



COOMBE BOTTOM, KELSHALL

Excavation of the small enclosure in progress. (Photos by Letchworth Museum).



EXCAVATIONS AT COOMBE BOTTOM, KELSHALL, 1977

by Gilbert Burleigh

In late July, 1977, construction commenced on the long-awaited dualling of the A505 Baldock to Royston road from Gallows Hill to the Litlington turning. It was known from aerial photographs, the earliest of which were taken by Professor St Joseph of Cambridge University in the early 1950s, that various archaeological features existed on the line of the proposed new carriageway, at the junction of Coombe Bottom road with the A505, by Lower Coombe Farm (Grid Ref. TL313391). These features included a small, square-ditched enclosure with an entrance on one side, a large rectangular ditched enclosure, a five-post structure, and one or two other ditches. It was thought that some of these features, including the small enclosure, were probably prehistoric in date, while the large enclosure might be medieval or later.

Archaeological excavation under the direction of the writer began as soon as the contractors moved onto the site. The site was in fact under a standing crop and thus access for excavation was not possible in advance of the roadworks. The main excavations continued for four weeks and approximately 1600 square metres were cleaned by hand to the chalk surface, largely by the use of hoes, after the main overburden of topsoil had been removed by contractor's plant. Labour was supplied by members of the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society and other local amateurs.

To the north of the small enclosure, a series of parallel ditches and ruts in the chalk were exposed. These proved to be very shallow, and two of the ditches had marked ruts or grooves cut in their bottoms on the same alignment as the ditches themselves. The fill of these features suggested an initial rapid silting with a fine, waterborne deposit which had solidified rock-hard, and then a slower silting with coarser, earthier material. The interpretation we put on these ditches and ruts is that they represent a road joining the Icknield Way at this point. On aerial photographs this road can be seen heading south over the hill by Heath Barn towards Sandon or Wallington. The little dating evidence recovered suggests this road was in use as late as the 18th century A.D.

A number of sections dug at selected points across the enclosure ditches all provided a similar story: initial silting in the ditch bottom followed by deliberate back-filling. The entrance on the west side of the enclosure proved to be a simple causeway of undisturbed natural chalk. The area enclosed by the ditches was about twelve metres square. The ditches themselves were between 0.50 and 0.71 metres deep and between 0.75 and 1.10 metres wide. Within the enclosed area there were only two features. Both were irregularly-shaped shallow pits filled with a very hard grey deposit. At least one, and possibly both, of these pits was apparently stratigraphically earlier than the enclosure ditch, but they produced no dating evidence. Even when the enclosure ditch itself was entirely excavated only one small abraded body sherd of possibly Iron Age date was found.

In the immediate vicinity of the small enclosure, but outside the ditches, a number of small post-holes and stake-holes were found, together with two shallow pits, one of which could conceivably have been the base of a corn-drying oven. The other pit was close to the enclosure entrance. Most of the other features did not make much sense and none of them could be dated, but there was an alignment of

stake-holes to the north of the enclosure, possibly a fence line.

To the east of the small enclosure five pits could be seen on one of the Cambridge aerial photographs. On excavation these proved to be the post-pits of a substantial timber structure. The pits were arranged like the five on a dice and the pattern they produced was 3.50 metres square overall. They varied in diameter at the top from 0.50 to 0.68 metres, and in depth from 0.41 to 0.62m. Three of these pits produced in section evidence for the posts themselves, which had been 0.35 to 0.40m in diameter, and were packed around with broken chalk. The only finds were a fragment of an iron pin and some pieces of decayed animal bone.

In view of the lack of finds, it is very difficult to say either what all these features were or to which period they should be dated. However, the character of the small enclosure and surrounding features, including the five-post structure, suggests perhaps an Iron Age date. The site was very badly plough-damaged, plough-marks being visible on the chalk over most of the area excavated. Whether the enclosure ditch once surrounded a building or burials, or was simply an animal compound, or was back-filled before being put to a use, it is not now possible to say.

To the south-west of the small enclosure a much larger, rectangular, ditched enclosure was visible on aerial photographs. One section was dug through a long side of this, where it was to be destroyed by the roadworks, and other sections were examined in the field to the south after harvest. This enclosure measured c.80.0m by c.70.0m overall and its flat-bottomed ditch was 2.30m wide and c.0.65m deep. The few finds recovered dated this enclosure to the 17th/18th centuries A.D., and it may be related to the road we had discovered. Alfred Kingston, the Royston historian, says in *Fragments of Two Centuries* (1893, p.22) there was a race course until the end of the 18th century just beyond King James' stables, later called the Jockey House, the ruins of which still stand today within a quarter of a mile of the large enclosure. It is possible that this enclosure was connected with the race-course.

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BOSWICK LANE, DUDSWELL, NORTHCHURCH

Evidence of Romano-British occupation was discovered here in June 1977 during the digging of foundation trenches for a small housing estate. (Grid Reference SP966095).

The site, which is situated in the Bulbourne valley close to the presumed line of Akeman Street, is approximately 400 metres from the Cow Roast and may have formed part of the Romano-British settlement there. (See *Hertfordshire's Past*, no.1, pp.16-17).

Excavation of the site was not

possible, but the builders were cooperative and allowed Alan Wyatt of the Berkhamsted Archaeological Society to keep daily watch on trenching, and where possible, to clean up and record features showing in the trenches.

The area disturbed by building work was approximately 150 metres by 100 metres. The main area of building was to the east of Boswick Lane, but some houses were erected on the west side and in that area three pits were exposed. Material found in these pits was of the Flavian period (68-96 AD). Also found was the bowl of an iron furnace with some slag/cinder