

A RESURVEY OF THE RINGBANKS ON PARWICH MOOR AND THE EXCAVATION OF FOUR RINGBANKS AT PARWICH, DERBYSHIRE

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INTRODUCTION

A preliminary field walk over the site in the Autumn of 1990 led both C. R. Hart and the author to believe that the earlier survey by John Lomas was not accurate and that there were many more ringbanks than appeared in his survey of the southern field (Lomas 1962, 92). He identified approximately 75 ringbanks in the southern field and 28 in the northern. Our preliminary look seemed to indicate considerably more and so a survey was conducted in the summer of 1991 and over 140 were recorded in the southern field alone (Fig. 1).

This was due certainly to considerable changes in the use of the land from that of bilberry and heather to pasture over the past twenty to thirty years since Lomas's survey. Locally, the northern field is known as 'Bilberry Moor' and the southern field as 'Heather Moor', indicating the original dominant vegetation of the fields before improvement. A limestone outcrop runs west to east across the northern field known as 'White Cliffe', from which the farm nearby takes its name. The soils of the area are loamy, acidic and heavily mineralised, but the present vegetation has been much improved by liming and fertilisers. The northern field has been ploughed and many of the ringbanks and other features have been destroyed or greatly reduced in height. In the southern field thornscrub has survived partly but has been much reduced by clearance and grazing. The survey and later the excavations were conducted in the southern field.

The site lies between 330m–370m OD, centred on Grid Reference SK173575. The area has seen a number of activities ranging from lead mining, quarrying, ploughing, and the construction of farm buildings. Also many tracks cross the area (Fig. 1). Two lead rakes cut across the southern field in a north–south direction whilst the tracks mainly run in an east–west direction. Many of these appear to be related to mining and farming but there are two older tracks. One of these tracks cuts diagonally from north–east to south–west towards Hawkslow, probably from Biggin to Parwich, whilst the other, running east to west, is a continuation of an old track running from Upper Moor Farm across to Alsop en le Dale. Both tracks have cut deep ruts and are easily identifiable. The smaller tracks seem to have been made either as a result of the extraction of lead or much later, as they converge onto gaps in the lead rake. Part of the southern field has seen some late, shallow ploughing, which seems to post–date the lead mining activity.

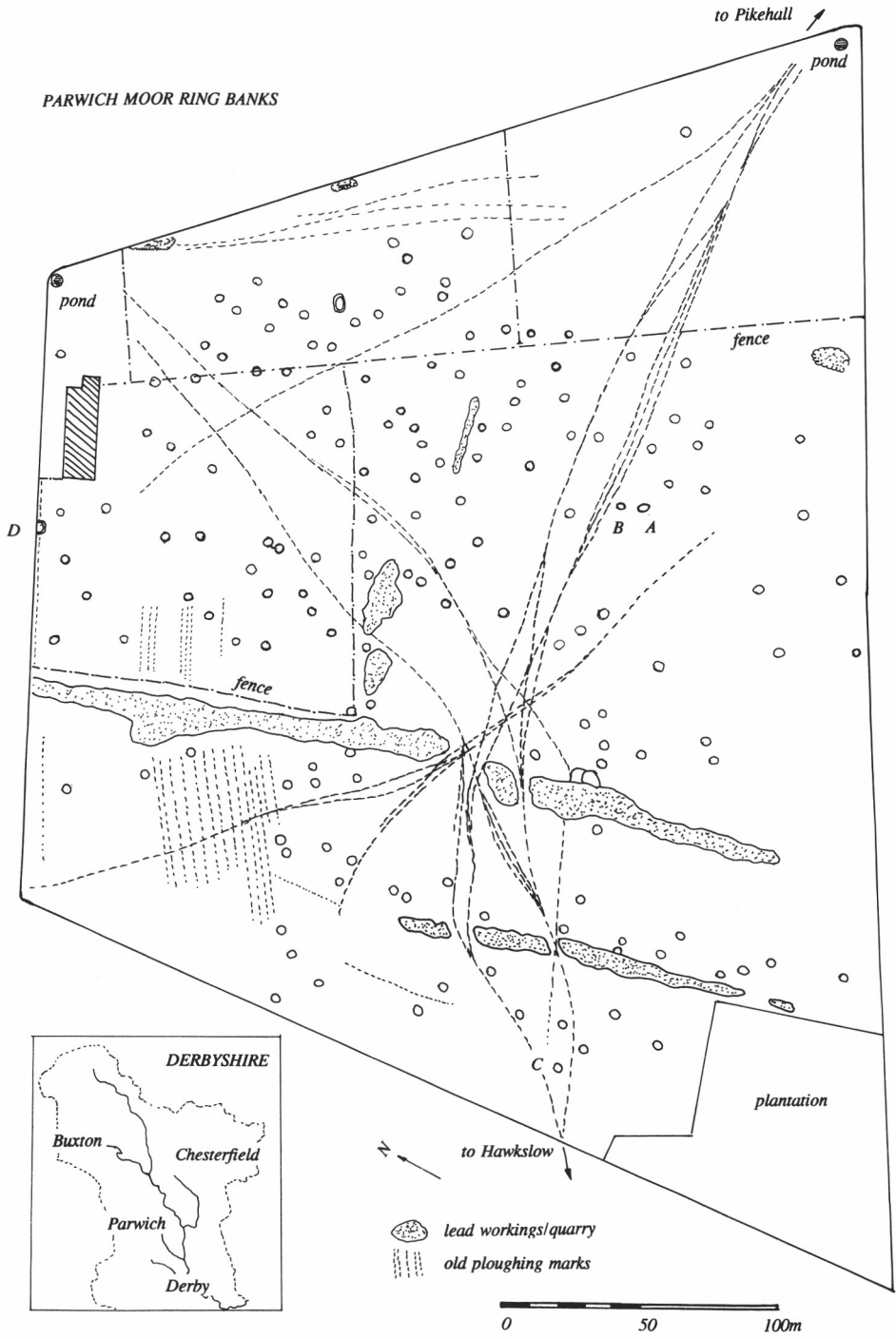


Fig. 1 Ringbanks on Parwich Moor: location.

THE RINGBANKS

The ringbanks generally have a circular outer bank and inner ditch with a central platform, which may or may not have a low mound. They vary in size and in shape from round to oval, with one large example ovoid–rectangular. The average size range is mainly between 6m and 8m in diameter, with a few slightly larger or smaller. Some ringbanks form extremely low features and can only be detected in very low sunlight or by a slight change in vegetation, especially in the inner ditch where the grass tends to be richer. The bank is slightly higher than the central platform in the majority of the ringbanks. There is no distinct pattern to their distribution, some are loosely grouped in clusters whilst others are spread over a wider area. There is no relationship between either round or ovoid ringbanks or whether they have level platforms or slight mounds. From the field evidence, together with that of Lomas's excavations, it is certain that the banks were formed from the material excavated from the ditches and central area. Many ringbanks have been heavily mutilated by animal burrows such as rabbits and moles. No artefacts have been recovered from the area and none been recorded by Lomas.

Recent fieldwalking by the author and Dr David Shimwell in June 1992, found two ringbanks and a possible barrow in the plantation on Alsop Moor (SK166574). This suggests that the ringbanks are not exclusive to the area of Parwich Moor and may be a much more widespread phenomenon. From an aerial photograph taken by the late D. N. Riley of the southern field, there appears to be a possible two or three ringbanks in a field adjoining the north–west corner.

The ringbanks on Parwich Moor have been thought to be many things ranging from burial monuments, Roman and Scottish army encampments and tree ring banks through to geomorphological periglacial features. In his article Lomas states (1962, 96) that they are older than the enclosure walls (c. 1788) and pre–date the lead rakes. The author supports this view through his own observations. In a contribution to Lomas's article (1962, 96–8), Cornwall's analysis found that as the soils are acidic there would be no survival of any bone to suggest burial. Cornwall's soil analysis, and that of Dimbleby (another contributor to Lomas's article: 1962, 98–9), implied a Neolithic, or Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date, respectively.

Ring ditches have been found at Lismore Fields, Buxton (Garton 1987, 250–53), at Wormhill (Hart 1981, 46–7) and Aston (Reaney 1968, 68–81). Although dating is not conclusive, they seem to pre–date the Bronze Age. Recent excavations at Brightlingsea (Essex) suggest that the ring ditches found there pre–date the Deverel–Rimbury pottery (Clarke 1991, 272–73 A 126).

THE RINGBANKS SELECTED FOR EXCAVATION

Four ringbanks were selected for excavation with differing characteristics; the aim was to examine these differences in relation to their construction. Their physical characteristics are as follows:

Ringbank A An ovoid ringbank, 7m x 8m overall, consisting of a substantial outer bank with a slight break in the south–east corner due to erosion. The ditch is ovoid in plan, 4.2m x 3.5m, with a fairly level, central, ovoid platform.

Ringbank B A circular ringbank with low, shallow features, 6.25m diameter overall and with a shallow ditch, 3.5m diameter, and level central platform.

Ringbank C A circular ringbank 8m diameter overall, partly truncated by the old track to Hawkslow, together with a shallow ditch, 3.75m diameter, and a central mound approximately 0.2m high.

Ringbank D An ovoid ringbank 6.5m x 9m overall with level central area and ditch c. 4.2m diameter, which has been truncated by a track and field wall constructed over the western part.

Both ringbanks A and B are next to one another in the middle of the southern field. Ringbank C is at the southern end, near the plantation, and ringbank D is situated close to the western part of the same field (Fig. 1).

THE EXCAVATIONS

All the Ringbanks were excavated using the quadrant method so that sections could be recorded (Figs. 2, 3).

Ringbank A

The excavations found clear evidence that the banks had been formed from 'dumped' material, presumably from the ditch and the central platform. This can be seen in a number of the sections, where several layers of material have been deposited. This dumping produced a mottling effect due to differing soils being mixed together. The ditch infill profiles revealed a number of stages of silting, accentuated by mole disturbances. Moles had formed 'runs' along what appeared to be stages in the silting process. The ditch was steep-sided with a gentle to flat base 0.5m wide and 0.25–0.3m deep. There were no indications of 'hollows' in the base suggesting postholes, similar to those found at Lismore Fields (Garton *pers. comm.*). The central platform was devoid of any original surface, which appeared to have been stripped clean to natural soil. Under the 'dumped' material of the bank, the old land surface/turf layer was preserved in places. No artefacts of any sort nor any shadow features, deposits or pits were found to indicate the site's use.

Ringbank B

A circular ringbank situated close to Ringbank A but much lower in profile. The ringbank itself again showed evidence of 'dumped' deposits making up the bank. The ditch was shallow, approximately 0.2–0.25m wide and 0.1–0.125m deep. The ditch had been a regular 'run' for moles and it was relatively easy to trace the original ditch profile because they had not disturbed the natural soil into which the ditch had first been cut. Again no artefacts or deposits were found and the central area had been cleared of the original land surface.

Ringbank C

A circular ringbank with central mound, 0.24m above the original surface. This ringbank again showed lenses of 'dumped' material from the ditch. The ditch profile was again was steep-sided and varied between 0.2–0.25m in depth and 0.3–0.5m in width. The central mound appeared to have been formed from turves after the original surface had been cleared. Some leaching had occurred and iron panning had formed on the cleared surface. The mound material was grey-black and slightly greasy and showed clear thin, black, peaty lenses where the turves had been deposited. The mound was taken down to base level but no artefacts or deposits were found, and the subsoil was undisturbed.

PARWICH MOOR RINGBANKS

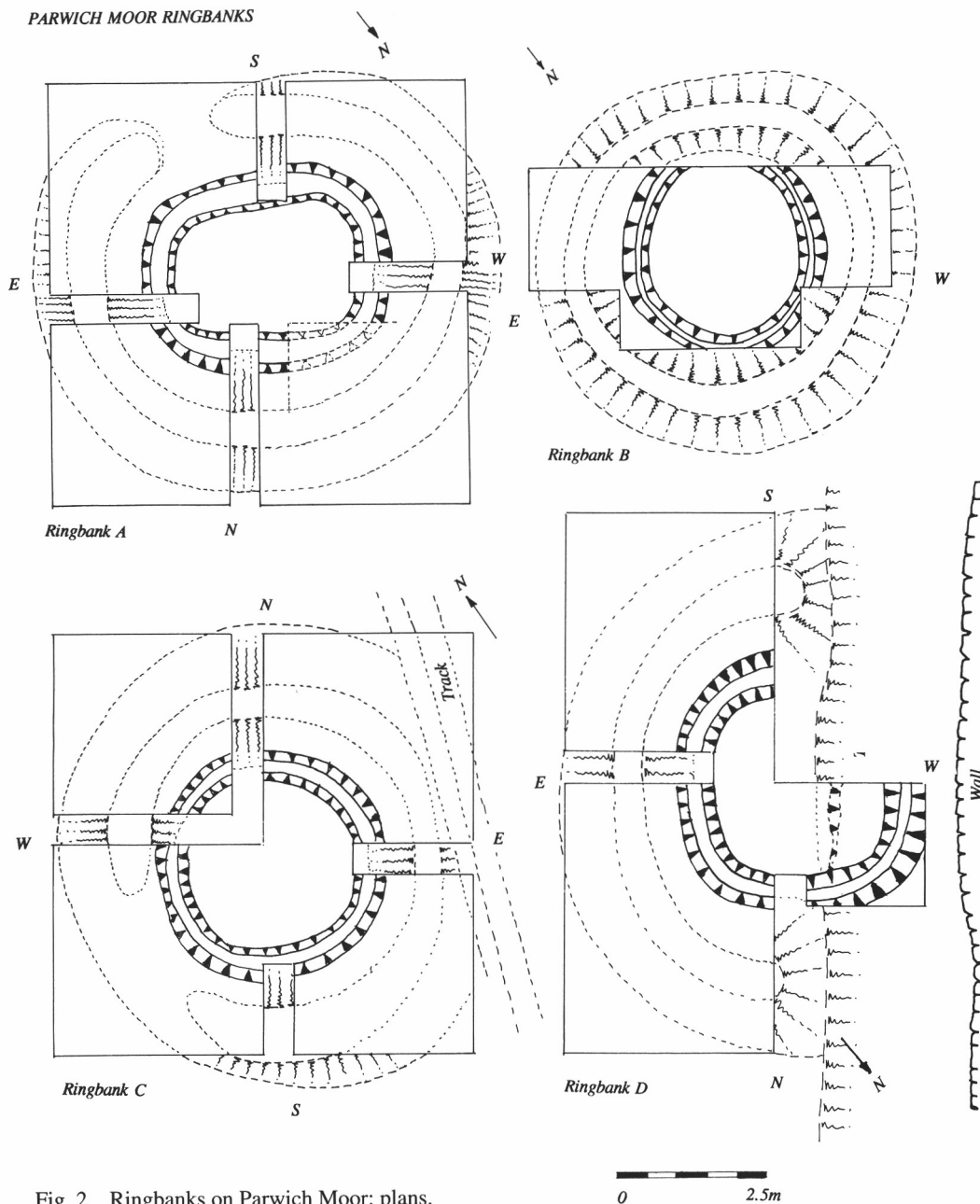


Fig. 2 Ringbanks on Parwich Moor: plans.

Ringbank D

A large ovoid ringbank, partly truncated by a track and with a wall built over part of the outer bank. Again 'dumped' material formed the ringbank and the central area was clear of any original surface deposits. The ditch was 0.25m deep and 0.3m wide and had been much

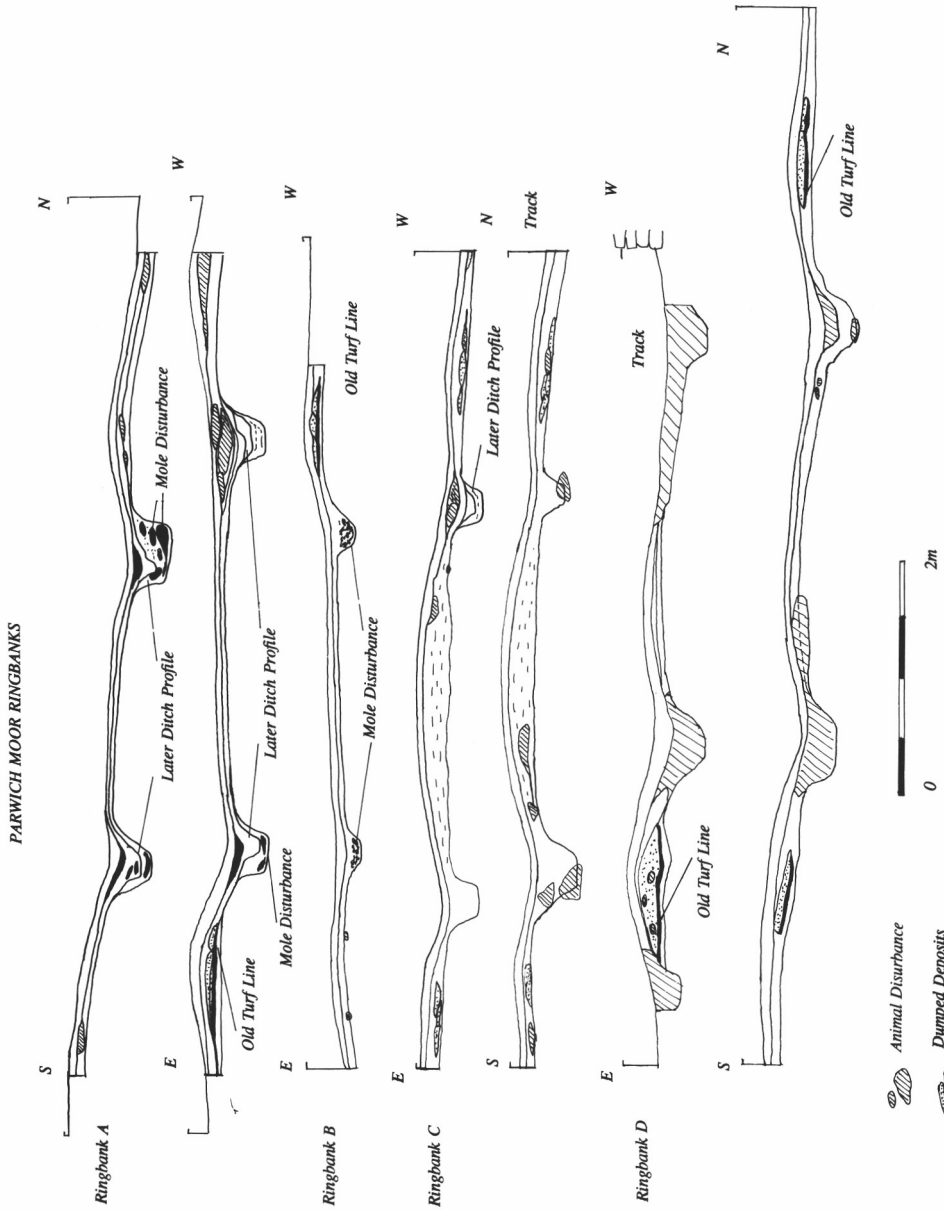


Fig. 3 Ringbanks on Parwich Moor: sections.

disturbed by moles and rabbits. The bank had sealed the old land surface which could be clearly seen in the section. Again no artefacts or deposits were found.

POLLEN ANALYSIS (DWS)

Introduction

The site was visited in June 1992 and the profiles of the outer ringbanks were surveyed and described. A typical profile was as follows:

Ringbank D Soil profiles of outer bank:

Vegetation Acidophilous grassland dominated by *Festuca rubra*, *F. ovina*, *Agrostis capillaris*, *Holcus lanatus* and *Danthonia decumbens*.

Soil profile (cm)

00-07	Light brown A horizon with prolific roots; pH 4.6.
07-17	Made ground of soil thrown out of ditch; pH 4.5.
17-18	Buried turf line; pH 4.3; samples taken for pollen analysis.
18-23	Podzolized silty-clay loam; pH 4.5.
23-23.5	Variable, diffuse to continuous iron pan.
24-52	Orange-yellow silt loam/loess matrix with chert fragments and barytes nodules (18% sand, 72% silt, 10% clay); pH 4.4; X-ray fluorescence analysis of a barytes nodule indicated a barium concentration of 30.1%.

Methods and results

Four samples were taken from the buried turf horizons in the outer bank of ringbanks A and D and subjected to the standard acetolysis preparation of Faegri and Iversen (1964). Pollen preservation was generally good and pollen counts of representative samples of >400 grains of all species were possible to allow a broad interpretation of vegetation and landscape type. The results are presented in the table below in which the pollen frequencies are expressed in terms of the representation of the major species-groups as a percentage of total pollen (A) and the individual tree species as a percentage of total arboreal pollen (B).

Pollen analysis of buried turf horizons

Sample	A1	A2	D1	D2
A. Percentage of total pollen				
Gramineae (grass)	54	52	55	54
Ericaceae (heaths)	29	30	29	28
Other herbs	3	2	2	2
Shrub - <i>Corylus</i> (hazel)	8	9	8	8
Arboreal (trees)	6	7	7	8
B. Percentage of arboreal pollen				
<i>Alnus</i>	54	56	50	52
<i>Quercus</i>	23	21	25	26
<i>Betula</i>	20	20	21	19
<i>Ulmus</i>	1	1	1	2
<i>Fraxinus</i>	1	1	1	1
<i>Tilia</i>	+	+	+	+
<i>Pinus</i>	+	+	1	+
<i>Carpinus</i>	-	-	+	-

Discussion

The uniformity of the percentages of the major species–groups indicates that the construction of ringbanks A and D was contemporaneous and it seems a reasonable assumption that all the structures are of the same approximate age. The results show a close correspondence with those of Dimbleby (1962, 98–9) from the Parwich site and with those of the 25cm horizon in the pollen profile from the nearby Hawkslow Plantation (Shimwell 1977, 54). From the dominance of the grass and heath pollen it is clear that the landscape was open, grassy heath at the time of construction of the ringbanks. The relatively low percentages of shrub (*Corylus*) and tree pollens are typical of most profiles examined on the limestone plateau of the Peak District (Shimwell 1977, 54) and are probably indicative of the presence of localised patches of scrubby woodland on the steeper slopes of adjacent dalesides. A comparison of these results with those from other analyses of podzolic soils on the limestone plateau of the Peak District suggests a date from the Sub–Boreal, Zone VIIb, from c. 1500 to 500 BC. A more precise dating may possibly be obtained from the radiocarbon dating of a buried turf sample.

The complete absence of flint and pottery artefacts, bones, charcoal and post–holes, pits and shadows is puzzling. The seemingly random distribution of the ringbanks and the absence of post–holes pits and shadows would suggest that the site was not one of occupation. The acidic nature of the soil may have been responsible for the total decomposition of the bone but the results of phosphate analysis, undertaken by Cornwall (Lomas 1962, 91–9), would surely have revealed higher concentrations on the central platforms had bodies been laid there according to some funerary ritual. In terms of agricultural function, it is difficult to interpret the structures as being associated with stock control and the poor representation of cereal pollen in the buried turf samples would seem to preclude their use as grain stores or threshing and drying floors.

An industrial function may be postulated, but again evidence is scant. The basal material in most profiles is the type of wind–blown loess described by Piggott (1962, 145–56), with which are commonly associated chert fragments and superficial deposits of barytes and fluorspar, Barytes is a relatively frequent material at Parwich Moor, both in the lead rakes and as a loessal scatter, and barium concentrations in nodules is as high as 30%. Barium oxide, formed by the oxidation of barium sulphate and barium carbonate in water, is an important component of many ceramics and glass. Could the ringbanks represent the initial stages of a barium oxide processing industry? Perhaps the barytes was mined on site, crushed and left to oxidise in shallow rain water in the ditches? There is some evidence of siltation in the ditch of ringbank A, but no apparent clay sealant layer to maintain the water level. Perhaps a detailed soil analysis of the barium concentration in the siltation layers may throw light on this postulation.

CONCLUSIONS

The lack of dateable artefacts or information as to why such monuments were constructed makes it difficult to draw conclusions. The number suggests some collective purpose. They are not periglacial features as there is no evidence of resorting of material by frost or ice action, Nor are they tent pitches as there are no entrances and the platform tends to be lower than the surrounding area. They are not tree ring banks as there are no features to suggest that trees were ever there and tree rings tend to have the ditch outside the bank. Suggestions have been made that these are hay stack stands but these tend to have the ditch externally. The area was common land until enclosure, and the fieldnames, Heather and Bilberry Moors, suggest that the land was acidic and was never used for hay making.

The reasons for their variable size and shape are now lost. On Parwich Moor the ringbanks cluster together in the saddle of the moor. There is no evidence to suggest that these were part of a settlement, nor are there linear features to suggest enclosures or house sites. There are no artefacts recorded from the immediate area, yet from the surrounding fields flints have been found and a number of barrows are recorded. This may suggest that this particular area was set aside for some special purpose.

The author would like to suggest that on Parwich Moor we may be looking at evidence for mortuary and possible excarnation practices which began in the Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age and which, given the pollen evidence, may have continued. There is evidence from the White Peak of a considerable number of Neolithic open settlements (Hart 1981, 42–7), mainly identified from flint scatters, but very few burials. The author therefore wishes to postulate that these monuments could have been repositories for the dead (though this is not endorsed by the phosphate analysis), which were laid on the open, cleared platforms or on turf mounds (bearing in mind that the turf mounds may have had vertical or near vertical sides). Later acidic soil conditions may account for there being no bone deposits of any kind surviving. The monuments are similar in form to early ditched barrows (disc) and the larger Neolithic henges, in that the central area is a platform and the bank is external to the ditch. We may be looking, therefore, at a ritual which has left no remains except for ringbanks and ditches. Parwich Moor may have formed a large open cemetery with features partly preserved which in other areas have been ploughed out or cleared by later activities, the ring ditches being all that is left in places such as Lismore Fields and Brightlingsea. As David Shimwell has suggested, radio-carbon dating would help by providing dates for monuments which from soil/pollen analysis appear to be largely contemporary.

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