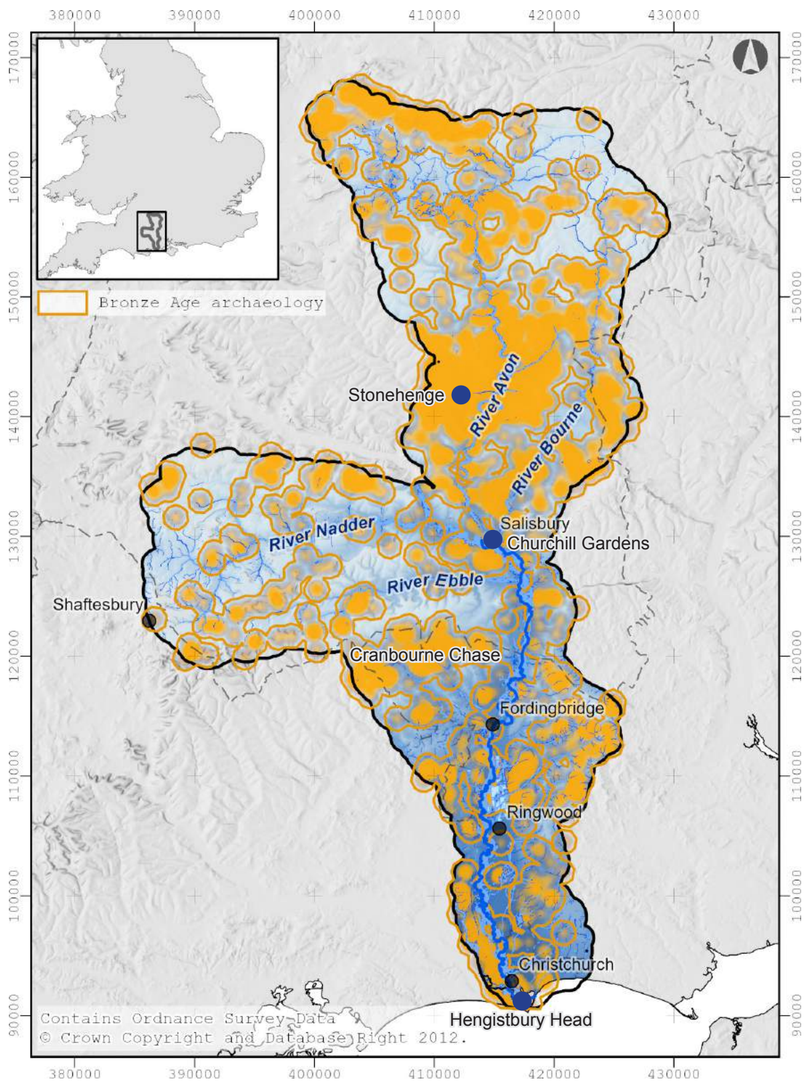
THE RIPPLE EFFECT Site 3: Churchill Gardens

Churchill Gardens is truly in a riverine landscape. The River Avon forms two sides of its border, connecting the park to some of the most iconic archaeological sites in the country. The Avon rises in the Vale of Pewsey, just north of here, and is fed by substantial chalk aquifers (underground rock layers that contain water). The Avon flows south through a diverse landscape of chalk downlands and picturesque valleys, sprawling farmland and the New Forest before reaching the sea near Hengistbury Head in Christchurch Harbour. Many people reading this will have encountered the river in various ways, swimming in its cold waters or kayaking on its surface. Some may have fished from its banks, and others might prefer having lunch in Churchill Gardens alongside it.

In the Bronze and Early Iron Ages of prehistory (the time before written history), c. 2500–400 BC, the River Avon was also the site of diverse activities. Rivers would have been sources of food and fresh water, which were necessary to sustain the growing population. Around rivers, communities lived in roundhouses on farmsteads in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and divided up the land by creating field systems. They grew wheat and barley and kept cattle, sheep and pigs, which would have provided food and wool. They also hunted wild animals, such as boar and red deer, and no doubt caught freshwater fish, though there is surprisingly little evidence for fish on the menu. Bronze Age people created burial monuments called barrows (earthen mounds) to honour their ancestors, who were often cremated. There is ample evidence for these in the Salisbury area. Later in the Early Iron Age from around 700 BC, larger settlements called hillforts were built. These were enclosures of up to 19 hectares that were typically (though not always) built on top of hills. A fantastic example of a hilllfort is at Great Woodbury, adjacent to Salisbury District Hospital, which is still visible on Google Maps.

It was not always easy living near a river in prehistory. In times of extreme weather, they would have flooded, endangering the lives of people and animals settled around them. We see this happen across the UK each winter. The city of Salisbury, as locals will be well aware, is near the confluence of five rivers – today, it is estimated that 40% of the properties in Salisbury are at risk of flooding annually. Luckily, we have flood management plans that help protect us. In prehistory, communities had to manage floods without modern technology. Perhaps this is why archaeologists often find valuable metalwork, like swords and spears, in rivers. Were people making offerings to the river, in an attempt to placate fickle gods and spirits?

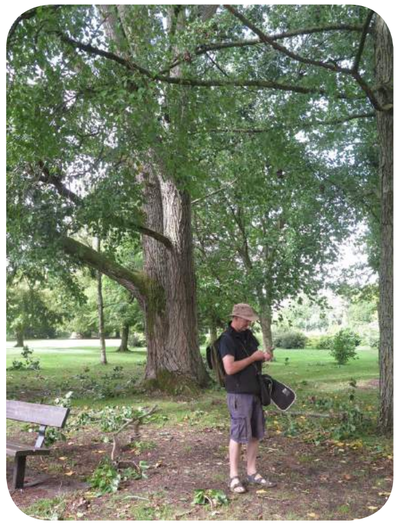
The River Avon viewed from Churchill Gardens. Photo: Joanna Ostapkowicz



The River Avon catchment, showing concentrations of Bronze Age archaeology, topography and watercourses.

The Avon flows through the Salisbury Plain, which is one of the richest archaeological areas of England. This is where Stonehenge was first created in the Neolithic period (c. 4000–2500 BC). People would have used the river to travel into the interior of southern Britain from the south coast at Christchurch Harbour. Interestingly, that is where the famous Iron Age hillfort Hengistbury Head is located. It is likely that Hengistbury Head was a port in earlier periods. The Avon would have connected many monuments that were built up around it, such as Stonehenge.

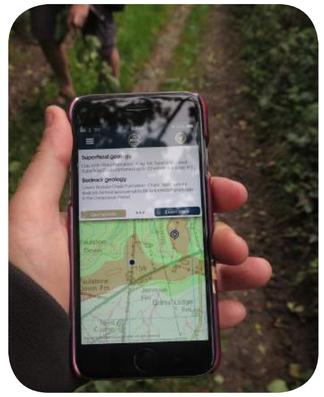
How do we know people used the river for travel? We find evidence for river travel from different types of archaeological evidence, such as logboats. Archaeologists also study what people in the past made, from pots to jewellery to coins. By studying where these objects were created and distributed, we learn about how people and things moved around the landscape. In the Iron Age, we find material culture made in France spread across the Avon valley, showing us that goods were coming to Britain from the Continent and making their way up the river.



Rick takes advantage of branches brought down by Storm Ellen, 20 August 2020, in Churchill Gardens. Photo: Joanna Ostapkowicz

One technique archaeologists use to evaluate past human diets is to analyse the skeletons of prehistoric people. This approach takes advantage of the well known adage: 'we are *what* we eat'. Certain types of foods leave traces in bones and teeth that can be used to distinguish, for example, how regularly an individual ate fish. This is why we are able to say for the Bronze and Iron Ages: not very often! But also, 'we are *where* we eat'. Foods, especially plant foods like cereals, contain a 'geochemical signal' that relates to the geology of where the plant grew, and this is retained in our bones and teeth.

We measure modern plants to see how they vary across the landscape, and this allows us to better understand which parts of the landscape were the focus of farming in the past, and how often people moved between regions with different 'signals'. For example, plants grown on the chalk downs of Cranbourne Chase will have a different geochemical signal than the same plants grown in the New Forest. In these photos, Professor Rick Schulting is taking samples of plants from this very park, Churchill Gardens. Our results from the park are what we would expect for plants growing on chalk. More surprising is that the same signal continues further downstream, after the river enters a different geology. This shows how rivers can affect the lands through which they flow even at a geochemical level.



Rick uses the British Geological Survey's iGeology and mySoil apps to guide his plant sampling strategy.

The Ripple Effect is a public engagement project about rivers in prehistory. This is one of 11 installations that displays an original artwork alongside a description of local archaeology. The painting above, *Watching the Dawn*, was created by the School of Archaeology's Artist-in-Residence Miranda Creswell. It recalls the feeling of being immersed in the light of the dawn and reminds us that prehistoric humans experienced the same dawn light. Did they also sit along the Avon, wondering why the light was different each morning?

See all 11 installations at *The Ripple Effect* website: https://bit.ly/3qAbZVo or use the QR code below.

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