

# Neolithic and Bronze Age

by Nigel Brown and Peter Murphy

*The next stage is to suggest how a prehistory based on the evidence of the lowlands would look different from the schemes that are currently in favour.* (Bradley 1992)

## I. Introduction

By its very nature in presenting a highly compressed summary of the evidence available for the Neolithic and Bronze Age, the *Resource Assessment* (Brown and Murphy 1997) creates an apparently seamless picture. This tends to hide a variety of areas in which knowledge is patchy or occasionally non-existent. It would be relatively easy to produce a list of 'Things we do not know about the Neolithic and Bronze Age in East Anglia'. However, such a list would be both very long and very tedious, it would tend to belittle the firm foundation of knowledge which is available in the region and which is summarised in the resource assessment. It would also tend to emphasise research as merely 'gap filling'. Nonetheless set out below (II) are some key areas of weakness in our existing knowledge; many of which are touched upon in recent summaries of the Neolithic and Bronze Age in parts of the eastern counties (e.g. Ashwin 1996; Hall and Coles 1994; Brown 1996; Healy 1992; Holgate 1996; Pryor 1992).

## II. Gaps in knowledge

For instance our understanding of earlier Neolithic ceramics is based on three large assemblages (Hurst Fen, Broome Heath, and Etton ) a few medium sized (e.g. Orsett, Spong Hill) and fairly numerous small groups. Work on some large or largish assemblages (e.g. Haddenham, Brightlingsea, and The Stumble) is in preparation or forthcoming. However, even when this work is available the sample scarcely seems adequate to deal with the nature and significance of ceramic developments across five counties for a period of many centuries; particularly given the current critical reassessment (Longworth 1990; Cleal 1992; Gibson and Kinnes 1997) of the traditional classificatory schemes (*Resource Assessment* p.14). Much the same might be said for the ceramics of later periods. It is perhaps only at the very end of the Bronze Age in south and central Essex that adequate samples are already available (*Resource Assessment* p.18, Brown 1996, Needham 1996). Similar points could be made for lithics, particularly with regard to production and distribution (*Resource Assessment* p.15). Two major centres of metal production are present within the region, the Fen edge and Lower Thames area, and evidence of production has been recovered from a number of sites (e.g. Fengate, Grimes Graves, Mucking, and Springfield Lyons). Despite this, and the numerous hoards and single finds throughout the region, production, distribution, use and deposition of metalwork is not well understood; though it is the subject of much discussion and research (e.g. Bradley 1990; Brown 1998; Coombs 1992; Needham 1990; Pendleton forthcoming).

The earliest palynological evidence in the region for probable cereal production is the presence of Poaceae pollen grains with large annulae in an organic clay/silt at the Ouse Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, dated to 5420(100±BP (Q-2814: 1 sigma cal BC 4370–4165: Waller 1994, 330); whilst charred emmer grains from Blackwater Site 28, Essex (The Stumble) were dated to 4675(70±BP (OxA-2299: 1 sigma cal BC 3605–3370: Wilkinson and Murphy 1995, 58). The latter is more reliable, as a definite indicator of cereals. Further radiocarbon dating of suitable material is clearly necessary in order to clarify the initial adoption of cereals. Although small assemblages of crop remains have been recovered from a number of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites, few have produced sufficient material to do more than establish the mere *presence* of particular crop species. Sample collections interpretable in terms of on-site processing activities and capable of providing information on the relative importance of farming and foraging are very rare (*Resource Assessment* p.12). Useful data for the Neolithic–Middle Bronze Age are skewed towards fen-edge sites (e.g. West Row Fen, Suffolk: Martin and Murphy 1988) and coastal sites (e.g. Blackwater Site 28: Murphy 1989 and in prep.) which may not be typical. We have some useful data on the arable economies of some Essex later Bronze Age sites (Murphy 1988, 1990), though little information from elsewhere. This is a particularly glaring gap, for there are good grounds for thinking that the later Bronze Age was a period of major agricultural development. Large, well-preserved and well-recovered bone assemblages are also very rare. Grimes Graves (Legge 1981) and West Row Fen (Olsen 1994) are the only really useful sites, and bone assemblages of the Neolithic and the later Bronze Age are virtually unknown. Overall, the long process of adoption and development of agriculture with all its social and economic implications is still very poorly understood. The evidence for progressive intensification and expansion in the Bronze Age, associated with the introduction of spelt, a new, high-yielding crop, and specialised forms of production (such as dairying) comes from very few sites, and far more studies are needed.

Early Neolithic 'settlement' sites are quite widespread throughout the region, although relatively few have been investigated on any scale. Sealed surface-intact sites such as The Stumble, are likely to be most productive. Settlements of the Late Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age are nationally rare, and some of the best available evidence comes from East Anglia (e.g. West Row Fen, Sutton Hoo; *Resource Assessment* p.14). The location and examination of further such sites would be of considerable interest and might enable a fuller understanding of the inter-relationship between settlement, fields, barrows and other monuments to be established. For the Middle Bronze Age, with some notable exceptions, very few settlements are known and there is clearly a need to rectify this situation. For the Late Bronze Age there are a considerable number and variety of known settlement sites in south and central

Essex although here there is a bias towards investigation of enclosed rather than unenclosed settlements. It is important to establish whether there was a similar density (Ashwin 1996, 55–6) and range of settlement sites throughout the region, or whether differential development of settlement patterns took place.

### III. Potential of resource

It would be possible to create research projects which would address one or more of the areas of interest noted above. For instance real progress can be made in understanding chronological development of pottery by the application of traditional methodologies of stratigraphic succession and typological comparison, supported by radiocarbon (Needham 1996) and/or thermoluminescence dating. Similar points might be made with regard to metalwork or other artefact studies. However, in order to do so it is necessary to understand depositional processes, which cannot be divorced from the cultural value of ceramics and other artefacts which underlie patterns of use and discard (e.g. Needham and Spence 1997). The inter-relationships of the material remains of the Neolithic and Bronze Age are complex. The recognition that the plant remains, bone, shell, fields, farms and houses are as much cultural items as barrows, pottery, metalwork or causewayed enclosures, must form the basis for further research.

The geology of much of the region, combined with intensive modern agriculture, is highly conducive to cropmark formation. Accordingly there is a great range of cropmark evidence available (e.g. Lawson *et al.* 1981; Priddy and Buckley 1987). This evidence includes a wide variety of trackways, field systems, ditched enclosures (Pryor 1998), and monuments of various kinds, many of which appear regionally distinctive and quite different from, for example, those on the chalk of southern England (Bradley 1993a; Last 1999). Large-scale rescue excavations prior to gravel extraction have been particularly informative with regard to cropmark sites, most notably at Fengate and Maxey (Pryor 1980, 1984; Pryor *et al.* 1985), but also in other locations (e.g. Brown 1988; Clark 1993; Wallis and Waughman 1998). This work has concentrated on areas where gravel extraction is a major threat, mostly south and central Essex and Cambridgeshire. Away from such areas relatively few of these cropmark sites and complexes have been examined.

For the greater part of this period settlement appears to have remained shifting or semi-permanent and much the same problems and opportunities exist in dealing with settlements during this period as with those of the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition. In the later Bronze Age a range of enclosed settlements were created alongside the widespread continuance of unenclosed settlements. Both kinds of site were often integrated into field systems. Examination of the inter-relationships between settlements, together with variation and transformations in settlement types, offers considerable potential to explore the social changes taking place.

Patterns of burial practice from the 4th to 1st millennia offer opportunities to explore the changing course of social action. In particular there is the well known shift from a range of burial evidence represented in the archaeological record of the 3rd to 2nd millennia to a far less archaeologically apparent form of burial practice in

the early 1st millennium BC (Brück 1995). The relationship between settlement sites and burial is likely to be a particularly fruitful area of study. Similarly the development and use of monuments, including burial mounds, as key elements in determining and understanding the landscape, may represent a key means by which the change from mobile settlement to a pattern of farms and fields was negotiated (Bradley 1993b; Bradley 1998). This may be exemplified by the integration of practices once associated with monuments into settlements, and the appearance of enclosed settlements, some of which were of monumental character, during the later Bronze Age.

Human impact on the natural landscape, including changing patterns of alluviation, woodland management and clearance, are vital elements in any understanding of developments during the 4th–1st millennia. More particularly faunal and plant remains can be important indicators of changing patterns of agricultural production and consumption. Priorities for palaeoecological study include detection of changes associated with the adoption and development of farming, the beginnings of large-scale woodland clearance and the establishment of permanent field systems. Targeted sedimentological, palynological and macrofossil analyses of sediment sequences in river valleys or lakes, adjacent to known archaeological sites, are needed to determine the dating, scale and geographical variation of these changes. To be most effective, palaeoecological investigations should be linked with wider programmes of aerial photography, field survey and excavation. Some small-scale work of this type has been undertaken recently in Essex with good results, both within a fairly large river valley and in the valley of an apparently insignificant stream. The later Neolithic ‘submerged forests’ of the Essex coast provide a rare opportunity to observe prehistoric woodland structure and composition directly, and have the potential to provide information on woodland management. Similar sites in coastal locations and under alluvium elsewhere in the region offer considerable potential for further study.

The data already available, (summarised in the resource assessment) in combination with targeted fieldwork in the manner suggested in the introduction, can be used to answer the challenge in the quotation at the start of this chapter (Ashwin 1996, 59). Set out below are a couple of suggestions for the *kind* of research projects, (one very general, one quite specific), which might help to achieve this aim. They make no pretence to ‘the be all and the end all’ of Neolithic and Bronze Age research in the region. It is not the aim of this paper or the document as a whole to provide a prescriptive list of research aims; but rather, as the title suggests, to set a framework for our research.

### IV. Research topics

A rather grandiose approach to research might be to establish an umbrella project for the whole region. This could be directed at the central problem of the Neolithic and Bronze Age: the development of farming and the attendant development and integration of monuments, fields and settlements. There is little doubt that the archaeological resource in this region could be used to consider seriously such complex and crucial problems (Pryor 1998). A project of this kind would have the

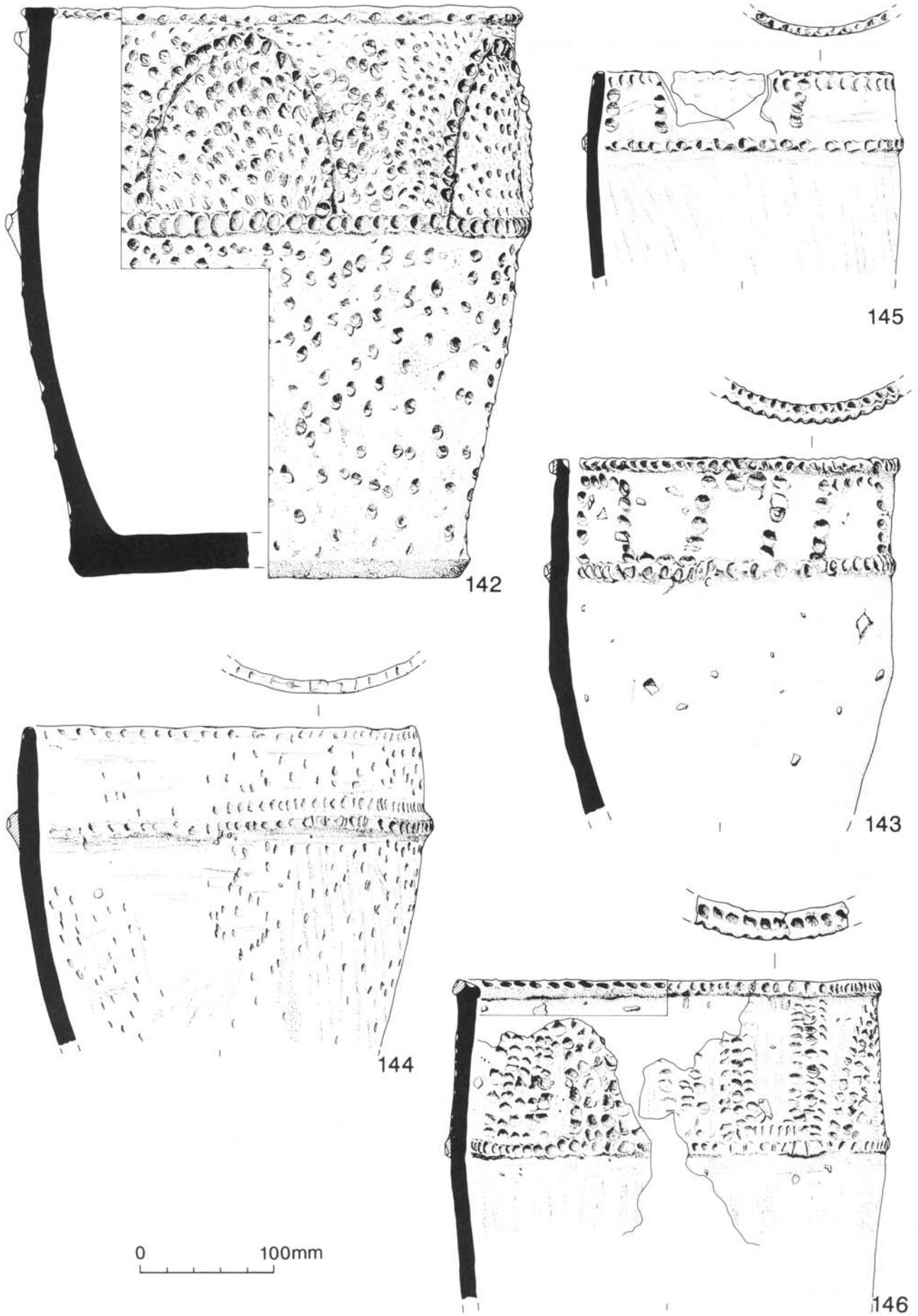


Plate II Ardleigh style pottery from a cemetery at White Colne, Essex. The distribution of this very characteristic pottery covers only a part of the eastern counties. In artefact studies, as with much else, it is important to be aware of variation within and beyond the region. (Illustrator: Sue Holden)

potential to address the problems of perception noted by Bradley (1992, 19; 1993b), to influence our understanding of British prehistory, and would also be of European significance. Whilst of considerable academic importance it would be relatively simple to make its purpose and results available to a broader public (English Heritage forthcoming, 32–34). As such a reasonably accessible title would be sensible. Something along the lines of ‘Fertile Fields: the Prehistory of farming in East Anglia’ might be appropriate. The project could take the form of a number of research programmes timetabled to be completed within a specific period, say five years, and carried out either wholly within individual counties, or in co-operation across county boundaries. In either case there would be need for co-ordination at a regional level. It would of course be possible to make such a project even more grandiose by replacing the word ‘Prehistory’ with something else and extending the chronological range to the post-medieval period.

As a more specific example, one area where it would be possible to usefully combine existing data and targeted fieldwork would be north-east Essex/south-east Suffolk. The Stour valley/estuary would be the centre of study, an area replete with archaeological potential but with relatively little development threat, and therefore little rescue-based work, but with a severe threat from the extension/intensification of arable agriculture. Examination of this zone could build on work carried out to the south at Ardleigh and Brightlingsea (Brown 1996 and 2000), and to the north in the Deben valley/Sutton Hoo survey area. At the latter site good evidence for Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age settlement has been recovered (Copp 1989; Hummler 1993).

North-east Essex/south-east Suffolk in general, and the Stour area in particular, has an extraordinary array of cropmark monuments. Many show peculiarities of size and form, and are hard to classify according to the traditional schemes. Recent photographic campaigns are adding fine detail to previously known sites, but the cropmark landscape as a whole has never been considered in its entirety. Amongst the numerous cropmark field systems one, at Lawford, has figured repeatedly in discussions of later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age farming practice (e.g. Fowler 1981, 1983; Pryor 1976, 1980, 1984, 1996), but has never been the subject of field investigation. There is clearly a need for a synthesis of the cropmark data from the valley as a whole. The Haverhill and Colchester Archaeological Groups have been very active in parts of the valley with fieldwalking campaigns, which now also require synthesis and are not well known outside the immediate region. The Stour estuary and adjacent coastal zone (Wilkinson and Murphy 1995), together with the sedimentary sequences of the Stour valley and its numerous small tributaries, offer good opportunities for finding environmental sequences and/or surface intact sites. Recent work in the Stour valley has indicated the presence of good environmental sequences in close proximity to cropmarks.

Small-scale investigation of part of selected sites might well prove useful in dating the cropmarks. Such work could provide artefact assemblages to enhance our understanding of the distinctive prehistory of this area. This can already be discerned by the nature and distribution of the highly distinctive Ardleigh style ceramics (Brown 1995) which seem to indicate a regional

identity, which may also be apparent in the way that other cultural elements were employed (Brown 1995 and 2000). Some preliminary work reflecting on the subtle inter-relationship of human movement through the landscape which structured, and was increasingly structured by, the location of monuments, fields and trackways has already been undertaken (Brown 1997 and 2000).

The above is not meant to imply that the Stour valley is especially significant; many other areas throughout the region could match (or even exceed) its research potential, nor that agricultural origin is necessarily the only theme worth pursuing. However, it is hoped these examples do suggest the kind of approach to research, whether artefact based or fieldwork, which may advance our understanding of this crucial period. At the risk of labouring a point, whatever the detail of the research programmes we may choose to pursue, the central aim must be to provide synthesis and interpretations of the data for both academic and popular consumption.

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