

# A Belgic Farmstead at Orton Longueville

by Carolyn Dallas

The site (scheduled ancient monument no. 97) is situated at TL 16659525 south of Orton Longueville village on Nene river gravels. It consists basically of three ditched rectangular yards (fig. 13), and seems to have been continuously occupied from the late Iron Age into the early Roman period, i.e. from approximately 100 B.C. to A.D. 140.

It was not possible to uncover the entire site, and certain areas only were totally stripped of topsoil. The rest was sampled by trial-trenching with a JCB machine. The accompanying plan (fig. 13) is a combination of information from site plans and the aerial photographs.

The earliest ditch found formed the first phase of the small yard on the north. This was recut with a new entrance, and the second ditch was half silted up by the time of the introduction of Belgic pottery into the area. The first phase of the largest yard was contemporary with this, although it had been almost entirely obliterated by recutting. The living area for these early phases seems to have been to the west and south of the small yard where evidence was found of curving gullies, a hearth and a water-hole.

The medium-sized yard on the north-west produced very little pottery, but seems to date to the Belgic period. Criss-cross trenching produced no internal features whatever and it is possible that this area is a stock-yard. There was some evidence for a palisade around the inside of the ditch. The small yard produced evidence of an internal division and two post-holes which post-dated this, and may have been a work-yard; for burnt grain was found in the division gully.

During the Belgic period there was a major revision of layout. The ditch of the large yard was totally recut, leaving an entrance on the north-east corner. The living area was laid out in the north-west area of this yard, and three hut circles in good condition were found. They range in internal diameter from 10.70 metres to 12 metres, and all have an entrance-gap on the eastern side. It is not clear whether the gully circle comprises the hut walls; for two of the circles produced evidence of posts in the gully — but it is only thin evidence. The area also showed a scatter of post-holes and small stake-holes of uncertain date which may represent fences, pens, drying racks and other such accoutrements as were necessary for the running of the farm.

By the middle of the first century A.D. this large yard was redefined by a small ditch which closed off the north-east entrance and extended the yard to the south. Evidence exists for a small yard, corral or garden area defined by gullies over the small yard, the ditch of which was by that time totally filled.

A final major phase of the farm spans the first half of the second century A.D. The large yard, continuing on its own, was again given a larger ditch (about 2 metres wide by 1.50 metres deep) with an entrance on the north-east corner. Postholes with Roman pottery in them show that at some time after the Roman conquest the living area was moved further eastwards within the big yard. In the north-west corner of the yard a small cemetery of eight adult skeletons was found, separated from the living area by a gully. Two of these had coffins, but none had any accompanying grave-goods. Scraps of late first-century pottery in the grave fillings suggest that the deceased were the occupants of the penultimate phase of the farm. All bodies were extended and had their heads towards the north-west. One old woman had been beheaded, and the skull had been placed in the foot of the grave.

A large pit on the east side of the big yard produced mid first-century pottery from the very bottom, and seemed cut by a small ditch which respects the presence of the large yard on its course eastwards. This, and some drainage ditches of uncertain date also running eastwards, are the only evidence for a field-system which might be associated with the life of the farm.

The farmstead seems to have been abandoned in the middle of the second century A.D. A drainage gully producing colour-coated pottery seems to have been cut after the large yard was no longer inhabited and is part of the field-system of another settlement. A pottery dump of some 3,000 sherds dating to c. A.D. 120-140 (with some residual material) was found in the final-phase ditch at a point near the living area. Perhaps the family moved to a place which was too distant to make it worthwhile transporting all the remaining kitchen equipment!

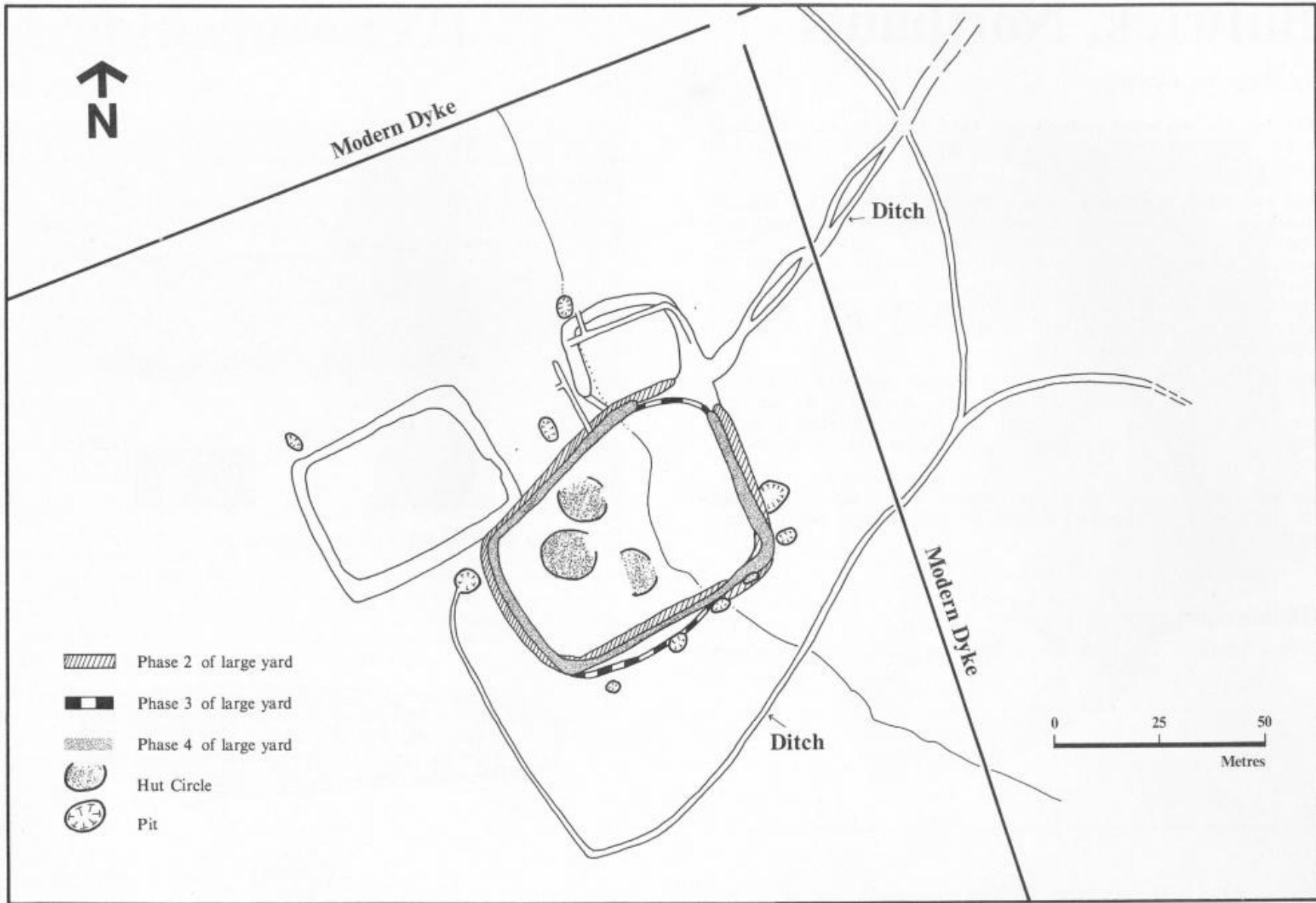


Fig 13 Plan of the Belgic farmstead at Orton Longueville