Prehistoric man on the Downs / by Arthur John Hubbard and George Hubbard.

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Publication/Creation

[London] : Printed by Spottiswoode, 1906.

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PREHISTORIC MAN

ON THE DOWNS

BY

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AND

GEORGE HUBBARD, F.S.A.

Reprinted from the 'Cornhill Magazine,' May 1906

Printed by

SPOTTISWOODE & CO. LTD., PRINTERS, NEW-STREET SQUARE, E.C.

1906

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PREHISTORIC MAN ON THE DOWNS.

BY ARTHUR JOHN HUBBARD, M.D., AND
GEORGE HUBBARD, F.S.A.

FEW things can be more interesting to the traveller than to survey, from some elevated spot, the road by which he has journeyed, and to observe its course as it winds away in the distance and is lost on the horizon.. It is an interest of a similar character, only immeasurably greater in degree, which we experience in looking back to the horizon of time and examining the works that remain to us of the earliest civilisation in our land.

The road behind us is dim, and the traces which our far-away fathers have left upon the hills and plains of England are so multitudinous, and yet so little understood, that it is necessary to make use of certain definitions and limitations of the subject if we are to arrive at any answer which shall be at once accurate and intelligible.

First, let us say that for the purposes of this paper we shall use the word 'neolithic' as a general term, applicable not only to stones bearing the imprint of a certain style of workmanship, but to all the works done by the earliest men of whose lives we can find traces, and also to the workers themselves. Palæolithic man we regard as below the horizon.

The human interest of this wider aspect of the subject far transcends the attractions of flints and sherds in a museum. It is true that the chipped or polished surface of the stones, and the outlines of the pottery, not only show manual dexterity, but bear witness to the nature of the life which was led by the workers. This evidence is, however, only subsidiary to the greater testimony of plain and hill.

Next, although the traces of the work done by neolithic man are probably to be found over the greater part of the world, we shall limit ourselves to our own doorstep—to the downs in the southern counties of England, where the interest is most immediate.

Even when thus restricted geographically, we find that we are gazing into a profundity of time which is scarcely to be measured

in centuries. When we consider that to change, and to follow the will-o'-the-wisp which we call progress, is of the essence of man's contract with things in general, we perceive that it would be unreasonable to regard this vast period as one, or to assume that considerations applicable to one of its epochs will be applicable to all. Again we must limit ourselves.

Two stages only can be defined. Of these the earlier may be called the Hill-period, and the later the Plain-period. The demarcation is fairly distinct, in spite of the fact that the diverse remains of the two periods frequently occur in the same neighbourhood.

The men of the earlier period were earthworkers, those of the later period, stoneworkers. The former were concerned only with the primitive necessities of life, and their settlements, built of earth, are of the earth, earthy, and the purpose of every part of them is purely utilitarian. The latter, as at Avebury and Stonehenge, built vast sun-temples in the open country, and showed great mechanical skill in moving and setting up the ponderous rocks which now form their monuments.

It is quite otherwise in the Hill-period—that earlier time of which we write. On the downs we find that the dominating idea of the hillmen was terror of the plains, which had become habitable in the later period. But, before we may pursue the subject further, we must justify ourselves in daring to describe, even in general terms, a life so far removed from our own.

It is necessary to bear in mind that we are dealing with works which were executed on the downland, and that there, when once the chalk has been scored, or an embankment built, the seal that has been set is imperishable, unless man himself again comes to destroy his own handiwork. In wooded lands the falling and decaying leaves will in time reduce all to the same dead-level; in cultivated land, ploughshare and worm are constantly transforming the surface; in a loose soil the drifting sand will in time fill up the hollows; on the mountain-side the storms and streams destroy, and on the lowlands the floods obliterate the records. But, on the uplands of the downs, man's work is practically everlasting. There, the ever-renewed mantle of short, dense turf spreads itself over the surface, moulds itself to every detail, and reproduces in its green outlines the forms which were graven in the white chalk below. Egyptian sand has not been more faithful to its trust; and the English turf has preserved for us the

record of a forgotten civilisation, whose works are to be seen, league after league, upon the downs.

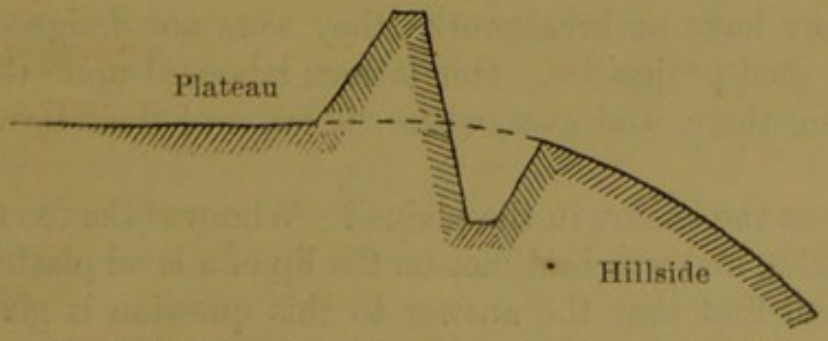
We cannot assign a date to these earthworkers of the Hill-period. Our furthest landmark in point of time is at Stonehenge, but there we find that the stones are shaped, and morticed and tenoned, though there is no evidence of any metal tool having been used upon them, and we see that the earthworks in connection with the stones of the temple are comparatively insignificant. We are indebted to Sir Norman Lockyer for the fact that we may say with much certainty that the date of Stonehenge is within two hundred years of either side of B.C. 1800.

Avebury, another great temple in a plain, is older, for the stones are unshaped, and the earthworks are immense. We do not know by how much Avebury is the older of the two ; but even there, immense though the earthworks are, they seem to have lost their significance as works of defence. The trench and embankment are not in their usual position with regard to one another. The trench is not on the outside—the side exposed to attack—as it is in all the other works with which we are acquainted, but on the inside, nearest to the temple.

The days of the hill settlements—of the terror of the plains—must be far away from the days when men worshipped on the levels of Avebury. How far back we cannot say ; perhaps the time should be measured in thousands of years. Probably our hill settlements may justly claim an antiquity comparable to that of the Pyramid age in Egyptian chronology.

The larger earthworks of this period may be divided into two well-defined forms.

First, and most striking in appearance, is the embankment and trench, thus in transverse section :

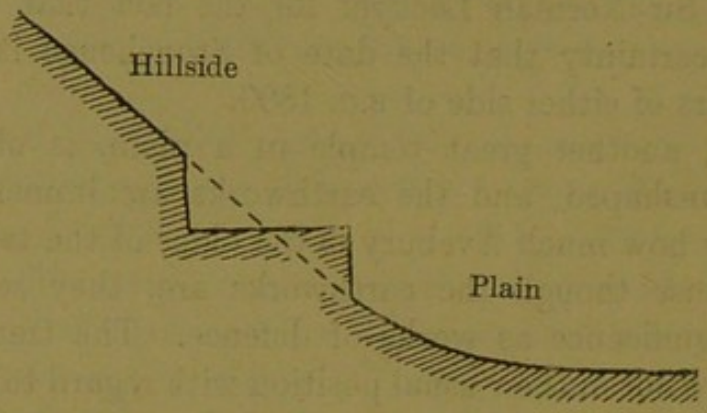


The dotted line shows the natural outline of the hill.

This form is generally found at a considerable elevation, on the

crest of a hill, and the breastwork was evidently designed as a defence against an enemy who used projectiles.

The second form, less commanding in appearance, is far more frequently to be seen, and is usually at the base of a hill on the edge of a plain. It is not too much to say that in most unploughed valleys running up into the downs we shall find this second form of defence. In the aggregate, hundreds of miles of it must still remain. Here there is no breastwork, but only a simple platform



The dotted line shows natural contour of ground.

generally constructed thus, as shown in transverse section, and several such platforms are often to be found one above another. They vary greatly in size, but very frequently show a rise of sixteen or twenty feet, and have a level platform of twenty to thirty feet in width. In Wiltshire they are sometimes known as 'The Shepherd's Steps.'

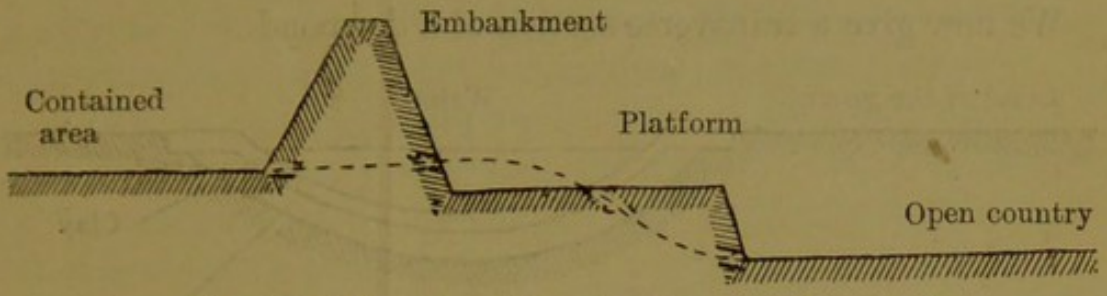
They are not a natural formation. They are not neolithic cultivation areas such as may be seen above Eastbourne or near Avebury. They are generally constructed only just above level ground, and without any regard to aspect, but cunningly planned to occupy the most advantageous positions against an enemy advancing from the plain.

But they have no breastwork; they were not designed against a foe who used projectiles. Our fathers laboured upon these platforms, here, there, and everywhere, because of their terror of the plains.

Who was the enemy in the plains? Who was the foe that used no projectiles, and was best met on the lip of a level platform?

We shall find that the answer to this question is given to us at Poundbury Camp, near Dorchester. Part of the earthworks which form the defences show a combination of the two forms

which we have hitherto described, the platform taking the place of the trench, thus in transverse section :



The dotted line shows the natural contour of ground

Poundbury Camp was the cattle station in connection with the huge encampment called Maiden Castle, with which it is connected by a well-marked neolithic road, and is situated in comparatively open country near Dorchester. We know of no other example of this combination of the two forms of defence, and we infer that it was more especially the herds which had to be protected by the level platforms—against, that is, the foe who used no projectiles, and who lived in the wooded plains.

This foe was the Wolf. The wolf, seeking his prey in the neolithic herds, was the compelling influence which drove man into the uplands, and led him to expend such an infinitude of labour on the 'shepherd's steps' which mark off the bases of the hills wherever we find the traces of our neolithic forefathers.

Keeping in mind the grey forms flitting through the night, we can grasp the significance of the other works which we find upon the downs ; the secular contest with the wolf furnishes the key to the enigma.

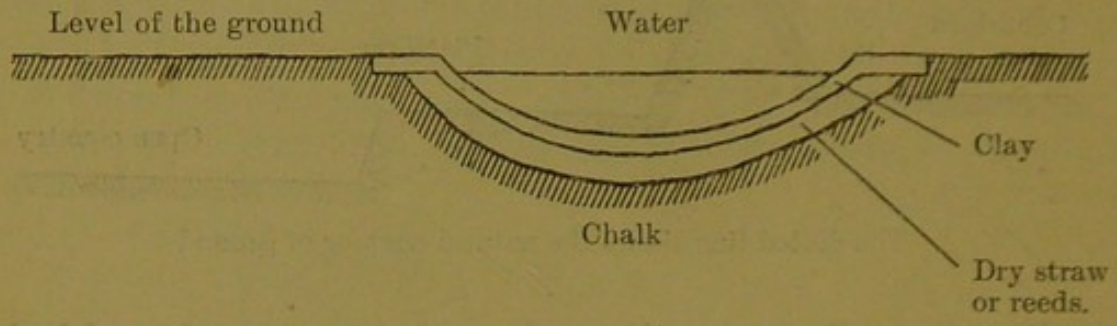
Of all the lesser works upon whose significance we are now able to throw a new light, the most interesting and the most important is the Dewpond.[1] We have elsewhere endeavoured to show that certain dewponds are neolithic structures, and it is evident that the upland country, devoid as it is alike of streams and springs, would have been uninhabitable by neolithic man had he not been able to secure an artificial supply of water.

He was not the master of a supply from the lowlands—the lowlands were held by the wolf—and all through the winter his herds must needs be kept in camp on the uplands. Without an unfailing supply on the hilltops, life was not possible to him, and perchance there was a time when the habitability of this country

[1] *Neolithic Dewponds and Cattleways.* Longmans. 1905.

depended upon a solution of the problem of securing it. The very ingenuity of the means by which he succeeded shows how desperate was the need.

We now give a transverse section of a dewpond.



We have elsewhere[1] discussed the thermo-dynamics of this structure, which, as constructed by neolithic man, could only be successful on the chalk. The subject is a large and important one, and by no means exhausted. As to whether or no there was indeed a time when the habitability of this country depended upon this device—that is as it may be. But we are convinced that the habitability of large tracts in this planet, now desolate, depends to-day upon the adoption of some scientific modification of this neolithic device. Over a thousand sheep may be watered daily at one dewpond when it is in good working order, and every morning finds it replenished.

We are uncertain as to whether the tumuli and barrows ought to be referred to the Hill-period or the Plain-period. Possibly the barrows belong to the former and the tumuli to the latter period. In any case, the wolf dominates even the mode of sepulture which was adopted for the dead. The dead were placed under a mound which was sufficient to protect them, and there is also much evidence which goes to show that cremation was widely practised.

We may now illustrate the foregoing remarks by an examination of any typical example of the encampments of the Hill-period.

For this purpose we have selected the settlement on St. Martinsell Hill, and the adjoining downs, not because it presents any unusual features, but, on the contrary, because it is representative of hundreds of settlements scattered on the hill-tops of this country, and more especially on the uplands of the downs in the southern counties.

St. Martinsell is a great chalk promontory jutting into a plain. At its base is the village of Oare, near Marlborough. St. Martinsell

[1] *Neolithic Dewponds and Cattleways.* Longmans. 1905.

Hill, Oare Hill, and Huish Hill together form a great amphitheatre, the steep sides of which rise some 400 feet or 500 feet above the underlying plain.

We shall here find an excellent example of the means adopted by neolithic man to preserve and maintain the community.

The steepness of the approach rendered the community at the top comparatively secure from an enemy advancing from the plains below, and such a situation must have been prized by him as a suitable site for a settlement.

The position is, in fact, a naturally fortified one, and the additional defences created by man must have rendered it impregnable to the ravaging wolves, or the human adversaries armed only with their sling-stones or arrows.

Before, however, examining his artificial defences, it is helpful to realise the necessities of his existence, and the conditions under which he lived. Everything must have been subordinate to the good of the community, for it was in the community only that safety could be found for the individual.

Great herds of cattle or deer must have been supported to provide the necessary food for any considerable number of people. These great herds would have to be driven into some place of security during the night, and great grazing-grounds would have to be provided for them during the day. In the winter months the herds would live on the fodder grown and gathered in during the summer and autumn. In fact, the care of the cattle must have occupied the first place in the plans of a chieftain.

A fortified citadel on the highest and most commanding position would have to be constructed where man could live in security, and whence he could survey the surrounding country and detect in the distance an advancing enemy or watch his herds grazing in the plain. Thence he could see in the distance the promontories and headlands where other settlements were established, and with the inhabitants of which he would be able to communicate by signal.

The power of being able to signal with neighbouring settlements may have been of the greatest importance. Evidence that camps were in the habit of signalling to one another may be found at Hog's Hill, between Maiden Castle and Poundbury Camp. This hill is in view of both encampments, which are out of sight of one another. On the top is an artificial mound with remains of dwellings close by it.

In this manner a timely warning of the coming of the wolves might be given. These slinking hounds advancing in the shade of the valleys, or in the shadow of the great forests, or louping along in their thousands over the marshy borders of the rivers, must have been a veritable danger to the herds while grazing in the plains during the day, and this danger would be still greater during the night.

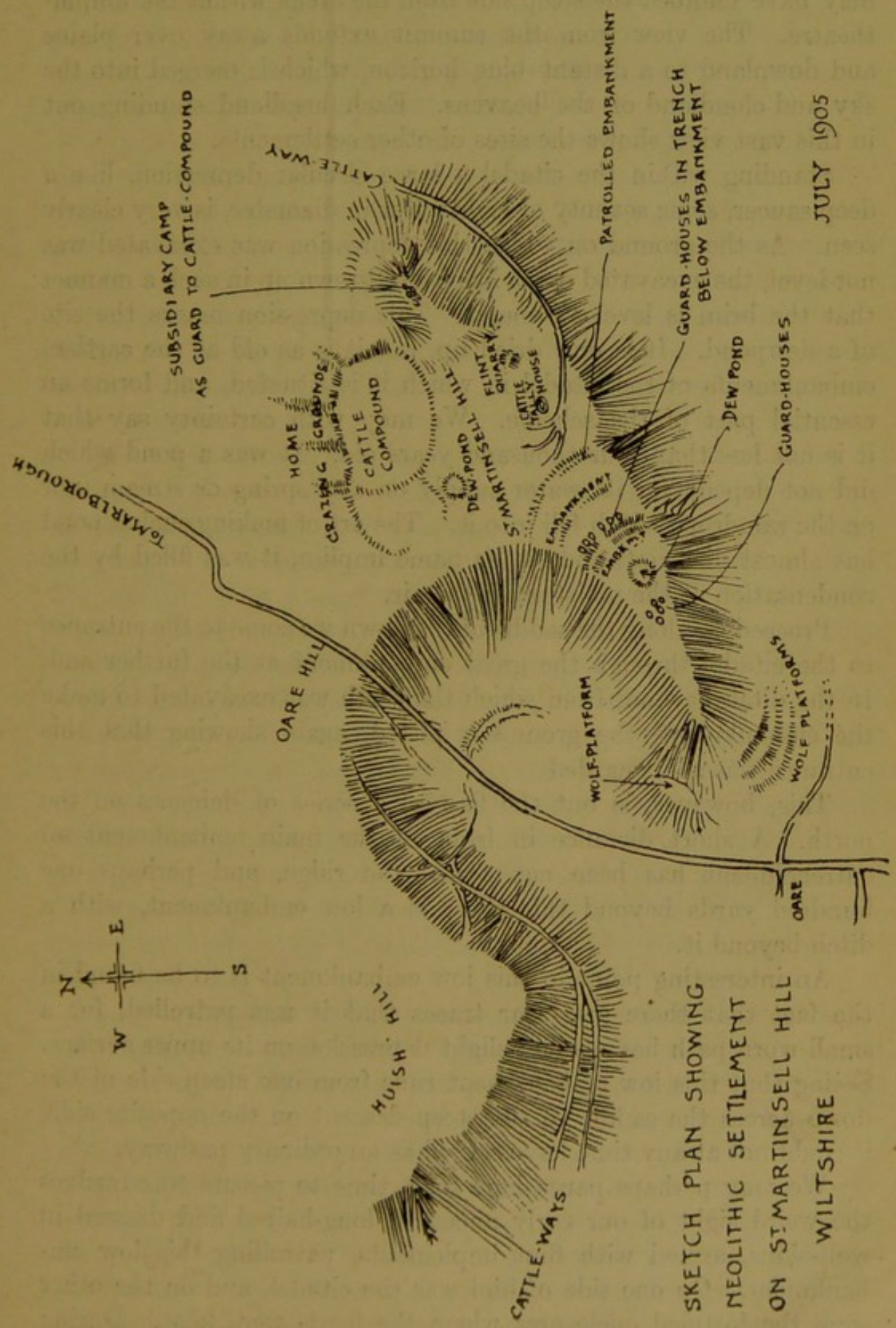
At the top of the hill a cattle camp would therefore be constructed to receive the herds in the evening, and at its base the great wolf platforms would be set in a position where a conflict might be carried on without stampeding the herds in the camp above.

As it is not the nature of wolves to fight a pitched battle against a great and organised adversary, the presence of bodies of shouting men stationed tier above tier on the platforms would probably have been sufficient to drive off the wolves. Furthermore, it is obvious for the security of the herds that the wolves would have to be driven off to a distance. To attempt to enclose a grazing-ground by an impassable barrier in the plain, even if such a course were possible, would have been to allow the wolves to lurk around the settlement.

Stupendous as are the works of neolithic man, it is almost inconceivable that even he, before the age of iron, could have erected and maintained, mile after mile, for hundreds of miles an effective palisading.

If we now approach St. Martinsell Hill from the south we see that there is only one natural way up its steep sides; but even here the pathway to the summit is worn into steps as being the only secure method of approaching the top.

At the foot of the hill and on either side of the pathway we may see the wolf platforms. Those lying to the east of the path are constructed in tiers where some three or four Titanic steps guard the approach on this side. These steps are thirty to forty feet wide, and the sloping face is but little less. On the west of the path is one great platform scooped out of the face of the hill, on which some fir trees are now growing. Near the summit of the hill the ground is pitted with small cup-shaped depressions. These small pits mark the sites of prehistoric dwellings. Situated as they are, they guard the entrance to the citadel, at the further end of which a great earthen embankment has been piled up. On the eastern side of the summit a level platform has been



SKETCH PLAN SHOWING
NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT
ON ST. MARTINSELL HILL
WILTSHIRE

constructed as though to withstand the attack of wolves which may have climbed the steep side from the arena within the amphitheatre. The view from the summit extends away over plains and downland to a distant blue horizon, which is merged into the sky and cloudland of the heavens. Each headland standing out in this vast view shows the sites of other settlements.

Standing within the citadel a large circular depression, like a deep saucer, some seventy or eighty feet in diameter, is very clearly seen. As the ground on which this depression was excavated was not level, the excavated earth has been thrown up in such a manner that the brim is level all round. This depression marks the site of a dewpond. It is now dried up, but it is as old as the earthen embankments of the citadel in which it is situated, and forms an essential part of the scheme. We may with certainty say that it is not less than four thousand years old. It was a pond which did not depend for its water supply on any spring or stream, nor on the raindrops which fell into it. The art of making such a pond has almost died out, and, as its name implies, it was filled by the condensation of the moisture of the air.

Proceeding along the saddle of the down we come to the entrance to the citadel through the great embankment at the further end. In the ditch beyond, from which the earth was excavated to make the embankment, the ground is pitted, again showing that this entrance was also guarded.

This, however, is but the first of a series of defences on the north. A short distance in front of the main embankment an entrenchment has been cut across the ridge, and perhaps one hundred yards beyond this there is a low embankment, with a ditch beyond it.

An interesting point in this low embankment is to be found in the fact that there are clear traces that it was patrolled, for a small worn path has made a slight depression on its upper surface. Seeing that this low embankment runs from one steep side of the down across the saddle to the steep descent on the opposite side, it could not at any time have served as an ordinary pathway.

We may perhaps pause here for a time to picture to ourselves the weird sight of our early ancestor, long-haired and dressed in wolf-skins, armed with flint implements, patrolling this low embankment. On one side of him was the citadel, and on the other were the fortified enclosures where the herds were kept. During the dark nights he must have heard the howling of the wolves,

and the frightened noises from the herds, and in the dim distance he could see, no doubt, the firelight from other settlements. From our highly civilised, if not over-civilised, point of view, the life may appear a hard one, but it was probably a healthy one for the strong, and the weaklings died early.

Continuing along the ridge, certain winding paths may be noticed which have a tendency to converge. By following the track of these paths it will be found that they lead into a country lane descending on the eastern side of the slope, and in places cut twenty or thirty feet deep.

As soon as we saw the convergence of these winding tracks leading to the deep cutting of the lane, we recognised at once that these were the tracks left by the herds going towards a cattleway leading to the plains.

We next looked for, and found, a confirmatory piece of evidence which we knew from previous experience would be present if this country lane had been, indeed, a neolithic cattleway. We sought a cup-shaped depression in the ground at a point at the top of the lane before it dispersed itself into the radiating paths. There, exactly in the position anticipated, the depression was found which marks the site of an early habitation. From the frequency with which a depression is situated in the same relative position with regard to a cattleway, it may be assumed that neolithic man tallied or counted his herds as they passed in or out of his settlements. We have called these particular depressions when found in other settlements the ' cattle tally houses.'

It is interesting to note from what was subsequently observed in connection with the settlement on Huish Hill, that this particular cattleway leads down to the grazing-grounds lying to the east of the settlements.

It will be presently demonstrated that considerable confusion resulted from the mingling of the herds which descended respectively from St. Martinsell Hill and from Huish Hill, and that neolithic man had to rearrange the grazing-grounds for the herds which were encamped on Huish Hill.

Continuing our journey along the ridge, and leaving the cattleway and the cattle tally house on our right, another depression in the ground is found. This depression does not possess the appearance of having been the site of a dwelling, owing to its considerable size and depth. Such depressions may be seen in neolithic settlements, and they generally have a low mound or hump across the

centre, thus roughly dividing the depression into two compartments. The frequency with which these humped depressions are found wherever neolithic man has settled, proves that they served some purpose in his economy. They are certainly not modern chalk-pits, as they are generally overgrown with the close, fine grass which seems to be peculiar to these heights. It is also noticeable that if once the surface of the ground has been ploughed a coarser grass takes the place of the fine turf. Furthermore, the absence of any cartway leading into the pits precludes the idea that they are of modern origin.

At the margin of the pit in question there is a faint indication of a worn path leading away from the raised hump in the centre. It leads to the edge of the steep side of the down, and here the excavated earth had been tipped.

These pits are, in fact, flint quarries, and the hump was left as a means of ingress and egress.

The whole surface of the land in the valleys and on the hill-tops is strewn with nodules of flint; but these were not found suitable for fashioning the flint implements of neolithic man. Flint which has been exposed to the air for some years becomes too dry and hard to be chipped into arrowheads, scrapers, or celts.

Sir John Evans has pointed out that flints which have been freshly brought up from a considerable depth under the ground contain more moisture and are much more easily worked than those from the surface.

Before the age of metal, flint working must have been one of the most important industries, for out of this material perhaps most of the primitive tools had to be wrought. It is therefore not surprising that flint quarries should be discovered on most hill-tops where neolithic man had settled.

It is also interesting to note that the surplus chalk and unsuitable nodules of flint had been tipped where it made the steep sides of the downs still steeper, and so added additional protection against any assailants.

A little further on is another dewpond, in this case still containing water. By the side of this second dewpond is a straw-thatched shepherd's cottage, where the kind wife of the shepherd made some tea with the water drawn from the dewpond, and her young daughters gathered a dishful of wild raspberries for us. Not the least of the pleasures in roaming over the wild downs is the pleasant rests we make in the cottages of these kind

shepherds, who are as pleased to extend their hospitality as we are to accept it. They refer to the larger embankments as the 'giants' graves,' or the great wolf platforms as the 'shepherd's steps'; but they know nothing further about them, except that they existed beyond the memory of man.

A short distance beyond the garden of the shepherd's cottage may be seen the outlines of a great encircling earthen embankment and a ditch on its outer side. Within this enclosure the herds were driven for protection during the night. The circumference of this enclosure must be at least a mile and a half, and it surrounds a level tableland with steep sides to the downs on almost every side. On the north, however, the ground falls away gradually, and here on the northern side the embankment and ditch are pierced by sundry openings. Opposite each opening is a field with an old hedge growing on the top of a bank. It seemed to us as we looked down upon these fields divided by the banks that they may have been small grazing-grounds for the herds near home. There must have been times of danger when it would have been inadvisable to allow the herds to roam in the valleys even by day, and the necessity of securing small grazing-grounds near the encampment is apparent.

By the side of these small grazing-grounds a spur pitted with the sites of dwellings runs out from the great promontory. From the position of these dwellings it appeared as though the occupiers of this small outlying camp were the watchmen of the grazing-ground. Only by the alertness and watchfulness of the men could the cattle be protected, and every precaution appears to have been taken to save the herds from the wolves.

All these works exist on the eastern arc of the great amphitheatre, and the western arc is in sight, a mile away, on our left.

In the distance we have seen great furrows scoring the south side of the western arc known as Huish Hill, but, viewed as we saw them, we had no conception either of their extent or depth. The furrows certainly did not appear to have been constructed for any defensive purpose, and it was not for some time after we had been examining them on the spot that their true meaning dawned upon us.

To pass from the eastern arc to the western it is necessary to cross the road leading from Salisbury to Marlborough over Oare Hill. This road passes through a deep cutting, and, as we scrambled down one side and climbed up the opposite, we were immediately

struck by the fact that a second deep cutting was scored in the ground running parallel to the road.

At a little distance beyond this was yet another trench, perhaps twenty-five or thirty feet deep, with particularly steep sides. Proceeding along the edge of this trench in a south-westerly direction, we found that it branched off into two. Each branch curved down the hillside to the plains below.

These trenches, without any embankments on either side to account for excavated earth, are cattleways. Occasionally other cattleways cut obliquely across the great one, and we were considerably perplexed to find that these oblique cattleways were not more than about six or eight feet deep. If both were cattleways it appeared as though the cattle travelling along the shallow trenches would have to make a mighty leap across the great ravine in order to continue their journey along the trench by which they were travelling. Hence the perplexity, for there was no evidence to show that the herds had clambered down the steep sides of the deep ravine from the shallow trenches above. We were therefore determined to follow up one of the shallow trenches in order to seek a solution of the problem. Our bewilderment was increased when we found that the end of the trench, where it opened upon the tableland at the top, had been deliberately blocked, and that in other cases the shallow cattleways had been likewise blocked at points just before they reached the deep one.

We presently realised that, for some reason or another, it had been found necessary to divert the herds from their accustomed tracks which led down to the arena contained by the amphitheatre, and to conduct them into others which opened out upon the level grazing-grounds lying to the west.

Cattle had been herded here just as they had been on St. Martinsell Hill. It must have been found that these herds when they descended into the plains by the old or shallow cattleways mingled with the herds which belonged to the inhabitants of St. Martinsell Hill, and in order to avoid the continuance of this confusion it was obviously determined to block up the old cattleways, and construct new ones, which conducted the herds down to the plains in the opposite direction. This explanation completely accounts for what we had discovered, and if anyone cares to ramble over Huish Hill, bearing our solution of the difficulty in mind, he will find how carefully neolithic man took all the necessary steps to carry out the alteration.

Apart, however, from the solution of the difficulty, anyone must be very forcibly struck by the age-long custom that must have continued century after century of driving the herds over the same road.

Even if one accepts the view that man may in the first instance have indicated by a cutting in the ground the line he intended his herds to follow, and making allowance for the deepening of the cutting by the washings of the storms and rain, it still remains that the trampling feet century after century could alone satisfactorily account for the depth of something like twenty-five or thirty feet of the great trench.

In conclusion, we may say that we know of no more pleasant occupation, or healthier one, than to leave the high roads and strike inland and upland and trace out the works of neolithic man. It is safe to say that nowhere in the high lands of the downs can the explorer find himself without the evidence of the great earth-workers. When the eye has once become accustomed to their works, it is always possible unerringly to detect their labours. Sometimes it may be only the slightest indication on the surface of the soil; but at others it may be that neolithic man has hewn great gaps through the downs, like gigantic railway cuttings, and the course of the country lanes occasionally has its origin in a neolithic cattle-way, or runs along one of the level wolf-platforms.

The hills and the plains speak eloquently of the prehistoric past to those who are willing to forget their own mode of life in the interpretation of the writing on the scroll which they spread before us.

Spottiswoode & Co. Ltd., Printers, New-street Square, London.