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Excavations at Larkwhistle Farm, Brimpton, Berkshire

By Alan Hardy and Cecily Cropper

OAU Occasional Paper Number 2

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Series editor Angela Boyle

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Plate 1 Aerial photograph of Area A

CONTENTS

List of plates

List of figures

List of tables

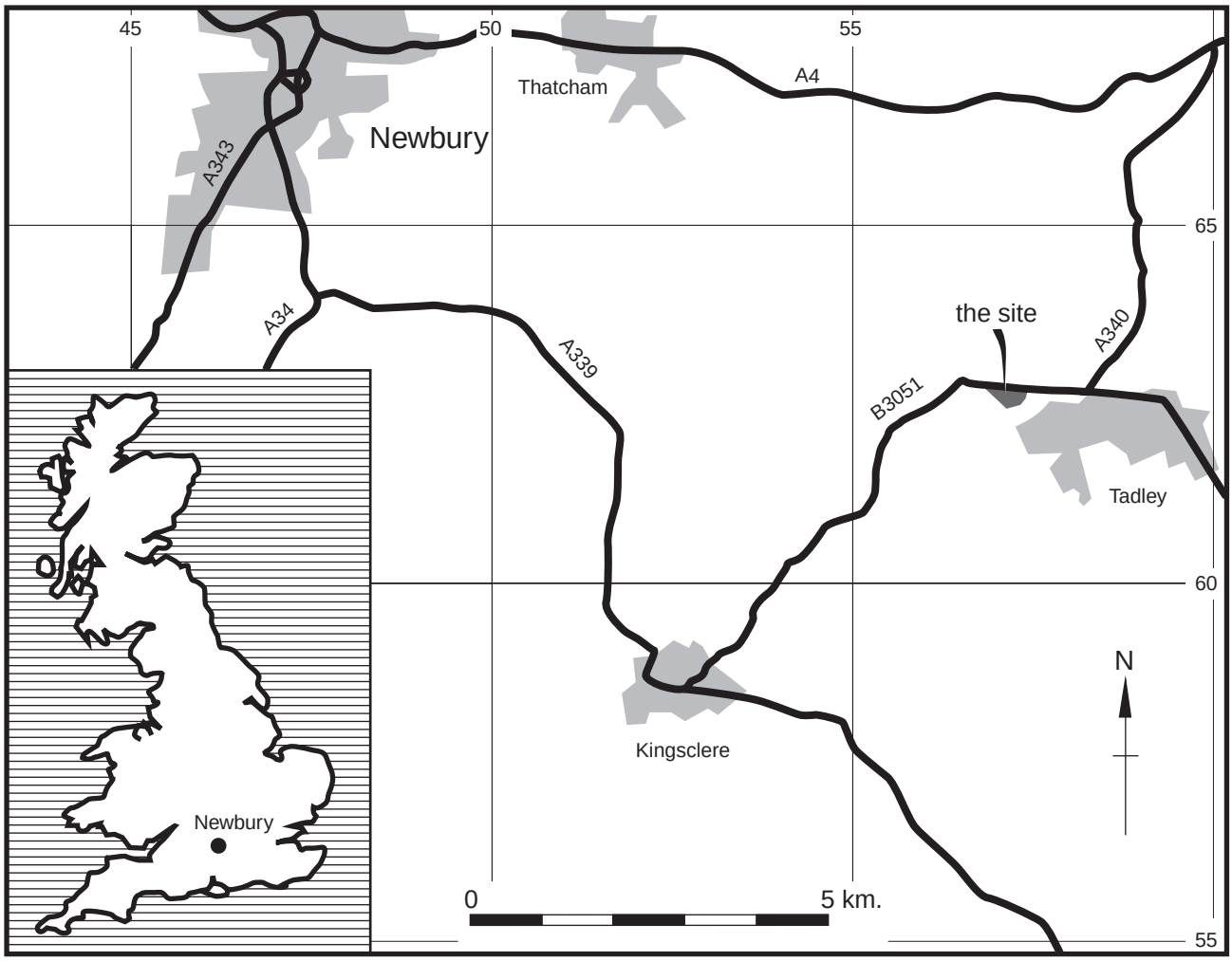

Figure 1 Site location map

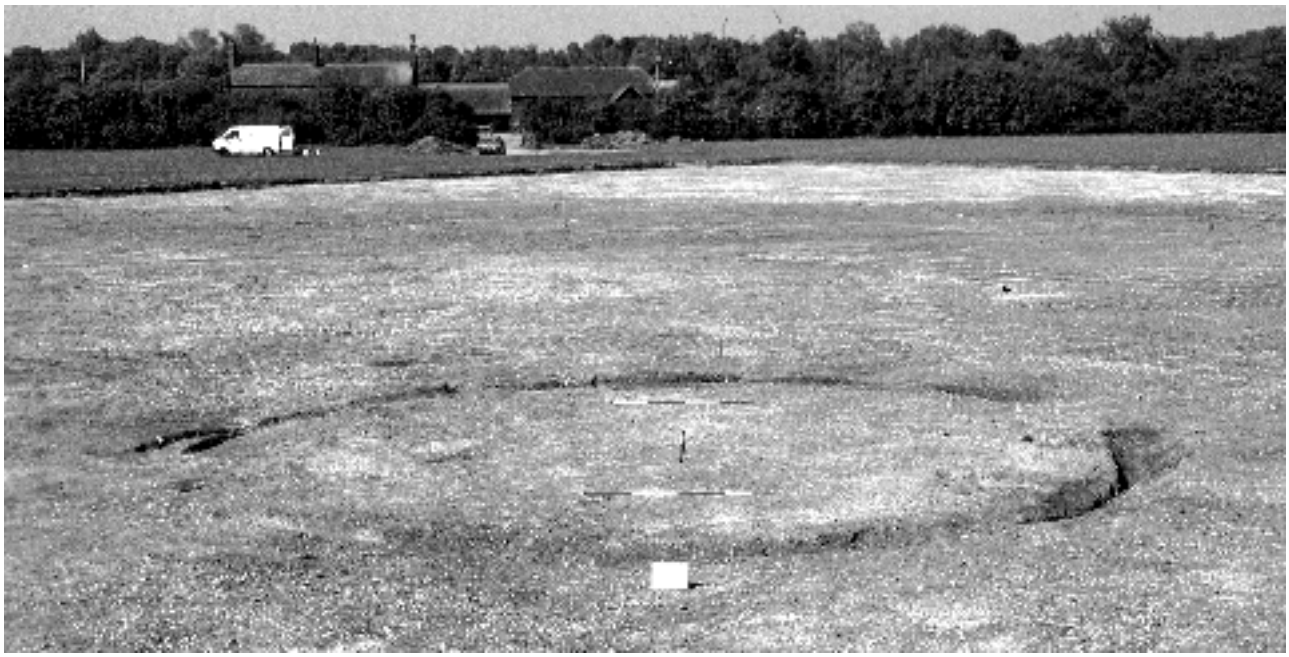

Plate 1 Area A, structure 194

Excavations at Larkwhistle Farm, Brimpton, Berkshire

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an excavation on *c.*8 hectares of gravel terrace south of Brimpton, at one time part of Brimpton Common, on the south borders of Berkshire. This followed the decision in December 1994 by Berkshire County Council to allow the extraction of gravel from the site by ARC (Planning Application 144973), subject to a legal agreement allowing a programme of archaeological investigation and publication. The OAU had performed an archaeological assessment of the site in 1987 following the initial proposal for the extraction of gravel. Excavations in 1995 revealed features of a middle Iron Age date, consisting of one rectangular enclosure, two associated circular gullies and one four-post structure. The archaeological evidence indicated a settlement that was short-lived and possibly marginal to a nucleus situated to the south.

INTRODUCTION

Location and geology *(Figure 1)*

Larkwhistle Farm, Brimpton, is located approximately 11 km to the south-east of Newbury. The site, centred at SU 573625, lies within fields to the south of the B3501 and immediately north of the alignment of scheduled prehistoric barrows known as the Borson group. The well-preserved bell barrow 6b (Scheduled Ancient Monument 122343) is immediately adjacent.

The site is essentially flat (106.9 m OD), and lies on a wide sheet of Lower Hill Terrace gravel, south of the River Kennet (OS Geological Map 268, 1946). The middle Thames gravels are predominantly composed of flint pebbles derived from the chalk and the overlying chalk and flints. The site geology corresponded with this, with the addition, in places, of overlying deposits of mid-brown silty clay representing palaeochannels. The water table was reasonably stable during the period of the excavation at approximately 106 m OD, but has been known to fluctuate considerably.

Historical and archaeological background

The Borson barrow complex is considered to date to the Bronze Age. Barrows 6a and 6b were 'exhaustively' examined by Greenwell and Money in the late 19th century (Newbury District Field Club iv, 1886–95, 186; Wymer 1968, 115), but with negative results. In 1961 Mr R Sheridan found two handaxes in the vicinity of barrow 6b but their precise location in relation to the barrow was not recorded.

Rocques' Map of 1761 and the Ordnance Survey of 1817 and 1877 show Larkwhistle Farm to have been part of Brimpton Common until 1877. The land was briefly cultivated but neglected between the 1920s and 1950s until its return to arable use in the 1970s. The excavation revealed evidence of modern field drains and deep 'prairie busting' plough furrows.

The 1987 evaluation *(Figure 2)*

The OAU undertook an archaeological assessment in 1987 as a response to the initial proposal by ARC for the extraction of gravel (Miles and Lange 1987). The entire site was subjected to a 2% sample excavation, by means of 48 machine-excavated trenches. All the trenches were 30 m in length and were aligned either north-south or east-west. Archaeological remains were poorly preserved having been subject to severe plough disturbance. However, three areas of undated archaeological activity were defined. A series of curved and linear ditches were identified in Area A while Areas B and C each contained a line of small and shallow postholes.

Methodology

Although the results of the evaluation were inconclusive, areas A, B and C were targeted for further attention with particular aims in mind. Area A would be examined to define the date, extent and character of the structures which would be compared with other structures locally and regionally. Environmental evidence would be used to determine the nature of the prehistoric landscape. Areas B and C would be examined to determine whether the posthole line related to activity in Area A or to the barrow group and possible associated funerary practices. Any other related features in these areas would be investigated.

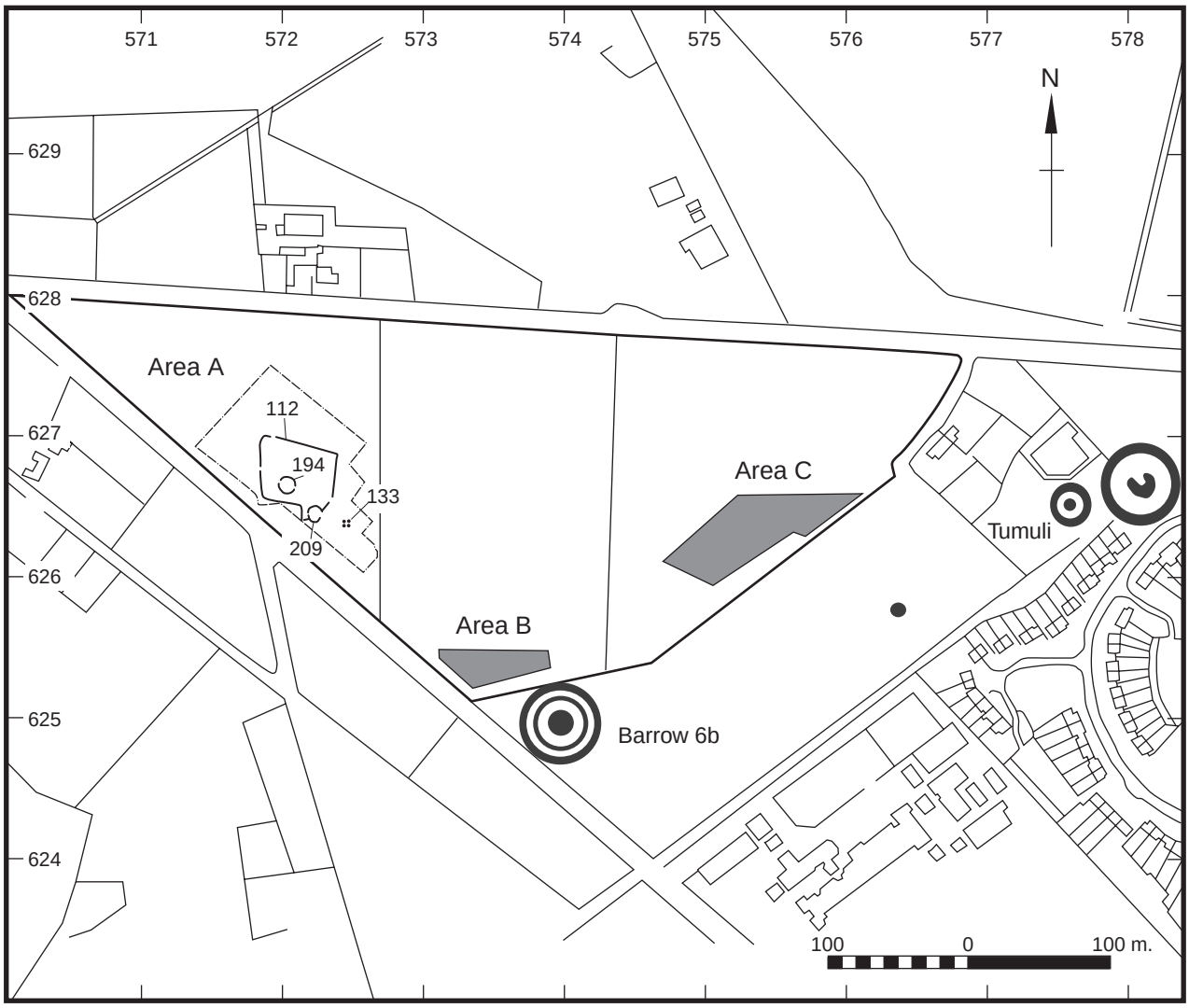

Figure 2 Trench location plan

The three areas were accurately surveyed into the OS grid. The topsoil and ploughsoil were removed, using a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless bucket , down to the natural gravel subsoil. A 10 m grid was laid out over the three areas and tied into the OS grid. Areas of archaeological potential were hand-cleaned to reveal the features, which showed distinctively dark against the lighter coloured gravel. Manual cleaning was abandoned within archaeologically barren areas after consultation with P Fasham, the Principal Archaeologist of Babtie Public Services Division on behalf of Berkshire County Council.

All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:50. The two circular structures, and any associated features, were completely excavated in order to maximise the recovery of material evidence and to record spatial distribution. Approximately 10% of the large enclosure ditch was excavated. Excavation in Areas B and C was limited to 50% sampling, by volume, of the features. All recording was by the standard OAU method (Wilkinson 1992).

A comprehensive photographic record was maintained during excavation. Furthermore, aerial photographs were taken of Area A, during and after excavation, using a large kite carrying a 35 mm camera with a radio-controlled shutter release (see Plates 1 and 2). The sampling strategy involved taking 10 or 20 litre environmental samples from the sections excavated in the enclosure ditch and from various sections from both circular gully features (see Robinson below).

Once Areas A, B and C had been excavated, a watching brief was maintained over the southern half of the entire extraction area during the topsoil stripping by ARC.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

The topsoil/ploughsoil, a dark brown silty loam with 30–40% gravel, varied in depth from 0.20– 0.30 m. This directly overlay the natural gravel/subsoil into which all archaeological features were cut. The gravel,

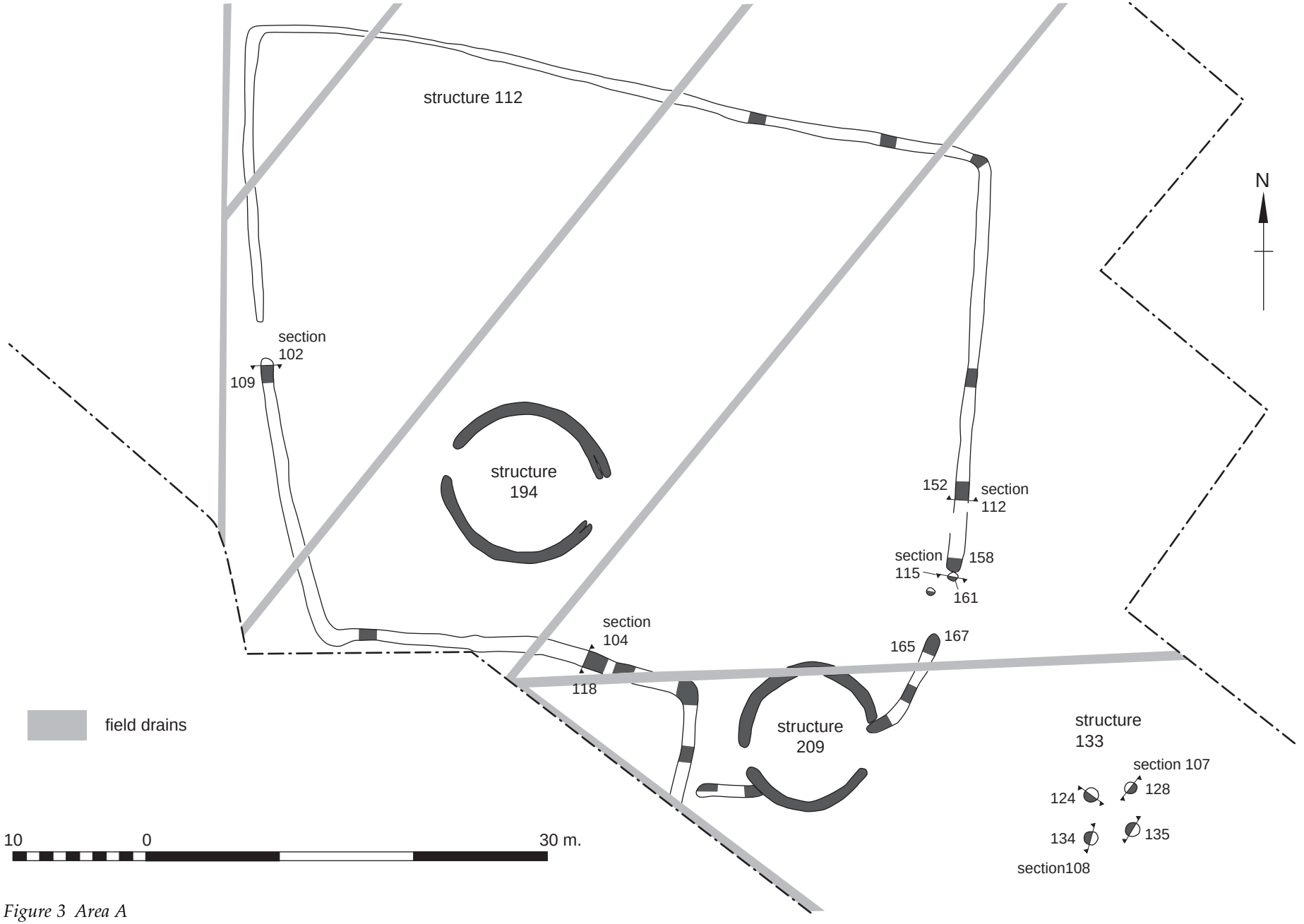

Figure 3 Area A

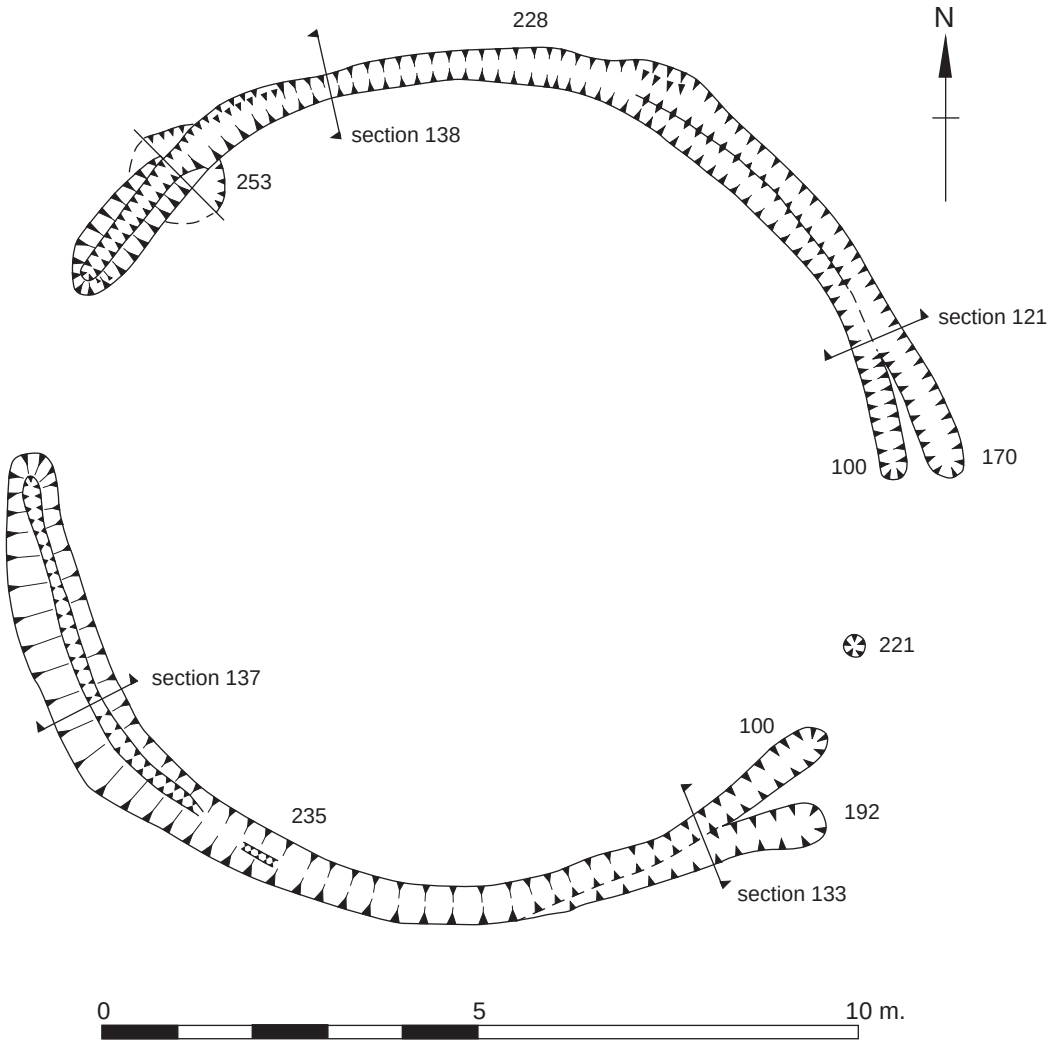

Figure 4 Structure 194

particularly in Area A, was disturbed by numerous tree-throw holes (not on plan).

Area A *(Figures 2 and 3; Plates 1 and 2)*

The rectangular enclosure, structure 112
(Figures 3 and 6, Sections 102, 104, 112 and 115)

The gravel was cut by a shallow, roughly V-shaped ditch, structure 112, that defined a sub-rectangular enclosure. The long axis was aligned roughly east-west and enclosed an area of approximately 2000 m². The ditch fills were similar throughout, consisting of very dark grey-brown silt with coarse gravel inclusions, overlain by a very dark brown-grey fine silt. The dimensions of the ditch varied from 0.80 m in width and 0.60 m in depth on the east side, to 0.20 m in width and 0.05 m in depth in the north-west corner where later truncation had been at its most severe. The west side of the enclosure ditch was interrupted halfway along its length by an entrance, 3 m wide. A second entrance, facing east and 4.3 m in width, was formed by the southern terminus of the western side of the enclosure and northern terminus of the spur running north from the circular structure 209. A single posthole (241), 0.30 m in diameter and 0.18 m in depth, was situated towards the centre of this gap, approximately 2 m to the south-west of the terminus of the enclosure's western arm. A further posthole (161), *c.*0.64 m in diameter and c0.14 m in depth, was situated at the end of this terminus. A possible corresponding posthole (167), with an average diameter of 0.50 m and a depth of *c.*0.20 m, was located at the northern tip of the north-running spur (165). There was, however, no difference in fill between this and the enclosure gully terminus. The enclosure ditch was recut for part of its length.

Circular structure 194
(Figures 3, 4 and 6, sections 121, 138, 137 and 133)

Structure 194 was situated within the south-west quadrant of the rectangular enclosure, approximately 6 m north of its southern arm. The circular structure consisted of two opposing curved gullies that formed a

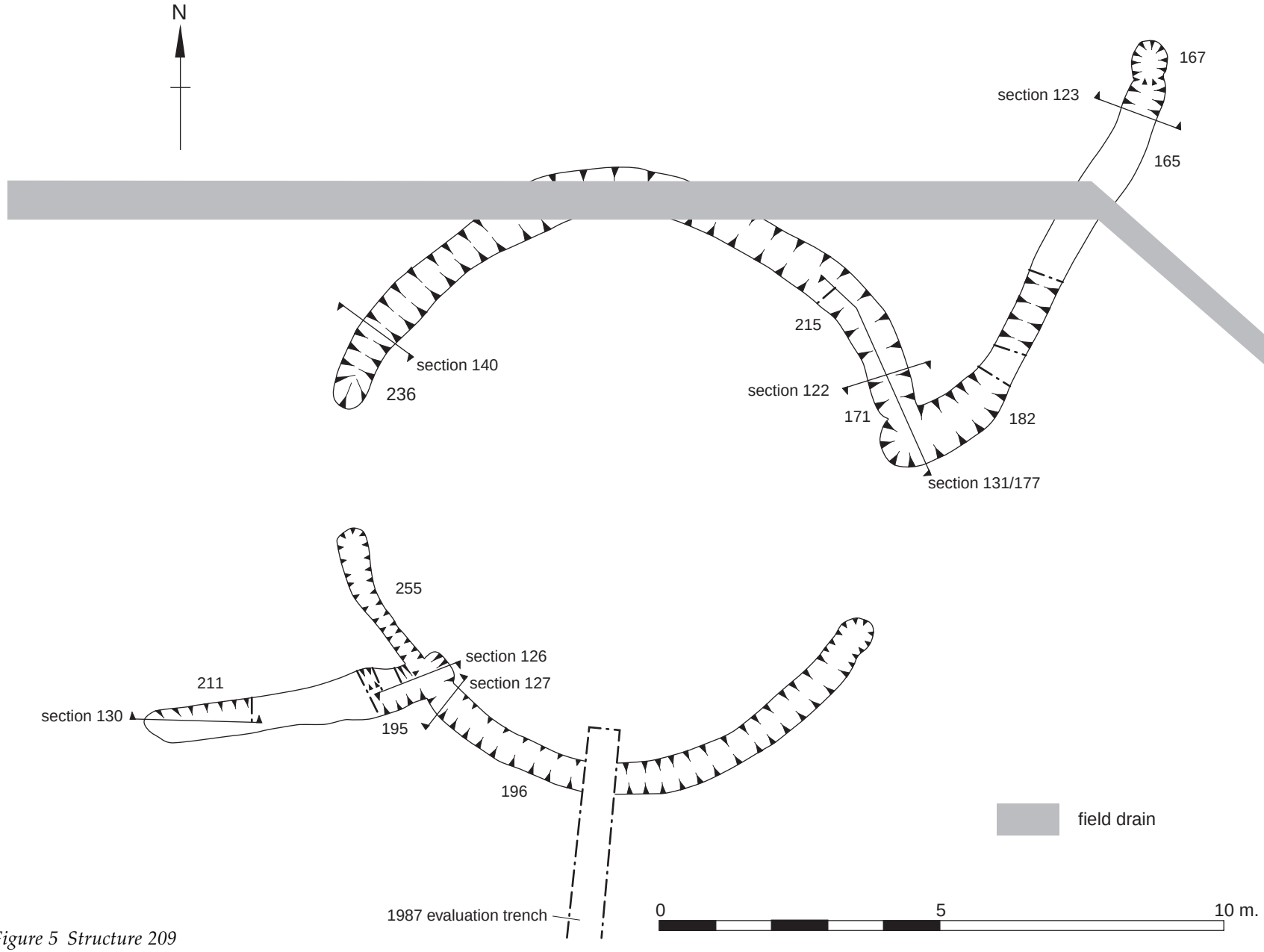

Figure 5 Structure 209

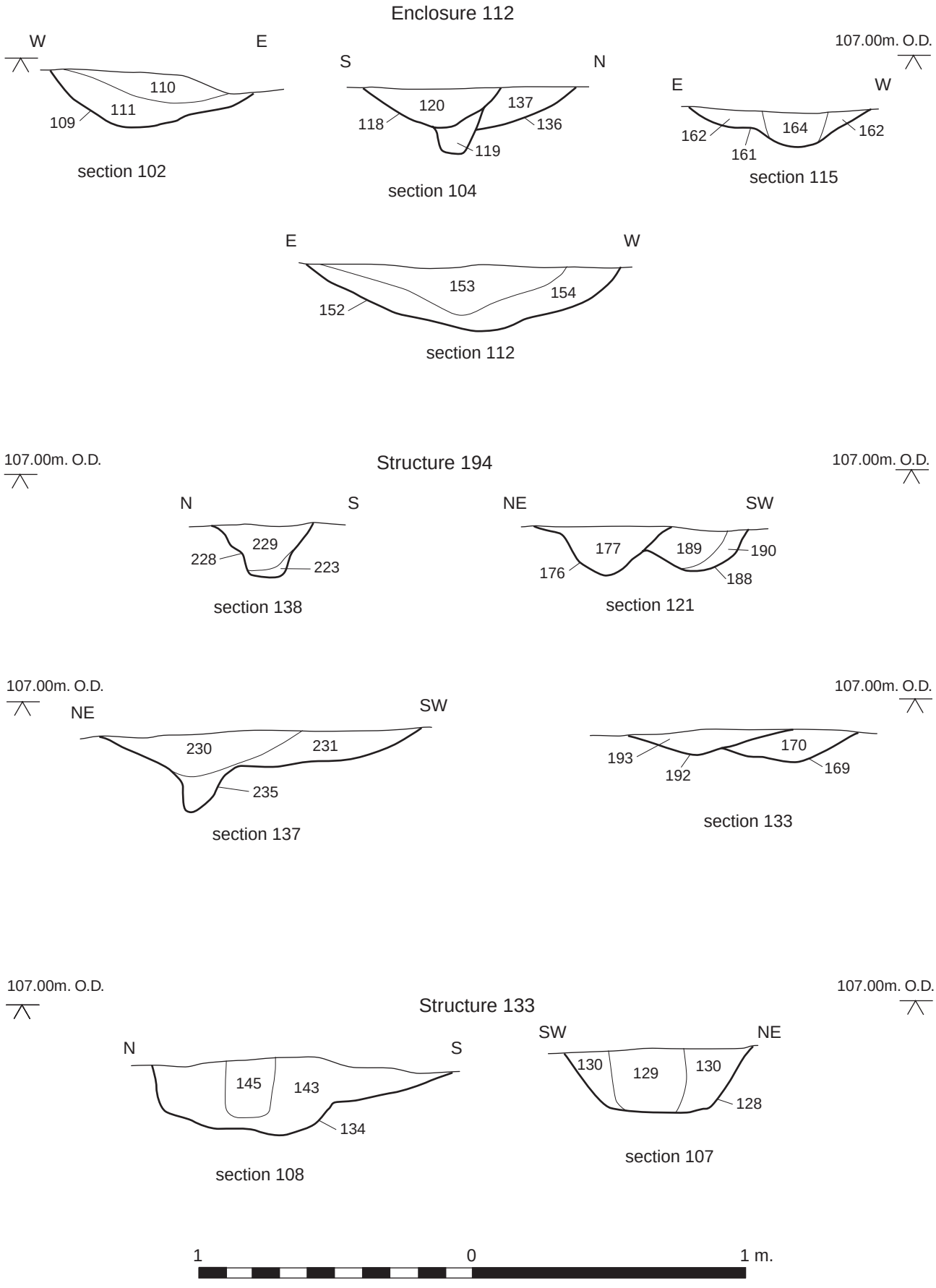

Figure 6 Sections

circular enclosure with an internal diameter of 10.2 m. The opposing terminals of the gullies left a gap on the north-west and south-east sides of 2 m and 3.2 m respectively. A posthole (221), with a width of 0.25 m and a depth of 0.09 m, was situated to the centre of the south-eastern gap. The gullies averaged 0.45 m in width and 0.25 m in depth. Re-cuts to the north-east and south-east ends of the ditches were seen in plan as bifurcating terminals. In section (Fig. 6, nos 121 and 133) it could be seen that the outermost terminals (cuts 176 to the north and 192 to the south) were later. The northern crescent of the gully cut a tree-throw hole (253) located 2 m to the east along from its western terminus. A small assemblage of middle Iron Age pottery was recovered from the eastern termini of the arcs.

The profile of the gullies varied slightly according to the nature of the subsoil. Where the ditch cut into gravel towards the east its cut was shallow and with a more rounded base (Fig. 6, nos 121 and 133). However, to the west, where the natural surface contained more clay, the sections were more irregular, in some places showing evidence of a 'slot' at the base of the ditch (Fig. 6, nos 137 and 138).

The fills reflected this difference in subsoil, in general being clay-loams to the west and silty-loams to the east. All fills were mid to dark grey-brown in colour and contained an average of 15% gravel inclusions. No internal features of any kind were identified within the circle.

Circular structure 209 *(Figures 3, 5 and 7, sections 131/177, 122, 140, 127, 123, 126 and 130)*

Structure 209 was situated in the south-east corner of the enclosure and consisted of two opposing curved gullies that formed a circle with an internal diameter of approximately 9.5 m. The northern crescent was truncated by a field drain running east-west. The northern crescent averaged 0.55 m in width and ranged in depth from 0.20 m in the west and 0.40 m in the east. The southern crescent averaged 0.70 m in width and 0.20 m in depth. The gaps created by the opposing terminals faced south-east and west and in width were 2.2 m and 2.8 m respectively.

A gully (including cuts 182 and 167), forming a spur, ran from the eastern terminus of the northern crescent northwards for a length of 8.7 m towards the southern terminus of the eastern arm of the enclosure. The spur averaged 0.75 m in width and 0.18 m in depth. The relationship between this and structure 209 was uncertain. A corresponding gully (cuts 195 and 211) ran from near the tip of the western terminus of the southern crescent westwards for a distance of 4.8 m and terminated approximately 0.75 m short of the enclosure gully that ran directly south. This latter spur averaged 0.70 m in width and 0.23 m in depth. From the sections (Fig. 6, nos 126 and 131/177) it would appear that both spurs are cut by the curved gullies and it is likely that the spurs are related to the rectangular enclosure 112.

A possible posthole (167) was located at the end of the terminus (165) of the north-running spur. This posthole was slightly deeper (0.20 m) than the terminus and had a diameter of *c.*0.57 m. The relationship could not be determined because the fills of the posthole and the terminus were identical, thus making the features contemporary.

The fills were predominantly silty loams and ranged considerably in colour and gravel content throughout the structure.

The four-post structure 133
(Figures 3 and 6, sections 107–8)

The square four-post structure 133 was represented by four postholes situated approximately 19 m east of the east-facing gap in structure 209, and 16 m east of enclosure 112. The postholes had an average diameter of 0.68 m and an average depth of 0.24 m. Postpipes, visible in all four postholes, had an average diameter of 0.29 m and depth of 0.19 m. All holes were flat bottomed except posthole 135 and postpipe 132 in posthole 124 which had rounded bases. Fills of both postholes and respective pipes contained in general friable or compact mid to dark brown silty loams, with greater amounts of gravel inclusions within the postpipes. Measurements taken between the centres of the postpipes show that they were a common distance apart, *c.*2.90 m, and formed a roughly true square that enclosed an area of *c.*8.41 m².

Area A phasing

Two phases of activity were suggested from the structural evidence rather than from the pottery evidence which, by its homogeneity, suggested short-term occupation or site-usage (see Timby below). Four-post structure 133 had no relationship with other features and therefore it has not been possible to phase this structure.

Phase 1 (enclosure 112 and circular structure 194)

The southern east-west running gully of enclosure 112 showed evidence of re-cutting (Fig. 6, section 104) with the primary cut (136) appearing to have terminated approximately 22 m east of the south-west corner of the enclosure. This would suggest that the original enclosure was constructed with a gap of approximately 24 m between this original terminus on the south side and the terminus (158) on the east side. There was no evidence of postholes defining a fence line or other barrier across this gap. Although there is no evidence linking the internal circular gully with the enclosure 112 or structure 209, it is proposed that structure 194 was part of this phase.

Phase 2 (addition of structure 209 and extension of south ditch of enclosure 112)

The re-cutting (118) of the southern arm (136) extended enclosure 112 to the east for approximately 5 m. The ditch then turned a sharp 90° to the south and continued beyond the edge of the trench. There was no evidence for re-cutting of the northern part of the enclosure ditch.

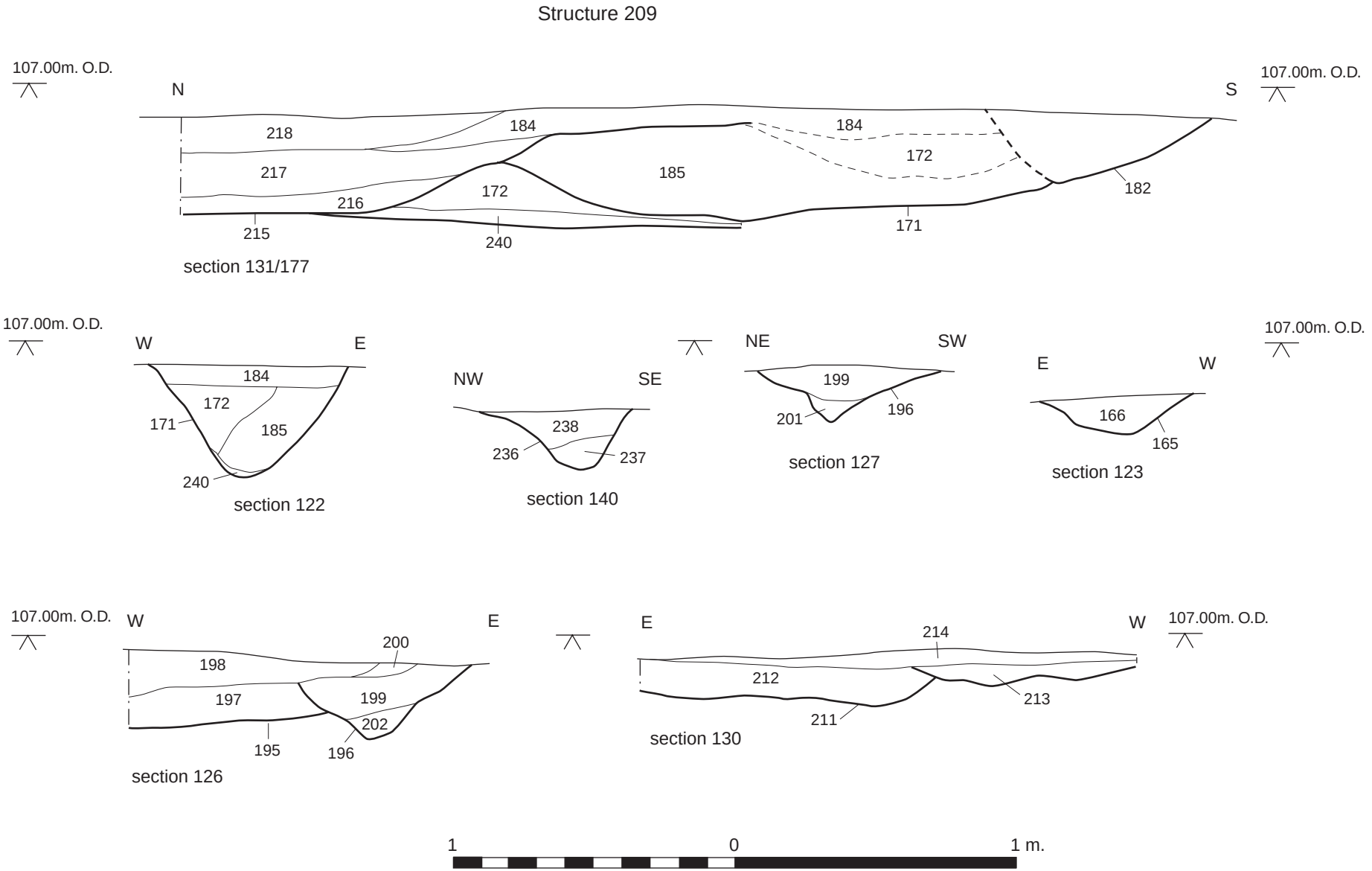

Figure 7 Structure 209 sections

It would seem likely that the original gap in the south-east corner of the enclosure was bridged at this time by the circular structure 209 and associated spurs. Although the pottery suggests that structure 209 pre-dated structure 194, the purportedly earlier sand-tempered wares represented only a very small proportion of the total assemblage. It is entirely possible that these coexisted with the flint-tempered wares and any change in fabric was gradual and localised.

Area B *(Figure 2)*

The original 1987 assessment trench (No. 42), located within the excavation area, revealed the line of supposed postholes. Closer inspection of these revealed that they were very shallow and sub-rectangular in plan and filled with compacted topsoil. It is most likely that they represent the footprints of the stabilisers of a JCB excavator and were presumably made during the original excavation of the assessment trench. No other archaeological features or deposits were revealed in the stripped area.

Area C *(Figure 2)*

A line of six postholes was revealed, aligned approximately east-west. The dimensions of the postholes were broadly similar, averaging 0.25 m in diameter and 0.25 m in depth. The spacing between the postholes varied from 3.0 m to 5.0 m. A further random scatter of five smaller postholes was identified at the west end of the line. All the features excavated had a similar fill, a dark greyish brown silty loam, with some inclusions derived from the natural gravel or the overlying pale brown silty clay. No artefactual evidence was found in any of the features in this area. However, while we cannot rule out a prehistoric origin for these postholes, the fact that they run almost parallel with a modern field boundary suggests that they are more likely to be a post-medieval precursor to the present boundary.

THE FINDS

The pottery by Jane R Timby

Introduction

The excavation produced a moderately small collection of middle Iron Age pottery amounting to some 482 sherds (3342 g). The material was of variable condition with a number of very small sherds, resulting in an overall average sherd weight of just 7 g. There were no complete profiles. In most cases surface finish could be detected although in a few instances this had been lost. The material was sorted macroscopically, with the aid of a x20 binocular microscope into fabric types, and quantified by sherd count, weight and estimated vessel equivalent (eve), based on rim fragments only, for each excavated context.

The pottery was recovered from fifteen individual contexts although some of these may be from essentially the same cuts. The greatest concentration came from the south-east corner of the site, with lesser quantities from the gully of the sub-rectangular enclosure (112) and from the circular gully (194) within this. There were few stratigraphic relationships available thus limiting any potential refinement of dating of what appears to be a fairly homogenous assemblage.

Fabrics and forms

Broadly the pottery could be split into two main fabric groups based on the main inclusions present in the clays: flint-tempered wares (fabrics F1, F2) and sandy wares (fabrics S1–3).

Flint-tempered wares account for 94 per cent by weight, 85.5 per cent by count. Two main forms are represented in the flint fabrics; saucepan pots, both straight-sided and slightly globular forms and slack-sided jars with inturned slightly beaded rims. No decorated sherds are present although burnishing had been extensively employed on the external and, with the saucepan pots, internal surfaces. Eleven sherds have evidence of burnt residue on the interior and one saucepan pot on the exterior surface.

F1: a moderately hard ware with a hackley fracture. The paste contains a sparse scatter of white, angular calcined flint up to 1 mm in size and sparse iron grains. One sherd from context 172 shows the impression of a small piece of bracken frond on the exterior surface.

F2: a moderately hard ware similar to F1 but distinguished by a generally slightly coarser range of flint, up to 2 mm, and the presence of an admixture of patinated brown and white angular fragments.

Sandy wares account for the remaining six per cent by weight. The sherds are of a much more fragmentary nature with an average size of just 3 g. Some sherds have external surface burnishing.

S1: a thick-walled fine sandy ware, dark brown in colour. The paste shows a dense frequency of well-sorted, sub-angular to rounded quartz sand visible as individual grains at x20 magnification.

S2: a brown sandy ware with a sparse to moderate scatter of black iron (?limonite)

S3: a very fine sandy, finely micaceous clay containing sparse elongated voids from vegetative matter.

Site distribution

The shallow ditch defining the sub-rectangular enclosure, structure 112, produced just twelve small abraded bodysherds of fabric F2 from 140. The circular structure within this enclosure produced a small group of thirty-five sherds of pottery from gully terminal 170 and a single sherd from 177. The pottery is exclusively flint-tempered (fabrics F1, F2), and both contexts contained sherds from vessels in the saucepan pot tradition.

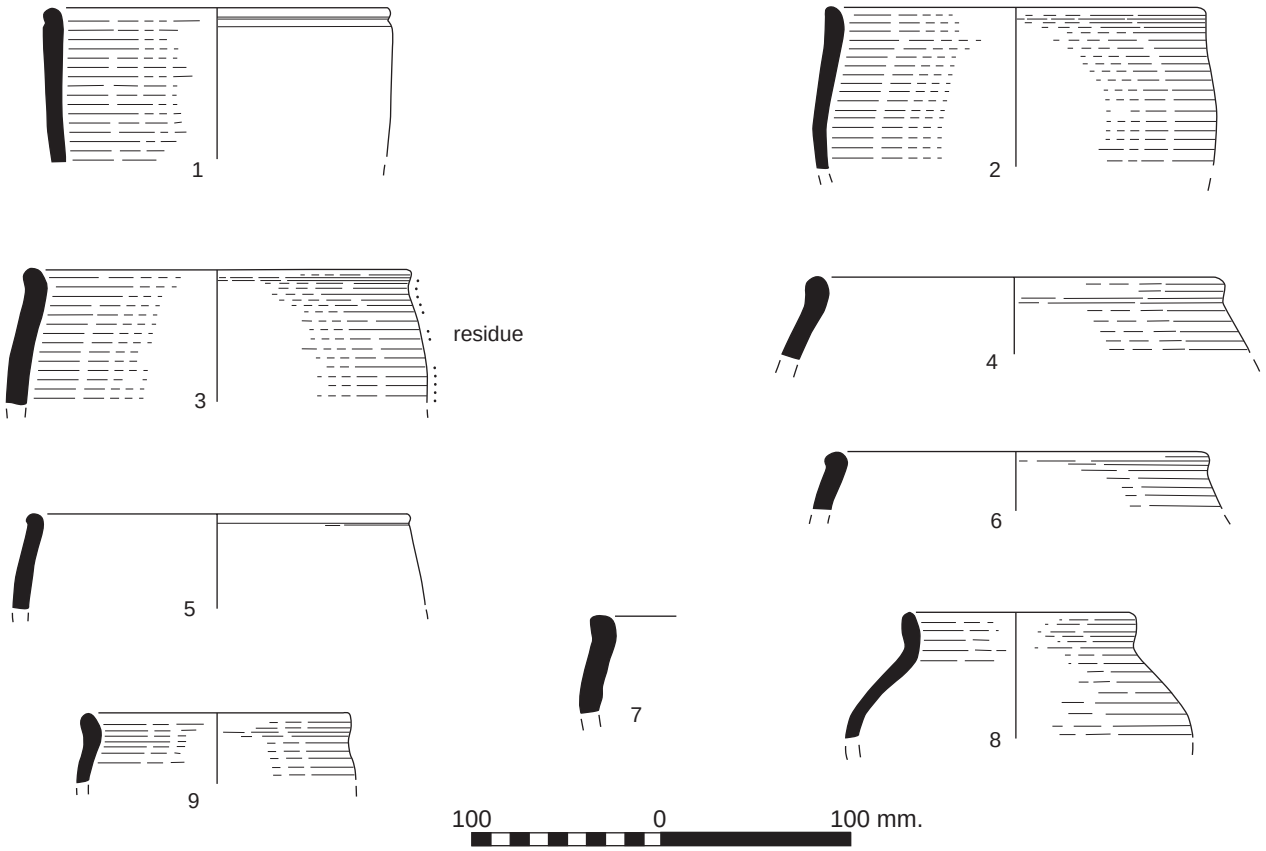

Figure 8 Iron Age pottery

The sub-circular enclosure in the south-east corner, structure 209, produced 239 sherds, 1800 g, from the gully (contexts 172, 183, 185, 199, 237, 256–7 and 262). A further 170 sherds, 1224 g, were recovered from the gully to the north-east of this enclosure (117, 166 and 168), and ten small sherds from the south-west gully extension (197). Whilst the group was dominated by flint tempered fabrics a small number of sandy ware sherds were present. In most cases fabrics S1 and S2 came from the lower fills, notably 168, 197, 237 and 257. Further sherds came from fill 183, while upper fills 117 and 262 contained sherds of fabric S3, not found in the earlier fills.

Discussion

The range of forms places this assemblage firmly within the middle Iron Age traditions of central southern England. Evidence from contemporary sites to the south, in particular Brighton Hill South, Basingstoke (Rees 1995), and Old Down Farm near Andover (Davies 1981), suggests that sandy wares dominate the early to middle Iron Age phases predating the flint-tempered tradition. The sandy wares at Brighton Hill feature as slack-sided jars and proto-saucepan pots and, as at Brimpton, occur alongside the later classic saucepan pots in the flint-tempered fabrics. On this basis it could be argued that the complex in the south-east area of the site which produced all the sandy wares predates both the other circular and the sub-rectangular enclosures, although this does not necessarily preclude their coexistence. Similarly, at Danebury a change in the use of sandy to flint based fabrics is witnessed throughout the middle-later Iron Age period (Cunliffe 1984, 248).

Several other middle Iron Age sites are known in the Reading area, in particular, Binfield (Roberts 1995) and Fairclough Farm, Bracknell (Torrance and Durden 1994) to the east, Risely Farm, Swallowfield (Lobb and Morris 1991–93) to the south, Southcote just west of Reading (Piggott and Seaby 1937), Beedon Manor Farm, Newbury to the west (Pocock 1990), and Ufton Nervet (Manning 1974) and Aldermaston Wharf (Cowell et al. 1977–78), both adjacent to the River Kennet immediately north-east of Brimpton.

The pottery from both Risely Farm, Swallowfield (Lobb and Morris 1991–93) and Fairclough Farm, Bracknell (Timby 1994) was dominated by a range of sandy wares and no saucepan pots. However, slack-sided jars similar to the Brimpton examples were a common feature. Conversely the Brimpton assemblage did not include any examples of scored ware as found at Risely Farm associated with a radiocarbon date of 2250 + 60 BP (Lobb and Morris 1991–93, 53). It is likely, therefore, that both these sites predate Brimpton.

A similar picture occurred at Binfield (Booth 1995) where sandy wares dominated the middle Iron Age assemblage and flint-tempered wares were rare.

Saucepan pots similarly did not feature, perhaps suggesting a break in continuity here between the middle and later Iron Age occupation phases.

Saucepan pots, however, are a common feature of sites to the south, for example Brighton Hill South, Basingstoke (Rees 1995). A small number also appear to be present, possibly residually, at Ufton Nervet (for example, Thompson and Manning 1974, fig. 13.18; 20.166) and flint-tempered examples occur at Southcote, Reading (Piggott and Seaby 1937, fig. 3, B3; fig. 4, 9). The latter site, unlike Brimpton, also features a large number of decorated sherds, as well as some later Iron Age vessels, and would appear to be of fairly long duration which may be considered in part contemporary with Brimpton.

The middle Iron Age assemblage from Aldermaston Wharf dated to the 3rd–1st century BC, mainly consists of flint-tempered wares, with examples of slack-sided jars and plain saucepan pots (Cowell *et al.* 1977–78, fig. 13.7–8, 13–4). Like Risely Farm there are some vessels decorated with shallow scored decoration. Again there would appear to be some contemporaneity with Brimpton but in the former case occupation continues into the later Iron Age/early Roman period. Brighton Hill South is another longer lived site with the same elements in its assemblage as those found at Brimpton, but again the repertoire is more diverse and includes a considerable number of decorated wares.

In conclusion, the absence of any decorated wares and the overall predominance of flint-tempered wares at Brimpton might argue for the site being active towards the latter part of the middle Iron Age, perhaps around the 2nd century BC. The marked absence of any decorated vessels, however, could be interpreted several ways: it may be due to the small size of the assemblage, it may be a reflection of the character/status of the site or it may be a chronological factor. Unlike many of the other sites in the locality with evidence of middle Iron Age occupation, this particular area of Brimpton was apparently only in use for a relatively short period of time.

Catalogue of illustrated sherds *(Figure 8)*

1. Straight-sided saucepan pot with a single tooled line below the rim. Burnished interior, smoothed, possibly originally burnished exterior. Fabric F2. (172)
2. Slightly globular saucepan type pot with a single tooled line below the rim. Burnished on the interior and exterior surfaces. Fabric F2. (172)
3. Slightly globular, slack-sided jar with a burnished exterior and smoothed interior. Blackened residue on the exterior surface. Fabric F2. (172)
4. Slightly beaded rim from a large jar. Fabric F2. (199)
5. Slightly globular saucepan style pot. Fabric F2. (168)

6–7. Slightly beaded rim slack-sided jars with a burnished finish. Fabric F2. (168)

8. Globular jar with a well-burnished exterior finish extending to just inside the rim. Fabric F2. (168)
9. Thinner-walled slack-sided jar with a slightly thickened rim. Burnished finish. Fabric F2. (117)

Fired clay by Jane R Timby

The excavations produced 1043 g, 560 pieces, of fired clay from five contexts (117, 168, 177, 199 and 262). One piece, from 168, showed one flat surface with organic impressions and may be part of a loomweight. A particularly large fragment, 836 g, with one flat surface marked by a small depression also came from this context. All the other fragments were small abraded pieces with no discernible form and no features.

The worked flint by Philippa Bradley

Eleven pieces of worked flint and twenty-one pieces of burnt unworked flint were recovered from the excavation. All of the material was found in Iron Age or later contexts. The flint is dark brown in colour with a thick grey cortex. It is of relatively good quality and may have been available locally.

The assemblage consists of eight flakes, one slightly blade-like flake, a multi-platform flake core and a core fragment. The core had been extensively worked and was probably discarded when no further flakes could be removed. The flakes are mostly hard-hammer struck, the blade-like flake is probably not a deliberate product. The burnt unworked flint is generally heavily calcined and includes one or two large nodules weighing up to 180 g. The assemblage is too small to provide any dating evidence but it does indicate earlier prehistoric activity in the area.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

Charred plant remains by Mark Robinson

During the excavation samples were taken from the ditches to recover charred plant remains (Table 1). The standard sample volume was ten litres but in some instance a pair of samples were taken from the same context, giving a total of twenty litres. Twenty nine samples from twenty three contexts were floated onto a 0.5 mm mesh and the dried flots sorted under a binocular microscope. The only charred item found other than charcoal was a tuber of the grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* sp. *bulbosum* (onion couch grass) from samples 12/13, context 172. Seeds and chaff were entirely absent. The charcoal was identified using incident light high power microscopy and the results are listed in Table 1, which gives an indication of the abundance of taxa. In addition, sample 42 from context 110 contained some charcoal, which probably represented the woody stems of sub-shrubs. One fragment could be matched with *Calluna vulgaris* (heather).

The absence of charred cereal remains from any of the samples is somewhat unusual for a settlement of middle Iron Age date given that many of the contexts sampled contained occupation debris. It suggests that little crop-processing activity occurred on the site. The soils of the terrace gravels here have a low fertility so it would not be surprising if the settlement primarily had a pastoral function. The possible charred heather would suggest acid soil supporting heathland in the vicinity, perhaps even on the site itself.

Table 1 Charcoal identification by context

		Sample	4	5	10/11	12/13	14	19/20	22/23	24/25	35
		Context	177	189	185	172	204	237	256	257	166
		Phase	1	2	3	3	1	2	2	2	2
Pomoideae indet.	Hawthorn,	Apple etc.	-	-	++	++	-	-	-	+	-
Betula sp.	Birch		-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-
Almus glutinosa	*Alder*		-	-	-	+	-	-	+++	-	-
Quercus sp.	Oak		++	++	++	++	++	+	+++	+	+

Key: + present, ++ some, +++ much

The charcoal from the site was primarily *Quercus* sp. (oak) but included *Betula* sp. (birch), a tree which tends to be associated with non-calcareous soils of low nutrient status. With the exception of a single small piece of oak charcoal from sample 35, context 166, all the wood charcoal was recovered from 'hut circle' gullies. This would be appropriate to domestic activities being centred upon these two areas. Hut Circle 194 only yielded oak charcoal whereas the full range of taxa listed in Table 1 were found in the gullies of Hut Circle 209.

DISCUSSION

The area around Brimpton and along the Enbourne and the Lower Kennet Valleys has been mainly investigated through small-scale excavations, fieldwalking and surveys, predominantly by the Berkshire Archaeological Unit and Wessex Archaeology. Cropmark sites have been identified but lack of excavation can only suggest that this evidence is of an Iron Age date (Lobb and Rose 1996, 84). Middle and late Iron Age activity is represented primarily by agricultural settlement with rectangular enclosures and associated field systems (Lobb 1977–78, 39–41), a landscape into which the activity at Larkwhistle Farm comfortably fits. Examples of other middle Iron Age settlement occur at Riseley Farm, within the Blackwater Valley (Lobb and Morris 1991–93) and Aldermarston Wharf (Cowell *et al.* 1977–8). On a wider regional scale, the settlement at Larkwhistle Farm, although smaller and short-lived, echoes the larger areas of extensive activity such as Aldermarston Wharf in the county of Berkshire and Wittenham Clumps (Hingley 1979–80, 21–55), now placed in the county of Oxfordshire, and also sites within the Upper Thames Valley such as Farmoor (Lambrick and Robinson 1979), Mingies Ditch, Hardwick (Allen and Robinson 1993) and Deer Park Road (Walker 1995) in Oxfordshire, and Pennyland (Williams 1993) and Bancroft (Williams and Zeepvat 1994) in the county of Buckinghamshire.

Structures

It would appear that the rectangular enclosure and associated structures at Larkwhistle Farm can be placed within the category of enclosed farmstead sites such as that at Old Down Farm, Andover (Davies 1981) and that represented within the early phases of middle Iron Age settlement development at Claydon Pike, Lechlade (Hingley and Miles 1984, 61). It is difficult, however, to say whether the Larkwhistle Farm enclosure is an example of an isolated farmstead or part of a larger complex, even though the unit appears to be integral.

Penannular gullies, either within or directly associated with the surrounding enclosure area, are a common feature of middle Iron Age sites although the opposed curved gullies as seen at Larkwhistle Farm would appear to be less common. Roundhouse 6 at Pennyland (Williams 1993, 21, fig. 14) is just such a structure, also House 3 at Mingies Ditch (Allen *et al.* 1993, 48, fig. 22) and within Area A at Deer Park Road (Walker 1995, 73, fig. 4), although the latter is more segmented and slightly more complex in form. Structural postholes were notably absent at Larkwhistle Farm as were other penannular/curved structures such as those mentioned above.

While the area has suffered from localised truncation, as shown by the north-west corner of the enclosure ditch (112), the survival of the four large postholes of the four-post structure (133) indicates that the southern half of the site has not been affected to the same degree. The perimeters of the field showed no evidence of the accumulation of 'headlands' which would support mass movement of material through long-term ploughing that may destroy structural evidence. Thus the lack of structural post/stakeholes must be explained on a constructional level. One possibility is that the curved gullies were settings for upright posts, or that cill beams, supporting timber uprights, were laid along the bottom of the gullies. Although some inconclusive evidence was found in part of the northern gully of structure 194 to suggest a slot to accommodate a cill beam (Fig. 6, no. 138), no evidence of post/stakeholes was found within the gullies. If the gullies represented the actual wall line of the structure, then it is difficult to see the logic for the width (up to 2.4 m) of the two opposing 'entrances'.

The current and generally accepted interpretation argues that these gullies acted as open features serving as drainage channels or 'eaves drips' for run-off from the roof of the building. As eaves drips they indicate that the roof covering was constructed to throw water well to the side of the doorway, thereby maintaining a dry environment in the vicinity of the entrances. The re-cutting of the eastern half of the gullies of structure 194 is arguably the result of the reconstruction of the roof of the structure. If so, the new roof extended slightly further to the east, requiring the repositioning of the drainage gullies to catch the run-off. A further argument for the gullies being open drains rather than slots for a

timber structure is the accumulation of pottery in the fill of the gully's eastern terminals. Were the gullies effectively construction trenches, the pottery would have collected after the structure was demolished, and presumably the site (or at least that part of it) was unoccupied. The presence of pottery in the eastern terminals suggests that this was the side of the true entrance. There is no evidence to suggest that the opposing gaps in the western sides of the gullies are entrances at all, though Allen *et al.* (1993, 43–50) argued that a concentration of gravel at the western gap in House 3 at Mingies Ditch did indicate use as a doorway.

Presented with a similar lack of structural evidence on other sites such as Farmoor, Mingies Ditch, Pennyland and Deer Park Road, the possibility of 'mass' walls of turf or cob have been suggested. Walls of this type of material would not necessarily leave any archaeologically detectable trace, especially on a site with a shallow overburden. Conceivably the mass walls could have incorporated a timber armature to support a roof structure. Such postholes as would be required for this method of construction may have been little more than shallow stakeholes, which may well have been truncated, or did not necessarily penetrate the natural subsoil. The single posthole (221) within the south-east entrance of structure 194 cannot be proven to be contemporaneous with the crescentic gullies but from its position may indicate the sole structural evidence remaining of a doorway.

Function of the enclosure and the structures

Even allowing for some truncation of the enclosure ditch, it was still far too shallow and narrow to have served, on its own, as a physical barrier either to keep stock in or to keep predators out. However, the ditch supplemented by a hedge or a fence could have formed a more effective barrier. No evidence for fence postholes was identified along the length of the gully although one probable and two definite postholes were identified at the eastern entrance of the enclosure. This would indicate an entrance structure associated with an upstanding boundary within the enclosure gully. A lightweight 'hurdle' fence would require only small stakeholes, which may have been destroyed by later ploughing. A hedge is a possible alternative but would arguably require at least a few seasons to establish, and other evidence from the site suggests that it was occupied for a very short period of time.

There is very little evidence of crop processing or arable farming on the site. The environmental evidence suggests that in the middle Iron Age the area was likely to be scrubby heathland of poor fertility, at best suitable for marginal pasture. The complete absence of bone, either animal or human, is almost certainly due to the previous soil conditions. The environmental evidence suggests the middle Iron Age soil was acid and unsuited to arable farming. The Iron Age site at Brimpton (Lobb 1977–8) produced very little bone, as did the excavations at Dunston Park (Fitzpatrick 1994). As the land was only seemingly good for marginal pasture, this may well help to explain, though tentatively, the reason for the apparent short-lived nature of the settlement at Larkwhistle Farm.

It is impossible to determine the nature of the four-post structure as no material or environmental evidence was recovered to suggest a function. All that can be said is that it is most probably contemporary with the other structures.

The assemblage of pottery was modest in quantity, and derived exclusively from the south-east corner of the enclosure and the two circular structures, more precisely the eastern termini of their gullies. This concentration of pottery around the eastern porch is not uncommon and has been noted at Dunston Park (Fitzpatrick 1994), Deer Park Road (Walker 1995) and Mingies Ditch (Allen *et al.* 1993). Hill (1994), amongst others, speculates that the orientation of entrances in prehistoric houses (mostly to the east and south-east) and the concentrations of pottery around the entrances may be due to reasons other than the utilitarian and practical, and that symbolic or ritual behavioural patterns may have played a part.

Local environment

No evidence was found to link the enclosure and structures to the barrow complex. Although the entrances of structure 209 are in direct alignment with the largest barrow in the vicinity, this may not have been intentionally for a ritual purpose. If the enclosure complex served a purely pastoral function for a family, as the evidence indicates, it may be that, by this time, the immediate environs of the barrows was not considered to be an 'exclusion zone' for occupation or domestic activity. If the site is marginal to a larger settlement site, the lack of evidence to the north suggests that further occupation evidence would lie to the south. This is supported by the re-cut, associated with Phase 2, of the southern side of the enclosure 112, running south and continuing beyond the site.

THE ARCHIVE

The archive has been microfilmed and is currently held at the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The records and the finds from the excavation will be deposited at Newbury District Museum, Berkshire.

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