

From: Robert Date: 25 October 2015

Dear John

I have read with interest your publications, especially concerning the hillfort. This was my playground as a youngster and I know it extremely well! I did some digging there myself, revealing potsherds that were indentified as St. Neots Ware, and hence medieval. They and a plan of the site from a survey made with the aid of a school friend and my late father, a Civil Engineer, in the mid-1960s, were handed to the County Archaeologist of the early 1970s and presumably are archived by them. I also briefly took part in the 1971 dig that revealed the Iron Age ditch.

As a kid, I spent a lot of time with Bill Allen, who farmed the land, and accompanied him frequently to the top orchard, the only one of three still remaining, albeit now overgrown. This was usually to tar-oil spray the tree during the winter. This is the orchard shown on your plan. Although the Western part was mainly plum trees, there were other, including a Medlar! My understanding was that at that time, Bill owned the land. His neighbour Jack Crouch, of the adjoining Cleat Hill Farm, was however a tenant, although I do not know the actual owner.

Bill and Jack did quite a bit of digging, with other friends. They trenched the North West Corner (now overgrown) and put a number of trenches through the banks of the North and South (or middle?) moats. They also in the early 1960s dug on the central island, uncovering stone footing to what was presumably a timber building of some extent. These footing were left exposed and may or may not still exist in situ. The island was clear of scrub into the 1970s - I spent quite few hours there myself with a slasher! But has since become overgrown. I have not visited it recently, due to the combination of ditch, ladi hedge and rather poor legs!

I am pleased to see on your map the trace of the Iron Age ditch cutting across the orchard. I have traced the burned clay along this line, as well as the South along what was a boundary hedge line separating meadow from orchard. I have never found this burnt clay along the Northern boundary, by the way, although the is quite a bit of what appears to be limestone in the banks. Most of this was revealed by rabbit burrows, and the inhabitants (in the 1960s and 1970s) of a few much larger holes, which I speculated might be badgers. (I never found any real evidence though).

My parents and I lived at 'Shortlands', at the bottom of Cleat Hill, about 100 yards up from the white house which was Bill Allen's, and on the West side of the road. This was on the Victorian brick workings. However, the burnt clay in the boundaries of the hillfort do not resemble Victorian brick and the local Archaeologists surmised that it was the result of the ramparts being fired at some time. Iron Age ramparts are constructed around a timber lattice for stability.

I also knew both firing ranges - there was a second shorter one to the West, I understood it was for pistol shooting. From the longer one, I recovered a number of Martini-Henry lead and .303 copper jacketed bullets. On the banks around this range grew a profusion of wild flowers, including numerous orchids. I have not visited it for many years, as it is 'out of bounds' on the golf course, so I do not know what grows there now.

There was also a pond at the lower part of the farm (one of two; the other being in the second orchard, below the wild flower meadow as marked on your map, then ploughed land.0 This pond sported flag iris and 'bulrushes' (Great Reedmace). More importantly, it housed numerous toads, during the spring, and Great Crested Newts! Frogs kept to the stream, along therewith three spined sticklebacks and stone laoches in abundance.

I hope I have not bored you with these memories!

Best Regards.

Robert.