

ART. I.—*Excavations of Native (Iron Age) Sites in Cumberland, 1956-58.* By BRIAN BLAKE, M.A.

*Read at Penrith and Kendal, April 6th, 1957, September 12th, 1957, and 11th September, 1958.*

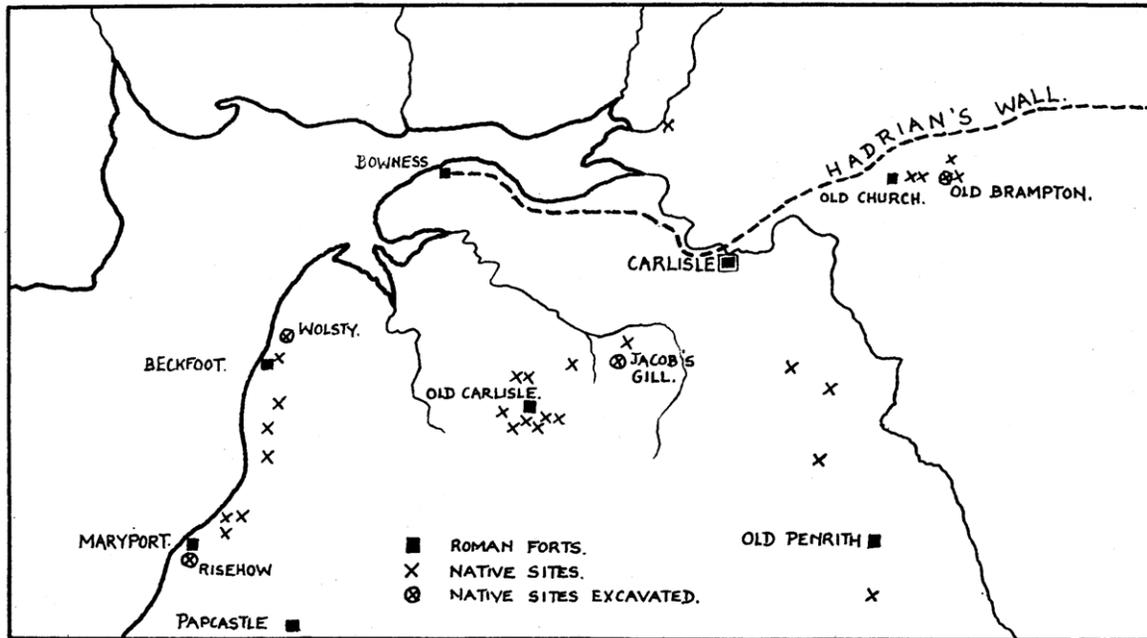
## I. INTRODUCTION.

STIMULATED by the work of our President and by the belief that years of concentrated study of Roman sites in the North have produced a somewhat unbalanced picture of Northern Britain in the first four centuries of our era, Miss K. S. Hodgson and I undertook the investigation of hitherto neglected native sites with a view to studying the relationship of Roman and Briton in the hinterland of Hadrian's Wall and its Solway extension. The excavations involved in this programme began in September 1956 at Old Brampton.

In the spring of 1957, we were gratified to discover that Mr Peter Salway was approaching the same problem at first on a basis of the interpretation of aerial photographs, and for one season the investigations were merged. Mr Salway's collection of photographs (almost entirely taken by Dr St. Joseph) indicated the existence of about forty farms in Cumberland to which we added a further dozen or so either presumed from tradition or identified from field-work and in two cases observed as crop-marks visible from a nearby hill.

## 2. PRELIMINARY PLANNING.

As a first stage, all these sites were indicated on a One Inch map of Cumberland, which is reproduced in the sketch diagram (fig. 1). This shows that no site which we assumed to be a native farm site is more than two miles from a Roman road, and that concentrations of farm



sites are marked in the neighbourhood of certain Roman forts. A first relationship is hereby strongly suggested unless the aerial survey was unduly selective, a point which cannot be immediately decided.

The second stage was to classify sites, albeit roughly, on a basis of ditch shapes as seen from the air, and this gave us our first approach, posing the question, "Is difference in ditch shape related to difference in period or function or merely idiosyncratic?"

### 3. EXCAVATION POLICY.

The main difficulty in excavating these sites is their number. They are not easy to excavate for they often demand large scale stripping of the surface. To excavate them all at the present rate of progress would extend the investigation for fifty or sixty years.

An attempt was made to experiment with a trial procedure at a site near Rosley, which we have called Jacob's Gill, and in four and a half days of excavation some useful information was obtained which might fit into a larger pattern, but we now feel that until more of the pattern becomes apparent, small scale excavations are likely to be unrewarding. At present, therefore, we have arbitrarily divided the sites into a small number of groups, such as "with small circular ditch", "with rectangular ditch", "with double ditches" and so on, and we are excavating a farm of each type as a first stage.

It may be added that most of the farm sites so far examined were established on low ridges of arable land, and that the situation of the building is often observed, before excavation, as a slight hollow on the top of a ridge, the original surface having been lowered for both floors and foundations.

### 4. EXCAVATIONS AT OLD BRAMPTON.

The relationship of this site to Old Church Roman fort and to Hawkhirst is shown in fig. 2(a). Of the two sites

at Old Brampton only the westerly one has been excavated, and there are two more sites in the vicinity of Hawkthirst as yet seen only from the air.

The excavation was based on Dr St. Joseph's photograph (Plate I) which clearly shows a single ditch. The position of the ditch was transferred to the map and a line drawn which was later excavated on the ground as a substantive interrupted trench to section the ditch and explore the interior (Plate II). The trench was 80 ft. long, 4 ft. wide and cut on a 10 ft. grid with 2 ft. balks so that it could form the basis of a gridded area excavation if required.

The first 8 x 4 rectangle clearly showed the nature of the Roman surface at a depth of only about 18 in. The second and third were joined to give a section through the ditch, and these two rectangles were widened to show an entrance, a 5 ft. berm and an internal trench for a continuous palisade. The sixth and seventh rectangles on the line revealed tumbled stones and the possible foundations of a low wall. The rest of the line was therefore extended into an area excavation of some 30 by 60 ft., which allowed a rectangular farm building to be examined closely. Further extension of the grid revealed remains of outhouses.

*The Ditch* (Plate III) (fig. 3(a) and (b)). The ditch was 9 ft. wide and had a shallow curve to a depth of 4 ft. In one place it had not been completely dug out, a mound of natural clay having been left to provide a central support for a bridge of planks, the marks of which remained. Inside the ditch, a palisade trench averaged 1 ft. in depth and contained the clear imprint of a wooden palisade with a constant width of  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in. From the absence of additional supports it would seem that this palisade would not be stable if much more than 5 ft. high.

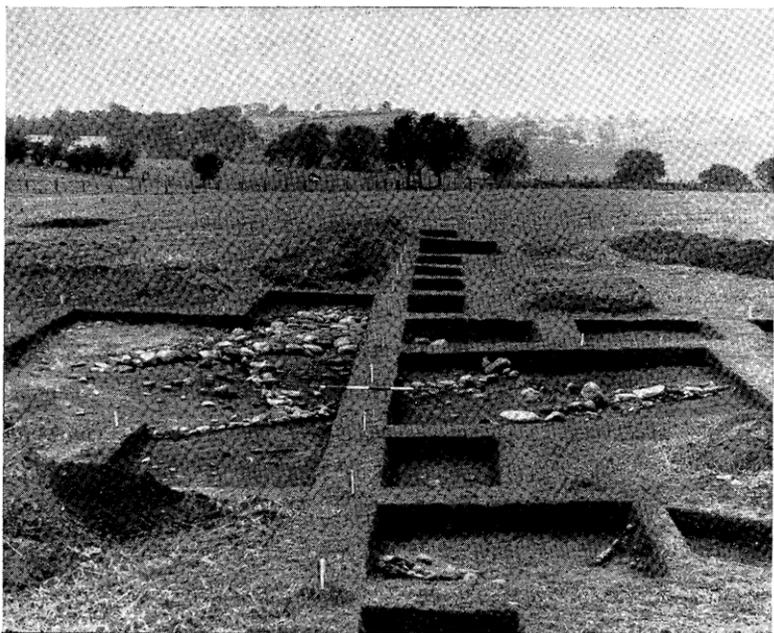
*The Main Building* (Plate IV) (fig. 4(a)). The main building was (almost) a square of some 24 ft. Its walls were composed of untrimmed cobbles packed with smaller



*Photo: Dr J. K. St. Joseph.  
facing p. 4.*

Pl. I.—Old Brampton: Aerial photograph.  
tcwaas\_002\_1959\_vol59\_0004

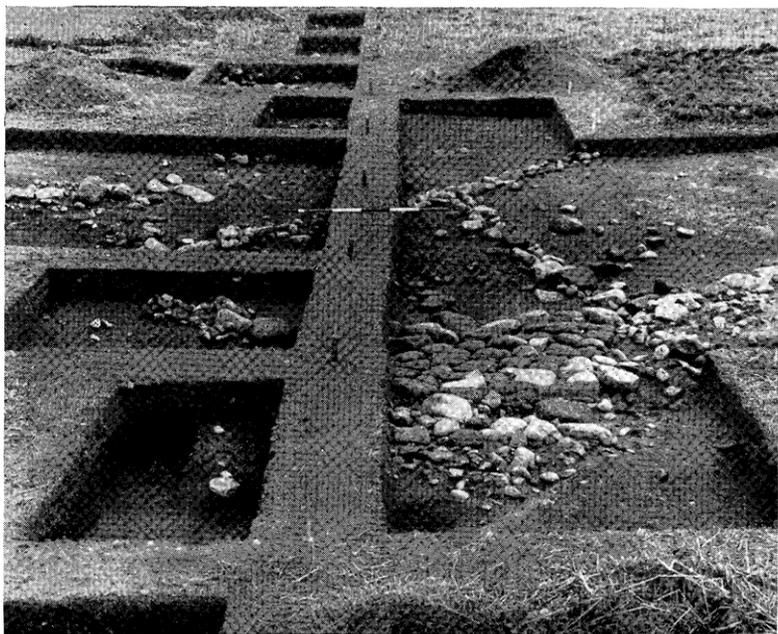
*Crown copyright reserved.*



PL. II.—Old Brampton: Long substantive trench.



PL. III.—Old Brampton. Section showing profile of ditch.



Pl. IV.—Old Brampton: House showing paved floor and drains.

stones and originally weather-proofed with turf. The decayed turf imparted a distinctive colouring to the external tumble. In several places the walls had been ploughed away, but their position could easily be distinguished by differences in the colour of the soil. The cobble walls could not have stood much more than 2 ft. high, and the upper structure would have been of timber, and, as far as the roof was concerned, was of branches and twigs, some of this having been burnt and the carbonized remains preserved. The interior of the building had been divided by crude walls of timber on a sparse foundation of stone into nine equal squares, each approximately 8 ft. square, of which we assumed that the eight against the walls formed the living area and the ninth or central one was a small courtyard, possibly open to the sky. The three squares on the northern side of the building were paved with small cobbles trodden rather than set, and here almost all the pottery was found. If humans and animals shared this building, we assumed that the humans lived on this side of the courtyard. The adjacent corner square was well paved with large blocks which had been well trodden. The purpose of this paved section was not apparent. It incorporated four pieces of Roman trimmed stone, presumably from Old Church Roman fort which may have been deserted when this farm was occupied, together with the broken segments of two querns. The interior of the building had been built in a shallow hollow of clay (presumably in dry weather), but at some secondary stage a main stone drain and a subsidiary one had been introduced. The drains were well built and supplied in places with cover slabs, but both were inadequately levelled.

In our extensions of the grid, the remains of outhouses were assumed from fragments of walls and floors, a stone hearth and pottery finds mainly of a crude native type, but we were unable to define the exact limits of these outbuildings.

*The Finds.* All the querns will be dealt with in a separate note. The pottery was of two classes. Crude native hand-made pottery in a coarse fabric showed no concessions to the Romans, but was found within a few yards of a great variety of sherds of Roman provincial pottery, from the North, the Dales and Derbyshire, together with three fragments of Samian ware. Mr J. P. Gillam has kindly dated this pottery to a fairly short period covering the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the fourth. A small iron knife came from the outhouses, and a finely manufactured implement of flint was identified as a lathe chisel by Dr D. B. Harden. Fragments of a spindle whorl were also found.

#### 5. JACOB'S GILL (ROSLEY) (Plates V and VI) (fig. 4(b)).

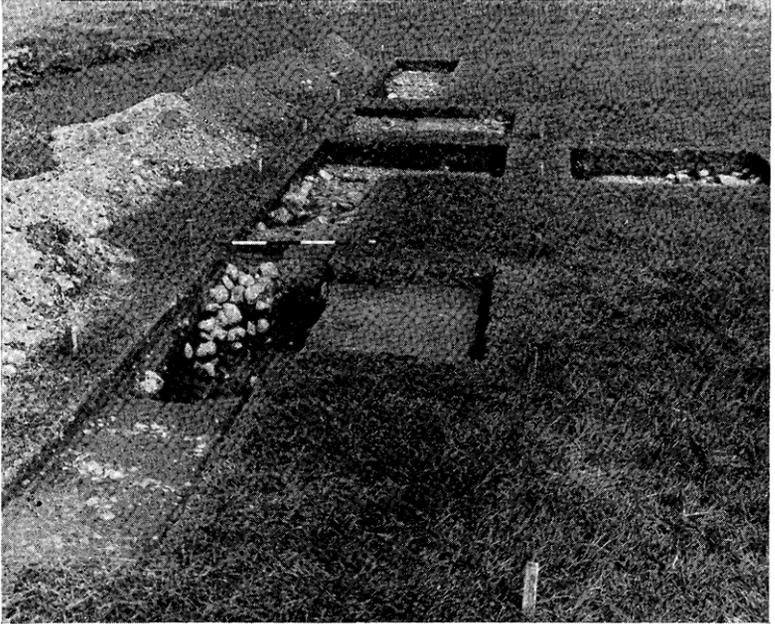
The trial excavation at Jacob's Gill occupied five days, and Miss Hodgson and I were joined by Mr Salway. The extent and the form of the ditch were determined, and these are given in the plan (fig. 2(b)) and section (fig. 3(c)). No trace of a palisade was found, and it seems possible that the tumble of untrimmed stones on the inner lip of the ditch represented a rough dry stone wall instead of a palisade. The interior of the enclosure revealed only one aspect of occupation, a floor of small cobbles more in the nature of trodden gravel than of hand-laid stones. There were also a few fragments of walls which had been built on this spread, without foundation trenches in the spread, but the whole excavation was complicated by a number of field drains, at least two sets of stone drains and a third, at right-angles, of horseshoe tiling.

*The Finds.* Only six sherds of pottery were found. Five of these were from the same coarse red-ware vessel, which can only be dated to "the latter half of the Roman period". The sixth was a 2-inch fragment of hand-made native ware not far removed from some of that found at Old Brampton.

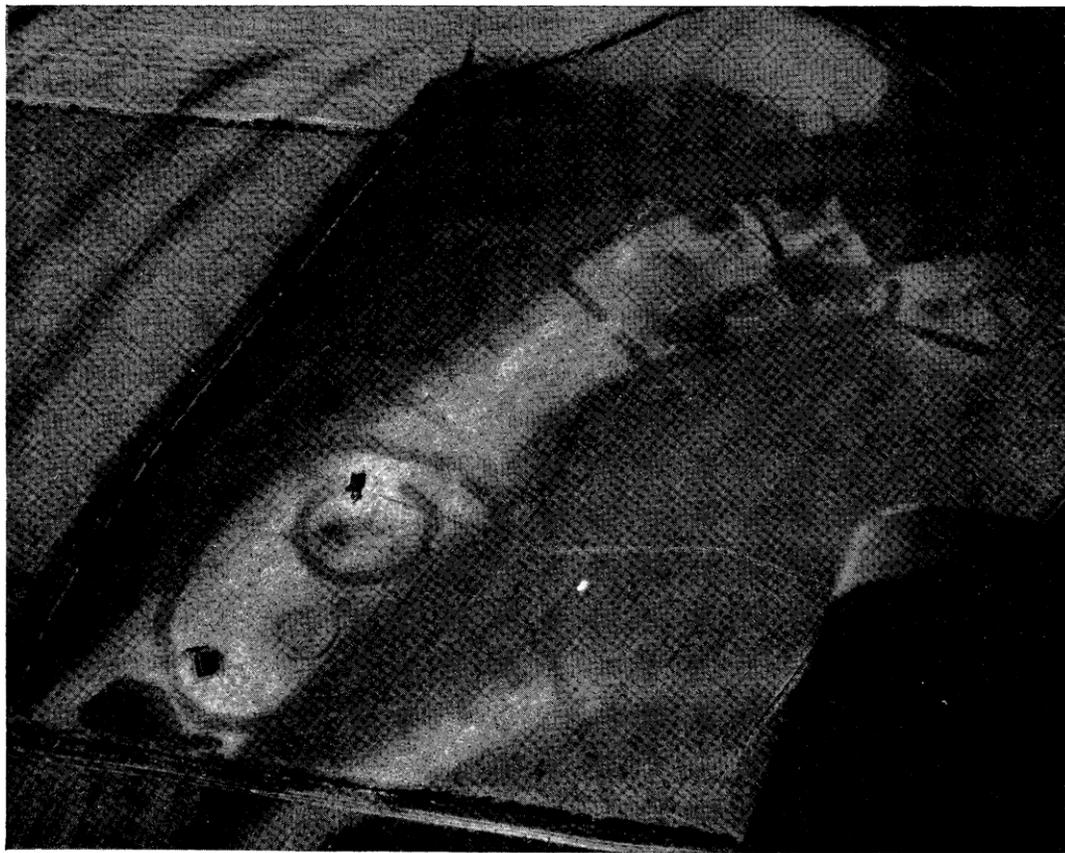


PL. V.—Jacob's Gill: Crop marks showing ditch.

*facing p. 6.*



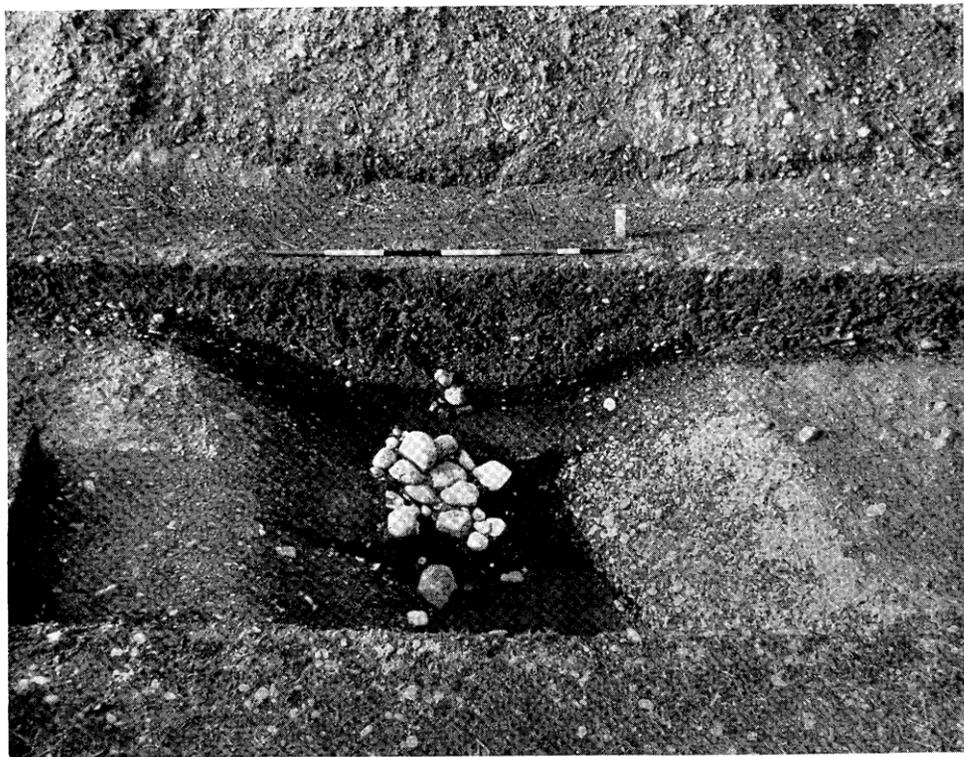
PL. VI.—Jacob's Gill: General view showing ditch in foreground.



*Photo: Dr J. K. St. Joseph.*

PL. VII. Wolsty Aerial photograph.  
tcwaas\_002\_1959\_Vol.5\_004

*Crown copyright reserved.*



PL. VIII.—Walsbyre Dish, 1890, circular enclosure.



PL. IX.—Wolsty: Round House.

## 6. WOLSTY HALL (fig. 2(c)).

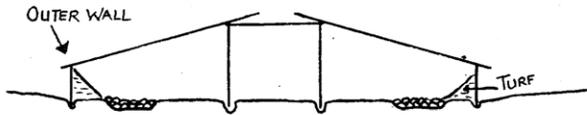
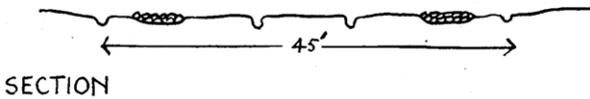
This excavation was based entirely on Dr St. Joseph's air photograph (Plate VII). For convenience, the three enclosing ditches are here called oval, circular and rectangular. All three were carefully established on a ridge of gravel which forms part of the main raised beach of the Solway, often known as "the twenty-five foot beach".

*The Circular Enclosure.* The occupation area within this circular ditch (fig. 3(d)) (Plate VIII) was well dated by pottery to the years immediately following the building of Hadrian's Wall and its Solway extension (of which there are two signal towers within half a mile). While no clearly defined buildings were found, a good assortment of pottery of typical northern Roman provincial groups, two knife blades and a quern were associated with the remains of stone floors as was a stone lined well, which held yet more pottery of the Hadrianic period including *mortaria*.

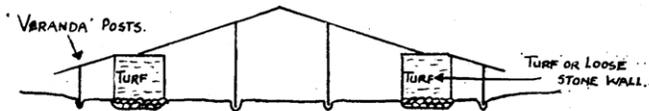
*The Oval Enclosure.* Hadrianic pottery was quickly found in the *upper* levels of this ditch (fig. 3(e)), and this, together with the fact that the habitation site associated with the ditch produced no pottery of any kind, suggested that this feature was pre-Roman. This suggestion was supported by comparison of the botanical evidence in the upper sections of this ditch and the bottom of the Hadrianic ditch, and also by the discovery of a saddle quern used as a packing stone for the strong wooden palisade which had been built 3 to 4 ft. within the ditch. The palisade had deep stone-packed holes for uprights every 3 or 4 ft. along the section excavated, and smaller holes must have supported uprights for gate-posts at the entrance.

*The Building* (fig. 4(c)) (Plate IX). The building which we associated with this ditch was circular (a round house) and consisted of four parts: (a) a trench approximately 2 ft. wide and 2 ft. deep, from 43 to 45 ft. in diameter

## POSSIBLE RECONSTRUCTIONS



POSSIBLE RECONSTRUCTION.



ALTERNATIVE RECONSTRUCTION BY MR PETER SALWAY.

WOLSTY ROUND HOUSE.

and broken by entrances at opposite ends of one diameter;

(b) a packing of turf inside the trench, presumably to make wind-proof the wooden wall which we assume the trench to have held;

(c) a circular floor of cobbles 5 to 6 ft. wide quite carefully laid some 4 or 5 ft. inside the wall, i.e. isolated from the wall by the turf packing. At the outer edge of this cobbled floor opposite the position of the gaps in the wall were post-holes to take the supports of doors (Plate Xa), and the existence of a small stone threshold on a level with the floor plus the absence of turf remains in the entrance gap implied that the doors opened outwards forming a kind of "Celtic" porch.

(d) In the centre of the circle, four large deep post-holes packed solid with cobbles formed an 11 ft. square and had obviously held the main roof supports. In one case, this main roof support had finally fallen after breaking at ground level, and though its wood had completely disappeared, the semicircular hollow it had left in the gravel had acted as a receptacle for fine blown sand, which when sectioned gave the unmistakable impression of a round timber post 11 to 12 in. in diameter (Plate Xb).

*The Finds.* This building unfortunately was remarkably clean and produced no evidence of occupation except for charcoal fragments, all of which were associated with the circular cobbled floor. Incorporated in these cobbles was one tooled piece of sandstone, on the flattened surface of which a groove had been carved  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. long,  $\frac{2}{3}$  in. across and  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. deep. A spoil groove on the other side of the stone suggested that this was a second attempt. The shape of this stone and the fact that its surface appeared to have been affected by heat suggests that it may have been used as a mould for some metal bar. Mr George Jobey tells me that he has found two similar ones in Northumberland, but their exact purpose is as yet unknown.

*The Rectangular Enclosure.* The rectangular enclosure

consisted of a wide and deep ditch (fig. 3(f)) (Plate XI) 18 ft. wide by 8 ft. deep. An inner palisade of wood was founded on uprights sunk in deep stone-packed post-holes at intervals of 4 to 6 ft. The entrance had had a series of upright posts also stone-packed which appeared to have been burnt down.

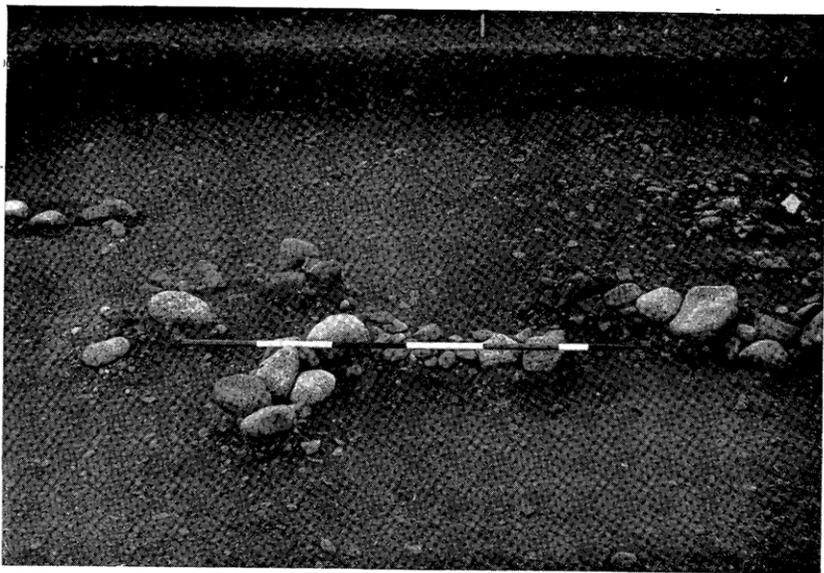
The strangest feature associated with this ditch was a series of large post-holes almost without packing stones which were found *outside* the ditch (Plate XIIIa). These post-holes first appeared as specks on the air photograph, and we were able to pin-point them easily on the ground and excavate two of them. They were regularly spaced at intervals of 21 ft. and were 12 ft. outside the outer edge of the ditch. They were slightly pear-shaped as though designed to facilitate the raising of a heavy post, and had axes of 3 to 5 ft. and were 5 ft. deep. Their exact purpose remains a mystery although the distribution of small pebbles in one of the holes excavated suggests that a post of some 12 in. diameter might have occupied the hole.

The interior of the rectangular enclosure contained not one but a complex of habitations. Each trial square opened produced Roman pottery of the 3rd-4th century, and in one corner of the enclosure a small area excavation revealed a squarish farm building (fig. 4(d)) (Plate XIII) which need not be described in detail as it is similar to the Old Brampton type although much cruder and lacking the stone drains and the paved corner.

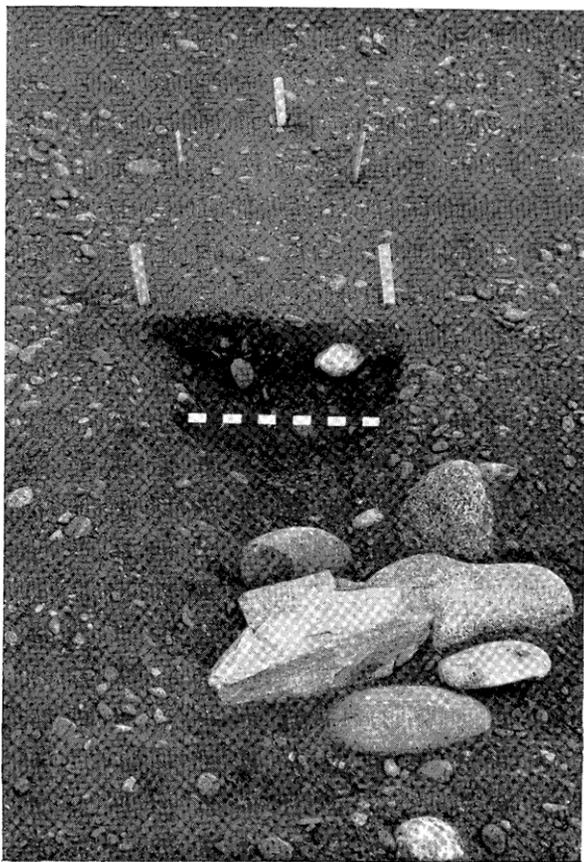
*The Finds.* A fair amount of pottery was found which has been dated by Mr Gillam to the late 3rd-early 4th centuries. Incorporated in the foundations of the square building was an unfinished quern.

## 7. RISEHOW, MARYPORT (Fig. 2(d)) (Plates XIV and XV).

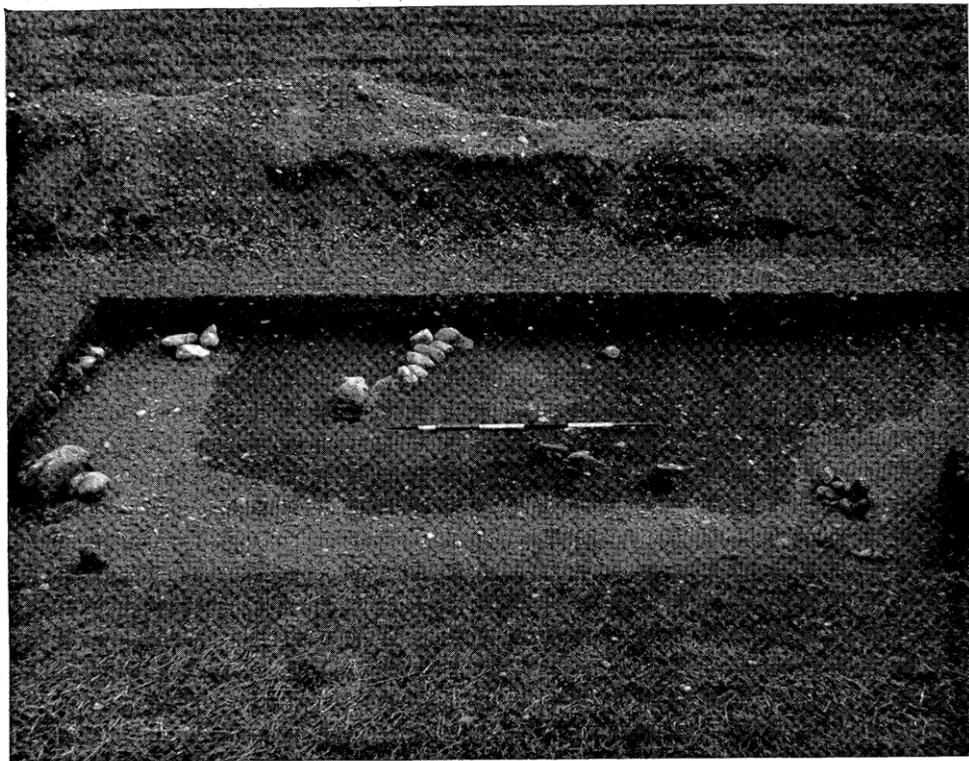
This excavation was again based entirely on Dr St. Joseph's air photograph which showed two ditches,



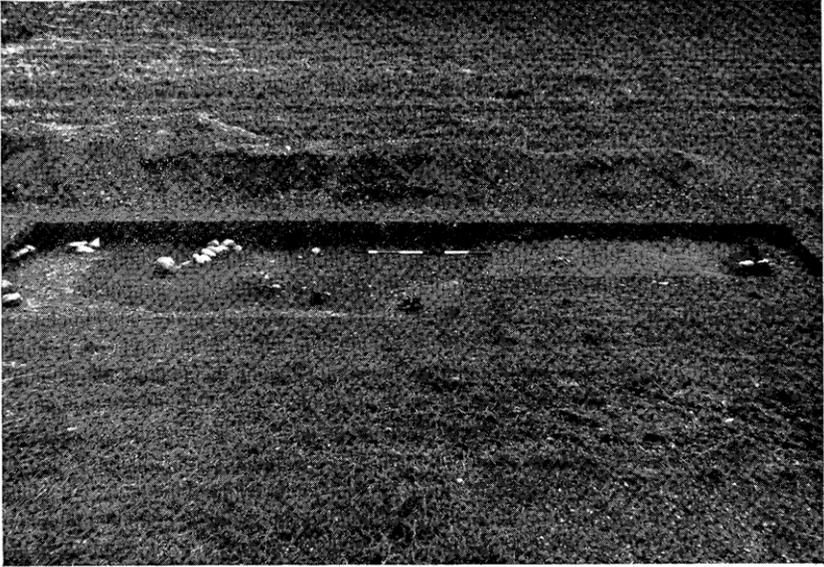
PL. X, (a).—Wolsty: Round House entrance.



PL. X, (b).—Wolsty: Post-hole of Round House with impression of post (sectioned).



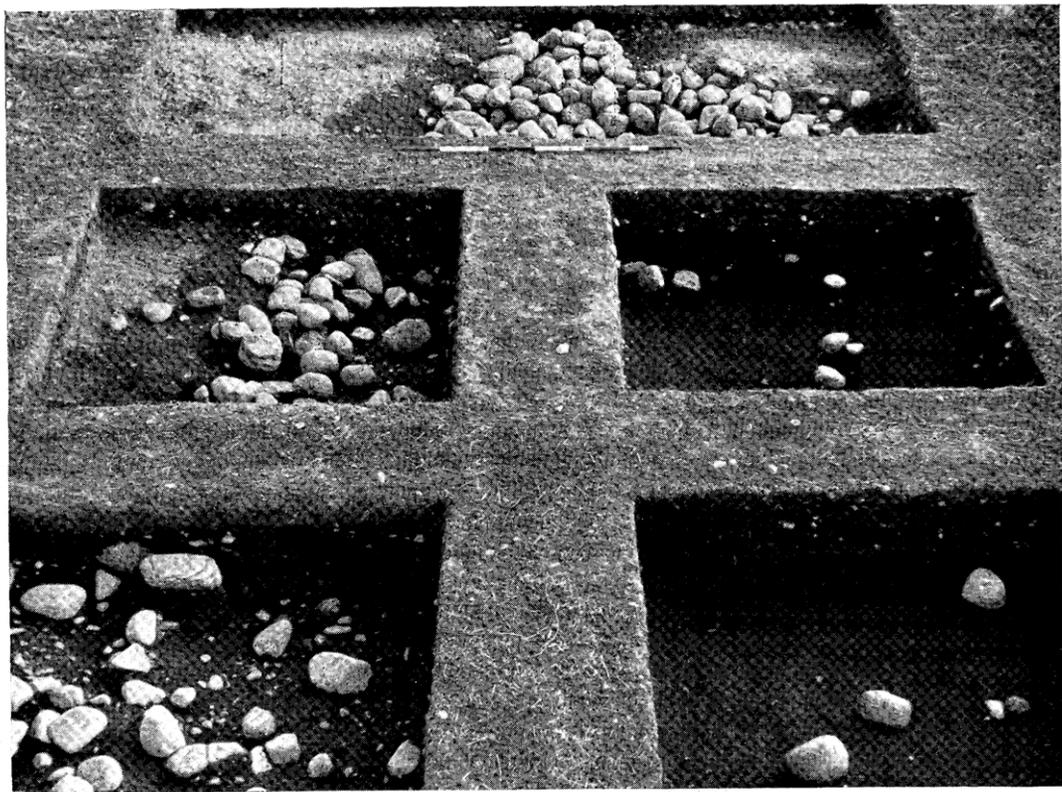
PL. XI.—Wolsty: Rectangular ditch at entrance (before sectioning).



PL. XII, (a).—Wolsty: Exterior post-hole in relation to rectangular ditch.



PL. XII, (b).—Wolsty: Section through Round House showing mould and wall trench.



Pl. XIII.—Wolsty: Corner of rectangular building.  
tewaas\_002\_1959\_vol59\_0004



*Photo: Dr. J. K. St. Joseph.*

*Crown copyright reserved.*

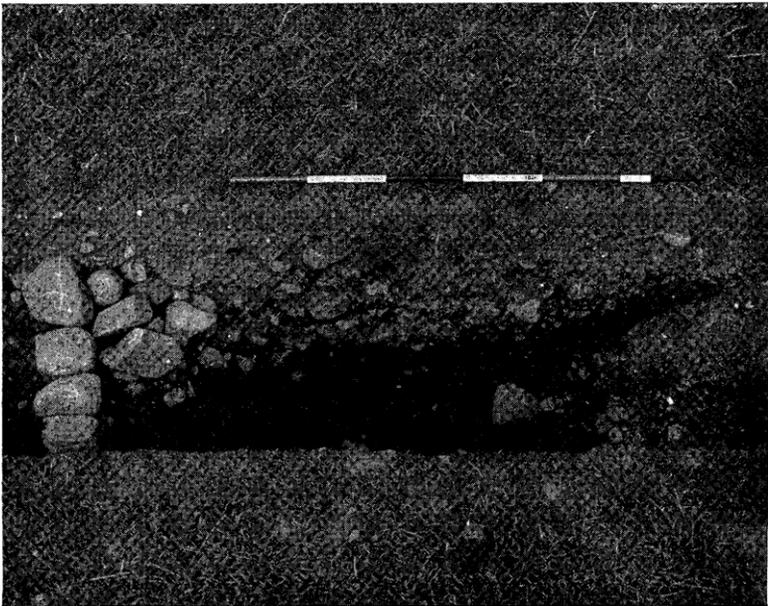
PL. XIV.—Risehow, Maryport: Aerial photograph.



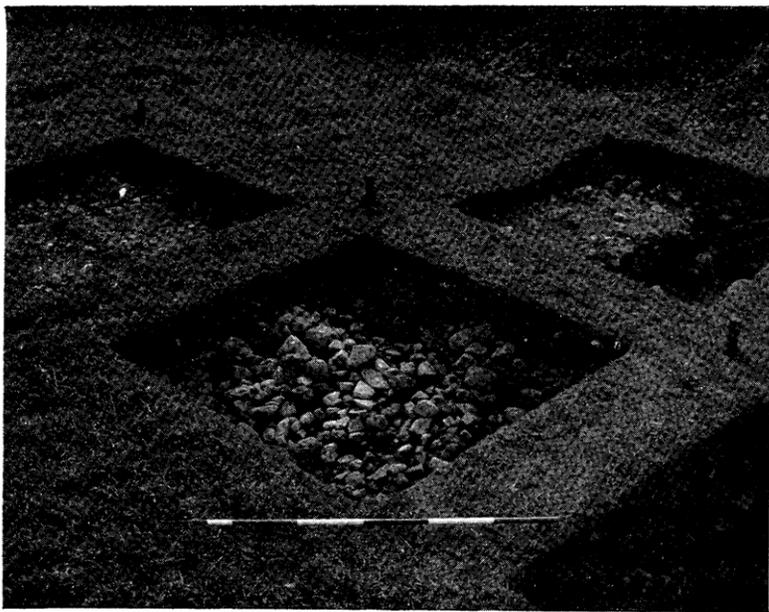
PL. XV.—Risehow, Maryport: General view of site.



Pl. XVIa.—Risehow, Maryport showing inner ditch.



Pl. XVIb.—Risehow, Maryport, profile of inner ditch and wall.



PL. XVIIa.—Risehow, Maryport, main foundations under tumbled wall.



PL. XVIIb.—Risehow, Maryport, main foundations with tumble cleared.

generally spaced widely apart, but converging at what we assumed was an entrance from which two more parallel ditches led in the form of a protected road to the nearest water supply.

*The Excavation.* The two enclosing ditches and a road ditch were sectioned (Fig. 3(g, h, i)), and an area excavation made in order to define the suspected outline of a building. The outer ditch was V-shaped and approximately 13 ft. across by 7 ft. deep. No trace of palisade was discovered although a tumble of stones in the bottom of the ditch implied the existence of a dry stone wall. The inner ditch was also V-shaped and slightly steeper on the inner slope, while on the very lip of the inner slope was a substantial and carefully built wall (Plate XVI(a) and (b)). These defences were impressive. The parallel ditches, 10 ft. across and some 4 ft. deep, were about 28 ft. apart, and as they led to a drinking place (still used for cattle), it was assumed that they were designed to stop cattle straying, perhaps in a time of danger.

*The Buildings* (fig. 4(e)) (Plates XVII a and b). In construction, the walls of the building were similar to the Old Brampton type, incorporating a row of very large cobbles as foundations for a wooden (?) superstructure, but the building was much larger than any of the others so far met, being approximately 70 ft. by 50. The size of the building plus the fact that there were few traces of occupation in its centre implied that it was more in the nature of a compound, and traces of cobbled floor and walling stretching only a few feet inside the main wall supported this view and implied the existence of lean-to shacks inside and against this compound wall.

*The Finds.* A portion of granite quern and several roughly trimmed stones and one inscribed but indecipherable fragment were found associated with the wall foundations. Very little pottery was recovered, most of the fragments being undatable, but in one of the floors close to the wall a fine rim of Crambeck ware allowed

us to suggest a fairly close date in the decades round about A.D. 360 for the occupation.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS.

Whilst it is too early to draw firm conclusions from a project which has only begun, it seems necessary to make the following tentative suggestions as a basis for further study even though these may have to be modified.

(a) The native population of pre-Roman Cumberland included an element of Iron Age farmers whose antecedents must be sought amongst the builders of Celtic round houses, and whose cultural relations have been discovered on sites reaching from Little Woodbury in the south up the western coasts of Britain from Cornwall to Scotland and including the Isle of Man. (Wolsty Oval).

(b) After the coming of the Romans, native farmers were encouraged to settle in the vicinity of the roads and forts built by the Romans in order to supply food, including cereals, for the garrisons, and that by some means this food was exchanged for Romano-British pottery.

(c) At the moment, it appears that these farm settlements were encouraged at three periods. The first followed quickly the building of Hadrian's Wall (Wolsty circular), the second coincided with the period of agricultural prosperity at about the beginning of the 4th century (Old Brampton, Jacob's Gill(?), Wolsty rectangular). The third classification appears to coincide with the unsettled period a decade or so after the middle of the 4th century (Risehow, Maryport).

(d) Certain distinctions in defences require explanation. The ditch and palisade defences of the Wolsty circular farm are far from strong, and were therefore presumably designed to keep out the occasional thief or wild animal, the extension of Hadrian's Wall being a sufficient overall protection in the early 2nd century. The Old Brampton farm, a single building, again is only defended by the equivalent of a farmyard wall, whilst the almost con-

temporary rectangular complex at Wolsty is strongly defended. It may be that at the end of the 3rd century the Wall garrison was in a position to protect Old Brampton while the Solway Roman defences were either neglected or deserted. It may even be that at this time the Solway was threatened from Ireland. In CW2 lvii 18-26, Mr Bellhouse has described how certain signal-towers on the Solway coast appear to have been rebuilt at a time later than that of Hadrian. One signal-tower showing such a rebuild is within a few hundred yards of Wolsty. The absence of an occupation layer associated with this rebuild might possibly indicate a non-permanent garrison in the form of local levies or Home Guard civilians. If this was the case, the source of such a garrison could well be the farming community who were then living in the rectangular complex within sight of this tower at Wolsty Hall. The strength and nature of the defences of the farm at Risehow, Maryport, in the later 300's reflects both the unease of the times and the lack of a strong Roman garrison in Roman Maryport at this period.

#### 9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS.

The excavations described above were directed by Miss Hodgson and the writer in conjunction with Mr Salway (at Jacob's Gill and Wolsty Hall). On all the sites, we had the willing co-operation of landowners and farmers; Mr Jefferson of Brampton, Mr Rothery at Jacob's Gill, Mr Thomas Sharp at Wolsty Hall (Mr Sharp's kindness to our party in a wet season will be remembered), and Mr Percival at Risehow, Maryport.

The excavations were made possible by grants from Durham University Excavation Committee, the Society, the Haverfield Trust and the Carlisle group of the Society.

The work was carried out by voluntary labour from within the Society and from many parts of the British

Isles with the assistance of Mr Michael McDonagh of Abbeytown.

The whole project is based largely on aerial photographs taken at various periods by Dr J. K. St. Joseph. The writers are indebted for advice and expert information to our President, Professor Birley, Professor Richmond, the late Professor Gordon Childe, who visited the Old Brampton excavation, Mr Gillam, Dr Donald Walker, Professor Gerhard Bersu (in discussion about the "round house") and Mr Bellhouse.

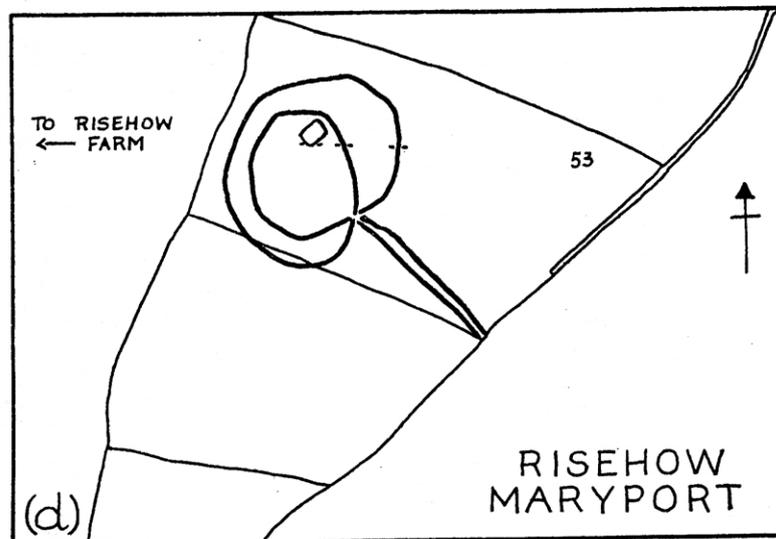
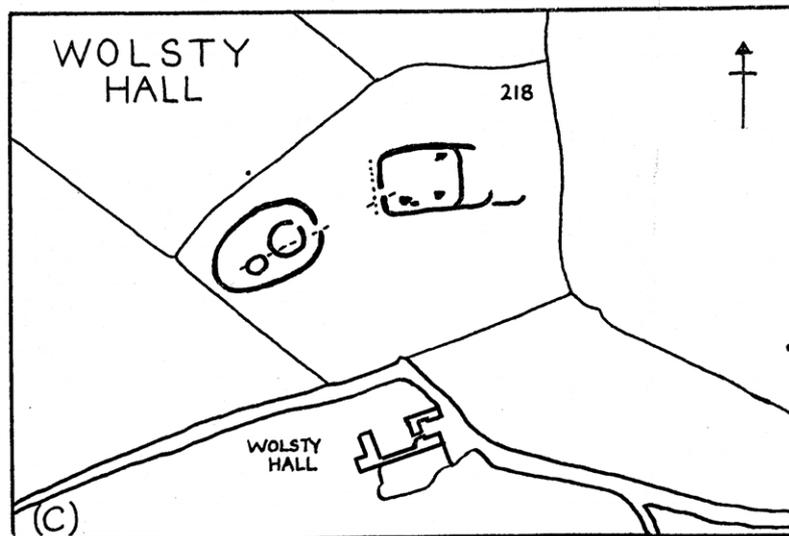
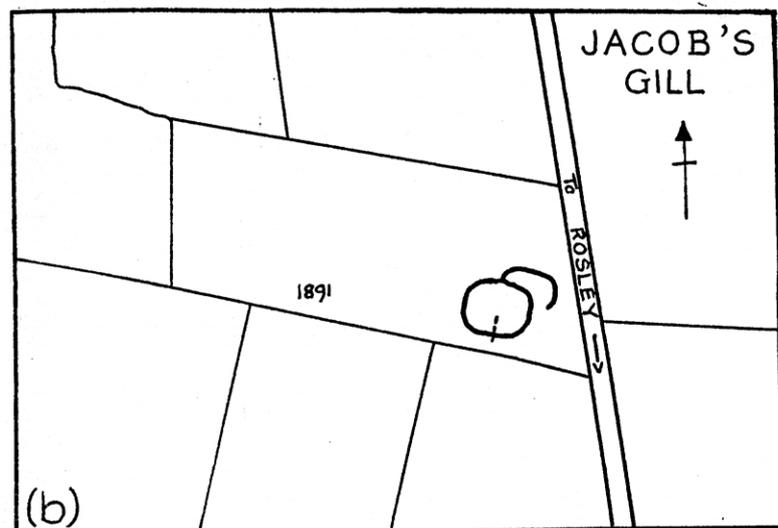
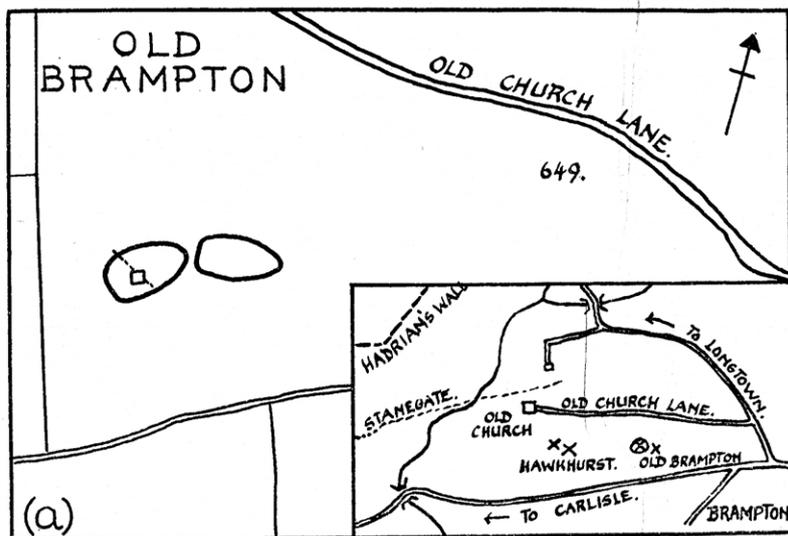


FIG. 2.

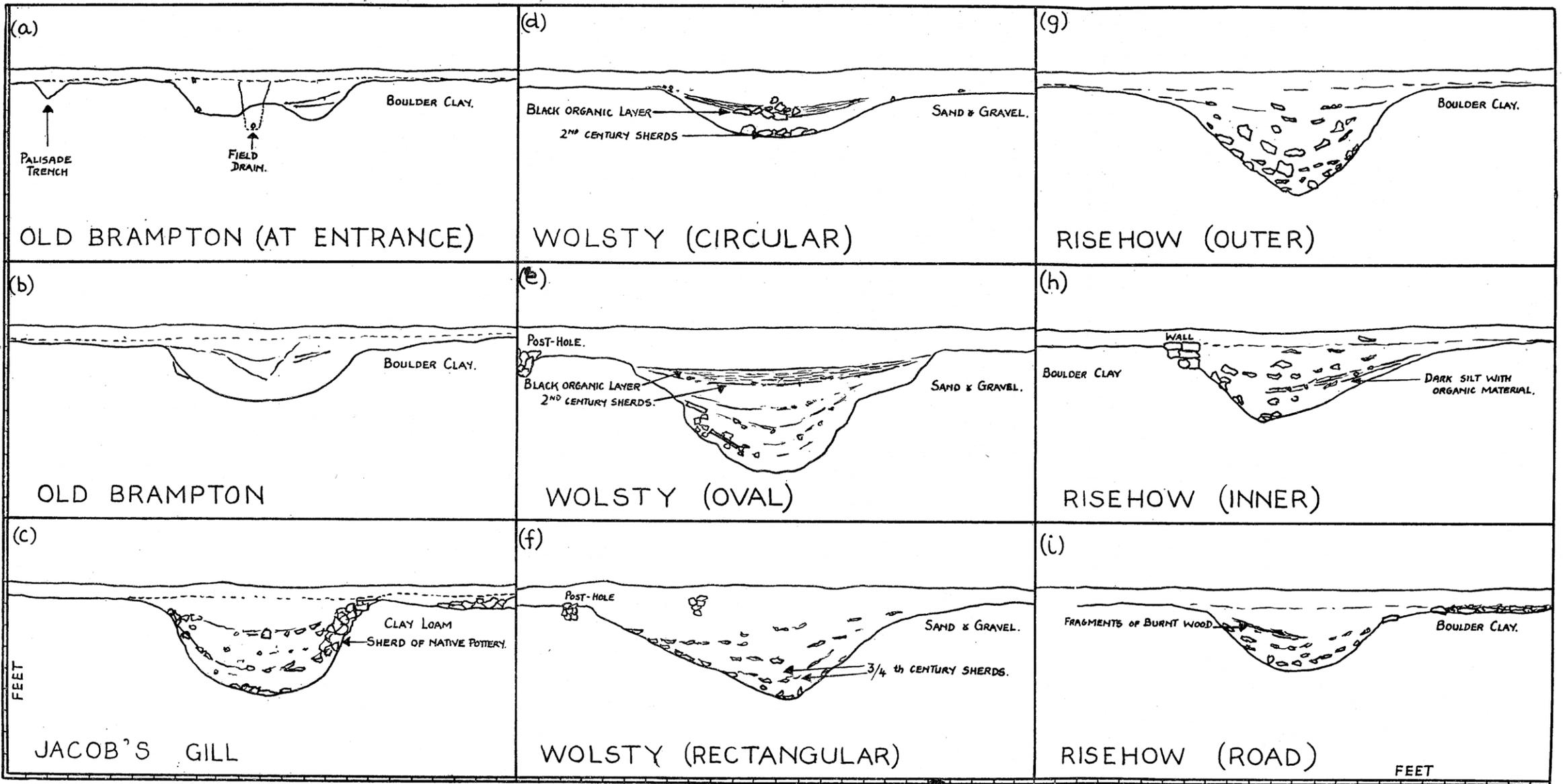


FIG. 3.

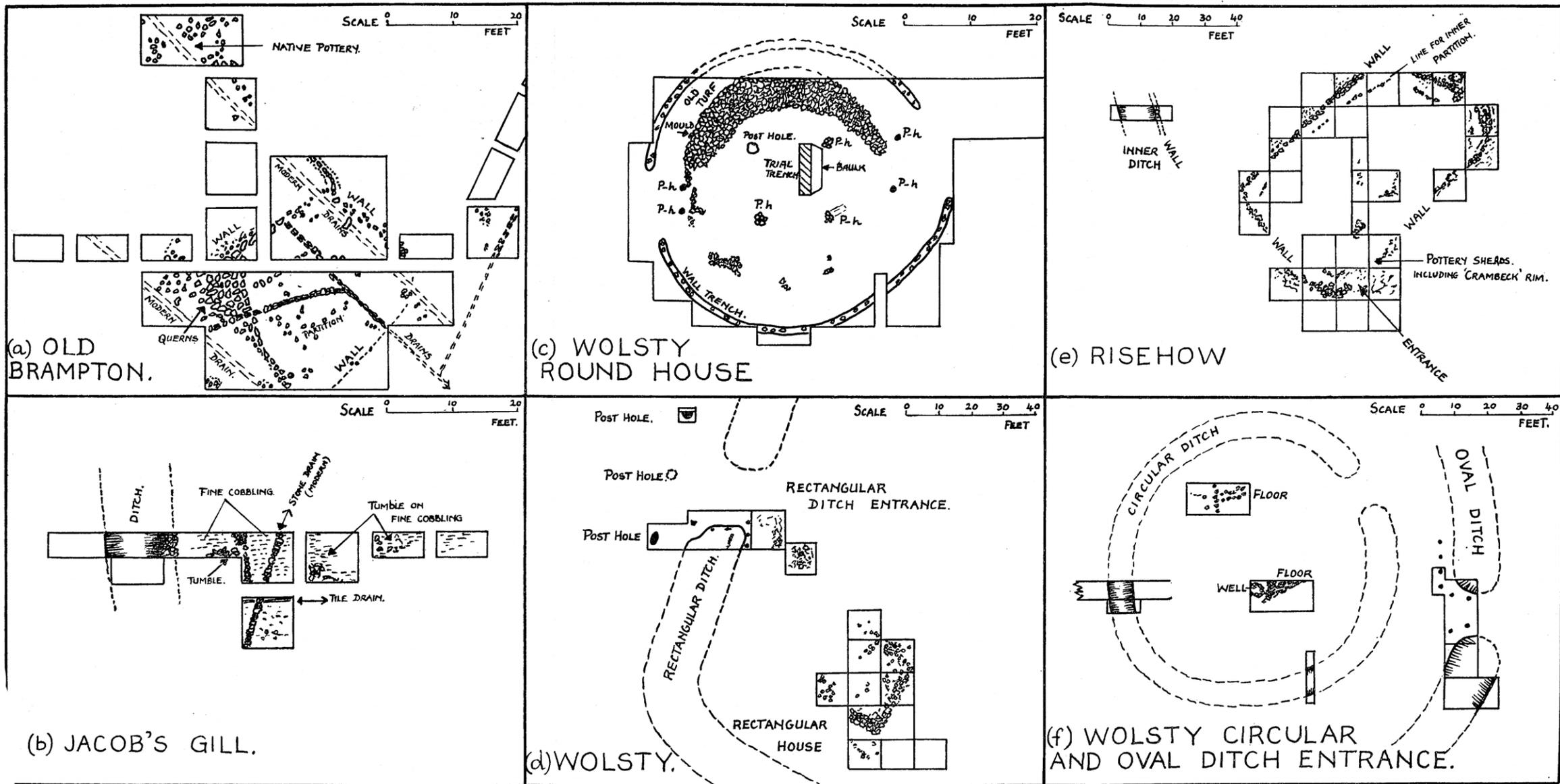


FIG. 4.