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EXCAVATION OF A PROMONTORY FORT AT PORT GRENAUGH, SANTON

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Of the numerous promontory forts on the coast of the Isle of Man only one — the Vowlan fort on the shore of Ramsey bay — has previously been excavated. It was examined in 1946 by Dr. G. Bersu, who found traces of five temporary buildings, which from their rectangular three-aisled plan could be ascribed to the Viking period. There were unfortunately no finds to date them more precisely. In his report (*Antiquaries Journal*, xxix, p. 62, *seq.*) he has made a tentative classification of the twenty-one Manx promontory forts which he lists.

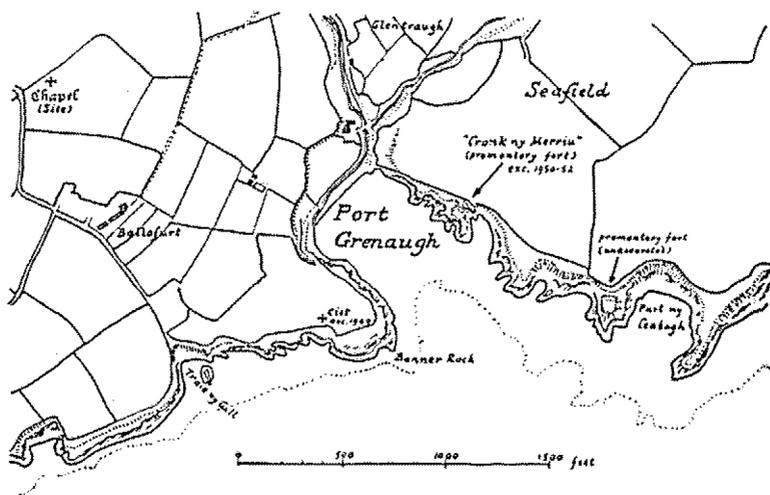
The promontory fort known as Cronk ny Merriu was selected for excavation in 1950. It is situated in the parish of Santon, about 150 yards from the mouth of the Grenagh river on the east side of Grenagh bay, which is small and sheltered and would provide a suitable landing-place for ships of shallow draught. Standing on the cliff-top some 80 feet above the shore it commands a fine view of the rocky coast to the south as far as the natural harbour of Derbyhaven, 2½ miles away; a projecting headland shuts off the coast in the other direction. On the north-west and south-west sides of the promontory the cliffs are almost sheer, but on the south-east side it is possible to scramble down perilously to the shore.

The site was chosen for investigation partly because it is much more easily accessible than most of the Manx promontory forts, and partly because there were clear and encouraging surface-indications of a long rectangular house. Work began in August, 1950, and continued each August, September and April until August, 1952.

The first season was devoted to examining the house, and this was done in two stages. First of all the thin covering of earth was removed, and the mass of stonework which was revealed was cleaned up to be examined and recorded. This made it possible to distinguish between stones which were still in position and those which had fallen and were lying alongside them. The walls as revealed at this stage were between 4 and 5 feet thick, built of earth with a stone facing both inside and out. It soon became clear that the fallen stones lay almost exclusively on the inside; the outer stone facing, therefore, was prob-

ably never very much higher than the one or two courses which stand to-day. The inside face had clearly been considerably higher.

The second stage was to remove the fallen stones and to try to find the floor of the building. The original floor-level was difficult to determine, as there was no occupation material, nor even any discoloration of the soil. An approximate indication of where the floor must have been was obtained from the height of some small stones, which continued the line of the bench. These projected only about four inches above an undisturbed layer; so the original floor-level, supposing the small stones projected above it at least an inch, must have been within three inches of the undisturbed earth.



The plan of the house was roughly rectangular, with internal dimensions of about 35 feet by 14 feet. The corners were curved on the outside but approximately square on the inside. The walls were preserved to a height of between 1 and 2 feet, with the exception of part of the west wall¹ which, probably owing to erosion of the side of the promontory, had begun to subside over the edge of the cliff. To give an idea of the original height of the inside of the wall, the fallen stones opposite a given length were rebuilt into approximately

¹ The west wall strictly faces north-west. All indications of direction have been simplified, so that the seaward wall of the house, which faces south-west, is referred to as the 'south wall.'

their original position, and stood about 5 feet above the floor-level. It seemed that on the outside of the walls there had never been more than one or two courses of stone, which would have served as a kerb for a thick structure of sods,² perhaps battered towards the stone facing on the inside.

There were three doorways — two nearly opposite each other in the long sides near the west end, and one in the short east wall. The doorways in the north and south walls may be treated together, as they were substantially alike. They varied in width between 3 feet and 3 feet 6 inches, and their sides were well built up with stonework similar to that which formed the inside facing of the walls. The southern door was narrower on the outside than on the inside, but this may have been accidental. The difference is about 6 inches. There were no traces in either doorway of doorposts.

The east door, on the other hand, was about 2 feet 3 inches wide on the inside, and at least twice that on the outside. It is possible that some stones were missing from the outer facing of the wall, but no traces of them were to be found in the ground. If this splayed shape is original it may have been intended to make it easier to go in and out of the doorway, which is so near to the edge of the cliff. The sides of this doorway had no facing of stone, and it was much inferior in workmanship to the neatly built doorways at the other end of the house. It seems excessive to have three doorways in use at the same time, and it may be suggested that this one was hewn through the east wall for some special purpose in a late stage of the house's history, when a carefully finished entrance was no longer thought necessary.

The main part of the building, to the east of the pair of doorways, seemed to have been divided lengthwise into three approximately equal parts. The division is clearest between the central and southern portions. A line of flat stones set up on edge begins about 5 feet from the east wall and runs parallel to the south wall, about 5 feet away from it, for about 12 feet. For the next 4 feet there may have been a gap; or possibly some small slaty stones which now lie inside the line may have once stood in the line and have been displaced by the collapse of the wall. Then there is one large isolated stone, after which small stones produce the line for about 4 feet 6 inches and then turn south to join the east side of the south doorway.

There are traces of a similar division between the central and northern portions. Some very small stones indicate a line beginning at the east side of the north doorway and then curving to the east

² The word 'turf' has been avoided as far as possible in this report, as it bears in the Isle of Man the special meaning 'peat.'

to run parallel to the north side about 5 feet away from it. There is an isolated large stone opposite the corresponding one on the south side, and then nothing more except for a few slight fragments opposite the easternmost stone of the south line. There were, however, marks in the subsoil about the middle of the line which suggested that fairly large stones had stood there. These stones supported the edge of the low earth ledge, which, raised some 14 inches above the floor, provided both sitting and sleeping accommodation in houses of this type. Such a ledge (technically known as the 'bench') ran along most of the south wall of the house, and perhaps originally along part of the north wall; but on the north side it had been mainly levelled out, possibly to allow more floor space. With both benches intact the floor space proper was only a narrow strip down the middle of the building. The filling of the central portion of the house, between the humus and the grey clayey subsoil, consisted of a homogeneous dark brown earth, often mixed with fragments of slate. On the northern and southern sides there always occurred, though in varying degrees, an undisturbed layer of reddish-brown earth, such as occurs naturally between the clay and the humus. It looks, therefore, as if the builders of the house dug out the central portion but left the side portions more or less undisturbed, and by placing a facing of stones along their edges, and perhaps building them up a little with extra material, formed the earth benches along both sides of the house.

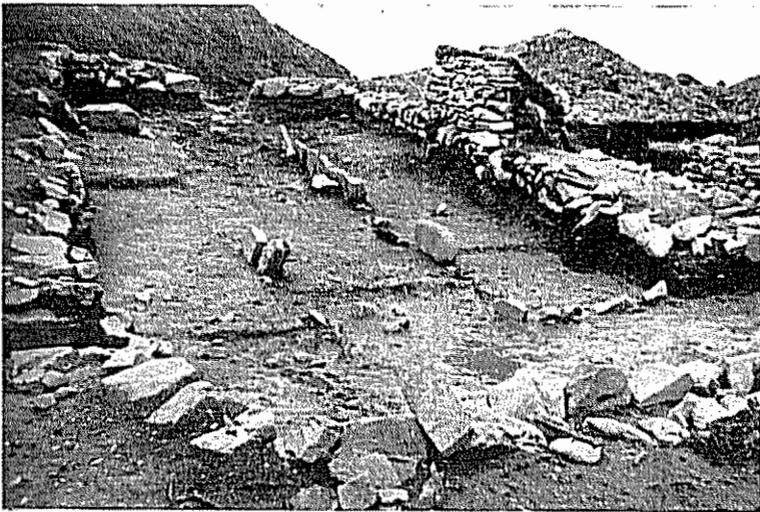
A comparable but much more irregular line of stones ran along the west wall. It was not possible to determine whether there had been a filling of earth between these and the wall. There was a gap at each end and also in the middle of this line of stones. There were marks in the subsoil which suggested that the two end gaps had originally been filled, but there was nothing to suggest that the middle one had been.

A large stone was set at right-angles to the north wall about 3 feet from the north-east corner, forming a small recess. Three post-holes were discovered, approximately along the central axis of the building. The westernmost, which was the largest, was clearly marked by four packing stones. They were not of uniform size nor regularly spaced, and probably did not belong to the original form of the building. They were perhaps put in position at different times as weaknesses revealed themselves in the roof.

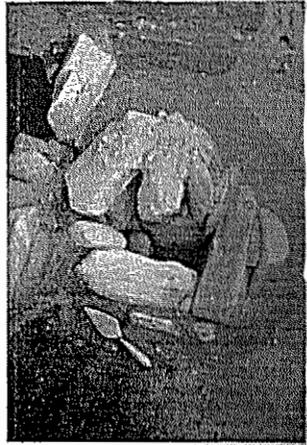
In keeping with the total lack of occupation material was the absence of a hearth. There were two clusters of 'pot-boilers' lying on the floor against the bench stones, and between the bench stones



Aerial view of the site from the north-west. The structure in the field opposite it is an unfinished reconstruction of the house. There is a second promontory fort near the far corner of the stone field-wall.



General view of the house after excavation, taken from the north-west corner. A small portion of the south wall has been rebuilt to show its original height.



and the easternmost post-hole part of the floor was stained a reddish-brown. The clay of the floor was extremely hard at this point, but there were no really satisfactory indications of a fire. Certainly there was nothing approaching a stone-built hearth.

The defences of the site consisted of a broad earth rampart and a fosse. One section was dug right through both to obtain a continuous profile, and the interesting arrangements on the inside of the rampart were examined in some detail. The fosse proved to have been dug about 9 feet below the original surface of the ground; it had steep sides, and a flat bottom about 5 feet broad. At one point it had been cut several inches into the rock. We were disappointed in our hope that small finds would occur in its lower levels.

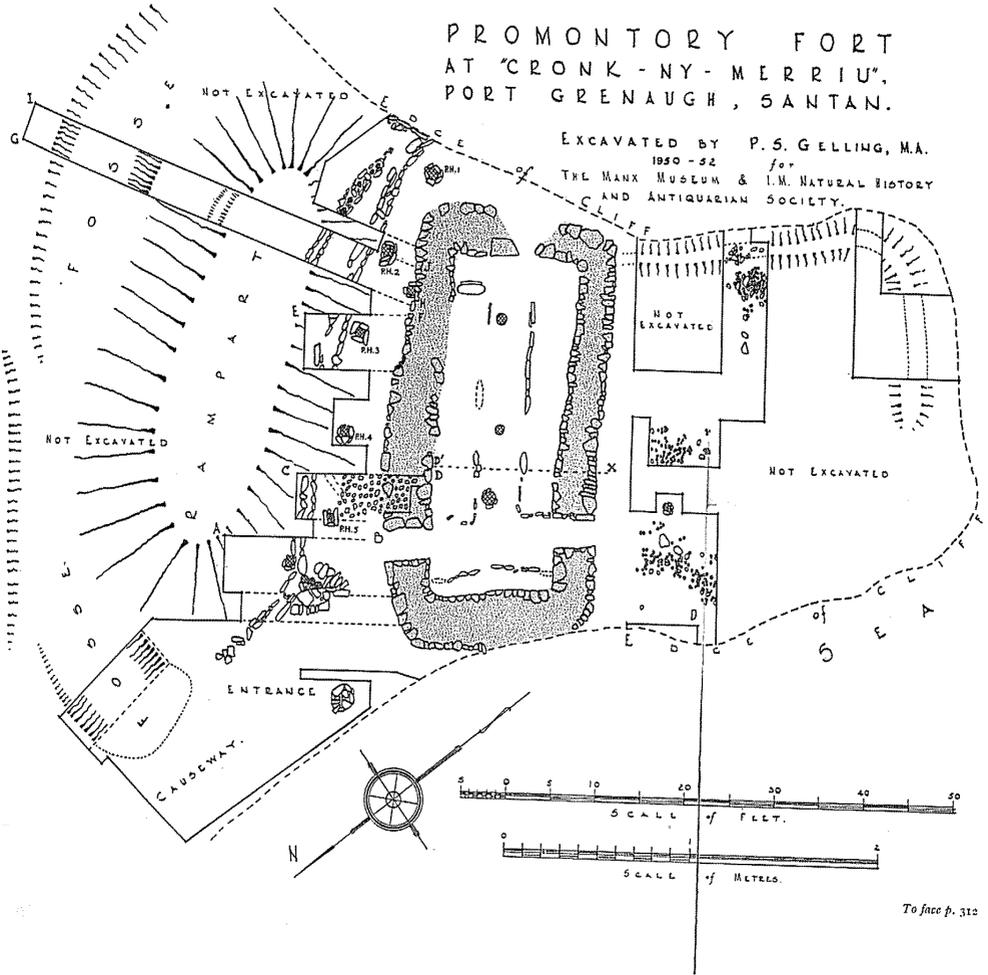
The material from the fosse was all thrown on one side to form the core of the rampart, its spread being checked about 20 feet from one edge of the fosse by a wall of sods. When the fosse material was exhausted the rampart was raised by sods some 30 inches, its present height above the old turf line being about 7 feet.

Along the inside of the rampart, immediately under the edge of the sods, ran a trench which varied between 1 and 2 feet in width and 2 and 3 feet in depth. It was lined with heavy stones (usually smoothly-rounded ones from the shore) between which, at a few places, fragments of wood survived in a very soft condition. In this trench was presumably set a continuous row of posts. If such trouble was taken to set them so deep and to pack them with heavy stones, they must have been intended to stand to a considerable height and to sustain considerable pressure. It is suggested that they stood at least as high as the top of the rampart, and held its inner face vertical. The space between the vertical posts and the sods on top of the rampart, which sloped away, would be filled with soil, a little of which is still in place. This soil, which is fine and possibly wind-blown, forms a clearly marked natural layer on the seaward side of the promontory.

Parallel to the trench in which the posts were set, and about 18 inches from it, ran a line of post-holes. The first was near the edge of the cliff on the east side, and there were four more, set at 9 or 10 feet intervals. Three of these (the first, third and fourth counting from the east end) were between 33 and 36 inches deep, and were carefully lined with flat slabs for almost their whole depth. The other two, the second and the fifth, were 26 inches and 18 inches deep respectively, and were rather less carefully lined with stone. All five seemed intended for posts of 9 or 10 inches diameter, and must

PROMONTORY FORT
 AT "CRONK-NY-MERRIU",
 PORT GRENAUGH, SANTAN.

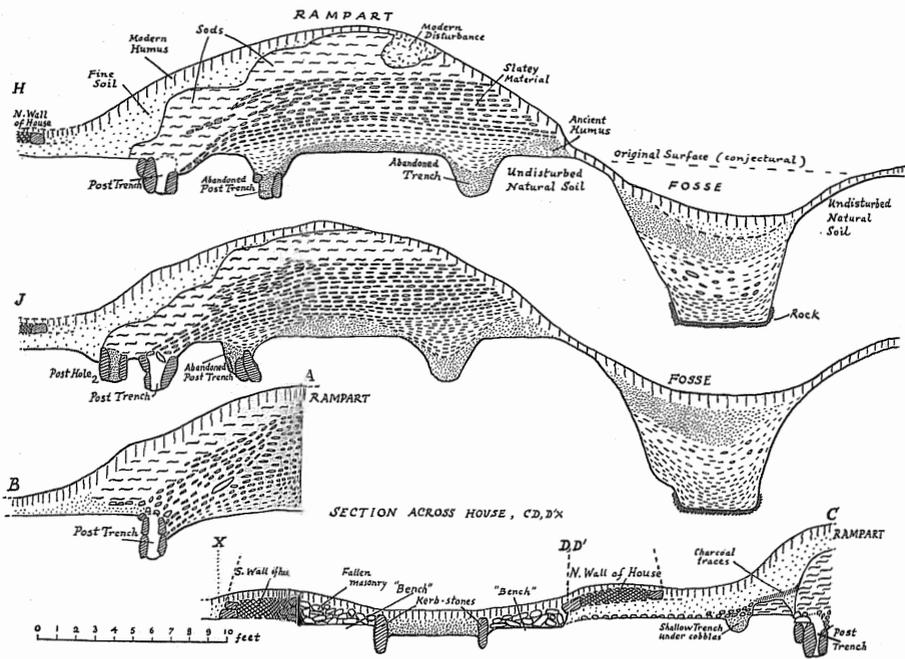
EXCAVATED BY P. S. GELLING, M.A.
 1950-52 for
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 AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY



have supported a structure to which the builders attached considerable importance. Perhaps this structure was a raised walk along the vertical inside face of the rampart. If this walk was more than a foot or two high (and the elaborate post-holes suggest that it was) then the rampart must have been higher than the 7 feet which it now stands; or, if the rampart was approximately the same height, then the posts which supported its vertical inner face may have projected above it, to afford protection to people using the raised walk.

The exact arrangements for fortifying the entrance were still unknown at the end of the excavation. The fosse stopped short about 10 feet from the cliff edge on the west side, leaving a solid causeway by which to approach the promontory. The trench in which the line of posts was set, and which is taken to mark the inside edge of the rampart, turned when just past the north door of the house and ran towards the end of the fosse. It stopped 11 feet short of the nearest corner of the edge of the fosse, and a line of stones, sometimes two courses deep, continued for another 6 feet in the same direction. At the point where the trench turned there was a number of flat stones set as if to make a very rough and uneven paving, and among them there were three post-holes side by side. There was also a post-hole on the inside of the trench immediately opposite them. These post-holes went down about 28 to 30 inches below the old turf line, and were about 8 inches in diameter. They were not lined with stone, and showed no sign of the careful workmanship of the five which ran in a line just inside the rampart. It does not seem therefore that they were intended to bear any considerable strain. They might conceivably represent replacements of a gatepost, but in that case they would surely have been more strongly made. It is possible that they supported some sort of wooden steps which gave access to the raised walk.

But if these post-holes had nothing to do with a gate, it is hard to say what the arrangements for blocking the entrance actually were. The only other possibly relevant feature was a small roughly circular platform of stones about 14 inches high and 34 inches in diameter. The stones were mainly smooth rounded ones from the shore, and two courses stood above the old turf line, and two more (in the centre, three) had been set in a hole down through it. There was no trace of a post having been set anywhere beside the stones or in their midst. In its present state it could have served as a point against which the swinging end of a gate could have rested. Without mortar (of which there was no trace anywhere on the site) it could never have stood very much higher.



PORT GRENARD. EXCAVATION: SECTIONS THROUGH RAMPART, FOSSE, AND ACROSS THE HOUSE.

The evidence is clearly insufficient to show how the entrance was blocked. There are some indications that the cliff edge has fallen away at this point as well as at the west end of the house, and perhaps some evidence has fallen with it.

The area between the house and the end of the promontory was uncovered in a few places, and in some of these there was a clear occupation deposit lying on the old turf line. This consisted almost entirely of an intermittent spread of pot-boilers, with a few larger shore stones among them. There was one post-hole 9 feet from the south door: it was 12 inches in diameter and 15 inches deep. A few very tiny fragments of bone were found in its filling, and a few more among the pot-boilers near it.

Along the east side of this part of the promontory, and part of the way along the south side, there were surface traces of a low bank. This was cut through in three places, and the much eroded core of a sod wall was visible in the sections. It looked as though the old turf line had begun to run up over this eroded core, which would mean that the sod wall was worn down before the occupation of the site was ended.

It was assumed at first that the rampart was originally designed to protect the house which we had uncovered, but this view had to be abandoned. The lowest stones of the outside kerb of the house wall were at most points a foot higher than the turf line on which the rampart had been built. The soil which raised them up in this way was part of the same layer as that which still partly covered the inside of the rampart. It seems likely that this soil was originally the filling between the sods on the top of the rampart and the posts which held up the inner face. When the row of posts collapsed this soil spread over the adjoining area, and the wall of the house was later built on top of it. If this is so, it follows that the rampart is older, probably considerably older, than the house. It also follows, since there is no sign of reconstruction, that the occupiers of the house considered the rampart a sufficient defence even when in a partly ruinous state.

Unfortunately it cannot be said how long the fallen soil lay there before the house was built on top of it. There was no sign of it having formed a turf line under the wall of the house, and this would suggest that it had not lain there long; but if the builders did any levelling before they began work, any turf line which existed might have been removed.

There were some traces of an occupation period which may have been contemporary with the rampart. Just to the east of the north

door of the house there was a small bed of cobble-stones (small rounded stones from the shore) which rested on an undisturbed layer and ran right under the wall of the house. Towards the rampart the cobbles gave place to pot-boilers, and both stopped short in line with the row of large post-holes. They had been buried when the side of the rampart collapsed. Further to the east, at the end of the long cutting through rampart and fosse, there was a post-hole partly concealed by the wall of the house and presumably belonging to an earlier structure.

A few fragments of querns were built into the walls of the house, and many of the stones showed signs of reddening. Some of them were only reddened on the ends which were hidden in the wall of the house, suggesting that they had originally been set the other way round in an earlier house which had been destroyed by fire.

There were traces of an even older structure than the rampart itself. Beginning at nearly the same point as the post-trench which marked the inner edge of the rampart, and running on a slightly different line, was a second smaller trench. In the first 8 feet from the east end it had held five posts, most of which had been packed round with stones. A few fragments of these posts survived. When it appeared 2 feet further on in the next cutting, the trench had a neat stone lining but there was no trace of extra packing stones as for individual posts. This trench was completely buried under the rampart, and possibly formed the footing of a stockade which the rampart replaced. But this stockade, if it existed, was apparently not continued to the west side of the promontory, for no trace of it was found there.

In the long cutting through rampart and fosse, about 6 feet from the edge of the fosse, there was another small trench about 24 inches deep and 30 inches broad. Except for one thin piece of slate there was no trace of stonework in it. The purpose of this trench is unknown. It is possible that it also was the footing of a stockade: the stone packing may have been robbed from it, or may never have existed. No trace of this trench was found at any other point.

As there were no small finds, apart from querns, it is not easy to date the site. The long rectangular type of house (contrasting with the pre-Viking round house) which occurs on several fortified promontories round the Isle of Man, makes it fairly certain that this group of sites belongs to the Norse period. These small defensive settlements on cliff-tops, which are found widely in coastal areas round the Irish Sea, are apparently unknown in Scandinavia, so it remains doubtful whether they were built by native Celts or by Viking colonists. If by Celts, then they were copying the domestic architecture of the

invaders; if by Viking colonists, then they were possibly copying a Celtic method of defending the homestead. The fort on Burrow Ned, with its remains of circular huts, may be an example of the kind of defences they found and imitated. We cannot at present say how long the specifically Norse house with benches went on being built in the Isle of Man. The political connection with Norway continued until 1265, but medieval building fashions are likely to have been adopted during the twelfth century. The Cronk ny Merriu house was probably occupied somewhere between the tenth and twelfth centuries.

The excavation was carried out under the auspices of the Manx Museum and the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society. Members of the Field Section of the Society, as well as some others who were not members, helped with the work on several occasions. Mr. J. F. Cowley, the Museum's foreman, assisted skilfully and keenly throughout. The proprietors of the Beach Café, Port Grenagh, allowed us to store our tools on their premises, and helped us in many other ways. The owner of the land, Mr. C. Kearley, kindly allowed the excavation to take place, and gave a piece of ground in the adjoining field for the building of a reconstruction of the house. Finally, our thanks are due to the Director of the Manx Museum, Mr. B. R. S. Megaw, for help and advice at all stages of the work, and to Canon E. H. Stenning, Chairman of the Ancient Monuments Committee of the Manx Museum and National Trust, for his support and encouragement.

Note

Samples of timber from the post trench were sent to the Forest Products Research Laboratory, Princes Risborough, Aylesbury, to whose kindness we owe the following report:—

'We have examined the samples of excavated timber . . . but regret to say that insufficient structure has been preserved in the fragments to enable us to carry out a satisfactory identification. Traces of growth rings are observable in a few cases . . . and the vestiges of anatomical structure detectable are rather suggestive of oak (*Quercus*) but we cannot be sure about this.'