a fairly fragmentary condition, were deposited at Buckinghamshire County Museum by the excavators. The following account is not intended as a definitive report on this material.

The bulk of the assemblage consists of plain wares in a coarse, sandy fabric (both oxidised and reduced). The typical range of medieval forms – cooking pot, jug and bowl – is represented, with the addition of a skillet from the kitchen area. A number of vessels with large, everted rims are suggestive of a twelfth century date. A range of decorative techniques was employed. Glazes, usually a pale green with some olive green and gold brown, had been applied to both jugs and bowls, in the latter case to the interior only. Glazing was sometimes combined with a white painted slip, a technique also used on its own. Incision was also represented, either as deep slashes on the strap handles of jugs or as shallow comb impressions. Finally, a few sherds were decorated with barbotine, i.e. applied plastic designs. The variety of decorative techniques implies that Fillington drew its pottery from a number of different kilns.

Documentary sources (the Winchester Pipe Rolls) make reference to a potter working in the manor of West Wycombe, and it is possible that this centre of production is to be equated with a possible kiln at Bolter End, Fingest (Farley *pers. comm*). Vessels from this source are characterised by the white painted linear decoration mentioned above.

Comparison of the assemblage with the pottery recovered from Fulmer (Farley 1982), a domestic site dated to the thirteenth century, reveals a number of immediate parallels. Phase 3 at Fulmer produced the barbotine decoration (Fig.9, 2) and slashed jug handles (Fig.9, 16) witnessed at Fillington, the latter a product of the Brill-Boarstall industry, known to have been operating in the thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries. In addition, both sites have examples of the lightly named 'M.40 ware' (Hinton 1973), a type characterised by vertical comb decoration between the base and the shoulder of the vessel. M.40 ware seems to be representative of a localized pottery industry, confined to the southern Chilterns, and is perhaps to be linked with the recently discovered kilns at Denham (Farley & Leach 1988). The latter also produced the barbotine effect (Fig.23, 1-3). Another form of combed decoration present at Fillington featured a multiple meander design. This is also represented at a contemporary site nearby, Desborough Castle, High Wycombe (Collard 1988, Fig.16, 15).

Discussion

The finds from Fillington Wood spanned two millennia, and represent perhaps four distinct phases of activity in the area:

1. Roman

A substantial quantity of Roman material was uncovered during the course of the excavations. The reservoir produced a mortarium fragment and a small piece of samian ware, and a scatter of grey ware was recovered from the topsoil in the area of the dovecote. The sherds were sufficiently large to represent something more than a casual field scatter. In addition, a bronze 'dolphin' fibula, of first cen-

tury date, was found on the yard surface within the enclosure. The excavations failed to reveal any features associated with this phase.

2. Medieval

The vast majority of the finds consisted of medieval pottery (twelfth/thirteenth centuries). Sherds from the primary ditch silts and occupation layers would place both the enclosure and its associated structures in this phase.

3. Late Medieval/Tudor

A number of sherds of brown-glazed pottery (sixteenth century) were recovered from the layer of charcoal which partially overlay the buildings on the terrace (see B above). This layer also contained pottery associated with the medieval layers, but is suggested to represent a phase of activity after the abandonment of the structures.

4. Post Medieval

The construction of the turnpike road resulted in considerable disturbance of the enclosure, involving both the removal of the bank and ditch for six metres on either side and the deposition of large quantities of spoil over the surviving medieval buildings. Clay pipes were recovered from the area of this disturbance. The construction of the turnpike is bracketed by the publication of two county maps of Buckinghamshire, Jefferies' (1788) and Bryant's (1824), the new road appearing only on the latter. As the Beaconsfield-Stokenchurch route was originally turnpike by an act of George I in 1719 (Albert 1972, 226) it seems likely that the Fillington section was secondary, perhaps related to the improvements authorised by George IV (1824)

The principal phase at Fillington was clearly medieval, dated, within the limits of pottery typology, to the twelfth/thirteenth centuries. At this time the flint buildings were constructed. The unusual shape of the enclosure suggested that it might predate the medieval occupation, but both the finds and the enclosure's relationship to the buildings (concentric) appear to confirm the contemporaneity of the pair.

The results of the excavation suggest a twofold division of the enclosure. Buildings were apparently confined to the northern half, the southern area forming a yard, with the boundary between the two marked by a rise in ground level (the terrace) and a flint wall. The most obvious interpretation is that the yard was given over to livestock, watered by the reservoir.

The Buildings

In many parts of England, peasant houses began to be built of (usually) unmortared stone during the thirteenth century (Clarke 1984), and in chalkland areas the stone most readily available was flint. Flint structures – admittedly of high status buildings – have been excavated in Buckinghamshire at Princes Risborough (Pavry & Knocker 1958) and Fulmer (Farley 1982); the latter, dated to the thirteenth century, also had a tile roof. In some cases, the buildings were flint to the eaves, but in most the stone merely provided footings for a cob or timber-framed superstructure; unfortunately, it was not possible to identify to which type the Fillington structures belonged.

The use of roof tiles, introduced in the twelfth century, was largely restricted to the south east where, however, it was fairly common (Cherry 1991). Roof tiles are attested from a number of medieval sites in Buckinghamshire, including both manorial and more humble dwellings, eg at Stokenchurch (Easterbrook 1978). During the century, nearby Penn was to become a major supplier of roof tiles to the Thames valley, the tilers being the only villagers required to pay tax on non-agricultural wealth (Eames 1968, 18). The peg-hole tiles employed at Fillington were well fired, in an orange-red fabric, and varied in size from 9" × 5" (228.6 × 127mm) to 10.25" × 6.75" (260.4 × 171.5mm). Interestingly, the Winchester Pipe Rolls refer to the purchase of tiles for roofing purposes within the manor of Wycombe. The entry for 1283/4 records the expenditure of 15d. on '500 tiles purchased for repairing the roof of the dovecote' and of 6d. for a mason to carry out this work.

Although medieval enclosures are by no means uncommon in the Chilterns, the circular earthwork at Fillington finds few parallels. Most contemporary sites are rectangular and the exception, the strongly defended ringwork at Hawridge, seems scarcely comparable. Ringworks are better regarded as earthwork castles, whereas the more modest defences of Fillington appear adequate only for the retention of livestock.

Simple morphological comparisons are of limited value. Further consideration must depend on an assessment of function. Although the scale of the excavated buildings at Fillington is unremarkable, suggesting nothing more sizeable than a peasant's cot, there are a number of elements which point to a degree of status for the occupants. First, there is the enclosure of the settlement which, in the context of moated sites, is often taken as an indicator of manorial status; secondly, the existence of a detached kitchen block (see C above); and finally, the dovecote. The latter provides a more certain suggestion of status, as historically dovecotes were a privilege reserved to the lords of manors.

The status of the occupant of Fillington is considered further below.

Fillington in the Winchester Customal, by John Chenevix Trench

The most complete survey of the society and economy of medieval West Wycombe is to be found in a document sometimes called 'The Winchester Customal' (B.L. Egerton MS 2418). A customal is a document listing all the holdings in a manor, with the names of the tenants, the extent of each holding and the rents and services due for them. There is one for each of the manors held by the Bishops of Winchester; they were compiled at various dates during the thirteenth century and, at an unknown date, copied onto vellum and bound up in a book.

The colophon of the West Wycombe customal states that it was prepared in the time of 'I(ohannis) Epi(scopi) Winton(iae)'. This is

certainly John de Pontissara, whose episcopate ran from 1282 to 1304. Unfortunately a blot on the skin makes it impossible to read in which year of his consecration the compiler was working. The date should not in any case be accepted without question: the Ivinghoe colophon says 'temp(or)e N(icholai) Epi(scopi) Winton(iae)', but internal evidence puts it beyond question that it was actually compiled during a vacancy of the see sixteen years before the episcopate of Nicholas of Ely (Chenevix Trench, forthcoming).

After listing the jurors the document names six free tenants, who pay money rents and owe light labour services, in contrast to the much longer list of customary or bond tenants (villeins), who pay lower rents but owe very onerous labour services. Four of the free tenants have two virgates each; the other two, one virgate; their rents are from 5s. 6d. per virgate, up to 17s. None of the customary tenants have more than a virgate; most have a half virgate or less. They pay only 5s. a virgate. (A virgate was not a compact body of land, but was made up of strips scattered dispersedly in the common field; in Bucks a virgate usually amounted to 30 customary acres, say 20 statute acres (8.3 ha.)) Land measured in virgates will have been in the common fields.

Among the free tenants is found 'Walter of Silindene'; among the villeins is 'Henry of ffilindene'. Silindene is almost certainly a scribal error for Filindene: no later place name possibly descended from Silindene is recorded, and confusion between 'f' and initial (long) 's' was common. (It led to initial 'f' being written 'ff' to avoid confusion, and, in our own day, to 'fossil' spellings such as 'ffrench').

Two questions then arise. Were either of these men in fact resident at Fillington, and which of them lived in the excavated homestead? To the first question the answer is almost certainly Yes. Surnames in the modern sense had not become general at the end of the thirteenth century; they were very seldom handed down in families, but used to distin-

guish one Walter from another by his occupation, domicile, appearance or habits. If a man is said to be 'of Filindene', he almost certainly lived there or was born there.

The second question can be answered with some confidence, thanks to the dovecot, which no villein would have been allowed to have. We can say that at the time of the customal, the tenant must have been Walter, and that Fillington was a farm of two virgates, for which he paid 5s. 6d. each. He also had to do some ploughing between Hockday (2nd Tuesday after Easter) and the feast of St. Peter in Chains (1 August); he had to reap for three days with all his household, apart from babes and their nurses, and be present in person on the last day of reaping; and he was responsible for conveying the reeve safely to the Bishop's castle at Wolvesey with the rent money. There was also a seven-acre 'purpresture' (land taken in from the waste), for which Walter paid 3s. 6d., and owed no labour.

Other people surnamed 'of Fillington' are known from the same period or a little later. The late Mrs. Audrey Gregory, who sadly left her research unfinished, left notes indicating the presence of a Robert de Filenden in 1282/3 and a Richard de Fylenden in 1316. That the latter was a free man is shown by his being party to a fine; but if of the same family he was of a cadet branch, being a carpenter by trade.

Pike (1992) has considered a number of enclosure sites in the Chilterns which also lack documentary evidence. They are broadly comparable to Fillington in terms of size and location, all being situated in woodland between 155–190m OD, e.g. the nearby example at Stokenchurch (Easterbrook 1978). These enclosures were tentatively identified as minor settlements or farmsteads.

Perhaps the closest parallel is provided by the earthwork at Sadler's Wood, Lewknor (Oxfordshire), excavated in advance of the M.40

road scheme (Chambers 1973). A ditched enclosure, albeit rectangular, surrounded a farmstead of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries; there were at least three buildings, all with flint wall footings and tiled roofs, although here a manorial function seems unlikely, as all the documented manors in Lewknor parish have been located elsewhere. Since much of Lewknor belonged to Abingdon Abbey at this time, it is tempting to see both Sadler's Wood and Fillington (owned by the Bishop of Winchester) as outlying farmsteads of an ecclesiastical estate, perhaps the property of an important sub-tenant.

The general lack of finds post-dating the thirteenth century from primary contexts suggests that the enclosure was abandoned before the end of the medieval period. The deposits of peg tile from the primary ditch silts point to the fairly rapid decay of the buildings.

The depopulation of medieval settlements in the period between the late thirteenth century and the fifteenth is well attested and has been attributed to many factors, amongst them climatic deterioration, agricultural fai-

lure and epidemics of plague (Clarke 1984). If the remarkable evidence of human remains from the shaft can be associated with the enclosure (bearing in mind that the shaft must already have been in disuse), it may not be too outlandish to attribute the abandonment of the settlement to the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348-9, or to one of its later recurrences (1360-2, 1369, 1375). West Wycombe is known to have been badly affected by these epidemics (VCH 1925, iii 137).

Acknowledgements

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