



# NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

## Towards a new prehistory

by

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### SUMMARY

*The history of the excavation of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in Northamptonshire is reviewed. Recent excavations are then set within the growing understanding of Neolithic and Bronze Age chronologies on a national level, which is emerging from new excavations and new approaches to radiocarbon dating. Northamptonshire is shown to be making a continuing, if relatively small, contribution to this process through both commercial archaeology and the Portable Antiquities Scheme.*

### NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE EXCAVATIONS IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

#### TRADITIONAL VIEWS

If you wanted to build a reputation working in Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology, Northamptonshire would not be at the top of your list of prime locations favourable for research. Having said that, this essay sets the scene for a series of articles describing various pieces of recent, and some not so recent fieldwork that have added new knowledge to our picture of Neolithic and Bronze Age Northamptonshire, with one of the new sites, at Banbury Lane, Northampton, being of national importance. The short summary of this theme would be: there is little visible but still much to be discovered, and Northamptonshire is making its contribution towards developing a new understanding of our prehistory, both locally and nationally.

An early statement of our knowledge of Neolithic and Bronze Age Northamptonshire was produced in 1917 by T J George, the curator of Northampton Museum. This account contained an excellent summary of recovered finds. George noted the presence of quantities of Neolithic flint around the Duston area west of Northampton, and also 'in the fields between Hunsbury Camp and the river' (George 1917, 12), presumably the site of the Briar Hill Neolithic causewayed enclosure, which was to be rediscovered over sixty years later when it appeared on an aerial photograph in 1972 (Bamford 1985, 1) (Fig 1). George then went on to note the recovery of Bronze Age metalwork from more than twenty locations and Bronze Age pottery in more than forty locations around the county.

For a county that has seen centuries of arable exploitation over much of its landscape and little intense antiquarian interest, these totals could have been seen as the tip of the iceberg, and encouraging signs that there was perhaps much that was missing and still to be discovered.

However, the comparison was made with the southern downlands, with their centuries of pastoral farming, 'those districts whose surfaces are still dotted with burial places of this age, such as Dorset, where, standing on Maiden Castle, the writer has counted some scores of round barrows,' (George 1917, 15). This was compared to Northamptonshire's 'somewhat scanty remains' and it was concluded that Northamptonshire, and other midland counties, were sparsely populated in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. The surviving earthworks of the Iron Age hillforts, such as Hunsbury, Northampton and Borough Hill, Daventry, only served to demonstrate how late it was before population levels had increased significantly.

Discoveries during the first half of the 20th century only strengthened this picture, and the midland counties were seen as a prehistoric vacuum, where a few people traversing the Jurassic ridge while heading elsewhere, a prehistoric precursor of motorists on the M1, occasionally had the misfortune to die on the journey and end up being buried in Northamptonshire, which accounted for those sparse local finds.

#### THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES

This early negative picture has been rewritten since the 1950s, but getting the message across on a popular level, and even academically, remains an uphill battle. Wessex is still the favoured location for much University-based research, and this becomes self fulfilling in maintaining the dominance of Wessex as the centre of the action in Neolithic and Bronze Age England, if not the whole of Britain.

The depth and breadth of the story of Midlands prehistory started to emerge in the 1950s as post-war aerial photography revealed a lost and unsuspected world of flattened and buried round barrows and other early monuments, as well as Iron Age and Roman settlements, strewn along the gravels of the Midland river valleys. These discoveries coincided with the post-war building boom, so as this lost world was being revealed it was simultaneously under threat of widespread destruction from gravel extraction. This was highlighted in 1960 when the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments published a compendium of aerial photographs, *A Matter of Time*, to show both the potential and the threat (RCHME 1960). In Northamptonshire, Richard Hollowell was a local pioneer of aerial photographic survey, and in 1971 an entire issue of the Bulletin of the Northamptonshire Federation of Archaeological Societies (6, 1971), parent to the current journal, was devoted to the results of his previous 15 years of survey work along the upper Nene valley.

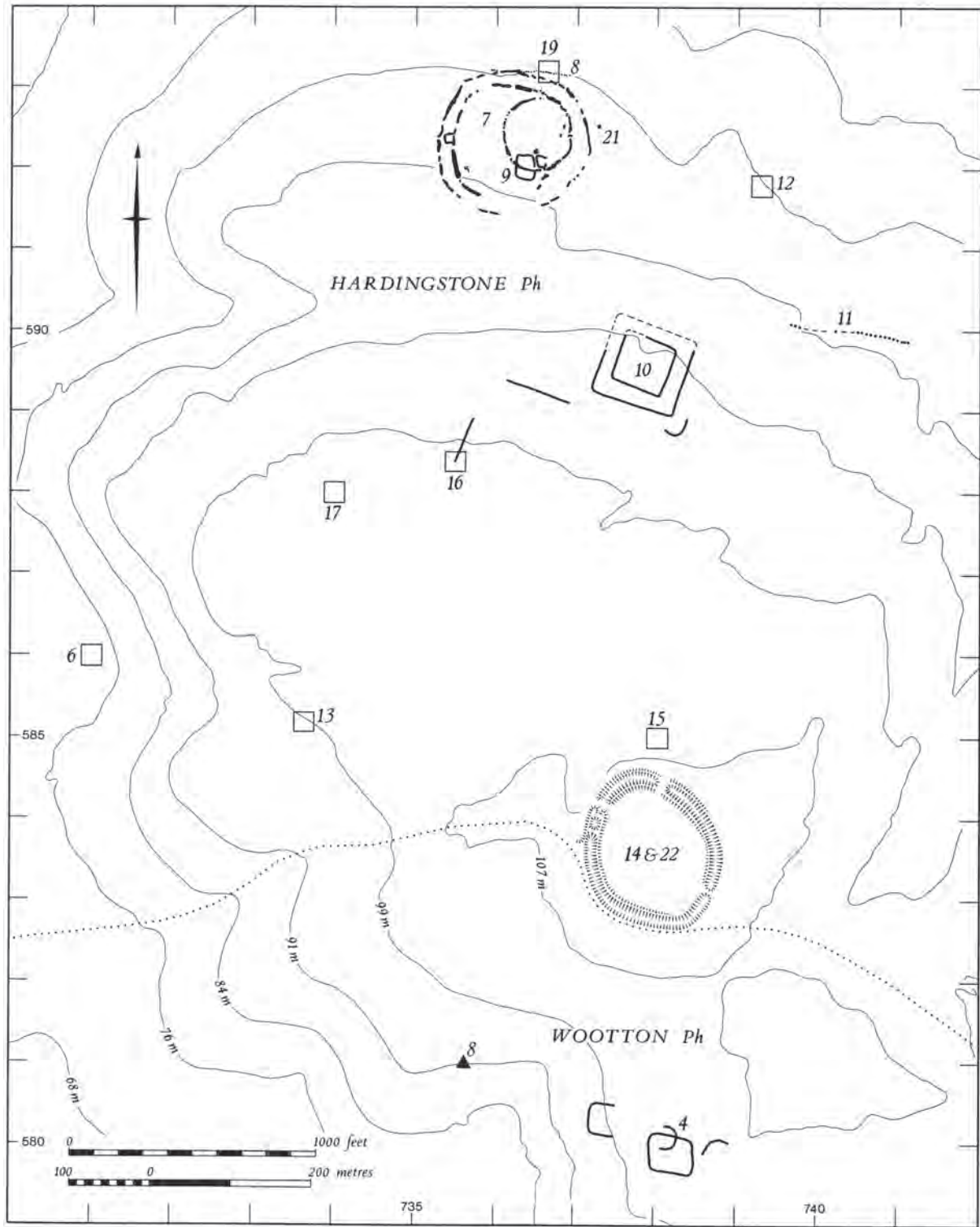


Fig 1 Briar Hill and Hunsbury, Northampton (from RCHME 1985, fig 3)

#### THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES

By the late 1960s a response on the ground was underway. From 1967 to 1971 Dennis Jackson was working in advance of gravel extraction at Aldwinckle, where he excavated an Early Neolithic oval barrow, a Nene-valley variation of the earthen long barrow, as well as nearby

Beaker round barrows of the Early Bronze Age (Jackson 1976 and Jackson 2010, 53-56). During the same period Dennis excavated an Early Bronze Age round barrow at Earls Barton, also in advance of gravel extraction (Jackson 1972). This barrow was perhaps the first site in the county to be radiocarbon dated, and controversially so at the time as the dates were considered to be

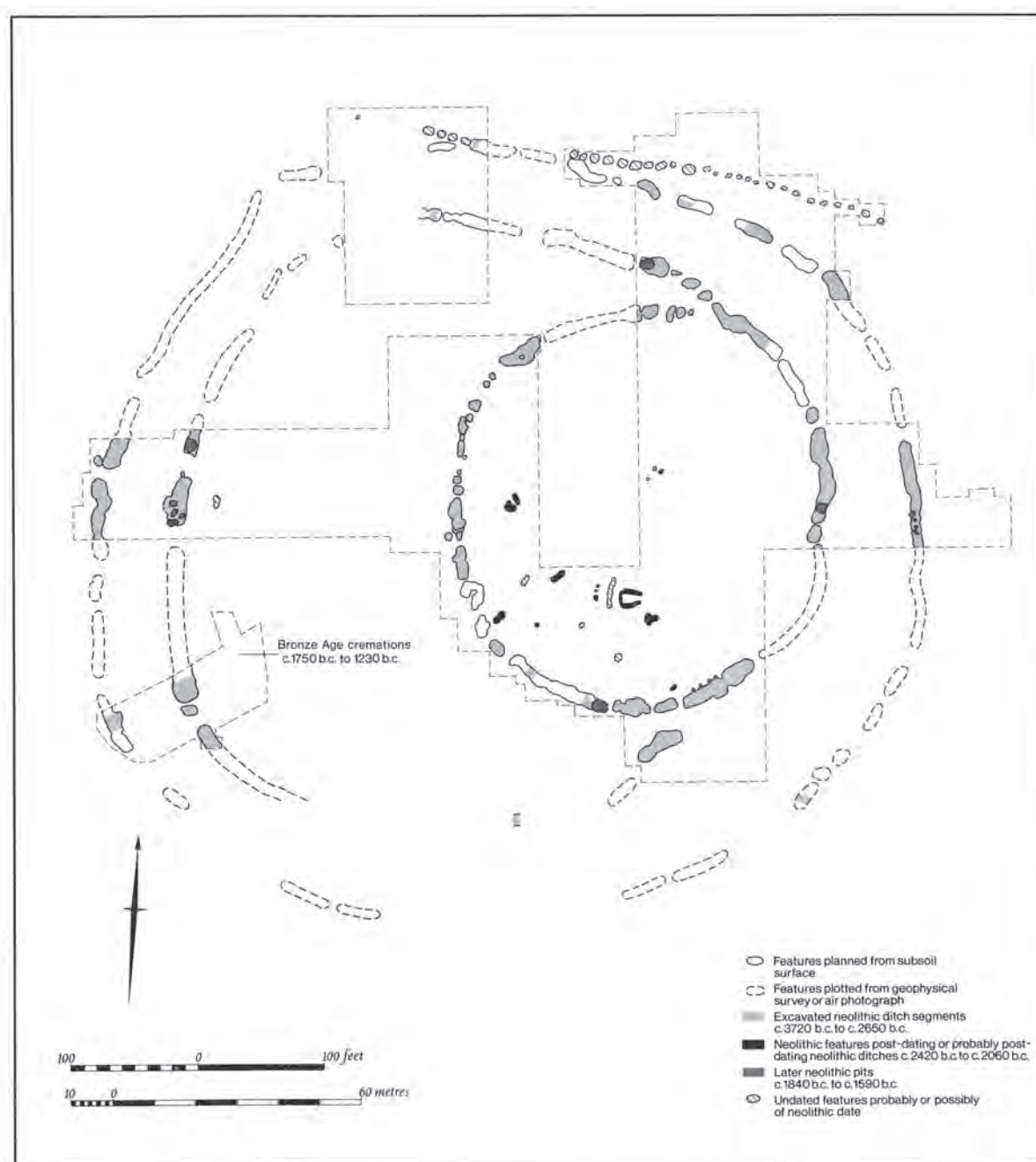


Fig 2 The Briar Hill causewayed enclosure (from RCHME 1985, fig 1)

unacceptably late, as the need for calibrating radiocarbon years to real years had not then been recognised. Dennis also excavated some disturbed Early Bronze Age burials at an ironstone quarry at Weldon in 1970, just a few miles from the Priors Hall henge monument described in one of the later reports in this volume, and it was the report on these Weldon burials that opened the very first journal volume of Northamptonshire Archaeology in 1974 (Jackson 1974).

Dennis Jackson was a freelance archaeologist, supported through grants from the then Ministry of Works, which became the Department of the Environment and later the present day English Heritage. However, the recognition of

the scale of loss of archaeological sites occurring at this time eventually led to the creation of archaeological units within local authorities, who could respond to these threats on a more systematic basis. With the 1970s redevelopment of Northampton, the Northampton Development Corporation Archaeological Unit launched what became four winter seasons of excavation, from 1974 to 1978, at the Briar Hill Neolithic causewayed enclosure, which had been recognised by aerial photography and was subject to an early geophysical survey (Bamford 1985) (Fig 2). This was the first extensive open area excavation of a causewayed enclosure in the Midlands. This excavation also brought the author to Northampton, to learn hard

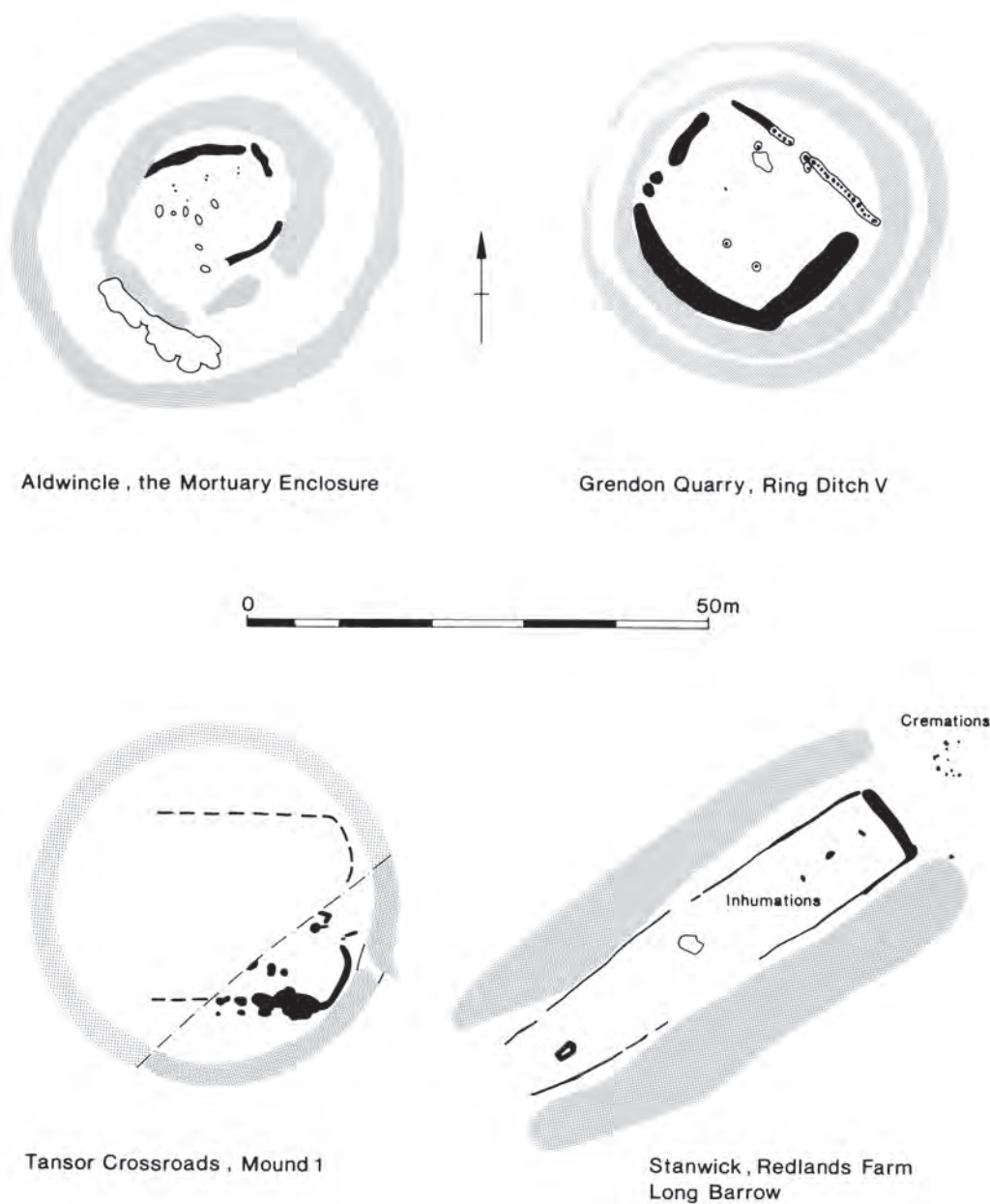


Fig 3 The Neolithic oval barrows and the Redlands Farm long barrow (from Chapman 1997, fig 5)

lessons on feature recognition on the difficult Northampton Sand and Ironstone geology, separating archaeology from variations in the natural and the ditch-like glacial ice-wedges forming complex polygonal patterns amongst the real ditches.

At the same time as the Briar Hill excavation another Early Neolithic oval barrow, this one including a massive timber facade, was subject to rescue excavation in 1974-75, in advance of gravel extraction at Grendon, along with much of the surrounding Bronze Age barrow group; one of the sites that had been recorded from the air by Richard Hollowell (Gibson and McCormick 1985). It was to be another twenty years before a further example, at Tansor crossroads, was partially excavated in the early

years of commercial archaeology by Andy Chapman in 1995 (Chapman 1997) (Fig 3), although another, and an exceptionally well-preserved example, on the outskirts of Peterborough excavated in the late 1970s, unfortunately remains unpublished.

Although already well past its sell-by date, the image of a densely wooded and sparsely populated Northamptonshire was, unfortunately, adopted by the local historian Greenall as late as 1979 in his *History of Northamptonshire*, in claiming that while Neolithic and Beaker pottery was present in quantities around Peterborough, at Fengate, it was only 'about 1800 to 1700BC' that 'there followed another wave of Bronze Age people who did penetrate the Nene Valley'. Of course, as this



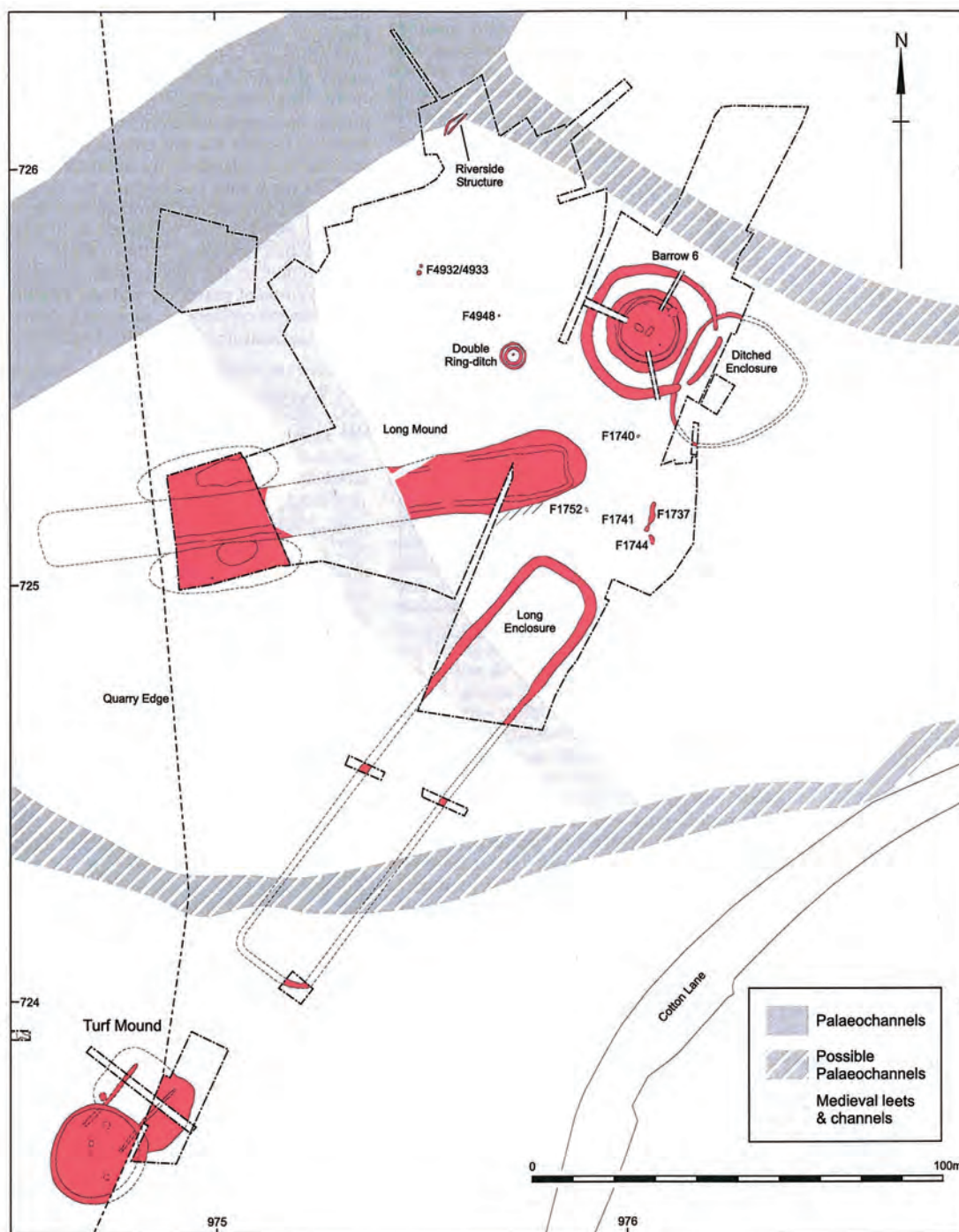


Fig 4 The prehistoric monuments beneath West Cotton medieval village (from Harding and Healy 2007, fig 1.6)

was being published the excavation of the Neolithic Briar Hill causewayed enclosure near Northampton was actually in progress, and the reprinting of this book twenty years later, with only minor changes (Greenwell 2000), has just served to maintain the currency of these long outdated views of our early history.

Another major step forward, although initially unplanned, was taken with the Raunds Area Project in the mid 1980s, initiated jointly by Northamptonshire County Council and English Heritage to examine a length

of the Nene valley under threat from the construction of the Raunds and Stanwick bypass and extensive gravel extraction. Originally, it appeared there were only a handful of round barrows along this stretch of the River Nene, and the prehistoric aspect of the project was considered of minor significance in comparison to the study of the Iron Age, Roman, Saxon and medieval landscapes. However, as a partially upstanding Neolithic earthen long mound and a triple-ditch Beaker round barrow and other monuments appeared beneath the buildings of West

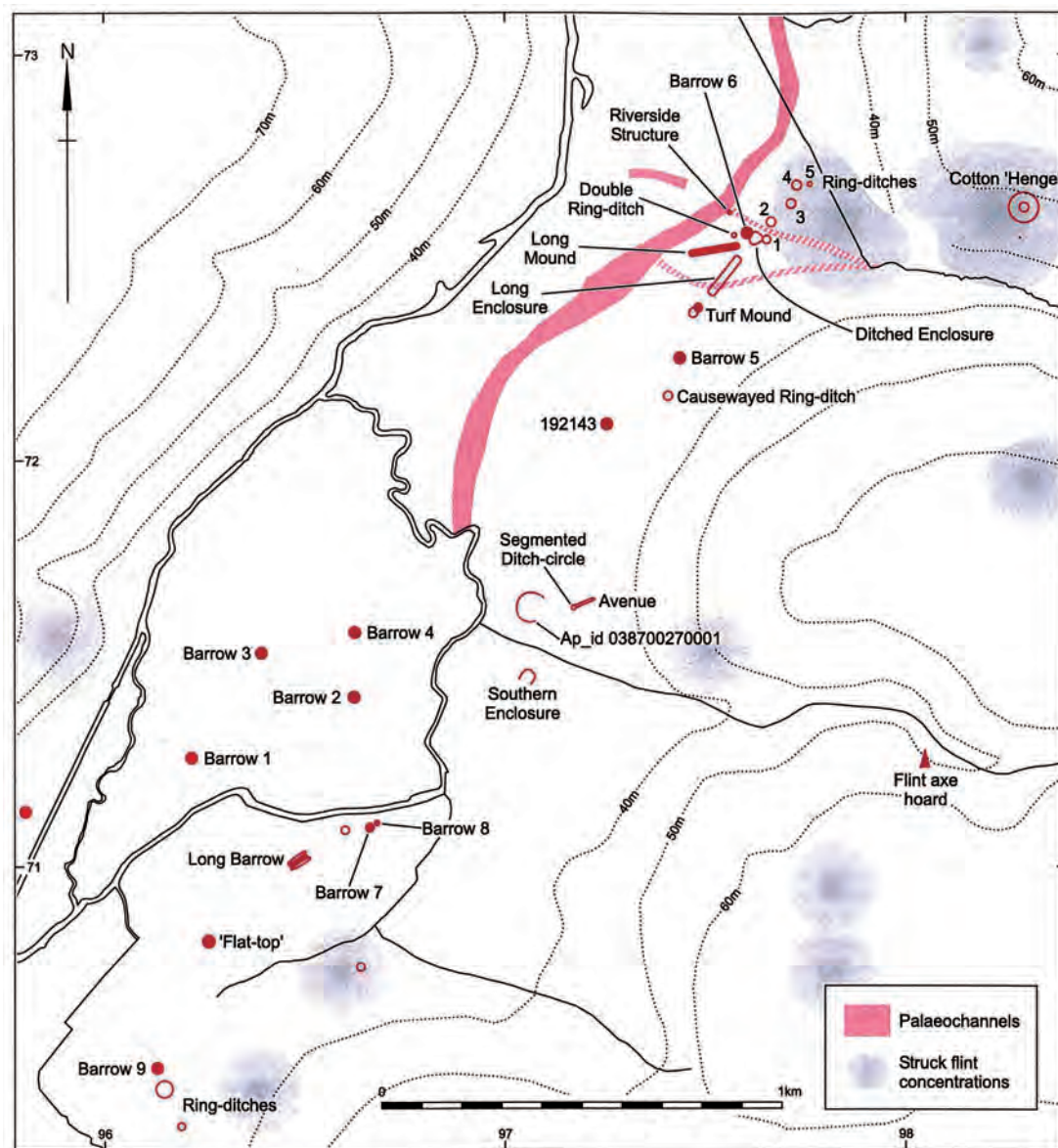


Fig 5 The prehistoric landscape of the Raunds area (from Harding and Healy 2007, fig 1.4)

Cotton medieval village (Fig 4), and two kilometres to the south a presumed round barrow became the county's only traditional Early Neolithic long barrow, this emerging and unexpected monument complex spanning the Early Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (Fig 5), added substantially to the overall project (Harding and Healy 2007 and 2011).

At the end of the 1980s Alex Gibson arranged a conference to highlight the value of the results coming from prehistoric research across central England spanning the Neolithic to Iron Ages. However, as his introduction to the published volume explained, despite the 'extensive publications and researches of local archaeological units and trusts...it is often felt that many archaeologists practising outside the region might consider a site such as an early second millennium round barrow in, for example, Leicestershire, as an exception which serves to prove the rule...that large areas of central England

constituted a prehistoric desert because of the inability to cultivate heavy clay soils (Gibson 1989, 1). It is sad that the view of so many had not really advanced since the study by George at the beginning of the 20th century, despite the accumulation of evidence to the contrary. As Alex Gibson summed it up, 'if people were dying here, they were doubtless living here too'.

The days of the independent freelance archaeologists roaming across the county, like Dennis Jackson, was brought to an end by the growth of archaeological units attached to local government through the 1970s and 1980s. For a brief period from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s Northamptonshire even had the luxury of two archaeological units, based respectively with the Northampton Development Corporation and the County Council, a factor that helped the author to continue working in the county by moving from one to the other as different projects progressed.



## THE NINETIES AND A NEW CENTURY

Through the 1980s large scale projects had been funded through the Manpower Services Commission, paying the plentiful unemployed to join archaeological work programmes. At West Cotton medieval village from the mid to late 1980s the digging team had received an extra £10 per week on top of their basic unemployment benefits.

In the 1990s the nature of the funding of archaeological fieldwork changed significantly, with the end of work programmes and the introduction of commercial archaeology, with competitive tendering and the bill falling to the developer, on the polluter pays principle. This has certainly produced a huge growth in both the number of archaeologists working in the county and the number of projects being carried out. It is also far less likely that an archaeological site of substance would be lost without record. Prior to this, sites were sometimes knowingly abandoned to the developer due to lack of resources. On the negative side, particularly since the start of the current recession in 2008, competitive tendering has become cut-throat tendering as commercial archaeologists fight each other to win jobs in order to stay in business, and this cannot be good for the quality of the archaeological product as we move forward.

The articles following this introduction all catalogue work that has been carried out from the mid 1990s, but mainly in the past five years, within commercial archaeology, plus a contribution from the Portable Antiquities Scheme. These reports cover sites such as Banbury Lane, Northampton and Priors Hall, Corby where

excavation was targeted on sites recognised as being of Bronze Age or earlier date during initial evaluation. At Wootton, Northampton, the Bronze Age element formed part of a broad landscape evaluation, and at Milton Ham and Warmington the prehistoric elements were fortuitous finds within excavations targeted on recognised sites of later periods. While we have no major large scale excavations to report, what we do have is smaller scale work filling gaps in our knowledge and painting a picture of life beyond the major monument complexes, in much the same way as Iron Age and Roman settlement excavations since the 1960s have been filling the gaps between Iron Age hillforts and between Roman towns and the major villas.

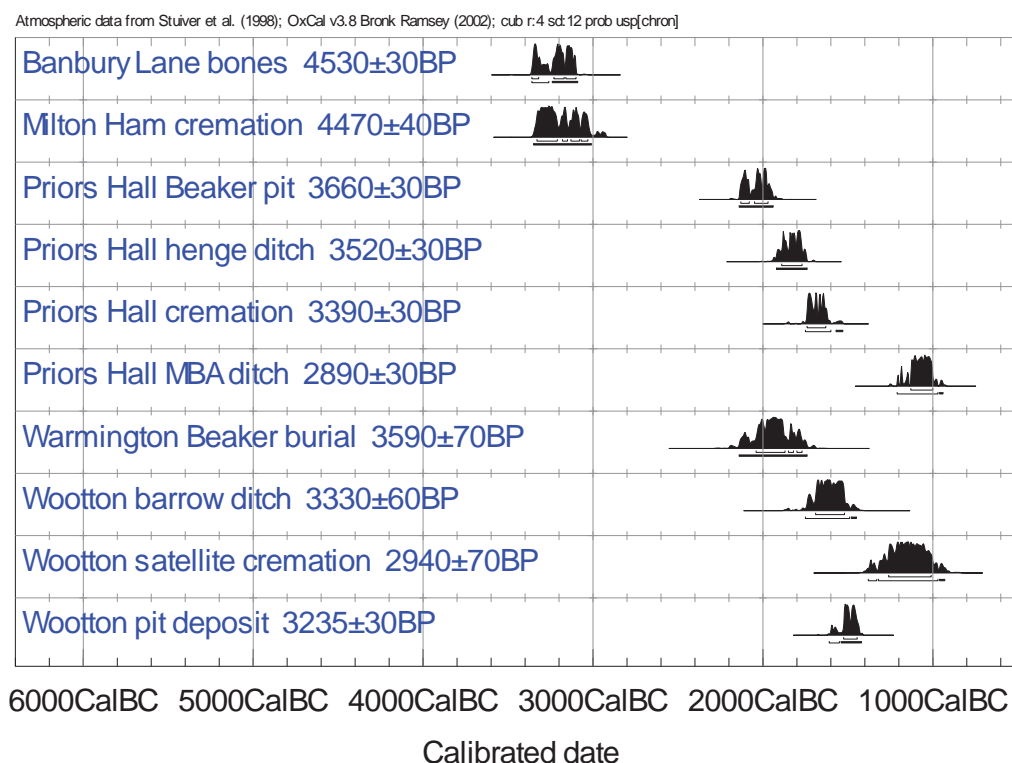
The earliest sites are Banbury Lane and Milton Ham, which fall in the Middle Neolithic (Table 1), while the others, Priors Hall, Warmington and Wootton, and span the Early to Middle Bronze Age (Table 1)

NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

It is beyond the scope of this introductory essay to produce a comprehensive overview of Neolithic and Bronze Age Northamptonshire. The intention is merely to link some of the past and present work with developing trends in current research and thinking that is beginning to rewrite our understanding of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages nationally.

Once radiocarbon dating had broadly mapped out the chronology for Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain, it

Table 1: Plot of radiocarbon dates for the sites reported in the journal



seemed that there was a lot of time into which to fit a relatively restricted repertoire of monument types, with the changes in monument form and burial rites, and associated changes in pottery styles and other material items being linked to major social changes. The tendency was therefore to spread everything quite thinly across these expanses of time, and the current author followed this approach in summarising the Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology of the county in the early 2000s for the *Archaeology of Northamptonshire* (Chapman 2004). It is also notable now that this text is remarkably vague about specific dates, setting activities within perhaps a half millennia bracket, but there was then little option to do otherwise given the sparse number of sites with a good series of radiocarbon dates and the inherent breadth of some three or more centuries within each calibrated date.

In recent years the application of Bayesian statistical modelling to large groups of radiocarbon dates has revolutionised the chronology of the Early Neolithic by examining the causewayed enclosures of England in considerable depth in the recent publication *Gathering Time*, while some of the broadly contemporary long barrows have also been subject to a similar analysis. For the first time in Neolithic studies it has become possible to refer to individual centuries, and perhaps even individual lifetimes, in reviewing the development of some monuments. This volume includes a useful review of the dating of the major Neolithic and Early Bronze sites in Northamptonshire (Whittle *et al* 2011, 293-314).

What has emerged from this work is that the development of many sites was not a process of slow steady change spread across centuries and slowly moving across the country, but that the development of different monument types commenced and spread across the country quite rapidly as successive episodes of intense activity, in which first long barrow construction and then causewayed enclosure construction was all the rage for perhaps a couple of centuries, before moving on to cursus construction and so on. As a result, long barrow chambers or mortuary houses did not receive burials from successive generations over hundreds of years as we may previously have thought, but perhaps only for a century or even less. That is not say to say that these monuments did not continue to have a role through the later centuries, as they clearly did.

#### THE EARLY NEOLITHIC (4100-3400 BC)

The Early Neolithic in England is now seen as beginning at around 4100 BC, but it was some three centuries before the earliest long barrows appeared and a further century before the advent of causewayed enclosures.

None of the sites reported in the volume fall within the Early Neolithic, but three of them; Banbury Lane, Milton Ham and Wootton, lie to the south of Northampton and in the environs of the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure. Briar Hill can therefore be seen as the focal point that attracted the later activity to this particular location. Since its excavation in the 1970s, Briar Hill had stood alone in its landscape, and with housing having covered much of the surrounding hillside, with little pre-emptive

archaeological work as the resources just were not available at the time, there seemed little prospect that a Neolithic and Bronze Age landscape associated with Briar Hill could ever emerge. However, as the zone beyond that developed in the 1970s and 1980s comes up for development, a number of discoveries are being made of sites dating to the Middle Neolithic onward.

While the triple causewayed ditches of Briar Hill had their origin in the Early Neolithic, 3800-3700 cal BC, unlike some other enclosures, Briar Hill was retained as a focal point throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age and just the nature of the activity changed.

#### THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC (3400-2900 BC)

In the Early Neolithic the creation and the maintenance of the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure was a process of pit digging, with later phases of new pits intersecting with earlier, partially silted, pits to eventually form the elongated, sausage-like, ditch segments.

By the middle Neolithic this process had ended and the usage of the enclosure comprised small internal pits and the occasional digging of pits into the existing ditches which by then were largely silted but still formed an evident earthwork.

The exciting and unique site at Banbury Lane, lying 1.5km to the south-west of Briar Hill, has been dated to the Middle Neolithic. This small circular monument with its triple ditch system contained a pit, perhaps forming an act of closure, as it seems to have blocked a narrow entrance into the inner enclosure, which contained a mass of disarticulated human bone perhaps from as many as 130 people. The story of this unique assemblage is still to be told, as in this volume we have only an interim statement of the findings. However, the deposit would seem to be a single event and therefore potentially from an event of mass death, an exceptional event that was perhaps recognised in the creation or the adaption of a monumental enclosure.

In contrast, the small cluster of cremation burials at Milton Ham, which fall within the same broad Middle Neolithic date range and lay nearly 2km to the south of Briar Hill, would seem to derive from the normal process of death, a small family cemetery perhaps. The sort of site that can only be discovered by chance: in this case because a Roman settlement later occupied the same hillside.

The Middle Neolithic is a period that is not well understood. It is now recognised that along with the abandonment of Early Neolithic monument types, there was also a decline in arable cultivation and consequent reforestation of some areas: a period of marked social recession. The cause of this may well have been an environmental downturn and Professor Emeritus Mike Ballie, a leading figure in dendochronology at Queen's University, Belfast, has given a vivid account of what he thinks the cause of the downturn was.

At the Neolithic Studies Group autumn meeting at the British Museum in November 2011 in a talk entitled, '*Anything 'odd' happen between 3300 BC and 2800 BC? Oh dear yes*', he outlined how tree ring chronologies had recorded a narrowest ring event in 3199 BC, and this

related to the beginning of two long oak chronologies, indicating a regeneration of oak forest that began in the decade following 3199 BC. This major event was also recorded in the American bristlecone pine chronology and there are contemporary anomalous sulphate levels in the Greenland ice cores. More dramatically, Mike associated this event with the breaking up of a comet, with a major impact in 3199 BC and further impacts from smaller fragments may have caused a succession of later climatic downturns: 2354BC, 1628BC, 1159BC, 208BC and AD540. He believes these events can be linked with dramatic changes in societies around the world, and not just within the British Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Such an impact may also be responsible for the plateau in the radiocarbon calibration curve within the Middle Neolithic that, unfortunately, broadens the span of all carbon dates through this period. It may be that a product of the event is preventing archaeologists from constructing the closer chronologies that might help to confirm his theory.

Could the Banbury Lane mortuary deposit be associated with the consequences of such a dramatic event?

#### THE LATE NEOLITHIC (2900-2400 BC)

In the later Neolithic Briar Hill was still a focus of activity. There were further pits excavated in the interior, but the major event was the building of a small timber

structure associated with Late Neolithic grooved ware pottery, between 2600-2400 cal BC. The deep side slots of the horseshoe-shaped structure may each have held three major timbers forming a six-post building, with an opening to the east, while a narrow and shallow slot to the west held a rear wall of lighter build (Fig 6). The size of the slots suggests the provision of large timbers that could have stood to some height. Was this a timber cove open to the east, or was it a roofed structure, with an enclosed room below and a platform above, an excarnation platform perhaps? Whatever the form, this structure can claim to be the oldest monumental free-standing timber building in Northamptonshire, following on from the simple two-post mortuary houses, as at Aldwinckle, and the solid timber facades at the Grendon enclosure and the Stanwick long barrow.

There are no known contemporary sites in the vicinity of Briar Hill, but at the other end of the county, at Priors Hall a classic henge monument, with a single entrance and an external bank has recently been excavated. This site lay on high ground just below the watershed, sitting on the banks of the Willow Brook. To the east the brook flows into the Nene, and there is a cluster of Neolithic sites in this area, including the Southwick causewayed enclosure, the Tansor mortuary enclosure and another Neolithic site associated with burial on the county border at Elton. These sites show an association with water that is a common theme for henge monuments.

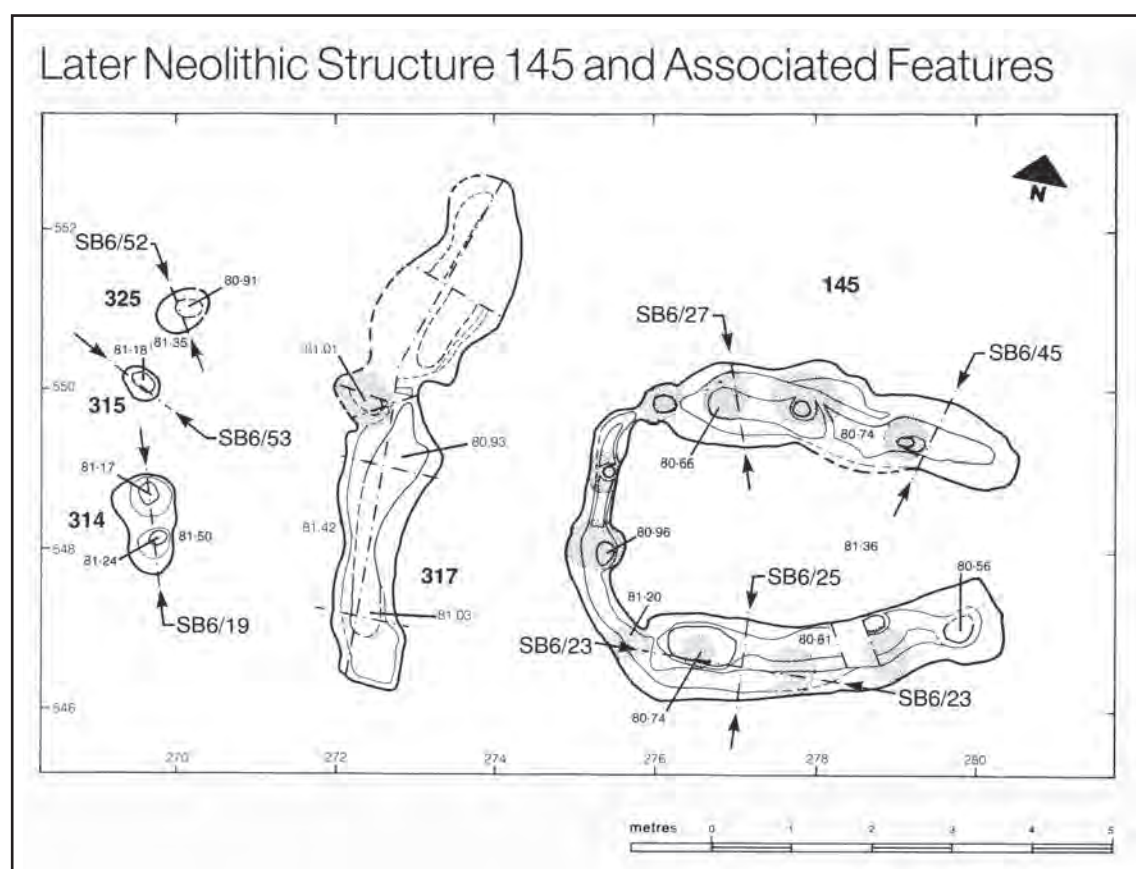


Fig 6 The horseshoe-shaped timber structure at Briar Hill, Northampton (from Bamford 1985, fig 22)



### THE EARLY BRONZE AGE (2400-1500 BC)

While henge monuments have traditionally been regarded as belonging to the Late Neolithic, with continuing usage into the Early Bronze Age, this interpretation has not been well supported by radiocarbon dating. Current thinking indicates that while the stone and timber circles and other constructions, such as the possible timber cove/house at Briar Hill, belong in the Late Neolithic and are closely associated with grooved ware pottery, the characteristic henge ditch, with its single or pair of opposed entrances and, most distinctively, an external bank, may often be later additions, and perhaps Early Bronze Age restructuring of these monuments. Smaller henges, as in ditched enclosures with an external bank and no major internal structures, might then be seen as entirely of Early Bronze Age date.

The Priors Hall henge fits with this new interpretation. The earliest radiocarbon date spans the period 2140-1950 cal BC, and comes from a nearby pit that contained Beaker pottery. The ditch was silting up after 2000 BC and there was an Early Bronze Age cremation burial within the interior between 1750-1620 cal BC. Small henges can therefore be seen as part of the Beaker culture, along with richly furnished burials under round barrows, the characteristic monument of the Early Bronze Age.

Northamptonshire has only a handful of upstanding barrow mounds, one of the factors that led George to conclude in 1917 that Northamptonshire was a prehistoric desert, but gravel quarrying along the Nene has resulted in the excavation of several round barrows, some of which were known earthworks and others only discovered as a result of quarrying. At Aldwincle the Neolithic oval mound was accompanied by two Beaker round barrows and there was a large barrow group around the Neolithic site at Grendon (Gibson and McCormack 1985). Similarly, the Neolithic complex at Raunds and Stanwick had also been a focus for a dispersed barrow cemetery.

While round barrows were constructed throughout the Early Bronze Age, a distinctive group of large multi-ditched barrows over primary Beaker burials appear to be a further example of a wave of similar monuments being constructed within a short time scale. Richly accompanied Beaker barrows less than 2km apart at Raunds/Stnwick could have been constructed within the same century, between 2100-2000 cal BC (Harding and Healy 2011), and a similarly complex barrow in the valley of the Great Ouse near Gayhurst, Buckinghamshire, is probably closely contemporary (Chapman 2007). At the widest span of the radiocarbon dates, the primary burials at these three barrows would cover no more than two centuries, 2150-1950 cal BC, but a further example of a large complex Beaker barrow from the Nene valley at Barnack, Peterborough, excavated in 1974 and displayed at the British Museum, with replica grave goods at Peterborough Museum, is a little earlier perhaps lying at the beginning of this wave of large barrow construction, 2300-2150 cal BC.

In contrast, Beaker burials dating to a little after 2000 BC at Warmington and at Ashton Roman town, described in this volume, were chance discoveries on excavations

of later settlements, as the burials were in pits with no surrounding ditch to provide material for substantial mounds. However, it is possible that the contrast in the marking of the respective graves was less extreme at the time, as substantial turf mounds could be provided and, once ploughed away, there would be no evidence of their former presence.

The final excavation report takes us back to Northampton. It describes further round barrows at Wootton, on the Hunsbury ridge to the east of Briar Hill, and also deals with pits, the smallest scale indicator of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity, apart from flint scatters.

The opportunity to open up large areas on commercial developments, particularly quarries, housing and industrial sites, has resulted in numerous chance finds of Neolithic and Bronze Age pits, either singly or in small clusters, and usually containing assemblages of pottery sherds from several vessels, along with other items. Across the country, each new example adds a little more to our knowledge of these periods at locations away from the contemporary monumental sites, such as henges and round barrows. This is true of Wootton, where a large scale field evaluation by geophysical survey and trial trenching located a single Bronze Age pit cluster in the excavation of 306 trial trenches, but many more must be awaiting discovery across the county.

### MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGES (1500-700 BC)

By the Middle Bronze Age the building of prominent earthwork monuments ended, and there was a gradual transition towards landscapes of enclosure, with field boundaries and round houses becoming the most visible signifiers of activity.

At Priors Hall, there were ditch systems laid out in the Middle Bronze Age that respected the existing henge monument, and the ditches at the entrance to the henge may even have been refurbished at this time. The Middle Bronze Age ditches produced domestic items, including a fragment of loomweight, but the presence of some human bone shows that the underlying preoccupation with death and the ancestors was still there.

The Middle Bronze Age is best represented by urnfield cemeteries and from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages there are several hoards of bronze axes and other implements, see below. For the Late Bronze Age the circular enclosure at Thrapston, 110-120m diameter, dated to the first quarter of the 1st millennium, is of great interest, but while part of the ditch has been excavated little of the interior has been seen (Hull 2001).

### FROM BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE

The final article takes us to the very end of the Bronze Age, with the deposition of bronze axes continuing through the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition at around 750-650 BC. This is a period we still know little about, as settlement evidence is sparse, typically comprising scattered collections of shallow pits and postholes usually located by chance in open area excavations of later sites, as these settlements leave so few traces in the ground that they are virtually



undetectable by geophysical survey and fieldwalking. A good example of the nature of the evidence was provided by the handful of small Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pits at Upton, Northampton, beside a complex of Middle Iron Age and Roman settlement enclosures, published in the last journal (Walker and Maull 2010, 16-19).

It is at this time and slightly later when those enigmatic land boundaries, pit alignments, were being constructed. But that is the beginning of another story in our landscape history.

### CONCLUSION

The process of fortuitous discovery during work on later sites has also been demonstrated modestly during recent works at the Roman town of Irchester. While most will focus on the spectacular results of the geophysical survey that has revealed the plans of numerous houses within the town (see the annual notes at the end of this volume), prehistoric archaeology has still not been totally trampled out of existence beneath the Roman hobnailed boot.

In 2011 there was limited excavation within the Roman town to establish the depth of burial and the state of preservation, to inform the future management of the site, a Scheduled Monument in the ownership of Northamptonshire County Council. Excavation in the north-east corner of the Roman town to define the town defences exposed part of a pre-town buried soil horizon. This soil produced a significant assemblage of 166 flints (Chapman 2012), which includes a large percentage of knapping debris along with micro blades, averaging 9mm wide, and a micro blade core. The small group of six retouched pieces comprises a retouched flake, two scrapers, a cutting flake and two serrated blades, one particularly long and narrow. These characteristics are very similar to much larger flint assemblages from a few kilometres downstream along the Nene at Stanwick and Raunds, and the interpretation of the assemblages from the area of the West Cotton confluence is that they derive from Mesolithic and Early Neolithic industries (Harding and

Healy 2011, 511-516). Even though reworked microliths are not present in the excavated Irchester assemblage, probable Mesolithic pieces have been recovered from surface collection within the Roman town. It is therefore suggested that the Irchester assemblage is similar in character to material from Raunds, and has a similar relationship to the river. It is also similarly indicative of early activity along the lower terrace above the valley bottom, with this including debris from the knapping of flint nodules from the local gravels.

Another small example comes from the excavation of Iron Age and Roman sites at Victoria Park to the west of the Roman town, during the development of the warehouse complex. A fragment from a perforated flint mace head of the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age was recovered as a residual find within an Iron Age roundhouse (Chapman 2012a) (Fig 7).

The mace head had probably been fashioned from a flint nodule that had needed only minor reshaping, and in the sides of the drilled perforation there are natural voids that probably lay near the centre of the nodule. The mace head has a rounded end, 57mm wide and 44mm thick. If the perforation/shaft-hole was central, it would have been c 88mm long, but the lost end might have been longer. The perforation or shaft-hole is hour-glass shaped, up to 25mm diameter, with a highly polished surface. The breakage is along a thermal fracture that runs across the perforation, but there is also more recent damage to the surfaces, which are otherwise smooth and rounded.

Stone and flint mace heads are a relatively uncommon find in Northamptonshire. The fieldwork of the Raunds area project, during which more than 20 monuments of Neolithic and Bronze Age date were excavated, produced only a single example.

We conclude that Neolithic and Bronze Age studies in Northamptonshire are alive and well. They may often be unspectacular and overshadowed by later settlements, but at Banbury Lane, Northampton there is a monument and a mortuary deposit as enigmatic and intriguing as anything that Wessex could produce.



Fig 7 The flint mace head from Irchester, Victoria Park, showing the perforation and later damage (left) and the section across the thermal fracture and the perforation (right) (Scale 50mm)

## NOTES

Digital copies of TJ George's paper of 1917, describing *Early Man in Northamptonshire*, and of Helen Bamford's report from 1985 describing the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure will be available on the CD at the end of this journal to complement the published material.

In writing this introductory essay the author has also seen the need to provide a more detailed review of the development of the Briar Hill enclosure, to set this important Northamptonshire site in the context of contemporary thinking, and perhaps such an article will appear in a future journal.

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