

V.—BARCOMBE HILL, THORNGRAFTON

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That the Western end of the prehistoric bank and ditched enclosure on the top of Barcombe Hill, Thorngrifton, 100 yards south of the Stanegate, had had activity and occupation other than that occasioned by quarry working in the Roman period, has been recognised for almost a century. However up to 1950 the only excavation that had taken place was that by Sir Walter Aitchison who is recorded as having dug some trial trenches across the position of the assumed signal station, showing that the site had contained a timber tower of *manifestly Roman type*. No finds were apparently forthcoming and no other information appears to have been left on record. In the early 1950's a trial trench was dug across the western half of the signal station by Mr. Ian Crawford. It is the purpose of this report to set out the recorded information gained from this trench.

From a survey of the site it appears that the Roman work consists of a sub-rectangular or circular ditched enclosure with one distinct and one possible causeway in opposing positions, and within the enclosure a slightly raised central platform. The ditch is so sited as to coincide on the western side with the larger ditch of the prehistoric enclosure, presumably to obviate work in this sector. The inner bank of the early enclosure is now entirely eroded away, but it seems likely that it could not ever have presented more than a slight obstacle to the siting of the signal station.

Mr. Crawford's section was sited to begin on the inner lip of the early and reutilised ditch and to extend radially into the platform of the signal station, stopping some 10' 0" short of the estimated centre. It appears from the section that the whole of what remained of the prehistoric rampart

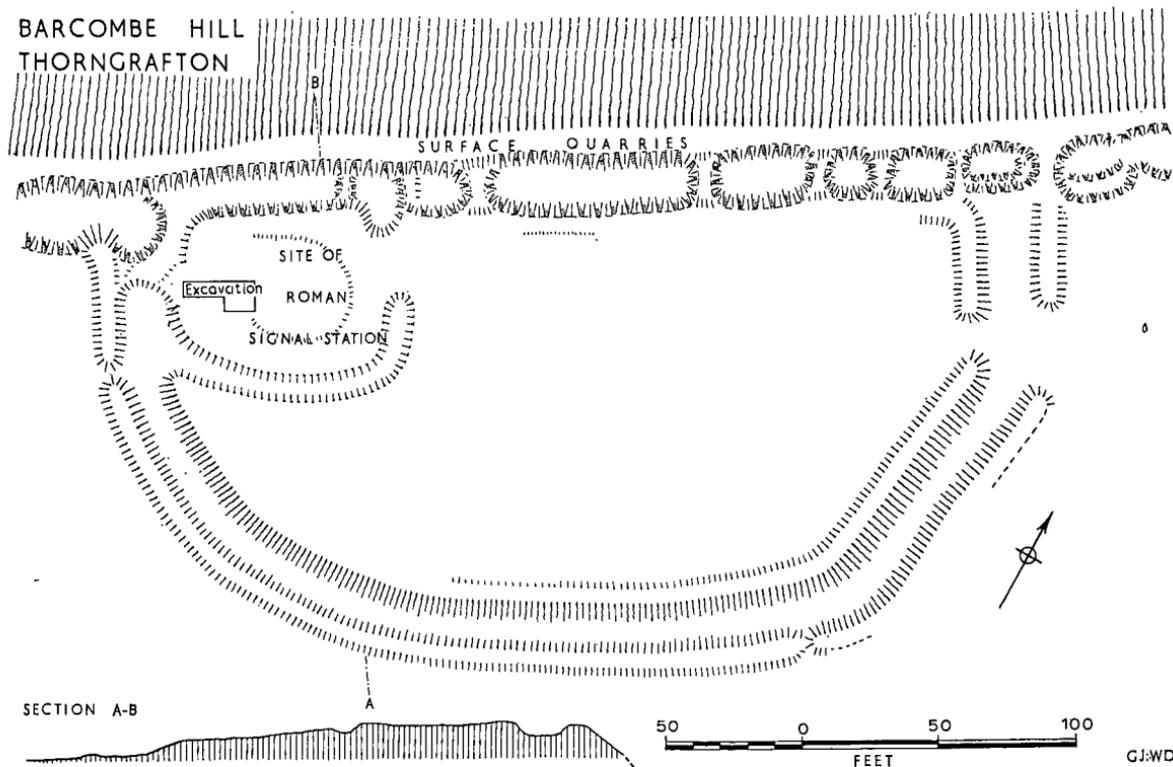
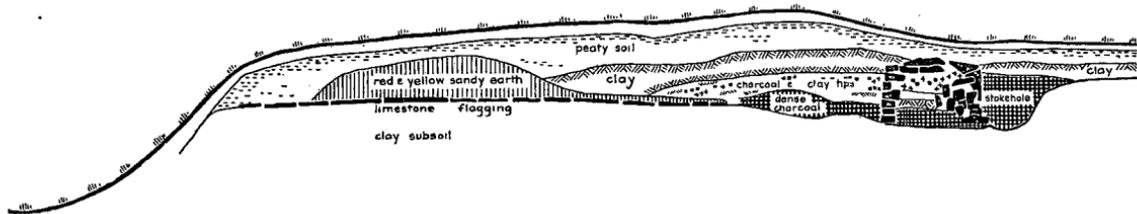


FIG. 1



BARCOMBE HILL
SECTION THROUGH BANK OF SIGNAL STATION



FIG. 2

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was initially cut away to slightly below natural subsoil level to insert a limestone flagging foundation averaging 13' 0" in width. On this a bank of light coloured sandy material was erected, which at present does not extend to the full width of the flagging on its outer margin. At the rear this bank appears to have been cut away to such an extent as to leave very little of the supposed rampart, but on a foundation of this width originally a bank height of 5-7 feet might be expected. The reduction at the front may possibly be explained if the rampart was at this point being reduced as it approached a gateway, although an access at this point of very difficult ascent to the hilltop seems on the whole unlikely. Perhaps the correct interpretation is severe erosion following the abandonment of the post.

The large scoop at the rear of the rampart appears to be connected with the insertion of a small oven, approximately 1' 6" × 2' 6" with a stokehole to the north-east, shortly after its completion, although the large size of the cut and the apparent damage caused to the rampart remains unexplained. A considerable amount of charcoal and ash was associated with the use and immediate disuse of the oven and it is from this material that the pottery described below is reported to have come. There is nothing to suggest that much time elapsed before the site appears to have been deliberately cleared up by the spreading of approximately 9" of sterile clay over the whole of the exposed area, a layer which in part is responsible for the present appearance of a raised platform. This clay could be the natural residue overlying the limestone which was later removed from its position when the quarries lining the north escarpment of the hill were opened during the construction of the Great Wall further to the north. The well known Thorngraston hoard¹ of the early years of Hadrian attests that the quarries were open at this period and may possibly have even been abandoned. This spread of clay appears to represent the end of the life of the signal station, after which time con-

¹ *A.A.* 2, iii, 269.

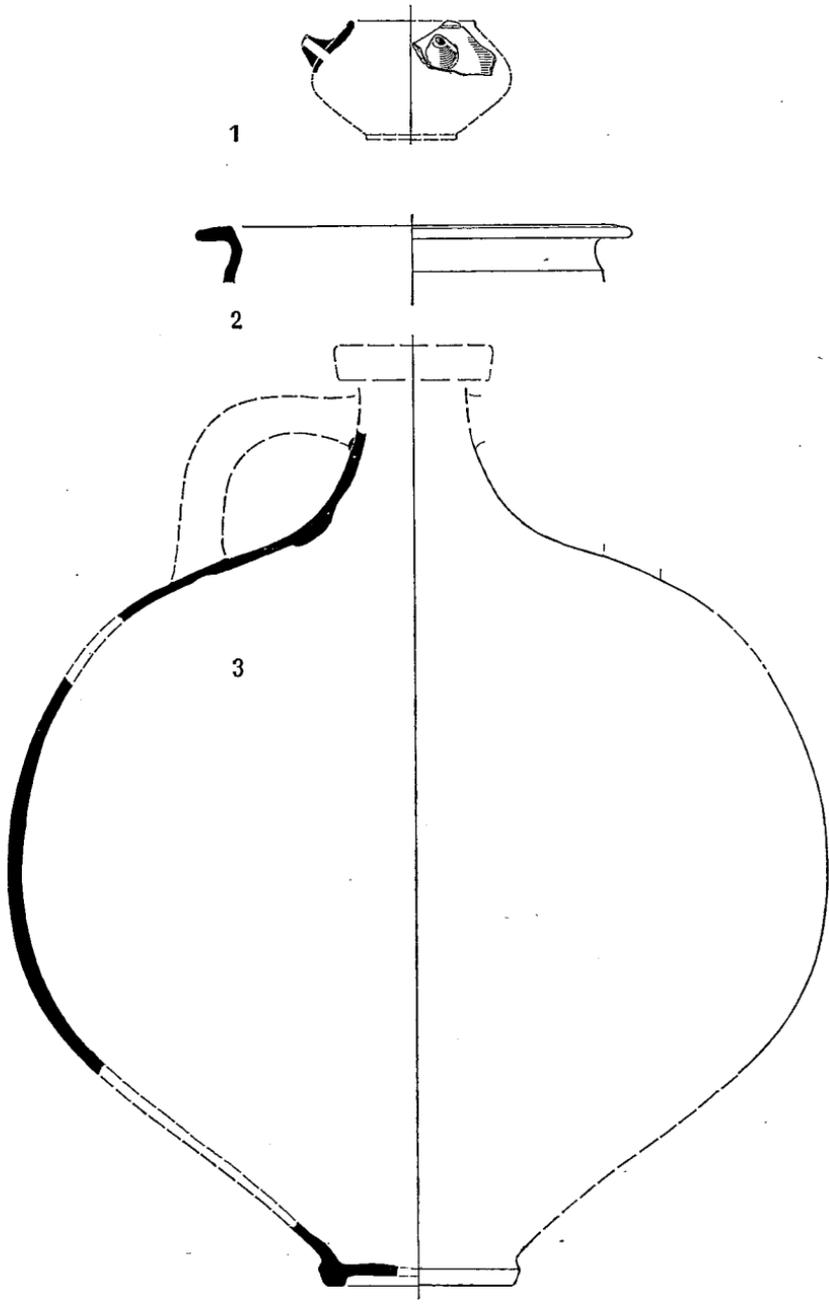


FIG. 3 (1/4)

siderable erosion has taken place with the formation of a sterile peaty soil over which the present topsoil lies.

POTTERY :

1. 3 sherds of pale pink smooth ware with sparse broken pre-fired red clay and a small applied spout. This appears to be a vessel of simple form such as that from Colchester illustrated in the British Museum *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* P. 36 No. 25, and fig. 17 usually described as an infant's feeding bottle, although probably not serving as such in this context.

2. 3 sherds of pale grey ware with darker surface, representing one bowl with wide and slightly downturned rim not reeded, and incurved below rim forming a slight constriction at the neck. Chesterholm 17. Flavian.

3. 45 sherds of buff self-coloured fabric representing one very large globular jug with handle(s) and bold footring. Rim absent. Camulodunum Form 172, p. 250. Flavian.

All the pottery from this excavation is reported to have come from the charcoal layer, the stokehole and the contents of the oven, including some from the upper filling, and indicates a Flavian date for the insertion of this feature in the pre-existing bank.

SMALL FINDS :

The only object recovered was an irregularly shaped piece of lead approximately 2" x 1½" found in the lowest filling of the oven. There is no indication of it having been worked since its last molten state. It may have been melted down in the oven by accident.

Conclusions

This trench has served to confirm the supposed pre-Hadrianic date of this site by the provision of exclusively Flavian pottery from a secondary feature. This feature cannot post-date the building of the bank by long, nor could its period of use but be short. However certain points of construction and dating still require further elucidation and total excavation of this site is necessary if a full picture is to

be obtained. The evidence for a Flavian signalling system seems inadequate and one must at present be content to see Barcombe tower as a lookout post more specifically connected with Chesterholm itself.

Acknowledgements are due to Mr. George Jobey for permitting the reproduction of his survey of Barcombe Hill, to Mr. J. P. Gillam for his assistance with the pottery, and to Professor Eric Birley for his help with the previous history of the site.

