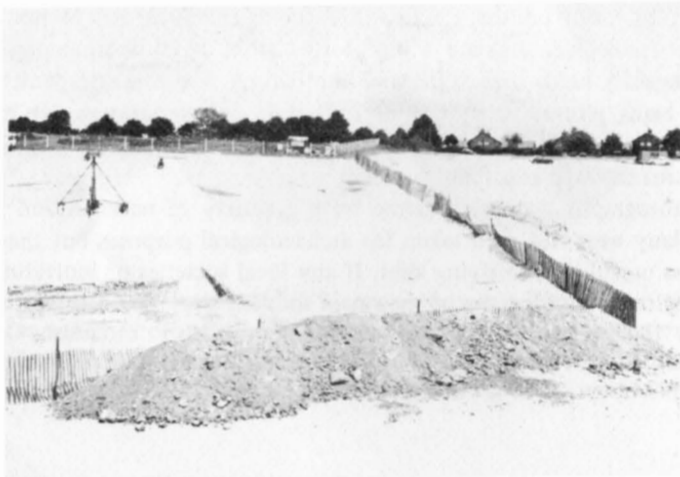


**WILBURY HILL, LETCHWORTH 1974** by *John Moss Eccardt*

For many years archaeologists have been aware of the existence of a small circular feature to the south of the Wilbury Iron Age hillfort which has shown up with regular monotony on aerial photographs, both archaeological and commercial. In 1929, W.H. Lane investigated the feature, declaring that its diameter was 60 feet, with a ditch 9 feet wide and 3 feet deep. By strange coincidence of numerology 3 pieces of 'indeterminate coarse pottery' were also found. Over subsequent years the circle remained undisturbed, except by the annual plough which helped, to some extent, to destroy its upper chalk structure. Recently it became known that the former Letchworth Grammer School was to be renamed 'Fearnhill' and that it would be situated in close proximity to the Iron Age monument. Plans took a long time to appear, and even then it looked as if the monuments would be free of all interference, but two factors were not very apparent. The first was that the school would occupy an area devoted to a strong local group of allotment holders who were not prepared to be moved very far; the second was that even the provision of harmless-looking playing fields and tennis courts involves very much more than the laying of a greensward in traditional English style, for the site was on a considerable slope.

The allotment holders were moved westwards, like an Indian tribe in nineteenth century America, right on to the rampart of the hillfort, but this was only exchanging one kind of cultivation for another and the plans looked innocent enough; they were passed without anyone realising the significance of a line of fencing and a screen of trees placed on the monument. When the site was visited by an Inspector of Ancient Monuments he found himself faced with a *fait accompli* in the form of a chain-link fence on concrete posts, as well as of numerous trees well advanced in growth and radical development. Worse would have followed but for the fact that on the very day in question we also saw that machines had already laid their sacrilegious grabs on the ditch and rampart and this operation was made to



cease immediately. During the discussions which followed with the County Council's architect and the contractor it transpired that a certain amount of deep digging into the hill slope must take place in order to avoid a form of tennis being played that offered a more distinct advantage to one side rather than the other! To prevent this the site would also be graded and the circular enclosure and other features would assuredly be utterly destroyed.

As a result of the maximum cooperation from the County Council officials involved, it was possible for the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Department of the Environment to arrange an emergency excavation which was under the overall direction of the writer and the direct supervision of **Mr. Howard Davies of Rickmansworth.**

The excavation lasted for forty-two days, the work being arranged so that maximum digging effort was concentrated over the weekends and the weekdays were used for the smaller force of full-timers to do the planning and photography. Where possible, a machine was used to clear off topsoil and dig rough sections which were tidied by hand afterwards. A hydraulic mobile platform was used for high-level photography but its use was limited in this case because of the very high winds on the days when this was available; on a less exposed site such equipment is exceptionally useful. The wind problem was reduced to some extent by the use of fast filmstock and fast shutter speeds. The changeable weather was overcome partly by the use of Permatrace for outside planning, while the rain proved a blessing from time to time when features needed better definition. When the rain-god failed to oblige, a hosepipe was used from the neighbouring allotments; such treatment on chalk sometimes leads to the formation of too much residual mud due to the large amount of dust coming from a stripped chalk surface under wind erosion.

An exercise in Public Relations was mounted by Howard Davies who left no stone unturned in order to bring members of the public along to the site to see what their money was being spent on. An estimated 500 saw the site during two days and were shown round the features by members of the team and were able to see various archaeological finds on display. It might be said that most sites should be treated in this way, since the aims of archaeology are not restricted to archaeologists alone and the more the Public know the better their support is likely to be. The one disadvantage is, however, that the site is nearly always not entirely finished and its interpretation not complete. Thus, many questions cannot be answered satisfactorily, which is frustrating for visitor and guide alike. Finally, an awful lot of effort has to go into such open sessions and one wonders whether the energy might not be better spent on the job in hand.

Several important lessons have emerged from this 'dig'. Firstly, that all plans should be studied exhaustively and their full implications be understood. Secondly, that all conversations with architects, and DoE officials should be backed up by correspondence containing very specific information. Thirdly, that the closest cooperation should be maintained with other groups in the country, for the excavator never knows when he will need help urgently!

The main difficulty facing this operation was the shortage of a trained full-time work force, although this was to a considerable extent offset by the assistance of members of Welwyn Archaeological Society, and the East Herts, and the North Herts Societies. The former were of such service in respect of assistance with transport and other similar jobs that without them the operation would have been in serious difficulty.

The archaeological results of this excavation will be dealt with in a further article.