

Excavations at Downend, near Bridgwater, 1908.

BY ARTHUR G. CHATER AND ALBANY F. MAJOR.*

DOWNEND lies at the extreme north end of the Polden-ridge, which there tails off to a point and descends abruptly to the level of the river-marshes. The researches of the Rev. W. Greswell have called attention to its changed importance since the time of Henry II, when under the Norman De Columbers it was the head of the barony of Stowey.† Equally great, as he has shown, have been the physical changes in its aspect since the time when a bend of the river Parrett, now diverted, washed the foot of the ridge and when this tail-end of the Poldens, before the river was embanked, must have projected into the tidal flats. The ridge ends in a semi-circular mount, very regular and apparently artificially scarped, below which lies what is now known as the "Bally Field," (? Bailey) broken at intervals by some three or four low ramparts of earth almost concentric to the mount.

Roman coins and foundations of buildings are said to have been found here (see pp. 173-4),‡ and the existing earthworks and Mr. Greswell's discoveries as to the past history of the place seemed to give colour to his surmise that the mound might

* The Rev. C. W. Whistler, who assisted at the excavations, though he was unable to be present all the time, has also given valuable help in the preparation of this report.

† "The Sequel to the Battle of Edington, A.D. 878," by the Rev. W. H. P. Greswell, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LIII, pt. ii, pp. 174-8.

‡ A Roman coin of Salonina was found at Puriton, 1908. (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LIV, i, 115).

mark the site of a Norman *motte*, and possibly of a still older fortification. At any rate it appeared that an examination of the place was eminently desirable in the interests of both the history and archæology of Somerset. Accordingly in August, 1908, the consent of the owner Mr. C. W. M. Greenhill, and the tenant, Mr. T. Tatchell, was obtained by Mr. Greswell, and a small amount to meet expenses having been collected from a few members of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society some trial excavations were made.

The work was carried out under the general direction of the Rev. W. Greswell and Mr. A. G. Chater, Hon. Secretary of the Earthworks Committee of the Congress of Archæological Societies, upon whose notes the following report is based.

DOWNEND, PURITON, SOMERSET ;

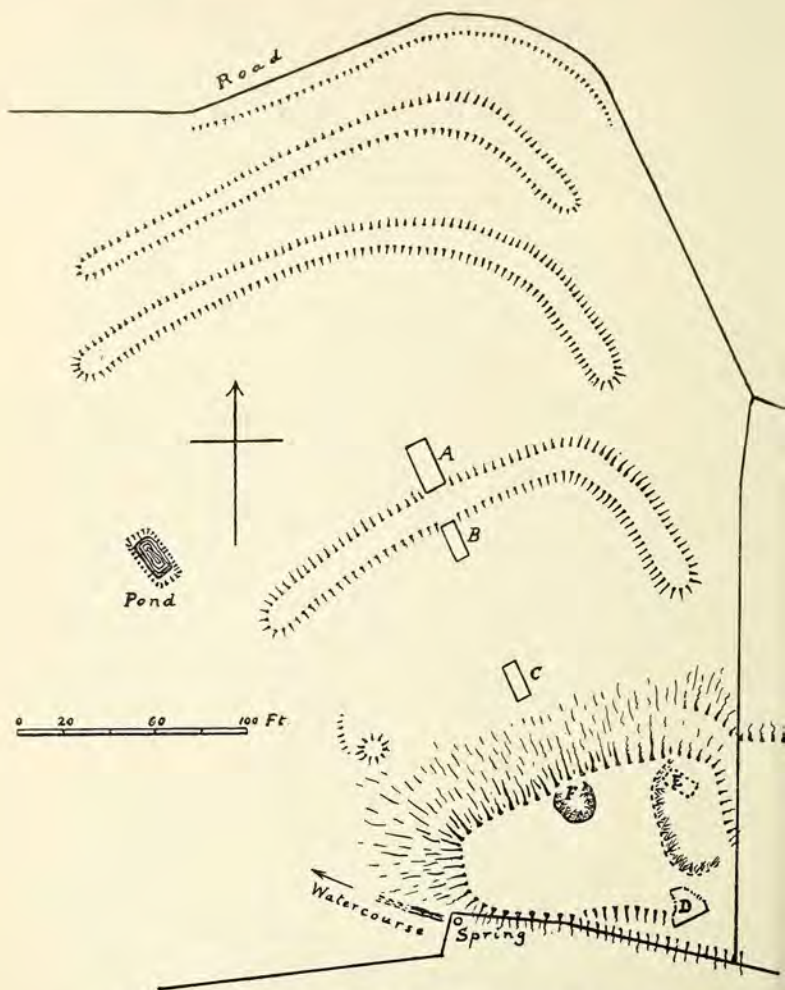
NOTES ON EXCAVATIONS IN THE "BALLY FIELD,"

August 3-6, 1908.

(See accompanying sketch-plan and photographic view).

August 3. Four men were employed for the work,—all used to digging the soil of the locality, and all natives except the foreman, who was sexton of the parish but foreign-born (Stogursey). The first trench (A) had been pegged out in advance, under the advice of Mr. H. St. George Gray ; running about 22 degrees w. of the n. and s. line. This trench was 20ft. long (afterwards extended about 3ft. to the s.) and 10ft. wide, at the foot of the outer scarp of the bank enclosing the inner court, where one would expect a fosse. The height of this bank is nowhere more than 3ft. and a few inches. Glazed pottery, occurred at a depth of 1ft. and below, pottery of other types being found as the cutting was deepened ; charcoal and burnt clay at 2' to 2' 6" ; iron at 2' 9". At about 3' 6", at the s. end of the cutting, were found some lias blocks, asserted by the men to come from different beds and to have been "put there." Fragments of bone were found at

3' 9" in wet clay; pottery ceased at about this depth. There was much charcoal in the clay at about 3' 6".



SKETCH PLAN OF THE "BALLY FIELD," DOWNEND, PURITON, SOM.

A.B.C. = Trenches cut August 3-6, 1908.

D. = Natural ledge of lias, on summit of Mound.

E. = Site of Shed (approx:) F. = Old excavation.

August 4. The cutting was extended to the s. Finds of the same character occurred : pottery of various qualities, including a handle ; a sling-stone, an oyster-shell (3ft.), iron nails, etc. (about 3' 6"). At the lower (N.) end of the cutting no sign of a counterscarp was seen, nor any indication of a fosse ; the floor of the outer court appeared to consist of wet clay, which at one time may have been flooded by the tidal river ; the w. side of both courts (that towards the Parrett) was left open, the banks only enclosing the N. and E. sides (more accurately N.N.W. and N.E.) There was an opening about 25ft. wide between the s. end of the E. bank of the outer court and the N.E. angle of the bank of the inner court, and a similar gap, but much wider, between the s. end of the E. bank of the inner court and the foot of the mount. Some 100 to 120ft. w. of Trench A., and roughly on a line drawn N.N.W. to S.S.E., connecting the w. ends of the two banks, is a pond, apparently a modern one, for cattle.

August 5. Another trench (B) was begun on the inner slope of the same bank, leaving an interval of about 17ft. (the top of the bank) between the upper ends of the two cuttings (20ft. from the *original* s. end of A to the N. end of B). The finds in trench B were of the same character as those from A and equally numerous ; a horse-shoe at 6" below surface ; other iron objects, including a spur.* At 3' 2" and close to the N. end of the cutting were found the fragments of a decorated Norman pot (figured on p. 169), together with iron objects, black and other pottery and fragments of bone. A pebble and a piece of brick came out of the same deposit. At 3' 6" clay was reached, corresponding to that on the other side of the bank, in trench A. In the clay was found a marine shell. During the day various points on and about the mount

* The spur found at a depth of 1' 6" in trench B measures 2½ins. long in its present condition ; max. ext. width 1¼ins. It is too fragmentary to date with any certainty. Dr. C. H. Read, P.S.A., to whom it has been submitted, says :— "It is common enough to find a spur fixed either at the level of the ankle, or in later times upon the heel of the boot itself. It is by no means necessary that the spur should be large enough to encircle the broadest part of the heel."

itself were tested for masonry foundations, with negative results.

A third trench (C) was begun, on a line with the other two, leaving an interval of 50 ft. between B and C. The length of each of these two cuttings was 15ft. and the width 6ft. Trench C was at the foot of the mount itself; the finds here were of the same character as in the others, but less numerous.

August 6. Spent in filling in A and B, and continuation of C. Trench C was carried to a greater depth than the others. It showed no indication of a fosse below the mount, that is, no counter-scarp was found; but at a depth of 6ft. stones with supposed mortar* (?) adhering were found, and all above this appeared to be made earth. These stones came from the n. end of the cutting. At the same place and about the same depth we came to clay of a different kind from that in trenches A and B. (The men stated that this clay in C was that found between beds of blue lias and was called "soft lift.")

On the top of the mount, towards the s.e., a natural platform of lias, D, was uncovered, mistaken for a laid floor when first struck. It was of irregular shape, its longest measurements being 16' 6" e. to w. and 12' 6" n. to s. It inclined slightly towards the n. From the earth above this came a piece of pottery, (no. 45); also one or two finds of modern date.

Just n. of this lias ledge, and some 5ft. lower (E in plan and photograph) a considerable platform had been levelled (about half-way up the mount) at some time. The 25" O.S. marks some small building as occupying this platform. Many tiles were found here, but no other signs of a building. Charles Meaker (oldest inhabitant) said he had put up a cowshed on this spot, but did not quarry away any of the bank to make room for it. He had known the field for seventy years and there had been no change in it during that time, so far as he remembered. He was also responsible for the tradition that

* It seems probable that this "mortar" was only a natural limy accretion.



THE "BALLY FIELD," DOWNEND, PURITON, SOMERSET, 1908.

Showing position of the excavations, looking South. The letters refer to those of the sketch-plan.

From a Photograph by Arthur G. Chater.



“the end of the war was here;” when asked, “what war?” he promptly replied “King’s Sedgemoor.”*

There is a spring at the foot of the mount at the s.w.

To the n.e. of the site is a little valley with a water-course; this small stream now runs into the ditch of the road which makes a bend round the “Bally Field,” surrounding its e. and n. sides. It was thought that the stream might formerly have passed through the site, by the gap between the inner and outer banks. The n.e. angle of the outer bank (the bank enclosing the outer court) is strengthened by a second external bank, extending 80 or 90ft. along the n. side, and about 50-55ft. along the e. side, from the angle, which is rounded like the corresponding angles of the other banks. The road outside is devious, its course conforming to the outline of the ancient enclosure. It was conjectured that there might have been a rampart some distance to the e., cutting off the end of the ridge, including the mount. An examination of the ground showed nothing to give support to this opinion, but the surface has been so much altered by quarrying and by recent occupation that it is impossible to pronounce positively on the point.

* * * *

From the foregoing report it will be seen that the results of the work so far are mainly negative. A few positive facts have, however, been ascertained, and it may be well to summarize them. The earth banks in the “Bally Field” are certainly artificial, but for whatever purpose they may have been made it seems certain that they were not fortification works. The mount is also to some extent artificial, but to what extent is unproved, nor is it certain whether it may not be merely “tip” from quarrying on the ridge above it. It is practically certain that it was never crowned by any stone-built walls, but Mr.

* Mr. Greswell, however, states (*loc. cit.*, p. 177), that a very old man once told him that “they of Athelney fought here.” Seeing how great the tendency is for the battle of Sedgemoor to absorb all earlier traditions, this may be the more genuine tradition of the two.

Greswell has shown that Downend ceased to be the head of the Norman barony at such an early date that we could not expect to find a stone-built castle there. So far, however, the exploration has revealed no trace of any timber buildings, wooden stockading, or other sign of habitation, though the amount of recognizable Norman and other early pottery found points clearly to a considerable occupation of the site in Norman and perhaps in earlier times.

Of Roman remains, such as earlier writers report, no traces were found, but of course, if we may accept the reported Roman finds as genuine, we are ignorant of the exact spot where they were discovered.

It is quite possible that the shape and position of the "Bally Field," which lies between the old course of the river and the debouchure of the small stream, already mentioned, from the higher ground, may point to its being the site of a backwater or inlet from the Parrett which had been embanked in early times. The excavations, which reached a uniform floor of moist and homogeneous clay, apparently extending from the embankment at the foot of the mound toward the corresponding bank across the level, rather favour this view than otherwise. The silting-up of a Parrett backwater, once the conditions which kept it clear are removed, is very rapid, as seen in the present day brick-pits, into which the river water is admitted for the purpose of refilling with clay—a process which takes but twenty years or less. As it is on record that there was a port at Downend, known in very early days as "Downend Pill," such an inlet, embanked for obvious reasons, might well have formed part of the accommodation for the small vessels of the period represented by the pottery found in the embankments themselves.

Unfortunately circumstances did not allow of the work being continued till some positive conclusion had been reached, but the results though indefinite at present, seem fully to warrant a resumption of the work when opportunity offers. In con-

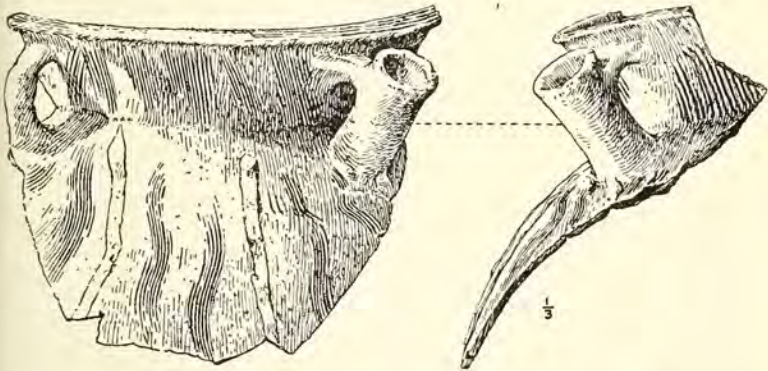
clusion those responsible for the work wish to record their appreciation of the assistance afforded them by Mr. Greenhill and the interest he showed in the work.

APPENDIX I.

POTTERY FOUND AT DOWNEND, NEAR BRIDGWATER,
August 3-6, 1908.

BY H. ST. GEORGE GRAY.

I have examined the 188 fragments and rims of glazed and unglazed pottery found in the excavations,—Cuttings A, B, and C. Of that number 41 fragments were found in Cutting A at depths ranging from 1ft. to 3ft. 9ins. below the surface ; 87 fragments in Cutting B, depth from 6ins. to 3ft. 3ins. ; and 60 fragments in Cutting C, depth from 6ins. to 3ft.



Piece of a Mediæval Pot found in the Downend Excavations, 1908.

(From a drawing by Mr. E. Sprankling.)

Of these pieces only two are of interest from an ornamental point of view—both typical of the Norman period. One, B 22, found at a depth of 3ft. 2ins. in Cutting B, in association with other early mediæval shards, two fragmentary pieces

of iron and bits of animal bone, consists of one-third of the rim* of a large but thin vessel, which when complete measured about 9ins. in diameter at the mouth. The rim, as seen in the accompanying drawing, is straight and 2ins. in depth; in one place it is connected with the body of the vessel by a small looped handle of oval section; in another position a spout, 2ins. long, of circular section protrudes from the upper part of the vessel in a direction almost parallel to the rim, being connected with the rim by a strut for its greater security. The ornamentation of the rim consists of oblique parallel scored lines,† and on the bulge of the vessel of the “combed” wavy parallel incisions so common in early mediæval times. The yellowish-green lead glaze of the outer surface has now very nearly disappeared.

The other decorated fragment, C 20, found at a depth of about 3ft. in Cutting C, consists of the handle of a vessel of highly-fired glazed pottery, ornamented with pairs of deep oblique notches.

Several pieces of rims were found, some of which can be matched with fragments found at Castle Neroche in 1903.‡

Fourteen “finds” of glazed (mostly green) pottery were found, viz., seven in Cutting A (nos. 2, 18, 19, 24, 32, 38 and 44); one in Cutting B (no. 22, previously described); and six in Cutting C (nos. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, and 20). These are all apparently Norman or early mediæval. Now we must consider their depth. In Cutting A they were found practically from top to bottom, *i.e.*, from depths of 1ft. to 3ft. 6ins.; in Cutting B, the only fragment of glazed pottery was found at the bottom of the excavation, depth 3ft. 2ins.; and in Cutting C, the glazed pieces extended from a depth of 6ins. to 3ft., the deepest point at which pottery was found here. One or two fragments, found at a depth of 1ft., I should be inclined to attribute to the XIII Century.

* Restored from 24 fragments.

† See similar ornament, Castle Neroche and Pen Pits, Somerset, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, XLIX, pt. ii, Pl. III, fig. 10; and p. 50, fig. 5.

‡ See *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, XLIX, pt. ii, p. 48, fig. 4, nos. 14, 17, 24 and 32.

It is seen, then, that glazed pottery, none of which can be regarded as pre-Norman, was collected in the three cuttings from top to bottom. Unglazed ware was found in exactly the same deposits, and of these many of the highly-fired fragments were probably glazed originally; in some pieces the glaze appears to have been used very sparingly and is only barely traceable owing to long burial and decay.

In examining each of the 188 fragments singly,* I have sorted out only 36 pieces as being *possibly* of pre-Norman manufacture. But as they are found in precisely the same deposits as much of the glazed ware, they must be assigned to the early mediæval period. The 36 pieces referred to are generally of a black, brown or red clay, coarse, gritty, rotten, and badly-baked, and in the last respect different to the highly-fired, brittle, grey and light-red wares typical of Norman and mediæval times.

It is worthy of notice that "finds" of glazed pottery of precisely similar type were discovered in Cutting A at depths of 2ft. 2ins., 3ft. and 3ft. 6ins.; and that hard Norman unglazed pottery of a similar type was found at from 6ins. to 1ft. deep, and also at a depth of 3ft. 3ins.

In conclusion I have to record that the great majority of fragments of pottery found is decidedly of early mediæval manufacture; and that the remainder is of a character most probably of Norman *date*, but as a *type* it has as many claims for assignment to pre-Norman (but certainly post-Roman) times, as to the early mediæval period. Some of the vessels in domestic use between the time of the Romans and the Norman Conquest generally have a certain amount of Roman character impressed on them, but a suggestion of un-directed native art always asserts itself. From the end of the V Century to the XI Century it is extremely difficult to draw

* In addition to these, one fragment of pottery, numbered A45, was found on the natural platform of lias referred to on p. 166. This ware is of a coarse unglazed quality used commonly throughout mediæval times.

any hard and fast lines between the qualities of the rougher earthenware.

I have been in correspondence with Mr. R. L. Hobson, of the British Museum, on the subject of the early pottery of this country from Roman times to the XIII Century; but he says that he has no more recent information on the subject than that summarized in the *Guide to the English Pottery in the British Museum*, 1904, in which he remarks that "there are no ceramic remains that can with any certainty be said to represent the last four centuries of the Saxon period, and this great gap can only be filled in our imaginations from the existing MS. drawings and the analogy of the somewhat rare continental pottery of the period." Mr. Hobson, proceeding to discuss the points raised in my letter, goes on to say, "Of course I cannot help feeling that some of our early pieces with green glaze must date from the XI Century at any rate; but there is no evidence that I know of that can definitely settle the point, any more than we can be quite certain when the green glaze was first used, though my own opinion is that it came over with the Normans. I am not forgetting that the Romans used it, but I am referring to the revival in Norman and mediæval times; for I think its use must have been quite lost in the interval. At any rate there is no trace of glaze on any known Saxon pot. I quite agree with you that the differentiation of unglazed *shards* from Roman to Norman times, and even later than that, is practically impossible; and I do not know of any glazed ware that can be absolutely dated between 1070 and 1170."

APPENDIX II.

The following references to Downend are worth notice in connection with the preceding report on the excavations there.

Victoria Hist. Somerset, I, 360 Haverfield: Romano-British Som.) :—Aubrey* mentions coins and ruins of Roman age $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles

* Aubrey MS. 15, fol. 122, in the Bodleian Library. Skinner, Add. MS. 33716, fol. 105, in the British Museum.

from Bridgwater, at "Chiefe Chidley Mount." This is identified in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxiii, pt. i, 35, with a mound called by O.S. (50 N.E.) Downend, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from Dunball railway station. Skinner mentions potsherds, including Samian, and late Imperial coins as found just at this point.*

Proceedings Som. Arch. and N. H. Soc., xxiii, pt. i, 35. (29th Annual Meeting, at Bridgwater, August, 1877.

CHISLEY MOUNT.

The mound bearing the above name is situate in a field alongside the roadway, and close to a hamlet known as Walpole, but marked "Downend" in the Ordnance Map, near the junction of the Puriton road and the turnpike road between Dunball and Pawlett. The sketch shown by Mr. Bull was examined on the spot, and the various entrenchments marked upon it were traced. The mound appears to be a small hill-fort commanding the Parret, the course of the river in early times being considerably nearer to the mound. It was one of the many forts which were held to guard the mineral traffic of the country.

Mr. B. C. Greenhill, the owner,† said that the ground was quite untouched, and that he had determined that nothing should be done until after the visit of the Society. He said that many years ago a Roman road could be traced, starting from this mound, through the adjoining orchard, and along the ridge of the hill; and that it seemed not unlikely that the road between Street and Glastonbury was connected with it. He thought that the mound might have been used in the trade carried on in tin with the Phœnicians.

Mr. Hunt suggested that there was no need to go back further than Roman times. He asked what Mr. Greenhill now purposed to have done with the land.

Mr. Greenhill said that he thought of having the mound opened, to see if any remains were to be found inside; that he should exercise great care in any search, and that he should not allow the face and appearance of the ground to be destroyed.‡

* The Mr. Skinner referred to is the Rev. John Skinner, rector of Camerton from 1800 to 1839. Prof. Haverfield says of him: "Skinner was an enthusiastic and industrious worker. But he seems to have been impulsive and unmethodical; he had received no proper archæological training, and his imagination not seldom ran away with his natural powers of observation."

† Father of the present owner, Mr. C. W. M. Greenhill.

‡ There seems to be no subsequent reference in the *Proceedings* to Mr. Greenhill's proposed excavations at Chisley Mount, which apparently were never carried out, and the remains do not appear under any of its names in the list of camps, etc., referred to in the *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* given in V. C. H., Early Man section.

Proceedings Som. Arch. Soc., 1878, xxiv, pt. ii, p. 9. From "Roman Somerset," by Prebendary Scarth:—"At *Chisley Mount*, opposite Bridgwater, Roman coins are said to have been found." And in a foot-note: "I have not examined this station personally, but it is mentioned in Reynold's *Iter Britanniarum*. Collinson supposes Bridgwater to have sprung from the ruins of a Roman settlement at the west end of Polden Hill, where coins and old foundations of buildings have been discovered. (See Aubrey's *Mon. Brit. MS.*)" Scarth spells it *Chisley* here and on his map; but at p. 19, in a list of places where Roman coins have been found, *Chidley*.