

Introduction

The Stour Valley defines the boundary between Essex and Suffolk and is particularly rich in crop marks indicating prehistoric activity. Partly triggered by the Essex and Suffolk Water company's proposal to construct a new pipeline from the river Stour to Abberton Reservoir, the Colchester Archaeological Group set up a working party to examine in detail a section of the valley between Bures and Wormingford where there is a particularly large number of crop marks.

This report is intended to build on the work of Nigel Brown, Debbie Knopp and David Strachan, set out in their report *The Archaeology of Constable Country: the crop marks of the Stour Valley* published in *Landscape History* in 2012. Their report was intended "as a platform from which to enhance long term management and to promote further fieldwork".

The crop marks and the corresponding study area lie along the flood plain of the Stour between Bures and Wormingford. The geology of the study area is primarily superficial sand and gravel alluvial deposits laid down as a result of the Anglian glaciation (c400,000 - 300,000 years ago) and subsequent cold periods terminating in the Devensian (c100,000 to 10,000 years ago). The soil on the higher land forms part of the Pleistocene Kesgrave Beds while the flood plain, on which the cropmarks are visible, mainly consists of Quaternary sand and gravel river terraces, Eocene London Clay and Palaeocene London Sands. Alongside Lodge Hills is Wormingford Mere a glacial kettle hole of considerable depth. It was used as a duck decoy from the 17th century and is a very notable feature in the landscape.

Only a small part of the area has suffered from sand and gravel extraction and consequently developer funded archaeological investigation has been largely absent. Arable agriculture, particularly deep ploughing, is the current major threat to the archaeology. However there are substantial areas of permanent pasture. The majority of the Study Area lies within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The archaeology of the study area goes back to the Palaeolithic (prior to 8,500BC) with occasional finds of flint tools and animal bones in the glacial gravels. Finds of Mesolithic (c8,500 - 4,000BC) flint tools, notably the recent discovery of an axe as part of a fieldwalking programme on Metlands, indicates the presence of people in the area at this time.

The earliest cropmarks recorded in the study area date to the Neolithic (c4,000 - 2,400BC), the oldest of which appears to be a remarkable open-ended earthwork, with rows of large internal pits or post-holes, interpreted as a mortuary structure or long barrow. Later Neolithic cropmarks include cursus monuments and two potential examples have been recorded as part of the study. The surviving cropmarks at EHER9194 at Bures St Mary bear a strong resemblance to other known cursus sites, while EHER9178 at Wormingford is of a similar date and almost certainly had a processional function.

The most common prehistoric features in the study area are ring-ditches, most of them in densely clustered groups and these have been shown to date from the Bronze Age (c2,400 - 700BC). In a number of the complexes these

ring-ditches appear as later additions to the monument groups indicating how such clusters increased in complexity and no doubt developed and changed in terms of function and symbolism. Examples excavated elsewhere have proved to be the remains of ploughed out round barrows. The internal structure of the barrows varied but often included a mound of turf or earth, surrounded by the ditch, and covering a central burial. Some may never have been barrows and in that case their function is obscure, although the absence of a gap or entrance in many would suggest that they are not hut circles or farm enclosures. The internal burial pits can be seen on some of the aerial photographs; sometimes secondary burials also took place. Unlike the classic Wessex hill-top barrow complexes these are on the flood plain, around the 20m contour.

Today the Stour forms the historic boundary between the counties of Essex and Suffolk. Its status as a boundary was in place by the Domesday survey and probably originated at some point in the post-Roman period as a result of the fluctuating fortunes of the nascent kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia. Prior to this in the Roman and Iron Age periods the boundary between the Trinovantes and the Iceni appears to have lain well to the north.

During the Bronze Age and preceding periods territorial boundaries are even harder to discern, but it may be significant that the Stour lies at the heart of the distribution of Ardleigh Urns, one of the most characteristic types of Bronze Age pottery of Eastern England. It is therefore possible that when the ring-ditches were created and used, the valley lay within a territory rather than at a boundary.

The latest cropmarks are linear features representing boundaries and field systems. None of these can be ascribed to the small regular 'celtic' fields of the Iron Age and Roman periods and may be Medieval, but more probably represent the later enclosed fields of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Many of these boundaries were still current in the later 19th and early 20th centuries and appear on Tithe and early Ordnance Survey maps.

Overall, the project has focussed attention on the relationship of the cropmark monuments to each other, to the river and to the wider topography. It is clear that particular locations were chosen for these earth constructions. Once established, the monuments became highly visible features in the landscape. An example of this may be observed where the Bures cursus cuts across the neck of a meander while on the opposite side of the river is the mortuary structure or long barrow. Although the latter probably predates the cursus, the two structures would have been intervisible and therefore it seems likely that their use may have been linked, their similar orientation and siting also reflecting symbolic associations with the river. Further downstream a monument complex at Wormingford appears to quite closely follow a relict course of the Stour, essentially following the river bank rather than cutting across it. Here again it is possible to suggest a developmental sequence for this complex based on cropmark evidence.

Each cropmark complex or Heritage Environment Record (HER) number within the study area is discussed separately.

