

II.

NOTICE OF SOME EXCAVATION ON THE FORT OCCUPYING THE SUMMIT OF BONCHESTER HILL, PARISH OF HOBKIRK, ROXBURGHSHIRE. BY ALEXANDER O. CURLE, SECRETARY.

Bonchester Hill lies some $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles distant to the north-west of the main line of the Cheviot range. It is a round-topped, grassy hill rising to an altitude of some 1050 feet above sea-level and some 500 feet above Rule Water, which flows by its base on the west to mingle with the Teviot some 6 miles onward. It grows good pasture; and tillage, except on the east, is carried well up its flanks. The presence of two large defensive enclosures within 200 yards of each other indicates the attractiveness of the hill as a place of regular or occasional occupation in prehistoric times. One of these enclosures is situated on the summit, and the other on the north flank at an elevation some 100 feet lower. Though it is with the former that this paper really deals, certain features of the latter may be noted. It consists of an irregular oval fort with a circular enclosure adjoining it, but separated by an intervening ditch on the east, thus forming two separately defensible enclosures. Though showing signs of foundations in the interior, these are not so numerous as in the upper fort.

The obvious connection between the defences of a fort and the natural configuration of the ground renders necessary a further description of the site. From the northwards a long ridge leads up by a gradual slope past the lower fort, and from this direction the position is consequently most assailable. On the west, beyond the limits of the fort, the ground falls sharply away. From the southward the approach is also steep, and on the east a rocky scarp flanks the actual summit. The plan is given on the Ordnance Survey Map 6-inch scale, No. XXVI., S.E., and has been reproduced in Dr Christison's *Early Fortifications in Scotland*, p. 296. In neither instance, however,

is any notice taken of the numerous hut circles and other signs of habitation so evident on the surface.

The fort consists of an inner oval enclosure occupying the actual summit of the hill, measuring some 317 feet from north to south by 280 feet from east to west, surrounded by the remains of a stony bank or more probably a wall, much ruined and pulled out, of indefinite width, and now, where visible, only of slight elevation. Outside this, and in rear of a second rampart, is an area stretching from the north-east round by west to the south, measuring some 170 feet across towards the north and diminishing to 50 feet in width as it passes westwards, and thereafter again broadening out. Over this area the outlines of numerous foundations are indicated on its surface. Along the north front the second rampart is defended by a ditch some 24 feet in width, having a third rampart crowning the counterscarp; while, still prominent on the east half of the north front and less so on the west half, a second ditch and, beyond it, a fourth rampart complete the defences in that direction. Beyond the north front, passing westwards, the second and third ramparts diverge and are about 150 feet apart (O.S. measurements) on the west side. Here also are signs of foundations, but less numerous and distinct than between the two inner ramparts. From the base of a rock on the north-east a ditch and rampart pass southwards at some distance from the base of the rocky scarp and terminate against the face of a rock, on the south-south-west, completing the system of fortifications from north-east to south-south-west.

There are three main roads leading into the fort; one, on the north, passes through the outer defences near the centre and leads directly to the summit; a second, on the north-east, winds upward at the north end of the rocky scarp; a third, from the south-east, passes through an opening in the outer defences below the rocks some 20 feet wide, and, winding round the south end of the hill, reaches the summit from that direction. Through the second rampart on the west are at least two entrances giving access to the hut circles in rear of it, but not

opposed by any corresponding gap through the bank of the inner enclosure, and similarly there is an opening through the second and third ramparts on the north-east. Some 60 feet or 70 feet outside the north-east entrance on the north side of the road, occupying a slight elevation, are remains probably of a ruined hut or guard-house.

In the inner enclosure are the foundations of four or five hut circles (Nos. I. to IV. on Plan). Nos. I., II., and III. are placed close by the ports or entrances, and No. IV. a little further into the interior. There were no surface indications of the fifth, but, on excavation, I was led to suspect its existence opposite No. II. on the west side of the north entrance. Besides the circles there have been huts built in the rampart on either side of the south gateway, that on the west being in rear of the hut circle No. I. and some 27 feet distant from the termination of the rampart; also structures of some kind abutting on the rampart near the middle of the west side, and sundry remains of occupation in the lower ground at the north end. On the summit the rock outcrops in numerous places and is thinly covered with soil except at the north end, where a forest of nettles luxuriates in a deep bed of loose dark earth. In the space between the inner and second ramparts are at least thirteen hut circles. Two lie in line on the right of the approach from the north, and the remainder on the west and south flanks. In the same space to the left or east of the line of the approach from the north are less distinct indications of numerous foundations against the inner rampart. The hut circles measure over all from 30 to 40 feet in diameter, mostly approximating to the former figure.

In 1906 a small grant was voted by the Council for the examination of this interesting fort. Unfortunately my time was limited and only one labourer procurable, and though at the end of a fortnight's work I left with the full intention of returning in the following summer, circumstances arose to upset my calculations, and, seeing no prospect in the near future of carrying on the excavation, I consider it desirable to place on permanent record the result of my exploration. The plan (fig. 1) is incomplete, but it may be of use to any future excavator. The hut circles

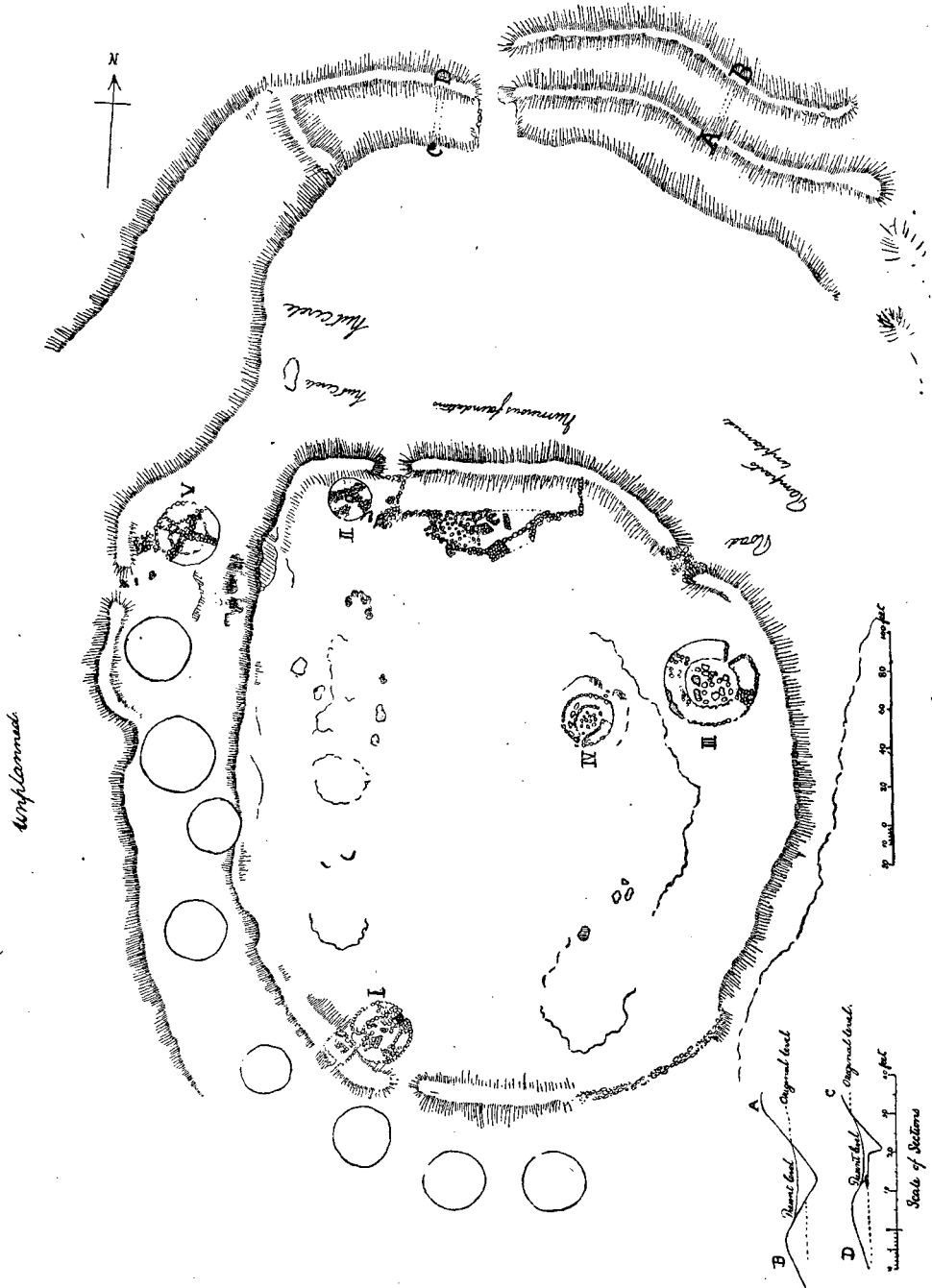


Fig. 1. Plan of the Fort on the summit of Bonchester Hill.

unexcavated are merely outlined, and the extent to which the others were exposed is indicated by the delineation of the stones which covered their surfaces.

Excavation was commenced on a depression in the rampart on the west side of the south entrance, some 27 feet from its termination. This depression was found to be a rectangular chamber about 12 feet square, the floor of which was some 2 feet 8 inches below the present surface. The sides appeared to be faced with boulders built into the rampart. From the south-west corner a passage about 2 feet wide passed directly through the rampart to the outside, while from the opposite corner another passage led into the hut circle (No. I.) beyond. Near the centre of the chamber and facing south-west was a fireplace rudely built

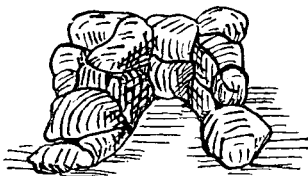


Fig. 2. Built Fireplace on floor of chamber.

of boulders and roughly rectangular (fig. 2). Its greatest elevation at the back and on either side was 18 inches; the length of the interior 3 feet; the width at the outer end 2 feet, and at the inner end 1 foot. On the floor lay a small quantity of charcoal. In the north corner of the chamber was a hearth of about 2 feet in depth raised a few inches above the floor-level and marked off with a segmental outline of stones measuring about 1 foot across. Over it lay a deep layer of black soil intermixed with charcoal. The floor of the chamber to a depth of some 15 inches was covered by a deposit of dark soil, through which appeared charcoal and small quantities of calcined bone. Some 8 inches above the lowest level there seemed to extend over a considerable part of the interior a layer of carbonised wood, among which birch branches of from $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches to 2 inches in diameter were recognisable by their bark.

Above the branches lay a number of stones irregularly tumbled in. Two fragments of flint, unworked, were recovered—one at the lowest level, and the other 15 inches below the surface; and some pieces of slag were also found.

On the left or north side of the passage leading to the hut circle there seemed to be a recess, rounded at the back, measuring some 3 feet 9 inches across by about 5 feet in depth. From it was obtained a small cylindrical piece of sandstone measuring $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, the upper and lower surfaces of which appear to have been rubbed smooth. The hut circle No. I., into the back of which this passage led, was roughly circular and measured over all some 32 feet in diameter. When the turf which covered it was removed there was disclosed a layer of boulders over the whole area lying on the natural surface, except where it had been found necessary to fill up depressions to bring the floor to a uniform level. No wall of any sort remained, but the base, or foundation, on which a wall had been raised with a breadth of from 8 feet to 10 feet was clearly identifiable by the outline of carefully laid boulders which marked its outer and inner faces. A total absence of superimposed stones or of debris showed that the wall above this foundation had not been of stone. The interior was pear-shaped in form, measuring 16 feet from the back to the entrance by 15 feet across. A number of flat sandstone slabs some 3 inches to 4 inches in thickness lay in the interior and had evidently formed the paving. The entrance passage, rudely cobbled for 5 feet 9 inches outwards, faced the north-east and was some 5 feet in width. The only relic recovered was a small saddle quern measuring $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 7 inches superficially by 3 inches in thickness. Two round pebbles, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter, appeared to be naturally formed, but may have been employed as sling stones.

The appearance of the end of the inner rampart on the east of the south entrance suggested that it had been occupied, and an excavation was accordingly made in it for a distance of some 14 feet inwards. The soil which filled the area was black and contained a small amount of burnt bone and charcoal, but the walls on both sides of the chamber had been

much broken down and no structural details were observable. The half of a small whorl, 2 inches in diameter, pierced with a hole from the convex side $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter, a broken portion of a saddle quern, and a small fragment of ore were recovered.

Attention was next directed to hut circle No. II., situated also in the inner enclosure on the west side of the north entrance. Over all it measured some 27 feet in diameter and was surrounded by a wall base formed of round stones, from 10 feet to 11 feet in thickness, analogous to that in circle No. I. A whinstone slab of great weight some 3 feet square covered the centre of the interior. The entrance faced east towards the gateway. No relics were recovered.

Hut circle No. III., situated to the south of the north-east entrance, was only partially examined. It was of large dimension, measuring some 43 feet in diameter over all, surrounded by a wall foundation some 8 feet to 10 feet in thickness enclosing an area of some 25 feet in diameter. The entrance faced the north-east; no relics were found in it.

Hut circle No. IV. lay at a slightly higher level, some 50 feet west of No. III. It was of small size, measuring only about 23 feet over all. The interior was pear-shaped, measuring some 15 feet by 12 feet, the longest axis being towards the entrance, which faced the south. The interior was strewn over confusedly with stones not suggestive of pavement. From the west side of the entrance, extending round for about a quarter of the circumference, five large stones were set at slight intervals apart along the mesial line of the wall base, above which they projected. A saddle quern similar to that found in hut circle No. I. was recovered from this site.

Hut circle No. V. is situated on the north side of the opening through the second rampart on the west side of the fort. Two trenches were cut across it at right angles, disclosing features similar to those in the other hut circles. It measured over all some 33 feet in diameter, and interiorly about 17 feet. The paving or cobbling of the interior was very rough. The entrance faced to the south-west towards the

opening, and a roughly cobbled road or path some 3 feet wide led from it to the outside of the rampart.

Attention was next directed to the area overgrown with nettles at the north end of the interior, and from a point some 20 feet south of the termination of the rampart on the east side of the north entrance a trench was dug eastwards for a distance of 90 feet. For the first 30 feet or so there was laid bare, immediately beneath the turf, a rude cobbling of round water-worn stones similar to what covered the sites of the hut circles. Cross-cuts were made in several directions to discover the outline, but to no effect. From the site, however, another saddle quern similar to those previously mentioned was recovered.

Some 36 feet from the commencement of the trench the soil deepened. It was immixed with calcined bone and charcoal, was very dark in colour, and 2 feet 6 inches in depth. Beneath it, lying on the rock, was a bed, some 18 inches in thickness, of small angular fragments of stone. From the soil, which was all passed through a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch riddle, a single shard of coarse hand-made pottery was recovered, also one half of a large roughly fashioned whorl with flat surfaces, which measures 4 inches in diameter by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch in thickness, and has a perforation in the centre drilled from each face $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter. A small area, in form a right-angled triangle, measuring some 30 feet along the line of the trench by 20 feet at base at the south end, was here completely excavated. The face of a wall, still some 2 feet in height, formed the third side. The wall was built of large stones carefully laid, and measured some 8 feet 6 inches in thickness. At the south-west end, where it sloped upwards to the higher level, it gave place to a cobbling of boulders faced with a kerb on the north-west, apparently forming one side of an uncobbled track some 6 feet wide leading into the hollow. On either side of this track, and over the surface beneath the turf to westward of the excavated hollow, the ground was covered with large water-worn stones. The walling crossed the hollow in the direction of the rampart, which it would meet if continued at about 94 feet from the east side of the north entrance. Within the triangular area, some 16 feet from its east

end, a fragment of wall, some 6 feet long by 3 feet wide, crossed towards the previously mentioned wall, approaching it from the northwards at an angle of about 40° . To the west of it and facing the east-north-east was another fireplace, similar to that previously described, 3 feet long, 2 feet wide, and about 18 inches high, on the floor of which was found charcoal and black soil. In rear of this structure from its south-east corner, a narrow passage led into a recess some 4 feet long by 2 feet wide. From the vicinity of the fireplace there were obtained (1) a shard of coarse red hand-made pottery, the upper part of a vessel of large diameter, measuring superficially some $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches in thickness, having a single round perforation, $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches below the lip. The pot thins away to the lip and is undecorated. (2) Another fragment of a similar vessel, about 3 inches square and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. Both pieces of pottery are much blackened on both sides. (3) One half of the base of a smaller flat-bottomed vessel of similar pottery, probably a crucible, measuring $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches in diameter; and (4) an iron pin, $5\frac{1}{10}$ inches in length, with a round shoulder to retain it in position, and an annular head, $\frac{8}{10}$ inch in diameter, formed by the bending of the wire. This relic was found some 3 feet below the surface. Some nodules of slag were also obtained.

Examination of the roadways into the interior at the entrance showed that while neither that at the north nor that at the south were cobbled, that at the north-east was roughly paved with large water-worn stones. Outward from the gateway for at least 30 feet, and also within the fort, this cobbling was continued.

Immediately within the north entrance was an uncobbled semi-circular space, with a radius of some 12 feet, around which, from the inner side of the rampart on the east of the entrance to the eastmost of two low outcropping rocks on the south-east of the hut circle No. II., the cobble-stones lay thickly strewn. Against the westmost of the two rocks the hut circle abutted, and between them a passage some 3 feet wide, quite free from stones, led into the interior.

It was impossible to say whether this cobbling around the entrance had been the base of a turf wall, such as probably surrounded the hut circles, or was merely the paving over the lower end of the fort to keep the surface above the deeper soil from being trampled into a mire. As the cobbling was not found at the south entrance, where the rock is near the surface, the latter is probably the true explanation.

The ends of the ramparts at the entrances were in most cases much worn down, but in no instance were there any signs of gateposts or of the holes in which they had been sunk. A kerb of single flattish boulders was used to round off the extremities.

The entrances on the north and south were some 10 feet wide, while that on the north-east, the sides of which were not worn down, measured 5 feet across the centre and 6 feet on the inner side.

A peculiar feature was observed where the roadway from the north passed through the third rampart. The passage was 9 feet wide, but on the inner side of the rampart the roadway expanded, entirely to the east, to 20 feet, the edge of the ditch over which it passes on the west side being flush with the west side of the passage.

Two sections were made through the ditches on the north face—one through the inner ditch (C-D on the plan), and the other through the outer ditch (A-B). The inner ditch is 24 feet across to the crest of the outer rampart, and at present level only 2 feet 9 inches deep below the level of the top of the counterscarp. On excavation it was found to have been 8 feet deep, with a scarp measuring 12 feet from the old level of the upper bank, above which there had existed a rampart now much worn away. The bottom was V-shaped, the counterscarp, however, being slightly more vertical than the scarp. The width was only 11 feet 6 inches, a level space or platform 6 feet wide stretching from the top of the counterscarp to the base of the outer rampart. The rampart itself was 21 feet wide at base, and on the inner side was laid on a cradling of irregular oblong boulders set with their ends outwards. The rampart was composed of compacted earth and stone. About a foot above the

bottom of the ditch there was visible a thin stratum of darker soil, such as might indicate a former level of vegetation.

The outer ditch (section A-B) measures some 26 feet across, and is 3 feet 5 inches deep below the level of the top of the counterscarp. It was found to have filled up to a depth of 5 feet from the original bottom and to be approximately V-shaped, the bottom being 15 inches wide. The scarp measured up the slope to the original level 11 feet, and to the top of the rampart 11 feet more. The present vertical height of the rampart above the original level is about 6 feet. The counterscarp to the original ground-level measured 5 feet, and to the top of the rampart 15 feet. The outer rampart, which has a level top about 4 feet broad, measures 29 feet on base and 6 feet in vertical height.

Though no spring now exists within the fort, there is water at no great distance down the slope below the entrance on the north-east.

The occupation of the fort appears to have existed over a long period, judging from the number and variety of the structures within its lines, and of these the hut circles are evidently referable to the original occupation. They are placed, it will be observed, in such relation to the various entrances as to indicate that they formed a factor in the scheme of defence. Except the saddle querns found in three of them, there was no other trace whatever of occupation noticed, nor was there the slightest evidence of the character of the superstructures.

A very similar disposition of hut circles may be observed in the

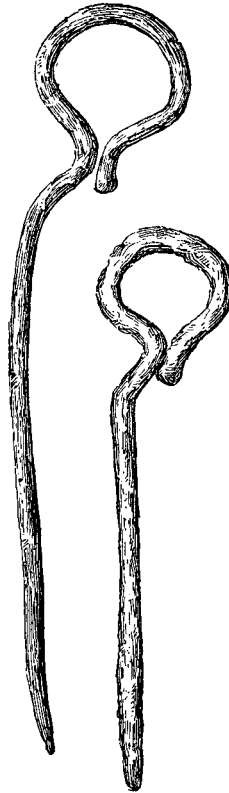


Fig. 3. Pin of Iron from the Fort of Bonchester, and smaller Pin of same type from Abernethy Fort.

fort above Coldingham Loch, No. 90 of the *Inventory of Ancient Monuments in the County of Berwick*.

The square chamber within the rampart at the south end obviously from its position does not belong to the original plan of the fort, and, as the structure in the hollow at the north end, which appears to have been of similar form, contains an identical fireplace, the presumption is that it belongs also to the same period; but whether these structures come late or early in the history of the occupation, there is no evidence recovered so far to indicate.

The coarse pottery and the iron pin found in the latter of these two sites are products of the Early Iron Age.

The pin (fig. 3) may be compared with one, also of iron, and, though imperfect, originally of somewhat similar size, preserved in the National Museum, and found in the fort on the Castle Law, Abernethy, along with a fibula of late La Tène type; while another pin of similar form but smaller size and fashioned of bronze, found on the site of a pile dwelling at Hammersmith, is preserved in the British Museum and figured in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, vol. xx. No. II. p. 345.

The presence of saddle querns suggests an early date for the occupation of the hut circles; but, in drawing any conclusions from the absence of rotary querns, the small extent of the excavation must be borne in mind.