



McDONALD INSTITUTE MONOGRAPHS

Pattern and Process

Landscape prehistories from Whittlesey Brick Pits:
the King's Dyke & Bradley Fen excavations 1998–2004

Mark Knight and Matt Brudenell



CAU Must Farm/Flag Fen Basin *Depth & Time Series* — Volume I

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Brick Pits: the King's Dyke & Bradley Fen
excavations 1998–2004

By Mark Knight and Matt Brudenell

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On the cover: *Bradley Fen 2001 (excavating the watering hole F.866).*

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CONTENTS

Contributors	ix
Figures	xi
Tables	xv
Acknowledgements	xix
Summary	xxi
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
The perfect palimpsest	1
Chapter 2 Project History and Setting	11
Project history	11
<i>Brick pit methodologies</i>	11
Project setting	18
<i>Gazetteer of sites (Iona Robinson Zeki)</i>	18
Environmental setting	26
<i>Micromorphological analyses of the buried soil (Charles French with Tracey Pierre and Sean Taylor)</i>	27
<i>Buried Soil – landscape development of the southern Flag Fen Basin (Charles French)</i>	28
<i>The later prehistoric environment – an overview (Rob Scaife and Charles French)</i>	30
<i>The Bradley Fen pollen data – vegetation and environmental change (Rob Scaife)</i>	32
<i>The developing vegetation and environment of the Flag Fen Basin and its immediate environs – the wider setting (Rob Scaife & Charles French)</i>	33
Flood-scape topographies	38
Setting out	43
<i>Structuring scale and environment</i>	43
<i>Structuring text and data</i>	44
<i>Summary contextual ‘brackets’: Neolithic and Roman archaeology at King’s Dyke and Bradley Fen</i>	44
Chapter 3 A Pre-Fieldsystem Landscape	51
Topographies and environments c. 2200–1500 cal BC	51
<i>The Flag Fen Basin (c. 2200–1500 cal BC) – from marine conditions to fen encroachment</i>	52
Monuments	55
<i>The henge and pit-circle</i>	55
<i>The round barrows and associated ‘cemetery’</i>	61
Monuments, burials and material culture	68
<i>Treating the dead (Natasha Dodwell)</i>	68
<i>Flint (Lawrence Billington)</i>	76
<i>Plant remains (Anne de Vareilles)</i>	78
<i>Other finds (Grahame Appleby and Vida Rajkovača)</i>	81
Monument discussion	81
Early settlement	82
<i>Beaker house and associated pits and postholes</i>	82
<i>The Collared Urn structures and associated settlement swatches</i>	86
<i>Summary</i>	91
Watering hollows, metalled surfaces, hoofprints and burnt mounds	92
<i>Watering hollows</i>	92
<i>Metalled surfaces</i>	98
<i>Inset: Metalled surface F.1052 (Lawrence Billington)</i>	100
<i>Animal tracks</i>	102
<i>Burnt mounds</i>	103
Settlement finds and material practice	108
<i>Prehistoric pottery (Mark Knight)</i>	108
<i>Flint (Lawrence Billington)</i>	118
<i>Faunal remains (Vida Rajkovača)</i>	125
<i>Plant remains and ecofacts (Anne de Vareilles)</i>	128
<i>Fired clay objects (Grahame Appleby)</i>	129
<i>Worked stone (Simon Timberlake)</i>	131

Discussion	131
Monuments	132
Burnt mounds	134
Inset: Spatial-temporal configuration 1 – the pre-fieldsystem landscape	138
Conclusion	140
Chapter 4 Fieldsystem, Settlement and Metalwork	141
Topographies and environments c. 1500–1100 cal BC	142
<i>The Flag Fen Basin (c. 1500 cal BC) – the emerging fen embayment</i>	142
The coaxial fieldsystem	146
Fields (Bradley Fen)	147
‘Wet’ boundaries	147
Dry boundaries – the main fieldsystem	164
Settlement traces	168
Inset: Wattle cordon F.892 (Maisie Taylor)	172
Inset: Log ladder and mallet head or ‘beetle’ (Maisie Taylor)	174
Middle Bronze Age or Deverel-Rimbury pottery (Mark Knight)	175
Middle Bronze Age ‘foodways’ (Vida Rajkovača)	175
Plant remains (Anne de Vareilles & Rachel Ballantyne)	178
Lithics (Lawrence Billington)	179
Metalwork	180
Metalwork Catalogue (Grahame Appleby)	188
Analysis and metallography of Bronze Age metalwork (Peter Northover)	197
Discussion – fieldsystem, settlement and metalwork	206
Building boundaries	206
Scale of occupation	212
Metalwork deposition	213
Inset: Spatial-temporal configuration 2 – fieldsystem, settlement & metalwork	218
Conclusion	219
Chapter 5 Settlement in the Post-Fieldsystem Landscape	221
Topographies and environments c. 1100–350 BC	221
Waterholes and scattered pits – the archaeology of the damp-ground contours	226
Key features – pit complexes and waterholes in Groups A and D	226
Inset: Animal bone dump in waterhole F.528 (Vida Rajkovača)	228
Key features – waterhole F.1064, Group C	229
Inset: The Group D waterhole complex: pin description (Grahame Appleby)	230
Discussion – land use, land allotment and the nature of activities along the damp-ground contours	236
Late Bronze Age settlement and structural remains – the archaeology of the dry terraces at Bradley Fen	238
Structures	238
Other features	239
Discussion – the character of the Late Bronze Age settlement remains	240
Inset: F.691 and F.698: the human remains (Natasha Dodwell)	241
Early Iron Age settlement and structural remains – the archaeology of the dry terraces at King’s Dyke	242
Roundhouses	242
Buildings defined by a wall trench – Roundhouses 5, 6 and 10	242
Buildings defined by post rings – Roundhouses 11, 12, 13 and 14	251
Buildings identified by four-post entranceways – Roundhouses 7, 8 and 9	257
Four-post structures	258
Other pits and postholes in the settlement swathe	259
Discussion – the character and development of the Early Iron Age settlement at King’s Dyke	259
Foodways	264
Foodways in context – the character and potential of the material record	264
The faunal remains (Vida Rajkovača)	268
The pottery (Matt Brudenell)	271
The carbonized plant remains (Anne de Vareilles)	278
Saddle querns	283

Other material traditions and technologies	284
<i>Material traditions in context</i>	284
<i>The boat section and boat building (Maisie Taylor)</i>	286
<i>Flint working (Lawrence Billington)</i>	289
<i>Textile production (Matt Brudenell)</i>	291
Inset: The Bradley Fen/King's Dyke later prehistoric fired clay fabric series	291
Inset: Loomweight and spindle whorl catalogue	292
Discussion	292
Inset: Spatial-temporal configuration 3 – settlement pattern (distributed and convergent)	293
<i>The Late Bronze Age</i>	294
<i>The Early Iron Age</i>	297
Chapter 6 The Arrival of Fen-Edge Settlement	303
Topographies and environments c. 350–100 BC	303
Settlement overview and chapter structure	305
Settlement architecture	307
<i>Roundhouses</i>	308
<i>Four-post structures</i>	312
<i>Pits, postholes and peat</i>	315
<i>Key features on the dry ground contours</i>	317
Inset: Characterizing the burnt stone contents of clay-lined pits, a case study of pit F.696 (Simon Timberlake)	326
Inset: The human remains (Natasha Dodwell)	327
<i>Key features on the wetland fringe</i>	328
Inset: Waterhole F.1018	329
<i>Finds from the wet</i>	333
Discussion – the character and organization of the settlement	334
Foodways	338
<i>The faunal remains (Vida Rajkovača)</i>	340
<i>The carbonized plant remains (Anne de Vareilles)</i>	345
<i>Saddle querns and rubbing stones</i>	347
<i>The pottery (Matt Brudenell)</i>	349
Material traditions and technologies	354
<i>The metalworking assemblage (Simon Timberlake, Roger Doonan and Peter Hommel)</i>	356
<i>Textile production (Matt Brudenell)</i>	368
Inset: Loomweight catalogue	370
Discussion	370
<i>Low-lying settlement</i>	370
Inset: Spatial-temporal configuration 4 – the arrival of fen-edge settlement	371
<i>The draw of the fen-edge</i>	374
<i>The dead and metalworking</i>	375
Chapter 7 Discussion	379
Review – a palimpsest pulled apart	379
Synthesis – mobility long and short	384
Implications – vertical prehistory	392
Futures	395
Time emplaced	397
Addendum	398
Bibliography	399
Index	415

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Figures

1.1.	<i>The Bradley Fen base plan in print.</i>	2
1.2.	<i>Bradley Fen 'reconstruction' from Unearthing the Past.</i>	3
1.3.	<i>Peacock's Farm excavations.</i>	4
1.4.	<i>Age/altitude correspondence of main periods for Bradley Fen.</i>	5
1.5.	<i>Top: View of Fengate looking northwest from Whittlesey. Bottom: Oblique view of King's Dyke.</i>	7
1.6.	<i>Site location.</i>	8
1.7.	<i>Vertical view of Whittlesey Brick Pits 1970.</i>	9
2.1.	<i>Phases of investigation.</i>	12
2.2.	<i>Geophysical and aerial survey plot.</i>	13
2.3.	<i>Oblique aerial photograph of King's Dyke excavations 1999.</i>	14
2.4.	<i>Oblique aerial photograph of Bradley Fen excavations 2001.</i>	15
2.5.	<i>Detailed plan of King's Dyke and Bradley Fen – prehistoric archaeology.</i>	16
2.6.	<i>Plan of King's Dyke excavations.</i>	16
2.7.	<i>Plan of Bradley Fen excavations.</i>	17
2.8.	<i>Gazetteer of prehistoric sites of the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	19
2.9.	<i>Pre-Flandrian profiles of the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	22
2.10.	<i>Key pollen and soil micromorphology sample points in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	27
2.11.	<i>The pre-Flandrian land surface – a 'predictive' palaeo-topographic reconstruction.</i>	39
2.12.	<i>Two flood maps.</i>	40
2.13.	<i>Four flood maps.</i>	41
2.14.	<i>Landscape windows.</i>	43
2.15.	<i>Prehistoric pottery totals by period.</i>	45
2.16.	<i>Neolithic archaeology at King's Dyke and Bradley Fen.</i>	46
2.17.	<i>Roman archaeology at King's Dyke and Bradley Fen.</i>	49
3.1.	<i>Pre-Flandrian landscape – c. 2200–1800 cal BC.</i>	52
3.2.	<i>Changing textures – transitional landscape c. 2200–1500 cal BC.</i>	53
3.3.	<i>Pre-fieldsystem landscape – Bradley Fen and King's Dyke excavation areas with schematic transect.</i>	54
3.4.	<i>King's Dyke monument complex.</i>	56
3.5.	<i>King's Dyke pit-circle and henge overall plan.</i>	57
3.6.	<i>Pit-circle and henge sections.</i>	58
3.7.	<i>Section across pit-circle and henge, Round Barrow 1, Round Barrow 2 and Ring-ditch 1.</i>	60
3.8.	<i>Round Barrow 1.</i>	62
3.9.	<i>Central burial F.795 with 'coffin' stain (Round Barrow 1).</i>	63
3.10.	<i>Plan of Round Barrow 2 and Ring-ditch 1 with detail and photograph of central grave.</i>	64
3.11.	<i>Cremation pit F.748 and Collared Urn 'capsule'.</i>	65
3.12.	<i>Isolated inhumation F.611.</i>	66
3.13.	<i>Cremation pit-pyres and cremation associated Collared Urns.</i>	67
3.14.	<i>Preferred monument/burial sequence and diminishing diameters – monument complex through time.</i>	69
3.15.	<i>Vertical and horizontal distribution of burials.</i>	70
3.16.	<i>Calcined bone fragment size by type.</i>	74
3.17.	<i>Excavation of pit-pyre F.1279.</i>	75
3.18.	<i>Bradley Fen – western end features.</i>	83
3.19.	<i>Structure 1 with small finds distribution.</i>	84
3.20.	<i>Photograph of Structure 1 (looking southwest).</i>	85
3.21.	<i>Flint tools from Structure 1.</i>	86
3.22.	<i>Location of Structure 2, Burnt Mounds 1–3, watering hollows and metalled surfaces.</i>	87
3.23.	<i>Structure 2 – plan and sections.</i>	88
3.24.	<i>Structure 3 – plan, sections and associated pits.</i>	89
3.25.	<i>Early Bronze Age pits/postholes associated with Structure 3 – dimensions.</i>	90
3.26.	<i>Excavation of inter-cutting pits F.276, F.317 & F.318.</i>	91
3.27.	<i>Waterhole F.859/F.866 with accompanying burnt mound features and later wattled pit-guard.</i>	93
3.28.	<i>Section of waterhole F.859/F.866 with accompanying burnt mound.</i>	94

3.29.	<i>Photograph of commencement of excavation of F.859/F.866.</i>	95
3.30.	<i>Waterholes (F.1093, F.1102 & F.1038) and metalled surfaces (F.951, F.1052 & F.1100).</i>	96
3.31.	<i>Photograph of waterhole F.1266 (looking to the west) and detail of Area 2 hoofprints.</i>	97
3.32.	<i>Plan and section of waterhole F.1266 and sections of selected Area 2 hoofprints.</i>	98
3.33.	<i>Perforated scapulae.</i>	99
3.34.	<i>Metalled surface F.1052 and distribution of worked flints.</i>	100
3.35.	<i>Sample of worked flints from metalled surface F.1052.</i>	101
3.36.	<i>Hoofprint chart (length and width ratio by species).</i>	103
3.37.	<i>Plan of Burnt Mound 2 incorporating earlier waterholes F.1102 and F.1038.</i>	105
3.38.	<i>Plan of Burnt Mound 3 incorporating waterhole F.1151.</i>	106
3.39.	<i>Plan of Burnt Mound 4 (with photograph looking north).</i>	106
3.40.	<i>Percentage heavy fraction composition of four burnt mounds.</i>	107
3.41.	<i>Beaker and Collared Urn pottery illustrated.</i>	109
3.42.	<i>Distribution of Beaker and Collared Urn pottery.</i>	110
3.43.	<i>Whole Collared Urn vessels (F.749 & F.750).</i>	115
3.44.	<i>Collared Urn fragmentation by key context.</i>	118
3.45.	<i>Worked flint from Collared Urn contexts.</i>	124
3.46.	<i>Percentage of domestic species relative to wild by feature categories.</i>	127
3.47.	<i>Percentages of calcined animal bone by feature categories.</i>	127
3.48.	<i>Loomweights and 'perforated' pebbles.</i>	130
3.49.	<i>'Fen-edge' mound composition contrast.</i>	135
3.50.	<i>Bradley Fen Embayment, incorporating the Must Farm landscape.</i>	137
3.51.	<i>Spatial-temporal configuration 1 – the pre-fieldsystem landscape.</i>	139
4.1.	<i>Flood map c. 1500 cal BC (0.50m OD) – 1300 cal BC (1.00m OD).</i>	143
4.2.	<i>Changing textures – Middle Bronze Age.</i>	144
4.3.	<i>Fieldsystem landscape – Bradley Fen and King's Dyke excavation areas with schematic transect.</i>	145
4.4.	<i>A system of fields.</i>	147
4.5.	<i>Field sizes by area.</i>	148
4.6.	<i>Field widths.</i>	148
4.7.	<i>Field lengths.</i>	148
4.8.	<i>'Wet' boundary – stake-built fence-line or 'dead-hedge' F.1306 and the subsequent bank and ditch.</i>	149
4.9.	<i>Photograph of excavated bank and ditch with underlying remains of earlier fence-line.</i>	151
4.10.	<i>Plans and photographs of bank and ditch.</i>	152
4.11.	<i>Photographs of effects of animal poaching on the sides of the ditch.</i>	153
4.12.	<i>Location of pollen profiles relative to the bank and ditch feature.</i>	157
4.13.	<i>Pollen diagram 1.</i>	158
4.14.	<i>Pollen diagram 2.</i>	159
4.15.	<i>Pollen diagram 3.</i>	160
4.16.	<i>Pollen diagram 4.</i>	161
4.17.	<i>Photograph of pollen sample process (P1–P3).</i>	163
4.18.	<i>Issues of preservation – high, middle and low boundary forms.</i>	165
4.19.	<i>Plan of main fieldsystem with associated settlement features.</i>	166
4.20.	<i>Plan of key fieldsystem junctions.</i>	167
4.21.	<i>Gateway – opening in Ditch C with metalled surface.</i>	168
4.22.	<i>Key settlement features.</i>	169
4.23.	<i>Shaft F.830.</i>	170
4.24.	<i>Photographs of shaft F.830, with articulated body, disarticulated fox and detail of bone with textile fragment.</i>	171
4.25.	<i>Shaft F.879 and wattle cordon F.892.</i>	173
4.26.	<i>Log ladder and mallet head.</i>	174
4.27.	<i>Mandibular tooth wear for cattle.</i>	177
4.28.	<i>Epiphyseal fusion data for cattle.</i>	177
4.29.	<i>Distribution of metalwork (hoard and spears).</i>	181
4.30.	<i>Photograph of spears in situ.</i>	182

4.31.	<i>Six 'single' spears.</i>	183
4.32.	<i>Plan and photograph of the hoard.</i>	184
4.33.	<i>Hoard location and deposition sequence.</i>	185
4.34.	<i>The hoard.</i>	186
4.35.	<i>Detailed drawings of individual hoard pieces and single spears.</i>	190
4.36.	<i>Detailed drawings of individual hoard pieces and single spears.</i>	190
4.37.	<i>Detailed drawings of individual hoard pieces and single spears.</i>	193
4.38.	<i>Detailed drawings of individual hoard pieces and single spears.</i>	195
4.39.	<i>Detailed drawings of individual hoard pieces and single spears.</i>	197
4.40.	<i>Bradley Fen bronze content – tin and lead.</i>	200
4.41.	<i>Bradley Fen bronze content – impurity patterns.</i>	201
4.42.	<i>Interrelationship of the fieldsystem with the existing barrows and burnt mounds.</i>	207
4.43.	<i>'Livestock dynamics'.</i>	209
4.44.	<i>Distribution of fieldsystems, Collared Urn and Deverel-Rimbury assemblages in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	211
4.45.	<i>Metalwork deposition and the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	214
4.46.	<i>Single spears and wooden hafts.</i>	216
4.47.	<i>Damage to hoard spears.</i>	217
4.48.	<i>Spatial-temporal configuration.</i>	218
5.1.	<i>Flood map for the earlier first millennium BC.</i>	222
5.2.	<i>Landscape reconstruction for the earlier first millennium BC.</i>	224
5.3.	<i>Plan of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age features at Bradley Fen and King's Dyke.</i>	225
5.4.	<i>Features along the damp-ground contours at Bradley Fen.</i>	227
5.5.	<i>Plan and section of waterhole F.528 with animal bone dump.</i>	228
5.6.	<i>Section of Early Iron Age well/waterhole F.480, with photograph of fineware bowl.</i>	229
5.7.	<i>The Group D waterhole complex. Left: plan and section of waterholes F.943–947.</i>	230
5.8.	<i>Waterhole F.1064, showing wooden tank with logboat section as base block.</i>	231
5.9.	<i>Profile and photographs of the surviving tank components.</i>	232
5.10.	<i>Pollen diagram from waterhole F.1064.</i>	235
5.11.	<i>The relationship between Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age features at Bradley Fen.</i>	237
5.12.	<i>Roundhouse 4 and adjacent features.</i>	239
5.13.	<i>Four-Post Structures 1 and 2.</i>	239
5.14.	<i>Posthole F.280, with photographs of the two loomweights recovered.</i>	240
5.15.	<i>Reconstruction of the pitting sequence and the disturbance of the burial in F.691 and F.698.</i>	241
5.16.	<i>Plan of the King's Dyke Early Iron Age settlement.</i>	243
5.17.	<i>Roundhouses defined by a wall-trench.</i>	244
5.18.	<i>Finds distribution from buried soil squares within Roundhouse 10.</i>	245
5.19.	<i>Roundhouse 5.</i>	247
5.20.	<i>Pit F.495.</i>	248
5.21.	<i>Roundhouse 5 – finds distributions and phosphate plot.</i>	250
5.22.	<i>Roundhouses defined by a post-ring.</i>	251
5.23.	<i>Three alternative reconstructions for the plan of Roundhouse 12.</i>	252
5.24.	<i>Roundhouse 14 – model of 'complete' plan and artefact distributions.</i>	253
5.25.	<i>Pit F.61 and adjacent features, with detail showing micromorphology sample locations and thin sections (1 and 2).</i>	254
5.26.	<i>Roundhouses defined by four-post entranceways.</i>	257
5.27.	<i>Four-post Structure 4–6, with a photograph of Four-post Structure 3.</i>	259
5.28.	<i>Pit dimension plot by site and contour range.</i>	260
5.29.	<i>Model of building sequence at King's Dyke Early Iron Age settlement.</i>	261
5.30.	<i>Shared architectural traditions.</i>	263
5.31.	<i>Later Bronze Age and Early Iron material distribution at Bradley Fen.</i>	266
5.32.	<i>Early Iron Age material distribution at King's Dyke.</i>	267
5.33.	<i>Relative importance of species by NISP for comparative sites.</i>	271
5.34.	<i>Fabrics, vessel classes and rim diameters.</i>	273
5.35.	<i>Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age pottery.</i>	275

5.36.	<i>Vessel sets from the Flag Fen Basin containing burnt sherds.</i>	279
5.37.	<i>Early Iron Age saddle querns from King's Dyke.</i>	284
5.38.	<i>Details of the boat section from F.1064 with comparative drawing of Clifton 1 logboat.</i>	287
5.39.	<i>Spindle whorl from F.433, Roundhouse 4.</i>	292
5.40.	<i>Temporal-Spatial Configuration 3 – Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age settlement.</i>	293
5.41.	<i>Map and model of the Late Bronze Age settlement landscape in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	296
5.42.	<i>Early Iron Age settlement swathes and other contemporary features in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	299
5.43.	<i>The King's Dyke and Tanholt Farm Early Iron Age site plans.</i>	300
6.1.	<i>Flood map for the mid-late first millennium BC.</i>	304
6.2.	<i>The landscape reconstruction in the mid-late first millennium BC.</i>	305
6.3.	<i>Plan of the Middle Iron Age settlement at Bradley Fen.</i>	306
6.4.	<i>Detail of the Middle Iron Age settlement at Bradley Fen.</i>	307
6.5.	<i>Roundhouses 15 and 16.</i>	309
6.6.	<i>Roundhouses 17.</i>	311
6.7.	<i>Four-Post Structures 7–11.</i>	312
6.8.	<i>Four-Post Structures 9, 10 and 11 with detail of posthole F.613 and inserted burial.</i>	314
6.9.	<i>Plan of Middle Iron Age pits and postholes.</i>	316
6.10.	<i>Middle Iron Age pits and postholes – depth/dimension diagram.</i>	317
6.11.	<i>Plan of furnace and features yielding metalworking debris.</i>	318
6.12.	<i>Photograph, section and reconstruction of furnace F.611.</i>	319
6.13.	<i>Archaeomagnetic dating stereograms.</i>	320
6.14.	<i>Photograph and sections of slag pit F.597.</i>	323
6.15.	<i>Slag pit F.597 – distribution of slag debris by sector.</i>	324
6.16.	<i>Burnt stone from clay-lined pits.</i>	326
6.17.	<i>Burial F.781.</i>	327
6.18.	<i>Waterhole F.1018 – animal bone dump and modified skull fragment.</i>	330
6.19.	<i>Distinctive butchery of bone from F.1018.</i>	331
6.20.	<i>Distribution of articulated and disarticulated human remains.</i>	332
6.21.	<i>Distribution of pits and postholes on the left-hand side of Roundhouses 15, 16 and 17.</i>	335
6.22.	<i>Functionally-related feature groupings.</i>	337
6.23.	<i>Sheep bone deposits in roundhouses.</i>	339
6.24.	<i>Distribution of pottery and animal bone in the Bradley Fen Middle Iron Age settlement.</i>	341
6.25.	<i>Sheep vertebra split down the sagittal plane.</i>	344
6.26.	<i>Gross fragment count by contour for Bradley Fen Middle Iron Age cattle and sheep bones.</i>	345
6.27.	<i>Two incomplete saddle querns and a large rubbing stone, bone point and copper alloy ring.</i>	348
6.28.	<i>Distribution of loomweights, querns, bone point, copper alloy ring and oven plate.</i>	349
6.29.	<i>Early Iron Age and Middle Iron Age pottery – fabric composition.</i>	350
6.30.	<i>Middle Iron Age pottery – rim diameters.</i>	351
6.31.	<i>Middle Iron Age pottery.</i>	353
6.32.	<i>Distribution of iron slag, crucible fragments and hammerscale.</i>	355
6.33.	<i>Composition of metallurgical debris from all Iron Age features.</i>	357
6.34.	<i>Slagged refractories.</i>	359
6.35.	<i>Furnace conglomerates.</i>	361
6.36.	<i>Slag runs.</i>	362
6.37.	<i>Crucible and mould fragments.</i>	365
6.38.	<i>Fired clay objects.</i>	369
6.39.	<i>Spatial-temporal configuration 4 – the arrival of fen-edge settlement.</i>	371
6.40.	<i>Cat's Water and Bradley Fen Middle Iron Age settlements.</i>	372
6.41.	<i>Distribution of Middle Iron Age settlement, metalwork and human remains.</i>	376
7.1.	<i>Four landscape views.</i>	380
7.2.	<i>Four cross-sectional diagrams.</i>	381
7.3.	<i>Plan and diagrammatical section of landscape zones.</i>	383
7.4.	<i>Four wider landscape views.</i>	385
7.5.	<i>Nene Valley monument distribution in plan and by height m OD.</i>	387

7.6.	<i>'Vertical rift' in Flag Fen Basin occupation.</i>	391
7.7.	<i>Fenland's prehistoric topography transformed.</i>	392
7.8.	<i>Early Bronze Age structures of East Anglia.</i>	394
7.9.	<i>Models of the survival of archaeological features on the western and eastern fen-edge.</i>	395
7.10.	<i>Bradley Fen: first exposure of the 'wet' boundary bank and ditch.</i>	394

Tables

1.1	<i>Radiocarbon age determinations from King's Dyke and Bradley Fen.</i>	6
2.1.	<i>History of investigation at Whittlesey Brick Pits – King's Dyke and Bradley Fen.</i>	12
2.2.	<i>Gazetteer of prehistoric sites of the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	20
2.3.	<i>Buried soil profiles from King's Dyke, Bradley Fen and the wider Flag Fen Basin.</i>	29
2.4.	<i>The prehistoric landscape of the Flag Fen Basin throughout the Holocene.</i>	34
2.5.	<i>Increasing saturation in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	42
2.6.	<i>Neolithic pottery.</i>	45
2.7.	<i>Flint assemblages from Neolithic features.</i>	47
2.8.	<i>Selected non metric traits of unretouched flakes from Peterborough Ware associated features.</i>	48
3.1.	<i>Henge ditch dimensions.</i>	56
3.2.	<i>Pit-circle dimensions.</i>	59
3.3.	<i>Distribution of principal finds in F.851 and F.857.</i>	61
3.4.	<i>Early Bronze Age burials at King's Dyke and Bradley Fen.</i>	71
3.5.	<i>King's Dyke cremation burials.</i>	71
3.6.	<i>Isolated Bronze Age cremation burials.</i>	72
3.7.	<i>Degree of fragmentation of cremated bone.</i>	73
3.8.	<i>Bronze Age formal burials in the Flag Fen Basin.</i>	75
3.9.	<i>Henge flint assemblage.</i>	76
3.10.	<i>Worked and burnt flint from the round barrows and 'cemetery'.</i>	77
3.11.	<i>Worked flint grave goods associated with inhumation and cremation burials.</i>	78
3.12.	<i>Henge and pit-circle plant remains.</i>	79
3.13.	<i>Early Bronze Age cremations & Round Barrow 1 plant remains.</i>	80
3.14.	<i>Early Bronze Age structures – radiocarbon dates.</i>	82
3.15.	<i>Structure/settlement material culture breakdown.</i>	91
3.16.	<i>Flint assemblage from F.1052.</i>	102
3.17.	<i>Burnt mounds.</i>	104
3.18.	<i>Burnt mounds – area and heavy fraction composition.</i>	107
3.19.	<i>Burnt mounds – radiocarbon dates.</i>	107
3.20.	<i>Beaker pottery distribution by site and elevation.</i>	108
3.21.	<i>Beaker pottery – King's Dyke.</i>	108
3.22.	<i>Beaker pottery – Bradley Fen (high).</i>	108
3.23.	<i>Collared Urn pottery by site.</i>	111
3.24.	<i>Early Bronze Age/Collared Urn pottery context division.</i>	111
3.25.	<i>Early Bronze Age/Collared Urn pottery – minimum number of vessels by context.</i>	112
3.26.	<i>Collared Urn decoration.</i>	113
3.27.	<i>'Cemetery' Collared Urns and Vase-type Food Vessel.</i>	114
3.28.	<i>Structure 2 – pottery assemblage breakdown.</i>	114
3.29.	<i>Structure 3 – pottery assemblage breakdown.</i>	115
3.30.	<i>Structure 3 settlement swathe – pottery assemblage breakdown.</i>	116
3.31.	<i>Structure 1 and Beaker-associated features – flint assemblage.</i>	119
3.32.	<i>Burnt mound-associated features – flint assemblage.</i>	120
3.33.	<i>Early Bronze Age pits and postholes – flint assemblage.</i>	121
3.34.	<i>Henge ditch F.851, Structure 2 and Structure 3 – flint assemblages.</i>	122
3.35.	<i>Non-metric traits of unretouched flakes from Early Bronze Age features.</i>	123
3.36.	<i>Early Bronze Age features – animal bone species count.</i>	126
3.37.	<i>Burnt mound-associated features – animal bone species count.</i>	127

4.1.	<i>Field dimensions.</i>	147
4.2.	<i>Fence-line-associated and ditch-associated wood condition scores.</i>	154
4.3.	<i>Upright stakes from fence-line.</i>	154
4.4.	<i>Categories of material recovered in association with fence-line and ditch.</i>	155
4.5.	<i>Categories of debris recovered in association with fence-line and ditch.</i>	155
4.6.	<i>Fieldsystem feature dimensions.</i>	164
4.7.	<i>Hollow F.991 – dimensions and find quantities.</i>	168
4.8.	<i>Middle Bronze Age shaft features –dimensions and find quantities.</i>	168
4.9.	<i>Deverel-Rimbury pottery.</i>	175
4.10.	<i>Total animal bone fragment count and weight for Middle Bronze Age features.</i>	176
4.11.	<i>Middle Bronze Age contexts – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	176
4.12.	<i>Number and percentage of fused epiphyses for Middle Bronze Age cattle.</i>	177
4.13.	<i>The ‘normalised’ percentages for the three main ‘food species’ from comparative sites.</i>	178
4.14.	<i>Fieldsystem lithics.</i>	179
4.15.	<i>Flint assemblages from Middle Bronze Age features.</i>	180
4.16.	<i>Metalwork radiocarbon dates.</i>	187
4.17.	<i>Compositions of copper alloy metalwork.</i>	199
4.18.	<i>‘S’ metal content of Wilburton assemblages.</i>	200
4.19.	<i>Impurity pattern matches between fragments.</i>	202
4.20.	<i>Metallography.</i>	204
4.21.	<i>Metalwork damage assessment.</i>	205
4.22.	<i>Collared Urn and Deverel-Rimbury assemblages from Flag Fen Basin sites.</i>	213
5.1.	<i>Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age roundhouse dimensions and finds totals.</i>	242
5.2.	<i>Lamb/sheep bone deposits in Roundhouse 14.</i>	255
5.3.	<i>Pit F.61 – sediment types and corresponding layers.</i>	256
5.4.	<i>Four-post structure dimensions and finds totals.</i>	258
5.5.	<i>Early Iron Age features – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	269
5.6.	<i>Number and percentage of fused epiphyses for Early Iron Age ovicaprids.</i>	269
5.7.	<i>Roundhouse 14 – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	269
5.8.	<i>F.528 – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	270
5.9.	<i>Late Bronze Age pottery.</i>	272
5.10.	<i>Early Iron Age pottery.</i>	272
5.11.	<i>Pottery – quantification of vessel forms.</i>	276
5.12.	<i>Pottery deposit size and frequency.</i>	277
5.13.	<i>Early Iron Age formal pottery deposits.</i>	277
5.14.	<i>Late Bronze Age charred soil samples from Bradley Fen.</i>	280
5.15.	<i>Early Iron Age charred soil samples from King’s Dyke.</i>	281
5.16.	<i>Comparative logboat dimensions.</i>	288
5.17.	<i>Later prehistoric worked flint from Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age features.</i>	290
5.18.	<i>Fired clay quantification by fabric.</i>	291
5.19.	<i>Early Iron Age settlement, contour range and distance from the fen-edge.</i>	298
6.1.	<i>Breakdown of artefacts categories for Roundhouses 15, 16 and 17.</i>	308
6.2.	<i>Summary of four-post structure dimensions (m) and finds totals.</i>	312
6.3.	<i>Archaeomagnetic results from fired clay lining of F.611.</i>	321
6.4.	<i>Categories of metallurgical debris within F.597.</i>	322
6.5.	<i>Summary of finds from clay-lined pits.</i>	325
6.6.	<i>Waterhole F.1018 – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	329
6.7.	<i>Single disarticulated skeletal elements assigned to the Iron Age at Bradley Fen.</i>	333
6.8.	<i>Relative importance of the three main domesticates on fen-edge Iron Age sites.</i>	339
6.9.	<i>Middle Iron Age contexts – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	342
6.10.	<i>Roundhouses 15, 16 and 17 – animal bone species count and individuals count.</i>	342
6.11.	<i>Roundhouse 15 – animal bone species count and bone weight.</i>	342
6.12.	<i>Roundhouse 16 – animal bone species count and bone weight.</i>	343
6.13.	<i>Roundhouse 17 – animal bone species count and bone weight.</i>	343

6.14.	<i>Middle Iron Age charred soil samples.</i>	346
6.15.	<i>Middle Iron Age fabric groups.</i>	350
6.16.	<i>Middle Iron Age forms.</i>	351
6.17.	<i>Middle Iron Age rim-top decoration.</i>	352
6.18.	<i>Middle Iron Age pottery – quantities of material interred.</i>	352
6.19.	<i>Material classes encountered in the metalworking assemblage.</i>	354
6.20.	<i>Quantification of metalworking debris.</i>	360
6.21.	<i>Bulk percentage of iron, manganese and nickel within iron ores and slag.</i>	363
6.22.	<i>Results of qualitative XRF analysis of crucible residues.</i>	366
6.23.	<i>Fired clay quantification by fabric.</i>	368

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want to employ it as a sensitive instrument. The monograph was proofread and indexed by Vicki Harley.

The monograph describes the core prehistoric archaeology of King's Dyke and Bradley Fen and is an expression of many peoples hard work in the field as well as in the library, lab and office. The excavation teams were as follows:

King's Dyke 1998: Marc Berger, Craig Cessford, Duncan Garrow, Cassian Hall & Mark Knight.

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Bradley Fen 2001: Marcus Abbott, Rachel Ballantyne, Emma Beadsmoore, David Beresford-Jones, David Brown, Matthew Brudenell, Simon Burney, Craig Cessford, Norma Challands, Philip Church, Andy Clarke, Jason Clarke, Chantal Conneller, Bob Davis, Paul Donohue, Natasha Dodwell, Andy Fergerson, Duncan Garrow, Susanne Hakenbeck, Andrew Hall, Candy Hatherley, Teresa Hawtin, Charlie Kitchin, Mark Knight, Mary Leighton, Jane Matthews, Lesley McFadyen, Mary Nugent, Ricky Patten, Richard Purves, Martin Redding, Neil Redfern, Christina Robinson, Beccy Scott, Mark Spalding, Fraser Sturt, Richard Turnbull, Roland Wessling, Steven Williams & Felicity Woor.

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Being in the field at King's Dyke and Bradley Fen was a process of sustaining a close engagement with context and circumstance. Much of the time we did this surrounded by the roar, exhausts and dust of heavy plant as it uncovered the ground in front of us or removed the ground behind us. The process was fairly rapid and there was a sense of things being done at a pace. Throughout, however, we tried to stay contextual and we achieved this largely by talking through our individual features, putting into words *cuts*, *fills*, *layers* and *finds*. Friday afternoons (invariably after chips) frequently involved walking around the site discussing each other's postholes, pits, ditches and deposits. In this manner, we were able to articulate and correlate different features and begin to recompose sites and landscapes. These grounded conversations occurred at the top of the contour, at King's Dyke, and continued all the way to the bottom of the contour, at Bradley Fen. As we moved down, the depth and complexity of sediment increased and our postholes, pits, ditches and deposits became progressively better preserved. In these sunken spaces, upcast banks and mounds endured. Buried soil, silt and peat horizons intervened between things. All of these details amplified our comprehension or, what we called at the time, our 'confidence in context' – in this we came to be immersed.

Summary

The King's Dyke (1995–1999) and Bradley Fen (2000–2004) excavations occurred within the brick pits of the Fenland town of Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire. The investigations straddled the south-eastern contours of the Flag Fen Basin, a small peat-filled embayment located between the East-Midland city of Peterborough and the western limits of the 'island' of Whittlesey. Renowned principally for its Bronze Age and Iron Age discoveries at sites such as Fengate and Flag Fen, the Flag Fen Basin also marked the point where the prehistoric River Nene debouched into the greater Fenland Basin.

In keeping with the earlier findings, the core archaeology of King's Dyke and Bradley Fen was also Bronze Age and Iron Age. A henge, two round barrows, an early fieldsystem, bronze metalwork deposition and patterns of sustained settlement along with metalworking evidence helped produce a plan similar in its configuration to that first revealed at Fengate. In addition, unambiguous evidence of earlier second millennium BC settlement was identified together with large watering holes and the first burnt stone mounds to be found along Fenland's western edge.

The early fieldsystem, defined by linear ditches and banks, was constructed within a landscape pre-configured with monuments and burnt mounds. Genuine settlement structures included three of Early Bronze Age date, one Late Bronze Age, ten Early Iron Age and three Middle Iron Age. Despite the existence of Middle Bronze Age wells, bone dumps and domestic pottery assemblages no contemporary structures were recognised. Later Bronze Age metalwork, including single spears and a weapon hoard, was deposited in indirect association with the earlier land divisions and consistently within ground that was becoming increasingly wet. By the early Middle Iron Age, much of the fieldsystem had been subsumed beneath peat whilst, above the peat, settlement features transgressed its still visible boundaries.

Combined, the King's Dyke and Bradley Fen excavations established a near continuous transect across the Flag Fen Basin's south-eastern gradient – the former exposing its very top, the latter its top, middle and base. The different elevations yielded different archaeologies and in doing so revealed a subtle correspondence between altitude and age. The summit of the gradient contained Roman as well as prehistoric features, whereas the mid-point contained nothing later than the early Middle Iron Age, and the base, nothing later than the very beginnings of the Middle Bronze Age. At the same time, there was a palpable relationship between altitude and preservation. A shallow plough soil was all that protected the most elevated parts. The very base of the gradient however, retained a buried soil as well as silt and peat horizons contemporary with prehistoric occupation and which preserved surfaces, banks and mounds that were not present higher up. The same deposits also facilitated the preservation of organic remains such as wooden barriers, log ladders and a fragment of a logboat.

The large-scale exposure of the base of the Flag Fen Basin at Bradley Fen uncovered a sub-peat or pre-basin landscape. A landscape composed of dryland settlement features related to an earlier terrestrial topography associated with the now buried floodplain of the adjacent River Nene. Above all, the revelation of sub-fen occupation helped position the Flag Fen Basin in time as well as space. It showed that the increasingly wet conditions which led to its formation as a small fen embayment transpired at the end of the Early Bronze Age. In the same way, the new found situation dissolved any sense of an all-enduring and all-defining fen-edge and instead fostered a more fluid understanding of the contemporary environmental circumstances. In this particular landscape setting wetland sediment *displaced* settlement as much as it *defined* it – the process was dynamic and ongoing.

*...simultaneity is mere appearance, surface, spectacle. Go deeper. Do not be afraid to disturb this surface,
to set its limpidity in motion. (Lefebvre & Régulier 2004, 80)*

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Index

Page numbers in *italics* denote illustrations, those in **bold**, tables.

A

aerial photographs 9, 13, 14, 15
age/altitude correspondence 5, 5–6, 51, 107, 138, 384, 391
animal tracks 97, 98, 102–3, 103
archaeomagnetic dating of metalworking 319–21, 320, **321**

B

Beaker pottery
 assemblage 108, 109, 110
 Bradley Fen 108, **108**, 111
 King's Dyke 108, **108**
 summary 118
Bradley Fen, background **12**, 14–15
Briggs Farm 19, **20**, 23–4
burnt mounds
 Bradley Fen 93, 94, 103–7, **104**, 105–7, 7, **107**, 107
butchery evidence 99, 99, 176–8, 268, 269, 328–31

C

Cat's Water 370, 372, 373–4
 burials 334
charred soil samples **280**, **281–3**, **346–7**
chronology **6**, **42**, **107**, 132–3, 206, 297, 380
cinerary urns
 Collared Urns 114
 Food Vessels 114
Collared Urns
 assemblage 108, 109, 110, **111**, 211, **213**
 cinerary urns 114, **115**
 decoration 112–13, **113**

discussion 116, 117
fabrics 112
Flag Fen Basin, distribution 211, **213**
forms 112
fragmentation 117–18, 118
King's Dyke 111–12, **111–12**
summary 118
urns and urns sherds 116
cremation burials, Early Bronze Age 70, **71–2**, 71–4, **75**, 76, 139
 cemetery group 65, 68
 Collared Urns **62**, **65**, **66**
 disturbed 61
 fragmentation **73**, 74
 pit pyres 67, 67–8, 75
 round barrow associated 61, **62**, 63

D

Deverel-Rimbury pottery 175, **175**
 Flag Fen Basin, distribution 211

E

Edgerley Drain Road 19, **20**, 23
Elliot Site 19, **20**, 23

F

faunal remains
 animal bone dump in waterhole F.528 228, 228
 Early Bronze Age **61**, 99, 125–7, **126**, **127**, 127
 Early Iron Age
 cattle 270
 discussion 270–1
 dog 270
 fish 270
 horse 270
 ovicaprids **269**, 269–70

pigs 270
 red deer 270
fox skeleton associated with human skeleton 170–1, 170–1
Middle Bronze Age
 cattle 176–7, **177**, 177
 discussion 177–8, **178**
 dog 177
 ovicaprids 177
 pigs 177
 red deer 177
Middle Iron Age 338–45, **339**, 339, 341, **342–3**, 344, 345
 bone pit, 328–33, **329**, 330–2, **333**
 cattle 340
 horse 343
 ovicaprids 340–1, 344
 pig 343
 roundhouse assemblages 341–3, **343**
 small mammal bones **283**
Fengate 19, **20**, 21
fieldsystems, Middle Bronze Age
 coaxial fieldsystem (Bradley Fen) 146–68, **147**, 147–9, 151–3, **154–5**, 157–61, 163–4, **164**, 166–8
 discussion 206–12, 207, 209, 211
 field boundaries, dry **164**, 164–8, 165–8
 field boundaries, wet 147–63, 149, 151–3
 fields 147, **147**, 147, **148**
 pollen associated with wet boundaries 157–61, 157–63, 163
 wood associated with wet field boundaries 141–2
fired clay objects 129–31, 130, **368**, 369
Flag Fen Basin
 burials 74–6, **75**
 environmental setting 26–38, 27, **29**, **34**, **35**

field systems 211
 gazetteer 18–26, 19, **20**
 landscape 38–42, 39–41, **41**, 52–4,
 52–5, 142–6, 143, 144, 221–6,
 222, 224, 303–5, 385, 387, 390–2,
 391
 metalwork deposition **214**
 monument distribution 387
 pottery **213**, 279
 Roman archaeology 49
 settlement 260, 297, 299
 survival of archaeology 395
 Flag Fen Platform 295
 pollen profile 31–2
 Flag Fen post-alignment 390–1
 pollen profile 31–2, 390–1
 Flag Fen West 19, **20**, 26
 flint 86, 100–1, 100–3, **102**
 cemetery features 77–8
 henge 76, **76**
 later Prehistoric 289–91, **290**
 Middle Bronze Age 179, **179**, 180,
180
 Neolithic 47, **47**, 48, **48**
 Round Barrow 1 76–7, **77**
 Round Barrow 2 77, **77**
 four-post structures
 Late Bronze Age 258, 258–9, **259**
 Middle Iron Age **312**, 312, 312–15,
 314

G

gazetteer 18–26, 19, **20**
 geophysical survey 13, 13

H

hammerscale 322, **322**, 323, 324, 326,
 354, **354**, 355, 356, 363–4, 367
 henge and pit circle (King's Dyke)
 55–60, 56, 57, 58
 henge 55–6, 58–9
 pit circle **59**
 hoofprints: *See* animal tracks
 Horsey Hill 19, **20**, 24, 31
 human remains
 Middle Bronze Age
 associated with fox remains
 170–1, 170–1
 Middle Iron Age
 in bone pit 329–34, 330, 332
 peat 329–34, 330, 332
See also, cremation burials,
 inhumation burials

I

inhumation burials, Early Bronze Age
 61–6, 70, **71**, 73, **75**

isolated 66, 66
 Round Barrow 1 60, 61–3, 62, 63
 Round Barrow 2 60, 63–5, 64
 Round Barrow 3 61
 inhumation burials, Middle Iron Age
 326, 327
 in posthole 313–15, 314
 insect remains **283**
 inset studies
 Animal bone dump in waterhole
 F.528 228, 228
 Bradley Fen/King's Dyke later
 prehistoric fired clay fabric
 series 291
 Characterizing the burnt stone
 contents of clay-lined pits, a
 case study of pit F.696 326
 F.691 and F.698: the human
 remains 241
 Group D waterhole complex: pin
 description 230, 230
 Human remains 327
 Log ladder and mallet head or
 'beetle' 174–5, 175
 Loomweight and spindle whorl
 catalogue 326
 Loomweight catalogue 370
 Metalled surface F.1052 100–1,
 100–3, **102**
 Spatial-temporal configuration 1 –
 the pre-fieldsystem landscape
 138–9, 139
 Spatial-temporal configuration
 2 – fieldsystem, settlement &
 metalwork 218
 Spatial-temporal configuration 3 –
 settlement pattern (distributed
 and convergent) 293
 Spatial-temporal configuration
 4 – the arrival of fen-edge
 settlement 371
 Waterhole F.1018 329–31
 Wattle cordon F.892 172–4, 173

K

King's Delph 19, **20**, 26
 King's Delph to Linwood Pipeline 19,
20, 24
 King's Dyke
 background 11, **12**, 13–14
 Roman activity 11, 13–14

L

log ladder 174, 174–5
 logboat
 construction 286–9, 287, **288**
 dismantling 289
 as part of water tank 229–33, 286

radiocarbon dating 398–9
 loomweights **291**, 291–2, 292, 326,
 370

M

metalled surfaces
 Bradley Fen 98–102, 99–101,
102
 metalwork, later Bronze Age
 180–205
 analysis and metallography 197–
 205, **199–200**, 200–1, **202**, **204**,
205
 catalogue 188–97
 chape 192
 deposition 213–17, 214
 discussion 180–205
 hoard 182, 184–6, 185
 spears, hoard 182, 184–6, 185,
 190–1, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196,
 197
 spears, single 181–3, 182–3, 188,
 189, 191, 193, 195, 197, 216,
 217
 tube, copper alloy 192
 metalworking, Middle Iron Age
 assemblage summary 366–8
 assemblage, copper alloy 364–5,
 364–6, **366**
 assemblage, iron working 356–64,
 357–9, **360**, 361–2, **363**
 conglomerates 356–8, 358–9, 360,
360, 361–2
 iron smelting
 archaeomagnetic dating 319–
 321, 320, **321**
 debris 317, 318, 321–5, **322**,
 323–4
 furnace 317–19, 318–19
 slag pit metallurgy 317, 318,
 321–5, **322**, 323–4
 ores 362–3, **363**
 refractories 322, **322**, 356–7, 358–9,
360, **363**
 slag 356–8, 358–9, 360, 361–2
 smithing hearth bottoms 322, **322**,
354, **360**, 361–2
See also hammerscale
 mobility 51, 133, 140, 145, 146, 379,
 381, 384–92
 molluscs 179
 Must Farm 19, **20**, 25, 32

N

Neolithic 44
 flint 47, **47**, 48, **48**
 pottery 45, **45**, 45, 47
 Northey landfall 19, **20**, 25

O

Oxney Grange 19, 20, 21
Oxney Road 19, 20, 23

P

Padholme Drain 19, 20, 26
Parish Drain 19, 20, 23
Parnwell 19, 20, 21
Peacock's Farm excavations 4
pits
 bone pit 328–33, **329**, 330–2, **333**
 clay-lined ('cooking pits') **325**,
 325–6, 326
 pit complex 326–7
pits/postholes 259, 260
plant remains
 Early Bronze Age 125–7, **126**, **127**,
 127
 Early Iron Age 278–83, **280–3**
 King's Dyke monument complex
 78–81, **79**, **80**
 Middle Iron Age 345–7, **346–7**
 radiocarbon age determinations
 6
Pode Hole 19, 20, 25
pollen analysis
 adjacent sites reviewed 30–2
 Bradley Fen 27, 32–8
 implications of radiocarbon date
 398–9
 Middle Bronze Age 157–61, 157–
 63, 163, 234–6, 235
pottery 45
 Deverel-Rimbury 175, **175**, 211
 Fengate-Cromer style 255, 258,
 274–5, **277**
 Food Vessels 85, 109, 112, **113**,
 114, **114**
 Middle Iron Age 349–54
 fabrics, forms and functions
 350, 350–3, **351**, 351, **352**, 353
 Neolithic **45**
 Early Plain Bowl 45
 Mildenhall (Etton-style) 45–7
 Peterborough Ware 47
 Post Deverel-Rimbury 238, 271–8
 Early Iron Age **272**, 273–5
 fabrics 271–4, **272**, 273, 275
 form 274–5, 5
 Late Bronze Age **272**, 273–5
 usage 276–8, **279**
 See also Beaker pottery, Collared
 Urns, cinerary urns
Power Station site
 burials 334
 metal objects 213–14
 pollen profile 30–1
pre-Flandrian landscape 52

Q

querns 182, 245–6, 259, 283–4, 284,
 347–9, 348–9
 rubbing stone 347–9, 348
 saddle quern catalogue 283–4, 349
quernstone 246

R

radiocarbon dates 5, 6, 82, **82**, 187,
 187, 399
 redating of logboat, implications
 399
Roman archaeology 11, 13–14, 48, **49**,
 49, 50
round barrows
 discussion 81–2
 Round Barrow 1 60, 61–3, 62, 63,
 71
 flints **71**, 76–7, **77**, **78**
 plant remains 78–81, **80**
 Round Barrow 2 60, 63–5, 64, **71**
 flints, **71**, 77, **77**, **78**
roundhouses
 Early Iron Age **242**, 242–58, 243
 Middle Iron Age **308**, 308–11, 309,
 311
 faunal remains 341–3, **343**
rubbing stone: *See* querns

S

saddle quern: *See* querns
settlement, Early Bronze Age 82–91
 Beaker house (Structure 1) 82–6,
 83–6
 Collared Urn structures
 (Structures 2 & 3) 86–93, 87–90
 flint 86
 material culture **91**
 pottery **114–16**, 114–16
 watering hollows 92–8, 93–8
settlement, Early Iron Age
 discussion 259–63
 foodways 264–84, **269–70**, 271
 roundhouses **242**, 242–58, 243
settlement, Middle Bronze Age 168–
 80, 169–71, 180, 173–4
 deposition pattern (Bradley Fen)
 187, 187–8
 Deverel-Rimbury pottery 175,
 175, **213**
 discussion 206–19
 foodways 175–8, **176–8**, 177
 human remains with associated
 fox skeleton 170–1, 170–1
 lithics **179**, 179–80
 log ladder 174, 174–5
 mallet 174, 174–5

molluscs as environmental
 indicator 179

plant remains 178–9
scale of occupation 212–13
shafts and pits 168
textile 170–1
wattle cordon F.892 172–4, 173
settlement, Middle Iron Age 305
 four-post structures **312**, 312,
 312–15, 314
 burial within posthole 313–15, 314
 overview 305–6, 305–7
 roundhouses **308**, 308–11, 309, 311
soil analyses
 Bradley Fen 28, **29**
 King's Dyke 28, **29**
South-West Fen Dyke Survey 19, 20,
 24
space and time 40, 40–2, 41, 393,
 395–6
 See also spatial-temporal
 configurations
spatial-temporal configurations
 1, the pre-fieldsystem landscape
 138–9, 139
 2, fieldsystem, settlement &
 metalwork 218
 3, settlement pattern (distributed
 and convergent) 293
 4, the arrival of fen-edge
 settlement 371
spindle whorls **291**, 291–2, 292, 326
Stanground 18, 19, **20**
Storeys Bar Road 19, 20, 25

T

Tanholt Farm 19, 20, 21, 298, **298**, 300
temporality 2–3, 4, 6, 10, 133, 134, 379
 See also spatial-temporal
 configurations
tenure 10, 51, 206–12, 209, 211, 380,
 381, 388–90
textile production
 Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age
 291, 291–2, 292
 Middle Iron Age **368**, 368–70, 369
topography 38–42, 39, 43
 counterfeit wetlands 38–9
 Early Bronze Age 51–5, 52–4, 137,
 138–9, 139
 Early Iron Age 221–6, 222–5
 flood maps 39–40, 40–1, **42**, 143,
 222, 304
 Late Bronze Age 221–6, 222–5
 Middle Bronze Age 142–6, 143–5
 Middle Iron Age 303–5, 304–5
 pre-Flandrian landsurface 39–40,
 39–40
Tower Works 19, 20, 21

W

- water tank 229–33, 286
 - radiocarbon date 398–9
- waterholes 315, 317, 328
- watering hollows 92–8, 93–8
 - Bradley Fen
 - eastern group 92–5, 93–5
 - western group 95, 95, 95–8
- wattle cordon F.892 172–4, 173
- Wissey Embayment
 - flint scatters 135
 - survival of archaeology 395
- wood
 - associated with wet field
 - boundaries 151–2, 153–6, **154–5**
 - bark 155, 156
 - log ladder 174, 174–5
 - mallet 174, 174–5
 - radiocarbon age determinations 6
 - roots 155, 156
 - roundwood 155, 156
 - timber debris 155, 156
 - woodchips 156
 - woodworking evidence 153–6, **154**
 - See also* log boat
- woodland 28, 31–3, **34–5**, 35, **53**, 55
- worked stone
 - Early Bronze Age 130, 131

Pattern and Process

The King's Dyke and Bradley Fen excavations occurred within the brick pits of the Fenland town of Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire. The investigations straddled the south-eastern contours of the Flag Fen Basin, a small peat-filled embayment located between the East-Midland city of Peterborough and the western limits of Whittlesey 'island'. Renowned principally for its Bronze Age discoveries at sites such as Fengate and Flag Fen, the Flag Fen Basin also marked the point where the prehistoric River Nene debouched into the greater Fenland Basin.

A henge, two round barrows, an early fieldsystem, metalwork deposition and patterns of sustained settlement along with metalworking evidence helped produce a plan similar in its configuration to that revealed at Fengate. In addition, unambiguous evidence of earlier second millennium BC settlement was identified together with large watering holes and the first burnt stone mounds to be found along Fenland's western edge.

Genuine settlement structures included three of Early Bronze Age date, one Late Bronze Age, ten Early Iron Age and three Middle Iron Age. Later Bronze Age metalwork, including single spears and a weapon hoard, was deposited in indirect association with the earlier land divisions and consistently within ground that was becoming increasingly wet.

The large-scale exposure of the base of the Flag Fen Basin at Bradley Fen revealed a sub-peat or pre-basin landscape related to the buried floodplain of an early River Nene. Above all, the revelation of sub-fen occupation helped position the Flag Fen Basin in time as well as space.

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