

III.

NOTES ON THE EXCAVATION OF AN ARTIFICIAL MOUND AT
KIDSNEUK, BOGSIDE, PARISH OF IRVINE, AYRSHIRE. BY
G. P. H. WATSON, F.S.A. SCOT.

Situated on the Eglinton estate, within the Bartonholm plantation, to the west of the Caledonian Railway line, at a point midway between Irvine and Kilwinning, is an artificial mound. It can be most conveniently reached from the western road from Irvine, crossing Irvine Moor. The construction (fig. 1), which lies 200 yards north of the Combination Poorhouse and 300 yards west of Kidsneuk cottages, stands at the northern end of the plateau, which slopes imperceptibly downwards to the town of Irvine on the south, and more steeply to the present course of the River Garnock, half a mile to the north; the river originally ran 150 yards north of the mound, and was diverted some years ago to free the mines in the neighbourhood from water.

As it is composed of sand, it is much wasted, and viewed from the road presents the appearance of a hog-backed mound, the major axis lying almost due north and south; but even in its present state it commands an extensive prospect in all directions save towards the east, where the wooded policies of Eglinton Castle intervene.

The mound is 15 feet high. The crest diameter is 25 feet; the diameter at base is 103 feet by 73 feet. On the north there appeared to be the outline of a ditch and rampart, and on the west a feature resembling a

berm. The track on the north-east appears to have been used for a long period as an access to the crown. Beyond the rampart on the north there is a re-entrant, and on the east a small plateau; these features may be natural.

On 30th April 1917, a trench 2 feet wide was excavated on the west side extending 9 feet outwards from the base of the mound (No. 1 on plan (B) of excavations, fig. 2). The material of which the mound was formed was found to be very fine yellow sand. At 3 feet 6 inches down the colour of the sand changed very sharply to white, the contrast between



Fig. 1. Mound at Kidsneuk, Bogside.

the two layers being very marked and constant. This white layer was horizontally laminated. At a depth of 5 feet water was reached. A quantity of pottery and pebbles was unearthened from this trench, lying exactly on the top of the white sand; nothing was found either above or below this level.

It is interesting to note that no trace of a revetment was found sustaining the forced mound. Unless such a revetment was of a perishable nature, the slope of the sides could not have been much greater than that of the west side at present, which is 30° ; the maximum slope at which the material will stand being 38° .

On the 2nd of May another trench, No. 2, was excavated traversing the ditch at the north-north-east. Where the trench crossed the ditch the conditions were precisely similar to those on the west, but on continuing the trench for a short distance into the side of the mound, 1 foot 6 inches of

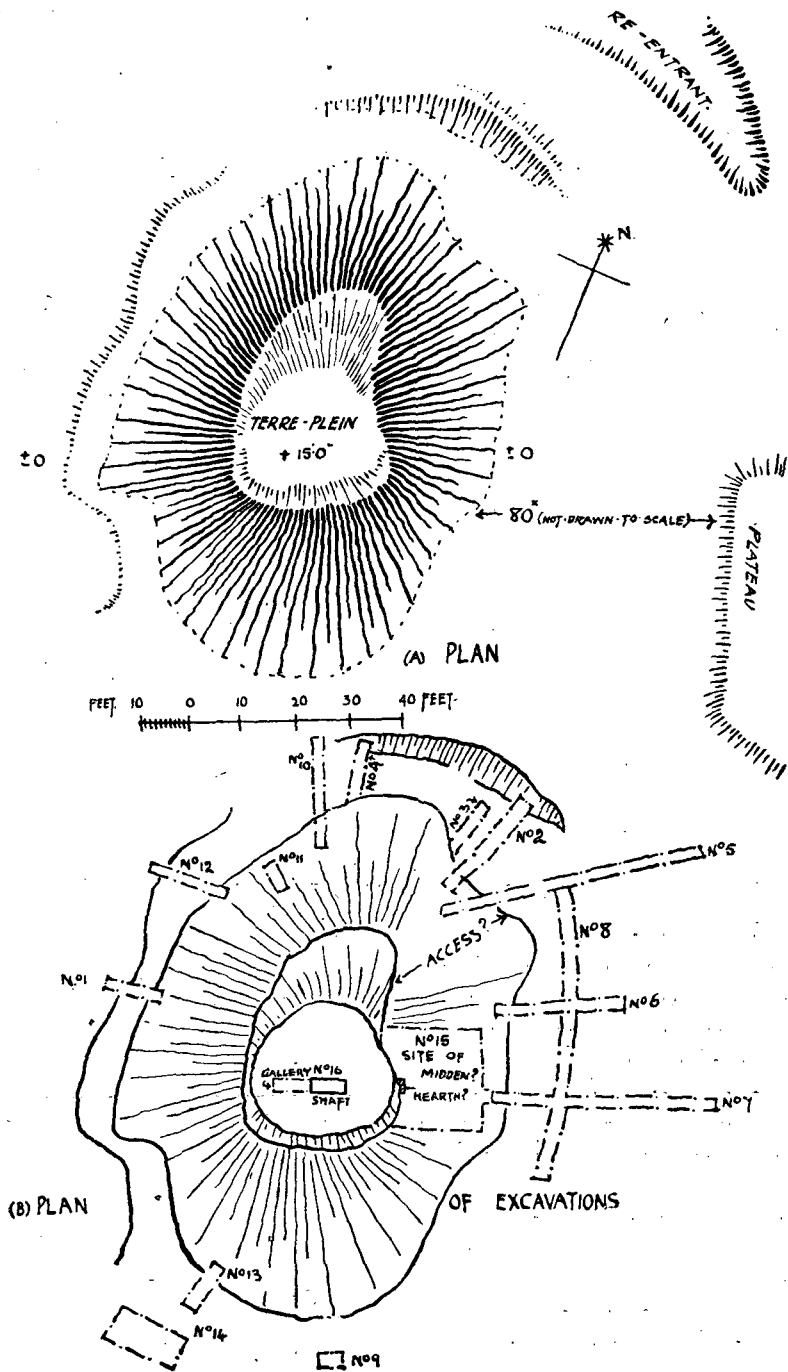


Fig. 2. Ground-plan of Mound at Kidsneuk and Plan of Excavations.

loam was first dug through, and then the white sand was exposed, at which level pottery was again found.

A third radial trench was run 5 feet to the northward, and a fourth at the extreme north where there appeared to be a vestige of a ditch. These trenches yielded one piece of flint and very few sherds. It was found that immediately below the water level there was a layer of black peaty substance of indeterminate depth.

Further east three other radial trenches, Nos. 5, 6, and 7, were run about 20 feet apart; in these fragments of pottery, pebbles, cinders, and indeterminate iron objects were found scattered on the top of the white sand layer, and were noticed to be more numerous some 7 feet out from the base of the mound. At that point a trench was run parallel to the base of the mound, No. 8, linking up the three radial trenches. In this a red pot handle, a piece of white crock, cinders, and bone were found 1 foot above the usual level. On clearing the yellow sand away innumerable fragments of pottery, with a few metal objects, cinders, metallic slag, parrot coal, and pebbles, were exposed lying on top of the white sand. Pebbles and stones were nowhere found in any quantity, nor were any of these larger than could be held in a closed hand. They were all abraded, possibly by the friction of the wind-blown sand. This might also account for the pottery being found in so fragmentary a state, and so widely dispersed; pieces, obviously of the same vessel, were discovered 30 feet apart.

On 25th May a pit, No. 9, 3 feet by 3 feet, was opened at the extreme south of the mound 9 feet out from the base. The white sand layer was only a spade depth below the ground surface; as before, fragments of pottery were found on top of the white sand.

Trenches Nos. 4 and 10 yielded a few small sherds beneath what was thought to be the rampart. From these trenches it was found that the white sand layer ran straight through the rampart. Other trenches, Nos. 11, 12, 13, and 14, were excavated early in June, and yielded results similar to those in trenches previously worked.

Before breaking ground it was assumed that the mound had been encircled by a ditch and rampart, but the excavations would seem to disprove this, as no trace of such features was revealed.

Towards the end of June it was decided to open up the terreplein; accordingly a shaft 5 feet 6 inches by 2 feet was sunk. Beneath 1 foot 6 inches of loam on the surface loose yellow sand was reached; and at 8 feet 6 inches from the surface a level black layer 1 foot to 2 feet in depth was found to run across the mound. It consisted of black loam, laden with cinder and ash with, in its centre, a 2-inch layer of pink sand quite distinct from any other shade noticed during the excavations.

In the black layer were found a very few fragments of pottery about 1 inch square, a few pieces of metal much oxidised, and some small bones. One of these sherds was found to be a portion of another piece unearthed from the midden, which is situated on the eastern scarp.

The shaft was continued downwards through forced sand until water was reached at a depth of 18 feet from the crown.

No relics were found above the black layer or below it; the layer was evidently the original surface at the time of occupation. A gallery 2 feet by 5 feet 6 inches was then driven from the shaft westwards (see section, fig. 3) so that a larger portion of the layer could be excavated. It yielded results similar to those found in the shaft.

At this juncture it was decided to sap through the escarp on the east to find where this had originally joined the old surface of the mound.

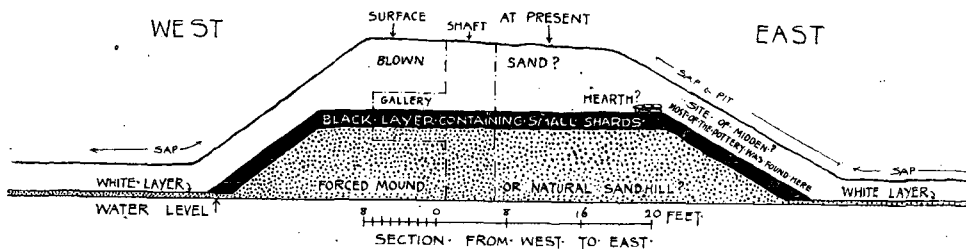


Fig. 3. Section of Mound at Kidsneuk.

Accordingly trench No. 7 was continued westwards; just beyond the present base a black layer was found, and in it were large sherds obviously portions of one vessel. The layer, 1 foot to 2½ feet in depth, rose upwards and joined the old surface layer, as was anticipated, 8 feet 6 inches below the surface of the ground. The inter-layer of pink sand previously mentioned was found intermittently through the black layer of the scarp. This black layer had a gaseous odour and produced a slightly erosive action upon metal tools. The fragments of pottery found in this sap were large and so numerous that it was concluded the midden lay in the neighbourhood. The sap was therefore developed into the pit marked No. 15 on the plan. Here were found portions of vessels which could to some extent be reconstructed. After being cast aside, the pottery had apparently been fractured afresh by pressure of the superincumbent sand and growth of tree roots. Metal objects were also discovered, including a clip or binding of brass enriched with a repoussé moulding. At the junction of the escarp with the surface of the mound a construction of built stone, 6 feet by 3 feet, was found (fig. 4). The stones were freestone unwrought, all evidently chosen on account of their

flatness. In size they averaged rather under a cubic foot; they were dry-laid and set to face outwards. A channel or flue, also faced, radiated inwards. In the immediate neighbourhood there was abundance of cinder, charcoal, and a little bone. The construction appeared to the excavators to resemble the primitive fireplaces which have not long



Fig. 4. Construction, possibly a Fireplace, in Mound at Kidsneuk.

passed out of use in remote parts of Scotland. Its proximity to the midden is suggestive.

The conclusions arrived at from the excavations are:—

- (a) That the mound is largely if not entirely artificial.
- (b) That it had an elevation of only 10 feet above the glacial, and now lies entirely below its covering of blown sand.
- (c) That any construction on the terreplein must have been of an extremely light nature.

(d) That the occupation was spread over a considerable period, dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.

I have to express my indebtedness to the Earl of Eglinton for permission to excavate and for the helpful interest he took in the work.