

Prehistory In and Around Shrivenham and Watchfield

(Part 1 – the Background)

Margaret Andrews May 2020

As many will know there has been a lot of excavation in Shrivenham and Watchfield in recent years ahead of development. Many of the finds have related to the “prehistoric” period, in particular the Iron Age. My aim with this and the next mini-presentation is to try to bring this together for you.

Before diving into the Iron Age finds it seems appropriate to give some background about what is meant by prehistory, and terms such as Iron Age and Neolithic and how they fit together, as well as looking at this area before the Iron Age.

Before starting a quick word about dating. One of the questions uppermost in peoples’ minds when discussing prehistory is “when are we talking about”? And how do we know if there are no written records?

To deal with the second question first. The first and most important method is what is known as typology. Huge amounts of work have been done on understanding the chronology of different artefacts. For this pottery is particularly important. This is why someone is able to look at a scrap of pot sherd and pronounce it to be “Roman” or “middle Iron Age” or whatever. Coins can be particularly exciting as finds as they can give quite close dates. However in Britain coins were not used until right at the end of the prehistoric period, just before the Roman invasion.

Sites are dug with chronology in mind. If item A is found at the top of a pit and item B is found at the bottom, then B must have gone in first assuming the pit is undisturbed. This is what all of the meticulous trowelling and recording is about when you visit a dig.

Lastly there are the various scientific methods. These all have individual drawbacks not least expense. Radiocarbon (or Carbon-14) dating can be applied if there is suitable organic material and is probably the most well-known. With large enough wooden remains tree ring dating may be useful. There are various other methods for example hearths can sometimes be dated in reference to the earths changing magnetic polarity, and buried stone may be dated by the electron polarity when it last saw light (optical luminescence dating) (This last was how the White Horse was dated). But mostly things are dated by typology; and particularly pottery typology.

Prehistory is just that; the period before written records. Traditionally prehistorians in Britain take their most recent event as being the Roman invasion of 43AD. This was described by Roman historians but as far as Britain goes generally written history is something of a hit and miss, for the next thousand years.

Prehistorians talk traditionally about several periods, starting with the stone ages. This subdivides into the Paleolithic (old stone age), Mesolithic (middle stone age) and Neolithic (new stone age). These are followed by the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, each of which gets subdivided into early middle and late.

None of the people living at these times knew that they were living a specific age, and they are just a convenient shorthand for us. Although some major cultural change is usually seen at the boundary between these periods was this rarely abrupt, often lasting several hundred years.

As I discuss each I will give broad dates for them.

Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age)

Here the sub phases are confusingly known as lower (oldest), middle and upper (most recent).

In very broad terms the old stone-age takes us from the earliest humans up to the end of the Ice Age. At the start in the so called Lower Palaeolithic archaic humans moved into Southern Britain. You may have heard of Happisburgh (c900,000 years ago) and Boxgrove (c500,000 years ago).

During the middle Palaeolithic Europe hosted a population of early humans known as Neanderthals. Despite persistent depictions of them as club wielding savages they seem to have had a culture of tool production and there is evidence of art and care of the dead.

Around 40,000 years ago the climate started warming again for a short period as we headed into the Upper Palaeolithic before going badly downhill with the last “glacial maximum” around 18,000 years ago. Also around 40,000 years ago new group of humans arrived, the so called anatomically modern humans. Their population came and went with the changes in the climate.

The types of stone tools produced by these folk do sometimes appear in this area, particularly in the Thames gravels. They are not in situ where they were used but have been moved around by the glacial outwashes. ,

Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) c10000BC – c4400BC

Around 11,500 thousand years ago the climate started warming properly. The warmer climate enabled forests to advance and people started using different flint tools. These were smaller, indeed they are termed microliths. The people still seem to have moved around the landscape following game animals.

Around 5600BC the rising sea levels inundated the land bridge to the Continent. Some of you will have heard of Doggerland. This was the low lying plain forming this bridge across what is now the North Sea that became flooded. Events like this happened in various parts of the world at this time and there has been speculation that it was the folk memory of inundation that produced tales of a flood that appear in not just the Bible but other early legends.

You will notice that I am being somewhat vague in dates. It has to be remembered that these periods of human history lasted an extremely long time. The Mesolithic lasted in Britain around 5000-6000 thousand years. In other words not far different than from its end to now!

Neolithic (New Stone Age) c4400BC – c2200BC

Around 4400BC Britain saw the arrival of the first farmers. Whether this was an actual influx of new people or the arrival of new ideas and technology is debated and I don't propose to go there. It is the sort of topic that people have spent a whole career debating!

The consequence of farming is that people tend to stay put much more. Crops need constant attention, even if livestock are moved about the landscape to take advantage of seasonal grasses. The evidence for this period suggests that while people stayed put and built dwellings, they still moved around the landscape a great deal.

Throughout the Neolithic there appears to be a preference for the river valleys over the higher land, the most researched locally being the Thames and Kennet. There is a supposition that the land remained largely wooded with areas of clearance and that the easiest means of travel would have been along the rivers and their valleys.

The people still used stone tools but the technology changed to suit the new situations, and these do turn up locally.



This group found in tree roots near Beckett House are in the heritage centre (rather better displayed this is an old photo).



These were found locally by someone walking across a field

With settlement we start to see more debris from daily life. Pottery vessels which are not really known from Britain before the Neolithic. We also start to see societies making a mark on the landscape. If you go to Orkney you can see Neolithic houses at Skara Brae. (Orkney is definitely worth a visit for the profusion of easily accessible monuments)





Remains of houses are elusive in the South of Britain because they would have been built of perishable materials. One of the most exciting discoveries locally in the recent past has been a Neolithic longhouse at Yarnton near the Thames.

In this part of the World Neolithic visible Neolithic remains are usually the monumental, if enigmatic.

Early Neolithic c4400BC-c3300BC (c1100 years)

- Long Barrows
- Causewayed Enclosures
- Long houses
- Skara Brae in Orkney

Middle Neolithic c3300BC-c2900BC (c 400 years)

- Cursus monuments
- First stone circles
- Maes Howe in Orkney

Late Neolithic c2900BC-c2200BC (c700 years)

- Henges
- Stone “avenues”
- Stone Circles (these extend from the late Neolithic through to the Middle Bronze Age)

Long Barrows

These burial monuments generally contain the remains of a number of individuals and there is evidence that the bodies had decayed before being placed in the long barrow. In some different body parts are arranged together rather than as an individual. Attempts at reuniting parts of an individual, where it has happened, sometimes go awry. At Chippenham seven skulls all had the wrong mandible! The evidence suggests that these barrows were kept open for more remains to be deposited or may have been refashioned over time.

It is important to remember that we are seeing only a small select group of the overall population. We have no idea, why these individuals were selected to be interred this way.



The local long barrow that many of you will know is that of Waylands Smithy.

Communal burial continued through the Neolithic. The monuments sometimes having different structures, in different places. For example in middle Neolithic Orkney they became more rounded in form.

Just because I have photos here is Maes Howe in Orkney



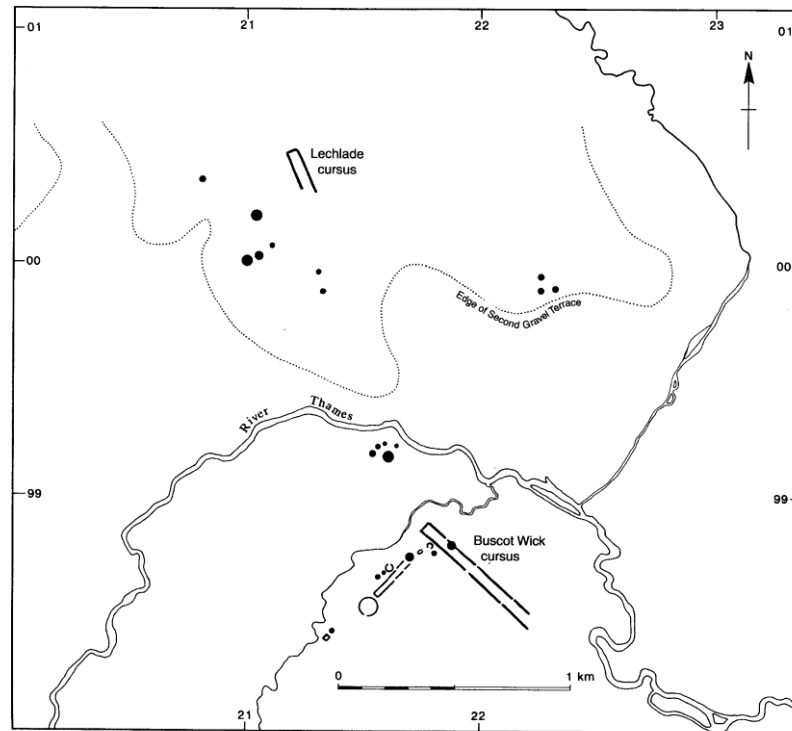
The people give some idea of its scale

Here is the interior of another smaller Orcadian communal burial mound, Cuween Hill which shows the impressive stone-laying that they were capable of. If the Orcadian Neolithic people were capable of this I suspect that our local ones were equally proficient in working materials – probably wood here.



Cursus Monuments

These bank and ditch elongated monuments are assumed to be some sort of processional way. They are frequently several hundred meters long. The Dorset cursus runs for about 10km. We have three known ones close to us; two at Buscot Wick and one on the other side of the Thames at Lechlade. These ones are not visible on the ground any longer.



(From "Lines in the Landscape", Oxford Archaeology 2004)

Henges and Stone Circles.

Henges are another enigmatic monument. One might think of Stonehenge or Avebury as examples, but to be picky henge refers to the bank and ditch part of the complex. Just about every other bank and ditch system you can think of – hillforts, castle moats etc – has the ditch on the outside of the bank, as if to defend against an external threat. In henges it is on the inside. Why? Next time you drive through Avebury have a look. Sometimes the henge alone remains in other circumstances there is a complex monument (eg Avebury, Stonehenge) with stone avenues and circles. Stone circles are remarkably common throughout Britain and often extend into the early Bronze Age. They vary in grandeur and size. Sometimes there are stone circles with no henge.

The function of these monuments has been much debated. There has been a lot of work done recently on Stonehenge. In essence the authors see these as funerary monuments. (And sadly for all of those who congregate at Stonehenge at midsummer think that its significance was for midwinter). If you are interested an hour can be whiled away googling the subject. Have a look for the Stonehenge Riverside Project, and Mike Parker Pearson.

The nearest known remains of one of these stone circles is at Coate, in Swindon. I'm afraid I have no pictures. But here are a couple elsewhere.



*The Merry Maidens – Cornwall 2500-1500BC
(dog for scale)*



The Ring of Brodgar, Orkney

Bronze Age c2200BC – c700BC

- Early Bronze Age c2200BC-1500BC Beaker culture
- Middle Bronze Age c1500BC-c1000BC
- Late Bronze Age c1000BC-700BC

The transition to the Bronze Age in Britain around 2400BC is also marked by one of those cultural shifts that occur in both history and prehistory. The so called “Beaker culture”. Long barrows went out of fashion and use, and round barrows started to appear. These often had a single, apparently high status individual surrounded by grave goods. “Bell beaker” jars, being one of the common ones.

If you would like to see the results of a recent excavation of a, very impressive, round barrow burial, google the Amesbury Archer. (e.g. <https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/our-work/amesbury-archer>)

The use of round barrows continued to be built long after the beakers went out of fashion. . Indeed it has been said of the Bronze Age that the people died but did not live as we find many round barrows but very few settlement sites. Many have been ploughed out but where they remain they are often sited just below a ridge of a hill so that they would be visible from below

If you are able to get to the woods at Ashdown House and look out to the South, you will see three on the horizon.



The ability to work copper was discovered in the Middle East. At some point early metal workers discovered that adding tin to the copper produced a harder, more useful alloy, bronze. Despite what the name suggests most people continued using stone tools, bronze being precious, and only reasonably widespread in the mid to later Bronze Age.

We do from time to time find hoards of metal objects. One such was found at Tower Hill near to Ashdown House by a dog walker (we can always hope). There was a mix of unfinished bronze axe heads and metalworking debris.



Tower Hill from the Ridgeway

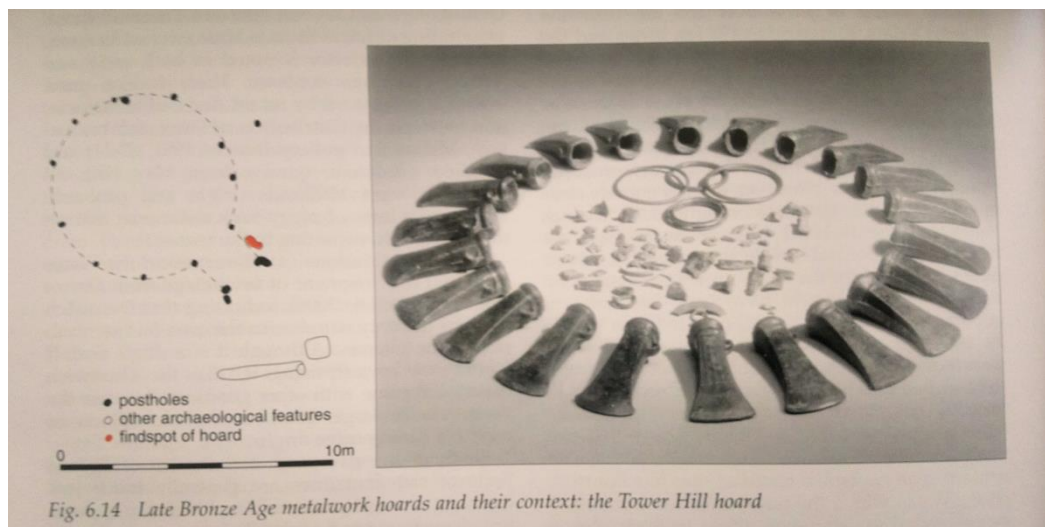


Fig. 6.14 Late Bronze Age metalwork hoards and their context: the Tower Hill hoard

(from Oxford Archaeology – Thames Through Time series)

Settlements and Land Use

Studies of early land-use and agriculture suggest a largely wooded landscape with cleared areas in the early Bronze Age much like the Neolithic. The early Bronze Age people are thought to have continued using seasonal settlements. However as time went on this woodland was cleared, particularly from the middle Bronze Age onwards, and it is thought that much of the landscape we see today in Southern Britain largely denuded of trees would not have been that unrecognisable to later Bronze Age people. Settlements became more permanent from the middle Bronze Age also and seem to have started expanding from the main river valleys (such as the Thames), up its tributaries such as the Ock and the Cole.

As far as Shrevenham and Watchfield go there is little in the way of Bronze Age remains, although odd sherds of pottery or flints do appear suggesting that Bronze Age people were here.

I will end this introduction now and move on to the Iron Age and the Highworth Road settlement in part 2.

If this all interests you the “Thames Through Time” series of books by Oxford Archaeology are definitely worth a look. Oxbow Books is currently selling these volumes off at a good price.

Otherwise:

The Oxford Illustrated Prehistory of Europe (ed Cunliffe) is also worth a look.