The Priddy Circles

PRELIMINARY REPORT

(O.S. 6 in. to 1 mile, Somerset 28 N.W. Grid ref. ST 5452)

By

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The circles which go by this name are actually in the parish of East Harptree. They are four in number and extend over ¾ mile. It is convenient to number them from south to north. The three southerly ones are close together (*see* folder, *Plate* 5, *A*). Circle 1 has been badly mutilated by mining in the southwest sector. It is not quite a true circle being slightly flattened on the west. It has a single entrance to the north-north-east. It has a diameter of 520 ft. between the crests of the bank. Circle 2 is a true circle and its diameter and the position of its single entrance are the same as for circle 1. It has been somewhat disturbed by mining. Circle 3 is distinctly flattened on the east and west. Its north to south diameter is 520 ft. It has a single entrance to the south-south-west. The interior and the ditch have been greatly disturbed by mining and the digging of two ponds. The marsh may be an original feature, or the product of mining: probably the former. The interspaces between the circles have been heavily mined. Circle 4 is much more complete than is shown on the O.S. map as it can be traced by the remnants of its ditch for all but a part of the perimeter in the west to south-west. Circle 4 has a diameter of 560 ft. The entrance, if there is one, must lie in the south-west.

Circle	Diameter	Interspace	Bearing of Entrance	Position of Bank in Relation to Ditch
	ft.	ft.		
1	520	270	13°	Inside
2	520	270	16°	Inside
3	520 and 490	1560	191°	Inside
4	560		SW.?	Inside

It is usually claimed that the centres of the three southern circles lie on a single axis. The idea seems to stem from Allcroft (1902, p. 562). This is incorrect as a study of the large scale O.S. maps will show and it is again demonstrated in the present survey (*Plate* 5, *A*). If the line joining the centres of circles 1 and 2 is taken as an axis and extended through circle 3 it will pass 50 ft. west of the centre of circle 3. This trial axis passes along the east side of the entrance of circle 1 and close to the west side of that of

circle 2 and well west of the entrance of circle 3. Just inside and west of the entrance of circle 2 is a mound, T316A*, which is not clearly the product of mining and may be a tumulus.

North of circle 3 is a gap more than large enough to have held another circle. Through this gap passes the Roman road from Charterhouse. Beyond is circle 4. Just inside the north-eastern part of the perimeter are four mounds, probably tumuli (T313–315). Close to T313A is another mound, oval, and lying outside the expected line of the circle: probably not a tumulus.

Circles 1–3 have many pits associated with them. Most are obviously mining pits and there are some spoil heaps. Other hollows may be the result of natural subsidence and these are likely to antedate the construction of the circles. Only the southern part of circle 1 lies on limestone. The rest lie either on silicified Lias or on Triassic marls and sands. This probably accounts for the apparent smooth outline of the ditches as no rock cutting would be necessary as at Gorsey Bigbury (Jones, 1938). The circles lie on nearly flat ground about 900 ft. above O.D. There is a gentle slope down from south to north for circles 1–3. After this the ground rises very gently towards circle 4 which is all but on the same level as circle 1.

Many writers have noted the circles and some have theorized upon them. No good purpose would be served by reviewing these references. Allcroft (1908, *Fig.* 189) mentions the recent destruction of part of the north-east quadrant of circle 3, though even now the line can be traced for most of the way by the slight hollow that still marks the site of the ditch. Allcroft considered the circles to be of ritual or astronomical character. Clark (1936) states that the circles have only the slenderest claim to be classed as Henge monuments but his view was based on the information then available. The Ordnance Survey maps still show them as "supposed ring forts". Stories are current that the circles once had stone settings. This is of course a possibility. At present there are occasional stones, mainly in circle 1, of considerable size in the banks, and partly exposed (e.g., S 2, *Plate* 5, *A*), and inside circle 1. Of the latter S 1 lies in a small hollow and appears to be the stump of a large stone that has been broken up. Just inside the bank of circle 2 is a group of six large stones each measuring about 4 by 3 ft. and up to 2 ft. thick. They were brought together in recent times (10–14). They are all silicified Lower Lias. The nearest exposure is at present at Wurt Pit about 1 mile to the north-east. The stones seem too large to be derived from the gravel spread that covers the area though this does contain this type of rock. Presumably they were brought to the site but not from any great distance. Other large stones can be seen in various hollows, but whether they are the product of mining or whether the hollows

* This number and others refer to the society's catalogue of barrows.

have been used as a convenient dumping place for large stones, some of which may have come from the circles, is uncertain. At 750 ft. from the centre of circle 2 on a bearing of 304° is a large block of Dolomitic Conglomerate. It is highly silicified and very similar to the stones at Stanton Drew. Lloyd Morgan (Dymond, 1896, p. 18 footnote) thought that the Stanton Drew stones came from Harptree ridge and this one may have come from near there too.

In 1956 some trial excavations were made to try to glean some information about the structure of the circles and their functions to replace mere suppositions. The excavations were on a small scale and have already provided considerable information, but any conclusions drawn must be regarded as tentative. Circle 1 was chosen for the work and the excavations fall under three heads.

THE BANK AND DITCH

(CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR)

The north-west sector of circle 1 had the best preserved bank and a trial trench was cut through this and the ditch. Subsequently the trench was enlarged by cutting bays (*Plate* 5, *B*).

Bank Section

1. Modern turf and subsoil.
2. Clean yellow earth.

2A. Spoil from post holes.

3. Yellow earth mixed with dark soil on and around the stones of layer 4.
4. Stone core. The main constituent is Old Red Sandstone with some silicified Lias and occasional pieces of Carboniferous Limestone. The sandstone is presumably derived from the surface of North Hill, south of circle 1.
5. Dark grey, gravelly and streaked with brown at the top. This is the prehistoric turf level.

Ditch Section

1. Modern turf and subsoil.
6. Dark grey layer merging at its top with the modern subsoil. Similar to layer 5 but without the gravel.
7. Black peaty soil.
8. Dark grey similar to layer 6.
9. Primary silting, which could be divided into :—
   (*a*) Slightly dirty yellow soil with a few small stones.
   (*b*) Fine orange yellow soil, presumably rain wash.

All the layers of the ditch had a clayey texture. *Plate* 1 gives a general view of the excavation.

Order of Construction

The circle was marked out by a shallow trench about 6 in. wide. About 30 ft. inside this two lines of post holes were dug at regular intervals. Posts about 8 in. in diameter and probably about 10 ft. high were erected and packed round with earth. In the line of the posts but between their circumferential positions stakes were driven and presumably some form of vertical revetment placed behind them. Stones, collected from the surface, were then piled between the two lines of posts and stakes and against the revetment to form extremely crude dry stone walling about 2 ft. high and 18 in. wide. The ditch was then cut, the turf and subsoil together with more stones were thrown in between the walls. When this mass was level with the top of the walling in the main only earth, from the lower levels of the ditch, was added to a height of about another 3 ft., still within the lines of the walls. The earth top probably had a slight inward batter. The revetment was carried to the top of the earth as there is no evidence of immediate slip of the bank earth after completion. Possibly the stakes, from their size, were not carried to the top of the earth layer. The posts probably projected 4–6 ft., and perhaps more, above the earth bank top. Presumably there was some form of cross-lacing between the posts to stop outward splay.

The evidence for this order of construction is as follows. The shallow trench, first located in the entrance excavations (p. 14) and subsequently here can only be a marking out trench and must presumably be the first structure. Its presence here was determined by digging bays L 3 and R 6. In the latter it showed as a groove 2 in. deep in the subsoil. In the former it was hard to distinguish because layer 1 was thicker and the trench did not cut clearly into the subsoil. The kink could be the result of an adjustment of the radial line used to set the site of the trench.

On each side of the stone core of the bank were post holes set about 6 ft. 6 in. apart, each pair being very nearly radial. They measured about 20 in. in diameter and showed up as yellow rings in layer 5 (*Plate* 2). Hole P 1 was excavated completely. At its top was yellow soil similar to layer 2, this gradually changed to a yellowy grey soil. There was no change in the texture in this hole and others sectioned to indicate the actual diameter of the post. Two small stones were found near the bottom of hole P 1 but it is not certain if they were chock stones. In hole P 3 there was a centrally placed ring, about 7 in. in diameter, of ferruginous material which may represent a deposit formed between the post and the packing. If so then the post was about 7 in. or more in diameter.

The holes are not very deep which suggests that the contained posts were not very high. But in hole P 1 there was a groove on one side 4 in. deep at the top tapering out to nothing about halfway down the hole. It looked as if a stake had been used to alter the position of a post using the

lip of the hole as a fulcrum. This indicates a fairly large total mass for the post, and, as the diameter has been estimated a guess can be made of the total height, which is put at 8–10 ft.

Underneath the stone core and resting directly on layer 5 were two piles of yellow earth, 2 A, similar to the natural subsoil, and they can only be the surplus spoil from the post holes. There were no signs that vegetation had ever grown over them. The holes were, then, dug before the stone core was placed but only very shortly before. Between, but in the circumferential line of the post holes, stake holes were found. They appeared as yellow patches about 3 in. in diameter half an inch below the top of layer 5. The stake hole between post 1 and 2 was grey all through layer 5 and had two concentric rings of ochreous material 2 and 4 in. in diameter. The reason for this is not obvious. As grass had clearly grown over the top of the stake holes after the stakes had rotted and before the stone core and earth top had slipped, it can be argued that the earth top must have had an inward batter or else it would have spilled over and covered the stake hole as soon as the stake had rotted.

At each post hole the edge of the stone core receded to form a bay. Obviously the holes did contain posts and were not solely ritual. The arrangement of the slip of the stone core and the earth top is such that the posts clearly lasted much longer than the stakes, and held the core up.

The stone core on the inner side was much more closely packed than the central part to form a crude stone wall. It is probable that the same held true for the outside, but the degree of slip that has taken place towards the ditch makes it impossible to assert this definitely. The core structure was such that it could not have stayed upright without some support, hence the deduction that a revetment was used, and this is supported by the evidence for stakes, which could serve no purpose save to help hold such a revetment.

So far the evidence from the post holes suggests that the posts served the simple function of support for the stone core and earth of the bank although their tops probably projected above the top of the bank. But in the entrance excavations (p. 15) a post hole was found in such a position that its contained post could never have served as a support for the bank. Some at least of the posts must, therefore, have had other functions than that of supporting the bank. Pressure from the gradual settlement of the material of the bank after construction would be considerable in an outwards direction. If the posts and stakes were not to splay outwards some form of cross bracing would be necessary. So far no direct evidence of this has been found.

The earth round the stones was much darker than layer 2 and a few pieces of dark grey soil, about an inch thick, were found covering the stones

at the outer edge. These soils can only be the top soil from the ditch cutting and so the posts, stakes, revetment and walls were in position before the ditch was dug and before the central part of the core was added. It would have been easy for the builders to have made the whole bank from earth from the ditch, but they chose to combine a quarry ditch with stone collecting, perhaps as part of a general scheme of clearing the whole area of surface stones. There are no stones at present identified that could not come from the vicinity of the circles. About 3 ft. from the inner edge of the stone core was a line of small soft patches below layer 5. They may be natural but are more probably stake holes in which the stakes rotted or were pulled up before the bank spill reached them. If they are stake holes their function is at present obscure.

The ditch as so far exposed is fairly regular with no evidence of the separate pit technique with baulks between so common on other sites. If it is assumed that the bank had a fairly vertical side externally, as it certainly had internally, then there was a berm about 7 ft. wide on the outer side between the bank edge and the ditch. This berm is now completely covered by bank spill. At the bottom of the ditch is a thin orange layer of fine soil. It is identical with the layer that was observed to form after the ditch was opened when there was heavy rain. It thus represents the initial rain wash down the sides of the ditch. Layer 9 represents a still further decay of the ditch sides so that the ditch as now seen is wider than when first dug. The spill on the inside and outside of the bank is nearly equal so that the earth had nearly reached its natural angle of rest on the berm outside before it started to spill into the ditch. A few stones were found in the ditch filling but these need not have come from the bank. A layer of turf, layer 8, formed over the ditch filling, but wetter conditions at the site brought about the formation of a dense black peaty layer, 7. As this increased in thickness it gradually turned into a normal turf layer, 6, which merges into the present surface subsoil.

Between layers 6 and 7 there was a small orange laminated layer only an inch thick and about a foot wide. It is shown black in the section. The layer ran along the ditch and tapered gradually at its eastern end. The portion exposed was 8 ft. long, but the western end was not exposed in the cutting. The cause of the layer is obscure but it could be silt under a fallen tree trunk or even a discarded post.

THE INTERIOR

(E. K. TRATMAN)

If the circles were Henge monuments then they might have internal structures of stone or wood or both. No stones were visible in the area selected, but it was thought that stone or post holes might be found, and if

the circles were not Henge monuments then some evidence of their use might be discovered by occupation material. The central area was deliberately left untouched to be excavated later in the light of evidence gained by the present excavations.

A line of pits, *A* in *Plate* 5, *A*, 4 ft. square and 4 ft. apart, was laid out from the east side of the bank cutting, radially, towards the centre. Other, Z, pits were laid off these circumferentially. One pit seemed at first to show a possible stone hole at its edge and so was enlarged to join up with adjacent pits. This was a false alarm. All the pits showed the same features. Turf and topsoil down to 9 in. and then undisturbed hard ferruginous subsoil. In places there was evidence of a double turf layer as if on deep ploughing, perhaps in the war, the sods had been turned right over and then sown on top. Later a second ploughing had been done which did not quite go down to the old turf. The regularity and the still partially undecayed grass of the lower layer clearly indicates a modern and not prehistoric origin. No occupation material was found, not a sherd of pottery, not even a Roman sherd, and neither post nor stone holes. A few small fragments of flint turned up chiefly from close to the undisturbed subsoil but none of them was an implement. This absence of finds points towards the site having been of a religious or ceremonial nature and not a living site.

THE ENTRANCE

(E. K. TRATMAN)

The circles 1–3 are shown on the O.S. maps as being complete and without entrances. Circle 4 is shown as incomplete. All the accounts refer to the circles as having no entrances. It had been noted, while doing a field survey of the area, in 1955, that circles 1–3 might have true entrances, one to each circle. In 1956 a further check was made with several other archæologists and the conclusion was reached that each of circles 1–3 had a single original entrance and that all other gaps were modern. Test borings with a hollow drill* cutting a 2-in. hole were made. The cores were examined and tended to confirm the surface observations. The entrances are shown on the plan. Tests were made at other gaps but these indicated that the ditch was present and had been filled in. Borings were also made in circle 4. The results were inconclusive. Holes 10 and 11 were drilled in a well-marked part of the ditch and there was a change from red marl to a lighter red, sandier layer at 42 in., the expected depth of the ditch. Holes 13–15 showed the lighter layer immediately under the turf and topsoil. The borings could, then, indicate an entrance causeway, in which case it is not quite in the same relative position as in circle 3, or it could indicate that

* So that the drill holes should not be confused later with stake holes a modern object was dropped in each hole. Usually a 1956 or 1955 farthing.

circle 4 was never completed. None of the bore holes showed the thick black layer found in the ditch of circle 1. Trial excavations are needed to get a stratification for the interpretation of the borings.

A trench was laid out to cover the eastern half of the entrance to circle 1 (*Plate* 5, *C*). It extended from just beyond the outer edge of the ditch as seen on the ground inwards to the line of the middle of the bank. It was designed to cover part of the causeway, the ditch end and the tail of the bank. The other half was left undisturbed for future investigation. Towards the end of the excavation period heavy rain flooded the ditch and kept it flooded for nearly three weeks. Further work was not possible in 1956 and the trench was filled in.

Marking Out Trench.—At the northern end of the excavation a trench, 6–8 in. wide and penetrating 1–2 in. into the subsoil, was found. When freshly exposed the darker filling of the ditch showed up clearly against the red brown subsoil. The trench was curved to the circumference of the circle and was obviously contemporary. It was also found in the bank and ditch trench. It can only have served as a marking out trench spitlocked fairly regularly through the original turf into the subsoil.

The Ditch.—This has a splayed end running up onto the causeway and does not cross it. It has a gently sloping upper part and a more steeply sloping lower. In the top of the primary silting of the ditch were a number of stones. It is possible that they may be connected with a foundation deposit but because of the bad weather they were left till another season.

The Causeway.—(*Plate* 3.)—The surface was fairly even. There was only one post hole described below. At the gap in the bank and extending outwards to just beyond the line of the outer edge of the bank was an area covered by stones, generally fairly flat ones. The whole seemed to form a crude cobbling and the material under them had the appearance of being well trodden (*Plate* 5 *B*, 1 *A*). The stones may have been placed as a repair layer in a muddy entrance. The cobbled layer did not extend right across the entrance.

The Bank.—Only the edge of the bank was cut, by design, inwards to its mid-line. At the outer corner of the bank a post hole (*Plate* 4) measuring 16 in. at the top, 12 in. at the bottom and 19 in. deep was found and adjoining it on the south-west was a stake hole 3 in. in diameter and 6 in. deep. This was not apparent until the original turf layer had been removed. The post hole was outlined by a very thin dark red-brown layer, and material similar in colour occurred in the filling in patches. It appeared to be ferruginous and of natural origin. There were no packing stones in the hole and the filling was fairly uniform in texture though a little softer towards the centre. It was not possible to determine the size of the post. The bank structure did not extend beyond the post onto the causeway but only up to

it. The section shown in *Plate* 5, *C* is drawn along the east side of the trench 2 ft. east of the post hole. The 1 in. thick layer, 2 A, of ochreous soil, by analogy with the findings in the Bank and Ditch trench, is the spoil from the post hole. It rested directly on the original turf level. Above it was a mass of dark material, 10, apparently a turf wall arranged radially and merging upwards with the present turf. A similar material appeared at right angles, starting from the post hole, and is therefore arranged circumferentially. Outside this is a wedge shaped mass of ochreous soil, about 4 in. thick at its base, of bank material, and it looks as if this is an overspill of material when the bank was built. The bank also tailed out originally towards the causeway so that the post at the entrance presumably served only as a symbolical gate post. Most of these details can be seen in *Plate* 4.

Discussion

In the Priddy area, where there is a good water supply, there are many barrows. A distribution map has been published by Tratman (1955). To the west of circles 1–3 are several barrows. One has been totally destroyed (T 19). It contained a cremation burial in a small clay-lined pit found during a very hurried saving dig after more than half the barrow had been destroyed. There was a kerb of small stones and the mound had been built of alternate layers of turf and earth. Beyond this is a very large round barrow and beyond again is Stow Barrow, the largest round barrow on Mendip. In the south-east corner of the field in which lies most of circle 1 is a large round barrow (T 316). South of circle 1 are the Ashen Hill and Priddy Nine Barrows groups* on North Hill, around the base of which are several substantial springs. It is not necessary to enumerate all the barrows, but attention is drawn to two Henge monuments. About $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles away to the north-west is Gorsey Bigbury (Jones, 1938) on a flat topped ridge between two valleys. There is a copious spring nearby. Just over 2 miles south-east from the circles is a structure, T 239A, whose surface appearance, measurements and position of the single entrance are identical with Gorsey Bigbury, but there may be an original central mound. It was found by one of us (E. K. T.) in 1954. It is not marked on the O.S. maps. Its grid reference is ST559498. There are several round barrows and a large disc barrow nearby. It lies in the wide flat bottom of a very shallow valley but the nearest springs are a good mile away at North Hill. One of the barrows, T 330, of the O.S. Priddy Nine Barrows is generally classed as a disc barrow, but the ditch is outside the bank and there appears to be a gap in both bank and ditch in the north-east sector.

* Wicks, A. T., 1953, "Barrows at Priddy—An Error in Nomenclature". P. Som. Arch. Soc. Vol. 97: 185. It is claimed that the O.S. Ashen Hill barrows are really Priddy Nine Barrows as they lie in Nine Barrow Lot and adjoin Nine Barrow Lane. The O.S. nomenclature is followed in the present article.

PLATE I

Photo.: Dr. H. Taylor, M.C.

General view of Bank and Ditch Trench, looking towards centre of circle.

PLATE 2

Photo.: Dr. H. Taylor, M.C.

Bank and Ditch Trench. Bay L1 showing post holes P2 and P3 and crude dry stone walling.

PLATE 3

Photo.: Dr. H. Taylor, M.C.

General view of Entrance Excavation. Left ranging pole is in Marking Out Trench.

PLATE 4

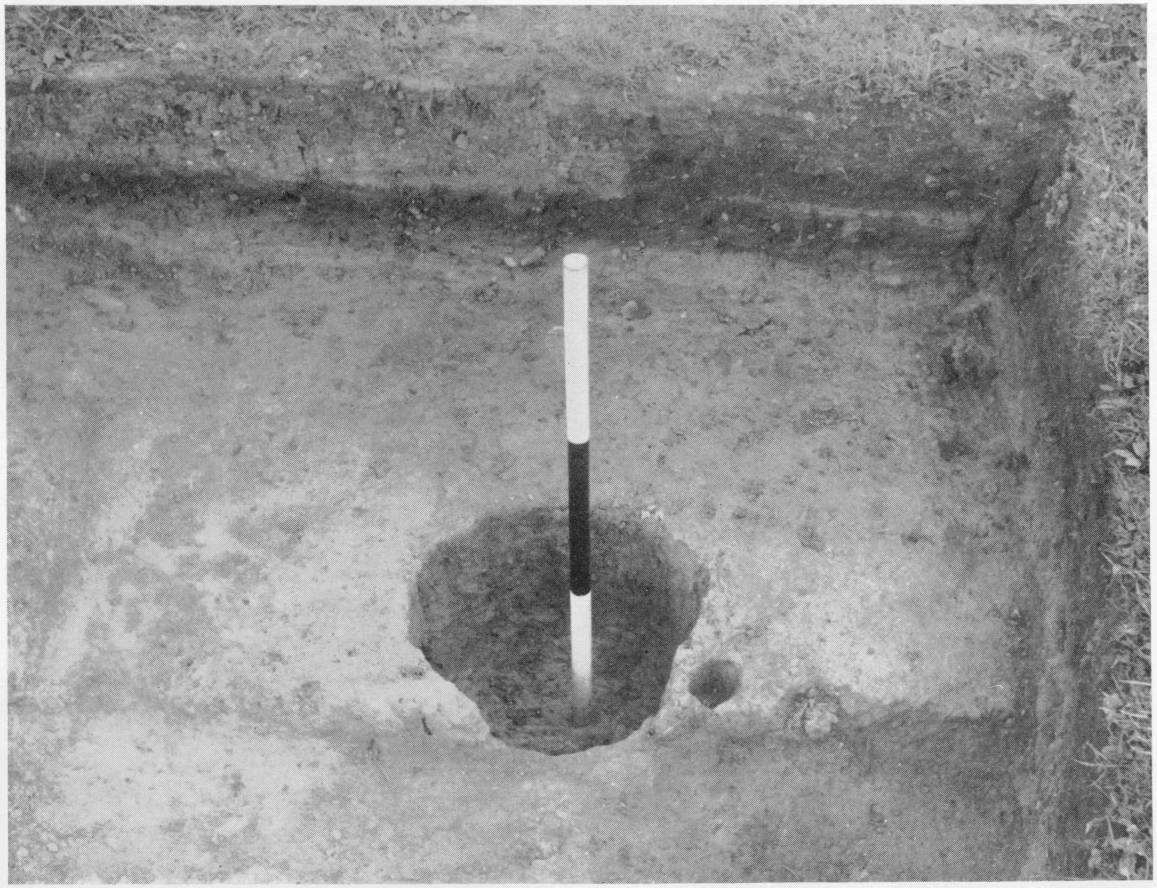


Photo.: Dr. H. Taylor, M.C.

Entrance excavation. Post and Stake holes shown. The dark layer beyond and to right of ranging pole is the turf wall, overlying, on right, the spoil from the post hole.

PLATE 5A

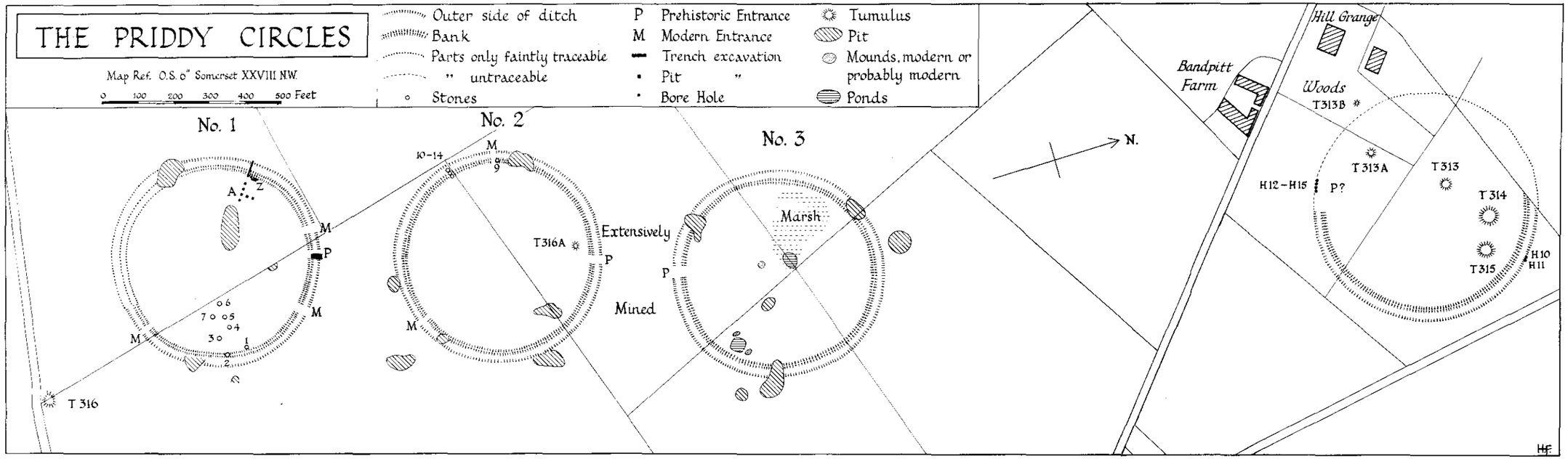
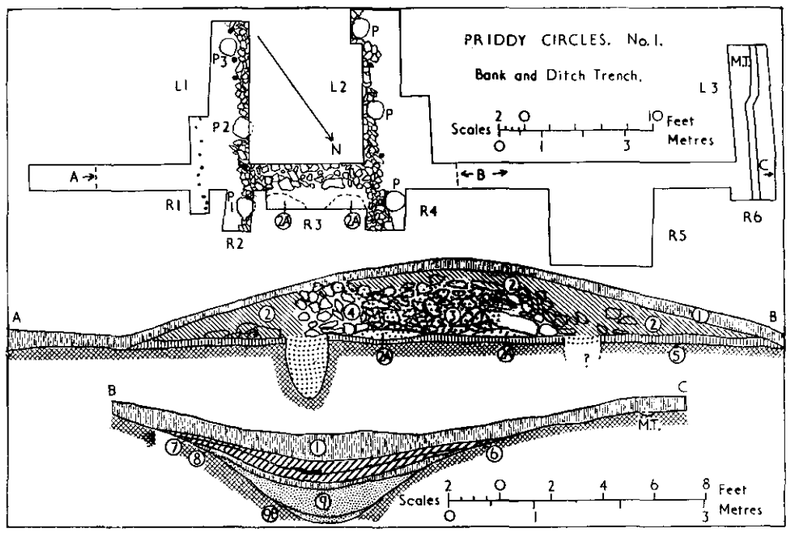


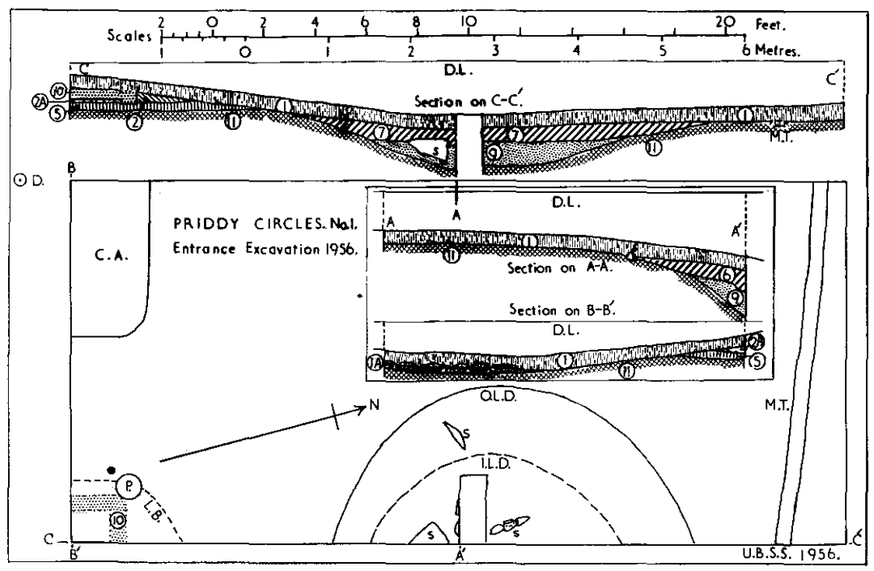
PLATE 5B



1. Turf and subsoil.
2. Ochreous soil of bank.
2A. Spoil from post holes.
3. Stone core mixed with earth from ditch.
4. Crude dry stone wall with little earth.
5. Prehistoric turf level.
6. Grey layer merging downwards to 7.
7. Black peaty soil.
8. Turf layer after ditch partly silted up.
9. Primary silting of ditch.
10. Turf wall.
11. Natural undisturbed sub-soil.

C.A. Cobbled Area.
D. Datum peg.
L.B. Present limits of bank.
D.L. Datum line.
P. Post hole.
• Stake hole.
I.L.D. Inner lip of ditch.
O.L.D. Outer lip of ditch.
M.T. Marking out trench.
S. Stone.

PLATE 5C



The Priddy circles themselves cover a site about as level as could be found in the area and do not occupy the highest ground. All parts of all the circles can be seen from any one vantage point in any one circle. It is possible that there always was water inside circle 3. The absence of internal structures in circle 1 may not be real as the excavations have so far been limited and the central area has not been touched. The greatest surprise is the double ring of post holes under the bank as it now stands. Their possible function has been discussed above. Their presence suggests that similar arrangements may be present in similar structures elsewhere. At Durrington Walls (Stone *et al.*, 1954) a double line of post holes was found along the outer edge of the bank on the south, and they are deemed to have held posts erected prior to the construction of the bank, but not to support it, though they may have preceded it by a few years. The lines were not continuous. It is not known certainly if similar lines exist along the inner side of the bank but the trench cut did not show signs of any. Though there are similarities between the two sites and their post hòles there are also considerable differences.

The evidence so far accumulated places the Priddy circles as Henge monuments in class I* or the single entrance type. This class includes Stonehenge I and Mayburgh but the Priddy circles are larger than any others in class I (Atkinson *et al.*, 1951, *Fig.* 27). Class II sites tend to be larger than class I. In both classes the ditches simply seem to be quarries for the material for the bank but at Mayburgh (Clark, 1936, p. 44) there is no ditch, the bank being formed by stones collected from the nearby rivers. Circle 1 at Priddy combines this collecting technique and the quarry ditch, which, like Stonehenge, is outside the bank and is so for all four circles. The arrangement of the three entrances seems to be more regular than is usual in class I monuments.

Summary

The excavations have revealed the complicated structure of the bank of circle 1. At the site of excavation this includes stones collected to form a core, stake holes and post holes. The latter form a double ring evenly spaced. The bank was raised directly on the original turf after the posts had been put up.

The ditch is filled at the bottom by rapidly formed silt and above by a dense black layer of vegetation material which at the top merges with the present turf level. Outside the edge of the ditch a shallow marking out trench had been dug.

* The division into classes does not imply a difference in date (Stone *et al.*, 1954, p. 157).

The existence of a true entrance causeway has been proved for circle 1. There are clear surface indications for a single entrance to each of the circles 2 and 3 and it is possible that there is an entrance to circle 4.

The circles belong to the secondary Neolithic cultures and fall into the Henge group of monuments, class I. There is no evidence for the date so far except by analogy with similar sites. On this basis a provisional date of 1900–1700 B.C. may be given (Atkinson, 1936, p. 80).

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* Also available as an off-print under the Council for British Archæology scheme.