

# **A Four Post Structure**

## **The Exploration of an Archaeological Feature**

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## Preface

In almost every excavation of occupation sites from ancient Britain, there are unidentified features that have the ubiquitous title of '*a four post structure*'. This suggests a multitude of possible structures, not only in the dimensions of the four posts of the square or rectangle, but also the diameter of the post holes. Occasionally there is an attempt, within the excavation report, to title the structures: i.e. granary, loom shed, store, etc. This paper documents the extrapolation of evidence, into working structures that could have been used across many prehistorical periods, and sites.

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So what if...

The exploration of what is possible became a spin-off during the construction of the round houses, in the iron age enclosure, at Butser Ancient Farm. Representation of a wider range of buildings of an iron age farm, with assorted out-houses, was needed. Some of those buildings fall within the idea of 'a four post structure'. The dimensions of these constructs range from one to three metre square, with assorted frame sizes.

Here are six ideas so far.

### Granary

*Constructed 2011*

*Size 1x1.5 metre.*

References to granaries in excavations of Danebury Hillfort.

To explore grain storage for human consumption, in contrast to pit storage for animal feed and seed grain. Following the construction of the round house, Danebury CS1, (during which process, the thatch for the house had been grown at the top of Chalton lane by the local farmer), 500kg of grain was obtained during the thrashing process, and stored in the granary. The experiment (successful) was to test the viability of dry storage, over a full year, with daily withdrawals, in a granary built on the principle of 'a four post structure'.

*Fig. 1*

### Toilet

*Constructed 2006*

*Size 1x1 metre square.*

References to possible middens in excavations at Maiden Castle Hillfort, and an iron age settlement on the Chiltern Ridge.

The excavation reports describe pits containing 'a rich greasy loam', interpreted as middens. A four post structure was built to represent an iron age toilet. A simple construct with a single slope roof, a hole in the ground, and a seat based on the Roman style keyhole cut-out. When the pit is full, the toilet is moved to a new location, leaving the midden to rot down, and to be used as compost at a later date.

(This has proved a great hit with the schools, with the children fascinated with any toilet functions!)

*Fig. 2*

## **Compost Bin**

*Constructed 2008*

*Size 1x1 metre square.*

A four post container to act as a composting bin. This keeps the waste material in a neat pile. It is topped up in the course of a season, until full. Then you build another one, whilst the contents of the first composts down.

*Fig. 3*

## **Cart Shed 2011**

*Size 2.5m x 2.5m*

After building an iron age cart, based on the excavations from Garton Station, E. Yorkshire, the decision was made to build a cart shed to house the vehicle. This has larger posts, and supports a thatched gabled roof of some dimensions. The frame is wind braced for stability, and in bad weather is used as a shelter and work space for groups of school children.

*Fig. 4*

## **Chicken House 2009**

*Size 1m x 1m*

This is the smallest in the series of structures. The Romans report that chickens were kept for cock fighting, so the construct is a platformed house to safeguard the birds over night.

*Fig. 5*

## **Hay Stack 2014/15/16/17**

*Size 1m x 1m*

Driven by the need for storage of animal fodder for over-wintering, grass is cut and dried into hay during the summer. It is then stored in a stack. It is supported a platform on top of four posts, with airflow from underneath to stop over-heating, (hay ferments if damp, and can self combust). The stack is roofed to keep the rain from spoiling the hay. A number of these can be built as required each year, to store hay for winter feed for the animals, and taken down when empty. Life span August to February.

For many years on the farm, single post haystacks have been used, following Peter Reynolds early constructs. A four post haystack may not store as much, but has proved very reliable, and maintains the hay in better condition.

*Fig. 6*



*Fig.1*



*Fig.2*



*Fig.3*



*Fig.4*



*Fig.5*



*Fig.6*

## **Placement within the enclosure.**

The decision as to where each construct is to be placed within the enclosure is sometimes instinctive. The construction is driven by some practical aspects, and incorporates possible status placements!

Granary: High status. Food storage for the family. Placed on the south gateway of the enclosure, exposed to the sun's warmth. Next to the gravel path for ease of access in all weathers.

Toilet: Low status. Eastern area in the enclosure. Lee side of the wind, down wind of all housing. Not in the eyeline of the nearest round house.

Compost Bin: Low status. Next to the toilet, keeping the two smelliest structures together.

Cart Shed: High Status. South side of the enclosure, close to the gateway for ease of access to the cart.

Chicken House: A sheltered spot, close to a tree for weather protection.

Hay Stacks: Between the houses on the west side of the enclosure. Protected from the wind, but open to the winter sun to help keep them dry.

## **Conclusion**

While we cannot say for sure what many of the four post structures really are, the experiential aspect to the interpretations are simply based on our modern ideas of what works, with the projection of what we think the iron age people might have used.

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