

A Prehistoric Enclosure at Chitts Hill, Colchester

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SUMMARY: The excavation of the ditch of a prehistoric enclosure is described. A late Iron Age date is suggested for it, and its place in the economy of the area tentatively ascribed.

Introduction

During the construction of the Colchester Northern By-pass in the spring of 1973, the contractors, the Amey-Fairclough Consortium, planned to extract gravel for use in the road-works from a site at Chitts Hill, Colchester, approximately one mile to the north of Lexden (TL 958 264). Aerial photographs¹ showed two major features threatened: a sub-rectangular enclosure which was saved at the instigation of J. D. Hedges, the County Archaeologist, by the location of the batching plant on it, and the ditch which was the subject of the excavations described in this note.

The site lies on the southern slopes of the valley of the River Colne. The geology of the site is simple: the gravel is part of the glacially deposited sands and gravels on which Colchester stands and overlies London clay which is exposed by the river near its banks.

Gryme's Dyke, one of the system of Iron Age defences known as the Colchester Dykes, runs parallel to, and just to the west of, the road that forms the western boundary of the gravel extraction site. It is visible as a substantial cropmark. Earlier gravel digging in the southern end of the field (at TL 9578 2623) had produced evidence for prehistoric activity in the form of a palaeolithic flint implement and Bronze and Iron Age pottery. An excavation subsequent to the one under discussion revealed a Bronze Age cemetery including seven ring-ditches and 30 cremations.²

The Excavation

The ditch was located using a JCB 3b mechanical digger by cutting five trenches (A—E) across its line as projected from the aerial photographs. Trench A was extended and a complete section dug by hand, and trenches D and E amalgamated as the butt proved to lie between them.

As can be seen from fig. 1 of Philip Crummy's paper (p. 2), the ditch ran approximately north-east across the field for 40 m before butting. Again using the JCB 3b mechanical digger trial trenches were dug in an attempt to locate the possible continuation of the ditch but none was found.

The stratigraphy of the ditch was closely similar in all sections. Beneath the topsoil was a light brown loamy subsoil, in which no traces of the ditch were visible. It appeared as a clear, dark soil-mark cutting into the natural, which was pebbly gravel in a coarse sandy matrix and lay beneath the subsoil.

The ditch was U-shaped in section (Fig. 1) and varied in depth between 1 m and 1.25 m below the level of the natural gravel. It was filled with leached grey clay, interspersed with lenses

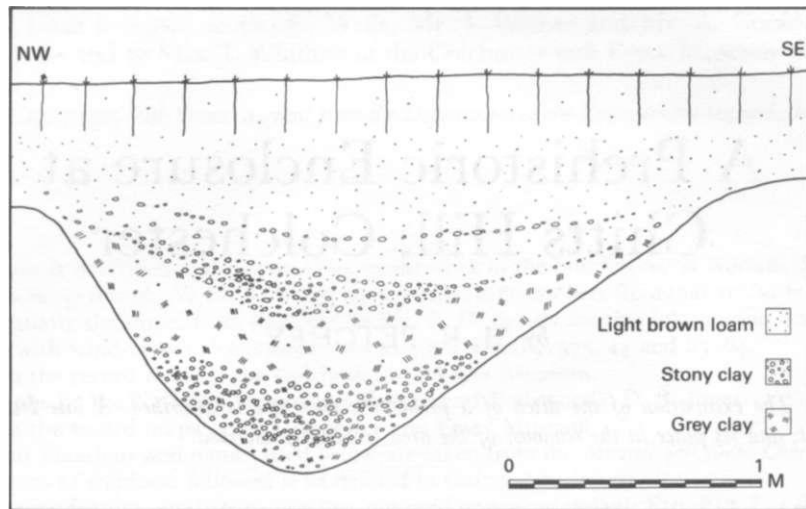


Fig. 1 Chitts Hill: Northern section of Trench A, showing excavated ditch.

of more stony clay and coarse sand. This suggests that the ditch filled by a gradual process of silting over a period of many years. The indications also suggest that any bank associated with the ditch lay on its north-west side. The only variation in this pattern was a fire lit in the upper silts of the ditch in trench B.

The ditch narrowed as it approached the butt, from 2.7 m wide in trench A to 2.25 m in trench D/E.

At the butt end, the ditch turned slightly to the north and ended in a semi-circular shelving terminal.

Dating and discussion

There were no finds from the ditch, even the hand-dug sections, except for a very small sherd of coarse flint-gritted pottery from the final silts in trench D/E. Therefore the dating, as well as interpretation of the ditch, depends on its relationship with other features.

It was initially thought that the ditch was the termination of Gryme's Dyke, and this has been suggested in print.³ This is unlikely for three main reasons. The ditch is too small. The bank seems to have been on the north-west side, which would have been the outside if it were functioning as a dyke. (The bank in the extant section of Gryme's Dyke is on the inside.) Most convincing of all is the evidence of the cropmark showing the dyke terminating at New Bridge on the River Colne. This is plotted on fig. 1 of Philip Crummy's paper (p. 2).

The ditch does not seem to be earlier than the dyke, however. No sign of a western continuation of the ditch beyond the dyke appears on the aerial photographs. Gryme's Dyke, in the latest review of the Colchester Dykes, has been allocated to the penultimate phase of their development, dated to the first half of the first century A.D.⁴ and so the ditch under discussion must be approximately contemporary to this or later.

The ditch represents part of a triangular enclosure, utilising Gryme's Dyke as its western boundary, and the River Colne as its northern. Why there should be no apparent continuation after the break, which presumably represents an entrance, is not clear, though one of the ditches running north-east to south-west across the area of the Bronze Age cemetery⁵ may be such a continuation and the break may be due to localised surface gravel-digging, which would not be obviously apparent in narrow machine-dug trenches.

The two enclosures in the field at Chitts Hill are a third phase, at least, of prehistoric land use in the area. When the ring-ditches were visible as round barrows the area was presumably not cultivated. Later the light soils were exploited for arable farming and the barrows ploughed out.⁶ Finally the enclosures, which are presumably for stock, mark a change from arable to pastoral. An appropriate reason for this change, which comes after the construction of Gryme's Dyke, might be the change in the distribution of population that the construction of this dyke reflects: a concentration in the Sheepen settlement. Accordingly, the Chitts Hill fields would have become distant and inconvenient of access, being cut off from the settlement by the two inner lines of dyke, and so used less intensively.

Acknowledgements

I undertook this excavation whilst holding a Rescue scholarship. I am grateful to them, and to the Amey-Fairclough Consortium for permission to excavate. I must also thank P. J. Drury for invaluable help and guidance and Peter Hawley who assisted during the excavation. The work was financed by the Department of the Environment. The figure is by D. G. Buckley.

The Society acknowledges with thanks a grant from the Department of the Environment towards the publication of this paper.

NOTES

1. By Mrs. I. M. McMaster.
2. Crummy, P., *Colchester: Recent Excavations and Research*, Colchester, 1974, p. 9; and see above, pp. 1—16.
3. Rodwell, W., 'Coinage, Oppida and the Rise of Belgic Power in South-Eastern Britain' in B. Cunliffe and T. Rowley (eds.), *Oppida: The Beginnings of Urbanisation in Barbarian Europe*. British Archaeological Reports Supplement. S.2, Oxford, 1976, pp. 181-367 (Appendix IV: The Camulodunum Dyke systems, P. 339)-
4. Ibid.
5. Crummy, P., *op. cit.*
6. Ibid.