

## Note on Excavations at Gorsey Bigbury, Charterhouse-on-Mendip, Somerset

1931—1935

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When the regular excavation of this site was commenced in July, 1931, it was agreed that no report should be published before the completion of the field work. In this way it was hoped to avoid unnecessary repetition and premature speculation. As the analysis of the material from this excavation is not yet completed, the purpose of this note is merely to record the completion of the excavation of the main features of the site, and to indicate briefly some of its more important aspects.<sup>1</sup>

The site is on the land of Lower Farm in the hamlet of Charterhouse-on-Mendip. It lies on a spur separating a small tributary valley from the valley occupied by Long Wood, which is linked to Cheddar Gorge by Velvet Bottom. To be more precise, the site is immediately south of the F in Lower F M in square J. 13 of Sheet 110 of the Popular Edition of the One Inch Map. It consisted essentially of a circular earth ring, or rampart, enclosing a flattish area with a diameter of about 70 feet and with a general tendency to rise a few inches towards the centre. Between the ring and the area thus enclosed there was a slight depression, running sympathetically with the ring, and suggesting the possibility of a ditch beneath. To the north the continuity of the ring was interrupted by a gap. As there were no similar gaps at other points of the ring, and as there was no beaten path across the site, this was inferred to imply the presence of a causeway. The indeterminate nature of its outer limit made it difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the width of the ring, and as this is not essential for the present discussion it will be reserved for the final report.

The excavation was commenced in July, 1931, and continued in September of the same year. Since then it has been continued

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to his temporary absence from England, the writer is without the use of his log book and field notes. Consequently detail has been avoided, and the aim has been merely to give other workers some idea of the nature of the site. No conclusions should be drawn until the complete report appears.

regularly at the Easter and Summer camps of the Society, and also at the usual week-end camps. By the end of the Summer Camp of 1934, there remained only one or two features of the rampart or ring which required further investigation, and work on these has been continued during the week-end camps of the present year.

### MAIN FEATURES AND METHODS OF EXCAVATION.

#### THE FLAT CENTRAL AREA.

The Flat Central Area was the first feature investigated, a face being advanced across it from east to west. The soil here varied in thickness from 6 to 9 inches, and the whole area was scraped to rock. The excavation revealed only natural formations such as a narrow rift and two small natural depressions. The former, tested to a depth of 6 feet, was filled with undisturbed clay. A few surface flints were found but none of any great significance. A tendency for the rock to slope outwards around the periphery of the central area further suggested the presence of a ditch.

#### THE DITCH.

The next step was the making of a trial trench to locate and define the limits of the ditch. The trench was commenced about 15 feet west of the Causeway, the plan being to advance the face later towards the Causeway. In this way the ditch was discovered, and its excavation was continued systematically on two faces, one advancing clockwise, the other anti-clockwise. Where the ditch contained any signs of occupation, the faces were carefully layered.

The ditch was obviously intended to be circular in shape, but its changes in direction at certain points are sufficiently marked for one to describe it as hexagonal in outline. It is modified on the north-west by a rift and interrupted on the north by a causeway of virgin rock. It was undoubtedly formed by peeling off thin layers of limestone along the natural cleavage planes; possibly wooden poles were used as crude wedges and levers. The relation of the ditch to the local geology is quite obvious. Where it runs with the strike of the rock, one wall is sloping and the other straight; where it runs with the dip of the rock, both walls are straight and the floor uneven or stepped. It is best developed to the north-east and to the north-west, where the deepest parts range from 6 to 8 feet below turf level and the width varies from 15 to 20 feet. To the west, south-west, south and south-east, it is shallower and narrower. In places the bottom is barely more than 4 feet below the turf level and the width varies

from 12 to 15 feet. On the north-west the ditch is, as stated, interrupted by a rift, 4 feet in width, running approximately from N.N.E. to S.S.W. The top portion of the rift had a filling of undisturbed brown clay resting on undisturbed yellow clay with grit. At a point 7 feet west of the junction of the ditch and the rift, this brown clay extended to a depth of about 9 feet below turf level, and a few inches above its junction with the yellow clay was a charcoal band *circa* 1½ to 2 inches in thickness. At a point 8 feet further west, the junction of brown and yellow clay was only about 7 feet below the turf level, and the charcoal band was at the junction. This evidence suggests an attempt to continue the ditch despite the broken nature of the ground, an attempt carried on apparently with diminishing ardour.

#### THE CAUSEWAY.

The excavation has proved, as indicated, that this consists of virgin rock and not simply of beaten earth. Other features of the Causeway will be discussed in the final report.

#### THE RING, OR RAMPART.

This, as indicated in Tratman's original field notes,<sup>2</sup> has been considerably ploughed down. It is best preserved on the west, where on the inner side it stood about 4½ feet above the bottom of the depression. Sections have been cut through it both on the west and on the east side. It is now about 3 feet high and about 25 feet across; it consists on the inner side of soil with small pieces of limestone; and on the outer side, overlying this, of a tip of surface soil. The stone was doubtless derived from the ditch but it can hardly represent the whole that was quarried. There was possibly a level space some 6 feet wide between the ditch and rampart. No trace of post holes or of a set kerb was found.<sup>3</sup>

#### FUNCTIONS OF THE DITCH.

As judged by material finds, the ditch seems to have had two functions: (a) as a burial site; (b) as a living site. Any deeper significance which may be attached to it is a matter for conjecture and lies outside the scope of the present note. These two functions must be briefly considered.

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<sup>2</sup> Some general information concerning the site, together with approximate measurements of some of its surface indications, will be found in Prof. Tratman's Field Notes in an earlier number of the *Proceedings* of this Society (Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 34-36).

<sup>3</sup> The final investigation of the ring is, in the writer's absence, being conducted by Dr. H. Taylor and Mr. C. R. Hewer, who are also very kindly supervising the cataloguing of material.

*a.* The one definite burial found occurred in the north-west portion of the ditch, approximately 15 feet west of the Causeway. The grave was adapted to the nature of the floor of the ditch in this section. The depression left by breaking off a slab along a cleavage plane, during the construction of the ditch, had been filled with small stones tightly packed to form an even floor. On this floor rested a thin limestone slab, on which lay a human skull, face upwards, and a few other fragments of human bone (details will be given in the final report). A few small limestone slabs marked the outer limit of the grave, the inner limit being the inner wall of the ditch. A sloping slab, resting against the inner wall of the ditch afforded slight protection to the skull, but beyond this there was no further evidence of a constructed grave. Associated with the human remains were a bone scoop, four bone points, a barbed and tanged arrow-head, a flint spear head, and a fragment of beaker ware with incised criss-cross lines. Many human bones, presumably of the same individual, were found in the ditch filling of this section. The evidence indicates the burial of a skeleton, not of a body.

The only other human bones found were half a mandible on the ditch floor a few feet east of the burial, and fragments of two skulls beneath a living site to the east of the Causeway. In these instances there was no evidence of definite burial.

*b.* The north-east, east, south and south-west portions of the ditch contained concentrated charcoal deposits yielding animal bones, worked flints, and pottery. The evidence leaves no doubt that these sections must have been used as a living site. The occupation seems to have been most intensive in the north-east section, immediately adjoining the Causeway. Here, as previously stated, the outer wall of the ditch shapes in to meet the vertical inner wall. At a point 10 feet east of the Causeway, a platform of rubble had been built on the floor of the outer half of the ditch. That this was intended to serve as a floor is evident from the thick charcoal band resting on it. Indeed, in this section, the occupation was almost entirely over the platform, with only occasional finds on the inner side of the ditch, which was filled with brown clay yielding only a few flints, pottery sherds, and fragments of charcoal. At a distance of 14 feet east of the Causeway, the rubble platform had disappeared, and the charcoal band indicating most intense occupation here rested on brown clay. Although evidence of occupation again tended to be most marked in the outer half, it here spread to a greater degree to the inner half. In the south and south-west sections, the evidence of settlement was much less marked, often being limited to a narrow charcoal band.

No post holes were found along the edges of the ditch, and so the possibility of there having been a crude roof of perishable material must remain open.

#### ARTIFACTS AND POTTERY.

As regards the flint and pottery finds, it is not advisable to go into detail at the moment, as the work of cataloguing, reconstructing, and classifying is not yet completed. A few matters of interest may, however, be noted. The site has yielded a good series of flints of Beaker age. The finding of pigmy flints in horizons containing Beaker ware is of considerable importance. Of other flints, round scrapers are very typical, whilst both barbed and tanged and triangular-shaped arrow-heads occur. The incomplete (as distinct from broken) nature of some of the flints, together with the very large number of very fine chips, leaves no doubt that many of them must have been made on the site. Further, the site has yielded an important series of domestic Beaker ware. The indications are that Abercrombie's Type A is strongly represented. One of the reconstructed beakers of this type has a circle of small perforations on one side of the body. They bear no obvious relation to the underlying pattern and seem undoubtedly later in date. The theory that they indicate repairs to the pot does not seem entirely satisfactory in this instance, and the matter deserves further investigation. One should note, finally, that thicker ware with coarse ribbed decoration also occurred.

#### AGE OF SITE.

A discussion of the age of the site must await the final report. Suffice it to say that a beaker sherd was found with the burial on the floor of the ditch, and that beaker sherds occur from the bottom to the top of the occupation areas (as distinct from the ditch). As would be expected, a few random finds of Iron Age ware were made in the subsoil, but the Beaker occupation of the site dwarfs all others. More than this cannot be said at present.

In conclusion, the nature and purpose of this note must again be emphasized. The circumstances under which it has been written have prevented the inclusion of plans, sections and photographs. A full report on the site will inevitably occupy some considerable time, but until this is completed speculation concerning any of the matters raised is undesirable.