

# Introduction

by Nigel Brown and Keith Wade

*What we need to do now is to devote substantial effort and resources both financial and intellectual over an extended period — maybe a decade or more — to taking stock of and consolidating what we have learnt, and to identifying and carrying out wider projects of analysis and synthesis in order to extend our knowledge of the archaeological record and our understanding of the past.* (Thomas 1994)

*It is always too soon to synthesise, but it is always imperative to do so.* (Bradley 1996)

## I. Background

The present document, a *Research Agenda and Strategy*, represents part 2 of a *Research Framework for the Eastern Counties*. Part 1, the *Resource Assessment*, described the reasoning behind the creation of such a framework, the area covered and the methodology employed (Buckley 1997). However it may be helpful to reiterate a few of the main points here.

The region was defined as the area served by the administrative counties of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Hertfordshire, with boundaries as at the end of 1995. These five counties have had an established regional co-ordination group for many years (Buckley 1997), and this long-standing history of co-operation between local authority archaeologists of the region has provided the impetus and mechanism for preparation of this framework. The co-ordination group has recently been extended to include Bedfordshire and is now coincident with the Regional Development Agency. The present research framework could not be extended to include that county without considerable reworking. However, Bedfordshire is currently preparing a county-based research framework which will complement the eastern counties one, and it is anticipated that any future revision will include Bedfordshire.

The format of the regional research framework follows that proposed by Thomas (1994) as subsequently modified in *Frameworks for our Past* (Olivier 1996, 5) and reiterated in the MARS report (Darvill and Fulton 1998, 231). This format was summarised in the *Resource Assessment* (Buckley 1997, 2) as follows.

A research framework comprises:

*Resource assessment:* the current state of knowledge and understanding.

*Research agenda:* gaps in knowledge, potential of resource, research topics.

*Research strategy:* priorities and methods for implementing the agenda.

A further stage beyond the scope of the present document can be defined as:

*Research project:* a detailed proposal to further the research strategy.

The period format adopted for the resource assessment has been largely retained for the research agenda, with the addition of a thematic chapter which highlights some areas of research which cut across period divisions.

The procedure followed in the preparation of this document was broadly similar to that adopted for the *Resource Assessment* (Buckley 1997, 2).

A draft text was prepared largely by those responsible for drafting the various chapters of the resource assessment, under the auspices of a steering committee made up of local authority archaeologists within the region, and English Heritage.

Following discussion and amendment within the steering committee, the draft document was circulated to a wide range of individuals for comment. The text was then revised in the light of comment received and further discussion within the committee.

The consultation process was repeated and in addition comments were sought from three paid readers. The document was once again revised and then this volume was produced.

The considerable costs of preparing this framework were largely borne by the five county councils; English Heritage grants assisted with the consultation stages, and with publication.

A research framework for the Greater Thames Estuary has recently been prepared by Essex and Kent County Councils, English Heritage, and RCHME (Williams and Brown 1999). The area covered by this document substantially overlaps that dealt with by the eastern counties framework. The two frameworks complement one another and should allow similarities and contrasts to be explored across a wide area of eastern England (Cunliffe 1982, 40; Bradley 1993, 56). A research framework is also being prepared for the East Midlands. For Greater London English Heritage have published *Capital Archaeology: Strategies for sustaining the historic legacy of a world city* (English Heritage 1998), a resource assessment is provided by *Archaeology of Greater London* (MOLAS 2000) and a research agenda is in preparation. These developments will provide a firm foundation for archaeology in eastern England in the 21st century. In addition the area covered by the eastern counties framework forms an integral part of a European region centred on the North Sea basin. Research generated by this framework should be viewed within this European context.

## II. Purpose of the agenda and strategy

Research/explanation and management/conservation are currently the two main concerns of the archaeological discipline. Whilst attempts have been made to reconcile these two aims (Carver 1996), they are often seen to be in conflict, and the former has received vocal and erudite championship as the prime aim of archaeology (e.g.

Barrett 1995; Biddle 1994). Although potential or actual tensions may arise between these areas of activity, it seems best to regard these two broad aims as ‘...overlapping and reinforcing roles...’ (Renfrew 1996), mutually supporting rather than necessarily conflicting. However, given the complementary role of research/explanation and management/conservation just espoused, and the nature of the committee (Buckley 1997) which has taken the lead role in the creation of this regional framework, awareness of management/conservation concerns underlie the research agenda presented here.

Research is seen as central both to the implementation of PPG16 (Thomas 1994; Courtney 1996, 107; Reeve 1997; Wade-Martins 1996, 39) and to the MAP 2 process (Andrews and Thomas 1995, 204). As such, the necessity of providing an adequate research framework, against which ‘...the thousands of individual research designs that are required by the implementation of PPG16...’ (Pryor 1995, 230) can be judged, is widely recognised (e.g. Wainwright 1996, 6; Olivier 1996, 223; English Heritage forthcoming). This research framework is intended both to provide a context for the development of coherent research projects and to support and inform work arising from the implementation of PPGs 15 and 16.

The *Resource Assessment* (Glazebrook ed. 1997) indicates the scale and range of the archaeological data currently available. There are clearly gaps in our knowledge and certain of these are highlighted in the period accounts presented below. Part of the research agenda may simply be directed at filling these gaps. Despite the wealth of information available in the region and presented in the resource assessment, it is perhaps worth noting that even now certain baseline information may be lacking.

Research excavation has tended (as did rescue work during the 1970s and 1980s) to concentrate on the same sort of sites (prolific in artefacts, large, obvious above-ground evidence, etc.). However, the need for some understanding of the full range of settlement is increasingly urgent as it is being constantly eroded, by development, ploughing and afforestation. Although this erosion has been recognised for some fifty years, there has not been a holistic approach to quantifying it or dealing with it. The Monuments at Risk Survey (MARS, Darvill and Fulton 1998), Monuments Protection Programme (MPP) and related initiatives have improved understanding and protection of the resource base. Agricultural erosion of the archaeological resource has tended to be ignored in comparison with rescue excavation linked to development. However, the establishment of adequate mechanisms to deal with development threats is the outstanding success story of the last twenty years culminating in PPGs 16 and 15. In terms of land use, however, development will only affect a small percentage of land. Whereas, within the region, for instance in a county like Suffolk, ploughing affects 66% of the land area and hence, most of its sites. In fact, afforestation could

affect more sites than development if the Rural White Paper’s target of doubling woodland in the next 50 years is achieved (*Rural England — A Nation Committed to a Living Countryside*, 1995). The extent to which the resource is being eroded should be better understood when the results of MARS are fully assimilated, and it is notable that the MARS report identifies agriculture as the largest

single threat to the archaeological resource (Darvill and Fulton 1998, 236–7).

Archaeology, as a discipline, can learn much from the natural sciences. Although Carver’s (1996, 47–50) strictures against the wholesale application of ecological principles to archaeology should be kept clearly in mind, the concept of biodiversity, in relation to natural resources, might be transferable to archaeology resources (‘Archaeodiversity’). If we are to preserve the diversity of the archaeological resource for future generations then we must concentrate on expanding our knowledge of the resource base as our contribution to Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

Nonetheless the regional research agenda cannot simply rely on filling gaps in knowledge. The two quotations at the start of this chapter were chosen with a purpose, that from Thomas follows on from a description of the previous couple of decades as a period of orgiastic data collection. The traditional metaphor of archaeology as an incomplete jigsaw puzzle — find a few more pieces and the picture will be clearer — is not entirely helpful. The truth is not out there, simply waiting to be discovered by more fieldwork. Research should be as much, perhaps more, concerned with interpretation and synthesis of existing data, as with new data collection (Reeve 1997). Further fieldwork will undoubtedly be required; however, the museum collections, published reports, excavation archives, results of evaluations, and sites and monument records of the region are a resource of inestimable value. The agenda set out below is wide-ranging, yet it cannot be all-embracing, neither is it intended to be an exclusive and static list.

The challenge for this regional research framework is to facilitate programmes of work which utilise this resource, in combination with fieldwork, to enhance our understanding of the region’s archaeology. It is intended that this will be pursued both at an academic level and through programmes of public information and education. Encouragement of popular appreciation of the region’s archaeology and enhanced understanding of its educational and tourism potential (Jones 1997) should be key aims of research. To summarise, we would endorse the three key concepts for ‘Advancing Understanding of England’s Archaeology’ set out in the draft English Heritage research agenda (English Heritage forthcoming, 16): synthesis, targeted data collection, accessibility of information, and these principles should underpin research initiatives arising from this framework.

## Bibliography

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