

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE DORNEY AREA

PHILIP CARSTAIRS

Fieldwalking, and a fresh analysis of existing aerial photographs, have revealed dense settlement along the Thames over a long span of prehistory—though not in Roman times. Sites deserving further study are noted.

Introduction

During the winter of 1985/86, Thames Water commissioned Buckinghamshire County Museum to carry out a survey of the archaeological resources in the Middle Thames Valley in order to investigate the potential impact of flood relief work between Maidenhead and Windsor. A reassessment of aerial photographs, mostly taken by the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England), together with a very limited programme of fieldwalking revealed that the area was of considerable archaeological importance. Sites investigated include an 'interrupted ditch' enclosure, a banjo enclosure, both of them the first examples recorded in Bucks; ring ditches, field systems, and flint scatters.

Full details of the survey and artefacts recovered during fieldwork are at Buckinghamshire County Museum.

The Dorney Region

Unlike the Upper Thames, the Middle Thames has received little detailed archaeological study. Apart from a review of the aerial photographs (Gates 1975) hardly any planned survey or excavation has been carried out. Since 1975 some new photographs have become available, but in comparison to other regions the coverage is poor, as local flying has been restricted by the proximity of Heathrow airport. Some sites recorded on photographs have since been destroyed without proper record, by urban growth, gravel extraction, and the construction of the M4 motorway. When the flood

relief programme was being planned, it was felt that a full assessment of the archaeological implications of the large scale water management plans should be carried out. Particular attention was paid to an area south and west of Dorney which was considered to be vulnerable. Lying within a large bend of the Thames between Maidenhead, Windsor and Slough (Fig. 1), the superficial geology is either flood-plain alluvium or flood-plain terrace gravels. Aerial photographs show that the area contains a series of gravel islands which appear as lighter patches surrounded by areas much darker in colour which are interpreted as being areas of deeper alluvial soil. This was confirmed by a limited amount of augering which showed the soil below the ploughsoil to be a yellow brown silty clay over 1.5 m deep. Photographs taken during severe flooding in 1947 show the gravel islands protruding above the floodwater whereas other areas are submerged. Most of the islands are clearly visible at ground level. Some of the areas of deeper soil are probably filled-in river channels of indeterminate date. Artefact scatters are restricted to the gravel as are all the cropmark sites. The sites themselves may extend beneath the alluvial cover, giving good potential for better preservation including associated environmental evidence.

The Survey Results

Mesolithic finds were restricted to the gravel islands, adjoining the river bank at site F, and at site I (Fig. 2). Finds consisted of cores, blades and flakes, of the local flint gravel. The sites are probably typical of the mesolithic

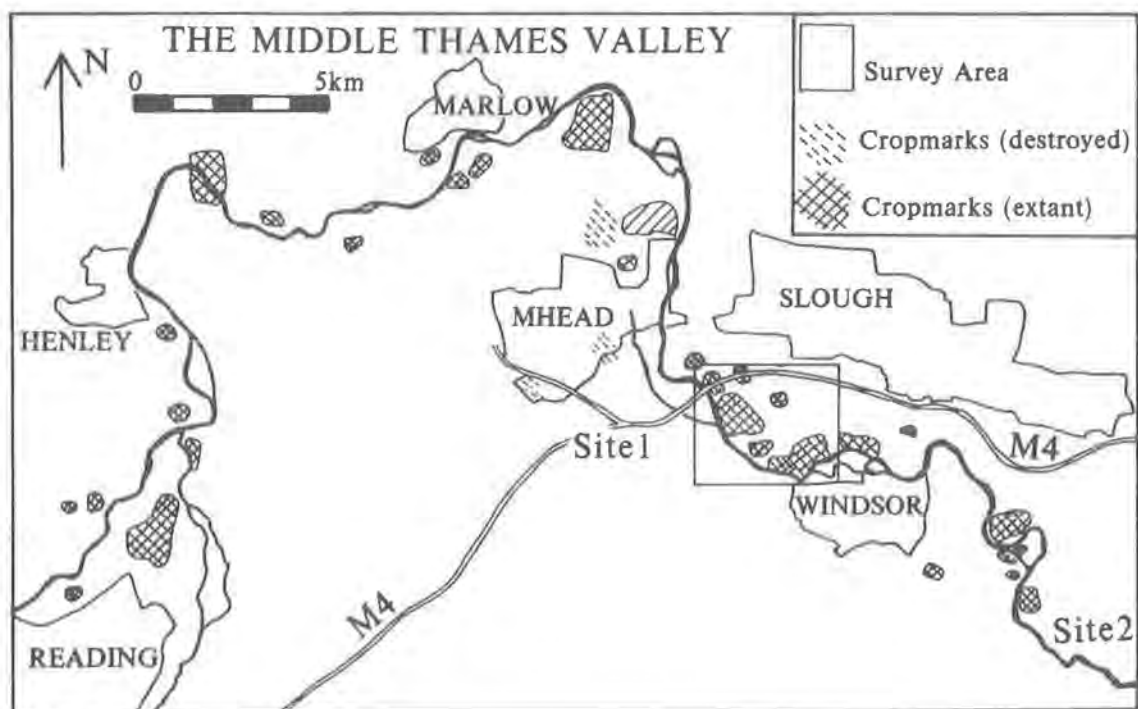


Fig. 1. The Middle Thames Valley.

occupation in the region. Ford (1987) reports a similar distribution of mesolithic sites around North Stoke, Oxfordshire and in East Berkshire. Here gravel terraces close to river, and other low-lying areas contained the sites with the densest lithic scatters. Excavation at site 1 in Berkshire (Fig. 1) produced evidence of mesolithic occupation. In the Dorney region these higher areas of gravel were probably exploited for occupation as well as being a source of flint.

The Neolithic is represented by an 'interrupted ditch' enclosure at Dorney Reach and possible barrow sites. The enclosure site D (Figs. 2-3 and Pl. XIII) appears on aerial photographs as a pair of parallel interrupted ditches, with segments 20-30 m long, narrow causeways between the segments, and a third line of interrupted ditches within the pair. The full extent of the enclosure is not visible as the southernmost part has been cut through by a modern pipeline and no aerial photographs of the adjacent field are available. However, it is likely that it is bounded by the Thames and is

'D'-shaped. The close spacing of the ditches is similar to other lowland interrupted ditch enclosures, as is its proximity to the river (Palmer 1976).

It is interesting to note that there are several similar sites in close proximity and more may yet be discovered. One has recently been investigated by S. Ford for Berkshire County Council less than three miles downstream at Eton Wick, site L on Fig. 2 (Ford 1986). Another is located further downstream at Staines (Palmer 1976). A possible interrupted ditch enclosure is currently being investigated in Reading (Bradley, pers. comm.). Site D was briefly investigated by field survey, and a very dense scatter of Late Neolithic/Bronze Age flintwork was observed. This is similar to the site at Eton Wick, where early Neolithic material occurred in the ditch fills but not in the plough-soil.

Other potential Neolithic sites identified in the area are oval and rectangular ditched

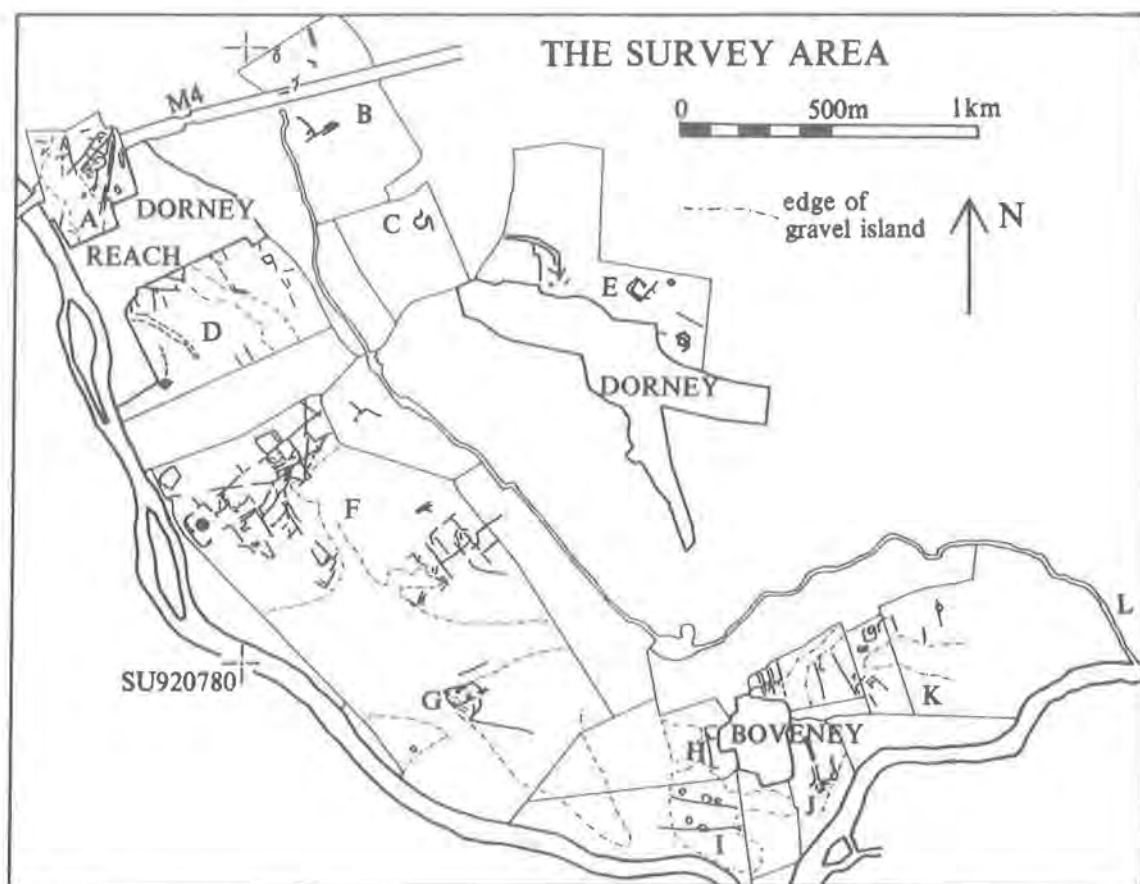


Fig. 2. The Survey Region.

cropmarks which are interpreted as either mortuary enclosures or ploughed-out barrow sites (sites A & B, Figs. 2 & 3). The one at site A has several internal features, and its proximity to the interrupted ditch enclosure is worthy of note.

Flint scatters and ring ditches are the most prominent remains of the late Neolithic and Bronze Age. Two large flint scatters were discovered during the survey, and careful examination of aerial photographs revealed six ring ditches in addition to those in the survey by Gates (1975). The largest flint scatter occurs on a ridge of gravel beside the Thames and probably extends from site D to site F; it is over 600 m long. It is possible that this scatter is associated with the field system and enclosure

with pits, at site F. This field system appears to have several different phases. One is aligned on a south-west/north-east axis and includes what may be a settlement enclosure with a complex entrance and pit clusters. A triple ring ditch is sited in the centre of a fragmentary rectangular enclosure on the same alignment beside the river. This system may be Bronze Age in date. A second field system aligned on a roughly west-east axis seems to intersect with the other. On the next island of gravel to the east is a further series of cropmarks which apparently are also part of a field system, although some may be geological in origin.

A further flint scatter and also calcined flint was noted at site I where there are also five ring ditches. The ring ditches may be barrows or

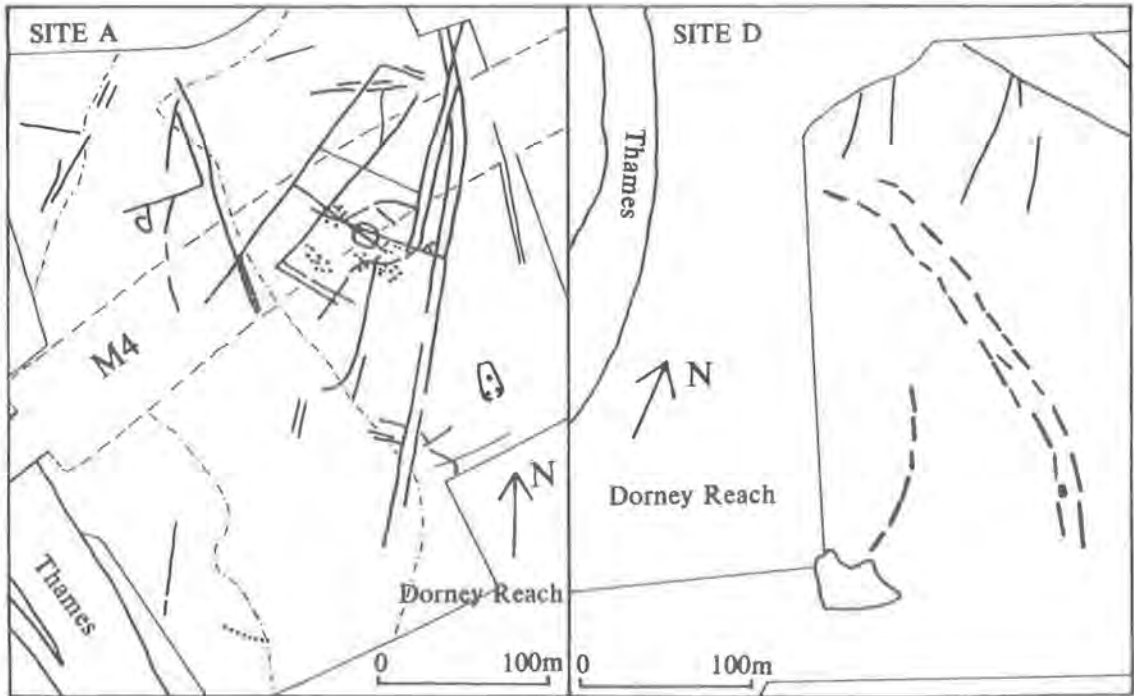


Fig. 3. Sites A and D.

could be Iron Age hut circles as some pottery which was probably Iron Age was recovered here. The flint scatter was less dense than that at sites D and F. Flintwork was observed during rapid field survey over most of the gravel areas surveyed but no other obvious concentrations were found. Small groups of ring ditches and isolated examples occur on almost every gravel island (Fig. 2).

In addition to the information provided by this survey several other pieces of evidence suggest that this region was of considerable importance during Prehistory. A major Neolithic/Bronze Age site has been excavated at Runnymede Bridge, Egham, Surrey (Fig. 1, site 2; Needham 1985) and a substantial amount of Bronze Age metalwork has been dredged from the Thames over many years. The relationship between the metalwork finds and occupation sites is however not at all clear. The issue has recently been discussed by Bradley (1984).

The majority of the cropmark sites with field systems and enclosures in the study area are probably Iron Age in date. However, site F, which apparently has two phases, may start earlier. Site A which is now partly covered by the M4 is also probably Iron Age. A few photographs only are available of this site and the rest is now under playing fields, and so the series of trackways, enclosures and pits remain uninvestigated (Fig. 3).

Site C has only been photographed once (Fig. 2), but it seems to be a 'banjo enclosure', and if so is the first known either in Buckinghamshire or in the Middle Thames Valley. Banjo enclosures are associated with both stock rearing and occupation, and occur primarily in Wessex and on the South Downs (Cunliffe 1978). This example would be on the periphery of the distribution of currently known sites. A brief field visit was inconclusive and only a small quantity of calcined flint was observed. Further aerial photographs and fieldwork are needed to

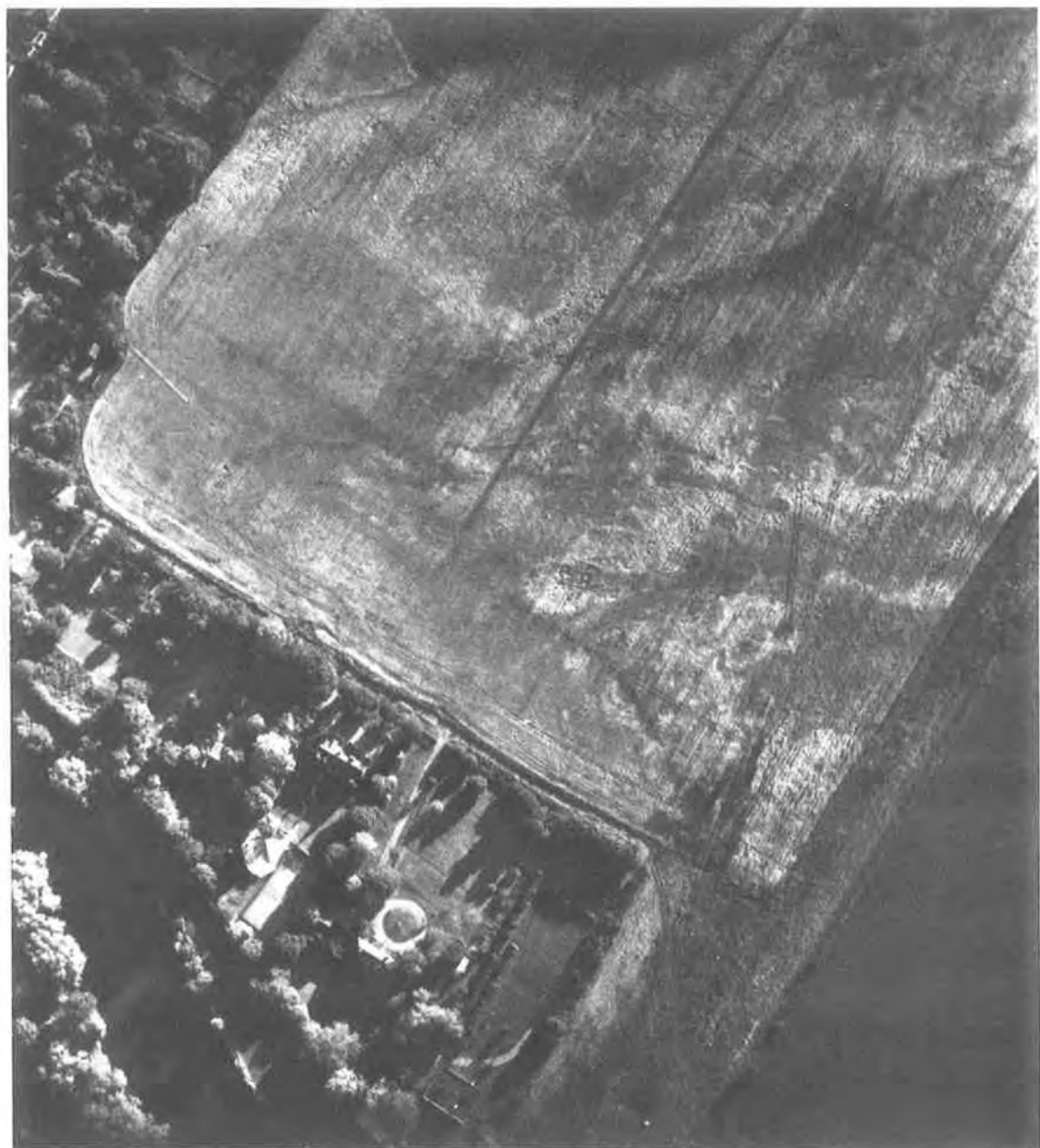


Plate XIII. Dorney, the causewayed enclosure looking NE. (Copyright Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.)



Plate XIV. Dorney, the Iron Age enclosure looking SW. (Copyright Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.)

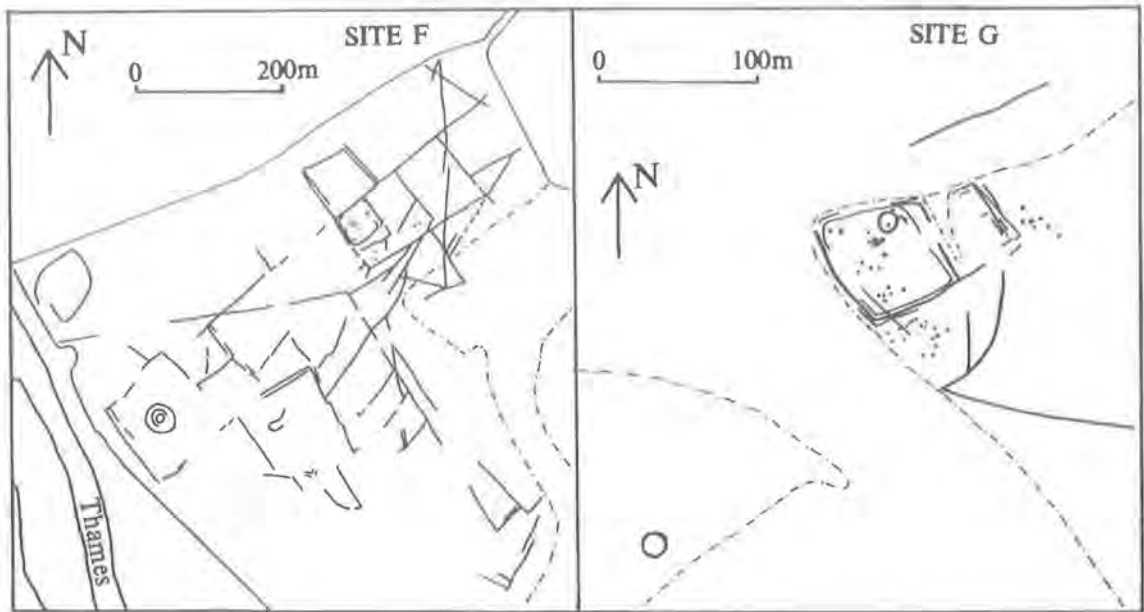


Fig. 4. Sites F and G.

confirm this interpretation.

The rectangular enclosure (site G, Figs. 2 & 4 and Pl. XIV), precisely sited on the corner of a large gravel expanse with filled-in channels on the north and west sides is certainly Iron Age. In places it is triple ditched with pits inside and outside, and a ring ditch or hut circle, and has a further enclosure attached to the north-east. The site was fieldwalked and several large well-preserved sherds of Aylesford-Swarling ('Belgic') type pottery were found, as well as a few small sherds of Romano-British pottery. This site has very good potential for preserved environmental evidence owing to its location on the edge of an alluvial channel and appears to be unique in the region.

The density of settlement along the river's edge is considerable: there seems to be an occupation site every half mile or so, although they certainly need not be contemporary. Romano-British sites are conspicuous by their absence in the study area. Apart from the sherds of pottery from site G only one cropmark site E (Fig. 2) appears likely to be

Romano-British. This is a square double-ditched enclosure, which lies south-west of a ring ditch. However, a site visit revealed no trace of any pottery or other evidence.

Some Medieval pottery was found to the south-west of Boveney, and cropmarks at sites H, J and K may relate to the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. Owing to shortage of time and bad weather these sites were not fieldwalked. Post-Medieval pottery, which was mostly nineteenth-century, occurred sparsely over the whole area surveyed and probably relates to existing settlement and to manuring practices.

Conclusion

The survey shows this region to be of particular importance throughout prehistory. There is a thin spread of Mesolithic material, followed by a more densely utilized landscape in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, with flint scatters and monumental sites. The density of sites appears to increase in the Iron Age, but sites of later periods are sparse. The region has been little affected by modern development other

than the M4 and house building. It is hoped that this rich landscape will receive both protection and further study.

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