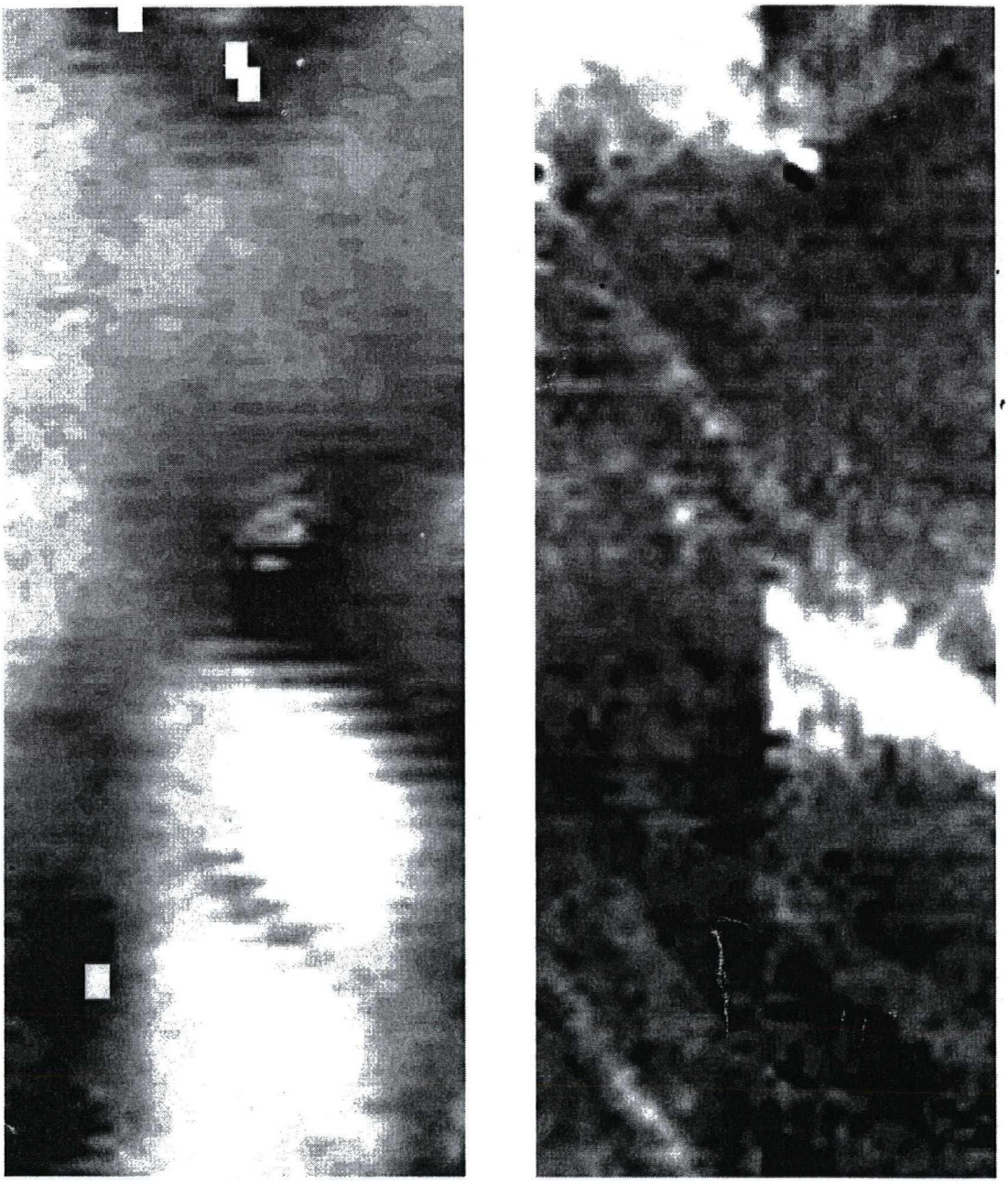
Southern Thornborough Henge



Northern entrance

12 August 1997

Earth resistance survey: 134Ω (white) to 432Ω (black); 20m × 50m @ 0.5m × 0.5m

Magnetic gradiometer survey: 2nT (white) to 7nT (black); 20m × 50m @ 0.5m × 0.5m

N

Figure 5: Geophysical survey of southern Thornborough henge monument.

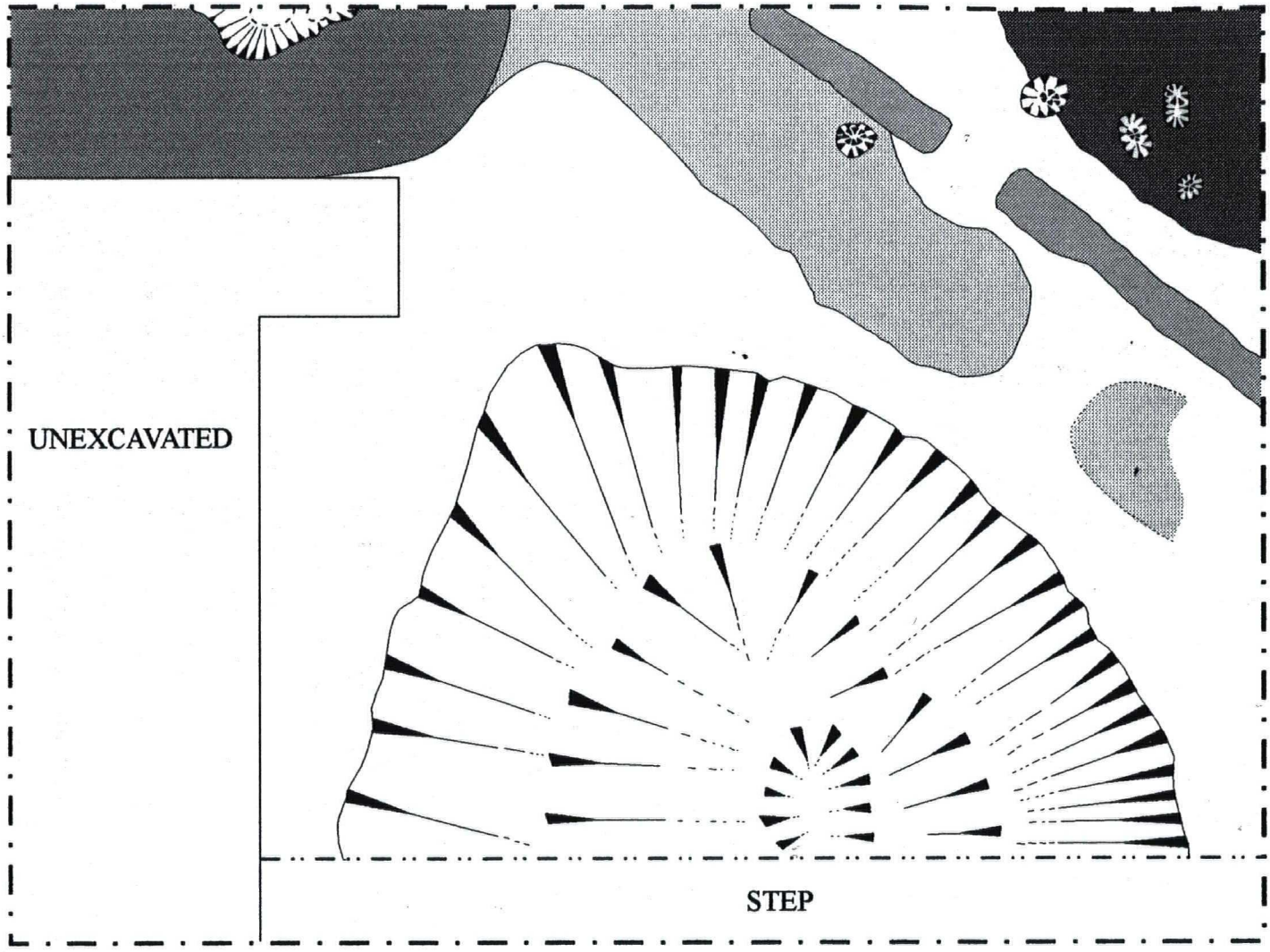
Furthermore, the area between the bank and the inner ditch to the north-west has several anomalies which could indicate an uneven dispersal of soil as a result of soil movement. In contrast, the survey illustrates that the northern and north-west sections of the bank still survive as prominent and well defined earthworks, having apparently suffered the least from agricultural disturbance.

3.3 GEOPHYSICAL RESULTS

The results of the geophysical survey illustrate the major structural features of the henge monument (**Figure 5**). Most effective was the resistivity survey which defined both the inner bank and ditch. An area of high resistance to the top of the plot is clearly the bank edge flanking the north-east side of the entrance, while the ditch is strikingly visible as a broad anomaly approximately 15m wide. The latter extends across 22m of the survey grid. The terminal of the ditch appears to be squared-off. The redeposited bank material which is thought to flank the ditch on the western side of the monument (cf. above) is also apparent to the bottom of the survey grid as a linear patch of very high readings. To the north it seems that the bank has undergone less disturbance, a conclusion which again corresponds with the results of the contour survey: the area of lower resistance indicates that this section of the earthwork simply underwent natural erosion. Perhaps one of the most interesting results of the resistivity survey is the anomaly which is located along the northern edge of the ditch terminal and appears to run across at least part of the entrance. The importance of what may possibly be an archaeological feature is reiterated by a patch of low readings in the magnetometer survey. The latter also produced three evenly-spaced linear anomalies which were aligned north to south. Their regularity suggests an association with agriculture. One of these appears to cut the top of the ditch feature. Part of the anomaly was located in the subsequent excavation trench and survived as a stone-built field boundary.

3.4 EXCAVATION RESULTS

The success of both the geophysical and contour survey enabled the accurate siting of the 20m by 15m excavation trench across the inner ditch terminal flanking the northern



BANK #1

BANK #2

BANK #3

BANK #4

0 5

Metres

Figure 6: Plan of the 1997 excavation trench at the southern Thornborough henge monument illustrating the inner ditch terminal and banked causeway feature.

entrance of the monument. (**Figure 3**). The excavation revealed four important structural components (**Figure 6**):

i) the inner henge ditch was located across much of the excavation trench. The eastern side of this feature slopes steeply downwards to form a rounded, but irregular, bottom (**Figure 7 & Plates 1-2**). The cut rises more gently on the western side of the feature. It has a maximum depth of 2.1m from the top of the feature. In outline the ditch gently tapers to a flat butt-end 9m from the south trench section. The ditch has a maximum width of 15.8m. It contained well defined primary, secondary and tertiary fills (cf. below). The top of the feature had been cut by a stone-filled hollow (**Plate 3**). This field boundary is evident to the east of the section.

ii) the remnants of a banked or platform structure of simple dump construction was located in the causeway immediately to the north of the inner ditch terminal (**Plate 1**). Unfortunately, it would only be possible to accurately reconstruct this badly disturbed feature with the more extensive excavation of the entrance. It is apparent, however, that it consisted of a number of distinct components on either side of a narrow central channel. Along one side of this was a linear feature with a maximum width of 0.4m (*bank #2*). It is interrupted by a 0.5m wide causeway. This appears to be a compacted area which abutted a low flattened mound some 2.5m wide (*bank #3*). The latter only survives to a maximum height of 0.24m and may be the remnants of a platform. Its interruption immediately behind the gap across bank #2 perhaps indicates the presence of a formal entrance through to the inner ditch terminal. The feature then rises to form a more substantial platform (*bank #4*). This survives to a maximum height of 0.6m and while it disappears under the unexcavated area to the west of the trench it seems likely that the feature continues into the original inner bank of the monument. On the other side of the narrow central channel is a low flattened mound which survives to a height of 0.55m (*bank #1*).

iii) the badly disturbed remains of five post-sockets, each with dense stone packing, and a pit were located across the causeway (**Plate 4**). The former were oval features with U-shaped profiles and flattened bottoms. Their diameters range from 0.35-0.58m and survive to a depth of between 0.29-0.47m. Three are under the platform in the north-east corner of the trench, while a larger post-socket lies on the edge of this feature adjacent the proposed causeway. The fifth post-socket, immediately to the west of the latter, would have been set into the lower platform. The pit, by contrast, is located in the north west corner of the excavation trench. While only partly excavated it seems to be approximately 2.7m by 1.8m in size. It appears to have been cut into the raised platform and originally held two uprights. It survives to a depth of 0.8m. It seems clear that all these features were an integral part of the causeway structure.

Plate 1: The top of the ditch and banked causeway feature at the southern Thornborough henge

Plate 2: The inner ditch terminal at the southern Thornborough henge monument.

Plate 3: The remains of the field boundary cut into the inner ditch of the southern Thornborough henge monument.

Plate 4: The excavated post-sockets located under the bank structure at the southern Thornborough henge.

iv) re-deposited bank material was evident on the western side of the excavation trench. The layer of gravel sediment, underlay by looser soil and stone, extends for about 3.2m from the edge of the trench and possessed a relatively straight edge. The majority of this deposit, with the exception of the north west trench corner, remained unexcavated. It presumably resulted from the natural erosion of the bank sides.

There is clearly much post-depositional disturbance to the structural features of the henge monument. Linear marks, from post-Medieval ploughing, were clearly evident at the top of the buried soil, while more ancient cultivation is indicated by the extensive disturbance to the banked causeway feature.

It is apparent, however, that a significant part of the inner ditch fill is undisturbed. Such a conclusion apparently contrasts with the earlier work on the inner ditch of the central henge. The latter resulted in a relatively simple depositional account for this feature: a shallow primary fill of natural tumble was followed by what was interpreted as the deliberate backfilling of the ditch between the 12th to 15th centuries AD (Thomas 1955, 432). The recent excavation at the southern henge, on the other hand, produced a more complex pattern of deposition for the inner ditch. The initial construction of this feature would have been followed by rapid episodes of weathering. These were clearly evident as primary deposits of sand which contained some charcoal. Above was an homogeneous secondary fill of silty loam, most of which is post-dated by an in-situ 1st century AD Roman brooch. This is of some importance for it suggests a more extended process of infilling than believed by the earlier excavator at the central henge. The location of the brooch indicates that over half of the ditch silts actually date to later prehistory. The secondary fill resulted from both natural patterns of deposition and stone dumping. The tertiary fill contained a sequence of Medieval and post-Medieval pottery, and the agricultural exploitation of the inner henge during this period is indicated by the remains of a field boundary cut into the top of the ditch (**Plate 3**). The existence of similar features from within the enclosure are indicated by the results of a geophysical survey. It is of some interest that the orientation of these probable field boundaries is similar to that of the banked entrance feature. This may suggest that the latter survived while the former were in use.

3.5 DISCUSSION

At present there are no radiocarbon dates for the southern henge monument. As a consequence, it is not yet possible to provide direct evidence for the proposed sequence of two major phases of construction at the southern henge (cf. 3.1). This is a particular problem given that the excavations in both 1996 and 1997 produced little in the way of material culture. Most striking is the complete absence of later prehistoric pottery which suggests that a deliberate attempt was made to keep the henge monument clear of debris during its construction and use. Tentative support for the sequence is provided, however, by the small assemblage of worked lithics. The causeway across the outer ditch, excavated in 1996, produced a small number of undiagnostic flakes which were all of chert. These had clearly been struck on site during a single knapping event, and as such are contemporary with the construction of the outer bank and ditch. In contrast, the entrance across the inner ditch was associated with exclusively flint artefacts. These consisted of a small assemblage of only 19 struck pieces whose technology, and the few tool types, are typical of those found elsewhere with later Neolithic Grooved Ware or Beaker pottery. They are likely to be contemporary with the phase of construction. The distinction in raw material selection may accordingly suggest a chronological difference between the inner and outer ditches. The recent discovery of charcoal in the primary fill of both these features will more accurately date their construction.

The proposed sequence of construction at the southern henge can, however, be best appreciated by considering it from the viewpoint of those who built and used these sites. The earliest activity at the southern henge consisted of the scooping-out of the outer ditch to provide quarry material for the construction of a surrounding bank. As mentioned, after a short time at least one of the major causeways appears to have been narrowed, suggesting that greater importance was now attached to the control of movement into and out of the enclosure. The position of the bank indicates that movement through the perimeter would have been orientated south-west/north-east. What was presumably a low fence was then erected, thereby emphasising the importance of the inner area, while the significance of the entranceway was marked with the erection of timber uprights. These different acts of construction may thus illustrate a trend towards the more exclusive enclosure of space which would

eventually result in the second major phase of building- the erection of the massive inner bank and ditch. It was perhaps at this stage that the outer bank was deliberately levelled. This new earthwork perimeter served to separate and demarcate the inner area from the surrounding landscape in a way which was not possible with the earlier enclosure. But as such it represents the continuation of a theme. Access was now controlled by just two major entrances, demonstrating the greater orchestration of those visiting the site. Indeed, as mentioned, the recent excavation of the inner ditch and adjacent causeway revealed a complex platform feature which could have served to channel people or focus their attention across the northern entrance into the monument. It ran along the side of the causeway and appears to have been associated with a number of timber uprights (**Figure 6**). While it is difficult to reconstruct the original appearance of this badly disturbed feature, it is possibly paralleled by an 'H'-shaped cropmark from the entrance of the largely denuded Cana Barn henge monument located some miles downstream from the Thornborough complex (Harding & Lee 1988, 304-5). What is strikingly apparent, however, is that it would have clearly emphasised the importance of crossing the ditch and entering the inner sacred area.

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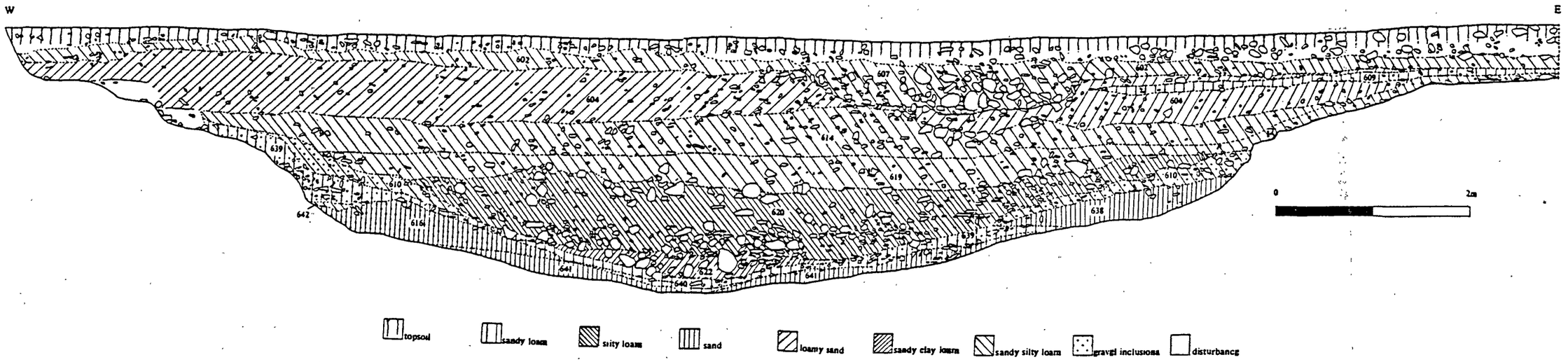

Figure 7: Ditch section at the southern Thornborough henge monument.