The Early Defensive Earthwork on Comb Moss.

By I. Chalkley Gould.

IN 1899, I had the pleasure of saying somewhat about early defensive earthworks, at the Buxton meeting of the British Archæological Association.

On that occasion, though reference was made to remains in various parts of Britain, special attention was drawn to examples to be seen in Derbyshire, a county rich in pre-historic relics, though not containing so many early forts as one finds in some districts, a fact to be accounted for by the poor character of the soil, and consequent sparse population in those hilly parts* which provide such admirable sites for defensive works.

To fix a chronological order in the date of certain types of earthwork forts which remain in this county is impossible in the present state of our knowledge, and in the ever-to-be-regretted absence of accurate record of the articles found by excavators in past times. Bateman did much to bring together such scattered information as he obtained, as well as to record his own observations; but, speaking broadly, it is to be said

* Celia Fiennes, a quaint but inaccurate diarist, says: "Indeed all Darbyshire is but a world of peaked hills, which from some of ye highest you discover ye Rest Like steeples or tops of hills as thick as Can be, and tho' they appear so Close yet ye steepness down and up takes up ye tyme."—*Through England on a Side Saddle in the Time of William and Mary.* London, 1888.

that no systematic attempt has been made to record the "finds" in a way to enable us to decide upon the relative age of the fortresses.

Form of construction alone will not always give the required basis for judgment, as the most simple forms adopted by early men were also on occasion used by the invaders of the eighth to the tenth centuries. In fact, when we examine forts of a time before the Roman dominion we are unable to fix a date, and must veil our ignorance by calling them pre-historic.

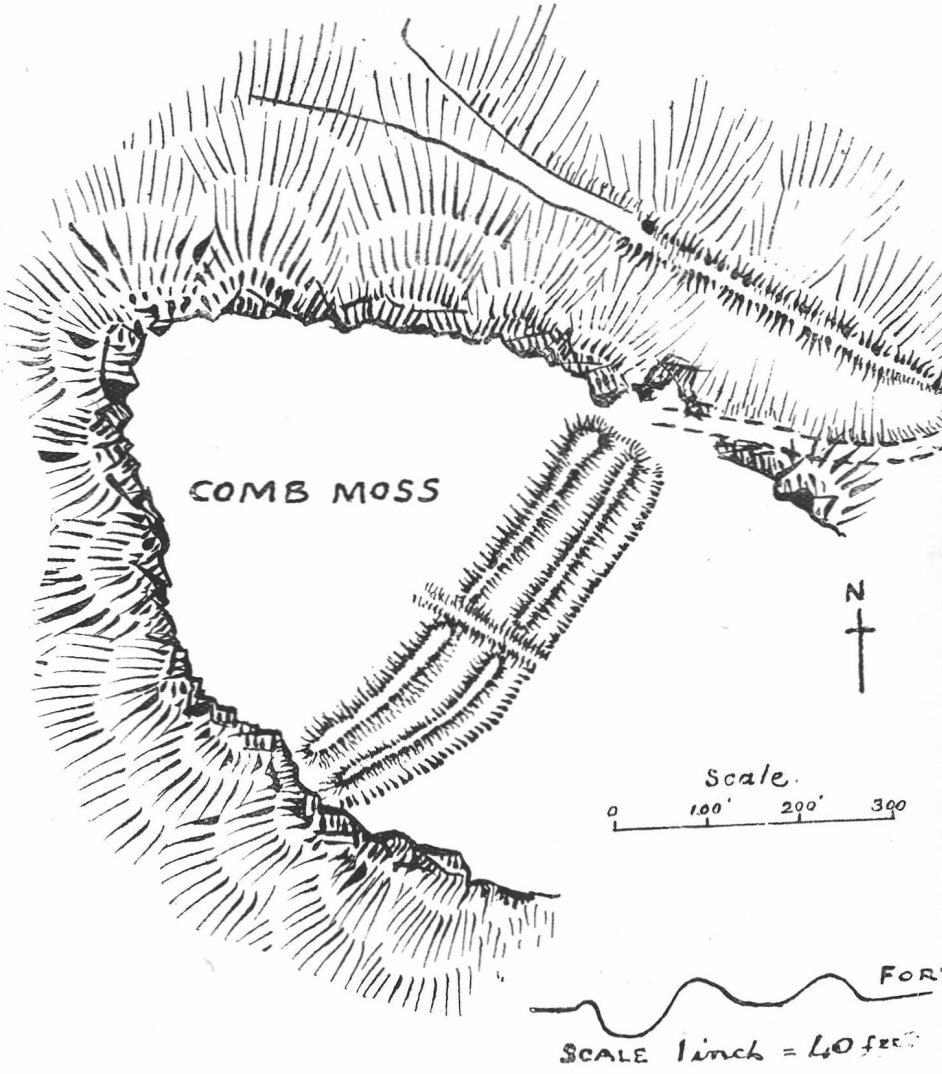
There are, however, certain characteristic features which distinguish early hill-forts. The entrance ways to these works were marked by difficulty of approach, for early man liked something circuitous, as at Ardoch; dangerous, as at Comb Moss; or involved, as at Maiden Castle.

The situation of a fort on a great hill 1,000 to 2,000 feet above the vales also indicates origin at a time when the tribes who lived on the lower ground needed, near by, a camp of refuge for men, women, children, and cattle, to be used only when tribal enemies were on the war-path.

Noticing the skill with which many of the early entrance ways were arranged, in some cases involving a passage along the outer fosse for many yards before arriving at the opening through the inner rampart, one cannot but be reminded of those stone-built works of far later days which the Normans reared, guarding every passage, sometimes leaving a gap between the fore-building and the keep door, into which an enemy might fall; sometimes carrying a winding stair up to a higher floor, making it necessary to descend another stair to reach the lower rooms, and so on.

Much more might be said than space will allow, and it is necessary to pass to the Derbyshire example which is selected for illustration of the work of early man.

Occupying a bold promontory high above Chapel-en-le-Frith valley and the surrounding country, Comb Moss fort is an interesting work of the "refuge" type. In shape triangular; nature has defended two sides by cliffs or precipitous slopes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dropping four or five hundred feet. Across the base of the triangle the makers threw a double rampart and fosse to protect the one side which was approachable on a level, so arranging their work that the only space left for an entrance to the fort was on the edge of a precipice at the North-east corner, a spot easily defended by a handful of men.

The dimensions of the fort and its defences are given thus by Mr. Sainter, in his *Rambles Round Macclesfield* (1878):—

Length of fosse and ramparts	547 feet.
Width of outer fosse at top of cutting	30 ,,
Depth of ditto from level of ground	10 ,,
Height of first or outer rampart from bottom of outer fosse	20 ,,
Width of inner fosse at top of ramparts ...	... 50 to 65 ,,
Depth of ditto from top of ditto	10 ,,
Height of inner rampart	10 ,,
Length of West side of camp	450 ,,
Length of North-north-east side of ditto	466 ,,
Length of entrance to camp, including the path ...	366 ,,

Major Rooke sent a communication (published in *Archæologia* IX., 139, 1789), in which he claimed a Roman origin for the fort, but, indeed, all remains were either Roman or Druidic to the archæologists of that day!

As his letter is interesting, I quote a portion of it:—

"Whilst the Romans frequented these baths [Buxton], it is natural to suppose that they would take possession of the heights and strong posts in the neighbourhood. Accordingly we find an exploratory camp on a high moor, called Combes Moss, about four miles from Buxton, which is seen from the hill where the temple stood.

"As this Roman work (which is called Castle dikes) has never, I believe, hitherto been taken notice of, I have given a plan of it. The South side, which is on a level with the moor, is strongly secured by a double ditch and *vallum*: here the entrance appears to have been. The East and West sides are inaccessible from a rocky declivity, which on the West side goes down to a brook from whence the camp was supplied with water, as appears by a passage cut through some rocks at B.*

* The spot indicated by B on Major Rooke's plan is about 150 feet from the point of the promontory, on the West side.

"Length of the South end 163 yards. The East side, where there is now a well, is about 162 yards; width of the inner ditch 7 yards; and of the outward ditch 5 yards. . . .

"The construction of the *vallum* (see the section) is different from any I have ever seen; being formed of long stones placed diagonally, so as to press inward towards the centre, and then covered with earth: the base of the *vallum* is 12 yards."

Section copied from *Archæologia*, IX. (1789).

Certain depressions of the surface have been thought to indicate stone huts, but their presence does not vitiate the theory of the early "refuge" purpose of Comb Moss, for such a wet and windy exposure would necessitate shelter during even the most temporary occupation.

In common with many other early works, the defences have suffered by alterations at the hands of those who occupied the fort in after years.

The straight pass through the ramparts, giving easy access from the plateau, was no part of the scheme of the original constructors, but is usually attributed to the Romans, who may have occupied the place for a time.

Granting that there was already a strongly defended fort here, the Romans are exceedingly likely to have seized upon and occupied a place which enabled them to command the road from their settlement at Buxton (Aquæ) to Manchester (Mancunium), the way from Brough to the same road, and possibly local track-ways for conveyance of material from the mines and quarries of the Peakland.

Probably in early days a wall of stone crowned the edge of the two precipitous sides pretty much as the partly modern wall now does to prevent cattle from falling over the cliffs.

Many early forts exist which show no signs of water supply, suggesting that, as in a New Zealand *pa*, it was often necessary

to carry up water for days beforehand when the fortresses were likely to be needed—a task allotted by the Maories to their women.*

It is, however, recorded by Mr. Sainter† that at Comb Moss "there is a good spring of water in about the centre of the area," and, as we have seen, Major Rooke refers to water supply.

A cursory examination (in a downpour of rain) of this interesting fortress made one long for the opportunity to conduct a systematic exploration under favourable conditions, which might tell us at what period the great ramparts were raised; a task which one may hope will some day be undertaken by Derbyshire archæologists.

Geological Notes.

The *Geological Survey Memoir on North Derbyshire*, 2nd edition, p. 15 (1887), says:—

"The large flat-topped hill of Comb Moss is capped by an outlier of Third Grit, while round its flanks the outcrops of the Fourth, Fifth, and Shale Grits run in concentric rings."

The *Geological Survey Memoir on the Stockport District*, p. 61 (1866), says:—

"At the top lies a hummock of shales, and the little coal at the junction [with the Third Grit] has formerly been worked . . . Round the flanks of the hill run the outcrops of two grit beds, the Fourth and Fifth Grits, representing the Kinder Scout Grit. The upper is mostly a coarse red grit, the lower not so coarse, and flaggy. . . . Below these is found the Yoredale Grit, a fine-grained brown sandstone. . . . The Third Grit . . . ends off sharply in a line of crags, broken here and there by large landslips, while below we may trace three fainter lines of cliff, marking the outcrops of the Fourth, Fifth, and Yoredale Grits."

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* *Old New Zealand* (1887).

† Sainter (J. D.), *Rambles Round Macclesfield* (1878).

For the benefit of readers who are not geologists, it may be well to intimate that the region belongs to the Millstone Grit division of the Carboniferous series, and that the Geological Survey mapped and named separately each bed of stone, thick belts of shale parting the several members.

The Memoirs from which the quotations are taken contain a mass of technical information, and to them those who are interested in geology are referred.