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Excavations in the Earthwork at Bitton, Glos

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EXCAVATIONS IN THE EARTHWORK AT BITTON, GLOS.

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BITTON CAMP¹ lies about 100 feet above Ordnance Datum on the east side of the valley of the Boyd (a minor tributary of the Avon) some six miles west of Bath. The confluence of the two streams is just under a mile south of the camp. The earthwork is rectangular and has slightly rounded corners. Its north-eastern rampart, the only side preserved entire, measures roughly 100 paces. The north-western and south-eastern ramparts are truncated by a farmyard wall and buildings which must nearly occupy the line of the fourth side. An aerial photograph taken by Dr J. K. St. Joseph shows traces of what may be the inner tail of this south-western rampart just outside the wall.

Beyond the north-western and north-eastern ramparts there is a marked drop in field-level which could be the remains of a ploughed-down outer rampart and its ditch. A section cut by the farmer in the north-eastern rampart revealed a homogeneous earthen structure.

The Roman road from Bath to Sea Mills, descending from Lansdown, must pass close by the camp; and because it is rectangular, and because Roman remains have been found at Bitton,² it has long been thought that the camp was probably Roman. In an attempt to settle this question, permission to excavate was obtained from the Ministry of Works and the landowner, and three trenches were dug on 1 June, 1952. Each was 10 feet long, 3 feet wide, and carried down to the buff clay subsoil, *i.e.* to a depth of 4 feet at most.³

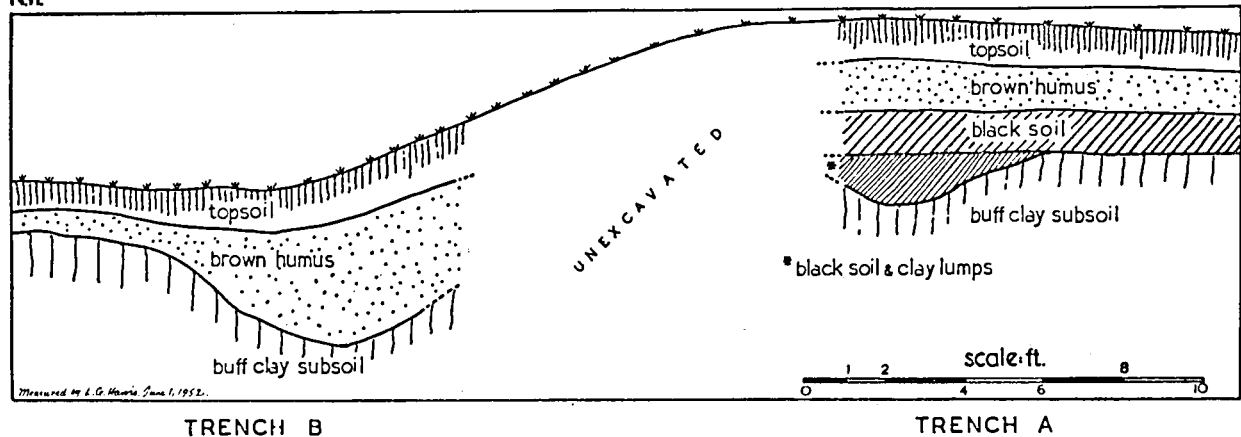
¹ National Grid reference: ST 682697 approximately.

² *e.g.* *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute*, 1851, p. LXVI, and Scarth, *Aquae Solis*, 1864, p. 135.

³ My thanks are due to Messrs G. Brown, L. G. Harris and P. A. Rahtz for their help in the excavation.

Datum bearing 310°
NW

BITTON CAMP, GLOS. SECTION NEAR N. CORNER, N.W. RAMPART, June 1, 1952. SE



TRENCH A (*See section*)

The first trench was dug near the northern angle of the earthwork to include the inner half of the north-western rampart at a point where surface indications gave hope that any structure might be well preserved. Unfortunately it proved difficult to distinguish the contour of the bank in section¹.

Below the topsoil—a friable, brownish loam—was a darker humus, containing a few potsherds of mediæval type² and, toward the rampart, a number of pebbles about the size of a man's fist, which may have been used to surface the bank.

A black layer between 12 and 15 inches thick was next encountered. We were fortunate to find in it some twenty pieces of pottery, again of mediæval type,² two flint flakes, probably strike-a-lights, a small brass strap-buckle, a piece of iron cinder, and a quantity of charcoal—in all, indicating some sort of domestic activity. This layer, which continued over the length of Trench A, was found to rest directly upon the buff clay subsoil. At the north-western end of the trench, however, a shallow, U-shaped excavation in the subsoil was noticed, filled with the blackish material of the contiguous layer and with small lumps of clean, subsoil clay. A few potsherds were also present. Though probably merely a localised depression, it may be a trace of a setting-out trench for the construction of the earthwork.

TRENCH B (*See section*)

The second trench was cut across the ditch of the north-western defences in line with Trench A, there being 10 feet between the two. Again the contour of the ditch was not easy to obtain with fidelity. The filling below the topsoil was homogeneous, consisting of the same, brownish earth as met below the topsoil in Trench A. Undoubtedly this is material from the demolished rampart in both cases, as was proven by the

¹ Probably mainly because the rampart had been demolished and spread over a wider area than it originally occupied: see Trench B.

² See Conclusions.

discovery, in Trench B, deep in the filling, of the base of a glass phial of 17th century type.

The black layer of Trench A was absent,¹ and a few shards of the same type as found in Trench A constituted the sole finds.

TRENCH C

The third trench was sited at right-angles to Trench A, some yards further inside the earthwork. No stratification was observed between top and subsoils. A few more shards were found, one or two broken pieces of Bath Stone, and a complete Pennant Sandstone roofing slab, also of mediæval type.²

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the black layer of Trench A ran well beneath the rampart. Its pottery content should accordingly offer a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the enclosure.

Mr G. C. Dunning has kindly examined the shards, and states that they are 'entirely mediæval, probably not earlier than the 13th century; all . . . domestic or kitchen ware. . . . There is one fragment of a rim from a bell-mouthed cooking pot, three fragments of sagging bases from cooking pots, and about a score of close-textured, sandy or gritty ware, not closely datable in themselves, but probably not earlier than the rim fragment'.

That pottery of identical type occurred in the material of the rampart as well as beneath it seems to show that it must have been built within a short time after the formation of the black layer upon which it was in part founded. The Bath Stone fragments and the roofing slab found in Trench C are possibly indications of a building nearby for whose defence or enclosure the 'camp' was built.

Nothing indicative of Roman occupation was found. The finds have been presented to the City Museum, Bristol.

¹ Its absence from Trench C seems to show that it was a very local deposit—perhaps a spread of rubbish.

² Like several found in the recent excavations at Bristol by the Ancient Bristol Excavation Fund.