The Neolithic of the Thames Valley: exploring regional diversity

The Thames Valley cuts across mainland Britain for some 200 km dividing north from south and connecting east with west. The river that has physically shaped the landscape has also influenced patterns of (Neolithic) human habitation, movement and practice. The papers offered today will explore and highlight the apparent diverse nature of the Neolithic evidence.

‘A sea change’ the Neolithic of the Greater Thames estuary- Nigel Brown (Essex County Council)

This talk will consider the nature of the Thames estuary, its location and character, including, critically is role in facilitating contact with a wider world, not least continental Europe. These points are essential to an understanding of the estuary’s exploitation by, and influence on, human society whether in the Neolithic or at any other period. Concentrating on the earlier Neolithic, the issue of settled or shifting settlement will be touched upon. A range of sites, ceremonial and settlement; will be described together with their relationship to each other and their local setting (which in certain cases within the estuary is quite well understood) against a wider pattern of landscape use, from which a number of points pertinent to understanding Neolithic settlement around the estuary will be suggested, which may also be more generally relevant to the Thames catchment as a whole.

River Finds and Riverscape - Jane Sidell and Alistair Barclay (English Heritage and Wessex Archaeology)

This paper will examine some of the recent finds and environmental evidence for the river Thames in the Neolithic. This will include recent fieldwork at the foreshore forest at Erith, south-east London, a re-assessment of some of the Thames skulls, and a selection of artefacts identified by mudlarkers and others along the foreshore.

Grooved Ware/Beaker/Collared Urn from Greater London: dating, context & meaning- Jon Cotton (Museum of London)

There has been much discussion of late as to the dating, context and meaning of the ceramics current in the third and early second millennia BC (ie Grooved Ware, Beaker, Collared Urn etc). Has London anything to contribute to the debate?

Beaker graves in the Upper Thames valley Paul Garwood (Birmingham University)

The Beaker funerary 'tradition' is usually treated in isolation, as if it had a life of its own disengaged from other uses of Beakers and from other fields of social practice. Only rarely have there been concerted attempts to make sense of the wider political or religious contexts of Beaker graves, and insufficient critical attention has been paid to the supposed durability and consistency of Beaker burial practice as a traditional
mode of cultural discourse and representation. The assumed long-term coherence of Beaker graves and their meanings is especially misleading given the changes we now recognise in the material, social, cultural and landscape contexts of these practices during the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC.

This paper explores the complex treatment of the dead in the Upper Thames valley in the period 2500-1750 BC, showing how this was driven by profound cultural and political concerns (with descent, community, identity, authority, and relationships between past and present) that changed radically over time. This reveals some striking patterns in the frequency, distribution and location of Beaker graves, and in the ways in which burial events were used to evoke particular symbolic meanings at different times and in different places. Evaluation of the rich Thames valley evidence, which includes many recent discoveries, allows for an unusually detailed new appreciation of spatiality and monumentality in Beaker funerary landscapes, conceptions of time and history, and the significance of the gender- and age-defined person-kinds represented in Beaker graves. What at first sight appears to be one tradition of practice on closer inspection devolves into a multiplicity of political, social and religious strategies that all relied - in diverse ways - on the presencing of certain kinds of dead people and careful manipulation of the material culture of death.

The Horton Neolithic House- Alistair Barclay & Paul McCulloch (Wessex Archaeology)

The discovery of a substantial early Neolithic timber building at the Kingsmead Quarry, Horton not far from an oval barrow and the Staines causewayed enclosure was quite unexpected. The building, which was 10x5 m in size, was probably built from split oak planks and posts and may well have had a roof of thatch or turf. Occupation debris from the house includes worked flint, broken pottery, fragments of animal bone, charred hazelnut and cereal grains.

The Horton house is just one of a growing number of buildings that have now been found in southern Britain as a result of developer-funded archaeology. The evidence from Horton indicates that the structure may have stood in relative isolation and alongside more typical and ephemeral traces of habitation. This paper will discuss the building within its immediate landscape, its possible role, comparative structures in south-east England and beyond, and its likely date.

The cursus monuments of the Thames Valley – Roy Loveday

The pioneering aerial photography of Major Allen made the Thames valley the real birthplace of cursus studies and, by virtue of continued aerial reconnaissance and a number of extensive excavations, it remains the principal test bed of theories. The clustering of monuments in the Upper Thames contrasts with that of causewayed enclosures and henges and demands explanation as does variation in cursus plan, orientation and association. These questions, along with those of structure and layout will be discussed and the wider context of the Thames valley sites considered.
Neolithic Heathrow - John Lewis (Framework Archaeology)

This paper is concerned with the Neolithic of the Taplow gravel terrace in the Heathrow area, bounded to the West by the river Colne and to the East by the River Crane.

The Neolithic of the area is characterised by long linear and small circular monuments containing very sparse artefactual assemblages which were constructed from the middle of the fourth millennium BC onwards. In contrast, the finds assemblages contained in pits appear to increase in complexity through the Neolithic.

The paper will speculate on how and why people adopted strategies of clearance, monument construction and deposition of material in pits in the fourth and third millennia BC and why and how this was finally replaced by the physical division of the landscape into fields and trackways in the early second millennium BC.

Making sense of monument variability in the Neolithic of the Thames Valley
Gill Hey (Oxford Archaeology)

The Upper Thames Valley has a rich record of Neolithic monuments which are present in a bewildering variety of shapes and sizes. From small monuments comprising little more than split posts to transepted Cotswold Severn long cairns, from simple single-phase monuments to those with elaborate sequences of development, from small burial sites of individuals to large communal gathering places, they span practically the entire period of the Neolithic. What sense can we make of this variability and the combinations in which different forms are found, and what light can these monuments shed on the people who constructed them and the events for which they were built?

Discovery of a major henge enclosure in Oxford – Steve Ford (TVAS)

The long held believe that a major Neolithic monument once existed under the present City of Oxford has at last been confirmed by the discovery of a major henge monument within the grounds of Keble College. This paper will outline the circumstance of its discovery, describe the Beaker associated activity and place the site in its local and regional context.