

EXCAVATIONS AT HOLMBURY CAMP, SURREY.

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BY

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A SMALL local committee—consisting of Mr. C. H. Grinling, of Peaslake, and Dr. Parkes and Miss Joan Parkes of Holmbury St. Mary—having raised an excavation fund, I was invited to superintend digging at Holmbury Camp in April 1930. Four weeks' work was entailed, three of digging and one of filling in. Two Peaslake men, Mansell and Sayers, carefully shifted a vast quantity of soil, and a little army of volunteer workers gave much help. To these, and especially to Mr. A. D. Franklin, of Worcester, who gave me a fortnight of his holiday, and to Mr. Handford, of Lancing College, I am grateful; also to Mr. Lee Steere, of Ockley, and Mr. Reginald Bray, of Shere, for permission to dig. Mr. King, of Abinger Hammer, kindly lent two useful huts; and I am obliged to Mr. Robert Gurd for the drawing of the plans. The meaning of the word Holmbury probably is "hill fort" (Old Saxon, *holm* = hill, and *burh* = fort). Several writers had expressed *à priori* views about the date of Holmbury Camp, and thought it prehistoric in origin, or Roman, or post-Roman, or even used again as a Saxon cemetery after the struggle at the battle of Ockley (A.D. 853). The result of our work was to prove the first of these hypotheses, and to narrow down the wide prehistoric range to the La Tène III period of the Early Iron Age, which may be taken roughly to cover the years 150 B.C. to A.D. 50. Camps of this age are apt to yield but scanty evidence, and a site overgrown with bracken, gorse, brambles and whortleberry certainly made investigation far from easy. Hence it was very cheering that, the first week having produced little but the rough

flint implements and flakes which seem to belong particularly to the millennium B.C., definite evidence of a Late Celtic occupation began to come to light, and that the indicia disclosed by hard, persevering and deep digging in many places were particularly consistent. One discovery after another confirmed the La Tène III date: only one fragment of a blackish-grey Roman rim, and that probably of early date, pointed to a possible extension of the Celtic occupation into Roman times.

Much of a general and interesting character might be written about Holmbury Camp and its neighbours on east and west—Anstiebury and Hascombe. Our success at Holmbury may encourage others to interrogate these two sites, the former larger, the latter smaller than Holmbury. But in the space available I must confine myself strictly to our digging and examination of the site, and it will be convenient if the parts of the subject are dealt with in the following order: (i) the earthworks as a whole; (ii) the trenches and holes dug and the evidence they yielded; (iii) a brief description of the "finds," the best specimens of which will be found at the Guildford Museum; and (iv) Holmbury in its historical setting.

(i) *The Earthworks.* The fosses and valla and southward scarps, together with the area enclosed, occupy about eight acres. The camp, a rough square with west, north and east sides each of about 220 yards, cannot be classified as strictly contour, promontory or hill-top camp: in its features it partakes of all three. It is on the top of a hill which slopes gently up from the foot of the Chalk Downs some $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles away northward, and then ends in a steep promontory sloping south. The altitude is 857 feet in the south-west, and 767 in the north-east corner of the enclosed area. Owing to the plateau the chief artificial defences are on the west and north sides; here two big valla and two deep ditches were made, though the inner vallum is now hardly visible on the west side. On the east side there is an apparently natural bank, outside and below which is now a terrace (about 18–20 feet wide and about 15 feet below the area) which was perhaps originally a fosse, with an exterior bank, now

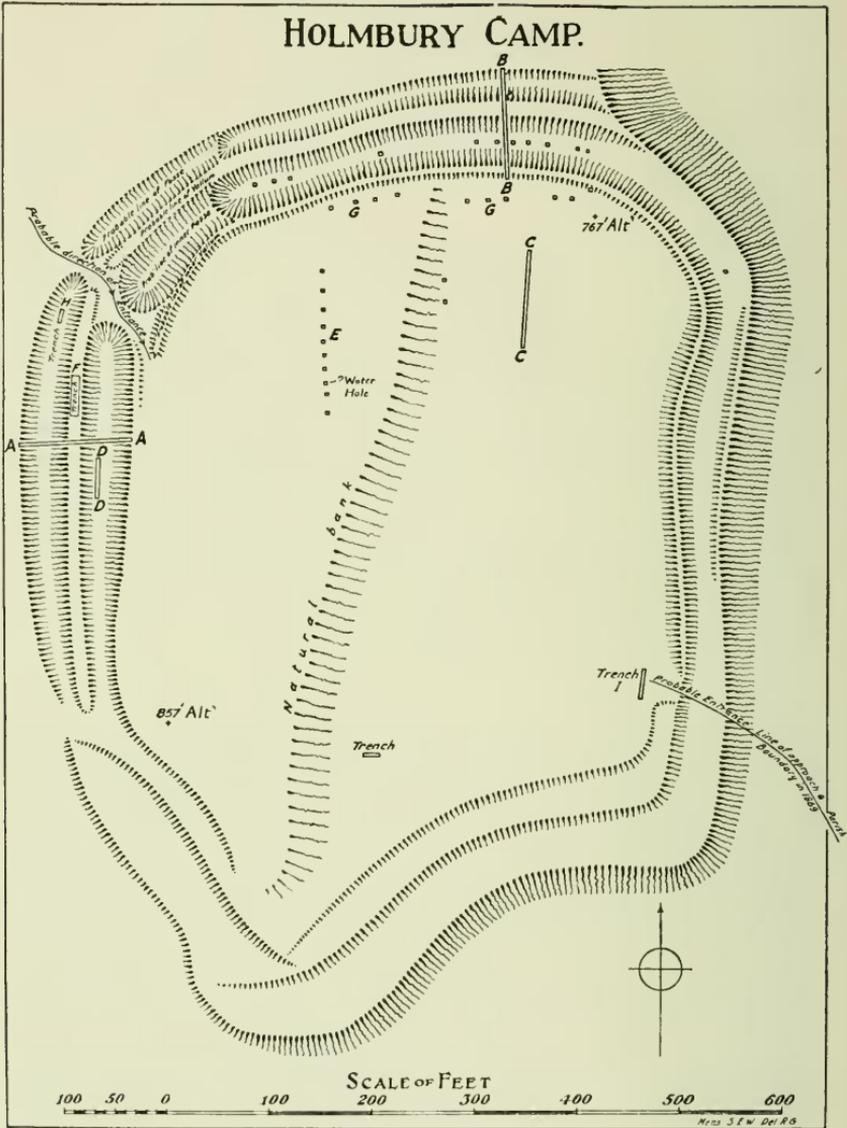


FIG. I. PLAN OF HOLMBURY CAMP

mostly eroded; outside these is the steep hillside. On the south side there is no trace of an inner vallum, but from the lip of the hill there is a scarp leading down to a terrace, another scarp and another terrace, and finally the steep descent of the hill. To south and south-west the upper terrace has been destroyed by quarrying, and high up there is a cave, with its mouth nearly blocked by loose débris, which might repay for clearing. The upper terrace on the south side is 20 feet below the lip of the hill, and the lower 20 feet below that. These terraces also, I am inclined to think from certain indications, were originally fosses, of which the floors have been silted up and the outer banks eroded. Unfortunately this point could not be cleared up, nor indeed did it seem so vital a matter as the date of occupation. The inner area is peculiarly divided into two levels, the higher to the west, the lower and altogether more snug to the east, the lowest-lying portion being north-east. The lower and comparatively level area has probably been ploughed: this one might infer both from the depth and the nature of the top soil, and from the fact that it has been and is known as the "Ockley Field." At 20 yards from the north inner vallum, the lower area is about 70 yards across east-west, the upper 100 yards. Certainly the hub of the Celtic camp was the north-east corner where the cooking and food department appears to have been. In spite of the nature of the soil—sand of the Hythe beds of the Lower Greensand—the inhabitants had water, held no doubt by strata of clay which occur here and there in these hills. About 75 yards outside the camp on the north is a little pond on a bed of clay, which supplied us with water for our work. Mr. Ernest Christie, of Ockley, who is a skilful diviner with the twig, assures me that there is plenty of water in at least two strongish springs under the north-east area from about 15 to 18 feet down; and one of the holes (see E on Plan) revealed what may have been a well or water hole 2,000 years ago, if it was not a purely natural drop in a water channel. According to Mr. Christie, at 8 feet deeper than the 8 feet we dug, water would have been found. As to entrances, there can be no doubt that the chief entrance was in the north-west corner: a secondary entrance or postern was probably at the south-east, where a

path now drops fairly gently down to the Weald: it served as a parish boundary certainly till 1869. The outer fosse on the north side towards the east end peters out on the steep eastern slope of the hill.

It is to be regretted that recent quarrying has almost hopelessly blurred the devices employed for protecting the original north-west entrance. Much time I spent on speculating at this point, like pious Æneas revolving my mind this way and that. Finally, it seemed best to record the amount of space over which interruptions have taken place in the lines of outer fosse, central vallum, inner fosse and inner bank. All of these can to some extent be traced over the interrupted space. In each case I give measurements starting from the north end of the west defences round the bend to the point where the north defences begin again. (The modern raised path, which must be very close to the original entrance, comes in from the north-north-west, and then runs along what was originally the west inner bank.) The outer fosse is interrupted for 180 feet; the central vallum, which still exists for 37 feet south-west of the path and 40 feet north-east of it, for 100 feet (*i.e.* 177 feet in all); inner fosse, 167 feet; inner vallum, about 160 feet. My impression is that after crossing the outer fosse, the line of the original entrance was a zigzag, first to the left and then to the right before the interior was reached. Obviously this would have been at a low level, and not as the modern path which is at the top of things. Such three-direction entrances are found at Yarnbury, Wilts; Hod Hill and Eggardon, Dorset; Dolebury, Somerset; Cockburn Law, and elsewhere. Allowing for the interruption of 167 feet at the north-west entrance, the periphery of the inner fosses and terraces measures about 840-850 yards. No tumuli are to be seen in the neighbourhood.

(ii) *The digging of trenches and holes.* A beginning was made with a thoroughgoing section across the west defences, at a point 100 feet from the north end of the inner fosse: trench A (see diagram of section). This proved, what indeed one would have expected in sand, that the two fosses had been silted up to a great depth. The bottom of the inner fosse

was originally 14 feet 6 inches below the top of the inner vallum; to-day it is 9 feet 7 inches, the difference of 4 feet 11 inches being accounted for by silting. The heavy stones on the slopes had naturally fallen first to the bottom, where they lay in a big, loose, wet mass. The central vallum is wide, about 24 yards over all from fosse to fosse, and no doubt

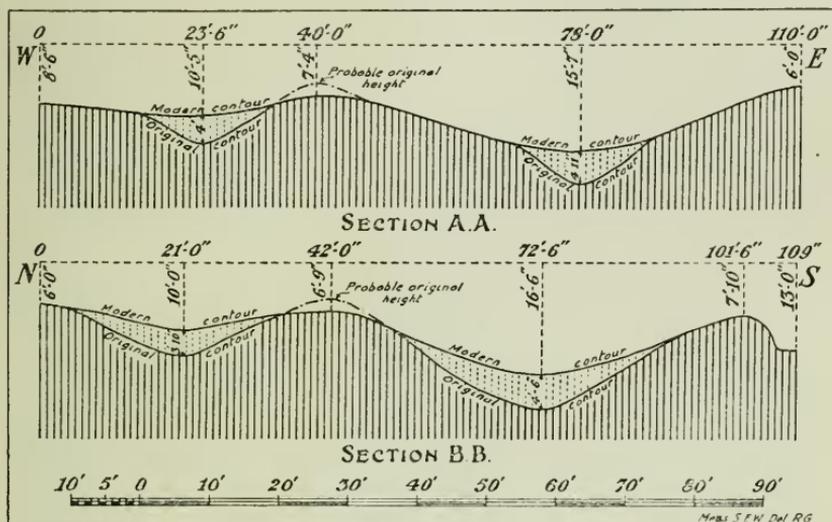


FIG. 2. DIAGRAMS OF FOSSE SECTIONS, A.A. AND B.B. ON PLAN

was originally 2-3 feet higher. The outer (or west) fosse, with no artificial bank to the west of it, has silted to a depth of 4 feet. A trench of a length of 30 feet along the top of the central vallum (see Plan F), undertaken with a view of finding post-holes for a stockade, failed to find them, but produced worked flints and a sherd of La Tène III pottery, found together 1 foot 6 inches down: their association is important. The nearly level bottom of the piling of the central vallum was 2 feet 9 inches down at the centre. (It is probable that the two fosses and intermediate vallum were made in what was originally a natural dip (north to south) 110 feet across, like several others existing on the hill top.) On this level were found several scraps of charcoal, six worked flints, and two clean fragments of what appeared to be worked chert. It seems obvious that, before the earthworks were made, flint

flakes and implements were lying on the original surface: some, the majority, were completely covered by the central vallum, and others, found at various levels both in fosses and valla, were thrown up or down as chance dictated. A few were only 15 inches down from the top of the central vallum. These flints were prior to the camp: other flints found consistently in the north-east area in association with La Tène III pottery, food bones and querns, were contemporary with its occupation. (The clean condition of certain pieces of chert, remains of what appear to be worked cores, and a few flakes, suggest that chert may have been worked here as well as ordinary flints, and this is natural, as it is available near at hand, whereas the nearest supply of flints is over 3 miles away.) A trench D dug just south of A was unproductive. The measurements of section B are partly conjectural. A series of big holes about 5 feet square were dug at intervals all along the north fosse. About half-way along it, and at a point corresponding to the natural bank which divides the camp into two parts, the fosse slopes steeply down to the east. Just below this slope three holes, subsequently joined up by cutting through the intervening ground, were dug to the original fosse floor at 4 feet 6 inches. On the south side of one, resting on the slope at 3 feet 10 inches down, was found part of a rim and one handle of a big red pot of flint-gritted ware (all the pottery hereafter described is of the La Tène III period). Except that the handle is attached to the rim, it resembles the so-called "Purbeck handles," that is handles found largely in the Purbeck Hills. Its horizontal perforation is only $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter, and not meant to admit a finger, but a chain for suspension over a fire. Right at the bottom of the fosse, whither their weight had naturally taken them when thrown out over the north vallum, was a mass of broken quern stones of beehive type. They were discarded after being broken, nearly all at the weakest parts, that is, at the round pivot holes and at the rectangular (not oval, as at Glastonbury) sockets for the handles in the upper stones. The shape of a whole quern is roughly conical and about 12 inches high. The grinding face of the nether stone has a diameter of about 10 to 11 inches. The pivot of course must have been of iron, but not the smallest scrap of iron of any



VIEW OF SECTION A THROUGH FOSSE,
VALLUM AND FOSSE (LOOKING E.)



GROUP OF QUERN STONES, ONE WITH RECTANGULAR HANDLE
GROOVE

kind of implement was found, and was not likely to be found in this sandy soil. (Within a year, in my work in three Early-Iron-Age camps on sand, I have found no iron relic whatever, but only iron slag at Saxonbury and Castle Hill, Tonbridge. I wonder whether other excavators have recovered iron from sandstone sites as freely as from chalk and clay sites.) There was much ado in trying to fit together the numerous parts of these querns, but only in a few cases with any success. At least twenty querns were represented by the fragments found, some big, some small. They are of a hard local sandstone which the quarry workers say is "Bargate stone"; but the geologists are cautious in giving it a name. Mr. F. H. Edmunds, of the Geological Survey, says they are of local chert. No doubt, as at The Trundle, they were derived from these Hythe beds of the Lower Greensand. About 150 beehive querns were found at the Early-Iron-Age settlement at Hunsbury, near Northampton, and all the rotary querns from the Glastonbury Lake-villages are of this type. They help to fix the anterior limit of occupation, as they are known not to have been used before about 200 B.C.

Though a section was not driven across the inner and outer north fosses and the bank between, the bottom of the inner fosse was found and enough of its sides to suggest the probable contour. A level line across from the top of the inner to the top of the outer bank was 101 feet 6 inches long. The modern bottom of the outer (or north) fosse is 4 feet below this level, and the silting probably about 3 feet 10 inches. The deeper inner fosse is to-day 10 feet 6 inches below the level, and is silted to a depth of 4 feet 6 inches. The level of the interior of the camp near the inner bank is 5 feet 2 inches below its top. Plenty of charcoal and burnt sandstone, no doubt the remains of fires made just inside the bank, were found in this inner north fosse.

The series of G holes were dug just inside the camp, parallel with the inner vallum, and in cases where it was necessary, joined up into continuous trenches. In brief, we found in the lower (or east) holes more querns, food bones (of sheep, ox, and wild boar), nine sherds (2 feet 8 inches down and probably in a hole) of soapy pottery, black and red, worked flints, and the remains of fires, and in one place (1 foot 10

inches down) a layer 5 inches thick of ashes and charcoal, concreted by sand and moisture into a solid mass: this extended for about 3 to 4 feet square. In the fire places was much burnt sandstone. Protected on the north by the vallum, on east and west by natural banks, and on the south by the long slope down from the south, this was beyond doubt *the spot* in the camp for shelter. The more western of these G. holes gave only worked flints, a few pebbles, and charcoal. A few yards south of the eastern G holes a trench of 100 feet in length (C) was dug, proving that the occupation level was only 1 foot 6 inches to 2 feet below the modern surface. The ploughing tilth was less than 1 foot. In it were found scattered a few sling pebbles, charcoal, part of what appeared to have been a rammed floor of brown clay, and on it a pot broken into about thirty pieces, containing charcoal moulded to the shape of base and bulge. No doubt this had been used as a charcoal pot for warming. It is described below. Three holes were then joined up to make a continuous trench, but nothing more was found. Two holes were dug west of this against the rising bank, but only flints and pebbles were found. In the eastern area two 20-foot trenches were dug, one (I) across the line of the probable south-east entrance, which gave one fragment of pottery. The other was east to west, west of the entrance and on the higher ground of the southern part of the camp, at a place which an isolated patch of whortleberry made suggestive; but the work here was fruitless. In the north-west area a series of a dozen holes (E), in places two deep, were dug west of and parallel with the dividing bank. These produced many flints and a large number of sling pebbles, all on the occupation level, 1 foot 6 inches to 2 feet below the surface. In one of these, barely 18 inches down, was found a rim of early Roman date, the only thing found which could be called distinctively Roman. The third hole from the south end of the series gave interesting results and had to be widened. At the original level (2 feet down) the removal of very loose soft soil led to the discovery of a round hole 3 feet 10 inches in diameter. It seemed to be roughly steyned with stones, and at 6 feet farther down on the bottom were big stones. The greenish colour of the sand on the west side of this, about 1 foot down (3 feet



WESTERN INNER FOSSE (LOOKING S.) WITH VIEW OF SECTION A



HOLES BEING DUG IN NORTH FOSSE

from the modern surface), indicated that there had been a water channel, about 1 foot 6 inches wide, discharging into this water hole. It had gradually silted up the hole with washed sand. Mr. Edmunds considered the hole a natural feature. Mr. Christie calculated that there is water about 8 feet below the bottom we reached.

The provenance of the selected pebbles (most of which were grey, but a few buff) is almost certainly Netley, or Ranmore, or north-west of Netley, which is about 4 miles away to the north on the chalk downs, where the Geological Survey Map marks a bed of Woolwich pebbles and Reading beds deposited on the chalk. The flints no doubt also come from the North Downs. The fact that several of the pebbles were found on the original level over the soft filling of the "water hole" suggests that the hole was filled in or silted up and had become obsolete, either before or while the pebble-using people were here. An average pebble weighs about 2 oz., slightly more than the beach pebbles found at The Trundle. It remained to test the north-west entrances. In trench X, dug to a depth of 3 feet at the north end of the outer western fosse, were found flint flakes and charcoal, 2 feet 6 inches down. Three other entrance trenches, not marked in the plan, gave no results.

Of course this excavation was very partial, and as such would not have been approved by General Pitt-Rivers, who, with ample funds and time, would probably have dug to undisturbed soil ("dead earth") over every square yard of the eight acres. But a fund of forty pounds and four weeks of work in which only two diggers could be depended on, naturally set narrow limits to the job; and the "all or nothing" theory is really fallacious. However, should a future excavator wish to continue our work, he will know where we have dug, always to the bottom. We found no signs of pit dwellings.

Meanwhile, substantial evidence points very definitely to the Late Celtic occupation of Holmbury Camp, *c.* 150 B.C. to A.D. 50, that is in the La Tène III period of the Early Iron Age. The evidence consists of: beehive querns, gritted red and soft pottery, rough flints, sling pebbles as found in pre-Roman Cissbury and Mt. Caburn (by Dr. Cecil Curwen), the

contours of fosses and valla, and the general lay-out of the Camp, the roughly square shape of which is due not to Roman influence, but to the contour necessities of the site.

(iii) *Finds.* (a) Flints, i.e. deliberately worked rough flints, about sixty or seventy in number, were found here and there, but the purposes for which they were used is still, so far as I know, as much a problem as it was when Pitt-Rivers in 1897 confessed himself at a loss to explain them. They do not seem to be "wasters," and the proportion of flint implements (four only) is very small. Hundreds of flints were found in the Glastonbury Lake-villages of the Early Iron Age, and Pitt-Rivers found them in plenty in Roman strata, and concludes they "must have been imported as such for a specific purpose. . . . Nothing but long and careful observation will suffice to throw light on this point, in the future." But we are still in the dark as to why so many flint flakes are found in Early-Iron-Age and Roman sites. My opinion is that not a single piece of Neolithic flint work was found on the site. But there are undoubted Neolithic flint-factory sites within a mile or two to the north, on the north slope of these sand hills, notably at Far Corner, near Peaslake, where Mr. Karl Walter has found hundreds of specimens. (I hope he will contribute a description of his site and finds to the *S.A.C.*) Mr. Hasluck at Westcott has another such site by a stream: and there are more. Flints were in use both before and after the construction of the defences of Holmbury.

Three implements, drawn by Mr. Christie, are illustrated. Of these No. 1 is a good specimen of an end-scraper; it was

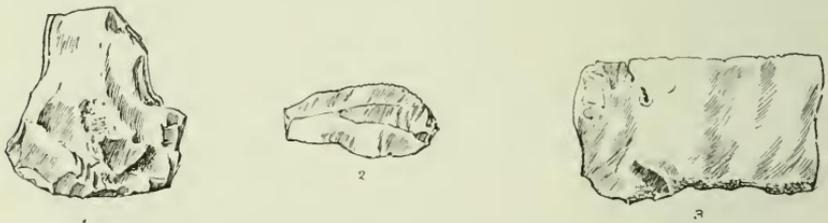


FIG. 3. THREE FLINT IMPLEMENTS

handled by the butt end raised at an angle of about 30 degrees. No. 2 is a neat little serrated flake, with three facets. Of No. 3 I have not seen the like: it is a thin flake saw, with the



SLING PEBBLES, FLINTS, LA TÈNE III
HANDLE (1) AND ROMAN RIM (2)

cortex on the reverse side. The drawings are half natural size. The flint pebbles, selected for size (about the size and shape of a small ovoid potato) and averaging about 2 oz. in weight, were used both for slings and as pot-boilers: many were cracked and showed signs of burning.

(b) Bones. These were found in the G holes, the cooking department. Part of the jaw of a wild boar (illustrated, half natural size), had

four teeth, of which one (in the opinion of Dr. Parkes) had not come through: it was a young

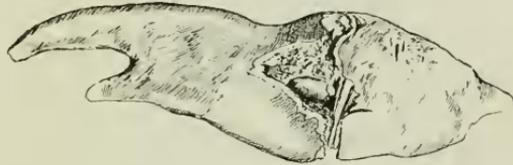


FIG. 4. WILD BOAR'S JAW

animal, probably stuck down in the Weald. Half of a jaw of a sheep had all the teeth in position: there was also part of a sheep's vertebra. Two fragments of small rib bones probably belonged to a small Celtic ox. Sheep and cattle were probably pastured on the hill top round the camp, where there was almost certainly a plentiful supply of grass, just as there now is on the high slopes of Leith Hill.

(c) Pottery. One fragment of everted and pointed Roman rim, grey-black, of softish texture (see Fig. 7, No. 2). Of La Tène III pottery fragments of two types were found; one, the soft soapy body so characteristic of the period, in black and red. The other, harder ware, gritted with crushed flint. The best specimen of this is the red rim and handle (or suspension hole) described above (see Fig. 7, No. 1). One piece only (about 3 inches by 2 inches) had ornament of shallow incised lines—three parallel horizontal lines round the shoulder crossed by oblique lines. This wheel-made pottery is the exact counterpart of that found by me at Saxonbury, Frant—a camp of the same period.

The sherds of the charcoal pot found in Trench C I managed to piece together with plastic wood, out of $\frac{2}{3}$ of a base, $\frac{2}{3}$ of a rim in three pieces, one or two fair-sized pieces of bulge (not fitting), and about twenty other fragments. The result is a typical La Tène III pot, red-brown in colour, but black inside with the charcoal contained. Its dimensions are: height, 5 inches, diameter of mouth, 4 inches; diameter of

greatest bulge, $4\frac{2}{3}$ inches (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches below the rim), diameter of base, 3 inches. It is a hand-made pot with a slender bead rim and a foot ring, above which is a slight inward curve. The edges of the sherds crumbled away in the first handling: hence the difficulty of fitting together.

(d) Querns. Parts of these (as described above) were found in the north fosse and G holes. Two of them had a pair of horizontal grooves round the upper stones, the grooves being 1 inch wide and separated by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch; ropes were probably fitted into them, so that the quern could be revolved from two sides. The typical Roman discoidal quern consists of two flattish discs, each about 3 inches thick. From the bottom of the north inner fosse with querns came a hand-crusher or pounder of the same stone as the querns. It is oval and cut straight below, roughly resembling a pine-apple. No iron or bronze was found.

(e) Chert. The possibility that chert was worked for implements grew upon me as we dug. The material is almost as much imported, though only from the lower strata of these hills, as ordinary flint. Pieces were found on the habitation level, especially in the north-east area, each piece coming out separate and clean. It is the lighter-coloured, not the dark brown type, which is used; and there seem to be deliberate flakes with bulbs, and cores with part of the cortex left. This is a point well worth further investigation, especially as at Chard, in Somerset (as I am told by Dr. Eric Gardner) a pit has revealed worked chert. In the opinion of Mr. Edmunds, however, the fractures are natural.

(iv) *Historical Setting*. Finally, a few sentences may be permitted about the general historical setting of Holmbury Camp. Early-Iron-Age men had settlements on the high places of the Weald, as at Saxonbury and Castle Hill, Tonbridge. At Holmbury he occupied a magnificent site overlooking a huge stretch of the Weald, to the south, west and east. There is little reason to suppose that he had no communications across the Weald, but it is obvious that Holmbury was connected mainly with the prehistoric east to west route along the north chalk downs. From this and the Tillingbourne valley a delightfully easy approach is provided by a natural valley which leads gently the whole way up

from Abinger Hammer nearly to the entrance of the Camp. If the Anstiebury and Hascombe Camps are also of Early Iron Age, it might perhaps be tempting to think that the three together had some broad strategical purpose in guarding the north-west exits from the Weald. But this is not likely in the first two centuries B.C., though in the century following the withdrawal of the Romans some such purpose would be intelligible, especially as Stane Street passed to the east of Anstiebury, and the Farley Heath Roman road between Holmbury and Hascombe, and the three would have constituted a formidable barrier against Saxons advancing from the south-east in the direction of Dorking, Guildford and Farnham. But there is at present no evidence whatever that these camps were occupied by the Roman-British against a Saxon advance, or by Saxons against the Danes. The spade is worth more than much theorising on general historical grounds. One writer of authority has considered that Holmbury was possibly a British Camp of the post-Roman period : two others in *V.C.H. Surrey* adopted this view, while another in the same work classed it as Neolithic : a fifth suggests its use as a Saxon cemetery. In the light of our finds these hypotheses will now hardly pass muster.

Musing many evenings on this hill top I pieced the past together thus. The last incoming wave of Brythonic Celts, crossing from N. Gaul, in the second century B.C., penetrated Britain chiefly by the North Downs route which connected Folkestone with Farnham, Winchester and Salisbury Plain. The sand hills close south attracted many groups to settle in such fine sites as those of Oldbury, in Kent, and Holmbury. They brought their Gallic civilization with them : their querns alone imply the growing of corn, and skill in stone work and the forging of iron. Possibly three groups belonging to the same tribe occupied three neighbouring fortified villages, and co-operated in the construction of all three. Some 500 people (probably fewer) occupied Holmbury, of whom perhaps 150 were grown men. On the top and on the northern slopes they pastured their herds and flocks, and grew corn ; in the Weald below they hunted the wild boar and other game. They made and drank mead, were fair potters, wove skilfully cloths of bright colours, and cleaned

animal skins for their winter clothing. They tatoed their bodies, and, led by the priestly caste of the Druids, practised cruelties in the religious rites connected with their gods of thunder, war, women's crafts and manly beauty—Taranis, Belutacador, Belisama, and Belin. With these were ranged also Nudd, and Lud, and Mabon, and the three Mother Goddesses. There were no pine trees then on the hills: this innovation of about a century and a half ago must be rigidly expunged from the picture. When the Romans came they made little resistance, for they had already for many years partially adopted the material side of their culture, and they lived on Holmbury, as elsewhere, practically unmolested till the fifth century A.D. The Saxon invaders came, and the Celtic folk of Holmbury finally trekked away westward and northward by Farnham and Guildford. Will this fancy serve?