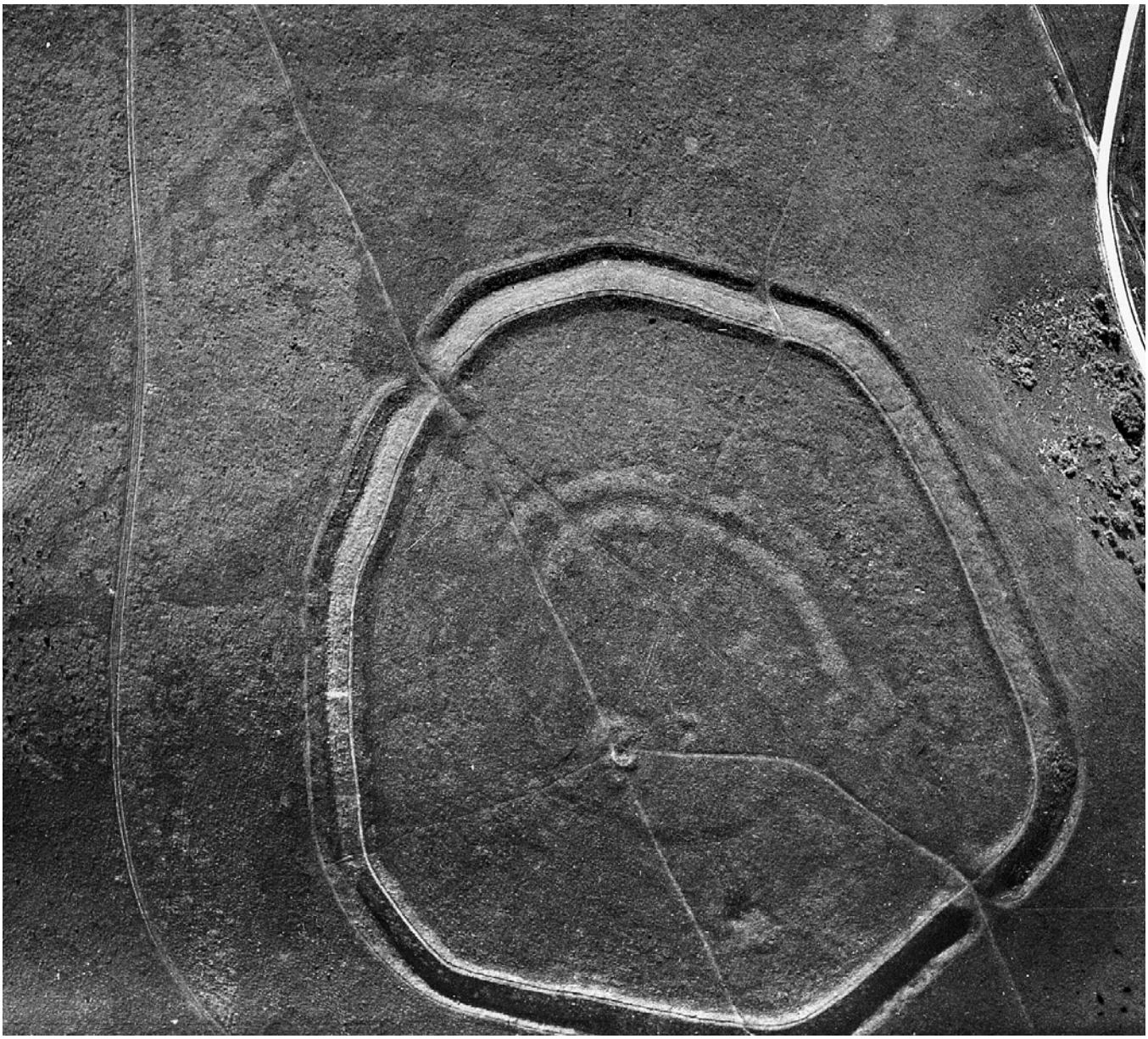
Historic England

# Causewayed Enclosures

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to causewayed enclosures and describes their form and common plan. A brief chronology is contained within the text. A summary of the academic interest in the asset type is also included which outlines the research which has been undertaken into causewayed enclosures. Relatively few examples have been extensively excavated using modern techniques, so much remains unknown. Causewayed enclosures were associated with two other types of early Neolithic monument: long barrows and cursuses, and this is summarised in this document. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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**Front cover**
Trundle West Sussex, as photographed in 1928. An Iron Age hillfort surrounds and partly overlies a larger causewayed enclosure with perhaps as many as five circuits.

# Introduction

Causewayed enclosures, also known as 'causewayed camps' or 'interrupted-ditch enclosures', are of great importance in European and British prehistory. They represent the earliest known examples of the enclosure of open space. They date to the early Neolithic (4000 BC – 3300 BC). Recent re-dating work suggests that the earliest enclosures were constructed around 3650 BC, slightly later than the earliest mining of flint but contemporary with the introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the manufacture of pottery, the quarrying of stone for the production of axes, and the construction of longhouses and ceremonial or ritual monuments including cursus monuments and long barrows.

Recent research has shown that many causewayed enclosures in the British Isles were constructed within a relatively short period and most scholars now believe that the concept must have originated in mainland Europe and spread quickly through France, Germany, Scandinavia and the British Isles. Causewayed enclosures in Kent seem to be earlier than those in Essex, but those in Ireland are earlier still, suggesting the rapid transmission of ideas by sea.

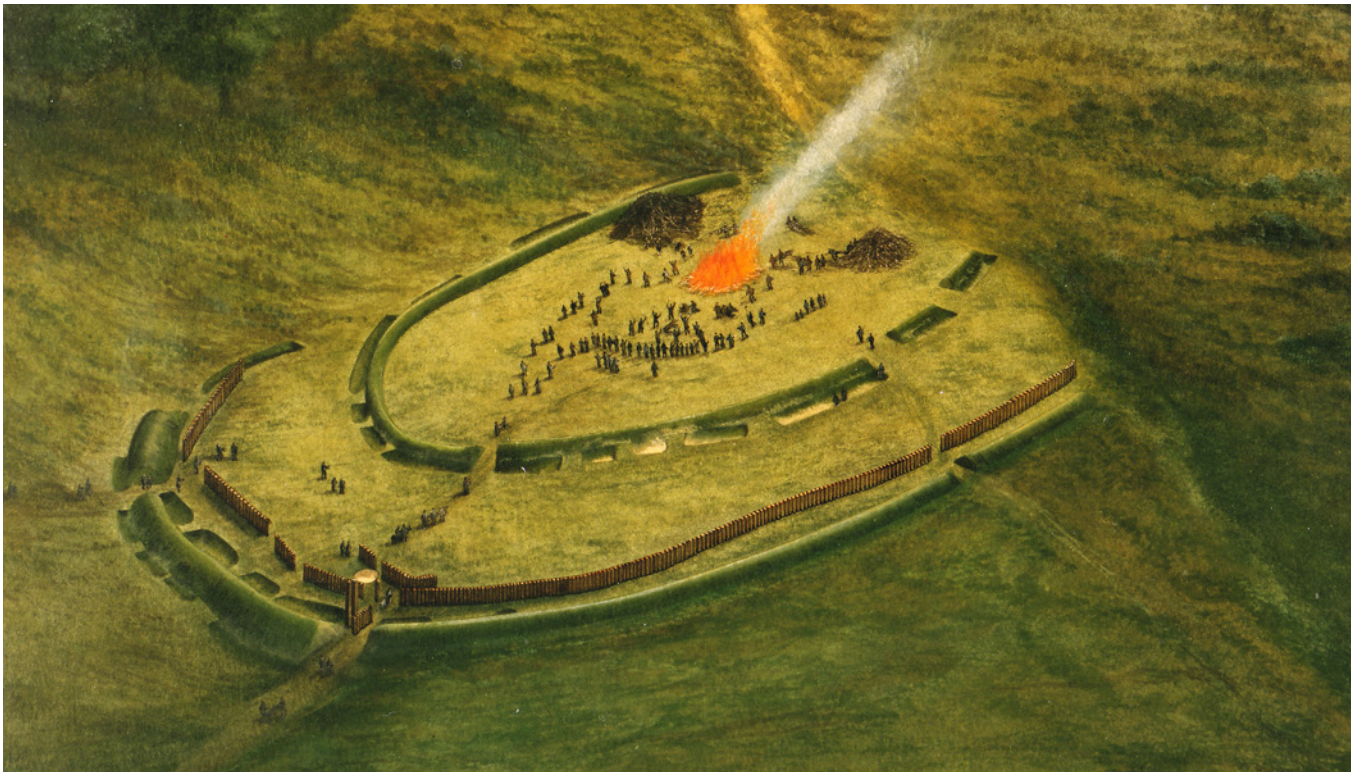


**Figure 1**
Reconstruction based on the excavated evidence from the causewayed enclosure at Orsett, Essex.

The construction of an artificial boundary around an area, creating a distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, private and public, human and wild, and perhaps sacred and profane, was to prove a profound social and architectural development. Indeed, some scholars believe that the act of enclosure was the primary function of the monument, the process of construction more important than the activities that took place in the interior.

Archaeologists have named this type of monument based on the distinctive form of the earthworks defining the perimeter: the ditch, and to a lesser extent the bank, were discontinuous, comprising short stretches of varying length separated by causeways of intact ground (Figure 1). They are not the only form of Neolithic enclosure: a few with continuous earthworks have proved to be of similar date.

Over 80 causewayed enclosures are now known in the British Isles and more examples certainly await discovery, but they will undoubtedly remain a rare type of monument. The majority of those currently known are found in England south of the River Trent, but a few outliers have been identified in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and Cumbria (Figure 2). Curiously, eastern Yorkshire, much of which has been well-studied through aerial photography and is known to possess a wealth of early Neolithic remains, has not yet produced a single example of a classic causewayed enclosure. At Carn Brea in Cornwall and other areas where hard rocks dominate the uplands, discontinuous drystone walls without ditches (called ‘tor enclosures’) may have performed a similar purpose to the causewayed perimeters elsewhere.

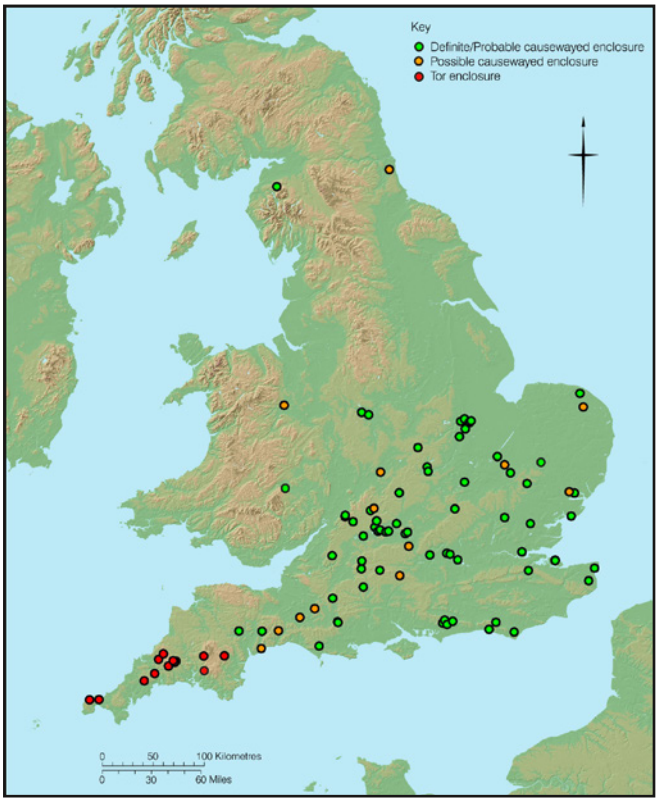



Figure 2
Distribution of causewayed enclosures in England: a few more exist elsewhere in the British Isles and new examples still occasionally come to light.

# 1 Description

Most causewayed enclosures are oval in plan, with some sufficiently close to a circle to suggest that the builders were aiming for this basic shape. Most comprise a single circuit of discontinuous bank and ditch (Figure 3). Some have two or three concentric circuits; in many cases, it remains uncertain whether all were created or used at the same time. Where double lines of ditch are closely spaced and run precisely parallel to each other, these may have provided material for a central bank, the two ditch circuits thus forming a single boundary. Most circuits are between 0.4ha and 3ha in internal area, but the largest is around 10ha. In some cases, perimeters incorporate natural barriers such as rivers and steep slopes, while a few (often called cross-ridge dykes) span the necks of spurs and promontories.

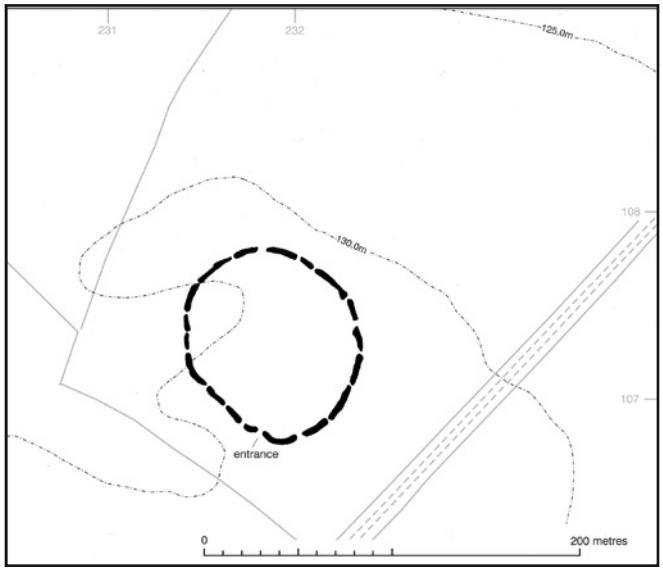



Figure 3
The causewayed enclosure at Burford, Oxfordshire, whose ditch has been plotted from aerial photography, exemplifies this form of monument at its simplest.

Individual ditch segments are generally up to 20m long, but the longest are much longer, while the shortest could be described as pits. Analysis of the few examples where the bank survives as an earthwork show that gaps in the bank were less frequent than those in the ditch and did not always line up precisely with those in the ditch. Early theories that every causeway represented an entrance have therefore been revised. Indeed, careful analysis of plans shows that many enclosures had one causeway picked out by a slight in-turn in the flanking ditch segments, suggesting it to be the main, or only, entrance. Study of the few examples that survive as earthworks suggests that the flanking bank segments may also have been larger.

Excavation has shown that the banks were not necessarily simple dumps of material cast up from the ditch. Lines of post-holes and stake-holes have been recognised, suggesting that timber revetments were sometimes built to give the bank an impressive façade. Free-standing palisades, also discontinuous, formed parts of some perimeters. These constructional elements were combined differently at different sites and the forms of many individual enclosures were modified episodically. The ditch segments in particular were repeatedly changed, through cleaning, recutting and partial in-filling; special deposits, including feasting debris, stone axes and human skulls, were sometimes carefully placed in the ditch, apparently to commemorate the event.

Most causewayed enclosures on higher ground are centred just off summits so that they have a distinct orientation, perhaps signifying a link with a particular area of lower-lying land. Some occupy striking landforms (Figure 4), while the so-called ‘tor enclosures’ of the south-west have been named because most surround or incorporate these prominent landmarks. Many of the examples

known through aerial photography are in lower-lying locations, frequently close to rivers or streams. Here too, enclosures were often sited on sloping ground, so that in some cases, parts of the circuit were seasonally flooded.

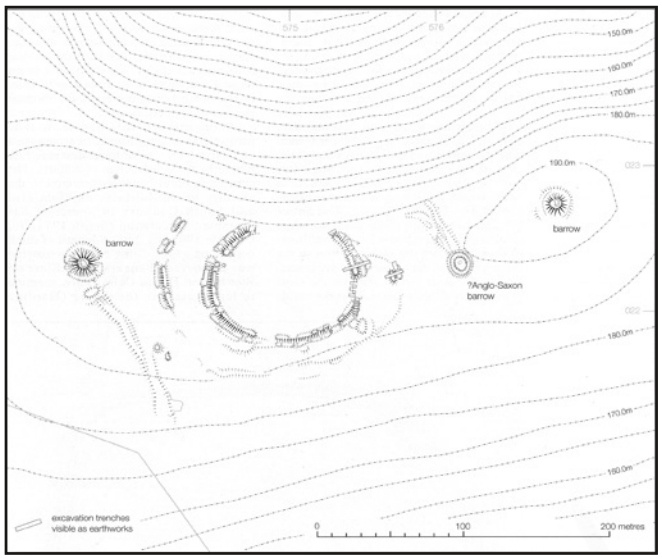



Figure 4
The well-preserved causewayed enclosure on Combe Hill, East Sussex, seems to have been sited at the head of the valley, a dramatic topographic feature.

Causewayed enclosures usually contain a sparse scatter of pits and post-holes. They were probably not permanently occupied (Figure 5). Modern investigations have supported early interpretations which compared them to fairgrounds: places where dispersed social groups could gather episodically on neutral ground to reaffirm their sense of community through a range of activities including feasting, crafts, and the performance of rituals associated with death. On occasion, certain enclosures were briefly used for defence (Figure 6). But not all enclosures hosted the same activities and sometimes the evidence is difficult to interpret.

Some experts see the creation of the monument as an end in its own right, the construction project itself serving to give the builders a common focus. This may explain why some enclosures seem to have been deliberately demolished – the banks being pushed back into the ditches – immediately after they were built.

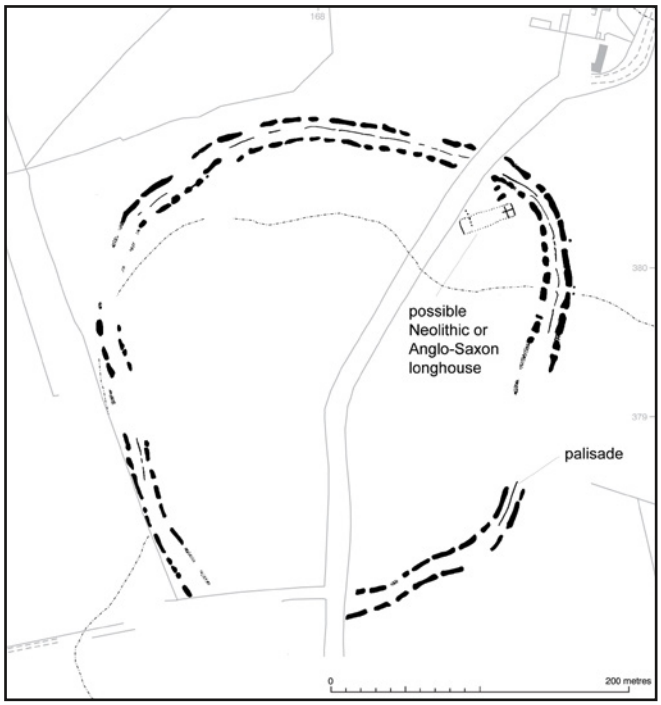



Figure 5
Permanent settlement does not seem to have been characteristic of causewayed enclosures; the possible Neolithic longhouse at Freston, Suffolk, is unique.

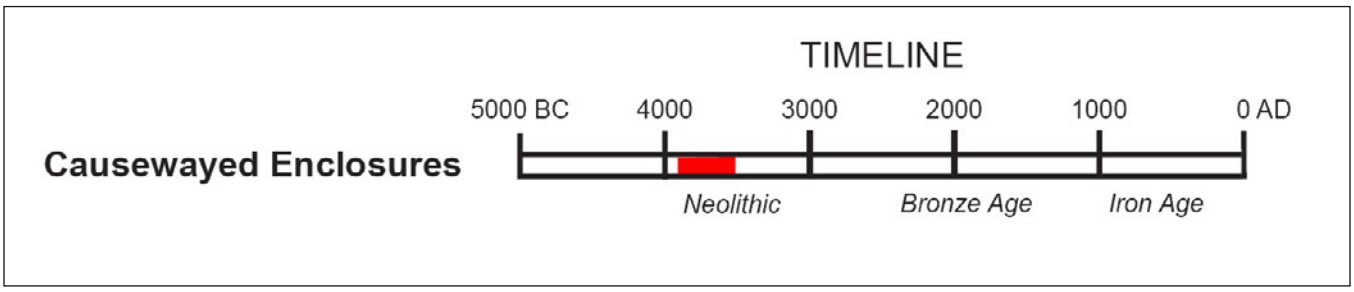

Figure 6
The distribution of flint arrowheads excavated outside the entrance to the causewayed enclosure on Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire, clearly testifies to an attack.

# 2 Chronology

In a few cases where multiple circuits are not concentric, a relative sequence of development – though not the absolute dates – can be inferred from the eventual plan. Where the circuits are concentric, it is only possible to prove whether they were contemporary with each other, or whether they represent successive enlargements or reductions in the original area, through excavation and radio-carbon dating.

The enclosure at Windmill Hill, near Avebury in Wiltshire, which has been extensively excavated, has three widely-spaced circuits which were very probably constructed over a period of between 5 and 80 years in sequence from inner to outer. The middle ditch was probably later than the inner and outer circuits. They were eventually used together to define three separate, concentric spaces where different kinds of activity took place. Here, and elsewhere, the outermost circuit was a considerably bigger earthwork, suggesting a change in the function of the enclosure.

Sophisticated mathematical calibration of radiocarbon dates available from excavated sites has recently transformed archaeologists' perception of causewayed enclosures. The early Neolithic was once regarded as a period of revolutionary change, but scholars from the 1980s onwards stressed the long time-span over which new items and concepts were probably introduced, thus portraying the period as an evolution, not a revolution. The newly available dates, however, seem to necessitate a return to the earlier view that the period was one of rapid change, for causewayed enclosures seem to have sprung up throughout the British Isles within a period of only 250 – 300 years, between about 3800 and 3500 BC. The timespan over which individual monuments were used appears to vary, with some perhaps being used for a single gathering and others for several generations, undergoing remodelling at each successive visit.



# 3 Development of the Asset Type

In the 1920s, Alexander Keiller and O G S Crawford excavated a causewayed enclosure on Windmill Hill, Wiltshire, research which was eventually published by Isobel Smith in 1965 (Figure 7). A search for comparable sites began and in 1930, based partly on Crawford and Keiller's work, E C Curwen correctly identified ten causewayed enclosures, all but one surviving in earthwork form on the chalk hills of southern England. Curwen inferred from this, and the comparable distribution of surviving long barrows, that high ground was favoured for Neolithic settlement, while the lowlands remained marshy and blanketed in impenetrable woodland.

Figure 7
The complex enclosure on Windmill Hill, near Avebury, Wiltshire, has dominated thinking about this type of monument for nearly a century.

The number of certain or probable causewayed enclosures has grown erratically and currently stands at over 80, the biggest jump occurring after the 1950s due to increased aerial survey. This new technique revealed many low-lying causewayed enclosures whose earthworks had been erased by later ploughing (which in some cases began in prehistory). It is now clear that the few causewayed enclosures still visible as earthworks have only survived because they lie on high ground, above the 'high-tide mark' of later arable agriculture, and that the true picture of Neolithic land-use is virtually the reverse of what Curwen envisaged.

Only one of Curwen's original list, an enclosure discovered by chance through excavation in the 1920s at Abingdon in Oxfordshire, lies on lower ground, occupying a low promontory between two streams. This location, which Curwen regarded as anomalous, can now be seen to be typical, reflecting the relatively intensive use of river valleys in the Neolithic. However, analysis of biases inherent in the distribution pattern derived from aerial survey, such as those caused by woodland cover and geology unsuitable for the production of cropmarks, suggests that more examples await discovery, perhaps through other prospection techniques. Excavation and geophysical survey, in advance of modern construction projects – in other words, effectively random sampling – occasionally lead to surprise discoveries.

Many of the key excavations from which the interpretations of causewayed enclosures derive have taken place on the chalk hills of southern England, amongst the most important being those at Windmill Hill in Wiltshire, Hambledon Hill (Figure 8) and Maiden Castle in Dorset, and Whitehawk Camp in East Sussex. Excavations of low-lying enclosures, such as those at Etton and Haddenham in Cambridgeshire, where waterlogged conditions sometimes preserve

organic materials, have offered different insights into the complex use of these monuments. Even so, relatively few examples have been extensively excavated using modern techniques, so much remains unknown.

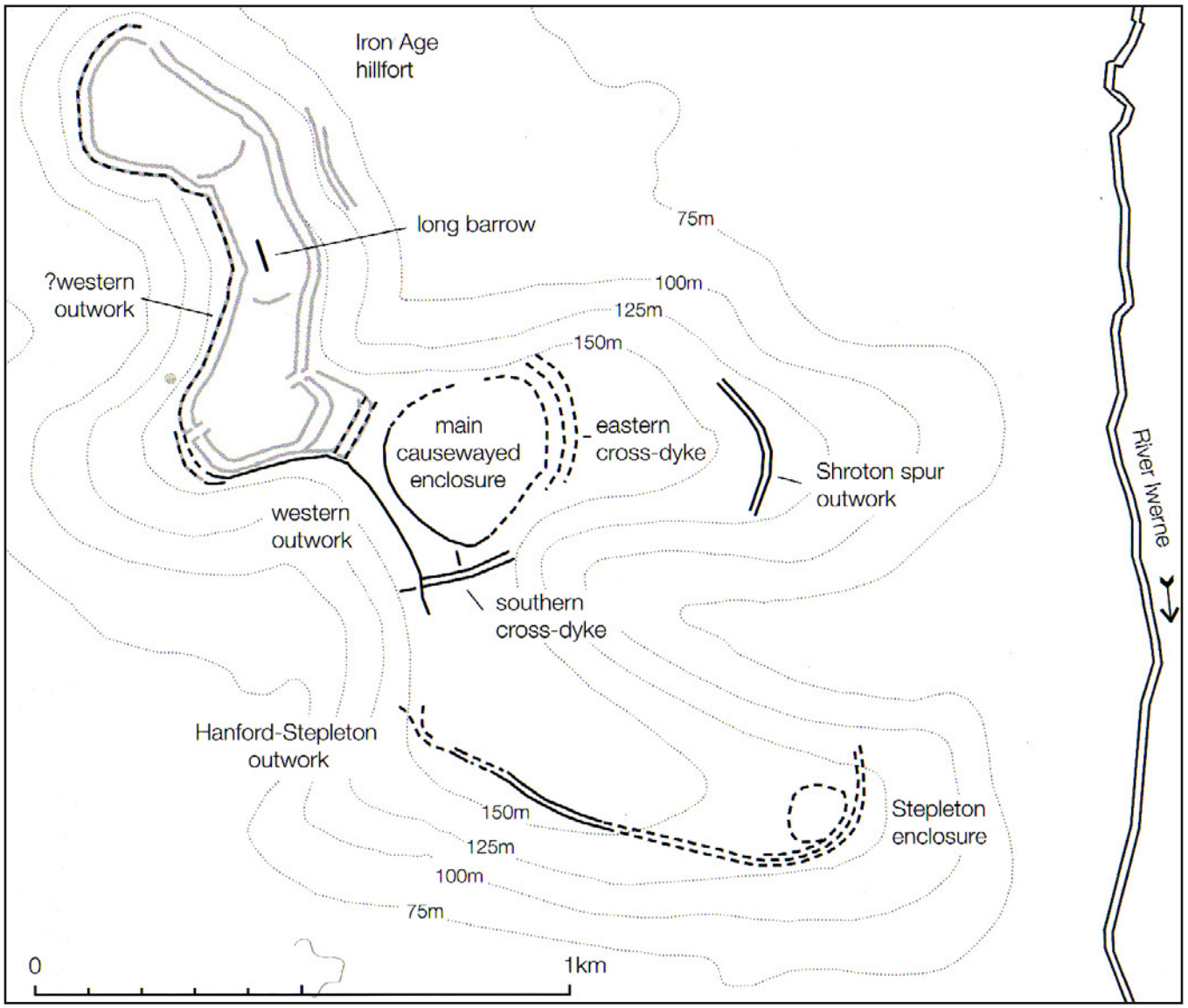



Figure 8
The extensively researched complex of two long barrows, two causewayed enclosures and numerous causewayed outworks on Hambledon Hill, Dorset, is unique.

# 4 Associations

Associations with other prehistoric monuments enrich the understanding of both causewayed enclosures and the monuments associated with them.

Causewayed enclosures were associated with two other types of early Neolithic monument: long barrows and cursuses. At Hambledon Hill, a long barrow was built in the space between the main circuit and one of the outlying causewayed cross-ridge dykes, while another occupied a spur on the opposite side of the enclosure. These associations reinforced the excavators' view that the causewayed enclosure was linked with ritual practices surrounding death. At Maiden Castle, the causewayed enclosure is overlain by the tail of an extraordinary long mound, also of Neolithic origin. Recent scientific dating shows that causewayed enclosures and cursus monuments overlapped chronologically, and in some cases physically (Figure 9).

When excavated, the upper levels of causewayed enclosure ditches often prove to contain Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material belonging to the transitional 'Beaker period' around 2000 BC. In some cases, this may represent essentially coincidental re-use of the same locality, but at Hambledon Hill, one Early Neolithic bank and ditch was deliberately remodelled in the Beaker period, potentially 1,500 years after it was first dug.

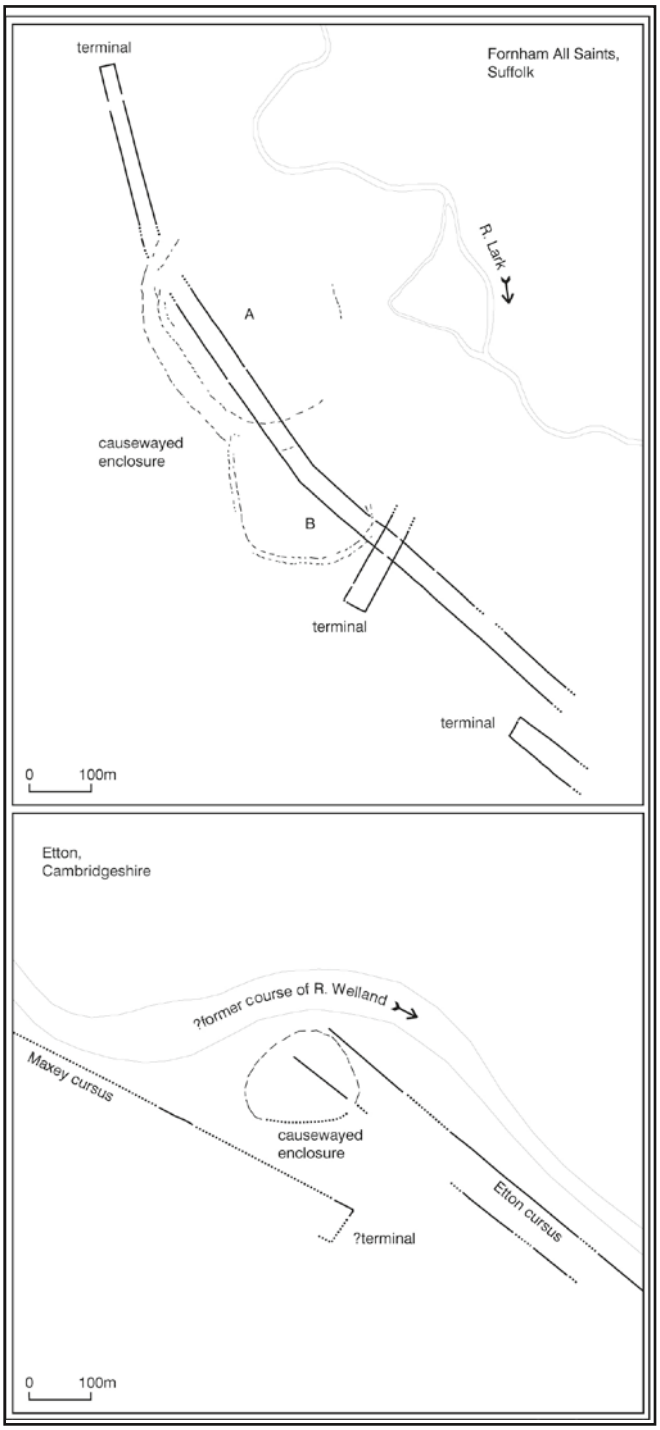



**Figure 9**
At both Fornham All Saints, Suffolk, and Etton, Cambridgeshire, aerial photography has revealed causewayed enclosures with several cursus monuments in close proximity.

Elsewhere, Early Bronze Age round barrows were sited on top of the causewayed enclosure earthworks, again raising questions about whether these later monuments were deliberately sited in relation to the enclosures, or whether it was essentially coincidence, reflecting the preference of the builders of both types of monument for conspicuous locations. Some round barrows have proved to be of Neolithic date, such as at Whitesheet Hill, Wiltshire, hinting that the interval between the two phases of building may not always have been so long.

A small number of Iron Age hillforts, such as Rybury, Wiltshire and Salmonsbury Camp, Gloucestershire, were superimposed upon causewayed enclosures, around 3,000 years after the causewayed enclosures were built, leaving short stretches of the Neolithic earthworks visible (Figure 10). It is possible that future excavations may reveal causewayed enclosures directly underlying, for example, medieval castle defences. Such co-locations can again probably be explained as a reflection of a shared preference for hilltops, and do not necessarily offer insights into the motivations of the later builders.

In a few cases, aerial photographic evidence suggests that Iron Age or Romano-British farming settlements incorporated the earthworks of causewayed enclosures into their perimeters, testifying to the longevity of the Neolithic earthworks. The superimposition of later banks may well have served to offer increased protection to the underlying Neolithic remains, making such associations important in terms of preservation. Various accidental associations with later monuments, from medieval chapels to 18th century eye-catchers, exemplify the richly interwoven character of the English landscape.

Figure 10
The Trundle West Sussex, as photographed in 1928. An Iron Age hillfort surrounds and partly overlies a larger causewayed enclosure with perhaps as many as five circuits.

# 5 Further Reading

The origin and chronology of causewayed enclosures is discussed in much detail in A Whittle, F Healy and A Bayliss *Gathering Time, Dating the Early Neolithic Enclosures of southern Britain and Ireland* (2011).

The most comprehensive modern overview of causewayed enclosures is A Oswald, M Barber and C Dyer, *The Creation of Monuments: Neolithic Causewayed Enclosures of the British Isles* (1999). Comparison with earlier overviews, such as E C Curwen's original article ('Neolithic Camps', *Antiquity* 4 (1930), 22-54) and Isobel Smith's benchmark study (*Windmill Hill and Avebury, Excavations by Alexander Keiller, 1925-1939* (1965)), will shed light on how perspectives have changed.

Detailed reports have recently been published on the survey and excavation of several remarkable enclosures around the country: at Hambledon Hill in Dorset, R Mercer and F Healy, *Hambledon Hill, Dorset, England. Survey and Excavation of a Neolithic Monument Complex and its Surrounding Landscape (2009)*; the partially waterlogged enclosures at Etton and Haddenham in Cambridgeshire, F Pryor, *Etton: Excavations at a Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure near Maxey, Cambridgeshire, 1982-7* (1998); C Evans and I Hodder, *A Woodland Archaeology: Neolithic Sites at Haddenham* (2006); and a pair of enclosures at Kingsborough in Kent, M J Allen, M Leivers and C Ellis, 'Neolithic Causewayed Enclosures and Later Prehistoric Farming', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 74 (2008), 235- 322. Each of these publications and sites has profoundly influenced archaeologists' general thinking about this type of monument.

For the social context in which the phenomenon of causewayed enclosures took root, see Mark Edmonds' two publications: 'Interpreting Causewayed Enclosures in the Past and the Present' in C Tilley (ed), *Interpretative Archaeology (1993), 99-142; Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic: Landscapes, Monuments and Memory* (1999). See also Alex Gibson, *Enclosing the Neolithic, recent studies in Britain and Europe* (2012) and Brian Albrecht, *A study of activity at Neolithic causewayed enclosures within the British Isles* (2012).

# 6 Where to Get Advice

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# 7 Acknowledgements

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Figure 6: © after Philip Dixon

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