A LINEAR EARTHWORK ON GREENHAM COMMON, BERKSHIRE

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Greenham Common, some two miles south-east of Newbury, Berkshire, is a portion of the upland ridge which lies between the valleys of the Kennet and the Enborne. Its broad summit is almost level and is covered with heath.

Both sides of the common are penetrated at various points by the valleys of small streams (fig. 1.), and in one part, about 1½ miles from Newbury railway station, two comparatively large valleys exist one on the north and the other on the south side of the common. Here the distance between the heads of the valleys is little over half a mile, whereas the common proper hereabouts is normally one mile wide.

A single bank with ditch on its western side, locally known as Bury's or Berry's Bank, runs approximately north to south across the common between the heads of these two valleys. Its course is for the most part plotted on the O.S. map, but a fresh survey accompanies this report (fig. 2).

At their northern end the bank and ditch, although now partially levelled, have clearly been constructed exactly as far as the spring which feeds the stream in the northern valley (pl. I A). Beyond this point the artificial defence or barrier was not needed, since its place was taken by the swampy ground, which must have existed in that valley under primitive conditions.

Across the flat common the earthwork is aligned in straight lengths, changing direction slightly in three places (pl. I B and Fig. 2). Where best preserved (see Trench A), it is just over 4 ft. high and 30 ft. wide at its base and the ditch is 30 ft. wide. For a short distance south of the modern road it heads straight for the spring, which feeds the stream in the southern valley, but it has here suffered some disturbance since it ceased to be in use, and the indications of the earthwork are not clear. Immediately east of this spring also the ground has been dug away in an irregular manner for the sake of the gravel, and for some distance there are no certain signs of any continuation of the bank and ditch. Further south, however, there is a slight projection of the level common towards the line of the stream, and here there are clear indications along the brow of the higher land of a similar earthwork. This curves south-westwards, and is well preserved until it runs out on the comparatively steep slope down to the bed of the valley (pl. II B).

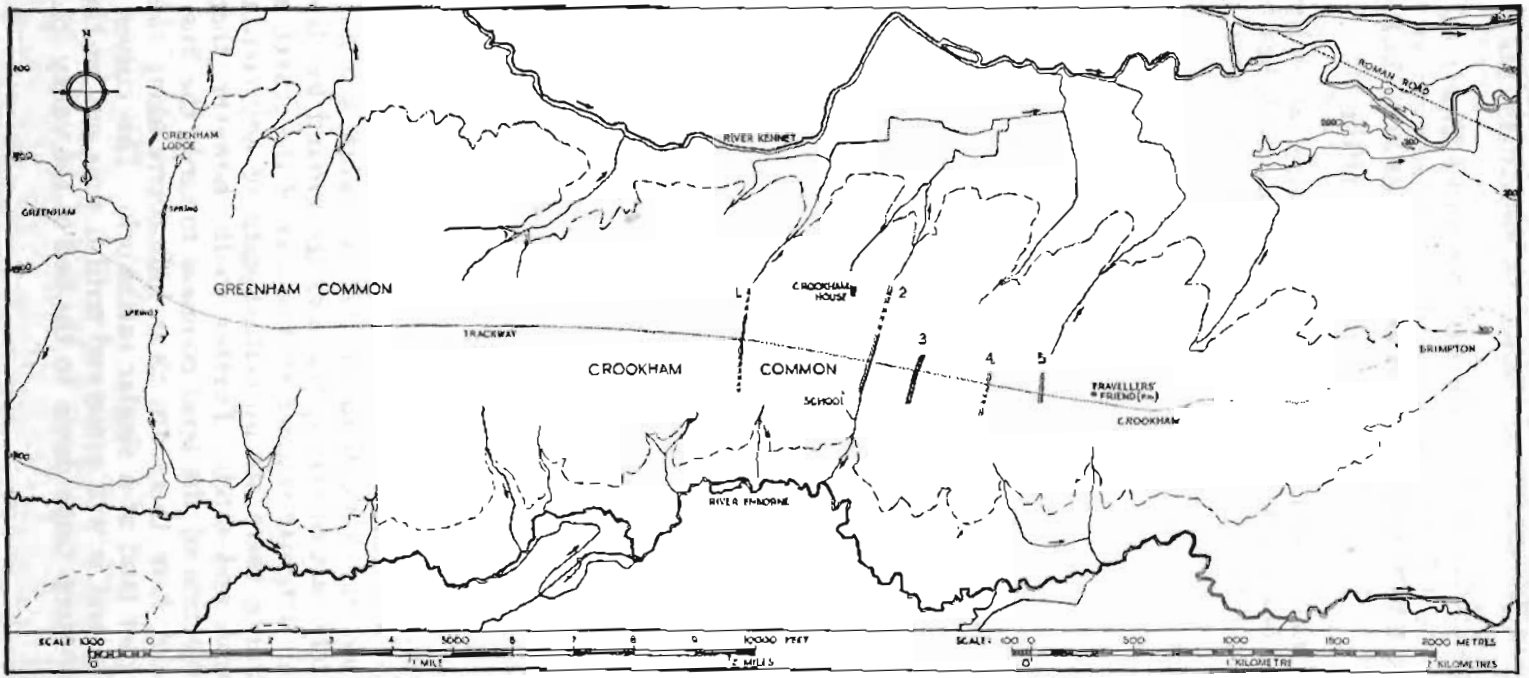

FIG. 1. GREENHAM COMMON AND CROOKHAM COMMON, BERKSHIRE

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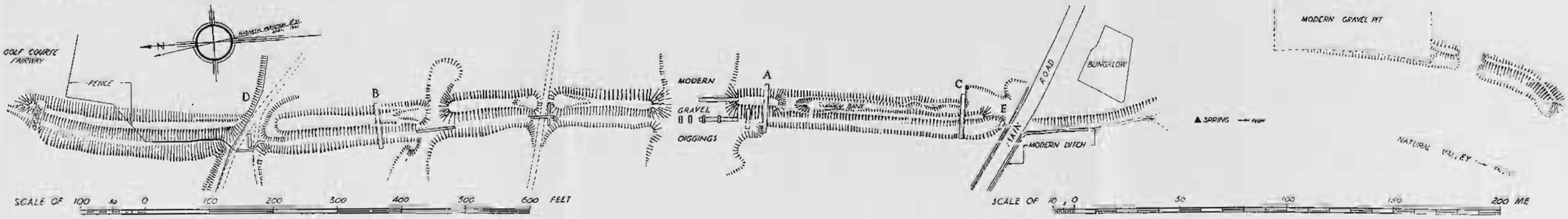

FIG. 2. BURY'S BANK, GREENHAM COMMON, BERKSHIRE

It seems certain that this work is part of the same system as the earthwork across the common, and that it was continued in this manner alongside the valley for a short distance ; otherwise access would have been easy across comparatively clear or dry ground below the spring and so beyond its southern end.

On the flat part of the common there are five gaps in the bank, as indicated on the plan. The three northernmost are not too wide to have been ancient entrances, but in the case of the most northerly but one there was clearly no causeway across the ditch. The third from the north is now very wide, and could not, of course, have been an original entrance in that form. Moreover the level of the ground here and for some distance east and west has clearly been lowered by the removal of all peat and heath in comparatively modern times. This may have been done in an attempt to drain the land. In view of this it was not possible to decide from surface indications whether a causeway had once existed across the ditch opposite any part of the gap in the bank.

The southernmost gap is that through which the modern road passes, and is, of course, too wide in its present form to be an ancient entrance. Apart from this, however, the lie of the land and the position and character of the road hence eastwards suggested even before excavation that this is the most likely position of the original entrance through the earthwork.

The first mention of the bank is a vague description by the Bishop of Cloyne in a paper on Roman roads contributed to Lysons's Berkshire.[1] The only other early one occurs in the History of Newbury and its environs, where the following sentence occurs : " The mound or trench called Berry's Bank, running north and south over Greenham Common, and alluded to by the Bishop of Cloyne, . . . is comparatively of very modern date, and cannot be attributed to the Romans ".[2] A summary of both appeared in the Victoria History of the county.[3] Since the section of the ditch just north of the highway appeared to have been widened, it seemed possible before excavation that this was done late in the eighteenth century, to make a water-jump for some local races. This suggestion, however, is not confirmed by the profile of the excavated sections. Mr. O. G. S. Crawford correctly interpreted the meaning of this bank in 1915.[4]

[1] Lysons, D. and S., *Magna Britannia*, I (London, 1806), 204.

[2] *The history and antiquities of Newbury and its environs, Speenhamland*, 1839, 161.

[3] *V.C.H., Berks.*, I, 273.

[4] *The Antiquary*, 1915, 253.

The purpose of the excavation was to discover the character and date of the earthwork, and to ascertain, if possible, where lay the original entrance or entrances through it. The work was in the immediate charge of Mr. W. E. Harris, to whom the writers are much indebted for his assistance.

Excavation showed that the bank was of simple construction, sometimes of two parts, clay in front with a backing and top of gravel, but apparently all of one date. Its average width overall was 28 ft. and it cannot have been of great height, since there was no sign of any revetment at back or front unless certain small deposits of grey clay are the remains of a turf bank to revet the front. The ditch was 24 to 30 ft. wide and 5 to 7 ft. deep and had become largely filled with gravel and clay silting. There was no counterscarp bank. As mentioned above, surface observations of the terrain had already suggested that the modern road passes through an

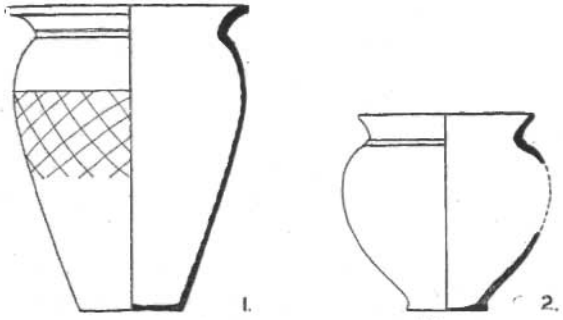

FIG. 3. ROMAN VESSELS ($\frac{1}{4}$)

enlarged ancient gap in the bank. Excavation has made the suggestion almost a certainty, and has also shown that there appears never to have been more than one original entrance through the earthwork.

The only dating evidence is supplied by large portions of two Roman vessels, which were recovered from the silt of the ditch at a depth of 5 ft. (fig. 3). The later of these vessels is of a type which was common in the fourth century A.D., but may well have existed still in use until a later date. These potsherds could have reached their find-spot in one of two ways. They could have been thrown in as refuse whilst the ditch still contained only a little silt, or they could have been washed down from the bank, in which they had been incorporated. As the considerable excavations in the vicinity failed to reveal traces of any occupation in the Roman or any other period, the second explanation of the presence of the

A. NORTHERN END OF BURY'S BANK, LOOKING SOUTH-EAST

B. BEST PRESERVED PORTION OF BURY'S BANK, LOOKING SOUTH

A. ROBBED BANK, BURY'S BANK, LOOKING SOUTH

B. SOUTHERN END OF BURY'S BANK, LOOKING SOUTH

potsherds seems the more likely. If it is the correct explanation, they may have been lying upon the surface or in the ground when the ditch was dug and so have become incorporated in the bank. Alternatively they may have been used, broken and cast away into the bank as of no value by those who were making the earthwork. The second alternative seems the less likely, since it is improbable from their disparity in age that both vessels were in use at the same time. It is possible to argue that, whereas the earlier vessel was already lying in pieces when the ditch was dug, the latter one was then being used by the workers on the spot. It is, however, wiser to suggest that both vessels were lying discarded at the time of the construction of the earthwork, and that their juxtaposition was fortuitous. By this reasoning the earthwork must be of late Roman or post-Roman date.

Much of this argument is necessarily based upon supposition because of the slightness of the evidence. Nevertheless it is possible to support it by using general considerations. It is inconceivable that the ditch was dug in prehistoric times, since potsherds of the fourth century A.D. were found deep in the silt, and the progress of silting must have been rapid in the soils of Greenham Common ; there was no indication that the ditch had been recut at any period. Moreover there is no evidence as yet that such earthworks were erected in this country during the Roman period. On the other hand it is known that they were frequently employed in the earlier centuries after the end of Roman rule. Thus the fourth century vessel found at Greenham Common, although not serving definitely to date the construction of this particular earthwork, falls into place as yet one more link in the chain of presumptive evidence, which supports this general conclusion. There is, therefore, no reasonable doubt from archaeological evidence but that the Greenham Common earthwork is a product of the fifth or sixth century A.D.

On Crookham Common, 2 to 3 miles east of Greenham Common there is a series of cross-ridge dykes, similar to Bury's Bank but shorter and slighter (fig. 1). Sometime ago Mr. O. G. S. Crawford stated[1] that there were four dykes within 1,200 yards. A more recent investigation has disclosed four certain examples with one doubtful addition within a distance of 1 mile.

The western dyke runs almost due north and south, but with a slight change of direction at a gap in the middle of the common. The maximum height of bank above the bottom of the ditch

[1] *The Antiquary*, 1915, 253.

is 2 ft., but there is no doubt of its true character. The northern end appears to have been ploughed out, but the dyke clearly ran to the head or side of a natural valley called Longlane Gully. Similarly at the southern end all traces of the dyke cease a few yards south of the gravel pit on the common, but it must once have continued, as indicated on the plan, to the edge of swampy ground in Thornford Gully.

About 800 yards further east there is a larger dyke, c. 3 ft. high, which is marked on the O.S. 6 in. map. Like the example just described it changes direction slightly in the middle of the common. Its southern end rests upon the edge of a steep slope to a small, swampy valley called Boar's Gully. At the north, in a paddock and orchard immediately east of Crookham House, there is no sign of the earthwork, which must have been ploughed out, unless it happened that this particular piece of ground was thickly covered with vegetation in early times. Plainly, however, the dyke was aligned to finish on the end of a small lateral gully in Kirton's Copse.

The next dyke eastwards is peculiar in that it seems to have a ditch between two low banks, 1½ to 2 ft. high and 18 ft. overall in width. It is not possible, therefore, to be certain in which direction it faces. Moreover, although, like the other dykes, it is visible only on the Common and has the usual change of alignment, it appears not to run at either end in the direction of a natural gully, but towards an intervening brow of the ridge. Thus it may not belong to the same class of work as the other dykes.

About 850 yards east of George's Farm there are faint traces in the field south of the common, when newly ploughed, that another dyke may once have existed at this point, running north to south. There are, however, no certain traces of such an earthwork on the Common.

Further east towards the Traveller's Friend there is another dyke, which is quite certainly of the same type as the two westerly earthworks of this common, although it is only 2 ft. high at most. It is easily traceable across the common without change of alignment. In the field to the south of the common there is no sign of it, but towards the north there are clear traces in the newly-ploughed soil. A distinct depression marks the site of the ditch. Although this is not traceable as far as the head of Bond's Gully, it is clear that the ground for some distance south of the actual end of the Gully is or can be marshy, and may well have been covered with thick vegetation under primitive conditions.

Thus there are at least three linear earthworks on Crookham

Common, all with ditches on their western side, as well as the one example across the same ridge at Greenham Common. Similar phenomena no doubt occur elsewhere, although it is difficult to quote another instance of so many dykes in so short a distance, and present conditions prevent a lengthy search for parallels. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that they are all at any rate approximately contemporary, since they are all of one type, derived ultimately from the same prototype.

It is generally allowed that this prototype was the Roman Wall between the Solway and the Tyne, and it is natural to assume that the lesson of that great work was learnt and put into practice by the Britons, when cut off from legionary reinforcements after the Roman withdrawal, and compelled to organize their own resistance to the penetrating Saxons. Later still the Saxons came to use the same device.

The excavation of Wansdyke and Bokerly Dyke showed that those linear earthworks are of Roman or post-Roman date. Pitt-Rivers clearly leaned to the idea that they were erected by Britons after A.D. 410.[1] There seems no reason why the earthworks on Greenham Common and Crookham Common should not also have been constructed during the same period, and, as has been noted, the evidence from Greenham agrees with this suggestion. It would appear that they were designed against people coming from the west and threatening to overcome those who dwelt further east. The obvious centre of importance east of Greenham Common is the Roman town Calleva Atrebatum, now Silchester.

The question of the survival of Silchester after the Roman evacuation has been pursued elsewhere by one of the present writers.[2] Meanwhile, however, the earthworks on Greenham Common and Crookham Common may be regarded as the demarcation lines or frontier of the Silchester Region in that period. They are hardly defences in the military sense, because they could be outflanked by really determined attackers, but they were probably proof against marauding bands. Above all, if this interpretation is correct, they indicate that military prowess was not the prerogative solely of the newcomers. The older inhabitants retained enough power to enforce a compromise or mutual agreement.

Details of the Excavation (fig. 4)

Trench A was dug at the point where the bank seemed to reach its maximum height, just over 4 ft. at 402 ft. above

[1] Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations in Bokerly Dyke and Wansdyke*, 28-30.

[2] *Antiquity*, 1944, 113-122.

O.D. The subsoil here is an orange sandy clay. Beneath the bank this is capped by a layer of grey clay, which is certainly natural.[1] It must represent the old topsoil, which as so often elsewhere has changed colour in the course of time because of the pressure of the soil above it and the chemical action thus caused. The concave line of the subsoil in this case suggests that the pressure has caused a slight subsidence.

At the front of the bank, above the general line of this grey clay, there is a small deposit of grey material, which is similar but contains less gravel. This feature occurs also in Trench B. It has probably been caused by the decomposition of turves, placed in position either as a demarcation line to guide the builders of the bank or as a low curb in the initial stages of the work. There is no indication that it was carried up any higher as a revetment unless the primary silt in the ditch can be interpreted as the remains of such a turf wall. No post-holes to serve this or any other kind of revetment were found in any of the sections, but time did not permit of an extensive search for them.[2]

Above the old turf line the front of the bank is formed of clay in three distinct layers, orange, yellow and brown. Behind the clay there are successive tips of varying types of gravel, medium, dirty clayey, small and medium. There is, however, no reason to suppose that the bank is of two periods. The clay was taken from the upper levels during the digging of the ditch. The gravel came from the lower strata there, and was tipped on to and behind the clay core from the front.

The ditch is V-shaped and rather shallow. The variation in the subsoil from clay above to gravel below was noticed in the section. The primary silt, the grey clay already mentioned, may be the remains of a turf revetment of the bank. Above this there is a small amount of black soil and then a layer of brown clay, which must be soil-wash from the counterscarp. Then there are deposits of medium gravel and small gravel, which have come from the bank, and at the top another layer of brown clay from the counterscarp.

No finds occurred during the excavation of this section.

In another cutting 17 ft. south of Section A (not shown on the plan) the bank had the same core of clay, capped and backed by layers of gravel.[3]

Trench B was dug as a typical section of the northern part

[1] This is placed within the subsoil in the drawn section.

[2] Postholes or a gully for a revetment have since been found in two other linear earthworks; for one of them see *Antiquity*, 1943, 195.

[3] Information kindly supplied by Keith Allen.

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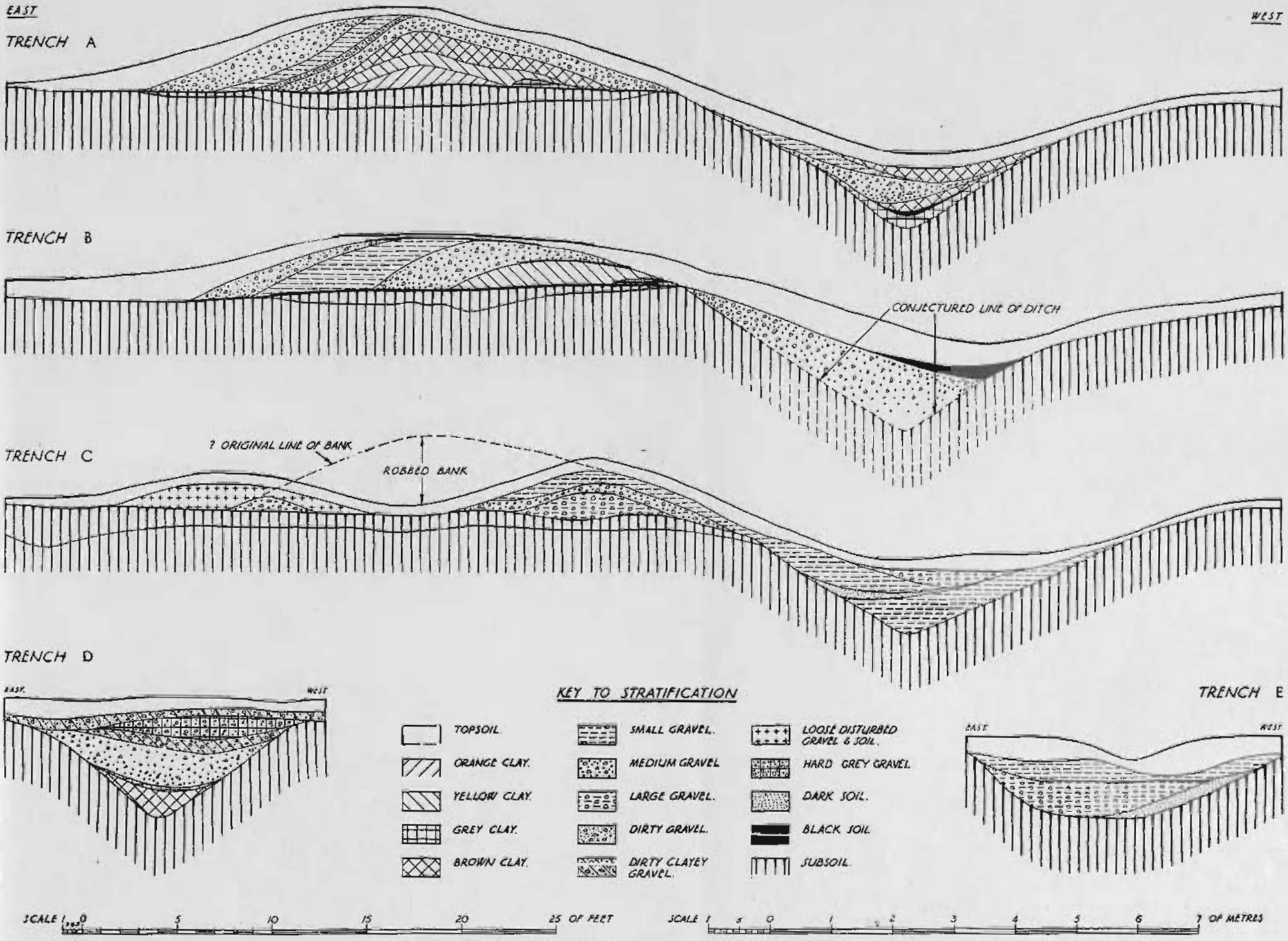

FIG. 3. SECTIONS OF BURY'S BANK, GREENHAM COMMON, BERKSHIRE

of the bank. Here also, beneath the bank and on top of the yellow or orange gravelly clay subsoil, there was a deposit of grey clay, representing the old top soil. Its upper limit was lined with a thin black layer, which must be the decomposed remains of the old turf or heath. This is shown in the section by means of a thick line, the line below showing the bottom of the clay.

At the foremost point of the bank, above the line of the old turf, as in Section A, there is a rather disturbed layer of grey clay, similar to the old top soil below. Above this the front part of the bank is composed mainly of pale yellow or white clay. At the back are layers of medium gravel, small gravel and dirty gravel, similar to those of Trench A.

Owing to the height of the water in this section it was not found possible to excavate the ditch completely. It has, therefore, been indicated on the section with a broken line in accordance with the evidence of other Sections. Below the modern topsoil the silt is dirty gravel with a layer of black soil on part of it. In the western end of black layer a rim fragment of medieval pottery was found. One tooth was found in the top of the dirty gravel.[1] There was no evidence of any counter-scarp bank.

Trench C was dug between Section A and the modern road, where the bank appears to be double (pl. II A). Although it seemed probable that this appearance is due to recent robbing, it was considered advisable to test this probability by excavation.

The subsoil here is a grey, sandy gravel, and it is impossible to distinguish with certainty the remains of the original turf line; all material above the line within the subsoil is grey in colour. In the front of the bank, above the topsoil, there are three layers of gravel, a large, medium and small. The two uppermost of these layers seemed to have been cut away at the back, i.e. eastern side. In the middle of the bank the present topsoil rests directly on the subsoil. At the back of the bank it was possible to distinguish a small deposit of medium gravel, which appears to be part of the original bank. Behind this, and now forming the greater part of the eastern line of the 'double' bank, is a large amount of loose disturbed gravel and soil.

The evidence suggests that there was here a bank of similar proportions as elsewhere. It has been so marked on the section with a broken line, but only the front and a very small amount

[1] A large molar from the lower jaw of a medium-sized dog, according to Mr. J. H. L. Addis, M.R.C.V.S., who kindly identified it.

of the back of it remains. Since the earthwork went out of use some persons unknown, probably gravel-diggers, removed the turf and accumulated earth along the top of the bank for a considerable distance, and placed them on the eastern side, where they yet remain as the loose disturbed gravel and soil. They then removed the greater part of the gravel bank. The proximity to the road of this part of the bank, and the fact that it was apparently composed entirely of gravel without any clay core, may have attracted those who did this work.

The ditch is of the usual shape. The lowest silt is small gravel, which becomes dark on its top near the scarp of the ditch. The other layers are fine gravel against the scarp, and large gravel in the centre and towards the counterscarp. No finds occurred in this trench.

The Entrance

Test excavations were made opposite all the five gaps in the bank across the common, in order to ascertain which, if any, of them represents an original entrance through the earthwork.

At the northernmost gap a single trench in the existing causeway across the ditch (Trench D, fig. 2 and 4) showed that the ditch originally was not interrupted at this point. The usual silt of clay and gravel occurred. The top three layers seem to be due to recent road surfacing.

At the next gap southwards there was no sign on the surface of a causeway, but a trench was dug along the line of the ditch in case such a feature had been removed in recent times, to facilitate drainage. In this trench below the usual topsoil there were layers of gravelly silt of the normal kind. Along the eastern side of the trench the scarp of the ditch appeared. Against this scarp at 6 ft. and at 12 ft. from the northern end of the trench a small amount of Roman pottery was found. The precise relationship of this find-spot to the bottom of the ditch could not be determined in the trench. But the character of the silt and its depth below the modern surface (5 ft.) make it certain that this pottery lay in the lowest or almost the lowest silting. It is, therefore, most likely to have reached the position in which it was found whilst the ditch was still open and in use. It may have been thrown in as refuse or it may have been washed down from the bank above, in which it had already been incorporated. The latter is the more likely theory, because the considerable excavations near this earthwork failed to reveal any other Roman pottery, such as might have indicated any definite occupation. For full discussion of this matter see pp. 180-1.

The various layers of silt were encountered throughout the length of this trench. It is, therefore, certain that there never had been a causeway across the ditch and the possibility of an original entrance at this point may be dismissed.

The next gap southwards was trenched in the same way and with the same result, except that no finds were made. The visible causeway across the ditch is, therefore, modern, and there was no ancient entrance here. The trench across the line of the ditch at the southern side of this causeway showed clear lines of silting similar to those of Section A.

Further south the line of the ditch opposite the wide gap in the bank was tested by means of a number of short cross trenches. As these all gave evidence of a completely silted-up ditch, it is clear that here also there was no entrance in ancient times. The silting was of the usual kind except in two trenches. In these two the filling contained less gravel and was largely composed of hard clay. The sides of the ditch could, however, be discerned, and the difference of the filling must be due to the different material in the original bank. Little is left of the bank immediately opposite these sections, but just to the south it was shown in trenches to be largely composed of brown clay.[1]

Finally the ditch was trenched close to the modern road. Its filling included layers of dark soil, large gravel, and fine gravel. It was, however, significant that the ditch is shallower and narrower here than at any other point, where it was investigated. Moreover its line seemed to be curving slightly towards the south-east. This suggests that it was coming to an end, and it is unfortunate that the proximity of the modern road prevented an investigation further south. Nevertheless it may be taken as highly probable, although not actually proved from this evidence, that the modern road passes through an ancient gap in the bank.

FINDS (fig. 3)

1. Olla of fine, hard, dark grey ware. The rim slightly oversails the body. Band of obtuse lattice is just visible. Mr. Bushe-Fox states that at Richborough this shape occurs in fourth century deposits.

2. Jar with everted rim of soft buff ware, the surface worn away in places as if from exposure to air or water. Mr. Bushe-Fox states that he does not know of a parallel to this shape, but that it appears to be much earlier in date than no. 1.

[1] These trenches showed little evidence of interest and do not merit publication. The old turf line was clearly marked as a wide band of pale grey clay.