

Reviews

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Michael Fulford and Elizabeth Nichols (eds.), *Developing Landscapes of Lowland Britain. The Archaeology of the British Gravels: A Review*. Society of Antiquaries of London Occasional papers, volume 14. Price £19.95.

Over the past twenty years the gravel bearing land of Southern Britain has been the recipient of more archaeological effort than any other part of the rural landscape. So what are the results? Has it been worthwhile? And where do we go from here?

It was to address these questions that the Society of Antiquaries organized a Seminar on *The Archaeology of the British Gravels* in 1988. The results are now published in a thankfully slim and readable volume. The seven papers cover fairly predictable ground: aerial photograph (Whimster) and environmental archaeology (Robinson); prehistory (Bradley), Iron Age to Roman (Fulford) and Anglo-Saxon (Hamerow); and three regional studies – late prehistoric and Roman farming on the Thames Gravels (Lambrick), the buried prehistory of the Fenland Margins (French & Pryor), and the Scottish Gravels (Barclay).

Inevitably, because of the emphasis of archaeological work in the past two decades, the Thames and the rivers of East Anglia flow mightily through these pages. In contrast the rivers of the south and the west, even the Severn and the Trent, hardly appear as trickles. As the Thames Valley is so much in evidence, this volume will be of particular interest to readers of *Oxoniensis*. Those who have followed the literature closely over the past decade will find that, to some extent, the papers cover familiar ground. However there is enough to stimulate even the dedicated gravel watcher.

Helena Hamerow emphasises what has often been implied: that the gravels, as such, are conceptually unsatisfactory as a subject of research. Probably no archaeologist believes that patches and strips of a particular geology are an appropriate unit of investigation in themselves. Nevertheless the gravels are a powerful draw: sites are easy to locate on the higher English terraces (Barclay provides a salutary reminder that Scotland is not the same and Pryor & French describe the problems and potential of areas blanketed by alluvium) and gravel extraction provides opportunities to excavate large blocks of land in advance of destruction.

In the 1970s and 1980s the case for substantial government funding for gravel excavations could be made thanks to the availability of the evidence from aerial photographs. Rowan Whimster charts the rise of aerial archaeology, which was pioneered in the Thames Valley by Major G.W.G. Allen and Flight Lieutenant Riley in the 1930s and 1940s. As I write this review I have just received the sad news from Sheffield of the death of Derek Riley, one of the finest and kindest of aerial photographers, who almost to the end of his life was pioneering from the sky, lately over Israel.

The Thames Valley has been flown and photographed regularly for about sixty years. Whimster sensibly points out that, while we are beyond the primary reconnaissance phase in

the Thames Valley, it is necessary to continue problem-orientated surveys. There are still many gaps in the region, between well-known sites and off the gravels. Even supposedly thoroughly explored areas can produce spectacularly new evidence, such as the Stadhampton Neolithic ceremonial complex near Dorchester-on-Thames, which was not seen until 1986. More recently extensive Romano-British landscapes have been revealed on the Corallian Limestone, which forms the ridge between the Thames and the Vale of the White Horse; this is not gravel but it is integral to the study of the region of which the gravels form a part. Both regional research and a coherent local authority planning policy for archaeology require that aerial photographic results continue to be mapped and updated.

The three period papers summarise results and suggest future directions. Richard Bradley's view is the most Olympian, managing to scan about three thousand years in seven pages, and yet remain clear sighted and stimulating. The gist of his testament is that British prehistory is still viewed largely from a Wessex perspective. But the work on the gravels has shown us that regional communities have their own character; people building cursuses in Lechlade or Maxey may not have quite the same idea in mind as those in Dorset. Even processes can be different; Wessex's Bronze Age slump may be the Thames Valley's period of prosperity. The salutary message from Bradley is that the Wessex strait-jacket will only be loosened when the results of the gravel programmes are properly published.

In the Upper Thames Valley the results are probably most impressive for the Iron Age and Roman periods. Fulford provides a succinct list of achievements. He, too, emphasises the need to consider regional variety, such as differences in vernacular architecture (What is a 'villa' in the Thames Valley?). At the same time he takes the long view, appreciating that Roman Britain did not spring fully formed from the events of AD 43. It is in the Iron Age and Roman period that we can begin to get to grips with settlement pattern, hierarchies and specialization. Nevertheless in spite of the richness of the archaeological data relatively little work has been done on high status sites such as richer farms, towns, large or small, and cult centres. Though the excavations have been extensive, they represent a very small sample of Iron Age and Romano-British settlements. We know a considerable amount about Romano-British lifeways but relatively little about social relations, cult activities and town and country interaction. Of course, in comparison with the Anglo-Saxon period we are awash with information. From the fifth century AD settlements are difficult to detect and poor in artefacts. However, recent work around Abingdon and Yarnton shows that persistence pays. If gravel archaeologists have a particular virtue it is probably doggedness and a devotion to a landscape which, as Francis Pryor makes clear, has subtle yet essential variations only appreciated by those who are prepared to walk and probe.

The period papers, particularly Fulford's, are complemented by those of Robinson and Lambrick. George Lambrick's discussion of intensification in Late Prehistoric and Roman farming is probably the contribution which best illustrates the virtues of long-term and persistent multi-disciplinary research. As a result areas like Stanton Harcourt, Lechlade and Abingdon are beginning to make sense; we can see how these landscapes were manipulated and changed through time. The gravels are not simply one thing. They are geologically and topographically varied. Humans also use them in different ways depending upon social and economic imperatives which may lie within or beyond the region. Lambrick's paper illustrates the level of sophistication in interpretation which we have achieved; Fulford and others indicate where we might go next.

One of the answers is 'under the alluvium'. The Fenland Project has shown the productivity of that direction, and also recent Thames Valley work at Wallingford, Drayton and Reading (*Reading Business Park: a Bronze Age Landscape* by J. Moore and D. Jennings, 1992, Oxford Archaeological Unit).

The OAU's largest current project is at Yarnton where Gill Hey has discovered buried

Neolithic and Bronze Age land surfaces beneath alluvium, and where Mark Robinson is unravelling a remarkable sequence of hydrological changes. The problem is how to find such sites, which often cannot be seen by either the aerial archaeologist or fieldwalker. The answer, at the moment, is by extensive trial trenching of the valley floor. Planning Policy Guidance, Note 16 (PG16): *Archaeology and Planning* encourages local authorities to ensure that field evaluations are carried out in advance of development. These have resulted in the discovery and investigation of sites of major importance such as the Bronze Age settlements and fields at the Reading Business Park. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when the initiation of major gravel excavations was dependent upon prior aerial photography, such a site would not have been found, let alone investigated. However, in order to require field evaluation local authorities must have a good database and coherent archaeological policies. Recently a developer in Northamptonshire refused to carry out an evaluation and won at Appeal. The case for archaeological evaluation of a 'blank' area was not accepted by the Inspector. The pressure of development is still strong in the river valleys of Britain. If archaeology is to progress it must win the political battles as well as the academic ones.

So has the work of the past twenty years been worthwhile? If *Oxoniensia's* editor wanted an objective answer to that question he should not have given this book to a reviewer who has spent most of that time in a gravel pit. I simply quote the words of Professor Fulford: 'Individually and collectively the results of recent research are of enormous importance . . . There is no doubt that, in the face of continuing destruction, the gravels will continue to justify the resources expended on their archaeology!'

DAVID MILES

C.A. Butterworth and S.J. Lobb, *Excavations in the Burghfield Area, Berkshire: Developments in the Bronze Age and Saxon Landscapes*. Wessex Archaeology Report No. 1, 1992. Pp. vii + 190. ISBN 1 874350 01 9. Paperback, £20.

This report on excavations in the Kennet valley vindicates the strong archaeological policy for extraction sites which Berkshire County Council developed during the 1980s. But for that policy, this extremely interesting group of sites would have been destroyed without record, as had been so much else during the previous two decades. The main features recovered were of the early Bronze Age and the 7th to 10th centuries AD, and they make a very useful contribution to understanding the historic landscape of the upper Thames and its tributaries.

Around 1600 BC, a large ring-ditched barrow was built on a low but prominent gravel bank beside a river-channel, with some smaller ring-ditches nearby. In the later Bronze Age several cremations were inserted, but the main funerary re-use occurred in the Anglo-Saxon period, when a cemetery of at least fifty burials developed over the barrow and on its south side. This had all the signs of a 'late pagan' cemetery: most grave-goods were utilitarian iron objects, there was virtually no jewellery, and many graves were unfurnished. The obvious local parallel for this 7th-century re-use of an exceptionally large Bronze Age barrow is the cemetery excavated at Stanton Harcourt in 1940.¹ In each case the Bronze Age monument had been sufficiently massive to survive as a low mound, presumably ascribed some ritual significance, into which the graves were terraced. At Burghfield it is mainly the later graves, outside the circuit of the ring-ditch, which are orientated west-east, possibly suggesting Christianisation during the lifetime of the cemetery.

¹ D.B. Harden and R.C. Treweek, 'Excavations at Stanton Harcourt, Oxon., 1940', *Oxoniensia*, x (1945), 16-41.

A mile eastwards, another water-front site revealed revetments and other timber structures of the Bronze Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods. Some timbers produced radiocarbon dates in the 7th century, in other words close to the period of the cemetery, and it is clear that there must have been a settlement somewhere nearby. The most remarkable find is an eel- or fish-trap of wicker basketwork, dated to the 10th or 11th century but virtually identical to the traps familiar from Victorian photographs.

JOHN BLAIR