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Assessment of prehistoric levels of population is fraught with difficulties. One way to circumvent many of the problems is to use the density of artefacts found in river terrace systems. The middle Thames valley in England meets many of the criteria necessary to pursue this approach, such as a well-defined and dated terrace sequence, and a long history of collection. Analysis of the evidence suggests that not only did population decline from the end of the Lower Palaeolithic through to the Middle Palaeolithic, but also that populations were largely absent or scarce from OIS 7 through to OIS 4. This data also seems to be supported by evidence from the major sites in Britain. Two factors are assessed as to the cause of this pattern: 1. the effect of changes in human habitat preference during the Middle Palaeolithic; and 2. the effect of either a newly-created, or increasingly wide English channel during all but the coldest phases.