

Romano-British Pit Dwellings at Hawthorn Hill, Letchworth, Herts.

BY W. PERCIVAL WESTELL, F.L.S., F.S.A.Scot.
(*Curator of Letchworth Museum*).

AS long ago as July, 1908, when the writer of this Paper removed from his ancestral home at St. Albans to the world's first Garden City of Letchworth, he discovered, when making a garden at the rear of his house in Wilbury Road, Letchworth, the neck and handle of a grey ware Roman Jug, of about A.D. 200. This object was put on one side and almost forgotten until twenty-two years later when, in the sloping field known as Hawthorn Hill, immediately at the rear of the aforesaid garden, there was discovered by Miss June Stone, in August, 1930, a Roman Cameo in onyx, portraying the Head of Medusa.

The chance find of this interesting Cameo led to the writer deciding to investigate further, with the result that he obtained permission from the owners of the land, First Garden City, Ltd., and the Tenant Farmer, to take out some trial trenches on the site at the rear of Nos. 115 and 117, Wilbury Road. Fortunately, the first trial trench which was excavated resulted in the discovery of a number of Pottery Sherds and other objects coming to light, and, with the aid of two labourers kindly loaned by First Garden City, Ltd., a part of the area near where the Cameo was found was excavated under the supervision of the writer, with the help of his colleague, Mr. W. H. Lane, and these excavations eventually resulted in the laying bare and surveying of seven Rectangular Pit Dwellings.

Before describing these, and their contents, it should be pointed out that the eighteen-acre field, known as Hawthorn Hill, is bounded on the North by Wilbury Road, and on the South by the Icknield Way, with the area known as Norton Common, associated with the days of King Offa, in between. Not far away to the West is the site of the Iron Age Camp at Wilbury Hill, as well as the Roman Villa site at Purwell, and



FIG. 1. THE HAWTHORN HILL SITE IN THE FOREGROUND, LOOKING SOUTH.



nearer still to the site under discussion, in Archers Way, Letchworth, Belgic Pottery was recently discovered on an occupation-site.

The straightness of Wilbury Hill Road to the west of Hawthorn Hill, which is intersected at the Iron Age Camp of Wilbury by the crossing of the Icknield Way, suggests that it was a Roman road leading to the Purwell Villa, branching off thither at right angles from the Icknield Way at Wilbury Hill Camp.

Baldock, where such amazing discoveries have been made since April, 1925, is about two miles away to the East, and to the South, just off the Icknield Way at Letchworth, in Nevells Road, a large quantity of Romano-British pottery has been secured. There is also in a large open field, bordered by the Hitchin Letchworth Road and Wilbury Hill Road, a round copse enclosing a Tumulus, and it is of interest and importance to note that more or less all these ancient sites are in alignment across this hill-top countryside.

In a gravel pit off the Icknield Way only a few fields distant from Hawthorn Hill the classic Belgic Cordoned Urn in Letchworth Museum was discovered in October, 1912 (see *Proceedings of The Society of Antiquaries*, Second Series, Vol. XXVI). A small Roman Cameo figuring the head of a boy was found by a boy at the junction of Green Lane and the Icknield Way, Letchworth, and from the old-world village of Norton there was obtained in Church Lane in the early days of modern Letchworth a rivetted Samian Ware Bowl, a Dish, Tazza, and Glass Phial of A.D. 100-200, as well as Iron Age Pottery.

Further away on the hill-top, at the unenclosed village of Bygrave, the writer has discovered Roman Coins and Pottery, and on Deadman's Hill, near Ashwell Station, aerial photography has revealed what appear to be the ditches of destroyed Bronze Age Barrows (see *Antiquity*, Vol. X, No. 37, March, 1936). Close by, on the tree-topped Metley Hill, on the site of the Baldock Radio Station, the writer examined in December, 1935, a Romano-British Tumulus which, although previously disturbed, yielded sufficient evidence to date its origin.

Fig. 1 is a photograph of the Hawthorn Hill Site in the foreground, with Norton Common forming a kind of catchpit between two ridges of ground, and modern Letchworth rising sphinx-like on the right.

Fig. 2 is a Plan of the area drawn to scale, showing the position of the site, and the seven Rectangular Pit Dwellings which were discovered and examined during September and October, 1930. The measurements of these Pit Dwellings were as follows:—

- Pit 1. 124 feet by 11 feet 3 ins.
- Pit 2. 19 feet 10 ins. by 10 feet.
- Pit 3. 21 feet 3 ins. by 21 feet, with a continuation to the north-west corner of 10 feet by 3 feet.
- Pit 4. 8 feet 3 ins. by 8 feet.
- Pit 5. 36 feet by 27 feet.
- Pit 6. 18 feet by 16 feet.
- Pit 7. 15 feet by 2½ feet.

It will be observed from the Plan shown in Fig. 2 that the seven Pits discovered were in comparative proximity to each other, forming a small community, but it is possible that others exist in the immediate vicinity, although further trial holes, taken out before closing down, failed to reveal anything of interest beyond a deep layer of undisturbed boulder-clay which overlies this part of Letchworth.

Broken Pottery and other objects referred to later in this Report were discovered at the greatest depth of 4—5 feet in Pit 6, but the other Pits were not so deep. The top floor of the shallowest Pit was only one foot below the surface.

The Pottery and other objects were found in layers on floors, or hearths, and these latter consisted of large stones of quartz, sandstone, and flints. Below the shallowest floor, further floors made up of layers of stones, were discovered at a depth of two feet apart. The soil beneath the overlying boulder clay where the Pits were discovered consisted of black humus, and each Pit was very clearly defined by this association.

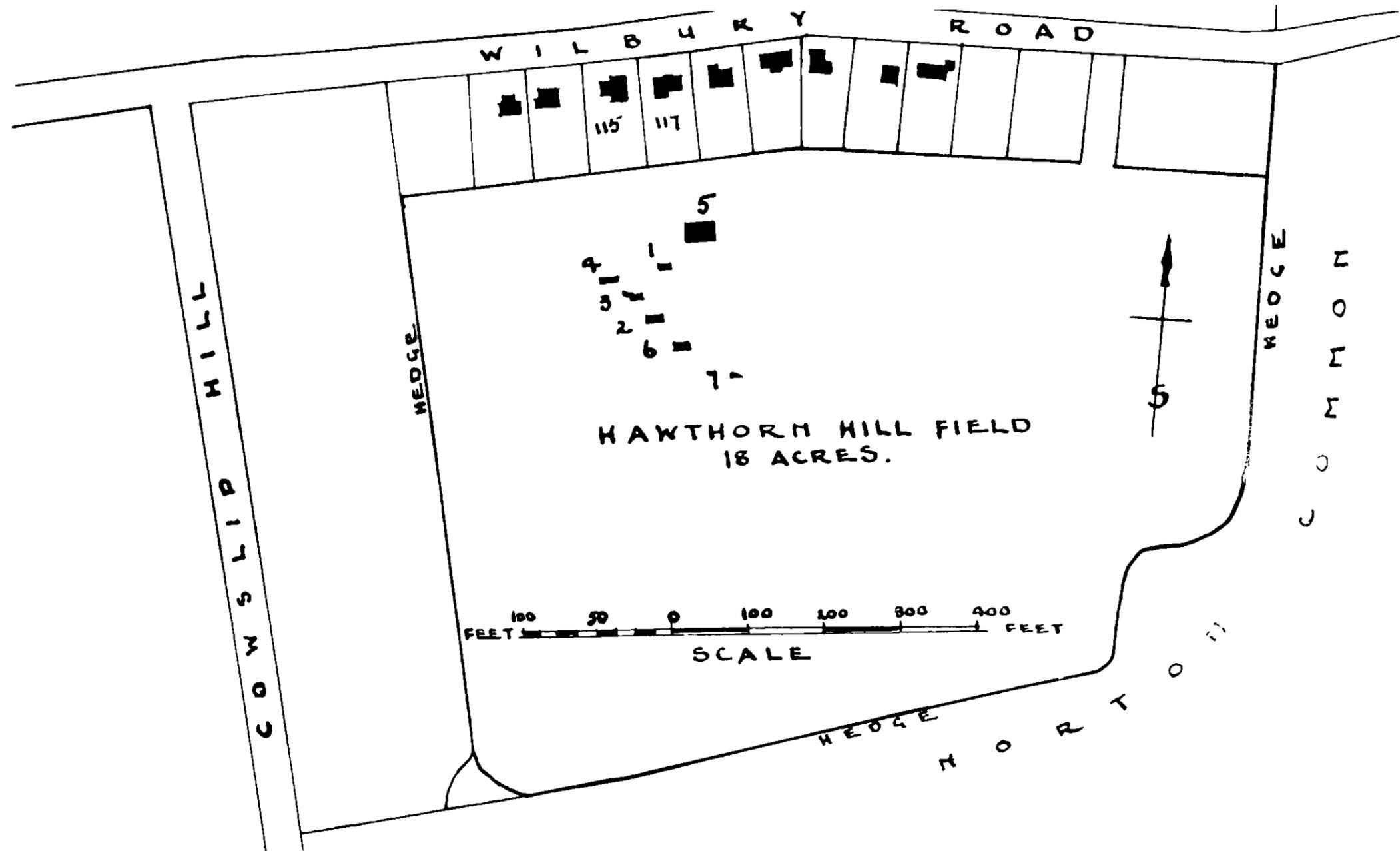


FIG. 2. PLAN OF THE HAWTHORN HILL SITE SHOWING POSITION OF RECTANGULAR PIT-DWELLINGS.



ROMANO-BRITISH PIT DWELLINGS AT LETCHWORTH.

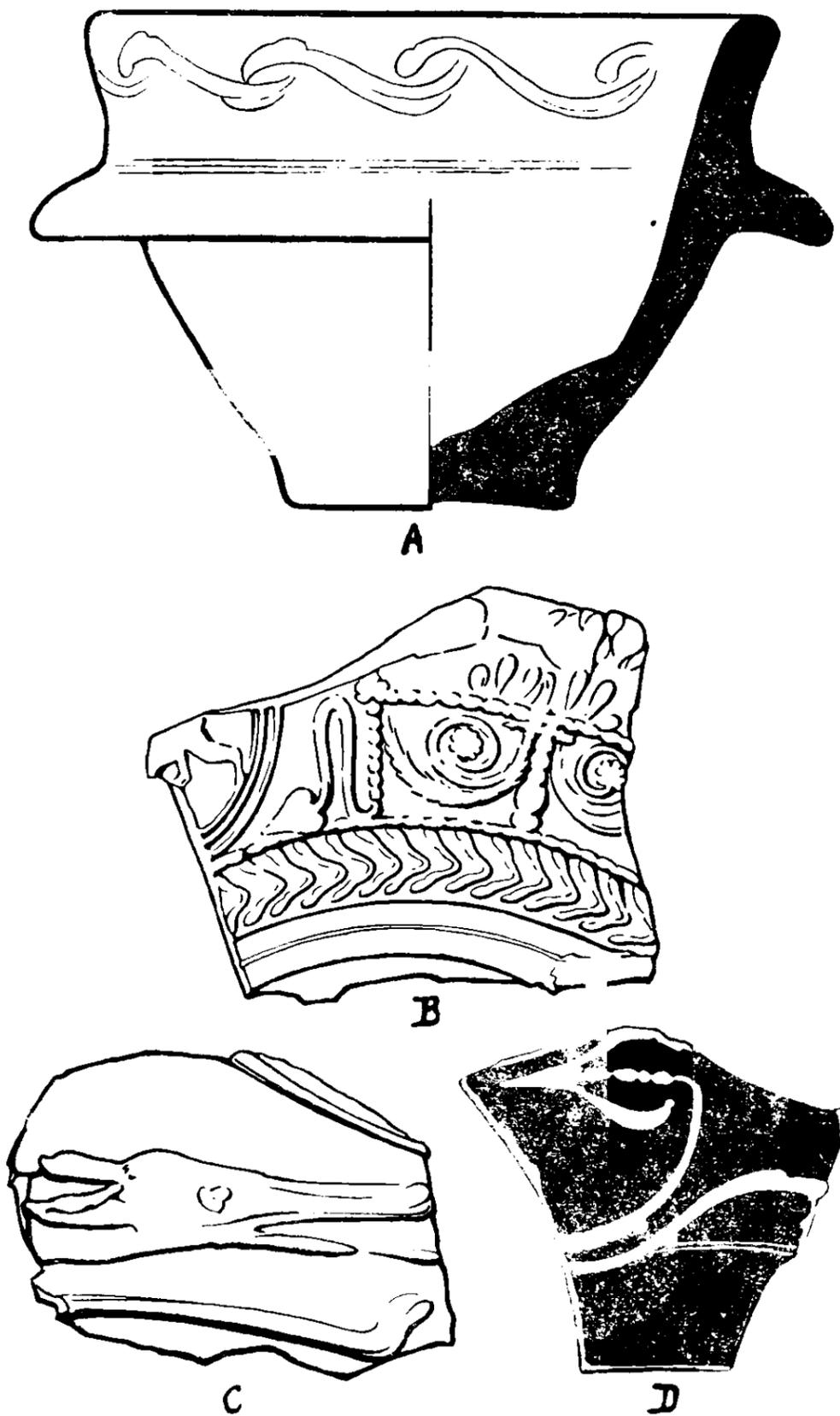


FIG. 3. (A) FLANGED BOWL WITH WHITE SLIP DECORATION, AND SHERDS OF (B) SAMIAN, (C) CASTOR, AND (D) NEW FOREST WARES (†).



ROMANO-BRITISH PIT DWELLINGS AT LETCHWORTH.

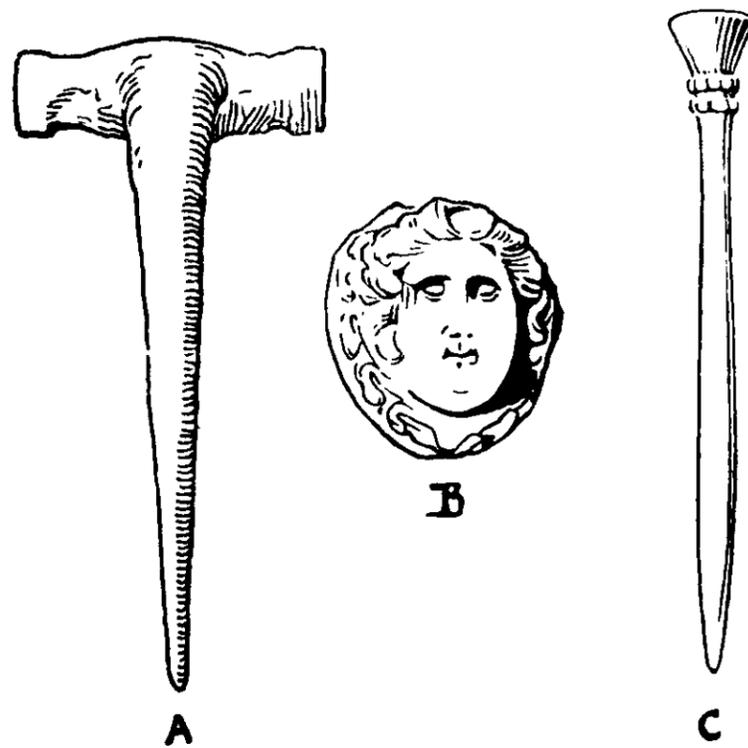


FIG. 4. (A) BRONZE FIBULA, (B) CAMEO OF HEAD OF MEDUSA, AND (C) BONE PIN ($\frac{1}{4}$).



Only one complete Pottery vessel was found, and this is illustrated in Fig. 3. It is a thick everted Bowl of yellow ware, coated brown, and ornamented on the rim by white wavy lines. A similar vessel was found with Grave Group 104, as in Colchester Museum, and there is also a contemporary vessel in Peterborough Museum.

The Pottery sherds discovered consisted of 1,625 Middles, 430 Rims, and 155 Bases. The other objects discovered were as follows: Cameo, Bronze Brooch, and Bone Pin (see Fig. 4), Small Rubstone, Large Muller, Parts of British and Roman Querns, Iron Knife-blade, Oyster Shells, the round Base of a Glass Vessel with a boss on the underside, a Leaden Disc (undecipherable), Animals' Bones and Teeth, Ram's Horn, Two Tesserae, a number of Iron Nails and Iron Fragments, a Lug Handle, Building Tiles, Part of a locally-made Brick two inches square, made of clay and flint, and another made of clay and nodules of chalk, half of a shallow Grey Ware Dish, the base of a Samian Ware Dish, probably of Form 31, with the Potter's Stamp *Maximi*, and one fragment of a Human Skull.

Dr. Felix Oswald reports on the *Maximi* Stamp on the base of the Samian Dish that this is the Stamp of Maximus of Lezoux, a Hadrian-Antonine Potter of the period A.D. 117-161. This Samian Ware Stamp occurs on Form 27 in London and Rouen, as also on Form 33 at Birrens, Cirencester, Corbridge, London, Silchester, and York.

The Pottery sherds represent Coarse Ware Cooking and Store Pots, a number of Mortaria in stone colour, pink, and red ware, New Forest Ware, Castor Ware, a few fragments of Samian Ware, Salopian Ware, and a fragment of a very large Amphora. The Sherd of a Samian Ware Bowl, Form 37, is shown in Fig. 3 and is contemporary with two other Bowls in Letchworth Museum from Baldock and Norton. The potter was probably Doecus, and his decoration is of the Hadrian-Antonine period. His Stamp appears on Forms Drag. 30, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38 and 56, and Walters 79, and his Kilns were at Lezoux and Lubié. The full Stamp

occurs at Heddernheim, Saalburg, and Zugmantel (Oswald & Pryce).

The chance find of the Cameo Head of Medusa, which led to this interesting discovery, is made of onyx, and has been submitted to Dr. R. E. Mortimer Wheeler who reports that this example is a noteworthy addition to the small existing series of Roman Cameos found in this country. On looking at this Cameo one can fully appreciate its mythological origin as showing one of the Gorgons whose head was considered so frightful that those who looked at it were changed to stone. Incidentally, it is worthy of note that a living species of Starfish is also called by the same sobriquet.

The objects discovered suggest that the occupation-date of these Rectangular Pit Dwellings on the sunny southern slope of Hawthorn Hill can be ascribed to the second century A.D., and serve as a further example of the prolific inhabitation of the Letchworth region in Romano-British times. It is, too, interesting to reflect that the late Sir Ebenezer Howard and his friends should have chosen this area for the site of the modern First Garden City of Letchworth, which has yielded, and continues to yield, such a wealth of archæological treasures.

All the objects discovered have been deposited in Letchworth Museum, and are available for examination by students, and anyone else who is interested.

The writer has to acknowledge his indebtedness to First Garden City, Ltd., and the Tenant Farmer, for permission to dig, and the provision of labour; to Miss Doris Meyer for her drawings; to Mr. Harold E. Hare for the photograph of the site; to Mr. W. H. Lane for help in digging and measuring the Pits; and to Mr. J. C. Tickle for preparing the Plan.

It has not been found possible to work out and publish a Report of this discovery at an earlier date owing to pressure of other work.