

Earthworks on Walton Common Down, near Clevedon,

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The great religious sites of prehistoric Britain, such as Stonehenge and Avebury, have appealed with such force to the imagination of generations of antiquarians that the discovery of analogous sites has in the past been a steady by-product of the field work of many worthy folk. New methods in archæology have made the determination of the age and character of sites a matter of comparative ease, but it is still tempting to jump to conclusions, especially when confronted with a group of earthworks like those on Walton Common Down.

The earthworks are situated on the summit of the limestone coastal ridge which runs in a north-easterly direction from Clevedon to Portishead.

The average height of Walton Common Down, which occupies the western end of the central mass, is 250 feet above sea level. The top of the hill is covered with downland turf, which shows no trace of modern agriculture, while the slopes on both sides are wooded.

The down is traversed by a cart track, which, starting from the upper end of the village of Walton, climbs round the steep escarpment of the down, crosses it obliquely, and passes through Hack Wood to the hamlet of Farley on the coastal road. The end of the Down immediately overlooking Walton carries a number of obvious lynchets, and these traces of ancient cultivation are shown with much distinctness on Plate A.

There is very little space on this end of the Down which has not been under cultivation in Iron Age or Romano-British times, and there are traces of a group of hut circles among the bushes on the slope above the gardens. Their position is not shown clearly by the air photograph, which was not taken specifically for an archæological purpose, but has been inserted on the explanatory diagram, and also on the general plan at A (Fig. 4).

These ancient cultivations are carried along the top of the Down beyond the limits of the photograph, to the neighbourhood of the earthworks. Here there is also a number of large shallow depressions,

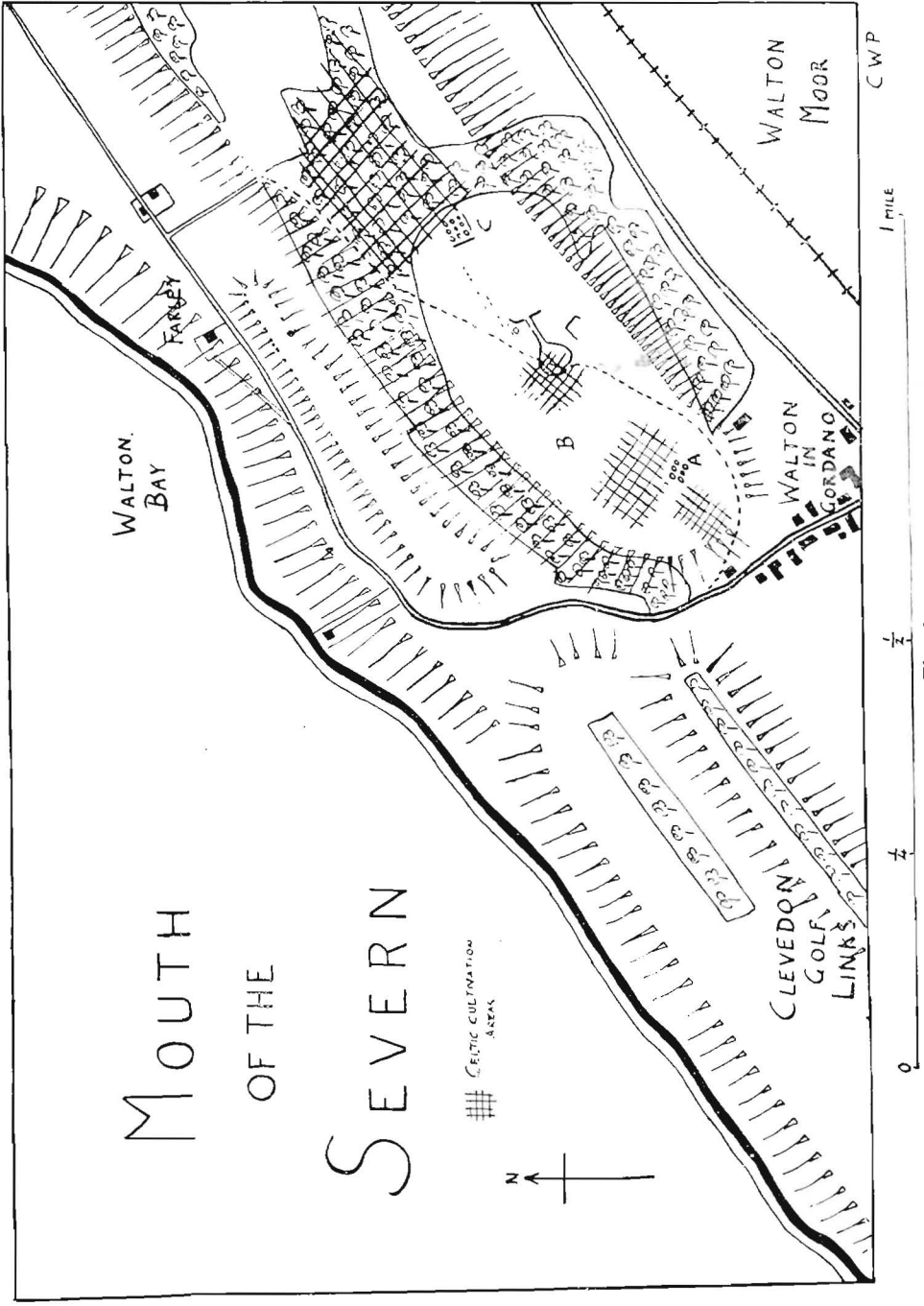


Fig. 4.

which show clearly on the ground by their superior turf, and these may also be traces of ancient dwellings. They are shown at B (Fig. 4) on the Down, and here there is a small deposit of plateau gravel containing some flint, but its quality is so poor that it can have had no value to ancient man.

The earthworks are met with half way along the open part of the Down.

They consist of a large roughly circular enclosure, with a low rampart seldom more than two feet six inches in height, fronted by a shallow ditch, which averages about 9 inches in depth. From the north eastern side of this work projects an avenue of similar construction which ends in passing through a cross bank and ditch at right angles.

There are also two lesser works, but before describing these works more fully, reference must be made to the notice they have received from earlier observers.

The first is a detailed account published in Vol. 19 of the *Wiltshire Archæological Magazine*, pp. 64-66, as an appendix to a paper by the Rev. A. C. Smith. In this, the author, Mons. C. S. Gosch, of the Danish Legation in London, gives an accurate account of the works in general, but does not mention any of the other antiquities visible on the Down, and seeks to draw a parallel between the plan of these remains, and that of Avebury. He observed the large enclosure well, but was less successful with the avenue, where many curious features are passed over without mention, though they must have been visible in his day, and provide evidence for a possible solution of the purpose of the whole work.

There follow two references to work carried out by Mr. Walter Long on the Down in the '50s.

Mr. Long's own account appears on page 157 of the *Archæological Journal* for 1859. He concerned himself with what can only be the large group of hut circles which still exists some 150 yards to the north east of the end of the avenue, and near the edge of Hack Wood (C Fig. 4). He describes them as being "at the end of the down," and as he has just given a short account of the enclosure and avenue it seems fairly safe to assume that he approached the whole complex mentally from the south west. His remarks on the earthworks scarcely call for comment save that he describes the avenue as a "winding way," which is an exaggeration of its admitted eccentricities, and also surmises that the whole complex was a "*locus consecratus*." He was clearly more interested in his excavation of the hut circles, but it cannot

be said that he succeeded in throwing much light on the period of their occupation. In his *Archæological Journal* article, he says :—

“ At the end of the down are about 15 hut circles, of which three were opened by Mr. Long. Under the thick turf and fine mould, about a foot deep lay some stones, and under them fragments of coarse black pottery, burnt earth, burnt bones, two crystals, and a stone spearhead, as supposed. The mould seemed saturated with animal matter, and the ground hollow. At about 4½ feet deep two thigh bones and other human remains were found ; the body had been drawn up, the size of the cist not allowing it to lay at full length. The skull lay at the side ; it seemed of a savage type, the cheek bones high, the mouth projecting.

The earth beneath was dark and unctuous, and about two feet below was a second deposit of bones, broken pottery, and burnt earth. The cavity was about six feet deep. A singular round cake of clay was thrown out in this excavation. The width of the hut circle was about five feet. The skeleton was pronounced to be that of a female.”

In his “ Worlebury,” in an appendix to Chapter II on page 67, Dymond refers to the excavation carried out by Long, when he is seeking parallels for the hut pits which he found during his excavation of Worlebury.

He had access to Long’s manuscript notes, and he gives the dimensions of as many as six pits. The extremes of depth were 4 feet and 5 feet 6 inches, and those of width 3 feet 6 inches and 5 feet, while in every case the pits were a little deeper than wide. Some were found to have a dry stone lining. By far the most remarkable was one of which Mr. Long said :—

“ It had star-like depressions running into it, one to each quarter, *viz.*, N. S. E. and W. On following a passage north eastwards we came to a stone chamber formed of very large free stones. On the inside its depth was 17 inches and its breadth 15½ inches. The large stone at the door was 6 inches thick. The crown of the aperture had a roof of solid stone. A paved passage about the width of the opening led to it. The entrance to the hole was 7 feet from the centre of the central hole, and ten feet from the surface of the ground. On further

examination we found the floor of the central chamber (the first we entered) paved with thick stones, similar to those forming the lateral chamber. We had not time to follow the other chambers."

Obviously Long had pitched on an interesting site, but his digging has done next to nothing to help its dating. The only artefacts found seem to have been the pottery, and the suspect stone spearhead, and the negative evidence is a safer guide in a case like this. There is no record of any metal object either in bronze or iron, and although this may be due to absence of vigilance in the excavators it remains surprising that nothing of the sort was found in six pits of some size, all of which were probably human habitations. It is probable that modern excavation would show that these huts belong to the Early Iron Age.

An interesting feature about this north-eastern group of hut circles, is that they are very crowded together, and are enclosed in a small rectangular enclosure. It is very difficult to determine the extent of this enclosure, because of the overgrown condition of the ground, and only its southern corner is clear. North east of these huts the ridge is at once covered by a wood dense with undergrowth, and this masks an elaborate and well-preserved system of ancient fields which extends several hundred yards through the wood, and links up with a system to the south west of Weston Lodge. As the footpath from Walton to Farley passes through this wood after crossing the earthworks on the Common Down it has continually to mount over the low stone banks which demarcate these fields from each other. The system extends across the ridge, and the main divisions cross it at right angles. It is probable that these fields belong to the hut settlement already described.

All these facts therefore show that there was settled life on the Common Down in prehistoric times accompanied by relatively extensive agricultural operations.

Now to return to the earthworks.

The large enclosure has two entrances. That on its southern side is flanked by two banks of unequal length, which run out in the case of the longer one, as far as 80 feet. The shorter is only about 30 feet long, and there is no sign that it was ever any longer. The banks only diverge from each other very little. The modern cart track across the Down enters the enclosure at this point, and emerges across the bank on the north side, where a rough section is exposed showing that the bank is mainly made of pieces of limestone, and has a line of small kerb stones running round its inner edge. Seen on

the ground the large enclosure has no other feature of interest, and its area is bare of any traces of structures, but the air photograph discloses that the date of this work is possibly later than that of the cultivation on the Down.

In the photograph, as shown by the explanatory diagram, a distinct cross hatching resulting from ploughing is visible all over the right hand side of the plate and this certainly extends into the enclosed area.

Several markings, shown on the explanatory diagram, seem definitely to underlie the bank and ditch, the presumption being that they are older, but they do not in themselves belong obviously to any system of Celtic fields. This cultivation is certainly very old, and although the photograph is not conclusive as to the relative ages of the ploughing and the earthwork, it is at least in favour of the superior antiquity of the ploughing that the bank and ditch are as strong where they encounter these traces of cultivation as at any other point. Since the bank is largely made of stones its total removal would seem to be a necessary preliminary to any ploughing across its line.*

The avenue, which leads away in a straight line north eastwards from a seven foot wide gap in the north east side of the enclosure is constructed in much the same way as the enclosure, but presents one or two unusual features. In the first place it is divided into two sections of nearly equal length, by a small bank which crosses it at right angles, and curves round slightly on the north side, carrying out a little beyond the line of the avenue. Inside this curve is a depression which looks as though it may have been the site of some sort of structure.

A very similar, but smaller, depression is found inside the avenue at its point of junction with the main enclosure.

This bank which divides the avenue into two is pierced by an opening seven feet wide.

The south western stretch of the avenue is not very regular when seen on the ground, but it is substantially straight, and has two gaps, one large and one small in its north side. They are both original.

The north eastern section has the same proportions of bank and ditch as the rest of the earthwork, save that the bank is a little stouter, and contains a number of large weathered blocks of limestone, which are mostly more than could be conveniently handled by one man. The avenue terminates in another seven foot gap in a long cross bank, which runs at right angles to it. The cross bank has a ditch on its north eastern side, and attains an average height of three feet.

* It is impossible to refute other explanations which have been advanced to explain these markings until more satisfactory air-photographs have been obtained.—*Editor*.

Its south east end reaches in a straight line nearly to the edge of the escarpment of the Gordano valley, and the north west part, which is a little shorter, curves round slightly to the north before ending in the air.

An interesting feature of the avenue as it approaches the cross bank, is the development of a seven foot wide causeway, about six inches in height down its middle, which emerges through the gap in the cross bank, and carries on for some forty feet in the line of the avenue outside.

The lesser works which accompany the main group are a small circular bank and ditch, some 60 feet in diameter, just to the north of the north east stretch of the avenue, and a small rhomboidal work with one side missing to the south of the main enclosure, close to the edge of the Gordano escarpment.

The small circle is probably a disc barrow, and much older than the other earth works, for there is a small mound at its centre which has been disturbed, though the interference is not recent, for Long reports that it had taken place before his time.

The rhomboidal work has a very regular bank and ditch four feet high and one foot six inches deep respectively. The air photograph reveals markings, indicated by dots on the diagram, which show that some form of closure has been applied to the work in the past, making it four-sided, but the present state of the ground hardly suggests that a pre-existing bank and ditch of the same type as that surviving have been thrown down. Excavation alone can settle this point.

The last feature of the Down which requires mention is a peculiar system of alignments of blocks of much weathered limestone which run along the Down parallel with, and to the north of the avenue. Only one of them goes very far and this, the most northerly, runs nearly to the group of hut circles at the end of the Down before disappearing. Most of the stones are quite small, and the biggest are probably within the lifting powers of an average man. It is likely that a vertical air photograph will show that these are connected with the boundaries of Celtic fields.

A somewhat similar enclosure to that which has been described is to be seen on the top of the hill, which terminates the Failand-Cadbury Camp ridge, immediately above Clevedon Court. Here also there is an avenue which is more in the nature of a double lynchet way, and there are also many Celtic fields further east along the ridge, but it is impossible to make out the relative ages of these different works on the ground, and the whole area carries too much gorse for

it to be easy to make out all the details of their plan. It looks as though the sequence of date would be very much the same as that on Walton Common Down.

A paper on the Walton earthworks was read before the British Association, at their Bristol meeting in September, 1930, and in the discussion which followed, a suggestion about their purpose was put forward which may possibly be an explanation of their curious form.

It was pointed out that there are similar works in Ireland, and that these were definitely constructed for sorting and corralling sheep.

The flock would be driven up against the cross bank, and forced through the entrance into the avenue, and the sorting process achieved by men stationed at the gaps in the avenue who turned the required animals out with hurdles as they came through the midway gate. The main body would pass on into the large enclosure. It was also suggested that the inequality of the banks flanking the southern entrance was designed to help in getting sheep into the enclosure easily from that approach.

In accordance with the pastoral theory, the three-sided work near the brow of the escarpment would possibly be a lambing enclosure.

This explanation is not very convincing, for the avenue seems quite unnecessarily long for this purpose, and the presence of the definite causeway at the outer entrance to the avenue is not accounted for.

Also the difference in type between the construction and strength of the large enclosure and the smaller work is very marked.

One is quite rough, while the other has been carried out with a good deal of precision, and they do not seem to belong to the same period.

The one thing that seems fairly certain about these works is that they are not to be put in the same class with Stonehenge and Avebury.

The present state of the surface shows that no cultivation is likely to have taken place since a remote time, for the rock is very near the surface, and, save for one or two fairly obvious lynchets at the Walton end of the Down, in the big system of Celtic fields, there are no visible signs of agriculture.

It is a pity that no vertical photographs of the area are available but the present plates are quite enough to demonstrate the value of aerial photography in the case of earthworks of unknown age.

The fact that there has ever been any agriculture at all on this area would scarcely be realisable without its aid, and it is along the lines of establishing the relationship in point of age between the earthwork and the cultivation traces, that the problem of the age and purpose of these works will be solved. The spade must come to the aid of the camera.

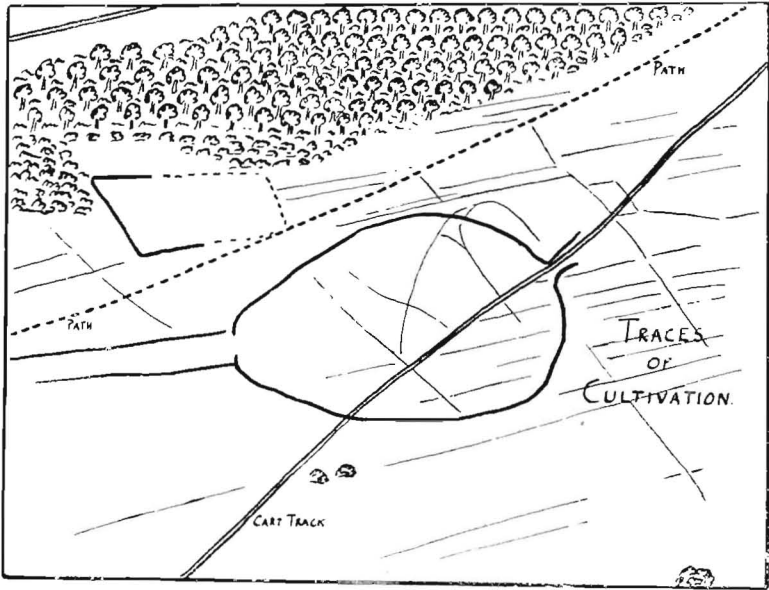


FIG. 6.

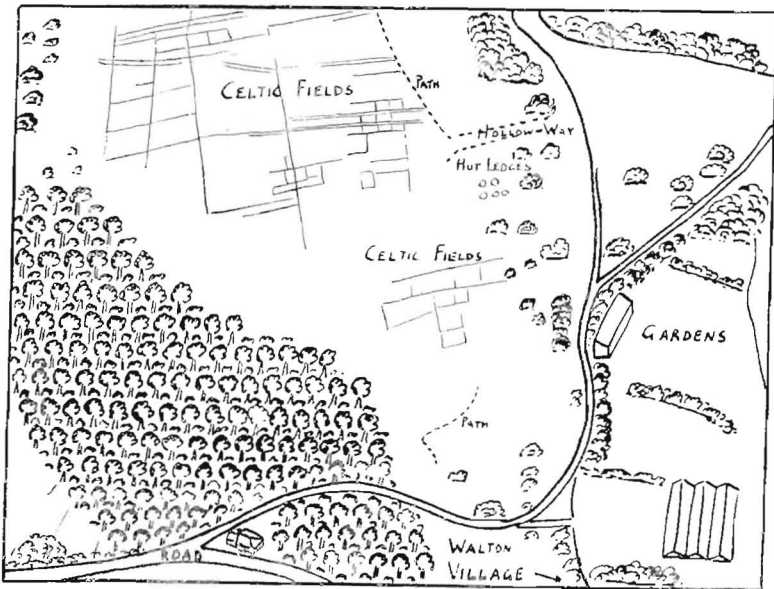


FIG. 7.



PLATE V. Walton Circle

*Photo.: Aerofilms Ltd.
Retouched.*

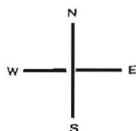
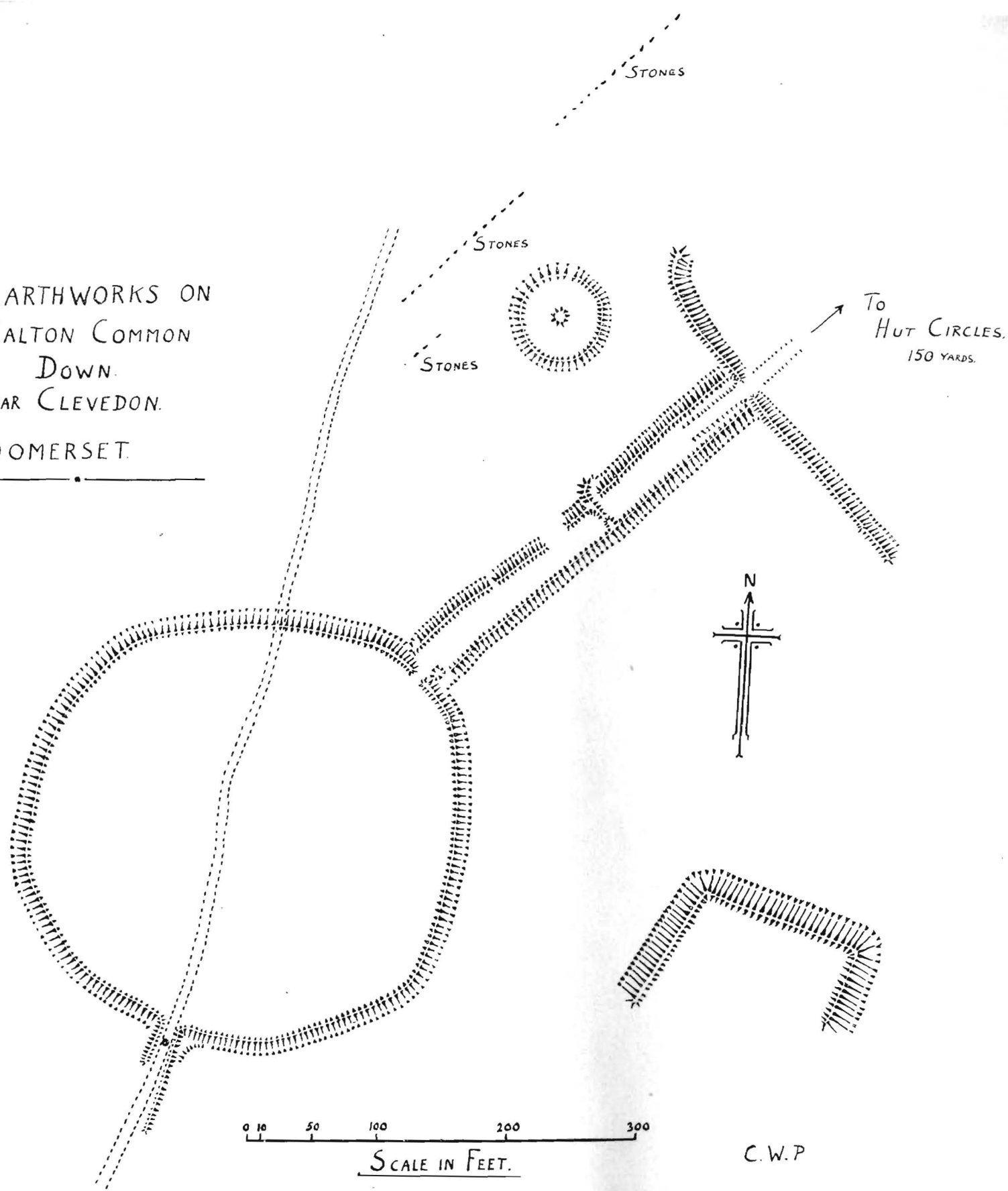


PLATE VI. Walton Down.

*Photo.: Aerofilms Ltd.
Retouched.*

EARTHWORKS ON
WALTON COMMON
DOWN.
NEAR CLEVEDON.
SOMERSET.



C.W.P