

AN IRON AGE PROMONTORY FORT AT BELLE TOUT

BY RICHARD BRADLEY

INTRODUCTION

This paper completes the publication of two seasons of excavation carried out at Belle Tout in 1968 and 1969. Accounts of the Beaker settlement, which formed the main object of this project, and of the methods employed in its excavation have already appeared nationally,¹ and the important assemblage of Mesolithic flints from the site is now discussed in a separate paper published by this society.² Here it is intended to give the results of two sections through the promontory earthwork which encloses the entire Belle Tout plateau and to publish the Bronze and Iron Age pottery found within its area in the course of excavation on the Beaker settlement.

The site itself is an extensive headland plateau of Upper Chalk occupying an area of roughly 25 hectares and rising to a maximum height of 80 metres.³ It lies three kilometres to the west of Beachy Head and immediately above Birling Gap where the land can be directly approached from the sea. Despite the effects of coastal erosion the single bank and ditch enclosing this area still take in fully 20 hectares and run from a point a little above Birling Gap to meet the cliffs again directly east of the 19th century Belle Tout lighthouse. The course of this earthwork is continuously traceable around the crown of the hill except for one short length to the N.W. where its line is completely concealed by undergrowth. Again to the N. and E. of the lighthouse its remains have been badly damaged by wartime use of the building as a gunnery target. Its line here however is clearly shown to be continuous by a pre-war air photograph of the lighthouse once issued as a picture postcard, and latterly by a clear surface crop mark. Only one possible entrance might be suggested from the evidence in the field. This lies at the midpoint of this circuit immediately SW. of Horseshoe Plantation but the steep scarp below the line of the ditch hardly supports this suggestion. A resistivity survey over this area failed to provide any unambiguous sign of a solid causeway, and it is more likely that the original entrance has now been lost to the sea. There is no reason to assume that the circuit was ever continuous to the S. and indeed the line of

¹ Richard Bradley, 'The excavation of a Beaker settlement at Belle Tout, East Sussex, England', in *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* (hereafter abbreviated *PPS*), vol. 36 (1970), pp. 312-79; 'Artifact density in the interpretation of timber buildings', in *Antiquity*, vol. 45 (1971).

² Richard Bradley, 'A Mesolithic industry from East Sussex and its implications', *Sussex Archaeological Society Occasional Paper* no. 2.

³ N.G.R. TV 557996.

the earthwork where it approaches Birling Gap is hard to explain without the defensive advantage imparted by the cliff. Despite thorough field work within the enclosure no internal features of Iron Age date have been recognised. The site has only once been fully discussed in print when a Neolithic date was suggested on account of the number of struck flakes within its area,¹ and the site plan in Fig. 1 is the first detailed survey of the earthwork to appear.

THE EXCAVATIONS 1968 AND 1969

It was not a major object of excavation in 1968 and 1969 to investigate the earthwork described above though the finding of quantities of early Iron Age pottery in the Beaker settlement within the enclosed area did demand some preliminary investigation of its character. This seemed to be of particular importance in view of the surprisingly slight nature of the surrounding ditch in both of the sections exposed at the cliff edge.

As a result this ditch was sectioned by hand to the SE. of Horseshoe Plantation (Section A) and the entire defences were sectioned mechanically above Birling Gap where they were best preserved, and where the cliff section indicated that the rampart might be of more than one phase (Section B). It will be seen however, that no contemporary material was found in either area and that the only pottery of its suspected date was that recovered from the loam surface sealing the Beaker occupation levels within the enclosure. This material was entirely unassociated with recognisable features and was found almost wholly over the N. side of the gully occupied by the earlier settlement. The fact that the parts of single vessels were found over closely confined areas does not suggest that these had been manure deposited and, though the gorse over the site may suggest disturbance of some sort, the area showed no sign of ploughing after the Beaker occupation had ceased. It is suggested instead that domestic occupation might have taken place upon the spur overlooking the earlier site and that this material may be rubbish from that activity.

Details of the two excavated sections are as follows:

Section A. In 1968 a section four metres in width was cut through the ditch and associated counterscarp bank at a point close to Horseshoe Plantation (Figs. 1 and 2). The resulting section is entirely consistent with that in cutting B and seems to agree with those exposed in the present cliff edge, though these could only be viewed safely from the sea. The ditch (Fig. 2) was of a shallow U profile with heavily eroded sides and a flat bottom at a depth of one

¹ A. H. Lane Fox, 'An examination into the character and probable origin of the hill forts of Sussex', in *Archaeologia* (hereafter *Arch.*), vol. 42 (1869), pp. 27-52.

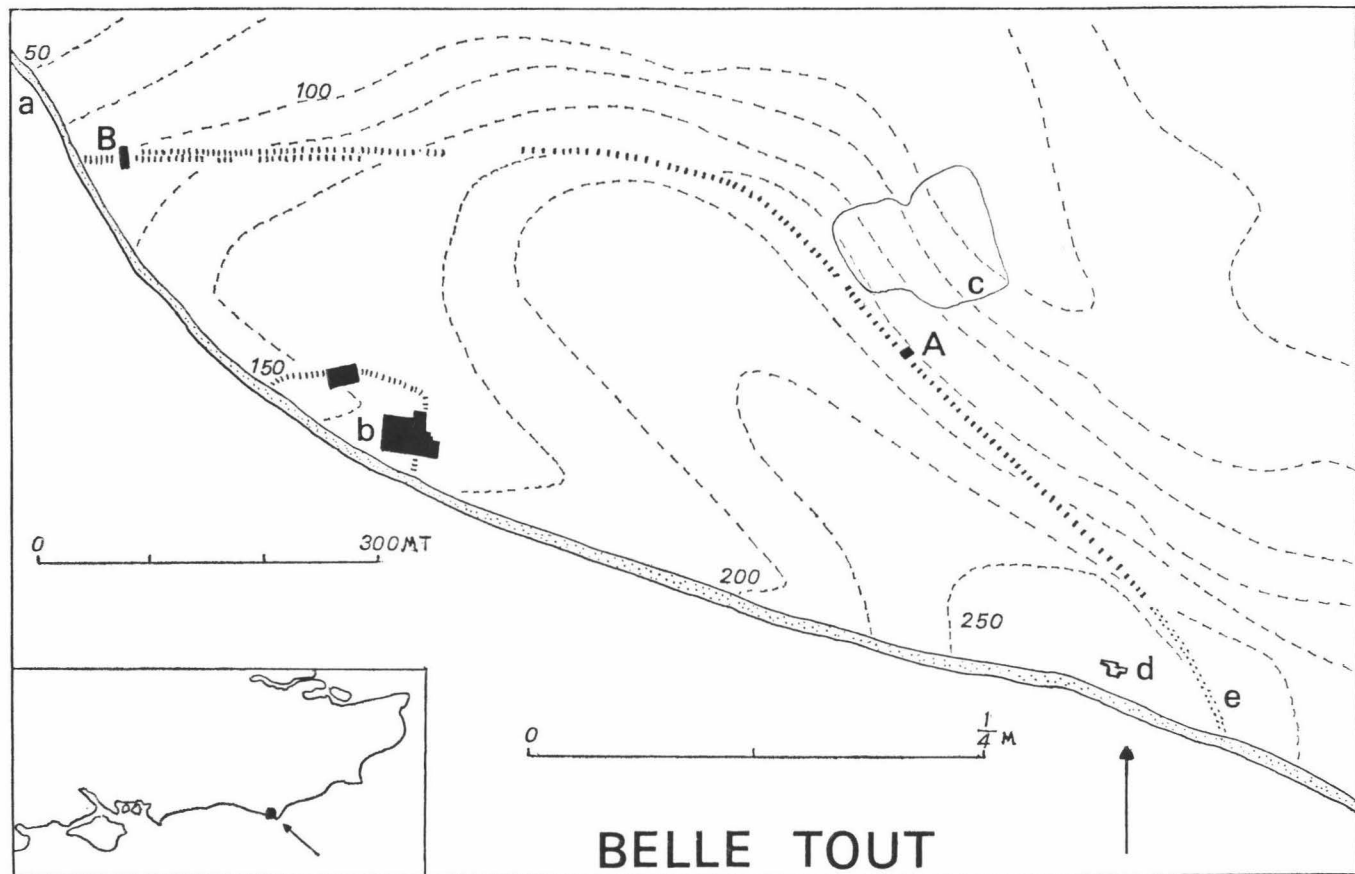


FIGURE 1. The Belle Tout promontory earthwork in its local and regional context. Contours are at 25ft. intervals and based upon the OS 2½ in. survey. a: Birling Gap; b: Beaker settlement; c: Horseshoe Plantation; d: Belle Tout lighthouse; e: earthwork hill to the east of the lighthouse. The two sections are lettered as in the text. All measured lengths are indicated in solid black.

metre from the present surface. The main filling was of deposits of loose weathered chalk, 9 and 7, and of a finer mixture of rain-washed chalk and humus, 8. The secondary filling consisted of small fragments of weathered chalk and humus, 2, and of bands of finer chalk and humus washing from the front of the rampart, 4, 5 and 6. The ditch may have been cleaned once of rapid silt and traces of a slight counterscarp bank of loose fragments of weathered chalk, 10, could be recognised, although no indication could be found of recutting.

Section B: In the following season the best preserved length of rampart above Birling Gap was sectioned mechanically to a width of three metres (Figs. 1 and 2). Here the ditch stratigraphy is entirely comparable with that in Cutting A, again showing a slight counterscarp bank which was already falling back into the ditch before the secondary filling of the latter had accumulated. Once again this bank, 15, consisted of medium sized fragments of loose weathered chalk, closely comparable to the primary filling of the ditch itself, 17.

The rampart seems to have been of two phases, the earlier represented by layers 4, 6, 7 and 8 and the later by layers 1-3. Though the section was badly damaged by two slit trenches which had been cut down almost to the buried land surface, it is suggested that the earlier rampart was turf revetted and that an extensive tip of brown humic soil, 9A, represents the collapsed remains of this facing. It is likely that this revetment may be associated with a narrow channel cut into the natural chalk of the hill and filled with chalky loam. At one point it could be established that this feature which fronted the bank throughout this section had also been cut through the buried soil (Fig. 2).

The tail of this bank was probably of weathered chalk fragments represented by layer 4 and seems to have been cut back by a secondary quarry scoop filled by layers 11-13. The buried soil, 9, also seems to have been removed. It is likely the material derived from this cutting had been used to heighten the rampart and three layers of chalk rubble unmixed with humus, 1-3, seem to have slipped back to fill this feature. Despite the disturbance caused by the two slit trenches, it is likely that the tips of loose weathered chalk 1 and 5 may be equated. The tail of the primary rampart included one abraded Beaker sherd which is regarded as a survival for reasons given below. This section seems to be essentially similar to that in the cliff face immediately to the S.

POTTERY

The only item from either section of the earthwork was a small abraded base sherd of a Beaker comparable to those from the main excavation. Where the earthwork was cut by a recent track

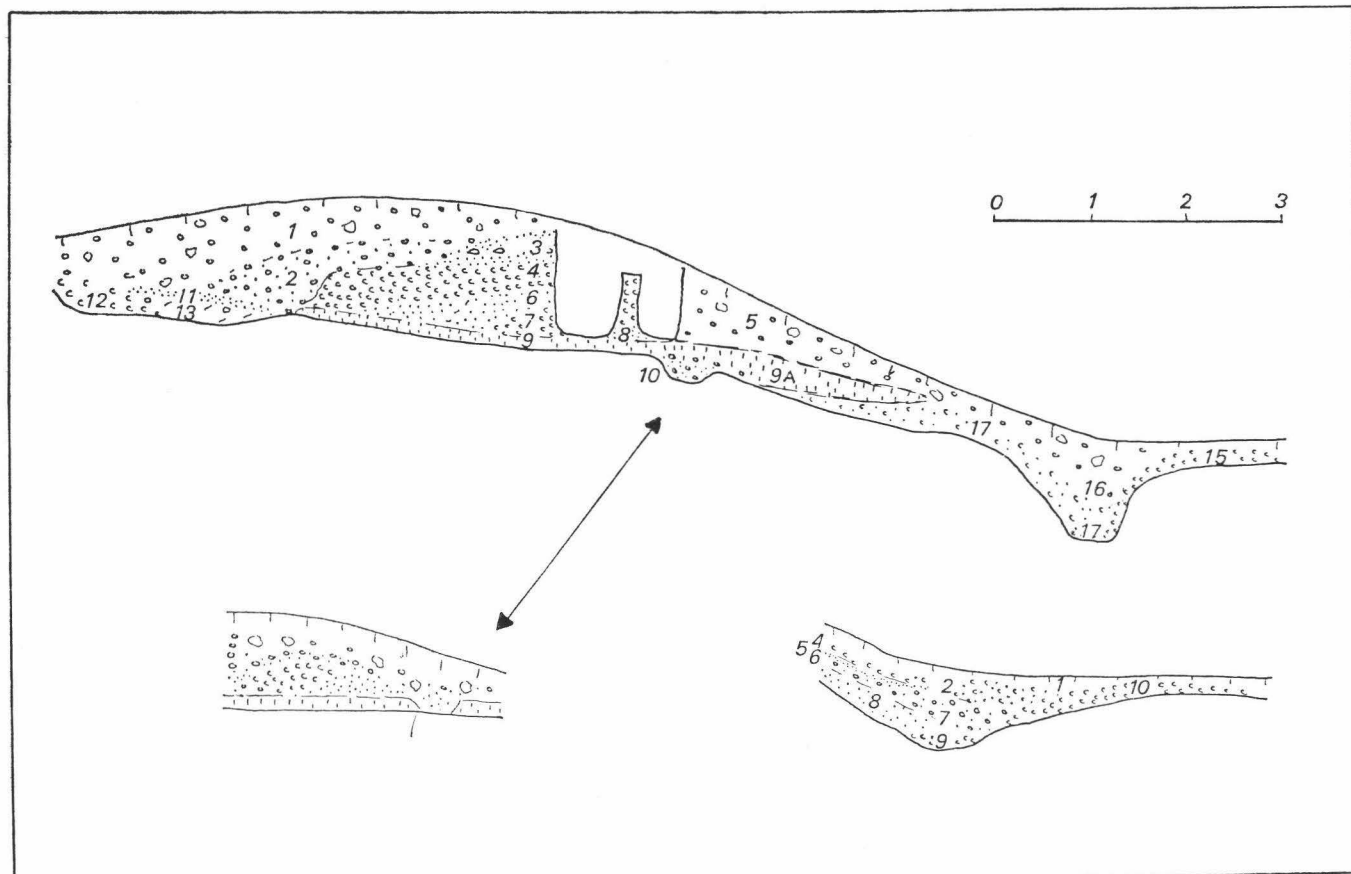


FIGURE 2. Sections of the Iron Age earthwork. Scale in metres. Cutting B south face above with detail of north face mirrored for comparison bottom left.

immediately to the north of section B a hammerstone and a quantity of flint flakes were recovered and so it appears likely that the dyke had disturbed one of several earlier complexes on the hill.¹

The remaining pottery all comes from the area of the Beaker settlement excavated close to the present cliff edge. Almost 400 very fragmentary sherds are represented. The assemblage as a whole does seem to be relatively homogenous and, in the complete absence of later Iron Age pottery, it is assumed that this material is contemporary with the promontory earthwork. Further, more detailed, work may well lead to some revision of this view. The illustrated sherds are as follows (Fig. 3)²:

1. Carinated bowl with slight omphalos base. Hard black to buff body, partially oxidised, with fine and medium flint filler towards base.
2. Neck and shoulder of carinated bowl. Rough sandy buff body with medium flint filler.
3. Rim and shoulder of shouldered jar. Hard black body with smoothed exterior face containing fine and medium flint filler.
4. Neck and shoulder of carinated bowl. Fine black to grey-black sandy body with smoothed exterior and rare fine flint filler.
5. Rim sherd of upright vessel with exterior face damaged. Hard grey-black to buff body with large flint filler.
6. Rim sherd of upright vessel. Abraded sandy body, red-brown externally and grey-black internally, containing large flint filler.
7. Slack profiled bipartite jar with flattened rim and traces of burnishing below lip. Smooth hard black to buff body with fine to medium flint filler.
8. Flanged rim sherd. Sandy body with medium flint filler, externally red-buff to black and internally grey-black.
9. Body sherd with parallel shallow tooled lines. Hard slightly sandy body with sparse fine to medium flint filler, externally grey-black and internally buff to black.
10. Fragmentary shoulder or possibly base. Hard buff to black body with medium flint filler.
11. Shoulder with slight cordon. Rough red-brown body with profuse large flint filler, internally black.
12. ?Shoulder with slight cordon. Grey-black sandy body with sparse medium flint filler.
13. Body sherd with damaged lug. Hard buff body with profuse medium and large flint filler.

Two principal forms appear to be represented, the carinated bowl and the straight sided bucket. The first type, represented by 1, 2, 4 and perhaps 3, has close affinities with the material belonging to the first occupation of Mount Caburn and farther afield with early assemblages in Wessex. Material from the two groups appear in probable association at West Stoke.³ For these a date at the opening of the Iron Age might be appropriate, although it is not clear how long these types remained in fashion. Some confirmation

¹ For details see Richard Bradley *op. cit.*, 1970, p. 312.

² The drawings are the work of Jane Holdsworth.

³ B. W. Cunliffe, 'Stoke Clump, Hollingbury and the early pre-Roman Iron Age in Sussex', in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter *S.A.C.*), vol. 104 (1966), pp. 109-20.

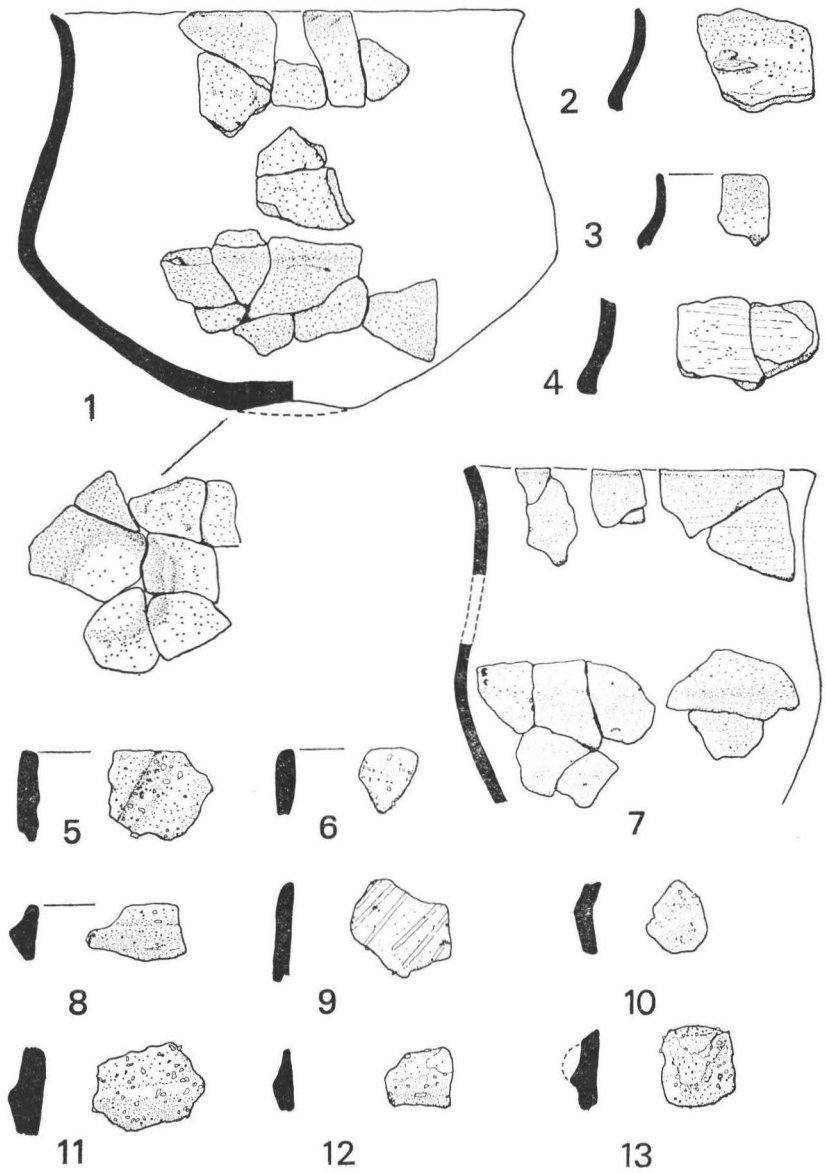


FIGURE 3. Iron Age Pottery from Belle Tout drawn by Jane Holdsworth. †.

of this early context is the apparent association of vessels of analogous type with Late Bronze Age metalwork at Minnis Bay in Kent.¹ The second type may be represented by 5, 6 and 13 and probably by 11 and 12. This form is not easy to date in outline and, though vessels of upright or slightly biconical form may represent a continuing coarse ware tradition with Bronze Age origins, the type is still present in the middle of the Iron Age. However, the presence of 11-13, all three in fabrics more easily matched in 'Late Bronze Age' assemblages in Sussex, may well support the earlier date. The lug on 13 is a particular characteristic of this material. 11 is in a similar ware and, though its form is by no means clear, it was found together with a quantity of straight sided sherds apparently from the same vessel. Though these were unfortunately not restorable, this supports the suggestion that it belonged to the shoulder of a slightly biconical bucket urn in the Bronze Age tradition. Similar sherds are now known in association with later Bronze Age pottery from Langstone Harbour in Hampshire.² The same interpretation might be applied with less confidence to the more fragmentary 12.

Three further sherds give problems. The flanged rim, 8, is hard to match in any context, though related forms are not entirely unknown in the mid Iron Age.³ The decorated body sherd, 9, probably belongs to the Caburn I series, partly on account of its fabric. Though analogous decoration is certainly found within this tradition, it is uncertain which part of the parent vessel this fragment represents and so final judgments are better not made. The last group of sherds, 7, give more serious difficulties. The flattened rim of this vessel together with its fabric and the traces of burnish below the rim all point to a normal Iron Age context though the profile is that of the Beakers recovered upon the site. Indeed several sherds from the same area of the site have been published as Beaker pottery on account of their decoration, and in the final report on the earlier material it was pointed out that a small area of ambiguity existed in dividing the two assemblages.⁴ This being said, it still seems more reasonable to assign this vessel to the later occupation in view of the Iron Age characteristics outlined above. If this is acceptable its profile might be compared instead with a rounded jar in the Minnis Bay assemblage, there found in association with carinated bowls.⁵ It must be added,

¹ F. H. Worsfold, 'A report on the Late Bronze Age site excavated at Minnis Bay, Birchington, Kent 1938-40', *PPS*, vol. 9 (1943), pp. 28-47.

² Publication by Bari Hooper and the writer in preparation.

³ Richard Bradley 'An Iron Age site at Paulsgrove', in *Proc. Hants. Field Club*, forthcoming.

⁴ Richard Bradley, *op. cit.*, 1970, cited note 1, p. 8.

⁵ F. H. Worsfold, *op. cit.*, fig. 6, p. 36.

however, that differences of ware and decoration make this comparison a tenuous one.

It appears therefore that two separate traditions may be represented in this small assemblage, an 'Iron Age' group and several vessels of 'Late Bronze Age' type. In more practical terms, however, this division is only that between fine and coarse wares and there is evidence that the two types could be regarded as contemporary with one another. One such association has been noticed at Mount Caburn,¹ while on the contemporary site at Highdown it is clear from the published report that Late Bronze and early Iron Age vessels were found "alongside" one another sealed by the rampart of the hill fort.² In the same way, it is now recognised that pottery in early Iron Age styles may appear together with Late Bronze Age metal types. Indeed it is worth mentioning that Belle Tout itself is the possible findspot of an important Late Bronze Age hoard, discovered a century and a half ago.³

If therefore the pottery may quite possibly all be contemporary, both groups can point to a date at the beginning of the southern British Iron Age. Though no stratigraphical association could of course be made out, to call one group 'Bronze Age' and the other 'Iron Age' might be a matter merely of semantics. It is in the light of these suggestions that the promontory earthwork must now be considered.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The evidence from Belle Tout is unsatisfactory in one major aspect, the context of the pottery. Whilst it has been argued that the diagnostic elements in the assemblage all point to an early date, it has not been proved that that is the date of the promontory enclosure itself, rather than that of an earlier farm which it came to replace. In the absence of later Iron Age pottery it is assumed in the present argument that this objection is not valid. Whether this is correct or not however, it will be seen that the affinities of the earthwork itself do lie in the early years of the Iron Age.

The enclosure shows four major characteristics which ally it with other earthworks in Sussex and beyond: its considerable area, its promontory siting, its low revetted rampart and slight surrounding ditch, and the width of the berm between them. In addition to these there is no strong evidence that the greater part of the interior was ever inhabited. In these aspects the site calls to mind Ranscombe Camp in Sussex,⁴ Butser Hill in Hampshire⁵ and

¹ B. W. Cunliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

² A. E. Wilson, 'Report on the excavations at Highdown Hill, Sussex, August 1939', in *S.A.C.*, vol. 81 (1940), p. 180.

³ Anonymous note in *Arch.*, vol. 16 (1812), p. 363.

⁴ G. P. Burstow and G. A. Holleyman, 'Excavations at Ranscombe Camp, 1959-60' in *S.A.C.*, vol. 102 (1964), pp. 55-67.

⁵ S. Piggott, 'Butser Hill', in *Antiquity*, vol. 4 (1930), pp. 187-200.

Bindon Hill in Dorset,¹ each of which has been seen as an unfinished hill fort, partly because of the slightness of the surrounding ditch. In the case of Belle Tout, the fact that the first defences were rebuilt argues that the site was not left incomplete. It is interesting that, like Bindon, it overlooks a natural coastal landing place and even loses some of its advantages as a defensive site in attempting to include some of the lower ground towards the shore. Each of these sites may be of an early date and Ranscombe most probably predates the main hill fort series on the South Downs. Butser Hill directly replaces a cross ridge dyke which in itself is not likely to be later than the early part of the Iron Age, while Bindon occupies a chronological position not unlike that of Ranscombe. It is interesting that the slight earthwork at Belle Tout could only have served as an enclosure to contain livestock and could never be properly defended, while the "double bend entrance" at Ranscombe is of a type otherwise peculiar to pastoral boundaries. Similarly Butser Hill is almost certainly a refortified cattle ranch, which in its earlier phase had been composed of a series of cross ridge dykes and spur dykes. There is evidence too that the smaller timber cased forts associated in Sussex with Caburn I pottery are derived directly from Bronze Age stock enclosures. These are however points which I have discussed at length elsewhere.²

The four feeble and extensive univallate enclosures so far discussed are attributed to a date early in the Iron Age and seem to align themselves with a wider group of rather similar enclosures in western England recently defined by Dr. G. J. Wainwright.³ He too has laid stress upon the extensive areas taken in by these sites, their revetted ramparts and the scarcity of domestic debris, and has also concluded that these were stock compounds. These sites, typified by Bathampton Down in Somerset, do not all occupy promontory positions and, if this perfectly arbitrary qualification is dropped, other comparable sites, which have hitherto seemed anomalous and independent, might be loosely grouped together. In Sussex, Beacon Hill, Harting with its foundation deposit of two Late Bronze Age penannular gold rings seems to belong to this period.⁴ It is interesting that this site too has been described as unfinished and unoccupied. Certainly it is largely unpublished. A second site still undated is the Devil's Dyke which might itself develop from a

¹ R. E. M. Wheeler, 'An Early Iron Age 'beach-head' at Lulworth, Dorset', in *Antiquaries Journal* (hereafter *Ant. J.*), vol. 33 (1953), pp. 1-13.

² Richard Bradley, 'Stock raising and the origins of the hill fort on the South Downs' in *Ant. J.*, vol. 51 (1971).

³ G. J. Wainwright, 'The excavation of an early Iron Age hill fort on Bathampton Down, Somerset', in *Trans. Bristol and Gloucestershire Arch. Soc.*, vol. 86 (1967), pp. 42-59.

⁴ P. A. M. Keef, 'Two gold penannular gold ornaments from Harting Beacon, Sussex', in *Antiq. J.*, vol. 33 (1953), pp. 204-6.

promontory enclosure. In Hampshire it is interesting that the earliest earthwork exposed in the cliff section at Hengistbury Head should be a slight ditch similar in dimensions to that at Belle Tout, though it would be quite inadmissible to assume without much firmer evidence that this must be equated with the earliest pottery from the interior of the site. A further extensive site, only recently excavated on any scale, is Balkerbury near Andover where it is clear that the first two phases of defences each consisted of a very slight ditch and a dump rampart comparable in dimensions to that at Belle Tout.¹ Only in the more imposing third phase does the excavator accept the existence of possible granaries on the site and, even in spite of extensive and sensitive excavation within the enclosure, no trace of early structures or pits have yet come to light. Though Dr. Wainwright himself has resisted an equation with Bathampton Down, this site again appears to belong to an early phase within the pre Roman Iron Age. A final site of a rather similar date, provisionally assigned by its excavator to the same period as Bindon, is Hog Cliff Hill in Dorset.² Here too an extensive but weak enclosure has been examined and, though a limited cluster of huts was investigated, the majority of the area was quite empty. From provisional accounts it seems that few corn storage pits occupied this site and, more important, that the 26-acre enclosure had possessed an internal ditch suitable for containing herds of livestock. This feature occurs again on the early Sussex 'hill fort' of Wolstonbury, which itself replaces a slight pastoral enclosure.

It appears therefore that Belle Tout may be linked with a relatively homogenous group of large but feeble earthwork enclosures which may be attributed to an early stage within the Southern British Iron Age. Some at least of these occupy promontories and a number give circumstantial evidence for a connection with cattle ranching. In these aspects they are to be distinguished from the main series of Sussex hill forts discussed by Curwen, with their major counterscarp banks and inturned entrances, and his own classification of East and West Sussex hill forts³ might usefully be reformulated on these lines. The implications which follow from the recognition of this group however must be discussed in a separate, more extended, paper.⁴

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¹ G. J. Wainwright, 'The excavation of Balkerbury Camp, Andover, Hants.', in *Proc. Hants. Field Club*, vol. 26 (1969), pp. 21-55.

² P. Rahtz, 'Second interim report on excavations at Hog Cliff Hill, Maiden Newton', in *Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, vol. 82 (1960), p. 83.

³ E. C. Curwen, *Archaeology of Sussex* (2nd edn., 1954), p. 237.

⁴ Richard Bradley, 'Economic change in the growth of early hill forts'. Paper to conference Southampton University March 1971, publication pending.

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