

The Neolithic henge-type enclosure at Balfarg – a re-assessment of the evidence for an incomplete ditch circuit

R J Mercer*, G J Barclay†, D Jordan‡ and
C J Russell-White§

ABSTRACT

Further excavation and pedological analysis of the gully forming the southern perimeter of the Balfarg, Fife, henge suggest that the channel previously interpreted as a natural stream is in fact the 'missing' southern segment of henge ditch.

INTRODUCTION

RJM

'To the S of the W entrance, however, the ground dropped away into the natural declivity already described and no ditch-butt was apparent: although the edge of the natural gully, being extremely abrupt at this point, caused the excavator not a little difficulty' (Mercer 1981). If no other argument exists (and it does) for the need for the excavator to state *in extenso* his arguments regarding his site in print surely this tortured statement furnishes an example. The writer is grateful to his colleague Gordon Barclay who, with his own pressing interest in the Balfarg complex (for thus we must now call it), smelt the rat, discussed the matter at an early stage and then found time and resources within the Balfarg project to conduct a rapid check by machine-cutting to obtain a second specialist opinion on the nature of the silting in the natural gully (or part of it) on the south side of the monument.

Meanwhile, neatly filed in the National Monuments Record were the unpublished record drawings of the excavator lodged there after the report was completed. Of these drawings three were of critical significance in the reassessment of the nature of deposits on the south side of the site. These drawings (published here as illus 1 & 2) are drawn sections of cuttings taken across the south flank of the site to check there for the naturally suspected existence of a ditch.

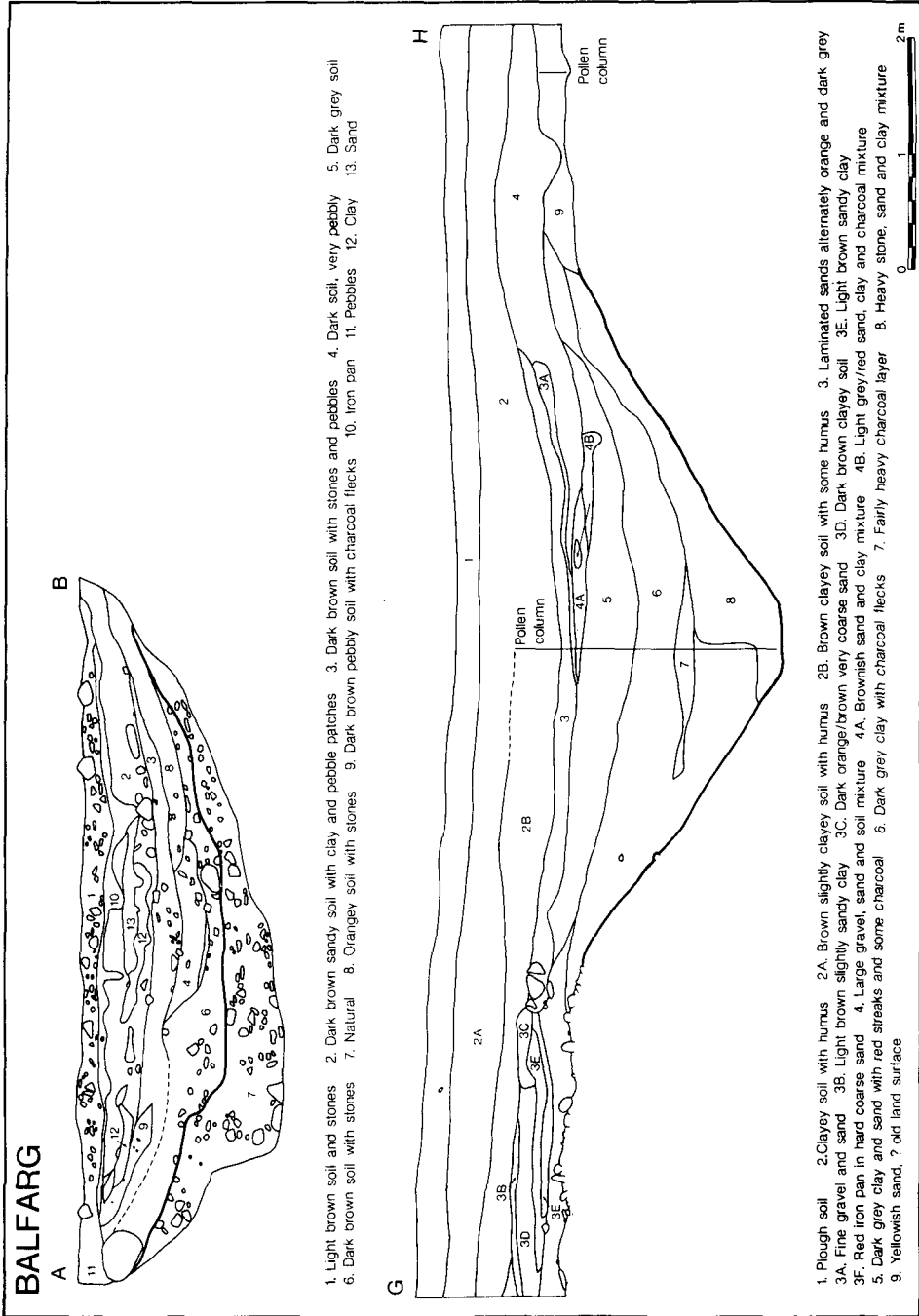
At this point it is perhaps necessary to remind the reader of the nature of the deposits within which the ditch at Balfarg was dug. For two-thirds of the circuit on the west, north and east sides of the site the shallow U-sectional ditch was cut into a pinkish-brown gravelly till of extremely variegated nature. The bank had been placed on the outer edge of the ditch and this bank had decayed,

* Department of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, George Square, Edinburgh

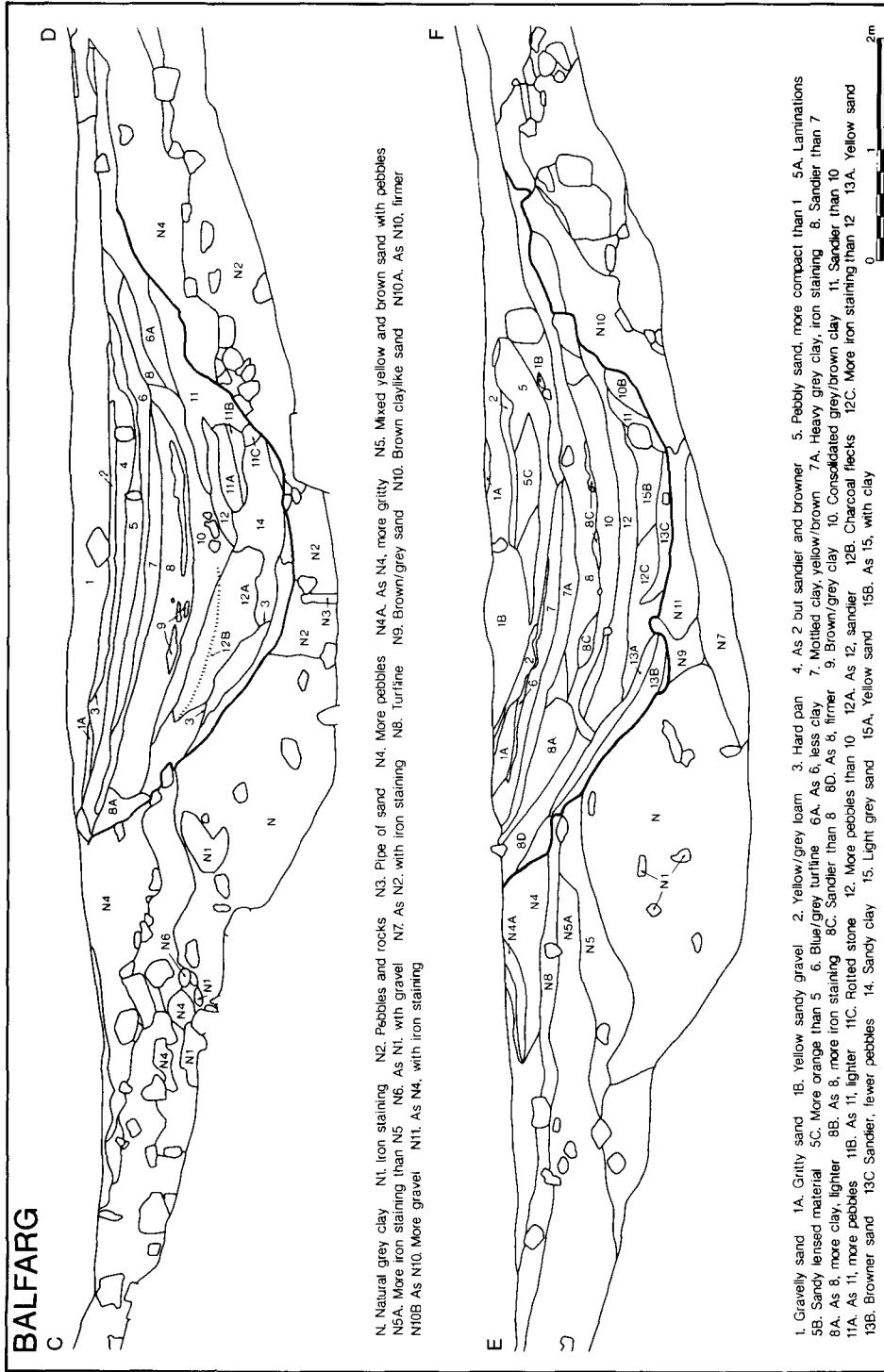
† Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate, 20 Brandon St, Edinburgh

‡ Ancient Monuments Laboratories, English Heritage, Fortress House, Savile Row, London

§ Central Excavation Unit, 9 Melville St, Edinburgh



ILLUS 1 Balfarg 1977/1978: record sections across 'gully'



ILLUS 2 Balfarg 1977/1978: record sections across 'gully'

replenishing the ditch with deposits that in all regards but hardness were indistinguishable from their parent material – the glacial till that formed the sides and bottom of the ditch. No finds whatever were encountered in the ditch-fill other than relatively recent material in the uppermost layers. A clear ditch-butt was perceived on the west side of the site with another again clearly defined in the south-east.

Beyond these two very clearly perceived butts the entire subsoil changed completely on the south side of the site. The ground here enters a steep declivity the material within which was a dark black-grey clay with substantial boulders set within it. This material appeared to be, and is still held to be, the filling of a channel created by a glacial melt-water stream in pre-Holocene time. Hand-digging of this material was tantamount to impossible and a series of machine-cut sections were excavated across it. The black-grey clayey material bottomed (at the base of the melt-water stream channel) in a clearly defined and very clean junction with the pinkish-brown glacial till referred to above. In the surface of the black-grey clay channel filling was a further declivity filled with identical material although with fewer boulders. The junction between this upper clay-filled feature and the lower clay-filled channel was never apparent in plan and could only, and then faintly, be perceived in section. The writer must emphasize that the enhancing clarity of the published section drawings, while reflecting the facts, does not reproduce their appearance *in situ*.

It was at this point that specialist assistance was sought to assist with the interpretation of this feature. A counter proposal was made to the writer's suggestion of a southern ditch segment that, in fact, a secondary, and lesser, natural channel filled with what were clearly water-laid deposits, had been cut into the surface of the already existing deeper channel. This argument together with the indistinguishable nature of the filling of the 'upper channel' from the lower persuaded the writer that the southern side of the monument at Balfarg was defined by a natural gully of complex formation.

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE GULLY SET TO THE SOUTH OF THE HENGE AT BALFARG

BACKGROUND

GJB

The henge at Balfarg, which lies at the northern edge of the new town of Glenrothes in Fife, was excavated in 1977 and 1978 prior to the proposed construction of houses in the area (Mercer 1981). The monument was subsequently saved from destruction and was partially reconstructed. In 1979 a further enclosure was discovered from the air to the north-east; this site was threatened by housing development. Excavation of this site commenced in 1983; as work progressed, hitherto unsuspected features were found to spread some distance to the west, towards the henge (Barclay 1984).

The henge at Balfarg was identified first by Steer on aerial photographs taken in 1947. Atkinson (1952) in his plot of the cropmarks, showed one entrance, the south-west with two opposing ditch-butts. He dotted in a suggested line for the south-east arc of the ditch, which was not visible on the photographs available to him or indeed on subsequent photographs. When excavated it was found that an area of different soils, in which the observation of features was even more difficult than elsewhere on the site (Mercer 1981, 66) occupied this southern zone. The linear feature was located within this area which was excavated and recorded as a ditch. However, because of the complex geomorphology in the area, only a limited part of which could at that time be examined by excavation, this feature was interpreted as a more recent stream course cutting through the fill of a broad, shallow, naturally formed gully which had been open at the time of the construction and use of the henge. It was suggested that the enclosure had been designed to utilize this natural gully as part of the boundary, so that a ditch was not necessary on the south-west side.

In the final season of excavation on the enclosure near Balfarg Riding School, in 1985, an

extensive programme of sample trenching was undertaken to ascertain how far the scatter of prehistoric features extended to the west and the south-east (Barclay *et al*, in prep). The numerous profiles exposed by the sampling allowed a much more detailed assessment of the geomorphology and pedology of the area than had been possible when the henge was excavated. An alternative explanation of the boundary features of the henge was suggested on the basis of this work and the small excavation reported here was mounted to test that hypothesis. The excavation was organized and supervised in December 1987 by CJR-W; the soil report for this site (and for the Balfarg-Balbirnie project (Barclay *et al*, in prep)) was undertaken by DJ.

THE EXCAVATION

CJR-W and DJ

A section was cut across the gully which lies to the south and west of the henge and the exposed face was examined. The aim of the exercise was to determine whether a channel running through the length of the gully was eroded by a natural stream and filled with its sediment or whether it was a part of the henge ditch and therefore man-made. Thus the question addressed by the excavation was whether this gully was formed and filled in a manner attributable to stream erosion and deposition, or to human excavation and subsequent colluvial ditch decay.

The exposed section was 10.9 m long and 0.77 m deep at its deepest. This is considerably less than the depth recorded by Mercer in his earlier excavation and it is likely that the loss of surface material occurred during subsequent landscaping. Well-sorted fluvial deposits were found in the lower part of this section. These were very similar to those found underlying the soils of the surrounding area and stones found in these deposits had correctly orientated silt cappings. These fluvial deposits were deposited on a scale far larger than the topography of the gully would allow and all the evidence suggests that they form part of the local glacial-outwash deposits.

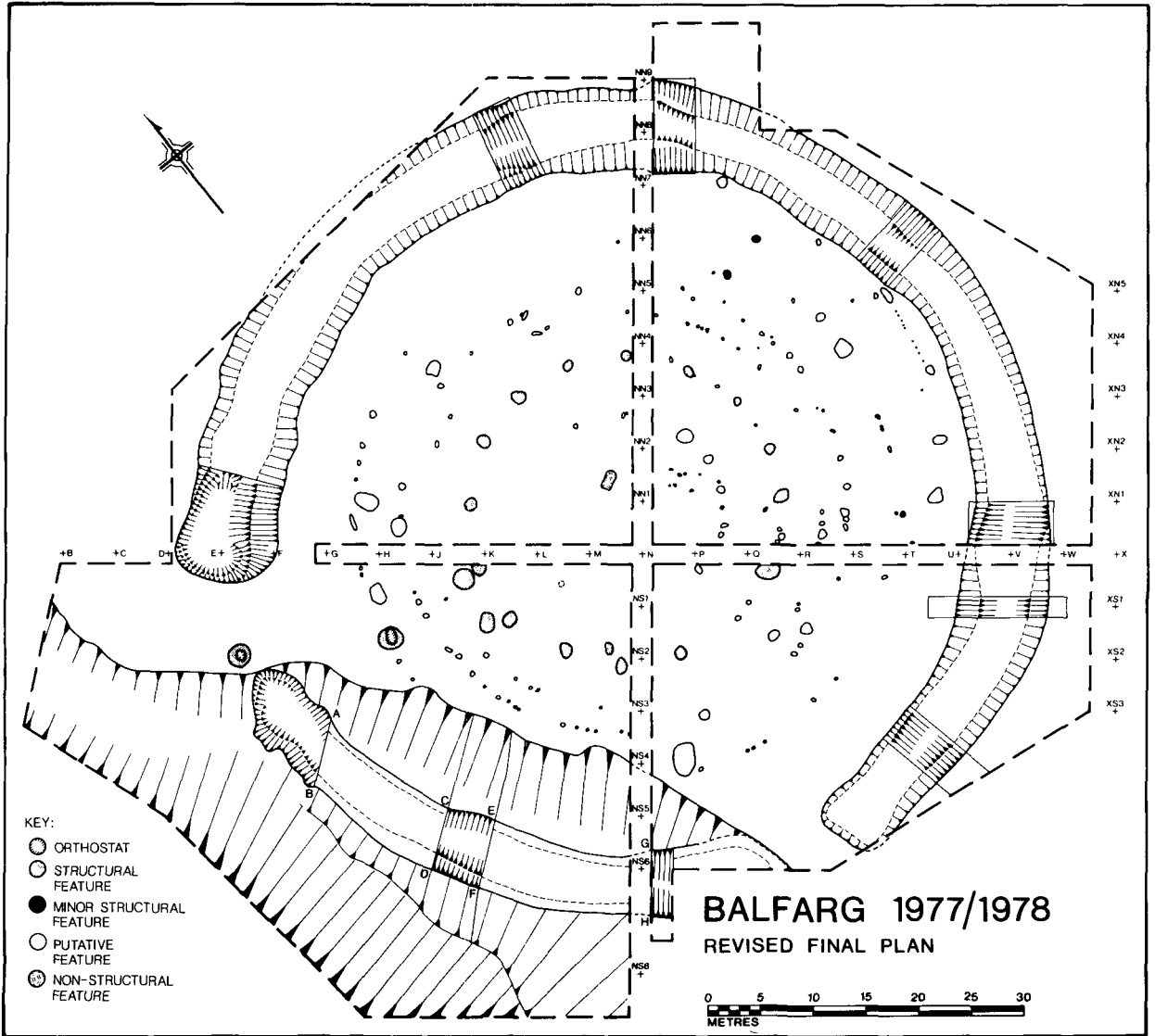
Overlying these sediments in the central part of the section was a gently dished deposit of mid-brown sandy clay loam. This was clearly differentiated by colour and texture from the A horizon above and the parent deposits below. It was differentiated into a few, very poorly defined, strata and became slightly more clayey and wet at the base. This deposit was tentatively interpreted as the lower part of the upper channel as defined by Mercer. The material filling the channel was poorly sorted and almost unstratified. It contained none of the features which might be expected of a stream deposit. The uppermost stratum, approximately corresponding to the A horizon, was poorly sorted and largely unstructured. This is consistent with it being mixed soil, recently deposited as part of landscaping.

To sum up, three well-defined strata were identified in the exposed section. The lowest is a periglacial stream deposit, above this is a tentatively defined ditch-fill and at the surface is landscaping dump. Although the interpretation of the section has been complicated by the landscaping it is clear that there are no Flandrian stream-deposits represented. We may therefore confidently reject the hypothesis that the channel and fill within the gully are the result of natural stream-erosion and deposition, on the basis of the section examined. We may also tentatively accept the hypothesis that the channel, as seen in the section, is anthropogenic in origin and may be a continuation of the henge ditch.

CONCLUSION

RJM

In view of the above report it would appear to the writer that Mr Jordan's view is consistent with the 'upper channel' in the southern declivity being the 'missing' southern segment of ditch on the site (illus 3). At the most cautious level the specialist evidence can perhaps now be seen to be inconclusive



ILLUS 3 Balfarg 1977/1978: revised final plan

and that therefore direct archaeological interpretation can proceed. It remains only to suggest those ways in which this important emendation to the original Balfarg henge report affects the interpretation of the site (illus 3). Firstly in terms of the 1981 report, the first two paragraphs of the discussion under the heading 'The Ditch and Bank' (Mercer 1981, 148) must now be regarded as redundant. However, as the monument in its former state was essentially unparalleled in Britain the present revision of interpretation may perhaps come as a relief. Nevertheless, we are still left with a monument with two non-axial entrances in its ditch circuit and thus, so far as the writer is aware, still unique.

Examination of the ditch stratigraphy (see illus 1 & 2), now that we can accept with confidence that a ditch is present, does lead one to speculate as to the original disposition of the bank in this part of the site. The ditch fillings do pretty clearly express one salient feature, and that is conflict in the bias of the filling origin. While filling from an external bank feature is in the writer's view clearly in evidence in sections A-B and G-H, in sections C-D and E-F the reverse could be held to be the case. The writer is of the view that this apparent contradiction must be seen in the context of the steep slope of the declivity within which the ditch is set and the heavy erosion of the northern side of gully leading to the destruction of the substantial group of structural features on the south side of the henge interior registered in the 1981 report. It will also be apparent that the stature and regularity of the ditch in other sectors of the site is not replicated in this 'new' southern section (a factor which also militated against its original acceptance as part of the ditch circuit). It is, however, possible to explain both these features in terms of physical conditions present on the site. The relatively diminutive scale of this southern segment of ditch is quite in keeping with the extraordinarily difficult natural matrix within which the ditch was dug (see above) while its slight non-concentricity is perhaps best set down to a relatively slight loss of grip on prehistoric surveying as the ditch moved into the gully out of direct line of sight with the centre and indeed the rest of the site.

We are, of course, left with the (still) dubious assignment of the monument to the classic Class I/Class II division of henge monuments. The writer feels that such divisions were indeed made by wise men for fools to obey. The (now virtually) securely circular form of the monument and the non-axial arrangement of its entrance prompts the writer to suggest that the monument is of Class I type *despite* its two entrances and that far more still unites this monument with monuments like Stenness, Orkney (Ritchie 1976) and the internal enclosure at Mount Pleasant, Dorchester, Dorset (Wainwright 1979) than with monuments like North Mains, Strathallan (Barclay 1983), Milfield, Northumberland (Harding 1981) or Arbor Low. The Grooved-ware association which would appear to be primary at Balfarg henge (although be it said *not* linked to the ditch stratigraphy) would also appear to militate against a Class II assignment where Grooved-ware associations are virtually unknown.

Much more remains to be said of the Balfarg ceremonial enclosure complex and the writer looks forward to the definitive publication of Gordon Barclay's work on the Riding School site. With this third element the interpretive possibilities of this fascinating complex will be enhanced beyond all present measure.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, R J C 1952 'Four new "henge" monuments in Scotland and Northumberland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 1984 (1951-2), 57-66.
- Barclay, G J 1983 'Sites of the third millennium bc to the first millennium ad at North Mains, Strathallan, Perthshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 113 (1983), 122-281.
- Barclay, G J 1984 *Balfarg Riding School: Fourth Interim Report*. Privately circulated paper, SDD/HBM.
- Harding, A F 1981 'Excavations in the Prehistoric Ritual Complex near Milfield, Northumberland', *Proc Prehist Soc*, 46 (1981), 87-135.
- Mercer, R J 1981 'The excavation of a Late Neolithic henge-type enclosure at Balfarg, Markinch, Fife, Scotland, 1977-78', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 111 (1981), 63-171.
- Ritchie, J N G 1976 'The Stones of Stenness, Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 107 (1975-6), 1-60.
- Wainwright, G J 1979 *Mount Pleasant, Dorset: Excavations 1970-71*. London. (= *Rep Res Comm Soc Antiq London*, 37.)

This report is published with the aid of a grant from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate (SDD)