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## **The Prehistoric Occupation of Churchdown Hill**

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# The Prehistoric Occupation on Churchdown Hill

Edited by HENRY HURST

IN 1972 excavations for a new pipeline by the North West Gloucestershire Water Board cut through part of the bank above Soldiers' Walk on the west side of Churchdown Hill. The section thus revealed was noted by Mr Bernard Rawes who reported his discovery to a meeting of the Gloucester and District Archaeological Research Group. Subsequently it was decided to carry out a detailed examination of this section, together with a study of the evidence for prehistoric occupation on the hill, as a W.E.A. evening class project.

The report which follows is the joint work of the six class members and their tutor.<sup>1</sup> For additional help we are indebted to Mr W. H. Payne, the W.E.A. district organiser, for making the class possible, to the North West Gloucestershire Water Board for permission to carry out the work, to Mr A. P. Garrod for allowing us to include his unpublished finds in the report and to Messrs D. L. Dartnall and J. F. Rhodes of the City Museum, Gloucester, for their help and advice throughout. The former in particular identified the molluscs and assisted with the geology of the site, the latter contributed the section on the 1966 finds.

## GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY (FIG 1)

Churchdown Hill, like Robinswood Hill nearby, is a remnant of an earlier Cotswold scarp which once stood much further west than today. Both hills are prominent landmarks within the low-lying Severn vale, Churchdown, the lower of the two, rising to a summit of 511 ft O.D. on its south-west side. The top of the hill is composed of beds of limestone nodules, sandy marlstone, clay and sand. These were previously thought to include the base of the upper lias but are now equated by the Geological Survey with a part of the middle lias, the marlstone at the top of the middle series being present only around St Bartholomew's church and Yew Tree Cottage.<sup>2</sup> Generally the beds dip 3 degrees to north-north-east, but the dip may have been reversed by cambering in the area where the section was taken (FIG 2).

Samuel Rudder in his *New History of Gloucestershire* (1779) makes no reference to any earthworks or entrenchments on the hill. The idea that there was a camp there seems to have been first put forward by Mr Barwick-Baker in 1821. Mr Baker included Churchdown in a list of prehistoric earthworks in Gloucestershire but only said of it: 'Its shape is very irregular, conforming entirely to that of the ground, and is rendered very imperfect by stone digging.'<sup>3</sup>

The Rev. F. W. Smithe noted that, in the 1880s, he could see the line of an ancient rampart and ditch extending across the hilltop away from the churchyard wall by the gate, and that the church and churchyard were included within the works.<sup>4</sup> Writing in the 1920s, Canon Bazeley remarked that there was a deep cutting to the north of the church which had been partly filled in at its east

1. The class members were: Mr R. Burns, Mr J. M. Hyde, Mrs D. Lethbridge, Mrs E. V. Eaton Shore, Mr J. H. Eaton Shore, Miss E. A. Witchell. [Their tutor was Mr H. R. Hurst.] Mr J. M. Hyde drew the plan and section, Mr R. Burns the pottery.

2. Geological Survey 1-inch map: Sheet 234, Gloucester (1972).

3. *Archaeologia*, XIX (1821), 169-70.

4. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, XIII (1888-9), 271-87.

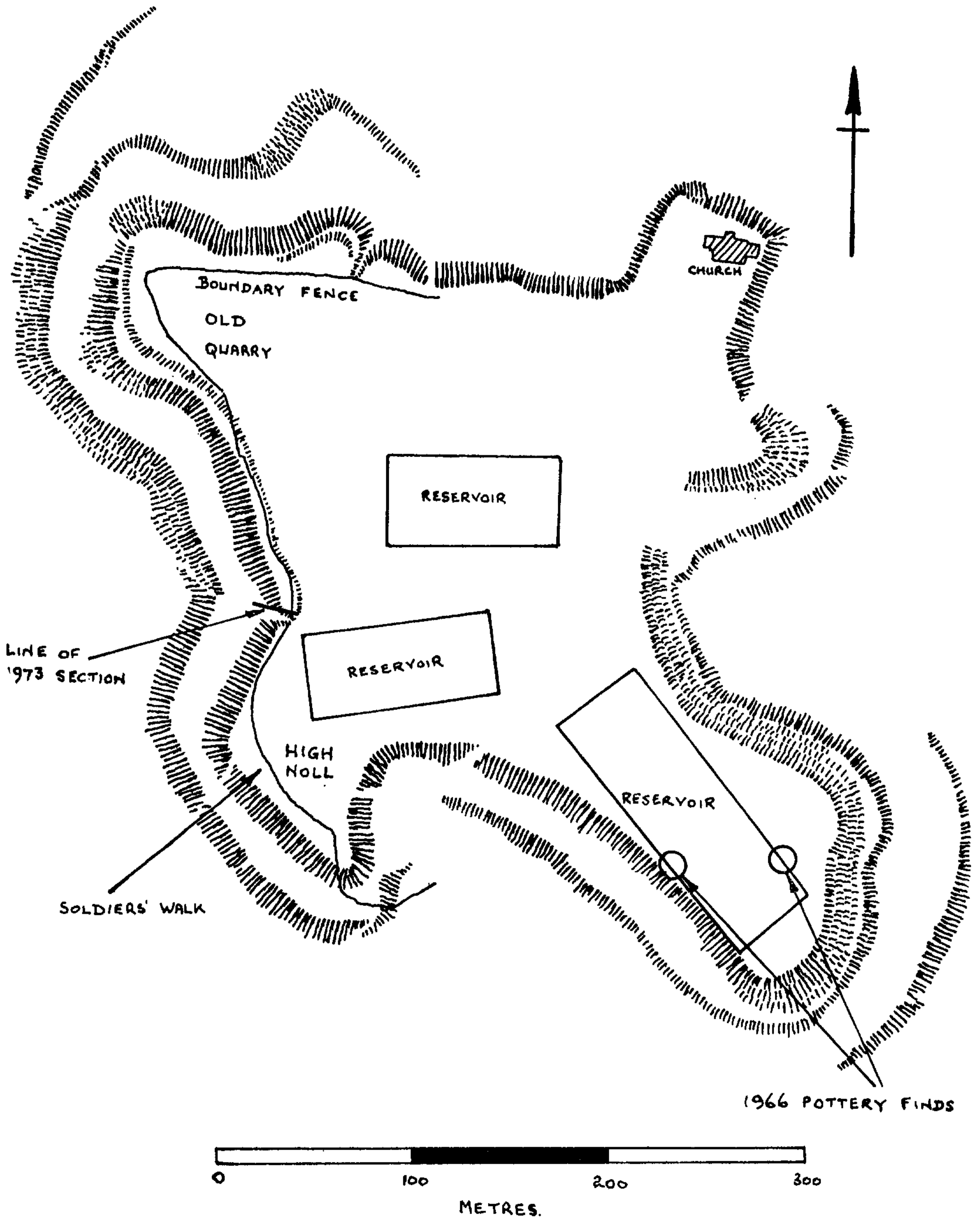


FIG. 1

end where the wall had been built across it to support the churchyard.<sup>5</sup> There was also once a hollow way leading from the Green in Churchdown village to the north-west corner of the camp, passing Roman Well.<sup>6</sup>

Because of its irregular shape and the woods and undergrowth covering those parts of the hill which have not been excavated by quarrying or for the reservoirs, several writers have disputed the presence of artificial embankments and argued that the various banks and ditches were the result of erosion or quarrying.<sup>7</sup>

#### DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE SECTION (FIG 2)

The section lay slightly to the north of a high ridge locally named High Noll. The footpath, Soldiers' Walk, ran below and parallel to the ridge and entered a junction of footpaths immediately south of the section (FIG 1: O.S. Nat. Grid SO 880189).

Excavation was limited to cleaning up the face of the cut and recording the features so revealed. In the section the eastern end of layer 5 was at the nominal height of 144 m (472 ft) above Ordnance datum.

The uppermost layer 1 (existing topsoil) consisted of a brown sticky loam containing a few stones and many modern roots. Below this layer and at the eastern end of the section was an orange-brown layer 2 which contained slightly more clay than 1 and also tended to be of similar colour and texture to layer 5. A line of stones some 20 cm above the base of the layer suggests a possible tip line. Two sherds of pottery, one of which is shown in FIG 3 (no. 1), and a few fragments of animal bones were found within this layer. Two bones were identified as pig. Layer 3 consisted of a charcoal-flecked loam with many burnt clay lumps (probably burnt daub) and was the darkest layer of the section due to the presence of the charcoal. Fragmentary bones of sheep and ox were found in this layer.

The main body of the section consisted of several tips of bluish-grey clay containing a few stones. Five variations were distinguished within the group although the overall appearance suggested a single body of material deposited at the same time. The layers were:

- 4A Fine textured clay with two bands of stones suggesting tip lines.
- 4B Coarse textured material with many hard lumps (compressed clay). Some patches of orange-brown material (also compacted clay?) at the junction with 4A.
- 4C Of similar texture to 4A.
- 4D A thin band of crumbly clay.
- 4E Similar to 4B.

These deposits lay above a well defined layer of fairly stone-free orange-brown soil 5. At the junction of 4A and 5 some examples of a *Helicidae* species of mollusc were found, suggesting that 5 was the original ground level. It overlay a 20–30 cm thick layer of angular or slightly rounded mixed sandstone and limestone fragments which in turn overlay clean grey-blue clay.

The modern ground profile on the west side of Churchdown Hill is generally similar to that shown in the section (see FIG 1), suggesting that the mound formed by the deposits just described is a linear feature. The character of layers 4A and 4E is reminiscent of the 'dump construction' ramparts at Bredon Hill<sup>8</sup> and Sutton Walls<sup>9</sup> and the link has further tenuous support from the parallel between the rim sherd in 2 and the 1966 finds (below) and the finds from those two sites. Layers 4A to 4E therefore seem best interpreted as the body of a rampart of glacial construction and the dip in the strata at the extreme west end of the section possibly indicates the edge of a ditch which would underlie Soldiers' Walk. Layers 2 and 3 could possibly indicate a secondary addition to the rampart:

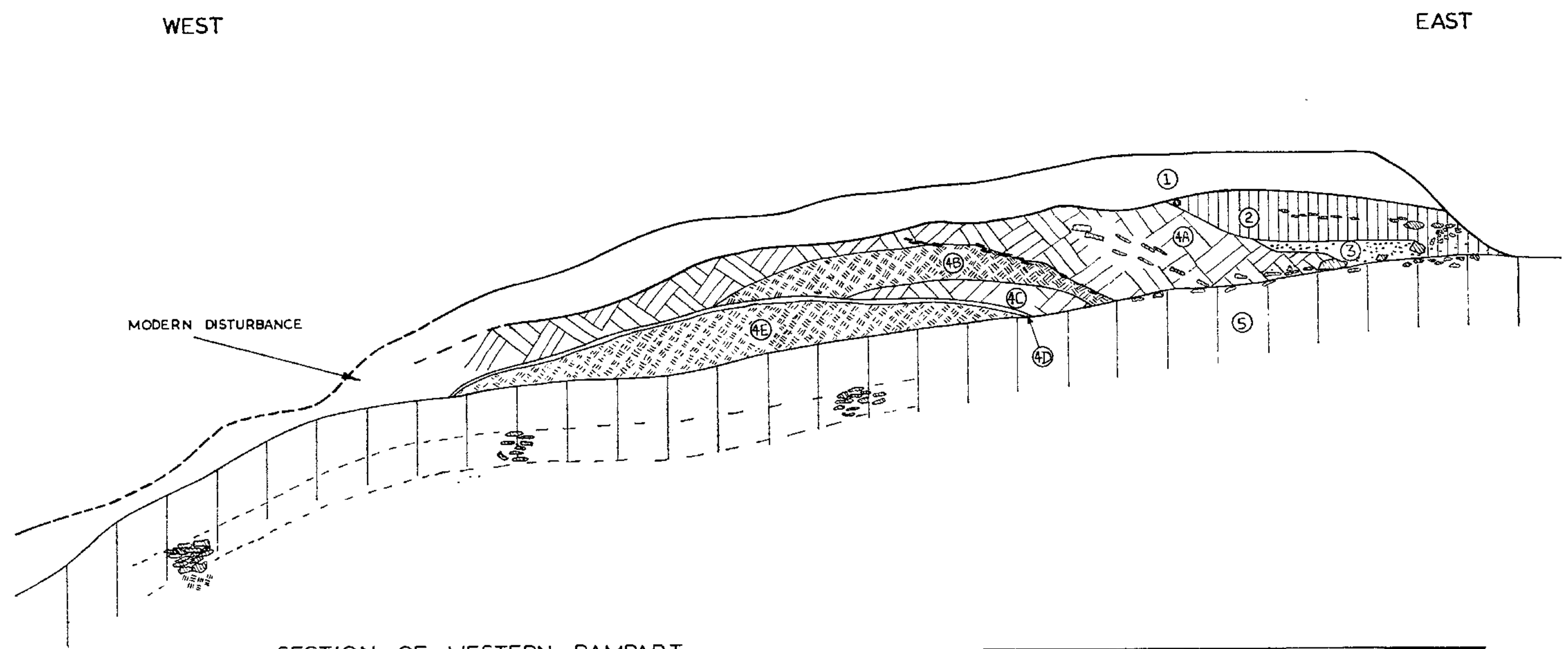
5. *Proceedings of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club*, XXI (1921–3) 17–30.

6. W. T. Swift. *Some Account of the History of Churchdown* (1905).

7. For example: G. B. Witts, *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, IV (1879–80), 206; J. J. D. Cooke, *Churchdown through the Ages* (1939).

8. *Archaeological Journal*, XCV (1938), 88 ff.

9. *Ibid.*, CX (1953), 1 ff.



SECTION OF WESTERN RAMPART  
 CHURCHDOWN HILL  
 GLOUCESTERSHIRE

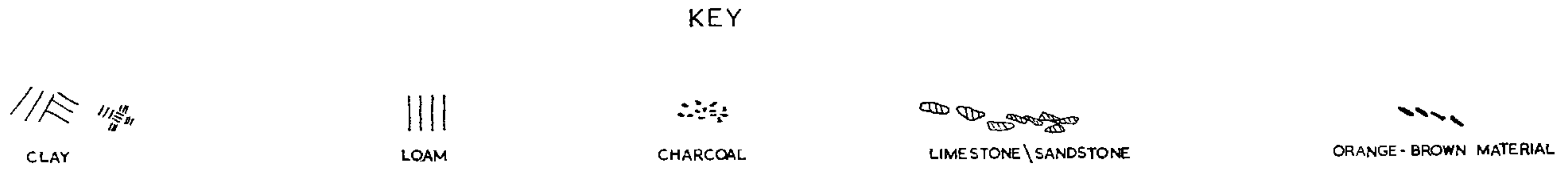
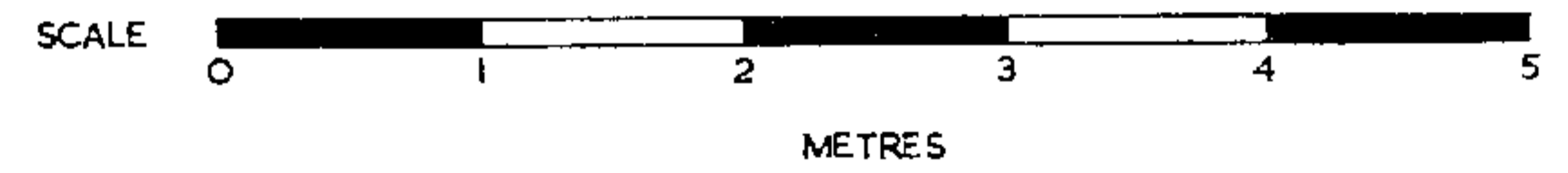


FIG. 2

in this interpretation 3 would be an occupation layer and 2 a redeposited layer of the secondary phase. It may be noted that fragments of probable burnt daub and bones were present in 2 and 3 but not in any of the other layers.

#### DISCOVERIES ELSEWHERE ON THE HILL (FIG 1). By J. F. Rhodes

When the covered reservoir at the south-east corner of the hill was being built in 1966 Mr N. Webley noted on the south-western edge of the reservoir excavation a deposit of charcoal and loose stones which in its depth and relationship to the escarpment corresponded with layer 3 in the recorded section (FIG 2). This deposit contained pottery (FIG 3, nos. 2-9).

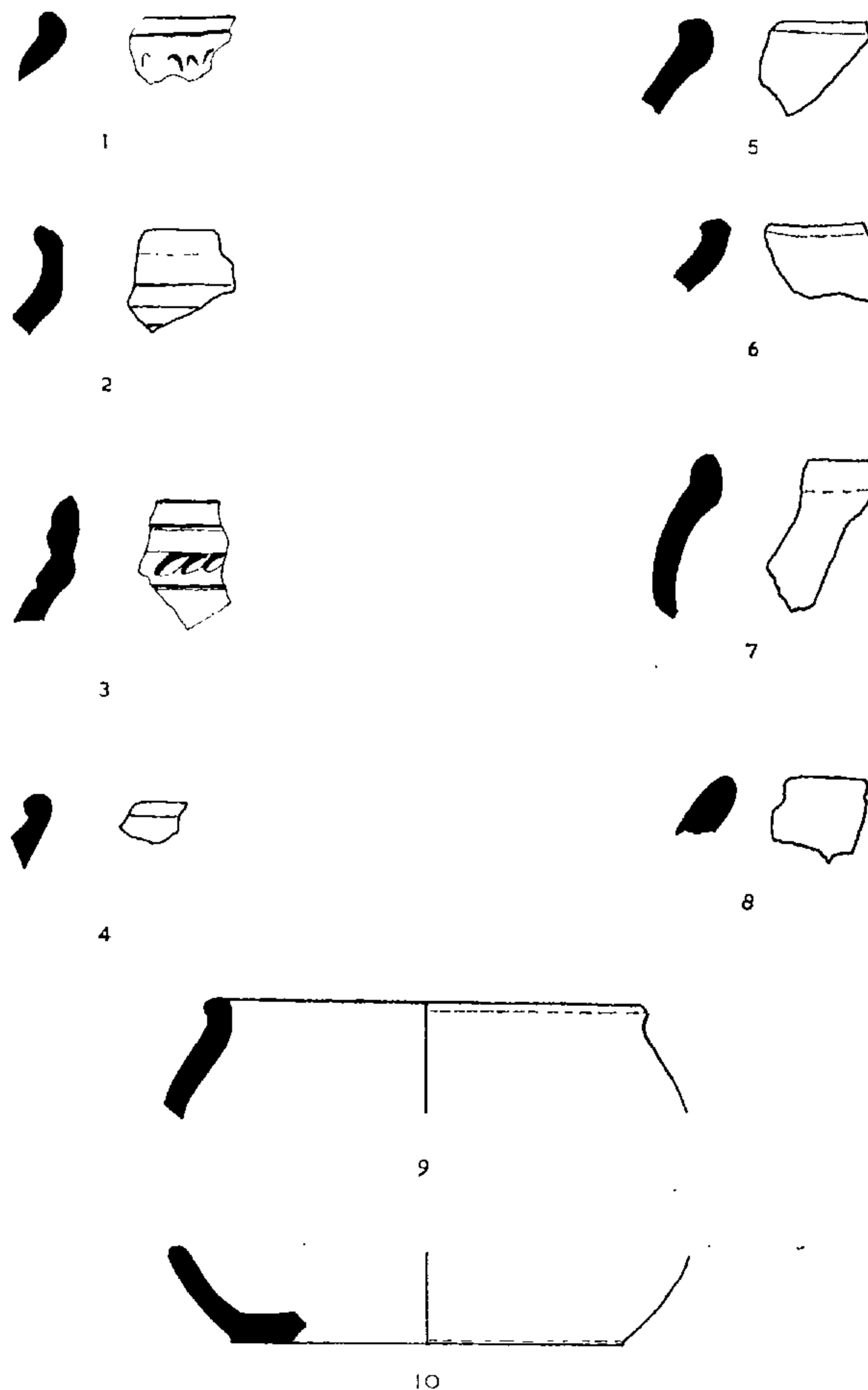


FIG 3. The pottery

On the north-western edge of the same excavation Mr A. P. Garrod recorded a feature cut to a depth of 90 cm through the natural brown sand. As seen in section the feature was 3.5 m wide, with a flattish bottom and a near-vertical south-western side; it contained dark brown loam with occasional umps of clay and, in the lower half, two lenses of charcoal. Within this charcoal Mr Garrod found

pottery (FIG 3, no. 10) and fragmentary bones of ox and sheep. The feature could be composite, comprising two intersecting pits or ditches; and on the north-east it cut another shallower feature which was filled with dark brown loam and extended for at least 2.6 m along the section line.

### THE FINDS

#### *Pottery* (FIG 3)

All the illustrated sherds are from the 1966 reservoir excavation as described above, except for No. 1, which is from layer 2 in the Soldiers' Walk section.

With the exception mentioned below, the sherds have a soft fabric with burnished exterior and filling of angular fragments of whitish limestone averaging 1–3 mm across. Colours vary from black to grey or buff. No. 1 is red-buff throughout. No. 8 has an unburnished soft grey fabric with pitted surface and core suggesting the former presence of angular 1–3 mm particles.

Dr Peacock described the limestone in No. 3 as containing 'abundant pelecypod remains' which suggested that it could be Jurassic.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Burnt clay*

Layers 2 and 3 in the Soldiers' Walk section contained many burnt clay lumps usually 2–3 cm across and 1–2 cm thick, sometimes with one flat surface, which suggests they may be burnt daub.

All the finds discussed above together with a charcoal sample from layer 3 are stored in Gloucester City Museum.

### DISCUSSION

Churchdown Hill must now be treated as an iron age fortified site. The evidence for a rampart and ditch on the west side of the hill has been discussed above and there are indications of earthworks following the other sides of the hill near its crest and enclosing an area of just under 18 acres (FIG 1). As so far recognized, the original rampart appears to be of glacis construction, not unlike those at Bredon Hill and Sutton Walls.

Pottery recovered from two parts of the hill includes the duck-stamped wares of the Cotswold–Herefordshire area. Dr Peacock's recent petrological study of this material suggested it was the product of a specialized industry with centres in the Malvern and probably Cotswold edge areas. FIG 3, no. 3 was of the latter category.<sup>11</sup> As a general class the stamped wares have been shown by the excavations at Bredon Hill and Sutton Walls to occur over a wide period of time from the first century B.C. until well into the Roman period. With Churchdown, therefore, the question is now raised whether there was any relationship between the occupation of the hill and earliest Roman Gloucester.

The most important result of the present work is, however, to demonstrate that the hill needs more detailed attention in the future. This will become a matter of urgency if further underground reservoirs are to be constructed within the defended area.

*June 1973*

10. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, XXXIV (1968), 422.

11. *Ibid.*, 414–26.