

The First Farming Communities

'Out of the Unknown' - but still not Out of the Woods.

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This paper is concerned with the two and a half thousand or so year period in which mixed agricultural practices gradually became increasingly central to the lives of the inhabitants of these counties, starting at some stage in the late 5th millennium BC, around 4000 B.C. It is a period that can be divided into Early Neolithic dated as 4000BC-2800BC, and the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age 2,800BC - 1500 BC (Clay 1999b, 3), the later not as easy to separate as earlier researchers had hoped, which is why they are now commonly referred to together.

The 1990s have been an important period for Neolithic Studies nationally and locally. There has been progress in both hard data and theory that together give a basis for our own reconstructions of the past. The work of the Neolithic Studies Group in organising conferences, and regularly publishing the results is to be applauded.

We are presented very much with a dichotomy for this (and other Prehistoric periods). There is a broad uniformity in the national picture of material and landscape culture in Britain as a whole - so we are tempted to extrapolate models from well researched areas - southern England, Wessex, the Thames Valley etc, onto our own. And yet, when the research in the archaeologically rich areas goes further, it shows great local variability and patterning - people inherited and nurtured their own established traditions based on their pasts, and their perceptions of their futures.

I have unashamedly drawn on the Internet published Research Frameworks documents and synthesis in the writing of this (http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/pdf_files/12leicneba.pdf), and I am thankful to Patrick Clay for his efforts. I have also incorporated more recent excavation data. Although at 25 years old the Field Workers are no longer children, I hope that as far as our archaeological understanding of the first farming communities in the County goes, we are still in our infancy. Despite all the hard work, in many areas we actually know very little. Who knows what the future holds - but if the last few years are any indication of what will be found, we can predict little.

Pete Liddle's 1982 Present State of Knowledge Volumes (Liddle 1982) were a celebration both of the archaeology of Leicestershire and Rutland and of centrally funded archaeological work. Pete covered the ground thoroughly, succinctly, and made some accurate predictions (Liddle 1982 Vol 1, 12). Our knowledge base is now broader and the pace of discovery has been accelerating particularly in the last decade - not least due to PPG16. The work of the Leicestershire Museums' Community Archaeology Groups has helped present a

broader picture in particular parts of the County and provide data for wider research.

The Problems in the search for the First Farmers

These are intertwined and to an extent self-supporting, and are essentially born from a lack of primary evidence (food stuffs and settlement remains) and a wealth of secondary evidence (monuments and flint scatters) and a wish to recognise a familiar life-style in the long distant past. The Neolithic - the New Stone Age is traditionally interpreted from European evidence as when people stopped hunting and gathering, joined the farming revolution, with at the core the ard and the axe.

FARMY BARMY

They cleared the forest, tilled the earth (which was surely light and well drained), and planted cereal crops that we still grow in some form today. The fields they forged from the wildwood were grazed by stock, descendant species of which we still farm today. To plough, sow and harvest, and to herd and tend their stock they needed a sedentary life-style that we have inherited to this day. They continued to make flint tools, and also included polished stone implements (axes, knives, sickles and chisels) recognisable as something we could use today, or at least recognise from our immediate ancestors world. They lived in long barn-like houses, made cooking pots and created surpluses with which they could support big scale monuments. The nature and speed of the transition was the focus of the argument - domination and change by immigrant farmers, or indigenous change by the local folk.

Evidence for this has been difficult to find. As a result of this patchy evidence, some archaeologists have been rethinking peoples' behaviour - perhaps gathering and hunting remained the major activities with stock husbandry an added extra and cultivation a still more marginal pursuit. Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic appear difficult to separate, with often the same areas exploited - whatever changes there were, were slow to come about, and far from uniform. Culture, tradition, kinship and memory all played their part.

Elements of the package appear here and there in the country, and are often celebrated - most notable the traces of substantial rectangular buildings at Lismore Fields, Buxton (Garton 1987), and Balbridie Grampian (Fairweather & Ralston 1993). These structures are associated with quantities of cultivated plant remains, but remain few and far between. Is this rarity solely

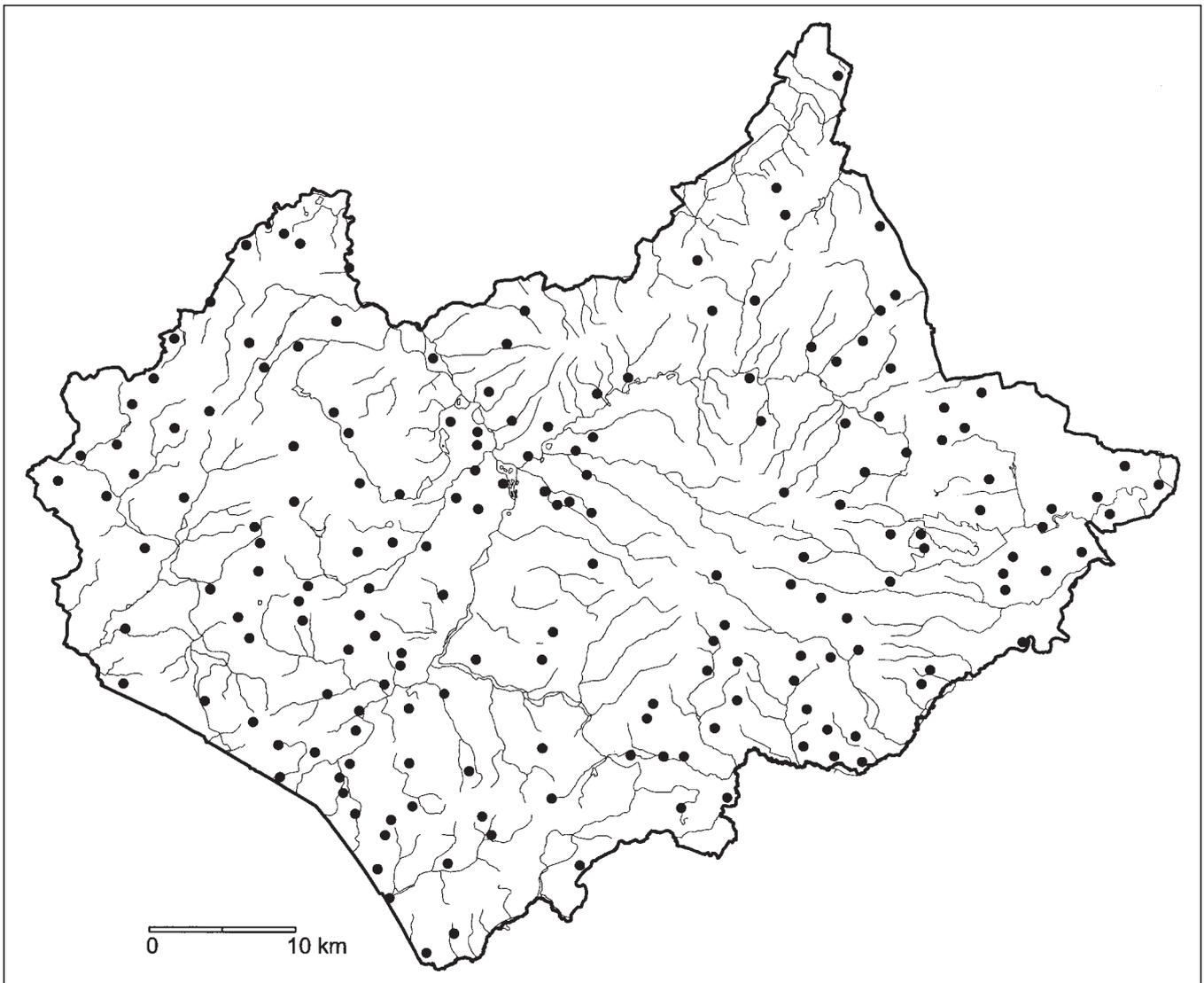


Fig. 1. Parishes with evidence of Neolithic or Bronze Age activity, Leicestershire and Rutland Sites and Monuments Record 2001.

because of plough damage - were buildings like these and the cultivation of cereals commonplace or special? These structures tend to belong to the fourth rather than the third millennia BC - to the Early rather than Late Neolithic - and whatever their popularity do not form the base of continuous building tradition.

Much European Early Neolithic research focussed on the spread of the particular form of longhouse dwelling agriculturalists along the light and fertile windblown soils or loess in Western Europe. The subject of Patrick Clay's PhD - *The East Midlands Claylands in Prehistory* - is itself a focus on the most significant historic preconception for these counties (and one so clearly borne from a culture or mind-set of intensive arable agriculture) that the predominant clay subsoils of the county were unattractive to agriculture and therefore unattractive to early farming communities. The surprise appearance of clayland flint scatters in the Late 1970s and early 1980s led to the rethink and an attack on the myth was published, 'Out of the Unknown' (Clay 1989). Further

work amply demonstrated that the clayland equals no-go land was fundamentally untrue, and that indeed the opposite may well be the case. Both light windblown soils and glacial clays would have developed forest brown earths until cleared, with similarly fertile characteristics (Clay 1999a, 19).

The Evidence

Given the dispelling of the *unpopular* myth, and accepting that there was activity in this area in the Neolithic period, the next step is to review the evidence and where it comes from, and attempt to reconstruct that activity.

The counties of Leicestershire and Rutland cover an area of 2,157 sq km. The land comprises lowland largely covered by glacial drift deposits, with limestone and ironstone ridges to the east (the Jurassic ridge) and Precambrian uplands to west (flanked by the Coal measures and Mercian mudstone. 60% of the area is

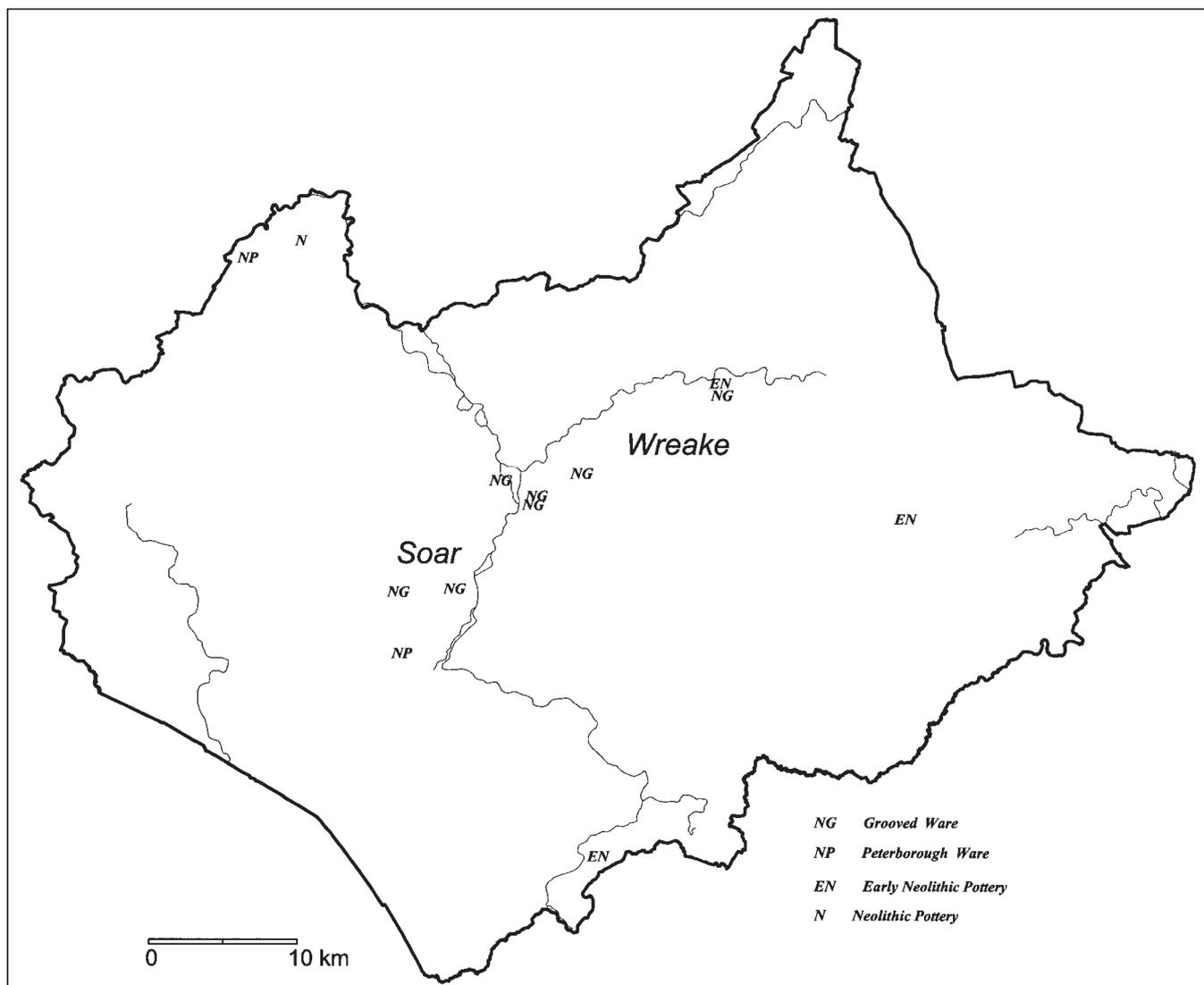


Fig. 2. Finds of Neolithic Pottery.

covered in clay. The land is well dissected by streams and rivers. The major rivers with their tributaries are the Trent in the north and west, the Avon in the southwest and Welland in the southeast. The Soar bisects the area north south. The County lies on a Midlands watershed - with rivers flowing to opposing coasts.

Of the 223 Leicestershire Parishes, and 58 Rutland Parishes, totalling 281, 179 or 64% now have entries relating to the Neolithic or Bronze Age on the Sites and Monuments Record (Fig. 1).

The collected evidence has been gathered by chance find, or organised activity by individuals, and community and professional groups. So there is fairly widespread evidence, and the SMR is only an indicator of resource (Clay 1999b, 2). What is the potential state of the resource? How much of the County is destroyed and developed, and ploughed deeply? Work in a neighbouring County estimates 74% to have been deep ploughed and 12% destroyed, with high potential unploughed or sealed and protected areas at a maximum 9% (Kidd 2000 [http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/pdf_files/](http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/pdf_files/19nh1stmill.pdf)

[19nh1stmill.pdf](http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/pdf_files/19nh1stmill.pdf)). Experienced Leicestershire county researchers estimate between 2% and 4% of ploughed fields have been fieldwalked (Richard Knox pers. comm.).

So what have the peoples of the Neolithic left behind for us to find?

The most common evidence due to its durability and collectability will remain the surface scatters of flint and stone artefacts such as cores, flakes, blades, scrapers, knives, arrowheads, etc. At best they can identify recently disturbed sites of short duration, and at worst 5,000 year long collections that have been eroded and ploughed down to leave little but tangled and confused remains.

When excavated flint and stone scatters produce variable results. In cases where excavated, results below scatters are variable. Sometimes nothing lies beneath, sometimes occasional features, and rarer still the monuments that so clearly mark a change in human behaviour between the Mesolithic and Neolithic.

Monuments and features had not been recognised ten years ago, but both Early and Late Neolithic groups of

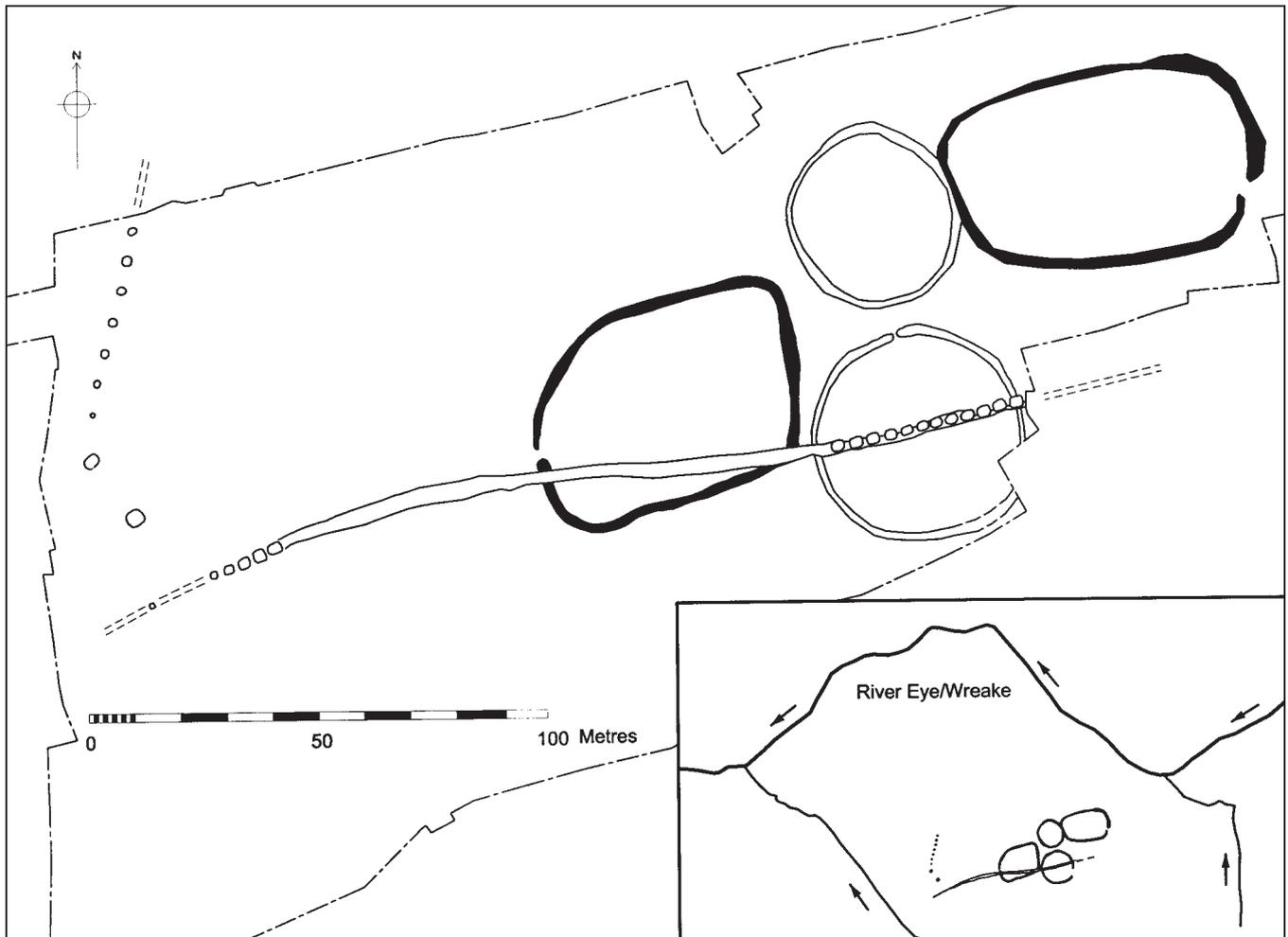


Fig. 3. Eye Kettleby, Melton Mowbray. Two opposed Long Enclosures of Neolithic date (solid), with later prehistoric burial and boundary forms (after Finn in prep.).

material have been excavated in recent years mostly due to PPG16 (Fig. 2). Finds of Neolithic pottery have increased by 1000% since 1991 (Clay 2001, 17).

Palaeo-environmental information that can include pollen, insects, snails and plant remains have now been gathered from a number of locations. The early results from well preserved land surfaces beneath the Sproxton and Eaton round barrows have disappointingly not been repeated and yet a steady number of palaeochannels are now being sampled for remains in the valley bottoms of Soar, Trent and Wreake.

The Early Neolithic

Lithic analyses by Clay have identified seventeen Early Neolithic *core* areas on the SMR, twelve of which had evidence of Late Mesolithic activity. These are located mostly on boulder clay at an average height of 111m. OD, which is slightly lower than that for Late Mesolithic core areas (Clay 1999b, 4).

In areas of systematic survey density of these *Core Areas* averaged one every 3.4 sq. km. With approximately 1898 sq. km. of undeveloped land one might imagine a further 558 core sites across the County waiting to be found.

61 stone axes have been found. 46% come from clay soils. Of these Great Langdale (Group VI) from Cumbria are the most numerous. We know that polished stone axes were quarried somewhere in the Charnwood region (Group XX), possibly at Charley (SMR Ref needed here). The highest incidence of Group XX axes remains in the High Peak (near the head of the River Derwent), whilst only 8 have been found in Leicestershire (Fig. 5).

The earliest possible excavation evidence has been found at Croft, near the confluence of the Thurlaston Brook and River Soar at around 70m OD. Here gullies forming surviving small circular or sub-circular structures have been found, but can only be tentatively dated on nearby lithics to the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic.

Until recently no clearly attributable or recognisable Early Neolithic monuments existed in the counties. The excavation Eye Kettleby, Melton Mowbray, has led to the discovery of 2 opposed *Long or Mortuary Enclosures*, dated to the Early Neolithic by form and an associated pit containing a deposit of Early Neolithic pottery (Neil Finn in prep) (Fig. 3). These complement cropmarks from Ketton, Misterton and Harston and may relate to a Long Enclosure tradition as found at West Cotton in

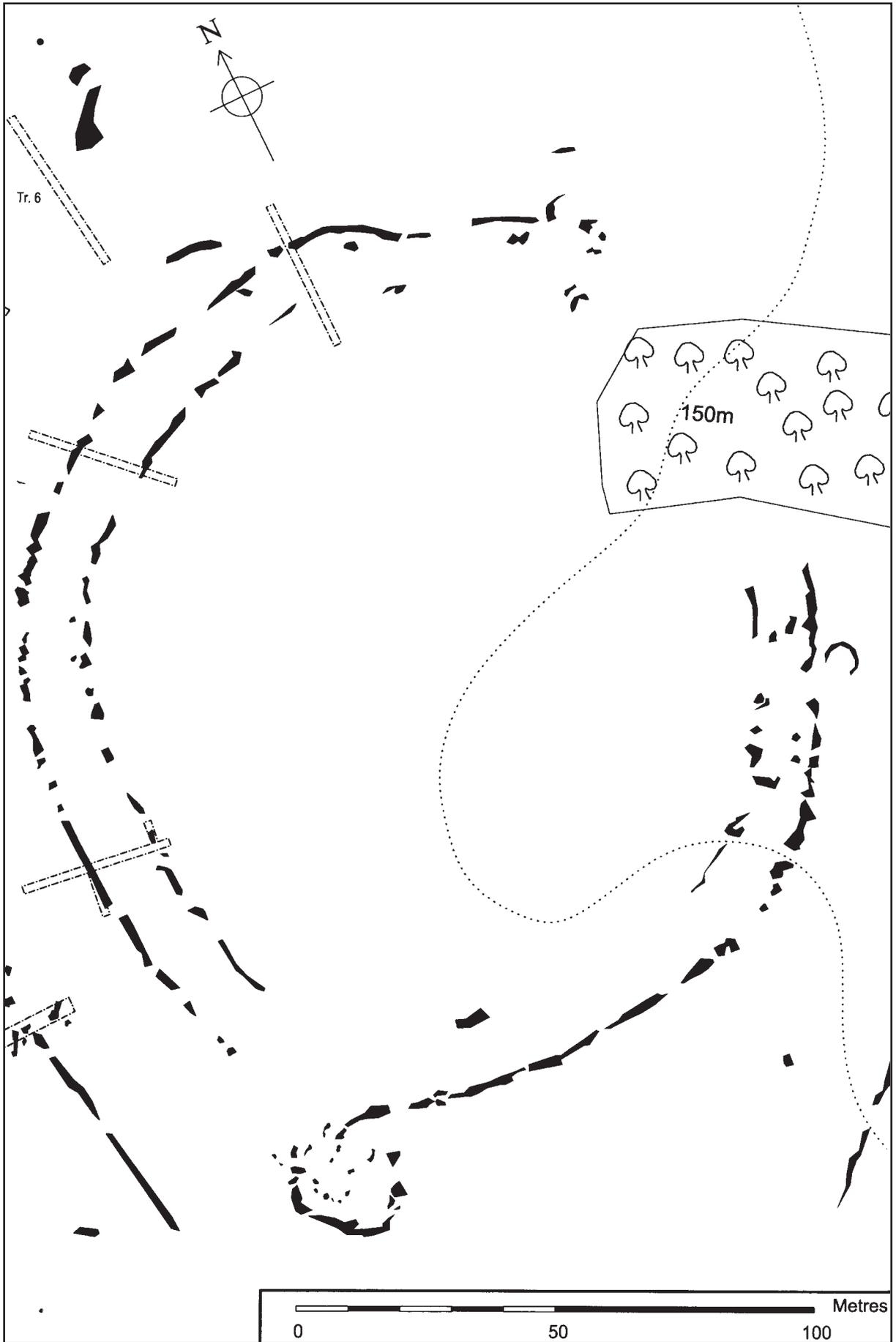


Fig. 4. The causewayed enclosure at Husbands Bosworth

Northamptonshire (Windell 1988, 88). No clear Long Barrows or communal burial areas as such are known in these Counties, and are lacking in the midlands in general.

The geophysical prospection of a flint scatter at Husbands Bosworth prior to development has detected a causewayed enclosure (Fig. 4).

The monument has closest affinities with relatively near neighbours at Barholm in Lincolnshire and Briar Hill in Northamptonshire (Palmer 1976, 184 Figs 14-15; Bamford 1985), supporting a notion of regional traditions. Limited excavation of the massive monument ditches produced Early Neolithic decorated pottery from a late infill.

The enclosure sits between the heads of the Avon, Soar and Welland again suggesting the importance of water-courses in the landscape. The cropmark of another possible causewayed enclosure comes from Appleby Magna.

No Cursus Monuments are known in the County, although regionally two are known in the Trent Valley in South Derbyshire at Aston-on-Trent and Willington. Again, the apparent lack of monument may well be due to invisibility rather than actuality, or reflect landscape use. Cursus monuments have been interpreted as perhaps lying between regions and acting as mediating mechanisms between groups. It has been noted that the two south Derbyshire cursus monuments of Aston on Trent and Willington, effectively lie between the source of Group XX axes, and their most common occurrence (Roy Loveday *pers. comm.*).

Early Neolithic environmental information comes from palaeochannel deposits near to the Croft site, and also from Kirby Muxloe, where pollen and insects indicate undisturbed mixed woodland (Rosseff *et al.* forthcoming; Brown forthcoming).

This is complimented by evidence of woodland clearance from a buried soil beneath EBA barrow at Sproxton on the Jurassic ridge, where the fire-clearance of woodland is interpreted and dated to 3990-3810 BC. Here soils and snails indicate a possible arable phase followed by pasture with no woodland regeneration before construction of the barrow in the Early Bronze Age (Clay 1981, 10).

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age

Clay interpreted 25 Late Neolithic core areas from lithic scatters - again the highest proportion on boulder clay, with a slightly decreased altitude of 104.3m OD. *Core Area* density increased to an average of one per 2.55 sq km, giving a further 744 potential Late Neolithic *core* sites.

Late Neolithic pottery (excluding Beaker) was in 1982 restricted to a single sherd of Grooved Ware recovered from a gravel pit by geologists in Thurmaston (Liddle 1982, 19082, I, 12-13). Further Grooved Wares have been excavated from two sites within 1km. from this find at Syston (Meek 1998, 184) with assemblage of tools and fresh flakes/debris and Wanlip (Ripper 1999, 115)

upslope from and complimenting the flint assemblage with Late Neo/EBA component excavated from the Iron Age site (Beamish 1999) and also from Kirby Muxloe (Cooper 1994), Queniborough (APS developer report), Braunstone (APS developer report), and EyeKettleby (Neil Finn *pers. comm.*; Fig. 6). At Braunstone and Eye Kettleby the pottery came from wide shallow pits

Late Neolithic Impressed Wares (Peterborough Ware) have been excavated at Lockington (Woodward in Hughes 2000) Enderby (Clay 1992), Husbands Bosworth (ULAS developer report), Oakham (Clay 1998), Wanlip (Ripper 1999), and most recently from Braunstone (APS developer report). Developers, and not research have dictated the location of all these sites, although it is worth noting the location of the recent Grooved ware finds in relation to confluences and Rivers.

There are no definite henge monuments, but the penannular ditch below the later barrow at Eaton excavated in 1978 (Clay 1984) can now be added to by another recently excavated example located on the western periphery of the Causewayed Enclosure at Husbands Bosworth (Jon Coward *pers. comm.*).

A multi phase Late Neolithic Pit Circle has been excavated at Oakham (Clay 1998) whilst a cropmark at Rearsby may be of a similar form. Early Bronze Age barrows, mostly recognised as circular crop-marks are ubiquitous and number between 250 and 300; important buried surface information can be preserved, although the quality of data from the 1970s excavations remains disappointingly unrepeated in these counties. Standing out from recent discoveries is the rich deposit adjacent to a ceremonial ring ditch of 2 gold armlets, and a copper alloy dagger with two Beaker style vessels (importantly both incomplete and deposited as such), buried in a small pit on the northern edge of a circular ritual monument, at Lockington. The composite dagger was a Breton import. Calibrated radiocarbon dates of 2580-2200 and 2190-1880 BC were obtained from organic material adhering to the dagger (Hughes 2000).

The burial lies in a barrow cemetery close to the Trent, near the confluences with Derwent and Soar. Again the watercourses may hold the key to the location.

Late Neolithic environmental evidence from palaeochannel deposits at Croft (Rosseff in prep.) and Kirby Muxloe (Brown forthcoming) indicate uncleared woodland with Lime - similar to other Midland sites. At Croft a post-elm decline mixed woodland showed some signs of disturbed ground, whilst at Narborough evidence for a partly cleared floodplain lay below a horizon dated to 2980-2035 BC (Brown 2000, 59). Pollen information from palaeochannel deposits at Hemington, near the confluence of the Trent and Derwent dating to 2880-2475BC - indicates clearance and cereal cultivation (Brown and Smith in prep.). Pollen evidence from Early Bronze Age features at Lockington is broadly indicative of an open agricultural landscape (Greig 2000, 83), with evidence of grazing animals immediately prior to barrow mound construction (Hughes 2000, 99).

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age plant remains are

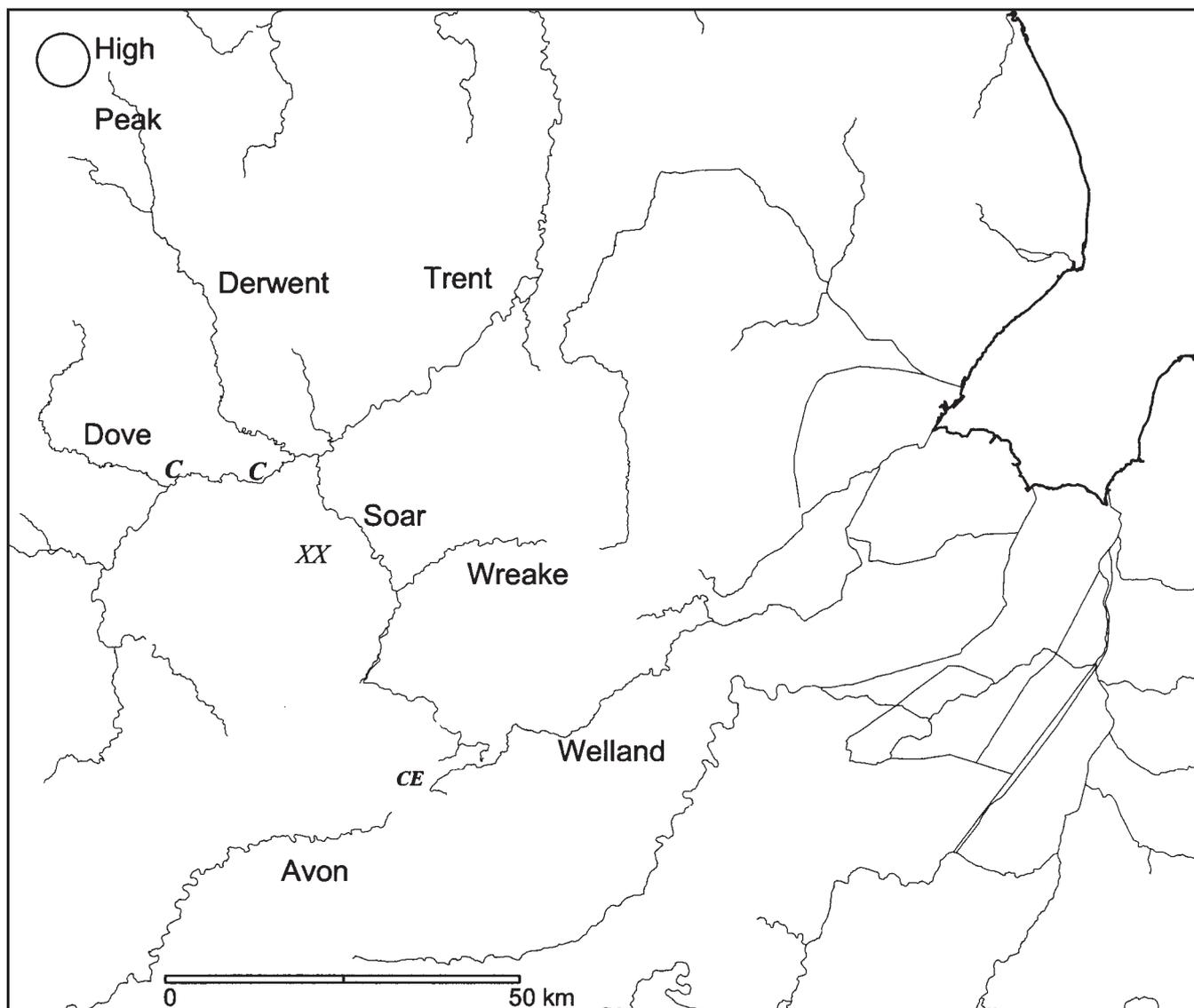


Fig. 5. Major Rivers of the East Midlands, with probable location of polished stone axe Group XX (Charnwood), and their highest incidence in the High Peak, Derbyshire, with Cursus monuments (C) at Willington/Potlock (left) and Aston-on-Trent (right). The causewayed enclosure at Husbands Bosworth (CE) sits at watershed of Avon, Welland and Soar.

extremely few and far between; they include bread wheat, barley and hazelnut shell from the Late Neolithic pit circle at Oakham (Monckton 1998, 323), and Emmer wheat from a pit at Lockington (Moffett & Monckton 2000, 81). Cereal Grains have recently been found at Braunstone (Albone 2001).

Bone assemblages are disappointingly rare (and significantly have not been added to since 1983) with only small assemblages from Sproxton and Oakham which include cattle, sheep, pig, red deer, roe deer, and small mammal species at the latter indicating proximity to woodland.

Discussion

So what does this all add up to? From the limited amount of work done to date it is abundantly clear that people were exploiting this region throughout the

prehistoric past but the question is how. The quantity of available information is not yet sufficient to enable firm conclusions regarding the activities of the first farmers. Although much new data is constantly emerging, this is still the start.

What little environmental evidence that there is does not indicate large amounts of clearance. The available evidence indicates that the landscape remained predominantly wooded until at least the middle of the Second millennium BC. The pollen evidence at Hemington indicates cereal cultivation but elsewhere this is only suggested by the scant grain finds and an interpreted arable phase at Sproxton. So the groups living in this area, leaving flint scatters, monuments and pottery, were, perhaps, largely woodland and not field dwellers. These must have had a network of communications and pathways that traversed their environments. Obviously the streams and rivers are the most continuous and

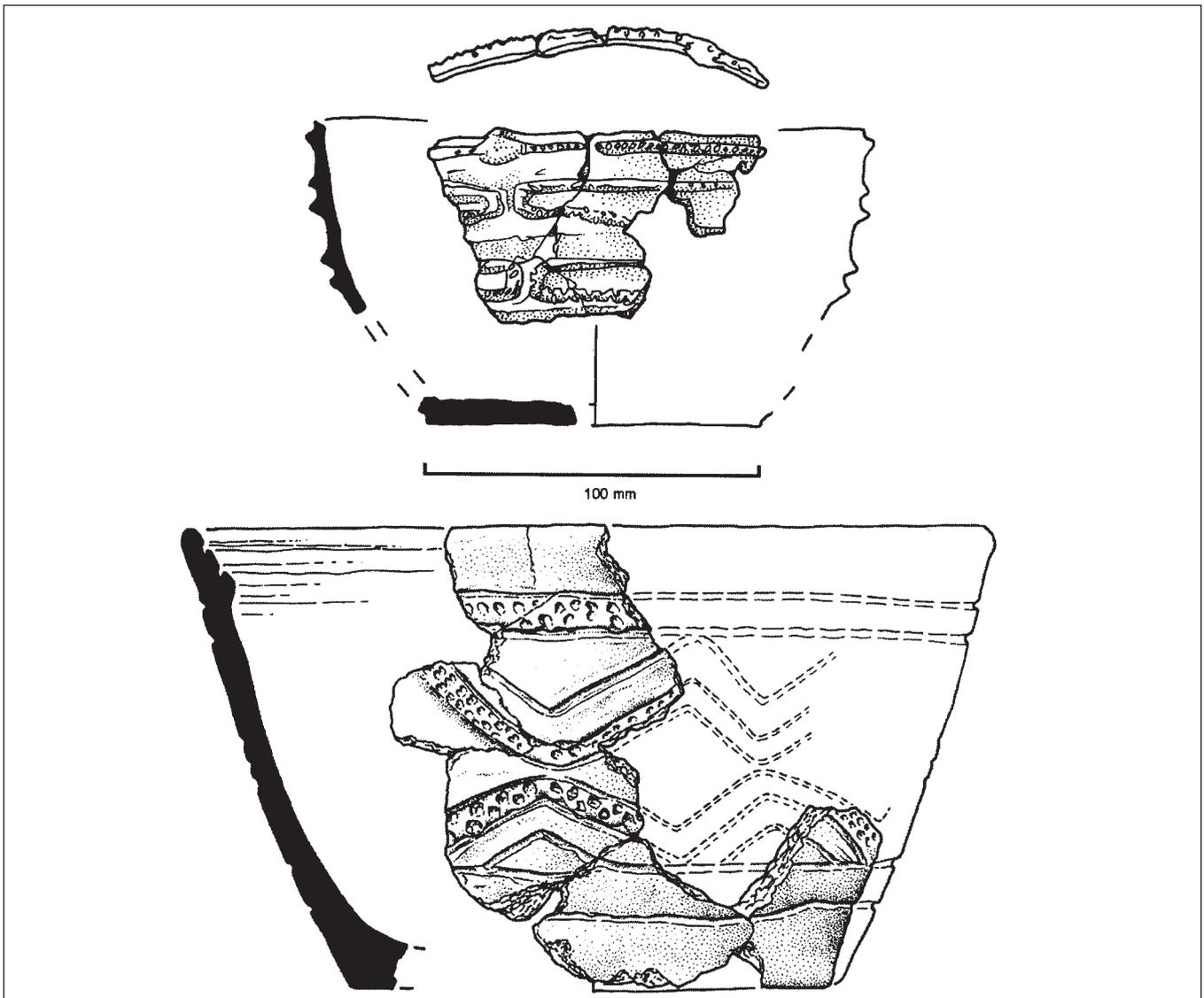


Fig. 6. Later Neolithic Grooved Ware vessels: Upper from Eye Kettleby, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire in Woodlands style (by C.Hegarty) and lower from Braunstone, Leicester in Clacton style (by D. Hopkins courtesy of APS).

permanent communication and boundary network. Small clearings whether formed by nature (lightning, wind) or encouraged by man (over-browsing, axe, fire, or ring-barking) were places to which animals and people would return, where prey might be found, old camps re-established, and kin groups meet (Edmonds 2000). We might expect these clearings to be scattered along traditional routes. There is good evidence to suggest that the Middle Trent between the confluences of the Dove in the west, and the Derwent in the east became increasingly important during the Neolithic - it is host to numerous ritual monuments including the cursuses and also henges, and later barrow cemeteries. The confluences and heads of rivers appear important - perhaps locally the confluence of Soar and Wreake had importance, with our Grooved Ware cluster, and Husbands Bosworth at the Avon/Welland/Soar watershed.

A suggested model has been one of non-intensive agricultural practices using long-fallow horticulture -

clearance, cultivation, abandonment, regeneration (Boserup 1965) with some animal pasturing as additions to the indigenous Mesolithic subsistencies - colloquially phrased the 'Mesolithic with knobs on'. Early Neolithic groups continue to gather and hunt like their forebears. Later, the tending and grazing of stock becomes more intensive, as does the extent of cultivation practices and consequently shorter fallow periods follow with an increasing need for more permanent - but not necessarily sedentary - settlement.

Recently the assumptions underlying the long fallow/short fallow model have been questioned. It is possible to cultivate small plots or gardens in the long term without the need for the plough or long fallow periods, and to maintain fertility by manuring or crop rotation (Jones 2000, 83). Small-scale, but permanent or semi-permanent, cultivation would fit equally well with the evidence for limited woodland clearance.

We can imagine fragmented, diverse and dispersed groups, practising herding and limited cultivation, hunting and collecting and moving according to resource and need. Their density and the focus of *core activities* increases and shifts down the valley through time, perhaps in response to increased need for grazing areas.

Our Neolithic finds distributions may not indicate clearance for cultivation, or even collection of winter leaf fodder, but clearance for grazing. In the Thames Valley herding and the creation of extensive tracts of grazing land has been recognised as a major part of Neolithic life (Barclay & Hey 1999, 74). With a varied subsistence, occupation would have shifted on a seasonal basis, with certain locations only seeing sporadic use, and others seeing more popular and more persistent use. River Valleys, flood plains, and the clay and stone plateau would have been inhabited in different ways and at different times. These seasonal movements may have only taken days - vale to wold, valley bottom or terrace to Charnwood hills in the west or clay hills in the east. Perhaps the varying activities are reflected in the variability of the flint scatters - small scatters with few diagnostic tools, perhaps one-off camps to repair tools, eat or sleep, and substantial scatters with a wide range of tools representing extensive repeated visits over the generations - high quality summer pastures or hard, protected winter ground (Edmonds 2000).

And what of the small pit groups containing Neolithic flints and pottery? The contents show selection of flint tools and flakes, with distinctive pottery sherds. These are fundamentally not rubbish deposits - not waste, or discard, but structured deposits, buried for a reason, perhaps marking family celebrations - feasts, deaths, a marriage or an agreement between groups (Edmonds 2000).

The Future

New sites will be discovered throughout the County. Continued development in previously under researched alluvial areas will bring different types of sealed site to light. Sites of all periods sealed from both below and above (i.e. containing only one phase of material) are a priority. The work of community groups identifying the flint scatters must continue - perhaps marking those small clearings within the wildwood, where groups lived and met.

Our understanding of monuments will rapidly change. The use of remote techniques to discover otherwise invisible remains will increase in quality and quantity, and need not always remain a professional specialism. So where we can identify Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments, research into topography and view sheds, will identify other areas of potential.

We need food remains and more detailed environmental data. We need animal and human bone. Ironically the best potential here is from clayland pastures that are not currently ploughed, and where bone survives. The use of chemical analyses to indicate

foodstuffs from residues in pottery must be used - in a region where bone assemblages are rare the use of such techniques can help redress the balance.

So the future is rosy! We have demonstrated a great potential for discovery - not to rediscover the first farmers of elsewhere, but to understand our own regional development. However, for the big picture we have to remain patient, and take a very long-term view. 2026 will surely see new understandings of Leicestershire and Rutlands agricultural roots, when we are, more out of the woods.

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