

Tye Henge a Lawford Stone Age mystery & Timber circle.

Over 4,000 years ago the Lawford Lads of the day constructed a monument in what is now Tye Field, just behind the football pitches off School Lane. By then this was an island, the melting ice causing sea levels to rise about 2,000 years earlier. This is the time when the Homo Sapiens here changed from simply hunting animals for meat and using any fruits gathered from naturally growing plants and started instead to domesticate a selected range

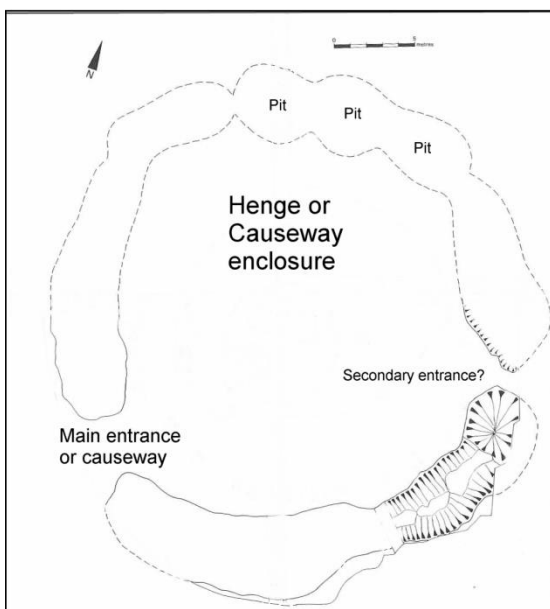
of animals and cultivated specific plants and crops. It was a gradual process that ran between 6 to 4 and half thousand years ago. It has become known as Neo-lithic period or New-Stone age.

These were the first farmers and a settled way of life had both benefits and challenges. They had to develop the technical skills needed to raise crops, breed and look after animals. As big a challenge was learning to live within much bigger social networks, from family groups to larger communities or tribes, as the population settled and expanded as food productivity increased.

The circular mound they created stood proud, left alone and respected until

technology gave modern farmers with tractors the ability to plough it level. In doing so they struck a mass of flints and archaeologists were brought in to rescue and make sense of what remained. They came back several times and were able to date the monument but the mystery was why had it been built here and what was it used for?

One thing was clear, it had always been intended to stand out and make a statement in the landscape. Neolithic people were very in touch with the land on which they depended. Whilst looking over the magical springs that fed down into Wignall Brook, and the fertile Stour river valley beyond, it was no co-incidence they picked out the highest point on the Tendring peninsula. So the southern aspect was just as important and from the ridge the views look back down the plateau sloping away towards Gt Bromley and beyond.

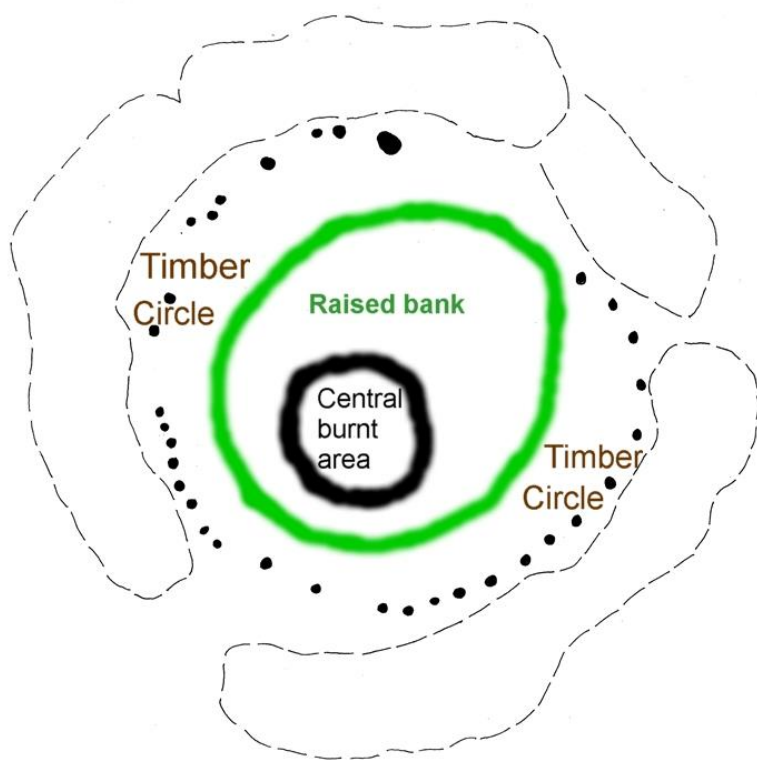


These first farmers were adept at clearing any woodland in the way, though due to the poor soils, it may have been fairly bare scrubland and perhaps used as today as pasture for cattle.

Neolithic monuments are very rare in this part of the country. First impressions from aerial photographs suggested a ring ditch, but it was clearly constructed by a series of connected pits of up to 2 metres in depth and up to 8 metres wide. There are two entrances which suggest a 'Henge' or a 'causewayed' enclosure. It is big, with an internal diameter of some 21 metres, plus the pits both sides, making it about 37 metres overall.

The pits could have been dug over a period of time, with people coming back each year to add more, or perhaps bury or re-bury items such as polished stones, axe heads, pots or the remains of ancestors as part of some communal activity.

One problem they had was the lack of any stone locally to build with. However during the first excavation in the early 1960's Bryan Blake identified the remains of a large 20 metre diameter circle of post holes set 1-2 metres apart. The holes were each about 40cm in diameter, a decent tree trunk size, 33 were finally identified, there may have been more to complete the circle. There are gaps in the timber circle by the main South west entrance. Inside it would have created a special, enclosed space (they didn't know buildings like we do today), it could have had wooden lintels on the top as well. It may have been built at the same time as the ditches or afterwards, we just don't know, the complex local geology making interpretation of the different layers difficult. Such timber circles are not found much in the rest of Europe so it maybe the local population were culturally as well as physically separated from the mainland by then.



The posts holes are not really close enough together to be used for a domestic dwelling.

One of the problems farmers face is knowing the seasons, when to plough, when to sow, when to harvest. There were no clocks or calendars or smart phones. If you wanted to measure out the year you needed to create a range of fixed points, such as you can get with a timber circle. Working out the shortest day of the year was an obsession in neolithic times – Stonehenge is just one example from the same period and it also started with a timber construction, as did a number of the other stone circles. Here in the east of the country they had no stone, so stuck with the readily available

timber, which saved them dragging big lumps of blue stone all the way from Wales. Observations of the sun give you a good start for an annual calendar to help tell the seed planters of the tribe when to go into action. In other parts of the country where they had stone – the remains of their observatories can still be found, often similar in size to that at Tye Henge.

For good observation you need a high point with all round visibility so you can mark out points where the sun and moon rise and set in different places, at different times of the year. The ridge here is ideal. We should be looking for outlying markers in the landscape, which would have radiated out from the circle, like they have at Stonehenge. There may

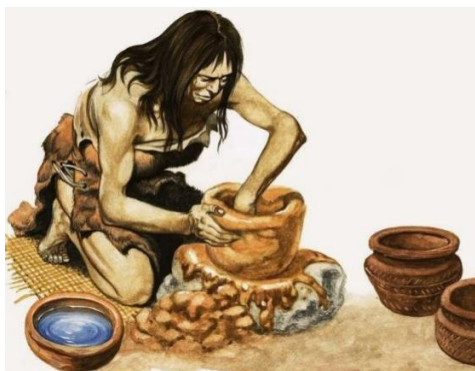
also be 'avenues' used to approach the monument, again perhaps to add to the ritual, its status and the pecking order of the local population.

It is also possible that the design was to observe the moon, perhaps to predict solar eclipses, which you can do from lunar movement and 'wobbles'. They could work out the much more complicated cycles of the moon in relation to the year and to the tides, observed easily in the estuary below and perhaps important to your neolithic seafarer. The full cycle of the moon is nearly 19 years so much more challenging to workout. Some timber rings may have been used to help compensate for the difference between the 12 lunar months of 29 and half days each, and the 12 month calendar we now use, based on our annual journey round the sun, which takes 11 days longer.

Attitudes towards the dead changed during the neolithic period and the archaeologists discovered in the middle a large round burnt area, some seven metres wide containing ash, suggesting use for communal feasting or even human cremation.

At some point they then built a large mound of earth several feet high, suggesting burial of the dead or their cremated remains. None of these would have survived for long in the local sandy soils which dissolve it all away like acid. The mound may have been designed to seal off all the ritual uses that had gone before.

If it was used as a burial 'barrow' it might have been surrounded by some internal banking in place of the posts. Given nearby later Bronze age barrows, it may be some transitional form of monument or simply have no national comparator of similar date.



The excavations discovered one of the largest collections of 'Grooved' pottery found in the East of England. This was hand made using local clay, possibly made up in coils as you might have done at school, but more expertly polished and finished. Most came out of the black burnt layer in the middle and a large pit on the south eastern edge of it.

Some earlier 'plain' neolithic bowl pieces were also found but the bulk was 700 pieces of intricately Grooved pottery, suggesting the site was four to five thousand years old, the same period as Stonehenge.

Some of this pottery was unusually red in colour; most common were parts of flat based jars. Much had been profusely decorated, even on the insides, with a variety of complex patterns such as triangles & chevrons, made using cords, combs and fingernails. This style (Rinyo-Clacton) originated in the Orkneys before spreading across the whole of the country. The patterns on the pottery could otherwise have been designed as statements about the location and the local landscape. Another local feature was the use of lozenge motives and the use of finger tips or nails to impress the patterns into the clay.



Often larger vessels, the pots could have a communal, ritual purpose as well as domestic use and are often found at Henge sites in association with timber circles. The pottery may have been specially made, deliberately broken and deposited with offerings of meat and flint work. Some pots had clearly had been used for cooking, much had been damaged by modern ploughing.



A small amount of animal bone was found, demonstrating even then a local taste for beef and pork. Pigs may have been specially bred for ritual purposes and again the use of such animals is often associated with Henge monuments. One long piece of bone had been fashioned into a pin and heavily used, either in the hand or from use on leather before it was broken. It could have

been just discarded or ritually deposited in some way.



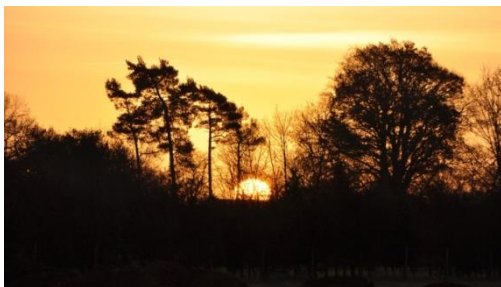
There were nearly 2,000 pieces of flint, the main material of the time for tools, utensils and weapons. The source was mainly pebbles found in the local gravels, rather than larger flint nodules mined elsewhere. As well as arrow heads they found blades of all sizes and a range of scrapers of different shapes used to skin animals etc. Again such

combined deposits are typical of neolithic Henge monuments.

Also in the burnt area they found examples of pot boilers. These are stones first heated in the fire and then dropped into pots of water to get the water to boil without having to put the fragile pot over the fire.

A small number of flint 'microliths' from the Mesolithic period were also found, so the site could have been used for thousands of years before the neolithic people started building.

In 1959 Felix Erith from Ardeley first dated the site and he suggested Tye Henge was part of a much wider ceremonial complex. Other likely spots that could be linked have since been identified in aerial photos. These include a 'Cursus' feature at nearby Parrington Farm, a very large enclosure next door at Glanfields and two possible Barrows to the south on Riddlesdale and Lawford Hall farms. There may be more features within the immediate vicinity, especially in line of sight, set out in the landscape as part of a wider monument or astrological complex. Even now it is an ideal spot to witness the winter solstice.



Given its national significance the site was added to the list of scheduled ancient monuments to protect it and its landscape.

This monument was built four to five thousand years ago, its purpose and use may have changed during that time. Whilst much remains a mystery, it was about ceremony & ritual, the sun & moon, night & day, summer and winter, the living & the dead, the age old human conundrums and concerns.

The Tye Field ridge is surrounded by a number of Bronze Age rings and barrows which came later. The excavators also found Iron Age pottery and with a Roman settlement & burial enclosure discovered at Dale Hall, we can see a unique continuation of human activity in the Lawford area, starting at this Henge monument, as significant as any other.

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