Chapter 2: White Horse Hill

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What a hill is the White Horse Hill! There it stands right up above the rest, ... the boldest, bravest ... chalk hill that you ever saw

Thomas Hughes (1889)

INTRODUCTION

The most important archaeological feature on the Hill is the chalk figure of the White Horse but there are also several burial mounds and the hillfort known as Uffington 'Castle' lies close by. There is another enclosure which survives only as a soilmark, to the west of the hillfort, a linear boundary ditch runs south from the hillfort and there are also traces of ancient fields nearby. The ancient routeway known as the Ridgeway passes over this hilltop immediately to the south of the hillfort. Some of the surrounding landscape features, particularly the flat-topped Dragon Hill and the adjacent dry valley known as the Manger, may not be ancient monuments, but they form part of the complex of features providing the setting for the White Horse (Plate 2.1 and Fig. 2.1).

The hill figure, carved out of the turf of a hillside, is a particularly English phenomenon. A number are known, and most are located on the chalk downland. These figures include giants, crosses, badges and various animals, as well as horses. Most are modern, and are known from records to have been cut during the 18th, 19th or 20th centuries, but a few early examples exist, including the Uffington White Horse, the Long Man of Wilmington, and the Cerne Abbas Giant. There are some references to these early figures in documents dating to before 1700, but the Uffington White Horse stands out in having a written history going back to the 12th century, although this reference does not necessarily date the figure. However, the Uffington Horse may be the earliest surviving example of this type of monument and clearly merits investigation.

This White Horse has a stylised form, and faces to the right which distinguishes it from most of the other horse figures. A silhouette also defines the Horse while narrow lines define the giants. The style of the White Horse suggests that it could be of Iron Age date, making it contemporaneous with the nearby hillfort. The position of this White Horse beside the hillfort and the other monuments may be significant too. There are other figures which are situated close to ancient sites, such as the first Westbury Horse, the Long Man of Wilmington and the Cerne Abbas Giant. Whilst these may be coincidences, it seems likely that the figures and other landscape features were linked. However, until the current project began no archaeological investigations had attempted to clarify the relationship of the Uffington White Horse and the nearby sites.

APPROACHING WHITE HORSE HILL

On 17 and 18 September 1857 some 15,000–18,000 people gathered on White Horse Hill to 'celebrate the Scouring of the White Horse according to immemorial custom' (Hughes 1889). The Horse was cleared of weeds and grass and then fresh chalk was puddled into the top of the trench forming the Horse itself. The Scouring of the Horse was the centrepiece of a range of celebrations within the nearby hillfort and the Manger, as the flat bottomed valley below the Horse was known. People came from all over southern Britain, using the still relatively new railways to transport them, as well as from the immediate area. The whole event had been organised by a Management Committee of local landowners and notables, including the author Thomas Hughes, who lived in Uffington and is best known for *Tom Brown*'s *Schooldays*. He also wrote a novel to celebrate this occasion, *The Scouring of the White Horse*.

The Scouring also prompted the largest excavations on White Horse Hill prior to those reported here. These were carried out by Edwin Martin-Atkins, owner of the neighbouring estate, member of the Management Committee and a rather accomplished archaeological excavator by the standards of the time. What is to be made of a gathering of 15,000 people on a beautiful but exposed part of the Berkshire Downs in the middle of the last century? Was such a crowd following an ancient ritual handed down from time immemorial? The sheer antiquity of the ritual, as a direct link to some imagined 'Olde England' was a major part of the attraction, but also there was science involved and good solid Victorian organisation in the form of the Management Committee.

This was a curious event, in which people arrived in their railway carriages but were really moved by England's ancient and mythical past. Two years before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* excavators like Martin-Atkins were working in a nascent scientific tradition and attempting to understand the past, but they could appreciate also the attraction of a more emotional attachment to old rituals. If such an event, which took place less than 150 years ago, is hard to understand and classify, how much more so those of several millennia ago, when the White Horse itself may have first been constructed.

For several thousand years people have regularly been cleaning the White Horse, burying their dead nearby and constructing features as massive as

Plate 2.1 Aerial photograph of White Horse Hill, Uffington, looking to the south and showing the flat-topped mound of Dragon Hill in the foreground, the adjacent dry valley of the Manger, the White Horse and the ramparts of Uffington Castle hillfort. Between the hillfort and the Horse lie a long barrow and a small round barrow which were also investigated (Copyright: Vale of the White Horse Council).

a hillfort or as small as a ditch on the hill. As will be seen, a number of unusual and perhaps inexplicable activities on the hilltop in prehistory, suggest that this place included a number of special ritual sites. The Scouring of 1857, therefore, provides pause for thought: if this recent event is only partially ritual, but really a compound of many motives and means, how should these earlier events be considered? It becomes unclear whether modern terms, such as sacred and profane, wealth and power, individual and group, can easily be used in later prehistory. The understanding of a complex of sites such as those on White Horse Hill requires not just the physical investigation of the archaeological features, but also a careful intellectual examination of the terms and ideas used to understand past happenings and people.

RETHINKING THE LATE BRONZE AGE AND IRON AGE

Over the last 20 years studies of later prehistory in Britain have moved from a stress on function to an exploration of ritual in a manner which has lagged behind a similar shift in studies of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age. The nature of the evidence from these earlier periods encouraged more non-functionalist ideas, as from much of Britain there is little evidence of settlement sites before the middle Bronze Age or direct indications of agrarian activity. However, there are monuments, such as causewayed camps, henges and cursuses, and such sites are seen to be locations in a ritual landscape animated by ideas unlike our own (Barrett 1994; Barrett *et al.* 1991; Bradley 1998; Thomas 1993).

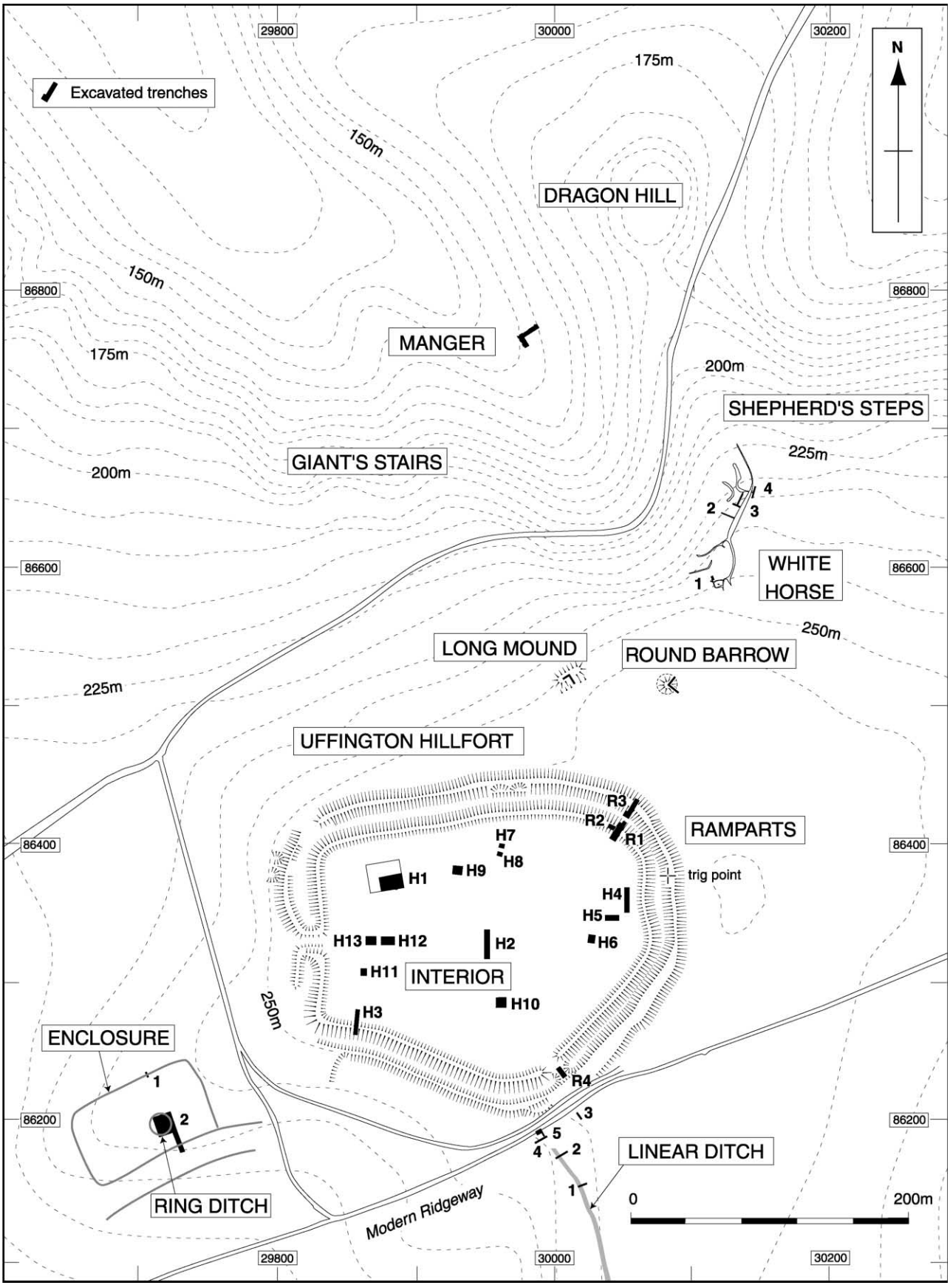

Figure 2.1 White Horse Hill. Plan of the area indicating the location of the main features and the excavated trenches: on the White Horse (1–4), on the Manger, Dragon Hill, the round barrow and long mound, the enclosure and associated ring ditch, on the Linear Ditch (1–5), within Uffington hillfort interior (1–13) and on the hillfort ramparts (1–4).

Conversely, from the middle Bronze Age, and certainly by the Iron Age, there seemed to be a more commonplace set of landscapes made up of enclosed settlements with evidence of cereal processing and the bones of domesticated animals, field systems, cremations and occasional burials. It appeared to make good sense to interpret this evidence in socio-economic terms. However, during the 1960s and 1970s the Iron Age was seen as a period during which redistributive chiefdoms flourished with the social elite controlling agricultural wealth and craft production. The control of these surplus products was employed to regulate the social process. Large sites, such as hillforts, began to be seen as the centres of chiefly power and the locations at which the agricultural economies and the production of objects were integrated (Collis 1977).

Ideas have changed over the last two decades as studies of the Iron Age have moved towards forms of explanation used for earlier periods. The Iron Age was not seen to be as prosaic as it seemed. Deliberate deposits of objects, animals and people in pits on Iron Age sites could not be seen as merely functional. These were viewed in the same light as deliberate deposits, for example, on Neolithic henges, and therefore as part of an active ritual life in which people tried to intercede with cosmological forces (Hill 1995). Hillforts were no longer seen only as means of defending the lineage's stored food and means of craft production from the war-like followers of rival chiefs, but also as markers of status and as symbols of power and prestige, sited at highly visible points on the landscape (Bowden and McOmish 1987; Sharples 1991). So it seems very possible that Iron Age society may not have been motivated by a socio-economic thinking like our own, and that many activities may have been non-functional and perhaps ritualistic.

The main objection to an emphasis on ritual, however, is that the word creates a division between impenetrable forms of ritual behaviour and those actions with a practical function. However, rather than seek out evidence of ritual, which also then requires the definition of a category of non-ritual action, the process of ritualisation requires examination (Bell 1992). Bell's view is that all societies pick out sets of actions which are formalised and repeated, if they are socially important, and thus provide some guide to the heart of the social and cultural process. Formalised and repeated forms of practice tend to take place at particular localities within the landscape, and help to shape those places. In addition, actions are often associated with special sets of material culture and forms of bodily movement, and so in turn special places and objects are needed to give important forms of practice their social impact. These practices create and maintain the places and sets of objects.

In the Iron Age ritualised action resulted in the deliberate deposition of bones and artefacts in pits, and these actions would have created and kept active many features of the landscape. Many of the features on the Berkshire Downs, such as linear ditches and enclosures, were not dug once and then left, but were kept in an active state over many centuries. The hillfort at Uffington, for instance, should not be interpreted as a static site, which was remodelled occasionally, but a place to be created and recreated, and it was this process of construction and reconstruction which was one of its most important aspects. So the sites on White Horse Hill are examined to determine how social relationships were established, transformed or prevented by actions within space and time.

MYTH AND HISTORY

Gosden and Lock (1998) have investigated the effects of sites in creating history of different types, and the distinction between myth and history has been explored. Mythical sites are those that still have power, but operate beyond the limits of human memory, giving considerable scope in what people can say and do with the ancient past. Historical sites are those whose makers are still remembered in genealogies, sites with names and dates attached to them. Myth and history are not polar opposites, but can easily coexist in the same societies and history will become myth, as generation follows generation and makers' names are lost. Old sites or objects, whose origins are forgotten, may then also be forgotten themselves or may be given new significance by virtue of their obscure and ancient origins.

One of the most striking features of the sites on White Horse Hill is that they have never lost their significance for subsequent generations. So the White Horse although created several thousand years earlier, still had the power to draw 15,000 people in 1857 and is visited by hundreds of thousands of people today. The exact meaning of the site has changed continuously: the Victorians saw it very differently to people in earlier times, but they were drawn to it nonetheless. These sites have been social actors over millennia and life in this region would have been quite different had they not existed. Our aim is to try and uncover some of the changing significances of the sites over the period of their existence and to avoid the distinctions of ritual or function.

THE BERKSHIRE DOWNS IN LATER PREHISTORY

There is considerable evidence of funerary activity in the Neolithic and early Bronze Age on the Berkshire Downs, although there is little indication of settlement. In surrounding regions such as the Marlborough Downs and the Kennet and Thames valleys, the middle Bronze Age represented a major change of activity with the establishment of field systems, settlements and a well managed landscape (Bradley 1986; Gingell 1992; Miles 1997; Yates 1999). However, on the Berkshire Downs there is less evidence for this middle Bronze Age settlement,

although at nearby Lambourn barrows, 112 cremations of middle Bronze Age type were found as secondary burials in and around a barrow (Case 1956–7, 20), a common form of burial in this period. It is quite possible therefore that open settlements consisting of houses without field systems, representative of a more pastoral society, could have existed. Such remains are not known, but inevitably research has concentrated upon the more visible remains on the Down.

In the later Bronze Age there was more obvious activity on the Berkshire Downs with the appearance of a range of sites which included linear ditches dividing up the countryside and the construction of some hillforts such as Rams Hill (Bradley and Ellison 1975). The people who occupied this landscape and made it human may have come from the surrounding river valleys and neighbouring downland. The communities that began to coalesce on the Downs in the late Bronze Age may well have had numerous origins and their actions and ideas have had a lasting effect on the area they occupied.

Aspects of Iron Age landscapes could be viewed as static, as banks and ditches appear very like barriers, but on the Berkshire Downs where groups may have been redefining themselves, the group dynamics were being constantly replayed. In this way barriers were created and adapted, and material culture was used to meet the struggle for group identity. So ways in which objects were moved across, or were blocked by boundaries or specially deposited, became socially significant. It is with the challenge of understanding and making sense of the past in mind that this project to investigate the material and spiritual remains of the White Horse Hill was undertaken.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Following the passing of the Ancient Monuments Act at the end of the 19th century the care of the monuments was no longer the responsibility of the landlord and the local community. It was recognised that their maintenance was of public concern and the Ministry of Works and its successor English Heritage carried out repairs to the Horse and the ramparts of the hillfort as they were deemed necessary, but had little control of the setting of these monuments. When the Right Honourable David Astor donated the land around the White Horse to the National Trust in 1979, new impetus was given to the maintenance of the complex as a whole. The conservation and enhancement of the area became the priority of both English Heritage and The National Trust.

The Trust together with the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, for the White Horse is in Guardianship, set about improving the setting of the hill figure in 1979. This was done by converting the ploughland which surrounded the monument to pasture, taking away fences, infilling raw scars in the chalk, and removing the old car park on the Hill to a new one in a nearby quarry. This removed some of the most obvious 20th-century features of the landscape which were detracting from the appearance of the monuments, but the guardians of the Hill were aware of the problems and conflicts involved in managing and interpreting the area with appropriate sensitivity.

The significance of the site continues to evolve, and its conservation is an ongoing matter. A greater understanding of the monuments and the site as a whole was required to develop a management strategy that would allow the continued diverse use and enjoyment of the area while halting the deterioration of the archaeology.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AIMS AND FIELDWORK

Modern fieldwork on the site began with a detailed survey of the White Horse in 1980 by the OAU with the aid of a group of volunteers, but did not get under way in earnest until almost the end of that decade when the current project began. This commenced in April 1989 and grew over the next six years, always with the overall aim of providing a definitive record of the area, to form a basis for future research, conservation and management. All the principal elements of the monument complex were eventually to be investigated in pursuit of this objective, with care taken to minimise disturbance and damage to the surviving archaeology. As a result much emphasis in the research design was placed on non-intrusive techniques and desk based study, validated by very small-scale targeted excavations. The excavations were often restricted to previously disturbed areas and did not go much beyond the limit of such disturbance, to leave as much of the archaeology preserved *in situ* as possible.

The University of Oxford (Department for Continuing Education, Institute of Archaeology and Pitt Rivers Museum) joined the project in 1994 and 1995 working collaboratively with the OAU, and with the additional objective of providing good quality fieldwork training for their full and part-time archaeology students. This provided the impetus for further work in the area by the University of Oxford, Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project (HFRP), which is on-going. The HFRP is investigating continuity and change within a larger area of landscape centred on White Horse Hill and the Ridgeway through the later prehistoric and Romano-British periods. By late 1999 the HFRP had spent two seasons at Segsbury Camp (Lock and Gosden 1997; 1998) and two at Alfred's Castle (Gosden and Lock 1999). It was hoped to integrate existing and new data within a Geographical Information Systems (GIS) database of the area and to explore theoretical concepts of continuity, discontinuity and notions of prehistoric histories (Gosden and Lock 1998). The Project will explore the extensive field systems and detailed archaeology known to exist from aerial photographs (Bowden *et al.* 1991–3a). The National Mapping Programme of English Heritage completed (Bewley 1993) the mapping of

the Lambourn Downs in 2000, which provides an important resource for further work.

By 1999 the HFRP had worked on Scheduled Ancient Monuments and was granted Scheduled Monument Consent due to its close association with the geophysics unit of the CfA. Another project that arose from the work at White Horse Hill was the Wessex Hillforts Geophysics Project which went on to conduct surveys of the interiors of 18 hillforts (Payne 1996). This involved the ground proofing of a range of geophysical anomalies by the HFRP in collaboration with the CfA as part of their on-going research into geophysical methodologies and interpretation.

Background research

One of the first research aims was to review, collate and analyse all aerial photographs of the area and background information. This included surviving documentary sources from the Anglo-Saxon charters, through other medieval and post-medieval text and illustrations, to the late 20th century. With this aim the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record and the National Monuments Record were also consulted.

Earthwork survey

The earliest stages of work on this project also included contour and geophysical surveys. Detailed contour surveys initially of only the hillfort, but later extending to Dragon Hill, the Horse and the area between the hillfort and the Horse which included known barrows. This was to provide a precise record and to help identify surviving earthworks. Particular attention was to be paid to the area of the Horse in order to record irregularities in the surrounding turf, which several earlier workers had suggested might relate to previous outlines of the figure.

Geophysical survey

Hillfort and enclosure

Initially geophysical survey was restricted to the interior of the hillfort and the area of the burials between the Horse and the hillfort with the intention of clarifying the character of the occupation in the hillfort and the nature and survival of the barrows. The CfA carried out this work. Results from the hillfort interior were initially promising with some pits indicated, but it was decided that they would benefit from enhancement by magnetic susceptibility to pinpoint occupation areas more clearly. The aim was to concentrate on non-destructive survey which could be validated by small-scale sample excavation targeted to specific areas. However, when three trenches were dug in the interior to investigate the fairly equivocal information from this work, the results were very disappointing.

As a consequence the CfA was commissioned to undertake a new geophysical survey within the hillfort in 1995. The survey also extended to an enclosure to the west of the hillfort identified as a soilmark on aerial photographs of the hilltop. This survey used new techniques to give a much more accurate enhanced result. Particular anomalies indicating archaeology were again identified for validation by small-scale trenching.

The Horse

The CfA extended the geophysical survey to include the area of the Horse, as it was hoped that earlier outlines would be recognised. Work by Grimes in 1953 had indicated that at least the head of the figure was a chalk packed feature cutting colluvial deposits, and that restoration had not always adhered to exactly the same outline.

Dragon Hill

The CfA also extended the survey to investigate the flat-topped mound Dragon Hill to try to understand its formation and use. Many antiquarians were of the belief that the feature had been used for burial, if not deliberately constructed as a barrow. Other ideas included suggestions that it was a medieval castle motte or the site of an early church. Stray surface finds of Iron Age and Romano-British date were known from the hill. Research in Victorian times had failed to clarify this, with some reports of bones having been recovered from chalk pits along the sides.

Excavations (*Fig. 2.1*)

The Manger

An L-shaped trench was excavated in the floor of the adjacent dry valley called the Manger to investigate the nature of a possibly anthropogenic terrace running around the valley floor and to examine the colluvial build up. This was one of the original aims of the research on the hill and formed part of the 1990 season's work. It was hoped that investigation of the colluvial deposits would assist in clarifying the impact of the human activity in the local landscape and so enable the information to be set in the regional context.

Round barrow and long mound

Excavations in the 1850s had demonstrated that at least some of the earthworks in this area were burial mounds with evidence dating to the Roman and Saxon periods. From the surveys carried out in the first phase of this project, it was apparent that the area between the hillfort and the Horse had been little disturbed by arable farming. Although the barrows were somewhat flattened, the round barrow ditch had survived, and the area also contained a long barrow. It was decided, therefore, to excavate

trenches through the two mounds which matched the Victorian descriptions. This work was carried out in 1993. There were a number of specific aims: the trenches were to confirm that these were the barrows excavated in the 1850s and to assess the extent of the earlier excavations, as these had not been fully published. This would enable an estimation of what might survive *in situ*. It was also intended to recover any material that would help to date the construction and use of the barrows and verify the structural sequences referred to in earlier reports. The potential for environmental analysis was also to be investigated.

The White Horse

Two small trenches were excavated by the OAU in the 1990 season. These were intended to validate the geophysical results, and to confirm the constructional method first identified, though not published, by Grimes in 1953. It was also intended to investigate the presence of an earlier, less slender form of the Horse, suggested by the irregular turf covering, and to provide samples to help date the figure. For some time there had been controversy over the date of the figure and it was hoped that these excavations could answer this question.

These first excavations showed that the figure was a complex monument and suggested the presence of a possible earlier plough lynchet. It was thought that this might be of use in dating the Horse if the samples taken for Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating in 1990 failed to produce any results. The samples did not prove suitable: this was a new dating technique, only then being developed.

As a result a further programme of work was undertaken in 1994. This was proposed to answer specific questions and clarify the use of the hillside before the Horse was created. Two further small trenches running up to the edges of the current Horse were excavated. The specific aims were to investigate the lower side of the body further to check the interpretation of this lynchet and, if possible, to recover finds from it; to verify the more naturalistic appearance of the back legs indicated by the resistivity survey. In addition it was hoped to investigate the linear geophysical anomaly running from the back of the Horse with particular emphasis on its date and relationship to the Horse. Further samples for OSL dating of the monument were also to be taken under strictly controlled conditions.

The hillfort rampart

The first intrusive research to be carried out as part of this project was limited excavations through the hillfort ramparts in 1989. A small section was dug through the north-eastern breach in the ramparts with the aim of recording and publishing data, before the breach was infilled in an effort to restore the ramparts to what was considered their original state. However, this work, combined with the research into the Anglo-Saxon charters, made further investigation of the ramparts of considerable interest.

This further investigation involved continuing the section across the ditch and through the counterscarp bank to give a complete section. A trench was also excavated through the rampart close to the south-eastern breach, where considerable wear and erosion was occurring due to its use for vehicular access. The aim of this trench was to check whether features observed in the north-east breach also occurred elsewhere in the circuit. This work was to be completed during the 1990 season.

Prior to the commencement of this project it was assumed that the breaches through the ramparts were relatively recent, but their origins were really unknown. Initially it was thought that they may have been contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon boundary that was recorded as passing through them in the 9th century, but the 1989 work had opened up the possibility that they may have existed before this date. This was another of the questions about the site that the 1990 rampart trenches were designed to investigate.

The hillfort interior

Three small trenches were excavated in 1994 to ground proof the results of the first geophysical survey, and to assess the preservation of the underlying archaeology. It was also important to establish the date and character of the occupation of the hillfort and to investigate any post-Iron Age activity. Each of these trenches was dug with specific additional objectives. Trench 1 was located to validate an area of geophysical anomalies, while trench 2 was situated centrally to attempt to locate evidence of a road on the main axis of the fort and trench 3 was located in the lee of the ramparts to investigate the preservation and character of the deposits.

Numerous smaller trenches were excavated during the next season with similar objectives following the disappointing results of the first season. In addition to these small trenches dug with the aim of ground proofing the second geophysical survey, a larger trench was excavated just inside a bulge in the line of the ramparts at the eastern side, which had tentatively been identified as a blocked entrance (O'Connor and Startin 1975). The geophysical results from this area were not very clear, but it was hoped that given the proximity to the ramparts archaeological features might be sufficiently well preserved to confirm this interpretation, and to determine the date and character of the entrance and its blocking.

The enclosure and ring ditch

This feature was first apparent as a soilmark on aerial photographs. It was picked out as a possible focus for Romano-British activity, which might add an extra dimension to the use of the hillfort. Resistivity survey confirmed this feature but a small circular one within the interior of the enclosure noted on the aerial

photograph was not confirmed. Two trenches were excavated crossing both features to assess the extent of the remaining archaeology, to date the enclosures and to characterise the associated activity.

The linear ditch

This feature, running south from the hillfort and apparently crossed by the Ridgeway, was visible on aerial photographs and on the ground for several kilometres of its length. Four very small sections were cut across it to ascertain its date and character and its relationship to the Ridgeway and the hillfort.

THE RESULTS

In the following Chapters 4 to 7 the results of these investigations which took place between 1989 and 1994 are reported, and in Chapter 14 the interpretation of these sites is undertaken, in light of the results obtained, both from the sites of the White Horse and of the investigations at Tower Hill.