

# Revisiting the Stone Circles of Dorset



Dr Anne Teather

# Today

1. General overview of stone circles and late Neolithic architecture
2. Kingston Russell stone circle
3. History of stone circles research in Dorset
4. Research into the Dorset stone circles
5. Discussion

# Late Neolithic monumentality

Thinking about stone circles

## What are late Neolithic monuments (3200 – 2400BC)

How is their architecture generally interpreted?



- Stone circles
- Timber circles
- Henge monuments



# Stone circles



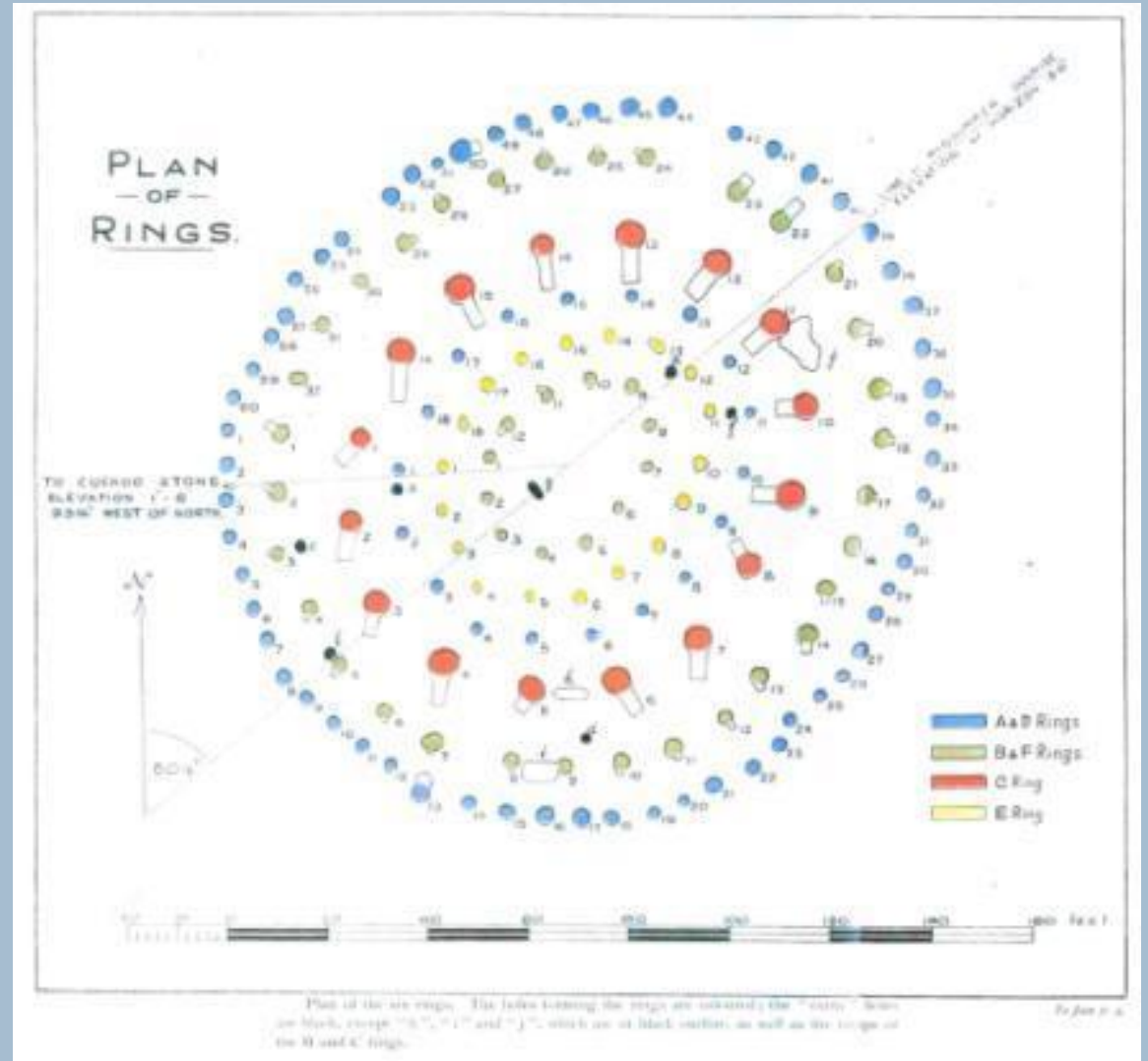
- “Stonehenge .... drew on a basic symbolism of the circle, which served to both include and exclude, to separate and unite” (Whittle 1997, 163).



# Timber Circles



- “enclosure itself defines space and creates a difference, the area within and the area without” (Gibson 1998, 90)

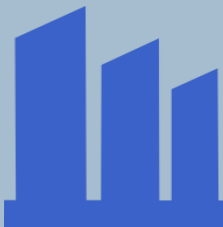






## Henge Monuments

- “henge monuments divide space into that which is ‘inside’ and that which is ‘outside’. The act of enclosure creates a place which is different or separate” (Harding 2003, 39).



The identical interpretations of what the architecture of these monuments achieves is predicated on 'similarity' - in their being circular and having material layers



- But the material layers are different: earth, wood, stone
- As is the architecture.





# Stone circles are present across the British Isles and Ireland



Templewood, Argyll



Boscawen, Cornwall  
Castelrigg, Cumbria

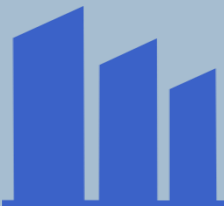




Sometimes they are composite: Arbor Low, Derbyshire, has a henge and a stone circle









## The remaining above ground monoliths at Brodgar

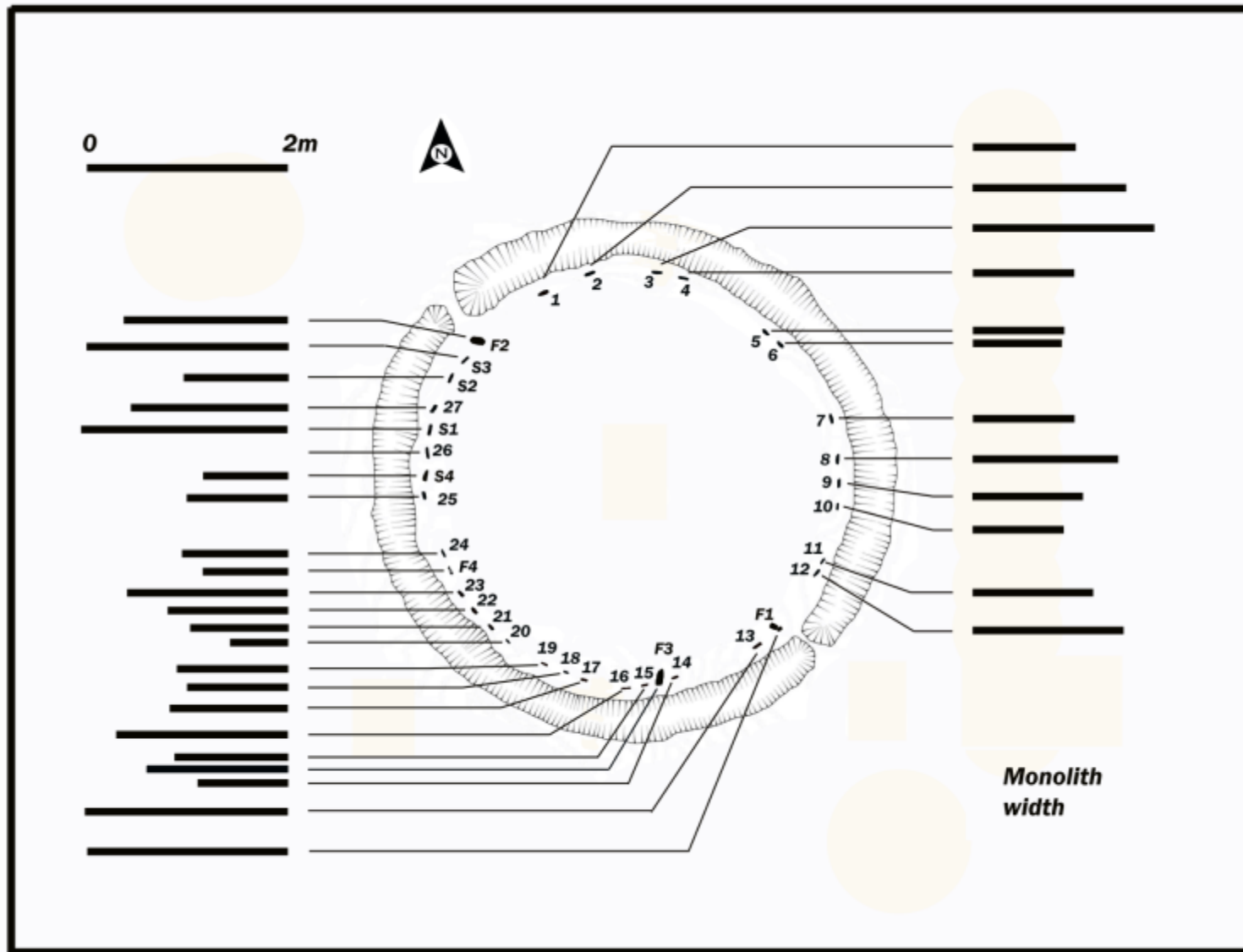




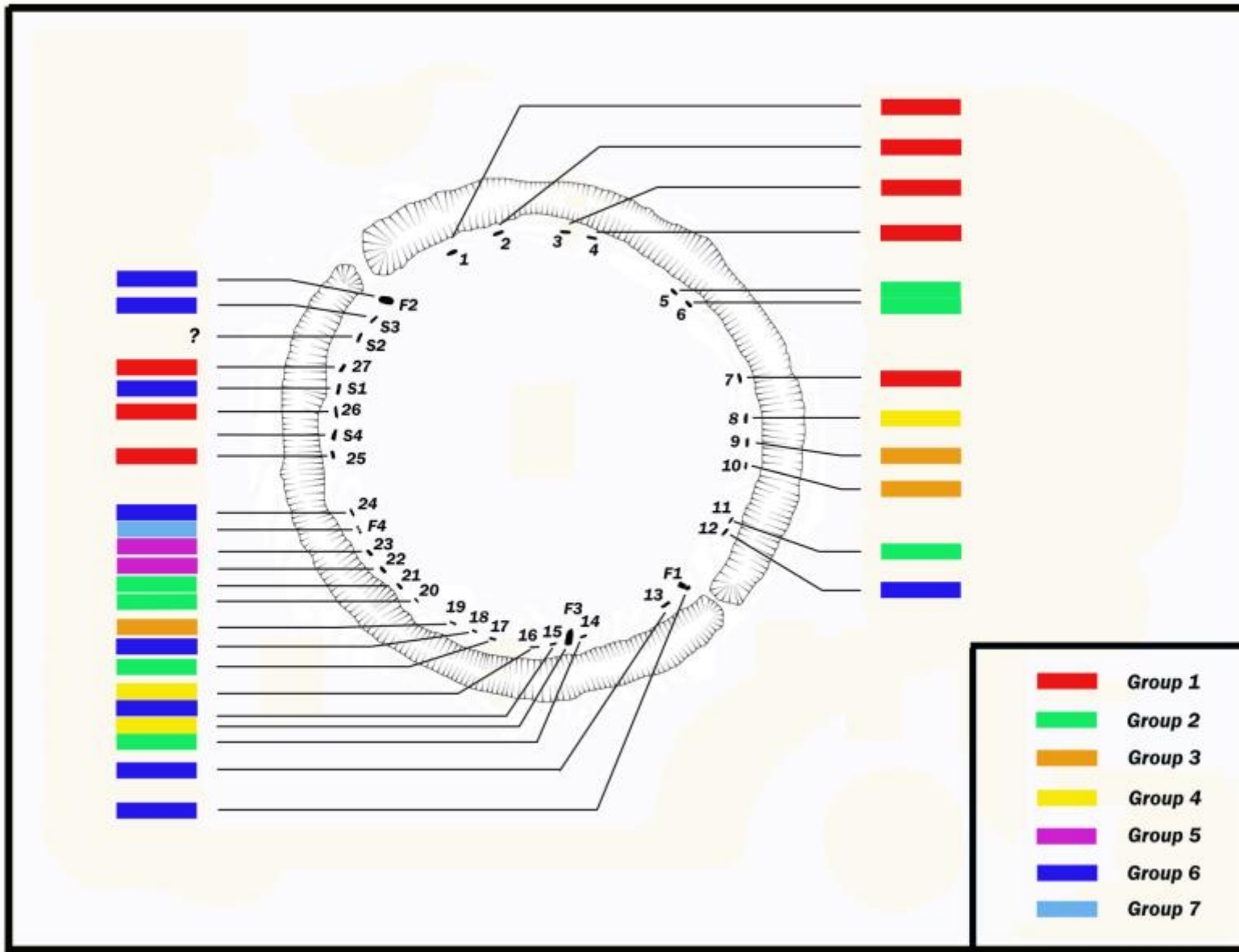
The monoliths at Brodgar form sections within the stone circle



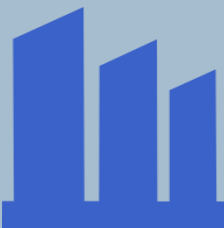
# Height of monoliths

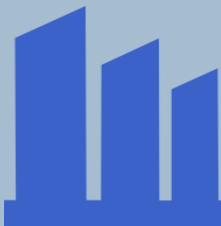
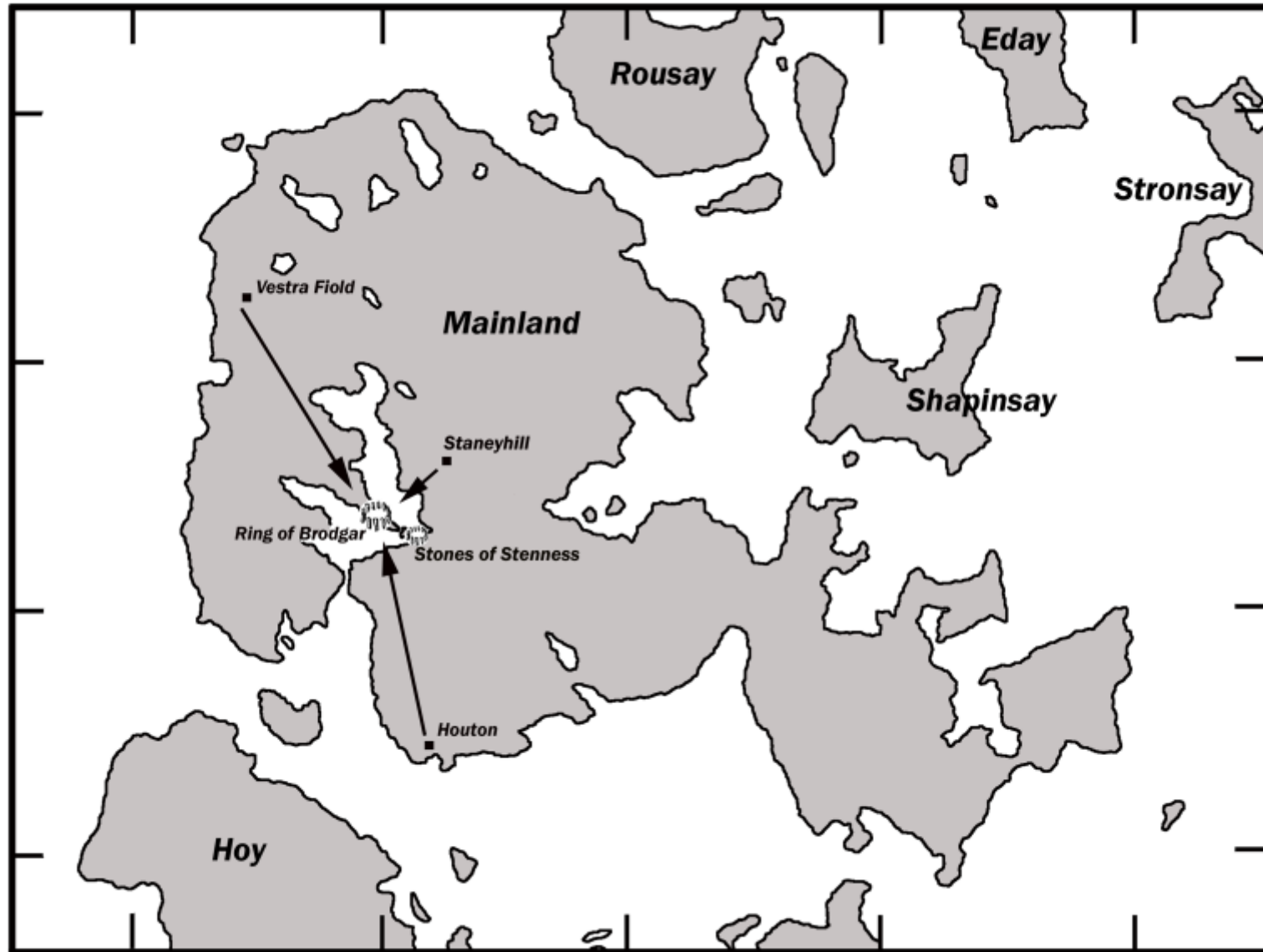






- At least 9 different lithologies form the Ring of Brodgar



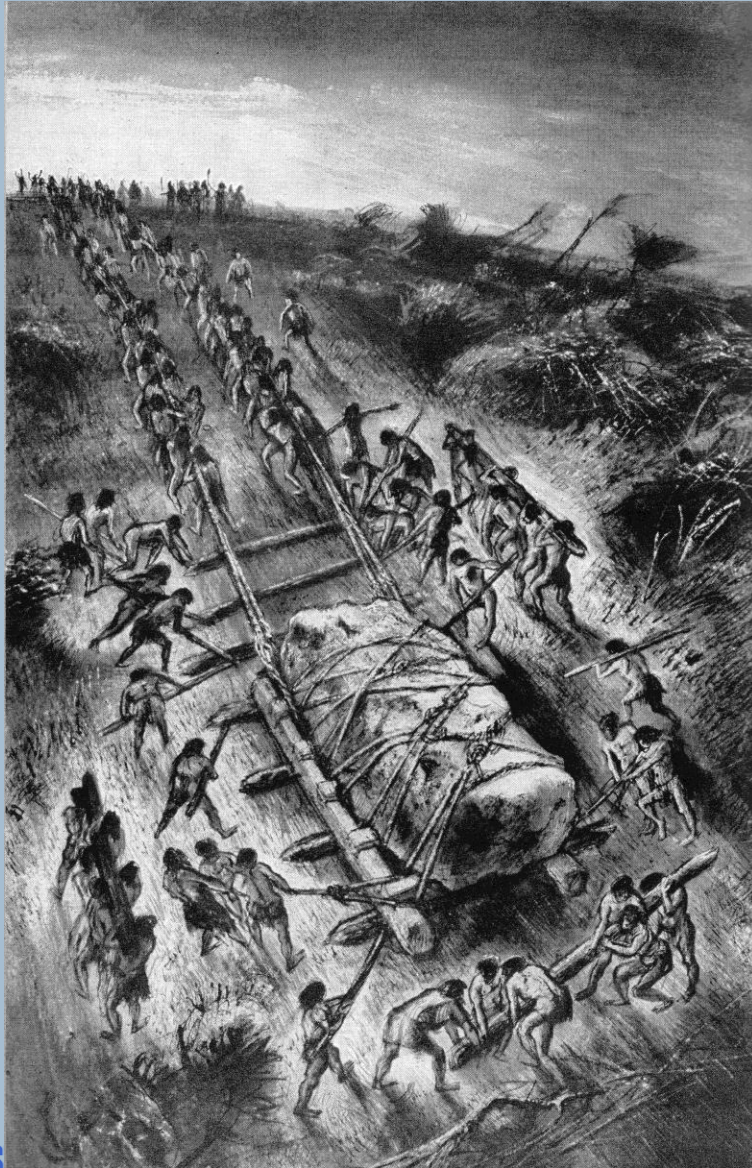


# Expedient architecture – an arena of competition - *construction*





Moving megaliths is symbolically and physically risk-laden, and highly socially competitive

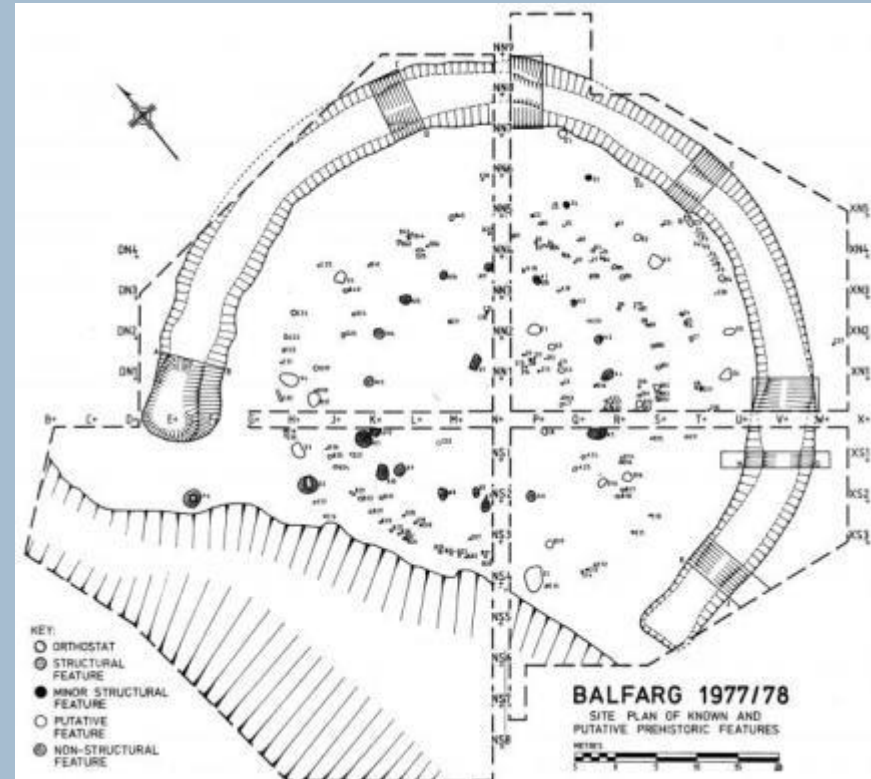


## Sometimes sequential – wood to stone (40%)



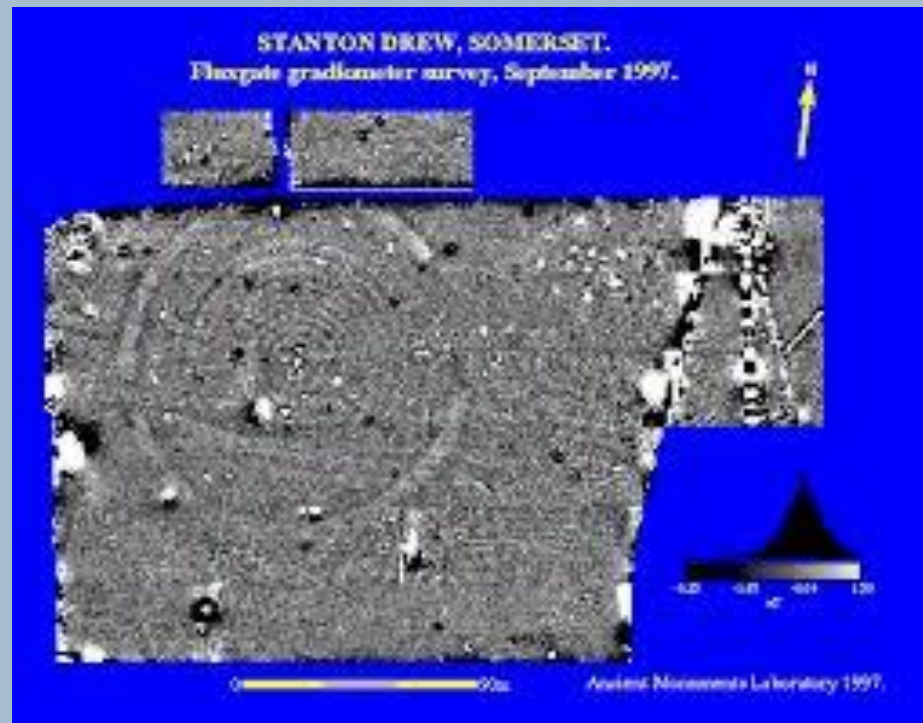
Machrie Moor, Arran

- Balfarg, Fife



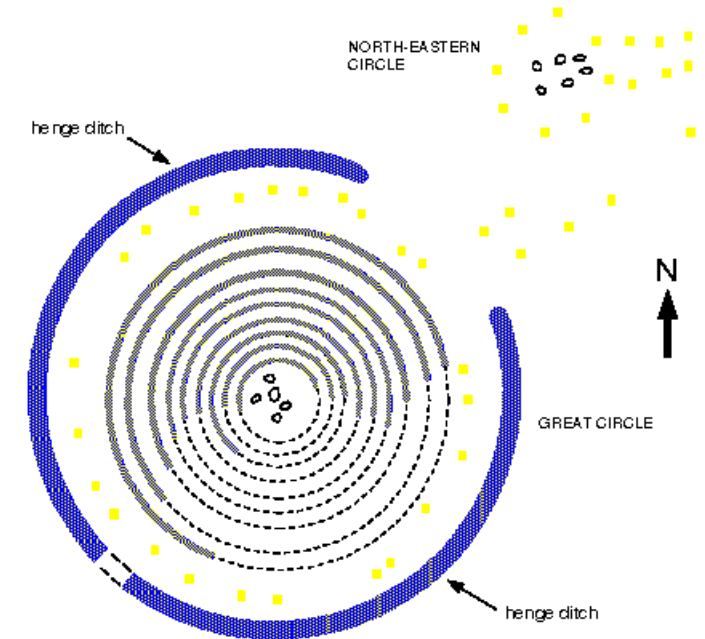


# Stanton Drew, Somerset has a timber and stone circle



## STANTON DREW STONE CIRCLES

Interpretation of Magnetometer Surveys



### KEY TO DIAGRAM



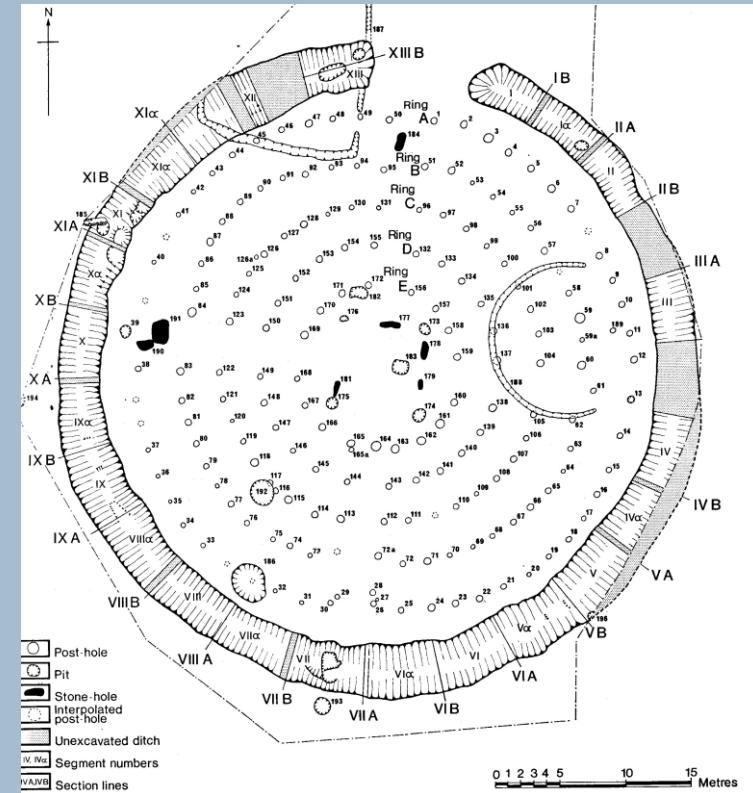


# Concentric Rings of Stone and/or Timber posts



The Sanctuary (stone and timber)  
Avebury landscape

Concentric stone circle



Site IV, (stone and timber)  
Mount Pleasant,  
Dorchester Landscape

# Wood & Stone- why?



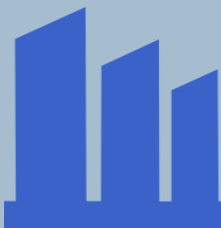
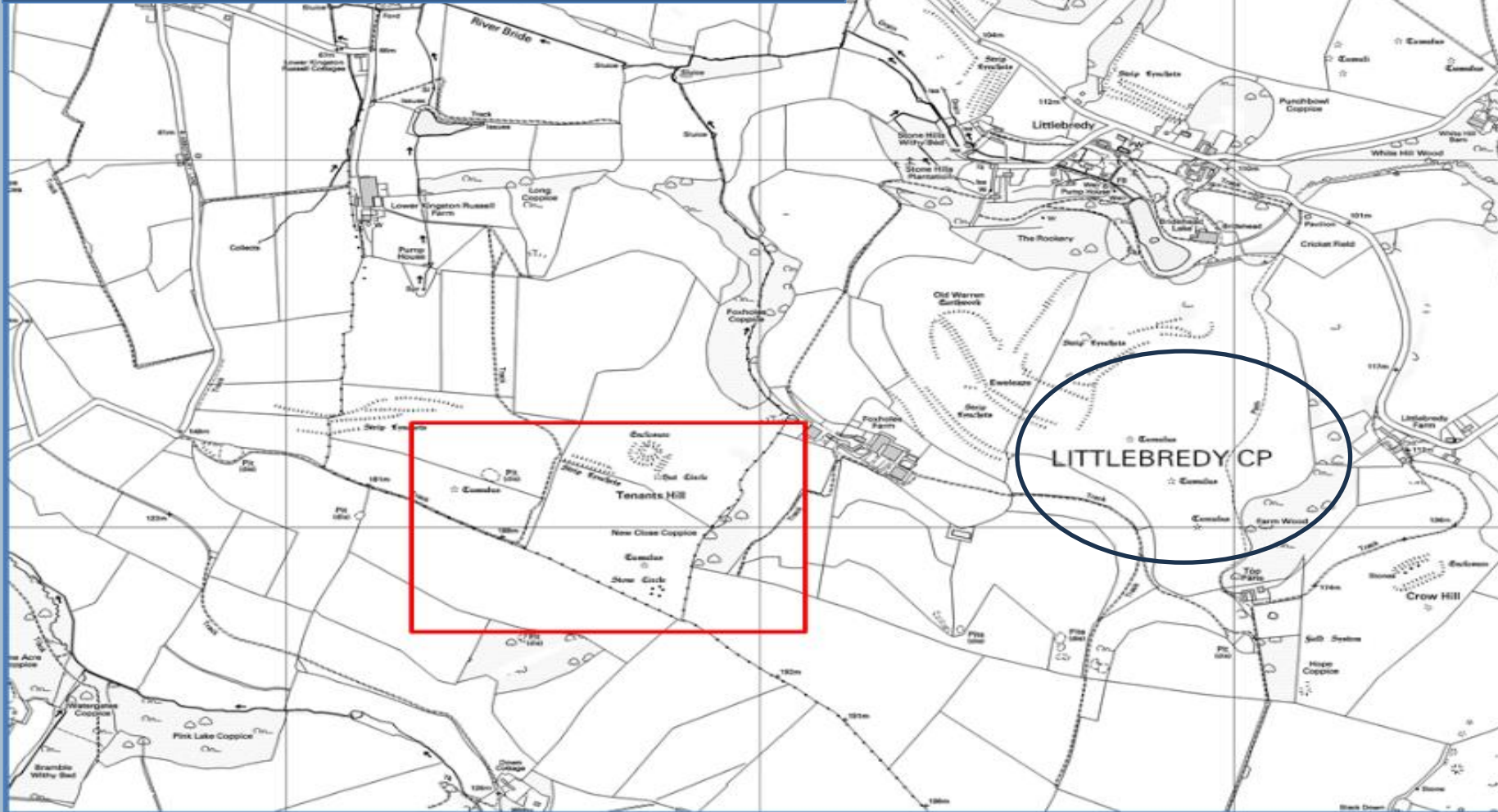


In a paper written in 1998, Mike Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina suggested that:  
these material differences were metaphoric

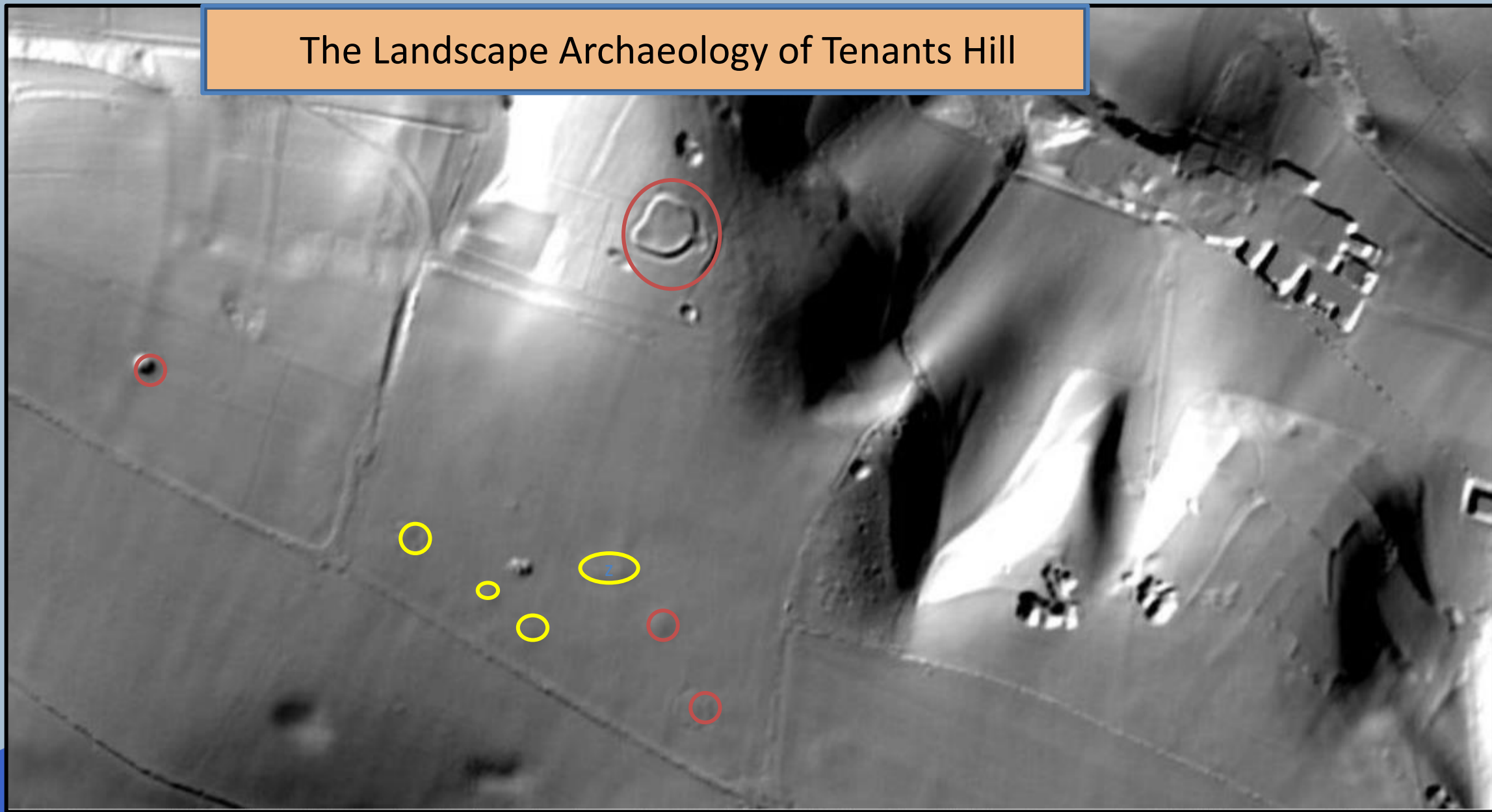




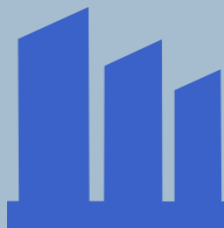
# Area of study



## The Landscape Archaeology of Tenants Hill

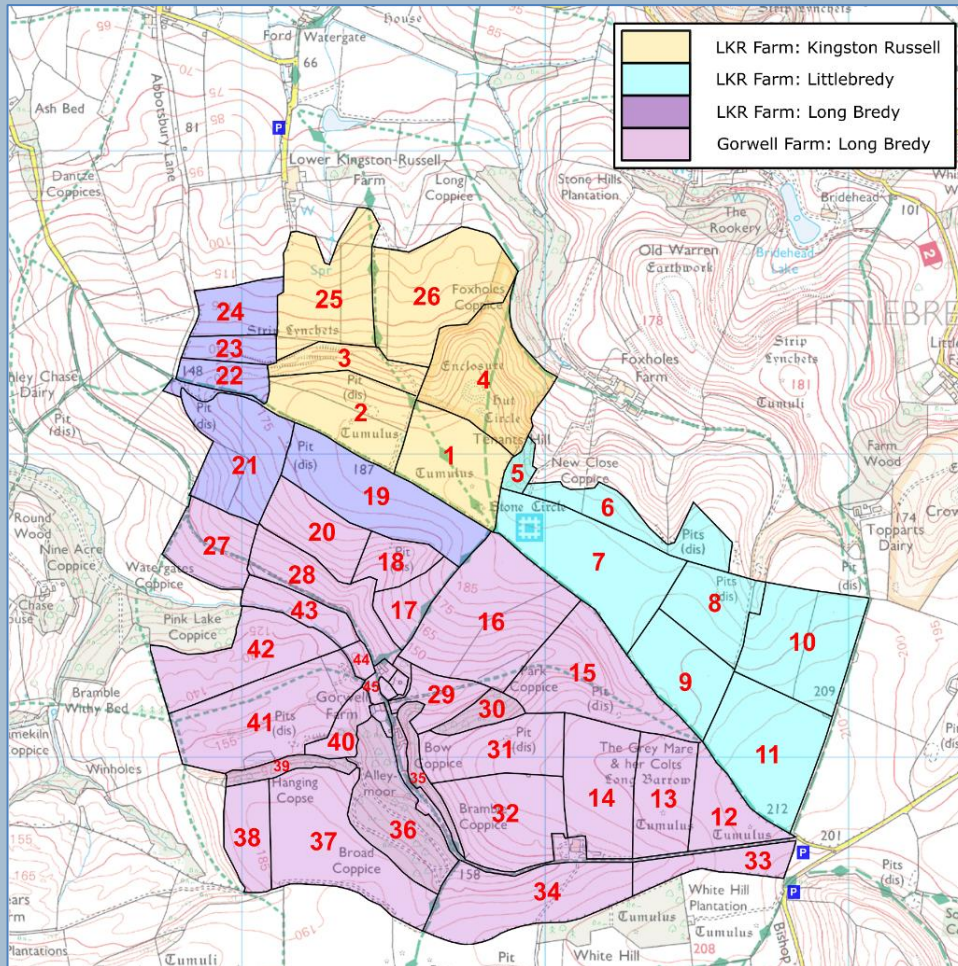








# The Survey Area



This pilot project focussed upon 40 fields and five areas of woodland.

Volunteers investigated 32 fields and 3 areas of woodland within the time available to the project.

(we have yet to collect spatial data from fields 4, 21, 22, 23 and 24, and the southern edge of field 7)

# Summary of Results



In these 30¾ fields volunteers identified **323** stones.

These comprised:

**221** sarsens

**61** greensand boulders

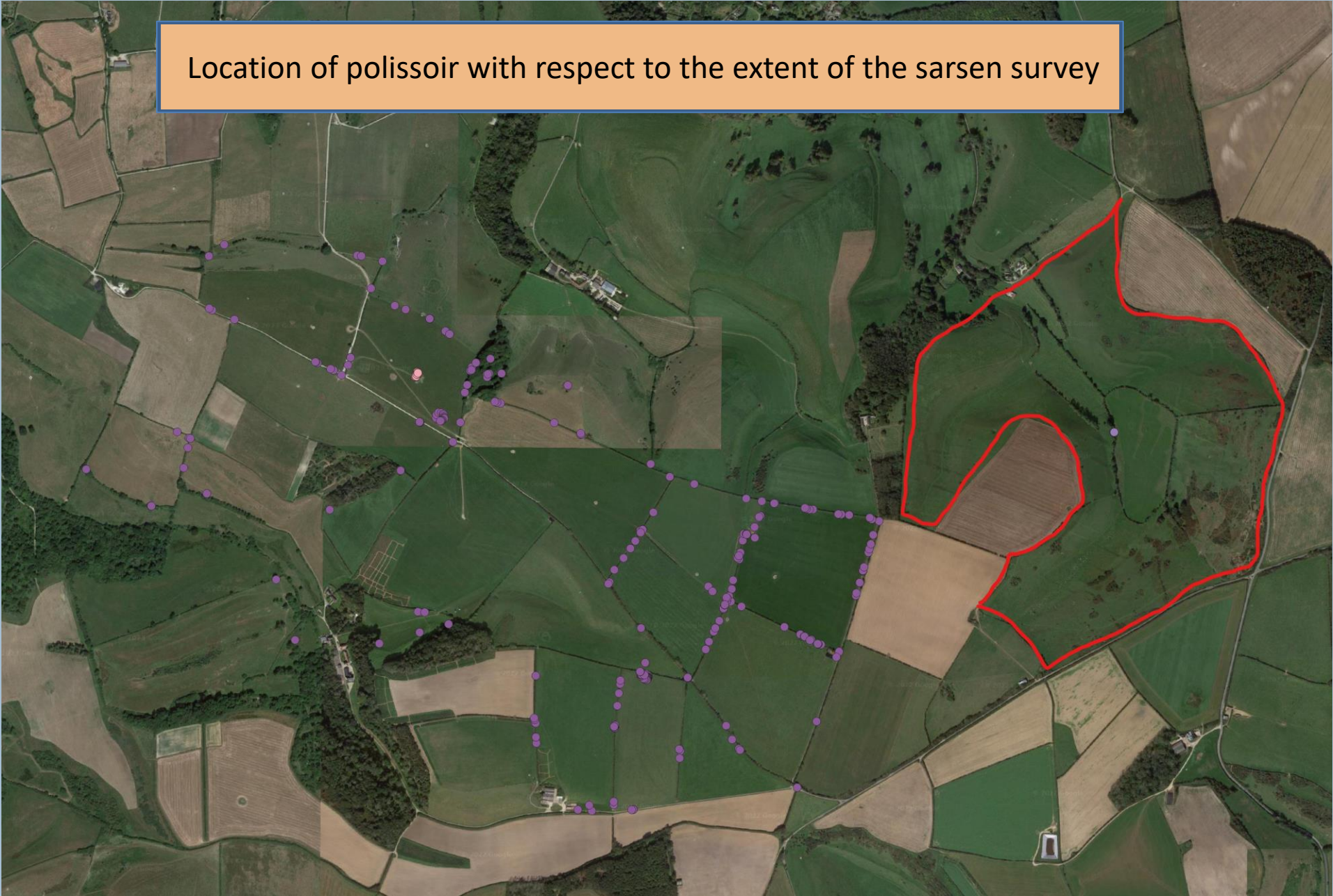
**35** flint nodules

**6** pieces of chalk,  
limestone or concrete

Although the data is incomplete, there are patterns in the distribution of different types of stone.



Location of polissoir with respect to the extent of the sarsen survey





# The polissoir



- EuCAN volunteers





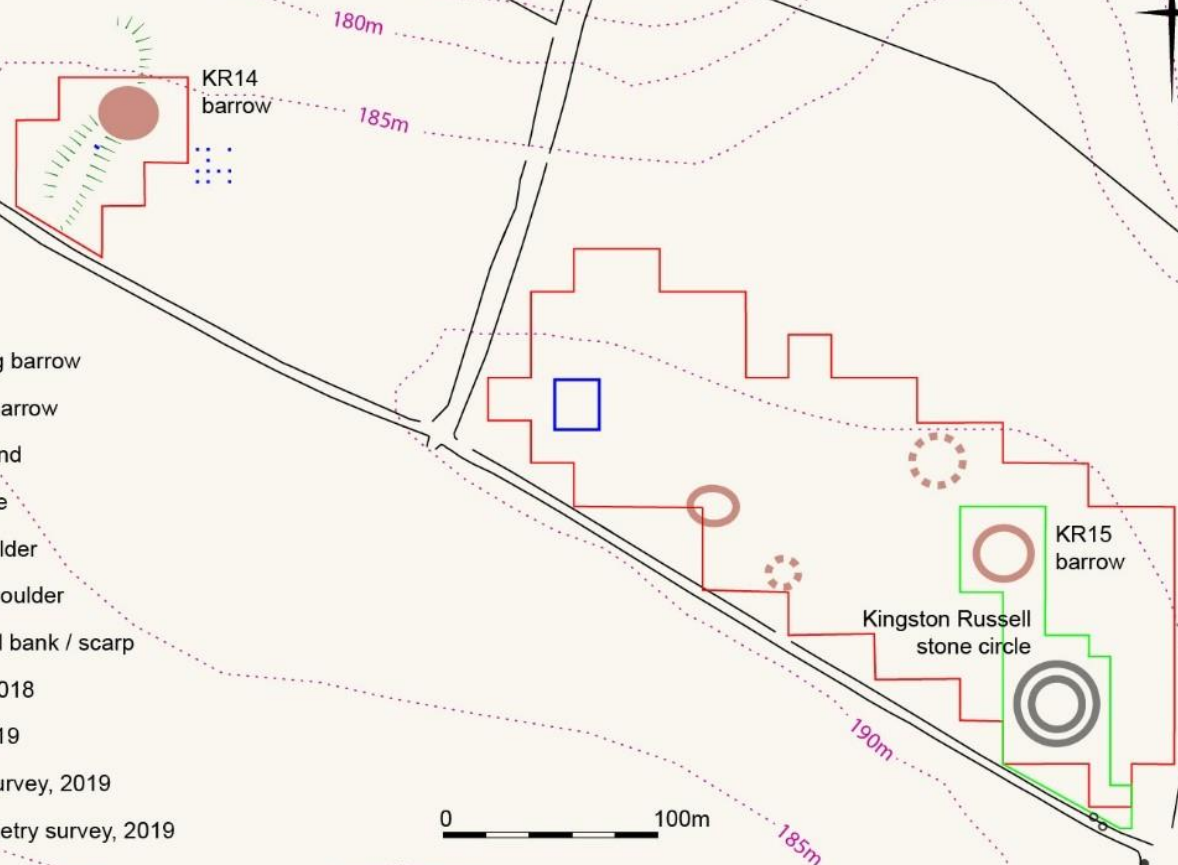
# Digging for Britain 2023/4





Tenants Hill, Kingston Russell, West Dorset

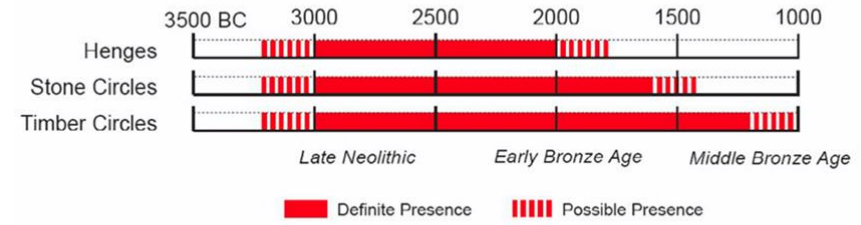
GN



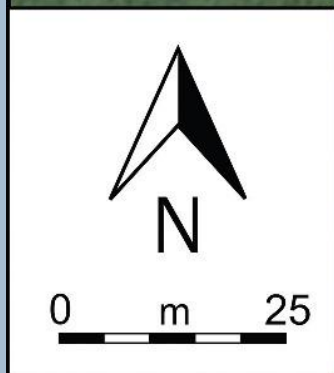
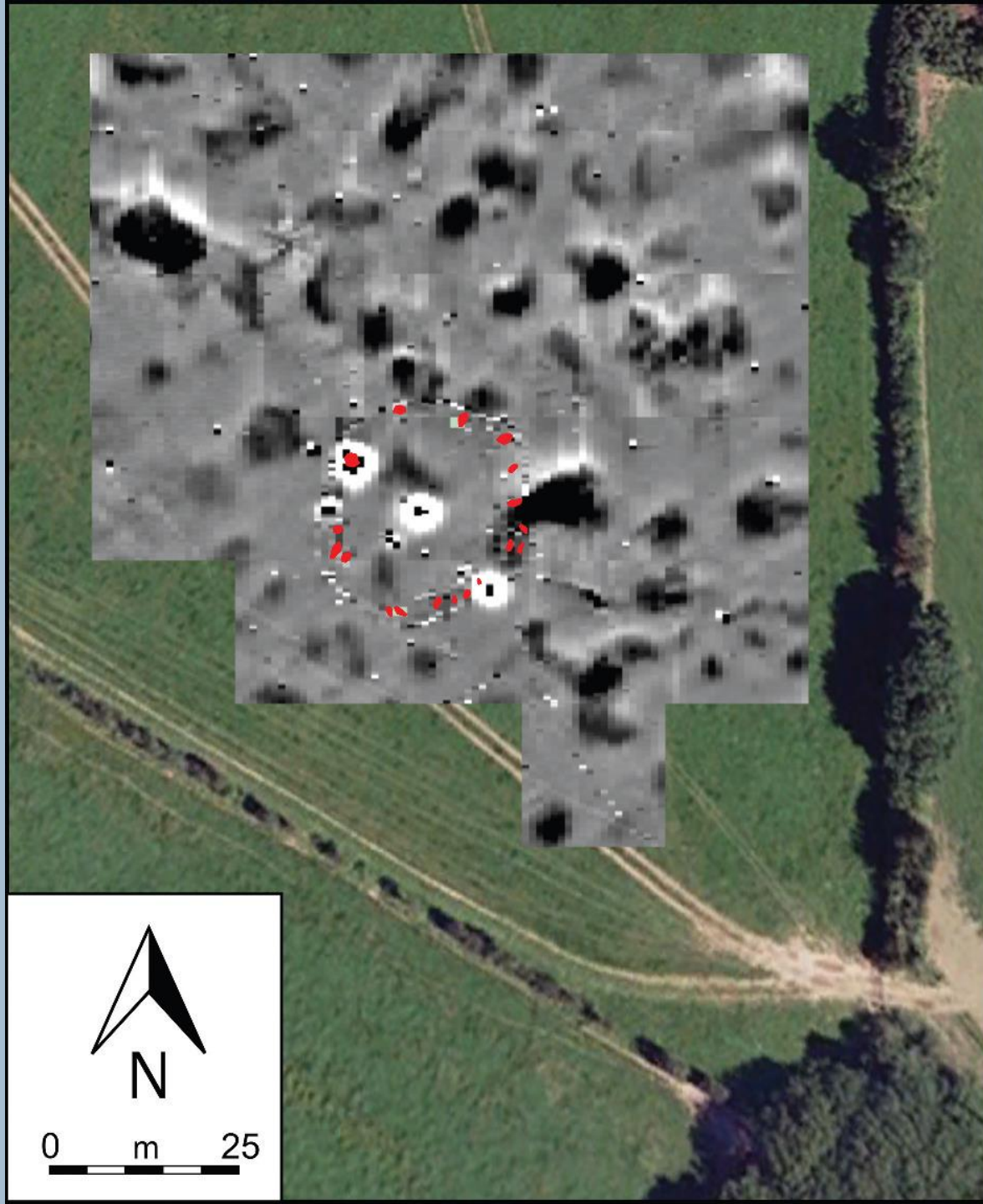
- upstanding barrow
- denuded barrow
- slight mound
- stone circle
- extant boulder
- removed boulder
- low spread bank / scarp
- test pits, 2018
- trench, 2019
- resistivity survey, 2019
- magnetometry survey, 2019

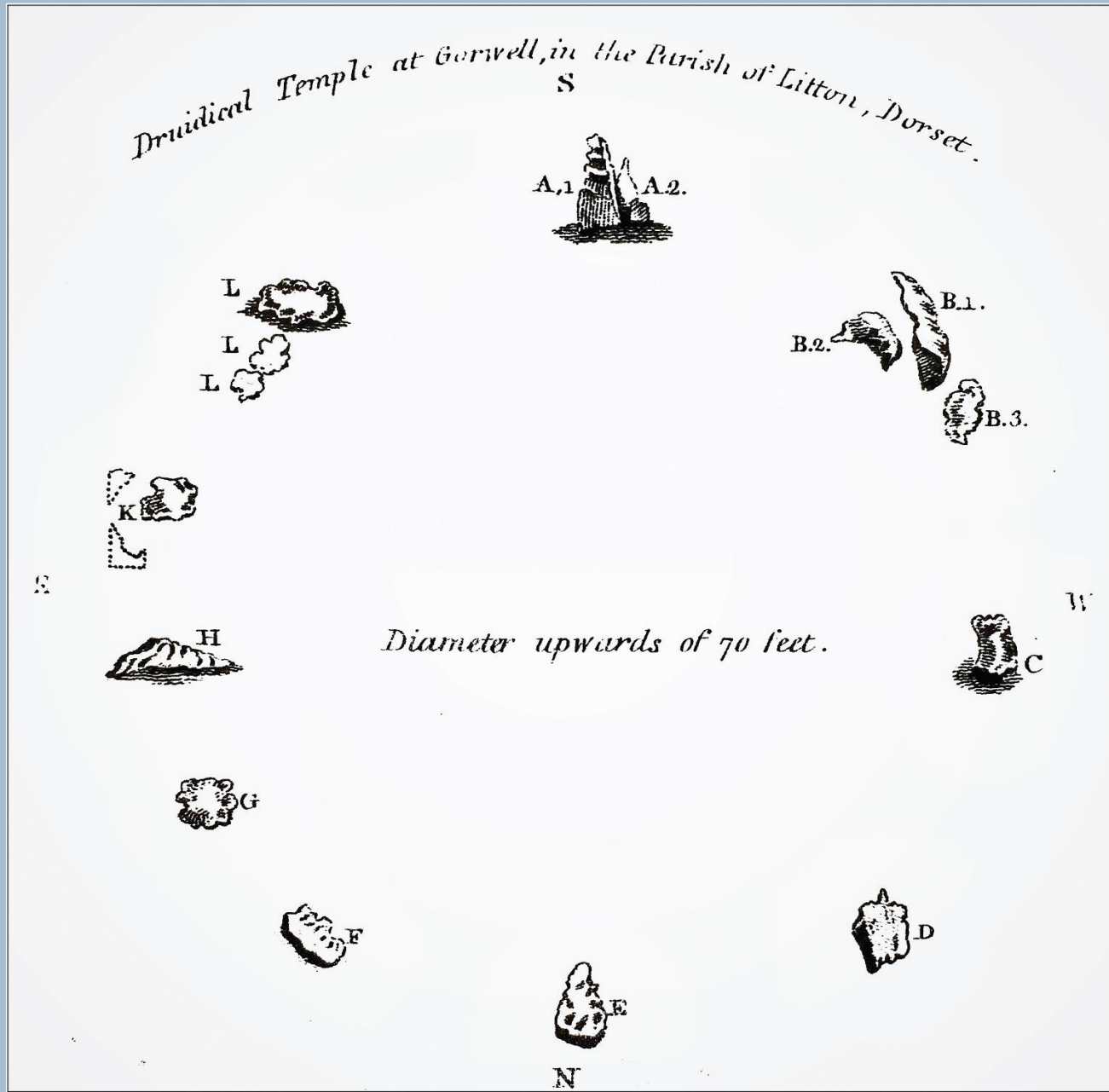
0 100m

TIMELINE









Plan of the 'Druidical Temple at Gorwell', the earliest known depiction of the Kingston Russell stone circle, made in 1805 by the Reverend James Knight (Hutchins 1796-1815, xli).



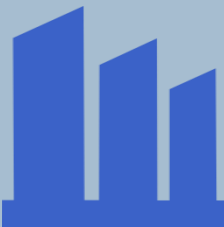
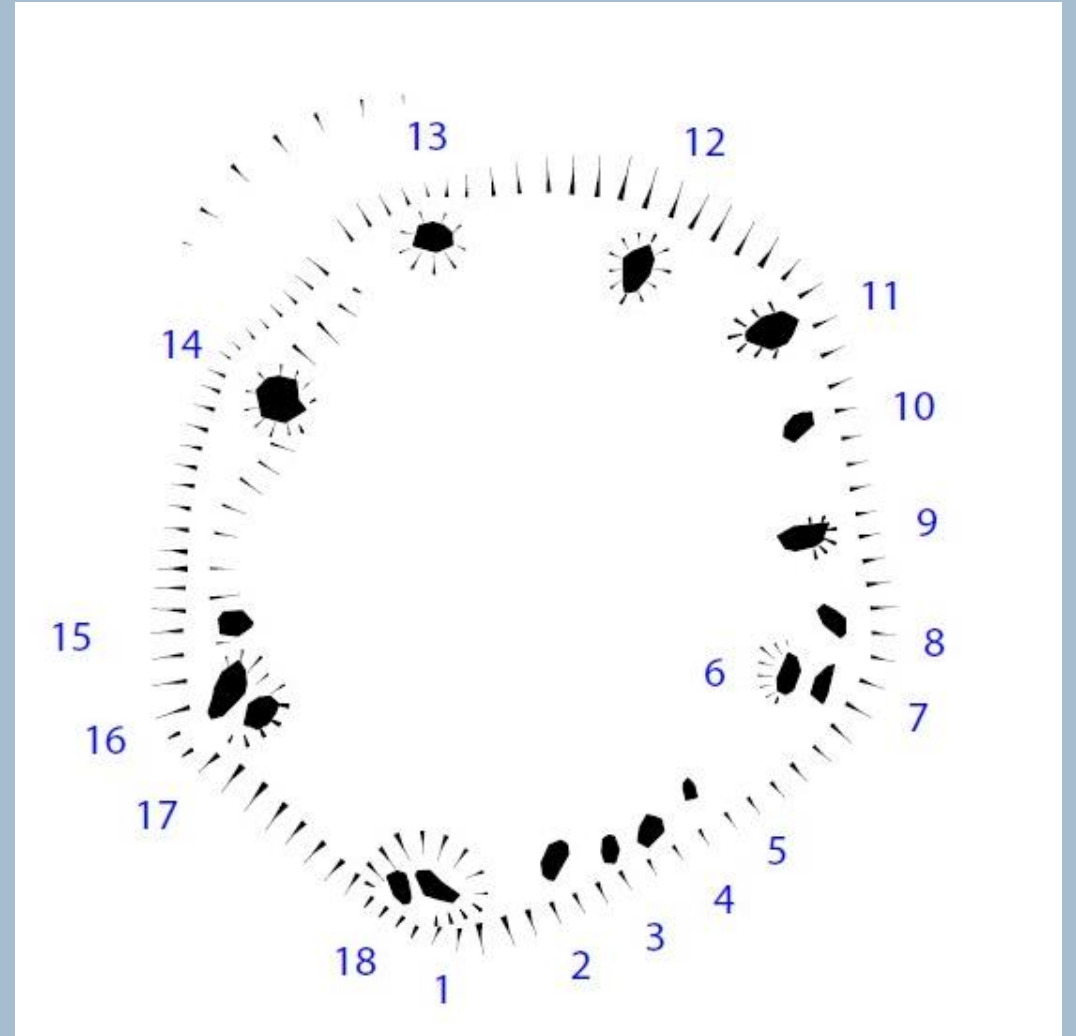


# Kingston Russell stone circle

Plan Rev James (1809)



Rebecca Pullen (HE) 2021



# Stuart and Peggy Piggott

“The primary purpose of this paper is to publish for the first time a complete set of plans and descriptions of the Dorset stone circles.....”

## Stone and Earth Circles in Dorset

by STUART AND C. M. PIGGOTT

THE primary purpose of this paper is to publish for the first time a complete set of plans and descriptions of the Dorset stone circles, and of certain allied monuments in which timber uprights may have played a part but whose visible remains today consist only of encircling banks and ditches. The existence of most of the sites described has been recorded, with full references, in the Ordnance Survey's *Map of Neolithic Wessex*, but we have been able to add several new circles to those listed there. The field-work was undertaken and the surveys made in 1936 and 1937, while in certain instances use has been made of air-photographs to which Mr O. G. S. Crawford has drawn our attention.

For once the county boundary, usually so uncomprisingly arbitrary with regard to prehistoric distributions, is a convenient definition of the area discussed, since the majority of the sites are concentrated in a small area in the Dorchester region, and the two outlying sites are both within the county—one in the Isle of Purbeck and one on the edge of Cranborne Chase. The general geographical setting is familiar from the Neolithic Wessex map referred to above; all the sites are on chalk with the exception of Rempstone, which lies on Bagshot Beds at the foot of a chalk ridge.

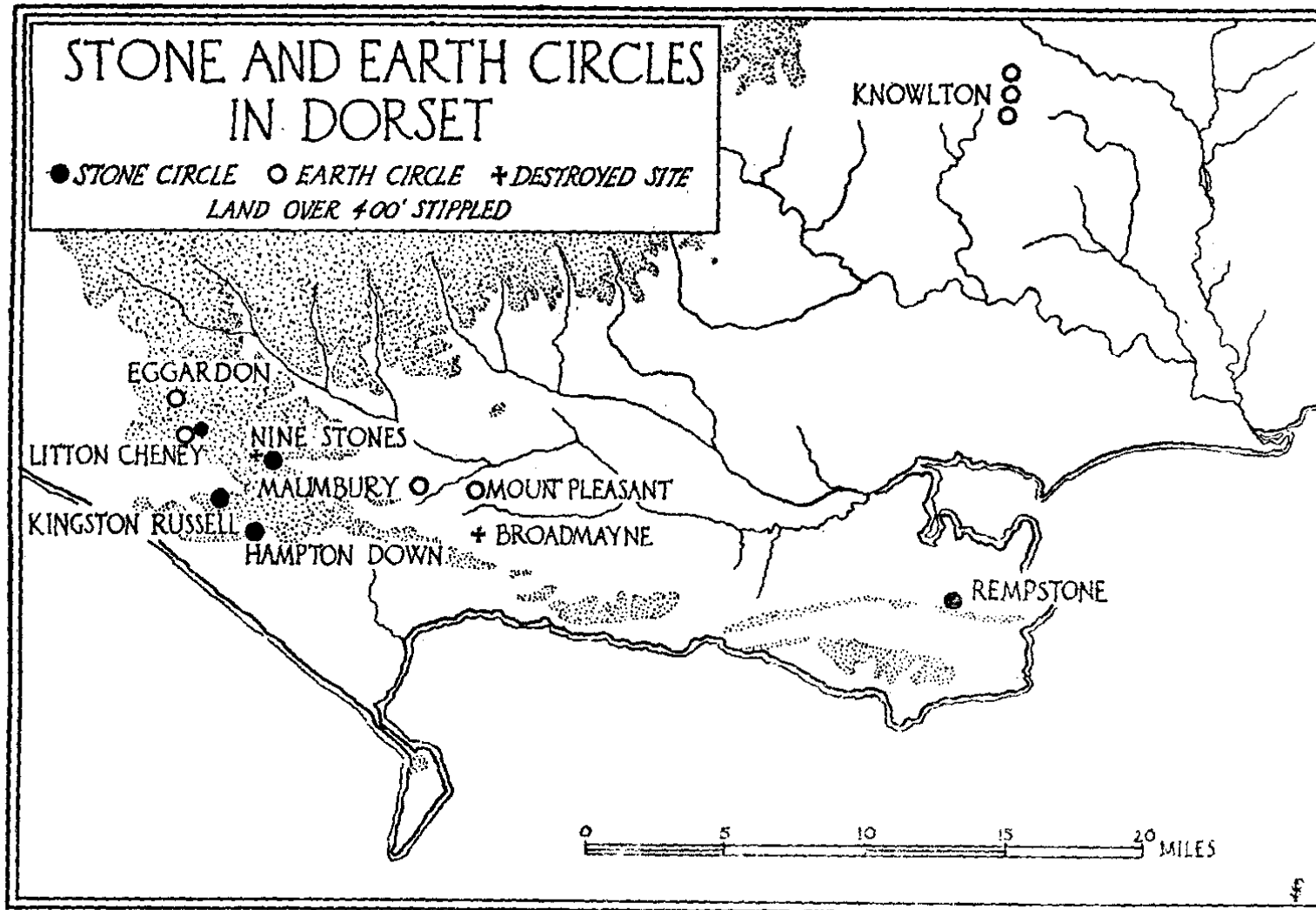
The types of monument represented divide, as the title of the paper suggests, into two main groups: free-standing stone circles and monuments in which a circular bank with internal ditch form the main and least destructible features. There is no example within our area of the combination of stone circle with bank and ditch in the Avebury-Arbor Low tradition.

### STONE CIRCLES

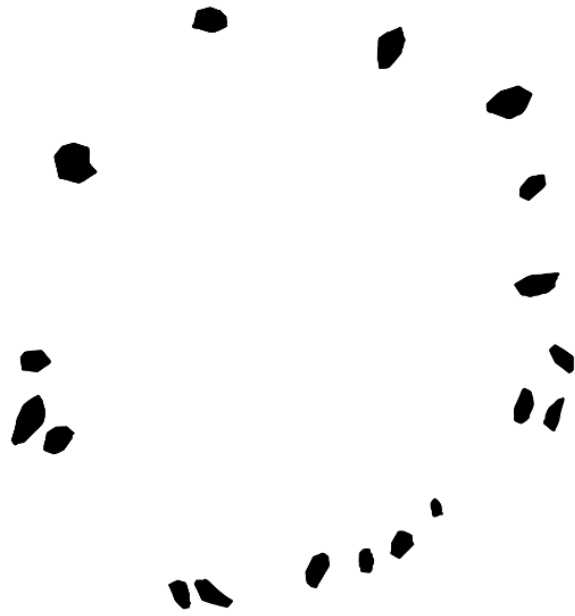
As can be seen from the map (FIG. 1), these have a limited distribution on the chalk hills west of Dorchester, with a single isolated example at Rempstone in the Isle of Purbeck. Those of the Dorchester group are all built of sarsen of the local variety which embodies numerous flint nodules; that at Rempstone is of sandstone boulders



# Stuart and Peggy Piggott



1 Kingston Russell



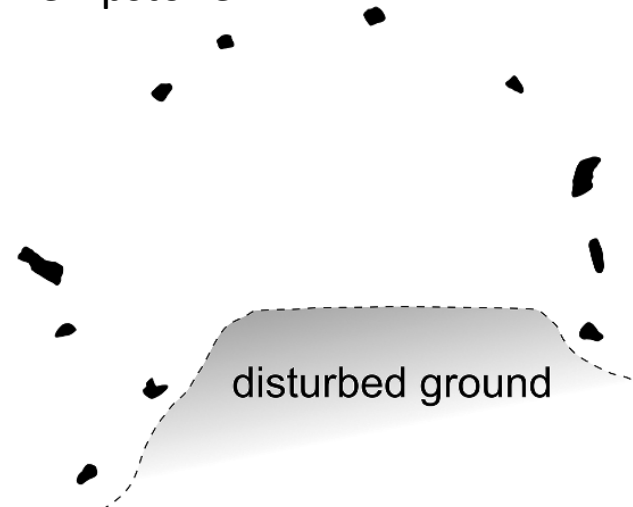
2 Hampton



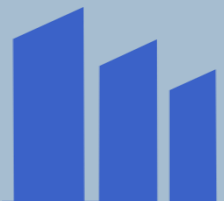
3  
Nine Stones



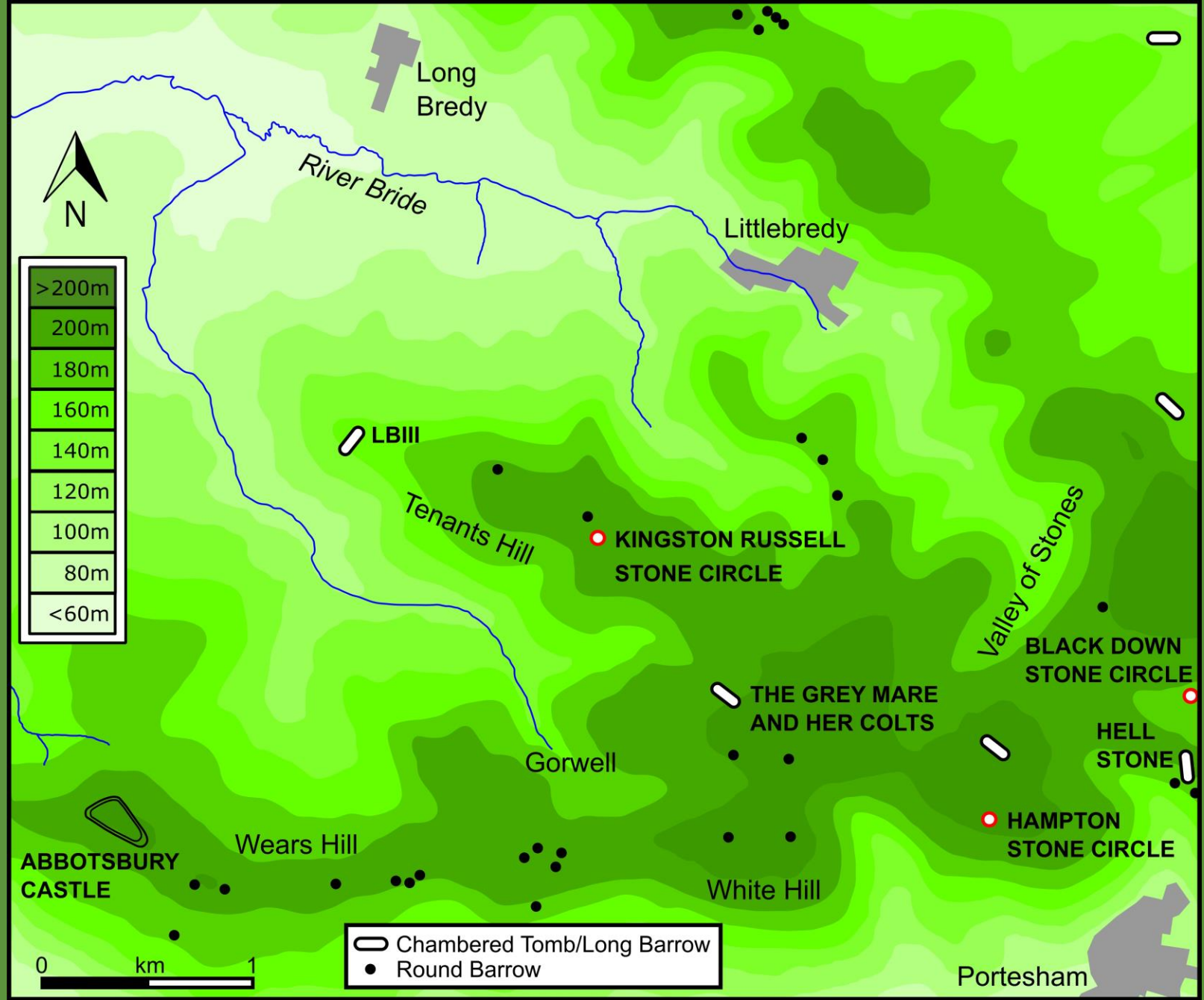
4 Rempstone

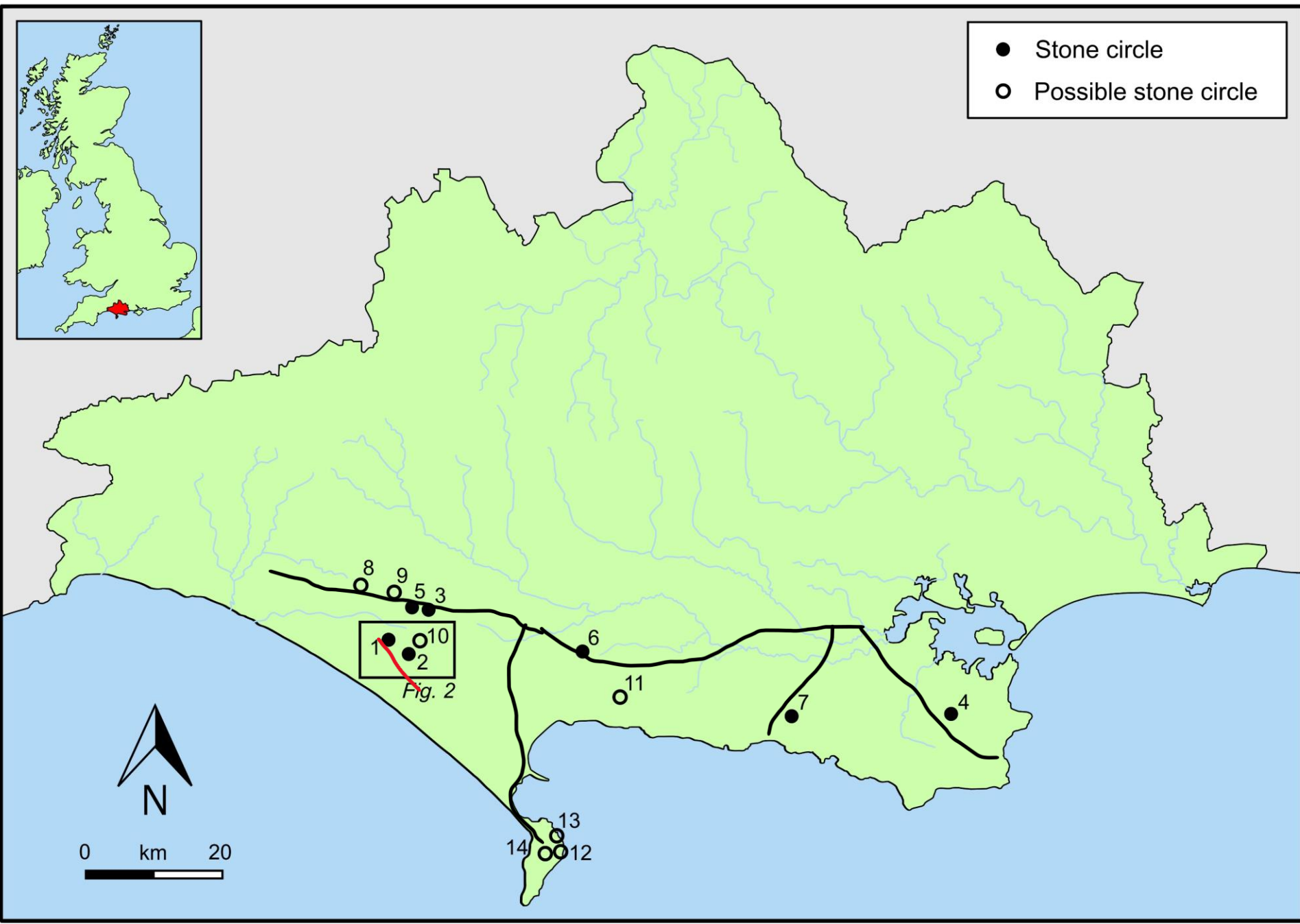


0 m 25



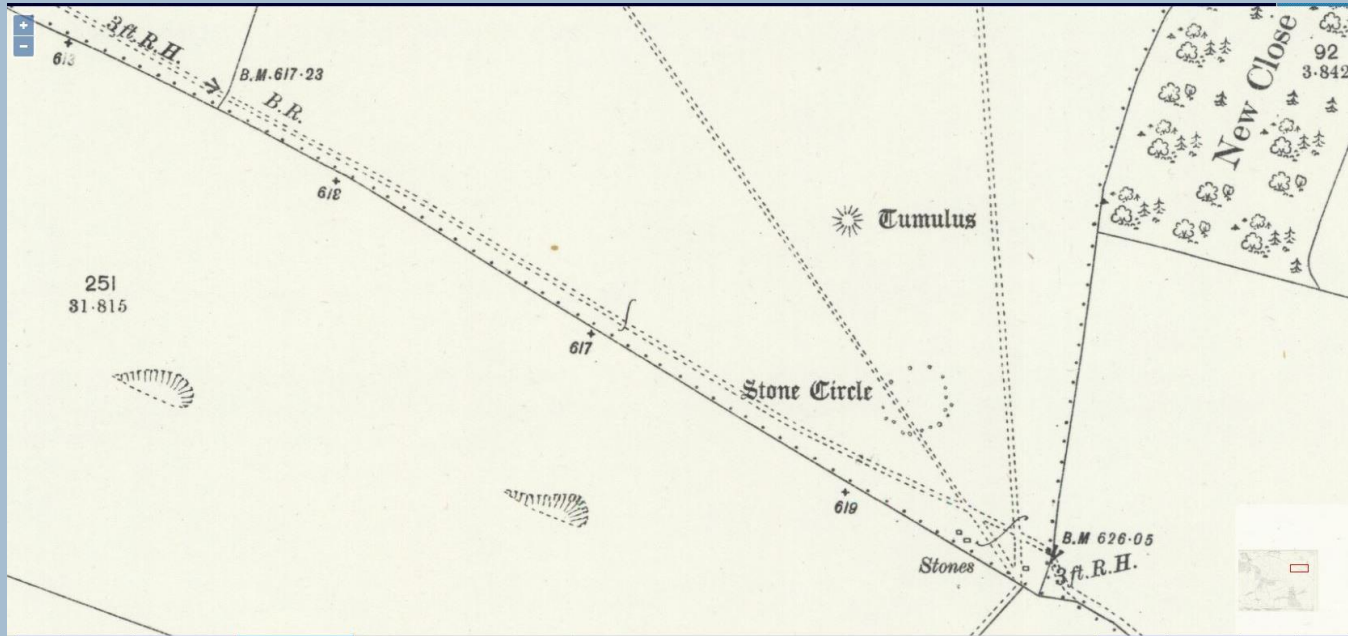








# Kingston Russell stone circle



No henge

No ditch

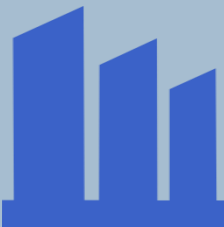
Probably no internal settings

Stones (probably) from the  
Valley of Stones

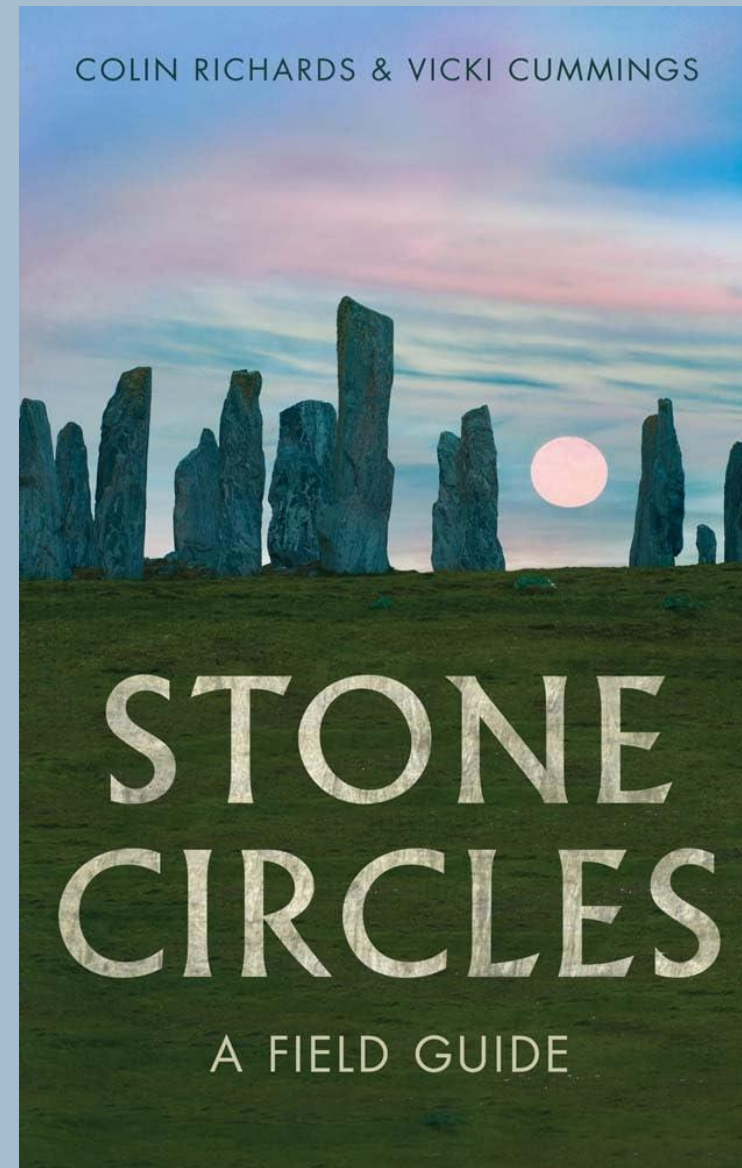
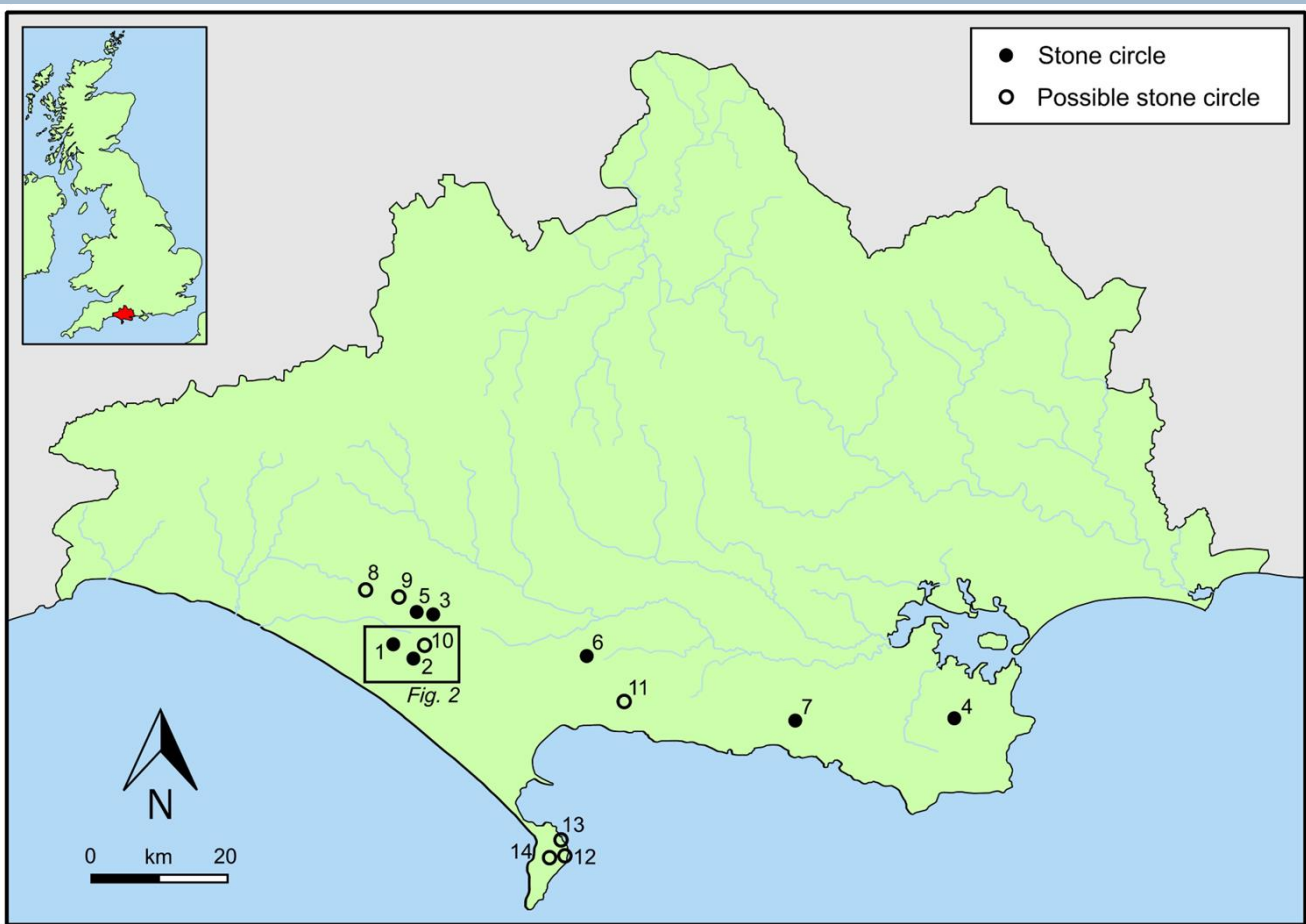
We have extended our sarsen  
survey into the Valley of  
Stones  
(2024-2026)

c. 2000 stones!

# Sarsen Survey







- Out now!