

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGY

THE TIMBER CIRCLE AT HOLME-NEXT-THE-SEA

by Mark Brennand

The site is located within an eroding peat bed on the beach at Holme-next-the-Sea, on the north-west coast of Norfolk (SMR Site 33771). The preserved remains of a circle of oak timbers surrounding an inverted oak tree bole were first reported to the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) in August 1998. Preliminary survey and sampling commissioned by English Heritage were undertaken by the NAU in the autumn of 1998 and the preliminary results of a radiocarbon dating programme suggest the circle was constructed between 1800 and 2200 cal. BC. The preservation of the 4000-year-old timber monument is unique in Britain. The peat layer that had protected the timbers in an anaerobic environment has been eroded away and it was realised that the site was under immediate threat of destruction. At the time of writing a programme of conservation and relocation has been approved and rescue excavation of the timbers, funded by English Heritage, is being undertaken. The timbers are being taken to Flag Fen for preservation and analysis before they undergo conservation and, it is hoped, are returned to a secure location within the region of the original site.

With a maximum diameter of 6.60m the circle (which is really an ellipse) is relatively small. The circumference is outlined by fifty-five oak posts. The upper, exposed, parts of the posts are severely eroded, but beneath the ground the timber posts are exceptionally well preserved and bark and tool marks are present. The posts are mostly tree trunks or large branches, split down



Plate 1 The timber circle before work began (October 1998), looking south-west. The central upturned oak bole is clearly visible. To its left lies a ship's timber of recent date.

Scale = 2m. *Photo: 33771HNS/9 by Mark Brennand*

the centre and positioned with the bark to the outside and the split face to the inside, thus creating a continuous wall of bark to the external viewer. The posts are touching each other; there is no break in the circumference and no immediately obvious entranceway into the centre. The posts are embedded into a construction trench which had been cut into the basal silt for a depth of 1m; the posts may have stood at least 2m high. This suggests that once all the timbers were in place there would have been no access into the centre, and vision into the middle would probably have been restricted. The central feature is an inverted oak tree bole with a maximum diameter of 1.20m. This is encircled at its base by strands of interwoven honeysuckle, possibly the rope used to manoeuvre the tree. Both the manner in which the posts were set and the form of the central timber are unique features with no known direct parallel in Britain.

There have been numerous suggestions as to the structure's function and its significance to its builders. While the monument has been dubbed 'Seahenge' by the press there is no surviving evidence for a ditch and bank surrounding the structure and it is not, in terms of strict definition (Burl 1991), a henge monument. The site was probably situated within a partially wooded, freshwater environment which was never tidal and lay some distance from the sea. Suggestions that it was either a calendrical feature for observing the solstice or a timber store for grain both seem implausible. It does not appear to have been a site where major gatherings and ceremonies took place, at least within the circle itself. It is currently thought more likely that the site was a funerary structure or monument. The central bole may have acted as an excarnation platform for the exposure of corpses to the elements. There is no surviving evidence for this, however, and it may have been purely symbolic.

If a funerary interpretation is correct, the site provides further evidence of the exceptionally wide variation in mortuary practices and monument-building during the later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. The situation in East Anglia at this time appears to be complex and varied and does not necessarily conform well with interpretations based specifically on the Wessex region. Notably there is an absence of stone-built monuments and structures: presumably wood was predominant and hardwoods may have acted as a substitute for stone. The site will provide invaluable information on woodworking techniques, the uses to which different trees were put, and the specific manner in which elements of trees were used within monumental structures.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burl, H.A.W, 1991. *Prehistoric Henges* (Shire, Princes Risborough)