

# **An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Neolithic and Bronze Age Leicestershire and Rutland**

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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**

In formulating an archaeological resource assessment it should be remembered that the landscape is the resource not the data on the SMRís which, by their very nature, provide a random unrepresentative sample. For this exercise the resource can be defined as an area of midlands landscape demarcated by the present boundaries of Leicestershire and Rutland (other than areas which have previously been destroyed). This is a lowland landscape characterised by a covering of glacial drift with, to the east, a limestone escarpment - the Jurassic ridge - and, to the west, Pre-Cambrian uplands with coal measures and Mercia Mudstone. Sixty per cent of the area has a clay substrata. The landscape is well dissected and separated by rivers and many tributary streams, demarcated by the Trent to the northwest, the Avon to the southwest and the Welland to the southeast while the south-north flowing Soar neatly divides the area into two. It is an agriculturally rich area, historically famous for its sheep farming and still possessing some of the finest pasture in Britain. The area is essentially plough-zone with consequent erosion although it has some potential for localised alluvial and colluvial burial and wetland areas.

In assessing the resource for the Neolithic and Bronze Age (and other periods) it must be remembered that systematic survey has only been undertaken in a few areas and consideration of SMRís in isolation will inevitably produce inherent biases (Mills 1985). Extrapolation and model building from well surveyed areas will, arguably, be a better basis for resource assessment than using SMR generated distribution maps alone.

The following is based on details from the Leicestershire and Rutland SMR and three area surveys (Clay 1996). Environmental evidence has been supplied by Angela Monckton. The area has seen relatively little research for these periods with few published accounts (Liddle 1982; Clay 1989). We are fortunate in the extent of field survey generated by Pete Liddle's Community Archaeology groups over the past twenty years, prior to which we largely faced a blank sheet traditionally thought of as an area of little prehistoric settlement (Hoskins 1957). More recent survey has shown that this was more a result of visibility, lack of fieldwork and pre-conceptions rather than a genuine lack of archaeological resource.

For the purpose of this paper the following period divisions have been used (following Brown and Murphy 1997):

Early Neolithic - 4000BC-2800BC  
Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age - 2800BC-1500BC  
Middle Bronze Age - 1500BC - 1000BC

Although there are few pollen profiles for the two counties there is a developing database of environmental information with insect and plant macrofossils providing important land-use data which it is hoped will be incorporated into the SMR in the future (Monckton 1995).

Lithics form a significant part of the material evidence and these have been interpreted following Pitts and Jacobi (1979) and Humble (forthcoming). Interpretation of the locations of settlements from lithic scatters is fraught with difficulty (e.g Yorston et al 1991). This is exacerbated in an area where flint sources are less readily available than in other regions (Henson 1983). For this paper possible settlement areas on the basis of surface collections are suggested following Schofield (1991) but the term *ecore area* is preferred following Foley (1981).

Following the resource assessment some initial ideas for a research agenda are suggested.

## **Early Neolithic**

Pollen profiles and insect evidence from Croft and Kirby Muxloe indicate undisturbed mixed woodland during the Early Neolithic (Rosseff et al forthcoming; Brown forthcoming a) while evidence for a partially cleared floodplain area is from a pollen profile at Narborough below an horizon dated to 2950-2050 Cal BC (Brown forthcoming b). More tangible evidence of woodland clearance comes from a buried soil beneath an early Bronze Age barrow at Sproxton on the limestone ridge to the northeast of the county. Here fire setting of tree stumps is interpreted from buried features dated to 3990-3810 Cal BC. Soil and land snail fauna analyses indicated a phase of arable land-use followed by pasture with no woodland regeneration before construction of the monument in the Early Bronze Age (Clay 1981).

Ploughzone areas have produced lithic scatters, occasionally with Early Neolithic material although separating Late Mesolithic from Early Neolithic has always been a problem. In Leicestershire 17 locations might be interpreted as core areas 12 of which also showed evidence of Late Mesolithic activity. These occur on sands and gravels, Northampton Sand and Liassic Clays but with most from boulder clay substrata. Their average height is 111m. OD slightly lower than that for Late Mesolithic core areas, the average distance to water is 0.38 km and 51% favoured south-facing slopes. Statistical analysis shows no bias in favour of non-clay soils. Three areas where systematic survey has been undertaken, at Medbourne, Misterton and Oakham, surface scatters show possible early Neolithic core areas on Liassic clay and boulder clay valley sides. Densities vary from one core area per 2 sq km at Misterton to one per 4.8 sq km at Medbourne. (Overall lithic densities from Misterton, for the Early Neolithic and later periods, are comparable with those from surveys of chalkland areas in the south including East Berks, Maddle Farm and the Vale of White Horse (Ford 1987; Gaffney and Tingle 1989; Tingle 1991).

Although most evidence comes from the visible plough zone areas in the form of lithic scatters there is increasing evidence of Early Neolithic activity from low lying stream and river-side areas. At Croft at the confluence of the Soar and Thurlaston Brook possible palisade gullies for post-ring round-houses were located tentatively dated on lithic evidence to the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic (Hughes and Rosseff 1995). Other Early Neolithic evidence comes from the River Trent at Hemington where a possible fishweir was located dated to 3200 Cal BC (Clay and Salisbury 1990). If the interpretation is correct this is the earliest fishweir in the country.

Early Neolithic monuments are few. Until recently there were no known causewayed enclosures in the two counties. One has now been located following geophysical survey targeting a flint scatter in the south of Leicestershire at Husbands Bosworth. Subsequent trial trenching confirmed the interrupted ditch system and survival of some structural elements. For those who like typologies preliminary indications suggest a type 3 closely-grouped concentric circuit similar to an example from Alewas in Staffordshire, although it also has some affinities with its former nearest neighbour, Briar Hill (Palmer 1976).

Ploughed out long barrows or long enclosures are suggested from cropmarks at Misterton, Ketton and Harston (Loveday 1980; Loveday and Petchey 1982). No cursus monuments are known from either Leicestershire or Rutland.

Sixty-one stone axes are known from the two counties, 46% from locations with clay substrata. The only early Neolithic pottery from the two counties is Grimston ware from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ceremonial site at Oakham (below, Gibson 1998).

### **Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age**

The Late Neolithic evidence from Croft and Kirby Muxloe indicate woodland with Lime in common with other comparable South Midlands sites. The former shows a post-elm decline mixed woodland with slight evidence of human activity (2280-2050 Cal BC).

Plant remains, including bread wheat, barley and hazelnut shell are known from the late Neolithic pit circle site at Oakham (Monckton 1995; 1998) while crab apples have recently been found in an Early Bronze Age context at Castle Donington. The earliest evidence of spelt wheat is from charred remains from a pit cluster at Lockington (c.1750 Cal BC; Monckton 1995). Bone assemblages are rare with only small assemblages from Oakham and Sproxton dating from this period. These included cattle, sheep, pig, red and roe deer and small mammal species which, at Oakham, suggested proximity to woodland. Auroch bones are known from a palaeochannel at Birstall although, at present, lacking a firm date. Pre-

barrow arable and pastoral phases at Sproxton were noted above, while pre-barrow ploughing was also suggested from Lockington (Posnansky 1955).

While the overall Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age SMR evidence appears greater than that for the early Neolithic when analysed there is in fact little difference in interpreting the core areas. Twenty-five core areas are suggested from lithic scatters, the highest proportion occurring from boulder clay areas. These are situated at a lower mean altitude (104.3 OD), are slightly further from a water source (0.41km) and 48% favour south-facing slopes. The case studies show an increase in core area density (one per 1.5 sq km for Misterton; 3.6 sq km for Medbourne) during the Late Neolithic-Earlier Bronze Age with an apparent bias towards boulder clay and Liassic Clay valley side locations.

Ceremonial areas are mainly known from cropmarks and show a wide variety of form. Pit circles are known from Rearsby and Oakham, the latter showing a sequence of pit enclosures associated with Late Neolithic Impressed Wares (Clay 1998). A Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age post alignment and mortuary enclosure has been located at Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998). No true henges are recorded although how interruptions to a ring-ditch can suddenly turn it into a henge has always been a mystery to me.

250 ring-ditches are known from cropmarks, 27 showing evidence of surviving mounds. Examples have been excavated at Cossington, Lockington (2), Melton Mowbray, Sproxton and Tixover. At Sproxton and Eaton multi-phase round barrows with timber circle phases and detailed pre-burial and burial sequences have been examined including possible evidence for excarnation (Clay 1981).

Neolithic pottery has been elusive in Leicestershire although recently it has been far more in evidence. Grooved Ware is known from Kirby Muxloe, Melton Mowbray, Syston, Thurmaston and Wanlip while Peterborough Ware has been found at Castle Donington, Enderby, Husbands Bosworth and Oakham. Beaker pottery is known from several locations while Collared Urns and food vessels are relatively common.

Metalwork has been found as stray finds or associated with other material, often in Beaker contexts. Of note is the remarkable group from Lockington and its equally remarkable early date placing it into the Late Neolithic (and pre-dating the barrow; Hughes 1996).

### **Middle Bronze Age**

Pollen, insect and plant macrofossil analyses from a Middle Bronze Age palaeochannel at Croft sees a change from the mixed woodland of the Neolithic with an increase in Alder while grass pollen, cereal pollen and plant remains suggest some nearby cultivated or disturbed land. At Castle Donington similar environmental information from a Middle Bronze Age palaeochannel shows limited woodland and an increase in meadow land and pasture land species.

Middle Bronze Age evidence is mainly in the form of metalwork, pottery and lithics. There are no known settlement sites from this period although some of the Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age core areas identified above may continue into the Middle Bronze Age. Similarly some barrows and ring-ditches included under the Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age category may date from this period and re-use of Early Bronze Age ceremonial sites in the Middle Bronze Age is known from various sites including examples from Castle Donington, Cossington, Melton Mowbray and Tixover. Flat cemeteries are known from Cossington and Melton Mowbray with other possible examples from Barwell and Stathern.

Burnt mounds have been recorded at Birstall and Castle Donington, the former associated with a timber bridge. Butchered cattle bones from adjacent palaeochannels at both these sites might suggest that cooking/feasting may have been taking place, although this is not the perceived wisdom from the burnt mound centre in the West Midlands.

Middle Bronze Age metalwork, all from stray finds, includes side-looped spearheads, palstaves and long-bladed rapiers.

### **Conclusion**

Contrary to traditional views the Neolithic and Bronze Age in Leicestershire and Rutland is comparable with many other lowland regions. Despite having what are perceived as unattractive soils, where survey has been undertaken, these do not appear to have been a barrier to exploitation during these periods. The undisturbed forest soils above clay soils may not have been very different from those above other substrata and would only begin to cause problems following a period of cultivation. They may even have been preferred locations during the climatic optimum in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. The east, an area of low rainfall, may have seen even less during this period and the clay soils' qualities of water retention may have been a positive advantage. Rather than substrata the proximity to water appears to have been the main environmental factor influencing core area location. Transient activity does appear to be taking place on the interfluvies - perhaps by transhumant groups using seasonal pasture.

In moving towards a research agenda/framework the data might be tested against some other current theoretical models. In examining the Neolithic-Bronze Age for the East Midlands John Barrett's model (1994) for long fallow cultivation in the Early Neolithic with short fallow more intensive cultivation in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age repeatedly seemed to fit. Have we, here, an essentially hunter-gatherer economy supplemented by long fallow cultivation in the Early Neolithic? Is the difficulty in separating the Late Mesolithic from the Early Neolithic because there was not much difference in their economies and material culture (Young 1988)?

Floodplain areas close to river and stream confluences are increasingly being recognised as possible ritual centres (Brown forthcoming b). The importance of the Trent, and in particular the area between its confluences with the Derwent and Soar, as a focus of settlement, ritual and communication is an ongoing research theme. Although its wider context is unclear, we cannot ignore the implications of the quality of the Late Neolithic metalwork from Lockington and what it might tell us about the social status of its owner(s).

The wider role of metalwork and the how flint technologies continued into the Middle Bronze Age (and later ?) are other questions worth pursuing.

However, we are still lacking base-line data for these and other periods. While PPG16 work is producing excellent data for the gravel terraces, and now the floodplains, we are still not getting a handle on the land use of the valleys and interfluvies. More survey is still needed targeting different landscape zones with transects across valleys (rather than along them) using methodologies which are systematic, consistent and compatible with those used in other areas.

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