

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Excavations at Icomb Hill

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1978, Vol. 96, 27-31

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Excavations at Icomb Hill, Gloucestershire, 1975

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SUMMARY

Examination of 222 sq. m. prior to the construction of an UHF Relay Station failed to reveal any evidence for iron age activity on the south-west side of the probable hillfort.

Introduction

Icomb Hill, three kilometres to the south of Stow-on-the-Wold (NGR SP 205230), is the site of a probable iron age hillfort. The proposed construction of an UHF relay station by the British Broadcasting Corporation on the hilltop, immediately to the east of Guy's Folly, posed a potential archaeological threat to this scheduled ancient monument. Accordingly, CRAAGS (The Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset) decided that an exploratory excavation should take place on the small area to be built over, and this was conducted between 13 January–18 February 1975 under the auspices of Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, with finance from the Department of the Environment. No features of archaeological importance were

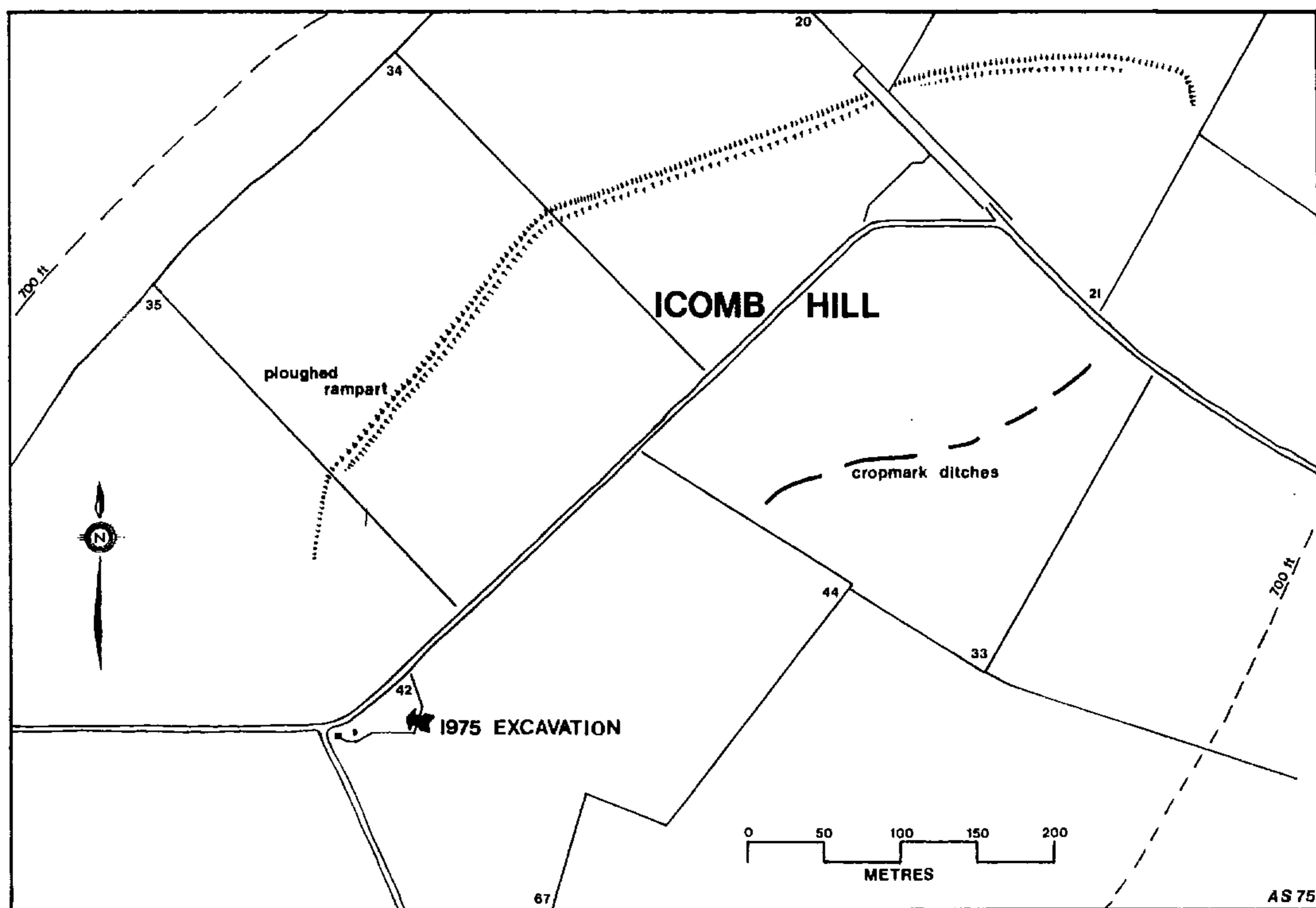


FIG. 1 Icomb Hill, location of 1975 excavation

located, and this brief report is therefore simply intended to serve as a record of the excavation. The UHF relay station has now been constructed, and the remains of Guy's Folly demolished.

The Excavation

The area involved (FIG 1), at a height of approximately 250 metres above O.D., comprises Ordnance Survey land parcel 42 (SP 20202285), which was formerly the garden attached to Guy's Folly, a building of 1805 (Verrey 1970, 282), but which had become completely overgrown since the Folly was last occupied some 30 years ago. The method of excavation was to open five trenches (A1-5) across the area to be disturbed by the construction of the relay station. The stratigraphy was found to consist uniformly of a topsoil (layer 1), between 15-30 cms deep, overlying an orangey red-brown subsoil (layer 2). Layer 2 formed the 'natural' on the site, but it was examined in detail in the westernmost 5 m of A1, where it was found to become progressively lighter and more clayey with depth ranging between 30-40 cms in thickness and directly overlying the convoluted surface of the bedrock, composed of angular fragments of Chipping Norton limestone. Elsewhere on the site, especially in A4-5, the limestone bedrock lay much nearer the surface of layer 2. Subsequent observation during the construction of the relay station foundations showed that the surface of the bedrock was extremely inconsistent, with deep depressions of over one metre infilled with layer 2 material.

A1, basically a 2 m wide cutting extending across the site for 34 m, was the initial trial trench to determine stratigraphy, and this demonstrated the absence of any major iron age features such as ditches. A1 could not be extended any further to the west because of the Folly, which at the time was in a dangerous state of half-collapse and surrounded by rubble. The additional trenches, A2-5, also failed to reveal any trace of iron age activity.

In the course of the excavation several features such as garden paths, plots and post-holes were exposed, but these could all be related by finds and general disposition to the occupation of the Folly, and dated to the 19th and 20th centuries. The ha-ha ditch which bounded land parcel 42 on the east side, and which appears to have continued around the south side, was partially sectioned where it cut the south-east corner of A1. Ploughmarks were noted in the top of layer 2 in A1, A2 and A5, and these must have preceded the use of the area as a garden, but are otherwise undateable.

All the features located were recorded in detail, but it was not thought appropriate to describe or illustrate them here. The excavation records, plans and photographs are housed at Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum (accession nos. 1975: 62-6), and these include the site plan, omitted from this report for reasons of space.

The excavation indicates the absence of archaeologically discernible iron age activity in the area sampled, but does not, of course, affect the interpretation of the camp as a whole, apart perhaps from suggesting that there had not been any great intensity of settlement associated with it.

The Finds

The excavation of this garden area produced, as might be expected, a considerable quantity of 19th/20th-century domestic refuse, including china, glass, pottery, iron, clay-pipe and bone. This material was distributed throughout layer 1, and over the surface of layer 2. Some of the finds from each of the above categories were kept, particularly those objects which related to the features exposed, but they are not described here.

Field-walking at the time of the excavation produced one abraded Romano-British pottery sherd, one unclassifiable sherd, and one presumably prehistoric sherd (shell-gritted wall sherd, red exterior, black interior) from field 44, and three abraded unclassifiable sherds and two possible fragments of pottery or daub from field 34. The prehistoric sherd is difficult to match, but is similar to some of the bronze age sherds from Bevan's Quarry round barrow (O'Neil 1967) now in Gloucester Museum. None of the sherds resembles the three probably iron age sherds found at Icomb by the RCHM during their survey work (RCHM; sherds in Gloucester Museum).

The only prehistoric finds recovered during the actual excavation were eleven flint artifacts.

Seven of these came from the topsoil, three from the top of layer 2, and one from well within layer 2, at a depth of 45 cms below the surface. These artifacts are all flakes or fragments of undiagnostic type.

Casual field-walking in the vicinity of the site produced a further sample of 123 flints, distributed by field number as follows: field 20: 14; field 33: 15; field 34: 65; field 44: 29. Almost all of the flints come from within the hilltop area delimited by the ploughed bank and the cropmarks. Fields 21 and 35 were not walked because of crops. The flints are mainly fragmentary waste material, but did include seven cores, which were irregular, multi-platform types, except for one B2 two-platform example. The retouched pieces are few, but include five scrapers, two points, and frag-

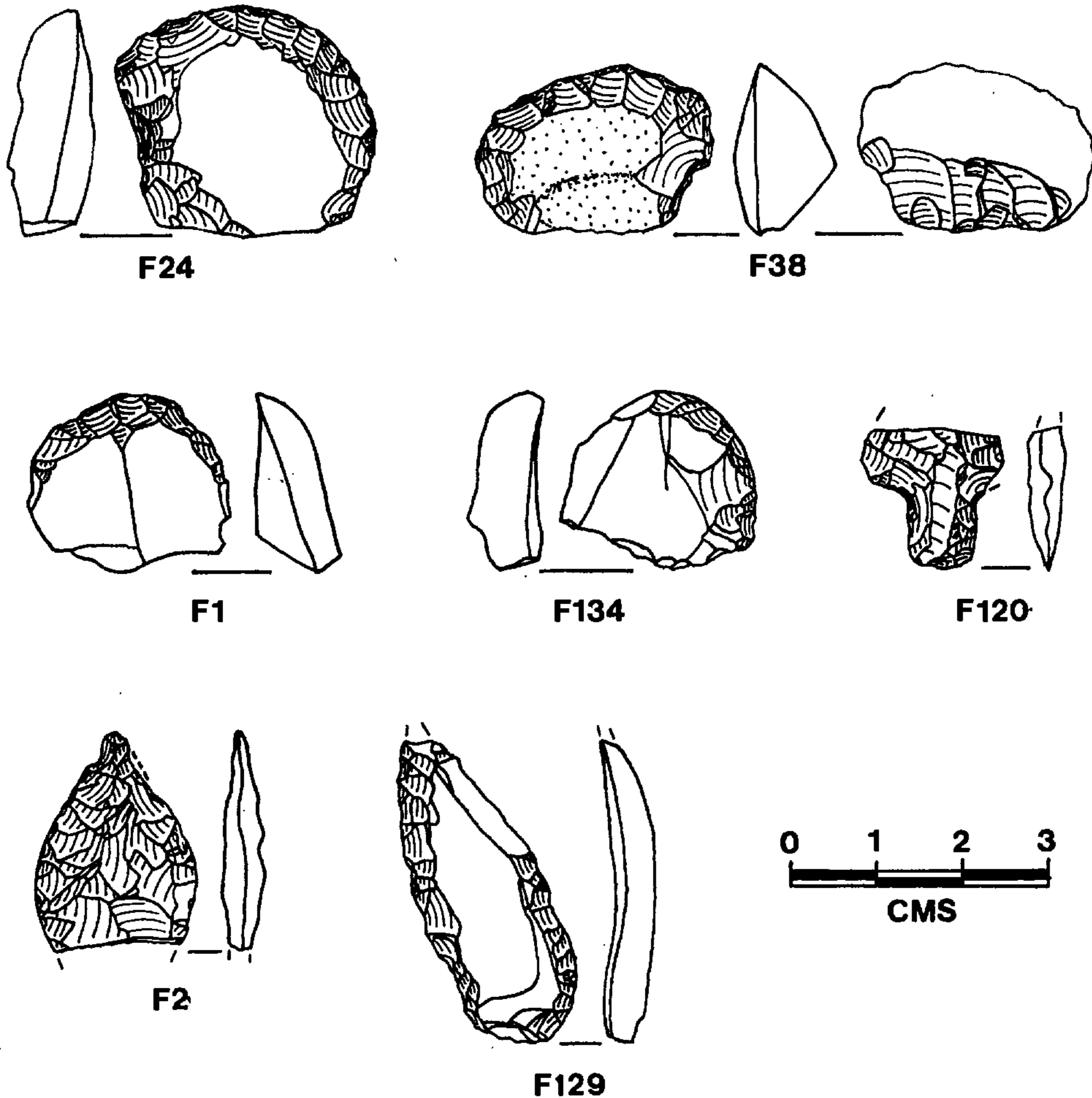


FIG. 2 Flint implements from fieldwalking on Icomb Hill

mentary examples of leaf-shaped and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads. The implements illustrated in FIG. 2 are described below.

F1, F24, F38, F134. Small end, and extended end scraper types, each retaining its bulb of percussion except for F38 which has a prepared base.

- F2 Leaf-shaped arrowhead with fully bifacial flaking, broken off at what is probably the base.
 F120 Base of barbed-and-tanged arrowhead of broad tang and vestigial barb type.
 F129 Point. Blade with scale-flaked retouch down whole of left-hand side and part of right, broken off at the tip which is presumed to have been a functional point.

Few conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample of material, other than that a neolithic and bronze age presence on the hilltop is indicated. No specifically mesolithic flint types were noted. The present finds are complemented by a flint scraper and a fragment from a polished stone axe-head (Evens, Smith and Wallis 1972, 270) previously found on the hill-top and now in Gloucester Museum.

All the finds from the 1975 excavation are housed in Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum (accession nos. 1975: 55-61).

The Hillfort (FIG 1)

The probable existence of a hillfort on Icomb Hill is today indicated on the ground by the heavily ploughed remains of an earthen bank crossing fields 20 and 34, surviving to a height of less than 30 cms, except for the point at which the field wall between fields 20 and 34 crosses the bank, where it survives to about 50 cms. When under crop the bank shows as a slight rise, and when ploughed a soil change distinguishes the remains of the artificial bank from the surrounding darker plough-soil. The extension of this bank into fields 21 and 35 as shown on FIG. 1 is taken from the 1922 edition of the O.S. 25-inch map (Glos. Sheet XXIX. 6) and although now more or less invisible on the ground, this extension can clearly be traced, particularly on the north-east side, from aerial photographs which show a ditch cropmark (e.g. NMR OAP SP 2023/7/205).

The only other evidence for former earthworks on the hilltop comes again from aerial photographs which show a discontinuous ditch cropmark crossing field 33 (plotted diagrammatically on FIG. 1 and illustrated more fully in RCHM). The RCHM suggests that this could represent the unfinished remains of the former circuit of a projected hillfort and notes that a large enclosure is shown hereabouts on a small-scale 18th-century map.

Mrs H. E. O'Neil has shown the present writer a copy of O. G. S. Crawford's field map of the area which is in her possession, on which there are two penciled projections of the bank on the west side leading on from the bank in field 35. One of these projections crosses land parcel 42, the other crosses the road just to the west of the junction. The basis on which these projections were made is not known, but the 1975 excavations now invalidate the former projection at least.

The only internal features showing on aerial photographs are some indistinct cropmarks in field 33 at approximately SP 205231, which could possibly be interpreted as three sides of a rectangular enclosure with a long axis of about 80 m.

On balance the available evidence seems to point to the former existence of an iron age hillfort on Icomb Hill, but only further, more extensive excavation could substantiate this and determine whether the hillfort was ever completed and occupied.

Acknowledgments. During the excavation the helpful co-operation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (in particular Mr P. D. Cleminson and Mr A. P. Waye) and of Cheltenham Corporation is gratefully acknowledged. The excavation team, which performed wonders despite adverse weather and disappointing results, comprised Tom Adamson, Silvia Carlsson-Camandona, Chris Cotton, Tim Darvill, Carolyn George, Cherry Goudge, Tim O'Leary and Steve Roskams.

FIG 1 incorporates evidence from NMR aerial photographs, and I am grateful to Mr J. Hampton and Mr G. Soffe of the Air Photographs Unit in London for permission to study and reproduce this evidence. Mr C. Bowen and Mr B. Eagles of the RCHM (Salisbury) allowed me to refer to the section on Icomb from the RCHM monograph on the Cotswolds in advance of publication. Mr M. Watkins of Gloucester Museum allowed me to examine the Icomb and Bevan's Quarry finds in his charge, and Mrs H. E. O'Neil kindly drew my attention to the O. G. S. Crawford map. Finally, Mr C. Bowen read this report in draft form and offered helpful comments.

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Addendum

On behalf of CRAAGS and the DOE, a watching-brief was undertaken at Icomb Hill on 17 and 20 October 1975 during the installation of the electricity supply to the new UHF relay station. From the archaeological viewpoint, the installation primarily involved the excavation by mechanical excavator of a trench 40-50 cms wide and 50-60 cms deep, leading from the relay station hut in land parcel 42, crossing the road at NGR SP/20162289, and continuing along the grass verge on the north side of the road for a distance of 35.8 m west of that point.

The importance of this trench, which crosses the major break in slope occurring on this side of the hilltop, is that it showed no indication whatsoever of any ditch/bank continuing south from the point where the putative iron age rampart fades out in field no. 35 (see FIG. 1 above). Together with the information from the archaeological excavation, this would seem to indicate that the iron age defences did not cross this part of the hilltop, and unless an extremely sharp-angled bend occurs in field no. 35 to bring the rampart round to the east of parcel 42, would endorse the interpretation of the hillfort as unfinished.

The only antiquity unearthed during the watching-brief was a 19th-century token, found at approx. SP/20142289. (Halfpenny token of John Knapp Junior, Worcester, 1813—now in Cheltenham Museum acc. no. 1975:196).

Thanks are due to Mr Reeves of the Electricity Board in Oxford for facilitating the watching-brief and to the workmen on site for their ready co-operation.

November 1975