

## Stokeleigh Camp, Somerset (N.G.R. ST 559733)

By

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Stokeleigh Camp is the north-western member of a group of three presumptively Iron Age hill-forts, situated on the high limestone plateaux overlooking the southern end of the Avon Gorge. The other two camps are Clifton Camp on the eastern side and Burwalls Camp, now almost completely destroyed, on the western side.

Stokeleigh Camp is sited on a spur between the Avon Valley and Nightingale Valley (Stokeleigh Slade of early writers). At the western end of the spur, two massive ramparts with their ditches to the west cross the entire width of the spur, enclosing about 3 hectares within the camp, making it the largest of the three (*Fig. 8*). Outside the two ramparts is a third; this starts parallel to the other two at the north end, but then diverges and turns sharply westwards, before ending abruptly. The southern side of the camp is protected by the steep slope of Nightingale Valley, making it less vulnerable than the western side. Here the inner rampart, decreased in size, continues along the edge of the valley, before turning sharply northward at the eastern end, and running out into the Avon Valley. The second rampart runs out into Nightingale Valley before ceasing. The northern side of the camp is well protected by steep cliffs and is hence only slightly defended. The most vulnerable part on this side is a wide gully, which leads into the main area of the camp behind the ramparts.

### MAJOR DEFENCES

It is on the easily approachable western side that the ramparts attain their most massive construction, but due to thick tree cover this is not apparent except at close quarters. At the southern end, the major ramparts reach their greatest size; however, even at the northern end, the summit of the inner rampart is over 10 m. above the floor of the first ditch (*Fig. 9, Section 1*). Allowing for denudation, this rampart must have been considerably higher and the ditch deeper in their original state, forming a formidable line of defence. It seems to have been surmounted by a drystone wall of some height, a portion of which has been uncovered (*Fig. 8, A*).

The inner ditch is wide in comparison with similar ditches found at other Iron Age hill-forts in the district. It is much obscured at the northern end,

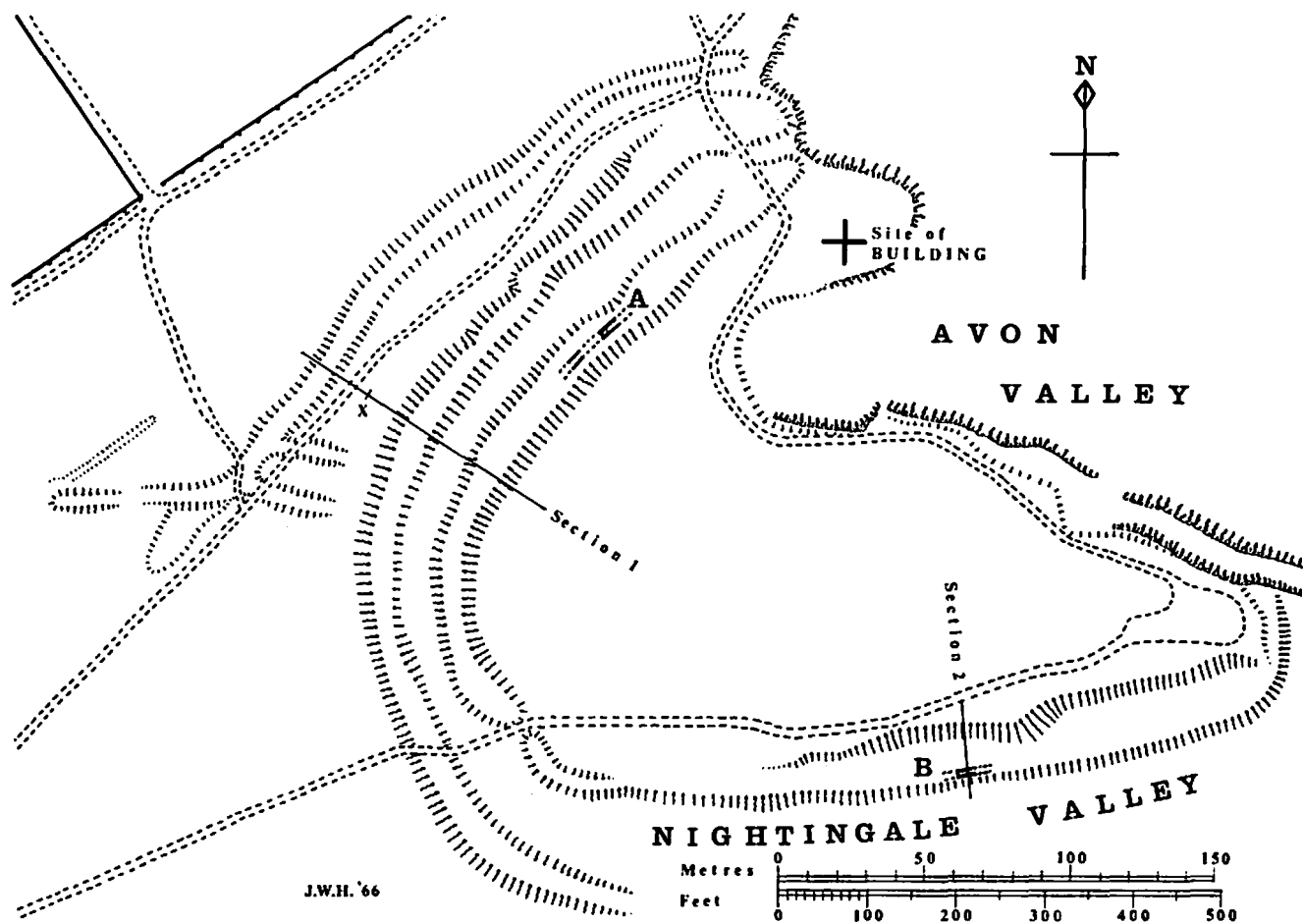
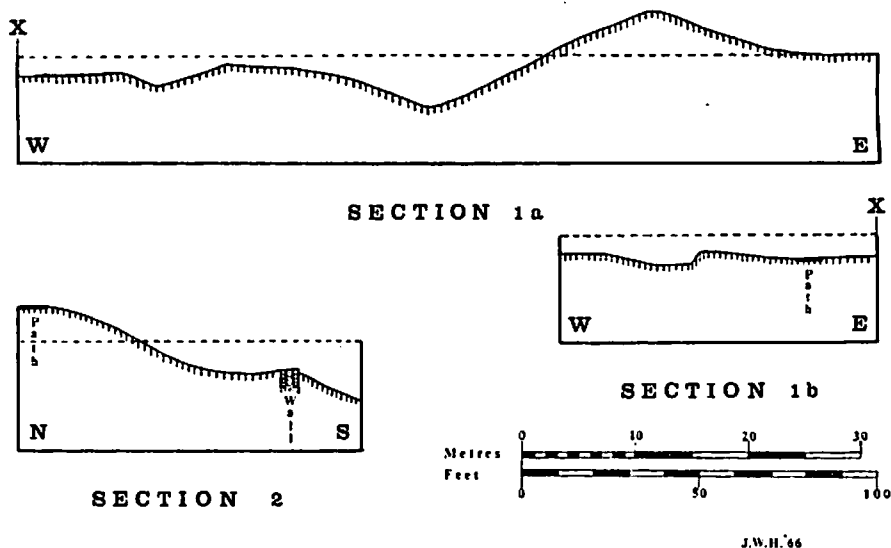


Fig. 8. Plan of Stokeleigh Camp, Somerset. Based on Ordnance Survey. (Crown copyright reserved.)

where the modern path enters the camp enclosure. The causeway over which the path passes may not be contemporary with the ramparts, but is possibly the result of the accidental accumulation of debris, and of a later date. This may not, however, be the case if there is an entrance at this point (see below).

The second rampart is very broad, and almost flat-topped, except for a heightening of the outer edge (*Fig. 9, Section 1*). This heightening may be



*Fig. 9.* Sections of ramparts of Stokeleigh Camp.

due to the presence of a wall, similar to that on the inner rampart. At the southern end, the second rampart becomes somewhat higher and less broad, before ending on the slopes of Nightingale Valley.

Beyond the second rampart and ditch is a flat area, varying between 20 and 30 m. in width, before the third rampart is reached. This rampart is a much smaller construction than the inner two. It gradually diverges from the line followed by the other two ramparts. Half-way across the spur it makes a sharp westward turn and appears to fork. The southern arm of the fork is mentioned by Seyer (1821) as an earthwork, but it is almost certainly a natural feature, or one perhaps slightly modified. The rampart forms the northern arm of this fork, continuing for a short distance before temporarily disappearing, reappearing a few metres beyond. The rampart then continues for about 30 m. before coming to an end. This temporary disappearance of the rampart and ditch suggests that this portion was unfinished. The rampart and ditch have no return to Nightingale Valley on the south side. However, the divergence of the rampart suggests that the builders may have been

influenced by methods from west Devon and Cornwall, where hill-forts with very widely spaced ramparts may be found.

On the southern side of the camp, the steep slope of Nightingale Valley is defended by a continuation of the inner rampart. Here the size of the rampart is much reduced, and at the eastern end it is not much more than an artificial terrace, making use of an already existing natural one, bounded on the uphill side by a slope of considerable steepness, which may have been artificially steepened (*Fig. 9, Section 2*). Most of this rampart was surmounted by a drystone wall, similar to that found on the western side, part of which has been exposed at B (*Fig. 8*). Though the existence of a wall along the inner rampart is fairly certain, it has only been represented on the map at A and B, since its extent has not been determined. The existence of large quantities of limestone fragments on the rampart is not necessarily an unequivocal indication of the existence of a wall, as the builders of the camp must have cut extensively into the surface of the limestone when digging the ditches, since the limestone surface is often less than 0.5 m. below the present surface of the top-soil.

Along the inner edge of the inner rampart, on the western side of the camp, a large quantity of slumped rock fragments has been discovered. These may be from the surmounting wall or may indicate the existence of an inner revetment wall.

At the northern end of the ramparts, the inner two have been partially obliterated by subsequent building operations; they seem, however, to run without deviation out into the Avon Valley.

The north side of the camp is protected by the precipitous cliffs of the Avon Gorge. Here there are some slight linear earthworks, possibly the site of a palisade, designed perhaps more to keep livestock in than attackers out.

### ENTRANCES

The weakest point on the northern side is the wide gully, which leads at a fairly steep gradient into the main body of the camp behind all the defences. It is flanked by steep cliffs, making it easily defensible, an excellent cross-fire being possible. Not far from the foot of the defile, there is a fresh-water spring. These factors favour the existence of an entrance up this gully. Little defence would be necessary at the sides, and a gate and palisade would be sufficient at the uphill end.

The other position for an entrance favoured by some authors, for example, Manby (1802), Seyer (1821) and Lloyd-Morgan (1904), is the point where the modern path enters the camp at the northern end. Though no well-defined break is visible, this may be due to the partial obliteration of the ramparts in this area. Lloyd-Morgan notes the existence of some stones at this point, apparently laid parallel to the path; these, however, are no longer

visible. The fact that the level of the supposed entrance is about a metre above the general level of the camp appears to contradict the evidence for an entrance at this point, unless the height of the path has been subsequently raised.

The existence of an extensive field system in Ashton Park possibly contemporary with Stokeleigh Camp (Phillips, 1933, p. 145), increases the probability of an entrance from the plateau, as well as from the Avon Gorge. If there is an entrance at this northern point, and the third rampart was not intersected here as it is today, the entrance must have been reached along the flat area between the second and third ramparts, making it an excellent example of an "inturned" entrance.

Seyer also marks an entrance in the south-west corner, where the modern path enters. This entrance is, however, almost certainly of modern origin, as it has obviously been cut through the ramparts. Seyer describes "foundations of a long narrow building, a gate-house or the like". These are no longer traceable. However, near the path within the camp there are some stones apparently set in line, which may be those he describes; that these belong to a gate-house is improbable.

## SPECIAL FEATURES

### DRYSTONE WALLING

The most interesting feature of the camp is its drystone walling. This may be contemporary with the ramparts, though this has not yet been proven with any certainty. It was uncovered by Lloyd-Morgan at points A and B, in 1900, and has subsequently been recleared by the author (*Plates 7 and 8*). It can easily be traced in several places for some distance, especially along the edge of Nightingale Valley. Lloyd-Morgan on his map of 1904 shows it as continuing throughout the entire length of the inner rampart, also being found on the second and third ramparts. It has been reasonably attested on the inner rampart by excavation, but this is not so in the case of the second and third ramparts. The existence of blocks and chippings of limestone on these ramparts may be due entirely to spoil from the ditches.

At the points where it has been cleared the wall has a width of about 1.4 m. Some of the larger stones forming the facing reach a size of 75 × 35 cm.

Lloyd-Morgan removed the rubble from the front face of the wall for a distance of some 3 m. on the southern side of the camp. The slump material was removed to a depth of 2.3 m. The upper metre was a vertical face of rudely built wall, the stones being selected and laid in courses. There was no evidence of mortar or cement bonding these stones. Below this the stones were irregularly disposed, and wedged in to form a footing. Both the outer and inner faces were formed of built stones, the interspace being filled with a packing of smaller stones.

The positioning of the wall upon the rampart is of interest, standing as it does in the centre of the summit. It might be expected to stand further towards the outside edge. This apparently unusual position may only be due to an asymmetrical accumulation of debris, the greater mass being concentrated on the outer face, since this is where material from the wall would tend to collect.

Drystone walling is found at many camps, some of the most notable in Somerset being Worlebury, Dolebury and Little Solsbury. That at Worlebury has been described in detail by C. W. Dymond (1902, p. 21). At this camp it appears that the walling is not confined to the summit of the rampart, but forms a major part of the rampart's construction. The walling is not vertical, as it is at Stokeleigh Camp, but slopes inwards from the base. The outer surface of the wall is formed by a definitely built facing, employing stones of a similar size to those at Stokeleigh. Not only are there these external facings, but the internal material is also strengthened by hidden faces lying within the wall. In some portions of the ramparts there are as many as three or four, giving the wall a total thickness of over 10 m. (Dymond, 1902, *Plate 5*).

Dry walling has also been found at Dolebury (Lloyd Morgan, 1904, and others), but there it is on the outer, not the inner rampart on which it is found. Here it seems to be more of a simple revetment wall, which slopes slightly inwards from the base.

At Little Solsbury, near Bath, drystone walling has been proved to exist along the north side of the camp. The single rampart is faced on both sides with a vertical revetment wall. There is no evidence here of the use of lime or the use of timbered supports (Dowden, 1957, p. 27).

It is therefore apparent that though there is a considerable quantity of drystone walling to be found in the camps of Somerset, its construction and *mode d'emploi* are different in most cases from that of Stokeleigh Camp though full excavation may prove otherwise.

#### BUILDINGS

On the spur, which runs out eastward near the north corner of the camp, there are some indistinct signs of walling. In this area foundations of a building are included in Barrett's plan (1789). Seyer also mentions a building of considerable size in this position, having a square base and a circular foundation in the middle. Lloyd-Morgan notes also the foundations of a building in a parallelogram 12.2 × 4.6 m. Manby marks a building in this spot, which does not, however, correspond in dimensions. These buildings are certainly not of the same date as the camp, but much more recent. Their presence may account for the extensive quarrying of the inner face of the inner rampart nearby that has occurred.

## MINOR EARTHWORKS

1. At the south-eastern corner of the camp, the ground is somewhat raised to form a platform. Seyer and Lloyd-Morgan suggest this to be the site of a signal or look-out post. This is likely as it commands an excellent view of a large portion of the Avon Gorge and the high ground opposite, the site of Clifton Camp.

2. Near the point where the outer rampart makes a sharp westward turn there is an almost rectangular enclosure, unmentioned by previous authors. It measures 18 m. north-south by 30 m. east-west. The western end of the enclosure is formed by part of the outer rampart, which seems to have a narrow gap in it, possibly contemporary with the enclosure. The eastern end is ill-defined, though it appears to cease before reaching the second ditch. There is no obvious enclosing bank at this end. The use of this enclosure is difficult to determine, and this is made more difficult by apparent incompleteness.

3. Near the western extremity of the third rampart, a shallow circular depression leads to an indistinct linear depression, lying in an approximately north-east to south-west orientation. It is about 3 m. in width, and neither edge of the depression is built up above the level of the surrounding area. It runs for about 37 m. from the circular depression to the north-east. Though these depressions appear to be connected with the rest of the camp, their purpose is a matter of conjecture.

## DATING EVIDENCE

Very little has been found at Stokeleigh Camp to give much indication of its date within the Iron Age. Its design and construction suggest the latter half of this period. Barrett states that a small hand-mill stone and a hilt of a sword have been found in the camp, though no detailed description is available, and it is doubtful whether they have even been preserved. The Rev. Dr. Hardman (1893, p. 178) stated that he had found several fragments of Romano-British pottery on the bank of the Avon, below the signal platform. This was never verified by him due to his sudden demise. Lloyd-Morgan and others have made a search in this area, but without success.

Dating evidence is severely lacking at Stokeleigh Camp, as it is also at the other two camps in the vicinity. It is thus impossible to assign this camp's construction to a period any more accurate than the latter half of the Iron Age. It may have been inhabited, however, as late as the Romano-British period.

## CONCLUSION

Stokeleigh Camp is a multivallate Iron Age hill-fort of uncertain date, possibly occupied as late as the Romano-British period. The main features

of interest are: the size and spacing of the two inner ramparts and the divergence of the third from the direction followed by the others; the unfinished nature of the westernmost parts of the defences; and, of greatest importance, the drystone walling. The walling is chiefly of interest due to its unusual construction and position, which is unlike most other drystone walling found in the region at other Iron Age hill-forts. The position of the entrance or entrances is not well defined and needs further clarification by excavation. Much about the camp, its inhabitants and its date remain unknown; some judicious excavation, however, might answer many of these questions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The map (Fig. 8) is based on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 Somerset VI, Sheet 1 (Crown copyright reserved). It will be found that the map deviates from the O.S. map in the western parts of the camp. These amendments were introduced from a survey by the author in February, 1966.

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**PLATE 7**

(*Photograph: J. W. Haldane*)

West face of wall at A. (Scale in feet).



**PLATE 8**

(*Photograph: J. W. Haldane*)

South face of wall at B. (Scale in feet).