# V

# THE SETTLEMENT AT CHESTER HOUSE, NORTHUMBERLAND

*Neil Holbrook*

## INTRODUCTION

A FOUR week excavation was undertaken in August 1985 by the Archaeological Unit for North East England upon the settlement enclosure at Chester House Farm, near Acklington, Northumberland (NU 237 025). The site lay in an area scheduled for development by British Coal and was excavated as part of a programme to investigate problems of the chronology and subsistence base of Iron Age and Romano-British settlement in the North-East.

It is a pleasure to record my thanks to British Coal and in particular to Mr. D. Stone of the Opencast Executive and his staff. British Coal generously financed the entire project and were of the utmost assistance during the course of the excavation. Thanks are also due to Colm O'Brien, the Unit Director, who coordinated the project, to Chris Smith who commented on an earlier draft of the text and to Professor George Jobey who gave me the benefit of his unrivalled experience. Lastly, but not least, I should also like to thank the people who worked on the site: Paul Harrison, Bill Hubbard, Maxine Moralee, Jonathan Pegg, Henry Stevens and Heather Wallis.

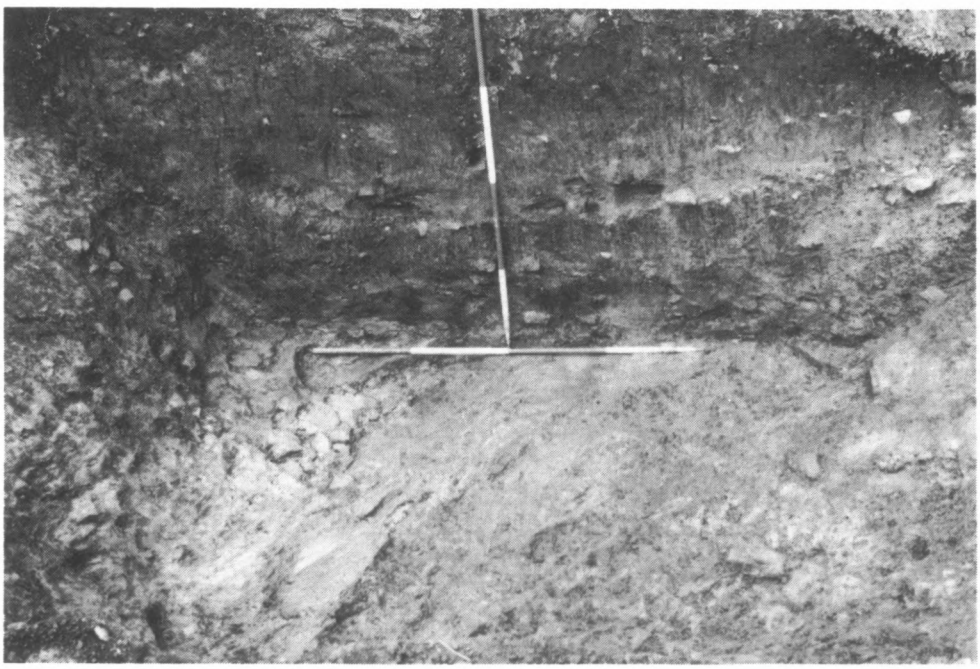
## THE SITE

The site, visible only as a crop-mark, was discovered in 1977 during aerial survey by Tim Gates (plate IIIa), although the existence of an earthwork hereabouts had been postulated in 1947 by A. H. A. Hogg (1947, 166) who suggested that the "Chester" element of the place name indicated a (now destroyed) earthwork.

The cropmarks revealed a 0·2 ha rectilinear enclosure, defined by a wide ditch with a 11·4 m wide entrance on its eastern side. A single round house was also visible in the interior. The enclosure lay on the summit of a slight rise (41 m above sea level and 4·8 km from the sea) characteristic of the coastal plain (fig. 1). The natural subsoil is a glacial till and this varied in the area of the excavation from a thick stony boulder clay to a coarse gravel, while on the eastern side of the enclosure a friable, laminated sandstone outcropped. Lenses of the underlying coal measures also appear on the till. Because of its slightly elevated location the site is well drained and the surrounding area has good agricultural potential, being previously designated Grade Two agricultural land.

The archaeological deposits have been heavily affected by agriculture, all upstanding strata having been removed by deep ploughing.

a) Chester House: The Cropmarks. Photograph T. Gates.



b) Enclosure Ditch by the North Terminal.

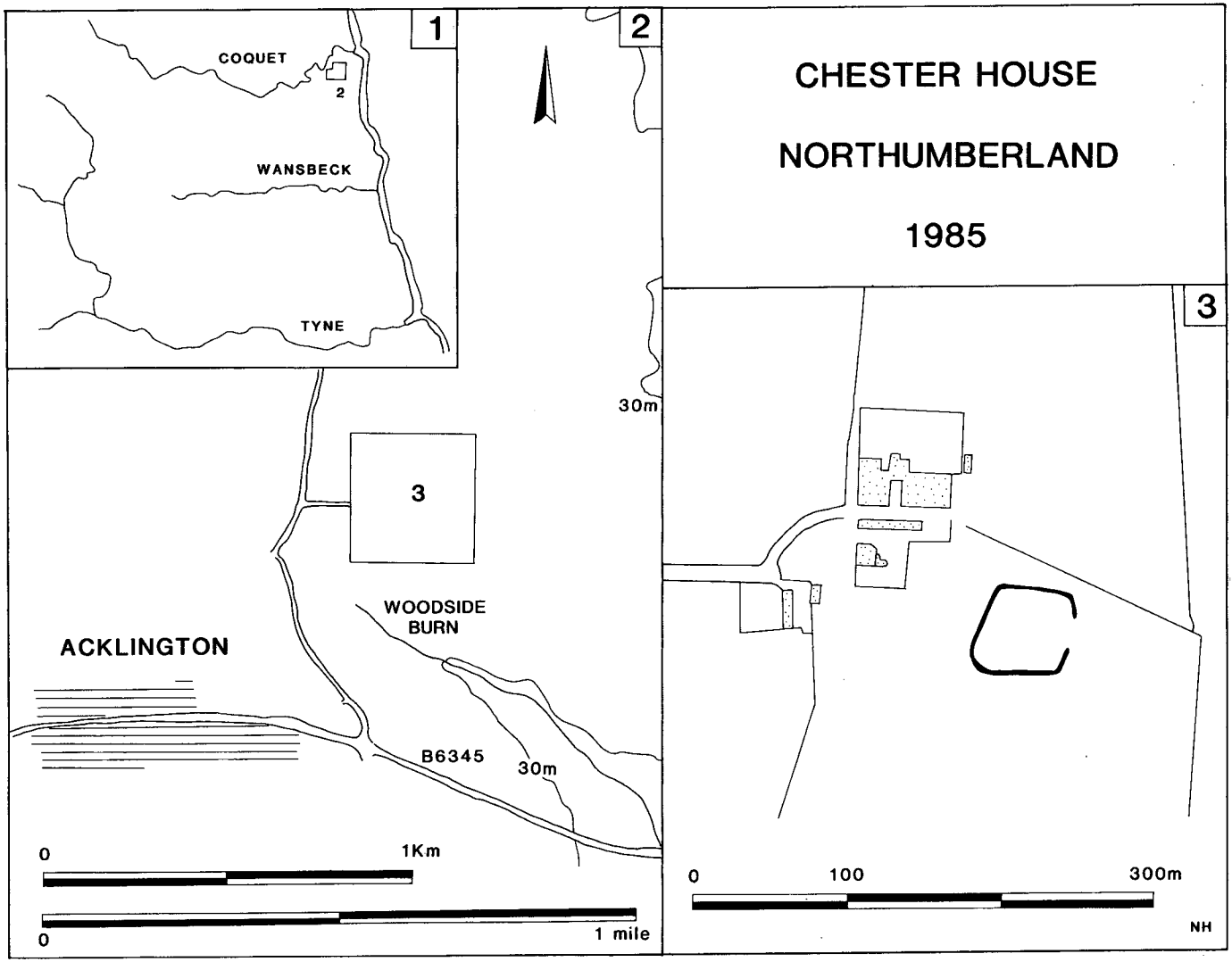



Fig. 1. Chester House: Site Location.

The cultivation of this area may well be of some antiquity as Chester House itself incorporates earlier masonry in its south-west corner, and also contains an internal rock-cut well. The date of this earlier structure is unknown but the place name demonstrates that at the time of its construction the enclosure was still a visible monument. Two broad furrows on an east–west alignment were found in the excavations and these are possibly the remnants of rig and furrow agriculture which occurred after the levelling of the enclosure (section 2, fig. 5).

## THE EXCAVATION

An area of *c.* 650 square metres of the interior of the enclosure was stripped (a third of the internal area) as well as *c.* 200 square metres immediately to the north-west of the enclosure (fig. 2). Initial investigation revealed that beneath the modern plough soil (100) there was an earlier plough soil (101) which pre-dated a system of nineteenth century field drains. This plough soil directly overlay the natural subsoil and was removed by mechanical excavator, the surface of the natural then being cleaned by hand. An enclosure ditch, a palisade and parts of 3 house foundations were identified. There were no artefacts to date the occupation, though it is hoped that some fragments of charcoal recovered may be used for radiocarbon dating as part of a separate study.

*External Features* (fig. 2)
In the area examined to the north-west of the enclosure (Area A) the only features discovered were small spreads of charcoal and red burnt clay (102), possibly daub, 5·3 m west of the enclosure ditch. These patches had an average diameter of *c.* 100 mm and a maximum depth of 5 mm. It is difficult to assign any significance to such a small amount of material and it is by no means sure that it can definitely be associated with the enclosure. Elsewhere in Area A the effect of modern ploughing has been so severe that had any traces of early agriculture existed they would have been completely destroyed.

*Enclosure Ditch and Palisade* (figs. 2, 3) (plate IIIb)
The enclosure ditch was sectioned in two places: at the north-west corner and by the northern terminal at the entrance. The ditch was 6·9–8·0 m wide and had a depth below natural of 1·50–1·74 m. At the terminal it was totally rock cut through the outcropping sandstone, while in the north-west corner the subsoil was boulder clay overlying siltstone. The fill of the two ditch sections was similar and so only the section by the terminal is illustrated (section 1, fig. 3).

The bottom of the ditch was perfectly clean with no trace of any organic refuse and was overlain by 0·45 m of primary silting. This comprised a very thick, compacted, grey silt which contained abundant flecks of coal and small sandstone fragments (110). In the top of this layer numerous brown streaks were visible which may indicate that the surface dried and cracked after deposition, thus allowing oxidization to occur. The silt was covered by a layer of dirty sand and decayed sandstone which had slumped in from the outside of the ditch (146). This material probably derived from an external

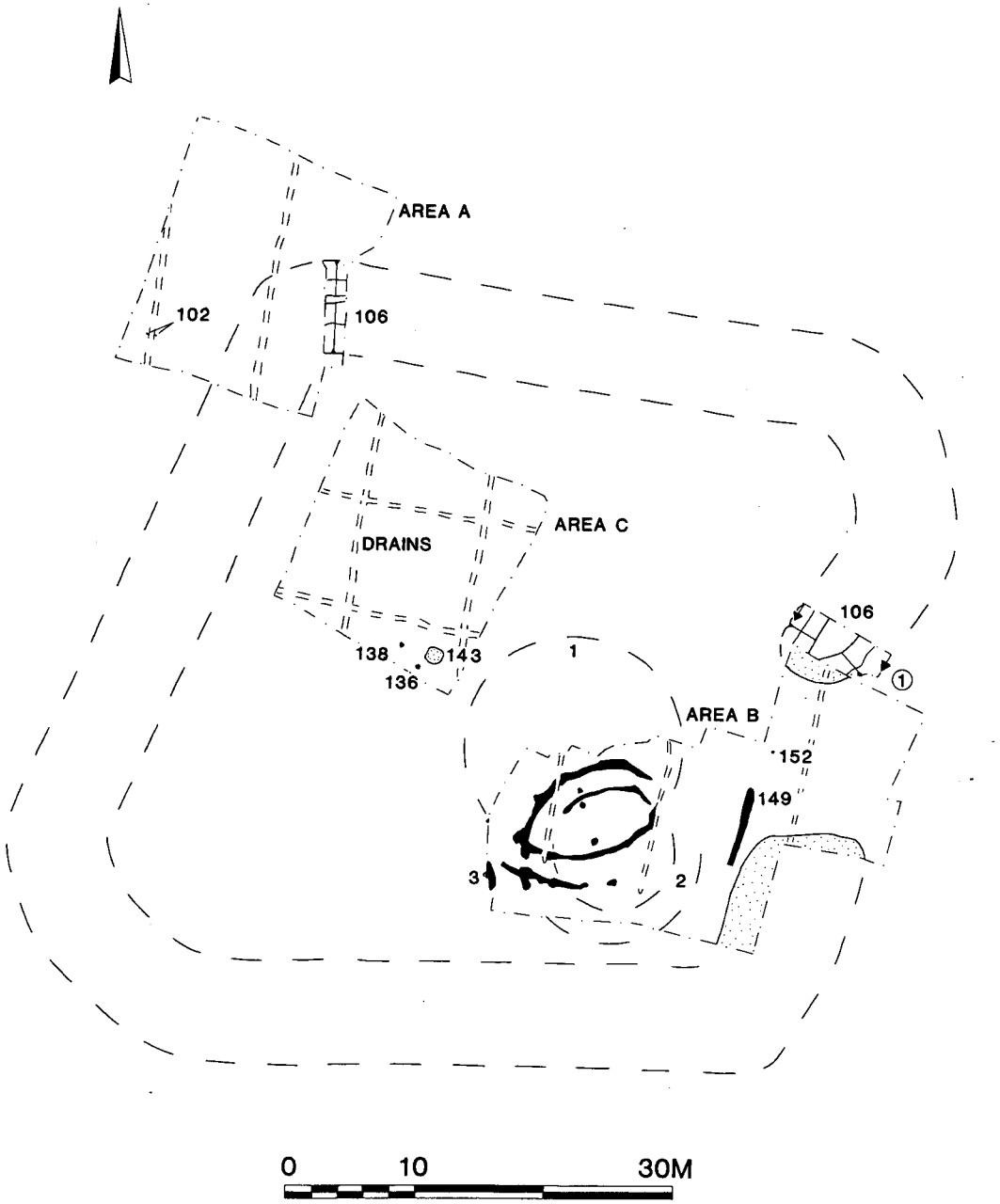



Fig. 2. Areas of Excavation.

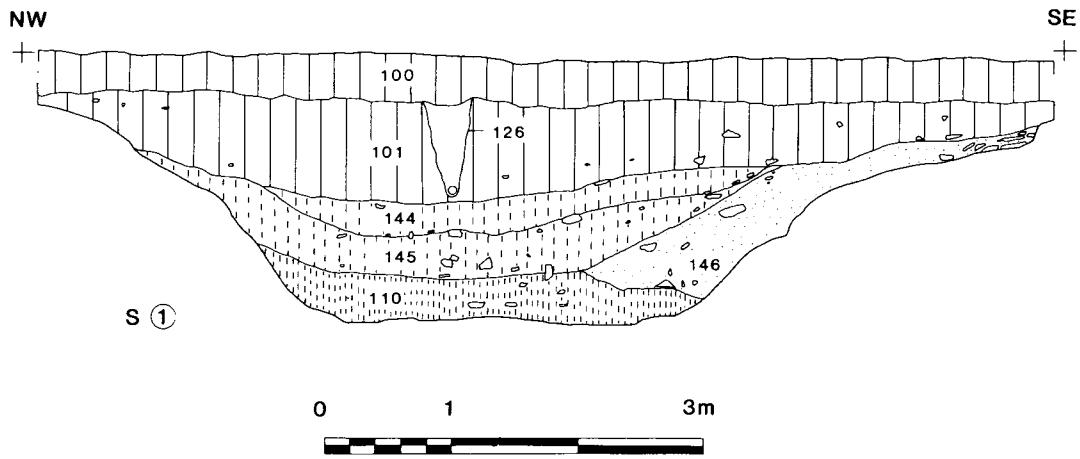



Fig. 3. Section 1. The Enclosure Ditch.

counterscarp bank composed of sandstone fragments which had subsequently eroded into the ditch. This material was overlain by a layer of light grey silt which contained an abundant amount of sandstone fragments as well as some large boulders, of average dimensions 0·7 m × 0·4 m × 0·5 m (145). Much of this material probably derived from an internal bank, the presence of which is suggested by the lengths of palisade at the entrance. This material is more likely to be the product of the deliberate slighting of the internal bank into the ditch (hence the boulders) than simply natural erosion alone. There seems no reason why this should have occurred before the onset of subsequent cultivation on the site, and so is likely to date to a period long after occupation of the enclosure had ceased. This layer was in turn overlain by up to 0·23 m of cleaner silt (144) before up to 0·82 m of plough soil was deposited over the whole ditch (101). This predates the laying of the field drains (126). No evidence was found in either section for the ditch ever having been recut.

On the southern side of the entrance a palisade trench was identified just inside the inner lip of the ditch (149). The trench was 0·5 m wide and up to 0·17 m deep with steep sides and a flattish bottom. Its northward limit was defined by a definite terminal, but southwards it simply faded out after 6·2 m. Considering both the shallow depth of the trench and the fact that the ground level fell away slightly at this point it is always possible that this feature did continue southwards although unfortunately time did not allow further investigation. The palisade trench certainly did not exist inside the north-west corner of the enclosure, however, where an area was carefully examined for any trace of it. In the 1·28 m of the trench emptied no post-settings could be determined and the fill (148) contained only small stones, so it is likely that it held a continuous row of posts. If a gate existed at the entrance (as seems probable) no firm evidence could be found for it, except possibly for a single post-hole (152), 0·1 m in diameter and 0·1 m deep, which lay 3·0 m north of the southern palisade terminal.

Two interpretations of the palisade can be suggested. If the palisade proved to be

continuous it could have formed a distinct enclosure which preceded that defined by the bank and ditch, but nevertheless which showed the same alignment and position of the entrance. A sequence such as this is known from a small number of sites in North Tynedale (Jobey, 1978, 24–7). The absence of the palisade trench at the north-west corner suggests that this may not have been the case, however, and that a palisade trench dug into natural existed only for short lengths by the entrance. Their purpose would have been to close down the wide entrance causeway, but there would not have been a continuous trench because away from the entrance the palisade would have surmounted the internal bank. This arrangement has been found elsewhere in the coastal plain at Marden and Burradon (Jobey, 1963, 24; 1970, 56). It is thus likely that there was only a single period enclosure at Chester House which comprised a large ditch with both counterscarp and internal bank, the latter surmounted by a palisade of continuous timbers. No evidence was forthcoming for the width of the internal bank, which varied from as little as *c.* 1·5 m at Belling Law where it was revetted with large boulders, to *c.* 5 m at Marden where it had been almost completely ploughed out (Jobey, 1977, 8; 1963, 24).

*The Interior* (figs. 2, 4)

An area of *c.* 250 square metres (Area C) was stripped towards the back of the enclosure in an attempt to see if any evidence was forthcoming on the functions performed there. As with many other sites of this type, however, the structural evidence was largely negative, the only features identified lying in the corner of the area which lay nearest the round houses. A small pit (143) and two post-holes were identified. The post-holes (136, 138) lay 1·64 m apart and were 0·38–0·44 m in diameter and *c.* 0·25 m deep. As they lay close to the edge of excavation it is possible that they formed part of a larger complex, although a comparable two post structure has been found at Burradon (Jobey, 1970, 69). Some form of above ground storage is a commonly favoured explanation for such structures although obviously a wide range of superstructures and functions are possible (Ellison and Drewett 1971, 189).

A second area (Area B) was excavated to examine the round house visible on the aerial photograph as well as the enclosure entrance. In fact evidence was found for at least two, and probably three, round houses.

*House 1*

This house proved to be the one visible on the aerial photograph; it was also the earliest examined. It was defined by two concentric trenches, *c.* 1·65 m apart. Their form indicates that they represent a ring groove and eavesdrip gully rather than the house being of the double walled variety outlined by Guilbert (1981, 299). Both the ring groove and gully had been heavily damaged by ploughing so that only segments survived. The ring groove (139) was a trench 0·30–0·35 m wide and 0·25–0·35 m deep, and had an estimated internal diameter of *c.* 16·8 m (section 2, fig. 5). The groove was given a pronounced V-shaped profile by the placing of rectangular fragments of fractured sandstone along its sides to produce a much narrower slot with a width at the top of *c.* 0·11 m. No post-settings could be determined within the trench so it presumably held a continuous row of split and sharpened timbers. The fill of the

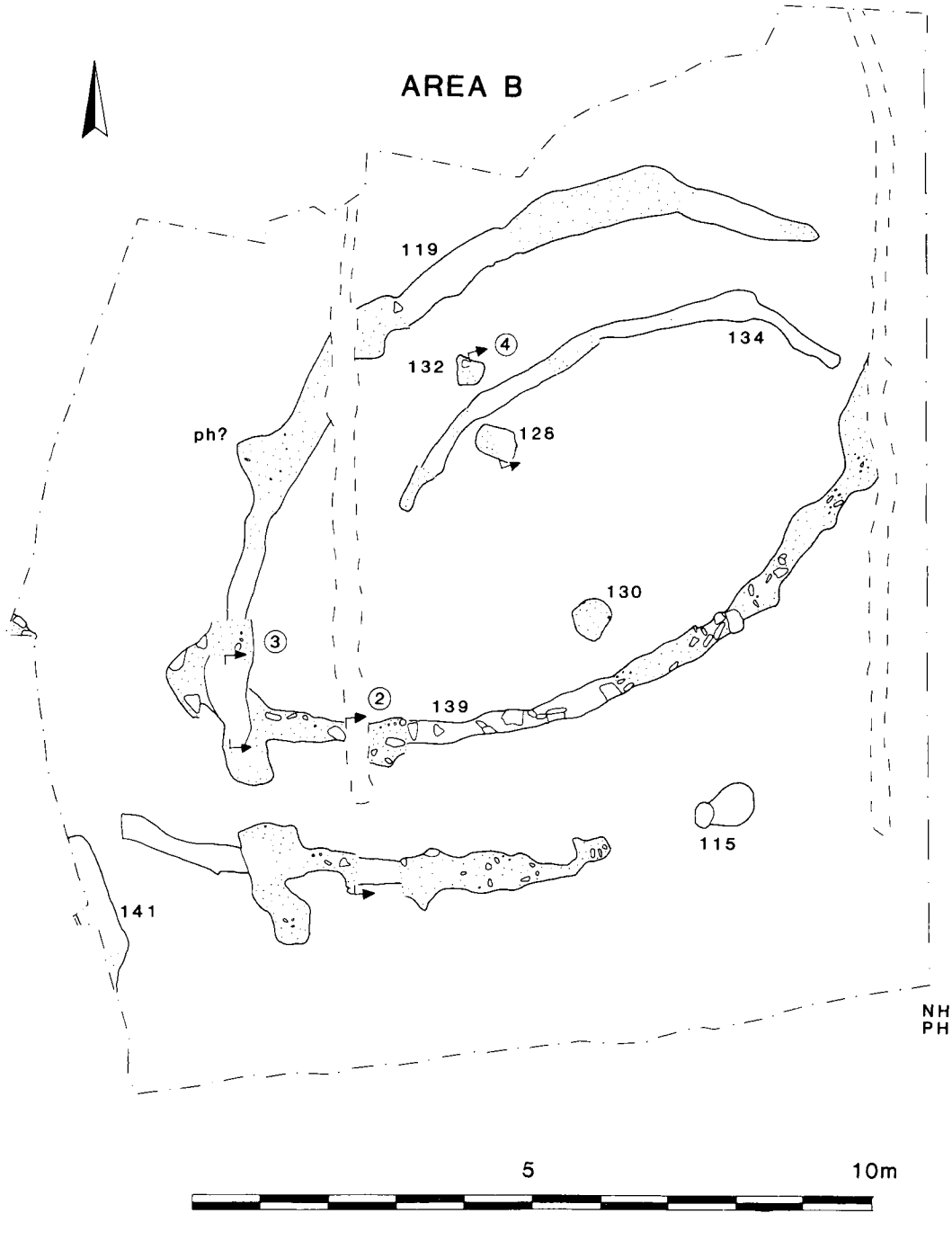



Fig. 4. Area B: Plan.

trench consisted of disturbed packing stones set in a dirty grey clay (116). While some of these stones may have been disturbed by the plough others represent a deliberate infilling of the trench and indicate the subsequent removal of the timbers. The eavesdrip gully (120) was *c.* 0·3 m wide and very shallow (maximum depth 0·15 m), which explains why traces of it are absent over large areas. It was filled with a soft silt which contained occasional sandstone fragments (118).

The diameter of the ring groove lies towards the upper limit of round house sizes in northern Britain although it can be paralleled at West Brandon B, County Durham, diameter of ring groove 15·2 m and Scotstarvit I, Fife, diameter 19 m (Jobey, 1962, 16; Bersu, 1947–8, 247). In both these houses, however, it was necessary to have two concentric rows of internal roof supports. This reduced to one row in smaller houses, such as West Plean II, Stirlingshire, diameter 11·6 m, and Apperley Dene, County Durham, diameter 11·5 m (Steer, 1955–6, 234; Greene, 1978, 40). At Scotstarvit I the outer of the two rows of internal posts lay 3 m within the ring groove. Of the post-holes discovered in the central area the ones which best fit into such a pattern at Chester House are 128 and 132. One of these post-holes may be the replacement of the other. Post-hole 128 lay 3·4 m within the ring groove, had a diameter of 0·5 m and a maximum depth of 0·3 m. Its fill contained some disturbed packing stones, once again indicative of the deliberate removal of the timber (section 4, fig. 5). Another possible post-hole of this outer row may have been that intersected by the gully of House 2. This lay *c.* 3 m from 128 although as this feature was not fully excavated the identification cannot be certain. On the eastern side of the house the ring groove had been completely destroyed and so further post-holes of the outer row may not have been preserved in this area. The centre of the round house lay just outside the excavation area and an inner row of internal supports, if they were preserved, may have lain likewise.

The fragmentary evidence of House 1 at Chester House therefore suggests that it does fall into the Scotstarvit I/West Brandon B type of construction, the addition of an eavesdrip gully reflecting nothing more than the clay subsoil upon which it was founded.

*House 2*

House 2 also consisted of two roughly concentric trenches, 0·78–1·56 m apart, which are once again to be interpreted as ring groove and gully. The eavesdrip gully of House 2 cut the ring groove of House 1, thus showing it to be later (section 3, fig. 5). The eavesdrip gully also intersected the gully of House 1 but their relationship could not be determined unequivocally at this point owing to the similarity in their fills. The ring groove (134) had a smaller diameter than House 1 (*c.* 9·3 m cf. *c.* 16·8 m) and its centre lay to the south-east of the earlier one. It consisted of a steep sided trench with rounded bottom, maximum width 0·45 m, and depth 0·35 m (section 4, fig. 5). Only a segment of the ring groove was preserved but on the eastern side a definite terminal was found indicating an east facing entrance. No deeper post setting was found here and indeed the groove decreased in depth to 0·2 m at the terminal. The ring groove contained no packing stones and had a fill of a dirty grey clay (133). The eavesdrip gully (119) was broad and shallow (width up to 0·60 m, maximum depth 0·20 m) and

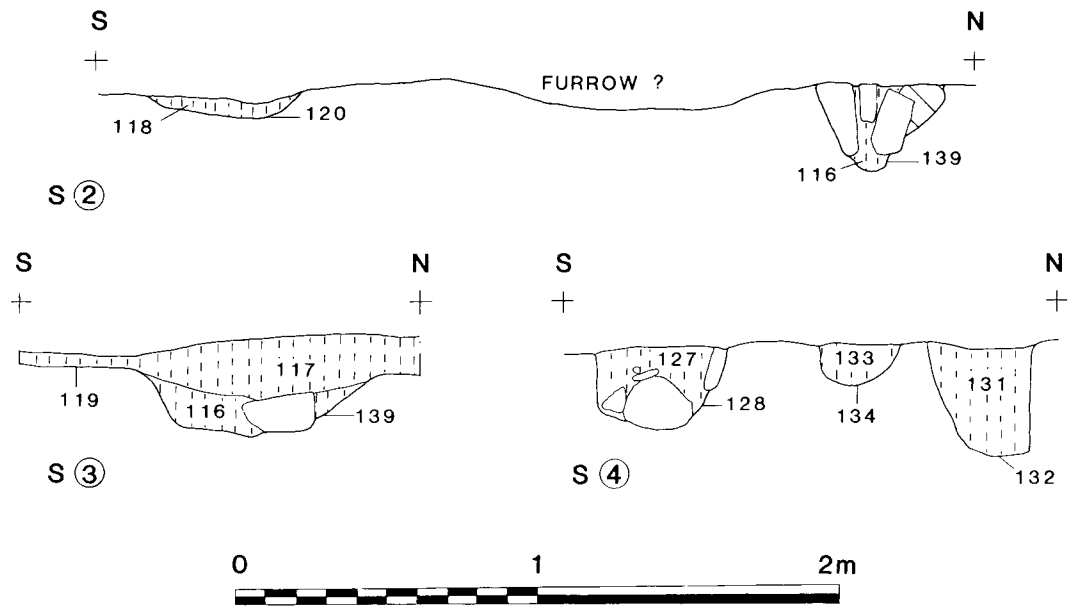



Fig. 5. Sections 2, 3, 4: Area B.

had a similar silt fill to the gully of House 1. There was no evidence of the gully becoming deeper on the western side of the house as was found at Burradon (Jobey, 1970, 56). No post-holes were found which could be securely associated with this house although considering the slight depths of the ring groove and gully, and their total absence in the southern part of the area, all traces could easily have been lost.

*House 3*

At the western limit of Area B a trench of a probable third house was identified. This consisted of a V-shaped slot, 0·29 m wide and 0·4 m deep (141), filled with a light brown silt with abundant small stones. As only a very small length of the trench lay within the excavation area it is impossible to be sure that it does represent another house, and if so, to estimate its diameter. Nevertheless the attribution does seem probable, and the form of the trench would appear to be more likely a ring groove than gully. If the latter existed no trace of it survived.

*Other Features*

The only other features identified in Area B (other than field drains) were four post-holes. Post-holes 128 and 132 have been argued to relate to House 1 while the significance of the other two remains unclear. Post-hole 130 was shallow, having a maximum depth of 0·20 m while 115 was 0·3 m in diameter and more than 0·84 m deep.

## DISCUSSION

House 1 has been shown to be earlier than House 2. House 1 also cannot have coexisted with House 3 for if their ring grooves are restored to their original circumference it transpires that one house will have overlain part of the other. It is probable that House 3 is the later of the two for in the area of intersection its ring groove survived to a depth of 0·4 m whereas all traces of House 1 had disappeared. House 3 could be contemporary with House 2 although the point is not proven.

If the eavesdrip gully of House 2 is restored it is apparent that there would have been a gap of only *c.* 1·6 m between its most southerly limit and the inner edge of the enclosure ditch (as plotted from the aerial photograph and the width of the ditch in the two excavated sections). It has been argued above that the enclosure possessed an internal bank and if an allowance of *c.* 2–3 m is made for this it follows that the bank would have overlain the southern part of House 2. House 2 must thus predate the enclosure (it can hardly be later).

If House 2 is earlier than the enclosure so too must be House 1. Nothing can be proved about the relationship of House 3 although it does lie more to one side of the enclosure than is perhaps normal for an internal house. The initial colonization of the Chester House site is therefore marked by at least two and possibly three phases of unenclosed settlement. This was succeeded by the construction of a rectilinear enclosure with which no houses can be certainly associated.

The earliest occupation appears to have taken the form of a single unenclosed round house of large diameter (House 1). While there may have been other contemporary houses which lay outside the excavation area had they been of similar construction (stone-packed ring grooves) they might have been expected to be visible on the aerial photograph. The single unenclosed house is a fairly common settlement type in Northumberland and, Gates's (1983, 110) survey of the county indicates that more than 50% of all known unenclosed settlements consisted of only a single house. The 16·8 m diameter, which is large by Romano-British standards, also fits better into an earlier context (ibid., fig. 3).

This single house is best seen as the residence of a large extended family although certain areas may have been given over to other functions, such as the indoor stalling of cattle through winter.

House 1 was replaced by House 2 and the evidence from the former of the deliberate removal of timbers suggests that there cannot have been a significant time lapse between their construction. As such this may be used as evidence in favour of the more or less continuous, rather than widely spaced periodic, occupation of the site in the pre-enclosure phase. House 2 represents a 70% drop in covered area from House 1 although this may be compensated by an increase in the number of houses. These could include House 3 and others which lay outside the excavation area. If (like House 2) they lacked packing stones in their ring grooves it is unlikely that they would have been visible on the aerial photograph.

Gates's (ibid., fig. 1) distribution map of unenclosed settlement in Northumberland shows an overwhelming concentration of sites in the uplands, with only six sites known below the 400 ft (122 m) contour. As Gates readily admits, however, this

distribution is more apparent than real for it largely reflects varying patterns of subsequent land use. Whereas in the uplands most of the sites are still visible as extant monuments these have long since disappeared on the coastal plain through centuries of ploughing. Equally, by the nature of their insubstantial remains this type of site is not well suited to recognition by aerial photography. However, an insight can be gained into their true lowland distribution by virtue of the fact that unenclosed settlements have now been found fortuitously beneath three later rectilinear enclosures (Burradon, Hartburn and now Chester House) (Jobey, 1970, 61; 1973, 49). Unfortunately it must be stressed that at none of these sites is the relationship totally unambiguous. At Burradon the existence of an unenclosed settlement depends upon the interpretation of the twin perimeters as representing either a single or two distinct phases of construction. The similarity of plan of the two perimeters, and especially the identical treatment of the entrance ways favours their contemporaneity, and in this case they can be considered to form a double banked and ditched enclosure of the Iron Age/Romano-British period. This would then place the series of houses which underlie the inner perimeter as a period of earlier unenclosed settlement. The native pottery recovered from these houses has been considered by Gates (1983, 106) to be far too early for an Iron Age/Romano-British context but would not be out of place in the early first millennium B.C. A similar argument ensues for Hartburn where pottery similar to that at Burradon was also recovered.

The Burradon and Hartburn pottery is therefore the only dating evidence currently available for unenclosed settlement on the coastal plain. The chronological insensitivity of native pottery in this region is well known but it does appear to indicate a first millennium B.C. date for these sites. This can be compared with Gates's (ibid., 117) overall date range of 1750–450 B.C. (on calibrated median dates) to suggest at least the possibility that unenclosed settlement on the coastal plain may not be as early as that in the uplands. These settlements could in fact prove to be related to the first substantial clearance and settlement of the coastal plain for, while earlier Bronze Age pottery is known from the area, there is as yet a dearth of settlement sites to go with it (Burgess, 1984, 182, fig. 8.6). The absence of dated pollen cores from the coastal plain is regrettable in this respect. Little can be said at present about the economy of the unenclosed settlements. However, bulk samples of sediment were processed for environmental remains and the results of these analyses will be published as part of a regional study by M. van der Veen.

There was almost certainly a period of abandonment of the Chester House site before the construction of the 0·2 ha banked and ditched enclosure for while this type may not now be exclusive to the Roman period it is unlikely to be considerably earlier. Such enclosures have generally been considered as non-defensive in nature, being designed to facilitate drainage and discourage wild animals. The ditch at Chester House seems excessively large if this was its sole function, however, and the element of prestige should perhaps also be considered.

In many respects the enclosure at Chester House is typical of those settlements of the Late Iron Age/Romano-British period found on the coastal plain between Tyne and Forth (Jobey, 1982), 19). The problem of the apparent absence of associated houses is best resolved by considering them to have been stone built. Evidence from

extant examples in the uplands shows that stone-built houses had no construction trenches and so, if they had been totally robbed or ploughed away, no trace would survive in the subsoil, other than perhaps a couple of post-holes marking the doorway. It must be stated, however, that there was absolutely no stray stone lying around the site or pushed into the subsoil such as was found at Doubstead and which Jobey (ibid., 7) took to be indicative of ploughed out stone houses. The absence of stock yards at the front of the site, which is unusual, may tend towards a more arable economy for the site or else a different method of cattle stalling. Finally, it should be noted that there was a total absence of finds, stone, ceramic or faunal, from the site. Whereas the lack of faunal remains is related to the acidity of the subsoil, the absence of the other types requires comment. In itself the absence of finds is not that unusual for many sites have produced little or no material. At Chester House the phenomenon may in part be a function of the heavy erosion of archaeological features that has occurred and perhaps may also be related to the excavation strategy. The house gullies were the features thought most likely to produce artefacts although only 4% of the estimated circumference of the gully of House 1 was emptied and 14% of that of House 2. As such the absence of finds need be no more than an accident.

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