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(new) **Chapter 3**
High northern downland:
a land-use sequence on Clay-with-Flints

Introduction: Overton Down North to North Totterdown ('Window' 1)

1: **Overton Down North/Totterdown:** rough grazing dominated by sarsen fields, including some utilised sarsens, and slight earthworks of BA and Rom. field systems, linked by earliest earthwork boundary in the study area (text also serves as intro. to excav. rpts. a, b, c & e in Ch. 4)

(to be written)

4.A Overton Down North and Totterdown (Pls. 4.00, 4.00; figs. 4.00-4.00)

Three small excavations were carried out close to each other at the N end of Overton Down (fig. 00). Each one had specifically different objectives but together, although each examined a different feature, they investigated the possibility that each feature was related within an the area with a certain homogeneity i.e. that fragments of a complex might have survived.

The three features still exist (1996), undisturbed since their partial excavation. In the roughly chronological order in which they will be described, they are a split block of sarsen stone believed to be a Neolithic stone axe-sharpening bench (cutting OD II); a short line of sarsen stones immediately W of the last (OD III); and a bank and ditch passing a few metres to the south which was sectioned slightly uphill (cutting OD I; all fig. 4.00). The bank and ditch was subsequently also sectioned further east on Totterdown (TD VIII and IX, fig. 3.00).

4.A.i Neolithic *polissoir* (OD II)

'...investigations carried out [around *polissoirs*] in the hope of discoveries have always proved unrewarding' (Lacaille 1963, 193)

The stone was discovered by Inigo Jones in 1962 and reported on, after 'repairing to the spot under his conduct', by Lacaille (1963, 191) whose phrase so assuredly links the discovery to another Inigo Jones (Ucko *et al.* 19**) and Fyford to the antiquarian tradition. Lacaille's (1963) description and discussion are so good, with excellent illustrations, that they need not be repeated here. It is important, however, to appreciate that the *polissoir* or sarsen bench had been split N-S. Its western part of unknown size had been removed at some unknown date (though reasonably imagined as C19-20, King 1968). On the one hand it seemed a remarkable stroke of fortune that the polished and grooved patch at the stone's SE (Pl. 4.00) corner had survived the stone-breakers' destruction; on

the other, one wonders what was on the perhaps larger part of the stone which has disappeared. It should be additionally recorded that close and repeated examination of the bench has shown that much of its upper surface has in fact been polished; and that the 'focal patch' is itself the product of time, for some grooves cut others, and some cut through previously polished areas. Two other polished, recumbent stones have also been noted further south on Overton Down (info. G. Swanton), but long-term if unsystematic observation of thousands of sarsens makes it unlikely that such stones are common now. With so many thousands removed or partly-removed, it can now never be known, however, whether such stones were formerly common.

This is merely a summary of the small excavation in 1963 which followed up the discovery of the *polissoir* in an area which was being critically examined anyway (*above*, Chap. 3, 'window' 1). The *polissoir* was, after all, probably one of the earliest visible features on the downs and some information about its context would be useful in a landscape sense. The main objective was to explore the possibility of Neolithic activity/settlement beside or near it.

Four small cuttings were excavated on three sides of the stone, but none on the W where a block of sarsen had long been removed (fig. 4.00). No structures or significant features were found in plan and the stratigraphy was consistently straightforward (Pl. 4.00, fig. 00 with layer details in caption). Layers 1 and 2, essentially what were to become the so familiar topsoil of humus underlain by worm-sorted flints, were disturbed, probably by rabbits as much as the sarsen-breakers. The material appeared to be redeposited on top of an earlier ground surface, inferentially of medieval or earlier date (*see below*). At the N end of the sarsen bench, however, the lip of a pit or trench was partly excavated. It showed clearly in plan as a feature dug into the top of an old but undated surface at the level of the disturbed top of the Clay-with-Flints; it was filled with flinty, clayey humus similar to that into which it was cut. In the top of that filling was a heavily weathered sarsen c 60 x 45 cms and a cluster of smaller, broken sarsen stones. The hole was at least 45 cms deep, its bottom as excavated marked by an increase in the density of flints. The evidence, though incomplete, suggested very strongly that the feature excavated was part of a hole dug to support the *polissoir* as an upright stone. The excavation was stopped, however, because enough had been done to demonstrate that, whatever the structural interest (which others may wish to explore), the immediate vicinity of the *polissoir* seemed unlikely to contribute significantly to our landscape objectives.

In a sense the most interesting landscape point to emerge from this small exercise was represented, not by Neolithic revelations but by a half-penny of King John (1197-1206, identified by the late Hugh Shortt, then curator of Salisbury Museum). Near it was an iron wedge; both were found in layer 2 at a depth of c 15 cms. The wedge exactly fitted the wedge-marks along the split W edge of the recumbent stone, the *polissoir*, which for reasons unknown was left by the stone-breakers. There was also at 20 cms depth half of an iron horse-

shoe, probably of late or post-medieval date. This somewhat unexpected evidence seemed to indicate active stone-breaking c 1200 at the time that people were living not so far away at Wick (*above* in Chap 3) and possibly beginning to occupy *Raddun* (*below* in Chap. 7); with perhaps later visits too.

Earlier activity was indicated by 20-30 flint flakes (see Everton flint report) including 3 micro-flakes, 8 sarsen chips and a sarsen 'flake'; but there was no spread of stone debris of the sort that one might expect from stone-axe manufacture. Polishing roughouts would not, however, leave much material. Only the sarsen material even hinted at the possibility of stone axe-manufacturing, and to remark thus is special pleading since sarsen axes are rare (CHECK this statement with ?Isobel Smith/ TWA Neo. expert?). More interesting is the possibility that the stone, then much larger than now, once stood upright. A larger excavation around its N end would be necessary to settle the matter but, if it was once a standing stone, presumably that was before it was used as a *polissoir*. Such a sequence would contrast with polished sarsens re-used in the West Kennet Avenue and in the West Kennet long barrow (Burl 1979, ++, and Piggott 1963, %%).

Excavation OD II did not, then achieve its initial objectives, rather bearing out Lacaille's expectations in the opening quotation and supporting his interpretation that such *polissoirs* were likely to be 'open places' (1963, 193). It produced two unexpected results, however, of considerable landscape interest some 4000 years apart. A somewhat squat upright stone c 2.10 m. tall and 1.80 m. wide may well have stood here in early-mid-Neolithic times before it was laid flat to use for polishing - perhaps grinding might be a better word? - stone axes, presumably in the 3rd millennium if not earlier. And this same spot is then witness to sarsen stone-breaking being under way by at latest the late C12/early C13.

4.A.ii Stone structure (cutting OD III; Pl. 4.00, figs. 4.00, 4.00)

Slightly uphill of and just a few metres NW of the *polissoir* is a somewhat irregular line of sarsens, then unclear in form and nature but now interpreted as the remains of a former clearance boundary of land to the north (*above* Chap. 3, p. 00). At what was thought to be its ENE end in 1963, when the feature was obscured by bushes, brambles and nettles, a small embanked depression appeared to be associated physically with visible 'wall' stones at a slight suggestion of a bend towards the *polissoir*. Had the point been as clear then as now, this small excavation would not have taken place. It was meant to be a single cutting merely to check whether any structure existed which might be, or have been, related to either or both the *polissoir* and the Beaker occupation which by then was known to exist in OD I (*below*).

(note for): much more clearly visible as it extends SW than was the case in 1963. It appears to be the remains, incomplete and probably robbed, of what was originally a line of upright and close-packed sarsen stones of the sort

elsewhere on the downs delineating the boundaries of fields; but it is not visibly connected to anything and does not readily fit in with the nearest field patterns to W and E.

The main excavated feature, the 'embanked depression', was a pit which cut everything else including the topsoil. It was almost certainly recent (fig. 4.00): a Home Guard or other military origin seems most likely. It seemed to be the source of a line of 'cob' which ran W-E through the original N-S cutting and N-S through the W-E extension, as if passing through a right angle. This chalky material, which looked like a wall foundation with 'spill' to either side, proved to be but a few centimetres thick and to lie on top of a former topsoil i.e. it was the upcast from the bottom of the pit where it cut into Chalk below Clay-with-Flints.

The short length of three stones exposed showed the sarsen wall to conform to the description above: a line of single sarsens side by side, partly under the chalk 'cob' and with a pile-up of material from the pit on their N side. The stones themselves sat on rather than in a flinty layer between the top of the Clay-with-Flints and the bottom of the former topsoil, suggesting that their placement was not too long ago i.e. after the formation of the characteristic worm-sorted layer 2. A line of sarsens roughly placed at the edge of marginal land clearance in the C18 or C19 is a distinct possibility, though the line of sarsens was undated archaeologically.

Nevertheless, 24 separate finds-contexts were recorded in this small excavation, 13 of them 'flint flakes' in layer 2 or the top of the Clay-with-Flints. A sarsen flake occurred in the last; and a leaf-shaped flint point, a beautiful implement, occurred in layer 2 right at the S end of the cutting. Overall, here was the same sort of material in a similar context to that in OD II, suggesting that the area was indeed one of activity in one or more phases during the 3rd millennium +/- a century or two (see below OD I).

From OD II and III, therefore, tiny excavations close together around the 244 m. (800 ft.) contour, enough evidence was produced to hint at the following phases in the development and use of this particular local landscape:

- i. Standing stone: early/mid Neolithic
- ii. Axe-grinding bench, and some flint/stone-working: mid/late Neo
- iii. Flint-working/?occupation: late Neo/EBA
- vi. Sarsen-breaking: c AD 1200
- vii. Military activity: ?1940s

The sequence seems reasonably secure; the dating is partly supposition; the numbering of the phases is in anticipation of OD I in section A.A.iii immediately below:

4.A.iii Linear ditch (OD I; Pl. 4.00, figs. 4.00, 4.00)

This linear feature was and is a bank and ditch for much of its length and has been interpreted as a track at least in parts (F.4 in Bowen and Fowler 1962; Lacaille 1963, 190: 'credibly part of an ancient trackway'; discussed above in Chap. 2, p. 00, Chap 3, p. 00, and *below* pp. 00, 00). It was important to examine its structure or structures, and to date it and its phases, because it stretched W-E right across the N part of the study area and was related *en passant* to a number of features. It therefore provided a crucial horizontal datum in landscape terms, with a potential for both functional and chronological information. 4 ft. wide cuttings in such a wide landscape were clearly not going to answer all questions, for the chances of finding stratified and dateable evidence were small; but it was hoped that by placing them carefully in the light of fieldwork some relative dating and possibly structural evidence might be established. In a conscious pattern of controlled variation, OD I was placed close to the highest point of the bank and ditch's course on Upper Chalk, immediately E and slightly down-slope of the Ridgeway (fig. 3.00). It was also not far from the *polissoir*. TD VIII was meant to provide a marked contrast, testing whether morphological form varied with topographical and geological situation. It was cut c 0.5 km. E of and below OD I, on Clay-with-Flints and SW-facing at a point where clearly defined, stone-walled fields were laid off south from the bank (*above* in Chap 3, Pl. 3.00, fig. 3.00). TD IX was higher up the slope of Totterdown, again on Clay-with-Flints but carefully sited to test the field deduction that the ditch continued up-slope under a 'Celtic' field after the track along it had turned off to the SE (*above* Chap 3, p. 00).

This part merely describes the excavations through the bank and ditch, beginning with OD I close to the two excavations just described (fig. 4.00); and then, after a brief discussion of the north end of Overton Down, moving on to the other two cuttings through it on Totterdown (TD VIII and IX; *below* p. 00).

OD I: excavation showed the slight remains of a bank to survive on the S side of the ditch. Its rear was marked by a sarsen stone at the foot of the slight superficial rise, and by the end of a tenuously-surviving old ground surface. In it and its erosion products at the rear were 3 flint flakes five, probably Beaker/EBA, sherds. The ditch to the N was 1.34 m. deep below the OLS, cut entirely into Chalk though presumably it had originally cut through a thin layer of Clay-with-Flints. The main features of the ditch filling were the relatively large amount of humic, not chalk, deposit, and the near-horizontal layer of chalk lumps across the upper part of that humic material (fig. 4.00). This was interpreted at the time as the surface of a trackway laid in the top of what at the time would have been a slight linear depression physically but may also (still?) have been a boundary. The same zone contained a Beaker sherd, two flint flakes and an iron nail. The first were presumably residual at that level, weathering out from the ditch sides; the last is a small piece of evidence on which to hang a landscape but it does not stop the trackway level being Romano-British, as was guessed at the time, and

now part of a major re-organisation evidenced over the whole of the study area (*above* Chap 2, p. 00, *below* Chap. 10, p. 00).

The landscape and structural sequence evidenced in this cutting is therefore of a Beaker activity area cut through by a long ditch and covered by its bank. At the foot of Avebury Down to the W this same ditch cuts through some 'Celtic' fields (VAP insert ref no.) so a post-Beaker horizon is not perhaps surprising. Conversely, other fields in the same area are laid off from it (fig. 2.00; *cf* ditch/fields relationship in vicinity of cutting TD VIII *below*, p. 00). After a long period of deposition, the line of the ditch at OD I was probably re-used as a track after receiving a chalk surface, probably (though not so-dated independently here) c AD 100. The earthwork grassed over and has remained undisturbed at this point ever since (though quarried away a few metres to the W).

This evidence and its interpretation can be merged with that from OD II and III (*above*) to suggest a local landscape sequence for this northern end of Overton Down:

- i. Standing stone: early/mid Neolithic
- ii. Axe-grinding bench, and some flint/stone-working: mid/late Neo
- iii. Flint-working/?occupation with Beaker pottery: late Neo/EBA
- iv. Boundary bank and ditch (+? field wall): MBA/LBA
- v. Trackway along BA boundary ditch: c AD 100
- vi. Sarsen-breaking: c AD 1200
- vii. Field-clearance and arable to north C18-19
- viii. Military activity: ?1940s

This area clearly has a high potential for producing further information about several matters, its main significance probably lying in its hints of activity and structure in the (fourth?) third and second millennia BC. These small excavations have been suggestive rather than conclusive but together, and at minimal cost, they provided an outline of landscape sequence in a fairly unpromising-looking *locale* towards the higher northern limits of the study area.

4.B Linear ditch continued, Totterdown (TD VIII) (Pl. 4.00, fig. 4.00)

The linear ditch sectioned in OD I *above* as part of a localised complex was further examined in its own right as a significant landscape feature. It was next examined with a single trench across the ditch and its slight bank on its south at a point, roughly a third of the way up the SW-facing slope of Totterdown, where 'early' stone-walled fields appeared to be laid off from it (*above* Chap. 3, p. 00, fig. 3.00; and *cf* comments on ditch/field relationships in previous section).

Remains of the bank were very slight, represented by a thickening of a layer of small flints and a single sarsen stone lying on disturbed Clay-with-Flints at the 'front' (fig. 4.00). Two (EBA?MBA? CHECK) sherds came from this disturbed

layer, which was cut by the inner edge of the ditch. Its dimensions were similar to those in cutting OD I, though here it was cut into Clay-with-Flints, not Chalk. The filling was uncomplex, indicating a long process of deposition in its progression from coarser soil with large flints in its pointed base to a fine brown (wind-blown?) soil beneath the topsoil.

Unexpectedly, given its remote position, the ditch produced seven stratified artefacts. Three sherds, all ?E/MBA urn, and a flint flake occurred in the primary fill among the large flints low in the point of the ditch bottom. Almost certainly this material weathered out of the Clay-with-Flints subsoil, probably in the first few years after the ditch was dug. Two further sherds, respectively on and just above a tip-line, may have been similarly derived and come to rest on a temporary surface stabilised during the ditch's depositional development. The same could be said about both of the next artefacts higher in section, a sherd and a flint flake. The last lay slightly up-slope to the north, and could have come from the outer, northern ditch side; but all the other artefacts almost certainly derived from the south, either weathering out of the disturbed subsoil or - a different scenario, - from post-construction activity on the bank. The two sherds under the bank incline interpretation towards the former.

This cutting suggested, therefore, that some E/MBA activity occurred here which was subsequently overlaid and cut through by a bank and ditch. Given the landscape nature of the Fyfod enquiry overall, the evidence is not surprisingly interpreted further in terms of an area of manuring for cultivation, perhaps in fields, becoming more orderly with a new bank and ditch marking the edge of cultivation and, if they did not already exist, fields being laid out systematically from it. The sherds obviously provide a *terminus post quem* for this change which, in the complete absence of any later dating evidence, hint that it may well have occurred around the middle of the 2nd millennium BC.

4.C Linear ditch continued, Totterdown (TD IX) (Pl. 4.00, fig. 3.00)I:

The same bank and ditch was also sectioned higher up Totterdown, again where Clay-with-Flints overlay UpperChalk. The cutting was planned as much to demonstrate that the feature existed at this point as it was to date it; for the 'obvious' earthwork had ended (on OS) and its apparent continuation had swung off to the SE (*above* Chap 3, p.00, fig. 3.00).

The bank was relatively well-preserved, having been respected at this point by the cultivation which had occurred in the 'Celtic' field. Its southern edge had been a sarsen drystone revetment of which some of the lowest two courses remained. From it had collapsed a spread of stones over a very thin layer of flinty soil. In this protective context, four grooves had survived, each scratched into the surface of the Chalk for a depth of c 1-1.5 cms. They were slightly asymmetrical in profile. The southernmost ran somewhat diagonally across the cutting; the other three were fragmentary but all four were parallel to each other and approximately

parallel to the rear revetment of the bank. They failed to re-appear in a small test-pit to their west where the protective context was also absent.

The grooves were interpreted as ard-marks. Their very specific location prompted the thought that they may have been created when extra pressure was applied to the ard during a ploughing-up of the headland alongside the fixed field boundary at this point. In contrast, a few metres to the SW, cultivation within the 'Celtic' field had passed over both the bank and the top of the ditch, the outer edge of the ditch apparently becoming the edge of the field. At the point excavated, the bank's revetment was the field edge, and the creation of a slight negative lynchet at its foot seems to have reduced the amount of cultivable soil and the whole of the Clay-with-Flints subsoil. The underlying Chalk was thus able to 'receive' the ard-marks.

The bank itself lay directly on top of Clay-with Flints, consisting of a matrix of flinty soil with sarsens in it on the south and smaller sarsens on its top in the centre. It had originally been fronted on the ditch side by a drystone revetment but all that remained *in situ* was a ledge cut into the subsoil where it had presumably stood. Flints lay on the ledge, trailing down into the ditch behind a block of the revetment which had slipped down as a small but cohering piece of drystone masonry. The stones had come to rest in the top of the main filling in the ditch centre, a brown, stone-free humus equivalent to the similar material in OD I (*above*). Below it was a layer of flinty soil and, in the rounded ditch bottom, the weathered product of eroded subsoil containing flecks of charcoal. Maybe these reflected a phase of land-clearance by burning before or at the time of the ditch-digging, but what is reasonably clear is that the banks stood, drystone walled to both back and front, for some considerable time. The collapse of the front revetment was certainly relatively late in the ditch's depositional history, and perhaps absolutely too. Indeed, in the light of evidence specifically from FL I (*below*) and generally, the possibility exists that the stone structural elements may relate to the early RB phase. Three sarsen stones and a heap of sarsen chippings also lay high in the filling along the ditch's outer edge, presumably remnant of some 'late' sarsen-breaking. Subsoil seemed to have been 'weeping' into the ditch until late in its depositional sequence but the indications were that grass finally grew over the filling a long time ago. No artefactual or other evidence for absolute date came from the cutting. That the ard-marks appeared to be related to the bank suggested the bank and ditch were prehistoric, and no evidence countermanded that.

In general, the bank and ditch appeared from excavated evidence from three cuttings to be later than Beaker/EBA (Cuttings OD I, TD VIII) and earlier than RB (OD IX). The absence of EIA pottery from all cuttings may be significant, suggesting the linear boundary belonged to an early phase of landscape development. This too is hinted at by the association with a block of stone-walled fields at the foot of Totterdown, independently suggested as 'early' on morphological grounds. Overall, the bank and ditch as a long land boundary

was not closely dated but is most likely to have originated in the mid/late 2nd-millennium BC. Its functions, first as a boundary feature and, more circumspectly, as a RB track, seem more certain.