

Gorse Bigbury, Charterhouse-on-Mendip,
Somerset
The Third Report

By

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In this report will be brought together several items concerning this site and a report on the excavations carried out in April, 1965, will be given.

THE NAME

The origin of the name was briefly discussed by Tratman (1927, p. 35) and it was suggested that, of the varied spellings, the one given by Phelps (1839, p. 135) of Gorse-Bigbury was probably correct and could be related to the nature of the vegetation cover still existing as late as the 1930's. Jones (1938, p. 4) also discussed the origin of the name and agrees with Phelps in deriving the first part of the name from the Celtic "Gor" or "Cor" meaning a religious circle and "Bigbury", an enclosure of earth in a circular form. The etymology of a name like this is often a difficult problem and the facile explanation may not be the real one. Still the author adheres to his original idea that the term "Gorse" is simply an adjective describing the vegetation cover of the area.

No field-name is known for the site, but about 1,200 yd. west (ST 475558) is a field named Little Bigbury. This field contains no visible prehistoric structure and air photographs do not suggest that one exists.

THE NATURE OF THE SITE

This has been conclusively demonstrated by the excavations reported by Jones (1938) and later by ApSimon (1951) to be a henge monument with a single causeway across the ditch on the north and having the bank outside the ditch. It thus falls into Class 1 of Piggott (1939). It was also shown that the central flat area contained no structures and was remarkably free of all types of objects. The ditch had become slightly silted up when the site was taken over and used by "A" Beaker people or more correctly "A-C" people who settled in the ditch and used it as a living site for many years.

ApSimon (1951) has briefly reviewed the evidence from the site as to its function and has also added a further description of some of the pottery

recovered from the war-time wreck of the Society's museum, and he has also described further pottery found in the store room and not formerly described. In general, he arrives at the same conclusions as Jones. The monument is a henge with a beaker occupation in the ditch as well as a burial of the same age in one place. He also mentions (p. 187) the lack of evidence that the inhabitants of the site practised agriculture. However Helbach (1953, p. 226), who examined the pottery from the site, noted one beaker base in which were the impressions of naked barley, a form connoting cultivation.

THE PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS

These have been reported on in full by Jones (1938). The only important point here is the statement that in the area of the causeway the excavations were extended outwards for "several yards beyond the outer edge of the ditch". But a single rough field-sketch that survives the war indicated that the "several yards" were in reality "several feet".

Sections were cut through the bank but not apparently at the entrance, where the ends of the ring mound "were too denuded to render possible any correlation between them and the causeway" (p. 7). Here it must be recalled that Skinner (1819) had recorded that the bank had been much levelled down, and certainly the bank terminations at the entrance are obviously not in their original form and what the form was is not determinable by observation on the ground.

THE 1965 EXCAVATIONS

The decision to make a further excavation of the entrance was made because of the discovery of the structures present at the entrance to the south circle of the Priddy Circles (Taylor and Tratman, 1957). The object of these fresh excavations was to examine the entrance way between the bank ends and thus to determine if there were any structures there, whether there was a kerb to the bank and to find out the original widths of the bank and berm. Also to determine if there was any form of revetment for the bank.

The cuttings made are shown in *Plate 2*: first the N.E. and N.W. corners of the ditches on the west and east were located. On the west side of the causeway the corner of the ditch was hard to determine exactly because the natural surface of the rock sloped into the ditch and, as described in the 1938 report, there seemed to have been a piling up of some loose stones to alter the width of the causeway. Cuttings A, B and C were dug first in that order. The extent of the old cuttings is shown as far as it was possible to determine it. Proceeding outward, north, and a short way beyond the limit of the old

excavations, several limestone slabs, quite small, were found to be not lying at the dip slope and associated with them was a block of Old Red Sandstone (*Plate 5*). Further examination showed that this was an artificial pit filled with compact, loamy, brown earth, rather dirty looking and quite distinct in texture and feel under the trowel from the redder, denser, clayish earth of the natural filling in the joints of the Carboniferous Limestone. The hole was 17 in. deep from the rock surface and at its base about 8 in. diameter. In the filling were two more small blocks of O.R.S.* No trace of rotted wood or charcoal was found in the hole, but there was a thin darker band at the base immediately above the undisturbed ground. *Plate 3* shows the hole, a post-hole, fully excavated.

Cuttings B and C were then made. In the latter a single-thickness layer of small, thin, limestone slabs was found arranged as shown in *Plate 2*. Just north of them bedrock cropped out below the turf. Under them and west of them there was a felt-like mass of grass roots resting directly on the bedrock and this sort of carpet extended over the whole area that had probably been covered by the former bank. The rest of the material above them consisted of a top layer of turf and then a mixture of earth and stones. In the west face of cutting B the original limits of the bank could be seen in the section. The width of the bank was about 14 ft. and the berm 8 ft. Practically the whole of the bank had been destroyed. No evidence of the stone core described by Jones (1938, p. 7) was found but rather the expected sequence, where a mound is made of ditch spoil, of soil at the base and earth and stones above. Beyond the limit of the bank the soil under the turf layer becomes thicker over the bedrock but the latter outcropped as shown. Beyond this was a natural fissure in the limestone with deep loamy soil. This was not bottomed as the excavation end was well beyond the outer edge of the bank. No post-holes were found in cuttings B and C.

Cuttings E and E₁ were laid out and dug. The former was designed to test for the presence of supporting structures for the bank. None were found. Cutting E₁, it was hoped, would expose a section of the bank and also permit soil sampling in the primary turf layer for a pollen analysis. Samples were taken.

Cutting D was then made, followed by F. In the former another post-hole was found. *Plate 6* shows an early stage of excavation of this hole. This, when fully excavated, was more of a trench than a simple hole, but its filling was similar to the hole on the west and it had a more circular part at the north end. The sides were stepped inwards in the rock, especially on the north and west. At base the diameter was 8 in. The depth from the rock

* O.R.S. is foreign to the site. The nearest outcrop is over 600 yd. away to the north, but there is plenty in the stream-borne detritus about 100 yd. away. Occasional pieces can be found distributed over the field.

surface was 23 in. At the base was a thin layer of darker soil. Quite close to the bottom was a minute piece of flint. Cutting F was made to make certain of the link-up with the earlier excavations.

Plate 4 is a general view of the excavations. The central and right poles are in post-holes 1 and 2. The poles on the left mark the original bank limits.

It was decided not to expose the east side of the way through the bank but to leave this for any future excavator. The weather throughout was unpleasant. Rain stopped work several times. There was always a cold, blustering wind which made it impossible, as the plates show, to keep the site clear of pieces of grass.

DISCUSSION

The two holes were undoubtedly man made. The nature of the fill showed this and in the west one there were several pieces of O.R.S. which could scarcely have got to their positions without human interference. There was an O.R.S. block at the top of hole 2 and a piece of flint near the bottom. Flint does not occur locally and all flint in this area of the Mendips has been brought there by man. Hole 2 could conceivably have held a thin upright slab of rock but hole 1 could never have held anything but a post.

The infilling of both holes was fairly compact. There was no sign of an inner ring in either hole as if a post might have rotted in place, but there was a layer of darker earth at the bottom of both holes. It is therefore considered that the structures, which were almost certainly posts, were removed deliberately and the holes filled in. It is a surmise that this action was contemporary with the taking-over of the site by the incoming "A" Beaker community. This group is known from the earlier excavations to have slighted the bank for stone to make a platform in part of the ditch.

The soil samples taken from cutting E1 did not, unfortunately, yield any results. Pollen in the alkaline soil was almost totally destroyed.

The only other finds, beside the flint fragment, were another nondescript piece of flint in the bank spread material and a minute sherd of beaker pottery on the berm under the bank slip.

There was some indication of a low kerb to the bank on the west side but the destruction had been nearly complete.

It is not known why pieces of O.R.S. were apparently selected for packing into the holes. That so many pieces were found in such a small area, whereas in general such pieces are widely scattered, is definite evidence of selection by man.

The field-name of "Little Bigbury" lends some support to the idea that "Gorsy" is just an adjective of topographical connotation and does not derive obscurely from the Celtic "Gor".

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations reported here throw a little more light on Gorse Bigbury and its original form. They confirm that it was a henge monument class 1. It has been shown that the gap through the bank at the entrance was defined by two posts. Both were quite slender. It is not known how high they were nor whether there was a lintel connecting them.

The posts were removed and the holes back-filled and not allowed to fill up naturally. This is surmised to have been contemporary with the site being taken over by "A" Beaker people, who, nevertheless, left the flat central area alone (Jones, 1938).

It is not known why O.R.S. pieces were used with the posts, presumably as chock stones. Their presence implies human selection.

The bank probably had a kerb, but this would have been composed of quite small stones laid flat and probably not more than a few layers high. Underneath the area which had been covered by the bank was a thin layer of matted grass roots resting directly on bedrock. This must be the original turf layer before the bank was thrown up.

There was no revetment in the form of posts for the bank either along its inner or outer sides. The bank on the west side was 14 ft. wide and the berm 8 ft. wide, between the bank and the outer edge of the ditch, which lies within the bank.

The orientation given by a line from the centre bisecting the causeway is about 7° west of north. But the two post-holes are asymmetrically placed in relation to the ditch ends and causeway, and a line from the centre bisecting the space between the post-holes would give an orientation of about 4° west of north.

The asymmetrical arrangement is probably attributable to the difficulty of digging out a site accurately when such hard rock as Carboniferous Limestone is encountered just under the turf. Jones (1938) also commented upon the asymmetry of the site and came to the same conclusion as to the reason for it. Furthermore, Jones was not certain, because of the effects of the dip slope and natural weathering of the limestone, of the exact position of the ditch end on the west of the causeway.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Permission to dig on this site was obtained from the Ministry of Works, for it is a scheduled monument, from the owners, the Bristol Waterworks Company, and from the tenant of the land, Mr. F. Young of Lower Farm. To all of these I am grateful. Mr. J. C. Crickmay was my principal assistant on the site and Dr. H. Taylor took many photographs on his visits. To both of these my thanks are due.

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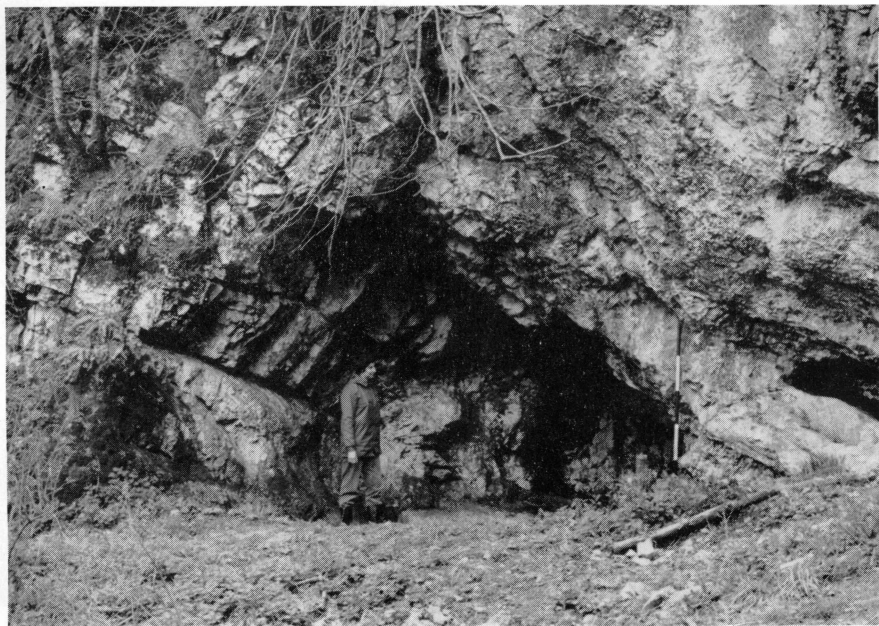


PLATE 1

(*Photograph: J. H. Barrett*)

Tom Tivey's Hole. General view looking east.



PLATE 3

(*Photograph: E. K. Tratman*)

Post-hole 1 completely excavated. Inch scale.



PLATE 4 (Photograph: H. Taylor)
General view of excavations. Ranging poles in feet.



PLATE 5 (Photograph: H. Taylor)
Post-hole 1 partially excavated. Inch scale.

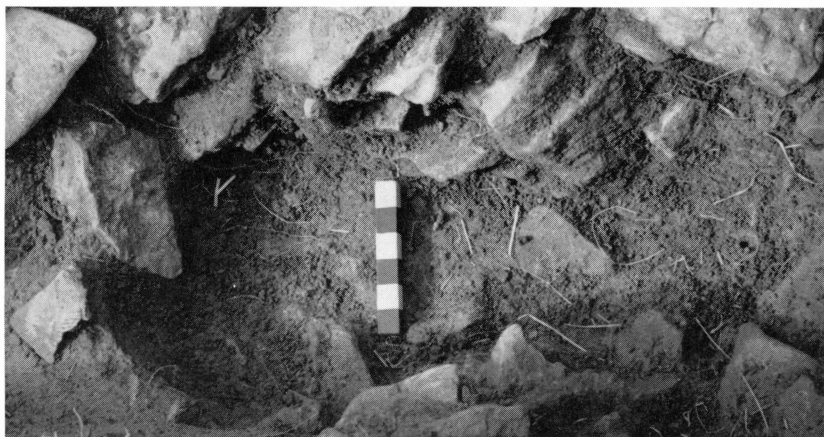


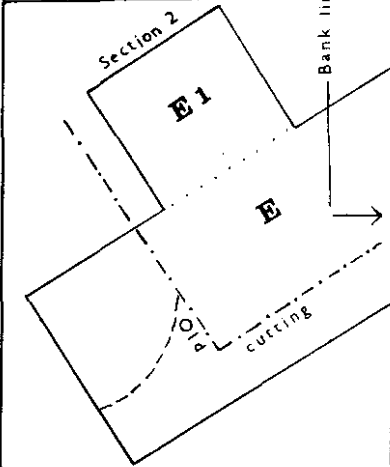
PLATE 6 (Photograph: H. Taylor)
Post-hole 2 partially excavated. Inch scale.

GORSEY BIGBURY

N.G.R. ST484558

Entrance Excavations 1965

- - - Limits old cuttings
- - - Limestone outcrop
- - - Edge of bank spoil
- P.H. Post hole
- F. Flint



- | | | | |
|--|-----------------|--|------------|
| | Turf | | O.R.S. |
| | Limestones | | Loamy soil |
| | Primary soil | | Bank soil |
| | Infilling | | Dark soil |
| | Carb. limestone | | |

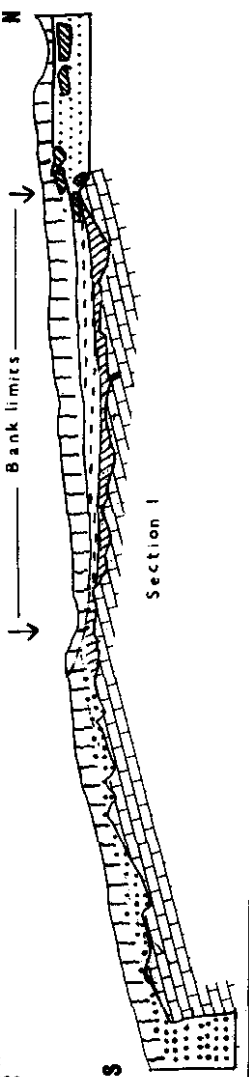
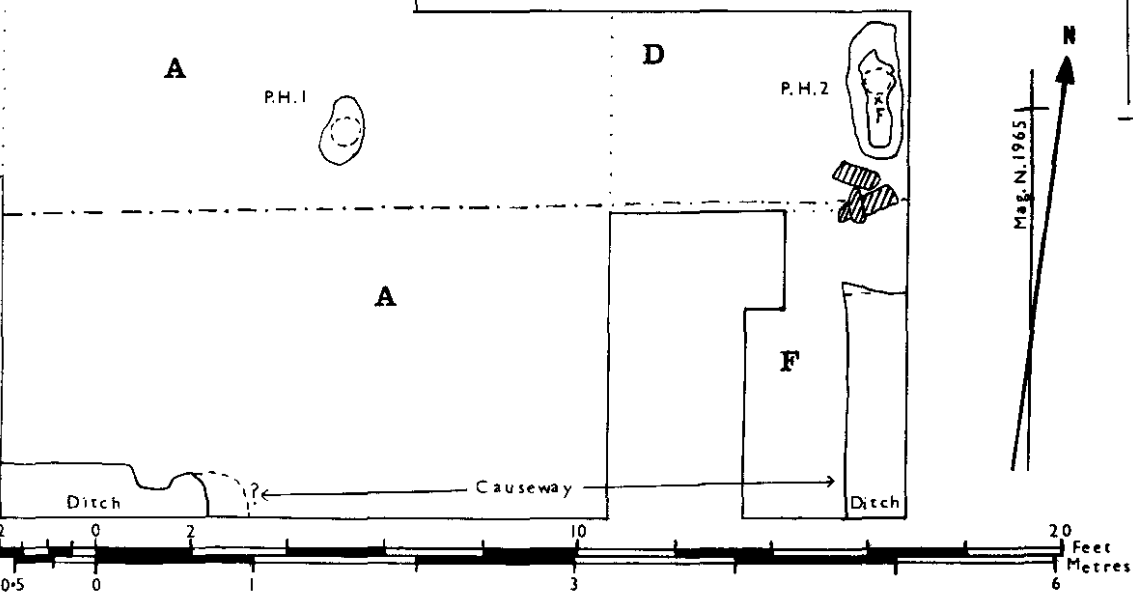
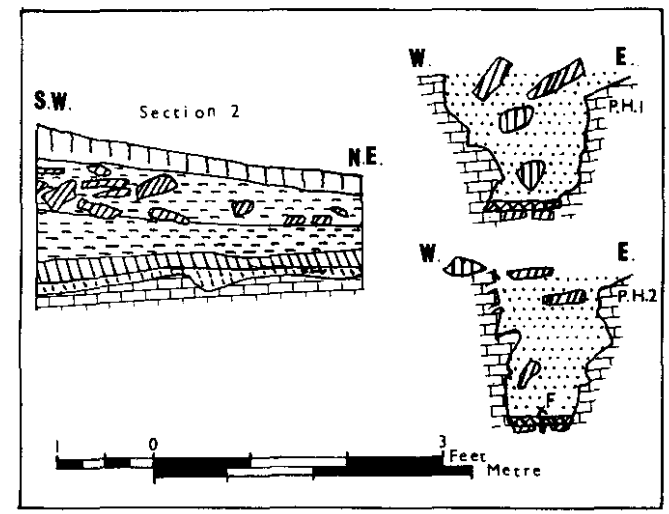
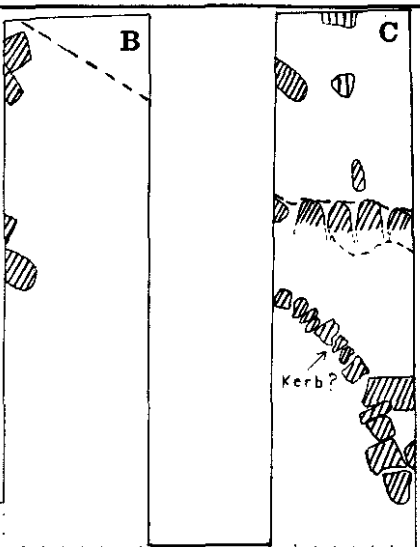


PLATE 2