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Neolithic cremation burials at Milton Ham, Northampton

by

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with a contribution by Sarah Inskip

SUMMARY

In 2008 Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out a strip, map and record excavation of a Romano-British settlement at Milton Ham on the south-western outskirts of Northampton. This report focuses on a small and unexpected bonus: the recovery of three pits containing cremation burials, one of which has been radiocarbon dated to the late 4th millennium BC, the Middle Neolithic period. The burials were associated with several other small pits, three of which may have been truncated burials, while two larger pits may have held wooden posts, perhaps cemetery marker posts. These burials add to a growing body of evidence for cremation burial in the Middle Neolithic and they also add to the developing picture of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity in the environs of the Briar Hill Neolithic causewayed enclosure.

INTRODUCTION

In February and March 2008, Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out a strip, map and record excavation of a Romano-British enclosure at Milton Ham, near Junction 15a of the M1 motorway, on the south-western outskirts of Northampton (NGR: SP 7311 5735; Fig 1). The excavation had been requested by Northamptonshire County Council's Archaeological Advisor (NCCAA) in response to the granting of outline planning permission for commercial and industrial development of the site. The archaeological work was commissioned by Waterman CPM, acting on behalf of the developer Parkridge (Milton Ham) Ltd.

The Romano-British settlement, which lay in the northern part of the development area, was located by archaeological evaluation in 2002, which had comprised geophysical survey (WYAS 2002) followed by trial trenching (Carlyle and Thorne 2002).

Following excavation, an assessment report and updated project design was prepared by Simon Carlyle (2008b) followed by further analysis and the preparation of the client report (Carlyle 2010), with illustrations by Amir Bassir. The client report will be available from the Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record and online through the Archaeology Data Service (ADS). The archive, comprising the finds, site records and all material associated with the project, will be held by Northamptonshire Archaeology until a suitable repository becomes available.

This report focuses on a group of Neolithic cremations burials that were an unexpected bonus to the main subject of excavation, the Romano-British enclosure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was overseen by Ian Travers of WCPM, who were responsible for liaison with the curatorial archaeologist (NCCAA), who monitored the works. For Northamptonshire Archaeology the project was managed and directed by Simon Carlyle, with assistance from Anthony Maull, and site supervisors Anne Foard-Colby and Adrian Burrow. The excavation team included Adrian Adams, Rosie Chapman, Alexandra El-Ab, Jonathan Elston, Tomasz Kolosek and Rob Smith. The report on the Neolithic cremations has been abstracted from the client report and edited for publication by Andy Chapman, and a new discussion has been provided.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The overall development area covers *c* 15ha and comprises five fields of pasture at Milton Ham, on the south-western outskirts of Northampton (Fig 1). It is bounded to the south by the M1 motorway, to the west by the A43, and by further open fields to the north and the east. The demolished remains of the farm of Milton Ham lie in the south-west corner of the development area.

The site straddles the northern end of a low-relief spur which overlooks Wootton Brook, a tributary of the River Nene. The ground descends from 75m aOD in the south-west corner of the area and slopes gradually to the north-west, north and east, to approximately 68m aOD. To the north of Wootton Brook there is a ridge of high ground, the Hunsbury ridge, which rises to *c* 110m aOD and extends eastwards towards Hardingstone, offering commanding views of the Nene valley to the north.

The excavation area lay close to the northern edge of the development area, adjacent to a small copse of trees. It was situated on the east facing slope of the spur, the ground descending from 71m aOD along the western edge of the excavation to *c* 68m aOD at the eastern boundary.

The underlying geology is Boulder Clay, overlying Jurassic limestone and sandstone of the Lias and Inferior Oolite Groups (BGS 1969). The soils across the development area are predominantly of the Hanslope soil association (411d), comprising slowly permeable, non-calcareous clayey soils (SSEW 1983).

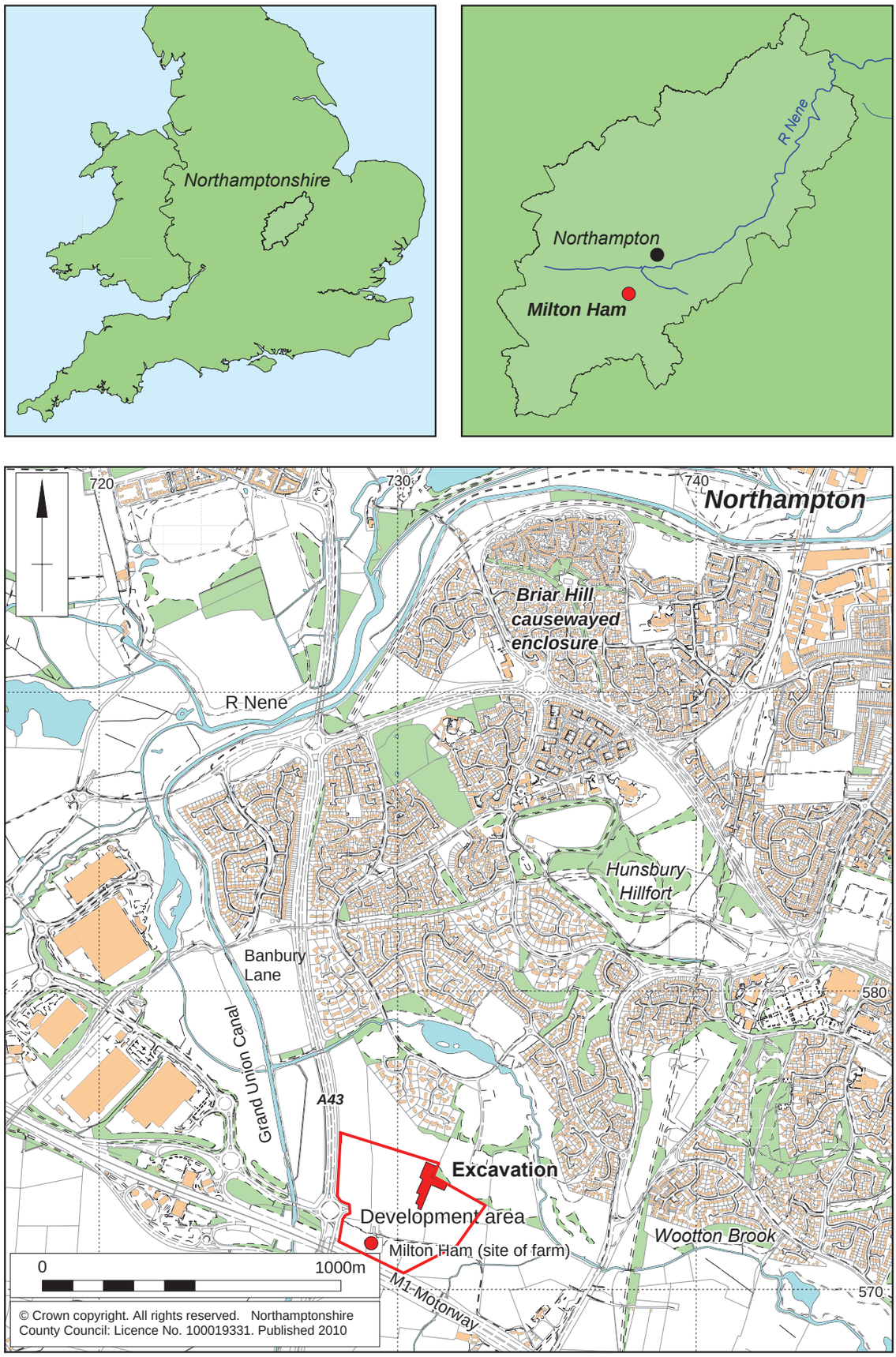


Fig 1 Site location

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Reference to the Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record (HER) and archaeological inventories and journals has identified a significant number of relevant sites of Neolithic and Bronze Age date in the area.

Located in a broad tributary valley of the River Nene and overlooked by the high ground of the Hunsbury Ridge to the north, the area surrounding the site at Milton Ham has attracted settlement and activity since the Mesolithic, when hunter-gatherers first settled on the light soils at the edge of the floodplain and exploited the plentiful food resources available. Mesolithic worked flints have been recovered as residual finds from many sites in and around Northampton, including assemblages from

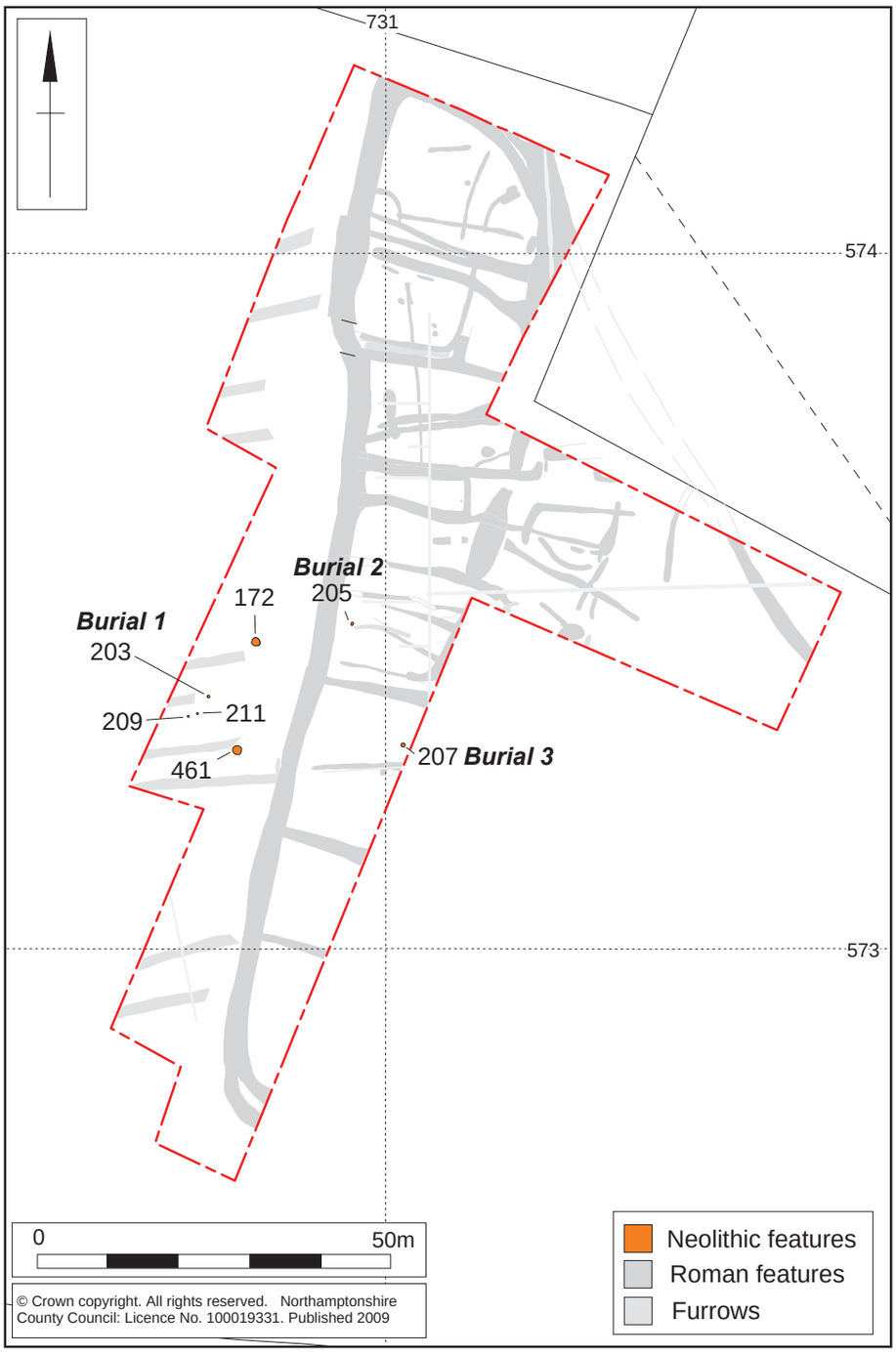


Fig 2 The excavated area, showing the Neolithic cremation burials and pits

Duston, Hunsbury (RCHME 1985), Marefair (Williams 1979) and St Peter's Street (Bamford 1979) and at the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure (Bamford 1985).

The light soils in the area were ideal for early methods of agriculture and were favoured by Neolithic farming communities. Neolithic worked flints and fragments of polished stone axes have been recovered from numerous sites in and around Northampton, indicating settlement in the area (RCHME 1985). On the northern slope of Hunsbury Ridge, overlooking the Nene valley, is the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure, excavated in the 1970s (Bamford 1985), which was constructed in the Early Neolithic and was still a focus for periodic activity through the Middle and Late Neolithic, and even into the Middle Bronze Age, when a small cremation cemetery was placed within the long abandoned circuit of the causewayed enclosure. Further to the east, near Wootton and Hardingstone, a small group of Bronze Age round barrows and an Early Bronze Age pit have been investigated in recent years (Chapman and Carlyle this volume; Chapman 2003; Carlyle 2008a).

This area was also to be significant in the Iron Age, with numerous smaller settlements clustering around the focus of the hillfort on Hunsbury Hill, and settlement continued into the Roman period, but these aspects are not detailed here.

THE CREMATION BURIALS AND OTHER PITS

The excavated area of 0.62ha, which was up to 150m long and 25-40m wide, was designed to take in the majority of the archaeology related to a Romano-British ladder settlement, a site elongated north-south and comprising numerous sub-enclosures within an outer boundary system (Fig 2).

Near the centre of the excavation area a dispersed group of five small pits and two larger pits lay largely to the west of the main Roman activity, although there was some disturbance from the furrows of the medieval field system, which ran east to west.

The small pits, including the three containing cremated bone, were all 0.29-0.48m in diameter and 0.13-0.20m deep. They had fills of mid yellowish-brown silty clay, containing small limestone pebbles and some flecks of charcoal, presumably pyre debris.

Burial 1, pit 203, contained only 14g of human long bone and skull. Burial 2, pit 205, contained just over 800g of bone, with fragments from all the major skeletal elements present, indicating quite thorough collection from the pyre down to the recovery of some hand and foot bones (Fig 3). The clean soil matrix indicates that the bone was carefully collected to exclude other pyre debris, with no more than sparse flecks of charcoal being incorporated into the deposit. Burial 3, pit 207, contained a few scraps of cremated bone, which was too degraded for analysis.

In the same area, two similar pits, 209 and 211, may have been the truncated remains of further cremation burials, but where no bone had survived later disturbance. Unfortunately, given the truncation of these shallow pits by later activity it is unclear just how much of the bone deposits may have been lost through disturbance. However, it is suggested that four of the pits may have held token bone deposits, while Burial 2 in pit 205, was distinctly different in containing a large proportion of the bone from the pyre even though the burial pit was not significantly larger of deeper than the others.

Two larger pits, 172 to the north and 461 to the south, are undated but their apparent association with the group of cremation burials suggests that they may also date to the Neolithic and form part of the funerary site. The sequence and arrangement of fills and the presence of a number of cobbles in the centres of both pits suggest the possible presence of post-pipes, to suggest that they may have held wooden posts, perhaps to mark the location and extent of the cemetery area.

Pit 172 was 1.2m in diameter by 0.52m deep, with near vertical sides and a flat base (Fig 4). The primary fill (171) of dark, mottled orangey-brown silty clay, may have been packed around a large post. In the centre of the pit there was a mottled deposit of light to mid brown silty clay (170) containing a number of large rounded cobbles, up to 250mm in size, the distribution of the cobbles indicating the former position of a wooden post. The upper fill (169) of mid to dark greyish-brown silty

Fig 3 Burial 2, pit 205, showing cremated bone deposit in section

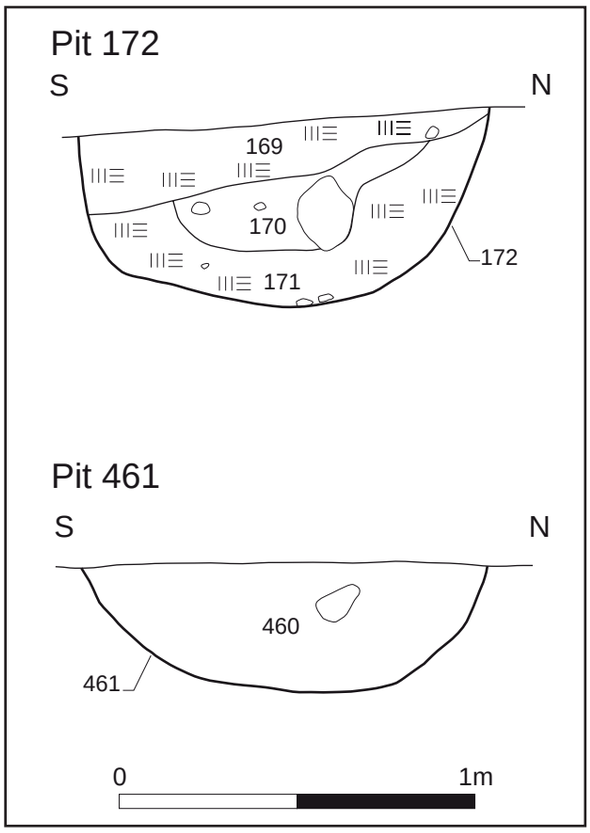


Fig 4 Sections of pits 172 and 461

clay with frequent charcoal flecks, sealed the post-pipe.

Pit 461, lay *c* 15m to the north of pit 172 and had the same dimension and profile, but was only 0.37m deep (Fig 4). It had a fill of mottled mid brownish-grey clayey silt (460) and in the centre of the pit there were several small rounded cobbles, perhaps suggesting that this pit had also once held a wooden post.

HUMAN BONE
by Sarah Inskip

Deposits of cremated human bone from Burial 1, pit 203, and Burial 2, pit 205 were received for macroscopic osteological analysis. Both cremations were uniformly white-cream in colour suggesting a pyre temperature above 600°C.

There was a large variation in bone fragment size; the largest was a femur fragment measuring 60mm x 16mm from Burial (Table 1). Over 50% of the fragments were retained in the 5mm sieve and over 90% of the material retained in the 10mm sieve was identifiable, although many shaft fragments couldn't be further identified (Table 2).

In Burial 2, every long bone in the human skeleton was represented in the bone deposit, including some small bones of the hand and foot. All the major bones of the skull were represented as well as all the bones of the spinal column. The identifiable elements are listed below. Very little information on age was recoverable but all visible epiphyses were fused suggesting that the remains were adult. The only pathological change noted was extra bone growth on the odontoid peg.

Table 1: Fragmentation of the cremated bone

Size	**Bone weight (g)**	
	Burial 1	**Burial 2**
(Max size	12x7mm	60x16mm)
> 10mm	0	284
> 5mm	8	439
> 2mm	6	90
> 1mm	0	1
< 1mm	0	5
Total (g)	**14**	**822**

Table 2: Identified skeletal elements by weight

Anatomical group	**Weight (g)**	
	Burial 1	**Burial 2**
Unident.	4	317
Skull	4	93
Vertebrae	0	33
Ribs	0	13
Upper limb	0	66
Lower limb	0	114
Unident. Long bone	6	127
Pelvis	0	19
Hands & feet	0	18
Total (g)	**14**	**822**

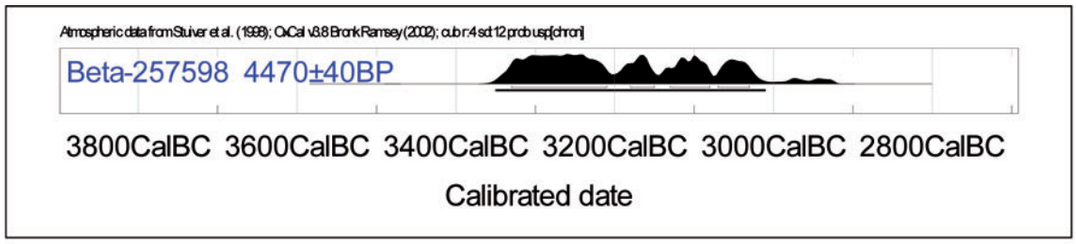
RADIOCARBON DETERMINATION

A sample of cremated human bone from Burial 2, pit 205, submitted for radiocarbon dating, returned a date in the Middle Neolithic (Table 3). It is unfortunate that this

Table 3: Radiocarbon determination of bone carbonates from pit 205

Lab no. and sample no.	**Origin of sample**	**Sample details**	**13C/12C ratio**	**Conventional radiocarbon age BP**	**Cal BC 68%** *95%*
Beta-257598 MHM08/204	Fill 204, pit 205 Burial 2	Cremated human bone	-23.8 0/00	4470 +/- 40	3330-3040 ***3350-3020***

Radiocarbon dating laboratory: Beta Analytic, Florida, Miami, USA
Method of analysis: AMS-standard delivery
Material pre-treatment: Bone carbonate extraction (cremated human bone)
Calibration: INTCAL04 (IntCal 04, Calibration Issue, *Radiocarbon*, 2004, **46/3**)



period coincides with a plateau on the calibration curve, which produces broad calibrated date ranges.

NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE BURIAL PRACTICES

by Andy Chapman

Understanding of burial practices in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages had, until recently, been largely dependent on the recording of substantial monuments of recognisable forms. For the Early Neolithic there were long barrows, and in Northamptonshire a variation on this theme with oval barrows. These have a tradition of communal inhumation burial, and the periodic removal of some bones for other practices, but clearly these monuments did not accommodate the entire deceased population. In the later 4th millennium and the early 3rd millennium, the Middle and Late Neolithic, knowledge of burial practices comes largely from cremation burials, unurned in pits, associated with henges and smaller hengi-form monuments, both rare in Northamptonshire.

Through the Early Bronze Age there is the round barrow tradition of individual burial, but even allowing for secondary and satellite burials, these too accommodated only a fraction of the population. The round barrow tradition also spans a change from inhumation burial, which was dominant from the mid 3rd to the early 2nd millennium BC, while thereafter cremation became the preferred rite. However, a sequence of five burials, dated to the early 3rd millennium BC, within a large central pit at the primary barrow of the Gayhurst barrow cemetery, near Newport Pagnell, followed a sequence of inhumation, unurned cremation, inhumation, unurned cremation and, finally, a cremation burial in a collared urn (Chapman 2007), showing that both inhumation and cremation burial were practised concurrently.

CREMATION BURIAL IN THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC

Sites such as Milton Ham are now filling gaps in our knowledge, and are providing at least a little of the missing early population. Individual or small groups of cremation burials comprising quantities of cremated bone and perhaps other pyre debris deposited in a small pit, with no urn or other datable material goods, have posed a problem on many excavations. In recent years, with the large scale excavation of sites, often of Iron Age and Roman date, through commercial archaeology in advance of development, chance finds of occasional earlier features have become increasingly common, and much new evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement has come from small pit groups containing deposits of pottery, flint and animal bone, such as the pit at nearby Wootton (see Chapman and Carlyle this volume).

However, with resources limited and the general character of the archaeology well attested, spending money on radiocarbon dating for the odd stray cremation burial would not be high on anyone's list of priorities. As a result, there have been many stray cremations that have either been assumed to be contemporary with the adjacent settlement or have been just listed as undated. In recent years, radiocarbon dating of some of these stray burials, often facilitated by the new ability to date cremated bone directly rather than just associated charcoal, has, as at Milton Ham, provided Middle or Late Neolithic dates.

The small cluster of cremation burials at Milton Ham, perhaps marked by wooden posts, are therefore part of a growing picture of the presence of small scale, non-monumental burial sites of the Middle and Late Neolithic. This tradition can be seen to continue into the Early Bronze Age locally, with an isolated cremation burial within a collared urn deposited close to the river at nearby Upton, some 3.5km to the north-east of Milton Ham, where there was no sign of an associated round barrow (Foard-Colby 2008).

The situation in the Middle Neolithic is further complicated by a site excavated in 2011, only 1km to the north-west of Milton Ham. At Banbury Lane there was a triple-ditched circular enclosure. A large pit, possibly blocking an entrance through the innermost ditch, contained a mass of disarticulated human bone, perhaps coming from as many as 130 individuals (Yates e*t al* this volume). No more can be said about this site until analysis has been taken further, but the first two radiocarbon dates place the bones within the final centuries of the 4th millennium BC, and therefore broadly contemporary with the cremation burials from Milton Ham.

The result of these new discoveries is that burial practices in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages can now be seen to be far more diverse than previously suspected, and operating on both monumental and non-monumental scales.

THE NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE LANDSCAPE AROUND BRIAR HILL

The cremation burials at Milton Ham can also be placed within a broader picture of Neolithic activity in the environs of the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure (Bamford 1985). Briar Hill lay on the northern slope of the Hunsbury Ridge, overlooking the River Nene, some 2km to the north of the Milton Ham. Briar Hill was constructed in the Early Neolithic, probably before the

middle of the 4th millennium BC, somewhere between 3750 and 3400 cal BC. The filling of the latest ditch recuts was occurring between 3350 and 2950 cal BC, after 150-500 years of active maintenance (Whittle *et al* 2011, 299).

Even when the ditches had largely silted, Briar Hill remained a focus for activity in the late 4th millennium and through the 3rd millennium BC. A few shallow pits were excavated in the interior of the enclosure in the late 4th/early 3rd millennium BC, and in the early to mid 3rd millennium BC, a horseshoe-shaped timber building, supported by six posts, was associated with Grooved ware (Bamford 1985, fig 22).

Towards the end of the 3rd millennium BC, the Early Bronze Age, pits were dug into the fills of the former enclosure ditches. In the Middle Bronze Age a small cremation cemetery, containing both urned and unurned burials, was located within the circuit of the former enclosure (Bamford 1985, fig 25).

Given the ephemeral and probably transient nature of Neolithic dwellings, and the difficulties of recognising such remains in the archaeological record, few Neolithic settlement sites have been identified in the area, with the possible exception of the late Neolithic site at Ecton, to the north-east of Northampton (Moore and Williams 1975). However, numerous Neolithic flint artefacts have been found in the immediate area, indicating the presence of Neolithic communities living in the vicinity of Briar Hill and exploiting the local resources.

The Neolithic funerary remains at Milton Ham are located on a low spur at the edge of the floodplain of Wootton Brook, overlooked by the Hunsbury Ridge to the north. The remains comprised a small group of at least three, but possibly up to five cremations, perhaps marked by timber posts. A single radiocarbon date places this small cemetery within the closing centuries of the 4th millennium BC, 3350-3000 cal BC. These burials therefore overlap with or post-date the very final use of the nearby causewayed enclosure, when the ditches were still silting, and they certainly span the same period as some of the shallow pits within the interior of Briar Hill.

However, as already mentioned, a much closer contemporary site has been excavated in 2011, only 1km to the north-west of Milton Ham, at Banbury Lane, where the deposit of disarticulated human bone provides a sharp contrast to the cremation burials at Milton Ham. In the later 4th millennium BC, the Middle Neolithic, we therefore have two sites within the vicinity of Briar Hill displaying contrasting forms of burial, with this diversity perhaps reflecting a period of significant social change, a society in flux, with this represented on the larger scale in the decline of causewayed enclosures and long barrows and the rise of the henge and other new monument forms.

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