

NOTES ON A HUMAN SKELETON, FOUND AT FOXEARTH, ESSEX.

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[WITH PLATE V.]

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ON lately visiting Foxearth, a small parish in the Stour Valley, near the northern boundary of Essex, I was shown a human skull, which at once engaged my attention from its size and evident age. On enquiry I found the labourer who had picked it up in a gravel-pit. The pit is situated two hundred yards east of Western Hall, just over the Foxearth boundary in the parish of Liston, in Field No. 25, and shown on Map vi. 6, 25 inch Ordnance Survey. (See Fig. 1.)

This gravel-pit has been open for some years. The workman referred to was digging and carting gravel therefrom, and was searching for something to block the wheel of his cart, when he picked up the skull, thinking that it was a great stone. The inference is that the skull slipped down with part of the cliff during the excavating operations. The floor of the pit is about 12 feet deep at the spot. When found the skull was encased in loam with fibrous roots in the cavities; it was in nearly perfect condition, the lower jaw being in position, and the set of teeth perfect, although by an unfortunate accident the skull was dropped, thereby detaching the jaw and knocking out one of the teeth.

The presence of the fibrous roots led me to suppose that the original resting-place of the skull had been somewhere near the upper surface of the wall of the pit. I carefully examined the face of the pit, but could find no trace of any place where the skull had lain, nor could any pottery or worked flints be discovered in the cliff or in the loose debris.

The geological character of the earth in which the pit was made is Glacial-drift, but whether any part of the upper surface is Post-Glacial I am not qualified to determine. The beds are composed of chalky gravel with patches or seams of coloured and white water-washed sands and a small layer of water-worn chalk nodules and some fossils and shells. I should say the beds are false-bedded, the lines of bedding being much curved and contorted, and towards the top or surface of the pit there are

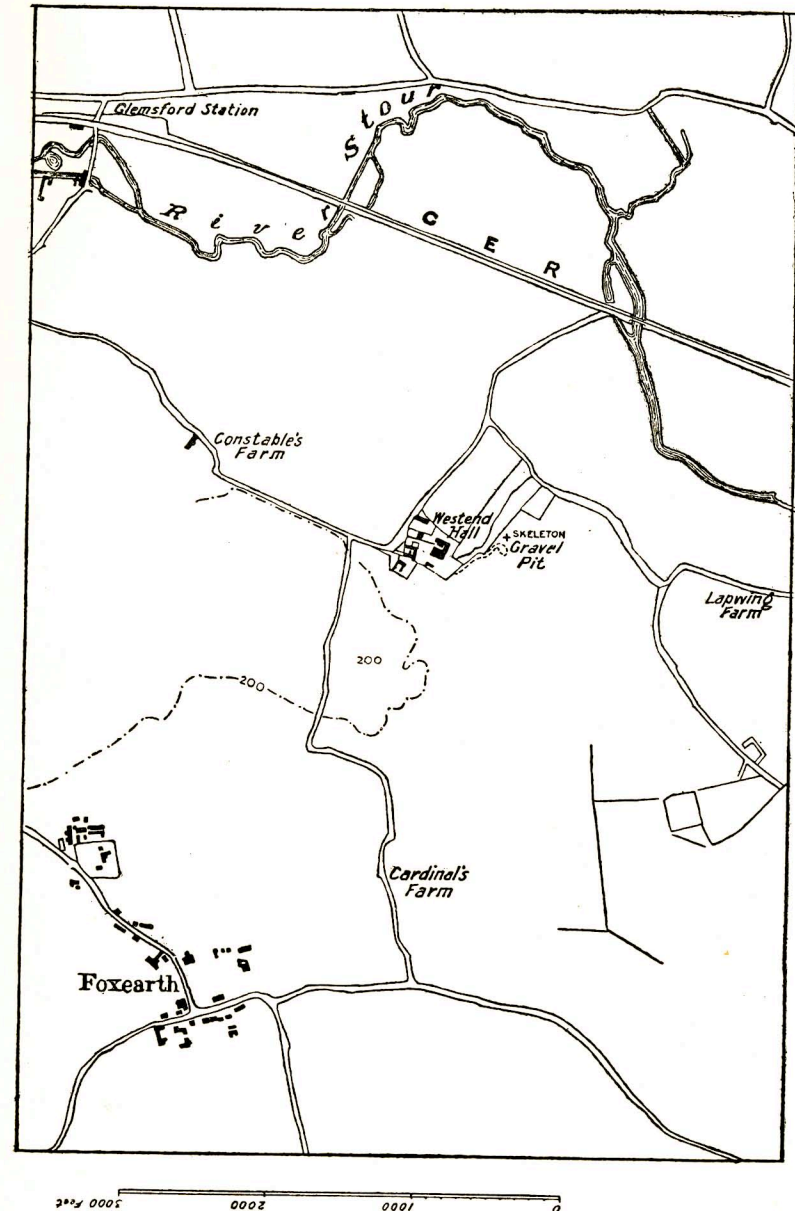


FIG. 1.—PORTION OF ORDNANCE MAP (ESSEX VI. 6, 25 INCH SCALE),
SHOWING POSITION OF GRAVEL-PIT AT FOXEARTH.

alternating beds of sand and loam. There is very little soil, and what there is consists of brown stained loam or brick-earth containing fragments of land shells. In no case is it more than 18 inches thick, except where there are several small pipes or patches of loam. In other places the glacial gravel and sand comes to the surface.

The surface of the land above the pit is about 165 feet O.D., on the southern flank of the valley overlooking the River Stour, from which it is distant about 400 yards, and is about 50 feet above the floor of the main valley. As the pit is practically all Glacial-drift, it immediately occurred to me that a skull found in such a formation might be of remote antiquity, or even of Glacial or Post-glacial origin.

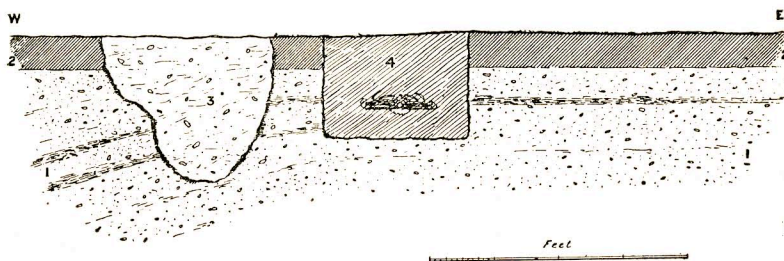


FIG. 2.—SECTION OF FOXEARTH GRAVEL PIT.

1. Glacial Gravel and Sand.
2. Surface-soil, about 4 to 6 inches.
3. Pipe of Loam and Gravel mixed; also Brick Earth.
4. Grave; soil 1 and 2 mixed.

I submitted the skull to the late Prof. Charles Stewart, F.R.S., of the College of Surgeons, who pronounced it to be a fine specimen, probably very old. Later, he wrote expressing the opinion that it was "Ancient British," whatever that phrase may mean. He appeared to base that opinion on the assumption that the cranium came from a shallow depth beneath the surface, as indicated by the loam and fibre adhering to it. Several other anthropologists to whom I have shown it are of opinion that the skull is of an early type.

Later, I visited the pit again, making a further search for pottery or other objects, quite unsuccessfully. But on examining the cliff face I found imbedded in the formation, at about 17

inches from the upper surface, a human skeleton. By a careful excavation the greater part was got out, and I now exhibit it. On further examination I found indications of disturbance of the soil, and the position of the skeleton was not altogether in parallelism with the lie of the formation. I presumed, although there is no direct evidence, that the skull and other parts of the skeleton belonged to the same individual.

The body seemed to have been placed in the ground without any rite or ceremony, and appeared to have lain face downwards. The lower part of the legs appeared doubled up under the body, but I could not find parts of the feet. The vertebræ also appeared to be twisted. The body lay N. and S., the head being south.

It should be added that the site of the pit is at a point formed by the intersection of a small cross-valley, at right angles to the main valley, and it commands a considerable view—just such a spot where one would expect to find a tumulus or ancient burial-ground, but no trace of any such works could be discovered.

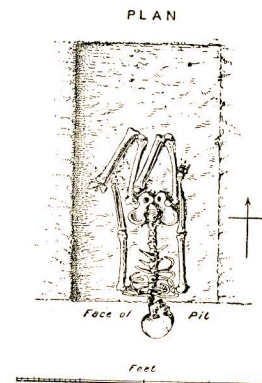


FIG. 3.—PLAN OF GRAVE, SHOWING POSITION OF SKELETON.

The above facts seem to throw doubt on the hypothesis that the remains had any direct connection with the Glacial formation in which they were embedded. But having found the skull in an environment of Glacial-drift, I may be pardoned in having been at first inclined to throw out a suggestion of Glacial or Post-glacial origin, as it appears probable that man existed as far back as the Glacial Period. A consideration of the facts, however, seems to indicate that we have here remains of a later origin. I have presented the skeleton to the Essex Museum of Natural History, so that it may be preserved for future study by some competent craniologist.