

# GLENACHAN RIG HOMESTEAD, CARDON, PEEBLESSHIRE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

THE River Tweed forms an inviting natural route inland from the North Sea which was followed by various prehistoric settlers whose former presence is witnessed in the lower and middle parts of the valley and in those of the tributary streams by numerous monuments dating from different times in the first two millennia B.C. The spread of monuments ceases as the valleys run up into the hills, and towards the source of the Tweed itself where the river runs at a comparatively high altitude through inhospitable open moorland signs of settlement thin out abruptly above Tweedsmuir. Several miles below this, however, the Tweed runs past the east end of a broad and flat valley 7 miles in length known as the Biggar Gap and drained by the now canalised Biggar Burn. The River Clyde runs past the west end of it, the gap thus forming both a through route across the central Lowlands and an extension of the habitable land beyond the strict confines of Tweeddale. The gap has several tributary valleys, one of the larger of which is drained by the Holms Water which joins the Biggar Burn between Broughton and its confluence with the Tweed. The Holms Water runs north-east out of the hills here separating upper Tweeddale and Clydesdale, the sides of its valley rising quite gently to allow good cultivable land on the floor and lower slopes with good grazing moorland above. The present house of Cardon stands a few yards east of a medieval foundation, while earlier monuments in the immediate vicinity include three large earthworks of uncertain date, an Early Iron Age hill-fort on Chester Rig and another, unfinished, on Rough Side, a small settlement 700 yds. west of Cardon house and the homestead on Glenachan Rig (NT 106328). The small settlement and the homestead were located, apparently for the first time, when air-photographs were being examined during the preliminary work on the forthcoming Inventory of Peeblesshire by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Scotland).<sup>1</sup> The former, which includes traces of six timber-framed houses, seemed to have been somewhat mutilated by the encroachment of cultivation, but there were no traces of interference at the latter.

Several homesteads and small settlements built entirely of wood and comprising timber-framed houses standing within wooden palisades have been located in recent years, especially in the Lowland hills, quite apart from the many structures that consist of timber-framed houses within earthwork defences or walls. The chance of survival of surface traces of structures in the former category is slight, one ploughing being sufficient to obliterate them; and it is only by virtue of the coincidence of their having been built at places that have never subsequently been re-used for dwellings or ploughed over that they remain. It is of course impossible to guess how many

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Commissioners for permission to use unpublished material in this paper.

such structures once existed, but most probably there were very many more than the present known distribution suggests. As little or nothing was known of the place they occupy in history or prehistory the Commissioners decided that a suitable example should be examined. Permission to have access to and to work at Glenachan Rig was readily granted by the Honourable Francis Scott of Cardon, and financial support and tools were generously provided by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. The work was carried out in July 1959 with the assistance of several voluntary helpers working for various periods up to three weeks, and all the drawings were made by Mrs R. W. Feachem. Technical information on wood remains and a piece of flint that is incorporated below is gratefully acknowledged from Mr Peter Green, The Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, and Mr Robin Livens, The University, Bangor. The finds have been deposited in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

## II. THE SITE BEFORE EXCAVATION (fig. 1)

The homestead on Glenachan Rig, like the small settlement on the other side of the valley, is situated at an elevation of about 200 ft. above the Holms Water on an inconspicuous feature protruding from the side of the valley and flanked by two small streams – in this case, the Glenachan Burn and the School Burn. From the

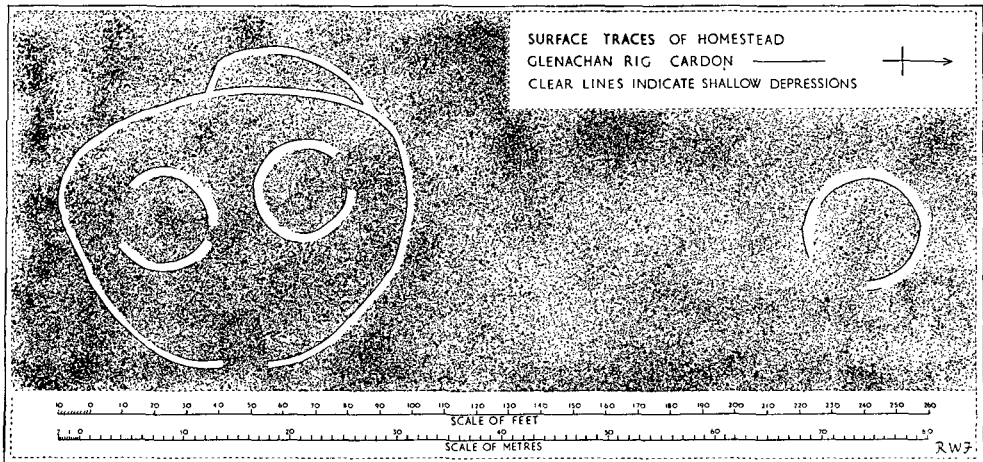


FIG. 1

highest part of the rig (984 ft. o.d.) the land slopes down gently for several yards in all directions; thereafter it falls a little more steeply to south-west and north-east to the burns, very gently north-west for 50 yds. before descending more sharply towards the river, and gently through some 15 ft. to the south-west before reaching the broad, marshy col separating the rig from the rising hillside beyond. The homestead lies on the north-west face of the rig, its south-east arc passing only a few feet from the summit. The slight surface traces of the remains consist of narrow,



Glenachan Rig Homestead, Cardon

intermittent stretches of grass-covered, shallow depressions visible among the heather but not easily distinguishable from the sheep-tracks that cross the hill in all directions. In a few places the depressions flatten out to leave mere grassy pathways, while very occasionally the grass follows instead a very slight mound – a phenomenon explained below. The homestead is bounded by an oval track roughly 2 ft. in width and usually an inch or two in depth which forms an enclosure measuring 108 ft. by 84 ft. internally with a gap at the margin of a hollow that lies immediately within the east arc. The identity and purpose of the addition adjoining the west-north-west arc could not be understood at this stage. Two circular areas can be distinguished within the enclosure, each measuring about 28 ft. in diameter within a broad and shallow gully measuring approximately 3 ft. in width and up to 6 in. in depth. The circle to the north-west has a gap in the north-west arc, the other two gaps. A similar circle outside the enclosure 40 yds. to the north-east appears similar to the two inside; it has one gap.

### III. EXCAVATION

#### 1. *The palisade*

The oval enclosure, examined at several places including the entrance (fig. 2), was found to consist of a trench 300 ft. long that had been hacked out of the substance of the rig to a depth of some 2 ft. below the present ground level. The shale bedrock comes very near the surface in places, but for the most part it is topped by a thin layer of broken and fragmented chips of rock or by small pockets of soil with which the peat and heather roots merge. In consequence, the profile of the trench is irregular. It measures generally 9 in. in width at the bottom and is filled with packing-stones varying greatly in size which had either been quarried locally or, more probably, collected from small patches of scree on the neighbouring heights. The collapse of the posts has caused a general shifting and settling of the stones and earth filling, and no clearly-defined post holes can be detected. Fragments of birch and of sizable timbers of alder were recovered from the trench.

The entrance (figs. 2 and 3, *c*) is formed by a gap of 9 ft. wide on either side of which the palisade turns out for a short distance before continuing on its regular course. In the short funnel thus formed and in the opening between the ends of the trench the surface of the rock is bare and worn, while a shallow hollow up to 2 ft. in depth and 15 ft. in diameter lies immediately inside. No signs of special posts being found at or near the ends of the trench, it was presumed that the gate may have been formed by resting movable logs between the last two posts on either side (fig. 7). Over most of its course the filling of the trench has subsided to leave the slight surface depression already described. In some places, however, where the packing-stones now rest firmly against each other on a solid bottom, the feet of animals following the grass growing along the line of the trench have formed a slight depression on the surface on one or both sides of the blockage beneath so that the course of the trench is marked by a slight mound.

The small addition like an annexe which adjoins the west-north-west arc of the enclosure (fig. 2) was examined at the junctions and at points along the intervening

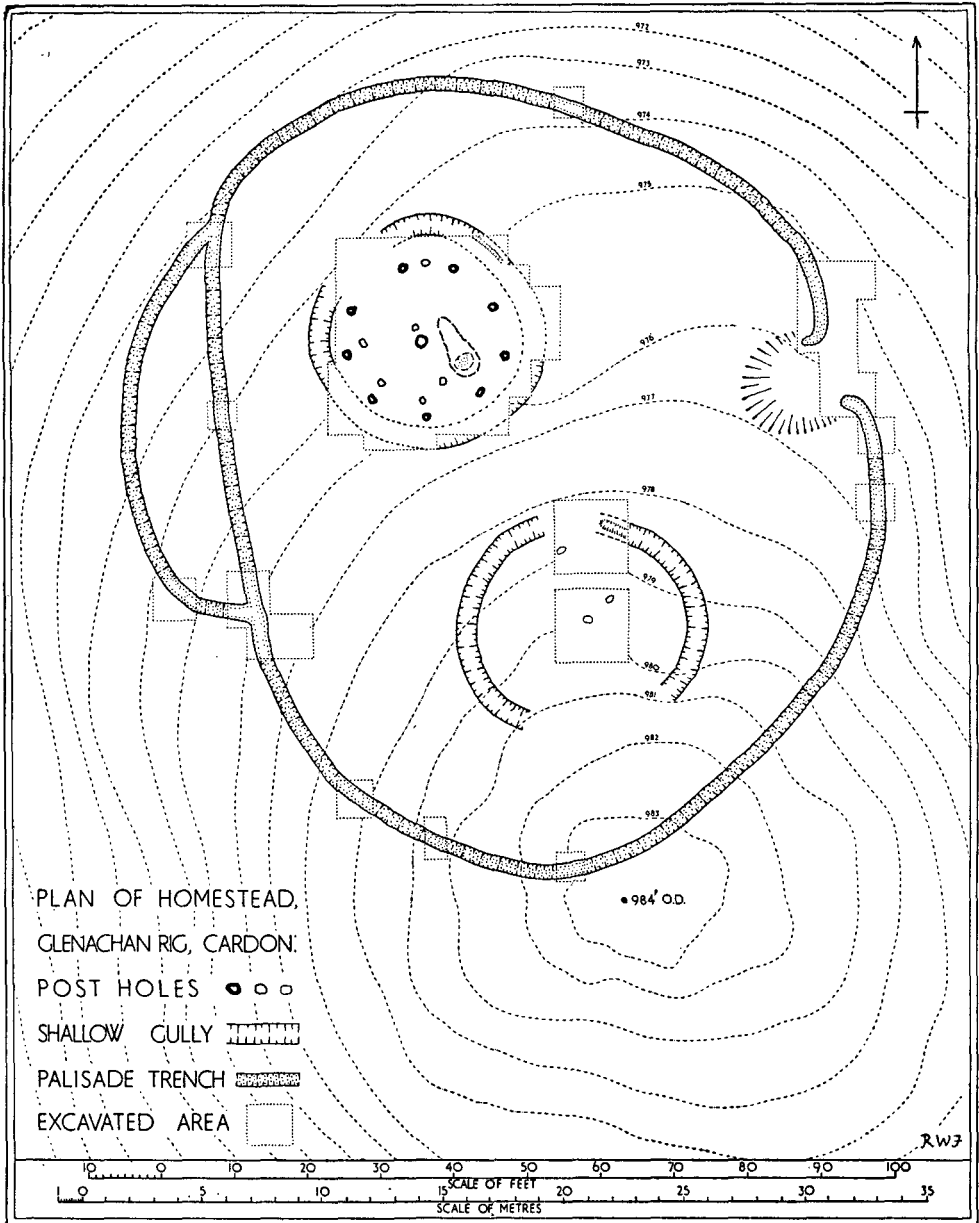


FIG. 2

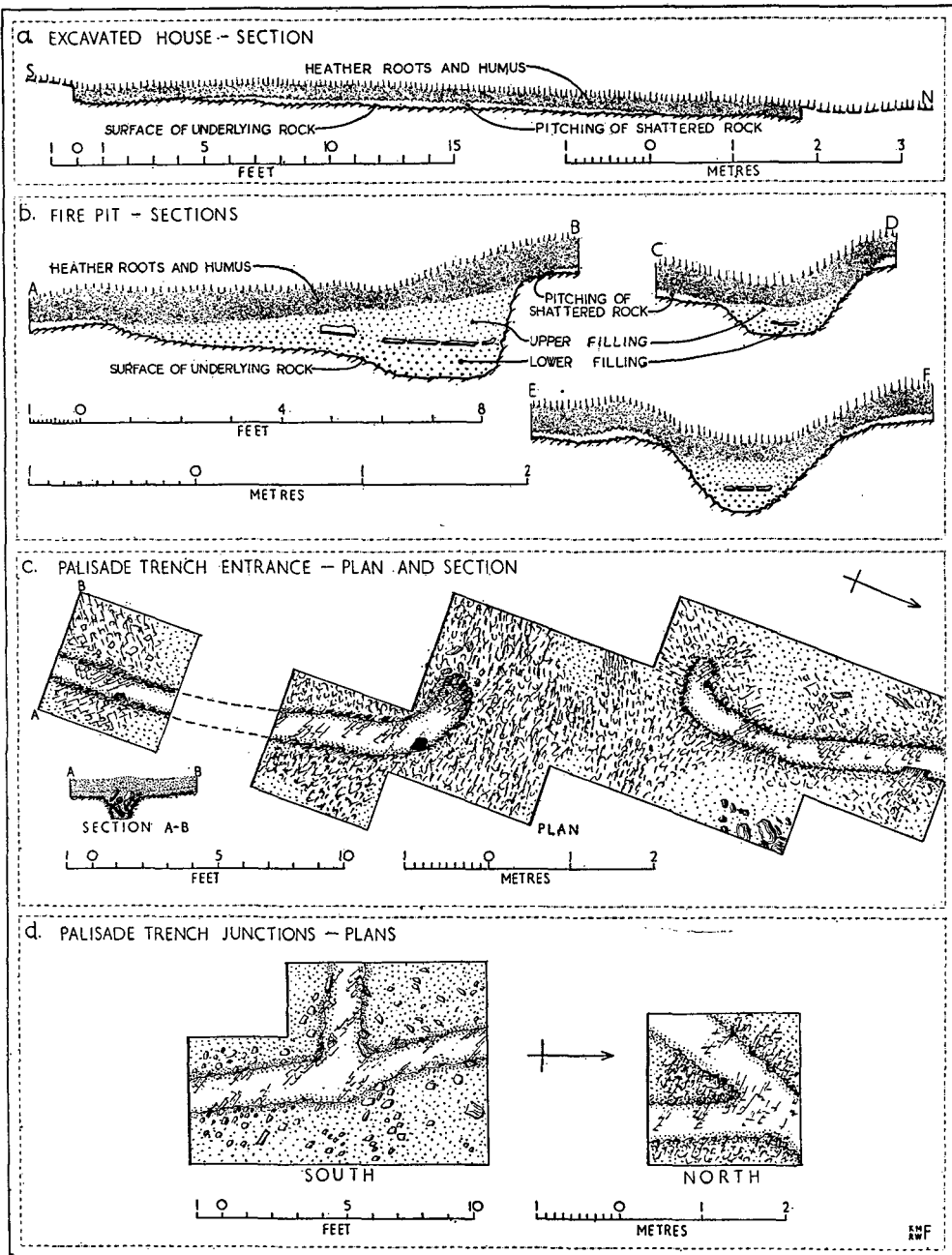


FIG. 3

stretches of the trenches. In the north junction (fig. 3, *d*) the packing-stones were found to carry right through from the north arc of the main trench into the west branch, while the south branch is filled with smaller stones and broken rock fragments. Likewise, at the south junction (fig. 3, *d*) the west and south arms are full of large stones while those in the north arm are noticeably less. Both lines are complete on the surface, there being no sign of a way into the addition either from the settlement or from outside. These indications suggest that the original course of the trench was the more regular, more easterly, one and that, owing perhaps to the decay or destruction of a sector of the palisade, a new sector was added on a slightly different course. The extra ground enclosed was slight, and it might at first seem curious that the occupiers should have bothered to undertake the considerable labour of digging a new trench 60 ft. long rather than merely cleaning out the old stretch. This may be accounted for by the possibility that the adjacent house, described below, was burnt down at least once in its history; if this were so, it might in falling have set fire to the fence with a result that, when both were re-erected, it would have been considered advisable that the fence should lie farther away from such danger in future. It is possible that the whole palisade was replaced when the extra length was put on, and that this operation coincided with a rebuilding of the house.

## 2. *The internal structures*

The penannular shallow depression defining the structure occupying part of the north half of the enclosure (fig. 2) was found on excavation to be an ill-defined and slight gully which was the more easily seen before the turf and heather were removed than afterwards. It surrounds a circular area about 25 ft. in diameter and may have represented nothing more than a scraping off of surface soil and shattered rock to provide a pitching (rather than a floor proper) over the space enclosed. It would also have a certain function as a drain for the space inside. The pitching, apparent once the peat and heather roots were removed from the interior, was found to coincide with a circle of post holes (fig. 4 and Pl. I). These vary individually in appearance, having been cut in the irregular underlying surface, some in rock and others in rocky soil. They measure about 9 in. in diameter and about 16 in. in depth below the present ground level, and were full of packing-stones when first exposed. Ten of them lie on the circumference of a circle 21 ft. in diameter centred on the hole numbered xv in fig. 4 and Pl. I; three others lie on an arc close to and within the south-west arc of this circle, and two others (xiv and xvi) are in the interior. The space between holes i and x, which is a little greater than that between most of the others, coincides with the gap visible in the external gully before excavation and may mark the entrance. Fragments of hazel and birch were found in hole i.

The fire pit, in the south-east sector of the house, is an excavation of irregular shape measuring 8 ft. in length by a maximum of 3 ft. in breadth (figs. 2 and 3, *b*). The south-east end forms a basin some 3 ft. in diameter to the north-west of which the pit is much shallower. Evidence that the pit was used during at least two separate periods (but without any indication of the length of the gap, if any, between them) was found in the presence of a layer of flat stones 7 in. above the bottom of the pit

embedded in the black ashes which lay above it for a further 9 in. (fig. 3, *b*). The ash in the lower layer contained considerable quantities of carbonised hazel and birch, and possibly willow, and that in the upper layer hazel and willow. No traces

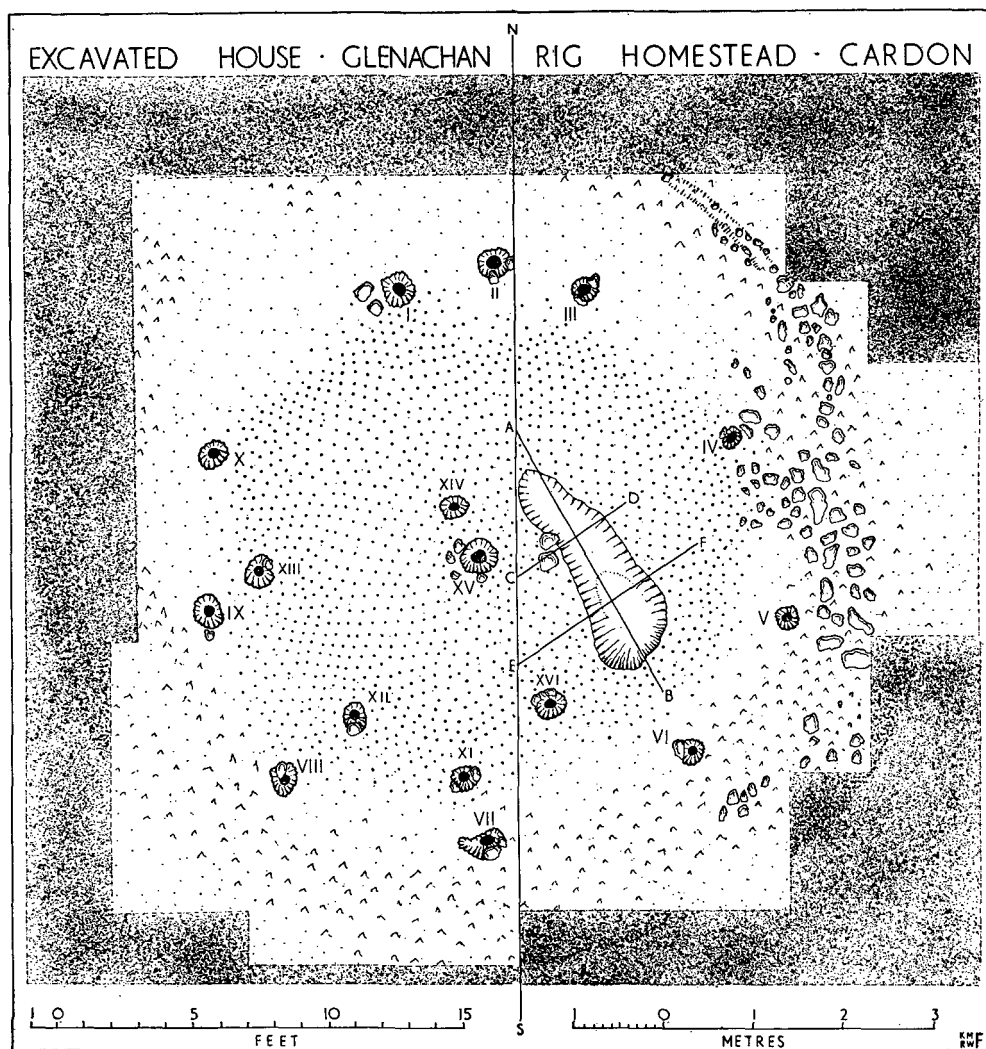


FIG. 4

of any other identifiable material were found. The only objects discovered on the floor of the house (fig. 3, *a*) were a flint flake and a used pebble, described below.

Time permitted the examination of only a small part of the other circular area which lies in the south half of the enclosure. Beneath the heather roots the gully exhibits the same rugged and uncertain appearance as does the other, while the



small part of the floor of the interior which was exposed is covered with a pitching of shattered rock similar to the one already described. Three post holes were revealed, and a used quartzite pebble (*infra*).

#### IV. THE FINDS

Fig. 5, *a*. The flint flake found in the fully-excavated house is of greyish-white translucent flint and was struck off a prepared core. No definite traces of retouching can be recognised on it, and it is probably a waste-product of unknown date.

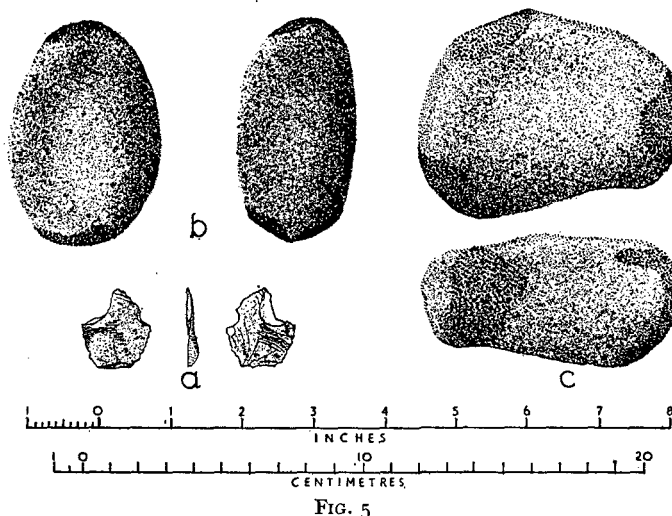


Fig. 5, *b, c*. The two used pebbles, one from a conglomerate rock and the other a quartzite pebble, have worn facets which exhibit certain recognisable characteristics. All the three apices of the quartzite (*c*) have been used; each used patch consists of an opposing pair of delicately-roughened surfaces, slightly but regularly curved and with an appearance of having been caused by grinding rather than by hammering. The conglomerate pebble (*b*), too, has pairs of such curved and delicately marked surfaces at either end.

In addition, one pebble that had been broken by heat was found.

#### V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The frame of the excavated house at Glenachan Rig consists of a ring of posts 21 ft. in diameter and a central post. The only other such house recorded between the Forth-Clyde isthmus and the Cheviots is the earlier of the two houses at West Plean,<sup>1</sup> a similar structure measuring 23 ft. in diameter. Both these houses have a fireplace at a point between the central post and the wall.

The shallow gully found to be so insignificant a feature of the Glenachan Rig house also appears at Braidwood,<sup>2</sup> as does the pitching of shattered rock forming the basis of a floor; but at Braidwood certain fundamentally different features occur,

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXIX (1955-6), 227 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, LXXXIII (1948-9), 1 ff.

including the lack of a central post and the presence in one house of a porch and in another of an inner ring of posts. It therefore appears that the surface indication of a broad, shallow gully defining such a house is of no use in determining the nature of the timber-framed structure beneath the turf.

At Hayhope Knowe<sup>1</sup> wooden houses were found beneath surface indications consisting of one, or two, shallow but narrow gullies; here, however, the hearths, not posts, occupied the centres of the houses. The second-phase house at West Plean likewise had a central hearth and two rings of roof-supports. At Scotstarvit<sup>2</sup> timber-framed houses were found with concentric rings of supports and no central post.

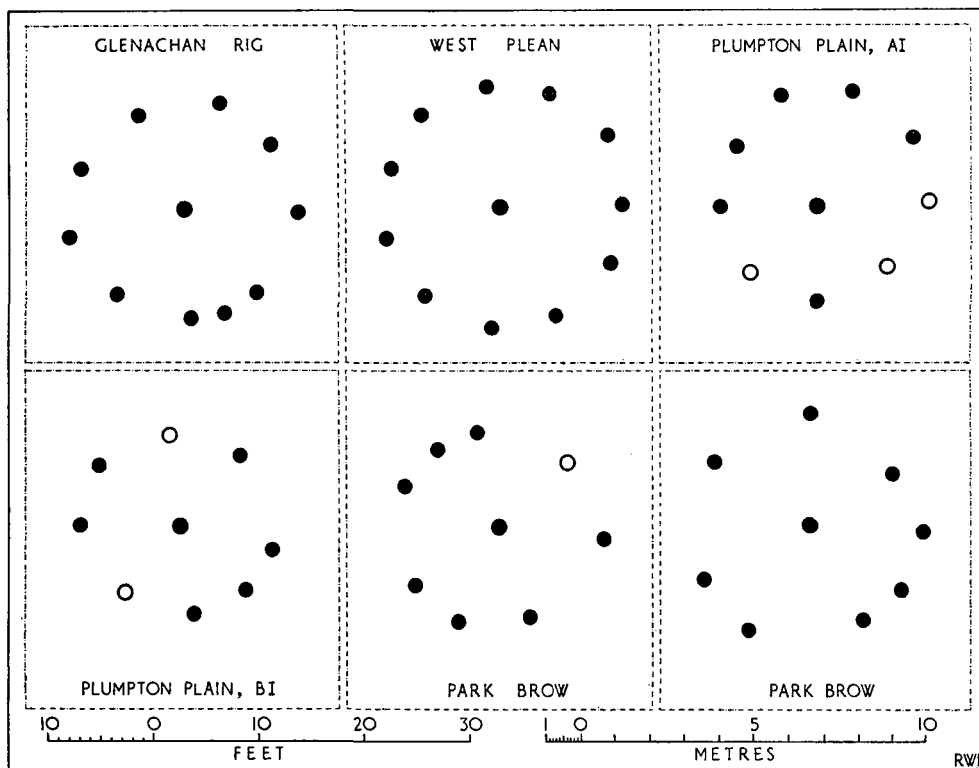


FIG. 6

All these houses except West Plean have been dated in the Early Iron Age by their excavators, as have other all-timber houses with no central post holes elsewhere. The possibility that all such central-post houses may be earlier than the other types may seem to be borne out by the opinion expressed in the conclusions reached at West Plean where the earlier (central-post) house underlying one of the other type is described as being of the type found in Late Bronze Age Settlements in Sussex, examples of which are shown for comparison in fig. 6. The settlement on Itford Hill, Sussex, is the best example of these.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, 45 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, LXXXII (1947-8), 241 ff., 264 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *P.P.S.*, xxiii (1957), 167-212.

The finds throw no positive light on the question, but provide a certain amount of negative evidence to be noted with unusual caution. Even at Braidwood, Hayhope Knowe and West Plean, where finds were not plentiful, something was found in each case to indicate that the houses were probably built in the Early Iron Age – though attempts at more precise dating were inevitably less conclusive. Pottery from the two former, as well as a piece of a glass armlet and an iron spearhead, and a quern and various holed stones from the latter, all added up to an admittedly small but

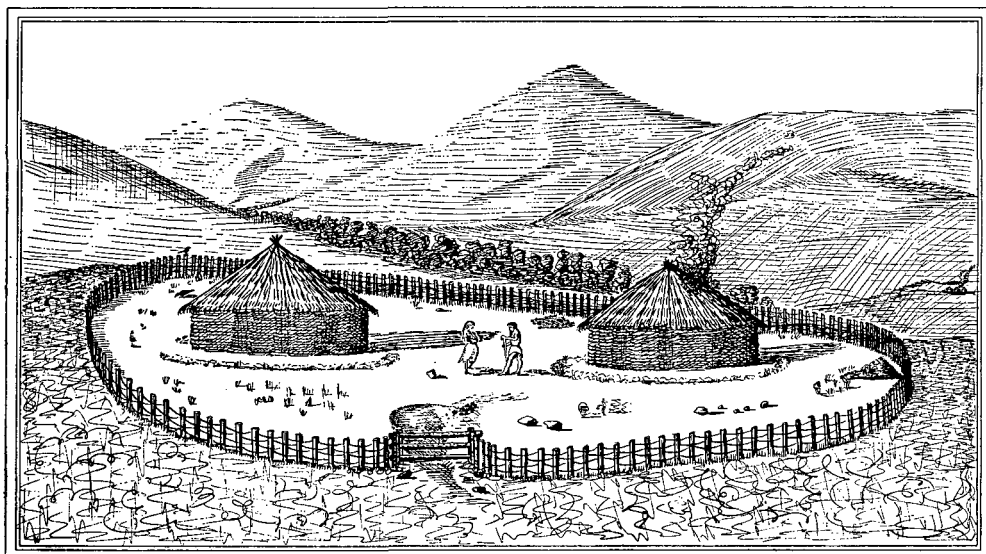


FIG. 7

undeniable total of Early Iron Age objects. At Glenachan Rig, however, the three stone objects are accompanied by nothing that might have been found in an Early Iron Age setting, either pre-Roman or later. The scarcity of cooking-stones<sup>1</sup> and the absence of any woods other than alder, birch, hazel and willow may also be worth remarking.

It is therefore suggested that the Glenachan Rig homestead may be of Late Bronze Age type (mid first millennium B.C.?).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Archaeologia*, LXXVI (1926-7), 1 ff.