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PRITTLEWELL CAMP
PRITTLEWELL
ESSEX

Earthwork Survey

NMR INDEX No: TQ 88 NE 18

NGR: TQ 8899 8783

Report by: A. Cooper & P. Pattison
Survey by: M. Brown, D. Garrow, A. Oswald & P. Pattison
Drawings by: A. Cooper

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prittlewell Camp lies on the northern fringe of Southend-on-Sea, at TQ 8899 8783, approximately 1 mile to the north-east of Prittlewell church (Fig 1). It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM no Essex 117) which includes the earthworks of a circular enclosure and a mound on its south-eastern bank. A 'green-lane' runs close to its eastern side. The enclosure sits just off the summit of a broad ridge, on a gently rising brick-earth covered gravel terrace. The site commands extensive views over the Roach Valley to the north.

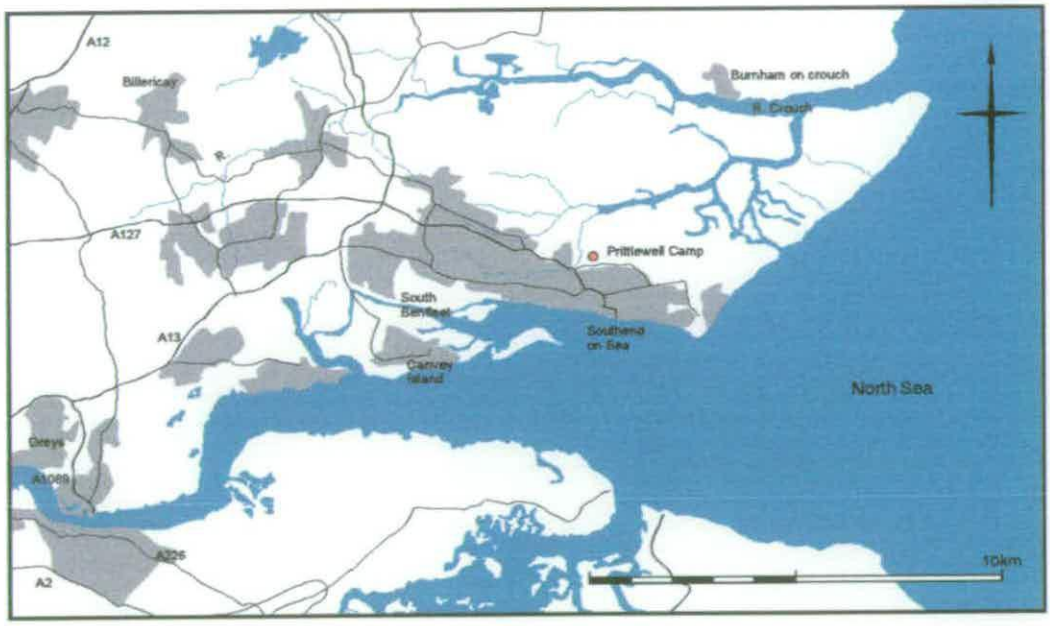

Figure 1
Location map

An archaeological survey of the site was carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) in August 1998, at the request of Essex County Council Planning Department and Southend Borough Council, with the aims of improving on the current definition and understanding of the monument and of providing a basis from which to devise a plan for its long term management.

Today, the site is seriously neglected and it has been significantly modified by post-medieval activity. Municipal rubbish dumping occurred here in the 1920's and it now lies immediately adjacent to a large supermarket on the fringe of the built up area of Southend. Dense young tree growth and scrub cover the southern and western arcs of the enclosure where its earthworks are best preserved: here also are multiple pathways and several small rubbish pits. The remainder of the enclosure lies within an arable field where the perimeter bank has been reduced considerably by intensive ploughing. The significance of the earthworks within the arable field has just been reaffirmed and until recently, only the southern and eastern earthworks were scheduled. The complete circuit of the earthworks and the interior of the enclosure are now scheduled.

2. PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

The site is known variously as Prittlewell Camp, Fossetts Camp and Grove Field Camp and its archaeology has been investigated on a number of occasions from the late 19th century onwards. However, this research has brought little real insight to its origin and purpose; both prehistoric and medieval origins have been suggested for the enclosure. Similarly, a medieval date was put forward for the large mound on its south-eastern bank on the basis of the 13th-century pottery found within. Previous considerations include a 'look-out mound' for the enclosure, a windmill mound, and even a Bronze Age barrow! The origin of a 'green lane' which runs close to the enclosure is also uncertain.

The substantial scale of the earthworks at Prittlewell ensured the recognition of their archaeological significance from the mid 19th century onwards. The earliest account describes:

'the remains of an ancient earthwork or intrenchment, situate upon a hill, having a gentle ascent from all approaches. It is of an oval shape, having two sides and a vallum well defined. It embraces about eight acres, and can be traced throughout in several fields, but the greater portion is in Grove's field. At the south east corner on the Temple Farm, is a circular mound, covered with brush and timber, which has been lowered, but still rises about ten feet around the surrounding land. This was probably the keep or stronghold'

(Benton 1873, 498).

Shortly afterwards, an excavation of 'the oppidum of the mound of Prittlewell' was mentioned at a meeting of the Essex Field Club in 1893 but the nature and location of this work were not recorded (Mepham 1930, 32).

A later account presents the site as one of several elliptical camps, enclosures and dykes in Essex and a more detailed description, including comment on the form and condition of the earthworks, with a plan and section drawings, was made in 1923 (VCH 1903, 275; RCHM 1923, 114; Fig 2).

In 1929, W A Mepham made a more concerted attempt to understand the nature of the earthworks. He began by cutting a series of trenches through the southern bank of the enclosure and at intervals in a line from there to the mound (Fig 3). These revealed the dimensions and form of the bank at this point, where it was some 9m across, standing to a height of 1.5m, and had a steep inner scarp and a more gently sloping outer scarp. The original strata within the confines of the enclosure bank appeared to be undisturbed, prompting the suggestion that 'the earth forming the ramparts had not been taken from within the enclosure, it had evidently been moved from the exterior fosse' (Mepham 1930, 35). The lack of finds in these trenches meant that no secure date could be assigned to the enclosure.

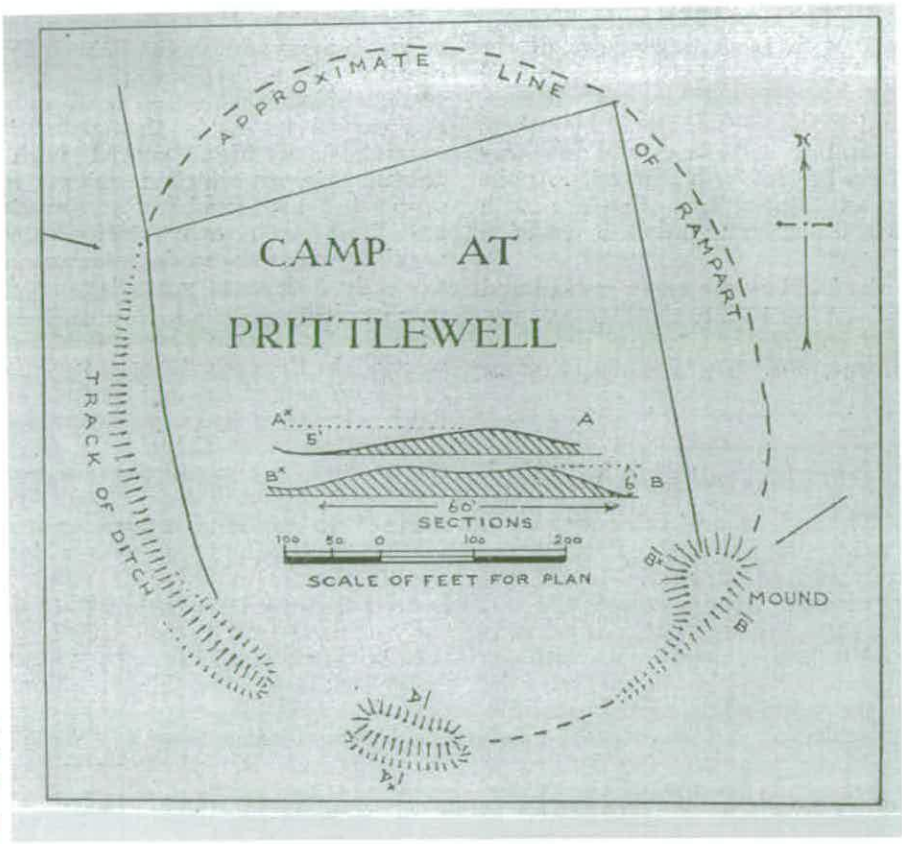

Figure 2
1923 survey plan of Prittlewell Camp (RCHME 1923, 114)

Mepham dug a further eight trenches and two 2.5m deep holes through the mound on the south-eastern bank of the enclosure (Fig 4). Recent disturbance had formed a crater in the centre, but finds from the mound material included 13th-century pottery, worked tufa, oyster shells, tiles, animal bones, iron nails, carved stone and the spring from a Roman padlock.

Mepham also surveyed and sketched the area which allowed him to interpret some of the earthworks, suggesting the position of a possible entrance to the enclosure in its western bank, and also mentioning the disturbance to the southern bank which he explained as the product of gravel extraction and rubbish dumping. Finally, he examined the sections of pipeline trenches that were cut through the western bank of the enclosure in the same year but found these uninformative (Fig 3).

Despite the substantial nature of his investigations, finds were few and consequently, Mephams's conclusions were hesitant. Although he favoured a prehistoric origin for the construction of the enclosure, he admitted that this could not be proven but suggested that 'its strategic value is obvious' and 'it would provide a refuge for people and cattle in times of danger but would not necessarily be a garrisoned fortress' (Mepham 1930, 45). He seemed

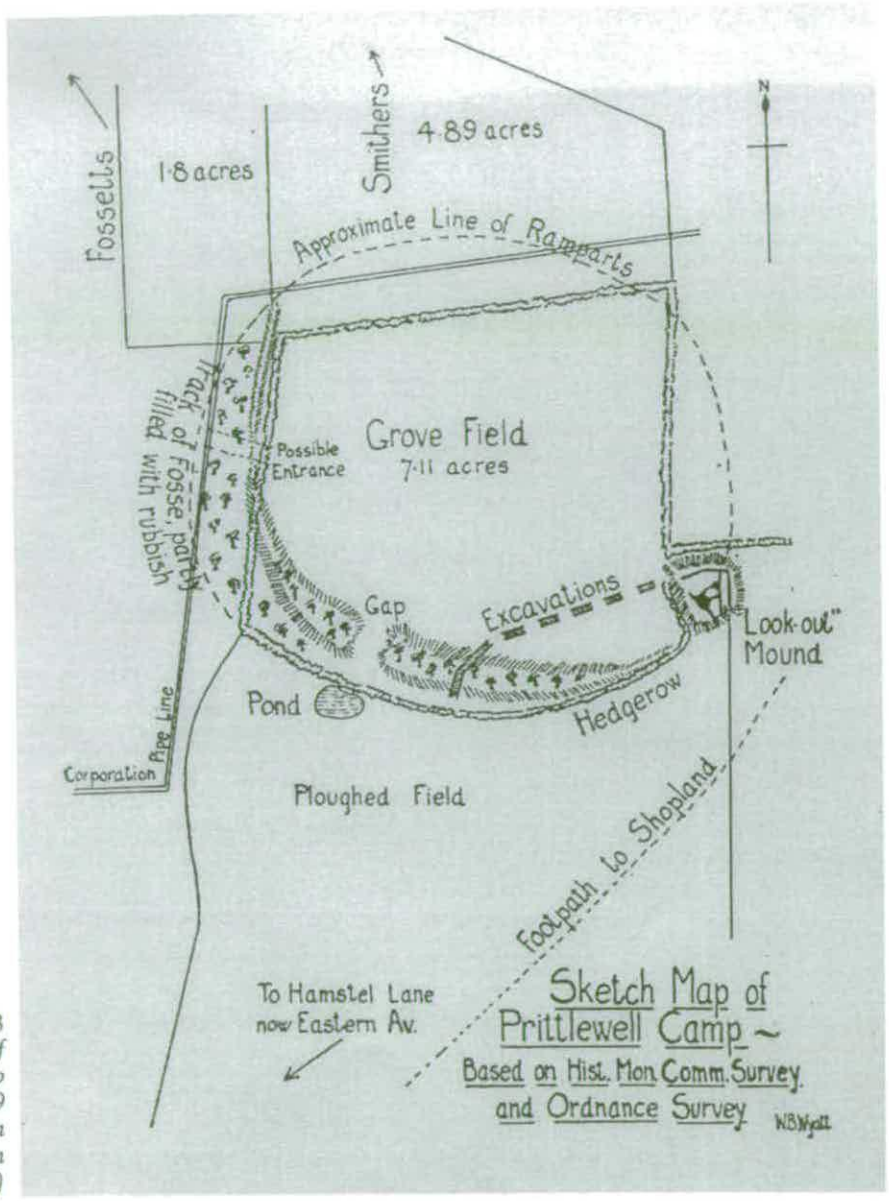

Figure 3
Sketch map of Prittlewell Camp showing the 1929 excavation trenches (Mepham 1930, 31)

more certain that his findings provided secure dating evidence for the mound but this disregards the fact that the mixed, dispersed nature of the finds within the mound might suggest that their inclusion was incidental and that it was constructed at a later date.

The most recent archaeological investigation in the survey area was an evaluation carried out by Essex County Council in advance of the cutting of the Rochford to Southend pipeline in 1997. A trench to the north-west of Prittlewell Camp produced the only finds, which were very similar in nature to those found in the 1929 excavation of the mound (Tripp 1998).

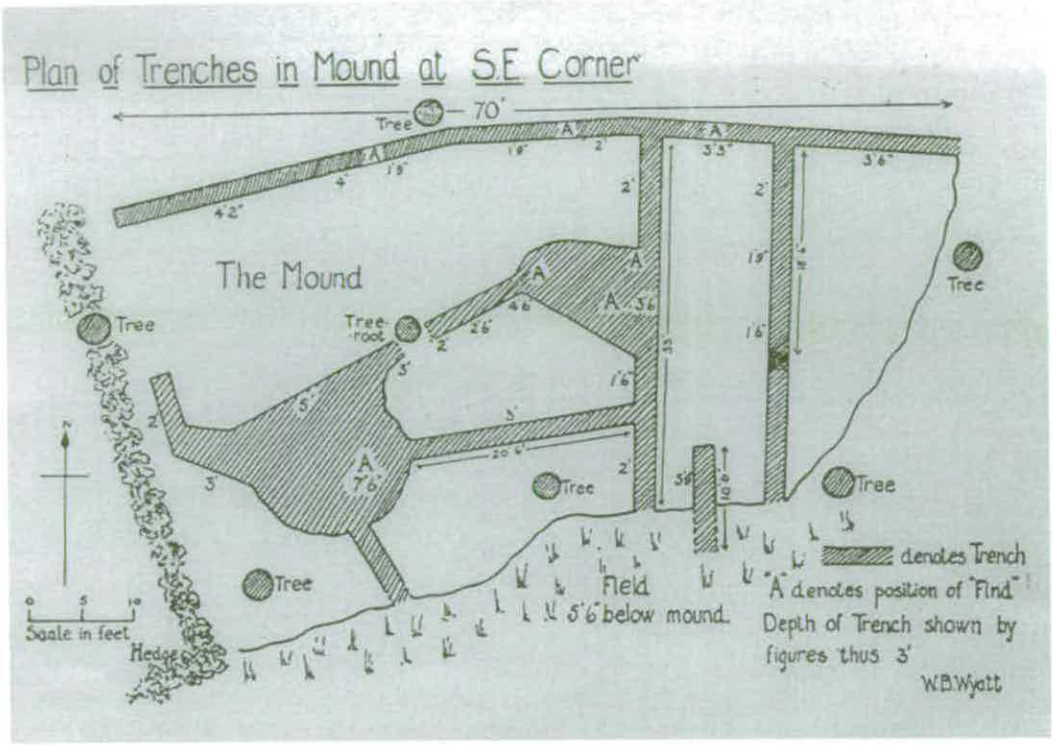

Figure 4
Plan of the 1929 excavation trenches in the mound (Mepham 1930, 36)

Whilst this is a further indication of considerable medieval activity in the area, there is no direct connection between these and the origin of the enclosure.

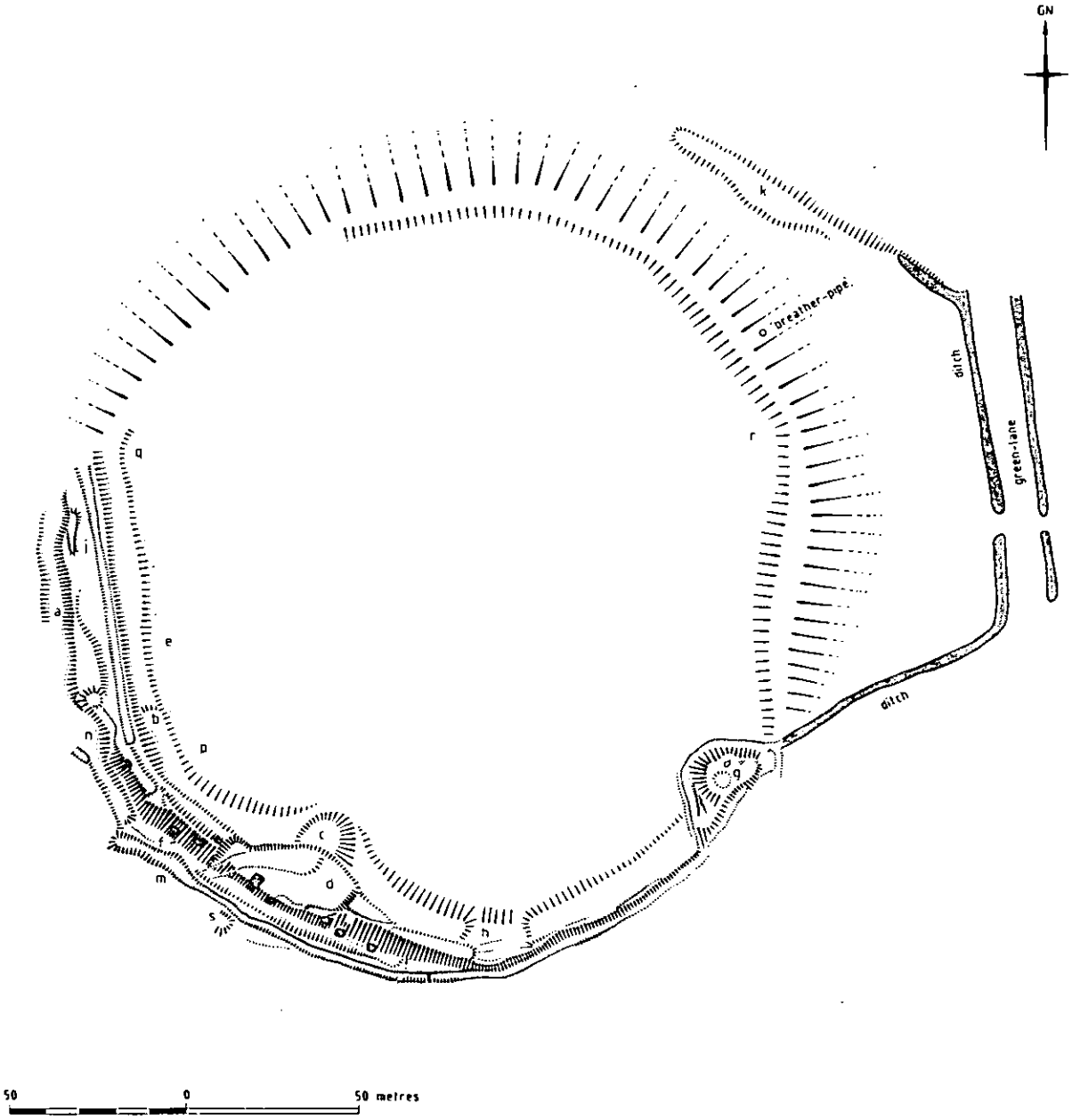

Figure 6 *RCHME survey plan of Prittlewell Camp (surveyed at 1:1000 scale)*

3. DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

For letters which appear **in bold** in the text, see Fig 5.

A summary interpretation is provided by Fig 6.

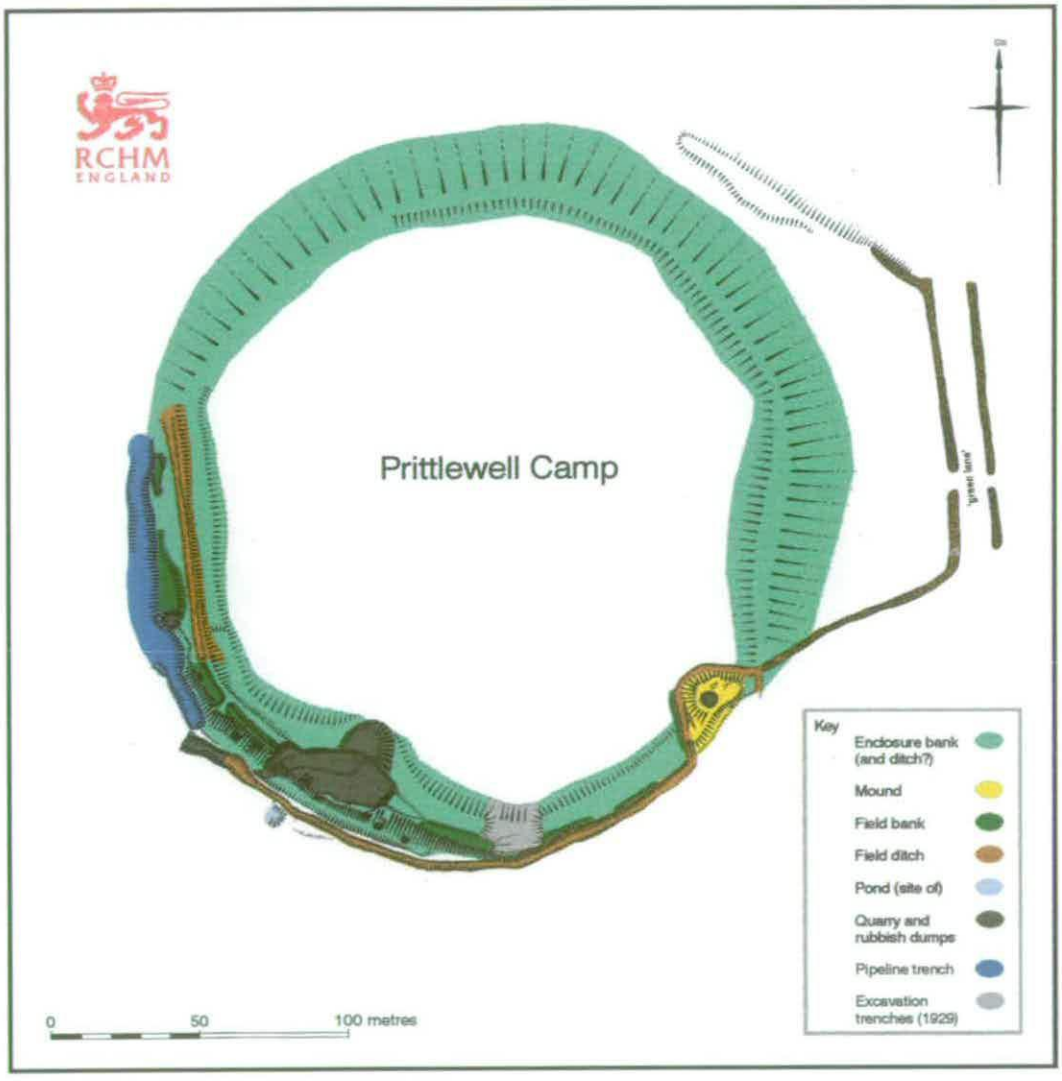

Figure 6
RCHME Interpretation plan of Prittlewell Camp

THE ENCLOSURE

This comprises a broad bank defining a near circular area of approximately 5.4 hectares (13.3 acres). Early accounts (see Benton 1873; RCHME 1923; Mepham *ibid.*) refer to an outer ditch or 'fosse', but the only remaining length of this lies in a seriously disturbed area on the

south western side of the enclosure and its antiquity cannot be assumed on the basis of earthwork evidence alone.

The northern and eastern arcs

This part of the enclosure bank lies within an arable field and it has been heavily spread by ploughing to as wide as 35.0m; nevertheless the external face still stands to a height of 1.0m and the feature is clearly visible. In profile, it has a long outer slope and a shorter, steeper inner slope, agreeing with the form shown for the southern arc in the RCHM survey (1923, 114) and in section drawings from the 1929 excavations (Mepham 1930, 34). There is no evidence here of an external ditch and any such feature is unlikely to have survived several centuries of ploughing in the field.

The southern and western arcs

The edges of this section of the enclosure bank, although forming a more prominent earthwork, are harder to distinguish because of their situation in thick woodland and undergrowth but also because of damage caused by later activities, particularly Corporation rubbish dumping in the early 20th century: there are various rubbish-filled hollows, mounds and grooves along the enclosure bank. A wide linear feature, **a**, running along the western edge, represents the line of the 1929 corporation pipeline that Mepham described and investigated. This trench has left a pronounced scar, which could be concealing the line of an original external ditch to the enclosure. Further evidence of the pipeline can be found to the north-east, in the arable field, in the form of a breather pipe.

The inner scarp of the enclosure bank is slight; it runs within the line of the modern field boundary and has been significantly reduced by ploughing within the field and stands to a maximum height of 0.2m to 0.4m. A slight scarp, **b**, running across the bank on its western side, is the point where Mepham postulated a possible entrance to the enclosure. There is no evidence to support his interpretation: both inner and outer scarps of the enclosure bank are continuous at this point, with no hint of a change in the earthwork that might indicate a blocked or infilled entrance.

From a casual glance, a larger break in the enclosure bank at **c** and **d**, might seem a more plausible candidate for an entrance. However, it was correctly explained by Mepham as the result of gravel extraction. The smaller hollow, **c**, is now in the ploughed field; it has deflected the inner face of the enclosure bank to the interior. Outside it, the larger disturbance, **d**, has cut away most of the enclosure bank but it is still possible to trace the line of the outer scarp of the bank running continuously across it. Along the northern side of the hollow is a faint linear depression, perhaps a track leading away from **c**.

The outer scarp of the enclosure bank has been severely damaged in several places. The western side at e appears to have been flattened out but further south, on each side of the hollow d, there are better-preserved stretches, f. These are both some 35.0m long and stand to a height of 1.7m, with a sharp and steep profile. It is here that there are traces of an outer ditch, but the degree of disturbance in this area must cast doubt upon its origin. To the south-east, the outer scarp is adopted by a later field boundary and can be traced up to the mound at g. This will have obliterated any trace of an earlier enclosure ditch. The mound sits squarely over the enclosure bank, utilising the outer scarp but obscuring the inner scarp with a pronounced inward bulge.

The large breach, h, in the centre of the southern arc, is a trench from Mepham's excavations in 1929.

The interior

There are no internal features visible on the surface and superficially, there was an absence of finds in the ploughsoil. However, the ploughed area would benefit from thorough fieldwalking to recover any small finds which might assist in dating.

THE MOUND

A large mound, g, is situated astride the enclosure bank on the south-eastern side. The prominence of the mound over the enclosure and the way a field boundary ditch loops around it, suggests that the mound is secondary to the enclosure. However, the archaeological relationship between the two has yet to be clearly defined. The mound utilises the steep outer scarp of the enclosure on the south-east whereas on the north-west its plan is rounded and there is a more gentle slope which extends beyond the line of the inner face of the enclosure bank. The resulting shape of the mound is nearly oval, some 22.0m by 18.0m, standing to a maximum height of 1.8m above the current ground surface. This contrasts with the height of 3.0m recorded in the late 19th century which, according to Benton (*ibid.*), had already been lowered. However, this might be explained by the known practice of measuring the slope, not the elevation.

A small crater in the top of mound could be the area of disturbance mentioned by Mepham but probably also partly the product of his own extensive excavations in 1929.

The mixed material produced from his excavations included 13th-century pottery: this suggests that it was built some time during or after the 13th century but doesn't allow for a more precise date to be assigned. The mound first appears in a documentary source on a map of 1796 (ERO: D/DCw P13). Although it is not possible to connect this mound directly to the features in the evaluation trenches that were dug to the north-west of the survey area

(Tripp 1998), the occurrence of a wealth of 13th century finds in both (cooking pots in particular), implies that the area of the enclosure was a focus of activity in the later medieval period.

A concrete and brick base on top of the mound, together with chunks of similar debris on the flanks, may represent the position of a military structure of Second World War date which appears on aerial photographs from 1943. This cannot be directly associated with the heavy anti-aircraft battery that lay to the north-east at TQ 899 889. It is unlikely that it marks the position of a pill box because of the density of tree cover above the mound and the insubstantial nature of the remains, although there are several pill boxes in the surrounding area. If it did fulfill any military function, it seems most likely to have held a light anti-aircraft gun or a Blacker Bombard (Spigot Mortar) (NMR APs: HLA/655/6005-6).

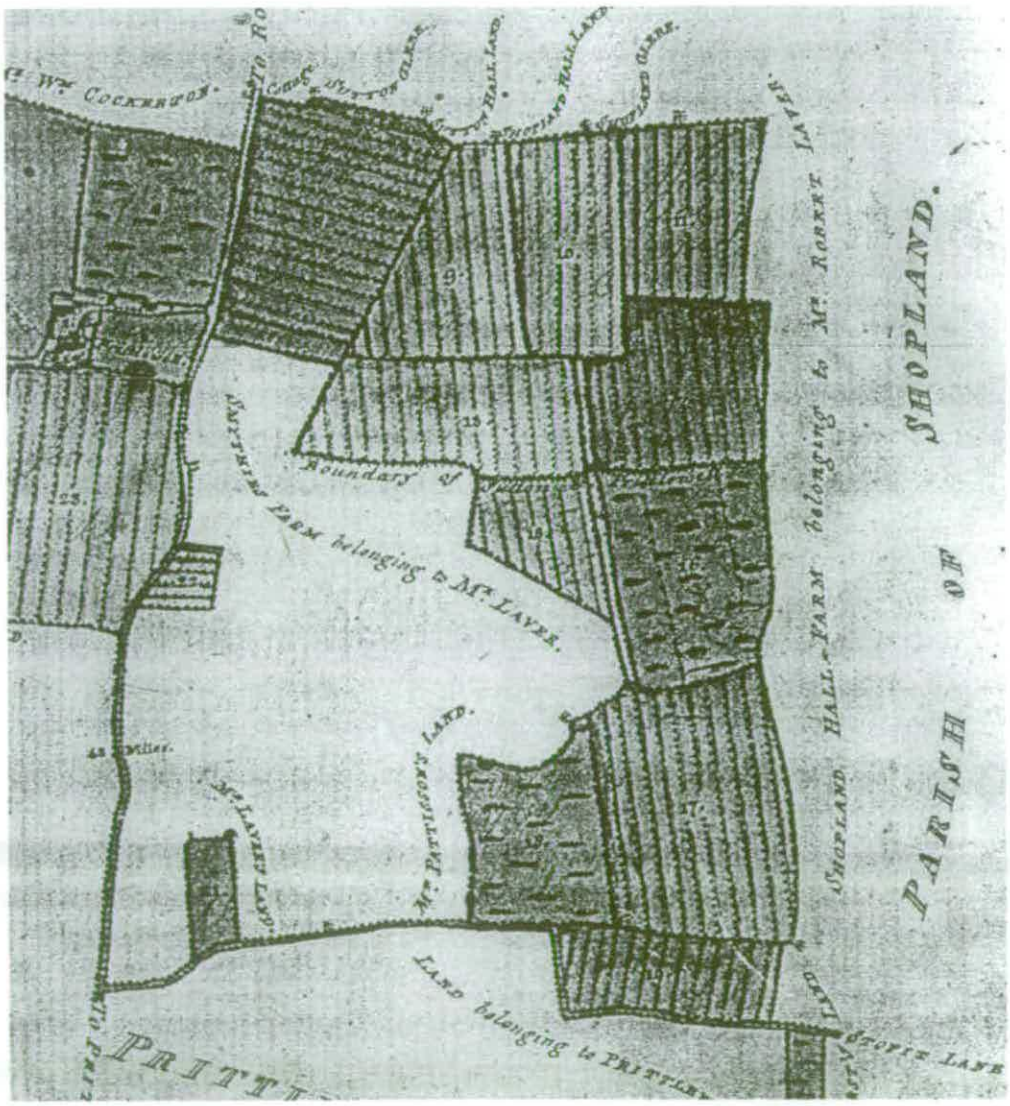

Figure 7
Extract of the 1796 Estate Map of Rochford Hall Estate (reproduced courtesy of the Essex Record Office: D/DCw P13)

Prittlewell Camp in the Later Landscape

Surviving maps, from the mid 18th century onwards, indicate that the enclosure remained a notable feature long after its original functions had ceased. Part of its bank was utilised by field boundaries in the post-medieval landscape, which explains the better survival of the southern and western arcs (ERO D/DMa P4; D/DCw P13; D/CT/276/1B). These maps indicate that the basic structure of enclosed fields around Prittlewell Camp remained relatively unchanged from the mid 18th century onwards.

A short distance to the east of the enclosure is a 'green lane'. This runs from north to south and is bounded by shallow, steep sided ditches. It is recorded as a short and narrow strip of land on the same maps and it seems likely to be preserving part of a former trackway, perhaps linking vanished medieval fields or settlements. It is described on the Tithe apportionment of 1841 as 'waste' and seems primarily to have provided access between fields; to the north,

Figure 8
Extract of the 1841 Tithe Map for Prittlewell (reproduced courtesy of the Essex Record Office: D/CT/276/1B)

it crossed the parish boundary between Prittlewell and Sutton but continued only for the length of a single field; the southern end was similarly abrupt against a small pond which was still there in 1880; north east of the enclosure there was a similar, but broader strip of land which ran parallel to the green-lane (ERO: D/DCw P13; D/CT276/1B; Ordnance Survey 1st Edn 6-inch Sheet Essex 78).

Several of these field boundaries have left their mark on the enclosure: there is a slight bank, j, running along the top of the enclosure bank near its outer edge. Another lies outside the enclosure to the north-east, where there is a broad but shallow bank, k, in the ploughsoil; it is depicted as a functioning boundary on a map of 1796, and on others thereafter (Fig 7). A ditch,m, skirting the southern edge of the enclosure bank and crossing it to the west of mound g appears on the same map (ERO: D/DCw P13).

A later ditch and bank, n, form the current field boundary and have done so since 1841 when the southern and western arcs of the enclosure were enveloped by a narrow crescent of woodland, as today. A number of pollarded oak trees of some age still exist within this crescent, marking the productive role of this woodland within the otherwise arable later medieval landscape. At this time the interior of the enclosure contained a rectangular field which, although now removed, has left its mark by biting into the enclosure bank to leave quite sharp changes of alignment at p, q and r and at the north-eastern tip of mound g (ERO: D/CT/276/1B; Fig 8).

Against the south-western edge of the enclosure, a shallow depression, s, is a former pond (Ordnance Survey 1st Edn 6-inch Sheet Essex 78).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The principal outcome of this survey has been to clarify the nature, extent and condition of the earthworks at Prittlewell Camp. It has clearly defined the more recent damage, enabling existing interpretations to be explored and a more informed understanding of the site to be gained.

However, on present evidence there can be no certain interpretation of the function and date of the enclosure. Taking form alone, it is likely to be of the later prehistoric period: its location over the brow of the hill, rather than a more strategic defensive position on the top of the hill, and its roughly circular form with a single bank, suggest that it may be best understood as one of a range of prehistoric enclosures that were built across the region from the late Bronze Age onwards. These include sites such as the later Bronze Age settlements at Mucking, Springfield Lyons and Lofts Farm (Brown 1988; 1996) as well as an array of sub-circular enclosed sites that are thought to be of early Iron Age origin and appear to have been used in very different ways.

In its scale, the enclosure bank was probably once an impressive sight, but the gentle incline of its outer slope and the lack of a substantial encircling ditch, might be seen to imply that the purpose of its construction was not purely defensive. This argument has been put forward for some hillfort sites in Wessex (e.g. Danebury, Hambledon) at which the defensive purpose of the enclosure ramparts is thought to have been secondary to the social and symbolic importance of their construction and maintenance and the activities that took place within their bounds (Hill 1995). These ideas have been generated from the detailed examination of material and earthwork evidence from within and around the sites concerned, and more fieldwork will be necessary before they can be considered as pertinent to the interpretation of contemporary enclosures in Essex.

The absence of evidence for an entrance is also intriguing and may simply be due to the poor preservation of the site as a whole. On the other hand, it could be, as elsewhere in Britain, that the entrance faced to the south-east (Hill 1996) and so may be obscured by the mound. The lack of well-stratified archaeological evidence from the enclosing bank or the interior is unusual and might imply that if it was ever occupied, this habitation was ephemeral rather than long term. A similar lack of evidence for permanent or intensive occupation has been observed at other early Iron Age enclosures in the region. For example, the majority of the material evidence that was found at Asheldham Camp (Bedwin 1991), was of middle Iron Age date although the construction of its enclosure bank was dated to the early Iron Age. This implies that here, the enclosure was not extensively occupied until several centuries after its initial construction. Recent evaluation of the earthworks and interior of Shoebury Camp have produced similar evidence. It is interesting in this respect that the majority of

evidence for early Iron Age occupation and productive activity in the region has actually derived from open or simple pallisaded settlements, such as those at Asheldham, North Shoebury, Maldon, Great Wakering and Fox Hall (near Prittlewell Camp) (Brown 1996; Sealey 1996), several of which lie close to roughly contemporary enclosure sites. This, and the co-ordination of people and activities within this landscape, deserve further investigation.

The absence of dating evidence also makes it difficult to understand the local and regional context of the evidence at Prittlewell, but this matter does need consideration. Several early Iron Age enclosures have been excavated and surveyed in Essex, but none are well understood. They have been described as '*a rather disparate group of earthworks*' for which the '*single unifying factor seems to be their siting in positions of strategic importance relating to rivers, estuaries and the coastline*' (Bedwin 1991, 26). In addition it can be observed that several such sites are roughly oval or sub-rectangular in plan; have simply constructed, univallate enclosure banks; have produced no certain dating evidence; have single gap or indeterminate entrances; and show evidence of earlier prehistoric cultivation or activity in the area prior to its enclosure (Morris and Buckley 1978). Morris and Buckley (*ibid*) have also noted that these sites tend to be situated along navigable rivers rather than being constructed at regular intervals in a 'territorial' manner, as has been suggested for enclosed sites elsewhere in Britain (*c.f.* Cunliffe 1984).

Several of the later prehistoric enclosures in the region were re-used during the Saxon and later medieval periods; the mound at Prittlewell Camp might be evidence of this practice. At Maldon and Asheldham the re-use involved the recutting of the enclosure bank and ditch (Bedwin 1990; 1991); the enclosed site at Ambresbury was apparently re-occupied in the Saxon period, and several of the later prehistoric enclosures listed by Morris and Buckley (1978) have mounds adjacent to or overlying their earthworks (e.g. Asheldham and Danbury) although the purpose of these needs investigation. The presence of 13th-century material from two locations at Prittlewell is tantalising in this respect; but not so convincing as to give credence to suggestions that the enclosure was a ringwork castle. The most likely explanation for the mound is that it was a windmill of medieval date (13th-century or later): its location on the highest point of the enclosure bank in an exposed position, favours this interpretation.

It is known from documentary sources that post-mills became widely used in Essex during the 12th and 13th centuries AD (Farris 1981), but only recently has archaeological evidence been found to support this. A combination of field-walking and trial trenching undertaken as part of the Essex 'Cropmark Enclosures Project' over the last four years has revealed the sites of 12th- or 13th- century windmills at Great and Little Bentley. The excavator of another early post-mill at Borham airfield described '*a crude base construction comprising a central large pit (5m diameter and 1m depth), surrounded by a ring ditch and possible bank or mound*

(18m total diameter)' (Bennett and Gilman 1996). The form and dimensions of this are remarkably similar to those of the mound at Prittlewell although here, the central pit is likely to be the product of more recent disturbance rather than representing the position of the removed base of the post-mill. Whilst this by no means provides conclusive evidence of the purpose of the Prittlewell mound, it certainly makes this interpretation a strong possibility.

The green lane is a rare survival in Southend of a once common landscape feature. Another example 800m to the west at Temple Farm was destroyed during the construction of an industrial estate in the 1980's. Whilst the lane cannot be directly linked to the use of the enclosure or mound with any certainty, the survival of this ensemble of ancient landscape features in close proximity to the edge of a dense urban area is remarkable. Their long-term preservation and management should be considered together.

5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The topographical survey at Prittlewell Camp was carried out by Moraig Brown, Duncan Garrow, Alastair Oswald and Paul Pattison of the RCHME. A divorced survey method was employed by establishing control stations using a Wild TC1610 electronic theodolite with integral EDM. The data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted digitally on a Hewlett Packard Designjet 750C Plus plotter. These stations were used as a framework from which to record the archaeological features with tapes using normal graphical methods, at a scale of 1:1000.

This report was researched and written by Anwen Cooper and Paul Pattison. The illustrations were prepared by Anwen Cooper using AutoCAD and CorelDraw, and the report was assembled by Moraig Brown using CorelVentura software.

The site archive has been deposited in The National Monuments Record Centre, Great Western Village, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ (NMR Number TQ 88 NE 18; HOB Uid: 418915). Further copies may also be obtained from this address.

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