

THE EXCAVATION OF A MOUND NEAR CAESAR'S CAMP, EASTHAMSTEAD

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IN 1949 Mr. Felix Hilder of Crowthorne discovered a line of thirty-four small mounds, ranging between twelve and twenty-four feet in diameter, and running for almost two-thirds of a mile through the pine-woods near Caesar's Camp, Crowthorne.¹ The line is roughly parallel with the Upper Star Post Ride, which connects the southern entrance of Caesar's Camp with the Devil's Highway, the Roman road from London to Silchester. (Fig. 1).

In June 1949 one of these mounds was excavated by Mr. Hilder and Mr. A. E. P. Collins. Nine small pits containing charcoal and signs of burning were found on the inner edge of the ditch.² The charcoal was identified³ as oak (nineteen specimens) and beech (four specimens). No evidence of the date or purpose of the mound was discovered.

Their proximity to the Iron Age hill-fort at Caesar's Camp and the Romano-British settlement at Wickham Bushes, grandiloquently called 'The Town', together with the possibility that the Upper Star Post Ride was a Roman road (it is so marked on the Ordnance Survey map) led to the suggestion that they might be barrows, and comparison was made with the Danes' Graves group of La Tène barrows in Yorkshire. In 1960, during clearance for replanting, the group was bulldozed and only six at the northern end and three at the extreme south survived. It was following this destruction that the Wellington College Archaeological Society decided to excavate one of the remaining mounds in May 1963, under the writer's direction.

1963 Excavation

The mound chosen (the most northerly but one of the group at SU 866654) was about thirteen feet and six inches in diameter and two feet high, surrounded by a slight ditch (Fig. 2). The mound itself was formed of material from the ditch, with the old, black, topsoil and turves at the centre, covered by the clean, slightly gravelly, brown and silver sand which is the subsoil. The buried soil level was perfectly preserved and quite unbroken under the entire mound. The ditch, which was about fifteen inches deep and between two and three feet wide, was filled with a mixture of sand, ash and charcoal, covered with a fibrous topsoil formed of decayed bracken and pine needles.

Around the inner edge of the ditch was a series of pits. Eight survived but a ninth had probably existed in the S.W. quadrant where the roots of a tree had destroyed the stratification. They were of the same depth as the ditch and their filling, which was continuous with that of the ditch, was of ash and sand mixed with considerable quantities of charcoal. The sand into which they were dug was burnt pink, a feature which did not occur in the ditch except where immediately adjacent to the pits.⁴

¹Nat. Grid Ref. SU866654-SU871647.

²Photographs and notes in Reading Museum.

³At the Department of Geochronology of the London University Institute of Archaeology.

⁴The south-east quadrant of an adjacent mound (the northern-most of the group) was excavated in order to confirm the structural findings from Mound I. The structures were, in fact, identical, and one pit was discovered opening from the ditch.

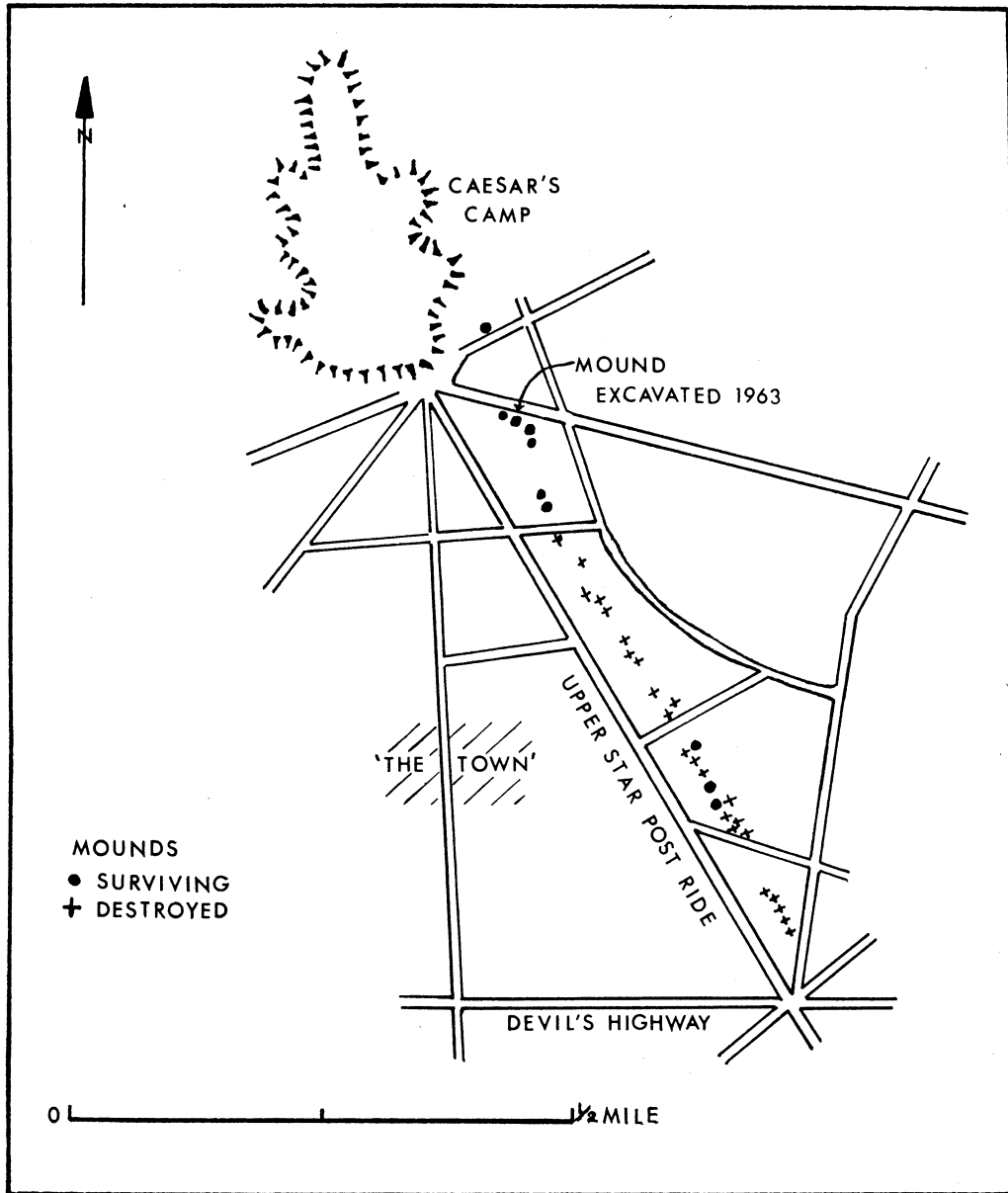


Fig. 1. Mounds near Caesar's Camp, Easthampstead

Dating and Purpose

Fragments of early nineteenth century, cream coloured, glazed pottery were found throughout the fill of Pit 1 and in the ditch in the north-east quadrant, and one piece was found stratified in the lowest layers of ash in Pit 2, thus dating the structure.¹

Their purpose is not obvious. The alignment on the Upper Star Post Ride is probably deliberate and the similarity between the three excavated examples indicates that they were all built to one design for a similar purpose. Presumably the ditch and pits are the functional parts and the mound is the spoil from them. The evidence of fire in all the pits suggests that they were built as hearths, but beyond this all is speculation. A suggestion that they are the remains of early nineteenth century military exercises was prompted by a series of redoubts in the area, but a thorough investigation by Major D. E. J. Pope (to whom the writer is most grateful) failed to produce any evidence for this theory and a great deal against it. In the absence of an alternative theory, and since their date precludes the customary resort to a ritual explanation, the question of their purpose must be left open.²

¹I am indebted to Mr. R. J. Charleston, Keeper, Department of Ceramics, Victoria and Albert Museum, for his opinion on these sherds. They are now in Reading Museum. (Accession no. 1738:64/1-3).

²Our thanks are due to the Crown Estate Office, Windsor, for permission to excavate, and to the

Master of Wellington College for obtaining this permission; to Messrs. Marnix Wells and Geoffrey Baber, who gave the original impetus for the work; to Mr. and Mrs. Peter Lewis, who organised the labour and equipment; and to the Director of Reading Museum for the loan of additional equipment.

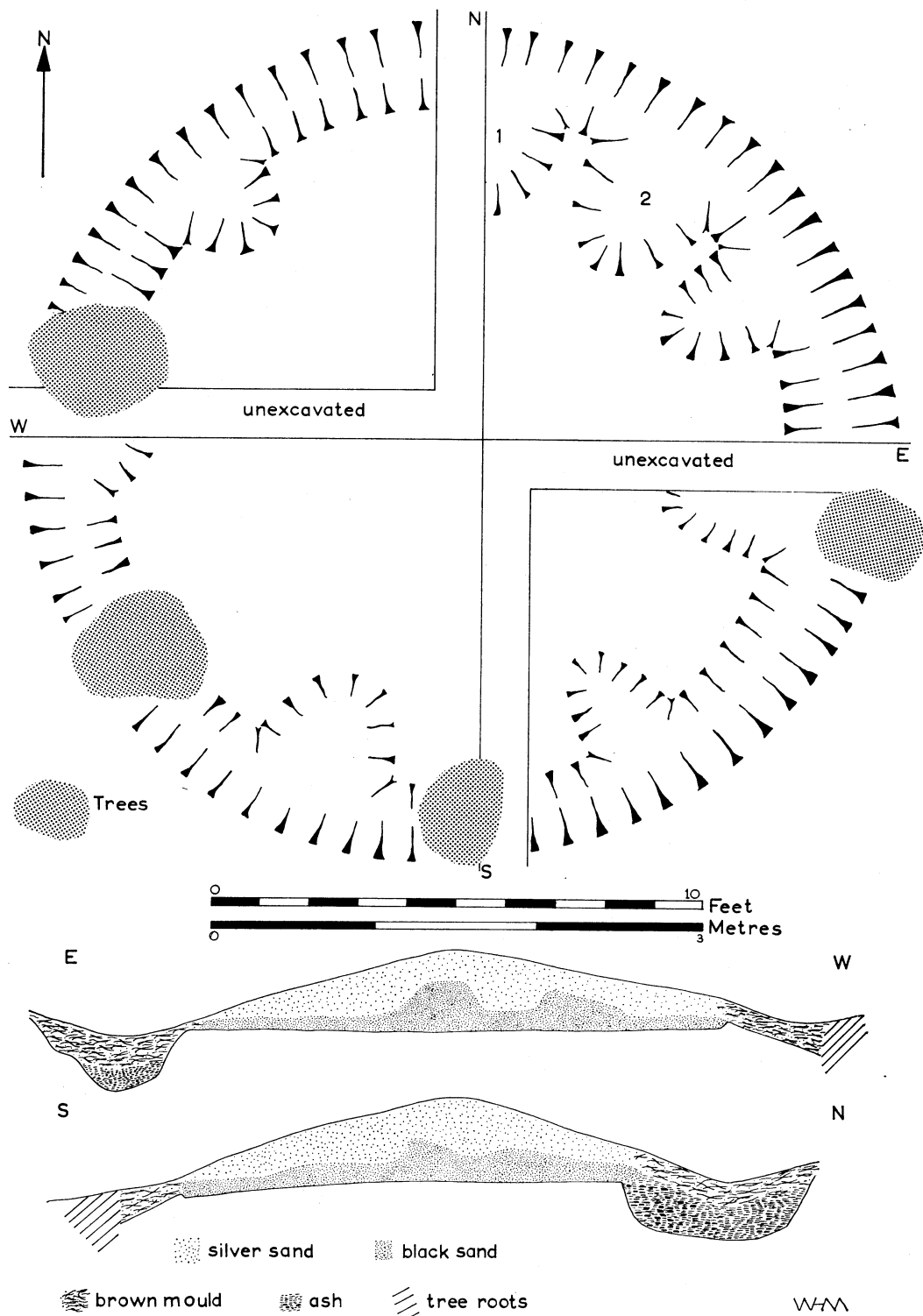


Fig. 2. Plan of mound near Caesar's Camp, Easthampstead