

About the Vale of York



The study area (red outline) in its glacial and post-glacial context
(© A.J.Howard)

The Vale of York is one of the largest lowland plains in the UK, covering an area of approximately 1,800 km² which extends from the Humber estuary in the south to the watershed of the River Tees in the north. It is bounded by the uplands of the Yorkshire Wolds and North York Moors to the east, and by the foothills of the Pennines to the west. The rivers of the Yorkshire Ouse system flow across the Vale from the Pennines into the Humber Estuary, whilst on the eastern side of the Vale the River Derwent drains the North York Moors. The Vale is now a largely agricultural landscape, dotted with market towns and villages, with the historic city of York its central focus. Today its soils are intensively cultivated within a mixed farming economy, the origins of which can be identified in the medieval period, and may extend as far back as the Roman occupation of Britain between the 1st and 5th centuries AD. The combination of natural processes of river and floodplain development with human settlement and land-use has created a landscape of distinctive character and subtle variation, in which modern agriculture serves to conceal, but has by no means replaced, a diverse environmental and cultural archaeological heritage.

The Aggregates Levy

Alluvial Archaeology in the Vale of York is funded by English Heritage with monies provided by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF). The Fund is administered by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), which provides support for the Countryside Agency and English Nature, as well as English Heritage, to address a wide range of environmental issues in areas affected by aggregate extraction. Alluvial Archaeology in the Vale of York is currently funded until March 2004.

Outreach

An important part of Alluvial Archaeology in the Vale of York is engagement with the communities of the Vale in promoting appreciation of the interest and significance of its archaeological heritage and landscape history. Details of the project and its aims are available on the project website at the address below. We also hope to produce a popular publication and a Teachers' Pack for use at Key Stages 1–4, covering the archaeology and landscape history of the Vale, and would particularly welcome input from local teachers regarding the second of these. If you would like further information or advice on any aspect of the project, please contact us.

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Background Image: Wheldrake Ings, May 2003
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Alluvial Archaeology in the Vale of York



York Archaeological Trust

University of Newcastle



ENGLISH HERITAGE

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Landscape

The extensive lowland of the Vale of York was created when ice scoured the region during the last Ice Age, about 20,000 years ago. As well as eroding the land surface, the ice impeded the drainage of water into the Humber Estuary, creating a glacial lake, known to geologists as Lake Humber. This lake covered the area of what is now the Vale of York and the lower Trent Valley. This vast body of water gradually deposited silts, sands and clays, and had silted up by approximately 11,000 years ago. It is these deposits which form much of the broad, flat surface of the Vale as it is today.

In the late glacial and early post-glacial period, about 10,000 years ago, the Vale supported little vegetational cover such as grass or trees. As a result, strong winds blowing across the region eroded large quantities of sand and silt from parts of the Vale and, in huge sandstorms, re-deposited it at locations which were sometimes many kilometres away. These 'wind-blown sands' created areas of sandy heathland, small areas of which survive today in spite of the extensive agricultural improvement of the Vale.



Subsidiary channel flowing into the River Ouse near its confluence with the Humber
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The rivers flowing through the Vale have also played an important part in its development. As river channels have meandered across their floodplains over periods of millennia, they have deposited thick layers of fine-grained silt and clay, called alluvium, during floods. In some areas peat deposits have formed; where these remain waterlogged they provide important records of climate change and human activity over long periods.

Archaeology



Late Iron Age roundhouses near Easingwold
© York Archaeological Trust (M. Andrews)

Relatively little is known of the archaeology of the Vale of York, particularly when compared with the city of York itself and with the upland landscapes to the east and west. Until quite recently it was widely assumed that most of the Vale would have been an empty wasteland until about the 12th century, when documentary sources begin to refer to villages and farms. But over the last twenty years aerial photography and archaeology have started to reveal a much longer and more exciting story. Parts of the Vale were certainly settled by humans in the late Iron Age, immediately before the Roman conquest of Britain in the 1st century AD. It is possible that in the Roman period (which lasted until the early 5th century AD) areas of the Vale were transformed from seasonally occupied grazing areas into intensively farmed landscapes. Going still further back in time, a small number of finds and sites suggest that the Vale, probably then a wet and marshy area, was exploited for its fuel, fowl and fish resources by Neolithic (New Stone Age) communities in the 2nd millennium BC, and by hunter-gathering bands of the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) in the 3rd millennium BC and earlier. It is even possible, in the southern parts of the Vale at least, that traces left by their Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) predecessors may still survive.

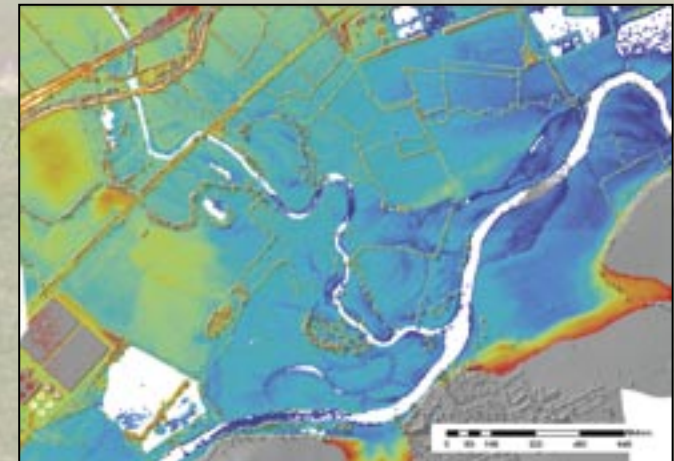
Background image:
The Vale of York from Sherburn in Elmet, May 2003
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Research

The key to understanding the archaeology of the Vale, and through that how people in the remote past lived in and exploited this lowland area, is the relationship between the rivers, ancient human settlement, and the possible survival of archaeological evidence beneath river-deposited ('alluvial') sediments.

The project aims to bring together archaeological, geological, geomorphological and hydrological data-sets to build a broad picture of past landscape development and human settlement in the Vale. This information is being stored and will be studied within a computer-based Geographical Information System (GIS).

It is anticipated that this research will allow the identification of localities where fieldwork could dramatically improve our understanding of these and related issues across a number of historical periods since the end of the last Ice Age. It may be possible to pursue such fieldwork at a later stage if further ALSF funding becomes available. The information gathered by Alluvial Archaeology in the Vale of York will be available to cultural resource managers in the region, to frame policy for archaeological aspects of the historic environment and inform future decision making.



LiDAR digital elevation model showing the pattern of minor channels at the confluence of two rivers
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