

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

THE SUPPOSED SAXON EARTHWORKS AT RENDLESHAM

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IN THE CONCLUDING SECTION of the chapter on 'Saxon Rendlesham' in his book *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, published in 1974, Rupert Bruce-Mitford drew attention to a 'curious, roughly circular projection of trees into the arable and pasture' which extended out from Bush Covert (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 106–7). The latter is one of several areas of woodland in the north of Rendlesham Park, lying between Thistly Belt and Hall Walls (Figure 97). The edge of the projecting area followed the eastern edge of an approximately oval earthwork which extended westwards into the wood proper. 'The ring is defined by a shallow ditch and another shallow ditch divides it centrally along its east–west axis into two parts'. Bruce-Mitford acknowledged that 'it may prove to be nothing more than an ornamental ring of trees such as exist elsewhere in the parkland', but noted the fact that it lay on the edge of the main area of ornamental grounds, and that a sketch map of 1828, made by Isaac Johnson, gives the name 'Woodenhall Grove' to Bush Covert and 'Great' and 'Little Woodenhalls' to neighbouring fields, names which Bruce-Mitford thought might preserve a dim memory of the halls of the Saxon palace (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 107). The map, the relevant section of which is reproduced in Bruce-Mitford's chapter, shows the oval as a free-standing feature, quite detached from the wood to the west (Figure 98); subsequent expansion in the course of the nineteenth century united the two.

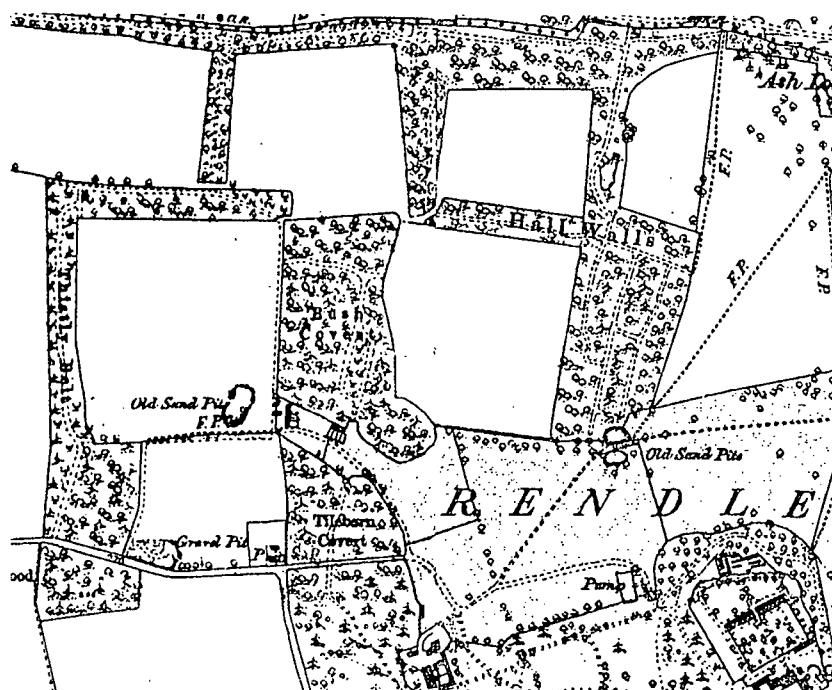


FIG. 97 – Bush Covert, Rendlesham and its surroundings as shown on the OS First Edition 6-inch map.

Bruce-Mitford was not the first to speculate on the earthworks in Bush Covert. Thirteen years earlier, Nicholas Pevsner's *Buildings of England: Suffolk* noted:

At THIRSTLY [*sic*] BELT, about half way between Rendlesham Hall and the Campsea Ash Road, is a ring of trees defined by a shallow DITCH, with another shallow ditch dividing it from E to W. This may be connected with the seat of the Saxon Wuffingas dynasty; there is however no conclusive evidence for its site... (Pevsner 1961, 374).

This statement was repeated in subsequent editions of the work, and is quoted (although not with any sign of approval) in the Suffolk HER.

The earthworks in Bush Covert (centred TM 34455430, were examined in August 2006, as part of a wider programme of research into the landscape context of the Sutton Hoo burial ground, sponsored by the Sutton Hoo Society (Figure 99). They comprise, as Bruce-Mitford describes, an oval enclosure formed by a bank and ditch which on its eastern side defines a semi-circular projection from the southern end of the wood. The latter has been extended eastwards again in relatively recent years, so that today the 'oval' projects slightly less far out from the wood than it did in Bruce-Mitford's day. Within the body of the wood, where it is surrounded on both sides by trees, the bank is around 0.2–0.3 m high and around 3m wide, and is flanked on the outside by a slight ditch, around 0.2–0.3 m deep. Where the oval projects out of the wood, and is thus surrounded on one side by arable land, the flanking ditch has largely disappeared.

The transverse earthwork, running east–west through the centre of the oval, comprises a rather more substantial bank (around 3–4 m wide) which is flanked on the south, for most of its length, by a ditch which is generally 0.1–0.2 m deep. About four fifths of the way along, from the east, the bank kinks and changes direction slightly, but is otherwise roughly straight. The character of the bank is different on either side of this point, being slightly higher to the west, and lacking much in the way of a flanking ditch.

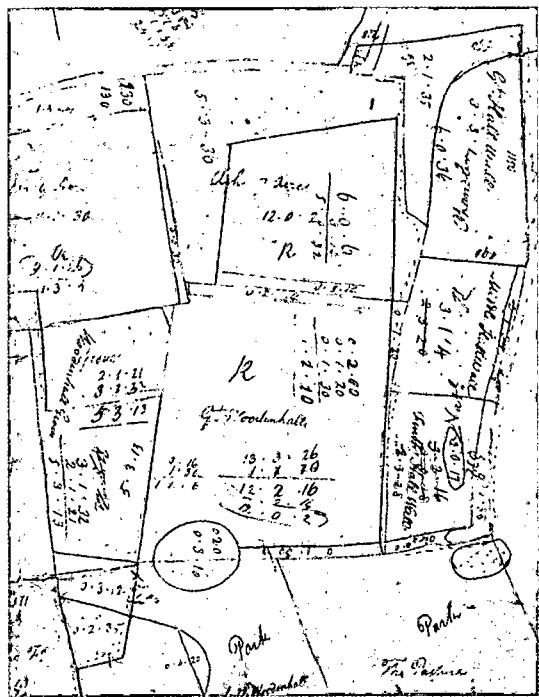


FIG. 98 – The area around Bush Covert, as shown on Isaac Johnson's sketch map of c.1828.

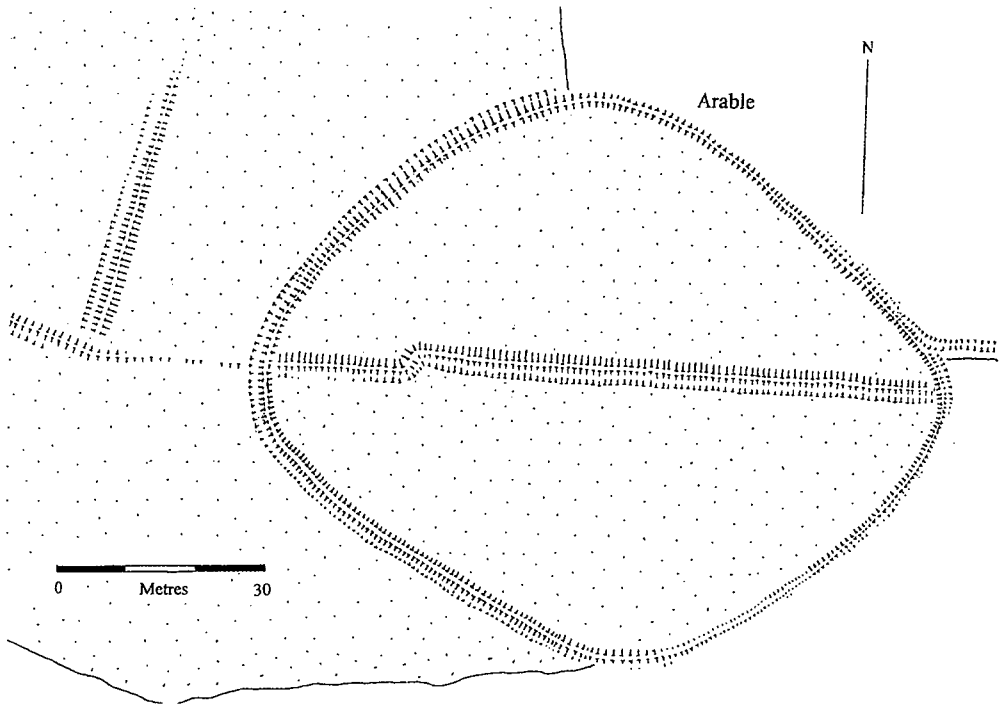


FIG. 99 – The earthworks in Bush Covert.

Two features of these earthworks make it quite clear that they are of no antiquity. The first is that the transverse bank continues, albeit in much degraded form, beyond the oval to the west, running through the woodland in a straight line to the corner of two other earthworks – banks and ditches which mark the old edge of Bush Covert/Woodenhall Grove as shown on Isaac Johnson's map, before the wood was expanded eastwards in the course of the nineteenth century. Evidently, transverse bank and oval are not of the same date: the latter cuts through, and is later than, the former. The second notable feature is the character of the vegetation associated with the two earthworks. The transverse bank has a number of coppice stools (sycamore, elm and maple) growing along its length. These do not occur elsewhere within the 'oval' and are clearly the remains of a hedge associated with the bank: these species are common elements in the older hedges in the locality and survive shading better than the hawthorn and blackthorn which doubtless (together, perhaps, with other species) once accompanied them. The shading is itself largely supplied by lime trees (*Tilia X Europaea* rather than *Tilia cordata*, the native small-leaved lime) in the form of pseudo-coppice – regenerating stumps of long-felled standard trees. Not one lime tree occurs outside the 'oval' in the woodland to the west, which instead mainly comprises (beyond an area of relatively recent planting) hazel with occasional maple coppice.

The transverse bank is thus unquestionably the remains of a field boundary, defined by a mixed-species hedge, of medieval or (more probably) post-medieval date; and, just as unquestionably, the oval is a later feature. The limes within the oval could theoretically have been planted later still, within a pre-existing enclosure, but if so it is hard to think what purpose such a feature might have served. Far more plausibly, lime trees and oval earthwork are contemporary, and represent (as Bruce-Mitford clearly at times suspected) a typical parkland clump surrounded by a bank (perhaps originally hedged) to protect it from grazing. It is noteworthy that the Isaac Johnson sketch map, which shows the oval as a free-standing feature quite distinct from the wood to the west, also shows a line running east-west

through its centre, roughly along the line of the transverse bank. This not only continues (like the earthwork) to the west, as far as the then corner of Bush Covert/Woodenhall Grove; but also to the east, where it is shown defining the southern edge of a narrow strip of ground, perhaps an earlier plantation. It is possible that Johnson's map was made in association with changes to Rendlesham Park, changes which included the creation of the oval clump on top of an earlier field boundary, the map showing both redundant and proposed features of the landscape.

Whichever is the case, the earthworks identified by Bruce-Mitford clearly have nothing whatsoever to do with the Anglo-Saxon 'palace', which presumably lay further south, near to the church of St Gregory, where John Newman's fieldwalking survey recorded two distinct concentrations of early and middle Saxon material (HER ref. RLM 013 (west of church) and RLM 014 (north-east of church); or, just possibly, beneath the outbuildings and paddocks around Naunton Hall, to the north-west of the church, which by medieval times was the site of the main manor in the parish. Instead, they are relatively recent features which simply result from the creation of a parkland clump at the expense of agricultural land.

This rather minor story of archaeological misinterpretation perhaps has two small lessons for archaeologists. The first is simply that context is all. The oval earthwork only took on an apparent significance because it was in Rendlesham: in any other location it would immediately have been recognised for what it was, a nineteenth-century plantation bank imposed on a post-medieval field boundary. The second is that the earthworks cannot be considered in isolation from other kinds of field evidence, and that archaeologists need at times to lift their eyes from the bumps in the ground to examine the trees, shrubs and other vegetation growing on and around them.

REFERENCES

- Bruce-Mitford, R. (1974) *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and other discoveries* (London: Victor Gollancz).
- Pevsner, N. (1961) *The Buildings of England: Suffolk* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).