The Geological Society

Lecture on Wednesday 24th January 2024

Ancient Rivers, Early Humans: The River Thames 500,000 - 1 million years ago

Presented by

Kathryn M. Price. PhD Student at University of Reading & Department of Britain, Europe & Prehistory, British Museum

Date: Wednesday 24th January 2024

Venue: RSK, 18 Frogmore Road, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire. Post code: HP3 9RT

Venue opens and refreshments from 6.30pm

Meeting starts at 7pm

Kathryn holds a BSc (Hons) in Archaeology from University of Wales, Cardiff, an MA (distinction) in Human Origins and Palaeolithic Archaeology from Southampton University and some eighteen years' experience of working in Archaeology, Heritage and Museums. She has worked for a variety of organisations including English Heritage, Cotswold Archaeology and the Newport Medieval Ship in various roles of field, finds, environmental and archive archaeologist as well as a lithic specialist.

Kathryn has had the privilege of surveying, excavating, and handling Palaeolithic material from a wide geographical area on several international research projects partnered with various UK universities, including projects in South Africa, Georgia, France, India, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. She also previously worked as Assistant Curator in the National Museum of Qatar, as Archaeologist (Artefact Analysis) for Historic England and Heritage Officer for the National Botanic Garden of Wales. Her public outreach has included talks for local heritage groups, organising a Young Archaeologists' Club and facilitating hands on archaeology sessions in local primary schools.

Abstract:

Kathryn's lecture explores some of the interconnections between Pleistocene geology in southern England and early hominid archaeology. There are ongoing discussions and hypothesis concerning the role of estuarine and river landscapes with respect to the early colonisation(s) of Britain and indeed North-Western Europe and in particular the strengths of estuarine environments as a mosaic of resources to endue winter months (Ashton & Lewis 2012, Cohen et al 2012). This has become a more prominent discussion especially with the discovery and understanding of the sites along the Cromer – Forest Bed in Norfolk where, at present, the earliest presence of humans in Britain is recorded (Lewis et al 2019) at Happisburgh 3 (MIS 25/21) and Pakefield (MIS 19/17).

The research project is focussed solely on riparian landscapes in the very middle section of the Ancient Ancestral River Thames. The study area (between Reading and Beaconsfield) is approximately between 172km and 208km inland from what would have formed the estuarine landscape of the Thames. The project therefore is a detailed snapshot of an inland river system which has the potential of contributing significantly to the nature of what inland occupation consisted of in terms of early 'pioneer' hominin occupation and in broad terms its chronology.

Significantly, the Thames River in the study area was not altered by the Anglian Glaciation (at ~500,000 ya), except in the Caversham Ancient Channel, and is an area in which remnants of all six of the higher pre-Anglian Ancestral Thames terraces remain (Westland Green, Satwell, Beaconsfield, Gerrards Cross, Winter Hill and Black Park Gravel Members). This area is therefore a key geographic location to investigate the presence, or absence, of these earlier pioneering populations.

Kathryn will present findings of this research so far, focussing on the fieldwork which has taken place in the study area over three seasons. The fieldwork was aimed to contextualise the river gravel deposits, sieve the gravels for potential human presence, and sample especially for clast lithology and dating - using the electron-spin resonance (ESR) dating technique. The presentation will also tie this methodology strand to the other more archaeological focussed strands to provide an overall view of what questions the research is attempting to answer:

• Was initial colonisation dependent on the more oceanic climates and wider, collectable food resources, e.g. shellfish, found in coastal areas? Did these early 'pioneer' populations move inland?

• Was inland occupation dependent on more advanced technologies, e.g. clothing, shelter, fire, better food acquisition techniques, e.g. hunting, and implicitly improved social cooperation?

There will be an opportunity to inspect some of the artefacts that have been found during the research.

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This event is free of charge to all members of the Geological Society Home Counties North Regional Group. Priority will be given to Fellows and Student Fellows of the Geological Society who are members of the Home Counties North Regional Group.

Please book your places on a first-come-first-served basis by e-mail to homecountiesnorthregionalgroup@gmail.com

Please provide your membership number when booking your place.

This event is supported by RSK, and Soil Consultants.

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