

## Little Solsbury Hill Camp

### REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS OF 1955 AND 1956

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Little Solsbury Hill Camp has been known for many years as an important site of the Early Iron Age. It had been examined previously and material collected from quarries cut into the hill and from exposures of occupation levels due to natural slip. A report on this was made by Falconer and Adams in 1935. In 1955 it was decided to carry out some trial excavations with the object of determining as accurately as possible the range in time, and the sequence of occupation, if any. The 1955 excavations did not include a section through the single rampart and in 1956 further excavations were undertaken with the objects of defining the limits of the occupation area in one part of the camp and of cutting a section through the bank. A description of the camp is included in the 1935 report and need not be repeated. A map of the camp is given in *Fig. 1*. It is self-explanatory. The sites of the 1955 and 1956 excavations are shown as well as other locations referred to in the 1935 report.

#### TRIAL GRID, 1955 (*Plate 6, A*)

Three trial pits, each 10 ft., square, were dug in a line at right angles to the edge of the plateau in its north-west corner not far from the entrance. At this point quarrying had in the past removed the rampart. From north to south the pits were numbered A I, A II, and A III. Bed-rock was reached at depths of 3 ft., 1 ft. 10 in. and 1 ft. 3 in. respectively. Some of the layers found in the 1956 excavations were clearly identical with those found in 1955 and have been given the same numbers in the reports and sections (*Plate 6, A, B*). All layers have been numbered from the surface downwards.

The stratification was :—

1. Turf and humus 4-5 in.
2. Grey rubble 1 ft. to 1 ft. 4 in. thick.
6. Yellow and black sandy layer 1 ft. 8 in. thick at its maximum.

Layer 1 contained occasional recent animal bones, and a few flint flakes. The turf had formed since the nineteenth century when the field was under plough. Layer 2 contained many bone and pottery fragments and occasional small objects. Both the bones and the pottery were in fairly small fragments and some of the bones showed signs of having been burnt.

## SOLSBURY HILL CAMP - BATH

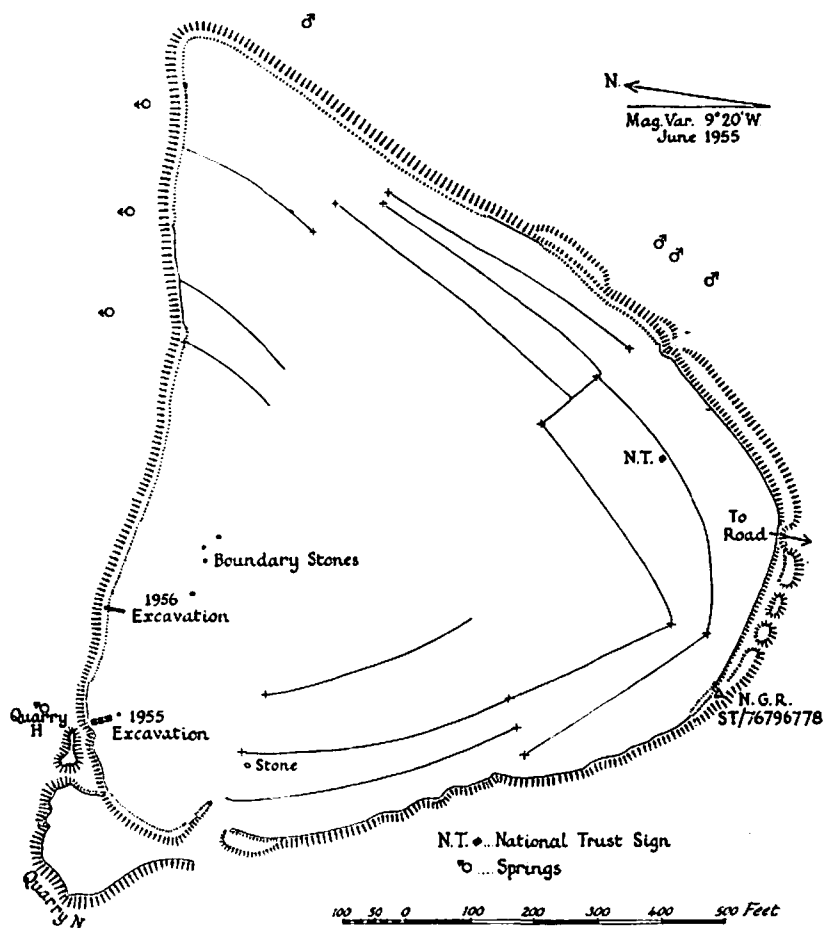
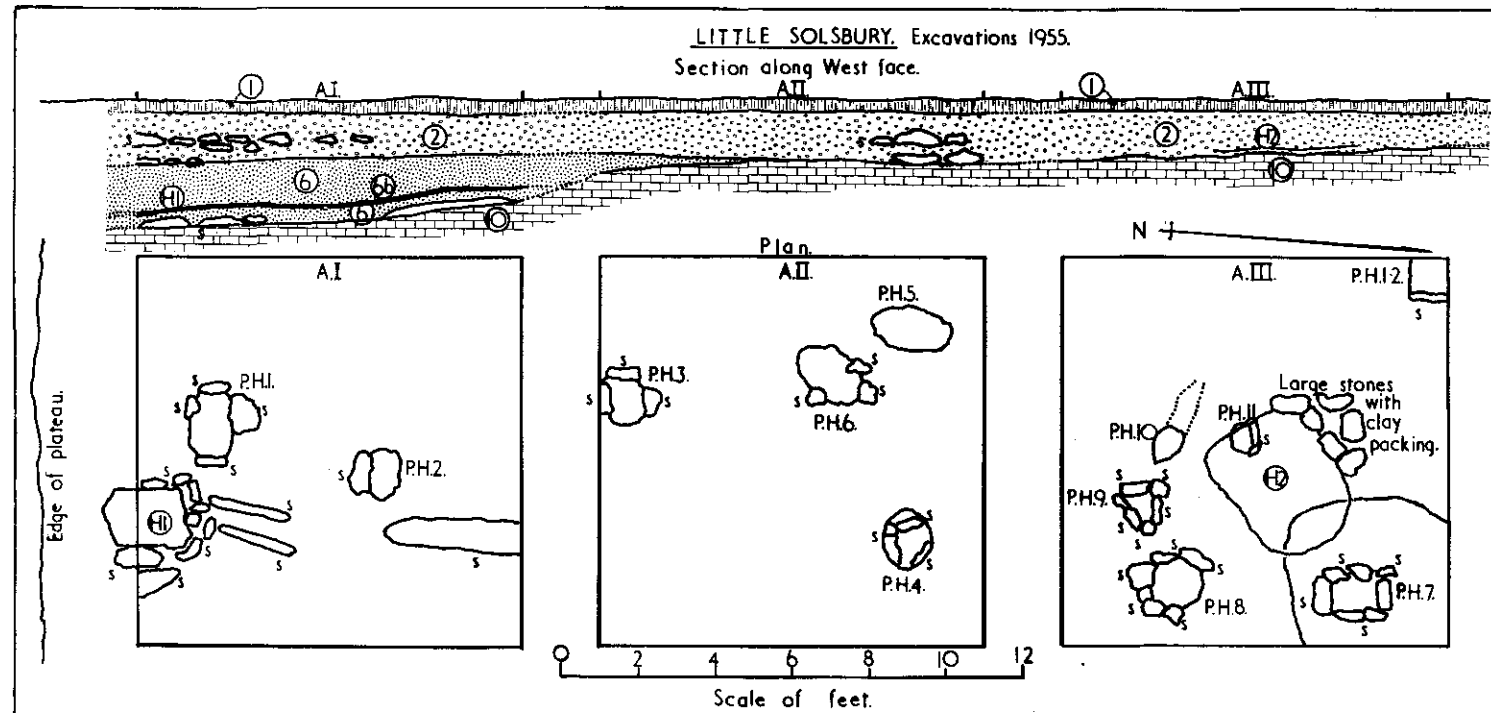


Fig. 1.

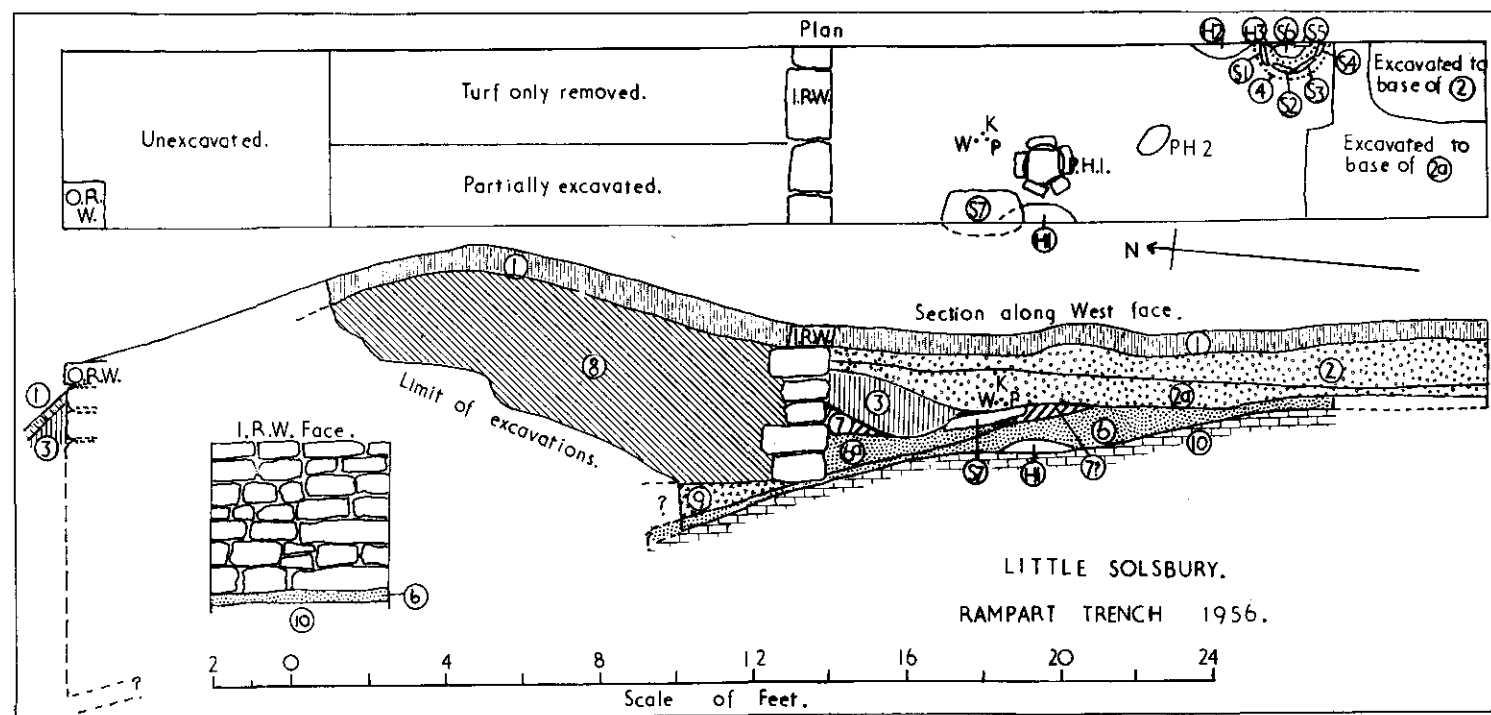
In A III and part of A II layer 2 extended to the rock surface. In the northern part of A I in this layer were two layers of large stones. It is possible that these were derived from the rampart wall during a period of collapse. In A I and parts of A II there was an abrupt change from layer 2 to layer 6, which was a much finer, sandier material containing only a few stones, which were of relatively large size. Fragmentary animal bones and pottery were still found though the fragments tended to be larger than in the layer above. At a depth varying from 2 ft. 3 in. to 3 ft. was a band containing many pieces of charcoal and patches of carbonized grain, 6 b.

PLATE 6A



1. Turf and sub-soil.
  2. Earth and stones.
  3. Loose stones with air spaces. Rampart spoil.
  4. Grey clay of hearth 3, Rampart Trench.
  5. See 7?
  6. Primary occupation layer.
  7. Trodden rampart spoil.
  - 7.? Trodden rampart spoil or perhaps part of layer 3 trampled.
  8. Loose stones with air spaces of bank. Clean.
  9. Platform for rampart.
  10. Natural rock.
- S. Stone.  
H. Hearth.  
K. Knife.  
P. Bone Point.  
W. Spindle Whorl.  
I.R.W. Inner Rampart Wall Face.  
O.R.W. Outer Rampart Wall Face.

PLATE 6B



This was only observed over the north-western part of A I. Over the rest it was represented by a layer of red and black fine dusty earth. On the same level or a little below was the well-made hearth H 1. Layer 6 continued into A II while layer 6 *b* disappeared under the baulk between A I and A II. A second hearth, H 2, was found in A III almost on the bed-rock covering post hole 11 and part of the shallow excavation round post hole 7.

The natural rock surface sloped down from south to north with a sudden drop between A II and A I. This could be of natural origin, but might represent deliberate quarrying. It was found again in the 1956 excavations. From the nature of this rock surface and the absence of an old turf line it appears that the area had been stripped of turf and soil and smoothed off where necessary with patches of fist-sized stones. Into the natural rock were sunk twelve pits, P.H. 1-12. These were up to 2 ft. deep and in several of them stones were so placed that they must have served as packing. There appears to be no doubt that these are post holes. Pit 7 had a shallow excavation round it and as this was covered by the hearth H 2 the latter clearly belongs to a phase of reconstruction of the building.

The post holes are cut down into the solid rock. Their depth compared with their diameter in a number of cases is such that they can only have been dug by the method of jumping, using a heavy iron bar, or a wooden stake shod with iron, in exactly the same way as a heavy bar is used today for making gatepost holes in rocky ground. In each of the larger and deeper post holes were found, towards the bottom, in positions that they could scarcely have reached by accident, a few pot sherds. A similar find was made in the large post hole in the Rampart Trench (p. 26). Aileen Fox (1954) has found pottery in a post hole in an Iron Age hut on Kestor. The occurrence argues for some form of foundation rite. Supporting evidence for the existence of rites of this kind comes from hearth 3 of the 1956 excavations (p. 24).

In the excavations daub, bearing wattle marks, was found frequently. The fragments were small and all had been burnt, but it should be noted that unburnt daub in small pieces is unlikely to survive in recognizable form. The association of this material with post holes indicates huts with substantial wooden uprights and walls of wattle and daub. In none of the post holes could definite evidence of burning be found, which suggests that the posts had just rotted. The contradictory evidence of burnt daub and unburnt posts has not been resolved. Fragments of charcoal were found in the fillings of the post holes but these were quite insufficient in amount to be the burnt residue of posts and presumably got into the holes while they were filling after the posts had rotted or, perhaps in some cases, been removed. No plan of the huts could be made out from the pattern of the post holes but this is probably because the area excavated was too small.

The pottery from both the 1955 and 1956 excavations was remarkably uniform and similar to that described in the 1935 report. It appears to be typical Iron Age "A" fabric with more than a hint of late Bronze Age ware. This does not necessarily imply a very early date for the commencement of the occupation especially as in the 1956 excavations a small sherd, of what seems to be a decorated vessel of Glastonbury Lake Village type, was found in the top of the primary layer of occupation, layer 6.

#### PRINCIPAL FINDS IN 1955

1. The only human bone was part of a mandible, with four teeth still present. Some of the teeth had been lost *ante mortem* from pyorrhœa and some of the teeth *post mortem*. Two premolars, probably belonging to this jaw, were found 2 ft. away. The jaw itself was in the packing of hearth H2.

2. Large quantities of animal bones, chiefly of young beasts. The animals so far identified include sheep or goat (by far the commonest), pig, ox, and dog.

3. From layer 6 *b* and from an exposure of the occupation layer in the cliff face west of the excavations came some grain and wood fragments. The grain is wheat, most probably a form of bread wheat (*Triticum vulgare*).

4. Portions of three sandstone rubbers and two spindle whorls (*Fig. 3, Nos. 3, 4*). One is complete and is made of the local oolite. The hole is possibly incomplete as it shows no evidence of smoothing from use. Of the other only a quarter was recovered. It was broken in ancient times and had seen much use. It is fire cracked on the outside and the hole is slightly conical and well smoothed. It is of whitish fine grained material.

5. Artifacts of bone are represented by pieces of a comb (*Fig. 2, No. 3*) decorated with a serpentine lattice pattern. This also was badly broken in ancient times and had been largely calcined. Two other small pieces of bone with incised decoration were found but the fragments are not large enough to determine the pattern or the articles from which they came.

6. Articles of iron include part of the blade of a knife (*Fig. 2, No. 7*), very similar to the one found in the Rampart Trench. There were two fragments of the edges of two iron axes, both much corroded, and a figure of 8 harness loop plated with bronze with both the loops in the same plane (*Fig. 2, No. 6*), which is rather an unusual form. A complete solid bronze ring is the sole article in this metal worth recording. It is too small to be a finger ring and is more likely to have been either an ear ring or an amulet. There is no indication of its mode of suspension (*Fig. 2, No. 4*).

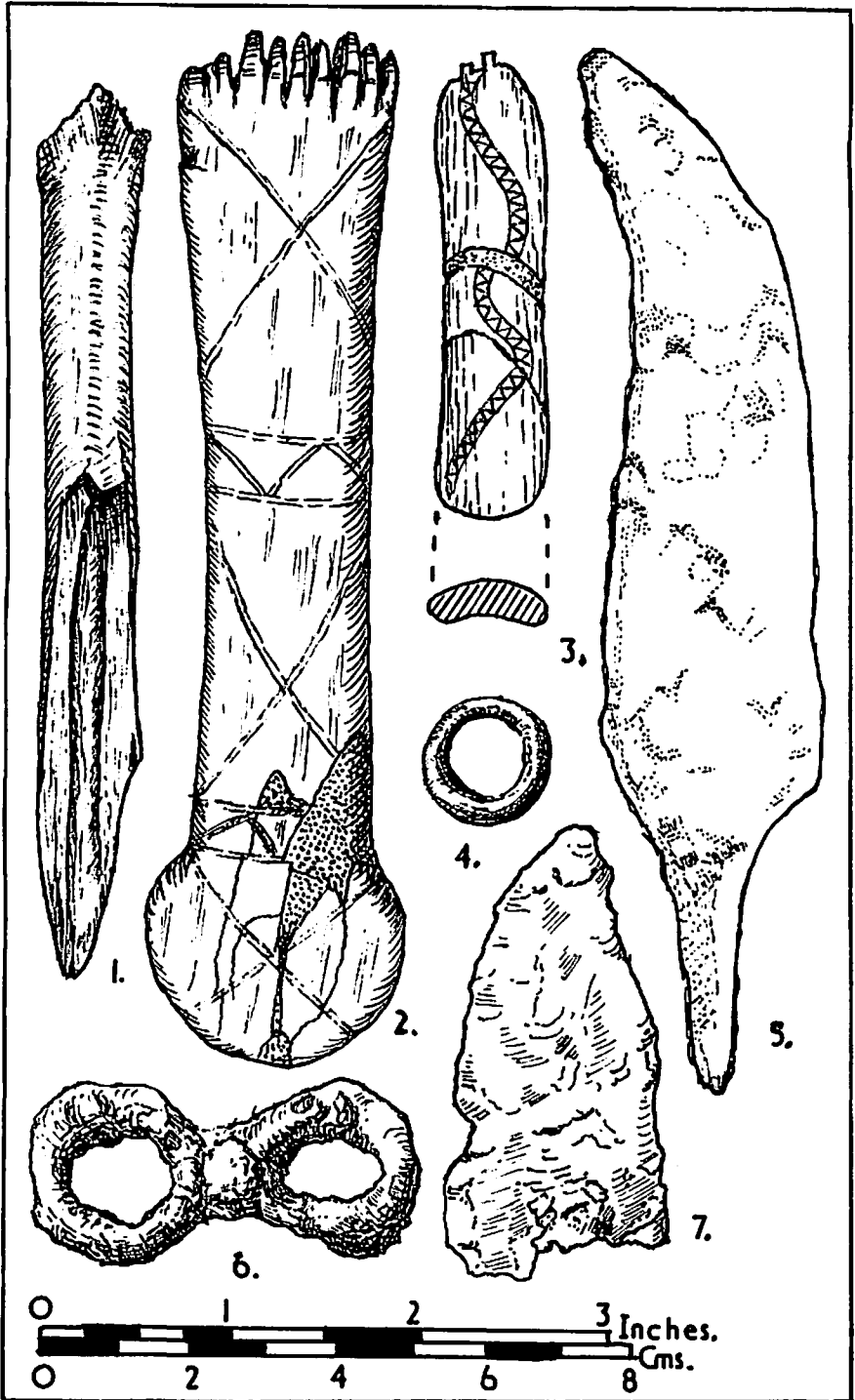


Fig. 2.

## RAMPART TRENCH, 1956

*(Plate 6, B)*

At this camp where the bank has slipped, which is chiefly on the western and north-western parts of the perimeter, occupation material is exposed in the face. It seemed as if there was a continuous belt of living sites just within the bank. The results of the 1955 excavations tended to confirm this but the time limit did not allow of extensive enough excavations to prove or disprove it. The first objective of the 1956 excavations was to try to delimit the area of occupation inwards. Secondly as the bank had been quarried away at the site of the 1955 excavations it was intended to prove if there had been any prolonged occupation of the hill top prior to the erection of the single bank defence. That this had been so had been hinted at in the 1935 report (Falconer and Adams, p. 186). Bad weather so hampered the excavations that barely half of the projected excavation was completed.

To test for the inward extension of the occupation zone a series of pits were to be dug, 4 ft. square, at intervals of 10 ft. inwards from the end of the 1955 excavations. In fact only one pit was necessary, sited at the first 10 ft. The section given by the pit was :—

1. Turf and humus 4-5 in.
2. Dark stony earth with an occasional pot sherd and animal bone fragments 5 in.
3. Natural rock with a weathered surface, rather uneven, and sloping gently down with the dip northwards.

No post holes, no evidence of huts and no cobbling were found. Clearly this pit was cut at the extreme edge of the occupation area here. It is possible that there are occupation areas further towards the centre of the camp but there is no surface evidence of this and the soil is thin. It may be tentatively concluded that this pit dug 40 ft. inside the rampart marks the limit of the zone of occupation and provides a useful indication for the lay-out of future excavations.

To test the second hypothesis a cutting was laid out from the crest of the rampart inwards for 40 ft., and it was intended to carry this to the outer edge of the bank if the evidence of the first part warranted it. Only part of this trench was completed. At the site of the cutting the bank is reasonably well preserved. It rises directly from the interior of the camp with no indication of a quarry ditch on the inside, while the outer edge of the bank is on the very edge of the escarpment. In only one part of the camp on the west side is there any indication at all of an internal quarry ditch, and even here the shallow U-shaped trough just inside the bank may be the result of natural slumping.

The detailed stratification is shown in *Plate 6, B*. Turf and humus layer overlay a layer of dark, nearly black earth and stones, layer 2. The division between the two layers was ill defined and layer 2, though thick, was very difficult to subdivide. During excavation it was arbitrarily divided into two parts the division being marked in some parts by a slightly lighter colour in the lower portion. In one part it overlay a more compact layer, 5, with fewer stones, that seemed to represent a more trodden part of layer 3. This was composed of loose stones with air spaces between them and with some admixture of black earth; it abutted against the rampart, resting on layer 6.

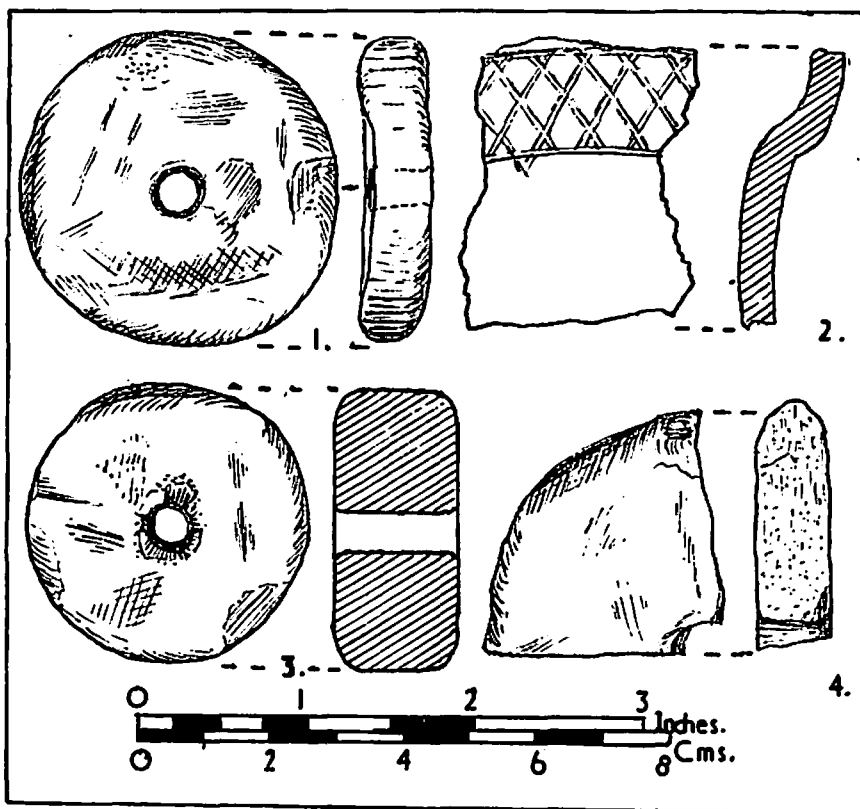
The mass of stones in layer 2 is not easily accounted for. Presumably they were derived from the rampart, which must therefore have fallen into disuse. The layer overlies the primary occupation, layer 6, with its post holes and must represent a second phase of occupation and the stones should therefore be the foundations and perhaps walls of the second set of huts, but nothing approaching even footings for hut walls was found. Further there is no indication of any appreciable break in time between the two phases of occupation. The only structure found in layer 2 was hearth 3, which being at the side of the trench has probably not been completely excavated. This hearth had been built at the base of layer 2 immediately on top of layer 6. A small mass of grey clay (4), very tenacious, had been prepared and laid in a sausage form in a crude semi-circle. Into this had been set on edge to a depth of about 2 in. four flat stones (S 1-4). S 2 and S 3 were set vertically while S 1 and S 4 sloped outwards and had been backed by more clay to hold them in position. S 5 was a thin flat stone found upright against the east face of the cutting and was the only one to show much evidence of fire. In the centre was a flat horizontal slab, S 6, luted to the others with clay. Immediately under this stone and visible when the stone was lifted was an antler comb (*Fig. 2, No. 2*). The handle and part of the shaft were against the under surface of the stone and had been partially crushed. The toothed end was concealed under more clay mixed with earth and was covered by some bones\* of a young sheep or goat. More bones of this animal surrounded the small keeled oblong stone below the comb. Several of the neck vertebrae were in their proper anatomical relationship. It was not clear if the lower stone was part of the structure or was merely one of those that occur in layer 6, probably the latter. The grey clay had not been fired enough to bake it thoroughly. It is from the grey Fuller's earth layer of the hill. It was free, with one exception, of any but small stones. The exception was part of a broken hone stone carefully embedded in the clay, which completely covered it. The whole must be a foundation deposit associated with unknown rituals.

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\* The bones included part of the skull, the two halves of the lower jaw, part of the pelvis, a radius and some vertebrae.



Close to the base of layer 2 A were found close together an iron knife, a bone point and a spindle whorl made from a pot sherd (K, P and W) (*Fig. 2*, Nos. 2 and 3; *Fig. 3*, No. 1). Pot sherds and fragmentary animal bones were found throughout layer 2. The pottery was remarkably uniform and generally much abraded so that the chances of being able to reconstruct a number of vessels are small. The pottery is similar to that found in 1955



*Fig. 3.*

and to that described in some detail by Falconer and Adams (1935). A single sherd (*Fig. 3*, No. 2) of decorated Glastonbury ware was found at 9 ft. from the inner face of the rampart in the very top of layer 6 and could belong properly to the base of layer 2 A. All the rest of the pottery from all the layers seems to be typical Iron Age "A" fabric with more than a hint of Late Bronze Age ware.

Towards the inner face of the bank layer 2 rested upon layer 3, which, from its nature, is clearly derived from the rampart when there was a major

collapse or when it was thrown down. The position of certain stones, such as S 7, argues for the rampart having been thrown down. Beneath, against the inner face of the rampart, was a wedge shaped mass of compact stones and earth, layer 7, obviously the result of relatively slow slip of rampart material which had been well trodden down. Under all these layers came the primary occupation, layer 6, resting directly on the bed rock. As in 1955 it was found that the slope of the rock steepened close to the rampart. It has been suggested above that this might be a natural phenomenon but if it represents some superficial rock clearance it took place before the rampart was built, and in the 1955 area the slope had been partly levelled off by cobbling. It seems hardly likely that the occupants of the hill would first quarry away the stone to give a slope and then try to restore it with cobbling to build a platform (see below) for the rampart. Nowhere was there any evidence, as in 1955, of an original turf layer below layer 6. Obviously the inhabitants cleared the sites down to rock before they put up their huts. Two hearths H 1 and H 2, were found resting directly on the rock near the sides of the cutting. Only a small portion of each was exposed. Layer 6 could be divided into two parts against the rampart. An upper loose portion, 6 a, and a lower more compact portion. Otherwise the grey layer was uniform with only relatively few stones but many fragments of charcoal. Layer 6 continued under the rampart so that occupation of the hill preceded its building, but the interval need not have been longer than that necessary for the inhabitants to settle down on the site and put up their huts before building the rampart. This sequence at least argues for a period of peace when the hill was first occupied. Pottery and animal bones occurred throughout the layer but not so plentifully as in layer 2. The pottery did not seem to differ from that found in layer 2.

Belonging to the primary phase of occupation were two post holes. One was nearly circular and about a foot in diameter and 2 ft. deep tapering slightly towards the bottom. It contained no packing stones but several flat stones had been carefully laid round the top of the hole. Towards the bottom of the hole in the filling were a few sherds of pottery, broken but not abraded. The second hole was oval, shallower and contained no pot sherds.

The rampart itself was faced with a well-built dry stone wall (I.R.W.) still standing over 4 ft. high (cf. Falconer and Adams, 1935, *Plate I* for the outer face). The stones of the wall were generally large, some being as much as one man could lift. The outer part of the base of this inner wall rested in part on layer 9, which, as so far exposed, is a wedge shaped mass, with a horizontal top, composed mainly of small stones and clean yellow clayish soil. It is obviously a construction to give a level surface on which to build the rampart. Above this the interior of the rampart was composed of

clean stones of all sizes, many large, and having many air spaces between them. Occasional charcoal fragments, presumably wind borne, and a few sherds of pottery occurred, but the looseness of the structure makes it impossible to use the pottery for dating from its position in the rampart. It was, because of the weather, impossible to take the cutting right through the rampart but the top three courses of the outer dry stone wall were uncovered. Against this outer face wall (O.R.W.) lay loose stones as against the inner face. The width of the rampart between the two walls is 20 ft. at their summit. It is not possible to say exactly how high the rampart was originally but if it is assumed that the natural slope continues evenly beyond the excavations then the outer face wall cannot have been less than 12 ft. high and the inner 7. Probably both were considerably higher. The rampart, at the site of the cutting, was built in one stage and there was no evidence for timber lacing or of burning.

The structure of the rampart described above does not agree at all well with the description of Falconer and Adams. There are some similarities but also considerable discrepancies. It is possible that the structure varies, but careful reading of the 1935 account suggests that it is layer 3 of the 1956 excavations that was taken in 1935 to be the rampart. The 1935 account refers several times to the quantity of pottery found in the rampart. This is quite contrary to the 1956 findings, but if the layers of the two accounts are in fact not the same then this discrepancy disappears.

#### DISCUSSION

In 1955 and again in 1956 no evidence could be found of an appreciable break in the occupation of the hill top. Two phases of occupation have been proved. The site was occupied and huts erected on the clean, cleared rock surface before the rampart was erected. This period need not have been longer than the time taken to clear the site, put up the huts and then to build the rampart at leisure. Clearly the occupation started in a period of peace. The primary huts were evidently supported by large posts and had wattle and daub walls. There is some evidence of burning of the huts but this could quite well be due to accident and not by enemy action. Whole villages of this type can be destroyed by fire in an hour. The primary hut sites do not appear to have been built right up to the edge of the escarpment but to have been laid out to leave a good margin on which, later, the rampart could be built. This phase seems to have come to an end with the partial collapse or more probably the throwing down of the rampart and a wide scatter of stones. But the occupation continued without interruption by the same people though there is a hint that Glastonbury ware now made its appearance. Possibly the site became subject to overlordship of people with this pottery.

The second phase was a relatively long one. The thickness of the layers makes this certain. The absence of post holes certainly belonging to this phase and the mass of stones suggests a change to stone-built huts, but so far nothing of their structure has been determined. The site seems to have been abandoned well before the Roman period for there is no trace of Roman influence.

The pottery is remarkably similar in type throughout, and there seems no reason to alter the conclusions reached by Falconer and Adams that the main occupation, represented by layer 2, may not be earlier in date than the second century B.C., though this might place too much weight on the evidence of a single sherd of pottery. The abraded nature of the sherds with the general absence so far of more or less complete pots suggests a long peaceable occupation.

The rampart itself has been described. There is no quarry ditch in the usually accepted sense of the term though it is possible that the looser material of the rock surface was removed near the escarpment. The cleanness of the stones of the core, their unweathered nature and their frequent large size indicate that they were quarried and, as they do not seem to have come from the inside of the camp, presumably from the natural very steep slope below the edge of the hill. The slope would be steepened still more so that with the wall on top there would be a drop of 30 ft., perhaps more, to the ledge below.

The site itself covers nearly 20 acres. It is an island hill mass at the south end of a long spur, and there are a number of good springs round the hill only a matter of a few yards down from the edge of the plateau. In all this would have been a very good site for a tribal *oppidum*. So far only a tiny fraction of the area of occupation has been tackled; an area scarcely larger than that lost annually by natural slip and by the depredations of treasure hunters. The next stage should be the linking up of the 1955 and 1956 areas of excavations. This need not be done in a single season but could well be carried out in a series. This should give much more information on the huts, their forms and structure and a detailed sequence of the events of the occupation of the hill top.

There is evidence for rites in connexion with the setting up of posts for huts and for laying down of hearths. The exact nature of those rites cannot, of course, be determined, but an interesting field for speculation and study is opened. Folklore and ethnographical studies may help to provide the answers.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due to the National Trust, the owners of the site, for permission to excavate inside the camp, the Batheaston Freeholders for allowing camping on their part of the hill while excavations were in progress

and to their generally helpful attitude to the work. Many members have assisted in the excavations and in the work on the material recovered and Dr. E. K. Tratman has helped, in addition, on the preparation of this report. Mr. and Mrs. S. Taylor have kindly made the drawings from which *Figs. 2* and *3* have been made. Dr. A. J. Willis, of the Botany Department, has identified the grain. To all of these I am grateful.

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