

EXCAVATION OF A MOUND AT ASCOTT

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DURING 1954 the stretch of road between Leighton Buzzard and Wing, on the borders of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, was widened and straightened where the main road curved round a low mound planted with fir trees. The mound was enclosed within the farmyard of Mr. James Lawrence, and widening operations included a strip of land on Waterloo Farm, now owned by the County Council and worked by Mr. Syrett. These adjoining farmlands with the fields formerly known as Cow Piece, Pound Piece and Ditch Furlong were originally part of the unusually large Common of Ascott hamlet. As the mound was to be demolished by the proposed road scheme, it was investigated on behalf of the Ministry of Works.

Standing opposite Well Lane where it joins the main road and at approximately 420 O.D., rising to $7\frac{1}{2}$ ft. at the greatest height, the mound was roughly circular and had survived many hazards.

Three of the six fir trees, some 140 years old (by tree-ring evidence), still remained standing, possibly planted in 1815, as local tradition reports, to commemorate the battle of Waterloo.

The boundary between the two farms cut through the eastern arc of the mound, and the field road was made up with cinders to the depth of over 1 ft. The farmyard was also made up with brick rubble, impinging on the mound and edging it on the north and west. The structure of the hillock had been sliced away on the south to make way for an asphalt footpath during earlier road improvements. In the 1939-45 war a trench was dug round three sides. Subsequently, the sandbag parapet as well as farmyard scrap filled in the trench.

The outline of the flat-topped mound was broken and defaced; nevertheless, it was a feature of some interest, and local opinion was sharply divided. One school of thought attributed its formation to mud from a nearby pond dug about eighty years ago, another held that it contained either a man in armour or the bones of a Roman general in a pot, and was haunted by the ghost of a black dog.

Excepting for areas disturbed by tree roots, the mound was totally excavated, and, in the subhumus, fragments of clay pipe stems appeared, as well as a George III penny dated 1806. Two levels of "flecked" or dirty sand in which small particles of charcoal appeared occurred at differing depths, interleaved with gravel and clean sand, the whole mound being formed of successive "tip" levels. At the central point of the flat top, 18 in. below the existing turf-line, a burnt

material spread over and sealed an area of blue clay, and a concentration of charcoal, identified as oak and willow, filled a slight hollow in the otherwise even surface, without, however, leaving any trace of stain or burning on the clay which formed an irregular funnel-shaped pit 2 ft. deep and 3 ft. in diameter at the top. The filling of this intrusive pit was dirty, and contained pieces of much corroded iron, apparently clinch nails, with rotted wood still adhering, which lay at the bottom of the pit. The workmen spoke of a local habit of using clay to wedge posts, but no evidence of a true post-hole showed in the clay, nor would the overall depth of 2 ft. steady any but a light pole.

The sandy loam into which the pit had been cut was perfectly clean, and some 8 in. below the bottom of the clay contained a hard grey sherd, the largest of similar fragments of wheel-made Roman ware. A heap of coarse pebbles, probably the marking-out point for the hillock, lay at the centre of the mound, immediately over the brown sand level, (7) on the section, which denoted the original turf-line. When tracing the mound under the brick rubble of the farm-yard, a greatly abraded rim and three fragments of baked clay, probably daub, were found in the old turf-line. The corky texture of the paste and the out-turned rim suggest a pre-Roman date, though no parallel for this can be cited. The only characteristic rim lay on the old turf-line, below the level of "flecked sand". Of soft red paste with a grey core, this rim sherd was wheel-made, with a slight burnish. This small sherd from the old ground surface, for which Dr. Corder suggests a first century A.D. date, is, like the hard grey fragments from the upper "tip" levels, of characteristic Roman ware. Roman pottery occurs in some quantity in a neighbouring field on Honey-pot Farm, so that stray sherds are not unlikely finds.

Two worked flint flakes were found, one in a sandy tip, the other below the old turf-line, the remains of earlier inhabitants also attracted by the dry gravelly site and the close proximity of water.



FIG. 3. Roman pottery sherd from original ground surface ($\frac{1}{2}$).

HAWKESLOWE, WING

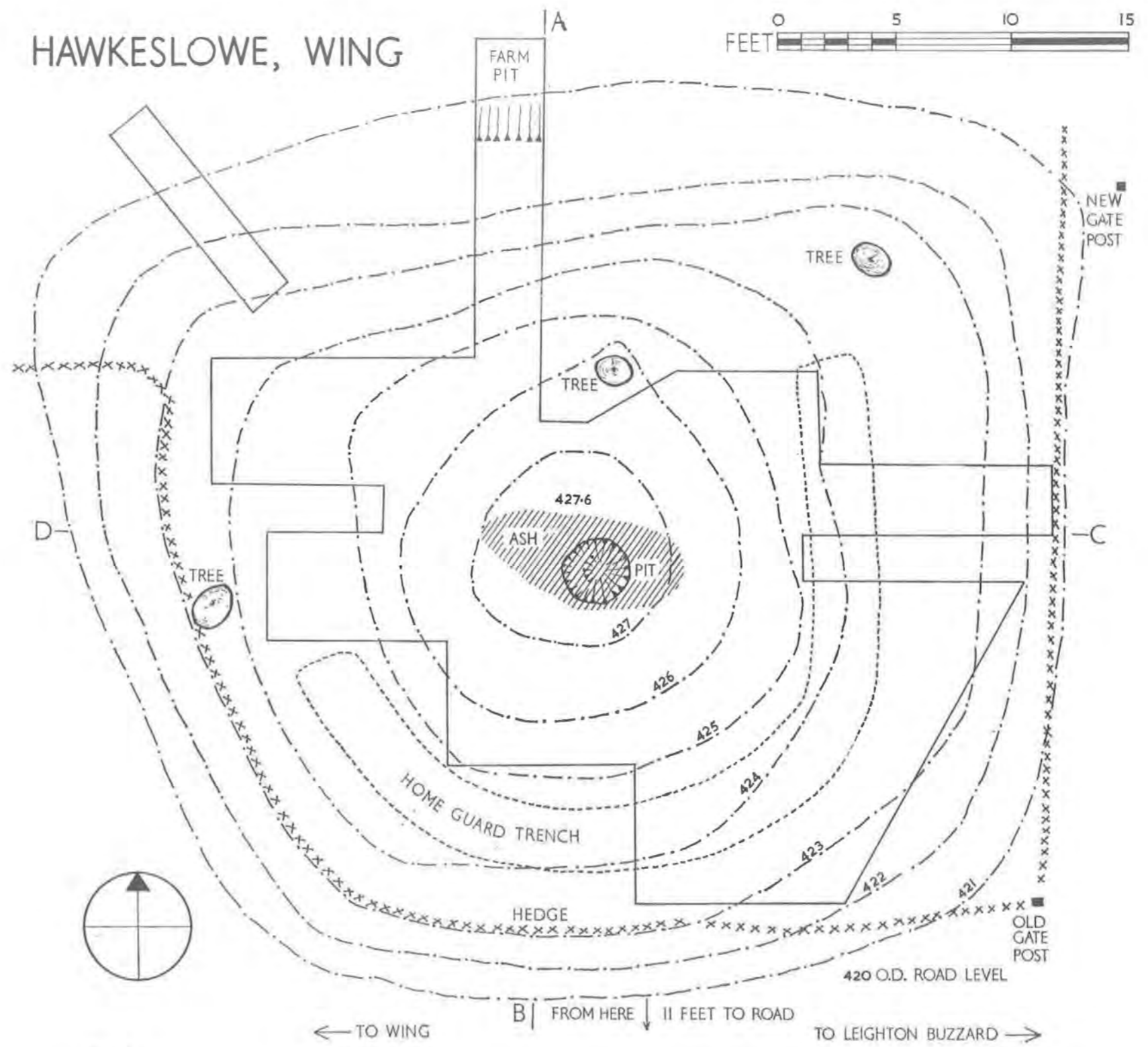
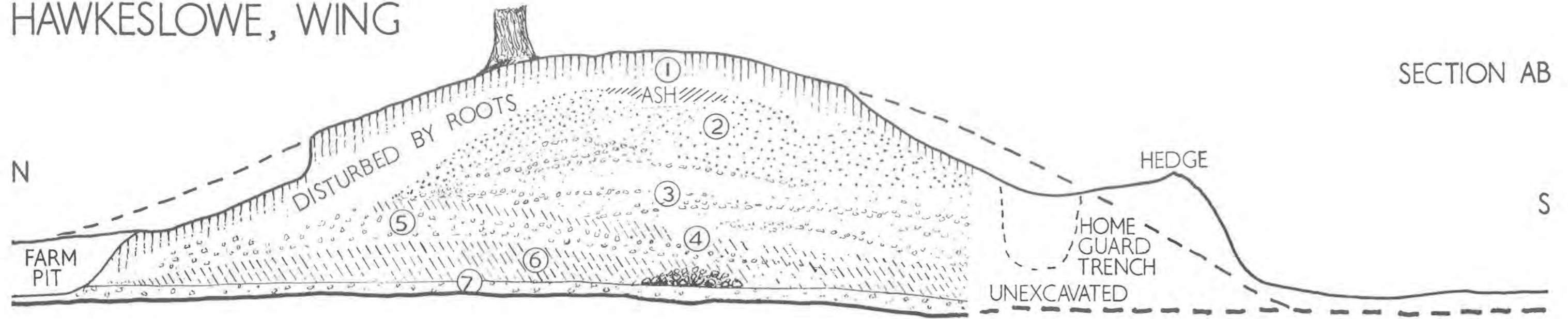
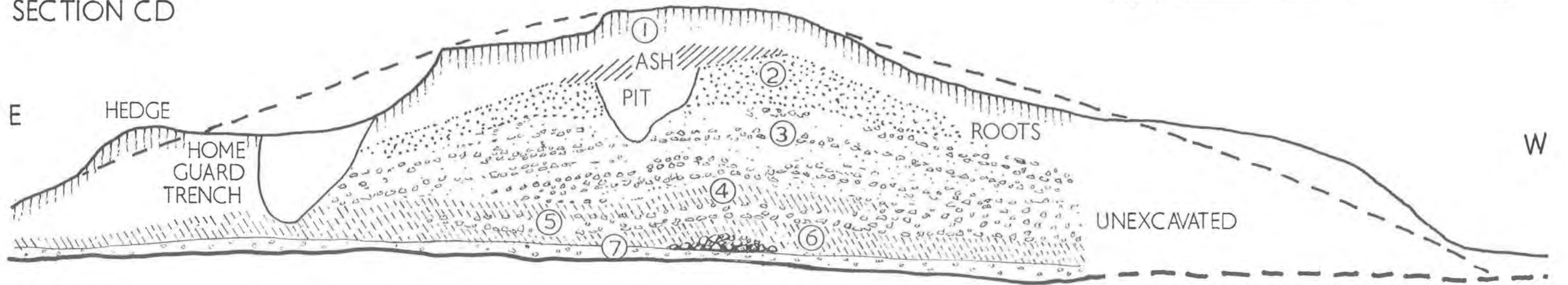


FIG 1.

HAWKESLOWE, WING



SECTION CD



1 SUB HUMUS. 3 INTERLEAVED SAND & GRAVEL. 5 YELLOW GRAVEL.
 2 BROWN SAND 4 FLECKED SAND I 6 FLECKED SAND II 7 OLD TURF LINE

FIG. 2.

The contents of the mound were not enlightening and there is little but negative evidence as to its function and date. The stray sherds, however, show that the mound must have been raised in Roman, or more probably from the fragmentary nature of the sherds, in post-Roman times. While direct evidence for dating purposes was not recovered, the old field name used in 1799 and 1833, "Roundhill", is interesting. The earlier name is "Hawkeslowe", with its HLAW component, denoting a meeting place or burial ground, which suggests a Saxon origin. While there was no evidence for a burial, the tip construction with central marking-out point, and the scarce and abraded material from the mound, supports the theory that the mound was raised as a meeting place.

Earlier references cannot be quoted, but I am indebted to our member, Mr. Vere Woodman, for bringing to my attention an extract of some interest.¹

"Orders for Ascott. Here it is ordered that every person shall lay downe to sward two acres for every yardland he hath in the comon feilds of Ascott, videlt one acre of the said two acres to be laid down in Hawkeslowe feild the other acre in the other two common feilds of Ascott. 8 Chas. I." (Court held 28th May, 1632.)

In closing this report it is of particular interest to underline the value of work undertaken by our late member, Mr. F. G. Gurney, as well as the application of that research by Mr. A. Vere Woodman. In acknowledging my debt to both, it seems fitting to pay tribute to the value of local research and record.

¹ Also extracts from Mr. Gurney's letters with reference to field names.