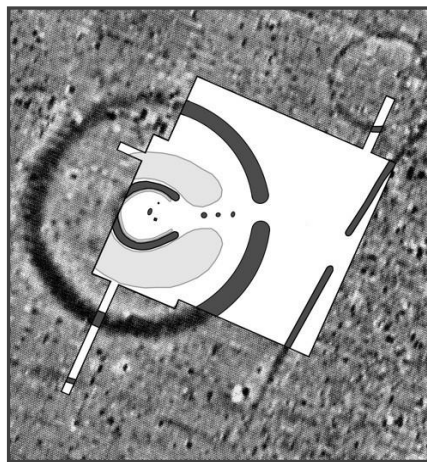




A HENGE AT NORTON, HERTFORDSHIRE

Discovery

In 1936, Major Allen, a pioneer of aerial photography in Britain, flew over a field to the east of the young Letchworth Garden City and photographed a large ring in the crop. It was long assumed to be the traces of a ditch that formed a quarry to make a Bronze Age burial mound, similar to hundreds of others along the line of the Icknield Way, only a few hundred metres to the south. A geophysical survey of the site in 1994, when it was proposed to develop a cemetery in the field, revealed the site to have two ditches with a “kerb” in between. The description did not quite describe the monument. The inner of the two ditches was horseshoe shaped while the outer ditch was circular, which suggested that something other than a burial mound once stood here. I suspected that this was something rather less common, an Early Bronze Age henge.



Plan of 1994 geophysical survey

In 2010, Norton Community Archaeology Group excavated a trench across the centre of the “ring ditch”, revealing deposits that all appeared to be of Late Neolithic date. Round barrows of this time are uncommon and the archaeology indicated that the chalk “kerb” was earlier than the inner ditch, which made no sense at all for a burial mound. A second trench was excavated in 2011 and a much larger trench, 40 m square, in 2012 and 2013. By the end of August 2013, the Community Group's investigations had produced some remarkable and unexpected results.

A Middle Neolithic henge

It became clear that the monument was a henge of unusually early date. Classic henges are oval and date from the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (c 2700-1800 BC). The Norton henge has a circular outer ditch and a bank inside it, associated entirely with Middle Neolithic material culture (c 3400-2700 BC). This early form is generally known as a ‘formative’ henge. Most examples so far identified are found in Wales and the West Country, which makes the Norton henge the first of this type to be identified in eastern England.

The outer ditch was around five metres wide, with nearly vertical sides and a flattish base, and around 55 m in diameter. The bank had been badly damaged by ploughing in recent centuries, surviving in places to a depth of no more than a centimetre or two. In the centre, much of the soil was worn away, leaving patches of exposed chalk bedrock. In the middle of the entrance, which faces due east towards the springs of the River Ivel, stood a line of three pits deliberately backfilled with a chalk rubble and clay to prevent them from filling with water after rain. White quartz pebbles seem to have been deliberately brought on to the site, perhaps for their sparking qualities in moonlight. Construction of the henge perhaps began before c 3000 BC.

A second phase of use began during the Middle to Late Neolithic, when the chalk bank opposite the entrance was cut back, creating an oval rather than circular interior. At the same time a horseshoe-shaped ditch was dug inside it and the interior of the henge and its entrance paved with dumped chalk. The fills of the inner ditch contained both Peterborough Ware and Grooved Ware, indicating that it began to silt up after around 2800 BC.

Later still, a deposit formed on top of the 'paving', with areas of in situ burning and sherds of Beaker pottery and Collared Urn. A large cremation pit dug in the precise centre of the henge contained the cremated remains of a newborn baby, a child and at least one adult. A couple of sherds of Beaker pottery suggest a date after 2500 BC. Nearby, a smaller cremation pit contained the remains of another child. Eventually, a low chalk bank, only about 30 cm high, was constructed on the inner edge of the ditch, with posts in the top of it, while another post was set up close to the centre of the henge. The site of the former cremation pit was covered with a roughly square rammed chalk platform. The final activity in this phase appears to have been the deposition of a complete miniature Collared Urn in its own pit, not accompanying a human burial. After this, which perhaps took place around 2200 BC, the site seems to have been abandoned until the Roman period.

A surprising discovery

Further excavation in 2013 revealed a short stretch of foundation trench filled with the chalk rubble. It turned out to be part of a horseshoe shaped structure, with upright plank walling, open to the south-east. This house must be earlier than the henge, so it dates to before about 3000 BC. Cleaning elsewhere revealed parts of two other structures, both also plank built.

The site in its landscape

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Norton henge is that we know a lot about contemporary activity in its vicinity. A few hundred metres to the south-west of the henge is Blackhorse Road where Neolithic and later occupation was identified beside the Icknield Way in



The miniature collared urn
excavated in 2012

the 1960s. Five shafts are thought to have been flint mines, backfilled with a mixture of pottery up to a thousand years old with a small dog buried in the base of each. Further to the south, a hengiform monument was discovered in 1999, with the crouched burial of an adolescent at its centre.

East of the henge and leading to the Ivel Springs, a cursus was identified in 1963. Further to the east, a flint working floor associated with a post-built structure was identified at Baldock in 1989. Another Neolithic burial, this time in a square enclosure with several groups of pits (including one containing a complete aurochs horn core) were found during the construction of the A505 bypass to the east of Baldock in 2003.

This concentration of Middle and Late Neolithic sites is unusual in Hertfordshire. I have started to refer to the area as “The Baldock Bowl”, as it is a distinctive landscape feature with a large number of monuments from the Neolithic through to the Roman period. Unlike more favoured parts of Britain, such as Salisbury Plain, where surviving earthwork monuments have long drawn the attention of antiquaries and archaeologists, the Baldock Bowl has been under the plough for the past two millennia. As a result, the prehistoric landscapes are largely obliterated and it is only through chance discovery and targeted research that we are beginning to understand its richness and complexity.

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The miniature collared urn
excavated in 2012