

Sandon Mount, Hertfordshire: Its Site, Excavation and Problems

BY W. PERCIVAL WESTELL, F.L.S., F.S.A.Scot.

SANDON MOUNT, near Royston, Hertfordshire, is scheduled by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments as a "Moated Tumulus." It is under the jurisdiction of His Majesty's Office of Works, from whom permission was granted to the writer of this Paper, their Chief Correspondent for Hertfordshire, to carry out an excavation of the Mount, subject to permission of the owners of the site (the Trustees of the late Henry John Fordham), and the tenant farmer, Mrs. Fisher Bowman of The Bury, Sandon. These permissions were readily obtained, and in co-operation with Mr. J. W. Sherlock, of Sandon School, the Mount was excavated from April to September, 1933. All the objects discovered have been deposited in Letchworth Museum.

Before giving an account of the excavations it will best serve the purpose if reference is made to another site which appears to be of a somewhat similar nature.

In *Field Archæology as Illustrated by Hampshire*, by J. P. Williams-Freeman, M.D., 1915, pp. 115-116, we read:—

"Weyhill, Hants.

"Just beyond the present horse fair, in a field to the right of the road, is what remains of a low Barrow. It was excavated in 1911, and proved to be a round Barrow with a considerable ditch. The reliquiæ furnished fine mixed feeding for the local archæologists. A few flint flakes, a good scraper, an exceptionally good bone needle, a stone chisel, a hammer stone, a Saxon knife, any amount of mediæval pottery, a large quantity of charcoal, a Roman coin, an iron spear-head, numerous bones of oxen and other domestic animals, some iron nails, all these were found higgledy-piggledy in the substance of the Barrow and the filling of the ditch. Beneath the Barrow itself, on the ground level, was

found a cruciform trench—the limbs of the cross about 30ft. long and $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. broad, cut 4ft. deep into the chalk at the centre, and each terminating in three or four irregular steps of varying heights—with charcoal lying in great quantities near the bottom, mixed with a good deal of clay.

“ Such crosses have been found by Mr. J. R. Mortimer in some Barrows in Yorkshire, and have been considered by him to denote that the Barrows were adopted as Moothills by our Teutonic ancestors. . . .

“ A more prosaic explanation is at least possible. This Barrow is described in old maps as ‘ Windmill Barrow,’ and in one of them a Windmill is figured, while a road leading to this part of the hill is still called Windmill Drove. Moreover, three out of four of Mr. Mortimer’s Barrows have the same traditional name. The mediæval Windmill was erected upon four stout timber struts; may not the cross trench with its steps cut in the chalk have been dug to afford a firm foundation for the wooden super-structure, and may not the charcoal and the mixture of mediæval and other relics be the result of the burning of some early Windmill? ”

In view of the foregoing, there was much speculation as to the results that would be obtained at, and conclusions drawn from, the excavation of Sandon Mount.

Mr. H. C. Andrews, F.S.A., has pointed out in the *Transactions* of the East Herts Archæological Society, vol. viii., 1928-29, pp. 137-138, that :

“ The Mount is between two roads which meet at Notley Green. The one road, Notley Lane (the name of this lane is Collin Lane, not Notley Lane—W.P.W.) comes from the north-east by Philpotts Wood, where is a moat, the site of Woodhall Manor House. The other road comes from the north from Kelshall by Fears Green to the gate of the field in which the Mount stands, and continues as an overgrown green lane known as Park Lane to Notley Green; but from the field gate the present road turns due west to Sandon.”

During a visit of the East Herts Archæological

SANDON MOUNT.



[Photo. by Mr. Harry Meyer.
FIG. 1. SANDON MOUNT TO-DAY.



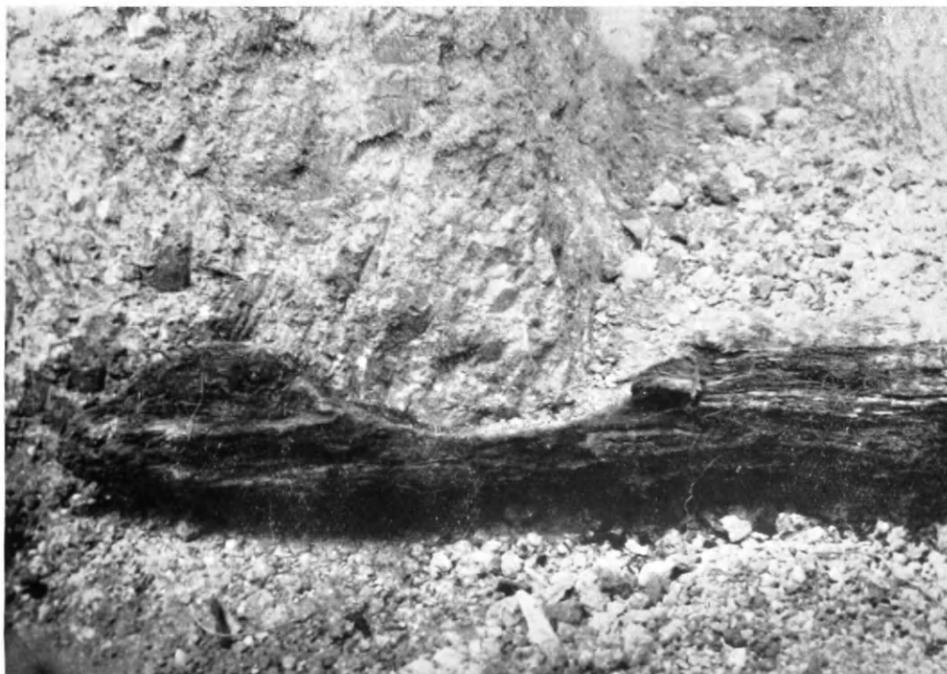
[Photo. by Mr. D. W. Brunt, A.R.P.S.
FIG. 2. EXCAVATION TRENCHES AT SANDON MOUNT SHOWING ONE CROSS-TREE *in situ*.
B



SANDON MOUNT.



[Photo. by Mr. Harry Meyer.]
FIG. 3. EXCAVATION TRENCHES SHOWING TWO CROSS-TREES *in situ*. TOP OF SPADE IS RESTING AGAINST ORIGINAL GROUND LEVEL, SHOWN BY DARK BAND OF EARTH



[Photo. by Mr. Harry Meyer.]
FIG. 4. END OF ONE CROSS-TREE SHOWING CUT OUT HOLLOW FOR LODGMENT OF QUARTER-BAR.



Society to Sandon Mount on July 24th, 1929, Mr. H. C. Andrews read a note from which the following is extracted from the *Transactions* above referred to:—

“ The Mount, Sandon.

“ Here and there scattered about England one occasionally comes across mounds which are definitely moat surrounded. What their age is it is impossible to say, and their purpose can only be conjectured by a study of their site and position. If early enough, they might be burial mounds, but these are not usually moat surrounded, but only girt at the most by a shallow dry ditch which, by weathering of the mound, has in course of time filled up. If later, they may be Saxon toot-hills, defensive centres, council-meeting centres, watch-towers, or signalling beacons for a community. Later still, they may be the mound of a small Norman motte type of Castle or Keep such as figures on the Bayeux tapestry. Our member Mr. A. Whitford Anderson, F.R.I.B.A., has very kindly given me the following note. He says: ‘ This is one of the five wet moated tumuli which I have had scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Act. The other four are at Hale Farm, Anstey; Cole Green, Brent Pelham; Little Hadham, and Rennesley Garden Wood, Standon. All these moated mounds are on relatively high ground, and the moats are apparently fed by springs, and I feel convinced that they were thrown up as defensive outposts, probably by Saxons or early Normans. . . .’ I would add one more to Mr. Anderson’s brief list of Herts moated mounds, and that is in Roughground Wood, at Old Hall Green. From personal inspection of Sandon Mount I certainly endorse his opinion as to its age and probable character.”

Under Sandon in the Victoria County History—Hertfordshire—vol. iii., p. 272, we read:—

“ Both John and Warin de Bassingbourn were presented as defaulters in the view of frankpledge of 1301 (D. & C. of St. Paul’s. B. Box 35, no. 7, Morrow of St. Lawrence, Martyr, 29 Edward I).

It *appears* that the holding of *John* de Bassingbourn included the Mill.¹ He was succeeded in 1320 by his brother Nicholas.”

Dr. Norman Davey's plan (Fig. 5) makes further detailed description unnecessary, except to state that the exterior diameter of the Mount is 86 feet from S.W. to N.E., and 88 feet from N.W. to S.E. The interior diameter from the same points is 58 feet and 64 feet respectively.

The Mount is almost circular, surrounded by a dry ditch 14 feet in width, but a stretch of 16 feet is filled in at the N.E. corner, which apparently served as an entrance to the Mount in bygone times.

The Mount is thickly covered with trees and bushes (Fig. 1) and stands on the highest point of Woodley Yards field just over 500 feet above sea level. An adjacent field is called Mill Field. In the ditch on the N.E. side and on the S.W. water collects, and remains in a wet season for some considerable time, but for the most part the surrounding ditch is dry.

Six trenches, 3 feet wide, were taken out to a depth of 6 feet 6 inches. The soil consisted of 1 foot of loam, 2 feet 6 inches of chalky boulder clay, a 6 inch brown band of loamy clay with flints, and 2 feet 6 inches of chalky boulder clay with erratics and the usual glacial assemblage. On removal of one foot of surface soil in the first trench pottery sherds were at once found, and over an area of 16 feet by 3 feet almost in the centre of the Mount, these pottery sherds and many flat-headed nails were distributed.

The objects obtained consisted of 610 middle sherds, 25 bases, 10 handles, 36 sherds of glazed and decorated ware, 76 rims, 4 small bronze objects, 200 flat-headed nails, a knife-blade, key, and other miscellaneous iron objects, a quantity of burnt material, a few animal remains of ox and boar, and oyster-shells.

At least three-fourths of these pottery sherds have been dated as thirteenth century, with later sherds penetrating into the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries.

Mr. Gerald C. Dunning, B.Sc., examined the pottery

¹ *Ibid.* Tues. after Mich. 8 Edw. II, Henry, son of Richard, held the site of the Mill in 1222 (Hale, *op. cit.* 15). The farmer in 1222 was John de St. Lawrence (*ibid.* 13). Open fields enclosed in 1842.

e. On removal of one foot of surface soil in
 trench pottery sherds were at once found, and
 may now be given (Fig. 6):—

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“ 1 to 7 Cooking-Pots.

“ The most frequent form, with everted rim squared on the outer side, as at Shefford, is well represented (nos. 2-6). The other rims, nos. 1 and 7, in which the rim takes the form of a flange, with offset above the neck, appear to be derived from a class of pottery common in the Cambridge region, and dated to the late Saxon period.²

“ 8 to 13 Bowls.

“ The rim-sections of bowls may be divided into two types, both flanged. In the first type (nos. 8 and 11) the top of the flange is flat or sloping, and its inner edge may be marked by a slight ridge (nos. 8 and 11). In the second type (nos. 12 and 13) the flange meets the side of the bowl at an obtuse angle and its outer edge is folded underneath, so that the rim is thickened.

“ 14 to 16 Jugs.

“ Jugs are represented by rim fragments (nos. 14 and 15) and parts of handles. No. 15, with moulding below the well-defined rim, is of fourteenth century character. The handles (not illustrated) are of oblong section; one is decorated down the centre with long slashes, the other has an incised wavy line and is green glazed.

“ No. 16, part of the body of a jug, was probably not made locally. It is of fine hard red ware with grey core. The outside is purplish-red with a splash of glaze. Enough remains to show that the decoration was in vertical panels, consisting of wide bands of white slip, with rows of applied white dots on the red areas. Jugs of similar technique and decoration, but more elaborate in style, are found in London, and assigned to the fourteenth century.³

“ Sherds from the old ground level.

“ Three small sherds were found at a depth of 6 feet, on the old ground level below the mound.

² Compare with cooking-pots at St. Neots. *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, xxxiii, 148, pl. ii, 2.

³ *Brit. Mus. Catalogue of English Pottery*, p. 61. Fig. 45. Other examples are in the Guildhall Museum and London Museum.

The sherds appear to belong to one fragment, but do not fit together. They are wheel-turned, friable black ware containing finely crushed particles of shell. The inner surface is light red; the outside is purplish-grey, speckled by the white grit, well smoothed and slightly soapy.

“ Pottery of this primitive ware, probably derived from coarse native fabrics of the Roman period, is common in the Cambridge region. At St. Neots it has been found in huts dated to the late Saxon period (about seventh to ninth century).⁴ How much later it was in use is at present uncertain; pottery of similar texture and of twelfth century type is found in London. The latest date for the survival of this coarse shelly ware is provided by the churchyard at Felmersham, Beds.⁵ Two jugs were found in association; a conical jug with green glaze of early fourteenth century date, and a large globular jug of shelly buff ware with soapy surface.

“ It is clear that this coarse shelly ware remained in use for a long period, and survived into mediæval times in eastern Britain. The Sandon Mount sherds may possibly be pre-Norman in date, but since there seems to be no reason to dissociate them from the pottery found in the mound, a mediæval date is more probable.”

These three small sherds have given rise to much speculation; so much so that they have been examined and reported on by Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, Archæology Officer of H.M. Ordnance Survey, Southampton; Miss M. O'Reilly, University Museum of Archæology and Ethnology, Cambridge; Mr. L. A. Curtis Edwards, M.A., Curator of Wisbech Museum; and Sir Cyril F. Fox, Ph.D., F.S.A., Director of the National Museum of Wales, who have variously reported that they may be: (1) Iron Age, (2) Romano-British, (3) Saxon, (4) Mediæval.

In view of the diversity of these opinions, and those of Mr. G. C. Dunning already outlined, I must leave the problem of the exact provenance of the three small sherds, and proceed further with my story.

⁴ *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, xxxiii, 137 ff.

⁵ Unpublished. In the Bedford Modern School Museum.

At a depth of six feet there was discovered *in situ* almost in the centre of the mound two oak structures sixteen feet each in length and one foot square, which have proved to be the cross-trees of a Sunk Post Windmill. (Figs. 2, 3 and 4.)

It appears clear that the pit made in the mound by the windmill people for the substructure of the Mill, was excavated subsequently to the original date of the site, and Dr. Davey has pointed out that it is:—

“ First, very doubtful whether the mound was thrown up when the Mill was originally erected, since: (a) The cross-trees were not placed centrally on the mound; (b) In order to embed the cross-trees, ground which appears to have been disturbed previously had to be excavated. And, secondly, the brown band of loamy clay (d. on Plan) would probably mark the original land surface. Generally, I should think the Mound (possibly a tumulus) was thrown up from the material excavated from the moat, and that the Mound was used at a subsequent date as a suitable spot for the erection of the Mill. If the Mound was a tumulus, it may be that the burial (if such there was) was unearthened when the hole was excavated for the cross-trees of the Mill, or the burial may still be there.”

Mr. Rex Wailes, A.M.I.Mech.E., and Mr. Donald Smith, F.R.G.S., F.R.Hist.S., examined the site and the objects obtained, and reported to the Windmill Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings that this Sandon Mount Sunk Post Windmill dates from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, thus pre-dating the oldest dated Post Mill still in existence, namely Bourn, Cambs., circa 1600, by over 200 years.

In trench 2, at the junction with trench 3, the plan clearly shows where the Windmill builders went through the Mound to insert their cross-trees, disturbing a depth of two feet six inches of soil probably thrown up by someone else. The Windmill people penetrated to a further depth of three feet, going through the brown band of clay which a survey of the site afterwards showed as the original surface level.

Beyond the area excavated by the Windmill builders no pottery sherds or other objects were obtained, with the exception that, almost in the centre of the Mount, lying on what was the original surface level, the three small sherds previously referred to were found. The discovery of these three early sherds, and the abundance of thirteenth century pottery, opens up the problem as to who originally threw up Sandon Mount, for it seems clear that the Windmill people adopted the existing mound as a suitable place to erect their Mill.

There are only two Post Mills now standing in Hertfordshire, and these are at Cromer, four miles west of Buntingford, and at Great Hormead. The former stands on an artificial mound. In Mr. Donald Smith's *English Windmills*, vol. ii., pp. 107 and 108, there is an interesting table of Mill sites in the County, listed by Chauncy in 1700 and by Salmon in 1728 from maps by Moll and Clark respectively, also from Warburton's map of 1720, from Kitchen's map of 1750, and from Andrew Drury's and John Andrews's map of 1782, of which the following is a summary:—

Moll (Chauncy), 1700	13	Windmills.
Warburton, 1720	40	„
Clark (Salmon), 1728	38	„
Kitchen, 1750-1760	40	„
Drury and Andrews, 1782	30	„

Mr. Rex Wailes has drawn my attention to a reference re Sunk Post Mills from *History of Corn Milling*, vol. ii., *Watermills and Windmills*, by Richard Bennett and John Elton, chapter xvii., pp. 278-279:—

“ The Sunk Post Mill.

“ 1. *Birkdale*. The extreme liability of structures such as the primitive edifices already described to be capsized in storms, or even by sudden changes in the direction of an ordinary working-wind, seems to have early been obviated to some extent by sinking the timber foundation within the ground, thus originating the Mills with ‘ their foot fixed in the ground ’ which the laws of Oleron of 1314 distinctly specify as differing from Mills ‘ held above the ground, and having a high ladder.’ The appearance of Mills built upon this plan may be illustrated

by a sketch by Herdman, in the possession of Mr. Bennett, representing the ancient mill at Birkdale, Southport, Lancs., about half a century ago, the floor of the structure being but slightly raised above the ground level.

“ 2. At Aughton Mill, near Liverpool, recently was discovered almost intact the curiously shaped excavations in which the sunken foundation timbers of the ancient Post Mill there had been fixed. In excavating a passage under the Mill to the drying kiln recently, an ancient cutting in the solid rock was discovered, some feet beneath the surface, and at the instance of Dr. Peck, a local antiquary, a thorough examination of the site was made. The complete excavation was found to comprise four channels radiating from a centre somewhat in the form of a Maltese cross, its diameter being rather longer than that of the ancient Mill which had stood over it. In the deep circular hole in the centre, as well as in the radiating cuttings, were found, embedded in the clay with which they were filled, the decayed remains of stout oaken timbers, which—though the fact did not strike the discoverers—doubtless had comprised the trestle-work foundation of the original Mill.”

The Sunk Post Windmill is the one pictured on early maps, psalters, and other documents, and the two earliest known are contained on a brass in St. Mary's Church, King's Lynn, 1348, and on the thirteenth century “ Windmill ” Psalter in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The whole structure was pivoted on a central post, and moved round by a tail piece so as to bring the sails into the eye of the wind.

Quotations from reports received from Mr. Rex Wailes and Mr. Donald Smith may now be given. Mr. Rex Wailes says:—

“ The remains found are certainly the cross-trees of a Sunk Post Windmill. They correspond in all visible detail to the cross-trees of a small Post Mill to-day. As no trace of the post has been found it can be assumed that it had gradually rotted down, and this accounts for the rotting of

the cross-trees at the centre. I should expect to find that it dated from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, and not to have lasted much more than three hundred years."

Mr. Donald Smith reports :—

" The matter is of extreme interest, and, so far as Windmills go, of first importance. 1665 (Outwood in Surrey) is given as the oldest authenticated Mill. Brill (Bucks) is dated 1668. Bourn (Cambs) runs them close, 1636 or earlier. Your discovery has another important bearing also. There are no references to Windmills in Domesday. Mills in number are mentioned, but there seems but little doubt that they were either Water or Ox-driven Mills. The earliest reference generally accepted to a Windmill is 1191. Your find will go a long way towards the substantiation of the claim of the Windmill as an English invention. . . . Many tumuli have been examined and ransacked, but such a Sunk Mill site is, to date, extremely rare. There seems no shadow of doubt but that your Mill was mediæval, predating any existing structure by probably a couple of hundred years. It is at present unique, in that it is the only known example in the Home Counties. Your Mill is interesting in that it would seem to have been large for its time, and also that it was sunk to such an effective depth. A six-foot-deep cross trench for the cross-trees with the soil well punned in around the quarter-bars would support a very important Mill. If the superstructure was only the usual structure running a single pair of small stones then someone had made a very thorough job indeed. The mystery of the actual date will probably remain unsolved unless, by chance, or patient research, some old deed or ' extent ' or the like, comes to light with exact references to Mill and site. It is a discovery of much interest, and of prime importance in the history of Windmills."

Tentative and other conclusions that may be briefly set out are :—

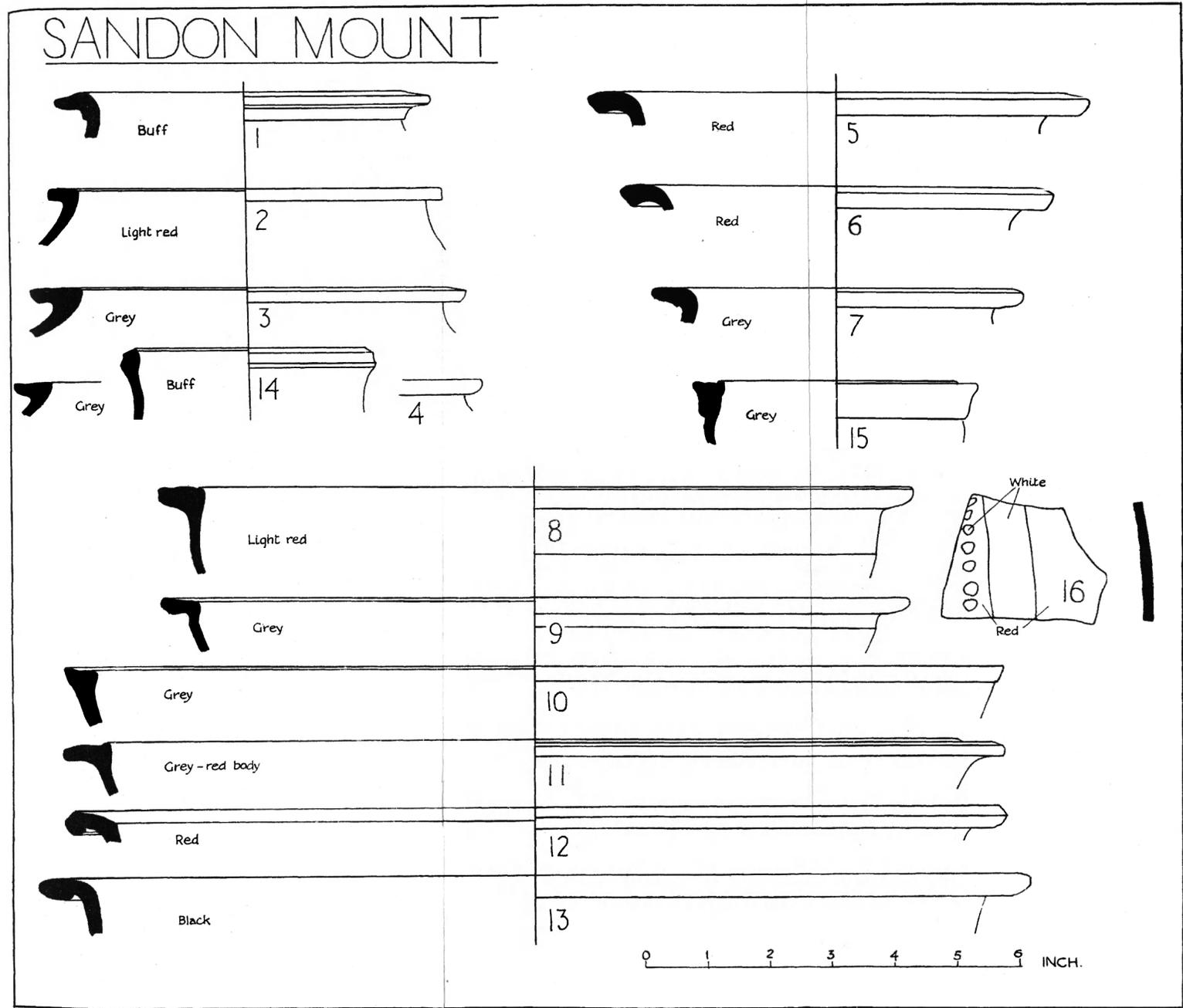


FIG 6. TYPES OF POTTERY FROM SANDON MOUNT.
 (SEE MR. GERALD C. DUNNING'S REPORT, PAGE 177).

1. That the Mount was *utilized* by the Windmill builders, and *was not thrown up by them*.
2. That the abundance of thirteenth century pottery sherds suggests that the Mount was originally a suitable look-out place, or defensive earthwork; and as the large number of thirteenth century sherds were scattered throughout that portion of the Mount excavated, it is suggested that it *was* thrown up at that period.
3. That the Windmill was erected during the fourteenth century.
4. That the problem of solving the exact date and provenance of the three small sherds still remains.
5. That the remains of the Sunk Post Windmill discovered predate any other known Windmill site in England by at least two hundred years.

[I have to express my thanks to H.M. Office of Works; the Trustees of the late Mr. Henry John Fordham (owners), and Mrs. Fisher Bowman (tenant) for permission to excavate the site; to Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Sherlock; to Dr. Norman Davey for surveying the Mount and for his Plan and pottery Drawings; to Mr. Rex Wailes for valuable assistance, as also to Mr. Donald Smith; to Mr. Gerald C. Dunning for reporting on the pottery, as also Mr. John Charlton and Mr. F. Cottrill; to Sir Cyril F. Fox for advice, data and encouragement; to Mr. E. Thurlow Leeds, Mr. L. A. Curtis Edwards and Miss M. O'Reilly for reporting upon the three small pottery sherds; to Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, Mr. Reginald L. Hine, Dr. J. R. Williams-Freeman, Mr. A. Whitford Anderson, Mr. H. T. A. Dashwood and Mr. James Hutt; to Mr. D. W. Brunt, Mr. H. Meyer and Mr. Rex Wailes for photographs; to the Windmill Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and to Miss Ruth Pym and members of Sandon Adult Educational Settlement Class.

The whole of the excavations were carried out without incurring expenditure of any kind.]