An Excavation at the Vicarage, Baldoch Road, Royston

During the week beginning 29th February 1988 the Reverend Bright of Royston Vicarage contacted Letchworth Museum about a dark ring mark which had appeared on the lawn of his back garden. As a result, Mark Stevenson visited the site on 2nd March and was able to sketch the feature. He also borrowed several photographs which had been taken from ground level and from the first floor of the house.

It was decided that this mark and a smaller one, which had been noticed on a number of previous occasions, deserved further investigation and on 8th March a small team from the North Herts Museum's Field Archaeology Section visited the site. The lawn was grid out into ten-metre squares using a theodolite, and a resistivity survey of that part of the lawn occupied by the mark was undertaken. A scale drawing of the mark was also made.

Initial processing of the data from the resistivity survey indicated that although there was no trace of the ring mark, a linear negative feature provisionally interpreted as a ditch crossed part of the area surveyed, and two groups of high readings of rectangular shape might represent building foundations. On the strength of this it was thought that a trial excavation combined with a resistivity survey of the rest of the lawn might establish the relationship of the visible mark to the buried features.

On 16th March a team of three people visited the site. The remainder of the lawn was surveyed, and a trench initially of 2x1 metres was opened, with the help of Mrs Sylvia Beamon and Mrs Bright. The turf was removed and the exposed surface cleaned to a depth of approximately 5cm, revealing a topsoil containing large quantities of clinker. This was trowelled at first, but it became clear that the deposit was about 15 to 20cm deep and uniform, while the finds indicated a mid-twentieth century date (these included fragments of flower-pot, clear glass and iron nails), so it was decided to remove this layer by spade.

Below the topsoil and clinker a greyish-brown subsoil was encountered, and a small bronze object (probably a horse harness fitting of sixteenth or seventeenth century date) was found. At the eastern side of the trench, where the edge of the supposed ditch had been expected, no trace of this could be found and it was decided to extend the excavation by half a metre in this direction. The edge of the feature was found shortly before the end of the day's work, and it was clear that a second day would be necessary to examine the features.

On 18th March a team of three excavators returned to finish the excavation. A narrow section was cut through the greyish-brown subsoil, which proved to be approximately 20cm in depth and contained no finds later than post-medieval in date (including a very abraded sherd of pottery and several fragments of clay pipe); this in turn overlay a greyish-brown subsoil. This deposit proved to be sterile, but as only a very small area was available for excavation, this cannot be taken as conclusive proof of a non-archaeological origin. About 20cm below the surface of this layer the weathered surface of a very flinty chalk bedrock was encountered.

The section of the "ditch" available for examination at the eastern edge of the trench was only about 15cm wide, so it was necessary to extend the excavation by a further half metre. The top fill of the feature consisted of a red/black layer of ash, below which was more of the clinker which had been found in the topsoil. There were no other layers, and the profile of the feature was a broad U shape which is more typical of a wide, shallow pit than of a ditch.
The last thing to be examined was a patch of carbonised wood noted in the surface of the greyish-brown subsoil. This proved to be a purely fortuitous concentration in what was probably a post-medieval plough soil. Nothing encountered during the excavation could have given rise to the ring mark, and it was decided at this point to backfill the trench.

The overall impression given by the excavation is that most of the activity on the site is of seventeenth century date and later. The large quantities of clinker are almost certainly related to a tennis court known to have existed earlier in the twentieth century, and the shallow pit seems to have been dug to dispose of some of this. The remainder appears to have been distributed throughout the topsoil before the laying of the lawn, to judge by the sounds made by inserting the probes of the resistivity meter into the soil.

The house itself was built in 1925 - rather later than the surrounding properties - prior to which the land had been used as an orchard. The excavation indicates that before this, and probably up to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the land had been arable, the greyish-brown layer representing a post-medieval plough soil. At this time the land had been in the Parish of Bassingbourn, Royston Parish not having been created until 1910.

Earlier activity on the site is suggested, however, by a single struck flint (a waste flake), found unfortunately unstratified in the topsoil. This could be of any earlier prehistoric date, but is most likely to date from the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age (between about 3000 and 2000 BC).

The grass mark is more of a puzzle. It does not appear to be a so-called "Fairy Ring" (a mark caused by the spores of the fungus *Marasmius oreades*), since its diameter (12-14 metres) is too large and it is certainly interrupted by the Anderson shelter to the north-west; no other biological origin can be suggested. Nor do there appear to be any geological origins for such a mark. The archaeological nature of the mark is therefore a reasonable assumption. That nothing encountered during the excavation could account for it is not surprising; it is presumably earlier than the post-medieval plough soil, and as this was not removed in its entirety any gullies causing it could remain undetected. The reason for it not showing on the resistivity survey is that if the width of a feature is less than 50cm it will not be detected, and work with this instrument in the past has failed to locate features as large as adult graves.

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Keith Matthews
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