

# SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

## NEOLITHIC AND EARLY BRONZE AGE OXFORDSHIRE

Gill Hey, December 2006

### **1 Key Neolithic and early Bronze Age aspects of Oxfordshire**

Probably the most important new aspect of Neolithic and early Bronze Age archaeology in Oxfordshire is the extensive prehistoric landscapes that are emerging, often on the better-preserved Thames floodplain, because of large-scale archaeological investigation in advance of development. This has usually been by professional organisations, but important information has also been gained by the persistent and long-term monitoring of gravel quarries and other developments by non-professional groups. Thus a much broader context is provided for 'sites', especially putting them in their landscape setting, but also providing time depth and allowing an understanding the chronological development of entire areas through time.

Other key aspects of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in Oxfordshire include:

- a focus on rivers, especially for early sites and monument complexes
- presence of some early Neolithic houses (and one late Neolithic example)
- possibility that early Neolithic settlement and economy differs from that of the middle and late Neolithic
- the number of causewayed enclosures and clustered distribution of
- pit deposits and more widespread distribution through Neolithic
- change in funerary practices at Neolithic/Bronze Age interface (Beaker).

### **2 Major sites and new sites and features**

The following is a list of major sites and some new sites. Those that are new, or are about to be published, are starred:

Abingdon causewayed enclosure and Radley Barrow Hills  
Ascott-Under-Wychwood\*  
\*Benson\* (pits)  
Cassington Mill  
Corporation Farm and other sites near the Thames at Abingdon  
Dorchester-on-Thames  
Drayton Cursus  
Eynsham (New Wintles/City Farm and Foxley Farm)  
Goring  
Hanborough flint scatters  
Mount Farm\*  
North Stoke  
Oxford: Beaumont Palace, Gene Function and other barrows  
Rollright Stones

South Stoke\*  
Stanton Harcourt, especially Devil's Quoits and Gravelly Guy\*  
Thrupp  
White Horse Hill  
Yarnton\*

Environmental sequences at Sidlings Copse and Daisy Banks, Abingdon

### **3 Summary of current state of knowledge**

#### **3.1 *Inheritance***

##### **3.1.1 *Key features inherited from earlier periods***

In Oxfordshire, the major feature inherited from earlier periods was the natural environment, in particular a forested landscape which was dense in some places, for example the river valleys and lower slopes (Day 1991; Robinson various). There is some evidence to suggest that clearings existed within the woodland, both along the major river corridors (eg Corporation Farm, Holgate *et al.* 2003, 133; and Gravelly Guy, Holgate 2004) and on higher ground, especially on the Cotswolds (eg Ascott-Under-Wychwood, Benson and Whittle forthcoming; and Rollright, Lambrick 1988), although there is no evidence that these were necessarily long-lived, or were created/enhanced by early populations. However, a number of these clearings (including those mentioned above) witnessed activity in the Neolithic. This may reflect the comparative ease of clearance and the favourable siting of these places, but could reflect the traditional use of particular locales in the landscape.

The Thames itself, and its major tributaries appear to have been important routeways during the Mesolithic, as indicated by the distribution of sites and the recovery of finds from the river, especially further downstream (Allen 1995) and this seems to have remained the case in the Neolithic.

It is possible that some patterns of activity were also inherited from earlier times, for example votive deposition, including deposition of material in tree-throw holes and in the Thames (see below and Allen 1995; Bradley 1990). Although the evidence in Oxfordshire is slight compared to that from the middle Thames, the creation of middens may also be a custom inherited from the Mesolithic. Patterns of mobility, with sporadic but repeated visits to particular sites may be an inherited routine.

There would be considerable merit in undertaking a review of some areas which have both later Mesolithic and early Neolithic activity with, at least, additional environmental sampling and topographical modelling.

### 3.1.2 *Nature of evidence base (possibly for introduction)*

The evidence comes from excavations and evaluations, much of these as a result of gravel extraction, but more recently housing and other urban/industrial development. There have been comparatively few road and railway schemes in recent years, although some important 19th century discoveries were as a result of these. Air photographic evidence has been and remains of great importance, as the river gravels and the upland slopes of the Cotswolds and the Berkshire Downs are conducive to cropmark development. Major Allen's photographs, dating mainly from the 1930s, remain amongst the best that we have available. These reveal a large number of feature types, in particular a large number of enclosures in many shapes and sizes, but it is very hard to date with any confidence many of these features on morphological grounds alone. Fieldwalking and the recovery of flintwork from later contexts is also significant, although the difficulties of dating this material closely make its use problematic also.

The most obvious and best-known evidence comes from ceremonial sites and funerary monuments, including important barrow cemeteries. Those at Dorchester-on-Thames and at Abingdon and Radley Barrow Hills are particularly well known. Flint scatters have provided important sources of information about settlement at the time (Holgate 1988). However, recent large-scale stripping has brought to light an important group of features which shed light on the Neolithic and early Bronze Age: pit groups, tree-throw holes with finds, middens and finds scatters on buried ground surfaces and occasional houses. Also deposition in rivers (again).

### 3.1.3 *History of research*

Oxfordshire has witnessed archaeological investigation from the days of early antiquaries, mainly because of the presence of the University in Oxford. This was fuelled by interest in a few spectacular standing monuments, such as the Rollright Stones, but also the proximity of gravel workings which provided a supply of artefacts as well as a fruitful source of information. Early antiquarian interest included that of John Aubrey and Dr Plot in the 17th century and William Stukeley in the 18th century. In the 19th century, railway construction and gravel digging provided addition new information and important contributions were made to regional and national research by Lukis, Dryden, Dawkins, Rolleston and Stephen Stone. Oxfordshire also had its share of important 20th century archaeologists: E T Leeds, Major Allen, Grimes and Riley. And - thankfully - a number who are still with us. [Also, unfortunately, it has had its fair share of not-so-well conducted or published sites, some of which have had to be published by others at a later date!].

There are, perhaps, two distinctive features of the history of archaeological investigations in Oxfordshire. Firstly relatively few excavations have been entirely research based, even research excavations conducted from university departments were often carried out in advance of development (eg Dorchester,

Radley oval barrow, Bradley 1992). However, there have been research excavations: Wayland's Smithy, White Horse Hill, Lambourn barrows that are now in Oxfordshire. Secondly, because of the scale of gravel workings, even in the earlier 20th century, there has perhaps been more of a focus on landscape archaeology than site-specific work. Stephen Stone's work in the later 19th century concerned itself with settlement archaeology at a time when this was not fashionable.

### 3.1.4 *Role of material culture*

Material-culture studies have been and remain central to an understanding of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in the county, for understanding the purpose of sites and the character of the activities that took place there. Flint and stone, pottery and objects of bone, wood, bark and leather, with gold, copper and bronze later on. However, the generally dry land positions of most sites has led to the decay of most organic material (especially as many low-lying sites which are wet now were dry in the Neolithic and EBA because the water table was lower). It is apparent that, in many contexts, objects have been deliberately deposited/placed. As grave goods, in ceremonial sites such as causewayed enclosures and in pits and other votive contexts (eg rivers again).

One of problem areas for this period is understanding the relationship between pit deposits and domestic activity: to what extent are finds within pits on settlement sites special, and to what extent do they represent material that was in everyday use? Some artefacts may have been made especially for deposition.

Exchange of exotic objects, especially stone, is important for indicating external contacts and, possibly, the degree of mobility.

## 3.2 *Chronology*

Pottery and, to a lesser extent, flint remain the main tools for dating sites (in the absence of material for radiocarbon dating or money to undertake scientific dating). Nevertheless, radiocarbon dating has been very important for setting artefact sequences into a more precise chronological framework. More recently, it has begun to transform our understanding of the Neolithic and EBA, especially for the early Neolithic (partly because of the better calibration curve at that time). For some sites it has been possible to use Bayesian modelling to reduce the date ranges for samples from stratigraphic sequences, although this is relatively rare in Oxfordshire. These sites are starred in this following list of new dates which have become available over the last ten years:

Yarnton  
Ascott-Under-Wychwood\*

Abingdon causewayed enclosure\* and the adjacent Daisy Banks  
channel sequence  
Goring  
Drayton Cursus\*  
Mount Farm, Dorchester  
(Whispering Knights, Rollright)

The earliest dates in the county come from the midden deposits beneath the chambered cairn at Ascott-Under-Wychwood (*c* 3900 cal BC), and other sites with Carinated Bowl pottery could date from this time or very slightly later. Dates from the earliest phase of the Neolithic (3800 - 3600 cal BC) also come from the main phase of use of Ascott-Under-Wychwood, Yarnton (two houses, pits, bread and a cremation) and Wayland's Smithy (and also the Lambourn long barrow in West Berkshire).

The Abingdon causewayed enclosure was in use in either the mid 3600s or the mid 3500s cal BC (Bayliss *et al.* forthcoming) and is associated with its eponymous Decorated Bowl pottery. It seems likely that the Drayton Cursus was constructed at a slightly later date, but perhaps sufficiently near in time for an older person to have been at a causewayed enclosure event when young. There is a radiocarbon date from upper ditch fills at Goring (*ibid.*), but otherwise no other causewayed enclosures have been dated (or dug, come to that). Other cursuses in Oxfordshire are not well dated, but the evidence is consistent with their use in the second half of the 4th millennium cal BC (Barclay *et al.* 2003). A number of burials and funerary monuments belong to this time: Radley Barrow Hills, Dorchester long enclosure Site 1, Mount Farm burials (Barclay *et al.* 1999; Bradley 1992; Hayden and Lambrick in prep.).

Pit deposits are hard to date with precision and the mid to late Neolithic periods tend to produce radiocarbon results with wide error terms. A group of pits at South Stoke produced eight radiocarbon determinations within the range of 3630 - 3350 cal BC (Timby *et al.* 2005, table 4). A number of pits usually associated with Peterborough Ware pottery have produced dates in the range of *c* 3300 - 2900 cal BC (eg Yarnton). And pits with Grooved Ware pottery date to the period *c* 2900 - 2400 cal BC (Yarnton, Drayton, Radley Barrow Hills).

Other features with late Neolithic radiocarbon dates include a house at Yarnton, flat graves at Radley Barrow Hills, the Site 2 penannular enclosure and Site 3 post circle (unless it is early Bronze Age) at Dorchester, tree-throw holes at Drayton, the Devil's Quoits henge ditch and stone circle.

The presence of a large number of Beaker burials, including some impressive examples, have yielded a good crop of radiocarbon dates for the earliest Bronze Age (Radley Barrow Hills, Gravelly Guy, Yarnton). These provide a date range of *c* 2400 - 1900 cal BC. Non-funerary deposits have been much less commonly dated (and, indeed, excavated) though they do exist (pits at Yarnton, Gravelly Guy).

Early Bronze Age dates have also usually been obtained on burials and funerary monuments, (Radley Barrow Hills, Devil's Quoits complex, Yarnton, Dorchester Site 4, latter is not a good date). But there are a very few dates from domestic contexts (house, waterhole, pits and burnt stone deposits at Yarnton). Biconical Urn deposits date from around 1900 cal BC.

Archaeomagnetic (at Drayton Cursus) and OSL dates.

### 3.3 *Landscape and land use*

#### *Rivers and woodland*

As already stated, the proximity of many early Neolithic sites to the Thames and its major tributaries suggest that, in a heavily wooded environment, the rivers were major routeways. Deposition of pottery, particularly Peterborough Ware, stone and worked flint, especially axes, in the rivers symbolise the importance of these places to early communities (Bradley 1990; Barclay 2002). There are no dated Neolithic or EBA human remains in rivers from Oxfordshire, but human bone has been found and examples from lower down the Thames suggest that some of these could be from our period.

Ceremonial monuments are often located near to rivers, for example causewayed enclosures and large henges, and it has been observed that cursuses were not only constructed near to them, but often run parallel to river courses (Barclay and Hey 1999; Loveday 1999). Monument complexes often developed near major river confluences

There is clear evidence for a heavily wooded environment in the early Neolithic: mixed deciduous woodland, with alder growing in the valley bottoms and lime, oak, hazel, ash and elm on better-drained soils of the gravel terraces and higher slopes (Day 1991; Parker 1995; Robinson 1992, 49-50). Early clearings may have been mainly close to river and on the higher slopes of the Cotswolds and, to a lesser extent, the Berkshire Downs. Evidence suggests shifting woodland clearings against a background of the gradual opening out of the tree canopy (Hey and Robinson in prep.). Permanent grazed grassland was probably only established around major monuments (eg Abingdon - Parker 1999) and a few long-lived and much re-used settlement clearings (eg Yarnton Island 1 - Hey and Robinson again).

Tree-throw holes are found on many sites of these periods and artefacts are often recovered from these (eg Drayton and Goring). There is evidence for the deposition of special, placed deposits in some (Yarnton and Goring). A possible link between pit deposits with wild food remains and forest clearance merits further investigation (Hey in prep.). Unfortunately there is little organic preservation from this period (because of a relatively low water table) and so any form of woodland management is hard to establish. Evidence elsewhere (especially the Fens) suggests coppicing from an early period (Taylor), and it has even been suggested that hazel was managed in order to yield large quantities of nuts as a crop (Francis Pryor pers. comm.).

### *Monument complexes as designed landscapes*

Monument complexes can be seen as designed landscapes in the apparently careful positioning of monuments in relation to the natural topography and to respect pre-existing monuments in the landscape (see below).

### *Agriculture and fields*

Cereal cultivation is evident from the earliest Neolithic period (the midden beneath the Ascott-Under-Wychwood long barrow ), wheat and barley being present from these times. Indeed the evidence for cereals in the early Neolithic is stronger than in the period from the middle Neolithic to the early Bronze Age (Abingdon, Yarnton, Ascott-Under-Wychwood). Middle and late Neolithic cereals are very sparse, being heavily outnumbered by wild food remains, principally hazelnut shells (as in Moffett *et al.* 1989; Robinson 2000). Cereals begin to become more numerous in Beaker and early Bronze Age contexts (Hey and Robinson in prep.).

There is little evidence of other cultivated plants , but possibly flax in the early Bronze Age.

There is little physical evidence of fields from this time period and no field boundaries have yet been identified in Oxfordshire, although a probable droveway recently excavated at Crowmarsh Gifford has been suggested to be early Bronze Age (Ford *et al.* forthcoming). Cultivated soil may, however, have been present beneath the Wayland's Smithy long barrow (Whittle 1991). At Yarnton, the stone-free character of feature fills suggests limited, if any, cultivation on the Thames floodplain in this area. Fields presumably existed on the lighter soils of the gravel terraces or on the uplands.

Domesticated animals are also present from earliest Neolithic, mainly cattle and pigs, but also sheep/goat (Serjeantson 2003). Cattle may have become increasingly important in the mid to late Neolithic. Environmental evidence from the Devil's Quoits henge ditch suggests grazed grassland in the surrounding area; Drayton cursus also had grassland but saw episodes of woodland regeneration.

#### *3.3.6 Hunting and gathering strategies (including fishing)*

Wild animals do appear in Neolithic and EBA contexts, principally in funerary and ceremonial monuments but also in pit deposits. Red and roe deer were hunted, as were boar, although many finds are of antlers which could have been collected when shed. The presence of dogs in funerary contexts shows that they were kept and were, presumably, used for hunting as well as herding. However, wild animals are by no means as common as domesticates, and it is probable that they did not form an important part of the Neolithic/EBA diet

(Mulville forthcoming). There is no evidence at all for the consumption of fish. Birds make a rare appearance, for example the white-tailed eagle bone point or awl from a Grooved Ware pit at Radley Barrow Hills (Barclay and Halpin 1999, 74), but there is no direct evidence that they were hunted.

Deer bone was used for tools, particularly antler picks, and ornaments, and boar tusks as knives/points and ornaments. As 'grave goods' they are found in Neolithic funerary monuments (eg Radley oval barrow, ?Ascott-U-W), but are perhaps most common in Beaker and EBA burials (for example red and roe deer, boar and eagle at Radley Barrow Hills).

Gathered plant foods are commonly found in middens and pit deposits, where they always outnumber cereals (in the mid to late Neolithic by a factor of about 100:2, Moffett *et al.* 1989). Hazelnut shells are abundant, but apple/pear, blackberries and sloes have also been found. It has been suggested that hazelnuts could have been harvested as a crop (Francis Pryor pers. comm.); nuts develop prolifically if hazel grows at the woodland edge rather than in the forest.

### **3.4 Social organisation**

#### **3.4.1 Society, hierarchy and social interaction**

In the early Neolithic, Oxfordshire was probably lightly populated by small groups of people, perhaps extended family groups. The settlement evidence suggests small-scale communities, and this is reinforced by the burial evidence (eg Ascott-Under-Wychwood) There is no obvious sign of hierarchy. There is evidence of social interaction, however, as raw materials and artefacts were acquired from distant sources; chalk flint and stone axes are the most common examples of this. Interesting evidence has emerged from the study of the clay sources of pots found in the Ascott-Under-Wychwood midden, which raises the possibility that people gathered here from different geographic areas or at least had access to potting clays /temper from a broad area (Barclay forthcoming).

The construction of causewayed enclosures in the mid 4th millennium cal BC suggests gatherings of larger groups of people with wider social networks. There is still little evidence of social differentiation, although a few individual burials, eg at Radley Barrow Hills, Mount Farm and possibly Yarnton (undated), may suggest that some people were accorded more ceremony at death. Individual burials become slightly more common later in the Neolithic (eg Radley Barrow Hills), but it is only in the Beaker period, and then the EBA, that this becomes regular practice. There are some extremely rich EBA, Wessex-style burials (Stanton Harcourt/Devil's Quoits and Radley Barrow Hills). This could signify a change in social organisation and greater emphasis on important individuals, but the relationship between burial rite and status is very uncertain and it would be unwise to take this information at face value without additional evidence.



Communal/ceremonial monuments suggest little difference in size between causewayed enclosures and henges (though both types are very variable in size), but analysis of their form suggests that they may have been used in different ways. Henges have features which suggest differentiation of space (eg Devil's Quoits) and indicate that people could have been excluded from events taking place in the interior; there is nothing to show that this was the case in the earlier causewayed enclosures, although screens and fences do not have to be earthfast to be effective. Cursuses are a completely different type of monument and it is much more difficult to estimate the numbers of people who would have used them at any one time. Their form suggests movement along them rather than gathering within them.

#### *3.4.2 Households and aspects of domestic-life*

See under settlement.

#### *3.4.3 Land ownership*

There is no obvious sign of land 'ownership' and no known physical boundaries. The population was small and formal claims to land may have been unnecessary. However, repeated visits to certain locales indicates that groups traditionally used particular places in the landscape. Burial monuments can also be seen as a claim to customary use of the surrounding area (Bradley 1984).

### **3.5 Settlement**

#### *3.5.1 Settlement and settlement hierarchies*

Neolithic and EBA settlement in Oxfordshire is poorly understood. It is recognised mainly through flint scatters (eg Holgate 1988) and occasional pit groups which sometimes include a few postholes, and the precise form of the settlements represented by these features is very uncertain. There are only four definite 'houses' known throughout the county, all from Yarnton (two early Neolithic, one late Neolithic, Grooved-Ware associated, and one early Bronze Age). On the basis of this evidence, it is impossible to assess settlement hierarchy, even supposing such a thing existed.

Settlement is also sometimes represented by middens and finds spreads. These are usually found in low-lying positions near rivers where they have been sealed beneath alluvium, for example Yarnton, Drayton North Cursus, Pumney, Otney Island and Andersey Island (the last three all near Abingdon). Many find scatters from the surface of modern ploughed fields may be the disturbed remnants of these deposits (eg Corporation Farm). They are also

found occasionally beneath monuments where they have been protected by mounds. The presence of human bone in some of these does beg the question of the relationship between the midden deposits and the later burial mounds.

Settlement sites seem mainly to be situated near the Thames and its major tributaries, or on the higher elevations of the Cotswolds and Berkshire Downs. It should be noted that these areas correspond either to places of major modern development (ie the river valleys) or where there is greater archaeological visibility (from the air or because of ploughing). It is also worth noting that the distribution of sites has probably changed since Robin Holgate undertook his study of the Neolithic in the Thames Valley in the 1980s (1988). This is suggested by the plots of flint scatters from the SMR data which probably underestimates the number of sites now known. There are more flint scatters known from fieldwalking in the river valleys (for example in the lower reaches of the Evenlode - Hardaker) and the number of sites found by the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society (AAHS) around Abingdon represented by flint scatters, sometimes quite sizeable assemblages, and where a Mesolithic component is often present, merits further investigation (eg AAHS 2002; Eeles 1999). A number of sites have come to light in recent years in zones where they had previously been scarce (for example to the north of the county around Bicester and Banbury, in the south of the Vale of the White Horse - Hearne 2000 - and flint scatters and occasional pits on the Corallian Ridge eg at Tubney and around Kingston Bagpuize).

However, it is worth noting that fieldwalking is becoming increasingly less common as an evaluation and research strategy. At best this is probably resulting in a loss of information and worst sites may be being missed, as fieldwalking is probably the best method for identifying the presence of Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites (Hey and Lacey 2001).

Pits of Neolithic date are a relatively common discovery on development sites in the county and they have been found in all parts of the county and on all topographies in recent years. They date from the early Neolithic (eg Benson, City Farm, Hanborough) to the early Bronze Age (Foxley Fields Farm, Finmere, Cotswold Archaeological Trust (CAT) 2001), although mid and late Neolithic pits are most common. Sometimes they cover extensive areas as at Yarnton, Drayton and Gravelly Guy, and their date ranges indicate repeated use of individual areas over long periods of time (Barclay *et al.* 2003; Hey in prep.; Lambrick and Allen 2004). Elsewhere, pits are found as tightly defined clusters, for example at Benson in South Oxfordshire (Pine and Ford 2003) and South Stoke (Timby *et al.* 2005), perhaps indicating more intensive but less long-lived use of single sites. Very often, however, they are recovered as isolated features or in pairs, perhaps indicating a single visit, and the geographical distribution of these is widespread (for example in the Cotswolds, eg CAT 2002; Oxford, eg Mansfield College, Booth and Hayden 2000; the Wallingford area, eg Network Archaeology 2005 and Richmond 2005; and on the Berkshire Downs, eg Howell and Durden 1996). It is rare to find the dense clusters of pits that are a feature of early 4th millennium sites of Eastern England. Little recent work has been undertaken on the extent,

topographical siting and contents of these, the most commonly discovered of Neolithic features.

### 3.5.2 *Permanence and mobility*

There are no known sites which were occupied for long periods of time through the Neolithic and EBA. The early Neolithic house at Yarnton may have been lived in year-round, and the contemporary landscape evidence at Abingdon may suggest a relatively sedentary form of occupation in this area (Hey in prep.; Parker 1999). As the population size was so small it is quite hard to assess the evidence. Most Neolithic and EBA sites suggest short-term settlement by a mobile population, perhaps staying for months rather than years (see above). A seasonal round or pattern of movement has been suggested, although this would presuppose that people stayed in one place long enough in spring and summer to plant, tend and harvest a cereal crop (?April to August). Such a pattern would allow pastoralists the opportunity to make use of the best grazing in different parts of the landscape through the year.

The absence of any obvious evidence of dense settlement around ceremonial sites, and the apparently large scale of monuments in relation to population size, indicates that people congregated in these places from a wide area on an occasional/episodic basis. This, too, supports the hypothesis of a relatively mobile population. People may also have travelled to exchange goods and acquire raw materials that were not locally available; ceremonial gatherings would have provided an opportunity for this activity. In most of Oxfordshire this would principally have been good-quality chalk flint, although more exotic (mainly stone) materials were exchanged.

## 3.6 *The built environment.*

### 3.6.1 *Houses and other structures*

Neolithic and early Bronze Age structures are rare in southern England. Only five or six are known from Oxfordshire. Two early Neolithic structures have been found at Yarnton and one (or two) beneath the chambered cairn at Ascott-U-W. Only the buildings at Yarnton look like 'houses'. They were set in small woodland clearings and widespread stripping of the surrounding area showed that they stood in relative isolation. The long house at Yarnton was aligned east - west and was made up of a basic rectangle, 21 by 11 m, divided into two modules with some substantial post-pits which presumably supported the roof. It also had outer lines of smaller posts which may suggest a trapezoidal outer shape and a maximum width of 15 m (Hey in prep.; Hey and Bell 1997, fig. 9). The position of a doorway is hard to see; it probably lay in the south wall, but could also have been in the shorter east wall. The building belongs to an early Neolithic architectural tradition of large rectangular roofed timber structures (Darvill and Thomas 1996).

The range of early Neolithic building types is expanded by a small circular structure at Yarnton which has recently been radiocarbon dated to the second quarter of the fourth millennium cal BC (*c* 3600 cal BC; Bayliss and Hey in prep.). The ring of posts was well-defined but only had a diameter of 2.5 m; the posts presumably supported a ring beam and the wall would have lain beyond, as has been suggested for circular Bronze Age and Iron Age houses.

Structures at Ascott-under-Wychwood are less recognisable as buildings, but the posthole arrangement beneath the chambered cairn could represent two small timber-framed buildings on either side of a hearth and pit (Benson and Whittle forthcoming).

A sub-rectangular house at Yarnton, *c* 9 m x 7 m was associated with Grooved Ware pottery and dated to the third quarter of the 3rd millennium cal BC (probably the 25th or 24th centuries cal BC). Its precise form was hard to determine, as a number of postholes and pits lay around its perimeter, but its general shape resembles that at Gwithian (Phase 1), Cornwall (Darvill 1996, fig. 6.8). At a later date, either around 2000 cal BC or as late as *c* 1800 cal BC, a circular house was constructed with a ring beam 4 m in diameter and with an entrance porch suggesting a building 5 m in diameter. Biconical Urn was found in the entrance posts.

Few areas in Oxfordshire have been stripped as extensively as Yarnton. Nevertheless much larger areas are now commonly examined and the increasing number of non-ceremonial/funerary sites with Peterborough Ware, Grooved Ware and Beaker pottery and the continued absence of any structures except at Yarnton strongly indicates:

1. that houses were relatively lightly-built without foundations at this time and
2. that settlements were not long-lived.

### **3.7 *Ceremony, ritual and religion.***

Ceremonial, ritual and funerary activity were often interlinked and monument complexes which grew up in parts of what is now Oxfordshire, often close to the river Thames and major river confluences, usually comprise a mixture of these types of monuments.

#### **3.6.2 *Communal/ceremonial structures***

The earliest 'structure' recognised in Oxfordshire, if it can be described as such, is the midden beneath the Ascott-U-W chambered cairn. The more dispersed midden at Yarnton cannot be precisely dated and may not be as early (though it seems to have been in use by *c* 3800 cal BC). Although these are the only examples known in the county, work in Gloucestershire (Saville 1990) and Buckinghamshire (eg Allen *et al.* 2004) suggest that the creation

and episodic augmentation of middens was a feature of early Neolithic life; as the middens grew in size they would have become conspicuous features in the landscape. They may be the remains of feasting events and thus represent gatherings, though it is not known how formal these occasions would have been or how far people would have travelled to attend them; doubtless considerable variety exists. The analysis so far undertaken suggests that the material is very fragmentary and complete objects can rarely be reconstructed. The material may have been selected from elsewhere for deposition, perhaps as a representation of past events, although Tim Allen has suggested that they also had a more mundane function as repositories of material that could be re-used at a later date. They would have supported a rich plant life which would have differed from the surrounding vegetation. Some people have suggested that they may have been cultivated, but there is no evidence of this from Oxfordshire (but see Hazleton North, Saville 1990).

It has been posited that Neolithic houses, especially the longhouse at Yarnton, were communal structures, cult houses or feasting halls, and the size of this building would certainly allow for its use by more than one family. The very few finds from the postholes do include unburnt and cremated human and pig bone with a small amount of cattle, although most of this comes from the packing around one of the substantial load-bearing posts. This may be a foundation burial and may not have been out of place in a domestic structure at this time; we know too little about them to be confident. The scarcity of finds within the Yarnton house has also led to a suggestion that it was not a domestic structure. However, this would also mitigate against its use for feasting, as most Neolithic ceremonies that we can identify (including burial) appear to involve the consumption and deposition of material. In the absence of any other evidence, the excavator believes that the simplest explanation is the best, which is that people lived here, although the building may have been used for a range of other activities including an ancestral hall. The circular Neolithic building is very small, but unnecessarily small for a free-standing post circle, and the postholes in this case do contain material that appears to derive from domestic activity.

From the middle of the 4th millennium, ceremonial sites were often defined by earthworks, principally causewayed enclosures, cursuses and henges. There are between ten and 12 causewayed enclosures known in the county: the SMR lists ten (of which the Stadhampton suggestion is surely unlikely), and Oswald *et al.* (2001) list 12 (of which there is doubt surrounding three, although Goring should probably have been listed as probable rather than unlikely). Their proximity to rivers is noteworthy, all being close to the river Thames, with the exception of Banbury which is near the Cherwell and Burford near the Windrush, and there is a distinct cluster in the west of the county at the southern edge of the Cotswold slopes. This is even more pronounced when the causewayed enclosures at Eastleach and Down Ampney, both just over the county boundary in Gloucestershire are taken into account, and it is important to consider these monuments in relation to other contemporary remains, such as chambered cairns in the Cotswolds and the communication links which may have existed between these sites.

Oswald *et al.* analysed the forms of causewayed enclosures (2001, 54-79) and it can be seen that in Oxfordshire these are mostly medium and small in size (very small if Radley is accepted) and have between one and four circuits with closely and widely spaced examples. Perhaps the most notable feature of the Thames Valley examples is the number which are designed to incorporate natural features: the river and gravel islands or terraces, of which Abingdon is the best known example in Oxfordshire. A small amount of sampling was undertaken at Goring (Allen 1995), but otherwise only Abingdon has been excavated. Despite the wide spacing of the two circuits at Abingdon, and their different character, recent work on the radiocarbon evidence indicates that this was a short-lived monument with no detectable difference in the dates of the ditches (Bayliss *et al.* forthcoming). This runs counter to previous interpretations of the monument.

Causewayed enclosures often did not become focus of later monuments, the exception being Abingdon which was a funerary landscape rather than ceremonial. There may also be a link between the causewayed enclosure and a long enclosure at Buckland.

Cursus monuments appear to be slightly later in date than causewayed enclosures, although the apparently early Drayton Cursus is only slightly later than the nearby Abingdon enclosure (Barclay and Bayliss 1999; Bayliss *et al.* forthcoming). They have recently been reviewed by Barclay *et al.* (2003, 216-32) in their account of the excavations of the Drayton North and South Cursuses. Eight are known in Oxfordshire (if Drayton North and South are counted as a single monument), with one further example at Lechlade just over the Oxfordshire/Gloucestershire county boundary. They vary in size from Dorchester (1650 m +) to South Stoke (200 m). They are all close to the Thames, except for Drayton St Leonard and Stadhampton which are along the Thame, and they frequently run parallel or nearly parallel to their rivers (*ibid.* fig 10.1). Many are close to the major river confluences (Thames with Leach, Ock and Thame). They tend to be situated away from causewayed enclosures; the closest, Drayton and Abingdon are 5 km apart, but most are further away. They are very often close to long/mortuary enclosures and/or long and oval barrows, however (see gazetteer in Barclay *et al.* 2003, 225-32). The Oxfordshire examples suggest some interesting interpretation about how these monuments were laid out, the ways in which they were used and their landscape and social context (Loveday 1999; Barclay and Hey 1999).

There are three certain, large henges in the county: Dorchester 'Big Rings', the Devil's Quoits at Stanton Harcourt and Westwell near Burford and the Windrush. The Devil's Quoits, a single circuit with opposing entrances had a stone circle and other stone and post settings in the centre; there was little evidence for internal features within the double-circuit Big Rings. Dorchester in a pre-existing monument complex, the other two in areas of earlier non-monumental activity. It is very difficult to quantify the smaller henges and hengiform monuments in the county because they are defined and recorded in such a variable way (segmented ring ditches, penannular enclosures or hengiform monuments) and the term has become very misleading. There are around eight listed in the county SMR.

In addition to the large stone circle of conglomerates within the Devil's Quoits henge (*c* 100 m in diameter), there is the smaller stone circle at Rollright. This was a very different monument which was not only smaller in diameter (*c* 30 m), but had smaller (limestone) stones which were closely set within slight bank. It bears a close resemblance to Cumbrian stone circles (Burl 2000, 305-6; Lambrick 1988). No other stone circles have been discovered, but there are a number timber circles which have been discovered during development work (Dorchester on Thames Site 3 with possibly another to its south-west not excavated; Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt; Abingdon Spring Road, Allen 2001) to remind us that stone was not easily available in much of the county and monuments such of these may often have been constructed in wood and would not easily be detectable. Pit circles are also found (Dorchester Site XI; Mount Farm, Dorchester).

Single standing stones are also present and, although some could be the remains of larger structures, most seem to be associated with burial sites - see below.

### *3.7.1 Use of natural places*

The position of monuments in the landscape often utilised significant topographical locations, in particular river confluences (see above).

### *3.7.2 Funerary monuments and cemeteries*

There are two portal dolmens in Oxfordshire, the Whispering Knights at Rollright Stones, and the Hoar Stone at Enstone, both in the north-west of the county on the Cotswolds, and an number of other small round or oval mounds which have a megalithic component have been found in the same area (Chastelton, Gough's Barrow at Rollright Stones, - now destroyed but recorded by Stukeley and Fisher - Hoar Stone at Steeple Barton (4681/2). It has been postulated that these are the earliest burial monuments found, although this has yet to be proved.

Chambered cairns and long barrows in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds lie at the eastern end of the distribution of Cotswold-Severn chambered cairns. Recent evidence from Ascott-Under-Wychwood indicates that they are early in the Neolithic sequence. Their chambers contain the now disarticulated remains of many individuals, and occasional more complete skeleton with later pottery and animal bone deposits and other placed artefacts such as stone discs (Benson and Whittle forthcoming; Darvill 2004). Who these people were and where they came from and why they chose these particular sites are questions that have been discussed in these publications. They appear to have been used for only a few generations, although the animal and artefacts deposits seem to be later and reflect continued concern with the burial monuments and their occupants.

Long barrows on the Berkshire Downs also tend to be classed with Cotswold Severn tombs (Darvill 2004 - three certain, if Lambourn is included, and three possible). The earthen oval barrow at Wayland's Smithy I and later chambered cairn phases are notable (Whittle 1991). The Lambourn long barrow, in West Berkshire, was excavated by Wymer in the 1960s; it has Carinated Bowl and early dates (Wymer 1966; Schulting 2000).

Long barrows are also found in the Thames Valley, including some recent discoveries through aerial photography (for example to the south-west of Abingdon, at Frilford (PRN 9625) and at Wheatley). They are by no means as common as long enclosures, however, a form of feature not so far discovered on the Cotswolds or the Downs. Long mortuary enclosures and long barrows occur every 5 - 10 km along the river corridor (Barclay forthcoming). They have mostly been discovered from the air and few have been excavated; those that have been examined are poorly dated. The two probably early Neolithic mortuary enclosures at Dorchester (Sites VIII and 1) share a common alignment and were later to be linked by the Cursus. The enclosure on the south-eastern end of the Cursus cut a pit containing splinters of human bone which had a very broad 4th millennium radiocarbon date, but probably belong in the second quarter of the 4th millennium (OxA-119;  $4800 \pm 130$ ; Whittle *et al.* 1992, 153 and table 12). A long enclosure at Yarnton had largely filled when it was recut in the middle Neolithic and Peterborough Ware was deposited; a few redeposited early Neolithic finds were recovered. Many of the Oxfordshire cursuses were constructed on sites with long enclosures, sometimes cutting them but sometimes incorporating them.

There is also a significant group of U-shaped enclosures and oval barrows (New Wintles Farm, Radley, Drayton, Yarnton), and small circular and hengiform ring ditches and penannular enclosures (eg Corporation Farm, Dorchester, Gravelly Guy, Yarnton). Some of these are early in date (eg Corporation Farm with some Carinated Bowl in its lowest fill, if this is not redeposited and New Wintles with Abingdon Ware) and others, such as Radley appear to belong to the end of the 4th millennium cal BC. (Kenward 1982; Bradley 1992; Lambrick and Allen 2004; Hayden *et al.* forthcoming; Hey in prep.)

There are many round barrows and ring ditches in the county (428 are listed in the SMR) but many more must exist that are not known about (such as the two found on the Thames floodplain at Yarnton which could not be seen from the air). Sometimes these are known as single monuments (most common in the north and east of the county), but often in small groups and there are numerous examples of these form the Cotswolds (eg Rollright) to the Thames Valley (eg the Kings Weir Barrows) to the Berkshire Downs (White Horse Hill). There are also many 'barrow cemeteries' (31 recorded in the SMR, although there is no particular set of criteria for designating these). Good examples are those at Stanton Harcourt and the Lambourn Seven Barrows (Barclay 1995; Case 1956-7).

A number of barrow cemeteries developed around Neolithic barrows (eg Lambourn, Radley, North Stoke) and in some cases barrow groups developed



into highly structured barrow cemeteries, of which the linear cemetery at Barrow Hills Radley is the most well-known example. Work in advance of development in north Oxford, however, suggests that the barrows known in South Parks could be part of a similar barrow layout. On the whole, however, there are few linear cemeteries and most Oxfordshire barrow cemeteries have no obvious plan, although this does not mean that the positioning of individual barrows did not have significance at the time. Barrows in most Oxfordshire cemeteries are quite simple in form (eg Foxley Farm, Eynsham, Stanton Harcourt, Standlake), but some cemeteries (eg Radley and North Stoke) have a number of 'twin' barrows and barrows with multiple or interrupted ditches.

Grave goods, including exotic items, are found with Neolithic and, particularly early Bronze Age, burials in Oxfordshire and there are some barrows with very rich grave goods (for example the Wessex-style burials at Stanton Harcourt, Radley, Ashville and Lambourn). Important work has been undertaken on early Bronze Age barrow excavations in the county (and other burial types) to understand the context of and the social practices behind these burial remains (Barclay and Garwood in Barclay and Halpin 1999; Garwood in prep.).

In addition to burial monuments, Oxfordshire has a significant number of flat graves. Sometimes these inhumations are found in barrow cemeteries between barrows or as outliers to the group, but they are increasingly being found in places with no obvious above-ground markers, either in groups (including the Beaker flat grave cemetery excavated by E T Leeds at Cassington in the 1930s - Leeds 1934 and Foxley Farm, Eynsham) or as isolated burials (Yarnton and a number of examples in Oxford). By and large, these are Beaker-style burials (many examples) but some are earlier (eg Barrow Hills, Radley with an early Neolithic mortuary structure within a pit and Grooved Ware burials, and a possible early Neolithic burial in the Yarnton long enclosure). These are examples of the sorts of features that come to light unexpectedly during the course of development work because they are so hard to detect using current evaluation techniques and they highlight why it is so important to strip and examine large areas. The surprisingly early date of some of these also demonstrated the importance of radiocarbon dating of unaccompanied burials.

Cremation burials are also a common occurrence in barrow cemeteries, as primary or, more commonly, secondary burials and sometimes these lie beyond the ditches of the barrows (eg Radley Barrow Hills). The recently discovered cremations near to ring ditches at Finmere (CAT 2001) are presumably part of this pattern. Cremation burials beyond barrows and ring ditches are not frequently recognised and are much less well understood. Nevertheless, they are present for these periods. They were found in post pits of the Neolithic long house at Yarnton and Beaker-period cremation burials have also been found from the same site. Cremated human bone is also found in small quantity in placed pit deposits, but the significance of these remains is uncertain. Was cremated human bone collected (perhaps as remains from the funeral pyre), kept and used as appropriate, or were people buried in several different places in the landscape that were of significance to them?

Burial practices also differ across space: multiple burials in Cotswold Severn tombs and, perhaps, excarnation rites associated with long enclosures in the valley and greater emphasis on the burial of important individuals, although the evidence for early burial rites in the lower topographies is very unclear. There are also changing practices through time: greater emphasis on individual burial and greater complexity of grave goods, occasional instances of biers and coffins (mainly Beaker). Cremations were previously thought to be a largely Bronze Age phenomenon, but there are now a number of known early Neolithic cremation burials and deposits (eg Yarnton). A review of the evidence is overdue.

#### 3.7.4 *Votive deposition*

Objects which could have been placed as votive offerings are found in many Neolithic and Bronze Age contexts. These are principally found in rivers and in tree-throw pits (see above), but also as pit deposits. The significance of material recovered from many Neolithic and early Bronze Age pits is uncertain, but it is evident that the material is selected and not random rubbish, that exotic or special items are often included and that the material can be seen to have been carefully placed in a number of instances (for example pottery sherds arranged around the edges of pits (Yarnton and Gravelly Guy). These pits are found near to ceremonial and funerary sites (eg Drayton Cursus; Radley Barrow Hills) but they often lie within or close to other features which seem to represent settlement and they may represent the remains of small household rituals (Bradley 2004; Hey *et al.* 2003).

### 3.8 *Warfare, defences and military installations.*

There is evidence for interpersonal violence at Ascott-Under-Wychwood in the early Neolithic (leaf-shaped arrowhead in third lumbar vertebrae of adult male; Benson and Whittle forthcoming) and early Bronze Age Radley (barbed and tanged arrowhead in rib cage of adult male; Barclay *et al.* 1999, 136-41) and Oxford (blow to back of skull, Boston *et al.* 2003). Other examples of violence are known from Neolithic Britain, but are not especially common (Schulting and Wysocki 2005).

#### 3.8.1 *Defensive earthworks*

Causewayed enclosures were clearly sometimes the scene of warfare (eg Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire), but there is not evidence for this in Oxfordshire so far. There are no Neolithic or early Bronze Age earthworks that are recognisably defensive.

### 3.9 *Material culture*

#### 3.9.1 *Domestic items*

The main domestic items found are pots and flint tools. Pots are mainly bowls, but there is a range and more varied assemblages are coming to light from the numerous pit deposits that have been excavated, including possible feasting sets (Barclay in prep.). Many pots may have been made for special occasions, however, and some are very finely decorated.

Flint was the main source for a whole range of cutting, scraping, whittling and drilling tools. Quernstones and rubbers are also found, mainly manufactured from locally available stone at this time although there is limited transport of good quern material (Roe). The most exotic items which are occasionally found on domestic sites are polished flint axes or stone axes made from igneous rock (see below). Although these may never have been strictly utilitarian items, they are often found as re-used objects.

Organic materials must have been most important in the household and the wood and bark containers from early Bronze Age contexts at Yarnton are rare examples of what we have lost. Part of what was probably a leather sheath was found in Barrow 1 at Radley Barrow Hills. Animal bone was used to make tools, most obviously antler picks but also shovels and small objects such as pins and needles.

Objects for personal adornment are seldom (if ever?) recovered from domestic contexts; they are most common in graves. A canal coal bead was found in a Grooved Ware pit at Yarnton, possibly as a votive offering.

#### 3.9.2 *Exotic and traded goods and artefacts*

The extensive trade in polished stone axes is evident throughout the county. The main source seems to have been Langdale tuff (Group VI), although stone from Cornwall (Group I) and west Wales (Group VII) is nearly as frequent (Roe \*\*\*). Other sorts of stone are found rarely, but include amber, jet, shale, canal coal and faience was used for ornaments (especially seen in the 'Wessex' style burial - see above). Jet or shale was used for a belt slider buried with a man in the oval barrow at Radley and is Neolithic in date.

Most stone for querns and rubbers was found much closer to home (as above) and good quality flint from the chalk was acquired by Neolithic and early Bronze Age communities. Occasionally people used more eye-catching materials such as Bullhead flint which is found in the Reading Beds.

The extent to which early metalwork was traded is uncertain, but some of the earliest objects are clearly very exotic, for example the copper neck ring from

Yarnton, the copper awl from the Abingdon Spring Road Cemetery and the gold objects from Radley Barrow Hills.

### 3.9.3 *Objects used in ceremonial and funerary contexts*

It is apparent that many objects were made for display or for special deposition. The significance of these objects to early communities should not be underestimated; they probably had their own personalities and biographies and were, perhaps, associated with particular individuals. Even pots, which largely seem to have been made locally, were often finely decorated and then 'buried' with some care.

Many of the exotic materials mentioned above were used in such contexts. Polished flint macehead from Yarnton. The importance of axe polishing may be indicated by deposition of axe polisher in a pit at Wallingford (Richmond 2005). Antler picks were often placed as deposits (eg Radley oval barrow) and a whole range of material from Radley. Antler combs at Abingdon causewayed enclosure (Leeds 1927-8). Decorated bone objects (grooves, dots and stamps).

## 3.10 *Crafts, trade and industries*

### 3.10.1 *Crafts*

Potting appears to have been undertaken at a household or community level; there little evidence that pottery was exchanged (Barclay and Bradley forthcoming). It is possible that pots were carried with people as they moved across the landscape in the Neolithic, as perhaps suggested by pottery fabrics with different clay sources found at Ascott-Under-Wychwood. There are slight indications that Beaker pottery was sometimes either made using imported materials or by itinerant potters (Yarnton, Barclay in prep.).

Flint knapping. Changes in flint knapping strategies through time, as the use of flint entailed less careful preparation of cores and the production of larger tools. Even less care after the introduction of metals.

Metalworking was probably undertaken by specialists, who would have appeared to have supernatural powers as they turned rocks into metal. Textile production. Fibres have been found attached to pottery at Radley Barrow Hills - a plain weave fabric with the warp and weft being of different counts and spins. An early Bronze Age wooden weaving sword came from a waterhole at Yarnton.

Jewellery and ornaments.

### *3.10.2 Raw material acquisition*

Potting clay from river sources and these can be difficult to identify precisely, but most acquired locally.

Flint. There is flint in the river gravels but upstream of the Goring Gap this is mostly too small for artefact production. Most flint seems to have come from either the Berkshire Downs or the Chilterns (cannot be distinguished). The slopes above the Thames at the Goring Gap would have provided good sources. Preliminary preparation on site but most transported as nodules.

### *3.10.3 Sites or areas of production and consumption*

Sites of consumption include middens under barrows, causewayed enclosures and material that provided deposits for pits. There are no obviously specialised areas of production.

### *3.10.4 Markets and exchange*

Exchange probably took place at places such as causewayed enclosures and henges, but most exchange would probably have been down-the-line

## ***3.11 Transport and communication.***

Rivers were probably major communications networks, although there is no direct evidence for this (eg boats). However, this can be inferred from early settlement pattern, position of monument complexes and votive deposits in rivers.

Doubtless there were overland routes too, and traditionally it has been postulated that the Jurassic Way over the Cotswolds (in the north of the county) and the Ridgeway along the Berkshire Downs would have been important trackways. There is no reason to doubt these hypotheses; high-level routes would have traversed less densely vegetated areas and the general distribution of artefacts and architectural traits (eg burial chambers) supports this suggestion. Others (eg Lambrick 1988) have suggested north-south routes linking these networks. These are more difficult to prove but it is clear that artefacts, raw materials and ideas were transported over wide areas and there must have been routeways which facilitating this.

Travel would have been undertaken on foot or by boat. There is no evidence of (post-glacial) horses in this country until the early Bronze Age and no evidence in Oxfordshire until the Iron Age; a horse on an old ground surface at Yarnton may be early but it is not possible to date the bone (no collagen).

### 3.12 *Legacy*

1. Transformation of the landscape and forest clearance. Mosaic landscape with woodland and clearings, and some of those clearings were quite long-lived by the middle Bronze Age. In addition, there were a few areas of much more extensive forest clearance which had become permanent grazed grassland by the middle Bronze Age, principally around monument complexes eg Stanton Harcourt, but also some domestic clearings, eg Yarnton.
2. Domestication. People were tied in to a farming system, although it seems likely that this was primarily focused on animal rearing (animals, grazed grassland, dung beetles etc, few cereals, little evidence of ground disturbance for tilling, few quernstones). More evidence of cereal cultivation in the early Bronze Age than in the late Neolithic, suggesting that this was becoming more important.
3. Architecture. People had begun to transform the landscape by building projects - houses, ceremonial and funerary monuments.
4. Elaborate treatment of the dead.
5. Manipulation of ideas about the past
6. Exchange of ideas and materials over large distances (though perhaps not directly)

## 4 **Research Agenda**

Valley bottom sites with good environmental sequences with potential to investigate mid 5th to mid 4th millennium assemblages. Relating material already discovered to contemporary environment and landscape development

Lack of any excavated evidence from causewayed enclosures in West Oxfordshire - indeed very poor understanding of West Oxon river valley archaeology.

Need to update Holgate's distribution of settlement in the region.

Need for better understanding of pit deposits and their more careful registration

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