

# Excavations at Wilbury Hill, an Iron Age Hill-Fort, Near Letchworth, Herts. 1959.

by JOHN MOSS-ECCARDT

THE work was carried out on behalf of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Ministry of Works and Letchworth Museum. It consisted of a trial excavation in a small area destined to become the site of a Royal Observer Corps observation post. Operations occupied a period of three weeks during September and October 1959. The writer wishes to place on record his thanks for the help and support received from Letchworth Urban District Council and from the Curator of the Museum, Mr A. T. Clarke, F.M.A.

Wilbury Hill lies about one mile to the west of Letchworth (Nat. Grid. Ref. 52/212326) at a height of 285 ft above Ordnance Datum. E. S. Applebaum considered the area of the camp to be about 15 acres but further excavation will have to decide this matter. Traces of the rampart can be seen for just under half of its estimated circuit and the camp appears to be of an oval shape (Fig 1 and Pl IV). A full account of the site is given by Applebaum in his report on the 1933 excavations.<sup>1</sup>

The camp is mentioned by various writers, among them Camden,<sup>2</sup> Salmon,<sup>3</sup> Brayley,<sup>4</sup> and Clutterbuck<sup>5</sup>. Roman finds are reported from Wilbury and its vicinity including coins,<sup>6</sup> interments, and a bronze figure.<sup>7</sup> No doubt these finds have been responsible for the local tradition of referring to the Wilbury gravel pit as 'the Roman Camp'. Bronze bracelets, rings, buckles, Roman and Iron Age potsherds from Wilbury are in Letchworth Museum.

Digging was carried out by William Lucas and Joseph Lister about 1810, and William Ransome between 1848 and 1850. In 1929 W. P. Westell dug a small area to the north of the supposed south gate of the Camp and found pits, hearths, flint pavements and potsherds.<sup>8</sup> He also dug trenches somewhere in the region of 1959 trenches but the position is very inexact on the plan (see Fig 1). In 1933 E. S. Applebaum conducted excavations at Wilbury which consisted of sectioning the rampart in four places and discovering the south gate<sup>9</sup> (see Fig 1). The majority of the finds is in Letchworth Museum.

<sup>1</sup>E. S. Applebaum 'Excavations at Wilbury Hill'. *Arch. J.* CVI.

<sup>2</sup>*Britannia*. ed. Gough. ii. 46.

<sup>3</sup>*Hist. of Herts* (1728). 160.

<sup>4</sup>*Beauties of Britain: Herts*. 176.

<sup>5</sup>*Hist. of Herts*. iii. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup>*Arch.* liii. 257.

<sup>7</sup>Cussans. *Hist. of Herts*. ii. 5.

<sup>8</sup>*J.B.A.A.*<sup>2</sup> xxxviii. 248 ff.

<sup>9</sup>Applebaum. *op. cit.*

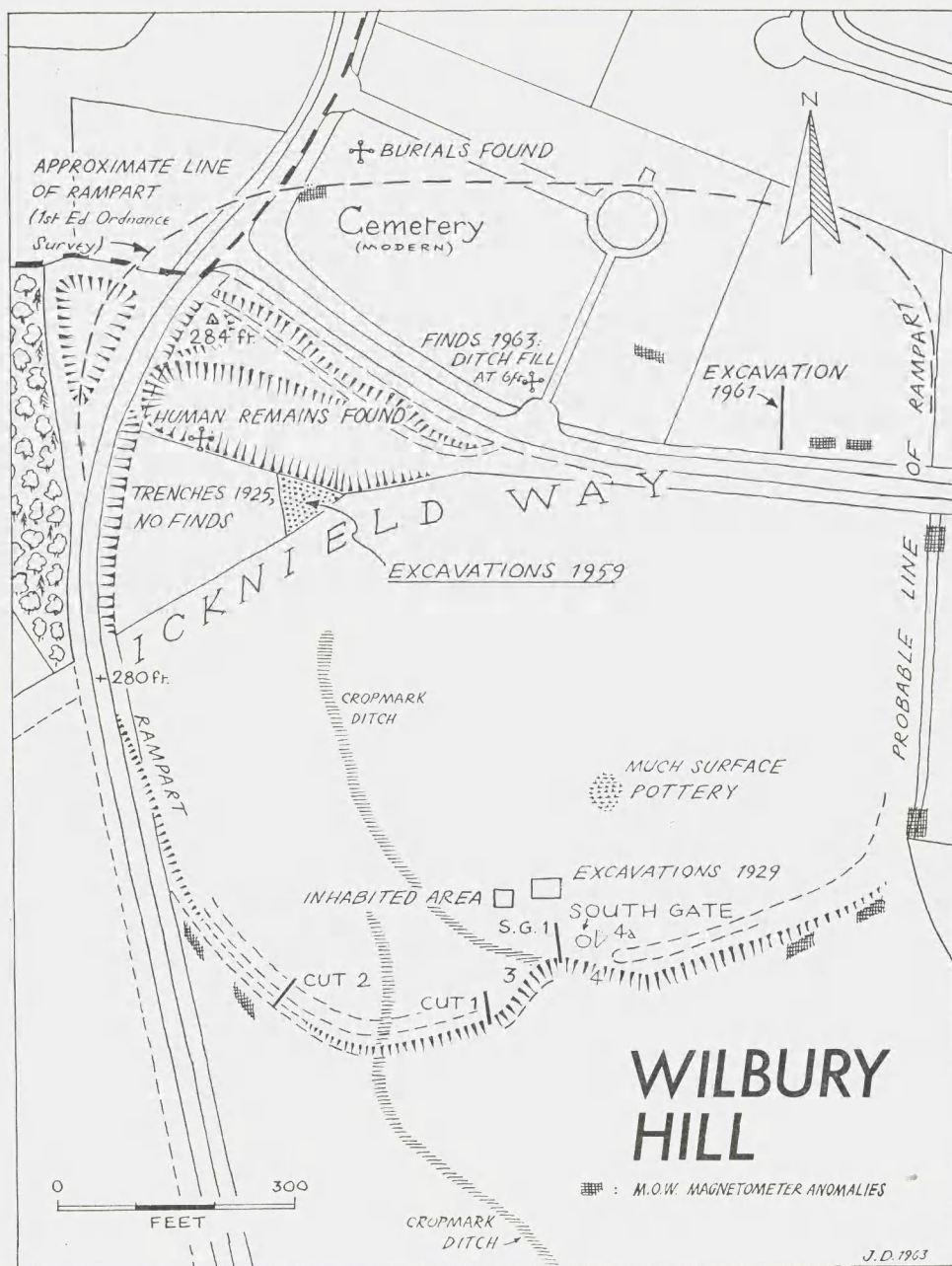


Fig 1. Map of Wilbury Hill, near Letchworth, showing the position of 1959 Excavations.

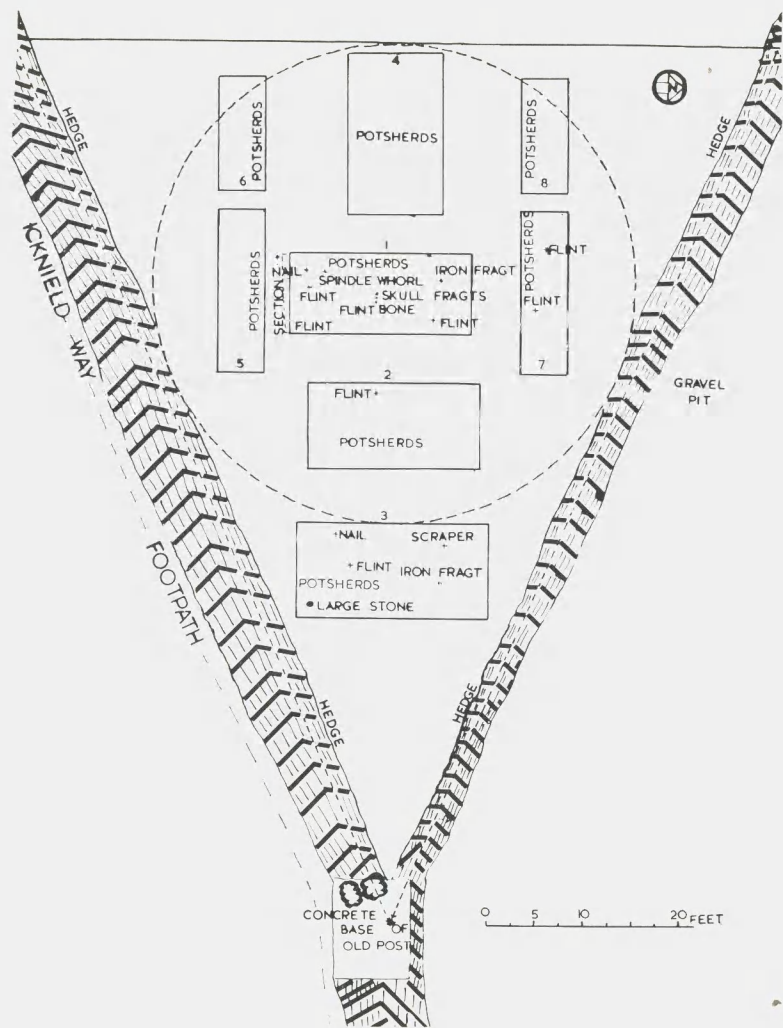


Fig 2. Wilbury Hill, plan 1959 of Excavation.

### PRESENT EXCAVATION (Fig 2)

The present excavation was carried out in the angle formed by the footpath and hedge which follow the track known as the 'Icknield Way', and the disused gravel pit. Eight cuttings of varying dimensions were made and the greater part of the area was investigated to a depth of c.  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft, into the natural sand and gravel.

No signs of structures occurred but finds of potsherds, iron objects and other occupation material were made in a homogeneous layer of black sand which indicated an occupation area somewhere in the near vicinity.

The pottery is of the Early Iron Age of which both the 'A' and 'C' phases are represented; these examples are characteristic of the site. Some small fragments of human skull were found in Cutting 1 together with part of a human humerus, calcined bone fragments, a broken spindle whorl, a small iron nail and a small iron hook. A few pieces of daub and flint flakes were also found in this area.

The site is covered with glacial drift and much irregularity in the occurrence of sand and gravel is common. The stratification (Fig 3) was as follows: topsoil, (2) red-brown fine sand with (2a) a layer of blackened sand containing occupation debris c. 6 in thick, (3) red ferruginous sand containing flints. In some places occurred (3a) as a band of large flint nodules under (2a). This band was not a pavement or road.

The greatest number of finds was concentrated in the area of Cutting 1. No structures exist to explain this neither do hearths or other indications of habitation. The number of finds occurring in the area of excavation is not enough, or distributed in such a way as to suggest a rubbish pit. Organic material and animal bones are completely absent but this may be mainly due to the nature of the subsoil. One can only conclude that here we have a scatter of material from a nearby occupation area and it is hoped that further excavation will be carried out in the adjacent areas, in order to discover it.

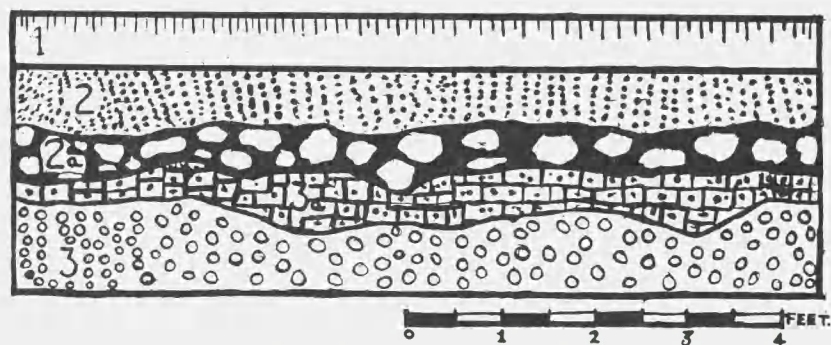


Fig 3. Section of 1959 Excavation

## THE FINDS

### THE POTTERY (Figs 4 & 5)

A total of 12¼ pounds of pottery was found and this consisted entirely of fragments. The wares were all gritted but there are degrees of fineness, and they may be grouped as follows:

- A. Coarse gritted wares, mainly buff or black, and of a 'biscuit-like' consistency. (fig 4, nos. 1-25). These fragments make up 55.3% of the total pottery found. (Diameters are all approximate.)
1. Everted rim of buff ware with brown surface; slight flattening of the rim. Diameter 7 in. Cutting 1. (Like Fengate Fig 8: XI).
  2. Everted rim of black sandy ware. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 4. Possibly showing Marnian influence (see Fengate Fig 5: K3).
  3. Rim, coarse brown ware, outside surface reddish, flat top extended outwards on edge, shallow cabling. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 2. (Similar at Wilbury 1933, Fig 8: 15; Holwell Fig 3: 7; Scarborough p. 187, Figs 16-18). Rims like this occur on urns with applied bands.
  4. Rim of situlate bowl, black ware with sandy buff exterior. Short fairly upright neck with high shoulder. Rim slopes outwards slightly—well-defined boundary between interior wall of neck and rim. Diameter 7¼ in. Cutting 2. (See Holwell Fig 3: 4; Hunsbury Fig 7: FT4a).
  5. Rim of situlate bowl, buff ware, more angular than (4) but less well-made. Rim curves down sharply to the top of the neck. Neck short and upright, shoulder curves away sharply. Diameter 5 in. Cutting 2. (Chinnor Fig 5: 5 for form).
  6. Flattened rim of black-brown ware, vertical neck, beginning of thickening for a shoulder. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 8. (Danbury Fig 1: 1, but our example is undecorated.)
  7. Small out-turned rim of dark-grey ware. Cutting 1.
  8. Small rim, crudely shaped, of black ware, shows signs of 'pinching'. Diameter 9½ in. Cutting 2. See no (5) above.
  9. Small rim of black ware, protruding slightly, pinched at end of neck. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 1. Probably a debasement of a situlate jar. (See Hunsbury FT9.)
  10. Rim of brown ware with smoothed surface, extended inwards. Finger-nail impression just below rim. Signs of smoothing with fingers. Cutting 3. (See Wandlebury Fig 8: 47; Hunsbury Fig 10: CI.)
  - 11a. Rim of buff ware, rounded and everted, paste smoothed over the neck. Diameter 9¼ in. (Fengate Fig 5: K3).
  11. Small rim of bowl, black ware, brown internally, neck upright, slight shoulder. Cutting 4. (West Harling Fig 28.)
  12. Shoulder fragment of buff sandy ware or urn-like pot. Reminiscent of the applied band. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 4.
  13. As above. Cutting 8.
  14. Fragment of rusticated ware, black inside, with finger-nail impressions. Cutting 8. (Like Linton Fig 5: 34.)
  15. Shoulder of situlate jar, thin sandy, brown ware with finger-nail impressions. Cutting 1.
  16. Fragment of hard black ware decorated with close horizontal furrowing. Cutting 7.
  17. Angular shoulder of brown ware, burnt red on outside. Possibly of biconical vessel. Cutting 2.
  18. As above. Cutting 4.



Fig 4. Pottery from 1959 Excavation. Sherds 1-35. (4)

19. Fragment of base of brown ware, soapy feel inside. Diameter 4 in. Cutting 7. (Scarborough p.187. Fig 21f; Chinnor Fig 5: 21.)
20. Fragment of flat base of brown ware, brick-red outside and black inside. Diameter 6 in. Cutting 4. (Hunsbury Fig 11: B8).
21. Fragment of flat base of grey-brown ware, pinched out at bottom. Diameter 6½ in. Cutting 1. Similar to (19) above but heavier.
22. Fragment of wall near base of black ware, probably slightly raised. Diameter 8 in. Cutting 1.
23. Fragment of wall base of brown ware, smooth red exterior, base flat. Diameter 6½ in. Cutting 1. (Like West Harling Fig 48.)
24. Fragment of base of brown ware, smoothed on inside. Diameter 8 in. Cutting 6.
25. Fragment of base of brown ware with signs of base ring. Diameter 3 in. Cutting 1.

B. Hard-baked, gritted wares, smaller grits with less flint, and vessels with smoother surfaces. These fragments represent smaller pots and many fragments are decorated. This group represents 32.5% of the total pottery found. (Figs 4 & 5).

26. Thick rim of dark brown ware, flat but uneven at the top, smoothed all over. Rim extended outwards (Cf. no 3 above). Diameter 8 in. Cutting 7.
27. Rim of jar of grey ware, black exterior, smooth brown interior. Rim flat-topped with very slight bevel. Diameter 6 in. Cutting 6. (Fengate Fig 1: A3.) From Harpstedt origins.
28. Slightly everted rim of reddish-brown ware. Upright neck and slight shoulder, very slight S-profile. Diameter 6 3/4 in. Cutting 4. (Lakenheath Fig 3: (q); Hunsbury FT1. La Tène.
29. Small flat-topped rim of brown ware smoothed on both surfaces. Diameter 6 in. Cutting 6. (Danbury Fig 1: 1, form only.)
30. Thin upright rim of brown ware, black inside and out. Cutting 1. (Wandlebury Fig 7: 35.)
31. Rim of brown ware, red on both surfaces. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 2. (Form like Warborough Hill (in Kenyon Fig 8: 7.))
32. Small nearly upright rim of hard grey ware, of situlate form. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 2. See (5) above.
33. Small flat rim of brown ware, orange on both smoothed surfaces. Inclining outwards towards a shoulder. Diameter 6¼ in. Cutting 6. (Fengate Fig 1: A3.)
34. Fragment of bowl of grey ware, smoothed on both sides. Cutting 4. (Like West Harling Fig. 38.)
35. Very small fragment of everted rim of bowl in brown ware, red inside. Stray.
36. Small rim of black ware, short neck inclining outwards towards shoulder. Red outside with finger-nail impression. Cutting 1.
37. Fragment of slightly everted rim of red ware, well smoothed inside and out. Cutting 4.
38. Small fragment of flat-topped rim of black ware with straight sides. Cutting 1. Probably situlate.
39. As above (38) but reddish ware, turned out slightly with curve on neck. Cutting 1.
40. Extended flat topped rim of brown ware, pinched at end of a short neck. Cutting 1. Selsey Fig. 7.
41. Thin small rim with upright neck of black ware.
42. Thick everted rim of black ware, smoothed inside and out. Cutting 1. (Perhaps Hunsbury L2.)
43. Fragment of bowl near rim, grey ware, dark brown on outside. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 1. (See Hunsbury FT1.) La Tène I.



Fig. 5. Pottery from 1959 Excavation. Sherds 36-78. (4)

44. Fragment of neck and shoulder of bowl, smooth black ware, grey outside and in. Cutting 6. (Form Fengate R2.)
45. Fragment of black ware, red on outside, decorated with finger-nail impressions. Cutting 1.
46. Fragment of brown ware, purplish on outside, decorated with finger-nail impressions and horizontal furrowing. Cutting 7.
47. Fragment of dark grey ware, red on outside and in. Smoothed and striated on the outside. Cutting 8.
48. Fragment of light brown ware with close horizontal furrows. Cutting 2.
49. Fragment of grey ware, partly red. Brown outside with horizontal furrows bisected by verticals in one corner. Cutting 1.
50. Fragment of buff ware, dark inside and smooth on both surfaces. Suggestion of zoned decoration. Cutting 1.



51. Small fragment of brown ware, chocolate in places, furrowed on the surface. Cutting 3.
52. Fragment of black ware smoothed inside and out. Signs of furrowed decoration. Cutting 3.
53. Very small fragment of dark grey ware with furrowed decoration. Cutting 5.
54. Fragment of black ware, red exterior. Decorated with parallel incisions and raised area between Cutting 1.
55. Fragment of dark brown ware, red outside, black inside, both smooth. Decoration of shallowly executed stroke-filled triangle. Cutting 2.
56. Small fragment of sandy black ware, decorated with shallow stroke-filled triangle. Cutting 1.
57. Small fragment of smooth grey ware, decorated with 'punch marks' arranged in pairs. Cutting 1. (Decoration see *All Cannings* pl. 48. 1.)
58. Small fragment of smooth brown ware decorated with a form of zig-zag lines and punch marks. Cutting 1.
59. Fragment of lug of dark grey ware, smoothed on both surfaces. Signs of its having been through a pot wall. Cutting 1. (Like Hunsbury L2 in form but the shape of the hole is similar to Fengate Fig 3: C5.)
60. Fragment of lug of orange brown ware. Cutting 1.
61. Fragment of lug of hard red ware, rather angular. Cutting 4.
62. Fragment of shoulder of bowl, brown ware, orange outside. Smoothed, and decorated with raised swags on the angle, outline strongly incised. Cutting 5.
63. Small fragment of angular shoulder of bowl, dark grey ware. Cutting 1.
64. Fragment of black ware with vertical scorings. Cutting 3.
65. Fragment of black ware, from near the base of large vessel, decorated with wide vertical furrow. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 4.
66. Fragment of well-made flat base of brown ware, smoothed on both surfaces. Diameter 4 in. Cutting 1. (*Wandlebury* fig 7: 5.)
67. Part of pedestal base of black ware, black and rusty smooth surfaces. Diameter 4 in. Cutting 5. (*Swarling* type 1.) 75-50 B.C.

C. Finer wares (fig. 5, nos. 68-78) containing very small grits of shell, mica, calcite and flint. Mostly wheel-made and burnished. These represent 12.2% of the total pottery found.

68. Everted rim of bowl, dark grey ware with black burnished surface. Wheelmade. Diameter 7 in. Cutting 2. (*Hauxton Mill* A.C.R. pl XVI. 13.) Belgic.
69. Small fragment of everted rim of bowl, red-brown ware, burnished inside and out. Wheelmade. Diameter 8 in. Cutting 2. (*Newnham* A.C.R. pl. XVI. 2.) 1st cent. B.C.
70. Fragment of black ware burnished inside and out. Upright neck and beginning of a shoulder. Wheel-made. Diameter 9½ in. Cutting 5. (*War Ditches, Cherryhinton*. A.C.R. pl. XVI.6.)
71. Small bead rim of brown burnished ware. Wheelmade. Cutting 2. (*Hengistbury Head* Class I. pl XXII. 1.) Late 1st century B.C.
72. Fragment of flat rim, brown burnished ware, smoothed inside and out. Short neck curves outwards, rim curves over slightly. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 2.
73. Very thin straight rim of brown ware, burnished inside and out. Diameter 4 in. Cutting 2. (Form probably like *Hengistbury* pl. XIX. 9.)
74. Fragment of chocolate-brown ware, surfaces burnished, exterior decorated with shallow furrowing. Diameter 9 in. Cutting 5.

75. Large fragment of beaker, grey ware, black burnished surfaces. Large horizontal furrow just below neck. Diameter 10 in. Cutting 6. (Lockleys Villa. Fig 6: 16.)
76. Fragment of grey ware, burnished outside. Part of decoration in bottom corner of stroke-filled triangle. Cutting 2.
77. Fragment of brown ware decorated with two parallel incised lines. Cutting 2.
78. Shoulder of hard grey ware with marked angle. Cutting 1.

#### Abbreviations used for references

A.C.R.: Fox, *Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*.

All Cannings: Cunnington, *An Early Iron Age Inhabited Site at All Cannings Cross Farm, Wiltshire*.

Chinnor: Richardson & Young, 'An Iron Age A Site in the Chilterns'. *Antiquaries Journal* XXXI. p. 132.

Danbury: Dunning, note in *Antiquaries Journal* XIV. p. 186.

Fengate: Hawkes & Fell, 'An Early Iron Age Site at Fengate, Peterborough'. *Archaeological Journal* C. p. 188.

Hengistbury Head: Bushe Fox, 'Excavations at Hengistbury Head, Hampshire'. *Society of Antiquaries Report III*.

Hunsbury: Fell, 'The Hunsbury Hill-Fort, Northants; a new survey of the material'. *Archaeological Journal* XCIII. p. 57.

Kenyon: 'Survey of evidence concerning the chronology & origins of Iron Age A in Southern & Midland Britain'. *Institute of Archaeology Report* 1952. p. 29.

Lakenheath: Gell, 'An Early Iron Age Site at Lakenheath, Suffolk'. *Cambridge Antiquarian Society* XLII p. 112.

Linton: Fell, 'An Early Iron Age settlement at Linton, Cambs'. *Cambridge Antiquarian Society* XLVI p. 31.

Scarborough: *Archaeologia* 77. p. 187.

Swarling: Bushe-Fox, *Society of Antiquaries Report V*.

Wandlebury: Hartley, 'Wandlebury Iron Age Hill-fort excavations 1955-6.' *Cambridge Antiquarian Society* L. p. 1.

West Harling: Apling, 'A Hallstatt settlement at West Harling' *Proceedings of Prehistoric Society of East Anglia* VII p. 111.

Parallels, or similarities have been found mainly at sites in East Anglia.<sup>1</sup> The earliest types seem to have features associated with urn-like pots (e.g. nos. 3, 4 and 12); vessels of Harpstedt origin are represented by nos. 27 and 33, while a series of situlate jars (nos. 4, 5, 8, 32 and 38) show features which suggest an A2 dating.

Marnian influence may be seen in examples 2 and 11a while a third century date may be given to nos. 6 and 29 which have parallels in the Kent-Surrey group. This latter group has been shown to have a common origin with the East Anglian

<sup>1</sup>For definition of region see Kenyon op. cit. p. 42.

in the Low Countries. Influence from Wessex appears in the forms of decoration – punch marks, rectilinear design, stroke-filled triangles and especially finger-nail decoration rather than of the whole tip. Unfortunately, the decorated fragments are too small to be of any chronological use here.

The pottery from Wilbury 1959 shows characteristics of the East Anglian group of Iron Age 'A' pottery traditions and demonstrates, once more that the position of Wilbury astride the Icknield Way laid it open to a certain number of influences from the South-West and the Midlands, and in particular to that brought via the Chilterns-Northants route.

#### SMALL FINDS (Fig 6)

##### Iron

1. Fragment of an iron object, broken off. Possibly upper part of a small knife blade. Length 2.5 cm. Thickness 8 mm. Cutting 1. 22 in down.
2. Small iron nail with head of lunate profile. Length 2.3 cm. Greatest width of head 1.7 cm. Thickness 5 mm. Cutting 3. 19 in down.
3. Square-headed, thin sectioned iron nail. Length 3.2 cm. Shaft thickness 3 mm. Head thickness 4 mm. Cutting 1. 27 in down.
4. Small iron hook or link, broken into two pieces. Total length 2.8 cm. Thickness 4 mm. Cutting 1. 24 in. down.

##### Clay

5. Spindle whorl of hard baked grey clay with a raised cylindrical end and hole. Diameter 3.5 cm. Thickness 2.3 cm. Cutting 1. 25 in down.

##### Flint

6. Flint scraper of horseshoe form. Nine flakes were found and are described below.  
Flint flakes were submitted to Mr John Wymer of Reading Museum to whom I am indebted for his report and the drawing (Fig 6: 6).

#### REPORT ON THE FLINTS

by JOHN WYMER

Nine flint artifacts were submitted: eight are small, simple flakes and one is a neatly made scraper of horseshoe form. Four of the flakes have relatively broad striking platforms and very obtuse flaking angles. The striking platform is, in each case, prepared, but there is no indication that the flakes have come from conical or prismatic cores. One of these flakes has slight secondary working on the back edge of the striking platform to form a rough, hollow scraper. It also has slight traces of patination as has one other of these four flakes. Of the four remaining flakes, two are mere spalls, one has a smaller striking platform than those of the other group, and the last is certainly struck with precision from a prepared core. The latter is of finer quality flint than the others and, although unpatinated, is also different in being lustrous. This flake, showing signs of

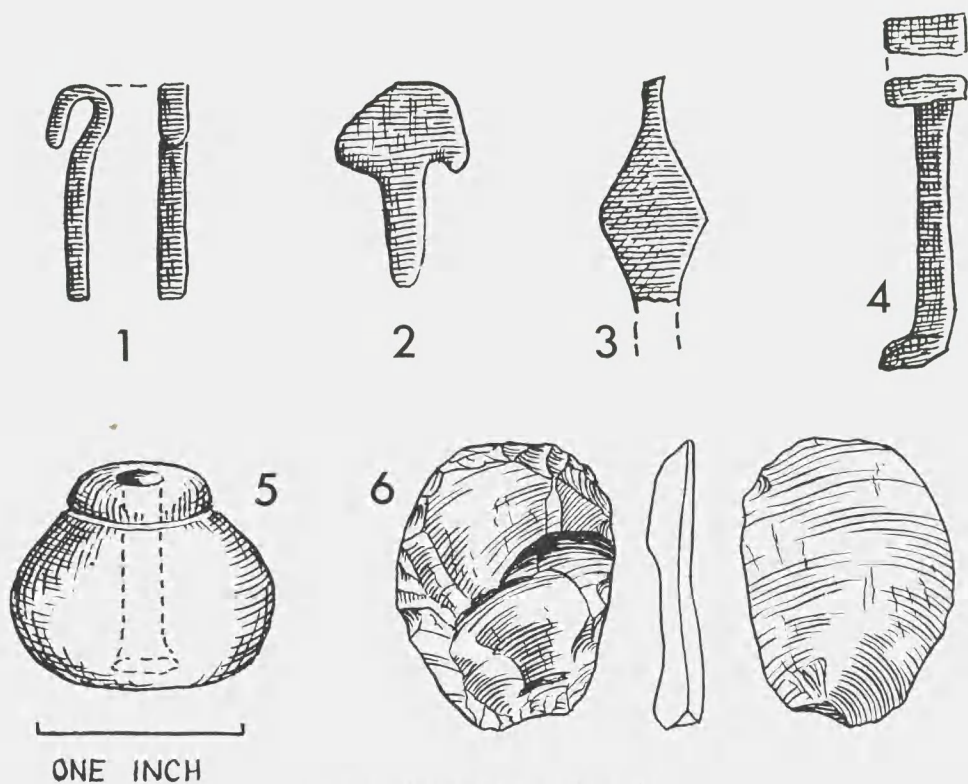


Fig 6. Small Finds from 1959 Excavations.

use along one edge, is probably Neolithic but the remainder would not be out of context on an Early Iron Age Site.

The same is true of the horseshoe scraper (Fig 6: 6); it is of a form that dates from the Mesolithic period, but its appearance has been noted on Iron Age sites<sup>1</sup>. Flint was still in general use during the Early Iron Age but, to judge from the scarcity of tool forms, it was almost restricted to cutting and scraping. A flake was struck when a sharp edge was required, but the methodical tradition of Neolithic flintwork was lost.

A small rectangular piece of frost-fractured flint showed some minute secondary working along its edge.

<sup>1</sup>Clark & Fell, 'Early Iron Age Site at Mickle Moor Hill, West Harling: *P.P.S.* XIX. p. 35. Fig 19. 2.

#### SURVEY AND TRIAL EXCAVATION 1961

In the Spring of 1961 six weeks were devoted to a limited resistivity survey and the digging of a trial trench to the north of the modern road known as Icknield Way in an area to the east of the cemetery. The object of the work was to discover the limits of the hill-fort and to obtain further dating material from the ditch.

The resistivity survey confirmed, on the whole, the position of the ditch as shown on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map and on the plan drawn by Applebaum in his report. In the north, however, it seems likely that the rampart and ditch lie farther south than was originally thought unless there was a duplication of the defences at this point. The trial trench (see fig 1) failed to reveal anything significant and one must assume that the line suggested by the resistivity survey was missed here. The survey does seem consistent in that it runs directly through the present cemetery to a bank opposite the Wilbury Hotel which appears to be part of the original rampart. Here it would also come into line with a length of possible rampart to the east of the Stotfold-Walsworth road.

Mr J. F. Dyer has kindly drawn my attention to the aerial photographs taken by Dr J. K. St Joseph which show some very interesting cropmarks running into the interior of the hill-fort. These suggest the existence of other ditches (see fig 1) which may well have formed a smaller fortified area before the construction of the larger works. If the interior ditch is connected with the indications shown by the survey we would then have a smaller oval hill-fort with its northern rampart and ditch a little off the line of the modern road. An interesting discovery was made during the digging of two graves when an antler and jaw of a fallow deer were uncovered at a depth of six feet in a pocket of rich brown loam. All other grave digging over the years has failed to produce any archaeological material at all but now that an area in line with the survey results is being dug it may be possible to trace the location of the northern ditch, although this will be a long process. If the existence of a smaller defensive area can be proved it may help to solve some of the problems connected with the earlier phases of this site.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of the Engineering Test Branch of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works and of Messrs. Mayes and Callaghan who carried out the survey. I am also indebted to Mr J. F. Dyer for his help and advice and for his drawing of the site plan. Amongst the many people who helped on the site I should like to mention Messrs C. Green, K. G. Wilson, V. G. Fenton and R. G. Castledine.