The Oxford Archaeological Unit Newsletter

OAU NEWS

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# THE DEVIL'S QUOITS

The Devil, playing at quoits one day on Wytham Hill, hurled large stones which landed at Stanton Harcourt, four miles away. This is a local version of a tale attached, with variations, to many prehistoric stone monuments. At Stanton Harcourt the name and the story were applied to three stones set upright in the ground to the S of the village.

Air photographs, the earliest of them taken by Major Allen in the 1920s, showed that one of the stones stood within a large ovoid ditched enclosure, with two opposed entrances, comparable to the ditches around Stonehenge and other henge monuments of the later Neolithic period (about 2800-2300 BC). Centuries of ploughing had flattened the bank originally built of the upcast from the ditch and filled in the ditch itself.

In 1940 investigations by the late Professor W F Grimes in advance of the construction of the World War II airfield at Stanton Harcourt showed that the two stones outside the ovoid enclosure had been re-erected in the positions which they then occupied and that the one stone within the enclosure, the largest of the three in the vintage postcard reproduced here, had formed part of a circle, the other stones of which were represented by the sockets in

which they had once stood. He also showed that the ditch defining the surrounding enclosure had been at least 2.5 m deep and had been accompanied by an external bank rather than an internal one.

In the post-war period accelerated gravel extraction led to more extensive excavations, conducted by Margaret Gray in 1972-3 and by John W Hedges for the OAU in 1988. The results of these have now been analysed and a report on them has been prepared for publication by Alistair Barclay, Margaret Gray and George Lambrick in OAU's *Thames Valley Landscapes* series.

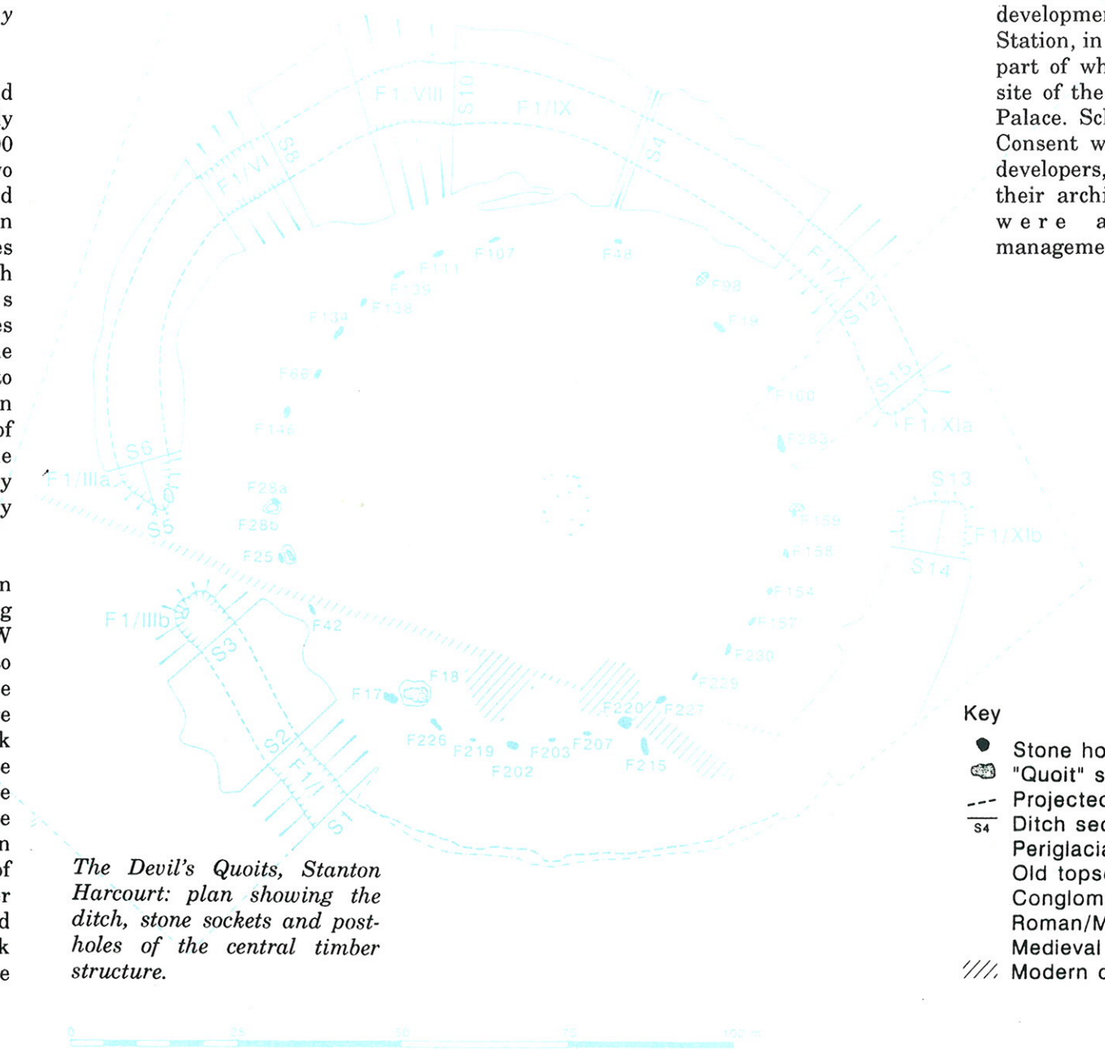
The ditch enclosed an ovoid area measuring approximately 125 m from NW to SE and 100 m from SW to NE with two opposed entrances oriented roughly E-W. Radiocarbon determinations on samples from the base of the ditch indicate that it was constructed in the centuries around 2600 BC. Some of the red deer antler picks used to dig the ditch had been thrown back into it. A group of undated postholes at the centre of the enclosure may represent a contemporary wooden structure.

Within the ditch stood an ovoid setting, measuring approximately 79 m from NW to SE and 74 m from NE to SW, of at least 28 stones, the largest over 3 m high. All were slabs of the conglomerate rock which occurs in seams in the gravels of the site. They were set in sockets cut into the gravel, and wedged in position with smaller fragments of rock. It is not clear whether the stone circle was erected after the surrounding bank and ditch were built or at the same time. Rock fragments and antler picks in a layer of the ditch accumulated during the early Bronze Age suggest that the stones may have been put up after the earth-built monument had been in use for some time.

As the centuries passed, the henge served as a central point around which smaller monuments, including over 60 burial mounds, were built, the area remaining an important ceremonial focus for a thousand years or more. Thereafter, changing beliefs and practices led to its abandonment and eventual levelling by cultivation.

It is now possible to reconstruct the monument on paper. ARC, the gravel extractors, plan to use the information collected to achieve a physical reconstruction, with provision for the protection of surviving deposits, as a part of the reinstatement of the area after gravel extraction is complete.

*Frances Healy*




*The Devil's Quoits, Stanton Harcourt: plan showing the ditch, stone sockets and post-holes of the central timber structure.*

## THE HEAVY HAND OF THE LAW

In February a trial took place at Knightsbridge Crown Court when Bovis Ltd were prosecuted under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. The OAU acted as archaeological consultants to Bovis in what was a complex case with important implications particularly for site contractors.

Bovis were the managing contractors for a major development at Cannon Street Station, in the City of London, part of which overlapped the site of the Roman Governor's Palace. Scheduled Monument Consent was granted to the developers, Speyhawk, through their architects, before Bovis were awarded the management contract. The developers agreed to make provision for archaeological recording to be carried out by the Museum of London. The total cost of this was in the region of £400,000.

Several months after archaeological site work had been completed, Museum of London staff discovered a manhole shaft on the edge of the development about which they had not previously been aware. As a result English Heritage and the Police were informed; the Department of Public Prosecution then initiated the prosecution.

The case raised a number of issues: the status of the boundary line around the Scheduled Monument, the definition of the Roman Governor's Palace site, the interpretation of the Secretary of State's Scheduled Monument Consent letter, the relevance of damage to the prosecution case and the responsibility for works on the site.

After a two week presentation of the prosecution case the judge made a legal ruling. He pronounced that the boundary line defined the Scheduled Monument and included all below ground deposits regardless of whether they were part of the Roman Governor's Palace or not. He also decided that the Secretary of State's letter did not constitute Scheduled Monument Consent specifically for the manhole. As a result of this ruling Bovis changed their plea in the major count to guilty. The judge in his summing up stated that he did not believe the manhole had done damage to the Roman Governor's Palace or to the adjacent Walbrook waterfront. He did not hold Bovis morally culpable but as managing contractors held them responsible for an offence of strict liability, that is, digging a hole within the boundary of a Scheduled Monument without consent. Bovis Ltd were fined £1,000 with £20,000 costs. They are to appeal.

In developments such as this Scheduled Monument Consent is normally applied for by the developers, their architects or their archaeological consultants. Contractors who come on board at a later stage, are often not involved in the process of obtaining consent. The Cannon Street case is a reminder that contractors working on a Scheduled Monument must beware.

*David Miles*

## ON THE ROAD TO IRCHESTER?

'All roads lead to Rome', they say. A recent OAU discovery in Northamptonshire may not have had quite such an exotic destination, but its possible association with a Roman town is of considerable interest.

Ditchford Gravel Pit, worked by ARC Central, lies on the north bank of the river Nene, approximately two miles E of Wellingborough. An earthwork running across the floodplain towards the river was investigated by the OAU in 1989 and was shown to be a metalled causeway. The feature may be of Roman date, although a single seed of a plant so far unknown in archaeological contexts dating from before the middle Saxon period was found.

The new discovery was made during a watching brief on the mineral extraction. About 45 m of limestone metalling was

found, running along a low ridge of gravel at right-angles away to the E of the earthwork. The new causeway turned sharply to approach the river at 90°. The structure consisted of an ironstone, sand and limestone bed, overlain by a carefully constructed limestone paved surface. Many horseshoes were recovered, testifying to the former use of the structure. Part of the skeleton of a foal was also found. Most of the finds appear to be Roman, although two medieval horseshoes were also present.

The SE end of the causeway was overlain by an organic layer which contained plant and beetle remains typical of a medieval hay meadow. The whole site was then covered by thick layers of alluvium, deposited by repeated floods from the river.

Irchester Roman town lies immediately to the S of the pit, on the opposite bank of the river. The town is surrounded by a substantial rampart, later modified to incorporate a stone wall. Several important Roman roads converge on the site, and extra-mural settlements run up to the walls to the S, E and W. A substantial cemetery to the E of the extra-mural settlement lay alongside the road into the town from *Durobrivae* (Peterborough).

The earthwork crossing the floodplain is aligned on the E gate of the Roman town. The new causeway, however, runs away from the earthwork before the river is reached. We can only guess at why the branch road was built: certainly it runs up to the river, and perhaps bridges it. Such a bridge would give direct access to the cemetery. Was this necessary so that funeral processions did not pass through the settlement?

The question may be premature. The deserted medieval hamlet of Chester-on-the-Water lies to the E of the Roman town. Neither the earthwork nor the new causeway is aligned on the hamlet, but it is possible that one or both of the roads was built (or at least used) during the medieval period. Wood samples taken from the causeway for radiocarbon dating should help to resolve the issue.

*Graham Keevill*

## CHURCHES

One area which has not been hit by the recession is the amount of development in and around churches. A phenomenon of the later 20th century is the introduction of lavatories, coffee rooms and social centres into ancient churches. This has been encouraged by the sale of vicarages and changing attitudes to church use. The Church of England has exemption from limited building controls but monitors proposals for church alterations through the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). The Director of the OAU is a member of the DAC in his role as Archaeological Advisor to the Bishop of Oxford.

Because of our experience with churches the Unit acts as consultant to a number of churches outside the diocese ranging from historic sites, such as Glastonbury Abbey, to busy parishes, such as St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, Kent (shown below), and St Peter's, Brackley, Northamptonshire. Recent evaluations have produced evidence of an earlier church and cemetery beneath St Nicholas's and a cemetery with intensive burials possibly starting in the late Anglo-Saxon period at Brackley.

Such work is done in close co-operation with County Archaeologists. The aim of archaeological evaluation is to ensure not only that any archaeology is recorded if necessary, but also to encourage architects to design structures which have the minimum impact on buried remains as well as the visible structures.

*David Miles*

OAU News is published three times a year. The subscription, which includes the Annual Report, is £5 *per annum*. Please make cheques payable to the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

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