

Challenging the Past: The Resurvey of Braidwood Hillfort

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Introduction

Many of us in Scotland are familiar with the initials 'NKB' as the author of several thousand site-reports held in the National Monuments Record of Scotland, but it wasn't until 1994, on a windswept hill in Northumberland, that I was introduced to the author himself, and could at last put a face to these initials. Having completed a survey of Braidwood, a hillfort at the south-eastern end of the Pentland Hills, this encounter on Wether Hill left me with an uncanny sense of *déjà-vu*. Braidwood bears surprising similarities to the fort that crowns the summit of Wether Hill (McOmish, this volume): both have traces of a palisade trench; both have earth and stone ramparts; both contain extensive remains of timber houses; and both contain evidence of complex sequences of construction. This *Festschrift*, therefore, provides a timely opportunity to present the results of the resurvey of Braidwood hillfort, and review earlier fieldwork at the site.

Site history

Braidwood lies a short distance to the north of the A702 between Silverburn and Nine Mile Burn, and is one of a number of forts set on low hills rising from the foot of the eastern flanks of the Pentland Hills to the south of Edinburgh. Although the fort escapes mention in the *Statistical Account*, it was evidently recognised as an ancient earthwork from at least the end of the eighteenth century, when a penannular twisted gold torc was discovered 'by a labourer trenching within the area of a circular camp' (Wilson 1863, 465). Writing some seventy years after the discovery, Daniel Wilson describes and illustrates the torc, but by then it had been lost, 'having been sold by the discoverer to a jeweller in Edinburgh' (*ibid.* vol. 1, fig. 93, 464-5).

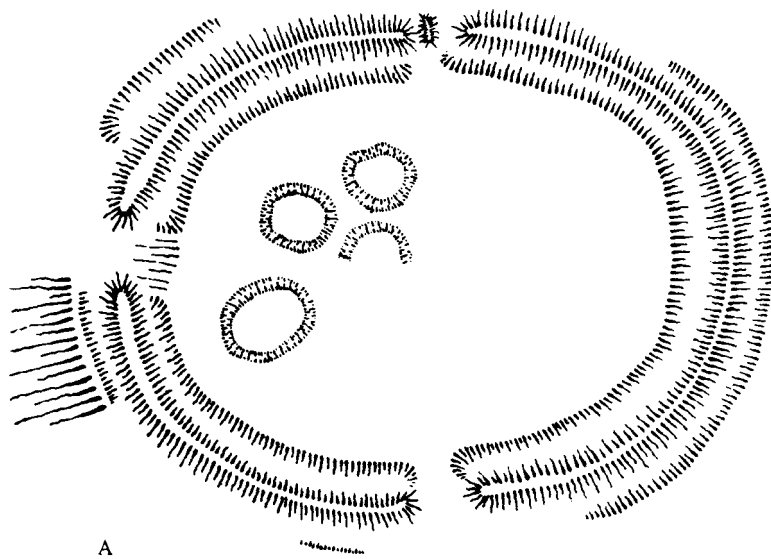
The first full account of the fort was published by the Royal Commission in 1929, by which time the outer defences had already been ploughed down (RCAHMS 1929, 156). The defences of the fort are depicted on the accompanying plan as an inner ditch, a rampart of earth and stone, and an outer ditch, the latter shown only on the north-east and

south-west (Fig. 1.A). Three entrances were recognised, and the narrowest, located in the middle of the north-western side, is shown with an oval mound lying transversely in its centre. In the interior, four structures are depicted (Fig. 2, 1-4), and attention is drawn to their morphology, as being markedly different from 'the usual hut-circle'; instead, they are described as low circular mounds surrounded by broad, shallow ditches (RCAHMS 1929, 156). No reference is made to the palisade trench in the account.

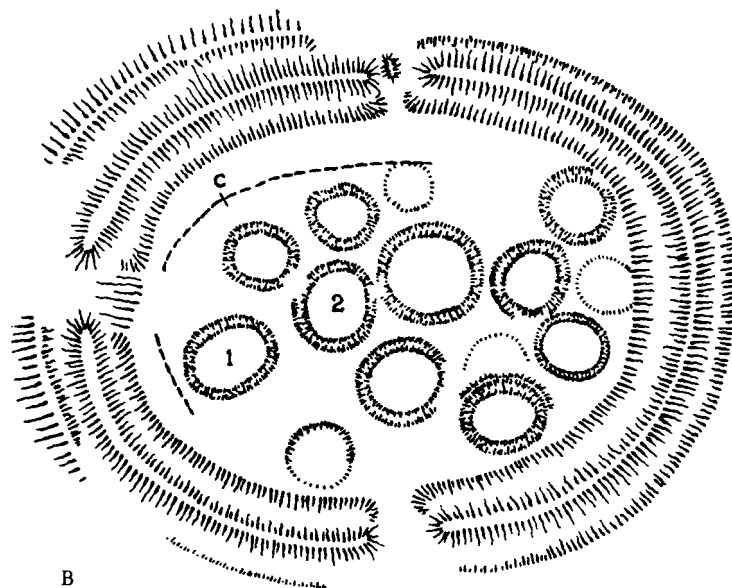
In 1940, and again in 1947-8, the unusual characteristics of the internal structures led to excavations undertaken by Robert Stevenson (Stevenson 1951; Fig. 2, I-II). Two of the structures recorded by the Royal Commission were examined, one completely (Fig. 2, 1), and the other partially (Fig. 2, 2), while traces of a further ten structures were also identified (Fig. 1.B; Fig. 2, 5-14). For want of a better description, Stevenson termed them 'ditched hut-circles' and commented on the increasing regularity with which comparable structures were being recorded at sites throughout the Scottish Borders; such structures are now widely acknowledged as ring-ditch houses. Excavation of the two ring-ditches revealed rings of post-holes within the ditches, and the finds included some sherds of pottery, a small stone ball and a fragment of a glass armlet.

During the 1947 season, Stevenson extended his excavation trench to incorporate a linear hollow visible to the south of ring-ditch 1. This revealed the line of a palisade trench, containing deep, widely-spaced, post-holes packed with stones. The hollow was observed as a surface feature extending north-west towards the south-west entrance of the fort, where it stopped for a short distance, before continuing more-or-less concentrically with the inner ditch of the earthwork defences. As plotted on Stevenson's plan, it peters out beyond the narrow north-west entrance immediately to the north of a ring-ditch (Fig. 2, 5). A short section was cut through this stretch and this confirmed its interpretation as the foundation trench for the posts of a palisade (Fig. 2, III).

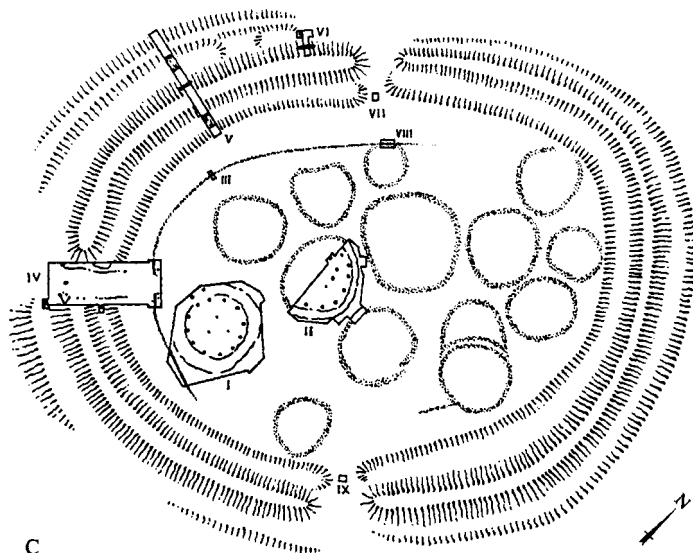
In 1951-3 further excavations were conducted by Stuart Piggott to establish a relative chronology, and to set this within a wider framework (Piggott 1960; Fig. 1.C). Piggott was primarily interested in establishing the relationship of the palisade trench to both the rampart and



A



B



C

Fig. 1. Plans of Braidwood hillfort. A is the Royal Commission plan of 1929; B is Stevenson's plan of 1951; and C is Piggott's plan of 1960.

the ring-ditch houses, and sought to clarify the nature of all three entrances, of which only that on south-west, opening onto the nose of the spur, he believed to be genuine. To these ends, he excavated six trenches, the largest of which explored the terminals and gateway at the south-west entrance (Fig. 1.C, IV), while the others were cut at key points at the two remaining entrances (VII and IX), across the earthwork defences (V and VI), and on the line of the palisade (VIII).

The small trench excavated on the line of the palisade was sited, according to Piggott's plan and description, 'at a point where it coincided with the inner edge of the shallow ditch surrounding a hut' (VIII; Piggott 1960, 63). Here, Piggott concluded that the posts of the palisade had been removed and the trench backfilled with stones and soil, and that the hut, therefore, post-dated the palisade trench. Resurvey of the site has called into question the relationship of the ring-ditch and the palisade, as the two do not appear to coincide, and the fact that the palisade trench is visible on the surface raises doubts as to whether or not it was deliberately backfilled. On excavation, the palisade trench proved to be on average 0.3m wide by the same deep, with the posts set about 0.3m apart, and these measurements were consistent with those obtained from Stevenson's excavations. It is unfortunate that Piggott does not explain why he believed that the palisade had been deliberately dismantled, for there is little hint that this was the case in Stevenson's description. The latter refers to packing-stones in the palisade trench, as well as 'many stones lying in and above the trench choking it' (Stevenson 1951, 11). There seems little doubt that both excavators were observing the same features, but interpreting them in different ways. It is reasonable to suppose that a palisade trench might become filled with earth and stones above any *in situ* packing stones simply as a result of subsequent occupation.

The dismantling of the palisade is a feature also suggested by Piggott in the main trench examining the south-west entrance passage (IV). In this trench, an entrance 3m wide led through the palisade, and post-holes recorded at the terminals may have been associated with a gate. This trench also took in the terminals of the inner ditch and rampart, and revealed another palisade, interpreted as a 'revetment trench', at the outer foot of the rampart. On the north-west side of the entrance, this palisade turned inwards at right angles to flank an entrance passage some 3m to 4m wide for a distance of 8.5m metres, stopping beyond the lip of the inner ditch. At several points the palisade widened to accommodate a post. On the south-east side, the palisade bifurcated to terminate in post-holes, while an isolated post-hole was discovered in the centre of the entrance, suggestive of a double gate. Two further post-holes and a short stretch of palisade flanked this side of the entrance passage.

The 'revetment trench' was also discovered at the outer foot of the inner rampart in a trench cut through the defences between the south-west and north-west entrances (V). Its packing-stones appeared to have collapsed into the palisade after the natural decay of the timber uprights. The ditches were examined also, revealing that the inner ditch was steep-sided with a flat bottom, while the outer ditch was

V-shaped and separated from the 'revetment trench' by a berm some 2.7m wide. Beyond the outer ditch lay the much-reduced remains of a counterscarp bank.

About 9m to the south-west of the north-west entrance, Piggott cut a small trench at a point where the outer ditch and counterscarp bank appeared to terminate on the ground (VI). No evidence was found to suggest that the ditch had been cut beyond this point, and he suggested that there was a gap in the outer ditch of about 15m extending to the north-east. Ultimately, this led to the conclusion that the earthwork defences at Braidwood remained unfinished. Two further small trenches were cut at the north-west and south-east entrances respectively (VII and IX), and these showed that the inner ditch had not been carried across at either. As such, Piggott acknowledged that both marked original breaks in the earthwork defences.

The earthwork defences at Braidwood were again examined in 1968, when a narrow trench was cut through the rampart on its north-east side by members of George Watson's College Archaeological Society, under the general guidance of Piggott (X). In this instance, the 'revetment trench' was apparently found nearer the centre of the inner rampart, and its timber uprights again appeared to have rotted *in situ*. In a brief report, it was concluded that the 'revetment trench' and the rampart were not contemporary features, and instead it was suggested that the 'rampart had been erected against a pre-existing palisade, the earth being piled on both sides of it, so that the stakes of the palisade protruded from the top of the new rampart' (Brown 1968, 26).

Resurvey

With so many interesting and potentially contradictory conclusions about the nature of the features and their relative chronology, a resurvey of Braidwood hillfort was initiated following a site visit, during which several more ring-ditch houses were recognised in the interior, together with further traces of the inner palisade (Fig. 2). The survey was undertaken by the author and Stratford Halliday over a number of weekends in the early spring of 1993, before the vegetation started to obscure the subtle internal detail. It would appear that both Stevenson and Piggott had reused the 1929 Royal Commission plan, so there was a clear need to start with a clean sheet of paper, as well as a fresh pair of eyes. This survey confirmed the constructional elements of the earthwork defences of the fort, including the three entrances, but revealed that more of the outer ditch and counterscarp bank survived, and so challenged the notion of Braidwood as an unfinished fort.

Resurvey has shown that the terminals of the outer ditch are still visible at the north-west entrance, where Piggott suggested that the ditch was never completed. Shallow semi-circular scarps are also visible within the base of the ditch to either side of this entrance, and these are reminiscent of segmented ditch construction: this suggests that Piggott's excavation trench may have been located at the narrow, unexcavated section between two ditch segments. The elongated mound in this entrance, recorded on the Royal Commission plan of 1929, is a curious feature

that survives to this day, and still remains unexplained.

The counterscarp bank, although much diminished, can be traced for most of its circuit but, while weathering and natural erosion have undoubtedly played their part in its reduction, later cultivation has been the main culprit. This is especially true on the south-eastern flank, where aerial photographs taken under snow in the early 1980s, pick out the furrows of an area of ridging that extends up the slope almost as far as the counterscarp bank. Furthermore, a slight bank leading obliquely to the entrance on this south-east side, may well be the remains of a field boundary associated with a phase of later cultivation, rather than one side of a trackway leading into the fort. This bank, which is also visible on aerial photographs, may account for the continuation of what appears to be the inner scarp of the outer ditch across the entrance passage. As they all but join, it is reasonable to see the two features as being related, and an alternative explanation of a staggered entrance seems somewhat unlikely.

Aerial photography has again helped in the interpretation of features surveyed on the ground at the south-west entrance. As drawn in the field, the outer edge of the counterscarp bank continues across the entrance passage as a scarp, and this edge can also be traced from the aerial photographs. What is also evident from the photographs, however, is the well-worn hollow-way leading up the nose of the ridge and through this entrance, apparently underlying this scarp (Plate 1). The most plausible explanation is that the terminals of the counterscarp bank are masked at this point by a plough-scar marking the upper limit of later arable cultivation, which cuts across the line of the entrance.

Later cultivation may have done much to damage and obscure the outer ditch and counterscarp bank, but all of the excavation reports comment on the degree of weathering to which the earthwork defences as a whole had been subjected. As Piggott's section shows, the construction of the earthwork defences allowed for berms of the natural hillslope to be retained between the ramparts and ditches, otherwise the ramparts would have rapidly slipped back into the ditches. For most of the circuit, the faces of the ramparts and ditches now form continuous slopes, but on more level ground, especially around the north-east end, a break of slope indicates the presence of the berm.

In contrast to this pattern of weathering, the preservation of the shallow, slight features in the interior of Braidwood is perhaps one of the most interesting and least understood aspects of the site itself. Resurvey revealed the traces of at least 25 timber houses in the interior, mostly of ring-ditch type, and their depiction and detailed planning, together with that of the inner palisade, provide the key to any understanding of the history of occupation within the interior. The ditches are the most obvious feature of the houses, but they are often accompanied by traces of external banks and grooves, some of which may survive to a height of only 0.1m, while others are almost imperceptible. Under the optimum conditions of March and April, before the grass starts to grow in earnest and the bracken begins to sprout, these features can be detected, although their

portrayal with hachures on a plan sometimes lends them a boldness that is out of proportion to their physical relief. This being said, such minor features provide the clues to the sequence of construction between adjacent structures.

The preservation of such minor features implies that a state of equilibrium was reached soon after the decay or abandonment of the structures they represent. This is a matter discussed by the Royal Commission in its recent publication on the archaeological remains of Eastern Dumfriesshire (RCAHMS 1997, 121). Here, the longer-term soil stability and preservation of the features are considered to reflect the site's situation and peculiar soil conditions, in which the soils are especially acidic and of no great depth, and consequently there is no active earthworm population to reduce the surface traces of such fragile features. This explanation accounts for the surface survival of the ring-ditch houses, but, in the case of the palisade trench, it would be reasonable to expect the excess upcast from the trench to survive as a bank. At Braidwood, no surface trace of an upcast bank remains, and this can only be because it was either deliberately removed, or was otherwise levelled during the long occupation of the interior.

Prior to resurvey, the inner palisade was thought to belong to the earliest phase of enclosure, as distinct from the earthwork defences, and this assumption rested on two main observations. In the first place, there is Piggott's contention that it was deliberately demolished in the south-west entrance as a 'part of the construction of the earthwork defences' (Piggott 1960, 63), and secondly, the sequence of construction claimed at similar sites. Although both observations may be flawed, resurvey has revealed more compelling evidence for this sequence. With regard to the inner palisade, it is reasonable to expect three relationships to be observed between the houses and the palisade trench: some of the houses may be enclosed by the palisade; others may be cut by the palisade; and other houses may cut the palisade itself. This is indeed the case, and the surface traces of the inner palisade can be seen running through some houses (15 and 16), presumably indicating that they are earlier, while its course is almost completely obliterated by others (9 and 12). The latter houses also appear to be cut by the inner ditch, thus providing the sequence between the inner palisade and the earthwork defences. This observation, however, raises the question of the position and character of the innermost line of earthwork defence, and while it may yet prove the case that the inner palisade, which is roughly concentric to the ditch, formed the earliest enclosure, the apparent relationship between the later houses and the ditch may be merely the result of weathering along the inner lip of the ditch.

The interior offers the misleading impression of densely packed contemporary structures, but on closer examination, this is far from being the case. It is impossible to unravel an overall stratigraphic sequence that encompasses all of the houses and the defensive enclosures, but detailed planning of the minor scarps and grooves around the perimeter of each house can provide local sequences. One of the most revealing involves the largest and potentially one of the latest ring-ditch houses in the interior, house 6, where a five-fold sequence can be

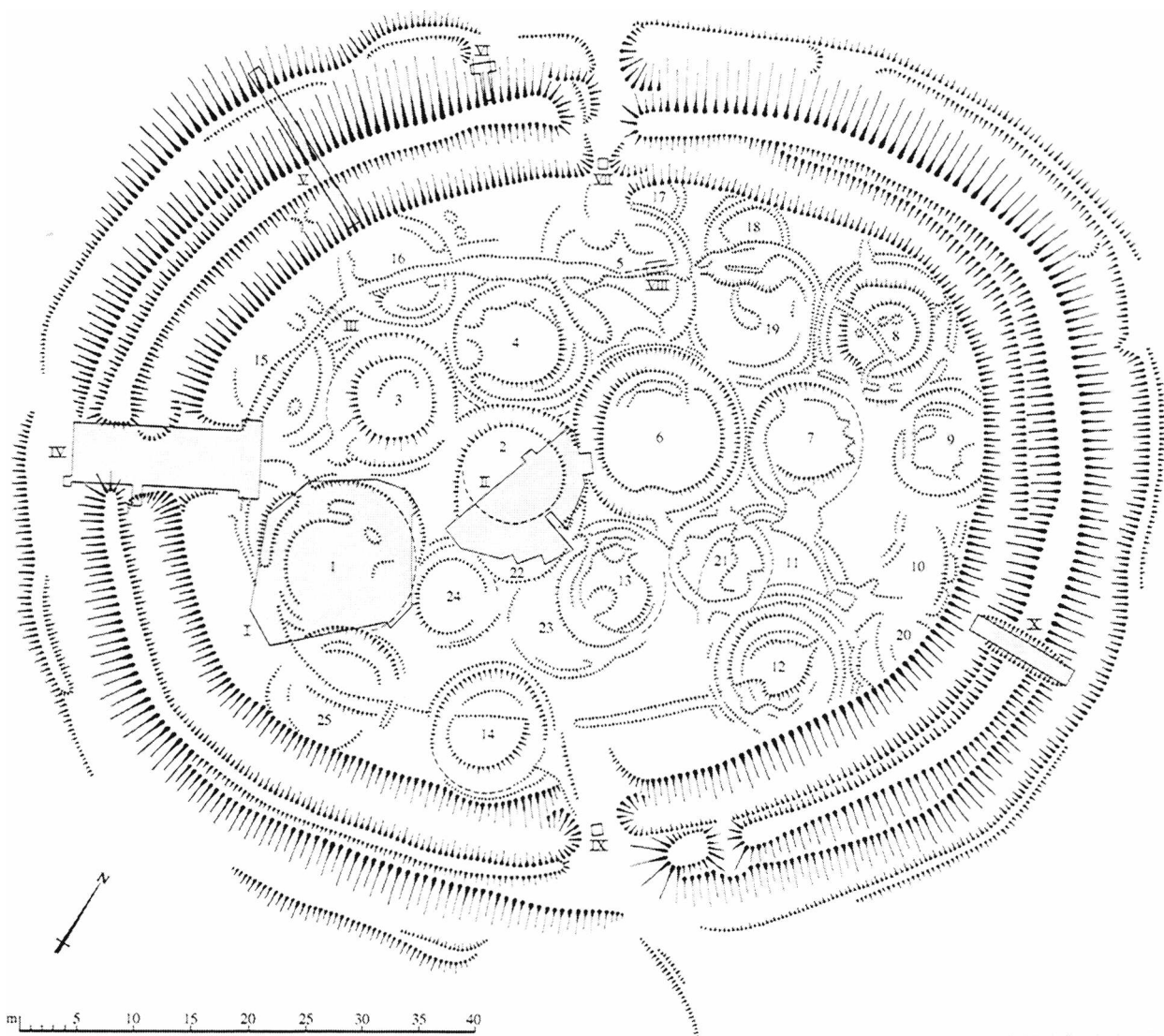
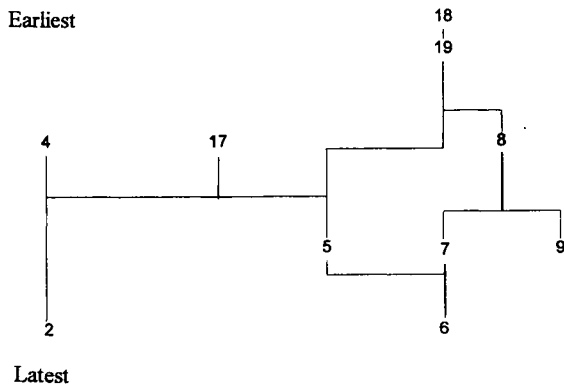


Fig. 2. Resurvey plan of Braidwood hillfort, 1993. The excavation trenches have been best-fitted individually, and are numbered in accordance with Piggott's plan, where trenches I to III accord with Stevenson's trenches, and IV to IX to Piggott's trenches. No plan has yet been published identifying the location of the trench cut by George Watson's College, but it is probably marked by the trench visible through the bank, and is marked X on the plan. The houses are numbered in the interior with 1 to 4 matching those depicted on the Royal Commission plan of 1929, 5 to 14 being the additional ten identified by both Stevenson and Piggott, and 15 to 25 the remaining houses discovered during the resurvey.



Plate 1. Braidwood hillfort under snow. The inner palisade and several of the ring-ditch houses can be seen in the interior, while the hollow leading through the south-west entrance is clearly defined (bottom right). Crown Copyright: RCAHMS (A78577).

proposed. This house may be contemporary with the excavated house 2, but overlies all the houses adjacent to it, of which 5 and 7 overlie other houses. House 5 in turn overlies houses 4 and 19, the former of which is also apparently cut by house 2. House 7 may be contemporary with house 9, both of which overlie house 8, and house 8 overlies house 19, which overlies house 18. These relationships are charted in the diagram below.



Traces of the palisade survive within at least three of the houses discussed in the above sequence (5, 19 and 8). Without any trace of an upcast bank, it is difficult to establish the relationship between the houses and the palisade trench. The palisade trench is particularly clear in the interior of house 8, for instance, but cannot be seen cutting all the way through its outer features. This again raises the issue of preservation, and why the course of the palisade might still be detected within later structures. It is possible that these are all later houses within which the occupation was not of sufficient duration or intensity to completely eradicate the palisade, so that when the houses fell into disuse, subsequent soil settlement has revealed its course.

Another interesting sequence involves house 12. Both Stevenson and Piggott recognised that this house had an arc of outer ditch, and depicted it overlying the incomplete circuit of house 11, but neither observed that house 12 appears to be overlain by two smaller houses, 20 and 21. As already mentioned, house 12, like house 9, is important in establishing the relationship between the palisade and the earthwork defences, as a significant sector of the ring-ditches of both houses appears to have been removed by the construction of the inner ditch. The final house worth noting is 14 on the south side of the interior. This is the only house that can be shown to be later in date than the inner ditch of the earthwork defences.

Summary and conclusions

The early plans and excavation reports relating to Braidwood are best viewed in their historical context, and, as such, can be seen as snapshots reflecting the development of archaeological interest and understanding. In the case of

Braidwood, the recognition of the palisade trench and ring-ditch houses owes much to the Royal Commission's field-survey in Roxburghshire from the 1930s to the 1940s. Although excavation provides unique opportunities for specific questions to be addressed (but never to be repeated), survey is a cumulative process, as can be seen from the successive plans presented here. The resurvey of Braidwood has built upon survey and research over the past fifty years to provide a complex picture rarely seen other than in excavation. In doing so, it has challenged some of the preconceptions of sequence and construction, but has reinforced others, in particular the succession from palisade to earthwork. Perhaps the most important conclusion of the survey is that the visible ring-ditches represent so many periods of occupation. With one phase of earthworks, and one or two of palisades, there are two or three enclosed contexts for the houses, but there is also the possibility of unenclosed settlement before, between and after them. The visible ring-ditches evidently belong to several of these contexts, as is clearly demonstrated by their stratigraphic relationships with the inner ditch of the earthwork and the internal palisade. At the time, the minor scarps and banks of the houses within Braidwood drove me close to despair, but that sense of *déjà-vu* on Wether Hill was coupled with a twinge of envy. Survey has much to offer on these timber-built settlements, from the personal challenge to the story of settlement that they have to tell.

Acknowledgements

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