

Guy's Rift, Slaughterford, Wilts. : An Early Iron Age Habitation.

BY T. F. HEWER.

While attempting to gain access to a rift at Slaughterford, Wilts., in 1922, Capt. Guy St. Barbe dislodged a quantity of earth in which he found numerous human bones and remains of various domestic animals; he spent some days in carefully collecting all available material and submitted a report to Sir Arthur Keith.

In spite of Capt. St. Barbe's vigilance at this time, some boys visited the spot and removed a large number of bones; fortunately, however, most, if not all, of these found their way to the Devizes Museum.

In the autumn of 1924 Sir Arthur Keith requested the Spelæological Society to assist Capt. St. Barbe in the excavation of the site. In January 1925 the work was begun.

The site consists of a seventy-five foot long vertical rift in the oolite cliff (Plate XVII) at the top of a steep slope overlooking the river, 520' west of B.M. 198.4, near the Slaughterford Paper Mills, on the 6-inch. Ordnance Survey Map, Wilts., Sheet XIX, S.E.; the site is here marked "Cloud Quarry," but it does not seem to be known by that name at the present day. Extensive quarrying of the oolite along the top of this hill was performed several hundred years ago, and it is said that stone for building Malmesbury Abbey was obtained here.

The rift nowhere reaches the surface of the ground above, as it is covered by ten feet of undisturbed rock. The northern end has been fully exposed by quarrying so that it is impossible to say whether the rift became much wider at that end, what the original entrance was like, or where it was situated. The lower levels of the rock, which are of superior quality, have been undercut, thus producing a cave-like appearance; this is represented by the dotted line on the plan (Fig. 1).

The floor of the rift was some twelve feet above the level of the ground, so that it could only be entered by a somewhat perilous climb up the face of the cliff. Plate XVII is a view of the north end of the rift; the trees in the foreground stand within the quarried area; the undercutting at the foot of the cliff and the precarious nature of the overhanging strata are plainly visible.

EXCAVATION.

The material fallen from the end of the rift was sorted and excavation of the undisturbed floor begun; this was attended with great difficulty on account of the darkness and narrowness of the passage the average width being less than two feet. The stratification was as follows:—

- (a) Two feet of dark earth, with the débris of countless jackdaw's nests.
- (b) A layer one foot deep, containing charcoal, burnt bones, pottery and human remains, etc.
- (c) Barren clayey soil with loose stones and boulders extending to the ground level.

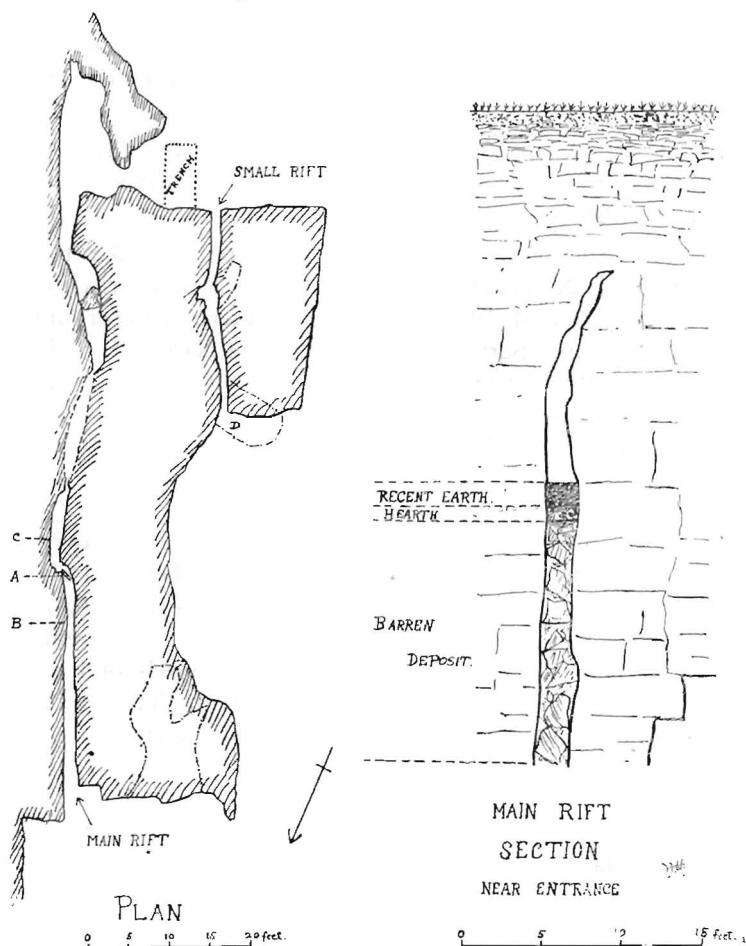


FIG. 1.

A trench was also dug to a depth of eight feet at the south end of the cliff (Fig. 1) ; this shewed that this end had also been quarried, and no signs of habitation were found.

The main rift could be entered at the South end, but it was not possible to get right through on account of some large boulders with which it was not safe to interfere. The earth deposit ended at a point twenty-nine feet from the north end (marked C in Fig. 1) so there was no object in attempting to force a passage.

The small rift was explored and opened up at its north end, so that it became possible to crawl through ; it was in a " chamber " here (marked D in Fig. 1) that Capt. St. Barbe found some fragments of flint, including a rough blade ; similar flints are to be found on the field above the cliff, and, in the absence of any possibility of this part being occupied at any time, they must have fallen in during quarrying operations.

FINDS.

These include those found originally by Capt. St. Barbe, those obtained during the excavations, and the bones which were sent to Devizes Museum ; for the last I am deeply indebted to the Committee of the Wiltshire Archæological Society who have kindly presented them to this Society.

HUMAN REMAINS.

Four adults and three children. It was possible to reconstruct a large part of one of the adult skulls, and it is on this that Mr. L. H. Dudley Buxton has written the report which is published in this issue.

Many other bones, besides skull fragments, were found, but these present no points of particular interest. One of the adults, judging from a mandible which shews signs of absorption, was an old man ; the other three were probably middle-aged ; the children were aged about four, six and eleven years respectively, these figures being arrived at by examination of unerupted teeth.

The human bones were found from the entrance of the rift to a point twenty-six feet in (marked A in Fig. 1), where the passage became narrowed, and there was a turn to the left ; no daylight penetrates beyond this point. At this corner there was a large flat stone lying obliquely across the passage, and it was under this that the frontal bone and other skull fragments of the eldest of the children were found.

ARTIFACTS.

A few rough pot sherds with charcoal and burnt bones were present in the occupation level for a distance of twenty feet from the entrance (marked B in Fig. 1). Only two pot fragments could be fitted together; they represented part of the brim and side of a vessel three inches in diameter (Fig. 2, No. 1); no part of the base was recognisable. The paste is over three-quarters of an inch thick, coarse and black throughout, containing many white granules and fragments of snail shells; the pot is hand-made and devoid of decoration; the rim is slightly incurved, and the sides slope uniformly inwards without a shoulder; the outside is coated with a thin layer of oolitic mud which has evidently formed since the pot was deposited in the rift.

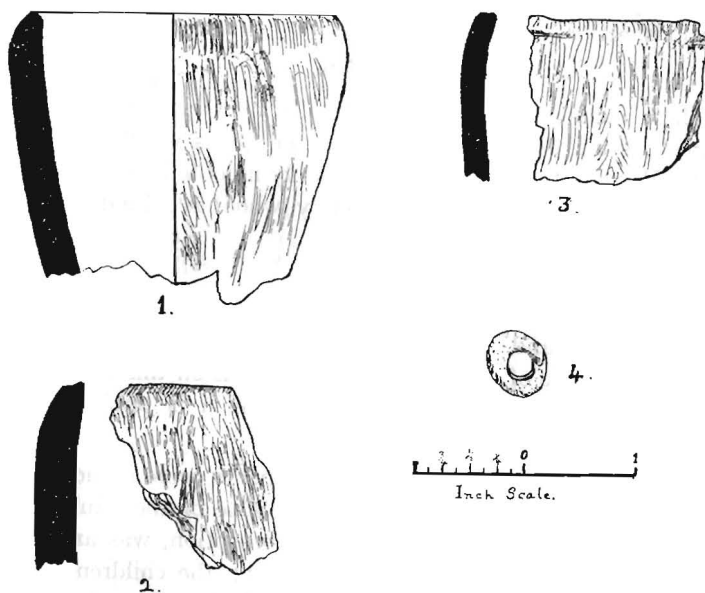


FIG. 2.

Rim fragments of two other vessels were found; the first (Fig. 2, No. 2) is of the same material as that just described, but is thicker and belongs to a larger vessel; it bears two faint indented lines, but these do not seem to be part of any scheme of decoration; the rim is incurved, flat on top, and has a slight lip along the inner side. The second fragment (Fig. 2, No. 3) is of finer material and belongs to a vessel roughly six inches in diameter; it also is hand-made, of

a reddish clay, containing many granules and shell fragments ; there are traces of a horizontal incised line one-eighth of an inch below the rim, marking it off from the body ; the rim is incurved and flat on top. This pot bears some resemblance to a type found at Fifield Bavant, Wilts.

A few sherds of another vessel, with a thin layer of red clay on the outside, were also found ; the paste is of the same nature as those described above, but is rather less thick.

All the fragments would appear to be ordinary domestic ware ; they are certainly referable to the Early Iron Age, but whether Hallstatt, or early La Tène, it is difficult to say.

The only other artifact was a chalk bead (Fig. 2, No. 4) which consists of a roughly circular nodule of chalk, flattened unevenly on either side and bored cleanly through the centre.

ANIMAL REMAINS.

A great many bones and teeth of ox, apparently belonging to one individual ; the distal ends of many of the ribs have been cut off by blows with some sharp instrument ; only a few of these shew signs of charring by fire, but the long bones are split longitudinally.

Wild boar and sheep bones are plentiful. Other animals include, badger, weasel and recent voles, mice and shrews, rats and (?) otter.

Several jaws of a large species of dog have been identified by Mr. J. Wilfrid Jackson as being "of the same type as those from Glastonbury Lake Village and the Early Iron Age sites at All Cannings Cross, Fifield Bavant and Swallowcliffe Down, Wilts. ; it is the type of *Canis familiaris* described by Rütimeyer as 'House-dog of the Stone Age,' and among present day races the type is represented by the hound or by the setter or pointer. There were no 'fancy' breeds in prehistoric times, but dogs of general utility to the herdsman and hunter."

The birds do not call for any special notice, as they are such forms as may be living in the district at the present time, viz. : Song Thrush, Redwing, Blackbird, Robin, House Martin, House Sparrow, Magpie, Jackdaw, Skylark, Brown Owl, Blackcock and Pheasant.¹

The molluscan remains include : *Pomatius elegans*, Müll, *Clausilia laminata*, Mont., *Polita cellarina*, Müll., and *Goniodiscus rotundatus*, Müll.

¹ Identified by Mr. E. T. Newton, F.R.S.

CONCLUSIONS.

The rift represents part of a site occupied by people with an early La Tène or Hallstatt culture. Mr. Buxton's observations upon one of the skulls (*q.v.*) suggest that they may have been descendants of the old Neolithic people.

There is no evidence of a definite burial for any of the human bones, and, on the other hand, there has been no fall of rock within the rift which might suggest that their presence was due to a catastrophe; they certainly did not merely fall into the rift so it is only left to suppose that this was the back of a larger habitation, the major part having been removed by quarrying.

My very grateful thanks are due to Mr. A. Jones of Manor Farm, Slaughterford, owner of the land, for his kindness and hospitality at all times, and to the Rev. H. E. Ketchley, of Biddestone, for providing labour on two days when the work was particularly difficult.
