

Chapter 4: The Aubreys

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SITE LOCATION

This was a limited excavation confined largely to a very narrow strip of land immediately west of the current M1, centred on NGR TL 084 118 (see Fig. 1.2). It lay at the eastern edge of the Iron Age hillfort at its lowest point (c 99m aOD) in the shallow dip sloping down north-eastwards towards the upper Ver valley at Redbourn. The underlying geology comprised Upper Chalk (see Fig. 1.3).

SITE LAYOUT AND SUMMARY (Fig. 4.1)

The excavation area comprised a narrow, irregular strip immediately to the east of the hillfort falling into two parts. The area had a combined length of 429m (roughly north-south) and a maximum width of 71m at its northern end, and a maximum width of 31m at its southern end. Within this excavation area the hillfort ditch was revealed in two places; ditch 261 ran across the southern part of the excavation area on a NE-SW alignment, while ditch 27 ran across the central part of the excavation area from SE-NW. To the south-east of ditch 261 was a scattered group of sub-circular and irregular pits (group 217). Beyond these, to the south-east, was a NE-SW-aligned gully (236/238) and two more pits (230 and 252). Two pits and a ditch terminal (13, 211 and 216), all undated, were located in the central part of the site. To the north of ditch 27 was a substantial pit or ditch (42/85) running beyond the western limit of excavation. This feature may have been a ditch terminal, representing part of an outer ditch running outside the known hillfort ditch. To the north of ditch 42/85 was a dense cluster of shallow gullies, hollows and possible postholes, and to the north of these a NW-SE-aligned gully (6/20), measuring 30m in length and running beyond the eastern baulk.

STRATIGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The Hillfort Ditch 27/261

Ditch 27 (Figs 4.2-3)

The principal hillfort ditch (27/261), the eastern-most part of which lay beneath the existing M1 embankment, was examined at two points. In the northern part of the excavation area a 40m length of the ditch was revealed (27), although for much of

this distance only the inner, western edge was seen, while in the southern part of the excavation area the ditch (261) was traced for a distance of 70m. One main section was cut through each of these two parts. The section examined in the northern part of the excavation area was some 8m wide and 2.7m deep. The profile was variable, being broad with gently sloping sides in the upper part, and with a step on the inner (west) side, while the lowest part was a more steeply sided cut 1.6m across and 0.8m deep, with a flat-bottomed V-shaped profile. There was no suggestion, however, that the lower part of the ditch represented a separate phase of hillfort construction. The basal fill (35) was of dark brownish-grey silty clay with very frequent flint lumps. This was overlain, in the upper part of the steep-sided ditch bottom and in the lower part of the wider profile, by a more gradually accumulated layer (34), up to 0.66m thick, of clayey silt with few flint inclusions. A shallow deposit (32) above this contained much flint and gravel and may represent a short-term infill episode, but it was of even thickness across the ditch and therefore did not derive solely from the rampart to the west. Subsequent fills reflect further gradual infill of the ditch. At the top of the sequence, fill 28, up to 3.8m across and 1.1m deep, is likely to have been the fill of a shallow sloping-sided and round-bottomed recut of the ditch, adjacent to the rampart. This appears to have been dug after the ditch had completely infilled and its date is unknown.

Ditch 261 (Figs 4.3-4)

The section of the ditch examined in the southern part of the excavation area was more truncated, and survived as a feature c 5.6m wide and 2.1m deep. The profile was more regular than that seen to the north and was essentially a shallow V shape with the basal section slightly more steep sided. The character of the fills in this section was broadly similar to that seen further north, although there were numerous variations of detail. The secondary fill (263) contained much more flint than fill 34 (see above), and the counterpart of the latter may have been fill 264, which overlay fill 263. Again, there was no suggestion of distinctly differential fill or collapse from the rampart side of the ditch. Equally, however, there was no evidence for the probable late recut seen in the section cut across ditch 27 (see

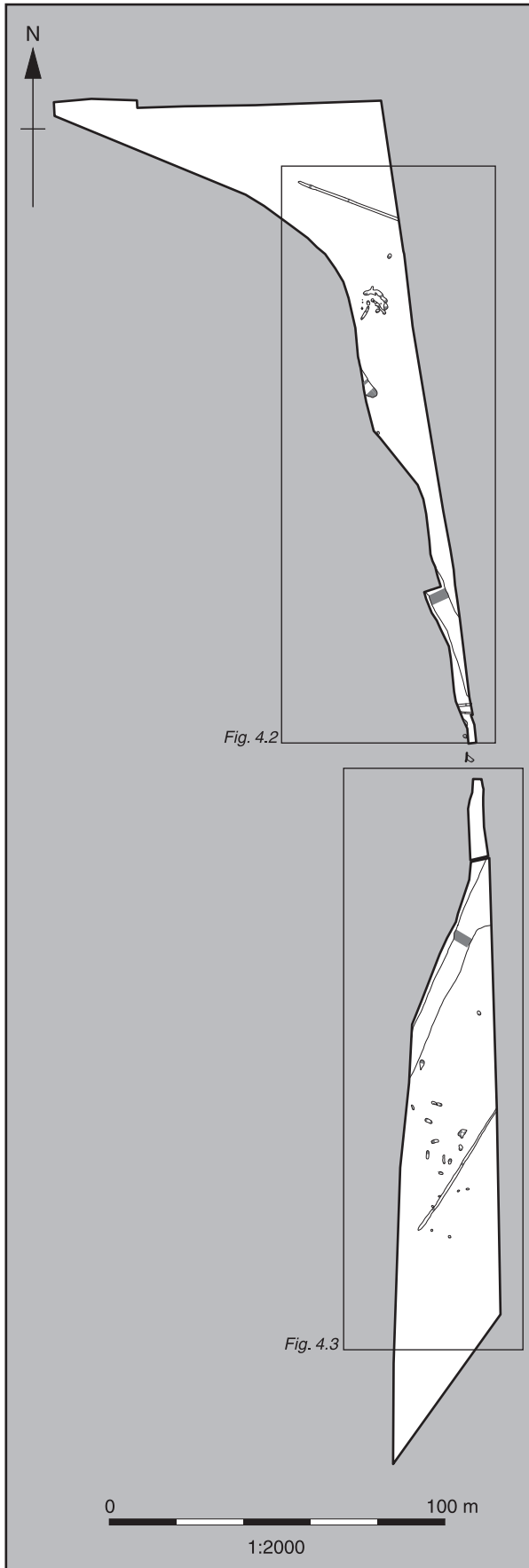


Fig. 4.1 The Aubreys, plan of all features

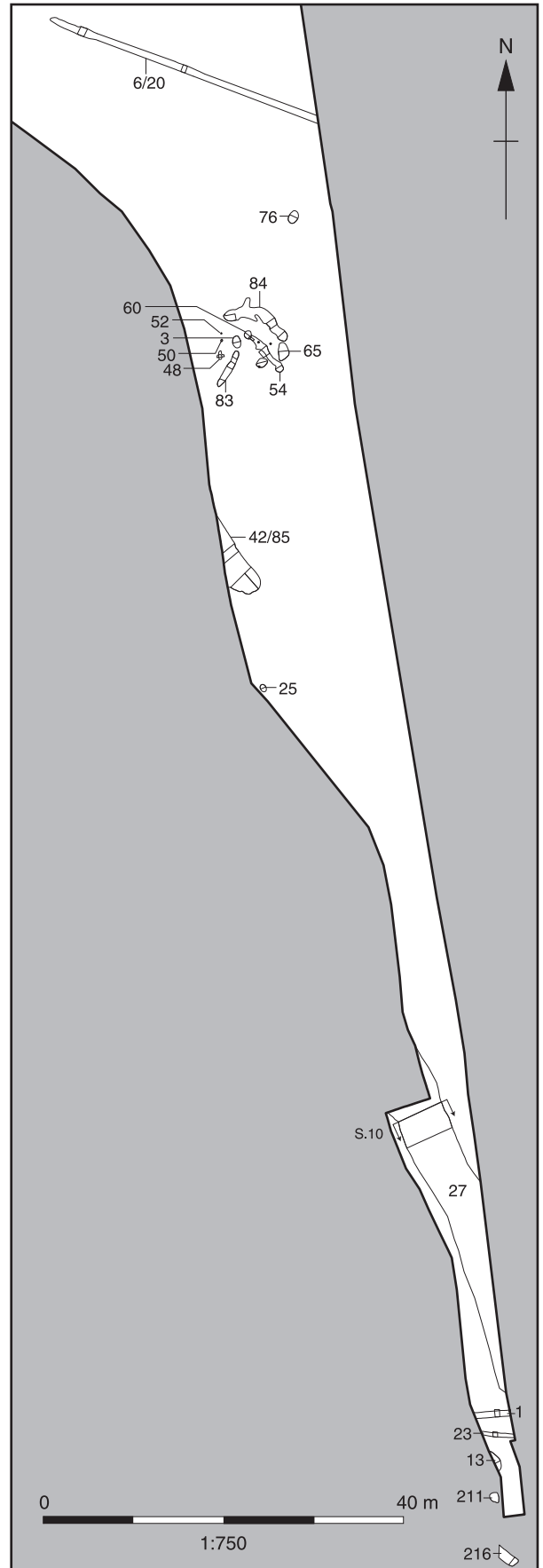


Fig. 4.2 The Aubreys, detail plan of the hillfort ditch and northern feature group

above). The only artefacts recovered from either section were a few struck flint fragments; no pottery or other Iron Age material of any kind was found.

Ditch 42/85 (Fig. 4.2)

Some 55m north of the point where ditch 27 disappeared into the western site baulk a substantial feature (42/85) projected from the same baulk at an oblique angle. The minimum surviving length of this feature was *c* 9.5m. Towards the tip of the terminal the feature was 3m wide and only 0.65m deep, and cut a possible tree-throw hole which lay on its north-eastern side. Some 2.3m further north the ditch was up to 0.9m deep but only a 2.1m width survived within the excavated area; the full original width and depth of the ditch are therefore unknown. Two small pottery sherds came from the main fill (86) of the more northerly intervention in this feature; one was possibly late Iron Age in date and the second, an abraded fine oxidised fragment, may have been Roman.

It is possible that feature 42/85 was simply a large pit, but the similarity of its orientation to that of the outer hillfort ditch is striking. The feature has

the character of a ditch terminal and may therefore represent a further ditch, presumably of limited extent, running parallel to and outside the line of the main 'outer' ditch (27). It is just possible that feature 42/85 related to the augmentation of the defences in the vicinity of an entrance, an idea that could be supported by the geophysical survey of the site which appears to show a break in the line of the outer rampart, and possibly even in the associated ditch, at about this point (Stratascan 1995, fig. 33). The significance of such a break would be uncertain as there is no indication of a corresponding break in the inner rampart at this point. Apparent differences in character (of depth and main fills) between ditches 27 and 42/85, might suggest that the latter was not contemporary with the main phase of the 'hillfort', but variations in ditch character might be expected in the vicinity of an opening. Given this, the presence of an opening in the outer rampart and ditch remains speculative.

Gully, hollow and posthole group (Fig. 4.2)

North of ditch 42/85 a complex cluster of features, consisting of shallow gullies, hollows and possible

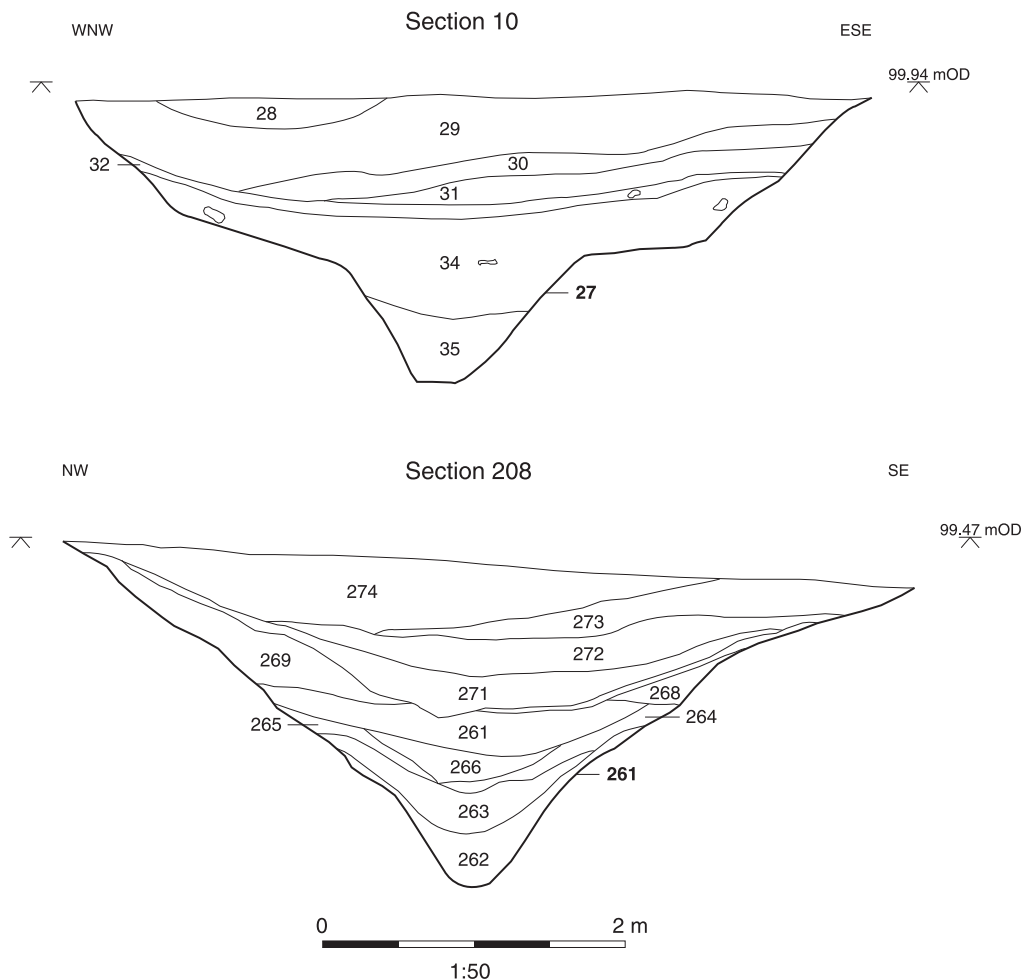


Fig. 4.3 The Aubreys, sections through the hillfort ditch and pit groups

postholes, occupied an area a little less than 10 x 10m. An irregular gully (group 54) up to c 5.9m long, 0.8m wide and 0.28m deep (but typically more shallow) was considered to be the primary feature, but a further gully (group 83), 4.5m long and up to 0.8m wide, lay roughly at right-angles to it and may have been related. North-east of 54 was a similar, larger gully (group 84) up to 1.2m wide and 0.35m deep, defining the north-eastern limit of this group of features. Other features in the area were three irregular pits, at least one of which was interpreted as a tree-throw hole, and six possible postholes, of which three (48, 50 and 52) formed a south-north line at the western edge of the feature complex. Just east of these, and between the north-west and north-east terminals of gullies 83 and 54 respectively was an oval-shaped hearth (3), measuring 1.2 x 1 x 0.06m, with a fire-reddened base and charcoal staining in the fill, which also contained two flint flakes. Flints were also recovered from gully 54 and pit 65 in this complex (two and four pieces respectively), but these were not closely datable.

Ditch/gully 6/20 (Fig. 4.2)

The only significant feature north of this complex was a NW-SE-aligned ditch/gully (6/20) up to c 0.75m wide and 0.38m deep, which was traced for some 30m from the east edge of the site. Beyond this point the feature faded out and no clearly defined terminus was seen.

Pits 13 and 211, and ditch terminus 216 (Fig. 4.2)

In the central area of the site three features, pits 13 and 211, and a possible ditch terminus (216) on a NW-SE alignment, were located west of the line of the outer ditch of the hillfort. None of these features were dated. Two east-west-aligned gullies (1 and 23) were also located in the same area, just north of pit 13. Of these, the former certainly and the latter probably cut the post-medieval subsoil, so a fairly recent date is likely, although they contained no finds.

Pit group 217 (Fig. 4.4)

A group of pits was located in the southern part of the site. Pits 246 and 244 were relatively isolated, but to the south pits 205, 258, 256, 217, 219, 226, 254, 209, 241, 222, 243 and 248 formed a reasonably coherent group. These pits varied in depth from 0.12-0.64m (although ten features had depths in a range of 0.18-0.52m) and all had gently rounded profiles. While some were irregular in plan, with 258 and 219, and perhaps 209 and 241, possibly representing tree-throw holes, a notable characteristic of a number of these pits was their oval shape. The functional significance of this, if any, is uncertain, and most had only a single silty clay fill. Only one feature (218) produced pottery; eight sherds of coarsely flint-tempered material, perhaps of middle Bronze Age date.

Pits 250 and 252, and ditch 236/238 (Fig. 4.4)

Two further pits (250 and 252) lay immediately south of the main cluster. They were separated from it by a NE-SW-aligned ditch (236/238), traced for a minimum distance of some 40m. This ditch was up

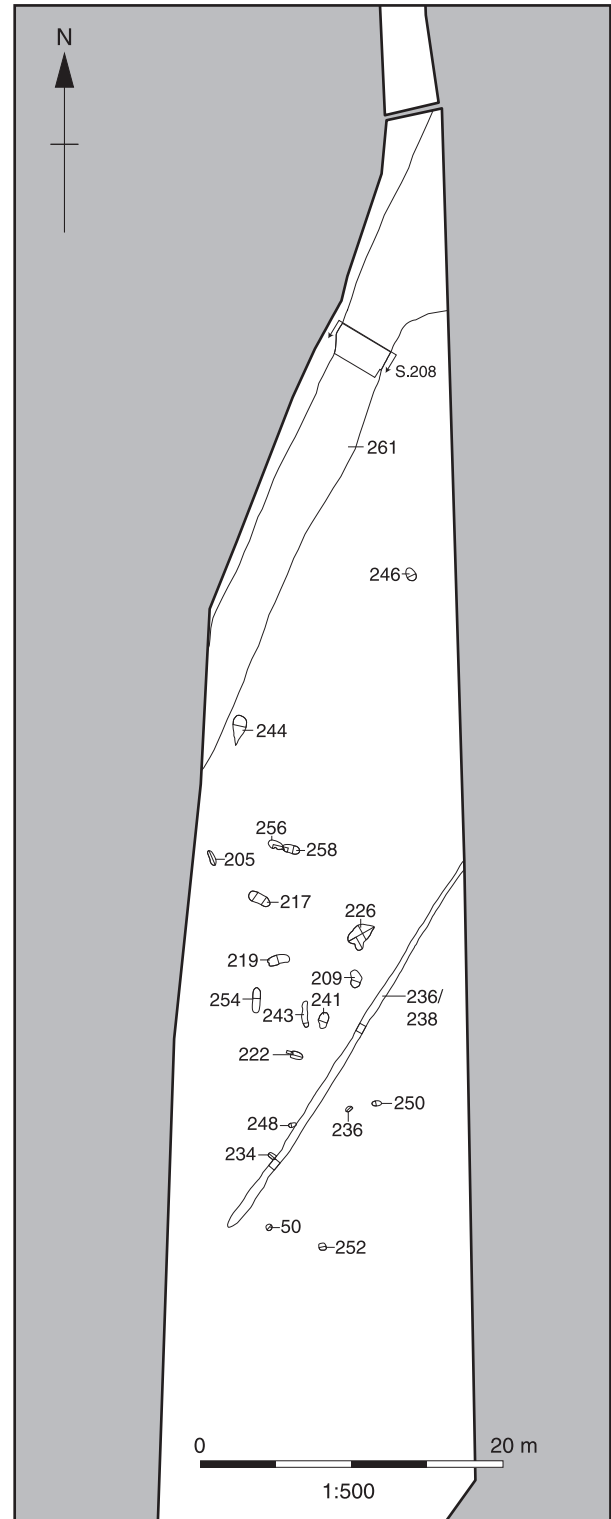


Fig. 4.4 The Aubreys, detail plan of the hillfort ditch and southern pit group

to 0.86m wide and 0.3m deep, with moderately sloping sides and a rounded base and had a single sterile clayey silt fill.

PHASING

The almost total lack of finds and stratigraphic relationships makes interpretation of many of the features problematic. The outer ditch of the hillfort can be assigned to the Iron Age by association, but not on any other criteria, while the possible additional ditch terminal in the northern part of the site may have been filling in the Roman period, but the evidence is exiguous. The three features (pits 13 and 211, and ditch terminus 216) in the central part of the site were located west of the line of the outer hillfort ditch. Although it is possible that they lay on the inner lip of this ditch, it is more likely that the area in which they were located was occupied by the associated rampart. While it is possible that these features post-dated the removal of the rampart at this point, as is almost certainly the case with adjacent east-west-aligned gullies 1 and 23, their character does not support this suggestion. On balance, therefore, they are more likely to predate the hillfort.

This may have implications for the other groups of essentially undated features. Interpretation of the northern cluster of gullies, pits and postholes is very uncertain. The function of the probable hearth (3) within this group is reasonably certain, and the

close spacing of the other features suggests that they were perhaps contemporaneous, but beyond this there is no certainty. Whether the features can be seen as forming irregular structures of two phases is very unclear. As recorded they do not readily permit any obvious reconstruction. A later prehistoric (but pre-hillfort) date might be suggested by a very small number of flint fragments from the hearth and two of the associated features, but this material could be residual and was not chronologically diagnostic.

The group of pits at the southern end of the site is similarly problematic. However, if feature 217 is dated by the associated pottery to the middle Bronze Age this may suggest a date for the other pits in its vicinity, and perhaps support the suggestion that occasional flints of generic late Neolithic-Bronze Age character from other features outside the rampart were not residual in the contexts in which they occurred.

Apart from the hillfort ditch, the only significant linear features were the ones found at the north and south margins of the excavated area. Their alignments are very roughly at right-angles to each other and also seem to reflect broadly the alignment of the outer ditch of the hillfort. On this basis it is likely, though not demonstrable, that they post-date the hillfort. For example, although speculative, such ditches could have formed part of a field system of late Iron Age or Roman date.

