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# EXCAVATIONS AT BIGBERRY, NEAR CANTERBURY, 1981\*

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with a contribution by Dr Isobel Thompson

## PART I: THE EXCAVATION

### *Introduction*

As a result of proposed apple-tree replanting on the south-western side of the camp, the Canterbury Archaeological Trust undertook a 'rescue' excavation over a period of four weeks during February–March 1981. Prior to this date, no large scale excavations had taken place in this area; previous excavations had concentrated largely on the defences and interior of the northern side of the camp (Jessup and Cook 1936; Thompson 1983). Two sections had, however, been cut across the relatively well-preserved south-west defences by Jessup in 1933–34 (Jessup and Cook 1936, 159) before the westward extension of the orchard to its present dimensions.

The field being planted represented the only surviving relatively undisturbed area within the camp; the remainder being disturbed by housing, coppices, ploughing and gravel quarries. It was, therefore, considered essential to conduct as large an area excavation as possible within the area to be replanted. The field in question (Fig. 1) covered an area of approximately 4,500 sq. m. and a little over 500 sq. m. was excavated in the four weeks available.

The main excavation (Trench I) consisted of an area 52 m. long and 10 m. wide at its maximum, cut across the rampart into the interior of the camp. This was designed to examine the remains of the rampart and any occupation immediately to its rear. Trenches II, III and V were laid out to test for evidence of occupation elsewhere in the field.

\* Published with the aid of a grant from English Heritage (Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England).

Trenches IV and VI to X were cut to locate the extent of an hitherto unrecorded gravel quarry, first located at the north end of Trench I, whilst Trench XI was laid out in an attempt to locate the cross-ridge dyke running across the hill-fort from the north. Outside the area of the field two short sections of quarry face were cleaned and recorded as Trenches XII and XIII.

*The Interior* (Fig. 1 and Plates IIA–IIB)

The stratigraphy within the field investigated was very shallow, comprising a 20 cm. thick deposit of dark grey clayey loam with many pebbles, overlying natural clay and gravel. The upper 15 cm. of this layer had recently been harrowed after the removal of old apple-trees. The roots of the trees, and limited ploughing between them, had badly disturbed the stratigraphy, plough- and root-marks being visible in the natural gravel. No evidence was located of intact Iron Age stratigraphy within the interior. It seems likely that the topsoil, complete with any surviving intact stratigraphy, had been removed down to the natural subsoil at the time of quarrying in the nineteenth century. The sparsity of Iron Age and Belgic pottery (approximately thirty sherds) in the present topsoil would support this hypothesis.

Features located within the interior proved to be either of post-glacial or recent origin. Four post-holes were located, three in Trench XI and one in Trench II, cut to an average depth of 15 cm. and backfilled with grey clayey loam and pebbles. Those in Trench XI may represent a fence line along the northern edge of the field whilst the single post-hole in Trench II is of unknown function. They are likely to be of recent origin due to their proximity with the road. No trace of the cross-ridge dyke was located in Trench XI: it is assumed that it either terminated just north of the modern road, where all above-ground traces of it disappear, or that it deviates to run east of Trench XI. Beneath the topsoil in Trench V, a deposit of mid grey loam and pebbles 10 cm. deep covered the southern end of the trench. This was overlaid by a layer of mid grey fine clayey loam, containing a few charcoal flecks, pebbles and a few sherds of flint-gritted pottery, up to 8 cm. in depth. This layer was very badly disturbed by animal runs, but may represent the only remains of occupation deposits in the field. No trace of the rampart was located in this trench.

Two other features located within the interior of the camp can be assigned to the phase of nineteenth-century gravel extraction. Feature 4 in Trench I was 2.20 m. deep and 1.50 m. wide with grooves on two sides indicating that it was a machine-cut hole, probably dug as a test pit during gravel prospecting in the area. Also relating to this phase was a small backfilled quarry, first located in Trench I and

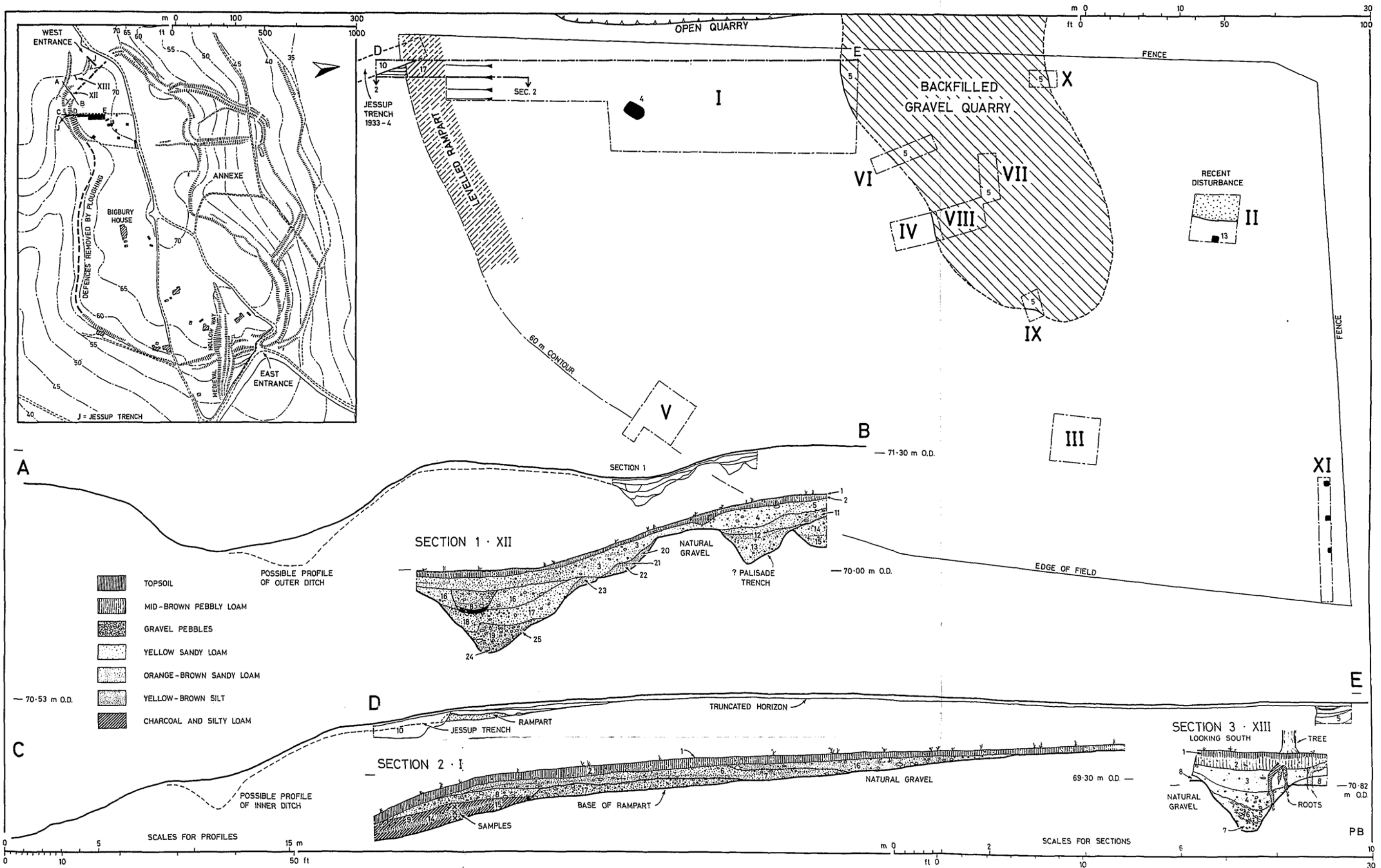


Fig. 1. Excavations at Bigberry 1981.

subsequently defined by Trenches IV and VI to X. The quarry was excavated in Trench I to a depth of 1 m. into the natural subsoil, revealing numerous small sherds of residual Iron Age pottery.

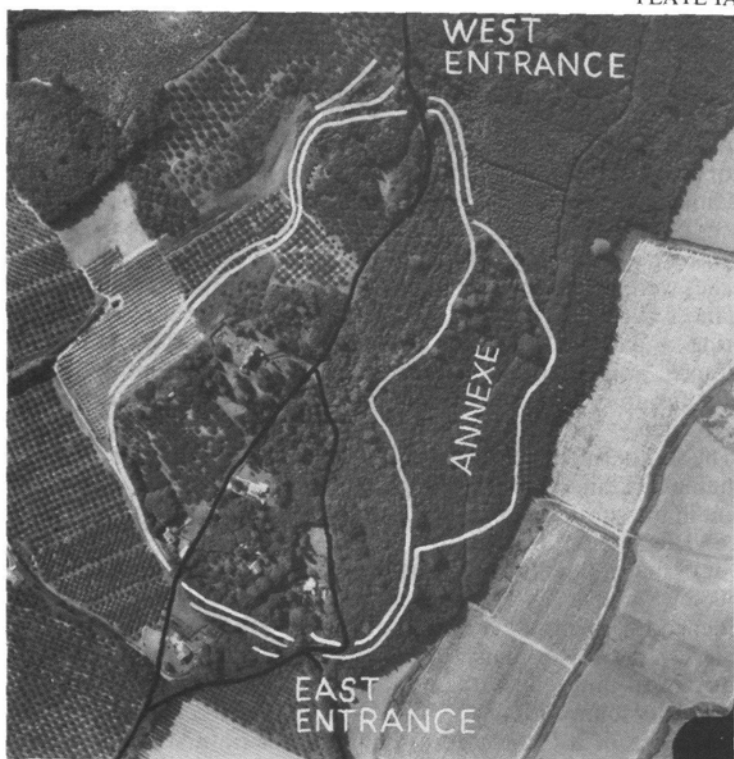
*The Defences* (Fig. 1 and Plates IA–IB)

On the south side of the camp, the defences were levelled a few years prior to 1874, when part of an existing wood was removed. Only in the immediate area of the present excavation are any comprehensible traces of the southern defences visible. A series of three ditches may be discerned, forming part of an elaborate western entrance. These ditches were largely untouched by ploughing, although a length of the defences between Trench XIII and the road has recently been buried during a partial backfilling of the gravel pit inside the western entrance. Soil-creep due to ploughing of the field south-west of the camp has unfortunately resulted in the backfilling of a stretch of the outer ditch.

The southern end of Trench I located traces of a rampart, as well as defining the line of Jessup's trench excavated in 1933–34. At this point in the southern defences the ditch was cut on a weathered scarp face. The section of rampart (17) located in Trench I, comprised a layer of fine yellow-brown silty loam 30 cm. thick with many pebbles, 4.40 m. wide at its base. Trench V failed to locate any certain evidence for this rampart further east. In front of the rampart were three layers of silty loam (9, 14 and 15) containing much charcoal, fire-cracked flints, flint fragments and pebbles, sealed by a layer of yellow silty loam with pebbles (8). It is tempting to see these deposits as evidence of a conflagration after Caesar's attack on Bigberry in 54 B.C. (*B.G.* v, 9), and the layer sealing the burnt deposits, representing rampart material which had weathered (or been levelled) into the ditch. Samples were taken from layers 9, 14 and 15 for radiocarbon dating. Only layer 9, the uppermost in the sequence, provided enough carbon for low-level dating. A calibrated date of 20 B.C. to A.D. 150 has resulted (Appendix A).

The reduced rampart was sealed by a deposit (7) of purplish silty loam of similar consistency to the weathered rampart material, and possibly representing an old ground surface. To the north, and overlying this layer, was a deposit of brown silty loam (16), which was truncated by the stripping of topsoil during gravel prospecting in the nineteenth century (Fig. 1, Section 2). A deposit of dark grey clayey loam topsoil sealed this sequence of stratigraphy and covered the entire area of the field.

An adjacent quarry face provided the opportunity to record in detail two of the three ditches in the south-western corner of the camp (Fig. 1, Trenches XII and XIII).



Aerial photograph of Bigberry camp, with defences outlined in white.



The slighted southern rampart, looking north, towards the excavation.

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PLATE IIA



Trench II, looking south-east.

PLATE IIB



Trench I, looking south.

*The Inner Ditch* (Fig. 1, Section 1, Trench XII)

Primary silt deposits (20, 21, 22, 23 and 25) were located on the inner edge of the ditch, washed in from the north-east side. Sealing silt 25 were two layers, one of rounded pebbles in sandy loam (24), the other of gravel in sandy loam (19), both representing primary deposits in the ditch. The secondary fill comprised layers 17 and 18, both deposits of sandy loam with many rounded pebbles. Layer 18 had probably weathered from the south-west side of the ditch, whilst layer 17 had obviously weathered from the north-east side, probably from the rampart. A tertiary fill, over this level, was represented by layer 16, a sandy loam containing many pebbles and few charcoal flecks, largely weathered from the rampart to the north-east. Cutting into the tertiary fill was a small pit (8), containing a primary fill of charcoal and loam overlaid by pebbles in loam. This may well be a fairly recent feature, but contained no datable finds. Above this level, layer 3 represented a more gradual accumulation of pebbles and loam, whilst layers 1 and 2 were topsoils.

To the north-east of the ditch, approximately 1.40 m. from the inner lip, was a possible palisade trench (13) 70 cm. deep. It was traced in plan into the face of the quarry pit for 30 cm., but no post-holes were located in the base of the feature. This does not, however, preclude the existence of post-holes in the trench, since only a limited length was excavated. Furthermore, the area north-east of the possible palisade remained unexcavated, hence it was not possible to check for post-holes or timber-slots beneath and to the rear of the rampart. When Trench I was excavated no palisade posts/slots were located, but the trench was narrow, and may well have passed between any structural post-holes. Layers sealing feature 13 in Trench XII may represent rampart material, which had weathered into the ditch once the palisade had decayed.

*The Middle Ditch* (Fig. 1, Section 3, Trench XIII)

This ditch had already been sectioned further to the north-west by Jessup in 1933-34. Jessup's cutting located a gravel rampart and ditch (Jessup and Cook 1936, 158). In the present trench only the ditch survived. The primary fill (7), which had weathered down the north-east side of the ditch, was of silty loam overlain by a deposit of loose pebbles in loam (5 and 6). A secondary loam and pebble fill was represented by layer 4, whilst layer 3, with fewer pebbles, formed the tertiary fill. Above this level was a loam and pebble spread, in turn sealed by topsoil.



*Discussion*

It now remains for the results of the 1981 excavations, in the south-western part of the hillfort, to be evaluated in relation to those of earlier excavations and in particular to the full discussion recently published by F.H. Thompson (1983, 252-9).

The southern defences were largely destroyed by ploughing before 1874 (Fig. 1, inset map). Like those on the northern side of the camp, they followed the 60 m. contour, exploiting the natural undulation of the hillside. For much of its length the southern defences were probably univallate with a simple rampart of dump construction on the inner lip. Trench I showed this rampart to be in excess of 4 m. wide at its base, and therefore wider than the excavated sections on the northern side of the camp (Thompson 1983, fig. 5) where the slope of the hillside is steeper and would not have required as substantial a rampart as on the less naturally well-defended southern side. No trace of timber lacing was observed in the 1981 trenches, and indeed no trace has yet been seen in any of the excavations at Bigberry. Trench XII of 1981 did, however, locate traces of a possible palisade slot along the front of the rampart of the inner ditch. This rampart, as indicated by Trench I, sat directly on the natural gravel and clay, although a pre-rampart feature, 15, of indeterminate size and function was located in Trench XII.

At the point of Profile A-B (Fig. 1) the defences become more complex. An outer bank and ditch or projecting 'hornwork' was constructed to continue the alignment of a natural valley which cuts into the south side of the hill to form one side of the 'neck' of the plateau which was utilised as the western entrance of the hillfort. At the point of meeting of the inner and outer defences a third or middle bank and ditch were constructed on a similar alignment to the outer defence. The middle and outer defences were obviously part of the western entrance.

The dating of this sequence, which surely covers several phases of construction, is difficult; the outer ditch has never been sectioned and of the other two, only the inner ditch and associated levels have produced pottery. Much of this was of flint-gritted fabrics, but there were also a few grog and grog-and-flint-tempered sherds, so that a similar range of 'early' and 'late' types as were encountered by Thompson (1983, 255) were present. The flint-gritted fabrics have been assigned a date range of c. 350 B.C. to the middle of the first century B.C. (p. 246). These fabrics occurred in the pre-rampart feature (XII, 15) where they provide a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the rampart. Flint-gritted fabrics were also predominant in the backfill of the inner ditch. The grog-and-flint-tempered sherds appear in the weathered (or slighted?) rampart

(I, 8) and the overlying levels. Dr Thompson has dated these tentatively to the first century B.C. (p. 247). The grog-tempered sherds, which occur in contexts overlying the reduced rampart, have been dated by Dr Thompson to the end of the first century B.C. (p. 247). A date of cal. 20 B.C. to A.D. 150 for charcoal in layer 9, beneath the slighted rampart, covers too wide a date range to assist this discussion.

This would, therefore, conform with F.H. Thompson's interpretation of the sequence at Bigberry, (1983, 253-9) with the construction of the defences during the second century B.C. and the slighting of the ramparts after the storming of the camp by Caesar after his landing of 54 B.C. Nothing can be said at present about the date of the middle and outer ditches of the western entrance.

## PART II: THE IRON AGE POTTERY

Dr Isobel Thompson

Most of the pottery consists of small sherds; none is very large. The contents of each feature are summarised here, and a full list is included in the archive.

Note: f/g = flint-gritting. All pieces are hand-made unless otherwise stated.

### FABRICS

1. *Flint-gritted*. The bulk of the pottery, present in all features, is flint-gritted, the standard Iron Age tempering in east Kent (see Macpherson-Grant 1980 for range of the Iron Age assemblages from Barham Downs and Bridge). It can be very coarse and occasionally fine, with corresponding finishes to the vessel. The recognisable forms here are later Iron Age, from somewhere in the period 350 B.C. to the overlap with grog in the late first century B.C. They are exactly comparable to the material from F.H. Thompson's excavations, but the range in this group is small: the base of an everted-rim foot-ring bowl (V 12), a few upright rims, of various sizes, one flaring, and one with a 'pie-crust' rim (I 3a) which is a trait found in the earlier Iron Age also (e.g. no. 23 from Barham Downs 1971: Macpherson-Grant 1980, fig. 6).

2. *Grog*. This replaces flint as the standard tempering in east Kent only at the end of the first century B.C. with the appearance of wheel-made Belgic pottery. The vessel forms are also new, but Belgic vessels are certainly not always wheel-made. There are a few grog-tempered pieces in this Bigberry assemblage, in features I 2 (unharrowed ploughsoil) and V 3 (ploughsoil): all scraps, curving sherds or cordons and the more readily recognisable storage jar sherds. Grog-tempering is not found in the main features, except in a few pieces of mixed grog-and-flint, discussed below.
  
3. *Grog-and-flint*. Found in I 8 (weathered rampart material on ditch edge) and XII 13 (palisade slot). As well as the usual flint grits, these sherds have dark grey flecks in the fabric that look like grog. Such mixed tempering does occur in east Kent in the late Iron Age, with the appearance of grog-tempered Belgic pots; the mixed-temper vessels are hand-made (Thompson 1982, 12–14). The Bigberry examples are of roughly Belgic form, but not easily classifiable. The rims from I 8 are not well-defined; the first (no. 8) has no genuine offset between rim and shoulder, and no. 9 has only a groove and an attempt at rilling, not true cordons and curves. The sherd from the palisade slot (XII 13) has large red-brown lumps instead of grey flecks; the form seems to be Belgic, but the fabric sounds apparently similar to certain vessels from Barham Downs site 1, 1971, of flint-tempering with some 'brown-red grog and/or haematite grains' in an assemblage of flint-tempered Iron Age pottery dating apparently to the period c. 500–350 B.C. (Macpherson-Grant 1980, 145, 179). Two of the mixed-temper Barham Downs vessels are in a small group of thick roll-rimmed jars that might belong to the first-century B.C. (*ibid.*, 146), so the Bigberry piece may still be contemporary with the other sherds containing grog.
  
4. *Greensand*. One sherd, hand-made, from I 8, the weathered rampart material at the ditch edge with a range of fabrics. The tempering is rare in east Kent, although more common in the Medway valley, west Kent, and southern Essex in the Iron Age, when it was used, for example, for some everted-rim foot-ring bowls (one at Birchington in east Kent: Drury 1978, 128–9). It was also used in the Medway area at the end of the Iron Age for Belgic forms, but not in east Kent. The Bigberry sherd (as those in F.H. Thompson's excavations) is of the earlier tradition.

## CONCLUSIONS

The assemblage is small, but is comparable to the material from F.H. Thompson's recent Bigberry excavations in terms of date and of range and proportion of fabrics. The standard fabric is flint-gritting, and the forms are of the period *c.* 350 B.C. to about the middle of the first century B.C. and a little later, not necessarily covering the whole of the period. Bigberry as a whole also has a small proportion of other later Iron Age fabrics such as greensand, and a certain amount of grog-tempered vessels of more or less Belgic appearance. On external evidence this grog-tempered pottery should be dated no earlier than the last quarter of the first century B.C.; the stratigraphical relationship between the grog and the earlier Iron Age material is difficult to ascertain at Bigberry, but in this assemblage it is noticeable that the grog occurs in the ploughsoil and in a layer beneath the ploughsoil, and not as a rule in tandem with the flint-gritting in the major features. It is just possible that some of the sherds with mixed grog-and-flint temper are earlier than the vessels tempered with grog alone: the shapes of the former are reasonably primitive and they are hand-made. The later Bigberry pottery as a whole may cover the entire first century B.C.

TABLE 1: Table of Pottery Fabrics

Trench I	LIA f/g	Grog	Grog + Flint	Other
Layer 2, under harrowed ploughsoil	24 sherds, base of foot-ring bowl (1)	6 grey curved sherds from 2 wheel-made pots; storage jar sherd (2)		
3A: fill of periglacial feature	Rim with fingertip impressions (3); 1 finer sherd with tooling			
5: backfill of recent quarry pit: A: B:	13 sherds Upright rim with flat top (4); 4 sherds			

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Trench I	LIA f/g	Grog	Grog + Flint	Other
6: old ground surface? over reduced rampart	Upright plain rim (5)			
7: ditto	c. 15 small sherds incl. upright rim (6)			Sherd with depressions (7)
8: on ditch edge, possibly weathered rampart material	12 rough brown-red sherds	Storage jar base (11) + 6 sherds from 2 similar jars	Roll rim (8) Upright rim (9) Small roll rim like (8) Shoulder sherd	Greensand sherd (12)
9: silty loam and charcoal in ditch	Large flaring rim, coarse brown, + 7 assorted sherds			2 very small sherds with ?shell
10: fill of 1930s trench	1 coarse brown sherd			
13: inner ditch, palisade slot	10 small coarse brown sherds		3 thin sherds, one curving	1 curved sherd with girth groove, f/g and ?grog
15: fill of small pre-rampart feature	Several coarse red sherds; 6 thick grey sherds, one from above flat base; 1 very small plain rim sherd			Soft red scrap, no temper; one soapy dark brown worn sherd
17: inner ditch, secondary fill	Grey-buff leached sherd			

*Numbered vessels:*

- (1) Part of base of everted-rim footring bowl; reddish, smoothed, with pale-brown core (cf. Thompson 1983, fig. 10, no. 19).
- (2) Large sherd of storage-jar, not thick; grey with lightly scored red-brown exterior.
- (3) Black coarsely gritted bead rim, roughly finished; rim not everted, but flattened and shaped with series of finger-tip impressions (cf. Thompson 1983, fig. 12, no. 85).
- (4) Thickened upright rim with flat top, dark grey, coarse gritting; pale red lumpy exterior.

- (5) Upright plain rim, brown, roughly smoothed outside.
- (6) Upright rim with gently curving shoulder; micaceous red-brown fabric, large grits, very smooth dark brown surfaces.
- (7) Soft brown sherd, no visible inclusions; a row of depressions decorates the outside.
- (8) Shouldered jar with roll rim, lumpy grey; blotchy yellow surfaces, smoothed well over rim.
- (9) Upright rim above shoulder with rough shallow rilling; dark brown fabric, smoothed rim.
- (10) Very thin, possibly wheel-made shoulder sherd, with offset; fine pale brown core, very fine grog, and quite a lot of *f/g*; very smooth brown surfaces.
- (11) Storage jar base sherd, softish dark grey-brown, smoothed underneath.
- (12) Brown shallow shoulder sherd tempered with greensand.

## APPENDIX A

Extracted from the Radiocarbon Dating Certificate of R.L. Otlet, Isotope Measurements Laboratory, Building 10.46, Harwell Laboratory, Harwell, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 0RA. The cal. date quoted is at one standard deviation.

TABLE 2: Laboratory results of the CARBON-14 dating of a charcoal sample from Layer 9 in the ditch at Bigberry Camp, Harbledown, nr Canterbury Kent.

1	2	3	4	5	6
HARWELL REF.	SENDERS REF.	TYPE	DC13 (o/oo)	AGE BP (YRS)	Cal RANGES (IML program, data of Stuiver and Reimer, 1986)
Har-5030	LAYER-1	Charcoal	-27.5	1930 ± 70	68% ]20 B.C. to A.D. 150 and % 100 B.C. to A.D. 250

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work which forms the basis of this report was made possible by grants from the Department of the Environment (now the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission) and the Kent Archaeological Society, and with the permission of the farmer and landowner, Mr Gordon McCabe. Thanks are due to Mr Peter Schmidt, the Farm manager, for his help during the excavation and to our weekend

volunteers and full-time excavators, who worked remarkably well in adverse weather conditions. Finally, the writers are grateful to Dr Isobel Thompson for examining and reporting on the pottery from the 1981 excavations.

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