

KINGS WESTON HILL, BRISTOL
Its Prehistoric Camps and Inhumation Cemetery
By

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ABSTRACT

In 1966 the Southwestern Gas Board cut a pipe trench along Kings Weston Hill (NGR. ST 5477). The trench crossed a cemetery, possibly of early Christian date cut through an earthwork near the centre of the hill and also went through the outer defence of the Iron Age camp at the east end. An account of the discoveries is given.

INTRODUCTION

Kings Weston Hill (Figs. 11 and 12) is the central portion of a ridge of Carboniferous Limestone northwest of Bristol. It stretches from Shirehampton on the R. Avon in the west to Blaise Castle in the east. It stands as a very steep-sided ridge dominating the lowland to the north and south. The upper slopes are densely wooded though the top is open country. The average height is 90 m above O.D.

In September 1966 the Southwestern Gas Board dug a trench along the length of the hill. It was aligned as far as was possible to avoid archaeological sites recorded on the O.S. maps. The author and his wife saw the trench being dug but were only able to pay hurried visits to the site and the retrieval of material was done under adverse conditions. The observations made on these visits form the basis of this paper.

The trench ran for about 1000 m southwest-northeast and then turned north. It was noted that the trench had cut through an inhumation at ST 54937783 (Cem) and also the corner of an earthwork (D). This had been recorded by Tratman (1924) but had not been entered on the revised O.S. maps. Further east the trench cut the outer ditch and bank of the Iron Age camp, crossed the established trackway, which here runs NW-SE and then cut through the bank and ditch of the east-running return of the outer defence of the main camp.

THE INHUMATION CEMETERY

The first indications of the presence of inhumations was the discovery of fragments of human crania, splinters of bone and human teeth in the earth thrown up by the trenching machine. This trench was about 0.7 m wide by 3.3 m deep. An examination of the section revealed a number of inhumations. I and II were found in shallow depressions scraped into the loose, weathered, natural surface of the limestone, here yellow/grey in colour. Six other inhumations were eventually located.

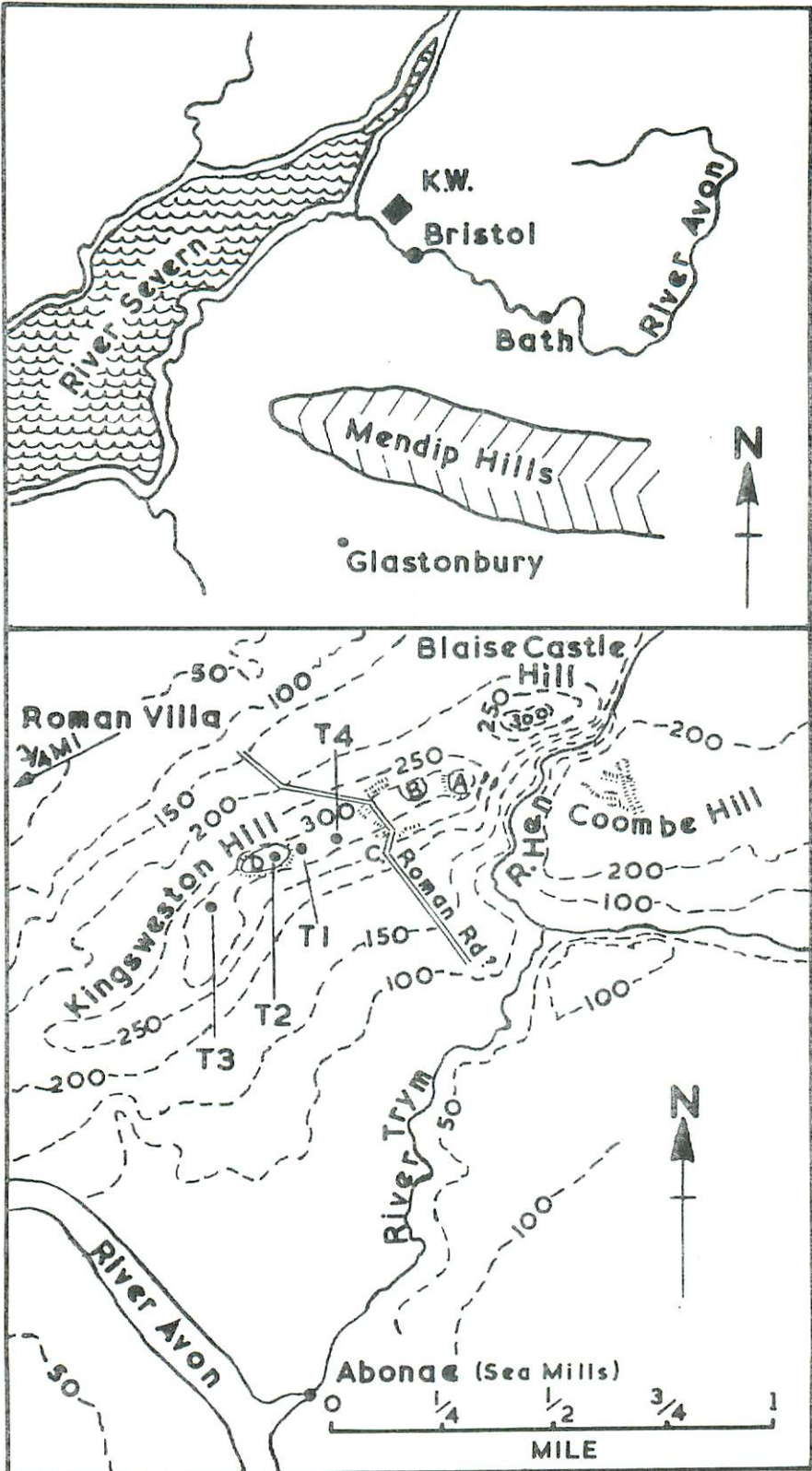


Fig. 11

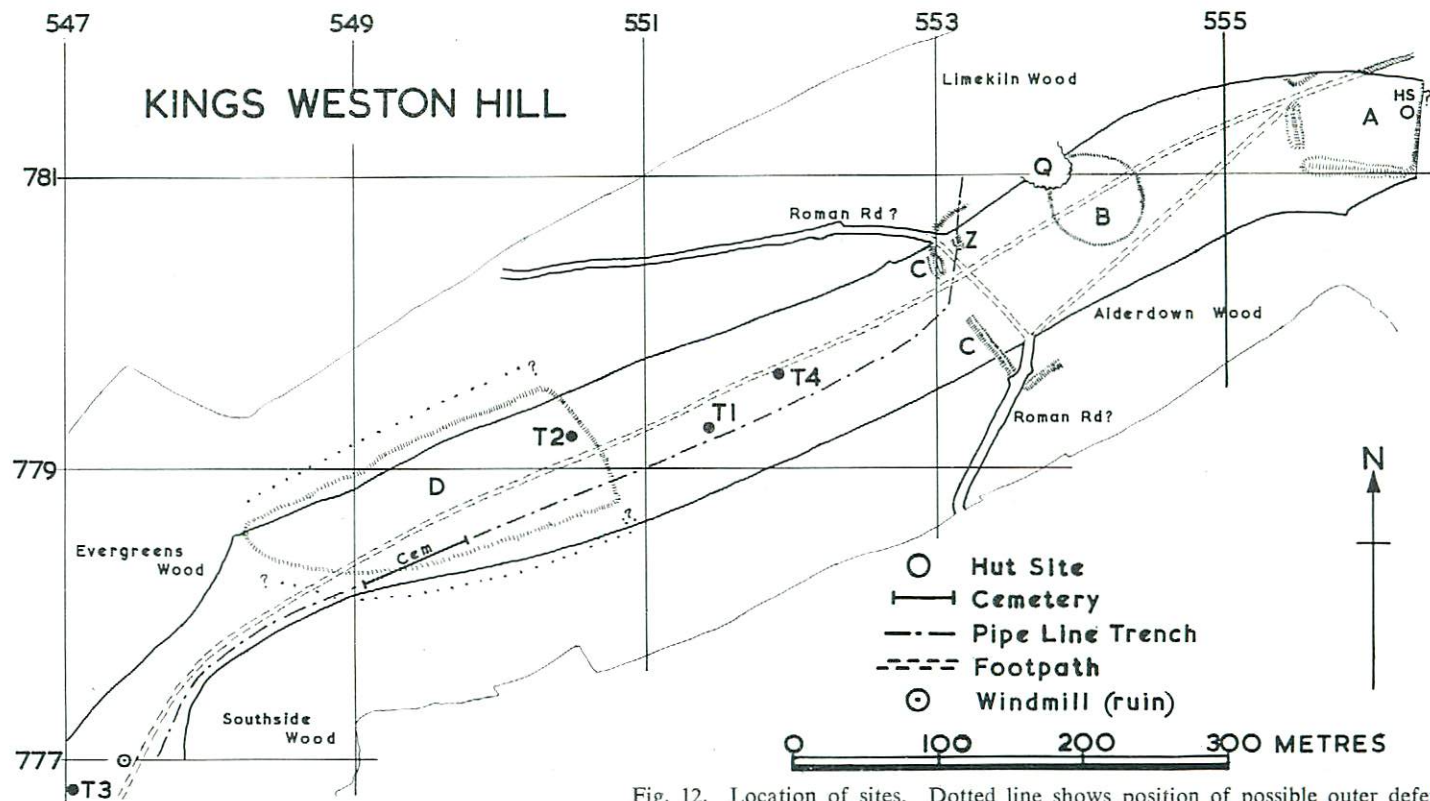


Fig. 12. Location of sites. Dotted line shows position of possible outer defence of earthwork D. Based on Ordnance Survey, Crown copyright reserved.

Time allowed only an area 2 x 1.5 m to be stripped around skeletons I and II. 8-10 cm of grey/brown humic topsoil overlay 15 cm of red/brown soil containing a large amount of limestone rubble, animal bones (some burnt), and small abraded pieces of pottery. All the graves were very shallow and were under a grassy track much used by horse riders; the heavy machine being used had caused further crushing. The graves by position were associated with the western earthwork (D). Six of the graves were outside the ditch. Three (IV, V, VI) were inside the work with the graves of IV and V cut through a disturbed area.

I. (ST 54937783). An extended supine inhumation of a youth aged about 16 years. The head was to the west, right arm across the chest and left arm flexed. The upper part of the left femur was present to show that the body had been extended. Most of the rest of the skeleton had been destroyed and the surviving bones were generally crushed and fragmentary. The grave infilling included small sherds of black ware and charred and cracked animal bones.

II. This lay 1 m east of I. What was seen showed the burial to have been an inhumation, supine, extended with head to the west. Only the upper part of this skeleton could be recovered. The right humerus was across the chest. There was a shallow grave.

III and III (1). 3 m west of I a jumble of bones indicated two inhumations. III was orientated with head to the west. The maxilla was lying in the middle of the trunk level with the elbow. Also present were a right humerus, ribs, cervical vertebrae, a clavicle, ulna and pelvis. A tibia presumably belonged to III (1). Black potsherds similar to those with I were present in the infilling.

IV. 60 m east of I. The bones were only examined in the section. The burial was supine, probably extended with head to the west. It appeared to belong to a female. The right humerus was by the side. The skeleton was covered with loose rubble and brown earth. The grave had been cut 75-90 cm into the rock. At rock surface the grave was 2 m long and at base only 0.4 m.

V. It lay 53 m east of I and had been largely destroyed by the trench cutting. The skull was to the west and the position extended, west-east, as determined by the position of parts of an ulna and radius. The bones were greatly eroded by roots. A very shallow pit had been cut as a grave.

VI. 38 m east of I lay a much disturbed adult inhumation. Bones were only seen in section. The head was to the west and the body supine and extended. The right arm had been folded across the body.

VII. This was 5 m east of I in the south side of the trench. It was an inhumation, supine, extended. The grave had been cut 20 cm into rock and through the overlying cultivation material.

VIII. This was 7 m west of I. Only a femur, tibia, fibula and small bones of the foot were found in normal anatomical relationship. These indicated a supine, extended inhumation with head to the west.

Other human material. Skull fragments of one and perhaps more individuals were found in the trench debris 1 m west of I. The associated material contained small sherds, charcoal, a piece of a chert pebble and burnt animal bones.

THE WESTERN EARTHWORK

(Fig. 12, D)

Tratman (1924) was the first to describe this. The trench cut the work in two places. Both cuttings were oblique. The west cutting showed a ditch, which had a loose rubble infilling, as 1 m deep and 9.0 m wide. The east cutting showed the ditch to be 1.25 m deep and the width

5.4 m and again a loose rubble infilling. The real width of the ditch at the top was estimated to have been about 3 m.

The earthwork has been re-examined by Tratman (personal communication). The northern bank does not run along the hedge line (1924, Fig. 19) but along the edge of the scarp about 12 m further north. Here the hill slope is very steep and the ditch is inside the bank and not outside as elsewhere. There does not seem to be any entrance. Within Evergreens Wood the bank and ditch are best preserved and there are signs of a retaining wall in the outer face of the bank at the west end. The bank here stands 1.5 m above the ditch and is 3 m wide. The ditch is more than 2 m wide.*

THE IRON AGE CAMP AT THE EAST END

The inner defence consists of a rectangular area (Fig. 12, A) with a ditch and bank on the west and south. There are no visible defences on the east and north where the slopes are very steep. There is probably a circular (7 m diam.) house site (HS) close to the eastern end. Some excavations were made in this part of the camp (Rahtz, 1957, Fig. 4, A). Between this work and the outer defence there is a roughly circular ditch with a very low bank inside (Tratman 1924, Fig. 19, B and Rahtz 1957, Fig. 4, 8). The northwest sector has been partly destroyed by a quarry. The outer work (Rahtz C) was cut by the trench. The cutting was very oblique to the line of the work and through an area where it had already been largely obliterated.

The trench did not reach the bottom of the ditch. The depth to the bottom was estimated to have been 1.5-2.0 m from the surface (*cf* Rahtz, 1957, Fig. 5). The lowest filling exposed was a red/brown earth and limestone rubble. Over this, sealing the lower layer, was a filling of small, yellow, part-weathered limestones. Above came a thick layer of red clay soil. In this was a sherd of green-glazed medieval ware. Next above was another layer of small, yellow part-weathered limestones and this in turn was capped by soil and grass.

In the lowest layer of the infilling was part of a human skeleton. The femora and tibiae were in their normal articular relationship. The head was to the north. The general arrangement suggested that the body had just been thrown in.

East of the bank is a flat area some 15 m wide bounded by a shallow ditch (2), which is not visible on the ground. The ditch section was similar to that of the ditch outside the outer bank and just described. It was cut obliquely by the trench. The filling included the equivalent of the layers of the outer ditch down to the top of the red clay. Further to the NE the trench cut through the bank and ditch of the supposed return of the outer defence of the main camp (A) along the north side.

* Since this paper went to press Dr. and Mrs. Everton have found indications of an outer defence along the northern and southern sides. Only excavation can provide proof of their existence.—Ed.

DISCUSSION

The gas main trench cut through various archaeological works on Kings Weston Hill. The existence of these were unknown to those concerned. The staff of the Gas Board and the contractors were as helpful to the author and his wife as the circumstances allowed.

The bones from the cemetery have been examined. They comprise a minimum of 10 individuals of varying age. They were all buried supine, extended, with heads to the west in very shallow graves. These had been cut through a soil that contained occupation material. The extent of the cemetery was not defined. The burials had been greatly disturbed. Family traits are noted in the detailed reports on the bones and teeth.

The people were of slender build and of only medium height. The age range was from 50 years down to 10 years. The dental state gave indications of periodic faulty development of the enamel of the teeth, perhaps caused by seasonal food shortages. The oral hygiene was poor with deposition of much salivary calculus. There was some dental caries of the modern fissure type and also some associated with food impaction between the teeth. There had been chronic inflammatory conditions of the gums. Skeleton II had a form of malocclusion consisting of a deep overjet of the maxillary incisors with pronation from pressure of the mandibular ones. In addition there had been long standing infection round the crowns of the mandibular third molars.

The infilling of the graves contained animal bones and small abraded potsherds derived from the soil through which the graves had been dug. The material thus provides only a *terminus post quem* for the burials and there were no grave goods. The pottery is comparable to that found by Rahtz in his excavations (1957) and is also like the Iron Age pottery found by in the barrows T1 and T2 close by (Tratman, 1924, 1926). Disturbance of T1 in Roman and perhaps Saxon times as well has been noted by Tratman.

Rahtz and Brown (1959) postulated that Blaise Castle, originally an Iron Age 'B' hill fort, had later survived as the site of a sub-Roman cemetery similar to other cemeteries in Somerset. But they found shallow graves of *tall, large-boned* people who had been buried extended, supine with heads to the west and dateable in one case to 4th Century and perhaps for all. There is ample evidence from the area as a whole for a dense Roman occupation till a late date. Thus by analogy the Kings Weston Hill cemetery may be of the same date or possibly later and contain Christian burials. Absolute dating is not possible on the available evidence.

The western earthwork (D) had a surprisingly deep and wide ditch much larger than could be anticipated from the poorly marked surface features. This ditch was cut into the solid limestone of the hill and was inside the bank on the north, so that it was probably defensive. Its isolated position in relation to the other works on the hill perhaps

argues for a construction independent of the eastern one, which is dated as Iron Age 'A'. On the other hand the eastern side of the work seems to avoid a proved Iron Age 'A' barrow, T2 (Tratman 1926). The loose rubble infilling of the ditch could bespeak a relatively late date.

The outer defence of the eastern camp was cut obliquely. An estimate of the depth of the ditch was 1.7 m and the width probably more than 2 m. These measurements correspond fairly closely to those of the inner bank and ditch (Rahtz, 1957). The bottom layer exposed had many similarities with layer (7) of Rahtz, who interpreted it as a destruction layer of Roman or later date. The small, yellow, part-weathered limestones of this layer is perhaps the product of simple weathering. Above this was a layer of red clay, which seemed foreign to the hill top and, as it contained a sherd of medieval pottery, could have been brought to the site during that period from the lower slopes of the hill. The reason for bringing this foreign material is obscure for by this time the ditch was quite shallow and deliberate infilling would seem to have been unnecessary. The sherd does not necessarily date the time of the infilling. The rest of the infilling seems to be the product of slow weathering.

One of the surprises was the shallow ditch, Z, (Fig. 12). No objects were found. To the north of the hill and on lower ground is the Roman villa of Kings Weston (Boon, 1950). But this was not the only Roman building found when the housing site was developed. The other ones were on a line trending up the hill roughly along the line of an old lane and trackway that comes up the hill and turns southeast across it east of earthwork C (Fig. 12). On the south the route is continued by a long straight lane down to close to the river Trym. One wonders if this is part of the missing portion of the line of the Roman road from *Abonae* (Sea Mills) to *Glevum* (Gloucester) via Cribbs Causeway. If so then the ditch Z could be the side ditch of the Roman road.

The drawings of the bronze object from barrow T1 on the hill has been re-examined. (The specimen was destroyed in 1940). Professor David Wilson (*in litt.*) of University College, London states ". . . it is not the normal type of Anglo-Saxon antiquity—it might be considered to be a belt buckle on the basis of the broken lug on the back (see Tratman, 1924, Fig. 20) and it is not improbable that it is a sixth-century object on the basis of a pair of hind legs, which appear predominantly in the ornament. Smith's parallel (in Tratman, 1924, p. 79) is, I believe, a bad one and has no connection with the object in question".

CONCLUSIONS

A gas main trench cut along Kings Weston Hill exposed part of an inhumation cemetery which cannot be securely dated. The mode of burial suggests that they were of Christians, presumably made sometime between 400-700 A.D.

Associated with the burials were animal bones, some being burnt, and small abraded potsherds. The pottery is of the same type as that from the eastern camp and barrow T2, both dated to Iron Age 'A'. The dispersal of this material suggests that it was a component of manure spread on the hill by the Iron Age 'A' inhabitants of the site.

The western earthwork (D) was shown to have a surprisingly deep and wide ditch. It antedates the cemetery but is otherwise undated.

The outer defence of the eastern earthwork showed features comparable with those of the inner defence ditch and enclosure. These yielded Iron Age 'A' material so the outer work can be reasonably assigned to that period. The return of the outer defence along the north side was proved to exist.

The unexpected extra, shallow ditch 'Z' just east of the outer defence could be the side ditch of the Roman road postulated to cross the hill here on its route from Sea Mills (*Abonae*) to Gloucester (*Glevum*).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DISPOSAL OF THE FINDS

All the material has been deposited in the City Museum, Bristol, together with the specialist reports. In these reports skeletons A-H correspond with I-VIII in this paper.

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