

EXCAVATIONS IN BULSTRODE CAMP.

CYRIL FOX, Ph.D., F.S.A., and L. C. G. CLARKE,
M.A., F.S.A.

This camp, the largest in the county, is situated on a plateau about 275 feet above O.D., between the Misbourne and the Alderbourne valleys, tributaries of the Colne; in the parish of Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire. It is roughly oval in shape, as the Plan shows, and is over 21 acres in area; the western side follows the steep escarpment formed by two lateral valleys, mainly dry, which, meeting at an acute angle, open out into the main valley, which trends in a south-westerly direction. The sub-soil is gravel and sand; but since ponds occur on the plateau near the camp, and springs on the western slopes, and since there is frequently standing water in the ditches, impervious beds of clay must exist at no great depth.

As the Plan (Fig. 1) shows, the defences consist of a double rampart for the greater part of the circumference; the outer bank and ditch fades away on the western side where the escarpment is steepest. (Plates I. and III.). The inner bank where it is best preserved (on the Eastern side) reaches a height of 6-7 feet above the interior surface, and is over 12 feet above the bottom of the inner ditch; the outer bank is 6-7 feet above the bottom of the outer ditch. The overall breadth of the work is about 30 yards. It bears a close resemblance in form, position and general character to Wallbury Camp, Essex. (See Hist. Mon. Commission, Essex II., p. 93.)

There are five openings (see Plan), none of which is *obviously* original:¹ none shows overlapping ramparts, flanking defences or advance posts.

There is no record of previous investigations, and none are apparent on the site. The present excava-

¹ The outer bank at Gap No. V. at the N.E. end of the fortress bends outward in a suggestive manner. The ground in the neighbourhood has, however, been much disturbed, and this may not be an original feature.



PLATE I.

tion, which lasted three weeks from June 14 to July 4, 1924, and in which four men were continuously employed, was carried out at the invitation and at the sole charge of Sir John Ramsden, Bart., the owner of Bulstrode, to whom we are much indebted. The operations may be considered under three headings: (1) The enclosed area; (2) the banks and ditches; (3) the entrances.

(1) *The enclosed area.* Two trial trenches 30 yards long, and 23 trial holes were dug; the sites are marked on the Plan. In the trenches, and in 20 of the 23 holes, nothing was found, and undisturbed gravel was reached at a depth of from 1 to 2 feet. The remaining 3 holes, respectively situated on either side of and 19 yards to the north of the gap in the rampart marked I. on our Plan, showed one a definite hearth of pebbles (see Plate I.), and the others black soil and charcoal on the ancient surface, 2½ to 4 feet below the present surface. It was evident that at some late stage in the history of the work the level of the ground had been raised at this, the only point within the enclosure where it is below the general level of the plateau.² These holes were much enlarged and a considerable area of the ancient floor exposed, as a result of these finds; but no pottery or any artifact was discovered.

(2) *The Banks and Ditches.*

(a) *The Bank.* One section was cut through the inner rampart down to the ground level close to Gap No. V., in order to determine its construction and to see whether any dateable artifacts were to be found in the ancient surface soil thereunder. This soil was barren. The bank (see Fig. 2a) was constructed solely of the gravel and sand removed from the ditch, the first deposit being placed nearest to the ditch and successive deposits on the reverse slope, in the manner usual in ancient earthwork. Its maximum height was 6 feet 4 inches. There was nothing to indicate that the rampart had been added to since its original

² This is because a small re-entrant has by the builders been included within the enceinte.

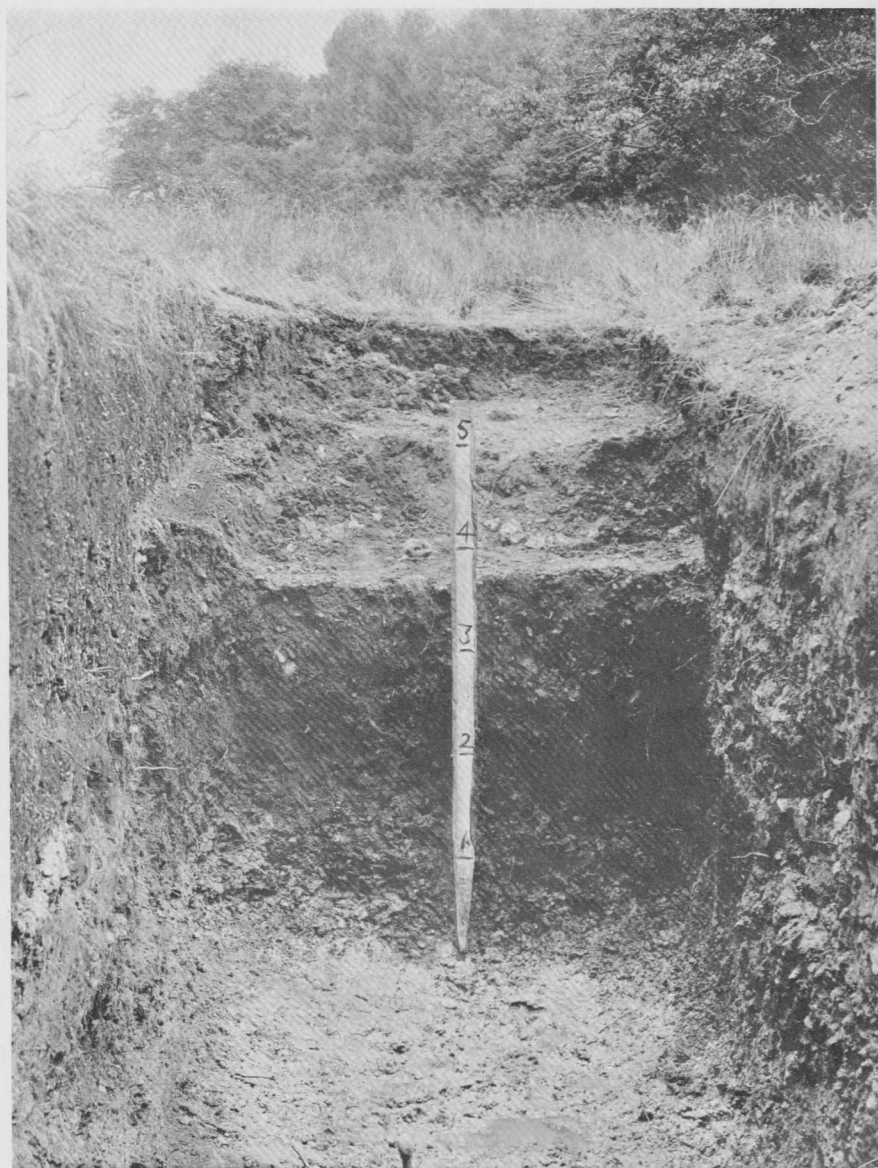


PLATE II.

construction. The bank had "spread" considerably, the slope being very gradual to the original ground level of the inner area. Nothing was found in the course of the excavation.

(b) *The Ditches.* Two excavations in the main ditch were commenced on the first day, one [C] on the east side of Gap No. V. (see Plan), the other [H] on the south side of Gap No. I. (both held to be possible original entrances). Owing to the wetness of the season it was found to be impossible to reach the original floor in either case,³ the work being stopped by mud and water. In the silting of the ditch at H, however, at depths of 2 feet 6 inches and 3 feet 6 inches respectively, two small pieces of abraded soft paste black and red pottery, apparently pre-Roman, were found (site marked on Plate III.); and it was unfortunate that the excavation had to be discontinued.

Trial pits were then sunk in the main ditch at several points in the hope that a porous subsoil might be struck and the ditch bottomed without difficulty. Water was met with at a depth of from 1 to 3 feet at all four points, D.E.F.G. on the East and South sides of the fortress,⁴ it was impossible to examine the mud properly and difficult to excavate it, and the work was here discontinued. Minute pieces of charcoal, burnt (not crazed) flints and soil stained with carbon were the only finds suggestive of human occupation. At the point B on the north-west side of the enclosure where the escarpment is steep the original floor was reached with difficulty at 7 feet 6 inches (Plan Fig. 2c). Rampart and inner ditch were here represented merely by parallel undulations on the slope of the hill; and the section revealed evidence that after a long period of silting by natural processes a layer of gravel had been shot into the ditch. A tradition survives on the estate that one of the Dukes of Portland, Sir John Ramsden's predecessors in title, levelled the

³ Three weeks of dry weather enabled us to deepen the section at C. On the last day the bottom was probed at 6 feet 6 inches; this represents then the depth of the silting of the ditch at this point.

⁴ At E the outer ditch also was trenched; with similar results.

rampart on this side of the enclosure, and the section provides some confirmation of the accuracy of the tradition.

No dateable finds occurred in this section; layers of charcoal, indicative of fires having been lighted in the ditch, and a few bones of oxen, one burnt, were met with in the later silting.

Better success attended the last excavation, that at A on the west side of the camp. Here the natural slope is steep, and the rampart, which is apparently single, has been much denuded or levelled. After a week's work on the upper layers to a depth of 5 feet the conditions improved, and it was found possible completely to excavate the ditch, the floor of which was found to be from 5 feet 6 inches to 6 feet 6 inches below ground. During the next fortnight the trench was carried along the centre of the fosse for a further distance of 12 yards. (See photographs, Plates I. and II.). The lowest 18 inches of filling here (see Plan, Fig. 2b), as at Section B just discussed, was grey to black in colour, composed of gravel and muddy sand. The upper margin of this grey layer was horizontal, not concave, and it seemed to us certain that at the time when the earthwork was in use stagnant water filled the ditch to this depth during a great part of the year. Occasional small pieces of charcoal and burnt flints (no pot-boilers or "crazed flints") were found, but only one piece of pottery. This was thin, hand-made soft paste black ware, with pounded flint in it; it belonged to a large vessel. The date is certainly pre-Roman, and probably Early Iron Age. It lay in the grey silt one foot above the floor.

(3) *The Entrances.* One of the most difficult problems which the camp presents is to determine which of the existing gaps in the defences are original entrances. Gaps numbered VII., III. and IV. on our Plan are probably modern. The ditches are here not completely filled up, and the openings are narrow; while the recorded existence of buildings near to III. and IV. in the XVII. century⁵ afford further grounds for

⁵ They are marked on the Estate Map referred to in the text. The foundations remain in part.



PLATE III.

considering these two to be recent. An estate map dated 1686 at Bulstrode Park shows an avenue crossing the camp from Gap No. VI. to Gap No. II. No. II. fronts a steep slope, and in the wood (see Fig. I.) there is no sign of trackways leading to the gap; the ramparts were probably levelled when the avenue, which led to the mansion, was designed. No. VI. *may* be original; it now shows no definite features, but such may of course have been obliterated when the gap was widened for the tree planting. Gaps Nos. V. and I. are near to ponds and springs; though the former are probably modern, the latter are without doubt ancient—constant elements in the topography of the area. It seemed to us likely, therefore, that the gaps in question might be original, giving access to convenient water supplies. A trackway having some signs of antiquity, moreover, leads from the main valley to the plateau, past gap No. I. (see Plates I. and III.); and the outer bank by gap No. V. is deflected outward in a rather suggestive manner. There was too much water in the ditch by this latter gap to encourage us to apply the test of the spade here; but it may be noted that the narrowness of the opening through the inner rampart—some four feet only—shows that it could never have been a cattle-way.

In order to determine whether Gap No. I. was original or no a trench 29 feet long was cut across the opening on the line of the ditch, traces of which are manifest on either side. (See photographs, Plates I. and III.). The sloping counterscarp of the ditch and its filling, gravel overlying mud, were found all along the line; it was thus definitely proved that there had originally been no break in the defences at this point.⁶ Here the enceinte is at its lowest, and water no doubt in normal seasons filled the ditch, which accounts for the character of the silting (the upper layers only of which could be tested by us). A dark

⁶ It is, we suppose, possible that entrance to the camp was provided by wooden bridges, and that no causeway of undisturbed soil exists on the line of the ditch at any point. But such a surmise is valueless until all the possible original entrances have been tested.

humus line was found 2 feet below the present surface extending for 18 feet along the centre of the cut, and exactly opposite the opening. The history of the alterations here, combining the already described results of the trial trenches made within the rampart, may be summarized as follows. At a late stage in the history of the work when the ditch was almost completely silted up with mud, an opening in the rampart was made, and the ditch levelled up and hardened with earth and gravel. That cattle used the entrance thus formed is suggested by the presence and definite limits of the deep black humus layer. At a still later date the level of the ground inside the entrance, and that of the entrance itself, were raised from 2 to 4 feet by the deposit of large quantities of gravelly earth. It was not clear to us why this should have been done; it may be that the site, a slight hollow, was considered to be a convenient dumping ground for the spoil removed in making the adjacent ponds.

Summary.

Three small fragments of soft paste pottery almost certainly pre-Roman and of the Early Iron Age, and one rude hearth of pebbles, were practically the only definite evidences of human occupation found in the course of three weeks' excavation at Bulstrode Camp. There were no pot-boilers; and most of the burnt stones and fragments of charcoal here and there visible might have been the product of forest fires. The original depth of the ditch and the character of the filling were determined in two places and the construction of the bank in one; the existing entrance on the west side was proved not to be original. The water-logged condition of the ground hampered the investigation, but enough work was done to suggest the possibility that the fortress was never a settlement, but merely a camp of refuge. That no trace of Roman pottery was found may perhaps in some measure support this suggestion. Bulstrode's double rampart, and the scale of the defences generally, eliminate, we think, the possibility that it was merely an enclosure for cattle.

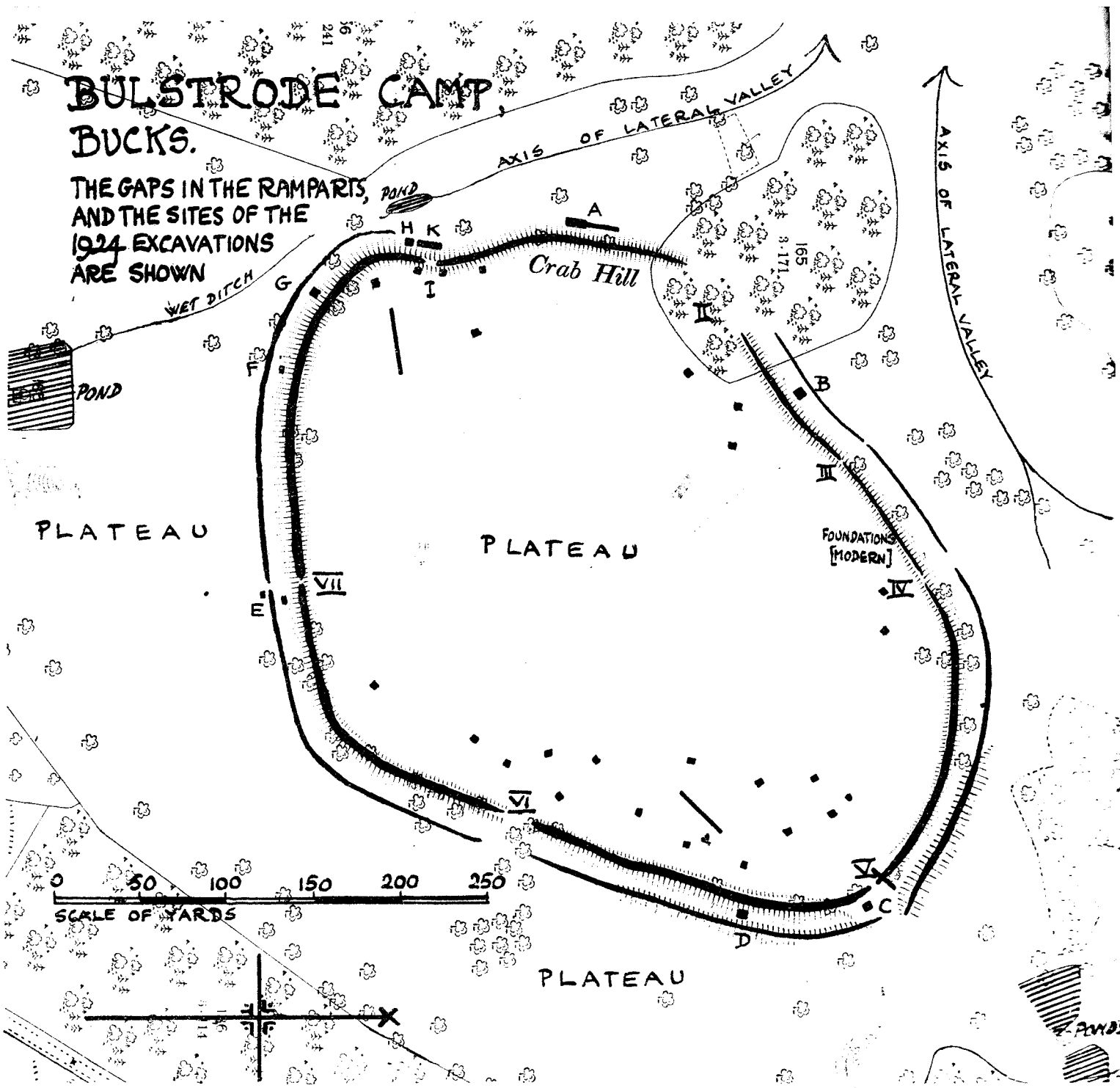


Fig. 1.

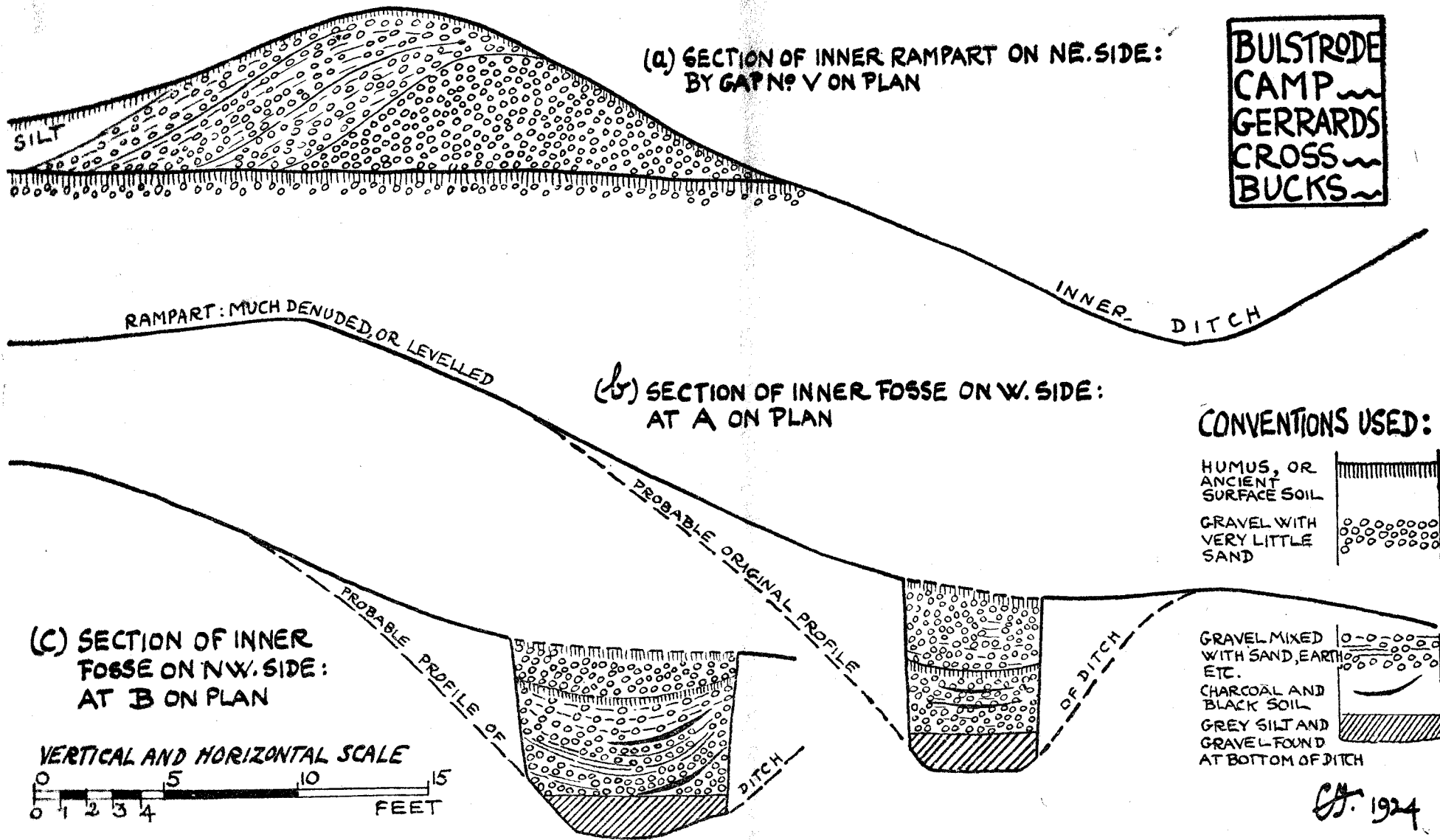


Fig. 2.