

THE DANES' DITCHES AT DANESFIELD (MEDMENHAM).

[BY ALFRED HENEAGE COCKS, M.A., F.S.A.]

Nearly half a mile east of Medmenham Abbey the Thames turns N.N.E. for about three furlongs, and then bends E. $\frac{1}{2}$ N. From this last bend, eastwards, the Bucks bank forms one of the few veritable cliffs occurring along the course of the river, and this was utilized as the southern boundary of the earthwork which has long been known as 'The Danes' Ditches, and from which traditional ascription the modern house and park of Danesfield received its name.

While not in a position to assert this is incorrect, it should be borne in mind that *Danes* is a very likely corruption of the Celtic *Dinas* = a fortified hill (or possibly of another Celtic word, *Dun* = a hill). As the language in use in this country altered, the meaning of many words became gradually forgotten, and in the case of names of places other words having a more or less similar pronunciation, and which seemed to be what the original name was intended for, were substituted. In the case of Deadman-Danes Bottom in Hughenden parish, the last word is simply the modern equivalent of the preceding one, a *Dene* being an older English word for a bottom or hollow.*

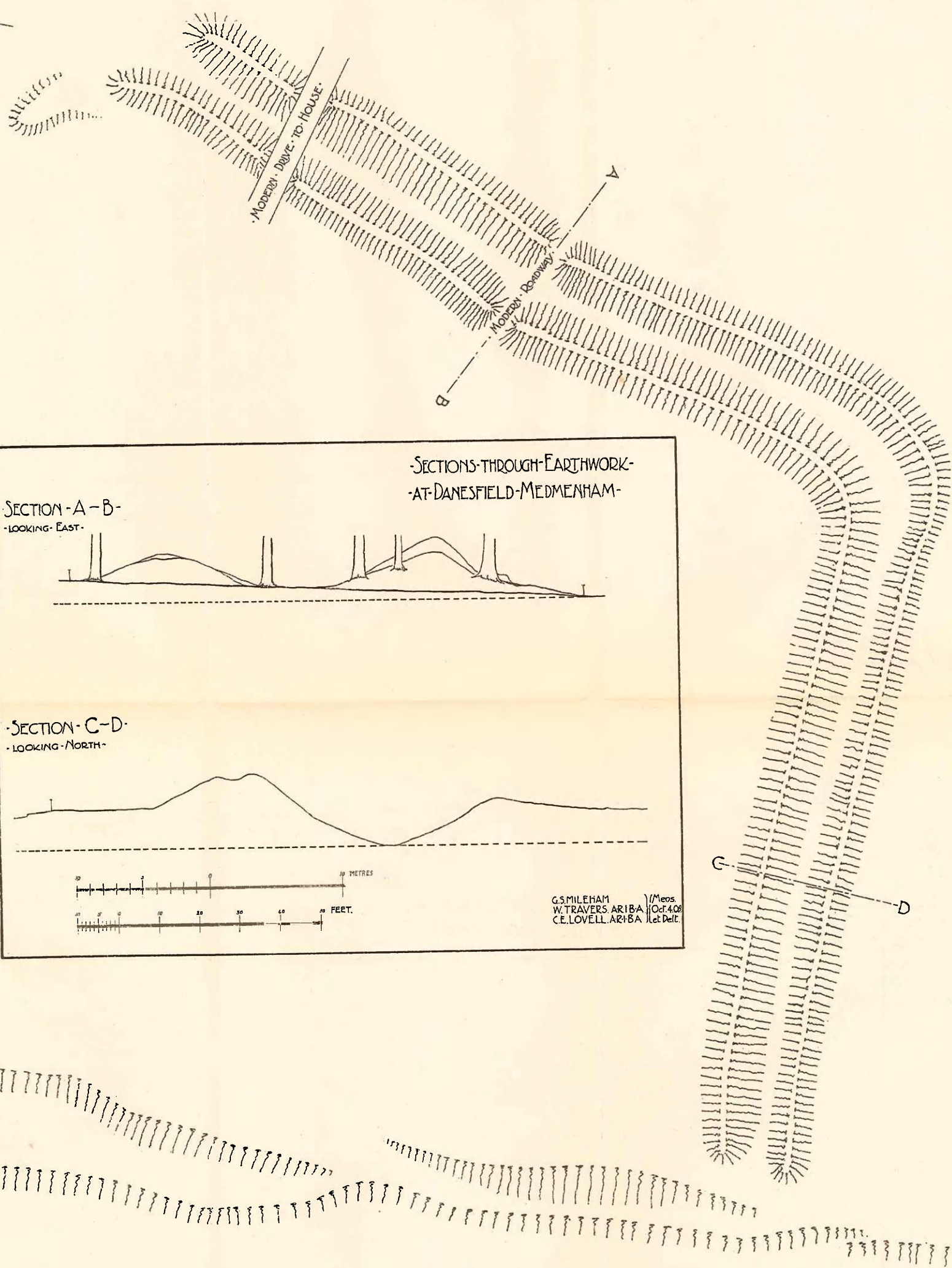
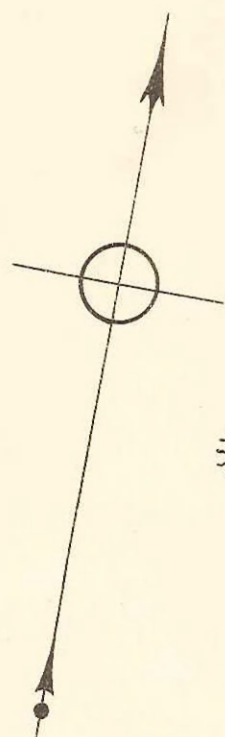
According to the classification of defensive works recommended by the Committee on Ancient Earthworks and Fortified Enclosures, the Danesfield Camp comes under Class A, the definition of which is:—"Fortresses partly inaccessible by reason of precipices, cliffs or water, defended in part only by artificial works;" and in form is "Rectangular," although this requires considerable qualifying.

The cliff face, though not a perfectly straight line, does not exactly coincide with the river edge, but has a general direction W. to E. The eastern valla†

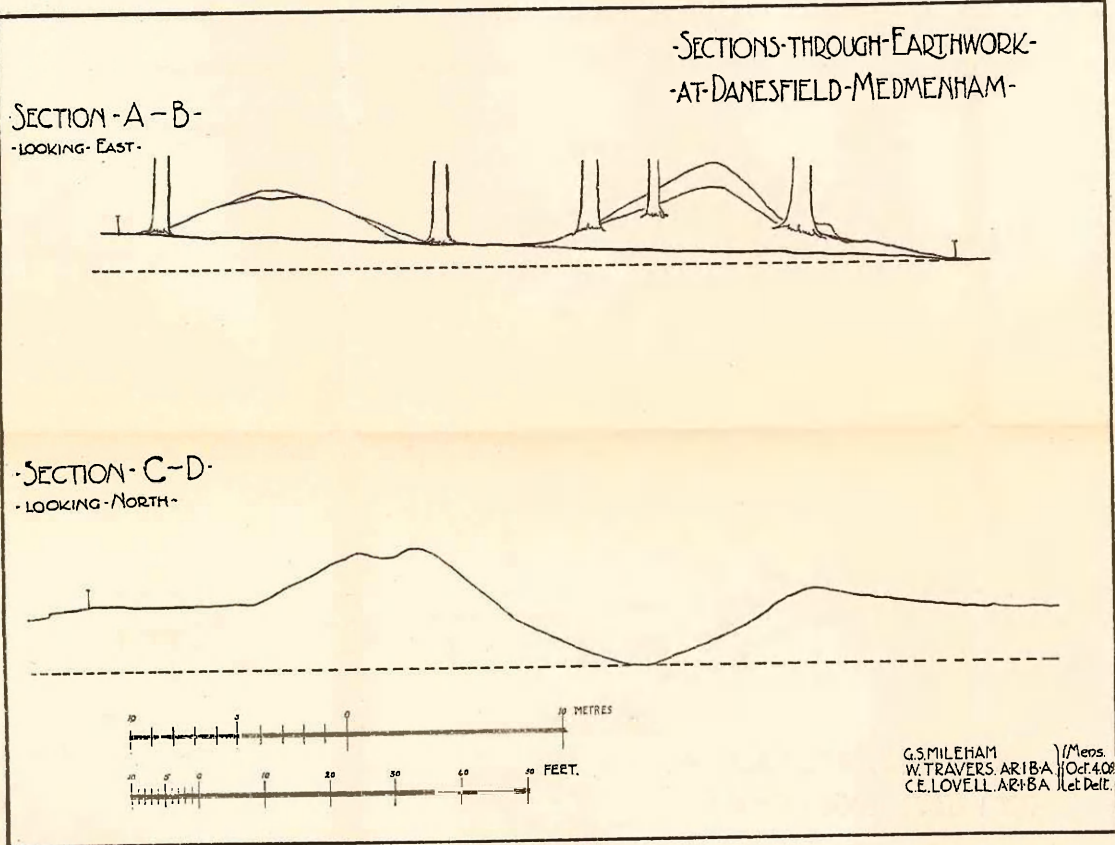
* See Edmunds, "Names of places," *sub vocibus*; Allcroft, "Earthwork of England," 71, foot-note; &c.

† I follow Mr. Allcroft in the use of this word. He says (p. 33, foot-note):—"If this unclassical form requires apology, the writer hereby apologises. Its convenience must be its excuse."

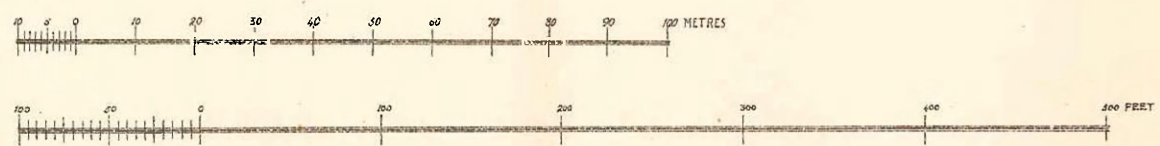
PLAN OF EARTHWORK AT DANESFIELD-MEDMENHAM



SITE OF HOUSE

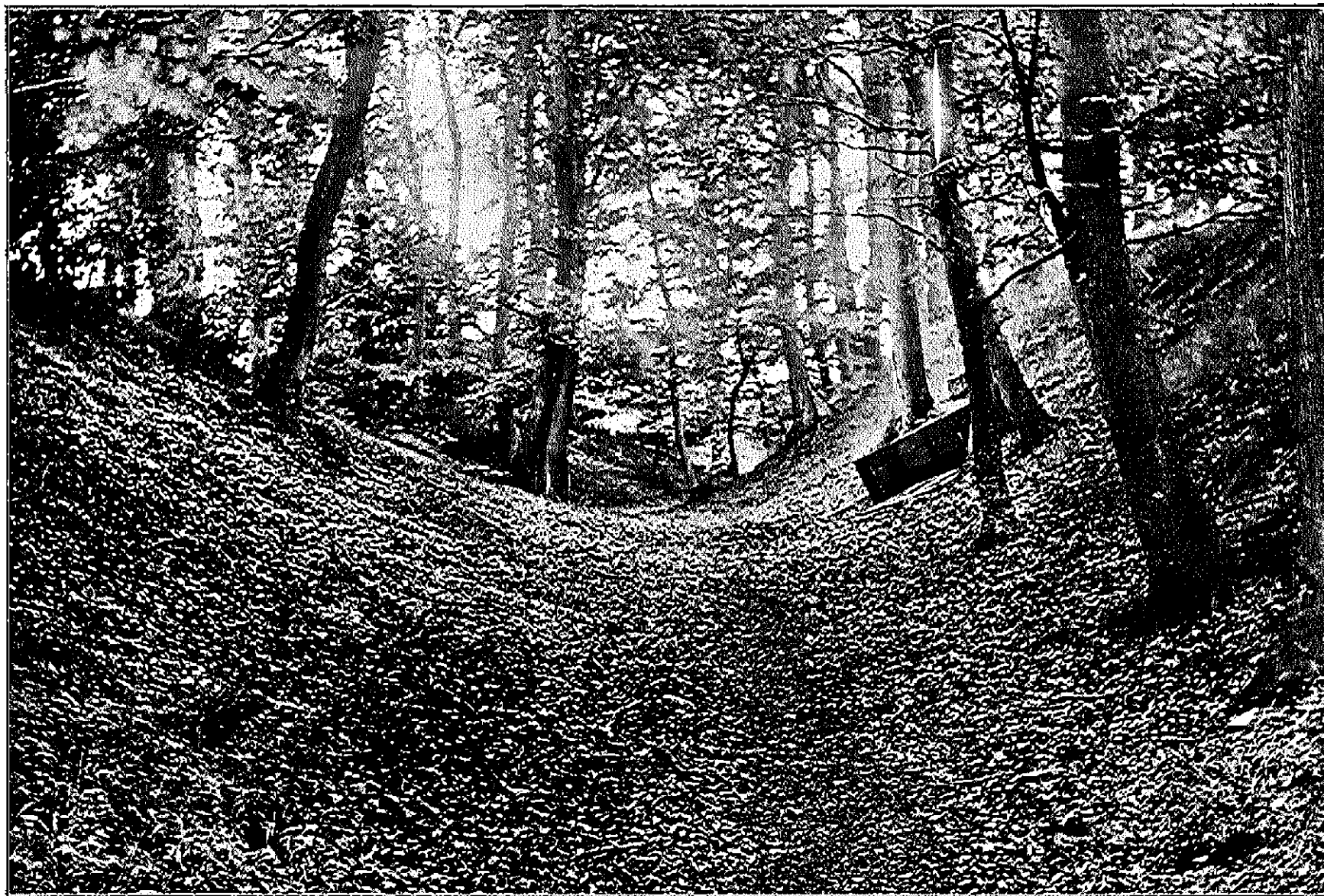


RIVER THAMES



G.S. MILEHAM
W. TRAVERS AR 18 A
C.E. LOVELL AR 18 A

Mens. Oct 4 1908
et Delt.



THE DANES' DITCHES, MEDMENHAM. FROM THE CART ROAD (= THE SECTION "A—B" OF THE PLAN). LOOKING S.E. BY E.

[A.H. C., Photo.

incline about N. $\frac{1}{4}$ E. from their origin on the cliff edge, and are some 620 ft. in length. The turn thence to the northern line is almost semi-circular, but there is a very slight angle when looked for. The latter valla run about W. by N. $\frac{3}{4}$ N., with a slight curve northwards and back to the original line at their present western termination, as if that point might have been the beginning of the curve to the western side. Their present length on the inner face is about 830 ft., with perhaps 50 or 60 ft. to the western angle missing.

The western ramparts are now entirely obliterated with the exception of an insignificant remnant near either end; the ordnance maps, however, (25 in. "2nd edition, 1898," and the 6 in. "2nd edition, 1900") show what remained of them until the building of the new house. Beginning about 130 ft. from the cliff edge, is shown what appears to be a single vallum, but was probably the inner one, with the outer one already demolished, running for some 380 ft. in a N. by W. direction; the southern extremity of this now alone remains, but cut down and smoothed out of all recognition. Then a gap or break, of about 350 ft., at the northern end of which there was, according to information kindly obtained locally by the Rev. S. M. Winter, Vicar of Medmenham, a short length of the double valla, which was latterly bisected transversely. These remnants are not recognizable among the trees, &c., shown on the ordnance maps, but at any rate vestiges of the northern segment remain to vouch for themselves, to this day. From close to this point must have begun the curve to meet the northern valla.

Not having the exact dimensions of the earth-work, its area cannot be ascertained accurately, but it encloses about 13 acres.

The height of the great earthen walls varies at the present time from 11 to over 20 ft. above ground level; no doubt they were originally of a uniform height of several feet in excess of the present maximum. From the gradual though constant dribbling of the steep surfaces of the valla, the precise point where they begin to rise is more or less indefinite, but the total width of the work is from about 100 to nearly 130 ft.;

and the ridges of the valla are about 65 to 80 ft. apart from centre to centre.

The former house of Danesfield stood just outside the N.W. angle of the Camp, in fact, probably the corner of the outer vallum of the west side had to be cut away to make room for extensions, and also the outer corner of the northern side for the stables: but the remainder of the western side continued as above described so long as the property remained in the possession of the Scott-Murray family; but the ramparts near the angle must long ago have been much mutilated, and must have run out gradually to a somewhat indefinite termination.

Langley, whose *History of Desborough Hundred* was published in 1797, states (p. 335) that the Camp was "perfect."* Further on (p. 350) he mentions that "Danesfield, the elegant villa of Robert Scott, esq. was the property of John Morton, esq. chief justice of Chester, who began the improvements, which have been so much extended by the present owner."

Lysons (*Bucks*, p. 605) gives fuller particulars of the modern history of this property. He wrote "the manor of Medmenham, and the site of the abbey, were granted in 1547, to Thomas and Robert Moore; this estate was conveyed by the Moores in 1558 to the family of Duffield, who resided at the abbey, and continued in possession till 1778, when the site of the abbey was purchased by John Morton esq. chief justice of Chester, and was sold by his widow, in 1786, to the present proprietor, Robert Scott, esq. Danesfield, the seat of Robert Scott esq. so called from an ancient circular entrenchment" (Langley called it "a rude horse-shoe") "of that name near the house, was the property of John Morton esq. above-mentioned."

Lipscomb (*III.* 613), without giving any authority, wrote of Danesfield: "It was formerly the property and residence of John Morton, Esq.," and continues: "who is said to have commenced an ornamental style of gardening here, which is only to be found equalled in the beautiful domains at Blenheim." Lipscomb

* Possibly, however, he was not critical.

confuses the earthwork here, known as the Danes' Ditches, with the "strong mounds or embankments in a wood above Medmenham Church," which surround the reputed site of Bolebec's Castle, but they are half a mile away (W. $\frac{1}{2}$ N.).

Sheahan, "History and Topography of Bucks" (1862), p. 905, repeats the substance of Lysons's account (but giving 1548 as the date of the conveyance of the estate from the Moores to the Duffields, and 1780 as that of its purchase by Robert Scott from Morton's widow), and brings its history down to date of publication. He says: "The mansion, originally built by Chief Justice Morton, was much improved by Mr. Scott, and afterwards almost entirely re-constructed by Charles Scott Murray, Esq."

A house had long existed here; Mrs. C. A. Scott Murray has kindly informed me that it was originally a farm named Medlicotts. The terminal S may be the genitive case of the patronymic of an early occupier whose family had adopted the surname from elsewhere, but if it is an original place-name here, this farm must have been of some antiquity. Morton apparently converted the farm-house into a "mansion," but the old name was not dropped, and the new name "Danesfield" bestowed, until Robert Scott "improved" the house.

Robert Scott (of Crailing*) died in 1808, leaving the property for life to his widow Emma (Assheton Smith, dec. 1837), and after her to his nephew, Charles Scott Murray, son of Charles Murray (of Philiphaugh†) and his wife Eliza, Robert Scott's sister. Charles Scott Murray died 1839, and was succeeded by his son Charles Robert Scott Murray, who married the Hon. Amelia Charlotte (daughter of the 14th Baron Lovat). He died 1882, and was succeeded by his eldest son Charles Aloysius Scott Murray, who sold Danesfield and the greater part of the Medmenham property in 1896 to Mr. R. W. Hudson,‡ and the remainder to Mr. R. H. Kearley (now Lord Devonport). Mr. C. A. Scott Murray

* Co. Roxburgh.

† Co. Selkirk.

‡ Since this has been in type Danesfield has been sold to Mr. A. Hornby Lewis.

retained the Hambleden part of the estate, and removed to the Manor House, Hambleden, an interesting house built about 1604,* where he died October, 1909. I have to thank Mrs. C. A. Scott Murray for kindly correcting the above particulars.

Mr. Hudson pulled down Danesfield House, and erected a successor some 200 yards further south, on the line of the western valla. He levelled the whole of the western valla then remaining, except the small fragment at each end, already mentioned; so that at least an idea of the position and general direction of this side of the earthwork may still be obtained. There is now a carriage drive forming the approach to the new house, cut through the northern side about 140 ft. from the present westerly termination; and further east again a cart road has been cut through the same valla; as it is shown in both ordnance maps, it must have been of some years' standing. The perpendicular faces of this last section remain bare of vegetation, and show the soil composing the valla to be a yellowish marl or clay.

Langley (p. 336) mentions that "A few years since some warlike instruments were found in making a walk round the rampart; but I have not had an opportunity of seeing them." This is a tantalizing item of information, as a bare record of whether they were of bronze or iron, without any detailed description, would have gone a great way towards determining the age of the earthwork. The single bronze spear-head, in my collection, found in the demolishing of the western valla, described and figured RECORDS ix. 437, though suggestive, is insufficient to prove anything. Like all antiquaries of old days, Langley agrees with the traditional assignment of these dykes to the Danes, and Mr. A. Hadrian Allcroft (*tom. cit.*) is inclined to the same opinion, referring to this earthwork in the chapter headed "Saxon and Danish Earthworks," where (p. 388) he writes: "The smaller work [*i.e.* compared with the camps at Shoebury and Hengistbury Head] known as Danesfield—the name may or may not be well-chosen—near Medmenham, is a miniature replica of the Dyke Hills at Dorchester,

* By the last Lord Scrope, Lord President of the North, who in 1627 was created Earl of Sunderland.

showing two parallel lines of rampart, terminating at one end on the bank of the Thames. The other end presumably also ran up to the bank, but it has been destroyed to make room for Danesfield House." *

The high double valla with intervening fosse are undoubtedly so similar to those at the Dorchester Dykes (near Oxford) that one is inclined to infer that the two earthworks are of the same period, and both depend on the river for their southern boundary; but in other respects the situations are totally different. At Danesfield the river edge is a cliff approximately 100 ft. high above the river level, and the ground rises within the area of the earthwork to more than 200 ft. above sea level. At Dorchester the Isis flowing through flat lowlands, and taking a sudden turn from south to east, forms the western and southern boundaries, and the tributary Thame forms the eastern boundary as it proceeds to join the Isis at the S.E. corner of the enclosure; from which point the united waters become, in ordinary acceptance, the Thames. These three sides (as at Danesfield) form a roughly rectangular figure; while, curiously enough, though probably from a mere coincidence, the northern side at Dorchester (furnished by the line of the Dykes themselves) has nearly the same alignment as that at Danesfield, in this case W. by N. $\frac{1}{2}$ N.—E. by S. $\frac{1}{2}$ S. There has been a peculiar, and now not clearly defined curve at the eastern end, perhaps connected with swampy ground bordering the Thame at that point. The area enclosed by the Dykes is higher than the surrounding plain, and would remain even now as an island for some time after flood-water has covered a wide extent outside.

Mr. Allcroft (*tom. cit.*) places the Dorchester Dykes among the Promontory Forts, which I understand him to consider as pre-Roman, though, as already mentioned, he places the Danesfield Camp—itsself a Promontory Fort—in his chapter headed "Saxon and

* In the Victoria History of Bucks. I. 34, the two Medmenham earthworks are merely mentioned without comment, under class "X.—Defensive works which fall under none of these headings." And even in the list kindly given me by my friend Mr. Ch. Ange'l Bradford, F.S.A., who has an unrivalled acquaintance with the earthworks of this county, they fare little better.

Danish Earthworks," though he does not commit himself to a certain opinion as to its Danish origin.*

Professor Rolleston always considered the Dorchester Dykes to be "British." Bronze weapons have been dredged from the river adjoining this Camp, but as Mr. Allcroft points out (p. 69, *foot-note*), "these may as well have belonged to the people who built Sinodun Camp, as to those who built the Dyke Hills. (Sinodun Camp is on the summit of one of a pair of conical hills on the Berkshire bank, almost immediately opposite, that is south of, the Dykes; the hills under the appellation of Wittenham Clump, form a conspicuous and widely-known landmark. There can be but few parishes in England which have yielded more antiquities than the two Wittenhams).

Mr. Allcroft goes on to say:—"Within the substance of the latter earthworks [*i.e.* the Dykes], when demolished by the plough, have been found coins and other remains of British, Roman, and Saxon dates, which would seem to suggest that the valla were thrown up at a later date. On the other hand flint flakes and stone implements have been found within the area," etc. The special demolition of the Dorchester Dykes was effected not by plough, but by spade labour in February and following months, 1871. Unfortunately they were the freehold of the farmer by name Latham, and he caused them to be demolished, according to his own account, in order to provide work for his men in the winter; but according to the freely-expressed opinion of the inhabitants of Dorchester, in order to deprive them of a pleasant place to walk on the soft turf on Sunday afternoons; and it is a cause of satisfaction to myself to have been humbly instrumental in saving the residue by calling attention to the wanton vandalism. Professor Rolleston, Colonel Lane-Fox (afterwards General Pitt Rivers), and others at once took the

* In the Revised Edition (1910) of the "Scheme for Recording Ancient Defensive Earthworks," etc., received (from the Soc. Antiq.) simultaneously with the revised proof of this paper, the very first illustration given of an example of Class A. is a plan of Dorchester Dykes. As copies of this revised scheme will no doubt be distributed to members of the Bucks Society with *THE RECORDS*, the plans of the two earthworks can be conveniently compared.

matter up, and notified the Society of Antiquaries; and eventually, though by that time it was almost too late, for the whole of the better-preserved portion had by then been levelled, Mr. Latham was induced to desist. The plough has, of course, since added to, and is, I fear, still adding to, the mischief thus wrought.

The Dykes proved to be full of Saxon burials, having been no doubt used as a cemetery by the later Saxon inhabitants of the adjoining town. My collection hence includes very little that cannot be referred to that period,—only a few fragments of undoubtedly pre-Roman pottery, the ashes from a burial by cremation, a good flint scraper, and two or three flakes. The skull (with many of the other bones) of a small dog was identified by Professor Rolleston as of a known Roman breed of pug wanting the normal first pair of premolars in the lower jaw; he supposed it to have belonged to a Saxon lady of Dorchester, the breed having been perpetuated since the Roman period; two or three iron nails are of the Roman coffin-nail pattern, and as they were found separately, may indicate more than one burial by inhumation, of Romano-British period.

In Dorchester itself Roman bronze coins used to be so common that when a man set to work to dig his garden it was called “going-a-Cæsaring,” and I have a quantity (about 250) so found.

The plan and sections from which the accompanying folding plate was made, and the necessary measurements for its production, were most kindly executed by Messrs. Geoffrey S. Mileham, Wilfrid I. Travers, A.R.I.B.A., and C. E. Lovell, A.R.I.B.A., at the time of their visit to this neighbourhood in connection with the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, in the autumn of 1909, and also in connection with the Architectural and Topographical Society, of which Mr. Travers is the Hon. Sec. The work naturally entailed a great amount of trouble and labour, and I have to thank them very sincerely for their most generous assistance, for the accuracy of which, Mr. Travers writes me, “we are prepared to stand guarantee.”