Durrington

Durrington Walls

ANCIENT SITE FEARED DAMAGED BY PLOUGHING

By Norman Hammond – Archaeological Correspondent

Archaeologists are concerned that recent agricultural work on the huge prehistoric enclosure of Durrington Walls, near Amesbury, Wiltshire, may have caused damage to buried structures.

The Department of the Environment has expressed distress and in a letter to an MP said: “It seems clear that some loss of archaeological evidence in the absence of facilities for recording must have occurred.

“In the letter, Mr Eyre, under-secretary of state at the department, told Mr Tom Dalyell, Labour MP for West Lothian, that ploughing may have been in breach of a preservation order made in 1969. Under it no work can be carried out without ministerial permission.

The excavations established that Durrington Walls was one of four known giant henge monuments in southern England, characterized by a bank outside a deep ditch and enclosing an oval area, which in this case is about 500 yards across.

The bank and ditch date from at least 2000 BC and are possibly several centuries earlier. But the most important discovery was of post-holes for several timber buildings in the enclosure.

Two uncovered were circular, consisting of several concentric rings of oak posts, which probably supported a sloping roof. A survey of the enclosure where the ploughing has taken place showed that more timber structures of unknown form existed in this area.

The monument was non-defensive and apparently not a settlement so it may well have been a regional ceremonial centre exerting political, religious and economic control over Neolithic east Wiltshire.

The department has been negotiating with the several owners of the site on compensation terms for compulsory preservation of the area. The extent of damage is still being investigated but the fear is that the post-holes have been affected.

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The land on which the work was done belongs to the Toomer estate and was carried out on the orders of Mrs Edna Richardson, an executor. Her solicitor said he was assured that the work was rotary cultivation and not ploughing.

The solicitor said: “There was an understanding that operations should be carried out to make the land fit for grazing. There was a stipulation that the department should be notified so that it could supervise.

“It was done in innocence. We overlooked giving notice”, the solicitor added that work was stopped as soon as the error was pointed out and a letter of apology was sent to the Treasury Solicitor.

(*The Times (London)* – Friday 14 July, 1972)

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