

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2026

## Reading - Ice age to Romans - Mike Cooper

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At the April meeting of Wargrave Local History Society, returning speaker Mike Cooper's presentation considered the evidence of human settlement around Reading from the hunter-gatherers to the Romans. This was a time when there was no "Reading", but a look at life in our area roughly 500,000 years ago.



Mike began with a review of the earliest evidence that now exists of Reading itself. Apart from parts of St Mary's church, the oldest structures above ground would be the remains of Reading Abbey, dating from about the year 1150, whilst the first detailed written record is the Domesday survey of 1086. The town had gained its name by 871, although possibly up to 400 years before that, whilst the oldest burial of a person in the town area dates to about 230AD. However, burials in the area around Reading date from about 1200BC to 890BC, showing there had been people in this part of the country long before the town was built.

The development of the district around what is now Reading followed the last Ice Age, which had brought glaciers as far south as Oxfordshire. People were living hereabouts half a million years ago, constructing their first buildings about 10,000 years ago, and making their first settlement around 2,900BC - before the time when Stonehenge was built. The evidence that had been discovered could indicate where these people lived, and what they were doing.

The Victorians had found a way to describe the various eras that followed the Ice Age. The first people would date to the paleolithic period (the old stone age), which was followed by the mesolithic period (middle stone age), of around 12,000 years ago, when the first buildings probably appear, and then the neolithic (new stone age), when settlements are created around 4200 to 1500BC. This was followed by the Bronze Age, until 800BC, and then the Iron Age, before the Roman era. Evidence of all of these could be found locally. Where people lived was determined by the nature of the land, some areas being - as now - liable to flood. The course of the major rivers, however, had not always been as they are now. The River Thames, for example, ran north of Caversham 500,000 years ago, whilst the River Kennet had joined it further west than it does now, near Pangbourne.

Discoveries from the Paleolithic era were made in 1879, in an area between Reading town centre and Tilehurst, during work to excavate gravel at what was known as Grovelands Pit. The people here at that time were not of the modern human species, homo sapiens, but homo heidelbergensis - Neanderthal man (*right*). Animals roaming in the area included long toothed elephants, mammoths, woolly rhinoceros, and deer - examples of their bones having been discovered there, as well as pieces of flaked stone, showing that the material was being worked to make tools that were found. To the north of Caversham, around Kidmore End, were found over 200 hand axes. Made by the Neanderthals, these were of the Acheulean pattern, (pear shaped



made of flint or other types of stone with similar characteristics) and were very long-lived tools that could be used for a variety of tasks - cutting, slicing or hammering. Archaeological finds from this period, including more hand axes, have been found across the area in Tilehurst, Southcote, Whitley, Earley and Woodley. These hunter-gatherers had well developed tools, and during the paleolithic era created string and needles, so making it possible to create more sophisticated clothing.

Britain was still joined across the Doggerlands between East Anglia and the Netherlands, so it was possible to walk from what is now London to Amsterdam. This made it possible for hunter-gatherers from northern Europe to reach the greater Reading area. Until the glacial sheets retreated at the end of the Ice Age, a large part of the European population was living in northern Spain, and DNA profiling has shown that these were a greater influence on the development of homo sapiens than the Neanderthals.



*Kidmore End flint,  
about 6" high*

In the mesolithic period, from around 10,000 to 4,200BC, the inhabitants were still hunter-gatherers, but had developed different tools. The climate had become more temperate, so that woods and forests grew. The population had also adapted to these conditions, becoming more like humans. They were able to grow plants which provided fibres that could be used to make textiles, and made possible the use of a bow and arrow. Amongst evidence found locally have been axe heads in the Thames and an ox skeleton discovered on the flood plain at Thames Valley Park, with cut marks from a man-made tool, whilst in Earley, stake holes in the ground suggest that buildings were being constructed there - there was also house building at Thatcham which is claimed to be the oldest town in Berkshire.

The neolithic time was only about 100 'human life-times ago', when those living around here were moving more to farming and stock rearing, and establishing more permanent settlements, and they are now able to create pottery. Archaeological work undertaken to the south of Reading in readiness for building the Green Park office park has revealed a cursus (a stone-age monumental earthwork with parallel ditches) and two ring ditches (their purpose is not known). Some of the worked stone items, such as a dolerite axe-head, seem more like prestige items than tools. Britain has now become an island, and the Thames follows its present course through the Reading area. The era of stone-age technology is however nearing its end, and as well as using timber to build houses, people are also working in wood near Crane Wharf in what is now the town centre, whilst the population is much more like Europeans than their Neandertal predecessors. There is no direct evidence of houses in the Reading area at this time, however.



The significant change that happened next was the move to metal based technology rather than stone. The first of these processes used bronze, with cutting implements not only in the traditional shapes, like axe heads (*top left*) but also spear shaped items with a cutting edge (*bottom left*). The workers had found that by hammering the metal, they could form it into the required shape. It was a time of big changes, with ideas and people coming from the continent, trading things they had made, and mixing practices of various cultures, becoming the ancestors of the British Celts.

(Unfortunately, the recording of finds when these were found would typically be just 'in the river at Reading', rather than a more detailed location).

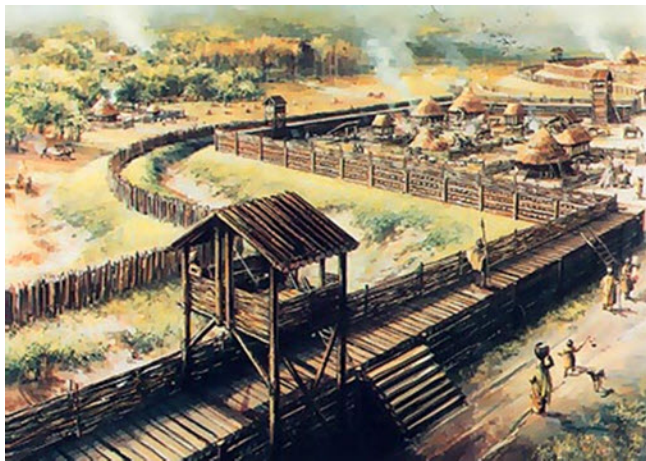
Other changes taking place during the Bronze Age have had a lasting effect on the landscape. Most conspicuous are the carvings onto the hillsides, such as the White Horse at Uffington. On a smaller scale were the burial mounds (known as barrows). In previous periods, burials were commonly in communal barrows, but during the Bronze Age individual burial plots, such as were excavated at Burghfield, were used.

During the archaeological digs on the Green Park site, cremation urns were discovered, and by using radio carbon dating were also found to be for Bronze Age burials. The same technique revealed that the site had been occupied for a long time, with animal bones for example surviving from neolithic times. Overall, the site revealed evidence of field boundaries, and storage for crops and food, whilst over 1,000 post holes indicated that at least 30 buildings had been erected there. By the Bronze Age, people were wearing what Mike called practical, sensible, clothing, made with woollen fabric forming a solid tweed tunic. By laying the pattern over a deer hide, it became apparent that the garment design was the same, but made with a more modern material. Other materials found on the site showed that tools, such as querns, stone axes and bronze implements had been made and used there, and at least 3 burials had taken place. The round buildings had porches that faced towards the south or south-east, so as to capture the light - a porch being necessary if a fire was lit in the centre, as otherwise it would behave like a blast furnace!



*Discovery of cremation urn*

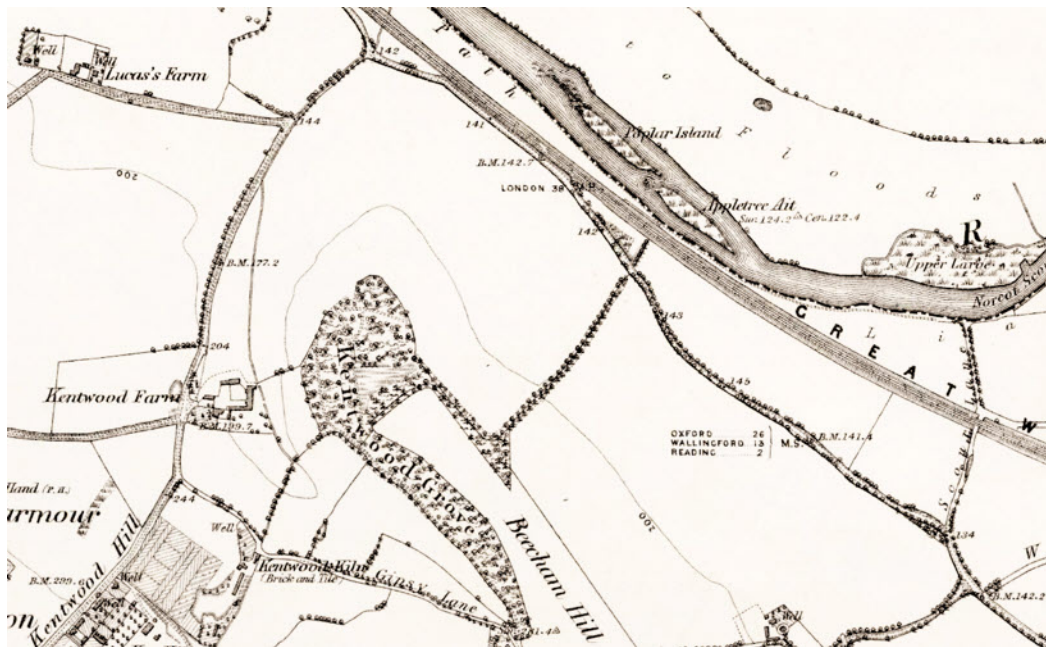
The nature of the farming depended on the location, and around Green Park there was scrubland and it was marshy near the river bank. The land liable to flood in some seasons was therefore more suited to grazing than for growing crops, although some barley, wheat and flax might be grown in the area. The livestock by the Bronze Age included not only cattle, sheep and pigs, but also domesticated horses.



As metal working techniques improved, Britain entered the Iron Age - although the differences were more than suggested by the name. The landscape was changed by the building of hill-top forts. The nearest of these is Caesar's Camp, just south of Bracknell, (*left*) which seems to have been a large enclosed settlement rather than a defensive position. (The name implies that it is of Roman origin but, although near a Roman road, it is much older than that). The Iron Age people were able to dye their woven cloth, so as to make a tartan like fabric for their clothes.

The first evidence of people occupying the town centre area of Reading dates from this period, with the discovery of two Iron Age female skeletons near Crane Wharf. Other objects that have been found include storage pots in the Southcote area, and wattle and daub buildings on the Caversham side of the river. Iron was used to make a range of products, but also as currency for use in trade. Several such iron bars, each about 2 ft long, have been found in the Reading area, as well as individual coins. Those discovered in the central Reading area came from different tribes - the Atrebates (who occupied Berkshire and Hampshire, having their capital at Calleva Atrebatum, which is the modern Silchester) and the Regni (who came from Sussex) - showing that people were travelling in order to trade, whilst from further afield, a Greek cup of similar date was recovered from the Thames.

Another Iron Age feature is what has been called the Tilehurst Bank, which has been dated to about 400BC. The earthwork, with a ditch alongside and marked by a line of trees on the map, runs south-westwards from the Oxford Road, and may have begun by the River Thames opposite Appletree Ait. On reaching Beecham Hill it turns to the north-west, and then turns south-westwards again at Kentwood Copse. (*Tilehurst station is just off the top of the map extract*).



It is clearly a sign that people had divided the land up at this point, but whether it was a field boundary, a territorial boundary, or the remains of a larger structure, and therefore the reason it was built, is not known. Amongst the items found along its course, however, are some pre-Roman coins - probably 'small change' lost by people passing that way.

Mike concluded that although the town of Reading itself was not that old, people had been living in the area for around half a million years, working in the area for about 7,000 years, and building homes for at least 3,500 years. The people themselves had changed, as revealed by their DNA, as had the landscape. By gathering information from a wide range of sources, a better understanding could be formed as to how those living in the area in ancient times related to the environment - long before any written records were created.

For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>

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