

## BREAN DOWN HILLFORT, SOMERSET, 1974

by  
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## ABSTRACT

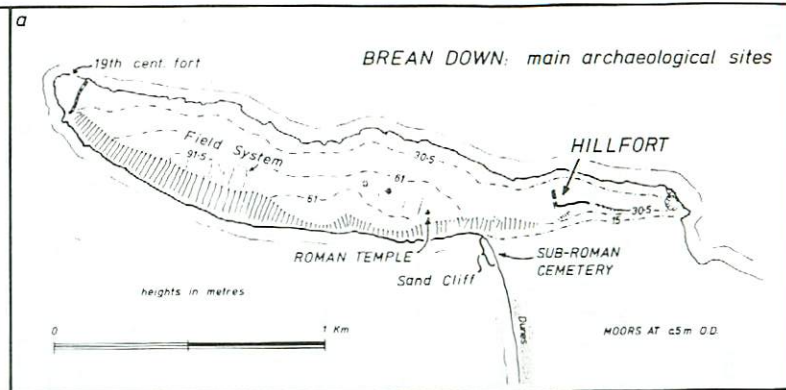
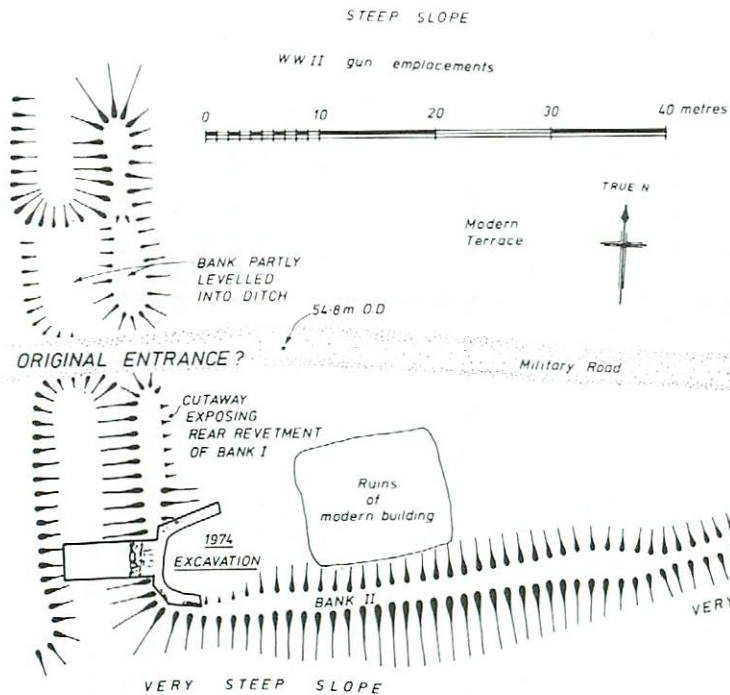
Limited excavation at the south-west angle of this small and now L-shaped earthwork showed the defences to consist of abutting rubble banks reverted front and rear with massive drystone walling, with a ditch to the west. Radio-carbon determinations indicate that the defences were constructed in the latter part of the Iron Age, and provide dates for the coarse pottery of Iron Age 'A' type in use on the site prior to the construction of the banks and while ditch silting was taking place. The site continued to be frequented in the Roman period.

## BACKGROUND TO THE EXCAVATION

The Carboniferous Limestone promontory of Brean Down forms a major landmark on the Somerset coast, being isolated from the main mass of Mendip by the Axe estuary. In addition to its ecological and geological interest, it possesses a number of important archaeological sites. Apart from the nineteenth-century fort at the western end, the known sites include a well-preserved field-system, possibly of late-Roman date (Fowler 1975, 130-1), several barrows, a late-Roman temple with associated fifth-century activity (ApSimon & Boon 1965), and, at the eastern end of the Down, the earthwork which was the object of the excavations described here (*Fig. 35a*). Against the southern flank of the promontory is the Sand Cliff, an important series of late and post-glacial deposits (ApSimon *et al* 1961). The upper strata of the sand cliff contain Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age material and an inhumation cemetery of unknown size. Suggestions that the latter was of the 'sub-Roman' type now familiar from Somerset and elsewhere (Rahtz & Fowler 1972, 199-201) have been strengthened by a radio-carbon date of  $650 \pm 80$  ad (Birm.-246) for one of the burials.

The excavation was undertaken in order to place the construction and use of the earthwork within the known chronological range of the sites on the Down, and more particularly to confirm or refute the hypothesis that it was of post-Roman date. The identification of settlement sites of the period AD400-700 remains difficult, but Fowler has suggested (1971, 209) that the proximity of cemetery and Roman temple sites to defensible enclosures may be a pointer to the use of the latter in the post-Roman period. The coastal situation of the Brean site was felt to increase the probability that imported pottery of types found elsewhere in western Britain would be present here, were the site in use at this time.

# BREAN DOWN HILLFORT 1974 Plan of Earthworks



W.E. mens '74 I.C.G.B. delt '75

Figure 35 Location plan of Brean Down Hillfort and the excavation of 1974. Inset 'a' based on Ordnance Survey, Crown copyright reserved.

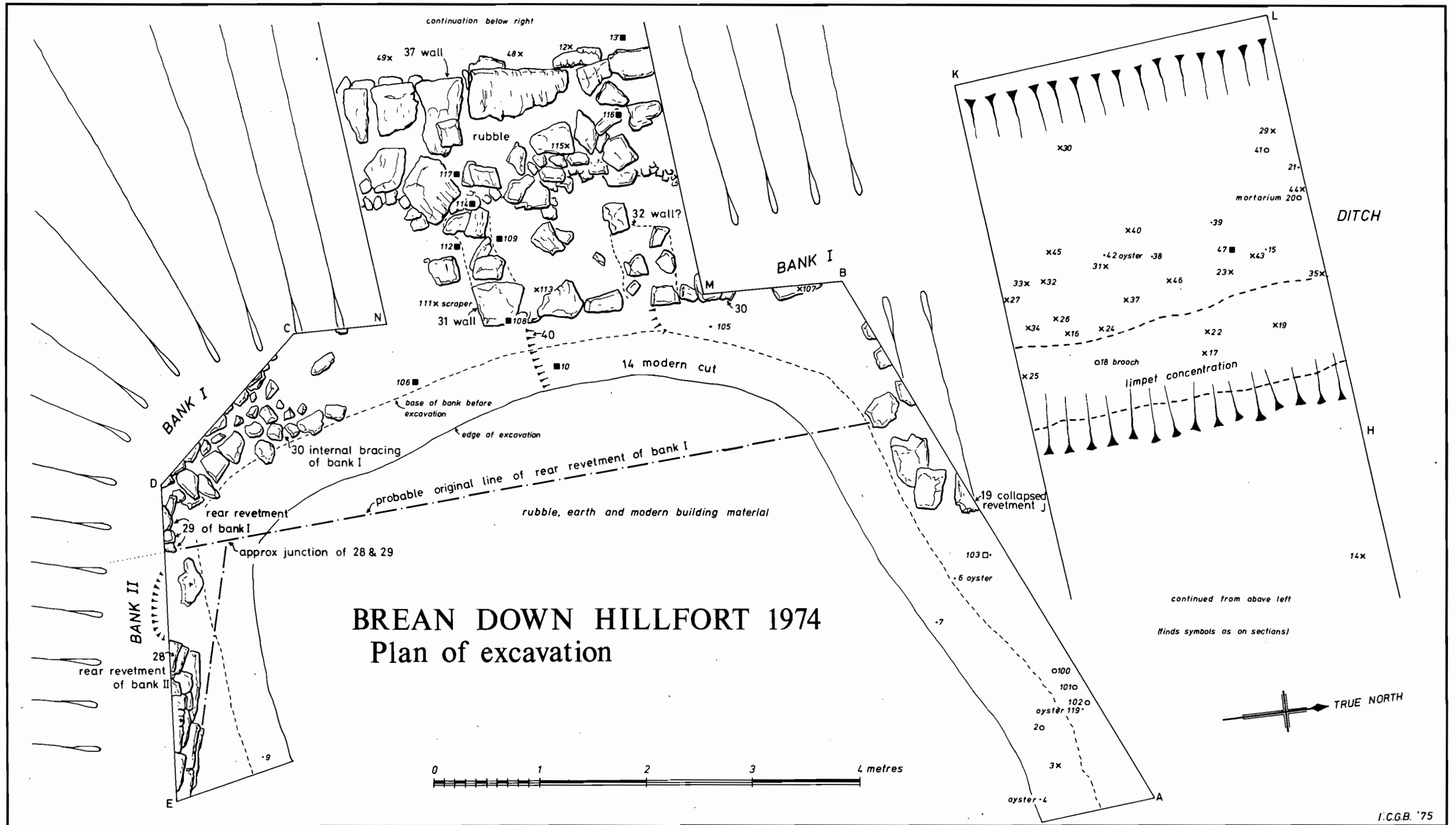
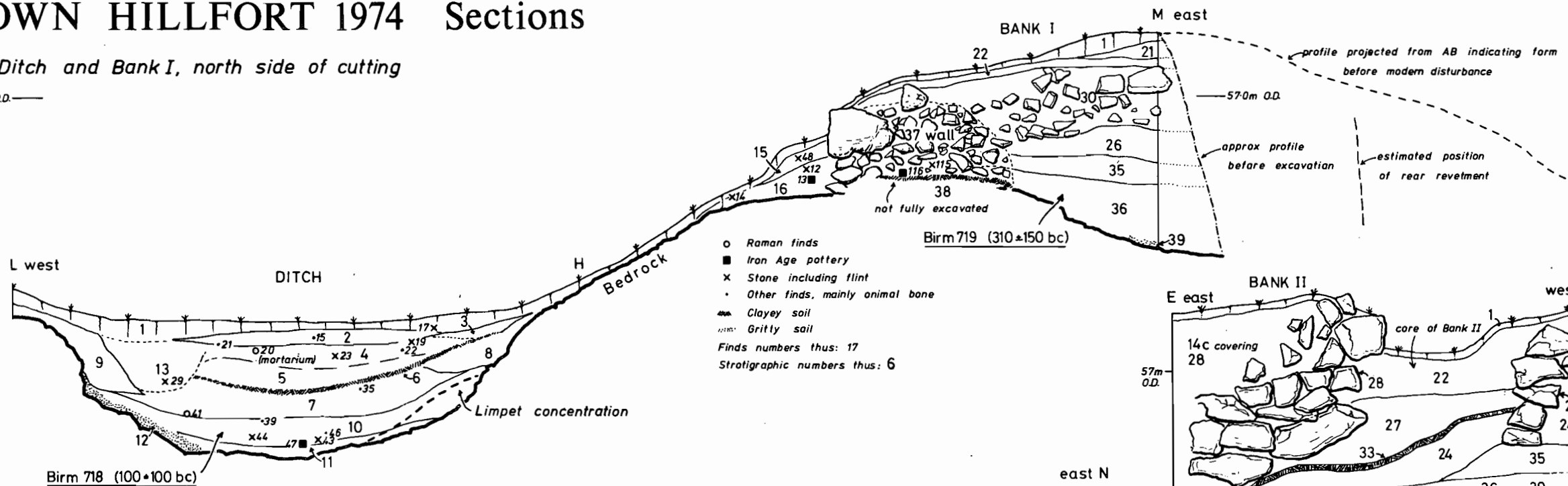


Figure 36 Plan of excavation.

# BREAN DOWN HILLFORT 1974 Sections

L-M Ditch and Bank I, north side of cutting

57.0m O.D. —



K-N Ditch and Bank I, south side of cutting, reversed

57.0m O.D. —

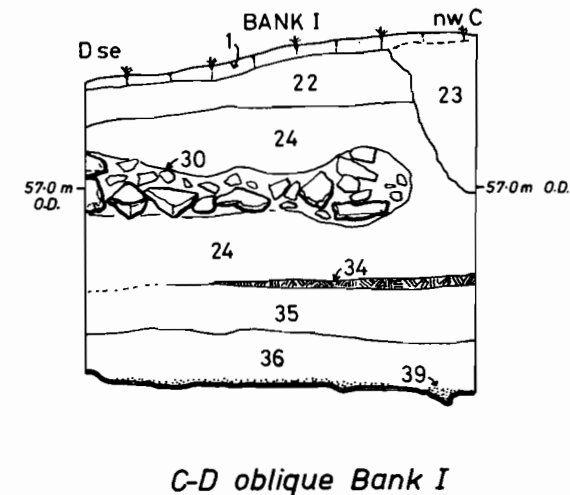
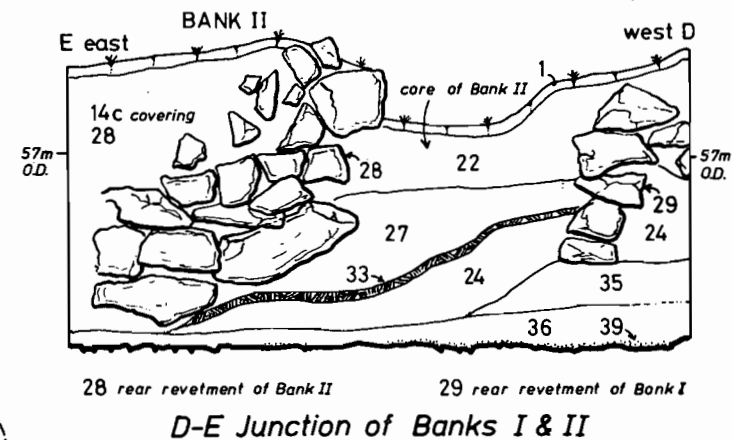
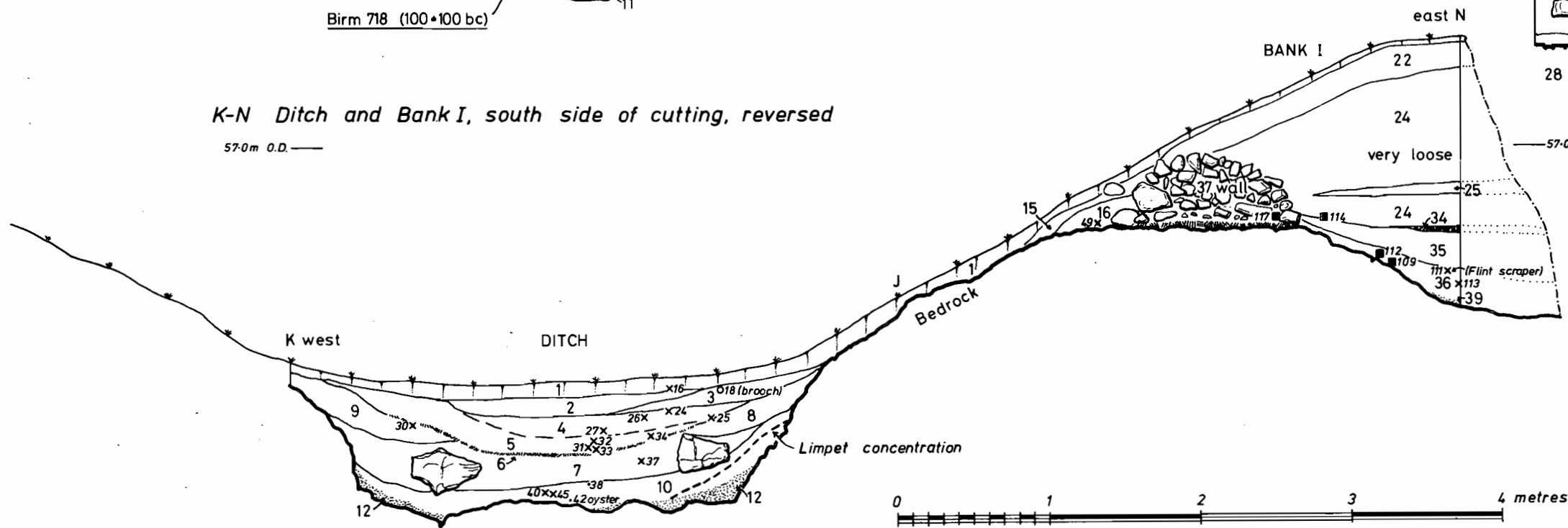


Figure 37 Bank and Ditch sections L-M and K-N.



## THE HILLFORT

*(Fig. 35)*

The site has not previously attracted much attention. Phelps (1836, 109, 136) described it as 'of a square form', and interpreted it as a Roman fort connected with the possible Roman 'port' at Uphill on the other side of the estuary. Warre (1864, 65-6) implied that it was in much its present form in his time, and regarded it as a Danish construction. A circumstantial account of the finding of early Roman coins on the north side is given by Knight (1902, 298), who adds that the northern rampart had been quarried away. The *Victoria County History* (Vol. II, 1911, 473-4) describes the site, but omits the coin finds. Fourth-century coins are recorded by ApSimon (1958, 109) as having been found within the earthwork. The site was omitted from the Ordnance Survey *Map of Southern Britain in the Iron Age*.

At present, the site consists of a single bank (Bank I), fronted by a ditch and running north-south across the ridge, and a second (Bank II) commencing at its southern end and running eastwards for c150 m along the natural scarp on the south side. This bank terminates where the present metalled road reaches the plateau from the south-west, but for about half of its length the bank is slight and may consist merely of a natural outcrop slightly enhanced by scarping and the addition of a small amount of rubble. The slope to the south is very steep, but that on the northern, seaward, side is less so. If there ever was a rampart along this side it is no longer traceable.

Bank I and its ditch have been damaged by modern military activity. The ditch, recorded in 1911 as extending down the northern slope as far as the cliffs, now terminates well up the slope beside a modern building. The military road to the coastal fort runs through a gap in Bank I and on a causeway across the ditch. This may be an original entrance, but is not mentioned in any of the earlier accounts. A counterscarp on the western side of the ditch in 1911 (*VCH, loc cit*) is no longer traceable. Large stones protrude through the turf on the front and rear of Bank I.

The interior, with an effective area of about 0.5 hectares (1.2 acres), has been extensively terraced for military buildings. There is now no sign of the 'hut circle' marked on the O.S. 6" at ST 29905888, close to the eastern end of the defences. Because of the apparent extensive disturbance of the interior and the limited resources available, examination of the defences was felt to provide the best opportunity for dating the site. Damage to the rear of both banks by a modern building in the south-west corner, had exposed longitudinal sections of both. This enabled much information to be obtained with minimal further disturbance of the earthworks (sections A-B, B-C, C-D, D-E). The exposed sections were cleaned down and the adjacent areas examined. The ditch deposits were recorded in a three-metre wide cut which was later extended through the bank to join up with section B-C (sections L-M, K-N).

*Disposal of Material*

The finds and records from the excavation will be deposited in Woodspring Museum, Weston-super-Mare, which holds other material from the Down.

## THE EXCAVATION

(Fig. 36)

Details of the stratification are provided in appendix 1, and are the basis for the following account. The numbers in brackets refer to the appendix and to the drawn sections.

*Pre-Bank Features* (Fig. 37. Sections L-M, K-N).

The bedrock surface beneath the bank was found to slope down eastwards from the rear of the front revetment walling (37). As this slope runs counter to the bedding planes of the limestone at this point it is probable that it is artificial, but the limited nature of the excavation renders its function unclear and it may either be unrelated to the bank or be connected with its construction. Only beneath (37) was a clear pre-bank deposit preserved (38), a relatively stone-free brown, clay soil containing a little flint, animal bones and Iron Age pottery. To the east of this, and merging with the stones of (37), was a deeper wedge of looser stony soil (36) lying directly on the sloping bedrock and thin patches of yellow sandy soil (39). The increase in depth of (36) eastwards suggests that it was deliberately deposited as a make-up layer contemporary with the construction of (37) but prior to the erection of the rest of the bank.

The occupation debris in both (38) and (36) clearly indicate activity in the area antedating the defences, and it is possible that (38) is the truncated remains of an occupation deposit which extended east and west, but which has been removed by the construction of the ditch and the scarping of the natural rock on the east. A radio-carbon date of  $310 \pm 150$  bc (Libby half-life, Birm.-719) was obtained from animal bone in layer (36). The limited scale of the excavation renders interpretation of these features difficult, but the absence of cultural material from the overlying bank layers suggest that this determination provides a satisfactory *terminus post quem* for the construction of the bank.

*The Banks*

The body of both banks was made up of carboniferous limestone rubble and earth, both presumably derived from the ditch or surface quarrying. The proportions of earth and stone, prevailing soil colour and average size of the rubble all varied, but the only features of possible significance were two thin bands of humic, stone-free soil (33) and (34), which probably represent fortuitous dumping of material during construction, rather than marking chronological breaks in the work.

The west side of bank I was revetted with a drystone wall of massive blocks, the rear of which was so integrated into the main body of the bank as to indicate that the wall was never a free-standing structure. The rear of the bank had been similarly, though less massively, revetted, but had been destroyed in the area excavated, surviving only in the exposed sections (A-B, (19) and (41); D-E, (29)). This rear revetment was constructed after the piling of material behind the front wall had commenced, since it was placed above a bank layer (35). The original width of the bank from front to rear of the revetment walling was about 3.5m.

The disposition of the make-up layers of the bank indicated that the



material had been tipped in simultaneously with concentrations of larger stones (31) and (32) forming ill-defined transverse and longitudinal alignments which may represent attempts to 'box' the upper parts of the structure, but the upper parts of the bank where such structures, and any evidence of timbering, would better survive had been removed.

Bank II, of which only the rear face was exposed, was also revetted with a well-preserved drystone wall ((28), section D-E). This had been destroyed to the west, and the body of bank was exposed butting against the rear revetment of bank I. Bank II is thus structurally later than bank I, but it is improbable that there was a long interval between the construction of the two.

The decay and collapse of bank I is indicated by the accumulation of material on the berm (15) and (16), the silting of the ditch and the accumulation of material at the rear (17), (18), (20). Layer (20) contained an Iron Age sherd and a hone but no other finds, but the overlying layer (18) was more humic and contained Romano-British sherds and animal bones. Immediately below the topsoil was a layer of small weathered stones without associated finds. In recent times (probably 1939-45) the rear of the banks had been damaged by building activity represented by feature (14), into which material from the rear of the banks had weathered.

#### *The Ditch*

The ditch was about 4.5m wide and 2m deep, although it had silted up to only half this depth. The profile, with steep sides and a relatively flat bottom, has been noted on two small enclosures on the north Somerset limestone (Phillips 1931, fig. 8; Rahtz 1957, fig. 5).

Stratigraphic differences within the silting were not marked, the main features being the concentration of limpet shells in the lower levels on the eastern side, a concentration of large limestone blocks (7) and a humic band (6) immediately above. A small concentration of charcoal from layer (10), a deposit of clayey soil with a few stones lying beneath (7) and immediately on the bedrock in places, was submitted for radio-carbon dating and a reading of  $100 \pm 100$  bc was obtained (Birm.-718). This provides a *terminus post quem* for the stones of (7), which are interpreted as the collapse from the front revetment of bank I. In addition, if the bank material is assumed to be derived from the ditch this date gives a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the defences which, taken with the determination from beneath the bank, indicates a date in the latter part of the Iron Age for the hillfort.

In the upper ditch layers a number of slingstones were found, in addition to a mortarium rim and a brooch of Roman date. A relatively stone-free soil patch was identified in section L-M (13), partly covered by the highest stone layer (2), but its date and significance are unclear.

## DISCUSSION

#### *Dating*

The initial hypothesis that the earthwork was of post-Roman construction can be firmly rejected in the light of the stratigraphic data and the radio-carbon determinations. The date obtained from the ditch indicates

that it was silting up in the last few centuries BC, following the construction of the banks. The identical character of the pottery from beneath and in the lower part of bank I and in the ditch may additionally indicate that the chronological separation between the postulated pre-bank phase and the making of the defences was not very great.

The collapse of the front revetment took place when wheel-made pottery of early Roman or 'Belgic' type was present on the site. The small quantities of Roman material in the upper parts of the ditch and on the tail of bank demonstrate continuing use of the site, if not permanent occupation, at least into the second century AD. The fourth-century coins reputedly found on the site may be no more than casual losses made by visitors to the Romano-Celtic temple. There is no evidence to indicate at what date the hillfort was abandoned, but it is conceivable that the establishment of the temple may have provided the occasion. The location of the temple on the headland may, in fact, owe something to the presence of the fort, since the religious importance of a number of larger hillforts in the Iron Age and Roman periods is now clear (eg South Cadbury; Alcock 1970, 17-20).

#### *Affinities of the Site*

While the use of the term 'hillfort' to describe the Brean Down enclosure is somewhat misleading, the scale of the banks and ditch and the defensive location set the site apart from the numerous small weakly defended enclosures of Iron Age type in North Somerset and Avon. It shares features with the inner enclosure of King's Weston Down Camp, Bristol, where the ditch and the interior were sampled by Rahtz (1957). The area enclosed by the inner ditch at King's Weston and the ditch at Brean Down is approximately the same, and the ditch profiles are similar. The chronological range of the two sites is comparable. Additionally, both sites are in close proximity to post-Roman cemeteries (see above p.141 and Godman 1972, p.47), although in neither case can the occupation of the enclosures be demonstrated at this period.

The scale of the excavations and the paucity of the finds were both too small for deductions concerning the economy, the character and intensity of the occupation to be made. The stratigraphical disposition of the mass of limpet shells indicates that they were deposited shortly after the construction of the defences. Their absence from later layers may indicate abandonment of this food source or the desertion of the hillfort. The location of the site is such that potential grazing land, both on the plateau and the moors, each perhaps having seasonal advantages, was readily accessible.

#### *The Radio-Carbon dates and the Iron Age Pottery*

The hand-made pottery found at Brean, King's Weston and several other sites in the area has been regarded as a devolution of the Iron Age 'A' tradition, deriving ultimately from All Cannings Cross types (ApSimon *et al* 1958, 99-105). The virtual absence of Iron Age material of Glastonbury or Belgic types from Brean might suggest that occupation of the site had ceased before these ceramics became current. The Radio-carbon dates imply the construction of the defences and currency of the coarser pottery in the last few centuries BC, and it seems probable that the site was occupied until the Roman period. If this is so, the lack of finer Iron Age wares may be explained



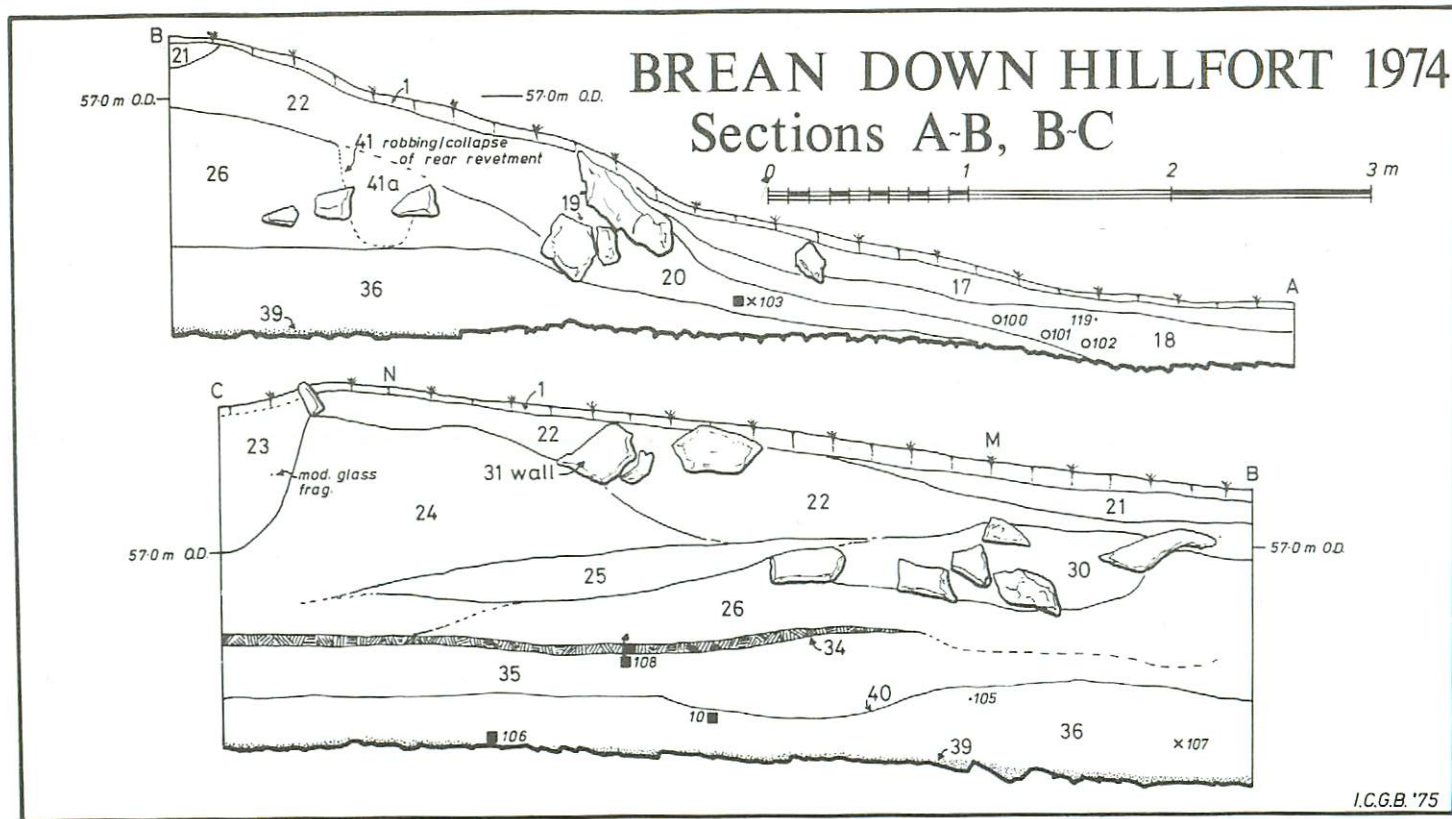


Figure 38 Sections A-B and B-C.

rather in terms of economics than of chronology, the Brean community being unable to purchase the products of an organized pottery industry (Peacock 1969).

### CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from the excavation indicate that the construction of the defences took place towards the end of the Iron Age, and was probably preceded by an undefended phase. Although it is possible that there was a considerable interval between these two phases, neither the radio-carbon dates nor the artefact evidence permit this inference to be made. Continuing use of the hillfort, in an undefensible condition, is indicated into the Roman period, but there is no data to suggest any post-Roman occupation or activity.

### APPENDIX 1

#### Details of Stratification

<i>Description</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i> Finds</i>
1. Turf & topsoil			Modern finds only
<i>Ditch Layers:</i>			
2. Loose angular small & medium rubble with little soil	below 1 in ditch	latest weathering	Clay pipe
3. Brown earth and tiny stones on E side of ditch	below 2 and above 4	slow silt	2 slingstones, 1 flint, Roman brooch
4. Compact medium & large stones with little soil	below 3 and above 5 in ditch	collapsed bank material	Mortarium 3 slingstones 1 flint, 1 hone, 1 slate, 1 animal bone
5. As 4, with higher proportion of sandy soil & few charcoal flecks	below 4, above 6	collapsed bank material	1 slingstone 1 hone
6. Thin layer of clayey humic soil	below 5 and above 8 & 9	buried soil marking break in silting	3 slingstones, 1 hone/rubber
7. Massive limestone blocks	below 8 & 9, above 10	collapsed front revetment of bank I	2 slingstones, limpets
8. Wedge of compact small stones	below 6 on east side	weathering	—
9. Wedge of compact small stones	below 6 on west side	weathering	—

10. Medium and small weathered stones in dark clayey soil	below 7, above 11	rapid silt and rubbish accumulation	Late IA/RB sherds IA sherd 3 slingstones hone/burnisher 1 slate Iron frag whelk, oyster & limpets animal bone charcoal (Birm.-718)
11. Small unweathered stones in gritty brown soil	below 10, on bedrock over most of ditch	rapid silt	Iron ore limpets animal bone
12. Red grit in patches	on bedrock	initial weathering of exposed bedrock	—
13. Humic earth patch	below 2 & cutting 4	recut or localized disturbance	—
<i>Front and rear of banks</i>			
14. Cut into rear of banks	later than all bank & associated features,	modern foundation cut	see components
14a. Weathered stone tumble	within 14 at east end of section AB	collapsed material from rear of bank I	6 RB sherds 1 flint oyster shell clay pipe frag
14b. Compact gritty b brown soil and small stones	on bedrock and below 14a & c	trampled soil in modern cut	—
14c. Granular clay soil with a few small & medium stones	over 14b and covering 28 on rear of bank II (section DE)	disturbed soil assoc. with modern cut	Clay pipe frag
15. Small loose stones in brown humic soil	below 1 and above 16 at front of bank I, running up to 37	material eroded from bank	
16. Compact small & medium stones in red soil	below 15 & on bedrock	as 15, less humified soil	5 IA sherds 4 slingstones limpets
17. Weathered small stones	immed. below 1 on tail of bank I	bank collapse	—
18. Weathered medium stones in dark humic soil	below 17, above 20 & running up to 19	Roman occupation/ rubbish deposit oyster on tail of bank I	5 RB sherds limpets animal bone
19. Large partly weathered blocks	at rear of bank I, above 36	collapsed rear revetment of bank I	—
20. Small & medium stones in little soil	below 18, above 36 running up to 19	Pre-Roman erosion from bank I	1 IA sherd 1 hone/rubber
<i>Banks</i>			
21. Tiny stones in humic soil	localized around B on bank I below 1	bank layer	—
22. Dark humic soil & medium angular stones	below 21 and 1 in banks I & II	bank layer	—



23.	Patch of loose soil and stones	below turf around C	modern disturbance	Mod glass
24.	Medium angular stones in red soil	above 34 in bank I	bank layer	—
25.	Compact angular stones in hard yellow clay soil	below 24 in bank I	bank layer	—
26.	Small angular stones in deep red soil	below 30 in bank I	bank layer	1 IA sherd
27.	Small angular stones in compact red clay soil	below 22 & above 33 in bank II	bank layer	—
28.	Drystone wall of massive blocks	rear of bank II, above 36 & covered by 14c	rear revetment of bank II	—
29.	Drystone wall of massive blocks	rear of bank I in section DE, destroyed by 14 to north	rear revetment of bank I, earlier than bank II	—
30.	Concentration of large blocks	in body of bank I, running north from 29	internal bracing of bank I	—
31.	Line of large stones	running e-w across bank I within 22	internal bracing of bank I	—
32.	Line of large stones	running E-W across bank I within 22	internal bracing of bank I	—
33.	Thin layer of dark humic stone-free soil	below 27 and above 24 in bank II	layer in bank make-up or possibly buried soil	—
34.	As 33, in bank I	above 35 in bank I	as 33	—
35.	Small angular stones in red soil	below 34 & merging with 24 & 26	bank layer	—
36.	Small and medium stones in loose greenish-brown clay soil	integral with the lower part of 37, and extending in a wedge eastwards across bank I	initial dumping of occupation material contemporary with 37 & prior to construction of rest of bank I	6 IA sherds 2 flints 2 slingstones animal bone (used for Birm. -719)
37.	Drystone wall of massive blocks	front of bank I	front revetment of bank I	—
38.	Stone-free compact greenish-brown clay soil	below 37, possibly cut away to E & W	pre-bank occupation soil?	7 IA sherds 1 flint animal bone
39.	Yellow sandy loam	patches on bedrock below 36	windblown material	—
40.	Shallow depression	in surface of 36, filled with 35 (section BC)	uncertain	—
41.	Irregular cut in rear of bank I (section AB)	cut into 26	seating of stones of rear revetment of bank I	—
41a.	Medium angular stones in reddish soil	filling 41 below 22	derived from 22	—

## APPENDIX 2

## The Finds

(Fig. 39)

The finds are marked with individual serial numbers. A complete list of numbers and contexts will be deposited with the finds.

*Iron Age Pottery*

A total of 27 Iron Age sherds were recovered, 18 from below the front revetment or in the lower layers of the bank. There is considerable variation of colour and thickness. The pottery is identical to much of that from the sand cliff (ApSimon *et al* 1961, 116-118) and is paralleled at King's Weston (Rahtz 1957, 36-8) and Cadbury Congresbury (Fowler *et al* 1970, 26). The ware is fairly hard with large limestone grits, the colour ranging from black to orange brown. The sherds are all from hand-made vessels, but no reconstructions are possible.

The date and affinities of this type of pottery have been discussed above (p.147), and it appears to characterise the Iron Age of North Somerset until late in the period.

*Roman Pottery*

Abraded rim sherd of mortarium in hard, fine, red-buff fabric with surface fired to buff. Quartz grits on interior surface. (20, layer (4) ditch, section L-M).

10 body sherds in hard sandy grey micaceous fabric. The surface colour varies from black to whitish grey. 2a-f, layer (14a); 100, layer (18), section A-B; 101a-c, layer (18), section A-B.

13 sherds from a small jar in a soft slightly sandy micaceous pale-brown fabric. Surface colour from very dark grey to brown, three sherds have a black slip or encrustation on the exterior. The context of this vessel is significant, being below the stones collapsed from the front revetment wall into the ditch. The rim form appears Roman, but the ware is comparable to fabric V at Butcombe, there dated to the late Iron Age and early Roman periods. (Fowler *et al*, 1968, 222). 41 a-m, layer (10) ditch, section L-M.

Hard, slightly micaceous sherd in black fabric with buff exterior 102, layer (18), section A-B.

*Stone objects**a) Slingstones*

21 rounded pebbles, varying between 3 and 7 cms in maximum dimensions, the majority of limestone, were recovered. Most were found in the ditch, but two were from layer (36), the primary bank layer.

*b) Hones and Rubbers*

5 flat-sided Old Red Sandstone beach pebbles had probably been utilized for these purposes, but lacked the highly polished surfaces frequently seen on rubbing stones, and only 30 can readily be interpreted as a hone. 26, layer (4) ditch, section K-N; 30, layer (5) ditch, section K-N; 31, layer (6) ditch, section K-N; 43, layer (10) ditch, section L-M; 103a, layer (20) rampart tail, section A-B.

*c) Flint*

7 flints were found, only one of which (111) was other than a waste or re-touched flake. 104 Utilised flake, unstratified; 111 Part of discoid scraper, layer (36) bank, section K-N; 115 Utilised flake, layer (38) below bank, section L-M.

*d) Ore*

A small piece of limonite and malachite, which occurs locally in the limestone. 51 layer (11) ditch.

*Metal*

Catch plate and part of bow of bronze brooch of Collingwood Type Q. Flat-ended circular knob with dot-and-circle motif at foot. The top of the bow has a recessed panel, possibly for enamel inlay, and faint chevron decoration. Second century A.D. 18, layer (3) ditch, section K-N. Lump of iron 38, layer (10) ditch, section K-N.

*Animal Remains*

a) Limpets (*Patella vulgata*). A minimum of 680 shells were recovered, mainly from the area in front of the wall of bank I and the lower parts of the east side of the ditch.

The length/breadth ratios of 50 limpets from layers 11 and 16 were compared graphically in order to assess differences between the two accumulations (Shackleton 1969, 408). The correspondence between the two

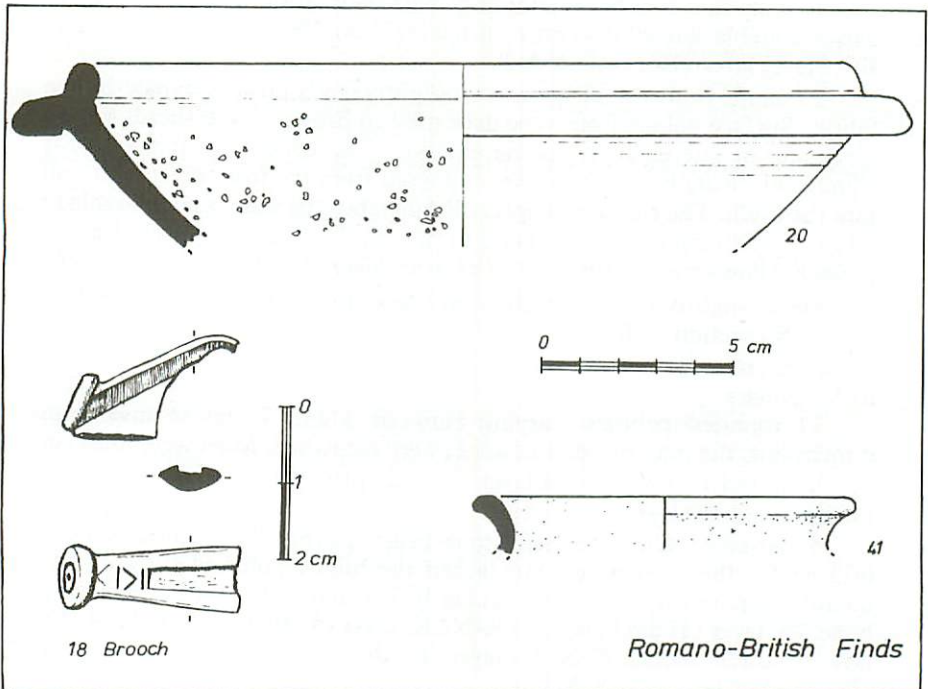


Figure 39 Roman Brooch and Pottery from Brean Down Hillfort.



was extremely close, indicating that they are probably of the same origin.

b) Oysters (*Ostrea edulis*). 4 examples.

c) Dog Whelk (*Nucella lapillus*) 1 example.

d) Animal Bone Only ½kg of bone was recovered, all in a fragmentary and decayed state. Cow, horse and sheep/goat are represented. The horse hoof, 112b, (layer (36), bank, section K-N) came from a small variety.

#### Radio-Carbon Determinations

Three samples were submitted to the Radio-Carbon Laboratory, University of Birmingham, and counts were run on two:

Birm.-718 (54 charcoal, layer (10) ditch) 100 ± 100bc (Libby half-life)

Birm.-719 (animal bone from layer (36)) 310 ± 150bc (Libby half-life)

#### Post-Medieval Finds

Layer (1) in the ditch area contained a range of modern objects indicative of the military presence here in the last war and more recent temporary occupation by campers, food debris and tent pegs being among the items found. In any earlier context, this data would doubtless be interpreted as indicative of 'squatting'.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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