
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCI
for 2002



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**Volume XCI
for 2002**

Editor Alison Taylor

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Editor

Alison Taylor BA, MIFA, FSA
40 Hertford Street
Cambridge CB4 3AG
Tel: 01223 500431

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Editorial

After two themed volumes these *Proceedings* return to the usual PCAS format of mixed papers, covering excavations, local history, landscape archaeology, architecture and historical geography. Indeed, in the finest antiquarian tradition many of the papers involve more than one of these disciplines. There should therefore be something to interest all members in this miscellany.

Two departures from recent practice are the inclusion of Conference synopses and an abbreviated *Conduit*. The synopses are by popular request, rising from a realisation that many members would be grateful to have a lasting reminder of these important papers. We are grateful to the authors who supplied copy so conscientiously after the event (naturally we had not thought of this in advance), and to Derek Booth who collected them all together. *Conduit* had to be an even more last-minute construct, when it became clear that the County Council could no longer keep up with the necessary production time-scale. This year's approach is a bit of an experiment, and it will be useful to know what reaction we have both from members and from affiliated societies.

Alison Taylor

President's Address

Two years as President is too short a time to see through any substantial programme of reform for CAS. When I was elected there were a number of initiatives I wanted to start in the hope they would mature in another President's time. To this end Derek Booth as Secretary and I put out a questionnaire in the year 2000 to profile our membership and to canvas opinion on possible changes.

It has been a central part of my Presidency to re-imbue the Society and its membership with confidence in its right to express opinion on heritage issues. It is essential that there remains a well-informed independent Society to safeguard archaeological and related services at a time when other pressures and agenda take precedence within local and central governmental organisations which we perhaps naively assume will be acting in our best interests in protecting the past. It is particularly regrettable that CAS has been excluded from representation within long-established fora to discuss and scrutinise public heritage services within Cambridgeshire at this time.

Another issue I hoped we could address was to reverse the decline of amateur archaeology, perhaps by re-establishing the Society's post of Director of Fieldwork, and to encourage research-led investigation in the County once more. This latter still awaits the right person and opportunity, but I am pleased there are encouraging signs in the way local groups have attracted grants which will give them solid research foci and draw in new members. Notable amongst these are Thriplow Society, Fulbourn Village History Society, Haverhill and District Archaeological Group and Cambridge Archaeology Field Group.

We asked members if it would be beneficial for CAS to develop other venues for meetings, and would there be interest in workshops on current research topics. We have developed the workshop idea with this year's conference dedicated to the archaeology, architecture and history of Ely, a town that has had considerable investigation in the past ten years, with some startling new discoveries but little co-ordination or academic discussion. Synopses of the talks are published within this volume. From October we shall be holding our monthly meetings in more comfortable and more accessible surroundings, in the newly built Divinity Faculty at the Sidgewick Site.

Other positive steps are that, after two years I can report that the Web page is now complete and will shortly appear at www.Cambridge-Antiquarian-Society.org.uk, and that the Society has taken back full ownership of *Conduit* which, over the past ten years, had been produced jointly with Cambridgeshire County Council.

In summary there has been good progress over the past two years and the Society will continue to build upon its strengths as the paramount amenity society guarding Cambridgeshire's heritage. Government policies at central and local level are capricious and we cannot afford to put faith in them without constant scrutiny and challenge. With the advent of regional government and root and branch reform of the planning system, a Cambridgeshire focus for our heritage provided by CAS will be ever more imperative. The Society is therefore essential and I thank you all for continuing to support and contribute to it. I am pleased to leave it in the capable hands of your secretary Liz Allan, and new President, Tony Kirby.

Tim Malim

The Ring-Ditch and the Hollow: excavation of a Bronze Age 'shrine' and associated features at Pampisford, Cambridgeshire

Joshua Pollard¹

with a contribution by E Yannouli

The paper describes the excavation of a highly unusual Bronze Age ring-ditch in southern Cambridgeshire. Dating to the mid-2nd millennium BC, the monument was defined by a broad, shallow ditch, set into the base of which were numerous post and stake holes. Quantities of worked flint, animal bone and later Bronze Age pottery had been deliberately deposited within the ditch whilst it silted. An incomplete ring of pits and one substantial post hole encircled the ditch. A cremation filled a localised re-cut within a large central post hole; and a second cremation was excavated to the south of the ring-ditch. A lithic scatter, pits and other cut features are indicative of further Bronze Age activity, including settlement, in the environs of the monument.

The monument lacks immediately analogy, though can be accommodated within a broader tradition that includes barrows, ring-ditches and timber circles. It is argued that the morphology of the monument may in part have been informed by that of a nearby natural hollow, which acted as a focus for flint working and a range of other activities during the Neolithic and later Bronze Age.

Introduction

Excavations at Bourn Bridge, Pampisford, Cambridgeshire (TL 516495), were undertaken during 1993 and 1994 by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) of the University of Cambridge, as part of a planning application for a borrow pit for the new A11 (figs 1 and 2). The site lies within chalk uplands known to be rich in prehistoric, Roman and Saxon archaeology. Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation is represented by numerous lithic scatters (Evans 1990, Pollard 1998) and isolated and grouped ring-ditches along the Icknield belt (Taylor 1981, fig. 44); a group of ploughed-out round barrows lies 1km to the north-east of the site (Barclay and Williams 1994).

Following evaluation in 1993 (Evans 1994), excavations across the 6ha river-side site were largely focussed on a Roman field-system and small Saxon settlement. However, prehistoric features also came to light, including an atypical Bronze Age ring-ditch (figs 3 and 4), the subject of this paper. The excavation was

directed by Christopher Evans and the author (whilst employed by CAU).

Topography and Geology

Situated within the Middle Chalk downlands of southern Cambridgeshire, the site falls upon a first-second gravel terrace of the River Granta (fig. 2). The drift geology consists of sandy gravel, throughout which are pockets of chalky gravel and marl. Over the eastern half of the site were numerous periglacial hollows, acting as traps for lenses of buried soil. Adjacent to the riverside, the site was bisected by Pleistocene palaeochannels. Localised alluvium (up to 1.0m thick adjacent to the river) overlay the gravel between 30 and 50m from the river. Limited alluviation appears to have taken place prior to the Roman period, but the bulk is perhaps post-medieval, and may relate to damming of the Granta at the Bourn Bridge during establishment of a water meadow.

The Bronze Age Ring-Ditch

Following the stripping of ploughsoil and a thin covering of alluvium, the monument was visible as a disc of brown sandy loam, around the circumference of which were several smaller features. The ditch fill of the south quadrant was excavated in metre squares to explore localised variation in artefact distribution.

The ring-ditch (F.137) formed a slightly flattened circle with uneven edges 9.5m in diameter, the ditch width ranging from 2.7–3.4m (fig. 5). The ditch was shallow, with a flat to undulating base (fig. 6), 0.18m deep on the north and east, and 0.41m on the south-west where it formed a clearly defined deeper zone around post holes F.165–F.213. A central platform of unquarried gravel, 3.0 x 3.4m across, formed the inner edge of the ditch. The top of this was 0.05m below the machined surface, indicating that it was originally set below the level of the surrounding ground surface.

The primary ditch fill [414] comprised a gravelly sandy clay loam, sealing a thin lens of pure sand and gravel on the south. Large quantities of worked flint

¹ School of Humanities and Science, UWCN, Caerleon Campus, PO Box 179, Newport, NP18 3YG

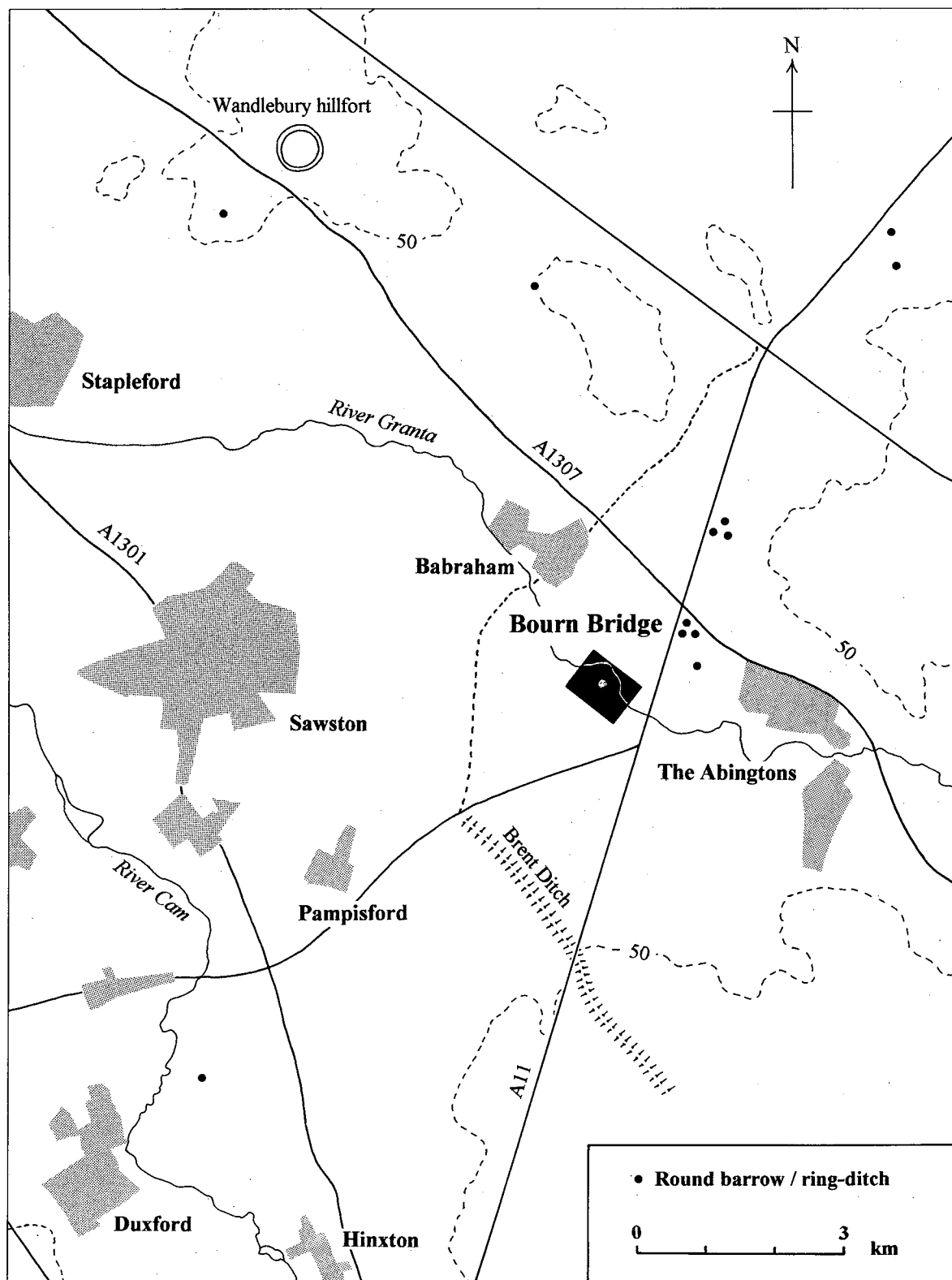


Figure 1. Bourn Bridge, location map

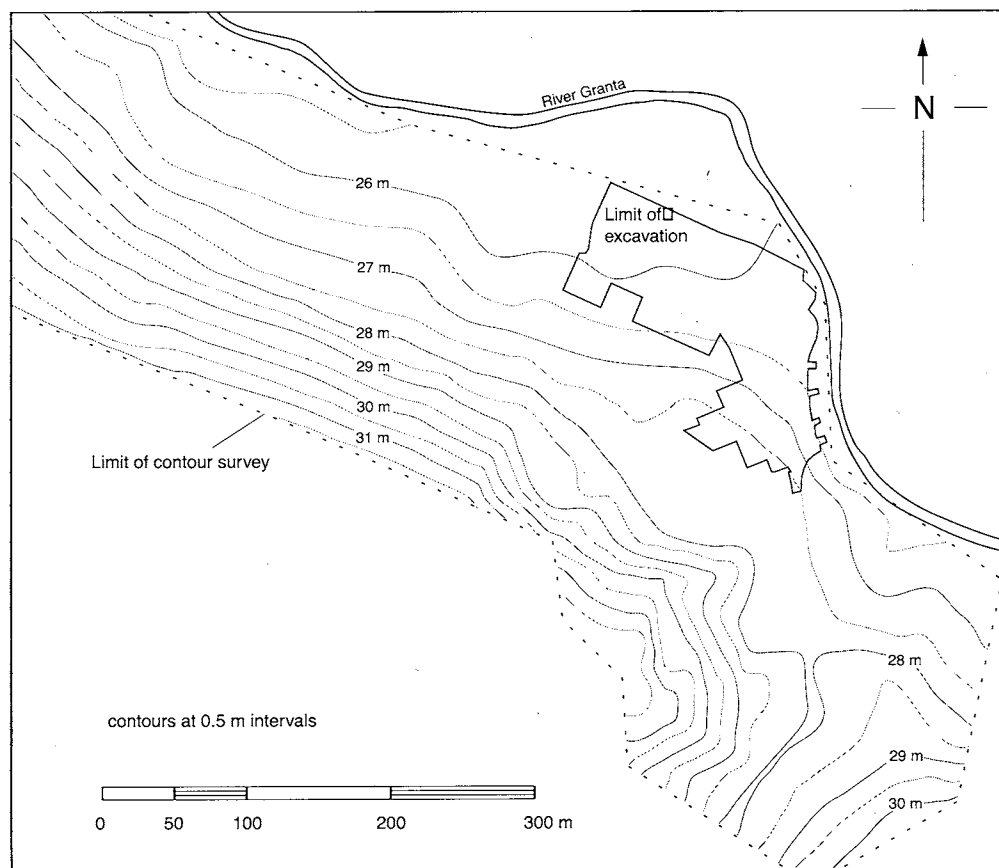


Figure 2. Location of trenches and the main area of excavation

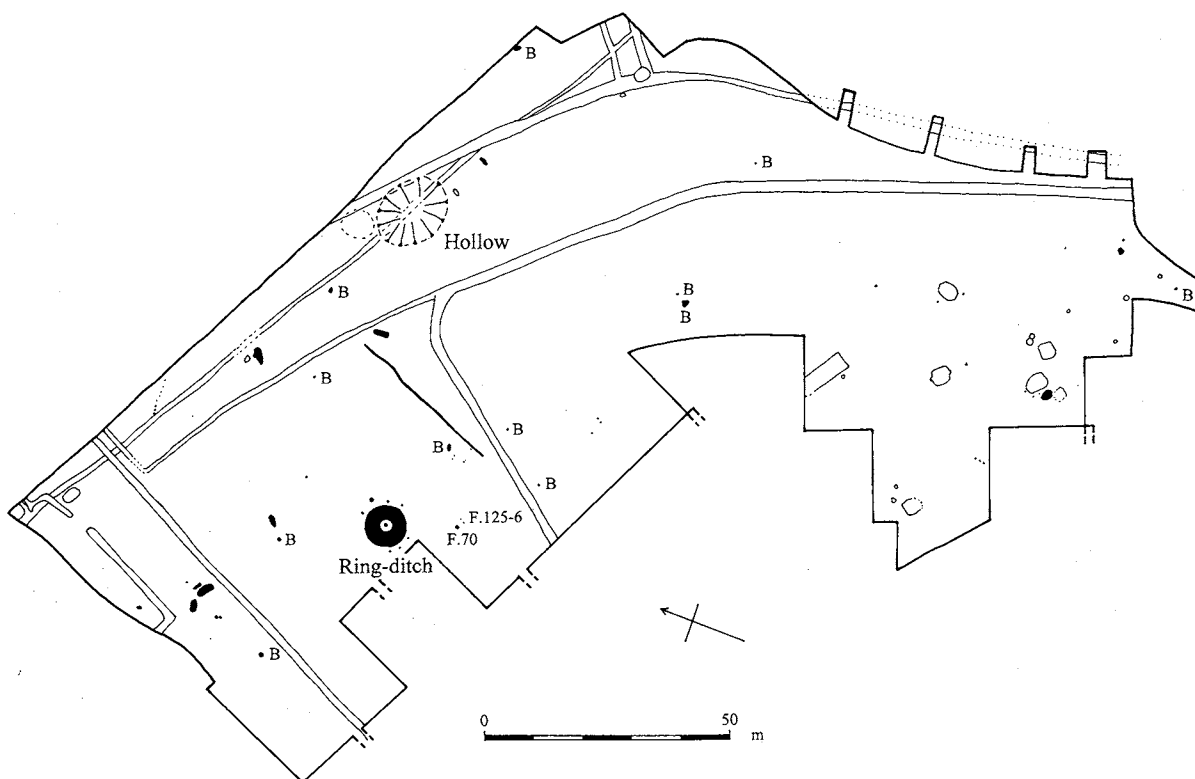


Figure 3. Prehistoric features (bold) within the main area of excavation. B=burnt flint pit. Later features shown in outline



Figure 4. The site under excavation, from the west. The ring-ditch (half-excavated) can be seen just to the right of centre

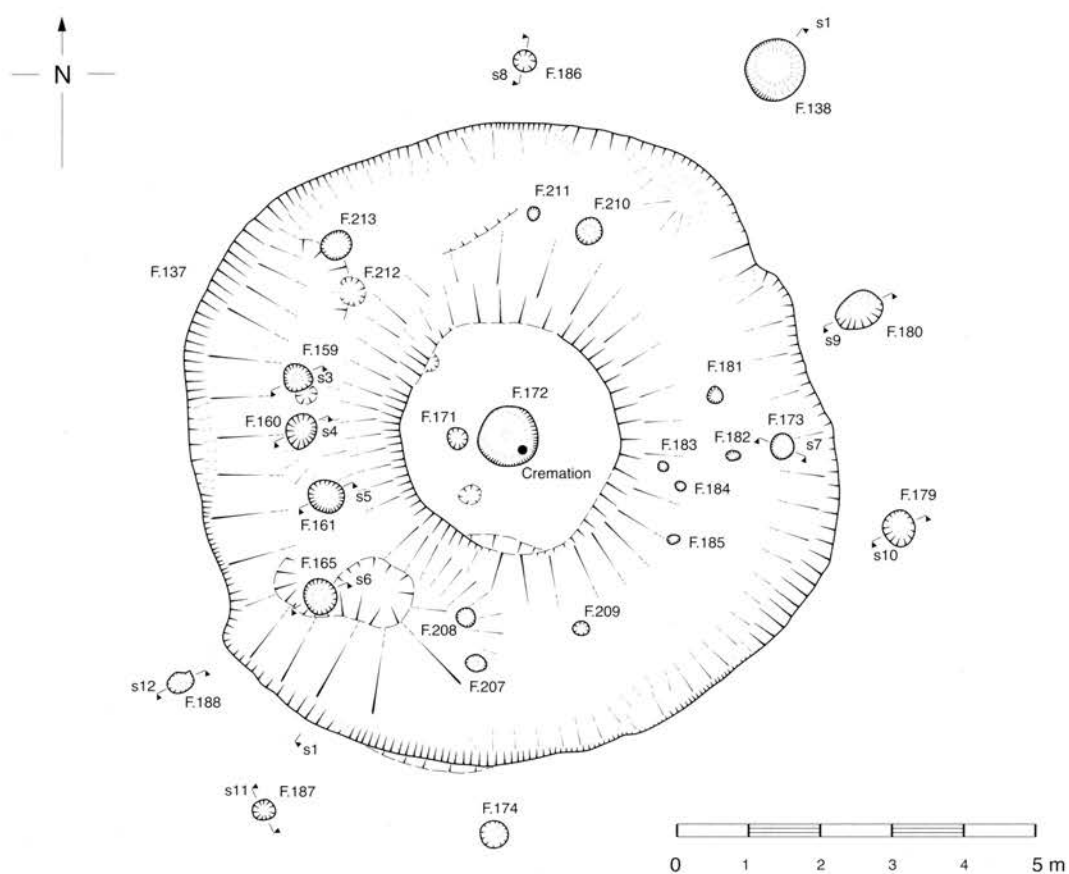


Figure 5. Plan of the ring-ditch as excavated

and pieces of heavily decayed bone were recovered from the base of the ditch and lower fill, particularly on the southern side (fig. 8). A date of 3345 ± 50 BP (OxA-8067) – calibrating to 1750–1520BC at 2 sigma – was obtained from animal bone found close to the base of the ditch. Worked flint concentrated around a post hole setting in the base of the ditch (F.159–F.161, F.165, F.213), generally as a high density spread, though one distinct concentration of knapping debris and a flint hammerstone occurred to the north-east of F.213. On the western side a clearly defined layer of humic silty loam containing occasional charcoal flecks [446] overlay the primary fills; in turn being sealed by a lens of gravel backfill or bank collapse. Forming a slightly domed mass up to 70mm thick, and covering an area of 1.2×2.5 m, [446] appears to have formed through an episode of dumping of topsoil or turves into the ditch (C. French pers comm). Bone and flint (a number of pieces re-fitting) were present within this.

The upper ditch fill comprised largely gravel-free loam [413]. Given the broad and shallow profile to the ditch and the general absence of gravel from this fill, the process of silting must have been protracted. Worked flint and bone was again present in reasonable quantities, along with over 400g of later Bronze Age pottery (fig. 8). Bone was extremely degraded, often only surviving as dark, rusty-brown patches, impossible to lift or identify. Pottery was concentrated in the southern and western sections of the ditch, in two instances occurring in localised groups. One group, deposited against the western edge of the internal

platform included sherds from a single large urn/jar; the other fragments from a minimum of two vessels.

Integral to the monument were: a central pit, F.172; a series of post holes, possible stake holes and shallow pits cut into the ditch base; and a ring of six external pits and a substantial post hole concentric to the ditch edge (fig. 5). The central pit was regular, cut near level with the deepest part of the ditch, up to 0.86m across and 0.37m deep. Its fill began with a lens of gravelly sandy clay [608], above which was a central post-pipe of dark loam [501], 0.32m across, surrounded by gravelly sandy loam post-packing (fig. 6). A compact deposit of 630g of cremated bone from a single adult individual (identified by C Eden) was incorporated in a localised re-cut on the east side of the pit. A distinct weathering cone had formed after the central post rotted. Worked flint and animal bone were present in the fill. To the west of F.172 were three shallow pits/scoops.

Seventeen minor pits, stake holes and post holes were cut into the ditch base. A line of five in the west quadrant (F.159–F.161, F.165 and F.213) showed clear evidence, by the presence of post-pipes, of having held timbers (fig. 7). Of the remainder, F.183–F.185 are interpreted as stake holes, and F.181, F.182, F.207, F.208, F.210, F.211 and F.213 as shallow pits of uncertain function. F.209 and F.212 were ephemeral and may represent little more than depressions in the ditch base. All were clearly cut into the ditch either before silting had occurred (eg F.159–F.161), or at least prior to the formation of the secondary fills (eg F.212

Section 1

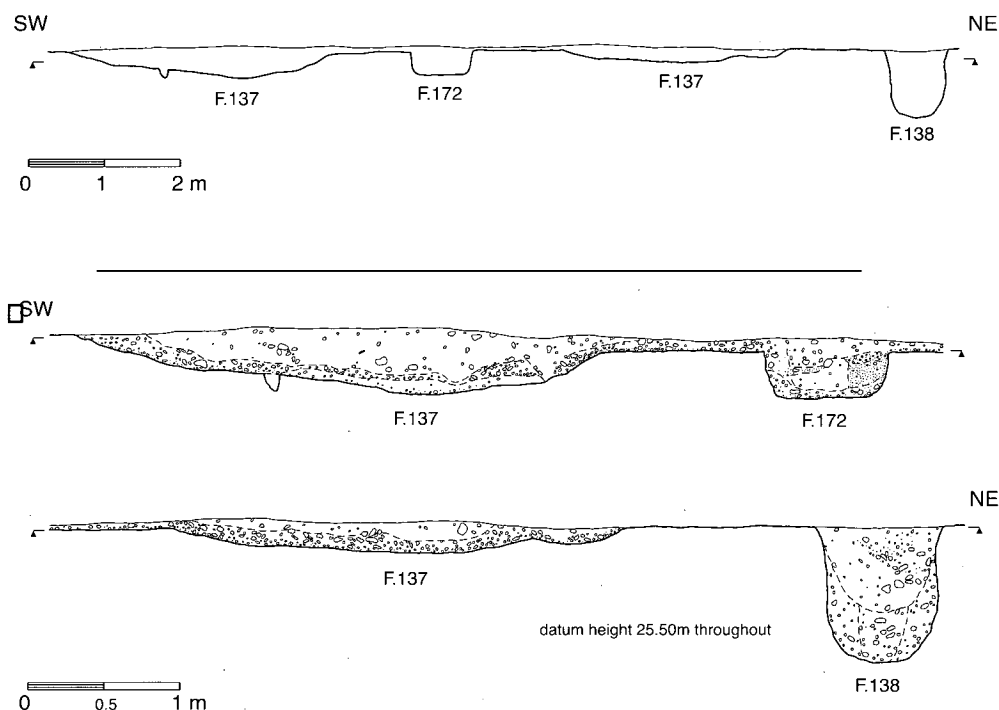
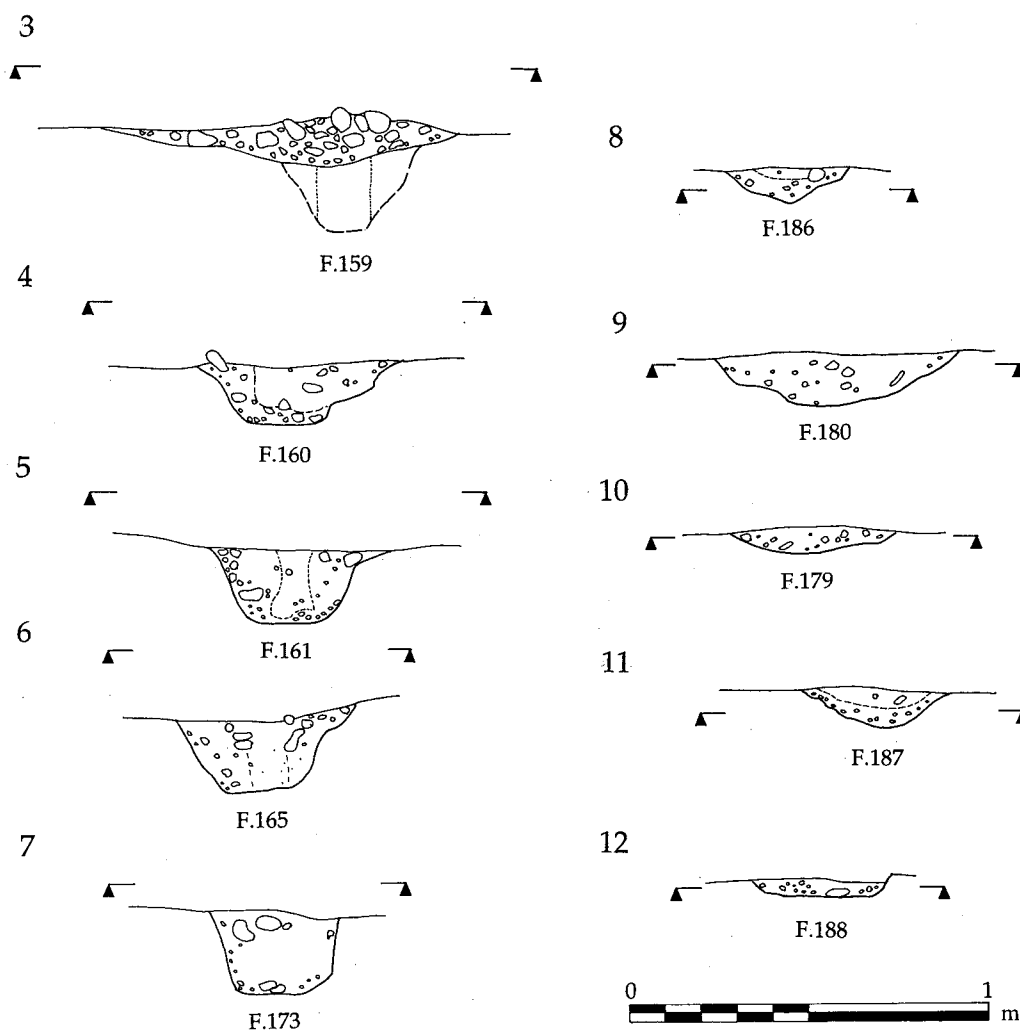


Figure 6. Ring-ditch: NE-SW section



Datum height 25.50m throughout

Figure 7. Ring-ditch: sections of minor features

and F.213). The somewhat chaotic distribution of these features might, however, bely a short sequence of re-working. One architecturally coherent element is provided by the line of five post holes on the west side (F.159–F.161, F.165 and F.213), apparently forming a small façade. A small ‘cairn’ of unworked flint pebbles, 0.60m in diameter, had been placed between F.159 and F.160 whilst the posts were still standing.

Around the external circumference of the ditch were six shallow pits, F.174, F.179, F.180, and F.186–F.188, and a large post hole, F.138. Given their seemingly truncated profiles, other pits may originally have existed, perhaps forming a complete ring spaced at intervals from 2.1–3.7m. It may of course be premature to assume that the arrangement of these features was intended to be symmetrical and that the pit ring is incomplete. With exception of F.138, all were shallow, showed no indication of having held posts and had silted naturally (fig. 7). The only find was a small crumb of prehistoric pottery from F.180.

Post hole F.138 was substantial, 0.90m in diameter, 0.84m deep, and slightly bell-shaped in profile. The fill [415] comprised a pale gravelly packing around a 0.30m diameter silty clay post-pipe (fig. 6). A deep weathering cone of silty loam cut into the top of the post-pipe. Assuming an original depth of c.1.1m for the post-pit, and a below-to-above ground ratio of around 1:3 for the post, the feature originally held a tree-trunk size timber standing 3.0–3.5m high. Finds included worked flint, mostly from the packing and post-pipe, and sherds of Rusticated Beaker from the upper fill. The ceramic evidence might indicate that the post hole pre-dates the ring-ditch.

A small oval pit (F.70) containing 675g of cremated bone occurred 10.6m south-east of the ring-ditch. Heavily calcined bone occurred in a basal lens [145] of charcoal-rich soil containing large quantities (426g) of burnt flint, sealed by fire-reddened orange-brown silty clay. No datable artefacts were present, though its proximity to the ring-ditch argues for a relationship

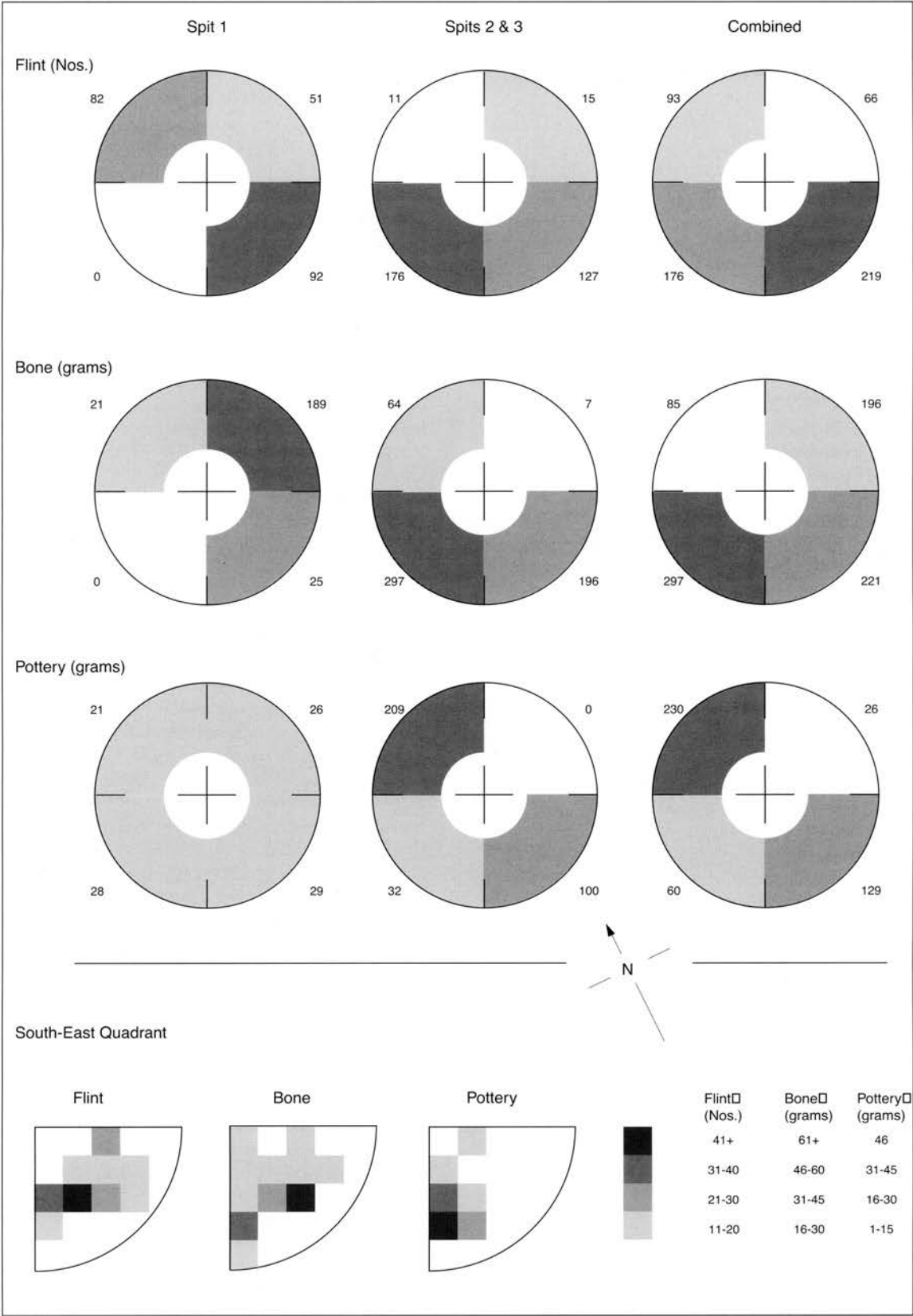


Figure 8. The distribution of worked flint, pottery and animal bone from the ring-ditch

with the monument. As with the central cremation, the bones represented incomplete remains of a single adult (identified by C Eden). Two stakeholes (F.125 and 126) immediately north-east of F.70 could have formed a setting associated with the cremation.

Pottery

502g of prehistoric pottery, c.150 sherds and crumbs, were recovered from the monument, most from the secondary silts of the ditch (Table 1). The material, from a minimum of 10 vessels in eight fabrics, is fragmentary, and it has not been possible to reconstruct profiles. Nonetheless, enough feature sherds survive to enable assignation to specific ceramic styles. Fabrics 1–3 are of earlier Bronze Age type, and belong to vessels of the Rusticated Beaker tradition (fabric 1) and possibly Collared Urn (fabric 3). The remaining fabrics are from middle-late Bronze Age vessels, and account for 76% of the assemblage.

Fabric Descriptions

1. Rusticated Beaker or Food Vessel. Hard fabric with common FLINT of varying size (up to 7mm), patchily distributed, and sparse fine SAND. Reddish-brown exterior and very dark grey core and interior.
2. EBA? Moderate to hard laminated fabric with common small to medium FLINT and common SAND. Dark grey-brown exterior and black core and interior.
3. EBA? Moderate to soft fabric with common small to medium GROG and moderate SAND. Pale orange-buff exterior, very dark grey core and dark reddish grey-brown interior.
4. Deverel-Rimbury. Hard fabric with common small to medium FLINT, patchily distributed, common medium GROG and common SAND. Reddish-brown exterior and buff interior.
5. Later Bronze Age. Hard fabric with common fine SAND and common to very common small FLINT. Often externally smoothed. Dark reddish-brown exterior and dark grey to black interior.
6. Later Bronze Age. Hard fabric with very common small to medium FLINT and common to very common SAND. Dark reddish-brown exterior and very dark reddish grey-brown interior.
7. Later Bronze Age. Hard, slightly laminated, fabric with abundant small FLINT and abundant SAND. Dark grey-brown exterior and very dark reddish grey-brown core and interior.
8. Later Bronze Age. Hard fabric with common to abundant SAND, moderate small to medium GROG and sparse small FLINT (probably introduced with grog).

Orange-brown exterior and very dark grey-brown core and interior.

Sherds in fabrics 1 and 2 form a distinct group within the assemblage, and were restricted to F.138. Parts of three vessels are present; one represented by a single sherd from the post packing (fabric 2), and the remainder (fabric 1) from two thick-walled, large diameter pots with rusticated decoration from the upper fill. The latter include a body sherd with irregular finger pinching (fig. 9, 3), and others from a vessel with bands of multiple horizontal lines of thick cord impressions/grooving, bounded by bands of vertical finger pinching (fig. 9, 1). There are three thick rim sherds from this last vessel with multiple lines of impressed cord on the wall and inner and outer top edges (fig. 9, 2). In profile, the rim top was slightly concave. The sherds find close parallel with Rusticated Beaker from Fen-edge sites such as Hockwold 93, Norfolk (Bamford 1982, figs 5–11). It is notable that the only other Early Bronze Age sherds from the site were recovered from the northern section of the ditch closest to F.138, implying some relationship with depositional events around the area of the post hole. These include fragments from a base or collar in fabric 3, and are tentatively considered to belong to Collared Urn.

Excluding the few earlier Bronze Age sherds, the assemblage from the secondary silts comprises fragments from a minimum of six vessels in hard flinty and sandy fabrics (4–8) of later 2nd to earliest 1st millennium BC date (fig. 9, 4–6, 8 and 9). The majority come from thick-walled, large diameter, urns or jars, the exception being a thin-walled vessel of medium diameter (c.15–20cm) in fabric 6. Vessel profiles are difficult to reconstruct, but a number of body sherds show a gently curved profile, and one at least is of bipartite form. Of six rims, there are four of externally expanded to T-shaped profile belonging to the thin-walled vessel in fabric 6, one simple and flattened, and one rounded and everted (fig. 9, 4–6). Decorative traits are restricted to oblique fingernail impressions on cordons and/or shoulders (fig. 9, 8 and 9), two sherds with diagonal fingernail impressions on the body, and a rim with grooved and smoothed 'cabling' (fig. 9, 6). Several sherds in fabric 5 appear to have been finished by application of slip to the external surface.

Two body sherds in fabric 4 with diagonal, widely spaced, fingernail impressions belong to the Deverel-Rimbury tradition, and find regional analogy in Bucket Urns from Grimes Graves, Norfolk

Table 1. Pottery from ring-ditch by fabric and context

	Fabric 1	Fabric 2	Fabric 3	Fabric 4	Fabric 5	Fabric 6	Fabric 7	Fabric 8	Uncertain	Total
F.137	-	-	20g	28g	157g	20g	9g	175g	1g	410g
F.180	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1g	1g
F.138	85g	6g	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	91g
Total	85g	6g	20g	28g	157g	20g	9g	175g	2g	502g

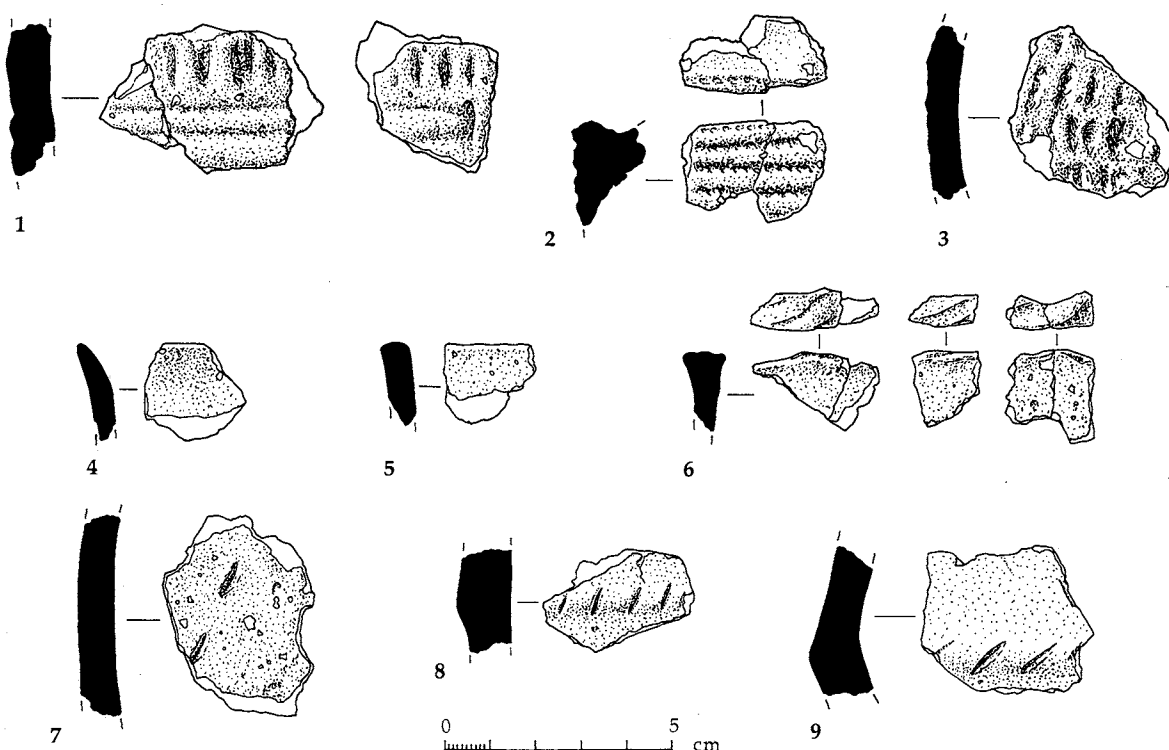


Figure 9. Prehistoric pottery from the ring-ditch

(Longworth *et al* 1988) and Grantham, Lincs. (Allen *et al* 1987, fig. 17). Superficially, the remaining material shares features common to both Deverel-Rimbury and post-Deverel-Rimbury (PDR) 'plain' and 'decorated' wares (Barrett 1980). Finger and fingernail impressed shoulders are common to both, and the use of diagonal grooves/cablings on rims occurs on Bucket Urns (eg Grimes Graves: Longworth 1981; Longworth *et al* 1988) and on jars in ultimate Bronze Age/earliest Iron Age assemblages (eg Orsett: Barrett 1978, fig. 42, 114). However, the fine hard fabric, presence of curved and bipartite vessel forms and everted rims, along with the attention given to surface finish on sherds of fabric 5, is in accord with a post-Deverel-Rimbury attribution (Barrett 1980: J Barrett pers comm).

Worked Flint

Large quantities of worked flint were recovered from primary and secondary fills of the ring-ditch (210 and 258 pieces respectively), and additional material came from the external post hole F.138 (15 pieces), central pit F.172 (5 pieces), and pit F.173 (1 piece) (Table 2).

The material from the ring-ditch and internal features forms an homogenous assemblage of mid-late 2nd millennium BC character. A few pieces from F.138 show earlier characteristics, more compatible with a (early?) Neolithic date. Amongst these are four blades/narrow flakes and a microdenticulate on a keeled flake.

The Bronze Age industry utilised locally occurring gravel pebbles, possibly material brought from a nearby periglacial hollow (see below). Differential patination demonstrates that earlier cores were occasionally re-worked. The assemblage from both the primary and secondary fills of the ditch was dominated by debitage (flakes, cores, flaked pieces and shatter fragments). The scarcity of implements and retouched or utilised flakes is notable, accounting for only six of the 468 pieces (1.3%), and of these two are hammerstones. Neither preparation flakes, nor cores/flaked pieces are particularly over-represented (15.2% and 6.2% of the assemblage total respectively), suggesting the debitage is not restricted to any particular stage in the core reduction sequence.

Table 2. Worked flint from ring-ditch by type and context

	Flakes	Chips (<15mm)	Cores	Flaked Pieces	Shatter frags.	Retouched
F.137 Primary	168	18	11	3	9	1
F.137 Secondary	217	1	4	11	20	5
F.172	2	3	-	-	-	-
F.173	1	-	-	-	-	-
F.138	11	3	-	-	-	1
Total	399	25	15	14	29	7

In accord with a mid-late Bronze Age date, the worked flint shows little technological sophistication (Harding 1992, 127). Little or no attempt was made to produce flakes of a standardised size and shape. Hard hammer flaking was employed throughout. Few cores show evidence for systematic or exhaustive working, platform edge preparation, or formal rejuvenation, beyond occasional trimming of step-fractured areas. Core reduction techniques can be described as opportunistic and wasteful rather than strategic, and seem not to have been directed by a desire to produce blanks of a predetermined form for transformation into implements.

In addition to two fragmentary flint hammerstones, the tool/retouched component comprises a flake with inverse notching, a notched shatter fragment, and two straight-edged semi-denticulate scrapers with bold, steep, retouch. Both scrapers came from the secondary silts in the north-western part of the ditch.

Twenty pieces refit, though in no instance has a sequence of more than three pieces been conjoined. These include two instances where it has been possible to join single flakes to cores. Although refitting flakes are present, a number of factors suggest the material is unlikely to represent *in situ* knapping. Chips are poorly represented, even from sieved samples (accounting for 4.1% of the ditch assemblage). Furthermore, although refitting was possible, large sequences of refits were not present, and the debitage from any one context gave the appearance of deriving from a number of cores/nodules. The material is likely to have been brought from elsewhere, and the density of material and its distribution within the ditch imply it was dumped/placed, rather than having weathered in.

Faunal Remains

E Yannouli

The ditch contained a total of 50 diagnostic animal bones (NISP = 69; NONID = 462 + 37 grams: Table 3). Comparison between the upper and lower deposits reveals a similar ratio of cranial to post-cranial elements, but species representations are different. Pig appears in the primary fill only, while horse and sheep are found in the upper layer. Cattle seem to be better represented in the secondary fill although this differ-

ence is probably deceptive; most of the fragmented non-diagnostic long bones from large mammals probably belonged to cattle and, on this basis, the proportion of cattle remains is similar in both contexts. The upper layer contained a significantly larger amount of non-identifiable bone, probably due to post-depositional effects on bone close to the surface.

Although the sample is small and probably non-representative there is no evidence for very young animals. The sheep/goat specimen is a 1st mandibular molar, probably from a sub-adult or adult individual. The horse specimen is also a tooth, a 1st maxillary molar, around 6–8 years of age on the basis of crown height measurements (3–11 years based on wear assessment) (Levine 1982). Cattle bones from the primary fill seem to have been the remains of one individual. These consist of loose teeth from the right mandible, and one, the M2, showed pathology. There is no definite indication of age but both the M2 and M3 were worn to the whole occlusal surface indicating that the animal concerned was a mature beast. The distal humerus of a *Bos* was also among the identified remains from this fill. As far as the secondary fill is concerned, the presence of two left half-mandibles, represented by incomplete tooth rows and fragments of jaw bone, suggests a minimum of two individuals, one of which was around 2½–3 years of age (the P4 could be seen erupting under the D4). Other anatomical elements included fragments from vertebrae, metacarpal and foot bones as well as a distal humerus.

Animal bone was also found in the central pit, F.172. A total of 19 burnt bones, the remains of cattle and sheep, and 27 grams of residue were embedded in its fill. Cattle occur with six specimens (four carpal/tarsals, one skull and one ulna fragment) and sheep (probably a ewe) with seven, all from a smashed skull. The remaining specimens were fragments of the long bones of medium- and large-size animals.

The lithic scatter and other prehistoric features

In addition to the ring-ditch, episodic prehistoric activity at Bourn Bridge was indicated by a low-level scatter of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age lithics, along with a number of subsoil features. The character of the lithic scatter is detailed elsewhere (Pollard 1998). Localised concentrations of burnt flint were recorded on the floodplain close to the river, and a spread of 2nd millennium BC worked flint on the higher ground in the south-eastern part of the excavation area. The latter, associated with a few sherds of late Bronze Age pottery, probably indicates an area of short-lived occupation.

Prehistoric subsoil features comprised 26 pits, perhaps a number of isolated post holes, a shallow gully or truncated ditch to the east of the ring-ditch, and two hollows (details are given in the archive report: Pollard 1995). The distribution of the pits was uneven, though with minor clusterings in the north-western and south-eastern parts of the excavated area (fig. 3). Chronologically diagnostic material was

Table 3. Distribution of animal bone in the primary and secondary fills of the ring-ditch

	Primary fill	Secondary fill	Total
Cattle	4	13	17
Horse	-	1	1
Sheep/goat	-	1	1
Pig	1	-	1
Mammal large	15	11	26
Mammal medium	2	2	4
Total NISP	22	28	50
NONID	79	365	444

rarely present from their fills, most features being allocated a prehistoric attribution because of the presence of burnt and occasional pieces of worked flint. Burnt flint pits formed the most coherent feature category. Fourteen pits of this type were recognised, a number close to the ring-ditch. They contained a matrix of burnt soil and burnt flint; a single notched flake of later Bronze Age character being the sole diagnostic artefact.

The hollow

The larger of the two hollows, situated on low ground 50m to the east of the ring-ditch, merits fuller description. Though essentially a natural feature, it is argued below that its morphology was possibly referenced in the format of the ring-ditch, and likewise that the

activities associated with it find some reflection in the depositional practices taking place within the adjacent monument.

The two hollows had formed in the top of a Pleistocene channel and were probably periglacial. The larger, southerly, of the two (15 x 12m and up to 0.70m deep) was encountered during the evaluation, and quantities of burnt flint and two fine Mesolithic/earlier Neolithic blades were recovered from layers of grey-brown and blackened silty clay (collectively [048]) near the base of the hollow. During the main phase of excavation, these deposits were sampled across two metre-wide transects, running from the base of the feature to its top edge, and at right-angles to this from the apparent centre of the burnt flint spread to its northern edge (figs 10 and 11).

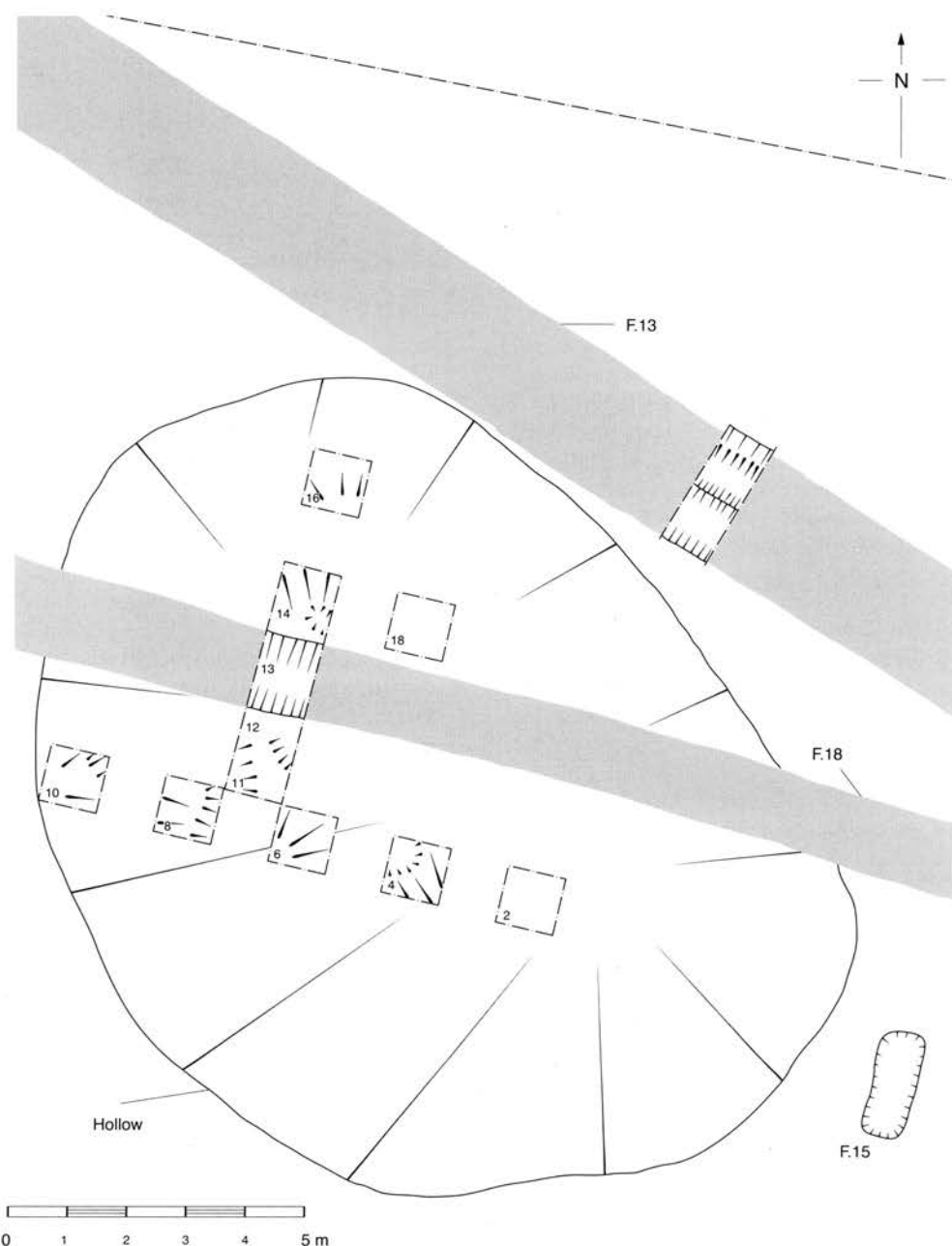


Figure 10. The hollow. F.13, 15 and 18 are of Roman and later date



Figure 11. The hollow under excavation, from the south-east

The highly irregular base of the hollow was sealed by a thin (0.05m thick) layer of greyish-orange sandy clay, above which were layers of locally blackened brown gravelly loam, containing high densities of lightly burnt flint, worked flint and fragmented animal bone. The blackened layers were interleaved with deposits of light brown gravelly loam and patches of greyish-orange sand and gravel. All were covered by a brown silty clay alluvium. At least two phases of activity, associated with the working and deposition of flint, are represented; the first belonging to the earlier Neolithic and the second to the mid-late Bronze Age. The artefactual and faunal material was distributed unevenly in the hollow in localized concentrations (fig. 12).

Three hundred and forty-two pieces of worked flint came from the 11 squares excavated within the hollow, and two blades from the assessment phase fieldwork (Table 4). Densities per metre square varied markedly from zero (at the very base and top – squares 2, 8 and 10) to 193 pieces (square 14); apparently reflecting the presence of knapping clusters or dumps, principally on the up-slope of the hollow.

The lithic assemblage includes earlier Neolithic

and mid-late Bronze Age pieces. Amongst the former, largely recovered from spits 2 and below, are a number of fine blades/bladelets produced through soft hammer flaking. Core rejuvenation is evident in several trimming flakes and a core tablet. Amongst the implement component of this early material (accounting for only 2.2%) are two denticulates, a notched flake and a utilised flake. The later material largely derived from spit 1, and was associated with a few sherds of PDR pottery. The material shares similar technological characteristics to the flint from the ring-ditch. Implements formed only 3.7% of the assemblage, and included retouched and notched pieces, a utilised flake and a fabricator or rod (Saville 1981, 10). The large quantity of fine debitage – pieces under 15mm accounting for 36.5% of the total – indicates *in situ* working. Both periods of working utilised local flint, probably eroded or quarried from the hollow itself.

Ninety-nine fragments of animal bone were recovered from the fill and identified by Eftychia Yannouli. Almost all the fragments were burnt, and only 14 identifiable. From the lower fill (spits 2 and 3) came the shaft of a tibia and the distal metatarsal of

Table 4. Worked flint from the hollow

	Flakes	Chips (<15mm)	Cores	Flaked Pieces	Shatter frags.	Retouched
[048] Spit 1	90	43	3	4	18	6
[048] Spits 2 and 3	89	82	-	1	2	4
Total	179	125	3	5	20	10

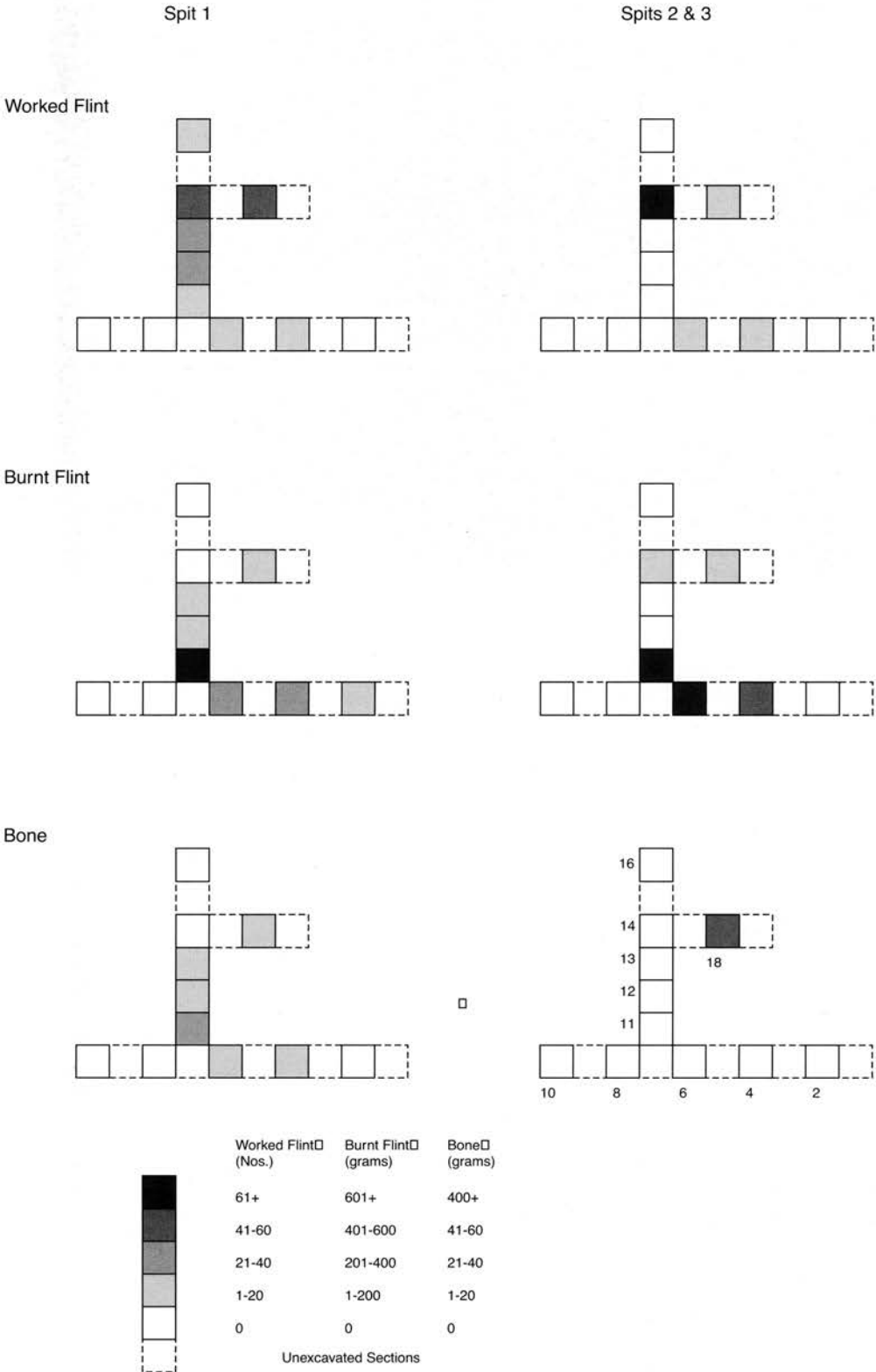


Figure 12. Distribution of worked flint, burnt flint and animal bone from the hollow

domestic cattle, the 3rd mandibular molar of a mature fallow deer, and the distal (fused) radius of a *Bos primigenius*. Four out of ten identifiable bone fragments from the upper (later Bronze Age) fill comprised isolated cattle teeth. The remaining specimens were long bone fragments of large-size mammals, presumably also cattle.

Assessment (by V Fryer and P Murphy) of macrofossils from two samples of the blackened loam taken close to the base of the hollow identified mollusca of predominantly open country (*Helicella itala*, *Pupilla muscorum* and *V. excentrica*) and catholic species (*Cochlicopa* sp. and *Trichia hispida* group). Shells of *Aegopinella* sp., a woodland/shade-loving species, were also present.

Although the hollow was probably of periglacial origin, it may have been humanly modified, probably during the extraction of flint nodules for working and heating/burning.¹ That cultural material should have been recovered from so close to the base of the feature (within 50mm) is itself surprising, accepting an early (Pleistocene – early Holocene) date for its formation. It would be expected that a far greater degree of silting would have taken place by the time of the earliest episode of flintworking, and one explanation for this would be truncation of the silts by later quarrying. The irregularity of the base also supports this. In a landscape where few exposures of good gravel flint may have been available, the hollow could have provided accessible material that would require little effort to extract.

The worked and perhaps burnt flint appear to represent *in situ* activity, though the remaining material, such as the bone and a limited quantity of pottery (15g in fabrics 5 and 6), might have been brought from elsewhere. Given the low lying situation of the hollow and its proximity to the river, the deposits may have been transported over a limited distance by fluvial action, though the focused distribution of flint around the hollow edge suggests this is unlikely. Alternatively, burning on the animal bone could be linked with the burnt flint, indicating cookery, analogous to practices associated with burnt flint mounds (and here the proximity to the river is surely important).

Discussion

Radiocarbon and artefactual evidence suggest the ring-ditch was constructed during the mid-2nd millennium BC, within a landscape that had already witnessed intermittent prehistoric activity. The monument was defined by a broad, shallow ditch into which posts were set, there was a central post-pit, and surrounding pits and a large post setting. Material from the ditch probably formed an enclosing bank, although even without a break it would not have seriously impeded access to the ditch and centre. Structural features within the ditch, including a line of small posts on the western side, along with the large quantities of artefactual material from its base and fills, implies that this feature acted more as a surface

for activity than a quarry for bank material.

Ambiguous analogies

Clearly the monument is of unusual form. The conventional approach to understanding such a construction would be to seek structural analogies – situating the site within a classificatory framework that would link it with other monuments of known function or context. As shall be shown, this approach has its limitations in this case, and ultimately it is only by contextualising the monument in relation to other features within the landscape, and the significance of a range of depositional and technological practices, that better understanding can be developed.

What of analogies? Regional context could be sought in a series of excavated later Bronze Age mini ring-ditches in Essex; for example at Vincens Farm and Martells Hall, Ardleigh (Erith 1975), and Chitts Hill, Colchester (Crummy 1977). These are associated with cremation burials, usually in Deverel-Rimbury urns ('Ardleigh Urns'). Alternatively, phase 2 of the Radley 611 'pond barrow', Oxfordshire, with its slightly raised centre, looks similar in plan to the Bourn monument (Barclay and Halpin 1999); as does the hollowed first phase central structure at Thwing, Yorkshire (S Needham pers comm); and the shallow, interrupted ditch and post settings of the mid 2nd millennium BC barrow on Itford Hill, Sussex (Holden 1972). Assuming the presence of a low surrounding bank, the original appearance of the Bourn Bridge monument would not have been dissimilar to the embanked form of many Bronze Age pond barrows (Ashbee *et al* 1989, 139–43; Barrett *et al* 1991, 136–7), though the presence of external radial pits and a raised central area draws distinction. These analogies are, however, geographically diverse, and are unlikely to have directly informed the format of the Bourn monument. They serve only to illustrate the tremendous variability in monumental construction which is becoming apparent in the Bronze Age of lowland Britain, seen not only with barrows, but ring-ditches, and timber- and pit-circles (Gibson 1994; Clay 1998). The extremes of this range are represented by 'unusual' monument forms such as the Street House 'Wossit' (Vyner 1988), Seahenge (Brennand and Taylor 2000) and the Bourn Bridge ring-ditch. Nearly all of these sites are worked around the theme of the circle, but show a local inventiveness in form, function and meaning – an illustration of what Bradley has described as the 'complicated relationship between tradition and invention' (Bradley 1998a).

Working, burning, transforming: contexts for interpretation

Despite the presence of a deposit of cremated bone in the central pit and a second cremation within 11m of the ring-ditch, it is unnecessary to assume that the monument had a funerary/mortuary role. Here it is envisaged as some kind of shrine rather than a marker/memorial to the dead. After all, the cremation within the central pit was inserted at a later stage, probably after the central post had rotted. In itself, this

interval would imply that the monument was not constructed with the intention of marking a burial.

No attempt seems to have been made to re-cut the ditch or physically maintain the structure in the long-term. Maybe the monument was not constructed as an enduring 'statement', and its original significance was immediate and transitory. However, continuing deposition within the ditch whilst the secondary silts were forming implies a remaining or renewed sanctity. Though the function of the monument cannot be readily pigeon-holed, the presence of deposits of flint, animal bone and pottery within the ditch provides a series of linkages with a range of technological and social processes that might illuminate the monument's meaning. This material was deposited in the ditch over a period of a few centuries (to judge by the ceramic record, which ranges from Rusticated Beaker to PDR). Initially only flint and bone was incorporated, principally on the south-western side of the ditch around the linear post setting. Formal placing is evident in at least one deposit, where a small cairn of flint nodules was constructed between F.159 and F.160. Whilst the secondary silts were forming, further deposits were made, which now included pottery. Again, much of this depositional activity was focused on the southern side of the ditch, though bone was now present in some quantity on the east; material tending to occur in localised concentrations probably corresponding to individual depositional events. Structured through cosmological principles of spatial order, it may not be coincidental that the focus of deposition on the southern side of the ring-ditch recalls the frequent placing of Deverel-Rimbury cremation cemeteries in secondary contexts on the southern sides of earlier round mounds (eg Latch Farm, Hants. (Piggott 1938)) and the orientation of Middle Bronze Age round houses (Bradley 1998a, 153).

These deposits recall similar practices associated with the later lives of some round barrows in the region, usually post-dating the use of the monuments for burial. A sizeable assemblage of late Bronze Age pottery, flint and bone was recovered from the secondary fills of a barrow ditch at Thriplow (Trump 1956); and at Hinxtun, 8km to the south-west, large quantities of knapping debris were found spread across the former mound of a barrow and filling a re-cut within the encircling ditch (Edmonds, in Evans 1993, 34–8).² The pattern of association between big 'industrial' assemblages and ring-ditches/funerary monuments is not just local, and a similar process of mid-late 2nd millennium BC lithic deposition is associated with round barrows in Wessex (eg Robertson-Mackay 1980; Saville 1980) and Sussex (eg Drewett 1982, 375–7). Usually such activity is interpreted as representing ad hoc exploitation of flint nodules eroding from barrow mounds, with the consequent generation of knapping waste (Fasham and Ross 1978, 49–51), implying lapsed sanctity of monumental form (Edmonds 1995, 184–7). What is interesting at Bourn Bridge is the occurrence of such activity in a primary context within the monument, when the original meaning and special significance of the structure

would still have been appreciated and presumably respected. Flintworking seems to have carried a significance in its own right, the meanings of which were drawn upon and brought to the fore through deposition. That the flint appears not to represent *in situ* knapping, and that the pottery sherds were fragmented, suggests that the material was brought in from elsewhere. Both the evidence for occupation in the southern-eastern part of the site and that for flintworking in the hollow provide possible contexts for the origination of this material. Here, there could be a direct material linkage with other social practices and contexts of routinised activity (cf. Bradley 1998a, chapter 10).

What remains interesting is the similarity in the assemblages from the ring-ditch and hollow, even if the activities that produced them may have differed in detail. Though essentially a natural feature, the hollow's utilization both for *in situ* flintworking and the deposition of other debris defines an ascribed cultural status. It is interesting to speculate whether a sharp conceptual distinction was made in the minds of those involved between the practices and processes taking place within the modified 'natural' hollow and the 'artificial' hollow of the ring-ditch. The practices enacted within the former are curiously reminiscent of those associated with the partially silted mine shafts at Grimes Graves, Norfolk, during the mid 2nd millennium BC (Mercer 1981; Longworth *et al* 1988), whether resulting from similar functional ends – ready supplies of flint and convenient places for mid-denning in both instances – ascribed special meaning, or a combination of the two. Another line of interpretation could relate the hollow to the kinds of practices (principally cooking) normally associated with contemporary burnt flint mounds, a common feature of the Fen-edge (cf. Leah and Crowson 1993). The burnt animal bone and large quantity of heat-fractured flint, along with the proximity of the feature to the river suggest this; and it would be tempting in this context to associate the locale with episodes of feasting, as well as activities such as flint extraction and working. In fact, there are a number of technological and procedural links between the ring-ditch and hollow. Burnt flint and animal bone occurs within the hollow, likewise calcined flint was mixed with the cremated bone in F.70; flint debitage and transformed (butchered/broken) animal bone and pottery occurred in both; the 'creation' of the two features probably involved digging-out and embanking.

The technological, the social and the symbolic are not exclusive spheres of practice. Many technological processes cross-over, are linked metaphorically, and become imbued with culturally specific meanings (Sillar 1996). It is tempting to see the working of flint, breaking of pots, burning of the dead and the burning of flint as linked by common metaphors of transformation. All are to do with the alteration of material (and social) states. That the practices associated with the ring-ditch appear to mimic in material representation those associated with the hollow is illustrative of the socially and symbolically embedded nature of

what at first sight appear to be disparate technological acts. Through deposition within the ritually-charged arena of the monument, these links were explicitly brought to the fore.

The basic format of the ring-ditch drew upon a wider tradition of constructing circular monuments during the Bronze Age, some intimately linked to the dead, others not. In detail though, its unusual form appears to have been informed by features in the landscape, in this case a partially modified natural hollow. This need not occasion surprise. The creation of monuments often drew upon the visual imagery of the natural world (Richards 1996, Bradley 2000), and there are instances where natural features were interpreted as humanly constructed monuments by prehistoric communities and their form emulated. At Bourn Bridge the connection between natural feature and monument is more closely embedded through associated technological processes.

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Endnotes

1. Other extraction hollows have recently been found in the area, but on chalkland and dating to the earlier Neolithic (Evans 1991, McFadyen 1999).
2. Slightly further afield, the same process of in-filling with cultural material is seen in the Butcher's Rise ring-ditch at Barleycroft Farm, on the River Great Ouse (Evans and Knight 2000).

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