

Chapter 1: Introduction

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LOCATION OF SITES

White Horse Hill and Tower Hill are located in the heart of the Berkshire Downs, within a cluster of spectacular topographical features in a chalk scarp landscape. Both sites lie close to a number of well known prehistoric locations (Fig. 1.1).

White Horse Hill lies on the northern edge of the Downs near to the village of Uffington in south-western Oxfordshire (SU 300 863), and comprises a complex of monuments whose construction and use spans the Neolithic to the Anglo-Saxon periods. These sites include burial mounds, the ditch and bank of a hillfort, a linear ditch, and the unusual chalk figure of a horse, visible on the hillside (front cover); there is also a Roman enclosure and trackway nearby. A number of other 'White Horses' are known locally, but the Uffington Horse is unique in being thought for sometime to have prehistoric origins (Marples 1949). All these features on the Hill have been objects of speculation since early medieval times.

Tower Hill lies about 4 km further south, at the northern end of a chalk ridge, in the parish of Ashbury in Oxfordshire (SU 284 839), and was excavated following the chance find of a rare metalwork hoard, comprising 92 Bronze Age artefacts (back cover). The eastern slope of the hill is Odstone Down with Weathercock Hill forming the southern end. It lies within a triangle formed by the three hillforts of Uffington often called Uffington 'Castle', Hardwell Camp and Alfred's 'Castle', and the area has a number of earlier prehistoric burial monuments.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BERKSHIRE DOWNS

Investigations have been carried out at a number of prehistoric sites on the Downs, within and around White Horse Hill and Tower Hill. Excavations were carried out in the area of the White Horse in the last century and also in the 1950s, when the Horse itself was subject to some restoration. This work followed removal of the camouflage covering after the Second World War, and is discussed in Chapter 3. Excavations have also taken place at the nearby Neolithic chambered long barrow of Wayland's Smithy (Atkinson 1965) and at the Bronze Age round barrows at Lambourn, Berks (Case 1956-7). Excavations in the early 1970s on and around Rams Hill, which lies just over a kilometre east of Uffington, examined the late Bronze Age and Iron Age hillfort (Bradley and Ellison 1975), and late Bronze Age activity has also been identified at Weathercock Hill (Gaffney and Tingle 1989). Research work is also

taking place at the nearby hillforts of Alfred's Castle and Segsbury (Gosden and Lock 1999; Lock and Gosden 1998).

Recent work has also revealed information on the historic and prehistoric landscape of the Berkshire Downs, showing that some ancient field systems are datable to the Roman period (Bowden *et al.* 1991-3a). Further information on the prehistoric and later periods of the landscape of the Downs has been provided by *The Maddie Farm Project* (Gaffney and Tingle 1989), and by *The Vale of the White Horse Survey* (Tingle 1991). In addition, a recent assessment and field survey of the Ridgeway long distance path has been completed. The Ridgeway lies adjacent to White Horse Hill, and the survey has identified many archaeological features and provided much interesting background information for the area (OAU 1999).

RESEARCH AIMS OF THE PROJECT

At White Horse Hill the general aim of the project was to provide a definitive record of the area. This information would then present a basis for future research work and for the conservation and management of the site. The results could also enhance the presentation of the site to the public. It was planned that this should be largely achieved by desk-based study and non-intrusive techniques, including geophysical and field survey, complemented by limited excavation of selected areas.

The nature and date of the construction of the White Horse has been the subject of much debate and with the advent of dating techniques such as Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL: Aitken 1990, 175) it was hoped that new information would be obtained. It was thought too that investigations of Dragon Hill and the Manger would clarify their nature. In addition it was considered that limited excavations of the rampart and interior of the hillfort would elucidate its dating and phases, and the nature of its construction. The aims of the investigations and the programme of work, which was undertaken at White Horse Hill, are summarised in Chapter 2.

Investigations at Tower Hill were prompted by the chance find of the bronze hoard in 1993. This provided an opportunity to investigate the metalwork of the Bronze Age period and the state of the hoard at deposition. A programme of work was developed to clarify the context of the hoard and to search for any contemporaneous settlement evidence. Geophysical and field survey and limited excavation followed as described in Chapter 8.

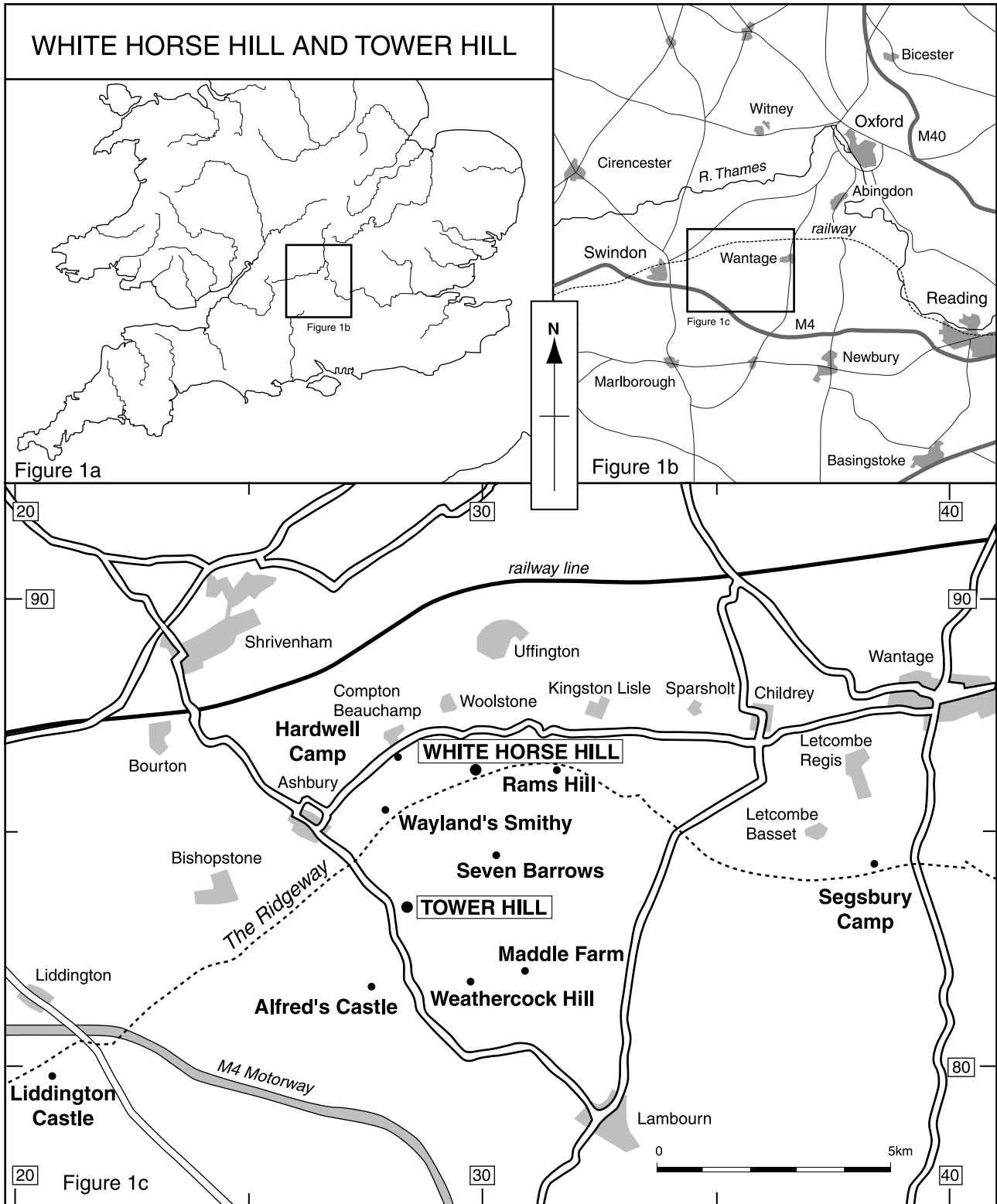


Figure 1.1 Location of White Horse Hill and Tower Hill within the Berkshire Downs, and of prehistoric sites in the area which are mentioned in the text.

STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLICATION

The early part of this volume concerns the monument complex at White Horse Hill. The Horse and the sites which lie close to it are discussed in Chapters 2 to 7. The relevant historical evidence is presented in Chapter 3 together with information on earlier excavations. Results of the topographical and geophysical surveys, and of the excavations which have taken place on these sites since 1989 are also reported.

Excavations and survey at Tower Hill took place following the discovery of the bronze hoard. The description of the project and the excavations form Chapter 8 of the volume, followed by an in-depth analysis of the bronze hoard in Chapter 11. The artefactual and environmental evidence from the excavations at White Horse Hill and Tower Hill is presented in Chapters 9 to 13.

Chapter 14 presents a synthesis and chronological description of the origins and development of the White Horse monuments and of Tower Hill and the surrounding landscape.

GEOLOGY

White Horse Hill and Tower Hill lie on the Berkshire Downs. The solid geology of the area (Arkell 1939) is composed of Jurassic and Cretaceous sedimentary rocks which dip gently to the south, exposing the earliest rocks in the north (Fig. 1.2). The River Ock, a tributary of the River Thames, which flows eastwards along the line of strike of the Gault Clay, has created the broad expanse of the Vale of the White Horse. A bench of Upper Greensand and then the Chalk scarp of the Berkshire Downs rise from the southern edge of the Gault Clay 100 m above the Vale of the White Horse. The general east-west sweep of the scarp is cut into by steep-sided dry valleys, the most dramatic of which is the Manger at White Horse Hill. Dragon Hill, a natural chalk mound, is situated towards the head of the Manger, but both are dominated by the Upper Chalk of Castle Hill which, at 260 m OD, is more than 50 m above the general crest of the scarp, giving it a commanding view over both the Vale and the Downs (Fig. 2.1). The Chalk of the Berkshire Downs dips gently southwards towards the Kennet Valley. The undulating landscape of the Downs is dissected by dry valleys which run down to minor seasonal streams which flow south-eastwards into the Lambourn and Pang, ultimately draining into the Thames. Tower Hill lies on the Middle Chalk.

There are extensive drift deposits in the Vale of the White Horse. Although there are Pleistocene gravel terraces alongside the River Ock, they are largely covered by thin deposits of clay. Marly chalk occurs extensively along the length of the lower slopes and at the foot of the scarp of the Berkshire Downs. Coombe rock occurs especially in some of the larger valleys of the dip slope of the Downs. The Berkshire Downs do not have the same degree of Clay-with-

Flints and Plateau Gravel cover as the dip slope of the Chilterns. However, these are present on some of the interfluvies, especially towards the south of the Berkshire Downs, but the supposed topping of the southern part of the Tower Hill ridge with Clay-with-Flints was not confirmed in the field.

SOILS

The region can be divided into three for a consideration of the soils (Jarvis 1973). The Jurassic and Pleistocene clays of the Vale of the White Horse develop gleyed clay soils of the Grove, Evesham, Kingston, Denchworth and Rowsham Series which suffer surface waterlogging in winter. Probably the best soils in the region lie on the Upper Greensand, which gives circumneutral to slightly acidic sandy loam of the Harwell Series, and the chalky drift at the foot of the scarp, which gives the silty rendzinas (highly calcareous soils) of the Wantage and Grove Series. The high quality of the soils and the spring line along the Upper Greensand resulted in many medieval villages being located at the foot of the scarp.

The main soil type of the Berkshire Downs is the silty rendzina of the Icknield Series. It is reasonably fertile, tractable and has a moisture-holding capacity in the chalk below. The main problem with Icknield soils is due to the extreme slopes and exposure of some of the localities where they occur. Poor acid soils of the Berkhamstead and Winchester Series develop from the plateau drift and Clay-with-Flints on the ridges of the dip slope and they have often remained wooded. Silty brown calcareous soils of the Coombe Series forms from chalky drift in the valleys of the dip slope but some drift in the valleys has been decalcified, giving rise to the silty brown argillic soils of the Charity Series.

EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

At White Horse Hill, most trenches were deturfed by hand in order that the turf could be re-laid, thus minimising damage to the appearance of the site. The only exception to this was the 1995 trenches, which were stripped by machine to the level of the archaeology, as the depth and character of the overlying deposits was determined during the preceding season. After deturfing excavation was by hand in all but the Manger trench. This trench was mechanically excavated, under supervision, as it was thought to contain accumulated colluvial deposits.

Since the site at Tower Hill, Ashbury was located in the middle of a modern ploughed field, it was possible to remove most of the modern soil mechanically without damage to the underlying archaeology, though samples of the topsoil from each trench were dry sieved to retrieve finds.

At both projects excavation and recording methods were employed in all stages following standard Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) procedures

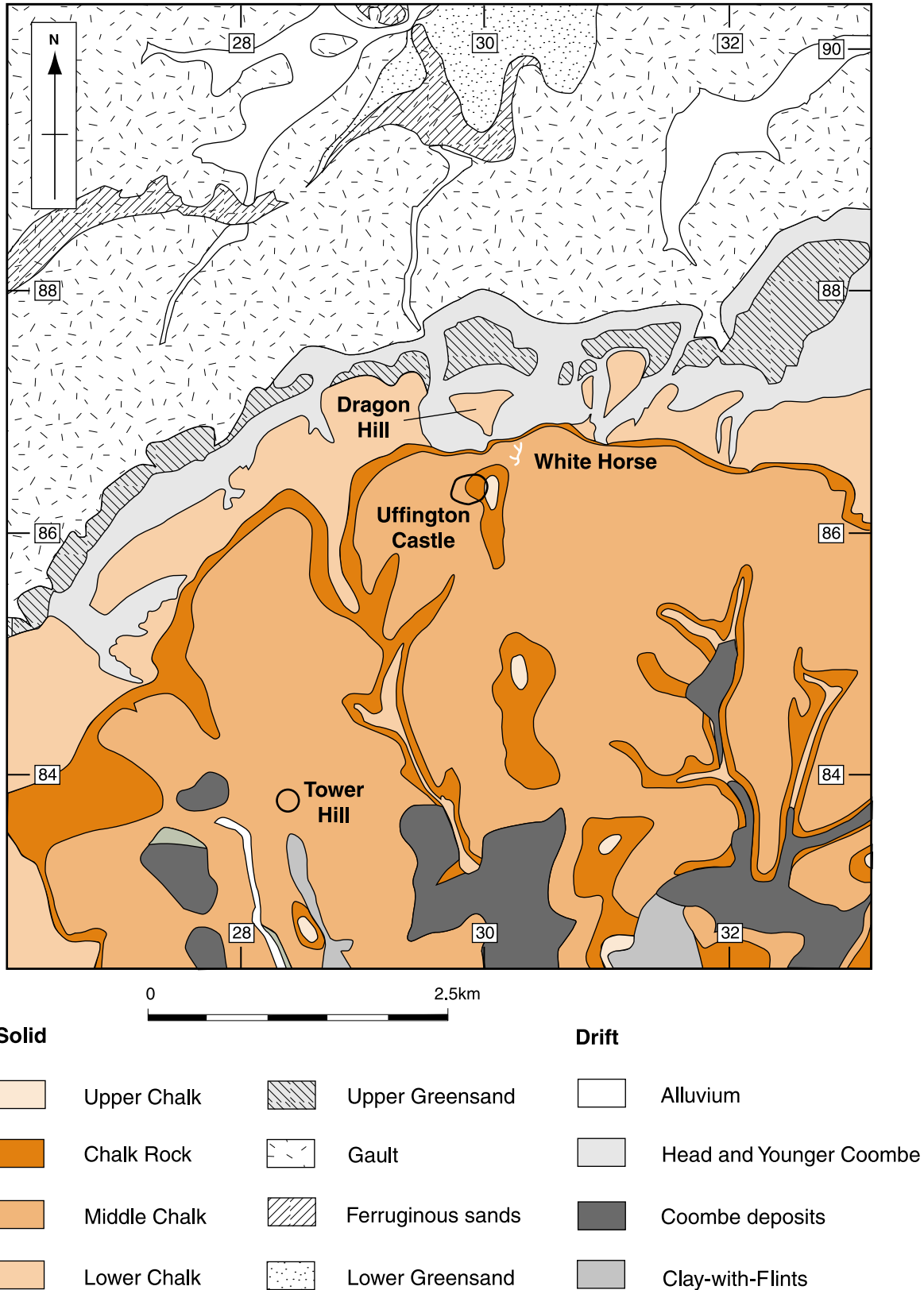


Figure 1.2 *Geology of the Berkshire Downs including the area of White Horse Hill and Tower Hill.*

(Wilkinson 1992). The trenches were carefully cleaned by hand with all features and variations in the soil planned relative to a site grid tied into the National Grid. All features were half sectioned, photographed and recorded using a single context system and the second half of some features was then removed. All finds were recorded by context. Metal and other special finds were also issued with a unique small find number. Environmental samples were taken from securely stratified contexts selected for their potential to yield information about the nature of the contemporaneous local environment, economy and activities. These samples were issued with unique numbers and processed for charred remains, invertebrates and artefacts.

NOTATIONS AND DATES

The English Heritage Centre for Archaeology (previously the Ancient Monuments Laboratory) is referred to as CfA throughout the text. Oxford Archaeology (previously Oxford Archaeological Unit) is referred to as OAU.

Context numbers are only quoted where these will help the reader to relate the text to the illustrations and finds, and features are designated by cut numbers. As excavations were undertaken by a number of diverse teams in the different years that made up the White Horse Hill project there was some overlap in the context numbers, but all are unique when quoted in conjunction with the appropriate site code or trench number. Where confusion might have arisen, trenches have been renumbered,

and have been grouped and named by the element of the site and numbered consecutively. For example, on Uffington hillfort, rampart trenches were numbered R1 to R4, and hillfort interior trenches H1 to H13.

Throughout the report calendar dates are quoted unless stated otherwise. Where radiocarbon dates are given and have been recalibrated these are denoted as cal BC. Recalibrations have been made using OxCal v3.5.

LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVES

Original site records for both the Uffington White Horse Hill project, years 1989–95, and the Hillforts of the Ridgeway excavations at White Horse Hill in 1995, together with the finds and material generated during the post-excavation analysis have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service (accession number OXCMS 1995.205). The slides, samples and documentation associated with the soil analysis carried out as part of the Uffington White Horse Hill project remain at the CfA. Site records from the Tower Hill, Ashbury project, together with the non-metal finds, and material generated during the post-excavation analysis have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service (accession number OXCMS 1995.336). The bronze hoard is in private possession.

Master copies of the paper archive on microfilm for each of these sites have also been lodged with English Heritage (previously National Archaeological Record, RCHM(E), Swindon), and a copy of this volume will be deposited with the SMR.