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PRELIMINARY EXCAVATION OF THE BARROW ON NOON HILL BELMONT LANCS.

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PART I

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Soon after the formation of the Bolton and District Archaeological Society in 1958 (June), the opportunity arose to carry out an investigation of a suspected barrow site on the crest of Noon Hill, Belmont, Lancs., about 6 miles north of Bolton. The site lies on the promontory of the Winter Hill/Rivington block at map ref. 647149 (1/25000 sheet SD.61) at an altitude of a little over 1260 ft. above sea level (Fig. 1).

The position of the site, approximately ½ mile due west of the barrow excavated by Dr. J.D. Bu'Lock and the late Mr. C.E.P. Rosser,[1] is a commanding one with clear views to the Lancashire coast (north-west to south). On clear days, the hills of the Lake District and Denbighshire can be seen with the naked eye.

The earliest known reference to the existence of the feature is found in a monograph "The History of Rivington" by Hampson, published in 1898. This identifies the site as "... a natural amphitheatre used by Non-Conformists for their religious observances." A further reference is found in Francis Erskine's publication "The History of Rivington" dated 1903, in which is a specific mention of a "tumulus."

Mr. J. Winstanley, then secretary of the Bolton & District A.S., obtained permission from the owners of the site, Liverpool Corporation, on whose gathering grounds it lay, and the consents of the grazing and shooting tenants, so that work could proceed without delay. The Committee of the Society then appointed Mr. J. Winstanley Director of the excavation, Mr. G. Jenkinson as Recorder and Mr. J. Booth as Surveyor. Before any further steps were taken, an accurate survey of the apparent extent of the barrow was taken, and its position, contours and elevation above sea level plotted, the lines of the baulks and periphery taped.

The Director of the excavation had decided to use the quadrant method of excavation in which the barrow was to be divided into four right-angled segments separated by baulks, and the material in any one segment is removed layer by layer, each successive layer being carefully examined before work was carried on to the succeeding lower layer.

Transportation of equipment started during the first weeks in August, and despite the difficulties of the terrain, all necessary equipment had been brought up on to the site by Saturday, August 9th. Work then commenced on removing the turf covering from Quadrant 'A' (Fig. 5) in the early evening. Members turned up to the site on the Sunday in such numbers that the whole of the turf had been removed by noon. The area uncovered was seen to be covered with a profusion of protruding stones: so much so that it was decided to make two exploratory trench excavations alongside baulks A and B respectively, and to take these down to the level of the surrounding ground in order to discover what the stratification was likely to be. From the evidence of the trenches it appeared that the barrow had a loose stone core covered with earth and then turf: a form of construction which would not readily lend itself to layering.

The weather continued favourable, and as many members arrived at the site it was possible to remove the loose earth covering and start work on the loose stone core. As there was more labour available than could suitably be used on quadrant 'A', the Director instructed that the turf on quadrant 'C' should be removed. By the early evening of Sunday the weather broke, and the site was deluged by a thunder-storm which effectively finished work for the day. The rain persisted steadily until 2 o'clock on Monday afternoon, when work re-started with a fair number of workers. Numerous flint finds were made as the layers were removed, and it became obvious from the random character of their distribution that they were part of the earth cover which had been taken from a nearby flint chipping floor.

Once again the rain arrived in the late evening of Monday and persisted until noon on Tuesday, making the work and conditions very trying. It was found necessary to dig drainage trenches to allow the water to drain from the site before any proper excavation could be started. The ground by now was completely water-logged and progress was extremely difficult.

Wednesday was washed out completely by a steady downpour, but Thursday dawned brightly and work started early, though at a much slower pace. The loose stone core was removed steadily and the lower level became apparent, exposing large stones protruding through in roughly concentric rings. By Friday the quadrant was almost cleared of the loose stones and excavation of the lower strata, a mixture of stones and earth, was under way. At one point a peculiar arrangement of stones, set on edge in a circle, was uncovered, and alongside a sandstone ball about 1⅛" dia. with flattened ends (Fig. 2), the stones were carefully removed without anything further being revealed.

The first discovery of cremated bone was made alongside baulk 'A' here partly in the baulk and partly in the excavation, a pocket of cremated remains was found, accompanied by a barbed and tanged flint arrowhead. It appeared that the cremation had originally been placed within a small recess formed with stones, but these had collapsed and spread the bone over a small area. On Sunday, 17th August, two diggers, R.E. Pearson and J. Winstanley jnr., working on a charcoal band close to baulk 'B', noticed traces of bone meal with distinct evidence of pottery. Further investigation revealed that it was in fact another burial close up against the stone core of the baulk.

In this case, a stone 'kist' had been constructed and an inverted pottery vessel containing the bone remains had been placed inside. The continual wetting it had received had quite clearly affected the vessel, as its fabric was soft, and the surrounding kist had partially collapsed, causing the weight

of the surrounding earth to deform the container laterally, presenting an altogether delicate situation.

It was decided, in the rapidly fading light, to remove the vessel: and the Director worked until late in the evening by the ineffectual light of an oil lamp to ensure that this delicate task was completed and removal, piecemeal was effected. The rain held off that night and the following morning, and work proceeded. Further excavation revealed traces of another cremation and also brought to light another post hole, making a total of two, each about 2' 0" apart. Among the bone remains of the third burial a fine example of a flint knife was discovered (Fig. 3).

Close to the centre of the barrow a fourth burial was uncovered, again part in and part out of baulk 'B'. The appearance of this cremation was similar in many respects to the first burial, bone meal scattered between the collapsed remains of a stone pocket. The whole of 'A' quadrant was by now cleared down to the level decided on by the Director, and the appearance of the projecting stone edgings was quite prominent.

The Committee decided at this stage that in view of the discoveries being made, it would be wiser to preserve the remainder of the barrow for excavation at a later date, and on Saturday 23rd August the work of restoration was commenced. The major work of collating information and evaluating the results of the dig was next considered, as it was essential that some estimate of the dating of the burials and the type of culture concerned could be made before a detailed report could be produced.

Samples of the finds and descriptions, drawings and photographs of the pottery vessels were sent for professional examination and opinion. All finds from the excavation were placed in the care of the late Mr. Alfred Hazelwood, Curator of Bolton Museum, who arranged to have the vessel restored.

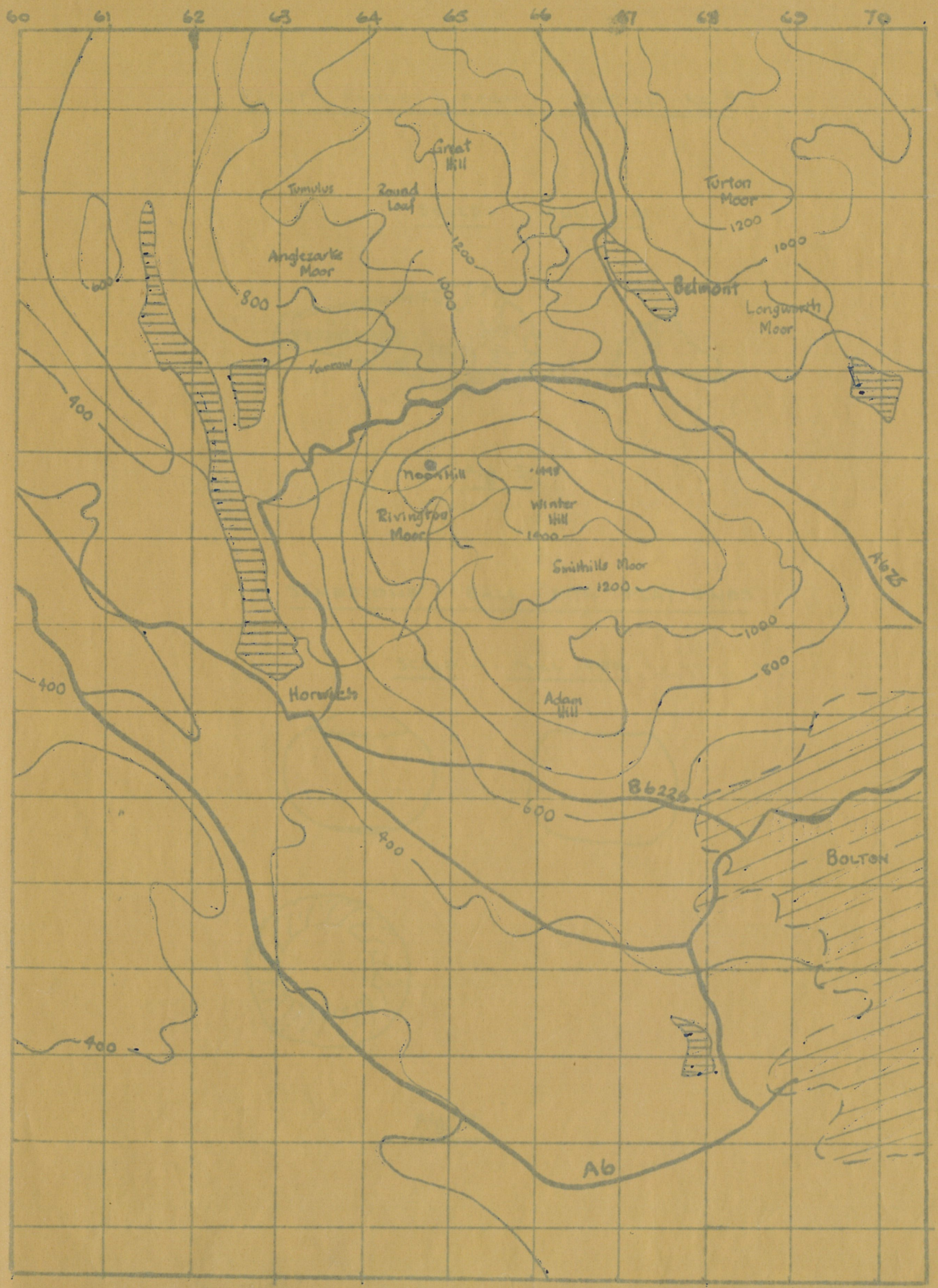
The then Assistant Curator of Bolton Museum, Mr. Cheetham, undertook the delicate task of restoration, and the vessel is now displayed in its stone kist in the Museum, along with other finds from the site.

Before a complete picture of the history of the barrow could be prepared, it was decided to obtain evidence of the geological formation of the area surrounding the barrow. An East-west trench was sunk down to bed-rock and continued at rock-head level, westward, until the periphery of the mound was reached. It was evident from the trench section (Fig. 6) that the protruding stone rim (Fig.5) encountered in the excavation of quadrant 'A' was apparently the top of some kind of stone walling, at the base of which there was evidence of burnt clay.

When the barrow is eventually re-opened, excavation will have to be carried out down to bedrock, so that any further habiltation floors, if they exist, should come to light. There remains only the Committee's gratitude to record to all the members of the Society and others whose enthusiasm under sometimed very trying conditions enabled the excavation to be carried out, and especially to those whose loan of equipment and expert advice enabled the Society's first major project to be carried out.

It is intended in the next issue of the Journal to attempt an evaluation of the nature of the barrow and the significance of the finds and vessel.

[1] Trans. L.º & C. Ant. Soc., LXX (1960), 66.



Scale 1:63,360 ~ about One inch to 1 mile. Fig. 1.

FLINT KNIFE FROM BURIAL No. 3

SCALE :- FULL SIZE.

Fig. 3.

SANDSTONE BALL WITH FLAT ENDS

SCALE :- FULL SIZE.

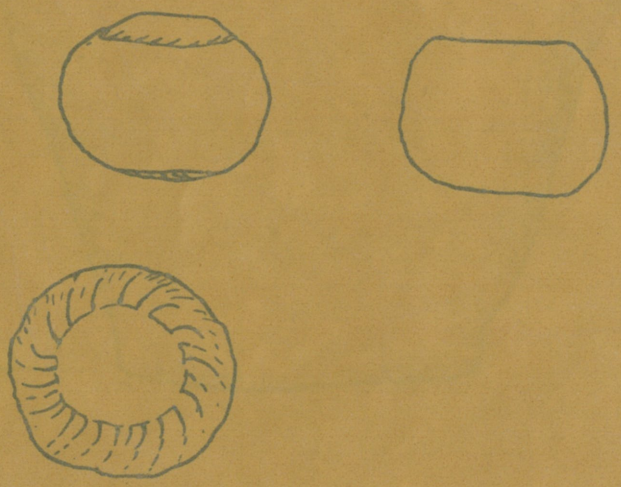


Fig. 2.

ENLARGED FOOD VESSEL TYPE

CINERARY URN

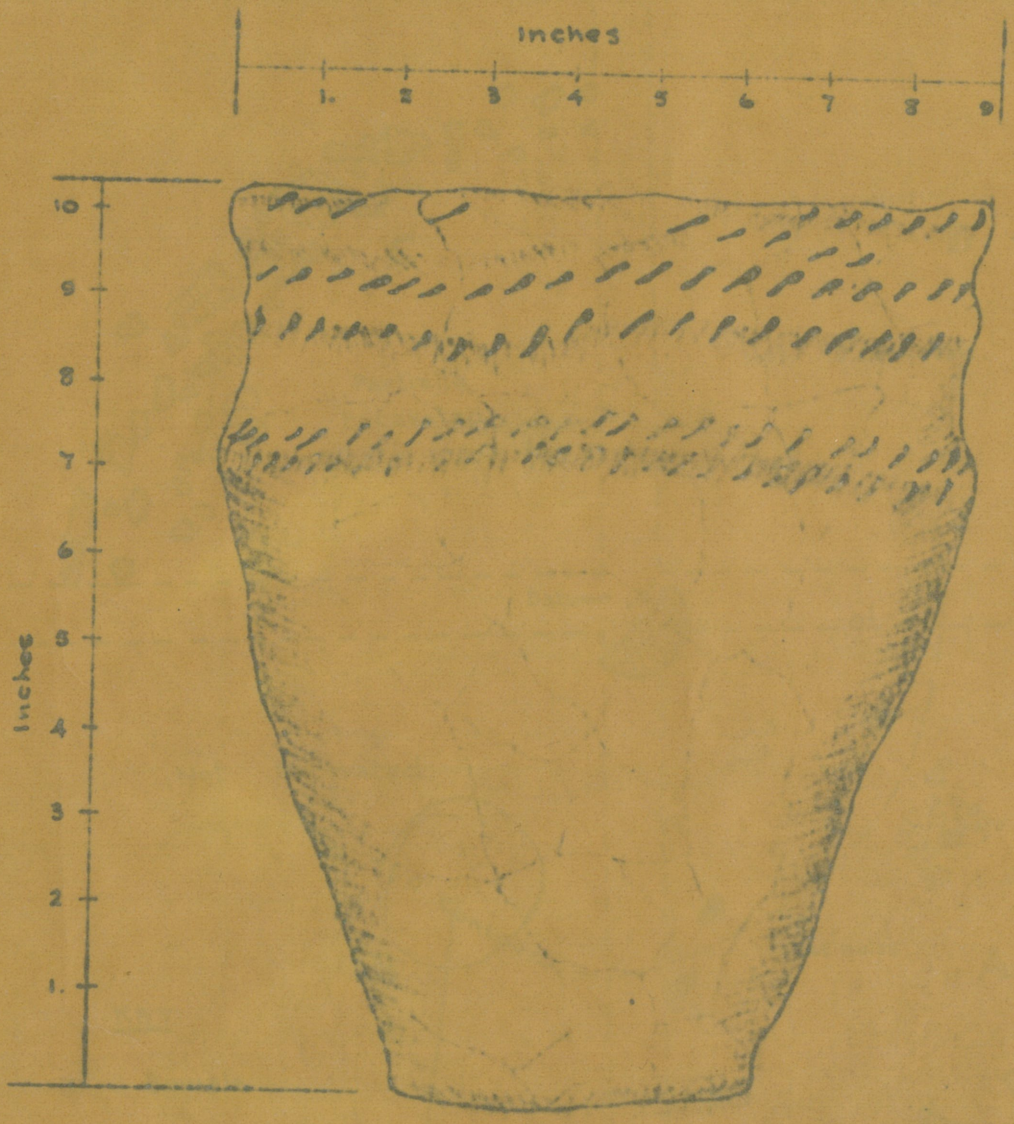
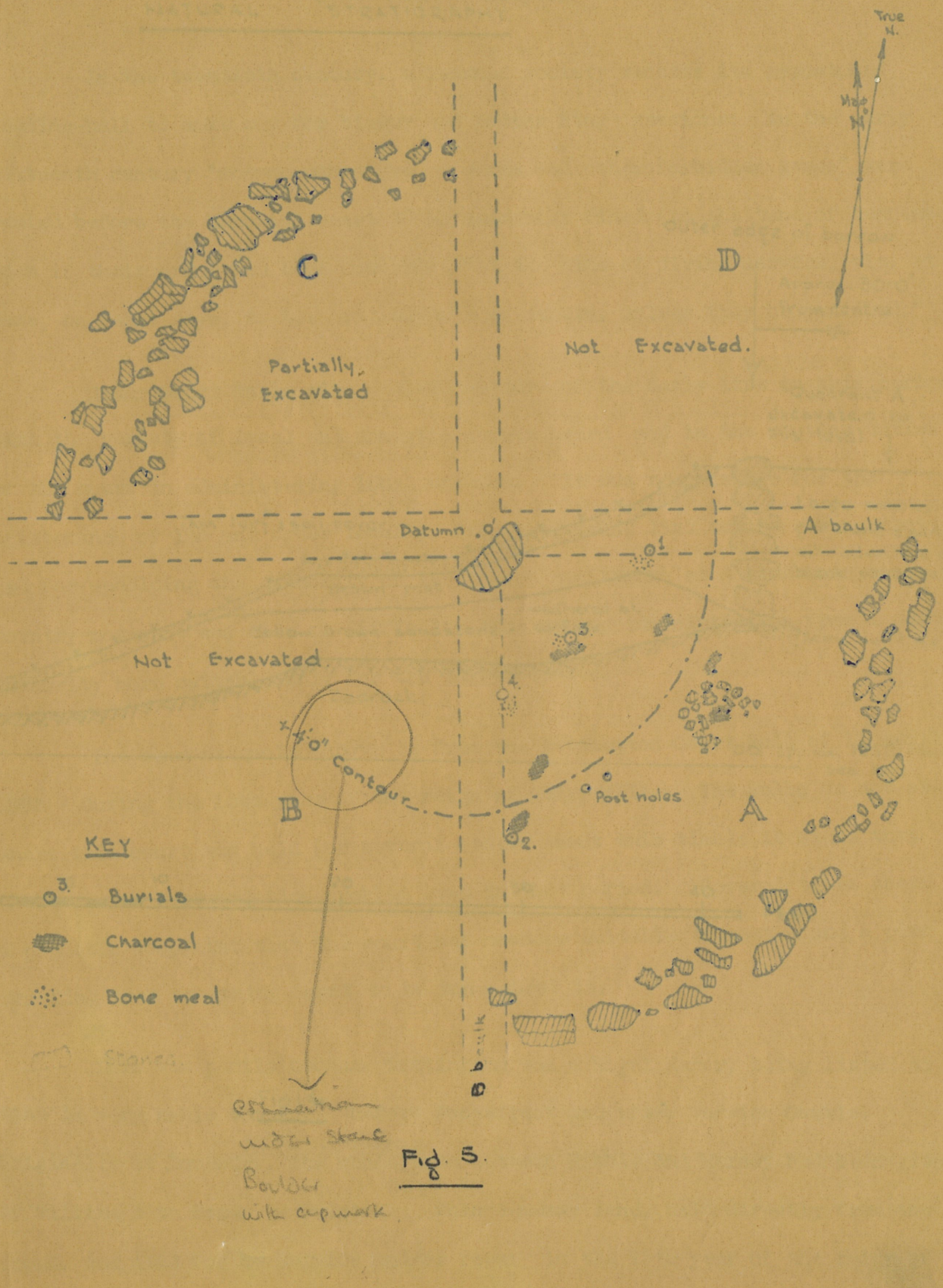


Fig. 4.

PLAN OF MAJOR FINDS AND STONE RIM

NOON HILL BARROW

Scale : 1" = 10 feet.



SECTION THROUGH EXISTING GROUND SHOWING NATURAL STRATIGRAPHY.

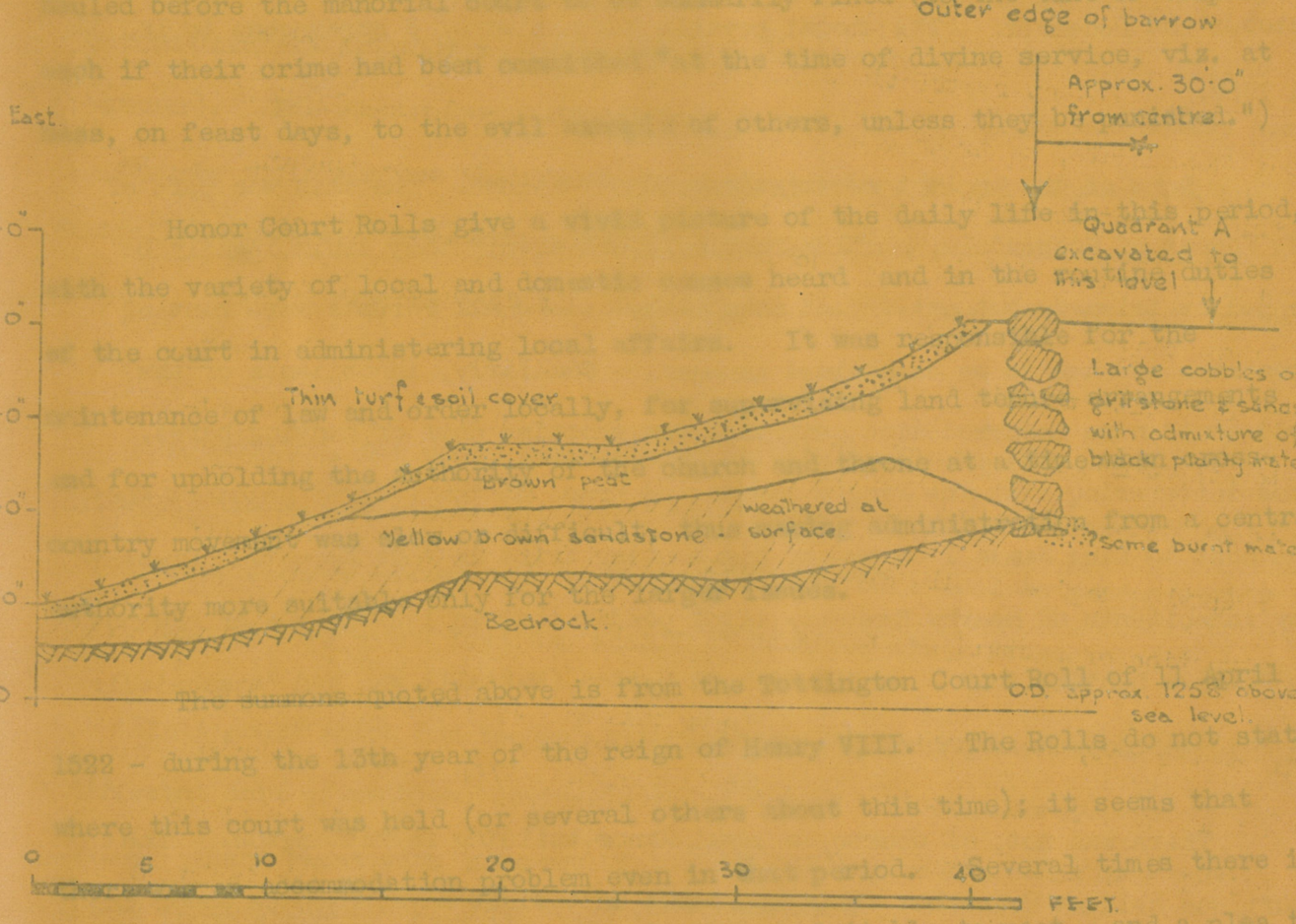


Fig. 6.