Excavations of the Earthwork at Wyfold Grange, Oxfordshire

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With Contributions from:

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Abstract

As part of a wider programme of field archaeology and landscape archaeology, excavations of the earthwork at Wyfold Grange, Oxfordshire, were undertaken by volunteers from South Oxfordshire Archaeology Group in 2022. Two trenches were cut through the earthwork and, with the aid of a coring programme, have shown that the earthwork likely formed a complete enclosure of irregular shape, some 210m across at its widest point. The enclosure was formed by a bank and external V-shaped ditch which may have had a total height of approximately 3m or more when constructed. A small fragment of charcoal, recovered from the old soil surface on which the bank appears to have been built, has been radiocarbon dated and provides a "terminus post quem" for the earthwork in the range 987 - 1030 cal AD (95.4% probability). Possible interpretations of this earthwork are discussed and it is suggested that it was constructed in a strategically important location in a time of instability at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report focuses specifically on excavations of the major earthwork at Wyfold Grange undertaken by South Oxfordshire Archaeology Group (SOAG) in 2022. Two accompanying reports, *Landscape Archaeology at Wyfold*, and *Post-Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange* cover related material and are occasionally referred to below.

1.1 Background

Wyfold Grange (centred on SU 68840 81640) lies near the summit of a low hill in the Chilterns approximately 4km east of Woodcote and 1km north of Gallowstree Common. The whole site is roughly elliptical with a maximum diameter of about 210m. The earthwork remains prominent around the northern half but is eroded to a lower profile to the south. According to the British Geological Society the site lies on a superficial layer of clay-with-flints over a white chalk bedrock. This is briefly discussed below and more fully in our report *Landscape Archaeology at Wyfold*. Arable fields surround the site stretching to woodland at a radius of about 0.5km almost enclosing the area.

The west-east road passes around the north side of the earthwork and the bank and ditch are clearly visible from it. It has been suggested (Peberdy, 2012) that this route, at one time known as the "Kings Road" may have been used as a drove road between Goring and Henley, perhaps as far back as Saxon times. This road, and the hydrology of the pond within the enclosure, are discussed further in our landscape archaeology report.

Though not mentioned specifically in Domesday it is believed that Wyfold Grange and surrounding land was part of the Royal Estate of Benson (or "Bensington") at that time (Mileson and Brookes, 2021, p16). It is first recorded in a grant to Thame Abbey c 1153 and remained in its possession until the dissolution. Subsequent history is well documented (VCH, Oxon Vols. II, XVIII, XX, Preece, 1990, Preece, 2005) and some aspects are further discussed in our report *Post-Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange*

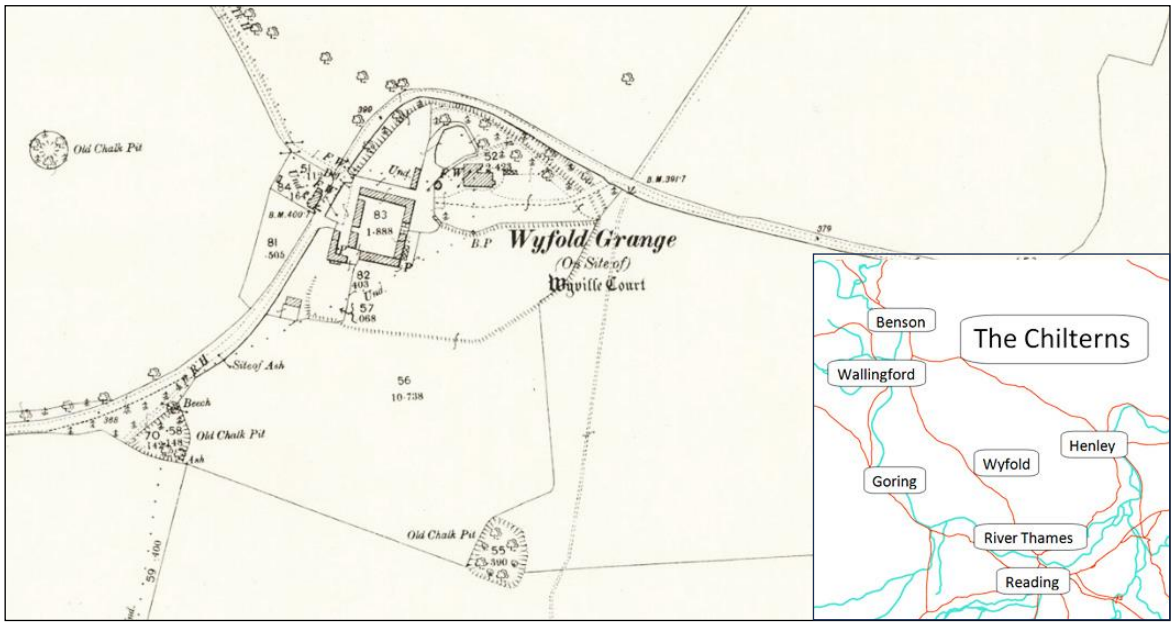

Figure 1. 1898 OS 25" map showing Wyfold Grange (also labelled Wyville Court). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The earthwork is shown clearly on the 1898 OS 25" map (Figure 1) demonstrating the bank and ditch on the northern half but less prominent ridge to the south. Most of the southern part of the western side has been obliterated by (possibly Victorian) development of the stables buildings. High resolution Lidar DTM data has kindly been supplied by the Chilterns Conservation Board "Beacons of the Past" project and is shown in Figure 2 (LRM visualisation by the author). This shows that most of the features shown on the 1898 map are still apparent with the exception of the northerly up-turn of the bank in the southwest corner.

Figure 2. Lidar image of Wyfold Grange showing location of excavation trenches

The aims of the present work were therefore to ascertain whether the southern half of the earthwork was the remnants of a continuation of the bank and ditch structure to form a complete enclosure, to determine the profile of the original bank and ditch and to seek for any datable material to indicate the time of construction.

1.2 Previous Archaeological Study

Despite the abundant historic record and the clear visibility of the earthwork from the road there has been very little previous archaeological study of Wyfold Grange. The Historic England record (Hob Uid: 241901) states *"On site of Wyfold or Wyville Court, moated manor house (14thc or earlier), moat? (rems. of)"* and *"There are remains of an earthwork on the NE and NW sides of the house, running alongside the modern road. It can be traced as a scarp around the SE and S sides. To the W. are farm buildings, and the course is here obliterated."* and an additional comment: *"It is not a moat, if Wyfold Court was once a hunting lodge it may have supported a pale."*

The suggestion of it being a moat can be dismissed immediately as impractical as there is a fall of approximately 6m north to south across the earthwork, and also there is no spring or other water source to feed a moat. The suggestion of it being a pale can also be rejected as the ditch is outside of the bank which would not serve to contain deer.

The Berkshire Archaeological Society visited Wyfold Grange in 1895 (Reading Mercury of 5 October 1895). The report claims "Wyfold Grange owes its interest to the fact it stands on the site of an old British and Roman circular camp, the vallum and agger of which are still to be traced in the grounds."

In 2005 SOAG undertook a short desk and landscape study (Preece, 2005) which stated "The earthwork may be Iron Age in date, or it could possibly represent later defensive works. The former seems more likely."

Likewise, the first Lord Wyfold, says *"The house is built in a prehistoric fort"* (Wyfold, 1923).

Tim Southern, a former SOAG member has undertaken work, including geophysical surveys, on the site of Park Farm just to the north of Wyfold Grange (Southern, 2006). This has provided much useful background information but the fieldwork did not extend to the Grange site itself.

2. FIELDWORK

Two trenches (shown in Figure 2) were dug across the earthwork. Trench 1 was located to the north where the remaining profile of the bank and ditch was most prominent, allowing for a best estimate of the original profile. It was also hoped to recover datable material from the base of the bank.

Trench 2 was located opposite Trench 1 on the southern side primarily to ascertain if there had been a ditch there and if the present slight rise in the ground represented the levelled out remains of a former bank. Here also it was also hoped to recover datable material from the excavation.

Prior to excavation core samples were extracted at a few key locations to determine from the geology the likely position and depth of underground features, in particular ditches.

2.1 Coring programme

(with contributions by Tom Walker)

A 25mm diameter hand auger (1m long with extension bars) and mallet were used, both prior to and during the excavations with four purposes:

- to understand the undisturbed base geology in the vicinity of the earthwork, in comparison with the British Geological Society (BGS) data
- to determine in advance of excavation the nature of deposits and the likely depths of changes down to natural levels
- to confirm, at various points, that natural levels have been reached in excavations (reported in Trench 1 and Trench 2 sections below)
- to determine if the ditch along the southern boundary continued along the expected line beyond the position of Trench 2

20 core samples were taken in the survey, the locations of some being illustrated in Figure 3, with labels of the form WGxx

2.1.1 Base Geology

According to BGS, the site lies on a superficial layer of clay-with-flints over a white chalk bedrock. A coring programme was undertaken and is described more fully in our report *Landscape Archaeology at Wyfold*. From this it appears that the superficial geology over much of the site is in fact a layer of yellowish-red material (taken to be the clay with flints recorded by BGS) overlying a red clay layer (at a depth of approximately 0.5m at the south boundary of the site) which in turn overlies a red Thames gravel layer (at a depth of approximately 0.8m). Table 1 shows a typical core sample record (WG03 for undisturbed soils near Trench 2).

Depth (cm.)	Texture	Stoniness	Munsell colour	Colour description	Horizon boundary	Comments
0-7	topsoil	nil	7.5YR 3/3	dark brown	sharp	
7-52	clay	<5%	5YR 4/6	yellowish-red	sharp	moist
52-82	clay	nil	7.5YR 4/6	red	sharp	
82-150	clayey sand	5%	2.5YR 4/6	red		distinctly sandy and, to the eye, redder than the overlying sediment; this horizon not reached in WG02; probably the natural

Table 1. Auger Survey Record WG03 at SU 68869 81573

Numerous other core samples were taken across the site including some outside of the enclosure (some described below, some in our landscape archaeology report and some in our post-medieval report as appropriate) but the chalk bedrock was not reached in any of these. Therefore, the Thames Gravel layer with undetermined depth is referred to as "the natural" in this report.

2.1.2 Location of the Southern Ditch

At the chosen location of Trench 2 the ditch was estimated to be about 1m north of the gate in the boundary fence. Coring at the chosen location only reached a depth of 100cm where stones prevented deeper coring. However, 30m to the west coring was successful to 270cm, with very wet sediment at the lowest level above the natural, consistent with this being the ditch. Table 2 shows a core sample record from this position (WG17).

Depth (cm.)	Texture	Stoniness	Munsell colour	Colour description	Horizon boundary	Comments
0-30	topsoil silt	nil	7.5YR 3/2	dark brown		
30-68	sandy clay	5%	5YR 5/6	yellowish red	clear	rounded stones to 2cm
68-206	sandy clay	<2%	5YR 4/6	yellowish red	sharp	
206-225	sandy clay	<2%	10YR 4/6	dark yellowish	sharp	grey-looking sediment
225-250	clayey sand	nil	7.5YR 4/4	brown	sharp	very wet – if cleared
250-270	sandy clay	nil	2.5YR 4/6	red	very sharp	natural; some small stones
	COMMENT					
	The natural is much deeper than elsewhere, suggesting that this may be in the lowest part of the ditch; the very wet much more sandy horizon at 225-250 supports this.					

Table 2. Auger Survey Record WG17 at SU 68834 81572 (near Trench 2)

This clearly indicates a very different subsoil structure to WG03 (undisturbed soils) and suggests that the ground where the ditch was expected had indeed been disturbed. This provided confidence that Trench 2 should proceed and the ditch exposed.

For Trench 1 a core sample was taken to indicate the likely extent of excavation required to fully expose the ditch which was partially filled with loose peaty material and accumulated detritus. Table 3 show the record indicating at least 80cm of this loose backfill.

Depth (cm.)	Texture	Stoniness	Munsell colour	Colour description	Horizon boundary	Comments
0-29	peaty	nil	10YR 3/2	very dark greyish-brown		very dry humic peat
29-80	peaty	nil	10YR 3/3	dark brown	sharp	slightly damp humic peat
80-98	silt	<5%	7.5YR ¾	dark brown	sharp	silty with stones up to 2cm

Table 3. Auger Survey Record WG01 at SU 68837 81738 (near Trench 1)

2.1.3 Line of Southern Ditch

In addition to core samples nos. WG02, WG03 and WG04, located close to Trench 2 shown below, further core samples were taken along the line of the ditch suggested by Lidar (i.e. the line of the present boundary) to the west of Trench 2. As with samples WG02, WG03 and WG04 these were taken along transects orthogonal to the expected line i.e. on the line 5m north of it and 10m north of it. These transects were 30m

(samples WG15, WG16 and WG17) and 55m (samples WG18, WH19 and WG20) west of Trench 2 as shown in Figure 3. As expected, the 30m transect was similar but not identical to that at Trench 2 and reached the natural at approximately 2.5m depth, indicating a continuation of the ditch. However, the 55m transect (samples WG18, WG19 and WG20) reached the natural at 0.8m, 0.9m and 1.05m respectively suggesting that though sample WG20 may be on the edge of the ditch, its deepest part is probably a little further south.

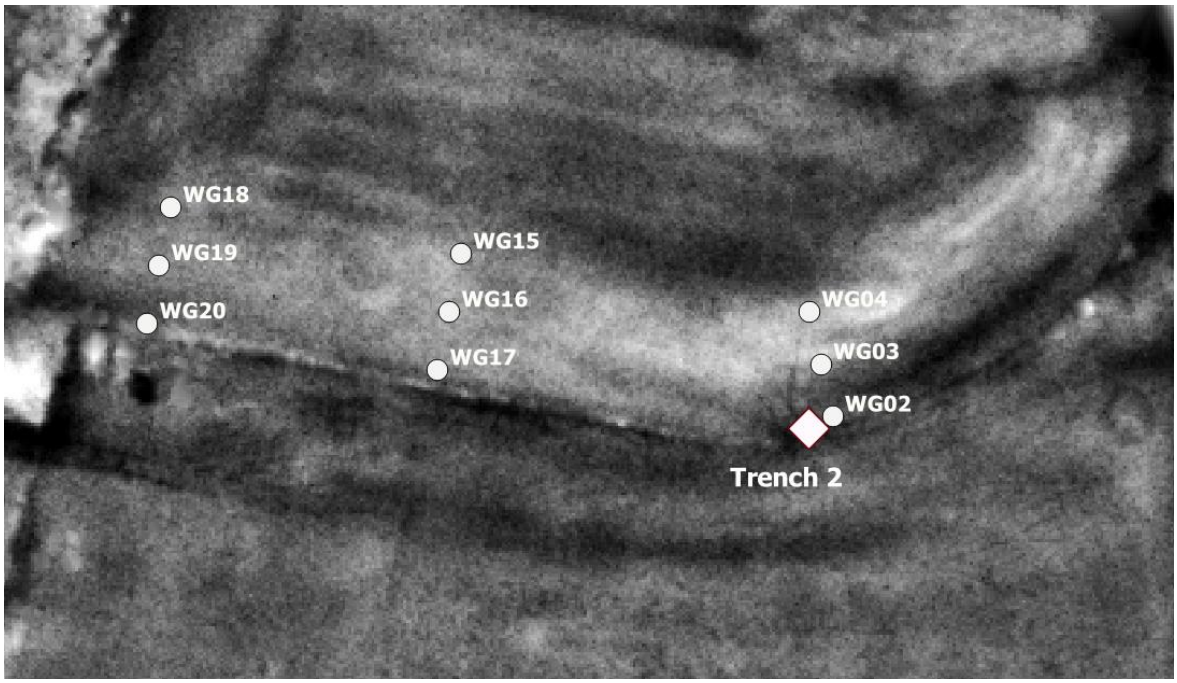

Figure 3. Core sampling points along southern boundary on Lidar image

The Lidar image (Figure 3) suggests that the remains of a former bank are now spread inside the boundary (broad white band). A resistivity survey (see our report *Post-Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange*) also suggests that the ditch continues along the southern perimeter.

Further west, the land was outside the scope of the present fieldwork. However, access was kindly granted to allow visual observation of the remainder of the southern line of the supposed enclosure. It was clear from this that, as seen on the Lidar, a substantial (0.5 to 1.0m high) bank remained as far as the western most point of the earthwork as indicated on the 1898 Ordnance Survey 25" map. It was also confirmed by the present landowner that the erstwhile northerly up-turn of the bank in the southwest corner has been levelled by modern garden landscaping.

Thus, the coring work, Lidar image, resistivity survey and visual observation have confirmed the probable former existence of a bank and ditch at, and both east and west of, the location of Trench 2 though the present land boundaries may deviate marginally from the ditch at some points. The bank continues west as shown on the 1898 map and there is no reason to doubt its northerly upturn was extant in 1898.

It therefore seems reasonable to consider it likely that upturn of the bank and ditch continued north to join the extant bank and ditch 70m further north (at the present west entrance) forming a complete enclosure.

2.2 Trench 1 - The Northern Perimeter

by Bill Annan

The purpose of Trench 1 was to investigate the bank and ditch that runs along the northern boundary of Wyfold Grange. This feature is readily visible from the adjacent road but it is apparent that the ditch is partially filled with much spurious material.

Particular objectives were to determine the profile of the original ground surface and the construction of the bank on it and to excavate the ditch to reveal its original extent.

2.2.1 Methodology

The precise location (see Figure 2) of the trench was selected because it was relatively clear of the trees and bushes which generally followed the line of the earthworks. Additionally, the outline of the ditch and bank appeared particularly well defined in this area.

The excavated length of the trench (north to south) was 8.4m, with a width (east to west) of 1.5m. Excavation of the bank was stepped for safety reasons. From approximately 1.4 m below the crown, excavation was limited to a sondage along the western section, 70cm wide. The ditch area was excavated to the full trench width.

Excavation was principally by large and small hand mattocks. All spoil was collected and removed from the trench by bucket. All spoil was sieved by hand and any finds collected and recorded by context. Both trench and spoil heaps were frequently tested by metal detector.

At the end of the excavation the trench was left open at the request of the landowner: the spoil was spread over the nearby areas.

2.2.2 Results

The distribution of the contexts is as indicated on Figures 4 and 5. Figures 6 and 7 show composite photographs (produced by Richard Miller) from above the trench and of the east facing section.

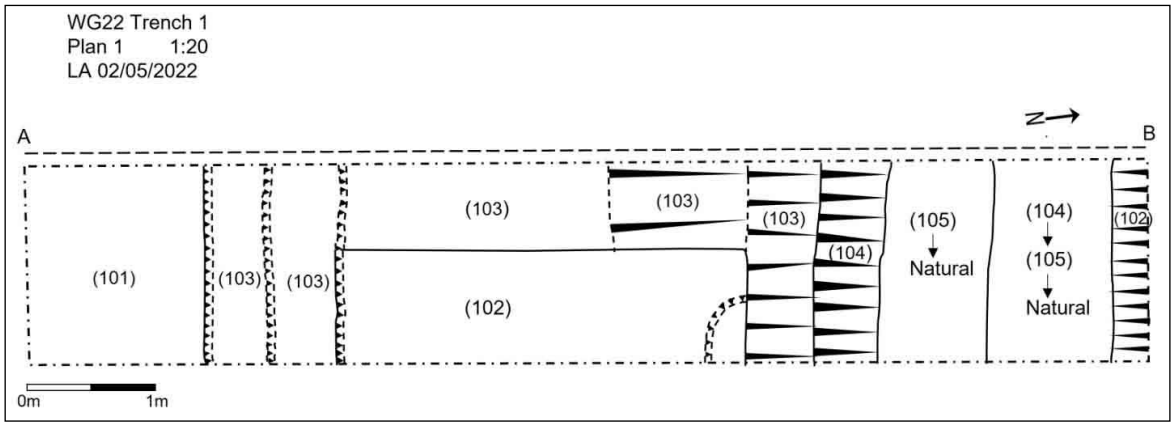

Figure 4. Plan of Trench 1 showing contexts

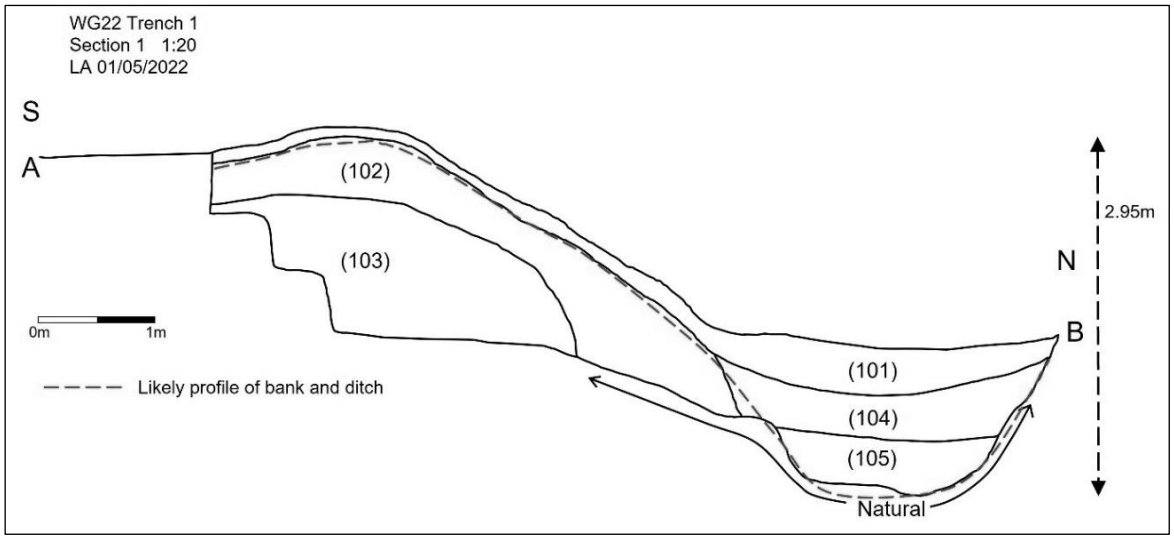

Figure 5. East facing section of Trench 1 with contexts (and likely profile of the bank and ditch).

Figure 6. Aerial composite view of Trench 1

Figure 7. Composite view of east facing section of Trench 1

Topsoil: The whole Trench was covered by a topsoil layer (context 101) of varying depth (12 cm at the crown of the bank, 40cm at the lowest point of the ditch). It comprised soft blackish organic soil mixed with leaf mould, pebbles and tree roots.

Bank: Immediately below the topsoil there was a layer of compact orange sandy gravel (Context 102) including a high pebble content and some small to medium sized flints (not knapped), with root inclusions and root disturbance. The depth of the context varied from 50cm (below the crown) to 80cm (at the base of the ditch). With depth the context became drier, with a higher incidence of gravel and sand. Context 102 is interpreted as material redeposited from the ditch to form the bank. No evidence of a palisade was found but as the trench was only 1.5m wide, it may have fallen between two post holes.

Context 102 transitioned to a very compact orange sandy clay and flints (Context 103), interpreted as the natural ground surface forming the base of the bank. This was excavated within the sondage only, to a depth of 1.1m.

Ditch: Beneath the topsoil there was an upper fill (Context 104) of dark blackish clayey soil, with pebbles and flints, 30-50 cm deep, with common root inclusions and root disturbance.

Context 104 transitioned to a lower fill (Context 105) also of blackish clay, but with significant inclusions of orangey red gravel (which coloured the layer) and flints, and rare charcoal specks. There was a deposit of larger (unknapped) flints in the central area of the ditch, immediately above the natural. Context 105 was 20-40cm in depth and was immediately above the natural orange sandy clay.

Contexts 104 and 105 are interpreted as cumulative infill of the ditch from the bank and surrounding land.

2.2.3 Small Finds

There were a small number of finds of modern or indeterminate date within the topsoil (Context 101) and the upper fill of the ditch (Context 104). These are reported in our report Post-*Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange*. No bones were found in any of the contexts. Three small pieces of charcoal were found in Context 102 but, as these were near the top of the bank where there were areas of disturbance caused by tree roots raising the likelihood of intrusion, they were not considered useful for dating purposes.

The lower bank (Context 103) was bare of finds, as was the lower ditch fill, (Context 105).

There were therefore no small finds in Trench 1 which can be regarded as establishing or indicating the likely date of the earthwork.

2.2.4 Trench 1 Summary

The likely profile of the ditch is shown on Figure 5. The combined height of the ditch and bank is currently 2.95m though infill of the ditch, presumed (at least in part) to have fallen from the bank, suggest a greater height when built.

No datable finds were made in contexts relating to the construction of the bank and ditch.

2.3 Trench 2 - The Southern Perimeter

by Derek Greenwood with contributions from Tom Walker

The purpose of Trench 2 was to investigate the faint curvilinear feature visible on Lidar (see Figure 2) that runs along the southern boundary of Wyfold Grange, apparently as a continuation of the imposing ditch and embankment to the north. This faint feature eventually disappears into adjacent properties to the west but along the southern boundary it is still visible as a shallow rise (15-20 cm) in the ground level of the meadow and a slight dip (15-20 cm) further out, close to the boundary fence.

2.3.1 Methodology

Trench 2 was excavated adjacent to a gate set in the fence and provided a 10 m transverse section through the rise and dip of the feature.

The aims were to excavate down to the natural, to look for evidence of the embankment and ditch and to recover any finds or other material, in particular any that might indicate the date of the earthwork, especially any that might be present at the lower levels of the bank.

Initial excavation of Trench 2 to a width of 1.5m involved the removal of about a 20 cm depth of turf, soil and subsoil, using mattocks and shovels. This proved to be a difficult exercise as the soil was compacted, mostly clay, full of flint and therefore hard to dig. As a result, a more limited programme of excavation was agreed at this point:

- Deeper excavation would be limited to the northern and southern ends of the Trench revealing hopefully the edge of the remaining embankment layer to the north and the ditch below to the south.
- Rather than digging the full width of the Trench, further excavation would be limited to narrower sondages running along the west-facing side of the Trench.
- Sieving was ruled out due to the nature of the soil. Finds would have to be located visually and with frequent checks by metal detectorists.

2.3.2 Results

The distribution of the contexts is as indicated in Figures 8 and 9. Figures 10 and 11 show composite photographs (produced by Richard Miller) from above the trench and of the east facing section.

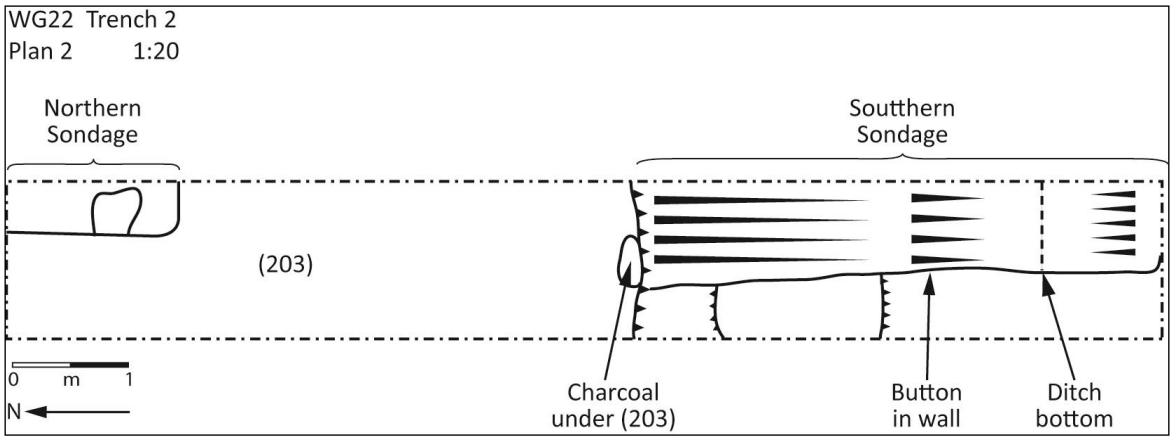

Figure8. Plan of Trench 2 showing contexts

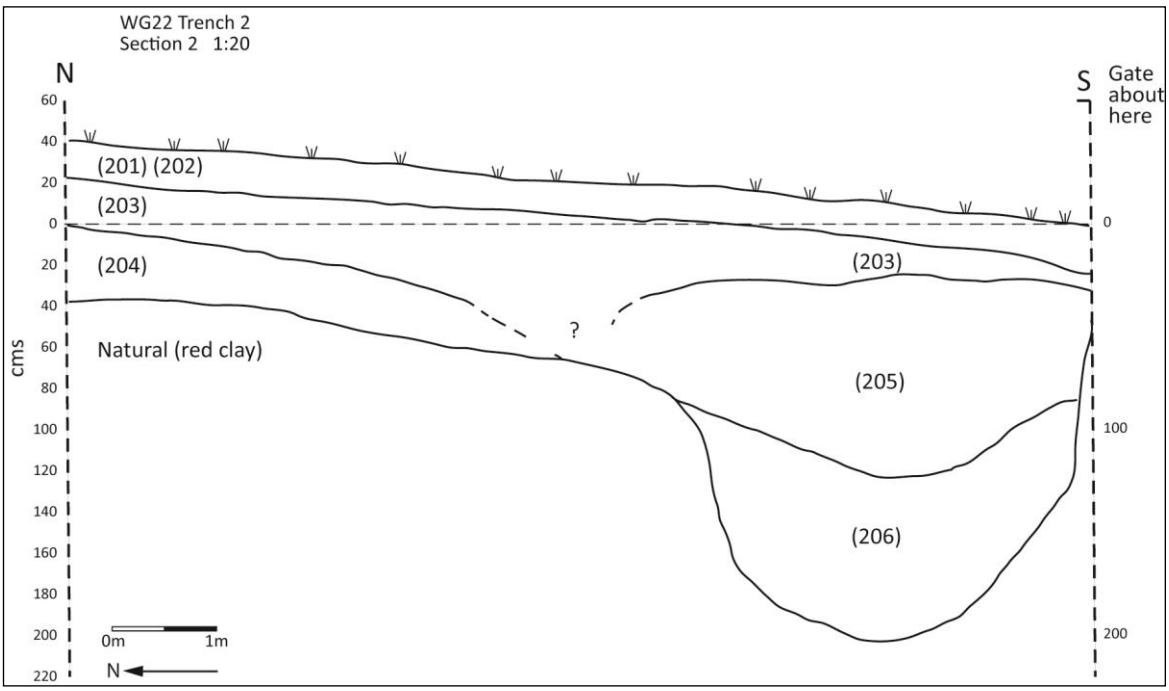

Figure 9. West facing section of Trench 2 (southern sondage) with contexts (and likely profile of the ditch).

Figure 10. Aerial composite view of Trench 2

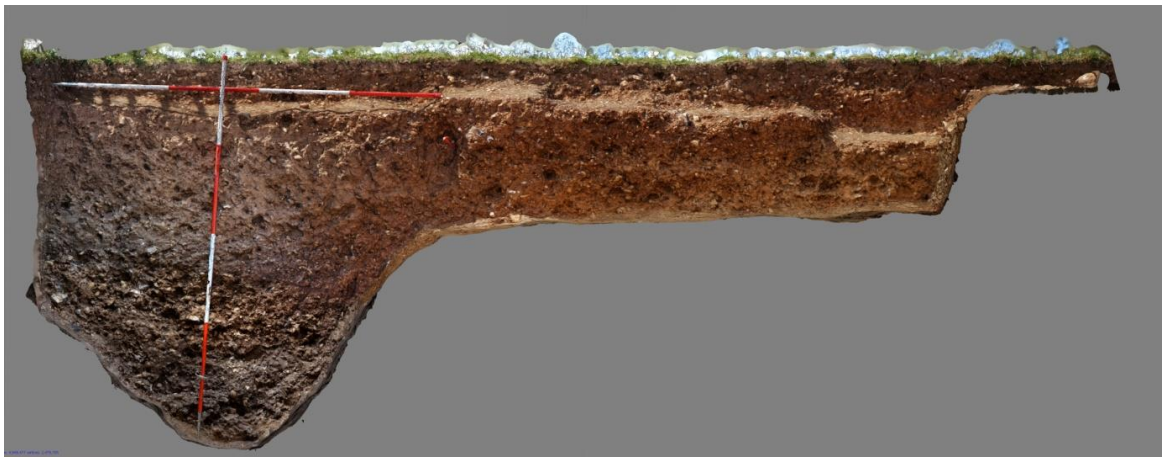

Figure 11. Composite view of east facing section of Trench 2 (southern sondage)

Excavations at the southern end of Trench 2

A sondage about 70 cm wide was put in along the last 5 m of the southern end of Trench 2, this being the minimum width to wield a mattock. Excavation down to the natural indicated very clearly that the slight depression running along the field boundary was in fact the visible fingerprint of the same large, deep ditch encircling Wyfold Grange to the north (as seen in Trench 1) and that in this southern location the ditch had cut a deep gouge into the underlying natural material, broadly in line with the findings from the auguring programme. The sondage also showed that the most southerly 50cm or so of the ditch could not be excavated as this was cut off by the boundary fence and not accessible to the project.

Immediately below the turf (Context 201) and soil (Context 202) there was a reddish clay-based layer (Context 203) containing substantial quantities of flint, pebbles, etc., quite distinct from the more recent meadow soil above. It also tapered noticeably, from about 50cm deep at the north where the shallow elevation of the embankment was visible, to 10cm or less at the extreme southern end above the ditch. This strongly supports the conclusion that this layer was the remains of the embankment thrown up around the Wyfold Grange site, which had subsequently been flattened and spread out during later occupation of the site.

The next layer down (Context 204) was a brownish soil-based layer, containing plenty of flint inclusions and turning light greyish when dry, which was found only at the northern end of the sondage furthest away from the ditch. The position of this context and its absence over the ditch provide reasonable evidence that this context was the original topsoil, covered up when the material from the ditch was thrown over it to form the embankment. This layer peters out and becomes indistinct close to the ditch, possibly suggesting some sort of platform or berm may have been provided along the ditch edge.

Within the ditch itself there were two further distinct deposits. The uppermost one (Context 205) was a lens-shaped deposit formed directly over the ditch, comprising a rich brown soil containing a number of large and medium flints. Most probably this was secondary infill, formed over an extended period from vegetation growing in the ditch and/or from soil pushed into the ditch by the movement of animals. Occasionally flints would also have made their way into this layer from the embankment above.

Below this deposit and extending right down to the natural, was a compacted mixture of brownish red clay, substantial flints and pebbles, with some very large flints at the bottom (Context206). This appears to be the primary infill into the ditch bottom, comprising the initial tumble and washout from the steep ditch walls and the exposed face of the embankment to the north.

Environmental samples were collected from the east wall of the trench in the region of the ditch. Unfortunately, no molluscs or other significant environmental evidence was found in the samples.

Excavations at the northern end of Trench 2

A sondage about 60cm wide and 1.7m long was excavated at the northernmost end of the Trench in order to provide a cross-section at a point where the shallow rise of the feature first becomes noticeable. This sondage provided supporting evidence of embankment material spread above the original soil surface as found in the southerly sondage.

Immediately below the turf and soil layers, there was a fairly even layer of flints, with a compacted reddish clay layer below containing significant flint and pebble inclusions. This material corresponded with the layer of embankment material found in the southern sondage, indicating that the embankment had, at some later period of occupation, been flattened and spread out along the southern boundary over an area 10 or more metres wide. The flint layer might have been laid down deliberately as some sort of strengthening for the embankment but could also be there as the result of natural processes occurring in the soil.

Below the red layer were layers of greyish yellow material with an overall thickness of around 40cm. These very likely correspond with the buried, “pre-embankment” topsoil layer found in the southern sondage.

The underlying solid red clay natural, identical with that found in the southern sondage, appeared at the expected depth of about 80 cm from the modern surface.

2.3.3 Finds

As anticipated, there were almost no finds evident during any part of the excavation of Trench 2. There were a few pieces of post-medieval CBM and a few bits of metal and a couple of pottery sherds in the upper contexts but nothing significant for dating purposes. The modern finds are documented in our report *Post-Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange*. The very lowest context in the ditch provided no finds at all.

However, during one of the checks by metal detectorists, an 18th century metal button was found in the wall of the southern sondage in the disturbed zone where Contexts 203, 204, and 205 met (see Figure 8). It was not obvious how this button ended up there, though it is possible that it was there as a result of activities associated with the levelling of the embankment suggesting that this may have taken place in the 18th century.

Of much greater significance was the finding of a charcoal fragment in the southerly sondage of Trench 2. The fragments were lying on the surface of the buried soil (Context 204) adjacent to the northern slope of the ditch, beneath the embankment sediments (Context 203) thrown up from the ditch (see Figures 8 and 9). The location of the charcoal on the buried soil strongly suggests that it dates to or earlier than the time of the bank and ditch construction.

Following the discovery of charcoal, some embankment material was carefully cut back, revealing a small area of the original topsoil surface with several obvious charcoal fragments exposed at or within the top 5cm of the soil surface. These have been collected and one has been radiocarbon dated by the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit (ORAU) providing a "terminus post quem" for the earthwork in the range OXA-X-3213-

7:1043+/-19 BP which has been calibrated using the Oxcal computer program (v4.4) of C. Bronk Ramsey, using the 'IntCal20' dataset (*Radiocarbon* 62 (4), 2020) to 987AD – 1030 cal AD (95.4% probability). The result is shown in Figure 12.

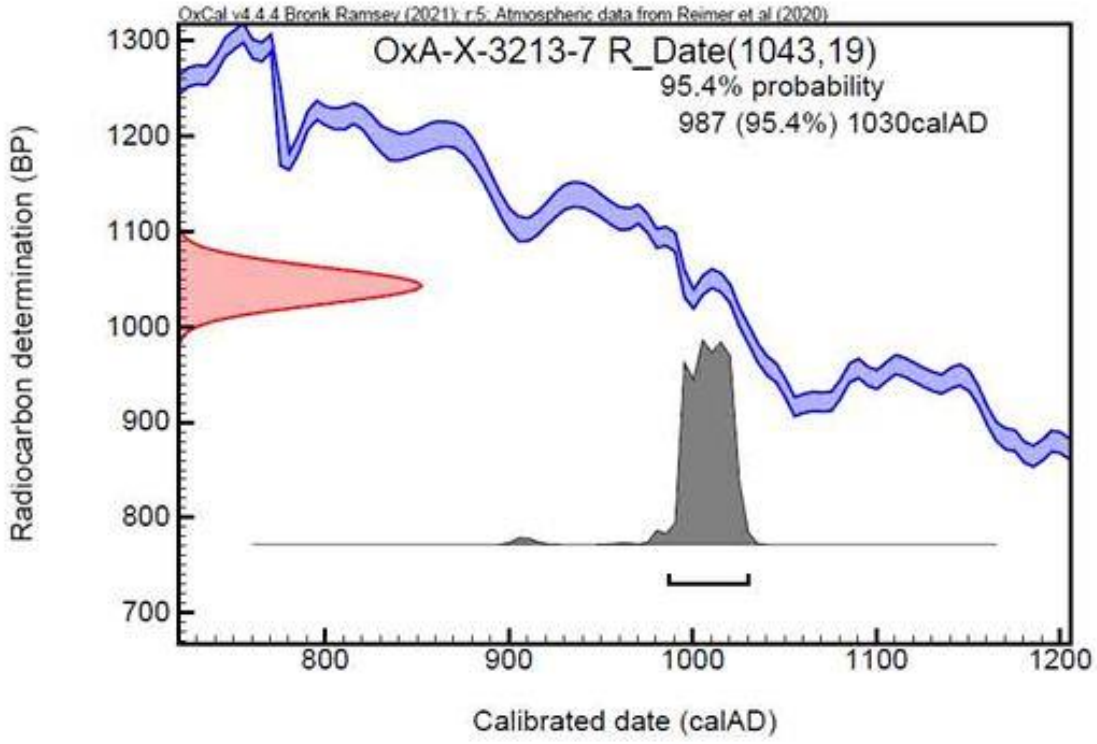

Figure 12. Radiocarbon dating of carbon sample from Trench 2. ORAU

2.3.4 Trench 2 Summary

Excavation has confirmed that the southern boundary was formed of a bank and ditch of comparable construction to that of the northern boundary.

Radiocarbon dating of a charcoal sample from a secure context has shown that construction was undertaken in the late 10th or early 11th century.

3. DISCUSSION

by Dave Carless and Elizabeth Surrey

3.1 Summary of Key Findings from Fieldwork

The excavations and coring have provided clear evidence that the earthwork was highly likely a complete enclosure with substantial bank and external V-shaped ditch of 3m or more total height. No entrances have been identified other than the two currently existing.

The southern half of the earthwork appears to have been deliberately levelled by flattening the bank, perhaps in the 18th century.

A radiocarbon dated sample of charcoal, found at the top of the old soil surface on which the bank was built, has provided a "terminus post quem" for the construction of the earthwork in the range 987AD – 1030 cal AD (95.4% probability).

3.2 Interpretations

Because of the possibility of the "old wood effect" in radiocarbon dating charcoal, it could be that the actual construction date is substantially later than the 987 to 1030 cal AD range indicated. However, as only small fragments of charcoal (i.e. no evidence of large pieces of wood) were found and as the find spot is remote from any known occupation site within the enclosure, it is considered unlikely that there is substantial "old wood effect".

Nevertheless, it is necessary to evaluate the possibility of construction during the English reigns of Anglo-Saxon, Danish or Norman monarchs, from Æthelred II to William I, or even construction as an enclosed

Cistercian Grange shortly after the time that Wyfold granted to Thame abbey c 1153. These possibilities are considered below.

Apart from the radiocarbon dated charcoal, no finds from excavation or metal detecting at the site (see our landscape archaeology and post medieval reports) have provided any dating evidence in the medieval period earlier than the late 12th century.

3.3 Probable Late Anglo-Saxon Enclosure

3.3.1 Political Context

Just two years after Æthelred II ("The Unready") first came to power (978AD) Viking raids, which had been largely dormant for many years, resumed. Following the 9th century establishment of the Kingdom of England (under the rule of the House of Wessex) and the Danelaw in the north and east there had been relative peace and a growth in prosperity. Administrative control had been revised by the establishment of the Shires and Hundreds, and by the wholesale division of large estates as attested by the profusion of grants recorded in the Anglo-Saxon charters.

Following the early death of Edgar in 975AD there was dispute, perhaps even civil war, between his two sons (half brothers) Edward and Æthelred (Stenton, 1947, p372). After a short reign Edward was murdered at Corfe and Æthelred ascended. Denmark and Norway had been united, and Christianised, under Harald "Bluetooth" Gormsson: a time of strength in Scandinavia compared to England's disarray. Hampshire, Thanet and Cheshire were raided in 980AD, Devon and Cornwall in 981 and Dorset in 982. As raids continued in the late 980s the Normans offered access to their ports to aid their northern cousins. The English sought respite. In 994AD for example, following the massive invasion of 94 ships the English bought peace for 16,000 pounds (Anglo-Saxon Chronicles). But, despite treaties and further payments, large scale raiding continued in following years.

Æthelred, in 1002AD, ordered that all Danish men in England should be killed on St Brice's day and one such massacre is recorded at St Frideswide's church in Oxford. There were further Danish raids in 1006 (the burning of Wallingford), 1009 (Sandwich), and 1013 (Gainsborough and Wallingford again) before Swein ("Forkbeard"), Harald's son, briefly took the English throne. Æthelred reigned for two more years and his son Edmund ("Ironside") briefly held the throne before Swein's son, Cnut ("The Great"), commenced the long Danish rule in 1016. Following his death in 1035AD his two sons Harald ("Harefoot") and Harthacnut disputed the crown with each eventually ruling in turn. Cnut's line of descent ended with Harthacnut's death and the house of Wessex was restored from 1042AD through to the Norman Conquest in 1066.

The Wyfold radiocarbon date provides a terminus post quem of late 10th to early 11th century, corresponding to the reigns of Æthelred II, Swein Forkbeard and Cnut.

3.3.2 Geographic Context

The extent of the royal estate of Benson in the early Saxon period (or "Bensington", apparently captured from the British in 571AD: Anglo-Saxon Chronicles), close to the initial Gewissan See of St Birinus at Dorchester from 635AD, is uncertain (VCH, XX, p8). But it is clear that by the mid Saxon period Benson had come to dominate the southern tip of Oxfordshire (VCH, XVIII, p36) and may have comprised most or even all of the four and a half Chiltern hundreds (Ewelme, Pyrton, Lewknor, Binfield and Langtree Hundreds) over which it retained hundredal jurisdiction in 1086 and into post-medieval times.

Following the establishment of Wallingford as a "Burh" c900AD, Benson's importance, from both military and administrative perspectives, declined. The estate, like most others in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and elsewhere, was neatly carved up by grants of the 9th and 10th centuries into smaller estates which became the bases of future Manors and Parishes. Many estates on both sides of the Thames owed service to Wallingford, indicated in Domesday Book.

But while Benson lost most of the land over which it had direct control, it did retain some small but notable outlying hamlets and minor landholdings in Wyfold, Rotherfield Greys, Henley, Nettlebed, Huntercombe (Nuffield), "Verneveld" (possibly in Swyncombe), Holcombe (Newington), Warborough, Shillingford, Preston Crowmarsh, Roke and Draycott. There may have been a reason that the King chose to retain these particular parcels.

In addition to their agricultural and silvicultural output, these diverse and scattered small holdings may each have offered some further economic benefit to Benson: for example, both Henley and Cromarsh Gifford have mill sites which may have been the location of the two mills held by Benson (which has only one mill site of its own) in Domesday. But it seems likely that there is a more strategic motivation for retention by Benson. Nettlebed, Nuffield and Swyncombe all lie on the route of the probable Roman road (Malpas, 1987) and later turnpike road from Benson/Wallingford to Henley. Even as late as the 1820s a perambulation of Benson's boundaries "included waste along the length of the Dorchester-Henley road" (VCH, XX, p36). Warborough and Newington lie on the Roman road and later turnpike road from the Thames crossings at Shillingford

towards Thame. En route, Simon Draper has suggested, Draycott may have been a trans-shipment point on the River Thame (Mileson and Brookes, 2021, p74). Roke provides access to this route from Benson.

Robert Peberdy (2012) has demonstrated a road from Goring, passing through Wyfold and Rotherfield Greys, towards Henley from at least the 14th century with the eastern section probably existing by the late Anglo-Saxon period. He has also argued that there must have been a road linking Wyfold to Benson (pers. comm.). We have shown in our report *Landscape Archaeology at Wyfold* that there is cartographic evidence that the road probably originally ran from Henley turning northwest at Wyfold towards Benson, with the Goring section being added later. Though there is no suggestion of a Roman road here, it clearly can be seen in terms of strategic waypoints along the route (Benson – Wyfold – Rotherfield Greys – Henley), as being comparable to the two other routes outlined above.

Perhaps also there was some need of fortification to provide security along these routes as at Wyfold. For example, the place-name "Kingsbury", at Holcombe (Gelling,1953, p117) suggests there may have been a royal fortified site on the Benson – Thame route.

3.3.3 Economic Context

That the Thames was, from early Anglo-Saxon days, a key communications route is evidenced by the early settlement pattern of the Upper Thames Valley and by clear links between the material culture of the region and that of the Lower Thames Frankish region (Mileson and Brookes, 2021, p48). The Thames could no doubt be navigated by small boats but larger vessels may have had difficulty passing the shallows in the upper reaches. Davis (1973, p262) has argued that the construction of mill weirs, predominantly in the 9th and 10th centuries, facilitated the passage of barges and thereby enhanced trade, notably to and from Oxford. But whilst improved navigation might have boosted commerce involving bulky goods it would always have been slow and unsuited to more urgent administrative and military matters, which would require roads adequate at least for horse travel if not wagons.

Like other burghs (for example Winchester) Wallingford was furnished with a street pattern and burgage plots to encourage the development of trade (Dewey and Dewey, 1977, p21) and was evidently successful, becoming Berkshire's prosperous Borough by 1086AD. A mint had been established by Athelstan's reign (925 to 940) and produced coins (silver pennies) throughout the Saxon period thereafter (Dewey and Dewey, 1977, p22). This is discussed further below.

3.3.4 Other enclosures built in England in this period

Other enclosures are recorded as probably built in England in the late 10th – early 11th centuries. Some of these are listed in Table 5 and possible interpretations are discussed below. To make a basic comparison of the shape and size of the enclosures, two metrics have been included in Table 5: (i) the enclosed area and (ii) the aspect ratio. The aspect ratio is defined as the ratio of the larger and smaller dimensions; it is always equal to or greater than one.

John Blair has identified a number of enclosures recorded in this period (Blair, 2018, Ch 11), typified by an egg-shaped ditch and bank. He suggests these were probably quasi-defensive but certainly high-status enclosures, for example Launton-en-le Morthern has been identified as a likely site for a hall of Edwin, Earl of Mercia (Castle Studies Trust 2020). They seem to have been sited as an 11th century response to a desire to monitor movements along routes: Sulgrave along the Cherwell valley, Fowlmere the London to Cambridge route, Pontefract the Great North Road along the Aire valley, etc.

Blair suggests these high status-sites were intended to be seen as a statement of power within the landscape. From Table 5 it can be seen that dimensionally Wyfold is significantly larger than these examples. This may simply be a result of the site but it also possibly indicates that it was a royal construction. It would possibly have been under the control of a powerful thegn, if not the King directly, but it is impossible to identify the individual.

Alex Langlands cites the creation of large enclosures in the late 10th to early 11th centuries, as a means to monitor, and possibly control, the movement of goods and people, and implies a commensurate amount of economic traffic (Langlands, 2013). He discusses the growth of a market-based economy from the late 10th century continuing into the 11th with an increased emphasis on regional trade in surplus commodities promoted by the development of local urban markets, and the implied increase in traffic generally across the period creating an opportunity for income by taxation (tolls) for use of the King's highway. Langlands (p 228) associates these enclosures with the requirements of the thegn to provide an element of protection to people using the road and maintenance of the road, burhs and bridges.

Three examples of enclosures in Wessex dating from the 8th to 11th century that appear to have had a role in controlling routes are discussed: Yatesbury, Trowbridge and Faccombe Netherton. At Yatesbury an enclosure of approximately 180m diameter has been identified (Reynolds, 1994 & 1995, Enc 3) as having originally sat

astride a route from Wroughton to Marlborough. At Trowbridge there was evidence of occupation from the Middle Saxon period and in the tenth century a church and graveyard together with a substantial, approximately 20m square, enclosure formed by a ditch and bank, which later became absorbed by the inner bailey of the Norman castle (Davies and Graham, 1987 and ASC). Trowbridge is located on a major route running from the SE to the crossing of the Avon at Bradford-on-Avon and a possible EW route across the upper Avon flood plain. Faccombe Netherton (Fairbrother, 1990) is a multi-phase site covering phases from the 9th to the 14th century. The site lies in a network of roads linking important Anglo-Saxon sites and, it is suggested that it may have been sited to control a route between Andover and Oxford via Hungerford and Wantage.

David Hill (1975), in considering the origin of Anglo-Saxon towns, considers the development of pre-conquest burhs, including towns and forts, ports (i.e. a market with a burh) and mints. He discusses such sites as an attempt at commercial exploitation of the large monastic and royal estates by fostering the development of (physical) markets by creating a burh and by offering inducements for its use such as improved roads and bridges, from which tolls could be collected. Two examples, Caistor and Horncastle (both in Lincolnshire), are similar in size to Wyfold and are known to have existed in the late 10th century.

Both Caistor and Horncastle were created from the ruins of Roman camps or forts and had stone walls and both had small mints active from 973AD. There are also examples of refurbished Iron Age forts as secure sanctuaries for mints during the reign of Æthelræd II in response to increased Viking raids between 980 and 1010 AD. During this time the Wilton mint moved to Old Sarum and the Ilchester mint to Cadbury (Hill p258). It has been suggested that the mint at the Iron Age fort of Cissbury originated at this time, seemingly operating in parallel with the mint at Chichester (Dolley, et.al. 1955-7) and subsequently forming the mint at Steyning in Cnut's reign. Excavation at Cadbury (Alcock 1969, 1970) showed extensive refurbishment with a mortared wall and supporting rampart, attributed to Æthelræd II. Old Sarum also shows evidence of refurbishment of the defensive bank (Montgomerie, 1974) but is tentatively dated to the early 10th century based on a terminus post quem find of a brooch.

The known record of Wallingford mint coins shown in Table 4 suggests a sharp reduction in production at Wallingford during the reign of Æthelræd II (Christie, 2013). Following the attack on Wallingford by Vikings 1006AD, is it possible that the Wallingford mint was moved to Wyfold? The Caistor and Horncastle evidence would then suggest the possibility that Wyfold could also be Iron Age or Roman in origin but refurbished around 1000AD, however no archaeological evidence has been found to support that.

	Æthelræd II				**Cnut**		
	991-997	997-1003	1003-1009	1009-1017	1017-1023	1023-1029	1029-1036
No. coins	37	28	7	4	16	16	20

Table 4 Known Coins from the Wallingford Mint in the Reigns of Æthelræd II and Cnut

Draper (2012) has identified a number of late Anglo-Saxon enclosed settlements in Wiltshire. Among these Bremhill, Codford St. Peter, Saintbury, Yatesbury (Enclosure 2) and Burbage are included in Table 5. All of Draper's example enclosures contain churches with evidence of late Anglo-Saxon masonry and some contain later manors. The foundings of these sites are attributed to high status individuals acquiring land following the fragmentation of larger royal estates and the gifting of land to a new aristocracy and religious houses.

In *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England* (2012), Helen Hamerow, discusses the evolution of several mid Anglo-Saxon enclosed settlements into the late Anglo-Saxon period and stresses the variation of layout over time. Bramford (Suffolk) in Table 5 is such an example. Not all of these settlements display an enclosing ditch and bank, but Springfield Lyons, (Tyler and Major, 2005) is an example, where a Bronze age ring ditched enclosure has been successively overlain by an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery and a late Anglo-Saxon domestic settlement, which appears to contain most of the accoutrements of a high status enclosure – three large halls, a towered building and a kitchen have been identified, together with a possible post-mill.

3.3.5 Comparison of Anglo-Saxon Enclosures *

Location (Ref)	Main dimensions excl bank & ditch (m)	Ditch width/ depth (m)*	Approximate Date & Evidence	Aspect Ratio	Area (ha.)	Comments
Goltho Period 5 (Blair), (Beresford)	81x98	5/2	950-1070 LAS pottery, coin Cnut, iron ware	1.2	0.62	Size est. from Beresford p72. Pre-dates Norman motte & bailey. Multi-phase site
Sulgrave (Blair)	84x124	4/-	C11th	1.5	0.82	Size est. from Blair fig 144. Shape assumed from road
Fowlmere N (Blair)	100x132	5/6	After 1000AD LAS pottery	1.3	1.04	Size est. from Blair fig 145. Curving road over major ditch
Fowlmere S (Blair)	67x92	~10/-	-	1.4	0.48	Size est. from Blair fig 145
Castle Cary (Blair)	89x111	~10/-	-	1.2	0.78	Size est. from Blair fig 146
Pontefract (Blair)	89x126	~6/-	1000-1050 A-N pottery	1.4	0.88	Size est. from Blair fig 146. Multi-phase site
Saintbury (Blair)	76x122	~6/-	-	1.6	0.73	Size est. from Blair fig 146. Multi-phase site
Laughton (Blair)	90x125	-/-		1.4	0.88	
Erringham (Holden), (Blair)	~72 (~86)	~5/2	After 1000AD Coin Æthelred II, A-N pottery	1.0	0.41	Size est. from Holden fig 7 & 13. Multi-phase site. Assumed circular based on palisade post holes
Eynsford (Horsman)	57x89	5/2.5	Early C11th Pottery & stratigraphy	1.6	0.40	Size est. from Horsman fig7
Stafford (Blair)	~64x70	-/-	After 1000AD LAS pottery	1.2	0.35	Size est. from Blair fig 143 & 100
Faccombe (Fairbrother)	~61x88	-/-	980-1070 Penny Æthelred II, Normandy penny 1040-50	1.4	0.54	Size est. from Fairbrother fig 3.5 Multiphase site
Trowbridge (Davies & Graham)	~58x68	-/-	Mid-late C10th	1.2	0.39	Size est. from Davies & Graham fig 1 p2 Multiphase site
Yatesbury (3) (Reynolds 1994, 1995)	~183x183	-/-	Possibly late Roman to Mid A-S, pottery sherds	1.0	2.63	Size est. from Reynolds (1995) fig 2 Assumed circular Multi-phase site
Caistor (Hill)	~174x272	-/-	LAS Mint 973AD	1.6	3.72	Re-used walled Roman site Hill

Location (Ref)	Main dimensions excl bank & ditch (m)	Ditch width/ depth (m)*	Approximate Date & Evidence	Aspect Ratio	Area (ha.)	Comments
Horncastle (Hill)	~116x174	-/-	LAS Mint 973AD	1.5	2.02	Re-used walled Roman site. Rectangular Hill
Bremhill (Draper)	~198x216	-/-	LAS C10th Church masonry	1.1	3.36	Size est. from Draper fig 6
Codford St. Peter	~202x232	-/-	LAS Cross shaft	1.1	3.68	Size est. from Draper fig 7
Yatesbury (2) (Reynolds, Draper)	~110x146	-/-	LAS Church	1.3	1.61	Size est. from Draper fig 8. Sub-rectangular
Burbage (Draper)	~97x200	-/-	LAS recorded 961AD	2.1	1.94	Size est. from Draper fig 9. Sub-rectangular
Bramford (Hamerow)	~106x116	~2.8/1.4	MAS-LAS Sceattas & stratigraphy	1.1	0.97	Size est. from Caruth fig 103 Multi-phase site
Wyfold	177x210	~5/2	(987 – 1030) AD probability 95.4% Charcoal ^{14}C	1.2	2.92	Size est. from Lidar, NLS map and garden observation

*Table 5 Comparison of A-S Enclosures**

*(*NB Where only one set of dimensions is given it was not possible to determine inner dimensions from the figures)*

3.4 Possible Scanic Fort

As, for much of the period under consideration, England was under Danish rule it is necessary to consider that in the last quarter of the C10th century a number of ring fortresses were constructed in Denmark. With a typical diameter above 100m, seven are known: Aggersborg (240m), Borgeby (150m), Borrering (145m), Trelleborg (136m), Frykat, Nonnebakken, Borgring (120m). Most are believed to have been built by Harald Bluetooth except Nonnebaken which was built by his son, Swein Forkbeard. There is an eighth possible candidate at Hellsingborg (Weidhagen-Hallerdt, 2009).

All are characterised by the following features:

- Monumental dimensions.
- An exactly circular geometry
- Four entrances, one at each point of the compass.
- Axial streets in association with the entrances.
- V-shaped ditches, placed a little way outside the rampart.
- Large hall buildings, forming symmetrically placed rectangles in each quarter of the fortress.
- The rampart is constructed of earth with an inner wooden framework and a timber-clad facade with inclined timbers (a so-called trelle or escarp) and can be 10m thick.

It is clear that the Wyfold enclosure does not conform to most of these features, and there are no other clear examples of Scanic style fort constructions in England so the possibility of Scanic influence can be considered highly unlikely.

3.5 Possible Late Saxon or Early Norman ringwork or bailey construction

The first motte and bailey castles in England were built in the reign of Edward ("The Confessor"). Due to his 24 year exile in Normandy, King Edward would have been well aware of Norman power architecture, and he invited several Norman knights to England to control some of the more difficult parts of the country, such as the Welsh Marches and the West Country (Crane, 2016). One such example is Richard's Castle on the Herefordshire/Shropshire border (HE 1011020). Built around 1050, the bailey is an irregular oval shape approximately 85m by 60m with an enclosing ditch (that includes the motte) of 6m depth and varying width around 20m. Another is Clavering (HE1011779) where the earthwork is roughly rectangular of dimensions 100mx150m surrounded by a ditch of 26m width and 5m deep along the NW side but approximately 8m wide on the other three sides.

Following the Conquest, a number of ringwork (or enclosure) defensive works were rapidly built. Their form was variable, often depending upon local topology. Sometimes these used existing earthworks as at Neroche (HE190295) and could be modified over a period of time to include a motte and additional baileys. Neroche has a multiphase development but in general banks were 0.5-4m high and ditches 0.5-0.7m deep and rectilinear in shape. A later motte and bailey was built in the late 11th century. Similarly, Ludgershall (HE1009912) may have been built on an Iron Age enclosure. This monument is unusual in having very broad banks surrounding two contiguous enclosures. Oakham castle (HE1010702) has a motte 6m high inside a 8-10m wide ditch all surrounded by a square bailey of 140m dimensions. William's Hill (HE1004907) a slightly later example at Middleham, is an oval earthwork of 70mx55m dimensions surrounded by a bank and outer ditch of width 5m.

There seems to be little conformity in the sizes and shapes of early Norman fortifications, except to note the use of wide ditches in general. Whilst the possibility of construction in the Norman period cannot be excluded, there is nothing in their form which makes this more likely than Anglo-Saxon construction. Most Norman Bailey castles were furnished with mottes and built in locations which either were, or later developed into, significant towns or villages. In this context there seems to be no evident motivation for construction by the Normans.

3.6 Possible Cistercian enclosure

Wyfold was held by the Cistercian abbey at Thame from c 1153, and it is possible that the enclosure was created by the Conversi - the historical antecedents of the Cistercian Lay Brothers. The motivation may have been to control access to the pond and to create a secure storage for valuable commodities such as wool.

The Cistercians have been widely studied and a comprehensive review covering most of England is provided by Platt (1966). Moated enclosures were used but most examples are rectilinear in shape with dimensions of 40m to 70m (Figure 5 in Platt), although the encompassing enclosure at Balk appears to have dimensions of around 130m. In Leicestershire, Burton on the Wolds and Sysonby Granges (of Garendon Abbey) show rectilinear earthworks (Courtney, ,1980) Figures 3 & 4). Burton shows what seems to be an enclosing bank of around 130m length but with no ditch and Sysonby appears to have an enclosing banked boundary of dimension approximately 250m accompanied by a ditch to the east and west boundaries. In Wales, there is a considerable body of surviving evidence for enclosures of larger dimensions (Roberts 2014). Other examples include Grange Castle, Jervaulx (HERR 21549), a rectangular enclosure 60mx40m with a ditch 8m wide and 1m deep and Bockendon (HE 1448265) rectangular 66mx60m, ditch width of 3m to 10m. Finally, South Grange (HE1018328) has a large surrounding rectilinear ditch enclosing an area of 4.1ha which is ~6m wide and between 0.5m and 1m deep. Smaller ditched earthworks further subdivide this enclosure.

Non-rectilinear examples seem to be rare. One is Bennington Grange (HERR 324035) which appears to be an irregular shaped enclosure and is Sauvigniac. Newlass (HE1019343) is defined by an irregular, curvilinear stony bank but has no ditch. The majority of examples of Cistercian enclosures seem to conform to a rectilinear shape of varying sizes, sometimes accompanied by a ditch of width from ~3m to 10m. The use of curvilinear boundaries does not seem to be widespread, at least in the literature reviewed here.

Wyfold does not conform with the rectilinear morphology so prevalent in Cistercian enclosures and, with a terminus post quem more than a century earlier than ownership transferring to Thame Abbey, Cistercian construction seems highly unlikely.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Excavations of the earthwork at Wyfold Grange have shown that it is a large irregular enclosure with a substantial bank and external V-shaped ditch. Radiocarbon dating of a charcoal fragment from a secure location below the bank has shown that it was constructed in the middle of the medieval period. With a "terminus post quem" in the range 987 - 1030 cal AD a number of potential interpretations of the earthwork have been considered.

Possible construction as a Scanic fort or a Cistercian enclosure are both considered highly unlikely on morphological grounds, and the latter also on dating evidence. The possibility of construction during the early Norman period cannot be eliminated though the location and lack of evident motivation makes this unlikely.

In the political, geographic and economic contexts prevailing at Wyfold in the late Saxon period, a wide range of enclosures constructed in England have been briefly reviewed. Possible purposes, and hence motivations for the investment required for the construction of major earthworks, including administrative, military, religious and economic, have been advanced by many authors and some of the most prominent recent discussions are briefly noted above.

We suggest that Wyfold was built in a strategically important location, initially within the large regal landholding of Benson and later becoming of importance to the burh of Wallingford. That it continued to be held by Benson through the mid medieval period, and was still recorded as Ancient Royal Demesne in 1279, suggests that it offered security along one of a number of important land routes from Oxford to the river crossing and embarkation point at Henley, and thence to London.

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