

EXCAVATIONS AT WHITSBURY CASTLE DITCHES, HAMPSHIRE, 1960

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ABSTRACT

Rescue excavation of a small area within the hill-fort allowed investigation of the internal face of the inner rampart and a workshop hut of unusual plan situated immediately inside it. The remains of the hut were well-preserved and were associated with a closed group of Middle Iron Age pottery. The rampart had been refurbished in the post-Roman period when further activities took place in the lee of it.

INTRODUCTION

Whitsbury Castle Ditches (SU 128 197) is one of the larger Iron Age hill-forts of west Hampshire. It encloses 6.27ha and lies astride the 121.92m (400ft) contour at the head of a shallow dry valley which opens on to the flood plain of the Avon a few kilometres north of the present town of Fordingbridge (Fig 1). The village of Whitsbury lies immediately south of the hill-fort. The fort is situated on the Upper Chalk which in this locality is characterised by large irregular hollows filled with later Tertiary deposits (Reading Beds). The excavated area (Fig 2) was located at the edge of one such hollow. The Reading Beds consist of irregular alternate bands of clay and sands. The clay is sometimes brightly coloured and is often mottled and plastic while the sands are also multicoloured, ranging from yellow to red-brown, and may contain flint pebbles (Anderson & Biek, microfiche frame 7).

The parish of Whitsbury lay originally in the Hundred of Cawden (Wiltshire) but was transferred to Hampshire in 1895. The name occurred as Wychbury and Wicheberia in the 12th century (VCH, Hampshire IV 594) and the 'bury' element undoubtedly refers to the adjacent hillfort. The Castle Ditches were first described by Colt Hoare (1812, 231) who

described them as a strong camp with a single bank and ditch and three entrances, although only that on the south-west side is now thought to be original (Fig 2). A more detailed description was supplied by Williams-Freeman (1915, 418) who first appreciated the complexity of the defences. These comprise three sets of banks and ditches although they have been much disturbed on the south-west side by the manor house and modern racing stables. The ramparts and ditches are thickly wooded. Three linear earthworks which are probably of Bronze Age date meet at Whitsbury. Of these, only one is now visible as a standing earthwork (Fig 2, top right), the others having been plotted from aerial photographs (Bowen 1975, 54, Fig 3.4 and RCHM forthcoming). Worked flints and late Roman pottery have been collected from the fields immediately south-east of the hill-fort and a Roman T-shaped corn-dryer was excavated in 'Close Field' north of the church (unpublished finds and notes by Major P Currie 1938, housed in Salisbury Museum). Birley suggested that Whitsbury camp may have been the site of the battle of Mount Badon (Birley 1932) but this claim has not been substantiated by more recent research, nor would such historical correlations now be postulated.

The rescue excavation was carried out in advance of building operations associated with the riding stables in the winter of 1960. An area of 93 sq m (1000 sq ft) was investigated (Figs 2, 4 & 7). A regular grid of fourteen boxes 3.05m (10ft) square was excavated. After recording the key sections the baulks were then removed in order that a full plan of the Iron Age structure might be examined. The archaeological layers were removed by hand

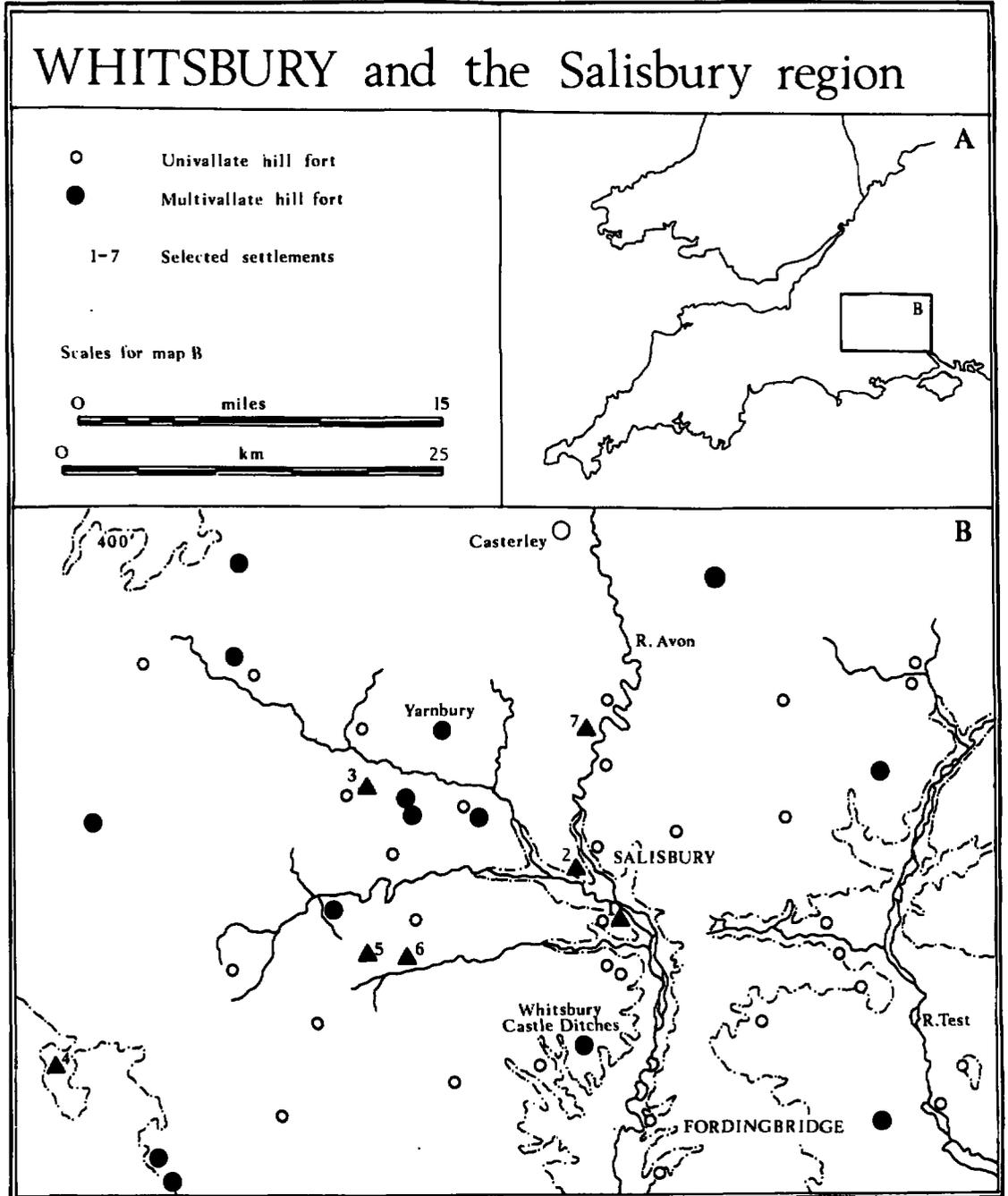


Fig 1. Whitsbury and the Salisbury region. Settlement sites: 1 Little Woodbury, 2 Highfield, 3 Stockton Earthworks, 4 Marnhull, 5 Swallowcliffe, 6 Fifield Bavant, 7 Wilsford.

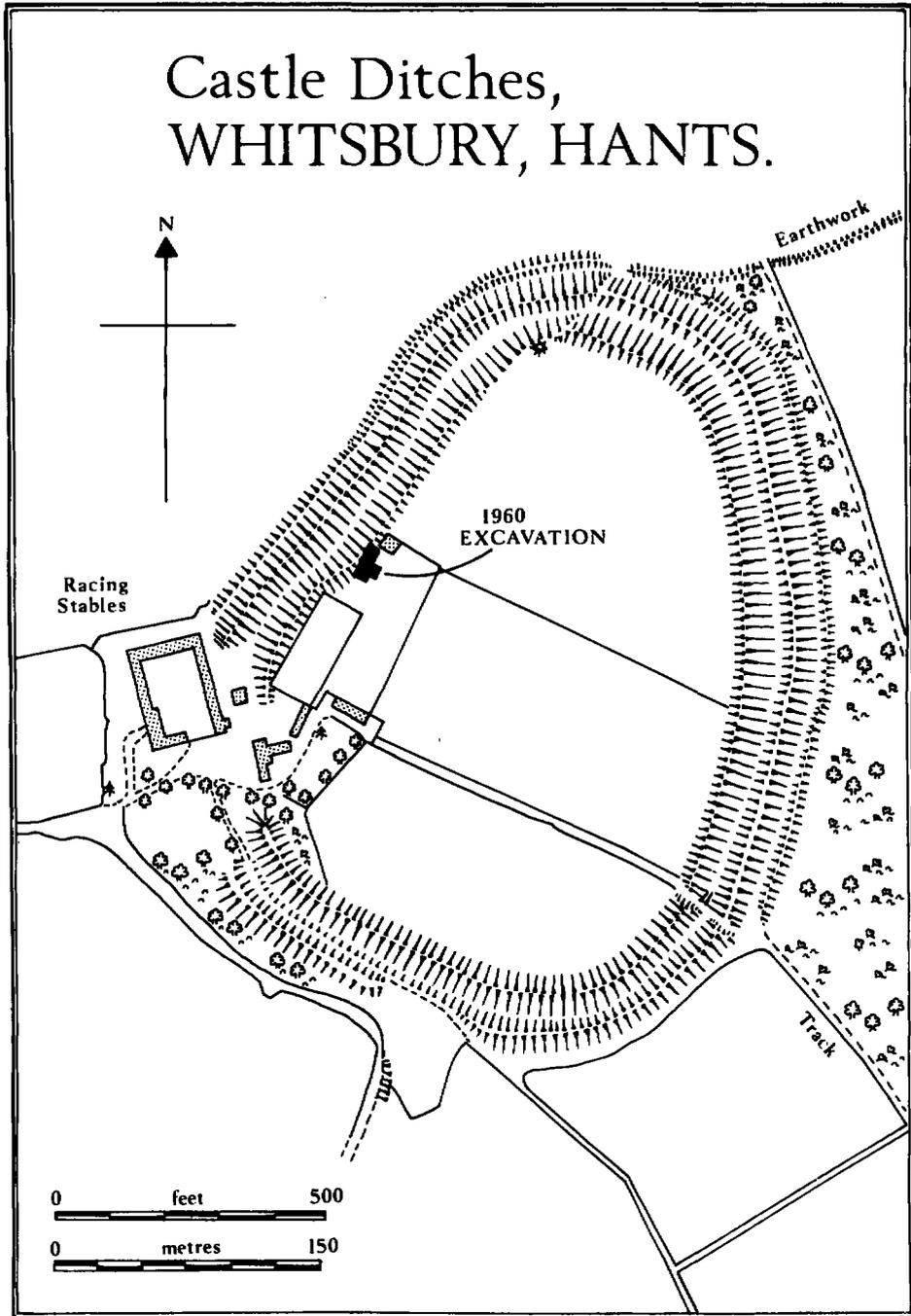


Fig 2. Whitsbury Castle Ditches: location of 1960 excavation.

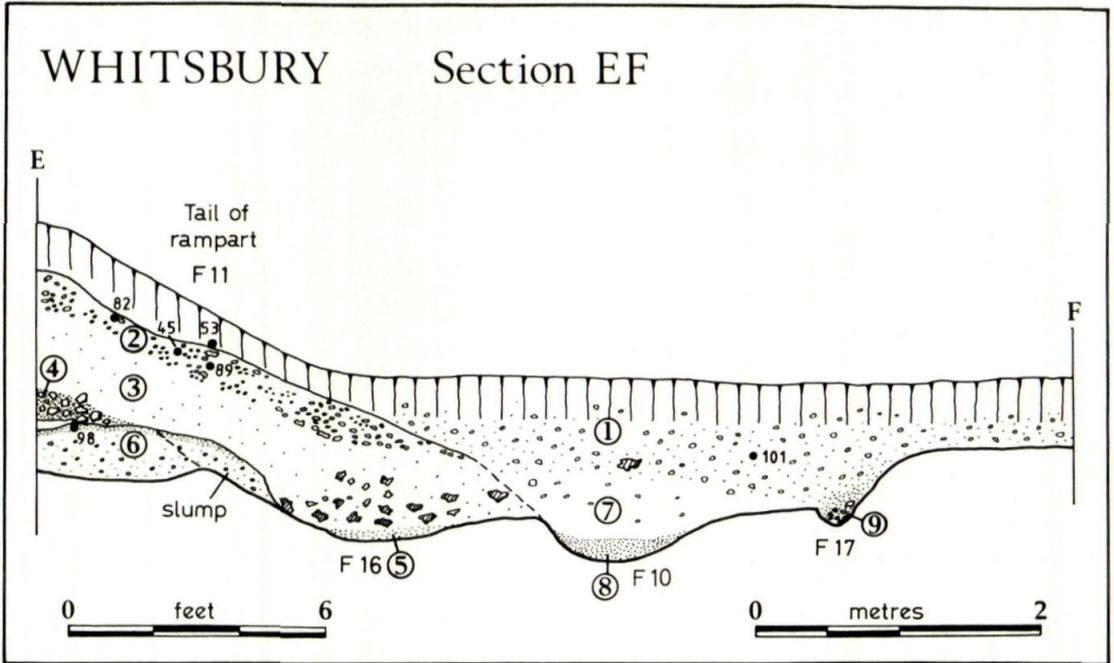


Fig 3. Whitsbury: section through tail of rampart.

using both pick and shovel and trowelling techniques.

PHASE SUMMARY

Within the excavated area the following phases of activity were represented:-

- Phase 1. Stray flints and a Thames pick: Mesolithic.
- Phase 2. Construction of inner rampart: Early Iron age.
- Phase 3. Construction of D-shaped hut and associated features: Middle Iron Age.
- Phase 4. Primary deposits in depression over site of decayed Phase 3 hut: Room or later.
- Phase 5. Silting above Roman layer: late or sub-Roman.
- Phase 6. Post-holes and possible renewal of rear revetment to inner rampart: sub-Roman.
- Phase 7. Burnt pit: post-Roman.
- Phase 8. Later deposits and disturbances.

PHASE 1: MESOLITHIC

The recovery of 57 struck flint flakes and tools from secondary contexts indicates that the hill-top formed a focus for activity during the early prehistoric period. The find-spots were widely distributed within the area excavated and the assemblage included a scraper and three artefacts of Mesolithic type: one blade, one possible microlith and a Thames pick (see Fig 9).

PHASE 2: EARLY IRON AGE (Figs 3 & 4)

The buried soil beneath the tail of the inner rampart of the hill-fort (Fig 3, E-F, layer 6) contained six plain sherds of Iron Age sandy fabric (98), indicating that the rampart at this point was initially constructed in the Early or Middle pre-Roman Iron Age. The soil was formed on a sandy facies of the Reading Beds and the profile may be diagnosed as a weakly podsolized soil with some indication of clay

WHITSBURY Iron Age Features

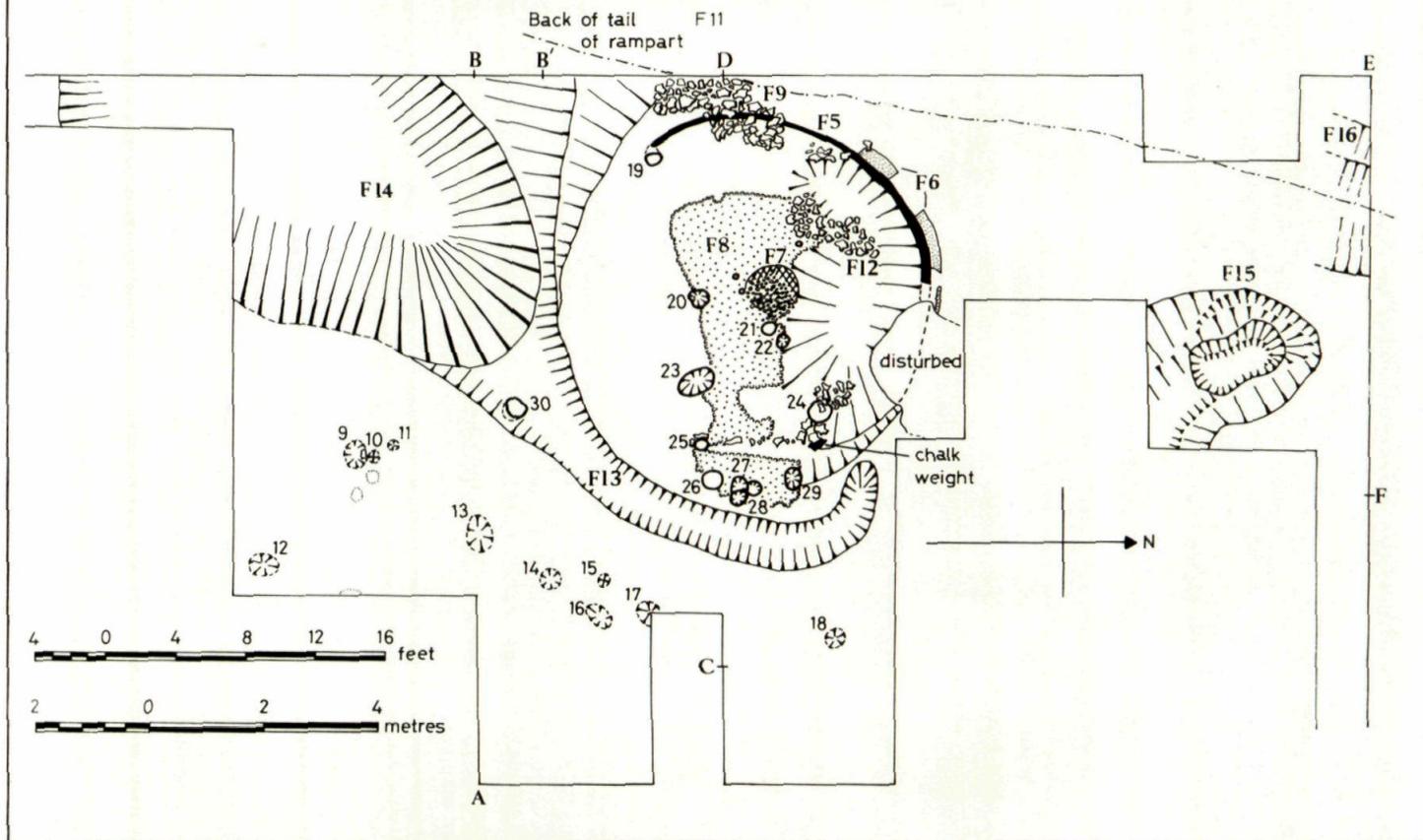


Fig 4. Whitsbury: plan of Iron Age features.



Fig 5. Whitsbury: foundations of Middle Iron Age but in lee of inner rampart, viewed from the north-east. Scales in feet.

eluviation. A full assessment of the soil by Dr S Limbrey is given on microfiche frames 7–8. The buried soil appears to have been cut by F16 which may have formed the foundation trench for an inner revetment of packed flints. Subsequently the sandy western edge slumped into the trench while the inner edge was destroyed by the gully F10 in phase 6. The existence of an Iron Age flint revetment is suggested by the tumbled areas of closely-packed flints found in later layers (Fig 4, F9 and F12 of phase 3; Fig 7, F1 of phase 6) and by the flints contained in the filling of F16. The extent of F16 could not be traced far within the area available for excavation and the area of its probable exit on section BE had been destroyed by a large modern disturbance. The core of the Iron Age rampart (Fig 3, F11) comprised a layer of chalk lumps (E-F, 4) closely packed in an orangey-brown sandy soil

below 0.6m of buff-brown sandy soil (EF, layer 3) and the remnants of a capping layer of sand and gravel (E-F, 2) which contained 20 sherds of Iron Age pottery. A further nine Iron Age sherds were recovered from the B horizon of the original Iron Age soil partly preserved beneath the hearth of the phase 3 but described below.

PHASE 3: MIDDLE IRON AGE (Figs 4–7)

Following the construction of the revetment of the inner rampart a timber structure was built immediately east and in the lee of it. The structure which appears to have been D-shaped in plan with its straight side facing south and of 6m (20ft) maximum diameter, possessed a timber (possibly planked) outer wall supported in a 5–8cm deep gully F5 by chalk packing (F6) on the outside. The roof

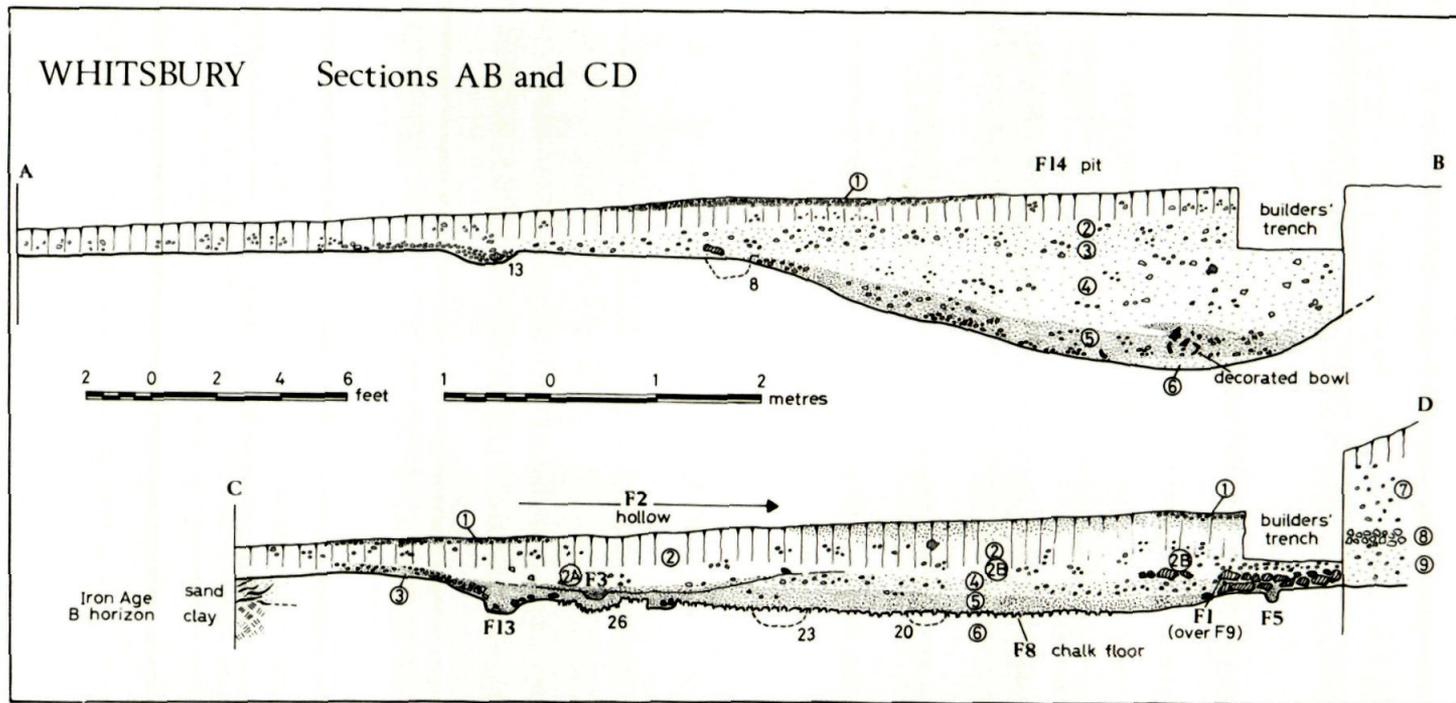


Fig 6. Whitsbury: sections through Iron Age, Roman and sub-Roman features.

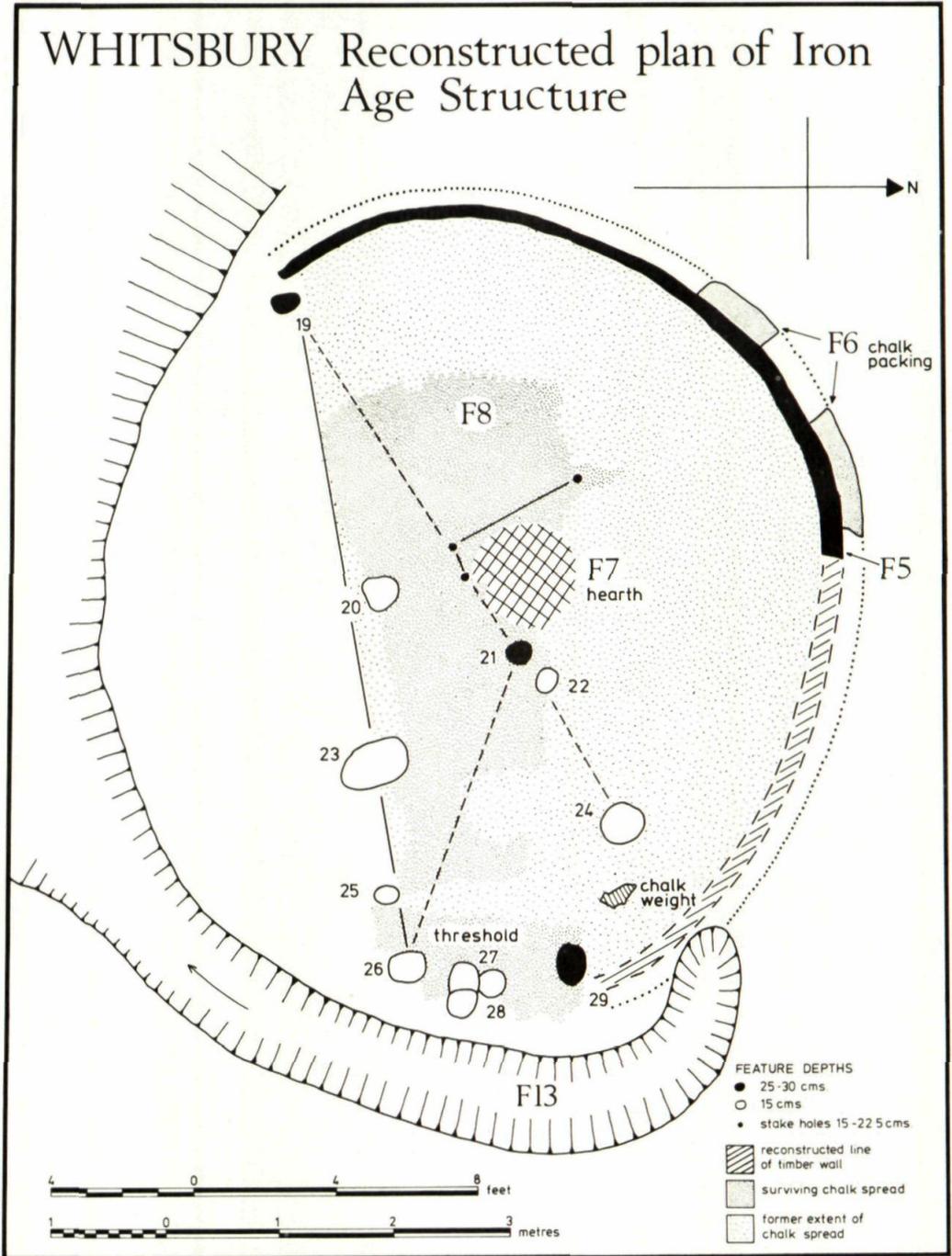


Fig 7. Whitsbury: Iron Age hut, conjectural reconstruction.

WHITSBURY Roman and Sub-Roman Features

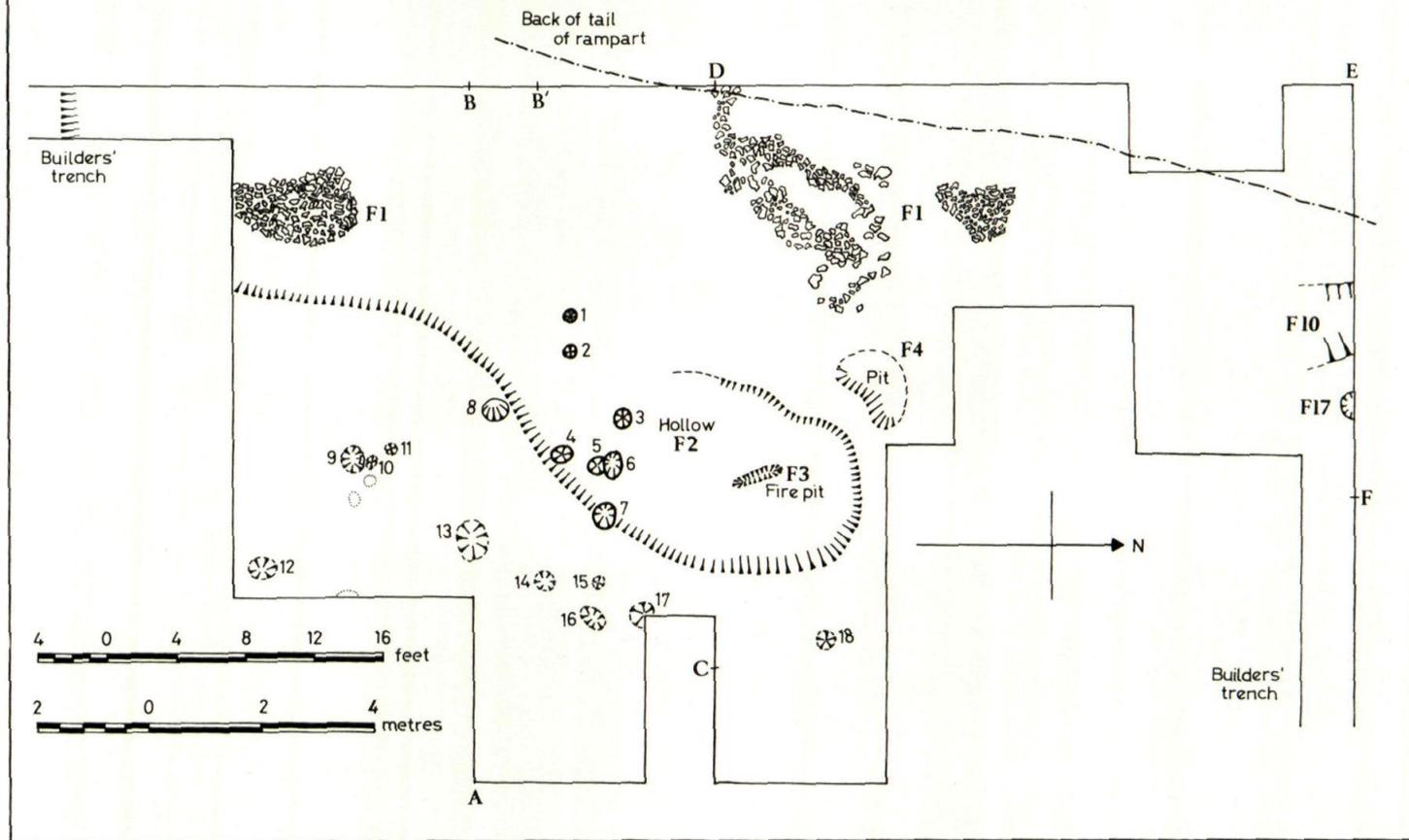


Fig 8. Whitsbury: plan of Roman and sub-Roman features.

was probably supported by two deep post-holes situated at the ends of the wall gully (F19 and F26, 30cm and 15cm deep respectively) and the 25cm deep 'central' post-hole 21 (see Fig 7). The other post-holes (20 and 22 to 25, 27 to 28) were on average 15cm deep and probably represent the line of a timber framed screen across the front of the hut and the supports for internal fittings. Within the walled area about 40% of a rammed chalk floor F8 was preserved. On the east side sharply cut limits, including the straight edge between post-holes 25 and 29, reflect the edge of hollows associated with the pit F3 belonging to phase 6. Near the centre of the floor was a burnt clay hearth F7 surrounded by a setting of three stake-holes 15 to 22.5cm deep and post-hole 22. The hearth was sited extremely close to the postulated 'central' post-hole 21. If the roof was in fact supported entirely by posts occupying holes 19 and 26 and the intervening screen then post-hole 21 or 22 may have paired with 24 to provide support for the posts of a two-post structure such as a loom. A large perforated chalk weight (Fig 10, 4) which may have functioned as a loom-weight was found near post-hole 24 and part of a bone weaving comb (Fig 10, 2) and two iron staples (microfiche frame 9, Fig 13) were found above the hut floor. If the entrance was not situated within the south screen wall, it may have been between posts 26/27/28 and 29; the latter arrangement would have allowed good penetration of light to the two-post structure. Immediately east of the hut lay a gully (F13) which was on average 15cm deep and drained into a 90cm deep pit F14. These arrangements, which must have greatly impeded access to the hut itself, were probably constructed to aid drainage from the hollow in the lee of the rampart. These features were definitely contemporary with the hut because portions of the same decorated vessels were found within F13, F14 and the occupation layers immediately above the hut floor. There was some evidence that the hut was eventually destroyed by fire and not subsequently rebuilt. The main occupation layer (Fig 6, CD, layer 5 lower) was analysed by Dr Limbrey (see

microfiche) who confirmed that, as expected, the very dark colour was due to a very high content of humus substances and much finely divided charcoal.

The row of post-holes 9 to 18 occupying the rising ground east of the gully F13 may have been associated with the Iron Age structures, or equally with the hollow F2 of phase 6 (Fig 8); they cannot be assigned securely to either phase. They were shallow and ill-defined but the filling of post-hole 11 contained a double-pointed bone punch (Fig 10, 3) of indeterminate date. The irregular pit F15, located north of the hut was 2.35m deep (from the modern surface) and contained some burnt Iron Age pottery. Chalk occurred at a depth of 1.80m within the pit and the hole may have served as a quarry pit to provide chalk for the floor of the hut.

PHASE 4: ROMAN OR LATER (Fig 6)

Within the hollow above the remains of the Iron Age hut a layer of dark gravelly silt accumulated (Fig 6, CD, layer 5 upper). This contained a small concentration of Roman pottery. Individual sherds dated from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD and indicate that the hill-fort may have been occupied during the Roman period. Work elsewhere (cf Burrow 1979; 1981) has suggested that Roman pottery in hill-forts, whatever its period of manufacture, is as likely to be post-Roman in use as Roman; this is especially true, for instance, of samian ware.

PHASE 5: LATE OR SUB-ROMAN (Fig 6)

A further layer of silting (Fig 6, CD, layer 4) contained almost no pottery (see Table 1) and was cut by some of the post-holes of phase 6.

PHASE 6: SUB-ROMAN (Figs 3, 6 & 8)

The inner face of the rampart F11 was remodelled by the cutting of a trench or gully (Fig 3, F10), whose extent could not be traced

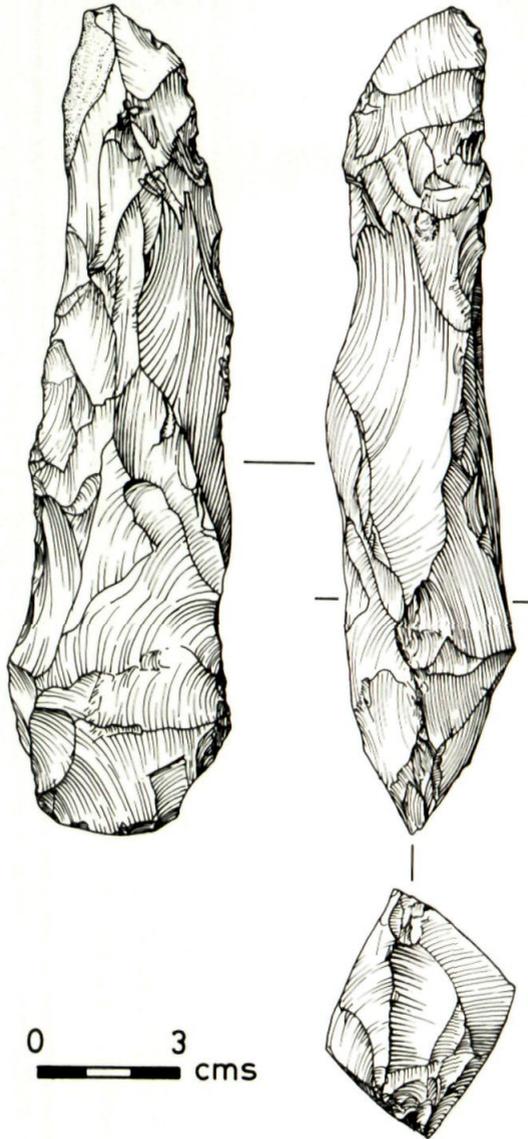


Fig 9. Whitsbury: Mesolithic tranchet axe.

with any certainty, and the possible restructuring of tumbled flints from the original Iron Age revetment (Fig 8, F1). The post-hole or gully-end F17 may also have been associated with this episode. The fact that no pottery of Roman date and only one sherd of Iron Age

style (101 in Fig 3, layer 1) was found in these deposits suggests that the refurbishment took place after the period of currency of Roman pottery.

Contemporary features (Figs 6 & 8) included a small pit F4, a setting of distinct

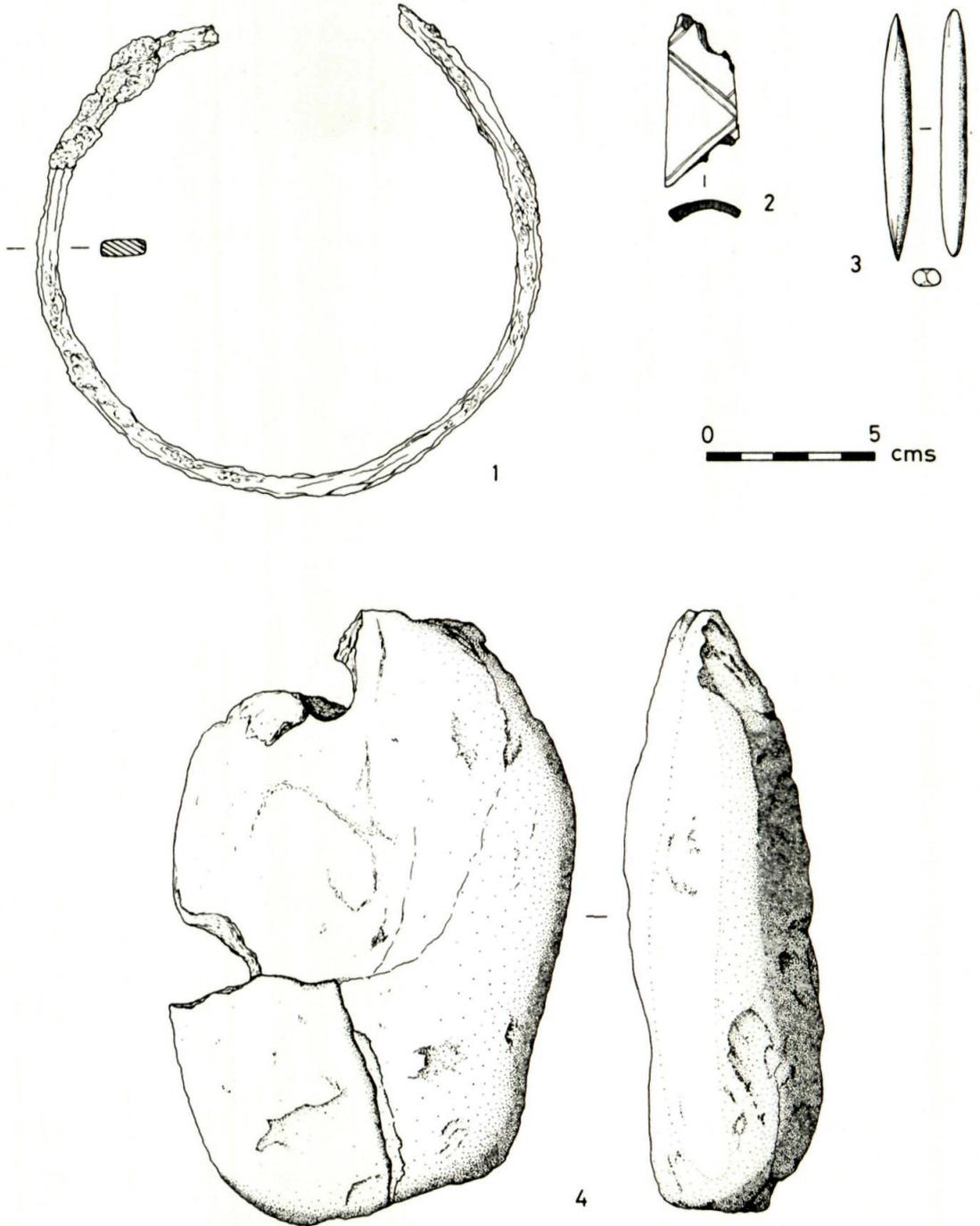


Fig 10. Whitsbury: objects of stone, bone and iron.

post-holes 1 to 8 and, possibly, the row of less distinct post-holes 9 to 18 defining the edge of a hollow F2 (but see above, phase 3). The layers sealing these features (Fig 6, AB, layer 3 and CD, layers 2B and 3) contained 19 Iron Age and four Roman sherds, all presumably residual.

PHASE 7: POST-ROMAN (Figs 6 & 8)

The cutting of pit F3 appeared to post-date the accumulation of a layer (Fig 6, CD, 3) which may also have sealed post-holes 9 to 18. Thus, if 9 to 18 were of phase 6, then F3 must be later. Alternatively it may belong with the structural features of phase 6. The area of F3 was first defined as a general spread of darker soil and charcoal. On further excavation, this was resolved as representing a narrow steep-sided trench 90 x 22.5cm in extent and 10cm deep. It was filled with much black soil and charcoal, eight fragments of fine burnt daub and the upper portion of a plain grass-tempered pot (Fig 12, 34).

THE FINDS

Mesolithic Thames Pick by the late Eric Higgs

The implement (Fig 9) is a typical 'Thames pick' made of grey flint and with the characteristic tranchet sharpening blow forming the cutting edge. The tool is the customary rough triangle in section with a pointed end. One side has been intentionally roughened by step retouch. The width of the cutting edge is 31mm. It is in sharp condition. The implement is 176mm in length and the maximum thickness is 35mm. The maximum lateral width is 49mm. The artefact will pass through a circle 49mm in diameter, so that the diameter of the hafting slot cannot have been greater than this. At 31mm from the cutting edge on one side and at 41mm on the other

side are two intentionally raised projections which are not directly opposed to each other, but are placed one towards each edge of the axe. By this means the axe is thickened and therefore strengthened especially at the edges. At this point the axe is also at its maximum circumference and the projections may have acted as 'stops' for the haft. If this is so, very little of the cutting end of the axe would have projected beyond the haft. The axe weighs 340g. The weight of an axe is proportional to the momentum of the blow and a modern timber felling axe weighs about 3.175kg. It seems unlikely that the Mesolithic axe would have been an efficient tool for felling anything other than green soft timber of small circumference. It would, however, have been an efficient adze.

Objects of Iron, Bone and Stone (Fig 10)

1. Iron ring or nave band, average 150mm in diameter (Fig 10, 1); found on south edge of gully associated with Iron Age hut.
2. Iron object, possibly portion of a large cleat (illustrated on microfiche Fig 13); found above floor of Iron Age hut.
3. Small fragment of iron, probably from a rod (not illustrated); found above floor of Iron Age hut.
4. A small amount of iron slag from within the hut has not been analysed.
5. Fragment of polished bone weaving comb (Fig 10, 2), decorated with double diagonal incised lines to form a chevron pattern = Hodder & Hedges (1977) Dec A or C; found above floor of hut on west side.
6. Double-pointed polished bone awl or punch (Fig 10, 3), length 73mm; found within the filling of post-hole 11.
7. Roof or loom-weight of chalk, roughly rectangular in shape and with a simple cylindrical perforation (Fig 10, 4); found on floor of Iron Age hut (see plan Fig 4).

Table 1. The Occurrence of Pottery by Fabric and Phase.

Phase	Date	Iron Age Pottery Fabric										Roman	post-Roman	Total
		IA	IB	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII				
2	early/middle Iron Age	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
3	middle Iron Age	317	57	7	20	5	1	2	-	1	8	-	418	
4	Roman or later	73	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	4	-	81	
5	late/sub-Roman	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	
6	sub-Roman	15	-	2	1	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	22	
7	post-Roman	37	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	59	
6/7	post-Roman	19	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	20	
8	later deposits	27	-	1	4	-	1	-	-	-	5	-	38	
Totals		506	58	10	30	5	4	2	2	2	19	18	656	

The Pottery

656 sherds were recovered during the excavation. Of these 619 belonged to the pre-Roman Iron Age, 19 were Roman and 18 (representing a single vessel only) were post-Roman in date. The post-Roman vessel was characterised by a distinctive organic-tempered fabric and is described below. Six pre-Roman Iron Age fabric groups were represented in the assemblage:-

Fabric IA: hard clay matrix with coarse sand inclusions

(a) plain

(b) burnished, usually on outer surface only

(c) finger-smear.

Fabric IB: hard clay matrix with fine sand inclusions, always burnished, usually on both inner and outer surfaces.

Fabric II: very soft 'soapy' matrix with sparse sand inclusions.

Fabric III: medium soft matrix with medium density calcined flint inclusions of varying size.

Fabric IV: soft thick 'soapy' matrix with dense coarse organic inclusions

(represented by voids); usually pale pink in colour.

Fabric V: hard 'soapy' matrix with evidence of sparse organic tempering.

Fabric VI: soft 'soapy' matrix with some calcined flint filler.

The occurrence of the various type fabrics is shown in Table 1 where the numbers of sherds representing each fabric type are tabulated in relation to the structural phases of the site. The forms and decoration of some of the vessels represented on the site are illustrated in Figs 11 and 12, where they have been grouped according to fabric.

Iron Age Pottery. From Table 1 it can be seen that coarse sandy fabrics (type I) were by far the most common, followed by fine sandy wares (type II) and flint-gritted soft coarse wares (type III). A large proportion of the pottery derived from the well-scaled contexts of phase 3 with only 35% of the Middle Iron Age ceramic assemblage having been disturbed and subsequently incorporated within contexts of later date.

The forms represented can be divided into

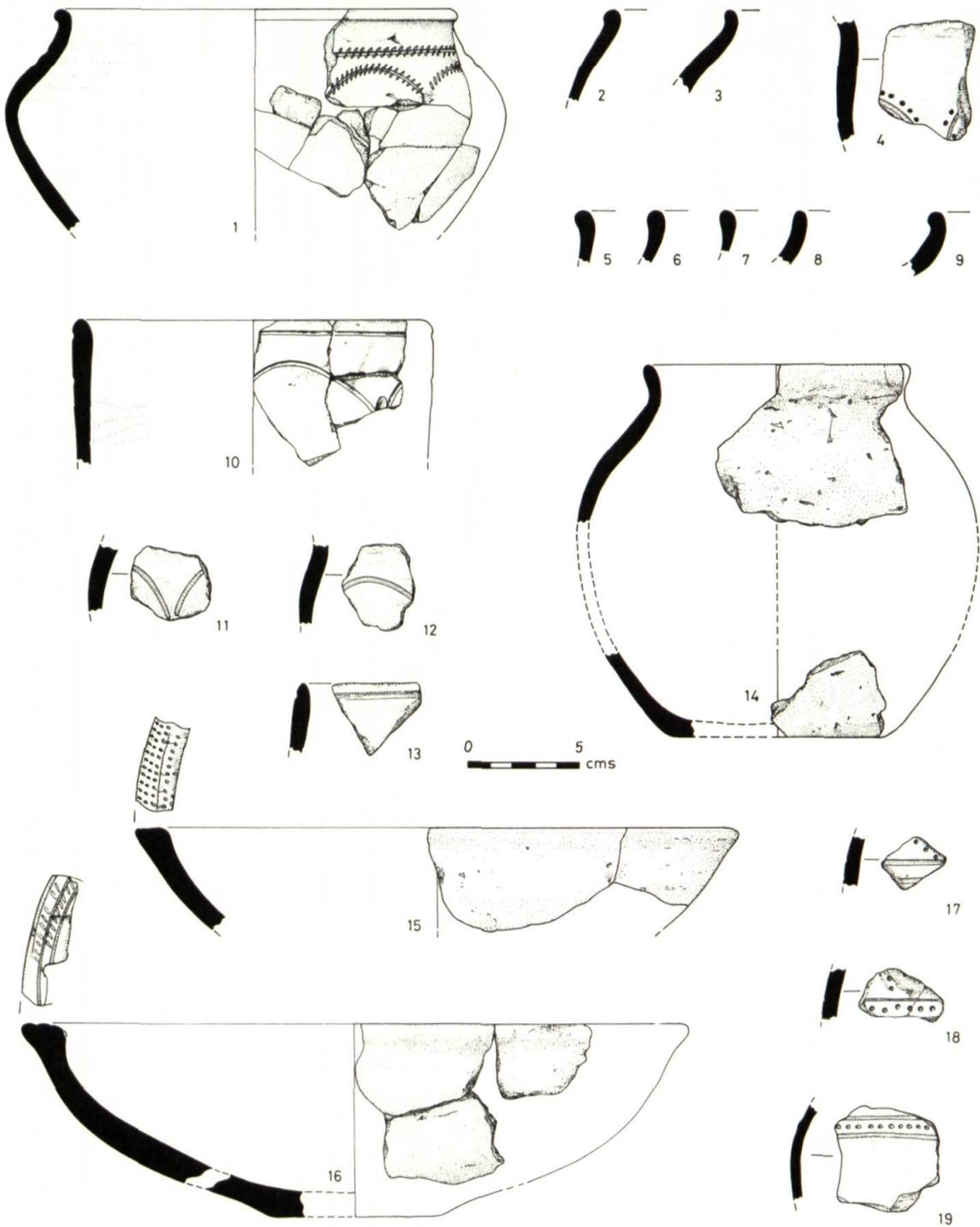


Fig 11. Whitsbury: Iron Age pottery, 1-19: fine wares.

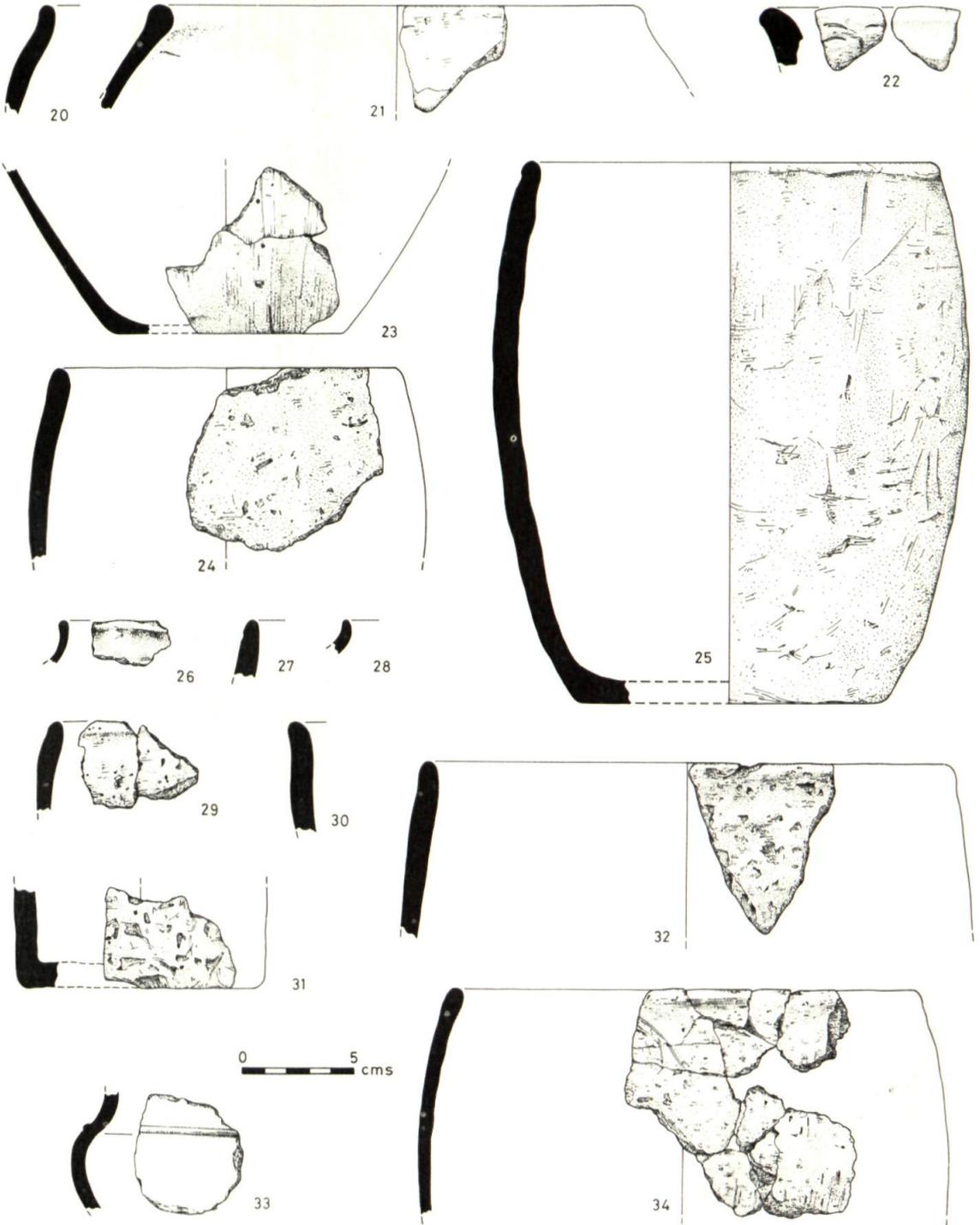


Fig 12. Whitsbury: Iron Age and post-Roman pottery, 20–34: coarse wares.

two major groups according to fabric and function: fine wares, mainly illustrated in Fig 11 and coarse wares, illustrated in Fig 12, 20-32. Fine-ware forms include globular necked jars and bowls (1-9, 11, 12, 14) in fabrics I and II, saucepan pots (10, 13) and shallow open bowls (15, 16) in fabric I and small globular jars (26, 28) in the softer fabric II. The coarse wares mainly comprise jars, either with a bipartite profile and internally thickened rim (20, 21) in fabric I or barrel-shaped in fabrics I or VI (24, 25, 32). Also in fabric VI is the lower portion of a vertical-sided container (31). The fine wares were often burnished, sometimes inside and out, while the coarse jars were sometimes finished with vertical finger-smearing (e.g. 23). The fine jars, bowls and saucepan pots were usually decorated with geometric motifs, shallow-tooled with a blunt-pointed instrument before firing. The motif repertoire includes horizontal lines, rows of dots (4, 17-19), zones of oblique lines (1, 16) and single-lined arcs with shallow circular impressions at their ends (10). Fig 11, 1 depicts an unusually fine burnished bowl decorated with a line of arcs emphasised with diagonal strokes below a horizontal line which is accentuated in the same elegant manner. Only one sherd of Late Iron Age pottery was recovered (33).

Roman Pottery. Nineteen sherds and a fragment of Roman brick were recorded from phases 3 (intrusive), 4 (Roman or later occupation level), 6 (sub-Roman refurbishment of rampart) and 8 (topsoil). The pottery, which was worn, could be dated in its manufacture from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD. Diagnostic sherds are described and illustrated in the microfiche (frame 11 and Fig 14), as is a copper alloy brooch loop recovered from the topsoil.

Post-Roman Pottery. Eighteen sherds of plain organic-tempered pottery were recovered from the burnt post-Roman pit F3. These have been reconstructed to show the upper portion of a thin-walled barrel-shaped jar with plain slightly inverted rim (Fig 12, 34). The fabric is

characterised by a very soft 'soapy' clay matrix with traces of widespread inclusions of organic material and some grog. The exterior surface shows sporadic vertical and diagonal markings resulting from grass impressions.

Animal Bones

Faunal remains were preserved in the Iron Age and post-Roman levels but were not collected on a systematic basis. Cattle, horse, sheep and pig were represented, the detailed evidence being recorded in the microfiche.

DISCUSSION

Investigation of a very small area within a previously unexcavated hill-fort has provided evidence for a substantial sequence of use and re-use of the hill top spanning four millennia. Following a phase of activity in the early prehistoric period and use of the hill as a junction point for boundary ditches in the Bronze Age the inner line of defences appears to have been constructed in the Early or Middle Iron Age. The pottery associated with the hut built in the lee of the rampart belongs to the Yarnbury-Highfield group of the saucepan pot styles dating from the 2nd and 1st centuries BC (Cunliffe 1974, Figs 3:5 and A.16). This pottery style occurs on the chalk plain west of the River Avon in south Wiltshire, north Hampshire and north-east Dorset (see Fig 1). The largest assemblages previously recorded were recovered from a probable open settlement site at Highfield, Salisbury (Stevens 1934) and from the univalate phase of another multivallate hillfort: Yarnbury Camp (Cunnington 1933). Similar pottery can also be identified at Little Woodbury (Brailsford 1949), Fifield Bavant (Clay 1924) and Marnhull (Williams 1951). This particular style zone displays a very distinct spatial clustering of specific decorative motifs into which Whitsbury falls extremely neatly (Hodder 1977, Fig 48).

The D-shaped hut plan cannot easily be matched on other excavated Iron Age sites in southern England. In form it best equates to

the semi-circular annexes found attached to circular huts on various sites and notably at Hod Hill (e.g. RCHM, Dorset III, part II, end flap) but the only parallel for a free-standing hut of this shape is the post and stake-built structure of 6m maximum diameter and 8th or 7th-century BC date excavated at Beedon Manor Farm, Berkshire by Richards (1984). This structure was interpreted as a workshop by Richards and provides a further example of later Bronze Age ancillary structures as defined by Ellison (1981, 419). The Whitsbury Iron Age hut with its hearth and assemblage of possible weaving equipment and domestic pottery also may have functioned as a workshop, either of Clarke's type Ib (minor houses; foci of female activities) or type II d (baking huts), rather than type II f annexe huts of the Hod Hill type which probably served as stables or chariot sheds (Clarke 1972, 816-823). The existence of a major living hut in the vicinity of the excavated area can be predicted with some certainty.

The evidence for the use of the hill-fort in the post-Iron Age period is of particular interest, especially as at least three episodes are represented. The first (phases 4 to 5) comprises Roman pottery in silting above earlier features; while this need be no more than the evidence of frequentation during the Roman period, all this pottery could have been in use in the 5th or 6th centuries AD. It may not indeed be much earlier than the second post-Roman phase (phase 6) when there is evidence for some refurbishment of the defences, though this occupation is apparently aceramic, perhaps in the 6th or 7th centuries AD. The final post-Roman phase (phase 7) is represented by a positive feature and by a distinctively post-Roman pot, whose cultural affinities in this area are more Saxon than dark age. *Grass-tempered pottery has been found elsewhere in the region at Winterbourne Gunner, Petersfinger and Ford, Wiltshire in pagan Saxon contexts and within a late Roman pottery scatter at Breamore, Hampshire (B Eagles, pers comm). Sherds recovered from the silt within the Rear Dyke at Bokerley Junction are now lost (H C Bowen, pers comm)*

and the Whitsbury vessel can best be paralleled by the bowl from Castle Meadow, Downton, Wiltshire (Rahtz 1964, Fig 3, 1), which was associated with Saxon domestic pottery of the Westbury type. None of these vessels can be dated securely within the Saxon period. The burnt pit F3 can be paralleled by a flued feature (1m x 0.5m) containing lenses of stones, ashy silt and sherds of grass-tempered pottery examined by Lobb at Riseley Farm, Berkshire (S J Lobb, pers comm). It has been suggested (by G C Astill) that the Riseley feature may have functioned as an oven for drying pots prior to firing, and a similar interpretation might be extended to the Whitsbury feature.

Although the reoccupation of hill-forts in the post-Roman period is now well-attested within Somerset and further west (see Burrow 1981 for a useful summary), in central Wessex such activity is not yet proven to be widespread (Fowler 1971, 204). Thus the evidence presented in this report provides a significant contribution to a site list which is still dominated by Cissbury, St Catherine's Hill and Maiden Castle and lacks the smaller hill-forts which were so commonly refurbished further west.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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