

Chapter 1: Introduction

by Margaret Gray and George Lambrick

TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies S of the village of Stanton Harcourt, on the W side of the road from Stanton Harcourt to Standlake, N of Linch Hill (back cover and Fig. 1). It is about 1.2 km E of the river Windrush and about 4 km from its confluence with the Thames. The monument is centred at NGR SP 411 047, and its height above sea level grades from 71 m at the N end of the site to 70 m at the S. By the time of the 1972–3 excavation the W side of the monument was bounded by a large lake, formed by earlier gravel extraction, which had destroyed the bank of the henge previously recorded by Grimes (1960). The area to the S was being intensively quarried and the area to the E was occupied by small disused pits and scrubland, whereas that to the N was under cultivation. The NE end of a wartime runway had been partially removed, leaving a farm track, and the SE end had been retained as a concrete platform for the gravel extraction plant. Neither the track nor the concrete platform were available for excavation at that time and the cultivated area to the SE was bounded by a fence. A modern field boundary which ran through the W terminal and as far as the farm track had been removed. In 1988 both the track and the area under the concrete platform were made available for excavation. By this time further quarrying had taken place around and within the monument, although much of the remainder of the interior and the ditch still survived.

GEOLOGY

The OS Drift Map of the Witney region (sheet 236) shows the Devil's Quoits to be at the centre of an area of Second and Third Terrace Gravels which form an apron between the Windrush and the Thames (back cover). The Upper Thames terrace gravels are largely calcareous and are derived from the northern limestones, having been washed down by the rivers of an earlier Upper Thames system. The surface of the subsoil varied over the site with the yellow-brown gravel interrupted by beds of yellow-brown sand and areas of red-brown silty clay and outcrops of conglomerate. Gravels, sands, clays and conglomerate were all highly variable in consistency, some of the lighter clays being possibly of loessic origin. The northern sections of the ditch cut through a large area of sand, there was a large area

of loessic clay at the E entrance and outcrops of conglomerate at the W entrance. This conglomerate was sometimes only a shallow, loose 'hard pan' on the surface of the gravel, yet in other places it formed anything from a thick layer of ferruginous concretions of sand and large pebbles to sizeable slabs such as those used for the stone circle. The loessic clays and the soils in the ditches were studied by Dr Susan Limbrey (Ch. 3).

The site was further complicated by the presence of a linear ice-wedge cast and several circular pads of red-brown clay, also periglacial in origin (Fig. 6).

HISTORY OF THE SITE

Mesolithic material has been recovered nearby in the field known as Gravelly Guy (Holgate 1988; Lambrick *et al.* in prep.). There is clear evidence for middle to late Neolithic activity from the same field (Ch. 5), from Linch Hill (Leeds 1940; Grimes 1960, 154–65) and the Vicarage Field (Thomas 1955; Case and Whittle 1982, 103–17).

The Devil's Quoits is one of the major class II circle-henge monuments of the British Isles (Burl 1976, 274–82) and lay at the centre of a dense and extensive distribution of late Neolithic and Bronze Age sites which included ring-ditches, flat graves, pits and possible mortuary enclosures (Fig. 39). Its diametrically opposed entrances, just N of E and S of W, its elliptical shape and its proximity to the tributary of a major river are typical of its class. By the Iron Age the monument had gone out of use, but must still have been a major landmark with its adjacent barrow mounds, although by then the ditches had silted considerably and the bank spread out from its original height. The 36 stones which originally formed the ring inside the enclosure may still have been in position. It is clear that the banks and ditches of the henge were ploughed over in the Roman period, and this certainly continued in the Middle Ages, when the whole site formed part of the common field of Stanton Harcourt and was used for ridge-and-furrow cultivation, traces of which were identified in excavation (Fig. 5).

By the end of the medieval period, either for iconoclastic or agricultural reasons, the majority of the stones had been removed. Had they remained they would, no doubt, have attracted more antiquarian interest, and there might have been more objection when the airfield was constructed over the

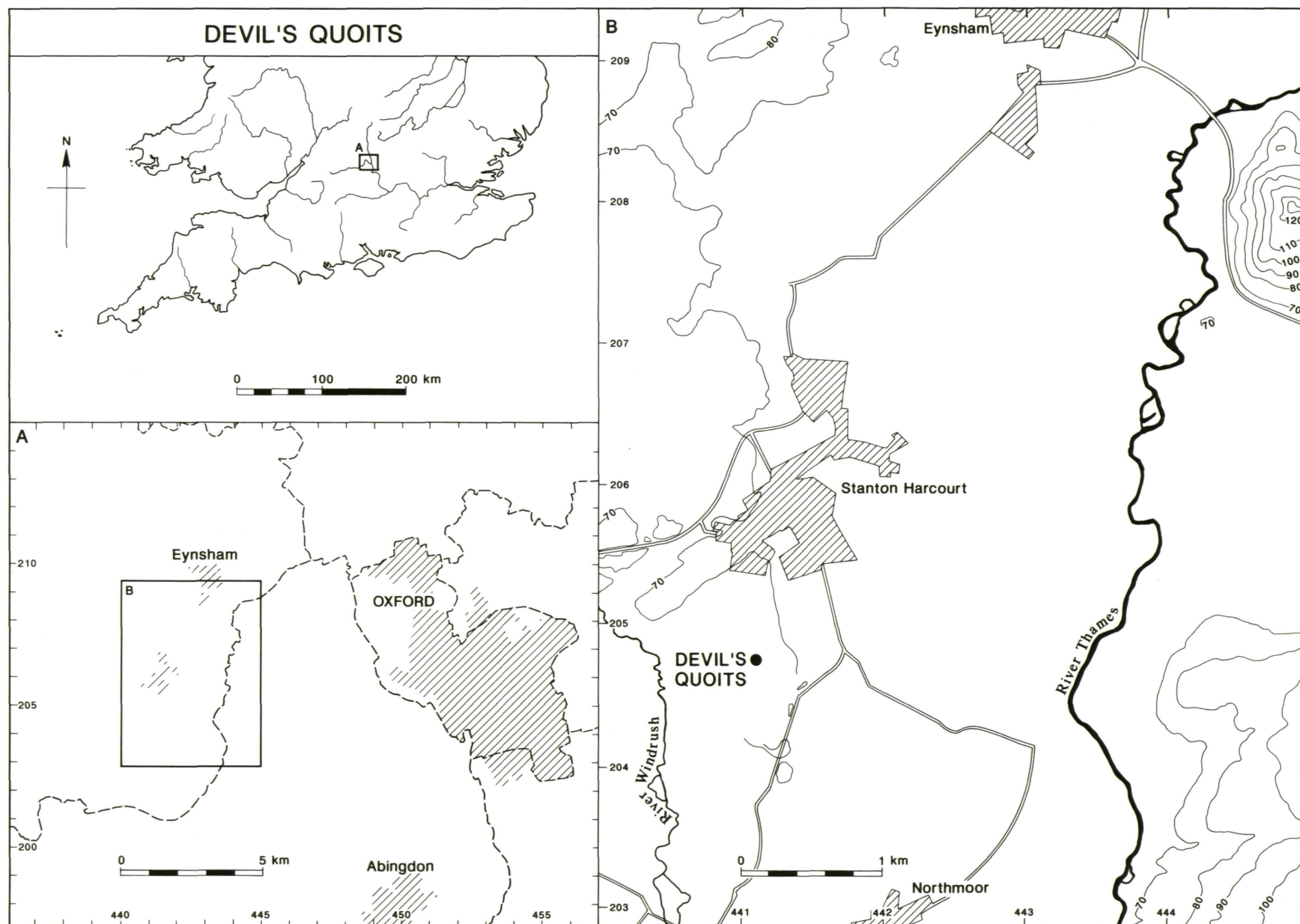


Figure 1 Location in the present day landscape

site in 1940, by which time only one standing stone (Quoit A) remained *in situ* (front cover, centre), in what was subsequently recorded as stonehole F202, while two others (Quoits B and C) had been re-erected outside the enclosure to the N (Grimes 1960, fig. 57). Quoit A was buried close to the new runway (Fig. 2). Literature dating from before the first excavation on the site in 1940, summarised by Grimes (1960, 145–6), shows that it was the remaining standing stones rather than the earthwork that excited interest in historical times.

Aubrey's observations on the three stones which stood in the vicinity of the monument in the mid 17th century made it clear that two of them had been re-erected away from their original positions. This was confirmed by Grimes' 1940 excavation (1960, 146, figs 57 and 59). Aubrey also mentions the large barrow to the NW (site XVI, 1, known as the Stanton Harcourt Barrow; Ch 5; Harden and Treweeks 1945). Robert Plot (1677) wrote of the three still standing stones

They are about eight foot high, and near the base seven broad; they seem not natural, but made by Art, of a small kind of stones cemented together, where of there are great numbers in the Fields hereabout; which makes thus much for the Conjecture concerning those at Stone-Heng that they be artificial, it being plain from those, that they could, and did do such things in the ancients times.

Like many monuments, the Devil's Quoits has become the focus of a good deal of folklore. Grimes quotes Akerman's (1857) version of the tradition that one of the stones was removed to make a bridge but restored to its old position at the request of one of the Harcourt family. An alternative version has it that the stone which was used as a bridge invariably slipped into the water however carefully it was bedded into the banks and was finally returned to its place in the circle (Burl 1976, 8). There is a closely similar tradition relating to the Rollright Stones (Lambrick 1983).

Sturdy (1973) quotes a tradition found in the Harcourt Papers that 'the Devil was playing at Quoits one Sunday on Wytham Hill, four miles distant, and that these stones were the result of his play. Mr Warton has suggested that these stones were erected to commemorate an engagement fought near Bampton in the year 614. Other accounts attribute the position of these stones to the Druids'.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Up to 1972

When Major Allen began his remarkable aerial reconnaissance in the 1920s it became apparent that the stones were by no means the only surviving relics of local prehistoric monuments. His photographs, with others later taken by St Joseph, Riley



Figure 2 The burial of Quoit A, 1940. Photo Donald Harden

and Baker, revealed not only the henge ditch, but an astonishing palimpsest of cropmarks which demonstrated the complexity and density of the area's archaeology. The air photographic evidence was first compiled and synthesised by Grimes (1943–4) and revised and expanded by him in the 1950s (1960, fig. 57). The cropmarks were further catalogued and reviewed by Benson and Miles (1974, 46–50, maps 21–22, figs 11–12). The elements likely to have been contemporary with the Devil's Quoits are shown in Figure 39.

Small-scale gravel quarrying was under way in Allen's day, but most of the cropmark sites still survived intact at the time of Grimes' 1940 excavation, before the destruction caused by the airfield runways (Fig. 3). Grimes' (1960, 144) total of 57 ring ditches (now over 70), was, as Sturdy (1973, 36) notes, three times the number of known barrows around Stonehenge. As it was proposed to remove the stones prior to the use of the area as an airfield, Grimes excavated the area around the three surviving Quoits and concluded that the only one in its original position was Quoit A, which was still within the ditched enclosure.

Grimes also opened six areas within the interior of the circle-henge (Fig. 4), sited to investigate possible stone- or postholes visible on one of Major Allen's photographs (Grimes 1960, 151). He thus located and excavated four stoneholes as well as a pit containing burnt stone (1960, fig. 60, 62). Grimes' contour survey showed that the external bank of the earthwork survived in a much reduced state, its crest set c. 15–25 m back from the eroded edge of the ditch (1960, fig. 60). A single section across bank and ditch showed that the bank then stood to 18 in (0.45 m) high and was spread to 46 ft (14 m) wide, with an underlying 'humus' about 9 in (0.25 m) thick, while the ditch was 8.5 ft (2.5 m) deep and 24 ft (7.5 m) wide (1960, 150–1, fig. 61).

Benson and Miles (1974, 81) vividly describe the destruction which took place at Stanton Harcourt

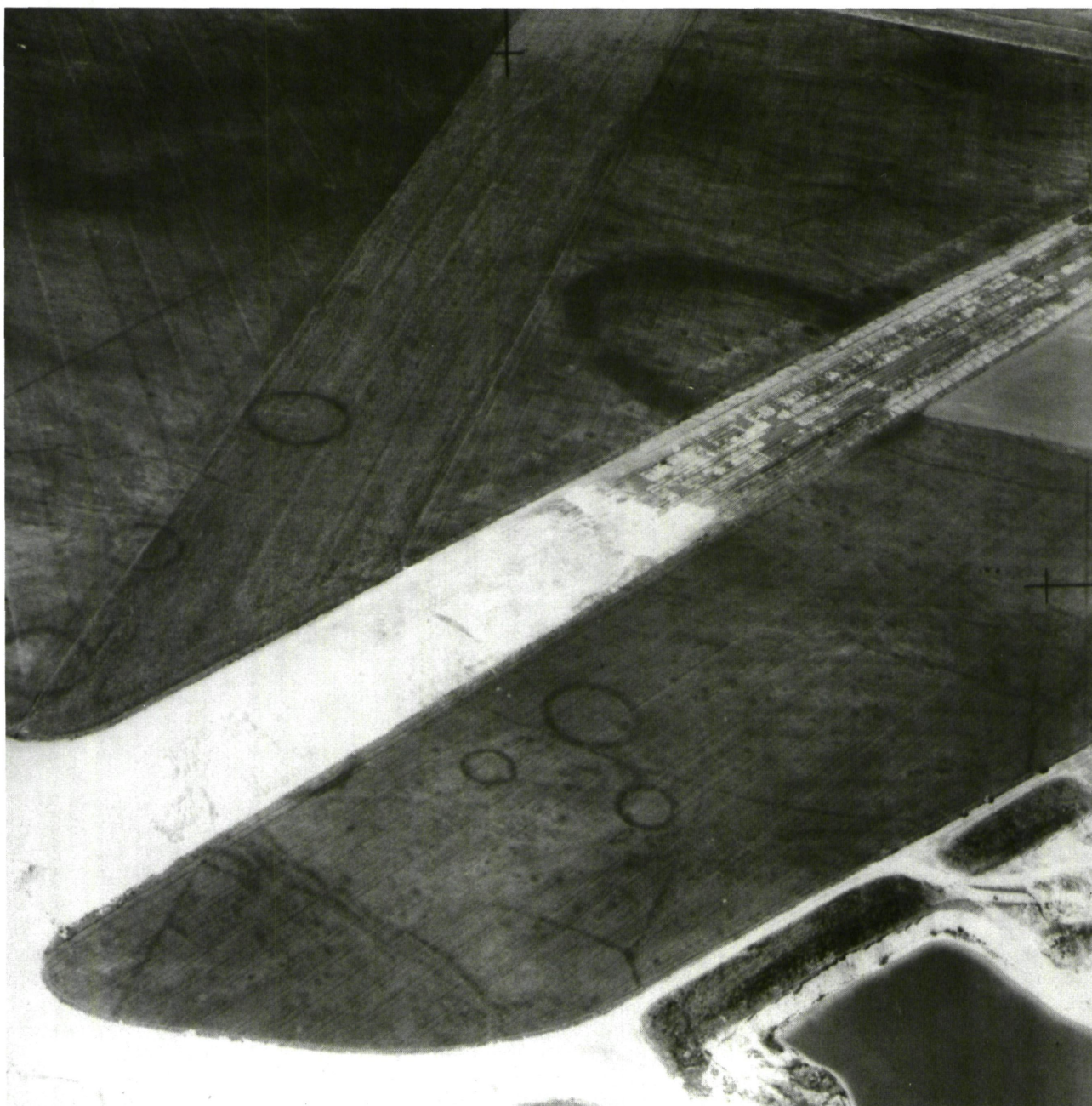


Figure 3 The Devil's Quoits from the S, showing ring ditches XXIII, 1-3 (left) and XXIX, 1-4 (right), runway of World War II airfield and water-filled gravel pit. Photo Professor J K St Joseph (Ref. VG72). © British Crown Copyright 1993/MOD, reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office

between the end of the war and the 1972-3 excavation at the Devil's Quoits. Their figures 11 and 12 show near-complete overlap between the cropmark complex and actual or imminent gravel extraction, which has continued until the present day, having been virtually completed by 1992. During the 1950s and 1960s numerous salvage excavations were carried out in the area under the auspices of the Ashmolean Museum, published in successive volumes of *Oxoniensia* and culminating in contributions to

Case's and Whittle's *Settlement Patterns in the Oxford Region* (1982).

The formation of the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee in 1967 signalled a more strategic response to this wholesale destruction of the landscape in the form of a policy of excavating threatened sites well in advance of their destruction. The Devil's Quoits henge and three circular cropmarks to the S of it (sites XIII, 1-3) were of prime importance in this plan. Protracted discussions took

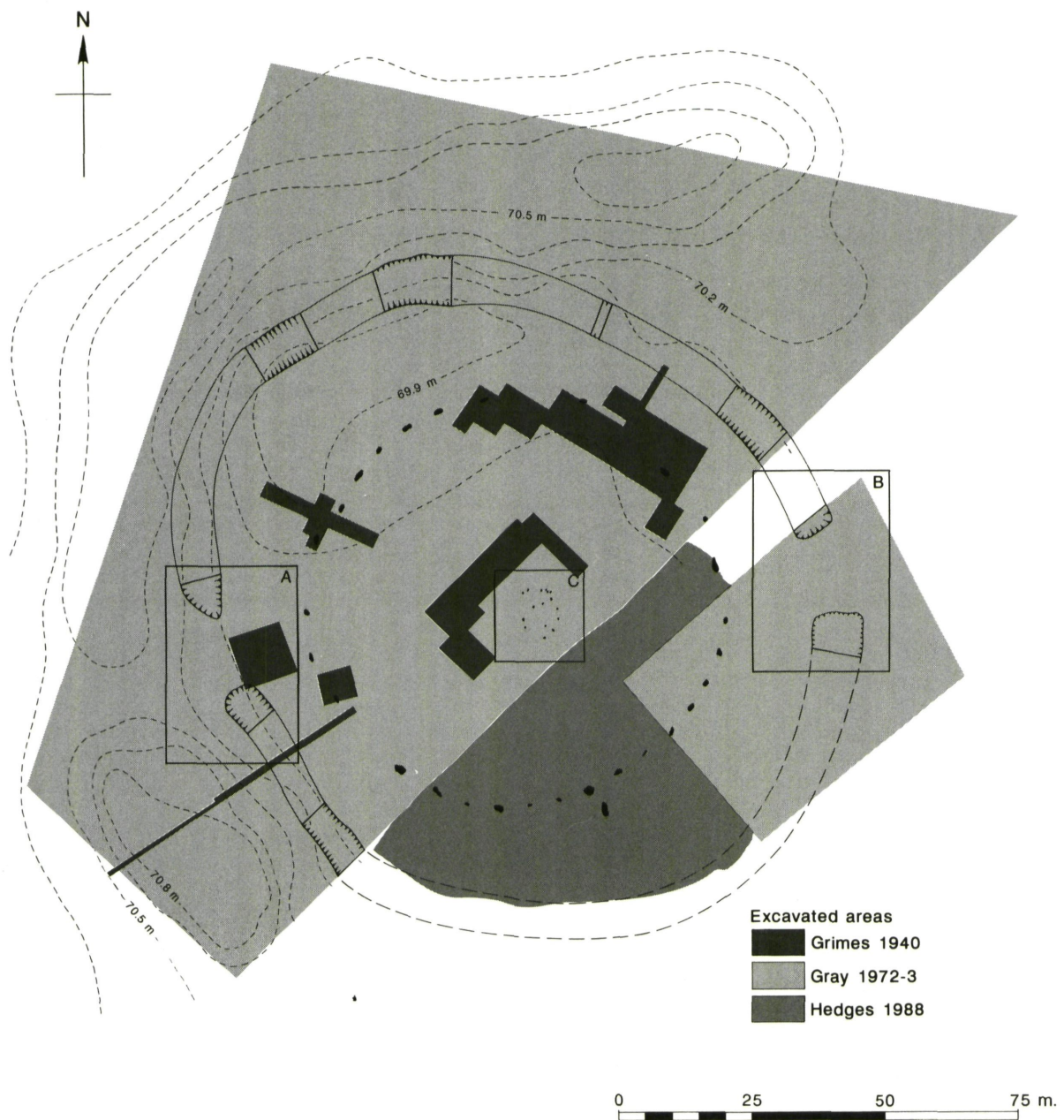


Figure 4 Extent of excavation. A = Figure 13, B = Figure 14, C = Figure 26

place between UTAC, All Souls College, Lord Harcourt, the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, the Oxfordshire County Council Planning Department and Amey Roadstone Company with a view to starting large scale excavation of the site in October 1968. Letters in the archive dated January and December 1968 refer to discussions about the scheduling of the site but in the event only Quoit A was scheduled. The excavation of the henge monument could not take place until the end of August 1972, by

which time the three cropmark circles had been destroyed and the W edge of the monument was close to a lake formed by gravel extraction (Fig. 5). At this time Quoits B and C were lost. A letter by Anthony Clark dated 16th June 1967 states that Quoit B had disappeared in the gravel pits which were by then a lake to the W of the site, and Quoit C was on the edge of an approaching quarry. The letter also records that all the field boundaries visible on old air photographs had been removed, so that the

locations of Quoits B and C could be found only by compass bearings and that of Quoit A by resistivity survey.

The 1972-3 excavations

Two seasons of excavation under the direction of Margaret Gray, from September to the end of December 1972 and from the end of March until the end of May 1973, a total of 25 weeks, took place on three-quarters of the monument (Fig. 4). The interior and the area of the bank and ditch not covered by the farm track and the remaining area of the concrete runway were stripped. The interior stoneholes, a possible central structure and geological anomalies were examined, nine sections were cut through the ditch, the ditch terminals were excavated and the area where the bank had stood was examined.

The 1988 excavations

Between 1973 and 1988 sporadic damage to the monument took place from the use of the upper levels of the ditch as a source of topsoil, and more drastic excavation of parts of the E ditch terminals, together with use of part of the unexcavated interior for gravel stockpiles. There had always been much underlying concern about the total destruction of a site which had been so important in its time, and which still retained significant stratified deposits. Various factors made it possible to reconsider the possibility of preserving part or all of the site. Following discussions a proposal was drawn up by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1986 and agreed by all the parties concerned. This was to preserve the *in situ* stratified ditch fills, which represent the most substantial and complex surviving prehistoric deposits on the site; to excavate the remaining part of the interior prior to gravel extraction; and, after suitable backfilling, to reconstruct the original appearance of the monument as it would have appeared after considerable silting of the ditch.

In 1988, under the new agreement, gravel extraction was about to take place around and within the monument. Excavation of the remaining part of the interior took place in June of that year under the direction of John W Hedges. This excavation was concerned with the examination of the remainder of

the stoneholes and other internal features, with limited survey and trenching of the ditch to determine the extent of remaining undisturbed deposits.

THIS VOLUME

A research design was drawn up by George Lambrick and John W Hedges for the Oxford Archaeological Unit in April 1988 which covered the 1988 excavation and post-excavation work. In June 1989 the authors updated this design for the preparation of this volume and proposed that there should be a single coherent report on the 1972-3 and 1988 excavations, together with a survey of all aspects of the monument in its immediate and wider contexts, as a contribution to the general study of henge monuments. It has also been possible to include an account of the 1979 excavation of a ring ditch to the NE of the henge (Taylor, Ch. 2). Since the final destruction of the Stanton Harcourt complex is now complete and there will be no further major opportunity to recover additional information, it was considered appropriate to review the results of all previous work on Neolithic and Bronze age monuments in the complex within the context of its focal monument. This has involved the compilation of a gazetteer of available information, published and unpublished, and the synthesis of the results of almost 50 years of salvage archaeology on the Neolithic and Bronze Age Stanton Harcourt complex. This provides the first comprehensive review and synthesis of the pre-Iron Age remains in the Stanton Harcourt complex.

Three main research themes are represented: a study of the monument itself in terms of its design, chronology, environment, function and social context, using the data from the excavations; an examination of its role as the focal point of the Stanton Harcourt complex and the place of this in the Upper Thames Region; and the development of the prehistoric and later landscapes and land use in the area. The first two of these and to a more limited extent the last, are considered in relation to comparable sites and landscapes elsewhere in Britain.

The volume was written in 1989-91 and reflects the knowledge and thought of the authors at that time, although certain aspects of the text have been updated.