

# Mother Anthony's Well

## Iron Age studies in Wessex on the Marlborough Downs

**G**eophysical survey supported field walking finds have revealed two previously unknown Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement sites in North Wiltshire

### Introduction

**Jan Dando** Although by no means widely known, mention Mother Anthony's Well (MAW henceforth), and most later Pre-historians and Romanists working in Northern Wiltshire are likely to recognise the name of this spring. Apparently overlooked by antiquarians, the archaeological significance of the area was first discovered at the beginning of the 20th Century by Maud Cunnington (1908) who identified a Romano-British building in the immediate vicinity. Despite being tantalisingly mentioned (Corney & Walters, 2001, 49; Tubb, 2009), MAW has suffered the fate of being just beyond the limits of recent study areas. Therefore, like other such archaeological sites in the county, it has only been subject to, largely, ad hoc investigations during the century since its discovery.

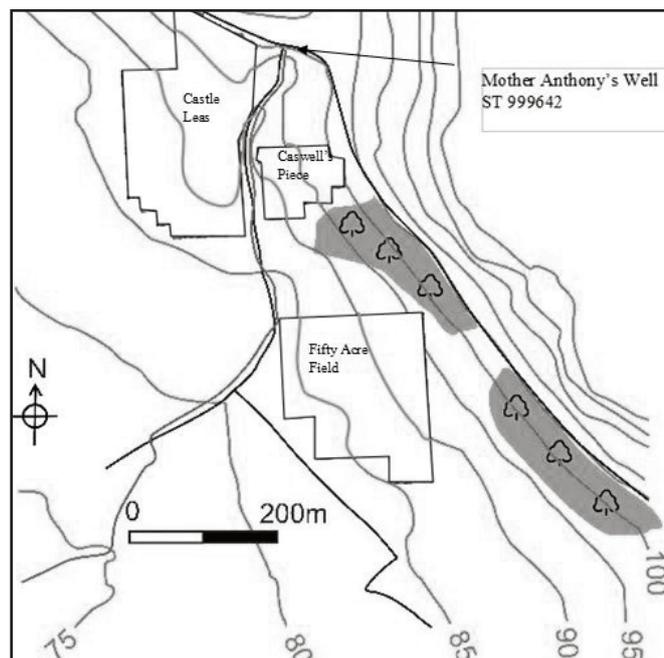
### Site and Location

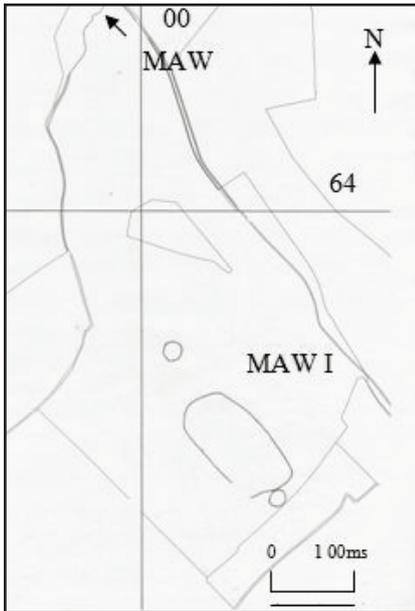
Overlooked by a small univallate hillfort known as Oliver's Castle, the spring lies immediately below the escarpment at the extreme south-western limits of the Marlborough Downs at ST 99976423, approximately 2 km north of Devizes, Wiltshire. Its situation at the junction of three parishes, Rowde, Bromham and Roundway, suggests that it has been an historically significant feature in the local landscape. The Romano-British building and surface finds associated with it, have been referred to on a number of occasions within the framework of Roman Wiltshire, variously described as a villa, bathhouse or shrine (Griffiths, 2001, 60; Moorhead, 2001, 90-99; Walters, 2001, 128; Draper, 2006). However, MAW has recently entered the literature in a late Prehistoric context (Corney & Payne, 2006, 129-30) through the inclusion of Oliver's Castle within the Wessex Hillfort Project. Part of this project's research agenda was to identify possible settlement sites in the vicinity of hillforts. Although geophysical survey established that there was no obvious sign of settlement within the ramparts, attention was drawn to MAW with the suggestion of Late Iron Age activity in the vicinity (*ibid.*, 129-30). As observations were made on the basis of desk-top survey and study of aerial photos only, I decided to set my fieldwork within the context of Iron Age studies in Wessex, rather than concentrate on the Romano-British building. The aim was to employ non-invasive techniques in the form of geophysical survey and field walking to establish whether there was, indeed, evidence of earlier settlement predating the Romano-British period.

### The Surveys

Inspired by the work of John Oswin and English Heritage in the use of wide-scale magnetometer surveys, the overall aim was to cover as large an area as possible. Time and manpower constraints always apply, so guided by results of my own desktop survey and analysis of aerial photographs, three discrete survey areas were identified (*see Figure 1*). Significantly, study of aerial photographs found within the research area revealed a large enclosure and two circular features (*see Figure 2*) visible to the southeast of the spring, which were not recorded on the SMR or mentioned in Wessex Hillforts. These were later found to be on the NMR, described

**Figure 1**  
Location of magnetometer survey areas.



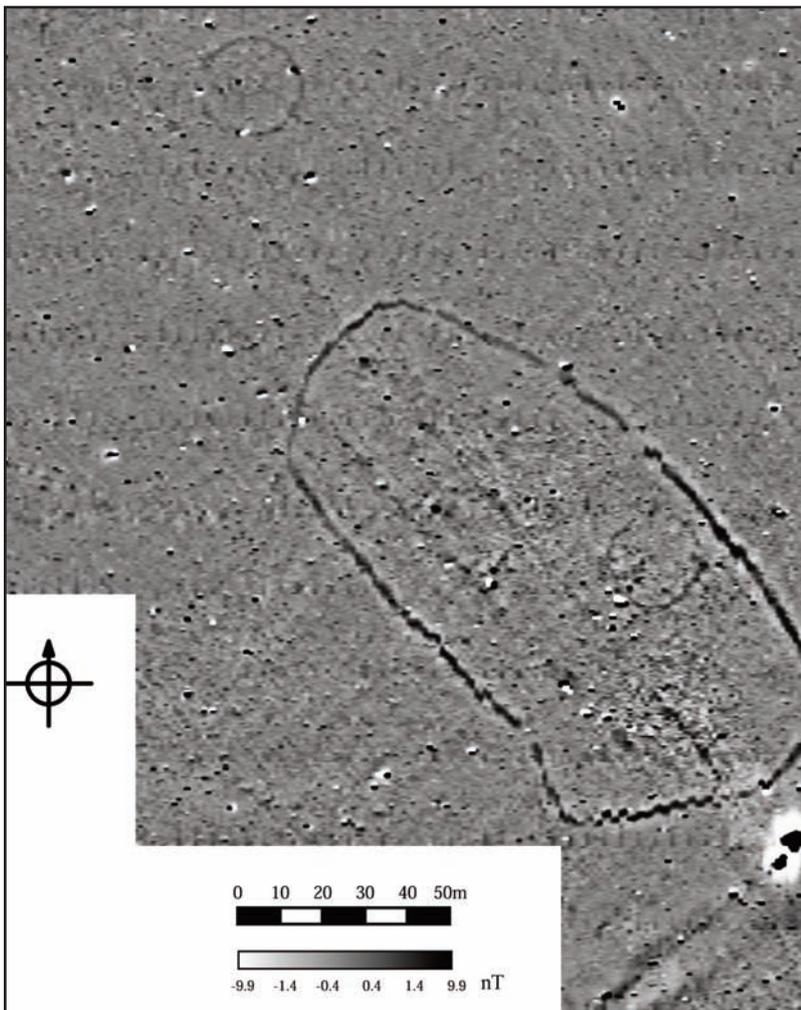


**Figure 2**  
**Transcription of AP NMR 15533 Frame 3 NGR/Index No SU0063/7 18th July 1996 showing an large enclosure in Fifty Acre field identified now as MAW I of approx. 1 hectare (2.5 acres) measuring approx. 150m by 65m and two possible round barrows.**

as a Prehistoric enclosure and round barrows. The enclosure, referred to as MAW I, was identified as a primary target for magnetometry. The survey area in Castle Leas covered the area known to be occupied by a Romano-British building with the aim of identifying features that pre-dated its construction. Caswell's Piece was also targeted as an area immediately adjacent to the spring, and one that had been singled out in the past as a discreet named area of land.

**Magnetometry survey**

This project could not have been carried out without the support of BACAS, both in respect of John Oswin's patience in teaching me how to use the then newly acquired Bartington 601/2 twin-probe fluxgate gradiometer and in the graciousness of the Committee in allowing me access to the equipment. Surveys were carried out within Fifty Acre Field, Caswell's Piece and Castle Leas during the autumn of 2009 and early spring, 2010, with each area surveyed over consecutive days. 20m square grids were laid out on a North-South grid as per the Society's protocol. The traverses were one metre apart with readings taken four times per metre along every traverse. The magnetometer was set to a scale of 100nT with a sensitivity of 0.1nT. All grids were walked in a clockwise 'zigzag' pattern. The results were processed using Insite and are presented as block shaded images using a grey-scale.



**Results of geophysical survey**

There was some concern over the viability of magnetometry in this location, as MAW is located off the chalk onto greensand and mainly gault clay. Despite the potential of clay to be less responsive, the results proved far better than expected.

**Fifty Acre Field**

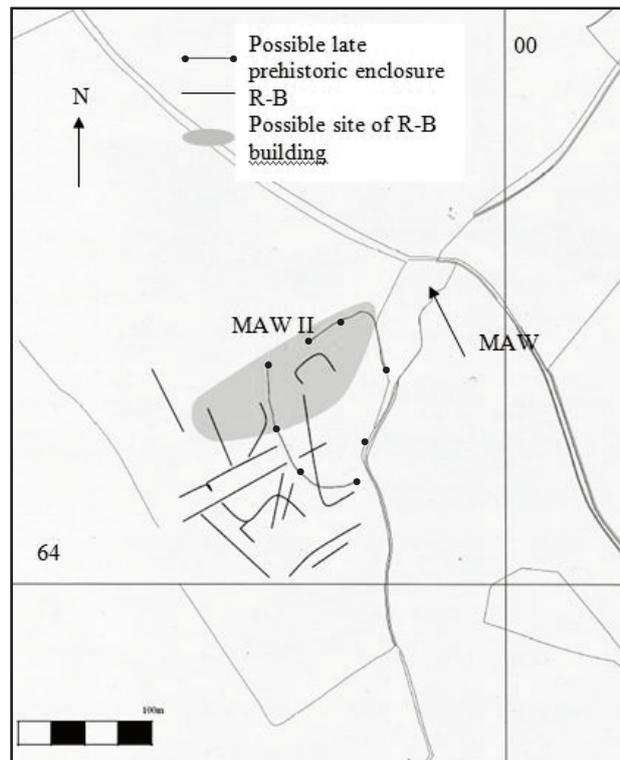
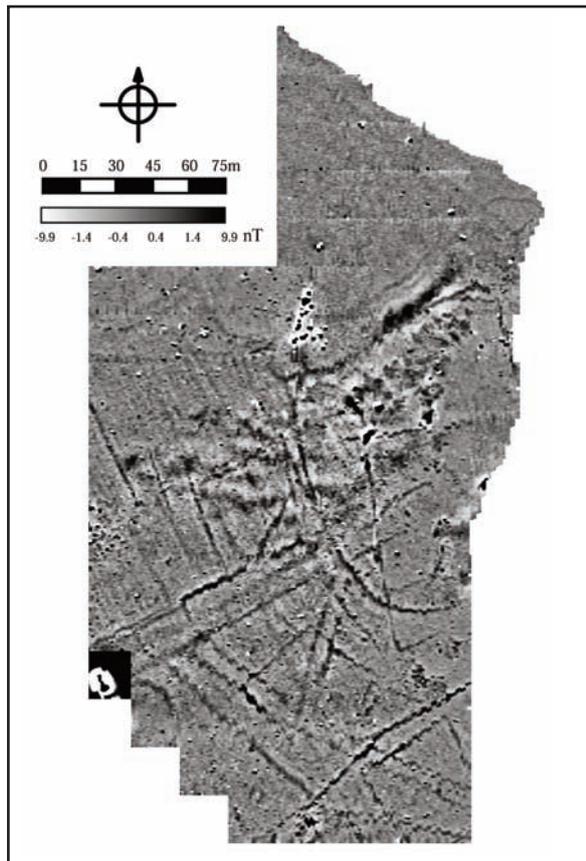
The survey produced relatively clear results, which considerably improved on the available aerial photographic evidence, thereby enhancing knowledge of the form of MAW I and the activity within it (see Figure 3). Not only was the enclosure clearly defined but the presence of two slightly in-turned entrances were identified, one to the northeast and the other to the southwest. At least two interior circular anomalies may be evidence of ring gullies, both appearing to have entrances facing approximately east. The arcs of other possible curvilinear anomalies may suggest the presence of further

**Figure 3**  
**Greyscale plot of Fifty Acre Field magnetometer survey.**

incomplete ring gullies. It is possible that there has been a failure to resolve other features as a result of truncation by ploughing. Running northwest – southeast through the enclosure are two linear anomalies which weaken and diverge to the northwest. A further isolated circular anomaly can be seen outside of the enclosure to the northwest, which corresponds with the suggested round barrow.

### Castle Leas

This survey produced an extremely ‘busy’ plot, suggesting complex archaeology probably representing a palimpsest of features indicative of prolonged activity (see Figure 4). It is probable that much of this relates to the Romano-British activity in this area, but a possible Late Iron Age date for some of these anomalies cannot be ruled out. However, a partial curvilinear anomaly is recognisable, which may represent a further late prehistoric enclosure, MAW II (see Figure 5).



**Figure 4 left**  
**Greyscale plot of Castle Leas magnetometer survey.**

**Figure 5 above**  
**Interpretation of Castle Leas magnetometer survey.**

### Caswell's Piece

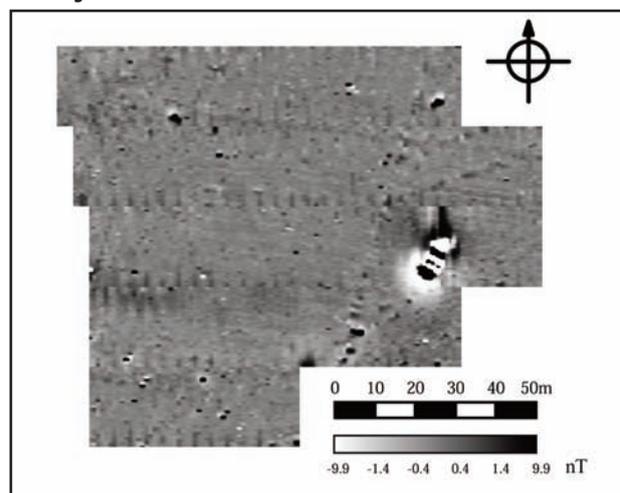
Although there are slight signs of amorphous magnetic anomaly in the northeast corner of this plot which may have an archaeological origin, the plot does not show any obvious archaeological feature (see Figure 6).

### Interpretation

Although this article is restricted to the geophysical survey results, the overall interpretation of the site was enhanced by the additional results of the field walking survey. It is hoped that a fuller report will be published in due course.

Characteristically, simple curvilinear enclosures appear to date from the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition (Sharples, 2010, 55) with Houghton Down being a well-dated example

**Figure 6 below**  
**Greyscale plot of Caswell's Piece magnetometer survey.**



(Cunliffe & Poole, 2000). Although slightly smaller, MAW I is morphologically similar, and the presence of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery in the form of the decorated sherds of All Cannings type pottery found during field walking does support a potential Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. The magnetometer survey has revealed two circular anomalies within MAW I, which suggests the presence of roundhouses (Linford, pers. comm.) supporting its interpretation as a settlement. The location of the environs of MAW as a settlement site in Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition also follows observations made to the east in the Vale of Pewsey. Permanent settlement appears to have been concentrated around the edge, either on the top of the chalk escarpments or at the base, usually within 2km of the scarp, including concentrations of activity in specific areas such as Tan Hill and Martinsell (Tubb, 2009, 112).

The roundhouses appear to have east-facing entrances. Detailed study of the orientation of roundhouse entrances has shown that there are a significant number orientated east to sunrise at the equinox and southeast to sunrise on the midwinter solstice (Oswald, 1997). Sharples (2010, 192) has commented that although locating houses is reasonably straightforward, assessing their overall dimensions is problematic. Houses can be delineated by internal postholes, timber slots or by drainage gullies. An outer wall can be seen as a stone wall, a line of stakes, a ring of postholes, a gully or a chalk cut scarp, with most of these features open to reinterpretation as internal or external features (ibid., 192). A gully is a particularly ambiguous feature, which may have held the external wall or may have been a surrounding ditch. On balance, the size would suggest that the anomalies in MAW I are likely to be the drainage gullies associated with these buildings rather than the postholes of the actual structure.

It is, therefore, clear that based on geophysical data alone, it is not possible to establish size of any possible structure. However, at 20-22m, the diameters of these putative drainage gullies may well be significant. A caesium magnetometer survey carried out by English Heritage at Flint Farm, Hampshire in advance of excavation revealed a drainage gully measuring 21m in diameter. Subsequent excavation showed this to be the site of an Early Iron Age roundhouse where the structure consisted of two concentric wall foundation slots, a possible external wall and an internal concentric partition with the timber building measuring 15m in diameter (Cunliffe & Poole, 2008, 27). A 15m diameter roundhouse is very rare (Pope, 2008, 17). Nevertheless, such major buildings, recognised to date from the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age - Early Iron Age (Haselgrove & Pope, 2007, 7), are not unknown within the Wessex area, with Pimperne (Harding et al, 1993) the most cited. Sharples (2010, 195) has recorded a small group of 32 houses from 10 sites in the Wessex region that can be dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition by the presence of furrowed bowls, some of which are spectacularly large including Longbridge Deverill Cow Down where the largest building measured 18.30m (Chadwick Hawkes, 1994, 49). A sherd of short necked furrowed bowl was found near this feature which does help to support an argument for the presence of a 'great' roundhouse of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age within MAW I and adds further weight to its interpretation of a settlement dating to this transitional period.

The presence of a partial second enclosure is also suggested in Castle Leas. The proximity of MAW I to the putative MAW II represents a phenomenon recognised elsewhere and may help to support contemporaneity. Close spatial association of two or more enclosures has been observed to the north on the Marlborough Downs (Bowden, 2005, 158) and has been recognised for sometime in Wessex (Harding et al, 1993). Again, All Cannings pottery was found within the enclosure supporting this suggestion.

## **Conclusion**

Long known as the site of a Romano-British building, the environs of Mother Anthony's Well, Bromham has now revealed an earlier period of occupation. Using a combination of desk-based research, aerial photograph analysis, field walking and geophysical survey, results of a non-intrusive study now provides evidence of an earlier Iron Age presence. Specifically, this study argues for the discovery of a previously unknown Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement enclosure (MAW I), which may have continued into the Early Iron Age, some 400m to the south-east of the spring. In

addition, geophysical survey has revealed a partial curvilinear feature, which may represent the remains of a further late prehistoric enclosure near the Romano-British site (MAW II), where there is also evidence of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age activity. Further work, including targeted excavation will undoubtedly provide a clearer chronological sequence to what was obviously an important area for a significantly longer period than previously thought.

#### Late Prehistoric Chronology Reference Chart

• The Late Bronze Age	(LBA)	1140-800BC
• The Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Transition	(LBA/EIA)	800-600/500BC
• The Early Iron Age	(EIA)	600/500-400/300BC
• The Middle Iron Age	(MIA)	400/300-100/50BC
• The Late Iron Age	(LIA)	100/50BC- AD43

(Sharples, 2010, 318-24)

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