

Excavations at Sandy Lodge, Bedfordshire

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SUMMARY

Excavation of an hitherto unknown promontory hillfort at Sandy suggested that the site was unfinished and had only been occupied for a brief period of time, probably early in the Iron Age sequence. A wide flat-bottomed ditch had provided quarry material for a glacis rampart faced with a low dry-stone wall. There had also been Mesolithic occupation of the area, producing a small series of cores and scrapers.

INTRODUCTION

The area under investigation lies within the parish of Sandy in the grounds of Sandy Lodge, the Headquarters of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and is protected as a nature reserve. The site under examination is situated on a south pointing spur of lower greensand, overlooking the valley of the river Ivel and Biggleswade Common, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile south-east of Sandy railway station. (TL 187478).

In the Autumn of 1967 the Director of the RSPB Mr Peter Conder, noticed a substantial bank and ditch cutting-off the northern end of the hillspur on the south-western side of the Nature Reserve. He drew the attention of the writer to the hitherto unrecorded earthwork and it was provisionally identified as a promontory fort of probable Iron Age date. At the invitation of the RSPB and with their fullest support, part of the site was excavated by students of the Department of Archaeology and History at Putteridge Bury College of Education, Luton, during July in 1968 and 1969, under the direction of the writer, assisted by Mr W.L. Gates.

The promontory forms part of the grounds of Sandy Lodge, a country house designed by Clutton (1869-77) for Sir Robert Peel. The grounds were landscaped at that time and many exotic trees were planted. The area of the promontory fort is somewhat wilder with bracken and coarse grass as well as many trees. Whilst this makes a beautiful and

ideal bird sanctuary, it creates difficulties for archaeologists, as it will be appreciated that any disturbance of the undergrowth and low-branched trees disturbs the habitat of the birds under protection. With this in mind, trenches had to be placed where they were least likely to disturb the natural vegetation.

Previous Work in the Area (fig 1)

Although the Sandy Lodge site is newly discovered, the area has long been of archaeological interest. For some centuries the market town of Sandy to the north-east has been recognised as a Roman settlement, and many attempts were made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to identify it with *Salenae*, one of the two towns attributed by Ptolemy to the Catuvellauni (the other being *Verulamium*). This identification is no longer accepted. Most of the discoveries relating to the Roman period were made between 1850 and 1880 when quarrying was taking place on Tower Hill and the Great Northern Railway was being built. The main area of Roman settlement seems to have lain around the railway station, with a cemetery lying further north below the modern one.¹

Primary occupation in the Sandy area is considerably earlier than the Roman period. Mesolithic flint tools have been found at Caesar's Camp and on Sandy Heath, both on top of the greensand ridge. Blades and scrapers of neolithic and Bronze Age date are also exhibited in Bedford Museum, and there is a Bronze Age collared urn in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Farnham, Dorset.

Two Iron Age forts already exist on the hills overlooking Sandy. The northernmost, a contour fort known as Caesar's Camp, has a single rampart and ditch following the top of the hill, with a simple inturn-outturn entrance on the south-eastern side. It encloses 7 acres.

South-east of Sandy is a second fort, Galley Hill. This is a small rectangular promontory fort, and a single line of rampart and ditch isolates a

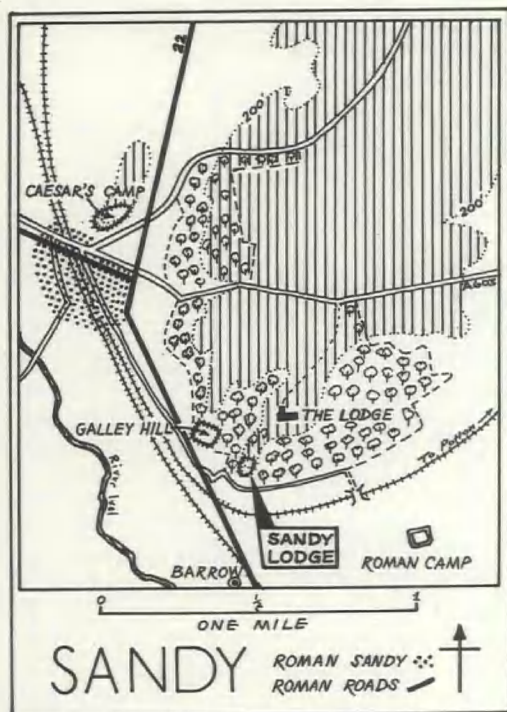


Fig 1 Sandy Lodge : location map.

hill-spur immediately west of the new site at Sandy Lodge. The two sites are separated by a narrow dry valley, and both are clearly visible from each other. Goddard in 1904 when describing Galley Hill observed 'There are also signs of other earthworks on these heights, which call for further examination'.² He may have been referring to the Sandy Lodge site.

Neither Caesar's Camp nor Galley Hill have been scientifically excavated, although sherds of Iron Age 'A' pottery are recorded from the former. Numerous Iron Age coins have come from Sandy at various times, including a gold coin of Cunobelinus, minted in Camulodunum, together with seven other coins of that reign and three of Tascivanus, and a silver plated coin of the Gaulish tribe, the Aedui. It is presumably this range of coins which led the Ordnance Survey on their map of *Southern Britain in the Iron Age* to label both the known camps as 'C' imposed on 'A' or 'B'.

A small Roman fort was discovered to the south east of Sandy Lodge by aerial photography, and excavated some years ago. The results have not been published. One further point of interest was the finding of a 'U' shaped pit 7 or 8 feet deep and 6 to

8 feet wide in a corner of the modern cemetery in 1953. It contained three probable male skeletons 'dumped in head-first', together with Romano-British pottery. Dr Anne Ross has provisionally identified this as a ritual pit connected with pagan Celtic religion.³

Survey

As no detailed survey of the Sandy Lodge site existed the Geography Department of Putteridge Bury College, under the supervision of E. Edwards, produced a chain and contour survey during the period of the excavations, for which the writer is indebted.

Topography of the site (fig 2)

This small fort is roughly oval in shape and encloses some 2 acres of land. Part of the north-west side has been destroyed by an old sand quarry, which has also removed part of the rampart, ditch and entrance causeway. The enclosed area of the spur slopes gently southwards from a central point at 210 feet O D, the greatest fall in height being at the southern end of the spur where the ground is 13 feet below central height. At this point, and on all sides except the north, the hill then falls very steeply away to the river valley 75 feet below. It is unlikely that there was ever any additional defence along the escarpment sides.

At the northern end of the fort a shallow dry-valley has almost cut across the spur. The western end of this valley has been artificially deepened by cutting the fort ditches along its length. The material taken from it has been piled on the southern, inner side.

The entrance to the fort seems to have been approximately at the centre point of the rampart and ditch; a causeway 34 feet wide (at least) crossed the ditch at this point. The western side of this causeway, and the rampart and ditch beyond, were all quarried away in the last century.

The rampart stands 5ft 6in above ground level close to the entrance, but gets steadily lower as it extends to the east, until it eventually fades out. This is presumably due to lack of construction material at the eastern end, since the ditch which formed the quarry runs into the existing dry valley at this point, and did not need artificially deepening.

Fig 2 (opposite) Sandy Lodge : contour survey and site plan.

Prior to excavation the ditch had a stepped or causewayed appearance, which suggested that the shallow dry-valley had been deepened by a series of pits that had not been properly joined together. Three ridges or causeways can be clearly seen. The whole of this area supports thick bracken.

THE EXCAVATION

It was decided in 1968 to test the interior of the site and in 1969 the rampart and ditch. As a few sherds of handmade prehistoric pottery were found in a mole-hill at the highest central point of the site on a preliminary visit, it was decided to lay out a grid of trenches at Site A, in the centre of the fort.

Site A – Interior

An area of 133 sq yd was cleared to an average depth of 2ft 6in. The stratification was identical across the whole area :

- a) Topsoil – about 6in thick - containing tangled bracken roots.
- b) Clean yellow windblown sand – about 1ft thick.
- c) Dark rusty-brown sand – from 6 to 9in thick.
- d) Greensand bedrock.

There were no structural features of any kind within the area examined.

The yellow windblown sand was entirely sterile, but the lower dark rusty-brown sand contained some 25 very abraded sherds of handmade pottery of Iron Age 'A' character. Mixed with this were a scatter of flint blades and flakes, most of which were mesolithic in character, with a few probable neolithic specimens. The distribution of the flint-work was more intensive in the south-western corner of the area excavated, suggesting that it had originated from somewhere outside our trenches in that direction (under a large ornamental tree). It may at first be considered curious to find material spread over four or five millenia stratified together, but as Ian Cornwall has pointed out⁴ sandy areas of this kind carry comparatively sparse vegetation and are very exposed to wind erosion, which can be speeded up by human agencies such as ground clearance by felling and fire, or even by very dry weather. Consequently it would be unusual to find mesolithic or other prehistoric material in its original stratified position.

Fig 3 (opposite) Sandy Lodge : sections of rampart, ditch and entrance causeway.

Site B – The Fortifications (figs 3 and 4)

The Rampart (fig 3)

A single cutting was made through the rampart to determine its construction. This was at its highest point near the entrance on the west side of the spur. Before excavation the rampart stood 5ft 6in high and 36ft wide at its base.

The cutting showed that the rampart was composed entirely of yellow sand, with thin runs of grey sand here and there, perhaps indicating decayed branches or wattle placed to stabilise an otherwise unstable feature. At the rear of the rampart was a small bank of grey material which represented a stack of decayed turves. This varied in height from one side of the cutting to the other, but got higher as it approached the entrance, 12ft to the west. This seemed to serve the dual function of demarcating the back of the rampart and stopping the spread of the sand, and also acting as a revetting to the rear of the entrance.

At the front of the rampart was a tumble of sandstone blocks which seemed to have been piled some half a dozen layers high as a revetment. These were flat slabs of ochreous sandstone and were graded with larger slabs below, and smaller ones near the top. Some of these blocks had tumbled forward due to pressure of sand behind them. Lack of fallen rubble in the ditch below showed that this wall had not continued any higher, and as at the rear, it could have done little more than demarcate the front of a great bank of sand. There was no indication of any timber work either vertical or horizontal, (other than the suggested stabilising branches mentioned above), and one can only conclude that the rampart was nothing more than a sand glacis.

The Ditch (figs 3 and 4)

As has already been said, the ditch seems to have been constructed by deepening a natural minor dry valley that was about 35ft wide at this point. At the eastern end of the valley no deepening is likely to have taken place at all, but at the west beside the entrance causeway, the ditch was dug 10ft deep and 35ft wide. It has already been noticed that the ditch appeared to be very irregular, with ridges running across it, dividing it into four causewayed sections.

Excavation soon showed that the ditch bottom was very irregular, with outcrops of sandstone 3ft high jutting up in places. The end nearest the entrance causeway was steep and square-cut with a

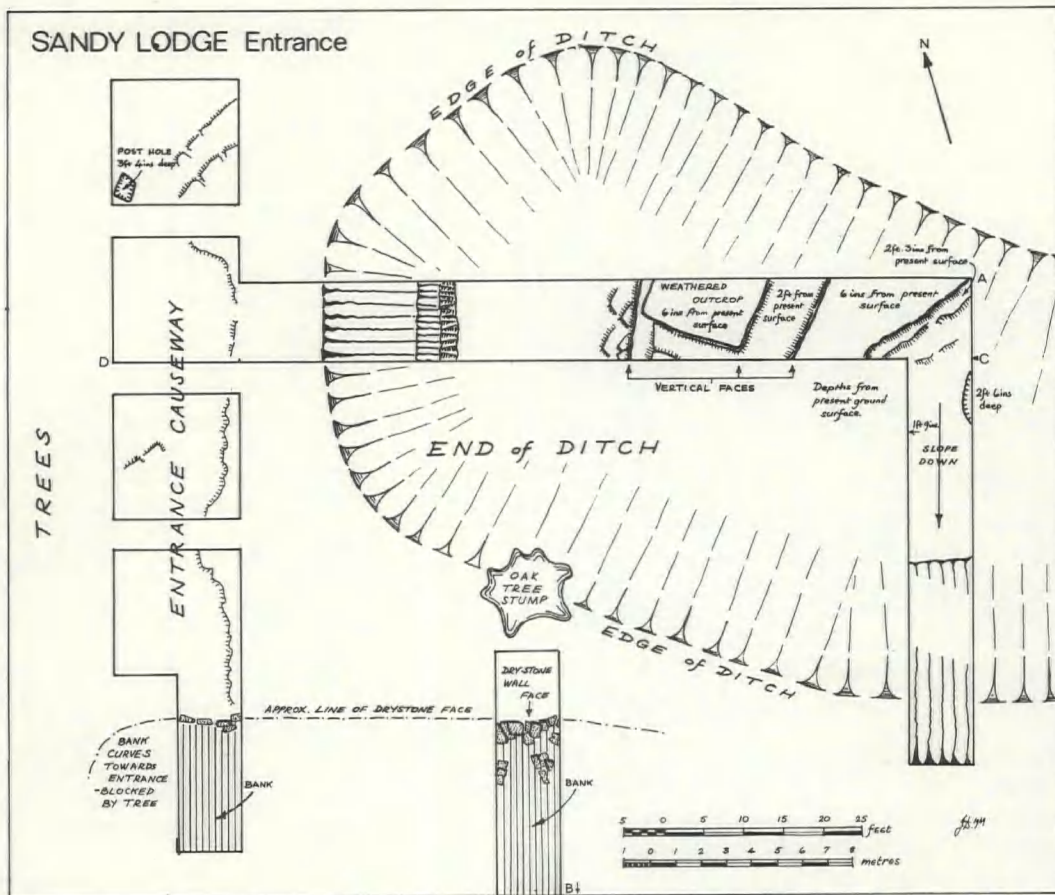


Fig 4 Sandy Lodge : plan of excavations at entrance.

flat bottom, whilst the inner edge of the ditch floor below the rampart lay at 45 degrees with a very irregular face. The ditch was devoid of finds, except for a single serrated flint flake of mesolithic type.

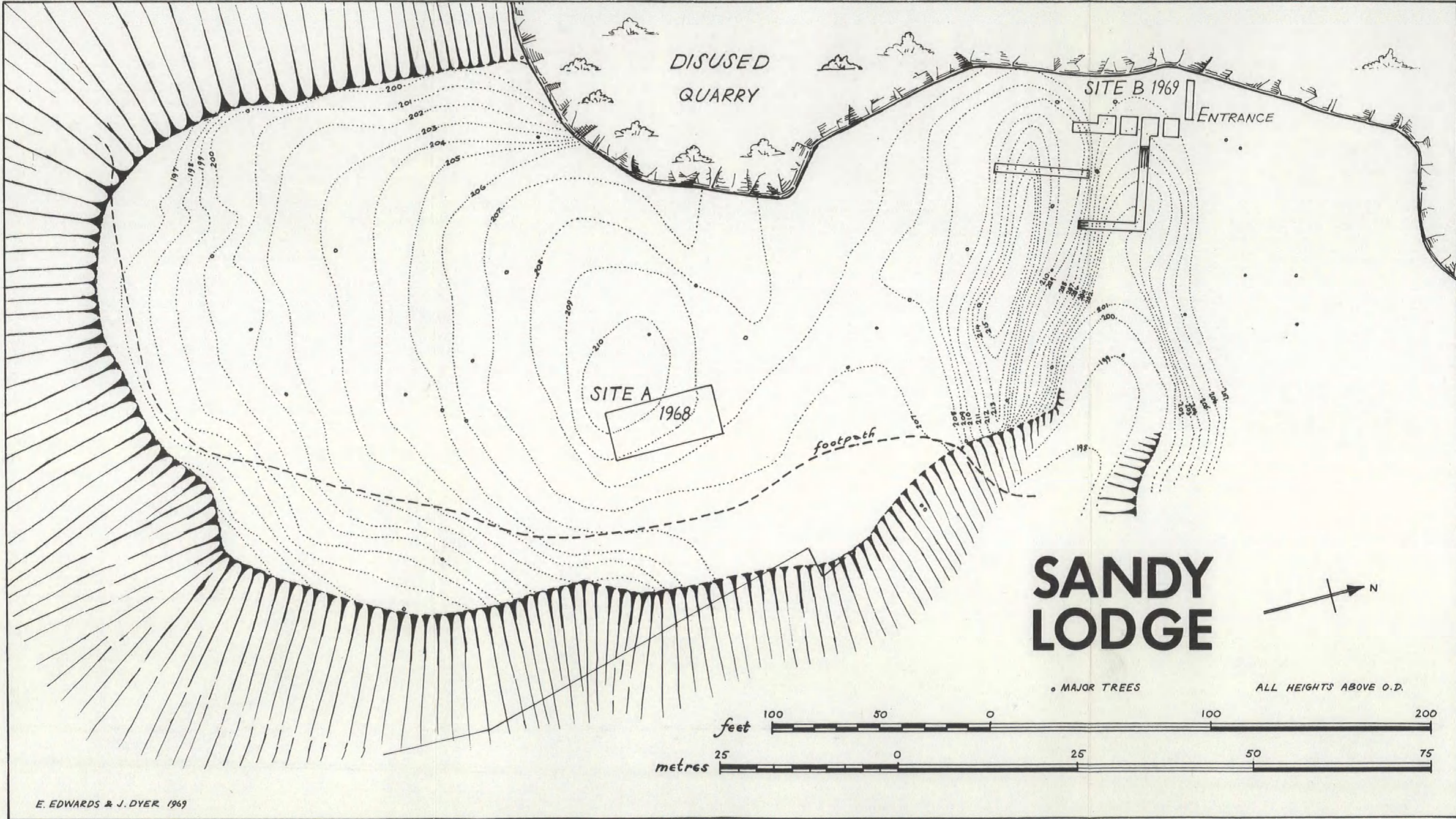
The clean sand silting in the ditch and lack of finds suggests that it was open for only a short time. This is also borne out by the unweathered and angular appearance of the rock-cut surfaces. Even so, the ditch was open long enough for two pairs of prehistoric sand martins to make burrows in the sides of it. These features were buried some four feet below the silted surface of the ditch. The adjoining modern quarry is still a favourite nesting place for sand martins!

The Entrance Causeway (fig 4)

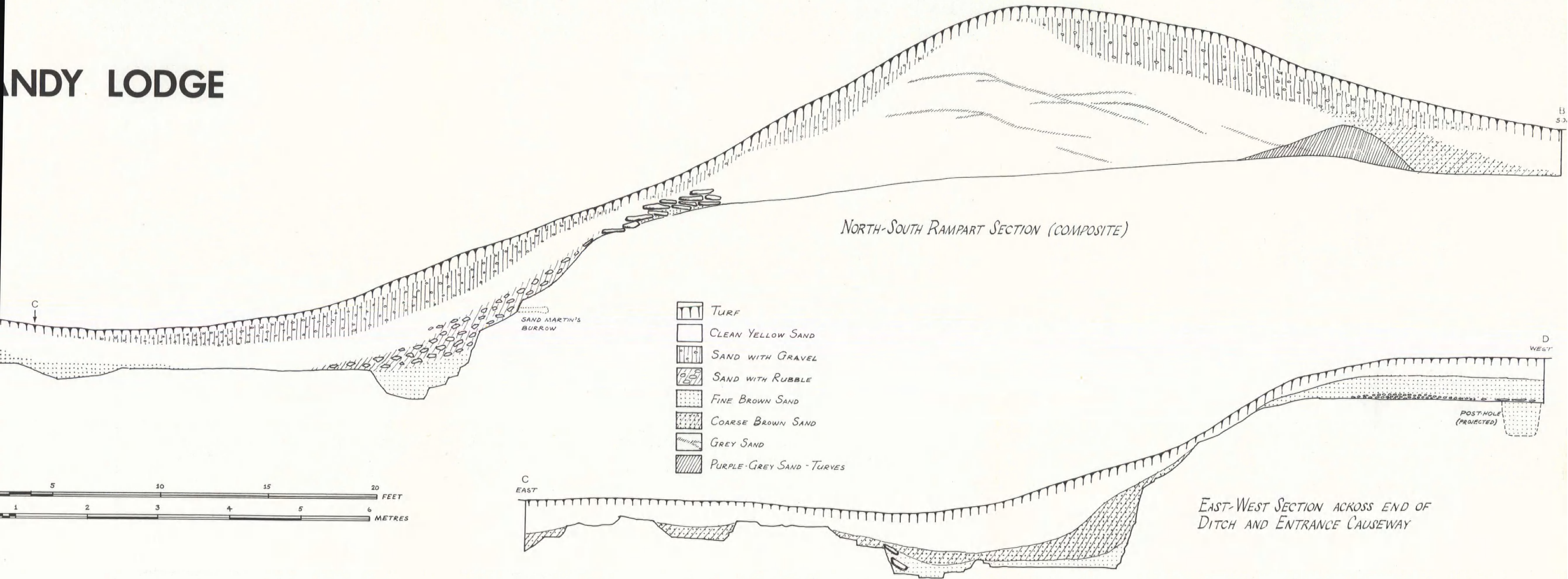
The causeway across the ditch was at least 34ft wide; it may have been more but the west side of

the fort, including the rampart, ditch and edge of causeway have all been quarried away.

The sand over the causeway was 18 inches thick before bedrock was reached. As with the centre of the site (Site A) it had clearly been eroded by the wind, and it was only in the lowest 6 inches of dark rusty-brown sand that a few flint flakes and cores were found, though no traces of pottery. There was no indication of any road surface across the causeway, or any sign to indicate that it had been frequently used by traffic. On the other hand the bedrock was lower along the centre of the causeway than at the edges, where the natural rock formed a noticeable ridge, before plunging into the ditch. A single post-hole was found at the northern end of the causeway, in a position which cannot be explained on the evidence available. It was 2ft in diameter and 3ft 4in deep from the present ground surface, and extended 1ft into the greensand rock. All



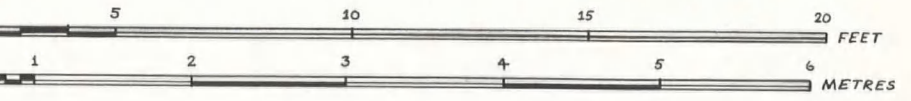
ANDY LODGE



NORTH-SOUTH RAMPART SECTION (COMPOSITE)

EAST-WEST SECTION ACROSS END OF DITCH AND ENTRANCE CAUSEWAY

-  TURF
-  CLEAN YELLOW SAND
-  SAND WITH GRAVEL
-  SAND WITH RUBBLE
-  FINE BROWN SAND
-  COARSE BROWN SAND
-  GREY SAND
-  PURPLE-GREY SAND - TURVES



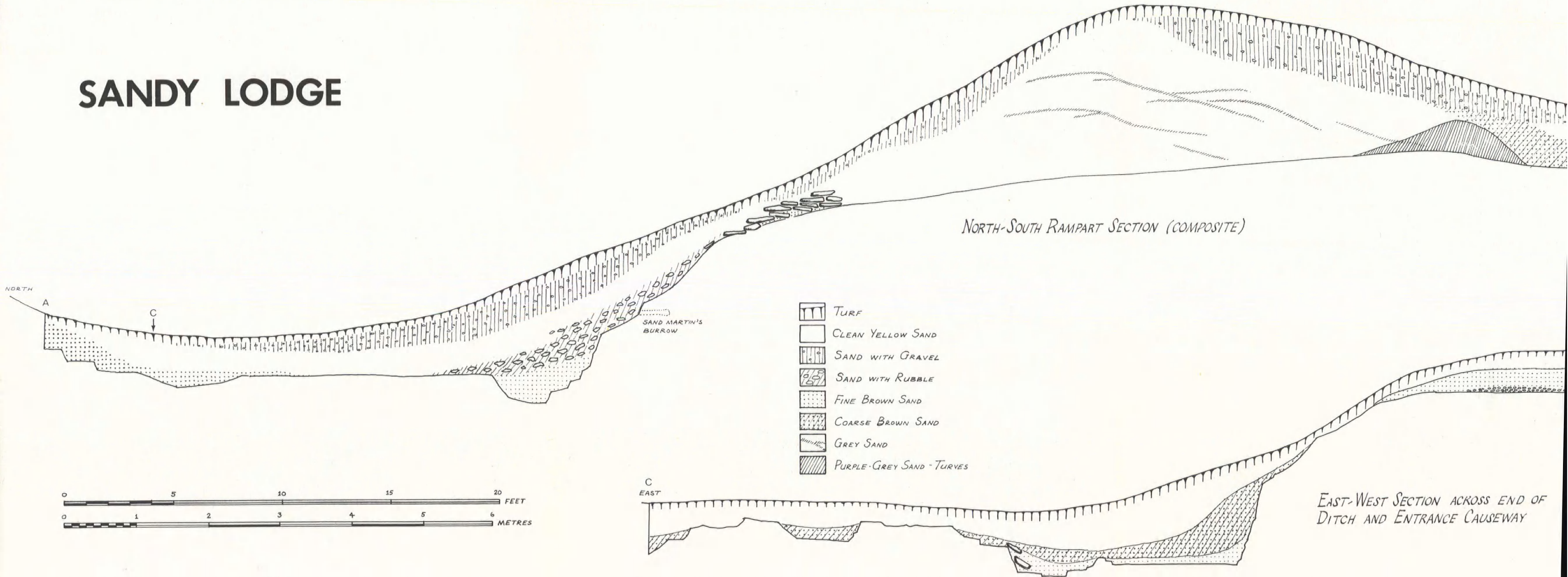
C
EAST

D
WEST

SAND MARTIN'S
BURROW

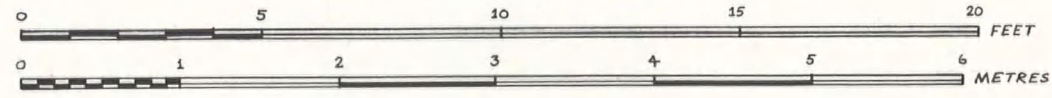
POST-HOLE
(PROJECTED)

SANDY LODGE



NORTH-SOUTH RAMPART SECTION (COMPOSITE)

-  TURF
-  CLEAN YELLOW SAND
-  SAND WITH GRAVEL
-  SAND WITH RUBBLE
-  FINE BROWN SAND
-  COARSE BROWN SAND
-  GREY SAND
-  PURPLE-GREY SAND - TURVES



EAST-WEST SECTION ACROSS END OF DITCH AND ENTRANCE CAUSEWAY

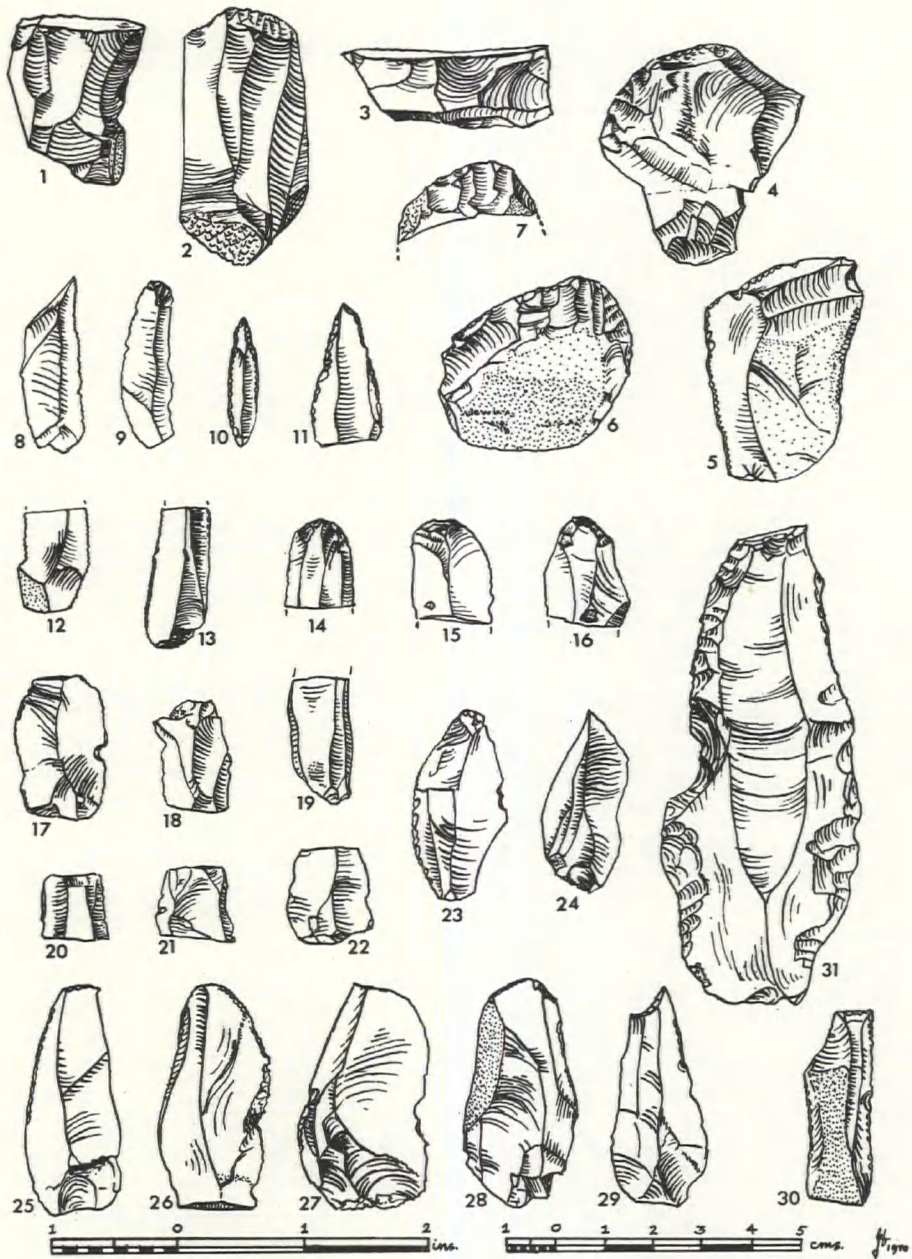


Fig 5 Sandy Lodge : Flints.

trace of any post which it contained had vanished.

It was impossible to examine the inner southern end of the causeway and gate area, due to the presence of two large trees.

DISCUSSION

Sandy Lodge leaves us with a number of tantalizing problems, which at present cannot be answered. Was the site ever completed as a defensive work? The irregular appearance of the ditch bottom, the instability of the rampart, and the apparently unused appearance of the entrance causeway tend to point to a hasty construction and short life. This latter point is borne out by the meagre Iron Age finds from the rest of the site. The simplicity of the Sandy Lodge rampart construction suggests that on typological grounds the promontory fort may be very early and constructed at a time when people, perhaps a single family, were still unsure of the best methods of defence. This suggestion is borne out by the sherds of pottery found which are very coarse and crude, and some of which would not be out of place in the late Bronze Age.

It is noticeable that at Ivinghoe (Bucks), Frere saw the timber reinforced ramparts there as very amateur affairs, and these he had good reason to date to the beginning of the 6th century B.C.⁵ At Sandy Lodge there was no apparent attempt to use timber to retain the rampart at all. The wide and relatively shallow ditch and dumped rampart is a feature of Fécamp type ramparts⁶ and traditionally this style is too late for our consideration, but Avery⁷ has recently suggested that some dumped ramparts and wide ditches may be considerably earlier, and Sandy Lodge seems to bear this out. The writer has drawn attention to this same feature further south in Bedfordshire on the chalk at Sharpenhoe.⁸

THE FINDS FROM SITE A

All finds from the site have been placed in Bedford Museum, by permission of the Director of the RSPB, Mr Peter Conder. It should be noted that due to the acid nature of the sand, no bone or metal was found. The writer would like to thank John Wymer for discussing the flint material with him.

1 The Flintwork (fig 5)

The flints from Sandy Lodge are predominantly mesolithic, though it is not possible to say to which

industry they belong. The patina of the flint varies, but this need not necessarily indicate relative age, but more likely some local soil factor.

- 1-3: Cores. 1 is a good example of a single-platform conical core for micro-blades. 2 may have been an undeveloped double-platform core which broke in half and was subsequently burnt.
- 4-7: Scrapers. 7 is the working edge of a broken (thermal) end scraper.
- 8: Saw.
- 9: Scraper on end of blade.
- 10: Rod-like microlith blunted down whole of one side and part of the other. Patinated. Such microliths are usually associated with Late Mesolithic industries.
- 11: Bottom half of microlith, almost certainly an obliquely blunted point with basal trimming. More characteristic of Late Mesolithic industries.
- 12-30: Flake blades and flake blade segments. 12, 13 and 25 are serrated blades of saw type. 14, 15 and 16 are the scraper ends of broken blades. 29 is a flake-blade with a shallow concavity worked on the tip.
- 31: Sickle blade. There are traces of corn gloss on the bulbar side. The secondary working is not like Mesolithic work, and is thus almost certainly Neolithic.

2 The Pottery (fig 6)

All the pottery was found in the dark rusty-brown sand layer of Site A. It is in each case handmade and extremely abraded, suggesting that it lay on the surface and was subjected to rain and blowing sand for a long period. Due to this abrasion, edges of some sherds have become smoothed and it is difficult to identify rims with certainty. Similarly the softer surfaces have been worn in such a way that the grits used in tempering have been left upstanding on the sherd surfaces.

The paste of nearly all the 25 sherds discovered is slightly micaceous. Flint has been used to grit all of them: the size of grits varying considerably, some very fine, others extremely coarse. All are similar in general character to the Iron Age material from Ravensburgh Castle, Herts., in Letchworth Museum. A number of the sherds are poorly

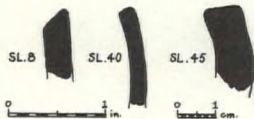


Fig 6 Sandy Lodge : pottery.

fired. Only three rim sherds can be identified, all the rest being wall sherds with one possible handle (or pottery bead). None of the sherds show any obvious decoration. All the pieces seem to form part of an homogeneous group, and although they are very abraded one can feel fairly confident in placing them in an early phase of the Iron Age southern first A culture, though it would be difficult to give a precise date.

- SL.8 Soft, grey exterior, pale orange interior.
 SL.40 Soft, grey-brown ware, with medium grits. Inner and outer surfaces roughly smoothed.
 SL.45 Soft, sandy coloured ware, fine paste tempered with a few large flint grits. Inner surface roughly smoothed.

NOTES

- 1 D E Johnston *Beds Archaeologist*, 1, 1955-56, 17,102.
- 2 A R Goddard *VCH Beds* 1, 1904, 274.
- 3 In conversation with the writer.
- 4 I W Cornwall *Soils for the Archaeologist*, 1958, 42-3.
- 5 S S Frere, *Rec Bucks*, 18, 1968, 191.
- 6 R E M Wheeler and K M Richardson *Hill-forts of Northern France*, 1957, 62ff; Oldbury II, J B Ward Perkins *Archaeologia* 90, 1944, 127-76.
- 7 M Avery *P P S*, 33, 1967, 251-2
- 8 J Dyer *Beds Magazine* 8, 1961, 114.

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