

# The Neolithic and Bronze Age of Leicestershire and Rutland

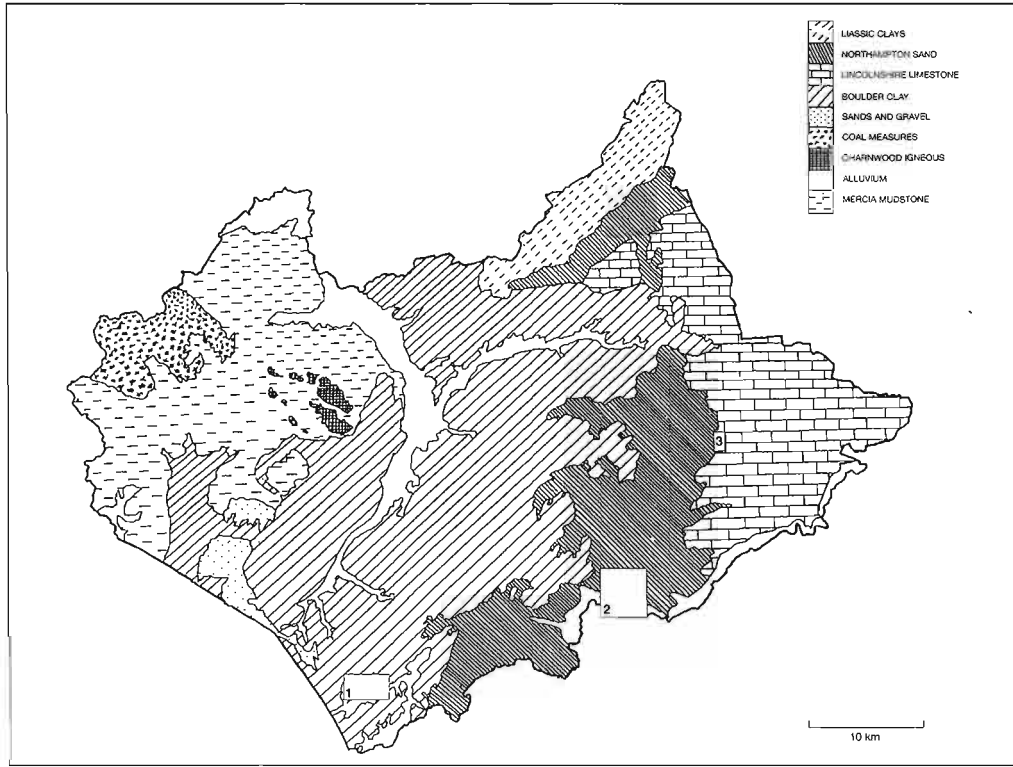
by *Patrick Clay*

An assessment of Neolithic and Bronze Age information from the Sites and Monuments Record, and three area surveys, for the counties of Leicestershire and Rutland suggests that far from being an area of little occupation during these periods it is in fact comparable with much of lowland Britain. Some clearance and occupation was taking place from the early fourth millennium BC onwards with expansion by the end of the third millennium BC. Proximity to water appears to have been a key factor in the location of 'core areas' and a movement of preferred settlement location from the headwaters downstream may be suggested.

## Introduction

Our understanding of early farming communities in Britain covering the fourth – second millennia BC has seen considerable advances over the past twenty-five years especially from work in the south of England (e.g. Bradley 1978; Whittle 1978; Barker 1985; Kinnes 1988; Thomas 1991; Barrett 1994). How agricultural practices were introduced into the area of the East Midlands covered by the modern counties of Leicestershire and Rutland, however, has remained relatively unknown. The Neolithic and Bronze Age in the area have seen little research with few published accounts (Liddle 1982; Clay 1989). However, the picture has begun to change by the extent of field survey generated by Leicestershire Museums' Community Archaeology groups over the past twenty years (Liddle 1985), prior to which we largely faced a blank sheet. It had traditionally been thought of as an area of little prehistoric settlement in view of the heavy clay subsoils which were perceived as being too difficult for early agriculture (Fox, 1932; 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 an archaeological resource.

Leicestershire and Rutland form part of a lowland Midlands landscape largely covered by glacial drift deposits with, to the east, a limestone escarpment – the Jurassic ridge – and, to the west, Pre-Cambrian uplands with Coal Measures and Mercia mudstone (illus. 1). It is characterised by its clay substrata which cover over 60 per cent of the area. The landscape is well dissected and separated by rivers and many tributary streams, demarcated by the Trent to the north-west, the Avon to the south-west and the Welland to the south-east 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 one of plough-zone with consequent erosion although it does have some well-preserved relict medieval landscapes and some potential for localised alluvial and colluvial burial and wetland areas. Urban development, together with coal, gravel and hard rock extraction, has also had an impact on various parts of the landscape.



1. Drift geology of Leicestershire and Rutland showing the areas of detailed survey  
1) Misterton. 2) Medbourne 3) Oakham.

### The nature of the evidence

In examining the evidence 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 the Sites and Monument Record (SMR) in isolation will inevitably produce inherent biases (Mills 1985). The subsoil in much of the area is not conducive to aerial reconnaissance (Pickering and Hartley 1985; Hartley 1989) and the potential for large areas of pasture remains unknown. Therefore, extrapolation and model building from well surveyed areas will, arguably, be a better basis for understanding how the area was exploited than using SMR generated data alone. In view of this, in addition to the Leicestershire and Rutland SMR, three different area surveys have been consulted (Clay 1996 and forthcoming). These are at Medbourne in the middle Welland valley, covering 29 sq. km, Misterton in the Swift valley (10 sq. km) and Oakham in the Upper Catmose valley (3 sq. km; illus. 1).

Analysis of pollen, snails, insects and plant remains can provide information on the changing land-use of an area over time (e.g. Bennett 1989). 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 additional land-use data which it is hoped will be incorporated into the SMR in the future (A. Monckton 1995 and pers. comm.).

For the purpose of this study the following period divisions have been used (following Brown and Murphy 1997). The Later Bronze Age is not included in this paper.

Early Neolithic – c. 4000BC-2800BC

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age – c. 2800BC-1500BC

Middle Bronze Age – c. 1500BC – 1000BC

All radiocarbon dates quoted are calibrated to two standard deviations (68 per cent confidence) following Stuiver *et al* (1993).

Lithics form a significant part of the material evidence and these have been interpreted following Pitts and Jacobi (1979) and Humble (forthcoming). In Leicestershire and Rutland initial identification following Pitts and Jacobi's divisions has been undertaken for most of the lithics recovered from fieldwalking. Interpretation of the locations of settlements from lithic scatters, however, 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). The locations of possible settlement areas on the basis of surface collections are suggested, however, following Schofield (1991) with the identification of retouched flint and cores perhaps having more significance than the overall density of lithic material. In this paper the term 'core area' is preferred to 'settlement', following Foley (1981) indicating a location where domestic and other activities were being undertaken, possibly intermittently, over time.

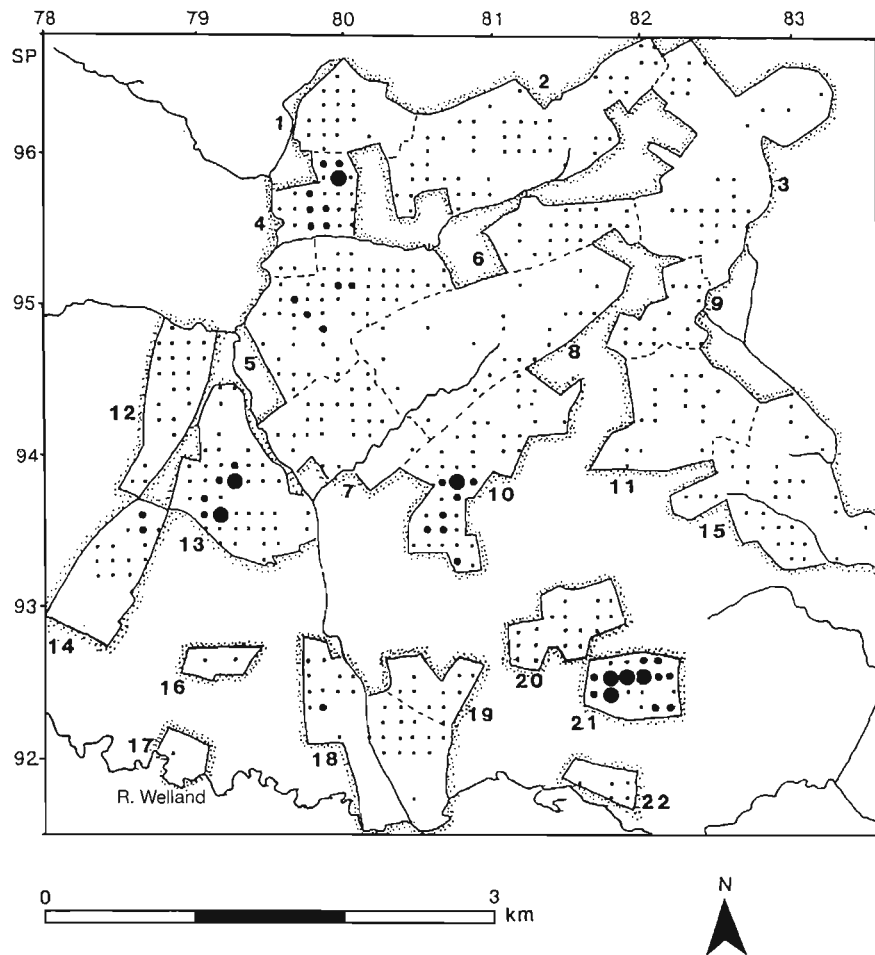
Present models of Neolithic settlement in Britain offer different interpretations. Whereas a rapid pioneering phase of agriculture from the late fifth millennium BC, with a slow down later in the third millennium BC, has been suggested (Whittle 1978), more recent interpretations have challenged this (Thomas 1991, Barrett 1994). Barrett, for example (1994), suggests that during the Early Neolithic, non-intensive agricultural practices using long-fallow horticulture and some animal pasturing were added to the activities already undertaken by Mesolithic groups. More intensive adoption of farming with shorter periods of time for the land to lie fallow was only to follow later, towards the end of the third millennium BC, with a consequent need for more permanent settlement. The growing body of evidence for the Neolithic – Bronze Age from this area of the East Midlands can therefore be tested against these models.

### **Early Neolithic**

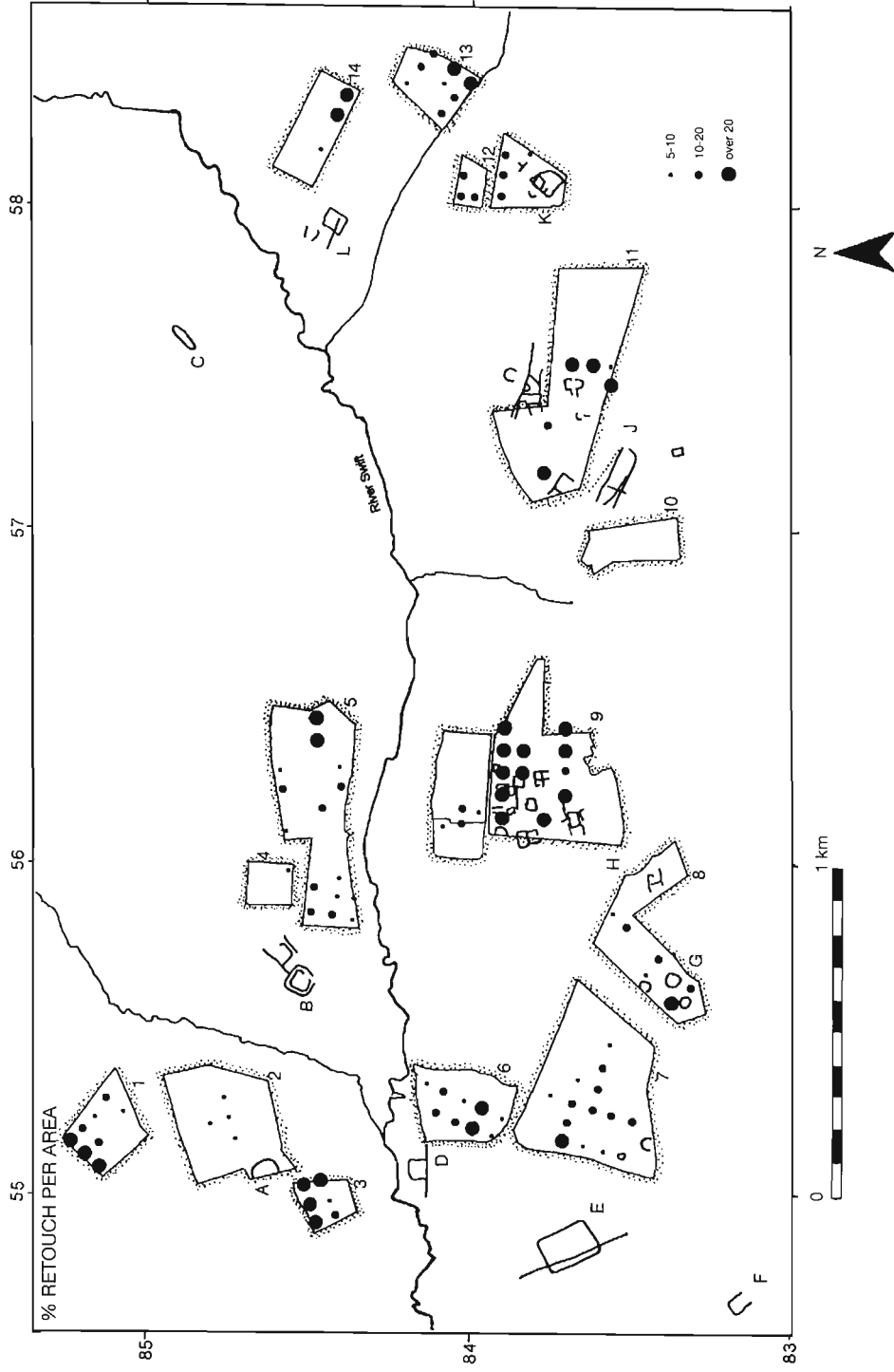
Pollen profiles and insect evidence from Croft and Kirby Muxloe indicate undisturbed mixed woodland during the Early Neolithic (Rosseff *et al* forthcoming; Brown forthcoming a). There is evidence for a partially cleared floodplain area below a horizon dated to 2950-2050 Cal. BC from a pollen profile at Narborough (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 in the north-east 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 the construction of the monument in the Early Bronze Age (Clay 1981, p. 10).

Fieldwalking has located lithic scatters, occasionally with diagnostic Early Neolithic material present, although separating Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic activity has not always been possible. In Leicestershire and Rutland seventeen locations might be

interpreted as Early Neolithic 'core areas', twelve 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', while the average distance to water is 0.34 km with 51 per cent of their locations favouring south-facing slopes. In 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' every 2 sq. km at Misterton to one every 4.8 sq. km at Medbourne (illus. 2-3). Overall lithic densities from Misterton, for the Early Neolithic and later periods, are comparable with those from surveys of chalkland areas in the south of England including those in East Berkshire, the Maddall Farm area, Wiltshire and the Vale of White Horse, Oxfordshire (Ford 1987; Gaffney and Tingle 1989; Tingle 1991).



2. Distribution of all worked lithics from fieldwalking survey by Leicestershire Museums at Medbourne.  
 • 1-5 pieces; ● 6-10 pieces; ● over 10 pieces



3. Distribution of cropmarks and retouched lithics (per cent per area) from fieldwalking survey by the Lutterworth Fieldwork Group at Misterton. The figures show the percentage of retouched lithics for each area walked. The cropmark of a long barrow or long enclosure can be seen to the north-east (C).



4. Plan of a causewayed enclosure located by geophysical survey at Husbands Bosworth.

Although most evidence comes from the visible plough zone areas in the form of lithic scatters there is some evidence of Early Neolithic activity from low lying stream and river-side areas. Close to the confluence of the Soar and Thurlaston Brook, north of Croft, possible palisade gullies for post-ring round-houses have been located tentatively dated on the basis of nearby lithic evidence to the Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic (Hughes and Rosseff 1995, p.105; illus. 5).

There are very few Early Neolithic monuments known from the area. Causewayed enclosures, consisting of areas demarcated by single or multiple interrupted ditched systems, are variously interpreted as settlements or central meeting places and many

may have changed in function over time. Until 1998 there were no known causewayed enclosures in the two counties although one has now been identified following geophysical survey targeting a flint scatter at Husbands Bosworth in the south of Leicestershire (illus. 4 and below p.100). This has a closely grouped concentric circuit consisting of a double ring of interrupted ditches enclosing an ovoid area covering *c.* 1.5 ha. Subsequent trial trenching confirmed the presence of an interrupted ditch system, which contained Neolithic pottery and flint, and the survival of some structural elements. It has affinities with other examples from Barholm in Lincolnshire and Briar Hill in Northamptonshire (Palmer 1976, p.184, figs 14-15; Bamford 1985). The only other, less certain, example has been suggested from cropmark evidence in north-west Leicestershire at Appleby Magna where aerial photography has located an ovoid enclosure *c.* 2.5 ha. in area demarcated by three parallel ditches, although in this case causeways are not discernible (Liddle 1982, p.12).

No communal burial mounds, either long barrows or long cairns, are known from the area although cropmarks of enclosures from Misterton, Ketton and Harston (Pickering and Hartley 1985, p.58; p.74) may indicate ploughed out long barrows (Loveday 1980; Loveday and Petchey 1982) or possibly long enclosures similar to an example excavated at West Cotton in Northamptonshire (Windell 1989). No cursus monuments are known from either Leicestershire or Rutland.

Sixty-one stone axes are known from the two counties, 46 per cent of which are from locations with clay substrata. The Great Langdale polished stone axes (Group VI) are the most common while the Charnwood area is a source for the Group XX axes although the exact location is unknown (Bradley 1989; Clough and Cummins 1988). The only Early Neolithic pottery from the two counties is possible Grimston ware from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ceremonial site at Oakham (Gibson 1998, p.318) and Lockington (G. Hughes pers. comm.). A radiocarbon date of 3500-2750 Cal. BC was associated with the latter. Other Early Neolithic evidence comes from the Trent valley at Hemington where a group of wooden posts was located during a watching brief during gravel extraction. Subsequent radiocarbon measurement of a sample from these timbers suggested a date of *c.* 3600-3300 Cal. BC (Clay and Salisbury 1990 p.290). From analogy with other timber structures in the area this has been interpreted as a fishweir, which, if correct would make it the earliest example so far identified in Britain.

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

The Late Neolithic environmental evidence from Croft and Kirby Muxloe (Rosseff *et al* forthcoming; Brown forthcoming a) indicate woodland with Lime in common with other comparable 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 p.34; 1998) while crab apples have recently been found in a possible Early Bronze Age context at Castle Donington (below p.90). Emmer is present in a pit at Lockington dated to 1875-1645 Cal. BC; (Monckton 1995 p.34). Bone assemblages are rare with only small groups from Oakham and Sproxtton 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 are suggested from

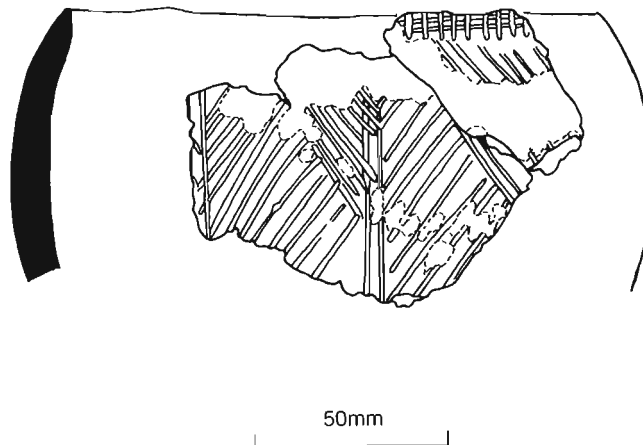
buried soils beneath round barrows at Sproxtton (Clay 1981, p.10) and Lockington (Posnansky 1955, p.25).

Twenty-five Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age ‘core areas’ might be suggested from lithic scatters, with the highest proportion again occurring in boulder clay areas. These are situated at a lower mean altitude (104.3 OD) from those in the Earlier Neolithic, slightly further from water sources (0.41km) and 48 per cent favour south-facing slopes. The surveyed areas show an increase in ‘core area’ density (one ‘core area’ every 1.5 sq km for Misterton; one every 3.6 sq. km for Medbourne) during the Late Neolithic–Earlier Bronze Age with the majority showing a preference for boulder clay and Liassic Clay valley side locations.

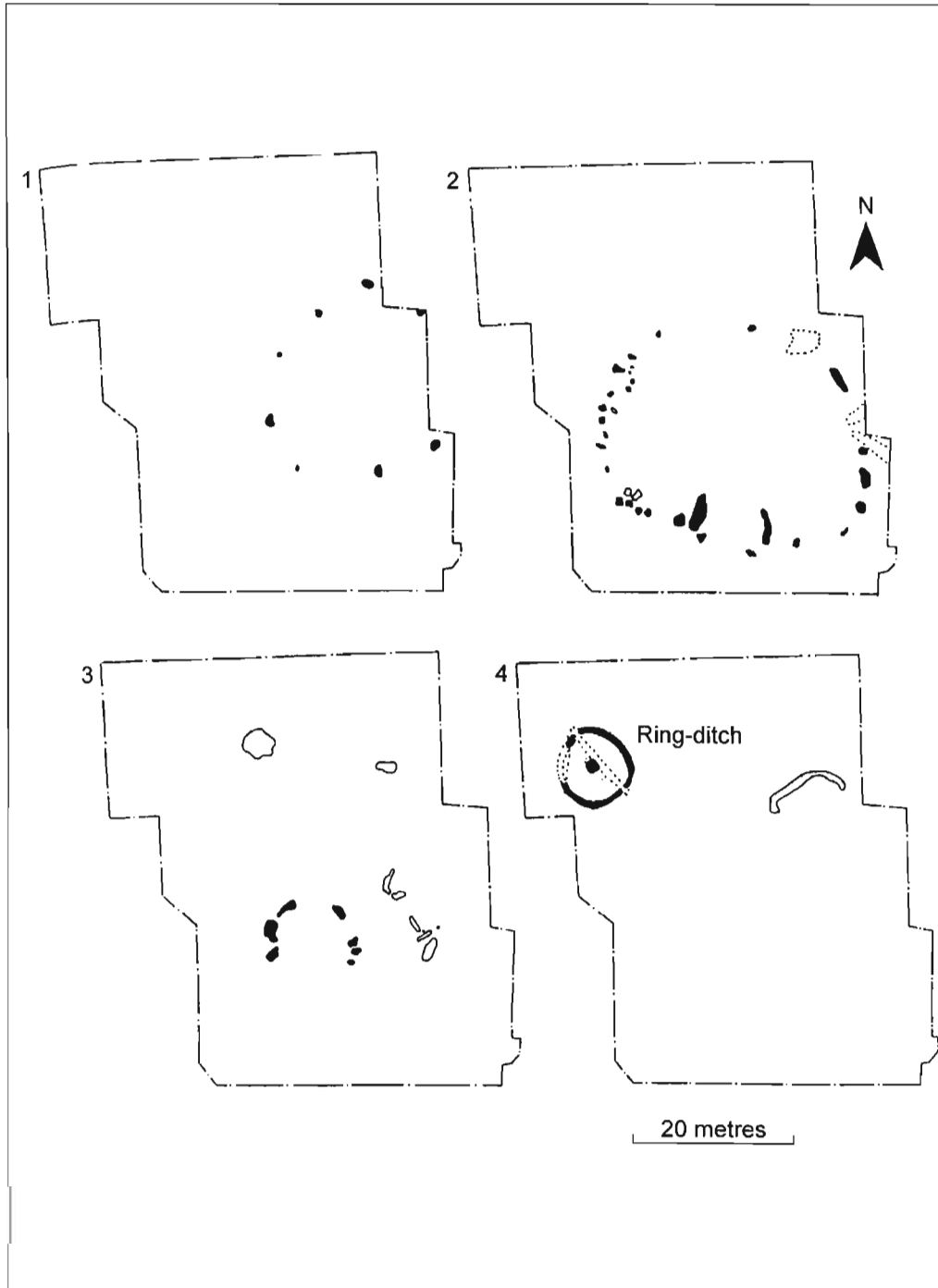
Late Neolithic pottery is rare in Leicestershire although recent fieldwork has added to the evidence. Grooved Ware is known from Kirby Muxloe (Cooper 1994a), Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998), Syston (Meek 1998) (illus. 5), Thurmaston and Wanlip (below p.115) while Late Neolithic Impressed Wares (Peterborough Ware) have been found at Lockington (below p.103), Enderby (Cooper 1994b), Husbands Bosworth (below p.100) and Oakham (Gibson 1998).

Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age ceremonial and burial areas can be interpreted from earthwork and, more commonly, cropmark evidence. No true henges are known although a Class 1 henge may be interpreted from a single interruption to a ring ditch from Eaton (Clay 1981, p. 27). The henge classification, however, is only one of a wide range of different form of ceremonial monument which can show considerable local variation (Clare 1986; 1987). Pit circles, for example, are known from two locations at Rearsby and Oakham. Excavations at Oakham showed a sequence of three enclosures demarcated by pits, associated with Late Neolithic Impressed Wares, located next to a small ring ditch surrounding a crouched burial (illus. 6; Clay 1998). It is possible that the pits originally marked the location of timber posts. A Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age post alignment and mortuary enclosure has been located at Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998).

In common with evidence from other areas of Britain, the most abundant form of Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age monument from the two counties, is the round

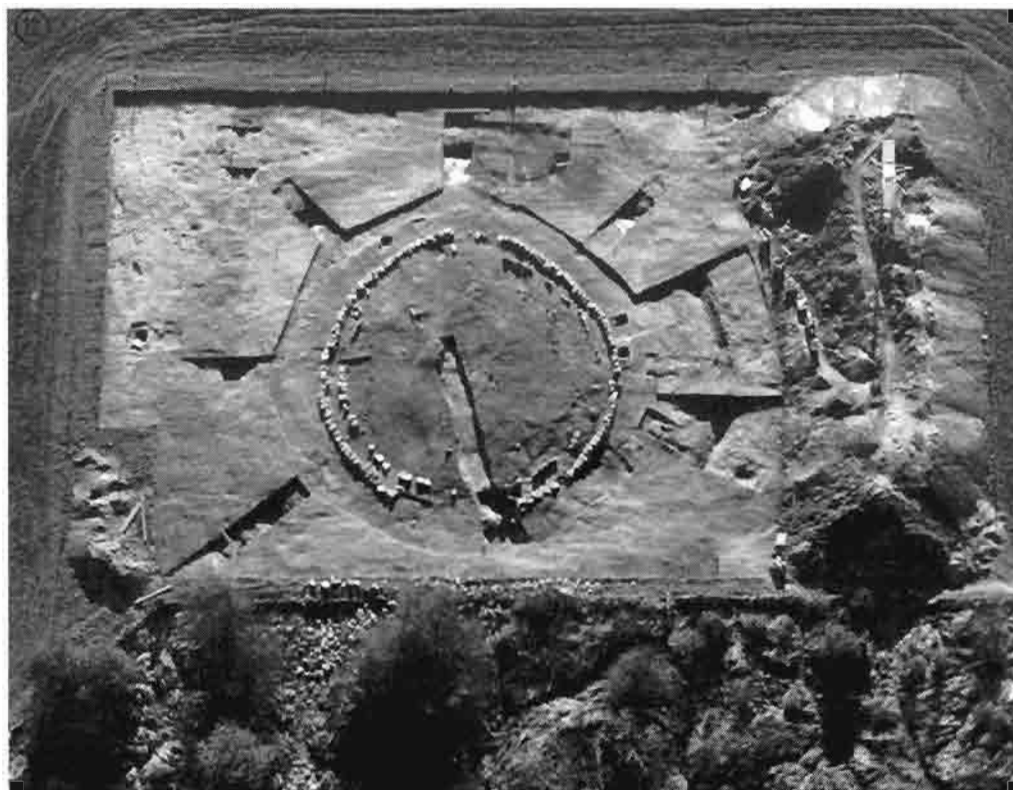


5. Grooved ware vessel from Syston. Scale 1:4.



6. Sequence of pit circles and ring ditch at Burley Road, Oakham.

barrow, 27 of which show evidence of surviving mounds. While most of the 250 ring-ditches recorded from cropmarks on the SMR are likely to denote ploughed-out round barrows others may be small ceremonial enclosures (e.g. Melton Mowbray; Finn 1998). Examples of round barrows and ring ditches have been excavated at Cossington (O'Brien 1976; J. Sturgess pers. comm.), Eaton (Clay 1981), Lockington (Posnansky 1955; Hughes 1996 and forthcoming), Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998), Oakham (Clay 1998), Sproxton (Clay 1981) and Tixover (Beamish 1992). At Sproxton a multi-phase round barrow, with two phases of timber circles and concentric stone kerbs, was excavated (Clay 1981). Pre-burial excavation prior to cremation has been suggested (Stirland 1981) while differential burning suggests that the body remained partially articulated and was laid face down with a pyre built over it. Three satellite burials and one secondary were located with radiocarbon dates suggesting use of the mound over a 200 year period from c.1950-1750 Cal. BC (illus. 7). At Eaton a sequence of four centrally placed burials saw a succession of a cremation in a plank built oak coffin, an inhumation in a monoxylous (tree trunk) coffin, followed by a cremation in an organic container and a further inhumation. A sequence of four concentric ring ditches denotes



7. Aerial view of the excavation of a multi-phase round barrow at Sproxton (north to the bottom). A sequence of concentric timber stake circles was later covered by a mound surrounded by two concentric stone kerbs. Finally material from an encircling ring ditch provided a stone capping. The trench seen running from the north towards the centre of the mound was excavated in 1860 by Thomas Bateman, and missed the central burial by 100mm (from Clay 1981).



8. Assemblage of gold armlets, copper alloy rapier and Beaker type pottery from Lockington (Photo by Graham Norrie. Courtesy of Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit).

successive enlargement of the monument while radiocarbon dates suggest use of the mound around 1900-1800 Cal. BC (Clay 1981).

Early Bronze Age pottery is known from several locations in Leicestershire and Rutland including examples of Beaker, Collared urn and food vessel. Metalwork has been recorded as stray finds or occasionally in association with other material, often in Beaker contexts. Of note is the remarkable group from Lockington consisting of two gold armlets, and a copper alloy dagger associated with two Beaker style vessels (illus. 8; Hughes 1996 and forthcoming). The dagger is of composite construction and is a Breton import (G. Hughes pers. comm.). Radiocarbon dates of 2580-2200 and 2190-1880 Cal. BC were obtained from organic material adhering to the dagger with the latter date being more compatible with the group on typological grounds.

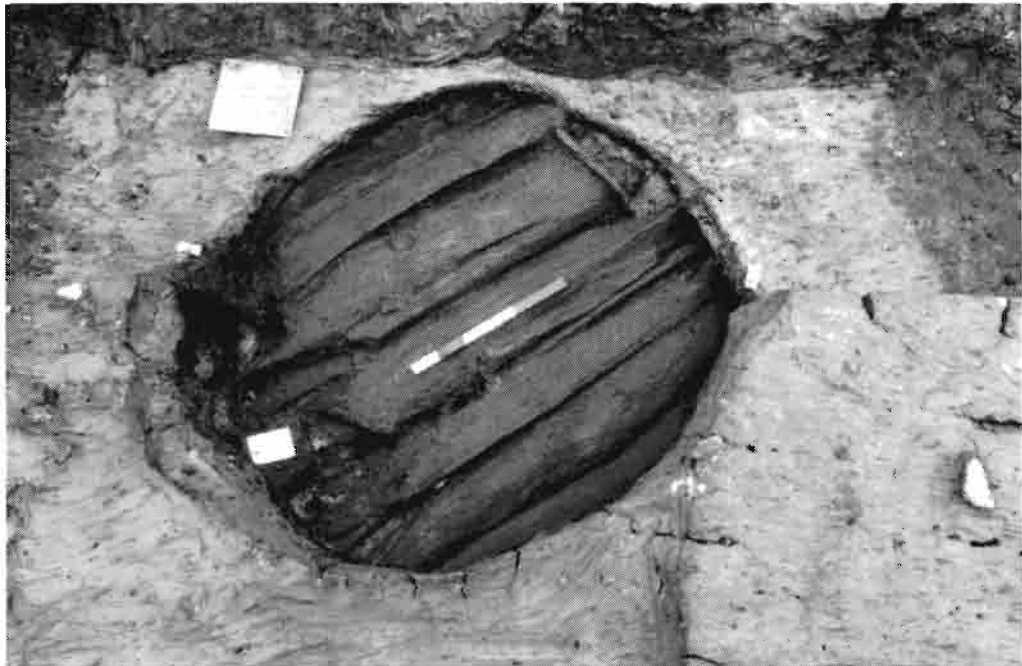
### **Middle Bronze Age**

Pollen, insect and plant macrofossil analyses from a Middle Bronze Age palaeochannel at Croft (Rosseff *et al* forthcoming) see 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 (A. Monckton pers. comm.). The earliest evidence of spelt wheat is from charred remains from a pit cluster at Lockington (*c.* 1425-1260 Cal. BC; Monckton 1995).

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 (J. Coward pers. comm.), Cossington (O'Brien 1976), Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998) and Tixover (Beamish 1993). Flat cemeteries are known from Cossington (O'Brien 1976) and Melton Mowbray (Finn 1998) with other possible examples from Barwell and Stathern (Liddle 1982, p.13). Middle Bronze Age metalwork, mainly from stray finds, includes side-looped spearheads, palstaves and long-bladed rapiers.

A burnt mound, of presumed Middle Bronze Age date, consisting of heated pebble debris and an associated timber lined trough has been recorded at Birstall adjacent to a timber bridge (illus. 9; Ripper 1997). Butchered cattle bones from adjacent palaeochannels at both this site and another from Castle Donington might suggest that cooking/feasting may have been taking place, although other alternative interpretations including saunas are suggested from similar sites in the West Midlands (Hodder and Barfield 1990).



9. Timber lined trough associated with a burnt mound from Birstall.

## Discussion

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 significant barrier to exploitation during these periods.

Occupation of this area of the East Midlands can be suggested during the Earlier Neolithic, although how the area was exploited is unclear. The evidence for this period has much in common with the rest of the country in that clear evidence of agricultural activity is rare (Kinnes, 1988). This may not indicate a real absence of activity but the absence of deposits where such evidence has survived. Although evidence is slight, no deliberate avoidance of clayland areas in Leicestershire and Rutland during this period is indicated. The true nature of these soils is unclear but the pure forest soils made available by clearance above clay substrata need not have inhibited pioneer agricultural practices. Indeed some of the East Midlands may have been covered by the fertile loess soils known to have been present in some parts of southern England, the extent of which is now difficult to deduce (Catt 1978; Foster 1994, p.48). Clay-derived soils would have maintained their fertility for a longer period than, for example, limestone, chalk or sandy soils, and so may have been potentially of more value to pioneer farmers (Sherratt, 1980; 1981; Mills 1985).

Distribution of Earlier Neolithic artefacts is not dense, however, and need not indicate long occupation. Pollen diagrams are lacking for this area and a pattern of vegetation change during the Earlier Neolithic cannot be reconstructed with any confidence. Evidence, where it does exist, appears to show the continued domination of woodland.

However, following Barrett (1994), a model for this area of the East Midlands can be suggested for the Earlier Neolithic with non-intensive agricultural practices including long-fallow horticulture and some animal pasturing added to the activities already undertaken by the Mesolithic groups with, in many cases, the same locations appearing to have been preferred. Small-scale clearances to enable new areas to be cultivated seem to have taken place, which, over time, would have led to a significant, if gradual, change in the landscape. The use of certain areas for more permanent settlement is perhaps suggested by the few communal monuments of this period which were perhaps constructed at the interface of the groups' 'home ranges'.

By the Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age, although 'core areas' are still difficult to detect, the results from surveys and the location of burials does suggest some expansion onto previously unexploited land together with the continued use of preferred locations many of which had also been occupied in the Mesolithic and Earlier Neolithic. While the boulder clay plateaux away from water sources were still only used intermittently, the clay vales were showing signs of occupation. One possible contributory factor to this may have been the warmer climate ('the climatic optimum') experienced during this period where average temperatures were two degrees Celsius higher than those of the present day. In an area of Britain where modern rainfall patterns are low, and assuming that these patterns can be extrapolated for the Late Neolithic – Early Bronze Age, the dryness of the soils may have been an important factor in the success or failure of arable and pastoral farming. The greater qualities of water retention of clay soils may have increased their desirability and outweighed any drainage problems experienced during the winter.

During the second millennium BC more permanent settlement with larger social groups may also be inferred, with some mobile stockherding to preferred seasonal

pasturing areas. Longer maintenance of cleared land and more intensive 'short fallow' agriculture may also have taken place (Barrett 1994) with allocation of land for ritual and burial rites, sometimes respecting or re-using areas where communal monuments had been established in the Early Neolithic. The maintenance of cleared land suitable for cultivation would have increased the importance of certain areas to these groups. This might have been re-inforced by reverence of the groups' ancestors, who would have been seen as important in the establishment of their territories (Bradley 1984). 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 evident. Although its wider context is unclear, the quality of the metalwork from this area at Lockington may reflect the high social status of its owner(s).

### **Conclusion**

From the SMR and survey evidence from Leicestershire and Rutland a model for occupation for the Neolithic and Bronze Age can be suggested which may be relevant for other East Midlands clayland areas. The data suggest that communities were using the same locations as the Late Mesolithic groups which were situated close to the headwaters of streams and rivers. As the same Mesolithic groups gradually added long fallow non-intensive agricultural practices to their hunter-gatherer activities during the fourth millennium BC, an expansion of occupation down stream from the 'core areas' located near to these headwaters appears to have taken place. Some occupation, perhaps for ritual activities, of low lying confluences was taking place (Brown forthcoming b) with the interfluves only being exploited intermittently. It is evident from this area that other environmental factors including slope and proximity to water are likely to have been more significant than the underlying substrata. This is especially true for the initial colonisation and first farming communities who would have been clearing and cultivating a forest brownearth or loess soil which would have been similar, whatever the underlying substrata. Non-environmental factors, not detectable in the archaeological record, may be of even greater significance, however (Mithen 1990).

By the later third millennium BC many of the Early Neolithic 'core areas' may have changed function, some of them becoming ceremonial areas. The Late Neolithic 'core areas', now the centres of more intensive short fallow agriculture, are more commonly situated at a slightly lower altitude, further downstream. This gradual progressive expansion downstream continues into the second millennium BC with some ceremonial areas again re-using former 'core area' locations. In the Middle Bronze Age there is the continued maintenance of cleared grassland surrounding 'core areas' first established in the Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age. Ceremonial areas continue to be used with flat cemeteries located between, and on the edges of, round barrows and ring ditches. Confluences and river side locations continue to be of significance perhaps linked to ritual practices which have left their signature in the form of burnt mounds. Evidence for settlement in the second half of the second millennium BC in the two counties, in common with many other areas, is elusive. To what extent this reflects the beginnings of a contraction in settlement in the face of a climatic deterioration and soil exhaustion or problems of the visibility of the archaeological evidence is unclear. However, there were undoubtedly changes in the nature of settlement and society which become more apparent in the first millennium BC.

## Acknowledgements

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