

THE EXCAVATION OF A BURNT MOUND AT HARBRIDGE, HAMPSHIRE

by S J SHENNAN

ABSTRACT

A burnt mound of Late Bronze Age date, as indicated by the pottery recovered, was excavated between 1983 and 1985. The site was largely covered by eroded material in the medieval period and hence was well preserved. In addition to the accumulation of burnt stone, a characteristic trough was also found. No finds of bones or cereals were made despite wet-sieving, and a phosphate survey did not produce evidence of organic waste deposition. Moreover, the site was located on a sticky clay unsuitable for settlement. It is suggested that the site may represent a 'sweat lodge' or something similar, used on a limited number of occasions.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s members of the Avon Valley Archaeological Society carried out a systematic fieldwalking survey of part of the middle Avon valley between Ringwood and Breamore (see Light *et al.* 1995). In the winter of 1982/3 fieldwalking in the area of Harbridge resulted in the discovery of several burnt flint mounds. One of these produced sherds of Bronze Age pottery on the surface, an indication that it had only recently been disturbed by ploughing as otherwise the extremely fragile pottery would have disintegrated. Since the process of destruction at this site had only recently begun and relatively little was known about the large number of burnt mounds in the Avon valley and the adjacent New Forest, it seemed worthwhile to excavate this one to see if it would throw any light on their function, as the function of burnt mounds in general has long been a subject of discussion and argument (Light *et al.* 1995 (and refs therein)). Accordingly, in the sum-

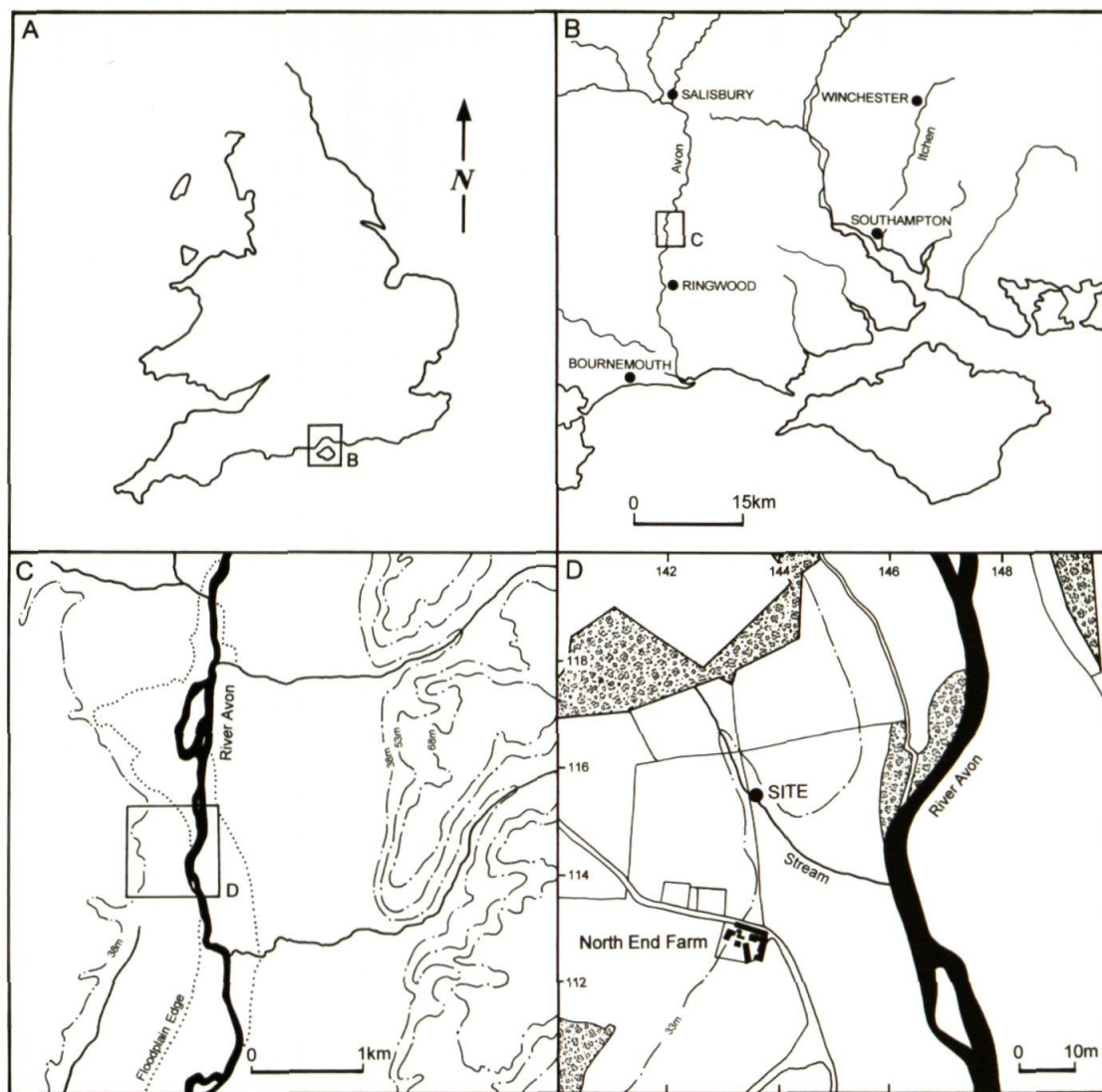
mer of 1983 a series of trial trenches was excavated by the author together with the late Bob Smith and members of the Avon Valley Archaeological Society. Subsequently, in 1984 and 1985, two larger scale excavation seasons took place, when the site was used as one of the training excavations of the Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton.

Location

The site is located near North End Farm, at the northern end of what is now the small hamlet of Harbridge, although in medieval times it was more extensive (see Light *et al.* 1995). Its location, at NGR SU 144 116 is shown in Fig. 1. In topographic terms it is situated in a small shallow valley on the bank of a stream which has now been canalised into a field drain, on a low terrace above the river Avon about 200 m distant from the river. On the one-inch geology map the area of the site is shown as near the boundary of valley gravels and Bagshot sands but in fact it is a sticky yellow clay containing large numbers of flints. Even today, despite the large number of field drains crossing the site area, this corner of the field is sticky and waterlogged in winter and the crop grows poorly. In the dry summer of 1984 when the first main excavation was being carried out the stripped clay surface rapidly baked and became impenetrable.

THE EXCAVATION

In 1983 six trial trenches were excavated and on the basis of these a large area was opened in 1984 and 1985 (Fig. 2). In addition to this large area,



observation of the sides of the open field drain immediately adjacent to it, but across the fence in the next field to the south, indicated that it had cut through archaeological features, so this area was also investigated.

then cleaned and excavated in the usual way. A standard context-based recording system was used; within larger contexts finds were recorded by 2 m grid square. The clay soil was simply too sticky for dry sieving to be a standard procedure but 10 litre samples for flotation and wet sieving were taken from all contexts.

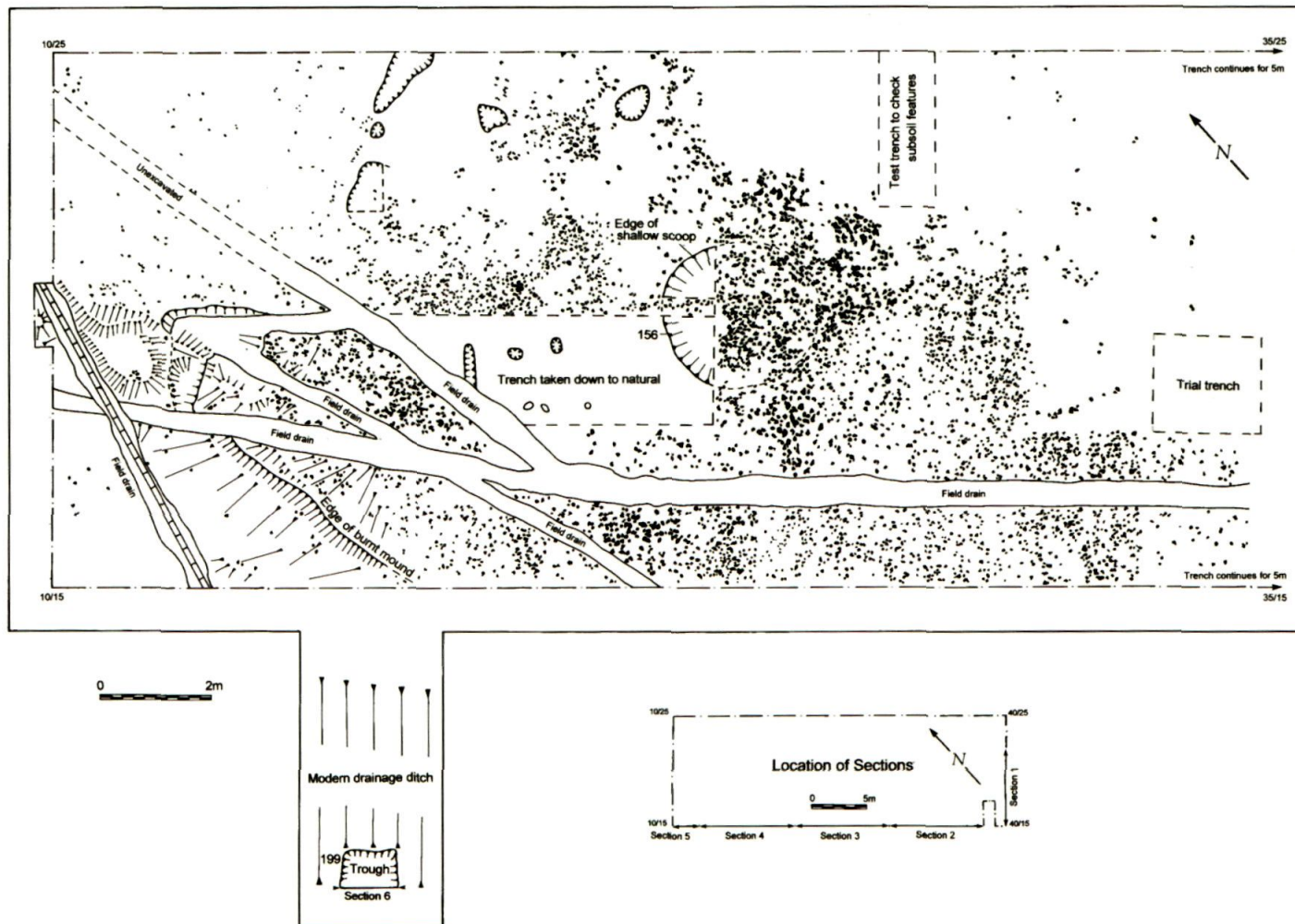


Fig. 2 Plan of the excavation, showing the distribution of burnt stone. The rectangular feature to the south of the main excavation area is the suggested trough.

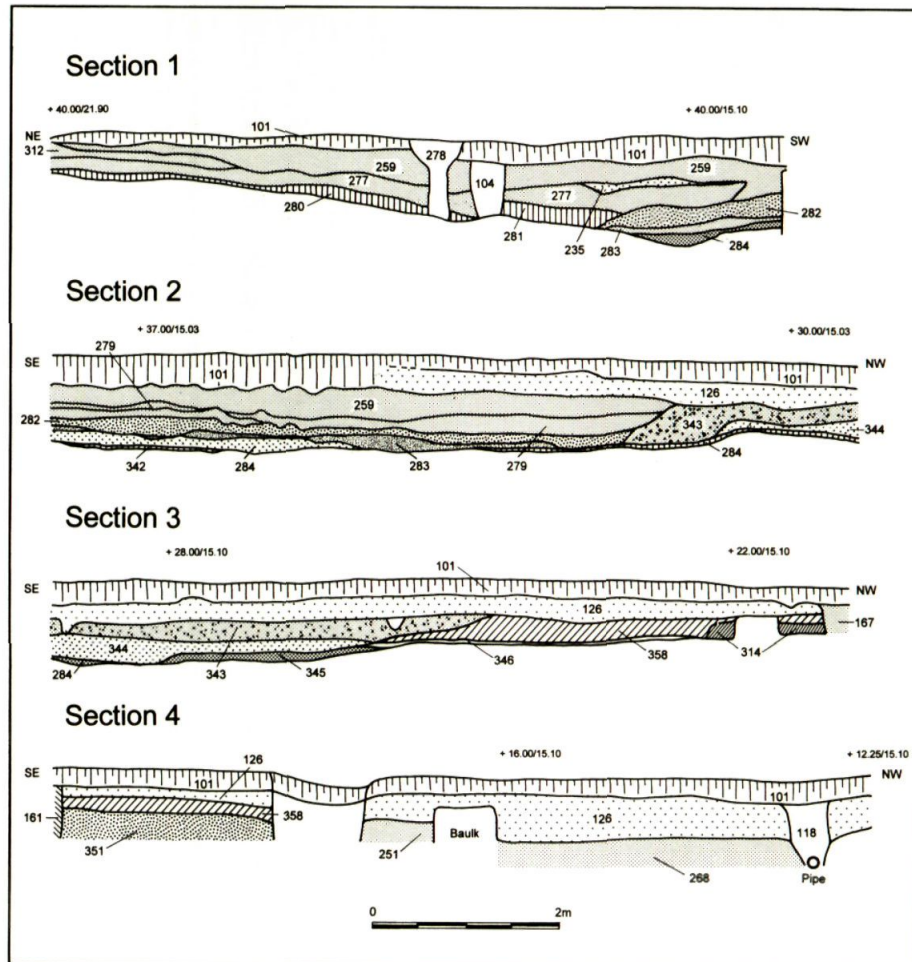


Fig. 3 The section of the southern (ie. north-facing) wall of the main excavation trench, shown in four segments from east (top) to west (bottom). Context 126 is the waterlaid deposit produced by medieval clearance and erosion; 358 is the mound material; 343 and 344 are outwashed mound material; 346 is a silty clay containing fragments of burnt flint and charcoal flecks; 345 is a stream-laid deposit; 277, 279, 312 and 259 are waterlaid deposits probably of the medieval period; 282 is a sandy layer

Stratigraphic sequence

In depositional terms the site was moderately complex (see section drawings, Fig. 3). It became apparent that immediately adjacent to the small stream on whose bank the site was situated, the present day surface did not correspond to the

Bronze Age one which existed when the site was formed; there had been a major subsequent episode of water-laid deposition. The occupation history of the site is as follows:

1. The activities associated with the creation of the burnt mound. As well as the mound itself there were a number of small features sealed beneath it

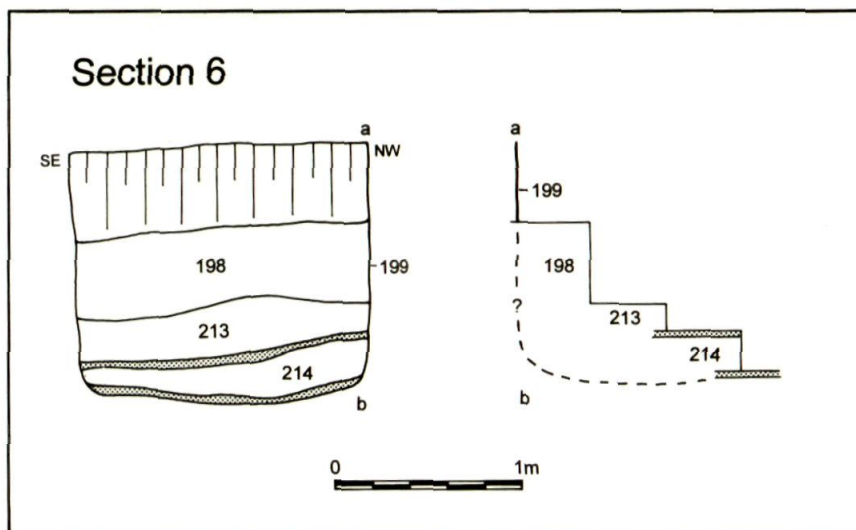


Fig. 4 East-west section through the suggested trough. NB This was cut in steps because of the oblique angle at which the side of the field drain cut through it.

and themselves filled with mound material, some of them containing Bronze Age pottery. These must be associated with the activities which produced the mound and may well have been dug only days or hours before they were covered with mound material. Other features dug into the surface on which the mound was resting but not covered by the mound cannot be demonstrated to be contemporary with it, although this must be regarded as more likely than not since there is no evidence for intensive localised activity on this surface at any other time. In addition to these features, the one to the south of the mound which had been cut by the field drain must also be considered here (see section, Fig. 4). With its vertical sides and flat bottom it must be the trough which is always associated with Bronze Age burnt mounds; it contained at least two layers of burnt material, including burnt flint, with at least one layer of grey-yellow probably water-laid clay in between, suggesting at least two episodes of use.

2. A single abraded sherd of Roman period pottery was found on the surface on which the

mound lies, indicating some sort of Roman period activity in the vicinity.

3. The area of the site was almost entirely covered by the deposition of a layer of water-borne material which had clearly been brought down by the stream. It was thickest close to the stream bed, lensed out away from it and at least partially covered the burnt mound. Finds of large unabraded sherds of medieval pottery from the bottom of this water-borne layer indicated that it was deposited in this period (see Fig. 5); the erosion and deposition processes which produced it are probably associated with the medieval clearance of this area connected to the founding of North End Farm (see Light et al 1995), since this would have made large amounts of soil in the stream catchment available for erosion for the first time. The medieval pottery was examined by Lorraine Mephram of Wessex Archaeology who noted the presence of a jug base and strap handle of probable 13th-century date.

4. In the recent past the area of the site was criss-crossed by a large number of field drains.

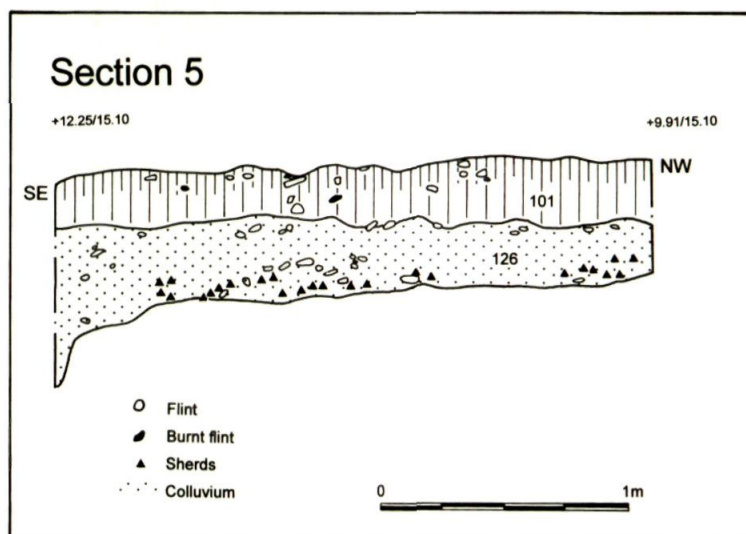


Fig. 5 Section of western end of the southern wall of the main excavation trench showing positions of medieval sherds at base of erosion layer.

Activities and spatial patterns

The mound itself was roughly 5 m across and clearly made up of a series of dumpings of burnt stone and charcoal, but burnt flint was scattered much more widely as Fig. 2 shows. In fact, it was not so much a raised mound as the fill of a slight hollow with a maximum height/depth of c. 30 cm; however, on the side nearest the stream it ran down the bank and into the old stream bed. It did not form the kidney shape with the trough in the middle which is often found at such sites. As the plan (Fig. 2) shows, the trough was slightly removed from the mound. The majority of the stone was burnt flint which would have been locally available on the site itself. In places, however, there were dumps of burnt sandstone. This does not occur on the site itself although it was available in the vicinity; its use would seem to indicate that some thought and effort went into the selection of stone for heating.

As noted above, some features occur on the site in addition to the trough but these are shallow and irregular and there is no indication that they form any structural plans. The very fact that they are

covered by the dumps of burnt stone and charcoal which form the mound would also tend to argue against this.

Other than the burnt stone itself the amount of cultural material associated with the burnt mound was extremely slight. There were about 160 sherds of Bronze Age pottery, all extremely fragile coarse body sherds, from within and under the mound itself; any pottery which did not find its way rapidly into a protected context would not have survived long.

The Bronze Age pottery was examined by Lorraine Mephram of Wessex Archaeology, who distinguished two fabrics. The majority of the sherds were flint-tempered and most probably belong to the post-Deverel Rimbury Late Bronze Age plain wares discussed by Barrett (1980). There were also sherds of coarse sandy fabrics which are probably of similar date. The flint-tempered sherds are very homogeneous and could represent a very small number of vessels, which in turn would suggest a very limited span of site occupation.

A small amount of lithic material was found, again mainly concentrated in and under the

mound, a total of 73 pieces in all, but this may well be an underestimate. 48 pieces come from the 1983 trial trenches and only 25 from the much larger area 1984/5 excavations; for the pottery by contrast the comparable figures are 6 from the trial trenches and 155 from the 1984/5 excavations. While the actual location of the material on the site is obviously a relevant factor, it may be suggested that the greater knowledge and expertise of those involved in the 1983 trial excavation compared with the first-year students meant that far more lithics were recovered; the situation was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that standard dry sieving could not be used because of the stickiness of the soil noted above. The vast majority of the lithic pieces were flakes but three cores and a small number of retouched pieces, including two borers, were also found.

DISCUSSION

In many ways, in terms of understanding the site's function, what was not found was as important as what did occur. A phosphate survey carried out on the excavated surface by Roy Entwistle of the Dept of Archaeology, University of Reading, produced extremely low values throughout, suggesting no significant deposition of organic refuse. No bone was found on the site, including no calcined bone fragments, even though the soil pH as tested on soil samples was between 7.0 and 6.5; that is to say, neutral to slightly acid. One would expect bone to survive in these conditions if it had been present. Examination of the burnt material produced by flotation produced no seeds, only large amounts of charcoal from the bonfires used to heat the stones.

These lines of argument, the lack of structural evidence and the fact noted above that the site lies on an area of sticky clay unsuitable for settlement strongly suggests that it had some special non-subsistence purpose. One may also suspect that in the Late Bronze Age the area was still wooded, in the light of the erosion that occurred when the stream catchment was cleared in the medieval period.

In contrast to the argument I put forward in Light et al (1995), before the negative seed evidence and the soil pH information was available, it now seems more likely that the site, and presumably others like it, had the kind of function suggested by Barfield and Hodder (1987) as some kind of sauna or sweat lodge. The contrast between the nature of this site and others like it, and the evidence of Late Bronze Age agricultural settlements which are widely known in southern England, is extremely marked and confirms the idea that they represent some special non-subsistence function. The fact that the Harbridge trough contained at least one layer of clean clay between layers of burnt material suggests that it might have been used on at least two visits separated by a period of time, perhaps a season. The evidence of the pottery, discussed above, would indicate that the visits were short ones. Two other such mounds were found in the same shallow valley and their use may have been successive. Ethnographically, such phenomena as sweat lodges are often associated with shamanistic practices. Given the Late Bronze Age date which seems characteristic of the majority of these kinds of burnt mounds (as opposed to those in the Orkneys, for example, which are clearly part of settlements), one might speculate that it was such small-scale and local ritual which followed the demise of the centralised ceremonial forms associated with the henges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Crofton Manor Farms, then owners of North End Farm, for allowing the excavation to take place; to the late Bob Smith, an outstanding archaeologist who had barely begun to realise his potential, for advice and assistance; to the members of the Avon Valley Archaeological Society who took part, especially Tony Light; to the site supervisors in 1984/85, Nick Bradford, Rod Fitzgerald and Chris Webster; to Lorraine Mephram of Wessex Archaeology for kindly examining the pottery; and to the Dept of Archaeology, University of Southampton, for financial and logistical support. Finally, I would like to thank Jane Russell for producing excellent drawings from unpromising material.

REFERENCES

- Barfield, L H & Hodder, M A 1987 Burnt mounds as saunas, and the prehistory of bathing *Antiquity* 61 370–379.
- Barrett, J 1980 The pottery of the later Bronze Age in lowland England *Proc Prehist Soc* 46 297–320.
- Light, A, Schofield, J, & Shennan, S J 1995 The Middle Avon Valley survey: a study in settlement history *Proc Hampshire Field Club Archaeol Soc* 50 43–101.

Author: Prof. Stephen Shennan, Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.

© *Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society*