Northamptonshire Archaeology, **39***, 2017, 3–10*

An Early Neolithic enclosure near West Cotton, Raunds

by

Andy Chapman

with a contribution from Karen Stewart

Summary

A major complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments lying along the Nene valley between Raunds and Stanwick, was investigated in the 1980s as part of the Raunds Area Project. An outlying circular enclosure on higher ground to the east of the prehistoric monuments beneath West Cotton deserted medieval village, the Cotton 'Henge', was trial trenched in 1993, but a firm date was not obtained. Recent extensive trial trenching in advance of a proposed extension to the Warth Park industrial and warehouse complex provided a further opportunity to examine this enclosure. A section across the outer ditch produced primary and lower secondary fills containing quantities of mature oak charcoal. Charcoal from the primary fill has provided a radiocarbon date within the early 4th millennium, 3965–3800 Cal BC at 95% confidence. Even allowing for an old wood effect, this indicates that at least the outer enclosure, at 70–75m diameter, most probably dates to the early Neolithic. It lies directly in line with the long mound at West Cotton, with which it was broadly contemporary. More widely, it would also have been broadly contemporary with the known causewayed enclosure at Briar Hill, Northampton and a newly discovered causewayed enclosure east of Wellingborough, both of which also lie on the slopes of the Nene valley. The smaller inner enclosure, which may have enclosed a mound, as well the flint scatter across the surrounding slopes, probably date to the late Neolithic to early Bronze Age, so that, like the rest of the Raunds monument complex,there was use and reuse throughout the Neolithic and early Bronze Age.

Introduction

A ditched enclosure known as Cotton 'Henge' is sited on Northampton Sand with Ironstone on a south-west facing slope on the side of the Cotton Brook in the parish of Raunds, Northamptonshire (NGR SP 9830 7260 Fig 1). It lies at an altitude of 47–51m OD, roughly 600m upstream from the complex of monuments at West Cotton. It was originally identified through aerial photography, which showed it to consist of two almost concentric ditches. The slightly elliptical outer ditch measures *c.*75m from north-west to south-east by *c.*70m. The inner ditch is *c.*21m in diameter. It was originally investigated as part of the Raunds prehistoric monument complex, and was tentatively interpreted as a possible late Neolithic henge (Humble 1994; Harding and Healy 2007), but remained undated until recent trial trenching in 2015 to the south of Meadow Lane in advance of a proposed extension to the Warth Park industrial and warehouse complex (Kidd 2015), which has shown an early Neolithic origin for the outer ditch.

Acknowledgements

The trial trenching in 2015 was carried out by MOLA Northampton, commissioned by CgMs Consulting. The project was managed by Adam Yates, and was led in the field by Carol Simmonds and Ben Kidd, with the client report prepared by Ben Kidd (2015). Thanks are also due to Frances Healy and Jon Humble, and the other contributors to the Raunds Prehistoric volumes, whose work on the Raunds Area Project and the Cotton 'Henge' is quoted extensively directly and indirectly. The radiocarbon date was financed by MOLA Northampton in order to set this monument within the context of the broader prehistoric landscape. This report had been compiled by Andy Chapman from the various primary sources.

The Raunds prehistoric monument complex

Soon after 4000 BC the Long Mound, 135m long and built of turf, had been constructed at West Cotton, on an alignment a little north of west-east, pointing directly to the Cotton 'Henge' on the hillside above (Harding and Healy 2007). Three other monuments, the Long Barrow, 1.8km to the south, the Avenue, lying between the Long Mound and the Long Barrow, and the north part of the Turf Mound, also at West Cotton, were also built in the first half of the 4th millennium (Fig 2). The new radiocarbon date indicates that at least the outer circuit of the Cotton enclosure was contemporary with the Long Mound at West Cotton, and the other early monuments

By 3000 BC a chain of five or six diverse monuments stretched along the river bank (the Long Mound, the Long Enclosure, the Turf Mound, the Causewayed Ring Ditch, the Avenue, perhaps the Southern Enclosure, and the Long Barrow). Domestic settlement was probably on the nearby valley sides.

For the next 500 years or more, both people and their animals seem to have come to the valley bottom less often. Trees grew on and around some of the monuments; late Neolithic artefacts were scarce; and the only site definitely dated to this period was the Riverside Structure at West Cotton, a timber platform at the edge of a channel of the Nene, into an upper layer of which cattle bones and

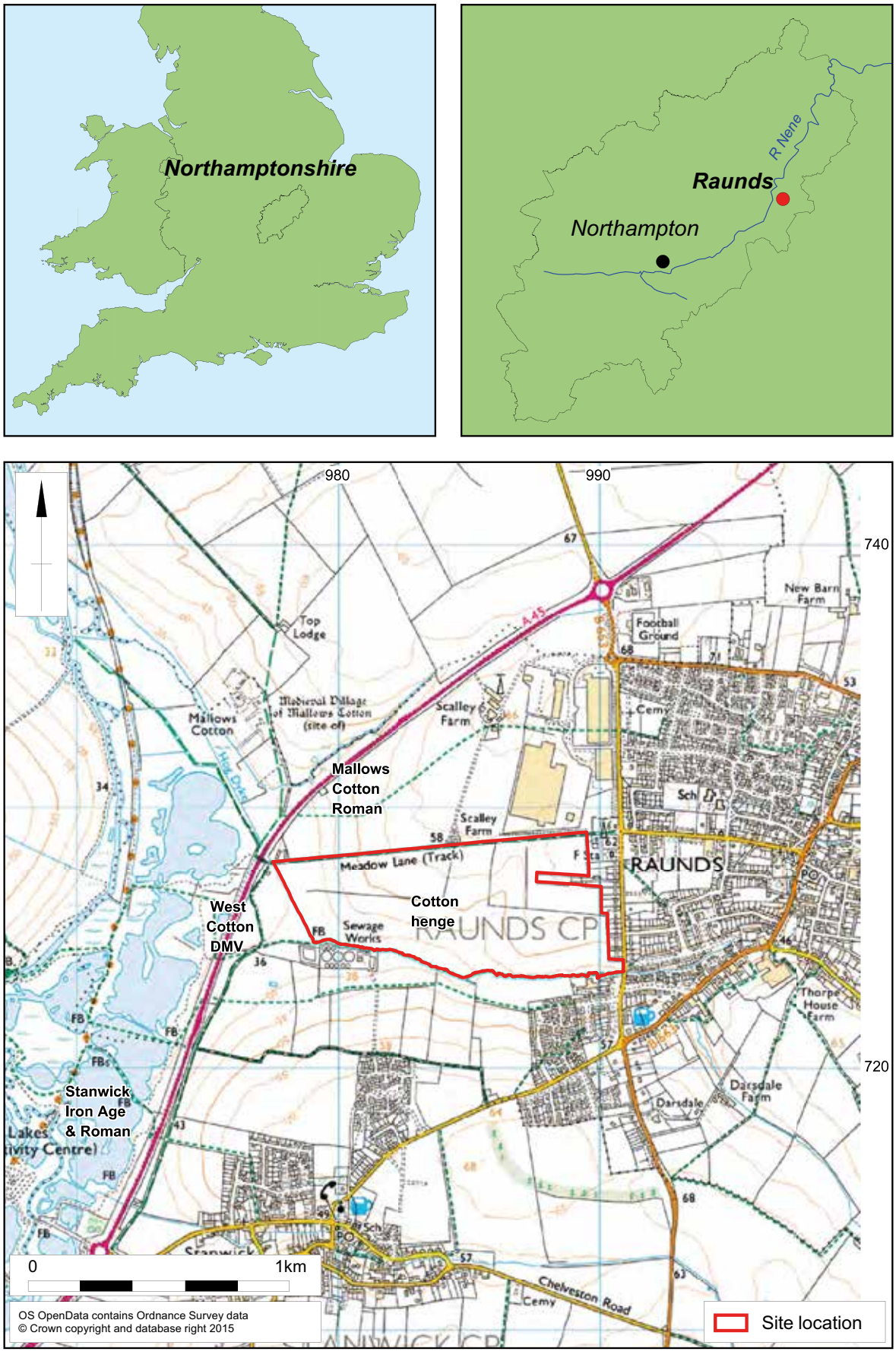


Fig 1: Raunds, Warth Park development, location plan

a couple of human long bones were either washed by the river or deliberately deposited.

By about 2200 BC the valley was more heavily grazed and less wooded than ever before. At this stage, monument-building accelerated and included the Segmented Ditch Circle and at least 20 round barrows, nine of which were excavated. These included two complex multi-ditched barrows with primary Beaker burials furnished with a range of grave goods, one at West Cotton at the northern end of the monument complex, Barrow 6, and one to the south, Barrow 1, near the Long Barrow. The other barrows were single ditched dating to the later early Bronze Age (1900–1500 BC). It is possible that the inner ditch of the Cotton Enclosure had surrounded a mound, suggesting that it would have been contemporary with the other round barrows.

The barrows were progressively enlarged, as cremation gradually became the normal burial rite. The valley bottom remained uninhabited, while settlement on the valley sides became more marked and activity began to extend onto the surrounding Boulder Clay plateau. Cremations continued to be buried in and around the mounds through the middle and late Bronze Age, down to about 1000 BC.

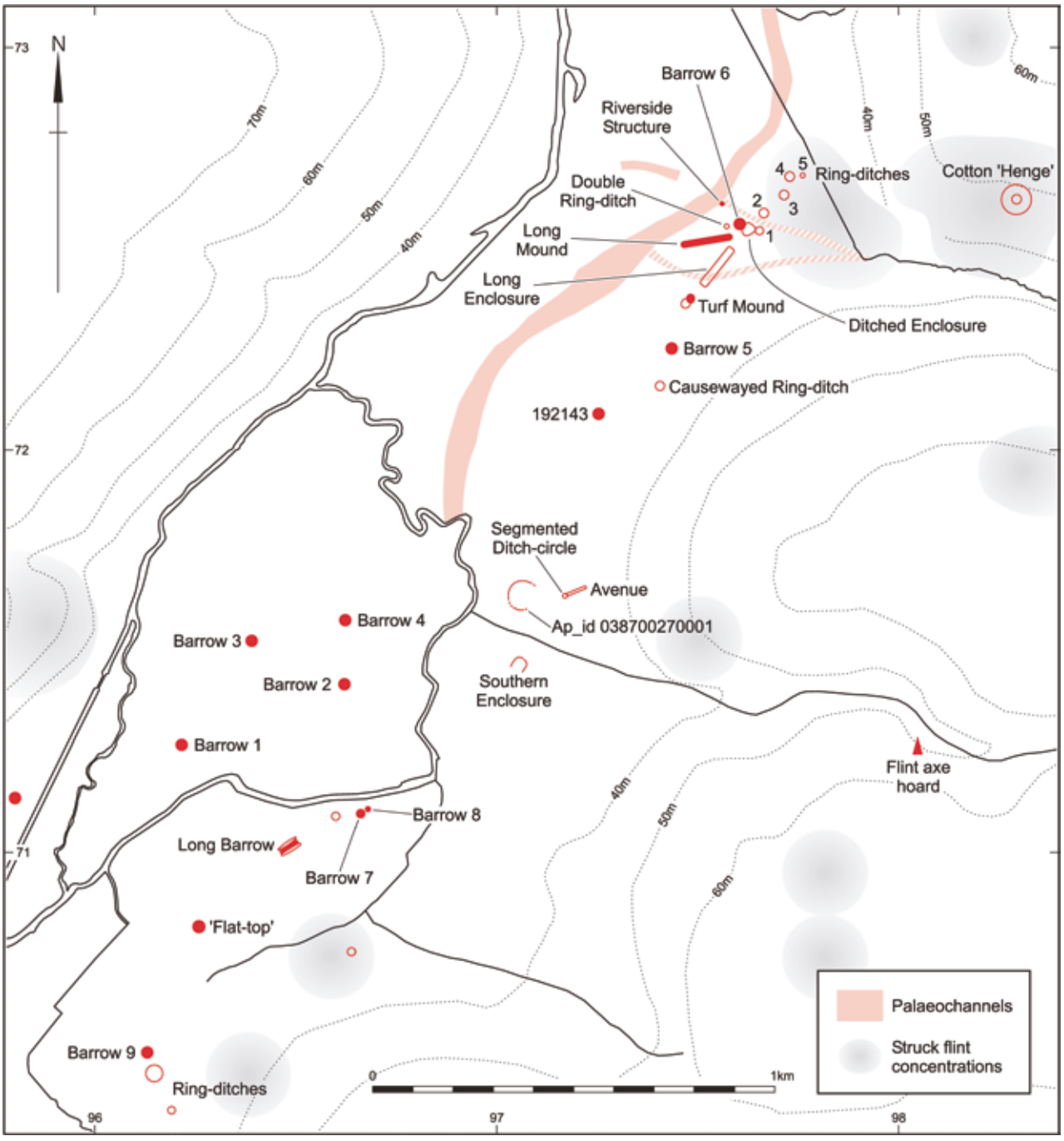


Fig 2: The Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments (from Harding and Healy 2007)

The Cotton Neolithic Enclosure

Previous investigation

In the 1980s the monument and the surrounding area were fieldwalked as part of the Raunds Area Project (Alan *et al* 2007, 145).

> "The site proved to lie within a 17ha concentration of lithics which ran along the side of the tributary valley for about 1km, on the light soils formed on the Northampton Sand and the Great Oolite. The lithics were of predominantly late Neolithic or early Bronze Age character, with some earlier and later material. The plan of the monument was confirmed by a magnetometer survey carried out in 1989.
>
> During 1993 a programme of evaluation by topographical and geophysical survey and excavation was carried out between January and June, to assess the archaeological potential and condition of the monument, especially the extent of plough damage. This entailed a second magnetometer survey, and a closer sample interval than the first and covering a wider area. The second survey confirmed that there was unlikely to be an entrance in either ditch (two breaks in the north of the outer ditch were due to a field boundary), and identified a number of discrete features (probably pits), relict ridge-and-furrow, and linear features probably post-dating the monument. The quality of the results prompted a magnetic susceptibility survey which yielded generally low readings inside the monument and considerably higher readings outside it, suggesting that the interior had not been occupied and that the area within the inner ditch, where readings were particularly low, could have been covered by a mound."

In 1993 five trenches were excavated by Jon Humble (Humble 1994; Harding and Healy 2007). The outer ditch was up to 0.91m deep. To the south-west, Trench 1, and to the south-east, Trench 4, the ditch was U-shaped with a broad flat bottom, but to the north, Trench 3, the profile was V-shaped (Fig 3).

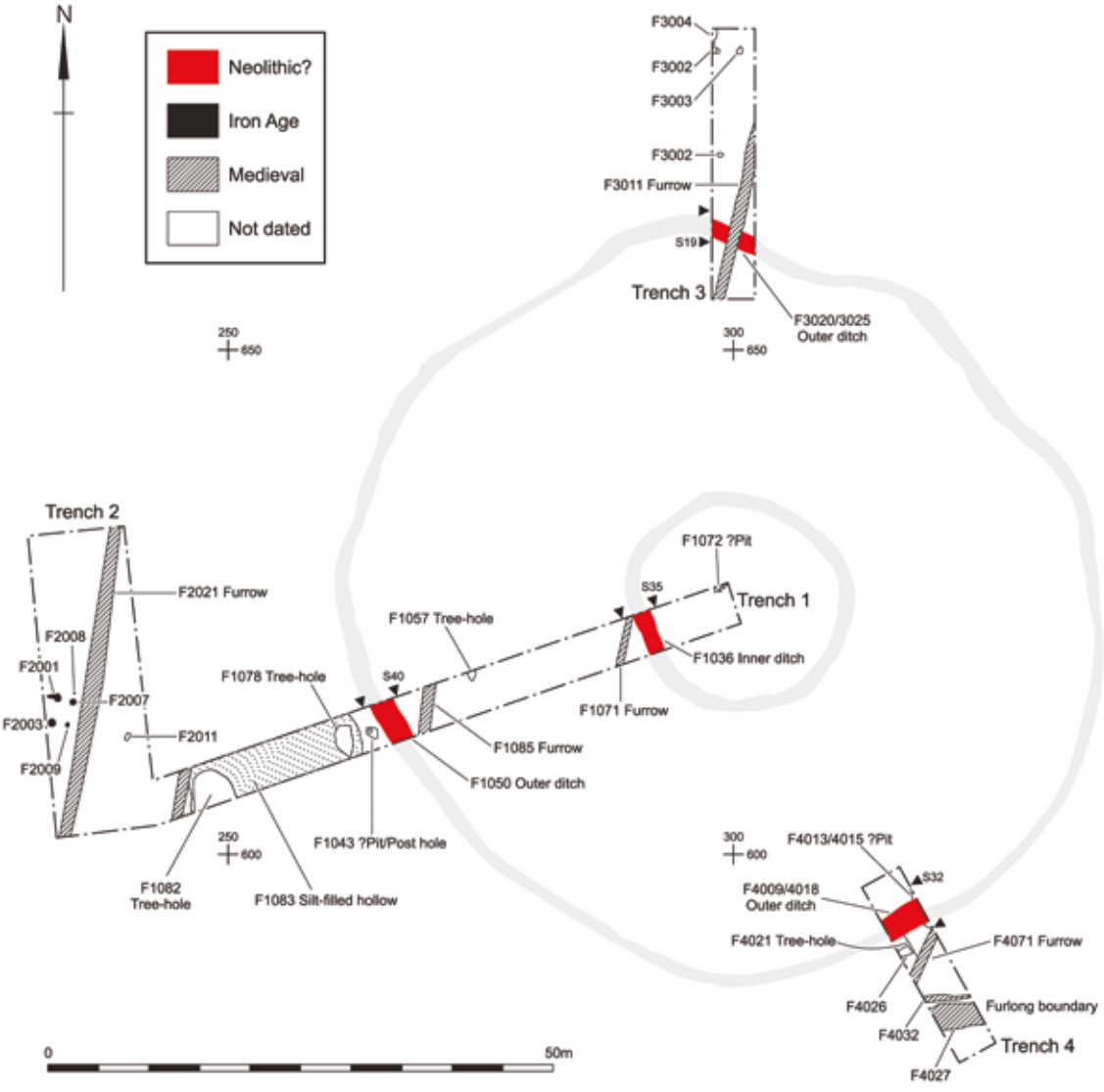


Fig 3: The Cotton 'Henge' (from Harding and Healy 2007)

The excavated portion of the inner ditch, in its south-western arc, was flat-bottomed with gently sloping sides, 1.60m wide and 0.45m deep. No evidence for an internal earthwork was observed during excavation, either in the form of a rise in the natural or in the character of the ditch fills.

Following the survey and trial trench evaluation in the 1990s the enclosure was summed up as follows (Alan *et al* 2007, 150):

> "Very little is known about the monument. Its date remains uncertain, as do the contemporaneity or otherwise of the two circuits and of the episodes of recutting and backfilling detected in different sections. The proximity of [pit] F1072 to the centre of the monument suggests a relation between the two. The results of the magnetic susceptibility survey combine with the very low yield of charred plant remains and artefacts from the excavation to suggest that the enclosure was not inhabited, and that the overlying and surrounding flint scatter reflects other activities than the use of the monument. The former presence of earthworks is indicated by the varying frequencies of gravel in the overlying topsoil, and low magnetic susceptibility in the interior would be compatible with its having been covered by a mound. It can only be said that these characteristics are compatible with a ceremonial function, and that its apparent history of recutting and backfilling echoes that of some Neolithic monuments. In its original form it may have consisted of a ditched round mound within a sub circular enclosure."

The 2015 trial trench evaluation

The early Neolithic enclosure

The outer ditch was investigated to the west, in Trench 43 (Fig 4). The original ditch was U-shaped, 0.76m deep with a broad flat base, 0.65m wide, and steep sides surviving only at the base of the cut. It would have been 1.2–1.4m wide at the present level of the natural. A little grey silt had accumulated in the base of ditch before there was a substantial deposit containing ironstone (4322) coming in from the eastern, inner, side, which intermingled with dark grey ashy silts, containing charcoal (4324, Sample 7), coming in from the western, outer, side of the ditch (Figs 5 and 6). This marked difference in the primary silting was provisionally interpreted as indicative of recutting, but seems more likely to relate to differential filling, perhaps as a result of the presence of an adjacent bank. The ironstone-rich fill on the east side could have come from either loose/eroded bank material or erosion/collapse of the ditch sides, but the charcoal-rich fill (4324) must have come from either direct dumping or the erosion of some surface deposit, marking a human intervention in the natural processes of silting and erosion. The lower secondary fills (4320/4321 and 4318), which accumulated against the eroding edges of the ditch, were also all grey to dark-grey fairly stone-free silts, and the depth of fill against the western side of the ditch (4318), contained further charcoal, similar to but less dense than in the primary fill (4324), perhaps confirming the presence of some surface deposit that was progressively eroding into the ditch.

The upper secondary fills may be more useful in identifying the location of a bank, and the sequence of varied fills coming in from the west, the outside of the henge, would suggest that the bank lay on this side. The lower secondary fills were overlain by a thin deposit (4317) containing much small ironstone and this was sealed by a more mixed deposit of orange-brown loams containing some ironstone, with an upper secondary fill (4315) containing more ironstone. These layers were all coming from the west, the outside, and would be consistent with material derived from the erosion of an external bank of upcast natural, occurring as the outer edge of the ditch eroded and perhaps undercut an adjacent bank. The outer edge of the ditch and its upper fills had been disturbed by animal burrowing 4311.

The final fill (4305) comprised dark orange-brown loams with little ironstone, similar to the overlying subsoil (4302).

Four worked flints were recovered from the outer ditch; a blade from the primary fill (4324), another blade from an upper secondary fill (4316), and a blade and a flake from the final fill (4305), and another flake came from the topsoil. These five worked flints form a third of the total of 16 flints recovered from the site.

The inner ditch was investigated in Trench 44. The ditch 4406 was 1.3m wide by 0.36m deep with a U-shaped profile. The fill (4405) contained much small ironstone, partly removed by a recut against the inner edge of the ditch, which was both narrower and a little shallower, at 0.80m wide by 0.32m deep, with a more V-shaped profile. The lower fill (4407) contained some ironstone, but perhaps largely derived from the earlier fill, while the upper fill (4404) was of dark orange-brown sandy silt with just a few pieces of ironstone. No flints or other finds were recovered.

An early Bronze Age ditch?

In Trench 34, 150m to the west of the henge, the fill (3404) of ditch 3405, contained two flint flakes and a few pottery sherds from a vessel with twisted cord decoration, suggesting a date no later than the early Bronze Age and probably, therefore, broadly contemporary with the later use of the Cotton Enclosure.

The charcoal
by Karen Stewart

Charcoal from fill (4324), sample 7, was analysed in order to identify the taxa present. All of the charcoal fragments were very small (<10mm³). All of the fragments which were of a size suitable for identification were found to be of oak (*Quercus* sp.). Very weak curvature of the growth rings was also noted in all of the fragments and this could suggest that mature oak wood was being burned, however the small size of the fragments precludes any certainty of interpretation.

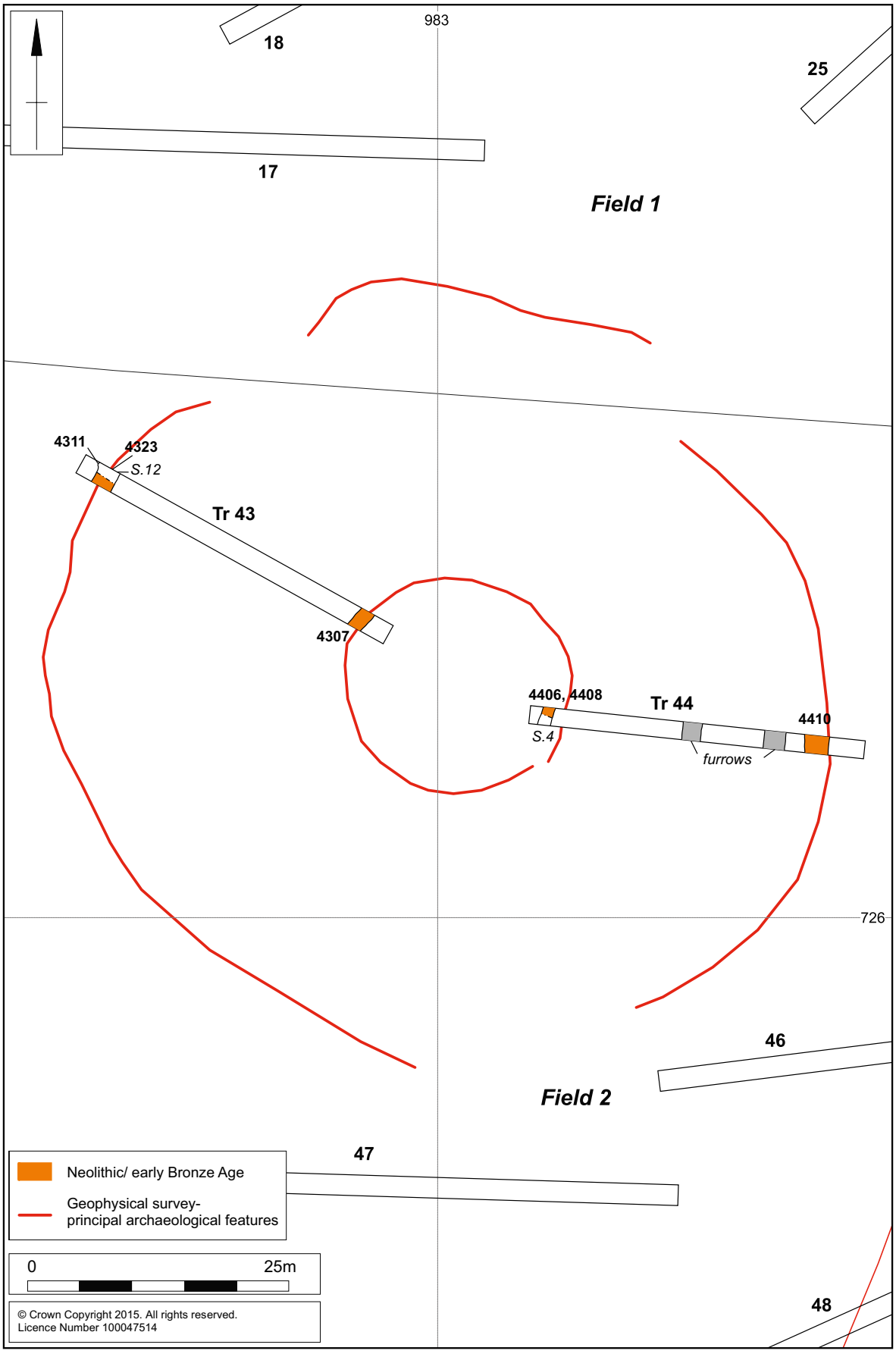


Fig 4: The Cotton Enclosure, excavated trenches 2015

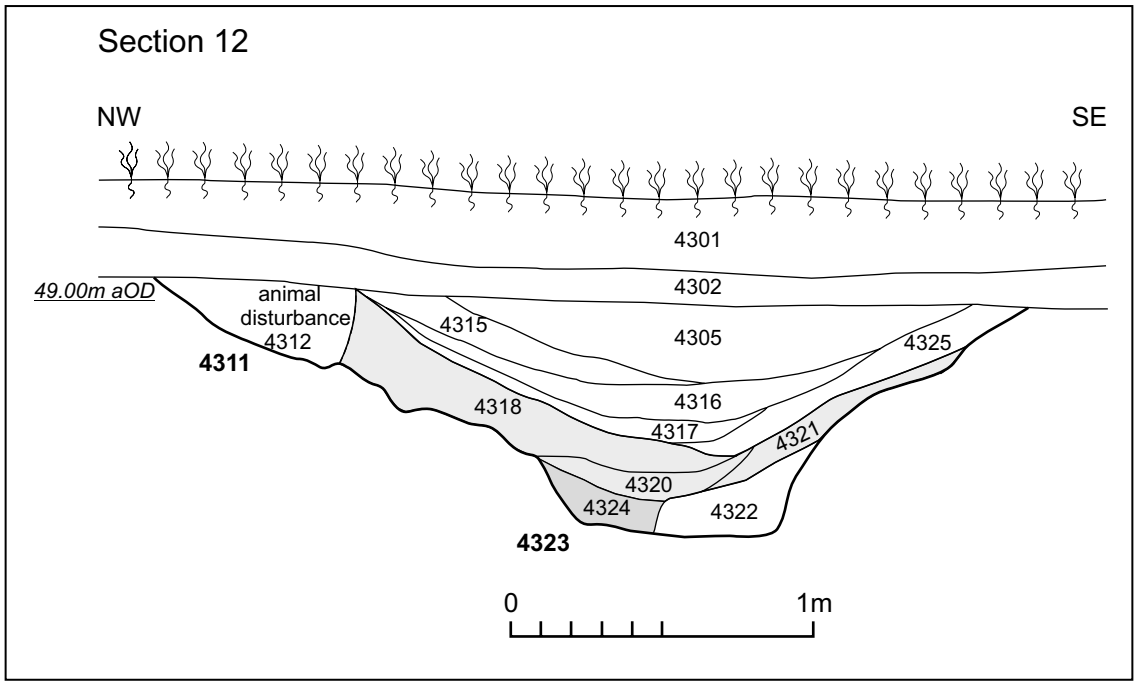


Fig 5: Section of the outer ditch

Fig 6: The outer ditch section, looking north

The radiocarbon date

Part of a sample of charcoal from mature oak (*Quercus* sp) deposited in some quantity in the primary and lower secondary fills on the outside of the outer ditch, has given a date in the early Neolithic (Cal BC 3965–3895/3880–3800, 95% confidence, 5100+/–30 BP, Beta-434723). Even making the most generous of allowances for an old wood effect, this still leaves the date comfortably within the early Neolithic (Table 1).

The context of the Cotton Enclosure

The radiocarbon date has come from a distinctive deposit within the primary and lower secondary fills of the outer ditch, which suggests that, with an allowance for an old wood effect, the charcoal is providing a sound date for the creation of the monument. The Cotton 'Henge' (Humble 1994) with its continuous outer and inner ditches was never a comfortable fit within the definition of classic henges, as was noted by Humble in his report (1994).

The radiocarbon date in the early Neolithic has shown that at least the outer ditch formed a roughly circular monument, 70–75m in diameter, which could now be called the Cotton Enclosure, which was closely contemporary with the earliest elements of the nearby monument complex at West Cotton (Harding and Healy 2007 and Harding and Healy 2011, 144–150).

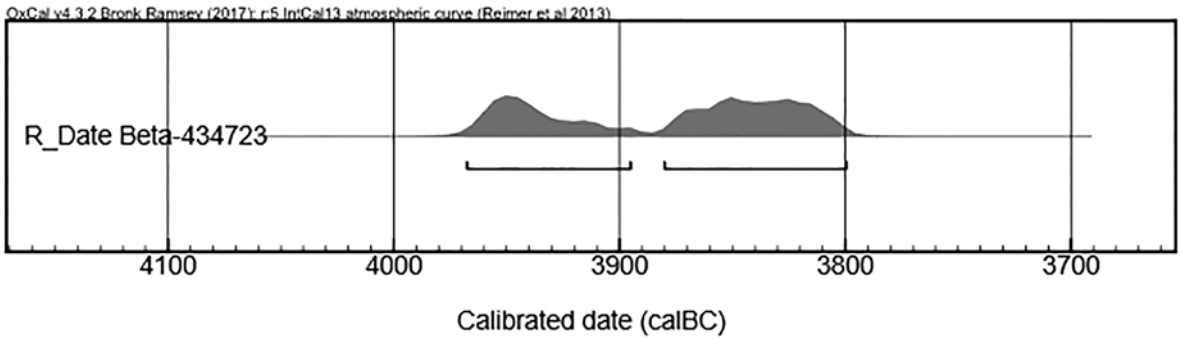
Most directly, it was broadly contemporary with the Long Mound at West Cotton, a mound 135m long aligned a little north of east–west and pointing directly towards the Cotton Enclosure on the hillside above (Harding and Healy 2007, fig 1.4). It can now be suggested that these were closely contemporary in origin, with the alignment an intended part of the design. The Turf Mound to the south of the Long Mound was also contemporary, as was the construction of the Long Barrow at Stanwick, the southern end of the monument complex, and the Avenue (Harding and Healy 2007, fig 3.6, 53–54).

The inner ditch at the Cotton Enclosure, 21m in diameter, could be a later addition to the monument, as has been suggested for the inner ditch within the early Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Dallington, Northampton (RCHME 1985, fig 2), with this and the Briar Hill causewayed enclosure, also at Northampton (Bamford 1986), both being broadly contemporary with the Cotton Enclosure. However, whether these are late Neolithic/early Bronze Age henges or some form of circular ring ditch of the middle Neolithic or even the early Bronze Age, remains to be determined.

More broadly, with the Cotton Enclosure dated to the early Neolithic it now joins the other known early Neolithic enclosures along the Nene valley (Deegan and Foard 2007, 46–48). At Northampton, there is the causewayed enclosure at Briar Hill, Northampton (SP 7365

Table 1: Radiocarbon date for the Cotton Enclosure

Lab & Sample No.	**Context**	**Sample details**	**d13C**	**Conventional Radiocarbon Age BP**	Cal BC intercept 68% confidence **95% confidence**
Beta-434723 RWP15/7	Primary fill (4324) Outer ditch 4323	Charcoal (Quercus sp) Mature oak	–25.2	5100+/-30	3950 3960-3935 & 3870-3810 **3965-3895 (37%) & 3880-3800 (58%)**



5925), which sat on the southern slopes above the river (Bamford 1986). There is now a further probable causewayed enclosure to the east of Wellingborough (SP 9159 6776), which is under excavation at the moment (MOLA Northampton pers comm August 2017), This sits on the lower slopes immediately above the floodplain, and is *c.*270m long and at least 130m wide, enclosing an area of around 3ha. There is also a further causewayed enclosure at Southwick (TL 0410 9296), at the northern end of the county. These lie at intervals of 20km, Briar Hill to Wellingborough East; 8km Wellingborough East to Raunds, Cotton Enclosure and 22km Raunds, Cotton Enclosure to Southwick. This could be seen as perhaps indicating the presence of major Neolithic centres at intervals of around 10km, with a number of comparable sites still to be identified to fill the gaps. However, the location of the known sites can also be seen to have a topographically basis, with each of the Neolithic enclosures situated close to the confluence of a tributary river with the main course of the Nene, which inevitably imposes a certain regularity of spacing from the nature of the topography and the spacing of the river tributaries between blocks of higher ground.

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