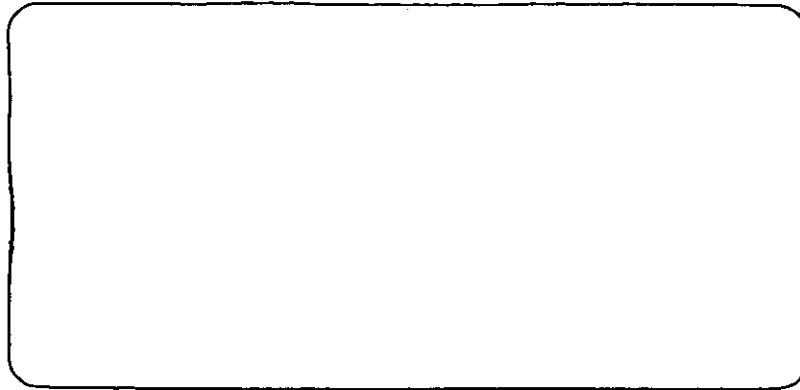


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GULSBOROUGH, Northamptonshire

An archaeological survey by the RCHME

January 1993

Guilsborough, (Northants)

An archaeological survey by the RCHME, Dec 1992 - Jan 1993

Introduction

An archaeological survey was undertaken by the RCHME at Guilsborough, Northants, following a request from English Heritage, who were involved with scheduling casework resulting from a development proposal. The survey was required to help in defining the extent and character of the site which, as a result of a trial excavation, is thought to be a denuded hillfort (see below).

The RCHME survey incorporated a site grid for staff of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, who were conducting a geophysical survey at the same time.

Geology and Topography

The site lies within the former Guilsborough Park at c. 170m above OD, on flat ground towards the southern end of a long NW-SE ridge of Northampton sand. It commands extensive views to the S and originally to the N although this aspect is now restricted by village growth. The former Guilsborough Hall, demolished in 1959 (1), was situated immediately E of the surviving portion of the fort in what is now Church Mount, and the church of St. Ethelreda stands just E of the hall site. Together then, the fort, the manor and the church occupy a primary position above the village which is aligned along a main street on sloping ground to the NE.

Previous investigation

Guilsborough is regarded as an Anglo-Saxon 'burh' name, implying the existence of a fortification (2). In the early seventeenth century Camden described the site:

'The camp at Guilsborough is called The Burrows; it is an oblong square, the north and south sides shortest, fenced by a deep broad single ditch, the longest side between 500 and 600 ft (152m to 183m), the shortest about 300 (91.5m), the area about 8 acres' (3.24 ha) (3).

Camden's information was repeated by Morton in the early eighteenth century when the site was believed to be of Roman construction (4). The N and S ramparts are depicted vaguely on a small scale map of 1812 (5). The S rampart and possibly the E were partially removed in the early nineteenth century, when skeletons and a stone coffin were also found in the NW corner. A plan, published in 1849, records that only the N rampart including a mound at the NW corner, and a mound at the SW corner, survived in a recognisable form at this date (6). The S rampart was further levelled in 1870 for the construction of a cricket ground (7).

In 1884 the first accurate survey depicts the N rampart (its E half only a scarp), including the NW corner, and also the SW corner (8). These features remained in 1947 when they are clearly visible on air photographs, with the cricket ground contained between the N and S ramparts (9); by 1971 the N rampart had been levelled, the cricket ground and numerous parkland trees removed and a series of gallops and paddocks established over most of the former park area (10). Similar land use continues, with permanent pasture in seven paddocks, used mainly for horses but there are a few sheep and cattle.

A collection of Roman pottery is known from the vicinity, found during the construction of a bungalow prior to 1910 (11). This is probably the bungalow in the former Park at SP 6751 7295, just outside the N defences.

The main sources and finds from the vicinity were summarised by the RCHME. Romano-British finds were noted but they could not be directly linked to the site, which was classed as an enclosure. The possible existence of the W rampart, apparently visible on air photographs taken in 1947, was recorded (12).

In July 1989 a small trial excavation was conducted by the Northampton Archaeological Unit. It comprised three machine trenches, two inside the fort and one across the N rampart. The rampart section, trench 1, confirmed Camden's testimony in revealing the remains of a single bank with a massive external ditch, the latter 14m wide and at least 3.5m deep below present ground level. The rampart was of at least two phases, the first probably of box construction and the second a broadening of the original design. Evidence was found for two episodes of deliberate slighting of the rampart into the ditch, one of which was recent. Eight pot sherds from a buried soil which pre-dated the construction of the defences have a date range of 5th-2nd centuries BC.

The two internal trenches, 2 and 3, revealed simple stratigraphies, from which three sherds of similar pottery were recovered. A small pit and traces of plough marks were found in trench 3 (13).

Description and Interpretation (see plan)

The defences

The defences are badly degraded by deliberate levelling, but enough survives to show the course of the N and S ramparts. The former is now a long, gradual slope (a), up to 1m high, representing rampart material spread over the concealed ditch proven by excavation. This slope is very slight towards the W but on the E enters private gardens where, heavily landscaped, it survives as a prominent N-facing scarp up to 2.5m high. The E end is truncated abruptly, its former course uncertain. At (b) a slight eroded access way through the rampart is the result of a former track, clearly visible as a sharp cut through the bank in 1947 (9), and possibly caused by military vehicles housed in the Park during the Second World War.

The S rampart (c) is similar, a broken gradual slope up to 1m high, but not yet tested by excavation. It is pocked with extraction holes from former trees, still standing in 1947 (9) but removed by 1971 (10). Its E end is lost in the gardens of the Church Mount housing development but may originally have been destroyed by the growth of Guilsborough Hall and its gardens.

The W end of the S rampart survives in better condition as a subcircular mound crowned by a brick water tower which formerly served both Guilsborough Hall and the village. The 1884 survey suggests that this mound encompassed the SW corner of the fort. The tower is not shown on this survey but its existence is implied by the very survival of the mound beyond the levelling of the rampart in 1870. On the ground floor the builders of the brick tower utilised part of an existing stone structure which possibly fulfilled the same function or was perhaps a folly or eyecatcher for Guilsborough Hall. The tower stands on its own circular platform, 0.4m to 0.8m high, towards the western side of the main mound.

In recent years the main mound has been disturbed on the NW (10), cut away on the SW and again on the NW for the construction of a stable complex for Guilsborough Hall Farm. These sides are the highest, between 3m and 4m, but on the NW there has been some dumping of concrete and other rubbish which has heightened the profile. An exposed section, c. 1.5m high, cut into the base of the mound behind the stable on the SW, reveals a homogenous layer of coarse red-brown sand containing frequent chips and fragments of sandstone.

The NW slope of the mound is gradual and interrupted by a small platform, perhaps the site of a temporary structure, and several tree extraction holes. The E slope is a product of cutting away the rest of the rampart to the E but its base is also clipped by a series of linear scarps which extend to the N and S (see below).

South of the mound a moderate NE-facing scarp (d), up to 0.4m high, defines the outer face of a substantial ditch, almost certainly part of the hillfort defences like that located by excavation outside the N rampart. It is visible over a length of 42m.

The 1947 air photographs show the remains of the W rampart as a broad, flattened feature: the N rampart continued for c. 30m beyond its present W end before turning S, slightly less than a right angle, towards the tower mound, its inner and outer edges clearly defined by tracks which meet at an apparent gap c. 20m N of the base of the tower mound. There is now no trace of this rampart in the improved paddocks at the W edge of the site.

The area between the ramparts is flat but was subject to drastic land improvement prior to 1971. It is understood from local residents that following the removal of parkland trees and the destruction of the cricket ground in what would have been the central area of the fort (most of the paddock containing trench 3), a significant depth of soil was removed in order to further level the area. The spoil was deposited locally in the construction of gallops. This should be noted before further excavation is undertaken.

Other remains

A marked S-facing scarp up to 1.5m high is contained by the paddock immediately W of Guilsborough Hall Farm. At its base there are several shallow linear and subcircular scoops, up to 0.3m deep, which are the landscaped remains of shallow quarries. These quarries, shown working on air photographs taken in 1978 (14), were probably exploiting a small outcrop of sandstone for local building projects.

On the W side of the survey area, three paddocks contain a continuous series of shallow linear gulleys, 1m to 5m wide and up to 0.4m deep, and scarps up to 0.3m high. There are two instances where one cuts across another. Although those in the SE corner of the paddocks could be remnants of ridge-and-furrow, the area has been heavily

disturbed and levelled for horse gallops (10) resulting in destruction of surface remains of the W rampart, so that several are clearly of modern origin.

The marked linear scarps which cut the E side of the tower mound (see above) extend to the N and S extremities of the paddock: these are associated with the W side of a gallop in use in 1971 but now narrowed to form the track to Guilsborough Hall Farm (10). At the N end of this paddock the scarps abut a truncated E-W section of track, also recent, a former continuation of the current track immediately to its E.

On the E side of the survey area is a shallow ditch defining a circle of 11-12m diameter. The ditch, 0.3m deep, encircles a small 'island' reached by a slight causeway on the NE, probably infill given that the outer scarp is continuous. The feature is not visible on the 1947 air photographs but appears in 1971 associated with a horse training paddock. According to local residents this feature is a result of lunging, a technique used to train horses in correct gait and posture. The horse is attached to a rope staked centrally and is trained while walking or trotting in a circle: the ditch feature has been created by repeated wear.

N of the circle, the ground is broken and disturbed (not surveyed). Local informants record that temporary buildings were erected in the vicinity during the Second World War and this is borne out by the 1947 air photographs which show areas of hard standing, probably where these buildings formerly stood.

The remains of Guilsborough Park

The large field forming the SE part of the area is the sole unimproved remnant of Guilsborough Park. It has preserved several moderate scarps, between 0.2m and 0.6m high, among which are four denuded linear ridges (e) aligned NE-SW. These appear to be the truncated NE ends of plough ridges from medieval ploughing. That the park was laid out over ridge-and-furrow is confirmed both by the 1947 and 1971 air photographs and by the dog-leg form of its S boundary as depicted in 1900 (15) and still

remaining in 1947 (9), which suggests that the park boundary encompassed several furlongs.

The SE end of this field contains a semi-circular platform (f), 0.8m high, on which are several irregular hollows and mounds, together with a scatter of building debris; brick, concrete and stone. That a small building stood here is likely but no documentary or cartographic evidence could be found.

The most prominent scarps in this paddock, towards its centre, were fenced boundaries in 1947 (9) but their size suggests an earlier origin: the terrace immediately SE of Guilsborough Hall Farm holds the remnant of a Scots Pine plantation and seems to be a deliberate landscaping feature associated with the former hall. The remaining scarps may have a similar origin but do not fit with the rectangular formality of the hall gardens as shown in 1884 (8). Possibly they are fragments of earlier garden earthworks or field boundaries but insufficient remains to form a clear picture.

At (g) is an amorphous hollow, up to 0.4m deep, containing further mounds and undulations. This area has been infilled since 1947 when a wide, track-like swathe had been cut through into the Park from the hall garden. The reason for this is obscure but once again may be connected with military vehicle activity.

Conclusions

It would be easy to overlook the surface remains of the fortification at Guilsborough if the documentary evidence did not survive: they are altogether unremarkable, extremely slight and now visually broken by the maze of fences surrounding the various paddocks. However, the 1989 trial excavations demonstrated the former strength of the defences with its massive external ditch. The RCHME survey has defined the area occupied by the fortification, in so far as that is now possible. Cartographic evidence suggest that the SW corner is partially preserved in the mound of the water tower. Both the NW

corner, in the vicinity of (h) on the plan, and the W rampart survived long enough to be captured on the 1947 air photographs. The ditch of the W rampart may survive under the two northernmost paddocks on this W side. The RCHME survey hints at an external ditch close to the SW corner. Despite the complete lack of knowledge about the E rampart and ditch, remains of which must lie buried under Church Mount, this would seem to confirm three sides of a sub-rectangular fortification aligned along the ridge top. It measured at least 180m (590ft) by c. 140m (460ft), thereby enclosing an area of c. 2.5 ha (6.25 acres), and probably considerably more.

The results from the 1989 excavation suggest that Guilsborough was a strongly defended univallate fort. The excavators believed it to be a hillfort of the late 1st millennium B.C. by virtue of the type of defence and on the basis of eight sherds of pottery, found in a buried soil sealed beneath the rampart and cut by the ditch, and providing a tentative terminus post quem for the construction of the defences. The sub-rectangular form of the fortification is unusual but not unparalleled in Iron Age contexts e.g. Salmonsbury (Gloucs.) but further excavation is required before a more solid model is established for the origins of the site. The possibility of an Anglo-Saxon burh should not be discounted.

Method

The area was surveyed at 1:1000 scale within a control framework generated using a Wild TC1610 electronic theodolite with integral distance measurement. Data was captured on a Wild GRM10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Hitachi H672 plotter. All earthwork detail was recorded with fibron tapes and an optical square using normal graphical methods.

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January 19th 1993