

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the study

The Yorkshire Dales in northern England is primarily an upland landscape interspersed with farmsteads, upland hamlets and river valley settlements that mark important river crossings, hill passes and cross-country routeways. Designated as a National Park covering some 831 square miles, it is located between the North York Moors and Lake District National Parks and is characterised by its distinctive limestone geology which supports many rare species of flora and fauna. Contained within the picturesque pastures and dry-stone walls of the individual Dales, the landscape is replete with the evidence of well-preserved archaeological remains comprising features such as stone cairns, enclosures, relict boundaries, and circular habitations that are testimony to the ancient settlement and farming legacy of the region (White 2005:20, Martlew 2011:61).

Whilst the archaeological potential of the Yorkshire Dales is well-known, much of it remains vastly under-researched in comparison to other similar upland landscapes (Martlew 2004:40). Distance and poor transport links, along with the remoteness of some villages and towns, appear to have deterred the levels of antiquarian activity seen in other northern regions such as the Yorkshire Wolds and Humberside (Greenwell 1877, Mortimer 1905) and even now, fieldwork projects can prove logistically challenging to organise. It has; therefore, been left to a handful of independent researchers and local history and archaeology groups to push the research of the region forward (Laurie 2003, Martlew 2009, 2010, Russ 2009, Luke 2013).

One activity that has contributed to our knowledge of the regional archaeological record is caving and pot-hole exploration. The Yorkshire Dales has some of the most extensive caving systems in Britain (Waltham 1987, 2007), and during exploration, cavers have collected both faunal remains and cultural artefacts, helping to illustrate the exploitation of these natural shelters from at least the Early Mesolithic (Lord and Howard 2013). Indeed, the sheer amount of material culture, human remains, and preserved archaeological contexts found within many of the regional caves now offers a rare opportunity to examine the lifestyles and belief systems of the Neolithic occupants of the Yorkshire Dales (Leach 2008, 2015).

Currently, the Yorkshire Dales region has an invisible Neolithic chronology. In other upland regions such as Cumbria and Northumberland, researchers are pursuing alternative approaches to identify this putative 'missing' Neolithic evidence and are considering the time depth of places and their landscape histories rather than simply

interpreting the finished, final form of monuments (Waddington 1999, Evans 2004).

In 2013-5, the survey of two previously unknown Neolithic henge monuments and the excavation of an Early Neolithic house in Upper Wharfedale demonstrated the importance of the Wharfe Valley to people during the Neolithic (Gibson 2017, 2018). These discoveries now raise broader questions regarding the social or ritual use of the Wharfe Valley landscape, the levels of social complexity involved, and the nature of any cultural influences at play during the period of henge activity.

Prehistoric people have always exploited the resource-rich landscape of the Yorkshire Dales, and during the Early Neolithic, when the nature of occupation shifted slowly from mobility to sedentism, incomers and settlers arrived in the region seeking rich grazing lands for domesticates and fertile land for cereal production (Sheridan 2004, 2007). In an attempt to discover more about the genetic ancestry of the Early Neolithic inhabitants of the Yorkshire Dales and the wider British Neolithic population, a recent scientific project has looked at the ancient DNA of human remains from various locations across Britain, including some of the skeletal material from Yorkshire Dales caves (Brace *et al.* 2019). The resulting data from this project raises important questions about the preceding indigenous Late Mesolithic population and the modes of contact between new and existing groups, if any existed at all.

Additional important evidence for the early settling of the Yorkshire Dales has come from the work of Leach (2008, 2015), who has been instrumental in obtaining an accurate chronology for many of the human remains found in the caves. Her work has pushed back the assumed Late Neolithic date of some of the remains to the Early Neolithic and questions the paradigm regarding the contemporaneous nature of Neolithic burial practice and associated material culture such as ceramics and lithics (Gilks 2001, 2003).

Upper Wharfedale is a productive area for lithic collecting (Raistrick 1929,1935, Cherry 1998, 2014, Williams *et al.* 1987), and this has resulted in the accumulation of large flint collections held both privately and within the local museums. Thousands of lithic tools found in molehills or collected from surface scatters reflect the deep history of prehistoric settlement and occupation in the area. Despite some local analysis (Williams *et al.* 1987, Richardson *et al.* 2002), no single study has yet managed to assess the picture across the whole of the Yorkshire Dales. A comparable situation exists for the field-based earthwork and stonework remains. Individual

archaeological features on the Yorkshire Dales National Park Historic Environment Record (HER hereon) have a broad-brush applied chronology where phrases such as ‘possible’ and ‘uncertain’ are commonplace and show how little is certainly known. There are two main reasons for this situation. Some of the unchallenged chronological assignments are the 20th century legacy of Dr Arthur Raistrick, a local archaeologist trained in geology and mining and who was prolific in his publications (Raistrick 1939,1978,1983). Secondly, despite the work carried out by the local archaeological groups and some independent investigators (Laurie 2003, Russ 2009, Martlew 2009), there is a paucity of fieldwork projects across the region (Martlew 2004:40, Luke 2013:7).

Non-intrusive surveying and aerial reconnaissance appear to have fared better, however. In 1988 the Yorkshire Dales Mapping Project was implemented on behalf of Historic England to address the lack of an up-to-date record by using aerial reconnaissance to identify unrecorded archaeology (Horne and MacLeod 1995, 2004:15). This project was an experimental pilot that subsequently paved the way for English Heritage’s National Mapping Program (Horne and MacLeod 2004:15) and succeeded in pushing forward a research agenda for the region (Roskams and Whyman 2007). Although a survey by aerial reconnaissance would seem cost-effective given the geographical extent of the Yorkshire Dales National Park (831 square miles), it can also produce problems of interpretation due to the glacially modified nature of the landscape, which can be challenging to read even at ground level. Monuments presumed to be archaeological can often prove to be natural (Luke 2013) and stone cairns assumed by some to be archaeological, can often be the result of natural processes. Others may be created by agricultural stone clearance, or even as modern follies constructed by walkers marking a successful ascent.

Beyond the geographical bounds of the Yorkshire Dales, the north of England has several large, well-recorded Neolithic sites which have been subject to intensive research, such as the Thornborough Complex (Harding 1997, 2013) and the Swale-Ure Washlands (Vyner *et al.* 2011). In contrast, the lack of such works in the Yorkshire Dales makes it challenging to draw comparisons with any contemporary features in the neighbouring counties or beyond. There is now a dichotomy between the 20th Century archaeological legacy in the Dales, and a desperate need for further research using modern scientific methodology.

With these issues in mind, the purpose of this work is to review and synthesise all the evidence for Neolithic period in the Yorkshire Dales. Topics such as the settlement evidence, funerary practices and monument forms will be reviewed and on completion, will provide an original contribution to the archaeological record for the Yorkshire Dales while adding new data to a period of prehistoric history currently subsumed within the archaeological record by the preceding Mesolithic and later Bronze Age periods. All radiocarbon dates quoted in this work have been calculated and calibrated using the University of

Oxford’s OxCal 4.2.4 program (Reimer *et al.* 2013) and are shown at 95% certainty unless otherwise indicated.

## 1.2 The study area

The Yorkshire Dales are located in north-western England (fig.1.1) and the area is designated a National Park (YDNP hereon) comprising some 831 square miles (fig.1.2), the majority of which is upland hill country.

Geographically, the most north-westerly parts of the YDNP are only 16km from the Lancashire coastline, whilst its eastern periphery extends towards the lowlands of the Vale of Mowbray via the river valleys of the Swale and Ure. For clarity, the geographic boundary of the YDNP will identify the study area in this book; however, this does not imply any working relationship between the writer and the YDNP Authority, and the ideas, suggestions and comments within this work are wholly the author’s own.

The region of the Yorkshire Dales known as Upper Wharfedale (fig.1.3), comprises the Upper Wharfe valley, Malham plateau, Langstrothdale, and Littondale. These landscapes have proven to be core areas of Neolithic occupation, as evidenced by the prolific lithic scatters and occasional finds of polished stone axes and broken sherds of Neolithic ceramics. For this reason, the cultural evidence from Upper Wharfedale will form a significant part of any discussions within this study. Upper Wharfedale is a resource-rich area which would have supported Mesolithic and Neolithic subsistence regimes, and more importantly, fresh water is always available. Although limestone geology is pervious to water and small streams and waterfalls can appear and disappear, the rivers Wharfe and Skirfare, and Malham Tarn have always been



**Fig.1.1 Location of the Yorkshire Dales within the UK.**  
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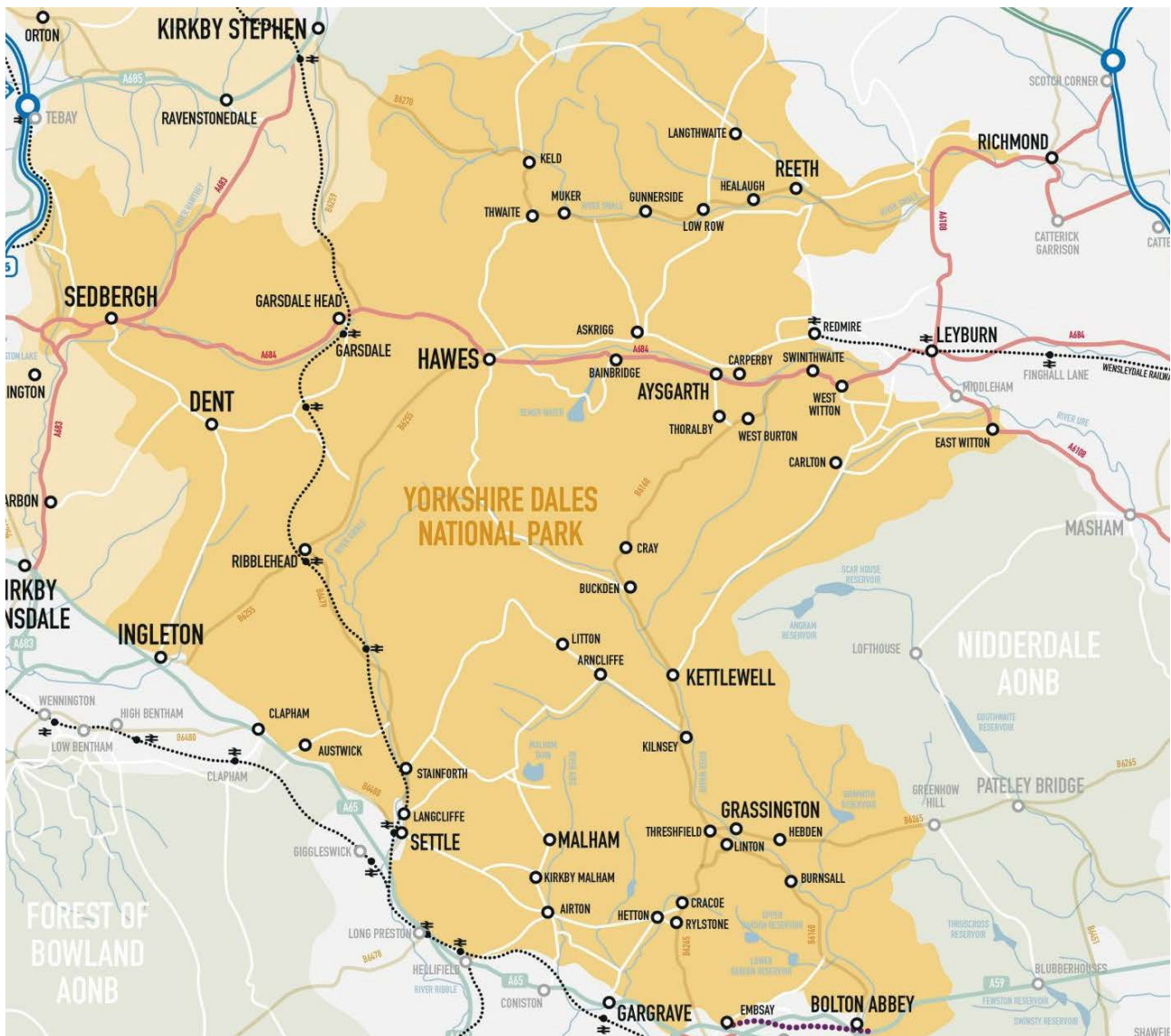


Fig.1.2 Map of the Yorkshire Dales study area. Image © Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

reliable water sources and as such, would have been crucial to the settlement and farming in the area during the Neolithic.

When discussing chronologies, some writers might use the terms early, middle, and late Neolithic, but for clarification, this study will follow the chronology put forward by Saville (2006:1), who has defined two stages known as the Early Neolithic (c.4000-3200/3000 *cal.* BC) and the Late Neolithic (c.3200/3000-2500 *cal.* BC) thus avoiding overcomplication. It is accepted; however, that adherences to conventional chronologies might not apply in all regions and that the notion of what was Mesolithic versus Neolithic can often be a point of debate (Roskams and Whyman 2007:25).

### 1.3 Questions, aims and objectives.

The overarching research question that this study will attempt to answer is what evidence is there for the Neolithic period in the Yorkshire Dales?

A further three key questions represent the aims of this project as follows:

What is the archaeological evidence for Neolithic settlement in the Yorkshire Dales and how has it been identified, what is the regional model for transition from the Mesolithic into the Neolithic, and what has specifically influenced society and culture in the Neolithic heartland of Upper Wharfedale?

The aims will be achieved by the following five objectives:

1. Create a core record of known Neolithic archaeology for further analysis and interpretation.
2. Identify a more comprehensive Yorkshire Dales Neolithic by including an in-depth examination of the peripheral areas of Nidderdale, the northern and north-western Dales and Rombalds Moor, Ilkley.
3. Evidence for Neolithic settlement expansion away from the known persistent Mesolithic places is used to posit the introduction of a pastoral landscape and

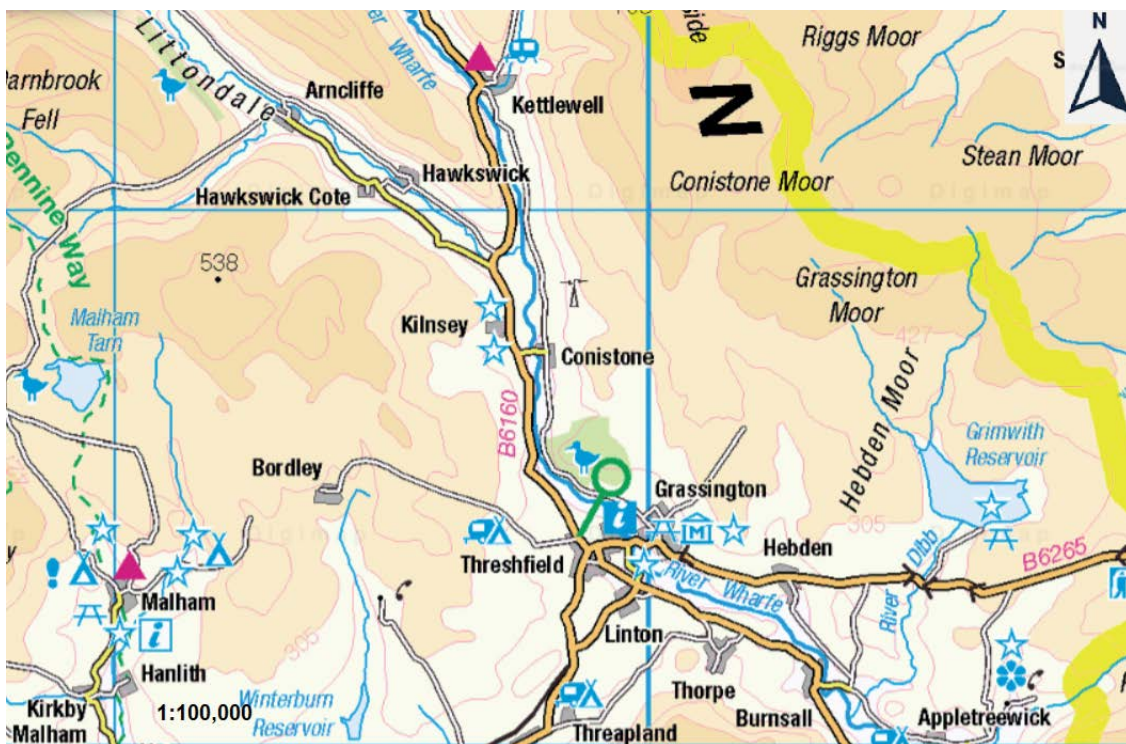


Fig.1.3: Map of Upper Wharfedale. Ordnance Survey (2023a) © Crown Copyright AC866163 using EDINA DIGIMAP OS Service.

an increased reliance on domesticates. This idea is investigated by the use of lithic analysis, site density, and distributions.

4. The speed of regional change within the Yorkshire Dales during the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition is currently unclear, despite Griffiths’ (2014a) wider model for Yorkshire, which excludes any dates specifically from the Yorkshire Dales. A review is put forward in this work using the most current available radiocarbon dates.
5. The final objective seeks to synthesise all the evidence in a concluding discussion to present an accurate and up-to-date record of the Yorkshire Dales during the Neolithic period.

#### 1.4 Format of the study

The chapters in this work will contribute towards an overall picture of Neolithic life and settlement in the Yorkshire Dales by using evidence-based data in a systematic approach. Following the introduction and literature review outlined in Chapters 1-2, Chapter 3 will overview the landscape and paleo-environmental history along with the limited evidence for cereal agriculture. Vegetational histories, prehistoric land use, and woodland clearance are still under-researched areas, along with the study of non-cave faunal assemblages, and subsequently, these are found to be topics in dire need of further study (Swindles *et al.* 2021).

Chapter 4 reviews the evidence for the Mesolithic to Neolithic transition and how it relates to other regions, along with an in-depth review of Neolithic settlement, habitations, and culture. Semi-nomadism

and transhumance and the gradual move to sedentism is also discussed. An examination of some contemporary Irish house forms offers a comparison to Yarnbury, and affinities are recognised (Gibson 2017).

Chapter 5 offers an in-depth review of the lithics, polished stone axes and ceramics from the Yorkshire Dales. The large flint assemblage from Upper Wharfedale is used to provide the basis of comparanda with the peripheral regions of the study area, namely the north-western Dales, the northern Dales, and Nidderdale.

Chapter 6 deals with the Neolithic non-funerary monuments, such as causewayed enclosures, cursus, henges, and stone circles and whereas wider comparisons are drawn beyond the study area, some regionalised forms are suggested for the Yorkshire Dales. A review of the funerary monuments sees an east-west bias in monument styles, whereas a consideration of the Neolithic cave burials finds a possible link to the megalithic burial tradition.

Chapter 7 discusses routeways and mobility across the Yorkshire Dales and the reasons for large and small group movements. Sea-borne and riverine navigation into the hinterland is proposed as a mode of dispersal for incomers and some of the cross-country lowland routes through hill country which have been historically identified as prehistoric axe routes, are questioned. Furthermore, the evidence for salt production on the Cleveland coast (Sherlock 2021) also raises the possibility of a salt route entering the Yorkshire Dales region. This is the first time that salt exploitation has entered the narrative of the prehistory of the Yorkshire Dales.

Finally, Chapter 8 offers an overview of the summary findings of the study. These are discussed and drawn together, along with important areas for further research.

### **1.5 Research methodology**

The methodology that will enable the objectives that have been set out in this chapter will comprise a desk-based assessment using existing literature, academic papers, the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority historic environment record (HER), grey literature, and any reports created by local archaeological and historical groups.

All the artefact and site distribution data has been plotted onto a Geographic Information System (GIS hereon), generally to the level of field names only, unless the finder has an accurate grid reference for the find-spot. To help with this study, the YDNPA Archaeology Team has kindly agreed to share their HER GIS data for research purposes.

Some definition of the use of the place-name Craven within this work is required. Smith (1986) defined the Craven area as comprising the limestone uplands, which are the source of the Ribble, Aire, and Wharfe headwaters but notes that the name is one of convenience (1986:3). It is often colloquially used to describe the Yorkshire Dales, and it is both a historical name for the region and a local government district. Where a Historic Environment Record prefix is quoted, those prefixed MYD are recorded by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority HER, whereas those prefixed MNY, are recorded by North Yorkshire County Council HER. All entries can be accessed via the Heritage Gateway website.