

# Excavations near Basing House, 1962-63

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IT is known from historical records that Basing House was built on the site of a Norman castle, but it has often been suggested that the site was occupied at a much earlier period.

The village of Basing already existed in King Ethelred's time and Roman pottery has been found in the village but there was no direct evidence of pre-Norman occupation of the Castle site. The excavations reported here were attempts to find such evidence. Our work in 1962 was directed to the main outer ditch and bank of the Castle (Site II) and in 1963 to a rectangular enclosure abutting on to the Castle grounds (Sites III and IV).

Very little is known about the building of the Norman castle but the Domesday book records that Basing was then held by Hugh de Port. Baigent and Millard<sup>1</sup> state that in the middle of the 12th century the Old Castle of Basing was given by John de Port to Sherborne Priory. Basing House was built in the 16th century, the Old House on the site of the Norman keep was commenced in 1530 and the New House on its N.E. side was completed about 1560. The two together formed the second largest house in England. The houses were hastily fortified in 1642 by John, the fifth Marquis of Winchester, and besieged for much of the Civil War by the Parliamentary forces. In October 1645 Cromwell personally attended their capture and shortly afterwards their total destruction was ordered. In the 1890's the site was cleared of its overburden of rubble and the house plan revealed, but since this excavation only cleared down to the floors and cellars of the Tudor house, and only in a few places went through the 16th century level, very little evidence was found of any earlier occupation.

The whole site covers some 14½ acres and is covered with a maze of earthworks as shown in Fig. 1, which is taken from the 25 in. O.S. map. On the northern side the site has been cut into by the Basingstoke canal. On the southern side there is an inner ditch with a very high bank inside it surrounding the Old House or Citadel. This bank was strengthened, and its surrounding ditch probably deepened, in the early days of the Civil War.

## SITE II. THE OUTER BANK AND DITCH SOUTH OF THE CITADEL

This earthwork has been variously described as an outer defence thrown up in the Civil War, a Norman earthwork and a prehistoric camp. It was decided to examine this earthwork and for this purpose a trench 3 ft. wide and 90 ft. long was marked out (see Fig. 1) at right angles to the line of the bank and ditch, in such a manner as to expose a complete cross section of this earthwork and also to cut the edge of the spoil heap thrown into the ditch from the small semicircular earthwork projecting southwards. On an old surface beneath the spoil heap in a thick ashy layer were found many artefacts from the Civil War, together with camp fire hearths, animal bones, bricks, nails and window glass. The fill of the ditch beneath this horizon was of rain-washed silt containing occasional fragments of pottery and flanged roof tile. In the rapid silt of the ditch no dating material was found. Small finds in the bank consisted of Civil War material just beneath the present turf line, and a few pieces of pottery

1. Baigent and Millard: *A History of Basingstoke*.

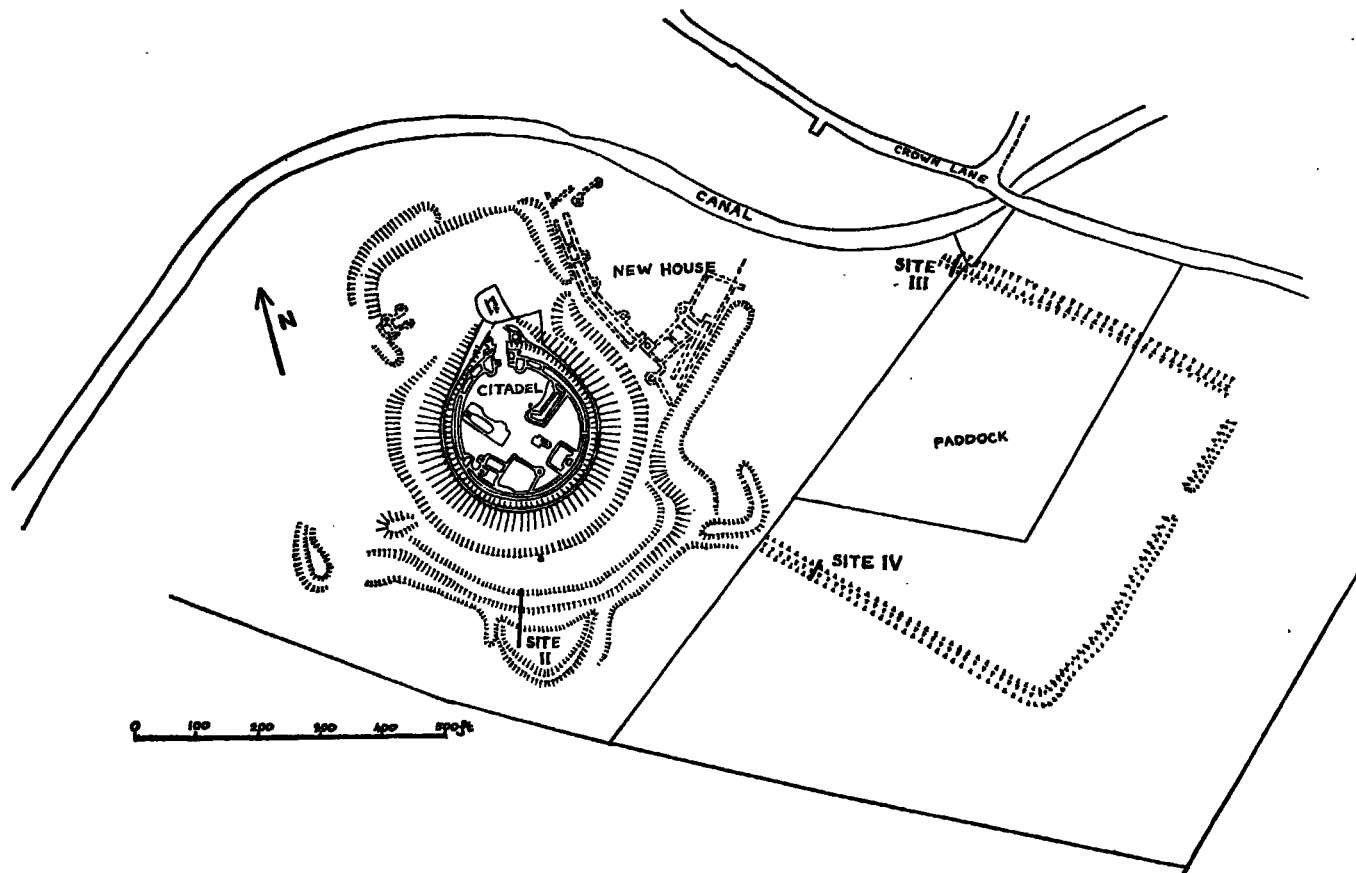


FIG. 1. Overall plan.

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and red brick in the body of the bank. Beneath the bank was found the ancient land surface, consisting of a layer of dark soil containing much pottery, brick and nails, and coins. Beneath this dark layer was undisturbed yellow clay with flints. Cut into the clay with flints and probably through the old turf line also, was a small V-shaped channel containing much burnt flint and two fragmentary jawbones. The dark layer was also found on the outer edge of the ditch and beneath it here was an even layer of small hard packed gravel about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches thick; this 'floor' had much pottery lying on and pressed into it. Lying on the 'tail' of the bank was a layer of large, rough flint nodules, apparently selected from the material quarried from the ditch. The Section is shown in Fig. 2.

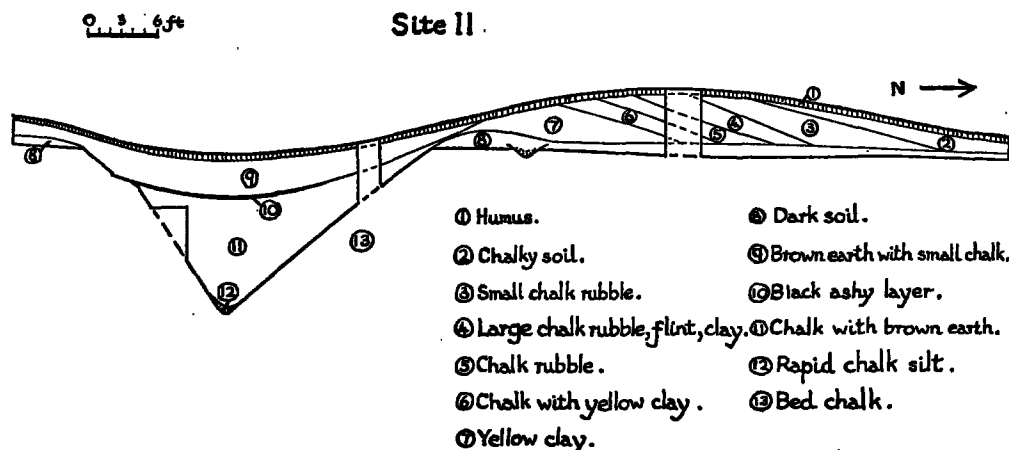


FIG. 2. Section of Site II.

### *Summary of phases of occupation*

The dark layer beneath the bank yielded mostly Roman material. This layer also yielded two minute fragments of 'thumbed rim' medieval ware. (Plate III, nos. 3 and 4). The Roman pottery, some of which is shown in Fig. 3, covers the whole span of the Roman occupation of Britain, i.e. 1st to early 5th century A.D. The medieval pottery has been tentatively dated to the 11th-12th century A.D. Owing to the small size of the sherds a closer dating is not possible. The coins, all Roman, date to the 4th century A.D. The material immediately beneath the spoil heap in the ditch all dates to the mid-17th century A.D. The few finds beneath the 17th century layer, in the silt of the ditch, are probably all Roman.

### *Interpretation*

Up to the time of the Roman occupation of Britain the site seems to have been lightly occupied, one fragment of possible Iron Age pottery was found in the bank, and several flint waste flakes were found throughout the section. Throughout Roman times the site was heavily occupied, the amount of roofing tile, wall tile and flue tile found suggesting a building in the near vicinity. During or later than the 11-12th century A.D. a large, very well made V-shaped ditch 15 ft. deep with very smooth sides was cut through the Roman occupation layer, through the clay with flints beneath, and into the rock chalk. A proportionately large bank of dump construction was built on the northern side of the ditch. At

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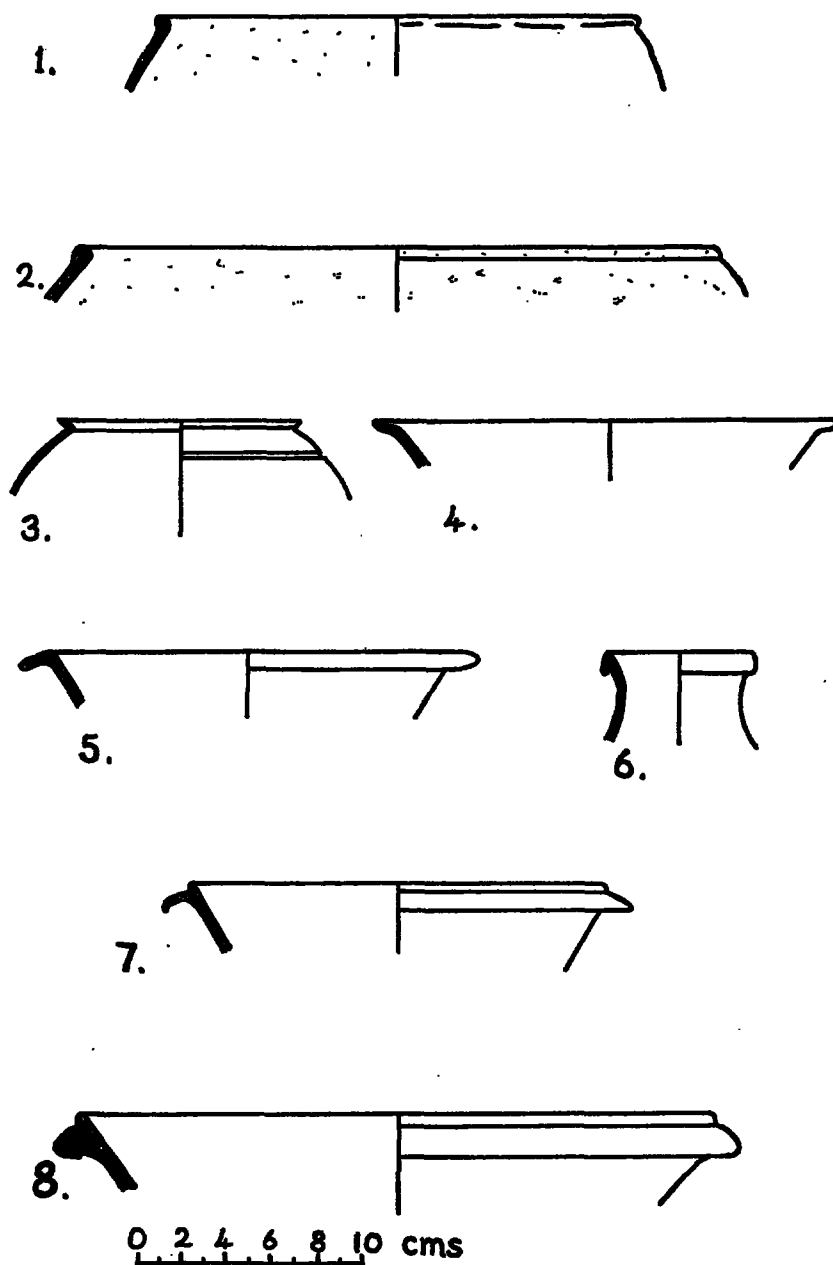


FIG. 3. Romano-British pottery from Site II.

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some later stage of the bank's decay, when the ditch had silted up to within 5 ft. of its lip, soldiers of the Civil War (probably the besieging army in the early part of the siege, as they are recorded<sup>1</sup> as 'lying in the open for 24 weeks') camped in the ditch. A little later, and before the defeat of the Royalists on 14 October 1645, another semi-circular earthwork was constructed on the southern side of the silted ditch facing south, i.e. outwards and therefore Royalist. Spoil from this late earthwork was thrown into the existing ditch, sealing in situ the camp refuse lying there.

### Coins

Of the four coins described below, Nos. 1 and 3 were found on the stony 'floor' outside the ditch and the other two in the humus layer beneath the bank.

1. Constantine I (A.D. 306-337). Plated bronze of (?) Arelate. Diam. 18 mm. Wt. 2.95 gm.

Obverse CONSTANTINUS AUG.

Bust of emperor in crested helmet wearing imperial mantle.

Reverse VICTORIAE LAET PRINC PERP.

Two Victories holding shield, inscribed VOT PR on altar. In ex (A)RL.

Provenance Layer 8 in XVIII.

2. Constantine II or Constans (A.D. 341-346). Bronze. Diam. 14 mm.

Obverse Bust.

Reverse Two Victories.

Provenance Layer 8 in VI beneath bank.

3. Valentinian I (A.D. 364-375). Bronze. Diam. 18 mm. Wt. 1.74 gm.

Obverse DN VALEN . . .

Bust of emperor diademed.

Reverse GLORIA RO (manorum).

Emperor dragging captive by the hair.

Provenance Layer 8 in XVIII.

4. Probably approximately the same date as 3.

Obverse Traces of bust of emperor with radiate diadem.

Reverse . . . BLICAE.

Traces of (?) horseman.

Provenance Layer 8 in -IV beneath bank.

### Animal Bones

A large quantity of animal bones, all of which had been butchered, was found in and just above the Civil War layer. The ox radius was from an animal not much over one year old. Immediately above the old land surface beneath the bank was found the lower jaw of a sheep. The teeth and jaw fragments found in the small V-shaped channel beneath the bank were of ox and dog.

### The 'Early' Pottery

The pottery was very fragmentary, no sherd being more than 2 in. across. The sherds from the ancient land surface were all well worn, indicating that they had been broken and exposed to weathering for some time before being covered by the bank. The following eight pieces are shown in Fig. 3:

1. From body of bank. Ill defined bead rim bowl in coarse black ware. Possibly Belgian.

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2. From body of bank. Large bead rim bowl in coarse heavily gritted ware. Native, mid-1st century A.D.
3. From 'stony floor'. Small globular bowl in fine pink paste, traces of yellow slip outside below rim. Native early 1st century A.D.
4. From body of bank. Everted rim vessel with register for lid, in hard sandy ware. 2nd century A.D.
5. From ancient land surface beneath bank. Everted rim vessel in hard sandy ware. 3rd century A.D.
6. From body of bank. Small necked flask in hard sandy ware with black exterior. Late 4th century A.D.
7. From ancient land surface beneath bank. Flanged rim bowl in hard black ware with white slip on flange. Late 4th to early 5th century A.D.
8. From ancient land surface beneath bank. Heavy, flanged bowl in hard sandy ware, trace of white slip inside, trace of black on flange. Late 4th to early 5th century A.D.

### *Small Finds*

All from the thick ashy layer beneath the spoil heap in the ditch.

1. A forged iron socketed pike head. The blade is 'hollow ground' and the socket is decorated with eight equally spaced lateral grooves. The grooves do not extend along the mounting straps, one of which is missing.
2. A forged iron pick head, the tip of which is missing.
3. A small (lady's?) finger ring of brass. The band is roughly rectangular in section. The pattern, a lozenge of 36 hemispheres, has been raised by stamping.
4. A clay pipe bowl with flat base, no trace of mould line.
5. A clay pipe bowl with pointed base. The underside of the bowl shows the mould line clearly, on the upper side and on the stem the mould line appears to have been removed before firing by burnishing. Nos. 1 and 2 are illustrated in Fig. 4.

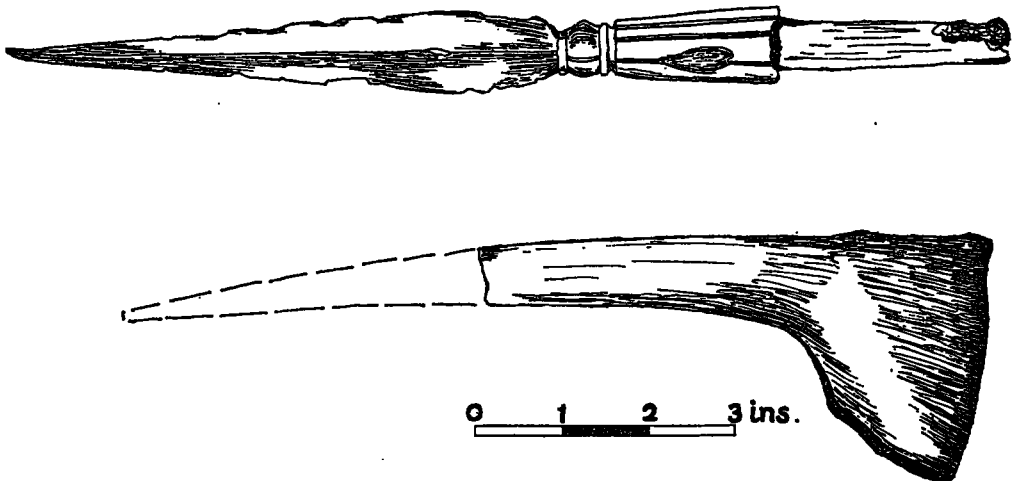


FIG. 4. Civil War pike and pick.

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### SITES III AND IV. THE RECTANGULAR ENCLOSURE ADJOINING BASING HOUSE

The aerial photograph reproduced in Plate IV shows a bank with ditch outside enclosing a rectangular area of about eight acres on the S.E. side of Basing House. (This bank and ditch envelops most of a paddock fronting on to Crown Lane and the N.E. side passes under the existing British Legion Hut). Where the S.W. side of the rectangle meets the outer ditch east of the Citadel, the latter turns sharply inwards and then turns through a right angle along the side of the New House to form the fourth side of the rectangle. This suggested that the rectangular enclosure was older than the outer ditch of the Citadel and that the latter ditch was deflected in this way to take advantage of an existing feature. It would therefore be of considerable interest to date the rectangular enclosure and for this purpose two sections were cut.

#### *General description and results (Sites III and IV).*

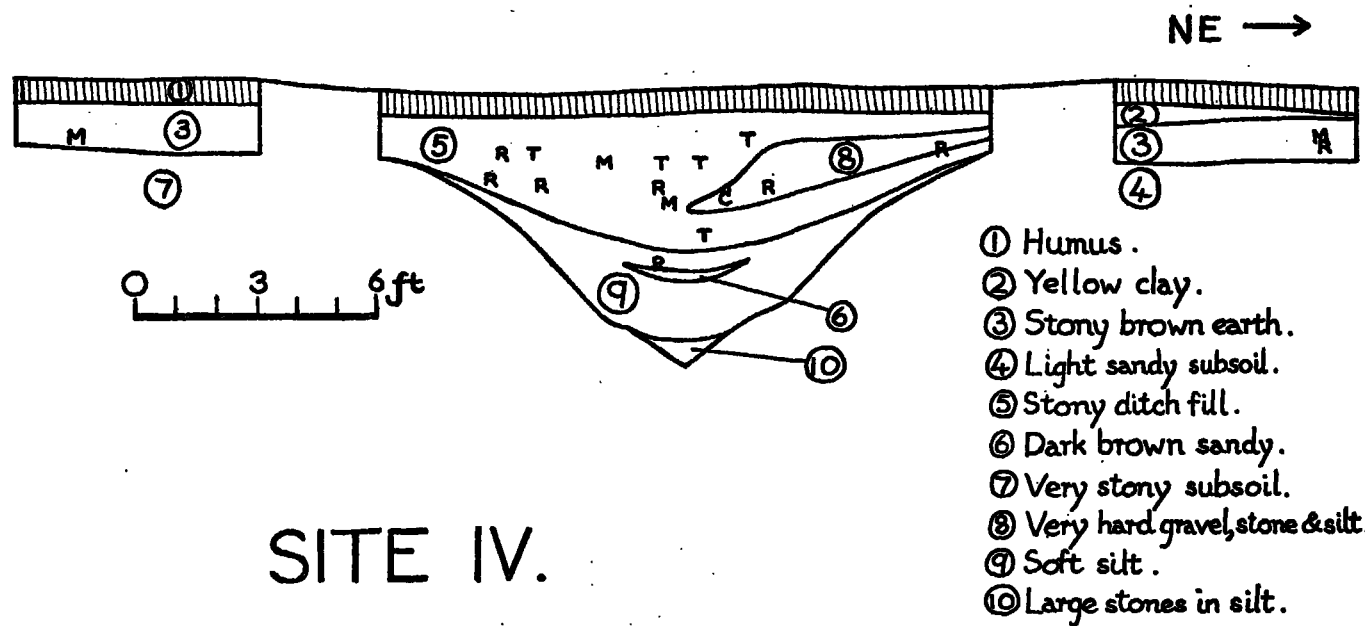
The first section (Site III) was taken across the N.E. side of the rectangle, between the paddock hedge and the canal. The bank is very clearly defined here but the ditch had been cut into by the canal and hence the section could only be taken through the bank and into the edge of the ditch. Later in the year, permission was obtained to dig in the clover field on the south and east sides of the paddock and a section (Site IV) was taken through the S.W. side of the rectangle about midway between the broad white track (this is the trace of a deep anti-tank ditch dug during the late war) shown on the aerial photograph and the boundary hedge of Basing House grounds.

At Site III the shape of the ditch could not be determined. Seven pieces of pottery were found, five under the bank which here was little more than one foot high, and two others two feet under the surface just inside the ditch. One piece of rim found under the bank is shown in Plate III (No. 2). The material is grey in colour and coarse in texture and contains glassy sand grains of up to one mm. diameter. The rim bears a typical thumb print and is medieval. It is this thumb print which has distorted the slight ridge on the inside of the rim shown in the plate. Four other pieces have much the same texture and colour and are probably of the same period. The two other pieces are of much finer texture. One of them, only 4 mm. thick with a grey interior and pinky brown surface, is probably Romano-British.

Four iron nails and two small pieces of iron plate were found but not identified.

At Site IV the bank was almost completely ploughed away but there was no difficulty in finding the ditch, which was some seven feet deep when excavated. The section is shown in Fig. 5. The subsoil on the N.E. side of the ditch, i.e. under the bank, was light and sandy down to a depth of at least four feet but on the outer side of the ditch was full of stones, i.e. the ditch at this point was cut through the very edge of a gravel deposit overlying the chalk and capping a slight hill.

The bottom three feet of the ditch were filled with soft silt which was completely sterile. In the upper half of the ditch and under the bank some 80 pieces of pottery, brick and tile were found, of which 17 plus one musket ball have been identified. Material of Romano-British or Iron Age, Medieval and Tudor date are marked R, M and T respectively on the section, while C denotes the musket ball which dates from the Civil War. The deepest buried of the pieces marked T was a piece of burnt brick identified as coming from the burnt-out gate house at the entrance to the Old House and hence dropped in the ditch after the Civil War. The same is probably true of the other Tudor artefacts.

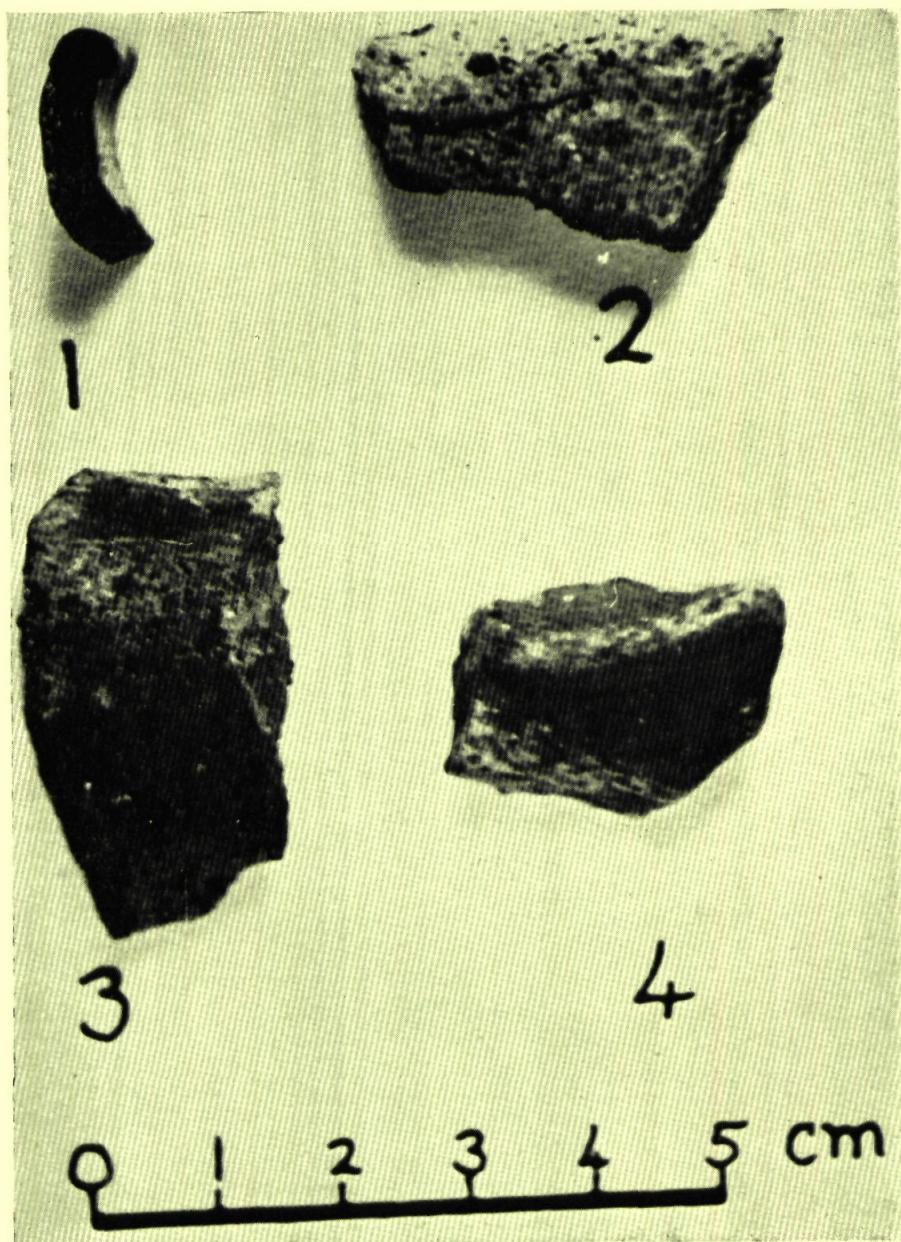


# SITE IV.

FIG. 5. Section of Site IV.



PLATE III.



4 pieces of rim.

PLATE IV.



Air photo looking south.

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Apart from one piece of flue tile and one piece of rim (Plate III, No. 1), the remainder of the R artefacts were identified by their texture. Of the artefacts identified as medieval, two were pieces of red tile with a dark yellow glaze and the remainder were of very open grey texture with pinky surfaces.

Apart from the brick, the remaining artefacts marked T on the section were tile similar to the material lying about in large quantities in the ruins of the House and hence almost certainly came from the destruction of the House.

Layer 8 consisted of a very hard mixture of gravel, stone and silt, which had undoubtedly formed part of the bank and had fallen or been pushed into the ditch some time after the Civil War.

### *Dating the bank and ditch*

At both sites III and IV one piece of medieval pottery was found under the bank. Hence this bank must have been formed, i.e. the ditch cut, some time after the Norman Conquest. The excavation produced no proof that it was cut much before the Civil War. However, the similarity of the pottery finds to those from Site II suggest that the two ditches were roughly contemporary. This suggests either that our bank and ditch were cut in the eleventh century when Basing Castle was built or in the fourteenth century when the deep defensive ditch round the citadel was recut.

During the Civil War the ditch was half silted up but part of the bank was still in position.

### *The purpose of the rectangular enclosure*

This bank and ditch could have served little useful part during the siege. D'Albier built an earthwork round his heavy battery in or near the present paddock and Cromwell one round his heavy battery to the south of the Citadel<sup>2</sup>. The aerial photograph obtained from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government was copied in greater contrast for reproduction as Plate IV and this showed up a number of features. A small circular earthwork inside the paddock and another south of the Citadel may be the Civil War gun sites. For our purposes, a more important feature shown up is an entrance in the S.E. side of our enclosure. An excavation near this entrance might have dated the enclosure more closely without revealing its purpose.

At the far eastern corner of the large clover field, at the junction of five roads, stood a gatehouse, probably built at the same time as the Tudor house. A recent road widening of Crown Lane revealed two ditches, very similar to our ditch at Site IV in size and shape and about 12 yards apart, running into the clover field a few yards from the gatehouse. However, the aerial photograph shows no trace of these ditches nor of the road from the gatehouse to Basing House. It is perhaps significant that the edge of the gatehouse is aligned on the entrance to the enclosure shown on the aerial photograph and noted above.

Lacking positive evidence, we can only speculate as to the purpose of the enclosure. It is of much the same size as those found by Beresford round medieval villages<sup>3</sup> and probably intended to keep animals from straying. Deer were kept in the Park (which stretched from Crown Lane to near the A30 London road) during Stuart times but by then the ditch by itself was too shallow to form an obstacle to them, although it might have served that purpose

2. Godwin, G. N. *The Civil War in Hampshire* (1904).

3. Beresford, M. W. *The Lost Villages of England*, p. 35.

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in Tudor times. A rectangular enclose at Bitton, Gloucester, very similar to ours was examined by Boon in 1952 and dated to about the 13th century.<sup>4</sup>

To determine the relative dating of the rectangular enclosure, the outer bank and ditch south of the Citadel and the main defensive ditch of the Citadel, one would have to excavate at their junction, a formidable task in an area much disturbed during the Civil War. The main purpose of our work has been achieved in that we have shown that neither of the two features excavated had a pre-Norman origin. Apart from that, our excavation has added one more to the long list of medieval enclosures of unknown purpose.<sup>5</sup>

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank the Honourable P. C. Orde Powlett for permission to dig at Sites II and III, and Lord Camrose and Mr. S. H. Burton for permission to dig Site IV. They also wish to thank the staffs of Reading and Basingstoke Museums for help and advice and members of the Aldermaston Archaeological Society who carried out the work. Fig. 1 is reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey and Plate IV by permission of the Air Ministry.

The small finds from the excavations may be examined by arrangement with the owner : the Hon. P. C. Orde Powlett at Basing House, Old Basing, Hants.

"Note added in proof. Later work near Site II has revealed a Belgic occupation, earlier than and distinct from that of the Romano-British period."

4. Boon, G. C. Excavations in the earthwork at Bitton, Glos. Trans. Bristol and Glos. Arch. Soc. LXXII, 45, 1954.

5. Fowler, P. J. A rectangular earthwork at Tisbury, Wilts. Antiquity XXXVII, 290, 1963.