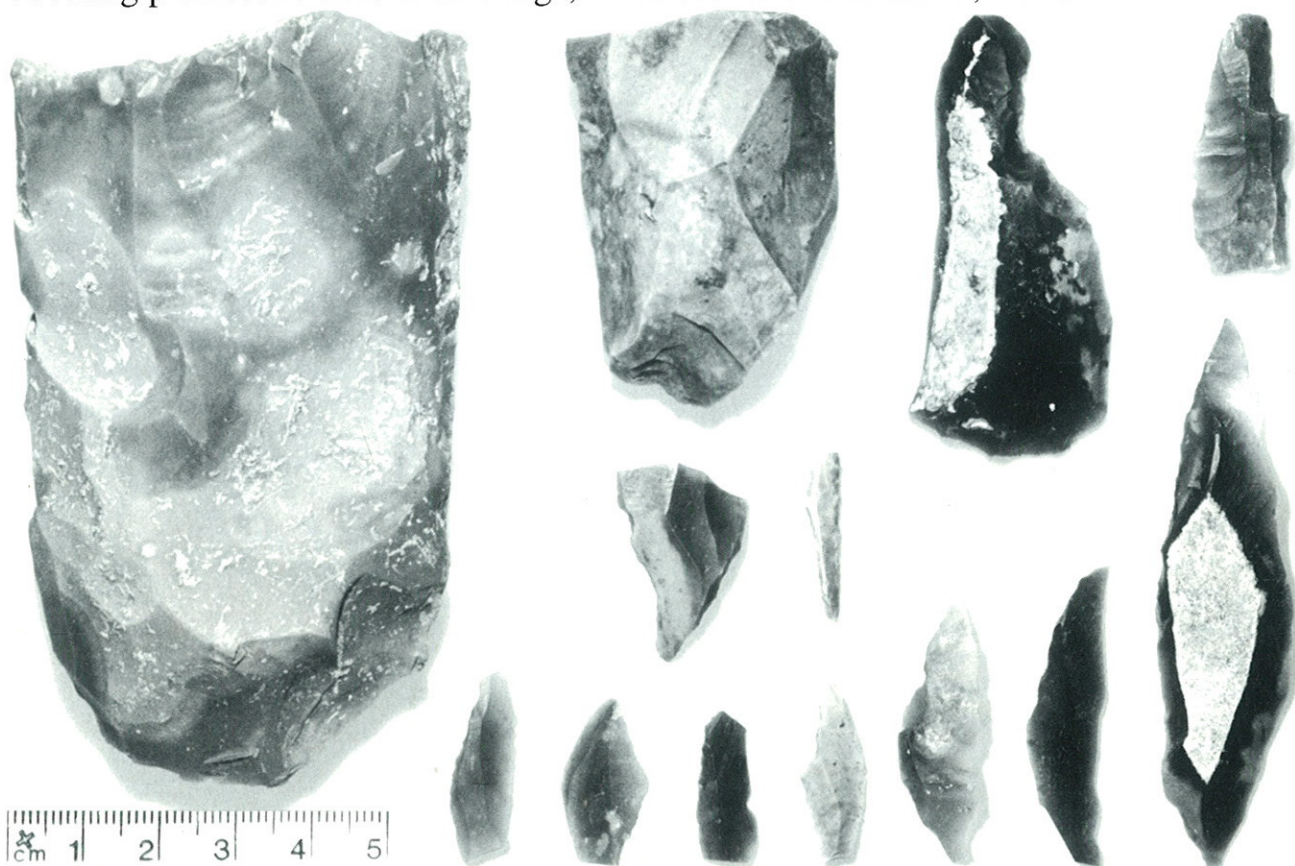


NEWS

Winter 1994

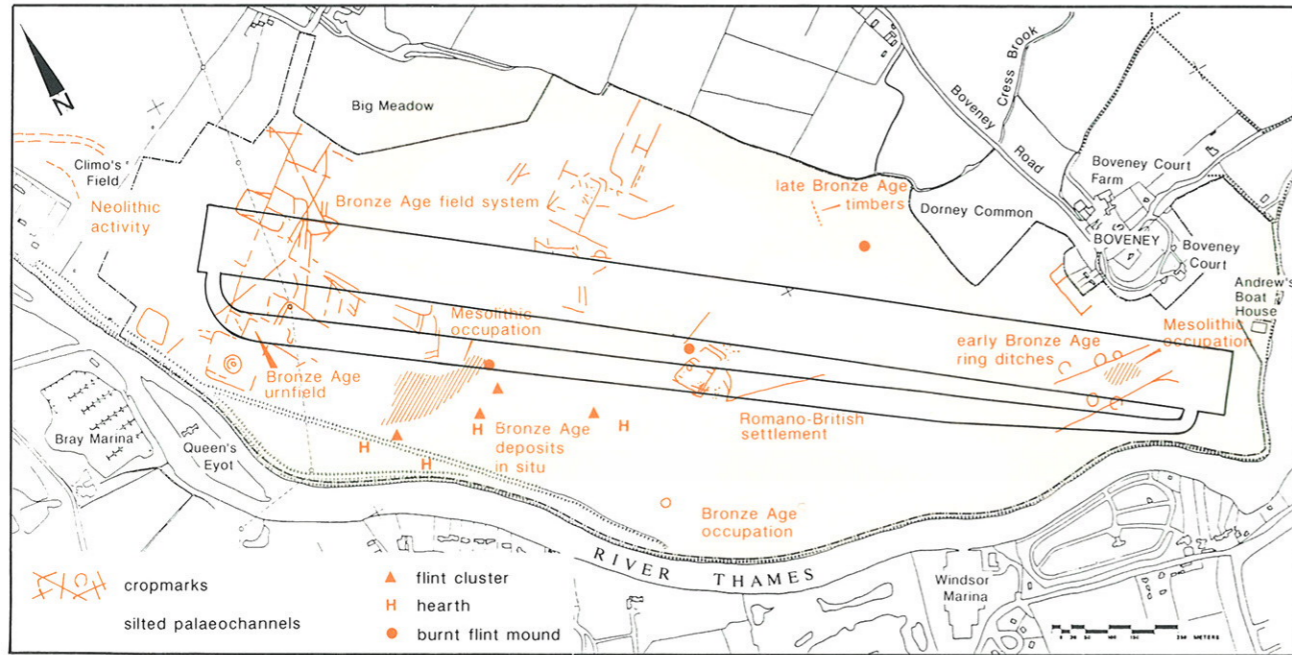
POTS, DITCHES AND LANDSCAPES: PREHISTORY ON THE GRAVELS

Another year is almost over, and we have pleasure in wishing the compliments of the season to all our subscribers. It is more or less an OAU tradition that as the days get shorter, colder and wetter we find ourselves excavating large and very muddy expanses of archaeology on the Thames Gravels. This year is no exception, and the evaluation by Tim Allen at Eton Rowing Lake promises to be only the beginning of a very large multi-period project, to which we will return in future issues of OAU news. Given that the OAU's sphere of influence these days follows the Thames and its tributaries well beyond Oxford, short items are also included, on a Bronze Age theme, covering prehistoric sites at Uxbridge, Middlesex and Gravesend, Kent.



Mesolithic flint tools: top row—2 broken axes, a scraper and a grooving tool. Bottom and middle row—microliths. These would have been hafted into grooves in wood or bone to be used as saws, harpoons etc.

The Eton College Rowing Lake by Tim Allen



The site covers approximately 150 hectares on the north bank of the River Thames. It sits upon flint gravel terrace deposits which are cut across by ancient, silted-up watercourses (palaeochannels). Cropmarks cover much of the higher gravel terrace areas (see map), and comprise an enclosure system and barrow cemetery of the Bronze Age and an enclosed Roman farmstead. This scale of cropmarks makes it one of the best Bronze Age landscapes in the Thames valley, though the initial evaluations in 1987 and 1990 showed some plough damage. A probable Neolithic causewayed enclosure lies just outside the site on the north-west.

A more detailed evaluation is now underway and has so far covered the north-west of the site. This has shown that the palaeochannels are of several different dates and include buried land surfaces preserved by later alluviation. Deep waterlogged deposits of Mesolithic and Bronze Age date have been found and the site thus has the potential to provide a long and well-dated environmental sequence of Holocene activity for the Middle Thames. In situ Mesolithic activity has been found on the edge of the oldest palaeochannel, which was a reedswamp at the time, and as the channel silted up it preserved hearths and other Bronze Age features. Bronze Age mounds of burnt flint, sometimes interpreted as primitive

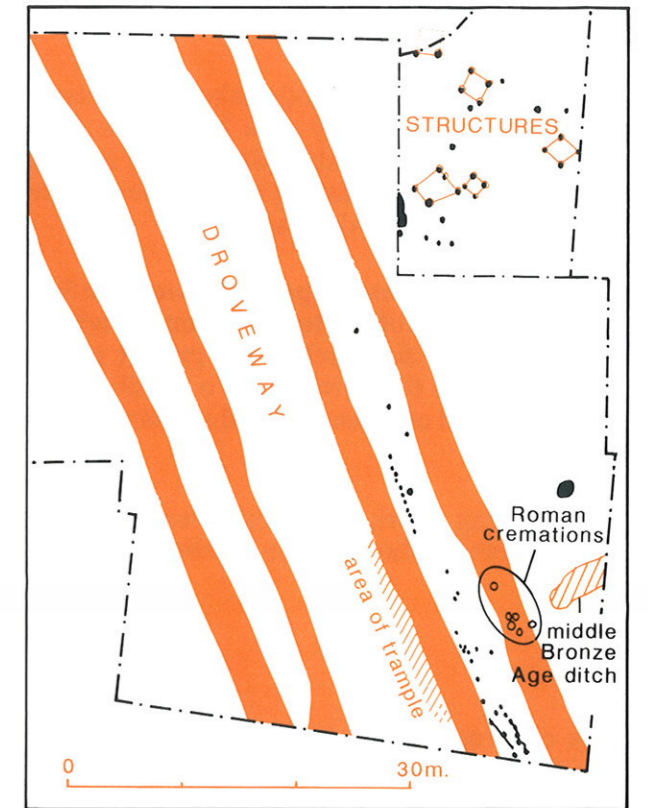
saunas, have been found on the edge of the channels and lines of stakes together with other worked wood from the late Bronze Age were also recovered.

Overall the site presents a huge challenge. The palaeochannels alone represent 60 hectares of complex deposits, within which individual activities (eg flint knapping) may occupy very limited areas, making effective sampling difficult. Our strategy will be to establish the palaeochannel sequence and thus reconstruct the changing patterns of landuse over time, providing a framework for the selection of areas for more detailed excavation.

This is a long-term project, likely to be carried out over ten years or more, commencing late in 1995. Our aim is to involve all those with an interest in the archaeology, whether field professionals, academics or amateurs. The coordinating body will be the OAU, but several university departments will participate, notably the archaeology department at Reading. The main excavations, which will be carried out in the summer months because of the high water-table, will welcome volunteers, and will include training for archaeology students. The first season of excavation will be from June-September 1995; for further details contact Louise Waltham on 0865 243888.

Harefield Road, Uxbridge

The site lies just east of the River Colne, on a high area of gravels. The OAU carried out an evaluation and subsequent excavation which were funded by Davies Street Properties Ltd. An alignment of four late Bronze Age ditches (1200-700 BC) with a parallel line of posts crosses the site, and a layer apparently trampled by animals lay between the ditches. On this evidence, together with parallels elsewhere, the alignment was probably both a droveway and a major boundary, forming part of a known late Bronze Age system of land division in the Uxbridge area. Similar systems are known from the south of England, and represent agricultural intensification on a scale unknown before this time, with concomitant social changes. Probably also from this period are the structures, each represented by four postholes, found in the north-east corner of the site. Other features found include a middle Bronze Age ditch and Roman cremations.



Uxbridge: late Bronze Age droveway ditches and posthole alignment

STOP PRESS — MORE GRAVELS, MORE PREHISTORY!

We have just heard that the Ancient Monuments Advisory Committee (AMAC) of English Heritage has approved a major new programme of archaeological work at Yarn-ton and Cassington, Oxfordshire, within the ARC gravel extraction pit. The project must now be scrutinised by Treasury but, subject to their assent, excavations will commence at the beginning of March 1995. The project will include four field seasons, concentrating on the Neolithic and Bronze Age sites discovered by the OAU on the Thames floodplain.

OAU ROUND-UP

The unit has recently undertaken a number of small to medium-scale excavations which will be reported on more fully at a later date. Mark Roberts has been investigating two 13th-century buildings in Ock St, Abingdon, while in Naseby, Northamptonshire, Andy Mudd and Chris Bell examined deposits relating to the Saxon origins of the town. Andy has also been working on part of the Roman town of Alcester.

Rob Early and his team spent four weeks at Springhead, near Gravesend, recording part of the Roman settlement south of the temple complex where an 800 m long pipe trench was cut. The OAU has also carried out its first fieldwork project in Cambridgeshire, evaluating ring ditches at Abington. Meanwhile, in the metropolis, a small excavation at the Middle Temple makes the Unit the first archaeological organisation, other than the Museum of London, to work in the City of London for 20 years.

Forthcoming work includes a large excavation at Abingdon Business Park, where there is a continuation of the Ashville Trading Estate site excavated by the OAU in 1972-4.

Coldharbour Road, Gravesend

This excavation (see Annual Report 1993/94) found what the OAU excavator, Andy Mudd, has interpreted as a late Bronze Age droveway with attached settlement – there are thus clear parallels with the Uxbridge site. One of the more interesting finds from Gravesend was a large sherd from a late Bronze Age hook-rimmed jar. Unusually, Carbon 14 analysis was applied to residue within the pot, yielding a date of between 1225 and 900 BC. A complete example of the same kind of jar came from the Unit's 1986 excavation of a high-status riverside settlement at Wallingford. This type of pottery is found across the Thames Valley, and is considered to be an indicator of wider social change, coinciding with the appearance of enclosed settlements and land boundaries (see also Uxbridge, this issue).

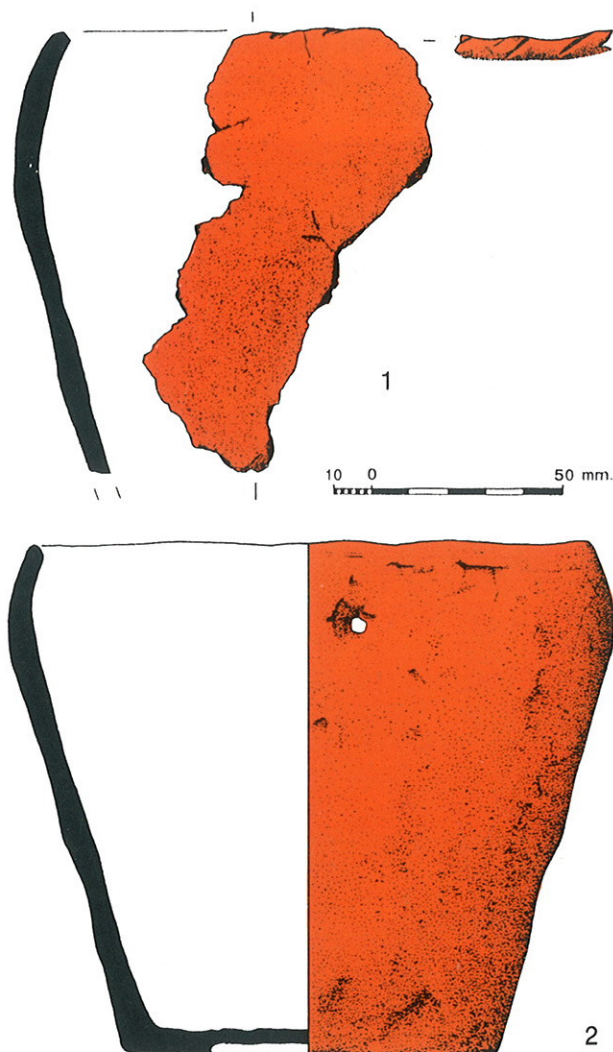
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*Late Bronze Age hook-rimmed jars from
(1) Gravesend (2) Wallingford*