



NEOLITHIC FACTSHEET 5
NEOLITHIC CAUSEWAYED
ENCLOSURES

Causewayed enclosures are circular or sub-circular monuments dating to the early Neolithic (3700–3500 BC) or around 5500 years ago. These monuments are extremely important as they are the first evidence for enclosure of the landscape. The Neolithic was a time of immense change: from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a semi-sedentary agricultural one; from a micro-flint technology associated with hunting equipment to a larger and more diverse repertoire including ground flint and stone axes; and from bark and skin containers to pottery vessels. The take up of these innovations was, however, uneven across the country.

The term causewayed was first coined by M E Cunnington during investigations at Knap Hill, Wiltshire in the early twentieth century. E C Curwen went on to define ‘causewayed camps’ in a paper in *Antiquity* in 1930. In his paper Curwen was able to describe 16 sites although we now know that not all of these actually date to the Neolithic. Excavations at a number of important sites were undertaken during the early decades of the twentieth century – notably at Windmill Hill, Wiltshire which is often regarded as the ‘type’ site for this class of monument. Other sites investigated at around this time include The Trundle, Sussex; Abingdon, Oxfordshire, and Whitehawk Hill, Sussex.

Over 80 causewayed enclosures are now known from the British Isles, and new examples continue to be revealed – the most recent examples at Larkhill, near Stonehenge in Wiltshire and Riding Court Farm, Berkshire both found in 2016. They are far from evenly spread, however, being overwhelmingly concentrated south of a line from the Wash to the Severn estuary. This is the area closest to the Continent where they are also known (e.g. Denmark, France and Germany) but also the principal zone of modern arable farming, that furnishes the vital cropmark evidence of their presence.

Causewayed enclosures vary in form considerably but their principal defining feature is interrupted ditches which can number

between one and five circuits. Enclosure size ranges from less than 1 hectare (e.g. Offham Hill, East Sussex) to just under 10 hectares (Windmill Hill, Wilshire). Banks, where they survive, are usually placed on the inside of the ditches; some examples have evidence for more complex timber palisades or ramparts. As the name implies ditches and banks are interrupted by frequent causeways. Their segmented nature has led to suggestions that particular work gangs or family members were responsible for creating individual parts of the monuments – perhaps reflecting the general structure of society. Longer causeways have been interpreted as entrances. These are sometimes associated with ‘architectural’ features such as flattening of one side of the enclosure and the in-turning of ditch segments. Banks are often quite slight and would generally have been of little use defensively although pioneer investigators viewed them in that light, hence the early name ‘causewayed camps’.

Not all enclosures are defined by complete circuits. Several examples (e.g. Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire, Buckland and Broadwell both in Oxfordshire) appear to have used landscape features including rivers to ‘complete’ their circuit(s), while Birdlip Camp and Crickley Hill in the Cotswolds cut off adjoining spurs overlooking the Vale of Gloucester. Similarly placed Iron Age promontory forts elsewhere may hide, or have eradicated, ditch lines of much earlier causewayed enclosures. Imposing outworks cut off approaches to the causewayed enclosure on Hambleton Hill, Dorset and sections of ditch elsewhere may have ‘protected’ enclosures now masked by hillforts (e.g. Rybury, Wilts). Continuously ditched Neolithic enclosures also appear in certain areas of the country (e.g. Sussex) and the ‘tor enclosures’ of Cornwall bear resemblance to causewayed enclosures and should be viewed as related monuments.

Detailed analysis of the stratigraphy has shown that ditches were frequently cleaned out, perhaps on an annual basis. Varied artefactual and environmental remains have been recovered

from them despite the fact that many sites have revealed limited evidence for activities within the interior of the enclosure itself. Finds include worked flint and stone, pottery, animal bones. Frequently the ends of ditches were used to place complex deposits of artefacts. At Etton, in Cambridgeshire waterlogging had preserved items including an axe haft, vegetable fibre twine (Neolithic 'string'), and wooden containers which provide details about everyday life that are missing from the majority of sites. The often large quantities of seemingly domestic debris led early investigators to suggest they were settlements. Some elements of 'settlement' or 'domestic' activities can be seen at causewayed enclosures but they were clearly not continuously occupied. Environmental evidence, particularly from sites in Sussex, has shown that some at least were constructed in woodland clearings.

The huge range and variety of artefacts at many of these sites has led researchers to interpret enclosures as meeting places where the exchange of goods and ideas took place. Ritual activities are indicated by the very structured (organised) nature of many of the deposits of selected materials and human remains. Evidence for exposure or excarnation of bodies has been identified at some sites (e.g. Hambledon Hill, Dorset). Rather than a single all-embracing explanation it is likely that activities varied from site to site or were zoned within them; at Etton it was possible to identify distinct activity areas within the enclosure relating to either the everyday/domestic or to ritual.

Large quantities of arrowheads littered the ground around the entrance to the enclosure at Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire that had partly been destroyed by fire. On Hambledon Hill a timber palisade collapsed onto the body of a young man with an arrowhead embedded in his chest cavity and at the tor enclosure at Carn Brae, Cornwall 800 arrowheads were recovered along with evidence of burning. Clearly some sites at least came to a violent end. It seems they were pivotal to society at a period when many changes were taking place.

Radiocarbon dating has shown that causewayed enclosures were used for perhaps only a couple of hundred years, although evidence from a number of sites has shown that they were still being visited in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Very much later several sites had Iron Age hillforts superimposed upon them (e.g. Crickley, Hill, Glos, Hambledon Hill and Maiden Castle both in Dorset).

Further Reading

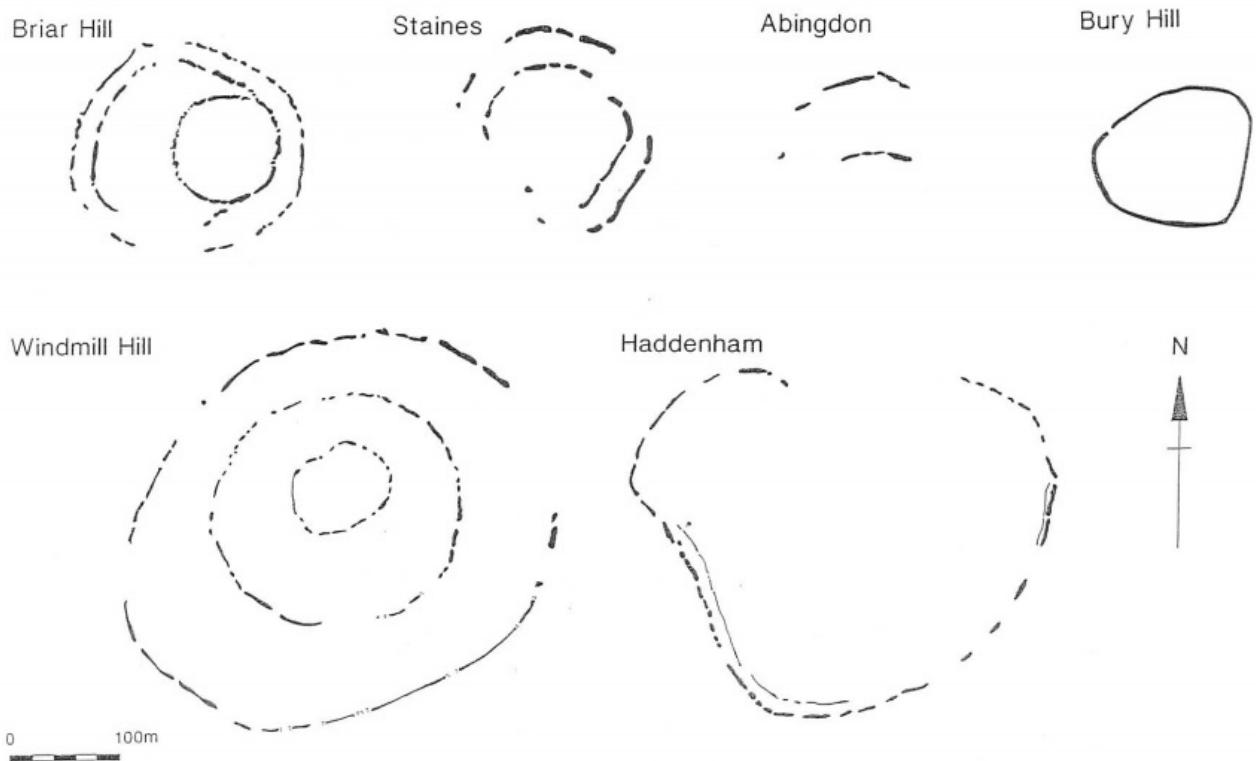
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Oswald, A. 2011. *Introduction to Heritage Assets: Causewayed Enclosures*. London: English Heritage

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Oswald, A., Dyer, C. & Barber, M. 2001. *The Creation of Monuments. Neolithic Causewayed Enclosures in the British Isles*. London: English Heritage



Plans of Causewayed enclosures mentioned in the text. Black lines represent ditches. Source: Philippa Bradley

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