

Chapter 4: The Affinities and Design of the Monument

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THE MONUMENT

The Devil's Quoits can be described as a circle-henge (Burl 1979, 274) of which Barnatt (1989, 507–8) lists up to 20 possible examples. These sites, which express the convergence of two distinct monument traditions, exhibit wide regional variation, and many have complex structural histories. Their distribution covers all of the British Isles (Burl 1979, fig. 2), with sites in Scotland, northern England, the Midlands, East Anglia, Wessex (including the Upper Thames Region) and the south-west. Circles occur in both timber and stone, the former tending to be chronologically earlier (Barnatt 1989, 9–10 and 157–161).

The monument can be divided into distinct structural elements: the henge, the central post setting, and the stone circle. These need not be contemporary or all part of a unified design. Both Avebury and Stonehenge are obvious examples of multi-phase monuments the overall design of which changed radically over time.

The henge

Recent surveys of henge and hengiform sites have been published by Harding (1987) and by Clare (1986; 1987), who has attempted a detailed classification. However, the simple dual classification into enclosures with one or two entrances devised by the Piggotts (1939, 140–141) is still perhaps the most readily applicable. Finer classification is rendered difficult by varying regional traditions and differing histories of development.

The henge belongs to the Piggotts' class II (1939, 140–141), ovoid in outline, having an outer bank, inner ditch and two opposed entrances. It is further characterised by a possible central post setting and entrance posts. The overall plan (Fig. 7) gives the impression that the ditch was dug in a series of fairly straight lengths.

Harding (1987) lists most of the probable henge and hengiform sites in the Upper Thames Region and the adjacent areas. Lambrick (1988, fig. 69) maps their distribution. There is a fairly clear distinction between small henge and hengiform sites and large, 'monumental' henges. Smaller sites are known from City Farm, Hanborough (Case *et al.* 1964–5), site X, 1, Stanton Harcourt (Gravelly Guy, Ch. 5), site XXII, 6, Stanton Harcourt (Taylor, Ch. 2), Dorchester on

Thames (Atkinson *et al.* 1951; Whittle *et al.* 1992), Langford (Benson and Miles 1974, 33), Northfield Farm, Long Wittenham (Gray 1970, 108; 1977, 9–12), Barrow Hills, Radley (Barclay and Halpin forthcoming) and Corporation Farm, Abingdon.

The Devil's Quoits is one of five large, 'monumental' henges in the Upper Thames Valley, the others being the Big Rings, Dorchester on Thames (Atkinson *et al.* 1951; Whittle *et al.* 1992), Westwell, Oxfordshire (Atkinson 1949), Cutsdean, Gloucestershire (Saville 1980) and Condicote, Gloucestershire (Saville 1983, 21–47). Cutsdean and Westwell are similar in form and size to the Devil's Quoits, with comparably oriented opposed entrances (Fig. 35).

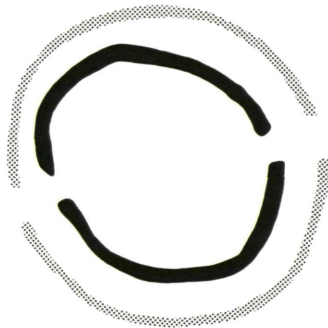
Westwell, near Burford, was discovered from the air by Major Allen (Atkinson 1949, 86, pl. XIIc). The site probably represents a class II henge with a diameter of *c.* 107–112 m, orientated WSW-ENE and with opposed entrances (Harding 1987, 259). It is located on land known as Barrow Field and a possible re-erected monolith has been recorded at Westwell Manor. It is also situated 800 m SSW of a possible causewayed enclosure (Case 1986, 19).

Little is known about the Cutsdean cropmark which may possibly be the product of soil variation (Barnatt 1989, 206).

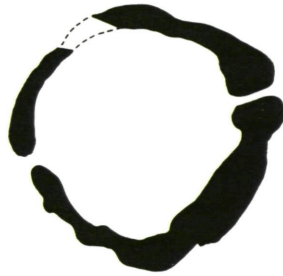
Condicote is similar in size but is double-ditched. The entrances have never been defined. It has been recently excavated, although on a limited scale (Saville 1983, 21–49). There are radiocarbon determinations of 2210–1750 cal BC (3620 ± 80 BP; HAR-3064) and 2400–1770 cal BC (3670 ± 100 BP; HAR-3067) for samples from the slower silting of the inner ditch, the former from a deposit including animal bone and fingernail-decorated Beaker pottery (Saville 1983, 33).

A number of large, classic henge monuments beyond the Upper Thames have features in common with the Devil's Quoits. The following, all listed by Harding (1987), are morphologically comparable. The dimensions given are internal diameters. King Arthur's Round Table in Cumbria (43.89–51.21 m); Arbor Low (46–52 m) and the Bull Ring (43–46 m) in Derbyshire; Knowlton Centre (55–75 m) in Dorset; Cana Barn (96–99 m), Hutton Moor (93–96 m), Newton Kyme (80–84 m), Thornborough North (92–98 m), Centre (83–92 m) and South (94–97 m), and Ferrybridge (90–102 m), all in Yorkshire; North Mains (32–35 m) and Cairnpapple (38–44 m) in Scotland; and Llandegai site B (69 m) in north Wales.

1 Devil's Quoits,
Stanton Harcourt, Oxon.



2 Westwell, Oxon.



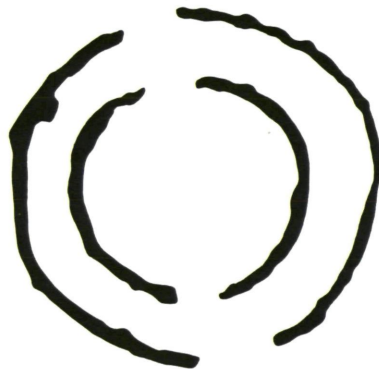
3 Cutsdean, Gloucs.



4 Condicote, Gloucs.



5 Big Rings,
Dorchester, Oxon.



6 Corporation Farm,
Oxon.



■ Ditch ▨ Bank

0 100 200 300 m. (1,2,3,4 & 5)

0 50 100 150 m. (6)



Figure 35 Henges in the Upper Thames Region

The large number of Yorkshire parallels reflects substantial similarities between the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age sequences of Bradley's (1984, fig. 3.2) Upper Thames and Yorkshire Wolds core areas (cf Thorpe and Richards 1984, 67-87). The large henge sites of Yorkshire and the Upper Thames are comparable in size and design, in particular the sites of Thornborough and the Big Rings, Dorchester.

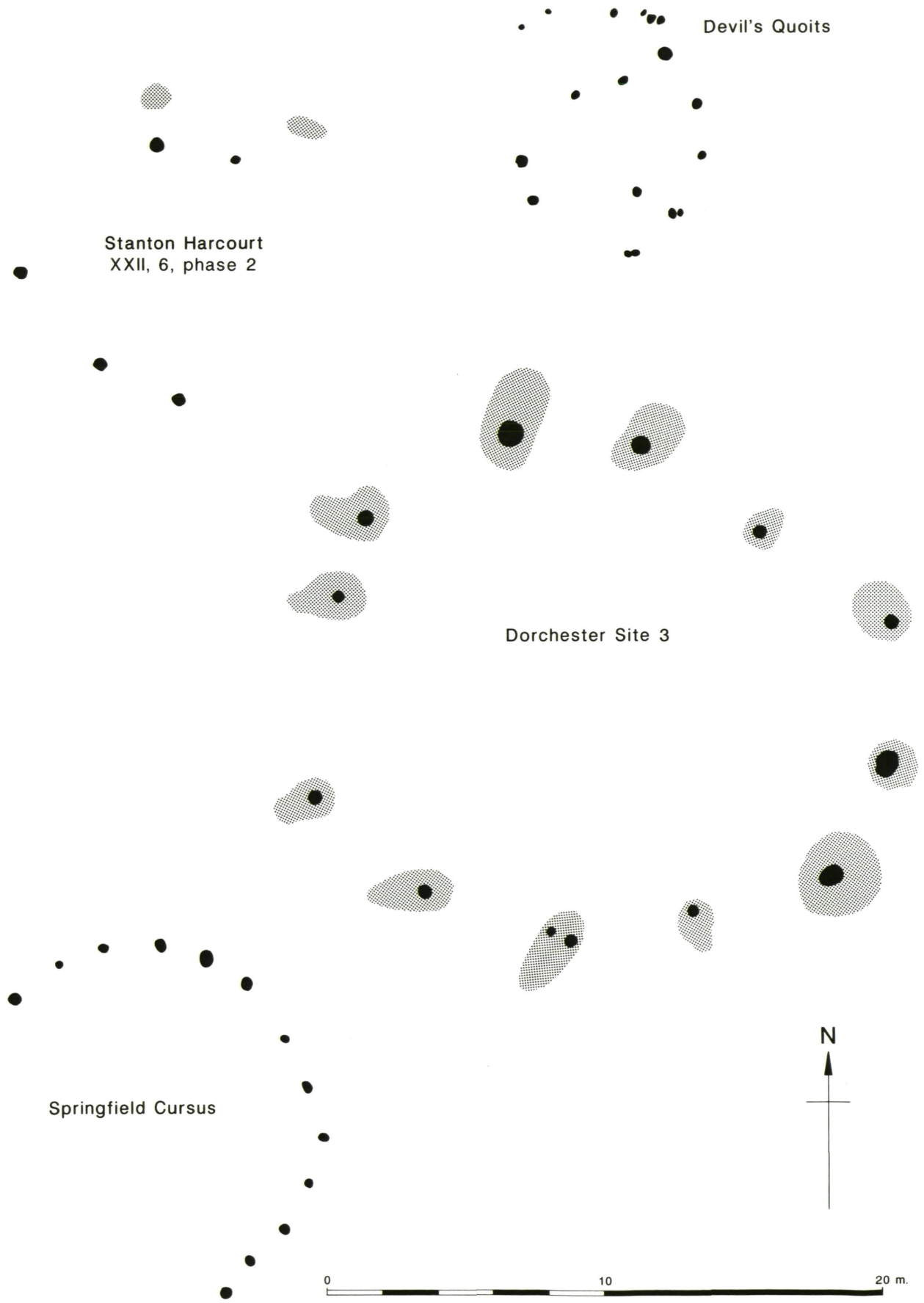
The two postpits in the S terminal of the E entrance of the Devil's Quoits (Fig. 14) may find an

imprecise parallel in a socket for a post some 0.60 m in diameter in the centre of the S causeway at Avebury (Smith 1965, 204).

The post setting

The setting of postholes near the centre of the Devil's Quoits (Figs 26-7) remains undated and may not be complete. Its location suggests contemporaneity with the monument. It could be interpreted as an ovoid structure. It was comparable in scale, irregu-

Devil's Quoits, Stanton Harcourt



larity and slightness with the post setting within ring ditch, XXII, 6, some 230 m to the NE (Fig. 36). Both were less substantial and regular than even the smallest of the post settings known from middle or late Neolithic monuments (Fig. 36), such as site 3 on the central axis of the Dorchester on Thames cursus (Bradley and Chambers 1988, 281, fig. 6) or part of a post-circle at one end of the Springfield Cursus in Essex (Hedges and Buckley 1981).

The Devil's Quoits setting was also far slighter than the massive wooden structures, often rich in finds, of later Neolithic monuments such as Durrington Walls, Woodhenge, and the Sanctuary in Wiltshire or Mount Pleasant in Dorset (Wainwright 1979, figs 90–91). It compares more closely, however, with the 10.50 m diameter structure inside the N entrance of the Marden henge, the postholes of which survived to an average of only 0.15 m deep (Wainwright 1971, 192–7). It is possible that, given the severe erosion of the central area, the (just) surviving postholes (Fig. 27) may represent a once more extensive structure.

The stone circle

The dimensions summarised in Table 18 include estimates; those of stone height have been calculated from the stonehole dimensions and where possible from the original stone size (Whiteman, Appendix 1).

The stone circle was slightly ovoid, with a maximum diameter of 79 m and a minimum of 74 m. Its longer axis ran ESE–WNW, corresponding to the two entrances to the earthwork enclosure. Some of the widest spacings between stoneholes also corresponded to the entrances, 9.80 m between stoneholes F159 and F283 in the E and 8.50 m between F28 and F25 in the W (Fig. 7). If the estimated stone heights are accepted then the tallest stones flanked the E entrance, in stoneholes F159 and F283 (Table 18). The tallest stones at Avebury and Arbor Low also coincide with the entrance causeways (Barnatt 1989, 365, 429). Overall stone spacing varied between 5.30 m and 9.09 m, with a calculated mean of 6.42 m, or 6.65 m if the estimated positions of the missing stoneholes are included.

The plan of the circle (Fig. 7) gives the impression that it was built in a series of arcs. This may explain misalignments between stoneholes F146 and F66, F230 and F299 and F107 and F105 and the wider spacing between F17 and F226. The plan and the data in Table 18 also suggest that diametrically opposed stoneholes were so frequent as to have been a deliberate rather than an accidental feature. There is the impression that the overall objective was to

create a structure which appeared circular rather than one which was truly circular.

The single outlying stone, in stonehole F215, was set radially to the circle in the SSE, without obvious relation to any detectable entrance (Fig. 7). The closest analogy is Castlerigg, Cumbria, where a radially set stone lies in a comparable relationship to the main entrance, which is marked by especially large stones within the circuit (Barnatt 1989, fig. 13).

The circle belongs to Barnatt's class of symmetrical circles (class E; 1989, 69, table 8), of which at least 24 examples are recorded. The majority are between 20 m and 45 m in diameter, but in Wessex larger circles occur. The Devil's Quoits, which lies midway between the Rollright Stones and other Cotswold monuments to the north and the stone circles of Wessex to the south (Lambrick 1988, fig. 69), can be placed in this group of larger Wessex circles with diameters ranging from 60 to 114 m, together with Stanton Drew Central, Somerset; the two inner circles at Avebury; and perhaps Coate in Wiltshire. Figures 37–38 serve to emphasise the exceptionally large size of the Stanton Harcourt circle.

Possible significance of orientation

The extent of the astronomical use and significance of stone circles remains a contentious issue (Barnatt 1989, 29–33), with a general acceptance only of low-precision astronomical alignments. Increasing weight is given to the relationship of ritual complexes to topographical features, orientation on which may incorporate low-precision astronomical alignments. Hodder (1986, 53) has noted that societies may give meaning to the world by reference to the position of 'the sun, moon, rivers, hills and wind'.

It is highly probable that some celestial alignments could be found within the Devil's Quoits (cf Burl 1979, 50–53). The structure of the circle-henge incorporates several axes: ESE–WNW for the stone circle and the entrances, NW–SE for the longer axis of the earthwork, SSE for the outlying stone. This last, however, has no obvious or significant astronomical alignment (Clive Ruggles pers. comm.).

It may be significant that three of the five large henge sites in the Upper Thames area, Westwell, Cutsdean (if it is indeed a henge) and the Devil's Quoits, share similar alignments, as does the far smaller monument at Corporation Farm, Abingdon (fig. 35). Harding emphasises the significance of topography in interpreting the grouping together of henges of different orientation in the Milfield Basin of Northumberland (1981, 130–1). His suggestion that at least one entrance of each henge was orientated to afford a vista of distant hills, sometimes

Figure 36 (opposite) Post settings: Stanton Harcourt XXII, 6, phase 2; the Devil's Quoits; Dorchester on Thames site 3 and the Springfield cursus, Essex

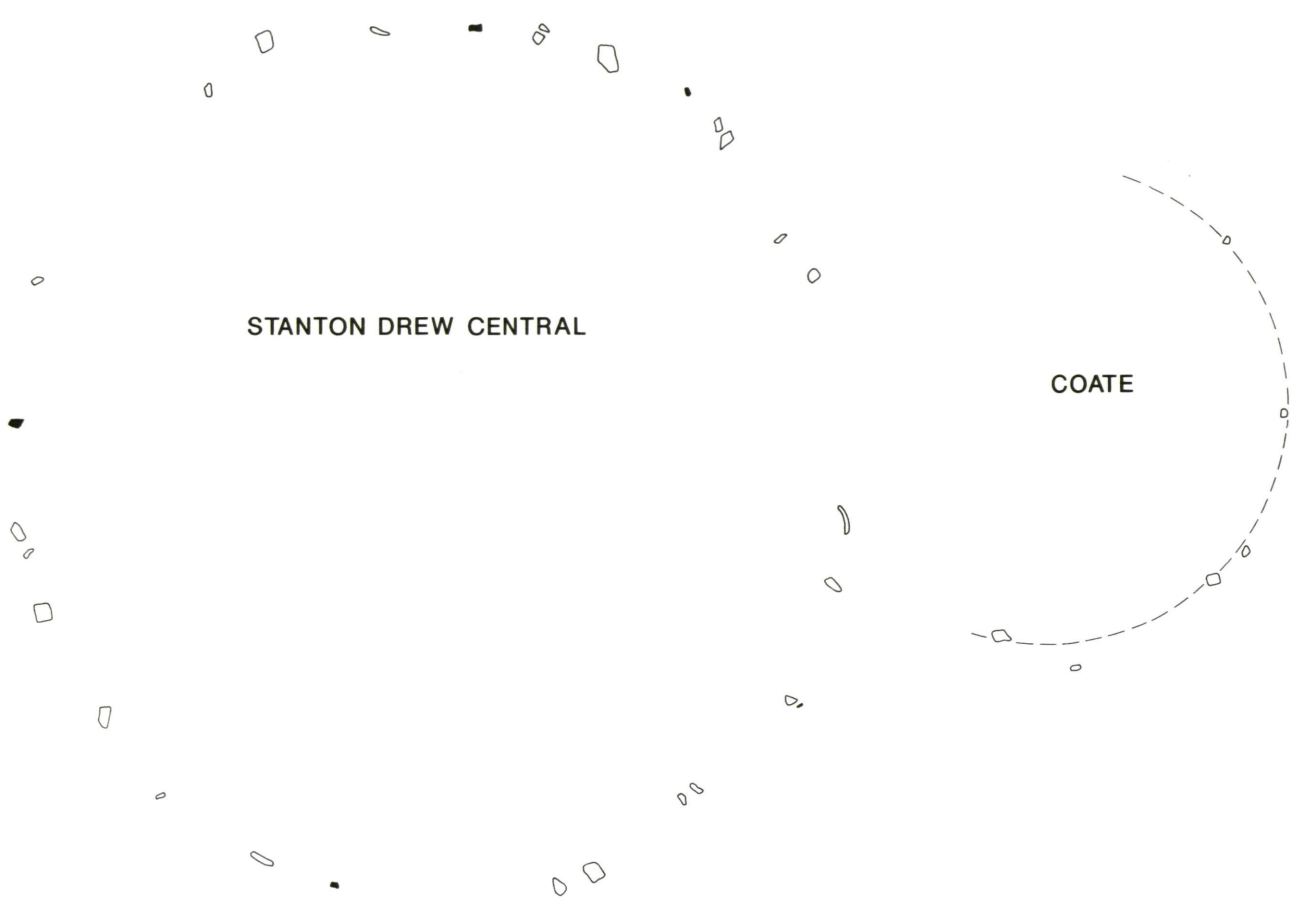
Devil's Quoits, Stanton Harcourt

Table 18. Estimated dimensions for the Devil's Quoits stone circle

Diametrically opposed stoneholes are placed opposite each other in the extreme left and right columns of the table, with the distance between them under 'Diameter' in the central column. k denotes a known stone height (Table 3). * denotes predicted stoneholes and measurements estimated from them

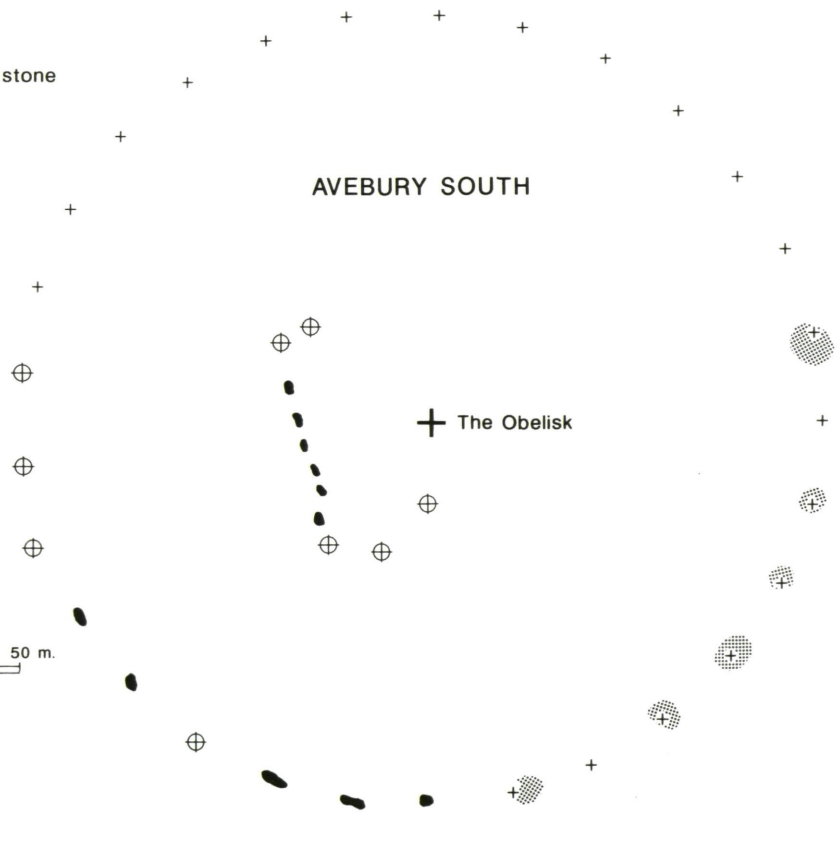
Stonehole	Estimated height (m)	Spacing (m)	Diameter (m)	Spacing (m)	Estimated height (m)	Stonehole
W entrance						E entrance
F28	k≥2.48 (St 3)		78.64		5.38	F159
		*6.77		6.12		
*	≥1.13	*6.77	*78.00	6.19	4.14	F158
F146	3.34		77.82		2.44	F154
		7.42		5.30		
F66	4.08		75.30		3.29	F157
		7.01		5.56		
F134	2.49		75.41		3.34	F230
		5.90		6.49		
F138	2.49		74.93		2.04	F229
		6.68		6.12		
F139	3.57		74.85		4.14	F227
		6.68		6.38		
F111	3.12		75.22		4.36	F220
		8.61		5.93		
F107	2.83		75.22		2.38	F207
		*6.17		5.45		
*	≥1.13	*6.17	*75.15	5.93	2.78	F203
		*6.17		5.93		
*	≥1.13		*76.52		k≥3.48 (St 1/Quoit A)	F202
		*6.17		6.12		
F48	2.15		77.60		1.76	F219
		*6.68		5.93		
*	≥1.13	*6.68	*75.67	8.16	1.81	F226
		*6.68		8.16		
F105	2.15		*75.48		5.10	F17
		*6.68		*5.93		
F19	1.81		*74.74		≥1.13	*
		*5.93		*5.93		
*	≥1.13		*75.56		≥1.13	*
		*5.93		*5.93		
F160	2.44		76.22		3.08	F42
		8.16		9.09		
F283	5.84		77.34		k≥2.34 (St 2)	F25
		9.83		8.53		
F159	5.38		78.64		≥2.48	F28
E entrance						W entrance

Figure 37 (opposite) Stone circles: Stanton Drew Central, Coate and Avebury South



KEY

- In situ stones and stoneholes
- ◊ Fallen stone
- + Estimated position of missing stone
- ⊕ Stonehole excavated
- ▨ Burning pit



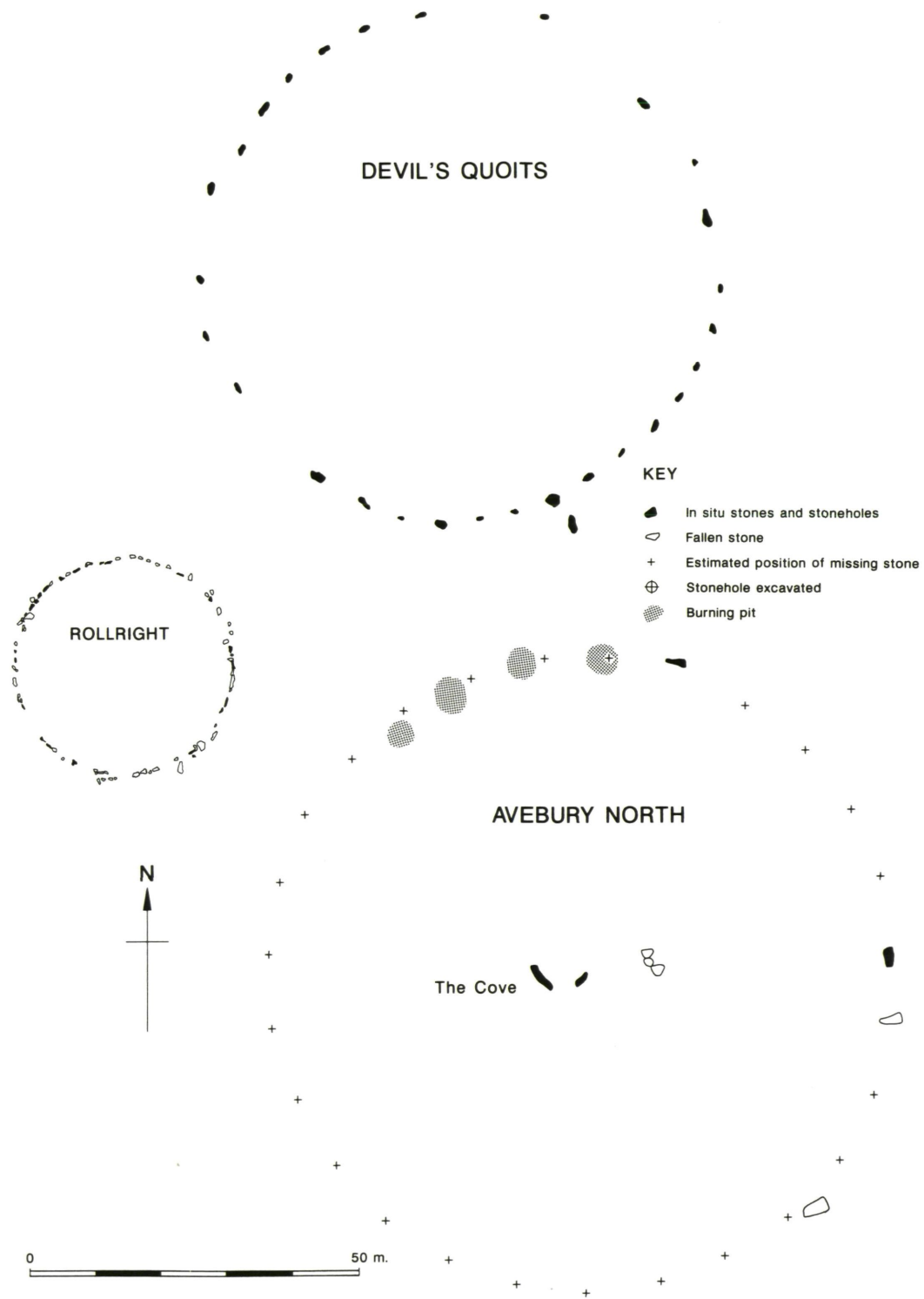


Figure 38 Stone circles: Devil's Quoits, Avebury North and the Rollright Stones

accompanied by a view of low-lying, settled land from the opposed entrance, and that entrances within a group were laid out to incorporate several different horizon views (Harding 1987, 36), may have wider application.

Monument and ceremonial

The functions often inferred for henge monuments to some extent perpetuate those attributed to causewayed enclosures, among them aggregation, ritual and exchange (Burgess 1980, 47; Burl 1979, 25). A ceremonial role is confirmed by the association of henge monuments with funerary structures and deposits and with timber and stone circles, as well as by the deposition of 'special' artefacts.

Many authors have echoed Atkinson's (1979, 169) view of the role of the earthworks enclosing henge monuments:

The symbolic as well as the physical function of the earthwork is surely that of a barrier, a boundary between the sacred and the secular, or the initiated and the profane . . . (the) function of the earthwork not merely to exclude but also to enclose.

It might be added that the earthwork could also serve to disguise the interior and actions taking place within it. Furthermore, the common arrangement of external bank and inner ditch, understood to be non-defensive or a deliberate inverse of the defensive function, has the effect of enclosing the ditch as well as the central area. This enclosure of henge ditches, evidence for their maintenance and episodic cleaning, and the nature of the deposits in them combine to indicate that the ditches filled a necessary and preconceived function in the use of the monuments, as well as providing material for the banks.

In contrast to some large henges, the Devil's Quoits produced only small quantities of artefacts and animal bone. It seems to have been exceptionally clean (Bradley 1984, 77-78). While this effect was undoubtedly heightened by the extent of machine excavation, it cannot be entirely attributed to it, since layers G-K, deposited during the construction and use of the monument, were hand-excavated in five of the eleven cuttings (Table 2). There is nonetheless some evidence for formal and selective deposition within the ditch terminals. This is most clearly seen in a pile of over 160 decortication flakes of flint brought from the chalk, twelve of them refitting, which were found in layer G in the N terminal of the W entrance (Brown, Ch. 3). These stand out not only from the predominantly gravel flint of most of the collection from the site but also from the small quantities of flint recovered from other ditch cuttings (Table 8).

The deposit recalls a similar find at Arbor Low, where a 'cache' of six flakes of good quality black flint was found at a depth of 0.82 m from the surface

placed on a ledge near one of the ditch terminals (St George Gray 1903, 469). The excavator concluded that

These flakes must have been placed by hand on the ledge and forgotten, eventually becoming buried in the silting, or perhaps purposely concealed; they could not have come by accident into the position in which they were found (1903, 470).

When layers G-K in the terminals are viewed as a whole there are several suggestions of repeated use, perhaps hinting at a concentration of ceremonial activity at the entrances. It is difficult to deduce a structural function for the two postpits in the S terminal of the E entrance. Fires were burnt in all four terminals, often at successive stages of silting. One of these, Hearth F150 in the N terminal of the E entrance, contained a human femur fragment and lay close to a group of animal bone. Hearth F41, in the S terminal of the W entrance, was covered by slabs of conglomerate themselves partly covered with redeposited ash. The one sherd of Beaker pottery came, like the knapping deposit, from layer G in the N terminal of the W entrance. In layers H-K animal bone and antler, including picks, were concentrated in the terminals.

The monumental scale of the site contrasts with this paucity of finds. The estimated workforce required for the construction of the earthwork (154 people over 15 days) and stone circle (60 people over 15 days after quarrying and transport) represents a considerable, although short-lived, input of labour (Whiteman, Appendix 1). The impetus for this input can only be conjectured. Monument size, expressing the consumption of labour and raw materials, has been seen as an index of population size, available resources, and complexity of social organisation by Renfrew (1973, 539-59) and Case (1982a, 1-7).

Bradley (1985, 1-21) adopts a different position, suggesting that monuments are more likely to be constructed not during periods of stable prosperity, but at times of social instability. They can be viewed as an attempt to enshrine an existing ideology, threats to which may be reflected in modification or rebuilding. A monument may act as a symbol of a particular shared world view, built on a massive scale in order to endure. Its rightful position in the landscape may be enhanced by the incorporation of structural alignments orientated on dominant topographical features or astronomical events. It would provide a theatre for the maintenance and reinforcement of an existing ideology through ritual.

Such an interpretation is attractive for British henge monuments because they can be seen as an assertion of the communal in the face of a growing emphasis on the identity and status of certain individuals, seen at an early stage in burials like that at Linch Hill Corner, Stanton Harcourt (site XXI, 1; Grimes 1960, 154-64), and in its developed form in the many Beaker burials from the immediate area (Ch. 5).