

## To Boldly Go...

### A newly discovered earthwork at Mackerye End

Bob Zeepvat

*In December 1998 a survey was undertaken by Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd of hitherto unrecorded earthworks in Marshallsheath Wood, Mackerye End (NGR TL 161 156). The survey was commissioned out of interest by the landowner, Andrew Reid, and carried out by the writer, assisted by Justin Neal and Chris Clack.*

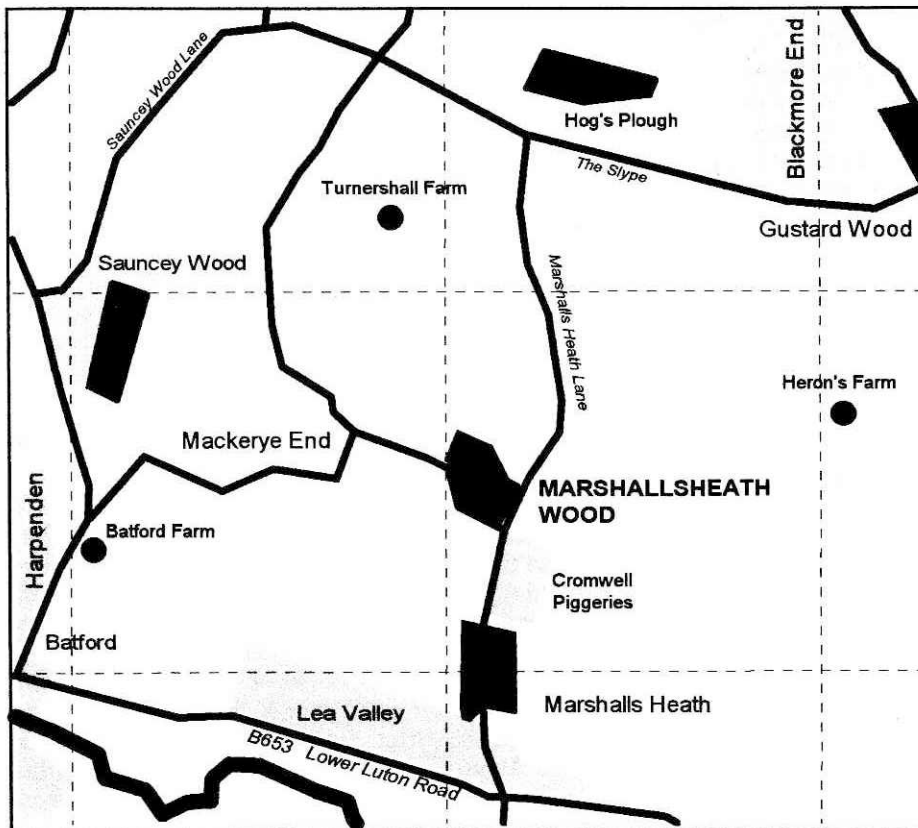


Figure 1: Site location

## Hertfordshire's Past 50

---

Marshallsheath Wood (Fig. 1) is located about 3km ENE of the centre of Harpenden, 600m east of the hamlet of Mackerye End. The wood, which covers some 3.6 hectares, is on the west side of a dry valley running north from the river Lea at Leasey Bridge. The wood is roughly rectangular, rising from 105m OD at its east end to about 116m OD at its west end. Its south side is bordered by the lane from Marshalls Heath to Mackerye End, and the east end by Marshalls Heath Lane. To the north and west of the wood is a single large arable field. The underlying geology consists of heavy clay soils.

Marshallsheath Wood is a deciduous woodland, designated as a *Mature Ancient Woodland* by Herts County Council. The interior of the wood is largely free from dense undergrowth, small areas of elder and holly offering the only obstacles to the survey. The wood is not subject to any consistent management at present: its principal use - horseriding - is shown by the jumps placed along the path leading through it.

The aims of the study were to produce an accurate drawn and photographic record of the earthworks, to place the site within its broad archaeological and historical context, and to attempt to understand its function and date. For the survey, a series of base lines was established close to the earthwork using a dumpy level, and offset measurements were taken using surveying tapes. Once the basic form of the earthwork had been established on plan, details were plotted in, and notes were made where appropriate. Profiles across the earthwork were taken where conditions permitted, using a level, staff and measuring tape, and these were tied in to the base lines. The earthwork was systematically photographed in black-&-white and colour, using both metric and human scales. In order to place the site in context, a document-based study was carried out for the site and the surrounding area extending up to a 1km radius.

### The Site in Its Context

Examination of the Hertfordshire Sites and Monuments Record revealed few known archaeological sites within the immediate vicinity of Marshallsheath Wood. At Heron's Farm, about 900m east of the wood, the line of a metalled road, possibly Roman, has been observed at two locations. At Turnershall Farm, cropmarks of uncertain date have been noted. About 600m south-west of the wood, cropmarks indicating a trackway and deserted settlement site of medieval or post-medieval date have been identified. The mansion at Mackerye End, 400m west of the wood, is the probable site of Mackeryes Manor, held in 1307 by William Makery, and which was the dwelling of John Bostock, abbot of St Albans, in the late 15th century. The house was rebuilt in 1665 by Thomas Hunsden, and further altered in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The house is a Grade I listed building: its gardens may also be of some antiquity.

Moving further afield, the area around Wheathampstead and Harpenden appears to have been of some importance in the late Iron Age and Roman periods.

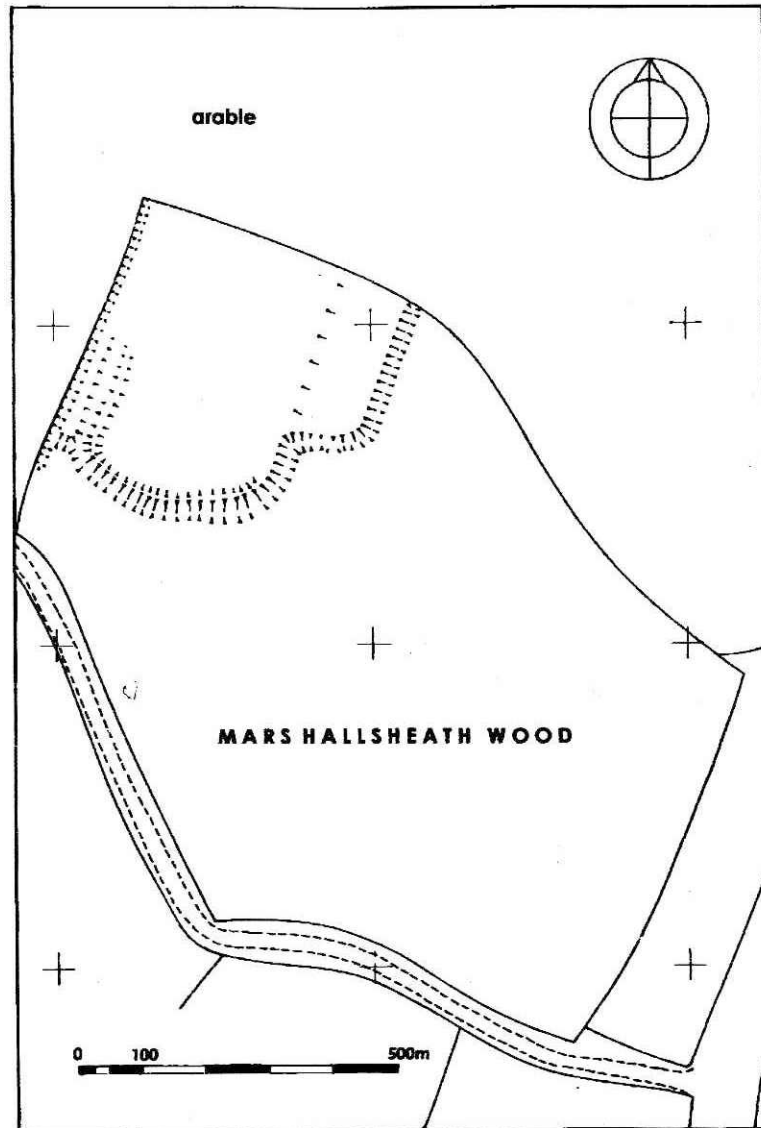


Figure 2: Location of earthwork in wood

## Hertfordshire's Past 50

---

To the south-east of Wheathampstead is the site of a substantial late Iron Age defended settlement or *oppidum*, identified by some as the principal Catuvellaunian stronghold attacked by Caesar in 54BC (Niblett 1995, 17). The Roman Watling Street (now the A5183) passes though Redbourn, 6km to the south-west, and the Roman road from Verulamium to Welwyn passes to the southeast of Wheathampstead, nowadays followed more or less by Coleman Green Lane. Late Iron Age barrows are known in the Harpenden area, and a Roman burial ground is recorded at Rothamsted, 4.5km south-west of the wood.

Marshallsheath Wood falls within the manor of Wheathampstead, which was in existence before the Norman Conquest, and was granted by Edward the Confessor to the abbot and convent of Westminster under a charter dated 28th December 1085 (Page 1914, 297; Dugdale 1917). Page notes (*ibid*, 298) that during the medieval period much of the manor was probably woodland, revealed in the Domesday Survey by the comparatively small proportion of the area of the manor shown to be taxable. Before the beginning of the 13th century the abbot of Westminster appears to have parcelled out what was probably forest waste into freehold tenements, each containing a carucate of land (120 acres or 48.6 hectares). The wood remained in the possession of the Abbey at least until the mid 19th century, when it is listed as such in the Wheathampstead Tithe Award of 1847.

The wood appears to be of some antiquity. The earliest recorded mention (Marshalswode) dates from 1390 (Gover et al 1970, 58). The name, along with that of Marshalls Heath, appears to derive from the le Mareschal family, first mentioned in documents of the 13th century (*ibid*).

The earliest cartographic depiction of the wood appears in Dury and Andrews' 1766 map of Hertfordshire. Allowing for the fact that this map tends towards the pictorial rather than being an accurate survey of the county, its appearance on this map tallies closely with the location and shape of the wood today. Examination of more recent maps, such as the Wheathampstead Tithe Map (1847) and the First and Second Editions of the 25" Ordnance Survey map (1881 & 1898 respectively) show that the wood has remained unchanged in size and shape for at least the last 230 years.

### The Earthwork

The earthwork is located at the northernmost end of the wood (Fig. 2), and covers about 0.9 hectares. In essence it consists of a continuous single ditch up to 5m wide and 0.8m deep, enclosing an irregular but roughly rectilinear area of more or less level ground. Four typical profiles, surveyed at intervals along the earthwork, are located on Fig. 3, and shown in Fig. 4. Along the southern and eastern sides of the earthwork traces of an upcast mound survive on the inside edge of the ditch, up to c.0.3m higher than the general level of the interior.

The western arm of the earthwork, some 40m in length, is perhaps the worst preserved section. It follows a NNE-SSW alignment, parallel to and about 10m from

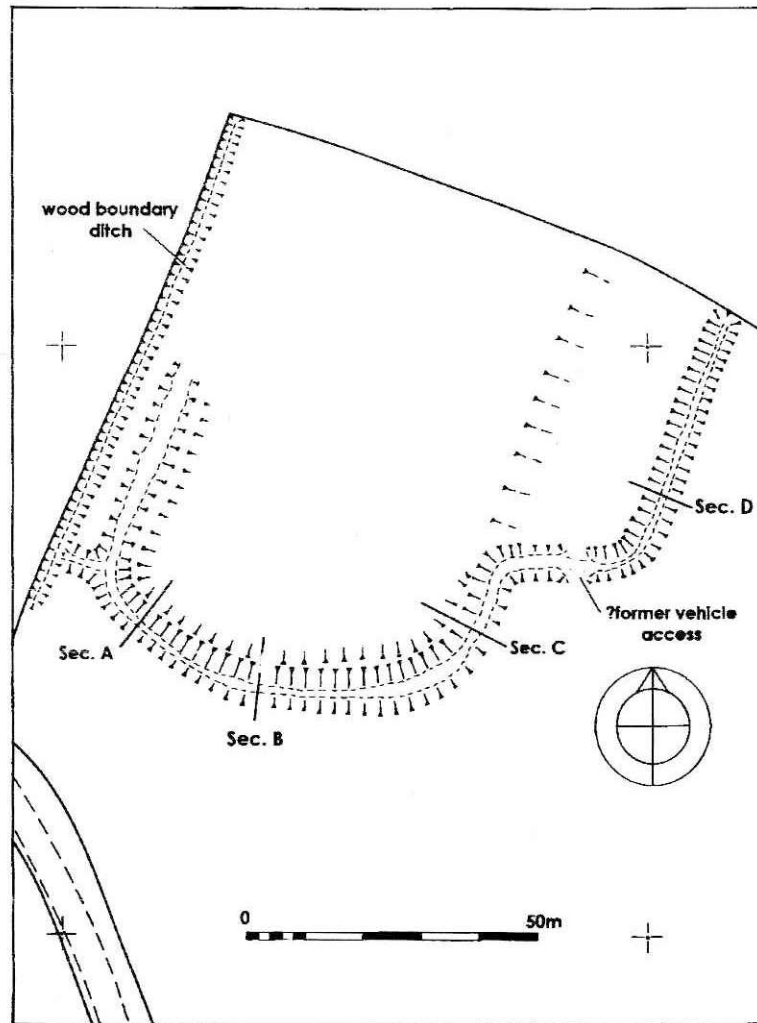


Figure 3: Plan of earthwork, showing location of profiles

the present west boundary of the wood, petering out at its northern end. The tree cover and undergrowth on this section was too dense to permit recording of its profile, which is at its shallowest along this section. From the south end of this arm, just before the point where the ditch swings to the south-east, a second arm branches off to the north-west, extending as far as the boundary ditch marking the west side

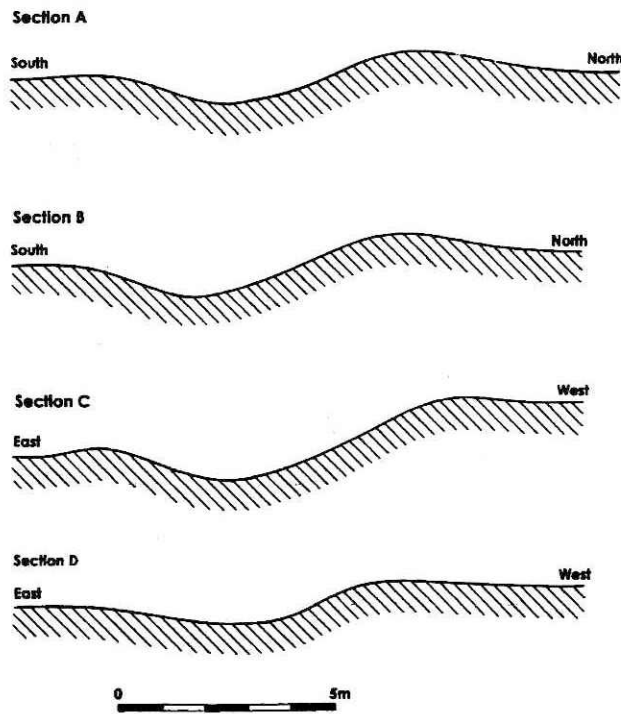


Figure 4: Earthwork profiles, A-D

of the wood. The relationship of this second arm to the main earthwork ditch and the field boundary ditch could not be determined.

From a point about 15m north-east of the entrance to the wood, the earthwork swings sharply to the south-east, continuing to curve eastwards and then north-eastwards over the next 90m.

This is the most accessible part of the earthwork, and the best preserved. The upcast mound is clearly visible along this section: in places, it appears disturbed by animal burrows, probably rabbit warrens, some of which appear to be at least partly artificial.

At the end of the section described above, the ditch turns sharply eastwards for about 20m, then NNE for about 45m, ending at the northern boundary of the wood. This section of the ditch is shallower and narrower than the rest of the earthwork, and does not appear to have any upcast bank. At the point where it meets the northern boundary of the wood, the ditch appears to be truncated by the low bank marking the boundary, evidently formed by repeated ploughing of the adjacent arable field.

### Discussion

The earthwork in Marshallsheath Wood is of some antiquity. From its relationship to the present boundaries of the wood, it evidently predates them. As the wood was evidently well established by the 14th century, this suggests that the earthwork is at least two hundred years or so older, to have allowed sufficient time for the wood to become established over it.

Although it is evidently only a partial survival of a larger earthwork, some pointers as to the possible date and nature of the monument can be gained from its form. The ditch comprising the earthwork encloses a roundish rather than squarish area, and is at present about five metres across, with an upcast bank on its inner edge. The rounded shape and upcast bank could be taken to suggest a late prehistoric (Iron Age) date, rather than medieval or Roman.

The topographic location of the earthwork is also significant. It stands on high ground on the north side of the Lea valley, overlooking a dry valley running northwards from the river. Although not at the highest point locally, the site stands on a 'crested' location where the land, sloping gently down from Mackerye End, falls away more steeply to the dry valley. Elsewhere in Hertfordshire, 'crested' sites have been shown to be favoured locations for prehistoric occupation (McDonald 1995).

It is interesting to note that the site is not recorded in the SMR, and appears to have escaped notice until now. This can be largely accounted for by its location in a private wood, concealing it from casual visitors and from detection by aerial photography. It is perhaps more worrying that no trace has been recorded of the earthwork's probable continuation into the arable field to the north and west of the wood, either by chance finds or by aerial photography, though the heavy soils in this area may well have masked the appearance of cropmarks.

### **Acknowledgements**

The writer is grateful to the owner, Andrew Reid, for commissioning and funding this survey, and for providing the opportunity for adding this hitherto unknown site to the archaeological record for Hertfordshire. Thanks are also due to the County Archaeology Office for providing the SMR data, and to staff of the County Record Office and Local Studies Library for their assistance.

### **References**

- Dugdale, W. 1817 *Monasticum Anglicanum. A History of the Abbeys and other monasteries, hospitals, Friaries, and cathedral and Collegiate Churches with their dependencies in England and Wales.* (London) 288-330.
- Gover, J.E.B, Mawer, A. and Stenton, F.M. 1970 *The Place Names of Hertfordshire.* English Place-Name Society vol. 15. CUP (Cambridge).
- McDonald, T. 1995 *The A41 Project,* Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust, in Holgate, R. (ed.) 1995 *Chiltern Archaeology, Recent Work: A Handbook for the Next Decade.* The Book Castle (Dunstable), 120-123.
- Niblett, R. 1995 *Roman Hertfordshire.* Dovecote Press (Wimborne).
- Page, W. (ed.) 1914 *The Victoria History of the County of Hertfordshire,* vol. 2, 2 15-230 (London).