

## VII.

### EXCAVATIONS AT CHESTER HILL FORT, HUNDLESHOPE, IN MANOR PARISH, 1939. By Miss P. A. M. KEEF, F.S.A.Scot.

Chester Hill is one of a striking cluster of forts overlooking a dry valley of the Tweed in Manor Parish, two miles south of Peebles. It crowns a spur 1000 feet above sea-level of the great mass of Hundleshope Heights, which rise over 2000 feet high at the junction of the Manor Water and the Hundleshope-Haystoun valley.

"Chester Hill, Hundleshope, . . . is strong by nature, as the spur on which it stands is somewhat isolated, and the slopes from it on three sides are long and steep."<sup>1</sup> The fourth side is the ridge which connects it with the main hill. The Fort itself occupies an oval flattening in the ridge. This flattening is accentuated by apparently deliberate levelling. Its area is 76 acres, and below it the ridge falls away in three narrow terraces before the final steep slope to the valley. In the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* it is described as occupying "a commanding site on a steep conical eminence nearly a mile distant from the entrenchments we have described. The fortifications consist of loose stones piled upon each other and within the last 20 years were upward of 5 ft. high." A mediæval hoard of coins was found near the Fort.<sup>2</sup> The Fort is well situated just above the cultivable boulder clay of the valley, and on soil that would maintain mountain sheep. Lead mines lie on the further side of Hundleshope Heights.

The only signs of defences before excavation were a few low irregular banks standing less than 2 feet high, except in a few places where the natural rock rises up, giving the appearance of walls. No ditches were visible at

<sup>1</sup> Christison, in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. xxi. p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> O.S. map.

*Plan of*  
**CHESTER HILL FORT**  
**HUNDLESHOPE**  
 NEAR  
**PEEBLES**

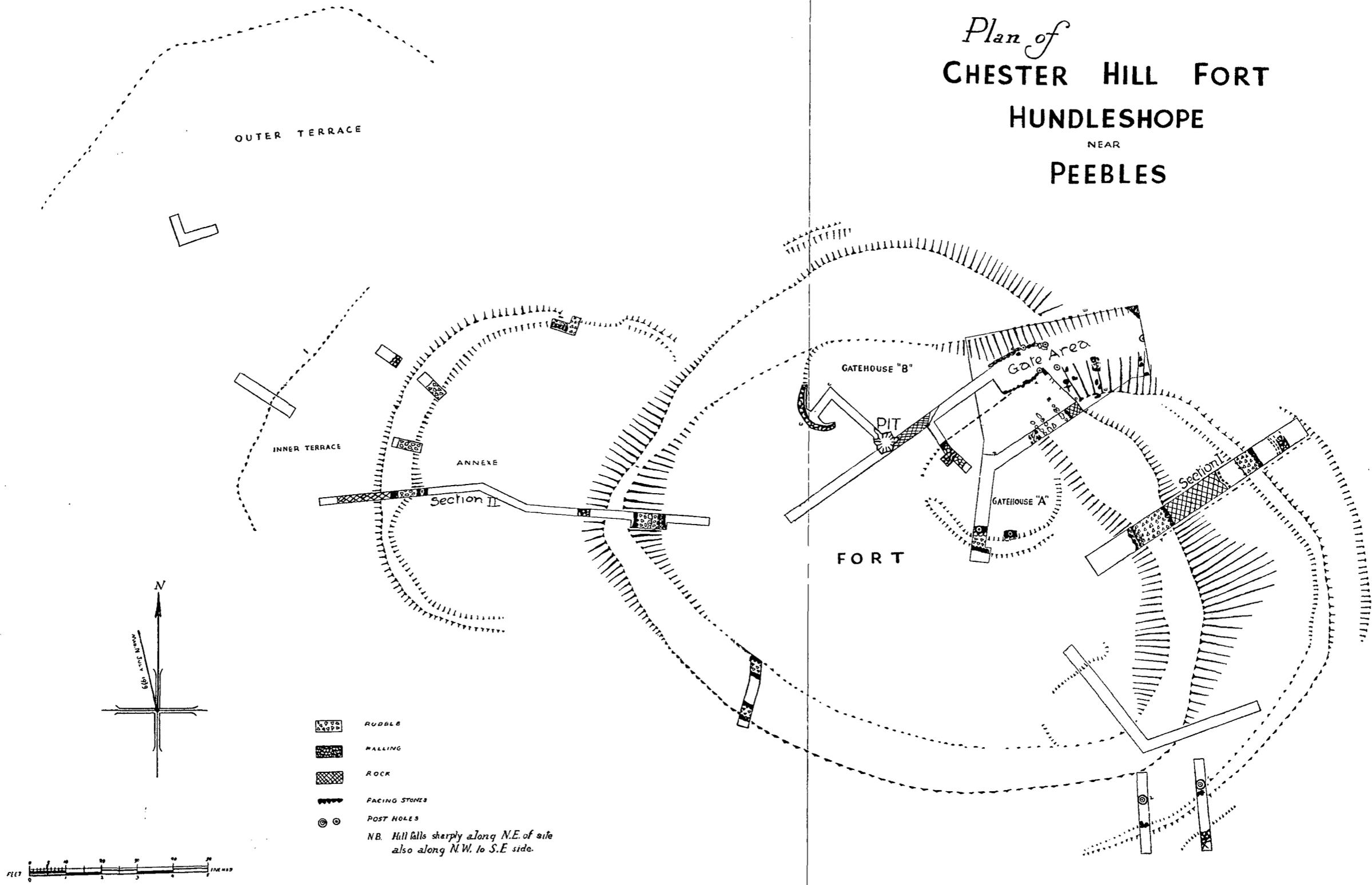


Fig. 1. Plan of Chester Hill Fort.

all, nor the outermost rampart wall. On the other hand, two huts and two gatehouses were clearly marked by banks. On the side of the steepest slope no surface indication of a rampart existed. A hole, thought at first to be only the result of stone-digging, turned out on excavation to be a drainage pit. The site was occupied by a pine wood, which seriously complicated the excavation. The curious shapes and positions of the

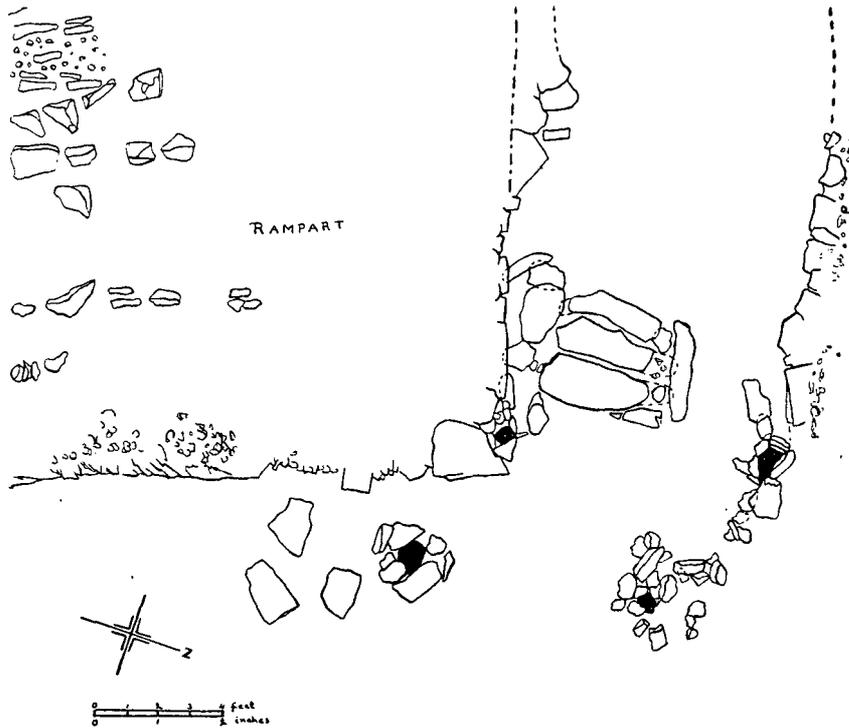


Fig. 2. Chester Hill Fort: enlarged plan of gate area.

excavated area, as shown in the plan (fig. 1), are due to the position of trees, and many problems had to be left unsolved as trees were growing in critical places.

Operations were directed to determine the arrangement of the entrance, the position of which was superficially visible, the structure of the defences, and of the huts inside the main enclosure. The rampart, and floors of an annexe on the west, and of terraces beyond it, were also examined.

*Entrance.*—The entrance (fig. 2) was clearly marked by a gap in the rampart on the east. At the gateway the rampart was robbed down to the foundations. It was apparently formed of a rubble core revetted inside and out with large stones, which were found at places appropriate for such facings. The entrance passage through the rampart is faced on the south

side with large irregular stones arranged with the flat side outwards (Pl. XIV, 1, 2), while the core itself is tied with large bond stones in the manner of a modern dry-stone dyke. This revetment stood 4 feet high, the best piece of walling exposed. The revetment terminates on the east in a massive corner-stone, a boulder of igneous rock, foreign to the site, so arranged that a groove on its face (perhaps artificially deepened) provides additional support for the gate-post. The socket for this gate-post (Pl. XIV, 4) lies immediately to the north of the corner-stone.<sup>1</sup> It is framed with interlocking stones, one of which extends under the rampart revetment so that its weight holds down all the stones. The interspaces between them are occupied with wedge-stones, driven in after the others were in place, to secure them in accordance with a system still current in the district under the local name of "pegging." The corresponding post-hole on the north side of the gate is made in the same way, but is deeper (Pl. XIV, 5). Two slabs found superimposed immediately behind the post-hole seem to represent the counterpart of the monolithic corner-stone.

Another pair of post-holes was discovered east of the foregoing and not continuing the line of the fairway through the ramparts, *i.e.* turning sharply to the right instead (Pl. XIV, 3). These post-holes are shallower than the inner ones, and the stones framing them are not interlocked, though one is pegged. As shown in the plan, a hornwork built out from the rampart on the north side of the gate connects the outer post-holes with the inner.

The fairway between the gate-posts is 9 feet wide, and is not cobbled, but made of trodden earth<sup>2</sup> with a few flat stones in it. Across the threshold were found inset in their original position three flat slabs 5 feet long (Pl. XIV, 2) of local stone.<sup>3</sup> They had been placed side by side, with their length across the gate, and, when lifted, turned out to be 1 foot thick. Nothing was found under them. At their north end they were all tied down by a billet-shaped stone across their whole width.<sup>4</sup> To the south the paving was continued by a series of small stones, laid touching one another, and a final slab that partly underlies the south wall. The three threshold slabs are interlocked like the stones framing the post-holes. Thus the wall's weight keeps the slabs in place.

The road up to the gateway was traced in two trial trenches dug outside the entrance. At each cut it proved to be 9 feet wide, and its surface was of trodden subsoil. In both trial trenches it ran in a hollow between the

<sup>1</sup> When found this post-hole was covered with a rock splinter and the hole itself left empty, suggesting that it had been deliberately slighted.

<sup>2</sup> The local subsoil becomes compacted under pressure, giving a hard surface suitable for paths and floors.

<sup>3</sup> Millstone grit.

<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that the gate itself stood over these slabs, the presence of which would prevent illegal entry by digging under the gate.



1. View through gate (represented by pole) into camp interior.



4. Enlarged view of south inner gate post-hole.



2. Gate area, showing original walling, threshold slabs, and south inner gate post.



5. Inner gate post-hole, north side.



3. South outer gate post-hole.

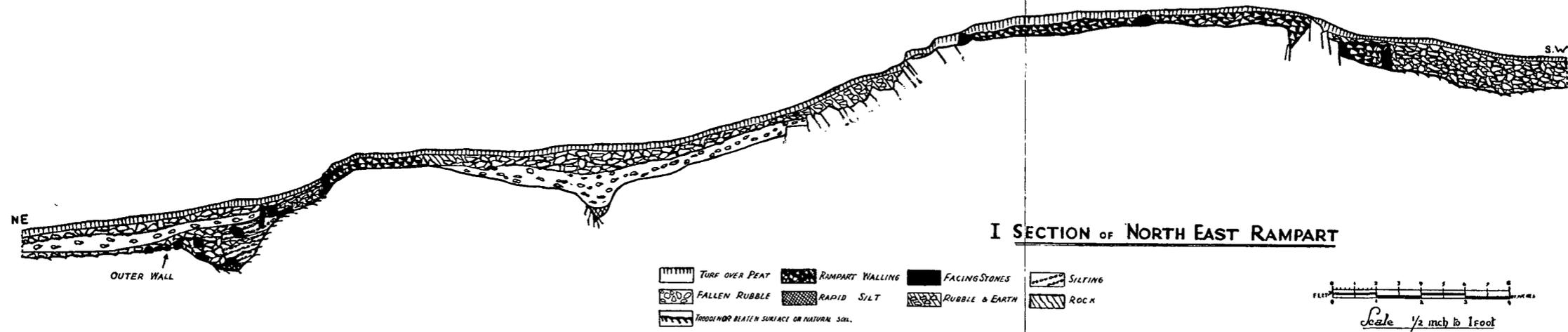


Fig. 3. Chester Hill Fort: Main and Outer Ramparts.

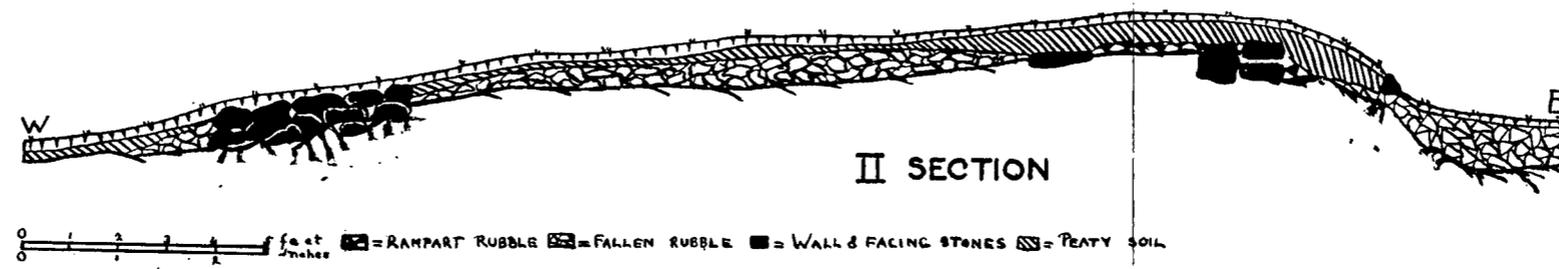


Fig. 4. Chester Hill Fort: Main South-west Rampart.

overlap of the north rampart and the ends of the defences of the east rampart. The width of the crossing over the ditches could not be determined in the time available.

The road approaches the gateway obliquely, mounting steadily till at the gate it turns sharply to the left and levels out, rising again as it enters the camp. It was difficult to follow the road inwards beyond this point, as trees were growing close together over all the suspected line, but its continuation may be defined by a wall running side by side with the wall of gatehouse A (see plan), and seeming to carry on the line of the south revetment of the gateway.

*Defences.*—South of the gate the defences were found to consist of an inner rampart 20 feet wide, a rock-cut ditch, an outer rampart, and an outer ditch dug in the subsoil with a free-standing wall beyond it.

The inner rampart, reduced to footing-stones, consists of a rubble core with built faces. The inner face follows a rock ridge that has been quarried away to enhance the height of the face. The latter seems to be double. The outer face is set back 4 feet from the edge of the outer ditch. The inner ditch has been almost entirely cut in the solid rock by splitting the stone along natural cleavage planes, leaving jagged edges (fig. 3). The outer rampart has been built on an earth surface. Its inner face, if any, had been entirely robbed, but, on the outside, a wall of large stones supported a rubble core. Between this revetment and the inner lip of the outer ditch is a berm 4 feet wide on which lay stones that had presumably slipped from the rampart. In the bottom of the outer ditch were found lying big stones from the face of the outer rampart and the outside wall. These lay on a small deposit of rapid silt that had accumulated while the defences were in use. Beyond the ditch were traces of a counter-scarp wall, represented only by footings consisting of large, carefully chosen stones, most of which had been pushed back into the ditch about the same time as the facing-stones from the outer rampart. Doubts as to the existence of the wall were, in fact, only removed after it had been found again, better preserved, in the section in the south corner (see fig. 1).

On the south-west, the main or inner rampart was tested in two places (figs. 4, 1). Prolonging the central trench southward we exposed an area of rock, studded at intervals with large stones, the southward of which should represent the south-west rampart, but this was here too far ruined for the construction to be discernible. To clear up the question the adjoining trench was extended southward, and here the rampart was quite clear, standing three courses high and 5 feet wide. Eight feet further south we exposed the footings of a second wall, also 5 feet wide. The earth in the space between the walls has been trodden hard. It was covered with a thin layer of rubble. We found no ditch outside this rampart, but the hill slopes steeply down beyond it. A second strip of

rampart was exposed outside the first, but only the foundations of the rubble core survived.

Further west the same rampart was exposed in a trench dug to determine the nature of the Fort's floor. Here the floor consisted of trodden subsoil and sloped up towards the rampart as in the east. As there, the rampart rested on the rock and was about 10 feet wide. It consisted of a rubble core faced on both sides with large stones. Outside this face compacted subsoil sloped steeply down to the annex floor, the slope being covered with a layer of rubble. At the point where the slope reached the annex floor another wall was found running parallel to the rampart at the top. It was built of large irregularly shaped stones, set about 9 inches deep in the earth. In two places handfuls of subsoil had been put between the stones, like mortar. Outside this rampart no trace of a ditch could be found, though two trial trenches were sunk in the annex to look for one.

In the south-east corner of the Fort a trial trench disclosed a platform of rubble standing slightly above the general level of the camp floor, but thinning out as the rock rose to its surface. Where the rubble packing ended trodden earth appeared.

At this point was a layer of rubble which began inside the line where the rampart would be expected, but continued outward, roughly to where the rampart's outer face would have been. No facing stones, however, came to light. Continuing the trial trench south-east beyond the presumed face we exposed a trodden earth surface. On it, just beyond the presumed rampart, we found two heaps of fallen rubble, and beyond these a cobbled surface. The heaps and cobbling occupied the area where the inner ditch was to be expected, but no ditch was traceable. Owing to standing trees this trench could not be continued in the usual way to the position of the outer defences: instead, two trial trenches were dug 18 feet further south. The more northerly of these exposed a narrow outer rampart and a tiny ditch beyond it. Beyond this ditch was a well-built free standing wall slightly sunk in the earth, with earth between the stones like mortar. A similar outer rampart was exposed in the southerly of these two trial trenches, but no ditch. Two large post-holes, dug after the erection of the outer rampart, were encountered (see plan, S.E. corner). The first hole had been dug into the rampart bank on the inner side, down to the solid rock. The second post-hole was pegged, and lay not directly behind the bank, but on the line of the inner ditch; not however in the filling of that ditch, for we found no trace of a ditch in this section. In both post-holes the soil was black and contained charcoal, as in the annex.

*Interior.*—A trial trench across the main Fort floor from the gateway showed that the open floor of the Fort was carefully levelled and drained. The rock was levelled away where it was too high, and was built up with earth where necessary. This levelling terminated in a row of set stones

just above the pit or drainage sump that lies a few yards inside the gateway. On the gateway side of the pit the rock came to the surface and divided the incoming roadway, so that the main road turns to the left on entering the gate from one side.

The sump was cut 4 feet deep into the rock and was square-bottomed. It lies at the lowest point of the Fort interior. At first it was thought to be some sort of cistern—and no doubt, if it was urgently needed, a skin lining would convert it into something that would serve the purpose—but as it was not found lined with clay, nor was it a spring, it seems more likely that it was a drainage sump for rain-water. In that capacity it acted splendidly, for during the week that the guardhouse and hut floors were open, though the weather was rather wet, the water never stood on these floors, nor did the Fort floor become swampy, but the water seeped into the drainage pit. The pit was found filled with soil of one colour that appears to have washed in over a small amount of rapid silt. The rock in which the pit was cut, and the rock between it and the roadway, was very much weathered and split as though by frost. Two ruined huts within the Fort seemed on investigation not to be ancient.

*Gatehouses.*—The wall of gatehouse A was robbed down to the footings. Its plan was roughly circular. The wall was reinforced on the inner face by post-holes set at intervals of about 9 feet. The earthen floor comes up to the posts. No trace of a central post-hole was found, nor of a hearth. Gatehouse B balances gatehouse A on the north. It was partly excavated in the rock; only the footings of wall remained in a few places and no post-holes were observed in the walls, nor hearth. The wall was partly founded on the rock, which slopes away towards the sump. No wall interrupts this slope, and a rock gully leads down into the sump, presumably to keep the floor dry.

*Annex.*—The floor of the area thus labelled, as revealed by a long trial trench, was of trodden earth. The rampart bounding the area rested on the rock, and was of the same width as the main inner rampart. An inner revetment face was exposed in this section and at the north-west corner. Below the revetment the natural rock sloped downwards, and was covered with a thin layer of rubble in which some large stones were set. No wall was observed at the base of this slope, nor yet any ditch, but the terrace below showed traces of occupation, *i.e.* a patch of cobbled surface. On the west the annex rampart had evidently been disturbed and was therefore not examined, but it may mark the site of a gateway. The small trial trenches revealed the rubble of the rampart only here.

*Inner Terrace.*—Outside the annex trial trenches revealed a cobbled surface of subsoil extending from the edge of the annex rampart. This cobbling continued to the edge of the terrace, where the rock outcropped and sloped down to the outer terrace. In the main trench we uncovered a

wall constructed like the top wall of the annex rampart. In both trenches there was dark ashy earth over the cobbling, suggesting occupation.

*Finds.*—No finds were made in the whole excavation, with the exception of two specimens of the mineral, crocoite or lead chromate, found at the gateway and at the east end of the Fort amongst rubble in both places, and unstratified.

*Beacon.*—Ninety feet south up the ridge from the Fort was a circular depression in the ground. It had the appearance of a sunk hut floor. One would think some look-out post would be necessary on that spot, as from there, and from there only, a clear view can be obtained both of the Fort interior and the ridge. However, two cross trial trenches disclosed no walling round the hollow and no flooring. The depression had been sunk into the rock, and the rock itself showed signs of having been very extensively burnt, in places to several inches below the surface. No remains of any industry were found. The inference is, I think, that the place had been used as a beacon. A fire there would be seen by the forts across the Tweed Valley, but would be invisible across the Border.

But there was nothing to connect this beacon pit with the Fort. Fire on such a large scale could only have been used before the planting of the trees in the early nineteenth century. The beacon may occupy the site of a little guard hut or something of the sort, and have burnt out all traces of the earlier building. On the other hand, it is tempting to postulate Chester Hill Fort as the fortified dwelling of the beacon tenders.

*Conclusion.*—There was no object found that could be dated. However, we were able to see exactly how the camp had been built, and were able to consider it of the Scottish Iron Age, probably after the arrival of the Romans in Britain. The place was roughly circular, and had a double rampart round three-quarters; on the fourth quarter were the bottom stones of a rampart, but, as there was no fallen stone at all, I do not think that it was ever finished—especially as, outside it, ran very large holes for posts. Of these we only had time to find two, but there was no doubt of their direction. The only earth we found containing ash or charcoal was outside the walls, on a natural terrace below. The earth inside the camp was quite clean. I was forced to think that the place, being on a hilltop, was built quickly at the approach of some enemy; that the walls could not be finished in time and so the fence, represented by post-holes, was built at that point instead; also that it was put out of action by the enemy, as we found the gateway filled up with stones right down to the entering road surface, showing that it had been filled with stones while it was still in use, and the main post-holes slighted. The gateway was in a very good state of preservation.

Edgerston Fort, in the same neighbourhood, shows post-holes along the interior wall face of huts, like Chester Hill's gatehouse A.

The excavation of Chester Hill Fort was undertaken in connection with a regional survey of the Manor Water district. Another type of dwelling-site, of presumably different date, was investigated at the same time by Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, M.A., F.S.A.Scot.

For permission to excavate I should like to thank the owner of the site, Sir Duncan Hay, Bart., of Haystoun. The grant of money made for the enterprise by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland I am most grateful for. It was supplemented from private sources, which prefer to remain anonymous but to whom I am no less grateful. I should like to express my indebtedness to the volunteers for their gallant help in all weathers, especially to those who came a great distance to assist us. I must acknowledge also the enthusiasm of the workmen employed on the site.

The plan of the site was most kindly undertaken by Mr A. H. A. Hogg, M.A., A.M.I.C.E., and Mr S. Cruden, M.A., F.S.A.Scot. For advice and information I must thank Dr Steer and the late Mr Edwards. Professor Childe kindly read this paper.