

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Neolithic and Bronze Age in Northamptonshire

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The intention behind the publication in 1989 of "Midlands Prehistory: Some recent and current researches into the prehistory of central England", was to show that the Midlands was "far from the prehistoric wilderness that was once envisaged" (Gibson 1989, 3). This collection of papers provided a demonstration of how the combined efforts of aerial photography, fieldwalking and rescue archaeology had brought life to a "desert" previously populated in the Neolithic and Bronze Age only by isolated oases of activity, such as the occasional round barrow.
- 1.2 The aim of this paper is to briefly review both the current state of knowledge for Neolithic and Bronze Age Northamptonshire, and the limitations and potential of the available evidence. There is no attempt to provide a synthesis of this data, although this paper does provide a first step on the approach to such a synthesis. A list of key sites and a bibliography are provided (Sites in **bold** type in the main text are those appearing in the list of key sites, which includes bibliographic details).

2. GEOGRAPHY AND SOILS

- 2.1 The county boundaries of Northamptonshire encompass the river Nene and its watershed, so the county can be considered to represent a single major geographical zone. In addition, it includes parts of several neighbouring zones; to the south and south-east there are small parts of the valleys of the rivers Cherwell and Great Ouse; to the west the high ground of the upper reaches of the Warwickshire Avon; and to the north-west the river Welland forms the county boundary.
- 2.2 The river Nene and its environs are typically on lighter soils, the flood plain gravels bordered by ironstone and limestone geologies. This area is now primarily under arable cultivation, and has been from the medieval period onward.
- 2.3 The higher ground in the north-west of the county is dominated by heavy soils on glacial clays and Lias Clays, and contains large areas of permanent or long-term pasture, but often with well or partially preserved ridge and furrow earthworks indicative of former medieval arable exploitation.

3. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

- 3.1 As intensive arable farming had covered virtually the entire county during the medieval period, the vast majority of the pre-medieval earthworks had been either levelled or at least degraded prior to the appearance of any antiquarian interest and recording. The few early field monuments that were recognised, such as the upstanding round barrows at **Three Hills Barrows, Woodford**, were therefore seen not only as rare survivals, but as also indicative of a genuinely sparse occurrence of early sites.
- 3.2 While some smaller sites, particularly round barrows, had survived as degraded earthworks until the last 100 years, ploughing since then has typically resulted in the final removal of these remnant earthworks. This process is, of course, still continuing, and as a majority of the known early prehistoric monuments are on arable land they are still subject to continuous erosion, even as scheduled ancient monuments.

- 3.3 Two other major destructive factors in the county have been ironstone quarrying and gravel extraction. Ironstone quarrying occurred around Northampton in the 19th century, and produced chance finds of prehistoric date. In the Corby area quarrying continued to the late 1970's, so at least in the later years there was archaeological coverage of this area. However, there is no doubt that much has been lost.
- 3.4 The extensive gravel quarrying that still continues along the river Nene has been a major source of our excavated data, but we must again accept that much was lost in the past. Another important factor is that the exploitation of these flood plain gravels has been so intense that they are now a rapidly diminishing resource, and only a single substantial length of Nene valley flood plain survives intact, at the northern end of the county around Fotheringhay.
- 3.5 Areas for potential good preservation are few and far between. Medieval woodland and heath land may contain upstanding earthworks but only small areas survive; the main concentration being remnants of Rockingham Forest in the north of the county. Much of the woodland is on clays and has, so far, failed to produce evidence of early prehistoric earthworks. There are, however, some exceptions, such as the probable mound or cairn in Wakerly Great Wood, which is on lighter soils, and possible prehistoric earthworks in Harlestone Firs, Northampton, a former medieval heath land.
- 3.6 While the gravels of the Nene valley are a diminishing resource, they are also still one of the most valuable, as was shown by the discovery at **West Cotton, Raunds** of previously unknown upstanding mounds and a nearby Neolithic timber platform at the edge of a river palaeochannel, both sealed beneath later alluvium.
- 3.7 Additional destructive factors are of course urban development and new roads, and we may note in particular how road construction and improvement schemes along the Nene valley have been as productive as gravel extraction in providing opportunities for fieldwork.

4. NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE RESEARCH

- 4.1 The history of archaeological research in the county has been closely tied to the sequence of destructive activities. The later 19th and early 20th centuries saw a steady trickle of chance finds entering the museums largely from the ironstone quarries, with important collections at both Northampton and Kettering. They include several Bronze Age burials from Weldon, near Corby (see Jackson 1974, 10) and the recovery of large quantities of worked flint from both Duston and Hunsbury, Northampton (RCHME 1985, 29).
- 4.2 The post-war revolution in our understanding came about initially as a result of aerial photography. This revealed the cropmarks of numerous previously unknown sites of all periods on the arable fields. Most importantly, this coincided with the commencement of large scale gravel extraction and so alerted the archaeological world to the full extent of the loss that was occurring, and the opportunity it provided to rewrite the prehistory of the midlands river valleys.
- 4.3 The first systematic fieldwalking studies were also undertaken, and an early pioneering study was the intensive fieldwalking in the **Brixworth** area by Martin and Hall. These showed the extent of early activity beyond the small number of identifiable cropmark sites.
- 4.4 From the 1960's rescue archaeology was making major contributions to our knowledge of individual sites, with excavations either in the north of the county around Corby, in advance of ironstone quarrying (**Cowthick, nr Weldon**), but particularly along the Nene valley in advance of gravel extraction (**Aldwinkle, Earls Barton, Ecton, and Grendon**). Some of this rescue work was on identified cropmark sites but watching briefs led to many additional discoveries. The role of Dennis Jackson in the recording of so many of these threatened sites beginning in the mid-1960's deserves a special mention as it has provided an invaluable basis for all future work.
- 4.5 The progress made up to the 1970's was catalogued in the five volumes of the Royal Commission survey (RCHME 1976, 1979, 1981, 1982, and 1985), and an overview was provided in the form of commentaries

on the series of site and finds distribution maps published in the supplementary atlas (RCHME 1980). Four of these maps catalogued Neolithic and Bronze Age sites and artefacts: Map 6, flint and stone axes; map 7, worked flints; map 8, bronze Age burial; map 9, Bronze Age pottery and metalwork.

- 4.6 This same period also saw the creation of both the Northampton Development Corporation Archaeological Unit, responsible for the major open area excavation of the then recently discovered causewayed enclosure at **Briar Hill, Northampton**, and of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Unit within the County Council. This resulted both in the establishment of the county Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and in the provision of a more systematic coverage for rescue archaeology.
- 4.7 A major product of the work of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Unit was the creation, in partnership with English Heritage, of the **Raunds Area Project**. From 1985, a programme of excavation and survey work was carried out prior to housing development, road construction, and gravel extraction. This had been planned to include the excavation of a known group of round barrows, but discoveries of previously unknown monuments at **West Cotton** and **Stanwick** transformed it into the investigation of a major complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, comprising a wide diversity of monument types and with accompanying environmental studies. The broader landscape was studied through a comprehensive programme of fieldwalking. This constitutes the major piece of prehistoric research carried out within the county. Indeed, it exceeds the total of all the other work on the Neolithic and Bronze Age put together. The publication of the results will provide a base for the interpretation of the more scattered evidence derived from many smaller pieces of rescue archaeology both within the county and across the river valleys of the entire midlands landscape.
- 4.8 In the past decade there have been relatively few opportunities for the excavation of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites, although work along the course of the A605 road between **Tansor** and the county boundary at **Elton**, has produced significant results. In addition, isolated finds of relevance have occurred on sites of other periods, such as a flat beaker burial recovered during the excavation a post-medieval building at Warmington (S Parry pers comm), and occasional pits containing Grooved ware recovered in the extensive excavation of an Iron Age and Roman landscape at Wollaston in advance of gravel extraction (I Meadows pers comm, and Gibson unpublished).
- 4.9 Enhancement of the Sites and Monuments record is continuing, particularly with a programme for mapping the aerial photographic evidence, and the further results of extensive fieldwalking also await publication. On the negative side, there is the now problem of the dissemination of the results of the numerous small pieces of fieldwork resulting from developer funded evaluations and recording actions. Results that are inevitably scattered across the numerous archaeological organisations that have operated within the county in recent years.
- 4.10 A final point worth noting is that while the county is fortunate to have both a comprehensive data base, originating with the Royal Commission surveys and continuing with the Sites and Monuments record, and a good body of excavated evidence, there have been no previously attempts to provide a full synthesis of this data, so the present exercise has little background to draw on and is therefore starting some way behind some neighbouring counties.

5. THE METHODS OF DATA RECOVERY

- 5.1 The available Neolithic and Bronze Age evidence cannot be regarded as representing the true distribution of contemporary activity as there are unavoidable sources of bias in the survival, and therefore also in the collection, of all forms of data. These factors were recognised and thoroughly discussed in the Archaeological Atlas (RCHME 1980), and the following comments on techniques and their limitations are based on those conclusions.

5.2 Aerial photography

- 5.2.1 Aerial photography produces good results on the lighter soils, such as the gravel terraces of the Nene valley and on the Northampton Sand and Jurassic Limestone geologies which border the valley. However, on the glacial boulder clays and Lias Clays which dominate the landscape of the higher ground along much of the north-western part of the county cropmark sites of pre-medieval date are rare.
- 5.2.2 On the lighter soils the pattern can be accepted as broadly representative, but the extent to which the lack of cropmarks on the clays does reflect a lower level of early exploitation is still not definitively defined. Foard (pers com), as a result of his extensive experience of aerial photographic survey in the county, is convinced that the absence of major prehistoric monuments on the clays is genuine. But it would still be safer to consider the clays as areas of uncertain potential, where we may be significantly underestimating early prehistoric activity. The discovery of extensive Iron Age and Roman settlements at the Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal, near Crick, provides an example of what can emerge from the clays.
- 5.2.3 The recognition of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites from cropmark evidence is also problematic, and at least partly as a result of the background "noise" caused by the numerous Iron Age and Roman sites. The most distinctive monument types are causewayed enclosures and ring ditches, although at least some of the latter will, no doubt, turn out to be Iron Age roundhouses. Possible henge sites may also be identified, such as **Cotton Henge, Raunds**, but these may also be confused with Iron Age enclosures. In addition, the work of **Raunds Area Project** has revealed a diversity of individual monuments, both large and small, that will be difficult to identify from aerial photography.

5.3 Fieldwalking

- 5.3.1 Fieldwalking has been an important indicator of the extent of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity, and often denotes the presence of early activity in areas where there is no other known evidence. The work of Martin and Hall in the **Brixworth** area identified a general flint scatter, indicating a strong bias to the lighter soils, but in addition it defined specific localised concentrations which were interpreted as "settlement" sites. However, the more recent fieldwalking survey in the **Raunds Area** has produced rather different results. It recovered comparable extensive flint scatters but without the very localised concentrations and with a less marked bias to the lighter soils, indicating that there was a considerable level of activity on the clays.
- 5.3.2 While fieldwalking surveys have covered large areas of the county, we must still accept that the results are not easily interpretable, while the wide variety of collection techniques makes it difficult to compare the results of separate studies.

5.4 Excavation and geophysical survey

- 5.4.1 Three major processes have led to extensive excavation programmes; ironstone quarrying, gravel extraction and new road construction. There has therefore been much the same bias to the lighter soils as has applied to aerial photography, and all of the major excavations of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites have taken place in the environs of the Nene Valley (**Aldwinckle, Briar Hill, Grendon, Raunds Area Project, Tansor, Elton**) and many chance finds have been derived from later period sites in the same area (eg Ashton Roman Town, Warmington bypass and Wollaston quarry).
- 5.4.2 Work along linear development schemes such as new roads or pipelines can provide an opportunity to obtain "random" transects across a diversity of landscapes, allowing some measure of comparative assessment. However, the major road scheme in the county has been the upgrading of the A45/A605 road along the Nene valley, which has therefore complemented work on the gravel quarries. The single cross-country route has been the A14, the M1-A1 link road, where the only substantial early site encountered was a later Bronze Age cremation cemetery at **Kelmarsh**.
- 5.4.3 More recently, the potential of the clays in the north-west of the county has been demonstrated by the discovery through geophysical prospection and survey of extensive Iron Age and Roman settlements at the

Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal, near Crick (Chapman 1994, and Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1998), and the now almost standard use of geophysical survey on sites of unestablished potential has been the most useful new tool for the location of sites on clays and pasture land.

6. THE NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE SITES

6.1 The Mesolithic background

6.1.1 Although Mesolithic worked flint occurs within fieldwalking collections, the analysis of the collection from Honey Hill, Elkington (Saville 1981) is still the only study of a pure Mesolithic assemblage within the county. However, small but important assemblages of Mesolithic worked flint have been recovered at several Neolithic sites, including **Aldwinckle**, **Briar Hill**, and **Ecton**, while quite substantial quantities were recovered from the body of the Long Mound at **West Cotton**. At a superficial level, this indicates that the excavation of Neolithic sites is one of the major sources of Mesolithic worked flint, but the presence of this material also raises some fundamental questions regarding the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition, and the nature of the midland flint industries based on flint from the river gravels.

6.1.2 The paucity of the recovered evidence for the Mesolithic and the sparse representation of the earlier Neolithic, make it impossible to produce any meaningful analysis of the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition within the county, and it seems likely that we will remain dependent on working by analogy from areas with better survival of the evidence.

6.2 The Neolithic

Causewayed enclosures

6.2.1 A major contribution of aerial photography was the discovery that causewayed enclosures were not merely a feature of the chalk downs of Wessex and Sussex, with a few stray outliers such as Hembury, Devon, but were scattered right across the Midland river valleys (Wilson, D M, 1975, and Palmer, R, 1976), and the excavation of the enclosure at **Briar Hill** was an important confirmation of the cropmark interpretation. This site provided a model of long-term usage but with only intermittent recutting of its ditch segments, suggesting that this evidently large-scale ritual site was never marked on the ground by anything more than a string of pits and low, and probably intermittent banks. It provided an important, but still largely ignored contrast, to the major earthwork causewayed enclosures of Wessex.

6.2.2 Two other examples are known within the county, at **Dallington**, Northampton, only a few miles from Briar Hill and in the north of the county at **Southwick**. As the only demonstrable earlier Neolithic monuments they form the major known resource for this period.

Henges

6.2.3 Henges are less easily distinguished from other enclosure types in the cropmark evidence, and this leaves it uncertain whether their sparse representation in the county (eg **Cotton henge**, **Raunds** and the possible henge within the causewayed enclosure at **Dallington**) is genuine. It is also a class of monument that still awaits its first large scale excavation. However, it does seem likely that "classic" henges, like "classic" long barrows (see below), may well be a rare occurrence. Their social/functional role may well have been encompassed within other monument types; the later Neolithic activity at the **Briar Hill** causewayed enclosure, including the digging of pits into the fills of the ditch circuit and the deposition of grooved ware in association with an internal timber structure, may well fall into this category.

Long and oval barrows

6.2.4 The only certain example of a "classic" long barrow is the excavated site at **Redlands Farm, Stanwick**, which relates to the Neolithic and Bronze Age complex investigated within the **Raunds Area Project**; prior to excavation this had been interpreted as a round barrow. As a contrast, the validity of the possible example adjacent to Rainsborough Camp (Scheduled Ancient Monument No. 13672) has recently been questioned as a result of recent earthwork and geophysical surveys, which suggest that the mound may be

the result of post-medieval landscaping (Northamptonshire Archaeology 1997).

- 6.2.5 The distribution of possible long barrow sites shows them to be concentrated on and around the tributary streams that form the headwaters of the river Nene, in distinct contrast to their contemporaries, the oval barrows.
- 6.2.6 A major contribution to Neolithic studies has been the recognition and excavation of Neolithic mortuary enclosures at **Aldwinckle**, **Grendon**, and **Tansor**, together with a further example just beyond the county boundary at Orton Longueville, Peterborough. Radiocarbon dating shows that these sites were in use from 3000-2000 BC and were then sealed beneath circular or oval barrow mounds. Along with the Redlands Farm long barrow, they form a chain of Neolithic mortuary sites spaced at intervals of 10.5 - 12.5 km along the Nene valley. While all of these sites possess common elements of structure and mortuary practice, they also display a great diversity in the way in which these elements have been assembled.
- 6.2.7 All of these mortuary sites had been considered, quite reasonably, to be probable Bronze Age round barrows prior to excavation, and it must be suspected that there are further examples within the known cropmark ring ditches, although recognising them prior to excavation will not be easy.
- 6.2.8 It must also be noted that all of these sites show continuation of respect, with specific Beaker associations and usage well into the early Bronze Age (at **Tansor** this extended to the late Bronze Age and a final reuse as a Saxon inhumation cemetery). Apart from the later direct reuse of these Neolithic mounds, some were also clearly the focus for small Beaker and Bronze Age barrow cemeteries, as at **Aldwinckle**, while the **Redlands Farm** long barrow has to be considered within the context of the adjacent major monument complex.

Other mounds and enclosures

- 6.2.9 The work of the **Raunds Area Project** has demonstrated most vividly the diversity of possible monument types that may await discovery elsewhere in the county. We may note in particular the cluster of sites at **West Cotton** that include the 135 m long **Long Mound** and the 120 m long **Long Enclosure**. The first, with its underlying structure of regular bays and flanking quarry pits, has clear affinities to the long barrow tradition, but its overall form and scale has no direct local comparisons. In contrast, the **Long Enclosure** has clear affinities to cursus monuments, and retrospective review of the excavation results at **Grendon** has identified a second possible example. Many sites of similar proportions have been located in the midlands as a result of aerial photography (Loveday 1989, fig 4.10). However, there is no known example of a cursus in the Nene valley, while they are present in other midland river valleys, such as the Maxey cursus in the Welland valley.

Habitation sites

- 6.2.10 A single late Neolithic habitation site has been excavated, at **Ecton**, nr Northampton, and this was another chance discovery resulting from observation during gravel extraction. The site comprised a scatter of shallow hollows with associated hearth debris, a flint scatter and pottery assemblage. Northamptonshire is therefore consistent with the national picture, with an absence of Neolithic or early Bronze Age settlement and only sparse evidence for individual habitation sites. However, we must also consider the occasional recovery of isolated pits containing late Neolithic pottery as being most probably indicative of the presence of habitation sites which have left no other below ground remains.

6.3 The early Bronze Age

Round barrows and flat burials

- 6.3.1 The single monument type represented in significant numbers is the round barrow, although a majority of these have been levelled and are therefore only known from their cropmark ring ditches.
- 6.3.2 These contain our major resource for the early Bronze Age, in terms of human remains, cultural material

and environmental data, and much has already been achieved, particularly with the excavation of significant barrow cemeteries at **Aldwinkle**, **Grendon**, and **Stanwick/Irthlingborough**. However, for unexcavated sites it is a resource of unpredictable value. At some ploughed-out round barrows all evidence of the burials that we would presume to have been associated with them will have been lost through plough damage, but this can only be established with certainty by at least partial excavation. At others deep grave pits, the barrow ditch or other internal and external pits might produce a wealth of material.

- 6.3.3 What is clear, however, is that any round barrow still surviving as an earthwork feature, indicating the survival of a protective mound until at least recent decades, has a much higher potential for information retrieval and should form the priority for preservation or, when unavoidable, detailed excavation.
- 6.3.4 There are no large barrow cemeteries within the county, but there are several smaller cemeteries. Many of these formed adjacent to a pre-existing Neolithic monuments, as has been demonstrated at **Aldwinkle**, **Grendon**, and in the **Raunds Area Project**.
- 6.3.5 Flat burials of beaker and Bronze Age dates have also been found intermittently across the county, such as at **Cowthick nr Weldon**, and more recent examples from Ashton Roman Town and Warmington, as already mentioned. Such burials can only be located as a matter of pure chance during excavations or watching briefs initiated for other purposes.

6.4 The later Bronze Age

Later Bronze Age cremation cemeteries

- 6.4.1 As with the flat burials of the early Bronze Age, the absence of any upstanding or substantial earth cut elements means that later Bronze Age cremation cemeteries can only be discovered by chance as a byproduct of other investigations. Three cemeteries containing 20 or more burials are known, one within the causewayed enclosure at **Briar Hill**, another within the cropmark complex at **Chapel Brampton**, while the third was located during observation along the route of the A14 following topsoil stripping at **Kelmarsh**; it is unfortunate that only the Briar Hill cemetery has been fully published.
- 6.4.2 There can be no doubt that many more such cemeteries must be awaiting discovery, and while there is no means of predicting their location some clearly respect earlier monuments, as at **Briar Hill**, while a single middle Bronze Age cremation was recovered during trial trenching at Marsh Lane, Irthlingborough adjacent to a group of three ring ditches (Northamptonshire Archaeology 1995a and 1995b).

Settlements/habitation sites

- 6.4.3 Whilst elsewhere there is considerable evidence for middle and late Bronze Age settlement, Northamptonshire has few examples. The identification of two roundhouses and remnants of associated boundary ditches at **Stanwick** provides our best evidence, but it seems likely that further examples are unrecognised within the numerous cropmark sites classified as of probable Iron Age date. Indeed, the recent work at the Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal suggests that the extensive middle Iron Age settlement there may have had its origins in, or had succeeded, a more modest settlement of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date (BUFAU 1998, 51).
- 6.4.4 In addition, we may also mention the recent excavation of a late Bronze Age enclosure at Thrapston, although the character of this site would appear to place it within the context of the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age settlement tradition.

7. **CHRONOLOGY, MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

7.1 Radiocarbon dating

- 7.1.1 The number of radiocarbon dates from the county is now approaching 100, and this forms a sound basis for establishing a chronology for the excavated sites. Approximately a half of these dates have been obtained from the **Raunds Area Project**, making this one of the best dated monument complexes in the country. The other major group are from the **Briar Hill** causewayed enclosure. Some of the earlier excavations have only a couple of dates, leaving the full history of these monuments less well defined chronologically, but these are still sufficient to place them within the broad chronological picture.
- 7.1.2 One difficulty in making comparisons is the lack of consistency in the presentation of the published dates. Many of those in earlier reports have not been calibrated, while the calibrated dates relate to a number of different calibration curves. A catalogue of available dates in a consistent form, with recalibration to the latest curve, would permit direct and useful comparison between sites.
- 7.2 Lithics
- 7.2.1 Only a single large assemblage of worked flint has been published, the 4359 flints from **Briar Hill**. All other publications relate to assemblages of less than 500 flints (eg. **Aldwinckle**, 298 flints; **Tansor** 323 flints). However, these assemblages have been sufficient to define the nature of this local, gravel based, flint industry. A definitive study of its characteristics should be provided by the publication of the **Raunds Area Project**, where over 10000 flints were recovered from fieldwalking, and a further 11000 came from the excavated monuments at **West Cotton** alone.
- 7.2.2 In addition to locally derived flint, there are also possible examples of imported items, such as polished flint axes and, maybe, the flint daggers associated with the beaker burials at **Irthlingborough** and **West Cotton**. For stone axes, a marked concentration of Group VI (Great Langdale) had been noted by 1980 (RCHME 1980, 2), in a similar fashion to other parts of the Midlands.
- 7.3 Pottery
- 7.3.1 Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery has been recovered from across the county, but the small quantities derived from any single site means that the data is scattered through numerous reports published in the past 3 decades, making comparison difficult; a county or regional corpus would be useful. One problem is the small quantities derived as isolated finds in excavations of later period sites, which are in danger of being "lost" in the excavation reports, if published at all.
- 7.3.2 The only major early Neolithic assemblage is from **Briar Hill**. Later Neolithic impressed wares have been recovered from across the county in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from isolated pits to major funerary monuments, but the only large assemblage that has been published is from the habitation site at **Ecton, Northampton**. Funerary vessels, particularly beakers and collared urns, have been recovered from across the county from the 19th century onward, so the published data is widely scattered through the literature.
- 7.3.3 The **Raunds Area Project** has produced the largest single corpus of later Neolithic and early Bronze Age pottery, and the publication of this material should form the benchmark for all future work.
- 7.4 Metalwork and other materials
- 7.4.1 There is a sparse collection of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age metalwork found in association with round barrow interments, most notably the copper alloy daggers from **Earls Barton** and **Irthlingborough**.
- 7.4.2 Later Bronze Age metalwork is represented by individual items and small groups scattered across the county (Kennett 1969). The only probable major hoard came from the cropmark complex at **Ecton, Northampton**, recovered by illegal metal detecting and therefore largely lost.

7.4.3 Small quantities of early Bronze Age grave goods in other materials have also been recovered, most notably the V-perforated jet buttons from the **Irthlingborough, West Cotton**, and Warmington beaker burials.

7.5 Faunal and environmental evidence

7.5.1 Animal bones are present only in small quantities from most individual sites. As a result there are no published faunal assemblages of any size from the county. The single major early Neolithic site, the **Briar Hill** causewayed enclosure was situated on ironstone where bone preservation is poor. The major groups awaiting publication are from the **Raunds Area**; this included a mixed bone assemblage from Bronze Age deposits above the timber platform in the palaeochannel at **West Cotton** and nearly 200 cattle skulls on the cairn above the central Beaker burial at **Irthlingborough**.

7.5.2 There is similarly little published information on environmental studies, although in this instance too the publication of the results from the **Raunds Area** will form a major study of the Neolithic and Bronze Age environment.

8. SITE DISTRIBUTION AND PREHISTORIC LAND USE

8.1 From the above summaries we must conclude that the work of the last 30 years has clearly dispelled the image of a prehistoric wilderness, and has given us a landscape of extensive prehistoric exploitation, including major monument complexes and a wide diversity of site types. This achievement alone marks a major step forward, and contributes significantly to the regional and national pictures of population levels, land utilisation and the distribution of monument types and elements of material culture.

8.2 However, while it may be likely that the balance of land use did favour the lighter soils of the Nene valley and its immediate environs, the imbalances in the various forms of evidence make it difficult to determine how the intense usage of this landscape really compares to the usage of upland clays, where we know there was activity, although its nature remains obscure.

8.3 Given the bias towards the Nene valley that has applied to all forms of data collection, the known distribution here may well be approaching the truth, even though the work of the **Raunds Area Project** has shown that major sites can lie undetected either beneath alluvium or later settlements. However, even though there may still be gaps either waiting to be filled, or already lost to earlier episodes of gravel extraction, the work along the Nene valley is certainly sufficiently detailed to provide a benchmark for midlands prehistory, and a suitable comparison and contrast to the southern downlands which have previously dominated all models of prehistoric land use.

LIST OF KEY SITES

Causewayed enclosures

Briar Hill, Northampton (NGR SP 73625923)

Extensive area excavation 1974-78 prior to development for housing (Bamford 1976, 1979 and 1985). The enclosure comprised an inner ditch and a double outer circuit. A programme of radiocarbon dating produced an extended chronology; the formation of the enclosure may have been as early as 4480 BC, while the ditches were still being recut at around 3380 BC. A continuation of activity into the later Neolithic/ early Bronze Age is denoted both by further radiocarbon dates and by the presence of impressed wares and Beaker pottery, recovered either from pits cut into the ditch segments or from some internal pit groups and a timber structure.

Current condition: lost under housing development.

Dallington, Northampton (NGR SP 72546350)

A cropmark site comprising a discontinuous ditch circuit interpreted as a probable causewayed enclosure. A smaller circular ditch circuit is interpreted as a possible henge monument (RCHME 1985, 30 and fig 2). Limited trial excavation in 1991 confirmed the nature of the enclosure ditches and the recovered flintwork, especially the polished axe fragments, indicated a Neolithic date (OAU 1991).

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

Southwick (NGR TL 04109296)

A cropmark site comprising two arcs of concentric interrupted ditches (RCHME 1975, 86 and plate 1)

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

Mortuary enclosures and round barrows

Aldwinckle (NGR SP 996803)

Excavation of a small dispersed cemetery comprising four round barrows and a Neolithic mortuary enclosure was carried out between 1967 and 1971 during gravel extraction (Jackson 1976).

The original mortuary enclosure was rectangular, defined by shallow and irregular gullies. It was later surrounded by a substantial ditch, with narrow causeways to the S.E. Within the central area two inhumation burials lay between a pair of post-pits. An outer ditch of oval plan marked the creation of a barrow mound.

Two of the barrows had central graves containing inhumation burials in boat-shaped coffins, and both were accompanied by Beaker style grave goods. The remains of eleven widely scattered un-urned cremations lay to the S-W of the mortuary enclosure.

Current condition: lost to gravel extraction.

Cowthick, nr. Weldon (NGR SP 922886)

Several fragmentary Bronze Age burials were revealed during ironstone quarrying in 1970 (Jackson 1974). Salvage excavation recovered remains of 3 certain inhumations and a possible fourth, and at least 6 cremations, three of which were associated with collared urns. No mound or ditches had survived, but the evidence suggested the former presence of a mound(s) or cairn(s).

current condition: lost to ironstone quarrying.

Earls Barton (NGR SP 870627)

A previously unrecorded bell barrow was excavated prior to gravel quarrying in 1969 (Jackson 1984). The mound had been extensively disturbed by animal burrows, and the only surviving burial comprised a small and disturbed scatter of cremated bones, in apparent association with a bronze ogival dagger. They lay near centrally at the base of the mound and above a square area of burnt soil and charcoal, which may have been a pyre or burnt mortuary house.

Two radiocarbon dates from this structure were the first obtained for the Wessex Culture, and created controversy at the time as they were later than expected (Selkirk 1972).

Current condition: lost to gravel extraction.

Grendon (NGR SP873617)

A Neolithic mortuary enclosure, 5 Bronze Age round barrow ring ditches, and a pit complex were excavated in advance of gravel quarrying in 1974-75 (Gibson and Mc Cormick 1985). The mortuary enclosure (barrow V) was square in plan, defined on three sides by a substantial ditch while the northern side had later been closed by a slot which had contained a substantial timber facade with a central entrance. A pair of concentric encircling ditches mark the later addition, and enlargement, of a barrow mound. There were no associated burials.

Current condition: lost to gravel extraction.

Tansor (NGR TL 057901)

A Neolithic mortuary enclosure/oval mound was partially excavated in 1995 prior to a road improvement scheme (Chapman 1997). The central area had originally been defined by intercutting pits, possibly post-pits, and at the eastern end a shallow slot may have held a timber facade with a central entrance. No burials were recovered, but a central pit produced a Mortlake ware assemblage. The enclosure was encircled by a ditch and mounded over at around 2000 - 1900 BC. Radiocarbon dates associated with the filling of the ditch show that activity continued into the later Bronze Age. Two early Saxon burials demonstrate later reuse.

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

Three Hills Barrows, Woodford (NGR SP 961760)

Three adjacent round barrows still surviving as mounds standing 2 m high, making them unique in the county (RCHME 1975, 111-2 and plate 1).

Current condition: under grass, but extensively damaged by various activities.

The Raunds Area Project

The multitude of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments excavated between 1985 and 1993 in Raunds, Stanwick and Irthlingborough are listed together as they are likely to constitute a single monument complex which was in use for at least 1500 years (Humble forthcoming). Eight Neolithic and five early Bronze Age monuments were excavated as part of the Raunds Area Project by English Heritage and Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit. They include a wide diversity of monument types, including some Neolithic sites of unique form, such as the 135m Long Mound at West Cotton, and well preserved Beaker barrows with rich grave goods (Halpin 1987, Windell 1989, and Windell *et al* 1990). In addition, a long barrow, two round barrows and a 'mini' barrow were excavated at Redlands Farm by Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1989-90 to the immediate south of the Raunds Area (Moore and Jackson 1990).

Later Bronze Age activity in the area is less well represented, but two Bronze Age roundhouses and parts of an extensive system of land boundary ditches have been recorded.

The overall chronology is based on an extensive programme of radiocarbon dating, comprising more than 40 dates spanning nearly 4000 years, from tree-holes dated c.5000 BC through to a Bronze Age cremation burial of 1250-1100 BC.

In addition to the excavations, systematic fieldwalking in the parishes of Raunds, Stanwick and Hargrave over a period of five seasons produced a collection of over 10500 worked flints. These have been analysed in detail to provide an indication of the utilisation of the contemporary landscape beyond the excavated monuments, which were almost exclusively located along the flood plain on the River Nene (Parry and Humble forthcoming).

This body of work constitutes a study of the development of a Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual landscape of national importance.

Cotton Henge, Raunds (NGR SP 983726)

A cropmark site comprising two ditch circuits, identified as a possible henge on the valley side above West Cotton. An evaluation trench was excavated in 1993 by English Heritage (Humble 1994).

Current condition: under arable cultivation, thin soil cover.

Redlands Farm, Stanwick (NGR SP 965710)

Excavation of a long barrow and two round barrows prior to gravel extraction by Oxford Archaeological Unit

(Moore and Jackson, 1990).

Current condition: lost to gravel extraction.

West Cotton, Raunds (NGR SP 976725)

A complex of previously unknown Neolithic and late Neolithic/early Bronze Age monuments lying beneath the deserted medieval village of West Cotton (Windell, 1989 and Windell *et al.*, 1990). The Neolithic monuments comprise a Long Mound, a Long Enclosure, an oval mound, a possible oval enclosure, and a timber platform at the edge of the adjacent river palaeochannel. The late Neolithic/early Bronze Age is represented by a triple ditched Beaker barrow. A further five major ring ditches lie to the immediate east of the excavated area.

Current condition: excavated monuments, lost to gravel extraction; unexcavated monuments, one field under pasture and the other under arable cultivation.

Irthlingborough and Stanwick (NGR 963725)

Four of five upstanding barrow mounds at Irthlingborough were excavated by English Heritage. A further round barrow and other monuments were excavated in the vicinity of the Stanwick Roman settlement, lying between Irthlingborough and West Cotton (Humble forthcoming).

Current condition: one barrow preserved within quarry.

Settlement

Ecton, Northampton (NGR SP 83896165)

Observation during gravel extraction in 1971 located a later Neolithic settlement or habitation site, which was subsequently excavated (Moore and Williams 1975). A roughly rectangular hollow and other nearby hollows, with associated areas of burning, produced an assemblage of Mortlake and Ebbsfleet pottery, and a dense flint scatter.

Current condition: lost to gravel extraction.

Elton (NGR 088925)

An area of Neolithic activity beside a small valley was excavated in 1989 prior to road construction (French 1991). A small ditched enclosure may have been a focus for domestic activity, but a pit containing the skeletal remains of at least five individuals, and remnants of a possible cairn denote possible contemporary ceremonial/burial activity.

Current condition: lost to road construction.

Bronze Age Cremation Cemeteries

Briar Hill, Northampton (NGR SP 73625923)

A small cemetery containing at least 27 cremation burials, 4 of which were in plain bucket-shaped urns, lay within the Neolithic causewayed enclosure (Bamford 1985).

Current condition: lost under housing development.

Chapel Brampton (NGR SP 722664)

A rescue excavation of a previously unknown site in 1970 in advance of a pipeline. A total of about 28 cremations were recovered, about half of them in upright urns (Moore 1971 and 1973).

Current condition: under arable cultivation?

Kelmarsh (NGR SP 71347931)

Salvage excavation of a previously unknown site in 1992 following topsoil removal prior to road construction. There were at least 21 cremations, 6 contained at least one sherd of pottery but in only a single instance did the full base of an urn survive in-situ (Soden and Dix 1995).

Current condition: lost to road construction

Major cropmark and fieldwalking sites

The Brampton Complex (NGR SP729647-725660)

Cropmarks extend almost continuously across at least 175 hectares in Chapel Brampton and Church Brampton (RCHME 1981, 17-21). Much of this is of later dates, but there are several probable Bronze Age ring ditches and

Neolithic and Bronze Age material has been recovered from this area (see **Chapel Brampton Bronze Age Cremation Cemetery**).

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

Brixworth (NGR SP735680-750720)

Intensive fieldwalking over a period of some five years in the late 1970's covering the arable fields of the parish of Brixworth, identified a total of 27 localised flint concentrations interpreted as settlement sites (Martin and Hall 1980).

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

North Ecton Complex, Northampton (NGR SP 821653-828640)

A dense cropmark site extending across 35 hectares of land to the north of Ecton village (RCHME 1979, 47-49). Mainly of later dates but certainly includes some probable ring ditches. A major hoard of late Bronze Age metalwork was recovered from this area by metal detecting.

Current condition: under arable cultivation.

Other sites

Northampton (NGR SP centre 750604)

Excavations within the historic core of the late Saxon town have produced a background scatter of residual worked flint and a little pottery, including Beaker sherds from Chalk Lane and a collared urn from St. Peter's Street (RCHME 1985, 29-34). The only certain early feature is a length of curving ditch at St. Peter's Street, possibly a Bronze Age ring ditch.

Current condition: urban area, residual finds of flint likely.

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