

Questions, not Answers: an Interim Report on Excavations at Etton, near Maxey, Peterborough, 1982

by Francis Pryor

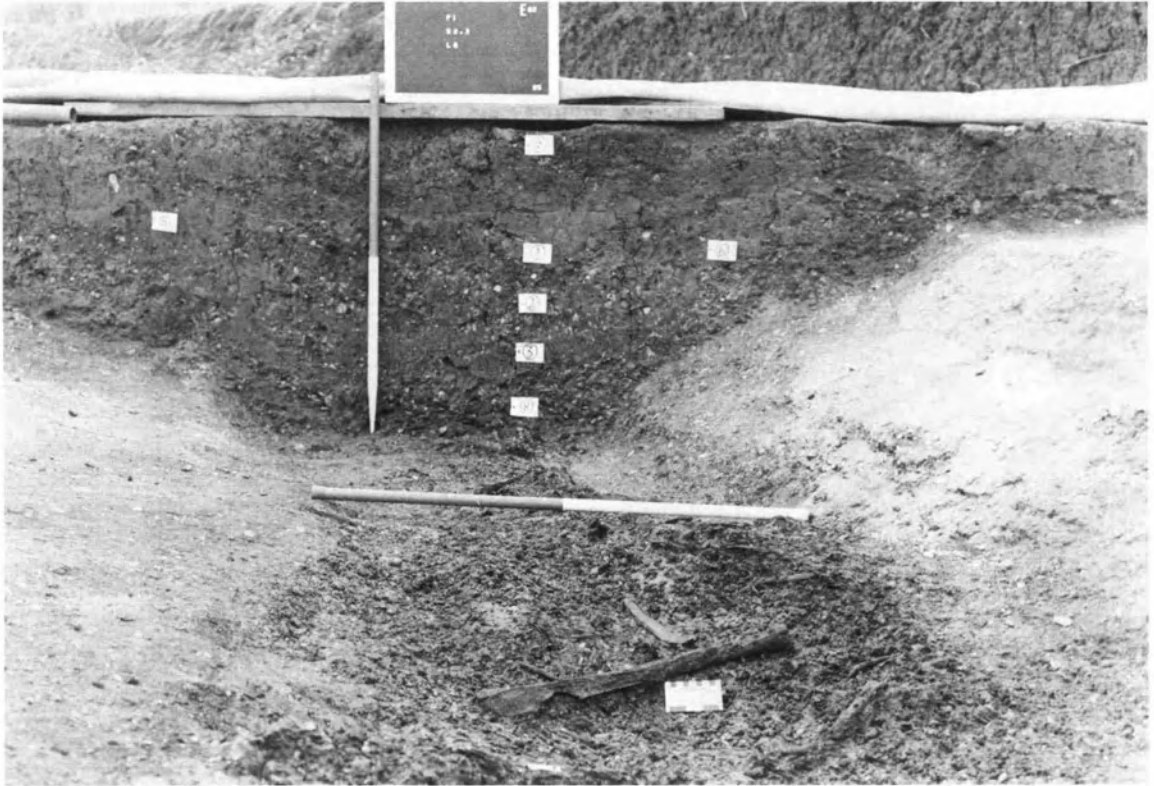
The site is a single ditched causewayed enclosure located within an extinct meander of a stream flowing in the old, dendritic, Welland system. It is still not entirely clear whether this stream was actually flowing all year round in Neolithic times, but it is probable that its course would have held standing water during wintertime. The enclosure occupies most of a low gravel knoll surrounded on three sides by the old stream channel; the fourth, southerly, side is obscured by thick deposits of clay alluvium, a high bank and a major modern drainage dyke, the Maxey Cut (South Drain).

The Etton causewayed enclosure (centred on TF 138073) was discovered by Steve Upex, flier to the Nene Valley Research Committee, in 1976 and was rapidly excavated by the present author and members of the Welland Valley Project in November 1981; the results of this investigation have been published recently (Pryor and Kinnes 1982). To recapitulate that report, the site was seen to occupy an area of *c* 2.5 hectares, the interior was protected and sealed by at least 0.50m of stiff clay alluvium and primary ditch deposits were waterlogged. The latter deposits produced large quantities of wood, mainly of Fen species (willow/poplar, alder/hazel, birch), together with pottery in the Mildenhall style of the Middle Neolithic, and quantities of animal bone. Etton is somewhat unusual in that it is both base-rich and partially waterlogged: these conditions are exceptionally favourable for preservation — most unusually the site has produced well-preserved pollen and molluscs.

The 1982 season confirmed the general picture painted in the initial rapid investigation. However, the most generous funding provided by the British Museum enabled us to investigate far larger areas than had been possible before and a few of our initial observations have had to be revised as a result. The most important revised interpretation concerns the evidence for an internal bank (Pryor and Kinnes 1982, FIG 1). This feature was constructed in two parts: a turf revetment along

the ditch brink which retained a dumped gravel interior bank. Both gravel and turf lay atop a gleyed soil which in turn lay on the Pleistocene sands and gravels of the Welland First Terrace (for recent geological work see Booth 1982). Larger scale work showed that the 'bank' was not in fact continuous: it was probably only some 20m long and was placed on the inner edge of the ditch at a point where the latter followed a natural hollow in the old land surface. The bank was therefore more of a platform which provided a flat surface, presumably raised above any flood water, and upon which we recovered traces of burning and other settlement debris. In all, we excavated about 50m of ditch, comprising one complete segment, from causeway to causeway, and a narrow trial trench was also cut through the ditch some 100m to the north. Apart from the short length of platform-type bank discussed above, there was no other evidence for a bank, either internal or external. Presumably upcast from the ditch was spread thinly on either side.

The ditch was undulating in profile, lobate in plan and was recut a number of times — currently we believe we can see about 6-8 phases of recutting, many of which may have been discontinuous and may help to account for the ditch's irregular shape. All primary deposits (see Pryor and Kinnes 1982, for a discussion of the terms 'primary', 'secondary', etc) were waterlogged and produced *c* 1000 pieces of wood worthy of being lifted intact. This material is still being studied, but about 35% shows signs of working (axe cuts, etc) and about 5% should prove worthy of conservation (Maisie Taylor, pers comm). The wood included numerous examples of rods (most probably the result of coppicing/pollarding), together with larger roundwood, split pieces and a variety of utilised 'tools' of uncertain function; an almost complete handle of a polished stone axe was found lying on the ditch bottom (PL 1). This very recognisable tool compares well with examples from Ehenside Tarn, Cumbria, now in



PL 1 Etton 1982: a view along part of the ditch, showing lower waterlogged deposits, including the handle for a polished stone axe (foreground near small scale; large scale in half metres). Photo FP

the collections of the British Museum (Darbyshire 1874; for a recent bog find from Lewis see Piggott 1982, 30). It is probably made of ash (Maisie Taylor pers comm), and carries impressions of lashing on its exterior surface. One rather surprising discovery was that small trees, perhaps even coppiced bushes, grew along the ditch bottom, where their roots were found to penetrate deep into the 'natural' subsoil below the ditch itself.

The primary deposits also produced a large quantity of animal bone in excellent condition. On the whole the bone from these deposits was large: there were numerous cattle ribs and long bones, the latter often carrying evidence for 'spiral fracture', indicating that they had been broken while still fresh. These deposits also contained small heaps of animal bone (usually sheep) which had been defleshed before deposition, and which might represent the remains of individual meals.

The animal bone is being studied by Miranda Armour-Chelu in conjunction with that from the equally well preserved Late Neolithic (Grooved Ware) site at Westray, Orkney. This comparative study should be particularly informative. Turning to artifacts, the primary ditch deposits produced a large quantity of pottery, much of it decorated (see Pryor and Kinnes 1982, FIG 2) and all of it demonstrably of Mildenhall style. The repertoire of forms and decorative motifs seems, on casual inspection, to be relatively limited; however we did recover the sherds of a large, decorated storage jar of height and diameter c 500mm. This is possibly the earliest example of a storage jar yet found in the British Isles. Rather surprisingly, however, the primary deposits produced very few flint tools or by-products. Secondary ditch deposits lay above the primary infilling and probably derived from the topsoil on either side of the ditch. Finds from these more slowly-

accumulated levels were very different from the more 'rapid' fills of the lower ditch. They did not include wood, and indeed may never have contained much in the way of organic material. Pottery was more broken-up and in some cases crushed. It also included a few later (Early Bronze Age — c 1500 BC) sherds of Beaker pottery. Unlike the primary deposits, these higher fills produced a wealth of flint tools and by-products, most of which showed signs of wear and abrasion; they also produced fragments of polished stone axes which originated from a number of sources in the Highland Zone, including (on macroscopic inspection) Langdale, Cumbria (Group VI). All polished stone axe fragments showed extreme signs of wear and were probably rejected as useless.

The ditch deposits show an interesting split between primary (*in situ*) and derived (secondary or residual) original sources. Patterning is less evident in the higher infilling, but it is probably there, nonetheless and may well reflect activities taking place around the inner brink (a Fen term meaning the extreme edge of a dyke) of the ditch. The primary deposits show clear patterning in the distribution of material from within them: thus wood debris shows evidence for woodworking in at least one location (where five wood chips can be joined together to form the 'negative' impression of a stake's pointed tip); rods and rod rejects are found in other locations, but roots, larger roundwood and split pieces occur elsewhere. These deposits probably derive from a number of places both in and around the ditch. Similarly, bone finds show distinct clusters, not only in the 'heap' (?meal) deposits, but in the generalised 'background' spread — one area, for example produced about 40 cattle ribs spread along about 10m of ditch. Isolated human bones were also found in the secondary levels, apparently mixed in with other derived domestic rubbish. Pottery, too, seemed to occur in vague clusters, most of which seem to have been thrown into the ditch from the interior. Sherds were large, thanks to the soft cushioning mud of the primary deposits. Our analysis of these finds must not forget their mutual relationships: it would be a great mistake, for example, to study the pottery or wood *in vacuo*, without reference to the animal bone or flintwork. Moreover, we must try to quantify the extent to which the material has been moved or sorted by water action, burrowing

animals, man, and so on.

All of our actions are governed to an extent by our personal history, upbringing and by wider, social constraints. As such it is often difficult to decide where personal or social preferences taboos and idiosyncrasies end, and where 'ritual' begins. Having said that, the primary deposits did include quite clear evidence for behaviour in which symbolism of some sort must have played a very important role. Deposits of this kind are perhaps represented by the animal bone heaps discussed above and by certain somewhat strange deposits near the ditch terminals: the southerly terminal, for instance was marked in its second stage by a complete Mildenhall bowl, resting on birch bark, directly on the ditch bottom. A few centimetres away lay a confined heap of lamb bones (largely complete, but missing skull and feet). At the other end of the ditch, again at the centre of the butt-end we uncovered a neat, probably bound-up, heap of defleshed pig ribs.

Turning briefly to the interior, we were able to prove that the old topsoil was intact beneath the later alluvium (deposited from Late Iron Age times until 1953). It included quantities of very finely crushed pottery and charcoal and over a thousand flints. Postholes, gullies and a thin floor lay immediately inside the only causeway we were able to reveal. The floor contained about 30-40 flints per square metre of surface. This building was probably 'domestic', on the meagre evidence available. Elsewhere there was evidence for a deliberate animal (*Bos*) cremation and two pits were found containing Grooved Ware sherds, flints and numerous animal bones — perhaps another apparently domestic deposit given heightened symbolic significance. These latter pits are clearly later than the rest of the monument and are probably associated with the Maxey cursus which passes alongside the enclosure, immediately to the west (Pryor and Kinnes 1982, postscript).

What general conclusions may we draw from this mass of data? First, there are no reasons to doubt our original assertions that the site was occupied seasonally, in summer (Pryor and Kinnes 1982). Put simply, the site would have been too wet in wintertime. The thick accumulation of trampled domestic debris, both on the interior surface and from ditch secondary deposits argues for settlement on the site, perhaps for several months at a time. The site might be regarded,

therefore, as a concentrated, nucleated, settlement, being confined physically and symbolically by an encircling ditch and old watercourse. This barrier may have been reinforced by social and psychological forces — traditional hostility with neighbouring groups, water taboos etc — and by physical means which have left no archaeological trace — trees, hedges etc. This bounded, nucleated settlement contrasts strikingly with what little we know about contemporary earlier Neolithic settlement in the region, which seems to have been based on physically isolated single family settlements. I must stress, however, that the data on the dispersed settlement is poor and that apparent physical isolation often hides strong social or kinship bonds (Pryor 1980, 178-80). At all levels, there is good evidence for ceremonial or ritual activity at Etton — what we must do now is decide to what extent this is unusual: perhaps what we are seeing is the normal symbolic behaviour that may be found in any human community, ancient or modern.

I finish with a question: to what extent, if any, is Etton (and other small, lowland causewayed enclosures) special? The Daily Round seems to have been given heightened symbolic attention in certain areas of primary ditch deposit, but should the presence of these deposits necessarily turn the site into an archaeological 'ritual monument'? If our thoughts on the role of symbolism and personal, family and social idiosyncrasy or history in our daily tasks be accepted — albeit only in part — then the solution of this problem may prove to be irrelevant. Answers can be very unenlightening — is it not time we started to dig for questions?

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