

AMPRESS CAMP, LYMINGTON: A LATE ROMAN, BRITISH OR JUTISH RIVERSIDE DEFENCE?

By ANDREW B POWELL
with illustrations by KENNETH LYMER

ABSTRACT

A radiocarbon date of cal AD 410–620 obtained from near the base of the substantial ditch defining Ampress Camp, suggests that this riverside enclosure to the north of Lymington, which lay immediately east of the Iron Age hillfort of Buckland Rings, may be sub-Roman in date, and possibly associated with the establishment and/or defence of the Jutish province in southern Hampshire.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017 Wessex Archaeology undertook a strip, map and sample excavation and watching brief on land at Ampress Lane, Lymington, prior to the site's development (The New Forest District Council Planning Application No: 15/10357). Two adjacent areas were excavated, only the northern of which, covering 300m² centred on NGR 432110 96960, contained any significant archaeology (Fig. 1). The site, which lies within the Ampress Business Park on the northern edge of the town, 80m southwest of Lymington River, was located on the southern boundary of a substantial earthwork known as Ampress Camp which has been variously suggested to be of Iron Age, 'Anglo-Saxon' or medieval date (Close-Brooks 2000; Williams-Freeman 1915; Hawkes 1936). A section through an enclosure ditch excavated in 2001 to the immediate west failed to produce any reliable dating evidence (Taylor 2001), and the ditch's line was traced slightly further west during a watching brief in 2011 (Wessex Archaeology 2011). If Iron Age, Ampress Camp would have been sited only 0.5km east of the Iron Age hillfort of Buckland Rings, a scheduled monument (List entry no. 1008706).

The excavation site lies at approximately 2.5m OD. The underlying geology is mapped as Beckton Sand Formation and Chama Sand Formation, overlain to the immediate east by alluvium along the valley floor (British Geological Survey online viewer). Lymington River flows into the Solent 4km to the south.

To the north of the site a local watercourse, Passford Brook, flows east into the river, joining it at the highest point to which ordinary tides flow. At this point there is also the first 'hard' up from the sea which Hawkes described as a natural 'land-fall' (1936, 126). The last open stretch of Passford Water is known as Ampress Hole, and appeared to Hawkes to have been enlarged and straightened to form a dock (*ibid.* 127) (Fig. 1). In addition, an 18th-century drawing of the site (Fig. 2) shows a pronounced inlet on the Lymington River's western bank, about halfway along the enclosure's eastern side, labelled as *Ambrose Dock* (Wright 1744, fig. 3). This map also shows water draining into the river from *St John's Well* near the southeast corner of the enclosure. A sunken lane runs a short distance along the line of its southern inner ditch (Close Brooks 2000, 7).

EXCAVATION RESULTS

A length of broad ditch, exposed for 30m on its northern side and 9m on its south side, aligned ENE–WSW, was revealed following the stripping of the site (Fig. 1). A 3.8m-wide sondage across the ditch was excavated by machine, with 0.9m-wide steps on either side to depths of 1.1m, and a 1.8m-wide slot in the centre excavated to the base. The ditch (1003) was 9m wide and 2.4m deep, with a moderately steep and straight northern (inner)

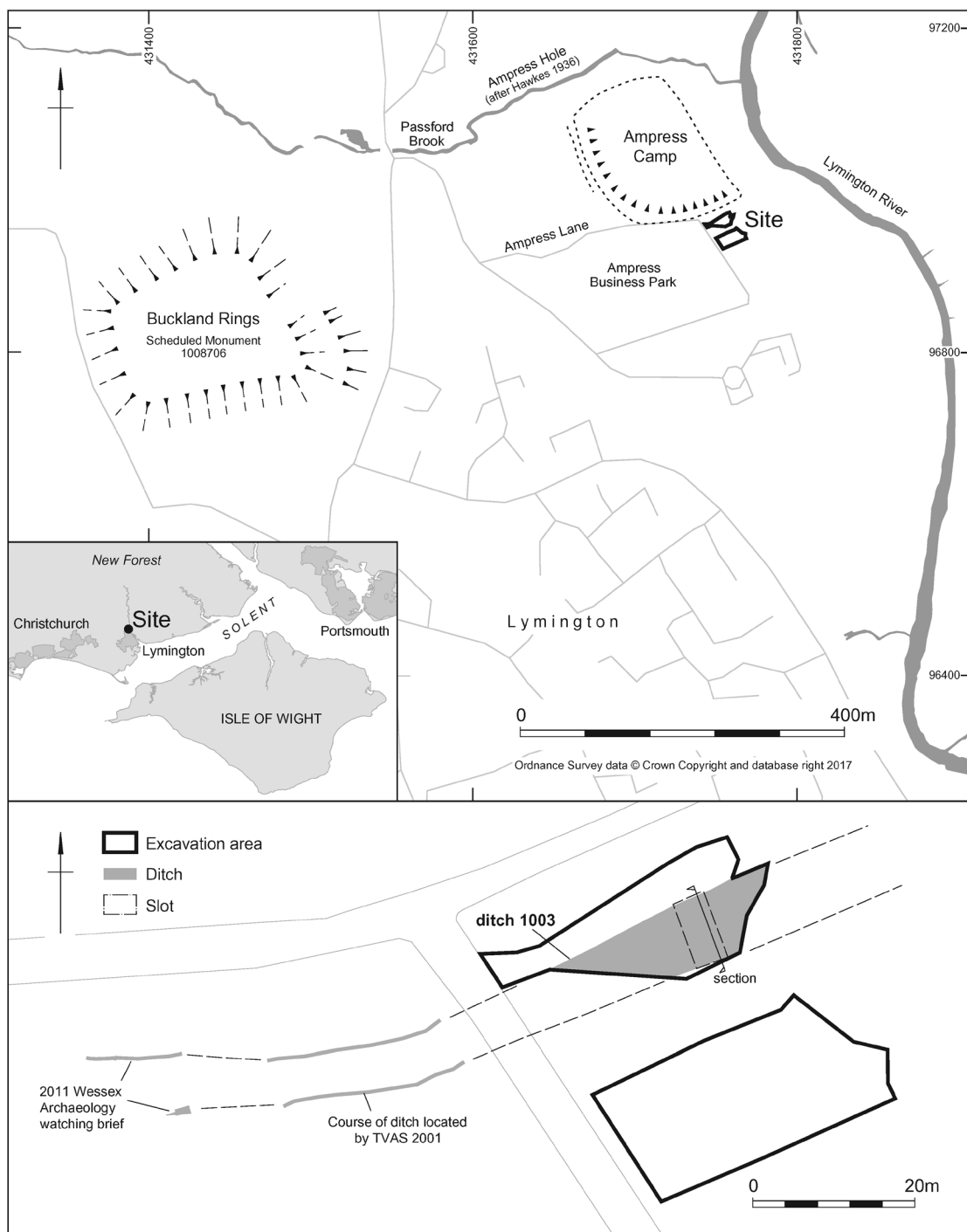


Fig. 1 Site location and excavation area

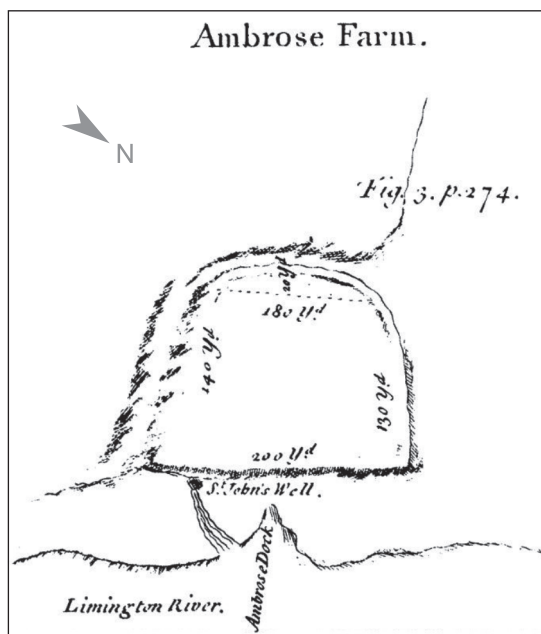


Fig. 2 Thomas Wright's 1744 drawing of Ampress Camp (reproduced with permission from Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society)

side, a slightly convex and steeper southern side, and a concave base; the ditch was shallow where eroded at its upper edges (Figs 3 and 4). A sequence of seven fills was recorded in the stepped west-facing section. No finds were recovered from the ditch.

The primary fill (1004) comprised blue/grey gravel and sand eroded from the sides of the ditch. It was as little as 0.1m thick at the lowest point of the base but was up to 0.3m thick where it extended up the ditch sides to a height of 1.2m above the base. It was overlain by a layer of dark brown, organic, peaty silty loam (1005) 0.1–0.2m thick, containing fragments of charcoal and waterlogged wood.

A single radiocarbon date (UBA-32637) was obtained on a piece of charred roundwood from layer 1005. Given that the sample is short-lived, its age is likely to be close to that of the deposit from which was recovered. When calibrated, UBA-32637 (1540±44 cal BP) has a range of 410–620 cal AD at 95% confidence, suggesting that the ditch was constructed at some point either during or just before the

5th or 6th century AD. This broad range of over 200 years is a function of the plateau in the corresponding segment of the radiocarbon calibration curve, but a very late Romano-British or immediate post-Roman origin for the ditch is a distinct possibility.

Layer 1005 was overlain by a similar, but darker and slightly sandier deposit (1006) up to 0.5m thick in the centre of the ditch. This was overlain by light brown gravelly deposits (1007 and 1008), up to 0.4m thick, which extended midway up either side but did not meet in the centre of the ditch. It is possible that they were separate deposits deriving from both sides of the ditch, but their similarities in character and profile suggest that they were part of a single deposit truncated in the centre by a later recutting of the ditch (1011), of unknown date.

Two further deposits filled the rest of the ditch (or the whole of its recut). The lower (1009) was a light brown sandy gravelly loam up to 0.6m thick, and the upper a 1m-thick layer of poorly sorted gravels interpreted as a deliberate backfill of possible 19th-century date.

Three bulk soil samples, each of 20 litres, were taken from layers 1005, 1006 and 1009 for the recovery of environmental remains, but provided little information. Both mature and roundwood charcoal was present in the samples, in abundance in fills 1005 and 1006 of the original cut, but there was no functional association with any particular activity which might have involved fuel selection. A single charred seed of speedwell (*Veronica* sp.), an annual plant which grows in a range of environments, was recovered from layer 1006. No waterlogged plant remains were recovered.

DISCUSSION

Ampress Camp encloses an area of approximately 2.4ha. Following his visit to the site in the summer of 1743, Thomas Wright described it as 'on lower ground, close by a river (which defends it on one side), with a ditch and a *vallum* half round, and a kind of morass on the other' (Wright 1744, 274). The outer rampart depicted by Wright has long since been flattened, and the ditches filled in, and waterworks occupy the northern part of the site

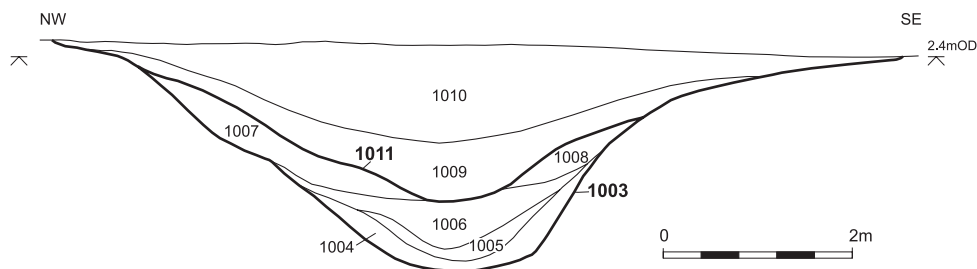


Fig. 3 Southwest-facing section through enclosure ditch

while commercial buildings have encroached upon the western half (Close Brooks 2000, 7).

There have been only limited excavations of the Ampress Camp enclosure. Its outer ditch on the western side was exposed during the cutting of a trench on the site of the former Wellworthy Piston Co. The ditch was 7m wide and 2.1m deep and there was a 7m gap between it and the inner ditch. A few scraps of pottery found at the site may date from the Iron Age (Close Brooks 2000, 5).

Despite its construction, its interpretation as an Iron Age enclosure has always raised the question of its relationship to the adjacent multivallate hillfort of Buckland Rings, considered to be of Early–Middle Iron Age date (*c.* 5th century BC) (*ibid.* 3). It has been suggested that it might have formed a beachhead for the Iron Age inhabitants of Buckland Rings, or that it was occupied at a different period in the Iron Age (*ibid.* 7). If it was related to the hillfort there are no indications on Wright's plan of an entrance facing west towards the hillfort entrance.

The new radiocarbon date of cal AD 410–620, obtained on short-lived wood charcoal recovered from within 0.25m of the base of the ditch, therefore provides important new evidence relating to the date of the enclosure. Since the calibrated range spans a period about which there is considerable historical and archaeological uncertainty, it raises intriguing possibilities about the nature, function and historical context of the enclosure. However, it is important to caution against over-reliance on this single determination, for if Ampress Camp really is of post-Roman date it would be a very unusual site, with no obvious parallels. The

possibility cannot be ruled out, therefore, that the enclosure was of earlier date, possibly part of late Roman (3rd–4th century) 'Saxon shore' (*litus Saxonicum*) defences built in response to Saxon raids. The site's location on the Lymington River may have extended this system of defences, as possibly represented to the east by the late Roman fortifications at *Clausentum* (Bitterne) (Cotton & Gathercole 1958), westward from the Solent.

However, if taken at face value, the radiocarbon result does appear to indicate a post-Roman date, and as noted above a Saxon date has been previously proposed for Ampress Camp, with Williams-Freeman (1915, 211) suggesting that it may have been a Saxon or Danish fort designed to protect shipping moored on the river. According to Bede, the founders of the West Saxon kingdom were the warrior Cerdic and his son Cynric who reportedly landed on the Hampshire coast with a small fleet of ships in AD 495. However, this account conflicts with other sources of evidence and is now considered suspect (Yorke 1990, 131). The actual date for Cerdic's arrival, possibly *c.* AD 532, may have been deliberately projected back for political and dynastic reasons (Dumville 1985). Moreover, Bede indicates that southern Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (the latter supposedly conquered by Cerdic in AD 530) did not become part of the kingdom of Wessex until they were conquered by Cædwalla in AD 686–8. Up to that point, these had been independent provinces of the Jutes (with origins on the Jutland peninsula of Denmark) with possible dynastic connections in Kent.

Early post-Roman populations with Jutish connections have been shown to be present on



Fig. 4 Slot through enclosure ditch viewed from the southwest

the Isle of Wight by the excavation of the Chessell Down and Bowcombe cemeteries (Arnold 1982), although as yet no evidence has been found for contemporary settlements. According to Bede, the Jutes invaded Portsmouth in AD 501, then made inland incursions up the Meon Valley. By AD 686 the southern boundary of the mainland Jutish territory appears to have stretched from Lymington in the west to Hayling Island in the east (O'Brien 1996, 291). This territory, stretching inland to the area north of Winchester, would have been easily accessible via sea-ports, rivers and the network of Roman roads (*ibid.* 302)

A final possibility for the context of Ampress Camp, suggested by a proposed derivation of its name, also needs to be considered. Wright noted (1744, 274) that:

'the Land lying betwixt [Buckland Rings and Ampress Camp] is, and has been time out of Mind, called *Ambrose Farm*: Besides an Arm of the River, or rather of the Sea (it being Salt-Water), running close up to [Ampress Camp], is called *Ambrose Dock*. From all it appears not improbable, that [Ampress Camp] may have been a principle Station belonging to *Aurelius Ambrosius*.'

According to Gildas, the 6th-century British monk who documented the history of the Britons before and during the coming of the Saxons, Ambrosius Aurelianus was a 5th-century Romano-British leader who won an important victory over the Saxons invaders. The rather tenuous connections between this, at least part-legendary, character and 'Ambrose' (and related) place-names in Hampshire and Wiltshire has been considered by Applebaum (1983). Unlike in Somerset and further west, where there is strong evidence for the sub-Roman reoccupation of Iron Age hillforts (Burrow 1981), such as at South Cadbury (Alcock 1972), there is less evidence from central and east Wessex. However, the hillfort at Whitsbury Castle Ditches near Fordingbridge, where there were indications of probable settlement during the Roman period, has rare evidence for reoccupation, and the renovation of its defences, during the 5th and 6th centuries (Ellison & Rahtz 1987).

Whatever role Ampress Camp played within the complex history (or prehistory) of south Hampshire, the new radiocarbon date appears to add some weight to a long-lived suggestion

(albeit one previously unsupported by any archaeological evidence) that this substantially defended riverside enclosure, sited at a strategic location in the heart of what became Hampshire's 5th–7th-century Jutish province, may have played a significance role in the political upheavals of the late or post-Roman periods, possibly including the arrival of the Jutes and/or their subsequent conquest by the West Saxons.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wessex Archaeology is grateful to Roland Gibbins of Westfield Properties (Hampshire) Ltd

for commissioning the work and to Frank Green (New Forest National Park Authority) who monitored the works on behalf of New Forest District Council. The excavation was directed by Peter Capps and the project was managed by Andrew Manning. The environmental evidence was analysed by Inés López-Dóriga, and the comment on the radiocarbon date provided by Alistair Barclay. The author is grateful to Nick Stoodley and Bruce Eagles for their helpful comments. Philippa Bradley edited this report. The archive is currently stored at the offices of Wessex Archaeology under the project code 76902, but in due course will be deposited with Hampshire Cultural Trust under the accession code A2016.36.

REFERENCES

- Alcock, L 1972 'By South Cadbury is that Camelot...' *Excavations at South Cadbury Castle 1966–70*, London.
- Applebaum, S 1983 A note on Ambrosius Aurelianus, *Britannia* **14** 245–6.
- Arnold, C J 1982 *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries on the Isle of Wight*, London.
- British Geological Survey, 2017 Geology of Britain Viewer, <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>.
- Burrow, I 1981 *Hillfort and Hill-top Settlement in Somerset in the First to Eighth Centuries AD* (BAR Brit Ser **91**), Oxford.
- Close-Brooks, J 2000 *Buckland Rings and Ampress Camp*, Lymington.
- Cotton, M A & Gathercole, P W 1958 *Excavations at Clausentum 1951–54*, London.
- Dumville, D N 1985 The West Saxon genealogical regnal list and the chronology of Wessex, *Peritia* **4** 21–66.
- Ellison, A & Rahtz, P 1987 Excavations at Whitsbury Castle Ditches, Hampshire, 1960, *Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc* **43** 63–81.
- Hawkes, C F C 1936 The excavations at Buckland Rings, Lymington, 1935, *Proc Hampshire Fld Club Archaeol Soc* **13** 124–64.
- O'Brien, E 1996 *Post-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England: the burial evidence reviewed*, unpubl PhD thesis, University of Oxford.
- Taylor, K 2001 *Ampress Park, Lymington, Hampshire: an archaeological investigation for Frobisher Limited*, Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, unpubl report, APL01/72.
- Wessex Archaeology 2011 *Plots D6 and D7 Ampress Lane, Lymington, Hampshire: archaeological watching brief report*, unpubl client report, 76900.03.
- Williams-Freeman, J R 1915 *An Introduction to Field Archaeology as Illustrated by Hampshire*, London.
- Wright, T 1744 A letter from Mr Tho Wright to James Theobald, Esq; F R S concerning two ancient camps in Hampshire, *Phil Trans Roy Soc* **43** 273–5, <http://rstl.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/43/472-477/273>.
- Yorke, B 1990 *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, London.

Author: Andrew B. Powell, formerly Wessex Archaeology, Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 6EB