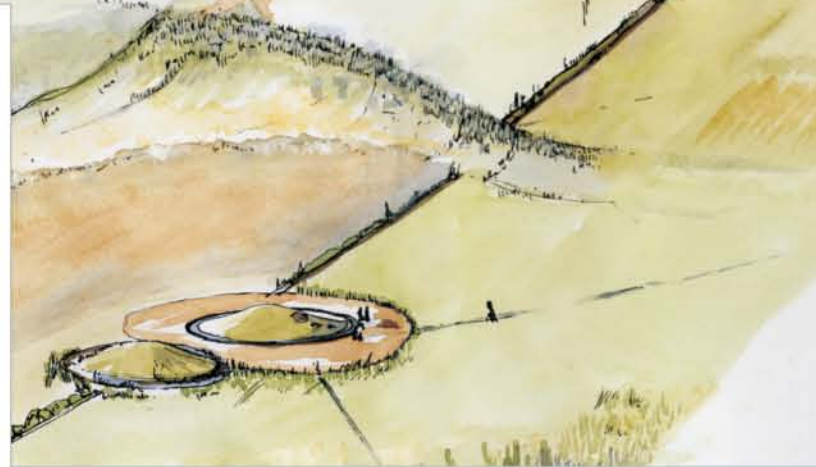


NEEDINGWORTH QUARRY. A DELTA LANDSCAPE



Environmental researches have shown that, prior to its straightening in recent centuries, along its lower reaches the River Great Ouse meandered in great oxbow bends across its floodplain. During later prehistory this would have been a delta-like landscape with many backwater channels encircling small islands. It would have been a particularly diverse environment, including marshland, water meadows, woodland stands and, on the higher ground of the gravel terraces, having the potential for pasture lands and arable plots. The Cambridge Archaeological Unit have undertaken fieldwork in the Needingworth landscape since 1992. The quarry site is of an enormous scale (c. 800ha) and straddles both banks of the lower reaches of the Ouse (just above its junction with the fen), with Barleycroft Farm on the western shore and Over to the east. Amongst the key research themes which the project addresses, is the status of the river in prehistory and how it was conceptualised - was it a corridor through landscape or a territorial divide?

This is a landscape abounding in monuments. Apart from a great earlier Neolithic causewayed enclosure - a type of communal ceremonial enclosure - located just to the northwest on the Upper Delphs terrace, there is also a major prehistoric barrow cemetery that continues along the old course of the river out across the fens into Haddenham and Sutton parishes. Whilst most of these are round and of Bronze Age attribution, at least two Neolithic long barrows are also known. Still standing over a metre high, clusters of round barrows occur on the Over-side of the river. The most important group are the eight in the south of the quarry area and, together with a major later Bronze Age settlement enclosure, these are being saved and made accessible to the public (see Over Monument Group).

The accompanying painting depicts the Bronze Age landscape (c. 1800-1000BC) as seen from the western shore of the river. Notice that the barrow group and the circular enclosure were then actually sited on an island. As revealed through fieldwork, fieldsystems extend across both banks of the river, around which are dotted small hamlet-like settlements. In the foreground is a double ring-ditch burial monument, one of whose circles became the site of a major cremation cemetery (The Butcher's Rise complex; see inset right and panel below). Criss-crossing the low ground before the river are a series of timber-post 'screens' that were excavated in 1996 (detailed inset left). These appear to have done little more than frame sight-lines towards the barrows on the opposite shore, and perhaps also to channel the movement of 'participants'. Together with the ring-ditches and barrow cemetery, they contributed to what would have been a major ceremonial landscape.