

Archaeological Evaluation of an Early Iron Age site at
Jack's Hill, Graveley, Herts [Letchworth Civil Parish].

Introduction

An Early Iron Age site was identified at Jack's Hill near Graveley during the construction of the filling station (National Grid Reference TL 233291) on the west side of the Great North Road in January 1930 and a subsequent salvage excavation by various Cambridge archaeologists identified five pits. The pottery which was recovered from the features fell into two broad classes: a coarse gritted ware with red to black surfaces used for jars and large bowls with some decoration, and finer black burnished ware bowls (Tebbutt 1932).

Later in the same year, during road-widening, C F Tebbutt observed a sixth pit in a pipe trench some two to three hundred yards [175 - 265m] north of the garage and on the east side of the then Great North Road (National Grid reference about TL 234293) and alerted Percival Westell, curator of Letchworth museum (Tebbutt 1930). Westell noted a pit 6' [1.76m] across and 4'6" [1.32m] deep containing similar pottery and bone (Westell 1930).

During January 1975 observation of a new water mains located further features on the east side of the road about 350m to the north of the original site and an apparent occupation layer extending for about 110m. One pit was excavated [keyhole trench x], producing more pottery and bone, including human cranial fragments (Denston 1976), and a small bronze object (Burleigh 1975). The pottery was broadly similar to that from the earlier site with coarse jars and fine bowls (although large coarse bowls are not part of this assemblage) and can be assigned to the fifth century BC (Barrett 1976).

When, during 1988, an outline planning proposal for a golf course was submitted to the North Herts. District Council, G R Burleigh [North Herts Museums Field Archaeologist] decided to investigate those parts of the site most likely to be disturbed by the development and to attempt to define the limits of the settlement to the north-east. Accordingly, on 17 and 18 November 1988 a series of trial trenches were dug with the kind permission and full cooperation of the landowners, J W & T J Franklin

The Trial Trenches [Supervised and recorded by KJM]

A JCB excavator with a 1.5m wide ditching bucket was used for all trenches. The ploughed topsoil was stripped first, then any subsequent layers, over a distance of about 2.5m (the maximum reach of the excavator's arm). The only cleaning of the trenches was done where features were visible, and trowels were used for this; the sections were also cleaned where appropriate. Originally it was intended to dig five trenches: one on the line of the proposed access road, one beneath the proposed car park, two beneath the proposed driving range and one beneath the proposed club house. These were located by triangulation from the current farm track and a point on the field boundary where the access road will be cut through.

Surprisingly no archaeological features were identified in any of these trenches, even though trench 1 was only twenty-five metres from the occupation layer observed in 1975. The topsoil is a firm mid grey-brown sandy clay with about 5% flint in fragments < 100mm in diameter and 5% chalk in similarly-sized pieces; the depth varies from 0.19m at the east end of Trench 1 to 0.35m in trench 4a with a mean of 0.28m. This lay directly over a highly weathered chalk surface consisting of chalk blocks (< 100mm in diameter) in a reddish yellow-brown sandy clay matrix. In trench 2 a linear patch of reddish yellow-brown sandy clay fills a linear hollow in the chalk 35mm deep running approximately north-south; this appears to be a periglacial feature.

It was therefore decided to dig more trial trenches closer to the line of the 1975 water mains, which at this point is about 5m east of the field boundary, one parallel to the mains, another at right angles to it. Trench 6, which was parallel to, and about 5m east from the water mains had deep topsoil (0.41m mean) below which two apparent subsoils were identified; the upper subsoil is a reddish yellow-brown sandy clay containing about 25% large flint nodules and the lower is a sterile reddish yellow-brown sand with virtually no coarse components. The combined depth of the two subsoils was 0.42m. Because of the sterility of the lower subsoil, only the topsoil was removed from most of the trial trench. Trench 7 cut across the line of the water mains which shows as a chalk-filled linear cut 0.8m in width. The topsoil was generally 0.4m deep, and to the east rested directly on weathered chalk, while to the west a subsoil similar to the upper subsoil in trench 6 was identified. Below the subsoil was a more greyish brown (?humic) silty sandy clay, from which one sherd of flint-gritted pottery was recovered; the top of this layer shows a number of plough ruts, and to the east the layer tapers out.

Two more trenches were cut parallel to the water mains. In trench 8 the topsoil was 0.35m deep and overlay a thin skim of chalk, evidently derived from the backfill of the water mains trench by ploughing, below which was the same subsoil as in trench 7. Again this overlay a ?humic layer, although three horizons were visible: the top humic layer was a dark brownish grey silty sandy clay with a few coarse components 0.04m thick below which was a much stonier layer 0.05m thick which overlay a lighter layer 0.1m thick. This in turn overlay a second subsoil in places, this being a dark reddish yellow sandy clay. Towards the south end of the trench the humic layers tapered away and the thickness of the upper subsoil increased to 0.33m. In trench 10 similar layering was observed with the topsoil 0.4m deep, chalk derived from the backfill of the water mains trench and a subsoil 0.25m deep. Between this and the humic layer was a layer of chalk 0.04m thick which rested on the sterile sand observed in trench 6 two metres to the east; this sand tapered away to the west, but clearly overlay the humic layer (which could not be separated out into horizons in this trench). Again the humic layer overlay a second subsoil.

To the south of the modern farm track, two more trenches were dug. Trench 9, 100m to the south, had 0.38m of topsoil overlaying a sterile subsoil 0.35m thick while trench 11, only a few metres south of trenches 6 and 10 had 0.28m of topsoil, an upper subsoil 0.15m thick and a lower subsoil (?the same as the sterile sand of trenches 6 and 10) 0.35m thick.

From the results of trial trenching, it is clear that the distribution of archaeological levels is limited to a strip about 25-30m wide east of the modern road where the soil overburden is deeper than in the rest of the field. There are several factors which are likely to have affected the soil depth here; firstly, this has been close to the line of a major road since at least the first century AD, and therefore will be on the edge of a field, where soil build-up is to be expected as a result of turning the plough; the existence of a hedgebank will also contribute to soil build-up due to annual deposition of vegetable matter adding humus to the surrounding soils; there is also the likelihood that the modern road has deviated slightly from its Roman course, and that a Roman (or later) road embankment has raised the ground surface here.

In addition, it is clear that although features cut into the chalk exist in the same general area (i.e. within 25m of the road), there is no trace of them further east in the field and that these have not been removed by ploughing. There is also no trace of archaeological deposits further south in the field than the current farm track, although they may well exist in the ten-metre strip nearest the road.

The archaeology

Apart from the humic layer, which is probably an occupation layer, and the sterile sand, which is evidently not natural, the only archaeological features were identified in trenches 7 and 8. At the eastern end of trench 7 a linear cut feature filled with a light greenish brown silty clay with no coarse components and no finds appears to be a ditch, possibly a roadside ditch associated with the Roman road from *Verulamium* to Baldock (road 221 in Margary 1973); it also seems likely that the chalk layer in Trench 10 is a road surface, and that a layer described as 'hoggin' in the 1975 observation (Burleigh 1975) is also part of the same road. The sterile sand could also be part of the make-up layers for an embanked road, although sand is not often encountered in *agger* foundations (Margary 1973).

Below the humic layer in trench 7 two small oval features were located. Feature 001 was a mid grey-brown silty clay containing about 30% carbonised wood fragments, 10% heat-fractured and discoloured flints and 10% burnt chalk or clunch; it was about 0.18m long and 0.13m wide. This feature was partially excavated to a depth of about 0.05m and ten potsherds recovered. Nearby feature 002 contained more burnt flint but was otherwise very similar to 001; it was about 0.2m long and 0.17m wide. In trench 8 a similar, but slightly larger (0.36m x 0.28m) feature (004) was also found; two sherds of pottery were recovered from the surface of this feature.

It is possible that these features are post-holes, although the degree of burning in all three is not easy to explain. Nor does the burning appear to have occurred *in situ* since there is no indication of heat transfer to the surrounding chalk. Moreover, the carbonised wood is very fragmentary.

The Pottery from the Trial Trenches

There are several different pottery fabrics from the site, falling into two broad classes; one (fabrics 1 to 4) has large flint grit in varying proportions, while the other (fabrics 5 to 9) has much smaller inclusions.

1 The most common is a rough pottery with a grey-brown core and fairly coarse flint tempering and generally oxidised surfaces; this resembles pottery from the Blackhorse Road and Green Lane Iron Age sites in Letchworth, as well as matching earlier material from Jack's Hill (Tebbutt 1932; Barrett 1976). 001 [10 sherds]; 003 [5 sherds]; 005 [2 sherds and 1 small fragment].

2 Similar to fabric 1 with a black core and coarse flint tempering with black surfaces. 004 [1 sherd].

3 Brown sandy core with a little coarse flint tempering and red surfaces. 005 [1 sherd].

4 Pale orange core with coarse flint and chalk tempering. 003 [1 sherd]; 005 [1 sherd and 3 small fragments].

5 Reddish brown core with small flint tempering and red-brown to orange surfaces. 003 [2 sherds]; 004 [1 sherd].

6 Dark grey core with sandy tempering and black to brown burnished surface. 003 [1 rim sherd].

7 Black core with sandy tempering and dark red-brown to black surface. 003 [1 sherd].

8 Grey-brown core with sandy tempering; one light brown (?burnished), one dark brown surface. U/S trench 7 [1 sherd].

9 Soft brown sandy fabric with black surfaces. This pottery was very badly fired and crumbly, so no pieces were recoverable in the rapid conditions of the evaluation.

The pottery is of the Chinnor-Wandlebury Early Iron Age tradition, although some sherds recovered (notably those of fabric 4) may be slightly earlier in date. None of the newly-found pottery appears to be decorated, and none of the sherds is really large enough to give any indication of form, although Barrett 1976 identifies the earlier fine wares as deriving from a series of bowls while the coarse wares can be jars (as, uniquely, in 1975) or bowls (Tebbutt 1932). It is possible that assemblages in which the fine ware flared bowls predominate are earlier than those in which these wares are absent (Cunliffe 1978); obviously with the limited material from Jack's Hill to date it would be unwise to draw any conclusions about chronological differences between sites.

Other finds

Two struck flints, both waste flakes. One was found unstratified on the field surface [B1451] and shows considerable plough damage; there is a hinge fracture and some cortex on the distal end, and the surfaces are highly polished with cortication more advanced on the dorsal surface. The second [B1452] was found in 003, the humic layer in trench 8, and is better formed and much less corticated.

Two animal bone fragments: one, from 003, is burnt.

The Settlement

Occupation evidence has now been found close to the road over a distance of almost 400m, consisting of seven pits, a ditch, a gully [plan and section y] and three smaller features together with a humic layer containing generalised occupation debris (pottery, bone etc.). It is clear that the site is unenclosed, which at this period is unusual, although in recent years similar settlements have been found in the Midlands (Cunliffe 1978), and it is also possible that the settlement is elongated along the line of the (later) Roman road. If this is the case, the site may represent ribbon development along an Early Iron Age precursor of the Great North Road, an intriguing suggestion. A further possibility is that only features on the eastern periphery of the settlement have been found so far, and that the main part of the settlement occupies the downslope to the west.

Conclusions

The earlier information about the site at Jack's Hill is sufficient to suggest that an extensive open settlement of Early Iron Age (and possibly) earlier date exists here and that development of the area will damage the surviving archaeological levels. The current evaluation has shown that the area closest to the road is the most likely to contain archaeological features and that these have hitherto been protected by a greater overburden of natural soils than is found further east on the field. This class of site is extremely rare in the region, which makes its destruction highly undesirable without proper recording. Landscaping of the golf course poses a major threat to the continued survival of the site and it is therefore recommended that an area of up to 25m east of the B197 road and 120m north of the current farm track be examined as thoroughly as possible before any work begins on it.

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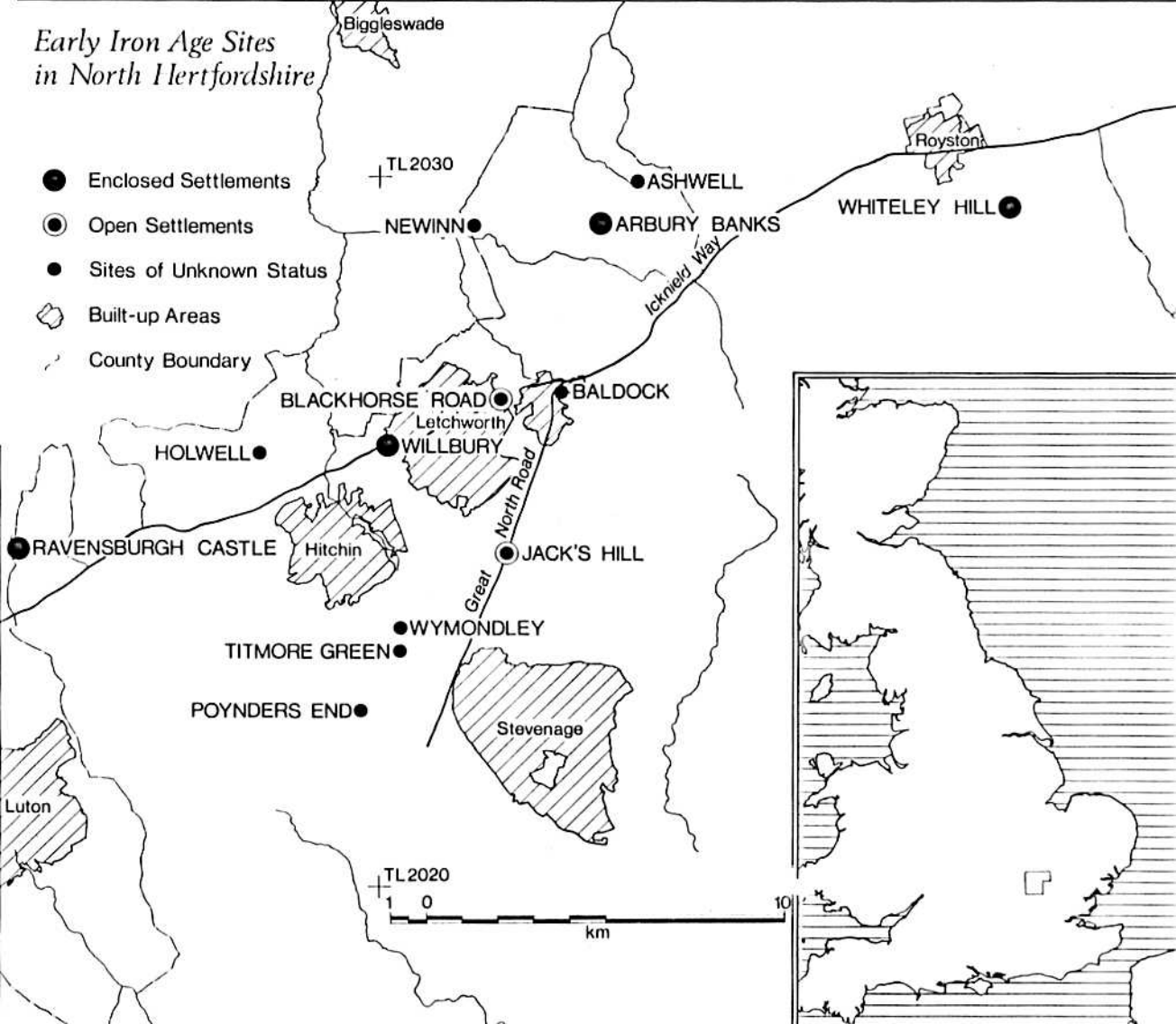
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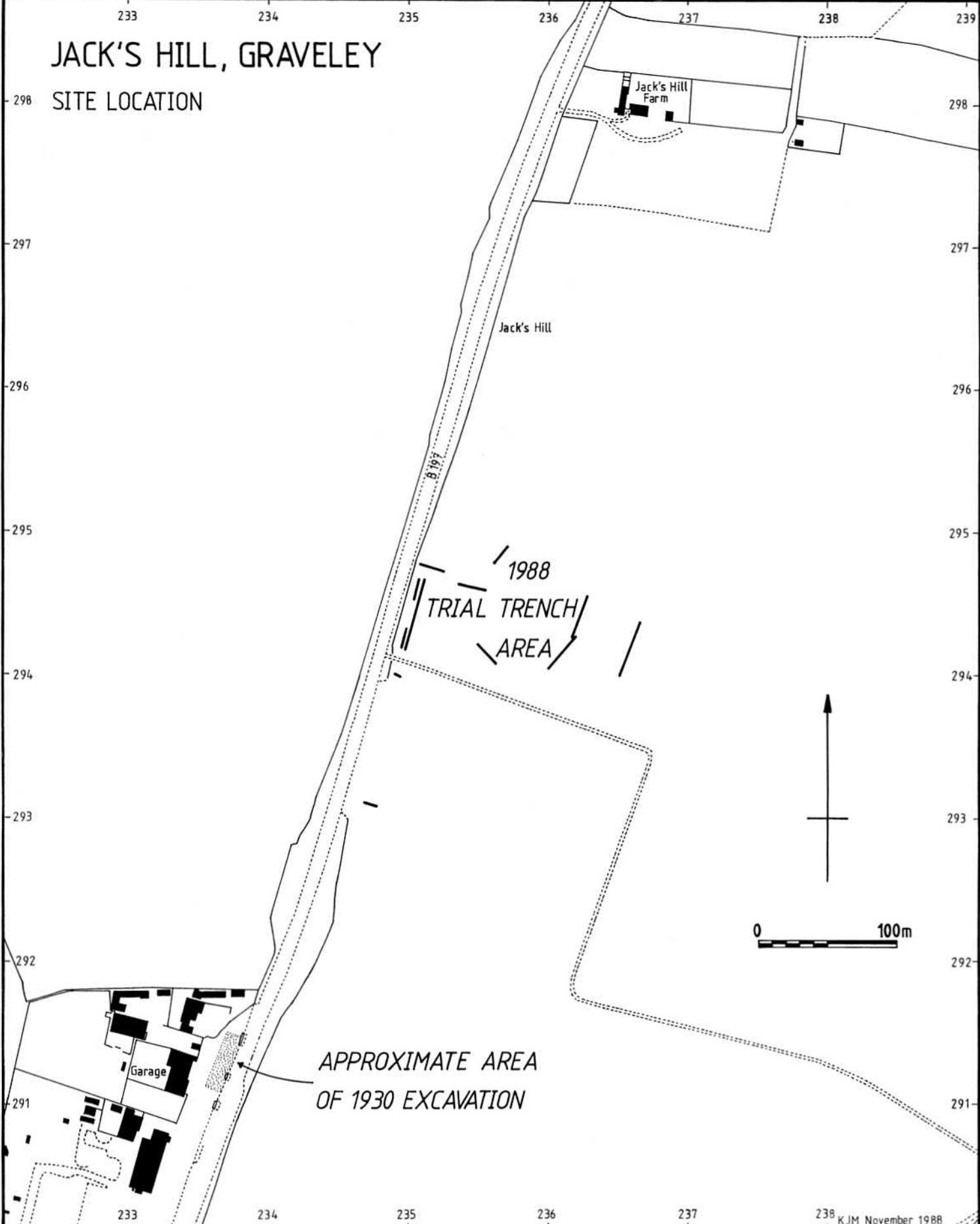
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Early Iron Age Sites in North Hertfordshire



JACK'S HILL, GRAVELEY

SITE LOCATION



JACK'S HILL GARAGE, 1930

+ TL 2338 2915

