

## Avebury, Yatesbury and the archaeology of communications

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### Introduction

The subject of communications in British archaeology has seen most energy directed toward the study of Roman roads, the foundations of which were laid by the research of the late I.D. Margary (1969), and prehistoric trackways, most notably those discovered on the Somerset Levels (Coles and Coles 1986). The characteristic straightness and often substantial construction of major Roman roads has frequently ensured their survival in the landscape either as routeways or as boundaries. Post-Roman road networks, however, are far less recognisable. The characteristics of Anglo-Saxon routeways are not so clearly defined, in the field or on maps, as are those of major Roman routes.

In this paper the application of archaeological techniques to the understanding of post-Roman routeways is explored with reference to the excavation and fieldwork currently being undertaken in and around Yatesbury and Avebury, North Wiltshire, by the Compton Bassett Area Research Project (CBARP) (Fig. 1). It will be suggested that the morphology of the henge monument at Avebury was modified by developments of the local communications in the tenth century and that this has implications regarding the number of original entrances to the monument.

### Finding a lost road: excavations and survey at Yatesbury

When fieldwork began at the shrunken village of Yatesbury in 1992, the intention was to elucidate the origins and development of the settlement by a survey of upstanding earthworks, followed by selective excavation in order to establish the chronological relationships of the features identified.

The presently occupied part of the settlement now lies some 300m east of All Saints Church. The earliest securely datable parts of the church can be assigned, on stylistic grounds, to the very end of the twelfth century (Reynolds *et al.* in prep.). The earliest standing building in the village dates probably to the latter part of the sixteenth century. Initially, this situation was seen to represent settlement shift in an easterly direction over a period of approximately 400 years. The results of recent excavations and survey, however, have suggested a rather different situation whereby the church and manor were originally discretely located within their own enclosure, with an associated settlement in a second enclosure to the east (Reynolds 1994a: 64). A third sub-rectangular enclosure lies to the west of the church and for convenience the three enclosures have been numbered 1-3 from west to east (*ibid.*: fig. 2; fig. 4B).

The entire settlement was replanned in the mid-eighteenth century with further developments in the mid-nineteenth. These changes have, however, obscured parts of the earlier network of routeways. A study was therefore mounted to establish the development of local and regional communications relating to Yatesbury.

The results of a survey of the earthworks of enclosure 3 revealed evidence of a south entrance (Reynolds 1994b: fig. 9) which corresponds with a green lane, formerly called Barrow Way, which runs southeast from Yatesbury to Avebury. The evidence of aerial photographs and the position of Manor Farmhouse at Yatesbury indicates that this



**Figure 1** Location of study area in southern England

route originally ran through enclosure 3 and on northward to connect with Yatesbury Lane (Fig. 2). Cartographic evidence suggests that the course of Yatesbury Lane had been altered to suit the new pattern of roads laid out in the eighteenth century and that it originally passed to the east, and not the west, of a group of now demolished properties known as Town's End at the most northerly extent of the village. The demise of the Town's End properties (which are first recorded on Andrews' and Dury's map of 1773) occurred after c. 1889, since the second edition Ordnance Survey map shows standing buildings.

Although this evidence is in itself sufficient to illustrate the former morphology of the settlement and its roads, excavation was undertaken which provided both a mid-eighteenth-century date for the replanning of the settlement and a Late Roman date for the origin of enclosure 3. To prove that the routeway formerly ran through enclosure 3 two trenches were dug. Trench E was cut east/west across the projected line of Barrow Way where it would have passed north of the Avenue and into enclosure 3 (Fig. 2). The excavation revealed a series of intercutting side ditches, of which the earliest were devoid of dating evidence but which were in turn cut by ditches of twelfth/thirteenth-century date. A further cutting, trench O, was dug on a north/south alignment in the entrance of enclosure 3 with the aim of locating the termini of the long sequence of intercutting ditches that had previously been recognised in cuttings across the enclosure earthworks (Reynolds 1994b: fig. 10). A terminal was located and this, together with the evidence from trench E, confirmed the hypothesis that the Barrow Way formerly ran through enclosure 3.

What remained to be established was the relationship of this former routeway to field boundaries and other routeways in the vicinity. Land divisions consisting of walls or ditches are usually difficult to date due to the paucity of finds, but the Yatesbury excavations have provided a pre-c. 1200 date for a feature which stretches for a considerable distance north and south of the village. Consequently, a chronological peg has been established in the landscape. Boundaries exhibiting an horizontal stratigraphic relationship to Yatesbury Lane can, therefore, be assigned broad *termini post* or *ante quem* dates depending on the nature of the relationship. An examination of these relationships has indicated the primacy of Yatesbury Lane as a determining feature in the

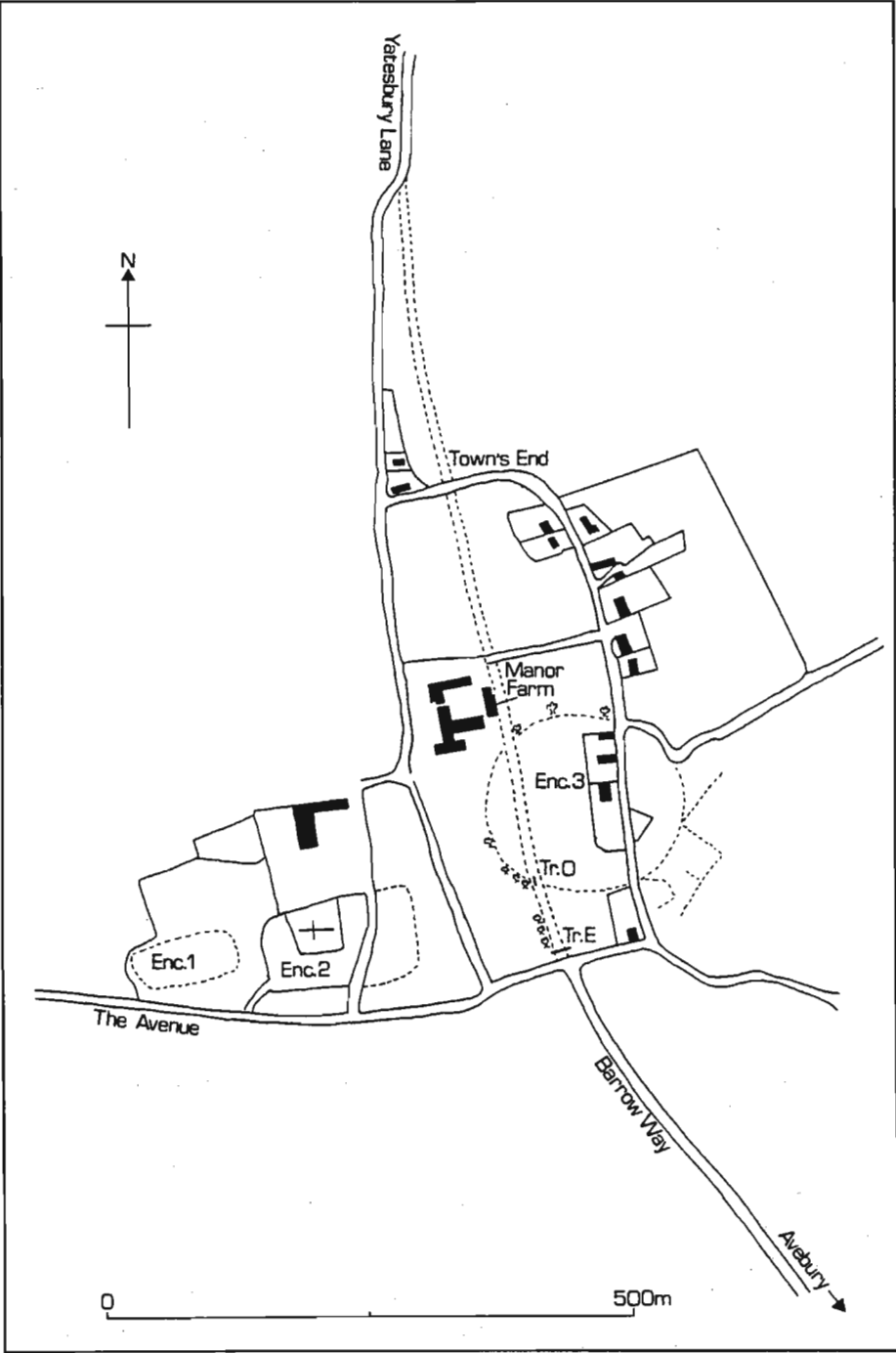


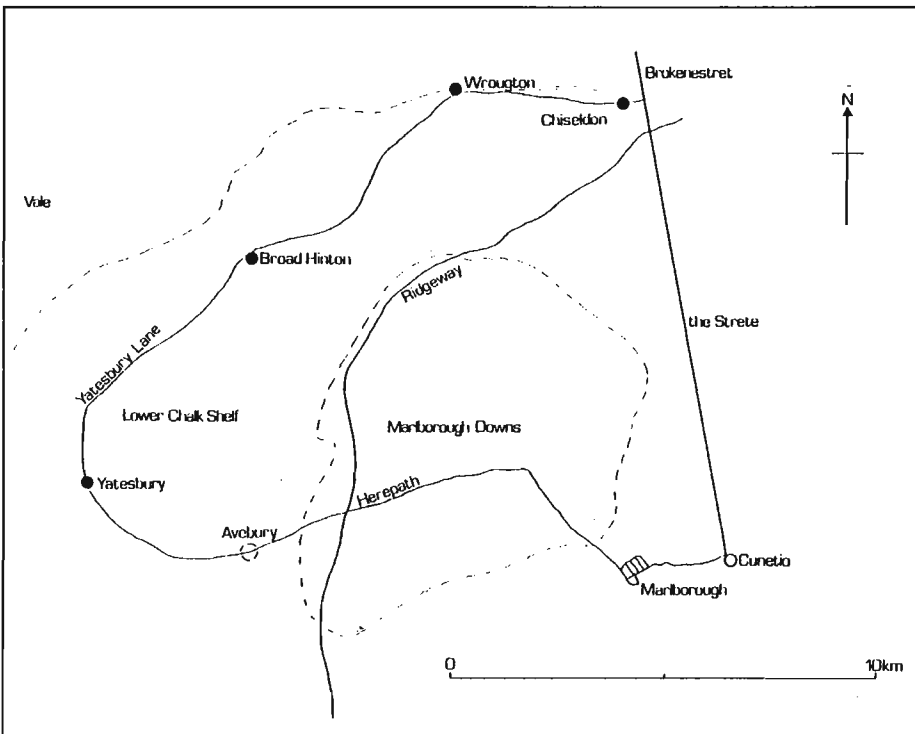
Figure 2 Yatesbury showing former course of Yatesbury Lane herepath enclosures 1-3 and location of trenches E and O

landscape since the majority of field boundaries about it, and it forms part of certain parish boundaries.

### Yatesbury Lane from Wroughton to Marlborough (Fig. 3)

#### *Yatesbury to Wroughton*

Once a pre-c. 1200 date for Yatesbury Lane had been established, the study was extended to place Yatesbury in its local and regional context. To the north of the village the lane can be traced as an uninterrupted routeway, as far as Broad Hinton and probably on to Wroughton and beyond where it joins a Roman road leading to the small Roman town of Cunetio (Mildenhall). None of the Roman small towns in Wiltshire became central places in the Anglo-Saxon period (Ray 1976: 107) and the evidence from charter bounds



**Figure 3** The full course of the Yatesbury Lane *herepath* from Wroughton to Marlborough and its relationship with other early roads in the region

strongly suggests that stretches of Roman roads were maintained only where relevant to the post-Roman settlement pattern, whilst others were left to decay. Of concern to this discussion are the authentic bounds of Chiseldon, appended to a grant of land given by King Eadred (AD 946-55) to Abbot Dunstan and dated AD 955 (Finberg 1964: cat. no. 273; Sawyer 1968: cat. no. 568). Alterations to local communications, probably in the post-Medieval period, have obscured the precise relationship between Yatesbury Lane and the Roman road but the Chiseldon bounds describe the latter route, immediately to the north of the suggested former junction, as 'Brokenestret' (Grundy 1919: 208). This terminology suggests that the derelict condition of the road at this point was its most

notable feature. Earlier in the bounds, a section of the same road, but this time to the south of the proposed former junction with Yatesbury Lane, is described simply as 'the Strete' implying its contemporary use (*ibid.*: 206).

A combination of topographical, cartographic and documentary evidence has, therefore, allowed the northbound course of Yatesbury Lane to be integrated into the network of local and regional communications in the Anglo-Saxon period.

#### *Yatesbury to Marlborough via Avebury*

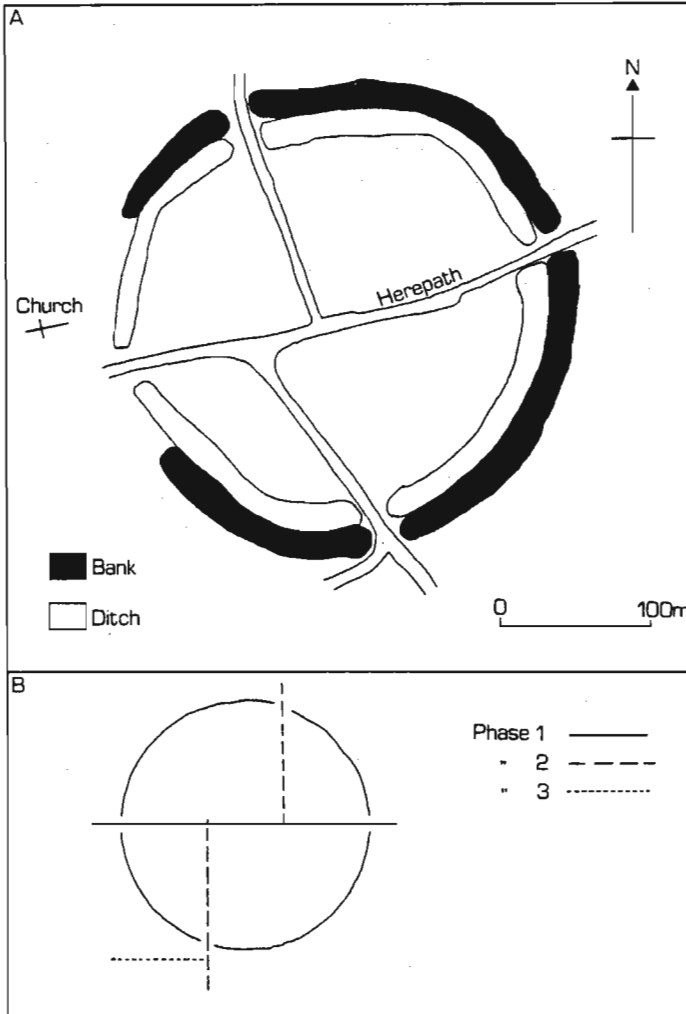
After leaving the south entrance of enclosure 3 at Yatesbury the lane heads for Avebury 4km to the southeast. On its approach to the western entrance of the henge monument the route crosses the River Kennet, and then continues, to leave by the east entrance (Fig. 4A). To the east of Avebury the route is termed a *herepath* on Ordnance Survey maps. This is an Old English word meaning 'highway', or, more specifically 'army way', and based on the evidence presented so far it can be proposed that all of Yatesbury Lane, as described above, constituted a *herepath* in the Anglo-Saxon period. This situation has implications for the interpretation of enclosure 3 at Yatesbury, and these are considered below.

The late Neolithic henge monument at Avebury has been a focus of archaeological research since the seventeenth century (Ucko *et al.* 1991). There has been recent discussion of the dating of the four entrances and of the nature of the routeways which serve the village which is situated within and to the west of the monument (Hindle 1993: Fig. 3, 22; Ucko *et al.* 1991: 172-3, 183-99) and this is considered below.

The original existence of the north, south and west entrances at Avebury has been adequately proved by excavation and the presence of the Kennet Avenue (Keiller 1939; Keiller and Piggot 1936). The east entrance, however, remains unproven, although the general consensus is that all four entrances are original (Ucko *et al.* 1991: 183). The east entrance has been suggested to be original based on the form of the bank on its northern side (Smith 1965: 195). To make such an assumption based on form, however, is somewhat hazardous given the antiquity of the earthwork and the fact that the east entrance has seen the passage of road traffic from at least the Late Anglo-Saxon period until the eighteenth or early-nineteenth centuries when the coach road was superseded by the Great West Road to the south (the modern A4). Geophysical survey outside the eastern entrance revealed evidence of a linear feature which was observed to run eastward approximately mirroring the line of the *herepath* (Ucko *et al.* 1991: 184-6). The linear feature, which was 5m wide, was interpreted as a road, with intermittent evidence for surviving wheel ruts. The anomaly abuts the bank of the henge to the north of the east entrance, which led to the suggestion that the configuration of the east entrance may be misleading (*ibid.*). Alternatively, the geophysical anomaly could be seen as a series of intercutting roadside ditches of a similar nature to those excavated at Yatesbury (see above) and the 'wheel ruts' as irregular peaks of natural bedrock which have survived truncation between phases of ditch cutting. The Yatesbury Lane evidence, both excavated and extant, shows that only one side of the routeway was ditched and that the position of a drainage ditch could undergo lateral movement of up to 7m, a measurement not inconsistent with the Avebury geophysical evidence.

An analysis of the stratigraphic relationships of the routeways in and around the monument was undertaken (Fig. 4B) using techniques developed by CBARP and particularly by Deacon (1994). This shows beyond doubt that the east/west road is the

earliest of the sequence, and that the routes entering the monument from the north and south are secondary (Fig. 4). It is possible, therefore, that the east entrance is related to the laying out of the *herepath*, the dating of which is considered below.



**Figure 4** The horizontal stratigraphy of Avebury's roads

After leaving Avebury the *herepath* runs up over the Marlborough Downs and descends into the Late Saxon town of Marlborough, along Kingsbury Street (Fig. 5). Haslam has suggested that the name Kingsbury, and evidence of defences to the west of St Mary's Church, implies a defended settlement, or *burh*, and he proposes an early-tenth century origin for the settlement (Haslam 1984: 101). The relationship of the *herepath* to the gridded, probably planned, streets of Marlborough provides further evidence supporting an Anglo-Saxon origin for the *herepath* route.

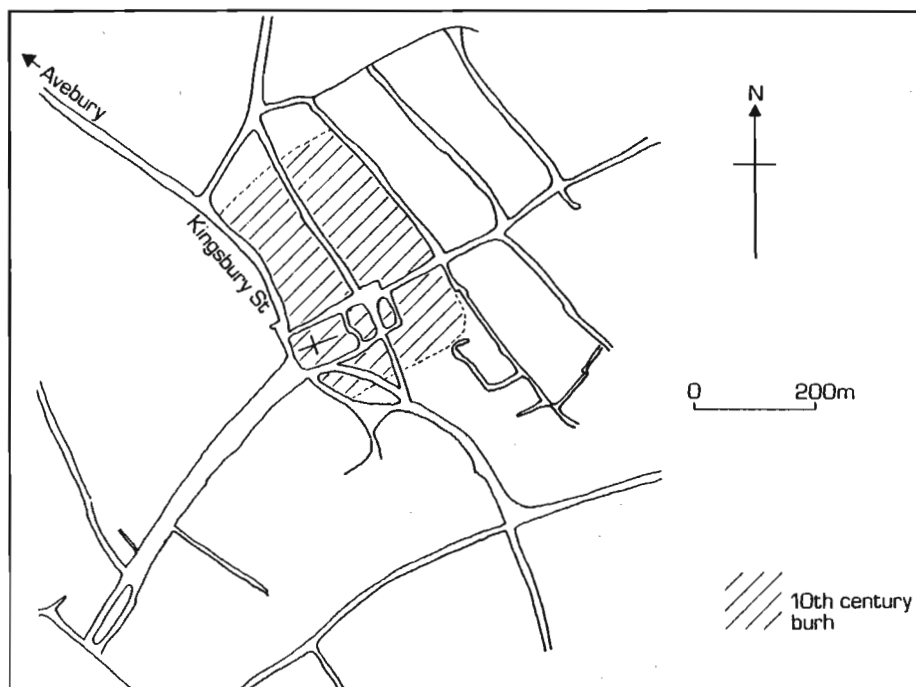


Figure 5 The early-tenth century town of Marlborough (after Haslam 1984) showing the herepath in relation to the planned streets

### Discussion

In a recent exhaustive discussion of the range of evidence available for the study of the Avebury monument, the lack of the application of modern, non-destructive archaeological techniques such as fieldwalking, geophysics and the analysis of ancient and modern cartographic evidence is rightly emphasised (Ucko *et al.* 1991: 158, 161). The associated discussion of the road network, however, failed to realise the full potential of such sources in the interpretation of the site. For example, only the seventeenth century and later use of roads was considered (*ibid.*: 172-3); this seems to be a result of concentrating on the evidence afforded by antiquaries. The function of Avebury's roads is perceived to have been limited to post-Medieval communications between Marlborough and Bath, even though the road to the east of the monument is still called a 'herepath'. The authors state further that the south entrance, and not the west, seems to have been used as the exit from the monument on the journey from Marlborough to Bath 'perhaps because the ford at the "Watery place" W of the church was unsuitable for major traffic.' (*ibid.*). However, the use of the south instead of the west entrance merely reflects a change in the pattern of local communications by the seventeenth or eighteenth century, a date broadly consistent with the replanning of Yatesbury. The vital point which was overlooked was the existence of an extensive network of communications in the region during the Anglo-Saxon period. In other words, the period of time during which the morphology of the Avebury monument may have been affected by routeways is considerably longer than that envisaged by Ucko *et al.*

It appears as though Hindle was similarly influenced by the later evidence,

when charting the course of Anglo-Saxon and earlier routes in the Avebury area, as he shows the *herepath* entering the monument by its east entrance and departing via the south (Hindle 1991: fig. 3). This interpretation pays no attention to the horizontal stratigraphy of Avebury's roads nor to the location of St James Church, which was probably a minster (superior) church in the Anglo-Saxon period (Semple 1994), which lies to the west of the monument. It is difficult to envisage a routeway in use in the Anglo-Saxon period - as the *herepath* name indicates - turning south and leaving the monument some 200m short of an important church and, probably, the focus of the Late Anglo-Saxon settlement. Hindle seems to consider the road to the east of Avebury as a discrete entity, and explains its function by suggesting a prehistoric origin for the route, as it connects the Great Ridgeway to Avebury (Hindle 1991: 22). In fact, in the authentic charter bounds of East Overton, recorded in a grant of land from King Aethelstan (AD 925-39) to a nun, Wulfswyth (in AD 939), the ridgeway itself is termed a *herepath* (Finberg 1964: cat. no. 245; Sawyer 1968: cat. no. 449). It can be observed once more that the Yatesbury Lane *herepath* played a central role in the early road network in the region, which in the Anglo-Saxon period consisted of selected parts of earlier road networks and new routes which developed as a response to changes in settlement patterns.

It has been shown that a *herepath* route probably ran from Wroughton to Marlborough via Yatesbury and Avebury and that this route served the dual purpose of linking these settlements to each other and to the regional network of communications. Although the Anglo-Saxon ditch terminals of enclosure 3 at Yatesbury remain to be precisely located, pottery of Early, Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon date has been recovered from the sequence of ditches which describe the enclosure. It is also significant that the largest of the ditches is of probable Middle Saxon date, suggesting a substantial enclosure of defensive proportions. The enclosure itself has been shown to have Late Roman origins but the ditch sequence from trench E suggests that the *herepath* is of a later period.

The evidence from Marlborough, which Haslam proposes was founded by King Edward the Elder (AD 899-911) as a defended site, might suggest that the *herepath* route was laid out in the early tenth century. The establishment of a substantial system of civil defence is traditionally seen as the work of King Alfred (AD 871-99) after his defeat of the Vikings at the battle of Ethandune (Edington in Wiltshire) in AD 878; with his successor Edward the Elder continuing the work of defending the realm (Stenton 1971: 264-5).

The *herepath* would have established a link with Avebury and its minster church, and the commanding topographical location of the route from Avebury to Wroughton may well have had a defensive motive. The inclusion of Yatesbury in this network was no doubt influenced by its defensible characteristics and enclosure 3 is probably best seen as a pre-existing minor defended site incorporated into the route. Pepper has termed such sites 'small *burhs*' (Pepper 1994) and these are seemingly related to a pre-Viking system of civil defence as first proposed by Gelling (Gelling 1989: 148).

## Conclusions

Fieldwork has shown how an examination of the development of routeways can provide information about the morphology and dating of settlements and landscapes over long



distances. The implications for our understanding of Avebury are not limited to the Anglo-Saxon settlement but extend to the henge monument itself; the possibility that its east entrance is the result of an early-tenth-century programme of civil defence serves to illustrate the point. It is hoped that this paper has shown the value of looking at sites in relation to changes in their associated routeways.

### Acknowledgements

The results presented in this paper have benefited from detailed discussions with Alexander Deacon, Gabriel Pepper, Charles Harward and Sarah Semple. Permission to excavate at Manor Farm, Yatesbury, was given by Roger Partridge whose assistance made the excavations a lighter task than they might have been. I am grateful to Gustav Milne, Dr Martin Welch, Professor James Graham-Campbell and Gabriel Pepper for their constructive remarks on earlier versions of this paper. The fieldwork upon which this research is based was generously supported by the University of Durham Rosemary Cramp Fund, Institute of Archaeology Gordon Childe Fund and the Cumber Family Charitable Trust.

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