

GRIM'S DYKE AT RUISLIP?

by Colin Bowlt

Introduction

In 1976 the Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote Local History Society carried out an archaeological dig across the large earthwork on the north side of the Manor Farm site. See Fig. 1. At that time the Society was much more active, including mounting large exhibitions as well as conducting excavations. The 1976 excavation was very much a family event, as can be seen from Fig. 2. Not quite how it would be done now – but it was great fun and allowed younger members with children to participate.

The finds from the dig were rather surprising – thirty-three worked flints of mesolithic/neolithic type and some Roman pottery. All these finds from within the bank had clearly been incorporated into the structure when it was constructed, that is, after the 1st century AD. This was written-up

in the Society's Bulletin (fore-runner of the *Journal*) for 1977 and also published in the *London Archaeologist* (1977). Since then, further consideration suggests that the large Ruislip earthwork is part of Grim's Dyke.

Ruislip Earthworks

Ruislip has a number of earthworks centred on the Manor Farm site. The old manor house stands in a moated enclosure in the extreme south-west corner of the bank and ditch which enclosed the 138 ha of the 'park for wild beasts' recorded in the Domesday Survey. This was fully traceable until the 1930s (Braun 1933; 1936). The southern section is now covered by the houses along the north side of Eastcote Road, but the northern section still remains within Park Wood and in the rear of some nearby gardens.

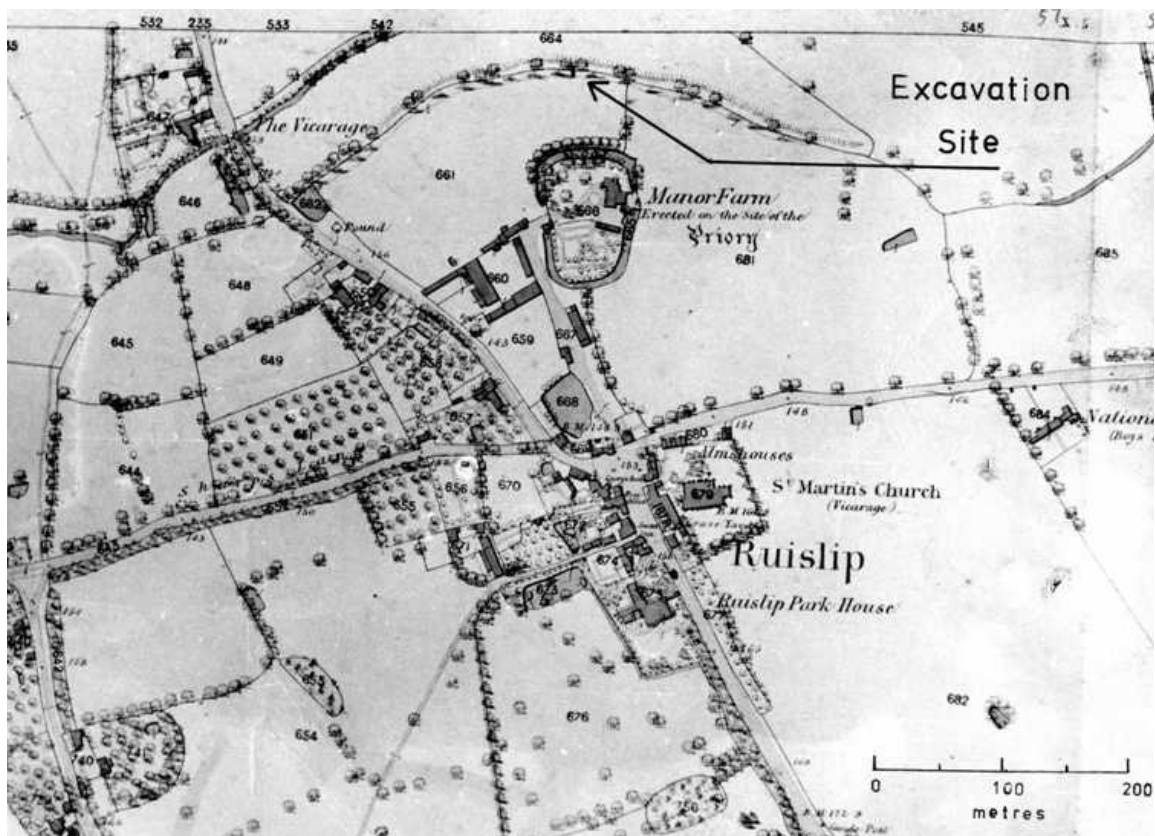


Fig. 1. 1866 Ordnance Survey map of Ruislip showing earthwork and site of the excavation



Fig. 2.

To the north of the moated house at Manor Farm the ground drops rapidly to the flood-plain of the River Pinn. Here at the bottom of the slope, 80m from the house is the large ditch, referred to above, 12m wide and 2m deep with an embankment on its northern side; it runs east-west for 190m. Its eastern end is now terminated by houses and gardens in St Martin's Approach, but the 1866 OS 25 inch map, Fig. 1, shows it continuing beyond. It is terminated at its western end by Bury Street. Nothing is really known about the purpose of this structure though it has been variously referred to as a mill leat, and as part of a defensive work surrounding Ruislip village in Saxon times (Braun 1933). There is no evidence for such suppositions, and the fact that the bank is on the opposite side of the ditch away from the village rules it out as a defensive work. It was here, in 1976, that the Society excavated a trench across the ditch and into the bank as far as its centre.

Grim's Dyke.

Grim's Dyke is the most significant earthwork in Middlesex. It is a mysterious, ancient ditch and bank that is known to have run from Cuckoo Hill through Pinner Green to Harrow Weald Common. See Fig. 3. Nowadays not all is visible. The section at Cuckoo Hill has been built over, as have others. It has given its name to Grim's Dyke House, now a hotel but once the home of W.S. Gilbert, and also the nearby Golf Course. The results of archaeological excavations during 1948-73 at Pear Wood

some 2.7 km farther east, Fig. 4, have suggested this is here an easterly section of Grim's Dyke (Castle 1975) which is now generally accepted. In the past there have been various claims that Grim's Dyke could be traced much farther at either end but there is no good evidence for this. It is generally thought that the name Grim is Saxon or Norse and was probably applied to large structures of unknown origin.

Grim's Dyke at Ruislip?

There are a number of features which make the Ruislip earthwork an enigma. It is massive but with no obvious purpose. It does not appear to have any relationship to the other earthworks in Ruislip. The similarities between Grim's Dyke proper and the Pear Wood earthwork with the earthwork excavated by our Society in 1976 suggest that the massive bank and ditch at Ruislip may be a western extension of Grim's Dyke as shown in Fig. 4 (Bowl 2008):

1. All are large earthworks which seem to be entirely unsuitable for defence.
2. All have their banks on the north or north-west side of their ditches (i.e. facing away from the Thames or London).
Mortimer Wheeler (1935) laid great emphasis on this point in comparing Grim's Dyke with Offa's Dyke in the Chilterns.
3. The latest finds within the bank at Ruislip were of Roman date, as at Pear Wood.
4. The dimensions of the Ruislip earthwork are similar to those recorded for Grim's Dyke and Pear Wood earthworks, in as far as they can now be determined with any accuracy.

The accepted Grim's Dyke in the Harrow Weald/Pinner area exists in several sections wending a curious east-west course along no obvious boundary (Stone 1935; Wheeler 1935). Whether it ever consisted of a single continuous structure is unknown, but it is difficult to think of a purpose in a disjointed series of relatively short sections of massive bank and ditch. The enormous amount of labour to construct it clearly indicates it was of some importance.

The date of Grim's Dyke.

The finds from the few archaeological excavations that have been carried out on Grim's Dyke suggest that it could not be earlier than 3rd/4th century. If the several sections are all part of a single undertaking (but perhaps spread over several years) then a post 3rd/4th century AD date is indicated.

It cannot be later than 1306 when it is mentioned in a rental of the Priory of St Bartholomew the Great (Castle 1975). All in all, the excavated evidence to date does not seem to alter Wheeler's conclusion (1935) that it was constructed in pagan Saxon times. Our excavation of the ditch and bank at Ruislip Manor Farm fits in with this dating.

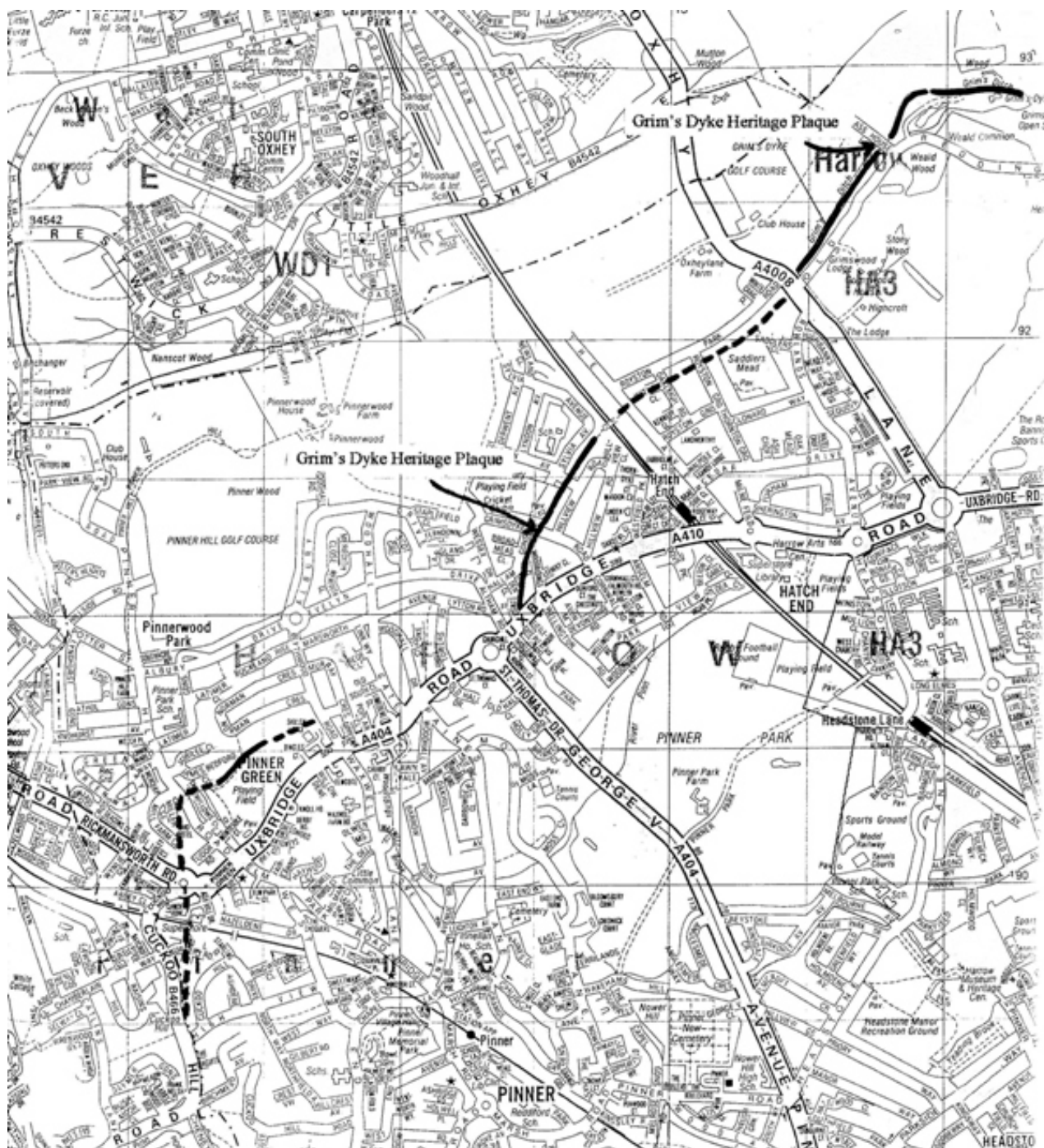


Fig. 3. Known route of Grim's Dyke - sections still visible shown as a continuous line

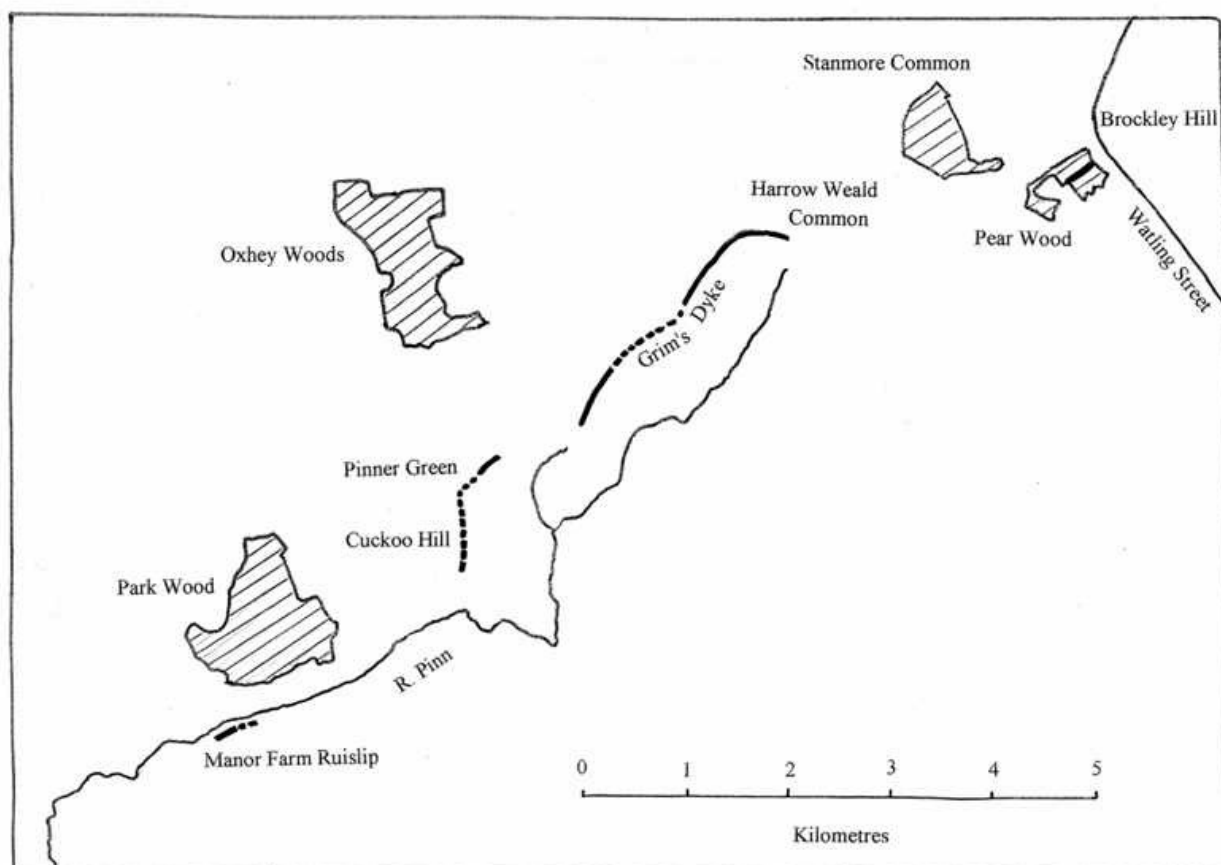


Fig. 4. Grim's Dyke showing probable extensions in Pear Wood and Manor Farm, Ruislip

References

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