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Excavations on Minchinhampton Common

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Given the considerable rate of gravel extraction within the area, it is a matter for conjecture (and concern) as to how many such implements have been disturbed and removed from the area without any form of recognition and no means of recording their existence. This point is supported by the fact that both were essentially chance finds, largely resulting from the interest and observation from one employee of the gravel company concerned.

The 1973 find was made on 9 October at Halford Quarry, at O.S. Nat. Grid, SU068968 approximately, being south of the new 'spine' road linking the A419 Cirencester—Cricklade road with the main gravel extraction areas of South Cerney and Ashton/Somerford/Poole Keynes. Although in the parish of South Cerney, the gravel pit in question is associated with the village of Cerney Wick to the south-east, and is so referred to here to avoid confusion with the extensive area of gravel extraction north of the 'spine' road. The find spot is approximately 6 km north-east of the Poole Keynes find.

The hand-axe was recovered from newly extracted gravel being deposited into a lorry and its discovery reported to the Corinium Museum by Mr Pockett, an employee of Roger Constant & Co Ltd. Both he and the company are to be congratulated on their observations and willingness to present their finds to public collections, the Poole Keynes implement to Bristol City Museum and the Cerney Wick hand-axe to the Corinium Museum, Cirencester (Acc. No. 1976/363) where it is now on display.

The axe is a fine example of Acheulian type, patinated and slightly rolled. It is 14.5 cms in length, almost exactly the same as the Poole Keynes example.

I am grateful to Alison Howard-Drake, museum assistant at the Corinium Museum for her illustration of the hand-axe.

April 1975

D. J. VINER.

EXCAVATIONS ON MINCHINHAMPTON COMMON IN 1973

Introduction

Following the proposal by the North-West Gloucestershire Water Board to lay two new water pipes from the reservoir on Minchinhampton common, one towards Box and the other towards the Park, a short excavation was mounted for two weeks in July 1973. As with much of the common, the areas affected by the pipe-line were scheduled as being of archaeological interest.

The major archaeological features of the common have been fully recorded by R.C.H.M.¹, of which the most notable are the Bulwarks (1), and the Amberley 'rampart' (7). Mrs Clifford's sections through the Amberley 'rampart', possibly one of the earliest earthworks, in 1937² revealed a bank 32 feet wide rising from the edge of a flat-bottomed ditch 23 feet across and 8 feet deep, producing iron age 'B' and so-called 'Belgic' pottery sherds. The most prominent earthwork is that known as the Bulwarks, an iron age bank and ditch, extending for at least 1½ miles from just north of the Halfway House inn to a point in the Park, beyond which it has been destroyed. It has an overall width of 47 to 62 feet and the bank varies from 1½ to 4½ feet in height. Neither the Bulwarks nor the 'rampart' extend over the complete summit of the common. If the Bulwarks are viewed as a defensive earthwork enclosing an *oppidum* sited under modern Minchinhampton, the acceptance of an internal ditch would be necessary. An alternative explanation for the purpose of the Bulwarks is a demarcation line separating the main area of Minchinhampton common from Rodborough common. If so, why was a shorter and more direct line between Box and Burleigh not chosen?

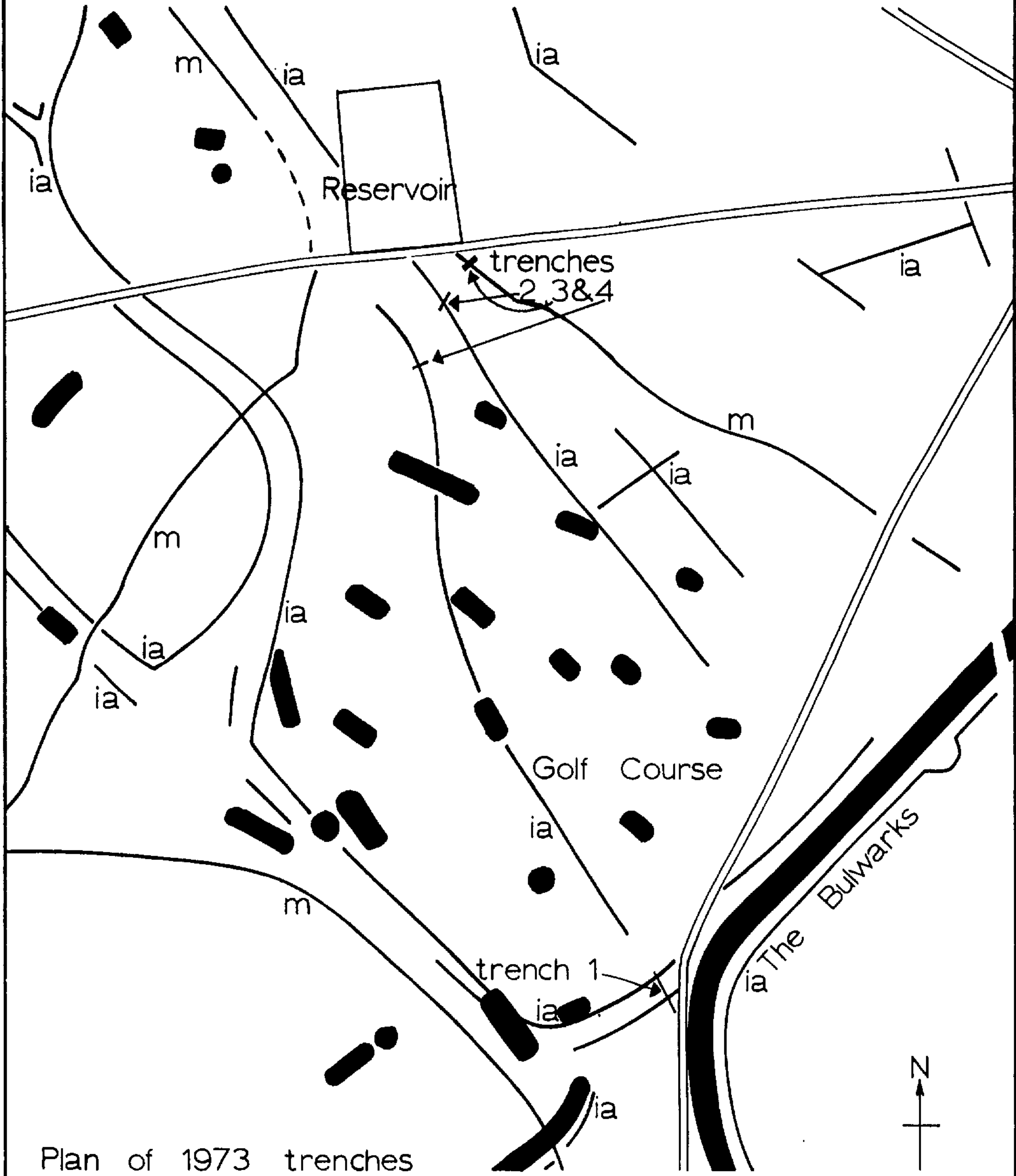
1. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Iron Age and Roman Monuments in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds* (1977). The Commission's numbering of monuments for the parish of Minchinhampton is followed in this report.

2. E. M. Clifford, 'The Earthworks at Rodborough, Amberley and Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LIX (1937), 287-307.

MINCHINHAMPTON

COMMON

1973



Plan of 1973 trenches
ia probably Iron Age
m probably Medieval
● Pillow mounds

0 100 200
Scale in metres

DJW

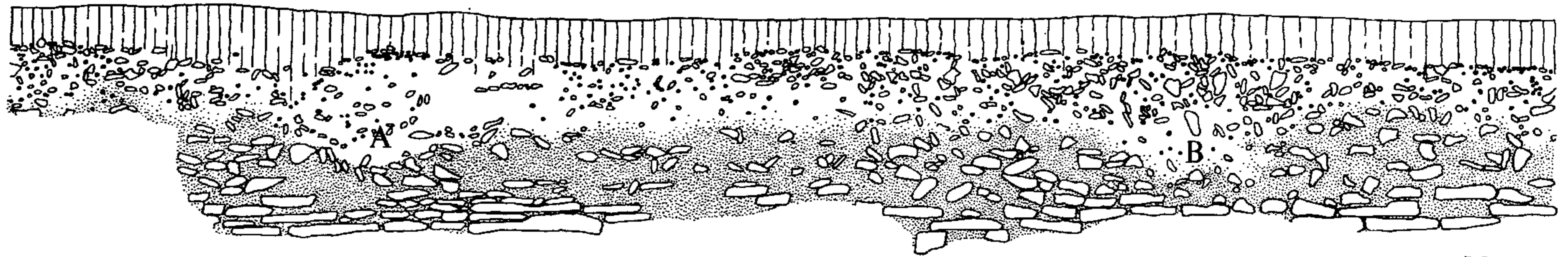
FIG. 1.

MINCHINHAMPTON COMMON 1973 WEST FACE TRENCH 1

South

9.5m

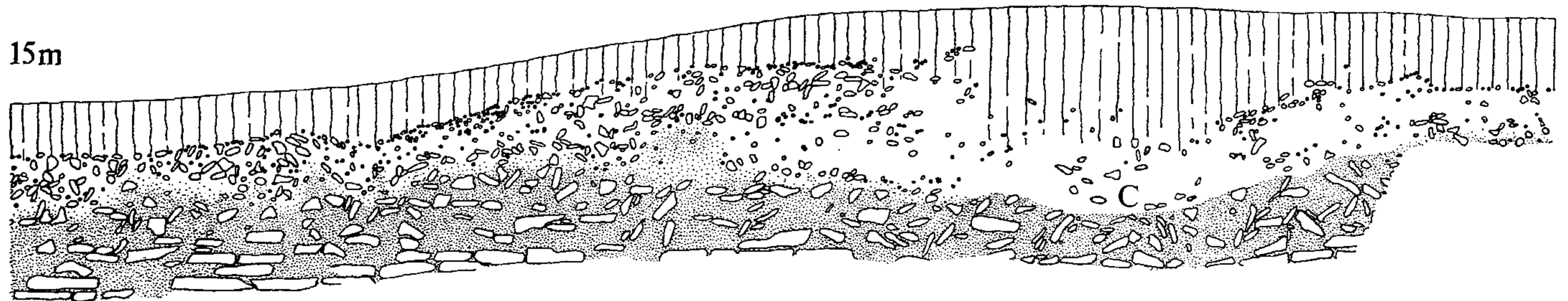
15m



North

20.5m

15m



metres

0 1 2



scale



Topsoil



Red-brown subsoil



Natural bedrock and brash

DJW

FIG. 2. Section from Minchinhampton trench 1

A short section of bank and ditch, probably of the Iron Age, extending from the Bulwarks but not apparently joined to it, may represent an abandoned scheme to extend the Bulwarks south-west rather than south. An enclosure (b) similar to and immediately south of, the so-called 'Amberley Camp' (a), consisting of a small bank and ditch probably dating from historic times, overlays the northern end of the 'rampart'.

In addition to the major earthworks, probably dating to the pre-Roman Iron Age, there is a maze of smaller linear earthworks (8) criss-crossing the common³, FIG. 1. Their distribution and relationships suggest the possibility of iron age origins. They are overlaid, for instance, by Amberley Camp, (a). Investigation by R.C.H.M. has shown these banks to be mostly about 12 feet across and 1 foot high crossing the common in straight lines or fluent curves. The parallel courses of various of these earthworks was noted, as if defining tracks, with three such 'tracks' apparently converging on an open space to the north of the golf club house.

Excavation

The proposal to lay two water pipes across the common provided an opportunity to section several of these linear earthworks in an attempt to establish their date and method of construction.

Sections were cut across four of the banks, the most productive 11 metres of which is represented as FIG. 2. Below the topsoil layer of 15 cms was a thin layer of accumulated stones, giving the misleading impression in section of a surface. The only find was an iron nail. A red-brown subsoil with considerable stone content lay below this and above the natural bedrock of great oolite, represented as flat bedding planes with brash and decayed limestone above. There were few definite archaeological features; A and B with a lack of stone infill may be possible features about which nothing else can be said as they contained no small finds and appeared clearly only in section.

C represents the only feature which could possibly be represented as a ditch. It is clear that there is even less evidence for a bank. There was no dating evidence.

Three further sections in trenches of 9, 3 and 8 metres in length were taken across very low banks. Excavations showed these were very slight and evidence for the ditches was almost totally lacking.

The excavations proved unproductive in finds and only a small number of modern objects was found. The absence of structural evidence, together with the almost total absence of finds allows very little to be said. It may be suggested that the surface features indicated on FIG. 1 belong to several periods. In the limited excavations which were possible only relatively small areas could be examined and clearly only large-scale work will establish the relationship, if any, between these smaller features and the major iron age earthworks of the common. A number of soil samples was taken for future analysis.

Acknowledgements. The excavation was financed by the Department of the Environment through the Woodchester Excavation Committee, and both writers are indebted to the director of excavations at Woodchester, Giles Clarke, who undertook all preliminary arrangements and acted as treasurer, and invited them to undertake the day-to-day direction of the excavation. Thanks are due also to the curator of the Corinium Museum, Cirencester, David Viner, through whose efforts a team of volunteers was organized, and a supply of equipment loaned by courtesy of Cirencester Excavation Committee.

The Commons Committee kindly gave permission for the work, and the Water Board were able to make available fencing from a nearby site. The debt owed to Mr Collin Bowen and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for permitting the use of material from the then unpublished survey of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds, will be apparent from this report.

December 1975

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3. C.V.A.P., VAP RC 8-L, 152-7, reproduced in Fowler, E. *Field Survey in British Archaeology* (C.B.A., London, 1972), 40-1.