

An Early Iron Age Site on Blewburton Hill, Berks.

By J. S. P. BRADFORD.

BLEWBURTON Hill¹ lies between the villages of Blewbury and Aston Tirrold, some four miles W.S.W. of the Thames at Wallingford. It is oval in form, with its longer axis lying N.E.-S.W., presenting a long, low, "whale-backed" profile. The ground falls away abruptly on the N., S., and W., and to a lesser extent on the E. slope; on every side it commands a fine prospect extending from the Vale of the White Horse down to the Goring Gap and along the escarpment of the North Berkshire Downs, from which it is separated by a dry valley barely half a mile across.

For some years past prolific surface finds of pottery² have drawn attention to an Early Iron Age occupation site on the brow of the hill, but its projected excavation, under the direction of Mrs. C. M. Piggott, was unfortunately frustrated by the outbreak of war. It is hoped that the following brief summary will prepare the way for the resumption of field-work at a more favourable opportunity.

The great proportion of these sherds came from near the S.W. corner (*Plate* No. I, xx), though they are also spread more thinly along the S. edge to the S.E. corner (whence, for example, came the haematite-coated bowl, No. 2). I have not yet personally observed any on the N. sector. No crop-marks have yet been identified on the summit (the eastern half of which is under cultivation), although there is nowhere more than about 15 inches of surface humus above the chalk. The plan and form of the settlement thus remain undecided, but an analysis of the pottery quickly shows that in quantity and quality we have here a potential "All Cannings Cross" of North Berkshire, which could provide a fine type-series for the latter part of the Wessex A.2 culture-phase in this area, during the latter part of the 3rd cent. B.C.

The site plans of Blewburton Hill in *V.C.H., Berks* and in the *Downman MS.* in Reading Library are now both in need of revision, but one of the late Major Allen's invaluable air-photographs brings out all the essential features, particularly the five prominent

¹ 1 in. O.S., 5th ed., Sh. 113.: Co-ordinates, E. 1,060,000; N. 1,313,000; measurements of summit, 1200 yds. N.E.-S.W. and 450 yds., maximum, in breadth.

² I should like to express my gratitude to the Curator of the Reading Museum who gave every facility for the examination of the material from Blewburton; also to Stuart Piggott, F.S.A., who generously placed his MS. notes on this and neighbouring sites at my disposal; and to the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, for his kind permission to reproduce two air-photographs by the late Major G. W. G. Allen.

AN EARLY IRON AGE SITE ON BLEWBURTON HILL, BERKS



Photo: The late Major G. W. G. Allen.

PLATE I.

Blewburton Hill, Berks., from the North-West.

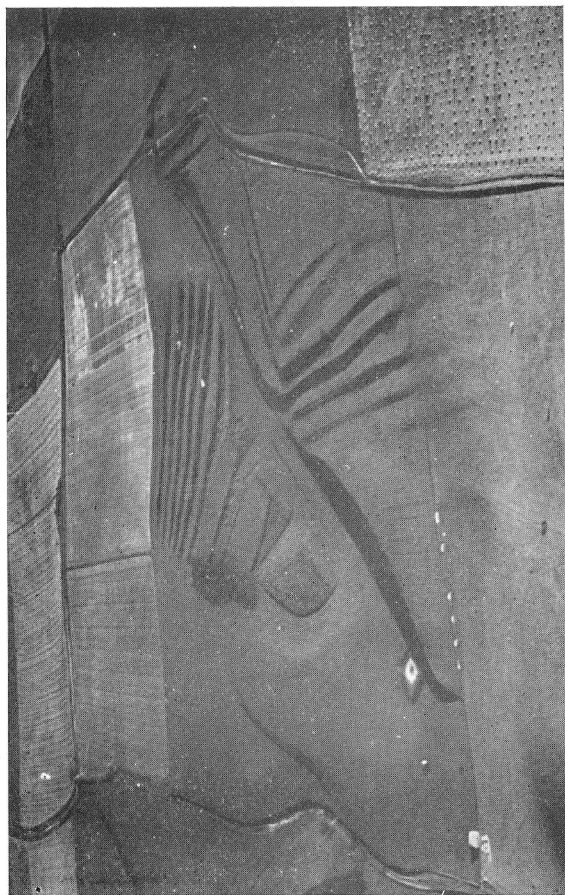


Photo : The late Major G. W. G. Allen.

PLATE II.

Strip-Lynchets near Bishopstone, Wilts.

cultivation-lynchets on the N.W. sector. (*Plate* No. I.) These cling to the contour of the hill side except on the N.E. and E. slopes, where they have been almost completely ploughed out. At the S.W. corner are traces of two lynchets at right-angles to the others; it seems probable that the entire circumference of the hill was thus cultivated. Neither here nor at Bishopstone (*Plate* No. II.), 18 miles further west, do we possess any direct evidence for their date, but an analogy they must be classed as part of Saxon strip-field systems.

Along the W. edge of the hill, there appear to be traces of a slight rampart still standing up to four feet above the level of the interior, though only excavation can establish its authenticity. If this interpretation is correct, it would strongly suggest the presence of a simple Iron Age A hill-top refuge for nearby open villages or farms,¹ temporarily fortified during a period of crisis. Unfortunately the Iron Age hill forts on both sides of the Vale of the White Horse have not been fully related chronologically to the sudden and urgent fortification of hill-tops and farmsteads in South England provoked by the earliest Iron Age B incursions in the middle of the 3rd century B.C.

There does not appear to be an adequate water supply today on the hill, or in its immediate vicinity, for a large permanent habitation site. Up to the present, no Iron Age AB or AC wares have yet been found to suggest an extended settlement—and, in fact, the uniform character of the A2 ware represented seems not inconsistent with quite a brief, if intensive, span of occupation.

THE POTTERY.

All these sherds² are unstratified, but the culturally unmixed nature of the series makes certain inferences nevertheless possible. It is instructive to compare the roughly contemporary series from Allen's Pit, near Dorchester, (*Oxoniensia*, VII) which show parallel but much more modified Wessex "A" features—though only seven miles to the north.³

The fabrics vary little in quality, and fall into three groups:—*Coarse Ware*: consistently very hard, heavy and leathery, fired from light grey to smoky black, sometimes with an admixture of shell grit; rarely, if ever, decorated with linear ornament, though frequently with finger-tipping.

¹ Equivalent Wessex A2 pottery has come from Hagbourne Hill (unpub.); Lowbury Hill (Atkinson); Scutcher Knob, Hendred (*Trans. Newbury F.C.*, VI, 93); E. Lockinge round barrow (*ibid*, 90); Churn Plain, Barrows B and C (*ibid*, 164, 167).

² Nos. 2, 12, 23 in Ashmolean Museum; Figs. 3 and 4, Nos. 42-47 from drawings by Stuart Piggott.

³ For the significance of the periphery of the N. Berkshire Downs as a partial cultural frontier in the Iron Age; see *Oxoniensia* IV, 15; *ibid*, VII, and further evidence adduced by C. E. Stevens, *ibid*, V, 166.

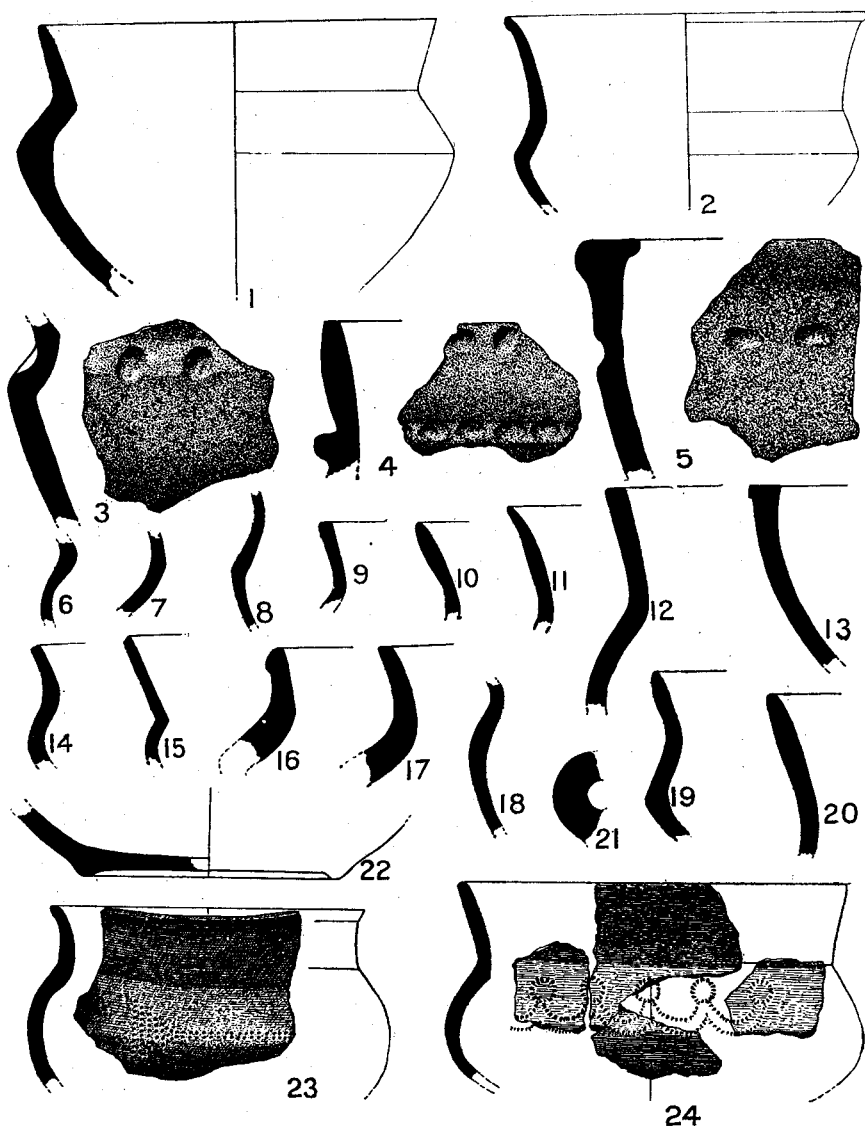


FIG. 1. (1/3)

Burnished Ware : ranges from pale chestnut to dark brown and warm black, also a characteristic greenish grey. Carefully applied, sometimes on both surfaces, to nearly all bowls and even some jars. It often attains an almost metallic lustre.

Haematite-coated Ware : i.e. Fig. 1, Nos. 2 and 6-II. Hard, bright red slip, highly burnished sometimes on both surfaces ; as yet only found on small, thin-walled bowl-forms.

The most important characteristics of form and decoration are as follows :—

1. *Bowl-forms*. These are present in large numbers, with flaring rims and constricted necks. Shoulders either carinated or becoming rounded in profile ; whether this actually entails the passage of much time must be decided by excavation. One bowl (Fig. 1, No. 21) had small handles and so, apparently, had No. 23.
2. *Omphalos bases*. A number of these were found. Though this feature occurs in an A 1 context at Long Wittenham (*Oxoniensia*, II, 4.), an omphalos base from the late A2 site at Radley (*V.C.H., Oxon* I, 253) reminds us that this cannot be used exclusively for early dating.
3. *Foot-rings*. Several bases have foot-rings similar to Fig. 1, No. 22. These are all of the hand-made "A" type, six of which were found at All Cannings Cross.
4. *Haematite slip-coating*. Fairly extensively employed, but has not yet been found combined with linear designs incised after firing, as was so common at All Cannings, Meon Hill etc.
5. "*Furrowed*" ornament on bowls. E.g. Fig. 3, 42 ; but otherwise conspicuously rare, and apparently obsolescent in this area when the Blewburton series begins. Only one good example was observed at Ram's Hill. (*Ant. Journ.*, XX.) and only one is known from N. of the Berkshire Downs—at Allen's Pit (*V.C.H., Oxon.*, I, pl. XI, c.) in a more simplified form. Cordoned bowls are so far absent.
6. *Decoration incised post-firing*. This technique is later than the broad tooling. A number of incised linear designs are thus executed (e.g. Fig. 2, Nos. 28, 29, 32, 33). The zones (No. 33) of small simplified continuous chevrons thus treated seem to be typical of the latest stages of A2 linear design, since this motif occurs uniformly in this context with cordons and is incised *after* firing, often in haematite. At All Cannings Cross, Fifield Bavant, Yarnbury, Lidbury, Wilts ; Meon Hill, Quarley Hill, Hants ; Hagbourne Hill, Berks ; Holwell, Great Wymondley, Herts ; Ellesborough, Bucks.
7. *Finger ornament on applied bands*. E.g. Nos. 4 and 25, an ultimate inheritance of a late Bronze Age technique, but by no means uncommon.

8. *Finger-tipping*, with its variants, is freely employed on the shoulders of many A2 situliform vessels, and on Nos. 4, 26, 35, on, or below, the outer lip of the rim.

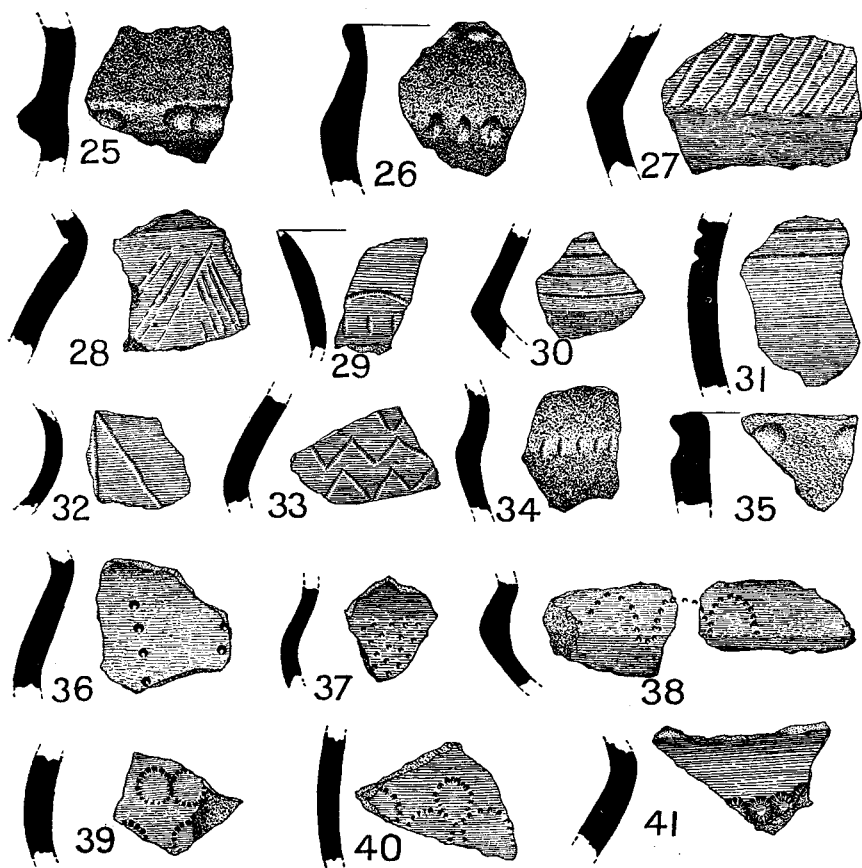


FIG. 2. (1)

9. *Heavy flat-topped rims*. A form common to most A2 sites which persists until the end of the Iron Age, and is combined with several types of large storage jar.
10. *White inlay*. Characteristic of all Wessex A sites. It is present in the circular (No. 36) and pin-pointed (Nos. 23, 37, 38) punch marks. It seems to have had a greater survival value than most other Wessex A techniques N. of the Berkshire Downs, being found at Wytham, Standlake, Allen's Pit, Bampton, Marston and Adwell Cop. The "arcading" of No. 38 is an ultimate devolution from the chevron; also noted at Hagbourne Hill.

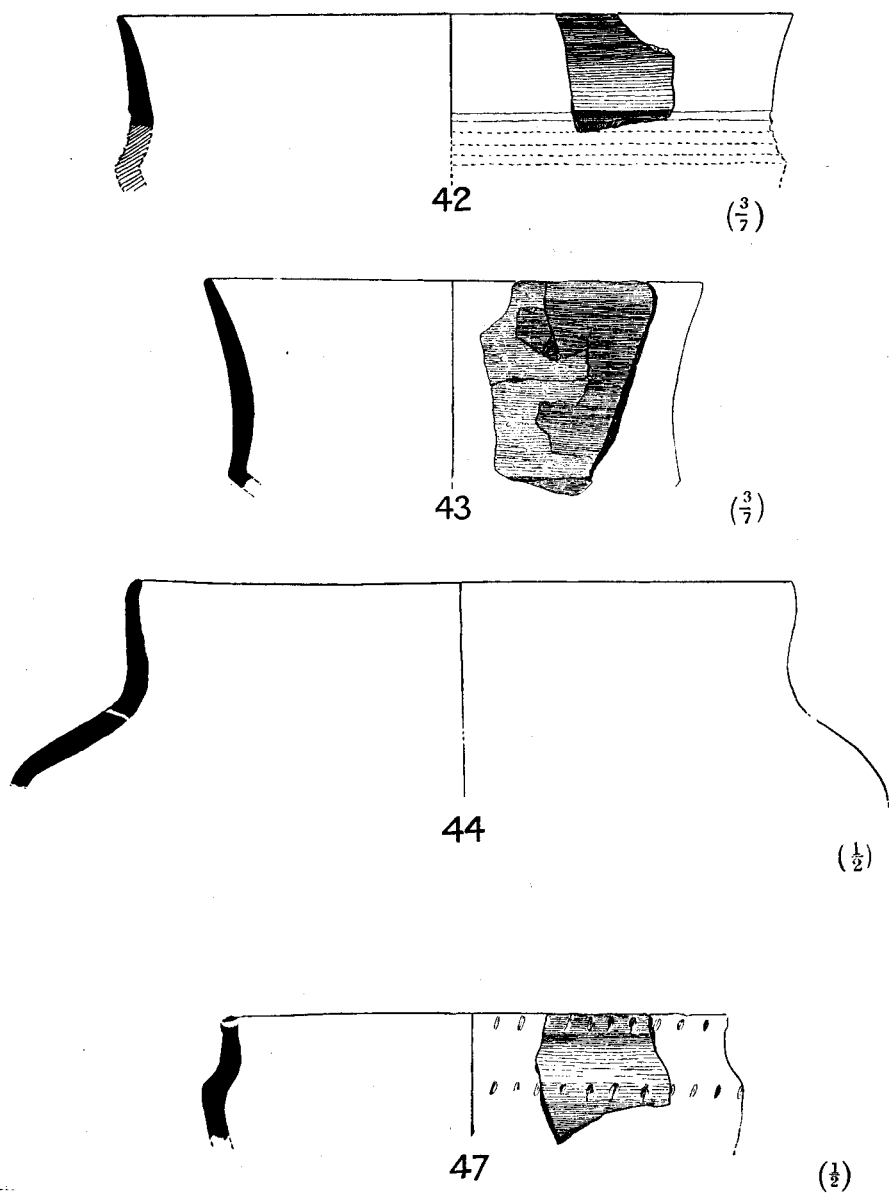


FIG. 3.

- II. *Stamped rosettes.* E.g. Nos. 24, 39-41. Evidently several different bone or wooden stamps were in use; there were also differing techniques. Thus the rosettes on No. 41, 46 and possibly 39 were stamped with a single blow; on the other hand the small triangular toothed impressions of No. 40 and the swags of No. 24 seem to have been applied one by one, while this is certainly true of No. 45. Stamped circular impressions are found at All Cannings (pl. 41, 4 and 47a, 6) and stamped circlets (pl. 47, 3; closely paralleled at Standlake, *Ant. Journ.* XXIII) but the distinctive technique at Blewburton is highly individual and specialised.
12. *Pendant swags.* The form and fabric (fired black with a glossy burnish) of No. 24 are typical of local A2 ware. But the pendant swags which hang from the stamped rosettes may be derived from early Iron Age B influence, and seemingly point to a suggestive example of hybrid¹ cultural connections. Although curvilinear tooling was used at All Cannings to enclose blocks of punch marks, arranged vertically, it never approached horizontal swagged ornament. Separated from the form, fabric, and context, the decoration in fact recalls the later and definitely "B" swags and circlets at Frilford, (*Oxoniensia*, IV, 22.) across the Vale of the White Horse. It is interesting to note that at All Cannings Cross, the decoration was also occasionally interrupted or broken off, as in Nos. 24 and 38, but the significance of this, if any, is not known.

FIG. 4. ($\frac{1}{1}$)

¹ One immediately thinks of the haematite-coated bowl with *incipient bead-rim* at Maiden Castle, Dorset, showing similar fusion of differentiated A and B strains on a single vessel, caught at, or soon after, the moment of cultural impact.

Highly burnished, rounded shoulder of A2 bowl (Fig. 5, No. 48). The upper row of stamps is unusual: roughly cruciform in shape and perhaps imprinted with a metatarsal sawn through at midshaft.

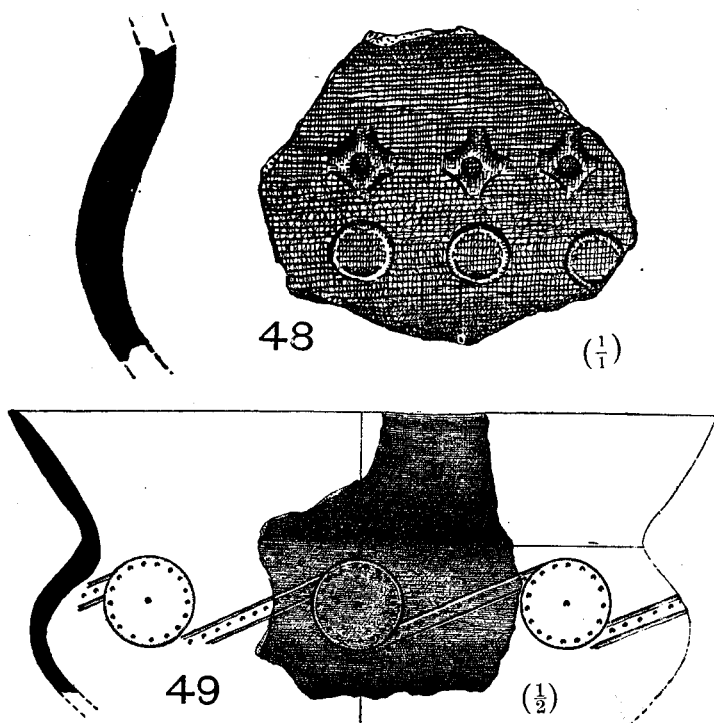


FIG. 5.

Smooth, brick red haematite-coated A2 bowl (Fig. 5, No. 49). The circles, incised *before* firing, are completely symmetrical and the punch marks filled with white inlay combine to create an effect of high craftsmanship. The decoration appears to be a stilted and embryonic rendering of the La Tene continuous spiral motif. The fusion of Iron Age A and B techniques proposed for No. 24 above is again suggested by this remarkable bowl. In this hypothesis, a native Iron Age A potter presumably selected the motif from the equipment of one of those marauding Marnian chieftains whose incursions and settlement began in the South about 250 B.C. The details of this process are only now being reconstructed with the aid of archaeological data, revealing one of the major historical events of the British Iron Age.