The Pre-Roman Iron Age Hillfort at Torberry, Sussex

THE SITE (Fig.1)

The hill of Great Torberry (pronounced Tarbury) is an outlier of Lower Chalk extending north from the scarp slope of the Sussex Downs (Pl. 1). It lies 3 miles (5 km) south-east of Petersfield in the Sussex parish of South Harting (grid reference SU 779204). The fort occupies the crest of the hill, which rises to a height of 511 ft OD (156 m), that is about 300 ft (91 m) above the surrounding shelf of Upper Greensand. The hill is elongated in an east–west direction and is joined to the Downs by a neck of chalk known as Little Torberry. Thus the fort is optimally sited to exploit the resource potentials of the chalk Downs, the greensand, and the Weald. A constant supply of fresh water can at present be obtained within ½ mile (about 1 km) from the site (Fig. 1, C).

THE SURVIVING FEATURES (Fig.2)

The defences of the hillfort were constructed around the contour of the hill and for the most part consist of a single ditch backed by a rampart. The hill was extensively ploughed in the late medieval period, during which time the Iron Age earthworks were substantially obscured, much of the southern defence being used as a contemporary field

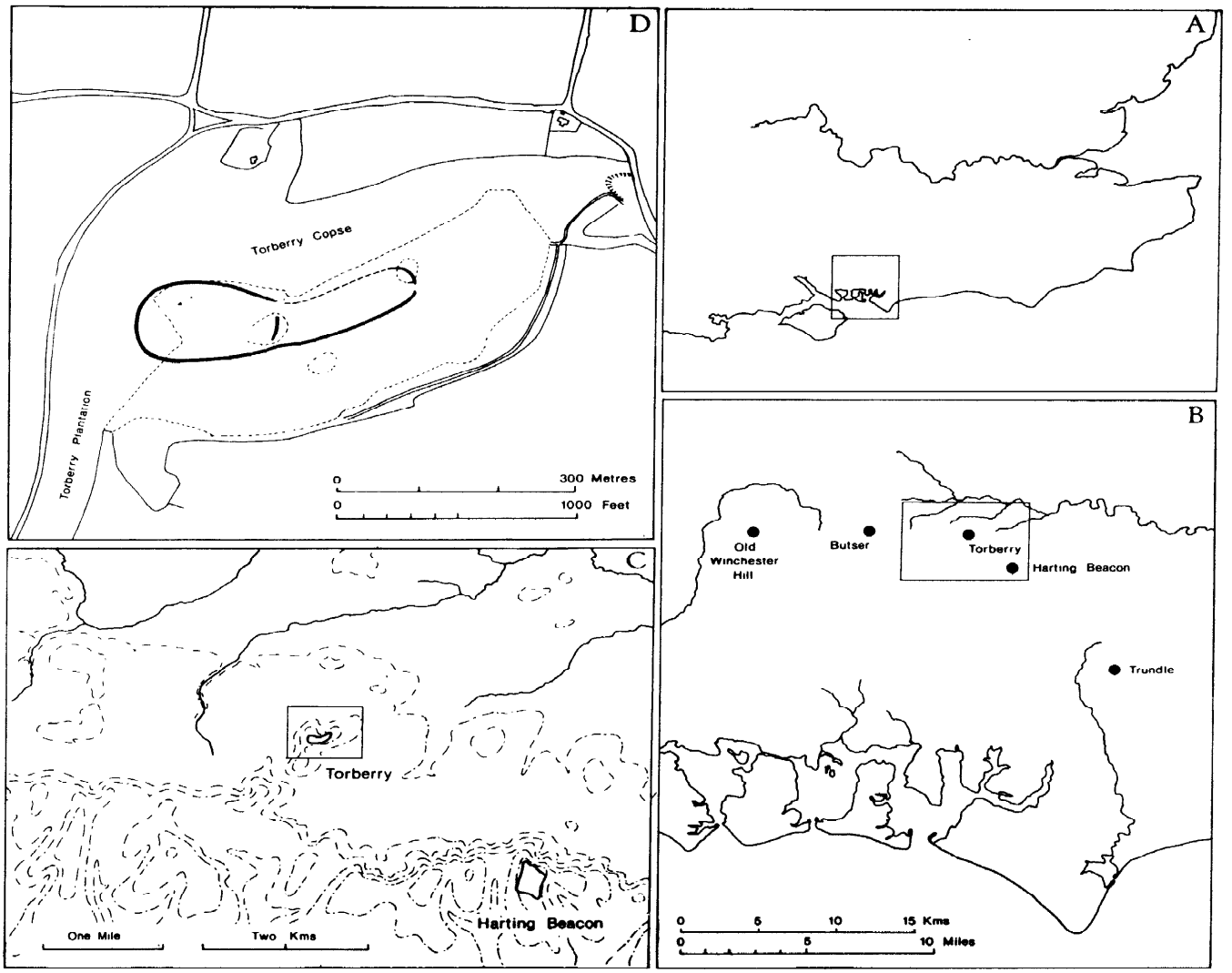

Fig. 1 Torberry: Situation plan

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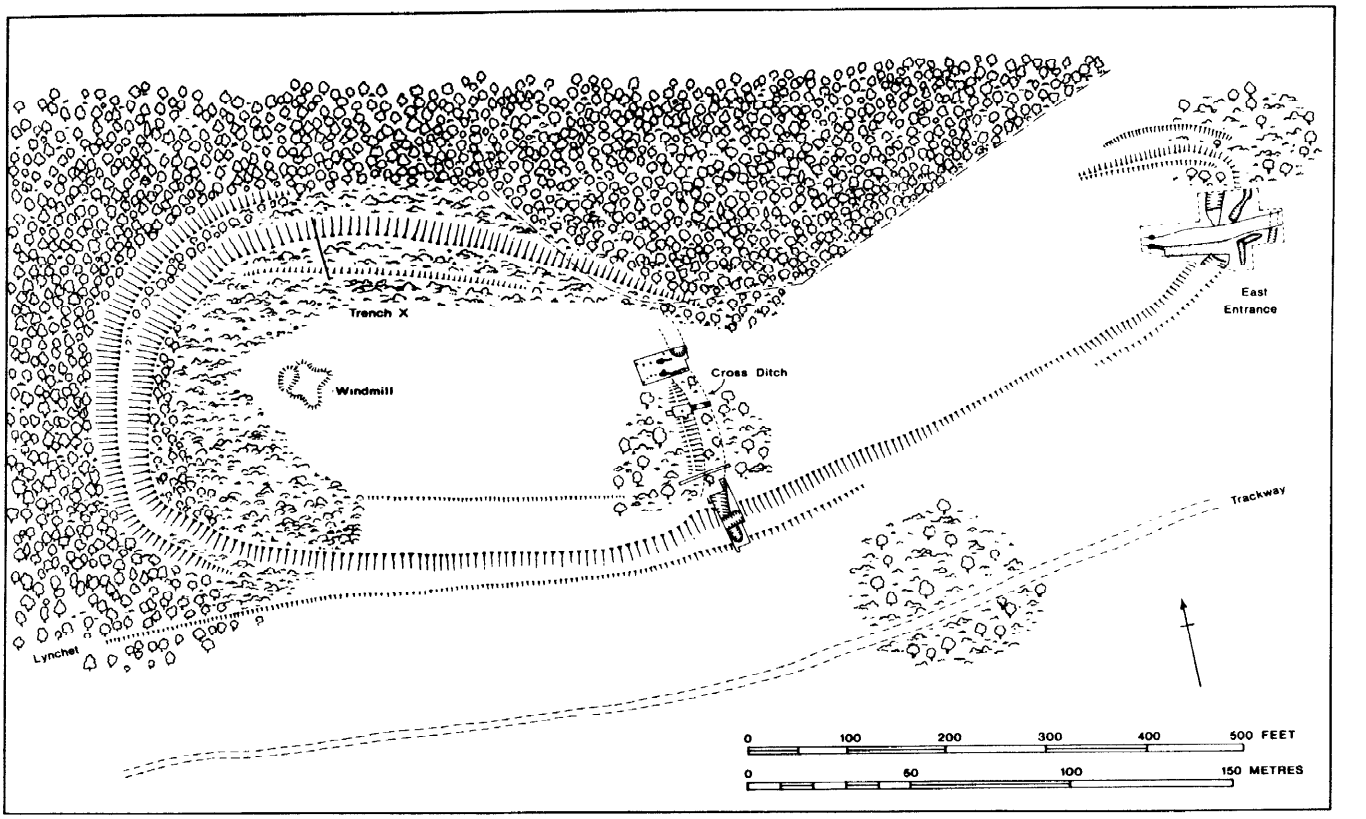

Fig. 2 Torberry: General plan of site showing the positions of the excavations

boundary. The north-west sector, however, appears to have escaped ploughing and in the woodland which now covers much of the area the rampart still stands to 8 ft (2.4 m) above the silting of the ditch. The centre of the fort, where the ridge is at its narrowest, is occupied by a small copse in which the remains of a cross-bank and ditch still survive, significantly aligned on a change in direction apparent in the southern defensive line. Another copse occupies the eastern end of the enclosure, preserving a further length of earthwork. Immediately to the south of this lay the east entrance (pp. 8–13), but surface features have been totally obliterated by late medieval ploughing.

The hill slopes away steeply on the north, west, and south sides, except for the narrow ridge running from the south-west corner. A terraced trackway, which can be traced along the southern face of the hill, turns south along the ridge towards the Downs. The eastern flank of the hill is more gentle. A hollowed trackway can be made out leading towards the site of the main gate and continuing into the eastern half of the fort. Whatever its origin, it must have been used in the late medieval period, since it is clearly related to the layout of strip fields, traces of which cover the eastern flank of the hill, and may have led to a windmill on the summit, the mound of which still survives.

In the last 30 years, areas of the hill top have been ploughed from time to time, but today the entire hill is permanent downland pasture for sheep. The decline in the rabbit population in recent years has allowed scrub to spread rapidly over much of the north-west part of the hill top, obscuring earthworks which only 18 years ago could be traced with little difficulty. Apart from the continuation of this process, there is likely to be little further change in the near future.

DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION

The hillfort was discovered in 1948 by the late Horace Brightwell, a local builder and amateur archaeologist. With the assistance of Mr A T Taylor, also of South Harting, he cut eleven trial trenches across the hillfort ditch, thus establishing the complete plan of the enclosure. Two further trial trenches sectioned the cross-ditch and two areas amounting to some 900 ft^2 were excavated immediately to the west of it, exposing several storage pits. A selection of pottery from these excavations is now stored in Barbican House Museum, Lewes, and Mr Brightwell's notes have been placed in the West Sussex County Record Office at Chichester. When, between 1950 and 1952, the hill top was ploughed, Dr E C Curwen visited the site with Mr Brightwell and collected surface potsherds. He records (Curwen 1954, 236) that pottery of the early pre-Roman Iron Age was common in the western part of the site, the eastern part producing only later pre-Roman Iron Age material, the implication being that the cross-ditch marked the limit of the original enclosure, which was later extended to the east.

In the spring of 1956, trial excavation began under the direction of Mr J R Boyden. One trench was cut through

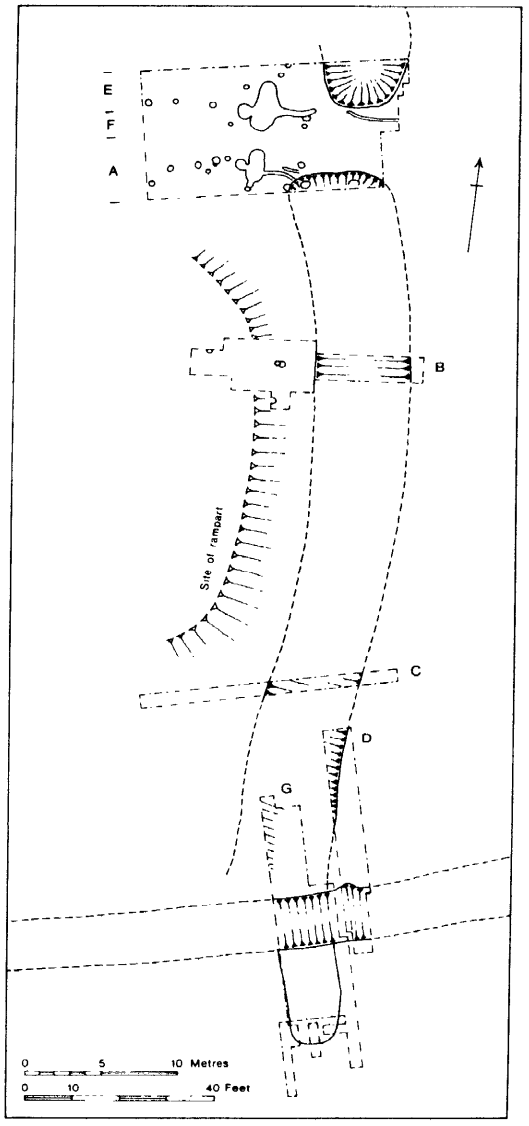

Fig. 3 Cross-ditch (site 2)

the defences in the north-western part of the site, another through the east entrance. In the following year, under the auspices of the Joint Archaeological Committee, a two-week excavation was organized to examine the east entrance in detail. The site work was directed by Dr G Duncan, while the project continued to be administered by Mr Boyden. In the summer of 1958, a further two-week season of excavations was undertaken under similar management, the work concentrating on two sites, the east entrance and the cross-defence. The examination of the junction between the cross-defence and the southern defence was completed at weekends in the autumn of 1958.

In the autumn of 1973 Mr Boyden invited the present writer, who served as a supervisor throughout the excavation, to prepare the material for publication.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXCAVATIONS, 1956–8

The excavations can be divided into three separate parts: a single trial trench cut across the north-western defences in 1956; the examination of the cross-defences in 1958; and the excavation of the east entrance from 1956 to 1958.

In the following section a description of the individual features is offered. A general assessment of the structural development of the site related to the ceramic sequence follows on pp. 25–6.

Trench through the north-western defences: Trench X
(Fig.9, section 5)

A single trench 77 ft 6 in (23.62 m) long by 3 ft (0.91 m) wide, was cut across the line of the bank and ditch. The ditch at this point was approximately 8 ft (2.4 m) wide and 6 ft (1.8 m) deep, with a V-shaped profile. It had silted up naturally to the level at which a thin turf line had formed towards the top. Above this was a thin layer of chalky soil which had presumably resulted from later ploughing (layer 3).

The rampart had almost entirely disappeared except for a spread of chalk blocks (layer 2), surviving to a maximum thickness of 9 in (0.23 m), which had been laid on the original ground surface after the removal of the original turf, One posthole, 9 in (0.23 m) in diameter and 9 in (0.23 m) deep, was found where the front of the rampart is likely to have been. Behind the rampart the natural chalk had been hollowed and trampled by wear over a width of some 16 ft (4.88 m). The slight terrace thus formed can still be traced as a surface feature, but its date is unknown.

Excavations across the cross-defence: Site 2, trenches A–G
(Figs 3–5, 8, 9)

The excavation will be described in three parts:

a. trenches across the line of the cross-bank and ditch: trenches B and C.

b. The area excavation of the original inner entrance: trenches A, E, and F.

c. The junction of the cross-defence and the south side of the fort: trenches D and G.

Trenches across the cross-defence: trenches B and C
(Figs 4, 8)

Trench B exposed a typical section of the rampart and ditch at a point where the rampart was best preserved. The ditch was flat-bottomed, approximately 8 ft (2.4 m) deep and 18–20 ft (5.5–6.0 m) wide. The lower silting (layers 12, 11, and 10) was the result of natural processes, principally the weathering of the ditch sides. Above this, however, the ditch had been packed with large, freshly quarried chalk blocks (layer 9) which are most likely to have been derived from the slighting of the rampart or from the digging of the new ditch at the time when the fort was extended to the east. Above the packing, further lenses of frost-shattered chalk had washed in (layers 5 and 4).

The rampart, of large chalk blocks (layer 13), survived to a height of 2 ft (0.61 m). The blocks had been placed directly on the surface of the natural chalk from which the turf had been stripped. Three postholes were found, one of

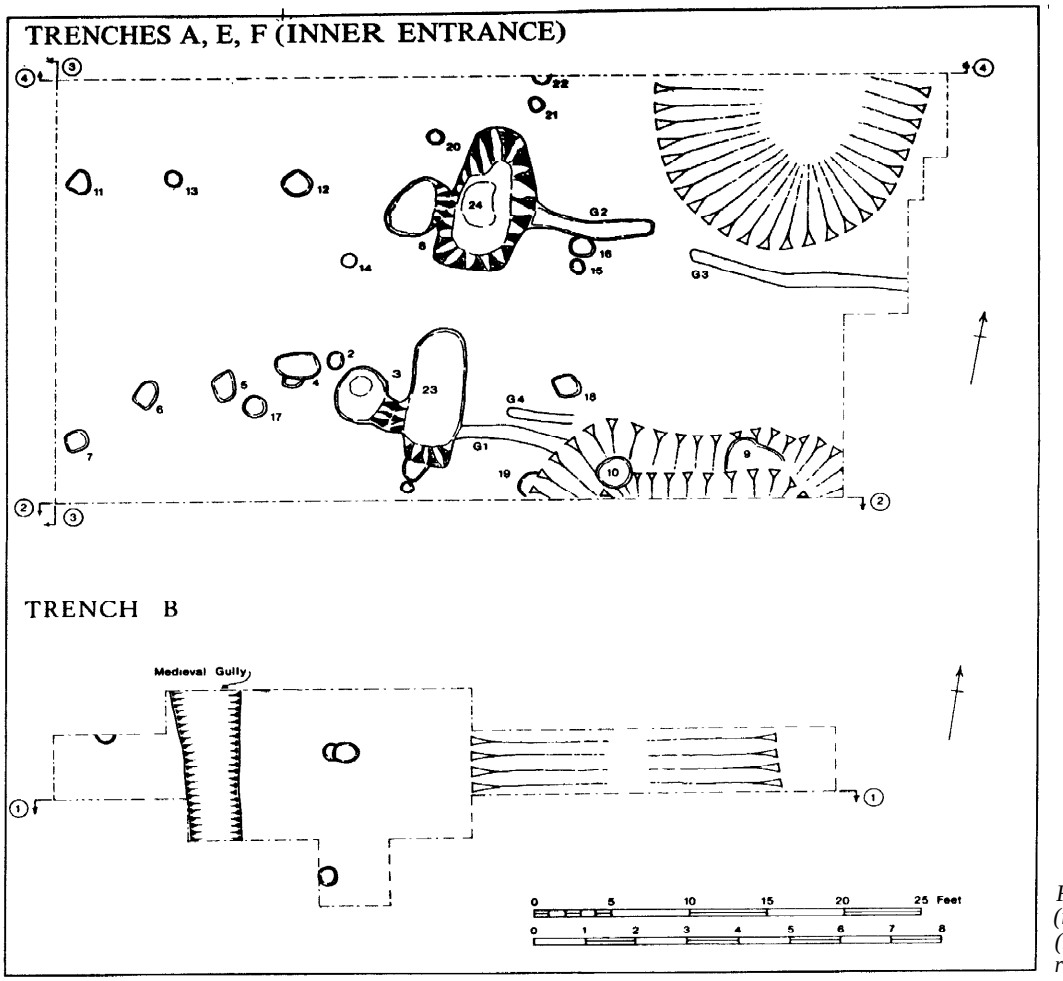

Fig.4 Trenches A, E, F (inner entrance) and trench B (not in correct spatial relationships)

which had been recut; they averaged 9–12 in (0.23–0.30 m) in diameter and 6–9 in (0.15–0.23 m) deep. It seems probable that the posts represent the timber structuring of a box-type rampart, with a row of front revetting timbers set at 9 ft (2.7 m) intervals and a rear revetting placed 15 ft (4.6 m) behind.

In the medieval period the rampart was used as a field boundary defined by a shallow gully containing late 14th century pottery. The field immediately to the east extended across the top of the ditch, the upper part of which gradually became filled with ploughsoil (layer 2). Extensive late medieval ploughing probably accounts for the low level of the surface of the chalk to the east of the ditch compared with that sealed beneath the rampart.

Trench C was a narrow trial trench cut to the south of trench B to establish the position of the ditch, which here was found to be 15 ft (4.6 m) wide at the top. The ditch was excavated to an arbitrary depth of 3 ft (0.90 m) into the top of a layer of chalk-block packing equivalent to layer 9 in trench B. No trace of the rampart survived, nor were any postholes discovered in the trench.

The original entrance: trenches A, E, and F (Figs. 4 and 8 and Pl. IIa)

The plan of the original inner entrance (Fig. 4) gives the appearance of a relatively simple structure, but since no stratigraphy survived, with the exception of that within the individual features, it is impossible to relate one feature with another, except in those cases where a physical relationship existed.

The ditch ends The south end of the north ditch was totally excavated (Fig.8, section 4). At this point the ditch was 18 ft (5.5 m) wide and 8 ft (2.4 m) deep with sloping sides and a flat bottom. The silting up to the level of the turf line (layer 3a) was largely the result of natural processes: the lenses of soily chalk which had eroded down the west face were interleaved with rather more chalky debris derived from the erosion of the east face. This difference was probably due to the fact that the rampart on the west side may have been built in part of turf. Layer 4 represents a time, before the turf-line had formed, when quantities of occupation debris were tipped into the disused ditch. After the formation of the turf-line, chalky silt continued to wash into the hollow, to be partly sealed by a packing of chalk blocks (layer 3) from among which were recovered sherds of Roman pottery. The final filling of chalky soil (layer 2) probably resulted from medieval ploughing.

The north end of the south ditch was only partly examined, since it did not project far into the excavated area (Fig.8, section 2). Its relationship to postholes 9, 10, and 19 and to gully 1 leaves little doubt that the ditch end, as it

now appears, is the result of erosion back from its original lip. The gully leading from gate-post 23 probably once stopped at the ditch lip in a manner similar to the termination of gully 2, on the opposite side of the road, leading from posthole 24. If so, it could be argued that postholes 9 and 10 were dug after the ditch had begun to erode to take uprights supporting a fence continuing the line of that bedded in the gully. An alternative explanation, that the posts pre-date the erosion, is of course possible.

The main gate-posts The structure of the gate or successive gates would have been supported by the posts set in holes 23 and 3 on the south side of the road, and 24 and 8 on the north side, the physical characteristics of which are evident from Fig.4 and the table below. Clearly, 23 and 24 form one pair, 3 and 8 another. While there is no structural reason why all four posts should not have been standing together (and the stratigraphical relationships were just beyond definite demonstration), the fillings suggest that the two pairs were not contemporary. Both 3 and 8 were packed tight with blocks of chalk after the posts had been removed. The fillings of the two larger holes, 23 and 24, on the other hand, showed that there had been some erosion of their exposed sides, the filling consisting of small chalk lumps mixed with soil, occasional large blocks of displaced chalk packing, some occupation rubbish, and a few small fragments of upper greensand and ferruginous sandstone. All indications are that postholes 23 and 24 were left open after the posts had been removed, to fill up gradually. The fact that pieces of greensand and ferruginous sandstone were found in the filling strongly suggests that the holes remained open after the construction of the east gate had begun, since it was only at this period that foreign stone was brought to the site in any quantity.

The above arguments therefore suggest two phases of gate building. The first gate was represented by postholes 3 and 8, but the posts were later removed and the holes packed before a new gate was erected in postholes 23 and 24.

Gullies Four gullies or slots were found, running east from the gate posts; they apparently once flanked the causeway between the ditch ends. All four were flat-bottomed and between 6 and 18 in (0.15–0.46 m) deep. They were filled with chalky soil in which no trace of posts could be seen. Both gullies 1 and 2 could be shown to predate the gate postholes 23 and 24, while gully 2 appeared to be earlier than posthole 16.

There can be little doubt that gullies 1 and 2 supported palisades or fences designed to prevent access (for livestock or humans) on to the berm between the ditch and bank in the phase when the early gate (postholes 3 and 8) was in existence. When the new gate was built, the fences probably went out of use, but a replacement barrier may have been constructed, based on the posts placed in postholes 16 and 18, which align well with the new gate-posts.

The function and phase of gullies 3 and 4 is more difficult to ascertain, but a fence in gully 3 could have served to prevent jostling animals from falling into the ditch end. It seems likely that gully 4 also once continued past the end of the south ditch before the ditch eroded back, or was recut.

Postholes In addition to the gate-posts, twenty individual post.-holes were found, of which two (4 and 9) show signs of replacement. The details of size and filling may be summarized in list form, in which measurements are given first in inches followed by centimetres in brackets:

Posthole	*Depth*	*Diameter*	*Filling*
1	8 (20)	10 (25)	Medium chalk
2	15 (38)	16 (41)	Large chalk blocks
3 (gate-post)	26 (66)	54 (137)	Large chalk blocks
4a	15 (38)	30 (76)	Medium chalk
4b	13 (33)	17 (43)	Medium chalk
5	15 (38)	24 (61)	Medium chalk
6	18 (46)	17 (43)	Large chalk blocks
7	6 (15)	18 (46)	Large chalk blocks
8 (gate-post)	27 (69)	54 (137)	Large chalk blocks
9	6+(15)	?	Medium chalk filling post-void. Large chalk packing around.
10	6 + (15)	24 (61)	ditto
11	6 (15)	24 (61)	Large chalk blocks
12	15 (38)	17 (43)	Medium-large chalk blocks
13	15 (38)	15 (38)	Large chalk-block packing
14	6 (15)	12 (30)	Medium chalk
15	7 (18)	12 (30)	Medium chalk
16	15 (38)	18 (46)	Small-medium chalk
17	21 (53)	16 (41)	Small-medium chalk
18	10 (25)	18 (46)	Medium chalk
19	–	24 (61)	Large chalk blocks
20	8 (20)	12 (30)	Medium chalk
21	8 (20)	12 (30)	Medium chalk
22	15 (38)	?	Medium chalk
23 (gate-post)	24 (61)	irregular (Fig.4)	Medium-fine chalk silting
24 (gate-post)	25 (63)	irregular (Fig.4)	Medium-fine chalk silting

From the above description it will be seen that some of the posts were deliberately packed with large chalk blocks, while others contained fillings of smaller chalk fragments. In view of the supposed two-phase structure of the gate, it remains a distinct possibility that the chalk-packed posts represent an early stage in the revetment of the rampart ends. If so, the fact that only a few other posts are recorded in the area would imply that no extensive revetting was maintained in the second phase.

The roadway The roadway which ran through the gates did not exceed 9 ft (2.74 m) in width. No trace of metalling survived but a slight hollow had been created by traffic (Fig.8, section 3).

The junction of the cross-ditch and the main fort ditch: trenches D and G (Figs.5, 9)

Because of the sharp westward curve of the cross-ditch, trench D, which was designed to be at the point of junction between the cross-ditch and the main ditch, proved to lie too far east. Trench G was therefore dug next to it, the complexity of the features uncovered requiring the trench to be further extended to the south. For the sake of simplicity, the features will be described as far as possible in chronological order.

The end of the original cross-ditch The original ditch end was discovered extending for a distance of 20 ft (c. 6 m) to the south of the later south ditch of the fort. When seen in complete section (Fig.9 section 9) it was flat-bottomed, measuring 6 ft (1.83 m) deep by 11 ft (3.35 m) wide. It had been allowed to silt up naturally (layers 4 and

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