

Neolithic Etton: a Waterlogged 'Causewayed Camp'

by Francis Pryor

The extraordinary site at Etton was discovered by the Nene Valley Research Committee's aerial photographer, Stephen Upex, in 1976. His photo (reproduced here, fig. 3) was very dim and rather indistinct, but this was no fault of Steve's – the site was covered by a metre thickness of stiff river-borne clay alluvium. During normal seasons this clay would have prevented cropmarks from appearing, but that exceptionally dry summer caused plant roots to grow deeper than normal, in search of water. They penetrated below the surface clay and there found the damp silts and clays of the prehistoric ditch. If you look closely at the air photo (fig. 3) you will see the narrow segmented Neolithic ditch surrounded by a darker grey swirling cropmark, an extinct course of the Welland river system. The site sits within a meander of the old river, on a low gravel rise. Near the top of the photo you can clearly see the parallel ditch-like lines of the old ridge-and-furrow system; these represent the last vestiges of the Mediaeval field-system which reached almost as far south as the Neolithic site. The land around the causewayed camp would have been too damp to plough regularly, either in the Middle Ages or in prehistory. Indeed, Mr Whitton, the present farmer, told me that the southern part of the field was subject to regular winter flooding as late as 1953. Mr and Mrs Whitton, I should add, have been particularly helpful to us during the excavation, and we are of course very grateful indeed to them.

(Readers interested in learning more on the site's discovery should see the 1982 paper by myself and Dr Kinnes; meanwhile the first (1982) season of excavation is described in *Northamptonshire Archaeology* for 1982.)

The Etton site was probably occupied for 50-100 years or thereabouts in the early part of the third millennium B.C., say around 2700 B.C. – although we must await radiocarbon dates from the British Museum before we can be more precise. There is some evidence to suggest that it was occupied during the dry months, i.e. between June and September, but the lower filling of the ditch must always have been wet. Indeed, when digging it out in the first place, the workers would have to have stood in water at least up to their knees. The ditch was cleaned-out a number of times, probably when people returned to the site at the end of the winter. In one

place they constructed a low-lying flat-topped platform, to fill in a low dip, and fires were lit atop this turf-fronted artificial promontory. The lower deposits of the ditch were waterlogged and organic material was consequently very well preserved. Plant remains included numerous twigs, leaves, seeds, pollen-grains and much evidence for wood-working, including wood-chips which we have managed to join together. Maisie Taylor, our wood specialist, has more to say about this and other aspects of wood working on p. 12.

The most easily-appreciated wooden find was an axe-handle, probably in ash, which was found lying directly on the ditch bottom (see fig. 4). It would originally have held a polished stone axe made of a stone imported to the site from a considerable distance – from Cumbria, for example. We recovered many fragments of such exotic axes and axe-fragments, most of which bore clear evidence of use. The axe-handle, too, was used and had split across the socket. One can imagine what was said as this beautifully-fashioned item was heaved into the stagnant muds of the ditch.

Other finds from the lower ditch filling included numerous large sherds of thick-rimmed 'Mildenhall' pottery, many of which were decorated and some of which still had food remnants adhering to their surfaces. Preservation was superb and even the lightest decoration showed up clearly; one pot was huge (height and diameter about 50cm) and was probably used for storage – as such, it is possibly the earliest recorded storage jar from England. The pottery was all very similar and showed a very reduced range of shapes and decorative motifs. Higher in the ditch fillings we encountered material that had never been waterlogged. Instead, it has slipped in from the interior and included finely crushed potsherds, small bone-fragments and numerous tiny flint waste flakes and broken tools. This material had almost certainly been trampled. We also found the post-holes and floors of buildings, and hope to excavate these more fully next season.

Once again Peterborough, already well-known for its important Roman presence, has produced a prehistoric site of international importance. I thought, after Fengate, that such a thing was impossible. Then we dug Etton. Again, I thought it impossible to cap Etton, only to discover Flag Fen (see p. 10). Surely we cannot go on like this for ever. Or can we? Only time will tell.

Bibliography

Pryor, Kinnes (1982) F.M.M. Pryor, I.A. Kinnes, 'A Waterlogged Causewayed Enclosure in the Cambridgeshire Fens', *Antiquity* 56, 1982, 124-6.

Acknowledgements

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Fig 3 Aerial photograph of the Etton causewayed camp, 1976, with north at the top. The first season of excavation took place to the left of the N-S boundary ditch

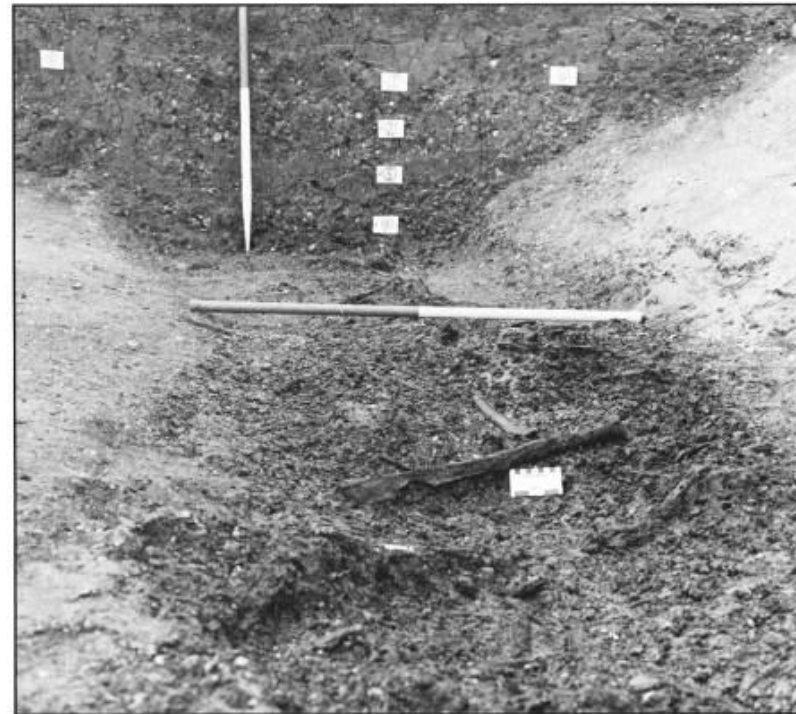


Fig 4 Etton: a view along the bottom of the enclosure ditch showing the wooden axe-handle lying in place (behind the small scale)