

A SURVEY OF EARTHWORKS AT FRITH HILL, GREAT MISSENDEN, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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Within Chalkdell Wood, on the westward-facing upper slopes of Frith Hill, overlooking the Misbourne and Great Missenden a quarter of a mile to the west, lies concealed a small complex of earthworks (Fig 1). The site is now a scheduled ancient monument.

The earthworks are in two parts: to the north a truncated curvilinear platform defined by a bank and ditch, which in the north and west survives to a maximum height of 2.6m from bank top to ditch bottom, but is of negligible height in the south; to the south a linear earthwork extends beyond the survey area. The curvilinear earthwork presumably originally completed a circuit, defining an enclosure, but its eastern return section has been destroyed or masked by a track and road. The southern earthwork survives as a ditch, which runs northwards to meet the northern enclosure at which point it turns sharply to the east. At its easternmost limit this earthwork attains a maximum depth of 2.2 metres but rapidly diminishes in depth as it returns westward and southwards. The original form and function of this southern earthwork are no longer ascertainable; road construction to the east and south has erased any trace of the further course of the earthwork and thus of a possible southern and eastern return section.

Little is known of the past history of the earthworks, first remarked upon by Lipscomb (1847, 359) who interpreted them as the remains of a 'Roman summer camp', though he conceded that 'nothing is certainly known on this subject'. The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England inventory for Buckinghamshire (RCHME, 1912, 176) merely reports the presence

of two adjoining earthworks, 'too fragmentary for classification'. However, after a field visit in 1971, R. Dunnett, then of the County Museum Archaeological Service, interpreted them as the remains of two linked medieval enclosures. The probable medieval origin of the earthworks was confirmed in 1991 by M.E. Farley, County Archaeologist for Buckinghamshire, who recovered medieval pottery sherds from tree-throws. He considered the northern earthwork to be of too massive construction to have been that of one of a fairly well-known group of Chiltern medieval farmsteads (Pike 1995), and consequently interpreted the remains as a possible ringwork castle. The southern earthwork he interpreted as a holloway running towards the parish church of St Peter and St Paul, c. 240 metres to the south.

The bank and ditch of the truncated northern enclosure are certainly of defensive proportions and a ringwork castle in this position would have been admirably situated to monitor and control the movement of people and goods along the valley of the Misbourne. However, the enclosure is situated on rising ground and lies at c.155–170m AOD, whilst Frith Hill rises to c.190m AOD on its eastern flank. Thus it must always have been overlooked by higher ground to the east, a serious defect if its primary role had been defence. Evidence of how the effects of this flaw might have been mitigated has been lost along with the eastern circuit of the enclosure. Nor, as adumbrated above, is it now ascertainable whether the southern earthwork represents the surviving portion of a holloway running south towards the church or formed part of a second associated enclosure. Farley was of the opinion in 1991 that the southern

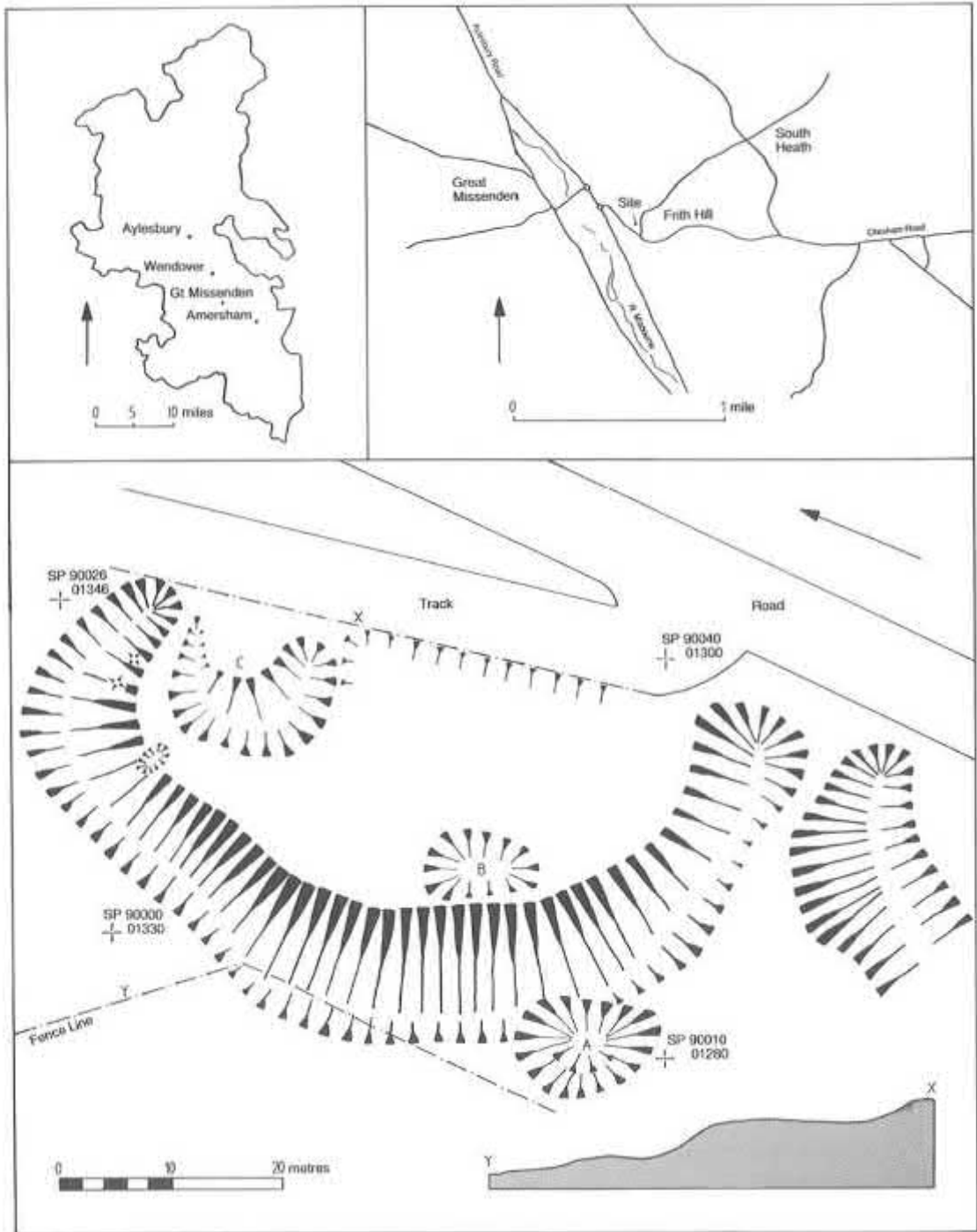


Fig.1 Medieval earthworks at Frith Hill, Great Missenden.

earthwork resumed its southerly course to the south of the Chesham Road. No trace of the earthwork in this position is visible today. That the earthwork did once form part of a second enclosure rather than function as a track is given a measure of support by both the 1963 and 1973 edition 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps, which show the southern extremity of the southern earthwork returning eastwards. Again, this area of ground has been extensively remodelled in recent times, destroying any trace of such a return leg.

Three features of uncertain date and origin are associated with the northern enclosure: two pits, A and B, which survive to a maximum depth of 1.5m and 0.6m respectively and a D-shaped platform and ditch C. Pit A slights, and clearly post-dates, the life of the enclosure ditch and counterscarp; a later date for B may similarly be postulated. The presence of a chalk quarry immediately to the west of the earthworks suggests that pits A and B are the product of quarrying. Alternatively, pit B might be an erosional feature; the interior of the enclosure has suffered much damage from tree throws, as has the enclosure bank at its northern limit. The derivation of feature C, a D-shaped mound and ditch which survives to a maximum depth of 2.1m from ditch bottom to mound top, within the interior of the enclosure, is even more uncertain. It is not evident whether the platform is coeval with its associated ditch or whether it post-dates it. Were they are of the same constructional phase, then it seems possible that this feature was constructed during the active life of the enclosure. If however, as the author suspects, the ditch preceded the mound, then feature C might have originated in a similar manner to features A and B, and was subsequently partially filled, to its present form, when the track and road were constructed, spoil from levelling operations being pushed down into the enclosure. There is some evidence within the

fence line fringing the track to the east that spoil was so discarded. Again, the truncation of the enclosure by later track and road construction precludes certainty in the interpretation of this feature.

Chalkdell Wood has recently suffered extensive gale damage. The southern earthwork remains lightly wooded, with a dense shrubby undergrowth, whilst the northern enclosure has been largely denuded of its former tree cover and is at present mantled in scrub vegetation. The Woodland Trust, the landowner, has initiated a tree-planting programme to make good the gale damage and the opportunity was therefore taken by the author to survey the earthworks at 1:200 scale in December 1995 while the vegetation cover was relatively light. Nevertheless, the scrub vegetation and tree cover made difficult the close examination of the archaeological detail, as did the inclement weather, and the survey was conducted within the possible limits of accuracy. Time constraints precluded the surveying of the southern earthwork.

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