

**Cropmarks in Constable Country: research and management in the Stour****Valley** Nigel Brown and Helen Saunders**Introduction**

The Stour valley through its representation in the paintings of John Constable is one of the iconic landscapes of the East of England, and a considerable tourist attraction as a visit to Flatford or Dedham on any sunny Sunday will reveal. Less well known is a remarkable series of cropmark complexes which exist throughout the valley and form the starting point of the present paper.

Cropmarks have long been known in the Stour valley through many years of air photographic recording beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s. The cropmarks are well known amongst the archaeological community locally (e.g. McMaster 1971; Priddy 1981; Martin 1981) but, until recently, perhaps not so well appreciated at a national level (Brown *et al* 2002). Furthermore, although throughout much of the valley, (a large part of which is an AONB) management for the maintenance and enhancement of landscape value and nature conservation is well established, appreciation and management of the considerable archaeological resource in the valley has lagged behind. This is perhaps surprising, given the long history not only of cropmark study but also of fieldwork; the latter carried out largely by local societies notably the Haverhill Archaeological Group and Colchester Archaeological Group. As recently as 1997 a major, and generally quite impressive, landscape study of the AONB stated that 'Evidence of prehistoric and Roman occupation in Dedham vale is not extensive' (Countryside Commission 1997)

**The Stour Valley Cropmark Project**

The valley floodplain, although traditionally used as grazing, has since the mid twentieth century been subject to intensive arable cultivation. Significant areas of permanent pasture survive, particularly in Dedham Vale but much of the rest of the valley is extensively ploughed. With some exceptions, the valley has not been subject to the kind of intensive pressure for development and mineral extraction which have affected many other valleys of the East of England. As a consequence

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

threat-led archaeological investigations have been largely absent. In the Stour valley, as in much of eastern England, arable agriculture has been the major threat to the survival of archaeological sites and deposits. English Heritage's Monuments at Risk Survey (MARS: Darvill and Fulton, 1995) has highlighted cultivation as the biggest single threat to the archaeological resource in England. Following fairly hard on the heels of MARS preparation of the Regional Research Framework provided the impetus for the Stour Valley project and the potential for work in the Stour was clearly recognised in the published Framework (Brown and Murphy 2000). The valley offered the opportunity to focus attention on a largely rural area with a rich archaeological resource but which had seen little threat lead fieldwork. The work of the National Mapping Programme provided a firm basis for the development of a GIS based cropmark synthesis which formed the core of the Stour Valley project. The project was proposed by Essex County Council and funded by English Heritage in the context of implementation of both MARS, and the Research Framework.

Whilst the Stour valley project was developed so that it could be delivered as a stand alone package, it was conceived as part of a longer term programme of promoting both the archaeological resource in the overall scheme of valley management, and providing the basis to develop further research including fieldwork of the kind undertaken by the related Essex Cropmark Enclosures Project (Brown and Germany 2002). The results of the Stour Cropmark Project have been fully described elsewhere (Brown *et al* 2002), and are briefly summarised here together with consideration of future work and wider implications.

The study area covered the valley from the head of the estuary to about Wixoe, in effect the stretch of the Stour which forms the boundary between Suffolk and Essex. Within the study area the Stour flows roughly west/east between Wixoe and Long Melford, then north/south to Bures, and once again west/east to the head of the estuary at Cattawade. For much of its length the Stour forms the historic boundary between the counties of Essex and Suffolk. Its status as a boundary was in place by the time of the Domesday Survey, and probably originated at some point in the post-Roman period as a result of the fluctuating fortunes of the nascent kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia (e.g. Parker-Pearson 1993). Prior to this in the Roman and

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

Iron Age periods the boundary between the Trinovantes and Iceni appears to have lain well to the north (Martin 1988, 1999). During the Bronze Age and Neolithic periods territorial boundaries are even harder to discern, but it may be significant that the Stour lies at the heart of the distribution of Ardleigh Urns, one of the most characteristic types of Bronze Age pottery in eastern England often associated with highly distinctive ring-ditch cemeteries (Brown 1995; 1999). It is therefore possible that, at the time the cropmark landscapes were being created and used, the valley lay within, rather than at, the boundary of major territorial divisions.

A remarkable range of monuments exists within the valley. Elongated enclosures are probably amongst the earliest constructions; likely to be Neolithic in date, they include oval barrows, long barrows and two cursus monuments at Bures and Stratford St Mary. The valley also contains numerous ditches of various kinds. One indication of the significance of the valley may be the concentration of dual concentric ring-ditches within it. Through the work of the NMP a total of 24 of these monuments are known for the whole of Essex, of which 8 are in the Stour valley, whilst the Stour project area has a total of 21 such sites.

The Stour valley project has focused attention on the relationship of the cropmark monuments to each other, to the river and to the wider valley topography. In creating monuments within the landscape, a new relationship could be established between the natural environment and human society. It is clear that particular locations were chosen for these new constructions of timber and earth. Once established the monuments themselves became significant, often highly visible features, which could subsequently be manipulated in many ways. Their construction and elaboration not only transformed the landscape physically but also, and perhaps more importantly, altered the way it could be understood and utilised. Additional structures could be added which over time transformed the appearance of considerable stretches of the landscape.

An example of this may be observed at Bures where north of the river a cursus cuts across the neck of a meander, and many of the monument complexes in the Stour form linear arrangements which do the same (Brown *et al* 2002). A remarkable oval

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

open-ended structure with rows of large internal pits or postholes lies across the river from Bures cursus. The Bures oval cropmark may be presumed to be amongst the earliest monuments in this part of the valley, contemporary with, or perhaps pre-dating the Bures cursus. The cursus lies about 350m to the north across the river, both monuments are located at a similar height around the 20m contour line. The two constructions would have been intervisible (assuming there was no extensive tree cover). It seems likely that their use may have been linked, their similar orientation and siting reflecting symbolic associations with the river, and perhaps patterns of human movement within the valley. Over time a linear sequence of monuments was developed across the neck of a meander, parallel to the Bures cursus on the other side of the river.

Slightly further downstream from the Bures cropmarks, a monument complex at Warmingford appears to follow quite closely a relict course of the Stour, essentially following the riverbank rather than running across, or being set within, a meander location which seems more typical of cropmark complexes in the Stour valley (Brown *et al* 2002). Here again it is possible to suggest a plausible developmental sequence for this complex based on the cropmark evidence. An early feature of the Warmingford complex may be a C shaped 'enclosure' (49.10), a clear parallel for this cropmark is provided by the C shaped early Neolithic earthwork excavated at Broome Heath, Norfolk (Wainwright 1972). The Broome Heath earthwork formed part of a monument complex which itself seems to have developed over some time, with a long barrow and round barrow constructed north-east of the northern terminal of the C, and a round barrow south-east of the southern terminal. This arrangement may be reflected in the siting of ring-ditches (49.11, 49.12, 49.8) close to the north-east and south-west terminals of the Warmingford C. To the west a large dual concentric ring-ditch (49.5) with narrow closely spaced 'ditches' may represent a palisaded enclosure. Further west again a second dual concentric ring-ditch (49.2) formed a line with 49.5 and 49.10, running along the former bank of the Stour. The space between 49.5 and 49.10 is infilled by four small ring-ditches (49.6-9), with a second similar group (49.11, 13-16) of small ring-ditches around and between 49.10 and 49.12. In this case, it is reasonable to suppose that these small and rather densely clustered ring-ditches are, by analogy with a number of excavated sites at

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

Ardleigh and elsewhere in north-east Essex (Brown 1996; 1999), of Middle Bronze Age date. They may be late additions to this group of cropmarks indicating how such clusters of monuments increased in complexity and no doubt changed and developed both in terms of function and symbolism.

GIS offers the opportunity to explore the relationship of monument complexes to river and slopes and to each other. Most cropmark monuments in the valley are situated on the lowest valley slopes just above, or on, the floodplain, quite unlike the classic barrow sites on the Wessex chalk. There is a tendency to think of the valley as a linear route, particularly when viewed two dimensionally on a map there appears to be a fairly simple linear distribution of monument complexes along the valley. However, when experienced on the ground the location of, for instance, the Belchamp St Paul double concentric cropmark complex, does not give much impression of a linear valley location. Rather, the broad curve of the river and the form of the valley slopes to the north and south tend to give a sense of enclosure with the monuments occupying the floor of a basin. Furthermore, GIS viewshed analysis allows intervisibility to be checked demonstrating that monument complexes are often visually isolated one from another. A good example of this is the nucleated complex at Cavendish; this group is one of many set within a meander of the river and may have developed from the construction of a possible long barrow/mortuary enclosure. Neither the complex (13) about 2km to the west nor that (15) about 1km to the east can be seen from complex 14. Here again the viewshed indicates a rather bowl-like setting for this complex, echoing the curve of the river.

The cropmarks in the Stour valley contain numerous linear boundaries and field systems. It is, of course, certain that more than one period is represented by these features and almost by definition field systems are long-lived entities which change and develop over long periods of time. In some cases a relatively recent, perhaps post-medieval, date can be attributed to these linear features. Others, particularly those towards the valley floor associated in one way or another with the monument complexes, are likely to be of ancient origin. There is widespread evidence for the association of barrows/ring-ditches with field systems dating to the Bronze Age throughout eastern England and, indeed, more generally in the British Isles. The

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

intimate connection between the construction/use of monument complexes and the origins and development of agriculture is increasingly apparent. This relationship encompasses not only the physical division of the landscape but also the conceptual and social changes necessary for the adoption and development of an agricultural lifestyle (e.g. Bradley 1998, 2000; Tilley 1994). The Stour valley offers possibilities to explore the development of monument complexes in their environmental context. The Essex Cropmark Enclosures project has demonstrated that sampling of colluvial /alluvial sequence reveals a range of peats and other deposits charting changes in the valley landscape during the time that the monuments were built and used, and is possible not only in the main valley but also in the valley's small streams. Accordingly targeted sampling can give us data closely related to cropmarks rather than just where bridges or other new developments are being built.

Subsequent to the completion of the GIS synthesis field visits have been undertaken to check the condition of a number of cropmark complexes on the ground (Heppell and Clarke 2003). The complex at Wormingford, discussed above, was visited together with two at Langham and a complex at Lawford. The monument complex at Lawford (the only scheduled monument complex in the valley) is enclosed within a large rectangular field. This enclosure is one of a number linked to a series of trackways leading from the river floodplain to the valley side which here forms a steep scarp leading to the flat top of the Tendring plateau, regularly cited in discussions of Bronze Age field systems but in fact undated. At Wormingford, fresh flints and sherds of prehistoric pottery were visible on the ploughed surface and the same was the case at the Langham complexes. Indeed at one of the Langham sites, in an area of deeper ploughing, subsoil was being brought to the surface together with substantial fragments of Ardleigh style urns and cremated bone, indicating that burials were being disturbed. By contrast the Lawford cropmarks have been returned to pasture and appear to be in a stable condition. This emphasises the benefits of arable reversion for longterm management of cropmark sites.

The new Environmental Stewardship scheme may prove beneficial in this regard, an advisory leaflet for farmers sets out the nature and importance of the Stour Valley cropmarks together with opportunities for grant aid to support enhanced

*East of England Archaeological Research Framework Review*

conservation. In addition considerable effort has been put into the revised *Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Management Strategy* (DVSJAC 2004), which now provides excellent coverage of historic environment issues. Consequently good foundations are in place for creating an ongoing integrated programme of research and management in the valley. This should be developed not only with regard to cropmark landscapes, but incorporating lynchets, field boundaries and other more visible elements of the historic environment. It should be possible to approach this work in a way which breaks down the divisions between academic, professional and amateur. The challenge will be to deliver on some of this rich promise within the five year life span of the *Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Management Strategy*. What can be achieved in the iconic landscape of Constable Country can be an exemplar for similar areas throughout the region and beyond.