

Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape

Results of Excavations 1990–98

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Front cover: artist's reconstruction of the early Neolithic house by Peter Lorimer.

Back cover: middle Bronze Age wooden implement, possibly a weft or pin beater, and Beaker burial with coffin stain

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Contents

List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables.....	xv
Summary.....	xix
Résumé.....	xx
Zusammenfassung.....	xxi
Acknowledgements.....	xxiii

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction.....	1
Structure of this volume.....	1
Site location, geology and topography.....	3
Background to the project.....	4
Sequence of investigations.....	7
Previous work on the site and in the locality.....	11
Discoveries in the study area.....	11
Other discoveries in the locality.....	13
Project objectives and methods.....	15
Objectives.....	15
Methods.....	16
Condition of archaeological features and deposits.....	18
Chronology and phasing.....	18
Archive.....	19

PART TWO: AN OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 Settlement and landscape

Introduction.....	21
The landscape context.....	21
Geology and topography and soils.....	21
Landscape change through the Late Devensian and Holocene.....	24
Human use of the landscape before 4000 cal BC.....	24
The landscape at 4000 cal BC.....	25
Neolithic settlement and landscape.....	25
Settlement in a woodland landscape: <i>c</i> 3800–3350 cal BC.....	25
The comings and goings of settlement: <i>c</i> 3300–2500 cal BC.....	31
The funerary and ceremonial landscape.....	36
Other activity in the Neolithic landscape.....	37
Bronze Age settlement and landscape.....	37
Early Bronze Age settlement and landscape.....	37

The early Bronze Age funerary and ceremonial landscape	41
The creation of open grassland landscapes in the 2nd millennium	42
Middle Bronze Age settlement	44
Late Bronze Age settlement	45
The landscape at 750 cal BC	49

Chapter 3 Neolithic and Bronze Age society at Yarnton

Settlement: its character and organisation	51
Structures	51
The early Neolithic rectangular building	51
The early Neolithic roundhouse	60
A possible late Neolithic structure	62
Early Bronze Age houses	63
Middle Bronze Age houses	64
Late Bronze Age houses	66
Bronze Age settlement patterns	67
Buried ground surfaces and middens	67
Site 2 buried ground surface and middens	68
Compacted stone and gravel spreads on the north bank of the southern channel	69
Finds in the north channel and on the channel bank	70
Tree-throw holes	70
Pits and pit deposition	72
The contents of pits through time	72
The origin of pit contents	75
Selection, structure and grouping	76
Pits and social practices	78
Waterholes	78
Burnt stone deposits	79
Ceremonial activity	80
Rectangular and U-shaped enclosures	81
Penannular and ring ditches	83
Alignments	85
Burial and funerary practices	86
Cremated human remains	89
Inhumation burials and other unburnt human bone	90
Humans and animals	91
Yarnton people	92

Chapter 4 Artefacts and crafts

Pottery and potting	93
Introduction to the assemblage	93
Procurement and production	96
Forms, typology and chronology	103
Use	108
Breakage and discard	109

Contents

Flint working	110
Raw materials and condition	111
Manufacture	112
Use	115
Worked stone	119
Exotic objects and materials	119
Everyday stone objects.....	121
Querns and rubbers	124
Other tools	125
Metalwork.....	126
Fired clay objects.....	127
Introduction	127
Amorphous.....	127
Objects.....	127
Structural clay/moulded pieces	128
Working wood	128
Felling trees	128
Woodworking.....	129
Containers.....	130
Equipment	130
Weaving equipment	131
Worked antler and bone tools.....	132
Antler.....	132
Bone objects	132
Other activities.....	133
Personal decoration and prized possessions	133

Chapter 5 Food production and consumption

Animals	135
Animals through time	135
Domestic Yarn in context.....	136
Wild species	137
Animal husbandry and the food resource	137
Domestic stock management	141
Minor domestic species	142
Wild species	142
Transformation of domestic food: preparation, consumption and disposal.....	144
Conclusion	145
Plant foods	145
Cultivated plants.....	145
Gathered foods	146
To grow or to gather?	147
Arable practices.....	147
Deposition of food remains	148
Food residues in pottery.....	149

Utensils for food production and consumption	150
Quernstones and rubbers	150
Flint and other tools	152
Pottery vessels	152
Other containers	153
Yarnton as an agricultural community	153

Chapter 6 The wider view

A new way of life: early Neolithic settlement at Yarnton	155
The enigma of arrival	155
Inhabiting a new world	158
Monumental beginnings	159
The comings and goings of later Neolithic life	160
Middle Neolithic	160
Late Neolithic	161
Bronze Age settlement	162
The beginnings of the Bronze Age at Yarnton	162
Changing perspectives in the early Bronze Age	165
Settling down in the middle Bronze Age	166
Cattle herder of the late Bronze Age	167

PART THREE: THE SITES

Chapter 7 Prehistoric activity on the Summertown-Radley (Second) Gravel Terrace

Introduction	169
Neolithic and early to middle Bronze Age features on Cresswell Field	169
U-shaped enclosure 8539	173
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age burials around the U-shaped enclosure	174
Other features associated with the U-shaped enclosure	179
Early to middle Bronze Age features on Cresswell Field	184
Later Bronze Age features on Cresswell Field	185
Later Bronze Age pits and postholes	185
Late Bronze Age features with burnt stone	187
Redeposited material on Cresswell Field	190
Neolithic to middle Bronze Age material found in later contexts	190
Late Bronze Age pottery found in later features	190
Transition to the Iron Age	192
Neolithic and early Bronze Age features and finds at Yarnton	192
Peterborough Ware pit 1495	192
Late Neolithic pit 3830	195
Finds scatter	198
Middle to late Bronze Age features and finds at Yarnton	199
Late Bronze Age features	199
Middle and late Bronze Age pottery in later features	201
Ring ditches at Yarnton and Worton	201
Ring Ditches at Yarnton and the 19th-century discoveries	201

Ring ditches at Worton.....	205
Other evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity on the gravel terrace to the west of Cresswell Field	205

Chapter 8 The floodplain: Site 2

Introduction	211
The Palaeoenvironmental record	211
The ground surface and possible Neolithic/early Bronze Age features	215
The ground surface on Site 2	215
Palaeoenvironmental sequence	217
Postpit 2330 and pit 2349 in the west of Site 2	238
Penannular enclosure 3802	240
Small features in the west of the site	247
Middle and late Bronze Age ceremonial features.....	247
The west linear ditch (2239)	247
The eastern linear ditch (3081)	252
The later eastern ditch (2607)	261
Rows of slots and postholes on Site 2	261
Undated features on Site 2.....	272
Other features cutting the ground surface.....	272
Undated tree-throw holes	274
Later Iron Age and Roman activity on Site 2.....	274
Finds from the causeway.....	274

Chapter 9 The floodplain: Site 1

Introduction	277
Neolithic and early Bronze Age features on Site 1.....	277
Neolithic pit 1088 and feature 1131	277
Other Neolithic pits	283
The 'U-shaped' enclosure	283
Beaker pits	284
Early Bronze Age pit 1047	290
Middle and late Bronze Age activity.....	294
Middle Bronze Age features.....	294
<i>Middle Bronze Age structure/'cooking area' 1363</i>	<i>294</i>
<i>Middle Bronze Age structure 1876 and associated features</i>	<i>298</i>
<i>Middle Bronze Age structure 1875</i>	<i>298</i>
<i>Middle Bronze Age structure 1874</i>	<i>301</i>
<i>Features to the south-west and south of structures 1874 and 1875</i>	<i>301</i>
<i>Middle Bronze Age waterhole 1810</i>	<i>302</i>
Late Bronze Age features.....	311
<i>Structure 1878 and associated pits</i>	<i>311</i>
<i>Structure 1879.....</i>	<i>312</i>
<i>Late Bronze Age boundary ditch (1479) and associated gully (1561).....</i>	<i>312</i>
<i>Cluster of postholes to the west of late Bronze Age ditch 1479</i>	<i>313</i>

<i>Cluster of late Bronze Age pits in the centre of Site 1</i>	314
<i>Cluster of features in the south-east corner of Site 1</i>	316
Feature of uncertain date	316
Undated pits and postholes in the west of Site 1	316
Tree-throw holes on Site 1.....	317
The palaeochannel.....	317
The early channel deposits (phases 1 and 2).....	317
Burnt stone surface and features on the bank of the palaeochannel (phase 3)	317
The earliest structures in the channel (phase 4)	321
Ponding silting and deposition of woodworking debris (phase 5)	323
Later structures in the channel (phase 6)	323
Finds from the channel	324
Earlier prehistoric finds recovered from later features	342
Chapter 10 The floodplain: Sites 3, 4, 4a and 4b (North)	
Introduction	345
Site 3.....	345
Early Neolithic features on Site 3	345
<i>Circular structure 5816</i>	345
<i>Features containing early Neolithic Decorated Bowl</i>	349
<i>Pit 5329</i>	352
Late Neolithic features on Site 3	353
<i>Grooved Ware pits in the south-west of the site (group 1)</i>	353
<i>Grooved Ware pits in the south of the site (group 2)</i>	356
<i>Grooved Ware pits in the east of the site (group 3)</i>	360
<i>Other late Neolithic features in the south and centre of Site 3</i>	363
<i>Late Neolithic features in the south-west of Site 3</i>	363
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features on Site 3.....	364
<i>Feature 5771 and Beaker pit 5306</i>	364
Early Bronze Age features on Site 3	366
<i>Early Bronze Age structure 5716 and associated features</i>	366
Late Bronze Age features on Site 3	369
<i>Late Bronze Age structure 5746</i>	369
<i>Oval posthole structure 5815</i>	371
<i>Features to the south of structure 5815</i>	372
<i>Features to the north of structure 5815</i>	375
<i>Fenceline 5772</i>	375
<i>Linear and rectangular posthole arrangements to the west of structure 5815</i>	375
<i>Waterhole 5068</i>	376
Undated features and tree-throw holes on Site 3.....	378
Site 4.....	380
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features on Site 4.....	380
<i>Ring ditch 7056</i>	380
<i>Features within the ring ditch</i>	383
<i>Tree-throw holes within ring ditch 7056</i>	385

Contents

<i>Features and tree-throw holes outside the ring ditch</i>	385
<i>Burnt stone spread 7246</i>	388
Site 4b	391
Features in the north of Site 4b	391
<i>Peterborough Ware pits in the north of Site 4b</i>	391
<i>Beaker features in the north of Site 4b</i>	392
Features to the west and north of Site 5	395
Site 4a	398
Pits in the south-west of Site 4a	398
Postholes in the north-east of Site 4a	403
Undated pits and postholes	404
Burnt tree-throw holes	404
Chapter 11 The floodplain: Site 5 and the adjacent watching brief area (Site 4b south)	
Introduction	405
Early Neolithic features on Site 5	405
Rectangular enclosure	405
Other middle Neolithic features on Site 5	421
<i>Grave 9469</i>	422
<i>Pits 9002 and 9007</i>	423
Late Neolithic and late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features on Site 5	429
Pit 9165	429
Beaker burial 113506	431
Other late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features	436
Middle Bronze Age features on Site 5	438
Feature cutting the Neolithic enclosure ditch	439
Other middle Bronze Age features on Site 5	440
Other middle Bronze Age features around the enclosure	444
Late Bronze Age settlement features	446
Circular structure 9568 within the Neolithic enclosure	446
Other late Bronze Age features on Site 5	449
Undated features	450
Undated features on Site 5 and in adjacent watching brief areas	450
Tree-throw holes on Site 5 and adjacent watching brief area of Site 4b (south)	450
Geophysical survey and phosphate sampling	452
Features in adjacent evaluation trenches	456
Chapter 12 The floodplain: Site 7	
Introduction	457
Early Neolithic rectangular building and associated later features	457
Early Neolithic building 3871	457
<i>The postholes</i>	462
<i>Disturbed area in the south-west of the building</i>	470
Pit 3815 to the east of the Neolithic building	474
Late Neolithic pit 4373 within structure 3871	476

Other early and middle Neolithic features on Site 7.....	479
Early Neolithic tree-throw hole 3884.....	479
Pair of Peterborough Ware pits in the south-west of Site 7.....	479
Peterborough Ware pits in the west of the site.....	489
Peterborough Ware pits and tree-throw holes in the north-west of the site.....	494
Other scattered Peterborough Ware pits.....	499
Late Neolithic features on Site 7.....	500
Possible structure 4291 in the west of the site.....	503
Grooved Ware pits in the south-west of Site 7.....	503
Pairs of Grooved Ware pits in the north-east of Site 7.....	508
Other scattered Grooved Ware pits in the north and east of the Site 7.....	512
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age (Beaker) features and other burial features.....	517
Pit alignment 4657 in the north-west corner of Site 7.....	517
Four late Neolithic/early Bronze Age (Beaker) features in the east of Site 7.....	521
Crouched burial 114004 in grave 114005.....	525
Crouched inhumation burial 6629 found in the observation area.....	526
Other Bronze Age features on Site 7.....	528
Ring ditch 3200.....	528
Features associated with the ring ditch.....	534
Circular structures 3600, 3686, 3353, 3468 and 3518.....	537
Fencelines and discrete features associated with the circular structures.....	538
Pit alignment 4069.....	538
Circular structure 4517.....	541
Circular structure 3503.....	542
Middle Bronze Age waterhole 4005.....	542
Middle Bronze Age pits and postholes.....	547
Tree-throw holes reused as hearths.....	549
Waterhole 3352 to the north of the ring ditch.....	552
Undated features, features of uncertain date and tree-throw holes.....	552
Undated features found in the observation area to the east of Site 7.....	558

Chapter 13 The floodplain: Sites 4c, 4d, 4e, 9, 10, 17, 21, 22 and 25

Introduction.....	563
Site 4d.....	563
Bronze Age pit and cremation burial.....	563
Pit alignment in Evaluation Trench 187.....	567
Site 22.....	567
Compacted areas of burnt stone and tree-throw holes.....	567
Site 9.....	571
Features on the north bank of the channel.....	571
Possible Bronze Age crossing point of the channel.....	575
Site 10.....	579
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age burnt stone pit 14006.....	579
Cremation deposits north of the channel.....	582
Channel silts.....	582

Contents

Site 21.....	582
Early-middle Bronze Age waterhole 15014 in the base of the channel.....	585
Segmented ditch 15009.....	589
Middle Bronze Age waterhole 15072 on the north bank of the channel.....	590
Burnt stone pit 15010 and associated features.....	592
Undated pits on north bank of channel.....	594
Tree-throw holes on Site 21.....	594
Site 4c.....	596
Post-built structure 16209.....	596
Burnt stone pit 16213.....	597
Postholes adjacent to structure 16209.....	598
Other pits and postholes in the north of Site 4c.....	599
Middle Bronze Age waterhole 16010.....	600
Pits and postholes in the centre of Site 4c.....	603
Pits and postholes in the south of Site 4c.....	604
Tree-throw holes on Site 4c.....	606
Site 4e.....	607
Middle and late Bronze Age pits.....	607
Undated pits and tree-throw holes across Site 4e.....	616
Evaluation trenches on the gravel island to the east of Site 4e.....	617
Site 17.....	619
Waterhole 10104.....	619
Middle Bronze Age waterhole 10159.....	620
Burnt stone pit 10022.....	628
Undated tree-throw holes in the vicinity of waterhole 10159.....	629
Undated tree-throw holes elsewhere on Site 17.....	630
Pit 10023 in the north of Site 17.....	630
Site 25.....	630
Pit 12089.....	632
Two small pits in the south-west.....	632
Undated tree-throw holes on Site 25.....	634
Buried ground surface south of Site 25.....	634
Evaluation trenches around and to the north of Site 25.....	634

PART FOUR: DATING EVIDENCE

Chapter 14 Scientific dating

Introduction.....	635
Objectives.....	635
Methods.....	635
Sample selection.....	635
Radiocarbon dating.....	637
Results.....	637
Calibration.....	637
Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) analysis.....	644
General approach to analysis and interpretation.....	644

Analysis and interpretation	645
Activity in the area of early Neolithic structure 3871	645
Early Neolithic circular structure 5816	645
Early and middle Neolithic pits	646
Activity in the area of the Neolithic rectangular enclosure	647
Inhumations around U-shaped enclosure on Cresswell Field	648
Late Neolithic structure 4291	648
Late Neolithic and Beaker pits	649
Early Bronze Age circular structure 5716	649
The channel deposits: floodplain Section A	650
Bronze Age linear ditches	651
Bronze Age activity on Site 1	652
Bronze Age occupation on Site 7	653
Bronze Age activity on Sites 4c, 4e, 9 and 10	653
Bronze Age activity on Sites 4c and 4e	653
Cremation burial on Site 10	655
Waterhole and burnt stone features on Sites 17 and 21	655
Discussion	656
Date and longevity of settlement	656
Clearance and use of different parts of the Yarnton-Cassington landscape	657
The identification of contemporary feature groups	659
Structures: their construction, form and use	663
Monuments in the landscape and the period of their significance	665
Human burial practices	666
Special or votive activity	667
Landscape development and land use	667
Woodland clearance	668
Farming practices	669
Crafts and industrial processes	669
Chronological relationships of the major pottery styles	670
Conclusions	670
 APPENDICES	
Appendix 1 Pottery	673
Introduction	673
Analyses	673
Recording methodology	673
Analysis of white inlay	674
Fabric recording codes	675
Appendix 2 Fired clay	677
Appendix 3 Flint	678
Introduction	678
Quantification	678
Raw materials and condition	678
Recovery	679

Contents

Methodology	680
Appendix 4 Worked stone	700
Appendix 5 Worked wood	702
Appendix 6 Metalwork	703
Appendix 7 Other finds	704
Burnt unworked stone	704
Cannel coal or shale bead	704
Bone objects	704
Appendix 8 Artefact conservation	705
Appendix 9 Human bone	706
Appendix 10 Animal bone	707
Appendix 11 Charred and waterlogged plant remains, charcoal, insects and molluscs	710
Appendix 12 Pollen	711
Appendix 13 Geoarchaeology	712
The sieving experiment: identifying traces of earthworks from stone densities	712
<i>Floodplain profile development and alluvium</i>	713
<i>Floodplain profile development</i>	713
<i>Enclosure ditch fills</i>	713
<i>Two pit fills: waterhole 3352 and pit 3247</i>	715
Ring ditch 3200: identification of turves and depositional processes	715
Correlating sediments of the floodplain: particle size analysis of alluvium and other deposits	717
The geoarchaeology of the mineralised vessel in pit 3815	719
Appendix 14 Geophysical surveys	722
Introduction	722
The influence of geology and soils	722
Results from the Second Gravel Terrace	726
Floodplain sites	728
Appendix 15 Phosphate sampling	737
Bibliography	741
Index	763

List of Figures

1.1	Location of the Yarnton-Cassington study area	2
1.2	Air photograph of the Yarnton-Cassington study area looking west	3
1.3	Modern development and areas of cropmark visibility in the study area	4
1.4	Drift geology and areas of fieldwork in the study area	5
1.5	Yarnton cropmarks as photographed from the south-west by St Joseph, Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs (AFU-65)	6
1.6	Yarnton-Cassington project fieldwork locations	8
1.7	Results of fieldwalking over the Yarnton-Cassington study area: Neolithic and Bronze Age	9
1.8	Yarnton-Cassington project excavation results	10
1.9	Previous discoveries in the locality	12
1.10	Worton cropmarks from the north, Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs (AY-94)	13
2.1	Windrush to Cherwell confluence area: geology and principal local sites	22
2.2	Prehistoric topography of the study area showing distribution of Mesolithic finds	23
2.3	Earliest Neolithic settlement (3800-3650 cal BC)	26
2.4	The earliest Neolithic landscape	27
2.5	Early Neolithic settlement (3650-3350 cal BC)	28
2.6	The early Neolithic landscape	30
2.7	Middle Neolithic settlement	32
2.8	The middle/late Neolithic landscape	33
2.9	Late Neolithic settlement	34
2.10	The late Neolithic landscape	35
2.11	Early Bronze Age settlement	38
2.12	Early Bronze Age settlement	39
2.13	Early Bronze Age landscape	41
2.14	Middle Bronze Age settlement	43
2.15	The middle Bronze Age landscape	44
2.16	Late Bronze Age settlement	46
2.17	Late Bronze Age landscape	47
2.18	The late Bronze Age settlement in the Cassington Pit Western Extension	48
3.1	The Neolithic house under excavation	52
3.2	Plan of the early Neolithic building (also showing posthole depths)	53
3.3	Possible interpretations of the early Neolithic house	54-5
3.4	Finds from the Neolithic house	59
3.5	Comparative plans of early Neolithic houses	61
3.6	Other Neolithic structures at Yarnton	63
3.7	Early, middle and late Bronze Age houses at Yarnton	64-5
3.8	Superimposed ground plans of middle and late Bronze Age houses on Site 1	67
3.9	Pottery from the Site 2 midden by period	68
3.10	Typical spread of pits with postholes at Yarnton (Site 3)	72
3.11	Dated pits at Yarnton by period	72
3.12	Average contents of Yarnton pits by period	73
3.13	The Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments	81
3.14	Cremation deposits and inhumations by period	87
3.15	Neolithic and Bronze Age inhumation burials	87
3.16	Location of Neolithic and Bronze Age human remains	88
4.1	Yarnton pottery chronology	94
4.2	Change in the use of temper over time (based on total weights)	95
4.3	Plain Bowl rim. No added temper (x4 TS37, SF2223)	99
4.4	Biconical Urn. No added temper (x3 TS20, 1761)	99

4.5	Ebbsfleet Ware rim. Flint tempered. Note that the clay matrix is relatively clean of natural inclusions (x4 TS34, SF2831)	99
4.6	Peterborough Ware sherd. Untempered clay (x6 TS36, SF2035)	99
4.7	Beaker. No added temper. Note ferruginous pellet (x6 TS14, SF2358)	100
4.8	Beaker base sherd. Large grog clast. Note oxidised margin (sherd surface) and 'grog within grog' (x6 TS3, 1780)	100
4.9	Beaker. Grog tempered. Note different states of oxidation between grog particles and clay matrix (x4 TS17, 8779)	100
4.10	Beaker grog tempered. Note that the 'grog' particles are in a similar state of oxidation to the surrounding clay matrix indicating that the clasts could be dried clay rather than broken up pottery (x6 TS10, 1784)	100
4.11	Late Bronze Age rim sherd. Quartzite and grog tempered fabric. Note that some of the grog also contains quartzite (x5 TS28, 1259)	100
4.12	Late Bronze Age rim sherd. Quartzite tempered (x4 TS31, 1259)	100
4.13	Relative contribution of each flint raw material source to the Yarnton flint assemblage, based on analysis of selected groups (see Appendix 3, Table App 3.16)	111
4.14	Metrical analysis of complete scrapers, serrated flakes and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads.	113
4.15	Relative proportions of flakes, retouched tools and cores in the Yarnton assemblage.	114
4.16	Combined results of low-power use-wear analysis of (a) middle Neolithic, (b) late Neolithic and (c) early Bronze Age assemblages	117
4.17	(a) Material type and (b) action type in middle Neolithic, late Neolithic and early Bronze Age assemblages.	118
5.1	A comparison of the three main animal food species (NISP)	135
5.2	Proportions of cereals, hazelnut shells and other wild foods at Yarnton through time.	147
5.3	Contexts yielding charred plant remains.	148
5.4	Plot of the $\delta^{13}C$ values of the fatty acid methyl esters prepared from lipid extracts (after Copley <i>et al.</i> 2002, fig. 3)	149
5.5	Plot showing proportions of different foods found as absorbed residues in Peterborough Ware and Grooved Ware vessels	149
6.1	Distribution of Mesolithic and Neolithic sites discussed in the text	156
6.2	Distribution of Bronze Age sites discussed in the text	163
7.1	Location of sites and evaluation trenches	170
7.2	Phase plan of Cresswell Field and distribution of redeposited late Bronze Age pottery	171
7.3	Neolithic and Bronze Age features on Cresswell Field	172
7.4	U-shaped enclosure from the kite	173
7.5	U-shaped enclosure 8539 and associated graves	174
7.6	Burial 8772 in grave 8775	176
7.7	Burial 8772 with coffin stain	177
7.8	Burial 8633 in grave 8620	178
7.9	Close up of infant burial 8633	179
7.10	Pits 8652 and 8767	180
7.11	Beaker pit 8782	180
7.12	Flint from pit 8782	181
7.13	Finds from pit 8782	182
7.14	Early to middle Bronze Age pits	184
7.15	Late Bronze Age pits	185
7.16	Finds from late Bronze Age pits	188
7.17	Features with burnt stone 7101, 7108 and 8364	189
7.18	Flint from features with burnt stone.	190
7.19	Redeposited finds from Cresswell Field	191
7.20	Yarnton excavation plan showing the location of earlier prehistoric finds	193
7.21	Early prehistoric features and finds scatter at Yarnton	194
7.22	Sections through pits 1495 and 3830.	194
7.23	Pottery from pit 1495.	196
7.24	Flint from pit 3830	197
7.25	Finds from later features on the Yarnton site: Neolithic and early Bronze Age	199
7.26	Finds from later features on the Yarnton site: mid to late Bronze Age	200
7.27	Plan of Yarnton ring ditches from Dryden plan	202

List of Figures

7.28	Yarnton diadem (Clarke <i>et al.</i> 1985 pl. 7.24)	203
7.29	Fluxgate gradiometer data from Mead Farm, Yarnton	204
7.30	Aerial photograph of Worton showing ring ditch (Allen 259).	205
7.31	Evaluation at Worton	206
7.32	Geophysical survey of Worton 1996, Site A, showing west edge of ring ditch. Comparison between (A) fluxgate gradiometer and (B) caesium total field data, including (C) a graphical summary of significant anomalies	207
7.33	Fieldwalking results at Worton	208
7.34	Pit 105708	209
7.36	Pottery from pit 105708.	210
8.1	Location of Site 2 in relation to other excavations areas and evaluation trenches	212
8.2	Site plan showing main phases of activity	213
8.3	Views of site from north and south	214
8.4	Distribution of finds on the buried ground surface.	216
8.5	Distribution of pottery on the buried ground surface, showing ware types.	220
8.6	Pottery from the buried ground surface	222
8.7	Distribution of all worked flint and other worked stone on the buried ground surface.	224
8.8	Distribution of all retouched flint and other worked stone on the buried ground surface.	226
8.9	Worked flint from the buried ground surface.	227
8.10	Worked flint from the buried ground surface and redeposited flint	229
8.11	Stone axehead fragment the buried ground surface	230
8.12	Distribution of burnt stone on the buried ground surface	232
8.13	Distribution of all animal bone on the buried ground surface, also showing Peterborough Ware	233
8.14	Distribution of Grooved Ware pottery and flint debitage on the buried ground surface	237
8.15	Plan and section of tree-throw hole/pit 2349 and sections through postpit 2330	239
8.16	Flint recovered from feature 2349	240
8.17	Plan of penannular enclosure, burnt stone spreads and tree-throw holes.	242
8.18	Sections through penannular enclosure	243
8.19	Sections through burnt stone spreads	244
8.20	Sections through postholes and slots in the penannular enclosure.	245
8.21	Plan and sections of features in south-west of site.	246
8.22	Pottery from pit 2521 in the south-west of the site	247
8.23	Plan of west linear ditch and associated features.	248
8.24	Sections through west linear ditch	249
8.25	Phase plans and profiles of west linear ditch cuts.	251
8.26	Plan of east of site with ditch 2607	253
8.27	Detailed plan of extension to east, showing east linear ditch, ditch 2607, banks, slots and postholes, and section through east linear ditch	254
8.28	Species groups of Coleoptera from Site 2	255
8.29	Sections through ditch 2607.	262
8.30	Plan of slots and postholes in south-east of the site	263
8.31	Detailed plan and sections of slots and postholes in the east of the site	264
8.32	Detailed plan and sections of slots and postholes in the north-east of the site.	265
8.33	Sections through slots and postholes in the south-east of the site	266
8.34	Posthole 2990 showing postpipe.	266
8.35	Plan of slots and postholes in the west of the site	267
8.36	Sections of slots in the north-west of the site: Rows 21 and 22	268
8.37	Sections of slots in the north-west of the site: Rows 24 and 25	269
8.38	Sections of short slots and postholes in the north-west of the site: Rows 29-32	270
8.39	Plate of over-excavated slot/postholes in Row 29	271
8.40	Plan of features of unknown date in centre and south of site	272
8.41	Sections through a selection of features of unknown date in centre and south of site	273
8.42	Plan of tree-throw holes, showing excavated features	275
9.1	Location of Sites 1 and 3 in relation to other excavations areas and evaluation trenches.	278
9.2	Plan of Site 1 showing main phases of activity.	279
9.3	Plan and sections of Neolithic pits 1088 and 1131	280
9.4	Flint tools from pits 1088 and 1131, with charred bread from pit 1088	281
9.5	Plan and sections of the U-shaped enclosure 1196.	283
9.6	Plan and sections of Beaker pits	285

Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape

9.7	Beaker pottery from pits	287
9.8	Flint from Beaker pits	288
9.9	Plan and section of early Bronze Age pit 1047	290
9.10	Pottery from early Bronze Age pit 1047	292
9.11	Middle and late Bronze Age houses and other features on Site 1	293
9.12	Superimposed ground plans of middle and late Bronze Age structures 1363, 1876, 1874, 1875, 1878 and 1879	294
9.13	Plan, sections and photograph of structure 1363	295
9.14	Globular Urn sherd from pit 1244 associated with structure 1361	296
9.15	Plan and sections of middle Bronze Age structure 1876	297
9.16	Plan and sections of structures 1874 and 1875 with associated features	299
9.17	Bucket Urn from pit 1445 in structure 1875	300
9.18	Finds from features to the south of structures 1875 and 1874	302
9.19	Section of waterhole 1810	303
9.20	Flint from waterhole 1810	303
9.21	Species groups of coleoptera from middle Bronze Age waterhole 1810	303
9.22	Plan and sections of structure 1878	310
9.23	Photograph and sections of pits to west of structure 1878	311
9.24	Plan and sections of structure 1879	312
9.25	Sections through late Bronze Age ditch 1479 and gully 1561	312
9.26	Plan and sections of postholes to west of ditch 1479	313
9.27	Late Bronze Age pottery from Site 1	314
9.28	Sections through late Bronze Age pits in centre of Site 1	315
9.29	Section through possible waterhole 1094	316
9.30	Section through palaeochannel	318
9.31	Plan and sections through burnt stone features	319
9.32	Finds from the burnt stone features	320
9.33	Structures in the channel	322
9.34	Cleaning wood in the channel on Site 1 and wood group 119	324
9.35	Plan of wood and woodworking debris in channel	325
9.36	Roundwood diameters by phase and structure/context	328
9.37	Types of wood from Yarnton by phase	329
9.38	All wood from Yarnton by type	330
9.39	Examples of roundwood debris (after Taylor 1998, fig. 148)	332
9.40	Types of woodchip (after Taylor 1998, fig. 148)	333
9.41	Dimensions of woodchips	334
9.42	Ropewood (WW1)	335
9.43	Thickness of bark by phase	336
9.44	Tree species identified from Yarnton wood	336
9.45	Other finds from channel deposits	339
10.1	Location of Sites 3, 4, 4a and 4b in relation to other floodplain sites and evaluation trenches	346
10.2	Phase plan of Site 3	347
10.3	Early Neolithic structure 5816	348
10.4	Flint from Neolithic structure 5816	349
10.5	Early Neolithic pits 5249 and 5246 and tree-throw hole 5134	350
10.6	Finds from early Neolithic pit 5246 and tree-throw hole 5134 on Site 3	351
10.7	Pit 5329	352
10.8	Worked flint from pit 5329	352
10.9	Plan and sections of group 1 Grooved Ware pits	353
10.10	Finds from group 1 Grooved Ware pits	354
10.11	Plan and sections of group 2 Grooved Ware pits	356
10.12	Finds from group 2 Grooved Ware pits	357
10.13	Plan and sections of group 3 Grooved Ware pits 5560 and 5561	361
10.14	Worked flint from group 3 Grooved Ware pits 5560 and 5561	363
10.15	Feature 5771 and Beaker pit 5306	364
10.16	Finds from feature 5771 and Beaker pit 5306	365
10.17	Early Bronze Age structure 5716	367
10.18	Finds from early Bronze Age structure 5716	367
10.19	Late Bronze Age structure 5746	369
10.20	Pottery from late Bronze Age structure 5746	370

List of Figures

10.21	Late Bronze Age structure 5815	371
10.22	Finds from late Bronze Age structure 5815	372
10.23	Fencelines and other postholes associated with late Bronze Age structure 5815	373
10.24	Fenceline 5772	374
10.25	Linear and rectangular posthole arrangement to west of structure 5815	375
10.26	Section through waterhole 5068	376
10.27	Tree-throw holes on Site 3	377
10.28	Phase plan of Site 4	381
10.29	Plan and sections of ring ditch 7056	382
10.30	Worked flint from ring ditch 7056 and other features on Site 4	384
10.31	Features within the ring ditch	386
10.32	Features outside the ring ditch	387
10.33	Overall plan of Sites 4a and 4b	389
10.34	Detail of part of northern area of Site 4b	390
10.35	Sections of features in the northern area of Site 4b	391
10.36	Finds from Peterborough Ware pit 6597	392
10.37	Finds from Beaker pits in the north of Site 4b	393
10.38	Plan and section of features to the west and north of Site 5	396
10.39	Plan and section of feature 6573 with cattle skeleton 6575	397
10.40	Flint from features to the west and north of Site 5	397
10.41	Plate of cattle burial 6575	398
10.42	Phase plan of Site 4a and sections of selected pits	400
10.43	Finds from late Neolithic pits in the south-west of Site 4a	401
10.44	Plan and sections of fenceline in north-east of Site 4a	403
11.1	Location of Sites 5 and 4b in relation to other floodplain sites and evaluation trenches	406
11.2	Neolithic enclosure under excavation	407
11.3	Phase plan of Site 5 and adjacent Site 4b (south)	408
11.4	Plan of the rectangular enclosure showing excavated sections	409
11.5	Plate of NW corner and north side of enclosure showing ditch sections	410
11.6	Sections through the enclosure ditch	411
11.7	Sampling positions and results of the sieving experiment across the enclosure	412
11.8	Plan and sections of postholes 9315 and 9153 and gully 9375 around the entrance to the enclosure	414
11.9	Plate of excavations at the entrance, looking south-east	415
11.10	Plan and sections of gully 9330/9564 and posthole 9350 in the south-west corner of the enclosure	415
11.11	Extent of first and second recuts of enclosure ditch	416
11.12	Finds from the first recut of the enclosure ditch	417
11.13	Flint from the third recut of the enclosure ditch	417
11.14	Flint from final silting of the enclosure ditch	420
11.15	Plan of middle Neolithic features	421
11.16	Plan of grave 9469 and skeleton 9515 and profile of grave pit	422
11.17	Grave 9469 and skeleton 9515	423
11.18	Plan and section of pit 9002	424
11.19	Plan and section of pit 9007	424
11.20	Pottery from pits 9002 and 9007	425
11.21	Pottery and worked flint from pit 9007	427
11.22	Plate showing macehead fragment	427
11.23	Plan of late Neolithic and late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features on Site 5	428
11.24	Finds from late Neolithic pit 9165	429
11.25	Plan and section of Beaker burial 113506	430
11.26	Plate of Beaker burial under excavation	431
11.27	Plate of Beaker grave group	432
11.28	Beaker grave group	433
11.29	Plates of Beakers during conservation	434
11.30	Section through pit 9011	436
11.31	Section through pit 6562	437
11.32	Finds from other late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features	437
11.33	Plan of middle Bronze Age features	438
11.34	Plan and section of middle Bronze Age burial 9456	439
11.35	Section of middle Bronze Age pit 9039	439

Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape

11.36	Plan and section of cremation pit 9452	441
11.37	Plan and sections of pits 9260, 9048 and 9015	443
11.38	Finds from middle Bronze Age features on Site 5	444
11.39	Plan of late Bronze Age features	446
11.40	Plan of structure 9568 and sections of postholes	447
11.41	Plan and sections of postholes 9102 and 9386	448
11.42	Late Bronze Age pottery from group of postholes in south-west of Site 5	449
11.43	Undated features on Site 5 and 4b (south)	451
11.44	Finds from tree-throw holes on Sites 5	452
11.45	(A) Greytone image of the fluxgate gradiometer data collected over the Neolithic enclosure together with (B), a graphical summary of significant anomalies. The position of the subsequent excavation area is also shown	453
11.46	Magnetic susceptibility survey by Adrian Challands across enclosure	454
11.47	Mineral magnetic sampling across enclosure ditch	455
12.1	Location of Site 7 in relation to other floodplain sites and evaluation trenches	458
12.2	Site 7 phase plan	459
12.3	Plan of early Neolithic building 3871	460
12.4	Early Neolithic building 3871 under excavation	461
12.5	Plan of early Neolithic building showing feature elements, dated features and selected sections	462
12.6	Plan of early Neolithic building showing posthole depths	463
12.7	Post pit 4580	463
12.8	Three interpretations of the Neolithic building	467
12.9	Reconstruction of Neolithic building	468
12.10	Tree-throw hole 4591 and associated features	471
12.11	Finds from tree-throw hole 4591	473
12.12	Section and photographs of pit 3815	474
12.13	Flint from pit 3815	475
12.14	Pit 4373	475
12.15	Finds from pit 4373	477
12.16	Plan of middle Neolithic features on Site 7	480
12.17	Finds in early Neolithic tree-throw hole 3884	481
12.18	Pits 3207 and 3700	483
12.19	Plates of pits 3700 and 3207 and pottery within	484
12.20	Pottery from pits 3207 and 3700	485-6
12.21	Worked flint from pits 3207 and 3700	488
12.22	Peterborough Ware pits in the west of the site	489
12.23	Pottery from Peterborough Ware pits in west of site	492
12.24	Worked flint from Peterborough Ware pits in the west of the site	494
12.25	Pits 4431, 4544 and 4352 and associated tree-throw holes	495
12.26	Pottery from pits 4431, 4544 and tree-throw hole 4642	497
12.27	Worked flint from pits 4352, 4431 and 4544	498
12.28	Sections of other Peterborough Ware pits with finds	499
12.29	Plan of late Neolithic features on Site 7	501
12.30	Late Neolithic structure 4291 and associated features	502
12.31	Late Neolithic pits in the south-west of the site	503
12.32	Pottery from Grooved Ware pits in the south-west of the site	507
12.33	Grooved Ware pits 4758 and 4755	509
12.34	Finds from Grooved Ware pits 4758 and 4755	510
12.35	Sections of selected Grooved Ware pits in the north and east of the site	511
12.36	Finds from Grooved Ware pits in the north and east of the site	514
12.37	Plan of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features on Site 7	516
12.38	Pit alignment 4657 and pit 4308	518
12.39	Cremation burial 4439	519
12.40	Finds from pit alignment 4657 and pit 4308	520
12.41	Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features in the east of the site	522
12.42	Finds from late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features in the east of the site	524
12.43	Crouched inhumation burial 114003 in grave 114005	525
12.44	Crouched inhumation burial 6629 in grave 6620	526
12.45	Plan of later Bronze Age features on Site 7	527
12.46	Ring ditch 3200	528

List of Figures

12.47	Plan of ring ditch 3200 and associated features	529
12.48	Sections through ring ditch 3200	530
12.49	Finds from ring ditch 3200	531
12.50	Finds from cleaning and disturbance around ring ditch 3200	536
12.51	Circular structures, fencelines and pit alignment in the south-east of Site 7	536
12.52	Structure 3600	537
12.53	Structure 3686	538
12.54	Structure 3353	538
12.55	Structure 3518	539
12.56	Structure 3468	539
12.57	Pit alignment 4069	540
12.58	Circular structure 4517	541
12.59	Circular structure 3503	541
12.60	Waterhole 4005	542
12.61	Finds from waterhole 4005	543
12.62	Sections of middle Bronze Age pits with Bucket Urn from pit 4492	548
12.63	Plan and section of hearth 3870	549
12.64	Finds from hearth 3870	551
12.65	Waterhole 3352	552
12.66	Undated pits and postholes on Site 7	553
12.67	Area of disturbed features 3873	554
12.68	Finds from area of disturbed features 3873	555
12.69	Flint from undated features on Site 7	555
12.70	Tree-throw holes on Site 7	560
12.71	Finds from tree-throw holes	561
12.72	Pit 113209	561
13.1	Location of Sites 4d, 9, 10, 21, 4c, 4e, 17, 22, and 25 in relation to other floodplain sites and evaluation trenches	564
13.2	Features on Sites 4c, 4d, 4e, 9, 10, 21, and 17, and in adjacent evaluation trenches	565
13.3	Plan and photograph of features on Site 4d and Trench 187	566
13.4	Worked bone pin fragment	567
13.5	Sections across excavated pits in Trench 187 pit alignment	567
13.6	Plan and section of Site 22	568
13.7	Plan of features on Site 9	569
13.8	Plan, section and photographs of pit 13058, with photograph of bark container WW3	570
13.9	Plan, section and photographs of waterhole 13275	572
13.10	Finds from pits on the north bank of the palaeochannel	574
13.11	Copper alloy objects from the causeway and lower channel deposits	576
13.12	Plan of Site 10 and sections of pits 14006, 14034 and 14036	578
13.13	Finds from burnt stone pit 14006	580
13.14	Plan of Site 21	583
13.15	Plan and section of waterhole 15014	584
13.16	Wooden bowl or trough WW4	586
13.17	Log ladder WW5	587
13.18	Plan and section of segmented ditch 15009	590
13.19	Waterhole 15072	591
13.20	Pottery from waterhole 15072	592
13.21	Burnt stone pit 15010	592
13.22	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 21	594
13.23	Plan of Site 4c	595
13.24	Plan of structure 16209	596
13.25	Flint from features in the north of Site 4c	597
13.26	Section of burnt stone feature 16213	598
13.27	Plan of features around structure 16209	599
13.28	Waterhole 16010	600
13.29	Pit 16022	603
13.30	Pit 16018	603
13.31	Finds from features in the centre of Site 4c	605
13.32	Possible four-post structure in south of Site 4c	606
13.33	Pits 16127 and 16129	606
13.34	Finds from features in the south of Site 4c	606

13.35	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 4c	606
13.36	Plan of Site 4e	608
13.37	Sections of pits on Site 4e	609
13.38	Finds from pits on Site 4e	612-3
13.39	Phase plan of Site 17	618
13.40	Waterhole 10104 and gully 10116	619
13.41	Waterhole 10159	621
13.42	Wood in waterhole 10159	622
13.43	Wooden weft or pin beater from waterhole 10159 (WW6)	624
13.44	Other finds from waterhole 10159	625
13.45	Burnt stone feature 10022	628
13.46	End scraper from tree-throw hole in the area of waterhole 10159	629
13.47	Phase plan of Site 25	631
13.48	Sections of pits 12167 and 12212	632
13.49	Flint from pits 12167 and 12212	633
14.1	Probability distributions of dates from activity in the area of the early Neolithic rectangular structure 3871. Each distribution represents the relative probability that an event occurred at a particular time. For each of the dates two distributions have been plotted, one in outline, which is the result produced by the scientific evidence alone, and a solid one, which is based on the chronological model used. The other distributions correspond to aspects of the model. For example, the distribution 'start_3871' is the estimated date for the construction of structure 3871. Dates followed by a question mark have been calibrated (Stuiver and Reimer 1993), but not included in the chronological model for reasons explained in the text. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	646
14.2	Probability distributions of dates from structure 5816. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	647
14.3	Probability distributions of calibrated radiocarbon dates from early and middle Neolithic pits	647
14.4	Probability distributions of calibrated radiocarbon dates from activity in the area of the Neolithic rectangular enclosure	648
14.5	Probability distributions of calibrated radiocarbon dates from burials in the area of the U-shaped enclosure in Cresswell Field	648
14.6	Probability distributions of dates from structure 4291. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	649
14.7	Probability distributions of calibrated radiocarbon dates from late Neolithic and Beaker pits	649
14.8	Probability distributions of dates from structure 5716. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	650
14.9	Probability distributions of dates from Floodplain Section A. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly.	650
14.10	Probability distributions of dates from the active late prehistoric channel on the Yarnton Floodplain (Section A). The format is identical to Figure 14.1, and the model identical to that shown in Figure 14.9. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly.	651
14.11	Probability distributions of dates from the linear ditches on Site 2. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	652
14.12	Probability distributions of dates from the Bronze Age occupation on Site 1. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	653
14.13	Probability distributions of dates from the Bronze Age occupation on Site 7. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	654
14.14	Probability distributions of dates from the Bronze Age activity on Sites 4c, 4e, 9, and 10. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand	

List of Figures

	side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	654
14.15	Probability distributions of dates from waterholes and burnt stone features on Site 17 and 21. The format is identical to Figure 14.1. The large square brackets down the left-hand side along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly	655
14.16	Probability distributions of dates from early and middle Neolithic features. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15.	657
14.17	Probability distributions of dates from late Neolithic and Beaker features. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15.	658
14.18	Probability distributions of dates from early and early/middle Bronze Age features. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15.	659
14.19	Probability distributions of dates from middle Bronze Age features dating to 15th and 14th centuries cal BC. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15	660
14.20	Probability distributions of dates from middle and late Bronze Age features dating from the 14th to the 11th centuries cal BC. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15	661
14.21	Probability distributions of dates from Island 3. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15	662
14.22	Probability distributions of dates from Island 4. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15	662
14.23	Probability distributions of dates from structures constructed in the 4th and 3rd millennia cal BC. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1- 14.15.	664
14.24	Probability distributions of dates from structures constructed in the 2nd millennium cal BC. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15	665
14.25	Probability distributions of dates from substantial deposits of human remains. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1-14.15.	667
14.26	Probability distributions of dates which evidence rising water table during the second millennium cal BC. The format is identical to Figure 14.1, elements of the graph are taken from the model defined in Figures 14.1- 14.15.	668
App 3.1	An analysis of raw material type and extent of dorsal cortex (as a percentage; non-cortical removals excluded due to uncertain provenance).	685
App 13.1	Particle-size distributions of samples from Floodplain Profile 1.	714
App 13.2	Particle-size distributions of samples Floodplain Profile 2	714
App 13.3	Heavy minerals (>1%) in the samples from the two floodplain profiles	715
App 13.4	Particle-size distributions of samples from section 9075	716
App 13.5	Particle-size distributions of samples from 9075 after removal of stones > 1mm	716
App 13.6	The main heavy minerals (>1%) in the samples from section 9075	717
App 13.7	Particle size distributions of 3248 and 3357 (bold) compared to samples from floodplain Profile 1 and 2 (Canti 2001)	718
App 13.8	Particle size distributions of all the 3815 samples	720
App 13.9	Particle size distributions of all the 3815 fills after removal of stones larger than 2mm.	720
App 14.1	Plan of the study area showing the location of geophysical surveys and geomorphology	723
App 14.2	(A) Greystone image of fluxgate gradiometer data from Cresswell Field together with (B) graphical summary of significant anomalies	724
App 14.3	(A) Greystone image of fluxgate gradiometer data from ARC Stage 4 together with (B) a summary of significant anomalies	725
App 14.4	Topsoil susceptibility data for ARC Stage 4. The inset greystone image shows results of a high resolution susceptibility survey conducted over the topsoil stripped excavation surface.	726
App 14.5	Greystone image of earth resistance data collected over ARC Stage 4	727
App 14.6	(A) Greystone image of fluxgate gradiometer data from sites YFPB92A and YFPB96 together with (B) graphical summary of significant anomalies. The inset bar chart	

	shows topsoil susceptibility values for samples collected along the indicated transects over the YFPB96 survey area	729
App 14.7	(A) Greytone images of the high resolution fluxgate survey of YFPB98A and the adjacent caesium total field magnetometer survey of YFPB98B. A graphical summary of significant anomalies (B) is shown together with (C) a greytone image of the standard resolution fluxgate data from YFPB98A.	730
App 14.8	Greyscale images of the 0.5m (A) and 1.0m (B) mobile probe spacing earth resistance data from YFPB98A together with a summary of significant anomalies (C). The location of excavation Trench 21 and the features revealed are also shown.	731
App 14.9	Greytone images of the fluxgate gradiometer data from the topsoil-stripped excavation surface of YFPB98A.	732
App 14.10	(A) Greytone image of the fluxgate gradiometer data collected over the Neolithic enclosure site together with (B) a graphical summary of significant anomalies. The location of the subsequent excavation, Trench 5, is also shown	733
App 14.11	Magnetic susceptibility survey conducted over the topsoil stripped excavation surface of the Neolithic enclosure, Trench 5. The figure also shows features subsequently revealed by excavation including the location of the enclosure ditch	734
App 14.12	(A) Greytone image of the fluxgate gradiometer data collected over YFPB97 together with (B) graphical summary of significant anomalies.	735
App 15.1	Summary of the results of phosphate analysis in and around the early Neolithic rectangular enclosure	738

List of Tables

4.1	Quantification of pottery at Yarnton by period (grouped by site)	96
4.2	Changes in the proportion of decorated pottery over time (based on Yarnton and selected sites from the Upper Thames Valley)	103
4.3	Comparison (% by weight) of selected wares (early Neolithic to early Bronze Age) from Sites 2 and 7, broken down by context type	109
4.4	Comparison of pottery (by weight) between Sites 2 and 7 (selected contexts and styles)	109
4.5	Summary of worked flint from the excavations at Yarnton (% of total)	110
4.6	Retouched forms from the excavations at Yarnton	116
4.7	Materials used to make saddle querns and rubbers through time	121
4.8	Sources of stone used for artefacts and the objects found	122
5.1	NISP of all animal bone fragments from Yarnton	136
5.2	A comparison of NISP and MNI for the three main animal food species	136
5.3	Charred plant foods at Yarnton through the Neolithic and Bronze Age	146
5.4	Assignment of absorbed lipid residues (where this was achieved). After Copley <i>et al.</i> 2005, appendix 1	150
7.1	Finds recovered from the U-shaped enclosure	174
7.2	Summary of dental pathology on skeleton 8772	175
7.3	Finds recovered from the Beaker-period graves	175
7.4	Finds from Beaker pit 8782	180
7.5	Animal bone from pit 8782	183
7.6	Condition of bone	183
7.7	Charred plant remains from Beaker pit 8782	184
7.8	Finds from early and middle Bronze Age pits	185
7.9	Finds from late Bronze Age pits on Cresswell Field	186
7.10	Finds from burnt stone features on Cresswell Field	189
7.11	Redeposited Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age finds on Cresswell Field	190
7.12	Finds from Neolithic pits at Yarnton Worton Rectory Farm (YWRF)	194
7.13	Charred plant remains and charcoal from pit 1495	195
7.14	Charcoal from pit YWRF 3830	198
7.15	Surface and redeposited Neolithic and Bronze Age finds at Yarnton (YWRF)	198
7.16	A breakdown of the pottery recovered from pit 105708	209
8.1	Molluscs from tree-throw holes cutting the buried ground surface	215
8.2	Waterlogged seeds from tree-throw hole 2722 in Evaluation Trench 3	217
8.3	Summary of finds recovered from the ground surface and from features cutting it	218
8.4	Animal bone from the ground surface	234
8.5	Pottery associations of flint on the ground surface	234
8.6	Flint from surface scatter at Drayton, Oxfordshire (after Holgate <i>et al.</i> 2003, table 6.8)	236
8.7	Finds from features 2330 and 2349	240
8.8	Charred plant remains from 2350 and 2351 (excluding charcoal)	241
8.9	Finds from the penannular enclosure and features associated with it	245
8.10	Radiocarbon age determinations from the west linear ditch (2239)	252
8.11	Radiocarbon age determinations from the east linear ditch (3081)	255
8.12	Waterlogged seeds from the linear ditches and dendritic features	256
8.13	Molluscs from features cutting the buried ground surface	260
8.14	Charred plant remains from hollow 2341, fill 2323, excluding charcoal	273
8.15	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 2	274
9.1	Finds from pit 1088	280
9.2	Charred plant remains (excluding wood charcoal) from pit 1088	282
9.3	Finds from U-shaped enclosure 1196	284
9.4	Finds from Beaker pits on Site 1	284

Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape

9.5	Charred plant remains (excluding wood charcoal) from the Beaker pits.	289
9.6	Finds from pit 1047	290
9.7	Finds from middle Bronze Age structure 1363	296
9.8	Finds from middle Bronze Age structure 1875	298
9.9	Finds from features to the south of structures 1874 and 1875	301
9.10	Finds from waterhole 1810.	304
9.11	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal) from waterhole 1810	304
9.12	Waterlogged plant remains from waterhole 1810.	305
9.13	Insects from waterhole 1810.	307
9.14	Finds from structure 1878 and associated pits	311
9.15	Finds from postholes to the west of ditch 1479	313
9.16	Finds from late Bronze Age pits in the centre of Site 1	314
9.17	Finds from undated features in the west of Site 1	316
9.18	Radiocarbon dates from early channel deposits.	317
9.19	Finds from burnt stone features on the bank of the palaeochannel	320
9.20	Finds from the palaeochannel	326
9.21	Wood groups relating to Phases 4 to 6	328
9.22	Summary of woodchips from Yarnton.	333
9.23	Summary of woodchips from Yarnton, by phase	333
9.24	Tree taxa identified at Yarnton.	337
9.25	Percentage of wood types by site	338
9.26	Percentage of woodchips by site.	338
9.27	Animal bone from the channel deposits	340
9.28	Gnawed, butchered and burnt animal bone from channel deposits.	341
9.29	Prehistoric pottery from Iron Age and Roman contexts on Site 1	342
9.30	Struck flint from Iron Age, Roman and later deposits.	342
10.1	Finds from early Neolithic structure 5816	348
10.2	Finds from early Neolithic pit 5246 and tree-throw hole 5134 on Site 3.	350
10.3	Finds from pit 5329	352
10.4	Finds from group 1 Grooved Ware pits	354
10.5	Finds from group 2 Grooved Ware pits	358
10.6	Finds from the pair of Grooved Ware pits (group 3).	360
10.7	Finds from late Neolithic features in the south and centre of Site 3	362
10.8	Finds from features in the south-west of Site 3	362
10.9	Finds from tree-throw hole 5285 and pit 5306	364
10.10	Finds from structure 5716.	368
10.11	Finds from late Bronze Age structure 5746	370
10.12	Finds from structure 5815.	370
10.13	Finds from features associated with structure 5815.	374
10.14	Finds from waterhole 5068.	376
10.15	Finds from undated features on Site 3	378
10.16	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 3	378
10.17	Finds from the ring ditch 7056	383
10.18	Mollusca from ring ditch 7056.	384
10.19	Finds from features within ring ditch 7056.	385
10.20	Finds from tree-throw holes within ring ditch 7056	385
10.21	Finds from trampled gravel and burnt stone layer 7246.	388
10.22	Finds from Peterborough Ware pits	392
10.23	Finds from Beaker features in the north of Site 4b.	394
10.24	Finds from features to the west and north of Site 5.	394
10.25	Finds from pits in the south-west of Site 4a	398
10.26	Finds from late Bronze Age postholes in the north-east of Site 4a	404
10.27	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 4a	404
11.1	Finds from the secondary and tertiary silting layers of the rectangular enclosure and features cutting those fills	407
11.2	Finds from the first recut of the enclosure ditch.	413
11.3	Finds from the second recut of the enclosure ditch	418
11.4	Finds from the final silting of the enclosure ditch	418
11.5	Presence/absence of molluscs in the Neolithic enclosure ditch	420
11.6	Finds from pits 9002 and 9007 and grave 9469.	422

List of Tables

11.7	Finds from late Neolithic pit 9165	430
11.8	Grave goods from Beaker burial	435
11.9	Finds from other late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features	436
11.10	Finds from features cutting the Neolithic enclosure	440
11.11	Finds from other middle Bronze Age features	442
11.12	Finds from circular structure 9568 and posthole 9078	447
11.13	Finds from other late Bronze Age features	448
11.14	Finds from undated features	450
11.15	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 5	452
12.1	Finds from post pit 4580	464
12.2	Finds from the postholes of the Neolithic structure	464
12.3	Burnt bone in the postholes of 3871	469
12.4	Finds from tree-throw hole 4591	472
12.5	Finds from pit 3815	475
12.6	Finds from pit 4373	478
12.7	Finds from tree-throw hole 3884	479
12.8	Finds from Peterborough Ware pits 3207 and 3700	482
12.9	Finds from Peterborough Ware pits in the west of the site	490
12.10	Finds from Peterborough Ware pits and tree-throw holes in the north-west of Site 7	496
12.11	Finds from scattered Peterborough Ware pits	498
12.12	Finds from possible late Neolithic structure 4291 in the west of Site 7	504
12.13	Finds from Grooved Ware pits in the south-west of Site 7	504
12.14	Finds from pair of Grooved Ware pits to the north-east of the early Neolithic structure	508
12.15	Finds from scattered Grooved Ware pits in the north and east of the site	512
12.16	Finds from pit alignment 4657 in the north-west of Site 7	520
12.17	Finds from late Neolithic/early Bronze Age (Beaker) features in the east of Site 7	522
12.18	Finds from ring ditch 3200	532
12.19	Presence of molluscs in ring ditch 3200	534
12.20	Finds from features associated with ring ditch 3200	534
12.21	Finds from the group of five circular structures	539
12.22	Finds from circular structure 4517	540
12.23	Finds from middle Bronze Age waterhole 4005	544
12.24	Waterlogged wood from middle Bronze Age waterhole 4005	544
12.25	Presence of molluscs in waterhole 4005	545
12.26	Waterlogged seeds from waterhole 4005	546
12.27	Coleoptera from waterhole 4005	546
12.28	Pollen counts (with percentages of total pollen in brackets) from waterhole 4005, order: Kent (1992)	547
12.29	Finds from middle Bronze Age pits	548
12.30	Finds from tree-throw holes reused as hearths	550
12.31	Finds from possible waterhole 3352	552
12.32	Finds from disturbed area north of the ring ditch	556
12.33	Finds from features in the north and north-west of the site	556
12.34	Finds from features in the north-east of Site 7	556
12.35	Finds from features in the south-west of Site 7	557
12.36	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 7	558
13.1	Finds from Bronze Age pits on Site 4d	563
13.2	Finds from features on the banks of the channel in Site 9	570
13.3	Presence of waterlogged seeds and other plant remains in pits 13058 and 13275	574
13.4	Presence of Coleoptera in pit 13058	574
13.5	Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts from lower deposits in the palaeochannel	577
13.6	Finds from Site 10	580
13.7	Presence of waterlogged seeds and other waterlogged plant remains in early channel silts on Site 10	582
13.8	Finds from waterhole 15014	585
13.9	Waterlogged seeds and other waterlogged plant remains from waterhole 15014	588
13.10	Presence of Coleoptera in waterhole 15014	589
13.11	Pollen, spores and parasite ova in waterhole 15014	589
13.12	Finds from waterhole 15072	592
13.13	Pollen, spores and parasite ova in waterhole 15072	593

Yarnton: Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlement and Landscape

13.14	Finds from burnt stone pit 15010 and associated features	593
13.15	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 21	594
13.16	Finds from structure 16209 and associated features	597
13.17	Finds from postholes adjacent to structure 16209	598
13.18	Finds from pits and postholes in the north of Site 4c	598
13.19	Finds from waterhole 16010	600
13.20	Presence of waterlogged seeds and other plant remains in waterhole 16010	602
13.21	Presence of coleoptera in waterhole 16010	602
13.22	Pollen, spores and parasite ova in waterhole 16010	602
13.23	Finds from pits and postholes in the centre of Site 4c	604
13.24	Finds from pits and postholes in the south of Site 4c	607
13.25	Finds from tree-throw holes on Site 4c	607
13.26	Finds from Bronze Age pits on Site 4e	610
13.27	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal) from pit 25045	616
13.28	Presence of waterlogged seeds and other plant remains in pits 25014, 25045 and 25050	617
13.29	Presence of Coleoptera in pit 25014	617
13.30	Pollen and spores from waterhole 10104	620
13.31	Finds from waterhole 10159	622
13.32	Presence of molluscs in waterhole 10159	626
13.33	Presence of waterlogged seeds and other plants in waterhole 10159	626
13.34	Presence of coleoptera in waterhole 10159	627
13.35	Pollen, spores and parasite ova in waterhole 10159	627
13.36	Finds from burnt stone pit 10022	628
13.37	Finds from tree-throw holes adjacent to waterhole 10159	629
13.38	Finds from other tree-throw holes on Site 17	630
13.39	Finds from isolated pit 10023	630
13.40	Finds from pits 12167 and 12212	632
14.1	Radiocarbon age determinations	638
14.2	Optically Stimulated Luminescence measurements from Section A, Site 1 (at 68% confidence)	645
App 3.1	Summary of worked flint from the excavations at Yarnton (% of total)	678
App 3.2	Categories used for the classification of the struck flint assemblage	679
App 3.3	Summary of core types from the excavations at Yarnton	680
App 3.4	Retouched forms from the excavations at Yarnton1	680
App 3.5	Quantification of the burnt unworked flint	681
App 3.6	Assemblages selected for further analysis	682
App 3.7	Results of technological analysis: flake type	683
App 3.8	Results of technological analysis: extent of dorsal cortex	686
App 3.9	Results of technological analysis: termination type	687
App 3.10	Results of technological analysis: platform type	689
App 3.11	Results of technological analysis: hammer mode	690
App 3.12	Results of technological analysis: platform edge abrasion	692
App 3.13	Results of technological analysis: dorsal blade scars	693
App 3.14	Results of refitting analysis	695
App 3.15	Results of use-wear analysis performed on selected assemblages	696
App 3.16	Results of raw material analysis performed on selected context groups	697
App 4.1	Worked stone from Yarnton	700
App 10.1	NISP of all bone fragments	708
App 10.2	Spatial distribution of NISP for bone identified to species/species group	708
App 13.1	XRF analyses (as oxide percentages) of the <2mm fraction of the four samples taken from 3815	719

Summary

This is the third in a series of three volumes reporting on a wide-ranging programme of field-work undertaken by Oxford Archaeology, mainly between 1989 and 1998, but also in 2005 and 2006, in and around the ARC (now Hanson UK) gravel extraction pit between Yarnton and Cassington, Oxfordshire. This landscape, extending from the floodplain of the Thames up onto the higher Summertown-Radley (Second) Gravel Terrace, has witnessed a long history of settlement and of topographic and vegetational change linked to human activity which extends up to the present day. This volume describes the remarkable discoveries of Neolithic and Bronze Age date; monographs on the Iron Age and Roman and the Saxon and medieval evidence have already been published (Hey *et al.* 2011; Hey 2004).

Mesolithic hunter-gatherers had moved through this landscape leaving occasional flint tools, but it was only at the beginning of the Neolithic that there is evidence for sustained occupation in the area. A substantial rectangular post-built house was built at around 3800 cal BC, and evidence for cremation burial, pit digging and midden accumulation also belongs to this period. Pottery production, cereal cultivation, the rearing of domesticated animals and characteristic flint tools all demonstrate a fully Neolithic way of life. A small circular structure was built a little later, at c 3600 cal BC.

Habitation continued throughout the middle and late Neolithic and the early Bronze Age but, with the exception of a possible late Neolithic building, this was represented by scatters and clusters of pits and some postholes. There was a pattern of persistent but short-lived settlement. Although farming continued, this was mainly focused on herding, and the quantities of cereals found declined. Many pits contained significant deposits, and the frequency with which these features were dug and the character of the remains that were put within them – the structure and formality with which they were placed – changed through time, perhaps indicating changing social concerns and beliefs.

A number of small ceremonial and funerary monuments of this period were examined, mainly on the floodplain but also upon the Summertown-Radley Gravel Terrace, and the deposits associated with them support the suggestion that the area was visited repeatedly throughout this period. Burial practices, mainly represented throughout the Neolithic by cremated remains, changed at the beginning of the Bronze Age with the advent of

Beaker-style burials; seven inhumations and a cremation burial were excavated. This flurry of burial activity was brief and in the 2nd and early 1st millennium, with the exception of a middle Bronze Age inhumation burial and two cremations, human remains were rarely deposited. Small quantities of cremated human bone, however, were found in pits from the early Neolithic to the middle Bronze Age.

Activity in the Neolithic occurred in woodland clearings, but by the early Bronze Age the landscape had been substantially cleared of trees, and grazed grassland was the predominant vegetation type. Settlement in the Bronze Age was represented by small circular post-built structures, with associated domestic features, including waterholes, and these groups of features suggest single generation households. Evidence for cereal cultivation, rare in the Neolithic, became more common through the Bronze Age, although animal husbandry continued to be of primary importance. With widespread clearance came a rise in water levels and the floodplain became increasingly waterlogged.

Occupation of the final Bronze Age was present on the floodplain, including a small household situated within a Neolithic ditched enclosure, but increased use of the Summertown-Radley Gravel Terrace at this time was evidenced by pottery finds, a small number of pits and two burnt mounds.

Throughout this period, finds demonstrate the range of craft activities undertaken, from potting and flint and stone tool production to weaving and metalworking. Bone and wood were also used to make tools. Not only is there evidence for the cereals grown and plant foods gathered, of the animals reared and hunted, but also of the changing methods of preparing and cooking these foods. This is seen in the food remains themselves, in the shapes and sizes of pots and the residues within them, and the flint and stone tools used. Objects made from materials acquired from elsewhere demonstrate the degree of social interaction with neighbours and more distant groups.

At the end of the Bronze Age/beginning of the Iron Age the floodplain at Yarnton appears to have been abandoned for settlement, although small middle Iron Age occupation sites are known on the Cassington floodplain to the south-west of the study area. Small and permanently-occupied settlements were established on the edge of the Summertown-Radley Gravel Terrace overlooking the low-lying ground at this time at both Yarnton and the adjacent site of Worton.

Résumé

Cet ouvrage constitue l'un des trois volumes portant sur le programme multidisciplinaire de travaux de terrains opérés par Oxford Archaeology, principalement entre 1989 et 1998, mais à nouveau en 2005 et 2006, sur le site et autour de la fosse d'extraction gravière d'ARC (aujourd'hui Hanson UK) située entre Yarnton et Cassington, comté de l'Oxfordshire. Ce paysage, qui s'étend de la plaine inondable de la Tamise jusque sur la plus haute (seconde) terrasse gravière de Summertown-Radley, témoigne d'une longue histoire d'habitats et de changement topographique et de végétation liés à l'activité humaine qui s'y est déroulée jusqu'à nos jours. Ce volume présente les découvertes remarquables du Néolithique et de l'âge du Bronze ; des monographies sur l'âge du Fer et l'époque romaine, et les témoignages des périodes anglo-saxonne et médiévale ont déjà fait l'objet d'une publication (Hey *et al.* 2011 ; Hey 2004).

Les chasseurs-cueilleurs du mésolithique se sont déplacés au sein de ce paysage en y laissant d'occasionnels outils en silex, mais ce n'est qu'au début du Néolithique que survivent les indices d'une occupation prolongée en ce lieu. Une importante maison rectangulaire sur poteaux construite vers 3800 av. J.-C., et les vestiges de sépulture à crémation, d'un creusement de fosse et d'un amas de déchets appartiennent à cette période. La production céramique, la culture céréalière, l'élevage d'animaux domestiques ainsi que la présence d'outils en silex caractéristiques démontrent tous un mode de vie néolithique à part entière. A cet ensemble s'ajoute une petite structure circulaire construite un peu plus tard vers 3600 cal. av. J.-C.

L'habitation perdure tout au long du Néolithique moyen et final et à l'âge du Bronze ancien à l'exception d'un éventuel bâtiment du Néolithique final, matérialisé par des débris épars et des groupes de fosses ainsi que quelques trous de poteaux. Un habitat en continu mais de courte durée se dessine. Bien que l'agriculture subsiste, elle est centrée principalement sur l'élevage et on constate une diminution de la quantité de céréales mise au jour. Nombre de fosses renfermaient des dépôts significatifs et la fréquence avec laquelle ces structures ont été creusées ainsi que la nature des vestiges qui y étaient déposés – la structure et la formalité selon lesquelles elles étaient disposées – a changé à travers le temps, indiquant peut-être des intérêts sociaux et des croyances changeantes.

Plusieurs petits monuments cérémoniels et funéraires remontant à cette période ont fait l'objet d'un examen, principalement dans la plaine inond-

able mais aussi sur la terrasse gravière de Summertown-Radley, et les dépôts qui en relèvent confortent l'idée selon laquelle ce secteur a été visité à maintes reprises tout au long de cette période. Les pratiques funéraires, principalement représentées tout au long du Néolithique par des vestiges inhumés, ont changé au début de l'âge du Bronze avec l'arrivée des inhumations campaniformes; la fouille de sept inhumations et d'une sépulture a été exécutée. Ce foisonnement d'activité funéraire a été bref et, au second puis au début du premier millénaire, à l'exception d'une inhumation de l'âge du Bronze moyen et de deux crémations, les vestiges humains étaient rarement déposés. Toutefois, de petites quantités d'ossements humains brûlés ont été livrés par des fosses datant du Néolithique ancien jusqu'à l'âge du Bronze moyen.

Au Néolithique, l'activité humaine se déroule au sein d'flots boisés mais dès l'âge du Bronze ancien le paysage semble avoir été défriché et le type de végétation prédominant devient alors la prairie pâturée. L'habitat de l'âge du Bronze se voit représenté par de petites structures circulaires construites sur poteaux accompagnées de structures domestiques associées dont des trous d'eau, et ces groupes de structures indiquent les foyers d'une seule génération. Les témoignages d'une culture céréalière, rares au Néolithique, deviennent de plus en plus courants à l'âge du Bronze, bien que l'élevage d'animaux demeure de première importance. Le défrichement généralisé a provoqué la montée du niveau de l'eau et la plaine inondable devient de plus en plus gorgée d'eau.

Une occupation de l'âge du Bronze final est manifeste dans la plaine inondable ; elle est matérialisée par un petit foyer situé au sein d'un enclos fossoyé néolithique, cependant ce sont le mobilier céramique, quelques fosses et deux tertres brûlés qui témoignent de l'utilisation croissante de la terrasse gravière de Summertown-Radley à cette époque.

Tout au long de cette période, le mobilier permet d'attester la gamme d'activités artisanales, qu'il s'agisse de la production de poterie, d'outils en silex et en pierre polie ou du tissage et du travail du métal. On utilisait aussi l'os et le bois pour fabriquer des outils. Les indices recueillis témoignent non seulement de la culture des céréales et des plantes ramassées à des fins alimentaires, des animaux élevés et chassés, mais aussi des modes de préparation et de cuisson de ces aliments. Ceci est indiqué par les restes alimentaires mêmes, par les formes et les tailles des pots et les résidus retrouvés à

Résumé

l'intérieur, ainsi que par les outils en silex et en pierre polie utilisés. Les objets fabriqués à partir de matériaux venant d'ailleurs démontrent le degré d'interaction sociale existant alors avec le voisinage mais aussi avec des groupes plus éloignés.

A la fin de l'âge du Bronze/premier âge du Fer, la plaine inondable à Yarnton semble avoir été abandonnée pour l'habitat, bien que de petits sites

d'occupation du second âge du Fer soient connus sur la plaine inondable de Cassington au sud-ouest du secteur d'étude. A cette période, des habitats de petite taille occupés de manière permanente ont été établis en bordure de la terrasse gravière de Summertown-Radley et surplombent les terres en contrebas à Yarnton et sur le site adjacent de Worton.

Zusammenfassung

Dies ist der letzte Band einer dreiteiligen Serie über ein weitreichendes Grabungsprogramm das Oxford Archaeology, hauptsächlich zwischen den Jahren 1989 und 1998, sowie 2005 und 2006, in und um die ARC (jetzt Hanson UK) Kiesgrube, zwischen Yarnton und Cassington in Oxfordshire durchgeführt hat. Die Landschaft, die sich von den Überschwemmungsgebieten der Themse hoch bis zur höheren (zweiten) Summertown-Radley Kies-Terrasse erstreckt, kann auf eine lange Siedlungsgeschichte und einen Wechsel der Topographie und Vegetation aufgrund menschlicher Einflüsse zurückblicken, ein Umstand, der bis zum heutigen Tag anhält. Dieser Band beschreibt die außergewöhnlichen Entdeckungen des Neolithikums und der Bronzezeit; Monographien, die die Eisenzeit, die Römische Periode, die Sachsen und das Mittelalter behandeln, wurden bereits publiziert (Hey -et al. 2011; Hey 2004).

Mesolithische Jäger und Sammler zogen durch die Landschaft und hinterließen gelegentlich Flintwerkzeuge. Mit dem Beginn des Neolithikums können kontinuierliche Besiedlungsspuren in der Gegend nachgewiesen werden. Ein rechteckiges Pfostenhaus wurde um 3800 cal BC errichtet. Brandbestattungen, Gruben und Anhäufungen von Abfall können ebenfalls dieser Periode zugerechnet werden. Keramikherstellung, Getreideanbau, die Zucht domestizierter Tiere und charakteristische Flintwerkzeuge demonstrieren die neolithische Lebensweise. Ein kleiner Rundbau wurde ein wenig später, ca. 3600 cal BC, errichtet.

Die Besiedlung setzte sich durch das mittlere und späte Neolithikum sowie die frühe Bronzezeit fort, eine Ausnahme bildet ein vermutlich spätneolithisches Gebäude, das nur durch sporadische Anhäufungen von Gruben und einigen Pfostenlöchern dokumentiert werden konnte. Ein Muster beharrlicher, jedoch kurzer Siedlungsaktivität war zu erkennen. Das Hauptaugenmerk in der Region lag auf der Viehhaltung, während der Ackerbau, belegt durch die Mengen signifikanter Getreidefunde in Schichtablagerungen vieler Gruben, zurückging. Die Häufigkeit mit der die Gruben angelegt wurden und die Besonderheiten der Überreste, welche dort abgelegt wurden – die Struktur und Formalität mit der sie platziert wurden – wandelte sich durch die Zeiten, vielleicht belegt dies einen Wechsel in sozialen Ansichten und im Glauben.

Eine kleine Anzahl zeremonieller Monumente und Grabdenkmäler dieser Periode wurden untersucht, diese stammten größtenteils aus den Überschwemmungsgebieten der Themse aber auch aus

der Summertown-Radley Kies-Terrasse. Das Fundspektrum lässt darauf schließen, dass das Gebiet immer wieder aufgesucht wurde. Bestattungssitten, welche durch das Neolithikum hinweg vor allem durch Brandbestattungen vertreten sind, ändern sich zum Beginn der Bronzezeit mit der Ankunft der Beaker- (Trichterbecher) Bestattungssitten; sieben Körperbestattungen und eine Brandbestattung wurden freigelegt. Das Durcheinander der Bestattungssitten war kurz und in der zweiten Hälfte des ersten Jahrtausends wurden, mit Ausnahme einer mittelbronzezeitlichen Bestattung und zwei Brandbestattungen, keine menschlichen Überreste bestattet. Eine geringe Anzahl eingäscherter menschlicher Knochen wurde jedoch in Gruben vom Frühneolithikum bis zur mittleren Bronzezeit gefunden.

Im Neolithikum fanden die meisten Aktivitäten auf Lichtungen der Waldgebiete statt, zu Beginn der frühen Bronzezeit hatte sich das Bild der Landschaft schon deutlich verändert, Bäume waren weiträumig gerodet und es herrschten Weideflächen und Graslandschaften vor. Das Siedeln in der Bronzezeit wurde durch kleine runde Pfostenbauten mit dazugehörigen häuslichen Merkmalen, inklusive Wasserlöchern repräsentiert. Diese Merkmale legen nahe, dass es sich dabei um Ein-Generationen-Haushalte handelte. Der Getreideanbau war selten im Neolithikum, wurde in der Bronzezeit jedoch gebräuchlich, auch wenn die Viehzucht weiterhin von primärer Bedeutung war. Mit der Rodung der Waldgebiete stieg der Wasserpegel und Überschwemmungsgebiete standen immer häufiger unter Wasser. Eine Besiedlung der Überschwemmungsgebiete in der Endbronzezeit ist nachgewiesen, unter anderem durch einen kleinen Hausstand, der innerhalb einer neolithischen Wallanlage errichtet worden war. Das Gebiet der Summertown-Radley Kies-Terrasse wurde nun stärker genutzt, was durch Keramikfunde, eine geringe Anzahl Gruben und zwei Brandhügel belegt ist.

Durch die gesamte Periode hinweg demonstrieren Funde den Umfang der handwerklichen Tätigkeiten wie Töpfern, die Herstellung von Flint- und Steinwerkzeugen, Weben und Metallverarbeitung. Knochen und Holz wurden ebenso zur Werkzeugherstellung genutzt. Es gibt nicht nur Nachweise für den Getreideanbau und das Sammeln von Nahrungspflanzen, von der Zucht und der Jagd auf Tiere, sondern auch Nachweise auf die sich ändernden Methoden der Zubereitung und des Kochens dieser Nahrung. Dies zeigt sich in den Nahrungsmittelfunden, in der Form und Größe der Tonware und in Rückständen, die darin gefunden

Zusammenfassung

wurden, sowie in den Flint- und Steinwerkzeugen die genutzt wurden. Objekte, hergestellt aus Materialien von entfernten Orten, belegen die soziale Interaktion mit Nachbarn und weiter entfernt lebenden Gruppen.

Am Ende der Bronzezeit und zu Beginn der Eisenzeit scheinen die Überschwemmungsgebiete bei Yarnton verlassen worden zu sein, obgleich

kleine mitteleisenzeitliche Siedlungen auf den Überschwemmungsgebieten bei Cassington südwestlich des Untersuchungsgebietes nachgewiesen sind. Kleine und permanent bewohnte Siedlungen wurden am Rand der Summertown-Radley Kies-Terrasse gegründet, welche die zu diesem Zeitpunkt tiefer liegenden Gebiete von Yarnton und das angrenzende Worton überblickten.

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In Memoriam

During the final stages of producing this volume, Jon Humble and Fiona Roe very sadly both died. Jon was a constant source of encouragement, and his enthusiasm and support were important reasons why funding for the final phases of work was provided. Fiona was a remarkable lady. She generously shared her extensive knowledge, coming out onto site and explaining to bemused diggers how to recognise small and unprepossessing pieces of imported and worked stone, as well as the shiny and obviously identifiable objects, and she worked assiduously to sift and identify the pieces we collected. The results demonstrate what an important contribution that made. In her quiet and understated way, she encouraged us to lift our eyes above the near horizon and think about those pieces of imported polished stone or quern material, how they got here and who brought them. Thank you, Fiona.