An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Derbyshire

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

Introduction

Derbyshire's landscape encompasses dramatic variations in geology, geomorphology and soil types. In the north lie the uplands formed by gritstones in the district of High Peak, and the dissected Carboniferous limestone of the southern High Peak and Derbyshire Dales. The latter is flanked on its eastern side by the gritstone outliers of the East Moors and Stanton Moor. In the north east, the Magnesian limestone of Bolsover district forms a narrow north-south ridge of higher ground. Sandwiched between the gritstone East Moors and the Magnesian limestone lie the complex, lower lying coal measures, running from the South Yorkshire border southwards through North East Derbyshire, Chesterfield, Amber Valley and Erewash. Here they give way to the Triassic marls and loams of South Derbyshire and the Trent Valley, Derby district and the southernmost parts of Derbyshire Dales.

The associated variations of topgraphy, soil type, climatic regimes etc, have had a less than subtle impact upon historic patterns of land use and development. The pronounced differences in the historic distribution and intensity of industrialisation, mineral wealth exploitation, transportation, together with variations in the balance of pastoral versus agrarian activity have all to be suspected as contributing factors to the extreme distributional bias which exists in the current quantitative distribution of known Neolithic and Early Bronze Age archaeology in Derbyshire. The relatively low intensity of erosive development and the essentially pastoral land-use of Derbyshires upland gritstones and Carboniferous limestone allowed the survival of large numbers of upstanding earthworks from the period. Barnatt's (1996a) survey of Peak District barrows identified between 518 and 670 of which 378 are certainly extant, a further 89 that are unproven, and an additional 131 thought previously to be barrows but which he rejected. To these upland sites we can add the dramatic henge monuments preserved as earthworks at Arbor Low and the Bull Ring along with a variety of upstanding stone circles and ringcairns (Barnatt 1990).

It is to this wealth of earthworks that early antiquarian attention was drawn. The barrow opening efforts of such nineteenth century notables as Thomas Bateman, Samuel Carrington, Llewellyn Jewitt, John Lucas and Rooke Pennington - to name but a few - served to establish the uplands of Derbyshire and North Staffordshire as one of the country's busiest landscapes for archaeological events. Furthermore, although the character and quality of events has changed greatly in the 240 years since Reverend Evatt opened a barrow at Wardlow the preponderance of archaeological attention which Neolithic and Early Bronze Age archaeology in Derbyshire's uplands receives in comparison with the rest of the county has not, or at least only marginally.

Garton's (1991) extremely useful review of Neolithic research in the Peak District amply documents the evolving picture in the uplands through the many site specific excavations and surveys of barrows, caves and fissures prior to the mid-1970s. By this time however the general shift in academic interest away from the earthwork monuments of ritual, ceremony and death towards the archaeology of settlement was encouraging fieldwork and recording which might equally be applied in areas where earthworks had not survived. The tentative first attempts at controlled surface collection from ploughed fields by Radley and Cooper (1968) presaged a number of such fieldwork programmes, supplemented by the use of test pitting, both within and outside of the uplands. This and the more widespread use of aerial photography in the identification of sites has gone some way in providing areas outside of Derbyshire's uplands with a Neolithic and Early Bronze Age record. Even here, however, the existing aerial photographic coverage betrays the paucity of previous survey over the coal measures, the clay of southern Derbyshire Dales and the southernmost tip of Derbyshire.

Today the record for the Neolithic and Bronze Age accounts for just over 21.0% of all records within the SMR. As might be expected from what has been said they show a very high degree of spatial clustering within the county. Derbyshire Dales has 60.7% of all Neolithic and 68.8% of all Bronze Age records whilst covering just 30.3% of the county. In Bolsover and High Peak the Neolithic and Bronze Age record is fairly well represented. But for the rest of the county records are relatively sparse, with just 10.8% of Neolithic and 9.7% of Bronze Age records coming from Amber Valley, Chesterfield, Derby, Erewash, North East Derbyshire and South Derbyshire combined, which together account for over 40% of Derbyshire's surface area.

Yet these figures actually under-represent the Early Bronze Age record for Derbyshire Dales district. The recognition of extensive areas of surviving earthwork field systems, field clearance, and settlement dating to the Bronze Age along the East Moors (Barnatt 1986, 1987) has benefitted through major landscape surveys undertaken by the RCHME on Stanton Moor (Derbyshire Dales) and the East Moors (principally within Derbyshire Dales). These surveys have recorded literally thousands of features, a large proportion of which are attributable to the Bronze Age. As yet the SMR has not incorporated this information.

Equally, the raw percentages do not convey the significance of certain sites outside of the uplands. In South Derbyshire aerial photography, geophysical survey and excavations (Guilbert unpub., St. Joseph 1966, Wheeler 1970) has informed the record concerning the nationally important Neolithic cursus and associated ritual landscape between Twyford and Willington. Ten kilometres to the east lies the second Neolithic cursus monument within this area of the mid-Trent, a site also recognised through aerial photography. Excavations designed to look at the relationship of the cursus to a ring ditch and to assess the impact of ploughing (Gibson and Loveday 1989) has recently been supplement by evaluation and recording work at this latter Scheduled Ancient Monument. The latter offers the prospect of more detailed dating and environmental information in the near future (Garton and Elliott 1998). Even on the basis of the small areas thus far excavated a comparison of the evidence from Derbyshire's two cursus monuments might prove highly informative. I am particularly struck by the occurrence in both sites of concentrated and defined charcoal dumps within the cursus ditch deposits at both sites. The absence of known cursus monuments from the Peak is a feature of discussions of Later Neolithic ritual landscapes in Derbyshire which certainly merits more attention than it has thus far received.

In summary, the known archaeology for the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Derbyshire is heavily biased towards upland areas where the preservation of earthworks has encouraged further research into the period or where traditions of artefact collection have been such that artefacts have been recovered. It is only within the past thirty years that the areas of Derbyshire not blessed with upstanding monuments for these periods have begun to provide information which may prove relevant to our views of how people lived between the mid-fourth and the mid-late second millennium bc.

Previous Research Frameworks

The pre-PPG16, pre-MPP world of formulating local, county or regional research objectives was quite different to that of today's curatorial concerns. Not unexpectedly, the formulation of research frameworks can be seen to have mirrored the changes in the character of archaeological research generally discussed by Garton (1991) for the Neolithic. Looking at policies in the 1970s and '80s for Northern Derbyshire (Courtney and Hart 1977, Hart 1981) or the Trent Valley (Wheeler 1977) there was an obvious priority of concern for the study of specific known sites, often perceived as under threat from development pressures. There was a real emphasis on obtaining more information about particular sites. Furthermore, behind many of the stated objectives was a desire to see sites thought to be of national importance protected.

By the mid-1980s the emphasis had shifted to a more thematic approach. Concerns about the inadequate statutory protection of sites were being somewhat alleviated by the 1979 Act and the initiation of the Monument Protection Programme. Derbyshire Archaeological Advisory Committee published 'Archaeology in Derbyshire: Research Potential' (1986) in which themes such as 'The transition to farming', 'The colonisation of marginal land in the second millennium bc', and 'The social and ceremonial life of prehistoric farmers' acknowledged the changes in archaeological thinking, away from a site-based approach to a more general concern for broad research issues affecting whole landscapes. Many of these and similar themes can be found within the current English Heritage Research Agenda volume.

Recent and Current Research

The shift from site-based to landscape-based research has had a considerable impact upon the study of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Derbyshire. Over the past thirty years work designed to study settlement patterns has grown into a considerable body of fieldwork, publication and debate. As Garton (1991) has recognised, the real start of this process can probably be traced back to the environmental work of Sheila Hicks (1971, 1972). In her study based around six pollen cores from the East Moors she explicitly sought to examine the impact of early man's activies upon local vegetational sequences. The series of absolute dates obtained are still a major element in current thought. Tracing a series of clearance and partial regeneration phases Hicks postulated that from the elm decline, dated to the late fourth early-third millennium bc, there were a series minor intrusions which, she argued, reflected the short-term activity of herders with their animals. Cereal pollen appears for the first time in the Early Bronze Age, with general tree clearance only being achieved in the Iron Age.

From this point the themes surrounding settlement patterns within the Derbyshire landscape become more and more important within research. In particular the timing, nature and intensity of activity on the East Moors becomes a key element in models developed subsequently to look at the Earlier Neolithic, Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Hawke-Smith's (1979) study sought to identify a series of 'land facets' within an area of the Peak District based upon environmental variables and modern landuse. He sought to reconstruct biotic communities for the Neolithic-Bronze Age and build these into a dynamic model of change in prehistoric settlement and economy. Drawing upon Hicks' study and Reaney's (1968) documented association of emmer wheat with Grimston pottery at Aston, South Derbyshire he suggested that Earlier Neolithic communities divided their use of the landscape into agrarian activity on the southern alluvium with the grazing of herds on the limestone and some hunting on the highest limestone and gritstone moorlands. It followed on from this that the increased volume of Later Neolithic archaeology reflected population growth. On the limestone, the occurrence of Later Neolithic material on the loess led to his view that cereal cultivation expanded onto the limestone, and that pastoral activity intensified on the gritstones. The appearance of 2nd millennium settlement on the gritstones was thought to reflect the continuation of this process of population growth, expansion and intensification of arable activity.

In 1982 Vine published a highly traditional analysis of artefactual evidence for the Neolithic and the Bronze Age for the area of the Middle and Upper Trent Basin, taking in part of the Peak district. Whilst this work did not set out to radically change thinking on the periods involved it did offer certain observations drawn from the wide array of unsystematically collected materials in the region. In particular, Vine drew attention to a possible concentration of unusually fine artefacts around the area of Arbor Low henge.

Hawke-Smith's paper came under scrutiny by Bradley and Hart (1983), and drew upon Hart's own data as well as that published the previous year by Vine. In their analysis of artefact distributions from barrows and scatters they found that there was indeed evidence for a concentration of elaborate artefacts around the henge at Arbor Low. The artefacts within this so-called 'macehead complex' were also identified with the use of imported raw materials and a concommitant low level of local chert use. They suggested that the area around Arbor Low was occupied by communities who drew upon extensive contacts with areas beyond the Peak. In their account of the Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age variations in the character of artefact distributions which Hawke-Smith identified with subsistence patterns became evidence for patterning in social relations.

The models which have developed carry implications for all discussions of Earlier Neolithic to Early Bronze Age settlement within the North Derbyshire landscape and they have proven to be in themselves a useful framework for discussion and further research. Recent years have seen a wide variety of important settlement and field system surveys and particularly excavations published involving Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age burial practices in the Peak District or its fringes (Barnatt 1994, 1996b, 1998: Collis 1996). Indeed, Garton (1991) took the opportunity of her review of the Neolithic in the Peak in which she gave detailed consideration of these models to identify four broad research themes for the future:

1. Earlier Neolithic
2. Neolithic settlement activities/activities as represented by flint scatters
3. Environmental and economic data
4. Contacts outside, and mechanisms of movement of goods inside the Peak

It would not be appropriate here to examine in detail the case for giving research priority to these topics. It is clear however that these topics suggested themselves within the context of the issues raised within the broader debate initiated by Hicks and developed by Hawke-Smith and Bradley and Hart. Furthermore, from the early 1980s onwards it is possible to identify a whole series of projects within the Peak which to varying extents were inspired by issues raised in this debate or which have subsequently been brought to bear upon related issues.

Under the guise of one of the early to mid 1980s MSC programmes a great deal of useful archaeological work was undertaken within the Peak under the direction of Ken Smith and John Barnatt which specifically sought to address some of the issues raised by Hawke-Smith and Bradley and Hart. In particular, systematic surface collection of artefacts from ploughed fields was designed to provide a coherent data set through which to look at patterning of settlement and the distribution of artefacts. This was organised along a transect incorporating the upland limestone country around Arbor Low, down into the valleys of the Wye and Derwent rivers and up onto the gritstone East Moors (Myers 1991). Further fieldwalking designed to expand upon the earlier work has recently been undertaken by Sheffield University. Hawke-Smith's view of the Earlier Neolithic as representing on the Carboniferous limestone a colonising phase in a previously unused part of the landscape was shown by Bradley and Hart (1983) to be erroneous. Indeed, from their analysis appears that on the limestone flint scatters containing Earlier Neolithic arrowheads show a high level of coincidence with scatters containing Later

Mesolithic material. This picture has been confirmed and extended by the surface collection projects. It appears that in the valley locations there is also a coincidence in the occurrence of materials from these two periods.

The materials resulting from a decade of student fieldwork training within an isolated valley on the Carboniferous limestone at Roystone Grange, have provided a invaluable data set for looking at long term land use change. Area excavation, test pitting and shovel probe surveys (Donahue 1990, McElearney 1992, Myers 1992, Torrence and Edmonds 1988) have not only provided valuable insights into the application of a variety of methods for artefact recovery but have also offered a detailed lithics-based view of how the use of this valley changed from the Later Mesolithic to the Middle Bronze Age.

The intensive, repeated fieldwalking and excavation programmes at Mount Pleasant, Kenslow (Garton and Beswick 1983) have provided important detailed information on the character of lithic scatters. In particular, the repeat collection work has provided salutory lessons on the caveats which should be attached to the interpretation of single season collections, and how scatter evidence may or may not correlate with sub-surface archaeology.

Work on attempting to characterise and source the lithic raw materials used in the region has varied between the geologically informed, visual analyses undertaken by Henson (1982), through to the detailed study of micro-fossil assemblages within thin-sections of flint (Brooks 1986). The latter holds out a particularly promising approach which has already informed discussions of the movement of raw materials in Later Mesolithic and Earlier neolithic contexts in and around the Peak District.

This short overview of selected projects should readily impress upon you that within the last twenty years a great deal of research has been undertaken which directly or indirectly feeds into the sorts of priority issues identified by Garton. As she herself recognises however, certain priorities imply primary data collection: for issues such as economic data the archaeological record within the Peak stubbornly persists in refusing to suddenly yield up its Neolithic bones, grain and seeds to the most carefully and purposefully designed research strategies. Instead it has been blind chance which has provided Garton's Earlier Neolithic and the economic data priorites with perhaps their most significant contributions in recent years.

Lismore Fields

In 1984 work prompted by a housing development and funded by Debyshire County Council, English Heritage and the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement sought to investigate the supposed line of a Roman road at Lismore Fields in Buxton. What emerged, in place of the resoundingly absent Roman road, after some three seasons of excavation, was an Earlier Neolithic settlement consisting of a lithic and pottery assemblage associated with a group features including sub-rectangular buildings with preserved floors, post holes and pits (Garton 1991). Analysis of the ground plans has suggested that three similar structures are present. Charred plant remains from the buildings included emmer grains and chaff, flax seeds, hazlenuts and crab apple fruits and seeds. Taken together with s series of 5 dates ranging between 3990-3105 calBC (95%) this site arguably challenges previous views of the Earlier Neolithic in the Peak and asks us to test our ideas on how settlement of varying levels of permanancy or seasonality might be expected to appear. The location of the site, within an upland basin formed by the Wye Valley at 300m OD and surrounded on all sides by hills, challenges the models with which so much has already been achieved.

Quite incidentally, the spatially coincident but quite distinct Later Mesolithic assemblage and possible features at Lismore Fields also reinforce the emergent picture gained from the surface collection surveys. The dated charcoal from a post hole associated with a ring slot feature perhaps places the assemblage around the late fifth or early fourth millennium (calibrated) BC. The character of the Later Mesolithic to Earlier Neolithic transition is perhaps a subject worthy of further research in its own right.

Gardom's Edge

Earlier Neolithic research may also prove to be a major beneficiary of the on-going work at Gardom's Edge, on the East Moors above Baslow (Ainsworth and Barnatt 1998, Barnatt and Edmonds unpub., Barnatt and Smith 1997: 34). The enclosure at Gardom's Edge consists of a massive rubble and boulder bank currently 5 to 9 metres wide and 1 to 1.5 metres high. Along its length of just under 600 metres are a series of approximately seven entrances. It encloses the eastern side of a crest, with the western side formed by a precipitous scarp much loved of rock climbers. For a number of years this site was included amongst Derbyshire's count of likely hillforts (Hart 1981, 74-5: 1985b). Detailed survey work by Barnatt suggested however that Bronze Age cairns and field systems actually overlay parts of the bank. Reanalysis led to the suggestion that this site might

represent an upland equivalent to the causewayed enclosure. If so, then this would represent Derbyshire's first such example.

A joint project organised by the Peak District National Park Authority and Sheffield University has spent a number of seasons surveying and excavating selected features in the complex of settlement and field system evidence around the enclosure, and have also excavated parts of the bank, two entrances, and the interior. The results of this work have yet to be fully evaluated. The 1998 season however revealed remarkable evidence concerning the construction of the bank which offers the prospect of dating the monument.

With an extended final season of this project to go the work at Gardom's Edge has already provided important evidence regarding the character of the late second millennium activity on the East Moors. Excavations of structures provisionally interpreted as houses have produced a large assemblage of pottery currently being studied. Scientific analyses of the soils preserved under the various structures may tell us a great deal more concerning the character and intensity of land use during the second millennium bc. The contribution which this research project will make to the overall debate concerning the development of settlement through the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods on the East Moors and beyond is considerable.

Concluding Comments

Thus far I have attempted to identify some of the key research developments within the study of the period in Derbyshire. Almost inevitably, the focus has been very largely upon the character of thinking and research being undertaken within Derbyshire's uplands. In many ways this talk could have been geared to research designs for the Peak District. Even here I have been far from comprehensive. There has been no discussion, for example, of the remarkable Later Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age discoveries made last year by CAS at the Longstone Edge barrows. In the face of the barrows collapsing into a limestone quarry as the 50000 ton block upon which they are sat progressively works itself free of the quarry edge CAS undertook a rescue excavation of these scheduled monuments. They discovered an intact excarnation area under the edge of one of the barrows, preserving physical evidence for pre-burial rites which have previously only been inferred from skeletal and anthropological sources. This work has yet to be reported or published.

However, the objective of this paper is to contribute towards the development of a regional research framework which will serve all of Derbyshire. In this sense, the detailed, research driven archaeology which has taken up so much of this paper will certainly play an important role. Yet I am concerned that the antiquarian focus on Derbyshire's upland archaeology has not evolved into a more holistic approach to Derbyshire's landscape. That the lack of archaeological quantity and detail of record outside of the uplands encourages the discipline to confirm the consequent in its research driven projects is all the more problematic when one considers the importance which subjects such as mobility, external contact, and raw material aquisition play - or should play - in models of settlement patterns, economic and social relations. The apparently stark contrasts between upland and lowland ritual or ceremonial landscapes begs the researcher to investigate further, surely? Yet detailed studies of of these periods which explicitly set out to compare facets of upland and lowland Derbyshire's archaeology have been few and far between (eg. Henson 1986).

Perhaps the most sobering element in our biased record of events has been the trickle of Neolithic and Bronze Age discoveries on the unfashionable coal measures as a product of PPG16 developer funded work. The discovery of a comparatively high density Neolithic/ Bronze Age scatter at Blackwell (Garton 1995) and of a fragmentary middle Bronze Age settlement, ditch, pottery, quernstone and rider included, just a few hundred yards to the north at Tibshelf (Manning 1995) must surely begin to raise academic concerns that our stories are short changing the listener? The cup marked rear of the saddle quern merely emphasises that at present our stories do not adequately link such finds with comparable examples of this art from the uplands.

Yet the potential has been around for projects to develop and grow ouside of the uplands. From the same MSC project era which initiated the transect survey in the Peak a similar project was underway in South Derbyshire. Fieldwalking around the parishes of Walton and Catton sought to relate surface scatters to the geology and geomorphology of alluvium, boulder clay, mudstones and sandstones forming the eastern side of the Trent valley. The project identified a series of Later Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age scatters which had previously been unrecognised. Indeed, these records form the sole entries for this period in this neck of Derbyshire. However, unlike its counterpart in the Peak District there has been little or no research interest or academic context into which the results could be slotted. The project ended, and nothing happened.

I welcome the burgeoning of Neolithic and Bronze Age fieldwork and research within Derbyshire's uplands. The character and quality of the archaeology is such that it would be perverse not to seek to learn from it. The opportunities for addressing issues of settlement, economy, ceremony, ritual and death within the upland

landscape have and will continue to draw researchers. Research frameworks for the region must accommodate the upland region within it. The more or less unique resources the upland provide us with need to be conserved and studied. For example, the caves and rock fissure of both limestones retain a kind of archaeology of Neolithic and Bronze Age burial which cannot be ignored and must not be squandered. Similarly, the unwritten or unpublished fieldwork of the uplands needs to be dealt with. Perhaps one of the most important discoveries for the Later Neolithic in Derbyshire, the sub-rectangular house floors excavated at Aleck Low, has not been and at present has no realistic prospect of being published (Hart 1985a, Garton 1991).

From my perspective however, the 'unwashed babies' of Derbyshire's lowlands are missed opportunities for eventually placing upland research into a wider, regionalised context. At the moment it would seem that we are faced with a future in which developer funded projects will form the only realistic basis for filling the gaps in our knowledge for the lowlands of Derbyshire. This may not be such a bad situation. After all, this may represent the first occasion since the archaeological discipline developed that these gaps in our spatial knowledge may begin to be addressed. There are the residual problems fo bringing such fieldwork within a sufficiently broadly based research framework - hence the current meeting. Perhaps the regional research framework will succeed in widening the landscape focus of academic interest, or will the future of the research framework continue to be one of old event patterns revisited? Meanwhile, a recent field evaluation undertaken in connection with a pipeline scheme through the same Walton and Catton (Moore and Bonner 1997) area has merely confirmed to me through the archaeology revealed that 'the truth is still out there'.

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