

Excavations at the Dorsey. (Continued)

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Excavations at the Dorsey.

O. DAVIES.

(Continued from Vol. IX, pt. 2).

THE NORTH DITCH AT BURNS' HOUSE.

In view of the discovery in 1938 that the Dorsey ditches are interrupted at the point where the old coach-road from Dundalk to Armagh enters the enclosure from the south,¹ it was decided in 1939 to test the northern crossing at the farm of Mr. Burns, who most kindly granted permission. The road continues across the Dorsey enclosure along a ridge, in the manner of a very ancient trackway. Beside Mr. Burns' house it skirts a patch of rough ground, and at the crossing over the ditch it makes a sharp turn northward (see plan, pl. I upper). East of this point the ditch may be traced on the surface along the north side of a field-bank (in fields 1.115 and eastwards) as far as the Newtownhamilton road, and thence to the north-east corner of the enclosure. The rampart along this line has been reduced to the size of an ordinary dyke. West of the crossing is an old pound with steep banks, of which the southern preserves the remains of the rampart, probably at less than its original height. Beyond the pound the ditch may be clearly traced descending the hill (in field 3.478).

The double bend of the road just south of the ditch is known not to be an original feature. Beside Mr. Burns' house stood an inn in the eighteenth century; and the road ran through the inn-yard (the modern farmyard), and approached the ditch-crossing from the south without a turn (see plan, pl. I upper).

Tests were made in the rough ground east of Mr. Burns' house and in various parts of the orchard, in the hope that ancient structures would be revealed. But nothing was found save a little charcoal, and in general till was encountered very close to the surface.

The stratification of the ditch was presented by the cross-section (pl. I upper, section II) and by other tests in the pound. The ditch has a flat bottom four or five feet wide, and sloping sides. On the surface of the till are large irregular stones, possibly set to prevent slip, or else natural boulders. The base of the ditch rises towards the east, apparently with the slope of the ground.² The ditch may have

NOTE.—“Inv. no.” in texts of the papers on excavations refers to the inventory of finds deposited in Armagh Museum.

¹ *C.L.A.J.* IX, part 2 (1938), p. 131.

² From the level of the base of the ditch on the east side of the coach-road, the base 30 ft. west is 4 ft. lower, and at 66 ft. west 5¾ ft. lower.

been dug to a constant depth, for it seems that nearly two feet of the surface-soil of the pound have been removed,¹ probably to construct walls of a sufficient height to prevent animals escaping.

The lower half of the ditch was filled with grey mud, $2\frac{1}{2}$ -4 ft. deep. In it were found many twigs and faggots, some of them rectangular strips $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 in. across and .1-.3 in. thick. They have been split and exhibit axe-marks. Other thicker pieces have been cut diagonally to rough points (see fig. 1a).² Other pieces are square at

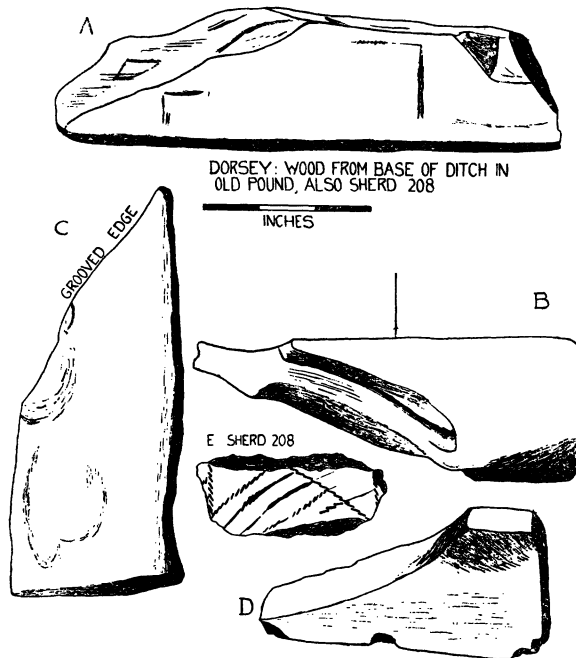


Fig. 1.

one end and pointed at the other, with a marked groove along the diagonal cut (fig. 1b and c); they have clearly been shaped for a definite purpose, whatever it may have been.³ One blunt-nosed piece (fig. 1d), .8 in. thick, is shaped to a point. Another piece, now measuring $4\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4} - 3\frac{1}{4} \times 1$ ins., is naturally rounded on one face and split on the other. The base is cut off slightly diagonally. It was probably

¹ See pl. I upper, section II, comparing the surface-level of the pound with that north and south of it.

² Fig. 1a measures $9 \times 2.2 \times 1.1$ ins. Other pieces are less typical. One roughly pointed piece is 1.6 ins. thick. Another measures $5 \times .4 \times .6$ ins.; the sides have been split fairly smooth, the end is formed into a blunt point with diagonal cuts. Another similar peg is rougher, the surviving portion being 4 ins. long.

³ Fig. 1b is a stout piece 7 ins. long, of rectangular section $2\frac{1}{2} \times 2$ ins. One end is deeply grooved and tapers to a point. Fig. 1c is a rougher piece, tapering and perhaps slightly grooved. The butt is cut diagonally. It measures $7 \times 3 \times .6$ ins. The sides and faces are fairly smooth, but appear to be split; but in fig. 1b they are well shaped and were probably sawn.

pointed but has been broken ; in this case it would have been 7 ins. long, which is more than the length of any of the other pointed pieces. Another, measuring 6.5 x 2.1 x 1 ins., is cut rectangularly at each end. A small piece, probably broken,¹ consists of half a bough with two diagonal cuts at one end to form a roughly pointed stake. Another, of roughly triangular section and measuring 6.4 x 3.1 x 1 in., has one end cut across, at the other the ridge has been planed away to give a roughly curved and wedge-shaped blade. On the east side of the roadway was a large worked log of oak.

These pieces of wood may have formed part of the ditch-revetment, like those described below near the south-west corner of the enclosure, and in the Black Pig's Dyke in Co. Monaghan and Cavan.² The only other apparent artefact from near the base of the ditch was a nodule of flint with two projecting bosses, which may have been hammered (inv. no. 316).

The upper part of the ditch-filling is sandy grey silt containing a few stones. On the cross-section (pl. I upper, section II) this was in part separated from the mud by the third paving, which was bedded on to a layer of gravel and clearly set. No sign of paving was observed in other pits at the east end of the pound, and its significance is uncertain. The sandy silt is not of great antiquity and probably accumulated rapidly ; it may be material shovelled in to level the ditch when the pound was constructed. At its base was found a fragment of the bottom of a nearly spherical wine-bottle of early eighteenth-century form (pl. I upper, inv. no. 321). In the silt were shapeless fragments of iron, some split pieces of wood, one of them perhaps pointed, a modern sherd, a piece of charcoal, a few bones and flint flakes, of which one was battered at the edge and could have been a strike-a-light.

In the entrance of the pound (see plan, pl. I upper) were two stout posts of fir 11 ins. across, unbarked. The southern had been shaped to a blunt point, the northern was wedged with stones. They survived to a height of two feet, and at the top of the northern was a socket into which fitted a small stone. These posts had probably been the gate-posts of the pound. They were eccentric to the ditch, and the base of the northern rested in the top of the grey mud, without evidence that the sandy silt had been disturbed for its insertion.

About a foot east of the large posts were two small pointed stakes two inches across. The northern had two holes near the base as if for pegs, the southern protruded through a ring of root packed with stones, which may have been set to prevent it from slipping. The bases of the small posts were shallower than those of the large, and they were perhaps stops for the pound-gate.

A short way west of the pound-gate were two other high-level pieces of wood, apparently roots or boles of old fir-trees.

¹ This measures 3 ins. (broken) x 1 x ½ in. The original bough would have been about 1½ ins. in diameter.

² Kane, *P.R.I.A.*, xxvii. C (1908-9), p. 301.

Above the grey silt was much gravel, with remains of one and in some places of two cobbled pavings (pl. I upper, section II). On and among the gravel were numerous flints, mostly natural, some perhaps slightly worked or bruised as if they had been used as strike-a-lights; also a tooth of deer (inv. no. 306), modern sherds, and a flat piece of wood rectangular at one end and broken at the other, measuring 3 x 2 ins. The soft filling of the pound probably became bogged in wet weather, so it was necessary to put down one or more layers of gravel and cobbling for drainage.

A flint which may have been worked was found in the pound-bank; it had perhaps been thrown up from the subsoil of the interior. At a high level inside were some ox-bones.

Trenches on the east and west verges of the coach-road where it crossed the ditch shewed conclusively that there had been no break like that in the southern ramparts. If the road at this point preserves the line of the ancient trackway, the ditch must have been crossed by a bridge, of which the timbers at the base of the ditch might be remnants, rather than of the ditch-revetment. No proof however exists of this hypothesis, and we were not permitted to excavate the whole of the coach-road to search for sockets. Alternatively, the trackway ran farther to the east.¹ Along this sector the ditch is nearly filled; but its line can be traced on the surface, and at no point is there an obvious break.²

We might thus be led to assume that there was no north gate of the enclosure; but this complicates all theories regarding its purpose. Tempest³ suggests that the Dorsey owes its remarkable shape to its having lain across two through-roads. Further, such tradition as exists speaks of it as the gate of Emania, consequently built up by the Ulstermen; and it is unparalleled for a people to construct a frontier-fort without access from their own territory. It may therefore be that a crossing of the northern ditch will be discovered; a series of pits to test the characteristic grey silt ought to locate it.

THE NORTH-EAST CORNER.

A trench was dug at the north-east corner of the Dorsey, to test the relation of the enclosure-rampart to the rampart which runs down to the Ummeracam River in field 1.480. This examination was curtailed by the outbreak of war, and no drawings were made; but the following facts were ascertained.

The Dorsey ditch lies on the north side of the rampart, and turns southward at the angular corner (in fields 1.675 and 3.967). It is shallow, apparently owing to

¹ Its ridgeway character would forbid us to search for it on the slope to the west.

² The curious disposition of field-walls at the junction of fields 1.935, 2.403, 1.070, 4.214 and 2.367 may suggest an adaptation to some earlier structure. This point lies almost directly in line with the course of the road from the south gate to the cross; so perhaps the coach-road diverged to the left at the cross and ceased to follow the ancient ridgeway.

³ *C.L.A.J.*, vii (1929-32), p. 187.

a large outcrop of rock ; the determination of its line was complicated by a modern drain. From the corner a small stone-lined ditch continues eastward down the hill towards the river, which from surface-indications it reaches. In its base is a little blue silt. On its north side is a low bank, composed of reddish burnt earth with blocks of charcoal. It was presumably strengthened with beams or a palisade of piles.

Surface-exploration has failed to reveal traces of a rampart east of the Ummeracam River. The sole object of interest is a souterrain in field 2.793 not far from the ruined cottage. If the Dorsey formed part of the frontier defences of the ancient kingdom of Ulster, as is suggested by the evidence at the west end,¹ the Black

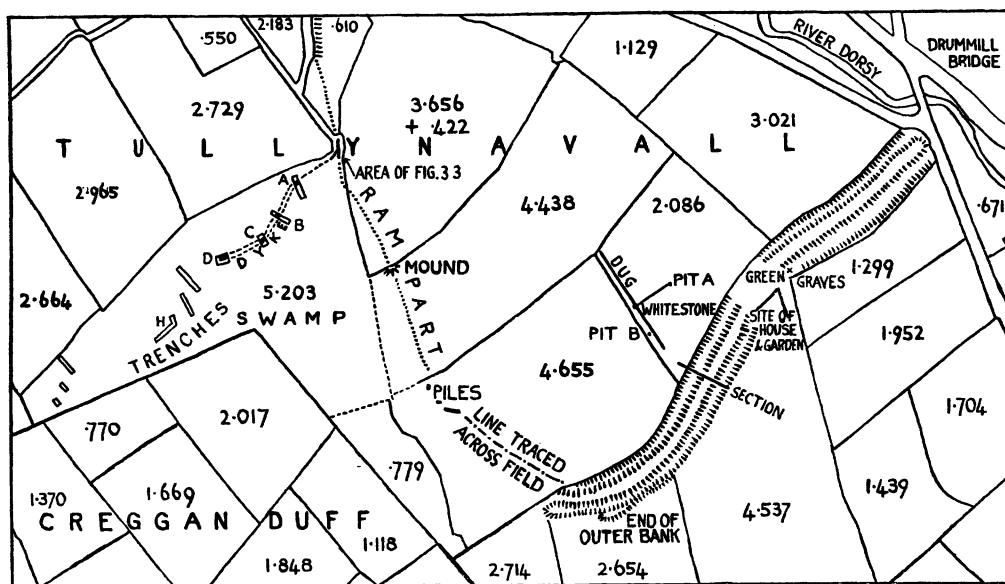


Fig. 2. Map of South Western Corner of Dorsey Rampart.

(Block kindly lent by *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*.)

Pig's Dyke must either have been unfinished, or east of the Dorsey it must have relied on natural obstacles for a considerable distance. Alternatively, the Dorsey may be conceived as an isolated enclosure, its flanks protected by two wings which extended to water ; but under such circumstances its strategic value is hard to discern.

THE WESTERN RAMPARTS.

Tests were executed in 1938 and 1939 on the western sectors of the Dorsey rampart (see fig. 2). In 1938 we excavated the rough bog-land at the western end of field 4.655. I traced the rampart and ditch across the field, when a storm levelled

¹ *U.J.A.*,iii (1940), p. 31.

the standing corn which had ripened slightly more quickly or grown slightly taller on them than elsewhere. In the bog the sole signs of the ditch were slight depressions in till, and the rampart had been mainly cleared away (see fig. 3). In section III (pl. I upper) was found its base, resting on peat. As in certain parts of the southern stretch, it was carried on lines of piles, which seem to have crossed it diagonally at intervals (fig. 3). Donaldson described sections of piling beneath the rampart as consisting of several rows of vertical stakes supported by horizontal beams. The

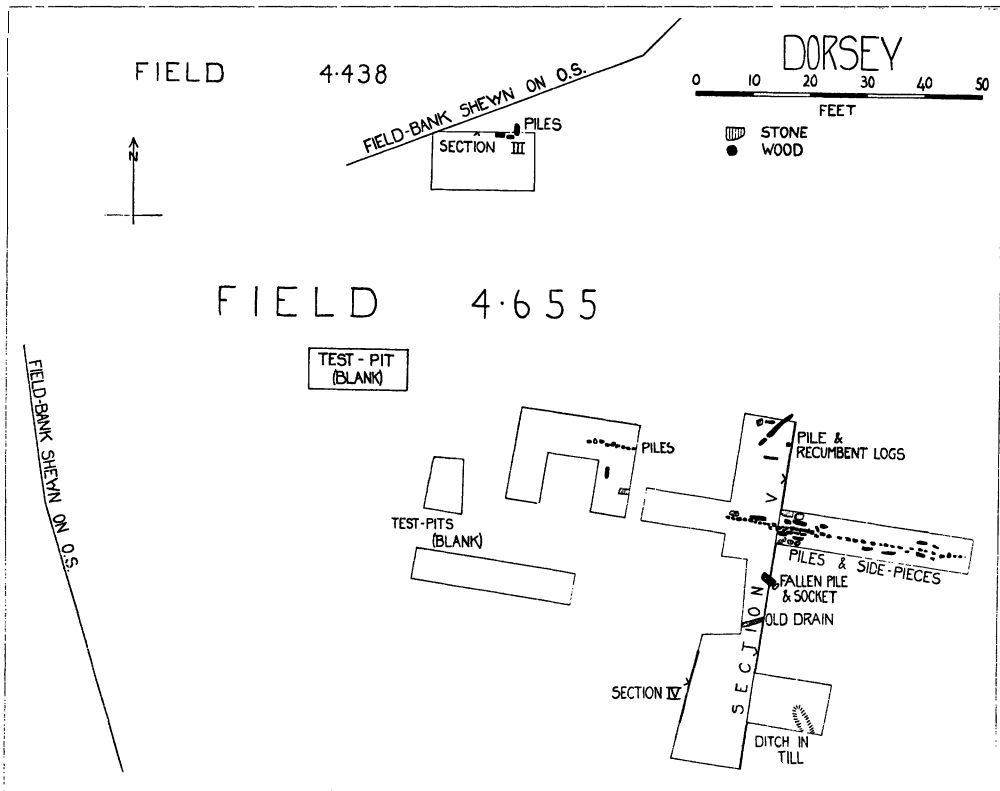


Fig. 3—Field 4.655.

piles which we found were wedged in place with stones and horizontal logs. Other irregular recumbent pieces of wood may be the remnants of a brushwood foundation. The stumps of the piles were rounded, sometimes split vertically; they were not sunk more than six inches into till (see section V, pl. I upper).

As far as could be determined, there had been in this area two ramparts, the outer consisting of a clay bank without piling. It is unlikely that either was of a height commensurate with other sectors, because no ditch was dug to provide material; and it may be suggested that in this easily defended area, fronted by a swamp or lake, the low banks formed artificial sides for the ditch, a device used on

certain portions of the Roman vallum in northern England, especially where the subsoil was rocky and difficult to excavate.

Both on the surface of the outer rampart and on till below it were found a number of flints (inv. nos. 51-53). Most are flakes of fine transparent or reddish flint, often preserving much cortex; one is a rough chip from a pebble. One reddish flake with much cortex is chipped down one edge to form a knife. Another flake has been burnt. Most characteristic are two hollow scrapers. One is rather rough and made from a thick flake; the length of the chord is 1 in., the depth .3 in. The other is a finer tool with slightly notched teeth, made from a thin oval flake measuring 1.7 x 1.1 ins.; the length of the chord is .9 in., the depth .25 in. These tools are of a more primitive type than the date generally accepted for the Dorsey ramparts; they probably formed part of a prehistoric cache turned up by the rampart-builders.

A section was dug across the southern ditches at the top of the rise beside field 2.086, as shewn in fig. 3 and pl. I upper, section I. The inner rampart consists of hard yellow clay. The inner ditch is V-shaped and 15 ft. deep, the outer apparently a little shallower. Both ditches were filled partly with blue clay, partly with coarse slimy peat containing many nut-shells and birch-twigs, and a few remains of alder and fir.

At the top of the filling of the inner ditch was a pebble-flake of flint (inv. no. 204). Charcoal was found on the blue silt and at the base of the ditch. But the most interesting discovery consisted of a number of shaped pieces of wood. In the inner ditch were many roughly split pieces with axe-marks. There was also a stout beam measuring $30 \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 7 \times 1\frac{1}{2} - 3\frac{1}{4}$ ins., shaped with an axe on both faces and partly rounded at one end; in it are cut two mortise-holes (see fig. 4a), so it perhaps formed a cross-piece of the ditch-revetment. Of uncertain purpose is a large pear-shaped block with many axe-marks, measuring $12\frac{1}{2} \times 10 \times 3$ ins., cut rectangularly at one end and

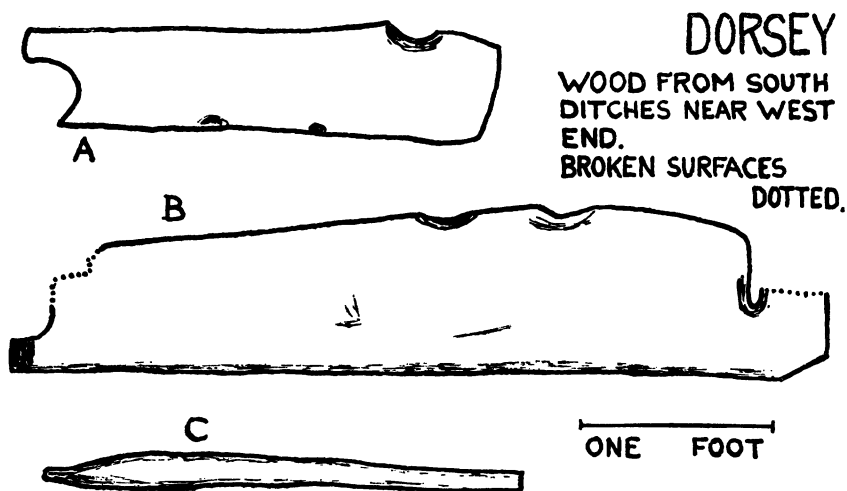


Fig. 4.

roughly rounded at the other ; it may not be entire. There was a small piece split to resemble a bat with blade and narrow handle ; the blade measures $4 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ ins., the handle is $2\frac{1}{2}$ ins. long. The inner ditch yielded also two stout stakes 1 ft. 6 ins. long ; one is of rectangular section $2 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ ins., the other ovoid $1\frac{1}{2} \times 3$ ins. They do not seem charred at the base, but are probably broken stakes of the revetment.

The outer ditch yielded many small pieces of wood, mostly half or whole boughs about six inches long and cut diagonally with an axe. There was also a stake 21 ins. long, apparently broken at the top end and charred at the base, which had been cut diagonally to a rough edge. Its sides had been split roughly square, to measure $2 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ ins. It corresponds closely to the pieces of ditch-revetment described by Kane (see below). In the base of the ditch was found a plank 4 ft. 3 ins. long and 1-2 ins. thick, roughly split with axe-marks on both faces (fig. 4b). The ends are slightly broken, but sufficient survives to shew that one was cut out to form a mortise-hole, and the other a slot. Near the base of the ditch we also unearthed a wooden object which can have had no structural purpose (fig. 4c). It is a slightly curved stick with blunt point which may have rotted. The centre of gravity is about a third of the way from the point. The section is oval, 1.4×2.2 ins. The length is 2 ft. $5\frac{1}{2}$ ins. The stick has been carefully shaped, and shews axe-marks. It is most probably a throwing-stick, and thus the only weapon which has yet been discovered in close association with the Dorsey ramparts.

The interpretation of the majority of the wooden beams as portions of a revetment of the ditch is justified by the description given by Kane of a portion of the Black Pig's Dyke in Lettercrossan : " There were found at intervals along the sides battens or barks of round timber resting against the original slopes as though they were stays. One end was pointed and charred, and driven into the ground. Also horizontal sleepers were found, lying transversely across the bottom, of about 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length, and roughly mortised at each end to the sloping side-timbers." It is unfortunate that in our excavations no timber was found in situ. But our mortised beams seem to correspond to what Kane described ; and they may have been fixed not by long uprights, but by short pointed pegs of which we found so many.

EXCAVATIONS ROUND THE CLOGHFIN.

The area west of the Dorsey River enclosed by the ramparts is a rounded hill about fifty feet high, surrounded by low and in general marshy ground except on the south. On this side there is a further rise to a height which would, in days of long-range missiles, dominate the interior ; but the ramparts traverse a neck of ground which effectively cuts the enclosed area off from the rest of the hill. At the highest point of the enclosure, in field 2.086, is a standing stone,¹ known locally as Cloghfin or Finn McCool's Stone or the stone of Caillagh Biorra, and identified by some scholars with the traditional White Stone of Watching.

¹ O.S. 25", XXVIII 9, 20.1" west, 1.2" north, see fig. 2.

The higher ground to the south proves that the stone cannot have been the station of a watchman, for both tradition and the doubling of the southern rampart shew that the enclosure was constructed against an attack anticipated from the south. It was therefore decided to make extensive tests in field 2.086, which we were enabled to do by the kind permission of the owner, Mr. Duffy.

The stone is a roughly conical block without artificial markings.¹ It is an erratic of hard grit, weathered into holes and grooves along bedding-planes. At about one foot above ground-level its sides measure 1 ft., 2 ft. 3 ins., 1 ft. 8 ins., and 3 ft.; lower down it is wider, and it rises to a thin edge. The maximum height is 5 ft. 11 ins. The base is pointed on the south, and rests three inches into till, about 1 ft. 2 ins. below present surface. The point is supported by soft yellow clay, probably till replaced. The other parts of the base are packed with small stones resting on till.

The stone is set unusually shallow; but there is little soil on the top of the hill, and there has probably been considerable denudation. North of the stone not more than eight inches of grey subsoil covers the till. The till is a light yellow clay, with occasional orange patches. Its surface is uneven; it contains some boulders, and many of the pits in it seem due to the removal of stones. In one pit were a few specks of charcoal; and others, with nearly vertical sides, might have been shallow post-holes, but they formed no plan. Scattered charcoal-specks (inv. no. 202) were found just above till, and also a small burnt flint and a burnt bone (inv. no. 203). But a phosphate-test from the base of the subsoil gave a very low result, so there is no evidence that these stray finds are due to habitation.

From 85 to 88½ feet down the slope (north-east) from the White Stone was found a deep pit (pit A, see fig. 2), sunk nearly three feet into till on the upper side, less on the lower. Its south and west walls were lined with large stones. Further down the hill are other small pits, and the till seemed disturbed and covered by more soil than elsewhere. The main pit was filled with small stones and dark earth containing a good deal of charcoal (inv. no. 201).

On the south side of the field, near the inner ditch (pl. I upper, section I), was deep brown soil with charcoal, overlying soft yellow subsoil which did not seem to have undergone denudation. In this area were found two steep-sided trenches two feet deep. They cannot have been drains, as they run parallel to the Dorsey ditch instead of towards it; also, one of them stopped within the trench that we dug, so that its limits are shewn on the section as projected. These trenches were packed to the base with stones, and in the upper parts were signs of burning, much charcoal and fused earth. There were found a scrap of iron (inv. no. 206), a burnt bone, and a piece of a clay pipe (inv. no. 209). The object of these pits is uncertain. But they may have been fire-pits, perhaps packed with stones to help the draught, and possibly the remains of a still like the trench found near the south gate of the Dorsey²

¹ For illustration see Tempest, *C.L.A.J.* VII, part 2 (1930), plate facing p. 204.

² *C.L.A.J.*, IX, part 2 (1938), p. 134.

About 68 feet south-south-east of the White Stone is an irregular pit in till, eight feet long by five feet wide (pit B, fig. 2). It was filled with stones and grey earth, which contained much charcoal, a cinder, a flint flake, a burnt quartz-pebble, a burnt bone, and two sherds of pottery. The last are coarse, pale red pieces, exhibiting no shape, though the slight curve on the larger indicates a vessel of about nine inches diameter. The surface is fairly smooth, the biscuit soft and rather gritty, the thickness about .4 ins. One sherd is decorated with incised lines of varying depth (fig. 1e). Some of the marks are cord-impressions, others look like drag-grooves, but the signs of the cord-plaiting may have been weathered, as it is unlikely that two techniques would be employed in rendering the same line. The scheme appears to be a series of hatched triangles. In general, these sherds approach most closely to wares of the late bronze-age, and I would be inclined to assign them to that period in default of better evidence to the contrary.

The pits south and east of the White Stone seem to be the remains of habitations. Other traces were not certainly located ; but the severe denudation of this hill-surface may have destroyed post-holes and have carried away settlement-refuse. It is tempting to regard the White Stone as the central point, probably religious, of a settlement which seems to have been earlier than rather than contemporary with the Dorsey ramparts. Little is known of prehistoric settlements in Ireland, perhaps owing to their generally ephemeral character ; and we may well believe that they sometimes consisted of nothing more permanent than shallow pits used as hearths and perhaps as dwellings.