

A Bronze Age ring ditch at Earls Barton quarry, Northamptonshire

by

CHRISTOPHER JONES AND ANDY CHAPMAN

SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was carried out at the southern extension at Earls Barton Quarry. A ring ditch enclosure, 10m in diameter, lay on a gravel island between two palaeochannels. It is dated to the Early Bronze Age by food vessel sherds from the ditch, suggesting that this was a funerary monument forming an outlier to the well known Grendon complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments. An undated cremation deposit to the east of the palaeochannel may have been directly related to the adjacent Grendon barrows. A pit excavated in the evaluation may have dated to the Iron Age. A medieval track was also recorded.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology at Earls Barton Quarry for Hanson Aggregates in advance of extending the quarry into a single field, with an area of 7.6ha, lying adjacent to their Grendon Lakes gravel pit complex (Fig 1; NGR SP 8700 6165).

The application area lay immediately west of the extensive Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary complex at Grendon (Fig 2), which is of national importance and forms a prehistoric landscape comparable to that investigated in the Raunds Area Project further downstream. Iron Age and Roman remains have also been discovered in the same area. With the potential for the discovery of further prehistoric and Roman remains, geophysical survey and trial trenching was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology in November 2001 (Carlyle and Morris 2002). The geophysical survey recorded several low level magnetic anomalies of potential archaeological determination, provisionally interpreted as forming possible pits, linear ditches and ring ditches, together with a series

of geological features, probably palaeochannels. The trial trenching found no evidence for the possible pits and ditches as the anomalies all related to land drainage systems and other modern activity on top of deep alluvial clays, with natural gravel often at a depth of up to 2.0m. Due to the depth of burial and the consequent flooding and collapse of the trench sides, the trial trenching was curtailed for health and safety reasons. However, at the centre of the area, where the alluvium was less deep, there was a buried soil horizon containing a single sherd of prehistoric pottery overlying a small pit.

Given the limited results of the trial trenching, Northamptonshire County Council Historic Environmental Team (NCCCHET) considered that a watching brief would be the most suitable response for identifying any further archaeological deposits within the development area. Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by Hanson Aggregates to carry out the watching brief, working to a specification approved by NCCCHET, and the work was carried out in two separate phases in 2003 and 2004.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site is situated on the floodplain of the River Nene at approximately 45m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology comprises a sequence of alluvial deposits (alluvium over sand and gravel), overlying Upper Lias Clay (BGS 1974). The land was used previously for arable agriculture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fieldwork was carried out by Chris Jones under the management of Steve Parry. The report was prepared by Chris Jones with additions and editing by Andy Chapman, the illustrations are by Jacqueline Harding and Andy Chapman.

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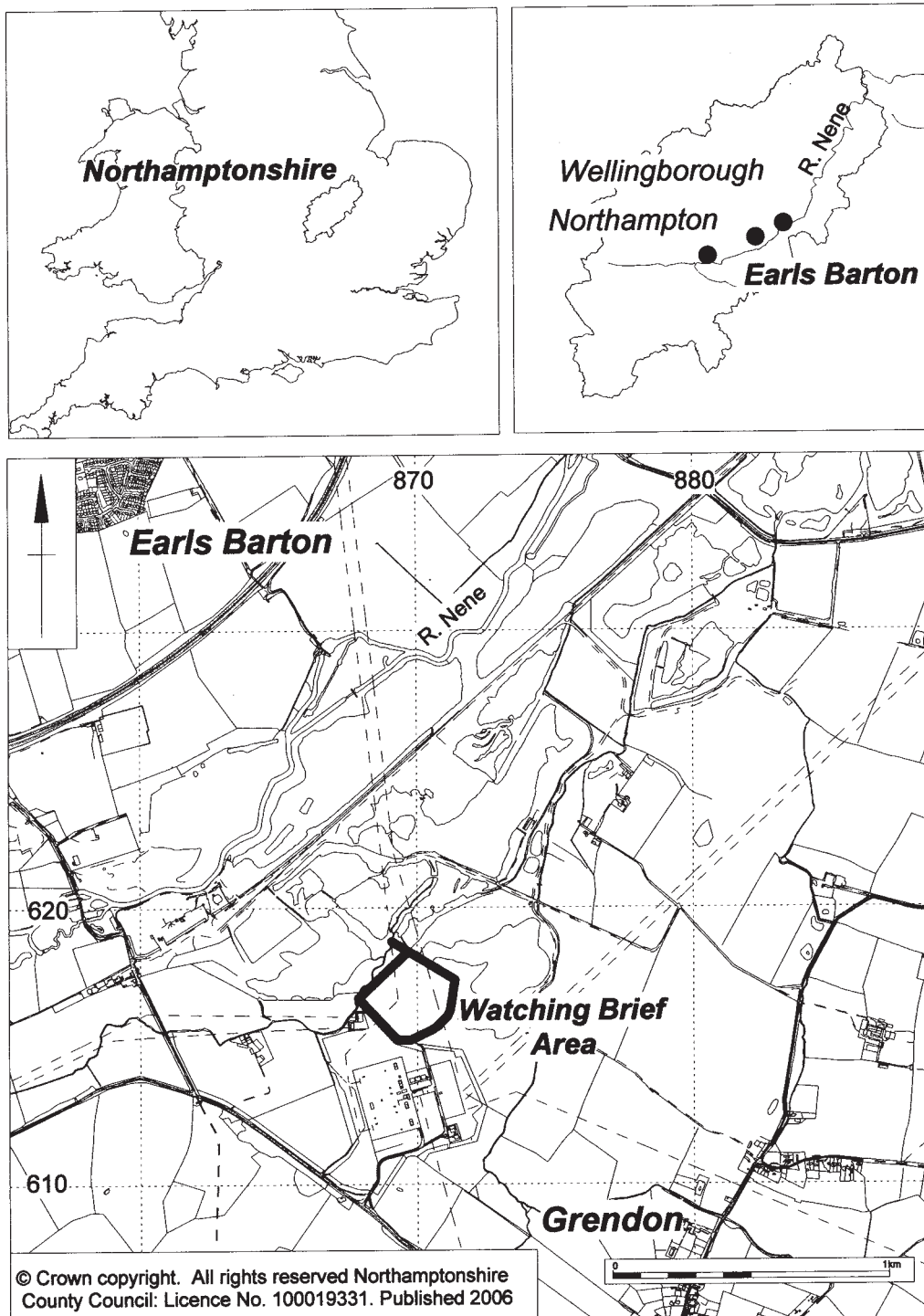


Fig 1 The location of the Earls Barton Quarry extension

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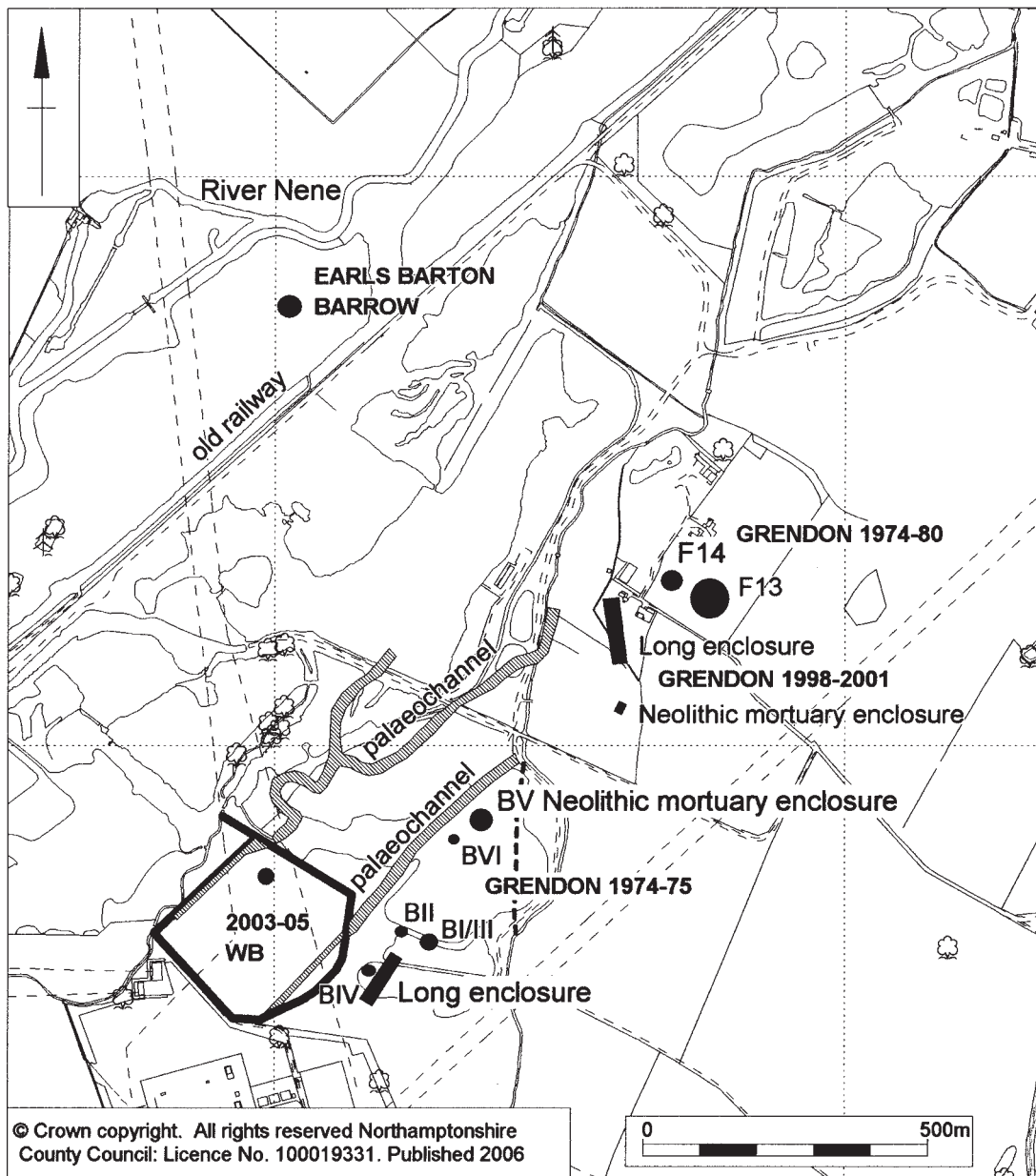


Fig 2 Previously excavated prehistoric monuments at Grendon

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

The new quarry extension lay in an area of archaeological interest adjacent to the important Grendon complex of prehistoric funerary monuments,

which were discovered by aerial photographic survey in the 1960s (Hollowell 1971). A group of monuments immediately adjacent to the present site, comprising a Neolithic mortuary enclosure, a possible long enclosure (SMR Monument No

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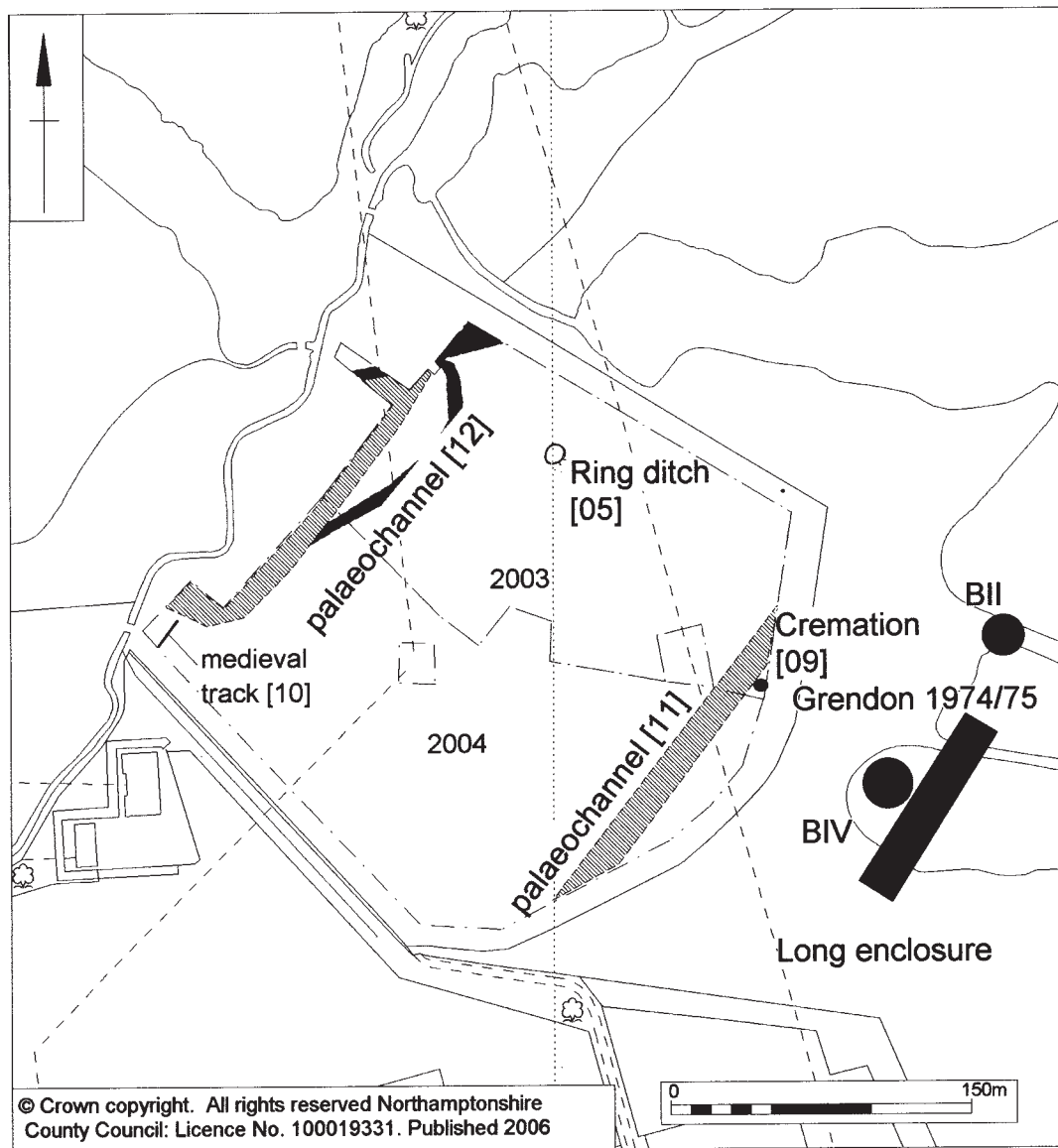


Fig 3 The watching brief of 2003-05

3550), and six Bronze Age ring ditches (Fig 2, BI-BVI), was excavated in the mid-1970s (Gibson and McCormick 1985). Later evidence included a system of rectangular Iron Age enclosures, a Roman ditched enclosure and pottery kiln and a section of a minor Roman road. The north-south course of a palaeochannel was also plotted between

the prehistoric monument complex and the quarry site.

Rescue excavations carried out during gravel extraction between 1974 and 1980 investigated a further complex of Bronze Age ring ditches 0.8km to the north-east (Jackson 1995; SMR Monument No 3728) (Fig 2, F13 & F14). More distant monuments

A BRONZE AGE RING DITCH AT EARLS BARTON QUARRY, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

include a single Bronze Age bell barrow, located approximately 1km to the north of the application site, excavated in 1969 (Jackson 1984; SMR Monument No 3547 and 3548) (Fig 2, Earls Barton barrow).

More recent work in 1998 and 2001 in advance of gravel extraction on the area between the previously investigated barrow groups has added further Neolithic monuments to the group, with the discovery of a double-ditched rectangular mortuary enclosure and a further long enclosure (Last 2005) (Fig 2, Grendon 1998-2001).

THE EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

The modern topsoil and subsoil deposits were removed by a mechanical excavator, fitted with a toothless ditching bucket, to reveal significant archaeological remains or, where these were absent, the natural gravels. This work was carried out at all times under archaeological supervision. Monitoring of the programme of fieldwork was carried out by Myk Flitcroft, Northamptonshire County Council Historic Environment Team.

The works were carried out in two stages, the northern half of the area was undertaken in 2003 and the southern half in 2004 (Fig 3). In 2003 at the northern end of the site, the topsoil was removed with a bulldozer blade and the overburden was stripped using a 360° tracked mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision. Mechanical excavation stopped at the top of archaeological deposits or at the natural gravel if no archaeology was encountered. The southern half of the area was stripped in 2004 using the same methodology.

THE PALAEOCHANNELS AND THE ALLUVIUM

Palaeochannels flanked the western [12] and eastern [11] margins of the investigated area, and both had also previously been recorded further to the north (Figs 2 and 3). There was no further investigation of these channels. The ground between formed a gravel island, but the records of depth of burial from the evaluation trenches show that across most of the area natural gravel lay at a depth of 1.0-2.0m as a result of the accumulation of a considerable depth of the alluvial clays (Carlyle and Morris 2002). Most of the area was therefore former river margin and is unlikely to have been utilised for occupation or monument building at any time in the past. The accumulation of these deposits along the Nene valley has recently been discussed in relation to work further north at Stanwick Quarry (Chapman 2004).

Across a small area centrally between the palaeochannels the gravel was higher, with no more than 0.5m of overlying alluvium.

In trial trenching a buried soil over a small pit lay within this area, and to the north there was the ring ditch located in the watching brief.

THE BRONZE AGE RING DITCH

The Bronze Age ring ditch was oval in plan, measuring 10.5m by 9.0m, with the long axis aligned north-east to south-west, broadly comparable to the general alignment of both the adjacent palaeochannels and of the Grendon monument complex (Figs 3 and 4). There was a narrow entrance, 0.9m wide, at the southernmost point of the circuit. The ditch was 700mm wide and 170mm deep, with a dark brown clay silty sand loam fill with small subangular pebbles and charcoals fragments. Sherds from a single decorated food vessel date the use of the ring ditch to the early Bronze Age (Plate 1). There were no internal or external features.

THE CREMATION DEPOSIT

Immediately to the east of the eastern palaeochannel, there was a small shallow circular pit [09], 400mm in diameter by 100mm deep, with steep sides down to a flat base (Fig 3). The fill was of light grey silty clay containing some burnt bone and charcoal flecks. This appears to be a truncated cremation deposit, but too little remained for analysis.

PREHISTORIC PIT AND SOIL HORIZON

In trench 13 of the evaluation, which lay close to the centre of the site in the southern half of the field, the alluvial clay was only 0.5m thick (Carlyle and Morris 2002). Beneath this there was an area of buried soil, up to 0.25m thick, perhaps surviving within a shallow cut feature, comprising a crumbly mid greyish brown silty clay with orangey brown mottles and frequent gravel pebbles. Nearby, there was a roughly circular pit, 0.6m in diameter, filled with black silty clay and containing small black, fire-cracked cobbles and charcoal flecks. A single small sherd of prehistoric pottery, with crushed flint inclusions, from the buried soil is not specifically diagnostic, but this together with the pit containing fire-cracked cobbles seems most likely to be indicative of an Iron Age date. It could be broadly contemporary with an Iron Age enclosure containing a roundhouse that lay to the immediate east of the palaeochannel within the area of the southernmost Grendon barrows (Jackson 1985, fig 8).

THE MEDIEVAL TRACK

To the south-west there was a 1.0m wide track, comprising flat laid large limestone fragments, 200mm deep, running north-east south-west. Only a 20m length was exposed and the north-east end faded out as it met palaeochannel [12].

THE BRONZE AGE POTTERY

by Andy Chapman

The fill of the ring ditch contained four sherds, weighing 96g, from a single vessel. They comprise a rim sherd and three plain

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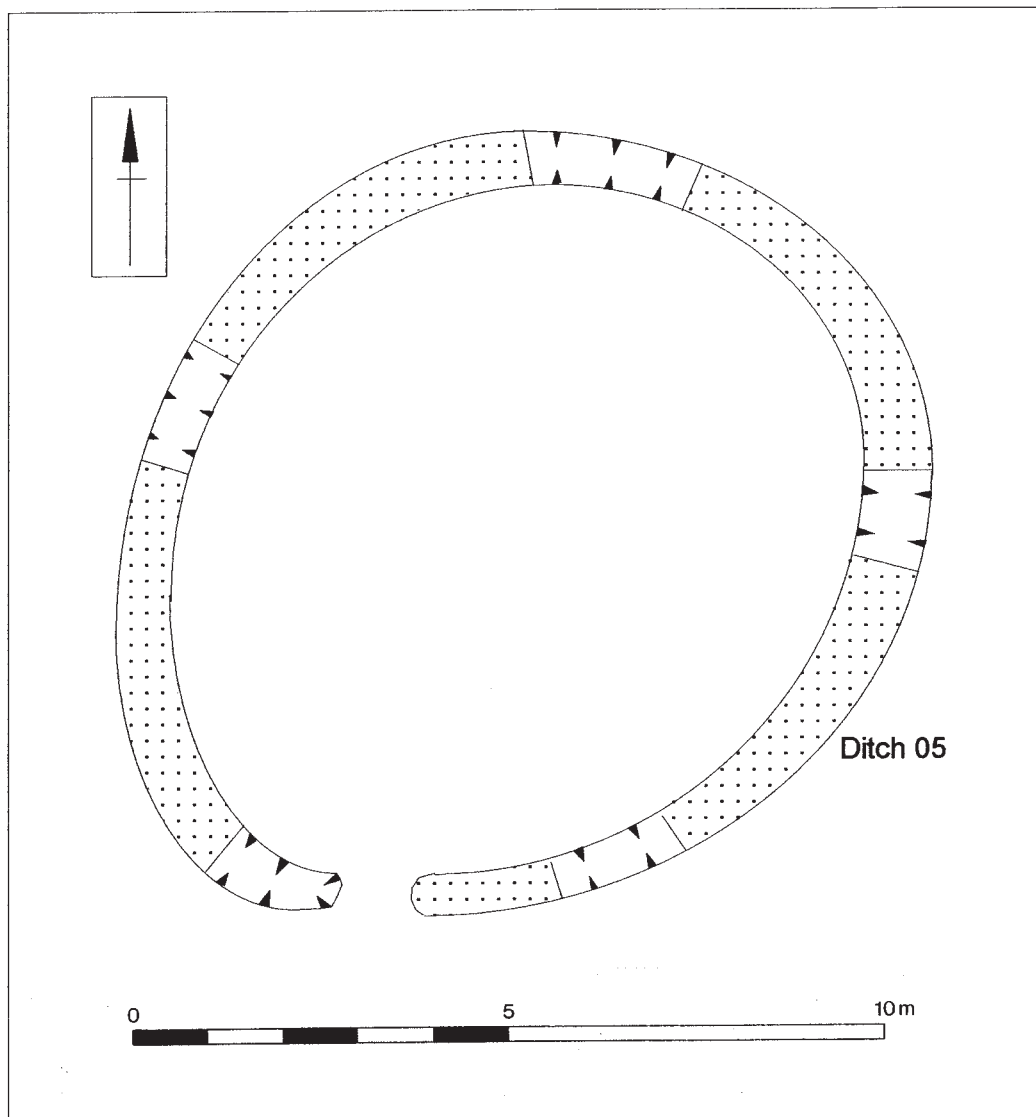


Fig 4: The Bronze Age ring ditch

body sherds from lower on the vessel. The fabric is 10mm thick, contains no coarse mineral inclusions, and has a reduced grey core and inner surface with an oxidised, brown outer surface.

The vessel is a bowl form, c250mm in diameter, with an internally chamfered rim, and it has impressed, twisted cord decoration at least on the upper body (Plate 1). There is a single encircling line of twisted cord decoration below the rim, and below this there appears to have been a series of rectangular panels framed by vertical lines of twisted cord decoration and containing chevrons also filled with oblique twisted cord

decoration. The chamfered rim is decorated with short, oblique lines of twisted cord impressions.

This vessel is in the food vessel tradition and is therefore of early Bronze Age date, the early second millennium BC, and provides a date for the usage of the small ring ditch monument. These vessels are also most commonly found in association with funerary deposits (Gibson and Woods 1997, 158-164), both inhumations and cremations, and its presence here would suggest that the ring ditch may well have had a funerary function for which all other traces have been lost.

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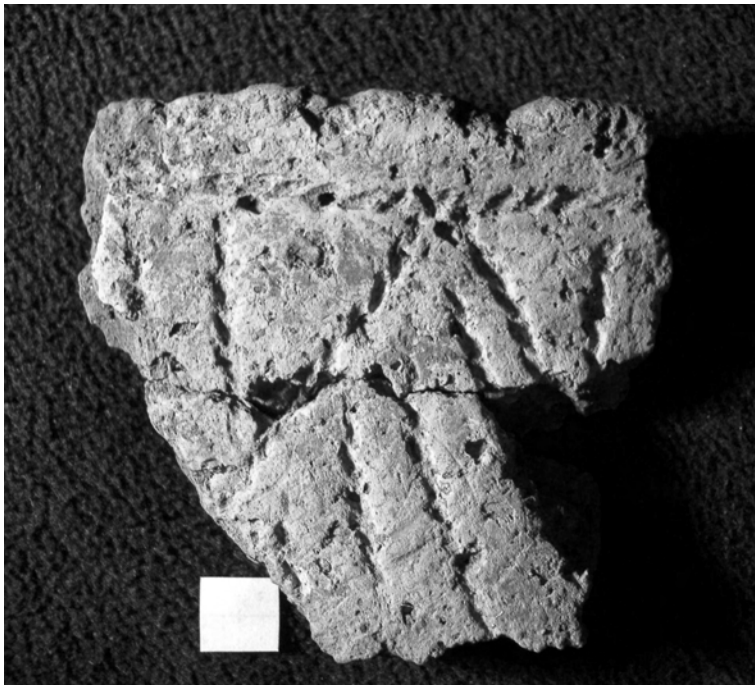


Plate 1 Food vessel sherd, showing twisted cord decoration (scale 10mm)

DISCUSSION

The small ring ditch has been dated to the early Bronze Age by the food vessel sherds from the ditch, and further food vessels have previously been recovered from the barrows 1km to the north (Thompson 1995). It is therefore evidently contemporary with parts of the Grendon complex, and may be regarded as an outlier at the south-western margin of the larger group. The presence of a palaeochannel to the east does suggest that it was physically separate from the adjacent barrows, standing isolated on its gravel island.

The form of the monument is uncertain. At only 10m in diameter it could be seen as a small round barrow, but a further possibility is that such small circular monuments may have been ditched funerary enclosures. The break in the ditch to the south may support this suggestion, although the ditch had evidently been truncated and is so shallow that it cannot be certain that this was more than a slightly shallower length of ditch.

A number of similar small ring ditches have been investigated further north along the Nene valley within the similarly large and extensive monument complex at Raunds, Stanwick and Irthlingborough

investigated as part of the Raunds Area Project. At West Cotton, Raunds there were two small ring ditches in association with a large Beaker barrow (Harding and Healy in press) while in Stanwick Quarry a 10m diameter ring ditch lay within 90m of a large unexcavated round barrow (Chapman 2004). In both instances in the Raunds area the small ring ditches can be seen as satellite monuments, while at Earls Barton the ring ditch appears to stand in isolation. In addition, the Earls Barton ring ditch appears to have stood on a small dry land area, surrounded by river margins to both the east and west, and this was similar to the situation at Stanwick quarry, where the similarly small ring ditch also stood near the old river margin (Chapman 2004).

The isolated cremation deposit is undated, but is most likely to be Bronze Age. It lay immediately adjacent to a palaeochannel and within 70m of one of the round barrows excavated in 1974/75 (Fig 3, barrow IV). It can therefore be seen as an outlier to the southern Grendon barrow group, but whether at a distance of 70m it can be regarded as a true satellite burial is open to question. At the Brackmills Link Road, Northampton a satellite cremation was found at a distance of 27m from a round barrow (Chapman

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2003, 5-9). As was concluded with the Brackmills site, these distant isolated burials emphasise the importance of the broader funerary area, and the need to examine extensive areas around individual monuments if the full story of their usage and respect is to be understood.

The palaeochannel systems, which are all courses of a tributary stream that joins the River Nene further to the north, illustrate the more complex pattern of the former water courses in comparison to the modern system, which had been reduced to two major channels. The pattern in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages would have been a braided system comprising multiple small channels, with a series of gravel islands between them on which the monuments were constructed. The eastern channel would have separated the small ring ditch from the southern end of the main Grendon complex. However, this channel evidently continued northward (Jackson 1995, fig 10), with the south-west to north-east monument alignment running parallel to the palaeochannel, which would have cut off the southern Grendon monuments from the group further to the north.

The western palaeochannel also appears to be the southern part of a channel investigated further to the north, where dated pollen samples have shown the accumulation of organic deposits within the channel spanning the Neolithic and Bronze Ages and running through to the early Iron Age (Last 2005, 346-349).

Over the two year period in which the watching brief was undertaken only a single ditched enclosure, set on a gravel island between two palaeochannels, and the truncated remnants of a cremation deposit was recorded. However, when added to the broader context of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity in the surrounding areas, as known from the series of excavations beginning in the 1960s (Jackson 1984, Gibson & McCormick 1985, Jackson 1995 and Last 2005) this site has made a further small contribution to that emerging picture of the early origins and development of the Nene valley landscape in terms of the extent and diversity of the Neolithic and Bronze Age monument types within one of the major prehistoric complexes within the valley. The group is inevitably less well known than it should be as a result of the piecemeal investigation that has now spanned several decades. However, the publication of the most recent results in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* has gone some way towards putting Grendon on the national archaeological map (Last 2005).

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