3
The Monument Builders: The Neolithic and Bronze Ages (4500 BC-1000 BC)

ANDY CHAPMAN

PREHISTORIC LANDSCAPES

In some parts of Britain evidence of the lives of our prehistoric ancestors is still visible above ground. There are the grassy banks and ditches of large earthwork enclosures, the long and circular mounds where they buried their dead, or the impressive standing stones and stone circles that can still attract gatherings of people in the present day.

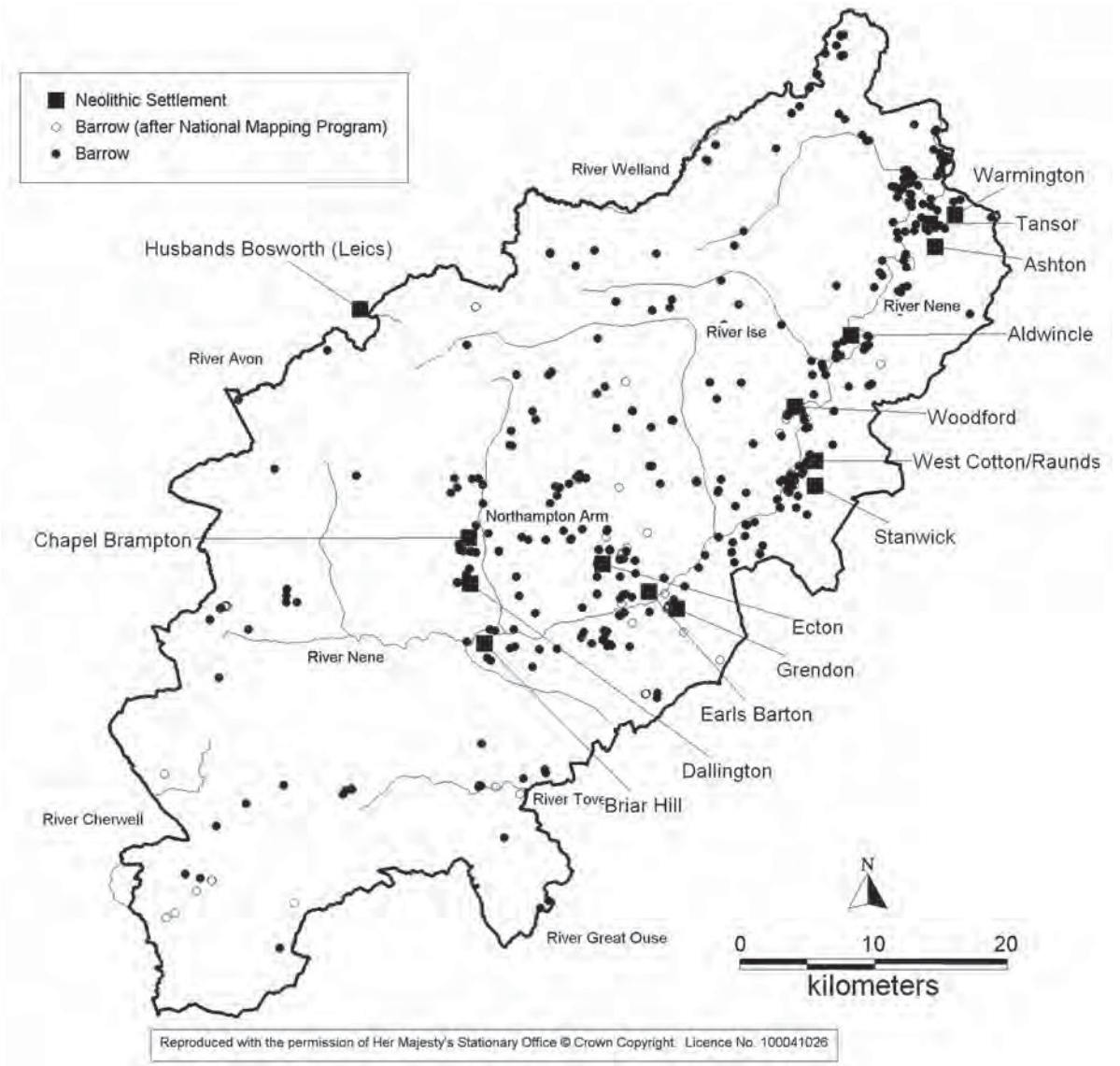
Up to forty years ago, few prehistoric sites had been found in Northamptonshire, or in the Midlands in general, and it was believed that this was because these areas had been sparsely populated backwaters. The accidental finds of flint or stone artefacts were seen as coming from the casual loss of tools by people probably merely passing through. The occasional burials that were uncovered came from the later part of the period, in the Bronze Age, perhaps as part of the very first wave of true settlement.

What this view did not take into account was that the Midlands have been dominated by arable farming for hundreds of years. So it was not that prehistoric people had ignored these areas, but that hundreds of years of ploughing had flattened the earthworks, leaving the evidence of their presence hidden beneath the modern fields. Clues as to the quantity of these hidden sites began to emerge with the more widespread use of aerial photographic reconnaissance, and by 1960 the cropmarks of ploughed out prehistoric sites in the arable fields of the Nene valley were being found in unexpected numbers (RCHME 1960). Ironically, just as this unknown archaeological wealth was being discovered its destruction was also occurring at an ever-faster rate. In the Nene valley gravel extraction was a major threat, and excavation in advance of gravel digging over the past 30 years has provided archaeologists with opportunities to explore and uncover the detailed stories of several important sites Beyond the Nene valley there is still much to learn, but programmes of fieldwalking have recovered prehistoric worked flints scattered across the fields in every part of the county, showing that they were also exploiting the higher and often clay covered and wooded land (Hall & Hutchings 1972, Martin & Hall 1980). So, as a result of the past forty years of work we can now see how our prehistoric ancestors created monuments in earth and stone over a period of some 3500 years, that would have rivalled some of the most famous sites in the country.

At the beginning of the Neolithic the landscape of the county would not have been recognisable to us. It had been thought that no one had lived here because most of the land was covered with dense, impenetrable oak forest, but the study of preserved pollen, seeds and charcoal has shown that it was actually a much more varied landscape. It was dominated by less dense woodland containing most of the trees and shrubs that occur in our present deciduous woods and hedgerows, and these provided food, as nuts and berries, and a range of timber for building and making tools and equipment. Signs of people would have been slight, but you might have seen some smoke drifting up through the trees from a small fire as a band of hunters cooked the meat of a wild deer they had just killed. In the valleys the dams of beavers would have been more evident than any influence of humans.

By the end of the period the valley and hillsides were largely cleared of woodland and on the open grassland there were herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and small fields of wheat and barley. Stone tools had been replaced by bronze, and the landscape was scattered with numerous grassed-over, but still known and visited, earthworks and mounds.

One thing was still largely missing; substantially



3.1 Neolithic sites and Bronze Age round barrows in Northamptonshire

built permanent houses. Even though these people were the first farmers, they were not like later farmers, with permanent fields and living in a farm house or a village. In the Neolithic period people were still semi-nomadic, as their ancestors had been. Initially, they probably did not herd their animals but controlled them indirectly by burning areas of woodland to create better pasture where the animals would stay. Gradually, over many centuries this changed to full domestication, and by the later Bronze Age we see the first appearance of boundaries running across the countryside to define territories. Similarly, they did not cultivate large fields of wheat and barley. They cleared and planted small plots that could be tended by a handful of people. There were also still extensive areas of woodland providing a seasonal harvest, and the river valleys would have been rich in waterfowl and fish.

So, for much of the year each community or tribe was probably split into smaller family groups, living in tent-like houses that could be transported across country from valley to woodland to pasture to field so they could exploit all opportunities for food gathering. It was only in the middle and late Bronze Age that larger fields were marked out with ditches, banks and hedges, and we also occasionally find the remains of timber-built roundhouses, probably a transformation of a circular tent into a more durable form.

It is because of the absence of permanent houses and settlements that so much of the story of Neolithic and Bronze Age life that follows is really a story of death, as so often it is only the burial sites that have survived to tell their story.

THE NEOLITHIC (4500-2200 BC)

THE FIRST FARMERS MARKETS: CAUSEWAYED ENCLOSURES

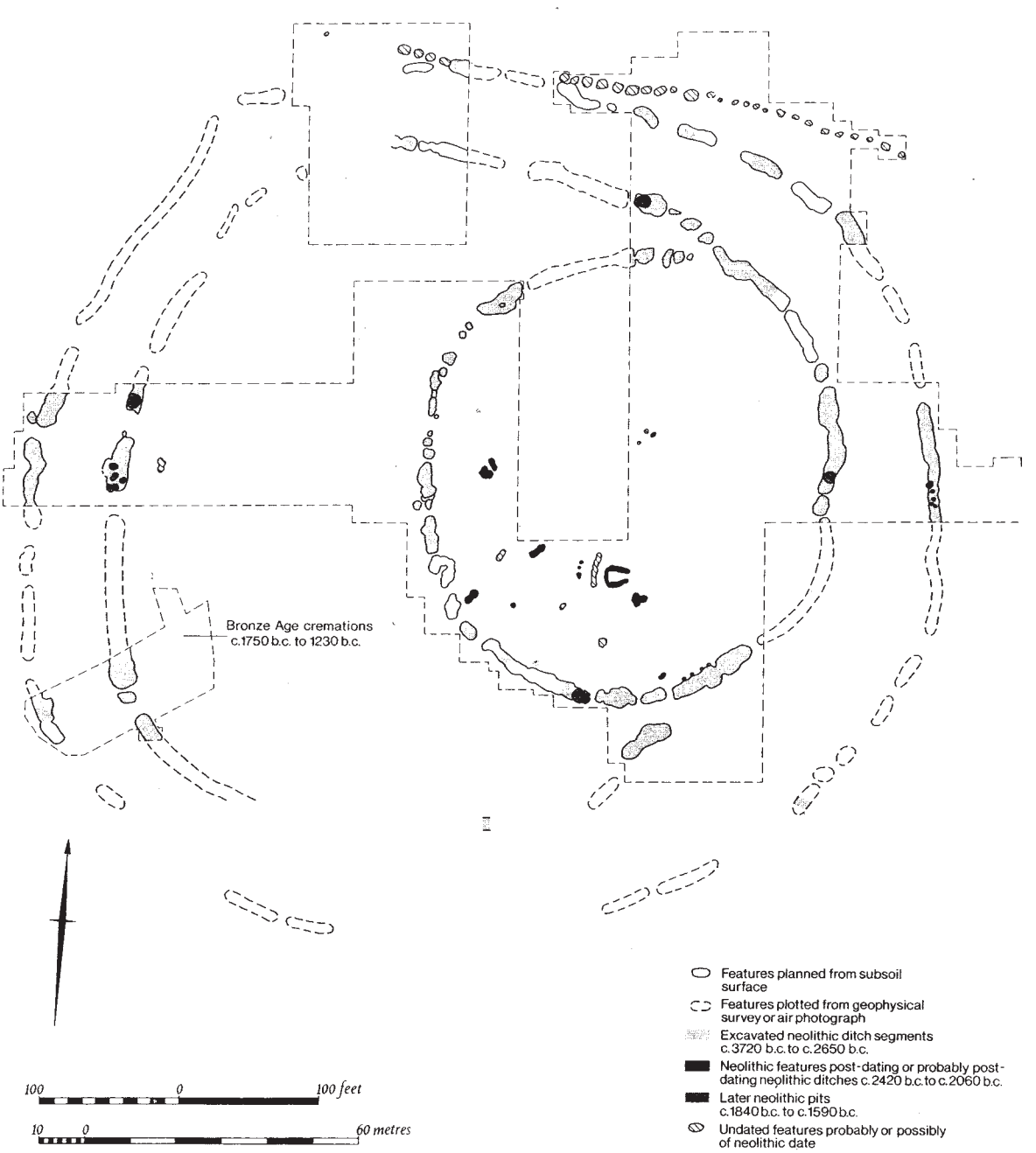
In the late 1970s a team from the Northampton Development Corporation Archaeology Unit excavated for four winters on a bleak hillside overlooking the Nene valley at Briar Hill, Northampton, prior to the building of a new housing estate (Bamford 1985). To the casual observer little could be seen on the shattered ironstone that lay beneath the topsoil, but careful cleaning revealed a pattern of elongated pits that marked out a large enclosure, which had first been recognised on aerial photographs. Many such sites have been known in southern England since the 1930s, but their discovery in the Midland river valleys was much more recent, and Briar Hill was the first to be extensively excavated (Figs 3.2 and 3.3).

At Briar Hill two parallel lines of pits formed a near circular enclosure up to 162m in diameter, while on the eastern side further pits marked out a more regular, elliptical inner enclosure, measuring 92m north-south. These sites are known as *causewayed enclosures* because the ditch circuits are made up of numerous pits with gaps, or causeways, between them, rather than having continuous ditches broken only at a few gateways. The soil and stone from the pits would have been dumped alongside in heaps to form a bank, but these had been ploughed away long ago. The pottery and flint found at these sites, as well as radiocarbon dating of charcoal from the ditches, shows them to be the first large-scale earthworks to be constructed in this country; the earliest appearing soon after the establishment of the first farming communities between 4500 and 4000 BC.

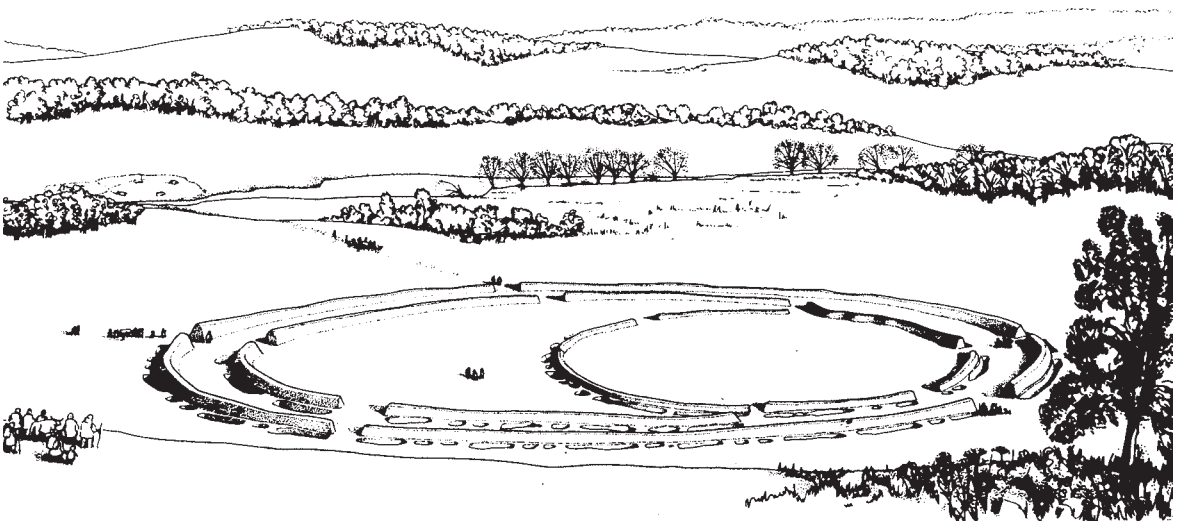
There has been much disagreement about how these enclosures were used. It has been argued that they were settlements, but with all evidence of the houses ploughed away, however, this argument fails as remains of Bronze Age and Iron Age houses have been found on similar sites. At many excavated sites it has also been shown that animal and, sometimes, human bone, and pottery, flints and stone objects found in the ditches had not been merely casually dumped as rubbish, but had been carefully placed in groups. This burial of used and broken objects, and of animal and human bone, is believed to be the ritual offering of these things to the mother, or earth goddess who had brought the people into being and gave them life and food. As the survival of these people depended on their animals, crops and the wild harvest, all of which were subject to the vagaries of the weather and disease, the making of such ritual deposits was part of everyday life as their only means of protection against such misfortune. At Briar Hill very little of this evidence survived as the acid soil had eaten away the bone, but a chain of small pits on the north-western side of the inner enclosure did contain pottery, worked flints, fragments of polished stone axes and broken querns and rubbing stones.

Most archaeologists now agree that these sites functioned as central meeting places: prehistoric markets. As their lives were spent following their animals, sowing their small arable plots and exploiting natural food sources, there was a need for people to gather at intervals, probably at fixed times like midsummer or midwinter perhaps, to confirm their common allegiance as members of the same community, or tribe. They could also exchange news, food, tools and arrange marriages to ensure their longer-term survival.

The excavations at Briar Hill illustrated some very important aspects of these sites. Radiocarbon dating showed that the site was used as a meeting place for about 2000 years. This is astonishing when you consider that our oldest respected sites



3.2 The Briar Hill causewayed enclosure. Reproduced by permission of RCHME/English Heritage



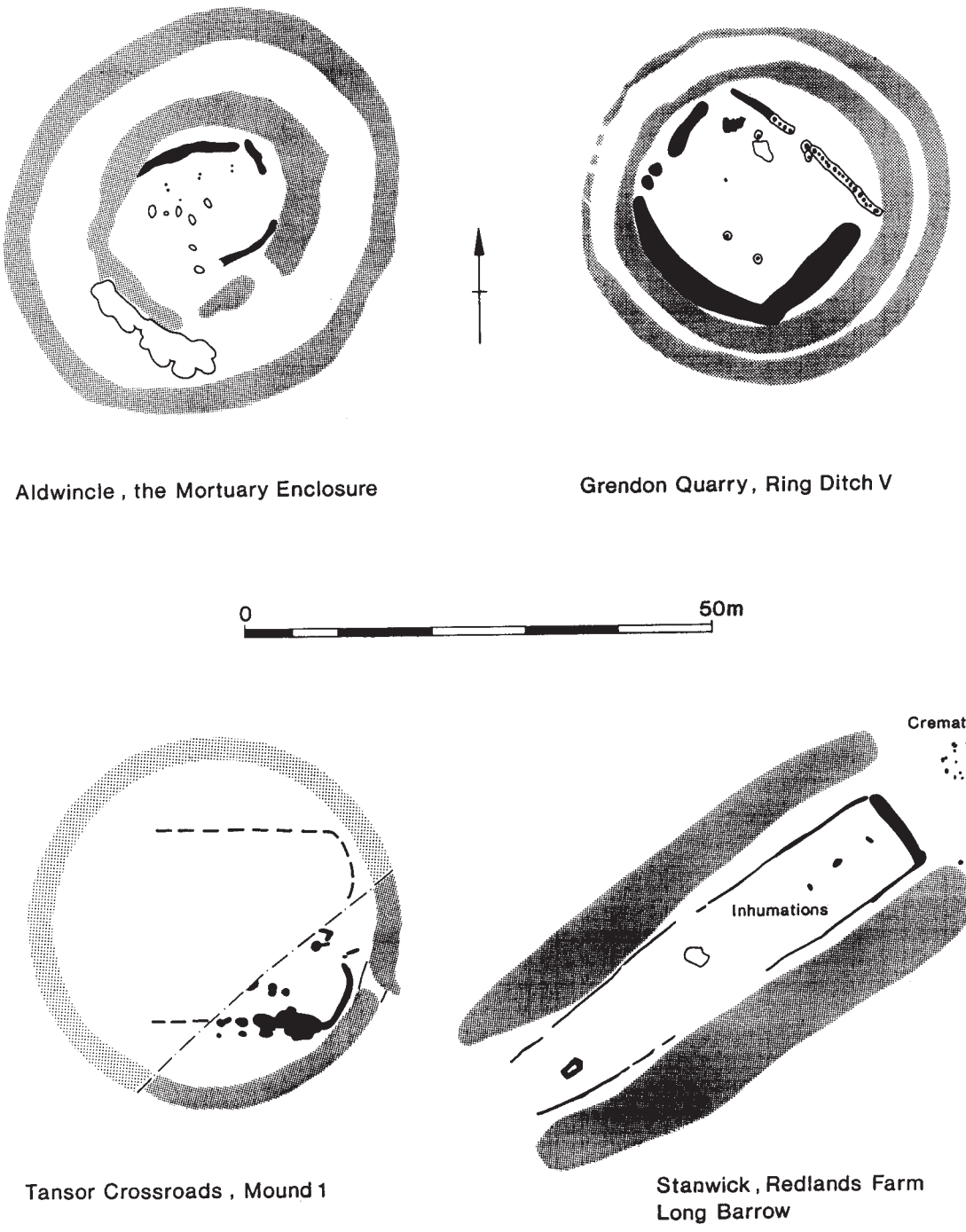
3.3 A reconstruction of the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

are our churches, and these have been standing for little more than a thousand years, half the time that the Briar Hill enclosure was in use. The story does not even end there, as we will see later that a final use of the site for burial in the middle Bronze Age adds another five hundred years to its lifetime. The way these site were maintained over this time is also interesting. The ditches were made up of elongated pits, like a string of sausages, but it was shown that each 'sausage' was itself made up of several shorter, near circular or oval pits 3.0-4.0m in diameter and 1.0-2.0m deep. These had often been dug when the neighbouring pit had silted up, and would have been visible only as a shallow hollow. So, for most of its 2000 years of use, the enclosure would have consisted of little more than a faint ring of grassed over shallow hollows and low banks or mounds, perhaps set within a forest clearing. New pits would have been excavated only at intervals of many decades, perhaps only once in every generation. This shows how little the way of life of these people changed for nearly 2000 years.

At least two more causewayed enclosures are known to exist in the county. One is also in Northampton, only 4 km to the north of Briar Hill at Dallington (RCHME 1985, fig 2). The other is at the other end of the county at Southwick, between Oundle and Peterborough. Like Briar Hill, they lie on the valley sides or higher ground quite near to the River Nene. Only small-scale excavations have been carried out at these two sites, but we can imagine that they were used in a similar way and for a similar period of time.

DEATH AND BURIAL: OVAL AND LONG BARROWS

While the causewayed enclosures were the meeting places of the living, the earliest burial monuments across most of lowland Britain were the *long barrows*; elongated mounds of soil or stones retained by timber or stone walls and usually flanked by deep ditches on either side. Under the higher eastern end there would be timber or stone-built chambers to hold the bones of the dead; these may have been either free-standing or set within a small mound. They often contained heaps of mixed bones from several people, rather than intact skeletons, indicating that the chambers were frequently reopened, with earlier burials being disturbed and



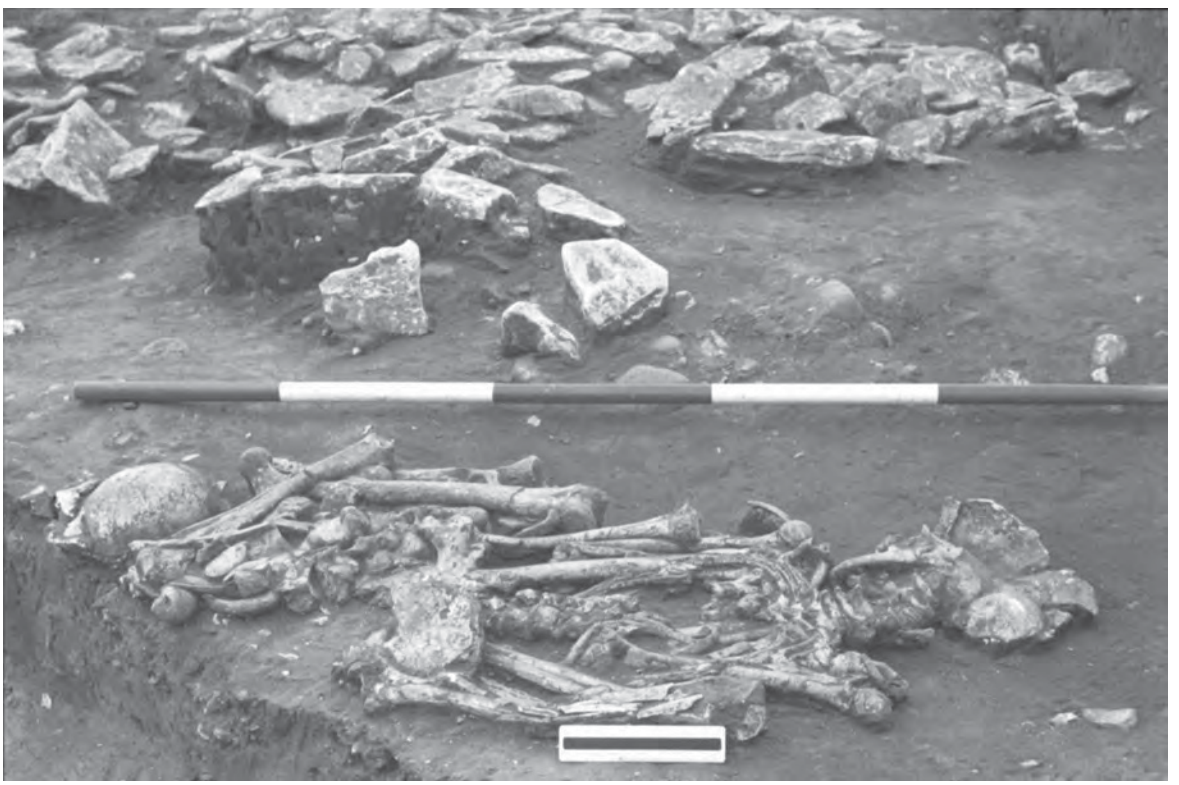
3.4 Neolithic oval and long barrows in Northamptonshire. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

rearranged when later burials were made. Some bones may even have been brought in from bodies left to decay elsewhere. While the final form of these monuments was as a mound, the building of the mound often occurred only as the final act at the end of many hundreds of years of use. The earliest were built soon after 4000BC, while the final mounding over may have occurred as late as around 2200BC, when the first round barrows were appearing.

In Northamptonshire there are several possible long barrows, particularly in the south-west near to Oxfordshire, but none of these has been confirmed by excavation. Along the Nene valley there were no known examples until 1989 with the discovery and excavation by Oxford Archaeology of the Stanwick long barrow (Colour Plate 2). It lay towards the southern end of the Raunds/Stanwick complex of prehistoric monuments, which are discussed below (Healy and Harding forthcoming). At the broader, north-eastern end of the mound there was a deep trench that had held massive timber posts forming an imposing facade, while smaller posts supported the long sides of the mound. No original burials survived at the eastern end, but there was a small stone cist to the west containing a few human bones. Three later Neolithic burials inserted into the mound showed that its use continued into later centuries, and a group of shallow pits to the east of the mound contained cremation burials of middle Bronze Age date.

The reason for the rarity of long barrows within the county is that Northamptonshire also had its own unique style of Neolithic burial monument, the oval mortuary enclosure and barrow. These cannot be easily found because of the coincidence in shape with the circular burial mounds of the early Bronze Age, and the excavation of all the known examples has started out by examining what were thought to be large round barrows**.**

The first was discovered in 1968 by Dennis Jackson while investigating a group of round barrows at Aldwincle that were about to be destroyed by gravel



3.5 The burials in the mortuary house at Aldwincle. Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson

extraction (Jackson 1976). It had a long history of construction and use. Initially, a timber structure had stood within a rectangular enclosure marked by a shallow gully. Later, a deeper ditch was dug to enclose an oval area. Within this enclosure there was a pair of deep post-pits that may have held the end posts of a tent-shaped mortuary house 2.0m long. Between the posts two people had been buried. One lay tightly crouched, with the legs drawn up to the chest, as if trussed in this position. The other consisted of a heap of disarticulated bone, perhaps from an earlier burial that had been moved aside when the second person was buried (Fig 3.5). They were both adult males, but the bones were too poorly preserved to say much more about them, although signs of arthritis on both shows that they were not young. The two posts were D-shaped, and 0.7m in diameter, indicating that they were probably the two halves of a single split trunk. These end posts may have stood well above the top of the mortuary house, perhaps being decorated with carved or painted spiral patterns, as is seen on stone-built tombs in other parts of the country. There was also a second pair of similar post-pits, but no traces of any burials had survived. At the end of the lifetime of the mortuary enclosure a new outer ditch was excavated, and the soil was used to create a central mound that covered and sealed from further disturbance all the earlier burials.

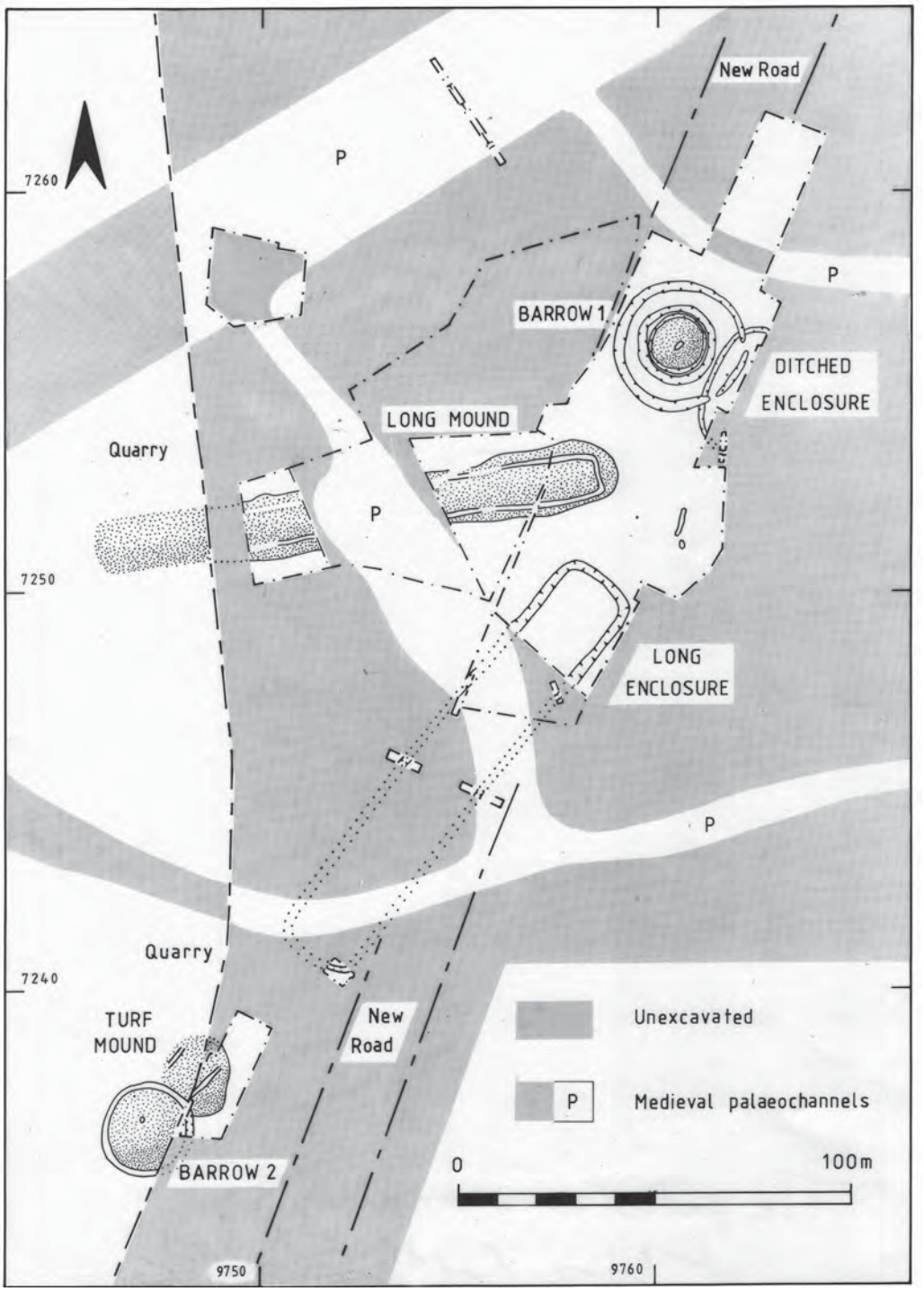
A further two monuments of similar size have been found in the Nene valley. At Grendon there was a near square enclosure, excavated in 1974 in advance of gravel working (Gibson & McCormick 1985). There was a ditch on three sides, but along the north-eastern side there was a gully or slot. Within this gully there were pockets of darker soil and charcoal from a series of oak posts 0.2-0.5m in diameter that had either rotted or been burnt in-situ. These would have formed an impressive timber facade 22m long with a narrow, 1.5m wide opening giving access to the central area. These posts too may have been decorated. It is likely that there were once burials within this enclosure, but all traces had been lost. The enclosure was surrounded by a pair of ditches, suggesting that there were two periods of mound construction perhaps associated with later burials (Fig 3.4).

At Tansor crossroads, on the line of a new road, part of a further oval barrow was excavated by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 1995 (Chapman 1996-97). Here the mortuary enclosure was rectangular, with a line of pits along the southern side that had been recut, suggesting that a line of large timber posts had been replaced more than once. To the east there was a shallower slot that may have held a timber facade, as at Grendon. Within the enclosure there was a deep pit that may have held an end post of a timber mortuary house, as at Aldwincle, but the remainder lay outside the excavated area and in the acid soil no bone had survived. Later a circular ditch was dug and the clay was used to form a substantial central mound. A further similar site has also been found lower down the Nene valley, on the outskirts of Peterborough. In this case the central mound still survived, and in the top of the mound were the remains of several early Bronze Age cremation burials, showing that these monuments continued in use for over a 1000 years. Similar evidence had probably been lost to ploughing at the Northamptonshire sites, but at Tansor we know that the prehistoric mound was still visible 3000 years after it was built as the remains of two Anglo-Saxon burials were found there.

While these Northamptonshire burial mounds are oval, the post-pits of mortuary houses and the presence of intact and disturbed burials is typical of the practices found at long barrows, showing that they all belong to a common tradition. It is also interesting that the four oval barrows and the single long barrow lie along the Nene valley at evenly spaced intervals of between 10.5 and 12.5 km. There may be other examples waiting to be discovered that would break this apparent pattern, but it is possible that each of the known sites served a single community, or tribe, each of which occupied a territory extending roughly 11.5 km along the Nene valley.

MONUMENTAL LANDSCAPES: THE RAUNDS/ STANWICK MONUMENT COMPLEX

So far we have looked at single monuments, but it is likely that at least some of these had nearby contemporary sites that have not been found due to the limited areas that have been examined in detail. In one place it has been possible to examine an extensive area of the Nene valley floodplain, and this work has revealed a landscape containing numerous prehistoric monuments spanning some 3000 years of use and respect. At Raunds and Stanwick a major programme of fieldwork and excavation, the Raunds Area Project, was carried out in advance of road building and gravel extraction through the second half of the 1980s as a joint venture



3.6 The prehistoric monument complex at West Cotton, Raunds.
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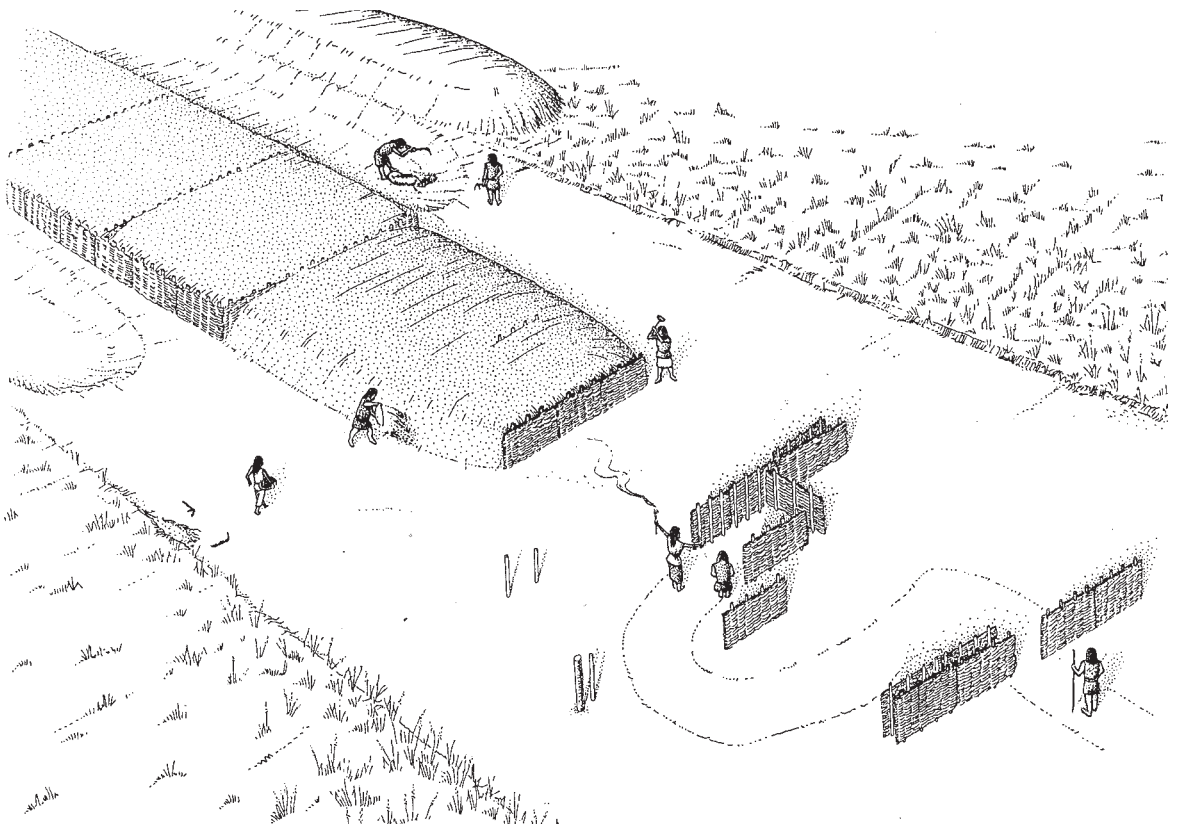
between the County Council Archaeology Unit and English Heritage. The main part of the excavation programme was to examine Iron Age and Roman settlement at Stanwick and the deserted medieval village of West Cotton, and the prehistoric part of the project initially only involved the excavation of four round barrows threatened with destruction.

Over the next few years understanding of the prehistoric use of the valley was transformed as a series of previously unknown monuments were discovered beneath the medieval village, a Roman temple, and under the alluvial clays deposited by floods. What emerged was a landscape of ritual monuments that is of national importance, and which illustrates just how much has lain hidden along the river valleys of the Midlands (Healy & Harding forthcoming).

A concentration of monuments lay at the northern end of the area, partly hidden under the deserted medieval village of West Cotton. The monuments included an oval mound, a long enclosure and a long mound in use between 4000 and 3000BC, and, after several centuries with no monument building, a large multi-ditched round barrow was constructed at about 2000BC and continued in use well into the early Bronze Age.

The long enclosure was 117m in length, but the only artefacts recovered from the ditch were two cattle tibia, a red deer antler and a few flints. We do not know what such sites were used for, although one idea is that they may have been places in which bodies were exposed to decay. The oval mound to its south was probably constructed of turf, and while there was nothing underneath it, two gullies on the top held timber fences on the same alignment as the long enclosure, as if it may have formed a viewing platform. The long mound was a more complex monument. Numerous lines of stake holes were



3.7 A reconstruction of the long mound at West Cotton, Raunds.

found beneath the mound showing that the turf and soil had been heaped up in a series of rectangular compartments. At the eastern end there was a more complex arrangement of stake holes that may have held wattle panels forming a forecourt and facade set in front of a small chamber, as in the reconstruction, but no burial remains were found. Later this area was itself covered by extending the mound. A shallow gully cut into the top of the enlarged mound may have held a timber fence.

Other Neolithic monuments in the area had similarly complex histories, and numerous radiocarbon dates have been obtained so that a detailed chronology of their development and use can be constructed, making it one of the most fully explored and understood prehistoric landscapes in the country.

When the Neolithic mounds at West Cotton had fallen out of use, at about 2500 BC, a timber platform was constructed at the edge of the nearby river channel. A layer of brushwood and smaller branches was consolidated with dumps of gravel and two alder trunks, on which axe marks were still visible. The clay above this platform contained much animal bone, and one or two pieces of human bone, and it may have been a ritual platform for the dumping of feasting debris and other remains into the river channel. This change from ritual dumping in pits to deposits placed in water is seen elsewhere at this time and later, most dramatically in deposits of broken bronze weapons and tools found at Flag Fen near Peterborough (Pryor 2002).

LATER ENCLOSURES

While the causewayed enclosures formed the meeting places of the first farmers in the earlier Neolithic, over much of the country they fell out of use when a new type of enclosure appeared: the *henge* monument. These were usually circular in plan, with substantial ditches and only one or two entrances, and the bank was constructed outside, rather than inside the ditch, showing that they were not defensive. Like the earlier enclosures, they marked a plot of land used as a meeting place and ritual centre. While these sites are widely scattered across the country, there are only a handful of possible examples in Northamptonshire. There may be one on the hillside above the monument complex at West Cotton, Raunds (Humble 1994). Another appears to sit within the causewayed enclosure at Dallington, Northampton, as if directly replacing the earlier monument. Something similar happened at Briar Hill, but here it involved a remarking of the earlier enclosure by the cutting of pits, possibly post-pits, into the silted enclosure ditches. A series of pits and a small horseshoe-shaped timber building in the interior also belong to this time, and were associated with the use of a distinctive type of highly decorated pottery, known as grooved ware, that is often found at henge monuments. The timber building was formed from three pairs of large posts, and might have been quite high, perhaps serving as either a watchtower or a platform for the exposure of bodies. So, at Briar Hill the old enclosure was refurbished and reused, instead of constructing a new style henge monument.

MOMUMENT ALIGNMENTS

In Neolithic monuments the entrances, the location of burials or the alignments of enclosures and mounds are often to the east or north-east. There is no doubt that this preference is genuine, but the question of what it means is more difficult to answer. At its simplest, it may relate to the direction of the rising sun, with north-easterly alignments pointing to the midsummer sunrise, the most important time of the year to prehistoric people. Their lives were built around the annual cycle of the seasons, and the death and rebirth of plants and animals that happens as part of that cycle. The changing pattern of the sun's movements were therefore part of that same cycle, while the monthly pattern of the moon's phases provided their only ready means of measuring the passage of time week to week. They therefore followed and understood these patterns and constructed their monuments to respect these celestial events. Having done this, these same monuments could then be used as practical calendars to mark the passage of the year. Just how far their understanding of the movements of the sun and moon extended has been, and will continue to be, a subject of much debate.

Another aspect is the possible use of simple geometry. Some monuments are only roughly circular, as if the line of the ditch was only roughly paced out before digging began. Others are quite closely circular as if an arc was actually scribed out on the ground, perhaps using a length of rope swinging around a central post. Other enclosures are clearly non-circular with a distinct axis of symmetry, such as the inner ditch at the Briar Hill causewayed

enclosure. This has an elliptical plan that appears to be a deliberate and accurate shape with the axes aligned on the cardinal compass points. It has also been suggested that some of these more complex shapes were drawn out as circular arcs centred on the points of right-angled triangles with sides in the ratio of 3:4:5. Other archaeologists still find it difficult to believe that our prehistoric ancestors had the technical ability to combine the construction of geometric shapes with astronomical alignments based on the rising and setting points of the sun and moon.

HABITATION SITES

Even though we do not find substantial houses or villages, there is a little evidence that shows us something of the way people lived in the later Neolithic. They must have lived in light-weight structures, presumably with a timber frame and a covering of animal skins, that have left no below ground traces for us to find. The conical tepee of the north American Indians or the circular near flat-roofed, yurt of the Mongolian herdsman of the steppes of central Asia may be the best comparisons from recent times.

Whenever people live anywhere for a length of time they inevitably leave something behind. The best evidence is from a site at Ecton, near Northampton discovered by Richard Hollowell close to the River Nene in 1971 during gravel extraction (Moore and Williams 1975). The central feature was a shallow, rectangular hollow some 4.4m long by 3.6m wide. Within this there were three smaller hollows filled with burnt clay and charcoal rich soils, one of which contained a hearth formed from several river-worn cobbles. This would appear to have been a house site, but whether it was a small timber building or a hollow formed under or beside a movable tent-like structure is uncertain. Nearby there was a scatter of further shallow hollows containing dumped hearth debris. Across the area, but particularly within the rectangular hollow, there was a scatter of some 800 pieces of flint and fragments from at least 18 different pottery vessels, representing the domestic debris but, unfortunately, the soils were too acid for animal bone to have survived. The pots were highly decorated bowls of later Neolithic date, known as Mortlake ware.

On large scale excavations of later sites, particularly on the gravel on the Nene valley, other individual or small clusters of pits containing Neolithic or Bronze Age pottery and flints have been found, and these too presumably mark temporary house sites. In the 1990s large scale excavations on Iron Age and Roman sites at Wollaston by Northamptonshire Archaeology found several pits of Neolithic date containing pottery, flints and polished stone axes, and three pits excavated by Dennis Jackson in a gravel quarry at Gretton in 1979 contained Beaker pottery. Two of these lay within a ring of shallow postholes that may have formed a house 6.0m in diameter.

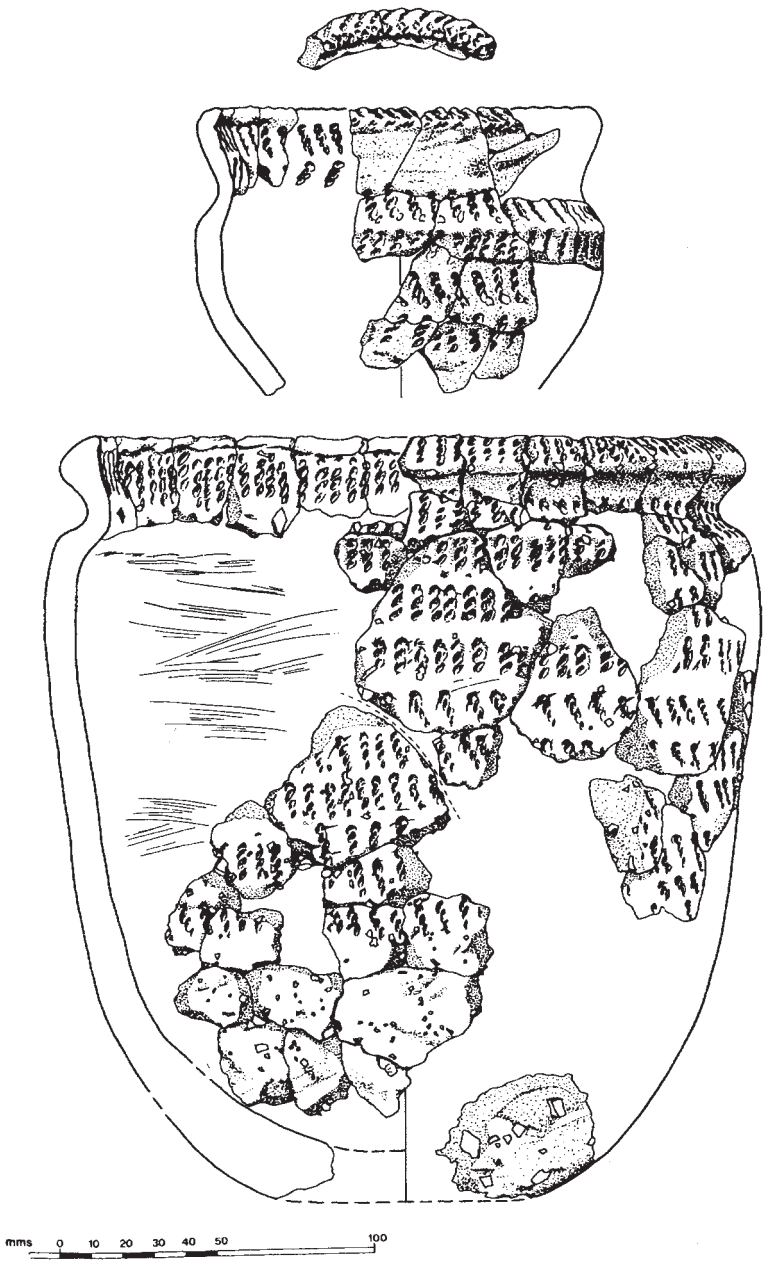
In addition, extensive programmes of fieldwalking carried out in various parts of the county have recovered scatters, and some more localised concentrations, of worked flint which must mark the locations of temporary camp sites. This work has shown the presence of prehistoric people right across the county, even on the clay-covered uplands where we have found little evidence for the building of monuments.

FLINT, POTS AND STONE

Prehistoric people made use of a whole range of materials to make their tools, clothes and houses. Unfortunately for archaeologists most of these were organic, such as wood, plant fibres and leather. Much evidence has therefore been lost, or is only rarely found, and what we are left with are the items that do not decay, the tools in flint or stone, the fired clay pots, and bone objects.

Today, in the affluent west, where few need worry about where their next meal is coming from, fashions change from year to year, if not more rapidly. In the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, where survival depended on the annual repetition of the cycle of life, death and rebirth for plants, crops, animals and people, fashions were more conservative. Changes only appear to have happened at intervals of several hundred years, each marking a major change in their way of life.

Hundreds or even thousands of flints may be found on a single site made from small nodules of gravel flint, either dug out of riverbanks or from the ditches of the monuments. The majority of the flints found are waste flakes, the unwanted debris left over from the knapping of a nodule, but a small proportion are tools fashioned by careful shaping of the struck flakes. Large flakes were fashioned into knives, and some had serrated edges for cutting



3.8 Neolithic pottery, Peterborough-type wares: An Ebsfleetbowl and a Mortlake jar from Ecton Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson

tougher materials. Scrapers with blunt, circular ends were used for cleaning animal skins. Other flakes were notched or pointed, and were used for working wood, bone or leather. For hunting they had flint arrowheads, leaf-shaped in the Neolithic and barbed-and-tanged in the Bronze Age (Fig 3.13), and these are often the most finely made items.

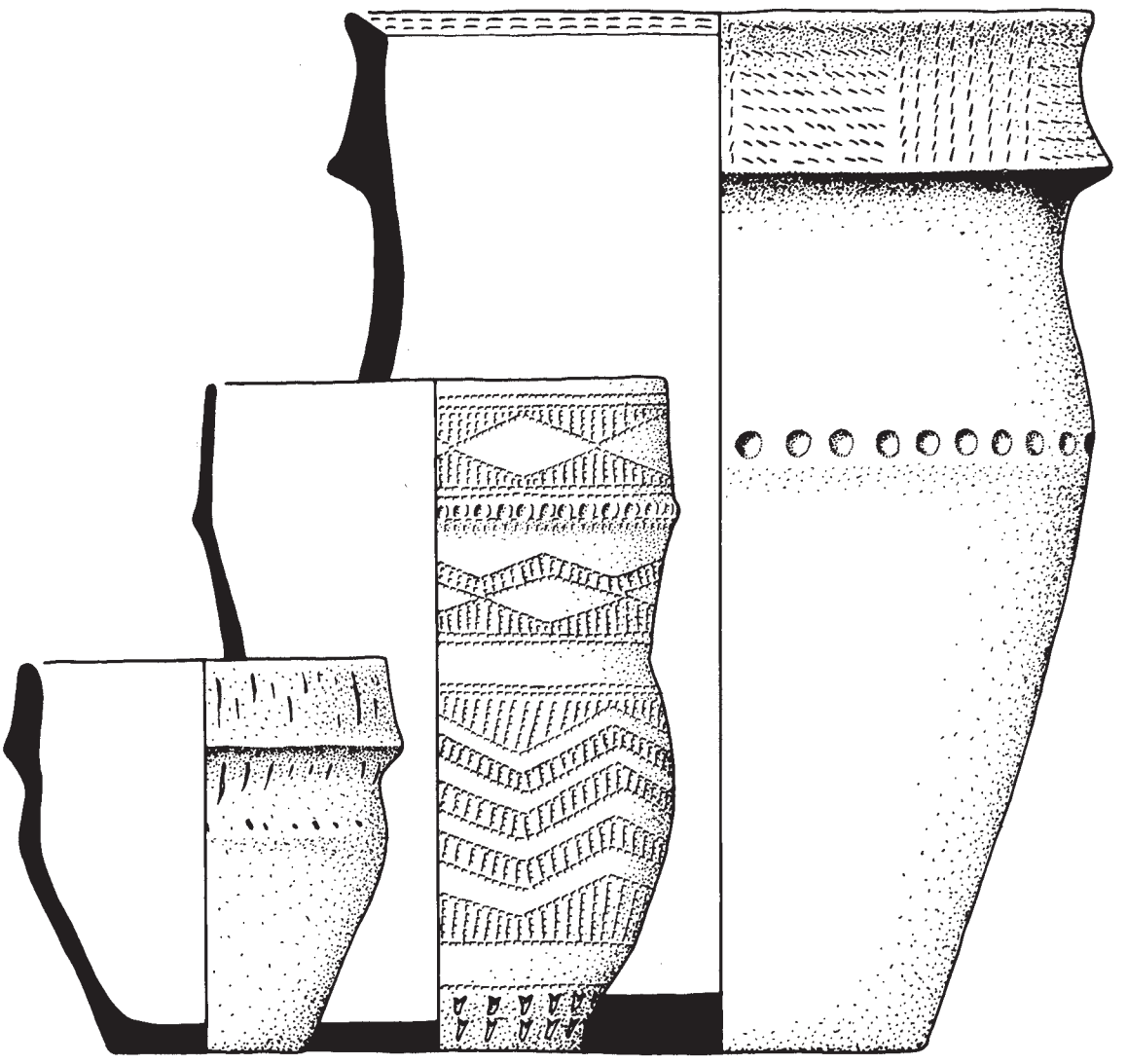
Small numbers of larger flint and stone implements are also found, and many of these were probably obtained by trading with neighbouring tribes. In

3.9 Prehistoric Flint: A flint dagger from West Cotton round barrow.

particular, there are the polished flint and stone axes that were used to fell the trees. From the types of stone used it can be shown that these came from as far away as the Lake District, Cornwall and Wales, showing that valuable objects were traded right across the country in the early Neolithic. Other fine pieces include the large flint daggers that may have been specially made to accompany the dead in their round barrows (Fig 3.9).

Neolithic and Bronze Age pots were typically handmade and thick-walled. They were fired in bonfires, so when they are found they are usually very soft and fragile. Each period had a distinctive style of pottery. In the early Neolithic they used plain, round-bottomed pots or bowls. Later, decoration was added with fingertip incisions on the rim or neck. In the later Neolithic there was a mixture of round and flat-bottomed pots, often with thick and elaborate rim shapes and typically decorated all over in a range of techniques including incisions, cord impressions and finger-pinching. These styles included Peterborough wares, often found at burial sites, and barrel or bucket-shaped grooved ware pots, often found at henges.

With the appearance of round barrow burial a high point was reached with the smaller, more finely-made Beaker vessels, typically orange or red in colour and with the decoration forming bands of geometric patterns. Most of the early Bronze Age pots that are found are urns, often quite large and used to contain cremation burials. The early examples were often decorated all over but on the later, collared urns only the thick collars were decorated. The middle Bronze Age urns were often decorated with thick applied strips, and by the end of the Bronze Age there was a decline in decoration to simple finger-tip impressions on the rim or around the body



3.10 Bronze Age pottery: a small urn, a long-necked Beaker and a collared urn from the Beaker period round barrow at West Cotton, Raunds. Scale 2:5. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

ANDY CHAPMAN

THE BRONZE AGE (2200-1500 BC)

BEAKERS AND BARROWS

Dramatic changes occurred at the end of the Neolithic with the appearance of the round barrow as the new form of burial monument, and the final mounding over of the Neolithic mortuary sites. This change, from communal monuments to the burial of individuals, reflected broader changes in society, as for the first time we can clearly see the presence of individual people who had the wealth to command the building of a mound to mark their passing. At this time metals first appear in the form of bronze tools and weapons, and the use of gold.

A completely new form of pottery also appeared, the well made and highly decorated Beaker pots. It was once thought that these had been brought in by invaders from the continent, the so-called Beaker People. The truth is more complex, and while some new settlers may have been arrived, all of the new practices and objects are now thought to be the result of the appearance of the new social divisions, of rich and poor. At least some of this new status may have been acquired by controlling the manufacture of the new bronze tools. The burial of quantities of cattle bone at some round barrows shows that ownership of cattle herds, and the land on which they grazed, was also a source of individual wealth and prestige. Society had evidently moved quite a long way from the lifestyle of the first farmers.

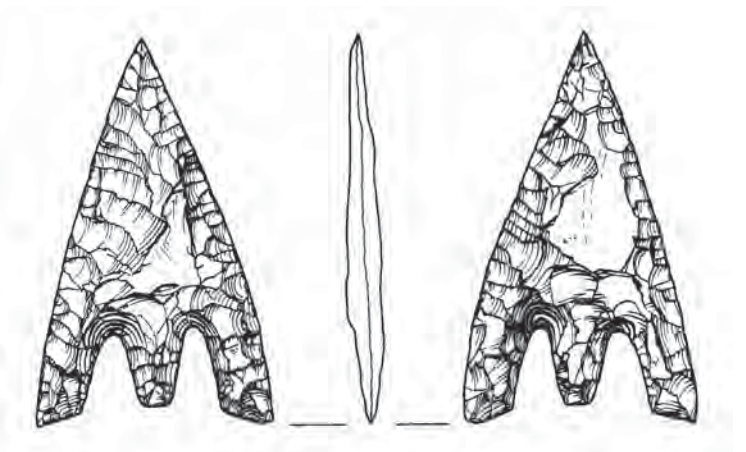
The numerous round barrows are the most common earlier prehistoric site, and from aerial photography a few hundred have been recorded in the county. Many of them lay along the Nene valley, but most of these have been ploughed flat. The line

3.11 The beaker burial at West Cotton, Raunds. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

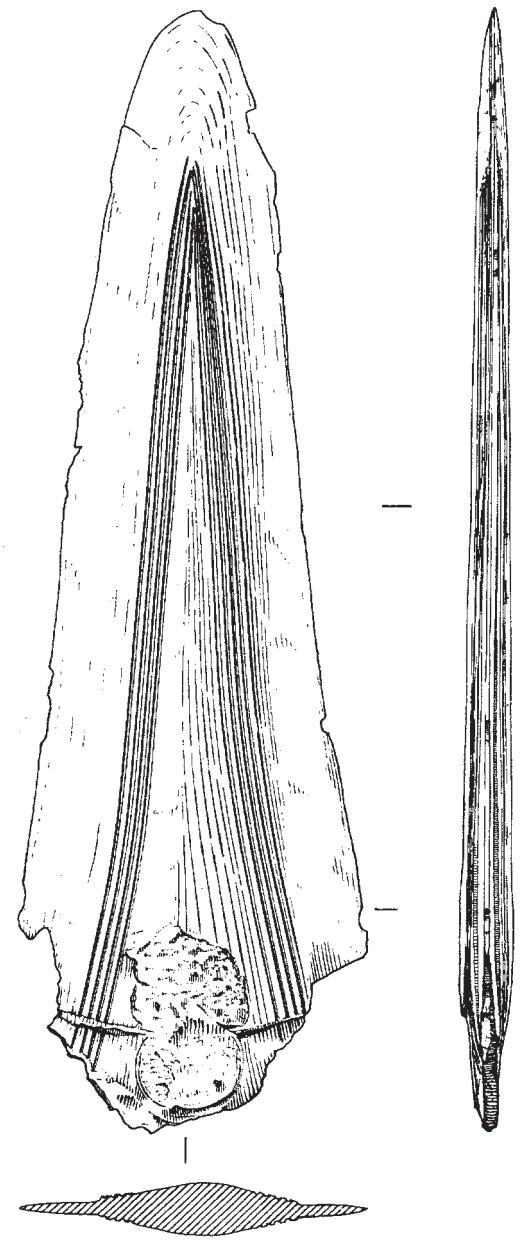
of mounds visible on the skyline at Three Hills Barrows, Woodford are among the few that can still be seen and visited by the public.

Early barrows at Stanwick and West Cotton were excavated in the 1980s as part of the Raunds Area Project. These both lay on the margins of the floodplain of the River Nene near the earlier monuments, and their mounds were still partly intact. They represent the pinnacle of Beaker period round barrow construction. At the centre of each the primary burial of an adult man was accompanied by a Beaker pot, a large flint dagger, jet buttons and other objects (See Colour Plate 2). The burial at Stanwick was inside a plank built chamber within a deep grave, above which a stone cairn had been constructed. On top of the cairn nearly 200 cattle skulls had been heaped up as either funeral offerings or as the debris from funeral feasting. At both barrows there were two main ditches, showing that the mound was successively enlarged to reach some 35m in diameter, probably as further burials were made both on and around the mound (Colour Plate 3). The later burials were mainly deposits of cremated bone placed in large pottery urns. Although this was a period of change, respect for the past is still evident. At Stanwick the heap of cattle skulls included skulls of the auroch, the larger ancestor of the domesticated cattle, and these were several hundred years old when they were deposited, as was a boar tusk placed with the burial itself. These items appear to have been kept and looked after for several generations, perhaps as treasured heirlooms recording past family deeds. At West Cotton this was taken further, as the 1000-year old bones of two people were buried directly beneath the Beaker burial.

For a while both inhumation and cremation burials occurred at the same time, but soon cremation became the normal form of burial and remained so through to the end of the Bronze Age. There are no large barrow cemeteries in the county, but there are several smaller clusters of barrows. These were often grouped around earlier monuments, perhaps partly in respect for the earlier traditions but perhaps also as a demonstration of how new ways of life, and death, were taking over from the old ways. At Aldwincle there were four barrows near to the Neolithic oval barrow (Jackson 1976). Two of these contained Beaker-style burials of adult men, both of whom had been buried in coffins fashioned from hollowed-out tree trunks. At Grendon four of the five barrows to the south of the mortuary enclosure have been excavated, and remains of inhumation and cremation burials of adults and some children were found, despite extensive damage from ploughing (Gibson and McCormick 1985). There were also many ploughed out barrows around the Beaker barrows and Neolithic monuments at Raunds and Stanwick.



3.12 Prehistoric Flint: a finely made barbed and tanged arrowhead from a Beaker burial at Warmington. Scale 1:1. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology



3.13 A bronze dagger from the Earls Barton barrow. Scale 5:6. Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson

During excavations at the Roman town of Ashton, near Oundle in the early 1980s, two crouched Beaker burials were found without any encircling ditches, and another was found in 1995 only 3.8 km to the north at Warmington (Fig 3.12). This burial was accompanied by a fine collection of grave goods, including a Beaker pot, a broken flint knife, a worn flint rod used as a strike-a-light, and a finely-made but unused, barbed-and-tanged arrowhead. While ditches did not surround these burials, it is possible that they may have been under mounds constructed purely from the turf and topsoil stripped from an area over and around the burial sites.

Burial in round barrows continued for several centuries, until around 1500 BC, but the later barrows were usually much smaller, often at little as 15m in diameter. One of the first modern barrow excavations was that of a large barrow at Earls Barton belonging to this later period. Although the mound still survived, it was only recognised during stripping for gravel extraction in the winter of 1968, and was excavated by Dennis Jackson (1984). Little had survived of the primary burial apart from an area of burnt soil, a few scraps of cremated bone and a fine early bronze dagger The excavation of this site was also important as it provided the first radiocarbon dates from a Bronze Age site in the county.

THE END OF THE MONUMENTS (1500-1000 BC)

By 1500 BC the last burials under round barrows had been made. Middle and late Bronze Age burial sites did not have any earthworks, or other visible marker. The cemeteries only consisted of small groups of pits each containing a heap of cremated bone, sometimes within or accompanied by a pottery urn. Lacking any evident markers, these cemeteries have only been found by accident.

After 3000 years one returns again to Briar Hill, where a cluster of 27 cremations were found inside the causewayed enclosure, and we must wonder whether the site was chosen by accident or if there was still a folk memory of its former importance (Bamford 1985). Four of the cremations were within large, undecorated urns, and the remainder may have been in leather or woollen bags. One cremation was accompanied by a tanged flint arrowhead that had been burnt on the funeral pyre. Other similar cremation cemeteries have been found

at Chapel Brampton in 1970, near Kelmarsh during road construction in 1992 (Chapman 1999), and at the eastern end of the Stanwick long barrow. Others must still await discovery.

For most of this period evidence of permanent settlement is only rarely found. Under the Roman villa and Iron Age settlement at Stanwick, earlier ditches and remnants of a roundhouse probably belonged to a small farmstead surrounded by small fields where crops were grown and animals corralled. A similar, but better preserved site, has been excavated further down the Nene valley at Fengate, near Peterborough. Next to Fengate, at Flag Fen**,** bronze tools and weapons, often deliberately broken before they were thrown or placed in the shallow water has painted a vivid picture of the ritual deposition of valuable objects at this time (Pryor 2002). In Northamptonshire we have nothing so spectacular, but bronze axes, swords and daggers have occasionally been found, sometimes buried in pits along with scrap pieces. It is believed that these were hoards belonging to bronze smiths who never returned to recover their hidden stores of the precious metal.

CONCLUSION

In the thirty-five years since the excavation of the Earls Barton round barrow, archaeology has transformed our understanding of Neolithic and Bronze Age Northamptonshire. From a sparsely visited backwater, it has become a landscape alive with people who not only survived but prospered sufficiently to be able to devote much of their energy towards building and maintaining enclosures as meeting places and in marking the burial places of their dead with large earthwork monuments.

Through this time we see long periods of stability broken by episodes of sudden change in their way of life, and in the monuments they constructed and the tools that they used. From the semi-nomadic communities of the early Neolithic moving across a landscape without visible boundaries, they became communities marking out territories and respecting the power and wealth of certain successful individuals, who no doubt acted as tribal chieftains. The stage was therefore set for the next period of major change, the appearance of established farming communities using a new metal, iron.