

TWO BRONZE AGE WOODEN STRUCTURES IN THE SOMERSET MOORS

by Richard Brunning

Two Late Bronze Age wooden structures have recently been discovered in Somerset, at Harter's Hill in Queens Sedge Moor and at Greylake in Kings Sedgemoor. Assessment excavations have revealed that both appear to be pile alignments which may have a ritual as opposed to purely practical use. As such they constitute a new type of prehistoric monument from the Somerset moors.

Harter's Hill

This site, south of Coxley near Wells in Somerset (ST 53 42) was discovered in 1996 by a farmer who pulled up some oak posts which had damaged his harrowing machinery. An initial survey of the field was followed by small-scale excavation funded by English Heritage. This work revealed that the oak posts were part of a pile alignment which stretches from the base of Harter's Hill out for at least 60 m into the peat deposits of the former wetland (Figure 1).

The alignment consists of 2-3 parallel rows of roundwood oak piles with diameters ranging from 0.16 m to 0.23 m. The tops of the piles are now at ground level but they survive to a length of between 1.35 m and 1.92 m. The field was last ploughed during the 1940s when no piles were encountered, suggesting considerable peat wastage over the last 50 years. Excavation revealed that 0.45 m below the present ground level a mass of wood had been deliberately deposited around the piles (Figure 2). This deposit was roughly 3 m in width and consisted of a mixture of oak plank fragments, offcuts and woodchips, and non-oak roundwood, twigs and logs. This horizontally laid material was at least partially retained by a series of small stakes running intermittently along both sides of the structure. The non-oak species included ash, alder, hazel and willow. Only the higher levels were excavated and the depth of the deposit is unknown.

No non-wooden artefacts were found but the Bronze Age date suggested by the toolmarks was confirmed by dendrochronological analysis of the piles which produced a felling date of

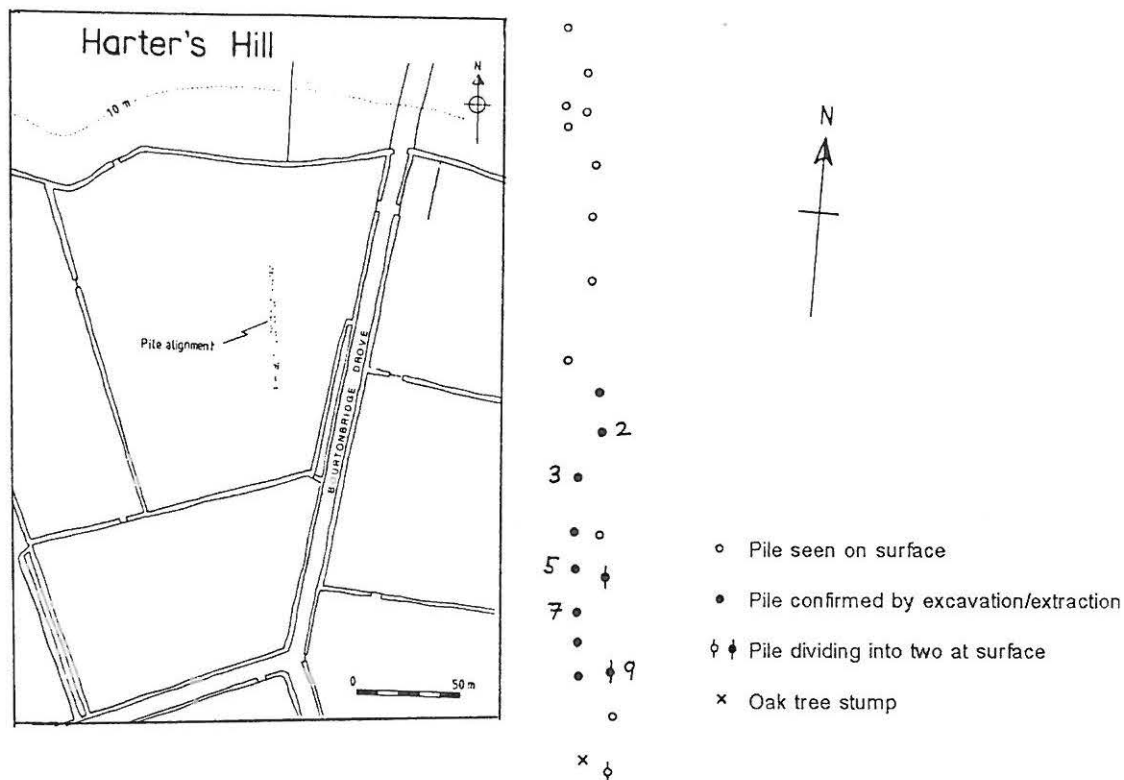
1076/5 BC for one pile. Later construction phases are evidenced by dates from other piles and horizontal planks which were from trees felled after 1071 to 1064 BC. The lack of sapwood on these samples precludes obtaining a felling date. All the samples have comparatively short ring sequences and would probably not have dated had it not been for the data from this period already collected from the Severn Estuary region (J.Hillam pers. comm.).

The function of the alignment is unclear. The piles are not in a regular pattern and show no evidence of supporting a superstructure, although the tops of the posts are badly eroded. It is likely that the mass of horizontal wood must have been covered by shallow water in order for the piles to survive c.0.45 m above it. Post-excavation work, including environmental analysis at Bristol University, is on-going, and further fieldwork is planned.

Greylake

Excavation was undertaken to investigate a wooden structure at Greylake, between Middlezoy and Greinton in Kings Sedgemoor (ST 39 33), which was subject to a brief investigation in 1926. At that time it was thought to have been part of a timber alignment called 'Strangway's Causeway', which was supposed to connect a large sand 'island' at Othery to a ridge of high ground to the north (Figure 3). Two oak piles, thought to be part of this causeway, were pulled out of the ground by a farmer, Mr. Strangways, in 1895 and in 1939 another pile was seen in the edge of a drainage channel.

The modern excavation, filmed as part of a 'Time Team' TV programme was positioned next to the area investigated in 1926. Vertical wooden piles were encountered forming an irregular line in a north-easterly direction. The piles were radially and tangentially split oak. A thin intermittent band of horizontal wood was associated with the piles, consisting of small woodchips, roundwood, plank offcuts and one



large radially split oak plank.

Artefactual material associated with this horizon included several sherds of broken pottery, numerous white quartz pebbles, two sheep jaw bones and several human bones. A deliberately broken socketed axe was also recovered from the trench but could not be conclusively tied in with the debris layer. The father of the present owner is reported to have found a human skull of uncertain date at the edge of the field during ditch cleaning.

Initial dendrochronological dating has shown that one of the piles was from a tree felled after 942 BC (no sapwood) while the horizontal plank was derived from a trunk felled soon after 963 BC. The socketed axe and the pottery style would fit with this dating. One of the human bones was found directly underneath the horizontal plank so contemporary deposition is assumed.

The vertical timbers are in an irregular formation and show no signs of having supported a superstructure. Initial environmental analysis suggests

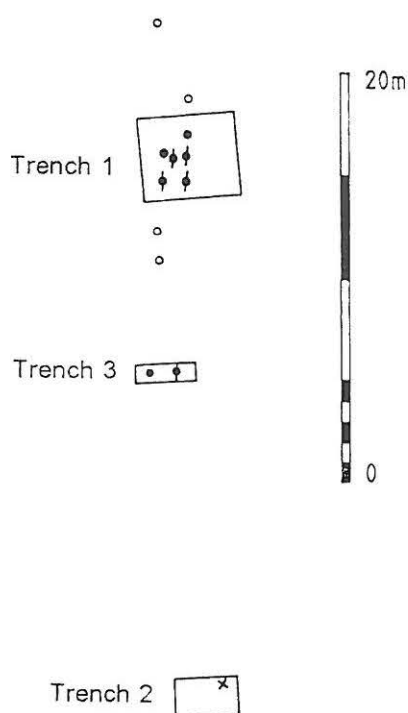


Figure 1: Harter's Hill, location plan



Figure 2: Harter's Hill, Trench 1, looking along the alignment after the removal of the top brushwood. Scales 1 m and 0.5 m

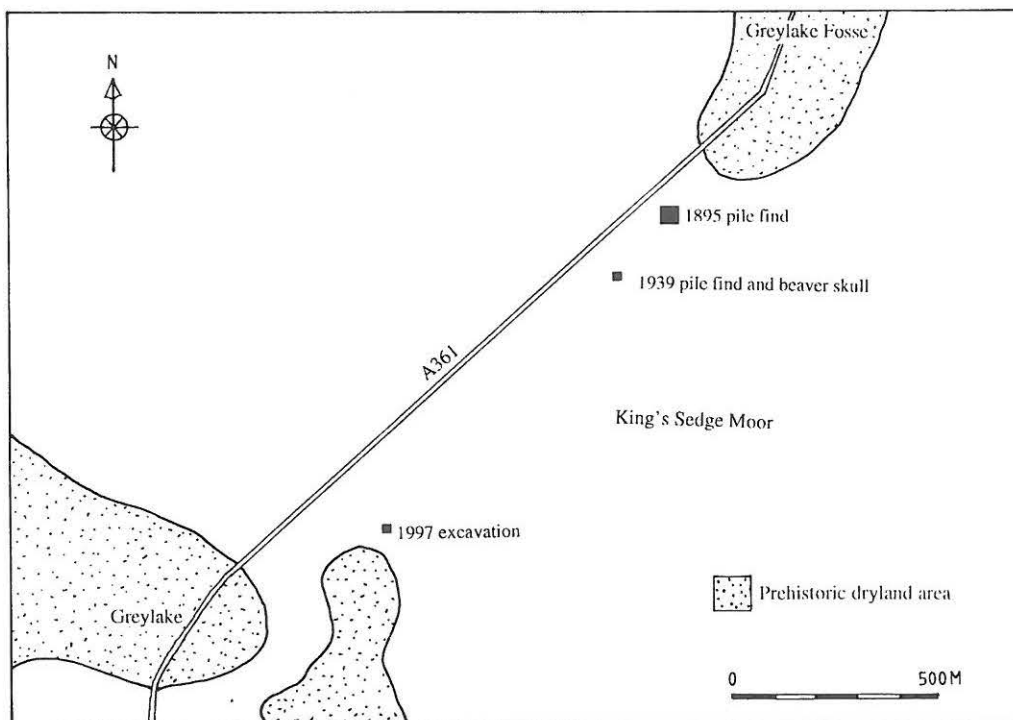


Figure 3: Greylake, location map

that the local area consisted of shallow fresh water with patches of reeds and fen woodland. Ritual deposition and demarcation appear to have been the functions of the structure although its extent and exact relation to the previous wooden finds in the area have yet to be conclusively proved. Post-excavation work, including environmental analysis at Bristol University, is on-going and further fieldwork is planned.

Interpretation

Both the wooden structures are unlike any of the other sites previously found in the Somerset Levels and Moors, and may not have functioned as communication routes. The closest comparison can be made with the alignment at Flag Fen (Pryor 1992; Taylor 1992) which is of a similar date and is structurally very like the Harter's Hill site. The range of artefact types recovered from the Greylake site is also close to that from Flag Fen, especially if the socketed axe was related to the structure, as seems likely.

The late Bronze Age was a time when the rituals associated with death were moving away from ceremonial monuments to practices that leave fewer traces in the archaeological record. Deposition of human remains in wetland environments is one of the main patterns that emerges, and where excavation has occurred this is frequently shown to be associated with wooden structures (Bradley 1990; Bruck 1995). This probably reflects not only changes in attitudes to the dead and to the social significance of metalwork, but also new perceptions of wetlands and their role in spiritual and social life.

Therefore, with the limited evidence available at present it seems that the functions of both the Greylake and Harter's Hill sites are more likely to be related to the ritual deposition and demarcation seen at Flag Fen than to the communication role played by the wooden trackways previously excavated in Somerset. The paleoenvironmental results and further fieldwork should help to clarify the roles which these structures played 3,000 years ago.

The future

Both the sites are suffering from recent dessication and the possibility of their future survival remains uncertain. Water level

monitoring of the Harter's Hill site is currently being undertaken by Somerset County Council and the possibilities for preservation *in situ* will be pursued where possible. Slow death by dessication is a fate that probably faces many wetland archaeological sites throughout the country, but it is seldom recognised as many sites lie undiscovered while little or no monitoring occurs of the known sites. The current English Heritage wetland projects in the North West, the Humber wetlands, East Anglia and the Thames foreshore have gone some way to redressing this situation. Somerset County Council intend to undertake a review of all the known prehistoric waterlogged archaeological sites in the county to build on the work of the Somerset Levels Project. This would be the first stage in developing a strategy for future research and preservation projects.

Acknowledgements

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