

THE TOM HASSALL LECTURE FOR 1995

The Earlier Prehistory of the Oxford Region in the Light of Recent Research

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SUMMARY

This paper is based on the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society by Richard Bradley in 1995. It presents a synthesis of recent work on the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods in the Oxford region in the light of new discoveries and important changes in archaeological thinking about these periods.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered by Richard Bradley in 1995, and for the most part it follows a similar format. The public presentation of these ideas drew extensively on work carried out by members of the Oxford Archaeological Unit. For that reason it seems only right that in the printed version of the text they should be allowed to speak for themselves. That is why there are now four authors where there was originally one. The objective of the paper remains the same as that of the original lecture. It is an attempt to draw together the results of recent work on the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods in the Oxford region.

It is impossible to do justice to all the available material. For this reason our starting point will be three papers published in the 1980s, for these represent the most recent attempts at synthesis. In 1986 the Neolithic period was considered in detail by Humphrey Case in his contribution to 'The Archaeology of the Oxford Region',¹ a rather different interpretation of the same material had been presented by Richard Bradley and Robin Holgate two years earlier.² The Bronze Age was treated in a separate contribution to the 1986 collection,³ and again the present discussion builds on that account.

Why is a new synthesis needed only ten years later? It would be easy to say that this is because of the growing pace of discovery, but that is only part of the reason, for the significance of any new finds is coloured by important changes in archaeological thinking. Naturally, that affects our perceptions of current work, but it also demands a new interpretation of much of

¹ H. Case, 'The Mesolithic and Neolithic in the Oxford region', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (Oxford University Department for External Studies, 1986), 18–37.

² R. Bradley and R. Holgate, 'The Neolithic sequence in the upper Thames valley', in R. Bradley and J. Gardiner (eds.), *Neolithic Studies* (BAR 133, 1984), 107–34.

³ R. Bradley, 'The Bronze Age in the Oxford area: its local and regional significance', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (Oxford University Department of External Studies, 1986), 35–48.

the material that was discussed in 1986. For this reason our paper is partly a review of new discoveries and partly an essay about ideas.

One fundamental change concerns the scale of analysis. For some time it has been clear that the Three Age System impedes our understanding of British prehistory. There is substantial continuity between the Late Neolithic period and the Early Bronze Age, just as there is between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. Conversely, one of the most significant breaks in the entire sequence occurs towards the middle of the Bronze Age. For that reason the 1995 Tom Hassall Lecture abandoned the conventional period division entirely, combining the Neolithic period with the early part of the Bronze Age. We shall adopt the same approach here. This allows us to discuss a continuous sequence extending from about 4000 BC to 1500 BC in calendar years. The lecture also employed a rather looser geographical framework than 'The Archaeology of the Oxford Region' with its distribution maps of sites in the modern county of Oxfordshire. A pragmatic definition of the 'Oxford region' would be the area whose archaeology contributed directly to earlier prehistoric developments in the Upper Thames Valley (Fig. 1). Rather than prejudging the issue by drawing an arbitrary boundary, that is a question to be investigated.

Although the conventional period labels are less often used now that absolute dating methods are available, the traditional terminology retains its power to mislead. This is one area in which opinion has shifted significantly over the last ten years. The term 'Neolithic' raises especial problems, for this is a word which has changed its connotations.⁴ Originally it was applied to the practice of polishing stone artefacts, but increasingly it came to stand for early agriculture. It was in this sense that the term was used by Case in 1986.

When he was writing, it was generally agreed that agriculture was the defining characteristic of the Neolithic period and that it was from the adoption of farming in prehistoric Britain that other developments followed. Farming was introduced by settlers from Continental Europe. After an initial phase of colonisation and experiment, communities became largely sedentary and developed an agricultural surplus which was enough to finance the creation of stone and earthwork monuments. Case has referred to this phase as one of 'stable adjustment'.⁵ At the same time farming was integrally related to the creation and operation of such monuments. Long barrows, for instance, were probably territorial markers.⁶

That interpretation seems inconsistent with the results of the research undertaken over the last ten years. There are several crucial problems which it does not address. There is very little information on the nature or timing of the transition between the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, and outside northern Britain their chronologies hardly overlap.⁷ This may be because microliths went out of fashion before the first appearance of domesticates, with the result that 'transitional' flint industries escape recognition, or it may be that certain aspects of 'Neolithic' material culture have simply been dated too late. On present evidence, however, there is nothing to suggest the primacy of agriculture over monument building.

To some extent that is because there is so little evidence for stable mixed farming. There is no reason to believe that Neolithic settlements in the south were occupied for long, and it is far from certain how such activity was supported. There is some evidence for the use of domesticated resources, but, as we shall see, wild plant foods normally outnumber finds of

⁴ J. Thomas, 'Discourse, totalisation and "the Neolithic"', in C. Tilley (ed.), *Interpretative Archaeology* (Berg, 1993), 357-94.

⁵ H. Case, 'Neolithic explanations', *Antiquity*, 43 (1969), 176-86.

⁶ C. Renfrew, 'Megaliths, territories and populations', in S. De Laet (ed.), *Acculturation and Continuity in Atlantic Europe* (De Tempel, Bruges, 1976), 198-220.

⁷ R. Bradley, *The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain* (Longman, 1984), chap. 2.

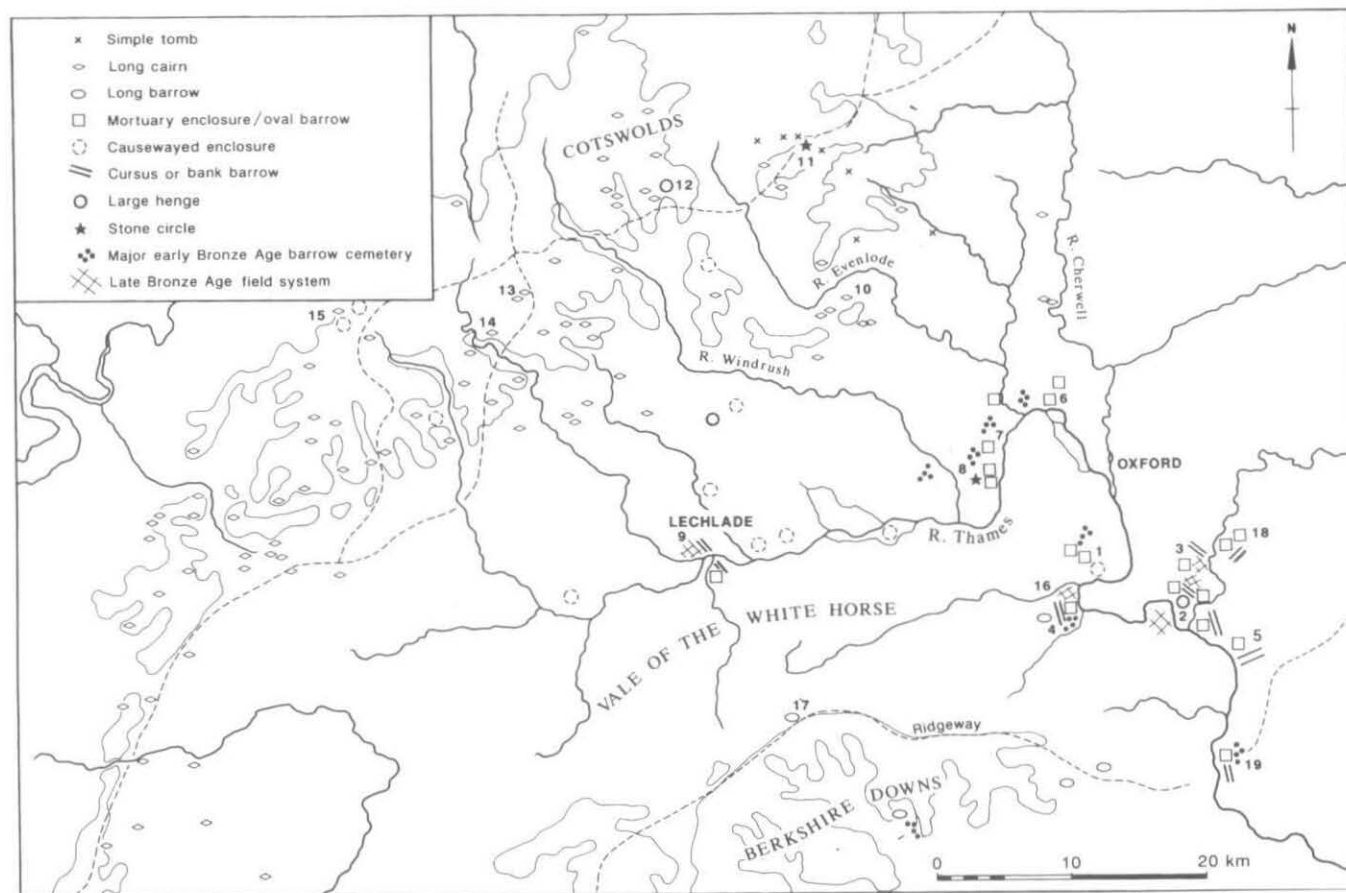


Fig. 1. Major sites and monuments discussed in the text. 1: Abingdon causewayed enclosure and Barrow Hills, Radley; 2: Dorchester-on-Thames monument complex; 3: Mount Farm, Dorchester and Wally Corner, Berinsfield; 4: Drayton (Sutton Courtenay) cursus complex; 5: Benson cursus; 6: Yarnton; 7: Foxley Farm, Eynsham; 8: Gravelly Guy and the Devil's Quoits, Stanton Harcourt; 9: Lechlade cursus; 10: Ascott-under-Wychwood; 11: The Whispering Knights and the King's Men, Rollright; 12: Condicote henge; 13: Hazleton North; 14: Sale's Lot, Withington; 15: Crickley Hill; 16: Corporation Farm, Abingdon; 17: Wayland's Smithy; 18: Stadhampton cursus; 19: North Stoke.

cereals, whilst the main groups of animal bones come from specialised deposits which are not associated with settlements at all but with a variety of monuments devoted to the dead and the supernatural. British prehistorians are not alone in facing these problems, for the Continental sequence raises similar problems. It is no longer appropriate to use the long-house settlement on the loess as any clue to the character of activity in lowland England. To do so is to overlook a vital difference of chronology.⁸ The British Neolithic began some time after those sites had gone out of use and during a period in which little is known about the settlement pattern in adjacent areas of Continental Europe. Problems of this kind affect the prehistory of southern England as a whole, and they are ones that also influence the archaeology of the Early Bronze Age. There are other difficulties which concern interpretations of the Oxford region. The settlement evidence seems far less impressive now than it did when Case was writing in 1986. His example of a sedentary Middle Neolithic settlement was the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, and this formed the basis for a reconstruction of the population, its farming practices and the pattern of settlement. It was a bold and imaginative interpretation, but ten years later it seems most unlikely that this enclosure was a settlement at all. Closer study of the distribution and character of the deposits found there make it much more probable that it was a ceremonial site akin to more extensively excavated examples in Wessex.⁹

The evidence for Neolithic field systems in the Upper Thames Valley has also been discredited. It rested mainly on Richard Atkinson's claim to have identified a droveway associated with Abingdon Ware and cut by the cursus monument at Dorchester-on-Thames.¹⁰ The excavator's failure to publish the work for four decades compounded a series of basic mistakes that have only now been rectified. In fact the droveway was later in date than the cursus, and the 'Abingdon Ware' claimed in Atkinson's interim report proved to be Middle Bronze Age pottery.¹¹ The earthworks formed part of a more extensive field system of later prehistoric origin which has since been investigated on other sites. Claims for a similar field system underlying the cemetery at Barrow Hills, Radley¹² also seem less likely, for it is quite possible that the early 'field ditch' recognised in small-scale excavation was a frost crack of natural origin. The Late Neolithic 'house pits' claimed rather tentatively elsewhere in southern England¹³ may also be of natural origin, as work on the Upper Thames gravels suggests that most of these were tree-throw holes.

The same problems extend into the Early Bronze Age, for here again certain revisions are needed to the framework employed in 1986. Again the principal domestic site has been reinterpreted. This was the ditched enclosure at Rams Hill on the Berkshire Downs, which was initially seen as a specialised enclosure engaged in the summer pasturing of livestock.¹⁴ Here there have been two changes. First, accelerator radiocarbon dating, a technique not available when the site was excavated in the early 1970s, has shown that the first enclosure

⁸ J. Last, 'Neolithic houses – a central European perspective', in T. Darvill and J. Thomas (eds.) *Neolithic Houses in North-west Europe and Beyond* (Oxbow monograph 57, 1996), 27–40.

⁹ R. Bradley, 'The excavation of an oval barrow beside the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, Oxfordshire', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 58 (1992), 127–42.

¹⁰ R. Atkinson, 'The excavations at Dorchester, Oxon 1946–51', *Archaeological Newsletter*, 4 (1951), 56–9.

¹¹ R. Bradley and R. Chambers, 'A new study of the cursus complex at Dorchester on Thames', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 7 (1988), 271–89 (see page 284); A. Whittle, R. Atkinson, R. Chambers and N. Thomas, 'Excavations in the Neolithic and Bronze Age complex at Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire, 1947–1952 and 1981', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 58 (1992), 143–201 (see p. 160).

¹² M. Parrington, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Oxon', *Oxoniensia*, 42 (1977), 30–41 (see p. 39–40).

¹³ I. McInnes, 'Settlements in later Neolithic Britain', in D. Simpson (ed.), *Economy and Settlement in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain and Europe* (Leicester University Press, 1971), 113–30.

¹⁴ R. Bradley and A. Ellison, *Rams Hill – A Bronze Age Defended Enclosure and its Landscape* (BAR 19, 1975).

actually dates from late in the Middle Bronze Age; any earlier pottery in its ditch was evidently residual. At the same time, more recent excavations at other sites in southern and eastern England make it possible to identify this earthwork as one of a series of defended 'ring works' created during the late second and early first millennia BC.¹⁵ As a result, this interesting site no longer needs to be considered in an account of the Early Bronze Age.

The original discussion of the Rams Hill enclosure also drew on some ideas put forward by Humphrey Case in a discussion of the ring ditches in the Upper Thames Valley.¹⁶ He suggested that these sites were built close to the floodplain because the area was occupied in the course of summer grazing. Certain of the enclosures might even be domestic sites. Again this interpretation has suffered a reverse. The evidence for similar settlements in other parts of the country looks distinctly equivocal compared with the interpretations that were favoured a decade or more ago¹⁷ and virtually all of these sites are likely to be levelled round barrows. At the same time, more recent work has established that the Thames floodplain only assumed its present form in the late first millennium BC. Before then much of the area was dry land. For a while the pattern recognised by Case attracted some discussion, but we must now accept that the relationship between ring ditches and alluvial grazing land was entirely fortuitous.

These new interpretations have not only undermined our confidence in earlier syntheses of the archaeology of the Oxford region, they also suggest a different point of departure for any new account. Perhaps the major development that took place during the Neolithic period was neither a change to sedentism nor a complete commitment to farming. More than anything else, Neolithic life was characterised by the creation and operation of monuments. These may have had a profound influence over human experience of place and time, but their establishment was far more than an inevitable consequence of agriculture.¹⁸ There has been a tendency to study earlier prehistory using models drawn from the well-preserved landscapes of the first millennium BC, or even from more recent peasant farming. That is quite inappropriate. The crucial period between 4000 and 1500 BC has a distinctive character of its own and can only be studied by the techniques of archaeology.

The same point applies to the artefacts of this period, for these have too often been taken for granted. In fact they may have been used in very different ways from those familiar in later prehistory. Pottery, for example, may not have formed a normal part of the domestic repertoire, and its use may even have been reserved for special occasions.¹⁹ The first metal artefacts were less suited to everyday tasks than the existing stone tool kit, and even polished flint artefacts may have possessed a specialised character.²⁰ That may be why so many of the more finely finished artefacts are discovered in specialised locations: pottery can be found in pits associated with formal deposits of animal bones; polished stone artefacts may be closely associated with monuments; and Early Bronze Age metalwork is normally found in graves or even in rivers.²¹ Such artefacts do not appear by chance. The fact that they survive to the present day may be because so many of them were deposited under special circumstances.

In each case the real change came towards the end of the period considered in this essay.

¹⁵ S. Needham and J. Ambers, 'Redating Rams Hill and reconsidering Bronze Age enclosures', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 60 (1994), 225-43.

¹⁶ H. Case, 'Notes on the finds [from Stanton Harcourt] and on ring ditches in the Oxford region', *Oxoniensia*, 28 (1963), 19-53.

¹⁷ C. Burgess, *The Age of Stonehenge* (Dent, 1980), 195-9.

¹⁸ R. Bradley, *Altering the Earth* (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1993), chap. 1.

¹⁹ J. Thomas, *Rethinking the Neolithic* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 5.

²⁰ M. Edmonds, *Stone Tools and Society* (Batsford, 1995), chap. 4.

²¹ Thomas, *op. cit.* note 19, chaps 3-5; R. Bradley, *The Passage of Arms* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 2.

Despite a considerable literature concerned with the effects of earlier prehistoric farming, the first convincing evidence for a firmly established agricultural economy in the Oxford region comes from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. This is the first period to provide unambiguous evidence for fixed settlements and land divisions, and it is the first time that pottery and metal played a significant part in everyday activities.²² Paradoxically, it is precisely at this time that ceremonial monuments disappear from the record. If the adoption of farming in lowland Britain represents the revolutionary event that was once claimed, we are faced with the further paradox that the characteristics of the 'Neolithic revolution' did not manifest themselves until half way through the 'Bronze Age'.

The following discussion is concerned mainly with two kinds of evidence. First, we shall consider the natural environment of the Oxford region and its exploitation. Then we shall consider the ceremonial monuments.

THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE: THE EVIDENCE OF ENVIRONMENT AND SETTLEMENT

Having isolated some of the problems that have arisen over the last ten years, we must review those areas where there has been progress. The first of these is our knowledge of the landscape.

Little is known about the character of earlier prehistoric land clearance in this area. Four main types of evidence are available: pollen analysis; the study of the land snails associated with prehistoric monuments; the identification of charcoal samples; and the physical traces left by the removal of trees. These reflect the pattern of activity on very different scales, all of which are useful, though pollen analysis in particular is still under-exploited as a source of information on environmental change.

Depending on the choice of sampling site, pollen analysis can supply either a regional picture or a more local one. It is only very recently that suitable deposits for this kind of study have been identified in the relatively small peat fens of the Oxford region. The most useful results to date come from Sidlings Copse,²³ Spartum Fen, and Daisy Banks,²⁴ the last of which is situated next to two of the most important monuments in the region: the Abingdon causewayed enclosure and the cemetery at Barrow Hills, Radley. The evidence from this site indicates that these monuments were created in a relatively open environment and even suggest that cereals were being grown on a limited scale during the Neolithic period. The surrounding area may have been largely wooded at this time. Parker estimates that there are as many as 70 fen and fen and peat sites in the region where such work can still be carried out. At present, the information from the Oxford region is extremely scattered. Parker²⁵ has recently summarised the available results of pollen analyses in the region. The Elm Decline is fairly consistently recorded at around the end of the fifth millennium BC, but there is a significant variation in the chronology of major clearance through the Neolithic and Bronze Age (Daisy Banks, close to early monuments, was cleared at around the start of the fourth millennium BC, Sidlings Copse and Spartum Fen, away from known monuments, were cleared within the late third to early second millennia BC). Evidence from the Thames floodplain at Mingies

²² Bradley, *op. cit.* note 7, chap. 5.

²³ S.P. Day, 'Post glacial vegetational history of the Oxford region', *New Phytologist*, 119 (1991), 445-70.

²⁴ A.G. Parker, *Late Quaternary environmental change in the Upper Thames basin, central-southern England* (Oxford Univ. unpubl. D. Phil. thesis, 1995).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Ditch and Gravelly Guy, for example, indicates the presence of wet alder woodland in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, whilst the adjacent gravel terrace at Gravelly Guy was probably open, with a decline of scrub and woodland elements and increasing grassland. More work of this kind needs to be undertaken.

The analysis of land snails has been undertaken on a wide variety of sites, although it is only recently that it has been recognised that this technique is better suited to deposits of silt than it is to buried land surfaces.²⁶ This method can only be used on calcareous soils and records changes over a much more limited area than pollen analysis. Even so, it has identified significant episodes of land clearance preceding the building of a whole variety of major monuments. On the Cotswolds, this applies to the megalithic tombs at Hazleton and Ascott-under-Wychwood as well as the Crickley Hill causewayed enclosure, all of which date from the fourth millennium BC. In the third millennium there is similar evidence from the Condicote henge monument which may well have stood within a woodland clearing. At Rollright differences in soil composition from buried soils beneath the Bronze Age monuments indicates a transition to more open conditions during the Neolithic.²⁷ On the Berkshire Downs, there was a comparable sequence at Wayland's Smithy where there may have been a phase of cultivation some time before the long barrow was built.²⁸ At Yarnton, on the floodplain, clearings had been created by the mid Neolithic. On a regional scale the results again suggest a complex mosaic of different types of vegetation. Similar evidence from the buried soils beneath a series of Early Bronze Age barrows on the chalk suggests that there were significant areas of open grassland on the west Berkshire Downs, whilst there was probably more woodland further to the east.²⁹ The evidence from the chalk also suggests that the first period of widespread clearance did not take place until the late second and early first millennia BC.³⁰

With the exception of work at the Abingdon causewayed enclosure during the 1950s, the systematic study of charcoal and carbonised plant remains is a recent development in this area. It is one of the specific aims of the current excavations at Yarnton, as it was at Gravelly Guy where the samples taken from Neolithic and Beaker contexts include a variety of species associated with the woodland edge, whilst the Iron Age deposits on the same site provide more evidence of scrub and hedgerow species. Analyses of charcoal from Gravelly Guy and Barrow Hills show the predominance of single species of wood used for cremation pyres, compared with more mixed species associated with 'domestic' contexts. These sites, together with Yarnton, have produced carbonised plant remains from drier deposits that can be compared with the pollen and plant remains found in waterlogged contexts nearby.

At present the only direct evidence for the process of earlier prehistoric land clearance is provided by the hollows left by fallen trees. These were first identified at Rams Hill in the early 1970s³¹ and they have been studied more systematically during recent excavations on the gravels. It is not clear how large trees were felled. They could be removed using stone or metal axes, but the same results could be achieved by easier means. It is quite possible that

²⁶ S. Carter, 'The stratification and taphonomy of shells in calcareous soils: Implications for land snail analysis in archaeology', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 17 (1990), 495-507.

²⁷ M. Robinson, 'The mollusca with some notes on the soils', in G. Lambrick, *The Rollright Stones: megaliths, monuments and settlement in the prehistoric landscape* (English Heritage Archaeol. Rep. 6, 1988), 105-8.

²⁸ A. Whittle, 'Wayland's Smithy, Oxfordshire: excavations at the Neolithic tomb in 1962-63', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 57.2 (1991), 61-101 (see p. 92).

²⁹ J. Richards, 'Death and the past environment. The results of work on barrows on the Berkshire Downs', *Berks. Arch. J.*, 73 (1990), 1-42.

³⁰ S. Ford, 'Linear earthworks on the Berkshire Downs', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 71 (1981), 11-20; S. Ford, 'Fieldwork and excavation on the Berkshire Grim's Ditch', *Oxoniensia*, 47 (1982), 13-36.

³¹ Bradley and Ellison, *op. cit.* note 14.

this was done by ring barking before burning the dead trees or allowing them to fall. At Drayton a considerable number of tree-throw holes were found in excavation and 43% of those examined, including one below the bank of a Neolithic cursus, exhibited signs of burning.³² Finds of flint and, more rarely, Peterborough Ware, Grooved Ware and Beaker pottery, came from thirty of these features. Charcoal from the holes was identified as oak roots, and provided dates that extend from the early fourth millennium BC through to the end of the third millennium BC.

Having considered the natural environment, where did people live? The late 1980s saw the first significant progress in investigating the pattern of settlement through systematic fieldwalking. Because pottery hardly ever survived on the surface, this was concerned almost entirely with the distribution of worked flint. Several areas were investigated in detail, including the Thames gravels,³³ parts of the Cotswolds,³⁴ the Stone/Haddenham Ridge, the Berkshire Downs and the Vale of the White Horse.³⁵ As a result of this work a substantial area of the Upper Thames catchment has now been examined. Holgate has studied the greater part of this material and also synthesised the information available from the artefacts in older collections.³⁶ Unlike Marshall and Tingle, both Holgate and Ford attempted to date the surface material, although they were more cautious about analysing the range of activities represented by these finds. Holgate suggested that there may have been a shift from a major focus of activity on the Cotswolds in the earlier part of the Neolithic to more use of the Thames Valley, but Ford's work at North Stoke is not consistent with this interpretation. Here it seems as if the earlier material was found in small scatters close to the Thames itself, whilst later finds were distributed across larger areas of the landscape. The concentrations of Late Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts were also more extensive. On the Berkshire Downs earlier Neolithic finds were uncommon and were usually associated with the dry valleys containing long barrows and again the distribution of later material was much less constrained. At present it is difficult to interpret these observations. The distribution of burial mounds may support Holgate's interpretation, but this is certainly not true of the other types of monument.

During the 1980s small-scale excavation was undertaken to test the character of some of the flint scatters in several areas: the Thames gravels, the Cotswolds, and on the Berkshire Downs.³⁷ The results were inconclusive. More extensive excavation at Gravelly Guy suggests that pits with domestic artefacts could be very thinly scattered over large areas (Fig. 3), making it extremely difficult to devise strategies for their investigation.³⁸ In any case the great majority of the finds are within the modern ploughsoil. The most useful information is emerging from current excavations at Yarnton where the earlier prehistoric land surface is sealed below the modern floodplain. As a result, pits and spreads of artefacts survive unusually well and the challenge of developing ways to investigate them is being tackled.

³² A. Barclay, G. Lambrick and J. Moore, *Cursus monuments in the Upper Thames Valley: the excavations at Drayton and Lechlade* (Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph in prep.).

³³ S. Ford, 'Flint scatters and prehistoric settlement patterns in south Oxfordshire and east Berkshire', in A. Brown and M. Edmonds (eds.), *Lithic Analysis and Later British Prehistory* (BAR 162, 1987), 101–33.

³⁴ A. Marshall, 'Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age settlement in the northern Cotswolds: a preliminary outline based on the distribution of surface scatters and funerary areas', *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol. Soc.*, 103 (1985), 23–54.

³⁵ M. Tingle, 'Inferential limits and surface scatters: the case of the Maddie Farms and Vale of the White Horse fieldwalking survey', in Brown and Edmonds, op. cit. note 33, 87–99.

³⁶ R. Holgate, *Neolithic Settlement of the Thames Basin* (BAR 194, 1988).

³⁷ Ford, op. cit. note 33.

³⁸ G. Lambrick, T.G. Allen and F. Healy, *Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt: the development of a prehistoric and Romano-British landscape* (Thames Valley Landscapes: the Windrush Valley, in prep.).

It is difficult to establish the relationship between the surface scatters and the kinds of features that are found by excavation. Groups of postholes and pits of this period are fairly common, however, and are often related to the positions of flint scatters. Where they have been exposed over large areas, as they have at Yarnton (Fig. 2) or Gravelly Guy (Fig. 3), they can clearly be ascribed to domestic activity. Several of the pits at Yarnton contained deposits which had been deliberately placed there, including most of the decorated pottery from the site. Neolithic and Early Bronze Age finds have also come from the tops of tree-throw holes which seem to have been used for the casual disposal of rubbish. Alternatively, refuse may have collected naturally in these hollows.³⁹

Because a number of the pits were filled with some formality, it is difficult to say whether their contents are representative of the full range of activities taking place at these locations. Such features seem to be found in most parts of the Thames gravels where large areas have been stripped of topsoil during mineral extraction. There are fewer opportunities for finding these features on other subsoils, although some examples are known from both the Berkshire Downs and the Cotswolds. In most cases these finds may result from short-lived visits spread over decades or even centuries, but this could only be demonstrated by an expensive programme of radiocarbon dating.

No convincing traces of Neolithic houses have been identified on the gravels of the Oxford region, although they have been found inside the Neolithic enclosure at Crickley Hill on the Cotswolds.⁴⁰ There seem to be signs of two post-built structures associated with a midden below the chambered cairn at Ascott-under-Wychwood,⁴¹ the details of which are still unpublished many years after the site was excavated. Another building may have predated the Cotswold long cairn at Sale's Lot⁴² and a linear arrangement of postholes associated with a hearth and midden was also found underneath Hazleton North long barrow,⁴³ although it could belong to an earlier phase of funerary activity.⁴⁴ It is only in the Early Bronze Age that evidence of domestic occupation takes a more substantial form. A small circular structure associated with sherds of Biconical Urn has been recognised at Yarnton, but it is not until the Middle Bronze Age that round and oval buildings can be recognised which are associated with a wider range of domestic features such as wells, cooking areas and deposits of burnt stone.⁴⁵

The earlier prehistoric economy remains poorly understood. Cultivated cereals have been found on the oldest Neolithic sites in the region and were first recognised over forty years ago as impressions in the pots from the Abingdon causewayed enclosure.⁴⁶ Carbonised or waterlogged plant remains now provide a further source of information. Wheat, particularly emmer, and barley, were grown from the beginning of the Neolithic period, and weeds from cultivated

³⁹ G. Hey, 'Neolithic settlement at Yarnton, Oxfordshire', in P. Topping (ed.), *Neolithic Settlement in Britain* (Oxbow Monograph, in press).

⁴⁰ P. Dixon, 'The Neolithic settlements on Crickley Hill', in C. Burgess, P. Topping, C. Mordant and M. Maddison (eds.), *Enclosures and Defences in the Neolithic of western Europe* (BAR Int. Ser. 403, 1988), 75-87.

⁴¹ A. Selkirk, 'Ascott-under-Wychwood', *Curr. Archaeol.*, 3 (1971), 7-10.

⁴² H.E. O'Neil, 'Sale's Lot long barrow, Withington, Gloucestershire, 1962-1965', *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol. Soc.*, 79 (1966), 20-4.

⁴³ A. Saville, *Hazleton North: the excavation of a Neolithic long cairn of the Cotswold-Severn group* (English Heritage Archaeol. Rep. 13, 1990), 17-22.

⁴⁴ J. Thomas, 'Neolithic houses in mainland Britain and Ireland - A sceptical view', in T. Darvill and J. Thomas (eds.), *Neolithic Houses in Northwest Europe and beyond* (Oxbow Monograph 57, 1996), 8.

⁴⁵ Hey, op. cit. note 39.

⁴⁶ H. Helbaeck, 'Early crops in southern England', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 18 (1952), 194-233.

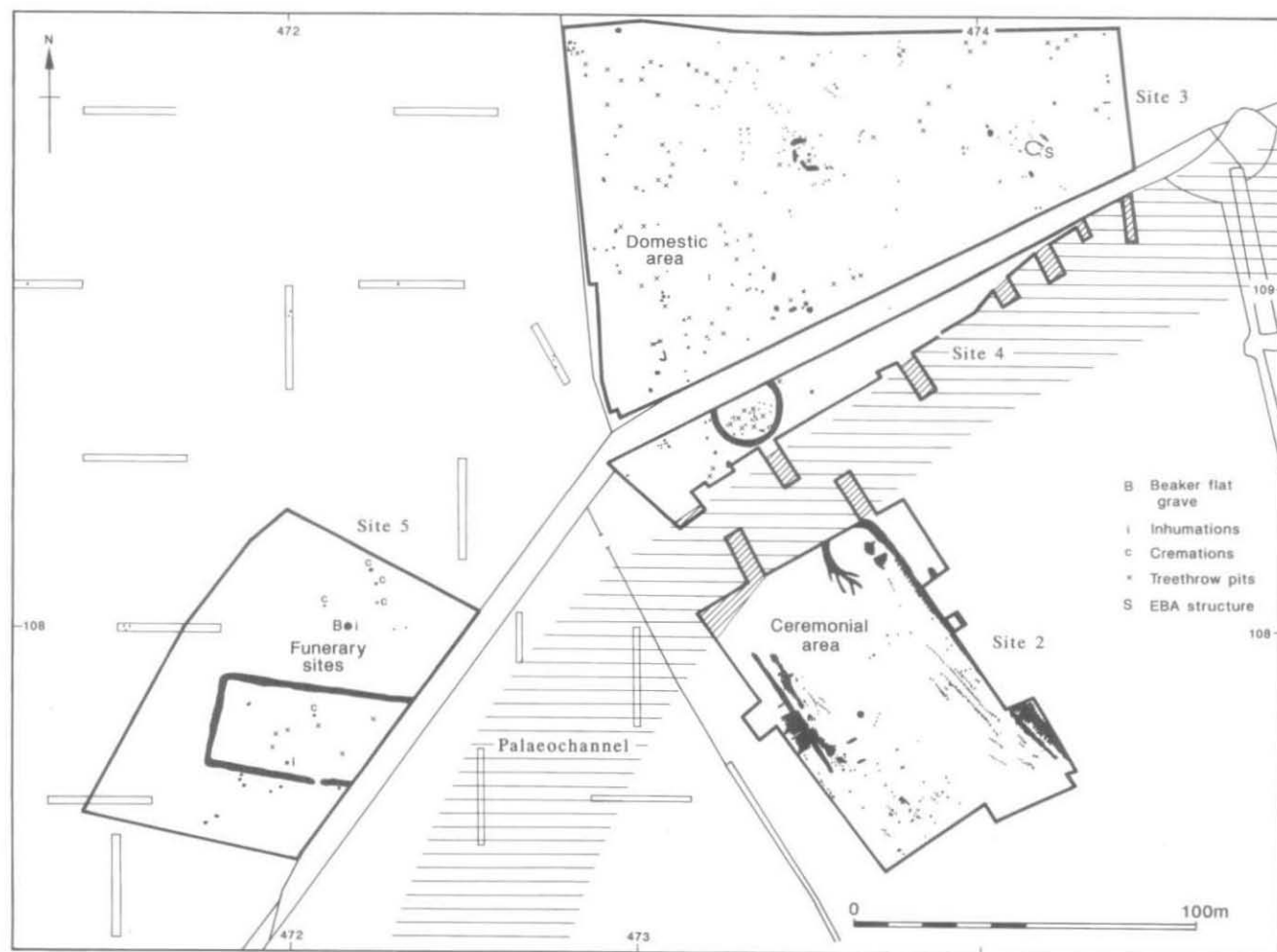


Fig. 2. Yarnton: the spatial segregation of domestic, funerary and ceremonial areas.

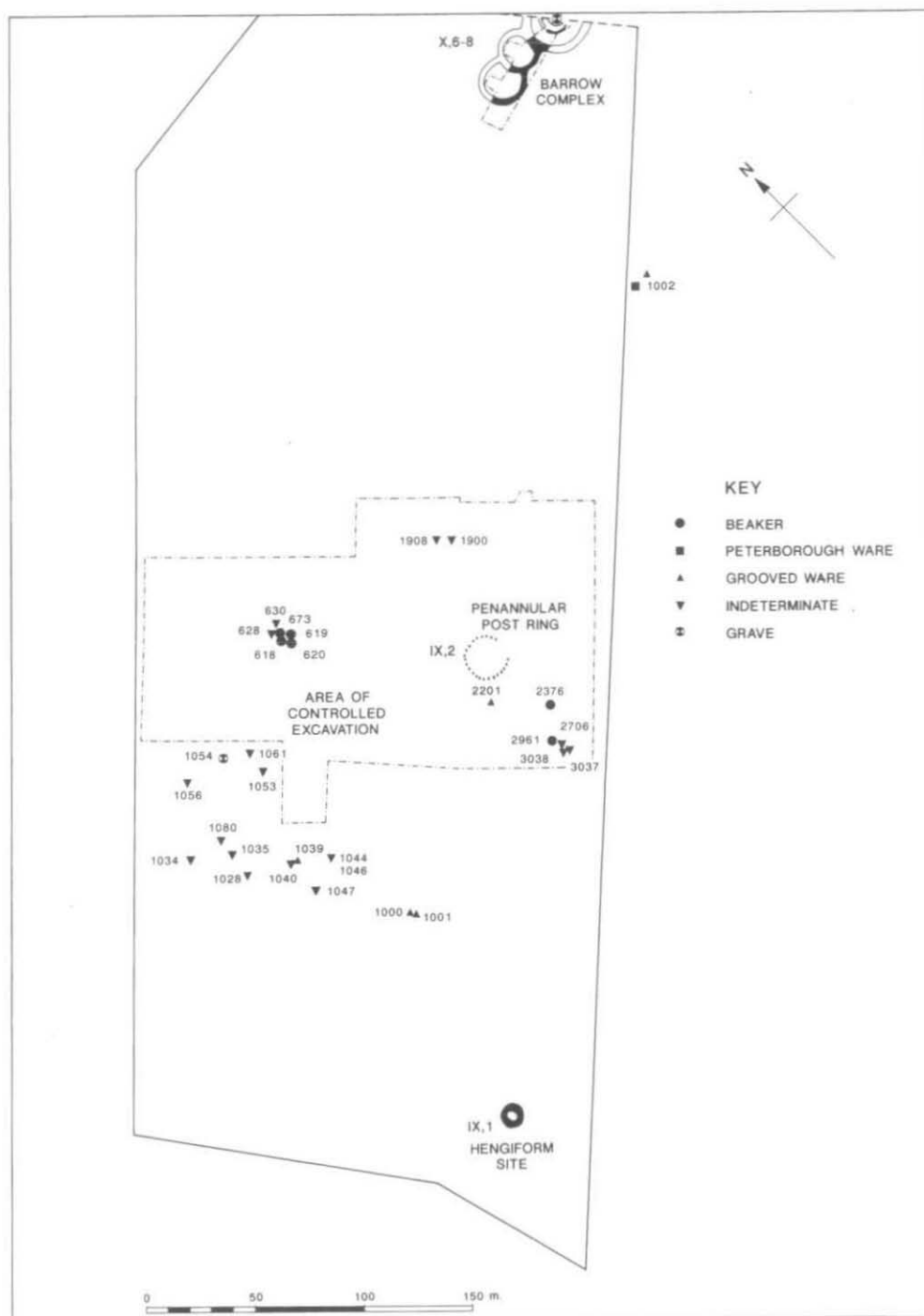


Fig. 3. Gravelly Guy: Neolithic and Bronze Age features.

fields are occasionally found, for example at Hazleton North.⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, there is cereal pollen from Daisy Banks.⁴⁸ The number of cereal grains seems remarkably low despite the extensive sieving and flotation programmes undertaken in recent years.⁴⁹ At Yarnton, for example, 814 ten-litre samples of soil taken from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age features have been analysed in detail but they have yielded only 185 cereal fragments (a meagre 2% of the plant remains from the Neolithic features and only 8% for the earlier prehistoric period as a whole). By contrast, the quantities of wild foods recovered from these sites, particularly hazelnut shells, are high (92% of the total from Yarnton); crab-apple pips, skins and cores and sloe stones are also found. This suggests that gathered plant foods still remained an important component of the diet. Excavators have commonly noted the unmixed nature of Neolithic soils,⁵⁰ which suggests that arable farming was limited, although cultivated soils have been proposed for a few sites, notably Hazleton North and Wayland's Smithy.⁵¹

Most of the cereals have been found at ceremonial or funerary monuments, like Hazleton North or the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, or in occasional pits with specialised deposits like those at Barton Court Farm.⁵² Even in these cases they are heavily outnumbered by the remains of gathered foods. The evidence from Yarnton shows that cereals are remarkably rare, even in domestic sites with good conditions of preservation. Quernstones (as opposed to rubbing stones which could have been used for many purposes) are recovered only in non-domestic contexts, such as the Abingdon enclosure, Hazleton North, Ascott-under-Wychwood and Wayland's Smithy.⁵³

Wild animals, on the other hand, form a minor component of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age bone assemblages. Antler predominates in burials and ceremonial contexts, though many of these had been shed and cannot be used as evidence of hunting. There are also occasional bones of deer, aurochs, bird, hare and fish. The teeth of wild boar are also found and may have been treated as personal ornaments. Recent work at Barrow Hills suggests that a variety of wild animal bones may have been used to form deliberate deposits within some of the monuments.⁵⁴

The overwhelming majority of the animal bones recovered in excavation are from domesticated cattle, pigs and sheep and/or goats. In general, cattle bones are the most numerous and account for a very high proportion of some assemblages, as at Devil's Quoits⁵⁵ and the Abingdon causewayed enclosure,⁵⁶ although in terms of the number of individual animals the

⁴⁷ V. Straker, 'Carbonised plant macrofossils', in Saville, *op. cit.* note 43, 215–18.

⁴⁸ Parker, *op. cit.* note 24.

⁴⁹ L. Moffett, M.A. Robinson and V. Straker, 'Cereals, fruit and nuts: charred plant remains from Neolithic sites in England and Wales and the Neolithic economy', in A. Milles, D. Williams and N. Gardner (eds.), *The beginnings of agriculture* (BAR Int. Ser. 496, 1989), 243–4.

⁵⁰ e.g. R. Kenward, 'A Neolithic burial enclosure at New Wintles Farm, Eynsham', in H.J. Case and A.W.R. Whittle (eds.), *Settlement Patterns in the Oxford region: excavations at the Abingdon causewayed enclosure and other sites* (CBA Research Report 44, 1982), 51–4.

⁵¹ R.I. Macphail, 'The soils', in Saville, *op. cit.* note 43, 224–6; Whittle, *op. cit.* note 28.

⁵² D. Miles, *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon* (CBA Res. Rep. 50, 1986), 27.

⁵³ M. Avery, 'The Neolithic causewayed enclosure, Abingdon', in Case and Whittle, *op. cit.* note 50, 40–3; Saville, *op. cit.* note 43, 176–8; 'Ascott-under-Wychwood' unpub. archive info.; Whittle, *op. cit.* note 28, 92.

⁵⁴ D. Serjeantson and B. Levitan, 'The animals', in A. Barclay and C. Halpin, *Excavations at Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire. Volume 1. The Neolithic and Bronze Age monument complex* (Thames Valley Landscapes, forthcoming).

⁵⁵ B. Levitan, 'Animal bone', in A. Barclay, M. Gray and G. Lambrick, *Excavations at the Devil's Quoits, Oxfordshire 1972–3 and 1988* (Thames Valley Landscape: the Windrush Valley, 3, 1995), 55–7.

⁵⁶ C.L. Cram, 'Animal bones', in Avery, *op. cit.* note 53, 43–6.

proportions of each species are often much more similar. This is true at Hazleton North⁵⁷ and Wayland's Smithy.⁵⁸

The evidence for early field systems has been reconsidered in recent years. As we mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Atkinson claimed to have found a Neolithic field system at Dorchester-on-Thames, but this argument was based on his misidentification of the Middle Bronze Age pottery associated with this feature. Similarly it seems unlikely that the Beaker 'field ditch' at Barrow Hills was identified correctly. If we discount these two sites, the first field systems in the Oxford region did not appear until the Middle Bronze Age. One is Atkinson's site at Dorchester-on-Thames,⁵⁹ and another recently excavated example is on the nearby site at Mount Farm (Fig. 4).⁶⁰ A small group of Middle Bronze Age field boundaries has been excavated at Didcot,⁶¹ and there may be rather similar evidence from an unpublished excavation at Corporation Farm, Abingdon.⁶²

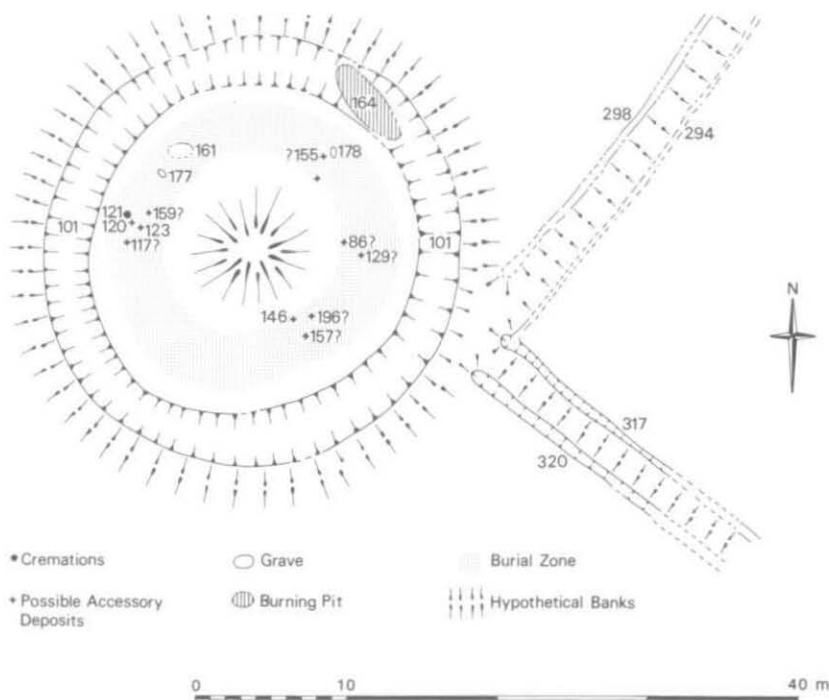


Fig. 4. Mount Farm: the alignment of the later Bronze Age field system on an earlier round barrow.

⁵⁷ B. Levitan, 'The non-human vertebrate remains' in Saville, *op. cit.* note 43, 199–209.

⁵⁸ N. Gardner, 'Animal bones', in Whittle, *op. cit.* note 28, 90–2.

⁵⁹ Whittle *et al.*, *op. cit.* note 11, 159–62.

⁶⁰ G. Lambrick, *Neolithic to Saxon settlements at Mount Farm, Dorchester-on-Thames* (Thames Valley Landscapes, in prep.).

⁶¹ I. Ruben, S. Ford, *et al.* 'Archaeological Excavations at Wallingford Road, Didcot, South Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, 58 (1992), 1–28.

⁶² J. Barrett and R. Bradley, 'The Later Bronze Age in the Thames Valley', in J. Barrett and R. Bradley (eds.), *Settlement and Society in the British Later Bronze Age* (BAR 83, 1980), 247–69 (see p. 257–8).

The comparatively late date at which the first fields were established suggests that settlement and land use may have taken a different form during the period discussed in this paper. By combining what little is known about the domestic sites with the environmental evidence and the results of field survey, we might suggest that between about 4000 and 1500 BC settlement was relatively scattered and small-scale. Throughout this time the Oxford region was far more notable for its monuments than it was for its domestic sites.

THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE: THE EVIDENCE OF MONUMENTS

Case's studies of the earlier prehistory of the Oxford region included a number of models summarising the relationship between settlements and monuments.⁶³ One reconstruction of the earlier Neolithic landscape envisaged a causewayed enclosure at the centre of a territory containing farmsteads, whilst another suggested that the cursus monuments and mortuary enclosures were located in quite peripheral positions. In the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age the henge became the main focus for communal efforts and was surrounded by farms and round barrows.

Fieldwork undertaken since Case's ideas were published necessitates some important revisions to this scheme. We have already seen how the first farmsteads do not appear until the Middle Bronze Age. It is also likely that causewayed enclosures might be located on the edges of the landscape, whilst mortuary enclosures were towards its centre. The only Neolithic houses that have been recognised so far are located not on the Thames gravels but on the Cotswolds. These underlie a number of megalithic tombs and are likely to belong to the very beginning of the period. The structures at Ascott-under-Wychwood are associated with fine carinated bowls which at present have no counterparts on the local river gravels. They are likely to date from the centuries on either side of 4000 BC.

The earliest style of pottery that can be recognised on the lower ground is Abingdon Ware. This came into use after the plain carinated bowls and was probably employed between about 3800 and 3300 BC. It is associated with a variety of different monuments in the river valley and beyond. It is best known at the type site, the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, but it is also associated with chambered cairns on the Cotswolds.⁶⁴ Enclosures are found in both of these areas but seem to be most common along the edges of the gravels and the limestone. To the south-west of the study area there is another concentration of sites on the outer limits of the Wessex chalk.

In the Upper Thames our knowledge of the causewayed enclosures is confined to the evidence from Abingdon. This may be misleading for two reasons. First, this particular enclosure may have gone through a long history of construction and reconstruction. It could have begun as a ceremonial site, but it is quite possible that it assumed a defensive role in its final phase.⁶⁵ To judge from what is known about the other sites, that is not likely to have been the usual sequence at such monuments, although the same developments could be evidenced at Crickley Hill on the western escarpment of the Cotswolds.⁶⁶ The Abingdon area is also rather unusual because so many other monuments have been studied along the same stretch of the Thames.

⁶³ H.J. Case, 'Introduction', in Case and Whittle, *op. cit.* note 50.

⁶⁴ A. Herne, 'A time and a place for the Grimston Bowl', in J.C. Barrett and I.A. Kinnes, (eds.), *The archaeology of context in the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Recent trends* (Dept. of Arch. and Hist., Sheffield Univ., 1988), 30-41.

⁶⁵ Barclay and Halpin, *op. cit.* note 54.

⁶⁶ Dixon, *op. cit.* note 40.

The area between Abingdon and North Stoke contains a bewildering variety of monuments belonging to the same phase (the Middle Neolithic), including cursuses, long barrows, mortuary enclosures, round barrows and a possible bank barrow.

In fact a rather similar concentration of monuments is found further up the Thames north and east of Lechlade, although in this case the landscape is dominated by causewayed enclosures. It is interesting that in both areas the two main types of monuments, cursuses and causewayed enclosures, are not found in close proximity.⁶⁷ A third type of Neolithic monument is the long enclosure, which is found widely on the river gravels but does not seem to extend beyond them. Excavation suggests that these sites originally took a variety of different forms. Some, like Dorchester-on-Thames Site VIII, were open rectangular enclosures and were apparently used in mortuary ritual,⁶⁸ whilst others, for example the oval enclosure at Barrow Hills, were really small long barrows and were associated with burials and grave goods.⁶⁹ Such monuments are often found outside the causewayed enclosures, as excavation has demonstrated at Abingdon, but they are also associated with cursus monuments, like those at Dorchester-on-Thames, Buscot and Drayton.⁷⁰ In some cases their distribution extends well beyond that of the larger monuments and suggests that Middle Neolithic activity on the river gravels may have been more extensive than was once supposed. For example, long or oval enclosures have been recognised recently at Stanton Harcourt,⁷¹ Foxley Farm, Eynsham⁷² and also at Yarnton⁷³ where two examples have just been excavated. One of these may have been an oval barrow, whilst the other was an open rectangular enclosure (Fig. 2). The most intriguing of the recent finds is an oval barrow at Stadhampton which on the evidence of cropmarks seems to be positioned over the only entrance to a cursus.

The later history of such specialised monuments is just as complicated. Case was certainly right to emphasise the importance of henges and round barrows,⁷⁴ although their position in the sequence is often difficult to assess. There are several reasons for this. It is by no means easy to distinguish between the smaller sites when ploughing has removed any surface earthworks. Thus the surviving remains of a circular enclosure might look much the same as those of a burial mound. There is also the chronological problem that until quite recently round barrows were automatically dated to the metal age, and it has taken some time to recognise just how many of the ring ditches of the Oxford region might be the remains of Neolithic round barrows of a kind that is much more common in areas further to the north and east.⁷⁵ Even when they are identified, there has been a tacit assumption that they must be the immediate precursors of the round mounds associated with Beaker pottery, but the very limited evidence available from the Upper Thames suggests that the first of these might have been built at least as early as the late fourth millennium BC.⁷⁶ Some of the later ring ditches might not

⁶⁷ A.J. Barclay, 'Grooved Ware from the Upper Thames', in R. Cleal and A. MacSween (eds.), *Grooved Ware in Context* (Oxbow monograph, forthcoming).

⁶⁸ A. Whittle et al., op. cit. note 11, 148–52.

⁶⁹ Bradley, op. cit. note 9.

⁷⁰ Barclay, op. cit. note 67.

⁷¹ A. Barclay, 'A review of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in the Devil's Quoits area', in Barclay et al., op. cit. note 55, 78–105.

⁷² D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames valley. An archaeological survey of the river gravels* (Oxford Archaeological Unit Survey 2, 1974), Map 20.

⁷³ C. Bell and G. Hey, 'Yarnton Cresswell Field', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter* 26 (1996), 63; G. Hey, 'Yarnton Floodplain', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter* 26 (1996), 66.

⁷⁴ Case, op. cit. note 63.

⁷⁵ Bradley and Holgate, op. cit. note 2.

⁷⁶ Bradley and Holgate, op. cit. note 2.

be the remains of barrows at all. They may actually be the surviving traces of earthwork enclosures whose form anticipates that of the large henge monuments established in the area in the mid third millennium BC. From that point onwards the sequence is better known. Those henges certainly retained their importance into the Early Bronze Age when a stone circle seems to have been added to the existing enclosure at Devil's Quoits⁷⁷ but it is not clear that such sites were maintained over the entire period in which round barrows were being constructed in the surrounding area. This final phase extends from about 2500 to 1500 BC or later.

Such monuments are of types which are well established, even if their interpretation remains a controversial issue. One result of recent fieldwork on the gravels of the Upper Thames has been the recognition of other kinds of field monument which are more difficult to characterise. Some of these are new to the region whilst others appear to be unique. The enclosure at the east end of the Dorchester-on-Thames cursus is a typical example,⁷⁸ for its partially causewayed ditch is not found anywhere else. Similarly a trapezoidal enclosure at Warborough may prove to be a new form of mortuary enclosure,⁷⁹ whilst excavation at Barrow Hills, City Farm and Gravelly Guy appears to have identified a new variant of the 'hengiform' enclosure – a small circular enclosure defined by a deep trench, which in two cases was held in place by a wooden revetment.⁸⁰

At Radley probable pit or pond barrows have been identified⁸¹ and a further example comes from Wally Corner, Berinsfield.⁸² Similarly, at Gravelly Guy excavation has identified an undated post circle of penannular form amidst a scatter of late Neolithic and Beaker pits.⁸³ This circle could have been aligned on the massive Stanton Harcourt 'Wessex' barrow.⁸⁴ Some of these structures can be paralleled outside the Thames Valley, and this is even more clearly the case with other monuments in the Oxford region. The cropmark of the unexcavated Drayton long barrow shows that it is flanked by considerable side ditches, a feature which it shared with better-known examples on the Wessex chalk. Other connections may extend over much greater distances. Thus the henge at Dorchester-on-Thames Big Rings is most closely paralleled by sites in north Yorkshire,⁸⁵ the Whispering Knights portal dolmen is more like sites in Wales and Ireland, and the Rollright Stones have features in common with monuments in north-west England.⁸⁶

One advantage of large-scale rescue excavation has been the opportunity which it offered to go beyond the individual monuments and to study how different structures were built in relation to one another. The Gravelly Guy and Yarnton projects have shed some light on the relationship between such monuments and settlement areas.⁸⁷ Three monument complexes first used in the Middle Neolithic have now been studied in detail and these have shed considerable light on the ways in which different groups of monuments were organised in the

⁷⁷ Barclay et al., op. cit. note 55.

⁷⁸ Whittle et al. note 11, 143–201.

⁷⁹ Case, op. cit. note 1, Plate 3B.

⁸⁰ A Barclay, 'The Discussion' in Barclay and Halpin, op. cit. note 54.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² A. Barclay and R. Thomas, 'Prehistoric Features', in A. Boyle, A. Dodd, D. Miles and A. Mudd, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Berinsfield and Didcot* (Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No. 8, 1995).

⁸³ Barclay, op. cit. note 71.

⁸⁴ G. Lambrick, 'Discussion', in G. Lambrick et al., op. cit. note 38.

⁸⁵ Whittle et al., op. cit. note 11, 191–3.

⁸⁶ Lambrick, op. cit. note 27, 114–24.

⁸⁷ Lambrick et al., op. cit. note 38; Hey, op. cit. note 39.

wider landscape. In the account that follows we shall consider the Neolithic phases of these sites separately from developments during the Beaker and Early Bronze Age periods.

The first of these combined two well-known sites: the Abingdon causewayed enclosure and the series of monuments aligned upon it known as Barrow Hills, Radley. Excavation at Barrow Hills during the mid 1980s produced a number of surprising results.⁸⁸ Some of the barrows from which the site took its name were already known to be associated with rich Early Bronze Age burials, but this work showed that some of the other monuments were in fact built during the Neolithic period. The earliest was an oval barrow placed on the opposite bank of a small stream to the inner ditch of the causewayed enclosure. This mound was associated with two inhumation burials and was probably of the same date as the nearby enclosure. A series of distinctive deposits, including antler, human bone, flint and sherds of pottery, had been placed around the end of the barrow, and these had precise counterparts among the material in the enclosure ditch.⁸⁹ The burials associated with the oval barrow were not the only examples on this site. Radiocarbon dating has shown that there were also Neolithic flat graves at Barrow Hills which belonged to the same period as the causewayed enclosure.⁹⁰ This is the first cemetery of its kind to be found in Britain and provides another reminder that human activity often extended well beyond the outer limits of such 'sites'. During the Late Neolithic period Barrow Hills retained its importance, although the presence of a flint scatter and a series of pits may suggest that this was a settlement area.⁹¹ Again these pits could include complex deposits of artefacts, and a rich assemblage including finely decorated Grooved Ware was found close to the end of the older long barrow, suggesting that the site retained something of its original significance. A miniature henge monument was built at about the same time and, as we shall see, it became a focal point in the layout of the Beaker and Early Bronze Age barrow cemetery.

At Drayton the northern section of a major cursus complex was excavated.⁹² This was built somewhere between 3600 and 3300 BC and is one of the earliest so far known in Britain. On this site two sections of cursus are laid out on the same alignment on either side of a stream. That alignment is echoed by other, unexcavated monuments in the vicinity including an elongated enclosure and another long barrow. Work in the 1930s also identified a pit containing the burials of several individuals within the area of the southern section of the cursus.⁹³ There seem to have been few contemporary features around the northern cursus. Subsequent developments on this site are discussed below.

Like the Abingdon/Barrow Hills complex, the monuments at Dorchester-on-Thames have been excavated over a lengthy period. For many years the situation was further complicated because the results of some of the main excavations were not available. By combining the results of work in the 1940s and 50s with those of rescue excavation when the Dorchester-on-Thames bypass was constructed, we can say something about the development of this monument complex, although more than one interpretation is possible at some points in the sequence.⁹⁴

The main feature of this complex is an alignment of monuments of several different kinds: two long enclosures and two circular structures provisionally interpreted as round barrows.

⁸⁸ Barclay, *op. cit.*, note 80.

⁸⁹ Bradley, *op. cit.* note 9.

⁹⁰ Barclay, *op. cit.* note 80.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Barclay *et al.*, *op. cit.* note 32.

⁹³ E.T. Leeds, 'A Saxon Village near Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire', *Archaeologia*, 73 (1923), 149-92.

⁹⁴ Bradley and Chambers, *op. cit.* note 11; Whittle *et al.*, *op. cit.* note 11.

These were originally built quite separately from one another, but they were linked together during a secondary phase by the building of the cursus during the Middle Neolithic period. That monument reinforced the original alignment and did so on a massive scale, but once it had been built there is no evidence that it was ever refurbished. Rather, like the Drayton cursus, its importance was emphasised by the creation of other monuments around it. The main structures were of Late Neolithic date. All were single-entranced 'hengiform' enclosures, although they might be defined in several different ways: by pits, by ditches or even by rings of posts. Some of these structures were built inside the cursus, others were just outside, but in every case these monuments were aligned along its path. As these monuments decayed, their positions seem to have been marked by deposits of artefacts or of cremated human bones.

This sequence came to an end with the construction of the massive double-ditched enclosure known as Big Rings which had a different orientation from the cursus complex. This was a henge monument of a rather unusual type, although a local parallel may be found at Condicote on the Cotswolds. This development marks a significant change in the use of the Dorchester-on-Thames complex. Elsewhere the same transition was marked by the construction of henge monuments in a completely new setting. This certainly applies to the Devil's Quoits at Stanton Harcourt,⁹⁵ where there had been no Neolithic monuments of any size, and the same is true of the enclosure at Condicote, which has so much in common with Big Rings. Such developments contrast with the situation further to the south-west at Avebury where one of the largest henge monuments of all was built not far from the exceptionally rich causewayed enclosure at Windmill Hill.

These sequences did not end with the Neolithic period, and exceptionally rich burials and other features have been found in barrows close to many of these older monuments. The simplest evidence comes from Drayton where most of the pit deposits that were identified in the 1985-6 excavations belonged to the secondary use of the site during the Beaker phase. Interestingly, the scatter of Beaker pits was along a stretch of the cursus with relatively few Early Bronze Age ring ditches. In contrast, E.T. Leeds excavated three ring ditches and a pit scatter across the adjacent northern end of the south cursus and found no Beaker material.

There were similar developments at Dorchester-on-Thames where a number of Beaker and Early Bronze Age round barrows were built around the site of the cursus. The positions of others focused on Big Rings. The same development has been identified at Stanton Harcourt, where a major cluster of round barrows formed around the Devil's Quoits, and on a smaller scale around the Rollright Stones.⁹⁶ Much the clearest evidence for the continued use of existing ritual complexes is at Barrow Hills, Radley where two parallel rows of unusually large round barrows were built, leading towards the position of the Abingdon causewayed enclosure and incorporating a small henge monument constructed during the Late Neolithic period. The unusual plan of this cemetery can be paralleled at Lambourn on the Berkshire Downs, but otherwise has much more in common with groups of barrows on the Wessex chalk and particularly those near to Stonehenge. That may also explain the unusually rich contents of the graves excavated at this site, which show a complex sequence of artefacts extending from early in the Beaker phase right through the Early Bronze Age.⁹⁷ With the exception of a few individual barrows, one of which is located very close to the Devil's Quoits,⁹⁸ there are few

⁹⁵ Barclay et al., *op. cit.* note 55.

⁹⁶ Lambrick, *op. cit.* note 27.

⁹⁷ Barclay and Halpin, *op. cit.* note 54.

⁹⁸ D.B. Harden and R.C. Treweek, 'Excavations at Stanton Harcourt, Oxon., 1940: II', *Oxoniensia*, 10 (1945), 16-41.

Early Bronze Age grave assemblages of similar quality outside Wessex. Not all the Bronze Age cemeteries of the Upper Thames were built around older monuments, but it is certainly true that the barrows around the Neolithic earthworks at Radley and North Stoke seem to have been built in a wider variety of types than the relatively simple monuments within the cemeteries of Cassington, Foxley Farm, Stanton Harcourt and Standlake.⁹⁹

Although such spectacular finds are undoubtedly important, we must remember that in many parts of the Oxford region the monuments were less impressive and may not have been grouped into ceremonial complexes of this kind. This seems to be the case at Yarnton where all the monuments had been conceived on a relatively small scale. Although they were located near to the settlement area, there is evidence that the two zones were complementary (Fig. 2).¹⁰⁰ It may be that sites such as these, which are partly concealed by the floodplain, were rather more closely integrated into the pattern of everyday life than the larger and more impressive structures on the higher gravel terraces. In more general terms it seems as if locations with Middle Neolithic monuments, like those at Drayton and Radley, might be reused as settlement sites during the Late Neolithic, whilst the places selected for Beaker and Early Bronze Age burials were restricted to ritual activities. In that case it seems more likely that the occupation areas were in between the monument complexes.

The distribution of these concentrations of monuments raises many interesting questions, for it is striking how often they are found along the river corridor. Here they are most apparent close to confluences. The sheer number of those groups of sites is quite remarkable, as most of them occur at intervals of no more than five to ten kilometres, meaning that, whilst each may have been located within its own territory, none was more than a short journey from its neighbours. Sometimes the monuments form pairs located on opposite banks of a river.

There is an important development during the history of these sites. Whilst the main forms of Middle Neolithic monuments – cursuses, long enclosures, causewayed enclosures, long barrows and round barrows – are not always found together, they are fairly densely distributed along the river gravels. The replication of these monuments might suggest that the landscape was very fragmented during this period of settlement.¹⁰¹ The major henges of the Late Neolithic, however, are considerable distances apart, suggesting that their construction and use might have been related to a much wider area. This may provide some indication of growing political centralisation at this time.¹⁰² To a large extent the siting of Early Bronze Age barrow cemeteries continued this trend, for their positions were often influenced by the presence of older ceremonial centres.

It is the disuse of these monument complexes that defines the end of the period considered in this paper, for the order imposed on the local landscape by enclosures, mounds and earthwork alignments was only disrupted by the creation of field boundaries in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. There is good evidence for the abiding importance of places on the Cotswolds and the river gravels over as long as two thousand five hundred years, and then that continuity was broken.

These local histories of monuments and the ceremonies associated with them show much the same persistence in different places. At Rollright, for instance, the construction of an early form of megalithic tomb was followed by the building of a stone circle, most probably in the

⁹⁹ Barclay, *op. cit.* note 80.

¹⁰⁰ Hey, *op. cit.* note 30.

¹⁰¹ J. Harding, 'Social histories and regional perspectives in the Neolithic of lowland England', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 61 (1995), 117–36 (see p. 126).

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 128–30.

Late Neolithic period, and then by a series of Early Bronze Age round barrows. On the gravels the monument complexes at Dorchester-on-Thames, Stanton Harcourt, Drayton or North Stoke all share a history that commenced in the Middle Neolithic and extended into the Early Bronze Age, yet in other places, for example Benson or Stadhampton, that sequence may not have developed over such a long period of time and these locations need not have been used for monuments after the Neolithic period. At Dorchester-on-Thames the influence of the cursus monument lasted until the middle of the Bronze Age when a ditched field system was constructed across its path, while at Lechlade a similar arrangement of fields respected the Early Bronze Age barrows, but by the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age the situation had changed and newly built land boundaries sliced through one of the mounds and cut across the cursus. At Barrow Hills, no new mounds were built after the Early Bronze Age, although the place was still used for burying the dead in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. After that it was abandoned until the Roman period. At Stanton Harcourt a similar abandonment of the early prehistoric monument complex occurred, with little Middle Bronze Age activity. However, while the cultural discontinuity is as strong here as anywhere, there are hints that the early prehistoric pattern of land use and grazing rights over the ceremonial complex may have survived and strongly influenced the organisation of late prehistoric and early Roman settlement and land use.¹⁰³

These developments are among the earliest evidence of quite new attitudes to place, to the natural world and even to the past itself. They are all part of a development that seems comprehensible today, for they helped to establish the agricultural landscapes that still influence our perceptions of the Oxford region. This paper has been concerned with what was there before those landscapes were created. If it has one message for archaeologists studying the development of this area, it is this: the earlier prehistoric world is even more remote from our experience than it appeared when we began to study it. Over the last ten years the orthodoxies have slipped from our grasp. That is why it is worthwhile considering this evidence again.

¹⁰³ G. Lambrick, 'The development of late prehistoric and Roman farming on the Thames gravels', in M. Fulford and E. Nichols (eds.), *Developing landscapes of Lowland Britain. The archaeology of the British gravels: a review* (Soc. Antiq. Occas. Pap. 14, 1992), 78–105.