

Notes concerning the Neolithic discoveries made in Bedford during 2016.

The Neolithic period is defined by the discovery of specific tool types and our understanding of how societal groups were formed. It was preceded by the Mesolithic period dating from about 8000 BC (End of the last ice age) to about 4000 BC. In Britain the Neolithic period lasted from 4000 BC until 1800 BC. Over this extensive period of time there are three identified patterns of living which are called Early, Middle and Late. The early period is dated until about 3200 BC and the middle period covers the time until 2600 BC. The Late period saw the introduction of farming and had a duration until the start of the Bronze age in Britain which was about 1800 BC.

A small handful of scattered Neolithic finds have been made in the Broom and Salford Priors areas in recent times. In 1999 Birmingham and Warwickshire Archeological Society published paper 103 concerning Neolithic, Bronze age and Romano British settlements on the edge of Salford. However in an historic period covering 2200 years there is not necessarily any connection between geographically proximate sites.

Structures known as Henges are one of the early forms of known communal construction. True Henges were constructed of wood, surrounded by a single unbroken ditch and an external bank providing privacy. The Bidford Henge is located adjacent to Marriage Hill which would provide additional concealment.

There are early stone circles in Britain such as the Rollright Stones on the Cotswolds and these are different to timber Henges. Stone circles are built on elevated ground and where stone is readily available. They were intended for exposure and not concealment and are thought to have been meeting places. A large number of both types of circle have been discovered across Britain. Some timber Henge structures have been found preserved off the coast of Norfolk.

During the Early Neolithic period structures tended to be built rectangular and straight. Circles in decoration and in construction started to appear about 3000BC and are thought to link to cosmology. Henges are all circular in construction, as we saw on the photographs for the talk and the received wisdom is it that they form an enclosure which may have had a cult or religious purpose, including burials. With no written records from this ancient period archaeologists and anthropologists can only make suppositions about how they were used. What is evident is that the people using these Henges were nomadic hunter /gatherers, who possibly operated within a defined tribal or family area and used their Henge as a sort of anchor point.

Many of the ancient structures, such as Henges, and later Barrows dating from about 2400BC, were used as burial places. However in general the number of people buried may have been relatively limited and it is believed that many dead were not buried but simply left in the open.

The identification of stone circles and the much later burial mounds tended to be made initially during the Victorian period. Generally these are located in areas of high ground such as the Cotswold edge above the rivers Severn and Thames and in the Peak District. All these were probably identified because they are essentially stone structures which provide a clear object on the landscape.

By contrast lowland Henges are not self evident, partly because of materials decay. Our Speaker identified that there is no way of predicting where lowland Henges, constructed from timber may be located. The site in Bidford was found without prior evidence and of approximately 40 exploratory trenches only a handful indicated the opportunity for further excavation. The presence of a Bidford Henge suggests that similar Henges could be present in any location which had ancient habitation.

To date a small number of similar Henge sites have been identified upstream and downstream from Warwick. All these sites are located close to a river, but we do not know why. No evidence has been found that Neolithic people ate fish.

We know that people in the Neolithic period used simple rafts and later plank boats for travelling on water as that may have been the easiest way to get about the landscape. So far there is no

evidence that this was the case near Bidford, as the Avon was wide shallow marshland until levelled in the 1740s.

The site excavations at Bidford remain inconclusive because results of the dating of the chemical residues are still awaited. In a number of Neolithic burial sites, in particular those in Barrows, human bones have been found in sufficient condition to identify skeletons and to ascertain their age. At Bidford the gravel is acidic which served to dissolve both the human remains and any timber. There is no evidence of any grave goods with the bodies and with the exception of some small shards of pottery, dissolved bone and ash layers there are no other tangible items.

The evenings talk served to confirm that Bidford has seen formal habitation for about 5000 years. It also contributes evidence about the spread of lowland communities but yields no information on the day to day life of ancestors living here.

John Alexander-Head
Jan 25 2017.