

A whiter shade of pale: powerful relationships between Neolithic communities and the underworld at Monkton Up Wimborne, Dorset

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INTRODUCTION

The enclosed pit circle at Monkton Up Wimborne in Dorset, situated within the complex of Neolithic monuments in the Upper Allen Valley, was excavated by Martin Green in 1997 (Green 2000, 2007). Although not directly related to the extraction of stone, a careful examination of this unusual monument and its landscape context has the potential to tell us much about how the acquisition of flint fitted into wider social relations that Neolithic people may have had with the underworld.

Over the past 20 years there has been a broadening of archaeological perspectives on materiality, with the argument that non-human things (animals, plants, substances) could have been perceived as alive and vibrant by people in the past, and thoroughly entangled in their social lives. Early approaches focused particularly on artefacts and objects as relationally situated within social networks (e.g. Thomas 1996, 151–3) but also on landscapes and materials (e.g. Thomas 1999; Bender 1998, 46–55). Under the banner of ‘new materialism’ many archaeologists have developed fruitful approaches that consider materials and substances as mutable and changing, intrinsically possessing dynamism and movement (e.g. O’Connor *et al.* 2009; Conneller 2011; Jones 2012; McFadyen 2016). This paper will argue that these approaches can also be applied to a consideration of landscapes, as vibrant and social places. Although some relational approaches have considered occurrences such as weather and the movement of celestial bodies as active or even agentic (e.g. Pauketat 2012), only a few have considered the qualities and active role of place (e.g. Fowler 2013).

Many new materialist approaches draw on assemblage theory, inspired by the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), often through the interpretations of Bennett (2005, 2009) and DeLanda (2002, 2006). They have emphasised the importance of the flow of relations between materials, people, ideas, places and things, rather than fixed and bounded entities (e.g. Ingold 2011; Jones 2012; Harris 2014). The crucial point here is that humans are not necessarily seen as ontologically prior to anything else, and are placed equally with other beings (e.g. animals and plants) and things, a concept termed ‘flat ontology’ (DeLanda 2002, 58). In this approach, neither human nor entity possess agency, but agency exists in the relations between various parts of the assemblage as a whole (Bennett 2005).

Power is rarely explicitly discussed in these discourses, but relationships between humans and non-human entities will not always be equal; there will be imbalances and inequalities, asymmetries of power, within and between them. This matches well with Foucault's conception of power as omnipresent in society, never possessed but only exercised or performed in relations between people. "Power must be analysed as something which circulates... .. Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation... And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault 1980, 98). If we merge Foucault's reading of power within a non-anthropocentric or 'flat' ontological approach, it opens up the possibility that non-human entities could be entangled in relations of power with humans. If so, is it possible to perceive these unequal relations through traces in the archaeological record?

With the idea of active and vibrant places and materials, and the potential for them to be involved in power relations, let us re-examine the enclosed pit complex at Monkton Up Wimborne and its landscape context.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNDERWORLD

The monument was created when a 1.5 metre deep circular pit, 11m in diameter, was excavated down to a joint between the upper and lower chalk, with a smooth base. Shortly after this pit had been dug, a 6.9 metre deep shaft was cut down from within the eastern edge (Fig 13.1). This shaft was dug down to a thin seam of flint, which was removed to reveal an undulating surface (Green 2007, 114–9). A large number of amphibian and small mammal bones found in the fills of this shaft suggest that it was left open for a substantial period (Maltby 2007, 371). The shaft had been re-dug and scoured out on several occasions, with the rubble being used to create a platform on one side (Green 2007, 116). This platform had a considerable concentration of charcoal and animal bones, mostly cattle, within it (Maltby 2007, 369). A number of hazel twigs from below this platform provided an estimate of 3331–2920 cal BC, a TPQ for the build-up of this platform (95% probability, Wk-18753, 4427±42; French *et al.* 2007, 11).

[Figure 1]

The fill of the shaft contained a series of carefully placed deposits. At the base were a number of chalk blocks, including one with a deep curved groove engraved into it and the butchered

remains of a six-month old pig. Against one side were some cattle vertebrae and a worked sandstone ball. Higher in the fill lay an elaborately decorated block of chalk (Fig 13.2) and a dog leg bone. Much higher were other disarticulated animal and human bones (including a fragment of skull), two flint arrowheads, and a variety of stones and pebbles (Green 2007, 119–120).

[Figure 2]

The decorated chalk block had a central hole, possibly for mounting on a post or handle and has parallels to Irish passage tomb art of similar date (Bradley 2007, 378). Recent analysis has found that the surface was decorated and then reworked to remove some of the decoration, before it was deposited (Jones 2017, 90). Surrounding the large central pit were 14 smaller oval pits, creating a circle of 35m diameter with two opposing entrances. Some large blocks of chalk from the central shaft had been placed within these pits, which again were left open for some time (Green 2007, 118).

[Figure 3]

Dug into the northern side of the central pit was a grave in which four individuals (three children and a woman aged between 30 and 45 years) were interred (Fig 13.3). DNA analysis has shown that the youngest child, a girl of about five years old, was the daughter of the woman. The other two children were a brother and sister, unrelated to the mother and daughter, aged about nine and ten (Green 2000, 79). All three children had *cribra orbitalia*, likely to result from iron deficiency anaemia (McKinley 2007, 376). These children may therefore have had pale skin, perhaps caused by an excess of cow's milk consumption, a lack of meat or other health problems (Paoletti *et al.* 2014). Strontium and lead stable isotope analyses have shown that the woman had originally lived in an area high in lead, probably the Mendips, 40 miles to the north-west, but had spent much of her adult life on chalk geology (Budd *et al.* 2003, 75). Her daughter too had been born in a lead-rich area, but had later moved to chalk. The other two children had been born on chalk geologies, but had lived partly in another region before their deaths. These individuals appear to have moved several times between the Mendips and Cranborne Chase (Budd *et al.* 2003, 76; Montgomery *et al.* 2000) and possibly elsewhere. A radiocarbon date from the adult gave a broad estimate of

3514–3101 cal BC for her death (95% confidence, OxA-8035, 3180±40; Bronk Ramsey *et al.* 2000, 461–2).

Although the shaft at Monkton Up Wimborne was probably not a flint mine, the shaft had been dug down to a thin tabular flint seam, which was removed, and this was seen as an appropriate place to cease digging. The smooth floor of the pit suggests that the people digging had an intimate knowledge of the nature of the chalk, recognising this subtle horizontal joint. Chalk can be hugely variable, ranging from soft, wet soliflucted ‘Coombe Rock’ to compact blocks. Anyone who has excavated at a chalk site or built a chalk cob building knows that it physically covers hands and bodies, clothes and tools, a powdery white. This can blur the boundaries between the substance, and the people who work with it (Harris 2009, 241) as well as the things found within it. Chalk may have been regarded as a regenerative medium because of its pure white colour and its amenability to being carved and re-shaped (Gillings *et al.* 2008, 223).

[Figure 4]

The evidence suggests that periodic ceremonies took place at the open shaft and its nearby platform involving feasting, the deposition of objects and the clearing out of the shaft, perhaps involving the display or re-carving of the chalk block. After these repeated activities, people began to fill the shaft, placing a number of carefully placed and assembled deposits within it (Fig 13.4). The activities are closely paralleled at contemporary flint mines (see papers in Topping and Lynott 2005; Teather 2016; other papers in this volume), suggesting a complex engagement with the underworld which went beyond the purely economic or practical. There are clear connections here to the chalk: the deep shaft, the decorated and worked chalk blocks, the placement of varied material within the shaft, the possibly pale features of the children. The placement of the four burials in a grave dug into the side of the large circular pit and rammed with chalk making virtually indistinguishable (Green 2007, 118), could be taken to imply that the chalk itself was more important or powerful than the lives of these particular people. It has been suggested that they may have been sacrificed (French *et al.* 2007, 122) and the ‘hidden’ nature of the grave gives the impression of the bodies being absorbed into the chalk. The children appear to have had a restricted diet and perhaps had a specialised role in life or in death.

Could the activities at Monkton Up Wimborne have been associated in some way to a relationship with the underworld? Is there some form of power relationship here? Thomas's ideas about how people may have engaged in reciprocal relations with the substance of the earth are relevant here (Thomas 1999). If people were offering or placing bodies and things within the chalk, what was it providing in return? At this time, a regular supply of chalk-derived nodular flint, essential for every form of tool production, was being exported to groups living in the Mendips (Bond 2004), where at least the woman and her child had lived for part of their lives. The burial and the shaft could be part of a complex 'gift exchange' mechanism, a triangle of relations between communities in the Mendips, the people on Cranborne Chase and their flint-giving chalk. The connection is perhaps further underlined by the use of Old Red Sandstone from the Mendip area for making saddle querns and rubbers that were deposited at the early Neolithic gathering place of Hambledon Hill, an easy day's walk to the west of Monkton Up Wimborne. These querns were all in a fragmentary state and often burnt, with the largest piece recovered a pit containing a young male burial (Mercer and Healy 2008, 293; Roe 2008, 634, 640). Radiocarbon dates on this burial and an associated charred hazelnut shell show that this person lived contemporarily with the individuals buried at Monkton Up Wimborne (3630–3375 cal BC, 95% confidence, weighted mean of two dates on human bone UB-4311, 4710±23 and OxA-7818, 4715±40; and hazelnut shell 3640–3360 cal BC, 95% confidence, OxA-7843, 4700±45; Healy *et al.* 2011, 129). Potentially flint and sandstone were caught up in complex, reciprocal or unequal social relations; certainly the specific fragmentation and deposition of querns at Hambledon Hill marks this material as having a particular disposal rite.

It is unlikely that sedentary and separate residential groups lived in the two areas of Cranborne Chase and the Mendips; more likely the people who frequented these landscapes were linked by trade, kinship and other forms of social relation. The isotope evidence of the burials from Monkton Up Wimborne suggests this more complex picture and is supported by other isotope studies which suggest that movement by individuals over long distances was not unusual (Neil *et al.* 2016; Neil *et al.* 2017). It could be suggested that people taking flint away to the Mendip area were indebted to, or perhaps in an unequal power relationship with, the chalk of Cranborne Chase, and perhaps also with the people who controlled this resource. A discussion of the specifics of engagement with materials and the underworld at one site, has led to speculation about power relations or inequalities between people, place and materials. This suggests that an approach that focuses on the potential of substances and places to be involved in social relations can not only enlighten us to potential relationships

between humans and non-humans, but also help us understand human-human relations in which these entities are intertwined. In this vein, let us consider the landscape setting of the monument within the wider Cranborne Chase monument complex.

‘A STRANGE CONTORTED LANDSCAPE’

[Figure 5]

There are two clusters of monuments within the Cranborne Chase complex: those around the Knowlton henges and those located adjacent to the central section of the Dorset Cursus. This extraordinarily long monument stretches for 10km across the headwaters of the Allen and the Crane rivers (Fig 13.5). It has a close relationship with a surrounding cluster of contemporary long barrows and ‘mortuary enclosures’, with some of the long barrows incorporated into the cursus and others clearly laid out in reference to the monument, particularly its terminals (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 36). The cursus has been described as linking together parts of the landscape that were already socially or historically important (Chadwick 2004, 18; Gosden 1994, 98) or monumentalising a pre-existing routeway (Johnston 1999). What has perhaps been less often discussed (although see French *et al.* 2007) is that the central portion of the cursus crosses a “strange, contorted landscape” (Green 2000, 13) consisting of several unusual geological features, all located within the Upper Allen valley.

Firstly, there is an area of approximately 300 square metres that is filled with a series of about 30 round and oval mounds (Fig 13.6). These ‘naleds’ were formed by the collapse of small periglacial ice masses at the end of the last Ice Age, when chalky sludge running off with melt-water built up around ice bodies which then melted (French *et al.* 2007, 3). Naleds are not common geological features, with other examples known only in East Anglia. Today they stand up to four metres high but they would have been more prominent in prehistory. One was the focus on an early Mesolithic flint scatter (Catt *et al.* 1980, 69, 75). When the cursus was built, several of the naleds were cut through by the digging of the ditch (French *et al.* 2007, 7).

To the north and west of the naleds are three deep geological shafts (dolines or sinkholes), one in Fir Tree Field, one in Home Field and the enormous ‘Endless Pit’ close to Down Farm (Allen 1998, Fig. 1). A further depression to the south-east may indicate another (visible as a hollow on Fig 13.6). The Fir Tree Field shaft appears to have attracted considerable attention throughout the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, with a series of postholes, pits and a structure all nearby and deposits placed within it (Green and Allen 1997; French *et al.* 2007, 82). Although the other two solution shafts have not been excavated, a semi-circular crop

mark partly encloses the 'Endless Pit' (Green 2000, 14) suggesting that it too was regarded as a place of significance.

To the east of the naleds is a steep river cliff, forming part of the north-east valley side for about 100 metres. During winter floods, a lake forms immediately below this cliff (French *et al.* 2007, 4) which at these times becomes the source of the River Allen. The river cliff was deliberately incorporated within the banks of the cursus. A rich and extensive flint scatter associated with Peterborough Ware pottery on top of this cliff appears to be the site of some form of occupation bounded within the cursus (Gardiner 1985; Barrett *et al.* 1991, 71).

[Figure 6]

The area of naleds, the seasonal lake, the river cliff and the solution hollows are an assemblage of natural features that together make this a particularly unusual area, an area that was deliberately incorporated into, or sliced through by, the Dorset Cursus. It is possible that prehistoric people viewed these landscape features not as geological formations, but as the cultural creations of past people or ancestral beings. The construction of cursus ditches across older structures or features is known elsewhere, for example at Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire, where a mortuary enclosure was cut by the ditches of the later cursus (Edmonds 1999, 147). The partly infilled 'natural' shafts may have been seen as some form of portals to the underworld, an idea analogous with a rich body of early Irish myths and legends (Waddell 2018, 80–6) and perhaps part of some form of layered cosmology of the world (Eliade 1954; Tuan 1974). The digging of the Monkton Up Wimborne pit and the placing of deposits within it may have directly emulated these large and active openings in the earth. Perhaps Neolithic people regarded this assemblage of unusual landscape features as a powerful locale, a place that was incorporated into stories and myths. There are countless examples in ethnographic studies of communities where people regard particular places in the landscape as active, alive, powerful or having a deep past embedded in myths and stories (Carmichael *et al.* 1994; Eck 2012; Feld and Basso 1996; Hamanşah 2014; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995). In particular, caves, mountain tops, river junctions, springs, sinkholes and unusually shaped rocks, appear to have provided a focus for ritual activity or construction. These are hierophanies as defined by Eliade (1954), special numinous locations where the sacred world is revealed. It is reasonable to assume therefore, that unusual landscape features or active geologies would have drawn the attention of Neolithic people, and that these would have provided suitable locations for constructed monuments and inspiration for ritual activities.

The potency of the Upper Allen valley was harnessed by deliberately incorporating it into the Dorset Cursus and its reputation influenced the siting of later Neolithic monuments such as the Wyke Down henges. These monuments cluster around these geological features which structured later activity, rather than around the cursus, as does a significant group of Early Bronze Age round barrows. Gale (2017, 115–116) has noted that each of the major Early Bronze Age barrow clusters in the Lower Allen Valley near Knowlton was built in close proximity to sinkholes, as indeed were the Knowlton henges themselves (Green 2000, 88). Tilley has made similar observations about the location of round barrows on the South Dorset Ridgeway (Tilley 2010, 234).

There is a pressing need for more detailed information about the Dorset Cursus, particularly the construction date and patterns of activity beyond the central portion, including geophysical survey and aerial photography analysis. Accurate dating currently relies on a single radiocarbon date from an antler pick (3365–3005 cal BC, 95% probability, BM-2438; Healy *et al.* 2011, 156), relatively late for cursus construction in southern England. . One testable hypothesis is that the central section was laid out across this active upper section of the Allen valley first and was only later extended to the north and south (contrary to the usual interpretation of the cursus as a two-phase monument (French *et al.* 2007, 8)).

DISCUSSION: POWER RELATIONS WITH ACTIVE PLACES

The cluster of unusual geological features in the Upper Allen Valley, accentuated over time by a growing and related assemblage of human-made monuments, must have made this a particularly appropriate location for a monument relating to the complex ‘triangle of relations’ between the communities in the Mendips, the people on Cranborne Chase and the flint-giving chalk underworld. The form of the monument, the carefully selected deposits, and the four people interred there, all point to social engagements with the underworld and its materials..

This paper has demonstrated the potential of careful consideration of the qualities and affordances of place, including ‘natural’ landscape features. Archaeology needs a ‘return to place’ as well as a ‘return to things’. The idea that landscapes have meaning and power is not new; Tilley (1994, 24) argued that ancestral powers and meanings in the landscape were actively appropriated by Neolithic people through the construction of monuments. However, the focus here and in the writings of similar phenomenological approaches (e.g. Kirk 1993, Thomas 1993, Barrett 1994; Bender 1998) was on differential power relations between people, orchestrated through control of space, by exclusion or inclusion. In these accounts,

power relations only exist between people; here it is argued that social relations, sometimes unequal in nature, existed between people, materials and places..

It is now 18 years since Richard Bradley published *An Archaeology of Natural Places* (2000), which challenged our understanding of what constitutes a ‘natural’ place, and how these might have been interpreted by prehistoric people as cultural or historical features. It must be asked why this volume didn’t precipitate a wholesale shift in the way that archaeologists think and write about these engagements with ‘natural’ places in prehistory. Perhaps the reason that archaeologists have not more frequently considered local topography and unaltered features of the landscape as directly engaged in social and power relations is because our theoretical approaches are only just beginning to catch up with the principles of Bradley’s thesis. With a shift to a non-anthropocentric perspective, we can begin to fruitfully engage with ‘natural’ features of landscapes. Prehistoric people will most likely not have divided the world into nature and culture in the way that contemporary Euro-American ontologies do (e.g. Ingold 2000; Descola 2013). They may have considered certain landscapes or locales as places which needed to be negotiated with, appeased, or relations with them renewed. Unlike Barrett *et al.* (1991, 3) who emphasised the study of the “*social* rather than the natural landscape”, we should envisage the social world of prehistoric people as encompassing place and landscape too. Of course, the extent and ability to act upon these relations would still have varied from person to person, depending on their initiation status, life stage, role, gender or personal experience. It is by paying close attention to the affordances and potential power relations of both materials and places that we can begin to understand something of the worlds in which Neolithic people lived.

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FIGURES



Figure 13.1- The central pit and shaft of Monkton Up Wimborne under excavation in 1997

(c) Martin Green

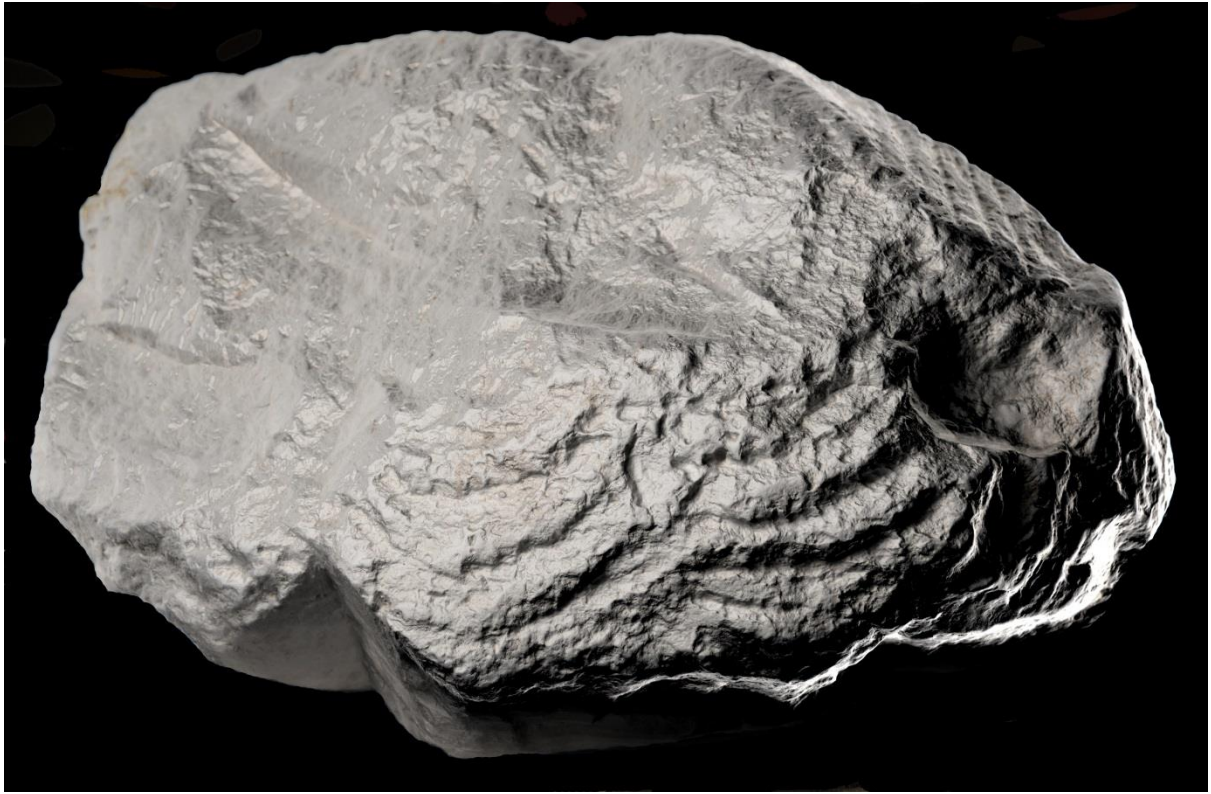


Figure 13.2 – Decorated chalk block from Monkton Up Wimborne shaft. RTI image (c) Marta Díaz-Guardamino Uribe/ Andrew Meirion Jones



[Figure 3]– The four burials from Monkton Up Wimborne pit complex (c) Dave Webb



Figure 13.4 – Reconstruction of Monkton Up Wimborne pit complex (c) Jane Brayne

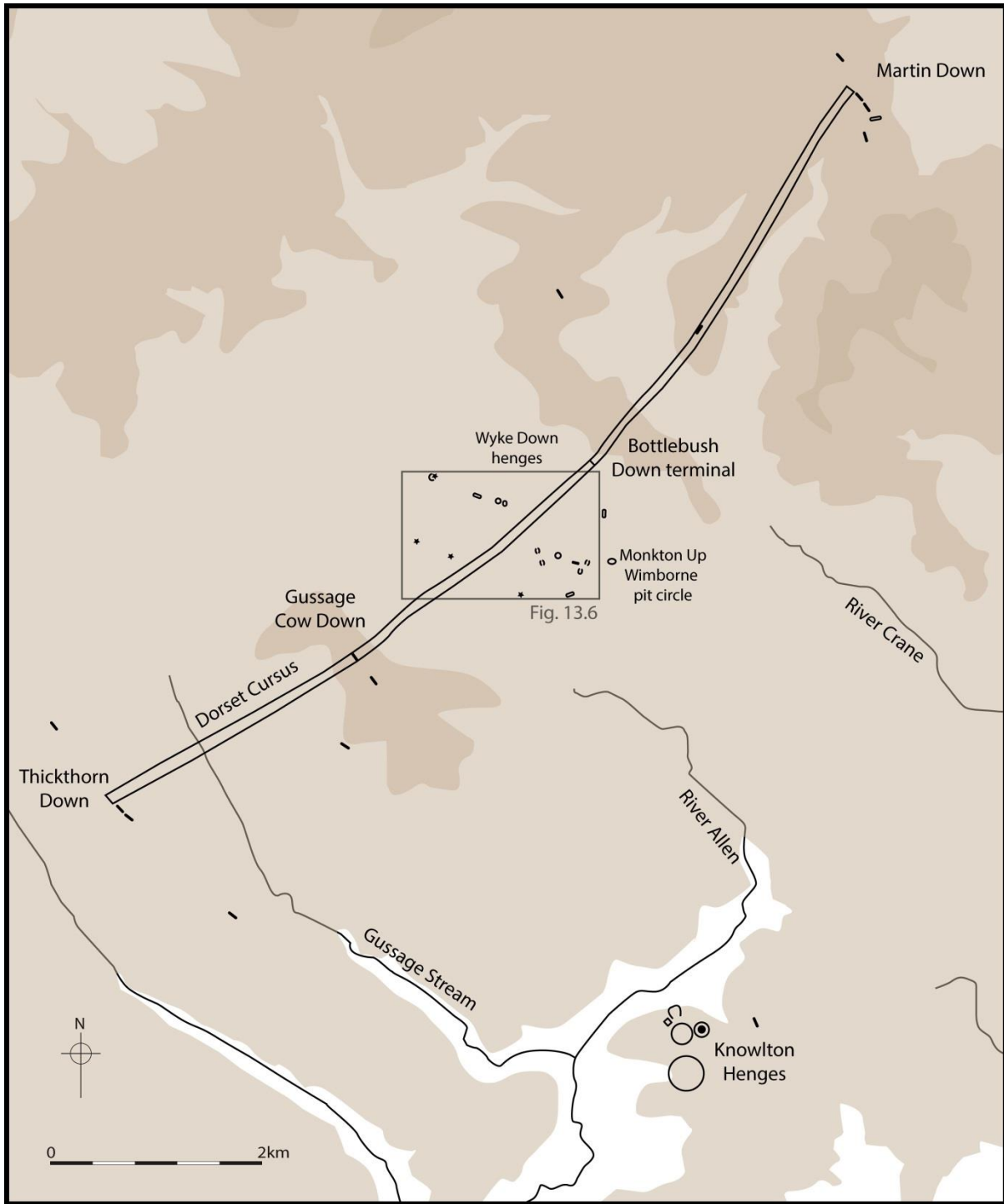


Figure 13.5 – Map showing Neolithic monuments in the area surrounding the Dorset Cursus and Knowlton.

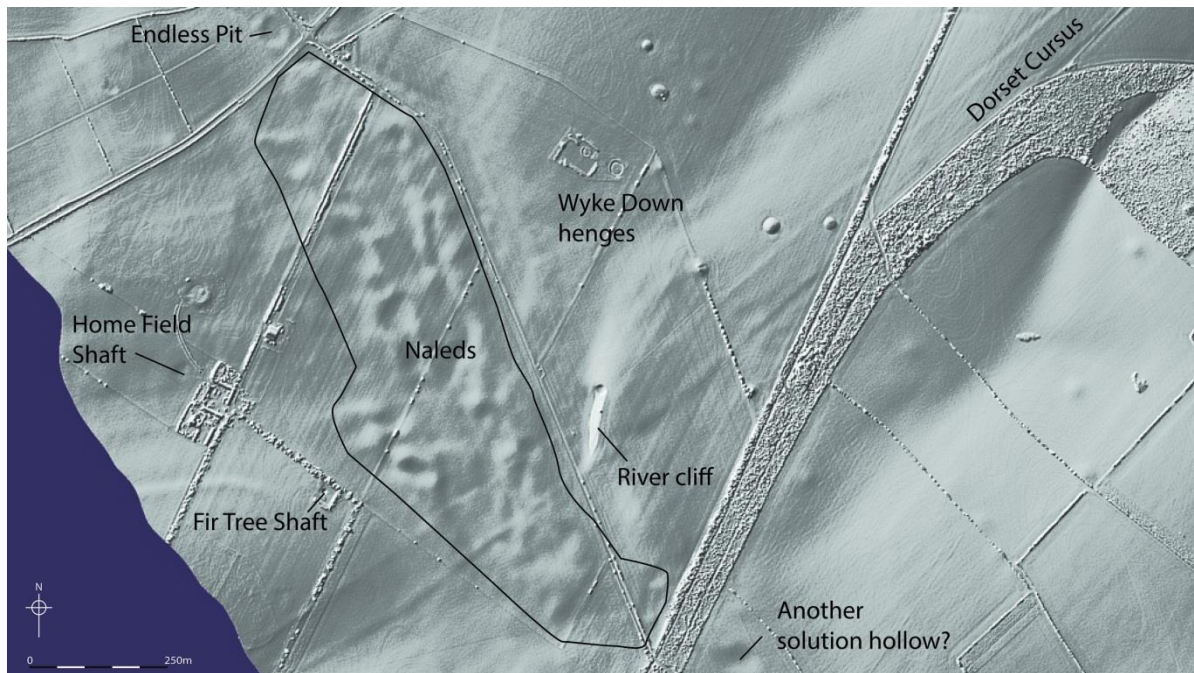


Figure 13.6 – Lidar imagery of the Upper Allen Valley, showing the central section of the Dorset Cursus and its associated geological features: naleds, solution hollows and the river cliff. The parallel earthworks of the cursus can be seen crossing the image from the north-east to the south-west. Lidar data (c) Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2015. All rights reserved.