

THE PROMONTORY FORT ON KESTON COMMON.

BY B. H. ST. J. O'NEIL.

IN the list drawn up by the Earthworks Committee of the Congress of Archæological Societies, Group A is assigned to promontory forts, viz. "Fortresses partly inaccessible by reason of precipices, cliffs or water, defended in part only by artificial works."

The writers of the Victoria County History in the chapter dealing with earthworks in Kent were unable to find any promontory forts and, as far as can be ascertained, none has hitherto been recorded in the County.

On Keston Common there is an earthwork (Fig. 1),¹ which seems so far to have remained unexplained. Although well known to local archæologists, in particular certainly to the late Mr. George Clinch, apparently the only reference to it in print is a passing remark in his *Antiquarian Jottings* (p. 136)—"the earthworks . . . facing the National Schools." It was, indeed, this sentence which directed the present writer's attention to the spot.

The earthwork consists of a single bank and ditch of small proportions but readily distinguishable from the cultivation banks or field boundaries, which exist further south as well as on the nearby Hayes Common.² A portion of it must have been destroyed during the working of the gravel pit immediately south and south-west of Cæsar's Well. As it is, the end of the bank can be distinguished in section at the edge of the pit by the mauve tint of the disturbed gravel against the deep orange of undisturbed

¹ The writer is indebted for help in planning this earthwork to Mr. R. S. Simms of H.M. Office of Works and Mr. J. B. Ward-Perkins, New College, Oxford.

² *Arch. Cant.*, XIII, p. 15. It is hoped to publish a revised plan of these as soon as completed.



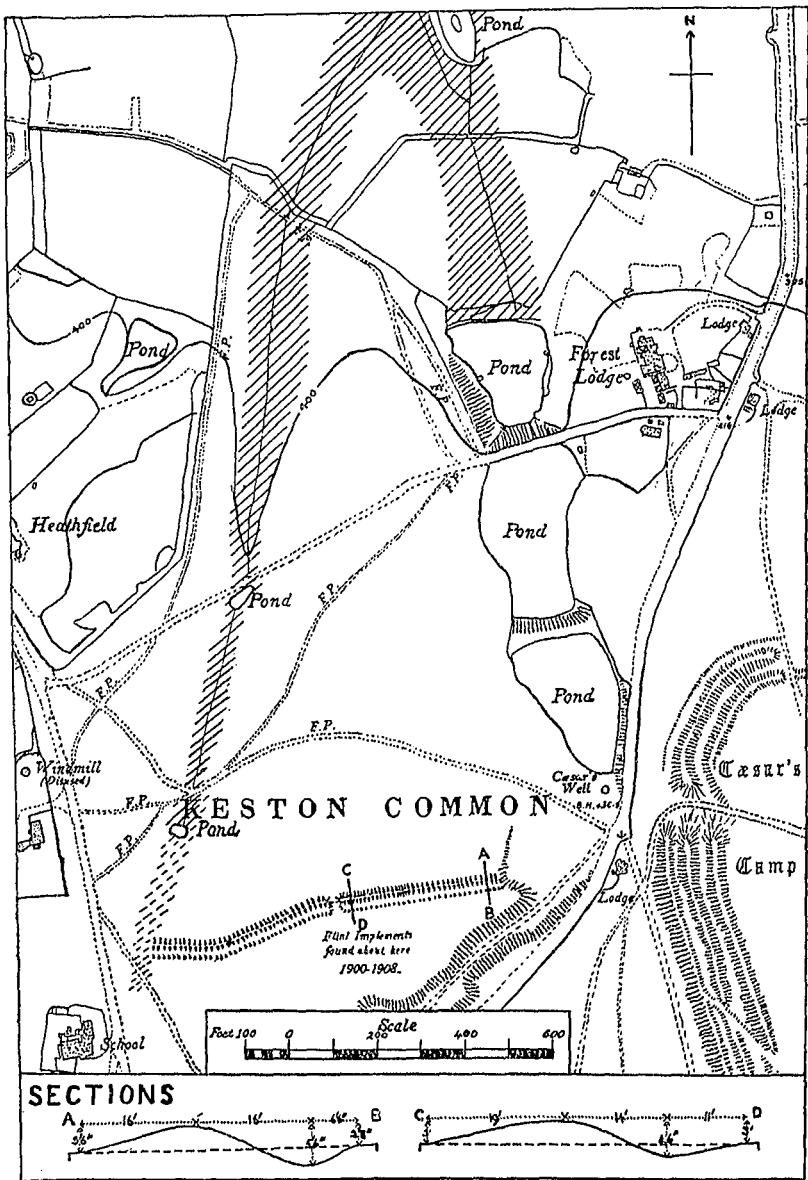
EARTHWORK ON KESTON COMMON.

ground beneath. The earthwork runs from the edge of this quarry in a dead straight line westwards for 353 feet when there is a gap with corresponding causeway across the ditch. It proceeds thence, twice altering its course and descending the slope, into a small valley. A few feet only from the bottom of this valley it ceases abruptly; there is no sign of any continuation up the other side of the valley, nor is there any suggestion that it once existed and has been levelled. Consequently it must be assumed that the earthwork is complete except at its eastern extremity. Here it probably continued in the same straight line or turned slightly to the north, descending the slope to the bottom of the valley and there terminated (as at the western end) at a spot due south of Cæsar's Well. The ground here has been much altered in recent years, but there is no indication within Holwood Park of any earthwork running up to the ramparts of Holwood Camp itself ("Cæsar's Camp" on plan).

The sections given with the plan on p. 126 and the photographs opposite indicate sufficiently the scale of the earthwork. West of the entrance it is slightly higher in places, but nowhere is the crest of the bank more than six feet above the bottom of the ditch. Its alignment in three straight stretches is well planned and calculated to leave no dead ground to the south.

The entrance is simple and measures 28 feet from crest to crest of the ends of the ramparts, the actual flat passageway being 6 feet wide. The causeway over the ditch, however, is 16 feet wide; it overlaps the end of the rampart at the eastern side. It may have been widened since the earthwork went out of use, for there are traces of a well used vehicle-track within the camp approaching the entrance from the north-west.

This single stretch of earthwork is unintelligible without consideration of the natural features of the district. The northern slopes of this region are intersected by a number of small valleys, which are noticeable for their copious supply of water. One at least of these within Holwood Park,



PLAN OF EARTHWORK ON KESTON COMMON.

which the writer has been privileged to see, is still practically in its natural state. The whole of the bottom of the valley is, for this part of England, extremely boggy. Although not dangerous, crossing needs care and takes time. The largest of these small valleys in the district is that which is now occupied by Cæsar's Well and a series of ponds, two of which being on Keston Common are a favourite pleasure resort. It can readily be understood that before the making of the ponds by means of a series of dams and the sinking of the well this valley also was extremely boggy; it was, probably, quite impassable in winter. The bog must certainly have extended some distance south of the well, which has served to drain the head of the valley, and also north of the third large pond.

The other valley on the common contains only two small ponds. Between them the valley bottom is boggy and north of the larger pond this bog assumes considerable proportions, being in places nearly 40 feet wide. The slopes are very wet and the flat bottom is well-nigh impassable. The stream in this valley flows northwards and soon joins the river Ravensbourne, which rises at Cæsar's Well.¹

South of the smaller pond the valley bottom past the western end of the earthwork is now quite dry, but it is practically certain that in prehistoric times the water level was generally higher, and there can be little doubt that this also was then natural bog.

The extent of this wet ground is marked on the plan by hatching. The areas which are still boggy are marked in solid lines, as are those outside the common, which must certainly have been bog until the advent of modern draining for agricultural purposes. The smaller area at the extreme south-west is marked with broken lines.

Thus there is a natural promontory comprising most of the common, defended on the two long sides by bog. The

¹ The writer has recently heard from Mrs. Thompson, lately of Hayes Rectory, the most likely derivation of this name, viz. a combination of the old and new common names for a stream—*yr afon* (Celtic) and *bourne* (Saxon).

only addition necessary in order to turn this to advantage as a camp in the Early Iron Age was a defensive earthwork at the base of the triangle. This was constructed in the manner already described.

The proximity of this camp to the great Iron Age fortress in Holwood Park raises the question whether it is merely a subsidiary work, attached to the larger stronghold. As mentioned above (p. 125), however, there is no indication now of any actual connection between the two, and the promontory fort is certainly complete in itself. In the absence of excavation the relative dates of the two works must remain uncertain.¹

The promontory fort may be of earlier date than "Caesar's Camp", which superseded it as the stronghold of the district, but on the other hand they may have been contemporary. In the latter case, although not actually joined together, the smaller camp would very likely have served as a pound for stock. The natural defences of bog and the single bank and ditch, even allowing for a palisade, are not insurmountable objects for determined attackers,² but they are certainly sufficient obstacles against cattle raising by roving bands of robbers.

¹ No real help in this connection is supplied by Clinch's finds of flint implements in the area to the south of the earthwork, as recorded upon the O. S. map.

² The extreme south-west corner of the camp is actually overlooked by higher ground, viz. the present road south of the Windmill, which is, also, the line of the prehistoric trackway to Hayes Common.