

Stepping stones to the Neolithic?

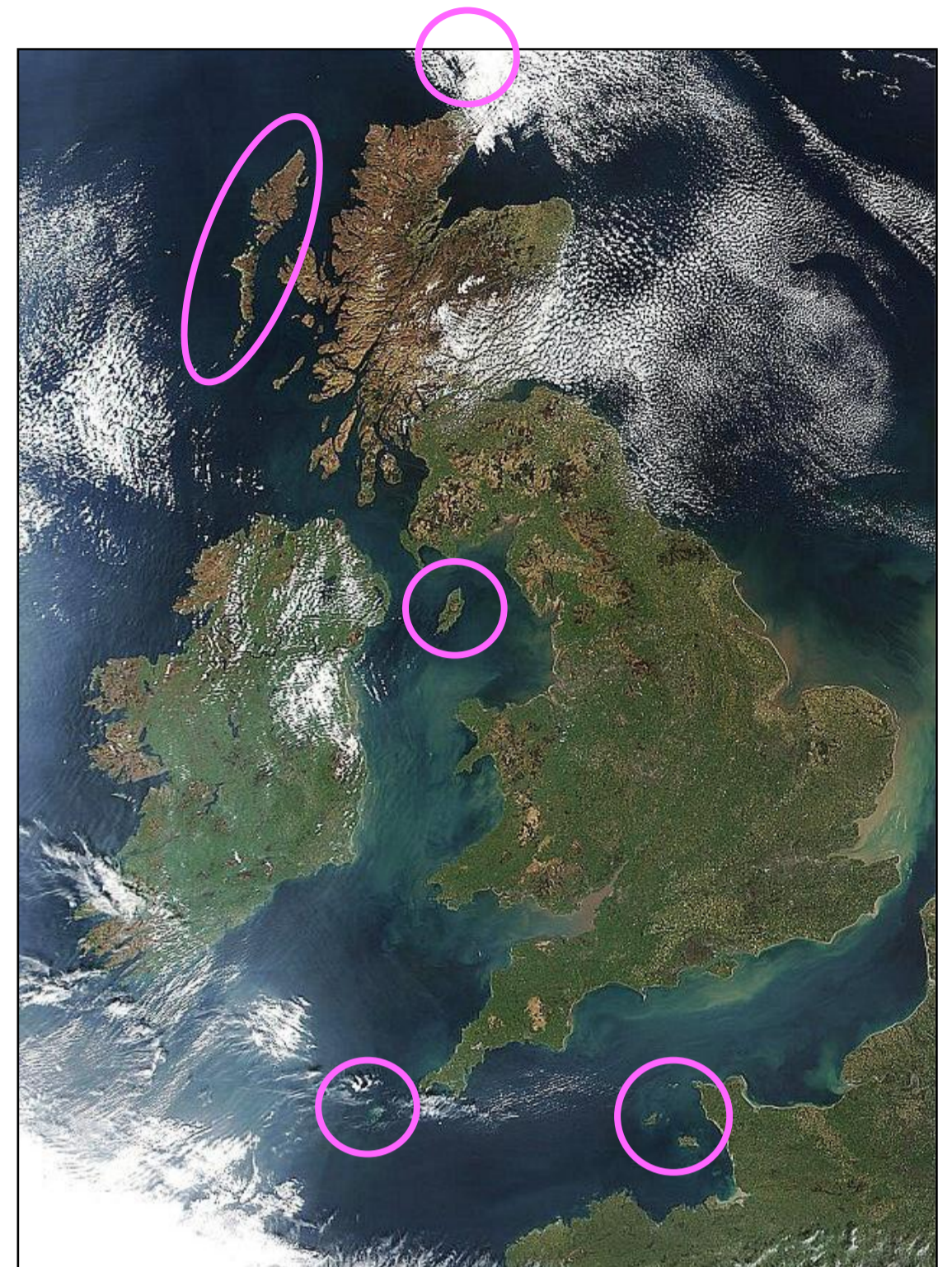
Islands, maritime connectivity and the 'western seaways' of Britain, 5000-3500 BC

The Neolithic

The Neolithic is the term used for the period in our past when the shift from hunting and gathering wild animals and plants to a farming lifestyle occurred. This change happened at different times and in different ways throughout the world, beginning around 10,000 BC in the Middle East and around 4,000 BC in Britain and Ireland.

The process by which the Neolithic arrived in Britain and Ireland is currently a hotly debated topic. Some scholars argue that colonists moved wholesale from the continent (bringing farming, pottery, etc. with them from France and/or Belgium), but others have suggested that the indigenous population of Britain gradually adopted a farming lifestyle on their own terms (possibly as a result of a broad shift in their worldview).

What is agreed is that some contact between Britain, Ireland and the European mainland must have occurred in the centuries around 4000 BC for the change to happen at all, and that this most likely happened across the 'western seaways' – an arc of sea extending approximately from the Channel Islands in the south, through the Isles of Scilly, the Isle of Man and the Hebrides, around to Orkney in the north.



Island groups to be investigated as part of the Stepping Stones project (image from NASA Johnson Space Center)



Island view, Herm 2010

Find out more...

Public lecture: Friday 2nd September, 8pm, Frossard Theatre, Guernsey Museum

Visit our excavations: Open Day on Sunday 11th September, 11.00-16.00

Visit our **webpage:** <http://www.neolithicsteppingstones.org>

Follow us on **Twitter:** @Neolithic_steps

and see photos on **flickr:** <http://www.flickr.com/photos/neolithicsteppingstones>

Stepping Stones project

The Stepping Stones project, directed by Duncan Garrow (Liverpool) and Fraser Sturt (Southampton) and funded predominantly by the AHRC, represents a research collaboration between the University of Liverpool and the University of Southampton.

We are also working closely with Cardiff University and our project partner museums: Guernsey Museums and Galleries, the Isles of Scilly Museum and Museum nan Eilean (Outer Hebrides).

The project aims to answer important questions about how and why the Neolithic arrived in and around Britain and Ireland at that time. We will be analysing all of the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic sites within the western seaways zone, carrying out computer modelling of the sea around that time, and excavating three key Early Neolithic sites (in Guernsey, the Isles of Scilly and the Outer Hebrides)

A key outcome of our research will be a series of educational web resources drawing on this research, including a 'western seaways' navigation game and a Google Earth 'plugin' which enables users to visualise changing sea levels in the past.

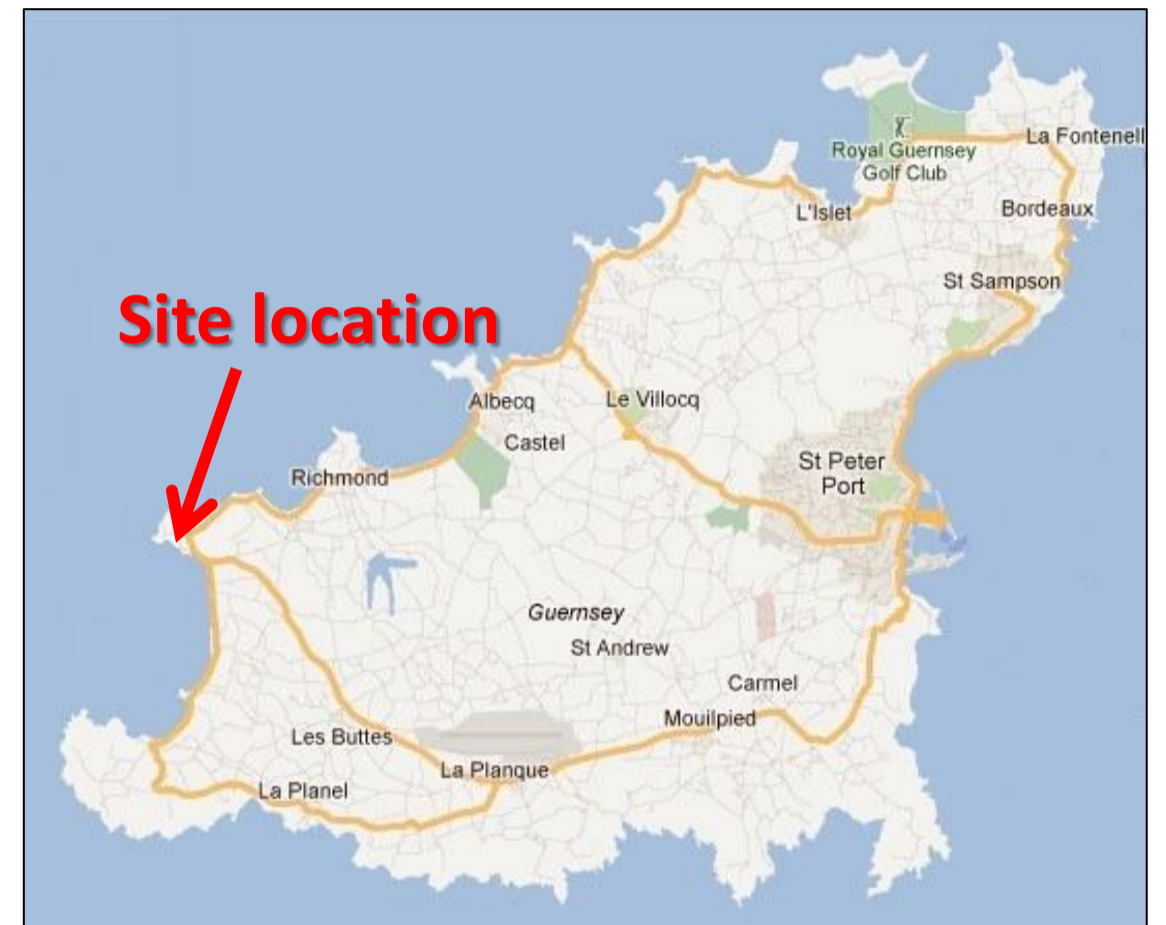
Excavations at L'Erée

An Early Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement in Guernsey (dating to c. 4700-2500 BC)



Neolithic life in Guernsey

Guernsey is renowned for the impressive number of burial monuments found within its shores. By contrast, settlement evidence of the same date is very poorly understood. Across the Channel Islands as a whole, only a handful of Neolithic occupation sites have been identified. The archaeological cliché that we know more about the dead than the living is truer than ever. It is difficult to understand any society through its tombs alone. Therefore, it is vital to our understanding of the region that the well-known monument record is placed in its broader landscape context, and that we gain a better knowledge of the places where people lived out their daily lives.



Map © 2011 Google

The site at L'Erée

Since the 1970s, seasonal storms have gradually been revealing a Neolithic habitation site on the west coast of Guernsey at L'Erée. Each year, quantities of pottery and flint, along with settlement features such as hearths, are eroded out of the low cliff face onto the beach below. Previous archaeological work on the site has uncovered substantial quantities of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age artefacts, and Early Neolithic radiocarbon dates.

A team of archaeologists from the Universities of Liverpool and Southampton, the British Museum, Oxford Archaeology and Guernsey Museums Service, along with many volunteers from the island, has been excavating the site since 2008. We'll be digging there again in September 2011. We are extremely grateful to Mr Terry Queripel, and to the States of Guernsey, for permission to excavate on their land.



Flint arrowhead found at L'Erée in 2009

Our excavations

Our excavations so far have revealed an important Earlier Neolithic settlement, as well as lots of Early Bronze Age material. The settlement features include well-preserved, stone-lined hearths, post-holes from small buildings, a stone wall (possibly also from a building) and a boundary ditch (which may have defined the edge of the settlement). This represents only the second confirmed living site of that period on the island.

This archaeology seems to have been created during the Earlier Neolithic occupation of the site, between 4700 and 4100 BC. Despite the number of post- and stake-holes found, no substantial buildings have yet been identified. It is therefore likely that the site witnessed repeated, camp-like occupation, with the site being returned to intermittently rather than occupied permanently. Importantly, close material connections between this settlement and artefacts found in the famous tomb excavated across the island at Les Fouillages (on L'Ancrese Common) suggest a very close relationship between the two sites: this appears to be a settlement contemporary with the earliest Neolithic monument on the island.



Excavations underway in 2010

Come and visit the site...

Please come and visit our excavations on the Open Day: **Sunday 11th September 2011**. Guided tours provided **11am-4pm**.