

Landscapes, monuments and social practices in the late 4th and 3rd millennia BC: a survey

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Introduction

The South East region, in comparison with regions such as Wessex, has often been seen as relatively impoverished in terms of the presence of ‘classic’ Middle and Late Neolithic monuments such as cursuses and henges (both absent) (Drewett *et al.* 1988, 63-79), and material culture types such as Peterborough Ware and Grooved Ware (very rare) (*ibid*). In the last two decades, however, this picture has changed radically as new discoveries have increased significantly the number of sites of these periods, and demonstrated the existence, for example, of both henges and widespread Grooved Ware pit deposits within the region. Although the overall density of sites and find spots is still relatively low, the increasing pace at which new discoveries are being made, especially in the context of large-scale development projects, suggests that we are at a turning point in Middle and Late Neolithic studies in the South East. Moreover, some of the sites concerned are important not only regionally but nationally (e.g. the very rare Late Neolithic buildings at White Horse Stone, Kent), which suggests that the South East in future will figure far more prominently in wider discussions of cultural life and social change in the late 4th and 3rd millennia BC.

Some reflection of this changing research context is provided by papers in the most recent work on the Neolithic of south-east England, *Towards a New Stone Age* (Cotton & Field (eds) 2004), although this volume does not include regional surveys of the evidence and the exceptionally important Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) data was not available at the time of publication. County-scale surveys of the evidence have been enhanced significantly by a full review of the Kent evidence by Tim Champion (2007), a partial re-evaluation of the Neolithic of Surrey (Cotton 2004a; cf. Field & Cotton 1987) and briefer considerations of aspects of the Sussex evidence (e.g. Garwood 2003, 56-7).

This paper summarises what is known about the Middle, Late and Final Neolithic periods in south-east England, focussing on monuments and other kinds of site data such as pit groups. There are separate discussions of the ceramic evidence by Alistair Barclay (this web site), and of the lithic evidence by Matt Leivers (this web site). In addition, there is a detailed discussion by Keith Parfitt of the henge monument at Ringlemere, Kent (this web site; cf. Parfitt 2006a). The distribution maps shown here, it is important to note, are works in progress that will be up-dated in preparation for full publication of the South East region resource assessment volume and other research papers (Garwood in preparation).

The Middle Neolithic (c.3400–2900 BC)

Distribution maps produced only 20 years ago were almost devoid of Middle Neolithic sites in the South East region (e.g. see Drewett *et al.* 1988, fig.3.1). Indeed, only in the last 10 years has there been a major increase in finds, primarily as a result of large-scale development projects (notably along the route of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and in the Thames valley) as well as greater sensitivity to the identification of pit deposits and other sites dating to this period. These finds have not, however, had an effect on the overall pattern of distribution, marked especially by the lack of Middle Neolithic evidence from most parts of the Weald,

other than the Greensand ridges and adjacent areas (Figure 1). This is consistent with the overall distribution of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites and finds in the region spanning the 4th-2nd millennia BC (see Figures 2, 3; cf. Drewett *et al.* 1988, figs.2.1, 3.1, 4.1; Gardiner 1990).

Monuments that belong definitely to the Middle Neolithic include three ring ditches in the middle Thames valley at Ashford (Carew *et al.* 2006), Manor Farm, Lower Horton (Ford & Pine 2003), and Staines Road Farm, Shepperton (Jones 1990). These vary considerably in size, form and material deposits (including birch bark containers at Manor Farm), although large Peterborough Ware assemblages were recovered from all three sites. Despite the exceptionally rare inhumation burials of women in the ditch at Staines Road Farm (one of whom probably came from a lead-rich area such as the Mendips), these sites certainly do not represent ‘cemeteries’ and are best interpreted as small ceremonial enclosures which may – or may not – have had some funerary role. Discoveries of Middle Neolithic ring ditches are relatively rare but widespread in southern Britain, and it is likely that some of the many undated ring ditches known in the region belong to this period. Elsewhere in the region, the only monument that has sometimes been regarded as Middle Neolithic is the Alfriston oval barrow, but serious problems with the dating of both the monument and inhumation burial are widely recognised (see Drewett 2003, 41; cf. Healy, this web site).

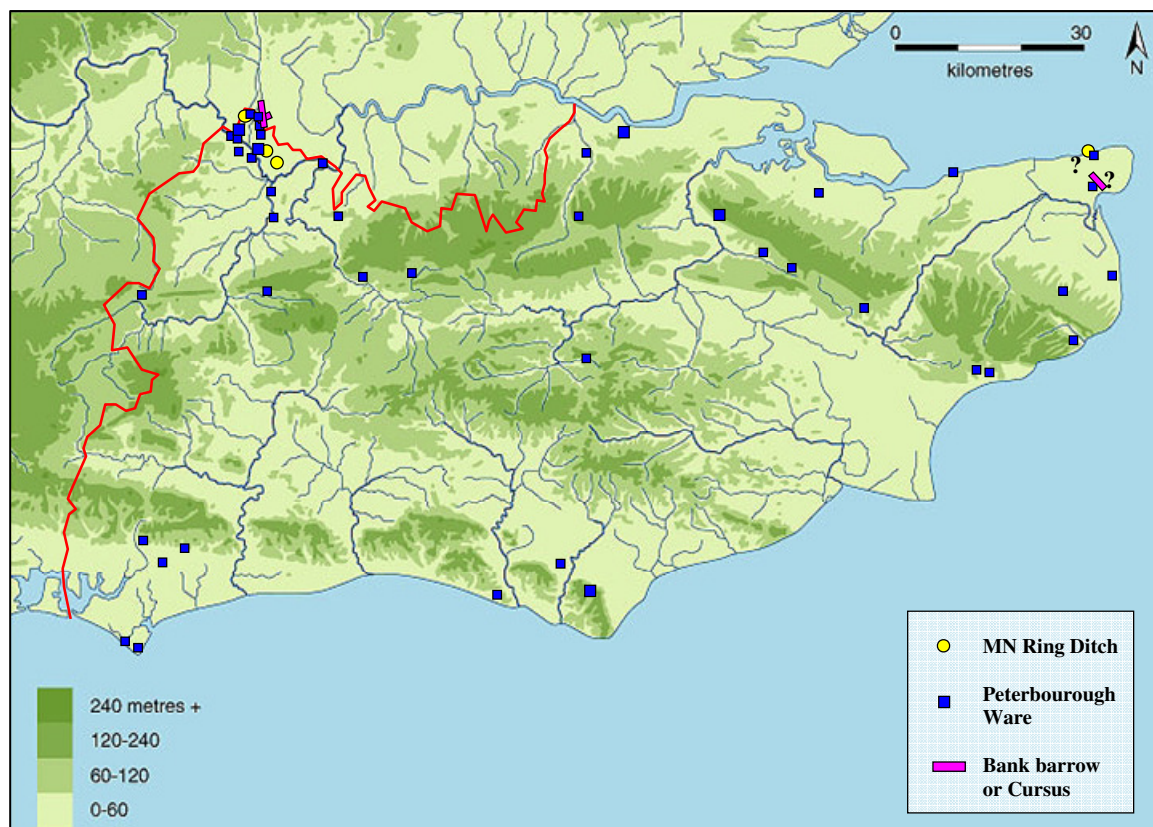


Figure 1: Middle Neolithic monuments and Peterborough Ware finds in the South East region

At present, the large linear monuments that typify the Middle Neolithic in most regions of southern Britain – cursuses, ‘long mortuary enclosures’ and bank barrows – are largely absent from the South East. The main exceptions are the Stanwell bank barrow and associated long enclosures on the edge of the study area at Perry Oaks (Framework Archaeology 2006, 47-81). It is possible that the long enclosure at Tollgate, Kent, is Middle Neolithic in date, but it is equally plausible that this and other similar sites within the region are plough-truncated Early Neolithic long barrows (see Healy, this web site). There is also the faint possibility that the linear ditches which cut across the area of the causewayed enclosure at Chalk Hill,

Ramsgate, are part of a cursus (see Dyson *et al.* 2000). The rarity of large linear monuments of this period may well, however, be more apparent than real: as recent discoveries in areas such as the West Midlands have shown (Ray 2007, 61-2), close scrutiny of air photographic data and new large-scale development projects can quickly transform both distribution maps and our expectations about the presence and preservation of prehistoric monuments.

It is important to emphasise, while allowing for the possibility of major monument discoveries in the future, that the majority of Middle Neolithic sites in south-east England consist of Peterborough Ware finds from non-monumental contexts such as pits. At present, the only detailed assessment of Peterborough Ware deposition and site contexts in the region relates to the concentration of finds in the Middle Thames area in Surrey and Greater London (Cotton 2004b), although increasing numbers of Middle Neolithic pit deposits elsewhere suggest widespread distribution in most parts of the region except for the central Weald (Figure 1; see also Barclay, this web site). In most cases, the number of sherds present is very small, for example at White Horse Stone, Kent (Hayden forthcoming), and Malling Hill, East Sussex (Allen 1995, 29-31), but there are also instances where complete or near-complete vessels were carefully placed in pits, as at Selmeston, East Sussex (Drewett 1975), and Hengrove Farm, Staines, Surrey (Howe *et al.* 2000, 195). Peterborough Ware has also been recovered from a diverse range of other depositional contexts such as the Thames foreshore (Cotton 2004b), buried land surfaces (e.g. at Mixnam's Pit, Surrey; Grimes 1960), and from valley bottom peat and river sediments at Ebbsfleet, Kent (Burchell & Piggott 1939). In some cases these deposits may relate to occupation activity, although the nature of this in terms of social organisation, residence patterns and economic activities remains unknown.

The purpose of pit deposits, in particular, is much debated, especially in terms of 'utilitarian' as opposed to 'ritual' explanations, and in relationship to settlement organisation and economic activity, but there seems little question that most derived from deliberate acts of assemblage and purposeful spatially-structured deposition; in other words, the outcomes of 'special' practices rather than a matter of everyday routine (Thomas 1999, 64-74; Harding 2006). This does not remove the possibility that some of these depositional acts took place within or close to occupation areas, although it is notable that the majority of Peterborough Ware deposits have been found near structures that were already ancient in the Middle Neolithic (e.g. at White Horse Stone, Kent, and Combe Hill and Whitehawk causewayed enclosures in East Sussex), and/or in areas that are usually assumed to have been 'marginal' to the main areas of farming and thus settlement on the chalk downlands (i.e. in supposed woodlands around the fringes of the Weald, on the Sussex coastal plain, and so forth).

The Late Neolithic (c.2900–2500 BC)

Until very recently, the Late Neolithic period in the South East was notable for its near-absence: 'classic' monument types were unknown (i.e. henges, 'hengiform' sites such as pit circles, and timber circles), while 'typical' material culture categories were almost non-existent in the region (especially Grooved Ware) (see Drewett *et al.* 1988, 66-8, 70). In the last 20 years, however, this picture has been transformed in the light of new discoveries, largely in the course of large-scale development projects, primarily but not exclusively in Kent. Although high-quality site information is still limited, there is no question that this new evidence demonstrates not only the presence but also the very great research potential of Late Neolithic monuments and material culture assemblages within the region. The distribution of known Late Neolithic sites (see Figure 2), however, remains thin (the Weald, in particular, is almost devoid of finds other than lithic scatters and axe finds) and geographically uneven, with a marked concentration of sites and finds in east Kent, and some important clusters in the Medway valley and around Chichester in West Sussex, but relatively little elsewhere.

In contrast with the abundant evidence for Early Neolithic enclosure sites and other kinds of monumental architecture in south-east England (see Healy, this web site), the absence of Late Neolithic monuments – which elsewhere provide the basis for most interpretations of cultural life in this period – has been regarded as both puzzling and exceptional. Explanations have ranged from a lack of fieldwork, through site recognition problems (especially in relation to air photographic data and/or geo-environmental constraints) to regional cultural variation. Attempts to ‘find’ putative henges in Sussex by broadening the definition of the term, and re-interpreting early ring ditches or poorly-dated enclosure sites accordingly, have produced questionable results to say the least (e.g. Russell 1996, 1997; cf. Garwood 2003, 56-7).

It is still the case, in this context, that early 3rd millennium BC henges and related monuments appear to be missing from the South Downs, although the earliest ring ditch at Lavant, with antler picks on its base, may belong to this period (Turner 1997; cf. Garwood 2003, 60, fig 5.8). The Neolithic ring ditches on the South Downs identified by Russell (1996) are not well-dated, but are probably Final Neolithic ‘open arena’ sites which - unlike henges - had some kind of role in mortuary practices (see Garwood 2007, 34-6). In Kent, however, there is now a definite henge site with a single entrance and external bank at Ringlemere, associated with a very large Grooved Ware assemblage (see Parfitt, this web site). Several more possible Late Neolithic monuments have been identified nearby from aerial photographs, for example at Tilmanstone, while numerous finds of Grooved Ware are known from the wider area between Thanet and Dover (Parfitt 2006b). At present, however, the suggested henges’ in Thanet are unconvincing: the earliest phase of Lord of the Manor Site I (MacPherson-Grant 1977), for example, *might* be Late Neolithic in date (based on a few re-deposited Grooved Ware sherds), but there is no evidence for an entrance, or for internal structures or material deposits usually associated with henges. Elsewhere in the region, the ‘probable’ henge near Bredgar is now thought to be doubtful (Martyn Barber, pers. comm.), and there is only a remote possibility based on vague 19th century accounts that a stone circle once existed at Church Hill, Brighton.

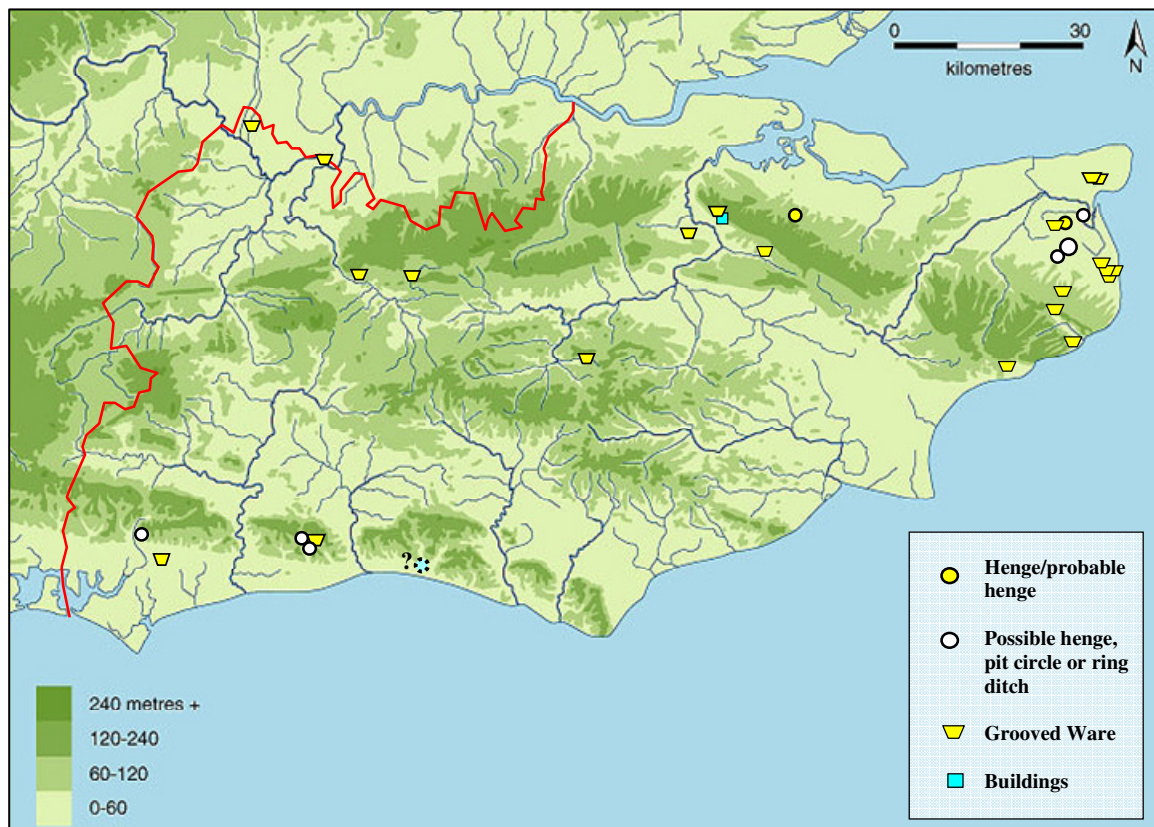


Figure 2: Late Neolithic monuments and Grooved Ware finds in the South East region

Perhaps the most striking change in distribution maps of Late Neolithic evidence in the South East is the proliferation of Grooved Ware finds (see Barclay, this web site). Whereas in 1988 this ceramic type seemed to barely present in the region at all (Drewett *et al.* 1988, 66-8), by 1999 a significant number of Grooved Ware finds were recorded in Kent, with a few in Surrey and Sussex (Longworth & Cleal 1999), and more have been recorded since, notably from Channel Tunnel Rail Link sites, at Ringlemere, Kent, and at Westhampnett, West Sussex. The majority of these derive from pit contexts (the interpretative issues relating to which were discussed above). A recurrent pattern is the occurrence of adjacent pits in pairs or groups of three, containing Grooved Ware sherds and other materials. There are several pit groups of this kind at White Horse Stone, Kent (Hayden forthcoming), and there is another well-excavated example at Betchworth, Surrey (Williams 2004). This spatial pattern could mark sequences of single but related pit-digging events, but it is notable that within triple-pit arrangements two pits are often found to be relatively deep while the third is shallow, which may point to recurrent series of activities structured around two or more open pits. It is worth noting that *pairs* of pits have also been found cutting through structural elements of several of the Late Neolithic houses excavated recently at Durrington Walls near Stonehenge: these have been interpreted as outcomes of ritual acts concerned with house abandonment (Mike Parker Pearson, pers. comm.). It is an intriguing possibility that paired or triple-pit groups containing Grooved Ware found in the South East mark the locations of truncated Late Neolithic houses.

The two circular post-built Late Neolithic buildings excavated at White Horse Stone, at the south-east end of the Early Neolithic timber long hall (Hayden forthcoming), are presently unique within the region and exceptionally rare at a national scale. One of these comprises a 3.2 m diameter ring of relatively substantial posts (Structure 5297) while the other is larger, c.3.8 m diameter, with less substantial posts and an internal partition (Structure 19140); in both cases the post rings may mark inner roof-bearing structures of somewhat larger buildings (*ibid*). Whether these were ‘houses’ is uncertain: neither, for example, were associated with hearths and there was little sign of occupation debris, although the floor levels had probably been truncated by subsequent erosion processes. Notably, the more substantial of the two buildings had a group of three pits on the outside, just to the south-east of the post ring and possibly on the line of an external wall. The implications of these discoveries for Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement archaeology in the region are discussed further below.

The Final Neolithic (Chalcolithic) (c.2500-2150 BC)

The evidence for early Beaker graves and funerary practices in the late 3rd millennium BC are discussed in another paper (Garwood, this web site b), but some general comments need emphasising here in relation to social and cultural change during the Final Neolithic. Despite considerable disagreement about how best to interpret the Beaker evidence, there is a growing consensus that the appearance of copper metallurgy in Britain and Beaker single grave burial practices are indeed broadly contemporary (from c.2500 BC). These are associated both with marked changes in the use of pre-existing ceremonial architecture, new emphasis on funerary monuments, and a new cultural land- and sea-scapes involving long-distance movements of people and maritime interactions (in stark contrast to the extreme insularity of southern Britain during the Middle and Late Neolithic; see Needham, this web site). Terms such as ‘Final Neolithic’ and (more contentiously) ‘Chalcolithic’ are now gaining wider currency as the very distinctive character of this period is recognised, both in relation to the cultural world of the early 3rd millennium BC, and the period from c.2150 BC when bronze metallurgy became dominant, single-grave burial practices increasingly common and diverse, and round barrow funerary monuments came to dominate the cultural landscape.

Our understanding of cultural change in the late 3rd millennium BC has been considerably enhanced by new assessments of the chronology and cultural significance of early Beaker

ceramics and funerary practices, notably by Stuart Needham (2005; and see Bradley 2007, 142-53). The limited evidence for very early Beaker burials is striking: there is no sign of either mass migration from the continent, nor for sweeping religious ‘conversions’. Instead, these burials appear to be very unusual events (see Figure 3), focussed spatially on pre-existing ceremonial foci, and it is possible that their significance related more to socially-circumscribed political strategies than to wider religious or community-oriented traditions. The rarity of early metalwork finds (see Barber, this web site) further reinforces the sense that social changes, insofar as they related to metal production, circulation and consumption, were perhaps far less generalised or pervasive than often assumed.

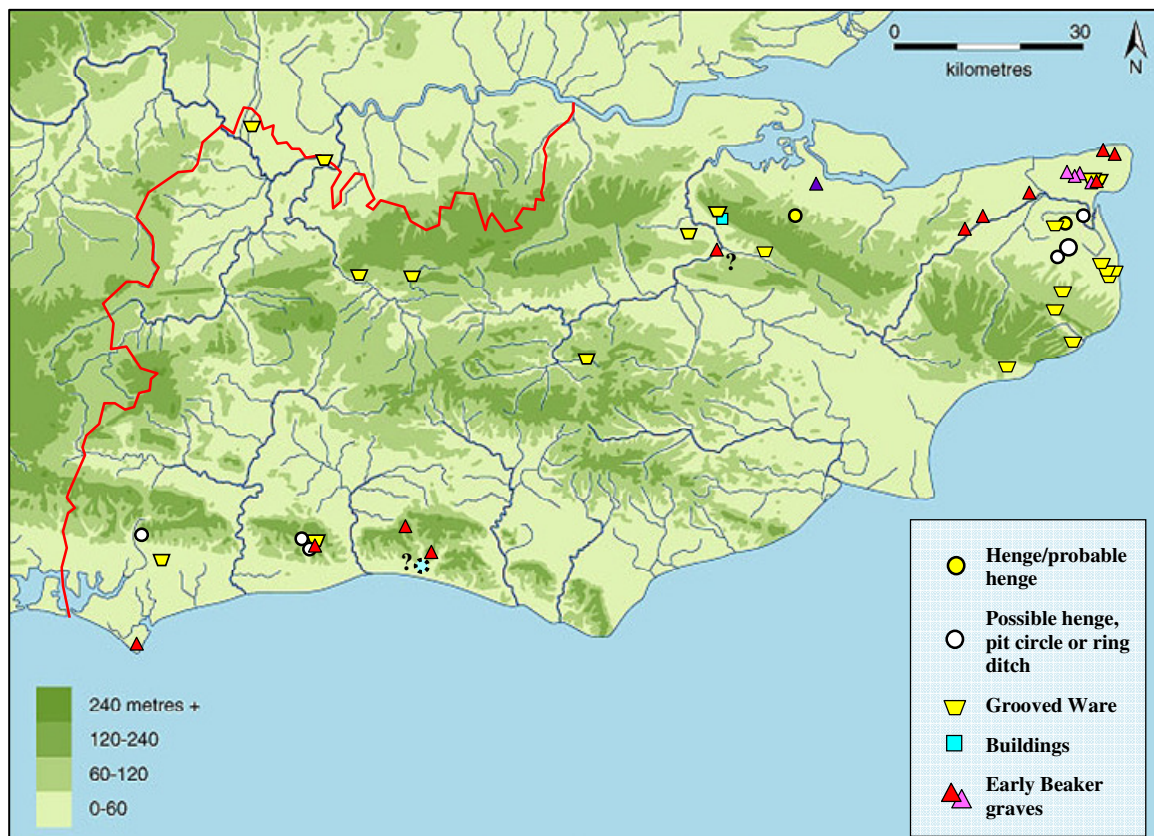


Figure 3: Final Neolithic early Beaker graves in the context of Late Neolithic monuments and Grooved Ware finds in the South East region

Critical to this interpretative debate, however, is an understanding of the nature of routine forms of social agency and interaction (e.g. in everyday economic practices, and social activities at occupation sites; cf. Bradley 2007, 150-2), yet it is precisely these aspects of the evidence that are most ephemeral and ambiguous. Some previous excavations, allied with more recent discoveries, do seem to offer tantalising glimpses of the settlement archaeology of the late 3rd millennium BC, but in wider interpretative terms these seem to point to the research *potential* rather than current value of the evidence. Perhaps most important, in this context, is the work of Mike Allen, Martin Bell and Richard Bradley on the South Downs, where Beaker-associated activity has been recorded in a large number of sub-colluvial contexts in dry valley locations (Bell 1983, Allen 2005), and in one hilltop setting at Belle Tout, where there is evidence for buildings, a midden, and work areas within a probable stock enclosure, associated with a very large ‘domestic’ Beaker assemblage (Bradley 1970, 1982). The Holywell Coombe sites in east Kent, which have produced evidence for a hollow way, fence lines and middens, and - after Belle Tout - the largest Beaker ceramic assemblages in south-east England (Bennett *et al.* 1998), provide additional insights into subsistence and settlement practices to set alongside the Sussex data. Combined, this diverse range of

evidence suggests the existence of a complex, multi-faceted settlement system, with durable components (e.g. enclosures, boundaries, eroded route ways, etc), that indicate sustained modes of economic practice, while at the same time dispersed and perhaps less durable occupation sites, which may indicate variation in residence patterns and some degree of residential mobility, at least on a seasonal basis (cf. Pollard 1999; Whittle 1997).

Although these sites mostly lack precise dating evidence (all belong broadly to the period c.2500-1800 BC), what they show is the enormous research potential of occupation sites in the South East region, especially in valley situations where they have been protected from erosion and ploughing by colluvial deposits. Moreover, it would be very surprising if similar sites did not exist also beneath alluvium in river valleys within the region. Although it should come as no surprise, this evidence does suggest that we should be looking for settlement and other kinds of occupation sites mostly in sheltered valley locations where there was access to fresh water sources.

Regional perspectives on the evidence

It is possible to characterise aspects of the Middle, Late and Final Neolithic evidence in broad spatial terms and in relation to recognised material categories, especially as a rough measure of presence and absence. Overall, there is no question that geographical distributions of the known evidence are very uneven, with some continuity in terms of the rarity of sites and finds in the Weald (Gardiner 1990), but also change over time (e.g. in the Middle Thames valley in Surrey which has a relatively dense concentration of Middle Neolithic finds but very few Late Neolithic finds). Clearly, there is a fundamental need to investigate large-scale spatial configurations of the evidence to determine whether these are the product of ancient cultural diversity (e.g. with respect to different modes of land use, social organisations, or cultural repertoires and values, etc), differential processes of site destruction or obscuration, and/or archaeological biases in terms of investigation and data recovery.

There are several obvious empirical and practical issues that arise in this context, which hitherto have attracted very little concerted attention but which affect seriously both investigative methodologies and research agenda:

- The visibility and accessibility of prehistoric sites in present woodlands and gorse-covered heathlands needs to be addressed, especially given the ineffectiveness of conventional air photographic survey over such areas (i.e. large tracts of the Weald, eastern North Downs and western South Downs). High-resolution LiDAR survey may be a way forward.
- Urban areas should not be dismissed with regard to the presence of prehistoric evidence (as the discovery of the Greyhound Yard palisade enclosure in Dorchester town centre and round barrows in Oxford clearly demonstrate): the likelihood of sites being present in towns throughout the region should be taken seriously in site evaluations.
- The presence throughout the region of extensive alluviated areas in river valleys and colluvial deposits, and the demonstrable presence of well-preserved prehistoric sites in such contexts, demands the development of more effective predictive modelling techniques and new site prospection and excavation methods.
- The maritime geography of the South East presents significant challenges to site location and recording, both in terms of destructive erosion processes (offshore and onshore) and obscuration by silting and inundation. Predictive modelling and effective site prospection and recording techniques in all maritime and estuarine contexts are still in their infancy, but are clearly essential for making sense of prehistory in the region.
- Assessments of sampling strategies in rural landscapes have demonstrated that in order to identify prehistoric sites it is necessary to use especially narrow sample intervals for

surface collection and test pit surveys, and a minimum 6-10% sampling level for evaluation purposes (e.g. by trenching) (see Hey and Lacey 2001). In other words, standard sampling methods for recording sites of later periods often fail to identify earlier prehistoric sites.

- ‘Strip, map and sample’ excavation methodologies have proved extremely effective for identifying and making sense of prehistoric site evidence, which is often dispersed and very difficult to recognise in vertical sections and small trenches. This approach is recommended wherever development projects are being undertaken. It may also, it is important to emphasise, be the only effective means of establishing the presence and character of Neolithic activity in parts of the region marked by especially low-intensity dispersed occupation in prehistory (e.g. in the Weald). Considerable caution is required, however, in contexts where there is the possible presence of ancient land surfaces and deposits sealed beneath colluvium or other superficial layers. As recent discoveries of Neolithic buildings have shown, these structures are extremely thinly-stratified (e.g. floor layers and hearths no more than 0.02-0.05 m in thickness) and may have only the most insubstantial of foundations such as stake holes and wall slots: the slightest disturbance by machining is thus likely to destroy them completely. This again emphasises the importance of sensitive site evaluation techniques and familiarity of site personnel with the particular character of earlier prehistoric evidence.

In cultural landscape terms, it is also apparent that some geo-environmental zones that existed in prehistory present special interpretative challenges, either because they were subject to especially complex environmental processes or/and because social practices in such areas were more likely to involve less durable material culture than practices in other areas. Two particular landscape zones stand out:

- Coasts: the impacts of rises and falls in sea level, and associated environmental changes, on coastal, estuarine and inland settlement and economic regimes in the course of the Neolithic.
- Woodlands: the extent and character of ancient woodlands and how these were occupied, traversed, exploited, modified and/or avoided by prehistoric populations.

Turning to site and material categories, it is possible to draw attention to significant ‘gaps’ in the known evidence in comparison with what is known from other regions of southern and eastern England. We know that Middle Neolithic ring ditches, Peterborough Ware and Grooved Ware pit deposits, Late Neolithic buildings, small henge monuments, and early Beaker graves and occupation sites are all present in the region (albeit mostly in small numbers and with varying degrees of preservation and material complexity). What we have not seen (yet) are cursus monuments, large henge enclosures, palisade enclosures and complex timber and pit circles. Re-examination of existing aerial photographic records and new surveys may prove especially rewarding in this context, especially for landscape zones in which prehistoric monuments can be abundant, as shown in other regions, such as major river floodplains and terraces (e.g. the Medway and Stour in Kent).

Key research themes

Research agenda for the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are outlined elsewhere (Garwood, this website b), but several key research themes can be identified here:

- Chronology and temporality: there is a need to develop high-resolution chronologies for architectural construction sequences, practices and tempos of social change, especially in the context of new developments in radiocarbon dating and analysis and far more precise kinds of periodisation.

- The nature and significance of social change, especially in the mid-3rd millennium BC in relation to the adoption of metallurgy and Beaker-associated burial practices.
- Migration, in the generic sense of movement of persons or small groups within, and into, the region: this theme relates to evidence for a high degree of geographical and perhaps social mobility experienced by individuals within their life times.
- Settlement, residential mobility and sedentism: new discoveries of Neolithic settlement sites have re-ignited intense debates concerning the nature and organization of occupation sites, economic regimes and social structures.
- Sacred places and landscapes: the supposed zonation of Neolithic landscapes into ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ domains, and the development of ceremonial centres, possibly with political as well as religious implications (e.g. in terms of territoriality, religious communities, forms of cosmography, etc.), have been key themes in Neolithic studies in other regions, but have been evaluated only rarely in relation to the South East, especially at a local landscape/ceremonial complex scale.
- Architecture and society: there are now more possibilities for investigating social practices related to several different kinds of Middle, Late and Final Neolithic architecture (such as henges and timber buildings), including use of phenomenological and virtual environment research methods.
- Death and cultural construction: while mortuary evidence has figured very prominently in Neolithic studies, both for social and cultural interpretation, the Middle and Late Neolithic are notable for the extreme rarity of such evidence, at least until the appearance of Beaker graves. Identification of burials of these periods would thus provide exceptional opportunities for investigating the social significance and symbolism of mortuary practices, with immediate relevance to research questions at a national scale.
- The past as media, resource or threat is a relatively new research theme in British prehistoric studies (cf. Bradley 2002). Although it is clear that social practices in the late 4th and 3rd millennia BC took place within landscapes with long cultural histories, already occupied by monuments and other remnants of past cultural activities, their conceptualization and referencing by people during the Middle, Late and Final Neolithic (e.g. through re-use of ancient sites and materials) remain little understood.

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