

EXCAVATIONS ON THE WREKIN, SHROPSHIRE, 1939

By KATHLEEN M. KENYON

The British tribe of the Cornovii had in Roman times its capital at Viroconium Cornoviorum, on the River Severn, about 5 miles south-east of Shrewsbury. Viroconium was founded first as a legionary camp, and it was shown in the excavations of 1936-7¹ that the lay-out of the civil town dates only from the Flavian period, when the legionary headquarters were transferred to Chester. It was suggested in the report of these excavations that it was only at that period that the Cornovii were transferred from their prehistoric capital to the riverside site. The only prehistoric site of any magnitude in the neighbourhood was the dominating one of the Wrekin, some 3½ miles away, and it thus seemed probable that the earlier history of the Cornovii must be sought there.

Excavations were therefore undertaken under the auspices of the Society of Antiquaries and the Shropshire Archaeological Society, and a preliminary season's work of five weeks was carried out in 1939. The inception of the scheme owes everything to the enthusiasm and financial support of Sir Charles Marston, F.S.A., President of the Shropshire Archaeological Society, and to him I would like to express my sincere gratitude. Lord Barnard, the owner of the site, most kindly gave permission for the work to be carried out, and the thanks of all archaeologists are due to him for allowing this important site to be examined. The late Mr. J. A. Morris, Vice-Chairman of the Shropshire Archaeological Society, was as usual deeply interested in undertakings to elucidate the archaeology of the county, and gave invaluable help in the arrangements on the spot. A large band of volunteers, mostly students of the Institute of Archaeology, assisted in the excavations, to all of whom I am most grateful. I would like especially to thank Mr. A. G. Buchanan, who was responsible for the survey, Mr. Edwin Birchenough and Mr. A. L. Sockett, who were present throughout the excavations, and Miss Vivienne Catleugh, who was in charge of the commissariat of the camp.

The Wrekin is a striking hogs-back shaped hill, rising steeply from a plain at a level of about 400 ft. to 1,335 ft. at the summit, the gradient on the long sides being something like 1 in 2½, with a more gradual, but still steep slope at each end (pls. I and II A). Shropshire is divided roughly into two halves by the great

¹ *Archaeologia*, lxxxviii.

curve of the Severn as it swings round from the west from its sources in the Welsh Mountains to its north-south route to the Bristol Channel (fig. 5). North of it, and also to the east after the turn, the country is comparatively low, and though not flat, with few high hills. South and west of it, Wenlock Edge, the Church Stretton Hills, and the Forest of Clun form the outlying spurs of the Welsh uplands, and are essentially part of the Welsh Marches. The Wrekin lies immediately north of the Severn just before it turns south, about a mile and three-quarters from the river at the nearest point, and in fact forms the last projecting spur before the plain is reached, cut off from the parent mass by the deep valley of the Severn. The fact that the hill belongs to the upland zone is emphasized by the contrast in view to north and south as one stands on the summit. The history of its occupation is however undoubtedly affected by the way in which it dominates the surrounding lowland country, and one would expect to find in its history indications of the conflict between the two zones.

The summit of the hill is encircled by two main systems of fortification, each in themselves multiplied in parts (Plan, fig. 1.) Along the steep sides of the hill the two systems are close together, but on the spine of the hill at each end, the outer system is advanced considerably beyond the inner, and the entrances lie on these lines. The inner system consists of a main rampart on the crest of a steep slope of rock which was in part natural and was in part steepened by the cutting of a scarp at its foot, with a ledge or low bank on its outer side. This rampart only survives as a low mound along most of its length, but increases considerably in height at each end (pl. II B), where it turns across the spine of the hill to form the entrances. At these points there are ditches outside, with slight counter-scarps beyond. The ditches die out as they curve round to meet the steep slope of the hill. The entrances through this rampart at each end have both well-marked in-turns, with surface indications of guardrooms opening off the passage-ways.

The outer ramparts survive mostly only as flattened terraces with steep slopes outside, though at the north-east entrance they again rise considerably higher. Even more than the inner ones, they make use of all the natural features of the hill, and run out to meet a series of rocky spurs at various points. For the greater part of both sides there are two of these terraces, but the lower one was apparently omitted in the stretch adjoining the Needle's Eye, a rocky outcrop near the south-east end, and in a short stretch on the west side, in both cases possibly because the steepness of the hill made it unnecessary. The

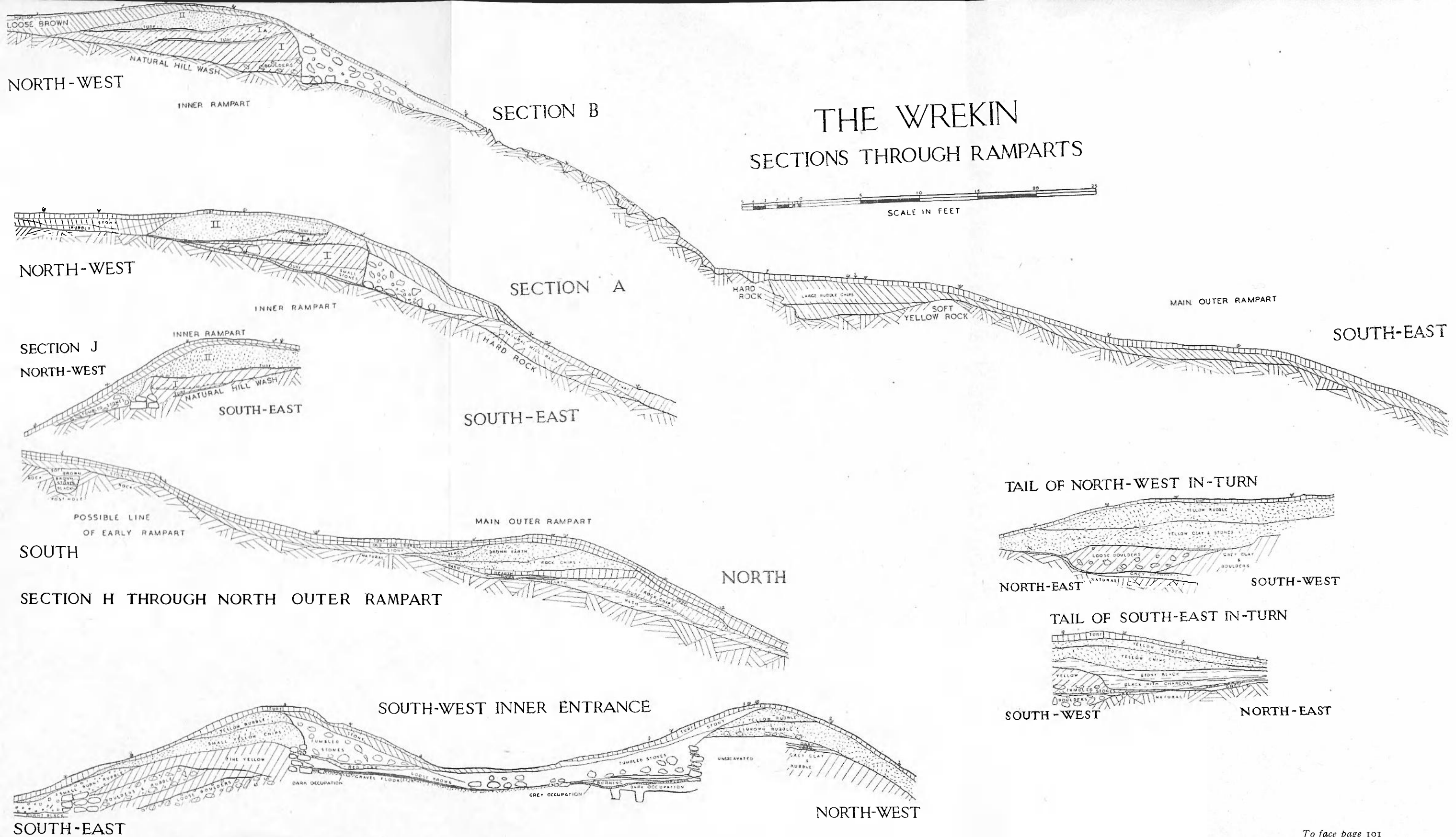


FIG. 2.

entrance at the north-east end has a very long in-turn, while that at the south-west has only slightly bulbous ends to the banks.

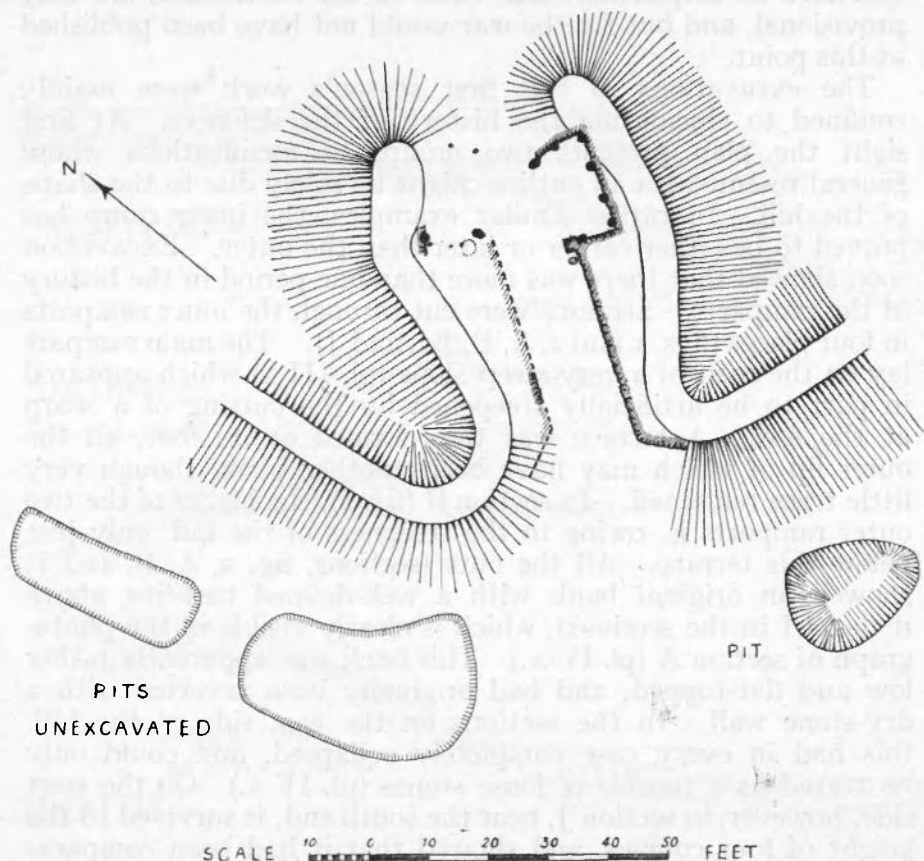
The excavations were planned for two seasons' work, and those of 1939 were intended only to be introductory. It must therefore be emphasized that most of the conclusions are only provisional, and but for the war would not have been published at this point.

The excavations in this first season's work were mainly confined to elucidating the history of the defences. At first sight the plan presents two groups of fortifications whose general resemblance in outline might be solely due to the shape of the hill. In rather similar examples, the inner camp has proved to be either earlier or later than the outer. Excavation soon showed that there was more than one period in the history of the ramparts. Sections were cut through the inner ramparts in four places (figs. 1 and 2, A, B, B2, and J). The main rampart lay on the crest of a very steep slope (pl. III A) which appeared in part to be artificially steepened by the cutting of a scarp at the foot. A terrace was thus formed at its foot, on the outer lip of which may have been another bank, though very little trace remained. In section B (fig. 2), the higher of the two outer ramparts is, owing to the steepness of the hill, only just below this terrace. All the cuts (sections, fig. 2, A, B, and J) showed an original bank with a well-defined turf-line above it (level I in the sections), which is clearly visible in the photograph of section A (pl. IV A.) This bank was apparently rather low and flat-topped, and had originally been revetted with a dry-stone wall. In the sections on the east side of the hill, this had in every case completely collapsed, and could only be traced as a tumble of loose stones (pl. IV A.) On the west side, however, in section J, near the south end, it survived to the height of four courses, and showed that it had been comparatively well built of straight-faced blocks (pl. IV B.)

In two of the sections, A and B, there was a second turf-line above a slight addition of material (shown as Ia in the sections), made apparently while the wall was still standing. This therefore does not represent an essentially separate phase, but level II does. This was the addition of a considerable quantity of rubbly material on top of the old bank, and overlying the collapsed revetment, as was clearly shown in section J. This addition thus represented a change in technique, a bank with rounded contours with presumably a palisade or wall towards its summit being substituted for a vertical-faced bank. There was no quarry ditch at the back for either period, and the

material for the bank was apparently gathered from the loose surface soil of the hill-side.

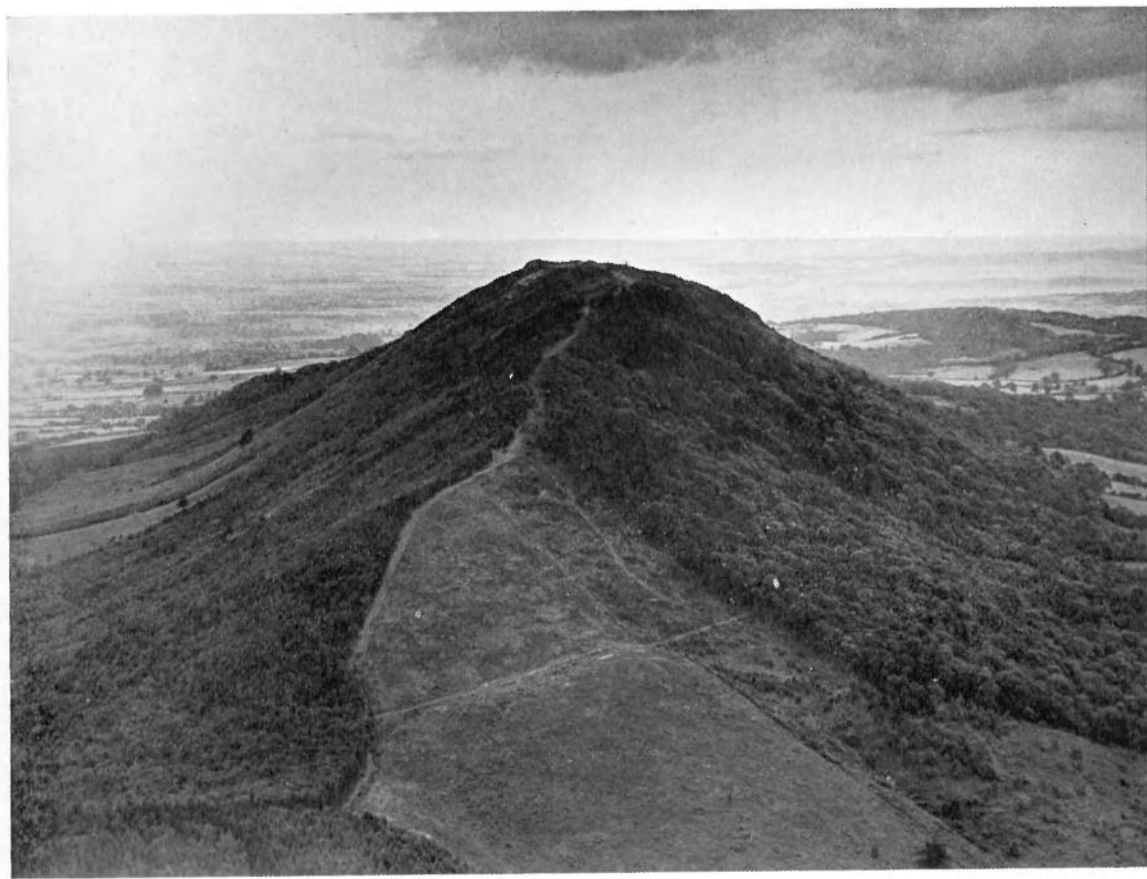
The south-west entrance, which was the only one excavated, likewise showed two periods (Plan, fig. 3). The passage way between the in-turned ends was in its last stage about 70 ft.



WREKIN UPPER GATE. SOUTH

FIG. 3

long. Of this, the outermost portion, 35 ft., was in an entirely different style of building from the inner, which included the guardrooms. The outermost portion (pl. V A), which survived in one place to the height of fourteen courses, or about 4 ft., was comparatively well-built of flattish stones, fairly well laid, but not really coursed. The wall is built with a slight batter, and the stones at the top are small, while many of those at the



THE WREKIN FROM THE SOUTH-WEST

(Photo by the late Major G. W. Allen)



A. THE WREKIN FROM THE SOUTH-EAST



B. NORTH-EASTERN INNER ENTRANCE, FROM NEAR OUTER
ENTRANCE

bottom are very large. Almost all of these large stones are sandstone, and must have been brought from a distance of several miles. The average size of these stones was 1 ft. 7 in. long and 6 in. high, the largest block of sandstone being 2 ft. 4 in. long and 1 ft. 1 in. high, while there was one block of native stone 3 ft. long by 1 ft. 6 in. high (pl. V B). At the outer end, the wall swings round to form the main rampart of the inner group. One large, stone-lined gatepost was found at the inner end of this portion of the entrance.

The guardrooms were of completely different structure (pl. VI A and B). The one completely excavated formed a recess 9 ft. 6 in. by 15 ft. In the walls were a series of large post holes, the remains of timbers which must have been necessary both from the rough build of the wall as well as to support the roof. The difference in style of build is well shown in pl. VII, figs. A and B. Pl. VII A is of the outer portion and shows how the stones are straight-faced, and laid comparatively flush and true. Pl. VII B of the guardroom shows how the stones are laid at all angles, and with no regular face. The stones of this portion are all native to the hill, and include many rounded boulders of glacial origin.

The sections through the banks of the entrance confirm the two periods indicated by the structure (fig. 2, section.) The tails of the in-turned banks on each side were originally considerably shorter and lower, and are separated from top layers, four feet or so thick, by a turf-line. On the south side the original bank is overlaid by a layer with much burning in it. The bank at the back of the south-east guardroom was bordered by a low wall which from the poorness of its technique suggests the second rather than the first period, but the very difficult stratification seemed to indicate that it belonged to the first period. Further excavation is necessary to settle this point.

Beneath the floor of the guardroom, and also beneath the original bank was a pronounced occupation level. A number of post-holes were associated with it, but the area excavated was not sufficient to indicate the plan. The surface of the roadway through the entrance was not very well-marked, and had probably been largely worn away.

Outside the rampart on either side of the entrance were indications of a ditch. Excavation, however, showed that this really consisted of a series of pits cut into the solid rock. One of these was completely excavated (pl. VIII A), and proved to have maximum dimensions of 23 ft. in length, 18 ft. in width, and 6 ft. 6 in. in depth.

The original form of the inner ramparts was thus a low,

flat-topped bank, with a fairly well-built dry-stone revetment. The entrance was apparently only slightly in-turned, and may not have had any guardroom. The pits outside may have belonged to either period, but, as will be seen, they seem to fit in better to the scheme of the second period.

The shape of the outer ramparts, as has already been said, approximates to that of the inner ones, owing to the shape of the hill, with an extension at either end along the spine of the hill. Along most of the length of the hill, the ramparts were represented by little more than flattened terraces with steep slopes outside them, their outline as they crossed the gulleys running up the sides of the hill being more rounded. The uppermost of the two terraces apparently consisted of a stone-revetted bank, though none of the revetment was actually found in position. At each end the two terraces swing away from one another as they turn across the spine of the hill, and approach the entrance. At the south-west end, the east side of the inner of the two rests on the rocky outcrop known as the Needle's Eye, with merely a mound on the inner side. The west side is simply formed by a bulbous end to the rampart, in which no structure could be traced. The outer terrace, which along the side of the hill lies at the foot of a very steep slope (pl. VIII B) the terrace being obviously formed by the artificial steepening of the foot of the slope, swings out considerably in advance of this entrance. On the spine of the hill, this flat terrace becomes a flat-bottomed ditch cut in the rock, with a slight bank on the inner edge, and a blunt end at the entrance (pl. III B). There was no trace of any structure flanking the causeway, which thus led up the spine of the hill between the butt-ends of the ditches and ramparts.

At the north-east end, the outer terrace likewise swings out in advance of the inner one and also has a blunt end against the causeway. The inner one however has a very pronounced in-turn, and resembles in plan the entrances through the inner ramparts. Surface indications, however, suggest that the greater part of this in-turn may be an addition. A little way short of the place where the defences turn across the spine of the hill, the rampart swings out in advance of the steep slope which lies below it along the sides, and which is probably partly artificial. This slope curves round to the entrance, and joins it at a point where there is a marked kink in its banks. It therefore looks as if the original entrance may have been very much the same in plan as that at the south-west end of the outer ramparts, with two butt-ended ramparts splaying apart as they turn across the hill. A cut near the point where the

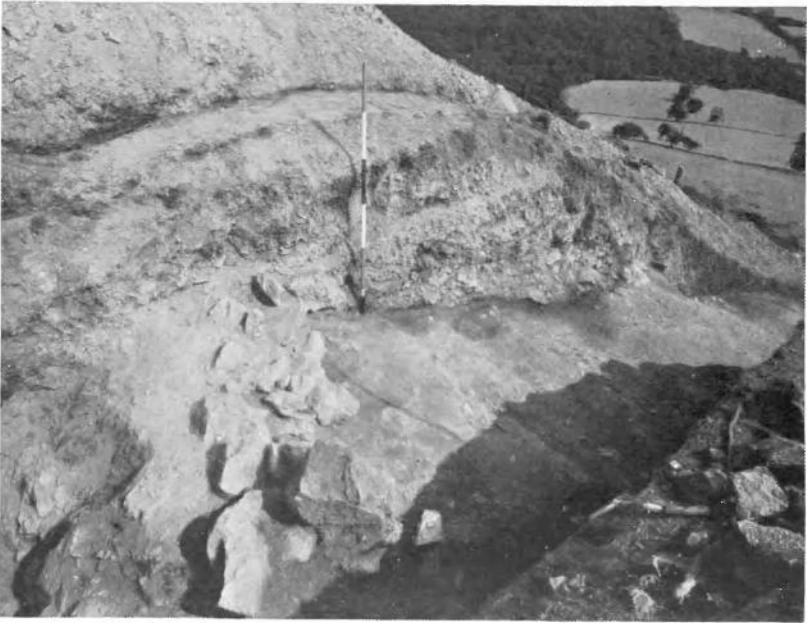


A. SECTION B THROUGH INNER DEFENCES

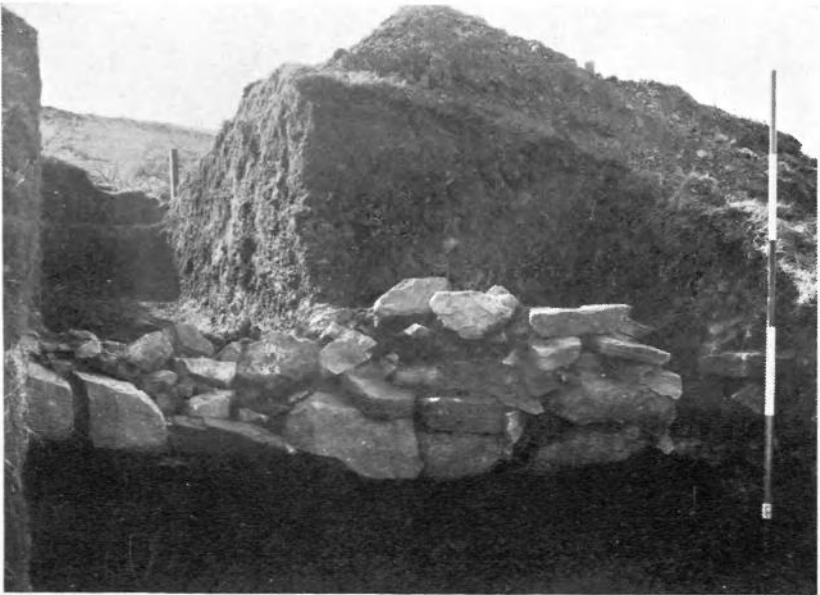


B. END OF DITCH OF OUTER RAMPARTS
AND SOUTH-WEST OUTER ENTRANCE

PLATE IV



A. SECTION A THROUGH INNER RAMPART, SHOWING 1ST PERIOD TURF
LINE AT TOP OF LOWEST RED SECTION OF RANGING POLE



B. SECTION J THROUGH INNER RAMPART, SHOWING 1ST PERIOD DRY
STONE FACING



A. PASSAGE WAY OF SOUTH-WEST ENTRANCE



B. LARGE STONES AT BASE OF WALL OF PASSAGE IN
SOUTH-WEST ENTRANCE



A. GUARDROOM AND PASSAGE WAY OF SOUTH-WEST ENTRANCE



B. GUARDROOM OF SOUTH-WEST ENTRANCE

existing rampart swings away from the slope (fig. 2, section H) did not show any remains of an original rampart on top of the slope, but it is more than likely that it would be transferred bodily to form the new rampart. On the crest was a large post-hole, certainly too shallow to have held a post of the size indicated without considerably more earth above the rock than at present, while under the existing rampart further down the slope was marked occupation, with two layers of hearths.

The history of the site which at the moment thus appears probable, though admittedly the conclusions are only provisional, is as follows. There was an initial period of occupation prior to the earliest known defences, the extent of which is unknown, as is also by what period it preceded the defences. In the first period of the defences, the inner ramparts had a comparatively well-built dry-stone revetment, with a fairly low, flat-topped bank behind. The entrances were only slightly in-turned, perhaps little more than bulbous ended. The original outer ramparts too probably had a stone revetment to the upper one, and the entrances were bulbous-ended, with a long gap separating the two ramparts. There is no evidence to show that this original period is contemporary with that of the inner ramparts, but if the suggestions made about the original plans of the two are correct, it probably is.

In the second period the inner ramparts were considerably raised, but this time in a different technique, with a revetment, if any, on the summit and not at the base. At the same time, the south-western entrance, at least, was given a much more pronounced in-turn, with guardrooms in a much worse style of masonry. Simultaneously, an in-turned entrance may have been added to the north-eastern entrance through the outer ramparts.

These alterations suggest two things. Firstly that after the initial fortifications had been erected, there was a period in which the defences were allowed to fall into decay, either because the place was not occupied, or because of comparatively peaceful conditions. Then in a period of renewed danger, an effort was made to increase the strength of the fortifications, both as regards the height of the ramparts, and the form of the entrances. Secondly, this strengthening was done by people not accustomed to stone-building technique, and was probably done in a hurry. This is suggested by four points, the comparatively rough way in which the ramparts were raised, without any form of revetting; the very rough build of the guardrooms, with the use of stones found on the hill alone, often very

unsuitable; and the fact that the south-west outer entrance was not altered as it is suggested that the other entrances were.

The ground excavated inside the ramparts was not large, being confined to an area 45 ft. by 45 ft. just inside the south-west entrance. The evidence from here strongly suggested that the camp had been definitely occupied, and was not just a place of temporary refuge. All over this area were post-holes and storage pits, and other traces of occupation. There were some traces of hard white floors, but the soil was only about 6 in. deep in most places, with a maximum of 2 ft., and most of the floors had been washed away. No actual hut plans

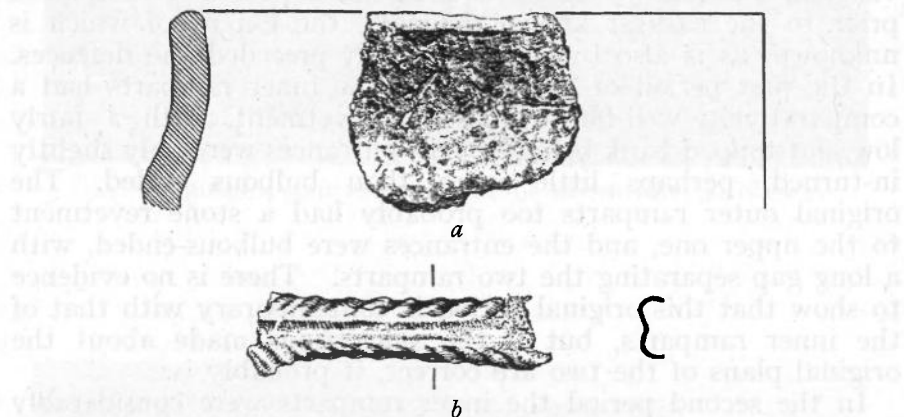


FIG. 4. *a* RIM OF POT ($\frac{1}{2}$). *b* BRONZE BINDING ($\frac{1}{2}$).

could be identified, but the careful construction of the post-holes, and the existence of gutters and storage pits show that the structures had been more than temporary shelters. Charcoal was found in a large number of places, and one definite hearth.

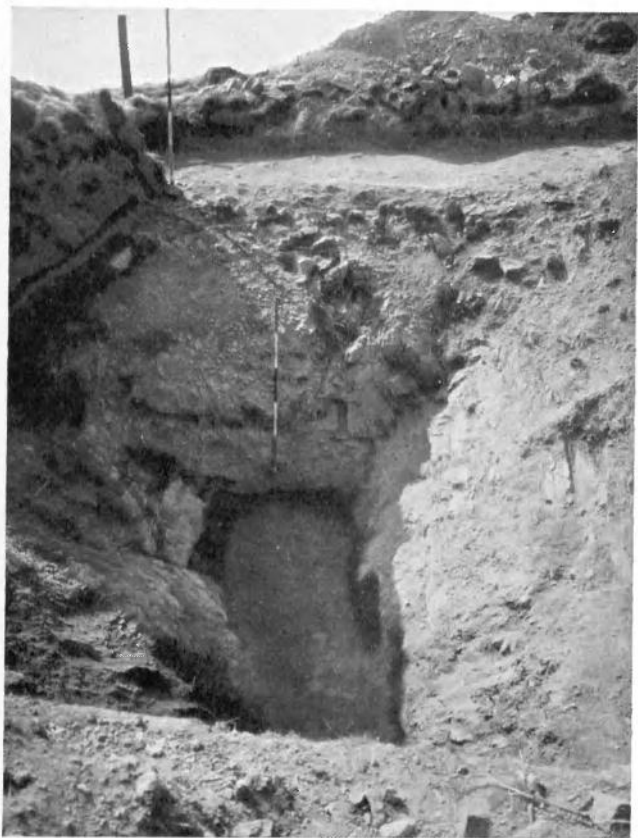
The finds consisted of a large number of pot-boilers, grinding stones and so on, a small fragment of a shale bracelet, a small fragment of decorated bronze binding (fig. 4b), and a quantity of pottery small in comparison with finds on southern sites, but rich in comparison with finds on sites in the Welsh Marches. It seems possible to divide the sherds up into three wares, one of light, bricky, red, found only in the burnt layer over the first period of the south-west inner ramparts, the second of grey gritty ware, firing light brown on the surface, and rather laminated in texture, found in occupation levels inside the ramparts, and a rather more compact grey ware, polished dark brown on the surface, found in the make-up of Period II, or the layers overlying Period I. It is not really certain that these last two are different, as the ware is so coarse and the



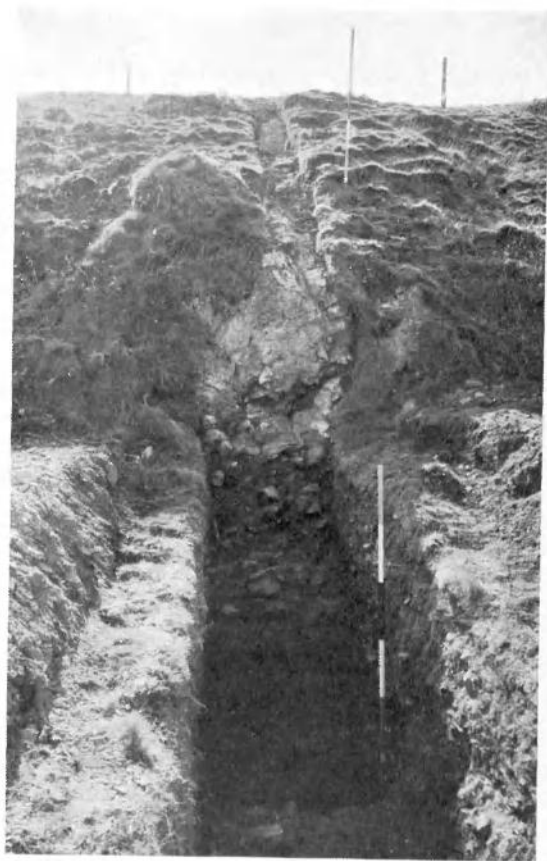
A. DETAIL OF MASONRY IN PASSAGE WAY
OF SOUTH-WEST ENTRANCE



B. DETAIL OF MASONRY IN GUARDROOM OF SOUTH-WEST
ENTRANCE



A. ROCK-CUT PIT OUTSIDE SOUTH-WEST INNER ENTRANCE



B. SCARP ABOVE OUTER TERRACE OF
OUTER RAMPARTS

pieces so small that there may be considerable variations in the same pot. The only rim found was in the last ware (fig. 4a). It belongs to a degenerate situla-like vessel, with upright neck and weak, rounded shoulder. It slightly resembles

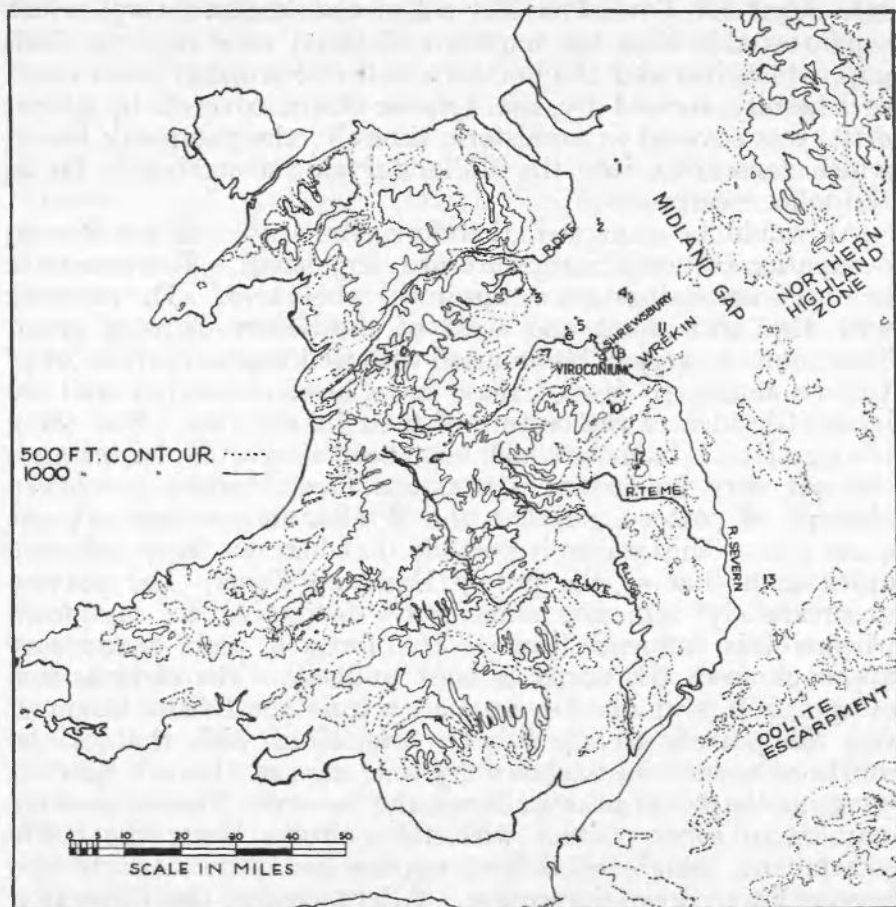


FIG. 5. MAP SHOWING GEOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POSITION OF THE WREKIN

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|------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Castle Ditch, Eddisbury. | 6. Oliver's Point, Great Ness. | 11. Kinnersley Wall, Wellington. |
| 2. Maiden Castle, Bickerton. | 7. The Breiddin. | 12. Titterstone Clee. |
| 3. Old Oswestry. | 8. Haughmond Hill, Uffington. | 13. Bredon Hill. |
| 4. Bury Walls, Weston. | 9. Meole Brace, Shrewsbury. | |
| 5. The Berth, Baschurch. | 10. Caer Caradoc. | |

vessels from Chastleton, Oxon, of the Iron Age A type, but the type is a very unspecialized one. What one can say, however, is that it definitely does not belong to the south-western culture.

The next point to be considered is the historical setting of the periods in the occupation of the Wrekin. In connexion with this must be considered the geology of the region. The Wrekin itself is of volcanic origin, consisting mainly of rhyolite. As has been said, it juts out from the highland zone of Wales, into what Sir Cyril Fox has called the Midland Gap¹ which separates this from the northern highland zone (fig. 5). This gap, which includes the northern half of Shropshire and much of Cheshire, formed by the Triassic Plain covered by glacial drift, was covered in prehistoric times by the damp-oak forest, which runs down into the Midland Plain, stretching as far as the oolite escarpment.

As would be expected, therefore, the traces of pre-Roman occupation of north Shropshire are very small. There seem to be only some half-dozen camps in the whole area. The contrast with the area south and west of the Severn is very great. There almost every hill is crowned with well-marked earthworks.² Unfortunately, so few of these have been excavated that we have little idea of the culture of their inhabitants. One thing is suggestive. In those which have been excavated, for instance the not very far-distant Titterstone Clee, there is a marked absence of pottery, so that the Wrekin in contrast appears quite rich. This makes it possible that here we have influence other than that of the purely Highland Zone. The pottery unfortunately was not sufficiently distinctive to say from whence this influence came. The forested plain made any approach from the north or west unlikely. The obvious line of approach is up the Severn Valley from the Bristol Channel. But the pottery clearly has no connexions with that of the south-west, such as is shown by one class of that at Bredon³ lying on the horizon lower down the Severn. The alternative may lie in some contact with the cultures along the oolite escarpment, which, of course, approaches quite near to the Severn lower down its course. Alternatively, the connexion may be in a northerly direction, along the edge of the Welsh Marches, and connecting thence with the northern upland zone. It is to be hoped that more extensive excavations will produce sufficient material to throw more light on this, and much evidence, either negative or positive, will undoubtedly be given by the continuance of the excavations at Old Oswestry, which again appears to be comparatively rich in pottery.⁴

¹ *The Personality of Britain*, p. 27.

² L. Chitty, 'How did the Hill-Fort Builders reach Breiddin?' *Arch. Camb.*, 1937.

³ T. Hencken, 'The Excavations of the Iron Age Camp on Bredon Hill, Gloucestershire, 1935-7,' *Arch. Journ.*, xlv.

⁴ Information kindly supplied by Mr. B. H. St. J. O'Neil.

But though there is little to show a cultural connexion between the Wrekin and the settlements of the Welsh Marches, there is a certain amount to show a common historical setting. The history of Titterstone Clee¹ is strikingly similar, a first fortification period, followed by a period when the defences were allowed to decay, and then a re-fortification. Maiden Castle, Bickerton, Cheshire², and a number of other sites seem to have had a somewhat similar history. The first period is thus certainly one when fresh immigrations in the south-east were causing population movements and pressure towards the north-west. This was followed by a period of quiet, succeeded by a renewed period of unrest. At the Wrekin, the defences of this period included the marked development of the in-turn of the ramparts. Miss Chitty³ has studied the distribution of fortifications with this type of entrance, and has shown that the route by which it reached North Wales was the Valley of the Wye, and to a lesser degree that of the Severn, and she and Mr. Varley⁴ have also shown that it is not confined to any one cultural area, but that rather it is the reaction to similar conditions. There is little doubt that the great majority of the Welsh hill forts were built in the last century or less before the Roman occupation. The re-fortification of the Wrekin and its neighbours would fit in historically either as a defence against the tribes displaced by the Belgae, or against the Romans. The history of Viroconium makes it very tempting to suppose that it was the latter. There was obviously a large population in the neighbourhood, or the Romans would not have established the tribal capital on that spot, and there is no site except the Wrekin which could have been the pre-existing town. One can thus picture the re-fortification of the hill-top, which shows every sign of haste, as the Romans drove Watling Street through the Midland Plain, but it is to be hoped that further excavation will produce definite proof.

It will thus be seen that the excavations at this stage have raised a number of highly interesting problems, but have settled few of them. When at last the second season's excavations can be carried out, it is clear that the solution of them will add materially to our knowledge of an important frontier zone, and it is hoped that light will be thrown on the origins and cultural affinities of the Cornovii.

¹ B. H. St. J. O'Neil, *Arch. Camb.*, 1934.

² W. J. Varley, Liverpool University
Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology,
xxii and xxiii.

³ *op. cit.*, *Arch. Camb.*, 1937.

⁴ *op. cit.*, *A.A.A.*, xxiii.