

Pre-Roman Iron Age Sites at Bozeat and Strixton, Northamptonshire.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many pre-Roman Iron age sites on the watershed between the Ouse and Nene valleys; a few show characteristic crop marks from the air, but most have been discovered by field work.¹ Since nothing was previously known about any of them, two of the Northamptonshire sites were partially excavated between 1963 and 1967. With improvements in modern agricultural techniques and consequent deeper ploughing, it was a matter of some urgency to investigate these sites before all occupation layers were destroyed. This paper reports the excavations at Strixton 1 and Bozeat 2 and 5, and also gives a field-work plan of the site Easton Maudit 10.¹ The pottery from the excavations has already been published.²

At Bozeat (sites B2, SP 900566 and B5, SP 900565), the Iron age settlement runs into two modern fields, which contain slag patches and dark areas of occupation. From the air three enclosures can be seen, the larger two apparently being regular hexagons. The settlement is part of a series of adjacent sites on the Bozeat Plain including Easton Maudit 10 (SP 897571). The geology is a stiff glacial clay-with-flints.

The site, Strixton 1, (S1, SP 894618) lies on a spur near Hill Mount Spinney commanding extensive views of the Nene Valley, including the contemporary hill-fort of Hunsbury. The subsoil is a yellow lime-with-fossils ('penny-land') overlying a blue clay, both belonging to the upper Jurassic series.

THE EXCAVATION

Bozeat 2 and 5 (Fig 1)

The ditch D1 of the largest enclosure was sectioned in 1964; it was V-shaped, 10ft wide and 8ft deep (fig 3, CD), enclosing an apparently hexagonal area about 350ft across. Another trench inside the enclosure revealed an entrance arm of a hut-circle, ditch D2, 7ft wide and 5ft deep; within the hut-circle there was a floor or yard made of small pebbles which stopped 3ft from the ditch edge.

The smallest enclosure was examined in 1966 (fig 1). Underlying it was the ditch D5, 4-5ft wide and 4ft deep. The earliest fillings of alternate well-

defined layers of clay silts and black occupation debris strongly suggest a seasonal occupation (fig 3, GH). The upper level had been re-cut and filled with black occupation and some pebbles.

The outer enclosure ditch, D3, was 8ft wide and 5ft deep, enclosing a circular area 120ft in diameter.

The section (fig 3, EF) showed that it had been re-cut and eventually filled with natural silting; clearly the period of use was a fairly long one. No trace of the rampart survived. Within the enclosure was a hut-circle ditch D4 5ft wide 2ft deep, enclosing a circular area diameter 50ft. The courses of ditches D3 and D4 could be seen as dark marks in the plough soil where unexcavated; D4 would be expected to have an entrance. The intersection of D4 and D5 showed that D4 was the later (fig 3, NO). D4 was filled with occupational debris and natural silting. Within the hut circle and partly overlying D5, there was an area of floors made of large pebbles and limestone pieces; on the east side there were many 2-6in diameter stake holes, some defining a circle 5ft diameter. Two substantial post holes in the central region, P1 3ft diameter, 3ft deep; P2, 1ft 6in diameter, 2ft 3in deep, could well have supported a roof.

The pottery from this site² is hand-made in a shelly fabric of the Iron Age B tradition. The following vessels were recovered from the features:

- D1 Sherds 19 (3 similar), 25, 42, and a sherd like 24.
- D2 18, 24 (2), 34, 36, and sherds like 28 and 30.
- D3 Produced only body sherds.
- D4 15, 27, and sherds like 28, 30, 32 and 44.
- D5 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 26, 31 (2), 37, 43, and sherds like 14, 28, 29, 30, 34 and 39.
- P1 14.
- P2 A sherd like 29.

Two vessels not represented in the previous selection are illustrated in fig 1 of this report, they came from D5. 838 sherds were recovered.

Small quantities of burnt clay, probably from hut walling, were found in the hut-circle ditch D4. Since the appearance of the previous paper, similar B pottery has been published from Harrold,³ and in Northamptonshire, Hardingstone,⁴ Rainsborough camp,⁵ and Upton.⁶ The Upton and Rainsborough

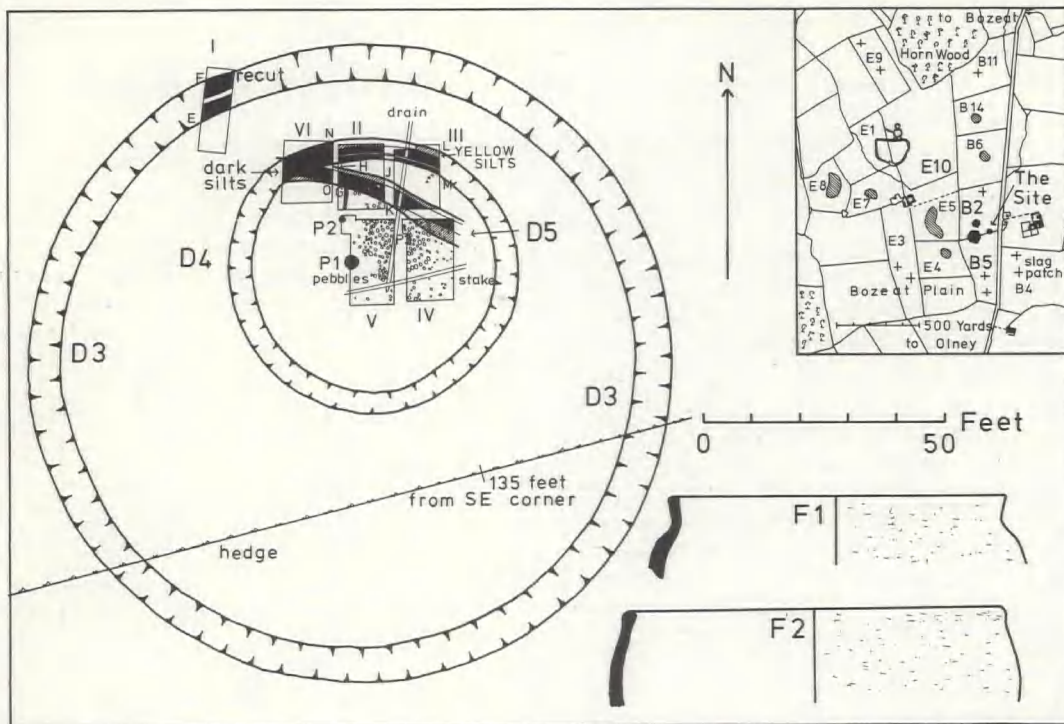


Fig 1 Plan of Iron Age enclosure at Bozeat, Northants. (F1 F2, $\frac{1}{4}$)

material is dated at about second century BC. Since in D5, the earliest ditch, there is a sherd of Belgic pottery, the Bozeat site must be contemporary with the Belgic period farther south, about the first half of the first century BC. A later date would not be consistent with the three well-developed phases of Belgic occupation which must be accommodated between Iron B and the Roman conquest at nearby Irchester.⁷

Strixton I

During 1963, cuttings I–IV established the nature of the main enclosure (ditches D1, D2, fig 2) and in 1967 cuttings VI–VIII were made between the medieval furrows where there would be least plough-damage.

All features were filled with dark occupation refuse unless noted otherwise.

The earliest occupation is represented by ditch D3, 2ft 9in wide, 1ft deep, and probably pit P1, 4-6 in to 1ft 4in deep, and the gully D7, 2ft wide and 4-6in deep. Ditch D3 was cut by the enclosure ditch D1, as shown by the abrupt ending of pottery deposits on entering D1, and in D1 a gap in a layer

of yellow silting weathered from the subsoil on either side of D3. D7 and P1 cannot be contemporary with the enclosure because they would be buried by its rampart; they are most likely earlier.

The main enclosure had two phases; the first represented by the cross-ditch D2 which has a V-shaped section 10ft wide and 5ft deep (fig 3, TU). The absence of primary silt and the irregular stratification of the subsoil fillings showed it had been filled shortly after being dug, presumably to enlarge the enclosure to its present size. The first enclosure was 90ft square and the later 90ft by 140ft. The ditch D1, of the later stage was 10-12ft wide and 6ft deep (fig 3, RS) with an entrance to the east 7ft 6in wide; two post holes suggest there may have been a gate. The ditch was filled with natural silting and occupation debris, and had clearly been open for some time. No trace of any rampart survived. Lying on the sides of the southern entrance arm were many flat pieces of lime stone, some with small holes pierced through them.

The interior of the enclosure contained a gully of the hut-circle type (D5) in the form of a semi-circle 60ft diameter, which had been re-cut. The earlier phase had a ditch 1ft 6in wide and 1ft deep,

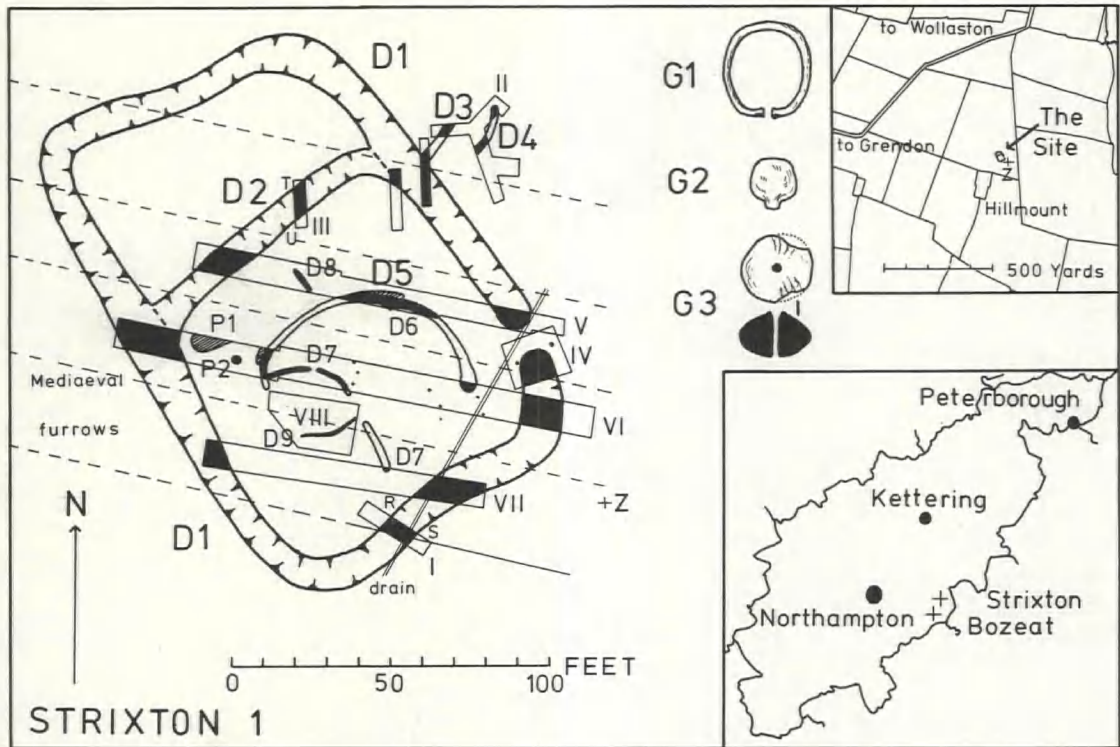


Fig 2 Plan of Iron Age enclosure at Strixton, Northants. (G1 $\frac{2}{3}$; G2 $\frac{1}{3}$)

filled with dark silts, and the later was 2ft wide, 2ft deep with a 9in flat bottom, filled with yellowish silts. Apart from a few post holes and shallow features, P2, D8, and D9, all 6in deep, no other structures survived; indeed it is impossible to relate the hut-circle gully to the main enclosure stratigraphically, but it is likely to be contemporary because of its central siting in the earlier enclosure. The pottery from this site²:

- D1 15 (2 sherds) 46, 47, (2), 49, 50, (6), 53, 57, 58, 60, 61 (2), 62, 64 (2), 65, 67 (2), 69, 71, 74 (3), 75, 76, 77 (7), 81, 82; and sherds like 14, 17, 18, 35, 38, 39, 54, 66, 68, 72, 73, and 79 (2).
- D2 Two sherds like 79.
- D3 51, 68, 80 and sherds like 50, 74, and 77.
- D4 70 and sherds like 44, 79, and 80.
- D5 48, 55, 56, 72, 73, and sherds like 14, 17, 39, 40, and 77.
- D6 D7 and D8 produced only body sherds.
- D9 59 and sherds like 21 and 75.

The pottery is very similar to that from Bozeat; a Belgic sherd was found in the upper fillings of ditch D1, so again the site must have been flourish-

ing during the earliest part of the first century BC. Since the upper stages of D1 are the latest phase of occupation here, the material from D3 may be rather earlier than that from Bozeat. 1348 sherds were recovered.

The small finds (fig 2).

G1 A penannular bronze ring from D5.

G2 A burnt clay sphere with a hole pierced from the bottom.

G3 Pottery loom-weight, worn by use to an irregular shape, from D1. Another similar fragment was found.

Daub with twig impressions was found in most of the features, particularly in D5, strongly suggesting the presence of a hut nearby.

Easton Maudit 10.

The plan of the field known as *Banky*, drawn-up from field-work, is given in fig 4. The general context of the site is given in the inset of fig 1. There are three connected enclosures with various other linear ditches probably belonging to field systems. The largest enclosure is in the form of an irregular 'D' covering 5½ acres. The eastern part of the site

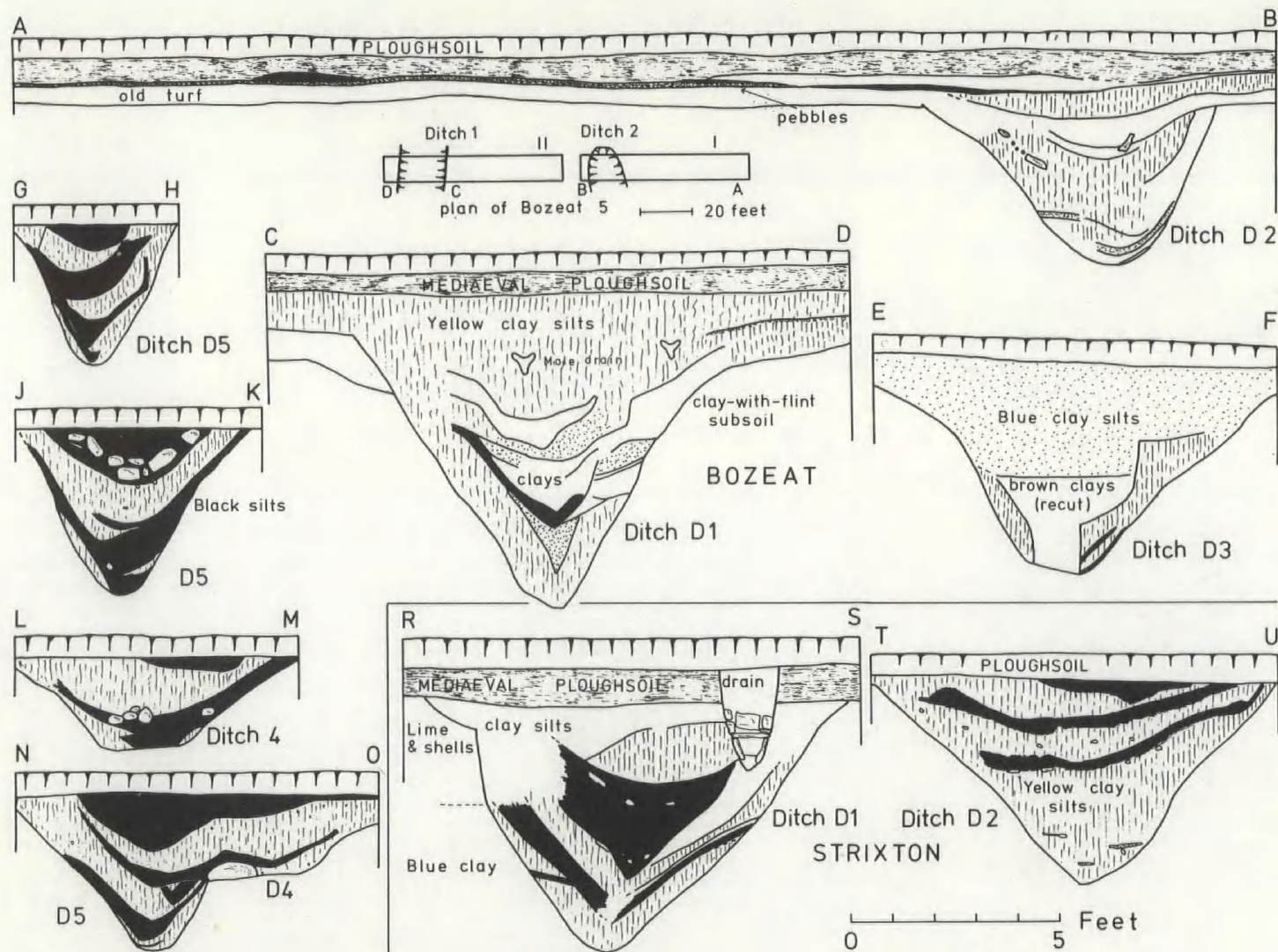


Fig 3 Sections of Iron Age ditches at Bozeat and Strixton, Northants.

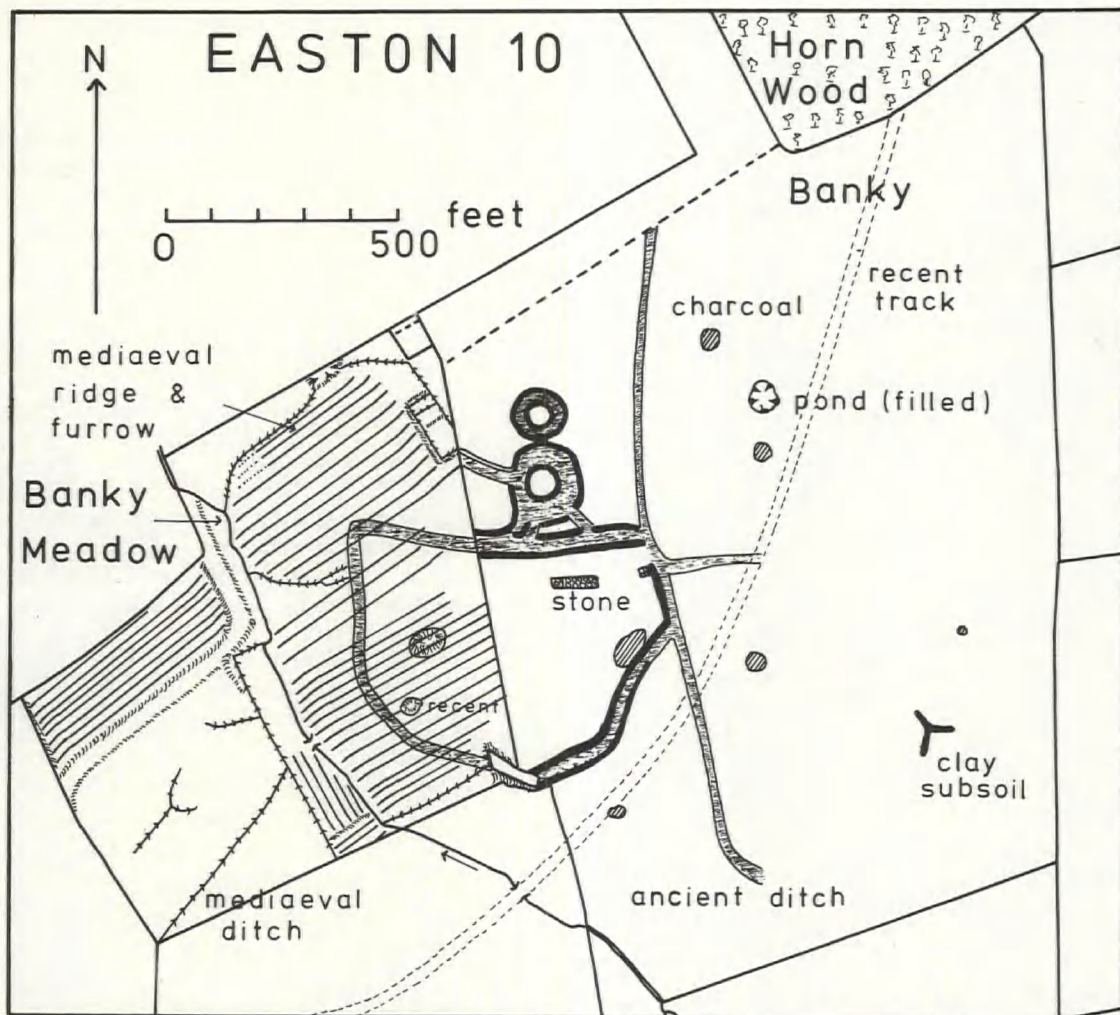


Fig 4 Plan of Iron Age site at Easton Maudit, Northants.

is ploughed and has been bulldozed showing up the ditch sides as yellow-clay subsoil, contrasting with the dark fillings. In the largest enclosure there are the footings of two stone buildings, one about 25ft square at the eastern entrance, and the other in the middle 100ft by 10ft with a cross-wall 20ft from the west end. At the west side of this same enclosure is a stone-covered mound, probably a barrow. Nearly all the pottery ploughed out of the Iron B type, although a few Romano-British sherds and roofing-tile are associated with the stone features. It may be that the buildings are Roman, a similar case of Roman buildings in an Iron Age enclosure

was found at Rainsborough.⁵ The west side of the site was grass until 1968; the ditch had been filled in anciently and mediaeval strips ploughed over. Nevertheless, the ditch was plainly visible as a hollow with greener grass growing in the bottom.

To the south east of the field is a ploughed-out subsoil feature in the form of a Y with arms 50ft long.

The size of these enclosures, which even now survive partly as visible earthworks, suggests that they are the most important part of this complex of sites on the Bozeat Plain.

DISCUSSION

These sites with superimposed ditches representing successive phases of occupation have general parallels at Hardingstone⁴ and Knuston, Northants.⁸ The latter is particularly complex with several hundreds of ditches covering 15 acres. No doubt Strixton and Bozeat are more complex as a whole; a recent photograph suggests a network of enclosures at Strixton.⁹ At Harrold³ there were many ditches, but this site was so poorly recorded that comparisons are difficult to make.

The excavations showed that faint marks on aerial photographs can be misleading; the discovery of ditches D3 and D4 at Strixton was made when searching for an apparently circular ditch with a central pit.

The best local parallel for the Bozeat site is at Draughton¹⁰ although the hut-ditches are on a smaller scale. The near-circle defined by the enclosure ditch is unusual.

The problem of the precise interpretation of hut-circle ditches remains. The nature of the fillings shows they are not pallsade-trenches; the sometimes used term drip-circle implies a building nearly as big as the ditch area, yet circles of post holes, representing hut walls just inside the ditches are rarely found (eg at Longbridge Deverill Cow Down, Wilts).

The earth dug from the ditches could be used to make a mud (cob) wall to support roof-timbers. The average cross-section of the hut-circle ditch at Bozeat is 10 square feet which would make a wall 3ft wide and rather more than 3ft high; this would be quite adequate to take timbers sloping up to a massive central post. The gully was full of occupation debris which suggests that it was important as a source of soil rather than a ditch or water-reserve, otherwise it would have been kept clean.

The half-circle at Strixton is more difficult to interpret in terms of structure. If a circular hut did stand there, material for a wall where there is no ditch could have come from the adjacent rampart of the main enclosure. However, at Rainsborough⁵

and elsewhere, semi-circular ditches are found away from the enclosure ramparts.

The suggestion of cob-walled huts gains some support from the nearby site Wollaston 18¹¹ where the subsoil is solid limestone and no suitable material for a mud wall could be dug out; here timbers would have to be used and there are circles of post-holes some 50ft diameter.

The plans of these sites are not diagnostic of late Iron age B, similar sites occur throughout the period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 For the method of coding archaeological sites see D N Hall and N Nickerson, *Beds Arch J*, 3, (1966) 1 - 6 and Hall and Hutchings, *Beds Arch J* forthcoming.
- 2 D N Hall and N Nickerson, *Beds Arch J*, 4, (1969), 1 - 12. Pottery numbers refer to this paper.
- 3 B N Eagles and V I Evison, *Beds Arch J*, 5, (1970), 17 - 55.
- 4 P J Woods, *Excavations at Hardingstone, Northants, 1967 - 8* (Northants C C, 1969).
- 5 M Avery, J E G Sutton and J W Banks, 'Rainsborough, Northants, England : Excavations 1961 - 5.' *P P S*, 33, 1967, 207-306.
- 6 D A Jackson, D W Harding, and J N L Myres, *Ant J*, 49, (1969), 202 - 221;
- 7 D N Hall and N Nickerson, *Arch J*, 124, (1965) 65 - 99.
- 8 P J Woods, recent work forthcoming.
- 9 R Hollowell, *Bull Northants Fed Arch Soc*, 5, (1971)
- 10 W F Grimes in S S Frere, *Problems of the Iron Age in Southern Britain* (1958).
- 11 D N Hall and N Nickerson, *Beds Arch J*, 5, (1970) 113.