INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

by H M Bamford

Introduction

The central matter to be considered is the function of the neolithic enclosure on Briar Hill: the intention behind its construction, the nature of its use and, on a broader scale its social and economic significance. The results of excavations carried out in the last decade on causewayed enclosures, at Hambledon and Crickley Hill in particular (Mercer 1980a; Dixon 1981), have demonstrated that such earthworks, built on the same general pattern, could have served one or more of a number of different purposes. The variety of possible interpretations to be considered at the outset is, therefore, quite large.

A further complication is that Briar Hill, as an excavated site, remains to date somewhat isolated geographically. Judging by the affinities and links of the cultural material, it belongs within a distinct Central and Eastern province. Most of the comparable enclosures which have been investigated in any detail are, on the other hand, in Southern and South Western England and the rest, such as Etton (Pryor 1983), are within the somewhat different environment of the Fens. The possibility of regional diversity has to be borne in mind.

The Neolithic Enclosure

The neolithic use of Briar Hill can be divided into two semi-distinct periods.

(1) Before 2500 bc: the earthwork was constructed and subsequently renovated several times, probably over a long period. Any activity within the enclosure was not of a kind to leave substantial archaeological traces.

(2) c 2500 bc-1600 bc: the earthwork as such ceased to be maintained or renewed, but use of the enclosure continued. This is evidenced by a number of structures and features within the enclosure and on its circumference.

The implication of this division is that there was in the mid third millennium bc either a change in the function of the site or else a change in the manner in which that function was expressed. At the same time there are strong indications of continuity, both in the chronological overlap which the radiocarbon dates clearly suggest, and in the structural relationship of the later features to older elements of the enclosure. The continuity may well be a matter principally of tradition, since continuity of occupation cannot be demonstrated and, as will be argued, is unlikely; but continuity and tradition are a key to interpretation.

The chronology of the two periods has an important bearing on this question. The second, later period of the site's use, dating from the last recutting of the ditch circuits, can have lasted little less than a thousand years. This is established securely by the internal consistency of the stratigraphy, the associated radiocarbon dates and the ceramic evidence. The radiocarbon dates and the stratigraphy allow a similarly long period between the first construction of the earthwork and the last recutting of the ditches, even though they do not absolutely prove it, the two strands of evidence being less closely interwoven than might be wished. Such a long chronology has not yet been proved for any individual causewayed enclosure: the range of radiocarbon determinations from Abingdon is considerable, but doubts have been expressed about the validity of using the earlier group to date the enclosure (Avery 1982, 17). The range of dates for causewayed enclosures as a type in Britain nevertheless spans an interval only slightly less than the range of the dates from Briar Hill alone.

If the dating of Briar Hill is accepted, then the history of the enclosure spanned the greater part of the known neolithic period in Britain. Such longevity in a structure argues that the structure was a centre of more than passing importance to the local population. In our own society, after all, the works of analogous permanence are churches and great public buildings.

What, then, were the purpose and use of the Briar Hill enclosure, and did these in fact develop and change?

Three separate fields of analysis may provide some answers, or at least point to answers to the question.

(1) Topography and the location of the site.

(2) The design, physical construction and development of the earthwork itself.

(3) The pattern of use of the earthwork as evidenced by the features associated with or resulting from use, the artefacts associated with the site and the distribution of both.

Location

The choice of location for the earthwork in itself suggests a range of possible functions for the site and rules out at least one other as unlikely.

The enclosure was on a hill slope, commanding a wide view of the river valley. In any practical sense, however, the site is indefensible, since it is below a false crest which, from the point of view of the occupant, creates a blind-spot on the uphill side, where attackers could approach unseen. The logical place for a fortified site would have been on the crown of the slope, where the iron-age hill fort was constructed.

In purely economic terms, and especially in terms of a pastoral or mixed economy, the position makes more sense (cf Barker and Webley 1978). Itself on a well-drained, lighter soil, the enclosure was just above a spring-line and overlooked heavier clay soils and the gravels and alluvium of the valley bottom. This situation seems to echo on a small scale what Bradley has observed on causewayed enclosures in Southern England: that they are often to be found on the interface between two soil types. He suggests that one of their functions might have been to integrate the economies of two different areas (1978a, 103). Equally, or alternatively, the Briar Hill enclosure might have had a symbolic function as the visible marker of a territory, especially if the river is regarded as a possible territorial boundary and if, as is almost certain, there was a crossing point nearby. (The mediaeval crossing and the probable site of an earlier ford are little more than a kilometre to the north east (Lee 1954, 166ff).)

Whatever the interpretation, the position of the site in relation to the second enclosure at Dallington is likely to be significant, assuming that the latter is of neolithic date. The two would have been mutually visible across the valley, although neither was on the most commanding spot available, and the suggestion is that they could either have fulfilled a similar role in the separate territories of two different peoples, or have had each a separate and specialised function within the same territory. The differences between them in plan might indicate the second alternative, but without some investigation of the Dallington site it is impossible to say further. It may be noted that the enclosures at Southwick and Tansor, further down the Nene Valley, are similarly paired on either side of the river.

The fact that both Briar Hill and the Dallington site were within what was evidently a fairly densely populated area is also significant, and the relationship to sites such as Duston must be considered. The greater part of the latter was destroyed by ironstone quarrying, but the sheer volume of worked flint collected there denotes a settlement of some permanence and/or importance. If the density of sites plot-

ted on the Northampton Sand and gravel terraces around Northampton is really higher than over the middle of the county generally and not solely the result of bias in recording, it provides evidence of crucial importance in understanding the causewayed enclosures. At the simplest level it can be seen as the clustering of sites around a nucleus. Viewed from another angle it might indicate a local growth and stability of population such as would provide prime conditions for the development and use of a large earthwork; while from this point it is possible to speculate that pressures on local resources might have fostered the need to define and mark territories. A great deal of further, systematic fieldwork will be necessary in the Midlands before questions of this kind can be pursued with authority, but it is possible that the outline of a pattern is emerging here.

The Construction of the Earthwork

It has been said that causewayed enclosures, considered simply as earthworks, are sometimes best understood as the result of a process of pit-digging (Startin & Bradley 1982, 291), and nowhere is the process better exemplified than on Briar Hill. A full appreciation of the literal exactness of such a description may be gained by studying the plan of the enclosure as it was originally and as it developed phase by phase. The plans (Figs 62-64) may err in detail, but give an idea of the true nature of the earthwork as it existed at any one time. The reconstructions of the individual segments are based on the stratigraphic and other evidence and the phasing is as outlined in the discussion of the chronology of the ditches and subject to the qualifications stated therein. Segments in early phases which may have been obliterated altogether by later recutting cannot be indicated, of course, although it is possible to infer something of the original spacing and to see places where such segments may once have existed.

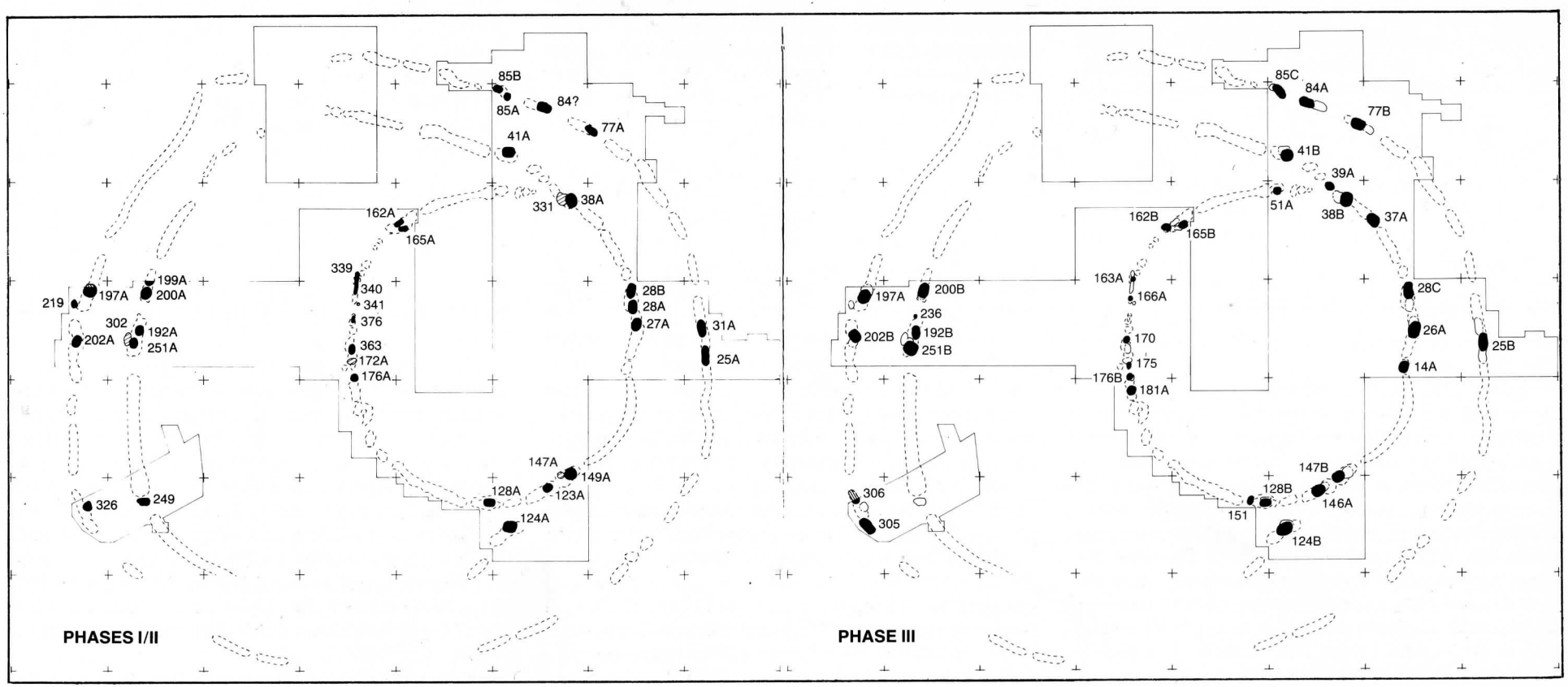
What the plans reveal has more in common with pit alignments than with what is normally signified by the terms 'segmented' or 'causewayed' ditch, and the implications of this are far reaching in respect of our understanding of the development and diversity of this whole class of sites.

The Lobate Ditches

To begin with, the 'lobate' character of the ditches as seen in palimpsest is fully explained. The characteristic is by no means unique to Briar Hill and is, indeed, the very basis of the supposition that such ditches were dug as a series of

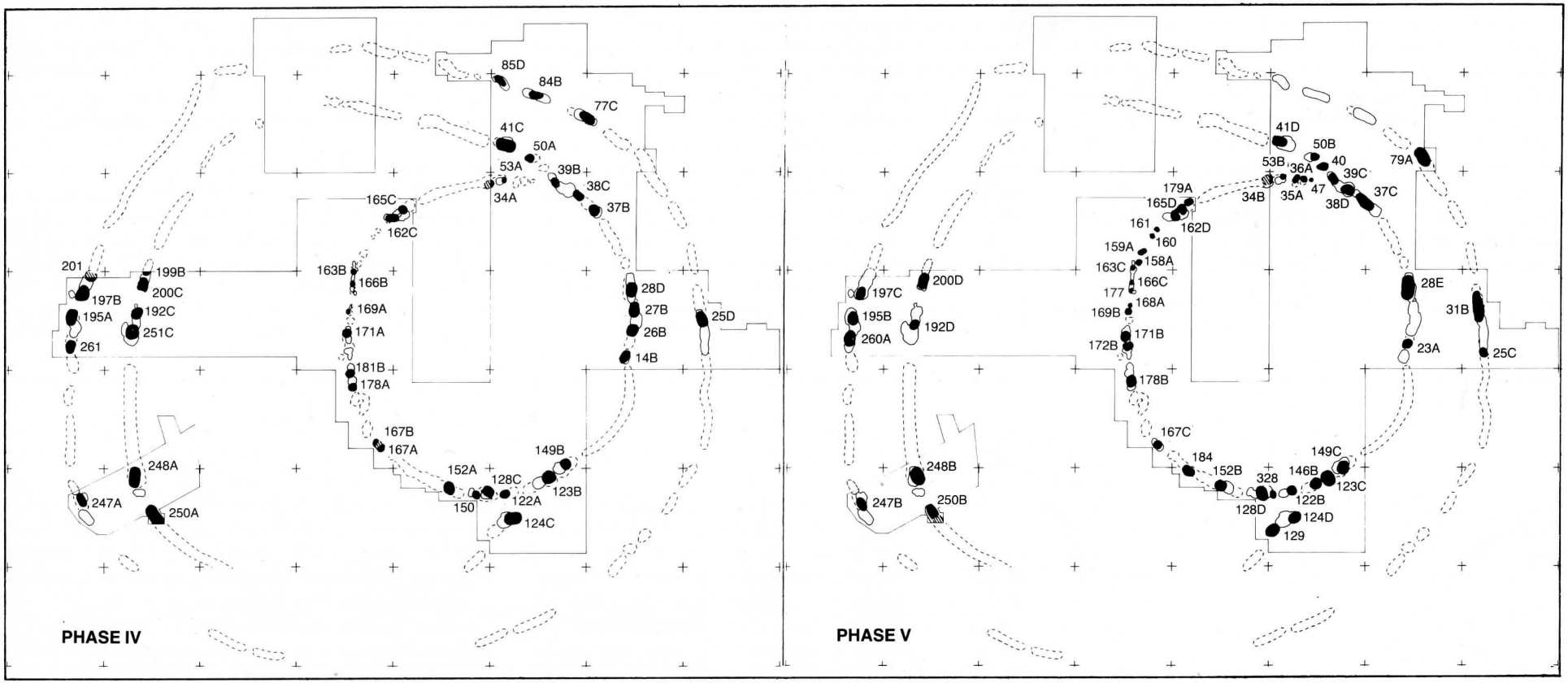
Reconstructed Plans of Neolithic Enclosure

Fig 62



Reconstructed Plans of Neolithic Enclosure

Fig 63



contiguous pits. The digging has, however, always been seen as more or less synchronous and not linked to a process of successive recutting, even where such a thing has been demonstrated or is suspected. Sometimes the necessary evidence one way or the other is lacking, as at Windmill Hill where the fact that the ditches were probably recut was not recognised until long after the excavation itself took place (Smith 1971, 98). On other sites, such as Hambledon, the stratigraphy observed and recorded evidently does not readily admit of such an interpretation. Briar Hill suggests an alternative possibility which will have to be borne in mind in future investigations, particularly of enclosures where the ditches are notably irregular.

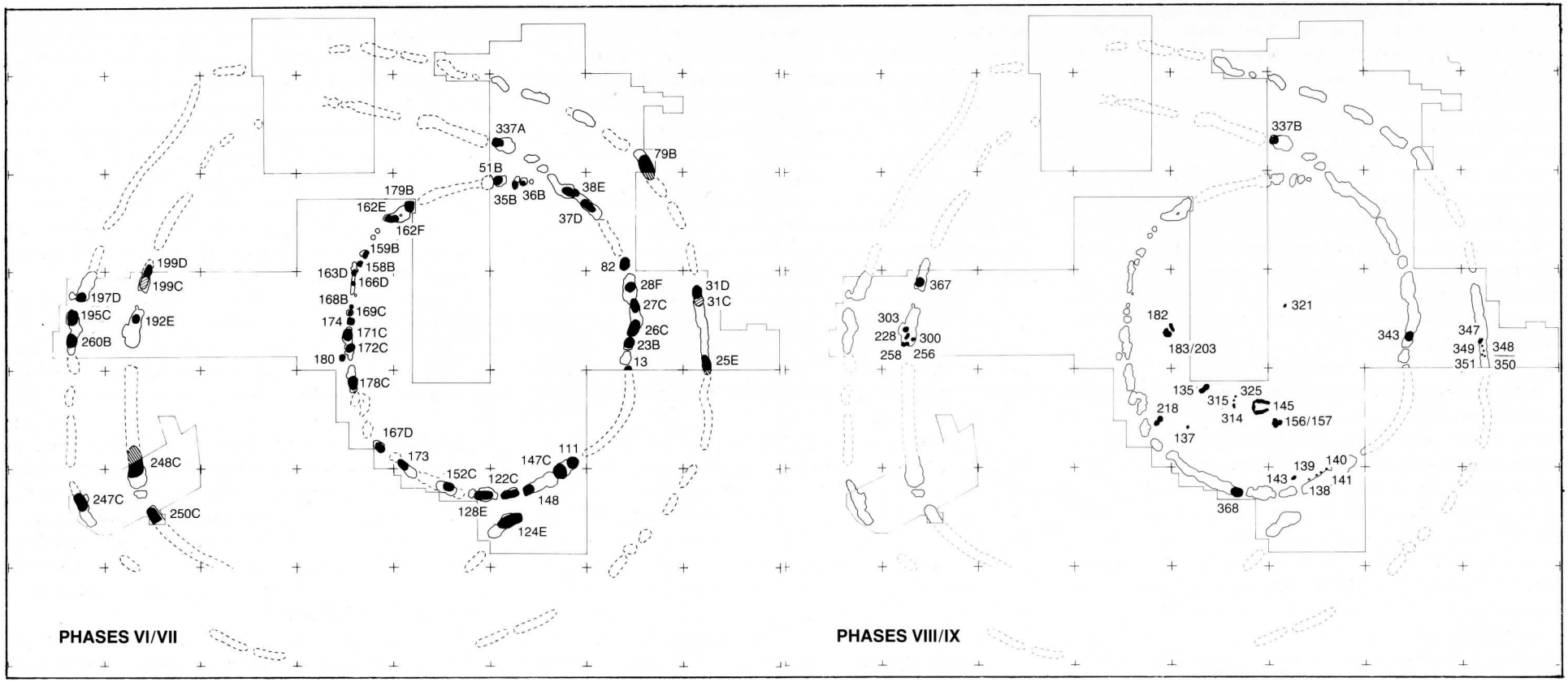
The Labour Requirement

If the labour requirement for the construction of the Briar Hill earthwork is calculated as has been done for other sites, on the basis of the total volume of the ditches irrespective of the recutting, the result is, naturally, very similar to that obtained for any other causewayed enclosure of similar size, varying only according to which formula is used. As the work study demonstrates, however, the labour requirement for the construction of an earthwork such as the phased plans of Briar Hill suggest, would have been much less than is estimated for the rest. The figure of 7850±450 man hours may be an underestimate, since it does not allow any extra time for the construction of revetted banks such as are envisaged on Briar Hill, nor for the possibly more intractable nature of the ironstone in quarrying as compared with chalk, but at any event it is a far cry from the various estimates for the digging of the Windmill Hill ditch system, whether 120000 man hours (Refrew 1973), 62760 man hours (Startin & Bradley 1982) or 39000 man hours (Mercer 1980a, 59). Windmill Hill is admittedly a much larger work: a more telling comparison might be the estimate given for the Stepleton enclosure, which is smaller than Briar Hill. This is 17000-19000 man hours (Mercer ibid) calculated according to a formula which would actually lower the figure for Briar Hill.

According to the calculation in the work study, the entire

Reconstructed Plans of Neolithic Enclosure

Fig 64



enclosure on Briar Hill could have been constructed initially by 48-56 people within a month or less, or by 32-36 people within about two months, even if a working day of no longer than five hours is assumed. This is to say, it would have required little more effort than the building of a long barrow. The expenditure of labour on pit-digging and maintenance throughout the entire life of the enclosure would have been in the order of 29000±2000 man hours. The population base necessary to provide the labour would therefore not have been particularly large, which may be an important consideration in view of the suggested early date of the initial construction.

The Plan of the Enclosure

The plan of the enclosure as a whole is unique among the known causewayed enclosures where the ditch circuits are more or less complete. This is not because of the spiral form of the inner cirucit, which has an approximate parallel in the second ditch of the Trundle (Curwen 1954, 84), but because the inner enclosure was eccentric to the outer circuit and shared a common eastern side with the main inner circuit.

The closest in plan is the enclosure at Orsett, Essex, although the ditches there form concentric arcs and seem always to have been incomplete (Hedges & Buckley 1978, 248). Despite these differences, there is a similar division into an outer area defined by two closely spaced segmented ditches and an inner, appreciably smaller area defined by a single segmented ditch. The same fundamental idea of a reserved inner area may be read into the plans of some of the concentric, multi-ditched enclosures of Southern and South West England at, for example, Windmill Hill, Whitehawk, the Trundle and also, perhaps, in the complex ditch systems at Hambledon, as Hedges has suggested (ibid 250). Whether the purpose of this division was the same in all cases is by no means certain and typological comparisons are in this respect of limited value.

On Briar Hill, as apparently at Orsett, the focus of

activity seems to have been the inner enclosure, and increasingly so in the later use of the site. This is reflected in the development of the plan as seen in Figs 62-64.

At the beginning, this plan appears to have been set out with some care and with, at the very least, an eye to symmetry. Although the use of plane geometry in the setting out cannot be proved, only demonstrated as a possibility, the engineering expertise involved in constructing a large enclosure to an evidently regular plan argues a directing hand or hands and a fairly high level of social organisation.

In the first construction (Phase II) all elements of the ditch system were probably established, but the western side of the inner enclosure appears only sketchily defined by widely spaced, very small pits and slots which might represent a post setting, though there is no positive evidence of this. No trace was found of a continuation of these pits around the south side of the inner enclosure, but this might be because subsequent, larger pits had removed the evidence entirely.

In succeeding phases the outline of the inner enclosure became more firmly defined, even though the pits were, for the most part, still of relatively slight dimensions. Meanwhile, on the north side of the enclosure, part of the outer circuit may not have been renovated after Phase IV. In the final recutting (Phase VII) almost all the emphasis seems to have been on the inner enclosure, while the other circuits were reduced to a relatively few, widely spaced and comparatively shallow pits, and these perhaps chiefly at 'significant' points of the circumference, such as the entrances.

Despite the shift of emphasis the constancy of the plan in essentials is impressive, especially if it endured for a millennium or more. At the least, it strongly reinforces the theme of continuity which has already been adumbrated.

The Nature of the Earthwork

The clarification of the ditch as a 'pit circuit' has implications concerning the character of the earthwork as a whole. The pits themselves could not have served any practical purpose as a barrier, although they might have functioned as such in a purely symbolic way. If it is assumed that they were primarily the means of quarrying the earth and stone for the construction of a continuous revetted bank or banks, the material they furnished would have been sufficient for a wall of only very modest proportions which, unless surmounted by a palisade or fence, would have constituted no great obstacle to either man or any but the least agile beast. Even the evidence for gate structures, such as it is, suggests symbolic markers rather than anything of practical use.

Finally, the long intervals which occurred between the episodes of recutting pits and (presumably) repairing banks can be seen as evidence either that the site was abandoned intermittently, or that maintenance of the earthwork in a state of good repair was not a matter of prime importance: the latter alternative seems the more likely of the two. In sum, everything suggests that the principal object of the earthwork may have been simply to define and set apart a specific area or areas.

The Pattern of use in the Earlier Neolithic Period

As no features which predated the final recutting of the ditch pits were identified anywhere in the interior of the enclosure, the pattern of use during this period is deduced very largely from the distribution of artefacts and occupation material as described in the section on finds and particularly in relation to the worked flints. Read in the most straightforward way this implies that the inner enclosure was the centre of activity, but it is by no means conclusive as evidence.

A progressive increase in the density of finds in the ditch segments from the outer to the innermost circuit has been observed at a number of other multi-ditched enclosures including Orsett (Hedges & Buckley 1978) and Windmill Hill (Smith 1965, 9). On Briar Hill the difference in this respect between the outer and innermost circuit, as summarised in Table 3, was exceptionally marked, especially in the distribution of pottery sherds, more fragile and much less durable than the flints. This seems to indicate quite clearly that most if not all activity connected with the enclosure was bounded by the main inner ditch circuit; there is nothing to suggest that much happened immediately beyond the outer circuit.

The density of finds was greatest by far in the pits around the inner enclosure, but the actual distribution here was not at all even, and this is an interesting point. As stated already, it was concentrated massively on the north west side of the enclosure, at the north end of the spiral arm of the inner ditch to either side of the possible entrance gap. There is, moreover a precise correlation with the deposits of 'ashy' material, rich in charcoal and burnt stone, which characterised the fill of the pits in this part of the circuit and which appeared to have been dumped in the ditch fills. The distribution of finds therefore reflects a pattern of deliberate deposition rather than random discard.

The contents of the deposits suggest that they were refuse from activities of a more or less domestic kind and not in any sense specialised or 'ritual' in the manner described by Mercer at Hambledon (1980a, 24; 30). The pottery in them was for the most part very fragmentary and the fragments dispersed, and there was no suggestion of deliberate sorting or selection of artefact types. Such a conclusion does not, of course, preclude the possibility that the deposition of the material in the ditch pits has symbolic significance (cf Smith 1971, 111), but this is a matter which is hardly susceptible of proof. Why the pits in just one area should have been selected for the purpose is an intriguing question which might have a bearing on the subject, especially as it seems to have been a practice spanning several phases and a considerable length of time. Possibly there is some connection with the entrance area.

The concentration of finds in the ditch segments of the inner enclosure was not matched by any corresponding increase in the number of contemporary finds on the surrounding subsoil surface, apart from what was clearly the minimal spread from the ditch segments themselves. This phenomenon, as well as the absence of earlier neolithic pits or other features, could have archaeological significance. In the case of the inner enclosure the lack cannot be attributed to inadequate sampling; nor is it at all likely that it was the result wholly of erosion, the loss of the old ground surface or a failure of excavation technique (*pace* Whittle 1977b) since both features and a distribution of worked flints in the subsoil surface survived from the subsequent use of the site in the later neolithic period.

The low density of earlier neolithic finds on the subsoil surface and the absence of earlier neolithic features seem, furthermore, to be parallel phenomena: the one is not necessarily directly consequent upon the other. This follows upon the arguments, advanced elsewhere, that the distribution of later neolithic material in the inner enclosure, while evidently related to the distribution of later neolithic features, was not simply a 'spread' from plough disturbance of these features or of post-neolithic features nearby, and that what survived in the subsoil surface was a roughly representative fraction of what had been on the old ground surface which overlay it.

If, as is argued above, the distribution of occupation material in the ditches was not random, it is not entirely safe to assume that this material was derived from a scene of activity immediately adjacent to the point of deposition. The possible connection between the relatively rich deposits of occupation material in some ditch segments on

the one hand and, on the other, the apparent cleanness of the contemporary surface within or outside the ditches is nevertheless obvious: the refuse resulting from occupation of or domestic activity within the enclosure may have been deliberately cleared and dumped in the ditch pits. Such tidyness as this suggests seems extraordinary by comparison with the seemingly squalid conditions obtaining at sites such as Hurst Fen (Clark et al 1960) or the pre-enclosure surface at Broome Heath (Wainwright 1972), and is so whether the motive was practical hygiene, ceremonial or ritual cleansing or the performance of a symbolic act.

It is not, of course, a novel interpretation. It is similar to one put forward originally by Dr Isobel Smith to explain comparable deposits in the ditch at Windmill Hill (1965, 1966) and also fits evidence from an inner ditch segment at Abingdon (Avery 1982, 17) in which there were very extensive layers of organic material not unlike the sequence in ditch segment 162E (Fig 13). The circumstantial evidence from Briar Hill simply adds weight to the argument.

If the deposits in the inner enclosure ditch segments are taken as the sum total or even a large part of the refuse resulting from occupation of the interior they do not amount to very much: little more than ten cubic metres, in fact. This is doubtless only a fraction of its original volume, but even so is scarcely consistent with a lengthy occupation (cf Avery 1982).

The 'reality' of the barrenness of the subsoil surface in excavated portions of the outer enclosure is upheld by the paucity of derived artefactual material both in the neolithic ditches adjacent and in post-neolithic features. The number of finds was not particularly high even in the ditch segments flanking the probable entrance on the west side of the enclosure and although 'ashy' deposits occurred, they were neither numerous nor as extensive as some of those around the inner enclosure. The absence of features seems also to be 'real' for reasons similar to those already stated. It may be argued that the outer enclosure was sampled less extensively than the inner and that there is consequently a chance that local concentrations of material or features existed in areas not examined. If so, one likely area for such a concentration might, on analogy with the inner enclosure, have been around the possible entrance at the northwest end of the main exis of symmetry.

The Nature of Use in the Earlier Neolithic Period

The principal source of information about the precise nature of the activities which took place in the enclosure is, once again, the material stratified within the ditches, and in particular the artefacts.

The assemblages of pottery and of worked flints which relate specifically to the period up to and including the final recutting of the ditch circuits appear on the whole to be domestic in type: that is to say, they reflect a range of practical, industrial and subsistence pursuits. They differ from other assemblages published for neolithic sites, however, in ways which can be interpreted as significant in relation to the status of the site. A few individual artefacts could even be interpreted as 'prestige' objects.

One of the most striking attributes of both assemblages, taken as whole, is quite simply their size. In proportion to the area excavated, let alone the probable duration of the site's use, this is extremely small: the scale may be gathered by reference to comparative data from the other sites, summarised in the discussion of the flint assemblage (Table 14). It remains extraordinary even if every allowance is made for loss of material by machine stripping and for the possible vagaries of excavation sampling, and suggests quite plainly that occupation of the enclosure was either not continuous or was on a very small scale indeed.

Since a small-scale occupation of comparatively short duration is argued on the basis of a much denser concentration of material at Abingdon (Avery 1982, 24f) perhaps the second alternative should be discounted entirely. By this light, the long chronology of Briar Hill and the volume of the finds from it, considered together, suggest a place of brief resort rather than a scene of even seasonal habitation. When they are set against the absence of pits which seem to be such a prominent feature of known neolithic settlement sites such as Hurst Fen (Clark et al 1960) the case is even stronger.

The pottery provides other evidence of a slightly different kind but whose implications are not inconsistent with the above. The most unusual feature of the assemblage as compared with those from other published sites is the number and range of different clays or fabrics represented. All but one are certainly of relatively local manufacture, but could indicate that the 'catchment area' of the site was greater than the district immediately surrounding it and included several different communities and their potters. The presence of at least one pot (NP15) of non-local origin and high quality is, however, potentially of great significance. It would be premature to make a comparison with the dissemination of gabbroic and oolitic wares in South Western England (Peacock 1969) but such an exotic item can, like the polished stone implements, be seen as evidence of a complex exchange network in which sites such as Briar Hill may have been nodal points.

In the flint assemblage the relative scarcity of waste material in proportion to finished implements and utilised pieces is another abnormal characteristic which needs explanation. Flint working, one of the commonest of 'domestic' activities, does not seem to have been commonly practised on the site, unless it was at all times restricted very tightly to a particular area or areas outside the scope of the excavation. Specialised areas of flint processing have been suggested on sites of shorter duration (eg Fengate, Storey's Bar; Pryor 1978, 155) and are indicated at Hambledon (Alan Saville, pers comm), but as sole explanation of the anomaly on Briar Hill, this seems a little inadequate. If flint processing was carried out somewhere other than the enclosure, this might indicate something about either the status of the site which rendered such work inappropriate, or the occasional and brief nature of activity here.

The various tool types and utensils suggest a variety of activities. Serrated flakes, many of which seem to have been used in wood-working, are relatively common, though not so common either proportionally or absolutely as on some other sites including Abingdon (Avery 1982, 38; Leeds 1927, 446; 1928, 467) Windmill Hill (Smith 1965, 91) and Whitehawk (Curwen 1954, 81). The probable association in some instances with wood-working is of particular interest in the light of recent proof of this activity, found in waterlogged deposits in the ditches of the enclosure at Etton, near Peterborough (Pryor, 1983). Scrapers also are common but, significantly, not arrowheads.

Food preparation is suggested by a number of shallow mortars or grinding stones as well as rubbing stones and pounders or pestles. As noted in the discussion of these objects, none looks particularly suited to the grinding of corn. One of the rubbing stones (Fig 49 S16) is, however, so unusually elaborate and well shaped that it might even be considered a possible 'status' or ceremonial object.

Evidence as to the economic circumstances of the enclosure is sparse, probably because it has not survived. The small fragments of tooth and bone from cattle and possibly other domestic animals, as well as red deer, could equally be remnants of food consumed on site or traces of something of larger significance. At least they indicate animal husbandry as part of the background. The few seeds and plant remains found in the charcoal-rich layers in the ditches, which relate chiefly to Phase VII, contain hints of

agriculture in the form of cereals, including single grains of emmer and naked six-row barley, and also some evidence of food gathering in a woodland environment. Beyond this it is impossible to draw any useful conclusions.

The fact that many of the tasks performed within the enclosure were of a broadly 'domestic' nature does not conflict with the evidence which suggests that the site was not permanently occupied or even purely domestic in function. All this is covered by Isobel Smith's suggestion (1965, 1966, 1971) that causewayed enclosures might be places of assembly. To ask whether it had primarily a domestic, ceremonial or even religious purpose might in any case be inappropriate in neolithic terms, since neolithic man in Britain probably would not have recognised such a strict division of life into compartments. The problem, as always, is the partial nature of the evidence. On Briar Hill it is comparatively easy to identify pointers to ceremonial or even ritual practice, whereas the major economic function of the site, if it had one, remains obscure.

There was, it is true, nothing to suggest the elaborate ritual procedures which seem to have taken place in the main enclosure at Hambledon (Mercer 1980a) apart from the single cremation deposit placed carefully on a prepared platform in one of the final recut segments of the inner ditch circuit. This, however, raises the question of mortuary practices in relation to causewayed enclosures (cf Mercer ibid; Drewett 1977); at Briar Hill it was the sole evidence of such a thing, for if there were ever unburnt human remains in the fills of the ditch segments, they had vanished long since.

It may never be possible to establish with certainty the precise functions of the Briar Hill enclosure but it was evidently, in its context, a site of important and enduring status. In fact it seems best to fit the model of a focal place, a centre of exchange, and both an instrument and an expression of communal and territorial identity for a population of peasant farmers living in small, relatively isolated communities. Such a model pre-supposes a complex and highly organised society such as is implicit in the design and construction of the earthwork itself. Whether or not the existence of sites such as Briar Hill need also imply a highly centralised society with emerging chiefdoms, as argued by Renfrew (1973), is debatable (cf Whittle 1981, 320ff). Such evidence as he adduced for a 'hierarchy' of sites in Wessex is largely missing in Northamptonshire, at least to date, and the status he has accorded causewayed enclosures in such a hierarchy may seem exaggerated in respect of Briar Hill and the relatively modest labour requirement calculated for its construction.

The dating of the construction of the enclosure provides important information about when, in this part of the Midlands, neolithic society may have reached the condition of 'stable adjustment' considered basic to such an undertaking (Case 1969). If the radiocarbon dates are an accurate guide, this was as early as or earlier than anywhere in the British Isles with the possible exception of Ireland, and since the Midlands not very long since were often regarded as having been an unpeopled wilderness until at least the later bronze age, there is a nice irony in this!

The Later Neolithic Use of the Site

No causewayed enclosures are known for certain to have been constructed after the mid third millennium bc. During the same period, pollen profiles in some regions of the British Isles indicate a regeneration of woodland and a decline in the number of new clearances; and more than one writer has suggested that the first phenomenon may be connected with the interval of 'recession' suggested by the second (Bradley 1978a, 105f; Whittle 1978).

Briar Hill fits therefore into a general pattern in that the final renovation of the earthwork, which seems to have been on a rather smaller scale than any earlier, took place around 2650 bc. As suggested already, what happened there subsequently can nevertheless be interpreted as a continuation and logical development of the same tradition, even though there is evidence to suggest elements of radical change.

At the most obvious level, continuity may be seen in the fact that the structures built and the pits dug in the centuries following the final recutting all related to the inner enclosure, at least in a spatial sense. They did so not only to the extent that they were all, with the possible exception of 245, confined within the inner enclosure, but in a certain conscious or unconscious symmetry in the placing of the major features. It could be that an abandoned earthwork was put to new use, but the full series of radiocarbon dates suggest that the period of abandonment was not long, if so.

The Features of the Interior

None of the few smaller pits and hollows in the inner enclosure looked significantly different from others found on many neolithic sites. Their original purpose is obscure, since none looked much like storage pits, but could well have been associated with minor and purely practical concerns. The larger features were of a different order.

The three lobed pits, which were in fact each made up of at least four pits superimposed, have been interpreted in their final stage as the settings for great posts: this is despite their similarity in some respects to single-phase features at Broome Heath which suggested a different interpretation. It seems reasonable to suppose that if the final pits of the sequence held posts, then so did the earlier ones. The very precise symmetrical placing of these features is remarkable, whether or not there was in fact a fourth to complete a very large rectangular setting. This symmetry and the fact that whatever they represented was renewed several times suggests they had a structural purpose, but they were so far apart it is hard to see what this could have been. No pits or post holes were aligned between them, so that whereas they could have defined an area, there is no sign that they were part of a solid fence. It is easier in the context to imagine them as symbolic markers, perhaps carved or painted or otherwise adorned, defining an area of special significance.

The small rectilinear structure 145, and the post pits associated with it were later in date than the lobed pits by two or three centuries unless, perhaps, the oak charcoal used for dating the latter came from heartwood. They must have been put up when the smaller pits of the circuit around the inner enclosure had become no more than dimples in the ground surface, if as much. 145 is nevertheless positioned on the north-south axis of symmetry of the inner enclosure, at the mid point of the southern half; a correspondence which has the appearance of deliberation. The whole small complex associated with Grooved ware pottery, whether it represented one structure or two, has no exact parallel among later neolithic house plans in lowland Britain, but so few are known that this is scarcely a matter for wonder. The closest seems to be the curious structure at Playden in Sussex, which has recently been the subject of a reappraisal by Bradley (1978b), although the probable wall bedding trenches on that site were less substantial and the circumstances not otherwise similar. In reviewing the evidence McInnes (1971) has suggested that the scarcity of evidence may signify that later neolithic house-building techniques were not normally such as to leave permanent traces. If so, the exceptions assume an added significance, especially this Briar Hill structure, which was more massive by far than any except the very different stone buildings of the period in Orkney and Shetland.

There was nothing, in fact, to say whether or not it was a house in the sense of a purely domestic dwelling, or even that it was roofed. It is quite possible to visualise it as an open timber structure analogous to the stone 'coves' found occasionally within henges (Wainwright 1979, 230f). Even if

the structure was a dwelling and if the occupation of the site was at any time in the later neolithic period continuous, it may still be argued that the site and its occupants had special status.

One observation which may be relevant is that, although there were many struck flints, chiefly waste flakes, in the wall trenches of the main structure, very little was found on the surface of the interior compared to the density of finds over the surrounding area. If there had been the kind of accumulation of domestic rubbish on the floor which has been noted on some of the known house sites, it might have been expected that this would be reflected, however faintly, in the subsoil surface distribution.

It must be stressed that none of the smaller neolithic pits around this complex can be shown to have been contemporary with it.

The Evidence of the Finds

The worked flints recorded from the subsoil surface in the same area constitute an assemblage of predominantly later neolithic type, and may thus be considered in relation to the dated later neolithic features. As argued in discussion of the worked flints and elsewhere, the relatively high density of finds over this part of the site reflected, at least broadly, a genuine pattern of distribution on the old ground surface which had gone, and not simply material derived from the disturbance of stratified material in features. This distribution therefore serves to emphasise the importance of the inner enclosure as the centre of later neolithic activity and, in the contrast between its relative abundance and the paucity of earlier neolithic surface finds, to mark some kind of change. Taken as a whole, however, it has one important characteristic in common with the earlier assemblages which lends itself to a similar interpretation: the proportion of retouched and utilised pieces is unusually high.

As with the earlier assemblage, the activities to which the tool types bear witness all seem to have been of a 'domestic' kind, subject to the kind of shifts which might be expected in a later neolithic context. The assemblage is marked by the appearance of one or two new, specialised tool types such as notched flakes, and there was apparently a decline in the use of serrated flakes. Perhaps the most specific evidence is provided by the rise in the number of tools showing the kind of wear produced characteristically by the working of hides.

The significance of the occurrence of various different types of later neolithic pottery on the site is not entirely clear: as has been stated, the stratigraphic associations did not wholly clarify the relationship between them but, on the whole, tended to stress the separateness of the types. Differences between the fabrics used for their manufacture also emphasise the distinctions between the several ceramic traditions, but whether these traditions can be equated with different communities or whether, in the context of Briar Hill, they have chronological implications remains to be decided.

The Final Act

The last detectable act in the neolithic use of the site was the digging of a series of pits above earlier ditch segments which had by now almost completely filled. The purpose of the pits is not obvious, since even those which probably contained posts are difficult to interpret as structures. The only clue is their direct relationship to the ditch system and, while the idea might seem far-fetched, they could perhaps have been dug in one or more stages as a symbolic reinstatement of the original circuits. It is certainly a curious coincidence that virtually all of them within the excavated area were at points very close to the lines of the projected axes of symmetry of the inner enclosure, as described in the geometric analysis of the enclosure plan.

The fill of one of the pits, 337B, contained what might be traces of firing waste from pottery manufacture, but there was no other positive evidence on the site of domestic or industrial activity contemporary with the pits themselves.

The Implications of Continuity

Later neolithic pottery and flints have been found in the upper fills of other causewayed enclosure ditches, but this is the first instance in which a thread of continuity can clearly be discerned between the earlier and the later neolithic presence and the latter shown so clearly to relate to the neolithic enclosure as such.

The presence of a structure associated with sherds of Grooved ware is especially interesting, since this type of pottery is more usually linked with a different kind of large earthwork, the so-called 'henges'. The tentative suggestion that the structure itself might in any way be related to structures sometimes associated with henges is, nevertheless, pure conjecture.

There has for long been argument and speculation on the subject of whether or not in Southern England some of the henges replaced causewayed enclosures in function and status (cf Wainwright 1975, 61). The chronological gap between the latest construction of causewayed enclosures and the earliest construction of henges, which at least one writer has seen as an argument against any direct connection (Catherall 1976, 8) could be explained by the theory of a recession in the mid third millennium bc. Perhaps in the evidence of Briar Hill there is a demonstration of the possibility of linear transmission of the concept, bridging the hiatus.

According to the theory of the mid third millennium recession, the construction of the larger henges is a sign of the recovery of a local population or society to the point where such major works could once again be undertaken (Bradley 1978a, 107). No henges of any kind have been recognised in the Northampton area, unless the large ring ditch within the Dallington enclosure is of this sort, and if the theory is applicable at all here, without the support of environmental evidence, then recovery may have been slow. If the Briar Hill enclosure was originally the focal point of a relatively large social group occupying a defined territory, and if it continued to fulfil a similar function well into the first half of the second millennium bc, it may be surmised that the contraction of scale which characterised this later period reflects the continuing depressed fortunes of the group. It would probably be speculating too far ahead of the evidence to see it in terms of fluctuating tribal power.

The Bronze Age Cemetery

The earlier of the two radiocarbon dates associated with the cremation cemetery suggests the possibility that burial there might have begun during the later neolithic/early bronze age period, before the enclosure as such was finally abandoned. For reasons already given, it is more likely that it was at least 150-200 years later than the latest demonstrable neolithic use of the enclosure, but the choice of site may nevertheless have been more than simple coincidence. Some tradition of the former importance of the place could, maybe, have persisted.

Between the period of the cemetery in the second millennium bc and the construction of Hunsbury camp not earlier than the fifth century bc is a gap in the archaeological record, on Briar Hill as almost everywhere in the district around it. All that fills the gap at present is a small group of sherds possibly of later bronze age type, found among the pottery from Hunsbury (David Knight pers comm).

The Iron Age Settlement

The first question raised by the evidence for iron age settlement on Briar Hill concerns the nature of the relationship between the settlement and the earlier neolithic enclosure;

whether or not the earthwork was still visible when the site was reoccupied and, if so, whether any use was made of it. The evidence appears contradictory.

The congruence of the east side of the iron age ditched enclosure 194 and the underlying neolithic ditch segments 192/251 suggests that the neolithic ditch may still have been visible, although it could equally have been encountered first, and followed, during the digging of the iron age ditch. The ditched enclosure 194, like all the iron age ditches and pits which cut neolithic features, had been dug from a level at least equivalent to the modern, truncated surface, which means that the declivity above the neolithic ditches must by then have been very slight at best. No iron age pottery was found stratified at any level in the neolithic ditch fills as such.

The position, extent and alignment of the two fence-slots 49 and 198 suggest strongly that the neolithic outer ditch circuits were used as points of reference in their construction. On the other hand, most other iron age ditches, gullies and pits cut across the lines of the neolithic earthworks without any variation in depth or profile to suggest that an obstacle had been encountered. A possible solution to the seeming paradox is that the earthworks were still faintly visible at the time of the initial occupation but were levelled later on, either deliberately or as a result of degradation by traffic over the site.

The iron age features themselves were part of a much larger pattern of settlement over the hillside below Hunsbury Hill fort, and this pattern is probably best understood as relating to the hill fort in some way, whether it is made up of individual farmsteads clustered around the focal point or is part of an integrated system of farming and stock management centred on the hill fort itself. Pits and gullies were recorded some 200m to the east during the building of a new housing estate on Briar Hill in 1969 (Jackson 1974). During road construction between 1974 and 1977 similar traces were observed to be very widespread. No dwelling site was identified nor any obvious nucleus of settlement other than the hill fort, but considering the generally piecemeal recovery of the evidence this is not surprising. South of Briar Hill and 150m from it, in the next field, was a large rectangular double-ditched enclosure. The ditches were V-shaped and two metres deep, and the little dating evidence suggested that it was an iron age construction (RCHM forthcoming. Hardingstone (10)).

It is unfortunately not easy to fix the date of any of this very precisely, but the Briar Hill enclosures were certainly contemporary with some part of the occupation of Hunsbury, judging by the evidence of the pottery.

Romano-British settlement

Around Hunsbury ample evidence has been found of farming and rural industry from the first century AD onwards, although much of it is incompletely recorded. Sites include a villa one kilometre south of the Briar Hill site (RCHM forthcoming. Wootton (8)), and several kiln sites, one of which was less than 300m distant (Shaw 1979). The slight evidence on Briar Hill for activity during this period must be seen, therefore, in such a context.

Saxon settlement

The three or four early/middle Saxon sunken-featured buildings on Briar Hill were presumably peripheral to a larger settlement. The nearest evidence recorded in the vicinity consists of a small quantity of early/middle Saxon pottery and other finds, including a silver sceatta, from Hunsbury Hill fort itself (RCHM forthcoming. Hardingstone (22); Metcalf 1976, 10). It is interesting, therefore, that the finds from one of the sunken featured buildings include apart of an iron age quern of a type which has parallels among the very large number found within Hunsbury.

At a slightly greater distance, an early Saxon cemetery is known to have existed at Duston (George 1904; 1919), and there is widespread evidence of settlements throughout this part of the Upper Nene Valley. By some time in the late seventh century an important, possibly royal estate seems to have been established where the town of Northampton now stands.

With the growth of larger, nucleated settlements, Briar Hill and the Hunsbury area ceased to be even a minor centre of population and all subsequent activity documented in the archaeological record is connected with mediaeval and later agriculture.

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