

CANNINGTON HILLFORT 1963

BY PHILIP RAHTZ

SUMMARY. This report describes the evidence for late Roman or later re-occupation of the hillfort, probably associated with the nearby cemetery. Attention is also drawn to a large extra-mural Iron Age enclosure north of the hillfort, from which sherds of Glastonbury-type pottery were recovered.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 3). In 1962-63, some 400 graves of late Roman and/or post-Roman date were excavated¹ on a hill on the east side of Cannington Hillfort; they were the last remaining graves of what is believed to have been a much larger cemetery, perhaps of as many as 5,000 graves (Site A, Fig. 3). The cemetery was apparently Christian, with an outside dating range of the fourth to eighth centuries A.D. The area of the cemetery was shown to have been occupied in the Neolithic and Beaker periods, the Middle Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and in Roman, post-Roman and medieval times.² At the end of that excavation, two additional small projects were undertaken, which form the basis of the present report.

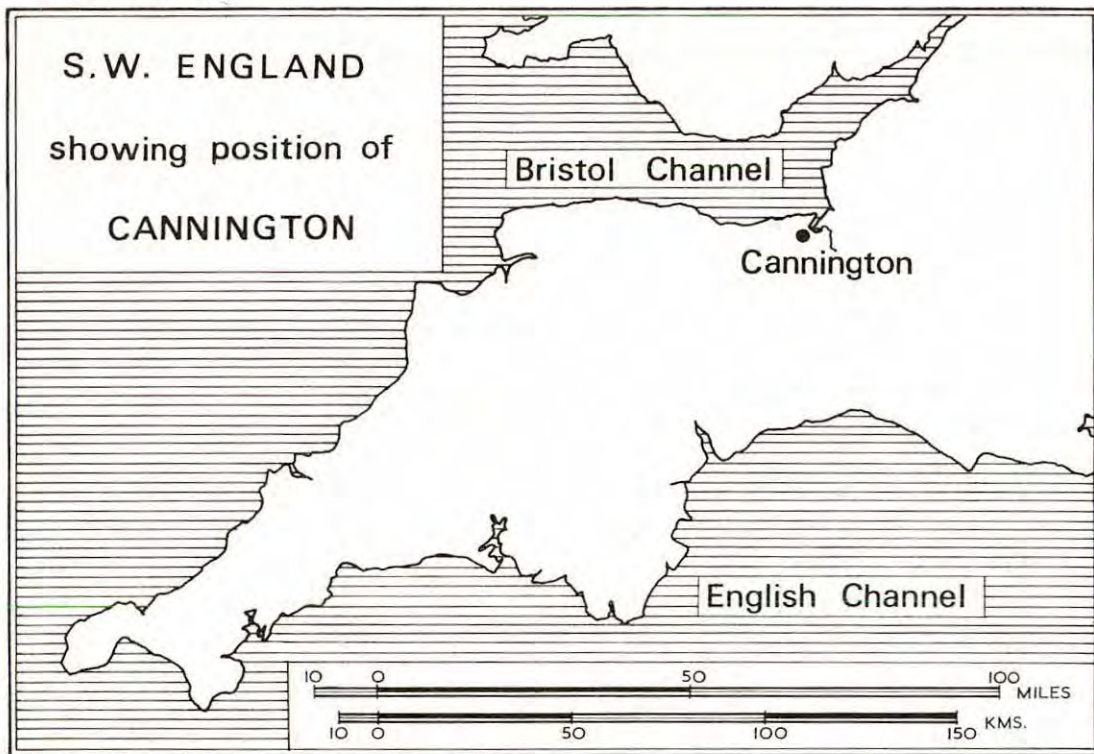


FIG. 1 Map of S.W. England, showing position of Cannington.

¹ Excavation for M.O.P.B.W. by writer, in advance of their destruction by quarrying. Full acknowledgements will be made in that report, which is in preparation; I should here like to thank Christine Mahany and Ronald Lampert, who were my assistants, and Susan Hirst, who has helped in the preparation of this report.

² Interim note in *Med. Arch.* VIII (1964), 237; see also *Christianity in Britain 300-700* ed. M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson, Leics. University Press 1968, 193-195.

The first was to test the date of an enclosure seen from the air on the north side of the hillfort (Site B). The second was a trial cutting (Site C) made in the lee of a rampart on the south side of the hillfort, to test a hypothesis that the settlement associated with the

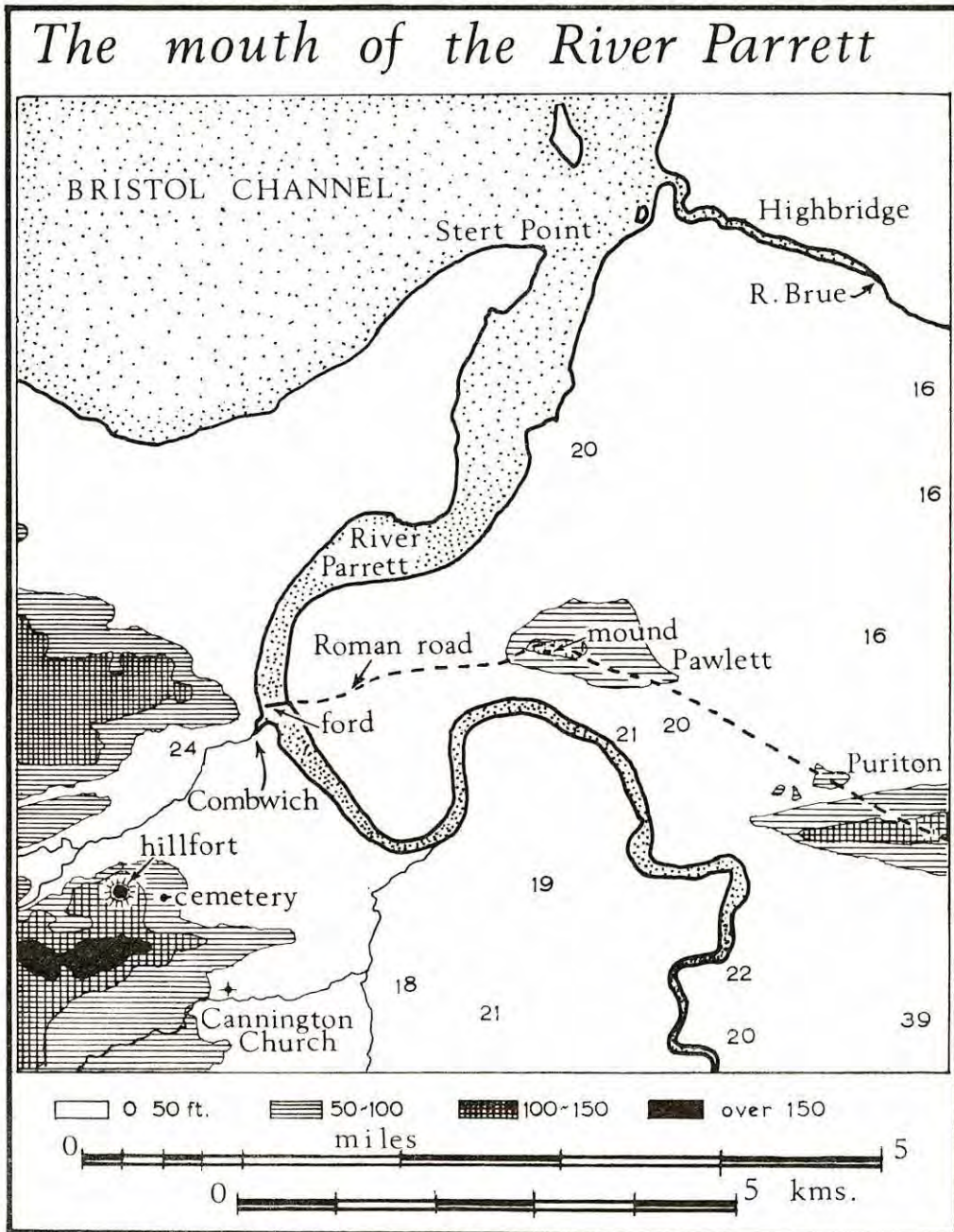


FIG. 2 Map of area.

cemetery might have been on the hillfort—a re-occupation in late or post-Roman times. Both projects were successful, the first yielding Glastonbury-type sherds, the second late Roman sherds and evidence of structural features.

TOPOGRAPHY OF AREA AND HILLFORT (Fig. 2). The area around the mouth of the River Parrett consists of low-lying alluvial flats, out of which rise higher areas, mostly of Liassic and Triassic deposits, with the unique exceptions of the hillfort and cemetery site. Combwich, the port at the mouth of the Parrett, lies partly on alluvial deposits and partly on higher ground which extends along the coast to the west, where the Lias strata are excellently seen in section. The landward approach to Combwich in Roman times was apparently only by the Roman road from Ilchester. This traverses the crest of the Polden ridge, crosses (or is buried by) alluvial deposits in the Dunball area, rises on to the area around Pawlett Church,³ and continues along the Pawlett ridge, passing on its south a very large, apparently artificial, mound.⁴ It then dips down sharply to the river, to a point where there was formerly an inn. Here there is a ford (said to be visible as a shelf of rock at low tides), which leads directly to Combwich on the other side. No further continuation of this road has ever been demonstrated, though it could lead to settlements beyond Combwich (see p. 64).

Also near the south shore of the Parrett, a mile or two inland from Combwich, lie two hills of Carboniferous Limestone;⁵ the higher of these, Cannington Hillfort,⁶ rises to a height of 262 ft. above O.D. Its summit is surrounded by defensive earthworks, enclosing *c.* 4½ acres, and including at least one stretch of dry-stone walling, presumably of Iron Age origin. On the south side the slope is less precipitous; here are other ramparts and a complex series of earthworks (Plates III and IV), whose origin and purpose are at present obscure; they may be ancient, or connected with the golf course, or military practice earthworks. The hillfort is connected by a col to the smaller hill, on which the cemetery lies (Plate I). Both hills contain caves,⁷ presumably the result of water action, though no water is now available on either. There are also veins of barytes, known locally as spar; this is a very heavy mineral, for which the Old Quarry, on the lesser hill, has long been famous to geologists.

THE HILLFORT (Fig. 3). The hillfort has been identified by earlier investigators⁸ with the Cynuit of Asser,⁹ the stronghold where the Dane Hubba besieged the Saxon force under Odda in A.D. 878. The cemetery was believed to be that of the thousand or so Danes killed in this battle. The identification was based on a similarity in name between Cynuit

³ Roman material has been found here: *inf.* Trevor Miles.

⁴ Conjectured locally to be a Roman signal station; it certainly commands an excellent view of the mouth of the Parrett estuary.

⁵ Unique in this area; the nearest similar rock is Mendip. Opinion varies as to whether the Cannington hills are independent of or outliers of Mendip.

⁶ Otherwise called Cannington Camp (locally), Cynwit Castle (25 in. O.S. map), Cynwir Castle (6 in. O.S. map). ST 247405, 4 miles north-west of Bridgwater.

⁷ That on the north side of Cannington Hillfort is scheduled (Som. 340); it was excavated in 1964 by John Coles, for the University of Cambridge, in an abortive search for Pleistocene material.

⁸ E.g. C. W. Whistler in "Ethan-dune A.D. 878—King Alfred's campaign from Athelney" in *Saga Book of the Viking Club*, 2, pt. ii (1899), 153–197; or C. Bazell, *The Edington Campaign A.D. 878*, privately printed, undated.

⁹ W. H. Stevenson (ed.), *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford 1904), p. 43, section 54, line 6.

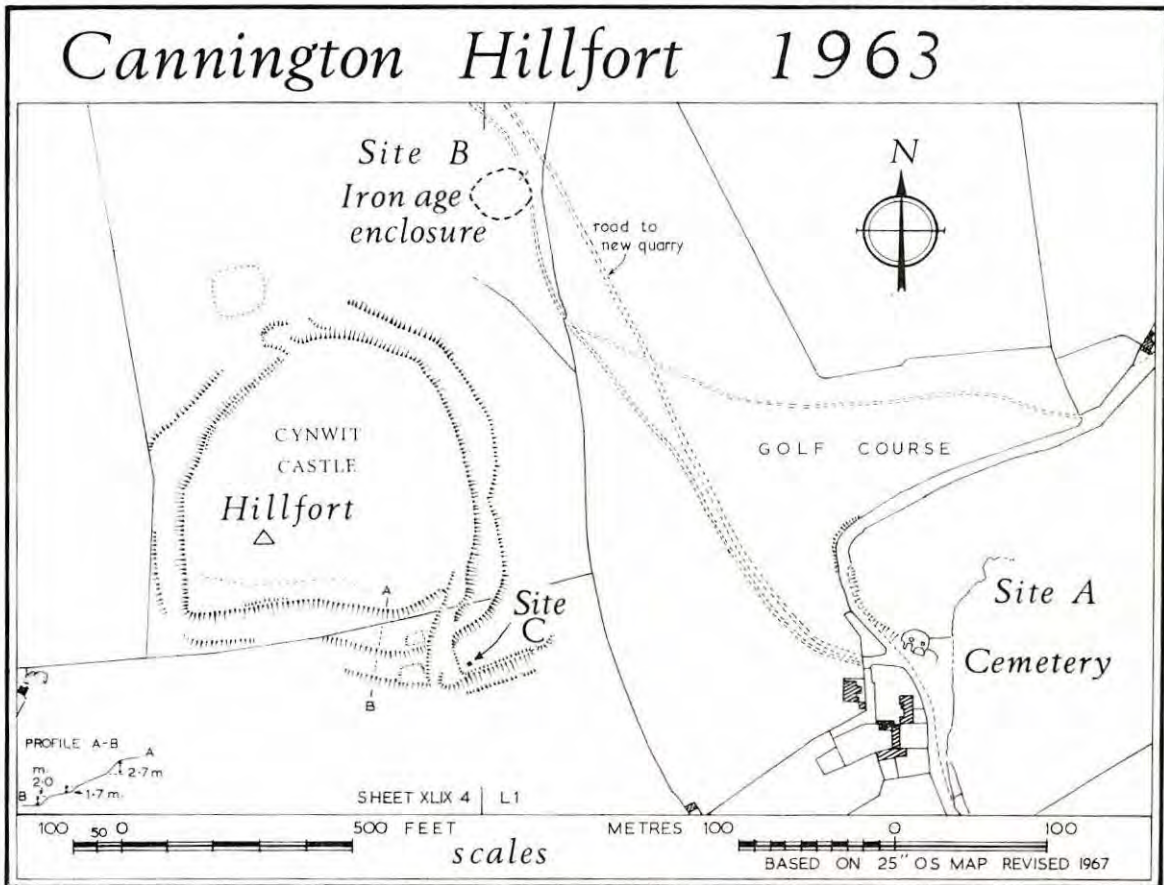


FIG. 3 Plan of Cannington Hillfort.

and Combwich, but cannot be sustained from other evidence. It did, however, gain sufficient credence for the Ordnance Survey to call the hillfort Cynwit or Cynwir Castle, and to place a crossed-sword symbol on the cemetery site, 'Site of Battle A.D. 878'.

At least two previous excavations have been carried out on the hillfort. In the summer of 1905, C. W. Whistler and others made a few exploratory trenches¹⁰ to find out whether the fort had been a permanent place of habitation, with hut circles or pits; nothing to indicate this was found, but there were "flint chips and early potsherds of the Glastonbury type". At one spot, almost on the rock and under some 18 in. of "mould", in a place overlooking the tidal ford of the Parrett, lay a dozen or so slingstones; "with them were the only sherds of wheel-turned pottery which showed any ornamentation, the inference being that here had been a siege of later date than that of the original fort-builders".

¹⁰ C. W. Whistler, "Further Notes on Kynwiche Castle", *Saga Book of the Viking Club*, 5, pt. i, 47-48.

This pottery may, of course, have been decorated Glastonbury pottery, but since it is contrasted with "Glastonbury-type" sherds found elsewhere, and thought to be of later date, there is at least the possibility that these sherds were Roman, an important point in view of the evidence described below from Site C.

The second excavation was by Mr. C. Bazell, who in 1913 "drove a trench in and found fortifications of dry-stone walling, carefully constructed and of great strength. Many shore pebbles, apparently collected for use as slingstones, were found inside the wall and some late-Celtic pottery of the same type as that found in the Glastonbury and Meare Lake Villages"¹¹ This was on the north side (Fig. 3); other pottery picked up there in more recent years, and in the museums at Bridgwater and Taunton, is also of Glastonbury types. There seems to be little doubt that the hillfort stone walling (still visible in places) belongs to this phase of the Iron Age, even if, as a defended place, it originated earlier in the Iron Age, or, as suggested later, was re-occupied some centuries later. At Taunton are sherds of our fabrics¹² A, B, C, apart from the Glastonbury types (GL), and also slingstones and a fragment of a quern of Devonian sandstone.¹³

SITE B (IRON AGE ENCLOSURE) EXCAVATION, 1963. No definite hut or house sites are visible inside the hillfort, though there are several rock terraces which would be suitable for building on. By chance, however, during a flight over the hillfort in 1962 a dark circle was seen in pasture on the north side of the fort, outside its defences (Plate II); this was photographed in colour and monochrome. No indication of it could be seen on the ground, but it was roughly plotted from the air-photo, as shown in Fig. 4. A single cutting was made across its line on the north side; the plan and sections of this cutting are in Fig. 5. It showed that the dark circle was the line of a rock-cut ditch, of irregular shape; it is difficult to cut a regular shape in the Carboniferous Limestone. The ditch was probably cut by levering out rock along its planes of cleavage. It does not seem quite straightforward at the point cut; there were post-holes (SB2, 4, 5, 6) and a cutaway (SB1) on the inner side, perhaps part of an entrance. The filling of the ditch (mostly in SB1) contained (Table, p. 68) only a few scraps of bone, slingstones and sherds. The most important of these sherds were a substantial portion of a bowl of Glastonbury decorated pottery; sherds of this joined to others from post-hole SB2, which also contained a chert flake. It seems likely that the post-hole had gone out of use before the Glastonbury pot was deposited.

The ditch is too big to have contained the posts of a building; it was clearly made to define an enclosure, and possibly contained the posts of a stockade. There were presumably buildings inside it; dark marks, possibly pits or post-holes, can be seen on the air photo; or it may have been only for stock. Its extra-mural position is unusual, but its significance in the layout of the hillfort cannot be assessed until it has been totally excavated.

COMBWICH. The only other relevant excavations in the locality were those at the Parrett mouth at Comwich in the parish of Otterhampton (Fig. 2). These have been described

¹¹ C Bazell, *op. cit.* p. 5.

¹² Type series of cemetery site—see below, p. 66.

¹³ identified there by R. Lampert.

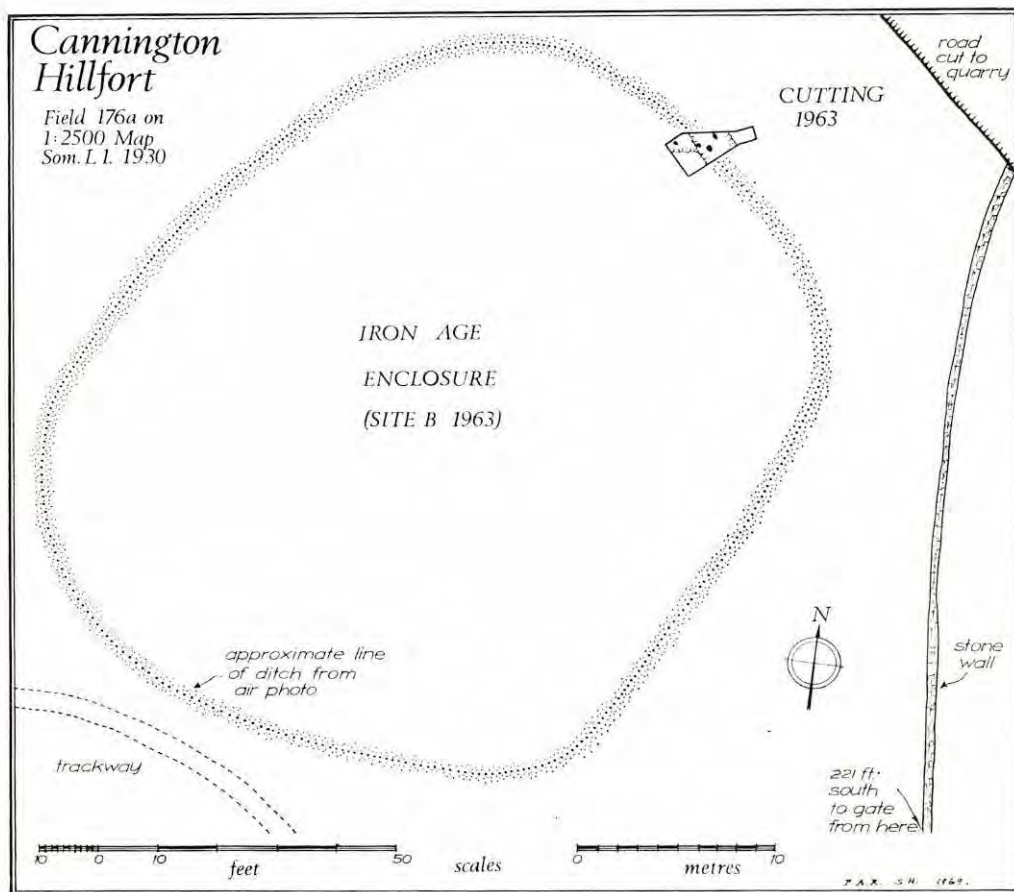


FIG. 4 Site B, plan of Iron Age enclosure.

by Mr. Dewar,¹⁴ and are summarised here. Their location was in the clay-pits at Combwich, in the centre of the present inhabited area, described as $\frac{1}{2}$ mile east of Bolham House, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile north-east of Putnell Farm, and about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile south-west of Combwich Passage,¹⁵ where the present ground surface was 24 ft. above O.D. Indications were of a settlement extending over *c.* 120×60 yds. (*c.* $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres) but it was estimated by Mr. Dewar that as much again had formerly existed before clay digging began—say 3 acres in all.

The earliest occupation traces were at a depth of $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft., a cleavage line in the clay slightly strewn with ashes. Most of the finds came from an 18 inch band of dark soil overlying the natural blue clay, with pockets and pits of black earth, charcoal, ash and coprolites. The only structural remains were patches of closely laid Liassic and Triassic

¹⁴ H. S. L. Dewar, "A Romano-British Settlement at Combwich", *Proc. Somerset Arch. Soc.* **86**, 7, 129-133. See also B. Cunliffe in note 20 below, p. 68.

¹⁵ These co-ordinates do not meet, but fall several hundred yards short of each other; probably near ST 262418.

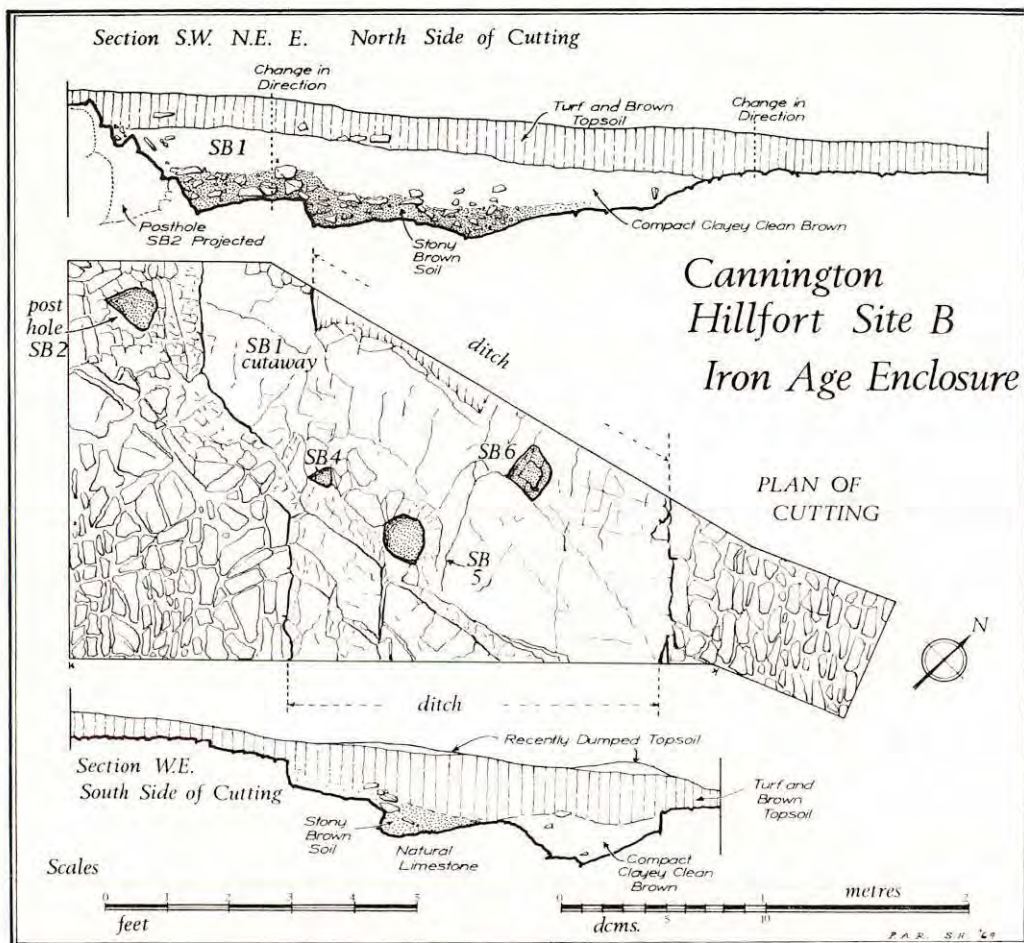


FIG. 5 Site B, plan and section of excavation.

stones and beach pebbles at a depth of one foot.¹⁶ The findings included 1 cwt. of Roman pottery of first–fourth century date; this came mainly from pit bottoms, but some came from all levels from 4 ft. 3 in. upwards. Some sherds were green glazed.¹⁷

There were also a crucible, a mould, spindle whorls, a whetstone, various polished stones, slingstones, fragments of baked clay, daub, bones, teeth and horn cores of the usual domestic animals. There were also two human skeletons. One was carefully excavated; it lay at a depth of 2 ft. 8 in., fully extended on back, legs apart, feet to east, face over left shoulder, with no associated finds.

Mr. Lampert investigated the area in 1962, along the south edge of the clay pits. He found a Roman grey ware rim and base, and Pennant roof tile (F/S 6 and 7) in over-

¹⁶ Possibly hut floors.

¹⁷ Not necessarily medieval; green-glazed pottery has come from several Roman sites in Somerset and elsewhere in Britain. See E. M. Jope in *Excavations at Chew Valley Lake*, H.M.S.O. monograph forthcoming.

burden deposited from the clay digging, at ST 259417. There was also a good deal of Lias here, which was not obviously attributable to any recent activity. The significance of these discoveries and their possible relationship to the present excavations, are discussed below.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE RE-OCCUPATION. The area around the mouth of the Parrett was probably in pre-Roman times part of the territory of the Dumnonii, though it is on the northern fringe of that area, and it is possible that the Parrett was in fact the boundary between Dumnonian territory to the south-west and other territory to the north-east. It must always have been an attractive point of entry into lowland Somerset. There is little if any evidence of its being a point of entry for any known prehistoric cultures, though the evidence may be submerged under alluvial deposits. In the Iron Age it must have been an attractive entrance, especially as close to hand was an easily-fortified hill of limestone only a few hundred yards from the tidal waters of the Parrett; this is no place to discuss the "invasion hypothesis" in relation to Iron Age cultures, but its supporters might well see Cannington Hillfort as an ideal "bridgehead" similar to that at Bindon Hill overlooking Lulworth Cove. This might be true especially of the Glastonbury culture. Sherds of this pottery have been found on the hillfort and in the cemetery excavation, and also (usually deep in alluvial deposits) in the Bridgwater/Highbridge area;¹⁸ one can easily imagine penetration by waterways from here to the Glastonbury/Meare area.

It seems probable that the importance of the Parrett as a point of entry continued into Roman times. The Roman settlement at Combwich may be interpreted as a port (possibly Ptolemy's ISCHALIS, see p. 61), used from the first-fourth centuries A.D. (p. 62). Combwich Pill is a useful landing place for vessels coming into the estuary. It was reached by a Roman road from Ilchester (LINDINIS), (p. 58) thus giving contact between the sea, the hinterland of Somerset, and beyond *via* the Fosse Way. The road may indeed have served also to give access to the coastal belt beyond the Parrett extending as far as Minehead. This is otherwise rather cut off from the rest of Somerset, either by the Parrett or by the Quantock Hills. There is rather sparse Roman occupation here, including some poor quality villa sites.¹⁹

There is some evidence that during the later Roman period there was a change in the relative levels of sea and land, a large part of Somerset being flooded.²⁰ The eventual coastline is thought to have been somewhere near the present 18 ft. contour. The effect on Combwich may have been serious. Not only would the lower part of the settlement (at around 19–24 ft.) have been periodically flooded by high tides or at any rate made waterlogged, but its importance as a port may have diminished as deeper-draught vessels could penetrate further up the Parrett.

The later years of the fourth century also brought insecurity in the form of pirates, who, like settlers, would have found the Parrett an attractive estuary to shelter in and raid from. Combwich and the lower-lying areas around Parrett mouth were probably becoming untenable for settlement in the late Roman period, or subsequently at any time

¹⁸ Information Trevor Miles.

¹⁹ Such as Spaxton, excavated in 1964 by Trevor Miles.

²⁰ B. Cunliffe, "The Somerset Levels in the Roman Period", in *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain*, CBA Research Report No. 7 (1966), 68–73. See also *Proc. Somerset Arch. Soc.*, **112**, 13–14.

while raiders were liable to sail up the Bristol Channel, irrespective of the water levels. These factors are, it will be suggested, very relevant to the problem of the re-use of the hillfort, and of its associated cemetery.

The sub-Roman or pre-Saxon period in Somerset was one of considerable duration, extending from sometime in the fifth century when central Roman administration and a fully Romanised way of life were breaking down, to the middle of the seventh century—200 or more years. The victory of Badon made Somerset safe till at least *c.* A.D. 550. Whether Somerset's continued independence in the later sixth century (after the battle of Dyrham in 577), and in the first half of the seventh century was due to a Saxon "pause to consolidate", or to any active strength on the part of the men of Somerset, is of course a complex question.

But an exact point of reference is given for our area in 658. After the battle of Penselwood in that year, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that the "Britons" were driven "back to the Parrett". This is usually interpreted as implying that the Saxons advanced westwards from Penselwood (in the Somerset/Wiltshire border area) through Somerset, until they reached the Parrett, beyond which the Britons presumably withdrew. This would leave the Parrett in nominal Saxon control, but not necessarily the coastal plain beyond, though it cannot have remained independent for long.

Hoskins has suggested an alternative interpretation,²¹ that the Britons were driven back to the Parrett from the east, the Saxons advancing not through Somerset but from Dorset, through the vale of Taunton on the south-east side of the Quantocks. "Back to the Parrett" in this context means of course primarily its upper reaches rather than its mouth, and need not affect our view of the "Britons" either around Combwich or in the coastal plain beyond.

In either case, it seems clear that until *c.* 658, the culture to be expected in the Cannington area would be sub-Roman rather than Saxon, whatever cultural contacts there may have been earlier. In the later seventh century, there is likely to have been an increasing infiltration of Saxon elements and culture into the area. This need not be seen as anything sudden, dramatic, or violent, but rather as a gradual fusion of cultures.

SITE C EXCAVATION 1963. The place chosen for the trial cutting was on a fairly flat area behind one of the outer southern ramparts, which, as will be seen from Fig. 3, seem to be a weak extension of the main defences down the slope. At the point cut, the ground to the south of the cutting hardly rose above the level shown in Fig. 6, i.e. the rampart here was more of a terrace than a bank. It was hoped that this was due to the back of the bank having been masked by an accumulation of material which might prove to contain a stratified series of finds, in which a Roman or later horizon might be identified at a high level. The cutting was 10 ft. square (Fig. 6). Below a deep topsoil (SC1) containing only a fragment of clay pipe was a dense occupation layer (SC2). The finds recorded from the base of SC1 were in the surface of SC2 and found while it was being clearly defined. They included some prehistoric sherds and slingstones, but these were outnumbered 38 to 12 by Roman sherds. In layer SC2 were further Roman sherds and a few prehistoric ones, but they were not stratified in order of date, and there is no doubt that SC2 is an

²¹ W. G. Hoskins, *The Westward Expansion of Wessex*, Occasional Papers of the Dept. of Eng. Local History, University of Leicester, No. 13 (1960).

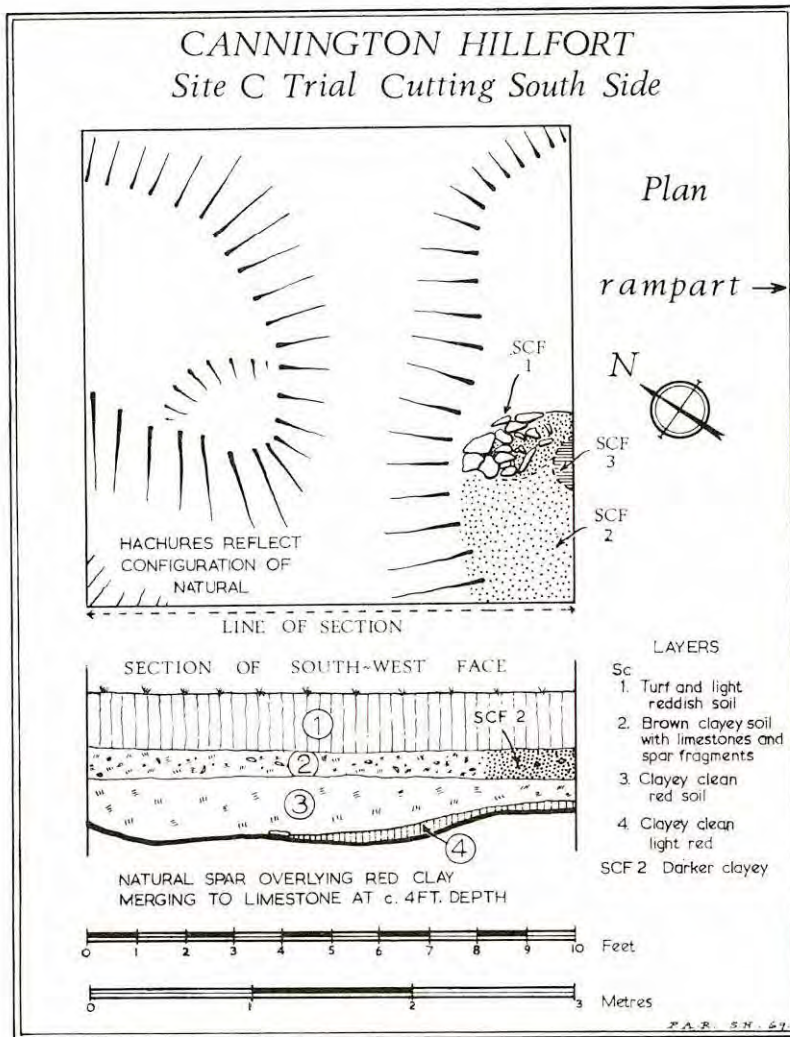


FIG. 6 Site C, plan and section of excavation.

accumulation of Roman or later times; when this was dug, it was assumed that an Iron Age level would be found below; this did not materialise, and a layer of hill-wash (SC3) contained only a flint flake and another Roman sherd.

On the edge of the excavation was a substantial post-hole (SCF1), which showed in the surface of SC2, with burnt daub around it (SCF2); SCF3 was a darker area in SC2, possibly another post-hole. SCF1 was packed with stones, which had fallen into the socket, as had another Roman sherd; there was further daub in the hole. It seems likely that SC2 was the floor-level of a building, of which SCF1 held a structural member. This may have been a dwelling-house or hut. But its position near a possible entrance way (Fig. 3) suggests that it may have been a guard-house or look-out building.

The absence of any definable Iron Age layer behind the rampart is surprising, and perhaps only explicable if the rampart is not of Iron Age date, but that of the occupation layer, i.e. of Roman or later date. This is an exciting possibility, and one which could easily be proved by extending the cutting southwards through the rampart itself.

CONCLUSION. The cemetery also yielded material of late Roman and later date. In the final report, it will be suggested that the burials continued until such time as the nearby village of Cannington was established (perhaps in the eighth century), or more particularly its church, to which the cemetery would be transferred.

The problem posed by the cemetery was of course the location and character of the settlement to which the dead belonged. The character of the cemetery is obviously relevant to this, and a full discussion is not possible here; it may however be said briefly that the cemetery was that of a normal lay population, representative of both sexes and all ages. Its possible original extent of several thousand graves, spread over two or three centuries or more, suggests a population of a hundred or two people. Where did these people live? The hillfort was an obvious possibility in this period; the excavation at Site C (described above) showed not only that there was Roman pottery there in some quantity (relative to the size of the excavation), but that there was some structure there as well. It seems possible moreover that the rampart in whose lee the cutting was made was also of Roman or later date, even if the main defences were Iron Age. This, then, was evidence of re-occupation of an earlier hillfort possibly associated with new defensive work. The new occupants were using Roman pottery, which is not closely dateable other than as "late", but it could continue in use into the fifth century at least, even if as residual material.

It is suggested that these people may have come from Combwich, which as we have already seen, may in the fourth century and later have been untenable. This is probably impossible to prove; but the character of the new settlement could be determined by excavation. It may lie within the area of the defences, or among the complex of earthworks of the southern slopes, the hillfort being reserved for a refuge. If the equation between cemetery and settlement can be accepted, then it continued into the post-Roman centuries; there are no post-Roman finds from Site C, but these might be found in a larger excavation. An alternative possibility is that the hillfort occupation was relatively short, and that the settlement moved, abruptly or gradually, to the present site of Cannington, even if the cemetery on the hill continued in use. A fuller understanding must await the thorough analysis of the cemetery and further excavation. It is hoped that the present paper will draw attention to the potential importance of any such future work.

DESCRIPTION OF POTTERY

The coding used in Table I is part of that defined for the main cemetery excavation, and will be fully discussed in that report. It may be summarised here insofar as it refers to the hillfort excavations.

- A soft soapy with few or no grits; included definite Beaker sherds, but some Iron Age as well.
- B limestone or quartzite gritted, some corky or pitted where grits have weathered; mostly Iron Age, but included some Neolithic and Bronze Age.

- C sandy, with or without grits; mostly Iron Age.
 GL Glastonbury ware, smooth homogeneous dark grey or black, often burnished; only defined as such where decorated or in identical fabric to decorated sherds.
 H black-burnished hard sandy Roman.
 I grey Roman ware, including micaceous sherds, probably of local origin.
 J red, including micaceous and red colour-coat.

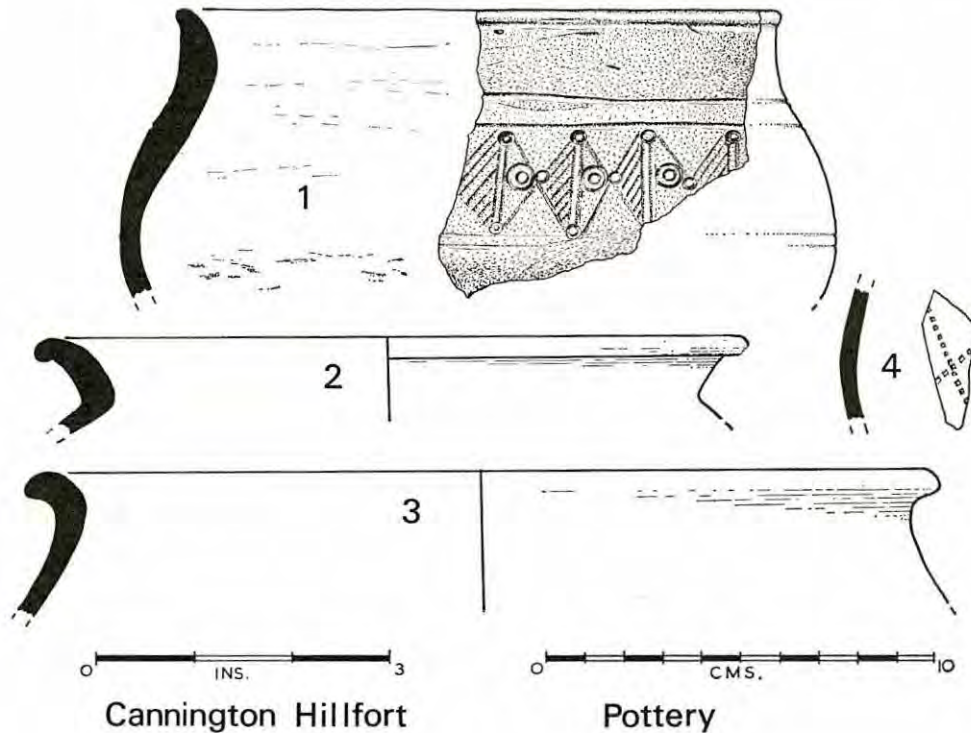


FIG. 7 Iron Age and Roman pottery.

The illustrated pottery (Fig. 7)

1. part of Glastonbury type bowl; hard fabric with much fine grit, some white; dark brown throughout;²² exterior lightly tooled, not burnished; lightly incised decoration, including dot-and-circle; surface worn; burnt concretion inside (P31-32, SB1 and 2); *cf.* Meare, P194.²³
2. rim sherd of cooking-pot, H fabric, light pinkish surface, possibly burnt (SC2).
3. rim sherd of jar, I fabric, hard gritty blue-grey (SC1).
4. sherd of soft orange micaceous fabric J, grey surfaced, comb decorated (SC2).

Not illustrated

J sherd from SC1, heavily micaceous, fine reddish.

²² David Peacock suggests, from a visual examination, that this is of Mendip origin.

²³ A. Bulleid and H. St. G. Gray, *The Meare Lake Village*, I, Pl. I, P194, p. 50.

CANNINGTON HILLFORT 1963—TABLE OF FINDS

	FINDS						POTTERY						Pot No.	Fig. 7 No.	
	Stone	Flint	Clay	Char-coal	Iron	Bone	A	B	C	GL	H	I			J
SITE B															
SB1	385 five sling stones					126	1			16				P31 ↑ Join	1
SB2 (Post-hole)	364 chert flake							1		8				↓ P32	1
SITE C															
SC1 (Base)	397-8 sling stones eight	365 370 flakes	daub flat face	126	204-5 four nails	128	6	4	2		24	13	1		3
SC2	399 sling stone	366 371 flakes	daub					2		3	1		1	P40	2, 4
SCF1 (Post-hole)											1				
SC3			367 flake								1				

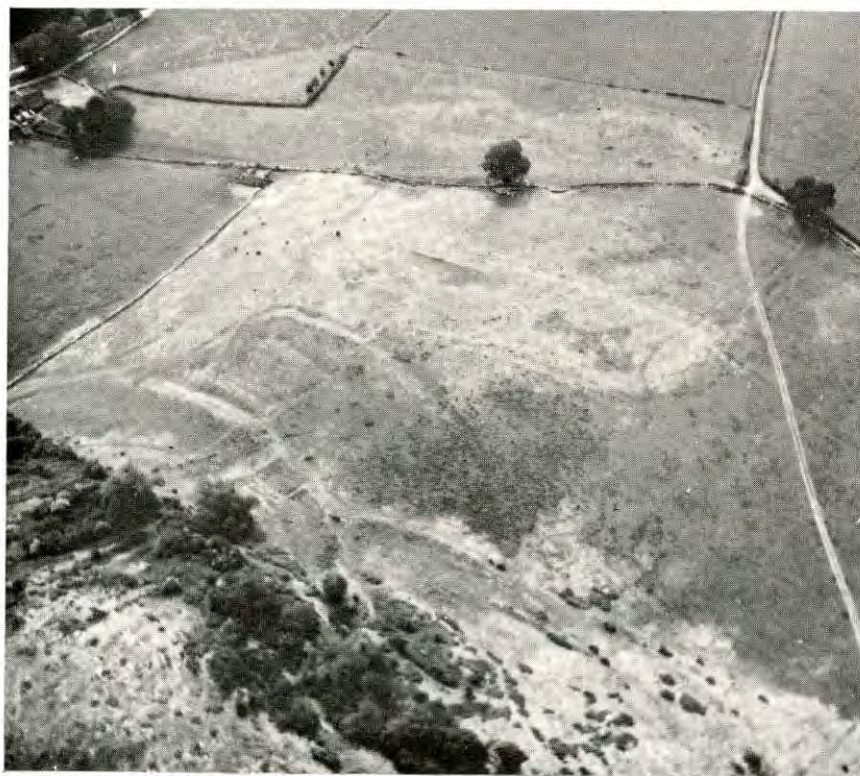
N.B.—NUMBERS ARE THOSE GIVEN IN THE MAIN CEMETERY FIND SERIES



PL. I Vertical air photograph of Hillfort area.
(north at top)



PL. II
Air photograph of Iron
Age enclosure from
north-west.



PL. III
Air photograph of south
side of Hillfort from
north-west.



PL. IV

Air photograph of south side of Hillfort from west.