

# The Excavation of a Circular Enclosure at Horsedean Plantation, Near Chatton, Northumberland: Interim Report

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*with additional notes by Colin Burgess*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the period traditionally known as the Late Bronze Age, c. 1000–700 BC, has emerged as one difficult for study because in so many parts of the country little or nothing is known of its settlements, burials and pottery. Indeed, over much of north and west Britain knowledge of this period rests largely on its metalwork. The hiatus is all the more apparent in an area like north Northumberland, where the preceding (Early and Middle Bronze Age) and succeeding (Iron Age) periods have such rich settlement records (Burgess, 1984).

Some hope of bringing light to this Late Bronze Age gloom has in the last few years come from the identification of a class of Late Bronze Age circular enclosures epitomised by those excavated at Mucking, Essex (Jones and Bond, 1980). What may be termed Late Bronze Age *ringworks* (Burgess, 1988, forthcoming) are noticeably regular circular enclosures, defined by a ditch and bank, the latter sometimes timber revetted or reinforced, with an inner, concentric ring present at some sites (e.g. Mucking South). Diameters range from c. 50–100 + metres, and internal arrangements vary considerably. The few excavations so far carried out suggest these were protected settlements enjoying some status in the social and political system of the time to judge from their form and, often, strategic siting. While they are best known in south-east England, the excavations at Thwing (Manby, 1980) confirm the type's presence at least as far north as Yorkshire, while the early circular enclosure at Navan Rath, Co. Armagh (Lynn, 1986) appears to represent an Irish version of the form. Visually similar ring enclosures appear on air photographs throughout Britain, but though there is an obvious possibility of confusion with henges and large ring ditch barrows, as Manby has noted in the case of the Yorkshire examples (1980, 323), careful scrutiny should make it possible to separate these out.

The Horsedean enclosure was chosen by the writers from a number of possible Northumberland ringworks known from air photographs, with the hope of shedding some light on this little known period in the county.

## THE SITE

Horsedean Plantation lies some 4 km east of Wooler, midway between Fowberry Tower and Fowberry Mains (NU 031 287). From the air the site appears as a characteristically regular circular ditched enclosure with an apparent entrance causeway on the north-east. Its size (c. 80 m in diameter) is well within the limits for Late Bronze Age ringworks, while the narrowness of the defining ditch argues for a ringwork rather than a henge, and the size against a ring ditch barrow. The site occupies the top of a gentle knoll of sand and gravel on the dip slope falling from the Weetwood Fell Sandstone scarp towards the Chatton basin. This is undulating country, and the ground falls away quite steeply from the site on the west and south-west. Beyond this dip it rises again towards the Weetwood scarp some 1.5 km away. Around the rest of its perimeter the site enjoys more open aspects, the land rolling away towards the Till floodplain. Horsedean, in fact, has the river on its east and north sides, for it is here that the Till, after flowing south past Chatton turns abruptly west to cut through the Weetwood scarp. That the site also lies on an important north–south routeway is suggested by the proximity of the Devil's Causeway, passing scarcely more than 100 m to the east. In this position it could also monitor east–west traffic skirting the projection of the Weetwood scarp at Clavering, as well as the Till crossing used by the Roman road.

Ordnance Survey records note that a stone cist was uncovered on or near the site in the nineteenth century, though no details of its contents survive.

## THE 1986 EXCAVATIONS

An area 48 m east–west by 16–20 m north–south was laid out in the south-western quadrant of the site, placed so as to test the supposed entrance causeway and adjoining ditch terminal, lengths of the ditch and palisade, and an adjacent area of the interior. The work was carried out over two weeks in the second part of August. Most of the topsoil was removed by machine, and the residue removed by hand trowelling down to the natural sand and gravel. Features showed variably as discolourations in the gravel, though not nearly as well marked as might have been hoped.

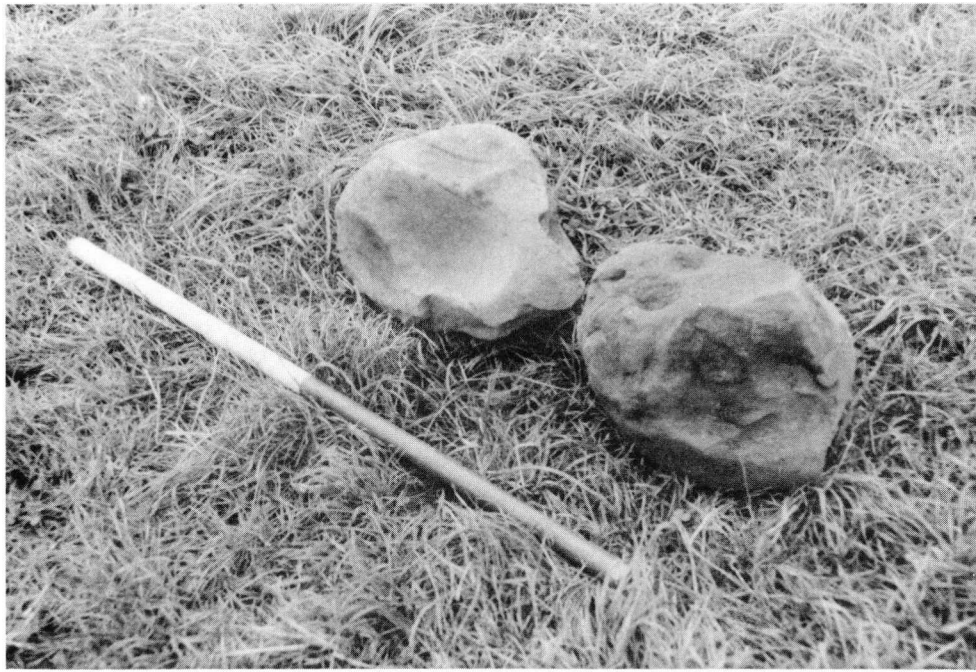


Figure 1 Polissoir and cup-marked stone from the ditch. (Oliver Doley)

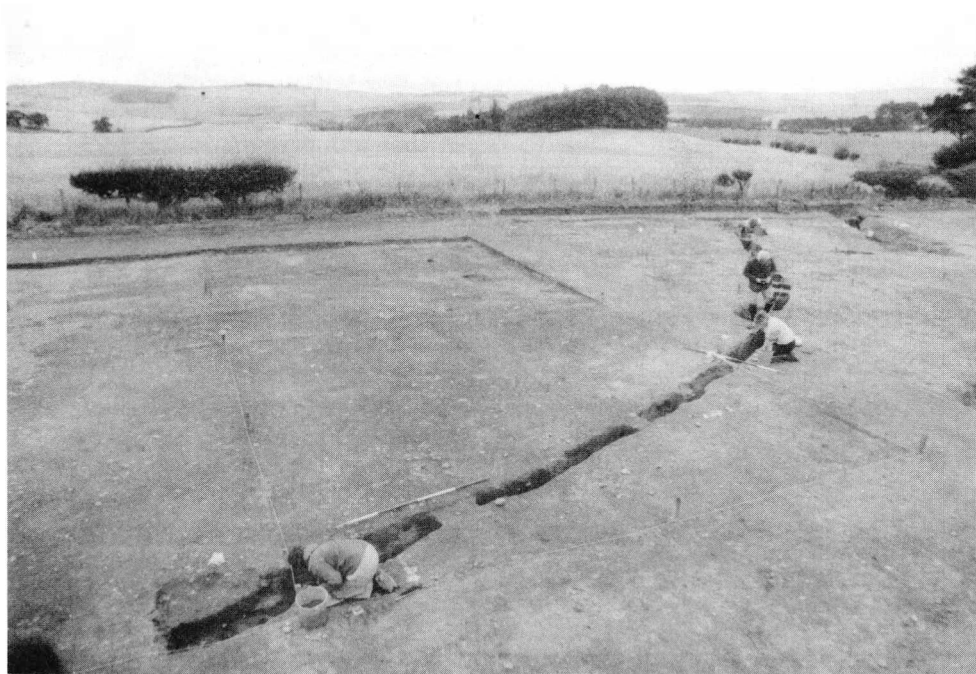


Figure 2 Palisade slot. (Oliver Doley)

### The Ditch

The ditch, averaging some 4.5 m in width, was cut to a gently sloping V-profile through beds of fluvio-glacial sands, gravels, and clays. The fill was predominantly a homogeneous red/brown sand, giving no indication whether an accompanying bank had been raised on the outside or inside margins. The causeway which appeared so positively on air photographs proved illusory: the ditch continued across its supposed position. No other causeway is visible on the air photographs; conceivably there is one concealed beneath the hedge line which traverses the site, but the question of an entrance remains open.

Within the lower ditch fill, though above its base, was found a remarkable *polissoir*, a large block covered with a variety of grinding facets (Figure 1). This level also produced a sandstone boulder with three cup-markings (Figure 1), flint flakes, but only one significant sherd: a gently incurving rim comparable with material commonly found on local palisades, hillforts, and Romano-British settlements. The primary silt did yield sufficient charcoal for C14 assay.

### The Palisade

A palisade slot lay 3 m from the inner edge of the ditch (Figure 2). Its average width was 0.5 m, its depth

c. 0.4–0.6 m, and it preserved the clear imprints of close-set vertical timbers averaging 0.2–0.3 m in diameter that appeared to have decayed *in situ*. No replacements were noted, except where the palisade passed behind the line of the supposed causeway. Here stone-packed holes for bracing posts had been replaced.

Finds from the palisade slot, in addition to charcoal and carbonised seed, included a number of flints and small body sherds in a variety of styles and fabrics.

### The Interior

Only a small area of the interior was excavated, lying immediately adjacent to the palisade and perimeter ditch. Internal features consisted only of a few scattered post-pits forming no apparent pattern. However, a small bowl furnace with a substantial quantity of iron slag indicated that this part of the site may have been reserved for industrial uses.

### Interim Conclusions

The finds indicate a number of periods of use of the site. Diagnostic flintwork, including points of leaf arrowheads, some of the pottery, and perhaps the polissoir and cup-marked stone, are appropriate to Neolithic activity, and probably earlier rather than later Neolithic since explicitly Late Neolithic pottery is absent. On the other hand there is also a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead of the Early Bronze Age, while the bowl furnace and metalworking is unlikely to be earlier than the Romano-British period (pers. comm. P. Northover). What is noticeable by its extreme paucity is the pottery which represents the local Iron Age and Romano-British traditions: the material that is so familiar on palisades, hillforts and settlements in the Border region. Some of the pottery recovered is unusually thin and fine, and there are two decorated sherds. This material does not fit well with other categories known in the region, and will clearly require further study.

Unfortunately ploughing has removed all trace of the bank and any stratigraphic relationships between the ditch and palisade, but their concentricity suggests that they may have formed part of the same defensive perimeter, or, at least, that they cannot have been too far apart in date. At first glance, however, their spacing makes no obvious structural sense. A gap of 9 m seems much too wide for a berm if the palisade was a front revetment for a rampart, but if it was a rear revetment one has to assume there was a front revetment close to the ditch which has disappeared in the eroding back of the inner lip of the ditch. Within the wider context of Late Bronze Age ringworks such a spacing seems less extraordinary, however. At Thwing the front revetment line is very close to the ditch and has eroded away in places, while at Navan the line of timbers is similarly set well back

from the ditch edge, though admittedly only 5 m away (Lynn, 1986). Reconstruction of the ringwork at Springfield, Essex (Prehistoric Society, 1987) provides another possibility for the form of the Horsedean perimeter: that a sloping bank rose from the inner edge of the ditch, either to be retained on its inner side by the palisade, or that the palisade rose through a sloping-faced dump rampart to project as a breastwork. Whether such a construction would have been possible given the friable nature of the Horsedean sands and gravels must remain a matter for speculation or experiment.

It has to be concluded that the nature and date of the Horsedean enclosure remain unclear after the 1986 excavations. Given that this spot has been occupied at several very different periods, that finds are so few, and that the small quantity of pottery is unhelpful, elucidating when the enclosure itself was built and used may eventually depend on radiocarbon dating. Having said that, nothing was found militating against this being a Late Bronze Age ringwork. The form of this site and its strategic positioning still favour this identification, while the scanty finds certainly argue against a place in the well-documented Iron Age/Romano-British sequence.

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### A NOTE ON THE 1987 EXCAVATIONS

A second season of excavations at Horsedean, scheduled to last for three weeks in August–early September, took place against a background of the wettest Border summer for decades. The impossibility of cutting the crop on the site on schedule meant that work was eventually restricted to about twelve days. Work was concentrated on the interior and sufficed to show that the effect of ploughing on the site has been so bad that nearly all traces of internal features have been lost. Finds were even fewer than in 1986, so that the importance of radiocarbon dating for determining the date of the site was further emphasised.

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