

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

OCTOBER 1936-DECEMBER 1937



VOLUME XXXVIII



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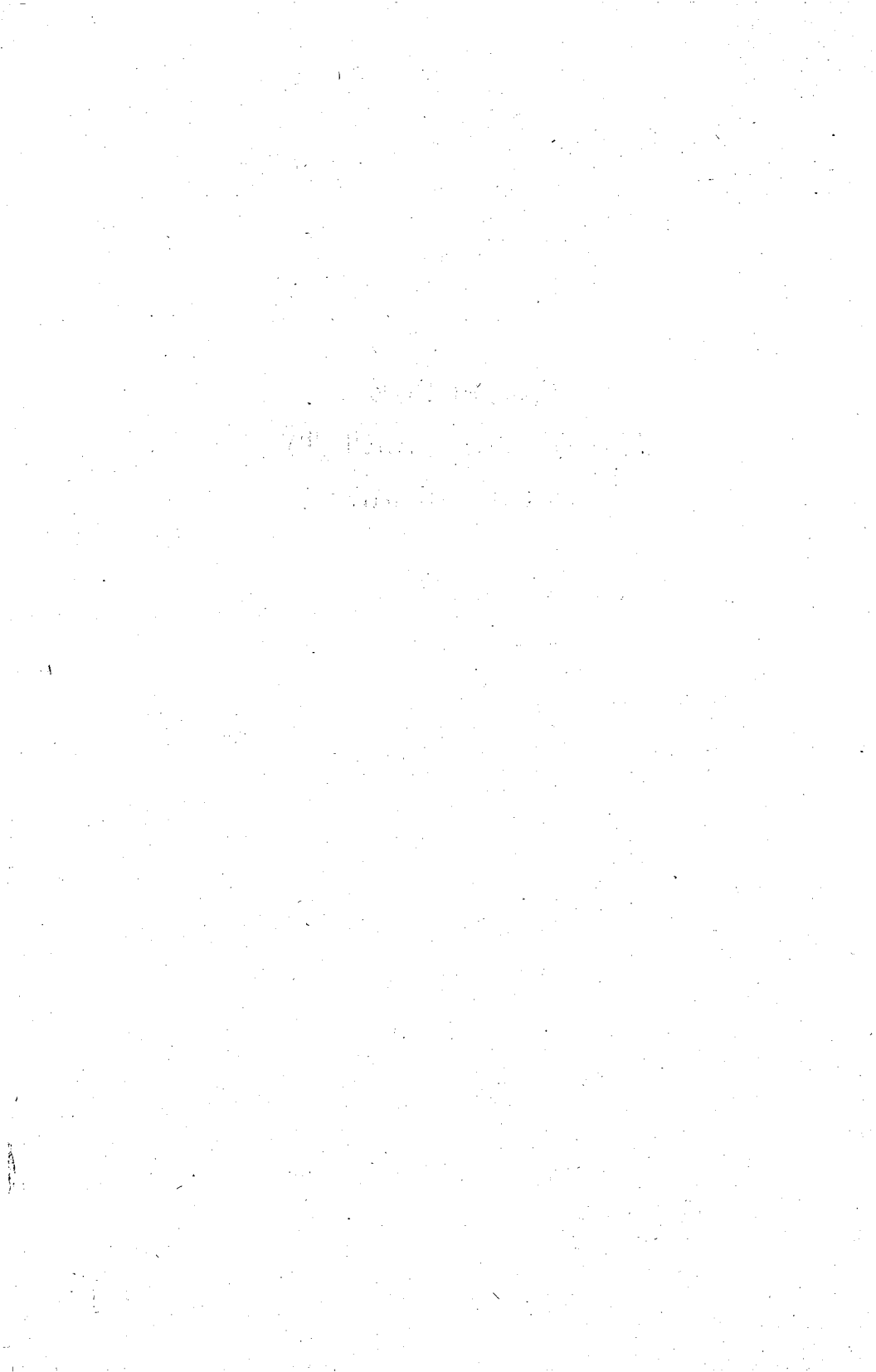
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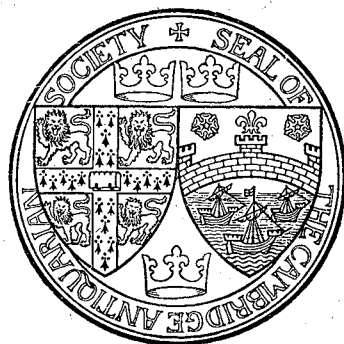
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A REPORT ON TRIAL EXCAVATIONS AT LIMLOW HILL, LITLINGTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

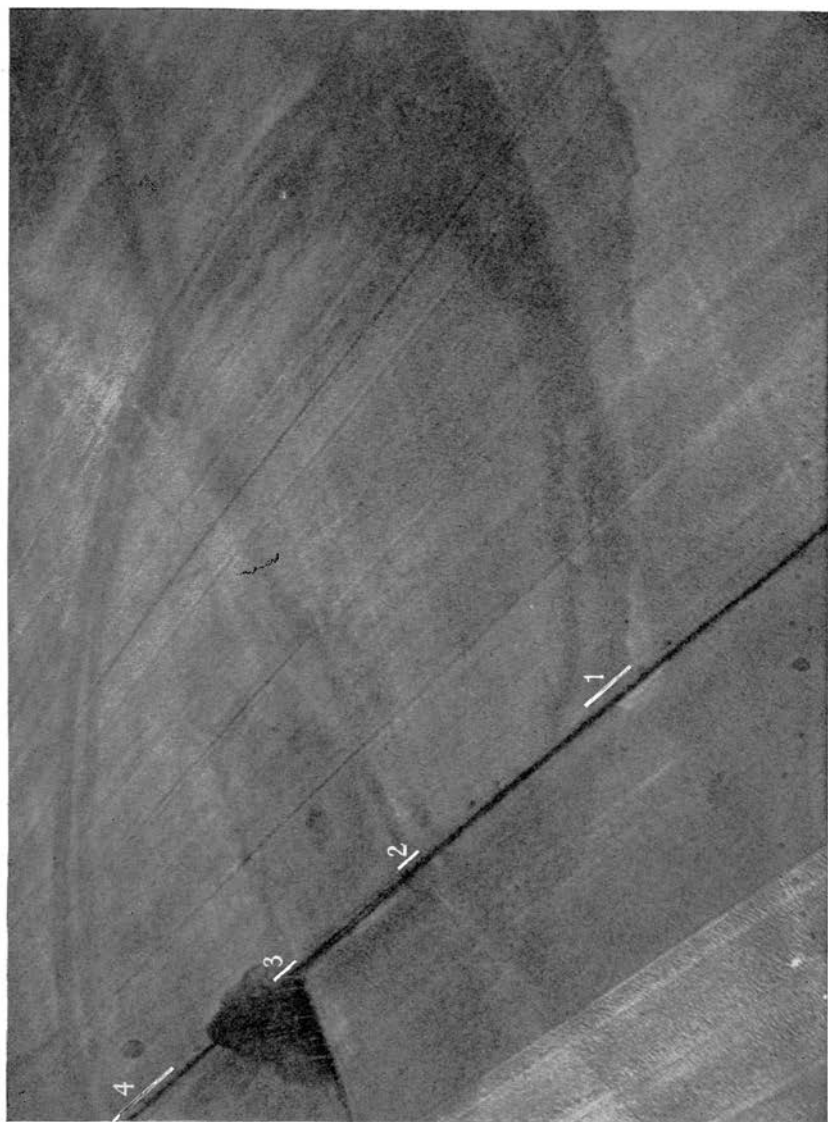
BY J. G. D. CLARK, M.A., PH.D., F.S.A.

THE excavations here described were prompted by the air-photograph reproduced on Pl. I. The photograph, which was taken in February 1934 by Major G. W. G. Allen, F.S.A., was first published by Mr O. G. S. Crawford, F.S.A. and it was his commentary¹ which attracted recent attention to the site. As long ago as 1921 suspicious markings had been noticed from the air and photographed, but the height from which they were taken was too great for details to be clearly visible.

Apart from slight traces of the round barrow, which until its destruction in 1888 was a prominent landmark, and the broad low banks of the headlands of the mediaeval open-field system, the observer on the ground would normally find no surface indications of the markings so well defined from the air.² The most striking of these are the triple bands encircling the hill, which Mr Crawford tentatively interpreted as a camp with single ditch and double rampart. The rarity of earthworks of the Early Iron Age in the county made it desirable to test the possibilities of this camp on Limlow Hill. Accordingly narrow trial trenches were cut parallel to the hedge at points calculated to section the ditch on either side of the copse. Since the photograph was taken from an oblique angle it was found difficult to calculate on the ground the position of the ditch on the eastern slopes of the hill, so a trench some 430 ft. in length was cut in order to avoid the possibility of error. It is noteworthy that the trench dis-

¹ *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* vol. II (1936), pp. 101-2 and Pl. XXV.

² Under the right conditions, however, the line of the ditch on the north of the hedge can be detected on the ground. Here the level of the ground has been lowered by quarrying. It was perhaps during this work that the first century graves, of which scanty records survive, were found.



Air-photograph of Limlow Hill

closed no trace of occupation within the area of the camp. In the event, hopes of a deep ditch with a silting rich in pottery were sadly disappointed. The sections (Fig. 1, nos. 1 and 4) disclose a ditch of such feeble proportions that it can only be regarded as a marking-out trench of a camp planned but never constructed. No archaeological material was obtained from the ditch. There is nothing to suggest from the photograph that the points at which the markings were sectioned were anything but typical of the whole.

That the makers of the Early Iron Age hill-forts of southern Britain marked out the outlines of their camps by a shallow furrow before excavating more deeply from a number of points on the circumference is well known. No better illustration of this could be found than the unfinished hill-fort at Ladle Hill, Hampshire, of which a fine air-photograph was published by Stuart Piggott a few years ago in *Antiquity*.¹ At Ladle Hill the work of construction had been carried well forward, but between the stretches of nearly completed rampart the remains of the original marking-out trench can be clearly seen. A possible explanation of the incipient camp at Limlow is that it represents either a belated effort on the part of dwellers on the Upper Cam Valley to construct a refuge against intruders pressing up the open chalk belt, or alternatively that the danger passed and the work was abandoned for that reason. To judge from the appearance of the air-photograph markings the "camp" on the neighbouring Hoy's Farm, also illustrated by Crawford,² may well be of the same nature. Lack of dating material from Limlow precludes any valid speculation as to the invasion against which the fortification of these sites may have been planned.

Attention was next turned to the large rectangular marking which shows up boldly in the air-photograph on the crown of the hill. Two sections cut parallel to the hedge revealed a flat-bottomed ditch some 24 ft. wide and 6½ ft. deep on the west and 21 ft. wide and 5½ ft. deep on the east. The ditch,

¹ *Antiquity*, vol. v (1931), pp. 474ff.; see especially Pl. I facing p. 478.

² *Op. cit.* Pl. XXVI.

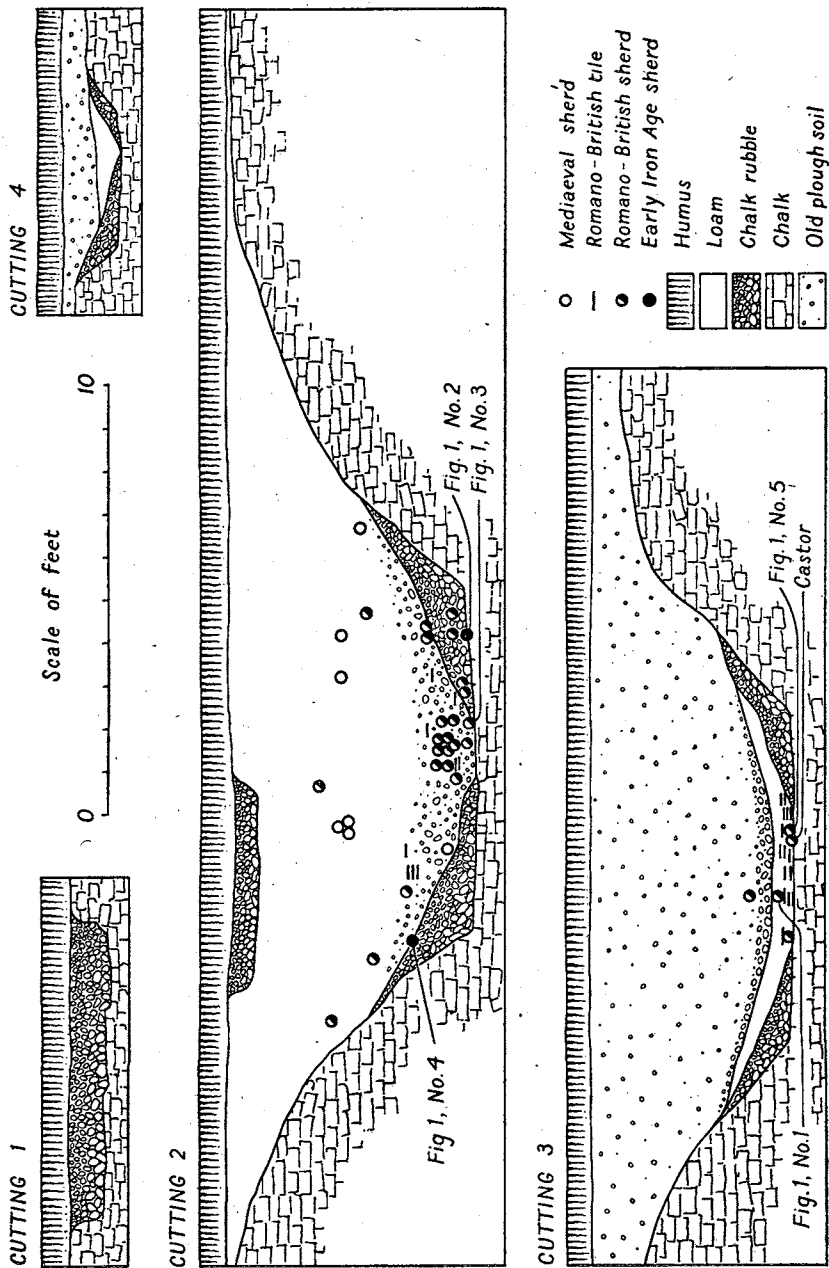


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic sections. Limlow Hill, 1937.

which defines a rectangular enclosure some 210 ft. across, was cut with care and regularity. A general view of cutting 2 is shown on Pl. II, in which the section of a footpath of rammed chalk is visible at the top of the loam infilling. The course of this path can be well seen from the air-photograph, which it crosses obliquely as a thin pale line. A gap in the hedge caused by use of this path was a useful guide in cutting the section. Cutting 2 showed rapid silt (chalk rubble) followed by slower silt with a strong solid admixture up to the natural angle of rest; thereafter the section showed a stoneless loam, in the middle of which mediaeval sherds occurred. In cutting 3 the rapid silting was followed by a loam band capped by rubble up to the natural angle of rest; in this case the remainder of the section consists of a homogeneous deposit of plough-soil from which no archaeological remains were obtained.

The ditch can be dated to the latter half of the second century A.D. by the following facts:

(a) Castor ware occurred in both sections on or near the floor which gives a minimum date in the middle of the second century.

(b) Sherds of layered texture, some containing shell grit, which occur in slower silting of cutting 2 and in the loam band of cutting 3 can be paralleled locally by an olla from the Guilden Morden cemetery, dating from the second century.

(c) "A" sherds from a "pie-dish" with convex sides in grey ware of a mid-second-century type were found on the floor of cutting 3 (Fig. 2, no. 5).

A rim-sherd from a late Belgic pot (Fig. 2, no. 2) found on the floor of cutting 2 under the rapid silting must have slipped from a higher level into the ditch when freshly cut. The rim-sherd of Early Iron Age "A" ware (Fig. 2, no. 4) must also be treated as derived. Apart from the sherds a considerable number of Roman tiles were found in both sections, on the floor and in the lower portions of the silting. The finds together with field drawings have been deposited in the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

Some clue as to the purpose of the enclosure can be found in its relationship to the round barrow, traces of which can be seen in its midst. From Hughes' account¹ it seems likely that the barrow belonged to that class of Roman barrows recently considered by Dunning and Jessup² and magnificently represented elsewhere in the Cambridge region by the Bartlow

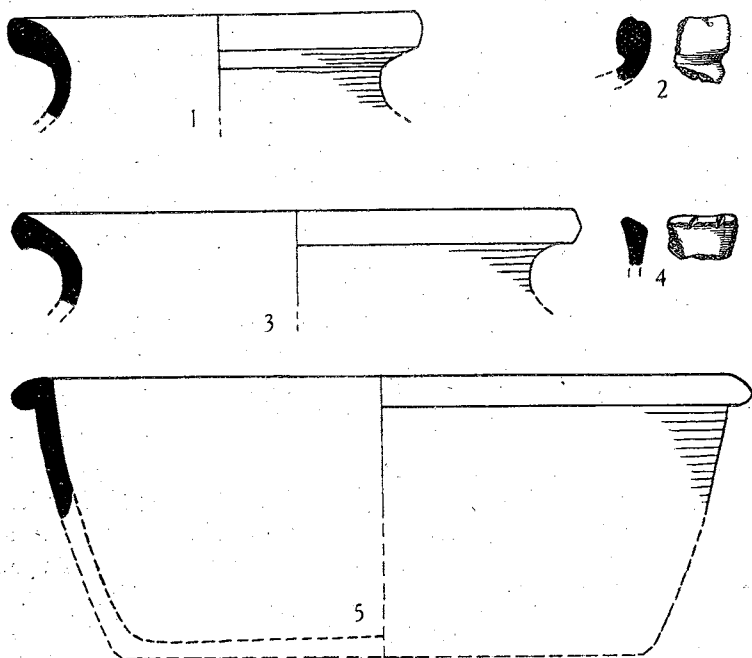


Fig. 2. Sherds from the ditch of the larger rectangular enclosure at Limlow. Nos. 2-4 from cutting 2; nos. 1 and 5 from cutting 3.

Hills. This is supported by the great height of the mound (18 ft.) in relation to its diameter (42 ft.) and is not contradicted by what was found during its removal, viz. a rectangular pit 4 ft. long by 2 ft. deep filled with large flints and an antler of red deer. It seems unlikely on general grounds that the barrow and the enclosure were constructed independently of one another, and there are indeed several

¹ *C.A.S. Comm.* vol. vi (1891), p. 395.

² *Antiquity*, vol. x (1936), pp. 37-53.



Limlow (1937): trial section (cutting 2) through the ditch of the larger rectangular enclosure

sound reasons for considering them as part of the same general scheme. We have seen that the pottery found in the silting of the ditch of the enclosure can be assigned with some probability to the second half of the second century A.D. Now it is precisely to the middle and latter half of the second century that Dunning and Jessup assign barrows of this type. The dating evidence available suggests that barrow and enclosure are substantially contemporary.

Further, it will not have escaped the attention of the reader that no account has yet been given of the disposal of the vast mass of material that must have been quarried from the ditch of the enclosure. Ploughing will do much to flatten banks, but it is inconceivable that all trace—even from the air—of the substantial ramparts which would have resulted from such a use of the material quarried from the enclosure ditch would have disappeared completely. This material must therefore be accounted for on other lines. If attention is now turned to the barrow one is at once faced by the converse question of how the vast bulk of material necessary for the erection of an 18 foot mound was obtained. It was evident to Hughes that the feeble ditch surrounding the barrow, traces of which in the form of a pale ring enclosing a dark patch [which itself probably marks the “rectangular pit”] can be seen on the air-photograph, could not have supplied more than a minute fraction of the material; indeed it was his opinion that the material from this ditch had been thrown outwards to form a slight outer bank. The conclusion seems inescapable that the material quarried from the enclosure ditch supplied the material for the barrow placed more or less symmetrically¹ within its area. This is moreover supported by Hughes’ observation that the material of the mound consisted “from top to bottom” of “rapid alternations of humus and chalk rubble in layers about 6 inches thick”, which is just what one would expect to find if the barrow had been constructed from material carried in small baskets. If this explanation is correct we must regard the large rectangular enclosure as supplying the material for and defining the precincts of a Roman barrow of the latter half of the second century A.D.

¹ The exact position of the barrow could be tested by excavation.

To establish the overall dimensions of the enclosure on the larger axis further sections would have to be cut. A distinct gap appears in the photograph in the middle of the ditch on the western side of the enclosure, but this requires testing by the spade. A smaller rectangular enclosure can also be seen on the air-photograph to the south of the larger one. This also could be tested by a future excavator. Finally, there is the problem of the burials mentioned by Fox,¹ which may indicate the presence on the hill-top of a cemetery of the first century A.D.

Best thanks are due to the Trustees of the Foster Estate and to Mr Towler, who farms the ground, for kind permission to dig, and to the Council of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society for providing the necessary funds. The writer also wishes to acknowledge the field assistance of his wife and of Mr S. S. Frere of Magdalene and the help of various kinds extended by the Society's Director of Excavations, Mr T. C. Lethbridge, F.S.A.

¹ *Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*, p. 190.

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