

## Report on the Excavation of Mendip Barrows during 1923.

BY R. F. READ.

During the past year excavations have been made in several tumuli in the Burrington District by this Society. None of these mounds are marked on the six inch Ordnance Maps (1902), and no record of their examination is known to us. All the barrows described below are on Blackdown, and are numerated in order of excavation.

Sepulchral mounds are common on Mendip, and many have been opened by early investigators, but unfortunately almost all record of their labours has been lost, and with the exception of urns from Rowberrow and Priddy, and a grape cup from the latter locality in the Bristol Museum, the "finds" have been lost. Therefore up to the present we have had only the scantiest records of the distribution and equipment of the Bronze Age peoples in this district, and it was to amplify this evidence that the work described in this paper was undertaken.

### BARROW No 1. (Fig. 14).

The position of this barrow is 980 yards east of the bench mark 499.3 feet at the junction of the Rowberrow, Burrington and Langford—Charterhouse tracks. It is situated on a level stretch of heath between Burrington Combe and Mendip Lodge Wood, which is an outlier of Blackdown, and is about 580 feet above sea level. The valley of the Yeo, the hills on the other side of the river, and the Welsh hills north of the Severn can be distinguished from the site.

The barrow is 41 feet in diameter, and rises to a height of two feet six inches near the centre. It is made up of a central mound, 25 feet in diameter, surrounded by a ditch now partially filled. Outside the ditch is a low mound 18 inches high, and five feet wide at the base and completely encircling it, except for an apparent gap of two feet six inches to the south. Both mounds are greatly obscured by many ant-hills.

### EXCAVATION.

Digging operations were carried out in May and June 1923. A trench was dug through the gap in a northerly direction, and widened so that most of the inner mound was eventually removed. The material moved was sorted carefully. It was found that the inner mound consisted of three layers, all above the original surface.

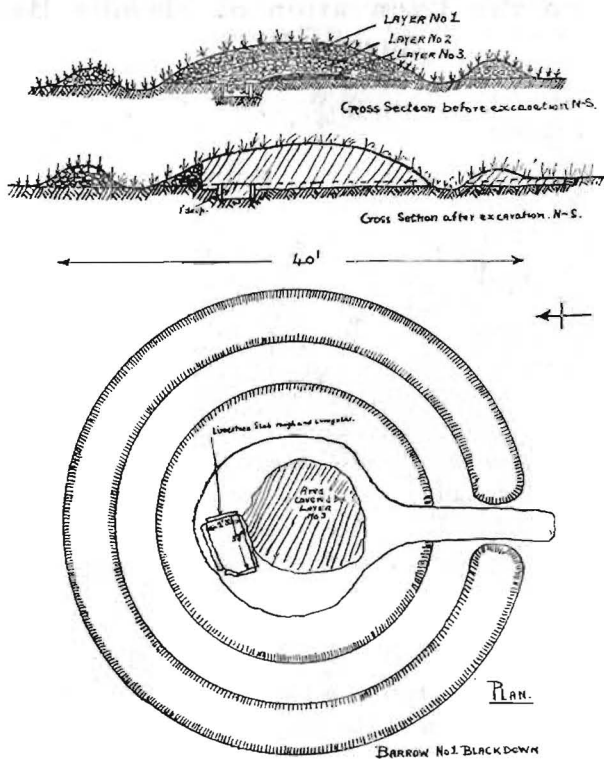


FIG. 14.

of the ground. The uppermost layer was made of Old Red Sandstone blocks mixed with black humus. Many of the blocks had been blackened by fire; its depth was one foot. The second layer was similar to the first, but red soil lay between the stones; its depth was also one foot. The third layer was six inches thick, and was composed of black and grey soil and stones. This layer extended about six feet from the centre of the barrow in every direction. At its northern limit and on the original ground level several large slabs of sandstone were found lying horizontally. When these were removed, a cist two feet three inches wide, three feet seven inches long and a foot deep was disclosed (Plate V, No 1.) The walls of the cist were made of sandstone, and one limestone slab. The cist was filled with earth, and contained the fragments of a beaker, but no interment. The barrow is situated near the junction of the Devonian and Carboniferous systems, and fragments of Old Red Sandstone are very common on the surrounding land.

Fragments of coarse pottery, charcoal, flints and calcined human bone were found throughout the third layer, but a much larger quantity of potsherds was found in the first and second layers in a small area about four feet south of the centre. Apparently the cist represents a primary interment, while the calcined human bone and coarse pot sherds represent a much later burial.

#### POTTERY.

The fragments of pottery, which were found against the west side of the cist, were soft, moist and friable, breaking under their own weight; this was largely due to the attacks of bracken roots. After removal, when the sherds had been dried they were fitted together and found to be parts of a beaker or drinking cup (Plate V, No. 5). The paste was dull red in colour, of a uniform texture, and had been finely ground. It contained no granules of quartz or calcite. The vessel, which appeared to have been well fired, had an ovoid body, with greatest diameter at one-third of the total height, narrowing gently above to form a recurved rim. It was decorated by eleven parallel rows of impressed marks, made by a slightly notched implement, then a plain zone, succeeded by two parallel bands of ten barred chevrons separated by another plain zone. There was a further plain zone at the base. Following Lord Abercromby<sup>1</sup> the beaker belongs to Type B, sub-type, Phase II, B, which lies half way through the period 2000—1500 B.C., that is near the beginning of the Bronze Age in Britain. It is the most northerly beaker found in the west of Province 1, that is, south of the Thames. The height of the vessel is  $8\frac{1}{2}$  inches, and the greatest diameter  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

The fragments of coarse pottery found in the third layer were made of a dark chocolate paste, without granules, which has been burnt to a lighter colour on the outside, and the interior being almost black. Parts of at least two pots were present, both being decorated with two rows of "pot-hooks" (Plate V, No. 2). Similar ornamentation was found on a cinerary urn from a barrow on Hengistbury Head.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately insufficient material was found to reconstruct these vessels, but the walls of the second were straight, and the rim was rounded simply.

#### ASSOCIATED IMPLEMENTS.

Two flint fragments and one knife (Fig. 16, No. 2) bearing

<sup>1</sup> *Study of British Bronze Age Pottery*, Vol. I, page 22, Plate 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Excavations of Hengistbury Head*, J. Bushe-Fox, Society of Antiquaries, London, 1915, Plate II.

secondary chipping were found inside the cist, and about a dozen fragments of worked flint were found in the other levels. The knife had been cracked by fire. A few fragments of chert, such as is often found in the local carboniferous limestone, were also discovered. Some of these may have been used as implements.

Finds of beakers have previously been made in Somerset at Wick,<sup>3</sup> Culborne, Exmoor; Wincanton; and Barwick. The vessel described above extends the province of the Beaker folk to the northern slope of the Mendips.

It is usual to find an inhumation with a beaker, but in this case the cist, alone was found, without a trace of any unburnt human remains. Only two minute fragments of calcined human bones which had obviously fallen from the secondary interment above, were found within the cist. It may be that owing to the conditions obtaining within the cist during the last three thousand years or more, and the effect of the roots of the heath and bracken growing on the surface of the barrow, the bones have become entirely disintegrated, but this is uncertain. Careful search has failed to reveal any trace of such an interment.

The practice of secondary interments in barrows is well-known, and calls for little comment. In this barrow the interment was certainly later than the beaker period, but the quantity of pottery discovered was too meagre for a determination of its exact period to be made.

#### BARROW No. 2. (Fig. 15.)

This barrow is situated 200 yards south of Barrow No. 1. It is a scarcely distinguishable raised ring about nine inches high, 35 feet diameter, and two feet six inches wide at the base.

#### EXCAVATION.

In the level space enclosed, and through the surrounding mound, a pit was dug about six feet square and two feet deep. This was in the south of the barrow. Later this excavation was supplemented by trenches to the east and west, so that eventually most of the area of the barrow had been examined. Undisturbed yellowish soil with few stones was found at a depth of 18 inches; above were fragments of Old Red Sandstone and humus.

Six feet south of the centre, under a mound of stones six inches higher than the general flat surface, a cist was discovered. Three sides were formed by large flat stones standing vertically below

---

<sup>3</sup> *Report on the Excavation of Wick Barrow*, H. St. George Gray.

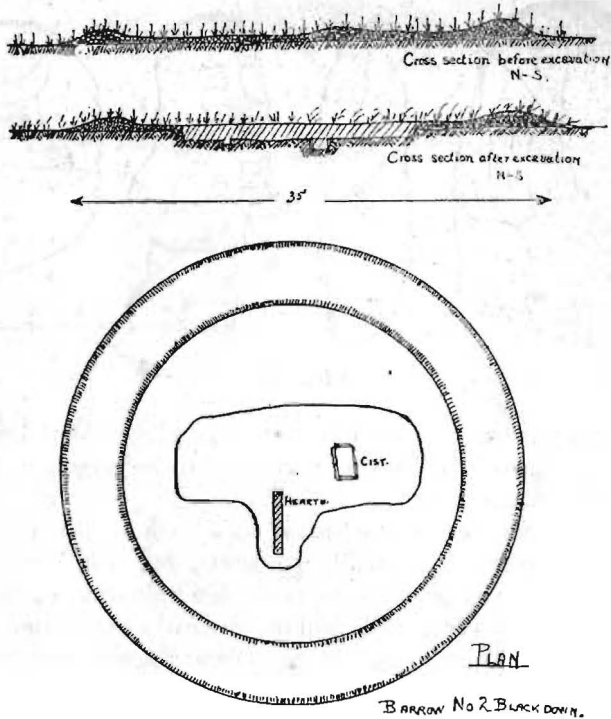


FIG. 15.

the original surface of the ground; the south wall was absent. The floor was composed of flat stones like a "crazy pavement." The cist was filled with earth in which were a couple of handfuls of calcined human bones, which was less fragile and more easily identified than similar fragments from Barrow No. 1. Beneath the stones of the floor lay unburnt bones of some animal, probably pig.

A small fragment of copper about the size of a threepenny piece, and numerous fragments of flint were found around the centres of the barrow. A larger rough flint implement, and a small piece of hæmatite, which is common in the locality, were found to the north.

In the west a trench was discovered running east and west, under a large stone lying horizontally; this was filled by a black layer, containing charcoal and flints. It was eight inches wide, three feet long, and six inches deep, and contained a little calcined bone, which may have been human. One of the flint implements was a large end scraper (Fig. 16, No. 1) showing a considerable amount of the cortex of the nodule, another was a flake knife, No. 3. Perhaps the most important find made in the barrow was also discovered in

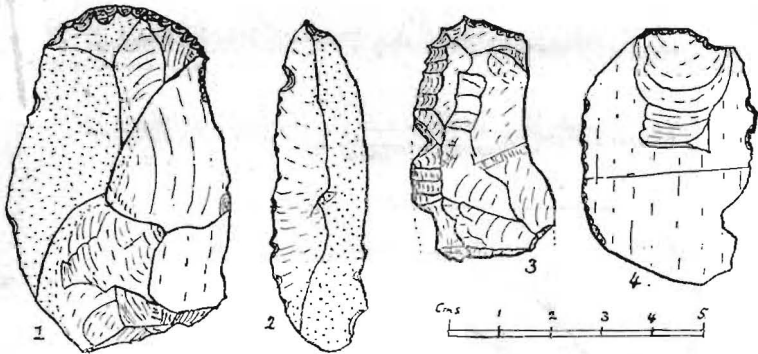


FIG. 16.

this hearth ; it was a small fragment of a polished flint implement, possibly a celt, patinated white, its edges bearing marks of apparent usage as a knife (No. 4).

The cist has been disturbed at some remote period, and any pottery it may have originally contained has vanished. This is unfortunate since it prevents accurate determination of the age of the barrow. However, the cist and in some ways the barrow, are very similar in construction to Barrow No. 1, and possibly both date from the same time. The polished flint implement supports this hypothesis. Against an early date for the tumulus is the occurrence of calcined human bone in the cist, but this may have been introduced at a later burial.

#### BARROW No. 3. (Fig. 17).

The site of this barrow is on the northern slope of Blackdown, in the valley of the brook which disappears into Read's Cavern. It is 700 feet south west of the bench mark mentioned above. Its elevation about 550 feet above O.D. Like the first barrow, it consists of a central mound surrounded by a circular mound (Fig. 17). The maximum diameter is 35 feet. The mean height of the central cairn is twelve inches, but the surrounding mound rises to two feet, and is about five feet wide at the base.

#### EXCAVATION.

The barrow was excavated in June 1923. The stones, which were of Old Red Sandstone and limestone, were removed from the centre of the inner mound, and digging commenced in the stony yellow earth, below the original surface of the ground. Almost directly in the centre of the barrow a number of vertical slabs were disclosed ; they formed a kind of degenerate cist, without capstones. The top

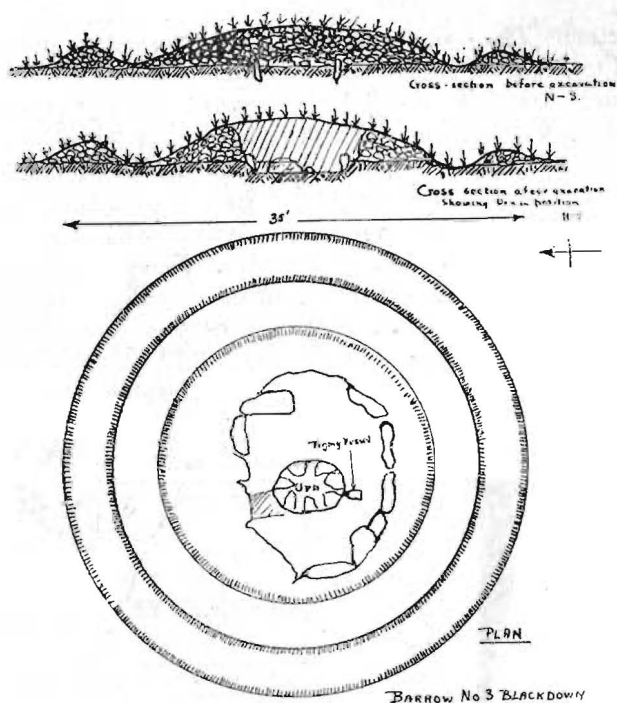


FIG. 17.

of the cist was flush with the original surface level. Inside was a very large collapsed urn (Plate V, No. 4). The absence of roofing stones and the depredations of bracken roots had resulted in the almost total destruction of the large pot, which had been placed mouth downwards. The base and walls had fallen in, leaving a collapsed heap of sherds, which crumpled when touched. Adjacent to the south side of this heap lay a pygmy vessel, which was almost intact. Measurements of the inverted rim were made *in situ*. It was found to be  $11\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $13\frac{1}{2}$  inches; this lack of symmetry being certainly due to distortion. About one ounce of calcined bone in a pasty condition, one small flint chip, and several rough pieces of chert came from inside the cist. On the northern border among the calcined bone lay fragments of the cheek tooth of a horse.

#### POTTERY.

The paste of the large cinerary urn was exceedingly coarse, sections of crinoids and pieces of limestone half an inch long having been introduced along with the grit used to strengthen the fabric. The sherds resembled in many ways some found in Read's Cavern, being black inside and some at least having a red ochreous exterior,

half section. The fragments which numbered over a hundred were allowed to dry and harden, and after infinite labour a reconstruction of the urn was made (Fig. 18). The vessel is of the enlarged Food Vessel Type 7 (Abercromby). The base is five inches in diameter, above which the body expands to a horizontal rib decorated with imperforate depressions about half an inch apart, and expands more gently to a raised rib decorated in a similar manner, but with larger depressions at slightly greater intervals. Between the raised rib, and the rim is a cylindrical collar ornamented with a simple design, made by the impressing of a cord into the paste before firing. The rim expands to a flat lip having four parallel impressed cord marks. The diameter of the rim is 18 inches, and the total height of the pot 19 inches.

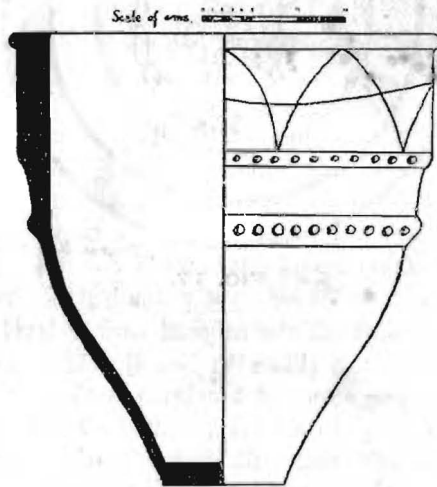


FIG. 18.

The pygmy cup (Plate V, No. 3), is made of a much finer paste than the larger urn. The colour is the same, but there is no stone or grit in its composition. It is  $2\frac{1}{4}$  inches high, rather barrel shaped, and entirely devoid of ornament.

Since the large urn is of the enlarged food vessel type this interment could have been made in the latter portion of the Period of Bronze Age II, dating from 1400-1150 B.C.<sup>1</sup>

The excavations described above shew that the northern slopes of Blackdown were inhabited for a large part of the Bronze Age at least. The practice of scattering potsherds throughout the material

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, page 109.



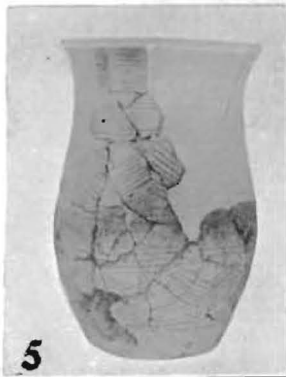
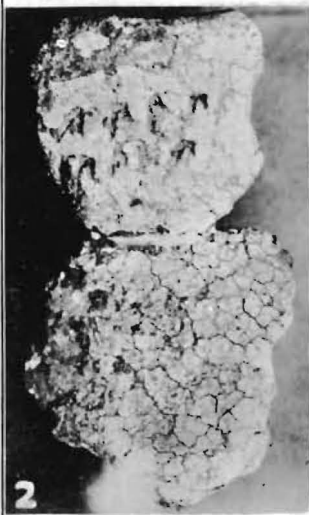
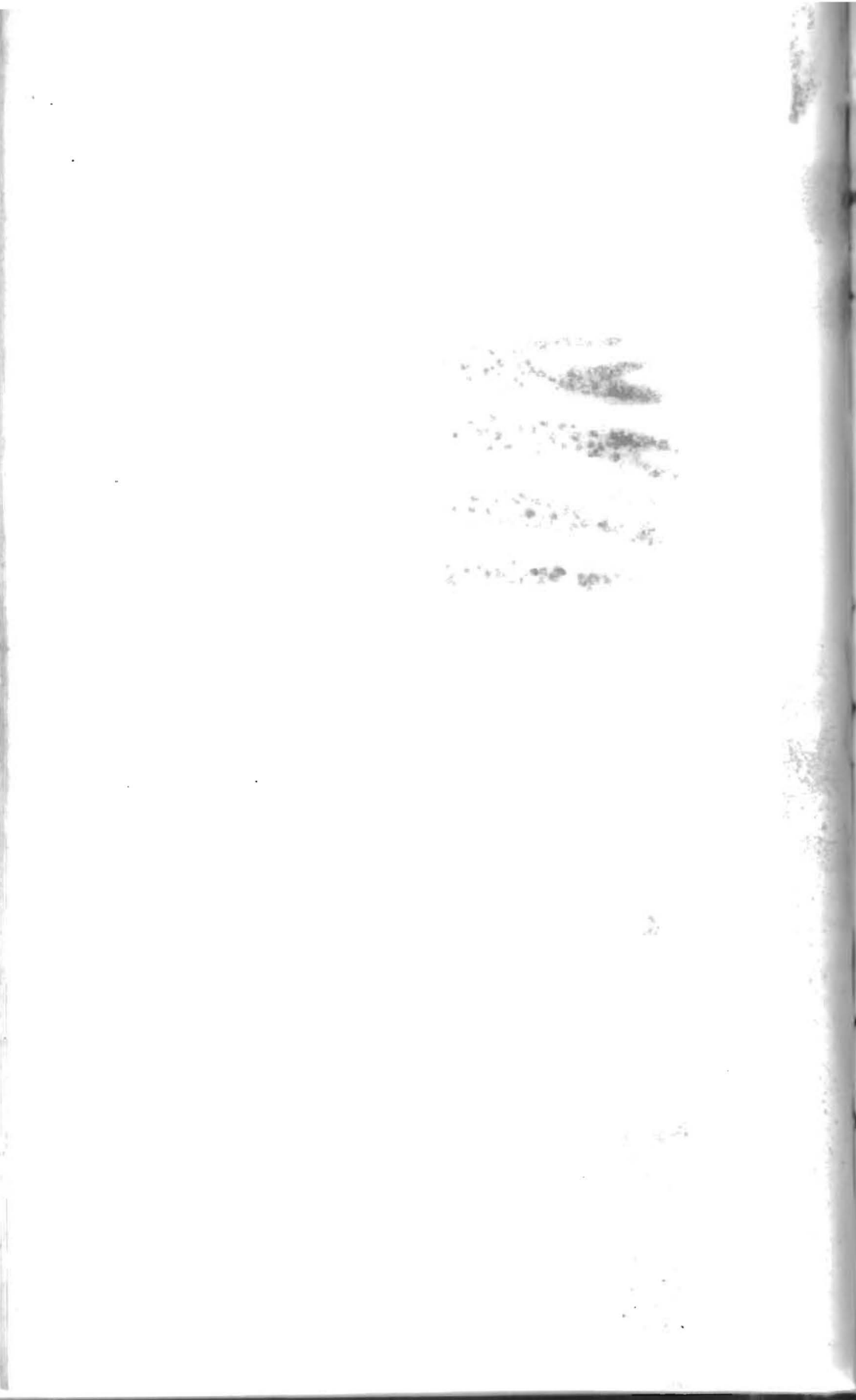


PLATE V.



of the burial mounds has not yet been discovered in this district, but though flint does not occur naturally within 25 miles of Burrington, fragments of that material are plentifully scattered around each interment.

Work is proceeding in other mounds in this district, with satisfactory results, and it is hoped that within a year much more will be known of the Bronze Age on Mendip.

The writer wishes to acknowledge his deep indebtedness to Mr. Herbert Taylor for the vast amount of laborious and skilful work which he has expended on the reconstruction of the pottery, and in many other ways. Without his aid the majority of the material obtained would have yielded little evidence.

Finally we wish to express our thanks once more to our Hon. President, Sir G. A. Wills for permission to excavate on his estate, and also to Mr. Williams for permission to excavate a barrow at Pinney Sleight Farm.

---