

DISCUSSION

Six main phases of activity are represented in the archaeological evidence from Blenheim Farm, each providing valuable insights on settlement and society in the upper Evenlode Valley from the Pleistocene through to the Middle Ages. The following sections summarize what was found in each phase, and situate the evidence within its wider archaeological and social context.

Palaeolithic (Period 0) by Timothy Darvill

The flint cordiform handaxe made on a cobble of yellow-brown flint recovered as an unstratified find emphasizes the potential of the Cotswold uplands as a source of artefacts from the late glacial occupation of the Midland Plain. Sumbler (2001) has shown that the Moreton Drift, also known as the Wolston Formation, can be sub-divided into several elements, including two separate deposits of glacial outwash gravel. The first, the Moreton Member, is characterised by Trias-derived erratic material originating to the north-west. It relates to Oxygen Isotope Stage 12 (OIS 12) within the Anglian Glacial Stage and therefore dates to before 400,000 BP. It is these deposits that choked the headwaters of the pre-Anglian Bytham River system thereby creating suitable conditions for the subsequent formation of the Avon, Stour, and Thames drainage system (Lang and Keen 2005, 75). The second, the Oadby Member, is characterized by younger flint-dominated erratics and dates to OIS 10, a cold phase during the early Wolstonian dating to about 350,000 BP. It is unlikely that the flint handaxe is residual within, or contemporary with, either of these drift deposits since it is not heavily rolled and is typologically too late for a Cromerian, Anglian, Hoxnian, or early Wolstonian origin. It may, however, have been made locally from a cobble derived from Oadby Member deposits. Most plausible is a connection with hunter-gatherer groups camping near the shores of Lake Harrison, a proglacial lake immediately south of the late Wolstonian ice sheets on the Midland Plain during OIS 6, c. 120,000 BP (Douglas 1980, 281; Roe 1981, 49). Covering the area from Moreton-in-Marsh in the south to Leicester in the north, and from Rugby in the east to Birmingham in the west this lake would have survived into the warm phases of the early Ipswichian (OIS 5), and been very attractive to migrating animal herds; hippopotamus is amongst the species recorded in a rich OIS 5 fauna from nearby Eckington, Worcestershire (Keen and Birdgland 1986). Although Ashton and Lewis (2002) argue that there is little certain evidence for human populations in Britain between the end of OIS 7 and some unspecified time during OIS 4, they accept that 'sooner or later rich archaeological sites of this age will be found' in the West Midlands (2002, 79). While the Blenheim Farm handaxe is strictly undated its form would be consistent with a Mousterian context so its presence at Moreton may point the way towards more Middle Palaeolithic discoveries in the area sooner rather than later.

The presence of a light scatter of struck flints and occasional worked pieces from the seventh through to the third millennium BC is entirely consistent with early post-glacial occupation of the area by hunter-gatherer, hunter-gardener, and early farming communities. However, the absence of evidence for much use of the area during the fourth and third millennia is curious given the relatively intensive occupation of the Cotswolds through this period (Darvill 1987, 33–65; 2006, 18–35). It suggests that the upper Evenlode Valley remained wooded well into the early second millennium BC.

16th – 14th centuries BC (Period 1: early) by Timothy Darvill

The first substantial phase of occupation at Blenheim Farm comprises four roundhouses, pit clusters, one or two waterholes, tree-throw pits, and a boundary ditch seemingly marking the north and west sides of an occupation area naturally delimited to the south and east sides by a small stream (Fig. 1). The full extent of the features associated with this phase may be partly truncated by later activity, especially the Roman and Medieval enclosures, compounds and

fieldsystems, but the surviving evidence provides a fair picture of activity for a period that until now was more or less invisible in the north Cotswolds. Four radiocarbon determinations on short-lived specimens from structures 1 and 3, and Pit 1860 in Pit group 12, span the period c.1600 BC through to c.1300 BC, centering on the mid 14th century BC. This falls within Period 5 of Needham's (1996; Needham *et al.* 1997) subdivision of the British Bronze Age, conventionally the later Middle Bronze Age, during which time metalwork of Acton Park 2, Taunton, and Penard industrial phases was in circulation, and Deverel-Rimbury pottery characterizes domestic assemblages. Across the British Isles it was a period of change, which Colin Burgess links to upheavals across much of Europe as a result of the collapse of the Mycenaean and Hittite empires (1980, 155–9; but cf. Needham 1996, 134). Certainly, new kinds of settlement appeared, occupation expanded into previously under-used territory, and technical innovations stimulated new kinds of metalwork. It is against such a background that the appearance of a wholly new settlement on seemingly virgin land at Blenheim Farm should be seen.

Topographically, the Bronze Age settlement at Blenheim Farm occupies an ideal position: a natural knoll of slightly higher ground with a southerly aspect and ready access to water. Pollen sequences from the Tewkesbury area suggest fairly extensive deforestation during the middle and late second millennium BC (Brown 1982; 1983; Brown and Barber 1985) and at Blenheim Farm isolated and clustered tree-throw pits within and to the north of the settlement area have been recorded. These strongly suggest some partial clearance of the landscape before occupation began, with continued periodic removal of remaining trees over the following centuries, a practice that has been noted at other sites of the second and early first millennium BC in the Thames Valley (Moore and Jennings 1992, 13 and figure 6). Two tree-throw pits contain material likely to belong with the early Period 1 occupation, many of the others are technically undated but contain similar fills and may therefore be associated with the same sequence of clearance events. West of the circular post-built structures (CPBS) 1063 contained a small assemblage of fresh flintworking debitage. Rather more unusual is 1008 which contained three flint flakes and, in the lower fill, the cremated remains of an adult human. This is the only evidence for burial practices preserved on the site, although it should be borne in mind that soil conditions were not conducive to the survival of unburnt bone. Tree-throw pit 1008 is one of a small cluster of eight such pits immediately south of waterhole 1 that may together have formed a highly visible landscape feature: a stand of mature trees atop a low but prominent knoll. It is tempting to speculate that following the loss of these ancient trees, perhaps in a gale or the result of a natural catastrophe, one of the resulting pits was chosen for the ritual deposition of a cremation. Similar evidence has been noted at Reading Business Park, Berkshire, where a single cremation dated to 1688–1431 BC was added to a much earlier monument, perhaps to strengthen ancestral ties to the land (Brossler 2001, 133).

Ditch 1, L-shaped in plan, provides a clearly defined northern and western boundary to the settlement area, running around the contour of the hill. The ditch itself is up to 3m wide, a shallow V-form in cross-section, and survives to a maximum depth of 1.3m. There is no evidence of recutting, and only the slightly asymmetric middle fill suggests the former presence of an internal bank. A gap 2.6m wide is taken to be an entrance causeway opening to the north; its unelaborated form confirms the idea that this insubstantial construction with its incomplete circuit cannot be considered a defensive feature in any meaningful sense. Rather it should be considered as a north-facing façade formally marking the entrance to a compound or occupation area whose other boundaries may well have been marked at the time with light fences, hedges, natural features in the landscapes, or simply a fall-off in the intensity of activity. Charred fragments of blackthorn and hawthorn recovered from the ditch fills may be indirect evidence of hedging alongside the ditch or in areas to the south and east where the ditch is absent. A collection of flint nodules on the floor of the ditch and fresh flint debitage in the lower fills

suggests that tool-making may have been carried out near the margins of the settlement but there is no indication that the boundary ditch was systematically used for the disposal of domestic debris and waste. A pollen sequence through the ditch fills suggests construction in a fairly dry environment followed by fairly rapid natural filling. The area defined by the ditch is a minimum of 100m east-west and 80m north-south, but it is unclear whether the full extent of the ditch, which extends beyond the excavated area, originally defined two or three sides of an 'enclosure'. Comparable examples of both can be cited from the second half of the second millennium BC in southern Britain and are generally known as Martin Down Style Enclosures after a type-site excavated by Pitt Rivers in Dorset (Piggott 1942; Barrett *et al.* 1983; Edmonds 1989). At Angle Ditch, Dorset, just two sides of an area with minimum dimensions of 50m by 25m are defined by a ditch up to 2m deep and with no sign of an accompanying bank (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 219–22). Boscombe Down East, Wiltshire, has three sides marked by ditches, although the western side is incomplete; the main entrance opens to the north (Stone 1936). The more recently excavated example at Down Farm, Dorset, has two and half sides, encloses a minimum area 35m by 25m, and had a bank immediately inside the ditch. During phase 2 at this site, dated by a series of radiocarbon determinations to c.1495–1310 BC, the internal settlement was bounded by a light fence and comprised a roundhouse c.9m in diameter, two ancillary structures each c.6.5m across, a small pond, and a yard (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 183–211). Larger examples include Martin Down, Dorset which is c.100m by c.60m (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 220) and Ogbourne Down West, Wiltshire, with a more sinuous outline, c.115m by 60m, and perhaps of more than one phase (Piggott 1942, 52). Within the overall range of such sites, Blenheim Farm is therefore towards the larger end of the spectrum (Fig. [add new figure with comparative plans]) and also the most northerly example currently known.

The rather partial character of the settlement boundary at Blenheim Farm and elsewhere may seem rather odd to modern eyes, but as already indicated this may in part be the result of an incomplete archaeological record. A ditched stream flowing close to the eastern and southern edges of the site at the time of the excavation may reflect the route of an ancient watercourse delimiting Period 1 occupation in these directions. Certainly, where the stream runs close to the southern edge of the site it seems to describe an arc that forms a mirror image of the boundary ditch to the north (Fig. 1). It is possible, therefore, that the boundary ditch was keyed into an existing landscape feature, and that the 'enclosure' was formed by a ditch along its northern and western sides and by a stream along its southern and possibly eastern sides.

Contemporary with the enclosure boundary were four CPBSs, ranging from 5m to 7m in diameter. In each the walls were defined by a single ring of postholes although other postholes both inside and outside the wall-line are considered to be part of the overall structure. The entrances probably opened to the south-east although there is little evidence for porches or elaborated portals. CPBS4 probably had a central support. CPBS1 and 3 must have been successive, and while it is noticeable that both appear to have had spreads of material immediately outside the doorways, it is impossible to say which of the two structures was earlier. Theoretically, a maximum of three out of the four recorded structures could have stood at any one time, but given the evidence for replacement represented by CPBS1 and 3 it seems pragmatic to think in terms of two structures at a time with two main phases of construction. Since none of the floors in these structures survived, little can be said about the purpose or the social use of space within each, although it may be suggested that at any one time there was a main dwelling together with an ancillary building such as a storehouse or workshop. CPBS1 is dated to 1430–1300 BC on the basis of two radiocarbon determinations on wheat grain from posthole 1101 (3109±31 BP: WK17813 and 3063±31 BP: WK-17814), and was associated with Deverel-Rimbury Ware. CPBS 3 dates to 1430–1260 BC on the basis of a single radiocarbon determination on hazel charcoal (3080±31 BP: WK-17812) and was likewise associated with

Deverel-Rimbury style pottery.

Two main architectural styles have been recognized amongst the round timber structures of the late second millennium BC in Britain: single post-ring buildings, and double post-ring buildings (Nowakowski 1991, 184–88). The Blenheim Farm CPBSs are entirely typical of the first style, and examples have been found right across southern Britain. Those at Down Farm, Dorset, have already been mentioned as they lie within a Martin Down Style Enclosure. They are exactly contemporary with those at Blenheim Farm according to available radiocarbon dates and show many affinities in size and design, although the main dwelling in Phase 2 at Down Farm seems to have had a well-defined porch while the ancillary buildings did not (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 186–95). Other contemporary sites with comparable architecture include, from west to east, Trethellan Farm, Newquay, Cornwall (Nowakowski 1991), Shearplace Hill, Dorset (Rahtz and ApSimon 1962), and Black Patch, East Sussex (Drewett 1979). Nothing of quite the same date is yet known in the Cotswold region, but from around the turn of the first millennium BC are the twenty or more CPBSs at Shorncote, Gloucestershire. Three main groups can be recognized, none of them enclosed, each representing a discrete occupation area (Darvill 2006, 40–1 with earlier refs.). The structures range in size from 4.5m up to 10m in diameter, and most are of single post-ring design. The majority had porches flanking doors opening to the south-east, and a few had internal posts.

Two waterholes situated near the core of the Blenheim Farm settlement were excavated. Both are undated, but their fills and form suggest a close association with the Period 1 occupation. Similar waterholes are known from many settlements of the later second and early first millennium BC, including Kemerton, Worcestershire (Jackson and Napthan 1998, 62), Shorncote (Hearne and Heaton 1994, 21-31, 48-49), and Reading Business Park, Berkshire (Brossler 2001, 133-4). Occasionally, such features had a secondary use as rubbish disposal pits (Jackson and Napthan 1998, 62) but whilst the tip lines exhibited by the main fills of Waterhole 1 were suggestive of backfilling, the material seems to have been clean topsoil with almost no anthropogenic inclusions other than a few burnt stones.

More than a dozen pits, also undated and variously of round and banana-shaped outline, may also be associated with the settlement on the basis of their horizontal stratigraphy. To the south-east, Pit Group 12 was distinctive in containing abundant burnt stones. A radiocarbon determination on charcoal from Pit 1860 of 1610–1420 BC (3225±32 BP: WK-17816) is accepted as dating the feature; a second determination falling in the eleventh century AD is considered intrusive. Pit Group 134 also contained burnt stones and while undated may be related. All the pits in the vicinity of the stream (Group 12) contain burnt stones and may be remnants of one or more burnt mounds of the type increasingly recognized beside streams in the south Midlands (Barfield and Hodder 1987); examples have been excavated at Frocester (Darvill 2000) and Leckhampton (Leah and Young 2001) in the Cotswolds. Whether such features were cooking places, industrial work-areas involving hot-rock technology, or had some kind of ceremonial role as feasting places or sweat-lodges remains to be determined.

Pit Group 10 outside the enclosure to the north comprised small holes that could have been postholes, but were most likely shallow pits just possibly for ceremonial purposes.

Overall, the mid second millennium BC settlement at Blenheim Farm should be seen as a small farmstead perhaps occupied by a single extended family whose dwelling, ancillary buildings, water supply, working spaces and yards were sheltered within the embrace of a Martin Down Style Enclosure with its most grandiose aspect facing north. Their material culture was seemingly relatively poor, but they certainly made and used flint tools, and may well have had metal objects too. Their pottery was manufactured locally in the Deverel-Rimbury style suggesting cultural links

to the south and south-east; the assemblage, although small, is the first in the area to be securely dated.

Evidence for the nature of the environment around the site remains difficult to interpret. The absence of damp-loving ground weeds in the environmental sequences examined indicates generally dry conditions. The low-level presence of charcoal from wetland tree species may reflect a genuine absence of such species from the environs of the site, but it is possible that their use for building material rather than for fuel has resulted in under-representation amongst the charred plant remains. If it is assumed that Waterhole 1, whose depth was not much greater than that of the ditch, had functioned successfully it seems probable that the southern part of the ditch, and the stream bed into which it extended, contained standing water when first cut.

There is very little evidence for cereal processing at the site, a similarity it shares with the slightly later settlements at Kemerton, Worcestershire (Jackson and Napthan 1998), and Shorncote (Darvill 2006, 40). It may also be noted that storage pits and above-ground granaries are absent at Blenheim Farm. This contrasts with general propositions of widespread arable intensification in the later second millennium BC across southern England (e.g. Campbell and Straker 2003), and claims based on higher concentrations of charred cereal processing waste found on larger settlement sites dating to the period after 1200 BC (Jones 1981). Clearly there are regional differences in the subsistence practices followed and that some areas were more dependent on cultivation while others focused on animal husbandry. Unfortunately, direct evidence for the nature and quantity of livestock maintained by the Blenheim Farm community is missing because of the poor preservation of bone in the generally acidic soils in the area. The only faunal remains from Period 1, the sheep/goat mandible, came from an animal whose age at death suggests that it was kept for wool production or for breeding. It may be noted, however, that the insect faunas from the waterholes show open environmental conditions, grassland and waste ground in the vicinity, and some species indicative of animal grazing.

The importance of the Blenheim Farm site lies in the broad landscape context that is provided by the extensive investigation of the surrounding area. Unlike the later second millennium BC settlements in the middle Thames region, for example at Reading Business Park, Berkshire (Brossler 2001) and Heathrow T5, Middlesex (Framework Archaeology 2006), the occupation area is not integrated within a contemporary field system. Rather, it must be seen as semi-open site beside a small watercourse within a comparatively open landscape perhaps with small garden-sized cultivation plots and extensive grazing lands and wood-pasture beyond. However, patterning to the social use of space in which the dwellings and ancillary structures form the focus of the settlement on the higher and drier ground, waterholes and pits lie round about, occasional ceremonial deposits and structures lie fully integrated with the domestic space, and burnt mounds for special events, industry, and cooking lie adjacent to the nearest watercourse is entirely typical whether or not associated with a Martin Down Style Enclosure (Fig. [add new figure summarizing Period 1 in schematic form]). At South Lodge Camp, Dorset, for example, two circular post-built structures, one larger than the other and probably representing a house and an ancillary building, stood immediately south-east of a burnt mound, the whole arrangement being set within an enclosure (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 209). Much the same can be observed at Shearplace Hill, Dorset, where there is a pond rather than a burnt mound (Rahtz and ApSimon 1962), and at Black Patch, East Sussex, where an unenclosed settlement comprised five structures and two ponds (Drewett 1979, fig. 1). At Heathrow T5, Middlesex, waterholes and burnt mounds were found associated with occupation debris and structures of the later second millennium BC, but the buildings are unlike others of the period noted above (Framework Archaeology 2006, 114–47). Further up-stream in the middle Thames Valley investigations at the Reading Business Park in 1986–88 and 1995 revealed a long-lived occupation site of the later second and early first

millennium BC with perhaps as many as twenty round buildings in clusters anything from 10m to 50m to the south-west of an equally long-lived burnt mound that flanked a palaeochannel. Waterholes and pits were also present, the whole arrangement being set within the framework of a rectilinear field system that was probably established early in the second millennium BC (Brossler 2001, with earlier refs.). Fragmentary traces of what must be the same overall pattern but with no evidence of contemporary field systems have been excavated in the upper Thames Valley at Roughground Farm (Allen *et al.* 1993). Here occupation dated to between 1500 and 1000 BC comprised a scatter of nine pits and a human inhumation. Traces of any structures present would probably have been lost through agriculture or the methods of top-soil stripping used. Crucially, no evidence of arable cultivation was found, and amongst the animal bones recovered sheep out-numbered cattle by nearly four to one (Allen *et al.* 1993, 34–5) suggesting that even off the limestone uplands proper a pastoral economy prevailed.

Evidence of other settlements of the later second millennium BC on the Cotswolds and adjoining areas of the upper Thames Valley and Severn Valley is scant, although gradually building as a result of development-related projects taking investigations into new areas. Traces of what may tentatively be regarded as small farmsteads have been noted at a handful of sites (Darvill 2006, 42) but none are yet fully published. The same applies to what may turn out to be a direct comparison for Blenheim Farm: an L-shaped enclosure containing roundhouses, pits, and a fence-line investigated at the Cotswold Community site, Somerford Keynes in 2003 (Weaver 2004). At Frocester in the Severn Valley excavations have revealed a linear boundary, burnt mound, and scattered traces of occupation (Price 2000), while further north at Hucclecote there are burials dating to the 14th – 12th centuries BC but as yet no direct evidence of structures and occupation (Thomas *et al.* 2003, 8–9). Further north still, near the confluence of the Severn and Avon at Tewkesbury there is clear evidence of occupation on the valley floor. A small 'D'-shaped enclosure and a curvilinear ditch was found on the east side of a slight promontory between the Tirl Brook and River Swilgate. Investigations in 1991–7 showed that it dates to the later second millennium BC and connects with a series of linear boundaries seen also in nearby excavations that may have been linked with animal husbandry and small-scale cultivation within a fairly structured valley-floor landscape (Walker *et al.* 2004, 85–7). Quite different in character is the hilltop enclosure at Stow on the Wold, which appears to have been constructed in the period around 1390–970 BC, perhaps as one or a series of regional or exchange centres scattered across southern Britain (Darvill 2006, 42).

The tradition of building round barrows, of which there are several hundred scattered across the Gloucestershire Cotswolds and adjacent areas, as burial places was largely over by 1500 BC, and the later second millennium BC is characterized by cremation burials either singly or in cemeteries. The isolated cremation in tree-throw pit 1008 is wholly within the expected range of deposits and its presence within an occupation area is not unusual. Elsewhere in the north Cotswolds single cremations within urns have been found at Cow Common and Lower Swell (Darvill 1987, 108–9) while about 9km to the east of Blenheim Farm excavations around the Kingstone at Rollright, Oxfordshire, revealed a small cremation cemetery overlying earlier round barrows and here seemingly marked by a standing stone (Lambrick 1988, 70–80). The largest such cemetery so far known in the area lies about 11km to the west of Blenheim Farm at Bevan's Quarry (O'Neil 1967). Here excavation of a round barrow (Temple Guiting 8) revealed a cemetery of at least five cremation deposits representing six or more men women and children cut into the top of the barrow mound. It is likely that the cemetery extended beyond the excavated area, perhaps as far as the adjacent Temple Guiting 3 barrow where fragments of broken urns have been found (Darvill 1987, 108). The Deverel-Rimbury style urns at Bevan's Quarry are very similar to those from Blenheim Farm in terms of form and fabric, although the site is probably too distant to have been directly connected. Richard Bradley (1981, 100) has shown that in central southern Britain cemeteries were typically situated less than 700m from

their associated settlement, often with the cemetery northwards of the settlement. In the case of Blenheim Farm attention might usefully be directed to the area east of the Dorn Roman settlement, between the A429 and the minor road to Todenham in a search for contemporary burials.

Landscapes of the later second millennium BC in western Britain often contain natural places that had special meaning to the lives of local communities and which were often used for the deposition of metalwork as gifts to local deities and spirits of the earth (Bradley 1990). Spring, rivers, and bogs seem to have been particularly favoured and in this connection the discovery in 1952 of a basal-looped bronze spearhead near a spring in Batsford Park (Neville Terry 1953) may be especially relevant as this piece belongs to the Taunton or Acton Park industrial traditions, and would therefore have been contemporary with the occupation at Blenheim Farm just 2.5km away to the east.

8th – 5th centuries BC (Period 1: late) by Timothy Darvill

Evidence for activity at Blenheim Farm during late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, broadly speaking the 8th through to 5th centuries BC, is restricted to some or all of the pits within Pit Group 9 and the tree-throw pit 1248 some c.90m to the north-west. All are united in being associated with bi-partite bowl and bowl/jar forms of pottery of post-Deverel-Rimbury tradition made in a series of sandy fabrics. The pits are generally small, between 0.4m and 0.8m across and up to 0.2m deep. They are clearly not storage pits, and some kind of ceremonial use involving the deposition of offering may be suspected. Hazlenut shells were present in pit 1331. Their position north of Pit Group 10 may also be relevant (see above). Tree-throw pit 1248 contained oak charcoal, possibly from the tree that formerly grew there, and may have been a long-lived and well-known landscape feature.

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