

SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

NEOLITHIC AND EARLY BRONZE AGE BERKSHIRE

Steve Ford March 2007

Inheritance

The onset of the Neolithic period in Berkshire, has by far the best legacy from the Mesolithic period within the Solent-Thames region as a whole. This legacy stems from the position of the now small county (since 1974 reorganisation) dominated by the major river valley of the Thames and its significant tributaries, the Kennet, Loddon and Colne. This riverine bias, as Clark identified some 80 years ago (Clark 1934) and as detailed by Chisholm (this volume), in particular the middle Kennet Valley, have a wealth of mesolithic evidence, comprising stratified assemblages with faunal, floral, environmental and scientifically dated assemblages (not of course forgetting the lithics). This evidence is less detailed for the Thames Valley and Loddon Valleys (Ames 1993; Harding and Richards 1993; Ford 1997). Another significant issue with regards to legacy is that the county is particularly favourably placed in terms of systematic large scale fieldwalking survey data from other geological outcrops away from the major river valleys (Gaffney and Tingle 1989; Ford 1987a; Ford 1997; Lobb and Rose 1996). These fieldwalking surveys, whilst necessarily dealing with unstratified and plough dispersed material, are nevertheless particularly adept (and perhaps the only systematic way) of finding comparable Mesolithic material away from the buried valley sites. That a significant proportion of our neolithic evidence is recovered from the downlands of West Berkshire and Wessex beyond, it is rather valuable that the mesolithic legacy in these latter areas is assessed in a comparable way. It is perhaps at locations such as Churn Plain at the headwaters of the river Pang now just within Oxfordshire where there is evidence for a coincidence of Mesolithic and early Neolithic where the direct transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic could be explored directly. It is rather ironic and perhaps of great significance that the middle Kennet Valley where the greatest concentration of Mesolithic sites to be found, is so woefully represented in the earlier Neolithic (Ford 2002). This topic will be returned to.

Similarly, but in less marked fashion is the contrast between the Mesolithic presence on the Eocene formations of East Berkshire and a marked paucity of earlier Neolithic material (Ford 1987).

Chronology

Definitions:

Early Neolithic: c. 4100-3300 cal BC

Middle Neolithic: c. 3300-2900 cal BC

Late Neolithic: c. 2900-2200 cal BC (beaker after 2500 cal BC)

Early Bronze Age: c. 2200-1700 cal BC

A modest number of absolute (mainly radiocarbon dates) are available for the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. These are detailed in Table 1 and have all been calibrated using the OXCal v 3.5 programme. For the earlier part of the neolithic these dates largely derive from the monumental sites at Eton Wick causewayed enclosure, Park Farm round barrow, Lambourn long barrow and Runnymede Bridge (Ford 1993; Whittle et al in prep; Richards 1986; Wymer 1966; Needham 1985).

Dates from sites which might reflect utilitarian occupation sites comprise a single example. At Cannon Hill, Maidenhead a 'shaft' (pit on top of solution hollow?) produced an early date of 4350-3800 cal BC (Bradley et al. 1976). A wooden stake and unworked wood from channel deposits of the Kennet at Reading with dates of 3960-3630 and 3650-3360 cal BC unfortunately are not associated with other

cultural remains (Hawkes and Fasham 1997, 38). The midden deposits at Runnymede Bridge (Needham 1985) and the presence of a ditch may belie the presence of more than a simple occupation site. Similarly the vast midden deposits at Eton Rowing Lake, Dorney just over the county border in Buckinghamshire (Allen et al 2005; Biddulph this volume) are not a product of a simple utilitarian rural occupation site.

In the context of discussion of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition none of the dates belong to the earliest phase of the Neolithic, here taken as before c. 4000 cal BC though the Dorney dates of c. 3900-3500 cal BC (Allen et al 2005) come close. Though the 'earliness' or otherwise of these neolithic dates is meaningless without 'late' Mesolithic dates to provide a comparison (Schulting 2000). It is ironic that the stimulation of interest in the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition from the uncalibrated comparison of the first date from Lambourn long barrow of 5360 ± 180 BP (GX1178) (Wymer 1966) with the later publication of a date of 5260 ± 130 BP (BM449) from the mesolithic site of Wawcott I (Froom 1972) now seems doubtful. Additional dates (OxA7672 and 7674) with less error and calibration indicate a construction date for Lambourn long barrow of 3770-3630 cal BC (Schulting 2000). Three other dates from Wawcott (BM 767, BM2718, BM2719) suggest use of the site is somewhat earlier- 5400-4800 cal BC. It is curious that a worked beaver bone from the Early Mesolithic site of Thatcham III (Wymer 1961) was much later than expected and possibly of Neolithic date (4700-3000 cal BC).

Dates for the subsequent later Neolithic are even less numerous with just three sites available. At the start of the late Neolithic the oval ring ditch at Horton surrounding (closing?) the earlier Neolithic 'C-shaped' (Ford and Pine, 2003, 61) produced dates of 3650-2490 cal BC and the segmented ring ditch at Green Park, Reading (Brossler, 2004, 8) dates of 2920-2580 cal BC. At Field Farm, Burghfield (Butterworth and Lobb 1992) a hearth associated with Mortlake pottery preceded an Early Bronze Age ring ditch and produced an archaeomagnetic date of 3900-3000 cal BC.

Radiocarbon dates for the Early Bronze Age are few and, apart from round barrows, reflect the paucity of excavated contexts where suitable material can be obtained. Even for the round barrows, most 'excavations' of these took place many decades ago and only a few modern projects included for radiocarbon dating. On the Berkshire Downs, two relatively recently excavated barrows produced C14 dates. At Lambourn 19 a date of 1960-1520 cal BC from an unaccompanied cremation burial pre-dated construction of the mound. At Hodcott A three dates of 2040-1440 cal BC also dated construction of the mound which overlay a cremation burial associated with a bronze dagger and other copper alloy objects. A watching brief at Lambourn Seven Barrows Stables revealed a crouched inhumation of a male associated with a beaker with a date of 1750-1510 cal BC (Richards 1986). In the Kennet Valley four ring ditches were excavated at Field Farm Burghfield (Butterworth and Lobb 1992), one of which produced two Early Bronze Age radiocarbon dates of 2300-1730 cal BC in addition to an archaeomagnetic date of 1859-1650 cal BC. Middle Bronze Age (and Saxon) use of the site also took place. One cremation burial with a Collared Urn produced a late date of 1270-900 cal BC. The segmented ring ditch at Green Park produced a date of 1700-1440 cal BC (Brossler, 2004, 8). Excavation of a barrow at Heatherwood Hospital, Ascot produced a date of 1890-1520 cal BC (Bradley and Keith-Lucas 1975). The other date comes from a pit circle at Charnham Lane, Hungerford with a date of 1880-1440 cal BC (Ford 2002, 75).

Social organisation

Economy/subsistence

Several of the excavated contexts have provided economic/subsistence data. The number of sites is relatively few and are insufficient to identify and detail any specific local patterns over and above the general countryside overview (Moffet et al. 1989). For the earlier Neolithic, the largest faunal assemblages have been recovered from Horton, Eton Wick and Runnymede Bridge. A small faunal collection was recovered from the pits at Reading Business Park, but which, exceptionally, included a complete cattle skeleton. The usual domesticated species are present, namely cattle, sheep, pig with cattle always most important in terms of food weight with some minor contributions, such as from horse. The use of wild animals is at most a minor component of the bone assemblages except for red deer antler. In contrast, recovered charred plant remains are disappointingly few despite extensive programmes of sieving. This is also the case for the various pits excavated in more recent times and also subject to sieving.

For the Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age there are no faunal assemblages as such, with just the occasional animal bone recorded representing the usual domesticated species and deer antler. The only noteworthy item is that of a pair of fish jaws (Pike) placed on the floor of the Horton outer ditch. With regards to the recovery of charred plant remains, sites with these are again few. Sampling of the pits at Green Park, Reading produced large numbers of hazelnut shells, some hazelnuts themselves along with wheat grains.

Landscape, landuse and Settlement

An overview of settlement and landuse can take two forms; namely a consideration of the distribution of all evidence (ie including monuments, stray finds and occupation sites) and more specific detail of definitive occupation remains.

A search of the SMRs for locations within the landscape identifiable as occupation sites in the Neolithic, even without database technology, would indeed be a quick affair with few sites encountered. Yet if the same type of search was carried out, say for the late Bronze Age, significant success would be achieved. In the latter period within Berkshire, and elsewhere occupation sites are 'text book' and can be represented by post hole-built houses, rubbish pits, four post granaries, enclosures, fences, wells, middens, and are found with a certain degree of regularity if not routinely. If these characteristics are taken as defining occupation then this aspect of the study of neolithic settlement does indeed hit the buffers.

Yet before one discounts Neolithic occupation as absent or not yet found, this paucity of occupation sites may all be in the mind and it is the expectation that Neolithic occupation remains should be similar to Bronze Age and later ones that is at fault. It is this dichotomy that led to the intensive field surveys in the 1980's which considered that the vast majority of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupation was like its Mesolithic predecessors and that its detritus, never found its way into stratified contexts at least on domestic sites (Brown et al. 1987; Schofield 1991). This realisation is naturally bad news for the recovery of stratified associations of artefacts, economic data and absolute dating of direct settlement evidence, and for non-flint areas of the country Neolithic occupation sites are, in effect, invisible.

The primary evidence for occupation sites within Berkshire is most usually either one or more pits, occasionally associated postholes and flint scatters or a combination of all three (Ford 2003, 16; Brossler 2005; Moore and Jennings 1992). There are no known house sites which have left below ground foundations, a single hearth (at Field Farm), no enclosed areas for occupation or animal husbandry.. For the Early and Middle Neolithic, there are a small number of seemingly isolated pits with less than 10 locations recorded (Ford 1991a, fig 6.3) but with occasionally much larger groupings as at Reading Business Park (Moore and Jennings 1992). The latter site can be compared to the larger pit groupings recorded for East Anglia (Clarke et al 1960; Garrow et al 2005; Healy 1988). In terms of numbers of findspots the small number declines for the late neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Again the excavations at Reading Business Park (Green Park), are noteworthy in revealing a group of 19 late Neolithic pits (Brossler et al. 2004). As noted on many previous occasions, for the Early Bronze Age, funerary monuments far outnumber pits and occupation sites by as much as 50:1. Such is the rarity of these pits and frequently non-utilitarian contents (ie not considered as rubbish) that several authors consider even these features as non-domestic in origin (Thomas 1991 60-61). Such an interpretation, for example, seems entirely plausible for an Early Bronze Age pit found at Kingsmead, Horton with an unusual collection of arrowheads (WA 2006).

The large scale fieldwalking studies outlined above, were largely intended to redress this lack of prehistoric occupation sites and have, with several caveats achieved a good measure of success. Those studies were designed not only to search for traditional 'sites' but also to collect data for an 'off-site' approach to settlement studies where zones of occupation can be identified even if individual stratified sites cannot (cf Foley 1981). The fieldwalking studies within the study area led to recovery of, sometimes, large volumes of struck flint. This is especially so for the chalklands of West Berkshire (Gaffney and Tingle 1987) and East Berkshire (Ford 1987) where dense flint scatters literally sprawled for several hectares. These contrasted with other locations where marked but discrete scatters could be

identified and more readily fit the pre-conceptions of sites. To make full use of this material, it was necessary, to provide a chronological framework which used the bulk of the material recovered rather than rely on the rare occurrence of distinctive items. The large numbers involved necessarily lent themselves to a range of statistical and metrical techniques.

Assessment of the data available for Berkshire does allow for some summarisation of the wider settlement pattern in Neolithic and Bronze Age times. For the earlier and middle Neolithic, flint scatters appear to reflect small scale occupation with localised distributions of material. They are frequently masked by the presence of later material (cf Healy 1983). It is clear though, that earlier Neolithic material is not widely located across the landscape; rather it is to be found in the river valleys (but largely avoiding the Kennet Valley) and on the chalk downlands; it avoids the claylands and heathlands of East Berkshire and the clay with flints capping on the east end of the Berkshire downs. Assessment of the distribution of distinctive earlier Neolithic material such as leaf-shaped arrowheads, monumental sites and excavated pits all tends to confirm this pattern.

This pattern changes for the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Some differentiation between flint scatters of these two periods is possible when discrete, one-phase scatters are recorded as at Donnington Grove, Newbury (Ford 1991b) and Riddings Farm, Brimpton (Ford 1992) but usually the flint scatters have to be discussed as a whole. Some sites on the chalklands or river gravel can be found to be very dense and occupying several hectares which implies large settlements, repeated use of the same locations, or both. Flint scatters of these periods are now to be found much more widely distributed with most geological outcrops and landscapes indicating some form of occupation towards the end of the study period. This can be matched by the distribution of round barrows, which are to be found everywhere, and (with a less marked pattern) from the distribution of Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age arrowheads.

It is therefore with regret that the use of this data for occupation evidence in terms of social organisation (eg farms, hamlets, village) degree of permanence, settlement hierarchies, economic specialisation, is therefore most premature for Berkshire and requires many assumptions if used on a countrywide scale, etc

Ceremony, ritual and religion

Monuments

Neolithic

The small county contains more than its fair share of ceremonial monuments all of which are located in valley floor locations; The only definitive example of a causewayed enclosure is recorded at Eton Wick, with possible examples at Runnymede Bridge (Needham 1985). Just beyond the county boundaries is the definitive example at Staines with further possible examples at Dorney and Gatehampton Farm, Goring. A previously discounted site at Eye and Dunsden located on the side of the valley has been reassessed as a possible example (Oswald et al 2001, 154).

For long barrows, several of which are recorded for the Berkshire Downs, yet just two (Lambourn long barrow and Sheep Down, East Ilsley) now lie within the county boundary. The Lambourn long barrow has been partially excavated and shown to include a megalithic component and collective human burial. (Wymer 1966). The now levelled mound at Sheep Down has been partially investigated, but without producing clear information though is now considered to be a long barrow (Richards, 1978, 31). On the north Hampshire downs lies the long barrow at Coombe Gibbett. Circular or oval barrows/monuments are marginally more numerous. Excavated examples are present at Park Farm, Upper Lambourn (Richards 1986) which also contained collective human burial whereas the C-shaped Earlier Neolithic ditch at Horton contained but a few disarticulated fragments of human bone (Ford and Pine 2003). Later Neolithic examples comprise a segmented ring ditch at Green Park Reading (Brossler 2004) the oval ditch surrounding the C-shaped ditch at Horton (Ford and Pine 2003) and a long mortuary enclosure at Sonning (Slade 1964). One unexcavated monument recorded only as a cropmark merits comment in this section due to its distinctive plan; a double ditched oval monument is recorded just to the east of the Eton Wick causewayed enclosure drawing comparison with the relationship of an excavated Neolithic monument of similar plan outside the Abingdon causewayed

enclosure (Ford 1993; Bradley et al. 1985). Finally, several large diameter, oval or segmented ring ditches are recorded as cropmarks and which may be of Neolithic rather than Bronze Age date (Ford 1991a, 284ff; Gates 1975).

Two cursus monuments are recorded, neither having been excavated. One is located at Sonning and is a very convincing cropmark with markedly rectangular end with entrance gap (Gates 1975, plate 11). Nearby is the partially excavated long mortuary enclosure (Slade 1964), a second enclosure and several other ring ditches. A second much less convincing example is located at Avington in the Kennet Valley which, if valid, would have a curving end (Ford 1991a, 281).

The preceding discussions were careful to describe the above features under the generic heading of monuments, rather than attempting to infer that they are funerary monuments. Despite broad similarities of monument type, there are in fact just two Neolithic monuments where burial is actually present, namely Lambourn long barrow and Park Farm round barrow, both collective. An earlier Neolithic inhumation burial at Pangbourne is of uncertain status but might represent an uncommon presence of an individual grave without monumental associations (Piggott 1929).

Significant commentary on the distribution of these monument types mainly draws on regional patterns observed rather than that which can be gleaned from the narrow constraints of the county boundary itself. From the wider perspective, several patterns are present; The monuments are wholly located either within the major valleys - principally on the gravel floor of the Thames, or the chalk uplands of the Wessex Downs. Neolithic monuments are unrecorded for the clay with flints or Eocene formations which occupy much of east and central Berkshire. True long barrows are absent from the gravel terraces (but with a single example upstream at Abingdon). Finally, large henges which are a feature of the bordering regions of Wessex and the Upper Thames, are missing. It is also unclear how many, if any, hengiform monuments are present; none have been excavated to date though several causewayed ring ditches are recorded as cropmarks.

Early Bronze Age

Monuments of the Early Bronze Age are, as probably true of the country as a whole are dominated by round barrows including their levelled counterparts (ring ditches) and including causewayed ring ditches. A moderate proportion have been known to have been dug into; with some simply looted; others investigated in the 19th and early 20th centuries with variable degrees of excavation skill, but, inevitably, relatively few subject to scientific excavation. There is a fairly comprehensive range of monument types and associations; large and small barrow cemeteries linear cemeteries; pairs, singles. Some barrows can be excluded from this discussion as they have been shown to be of Neolithic and Middle Bronze Age date, and doubtless others will also be of similar date. A fairly comprehensive discussion of the chronology associations and distribution of barrows and ring ditches was presented in Ford (1991, 336ff) but which included a study area greater than Berkshire. One of the more unexpected facts to emerge from study of the distribution of barrows was that the highest density of monuments was to be found on the river gravels rather than the chalk downlands (where more upstanding barrows occur). As already alluded to above it is noteworthy that it is only with the onset of the Bronze Age, are monuments to be found across the full range of geological outcrops again implying that for the Neolithic or at least the earlier Neolithic, full use of the landscape did not take place.

The only non-barrow Early Bronze Age monument is that of the Charnham Lane pit circle with a date of 1750-1525 cal BC whose date overlaps with the succeeding phase (Ford 2002). This monument comprised a circular group of pits surrounding an intensively burnt area but without any obvious evidence for a mound. Finds from the pits included fragments of an 'Aldbourn Cup' - a very distinctive accessory vessel of which few are recorded, all from barrow excavations in east Wiltshire. The other distinctive feature of the pit circle was its close association with occupation.

Votive deposition

Sources for consideration of the deposition of votive material are relatively widespread within the county. If one were to accept that all Neolithic pits were for votive offerings (Thomas 1991,61), then this topic more or less covers the whole range of evidence summarised above. One of the more impressive sources of evidence is that of the large numbers of flint and stone axes recovered from the

Thames. Whilst undoubtedly some of these are lost from eroded riverside occupation sites, their sheer numbers indicates that this cannot be a full explanation (Bradley;; Chappell).

Craft and trade/exchange

Relatively little material evidence is available for consideration. The main evidence for trade/ exchange is the presence of objects made from exotic materials not available locally. For the Neolithic imported items are largely restricted to lithic materials with stone axes made from hard rocks with origins in northern and western Britain with Group I (Cornwall) and Group VI (Langdale) predominating. It is possible that some might be made from glacial erratics incorporated within the Thames gravels. A few lithic items are made of chert, possibly or probably from Portland in Dorset.

The recovery of bowls made from bark from the later Neolithic ditch at Horton merits a mention under the topic of craft activities if only for the extreme rarity of such finds. The bowls, made from Birch bark, were stitched together with Lime bast. Some of the poorly preserved 'bowls' may be lids and one thicker object made from oak may have been a platter (Cartwright 2003. 52). It is assumed that such containers would have been ubiquitous for much of prehistory but only surviving in the most favourable of circumstances.

For the Early Bronze Age, a wide range of exotic materials are known. Some stone tools, such as battle axes and axe hammers appear to be specifically of Bronze Age date (Roe 1979). The most obvious exotic finds though, are those made of bronze with no ore sources available locally.

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Table 1 Radiocarbon and other dates

Site	Date (BP)	Calibrated dates (OxCal v3.5)
Mesolithic sites mentioned in text		
Wawcott I	5250±130 (BM449)	4350-3750

	6120±134 (BM767) 6079±113 (BM826) 6130±100 (BM2719)	5400-4700 5300-4700 5310-4800
Thatcham III	5100±350 (OxA1201)	4700-3000
Early and Middle Neolithic		2 sigma (95.4%)
Eton Wick outer ditch	4750±80 (BM2533) 4680±110 (BM2534) 4680±50 (BM2535) 4900±50 (GrA31370) 4600±35 (GrA31534) 4630±50 (GrA31177)	3670-3360 3700-3050 3640-3360 3800-3530 3510-3110 3650-3100
Lambourn Long Barrow	5365±180 (GX1178) 4870±45 (OxA7692) 4915±45 (OxA7694) 4955±45 (OxA7693) 4395±65 (OxA7899)	4600-3750 3770-3530 3790-3630 3910-3640 3340-2880
Runnymede Bridge, Egham	5075±45 (GrA31357) 4890±40 (GrA31358) 4360±45 (BM2835)	3970-3760 3770-3630 3100-2880
Cannon Hill, Maidenhead	5270±110 (HAR 1198)	4350-3800
Park Farm, Upper Lambourn	4800±90 (HAR3898) 4780±70 (HAR3884) 4870±70 (HAR 3883)	3770-3360 3700-3370 3800-3500
Crane Wharf, Reading	4950±80 (HAR7028) 4740±70 (HAR7020)	3960-3630 3650-3360
Field Farm, Burghfield 417	Archaeo-magnetic (AJC-63)	3900-3000
Later Neolithic		
Horton outer ditch	4390±75 (OxA3577) 4320±120 (OxA3008) 4585±75 (OxA3576) 4520±75 (OxA3578) 4100±60 (BM2754) 4390±100 (BM2797) 4355±37 (BM2816) repeat of 2797 (3500±90 (OxA3086)) (3570±80 (OxA3088))	3340-2880 3350-2600 3650-3000 3500-2900 2880-2490 3400-2700 3090-2880 Discounted Discounted
Green Park, Reading segmented ring ditch	4212±57 BP (NZA9478) 4183±58 BP (NZA 9411)	2920-2620 2900-2580
Early Bronze Age		
Charnham Lane pit circle	3360±90 BP (BM2737)	1880-1440
Green Park segmented ring ditch	3300±57 BP (NZA9508)	1700-1440 (93.1%)
Field Farm, Burghfield 417	3650±80 (HAR9139) 3569±80 (HAR9142) Archaeo-magnetic (AJC-64) (2890±60 (HAR9143))	2300-1750 2140-1730 (93.4%) 1859-1650 1270-900 Discounted?
Hodcott Down A	3340±70 (HAR3599) 3370±70 (HAR3608) 3490±80 (HAR3607)	1780-1440 1880-1500 2040-1600
Lambourn 19	3440±90 (HAR3818)	1960-1520
Seven Barrows Stables, Lambourn	3360±50 (BM2643)	1750-1510
Heatherwood Hospital, Ascot	3430±70 (HAR 478)	1890-1520