

Chapter 19

Conclusions

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Introduction

The creation of a Resource Assessment and Research Agenda has demonstrated the keen level of interest in the Solent-Thames historic environment and the range of groups and individuals who are actively involved in research in the area. Many of these people have contributed to this volume. There was considerable support for the idea of a Research Framework, and the online version of the county contributions has attracted attention from researchers across the UK and from Europe. People from all sectors of interest have been involved in its preparation, including non-professionals.

Whereas a research-led approach to the examination of the historic environment is well established in archaeology, including in a planning context, this concept is less usual for the built environment and, with some exceptions, the project was unable to generate much enthusiasm to participate from this sector. This area of study is less-well represented in this volume than we would have liked.

The preparation of this document has demonstrated the richness and variety of the historic environment of the Solent-Thames sub-region. Despite the quantity of research that has been carried out to date, a number of areas have been identified where there is insufficient evidence to inform understanding. The reasons for this include:

- advances in research techniques, not available when previous work was carried out;
- lack of knowledge of areas that have seen low levels of development and of archaeological investigation;
- lack of focus on specific research questions in planning work.

Common themes

Although research issues that are specific to each chronological period have been identified, a surprising number of themes have emerged that are common to more than one. Some of these are related to the application of particular approaches to data and investigation, others to a specific geographical area, and some to particular topics.

The need for existing collections to be revisited and re-appraised arose in most of the period agendas. In

particular, it is thought that flint artefacts may have been wrongly identified in the past, leading to incorrect assessments about the levels and locations of past activity for different chronological periods (see, for example, the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic chapter).

More accurate dating was seen as desirable for all periods. The use of scientific techniques, such as radiocarbon and OSL (optically-stimulate luminescence) dating, as well as refinements to artefact typologies, are seen as being able to contribute to this objective. These can be applied to both existing collections and as a more regular feature of current and future investigations.

Environmental sampling was another area where more work is observed to be generally necessary. More samples are required, for landscape reconstruction and for targeting specific issues. Greater consistency and co-ordination in sampling strategies over wider areas and in different contexts would also enable a better comparison of results and more rapid acquisition of useful research data (see, for example, the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age chapter). In addition to informing understanding of a particular chronological period, the results will contribute to the developing picture of how the wider landscape of the region has evolved. As has been pointed out in a number of the period assessments and agendas, the full value of much environmental work that has already been undertaken has not been realised, and a synthesis of existing datasets would, in itself, shed much light on the past landscapes of the region.

As has been stressed by a number of the contributors, our current understanding of the historic environment of the region has been biased by our focus on development-led work, which has been concentrated in particular areas (see the late Bronze Age and Iron Age chapter). Other parts of our region are much less well understood. An example is the gaps in our understanding of the Roman settlement pattern (see the Roman chapter).

The importance of understanding the landscape setting and environmental context in order to appreciate human settlement has been stressed by several authors, especially for early periods when finds may be scarce. As the environmental introduction and the Palaeolithic chapters make clear, for some periods reconstructing the contemporary physical geography of the region is a fundamental starting point for assessing where sites of the greatest potential might lie and where different kinds of activity can be expected. Francis Wenban-Smith has

described this as understanding the ‘lived landscape’ (Lower and Middle Palaeolithic chapter). Investigating how people moved through these landscapes and how this changed through time is another cross-period theme. Understanding shifting *vs* permanent settlement, and the changing range and balance of settlement types, are research topics that occur repeatedly throughout this volume.

For our region, extremes of environmental change are clearest in the long period covered by the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic. Even in later periods, however, the significance and effects of natural climatic changes and human modifications to the environment are important. In archaeological terms, some extremely high-quality data has come from remains sealed beneath alluvium and colluvium (see, for example, the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age and the Early Medieval chapters). The relationship between field systems and settlement, boundaries, land rights and the changing balance between clearance, pasture and arable is a persistent theme from the Neolithic to the medieval periods, as is the importance of a better understanding of human impact on the ‘wild’ environment of plants and animals. The introduction and use of domesticated plants and animals in the Neolithic is still poorly understood, but the availability of new foods and changing diets are research topics raised for all periods (see, for example, the Roman and the Medieval chapters). The relationship between towns and their hinterlands, it is felt, are still little understood, despite the prominence of national research projects like that for Wroxeter (Gaffney and White 2007), and could be much improved by the better use of environmental data.

The importance of understanding taphonomic factors is raised in several chapters, for example the fortuitous relationship between deposition of Palaeolithic implements and their rapid burial by land slips or silt deposits. Ploughing has had an impact on the preservation of fragile deposits of many different periods and understanding the resulting palimpsest of surface finds is a common theme, especially for occupation which pre-dates our present settlement pattern (see, for example, the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic and the Early Medieval chapters). In towns there is the problem of the differential survival of the less substantial remains of early settlement or housing related to lower income groups (see the Medieval and the Post-medieval and Modern chapters). How far this last issue can be addressed in future remains to be seen.

The Solent-Thames region has had a particularly strong association with royalty since the early medieval period, only in part related to its proximity to London. The importance of this region in the emergence and changing composition of elites is a cross-period theme (from the Neolithic to the Post-medieval and Modern period) which would merit more study. The link between the rise of kingship and the re-introduction of Christianity and its developing structure is an issue with great potential for further work in this area, with early bishoprics present at Winchester and at Dorchester-on-

Thames. The changing face of Christianity and, latterly, other religions can be charted up to the modern era.

New industries were influenced by the geography and geology of the region, for example potting in the Roman period and the early use of bricks in medieval vernacular architecture (see the Roman and the Later Medieval chapters). Proximity to long-distance contacts and trade routes also played an important role and a main research area to be addressed is the maritime heritage of the region. Work in this area will need to consider the *Maritime Archaeological Research Agenda for England* (Ransley *et al.* 2013). The gradual change of the Solent river into a marine channel, the particular character of the Isle of Wight, Britain as a maritime power and defence against invasion are all relevant here. The interesting relationship between the mainland and the Isle of Wight, and the importance of the Island have been flagged up as meriting greater scrutiny, especially for the Roman, early medieval and later medieval periods. The present Solent hides drowned landscapes of the Mesolithic and earlier periods.

Long-distance links extending beyond the region are relevant for all periods. These can be investigated in terms of migration routes or trading links for example. The Solent-Thames region is not an obviously homogeneous area and its relationships to adjoining regions are important. The role of immigration on its society and the changing cultural affiliations of its population are important research themes and the use of stable isotope analysis and DNA sampling of human and animal remains to shed light on this issue has been highlighted by several authors (see, for example, Late Bronze Age and Iron Age and Early Medieval chapters).

Serendipity will always play a part in archaeological endeavour, and remains of international significance can emerge unexpectedly. It is vital that these are recognised and treated appropriately, whether they are identified in a Research Framework or not. We must not allow what are intended to be helpful commentaries on the known resource and the obvious gaps in knowledge to lead to formulaic responses. We hope they will promote new insights and innovation and the recognition of the genuinely new and unexpected.

Research strategy proposals

A Research Strategy for the region is the next stage in this Research Framework Project. It will examine potential mechanisms for addressing the issues raised in the Research Agendas and will formulate a policy for further research within a national, regional and local framework.

The strategy will look at the many ways that archaeological research can be integrated into strategic and development opportunities to ensure that research funding, whether from developers, public bodies or grant-giving trusts and others, is used in a cost-effective manner. It will also seek to mesh with the Research Frameworks of adjacent areas and those which are

period or theme specific, as also with national policy statements that set out the need for research to underpin the public value of the historic environment. It is of vital importance to provide a strategic vision of fundamental values for the historic environment which is related to the public interest.

The Strategy needs to encourage the participation of everyone active in the study of the historic environment for the benefit of the public, part of which is to inform

and facilitate curatorial decision making, providing a recognised framework within which judgements can be made and justified.

The Research Framework presents the state of the historic environment at a particular point in time. Levels of knowledge and understanding will change over time and the Research Framework will need to evolve alongside these changes. Part of the Strategy will be to put in place a review process to allow this to happen.