Terrestrial environmental change across the onset of the PETM and
the associated impact on biomarker proxies: a cautionary tale

Gordon N. Inglis\textsuperscript{a,b}, Alexander Farnsworth\textsuperscript{b,c}, Margaret E. Collinson\textsuperscript{d}, Matthew J. Carmichael\textsuperscript{a,b,c}, B. David A. Naafs\textsuperscript{a,b}, Daniel J. Lunt\textsuperscript{b,c}, Paul J Valdes\textsuperscript{b,c}, and Richard D. Pancost\textsuperscript{a,b}

\textsuperscript{a} Organic Geochemistry Unit, School of Chemistry, and School of Earth Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
\textsuperscript{b} Cabot Institute, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
\textsuperscript{c} BRIDGE, School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, UK
\textsuperscript{d} Department of Earth Sciences, Royal Holloway University of London, UK

Corresponding author: Gordon N. Inglis

Email: gordon.inglis@bristol.ac.uk. Telephone: +44 (0)117 954 6395
Abstract:

The Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM; ~56 million years ago (Ma)) is the most severe carbon cycle perturbation event of the Cenozoic. Although the PETM is associated with warming in both the surface (~up to 8°C) and deep ocean (~up to 5°C), there are relatively few terrestrial temperature estimates from the onset of this interval. The associated response of the hydrological cycle during the PETM is also poorly constrained. Here, we use biomarker proxies (informed by models) to reconstruct temperature and hydrological change within the Cobham Lignite (UK) during the latest Paleocene and early PETM. Previous work at this site indicates warm terrestrial temperatures during the very latest Paleocene (ca. 22 to 26°C). However, biomarker temperature proxies imply cooling during the onset of the PETM (ca. 5 to 11°C cooling), inconsistent with other local, regional and global evidence. This coincides with an increase in pH (ca. 2 pH units with pH values > 7), enhanced waterlogging, a major reduction in fires and the development of areas of open water within a peatland environment. This profound change in hydrology and environment biases biomarker temperature proxies, including the branched GDGT paleothermometer. This serves as a cautionary tale on the danger of attempting to interpret biomarker proxy records without a wider understanding of their environmental context.

Keywords: lignite, biomarkers, GDGTs, hydrology, Eocene, peat
1. Introduction

The Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM; ca. 56 million years ago) is a rapid global warming event associated with the release of $^{13}$C-depleted carbon into the ocean-atmosphere system. During the PETM, the deep ocean warmed by ~5°C (Tripati and Elderfield, 2005; Zachos et al., 2008a) and sea surface temperatures increased by up to 8°C (Aze et al., 2014; Frielng et al., 2017; Frielng et al., 2014; Schoon et al., 2015; Sluijs et al., 2011; Sluijs et al., 2006; Sluijs et al., 2014; Zachos et al., 2006). During the same interval, continental temperatures increased significantly (ca. 4 to 7°C) (Fricke and Wing, 2004; Gehler et al., 2016; Secord et al., 2010; Wing et al., 2005). There is other evidence for increasing terrestrial temperatures during the PETM, including floral turnover (Schouten et al., 2007; Wing et al., 2005), enhanced insect herbivory (Currano et al., 2008) and mammalian (Secord et al., 2012) and soil faunal dwarfing (Smith et al., 2009). However, our understanding of continental temperature change during the PETM remains restricted to a few, well-sampled regions (primarily western North America) and additional records are required to fully evaluate climate model simulations.

Continental temperatures are also important because they exert a first-order control upon the hydrological cycle. During the PETM, proxies and models indicate that the hydrological cycle exhibits a globally ‘wet-wetter, dry-drier’ style response (Carmichael et al., 2017). However, there is significant regional and temporal variability in both proxy and model data. For example, high-latitude and coastal settings are generally characterised by stable and/or increasing rainfall, with proxy evidence for both enhanced terrigenous sediment flux to marginal marine sediments (John et al., 2008) and enhanced chemical weathering (Dickson et al., 2015; Ravizza et al., 2001). In contrast, mid-to-low latitude and continental interior settings are
typically characterised by decreasing rainfall but an increase in extreme precipitation rates (Carmichael et al., 2018; Handley et al., 2012; Schmitz and Pujalte, 2007). Perturbations to the hydrological cycle also impacted vegetation patterns (Collinson et al., 2009; Jaramillo et al., 2010) and various biogeochemical cycles (e.g. methane cycling; Pancost et al., 2007), and may have played an important role in maintaining the warmth of the PETM (Zachos et al., 2008b) and in the subsequent recovery phase (Gutjahr et al., 2017).

To reconstruct temperature and hydrological change during the PETM, we investigate the biomarker distributions within an immature lignite seam from Cobham, Kent, UK (~48°N palaeolatitude). The Cobham Lignite Bed is inferred to represent an ancient continental mire system and is characterised by a negative carbon isotope excursion characteristic at the PETM onset (Collinson et al., 2003; Pancost et al., 2007; see Collinson et al., 2009 for details on age model). We consider our new results in the context of previously published indicators of vegetation and hydrological change (Collinson et al., 2003; Steart et al., 2007; Collinson et al., 2009; Collinson et al., 2013) and new climate model simulations to develop a holistic and nuanced understanding of paleoenvironmental change in northern Europe across the onset and during the early PETM. Our results serve as a cautionary tale on interpreting biomarker proxies without a wider understanding of their environmental context.

2. Methods

2.1.1. Sample site

The Cobham Lignite Bed was deposited in a low-lying freshwater setting very near sea-level (~48°N palaeolatitude). The Cobham Lignite Bed is underlain by a sand and
mud unit (shallow marine; S&M). The Cobham Lignite Bed comprises a thin clay layer (<10 cm) at the base, overlain by a charcoal-rich lower laminated lignite (ca. 43 cm thick; lower LL). This is overlain by a charcoal-poor upper laminated lignite (ca. 2 cm thick; upper LL), a middle clay layer (MCL < 10 cm thick) and a charcoal-poor blocky lignite (ca. 130 cm thick; BL). The Woolwich Shell Beds (marginal marine/lagoonal, containing the *Apectodinium* acme; WSB) overly the Cobham Lignite (Collinson et. al. 2009).

**2.1.2. Age control**

The Cobham Lignite Bed is underlain by the Upnor Formation, which at a nearby site is dated as latest Palaeocene by means of the occurrence of calcareous nannoplankton zone NP9 and magnetochron C25n in its lower part (Collinson et al., 2009). A negative carbon isotope excursion (CIE) of ~ 1.5 ‰ is present near the top of the charcoal-poor upper laminated lignite (54.45 cm), slightly below the middle clay layer. This is interpreted as being the negative CIE characteristic of the PETM (Collinson et al., 2003; 2007; 2009). As such, we interpret the uppermost laminated lignite (54.45 to 57.6 cm), middle clay layer (57.6 to 65.3 cm) and blocky lignite (65.3 to 194.8 cm) to reflect PETM age. Based on a peat to lignite compaction ratios, the blocky lignite (65.3 to 194.8 cm) is likely to have accumulated as peat during 4–12 kyr (range 1–42 kyr) (Collinson et al., 2009) and thus represents only the early part of the PETM. The shallow-marine Woolwich Formation, which overlies the Cobham Lignite Bed at Cobham, contains the *Apectodinium* acme indicating that it is also within the PETM. For a full description of the stratigraphy, see Collinson et al. (2009).
2.2. *Lipid extraction*

The current study utilised aliquots of total lipid extract (TLE) originally prepared by Pancost et al. (2007) and which had been stored dry and frozen (-20 °C). We focus here exclusively on the lignite sediments (Supplementary Information). Briefly, the powdered samples were extracted by sonication with a sequence of increasingly polar solvents (four times with dichloromethane (DCM), four times with DCM/methanol (MeOH) (1:1, v/v) and three times with MeOH). The total lipid extracts were separated into three fractions using a column packed with (activated) alumina by elution with hexane (apolar fraction), hexane/DCM (9:1 v/v) and DCM/MeOH (1:2 v/v; polar fraction). The polar fraction, containing the GDGTs, was dissolved in hexane/iso-propanol (99:1, v/v) and passed through a 0.45 μm PTFE filter.

2.3. *Analytical methods*

Hydrocarbon fractions were analysed using a Thermoquest Finnigan Trace GC interfaced to a Thermoquest Finnigan Trace MS. This was achieved using a fused silica capillary column (50 m × 0.32 mm) coated with CP-Sil-5 (film thickness 0.12 μm) and via the following temperature programme: 40 °C to 140 °C at 20 °C min⁻¹, then to 300 °C at 4 °C min⁻¹, maintained at 300 °C for 22 min. Polar fractions were analysed by high performance liquid chromatography/atmospheric pressure chemical ionisation – mass spectrometry (HPLC/APCI-MS). Samples were analysed following Hopmans et al. (2016). Normal phase separation was achieved using two Waters Acquity UPLC BEH Hilic columns (2.1 x 150 mm; 1.7 μm i.d.) with a flow rate of 0.2 ml. min⁻¹. Samples were eluted isocratically with 78% A and 18% B for 25 min followed by a linear gradient to 35% B over 25 minutes, then a linear gradient
to 100% B in 30 minutes, where A = hexane and B = hexane:IPA (9:1, v/v) (Hopmans et al., 2016). Injection volume was 15 μL, typically from 100 μL. Analyses were performed using selective ion monitoring mode (SIM) to increase sensitivity and reproducibility (m/z 1302, 1300, 1298, 1296, 1294, 1292, 1050, 1048, 1046, 1036, 1034, 1032, 1022, 1020, 1018, 744, and 653).

2.4. Biomarker proxies

2.4.1. Biomarker-based temperature proxies

Branched glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraethers (brGDGTs) are membrane lipids produced by Bacteria (likely Acidobacteria; Sinninghe Damsté et al., 2018). The distribution of brGDGTs in peats is influenced by mean annual near-surface air temperature (MAAT), with the degree of methylation decreasing as temperature increases (Weijers et al., 2007; Naafs et al., 2017). This is captured in the methylation of branched tetraether (MBT°5ME) index (De Jonge et al., 2014):

\[
(1) \text{MBT}^{5\text{SME}} = \frac{(I_a + I_b + I_c)}{(I_a + I_b + I_c + II_a + II_b + II_c + III_a)}
\]

For application to peats and lignites, MBT°5ME is translated to MAAT using the peat-specific calibration (Naafs et al., 2017):

\[
(2) \text{MAAT}_{\text{peat}} = 52.18 \times \text{MBT}^{5\text{SME}} - 23.05 \quad (n = 94, r^2 = 0.76; \text{RMSE} = 4.7\degree C)
\]

Roman numerals refer to individual GDGT structures shown in the Supplementary Information (Figure S1). In brief, I, II and III represent the tetra-, penta- and hexamethylated components, respectively, and a, b and c represent the brGDGTs bearing 0, 1 or 2 cyclopentane moieties. Penta- and hexamethylated brGDGTs can be
methylated at the C-5 position or C-6 position on the alkyl chain. The latter are indicated by an apostrophe (e.g. IIa' – see equation (7)). Note that samples from the lower laminated lignite (i.e. pre-PETM; n = 7) were previously analysed for branched GDGTs. For more details, see Naafs et al., (2018b).

Recent work has demonstrated that the distribution of bacterial-derived branched glycerol monoalkyl glycerol tetraethers (brGMGTs) can also be influenced by MAAT, with the degree of methylation decreasing as temperature increases (Naafs et al., 2018a). This is captured in the H-MBT_{acyclic} index:

\[
(3) \quad H-MBT_{acyclic} = \frac{\text{H-Ia}}{\text{[H-Ia]} + \text{[H-IIa]} + \text{[H-IIIa]}}
\]

In addition to brGDGTs and brGMGTs produced by Bacteria, peats also contain a wide variety of isoprenoidal (iso)GDGTs, produced by Archaea (Weijers et al., 2004). Of these compounds, isoGDGT-5 occurs exclusively within acidic (pH < 5.1) tropical (> 19°C) peats (Naafs et al., 2018b). The relative abundance of isoGDGT-5 is captured using the following index:

\[
(4) \quad \%GDGT-5 = \frac{\text{isoGDGT-5}}{\text{isoGDGT-1} + \text{isoGDGT-2} + \text{isoGDGT-3} + \text{isoGDGT-5}}
\]

%GDGT-5 values > 1% are only found in peats with both a MAAT > 19.5°C and pH < 5.1. isoGDGT-4 is excluded from this ratio due to co-elution with crenarchaeol. Note that samples from the lower laminated lignite (i.e. pre-PETM; n = 7) were previously analysed for isoGDGT-5. For more details, see Naafs et al., (2018b).

2.4.2. Biomarker-based pH proxies
In addition to temperature, the distribution of brGDGTs can also be influenced by other environmental parameters, such as pH. For instance, both 5- and 6-methyl brGDGTs are more abundant at higher pH (De Jonge et al., 2014). This is captured in a modified version of the cyclisation of branched tetraether (CBT) index:

\[
\text{CBT}_{\text{peat}} = \log((I_b + IIa' + IIb + IIb' + IIIa')/(I_a + IIa + IIIa))
\]

CBT_{\text{peat}} is translated to peat pH using the following equation (Naafs et al., 2017):

\[
\text{pH} = 2.49 \times \text{CBT}_{\text{peat}} + 8.07 \quad (n = 51; r^2 = 0.58; \text{RMSE} = 0.8)
\]

6-methyl brGDGTs are also more abundant at higher pH (De Jonge et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2015). This is captured in the IR6_{ME} index (Yang et al., 2015):

\[
\text{IR6}_{\text{ME}} = \frac{(IIa' + I lb' + IIc' + IIIa' + IIIb' + IIIc')}{(IIa + IIa' + IIb + IIb' + IIc + IIc' + IIIa + IIIa' + IIIb' + IIIc + IIIc')}
\]

Peat pH can also be reconstructed using the isomerisation of bacterial-derived hopanoids \((C_{31} \text{ hopane } \beta\beta/(\beta\beta+\alpha\beta); \text{Pancost et al., 2003})\). This index is translated to pH using the following equation (Inglis et al., 2018):

\[
\text{pH} = 5.22 \times (C_{31} \text{ hopane } \beta\beta/(\beta\beta+\alpha\beta)) + 3.11 \quad (n = 94, r^2 = 0.64; \text{RMSE} = 1.4)
\]

2.5. Modelling simulations

Temperature and precipitation estimates were obtained for the Early Eocene (Ypresian) from an ensemble of coupled atmosphere–ocean GCMs. These simulations include the EoMIP ensemble (Lunt et al., 2012), but also more recent simulations (Inglis et al., 2017; Kiehl and Shields, 2013; Sagoo et al., 2013) (Table 1).
Table 1: Summary of model simulations. See the supplementary information and original references for more details.

We also generate new temperature and precipitation estimates using a revised version of HadCM3L, HadCM3L-I2 (Table 1). Using the nomenclature of Valdes et al. (2017) these new model simulations are carried out using the HadCM3L-M2.1aD version of the model. The boundary conditions (paleogeography, solar forcing) representing the Ypresian are the same as in Lunt et al. (2016) but with modifications made to the ozone distribution such that it more closely reproduces modern ozone and consequently surface air temperature values when run under modern conditions. These new simulations were initialised from a previous 10,422 model years fully equilibrated 2x preindustrial CO₂ run of the Ypresian. One simulation was kept constant at 2x preindustrial CO₂ for 1000 model years while the second experiment used elevated 6x preindustrial CO₂ for 1000 model years, and a third simulations used 3x preindustrial CO₂ for 6,000 model years. A mean of the last 50-years is used to produce the climatologies in all 3 simulations. To study changes in occurrence of extreme events, we also include the simulations by Carmichael et al. (2018).
Simulations are performed with atmospheric CO$_2$ at 2x and 4x preindustrial concentrations. However, unlike other HadCM3L simulations, precipitation rates were recorded at every model hour for the 99-year run. Within the simulated palaeogeography the nearest land point to the Cobham locality was identified using the Getech Plc. plate model at the mid-point of the appropriate geological stage (Ypresian), which is consistent with the paleogeographies in the HadCM3L-I and HadCM3L-I2 simulations.

3. Results

3.1. Biomarker distributions in Cobham lignite sediments

The branched GDGT (brGDGT) distribution within the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) is dominated by tetramethylated brGDGTs (average: 90% of the total brGDGT assemblage; Fig. 1a). Within the upper laminated lignite (54.15 to 55.9 cm), the relative abundance of tetramethylated brGDGTs decreases (average: 78% of the total brGDGT assemblage). The relative abundance of tetramethylated brGDGTs decreases further within the blocky lignite (average: 65% of the total brGDGT assemblage; 67.5 to 194.8 cm).

The isoprenoidal GDGT (isoGDGT) distribution within lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) is dominated by GDGTs with 0 to 5 cyclopentane moieties and the abundance of isoGDGT-5 is high (average %GDGT-5: 3.0%). Within the upper laminated lignite (54.15 to 55.9 cm), the abundance of isoGDGT-5 is slightly lower (average %GDGT-5: 2.3%). Within the blocky lignite (67.5 to 194.8 cm), isoGDGT-5 is typically absent (although there are exceptions; e.g. 121.9 cm) and the relative
abundance of isoGDGT-0 increases significantly (average: 80% of total isoGDGT assemblage).

**Figure 1:** Fractional abundance of (a) branched GDGT and (b) isoprenoidal GDGT lipids within the lower laminated lignite (pre-PETM), upper laminated lignite (PETM onset) and blocky lignite (early PETM)

The Cobham lignite also contains recently identified branched and isoprenoidal glycerol monoalkyl glycerol tetraethers (brGMGTs and isoGMGTs, respectively; Naafs et al., 2018a). The isoGMGT distribution is dominated by isoGMGT-0 throughout (average: 95% of the total isoGMGT assemblage). The brGMGT distribution within the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) is dominated by tetramethylated brGMGTs (average: 85% of the total brGMGT assemblage; Fig. 1a). Within the upper laminated lignite (54.15 to 55.9 cm), the relative abundance of tetramethylated brGMGTs decreases (average: 75% of the total brGMGT assemblage). The relative abundance of tetramethylated brGMGTs decreases further within the blocky lignite (average: 65% of the total brGMGT assemblage; 67.5 to 194.8 cm).

The Cobham lignite also contains a range of bacterial-derived C_{27}–C_{32} hopanes and C_{27}–C_{30} hopenes (see Pancost et al., 2007 for full details). The hopanoid distribution within the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) is dominated by the (22R)-17α,21β(H)-homohopane (C_{31}) (average: 31% of total hopanoid assemblage).
This is one of the most abundant hopanoids in modern peats and typically dominates the hopane distribution within acidic, ombrotrophic bogs (Inglis et al., 2018). The relative abundance of the (22R)-17α,21β(H)-homohopane (C₃₁) decreases within the upper laminated lignite (average: 15% of total hopanoid assemblage) and the blocky lignite (average: 5% of total hopanoid assemblage). The blocky lignite is dominated by C₃₀ hopenes (up to 50% of total hopanoid assemblage).

3.2. MAAT and pH trends in the Cobham Lignite inferred from biomarker proxies

Branched GDGT-derived MAAT estimates from the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) are relatively stable and range between ca. 24 and 26 °C (average: 26°C; Naafs et al., 2018b; Fig. 2). Lower MAAT estimates are observed within the upper laminated lignite and blocky lignite. However, see Section 4.1 and 4.2 for further discussion on the validity of these results. CBTₚₑₐₜ and C₃₁ hopane ββ/(ββ+αβ)-derived pH estimates from the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 43.3 cm) are relatively low (average: 5.3 and 4.4 pH units, respectively; Fig. 3a-b). CBTₚₑₐₜ and C₃₁ hopane ββ/(ββ+αβ)-derived pH estimates from the upper laminated lignite increase slightly (average: 6.0 and 4.6 pH units, respectively; Fig. 3a-b). CBTₚₑₐₜ and C₃₁ hopane ββ/(ββ+αβ)-derived pH estimates increase further within the blocky lignite (average: 6.8 and 6.3 pH units, respectively; Fig. 3a-b).

4. Discussion

4.1. Biomarker-derived temperature estimates across the onset of the PETM

Branched GDGT-derived MAAT estimates from the lower laminated lignite pre-PETM interval (i.e. 4.65 to 54.15 cm) indicate warm terrestrial temperatures (ca. 22 to 26°C; average: 24°C; Naafs et al., 2018b; Fig. 2). Naafs et al., (2018b) also identified the
occurrence of isoGDGTs with > 5 cyclopentane moieties during the pre-PETM interval, indicating minimum MAAT estimates of 19°C. High H-MBT_{acyclic} values within the lower laminated lignite (4.65 to 54.15 cm) would also imply elevated terrestrial temperatures (Naafs et al., 2018a). Our biomarker-based temperature estimates also agree with MAAT estimates for the Cobham region simulated by climate model simulations run at high CO₂ concentrations (e.g. HadCM3L 6x PI; CCSM3-H 8x and 16x PI; CCSM3-W 16x PI; Figure 4a; Table 1), in agreement with existing proxy-based CO₂ estimates for the PETM (Hollis et al., 2019). They also agree with climate model simulations which have modified specific model parameters (e.g. CCSM3-K and FAMOUS-1; Figure 4a).

Figure 2: Terrestrial biomarker proxies before, across the onset and during the early part of the PETM at Cobham. a) Branched GDGT-implied MAAT estimates obtained via MAAT_{peat} proxy, b) MBT_{acyclic}, c) H-MBT_{acyclic} and d) %GDGT-5. Dashed line corresponds to onset of CIE (54.45 cm). Note that MAAT_{peat} and %GDGT-5 estimates from the charcoal-rich lower laminated lignite (i.e. pre-CIE; n = 7) were published in Naafs et al. (2018).
Branched GDGT-derived MAAT estimates decrease within the PETM-aged upper laminated lignite (54.45 to 55.9 cm) and blocky lignite (67.5 to 194.8 cm), indicating lower terrestrial temperatures at the onset and during the early PETM (ca. 11 to 20°C; average: 15°C; Fig. 2). The PETM-aged blocky lignite (67.5 to 194.8 cm) also contains a lower abundance of isoGDGT-5 (Fig. 2d; but see pH discussion below; section 4.2.3) and lower H-MBT_{acyclic} values (Fig. 2c), both suggesting lower temperatures. Although the absolute temperature estimates agree with MAAT estimates for this region simulated by climate model simulations run at lower CO$_2$ concentrations (e.g. HadCM3L 2x, 4x PI; ECHAM 2x PI; CCSM3-H 2x and 4x PI, GISS 4x PI; Figure 4a) or that have modified specific model parameters (e.g. HadCM3L-I2 and FAMOUS-2; Figure 4a), for all model simulations in our ensemble with more than one CO$_2$ concentration (Table 1; Supplementary Information), there is warming at the Cobham location as CO$_2$ increases.

Decreasing terrestrial temperatures in the upper laminated lignite and the blocky lignite are inconsistent with the presence of the Apectodidium acme throughout the overlying Woolwich Shell Beds and the short accumulation time estimated for the BL which demonstrate that the blocky lignite accumulated as peat during the early part of the PETM (Collinson et al 2009). Lower temperatures are also inconsistent with increasing palm pollen in some BL samples (Collinson et al., 2009). Decreasing temperatures are also at odds with the regional response, with proxy evidence for increasing terrestrial temperatures in northern Europe during the PETM (up to 6°C; Schoon et al., 2015). The marine realm also indicates increasing temperatures in northern Europe during the PETM, with evidence for 3 to 4°C of surface ocean warming in both the Bay of Biscay (Bornemann et al., 2014) and the North Sea (Schoon et al., 2015). Decreasing terrestrial temperatures also differ from the global
response during the PETM (Hollis et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2013; McInerney and Wing, 2011). Collectively, this implies that the biomarker-based paleotemperature proxies in the upper laminated lignite and blocky lignite are impacted by non-thermal influences or ecological signals; below we explore what these controls may be.

4.2. Exploring additional controls upon peat-specific biomarker temperature proxies

4.2.1. Vegetation

The lower laminated lignite (pre-PETM) is dominated by fern spores and is rich in charcoal including fern leaf stalks and was interpreted to indicate a fire-prone, low-diversity vegetation (Collinson et al., 2009). In contrast, the upper laminated lignite and blocky lignite (PETM) are characterised by the reduction then loss of ferns and charcoal, an increase in wetland plants (including cupressaceous conifers) and a more varied flowering plant community with palms and eudicots. Although it has been previously argued that changes in vegetation could have influenced the distribution of brGDGTs in peatlands (e.g. Weijers et al., 2011), this was later attributed to the overly strong pH correction in the MBT/CBT proxy (Inglis et al., 2017). Indeed, recent studies within modern peatlands (Naafs et al., 2017) and ancient lignites (Inglis et al., 2017) have indicated that vegetation change is less of a concern than originally inferred by Weijers et al. (2011). As such, we argue that, although there is vegetation change, it is unlikely to have exerted a primary control upon biomarker paleotemperature proxies in the Cobham Lignite.

4.2.2. Lithofacies
The Cobham Lignite Bed is characterised by two different lithofacies (laminated vs blocky lignite). The laminated lignite is characterised by repeated (episodic) deposition of charcoal (mostly from local sources, via run-off related local transport; Steart et al., 2007), whereas the overlying blocky lignite is dominated by continuous deposition of non-woody material in a persistent peat-forming environment (Steart et al., 2007).

Whilst previous studies have noted subtle differences in brGDGT distributions (and therefore, MAAT estimates; up to 4°C) between different lithofacies (e.g. lignite vs shallow marine sediments; Inglis et al., 2017), a decline in biomarker-based temperature estimates within the Cobham Lignite Bed occurs within the upper laminated lignite (54 to 56 cm; Figure 2) and prior to changes in lithofacies. Therefore, lithofacies are not a primary control upon biomarker paleotemperature proxies in the Cobham Lignite.

4.2.3. pH, hydrology and presence of open water areas

Within the Cobham Lignite Bed, we reconstruct pH using two independent, peat-specific pH proxies: 1) CBT_{peat}, based upon the cyclisation of brGDGTs (Naafs et al., 2017), and 2) the C_{31} hopane ββ/(αβ+ββ) index, based upon the isomerisation of C_{31} hopanes (Inglis et al., 2018). Within the lower laminated lignite (pre-PETM), brGDGT- and hopanoid-derived pH estimates (pH: ca. 4 to 5.5) are low and indicate acidic conditions (Fig. 3). The occurrence of isoGDGT-5 (> 1%; Fig. 2d), the absence of 6-methyl brGDGTs (IR_{6ME} < 0.01; Fig. 3c) and the dominance of the C_{31} αβ hopane provides additional evidence for acidic conditions within the lower laminated lignite. We observe a remarkable increase in hopanoid- and brGDGT-derived pH estimates within the upper laminated lignite (0.5 pH unit) and especially the blocky lignite (ca. 2 pH units to pH values > 7.5; Fig. 3). The upper laminated lignite and blocky lignite also
contain a higher abundance of pH-sensitive 6-methyl brGDGTs (average IR$_{6\text{ME}}$: 0.23 and 0.29, respectively; Fig. 3) and a lower abundance of the C$_{31}$ αβ hopane. This indicates a profound change in the environment during the onset and early PETM and provides an alternative explanation for the decrease in the abundance of isoGDGT-5 (see 4.1; Naafs et al., 2018b).

Figure 3: Peat pH before, across the onset and during the early part of the PETM at Cobham, a) C$_{31}$ hopane (ββ/αβ+ββ)-derived pH estimates, b) CBT$_{\text{peat}}$-derived pH estimates, b c) IR$_{6\text{ME}}$ (the ratio between 5- and 6-methyl brGDGTs. High values imply higher pH). Dashed line corresponds to onset of CIE.

An increase in pH values within the onset and early PETM implies changes in local hydrology, supported by other hydrological and botanical indicators at Cobham (UK). For example, the blocky lignite is characterised by an increased percentage of Inaperturopollenites pollen (representing swamp-dwelling cupressaceous conifers) and Sparganiaceaepollenites pollen (representing marginal aquatic
monocotyledonous angiosperm herbs), indicating the development of waterlogged
swamp environments (Collinson et al., 2009). The base of the blocky lignite also
includes the unusual co-occurrence of two genera of freshwater, free-floating water
plants, the heterosporous ferns *Salvinia* and *Azolla* (Collinson et al., 2013). There is
also the loss of wildfires, with both the upper laminated lignite and blocky lignite having
a significant reduction in, or loss of, both macroscopic and microscopic charcoal
(Collinson et al., 2009).

Taken together, the evidence indicates enhanced waterlogging during the
onset of the PETM and the development a persistent peatland with patches of open
water. The development of open water conditions is likely to be associated with the
input of brGDGTs from aquatic sources (as observed in lakes and ponds; e.g. Colcord
et al., 2015; Huguet et al., 2015; Tierney and Russell, 2009; Weber et al., 2018).
Aquatic brGDGTs can reflect near-bottom water temperatures (Weber et al., 2018)
and application of mineral soil or peat calibrations in modern lacustrine settings
consistently yields colder-than-predicted temperatures (up to 10°C in modern
systems; Tierney et al., 2010; Zink et al., 2010). The input of GGDTs from aquatic
sources can therefore explain the apparent cooling in our brGDGT-derived
temperature estimates during the onset of the PETM. This also indicates that the
brGDGT paleothermometer in terrestrial archives should not be employed in settings
where major changes in pH and hydrology took place. Future work aiming to determine
palaeotemperatures would therefore benefit from accompanying proxy-based pH
reconstructions based on the distribution of hopanes (Inglis et al., 2018) or branched
glycerol dialkyl glycerol tetraethers (brGDGTs) (Naafs et al., 2017) or alternative
palaeohydrological indicators (e.g. *n*-alkane δ²H values; (Sachse et al., 2012)).
A shift towards wetter conditions in northern Europe during the PETM

Our data – as well as previously published proxy evidence – suggests a shift towards wetter conditions during the PETM at Cobham (see section 4.2). To test these observations, we used the same ensemble of model simulations (see section 4.1; Table 1) to investigate changes in mean annual precipitation (MAP) at Cobham (UK) for two PETM-type scenarios (i.e. doubling or tripling of CO$_2$; Fig. 4b). For a tripling of CO$_2$, modelling simulations indicate stable (e.g. HadCM3L) or decreasing MAP (22%; e.g. HadCM3L-I2). For a doubling of CO$_2$, model simulations indicate increasing (6 to 7%); CCSM3-H, HadCM3L-C), stable (e.g. HadCM3L) or decreasing MAP (5 to 22%; HadCM3L-I, CCSM3-W). A decrease in MAP is inconsistent with proxy evidence at Cobham. However, model simulations run at hourly resolution (i.e. HadCM3L-C) also show a change in precipitation extremes at Cobham for a doubling of CO$_2$, with an increase in the 90$^{th}$ percentile storm extreme rate (+7%; HadCM3L-C). This indicates an increase towards more intense rainfall events. Furthermore, an increase in tail width (+28%), indicates more frequent heavy rainfall events of a given size (Carmichael et al., 2018). Decoupling between MAP and extreme events has previously been noted for other mid-to-low latitude PETM settings (e.g. Tunisia, Tanzania; Carmichael et al. 2018) and should be considered in future proxy-model comparisons.

Geochemical and botanical proxies at other sites also provide further evidence for enhanced rainfall in northern Europe during the PETM, with evidence for an increase in wetland-type environments in northern France (Garel et al., 2013) and other parts of the region surrounding the North Sea (Eldrett et al., 2014; Kender et al., 2012). There is also evidence for abundant low-salinity tolerant dinocysts (Sluijs et al., 2007), enhanced clay mineral deposition (Bornemann et al., 2014) and isotopically-
depleted tooth apatite $\delta^{18}$O values (Myhre et al., 1995) within North Sea marine sediments, all of which indicate wetter conditions during the PETM. This indicates a shift towards wetter conditions in northern Europe during the PETM and perhaps an increase in the occurrence of extreme rainfall events (Carmichael et al., 2018). In these settings, terrestrial biomarker proxies may be subject to additional controls (e.g. pH, hydrology and/or the presence of open water areas) and should therefore be interpreted within a multi-proxy framework.

**Figure 4.** Model-derived mean annual surface temperature and precipitation estimates as a function of CO$_2$ at Cobham (UK). Simulations represent the mid-point of the most appropriate geological stage (Ypresian; 56 to 47.8 Ma). For full details on each model simulation, see Supplementary Information. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

**5. Conclusions**

Here we have reconstructed terrestrial paleoenvironmental change within the Cobham Lignite Bed, which spans the very latest Paleocene, onset and early part of the PETM. Proxies indicate high terrestrial temperatures prior to the PETM (22 to 26°C),
consistent with model simulations. However, inconsistent with local, regional and 
global evidence, the biomarker proxies seem to indicate significant cooling during the 
onset and early PETM (ca. 5 to 11°C). We attributed this to enhanced waterlogging 
and the development of a persistent peatland with areas of open water, biasing the 
brGDGT paleothermometer. This study implies the need for care when applying 
biomarker-based temperature proxies in transitional terrestrial environments (e.g. mire 
settings). It also serves as a cautionary tale on the danger of attempting to interpret 
proxy records without a wider understanding of the environmental context, especially 
the pH and the hydrology.

Acknowledgements
This research was funded through the advanced ERC grant ‘The Greenhouse Earth 
System’ (T-GRES. Project reference: 340923). RDP also acknowledges the Royal 
Society Wolfson Research Merit Award and funding from the NERC. BDAN 
acknowledges additional funding from a Royal Society Tata University Research 
Fellowship. We thank the NERC Life Sciences Mass Spectrometry Facility (Bristol) for 
analytical support. A.F., D.J.L. and R.D.P acknowledge funding from NERC through 
NE/K014757/1, NE/I005722/1, NE/I005714/1, and (PJV also) NE/P013805/1. We 
gratefully acknowledge funding to M.E.C. from NERC grant NE/J008656/1 and to 
R.D.P. from NERC grant NE/J008591/1. M.E.C. thanks the Leverhulme Trust for 
providing funding (Grant number F/07/537/0); Alfred McAlpine, AMEC and Channel 
Tunnel Rail Link for access to the Cobham site.

Data availability
Data can be accessed via the online supporting information, via http://www. 
pangaea.de/, or from the author (email: gordon.inglis@bristol.ac.uk).
References

Aze, T., Pearson, P.N., Dickson, A.J., Badger, M.P.S., Bown, P.R., Pancost, R.D.,
(2014) Extreme warming of tropical waters during the Paleocene–Eocene
Thermal Maximum. Geology. 42. 739-742.

Bornemann, A., Norris, R.D., Lyman, J.A., D’Haenens, S., Groeneveld, J., Röhl, U.,
Farley, K.A. and Speijer, R.P. (2014) Persistent environmental change after the
Paleocene–Eocene Thermal Maximum in the eastern North Atlantic. Earth and

Carmichael, M.J., Inglis, G.N., Badger, M.P., Naafs, B.D.A., Behrooz, L.,
Remmelzwaal, S., Monteiro, F.M., Rohrssen, M., Farnsworth, A., Buss, H.L.
associated biogeochemical consequences of rapid global warming during the

extreme precipitation events at the Paleocene–Eocene thermal maximum.

(2015) Assessment of branched GDGTs as temperature proxies in sedimentary
records from several small lakes in southwestern Greenland. Organic
Geochemistry. 82, 33-41.

penecontemporaneous macrofloras of southern England: A record of
vegetation and fire across the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum. Special

Collinson, M.E., Smith, S.Y., van Konijnenburg-van Cittert, J.H., Batten, D.J., van der
Burgh, J., Barke, J. and Marone, F. (2013) New observations and synthesis of
Paleogene heterosporous water ferns. International Journal of Plant

Collinson, M.E., Steart, D.C., Harrington, G.J., Hooker, J.J., Scott, A.C., Allen, L.O.,
dynamics in response to palaeoenvironmental change across the onset of the
48, 38-66.

(2008) Sharply increased insect herbivory during the Paleocene–Eocene

Damsté, J.S.S., Rijpstra, W.I.C., Foesel, B.U., Huber, K.J., Overmann, J., Nakagawa,
of the occurrence of ether-and ester-linked iso-diabatic acid membrane lipids in
microbial cultures of the Acidobacteria: Implications for brGDGT paleoproxies
for temperature and pH. Organic Geochemistry. 124, 63-76.

Damsté, J.S. (2014) Occurrence and abundance of 6-methyl branched glycerol
dialkyl glycerol tetraethers in soils: Implications for palaeoclimate
reconstruction. Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta 141, 97-112.

Dickson, A.J., Cohen, A.S., Coe, A.L., Davies, M., Shcherbinina, E.A. and Gavrilov,
Y.O. (2015) Evidence for weathering and volcanism during the PETM from


