

Maesbury Castle, Somerset

(O.S. 6 in. to 1 mile, Somerset 41 S.E. N.G.R. ST 6147. Figure 38.*)

By

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This is one of the most often mentioned contour hill forts of Somerset. Presumably it dates from the Early Iron Age. It is mentioned in several places by Allcroft (1908). Bothamley (1911) and Burrow (1924) have both given short accounts of it as a bivallate work and both mention a detached outwork to the south-east very faintly marked. Gray (1908) has given the fullest account. He could find no record of any objects having certainly been found within the camp, though he records finds made in the vicinity. He places on record the alleged discovery of a polished flint axe near the water on the north-west inside the camp and correctly notes that its discovery, if authentic, could have no bearing on the date of the construction of the camp. Gray (1908, p. 81) also consulted Boyd Dawkins about finds inside the camp and the latter confirmed the view that none had been made. Boyd Dawkins (1906) considered that the main rampart contained a dry stone wall similar to that found at Worlebury.

The object of the present paper is to give a revised account of the camp and to give some tentative conclusions about the site based on the facts noted. In several ways the present author disagrees with Gray.

The camp is essentially a bivallate contour fort making use of the steep slope of the hill on the south and of the gentler slopes elsewhere. The camp lies at the western end of a long ridge of high ground at over 900 ft. above O.D. It is ovoid in form and the steepest natural slope is on the south. To the east the ground is fairly level for some way before it rises again. On the north and west the slopes are gentle, while the area enclosed within the inner bank is fairly level from east to west but has a gentle slope down from north to south. The area enclosed within the inner rampart is about 7 acres out of the total of over 15 acres within the fortifications, the limit of which is taken to be the outer lip of the outer ditch. About 400 yards to the north is the Roman Road from Charterhouse on Mendip running approximately south-east towards Old Sarum. About 2 miles to the east is Beacon Hill with its

* Mr. H. Freke of the Department of Geography has drawn the map from which this figure is made.

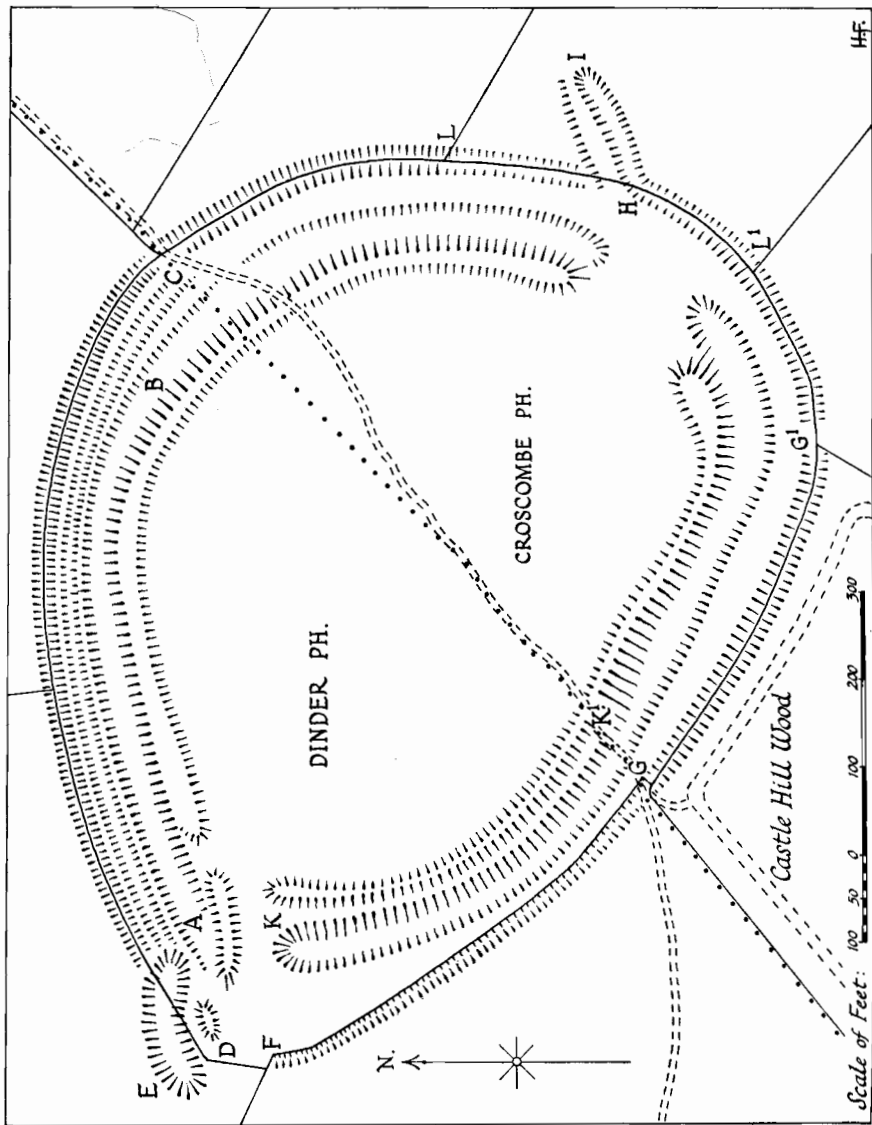


Fig. 38.—Maesbury Castle.

considerable group of barrows, some of which are known to be of Bronze Age date, and the rest are presumably of the same period. The Fosse Way crosses the west end of Beacon Hill from north to south. The parish boundary between Dinder on the west and Croscombe on the east crosses the camp from south-west to north-east. The interior of the camp is under cultivation. It has been observed under varying conditions at different seasons under

different crops but no crop markings have been observed at any time and nothing appears in the air photographs. Perhaps the soil is too thick to produce crop markings.

Gray considered those parts of the outer ditch that he recorded, on the south along the north edge of Castle Hill Wood and along the western part of the north side of the camp, to be modern and to have been made when the boundary hedge was planted. Neither he nor other writers mention a quarry ditch on the inner side of the inner rampart and there is certainly no superficial evidence of one there now, 1959.

THE INNER RAMPART

The spoil from the inner ditch seems to have been taken almost entirely uphill to form the inner rampart and the sides of the hill to have been artificially steepened, presumably to improve the defence and to provide more material for the bank. For most of the perimeter the bank stands about 5 ft. above the interior of the camp but at the eastern end the bank height increases to 10 ft. above the interior. Here the top is 20 ft. wide, and flat with its sides sloping very steeply to the base, which is estimated to be 35 ft. wide. There are two gaps in the rampart, one to the south-east and the other to the west. At the south-eastern gap traces of a stone core to the bank can be seen on the north side of the gap. From the south side of the western gap and extending east to the parish boundary there is a well-marked berm about 6 ft. wide between the outer edge of the bank and the lip of the steep descent to the ditch, K-K'. Traces of this berm can be seen in other parts. The steepness of the sides of the bank together with the berm must indicate a wall structure within the bank. This wall is probably about 20 ft. wide and is probably still standing to a height of up to 6 ft. at the east end. If so it would compare well with the dry stone wall of the bank at Little Solsbury Hill camp (Dowden, 1957).

THE INNER DITCH

This has a flat bottom and is not of the usual U form. Some of the flattening may be due to cultivation. Its base now is about 15 ft. wide and lies about 6-8 ft. below the outer lip. The outer side of the ditch is remarkably steep. On the south of the camp the present bottom of the ditch is estimated to be 18 ft. below the top of the inner bank, and all round the slope up is very steep. There is a wide gap at the south-east opposite the gap in the inner bank and a smaller gap at the west end where the ends of the ditch on either side of the gap there are splayed. On the north side of the south-east gap the ditch usually holds water in the wetter months. Along the north side of the camp from A-B (*Fig. 38*), the ditch holds water all the year round. In comparatively recent times an attempt has been made

to drain off this water by cutting through the outer bank approximately at B. Without this cutting the whole length of the ditch along the north side would probably be water-filled to a depth of a foot or more above the present bottom. The camp is thus one of the very few that have a copious water supply within the precincts.

THE INTERSPACE BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER DITCHES

The width of this space varies somewhat between 30 and 40 ft. On the north the portion east of the parish boundary is very much flatter than that west of the boundary. The difference would seem to be mainly due to the effects of cultivation. The land in the parish of Croscombe has, in the past, been used to better advantage than the land in Dinder parish. In the part in Croscombe parish there are very low, never more than one foot high, wide banks along either side of the interspace; along the outer edge of the inner ditch, that is forming a counterscarp bank, and on the inner edge of the outer ditch. The banks are about 10 ft. wide and there is a level area between them of 10 ft., sometimes more. These very low banks can be traced across the south-east gap but not across the west gap.

On the north, at C, in Dinder parish there are two well developed banks on this interspace. On the outer edge, that is the inner lip of the outer ditch, the bank is about 3 ft. high and 15 ft. wide at its base. Then there is a space of about 15 ft., which is level, to the less well developed counterscarp bank along the outer edge of the inner ditch. This form of twin banks continues as far as A. But here the banks do not fuse as they approach the western gap but do become higher and steeper sided reaching a height of over 4 ft. above the flat interspace. Here shallow quarrying at E confuses the picture and the detached mound at D appears to be spoil from this quarry and not an outlying part of the defences.

On the south side of the western gap from F-G the modern hedge marks the outer edge of the interspace between the two ditches. There is a nearly vertical drop of about 8 ft. to the outer ditch. Along this stretch there is no trace of a bank along the outer side of the interspace, which gradually narrows till at G, where the modern track enters, it is only 15 ft. wide. This narrowing is almost certainly largely due to the cutting that has been made to allow the track to enter. Along the inner edge of the interspace there are traces of a low flattened counterscarp bank of the inner ditch. These traces are very faint and there has evidently never been much of a bank here at all,

THE OUTER DITCH

From F-G this is seen as a very shallow ditch, a few inches deep and about 12 ft. wide. At the modern track the ditch is obliterated. For the rest

of the perimeter it is continuous, save at G and G' where it has been filled in in modern times, right round to the north side of the western gap, where its end has been destroyed by the quarry E. It is also interrupted by the bank of the Outwork (*see below*). Its depth and definition vary considerably. Its width averages about 15 ft. between present-day lips, and its present bottom is, in places, 6 ft. below the platform of the interspace between the ditches. The depth is variable. There is no real evidence for a counterscarp bank on the outer side except for a short stretch on the north immediately west of the parish boundary. The ditch is only just discernible from L-L'.

The modern hedge line roughly follows the centre line of the ditch with a tendency to lie towards the inner side. Gray, as noted above, considered this ditch to be modern but there seems no doubt that it is ancient though altered, when the hedge was made, by re-excavating the outer side of the ditch and throwing the earth inwards to form the hedge bank within the hollow of the ditch. The double profile so formed is distinctive. The outer side of the ditch is steep.

THE OUTWORK

Bothamley and Burrow refer to a detached work to the south-east. This could not certainly be identified in 1959. On the other hand, there is, beginning at H and running for 30 yards to I, a much ploughed down bank about 1 ft. high by 10 ft. wide, and outside it is the corresponding shallow ditch. The bank blocks the main outer ditch, which has been turned outwards to be continuous with the ditch of the outwork. Beyond I the outwork cannot be traced and the manner in which it ends abruptly indicates that it was never built beyond this point.

THE SOUTH-EAST AND WEST GAPS

Gray (1908) considers the south-east gap to be the original entrance, having been widened in modern times, and the west gap to be recent. Bothamley and Burrow thought the reverse, and so does the present author. The south-east gap is wide and the central 30 ft. appear to be more ancient than the rest, and perhaps connected with the faintly marked sunken way coming up from the south-east. On the other hand the cut ends of the inner bank oppose each other with no indication of inturning or overlapping. The low banks on the platform of the interspace between the two ditches and the outer ditch itself are all continuous across the gap. There seems to be little doubt that the whole of the south-east gap is modern. Only excavation can prove the validity of this conclusion, but it does seem unlikely that a form of straight through entrance would be made at the most easily accessible place and where the inner bank has been heightened, presumably to increase its defensive value.

The western gap presents an entirely different picture in spite of the confusion produced by modern alterations, which include the gap near A in the inner bank. North of the gap the inner bank is running nearly west at right angles to the present end of the inner bank on the south side of the gap. It continues past the end of the bank on the south for about 20 yards. It has been much mutilated. Further, Bothamley (1911) describes how the inner bank south of the gap turned abruptly outwards, west, and continued for about 20 yards, thus matching the bank north of the gap. This out-turned part is shown on his plan but not on that of Burrow. This out-turned part cannot now be traced. Presumably it has been levelled and the material thrown into the inner ditch. This would account for the large flat area outside the west gap. There seems to be no doubt that this is the original entrance. Its form is unusual and appears to be the reverse of the more usual inturned entrance. A similar form of entrance occurs at the small camp of Tap's Combe. Here the entrance was funnel shaped (Thorburn, 1926).

DISCUSSION

The inner bank and ditch seem to form a unit and to be complete. The width of the flat interspace between the ditches coupled with the placing thereon of spoil from both ditches in relatively small amounts so as to form twin banks suggests a plan for strengthening the defences by adding a large second bank, by deepening the inner ditch and cutting the outer ditch, but this plan, for reasons unknown, was never completed. The outwork seems to be a still later addition possibly to form a cattle kraal and that too was never completed.

The inner bank almost certainly contains a dry stone wall. The Old Red Sandstone quarried from the side of the hill and from the ditches would be suitable for such a structure and its postulated dimensions are similar to those of Little Solsbury Hill Camp, which is of Early Iron Age "A" date (Falconer and Adams 1935, and Dowden 1957). But this interpretation of the inner bank at Maesbury is based on only the slenderest data. The flatness of the floor of the inner ditch together with the steepness of the outer sides of both ditches, and the flatness of the interspace between the ditches would seem to indicate that Maesbury Castle was a Belgic stronghold (Wheeler and Richardson 1957, pp. 8-14), and therefore very late. The existence of a copious water supply within the camp points in the same direction, and the very existence of this supply may well have determined the selection of the site for the fortress rather than the higher and less well watered ground to the east. The absence of crop markings suggests an absence of pits and this again would be in keeping with a Belgic date (e.g., Wheeler 1943, p. 58). The main rampart in its massive strength, the flat interspace between the ditches, the feeble counterscarp bank of the inner ditch and the similarly feeble bank of

the outer ditch all present similarities to those which have been described as the Fécamp series (Wheeler and Richardson, 1957). The entrance at the west end does not in its present form show the typical Fécamp type of massively in-turned entrance but instead an out-turned one. All the same, the general conclusion is that Maesbury is possibly a Belgic stronghold, constructed by them and possibly by the Dumnoni and is quite a fair example of the Fécamp series. This would put the date of construction in the later part of the 1st century B.C. and possibly as late as the beginning of the 1st century A.D. It is tempting to consider it as being in process of alteration at the time of the Roman conquest of Britain.

Belgic pottery is amongst that found at Kingsdown Camp, Mells (Gray, 1930). This camp is about 6 miles east of Maesbury. It is a very late and feeble work. The evidence from the excavations points to it being probably entirely of post-Conquest date and there is no evidence for dating the little Belgic pottery found any earlier. The other camps nearby are Newbury, Wadbury and Tedbury. Only the last has any massive defences which, for part of the west side, consist of twin large banks, probably containing dry stone walls, with a very wide ditch between. It is too overgrown to be examined properly. It is associated with two streams. These features could, very doubtfully, be interpreted as indicating a Belgic origin. On the other hand trial excavations at Burlledge Camp (ApSimon, 1957), which is about 6 miles north-west of Maesbury, yielded no Belgic pottery. So perhaps Maesbury, if it is Belgic, marks the western limit of pre-Conquest Belgic penetration of the area.

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