

# Opening the Wood, Making the Land

The Archaeology of a Middle Thames Landscape: the  
Eton College Rowing Course Project and the Maidenhead,  
Windsor and Eton Flood Alleviation Scheme

*Volume 1: Mesolithic to early Bronze Age*

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# Contents

List of Figures .....	xi
List of Plates .....	xvii
List of Tables .....	xix
Acknowledgements .....	xxiii
<i>The Eton College Rowing Course Project</i> .....	xxiii
<i>The Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton Flood Alleviation Scheme</i> .....	xxiii
<i>Lot's Hole Gravel Storage Area</i> .....	xxiv
<i>Location of the project archives</i> .....	xxiv
Summary .....	xxv

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction .....	1
The projects .....	1
<i>The Maidenhead, Windsor and Eton Flood Alleviation Scheme</i> .....	1
<i>The Eton College Rowing Course project</i> .....	1
Methodology .....	4
<i>Excavation methodology</i> .....	4
<i>Post-excavation</i> .....	7
Archaeological background .....	7
Topography, geology and environment .....	9

## Chapter 2: The sites

The sites: an introduction and summary .....	13
The Eton Rowing Course Sites .....	13
<i>Areas 20, 24, RC1 and 2 and NAR</i> .....	15
<i>Area 18 and Site F East</i> .....	17
<i>The north-western side of Basin R: the floodplain and terrace edge (evaluation trenches)</i> .....	17
<i>Areas Ex1-3, 11 and 1</i> .....	17
<i>Palaeochannel Q (Area 1 and the northern parts of Areas Ex1-3)</i> .....	19
<i>The floodplain within Basin R on the northern side of Site X (northern parts of Areas Ex1-3)</i> .....	19
<i>Site X: the gravel island (southern parts of Areas Ex1-3 and northern part of Area 11)</i> .....	19
<i>Basin W: the floodplain to the southeast of Site X (southern part of Area 11 and evaluation trenches)</i> .....	20
<i>Area 16</i> .....	20
<i>Areas 3 and 5</i> .....	20
<i>Area 10</i> .....	21
<i>Area 15</i> .....	22
<i>Area 4</i> .....	22
<i>Area 6</i> .....	23
The Jubilee River: the south-eastern sites .....	24
<i>Agar's Plough</i> .....	24
<i>Roundmoor Ditch</i> .....	24

<b>The Jubilee River: the central sites</b> .....	24
<i>Lake End Road East</i> .....	24
<i>Lake End Road West</i> .....	24
<i>Lot's Hole</i> .....	24
<i>Lot's Hole Gravel Storage Area</i> .....	24
<i>Marsh Lane East Site 2</i> .....	25
<i>Marsh Lane East Site 1</i> .....	25
<i>Marsh Lane West</i> .....	25
<b>The Jubilee River: the northern sites</b> .....	25
<i>Amerden Lane East</i> .....	25
<i>Amerden Lane West</i> .....	25
<i>Taplow Mill Site 1</i> .....	25
<i>Taplow Mill Site 2</i> .....	25
<i>Widbrook Common</i> .....	26
<b>Chapter 3: The development of the late Glacial and early to mid Holocene landscape</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	27
<i>The geology and present topography of the study area</i> .....	27
<i>Previous archaeological and palaeoenvironmental knowledge</i> .....	27
<i>The development of the aims of the palaeoenvironmental analysis</i> .....	27
<i>Location of the principal samples</i> .....	31
<b>The Mesolithic</b> .....	31
<i>Mesolithic sites</i> .....	31
<i>Mesolithic channel evolution and floodplain development</i> .....	31
<i>Mesolithic environmental and vegetational sequence</i> .....	35
<b>The Neolithic</b> .....	41
<i>Neolithic sites</i> .....	41
<i>Pollen</i> .....	41
<i>Charred plant remains</i> .....	43
<b>The late Neolithic and early Bronze Age</b> .....	43
<i>Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age site activity</i> .....	43
<i>Charred plant remains</i> .....	44
<b>Neolithic and Bronze Age channel evolution</b> .....	44
<b>The Neolithic and early Bronze Age landscape</b> .....	47
<b>Neolithic and early Bronze Age agriculture and the procurement of biological resources</b> .....	50
<i>Neolithic</i> .....	50
<i>Early Bronze Age</i> .....	52
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	52
<b>Chapter 4: The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	55
<b>Areas 20 and 24: Palaeolithic and early Mesolithic flint</b> .....	55
<i>Palaeolithic and Mesolithic flint from Areas 20 and 24</i> .....	58
<b>Mesolithic activity around Basin R</b> .....	58
<b>Basin R north-west: early Mesolithic lakeside occupation</b> .....	58
<i>Struck flint from the early Mesolithic occupation in Basin R</i> .....	62
<b>Gravel Island X (Areas Ex1 and 11) and the floodplain to the north (Trench 46; Basin R south): late Mesolithic finds from tree-throw holes</b> .....	68

## Contents

<i>Late Mesolithic struck flint from tree-throw holes on Gravel Island X and the floodplain to the north (Areas Ex1-3 and 11 and Trench 46)</i> .....	68
<i>An antler-beam mattock from Area Ex3</i> .....	70
<i>Mesolithic animal bones from the floodplain in Areas Ex2 and Ex3</i> .....	71
<i>Macroscopic plant and invertebrate remains from Mesolithic organic sediments in Basin R</i> .....	73
<b>Areas 3 and 5: late Mesolithic/early Neolithic flint scatters and other remains</b> .....	76
<b>The floodplain in Area 5: Mesolithic and early Neolithic flint scatters and tree-throw holes</b> .....	76
<i>Mesolithic and early Neolithic struck flint from Area 5</i> .....	77
<i>Late Mesolithic/early Neolithic animal bone from Area 5</i> .....	80
<b>The floodplain in Area 3: late Mesolithic and early Neolithic flint scatters</b> .....	80
<i>The Mesolithic/early Neolithic assemblage from Area 3</i> .....	80
<i>Waterlogged macroscopic plant remains and molluscs from Mesolithic backswamp sediments in Area 3</i> .....	83
<b>Area 16: a Mesolithic tree-throw hole</b> .....	85
<i>Mesolithic flint from Area 16</i> .....	85
<b>Area 14: a Mesolithic pebble-hammer</b> .....	87
 <b>Chapter 5: Earlier Neolithic Middens and other evidence from Sites 6 and 10 and Lake End Road West</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	89
<b>Area 6: earlier Neolithic Midden deposits and other remains</b> .....	89
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Area 6</i> .....	106
<i>Fired clay from Area 6</i> .....	148
<i>The struck flint from Area 6</i> .....	148
<i>Worked stone from Area 6</i> .....	178
<i>A shale bead fragment from Area 6</i> .....	182
<i>Worked bone and antler from Area 6</i> .....	183
<i>Early Neolithic animal bone from Area 6</i> .....	183
<i>Charred plant remains from the early Neolithic midden deposits in Area 6</i> .....	198
<b>Area 10: earlier Neolithic middens and other features</b> .....	202
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Area 10</i> .....	210
<i>Fired clay from Area 10</i> .....	221
<i>Early Neolithic flint from Area 10</i> .....	221
<i>Worked and burnt stone from Area 10</i> .....	234
<i>Animal bones from the Area 10 early Neolithic hollow</i> .....	235
<b>Radiocarbon dates from the Area 6 and 10 middens</b> .....	236
<b>Organic residue analysis of sherds from Areas 6 and 10</b> .....	243
<b>Lake End Road West: midden deposits and other early neolithic activity</b> .....	252
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Lake End Road West</i> .....	255
<i>Early Neolithic struck flint from Lake End Road West</i> .....	258
 <b>Chapter 6: Early Neolithic evidence from other sites</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	261
<b>Areas Ex1-3, 11 and 1: early Neolithic activity</b> .....	261
<i>The former Thames channel: early Neolithic finds</i> .....	261
<i>The floodplain to the north of Site X (Areas Ex1-3; Basin R south): earlier Neolithic finds</i> .....	264
<i>The floodplain to the south-east of Gravel Island X (Area 11; Basin W): early Neolithic or later Mesolithic activity</i> .....	269
<i>Gravel Island X (Area Ex1 and 11): early Neolithic and undated activity</i> .....	271

<i>Early and early/middle Neolithic pottery (Bowl and early Ebbsfleet Ware) from Areas Ex1-3</i> . . . .	284
<i>Earlier Neolithic struck flint from Areas Ex1-3</i> . . . . .	285
<i>Neolithic animal bone from Areas Ex1-3 and 11</i> . . . . .	298
<b>Areas 20 and 24 and their surroundings: early and early/middle Neolithic evidence</b> . . . . .	303
<i>Earlier Neolithic pottery from Areas 20, 24, 24a and RC1-2, the watching brief in Area 14 and from evaluation west of the former Thames channel</i> . . . . .	303
<i>Early/middle Neolithic flint from Areas 20, 24 and RC1</i> . . . . .	306
<i>Animal bones from Areas 20 and 24</i> . . . . .	306
<b>Areas 3 and 5: a human skull and other earlier Neolithic finds from the palaeochannel</b> . . . . .	306
<i>Early Neolithic animal bone from Areas 3 and 5</i> . . . . .	309
<b>Marsh Lane East Site 2: an early Neolithic oval ring ditch and pits</b> . . . . .	310
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Marsh Lane East Site 2</i> . . . . .	313
<b>Area 16: early Neolithic pits and residual finds</b> . . . . .	313
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Area 16</i> . . . . .	313
<i>Worked flint from Area 16</i> . . . . .	316
<i>Animal bone from early Neolithic pit 9330</i> . . . . .	320
<b>Lot's Hole: early Neolithic pit 50189</b> . . . . .	320
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Lot's Hole</i> . . . . .	320
<i>Struck flint from pit 50189, Lot's Hole</i> . . . . .	320
<i>Neolithic plant macrofossils from pit 50190, Lot's Hole</i> . . . . .	322
<b>Marsh Lane West: early Neolithic tree-throw holes</b> . . . . .	322
<i>Early Neolithic pottery from Marsh Lane West</i> . . . . .	322
<i>Struck flint from Lot's Hole</i> . . . . .	323
<i>Charcoal from tree-throw hole 61010, Lot's Hole</i> . . . . .	326
<b>Marsh Lane East Site 1: an early Neolithic tree-throw hole</b> . . . . .	326
<i>Struck flint from Marsh Lane East Site 1</i> . . . . .	327
<b>Taplow Mill Site 2: a possibly early Neolithic tree-throw hole</b> . . . . .	330
<b>Roundmoor Ditch: a flint scatter, tree-throw holes and other features</b> . . . . .	330
<i>Earlier prehistoric pottery from Roundmoor Ditch</i> . . . . .	333
<i>Worked flint from Roundmoor Ditch</i> . . . . .	333
<b>Chapter 7: The middle Neolithic</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	337
<b>Area 6: Middle Neolithic inhumations and other evidence</b> . . . . .	337
<i>The middle Neolithic flint from Area 6</i> . . . . .	340
<i>Middle Neolithic human remains from Area 6</i> . . . . .	340
<i>Middle Neolithic animal bone from Area 6</i> . . . . .	342
<i>Worked antler from Area 6</i> . . . . .	342
<b>Area 10: middle Neolithic cattle burials, artefacts scatters and other evidence</b> . . . . .	343
<i>Middle Neolithic pottery from Area 10</i> . . . . .	345
<b>The watching brief in the former Thames channel: human and cattle skulls and other middle Neolithic finds</b> . . . . .	348
<i>Neolithic animal bones from the watching brief on the former Thames channel</i> . . . . .	349
<b>Lake End Road West: middle Neolithic pits</b> . . . . .	349
<i>Middle Neolithic pottery from Lake End Road West</i> . . . . .	353
<i>Struck flint from the middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West</i> . . . . .	368
<i>Plant macrofossils from the middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West</i> . . . . .	375
<b>Taplow Mill Site 1: middle Neolithic pits</b> . . . . .	376
<i>Middle Neolithic pottery from the pits at Taplow Mill Site 1</i> . . . . .	378

## Contents

<i>Struck flint from the middle Neolithic pits at Taplow Mill Site 1</i> .....	380
Marsh Lane East Site 1: middle Neolithic pits.....	382
<i>The middle Neolithic pottery from the pits at Marsh Lane East Site 1</i> .....	384
Taplow Mill Site 2: middle Neolithic pits.....	385
Area 16: Middle Neolithic tree-throw holes and a pit.....	385
<i>Middle Neolithic pottery from Area 16</i> .....	389
Area 3: a middle or late Neolithic flint scatter.....	391
<i>Worked flint from scatter 3181, Area 3</i> .....	391
Middle Neolithic Pottery from Area 18, Site F East, Areas 20, 24, 24a, NAR RC1-2, 18, the watching brief in Area 14 and from evaluation west of the former Thames channel.....	393
<b>Chapter 8: The late Neolithic</b>	
Introduction.....	395
Area 6: a skeleton from the former Thames channel and other late Neolithic finds.....	395
<i>Late Neolithic Grooved Ware from Area 6</i> .....	395
<i>The late Neolithic flint from Area 6</i> .....	395
Area 16: late Neolithic pits and a burnt flint spread.....	398
<i>Late Neolithic pottery from Area 16</i> .....	398
<i>Late Neolithic flint from Area 16</i> .....	401
<i>Worked bone from Area 16</i> .....	405
<i>Animal bones from late Neolithic pits 16023 and 13650 in Area 16</i> .....	406
<i>Charred plant remains from a late Neolithic pit in Area 16</i> .....	407
Areas 20 and 24 and their surroundings: late Neolithic pits and other finds.....	408
<i>Late Neolithic Pottery from Area 18, Site F East, Areas 20, 24, 24a, NAR RC1-2, 18, the watching brief in Area 14 and from evaluation west of the former Thames channel</i> .....	410
<i>Worked flint from Areas 24 and surroundings</i> .....	410
<i>Late Neolithic animal bone from Area 24</i> .....	417
Area 10: late Neolithic tree-throw holes and a pit.....	417
<i>Late Neolithic pottery from Area 10</i> .....	417
<i>Late Neolithic flint from Area 10</i> .....	419
<i>Late Neolithic pottery from Areas EX1-3, 11 and 1</i> .....	419
Late Neolithic animal bone from the watching brief on the former Thames channel.....	420
<b>Chapter 9: The Beaker period and the early Bronze Age</b>	
Introduction.....	423
Area 6: ring ditches and other late Neolithic/early Bronze Age evidence.....	423
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age Beaker pottery from Area 6</i> .....	429
<i>Early Bronze Age worked flint from Area 6</i> .....	432
Marsh Lane East Site 2: early Bronze Age funerary activity and monuments.....	432
<i>The Collared Urn from Marsh Lane East Site 2</i> .....	439
<i>Cremated human remains from Marsh Lane East Site 2</i> .....	439
<i>Charcoal from the early Bronze Age cremation burial at Marsh Lane East Site 2</i> .....	441
Area 16: late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditches and other evidence.....	441
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age and early Bronze Age pottery from Area 16</i> .....	445
<i>Early Bronze Age flint from Area 16</i> .....	446
<i>Worked antler from Area 16</i> .....	446
Areas Ex1-3, 11 and 1.....	447
Basin R south – the floodplain to the north of Site X (Areas Ex1-3): a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age horizon, artefacts scatters and other evidence.....	447

<b>Basin W – the floodplain to the south-east of Site X (Area 11): late Neolithic/early Bronze Age activity</b> .....	451
<b>Site X – the gravel island (Areas Ex1-2 and 11): late Neolithic/early Bronze Age tree-throw holes and a pit</b> .....	451
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age and early Bronze Age pottery from Areas Ex1-3</i> .....	454
<i>Later Neolithic and early Bronze Age struck flint from Areas Ex1-3</i> .....	456
<i>Early Bronze Age worked flint from Area 11</i> .....	459
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age animal bone in Areas Ex1-3 and 11</i> .....	460
<b>Area 3: late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint scatters</b> .....	461
<i>The late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint from Area 3</i> .....	462
<b>Taplow Mill Site 2: late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint scatters, tree-throw holes and a ditch</b> ...	466
<i>Struck flint from Taplow Mill Site 2</i> .....	467
<b>Amerden Lane West: late Neolithic/early Bronze Age and other artefacts from a silted palaeochannel</b> .....	471
<i>Neolithic and early Bronze Age pottery from Amerden Lane West</i> .....	474
<i>Struck flint from Amerden Lane West</i> .....	475
<b>Area 18 and Site F East: late Neolithic/early Bronze Age pits</b> .....	479
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age pottery from Area 18, Site F East, Areas 20, 24, 24a, NAR RC1-2, 18, the watching brief in Area 14 and from evaluation west of the former Thames channel</i> .....	479
<b>Marsh Lane East Site 1: a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age tree-throw hole</b> .....	479
<b>Area 10: a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age pit and tree-throw holes</b> .....	482
<i>Late Neolithic-early Bronze Age pottery from Area 10</i> .....	482
 <b>Chapter 10: Discussion</b>	
Late Glacial .....	483
Early Mesolithic .....	483
Later Mesolithic .....	485
The Neolithic .....	488
<i>The middens within the Rowing Course site</i> .....	488
<i>Dating of the hollow deposits</i> .....	490
<i>The preservation of the deposits</i> .....	491
<i>The origin and character of the deposits</i> .....	492
<i>Differences between the hollow deposits</i> .....	495
<i>The evidence from the Stumble in the Blackwater Estuary, Essex</i> .....	496
<i>The early Neolithic occupation in context</i> .....	497
<i>Tree-throw holes and pits</i> .....	498
<i>Implications of the discoveries</i> .....	501
Burial in the early-middle Bronze Age .....	505
 <b>Appendix 1 – Ceramics: methodology</b>	
<i>Chronology and approach to the assemblage</i> .....	509
<i>Recording</i> .....	510
<i>Fabrics</i> .....	
 <b>Appendix 2 – Struck flint: methodology and overview</b>	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	513
<i>Methodology for the analysis and recording of struck flint</i> .....	516
<i>Mesolithic to early Bronze Age struck flint: an overview</i> .....	520



<b>Appendix 3 – Animal bone: methodology and overview</b>	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	527
<i>Identification</i> .....	527
<i>Recording</i> .....	527
<i>Overview of the animal bone from the Eton Rowing Course</i> .....	527
<i>The wild and domestic species at Eton</i> .....	528
<b>Appendix 4 – Charcoal from the Eton Rowing Course</b>	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	535
<i>Methodology</i> .....	535
<i>Results</i> .....	536
<i>Discussion</i> .....	537
<i>The woody environment</i> .....	537
<i>Fuelwood selection</i> .....	538
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	540
<b>Appendix 5 – Radiocarbon dates</b>	
<i>Eton Rowing Course Dates</i> .....	541
<i>Jubilee River Dates</i> .....	543
<b>Appendix 6 – Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating</b>	
<i>Aims of the dating</i> .....	545
<i>Sediment</i> .....	545
<i>Measurements procedures</i> .....	545
<i>Results</i> .....	546
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	546
<b>Appendix 7 – Human remains: methodology and overview</b>	
<i>Introduction</i> .....	547
<i>Methodology</i> .....	547
<i>Inhumations</i> .....	547
<i>Cremations</i> .....	547
<i>Assemblage composition</i> .....	547
<i>Stature</i> .....	547
<i>Metric analysis</i> .....	548
<i>Skeletal pathology</i> .....	548
<i>Dental pathology</i> .....	548
<i>Discontinuous traits</i> .....	549
<i>Possible anthropogenic alterations of human bones</i> .....	550
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	551
<b>Index</b> .....	567



## List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	Project location plan and geological map.....	2
Fig. 1.2	General site location plan .....	3
Fig. 1.3	Detailed site location plan of the Eton Rowing Course.....	5
Fig. 1.4	Reconstruction of the topography in the area of the Eton Rowing Course (contours at m intervals) .....	10
Fig. 2.1	The channels and gravel islands in the area of the Eton Rowing Course.....	16
Fig. 2.2	Levels of excavation in Areas Ex1-3 .....	18
Fig. 3.1	Location of environmental samples and major sections .....	32
Fig. 3.2	Section across Inlet Z in Area 15 .....	33
Fig. 3.3	Lot's Hole, percentage pollen diagram .....	36-7
Fig. 3.4	Area 15, percentage pollen diagram .....	38
Fig. 3.5	Area 3, columns 615 and 706 (upper), and 648 and 658 (lower), percentage pollen diagram .....	39
Fig. 3.6	Sections of Trenches 46 and 167, with a plan of the flint cluster in Trench 46 .....	42
Fig. 4.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 4. ....	56
Fig. 4.2	Location of Mesolithic flint in Areas 20 and 24a .....	57
Fig. 4.3	Mesolithic flint from Areas 20 and 24a .....	59
Fig. 4.4	Location plan of Evaluation Trenches 166, 173 and 180 containing early Mesolithic flint on the northern side of Basin R, and of Evaluation Trench 46 on the south, with plans and sections of Trenches 166 and 180 .....	61
Fig. 4.5	Early Mesolithic flint from Trenches 166, 173 and 180 .....	66
Fig. 4.6	Early Mesolithic flint from Trenches 166, 173 and 180 .....	67
Fig. 4.7	Tree-throw holes with Mesolithic flint in Area Ex1 .....	69
Fig. 4.8	Mesolithic flint from Areas Ex1-3 .....	71
Fig. 4.9	Antler-beam mattock from Area Ex3 .....	72
Fig. 4.10	Location of flint scatters and tree-throw holes containing Mesolithic flint in Area 5 .....	77
Fig. 4.11	Flint from Area 5 .....	79
Fig. 4.12	Location of flint scatters and features in Area 3 .....	81
Fig. 4.13	Mesolithic flint from Area 3 .....	83
Fig. 4.14	Location of feature 13409 in Area 16C .....	86
Fig. 4.15	Unstratified Mesolithic pebble hammer .....	87
Fig. 5.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 5. ....	90
Fig. 5.2	Overall plan of Area 6 showing areas of evaluation, test-pitting, fieldwalking and excavation .....	91
Fig. 5.3	Plan of Area 6 hollow, western part, showing numbering of sample squares, features and locations of illustrated sections .....	96
Fig. 5.4	Plan of Area 6 hollow, eastern part, showing numbering of sample squares, features and tree-throw holes, and locations of illustrated sections .....	97
Fig. 5.5	Area 6: sections of excavated squares showing monolith sample locations .....	98
Fig. 5.6	Plan of Area 6 hollow showing overall distribution of pottery, struck flint and animal bones .....	100
Fig. 5.7	Area 6: plans and sections of tree-throw holes .....	101
Fig. 5.8	Plan of features in Area 6 south showing location of early Neolithic pottery and Neolithic pick/adze .....	102
Fig. 5.9	Area 6: plan of possibly Neolithic burial 5125 .....	104
Fig. 5.10	Area 6: section of Neolithic pit 5110 .....	105
Fig. 5.11	Distribution of Neolithic and early Bronze Age pottery from the Area 6 hollow by phase .....	107
Fig. 5.12	Area 6: distribution of early Neolithic fabric groups .....	109

Fig. 5.13	Area 6: percentage of different rim forms compared with those from Staines causewayed enclosure . . . . .	112
Fig. 5.14	Area 6: distribution of early Neolithic rim types . . . . .	113
Fig. 5.15	Area 6: percentages of different rim forms in selected context groups . . . . .	114
Fig. 5.16	Area 6: percentages of different shoulder forms in selected context groups . . . . .	114
Fig. 5.17	Area 6: distribution of early Neolithic vessels: cups and bowls. . . . .	116
Fig. 5.18	General distribution of vessel groups in the Area 6 hollow . . . . .	123
Fig. 5.19	Area 6: spread and refitting sherds of vessel P92 . . . . .	124
Fig. 5.20	Area 6: spread and refitting sherds of vessel P94 . . . . .	124
Fig. 5.21	Area 6: spread and refitting sherds of vessel P189 . . . . .	125
Fig. 5.22	Area 6: selected midden deposits: a - sherd weight profiles; b - sherd thickness profiles . . . . .	126
Fig. 5.23	Area 6: mean sherd weight (g) profiles in tree throw hole 11427 and immediate surface deposit 11159, tree-throw hole deposits, and surface midden deposits. . . . .	126
Fig. 5.24	Area 6: states of abrasion of sherds from selected midden deposits . . . . .	127
Fig. 5.25	Area 6: a comparison of early Neolithic ceramic deposits by character . . . . .	129
Fig. 5.26	Neolithic pottery from Area 6: early fills 11202, P1-5; early Neolithic horizon 11201, P6-P19. . . . .	132
Fig. 5.27	Early Neolithic pottery: early Neolithic horizon 11201, P20-39 . . . . .	133
Fig. 5.28	Early Neolithic pottery: early Neolithic horizon 11201, P40-69 . . . . .	135
Fig. 5.29	Early Neolithic pottery: early Neolithic horizon 11201, P70-91, midden deposit 11421, P92 . . . . .	136
Fig. 5.30	Early Neolithic pottery: midden deposit 11421, P93-102. . . . .	138
Fig. 5.31	Early Neolithic pottery: midden deposit 11422, P103-106; midden deposit 11426, P107-131 . . . . .	139
Fig. 5.32	Early Neolithic pottery: midden deposit 11426, P132-138; midden deposit 11352, P139-148. . . . .	141
Fig. 5.33	Early Neolithic pottery: context group 11424, P149-167; context group 11420, P168-177; context group 11427, P178-180 . . . . .	142
Fig. 5.34	Early Neolithic pottery: pit 11179, P181-2; other neolithic features, P183-190 . . . . .	144
Fig. 5.35	Early Neolithic pottery from Bronze Age ditch: P191-198. . . . .	145
Fig. 5.36	Early/middle and middle Neolithic pottery from Area 6: P199-215 . . . . .	147
Fig. 5.37	Graphs of technological traits of struck flint from Area 6 (For explanation of categories see Appendix 2) . . . . .	164
Fig. 5.38	Area 6: length to breadth plots (mm) for fill 11313, midden 11424 . . . . .	165
Fig. 5.39	Area 6: length to breadth plots (mm) for layer 11159, part of land surface 11201 . . . . .	165
Fig. 5.40	Area 6: use-wear graphs . . . . .	168
Fig. 5.41	Area 6: flakes and cores etc, nos 1-7 and 10. . . . .	172
Fig. 5.42	Area 6: Neolithic cores, laurel leaf and leaf-shaped arrowheads, nos 8-9 and 11-18 . . . . .	173
Fig. 5.43	Area 6: Neolithic arrowheads and scrapers, nos 19-36 . . . . .	174
Fig. 5.44	Area 6: awls, piercers, serrated flakes, saws, denticulates and knives, nos 37-49. . . . .	176
Fig. 5.45	Area 6: single piece sickles, fabricator and axes, nos 50-56. . . . .	177
Fig. 5.46	Area 6: miscellaneous retouch, nos 57-8. . . . .	178
Fig. 5.47	Worked stone from Area 6 . . . . .	181
Fig. 5.48	Shale bead from Area 6 . . . . .	182
Fig. 5.49	Bone gouge from Area 6 . . . . .	183
Fig. 5.50	Distribution of animal bones of different species in the Area 6 hollow . . . . .	187
Fig. 5.51	Cattle measurements, compared with aurochs, and Neolithic and Iron Age domestic cattle. . . . .	191
Fig. 5.52	Area 6: location of samples for charred plant remains and charcoal. . . . .	199
Fig. 5.53	Plan of Area 10 showing extent of evaluation and excavation, and indicating all features including the hollow, grids of squares and tree-throw holes within it . . . . .	203
Fig. 5.54	Area 10: largest grid of squares showing numbers and overall spread of struck flint, pottery and animal bones . . . . .	204
Fig. 5.55	Area 10 showing Neolithic features outside the hollow, and distribution of Neolithic and early Bronze Age pottery by period . . . . .	205
Fig. 5.56	Concentration of finds in Area 10 hollow, square 6615 . . . . .	206
Fig. 5.57	Sections of Neolithic features 6881 and 6329 within the hollow . . . . .	207
Fig. 5.58	Partial cattle skeleton 6915 in Area 10 hollow, square 6601. . . . .	209
Fig. 5.59	Area 10: early Neolithic pottery from the area of the SE squares, 1-26. . . . .	216
Fig. 5.60	Area 10: early Neolithic pottery from the area of the SE squares, 27-47. . . . .	217
Fig. 5.61	Area 10: early Neolithic pottery from the area of the SE squares, 48-51; layers 6458,	

*List of Figures*

	6880 and 6331, 52-63; central squares, 64; evaluation trench 86/2, 65; tree-throw holes 6801, 6881 and 6913, 66-73; and evaluation trench 88, 74 . . . . .	219
Fig. 5.62	Area 10 early Neolithic pottery. Evaluation Trench 88, 75; later features, 76-86 . . . . .	220
Fig. 5.63	The technological traits of the flint from the midden deposit in Area 10 . . . . .	224
Fig. 5.64	The length to breadth plot (mm) of the metrical sample from the hollow . . . . .	224
Fig. 5.65	The weight range of early Neolithic cores in Area 10 (g) . . . . .	225
Fig. 5.66	The technological traits of flint from tree-throw hole 6881 . . . . .	228
Fig. 5.67	Use-wear graphs for 6613, 6615 and 6882 . . . . .	229
Fig. 5.68	Area 10: Mesolithic points and Neolithic flakes and cores, nos 1-11 . . . . .	232
Fig. 5.69	Area 10: Neolithic arrowheads, scrapers, awl and polished implement, nos 12-26 . . . . .	233
Fig. 5.70	Worked stone from Area 10 . . . . .	234
Fig. 5.71	Probability distributions of dates from Eton Rowing Lake. Each distribution represents the relative probability that an event occurred at a particular time. These distributions are the result of simple radiocarbon calibration (Stuiver and Reimer 1993) . . . . .	240
Fig. 5.72	Probability distributions of dates from Eton Rowing Lake (model I) . . . . .	241
Fig. 5.73	Probability distribution showing the number of calendar years during which activity occurred at Area 6. The distribution is derived from the model shown in Figure 5.72 . . . . .	242
Fig. 5.74	Probability distributions of dates from Eton Rowing Lake (model II) . . . . .	242
Fig. 5.75	Partial HTGC profile of the trimethylsilylated total lipid extract from sample DBC16, illustrating the distribution of components characteristic of a degraded animal fat . . . . .	245
Fig. 5.76	The ketonic decarboxylation of free fatty acids which leads to the formation of ketones by condensation of the fatty acids. The reaction is catalysed by metal oxides and proceeds at temperatures in excess of 300°C. The subscripts n and m correspond to alkyl chain lengths in the range 13-16 (Evershed <i>et al.</i> 1995; Raven <i>et al.</i> 1997) . . . . .	247
Fig. 5.77	Partial HTGC profile of the trimethylsilylated total lipid extract from sample DBC23, illustrating the distribution of components characteristic of animal fat that has undergone heating and extensive degradation . . . . .	249
Fig. 5.78	Plot of the <sup>13</sup> C values of the fatty acid methyl esters prepared from lipid extracts from the Eton Rowing Lake Neolithic assemblage. The majority of the extracts plot close to the reference ruminant adipose and milk fats. The reference fats are represented by confidence ellipses (1 standard deviation), with blue being porcine, green being ruminant (bovine and ovi-caprine) and red being of dairy origin. . . . .	249
Fig. 5.79	Stable isotope values for the pottery vessels with lipid residues, with vessel forms indicated . . . . .	251
Fig. 5.80	Plan of Lake End Road West . . . . .	253
Fig. 5.81	Plan of Hollow 42319, Lake End Road West . . . . .	254
Fig. 5.82	Pit 42069, plan and section, and pit 40213, section, Lake End Road West . . . . .	254
Fig. 5.83	Distribution of finds in spits from the early Neolithic deposits in hollow 42319 at Lake End Road West . . . . .	255
Fig. 5.84	Early Neolithic pottery, Lake End Road West . . . . .	257
Fig. 5.85	Worked flint, Lake End Road West . . . . .	260
Fig. 6.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 6. . . . .	262
Fig. 6.2	Plan of Areas Ex1-3 showing the location of early Neolithic flint scatters and palaeochannel deposits . . . . .	263
Fig. 6.3	Areas Ex1 and Ex3 north end sections showing the southern edges of the early Neolithic channels . . . . .	264
Fig. 6.4	Flint refits in Area Ex1 . . . . .	266
Fig. 6.5	Plot of flint scatter 633 . . . . .	267
Fig. 6.6	Plot of flint scatter 10010 . . . . .	268
Fig. 6.7	Plan showing location of early Neolithic activity area 672/720 and 721, and a plot of the material . . . . .	270-1
Fig. 6.8	Plot of scatter 1062 and the burnt soils it overlay . . . . .	272
Fig. 6.9	Plan of Ex1 and Area 11 gravel terrace area, showing features with burnt flint . . . . .	273
Fig. 6.10	Detailed and numbered plan of Ex1 . . . . .	274
Fig. 6.11	Detailed and numbered plan of Area 11 . . . . .	275
Fig. 6.12	Plan of Ex1 showing features phased by pottery or struck flint. . . . .	279
Fig. 6.13	Sections of tree-throw holes in Area Ex1 . . . . .	280

Fig. 6.14	Sections of pits, postholes and other features in Area Ex1	283
Fig. 6.15	Earlier Neolithic pottery from Areas Ex1-3	285
Fig. 6.16	Flint refits in Area Ex1	289
Fig. 6.17	Ex1-3 struck flint	294
Fig. 6.18	Ex1-3 struck flint	295
Fig. 6.19	Ex1-3 struck flint	296
Fig. 6.20	Ex1-3 Scatter 10010	297
Fig. 6.21	Ex1-3 struck flint	298
Fig. 6.22	Plan of Areas 20, 24, RC1 and 2 and NAR	304
Fig. 6.23	Early and early/middle Neolithic pottery from the Area 14 watching brief (1) and from RC1 and 2 (2-3)	305
Fig. 6.24	RC1 struck flint	306
Fig. 6.25	Section of the palaeochannel in Area 5	307
Fig. 6.26	Section of the palaeochannel in Area 3	308
Fig. 6.27	Oval barrow: plan and section, Marsh Lane East Site 2	311
Fig. 6.28	Overall plan of Area 16	314
Fig. 6.29	Sections of early Neolithic features in Area 16	315
Fig. 6.30	Early Neolithic pottery from Area 16	315
Fig. 6.31	Area 16 struck flint	317
Fig. 6.32	Lot's Hole, site plan, showing location of Neolithic pit 50189	319
Fig. 6.33	Section of pit 50189	320
Fig. 6.34	Refitting flint, Lot's Hole	321
Fig. 6.35	Marsh Lane West, site plan	323
Fig. 6.36	Sections of early Neolithic tree-throw holes at Marsh Lane West	323
Fig. 6.37	Worked flint, Marsh Lane West	325
Fig. 6.38	Marsh Lane East Site 1, site plan	326
Fig. 6.39	Refitting flint: Marsh Lane East Site 1	328
Fig. 6.40	Worked flint, Marsh Lane East Site 1	330
Fig. 6.41	Worked flint, Marsh Lane East Site 1	331
Fig. 6.42	Roundmoor Ditch, site plan	332
Fig. 6.43	Sections of tree-throw holes at Roundmoor Ditch	333
Fig. 6.44	Struck flint from Roundmoor Ditch	335
Fig. 7.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 7	338
Fig. 7.2	Location of middle Neolithic burials in Area 6	339
Fig. 7.3	Plans of middle Neolithic burials in Area 6	340
Fig. 7.4	Worked antler objects from Area 6	342
Fig. 7.5	Location of middle Neolithic features and deposits in Area 10	343
Fig. 7.6	Partial animal skeleton 6915 in Area 10 hollow, square 6601	344
Fig. 7.7	Sections of Neolithic features 6881 and 6329 within the Area 10 hollow	344
Fig. 7.8	Area 10 middle Neolithic pottery	346
Fig. 7.9	Area 10 middle Neolithic pottery	347
Fig. 7.10	Location of middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West	350
Fig. 7.11	Plans and sections of middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West	352
Fig. 7.12	Summary of weight of pottery in middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West	354
Fig. 7.13	Summary of weight of pottery in major fabrics in middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West	354
Fig. 7.14	Summary of sherd weights from middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West	354
Fig. 7.15	Pit 41050, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	358
Fig. 7.16	Pit 41050, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	359
Fig. 7.17	Pit 41341, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	360
Fig. 7.18	Pit 40605, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	362
Fig. 7.19	Pit 40600, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	363
Fig. 7.20	Pit 40528, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	364
Fig. 7.21	Pit 41222, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	365
Fig. 7.22	Pit 40684, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	366
Fig. 7.23	Pit 41434, Peterborough Ware, Lake End Road West	367
Fig. 7.24	Flint refits, Lake End Road West	371
Fig. 7.25	Worked flint, Lake End Road West	372
Fig. 7.26	Worked flint, Lake End Road West	373
Fig. 7.27	Worked flint, Lake End Road West	374
Fig. 7.28	Taplow Mill Site 1, plan	376

*List of Figures*

Fig. 7.29	Neolithic pits, plan and sections, Taplow Mill Site 1	377
Fig. 7.30	Peterborough Ware, Taplow Mill Site 1	379
Fig. 7.31	Worked flint, Taplow Mill Site 1	382
Fig. 7.32	Plan and sections of middle Neolithic pits at Marsh Lane East Site 1	383
Fig. 7.33	Location of middle Neolithic pits at Taplow Mill Site 2	384
Fig. 7.34	Section of pit 100011, Taplow Mill Site 2	385
Fig. 7.35	Location of middle Neolithic features and finds in Area 16	386
Fig. 7.36	Section of feature 13411, Area 16	385
Fig. 7.37	Middle Neolithic pottery from Area 16	388
Fig. 7.38	Location of flint scatter 3181 in Area 3	389
Fig. 7.39	Plot of flint scatter 3181 in Area 3	390
Fig. 7.40	Refits in flint scatter 3181	391
Fig. 7.41	Plan of Site F east with Neolithic pottery and insets of Area 18 and Trenches H-J	392
Fig. 8.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 8	396
Fig. 8.2	Late Neolithic pottery from Area 6	395
Fig. 8.3	Late Neolithic features in Area 16	397
Fig. 8.4	Section of late Neolithic burnt spread 12812	398
Fig. 8.5	Plans and sections of late Neolithic pits in Area 16	399
Fig. 8.6	Late Neolithic pottery from Area 16	400
Fig. 8.7	Area 16 struck flint	404
Fig. 8.8	Worked bone from Area 16	405
Fig. 8.9	Late Neolithic activity in Area 24	408
Fig. 8.10	Plans and sections of Grooved Ware pits in Area 24	409
Fig. 8.11	Late Neolithic pottery from Area 24	410
Fig. 8.12	Areas 20 and 24 worked flint	416
Fig. 8.13	Late Neolithic features in Area 10	418
Fig. 8.14	Late Neolithic pottery from Area 10	419
Fig. 9.1	Location of sites discussed in Chapter 9	424
Fig. 9.2	Beaker period and early Bronze Age features in Area 6	425
Fig. 9.3	Ring ditches 5169 and 5579	426
Fig. 9.4	Plan of earlier prehistoric features in Area 6 south phased by pottery or struck flint	428
Fig. 9.5	Beaker pottery from Area 6	431
Fig. 9.6	Early Bronze Age pottery from Area 6	432
Fig. 9.7	Marsh Lane East Site 2, late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features	434
Fig. 9.8	Ring ditches: plan and sections, Marsh Lane East Site 2	435
Fig. 9.9	Central cremation deposit 70037, plans, section and reconstruction of Collared Urn, Marsh Lane East Site 2	436
Fig. 9.10	Beaker and early Bronze Age features in Area 16	442
Fig. 9.11	Plan of ring ditch 9233 and partial ring-ditch 9234	443
Fig. 9.12	Sections of ring ditches 9233 and 9234	444
Fig. 9.13	Beaker and early Bronze Age pottery from Area 16	446
Fig. 9.14	Worked antler from Area 16	446
Fig. 9.15	Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint scatters on the flood plain north of Gravel Island X (Areas Ex1 -3)	447
Fig. 9.16	Long sections across floodplain: 262 and 263	448
Fig. 9.17	Plan of the area of layer 131 gridded for excavation, showing the archaeological features, the distribution of Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery and of animal bones	450
Fig. 9.18	Plan of Ex1 and Area 11 gravel terrace area, showing features with burnt flint	452
Fig. 9.19	Plan and section of hearth and burnt flint spread 10700 in Area 11	453
Fig. 9.20	Beaker and early Bronze Age pottery from Areas Ex 1-3	455
Fig. 9.21	Early Bronze Age pottery from Area Ex2	456
Fig. 9.22	Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age evidence in Area 3	461
Fig. 9.23	Plot of flint scatter 3192 in Area 3	462
Fig. 9.24	Refits in flint scatter 3192	463
Fig. 9.25	Taplow Mill Site 2, site plan	465
Fig. 9.26	Sections, Taplow Mill Site 2	466
Fig. 9.27	Worked flint, Taplow Mill Site 2	471
Fig. 9.28	Amerden Lane West, site plan, showing distribution of artefacts	472
Fig. 9.29	Hollow 90061, section, showing burnt and scorched deposits and areas disturbed by tree-throw holes, Amerden Lane West	473

*Opening the Wood, Making the Land*

Fig. 9.30	Sections of tree-throw holes, Amerden Lane West . . . . .	473
Fig. 9.31	Pottery, Amerden Lane West . . . . .	474
Fig. 9.32	Worked flint, Amerden Lane West . . . . .	476
Fig. 9.33	Plan of Site F east with late Neolithic/early bronze Age pottery and insets of Area 18 and Trenches H-J . . . . .	477
Fig. 9.34	Plan of Areas 20, 24, RC1 and 2 and NAR . . . . .	478
Fig. 9.35	Early Bronze Age pottery from Trench 159 . . . . .	479
Fig. 9.36	Marsh Lane East Site 1, location of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age tree-throw hole . . . . .	480
Fig. 9.37	Section of tree-throw hole 80010, Marsh Lane East Site 1 . . . . .	479
Fig. 9.38	Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age activity in Area 10 . . . . .	481
Fig. 9.39	Beaker pottery from Area 10. . . . .	482
Fig. 10.1	Mesolithic evidence . . . . .	484
Fig. 10.2	Early Neolithic evidence . . . . .	487
Fig. 10.3	Middle and late Neolithic evidence . . . . .	489
Fig. 10.4	Enclosure 5500 in Area 6 and other comparable Neolithic enclosures in the Thames Valley . . . . .	495
Fig. 10.5	Beaker period and early Bronze Age evidence . . . . .	504
Fig. 10.6	Geophysical survey of the ring ditch on Site F West by Phil Catherall. . . . .	505
Fig. App 3.1	The proportions of species in the Neolithic to early Bronze Age phases (E – early; o – other; M – middle; pr – probably; L – late). . . . .	529
Fig. App 4.1	Charcoal: taxa presence by number of samples . . . . .	537
Fig. App 4.2	Charcoal: presence of taxa by phase . . . . .	537
Fig. App 4.3	Composition of ‘burnt mound’ deposits . . . . .	538
Fig. App 4.4	Charcoal: number of taxa positively identified in each feature type. . . . .	539
Fig. App 4.5	Charcoal: taxa by feature type . . . . .	539



## List of Plates

Plate 1.1	Aerial photograph of the site, showing showing palaeochannels and gravel islands . . . . .	4
Plate 1.2	Aerial photograph of SE end of site from the south, showing the former Thames palaeochannel, with Inlet Z to the west and the hollow containing the Neolithic Midden in Area 6 . . . . .	6
Plate 1.3	Aerial colour photograph of Area 6 from the north, showing the hollow containing the Neolithic midden, the cropmarks of the adjacent ring ditches and the modern Thames . . . . .	7
Plate 1.4	Aerial photograph of the central part of the site from the south-east, showing the former Thames channel between Site F East and Area 16, including the ring ditch in the latter . . . . .	8
Plate 1.5	Aerial photograph of Site F East looking south-east, showing the variable gravel and sand/silt geology, and the probable ring ditch at the junction of the two . . . . .	9
Plate 1.6	Aerial photograph of double or triple ring ditch at the NW end of the site, from the south west . . . . .	11
Plate 3.1	View of trenching in the backswamp deposits . . . . .	28
Plate 3.2	Detail of trenching in the backswamp deposits showing occupation horizon within the alluvium . . . . .	28
Plate 3.3	Evaluation trench section showing the sequence of dark and lighter deposit horizons within the backswamp. The lowest dark deposit is peat. The upper deposits have concentrations of manganese, indicating former landsurfaces between phases of sterile alluvial accumulation. The uppermost landsurface included an early Bronze Age hearth. . . . .	28
Plate 3.4	View of machine excavation on the floodplain in Area Ex1, looking south from above the palaeochannel (not in picture). The hut in the background is close to the edge of the gravel terrace . . . . .	29
Plate 3.5	Detail of floodplain deposits which accumulated behind a levee in Area Ex1 . . . . .	29
Plate 3.6	View of levee from the early Neolithic channel to the north in Area Ex1. . . . .	30
Plate 3.7	Section cut through channel deposits in Area 3, showing the Mesolithic sediments cut by the early Neolithic peat-filled channel edge, looking north-west . . . . .	30
Plate 3.8	Tree-throw hole in Trench 46 containing later Mesolithic flints . . . . .	41
Plate 3.9	Tree-throw hole in the Area 6 hollow, part-excavated, looking west, and showing midden debris filling the open half. . . . .	43
Plate 3.10	Burnt mound deposit 10700 in Area 11 . . . . .	44
Plate 3.11	Photograph of the early Neolithic phase channel in Area Ex2, showing the trunk of an oak tree that was growing on the levee fallen at right angles into the channel. . . . .	45
Plate 3.12	Beaver-gnawed branch showing characteristic tooth-marks on the facets. . . . .	45
Plate 3.13	Photograph of the early Neolithic channel in Area Ex3, showing wood spread along the channel edge. . . . .	46
Plate 3.14	Photograph of partial exposure of tangled trunks and logs at the edge of the channel in Area Ex3, probably the remains of a beaver lodge. . . . .	46
Plate 3.15	Detail showing large trunk with small beaver-gnawed branches adjacent, presumably representing a food cache or store. . . . .	47
Plate 3.16	Detail of the gnawed ends of two of the small branches. . . . .	47
Plate 3.17	Views of a bear bone fragment from Area Ex2 alongside a modern specimen from an Alaskan brown bear . . . . .	50
Plate 3.18	Partial pig skeleton recovered on the western bank of palaeochannel . . . . .	51
Plate 3.19	Burnt flint deposit 12177 on the western bank of palaeochannel. . . . .	52
Plate 3.20	Burnt mound deposit spilling from the edge of the gravel terrace onto the floodplain in evaluation Trench 181 . . . . .	53
Plate 3.21	Sandbank in Area 1 . . . . .	54
Plate 4.1	Early Mesolithic heavy tools from Trenches 166, 180 and 173 . . . . .	64

Plate 4.2	Mesolithic microliths from Trenches 166, 180 and 173 (upper row) and Trench 46 (lower row) . . . . .	65
Plate 5.1	Air photograph of Area 6 showing cropmarks of hollow and barrows, viewed from the north. . . . .	92
Plate 5.2	Hollow during excavation with enclosure 5500 and barrow 5579 in the foreground, viewed from the north-east . . . . .	93
Plate 5.3	Occupation layer and shallow middens sampled by 2m squares . . . . .	93
Plate 5.4	Shot showing depth of the general land surface within the hollow, and darker midden patches . . . . .	94
Plate 5.5	Findings spread in the hollow during initial cleaning . . . . .	94
Plate 5.6	Cleaning of midden deposit 11421 showing joining sherds of a Carinated Bowl . . . . .	95
Plate 5.7	View of partly reconstructed Carinated Bowl . . . . .	95
Plate 5.8	Excavation of tree-throw hole midden 11420 viewed from the west. . . . .	99
Plate 5.9	Enclosure 5500 from the south-west . . . . .	104
Plate 5.10	Burial 5127 in Area 6 south . . . . .	105
Plate 5.11	Vessel 94 showing thickening of rim with finer clay . . . . .	111
Plate 5.12	Area 6, leaf-shaped and transverse arrowheads . . . . .	153
Plate 5.13	Area 6, Neolithic core tools nos 77 and 78 . . . . .	156
Plate 5.14	Area 6, Neolithic core tools and hammerstones nos 79 and 80 . . . . .	157
Plate 5.15	Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age shafthole adze from the Area 6 midden . . . . .	180
Plate 5.16	Area 10 hollow after initial stripping, viewed from the south-east . . . . .	202
Plate 5.17	Area 10 pottery cluster in square 6615 . . . . .	206
Plate 5.18	Partial cattle burial 6915 . . . . .	207
Plate 5.19	Area 10 crudely flaked pick no. 28 . . . . .	225
Plate 6.1	Excavation of channel in Area Ex1 with floodplain and main early Neolithic activity area in background . . . . .	263
Plate 6.2	View of occupation area in Area Ex1, looking north . . . . .	265
Plate 6.3	Detail of flint cluster in Area Ex1 . . . . .	265
Plate 6.4	Arrowheads from Area Ex1 . . . . .	291
Plate 6.5	Human bone and flint scatter on floodplain in Trench 202 . . . . .	300
Plate 6.6	Early Neolithic skulls from the Area 5 and Area 1 channels. . . . .	309
Plate 6.7	Pit 70056, Marsh Lane East Site 2. . . . .	311
Plate 6.8	Pit 70086, Marsh Lane East Site 2 . . . . .	312
Plate 7.1	Burial 5587. . . . .	337
Plate 7.2	Burial 5856. . . . .	340
Plate 7.3	Peterborough Ware sherd from Area 10. . . . .	346
Plate 7.4	Pit Group 1, Lake End Road West . . . . .	351
Plate 7.5	Pit 41050, Lake End Road West . . . . .	351
Plate 7.6	Pit Group 2, Lake End Road West. . . . .	351
Plate 7.7	Pit 40600, Lake End Road West . . . . .	353
Plate 7.8	Mortlake Ware, vessel 1, Pit 41050, Lake End Road West . . . . .	356
Plate 9.1	Ring ditch 5169 with central pit 5201, from the north-west . . . . .	429
Plate 9.2	Barbed and tanged arrowheads from Area 6 . . . . .	432
Plate 9.3	Ring ditch 70146, Marsh Lane East Site 2. . . . .	434
Plate 9.4	Ring ditch 70131, Marsh Lane East Site 2. . . . .	437
Plate 9.5	Pit 70037, upper fills, Marsh Lane East Site 2 . . . . .	437
Plate 9.6	Pit 70037, lower fill, Marsh Lane East Site 2 . . . . .	437
Plate 9.7	Aerial view of Area 16 with ring ditch in foreground, looking west. . . . .	443
Plate 9.8	Ring ditch 9233 in Area 16, looking north-east . . . . .	444
Plate 9.9	Early Bronze Age burnt area in Area 11 on floodplain . . . . .	446

## List of Tables

Table 2.1	Chronological summary of features and finds. . . . .	14-15
Table 4.1	The Mesolithic assemblage from Areas 20 and 24 by category . . . . .	55
Table 4.2	The flint assemblage by evaluation trenches in Basin R . . . . .	62
Table 4.3	The Mesolithic flint assemblage from Areas Ex1-3. . . . .	70
Table 4.4	Animal bone of Mesolithic or probably Mesolithic date from Areas Ex2-3 . . . . .	73
Table 4.5	Waterlogged seeds from Mesolithic Basin R . . . . .	74
Table 4.6	Other plant remains from Mesolithic Basin R (waterlogged unless stated) . . . . .	74
Table 4.7	Coleoptera from Mesolithic Basin R . . . . .	75
Table 4.8	Other insects from Mesolithic Basin R . . . . .	76
Table 4.9	Mollusca from Mesolithic Basin R. . . . .	76
Table 4.10	The assemblage from Area 5 by key context . . . . .	78
Table 4.11	The flint assemblage from Area 3 . . . . .	82
Table 4.12	Mesolithic waterlogged plant remains (seeds unless stated) from Area 3 . . . . .	83
Table 4.13	Mesolithic mollusca from Area 3. . . . .	84
Table 5.1	Catalogue of Neolithic and undated pits and burials in Area 6. . . . .	103
Table 5.2	A breakdown of the assemblage from Area 6 . . . . .	106
Table 5.3	A breakdown of all fabrics by group (Number of sherds, weight (g)) . . . . .	108
Table 5.4	A breakdown and quantification of the rim forms with a comparison with Staines . . . . .	112
Table 5.5	A breakdown of rim types by selected feature groups. . . . .	112
Table 5.6	A breakdown and quantification of the shoulder forms with a comparison with Staines (SCE; published vessels only). . . . .	114
Table 5.7	Concordance of vessel shapes used in the analysis (after Cleal 1992; Robertson-Mackay 1987; Wainwright 1972) . . . . .	115
Table 5.8	Vessels based on rims and selected featured sherds. . . . .	115
Table 5.9	A breakdown (number, weight) of fabrics by selected feature group . . . . .	119
Table 5.10	Radiocarbon dates on carbonised residues . . . . .	122
Table 5.11	Peterborough Ware from Area 6 summarised by context group . . . . .	146
Table 5.12	Summary of middle Neolithic fabrics from Area 6. . . . .	146
Table 5.13	The Area 6 flint assemblage by phase . . . . .	148-9
Table 5.14	The range and average weight of cores from Area 6 . . . . .	152
Table 5.15	The flint assemblage from the midden deposits . . . . .	158
Table 5.16	The flint assemblage recovered from the hollow deposits (excluding middens). . . . .	160-1
Table 5.17	The flint assemblages from other early Neolithic and early/middle Neolithic contexts. . . . .	162
Table 5.18	Proportions of flake type present in selected samples from the land surface and two midden deposits . . . . .	163
Table 5.19	Proportions of butt types present in selected samples from the land surface and two midden deposits . . . . .	163
Table 5.20	Proportions of termination types present in selected samples from the land surface and two midden deposits . . . . .	163
Table 5.21	Proportions of cortex present in selected samples from the land surface and two midden deposits . . . . .	165
Table 5.22	The use-wear samples by use damage identification. . . . .	167
Table 5.23	All flint analysed for use-wear by presence of use damage and category . . . . .	170
Table 5.24	Summary of stone artefacts and materials in Area 6 . . . . .	179
Table 5.25	Early Neolithic animal bone from Area 6, by feature. . . . .	184
Table 5.26	Bone preservation, Area 6 early Neolithic . . . . .	185
Table 5.27	Percentages of bones from the head, body and foot, between species and within species . . . . .	185
Table 5.28	Anatomical analysis, early Neolithic bone from Area 6. . . . .	186
Table 5.29	Cattle measurements, using relative size to suggest identifications of the cattle as wild, domestic or wild/domestic. . . . .	188-90

Table 5.30	Area 6 early Neolithic cattle bone fusion . . . . .	193
Table 5.31	Area 6 early Neolithic cattle teeth, with estimated age classes. . . . .	193
Table 5.32	Other Neolithic to early Bronze Age animal bone from Area 6, by feature . . . . .	196
Table 5.33	Other Neolithic to early Bronze Age measurements and age data from Area 6 . . . . .	197
Table 5.34	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal) . . . . .	200-1
Table 5.35	Catalogue of pits in Area 9/10, excluding 6405=6407 . . . . .	208
Table 5.36	Dated tree-throw holes in Area 9/10 . . . . .	209
Table 5.37	Summary of the pottery assemblage from Area 10. . . . .	210
Table 5.38	Summary of all fabrics by group (Number of sherds, weight (g)). . . . .	211
Table 5.39	Summary (number, weight) of fabrics by selected feature group. . . . .	210-11
Table 5.40	Illustrated rim forms . . . . .	212
Table 5.41	A breakdown and quantification of the rim forms with a comparison with Staines . . . . .	212
Table 5.42	A breakdown of rim types by selected feature groups. . . . .	213
Table 5.43	Illustrated shoulder forms . . . . .	213
Table 5.44	A breakdown and quantification of the shoulder forms with a comparison with Staines (SCE; published vessels only). . . . .	213
Table 5.45	The Area 10 flint assemblage by category . . . . .	222
Table 5.46	The Area 10 flint assemblage from the hollow (brackets indicate Mesolithic flints). . . . .	223
Table 5.47	The range and average weight of complete early Neolithic cores. . . . .	224
Table 5.48	The assemblage from Evaluation Trench 88. . . . .	227
Table 5.49	Flint assemblages from early Neolithic tree-throw holes in Area 10 . . . . .	227
Table 5.50	The remaining flint assemblage by phase in Area 10. . . . .	230
Table 5.51	Summary of stone artefacts and materials in Area 10 . . . . .	234
Table 5.52	Animal bone from the Area 10 hollow . . . . .	235
Table 5.53	Preservation of animal bone in Area 10 . . . . .	235
Table 5.54	Area 10, age and size information from bones in Neolithic hollow excluding measurements. . . . .	cattle 236
Table 5.55	Radiocarbon dates from Area 6 and 10. . . . .	238-9
Table 5.56	List of sample sherds from Areas 6 and 10. . . . .	246-7
Table 5.57	Summary of lipid analyses . . . . .	248
Table 5.58	Area 10 sherds with identified lipid residues . . . . .	250
Table 5.59	Area 6 sherds with identified lipid residues . . . . .	250
Table 5.60	Assignment of absorbed lipid residues from the Neolithic site at the Eton Rowing Course . . . . .	252
Table 5.61	Summary of Neolithic pottery from Lake End Road West . . . . .	256
Table 5.62	Summary of early Neolithic fabrics from Lake End Road West. . . . .	256
Table 5.63	The categories present in hollow 42319 . . . . .	258
Table 5.64	Flint from pit 42069, fill 42061 . . . . .	258
Table 5.65	The utilisation by category of flint from the hollow at Lake End Road West . . . . .	259
Table 5.66	Use-wear of flint from the hollow at Lake End Road West. . . . .	259
Table 5.67	Flint by category in context 40212. . . . .	260
Table 6.1	Catalogue of tree-throw and root holes on the gravel terrace (Areas Ex1 and 11). . . . .	276-8
Table 6.2	Catalogue of pits and postholes on the gravel island (Areas Ex1 and 11). . . . .	281-2
Table 6.3	A breakdown of the total pottery assemblage in Areas Ex1-3 by site and date. . . . .	284
Table 6.4	The earlier Neolithic tree-throw hole and pit assemblages in Areas Ex1-3 . . . . .	286
Table 6.5	The assemblage of the early to middle Neolithic knapping scatters in Areas Ex1-3. . . . .	287
Table 6.6	The assemblage of the early to middle Neolithic deposits of utilised material. . . . .	287
Table 6.7	The assemblage of the early to middle Neolithic activity areas in Areas Ex1-3. . . . .	288
Table 6.8	Lithic assemblages of broadly Neolithic date . . . . .	293
Table 6.9	Animal bones from Neolithic contexts in Areas Ex1-3 and 11 . . . . .	299
Table 6.10	The cow skeleton from the channel in Area Ex3, context 10190. . . . .	300
Table 6.11	Age and size data not shown elsewhere . . . . .	301
Table 6.12	Beaver bones from the channel in Area Ex1 692. . . . .	302
Table 6.13	Measurements of the Eton bear scapula, compared with others in the Natural History Museum. . . . .	302
Table 6.14	Late Mesolithic to early Bronze Age animal bone from the former Thames channel in Areas 3 and 5 . . . . .	310
Table 6.15	Area 16, a breakdown of all fabrics by group (number of sherds, weight (g)) . . . . .	316
Table 6.16	The flint assemblage from Area 16 . . . . .	317
Table 6.17	The flint assemblage from Area 16 by category and phase (excluding later Bronze Age). . . . .	318

*List of Tables*

Table 6.18	The flint assemblage from earlier Neolithic pit 50189 .....	320
Table 6.19	Charred plant remains from Lot's Hole .....	322
Table 6.20	The flint assemblage by feature and category .....	324
Table 6.21	The Mesolithic to early Bronze Age flint assemblage from Marsh Lane East Site 1 .....	327
Table 6.22	The flint assemblage from Roundmoor Ditch by category and feature .....	334
Table 6.23	Burnt unworked flint by feature .....	336
Table 7.1	Struck flint from middle Neolithic, late Neolithic and possibly Neolithic features in Area 6. ....	341
Table 7.2	A breakdown of all the Peterborough Ware pottery from Area 10 by context. ....	345
Table 7.3	Summary of quantities of pottery and sherd size from middle Neolithic pits at Lake End Road West .....	354
Table 7.4	Summary of middle Neolithic fabrics. ....	355
Table 7.5	Summary of main fabric groups by pit. ....	355
Table 7.6	The flint present in each pit by category .....	368
Table 7.7	The total use of flint in the Neolithic pits. ....	368
Table 7.8	Broad patterns of use in the Neolithic pit .....	369
Table 7.9	The use-wear of the Neolithic pits. ....	369
Table 7.10	Charred plant remains from Lake End Road West. ....	375
Table 7.11	Summary of features at Taplow Mill Site 1 .....	378
Table 7.12	Summary of Peterborough Ware from pits at Taplow Mill Site 1 .....	378
Table 7.13	The flint assemblage by feature and category type from Taplow Mill Site 1 .....	381
Table 7.14	Summary of Peterborough Ware from pits at Marsh Lane East Site 1 .....	384
Table 7.15	Catalogue of Neolithic, Bronze Age and undated pits from Area 16. ....	387-8
Table 8.1	The flint assemblage from late Neolithic pits 13650 and 16023 .....	401
Table 8.2	Animal bones from pit 16023 .....	406
Table 8.3	Age from conception estimates for the piglet bones from pit 16023 .....	407
Table 8.4	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal) from Area 16 .....	407
Table 8.5	The Neolithic pits by category and context .....	411
Table 8.6	Animal bones from pits 14373, 14066, 14070 and 14093. ....	417
Table 8.7	A summary quantification by context of all late Neolithic pottery .....	419
Table 8.8	The late Neolithic to early Bronze Age assemblage from Area 10 .....	419
Table 8.9	A pig partial skeleton from 12165 and 12181. ....	420
Table 9.1	Beaker pottery from Area 6 summarised by context group and quantified by sherd count (NOSH) and weight (WT). ....	430
Table 9.2	The flint assemblages from the early Bronze Age ring ditches and pit 5201 .....	433
Table 9.3	Summary of cremated human remains from pit 70037 .....	440
Table 9.4	Breakdown of cremated bone weights by body parts .....	441
Table 9.5	Colours observed after heating of fresh goat bone (Mays 1998, table 11.1) .....	441
Table 9.6	The flint assemblage from the early Bronze Age phase of Area 16 .....	446
Table 9.7	Catalogue of stakeholes associated with hearth 10899 on the floodplain in Area 11 .....	454
Table 9.8	The late Neolithic/early Bronze Age assemblages from pit 184 and tree-throw hole 1066. ....	456
Table 9.9	The assemblage of the late Neolithic to early Bronze Age knapping scatters .....	457
Table 9.10	The assemblages of the late Neolithic to early Bronze Age activity areas, dump of utilised material and finds spread 131 .....	458
Table 9.11	The flint assemblage from Area 11 by category. ....	459
Table 9.12	Animal bones from late Neolithic to early Bronze Age contexts in Areas Ex1-3 and 11 .....	460
Table 9.13	The flint assemblage from layer 3021 by area .....	464
Table 9.14	Summary of features at Taplow Mill Site 2 .....	467
Table 9.15	The flint assemblage from Taplow Mill Site 2 by category and phase .....	468
Table 9.16	The flint assemblage from late Neolithic/early Bronze Age features at Taplow Mill Site 2 by category .....	469
Table 9.17	The flint assemblage from late Neolithic/early Bronze Age spreads by category .....	469
Table 9.18	The flint assemblage from scatter 100034 by 1m square (part of layer 100003/4). ....	470
Table 9.19	The flint assemblage from scatters 100022 and 100068 by 1m square (part of layer 100003/4) .....	470
Table 9.20	Summary of pottery from hollow 90061 by fabric (no. sherds/weight period). ....	474

Table 9.21	The site assemblage by feature. . . . .	475
Table 9.22	A summary quantification by context of all late Neolithic/early Bronze Age pottery from Area 10 . . . . .	480
Table App 1.1	Adopted periodisation and suggested chronological date ranges for earlier prehistoric pottery (after Barclay 2000; Benson and Whittle 2007) . . . . .	509
Table App 2.1	Flint categories. . . . .	513
Table App 2.2	The flint assemblage from Eton Rowing Course by Area . . . . .	514-7
Table App 2.3	The flint assemblage from the Maidenhead to Windsor Flood Alleviation Scheme by site . . . . .	518-9
Table App 2.4	The composition of selected flint assemblages from the schemes and local comparisons . . . . .	522
Table App 2.5	Composition of retouched assemblage component from selected contexts on the scheme and comparative sites. . . . .	524-5
Table App 3.1	Number of animal bones from each area of the site of Mesolithic to early Bronze Age date . . . . .	528
Table App 3.2	Summary of the animal bone from Pleistocene to early Bronze Age phases. . . . .	528
Table App 3.3	Identifications of wild, 'wild or domestic' and domestic cattle. . . . .	529
Table App 3.4	The proportions of species in the Neolithic to early Bronze Age . . . . .	530
Table App 3.5	Summary of the red deer and roe deer, showing the number of antlers . . . . .	530
Table App 3.6	Comparative measurements for red deer antlers. . . . .	532
Table App 3.7	Measurements of antler from all areas, of Mesolithic to early Bronze Age date . . . . .	532-3
Table App 3.8	Numbers of shed red deer antlers, and left and right sides. . . . .	533
Table App 4.1	Summary of charcoal samples analysed . . . . .	535
Table App 4.2	Results of the charcoal analysis by fragment count . . . . .	536-7
Table App 6.1	Summary of OSL dates. . . . .	
Table App 7.1	Summary of the inhumations . . . . .	546
Table App 7.2	Summary of dental pathology (adults only). . . . .	546
Table App 7.3	Summary of disarticulated material . . . . .	547

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#### **Location of the project archives**

The archive of the Eton Rowing Course Project is deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum. The archive of the Flood Alleviation Scheme is split between Buckinghamshire County Museum and Berkshire Museum, Reading. A copy of the archive will also be deposited with the National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon.



## Summary

Excavations at the Eton Rowing Course and along the Maidenhead to Windsor Flood Alleviation Channel revealed extensive evidence for occupation in all of the conventional periods of prehistory from the Mesolithic to the early Bronze Age. (Later discoveries are discussed in Volumes 2 and 3.)

The two projects revealed a complex sequence of palaeochannels of the Thames which ran between a number of gravel islands. Features and artefact scatters revealed were distributed across these gravel islands and the floodplain adjacent to the channels, in some cases being preserved in sequences of alluvium. Extensive early Neolithic midden deposits had been preserved in hollows which had formed by the partial infilling of earlier palaeochannels. A number of finds, including human remains, were recovered from deposits within the channels themselves.

The earliest significant evidence for occupation was provided by an extensive concentration of early Mesolithic flint, situated along the edge of a former channel of the Thames which ran through the area of the Rowing Course. A number of smaller scatters of similar date were found in similar contexts elsewhere on the Rowing Course. Late Mesolithic worked flint was recovered from tree-throw holes and as scatters on the floodplain and on one of the Gravel Islands.

Perhaps the most significant discoveries were three early Neolithic midden deposits, preserved in hollows formed by the infilling of earlier palaeochannels, at Sites 6 and 10 on the Eton Rowing Course and at Lake End Road West on the Flood Alleviation Channel. Similar deposits found at Amerden Lane had clearly suffered from much more significant disturbance than those at the other sites. The midden deposits on Sites 6 and 10, in particular, contained large quantities of pottery (largely Carinated, Plain and Decorated Bowl, but including also later styles), worked flint, animal bone and other finds. Similar ranges of finds were

also recovered on these sites from tree-throw holes and pits. Modelling of radiocarbon dates suggests that the midden deposits in Area 6 had built up over a considerable period of time.

Further evidence for activity in the early Neolithic was provided by flint scatters on a gravel island on the Rowing Course, finds from pits and tree-throw holes at other sites, including one at Marsh Lane West which contained a small quantity of cremated human remains, and a human skull recovered from a palaeochannel. It is possible that an oval barrow at Marsh Lane East Site 2 was originally constructed in the early Neolithic, although it was recut in the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age.

In contrast to the early Neolithic, middle Neolithic activity was evidenced most extensively by finds from pits which usually occurred in pairs or small groups. More exceptional evidence for activity in the middle Neolithic was provided by two inhumation burials and two cattle burials from Areas 6 and 10, as well as a human skull from a former channel of the Thames.

Evidence for activity in the late Neolithic was more limited, but at the Rowing Course a small number of isolated pits and tree-throw holes dating from this period were identified. More exceptional finds, including part of a human skeleton were again recovered from the former channel of the Thames.

Evidence for activity in the Beaker period and the early Bronze Age included ring ditches in Areas 6 and 16 on the Rowing Course and at Marsh Lane East Site 2. One of the ring ditches at the latter site was associated with a central cremation burial in a Collared Urn, in a pit which also contained deposits of pyre material and possibly the remains of a bier. Alongside these monuments, evidence of settlement was also found, consisting of scatters of worked flint, spreads of burnt flint, a hearth, and pits and tree-throw holes on the floodplain and gravel islands.

## Zusammenfassung

Ausgrabungen bei der Eton Ruderbahn und längs des Maidenhead Hochwasserentlastungskanals haben umfangreiche Siedlungsspuren hervorgebracht, die sich durch alle bekannten Perioden der Vorgeschichte, vom Mesolithikum bis zur Bronzezeit ziehen. (Spätere Perioden werden in den Bänden 2 und 3 behandelt).

Die beiden Projekte enthüllten eine komplexe Sequenz von Paläokanälen der Themse, die zwischen einigen Kiesinseln floss. Befunde und Fundstreuungen waren um die Kiesinseln herum verteilt und auch in der, den Paläokanälen angrenzenden Talaue, zu finden. In einigen Fällen waren diese in den Sequenzen des Alluviums enthalten. Umfangreiche frühneolithische Abfälle hatten sich in Hohlräumen, ehemaliger teilweise aufgefüllter Paläokanäle angereichert. Einige Funde, darunter auch menschliche Überreste, wurden in Ablagerungen innerhalb der Paläokanäle gefunden.

Aussagekräftige, frühe Spuren für eine Besiedlung sind an weitreichenden Konzentrationen von mesolithischem Feuerstein nachzuweisen, die sich entlang der Flanke eines ehemaligen Themsenarmes ablagerten. Dieser Flussarm ist im Bereich der Ruderbahn zu lokalisieren. Einige kleinere mesolithische Fundstreuungen wurden in ähnlichen Fundsituationen in anderen Bereichen der Ruderbahn entdeckt. Spätmesolithisches bearbeitetes Flintmaterial wurde in Gruben von Baumwürfen sowie als Streufunde in der Talaue und auf einer der Kiesinseln nachgewiesen.

Die wahrscheinlich bemerkenswertesten Entdeckungen waren drei frühneolithische Abfallgruben, erhalten in Aushöhlungen früherer Paläokanäle, an den Fundstellen 6 und 10 der Eton Ruderbahn und am Lake End Road West Hochwasserentlastungskanal. Vergleichbare Funde an der Amerden Lane waren deutlich stärker gestört als die der anderen Fundstellen. Besonders die Abfallgruben der Stellen 6 und 10 enthielten eine große Anzahl Keramik (größtenteils knickwandige, flache oder dekorierte Schalen, aber auch spätere Formen), bearbeiteten Feuerstein, Tierknochen, und andere Funde. Ähnliche Vergesellschaftungen wurden an den Fundstellen 6 und 10 in Baumwürfen und Gruben entdeckt. Radiocarbon-

daten der Abfallgruben der Stelle 6 zeigen, dass die Ablagerungen sich über einen beträchtlichen Zeitraum angesammelt haben.

Weitere Nachweise für frühneolithische Aktivität sind Flintstreuungen auf einer der Kiesinseln in der Ruderbahn sowie Funde in Baumwürfen und Gruben an anderen Fundstellen. Diese beinhalten eine Grube an der Marsh Lane West, welche eingäscherte menschliche Knochen enthielt und den Fund eines Schädels, der in einem Paläokanal dokumentiert wurde. Es ist möglich, dass ein ovaler Hügel an der Marsh Lane East, Fundstelle 2, im frühen Neolithikum angelegt wurde, wenngleich dieser im späten Neolithikum oder in der frühen Bronzezeit ein weiteres Mal geschnitten wurde.

Im Gegensatz zum frühen Neolithikum zeigt sich mittelneolithische Aktivität meist in Form von Funden aus Gruben welche in der Regel in Paaren oder kleinen Gruppen auftraten. Ungewöhnlichere Nachweise der mittelneolithischen Aktivität sind zwei Körperbestattungen und zwei Viehbestattungen aus den Fundstellen 6 und 10 sowie ein menschlicher Schädel aus einem ehemaligen Themsenarm.

Spuren spätneolithischer Aktivität sind spärlicher, doch am Rudersee wurden einige isolierte Gruben und Baumwürfe nachgewiesen, welche in diese Periode fallen. Etwas außergewöhnlichere Funde kamen wiederum aus einem Nebenarm der Themse, wo ein Teil eines menschlichen Skelettes entdeckt wurde.

Von der Glockenbecher Kultur und der frühen Bronzezeit konnten Kreisgräben in den Fundstellen 6 und 16 der Ruderbahn sowie bei der Marsh Lane East in Fundstelle 2 dokumentiert werden. Einer der Kreisgräben an letztgenannter Fundstelle steht in Verbindung mit einer zentralen Brandbestattung in einer Kragenerne, die in einer Grube zusammen mit Resten eines Scheiterhaufens und möglicherweise Überresten einer Totenbahre festgestellt wurden. Neben den genannten Monumenten wurden auch Siedlungsspuren gefunden. Diese bestanden aus Streufunden von bearbeitetem Feuerstein, gebranntem Feuerstein, einem Ofen, sowie Gruben und Baumwürfen in der Talaue und auf den Kiesinseln.

## Résumé

Les fouilles menées sur l'emprise du site du bassin d'Eton (Eton Rowing Course) et le long du Chenal d'atténuation des inondations, Le Maidenhead to Windsor Flood Alleviation Channel, ont mis au jour d'importants témoignages d'occupation à toutes les périodes conventionnelles de la préhistoire, du mésolithique à l'Age du Bronze ancien. (Des découvertes ultérieures font l'objet d'une discussion aux volumes 2 et 3).

Les deux projets ont mis en évidence une séquence complexe de paléochenaux de la Tamise qui se déploie entre de nombreux îlots de graviers. Les structures et le mobilier épars sont dispersés sur ces îlots et sur la plaine d'inondation adjacente aux chenaux, dans certains cas ils sont conservés en séquences alluvionnaires. Des dépôts considérables de débris du Néolithique ancien ont été conservés dans des creux formés par le comblement partiel des paléochenaux plus anciens. Un mobilier abondant, dont des vestiges humains, ont été découverts dans les couches au sein même des chenaux.

Le témoignage marquant le plus reculé d'une occupation est attesté par la grande concentration de silex du Mésolithique ancien, localisée en bordure d'un ancien chenal de la Tamise qui s'étend sur la surface du bassin d'Eton. Nombre de petits restes épars de datation comparable ont été retrouvés dans des unités stratigraphiques semblables, ailleurs sur le périmètre du bassin. Du silex taillé du Mésolithique récent a été mis au jour dans des chablis et sous forme de fragments épars dans la plaine d'inondation et sur les îlots de graviers.

L'une des découvertes les plus notables est peut-être celle de trois dépôts de débris du Néolithique ancien, conservés dans des creux formés par les remplissages d'anciens paléochenaux, sur les sites 6 et 10 du bassin d'Eton et à Lake End Road West sur le Chenal d'atténuation des inondations. Des couches analogues repérées à Amerden Lane témoignent manifestement d'une plus grande perturbation que celles des autres sites. Les dépôts de débris des sites 6 et 10, plus particulièrement, renfermaient une abondante céramique (principalement carénée, non décorée et décorée, mais figurant aussi d'autres styles plus tardifs), du silex travaillé, des

ossements animaux ainsi que d'autres artefacts. Une gamme de mobiliers similaires a aussi été recueillie sur ces sites dans des chablis et des fosses. La modélisation de la datation au carbone 14 indique que l'accumulation des dépôts de débris du site 6 s'est effectuée sur un laps de temps considérable.

D'autres témoins d'une activité au Néolithique ancien sont apportés par les éclats de silex ramassés sur un îlot de graviers du bassin, le mobilier des fosses et des chablis, dont une à Marsh Lane West contenant une faible quantité de restes humains incinérés, ainsi qu'un crâne humain récupéré dans un paléochenal. Sur le Site 2 de Marsh Lane East, il est possible qu'un tumulus de forme ovale ait son origine au Néolithique ancien, bien que recoupé au Néolithique récent/Bronze ancien.

Par contraste au Néolithique ancien, les témoignages d'une activité au Néolithique moyen se manifestent largement par la présence de mobilier livré par des fosses disposées en binômes ou en petits groupes. L'indice le plus remarquable d'une activité au Néolithique moyen est celui que procurent deux sépultures et deux inhumations de bovins provenant des Sites 6 et 10, ainsi qu'un crâne humain issu d'un ancien chenal de la Tamise.

Les éléments d'une activité au Néolithique récent sont plus limités, mais au bassin d'Eton, seuls quelques fosses et chablis isolés de cette période sont repérés. Du mobilier plus exceptionnel, dont une partie d'un squelette humain a été mis au jour dans l'ancien chenal de la Tamise.

Les témoignages d'une activité au Chalcolithique (période campaniforme) et au Bronze ancien comptent des fossés circulaires sur les Sites 6 et 16 du bassin d'Eton et sur le Site 2 de Marsh Lane East. Sur ce dernier, un des fossés circulaires est lié à une incinération centrale dans une urne à col, recueillie dans une fosse renfermant aussi les restes de matériel d'un bûcher funéraire et sans doute les restes d'une bière. Des témoins attestant d'un habitat ont aussi été mis au jour auprès de ces monuments ; il s'agit de restes épars de silex taillé, d'épandages de silex brûlé, d'un foyer, et de fosses et de chablis sur la plaine d'inondation et sur les îlots de graviers.

