

# An Emergency Excavation on Pontesford Hill Camp, 1963

Philip Barker

I am doubly delighted to be able to offer Miss Chitty this excavation report, firstly as thanks for the unstinting encouragement and friendship she has always given me, and many others beginning in archaeology, and secondly, because Pontesford Hill, a towering landmark overlooking her house, has become part of her life, and just as it was a great pleasure to show her the excavation in progress it is now a greater pleasure to offer her the results as a tribute.

*This short excavation on one of the outer ramparts of the small multivallate lower fort on Pontesford Hill showed that there had been pre-rampart occupation of at least three phases, the first associated with Neolithic flint implements, the second and third with pebble floors, probably of flint. There was evidence that the rampart which overlay these had been crowned with a palisade. Apart from the flint implements there were no finds except one pig's tooth.*

## *The Site (figs 1, 2)*

Pontesford Hill is a massive outcrop of pre-Cambrian rocks on the northern edge of the Shropshire hill country overlooking the plain in which Shrewsbury lies.

The highest part of the hill, properly called Earl's Hill, carries a large fort with an extension, perhaps later in date, along a spur to the south. The main entrance, which is at the northern end of the camp, is intrenched and is approached by a winding track leading from the line of dying trees which runs like the crest of a boar down the ridge northwards toward the lower camp. There are outworks which guard this road and form additional defences to the entrance above. The main camp is separated from the extension along the spur by a rampart and a deep ditch without a defended entrance. The defences of the extension are slighter, with a narrow entrance approached by a steep track at the south-western end, where there are three banks and ditches across the tip of the spur. Little is known about this camp; no extensive excavation or significant finds have been made there, and its dates, phases and intensity of occupation remain conjectural.

The hill-forts on Pontesford Hill have been described and illustrated in the *Victoria County History of Shropshire* (i, 368-9) and by Forde-Johnston (1962). Neither camp, however, has been fully surveyed.

The short excavation of 1963 was sited outside the main entrance of the lower camp, a much smaller, though multivallate, fort on the northern flank of the hill. Although heavily defended it is curiously vulnerable, being dominated by the main hill which rises above it to the south.

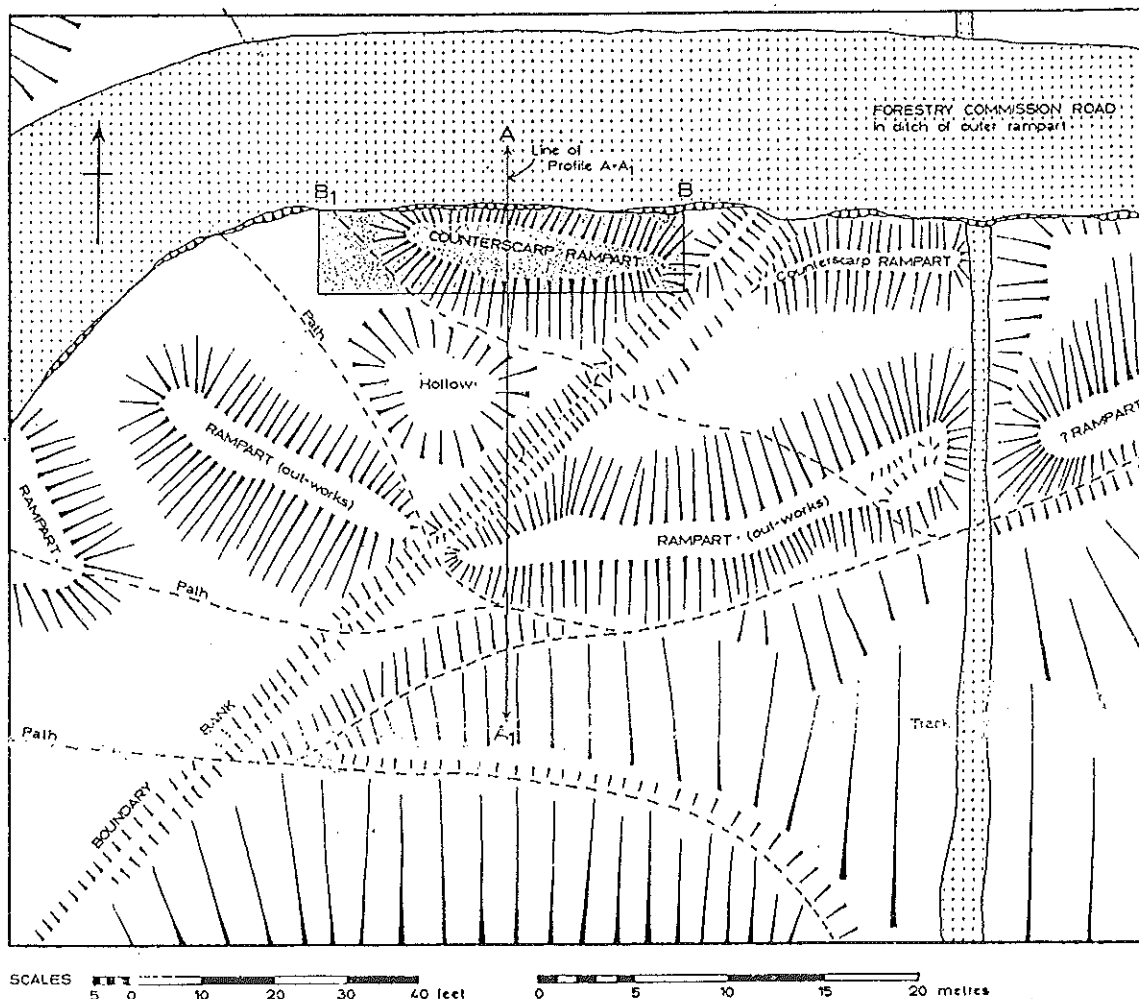


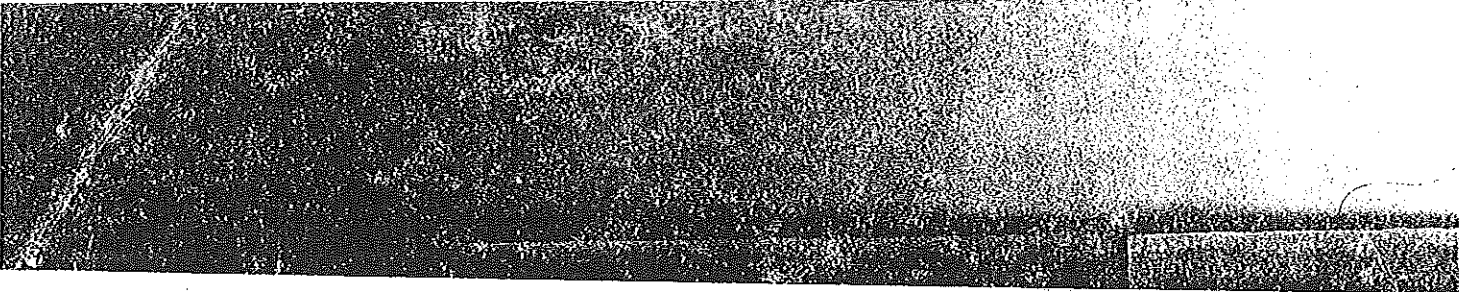
fig. 2 Pontesford Hill: Lower Camp. Plan of earthworks in vicinity of excavation area

The earthworks on the col between the lower camp and the main hill are very complicated, being confused by a boundary bank and by paths which criss-cross the area. They have never been surveyed in detail and fig. 2 represents only part of the complex. The purpose of the lower camp has been the subject of a good deal of speculation (Forde-Johnston, 1962), which only extensive excavation of this and the upper camp will solve.

The subsoil of the excavated area was presumed to be the boulder clay into which the earliest features were cut, a glacial deposit lying in the col between the hills.

#### THE EXCAVATION (plates XVII-XVIII)

An access road, built by the Forestry Commission to enable them to deal with fires on the hill, had been sited along the main ditch of the lower camp and had sliced off the front edge of the counterscarp of the outer rampart. This exposed a long section (fig. 3, section B-B1) which showed that a thick layer of dark earth and charcoal (layer 3) and some pits and other features (F6, 7, 8, 21, 22) were sealed by the rampart material (layer 2). The writer, on discovering these



nature, have been destroyed. It will be seen from the discussion below that the whole of the col between the smaller fort and the main hill will repay large-scale area excavation in the future.

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## THE SEQUENCE OF STRUCTURES

The natural boulder clay was reached in only three places (shown on fig. 4, *Plan of earliest excavated features*). In the south-east corner of the excavated area gullies had been cut into the natural clay and had become filled with soft brown stone-free clay (layer 4). This clay, which was confined to this small area, contained the flints described and illustrated below. No flints were found at any higher levels.

These gullies are the earliest features and may perhaps be dated by the flints in their fill to the Neolithic period. Their relationship with pebble surface F20 and post sockets F16a-19 cannot be demonstrated. The four post sockets are grouped a little beyond the edge of pebble surface F20 and it is tempting to see F20 as a hut floor with the post sockets as part of the hut structure. Since all these features remain undisturbed, it should be possible to show their function in a future excavation.

The clay-filled gullies were sealed by a stone arrangement enclosing an area of charcoal (F14a) close to two postholes F13 and F14 which were cut into the clay and the underlying subsoil, but were sealed by layer 3. The filling of PH F14 was very similar to the soft brown clay which filled the gullies, but the filling of PH F13 was quite different (see section h-h<sub>1</sub>). In addition it will be observed that layer 3 sags into the filling of F13, but not into that of F14 (fig. 5, sections a-a<sub>1</sub> and h-h<sub>1</sub>). It appears likely therefore that F13 and F14 are not contemporary and that F14 is perhaps earlier than F13. It is not possible to demonstrate the relationship of either of them to pebble floor F15. F6, on the edge of the area, was a clay-filled pit with burning and charcoal in its upper levels and was perhaps a rubbish pit in which a fire had been made. It contained no finds. F16 was a layer of clay, burnt red, and may have been a small hearth, though since there were no finds it is impossible to be sure. Pebble surface F22 had a small pit F21 cut into it. Though the interpretation of these features is unsatisfactory, it is clear that they represent timber structures probably associated with pebble floors, and that the burnt areas and pits, even without finds, imply occupation.

All these earlier features were sealed by layer 3 which was continuous over the whole area. This layer of dark earth with stones and much charcoal seems to represent a build-up of occupation material after the pebble surface and their associated features had gone out of use. As so often occurs, these thin pebble surfaces could not be seen in the sections (d-d<sub>1</sub>, f-f<sub>1</sub>) (fig. 5).

## THE RAMPART

The rampart (layers 2, 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d) was a dump of yellow boulder clay. There were three very shallow postholes of large diameter along its crest (F4, F9, F10). It is clear that these are simply the bottoms of postholes which were originally much deeper, the rampart having lost through weathering a good deal of its former height. This view is reinforced by the way in which layers 2a and 2b (fig. 5, section a-a<sub>1</sub>) slope upwards to the present surface, where they have been truncated by erosion.

The distance between PHs F9 and F10 is exactly twice that between PHs F4 and F9 and it seems reasonable to postulate a lost posthole halfway between F9 and F10, a posthole that was originally a few inches shallower than the others and therefore did not survive.

These three postholes, together with PH F2, did not have construction pits, the rampart material having been piled round the standing posts. PH F3, on the other hand, appears to be later than the rampart since a hole, F3a, had to be dug to receive it.

PHs F2 and F3, together with pebble surface F5, may be part of a fenced entrance leading to

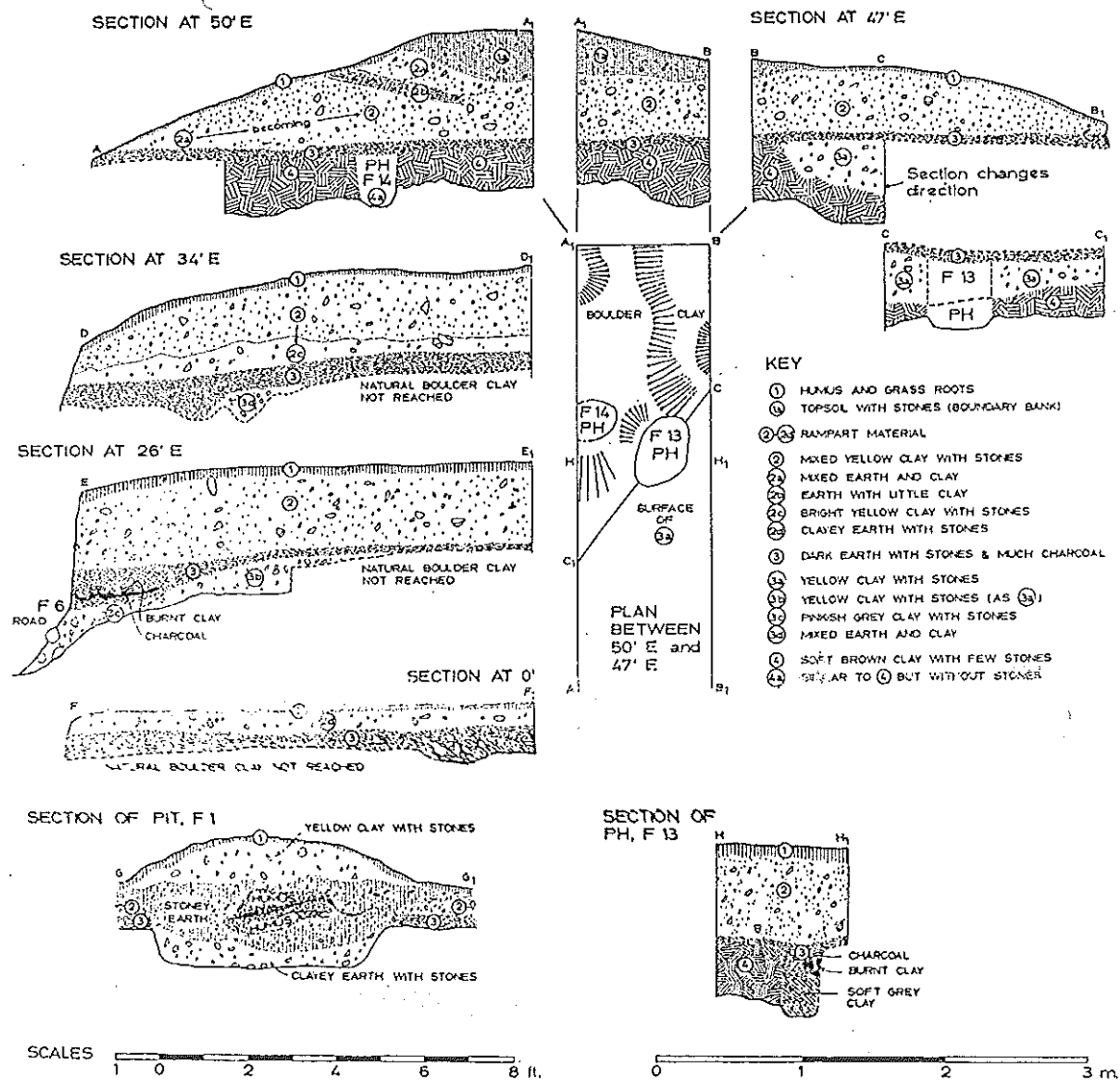
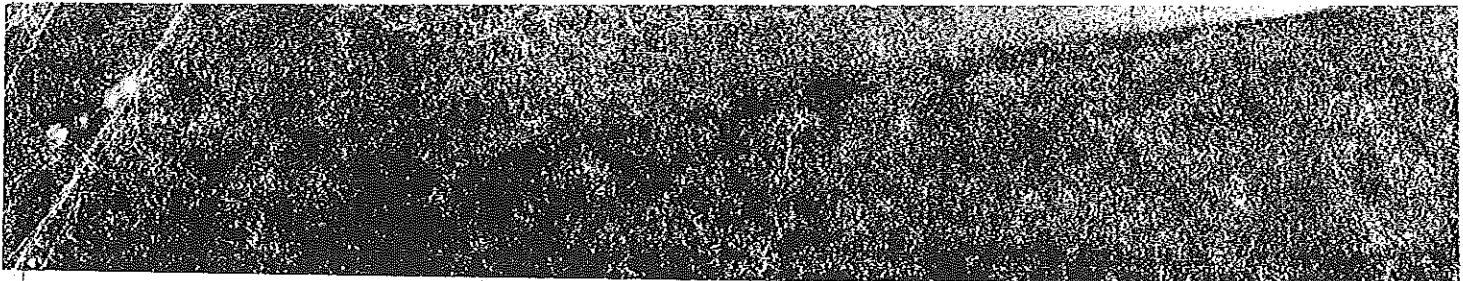


fig. 5 Sections across excavated area (N-S)

## THE FLINTS

The writer is most indebted to Miss Chitty and Mr Nicholas Thomas for the following account.

1 (fig. 6). A large steep-ended round scraper of opaque pale grey flint, plano-convex, worked all round to give sharp edges and leaving a plain, slightly concave, sloping area on the back; the end is strongly overhung, with flaking nearly vertical. There is a fleck of gloss on the face. The type and size are exceptional for Shropshire but can be paralleled by scrapers from the earliest levels at Windmill Hill (Keiller, 1965; e.g. fig. F7 and fig. 40, F32 and F33 from primary



Since the col, from its situation below the hills, will have received downwash from them, there is every possibility that the Neolithic occupation levels have been preserved. This may therefore be one of the very few sites in the region where there is a real chance of excavating Neolithic structures. It is very much to be hoped that the chance will one day be taken on an adequate scale and with full scientific facilities.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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