

THE MEDWAY MEGALITHS AND NEOLITHIC KENT*

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INTRODUCTION

The Medway megaliths constitute a geographically well-defined group of this Neolithic site-type¹ and are the only megalithic group in eastern England. Previous accounts of these monuments² have largely been devoted to their morphology and origins; a study incorporating current trends in British megalithic studies is therefore long overdue.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN BRITISH MEGALITHIC STUDIES

Until the late 1960s, megalithic chambered barrows and cairns were considered to have functioned purely as tombs: they were the burial vaults and funerary monuments for people living in the fourth and third millennia B.C. The first academic studies of these monuments therefore concentrated on the typological analysis of their plans. This method of analysis, though, has often produced incorrect interpretations: without excavation it is often impossible to reconstruct the sequence of development and original appearance for a large number of megaliths. In addition, plan-typology disregards other aspects related to them, for example constructional

* I am indebted to Peter Drewett for reading and commenting on a first draft of this article; naturally I take responsibility for all the views expressed.

¹ G.E. Daniel, *The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales*, Cambridge, 1950, 12.

² Daniel, *op. cit.*; J.H. Evans, 'Kentish Megalith Types', *Arch. Cant.*, lxiii (1950), 63-81; R.F. Jessup, *South-East England*, London, 1970.

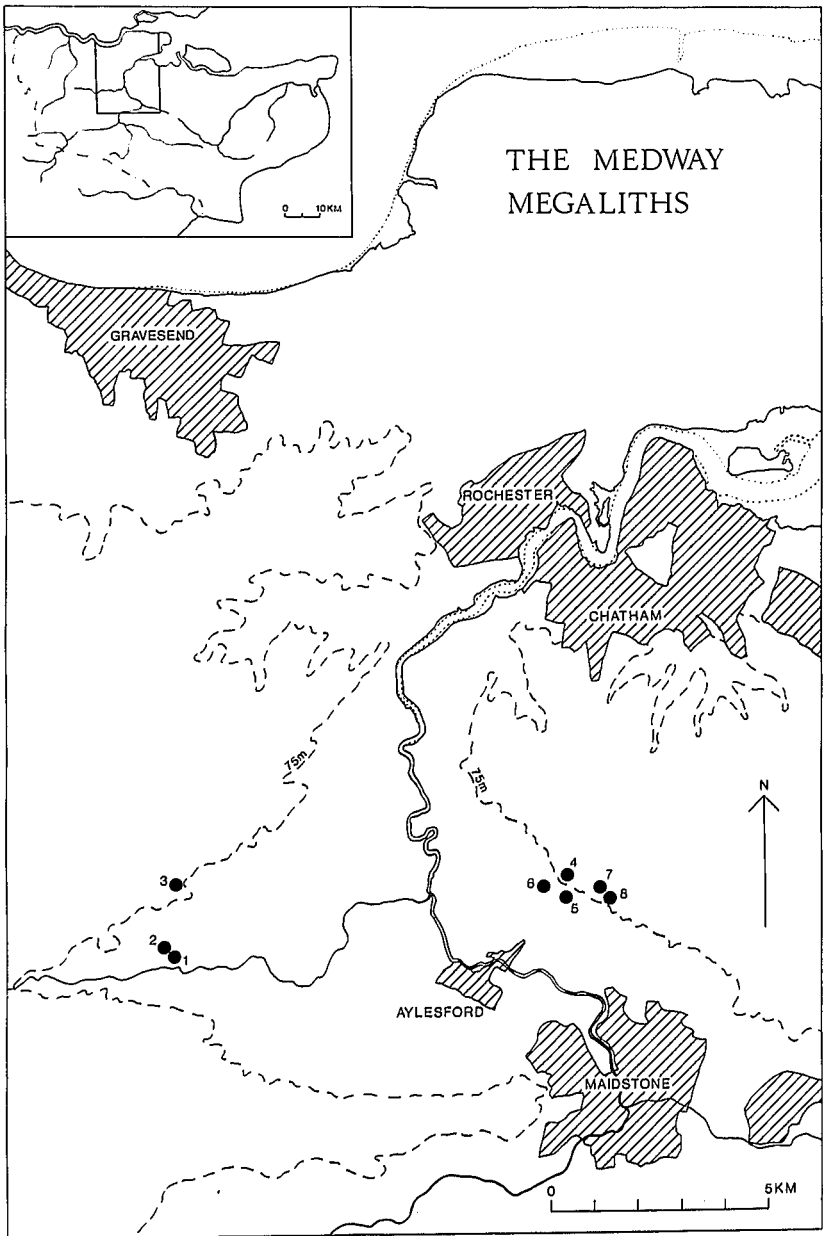


Fig. 1. Location Map of the Medway Megaliths. Legend: 1. Addington Long Barrow; 2. The Chestnuts; 3. Coldrum; 4. Kit's Coty House; 5. Little Kit's House; 6. The Coffin Stone; 7. Smythe's Megalith; 8. The Upper White Horse Stone.

details, and implies that an evolutionary system of development was responsible for the presence of different megalithic types.³

The first attempt to break away from the typological study of megaliths was made by Fleming,⁴ who attributed significant changes in their form to design. By analysing the effectiveness and efficiency of their design, he concluded that they were not merely receptacles for the dead, but monuments 'deliberately designed to rivet the attention of living individuals'.⁵ He saw them as 'tombs for the living',⁶ functioning as signalling devices 'in maintaining the structure of contemporary social organisation',⁷ by acting as territorial markings on which individuals could focus their territorial loyalties. Although this assumes that territoriality was a well-developed concept within Neolithic society, this is a plausible assumption given the sedentary nature of Neolithic communities.

Renfrew,⁸ and more recently Darvill,⁹ have attempted to use forms of spatial analysis for investigating the social and ritual organisation of Neolithic society. In combination with references to ethnographic data, Renfrew suggested that megaliths 'functioned as territorial markers for segmentary societies', and that their 'function as a place of burial, an ancestral resting place, was central to that symbolic expression of territory'.¹⁰

Megalithic chambered mounds are thus no longer considered to be just burial chambers, but communal monuments fulfilling a social function for the communities who built and used them. However, difficulty arises in interpreting megaliths in pairs or larger groups situated close to one another, as exemplified by the Medway megaliths (Fig. 1). Were these monuments all built at the same time, or did one succeed another? And did they function identically,

³ T.G.E. Powell, *et al.*, *Megalithic Enquiries in the West of Britain*, Liverpool, 1969, v–vii.

⁴ A. Fleming, 'Vision and Design: Approaches to Ceremonial Monument Typology', *Man* (n.s.), vii (1972), 57–73.

⁵ A. Fleming, 'Tombs for the Living', *Man* (n.s.), viii (1973), 187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁸ C. Renfrew, 'Monuments, Mobilization and social Organisation in Neolithic Wessex', in C. Renfrew (ed.), *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*, London, 1973, 539–58; C. Renfrew, 'Megaliths, Territories and Populations', in S.J. De Laet, (ed.), *Acculturation and Continuity in Atlantic Europe*, Bruges, 1976, 198–220.

⁹ T.C. Darvill, 'Court Cairns, Passage Graves and social Change in Ireland', *Man* (n.s.), xiv (1979), 311–27.

¹⁰ Renfrew, *op. cit.* second reference in note 8, 204–5.

THE MEDWAY MEGALITHS

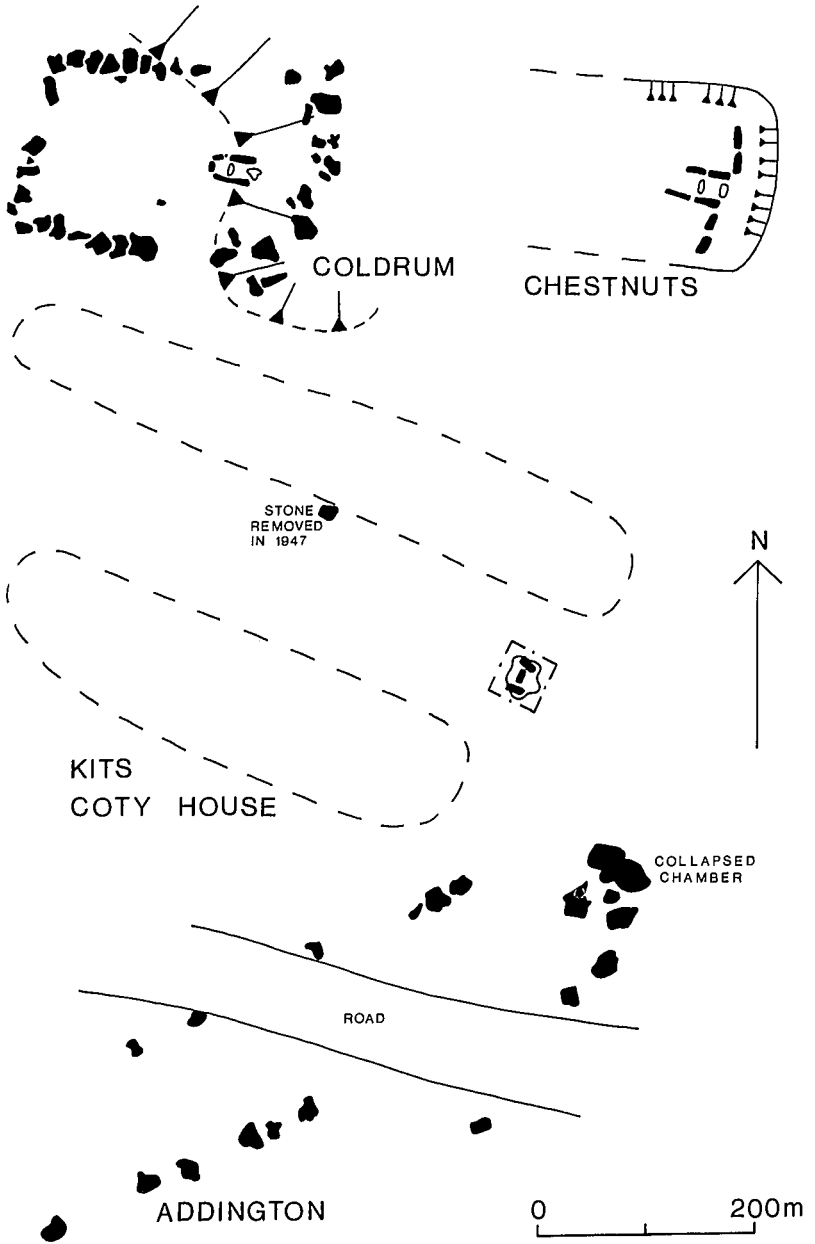


Fig. 2. Plans of the Medway Megaliths.

or were they put to a hierarchy of uses?

It must be remembered that Neolithic people were primarily farmers and not megalith builders. In order to investigate further their contribution to Neolithic society, megalithic chambered monuments should be studied in relation to the economic strategies and settlements of the communities responsible for their construction, and not in isolation as a 'special category' site-type.¹¹

THE MEDWAY MEGALITHS

Sadly, little is known of the archaeology of the Medway megaliths: 'there has been but one skilled and satisfactory excavation, and not a single absolute date'.¹² In addition, a variety of destructive agencies has ensured that none of these megaliths retain their Neolithic appearance. The plans of the four best preserved megaliths are illustrated in Fig. 2, while the descriptions and details of past investigations for all known megaliths in the Medway Valley are summarised in an Appendix.

Presumably, the chamber of each monument was constructed first and the mound heaped up around this. In one instance at least, flanking quarry ditches provided the mound material. The stone revetment kerb could have been constructed either before or after the mound had been half-built. Eventually, the entrance to the chamber was blocked, but many intermediate phases of blocking could have taken place before the final blocking.

In spite of the limited information available from excavation, two main points arise. First, for those that still retain traces of their original covering mound, some elements of similarity can be discerned. For example, they all consist of rectangular chambers, three of which contained medial stones, set in the eastern end of the mound. In three cases, a stone revetment kerb surrounds the mound; where this can be defined, it is rectangular in shape. The second point is that this type of megalithic chambered monument does not occur elsewhere in Britain.

Past studies of the Medway megaliths have all taken up the subject of their origin. Piggott concluded that they originated in Holland; Daniel thought they were derived from Scandinavia; while

¹¹ R. Holgate and P. Smith, 'Landscape Studies in Prehistory: two Examples from Western Britain', *Bull. Inst. Archaeol. Univ. London*, xviii (1981).

¹² Jessup, *op. cit.*, 111.

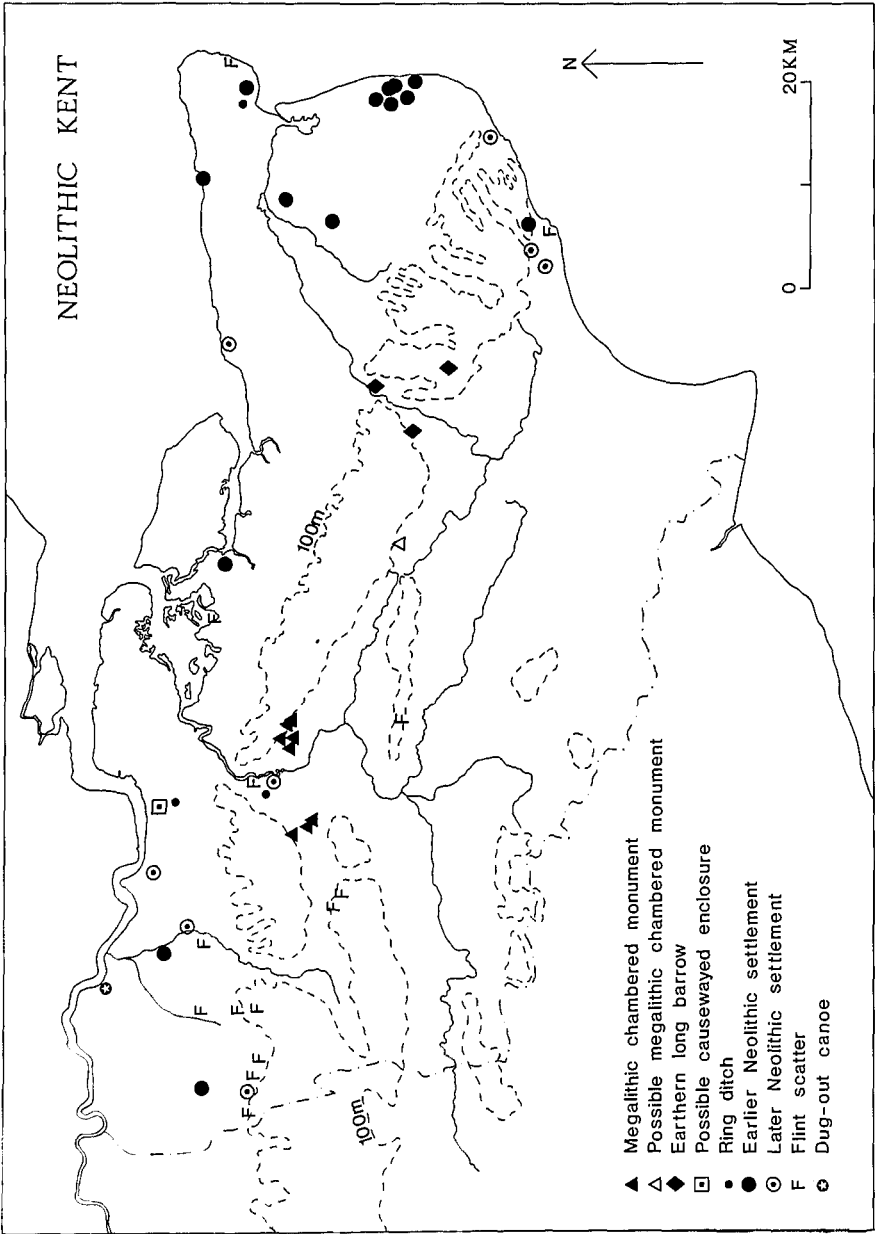


Fig. 3. Location Map of Neolithic Sites in Kent.

Jessup favoured a Cotswold-Severn origin.¹³ However, in none of these areas can exact parallels be found with the Medway megaliths. Manby suggested that parallels between these megaliths and the wooden structures associated with earthen long barrows could be found, and Clarke demonstrates this possibility by outlining the similarities between the Medway megaliths and the Yorkshire earthen long barrows.¹⁴ Radiocarbon dates for the construction of the first of the Medway megaliths are obviously required to demonstrate the possibility of the existence in eastern England of wooden prototypes for these megalithic structures. In the meantime, it can be concluded that Neolithic people in the Medway Valley decided to construct megalithic chambered mounds in the area, and probably based their design on monuments already known to them. Whether or not they were newcomers to the area, as opposed to being established farmers, remains conjectural.

Little precise information is available for the dating and functions of the Medway megaliths. Pottery recovered from the Chestnuts excavation¹⁵ demonstrates that this monument was constructed in the earlier Neolithic period and continued in use, throughout the third millennium B.C., until the end of the later Neolithic period. Coldrum, the Coffin Stone and Smythe's megalith produced inhumated human bones, whereas Chestnuts produced cremated bones.¹⁶ However, two unburnt teeth were also found at the Chestnuts. Given the acidity of the soil on the site, the possibility remains that both cremation and inhumation were practised here.

It therefore appears that some of the Medway megaliths were used as mausolea throughout the Neolithic period. But what other functions did these megaliths serve; and did each one have equal status and serve identical functions? Clearly, sample excavation of each monument is required to provide a chronological and structural framework for the development of the Medway megaliths before these questions can be answered.

¹³ S. Piggott, 'A Note on the relative Chronology of the English Long Barrows', *PPS*, i (1935), 122; Daniel, *op. cit.*, 161; Jessup, *op. cit.*, 111.

¹⁴ T.G. Manby, 'Long Barrows of Northern England; structural and dating Evidence', *Scot. Archaeol. Forum*, ii (1970), 21; A.F. Clarke, 'The Neolithic in Kent: a Review', in P.J. Leach and A.F. Clarke (eds.), *The Archaeology of Kent to A.D. 1500*, *CBA Research Report* no. 48 (forthcoming).

¹⁵ See the Appendix for further details.

¹⁶ See the Appendix for further details.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE MEDWAY MEGALITHS
TO NEOLITHIC KENT

The Medway valley does not stand in isolation as the only part of Kent occupied in the Neolithic period. A group of unchambered earthen long barrows were constructed in the Stour valley, and traces of both earlier and later Neolithic settlements and other site-types have been recovered from the loess-based brickearth soils that lie between the North Downs and the northern coast-line of Kent (Fig. 3). The Neolithic period witnessed the development of the first farming communities to inhabit Britain; it is therefore against this background that the Medway megaliths and the Stour long barrows should be viewed.

Kent displays a variety of landscape and divides into sharply-contrasted regions.¹⁷ The agricultural potential of each region varies markedly. Thus, while the coastal region comprises one of the most easily and profitably farmed tracts of land in Britain, much of the Low and High Weald has never really been fit for any form of agriculture other than pastoralism. At the start of the Neolithic, when most of Kent was covered in woodland, this difference in agricultural potential undoubtedly prevailed. Consequently, the density of known Neolithic settlements is greatest on the coastal brickearth soils. The possibility remains that this is merely a reflection of our archaeological knowledge as opposed to Neolithic reality; but as Neolithic farming practices and settlement patterns were influenced by altitude, aspect, micro-climate and soil quality,¹⁸ the distribution of known Neolithic settlements in Kent may well be representative of their original population.

The majority of Neolithic settlement sites have a coastal or riverine location. It should be remembered that the Neolithic sea-level was about 7 m. lower than the modern sea-level¹⁹ and that a number of settlement sites has probably been submerged through marine transgression. This is supported by the discovery of a 'working floor', including unfinished leaf-shaped arrow-heads, between the High and Low Water Marks at Lower Halstow;²⁰ and

¹⁷ A.M. Everitt, 'The Making of the agrarian Landscape of Kent', *Arch. Cant.*, xcii (1976), 6.

¹⁸ Holgate and Smith, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ J.H. Evans, 'Archaeological Horizons in the North Kent Marshes', *Arch. Cant.*, lxvi (1953), 128.

²⁰ J.P.T. Burchell, 'A final Account of the Investigations carried out at Lower Halstow, Kent', *Proc. Prehist. Soc. of East Anglia*, v, part 1 (1925), 291.

by the abandonment of the earlier Neolithic settlements at Wingham and Minnis Bay after rising sea-level created marshy conditions and peat accumulation.²¹

In spite of the presence of Neolithic and post-Neolithic peat deposits, environmental information from Kent is disappointingly small. Hillwash deposits in a scarp-face combe at Brook were sampled for molluscan analysis and indicated that clearance of the primary woodland had taken place by 2590 ± 105 b.c.; while pollen analysis of organic valley deposits from Frogholt and Wingham showed the presence of cleared land and agriculture by the Bronze Age.²² However, the extent of forest clearance in Kent throughout the Neolithic period is still unknown.

Economic evidence is similarly lacking. Two earlier Neolithic sites have produced bone: ox at Grovehurst; and ox, sheep/goat and pig at Wingham.²³ No seed remains have been retrieved from any fully-published site, though quernstones or rubbers have been found at Grovehurst, Wingham, Dartford and Mill Road, Upper Deal, all of which are earlier Neolithic in date.²⁴ It would appear, therefore, that earlier Neolithic farmers adopted a mixed farming strategy. The presence of arrowheads at most sites, a red deer antler comb at Wingham and shells in the pits at Nethercourt Farm, Ramsgate and Wingham²⁵ indicate that the subsistence economy was still supported by hunting and gathering. Unfortunately, no evidence is forthcoming concerning later Neolithic farming practices in Kent.

The settlement sites themselves only comprise artefact scatters or isolated pits. These pits may have initially been storage pits before being used for rubbish disposal. The pit at Nethercourt Farm, Ramsgate, also contained two inhumated bodies.²⁶ But were these settlements individual farms or small villages? As marine

²¹ E. Greenfield, 'A Neolithic Pit and other Finds from Wingham, East Kent', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxiv (1960), 61-21; N. Macpherson-Grant, 'Two Neolithic Bowls from Birchington, Thanet', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiv (1969), 249.

²² M. Kerney, E.H. Brown and T.J. Chandler, 'The Late Glacial and Post Glacial History of the Chalk Escarpment near Brooke, Kent', *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc.*, B, 248 (1964), 135-204; H. Godwin, 'Vegetational History of the Kentish Chalk Downs as seen at Wingham and Frogholt', *Veröff. geoböt. Inst. Zürich*, xxxvii (1962), 83-99.

²³ G. Payne, 'Celtic Remains discovered at Grovehurst, in Milton-next-Sittingbourne', *Arch. Cant.*, xiii (1880), 124; Greenfield, *op. cit.*, 67.

²⁴ Payne, *op. cit.*, 124; Greenfield, *op. cit.*, 63; E. Mynott, 'A major prehistoric Site discovered at Darenth, Kent', *Kent Archaeol. Review*, xliii (1976), 60; G.C. Dunning, 'Neolithic Occupation Sites in East Kent', *Antiq. Journ.*, xlvi (1966), 3.

²⁵ Greenfield, *op. cit.*, 64; Dunning, *op. cit.*, 11; Greenfield, *op. cit.*, 68.

²⁶ Dunning, *op. cit.*, 10.

transgression has resulted in the preservation of several Neolithic settlements, there must be a possibility of locating sites where details of house structures still survive, which could help resolve this question. The location and excavation of these sites is obviously a priority in Kentish Neolithic studies, not only in the hope of obtaining structural details, but also to collect further economic and environmental data.

In spite of the paucity of information relating to Neolithic farming practices and settlements in Kent, some trends can be discerned. The first farming communities probably established themselves on the coastal brickearth soils, practising a mixed farming strategy supplemented by hunting game and collecting marine resources. Settlements were close to water, with the Stour, Medway and Darent valleys soon becoming foci for Neolithic settlement. Rising sea-level and the increase in land taken in for agriculture gradually pushed settlement further upstream and below the scarp slope of the Downs. It may have been now that the Stour long barrows, the Medway megaliths and other site-types, as exemplified by the possible causewayed enclosure at Chalk,²⁷ were constructed.

Neolithic communities had become more sedentary, adopting a more organised approach to the exploitation of the environment, than the preceding Mesolithic hunter-gathering communities with individual site-types occupying specific, though interrelated, niches in the landscape. A patchwork pattern was thus established of woodland, cultivated fields, grazing land, settlements, enclosures and communal monuments, which changed with fluctuations in the water table, soil exhaustion, improved farming techniques, population increase and the dictates of society. The Medway megaliths and Stour long barrows could have acted as 'territorial markers' for the communities occupying these river valleys, but they could equally have been communal or 'prestige' monuments totally unassociated with expressions of territorial loyalty as brought about by stress on economic resources.

CONCLUSION

The position of Kent on the estuary of the major river in eastern England and its possession of fertile, loess-based soils along its northern coastline must have made it a leading reception centre for continental imports, immigrants and visitors throughout the

²⁷ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 73.

THE MEDWAY MEGALITHS

Neolithic. This is therefore a part of Britain that could provide valuable information on the transformation from a hunter-gathering to a predominantly farming economy that took place in this country in the early fourth millennium B.C. Obviously, aerial reconnaissance and field survey aimed at the recovery of further Neolithic sites from each landscape region in Kent must be undertaken to clarify the present picture of Neolithic life in the county.

APPENDIX

Descriptions of the Medway megaliths.

1. Addington Long Barrow. TQ 653591

Description

A sarsen stone chamber set in the north-east end of a sarsen stone revetted long barrow (Fig. 2). There is no evidence for quarry ditches or scoops. When the road was widened and deepened in 1827, two stones from the revetment kerb were removed from their original positions and placed in the corner of the wood to the south of the barrow.²⁸

Past investigations

In 1845, L.B. Larking, a local parson, dug into the chamber and recovered pieces of 'rough pottery'.²⁹

2. The Chestnuts. TQ 652592

Description

A rectangular sarsen stone chamber and façade set in the east end of a sand mound. There are no traces of a revetment kerb or quarry ditches (Fig. 2).

Past investigations

Excavation of the chamber and forecourt by Dr. J. Alexander in 1959 produced sherds of Grimston, Peterborough and Beaker pottery; barbed and tanged and petit tranchet derivative flint arrowheads; the cremated remains of at least ten individuals (nine adults and one, possibly two children); and two uncremated molar teeth.³⁰

3. Coldrum. TQ 654607

Description

A rectangular sarsen stone chamber set in the east end of a rectangular, sarsen stone revetted mound. There is no evidence for

²⁸ J.H. Evans, 'A Disciple of the Druids; the Beale Poste Mss.', *Arch. Cant.*, lxii (1949), 136.

²⁹ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 103.

³⁰ J. Alexander, 'The Excavation of the Chestnuts Megalithic Tomb at Addington, Kent', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxvi (1961), 1-57.

quarry ditches or scoops (Fig. 2).

Past investigations

Excavations in 1910, 1922, 1923 and 1926³¹ cleared the chamber area and exposed the revetment kerb stones. The chamber contained the inhumated remains of at least 22 individuals (of all age groups and both sexes);³² a flint saw; and small portions of 'rude pottery', of which the only piece to survive is a rim sherd of post Iron Age, and probably Saxon, date.

4. Kit's Coty House. TQ 745609

Description

An H-shaped sarsen stone chamber set in the east end of a mound that was undoubtedly revetted by a sarsen stone kerb, as described in a letter sent by Hercules Ayleway to William Stukeley in 1723.³³ One of the stones from the kerb was removed in 1947.³⁴ The mound was derived from two flanking quarry ditches (Fig. 2). A sarsen stone, known as The General's Tombstone, is marked on two of Stukeley's sketches of the monument.³⁵ It is unclear whether this was part of the revetment kerb or a naturally occurring sarsen that originally stood to the west of the mound. It was blown to pieces using gunpowder in 1867.³⁶

Past investigations

In 1854, Thomas Wright recorded finding 'rude pottery under the monument'³⁷ and in 1936, a number of pieces of later Neolithic and beaker pottery were recovered from the surface of the field surrounding the monument.³⁸ A trial excavation in 1956 located the southern ditch and records it as having 'been filled up with earth from the barrow to permit the cultivation of the field'.³⁹

5. Lower Kit's Coty (The Countless Stones). TQ 744604

³¹ F.J. Bennett, 'Coldrum Monument and Exploration, 1910', *Journ. Royal Anth. Inst.*, xliii (1913), 76-85; E.W. Filkins, 'Excavations at Coldrum', *Antiq. Journ.*, viii (1928), 356-7.

³² A. Keith, 'Report on the human Remains found by F.J. Bennett, Esq., F.G.S., in the central Chamber of a Megalithic Monument at Coldrum, Kent', *Journ. Royal Anth. Inst.*, xliii (1913), 86-100.

³³ W. Stukeley, 'Dr. Stukeley's Diaries', *Surtees Soc.*, 76, 226.

³⁴ A. M^cCerie, 'Kit's Coty House, Smythe's Megalith and The General's Tomb', *Arch. Cant.*, lxx (1956), 251.

³⁵ W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*, (London, 1776, 2nd ed.), 33.2^d and 32.2^d.

³⁶ M^cCerie, *op. cit.*, 252.

³⁷ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 98.

³⁸ N. Cook, 'Neolithic', in 'Archaeology in Kent, 1936', *Arch. Cant.*, xlvi (1936), 234-5.

³⁹ M^cCerie, *op. cit.*, 251.

Description

A sarsen stone chamber that was probably covered by a mound. One of Stukeley's sketches⁴⁰ suggests that the mound may have been revetted by a stone kerb, but this is by no means certain. Only a jumbled heap of about 20 stones remains today.

Past investigations

The site has never been properly excavated.

6. The Coffin Stone. TQ 740606

Description

A sarsen stone chamber, probably covered by a mound, may have stood here. Only one massive sarsen (the Coffin Stone) survives today, though a second sarsen has recently been placed on top by the farmer.

Past investigations

Human remains, including two skulls, were found under the stone in 1836.⁴¹

7. Smythe's megalith. TQ 753606

Description

A rectangular sarsen stone chamber, probably covered by a mound, was discovered and destroyed in 1823.⁴²

Past investigations

Clement Smythe witnessed the removal of the stones and recovered a piece of 'an unglazed urn'⁴³ and the bones of at least two adults.⁴⁴

8. The Upper White Horse Stone. TQ 753603

Description

A possible sarsen stone chamber may have stood at this site. All that exists today is a large upright sarsen.

Past investigations

The site has never been properly excavated.

9. The Lower White Horse Stone (The Kentish Standard Stone). TQ 750603

A similar site to the Upper White Horse Stone. It was destroyed in 1823 without excavation.⁴⁵

10. Cobham. TQ 685671

A megalith is reputed to have stood at Cobham.⁴⁶ This was probably

⁴⁰ Stukeley, *op. cit.* in note 35, 32.2^d.

⁴¹ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 101.

⁴² J.H. Evans, 'Smythe's Megalith', *Arch. Cant.*, lxi (1948), 135-40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁵ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 102.

⁴⁶ VCH (Kent), i (1908), 320.

a group of natural sarsens.⁴⁶

11. Blue Bell Hill. c. TQ 75 61

Groups of sarsens lie in several places around the lower slopes of Blue Bell Hill, spreading across to Westfield Wood.⁴⁸ None of these have known prehistoric associations.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Evans, *op. cit.* in note 2, 75-7.

⁴⁸ VCH, *op. cit.*, 319.

⁴⁹ Evans, *op. cit.*, in note 2, 69-9; Jessup, *op. cit.*, 102.