

AN EXCAVATION AT NUNNINGTON PARK NEAR WIVELISCOMBE, SOMERSET

BY GRAHAM WEBSTER, M.A., F.S.A.

A small scale excavation was carried out between the 4th and 14th September, 1956, at Nunnington Park Camp.¹ With the help of a grant from the Somerset Archaeological Society of £60 it was possible to employ two workmen, and thanks are due also to a body of keen volunteers.² Ready permission and helpful co-operation came from the owner of the site, Mr. J. C. Leigh-Firbank of Manor Farm, and also from the tenant of the adjoining grass field (No. 1183), Mr. H. Webber of Mount Farm.

The site has long been known as an ancient one and has been fully described and documented by Mr. H. St. George Gray,³ who with commendable caution preferred not to pass comment on its date or function.⁴ A visit was paid to the site in September, 1955, by the writer and Mr. A. L. Rivet of the Ordnance Survey in the course of a search for sites of Roman forts of the first century; this one seemed to have distinct possibilities in its size, shape and situation.

The excavation was aimed at the defences and Section I, 155 feet long (Plate V), was cut through the line on the north side, where there has been no interference by modern hedges. Three main elements of the defences were revealed, a rampart and two ditches. The former was 18 feet wide, but only the bottom 9 inches had been preserved. It consisted of a light yellow, loamy material; here and there — and especially at the base — were patches of hard, brown iron-pan, an effect frequently obtained with timber and turf in association. Unfortunately these marks revealed no pattern to identify them with brushwood or timber strapping, but this suggestion is supported by soil analysis (see Appendix). At the heel of the rampart was a layer of cobbles, 2 feet 6 inches wide, forming a small revetment.

¹ O.S. Sheet LXIX 6 (Somerset 1930), Nat. Grid, Ref. ST/090271.

² These included Misses A. Grosvenor Ellis (who also undertook the photographic record), S. Storm-Turner, J. Fuller, J. Ralston and M. Thomas, Messrs. G. Rybot and C. Burgess, and two schoolboys, K. R. Maxwell and W. Browning, who camped near the site.

³ *Proc. S.A.S.* XCII (1946) p. 65.

⁴ The Ordnance Survey has been less discreet and boldly labelled the site 'Roman Camp' on the 25 inch sheet, 1930.

The rampart had been laid on the thin gravel capping to the plateau and the two ditches cut in the soft red sandstone below. They had not been dug on the original slope but on a level shelf cut into this. The ditches had been carefully cut to a slope of about 45-50° with a flat-bottomed slot 12 inches wide. The inner ditch, cut immediately from the front of the rampart with no allowance for a berm, is much the larger. It is 10 feet below present ground level and the original width would probably have been about 16 feet. In this section the north side of the inner ditch has evidently collapsed, since its present lip is below that of the outer ditch. This latter is 6 feet deep below the present ground level and 9 feet 3 inches wide. Unfortunately in this section there has been interference by badgers or other burrowing animals, which has affected the original profile. This disturbance had not been carried across the full width of the trench.⁵ In both ditches there was little rapid silt — 9 inches in the inner and 18 inches in the outer. The red sandstone is very soft and almost a pure sand in its uppermost levels and, had the ditches been left, would have created a considerable depth of rapid silt; the absence of this clearly implies a clearing out of the ditches in their early stages. When eventually the fort was abandoned, the weathered tumble of rampart began to fill the inner ditch with 3 feet of silting. Alternatively it could be argued that the fort had a very short life, after which the rampart was deliberately slighted and the front cut away to fill the ditch. Subsequent filling was probably at a much later date when the field was put to the plough. Curiously enough the bulk of the rampart seems to have been completely removed, since there is no trace of it in the upper ditch filling. An interesting feature is the layer of clay laid at the approach to the outer ditch. The ditches themselves may have been clay-lined originally, but there is a thin seam of clay in the sandstone which makes this detail uncertain.

Section 2 (Plate V) confirmed the conclusions of Section 1.⁶ Here the natural subsoil was much stiffer and the full original profile has survived. The dimensions are: depth from present ground level 10 feet, width 22 feet. The filling had the same character-

⁵ This, the east side of the trench, was measured, as the other side had been badly obscured by an extensive collapse of the trench side in the inner ditch during excavation.

⁶ It was possible here only to section the inner ditch.

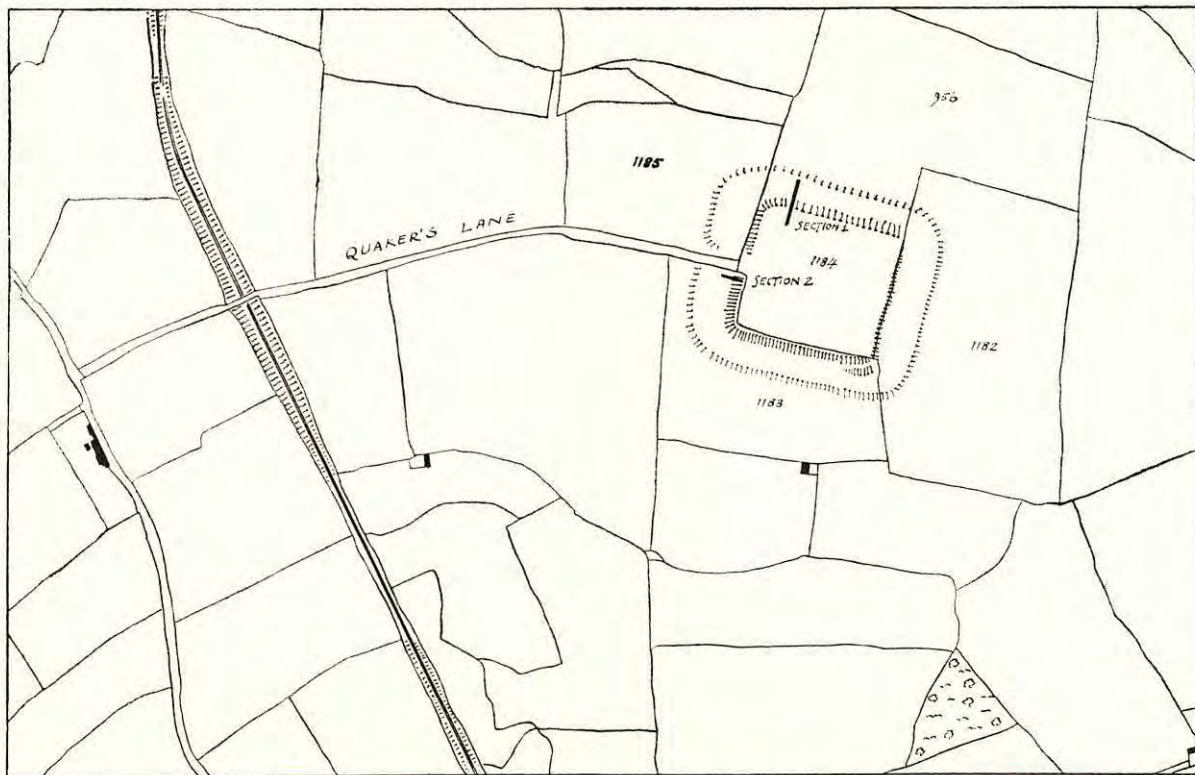


FIG. 1. PLAN OF NUNNINGTON PARK FORT (Scale 1 inch = 570 feet)

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istics as in the other section, except that here there was an 18 inch band of loamy clay (not rampart material) half way down.

A careful ground examination was made of the fort area. (Fig. 1). Its dimensions are not exactly square, as previous observers have estimated, but rectangular. The dimensions, measured as nearly as possible to the rampart front, are 420 feet by 370 feet, the larger figure being the east-west axis. The shelf in which the ditches were cut also varies in size. On the steepest side (the north), through which Section 1 was cut, it is only about 70 feet wide; on the east side it is 120 feet; on the south 100 feet; and on the west 130 feet. These measurements were taken from the estimated position of the rampart front to the crest of the counterscarp. This raises the possibility of three ditches on the three latter sides, where the natural slope is much less, and this a point which needs testing in any future excavation.

There are no surface indications of any gates. Mr. H. St. George Gray considered that Quaker's Lane may have led to an original entrance and there are slight surface indications of a break in the counterscarp to the north of this lane at a point approximately midway across the north-south axis of the fort. There was time only to test the suggestion with a short trench. If the rampart had continued on its known alignment, traces of it should have been found here, but there was no indication of it at all; there is therefore a strong presumption of a gap in the rampart at this point and a gate.

THE DATE OF THIS FORT

The principal objective of the excavations was to find reliable dating evidence. In this it has not been fortunate; some half dozen sherds were recovered, but they are of a somewhat indeterminate nature. It is, however, possible to recognise certain characteristics. The pottery is fairly thin (*i.e.* from 1/8th to 3/16 inch), dark and light grey in colour, and of coarse fabric containing small quartz grains; in two cases there is evidence of wheel turning. The general consensus of opinion, in which the writer would concur, is that they are Romano-British. Mr. Raleigh Radford is of the opinion that they could fit into a mid-first century horizon and he has kindly

drawn my attention to similar fabrics from early levels at Catsgore⁷ and the small rectangular enclosure at Milber Down.⁸

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The fact that Romano-British pottery has been found deep in the rampart base and also in the early silting of one of the ditches rules out the possibility of this being a prehistoric site. It could, however, be later than Roman⁹ and there remain for consideration the defences themselves. It is the writer's opinion that the following characteristics are indicative of Roman military work:

1. The careful cutting of a shelf on the north, and possibly other sides.
2. The size and shape of the ditches with their channelled bottoms.
3. The relationship between the inner ditch and the rampart.
4. The construction of the rampart of clay (or turf) with its cobbled heel.

Roman military defences are normally well planned so as to leave as little dead ground as possible and to bring the ditches within killing range of the rampart top. To illustrate this a diagram has been prepared (Fig. 2) allowing for a 12 foot high rampart and a build-up between ditches, which has since been lost.

Apart from these details, the tactical situation of the fort is typically Roman. It stands on a small plateau, where the valley broadens, commanding the outlets to several small valleys, which lead down from the Brendon Hills in the north and Exmoor in the west (Fig. 3). Although nothing is known about Roman roads in the area, there must have been a way towards the east into the Vale of Taunton and presumably towards Ilchester on the Fosse.

It is difficult in our present state of knowledge to place this fort in its setting, but it seems most likely to represent an advance post beyond the Fosse Way during the initial stages of conquest. The Fosse Way, which can be traced as far south as Axminster, has long

⁷ *Proc. S.A.S.* XCVI (1951) p. 41.

⁸ *Proc. Devon Arch. Expl. Soc.* IV (1949-50) p. 54.

⁹ Mr. Radford has, for example, drawn my attention to the existence of an Anglo-Saxon burgh at Wiveliscombe (Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* No. 476, A.D. 854), the site of which is not known.

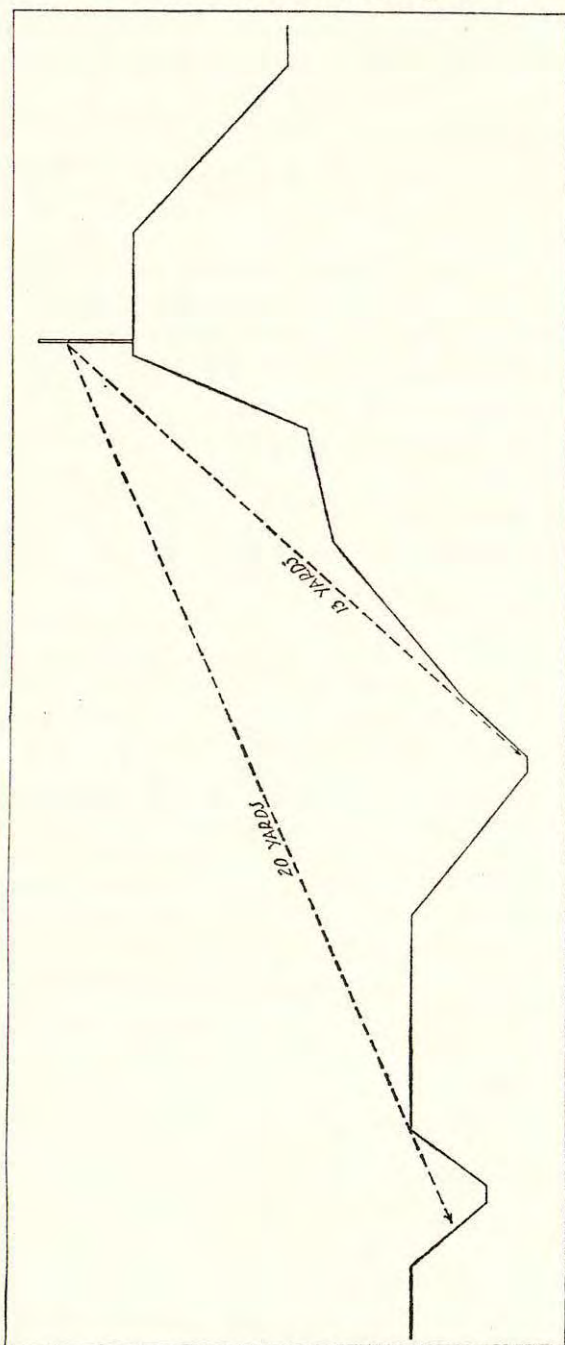
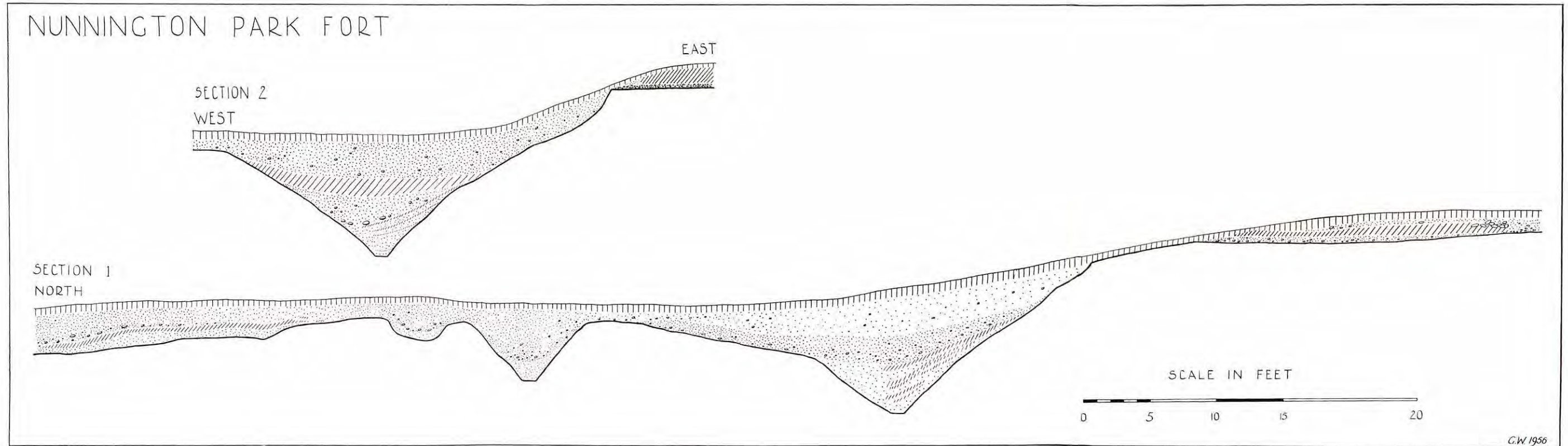


FIG. 2. A DIAGRAMMATIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DEFENCES, SHOWING THE FIRE COVER

PLATE V



G.W. 1956

SECTIONS THROUGH THE DEFENCES OF THE NUNNINGTON PARK FORT

been recognised as probably part of a military frontier¹⁰ during a stage of the Roman conquest in the middle of the first century. What has not been so clear is its exact date and function. Whether it was the work of the first Roman Governor, Aulus Plautius, or of his successor, Ostorius Scapula, is hardly relevant in the present context. The relationship of the Fosse Way to the Bristol Channel, about 20 miles to the north-west, suggests that the road was a lateral line of communication in a fortified zone and that one might expect to find advance forts along the coast of the Bristol Channel (Fig. 4). In this connection the early development of the Mendip silver/lead mines, from which there are lead pigs dated as early as A.D. 49,¹¹ is not irrelevant. There is little doubt that this mineral exploitation was planned as part of the military conquest and annexation. For, as Tacitus tells us, the silver was regarded as "*pretium victoriae*".¹²

The key site of Gloucester was at this stage, or more probably a little later, a legionary base, with possibly an initial phase, under Plautius,¹³ as the site of an auxiliary unit — as the tombstone of Rufus Sita implies.¹⁴ The only evidence of another early military site is at Sea Mills in the form of early pottery and coins.¹⁵ This part of the coastline probably at this time consisted of a number of promontories divided by areas of marsh.¹⁶ Any system of defence in such circumstances would have been denied lateral communications except by water. Connections would have been present with the Fosse Way, which in this area represented the only landward link. Forts might be expected either on promontories or on rivers, in particular the Somerset Axe and the Parrett. There was a Roman

¹⁰ Collingwood, *J.R.S.* XIV (1924) p. 252; Davies Pryce, *Ant. J.* XVIII (1938) p. 29. A general paper on this problem by the writer is to appear shortly in the *Archaeological Journal*.

¹¹ *C.I.L.* vii 1201 found at Charterhouse in c. 1540 and since lost and *C.I.L.* vii 1202 found near Blagdon in 1853 and now in the British Museum. Whittick has raised objections to the dating of the latter pig which is based on the reading of a cold-struck stamp. (*Trans. Newcomen Soc.* XII p. 68).

¹² *Agricola* 12.

¹³ *J.R.S.* XXXII p. 39; XXXIII p. 15.

¹⁴ *C.I.L.* vii 67, unless, of course, his unit was brigaded into the legion.

¹⁵ *J.R.S.* XIV (1924) p. 252; *Bristol & Glos. Trans.* LXV (1944) p. 195; LXVI (1945) p. 258; LXVIII (1947) p. 184; LXXI (1954) p. 70. The coins include military imitation types and the samian pottery suggests a Neronian occupation with Claudian survivals. There are also fragments of military equipment now in Bristol Museum.

¹⁶ J. A. Steers, *The Coastline of England and Wales* (1946) p. 200.

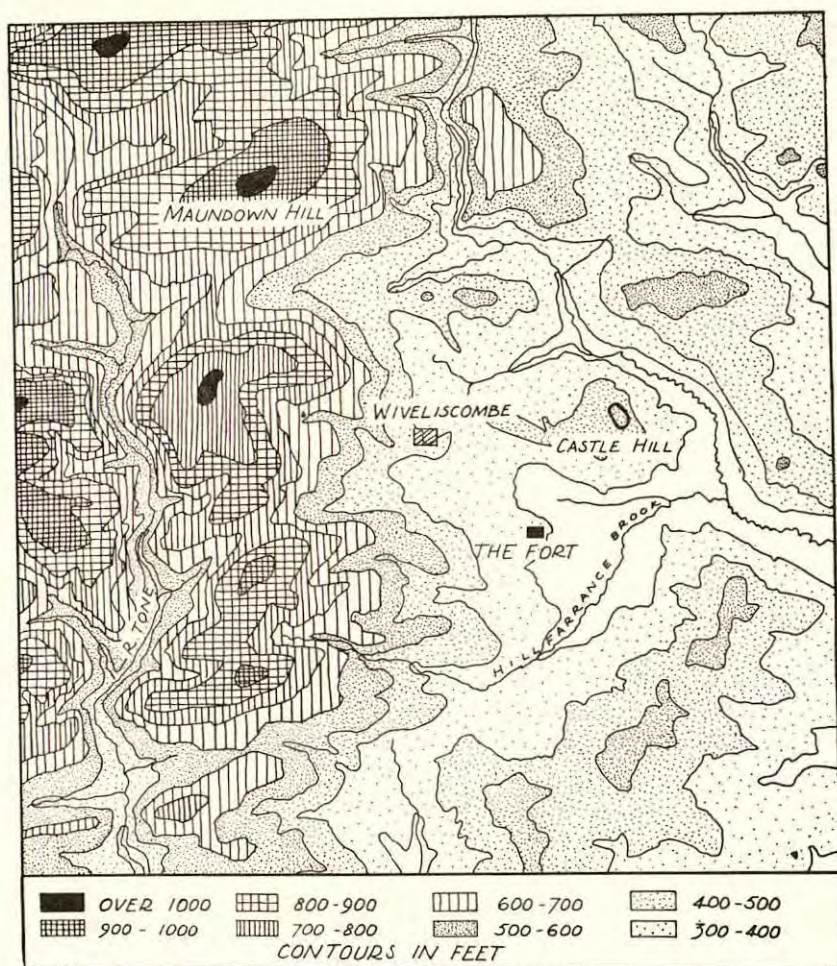


FIG. 3. PLAN SHOWING THE SITING OF THE FORT

settlement at Combwich, where the high ground approaches and commands the Parrett. But the finds so far recovered there have been from a low-lying area and do not include any first century material;¹⁷ a fort, if it existed, would have been on the higher ground. At this point the coastline changes direction and continues in a westerly alignment. If, however, the line from Sea Mills to the Parrett is produced inland, it strikes, at a distance of 18 miles, the Wiveliscombe fort. To the south-west of this point matters become more speculative, except for the early site at Topsham at the head of the Exe estuary.¹⁸ Here the occupation, associated with a large timber building, has been assessed at a Claudian date and Mr. Raleigh Radford has suggested that the place was possibly a naval base.¹⁹ The distance between Topsham and Wiveliscombe makes an intermediate fort necessary; and the obvious strategic position for this would be at the lowest crossing of the Exe, probably in the angle formed by its junction with the Culm.²⁰ At the rear of the Fosse, *i.e.* to the east, the evidence is much slighter, but the Claudian fort at Hod Hill²¹ must be either a rearward element in the suggested fortified zone or an early stage in the advance. Other possible sites are Ham Hill²² and Waddon Hill, near Stoke Abbott.²³

There is clearly much work to be done in the field before this interesting phase of the history of the area is understood.

¹⁷ *Proc. S.A.S.* LXXXVI (1940) p. 131.

¹⁸ *Proc. Devon Arch. Expl. Soc.* II (1935) p. 200; III (1938) p. 67; IV (1948) p. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* III (1937) p. 10.

²⁰ At this point there is a fine ridgeway running N.N.E. through Butterleigh, which could, with reasonable convenience, connect with Wiveliscombe. Mrs. Woolner of Newton Abbot has kindly informed the writer that she has recently found stretches of a road conforming to this suggestion.

²¹ *J.R.S.* XLII (1952) p. 99; XLIII (1953) p. 124.

²² Where items of legionary equipment have been found. *V.C.H. Som.* I p. 295; *Proc. S.A.S.* LXXI p. 60; LXXII pl. xiv; LXXV p. 100; LXIX pl. xi; XCII p. 93; XCV p. 143; *Proc. Soc. Ant.* XXI p. 130.

²³ Boswell Stone, *Prehistoric and Roman Remains of West Dorset* (1893). Some of the material found here is now in Bridport Museum, and includes some early brooches and items of military equipment. The existence of a fort has now been proved by excavation in 1959.

APPENDIX

REPORT ON SOIL SAMPLES²⁴

BY DR. I. W. CORNWALL

Five samples were received, with the inquiry as to whether Nos. 2 and 3 represented a turf rampart.

Rough pH determinations showed that the modern soil, at the summit of the section, was a rather acid brownearth. There was no sign of bleaching which might suggest that it was acid enough to verge on the podsol, with eluviation of iron. It is, therefore, what would be called, in Kubiena's terminology, an oligotrophic braunerde (samples 1 and 2).

The pH readings were almost equal throughout the section, so that the buried soil, if any, was likely to be of the same character as the modern soil—pH 5.1—5.3.

Sample No. 3 was said to be somewhat ferruginous; No. 4 was of a darker colour and appeared likely to represent the buried soil (*i.e.* the pre-rampart turf line); No. 5 was again paler, apparently the subsoil to any pre-rampart weathering.

Humus determinations through the section gave the following results:

Sample No. 1.	Modern Humus	18.8 mgs Alkali	/ 100 gms dry soil
		-soluble humus	
2.	Rampart	4.8	
3.	Rampart at lowest level		
	with traces of staining	8.6	
4.	Original Turf Line	10.4	
5.	Natural Subsoil	6.0	

It is clear from this that the main concentration of humus, apart from the modern top-soil, is in Sample No. 4, which probably represents the upper part of the old soil.

It will be noted that the humus content in No. 3 is double that of No. 2. This does not look like a natural phenomenon; for the humus of a natural brownearth is most concentrated at its actual surface, and since, in this climate, water-movement is almost exclusively downwards, it is hard to see how organic matter from the buried surface could diffuse upwards into the overlying rampart make-up. The most likely explanation is that this represents a turf work or brushwood at the base of the rampart.

²⁴ The samples were kindly obtained by Mr. G. Rogers.

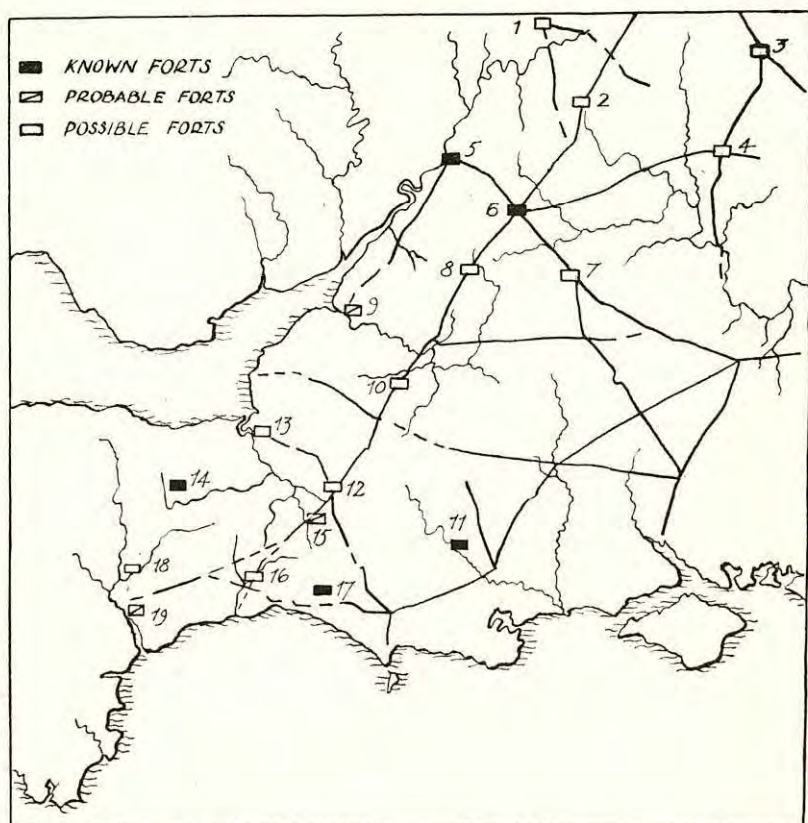


FIG. 4. A SUGGESTED ARRANGEMENT OF FORTS AND ROADS
IN THE MID-FIRST CENTURY

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Alcester | 10. Camerton |
| 2. Dorn | 11. Hod Hill |
| 3. Towcester | 12. Ilchester |
| 4. Alcester | 13. At the mouth of the Parrett |
| 5. Gloucester | 14. Wiveliscombe |
| 6. Cirencester | 15. Ham Hill |
| 7. Wanborough | 16. Near Axminster |
| 8. On the Fosse, approximately
midway between Bath and
Cirencester | 17. Waddon Hill |
| 9. Sea Mills | 18. At the Junction of the Exe and
Culm |
| | 19. Topsham |