Thames Valley National Mapping Programme project

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The archaeology of the Thames Valley is characterised by the cropmark remains of numerous prehistoric ritual sites and numerous settlements from the prehistoric to medieval periods with associated fields and trackways, forming landscapes which were traced over a number of kilometres. This intensive use is characteristic of lowland river valley locations throughout England with well-drained land ideal for cultivation and settlement, and the rivers offering water, communication and ritual foci.



Aerial view of Standlake village, Oxfordshire taken on 03-JUL-1990 showing the earthworks of the medieval settlement close to the village, and the cropmark remains of a probable Iron Age or Roman settlement in the nearer fields. In the foreground are recent gravel pits, some already filled with water. (NMR 4609/32). © Crown copyright. HE

The abundant river gravel deposits are steadily being quarried and flooded resulting in

The Thames Valley

loss of many of these archaeological sites. The Thames Valley has been cultivated for centuries and much of the prehistoric remains were levelled and lie beneath the later medieval ridge and furrow, only visible as cropmarks from the air. Many sites recorded from earlier aerial photographs (some taken in the 1930s) had already been destroyed by more recent quarrying.

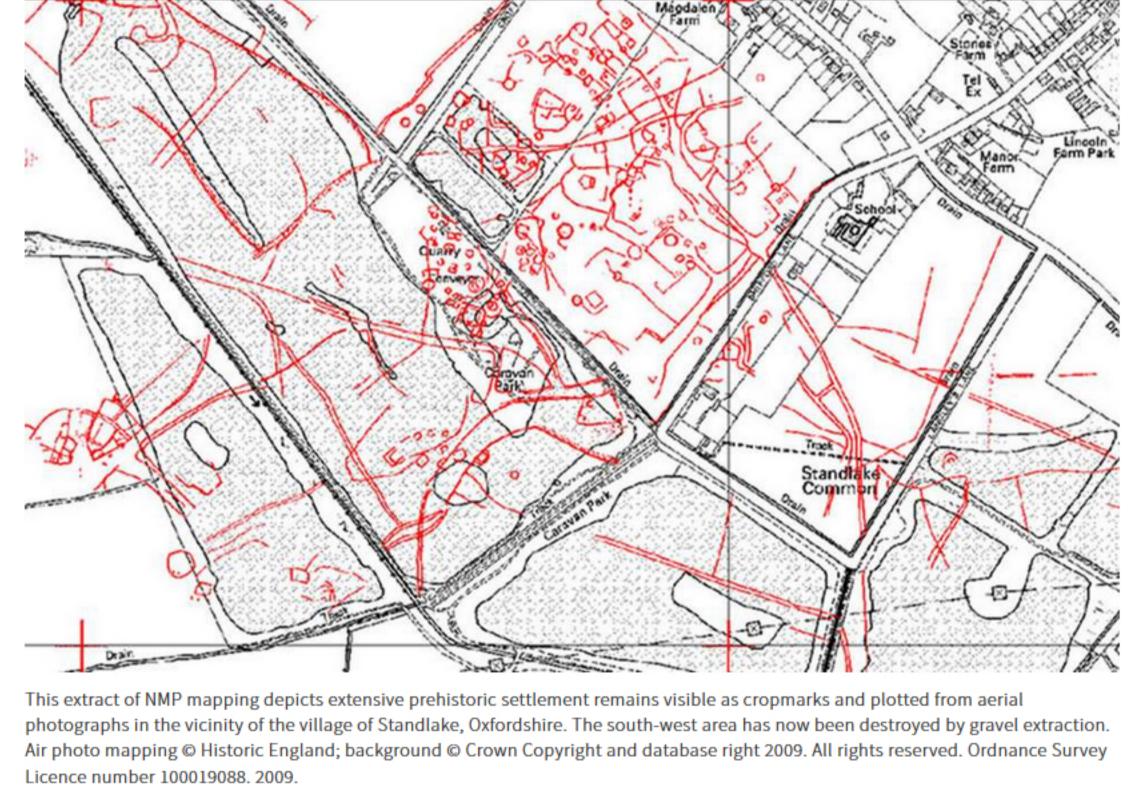
The village of Standlake in Oxfordshire illustrates the typical archaeological remains

encountered throughout the Thames Valley with extensive multiphase Iron Age or Roman settlements consisting of hut circles, enclosures, ditches, pits, field system and trackways which have remained hidden beneath medieval settlement and ridge and furrow until the mid to late 20th century with a shift from predominantly pasture to arable farming.

The survey utilised photographs dating from the 1930s to the 1990s. Because of the extensive aggregates extraction which has taken place along the length of the Thames

The project

Valley since at least the 1950s, the survey mapped numerous sites or parts of sites which had long since been destroyed, and many that have been subsequently removed since the end of the project. This is illustrated when the transcribed plots are overlain on the current map.



The archaeology of the Thames Valley

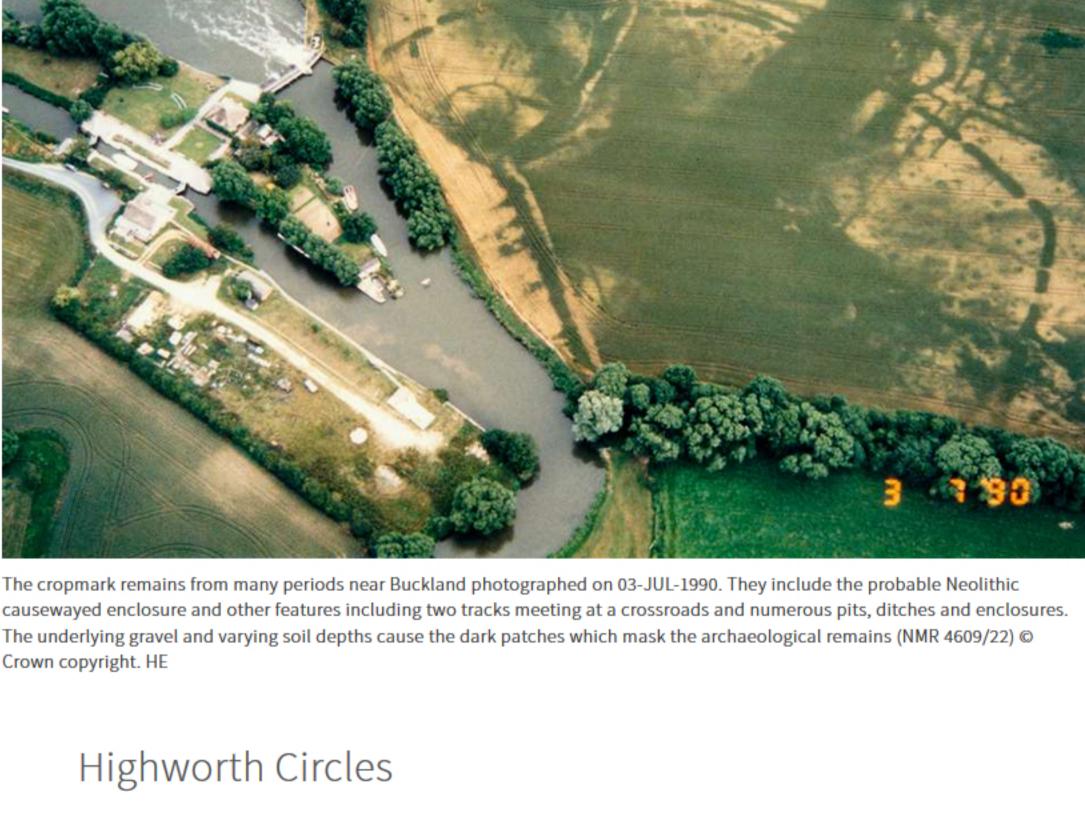
Numerous prehistoric sites identified as ritual and funerary in nature have been recorded

throughout the region. There were nearly a thousand Bronze Age barrows recorded, but of

particular note were the Neolithic ritual sites clustered in close proximity (within 2km) to

the river and its tributaries. These included four henges and 16 cursus monuments, six of

which were new to the record. Also, a total of 12 Neolithic causewayed enclosures were recorded, three of which were new discoveries.



Of particular interest were a group of sites known as Highworth Circles. These are a cluster of circular enclosures typically 40 to 95 metres in diameter, with an external bank and internal ditch and no apparent entrance. In total 41 were recorded, with many still

surviving as earthworks.

This is a little understood group of monuments and there are two schools of thought concerning their likely date and function. Based on morphology it was suggested that they represented a form of hengiform enclosure of prehistoric date. However, their sheer number and general confinement within the Hundred of Highworth supported by the results of excavation has led to the suggestion that they are medieval (13th-14th century)

in origin and probably related to some form of stock management.

