

## BEAKER DOMESTIC SITES ACROSS THE NORTH SEA : A REVIEW

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Bell Beaker pottery has probably received more attention from British and continental scholars than has any other type of common archaeological phenomenon. It is surprising in this light that there is still a facet of the Beaker phenomenon that has, until recently, received little attention on either side of the North Sea - namely settlement sites and domestic assemblages. Gradually, however, this pattern of research is changing and it is now apparent that there are in fact numerous Beaker settlements which allow us a better canvas on which to paint a fuller picture of the Beaker phenomenon.

In their study of Beaker relations in the Rhine basin, Lanting and van Waals concluded that 'the settlement evidence is fairly negative but for PFB, AOO and BB all to the same degree' (1974, p. 72). In Britain too, settlement appeared to be rare and articles were written to explain their paucity (Bradley, 1970a, 1972) based on arguments for and against transhumance/nomadism. The house plans from the few identified Beaker settlements were published collectively by Simpson (1971) and it was noticeable that they came almost exclusively from the highland area of Britain where the use of stone as a building material contributed greatly to the survival potential of the structures. Beaker houses from the south and east of Britain were unknown with the exception of the now disputed structures at Belle Tout (Bradley 1970) and the poorly understood bedding trench structure at Easton Down (fig. 2.1) (Stone, 1933, Simpson 1971). In the last decade, however, attention has been directed towards the settlement aspect of the British Beaker phenomenon (Bamford, 1970, 1982, Gibson, 1982) allowing us to make both additions to Simpson's corpus of house plans as well as to recognise settlement evidence without structural evidence. Similarly, the publication of Molenaarsgraaf (Louwe Kooijmans, 1974) and Myrhøj (Jensen, 1972) have added western European dots on our distribution map.

Since Simpson's study, some more house plans have been located in The British Isles which obviously allow us to add to his corpus however, a few of the sites that Simpson included are doubted by the present writer. To be added is the small oval sunken structure at Monknewtown (Sweetman 1976) with internal hearth and internal postholes (fig. 1.1). There is also the recent discovery of an oval stone-built structure, though incomplete, from Sorisdale on the island of Coll in the

Hebrides (Ritchie, 1978) (fig. 1.2). If reconstructed, this site might prove to be similar in plan to the houses from Northton (Simpson, 1976) (fig. 1.8). A similar structure was found excavated into the Beaker midden at Rosinish, also in the Hebrides, (fig. 1.12) which may possibly be the butt end of a stone built house. This was actually dug into the surface of the midden and must, at the very earliest, represent the end of the Beaker occupation at the site (Shepherd, 1976, Shepherd and Truckwell, 1977).

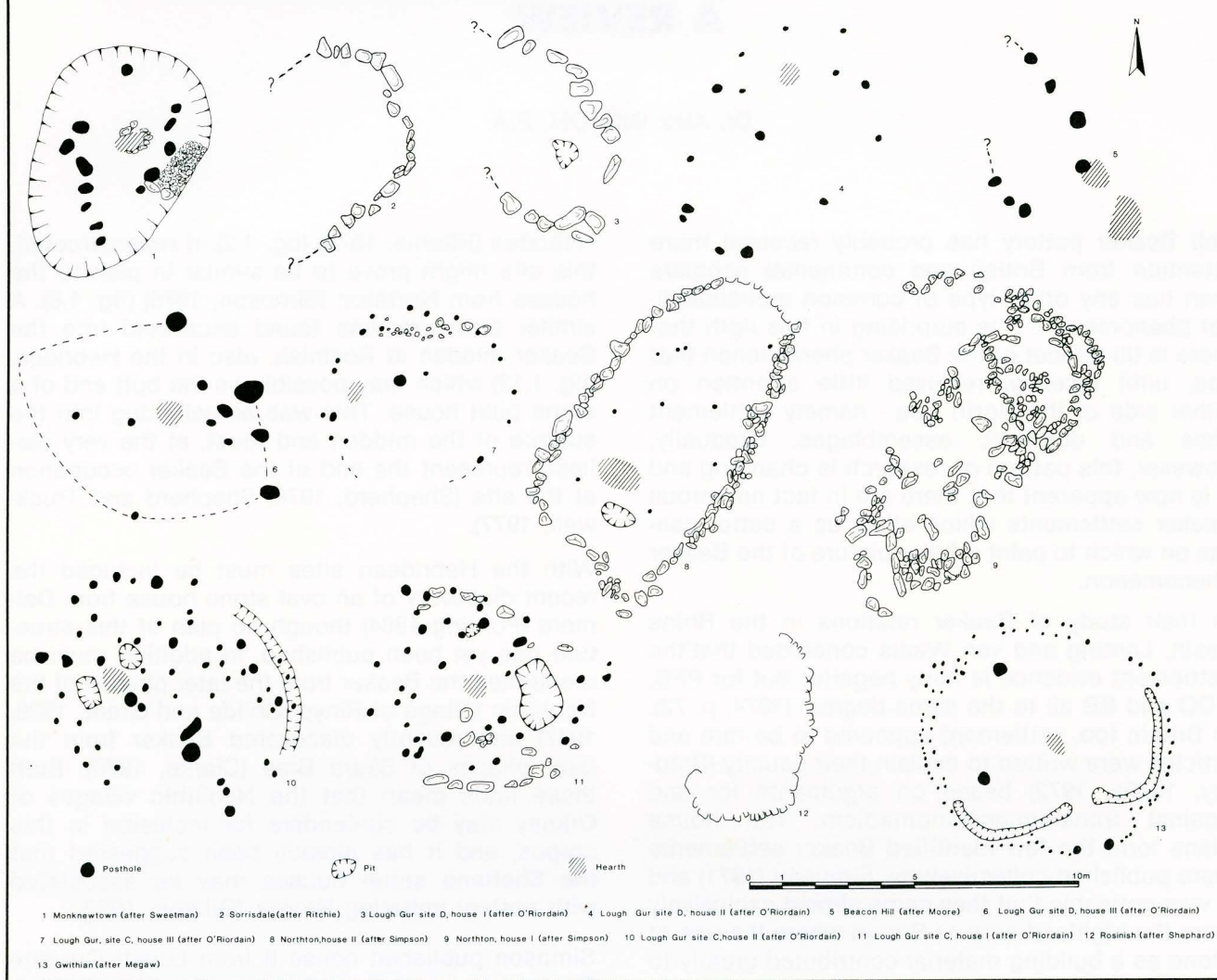
With the Hebridean sites must be included the recent discovery of an oval stone house from Dalmore (Ponting 1984) though no plan of this structure has yet been published. In addition must be mentioned the Beaker from the later phases of the Neolithic Village of Rinyo (Childe and Grant, 1939, 1947) and recently discovered Beaker from the later phases of Skara Brae (Clarke, 1976). Both these finds mean that the Neolithic villages of Orkney may be contenders for inclusion in this corpus, and it has already been suggested that the Shetland stone houses may be associated with pottery imitating Beaker (Gibson, 1982).

Simpson published house II from Lough Gur site D in his corpus but omitted the other houses from site C (O'Riordain, 1954) on the grounds that they were not directly associated with Beaker pottery. In the current view, however, that O'Riordain did not understand his stratigraphy (Raftery pers. comm.) it may be permissible to add houses I and II at Lough Gur site D, and houses I, II and III from site C (fig. 1 : 3,6,7,10 and 11) as these sites did have a strong Beaker presence if not a reported association. To be added to the Irish corpus must also be the Beaker house recently discovered near Newgrange though as yet unpublished and the bedding trenches and postholes in the central and far western areas at Newgrange itself (O'Kelly, 1983). The present writer does not, however, find the published Newgrange structures convincing as house plans.

To be added to the south and eastern sites in Simpson's corpus is the circular living floor surrounded by a double stake hole circle at Hockwold cum Wilton in Norfolk (Bamford, 1970, 1982) (fig. 2.4). This probably represents a circular house with a wattle and daub wall supported by the stakeholes. In which case this site can be compared directly with the Beaker associated timber house at Gwithian in Cornwall (fig. 1.13) (Megaw, 1976).



Fig. 1 : Beaker houses in the North & West of the British Isles



The large stake and posthole structure from beneath barrow V at Chippenham in Cambridgeshire (Leaf, 1940) has been re-interpreted as a large timber house by the present writer (Gibson, 1981). Again a wattle and daube wall would have been supported by the outer double stake-hole circle (fig. 2.5) terminating in two large postholes forming the door jambs. The multiple "hearths" inside the house are probably simply the result of intense resulting from the destruction of the house (Gibson, 1981). The small circular structure at Butley may also be a small Beaker house. It was associated with four hearths and two pits (fig. 2.3) and contained sherds of step 6 Beakers (Gibson, 1982, fig. BUT 1-2). The excavation of this site was very poor and it remains unpublished (information from Ipswich Museum) so we must be forced to hold a large question mark over the validity of the interpretation of the site as a living area.

To be withdrawn from Simpson's corpus must be the house plans from Belle Tout (Bradley, 1970) which the excavator now regards as peri-glacial features (Bradley, pers. comm.). The present writer

would also now dispute the validity of the site at Woodhead in Cumbria as a house site and would prefer to see it as a ring cairn of a type common in the highland zone, and especially the North. This possibility was already acknowledged by Simpson (1971, p. 151). The validity of the Downpatrick site as a house plan is not disputed here, but the writer does dispute its Beaker associations (Pollock and Waterman, 1964). The majority of the pottery has affinities collared or cordoned urn and not with Beakers-despite the fine fabric of some of the sherds. The similarity of some of the finer miniature urn fabrics to Beaker wares has already been proposed (Gibson, 1979).

All the British Bell Beaker houses are small and oval to circular in plan. The presence of an internal hearth is a frequently recurring characteristic found in all eleven of the complete house plans available. The house at Chippenham (fig. 2.5) stands out above the other British house sites in respect of size. It has a diameter of some 12 m and an internal floor area of c. 140 m<sup>2</sup>. This is in stark contrast to the other houses which have

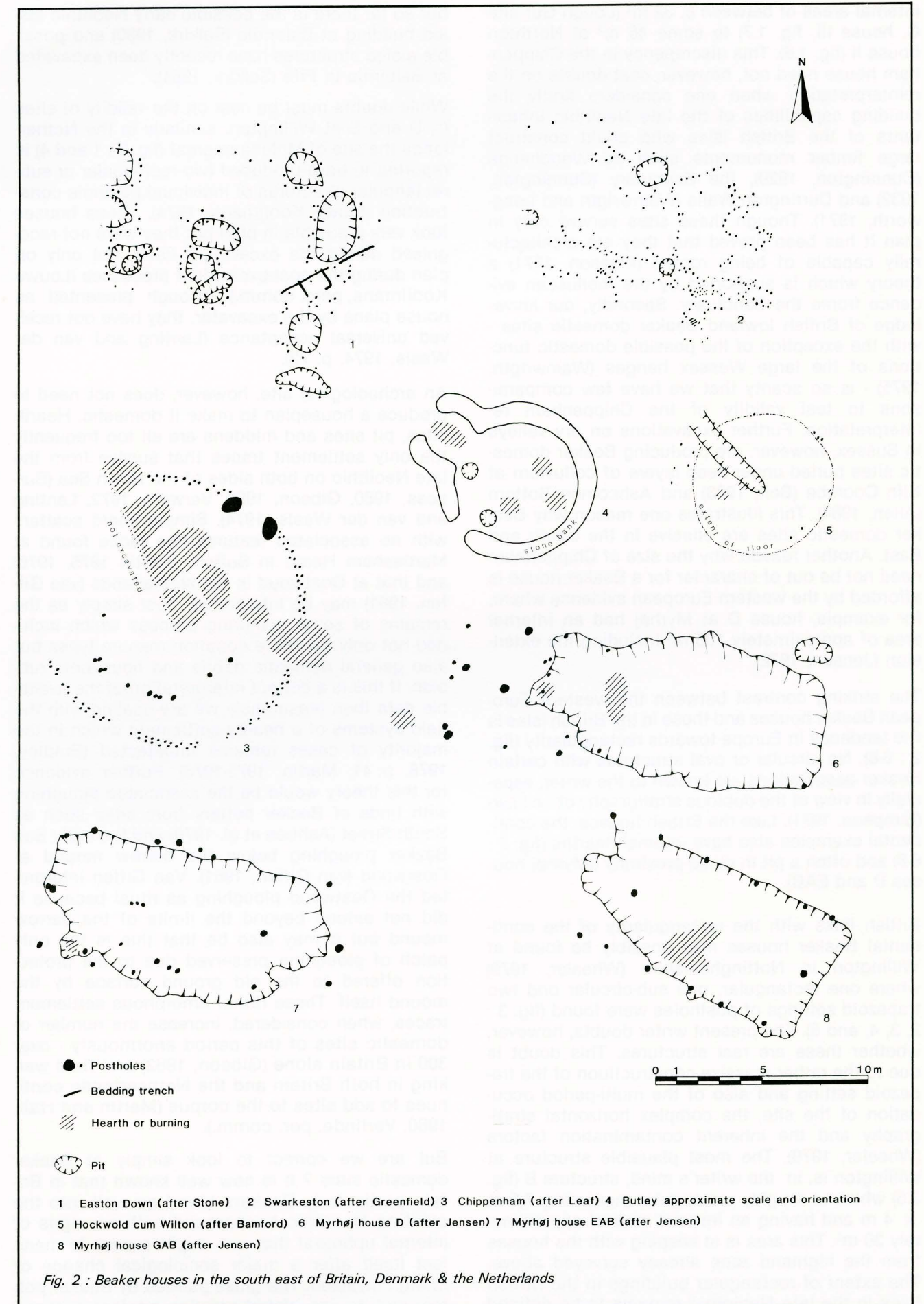


Fig. 2 : Beaker houses in the south east of Britain, Denmark & the Netherlands



internal areas of between c. 32 m<sup>2</sup> (Lough Gur site C, house III, fig. 1.7) to some 46 m<sup>2</sup> at Northton house II (fig. 1.8). This discrepancy in the Chippenham house need not, however, cast doubts on the reinterpretation when one considers firstly the building capabilities of the late Neolithic inhabitants of the British Isles who could construct large timber monuments such as Woodhenge (Cunnington, 1929), the Sanctuary (Cunnington, 1932) and Durrington Walls (Wainwright and Longworth, 1971). Though these sites survive only in plan it has been proved that they are architecturally capable of being roofed (Musson, 1971) a theory which is supported by the molluscan evidence from the Sanctuary. Secondly, our knowledge of British lowland Beaker domestic sites - with the exception of the possible domestic functions of the large Wessex henges (Wainwright, 1975) - is so scanty that we have few comparisons to test validity of the Chippenham reinterpretation. Further excavations on dry valleys in Sussex, however, are producing Beaker domestic sites buried under deep layers of colluvium at Kiln Coombe (Bell, 1983) and Ashcombe Bottom (Allen, 1984). This illustrates one reason why Beaker domestic sites are elusive in the South and East. Another reason why the size of Chippenham need not be out of character for a Beaker house is afforded by the western European evidence where, for example, house D at Myrhøj had an internal area of approximately 105 m<sup>2</sup> including the extension (Jensen, 1972).

The striking contrast between the western European Beaker houses and those in the British Isles is the tendency in Europe towards rectangularity (fig. 2 : 6-8). No circular or oval structures with certain Beaker associations are known to the writer, especially in view of the dubious stratigraphy of Le Lizio (Simpson, 1971). Like the British houses, the continental examples also have internal hearths (fig. 2 : 6-8) and often a pit in close proximity ((Myrhøj houses D and EAB).

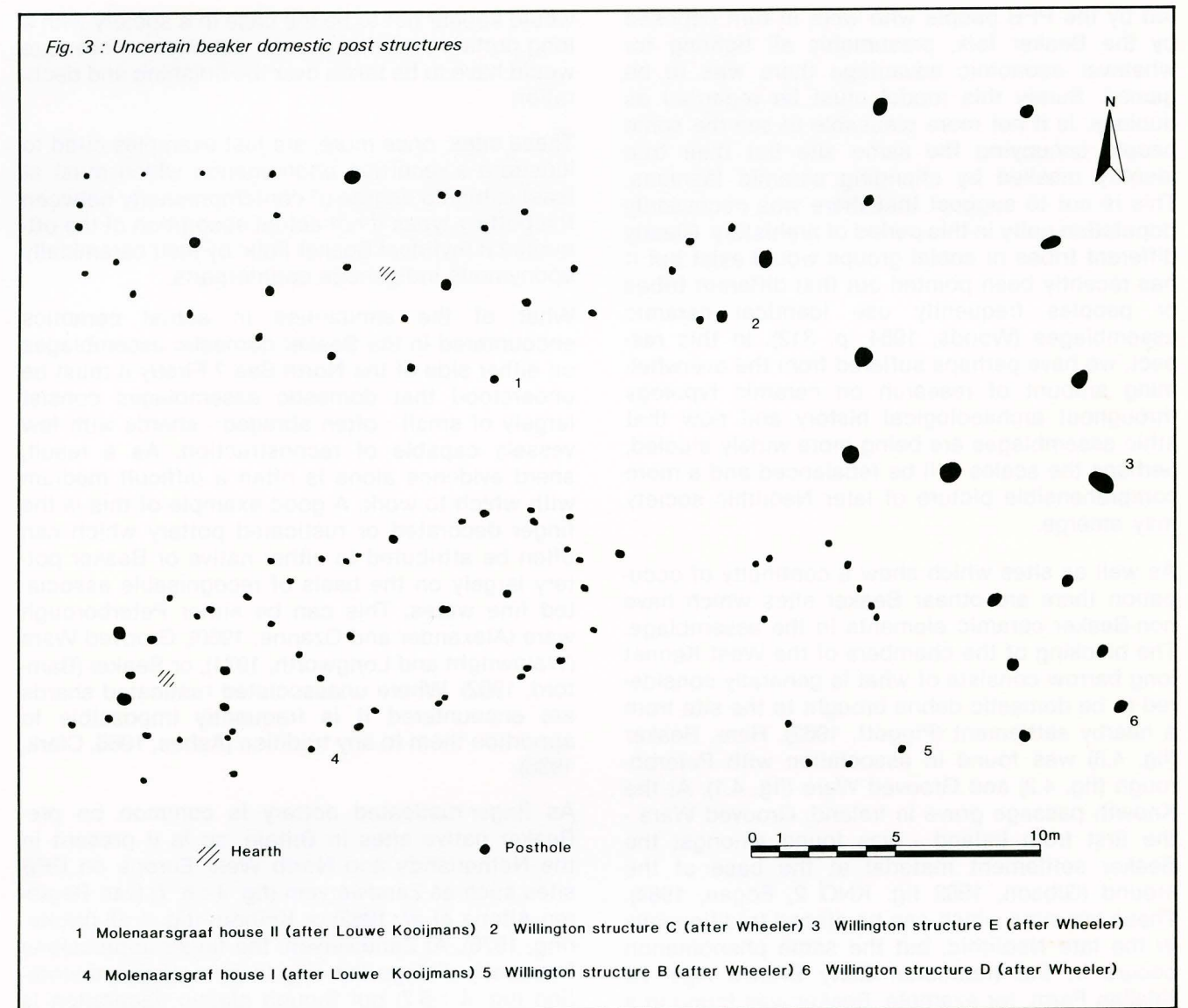
British links with the rectangularity of the continental Beaker houses may possibly be found at Willington in Nottinghamshire (Wheeler, 1979) where one rectangular, one sub-circular and two trapezoid settings of postholes were found (fig. 3 : 2, 3, 4, and 5). The present writer doubts, however, whether these are real structures. This doubt is due to the rather massive construction of the trapezoid setting and also of the multi-period occupation of the site, the complex horizontal stratigraphy and the inherent contamination factors (Wheeler, 1979). The most plausible structure at Willington is, in the writer's mind, structure B (fig. 3.5) which is roughly rectangular measuring 7.5 m x 4 m and having an internal area of approximately 30 m<sup>2</sup>. This area is in keeping with the houses from the highland zone already surveyed above. The extent of rectangular buildings in the British Isles in the late Neolithic remains to be defined

but so far there is the possible early Neolithic aisled building at Balldrie (Selkirk, 1980) and possible aisled structures have recently been excavated at Balbirnie in Fife (Selkirk, 1984).

While doubts must be cast on the validity of sites C, D and E at Willington, similarly in the Netherlands the site of Molenaarsgraaf (fig. 3 : 1 and 4) is reported to have produced two rectangular or sub-rectangular structures of individual posthole construction (Louwe Kooijmans, 1974). These houses look very plausible in plan but they were not recognised during the excavation itself, but only on plan during the post-excavation processes (Louwe Kooijmans, pers. comm.). Though presented as house plans by the excavator, they have not received universal acceptance (Lanting and van der Waals, 1974, p. 72).

An archeological site, however, does not need to produce a houseplan to make it domestic. Hearth sites, pit sites and middens are all too frequently the only settlement traces that survive from the late Neolithic on both sides of the North Sea (Burgess, 1980, Gibson, 1982, Verwers, 1972, Lanting and van der Waals, 1974). Simple sherd scatters with no associated features like those found at Martlesham Heath in Suffolk (Martin 1975, 1976) and that at Oostwoud in the Netherlands (van Giffen, 1961) may be interpreted most simply as the remains of some manuring process which included not only the more common manure types but also general domestic debris and household rubbish. If this is a correct interpretation of the available data then presumably we are dealing with the field systems of a nearby settlement which in the majority of cases remains undetected (Bradley, 1978, p. 41, Martin, 1975-1976). Further evidence for this theory would be the associated ploughing with finds of Beaker pottery from sites such as South Street (Ashbee et al. 1979) and the early Bell Beaker ploughing below the barrow mound at Oostwoud (van Giffen, 1961). Van Giffen interpreted the Oostwoud ploughing as ritual because it did not extend beyond the limits of the barrow mound but it may also be that this is the only patch of ploughing preserved due to the protection offered to the old ground surface by the mound itself. These rather amorphous settlement traces, when considered, increase the number of domestic sites of this period enormously - over 300 in Britain alone (Gibson, 1982) and field walking in both Britain and the Netherlands continues to add sites to the corpus (Martin and Hall, 1980, Verlinde, per. comm.).

But are we correct to look simply at Beaker domestic sites? It is now well known that in Britain particularly Beakers blend so well into the existing Neolithic background with no signs of internal upheaval that one might expect to manifest itself after a major sociological change or foreign invasion. The gloss painted by Beaker pottery and its associated prestige artefact package



over the later Neolithic native canvas has become known as the Beaker Phenomenon and would appear to be as relevant to Europe as to the British Isles (Burgess and Shennan, 1976, Shennan, 1977, Harrison, 1981).

With this in mind it is interesting to note the continuity of occupation at many sites. At Northton on the Isle of Harris, for example, there were two late Neolithic horizons with purely native pottery forms such as Unstan bowls and Hebridean incised and carinated wares (Simpson, 1976). This occupation was followed by two Beaker horizons with no ostensible native element save for some fabrics and incision remaining the principal decorative technique. Similarly, at Downton in Wiltshire, a Beaker associated occupation hollow succeeded a settlement site associated with Peterborough ware (Rahtz and ApSimon, 1962). In the Netherlands, too, the settlement at Anlo had TRB, PFB and BB occupation phases. The Protruding Foot Beaker phase (PFB) was associated with a cattle

kraal (Waterbolk, 1980) which probably remained in use during the BB phase. The Vlaardingen sites too have a long history and deep stratigraphy (van Regteren Altena et al. 1962) and have successive ceramic assemblages. The Vlaardingen native pottery is replaced by a PFB assemblage and finally by a BB assemblage. It is interesting to note, in the view of current theory as to Beaker prestige, that the BB occupation at Vlaardingen represents a very poor period in the occupational history of the site.

These sites are offered only as examples and do not by any means constitute a corpus of settlements exhibiting an occupational continuity. But the picture emerges of good settlement sites being used for considerable periods of time - hardly surprising when one considers that each site must have had its own economic advantage. On the old pots = people model, however, we must see new incomers ousting the previous settlers. Thus at Vlaardingen the VI people were oust-



ted by the PFB people who were in turn deposited by the Beaker folk, presumably all fighting for whatever economic advantage there was to be gained. Surely this model must be regarded as dubious. Is it not more plausible to see the same people occupying the same site but their true identity masked by changing ceramic fashions. This is not to suggest that there was necessarily population unity in this period of prehistory. Clearly different tribes or social groups would exist but it has recently been pointed out that different tribes or peoples frequently use identical ceramic assemblages (Woods, 1984, p. 312). In this respect, we have perhaps suffered from the overwhelming amount of research on ceramic typology throughout archaeological history and now that lithic assemblages are being more widely studied, perhaps the scales will be rebalanced and a more comprehensible picture of later Neolithic society may emerge.

As well as sites which show a continuity of occupation there are other Beaker sites which have non-Beaker ceramic elements in the assemblage. The blocking of the chambers of the West Kennet long barrow consists of what is generally considered to be domestic debris brought to the site from a nearby settlement (Piggott, 1962). Here, Beaker (fig. 4.3) was found in association with Peterborough (fig. 4.2) and Grooved Ware (fig. 4.1). At the Knowth passage grave in Ireland, Grooved Ware - the first from Ireland - was found amongst the Beaker settlement material at the base of the mound (Gibson, 1982 fig. KNO 2, Eogan, 1984). These are sites which can be placed traditionally in the late Neolithic, but the same phenomenon occurs in the traditional Early Bronze Age. At Killellan Farm, for example, Beaker was found in a midden which contained a great deal of Food Vessel pottery (fig. 4.5) (Burgess, 1976). Similarly, at Hockwold cum Wilton in Norfolk, Collared Urn sherds were also found in the Beaker domestic material (fig. 4.4) though it must be stated that the association is not unequivocal (Bamford, 1970, 1982).

More importantly, at Arretton Down on the Isle of Wight the domestic ceramic assemblage located beneath the round barrow was primarily in the Peterborough tradition but with some Beaker inter-mix. This Beaker, however, was in a fabric identical to the Peterborough pottery (Alexander and Ozanne, 1960). At Newgrange too, the Beaker pottery from the settlement around the base of the passage grave mound has been subjected to intensive microscopic and chemical analysis to retrieve source and technological information. It was shown that the Beakers had been made from local clays and were of the same basic technological standard as the other late Neolithic ceramic types (Cleary, in O'Kelly, 1983). The notion that Beakers are extra-special fine wares (van der Leeuw, 1977) that need specialist manufacture

would appear not to be the case in a society with a long potting ancestry though doubtless more care would have to be taken over the finishing and decoration.

These sites, once more, are just examples cited to illustrate a recurring phenomenon which must at least exhibit a degree of contemporaneity between the pottery types if not actual absorption of the oft-quoted if mythical 'Beaker Folk' by their ceramically eponymous indigenous counterparts.

What of the similarities in actual ceramics encountered in the Beaker domestic assemblages on either side of the North Sea? Firstly it must be understood that domestic assemblages consist largely of small - often abraded - sherds with few vessels capable of reconstruction. As a result, sherd evidence alone is often a difficult medium with which to work. A good example of this is the finger decorated or rusticated pottery which can often be attributed to either native or Beaker pottery largely on the basis of recognisable associated fine wares. This can be either Peterborough ware (Alexander and Ozanne, 1960), Grooved Ware (Wainwright and Longworth, 1971), or Beaker (Bamford, 1982). Where unassociated rusticated sherds are encountered it is frequently impossible to apportion them to any tradition (Ashee, 1966, Clark, 1936).

As finger-rusticated pottery is common on pre-Beaker native sites in Britain, so is it present in the Netherlands and North West Europe on PFB sites such as Zandwervem (fig. 4 : 6, 7) (van Regteren Altena *et al*, 1962) or Kolhorn (fig. 4 : 9) (Wolterring, 1976). At Zandwervem, the finger impressions frequently dislodge the clay to form plastic decoration (fig. 4 : 6-7) but though plastic decoration is found on rusticated ware in Britain, it does not form the distinct wavy line encountered on the Dutch material. Finger rusticated pottery continues through the full Bell Beaker period and does in fact increase in quantity towards the end of the period in Britain at least (Gibson, 1982). Single or paired fingernail impressions form the bulk of the material and again are found on both sides of the North Sea at, for example, Molenaarsgraaf (fig. 4 : 8, 14-15), Schipborg (fig. 4 : 10), Fifty Farm (fig. 4 : 11) (Leaf, 1935), and Wattisfield (fig. 4 : 12-13) (Robertson-Mackay, 1961).

The rib decorated pottery from Molenaarsgraaf (fig. 4 : 14-15) also bears a strong resemblance to some British material from, for example, Windmill Hill (fig. 4 : 16) (Smith, 1965), Stainsby in Lincolnshire (Gibson, 1982) (fig. 4 : 17, 19) and Lion Point in Essex (Hazeldine Warren *et al*, 1936) (fig. 4 : 18).

Barbed Wire (BW) Beaker is also common on both sides of the North Sea and also has a pre-Beaker ancestry both in Britain (Smith, 1974) and North West Europe (Bakker, 1979). Bakker points out that the BW technique, as opposed to motif, is com-

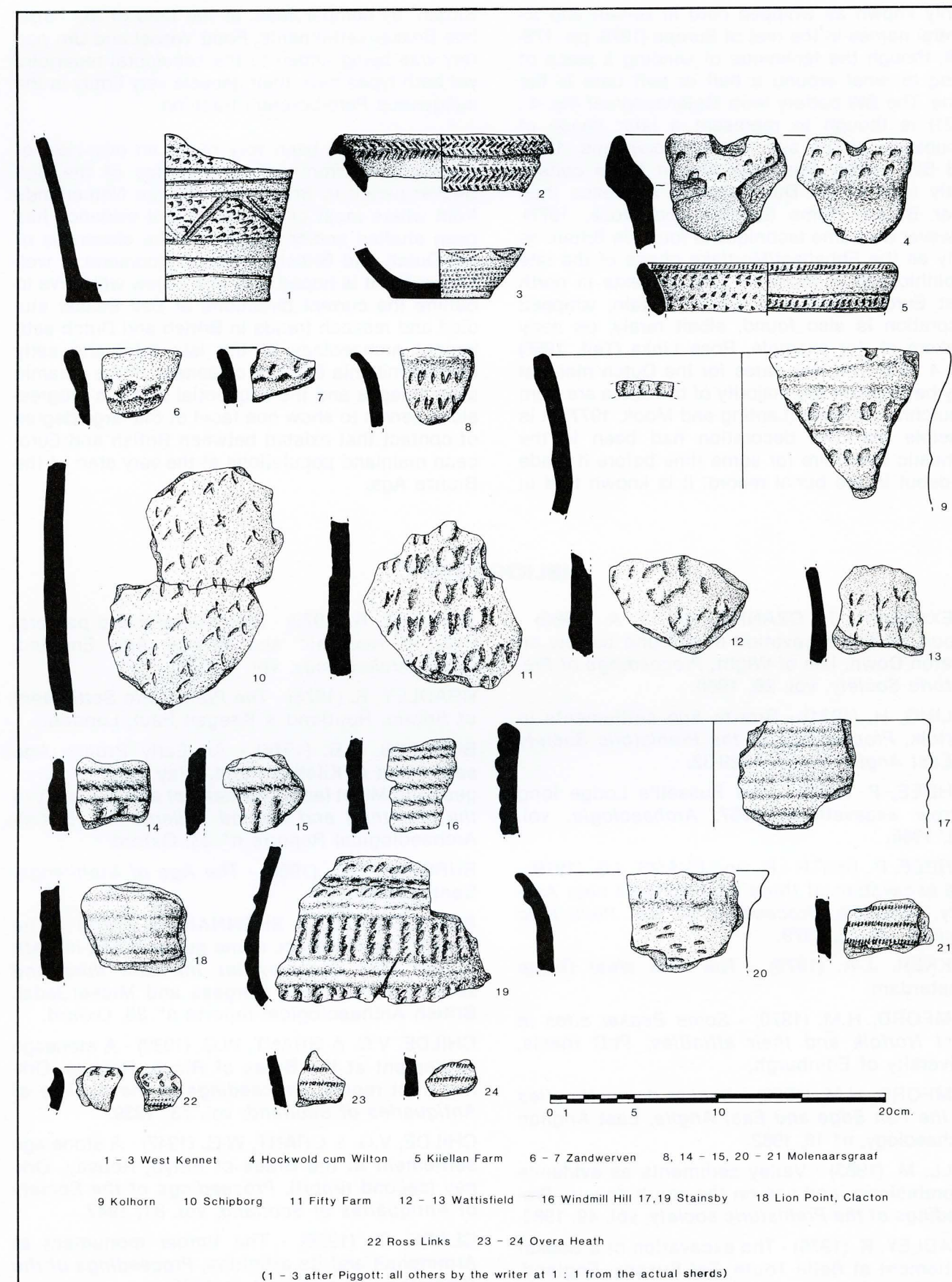


Fig. 4 : Beaker-associated domestic pottery from Britain & the Netherlands



monly known as whipped cord in Britain and as several names in the rest of Europe (1979, pp. 178-179), though the technique of winding a piece of string or wool around a harl or soft core is the same. The BW pottery from Molenaasgraaf (fig. 4 : 20-21) is thought to represent a later phase of occupation at the site (Louwe Kooijmans, 1974) and BW pottery has been shown to be consistently later in the Dutch Beaker sequence than other Beaker forms (Lanting and Mook, 1977). However the same technique is found in Britain as early as the Ebbsfleet/Mortlake phase of the late Neolithic and is found in TRB contexts in north west Europe (Bakker, 1979). In Britain, whipped decoration is also found, albeit rarely, on early Beakers at, for example, Ross Links (Tait, 1965) (fig. 4 : 22). The late dates for the Dutch material may be because the majority of the dates are from sepulchral contexts (Lanting and Mook, 1977). It is possible that BW decoration had been in the domestic repertoire for some time before it made its debut in the burial record. It is known that in

Britain, by comparison, at the time of the large, late Beaker settlements, Food Vessel and Urn pottery was being added to the sepulchral repertoire yet both types have their genesis very firmly in the indigenous Peterborough tradition.

This review has been very much an over-view of the evidence from settlement sites of the Bell Beaker period in Britain and the the Netherlands from where most of the settlement evidence has been studied and/or published. The closeness of the Dutch and British Beaker phenomena is well known but it is hoped that this review will serve to outline the current directions of Bell Beaker studied and reseach trends in British and Dutch settlement archaeology of the late third and early second millenia BC. The closeness of the ceramic assemblages and the sequential ceramic progressions serves to show one facet of the large degree of contact that existed between British and European mainland populations at the very start of the Bronze Age.

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