

Werrington: an Iron-Age and Roman Site

by Donald Mackreth and Francis O'Neill

The site at Werrington, recorded on a high-level vertical aerial photograph taken in 1964, showed as a single enclosure. It was excavated in advance of development in the expectation that it might be Iron-Age in date and would provide some evidence for the economy of the Fen Edge. The site was more complex than the aerial photograph suggested (fig. 13), being overlaid by a Roman site lying to the west.

Period One

The primary enclosure (black on fig. 13) may have been isolated, but the excavation limits could not be extended north and west to prove this. The boundary ditch was substantial, being 3 to 4 metres wide and over 1.75 metres deep. The deposits in the ditch did not yield evidence for a bank, but the internal features on the north and east stop short of the ditch, and this itself may be suggestive. A site in such an exposed position would have needed some shelter from the north-east at least. The only evidence for an entrance was in the south ditch close to the south-east corner. Here, the bottom of the ditch rose suggesting that there may once have been a causeway; but, by the time the deposits in the ditch were beginning to accumulate, any such had disappeared and may have been replaced by a bridge. A post-hole, suitable for a post some 40 cm across, was found in the middle of the ditch, while on the inside edge, and inclined to the south at an angle of 30°, was another which may have been a brace.

Inside the enclosure, and slightly off-centre, was a large ring-ditch about 15 metres in internal diameter and some 2 metres wide by 0.75 metres deep, which had a V-shaped profile. On the eastern side was a break 3.6 metres wide. Although various features were found inside, they all appear to belong to a time when the ring-ditch had gone out of use. To the north of the ring-ditch was a house site, internal diameter of which was c. 9.5 metres. The gully defining the house was narrow and there were traces of posts having been set in it. The ring was not continuous nor of even depth. The entrance faced north-east and there were no internal features. A mediaeval headland ran down the eastern half of the site and the rest of it was cut about by furrows. (This accounts for the large break in the house on the western side.) Very slight traces of a house on the south side of the main ring refused to resolve

themselves and it had probably been ploughed away in mediaeval and later times.

Of the other features inside the enclosure which can be assigned to this period reasonably safely, those to the south and east of the house site seem to have been laid out in relation to that rather than the main ring, but may have acted with the latter in defining functionally separate areas. In the north-west quadrant was a long and deep trench which may have been used as a latrine, while in the south-east corner lay a hearth with a limestone core.

The date of Period One is based upon a preliminary examination of the finds, which suggest that the site may have started in the first century B.C. or earlier, and the primary occupation came to an end in the first decade after the Roman Conquest. Amongst the finds were thatch-weights, baked clay fragments and lumps of slag. Fragments of these occurred in later contexts, but they are probably all derived from Period One.

Period Two

The lack of domestic features in this and the next period suggests that Period Two (hatched on fig. 13) began with a marked shift of occupation which the subsequent development of the site as well as surface finds suggest was now placed to the west. Throughout this period the original enclosure survived as a substantial earthwork and the plan indicates that the enclosure was subsumed into a larger layout. Some re-definition of the main enclosure took place, principally in the north-west area.

Even though the early site was now part of a larger scheme, it was maintained as an entity and its layout shows that most of the incident was on the side next to the new focus. On the plan, the dominant feature lies in the north-east quarter. Superficially, it appeared to be a pond. Excavation showed that it was only 10-20 cm deep and it may have been the result of the area having been used as a crew-yard.

The dating evidence suggests that the centre for the re-organised site was established towards the end of the first century A.D. and that the old earthworks had been incorporated sometime near the beginning of the second century. Thereafter, the yard continued to be used in one form or another to the end of the third period.

Period Three

There appears to have been a major change in the layout of the main site in Period Three (stippled on fig. 13), at least so far as the excavated area is concerned. The eastern side of a large enclosure can be seen, with a return west at the north end and possibly an entrance in the south-east corner.

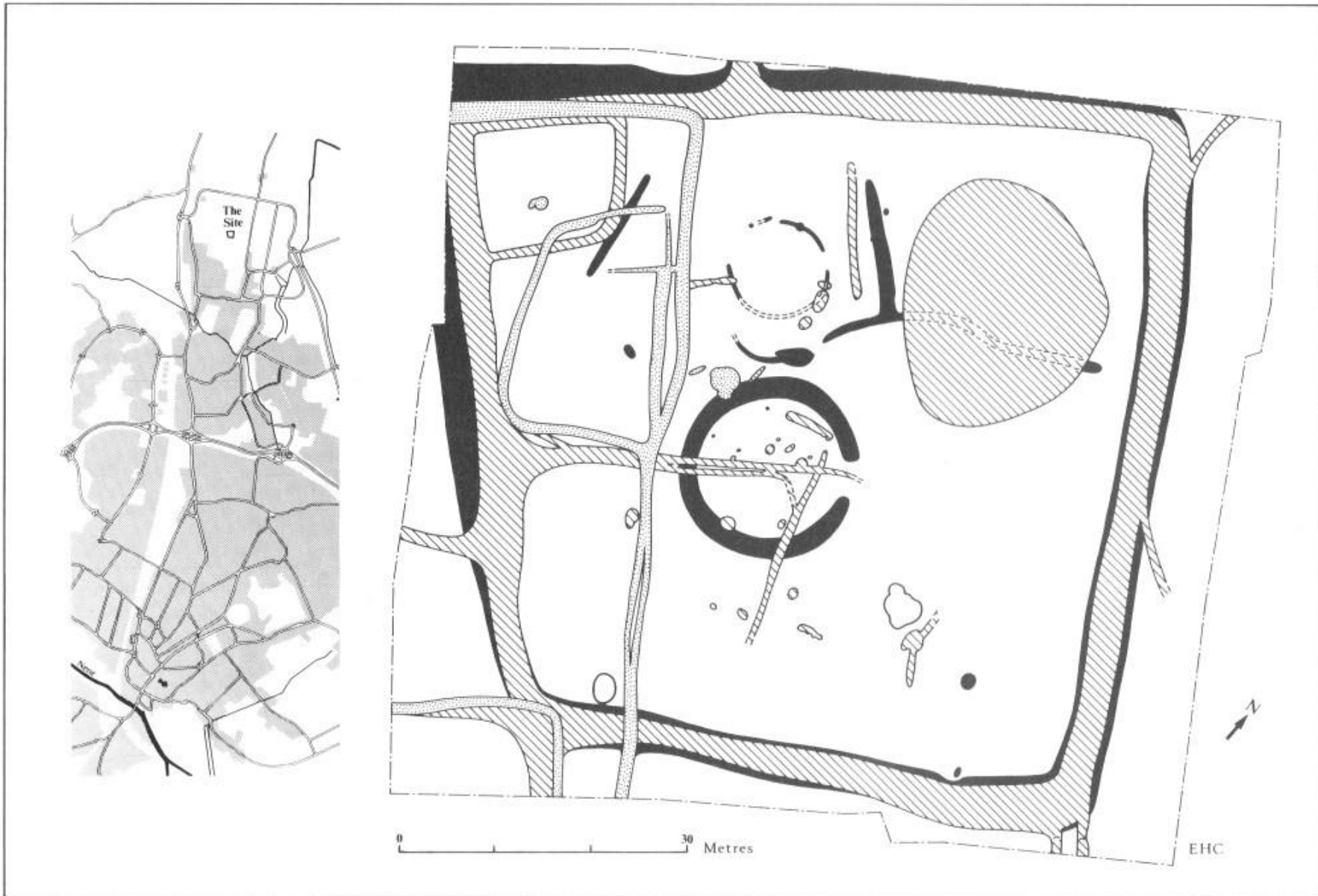


Fig 13 Plan of the Iron-Age and Roman site at Werrington

Attached to the centre of the east side is a small enclosure. It seems clear that by the time the new work was carried out, the western part of the original enclosure had become largely obliterated, but the eastern ditch had not filled completely, as fourth-century pottery was found in the upper filling.

Period Three began sometime in the third century and ran into the fourth, but it is uncertain for how long. There was certainly no Early Saxon pottery of the kind found at Orton Hall Farm (*Durobrivae* 2, 1974, 19) and there were no later features before the imposition of ridge and furrow. Without stripping the whole of the Roman complex, it is not possible to tell whether or not the fourth-century content of the excavated sample is typical of the whole.

Little can be said about the economy of the site, as only the snails have been examined so far (p. 26). However, the analysis seems to show that, both early and late, the area was largely grass and hence the essential economy should have been based upon animals, but what kinds and in what period must await the examination of the bones.

It had been hoped that much of the Roman complex in Werrington would be excavated in order to provide a useful comparison with Orton Hall Farm or with sites in the Fens or on the Fen Edge. However, the degree of plough damage is such that the allocation of large-scale resources to such a project promised only a very limited return.

The only features on the site which proved not to belong to the main run of its development are shown on the plan as plain with a thick outline. The south-western one produced an assemblage of pottery, all in small pieces, with a fair amount of animal bone, but with no pottery which can be assigned to the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age or later. It seems that the pottery can be paralleled in earlier Iron-Age contexts and that its date may be in the sixth or fifth centuries B.C.

A small selection is illustrated (fig. 14). The fabric is uniformly shell-gritted with two possible exceptions, which may be tempered with a very fine sand. The forms are mainly cooking pots with two or three bowls, an object which looks like a cresset, and a lid-like pot with a carefully made hole in the centre. Decoration is sparse: a few rims have finger-nail marks on them and two shoulders have finger-tip impressions.

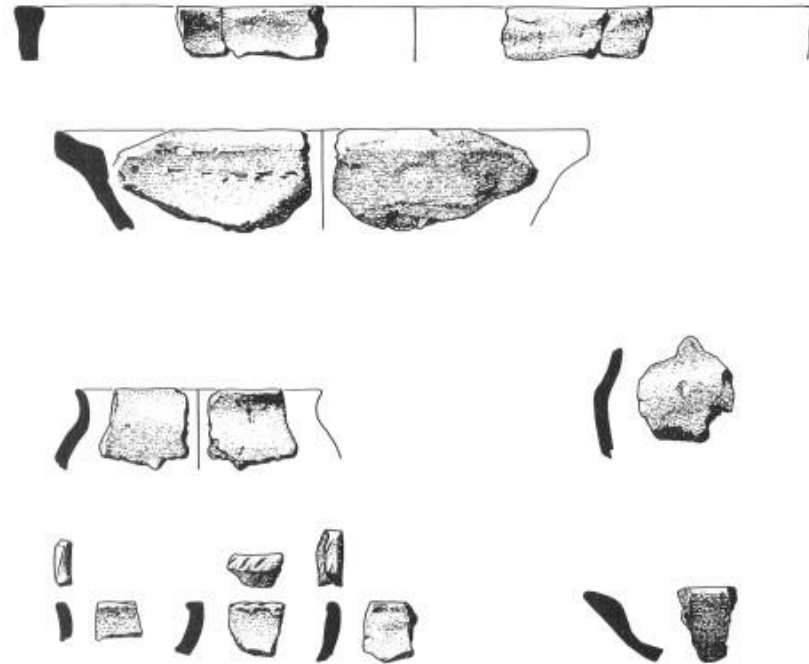


Fig 14 Some early Iron-Age pottery from Werrington

The Molluscs from the Werrington Enclosure

by Charles French

The settlement enclosure at Werrington (TF 16640390) is situated within the watershed of the River Welland on a Fen gravel subsoil overlying Oxford Clay at c. 11 metres O.D. Its occupation probably began in the Late Iron Age, but the main enclosure ditch probably remained open into the fourth century A.D. (p. 23). Samples for molluscan analysis were taken from the large enclosure ditch and the results are presented here in the form of a relative histogram (fig. 15). The enclosure ditch was infilled with silt loam with gravel (0-170 cm) and clay with gravel (170-200 cm).

The molluscan assemblage in the lower two-thirds of the enclosure ditch is dominated by freshwater species. The low numbers of exacting fresh-water species and the dominance of tolerant and slum species suggest that the water conditions in the ditch were poor and subject to change. These species are important as they are often found on prehistoric sites on river gravels in ditches, such as at Maxey (Cambs) (Evans (1972)), Fengate (Cambs), and Billingborough Fen (Lincs) (French (1980)). In particular, the alternating dominance of the tolerant and the slum groups of species indicates that the ditch was probably subject to alternate periods of drying out and stagnation, standing and slowly flowing water. But the time scale during which the ditch existed, three to four centuries, and the apparently slow natural infilling suggests that the picture represented by the molluscs is probably a compressed version of the actual events.

Although it would be easy to ascribe the presence of freshwater on the site to deteriorating climatic conditions, it is more probable that it is due to local subsoil and groundwater conditions. The exceedingly sticky clay loam with gravel subsoil drains very slowly and thereby creates considerable run-off. Consequently, the ditch was as much dug for drainage as for any other purpose. The land-snail species are incidental, either being washed in or having rolled in, until the ditch was all but infilled and had become a terrestrial habitat. The site then probably supported a damp, undisturbed grassland habitat.

Samples were also taken through the silt-loam infill of the internal ring-ditch. But the molluscan assemblage was not abundant enough to represent on an histogram. This was due to a combination of the lack of waterlogged conditions and borderline calcareous conditions. Nonetheless, the species

represented are similar to those found in the upper third of the main enclosure ditch, and suggest damp, open and undisturbed grassland.

Conclusions

1. The molluscs were largely preserved due to the waterlogging of the ditches, rather than to a calcareous subsoil.
2. The relatively impervious and slow-draining subsoil of clay loam with gravel made drainage a necessity and run-off a considerable problem. Poor drainage was part of the reason for the massive enclosure ditch around the settlement site.
3. The freshwater molluscan assemblage only reflects accurately the habitat conditions within the ditch itself; but the site was evidently subject to changing groundwater conditions.
4. Whether the site was used for arable, pasture or fallow land during the Roman period is unknown, but by the third or fourth centuries A.D. damp, open grassland had become established.

I would like to thank Mr D. F. Mackreth and Mr F. E. O'Neill of the Nene Valley Research Committee for allowing the writer to take and analyse samples from Werrington.

Bibliography

- Evans (1972) J. G. Evans, *Land Snails in Archaeology*, 1972.
- French (1980) C. A. I. French, 'A Molluscan Analysis of the Iron Age Ditches at Fengate, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire', *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, forthcoming.

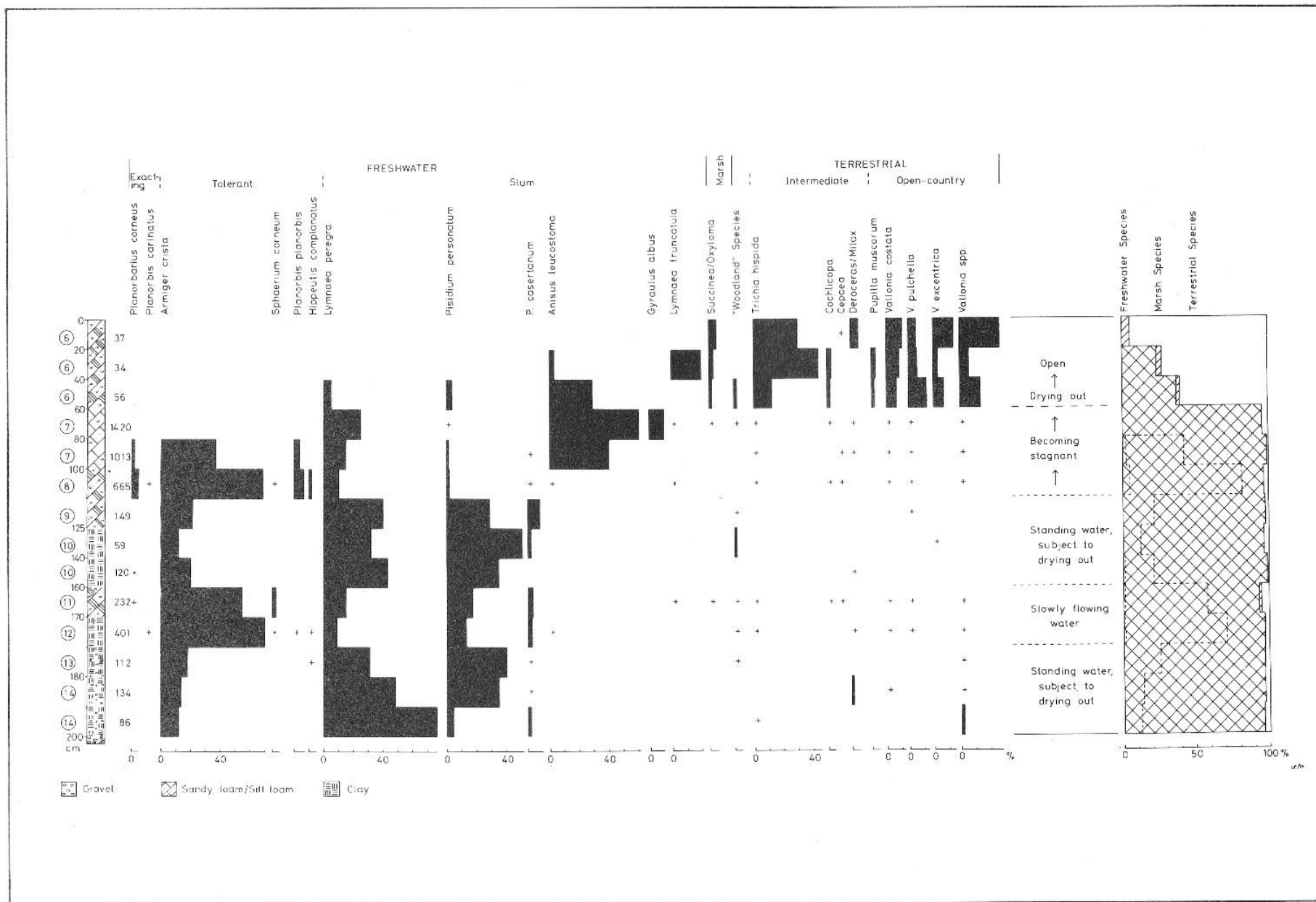


Fig 15 Histogram of the molluscan assemblage from Werrington