

## RECENT EXCAVATIONS IN PEEBLESSHIRE

by A. MACLAREN, F.S.A.SCOT.

THE two excavations here described were undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland during 1961 and 1962 as part of the preparatory work for the *Inventory of Peeblesshire*. The first site, Weird Law, which lies a little to the SW. of Tweedsmuir, proved to be an Enclosed Cremation Cemetery dated to the middle of the second millennium B.C., while the second site, Broughton Knowe, situated about two miles NNW. of Broughton, was found to be a barrow, covering a cremation burial; the dating evidence, however, for this site is inconclusive. The excavations were carried out by Messrs A. MacLaren and I. G. Scott of the Commission's staff, the drawings being executed by Mr Scott.

### THE ENCLOSED CREMATION CEMETERY, WEIRD LAW

#### *Introduction*

The Enclosed Cremation Cemetery (RCAM, *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, No. 109, p. 64) is situated in the upper Tweed valley, some six miles downstream from the river's source. It stands at a height of 900 ft. O.D. on the crest of one of several low ridges which rise above the broken marshy ground at the foot of the SE. slopes of Weird Law, a little over three-quarters of a mile SW. of Tweedsmuir Post Office and 100 yds. NW. of the main Edinburgh-Moffat road (N.G.R. NR 085234). It is one of a small number of similar sites now known in the county; when first discovered, however, in 1960, nothing was known of their date or affinities. The Commissioners, therefore, decided that a suitable example should be examined. Permission to excavate was readily granted by the owner, Mr V. D. Thorburn, who also kindly provided storage space for equipment while the work was in progress. The excavation lasted for three weeks during September 1961.

#### *The Site before excavation*

Prior to excavation the site appeared as a very low turf-covered mound, circular in shape measuring 14 ft. in diameter and rising to a height of 9 in. This mound stood near the centre of a circular level space measuring 34 ft. in diameter and surrounded by a low bank, which was 8 ft. in thickness and 9 in. in greatest height. The bank appeared to be interrupted by a gap, about 10 ft. wide, in the W. arc. Apart from a small intrusive depression in the SE. sector of the central mound, the site appeared to be quite undisturbed.

#### *The Excavation*

One quadrant was completely stripped in order to include the apparent gap in the outer bank. Subsequently the central area was considerably enlarged and sections were cut to provide a complete section and cross-section.

Immediately beneath the turf there was a layer of peat which overlay the whole

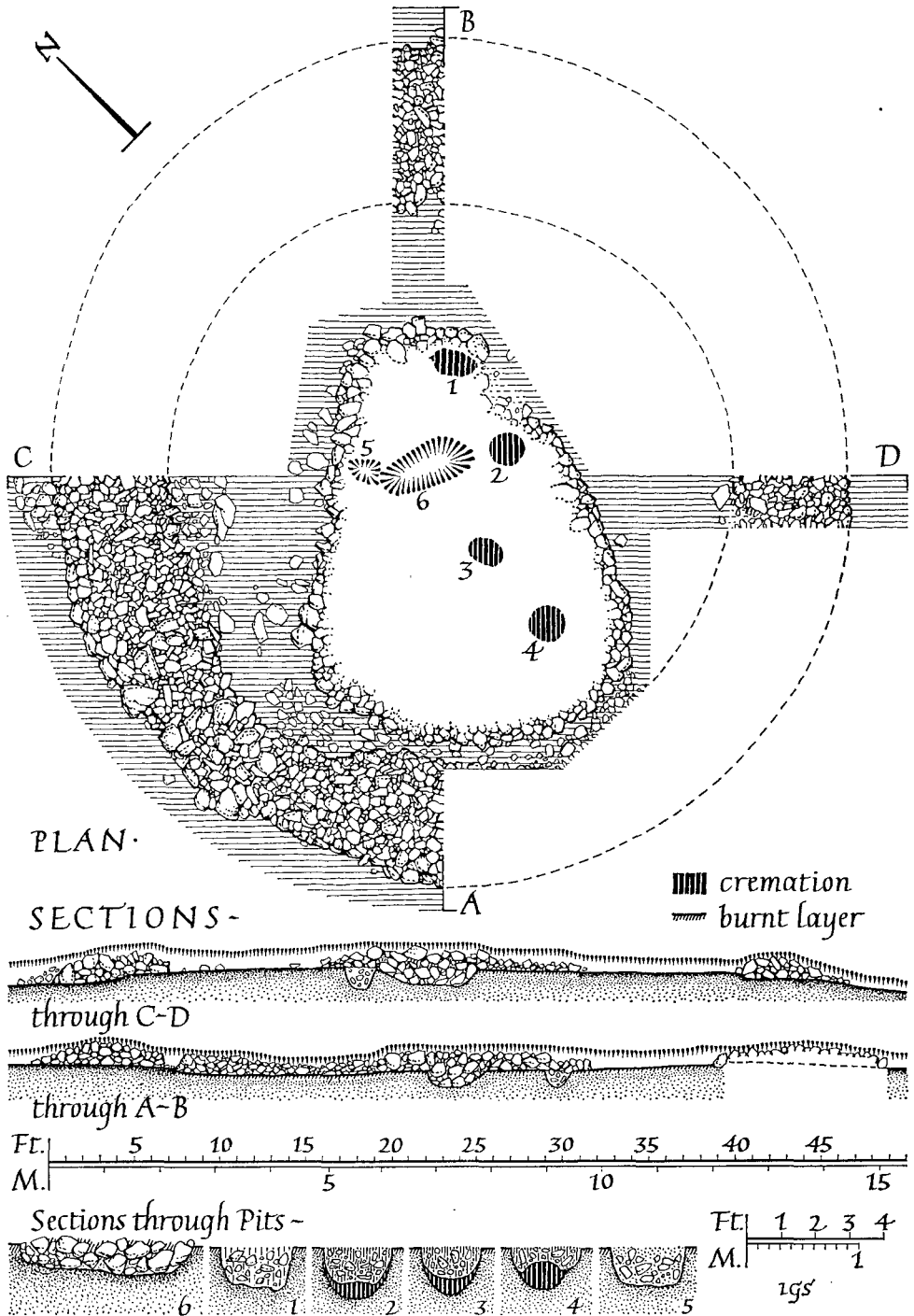


FIG. 1. Plan and sections, Weird Law

area, to a greatest depth of one foot. This peat is of comparatively recent growth, probably within the last 1000 years.<sup>1</sup>

The enclosing bank (fig. 1) was formed by a band of stones, and varied in thickness between 6 and 8 ft., with a maximum height of 1 ft. 8 in. The majority of the stones were about the size of a football or less, and none of them was too big to be carried by one person. While there was no indication of any formal kerb to the bank, there was a general tendency for the larger stones to be towards the inner and outer edges. The slight dip in the turf-level in the SW. quadrant that had suggested a possible entrance was shown to be merely due to the fact that at this point the volume of stones forming the ring was rather less than elsewhere. There was no trace of an entrance whatsoever in the parts of the bank which were excavated, and while surface indications give no hint of a gap in the unexcavated portions, the original presence of an entrance cannot be eliminated. The circular area enclosed by the stone bank measured 33 ft. in diameter.

When completely stripped of turf and overlying peat the internal mound was found to be pear shaped, and not circular as it appeared on the surface. It measured 25 ft. by 19 ft. with the long axis alined NE.-SW. It was composed of stones of similar size to those forming the enclosing bank, and had a maximum height of 1 ft. 6 in. at the centre. It was not placed centrally in relation to the bank; while its broader SW. end almost merged with the inner edge of the bank, there was elsewhere a clear intervening space measuring up to 10 ft. in width. This space was completely featureless, the peat layer resting directly on the surface of the natural subsoil which consisted of a thin but very hard pan-like layer overlying a loose mixture of gravel and sand. The enclosing bank also rested directly on this hard natural surface. The slight depression in the mound, which had been visible on the surface, proved to be nothing more than a shallow disturbance probably due to attempted peat-cutting.

The removal of the stone mound was started at the NE. end and continued towards the SW. The stones were found to be covering a layer of burnt debris, measuring up to 2 in. in thickness, which in turn merged with the top surface of the natural sand and gravel. The pan-like layer found elsewhere on the site was absent in the area of the burnt layer. The first pit to be recognised was No. 6 on fig. 1. It appeared initially as an isolated accumulation of tightly-packed stones protruding slightly through the burnt layer. When removed they were found to be filling a shallow pit measuring 5 ft. 3 in. in length by 2 ft. 8 in. in breadth and just over one foot in depth, with the long axis alined ESE.-WNW. It contained nothing apart from the stone packing, but it was significant that it was placed almost centrally in relation to the enclosing bank and that it was also earlier than the layer of burning which filled the interstices between the stones forming the upper part of the filling. Of the five other pits (Nos. 1-5), Pit No. 1 measured 2 ft. 3 in. by 1 ft. 4 in. by one foot in depth. The filling consisted of fairly clean sandy soil and gravel mixed with small pockets of black ash and about a dozen small fragments of cremated bone. Pit No. 2 measured about 2 ft. in diameter and 1 ft. 9 in. in depth; the top 10 in. of

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to Dr S. E. Durno of the Macaulay Institute for Soil Research for this information.

the filling was again a fairly clean mixture of sand, and small gravel, but the bottom 6 in. consisted entirely of black ash and cremated bone. Pit No. 3, which measured 1 ft. 9 in. by 1 ft. 6 in. and 1 ft. 2 in. in depth, was very similar to Pit 2, containing a deposit of ash and cremated bone on the bottom and an upper filling of sand and gravel. Pit No. 4, measuring 2 ft. in diameter and one foot in depth, had the largest content of cremated material. The bone and ash lay in a compact mass filling the bottom of the pit, and as the upper filling was removed the upper surface of the cremated deposit was found to be dome-shaped, indicating that the remains had been originally contained within some kind of bag made of a perishable material. Pit No. 5 was irregular in shape, measuring 2 ft. by 1 ft. 6 in. and 1 ft. 3 in. in depth, and contained a filling of earth and small stones sealed beneath the burnt layer. A detailed report on the bone will be found in the Appendix.<sup>1</sup>

### *Finds*

The only finds other than the cremated bone were two small unworked flakes of chert, which were found among the stones of the internal mound.

### *Discussion*

In the absence of grave-goods or other datable finds, the interpretation of the site must rest principally on the structural evidence and on comparison with other sites of similar type. The suggested sequence of events is as follows. The earliest features of the site appear to have been the enclosing ring of stones and pits 5 and 6. While there was no direct evidence to reveal the function of these pits, their central position in relation to the stone ring makes it reasonable to regard them all as contemporary. The pits may have been dug as part of a ritual dedication of the site previous to the actual burial ceremonies, and pit 6 is big enough to have served as a temporary grave in which the two bodies were inhumed for a short time while preparations were being made for their subsequent cremation.<sup>2</sup> The cremation pyre was then erected within the enclosure, and on top of pits 5 and 6, which had already been filled up. When the actual cremation was completed pits 1-4 were dug through the ashes left by the fire and the main accumulations of bones from each of the two bodies were first placed in some kind of bag, possibly of leather or cloth, and laid at the bottom of pits 2 and 4 respectively; the small amount of bone still remaining was committed to pits 1 and 3. All four pits were then filled up partly with the residue of the fire, and the top levels with fairly clean surface soil. Finally the area occupied by all six pits was covered with a protective layer of stones.

In Scotland apart from the eight others identified in Peeblesshire<sup>3</sup> the closest parallels, known so far, both typologically and geographically, have been found in Dumfriesshire where, as a result of a valuable programme of field research planned and carried out by Major-General Scott-Elliot,<sup>4</sup> at least a dozen comparable sites

<sup>1</sup> I am much indebted to Dr F. P. Lisowski and Mr T. F. Spence of the University of Birmingham for their examination of the cremations.

<sup>2</sup> A similar suggestion has been made for the cremation cemetery at Loanhead of Daviot (*PSAS*, LXX (1935-6), 301), a site which has several other features in common with Weird Law.

<sup>3</sup> RCAM, *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, Nos. 110-14.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Gen. Scott-Elliot for permission to quote unpublished work.

have already been identified. One of these, situated seven miles N. of Dumfries on Whitestanes Moor,<sup>1</sup> has been fully excavated and has proved to be remarkably similar to Weir Law. Only a few more sites are as yet known in Scotland; Bargatton, Kirkcudbrightshire,<sup>2</sup> Glen Cochill, Perthshire,<sup>3</sup> and possible examples at Dalnaglar, Perthshire.<sup>4</sup> In Dumfriesshire they are found in association with large numbers of small cairns (average diameter about 15 ft.) and other structures including some which appear superficially to be smaller forms of ritual enclosures similar to Weir Law and Whitestanes Moor, measuring 18 ft. or less in external diameter. But little is as yet known of their purpose, and their significance can only be determined by future excavation.

In view of this new evidence from Dumfriesshire, it is clear that several at least, if not all, the so-called 'hut-circles' are not domestic sites, but burial-places; and it seems probable that re-examination of comparable structures elsewhere, in particular in Galloway, would produce similar results. In this context mention may be made of the well-known group of 'hut-circles' excavated between 1913 and 1926 at Muirkirk, Ayrshire. In the excavation reports<sup>5</sup> these structures were identified as circular houses, and have been accepted as such ever since. But reconsideration of the evidence strongly suggests that they should no longer be regarded as houses, but rather as enclosed cremation cemeteries of the same type as those now under discussion.

The Weir Law site falls, broadly speaking, within a large group of cremation cemeteries, whose distribution is largely confined to the Highland Zone of Britain. It is now recognised that the practice of disposing of the dead by cremation was firmly established in Britain in the Late Neolithic period by about 2000 B.C. as an alternative to the more widely-used rite of inhumation. Eventually cremation was to supersede inhumation, and this process may to some extent have been delayed and complicated by the arrival, in the early part of the second millennium B.C., of the Beaker peoples from the Continent, who introduced the custom of single-grave inhumation. But the replacement of cremation by inhumation must be regarded, not as the result of the importation of a new tradition from abroad, but rather as the assertion of one already indigenous rite over another.

The enclosed cremation cemeteries of Southern Scotland are one facies of a diverse group of 'flat' sites in which the cremations are all deposited within a circular enclosure or temenos. The origin of the circular temenos may be seen in the ritual monuments of Henge type found at Dorchester-on-Thames,<sup>6</sup> or Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian.<sup>7</sup> Their development may be traced through the pond barrows of the Wessex culture<sup>8</sup> to such sites as Blackheath, Todmorden, W.R. Yorks,<sup>9</sup> with its circular bank of earth and stones enclosing a floor of laid clay beneath which were found cremation burials. Analogous sites and their associated finds situated on the gritstone moors of N. Derbyshire, in Lancashire and Cheshire, the Peak district,

<sup>1</sup> TDGAS, XLII (1965), 51-60.

<sup>2</sup> RCAM, *Inventory of Galloway*, Vol. ii, No. 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Discovery and Excavation Scotland 1964*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> PSAS, xciv (1961-2), 134 ff.

<sup>5</sup> PSAS, XLVIII (1913-14), 373 ff; LIV (1919-20), 210 ff; LXI (1926-7), 272 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Atkinson, Piggott and Sandars, *Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon., Part I* (Ashmolean Museum, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> PSAS, LXXXII (1947-8), 76-81, 112-14.

<sup>8</sup> e.g., Sheep Down, *Arch. J.*, cvii (1951), 1-24.

<sup>9</sup> Russel, in Ling Roth, *Prehistoric Halifax* (1906), 307-22.

Cumberland and Westmorland have been recently discussed by Bu'lock<sup>1</sup> and Varley.<sup>2</sup> The chronology and affinities of the Scottish cremation cemeteries of all types have been studied by Professor Piggott.<sup>3</sup> While some cremation cemeteries were in use over a considerable time-span,<sup>4</sup> the more precise dating-evidence is provided by links with the Wessex Culture of Southern England, and in particular with the second phase of that culture, dated to about the fifteenth century B.C. The absence of grave-goods at Weird Law makes precise dating very difficult from the archaeological evidence alone; it was fortunate, however, that a sufficient quantity of carbonised wood was recovered from the cremation pits to enable a radiocarbon measurement to be made. A sample from pit 3, which was measured at the National Physical Laboratory, gave a date of 1490 B.C.  $\pm$  90 years (NPL-57). The precision quoted represents one standard deviation, so that the chances are about two to one that the correct absolute date lies between 1580 B.C. and 1400 B.C. The date provided by a radiocarbon measurement of a sample from Whitestanes Moor was 1360 B.C.  $\pm$  90 years, or 1450-1270 B.C. Both sites fall within a bracket of about 300 years, and in the absence of closely datable relics from either sites, the radiocarbon method provides a satisfactory confirmation of the approximate date suggested by the archaeological evidence.<sup>5</sup>

#### APPENDIX

##### *The Cremations of Weird Law*

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The examination of the cremated contents of Pits 1, 2, 3 and 4 gave the following information.

##### *Pit 1*

General, very small amount of yellowish-brown pieces. Skull, one small vault fragment. Others, ten miscellaneous pieces.

*Remarks* ? part of Pit 4. Number cremated, sex and age impossible to diagnose.

##### *Pit 2*

General, fragments small in amount and size, grey to white colour. Skull, three vault pieces, a petrous temporal fragment. Others, a few unidentifiable long bone elements and miscellaneous fragments.

*Remarks* ? part of Pit 3.

##### *Pit 3*

General, small amount, small fragments often twisted and with elliptical cracks, hard and brittle in consistency and grey to white in colour. Skull, a few vault fragments with serrated sutural edges, maxillary elements—one with a molar root projecting into maxillary sinus and several mandibular fragments with tooth sockets. Teeth, part of canine, premolar and molar teeth with little wear.

<sup>1</sup> *T. Lancs & Cheshire Ant. Soc.*, 71 (1961), 1-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Cheshire Before the Romans* (1964), 62-76.

<sup>3</sup> *The Prehistoric Peoples of Scotland* (1962), 93-103.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Kirkburn, Dumfriesshire, *PSAS*, xcvi (1962-3), 107 ff.

<sup>5</sup> The only other radiocarbon dates yet available for monuments of this kind come from the broadly analogous ring-cairn 278, Penmaenmawr, Caernarvonshire (*PPS*, xxviii (1962), 387), where two samples yielded dates of 1560-1250 B.C. and 1675-1375 B.C.

Vertebral column, numerous fragments of cervical, thoracic, lumbar and sacral regions, some with epiphyses barely united. Thorax, a few rib elements. Upper limb, parts of scapula and humerus. Lower limb, innominate and femoral pieces and one phalanx. Others, a few unidentifiable long bone fragments and miscellaneous pieces.

Pathology: nil. Number cremated: one. Sex: ? Age: subadult.

#### *Pit 4*

General, numerous small fragments some are twisted and with elliptical cracks, of soft and brittle consistency and yellowish white in colour. Skull, numerous fragments with serrated sutural edges, right and left superior orbital margins, maxillary pieces, left petrous temporal fragment and right head of mandible. Teeth, elements of incisor and canine. Vertebral column, parts of cervical, thoracic and lumbar regions. Thorax, fragments of ribs and manubrium. Upper limb, parts of clavicle, scapula, humerus, ulna, carpus, metacarpus and phalanges. Lower limb, pieces of innominate, femur, tibia and phalanges. Others, numerous unidentifiable long bone fragments and miscellaneous pieces.

Pathology: osteoarthritis. Number cremated: one. Sex: ?female. Age: young adult.

### BARROW, BROUGHTON KNOWE

The barrow (RCAM, *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, No. 4, p. 51) is situated two miles NNW. of Broughton and a quarter of a mile W. of the Edinburgh-Moffat road (N.G.R. NR 098396). It lies on almost level ground about 400 yds. NE. of Broughton Knowe farm, and at a height of 1000 ft. O.D. Its unusually small size and its close proximity to a group of Ring Enclosures,<sup>1</sup> together with the fact that it appeared to be composed predominantly of earth rather than of stone, indicated that it might be something other than a typical Bronze Age cairn. It was therefore decided that it was worth a detailed examination, and an excavation was carried out in July 1962. The Commissioners are indebted to the Director of the A.R.C. Animal Breeding Research Organisation for giving permission to dig, for providing fencing materials and for presenting the finds to the National Museum of Antiquities. Financial support and tools were generously provided by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Thanks are also due to Mr R. B. K. Stevenson and Miss A. S. Henshall for their help in the identification of the finds; and to Miss C. Smellie, Mr F. H. G. Petzsch and Mr J. R. Scott for their assistance during the excavation.

#### *The Excavation*

Before excavation the barrow appeared as a low, turf-covered mound, measuring 18 ft. in diameter and 1 ft. 4 in. in maximum height, and showing no surface indications of a surrounding ditch.

The excavation was done by quadrants, and after the turf had been removed it was immediately apparent that a slight depression visible in the turf-line in the centre of the mound had been caused by previous interference during which a pit had been sunk into the middle of the barrow. The barrow itself (fig. 2) was composed of a core of a loosely packed mixture of sandy soil and small stones, which had originally had at least a partial, if not complete, capping of dark earth, boulder clay and larger stones

<sup>1</sup> For a description of this type of structure, see RCAM, *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, 16, 66.

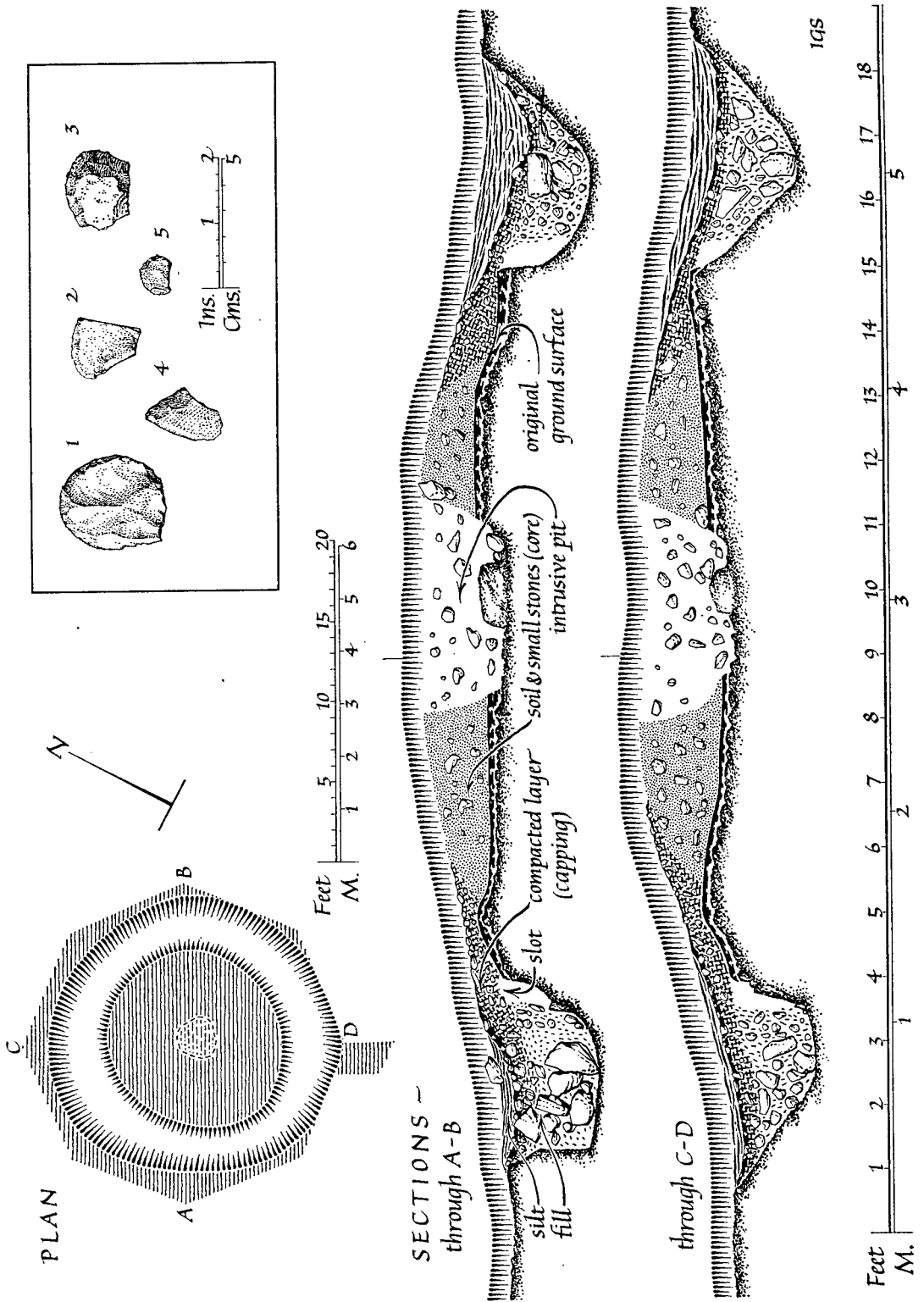


FIG. 2. Plan and sections, Broughton Knowe



which had formed into a hard-packed crust. This capping was found to extend down the sides of the core material as a layer measuring up to 8 in. in depth. Beyond the perimeter of the barrow it continued outwards for about 3 ft. Above this capping layer, and below the turf, there was a band of fine dark peat-like silt which represented the material washed down off the outer surface of the barrow during the initial weathering. The surface of the capping layer was so compact that at first it was difficult to distinguish it from the natural shattered rock surface which is to be found everywhere in the vicinity of the site almost immediately beneath the present turf-level. But when the capping was removed, it was found to be only a thin layer extending across the top levels of a ditch encircling the barrow. The ditch, which was for the most part rock-cut, was of irregular profile, measuring 3 ft. 3 in. in average width and 1 ft. 8 in. in greatest depth. The filling consisted mainly of fairly large angular chunks of rock interspersed with a mixture of small stone chips and light-brown sandy soil. There was no silting at all on the bottom and the filling was extremely clean except for the top few inches which had been stained by percolation from above. This indicated that the ditch had been deliberately refilled almost immediately after it had been dug. The arrangement of the filling itself was of considerable interest. The large stones occupied only the outer part of the ditch, whereas a narrow space between them and the scarp was by comparison notably free of any stones at all and was filled with a fine light-grey sandy soil completely different in colour and texture from the remainder. This feature was consistent throughout the circuit of the ditch, which was completely excavated. A few tiny wood fragments were recovered from this light grey filling. While it is difficult to explain this feature, it is suggested that it had, at some time, contained the frame-work of a tent-like covering for the area enclosed by the ditch. This frame-work may have consisted of a number of wooden posts resting against the sloping inner scarp of the ditch and held firmly in position by the heavy stone filling bearing against them from the outside.

Extending inwards beneath the barrow from the inner lip of the ditch the old ground surface could be recognised as a thin dark band of clay, except in the centre where it had been disturbed by the intrusive pit; outside the ditch it had been removed by the plough which had come right up to the perimeter of the barrow, if not right over the top of it.

It was unfortunate that the central area had been so severely disturbed, but a small quantity of cremated bone and charcoal survived to indicate that the barrow had been built over a cremation burial laid on the old ground surface. The lowest levels of the loose filling of the pit also yielded three sherds of pottery and five flint scrapers, and two further sherds and a few tiny scraps of cremated bone and charcoal were found beneath the undisturbed portion of the core of the barrow.

### *Finds*

*Flint.* Five scrapers, all made on flakes (fig. 2).

1. Round end-scraper, with prominent bulb of percussion and striking platform. Steeply flaked working edge.
2. End-scraper with steep flaking on working edge. Some surface cortex remains.

3. End-scraper with steep flaking on working edge. Prominent bulb of percussion and some surface cortex.
4. Side end-scraper, with secondary working on both faces.
5. Small round end-scraper.

#### *Pottery*

1-3. 3 wall sherds of fairly hard black ware with pale speckled granitic grits and a tendency to laminate. Outer surface uneven, but smoothed, internal surface lost. Maximum surviving thickness 0.5 in.

4-5. 2 small wall sherds, one 0.4 in. thick, the other 0.6 in. thick, but both probably belonging to the same pot. Fairly hard ware, dark grey in colour with outer surface buff.

#### *Discussion*

Structurally the barrow exhibits the normal features of the Bronze Age tradition of burial under a circular barrow surrounded by a ditch. The fact however that the ditch was filled in shortly after it was dug is unusual, but it is suggested that this was done in order to support a temporary protective covering for the central area where the body may have lain for a short time prior to being cremated. Before the barrow itself was built this temporary structure would be dismantled and not burned *in situ* though it may have provided convenient material for the pyre. Its function, therefore, was not that of a permanent mortuary house,<sup>1</sup> though it may be compared with such structures in a broad general sense. The damage done by previous disturbance has destroyed any detailed evidence about the burial, but the small quantities of cremated material surviving both at the very bottom of the intrusive pit and sealed beneath the undisturbed portion of the barrow indicate that the remains were deposited on the ground surface and not in a cremation pit. The scarcity of cremated remains found under the barrow itself points to the fact that the main cremation deposit was most probably laid in the centre, but that small residual amounts were scattered generally elsewhere within the ditched enclosure. There was no evidence that the cremation had taken place anywhere within the area now occupied by the barrow; but the site of the pyre was presumably located somewhere nearby. The two sherds of pottery which came from under the undisturbed part of the barrow had clearly been broken in antiquity, and as both types of ware were found thus sealed, it seems likely that the pottery represents a ritual scattering, and that the cremation was not contained within or accompanied by a complete pot. The flints show no sign of having been subjected to heat, and as they all came from the ground surface at the bottom of the intrusive pit, it is reasonable to assume that they were buried along with the cremation.

The pottery fragments (all body sherds) are so small that it is impossible to make any estimate of the size or shape of the vessels to which they belonged. But in fabric and colour the first three sherds described above seem to find their nearest parallels in wares from Kildalton, Islay (e.g. NMAS HM 327) and Knappers Farm, Dun-

<sup>1</sup> Ashbee, *The Bronze Age Barrow in Britain* (1960), 52 ff.

bartonshire (NMAE EO 965, *PSAS*, LXXXII (1947-8), 234, Pl. xlv, i), while Nos. 4 and 5 may be tentatively compared with some of the pottery from the Chambered Tombs at Bicker's Houses and Glecknabae, Bute, or from the coastal site at Hedderwick, East Lothian.

While the flint scrapers do not provide firm dating evidence in themselves, they are all of a type that would lie most readily within a Bronze Age context, and the evidence from both the flints and the pottery can thus suggest a Bronze Age date for the barrow, probably within the second millennium B.C. On the other hand a cairn recently excavated at Alnham, Northumberland,<sup>1</sup> which in size and structure has certain features in common with Broughton Knowe, has been dated to the Iron Age. It should be noted, however, that the Alnham cairn was one of a small cairnfield of 22 simple stone-built cairns, others of which have been proved by excavation to belong to the Early and Middle Bronze Age.

The date of the Broughton Knowe barrow must therefore remain uncertain until further examples have been discovered and excavated; but although the possibility of an Iron Age date should not be ruled out, it is suggested that an earlier date is the more likely.

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Ael.*, 4 ser. XLIV (1966), 25 ff.

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