

### **3. Neolithic (4000 - 2200 BC)**

#### **3.1 Summary of the Collections**

##### **3.1.1 Archaeology**

The Neolithic monuments of Wiltshire are among the most famous archaeological sites of Southern Britain. The Museum collections dating to this period are perhaps surprisingly small, yet are extremely significant, with assemblages relating to a number of key sites throughout the county. Amongst the earliest Neolithic assemblages in the collections are the unpublished contents of early Neolithic pits excavated beneath the Early Bronze Age Bishops Cannings G61 and G62a round barrows on Roughridge Hill by Edwina Proudfoot in 1964. These pits produced an assemblage of 610 Early Neolithic ceramic sherds, including carinated bowl forms and with a composition which closely resembles that seen in the Conybury anomaly (Barclay et al. 2018), implying a very early date. Unfortunately, it is unclear what proportion of the human and animal bone assemblage was retained, and that which is recorded in the museum collection management system could not be found in time for inclusion in Barclay et al.'s (2018) project (see **3.2.1**). A comparably early Neolithic site has also been identified at Oliver's Hill Field, Cherhill (Smith and Evans 1983), discussed above (see **2.1**) for its Late Mesolithic occupation. 210 early Neolithic sherds were recovered, in addition to a slightly larger Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware assemblage. A sizable assemblage of flint is also recorded from Neolithic features at the site, but as has previously been noted, the animal bone assemblage from this site is now held by the Natural History Museum.



*Figure 3.1: The Breamore Axehead.*

In addition to these site assemblages, 59 Early Neolithic stone axeheads are held by the museum, including the exceptional Breamore axehead, made from Alpine Jadeitite (Figure 3.1, see **3.2.1**).

Other Early Neolithic sites assemblages in the collections include a substantial collection of ceramics from Windmill Hill, excavated by Rev. H.G.O. Kendall in 1924 (Cunnington and Goddard 1934: 83), and a small assemblage of ceramics, flint and animal remains relating to both Cunnington's and Conah's excavations at Knap Hill (Cunnington 1911; Conah 1965). Unlike many other Neolithic enclosures, Knap Hill appears to have only been occupied only briefly in the Neolithic (Conah 1965), an interpretation recently reinforced by radiocarbon dating (see below, **3.2.1**). The most famous of the Early Neolithic assemblages held in the Museum collections derives from Stuart Piggott's excavations of West Kennett Long Barrow, in addition to the human remains, a small assemblage of early Neolithic pottery and flint was also recovered, but the archive also contains a sizable assemblage of Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware. Much smaller assemblages of Peterborough ware are also associated with

the excavations of the Millbarrow, Winterbourne Monkton, (Whittle 1994) and Beckhampton Road, Avebury, long barrows (Ashbee et al. 1979), the former was much disturbed however, the excavations of the latter were able to reconstruct the construction sequence of the barrow in relative detail. Beckhampton Road (Bishops Cannings G76) is of particular interest as the monument contained no human remains, and appears to have been built around three partially articulated cattle skulls placed along its central axis. Although the onsite recording is inconsistent, with a few exceptions which appear to have been removed at the time of the initial report's preparation, the entire animal bone assemblage is extant.

The principal Late Neolithic assemblage in the collections relates to Wainwright's 1969 excavation of Marden Henge, in the Vale of Pewsey (Waingwright et al. 1971). The excavation of this henge monument, comparable to the more famous site at Durrington Walls, produced a large assemblage of 602 Grooved ware sherds, mostly in the Durrington style, as well as a small but important collection of animal bone, dominated by cattle and pigs, and flintwork. More recent excavations on the site have also produced further artefacts, including a pair of exceptional oblique arrowheads (Bishop et al. 2011), although the bulk of these archives still await deposition. The Museum also holds the archives relating to St. George Gray's 1908-1922 excavations of Avebury, and the sizable Grooved ware assemblage from the Cunington's 1926-8 excavations of Woodhenge, as well as numerous assemblages from other, smaller sites from across the period not mentioned here.

### 3.1.2 Human remains

The most substantial assemblage of human remains dating to the Neolithic period belong to the excavation archive of West Kennett Long Barrow, with the Museum holding all of the post-cranial elements recovered during Stuart Piggott's excavations. Unfortunately, the cranial elements are held separately by the Duckworth Laboratory in Cambridge. As would be expected, the majority of Neolithic human remains in the collections date to the early Neolithic; with smaller assemblages of material from historic excavations of long barrows such as Bowl's Barrow (Cunington 1889), and Lanhill Barrow (Cunington 1910). A more recently excavated assemblage of human bone belongs to the archive associated with Whittle et al.'s (1994) excavation of Millbarrow, Winterbourne Monkton, although the barrow had been leveled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, meaning the remains were largely from disturbed contexts. In addition to these groups, a number of isolated burials are also held in the collections: including an unpublished juvenile burial from the ramparts of the Knap Hill causewayed enclosure, and late Neolithic remains from Marden Henge (Wainwright et al. 1971) and a cist near Millbarrow, recently radiocarbon dated by the Beaker People Project to 2880-2630 cal BC (see **4.2.1**, Parker Pearson et al. 2019: SK132). A substantial quantity of cremated human remains of probable Late Neolithic date were also recovered in a pit below West Overton G44 in association with Late Neolithic pottery, but is not published.

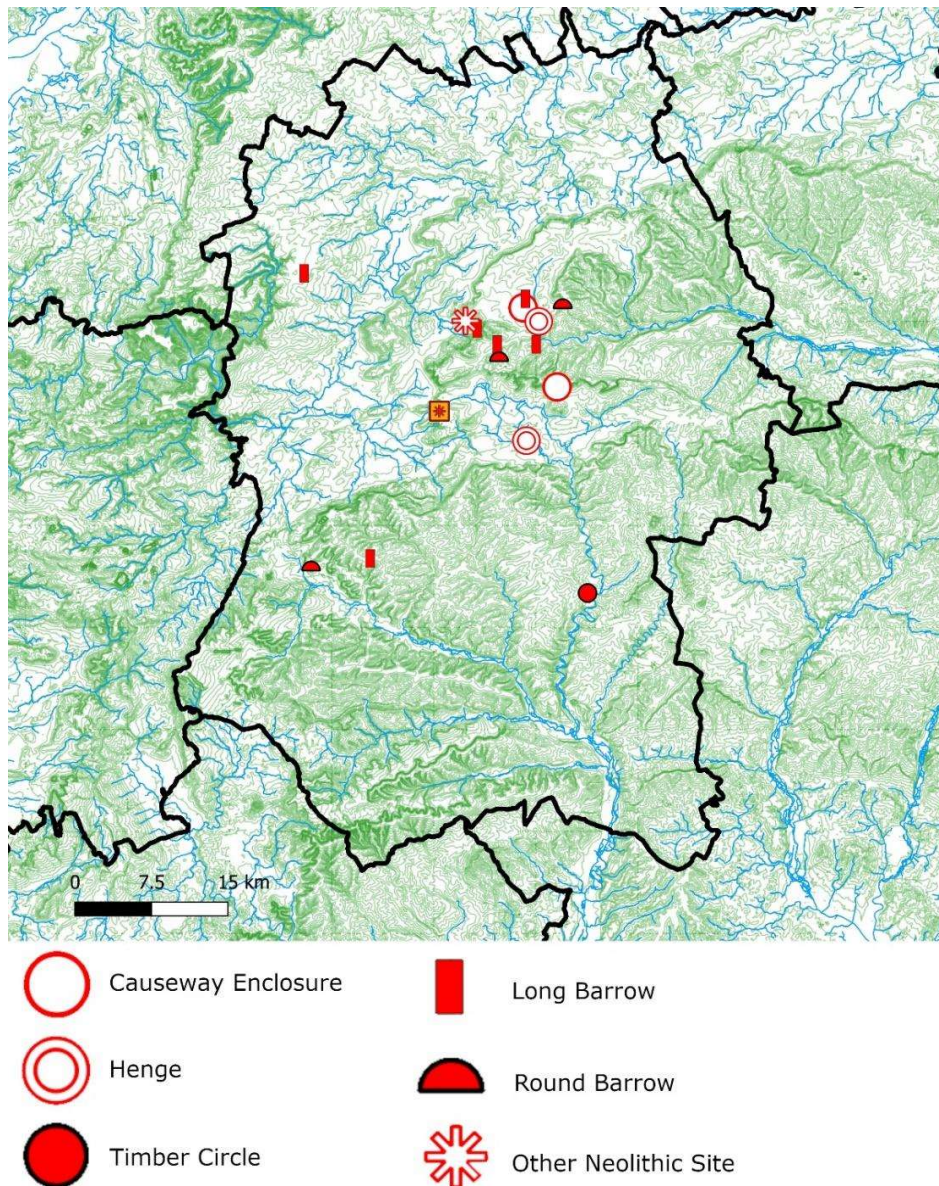


Figure 3.2: Map showing the distribution of key sites mentioned in the text. Image contains Ordnance Survey data, crown copyright 2022.

### 3.2 Research summary

#### 3.2.1 Summary

Published at the very beginning of the period covered by this project, the results of *Programme JADE*, remain some of the most impressive of all of the research undertaken on the Museum's Neolithic collections (Sheridan et al. 2010; Sheridan 2011). Combining scattered

reflectance spectroradiometry, a technique elsewhere used to explore the surface of Mars, and extensive fieldwork, this pan-European project has been able to identify the likely source of the exceptional Breamore jadeite axehead as a free-standing block of Jadeitite near Genoa, Italy. In addition, the typo-chronological work undertaken by the researchers allows for the axehead's long pre-depositional history to be



reconstructed. After initially being produced in Northern Italy, it was then substantially re-worked in Southern Brittany during the latter half of the Fifth Millennium BC, before reaching Britain in the early centuries of the Fourth, probably alongside early farming groups.

The collections have also benefited in a large number of radiocarbon dating projects since 2010, particularly by Historic England. Barclay et al. (2018) sampled carbonised residues on Early Neolithic ceramics from sites across Wessex, including Oliver's Hill. The using Bayesian modelling, the results have led to the re-evaluation of the chronologies of the earliest ceramic industries in the region; with the Carinated bowl tradition current *4245-3395 cal BC (95% probability)* and the subsequent decorated (Windmill Hill) tradition current *3890-3285 cal BC (95% probability)*. The unpublished assemblages from Bishops Cannings G62a and G61 were consulted, although no suitable residues were identified. IN addition, Roberts and Marshall's (2020) study of Neolithic pit digging has further refined our understanding of the chronologies of ceramic deposition in Wiltshire. In particular, they highlight a period of overlap between Grooved Ware and Peterborough Ware deposition around *c. 3000 cal BC*, although the overlap between Peterborough Ware and Early Neolithic ceramic traditions is less substantial. The project was also able to describe decreasing relative levels of cattle in pits through the period, in contrast to pigs, caprids, and deer, which increased in relative number after the Early Neolithic. This, they argue, supports the suggestion of a shift in subsistence strategies as the Neolithic matured. Radiocarbon dating of a number of samples from the original excavations of Marden Henge was undertaken by English Heritage (anon. 2013), to tie in with the 2010 excavations of the site. The

results confirm the construction of the monument in the middle of the Third Millennium BC. Antler sampled during the original dating programme was redated, providing statistically consistent results, but unfortunately, the human remains from Marden failed to provide sufficient carbon. As part of their wider *Gathering Time* project, Whittle et al. (2011: 97ff) obtained radiocarbon dates for the Neolithic occupation of Knap Hill, which ultimately confirm Conah's (1965) original interpretation of a short, single phase of Neolithic occupation. These dates were republished by Marshall et al. (2020) as part of a gazetteer of radiocarbon dates funded by English Heritage between 2003 and 2006, several of which were also relevant to the collections.

More traditional studies of material culture include Ard and Darvill's (2015) re-assessment of Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware assemblages, which included that from West Kennett long barrow (Figure 3.3). The aim of the project was to investigate the validity of the traditional sub-divisions of the fabric re-assess the established sub-divisions of the tradition, Mortlake, Ebbsfleet, and Fengate, finding that they continue to be meaningful



*Figure 3.3: A Peterborough ware bowl from West Kennet Longbarrow.*

divisions. Over the course of his MSc thesis and ongoing PhD, Rowlands (2018; 2022) has undertaken use-wear analysis on a number of Neolithic objects, such as an antler macehead from Warminster G10 antler macehead, and the flint knife from Millbarrow, as well as bone beads from West Kennett long barrow. These projects have made substantial contributions to our understanding of the complex use-lives of these objects, demonstrating, for instance, that the Warminster macehead had been produced from an extensively used antler pick or hammer, and discounting previous interpretations of the object as an adze-sleeve. In particular Rowlands' MSc thesis highlights the potential value of even relatively small-scale Masters-level research projects in increasing our understanding of museum collections. A further small-scale feasibility study of flint from Marden henge has demonstrated that it may be appropriate for use-wear analysis in the future (Chan 2019).

Banfield's (2018; 2019) reassessments of the osseous assemblages from West Kennet and Beckhampton Road long barrows, amongst other sites, importantly highlights the lack of attention animal remains received even relatively recently, especially when fragmentary. In addition to identifying potential differences in practice between the north and south of Wiltshire, Banfield makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of Beckhampton Road Long Barrow (Banfield 2018; Banfield et al. 2019). In particular, her examination identified evidence of a healed impact trauma on one of the cattle skulls placed along the central axis of the long barrow, which almost certainly relates to an unsuccessful, attempt to slaughter the animal. She suggests that these animals may have been known individuals to the community, extending 'personhood' to them. Another study of osseous

material, this time focusing exclusively on human remains, was undertaken by Cuthbert (2019), examining remains from Winterbourne Monkton G17a and Oldbury long barrow, Cherhill, amongst others, as part of a re-assessment of human remains from over 40 long barrows across Southern England. Previously unrecognized levels of interpersonal violence and chronic disease were identified amongst the remains, and she argues that this may have factored in the decision to select certain individuals for inclusion in the monuments.

Animal bone from Marden henge features in what is probably the most high-profile research into the Neolithic period in recent years: teeth from eight pigs and one cattle have been sampled for multi-isotopic analysis as part of projects studying the mobility of animals consumed at henge sites. Both demonstrate that Marden was able to draw in individuals from a wide geographical area, with just one of the sampled pigs having been raised locally (Evans et al. 2019; Madgwick et al. 2019).

### 3.2.2 Research projects and publications

Ard, V., and Darvill, T. (2015) Revisiting old friends: the production, distribution, and use of Peterborough ware in Britain, *Oxford journal of Archaeology* 34, 1-31.

Banfield, E. (2018) *Tales from the ontological tern: an examination of the role and meaning of faunal remains in the Neolithic long barrows of Wiltshire*, Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Leicester.

Banfield, E., Stoll, A., and Thomas, R. (2019) Healed impact trauma to a Neolithic cattle frontal bone: A posthuman perspective,

*International Journal of Palaeopathology* 24, 197-200.

Barclay, A.J., Bayliss, A., Bronk-Ramsay, C., and seven others (2018) Dating the earliest ceramics in Wessex, *Historic England Research Report 63-2018*.

Chan, B. (2019) *The use-wear analysis of the Marden Henge flint assemblage: an assessment report*, Unpublished report: University of Southampton.

Cuthbert, G.S. (2019) *Enriching the Neolithic: The forgotten people of the Barrows*, Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Exeter.

English Heritage (2013) *Marden radiocarbon dating – August 2013*, Unpublished report: English Heritage.

Evans, J., Parker Pearson, M., Madgwick, R., Sloane, H. and Albarella, U. (2019) Strontium and oxygen isotope evidence for the origin and movement of cattle at Late Neolithic Durrington Walls, UK, *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11, 5181-5197.

Madgwick, R., Lamb, A.L., Sloane, H., Nederbragt, A.J., Albarella, U., Parker Pearson, M. and Evans, J.A. (2019) Multi-isotope analysis reveals that feasts in the Stonehenge environs and across Wessex drew people and animals from throughout Britain, *Science Advances* 2019:5, eaau6078.

Marshall, P., Bayliss, A., Bronk-Ramsay, C., Cook, G., McCormac, G., and Plitch, van der, J. (2020) *Radiocarbon dates from samples funded by English Heritage between 2003 and 2006*, Portsmouth: English Heritage.

Roberts, D., and Marshall, P. (2020) Pit digging and lifeways in Neolithic Wiltshire, *WANHM* 113, 16-34.

Rowlands, J. (2018) *Just scratching the surface: a comparative study of the use lives and artefact curation in middle Neolithic grave assemblages*, Unpublished MSc Thesis: University of Southampton.

Sheridan, A., Field, D., Pailler, Y., Petrequin, P., Errera, M. and Cassen, S. (2010) The Breamore jadeite axehead and other Neolithic axeheads of Alpine rock form central southern England, *WANHM* 103, 16-34.

Whittle, A., Healy, F. and Bayliss, A. (2011) *Gathering Time: Dating the Early Neolithic Enclosures of Southern Britain and Ireland*, Oxford: Oxbow Books.

### 3.3 Research Priorities

The Museum's Neolithic collections appear to be well-utilised, and there are few obvious gaps in the research to be highlighted. The relative lack of scientific analyses of human bones in the collections when compared to the subsequent Early Bronze Age is probably partially due to the major re-dating projects undertaken for a number of Neolithic monuments prior to 2010 (Bayliss et al. 2007a; Whittle et al. 2007), including radiocarbon dating of numerous samples from West Kennett long barrow (Bayliss et al. 2007b) and Bowl's Barrow (Smith and Brickley 2007). That the cranial elements of the West Kennett human remains are held by the Duckworth Laboratories, Cambridge, seriously hampers the kinds of research that the Museum collections can contribute to, as without teeth several aspects of isotopic analysis become more difficult and expensive (R. Madgwick *pers. comm.*). It should be noted however, that similar research projects would be possible on the remains from other sites, including Bowl's Barrow and Millbarrow. Ancient DNA analyses of

the Neolithic human remains from long barrows held by the Museum may be of interest, especially given the short timeframe in which the individuals interred in West Kennett appear to have died (Whittle et al. 2007) and recent results concerning the close familial relations of many within the Hazelton North long barrow, Gloucestershire (Fowler et al. 2022).

In light of Banfield's (2018) recent work on the animal bone of assemblage from Beckhampton Road long barrow, wider scientific analysis of these remains may help build a more detailed understanding. Whilst Ashbee's (1967) contexts cannot be located spatially with certainty, they can often be attributed to, for example, the pre-mound soil or mound material in a given area of the barrow, meaning that a refined understanding of the chronology of the mound's construction should be possible. This would also allow for the relationship between the display of the three cattle skulls along the central axis and the barrow itself to be fleshed out, with isotopic analysis providing an insight into whether the animals were raised elsewhere.

As with the scientific analysis of human remains, lipid analysis of ceramics from the Neolithic was also extensively studied in the 2000s, although no ceramics within the Museum's collections were sampled (Copeley et al. 2005). Lipid analysis of grooved ware assemblages have demonstrated a statistically significant link with pig preparation, especially in non-domestic contexts (Mukherjee et al. 2007; 2008), although with the bulk of grooved ware

sampled at Durrington walls found to have been associated with ruminant products (Craig et al. 2015). Lipid analysis of ceramics from Wessex henges has often focused on those from Durrington walls, with the conclusions drawn often relating back to Stonehenge – either feeding those who laboured in its construction (Craig et al. 2015), or possibly in the production of tallow (Shillito 2019). Analysis of the grooved ware assemblage from Marden may provide an interesting comparison. Whilst Grooved ware was the only major Neolithic ceramic group in the collections not examined in this period, a PhD investigating Grooved ware in the Thames Valley has recently been undertaken (Botfield 2012), and it seems probable that its results would be applicable at least in general terms.

Aside from seeing use wear assessment of the flint from Marden Henge completed, the other immediate concerns revolve around publishing and improving awareness of unpublished Neolithic sites and features. Of particular significance are the early Neolithic pits identified under Bishops Cannings G61 and G62a, whose ceramics have never been published in detail but are contemporary with some of the earliest Neolithic ceramics in Wessex, and the probable late Neolithic cremation burial(s) found under West Overton G44, both excavated in the 1960s by Edwina Proudfoot and Jodie Birmingham respectively. In particular, a detailed discussion of this material may clarify what elements and proportion of the assemblage are extant.