

Mammoths and Neanderthals in the Thames Valley

Excavations at Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire

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Contents

List of Figures	iv
List of Tables	xi
Acknowledgements	xiv
Preface	xvi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The excavations.....	5
Geological context of the Stanton Harcourt Channel.....	6
The regional setting of the Stanton Harcourt Channel.....	7
Lower Stratigraphic Boundary	8
Upper Stratigraphic Boundary.....	8
Chapter 2: Evidence for the Contemporaneity of Bones, Wood, Molluscs and Artefacts	11
Stratigraphy and sedimentology.....	12
Bones assemblages at their death sites	20
Group A	22
The context of the mammoth skull SH1/242 in Group A.....	22
Group B.....	29
The context of the mammoth skull SH4/124 in Group B.....	29
The 'plank'	34
Group C.....	36
The context the semi-articulated mammoth vertebrae SH1/245	37
Group D.....	37
The context of the mandible SH1/180, skull SH1/162 and tusk SH1/179	37
Group E.....	39
The context of the bones of Group E.....	42
The context of wood, fresh-water molluscs and other environmental material at the excavation site.....	47
The presence of hominins	50
Chapter 3: Dating The Stanton Harcourt Channel Deposits.....	55
Absolute dating	55
Amino acid dating of shell.....	55
Amino acid dating of dental enamel.....	55
Optically stimulated luminescence	58
Electron spin resonance and Uranium series	58
Biostratigraphy	59
Large vertebrates.....	59
Molluscs	61
Insects.....	67
Vegetation.....	72
Artefacts.....	75

Chapter 4: The Mammoths	76
The composition of the mammoth assemblage.....	90
Dental and cranial remains.....	91
Skulls.....	93
Upper dentition.....	93
Mandibles and lower dentition.....	94
Tusks.....	97
The age range of the mammoth tusks at Stanton Harcourt.....	99
Post-cranial remains.....	109
Forelimbs.....	109
Hindlimbs.....	109
Ribs, vertebrae and feet.....	109
The sex of the Stanton Harcourt mammoths.....	122
Mandible shape.....	122
Size and robusticity of the skeleton.....	122
Tusks and alveoli.....	123
Pelvic morphology.....	123
Interpreting the mammoth remains: death, carcass dispersal, the effect of the river	124
Causes of death among elephants.....	124
The dispersal of elephant carcasses after death.....	125
Surface condition: weathering and gnawing.....	126
Differential preservation of the mammoth remains in a fluvial environment.....	127
The role of epiphyseal fusion in the preservation of skeletal elements.....	127
The role of weight and shape in preservation of the mammoth remains.....	128
Population structure of the Stanton Harcourt mammoth assemblage.....	129
Determining ontogenetic age in mammoths.....	130
Elephant and mammoth populations and age profiles.....	132
Chapter 5: Vertebrates other than Mammoths at Stanton Harcourt	142
The carnivores.....	142
Wolf - <i>Canis lupus</i>	142
Bear - <i>Ursus arctos</i>	145
European cave lion - <i>Panthera spelaea</i>	147
The herbivores.....	155
Straight-tusked elephant - <i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i>	155
Horse - <i>Equus ferus</i>	161
Red deer - <i>Cervus elaphus</i>	167
Steppe Bison - <i>Bison priscus</i>	168
Bison cranial and dentition.....	171
Bison post-cranial.....	172
Small vertebrates.....	179
Herpetofauna – reptiles and amphibians.....	179
Ichthyofauna - fish.....	180
Avifauna - birds.....	180

Chapter 6: The Climatic and Environmental Evidence	181
Wood and other vegetation as climatic indicators.....	182
Wood.....	182
Pollen, seeds and spores	187
Climatic interpretation of the molluscs.....	189
Populations and species	189
Isotope studies	190
Large vertebrates as climatic indicators.....	199
The local environment - wood and other vegetation	200
Wood.....	200
Pollen, seeds and spores	201
Seeds and plant fragments.....	203
Insects and the environment	203
Molluscs and the environment	207
Vertebrates and the environment	207
Species representation	207
Isotopic analyses of mammalian teeth.....	208
Chapter 7: The Artefacts	212
Descriptions of the artefacts.....	212
Artefacts from the wider context near Stanton Harcourt	222
Selected items from Dix and Gravelly Guy pits.....	222
Discussion	225
The Stanton Harcourt artefacts and other British assemblages	232
Chapter 8: Neanderthals in the Thames Valley	233
References	240

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Site location map with simplified geology	2
Figure 1.2	Looking SE at part of the excavation site showing the Pleistocene fluvial sediments that had been left at the base of the pit after gravel extraction and, below these, the Oxford Clay.....	3
Figure 1.3	Plan of the excavation grid at Dix Pit, Stanton Harcourt.....	4
Figure 1.4	Excavating a mammoth tusk.....	6
Figure 1.5	A mammoth mandible with dentition being uncovered.....	6
Figure 1.6	Shoulder height in British Pleistocene mammoths estimated from fossil post-cranial remains. Minimum and maximum shoulder heights for the Early Pleistocene steppe mammoths and the Late Pleistocene woolly mammoths are calculated from the skeletal remains of males (data from Lister and Stuart 2010). Females are likely to have been smaller. The remains of the MIS 7 steppe mammoths were not sufficiently complete to determine the sex of individuals. Thus the figure simply represents the shortest to tallest individuals represented (Scott and Lister in press).	7
Figure 1.7	(a) Plan of ice wedge cast at Site 1 bisecting mammoth tusks SH1/17 and SH1/18.....	9
Figure 1.7	(b) Photograph of the ice wedge and tusks taken from west.....	10
Figure 1.8	Ice wedge bisecting bison mandible SH1/340). Inset: the mandible once restored	10
Figure 2.1	A complete ‘turtle’ stone partially resting on the bluish-grey Oxford Clay (left) with <i>Gryphaea</i> shells against it on the upstream side. The distance between pegs 13 and 14 is 1 metre.....	14
Figure 2.2	Mammoth tusks, teeth and bones with wood and ‘turtle’ stones at Site 7	15
Figure 2.3	Early bar sediment on the left bank of a meander bend.....	17
Figure 2.4	Bones and tusks stacked against sandy silt at the base of the bar (scale = 30 cm)	18
Figure 2.5	Modern curvilinear faults in clay. Rotational sediment movement is downward into the void on the left.	19
Figure 2.6	Map of the bones of an African elephant <i>Loxodonta africana</i> one year after death Skull = yellow, fore limbs = green, hind limbs = brown, axial skeleton = grey, pelvis = blue (from White and Diedrich 2012).	21
Figure 2.7	Proposed locations of bone groups in the channel (Photograph taken at Combe Mill, Oxfordshire, on the River Evenlode.....	22
Figure 2.8	The bones of Group A: centred around mammoth skull SH1/242	23
Figure 2.9	Bed 37. Bone Group A. Mammoth skull SH1/242 in the channel in Bed 37.....	24
Figure 2.10	Beds 38 and 39. Erosion and deposition near ‘turtle’ stones	26
Figure 2.11	Mammoth skull (SH4/124) resting on oak logs and large ribs	29
Figure 2.12	The bones of Group B: centred around mammoth skull SH4/124	28
Figure 2.13	Bed 43. Bone Group B. Mammoth skull SH4/124 at the wooded right bank	30
Figure 2.14	Bed 44. Bone Group C. Meander expansion and migration.....	32
Figure 2.15	The ‘plank’. The distance between peg A48 and the peg in the centre of the photo is 1 metre.	34

Figure 2.16	A section of the neck of a mammoth (SH1-245). From right to left are the axis, 1st, 2nd and 3rd cervical vertebrae	36
Figure 2.17	The bones of Group D. Top left: Plan of mandible SH1/180, tusk SH1/179 and the skull SH1/162 with part of a tusk still in its socket. Top right: photograph of the group showing extensive damage to the skull. Below: after the removal of the skull.....	38
Figure 2.18	The bones of Group E: the post-cranial remains of a mammoth	40
Figure 2.19	Tusk, molar and post-cranial remains (shaded) of the mammoth at Site 7/8 (Group E)	40
Figure 2.20	Three lumbar vertebrae (part of SH8/4). These and the adjoining sacrum were all dorsal side down in the silt. The spines (although cracked in the process of excavation) showed almost no damage, suggesting little post-depositional disturbance.....	41
Figure 2.21	Right innominate (pelvis) SH7/119. The long margin of the iliac crest is virtually undamaged, indicating little post-depositional movement of this bone. This delicate long edge is incomplete in all other examples of this bone (see Chapter 4).	41
Figure 2.22	Bed 58. Bone Group E. An undisturbed mammoth carcass near the undercut right bank at Site 8	43
Figure 2.23	Bed 60 and 62. Sediment movement to the NE at Site 8. Carcass burial	44
Figure 2.24	The decaying carcass of an African elephant on a river bank. The mammoth carcass (bones of Group E) is interpreted as having originated similarly at the edge of the river and become incorporated into the Channel sediments (photograph reprinted with permission from The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Elephants by S.K. Eltringham. London: Salamander Books).	46
Figure 2.25	Examples of the preservation of wood at the site. Clockwise from top left: logs and tusks at Site 4; roots at Site 2; branches at Site 7; log and branches at Site 1	47
Figure 2.26	Log jams across the site concentrated and preserved molluscs, seeds and small bones.	48
Figure 2.27	Above: clusters of articulated <i>Potomida littoralis</i> with commissures pointing upwards. These are interpreted as an in-situ population that had been rapidly buried. Below: single <i>P. littoralis</i> (not in life situation) but showing typically excellent preservation of these molluscs at the site.	49
Figure 2.28	Above: Molluscs (<i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> and a few snail shells) from Stanton Harcourt illustrating their good preservation. Below: <i>C. fluminalis</i> from the excavation (left) compared to a modern <i>Corbicula</i> from Indonesia.	51
Figure 2.29	Handaxe A4. The negative scars are quite sharp, suggesting that the artefact was not exposed for long on the land surface before becoming buried and moved very little once in the streambed.	53
Figure 2.30	Patinated artefacts excavated from the bar sequence at Site 1. A3 was from just above the early sand scrolls. A5 is an unrolled artefact from a very thin fine sand near the top.	53
Figure 3.1	Free amino acid (FAA) vs total hydrolysable amino acid (THAA) racemisation of Elephantidae enamel samples from Stanton Harcourt gravel pit and samples from other UK sites (Dickinson et al. 2019). The other UK sites have	

	been correlated with: MIS 6 (Tattershall Thorpe), MIS 7 (Crayford, Ilford) and MIS 11 (Barnfield pit, Swanscombe)	58
Figure 3.2	Large vertebrate representation at Stanton Harcourt	60
Figure 4.1	Skeletal remains of mammoth from Stanton Harcourt. Numbers represent individual specimens (NISP) rather than the number of mammoths (MNI)	91
Figure 4.2	Diagrams of a mammoth skull and mandible from the side and a skull from the front	92
Figure 4.3	Frontal and nasal of partial mammoth skull SH1-242. Although the occipital region of this skull was missing, this skull has one premaxilla, the palate, and part of the left maxilla with M3.	92
Figure 4.4	Mammoth skull SH15-36 with palate facing upwards showing left and right M2s and M3s <i>in situ</i>	93
Figure 4.5	Mammoth upper molars showing little damage to the fragile roots. SH6-21: L M2; SH14-45: R M1; SH7-238: R M3; SH7-220: L M3.....	94
Figure 4.6	Mammoth upper molars in fair condition but having lost their roots. SH1-223: L M3; SH4-89: L M3; SH7-27: L M3; SH6-126: L M3	95
Figure 4.7	Diagram showing parts of mammoth mandible	96
Figure 4.8	Three mammoth mandibles with dentition in different stages of eruption and wear. For estimated age at death (AEY) see Chapter 4. SH6-233 with Rdp3 in medium wear and L+R dp4 in crypt – AEY 1-2 years. SH6-253 with L+R m2 (worn) and L+R m3 in medium wear - AEY 39 years. SH1-237 with L+R m3 (worn) – AEY 43 years	96
Figure 4.9	Mammoth lower teeth showing relatively undamaged roots. SH1/365: L m3; SH7/10: R m3; SH7/54: L m3; SH2-50: Rm3	97
Figure 4.10	Mammoth mandibles without dentition illustrating two types of post-depositional preservation. In the top two rows SH1-101, SH1-103, SH1-325 and SH6-149 have lost molars but have distinct morphological features and sharp-edged breaks. These probably underwent little movement in the water after deposition. In the lower two rows SH1-24, SH1/207, SH7-147 and SH7/289 have rounded contours and show significant weathering and/or fluvial damage.....	98
Figure 4.11	Relative frequencies of complete and partial tusks at Stanton Harcourt	99
Figure 4.12	Complete tusks in the process of excavation showing relatively little surface damage. Note that the tusk (e) is still encased in the premaxilla.....	101
Figure 4.13	Some of the complete tusks from Stanton Harcourt: (a) SH6/144 (b) SH1/125, SH6/212 and SH1/179	102
Figure 4.14	Tusks removed from the field in fibreglass and Plaster of Paris.....	103
Figure 4.15	Examples of post- depositional damage to tusks: (a) Three tusks: SH7/241 has both ends removed by quarrying to the interface of the MIS 6 (quarried) gravel and the underlying channel gravel. SH7/243 has had the proximal end cut off during quarrying and the distal end destroyed by the excavation of a trench. The small tusk SH7/242 has also been intersected by the trench. (b) the proximal end of SH7/80 was evidently sheared off by the incoming MIS 6 gravel and the distal end was damaged during trench excavation. (c) Distal end of tusk SH4/125 quarried away (d) Tusk SH7-280 damaged by quarrying/surface scraping leaving only traces of the complete tusk.....	105

Figure 4.16	African elephant and mammoth tusks in various stages of weathering. (a) the larger grey tusks of African elephants had been lying about for less than 10 years and are similar in surface condition to many complete tusks from Stanton Harcourt. (b) Africa elephant tusk that had lain on the surface for 10-15 years. (c) detail of weathered tusk from Stanton Harcourt (elephant tusk photos with kind permission of Gary Haynes)	106
Figure 4.17	Stanton Harcourt mammoth tusks on which it was possible to take complete outside length measurements (Table 4.5). On the right hand are shown the average range of tusk lengths for male and female European woolly mammoth <i>M. primigenius</i> (data from Lister and Bahn 2015).....	107
Figure 4.18	Proximal diameter of Stanton Harcourt mammoth tusks (for measurements see Table 4.5)	107
Figure 4.19	Proximal width vs. length of complete tusks from Stanton Harcourt	108
Figure 4.20	Examples of mammoth scapulae from Stanton Harcourt showing typically good preservation of proximal ends and damage to distal margins: (a) SH1/261 and (b) SH7/174	110
Figure 4.21	Measurements taken on mammoth scapulae	111
Figure 4.22	Selection of mammoth humeri from Stanton Harcourt: SH4/73, SH1/4 and SH3/4	112
Figure 4.23	Measurements taken on mammoth humeri.....	112
Figure 4.24	(a) complete mammoth ulnae SH8/46 and juvenile SH6/45 (b) typical preservation of ulnae at the site - SH1/284.....	114
Figure 4.25	Measurements taken on mammoth ulnae	114
Figure 4.26	Fragmentary mammoth radii from Stanton Harcourt – SH6/88, SH8/36 and SH6/218	114
Figure 4.27	Typical preservation of mammoth innominates from Stanton Harcourt	116
Figure 4.28	Measurements taken on mammoth pelvic bones (innominates)	117
Figure 4.29	Mammoth femora from Stanton Harcourt. (a) complete femur (SH8/25) with both proximal and distal epiphyses fused. (b) femur SH1/308 with fused distal epiphysis. (c) diaphysis of young mammoth (SH1/5).....	119
Figure 4.30	Measurements taken on mammoth femora	120
Figure 4.31	Tibia SH2/58 (modern break)	120
Figure 4.33	Almost complete mammoth fibulae SH7/100 (centre) and SH7/230 (below) with small section of elephant fibula SH1/15 above	120
Figure 4.32	Measurements taken on mammoth tibiae (Table 4.15)	121
Figure 4.34	The ratio of the diameter of the acetabulum against the width of the base of the ilium is a good index of animal size and appears to show clear bimodality of the pelves of the Stanton Harcourt mammoths. (Measurements 1 and 4 in Figure 4.28, Table 4.12).....	123
Figure 4.35	Stanton Harcourt mammoth dentition assigned to age groups based on tooth wear related to age as described in the text. For the upper molars n=71; for the lower molars n=88.....	134
Figure 4.36	Mortality profile of the Stanton Harcourt mammoths compared with mortality profiles for African elephants. The simulated Hwange population is the combined data of the multi-year culled family groups to which is added the estimated number of males not culled. The die-off profile is	

	constructed from data on deaths of herds affected by drought over multiple years (Haynes 1987 and unpublished data pers. comm.)	134
Figure 4.37	Stanton Harcourt mammoth age profile compared with data for a stable population of African elephants and Pleistocene mammoth assemblages from Poland and Alaska	136
Figure 5.1	Proportional representation of large vertebrate species at Stanton Harcourt .	143
Figure 5.2	Wolf metacarpal (SH7-24: left MCII) from Stanton Harcourt	145
Figure 5.3	Bear remains from Stanton Harcourt. Top row: mandible SH6-263; upper middle row: mandible SH5-8; lower middle row lumbar vertebrae SH2-17 and SH1-115; bottom row: first phalanx SH2-4	147
Figure 5.4	Comparison of lower m1 measurements for <i>Ursus arctos</i> . Data for Banwell Bone Cave, modern Europe and the Balkans are from Pappa (2014) and shown as the mean for m1 in each sample. Points for specimens from Picken’s Hole (PH5) and Stanton Harcourt are K.Scott’s measurements.....	148
Figure 5.5	Remains of lion <i>Felis spelaea</i> from Stanton Harcourt. Diagram (top right) shows relative positions of premaxilla SH2-27 (5.5a) and left mandible SH4-10 (5.5c) Figure 5.5d shows metapodial SH4-22	150
Figure 5.6	Right mandible of lion from Marsworth (MIS 7) Specimen AYBCM : 1980.544. L7/2. Photograph and measurements of this specimen were kindly supplied by M. Palmer, Buckinghamshire County Museum.....	150
Figure 5.7	Lion carnassial (m1) length for modern African lions compared with British Pleistocene specimens (see Table 5.5 for measurements)	154
Figure 5.8	Estimating the relative heights of Neanderthal man and the lion <i>Felis spelaea</i> from Stanton Harcourt (SH4-22). With thanks to Jersey Heritage and sculptor Elizabeth Daynes for permission to reproduce the photograph of the statue of a Neanderthal man.....	154
Figure 5.9	Remains (NISP) of straight-tusked elephant at Stanton Harcourt	158
Figure 5.10	Dentition of straight-tusked elephant <i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i> from Stanton Harcourt. 10a and 10b: occlusal and buccal views of lower left m1 (SH14-42). 10c and 10d: buccal and occlusal views of upper left M3 (SH1-96).....	158
Figure 5.11	Representation of herbivores at MIS 7 sites. Data for Stanton Harcourt, Marsworth and Latton is the author’s; data for other sites from Schreve (1997).	159
Figure 5.12	Proximal ulnae of elephant (SH1-282) and mammoth (SH6-162)	159
Figure 5.13	Partial mandible of straight-tusked elephant (SH7-290) compared with mammoth mandible (SH1-103) showing the much deeper, thicker definition of the mandibular symphysis in the elephant.	160
Figure 5.14	Posterior and anterior views of axis vertebrae of mammoth (SH4-126 above) and of straight-tusked elephant (SH1-7).....	160
Figure 5.15	Representation of skeletal remains of horse at Stanton Harcourt (ribs were present but not counted).....	162
Figure 5.16	Horse metatarsal from Stanton Harcourt (above) compared with the largest from Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3)	164
Figure 5.17	Horse distal tibiae from Stanton Harcourt (left) and Sutton Courtenay	164
Figure 5.18	Comparison of horse distal tibia measurements from Stanton Harcourt and Latton (MIS 7 sites) with those from Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3)	164

Figure 5.19	Comparison of horse proximal metatarsal measurements from Stanton Harcourt and Ilford (MIS 7 sites) with those from Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3) ..	165
Figure 5.20	Comparison of estimated height at withers for <i>Equus ferus</i> based on metatarsals from MIS 7 and MIS 3	166
Figure 5.21	Tibia (SH1-320) and part of frontal with antler (SH2-18&19) of red deer <i>Cervus elaphus</i> from Stanton Harcourt.....	167
Figure 5.22	Difference in the shape of horn cores in aurochs <i>Bos primigenius</i> (above) and bison <i>Bison priscus</i>	169
Figure 5.23	Partial skull of Stanton Harcourt bison <i>Bison priscus</i> (SH4-63)	169
Figure 5.24	Measurements taken on skulls of bison	169
Figure 5.25	Right horn core of young bison (SH1-327).....	170
Figure 5.26	Lateral view (left) of bison right mandible (SH1-131) and close up of dentition (right).....	170
Figure 5.27	Representation of skeletal remains of bison at Stanton Harcourt (number of identified elements)	170
Figure 5.28	Bison proximal metacarpal measurements from Stanton Harcourt compared with those from various Late Pleistocene sites.....	177
Figure 5.29	Bison proximal metatarsal measurements from Stanton Harcourt compared with those from Late Pleistocene British localities.....	177
Figure 5.30	Bison distal tibia measurements from MIS 7 sites (Stanton Harcourt and Marsworth) compared with those from various Late Pleistocene sites.....	178
Figure 6.1	$\delta^{18}\text{O}$ curve for Marine Isotope Stage 7 showing warm substages MIS 7e, 7c and 7a (shaded) and cold substages MIS 7d and 7b (from Martinson et al. 1987, Candy and Schreve 2007).....	181
Figure 6.2	Trees and shrubs represented at Stanton Harcourt.....	183
Figure 6.3	Flowers and grasses represented at Stanton Harcourt.....	184
Figure 6.4	Aquatics represented at Stanton Harcourt.....	185
Figure 6.5	Bed of <i>Potomida littoralis</i>	192
Figure 6.6	The eroded right bank of the River Evenlode	192
Figure 6.7	Size range of <i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> from sample 1069 from the top of Bed 58 at Site 1	193
Figure 6.8	Graphs showing variations in the ^{18}O and the ^{13}C of shell carbonate of <i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> 4003.2 from Bed 58.	196
Figure 6.9	Comparison of the Maximum, Average and Minimum values of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of shell carbonate of <i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> from Bed 58 compared to a modern <i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> from Indonesia	196
Figure 6.10	<i>Corbicula fluminalis</i> from the excavation (left) compared to a modern <i>Corbicula</i> from Indonesia	197
Figure 7.1	Artefact A5 detail showing retouched edge	215
Figure 7.2	Artefact A11: part of the row of small spalls on one edge.....	217
Figure 7.3	Enlargement of Artefact A14 showing ten spalls all from the same side along one edge	217
Figure 7.4	Quartzite handaxe Artefact A27	220
Figure 7.5	Map of Stanton Harcourt with artefact zones as mapped by MacRae in 1990 (pers. comm.). 'Dix Pit' was also known as Smiths Pit and was later extended into the 'Channel' area. Hardwick is probably not lithologically parallel to the Channel and any finds from there are omitted.....	223

Figure 7.6	Gravelly Guy Ficron	223
Figure 7.7	Dix Pit handaxe 2 with finely worked tip.....	223
Figure 7.8	Smiths Pit Cordiform Flint handaxe 22.....	224
Figure 7.9	Smiths Pit Flint handaxe 7	224
Figure 7.10	Smiths Pit flint handaxe 11	224
Figure 7.11	Stanton Harcourt quartzite handaxe unnumbered	224
Figure 7.12	Quartzite cleaver from Stanton Harcourt (pit not recorded)	226
Figure 7.13	(a) Handaxe of local flint with modern break showing very thin white cortex under the brown stained surface. (b) Remote flint with break showing very thick white cortex below the surface. (c) Local flint handaxe showing typical brown colour and rough cortical surfaces.....	226
Figure 7.14	The complete assemblage of artefacts from Stanton Harcourt	227
Figure 7.14	Continued, The complete assemblage of artefacts from Stanton Harcourt.....	229
Figure 8.1	Flint handaxe Artefact A4 from Stanton Harcourt compared with one of the remarkable bifaces made of elephant bone from the Middle Pleistocene site of Castel di Guido (Boschian and Saccà 2015).....	234
Figure 8.2	Top: Mammoth skull SH4-124. Below: Elephant skull, log and associated artefacts at the Middle Pleistocene Acheulian site of Geshar Benot Ya'aqov, Israel (Goren-Inbar <i>et al.</i> 1994).....	235
Figure 8.3	Damaged skull of African elephant revealing the honeycomb-like tissue that comprises the crown of the skull (frontal and parietal regions). As the braincase is behind the nasal cavity, the entire frontal and parietal region would have to be smashed to access the brain. Photograph by kind permission of Erika Gouws Publishing Services & Photography	237
Figure 8.4	Surviving parts (shaded) of mammoth skulls from La Cotte de St. Brelade, Jersey, Channel Islands (modified from Scott 1989).....	237

List of Tables

Table 1.1	Summary of identifiable large vertebrate remains from Stanton Harcourt.....	5
Table 3.1	Intra-crystalline amino acid date from the opercula of <i>Bithynia</i> from sites in southern Britain (Columns 1 and 2). In Column 4 data are shown alongside terrace stratigraphy (NW – Nene/Welland, SA – Severn/Avon, TH – Thames, TW – Trent/Witham) and occurrences of important biostratigraphic indicator species. Sites with in situ archaeology are indicated in Column 5 and existing consensus views on their correlation with the MIS record are indicated in Column 6. Table modified from Penkman <i>et al.</i> 2011	57
Table 3.2	The large vertebrates from the Stanton Harcourt Channel	60
Table 3.3	Molluscs from Site 1(1020-37) Site 2(2002A-11) Site 4(4003) and Site 6(6002) at Stanton Harcourt (Keen 1992; Gleed-Owen 1998).	66
Table 3.4	Coleoptera from the Stanton Harcourt channel deposits identified by G.R. Coope. The nomenclature and taxonomic order follow that of Lucht 1987. The numbers in each column and opposite each species indicate the minimum number of individuals of that species in the sample.	71
Table 3.5	List of Trichoptera obtained from the original sedimentary sample at Dix Pit (Coope in Briggs <i>et al.</i> 1985). All specimens were disarticulated larval sclerites and no attempt has been made to indicate their relative abundance.	72
Table 3.6	Vegetation identified at Stanton Harcourt.....	75
Table 4.1	All mammoth upper dentition from Stanton Harcourt. The Laws categories and the estimated age at death of the individual represented (AEY) are discussed in the Chapter 4.....	80
Table 4.2	Mammoth cranial remains without dentition	81
Table 4.3	All mammoth isolated lower dentition and mandibles (with or without dentition). The Laws categories and the estimated age at death of the individual represented (AEY) are discussed in the Chapter 4.	84
Table 4.4	Mammoth tusks at Stanton Harcourt	85
Table 4.5	Tusks and fragments recorded at Stanton Harcourt (measurements in cm)	89
Table 4.6	Post-cranial remains of mammoth from Stanton Harcourt	110
Table 4.7	Measurements (mm) of mammoth scapulae (see Figure 4.21).....	111
Table 4.8	Epiphyseal fusion rates in the African elephant <i>Loxodonta africana</i> (data from Haynes 1987, 1993 and Haynes <i>pers. comm.</i>).....	112
Table 4.9	Measurements (mm) of mammoth humeri (see Figure 4.23)	113
Table 4.10	Measurements (mm) taken on mammoth ulnae (see Figure 4.25)	113
Table 4.11	Measurements (mm) of mammoth radii	115
Table 4.12	Mammoth pelvic bones on which it was possible to take measurements (mm). See Figure 4.28	115
Table 4.13	Mammoth pelvis remains on which no measurements could be taken	117
Table 4.14	Measurements (mm) of mammoth femora (see Figure 4.30)	118
Table 4.15	Measurements (mm) of mammoth tibiae (see Figure 4.32)	121
Table 4.16	Sequence of disarticulation observed among African elephant carcasses (data from Haynes 1988).....	126

Table 4.17	Tooth wear related to age in the African elephant <i>Loxodonta africana</i> . Table compiled from Laws (1966), Stansfield (2015) and Lee <i>et al.</i> (2012).	131
Table 4.18	The representation of upper and lower mammoth teeth at Stanton Harcourt	132
Table 4.19	Upper dentition of mammoths from Stanton Harcourt assigned to categories with estimated age at death based on African elephant data (Laws 1966). Where a tooth is damaged or has been lost, no age estimate is given	139
Table 4.20	Lower dentition of mammoths from Stanton Harcourt assigned to categories with estimated age at death based on Laws' African elephant data (1966). No age estimate is given in cases where a tooth is damaged or has been lost.	141
Table 5.1	Large vertebrates from Stanton Harcourt: the number of identifiable bones of each species (NISP) and the percentage they represent.....	143
Table 5.2	Representation of wolf, bear and lion at Stanton Harcourt	143
Table 5.3	Representation of wolf, lion and bear at British MIS 7 sites.....	144
Table 5.4	Lower m1 measurements for bear <i>Ursus arctos</i>	148
Table 5.5	Carnassial (m1) measurements for Pleistocene and African lions. Data for African lions kindly supplied by Prof. R.G. Klein (Stanford University).....	153
Table 5.6	Skeletal remains of straight-tusked elephant <i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i> at Stanton Harcourt	156
Table 5.7	Dentition of straight-tusked elephant <i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i> from Stanton Harcourt	157
Table 5.8	Representation of horse <i>Equus ferus</i> and bison <i>Bison priscus</i> at Stanton Harcourt	162
Table 5.9	Distribution of horse <i>Equus ferus</i> and bison <i>Bison priscus</i> across the site.....	163
Table 5.10	Metatarsal measurements for horse from Stanton Harcourt and Ilford (MIS 7) and Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3). The estimated height at the withers of the individuals represented is calculated (as discussed in the text) by multiplying the maximum length of the metatarsal by 5.33. See Figure 5.20. .	163
Table 5.11	<i>Equus ferus</i> distal tibia measurements (mm). See Figure 5.19.....	165
Table 5.12	Cranial measurements (mm) for bison <i>Bison priscus</i> from Stanton Harcourt.....	171
Table 5.13	Dentition measurements (mm) for bison <i>Bison priscus</i> from Stanton Harcourt	172
Table 5.14	Skeletal remains of bison <i>Bison priscus</i> from Stanton Harcourt.....	173
Table 5.15	Bison metacarpal measurements (mm) from Stanton Harcourt (MIS 7), Thrupp and Yarnton (MIS 5a), Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3) and Siberia (MIS 5-3). Data from British sites: K. Scott; Siberian data from Shpansky <i>et al.</i> (2016)	175
Table 5.16	Bison metatarsal measurements (mm) from Stanton Harcourt (MIS 7), Thrupp (MIS 5a), Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3)	175
Table 5.17	Bison tibia measurements (mm) from Stanton Harcourt and Marsworth (MIS 7), Thrupp (MIS 5a), Sutton Courtenay (MIS 3) and Siberia (MIS 5-3). Data from British sites: K. Scott; Siberian data from Shpansky <i>et al.</i> (2016).....	176
Table 5.18	Herpetofauna from Stanton Harcourt (Gleed-Owen 1998)	179
Table 5.19	Ichthyofaunal species identified in the Stanton Harcourt channel (B. Irving 1995)	179
Table 6.1	Summary of vegetation from Stanton Harcourt (for details see Chapter 3).....	186
Table 6.2	194
Table 6.3	195

Table 6.4	Large vertebrates from Stanton Harcourt: the number of identifiable bones of each species (NISP) and the percentage they represent of all identifiable remains.....	200
Table 6.5	Ichthyofaunal species identified in the Stanton Harcourt channel (B. Irving pers. comm.).....	208
Table 6.6	Results of isotopic analyses of tooth enamel of straight-tusked elephant (SH4-45) and steppe mammoth (SH6-138) from Stanton Harcourt (Lee-Thorp 2020). See text for discussion.....	211
Table 7.1	Artefacts from the Stanton Harcourt Channel.	213
Table 7.2	Artefacts from adjacent pits compared with those from the Channel	225
Table 8.1	British sites of MIS 7 age with artefacts. With the exception of Pontnewydd, Wales, all sites are from within or on the surface of fluvial sediments laid down by the Thames or its tributaries. The proposed date for the assemblages is mainly dependent on the interpretation of terrace stratigraphy. The data for Stanton Harcourt and Latton are from Scott and Buckingham (2001) and for all other sites from Ashton & Scott (2016).....	234

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Abundant illustrations are essential to describe a site so rich in finds as Stanton Harcourt. The maps and plans in Chapters 1 and 2 describing the geological context were drawn by CMB. As regards the rest of the illustrations, it is hard to do justice to the contribution made by Greg Scott to this volume. Not only did he finalise all KS's line drawings of animal remains, but he produced the finished photographs of over 100 fossils and 74 artefacts, created the vegetation reconstructions in Chapter 6, and designed the cover for the book.

Last but not least, we express deep gratitude to our husbands, Richard Cropper and Keith Buckingham, for their forbearance, support and encouragement over so many years.

Preface

This book describes an unusual situation near the village of Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire. In 1989, fossils came to light in a quarry that had been the focus of gravel extraction a decade previously. The discovery, in a disused pit, presented an opportunity to carry out extensive fieldwork for 10 years rather than the more usual 'rescue' excavation and resulted in one of the most remarkable Pleistocene assemblages in Britain.

At the base of the pit, below the extracted gravel, was a metre or so of 'uneconomic' gravel, so-called because it contained a variety of large stones and organic material. This gravel was left in place, the pit was abandoned awaiting its use for waste disposal, and vegetation took root across the quarry floor. In 1989, in the course of drainage maintenance, the tusk of a mammoth was discovered. By coincidence, the authors visited the quarry shortly thereafter and agreed to return to salvage the tusk. Within a short time, it was clear that there were abundant *in-situ* animal and plant remains. In 1992, there was great excitement when the first of many stone artefacts was found. For the rest of the decade, it was possible to excavate, record and analyse the context of a very large assemblage of Pleistocene bones, artefacts, shells and wood in the sediments of a meandering river.

Such a situation is extremely rare in Britain. The majority of bones and stone tools donated to museums by fossil collectors over more than a century have come from gravel pits. In most cases, there is little or no accompanying contextual information as there is rarely an opportunity to carry out detailed fieldwork at working quarries. Hence fossils and artefacts are generally found in the wake of quarrying at the base of excavated pits or on piles of extracted gravel. Gravel is the accumulation of millennia of ancient river beds and so, even in cases where it has been possible to record the context of fossils, it is a common perception that such material is of limited value in reconstructing the past because, by its very nature, a river is a dynamic environment with the potential to transport and redistribute such material.

Stanton Harcourt proved to be an exception. The excavated deposits revealed a buried channel, a former course of the River Thames. Material that found its way into this channel had evidently been rapidly buried, preventing oxidization and erosion, with the result that organic material was extraordinarily well preserved. In such a situation, it had a better chance of surviving into the fossil record than equivalent material on the ground surface. Apart from more than 1500 animal bones, teeth and tusks, there were molluscs, insects, and vegetation including seeds, nuts, branches and trunks of trees. A date of c.200,000 years makes this assemblage unique for this period in Britain.

Over the course of the decade, it was possible to document the course of the river over a wide area and, through the detailed analysis of the sedimentary environment, to identify a variety of depositional histories within this fluvial setting. The particular significance of this site is that it is possible to describe in unprecedented detail a temperate environment approximately 200,000 years ago (marine isotope stage 7). Analyses of the vegetational remains reveal this region of the Upper Thames to have been an area of open woodland and grassland bordering a river where large mammals grazed. Of particular interest is the most common species at the site – the mammoth. Initially thought to be the woolly mammoth *Mammuthus primigenius*, it was soon recognised as an earlier species – a small form of the steppe mammoth

M. trogontherii. This mammoth was living alongside the much larger straight-tusked elephant and other animals – bison, horse, bear, wolf and lion.

The discovery of stone tools in the same context as the large vertebrates was highly significant because, at the time of excavation, it had long been believed that people were not present in Britain during interglacials. The lack of archaeological evidence was taken as an indication of the reluctance or inability of Pleistocene hominins to occupy forested habitats. It has become increasingly clear that the more open environment of MIS 7 was not a limiting factor to human movement in Britain.

As will be seen in the Acknowledgments, a substantial number of people and institutions contributed to the success of the excavation both on- and off-site. Access to several acres over a period of ten years generated a vast amount of data: crates of fossils, buckets of sediment samples, and thousands of photographs, plans and section drawings. Apart from the enormous task of analysing and collating these after the excavation, the vertebrate fossils required conservation. Although generally well-preserved when unearthed, they were not fully fossilized which meant that most larger items required to be encased in fibreglass or Plaster of Paris before they could be lifted. Reversing this process was time-consuming and often difficult especially in the case of the mammoth skulls and tusks two metres in length and curved. Apart from the technical difficulties encountered in such a conservation task, suitable workspace was always a problem. Derek Roe generously allocated us an office at the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre in Oxford but the University lacked the extensive space required for the excavated material. The Oxford University Museum of Natural History had long expressed interest in acquiring the Stanton Harcourt material (as well as that from several other Upper Thames sites at which we had worked) but had not sufficient space to house it. Friends on farms provided temporary accommodation in their barns for the first few years and then Hanson (the quarry owners) gave us access to a large disused glasshouse. This offered everything we needed and had always lacked – ample space, light, and water. However, the publicity that resulted from media interest in the discovery of mammoths near Oxford and the excavation having featured on television in the *Time Team* series made the collection extremely vulnerable. Sporadic thefts of fossils from the excavation were a continual problem but, when thieves broke into the glasshouse and stole some of our best, fully prepared specimens, it was a major blow. The theft triggered an immediate and onerous move to another farm where conservation went on in secret until 2018. At this point, the University Museum took possession of buildings at a former airbase and acquired funds to employ a curator. It was a great relief to spend the summer of that year cataloguing and crating up the entire collection to be donated to the OUM, knowing that it would be curated, eventually made available to future researchers, and displayed.

With the future of such a large and valuable collection assured, it remained to us to complete our analysis of the large vertebrates, put the finds within their geological context, and collate all other contributions in preparation for this volume. It is a matter of great regret to us that four of the contributors are no longer with us. Derek Roe, Russell Coope, David Keen and Terry Hardaker were all very generous with their support and expertise during the excavation years, we benefitted greatly from their enthusiasm and presence on site, and from innumerable discussions with them. The reports they prepared make a significant contribution to this volume and we trust that the way we have incorporated their research gives these authors the recognition they deserve.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As the title denotes, this book concerns the excavation of 200,000-year-old fossiliferous deposits at a site known as Stanton Harcourt in Oxfordshire (SP413051). More accurately, the excavation site was Dix Pit, a former gravel quarry near the village of Stanton Harcourt (Figure 1.1). Oxfordshire is rich in mineral resources. Those which are used for primary aggregate production comprise extensive alluvial sand and gravel resources along the River Thames and its tributaries. River terraces occur at several levels above the modern floodplains within the Thames, Evenlode, Windrush and Thame valleys and their minor tributaries. The sands and gravels within these terraces comprise mainly unconsolidated materials laid down by rivers and streams and are an important resource in the county. Once the gravel is removed, the pits are flooded and used for recreational purposes.

In the immediate vicinity of Stanton Harcourt, the sand and gravel deposits are attributed to the meltwater of the penultimate cold stage. Dix Pit, quarried in the 1970s by Hanson Aggregates (formerly ARC), was unusual for two reasons. Firstly, below the 5-6m of quarried sands and gravels was a less well sorted deposit approximately 1m thick. This was considered uneconomic and not quarried. Secondly, as Dix Pit had been ear-marked as a waste disposal site, the abandoned quarry was not flooded, and vegetation grew on the quarry floor. Over the next decade, sporadic visits by Quaternary scientists led to the conclusion that this lower gravel represented a former river channel cut into the Oxford Clay and it became known as the Stanton Harcourt Channel (Briggs *et al.* 1985). Within these channel deposits were warm adapted molluscs, insects and plant remains that were not typical of the bulk of overlying quarried gravel which represented cold conditions.

In 1989, during drainage operations, the tusk of a mammoth was unearthed at the base of the pit. The authors' initial interest was in trying to retrieve this tusk but it was soon apparent that it was in sediment containing fresh water shells of a species normally found in much warmer climates than in Britain today and that this area of the pit might be another exposure of the Stanton Harcourt Channel reported by Briggs *et al.* (*op. cit.*). Mammoths are generally associated with a cold climate but the associated molluscs indicated temperate conditions. However, the gravel deposits were predominantly of fluvial origin so the question that arose was: had the tusk and shells originated in different climatic episodes and become mixed together by river action or was the mammoth a survivor from a previous cold episode that had become adapted to a warm climate? This apparent anomaly of creatures of cold and warm habitats in the same deposit led the authors to explore the site further.

As the pit had been designated for waste disposal in the foreseeable future, field work at the site was initially in the nature of a rescue operation. As time passed and as the finds and their importance increased, funding was applied for and field work was undertaken between 1990 and 1999 on a more systematic basis (Figure 1.2). For several years, funds facilitated three two-week excavations with volunteers and field assistants. At other times, the authors and various local helpers made regular visits to the site. The excavations became known as the 'Mammoth Project' and later as the 'Oxford Mammoths'.

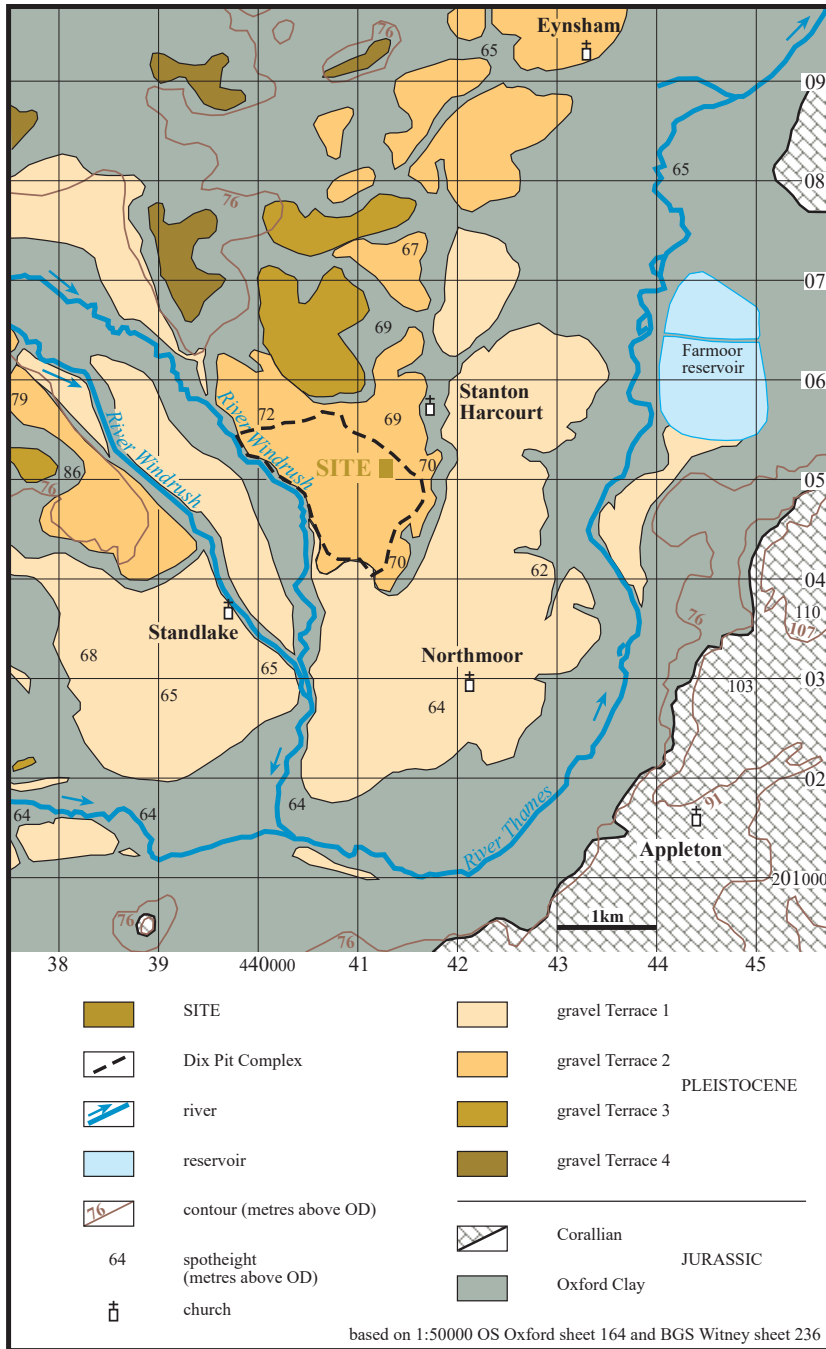


Figure 1.1 Site location map with simplified geology



Figure 1.2 Looking SE at part of the excavation site showing the Pleistocene fluvial sediments that had been left at the base of the pit after gravel extraction and, below these, the Oxford Clay.

Preliminary reports on the early years were given by Buckingham *et al.* (1996) and Scott and Buckingham (1997). Further descriptions of the excavations and the importance of the finds were published by Scott and Buckingham (2001), Scott (2001), Jones *et al.* (2001), Buckingham (2007) and Scott (2007).

It was a very interesting time to undertake this excavation as new research on the application of oxygen isotope stratigraphy to oceanic sediments was indicating a far greater number of warm and cold periods within the last 2 million years than had previously been thought. In the absence of suitable material for absolute dating, previous attempts to distinguish between British interglacial deposits had depended solely on the terrestrial record. A means of distinguishing between interglacial deposits based on botanical remains had been proposed by West (1963, 1968). Mitchell *et al.* (1973) applied West's palaeobotanical interpretations of the temperate deposits, together with geological evidence for the deposition of other sediments under extremely cold or even glacial conditions, to create a chronostratigraphic framework that would enable Quaternary specialists to identify glacial and interglacial deposits. However, it soon became apparent that the 1973 scheme as a chronostratigraphic tool was problematic in the case of deposits that were widely separated and had little or no pollen. Furthermore, the fossil mammals from the Lower Thames seemed not to fit into the scheme and Sutcliffe (1975, 1976) argued for a hitherto undocumented temperate phase between the Hoxnian/Holsteinian Interglacial and the Last Interglacial to account for anomalies within the large vertebrate assemblages from these localities.

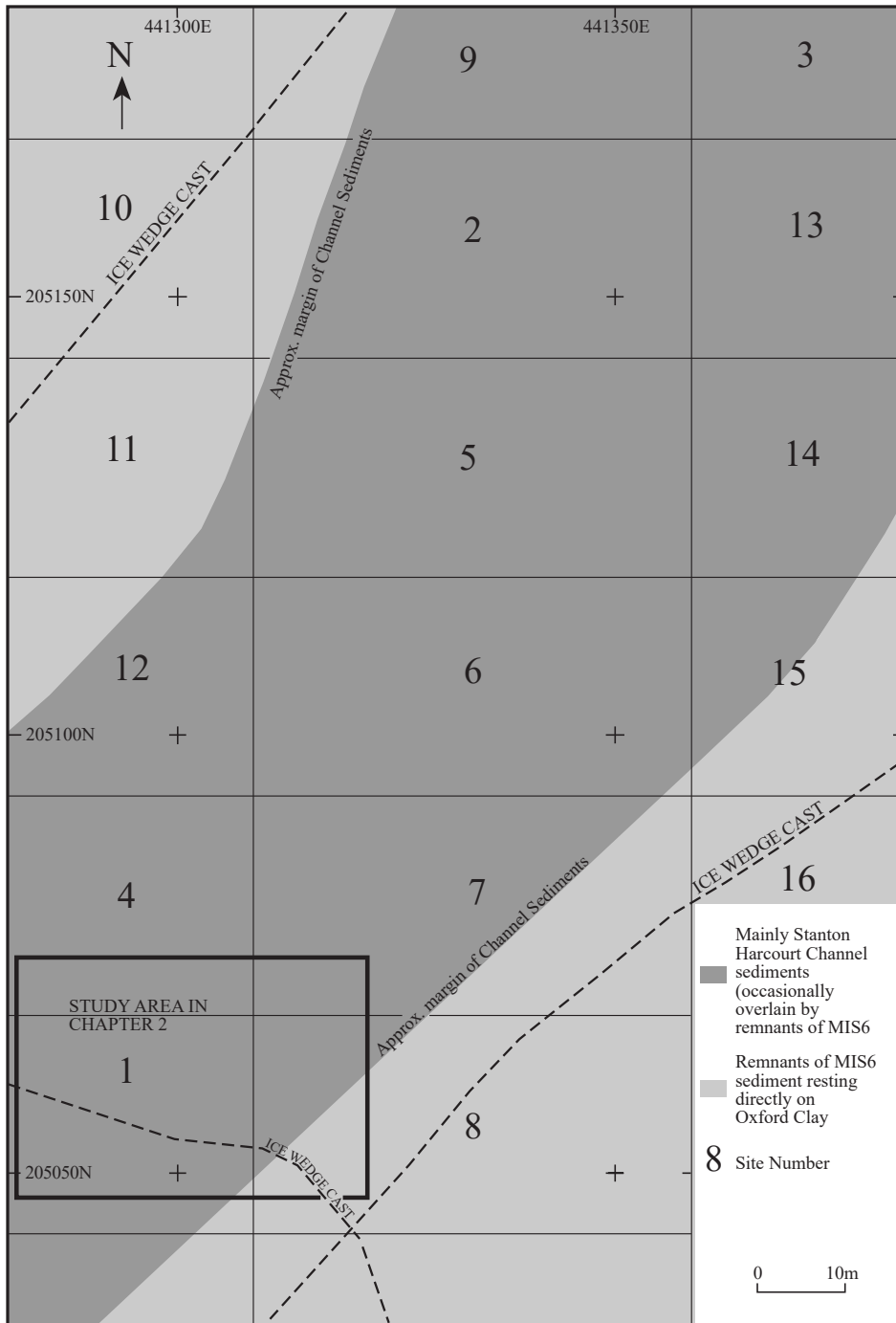


Figure 1.3 Plan of the excavation grid at Dix Pit, Stanton Harcourt

The emergence of the oxygen isotope record to become a stratigraphic standard with which terrestrial sequences may be correlated was thus widely welcomed. Of particular relevance to this site was the proposal that the temperate deposits of the Stanton Harcourt Channel should be equated with the so-called ‘new’ interglacial (MIS 7) between the established Last Interglacial (Ipswichian) and the Hoxnian (Briggs *et al.* 1985). Amino acid racemisation of molluscs from the site supported this view and indicated a date of c.190,000-200,000 years BP (Bowen *et al.* 1989).

The excavations

The area covered by fieldwork between 1990 and 1999 was approximately 150m x 100m and was divided into a number of separate excavations (Figure 1.3). From the outset, bones, teeth and tusks were numerous and frequently associated with Pleistocene molluscs and vegetation (including oak) clearly indicative of a warm climate. Although many larger bones and tusks appeared to be in poorly sorted coarse gravels, there were also other bones in silt and sand layers. Sedimentary structures such as ripple laminae within these sand or silt layers indicated relatively undisturbed sedimentary deposits within the river channel. There was no evidence of major floods or mixing of material of different Pleistocene environments and this suggested that the basal sediments at Stanton Harcourt were all deposited during the same interglacial by the same river, gradually, over a period of time (See Chapters 2 and 3).

Of the numerous large vertebrate remains at the site, mammoth was overwhelmingly the best represented (Table 1.1; Figures 1.4 and 1.5). Initially, this was identified as the cold-adapted woolly mammoth *Mammuthus primigenius*, yet the associated environmental evidence indicated that these mammoths were living in a warm climate in the vicinity of deciduous woodland. This was further supported by the discovery in 1993 of the molar of a straight-tusked elephant *Palaeoloxodon antiquus*, a true temperate forest species. There was much discussion

Number of specimens	
Carnivores	
<i>Canis lupus</i> , wolf	1
<i>Ursus arctos</i> , brown bear	10
<i>Felis spelaea</i> , lion	3
Herbivores	
<i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i> , straight-tusked elephant	57
<i>Mammuthus trogontherii</i> , steppe mammoth	922
<i>Proboscidean unidentifiable post-cranial</i>	274
<i>Equus ferus</i> , horse	34
<i>Cervus elaphus</i> , red deer	4
<i>Bison priscus</i> , bison	125
<i>Bovid/equid unidentifiable post-cranial</i>	21
<i>Other post-cranial unidentifiable to species</i>	126
TOTAL	1577

Table 1.1 Summary of identifiable large vertebrate remains from Stanton Harcourt

as to whether the mammoths represented populations from the previous cold stage that had been isolated in Britain by the MIS 7 sea-level rise and adapted to a temperate habitat. However, during the course of preparing the fossil material for publication, new research into the evolution of mammoths indicated that, on the basis of certain distinctive dental characteristics, some assemblages of mammoths previously described as woolly mammoths were more correctly a late form of *M. trogontherii* - the steppe mammoth (Lister and Sher 2001). Based on their criteria, the Stanton Harcourt mammoths were also identified as *M. trogontherii* (Scott 2007). The significance of this



Figure 1.4 Excavating a mammoth tusk



Figure 1.5 A mammoth mandible with dentition being uncovered

finding was that the steppe mammoth is a common element in interglacial faunal assemblages and thus the apparent anomaly of mammoths in a temperate environment was resolved. A particularly diagnostic feature of the Stanton Harcourt mammoths is their small size relative to steppe mammoths from earlier interglacials (Figure 1.6). As described in Chapter 4, this is now recognised as an important marker for MIS 7 (Lister and Scott in press).

Unexpectedly, soon after the excavations began, the first of more than 30 stone artefacts was discovered, many of them in good (unrolled) condition. Until the emerging realisation of the ‘new’ interglacial c.200,000 years ago, it had been generally accepted that the north European interglacials were characterised by heavy forestation. The apparent absence of archaeological evidence from known sites of interglacial age supported the conclusion that forested habitats were unsuitable for hunter-gatherers. Although this remains true for the Last Interglacial, the evidence at Dix Pit indicates that the terrain during MIS 7 (at least as represented by the excavated deposits) was predominantly open with some woodland in the vicinity and was evidently favourable to hominins (See Chapter 8).

Continued excavations at Stanton Harcourt throughout the decade enabled detailed documentation of this MIS 7 environment, a habitat where hominins co-existed with lion, bear and various large herbivores, including the steppe mammoth. This was a unique opportunity to excavate an ancient riverbed in 3-dimensions and to establish the nature of the fossil accumulation in its sedimentary deposits.

Geological context of the Stanton Harcourt Channel

Understanding the sediment that is deposited by a river requires an appreciation of a large number of variables. The amount and particle size of the sediment carried by a river is mainly a feature of its discharge. This in turn depends mainly on the rainfall, the river gradient and the size of the catchment. The type and structure of the rock over which the river flows are

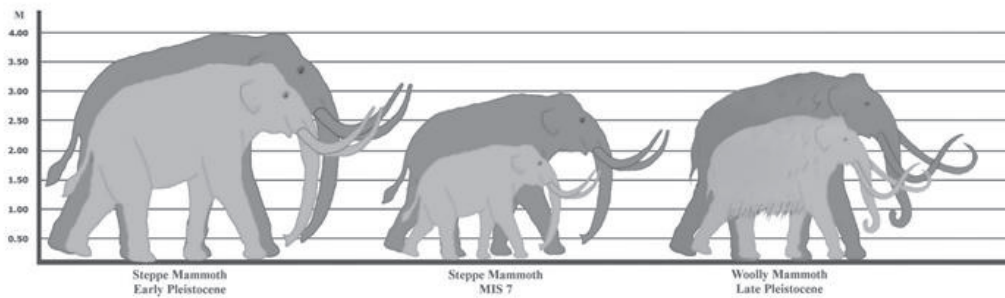


Figure 1.6 Shoulder height in British Pleistocene mammoths estimated from fossil post-cranial remains. Minimum and maximum shoulder heights for the Early Pleistocene steppe mammoths and the Late Pleistocene woolly mammoths are calculated from the skeletal remains of males (data from Lister and Stuart 2010). Females are likely to have been smaller. The remains of the MIS 7 steppe mammoths were not sufficiently complete to determine the sex of individuals. Thus the figure simply represents the shortest to tallest individuals represented (Scott and Lister in press).

also significant factors in determining how easily material can be entrained and transported by the water and how the size and nature of that river evolves. Disarticulated bones and pieces of wood can also be regarded as potential sediment to be transported if the discharge is high enough and deposited when the energy wanes.

The regional setting of the Stanton Harcourt Channel

At the time of the existence of the Stanton Harcourt Channel the catchment area of the Upper Thames and its tributaries was probably of a similar size to that of today. The palaeo-Thames had a meandering route on low lying relatively flat land along a wide valley between Cheltenham and Oxford, north of its current route. This area is mainly defined by the NE/SW strike of the Jurassic Oxford Clay, north of the Corallian limestone escarpment. Throughout the Middle and Late Pleistocene, the River Thames has shifted laterally down-dip to the SE, in response to both channel migration and regional uplift (Maddy 1997).

The main tributaries drained NW to SE down the limestone dip slope of the Cotswolds, joining the palaeo-Thames on its left bank, when looking downstream to the NE (Figure 1.1). The gradient of the tributaries would have been higher and the potential for both incision and deposition would consequently have been greater than that of the main river, especially during Glacial Stages of the Pleistocene. As a result, previously deposited fluvial sediments remain as discontinuous river terraces on the NW side of the main valley, mainly at the confluences with, and in, the lower reaches of the tributaries. The fluvial deposits form a series of terraces which become progressively younger and at a lower elevation towards the current R. Thames. Bridgland *et al.* (2004) have stressed the importance of terrace sequences for providing a semi-continuous record of Pleistocene fluvial deposition, with periodic incision isolating individual deposits with unique faunal and floral characteristics.

The tributary of particular interest to the Site is the River Windrush. In the area near Stanton Harcourt, sediment mainly from the R. Windrush has encouraged the R. Thames to migrate

south eastwards and to undercut the Jurassic Escarpment. The Pleistocene sediments discussed here underlie the Second Terrace surface (approx. 70m above OD) and at the time of deposition were located near the confluence of the River Thames and its tributary the R. Windrush (Fig 1.1). These sediments are separated from the First Terrace by an outcrop of Oxford Clay which underlies the church at Stanton Harcourt village.

At Dix Pit, Stanton Harcourt, the Second Terrace is comprised of two distinct gravel deposits representing two climatic events within the Pleistocene. The upper deposit, mainly composed of limestone dominated sand and gravel, was the deposit of commercial interest and reached a depth of 5-6 metres. Underlying this, the bone-bearing sediments formed about 1m of sediment that remained at the bottom of the gravel pit after quarrying ceased, mostly below 64m above OD. These basal deposits described as the Stanton Harcourt Channel are formally known as the Stanton Harcourt Bed of the Summertown-Radley Member of the Upper Thames Formation and are correlated with the interglacial at Marine Isotope Stage 7 (MIS 7) (Bowen, 1999).

The presence of the earlier gravel terraces and fossils within the Oxford Clay provided the raw material for potential incorporation into the sediment of the Stanton Harcourt Channel. The gradient of the channel would have been low where it flowed over the clay. At the excavation site the bone-bearing channel deposits were found to lie between clear geological boundaries.

Lower Stratigraphic Boundary

Mapping of the Stanton Harcourt Channel showed that the MIS 7 bone-bearing sediments of interest had a lower stratigraphic boundary with the Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay (Buckingham *et al.* 1996; Buckingham 2004 and Figure 1.). The excavation area was in the Stewartby Member (Middle Oxford Clay), near the transition from the *Kosmoceras spinosum* sub-zone of the *Peltoceras athleta* zone to the *Quenstedtoceras lamberti* zone (Cox *et al.* 1992). The Stewartby Member is a stiff, light blue grey, plastic clay, which is occasionally silty (Hollingworth and Wignall 1992). Ammonite zone fossils in this clay indicate that the base of the Stanton Harcourt Channel was near the boundary with the Lamberti limestone, a distinctive fossiliferous, calcareous mudstone bed within the Oxford Clay. 'Turtle stones' (large pillow-shaped concretions from the Oxford Clay) were also commonly *in situ* near the top of the clay, at the base of the Pleistocene sediments. Scours and grooves below the sediments of interest, together with local fossils and lumps of clay within them, suggest that this boundary was erosive (Buckingham 2004).

Fieldwork suggested that the harder mudstone layers and turtle stones within the Oxford Clay were instrumental in inhibiting the lateral migration of the Stanton Harcourt Channel. An environment was created where there was net sedimentation rather than erosion which resulted in the location of this exceptional fossiliferous site (See Chapter 2).

Upper Stratigraphic Boundary

At the excavation site it was observed that the upper stratigraphic boundary of the MIS 7 bone-bearing beds was also predominantly erosive with scours and cobbles at the base of overlying limestone dominated sand and gravel. Evidence indicated that the overlying sediment belonged to periglacial conditions of the succeeding glacial at MIS 6. Patterned ground with

ice wedge casts was mapped. One cast bisected two mammoth tusks and a bison jaw within the MIS 7 sediments (Figures 1.7 and 1.8). A reindeer shed antler was also excavated from the MIS 6 basal sediment. In areas of Dix Pit beyond the margins of the MIS 7 channel, the MIS 6 sediments directly overlie Oxford Clay.

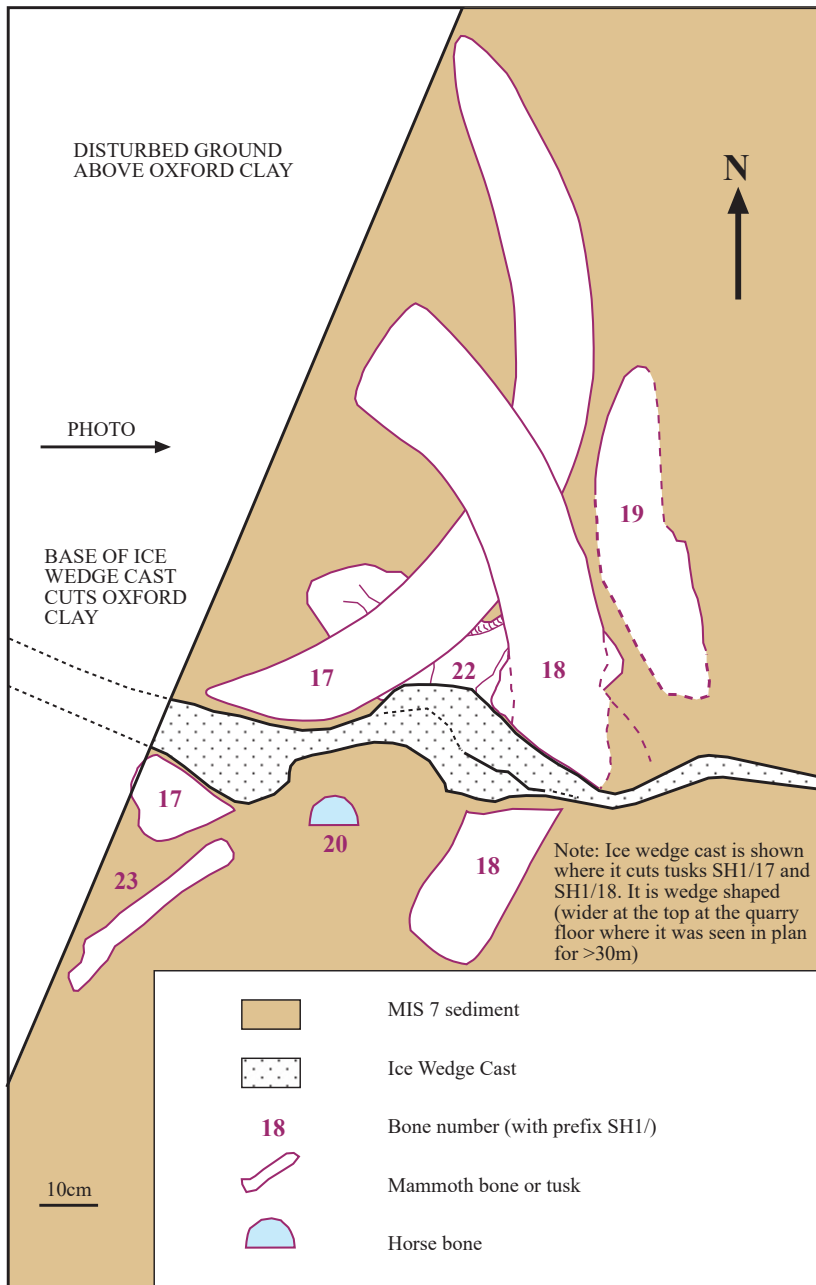


Figure 1.7 (a)
Plan of ice wedge cast at Site 1 bisecting mammoth tusks SH1/17 and SH1/18

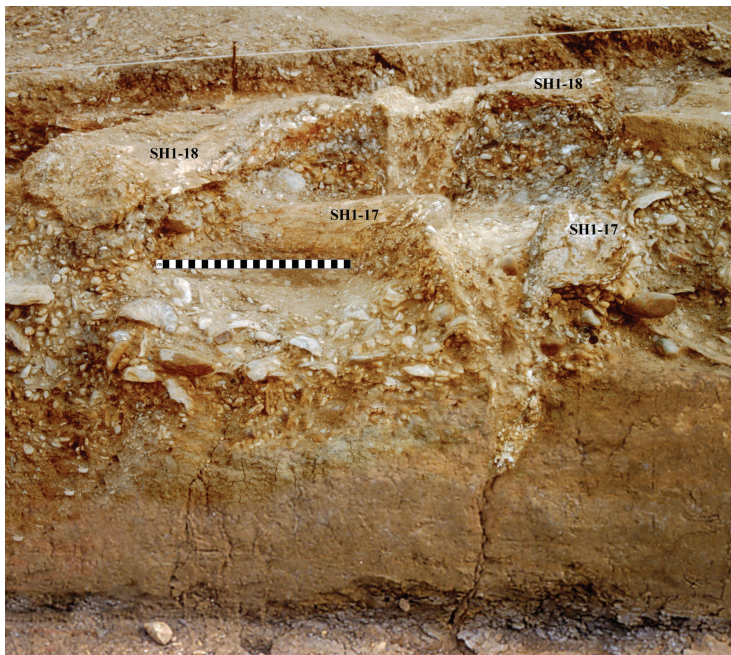


Figure 1.7 (b) Photograph of the ice wedge and tusks taken from west



Figure 1.8 Ice wedge bisecting bison mandible SH1/340). Inset: the mandible once restored