

7. SITE INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The near-complete excavation of the double-ditched enclosure at Winchburgh provided an excellent opportunity to investigate the character and nature of a cropmark site within the intensively farmed landscape of central Scotland, which has seen little modern research (Haselgrove et al 2001: 23; ScARF 2012). However, the excavation has thrown up as many questions as answers.

7.1 Classification

One of the key questions regarding Winchburgh is whether it should be classified as a hillfort, enclosed settlement or enclosure. Recent definitions of 'hillfort' (Ralston 2006: 12–13; Halliday & Ralston 2010) identify a number of key elements. These include at least one circuit of enclosing works, normally adapted to the topography, which may provide a degree of defensive advantage. The double ditches at Winchburgh were relatively substantial and certainly would have offered a degree of protection, especially along the eastern side, where the ditches survived to a depth of approximately 1.3m and width of 3.7m. However, the Winchburgh enclosure occupied an east/west-running ridge of locally higher ground at 72m AOD. It was only marginally higher than the lowland landscape and would have offered very little in the way of defensive advantage. The western side of the site could be approached with very little difficulty. However, it is possible that the surrounding landscape may have been subject to periodic flooding. Adverse weather conditions during the latter half of the excavation led to large areas of lying water in the adjacent fields and the ditches required constant emptying. Analysis of the ditch fills also suggested there had been repeated episodes of wetting and drying (see 5.4.2 'Discussion').

Ralston (2006: 13) suggests a lower limit of 0.25ha for monuments to be classed as hillforts, which has recently been revised to a lower limit of 0.2ha for inclusion within the *Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland* (Lock & Ralston 2017). The inner ditch at Winchburgh enclosed an area of *c* 0.16ha and the outer ditch enclosed a total area of *c* 0.3ha. Therefore, in terms of area, Winchburgh should be considered as an enclosure rather than a hillfort.

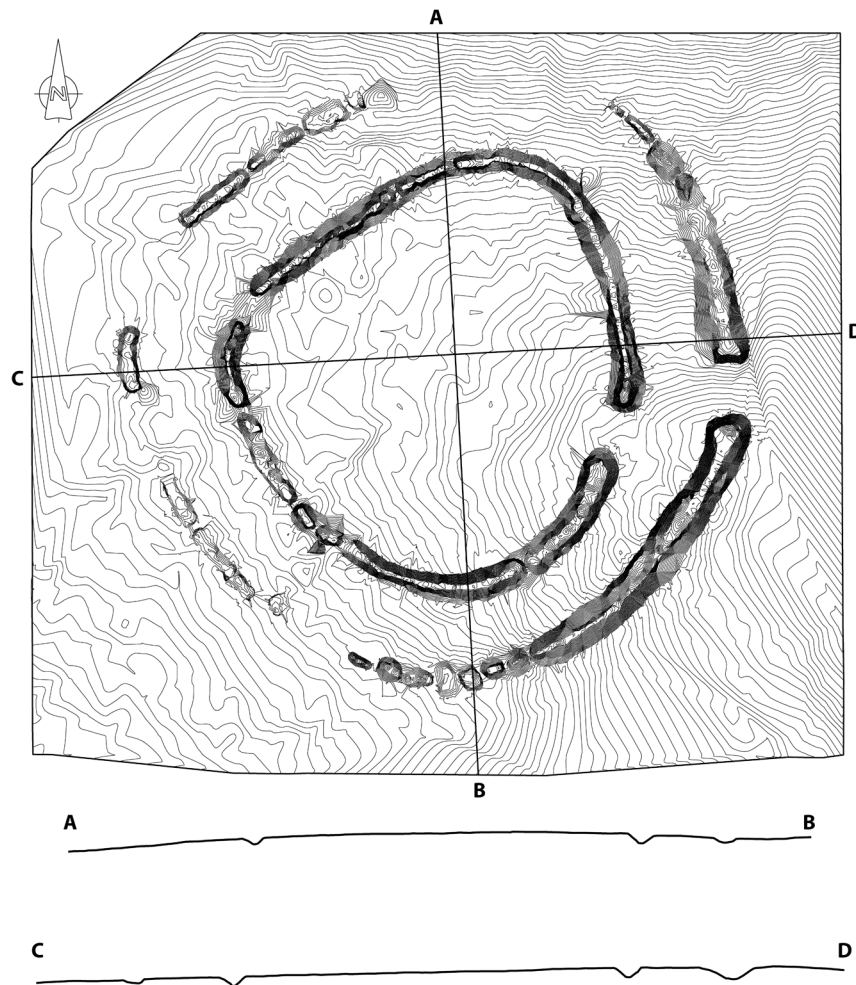
7.2 State of survival

One of the questions posed of the site is the extent to which the remains of the enclosure were subject to plough truncation, to provide an indication of the original depth of the ditches and whether there could have been truncation/removal of structures formerly present in the interior.

The depth of the inner ditch varied along its circuit, which could suggest that the ditch was constructed by digging a series of conjoined pits or lengths of ditch. However, most of the circuit of the inner ditch ranged between 0.75m and 1.3m deep, with most sections being on average 0.9m deep: to the west (see Illus 24), the ditch varied between only 0.35m and 0.6m deep (Slots 100B and 110, respectively) and so was significantly, and consistently, shallower.

The outer ditch exhibited far greater variability around its circuit, and only the eastern half formed a coherent, continuous ditch. The southern part consisted of a number of conjoined pits (Contexts 010, 025, 036, 091 and 293–5) as did the north-western quadrant (Contexts 050, 077, 078 and 080). The western/south-western part of the enclosing works consisted of four separate pits (Contexts 055, 071, 075 and 076) but there were large gaps between them. As in the inner ditch, the deepest and widest pits/segments were found on the eastern half. However, the outer ditch did not exhibit the same general decrease in depth from east to west.

The remains of rig-and-furrow cultivation were recorded overlying the western and south-western parts of the outer ditch during the topsoil stripping operations, while the evaluation trenches located over the western half of the enclosure recorded only topsoil (average 0.35m deep) and the evaluation trenches placed over the eastern half also contained a subsoil (0.1–0.2m deep). The topsoil and subsoil depths did not vary greatly across the evaluation (Glendinning 2013). Taking the hypothesis that the varying depths of the ditches is a proxy indicator of truncation, the western half of the site would appear to have suffered the most, but this cannot account for the incomplete nature of the outer ditch. One would assume, even taking into consideration the theory that the ditch segments were excavated by separate gangs of workers, that the ditch would still have survived as a continuous



Illus 24 Profiles across site. © CFA Archaeology Ltd

circuit if that was how it had been constructed, as the segments did not vary in depth to such a great degree. Since the enclosure was located on relatively flat ground at the end of a slight ridge which sloped down to the west, the greatest truncation should occur within the interior of the enclosure, with soil movement resulting in an accumulation in the lower-lying western half. No artefacts or evidence of domestic occupation were recovered from the subsoil within the western half of the site during topsoiling operations. In addition, assuming the inner ditch had been truncated to such a degree to account for the difference in depth from east to west, there was no evidence of the same volume of stone that was observed within the eastern half of the inner ditch.

It is highly unlikely that the site did not suffer some amount of truncation but, given the evidence

presented above, it seems unlikely that truncation has resulted either in the complete destruction of some parts of the outer ditch or the partial reduction of the inner ditch to any substantial degree. Therefore, it remains more likely that the differences seen in the continuity of the ditch circuits are an original feature and that this was intended by the builders of the enclosure. There was also no evidence for internal structures, but buildings constructed on sleeper beams may have been preferred, leaving very few traces, rather than being evidence for the complete truncation of post-built structures, or indeed it could be the case that there never were any internal structures associated with the enclosure; it is highly unlikely that there was significant enough truncation to have erased all negative features associated with former structures within the interior of the enclosure.

7.3 Sequencing of the site

The distinct lack of intercutting features meant that any sequencing of the site would have to rely on finds or dating samples recovered from the fills of the ditches. Unfortunately, there was a paucity of finds from both the inner and outer ditches. The few samples of bone which returned radiocarbon dates were recovered from the inner ditch (see 6 'Radiocarbon dating' for discussion). All of the bone samples submitted for radiocarbon dating from the outer ditch failed to provide dates due to insufficient carbon content.

If there were two distinct phases of ditch construction, the concentricity of the ditches suggests the earlier ditch was extant and was respected during the construction of the second, although it is impossible to say which was dug first, or indeed whether they are contemporary and formed a coherent unit built at the same time. The differences in the radiocarbon dates from samples recovered from the ditch terminals may indicate that the process of silting up of the ditch took place over an extended period of time, or that the earliest date is residual material incorporated into the ditch fill. The dated material can at best provide only a *terminus post quem* for the infilling of the ditches.

7.4 Function of the site

Given the paucity of material remains recovered, elucidating the function of the site remains problematic. The only possible clues are provided by a few examples of shale roughouts. Similarly to Braehead (Ellis 2007), the examples predominantly consist of roughouts, or the preparation and initial perforation of a block. Winchburgh may have been the focus of a particular link in the *chaîne opératoire* of the shale jewellery manufacturing process, much as Hunter (2007) postulates for Braehead, with the initial processing of the shale carried out at Winchburgh, providing the blanks for further work and finishing elsewhere. Admittedly, the amount of shale roughouts recovered from the site is rather meagre, but intriguing nonetheless. Hunter (4.1 'Worked shale') notes that the assemblage is dominated by a single stage of the working process. The lack of débitage recovered suggests that material was part-worked elsewhere and brought to the site

perhaps for exchange. Certainly, it would appear, given the lack of evidence for a domestic use of the site, that it had an alternative function, one of which may have been a meeting place to trade the partially finished products.

As mentioned previously, the lack of evidence for any internal structures, apart from the two possible post holes, may be an indication that Winchburgh never functioned as a domestic site. In addition to the lack of structures, there were practically no finds indicating a domestic occupation. In comparison to some other hillforts and enclosures, Winchburgh was practically bereft of finds. Only a few animal bones exhibited evidence of burning and only one displayed a knife mark (see 5.1 'Animal bone'). Similarly, the amounts of charcoal recovered from the ditch fills revealed that they had not been the recipients of domestic refuse (see 5.3.1.3 'Charcoal').

7.5 The enclosing works

As noted above, the inner ditch of Winchburgh was a complete circuit with an east-south-eastern entrance and another entrance in the west-north-west. The outer ditch consisted of a number of conjoined pits or scoops around most of the eastern section of the circuit. The remainder of the outer circuit was discontinuous and consisted of separate oblong pits. As suggested for Braehead (Ellis 2007: 253) and Port Seton (Haselgrove & McCullagh 2000: 81), the irregularity and segmental nature of the ditch segments at Winchburgh may reflect construction methods involving gangs, each working on separate segments of ditch.

There was no evidence of re-excavation or cleaning of the ditches at Winchburgh, and the results from the soil micromorphology suggest that there was no deliberate backfilling and that the fills were the product of natural accumulation (see 5.4 'Soil micromorphology'). Therefore this would suggest that the ditches were not maintained and were allowed to silt up naturally. No evidence of recutting was found at Braehead (Ellis 2007: 254) or Woodend (Banks 2000: 248) either, and differential upkeep of the ditches was noted at Fisher Road West, Port Seton (Haselgrove & McCullagh 2000: 77). However, it must be noted that only eight samples were taken using Kubiena tins (one from the inner ditch and one from the outer ditch) and it was not

possible to extract any samples from the terminals or the circuit of the eastern half of the inner ditch as the stone within the fills was too tightly compacted. The soil micromorphology, therefore, is not necessarily representative of the entire ditch circuit.

At Winchburgh there was very little silting up of the terminals of the eastern entrance of the inner ditch prior to the deposition of the slabs and rubble. In addition, there were very few voids within the matrix of stones, which is indicative of a rapid deposition of the stone within the inner ditch. If the stone had accumulated in the ditch over a longer period of time, one would expect far greater mixing of the rampart material. The sheer volume of stone recovered from the inner ditch, much of which consisted of large slabs, would seem to indicate the presence of an outer stone revetment to an earthen rampart. The largest, flattest slabs were recovered lying horizontally against the inner face of the eastern entrance terminals and more stone was recovered from the inner side than the outer of the fills. In addition, the fills of both ditches were derived from re-deposited upcast material as well as eroding soil (see 5.4 'Soil micromorphology'). Therefore, the most likely explanation is that the bank and revetment were located behind the scarp of the inner ditch. Two possible explanations for the slabs and stone lying horizontally in the scarp of the inner ditch are: (a) relatively shortly after its completion the revetment was deliberately destroyed or (b) the underlying edge of the ditch collapsed, causing the material to slump into the ditch.

The volume of stone within the inner ditch at Winchburgh decreased from east to west, which suggests that there was more revetting around the eastern entrance to the enclosure, also observed at St Germain's (Alexander & Watkins 1998). This may indicate a greater adornment of the eastern entrance and that the remainder of the inner bank had a stone kerb or capping. This would explain the decreasing amount of stone recovered from the western half of the inner ditch. It would serve to emphasise the eastern approach to the enclosure. Certainly, the ditches at Winchburgh were far more substantial in the vicinity of the eastern entrances and this, coupled with a more extensively embellished entrance, would create an impressive visual effect.

Even assuming there was some degree of truncation of the site, it seems unlikely that this

would have resulted in the incomplete nature of the western half of the outer ditch. Defensive considerations seem to be secondary to the visual aspect of the site. Indeed, there are many examples where it appears that defensive considerations were not the primary factor in the siting of the enclosure (ScARF 2012: 85). For example, both The Chesters, Drem (NRHE Site No. NT57NW 1) and Castle Law, Glencorse (NT26SW 2) are overlooked from higher ground, and the topographic setting of the recently evaluated multivallate lowland fort in Keir Wood, just across the Firth of Forth in Kincardine (Kirby 2014), does not offer much defensive advantage. The excavated enclosures at Mar Hall, Renfrewshire (Cavers et al 2012), St Germain's, East Lothian (Alexander & Watkins 1998), Shiels Farm (Scott 1996) and Woodend Farm, Dumfriesshire (Banks 2000) all have fairly substantial ditches but their low-lying locations would tend to counteract any defensive aspect.

Recent theories have offered alternative explanations for the use of enclosing works. Enclosure could have had a wide range of social and symbolic meanings, such as outward displays of status, to provide a symbolic separation of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Hingley 1990; Ralston 2007: 11), while emphasising the importance of the site in the surrounding low-lying landscape (Bowden & McOmish 1987: 77). Hingley (1990) suggests that banks and ditches would have reflected social concepts such as the control or ownership of resources and land. The very act of construction may have served to structure people's ideas about community or to enhance the prestige of its inhabitants or provide a visible indicator of identity (Bowden & McOmish 1987: 77; Banks 2000; Ralston 2007: 11). Bowden & McOmish (1987) suggest that the act of digging the ditches would serve to enhance the status of the inhabitants (*ibid*), and the mobilisation of the required workforce would be an expression of power (Banks 2000; ScARF 2012: 75).

Another explanation for the incomplete nature of the ditches is that rather than having a defensive function they served to emphasise the main approaches to the site. The volume of stone recovered from the ditch fills decreased from east to west around the circuit of the inner ditch, perhaps suggesting that bank size too decreased from a focus near the entrance. As has been discussed above,

this is unlikely to have wholly been the result of truncation and may represent the remains of a revetment to a wall or bank which tapered from east to west, creating an impressive visual effect while emphasising the eastern entrance. Assuming this to be the case, the main approach to the enclosure would have been from the east, along the east/west-running ridges, and this emphasis on the east may explain why the ditches of the western half of the enclosure are less substantial and discontinuous.

Another consideration of the visual aspect of the site would be the presence of water within the ditches. During the excavation the ditches were frequently filled with water, which required emptying by means of a pump. Indeed, the water is still very apparent in the aerial photograph in Illus 5, which was taken after the excavation was finished. Standing water would have served to emphasise the ditches and could have acted as a symbolic separation as well as providing a defensive function. A similar theory was suggested for the enclosures at Shiels and St Germain's (Alexander & Watkins 1998).

7.6 Regional context

There are a number of similar examples of enclosures within the Lothian Plain and Central Scotland. However, only a handful of these have

been excavated, including Mar Hall, Renfrewshire (Cavers et al 2012), St Germain's, East Lothian (Alexander & Watkins 1998), Shiels Farm, Glasgow (Scott 1996), Whittingehame Tower, East Lothian (Haselgrove et al 2009), Braehead, Glasgow (Ellis 2007) and Ravelrig Quarry, Edinburgh (Rennie 2013). Most of these have been thought to have had a domestic purpose, though, and have a longer lifespan than is postulated for Winchburgh. In addition to the excavated sites, there are many more crop mark sites which are reminiscent of Winchburgh but remain undated at present. These include Blackness (NRHE Site No. NT07NW 54), Stacks (NT07NW 49 and NT08SW 26), Burnshot (NT07NW 48), Priestinch (NT07NE 126), Duddingston (NT17NW 42), Craigton (NT07NE 41), Newton (NT07NE 39) and Milrig (NT17SW 170). Therefore, Winchburgh did not sit in splendid isolation but had its place within a plethora of contemporary Mid/Late Iron Age sites, including Kaimes hillfort which was probably occupied at the same time. Winchburgh can be seen to be a part of the continuum of enclosure, whether it was for defensive, symbolic or practical considerations, which is evident during the Later Bronze Age and throughout the Iron Age.