

Field Work at Chastleton

By DON BENSON and PETER FASHAM

SUMMARY. *This paper records results of recent field work on a group of prehistoric sites south east of Chastleton village and includes an account of a rescue excavation on the site of a long mound which proved to be of natural origin.*

INTRODUCTION

THE limestone ridge running roughly north-eastwards from Adlestrop to Swerford has not been the subject of much archaeological investigation in recent years. Though the central part of the ridge contains the site of the famous Rollright Stones, other parts are less well known. Yet the south-western end, around Chastleton Hill, has on it a number of interesting sites. Little new information has come from this area since Crawford's field work in the 1920s and 30s. This is perhaps all the more surprising in view of the sites Crawford recorded. On the west side of Chastleton Hill in particular, was a group of sites including a possible long barrow, round barrows and stone circles (see FIG. 1). These sites are dealt with in detail below.

SITE F (P.R.N. 5377).¹ SP 266286

During a field investigation by Don Benson in December 1971 it was evident that a large number of stones had been removed from the field containing sites E and F. Some of these stones had been dumped in the hedge on the north east side of the field, others on site E itself. There were also some other large stones freshly disturbed, lying on the surface over various parts of the ploughed field. Only one of these stones appeared to be of any further interest. This was some 90 cm. long, 50 cm. wide and 20 cm. thick. It appeared to have been detached from a slab still largely buried but projecting at a shallow oblique angle from the plough soil. The northern end of the broken section rested on a vertical stone some 5 cm. thick at the top. These features lay at the south-eastern end of a slight ridge running across and slightly up the gentle slope of the field. The ridge was accompanied by a considerable surface stone scatter extending to the north-west. The ridge seemed to terminate at the thick hedge within which were two larger stones deeply embedded. One of these was recumbent, measuring 1.6 m. x 1.0 m. and 30 cm. thick. The other appeared to be a vertical stone whose top was projecting just above the surface. These latter stones lay on the County boundary. Superficial examination of the ploughed field in this area revealed several flints, mostly indeterminate. In short, the features described had every appearance of a ploughed down long barrow with a main terminal chamber in the hedge and a further chamber or 'cist' at its narrow end in the ploughed

¹ P.R.N. refers to the Primary Record Number allocated to the site in the Sites and Monuments Record at the City and County Museum.

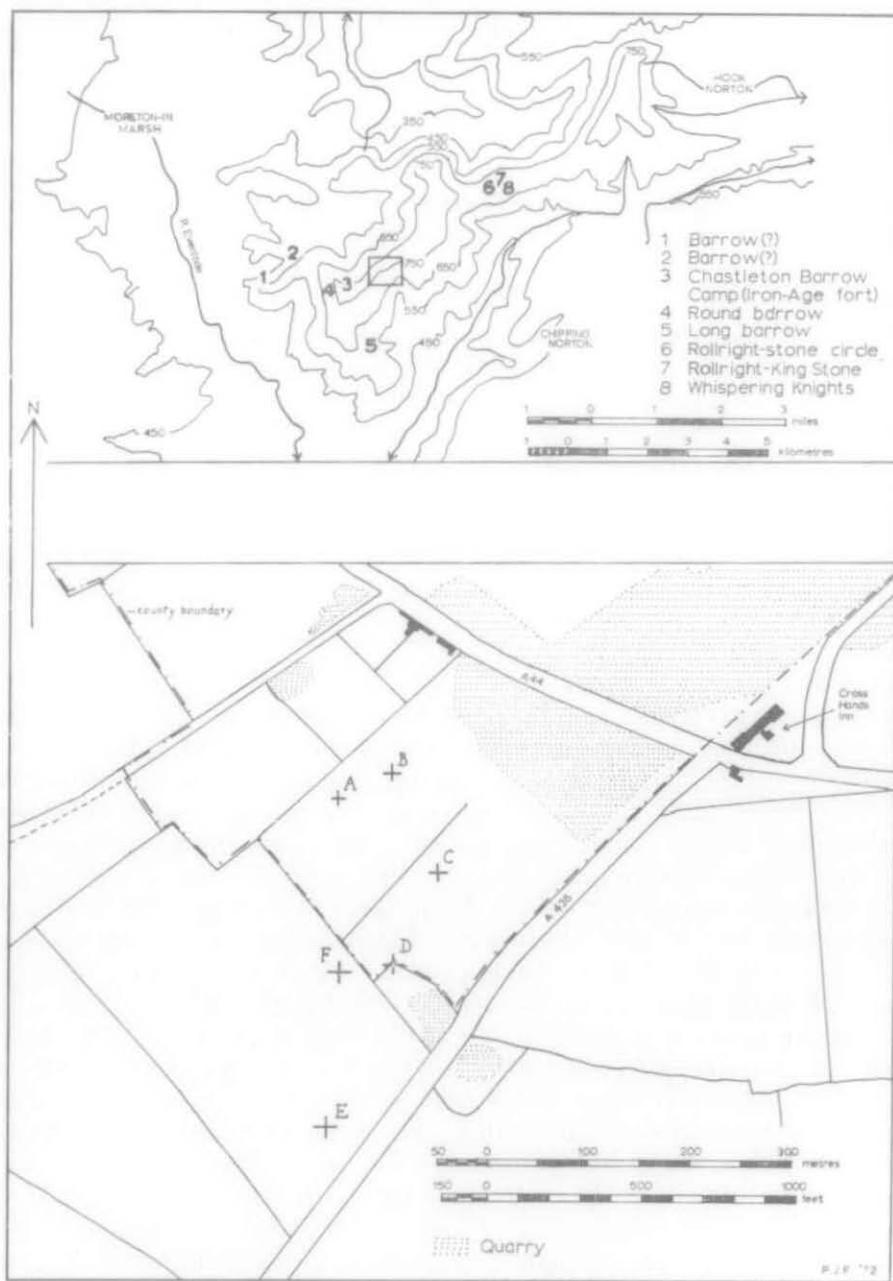


FIG. 1

Upper : Prehistoric Sites on the Adlestrop-Swerford Ridge.

Lower : Sites on West Side of Chastleton Hill.

Based on Ordnance Survey maps by permission of the Controller, H.M. Stationery Office. Crown Copyright reserved.

field. The site was not one recorded by Crawford. A rescue excavation was organized in order to excavate the 'cist' and determine the extent and nature of the site. This work was supervised by Peter Fasham, assisted by Nicholas Hawley and Richard Chambers.² A financial grant was made available by the Department of Environment.

SITE F : THE EXCAVATION

A 5-metre square was opened around the 'cist' and two trenches were opened to the north-west and south-east, 2 m. × 19 m. and 2 m. × 20 m. respectively in order to ascertain the limits of any mound. In the event these excavations established that the suspected long barrow was an entirely natural feature.

Within the 5-metre square, the first surprising feature was the shallow nature of the 'topsoil' (FIG. 2). This overlay, in places, some large slabs of oolitic limestone (Chipping Norton Limestone) tilting at an angle of 25° to the south-east. Some of the larger slabs measured 1·20 m. × 80 cm. and varied in thickness upwards from 26 cm. The discrete nature of these slabs was also due to their juxtaposition with less solid limestone and in other areas with a yellowish, greenish clay, the latter probably a residual weathering deposit. In other areas within the 5-metre square, small knots of rather rounded fragments of limestone in a clayey matrix suggested periglacial activity. In the northern trench, some solid limestone occurred at depths of between 15–20 cm. and at irregular intervals. Between, were areas of soil up to 50 cm. in depth, with occasional deeper 'troughs' up to 1·50 m. in depth and 1·50 m. in width, of reddish brown loamy clay with greenish clay and limestone fragments at the base. A similar pattern was observed in the southern trench.

The suspected 'cist' proved to be a shallow cavity caused by the removal, presumably following ploughing, of a slab of solid limestone; the suspected orthostat on the north-western side, the product of solution along two closely parallel joints; the suspected capstone, a broken slab tilted back over the upright weathered limestone block (PL. I).

Not a single artifact was found during the excavation and although the work turned out to be more of a geological investigation than an archaeological one, the results are not without interest to archaeology.

Although during the post-glacial prehistoric period this limestone is likely to have been covered with a somewhat deeper soil than at present, stone slabs of this sort would have provided a relatively easily obtainable source of material for use in the construction of chambers or cists for Neolithic or Bronze Age tombs or for stone features of other religious monuments. Little effort would have been required to prise them out of the ground and they would have had the advantage of occurring in shapes and sizes which would require no further dressing.

The second point is that this experience is a warning against inferring the

² The help of pupils of Kingham Hill School and members of Moreton-in-the-Marsh Fire Service Training College is gratefully acknowledged.

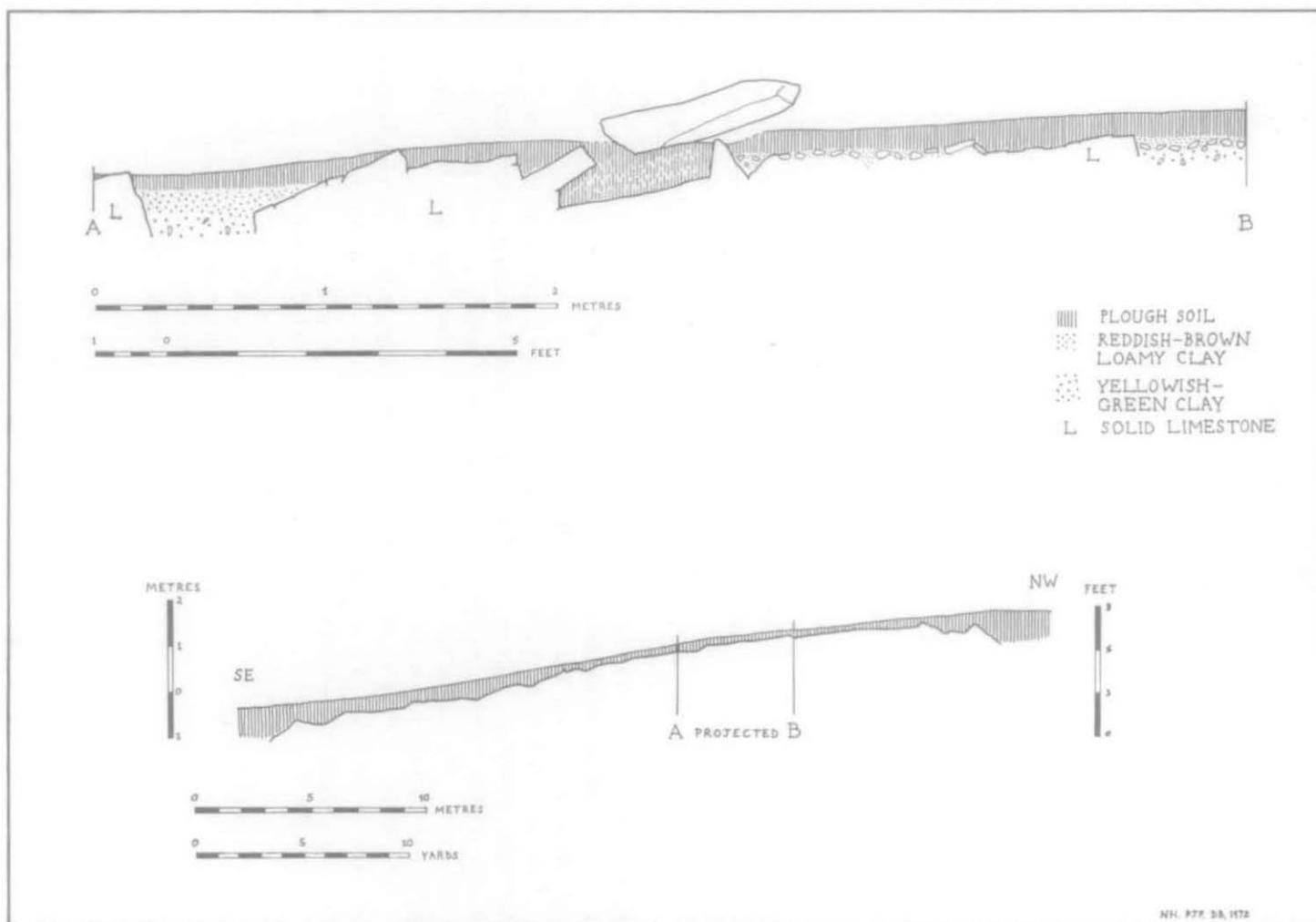


FIG. 2
Site F, Sections across Suspected Cist and Limestone Ridge.

existence of some prehistoric structure from the presence of large stone blocks, even when combined with apparently definite concentrations of stone. But since in areas where such stone blocks are most easily obtained, they may thus have been extensively utilized in the construction of nearby monuments now ploughed down, the problems of field interpretation are increased rather than decreased. A further cause for confusion is likely to result from the gradual ploughing down and round, together with the deliberate destruction, of outcrops of rock which 50 years ago were in land under permanent pasture. With these points in mind we may discuss the other sites in the immediate vicinity.

SITE A/B (P.R.N. 5040) SP 266288

A note, probably by Crawford, in the margin of the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division's six-inch record sheet SP 22 NE, states 'Whether the Stone A is the remains of (1) a long barrow, (2) of a round barrow and surrounding circle, (3) of a stone circle. I incline to (1) because of the low ridge connecting it with B, but the number of stones, 26, in the hedge makes (3) not impossible'. There is now no trace of A and B or the other 26 mentioned. Nor can any long ridge be distinguished. Local information suggests that a large stone too heavy to remove from the field, was deliberately buried in the spring of either 1965 or 1966.

SITE C (P.R.N. 5041) SP 26702875

In 1922 Crawford recorded a prostrate stone here, 6 ft. 7 in. long, 2 ft. 3 in. wide in the middle and 2 ft. thick near the base, with many loose stones and nettles growing round it. There appeared to be a small round tumulus 50 paces to the north-east.³ No trace of either of these features remains and it is likely they belonged to the same natural ridge of limestone as site F.

SITE D (P.R.N. 2626) SP 26662867 (FIG. 3)

This site lies in the north-east corner of a wood on the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire boundary. Crawford in 1930 recorded it as a 'Round ? Cairn. 5 uprights in corner in thicket'.⁴ A survey was carried out by the writers and Mr. T. K. Green. One large upright and one adjacent inclined stone survive, together with some smaller slabs. The upright stone on the west side is 1·54 metres long, 72 cm. thick and stands 94 cm. above the existing ground surface. This block of limestone must weigh at least 15 cwt. (about 680 kg.). The eastern inclined stone measures about 1 metre long, about 1 metre wide and is at least 50 cm. thick. On the south (Oxfordshire) side a shallow depression indicates a robbed area and there can be no doubt that the site is that of a barrow. Superficial examination of the humus within the central area produced two small fragments of human skull, two fragments of long bones, possibly human, three struck flints,

³ O. G. S. Crawford, *The Long Barrows of the Cotswolds* (1925), 76.

⁴ O.S. Archaeology Division Record Card No. SP 22 NE 1.

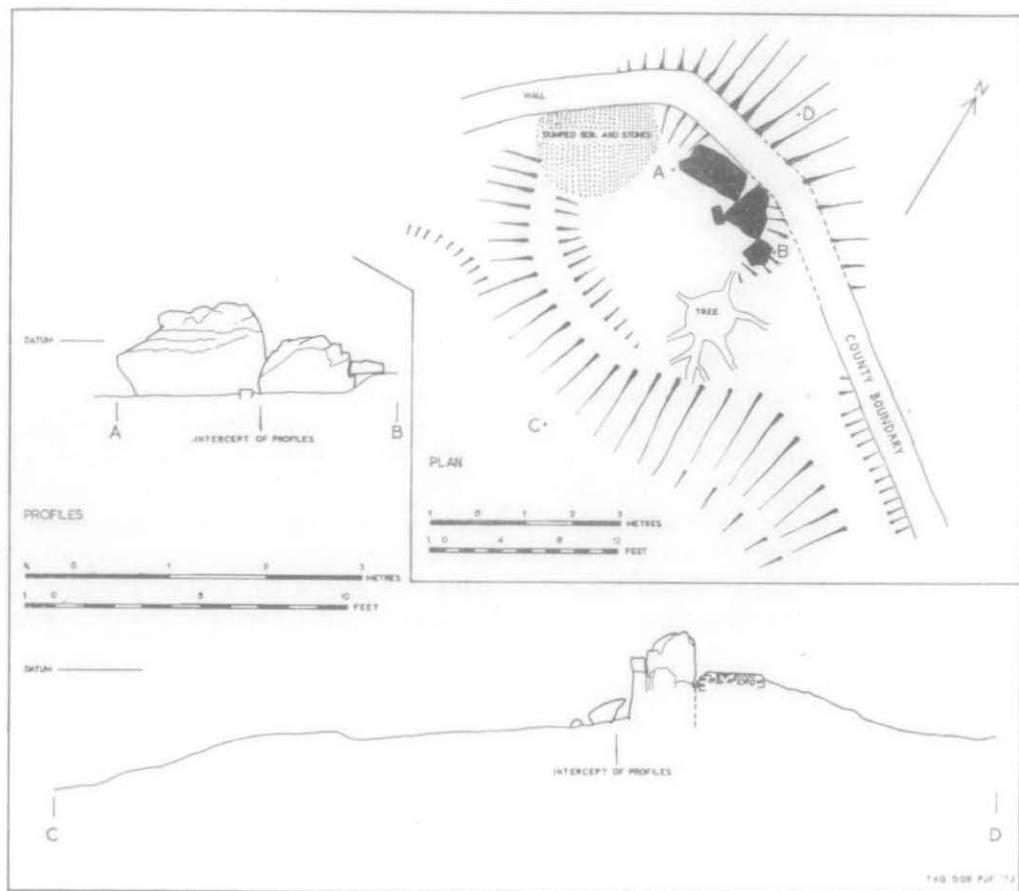


FIG. 3
Site D, Plan and Profiles.

including one retouched flake and two fragments of pottery too tiny for identification. More of the original barrow mound may survive on the northern side where the slope down to the surface of the ploughed field is unlikely to be accounted for solely by accumulated tumble from the ruinous enclosure wall. To the south-east and to a lesser extent to the north-west, there is a low bank following the line of the enclosure wall and separated from it by about half a metre. On the south-east side this extends for a distance of some 24 metres. It is unlikely to belong to the barrow and is probably the remains of an earlier boundary wall or bank along the county boundary. The barrow seems thus likely to have been round rather than long. The size of the surviving chamber stones is unusual. The existing plan is also odd and the inclined, southerly stone has probably been displaced. At present the site is unfortunately becoming a focal point for dumping of stone removed from the adjacent field.

SITE E (P.R.N. 1470) SP 26602850 (FIG. 4)

This site was first noted by Sir Arthur Evans⁵ and rediscovered by Crawford in 1922.⁶ At the time Crawford visited the site, its overgrown nature prohibited accurate planning, but three or four apparently complete rings consisting of large standing, inclined and prostrate stones could be distinguished with an overall outer diameter of about 70 feet. The circles appeared to be sited on a long mound orientated S.W. to N.E., 'at least 65 paces' long and resembling a long barrow. The site was described by Crawford as a 'barrow circle', entitled by him the 'Cornwell Circle' and listed as being in Cornwell parish, though in fact it lies in the parish of Chastleton. In the hope of determining the nature of the site a survey was carried out in March 1972, principally by T. K. Green.

The site covers an unploughed area of some 700 sq. metres. The perimeter is much overgrown with brambles, as it was 50 years ago. The site occupies a relatively level area, with a scarp on the south-east side, the whole having the appearance of a platform against the overall south-easterly slope of the ploughed field. In the central area are traces of a circular enclosure 14 metres in diameter, defined by a slight earthen bank about 10 cm. high. This bank can, however, be traced for most of the circle's circumference except on the north side where the surface is uneven and pitted by animal burrows. On the west side a slight ditch can be made out.

The circle contains two standing pines and one ash tree and several old stumps can be traced with difficulty. The roots of the more northerly of the pines have spread out over a large piece of limestone, but the extent and nature of this piece could not be ascertained. The surface of another piece of limestone can be seen next to an old stump within the western side of the enclosure, but whether this is a discrete slab or part of a natural outcrop is impossible to say. Two small and apparently vertical slabs are embedded in the outer part of the enclosure bank on the western side. There are no other stones associated with the enclosure and since the old stumps are exclusively confined within it, the bank itself is likely to be of the same date as the original plantation.

Over the rest of the site, except at the southern end, there is now no trace of any upright or inclined stones, nor are there sufficient recumbent stones to postulate even one original circle. Crawford was not able to record the number of standing stones, but he gave heights for some, ranging from 1 foot 6 inches to 3 feet. But there must be some doubt that there were ever any upright or any deliberately *erected* stones in view of Crawford's statement that 'many of them are of such a character that it is not easy to say whether they are standing or fallen'.

Over most of the site outside the circular enclosure there are no embedded stones to be seen and of the stones lying on the surface, most are the result of recent dumping. Two large stones lying outside the western side of the enclosure, however, seem to have been there for a longer period. The more westerly one of the two has the remains of a drilled hole in one side, presumably for blasting.

⁵ Sir A. Evans, *Folklore*, VI (1895), 14.

⁶ Crawford, op. cit., 175-6.

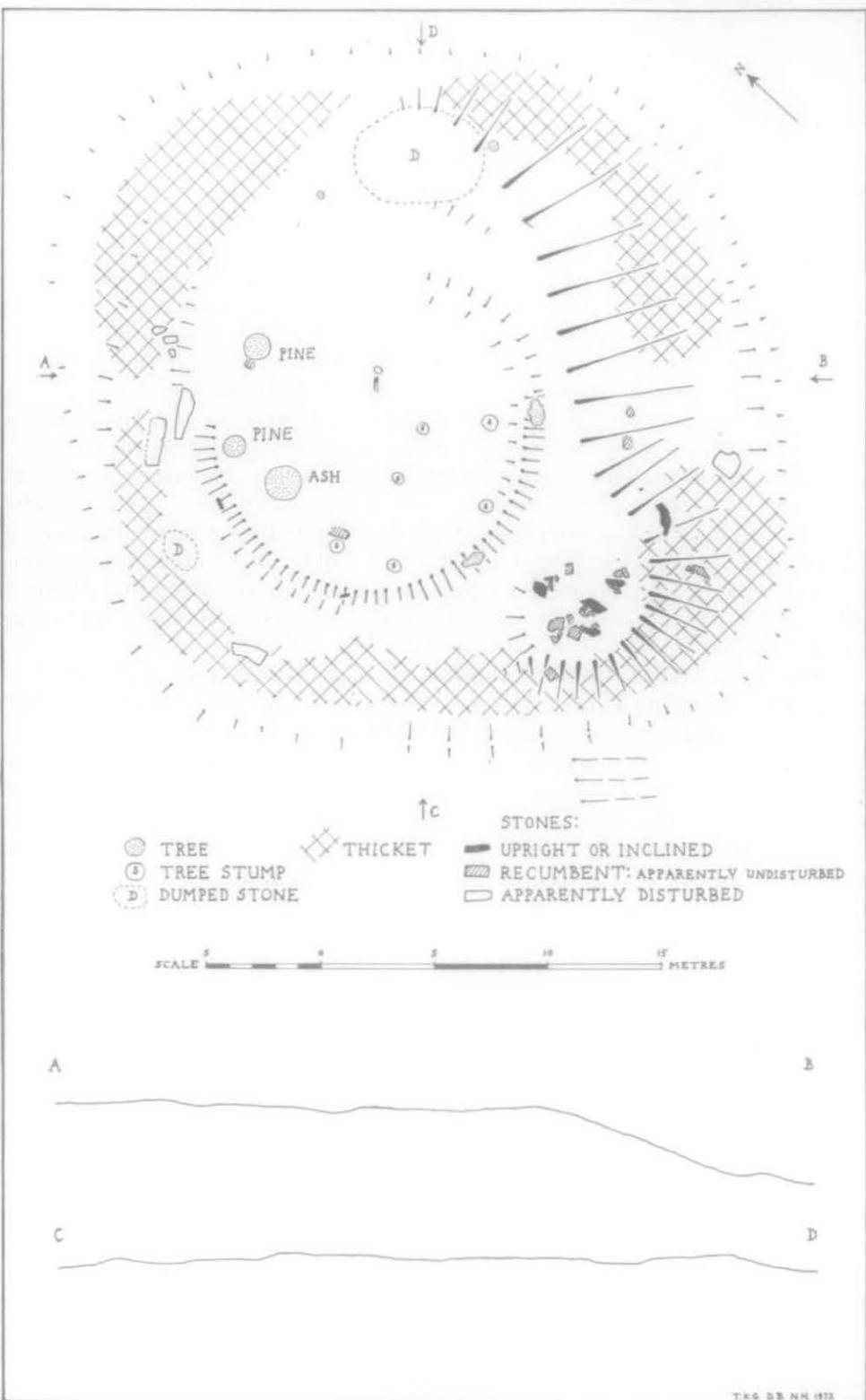


FIG. 4
Site E, Plan and Profiles.

Only at the extreme southern end of the site and at its highest point, are there any features which may belong to an earlier archaeological monument. The external scarp is steepest here and partly surrounds a number of apparently deeply embedded stones. Of those apparently upright or inclined stones marked on the plan, not enough of any of them project sufficiently above the surface to determine whether they are truly upright and discrete. Nor does any meaningful pattern emerge in plan.

The scarp itself, although much reduced, extends for some 30 metres west of the thicket and is accompanied by surface concentrations of stone down the slope, rather than on its crest. In view of the features uncovered on site F higher up the same field, this scarp is most likely to mark a buried limestone ridge. The steep and rather rounded appearance of the area of embedded stones may be due to ploughing across the scarp around the perimeter of the stones.

Allowing for the possibility that the whole site may originally have been a megalithic monument which served as a convenient site for a plantation (as at the nearby Rollright stone circle) there is at any rate no existing evidence to indicate that it was ever a stone circle and the long barrow hinted at by Crawford is almost certainly a natural scarp. The features at the southern end may also be largely natural in origin. This part of the site has something of the appearance of a round barrow, but there would seem to be too many large stones for such a monument. Only excavation could settle the matter.

The Society acknowledges with gratitude a publication grant from the Department of the Environment for this article.

PLATE I



CHASTLETON, OXON. Part of excavated area showing exposed subsoil and supposed 'cist'.
Photo : N. Hawley

OXONIENSIA, VOL. XXXVII (1972)

FIELD WORK AT CHASTLETON