

MERTON (OX)

MERTON BORROW PIT
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
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SUMMARY

The site is chiefly of interest for prehistoric remains and lies in an area where, compared with the Thames gravels, little work has been done. The assessment identified an area of Neolithic and Iron Age activity, approximately 60m x 60m. The area occupied is slightly higher ground adjacent to the River Ray floodplain.

The occurrence of scatters of Neolithic flint, the subsequent Early Bronze Age ring ditches to the east, and evidence of Iron Age occupation suggest a site of continuing activity over a long period of time (c. 2,500-3,000 years).

The absence of definite pits, or other structures identifiable with the earlier prehistoric phase in the assessment trenches is not surprising since such features tend to be small, very scattered and difficult to find.

The later prehistoric material indicates a settlement but the low density of both subsoil features pits, ditches and gullies and post holes and the very sparse finds suggest that the site was probably a small farm, possibly of short duration or only peripheral to a nearby settlement.

The larger area uncovered over the southern ring ditch in the adjacent field has revealed very little further evidence for this period as yet but the rectangular enclosure, intersecting the second ring ditch has not yet been exposed and it is a potential candidate for the associated settlement.

In terms of preservation, later ploughing has truncated former ground surfaces and there is little prospect of waterlogged remains. Stratigraphic relationships between prehistoric features and alluvial deposits may be found.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological assessment was undertaken in February 1990 by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on behalf of Sir Alfred Mc Alpine Ltd. The assessment site consists of a proposed area for storage of topsoil and overburden in connection with the M40 motorway construction borrow pit, immediately to the east.

The borrow pit is situated 6 km south of the town of Bicester and ½ km S W of the village of Merton (SP 568-169). The assessment site occupies just over 2 hectares. *WRONG.*

At present the site is under pasture at approximately OD 60m. The

topsoil overlies a Jurassic rubbly Cornbrash limestone.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The aerial photograph of the site shows two substantial ring ditches and an enclosure in the field to the east. Part of this area was being exposed at the same time as the assessment. No features can be seen on the aerial photograph of the assessment field but the field was under pasture and cropmarks would be unlikely to show up.

Other ring ditches are known between Islip and Merton, and Neolithic axes have been found 1 km north of the site. Mesolithic flints have been recovered just south of the River Ray.

Four hundred metres to the east is the course of the Roman road from Dorchester on Thames to Alchester.

STRATEGY

The assessment trenches were dug using a 360° excavator with a 6 foot grading toothless bucket. Initially 11 trenches were laid out on the national grid to give a c. 3% sample of the area (fig.1). Features were excavated by hand to establish their type, condition and date.

In the area with the most archaeological deposits 3 extra trenches were dug. This increased the sample to 3.7%.

The exceptional rain and subsequent severe flooding of early February flooded **trenches 4 and 10**, only the layer depths and type being recorded. These trenches were quickly submerged by floodwater from the River Ray. Each trench was observed when machined and no archaeological features were noticed. The natural was a mottled light grey and orangey-brown clayey sandy silt. The darker grey clay fill of the features in **trench 7** suggest if any features existed they would have been evident when the trenches were dug.

In **trench 1** the eastern 4m revealed cornbrash and the remainder consisted of a light grey and mottled orangey-brown, clayey sandy silt. **Trenches 2, 3 and 14** were partly cleaned before they were flooded.

For all of the trenches the machined subsoil was examined to recover any finds (Table 2).

RESULTS: SOILS

The topsoil was a dark brown silty loam. The depth of topsoil varied from 0.12m to 0.25m. In the area south of **trench 7** a bluish grey alluvial clay underlay the topsoil. The alluvium contained aquatic mollusca in the south end of **trench 2** and in the low lying area, probably an old river channel. This was examined in **trenches 4 and 14**, where the bluish-grey alluvium

overlay a dark grey alluvial soil, which also contained aquatic mollusca, charcoal and burnt clay flecks. Below it was natural cornbrash or a mottled light/mid-grey sandy silt. There was no evidence of waterlogged organic preservation. The alluvium overlies the earliest archaeological features, while others are cut through it (fig 3).

The alluvium did not extend onto the higher ground north of **trench 7**. The topsoil overlay an earlier truncated topsoil of mid brown clay silt. Below this the natural subsoil was a reddish brown clay silt containing manganese granules.

In the trenches north of **trench 7** a layer of mid brown clayey silt was below the topsoil. This was interpreted as an old truncated topsoil. In some places this layer had been disturbed by ploughing. This layer contained flint flakes but only one sherd of prehistoric pottery (from **trench 6**). The depth of the layer varied from 0.07m to 0.28m, with an average of 0.14m. The depth was most variable in **trench 6**, which produced the highest density of flakes.

The old topsoil was machined off and where it did remain in hollows it was sectioned to see if it overlay any features. Although its relationship with some of the features was uncertain the other features cut through it.

The layer was characterized by being very clean and uniform with no inclusions or charcoal flecks. At the east end of **trench 7** the old topsoil was overlaid by the later alluvium, although its depth was reduced to 0.07m, in contrast to the 0.25m at the west end. This may suggest an erosion of the old topsoil, where it dips down onto the flood plain.

RESULTS: ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS

Trench 6 contained a scatter of 14 flints, mainly concentrated at the east and west ends. The flint was characterized by fine thin flakes including one large blade, which indicates a Neolithic date. The flint occurred in the old truncated topsoil or just above the natural. There was an undated V-shaped post hole, 0.30m deep, with a grey clay and charcoal fill produced no finds. Its shape suggests it is a driven post pipe, where the post has been driven straight into the soft subsoil.

There was a very shallow (0.18m) linear feature 6/4 which produced 4 flint flakes. The fill was very similar to the old topsoil although it did appear to cut this layer and contained a piece of charcoal. It is uncertain whether this was a man-made feature.

Trench 5 contained a shallow post hole containing fragments of soft burnt clay.

In **trench 11**, 3 flint flakes were found in the old topsoil. At the north end of the trench there was a similar wide shallow ditch 11/5. It had reddish-brown clay silt fill and produced 5 flint flakes of a very dark reddish brown colour. Its similarity with the natural meant it was only possible to identify it with careful cleaning.

In **trench 7** a curvilinear gully 7/6, 0.37m deep and 0.8m wide, with a mottled light grey and orangey-brown fill contained over 30 sherds of pottery, of which one rim was identifiably middle to late Iron Age. The gully also contained 3 flint flakes, lumps of fired clay and 3 small bone fragments, not very well preserved. At the west end of **trench 7** there was a large but shallow pit 7/5. The fill of gleyed clay produced 2 flint flakes.

A U-shaped ditch 7/7, 1.25m wide and 0.50m deep, orientated N E/S W was also excavated. It also had a clay fill and produced 1 flint blade. This ditch was also located in **trench 12** and **14**. This ditch was overlaid by the later alluvium and it cut the old topsoil. It ran along the ridge separating the higher ground from the floodplain.

Although the ditch and pit only contained flint it is possible they are contemporaneous with the Iron Age gully; with the flint being residual.

In **trenches 6** and **7**, 3 sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the topsoil.

Trench 12 produced two parallel ditches, 12/4 and 12/5, of which 12/4 is probably the same as 7/7. 12/5 was somewhat comparable to a ditch in a similar position in **trench 14** (14/7) but was not traced in **trench 7**.

Trench 9 had a similar shallow ditch running NE, 9/4, at its N end

Trenches 2 and **3** had irregular shallow features with odd patches of charcoal, which were interpreted as undated land clearance.

Trench 14 contained a small ditch 14/6 which was not quite bottomed due to flooding but its fill was very similar to ditch 7/7, and was likewise sealed by alluvium (fig 3). To its N was a parallel ditch cutting the alluvium, and to the S a larger ditch with modern infill in the top corresponding to a field boundary visible on the air photo. A smaller gully 14/4 ran SE.

No archaeological features were observed in **trenches 1, 3, 4, 8, or 10**.

RIDGE AND FURROW

Medieval ridge and furrow ploughing had taken place in the northern half of the assessment field, orientated N E/S W. The width from furrow to furrow averaged 11m. While a possible headland was noticed just north of **trench 5** it was not possible to trace it clearly in the east and west end of the field. Furrows were located in **trenches 5, 7, 11, 12, and 13**. The furrows, associated with visible furrows on the surface, contained a dark brown clay silt loam.

One furrow produced a sherd of post medieval orange glazed pottery, along with a clay pipe bowl in the topsoil, just above a furrow it suggests a late date for the final ploughing.

FINDS

The commonest finds from the assessment were prehistoric struck flints. A total of about 70 were recovered. No implements or retouched pieces were found. The waste material included 12 blade or blade fragments, 4 thin tertiary flakes and a few chips possibly indicative of axe manufacture. There were no cores.

A few sherds of mostly poorly preserved prehistoric pottery were found. Almost all were small undiagnostic body sherds. Some may be earlier prehistoric on the basis of fabric but the only recognizable piece (fig.4) is probably Middle to Late Iron Age. Other sherds from the same feature 7/6 were of a similar fabric, containing some sand and voids from leached shell inclusions.

A few medieval and later finds came from topsoil and ploughsoil layers.

TABLE 1: LIST OF EXCAVATED FINDS

TRENCH	TYPE	FINDS
5	5 Post hole	Burnt clay
6	1 Topsoil	Pottery, green glazed
6	2 Layer	14 flint flakes
6	3 Layer	2 flint flakes
6	4 Ditch	4 flint flakes
7	1 Topsoil	1 flint flake, 2 pot sherds, Prehistoric and Roman.
7	2 Layer	2 flint flakes
7	5 Pit	7 flint flakes, 1 pot sherd, Prehistoric.
7	6 Gully	30+ pot sherds, Prehistoric; 3 flint flakes, 3 bone fragments; fired clay.
7	7 Ditch	1 flint bladelet.
9	1 Topsoil	1 flint flake
9	2 Layer	1 flint flake
11	1 Topsoil	Clay pipe bowl
11	2 Layer	1 flint flake
11	4 Furrow	1 pot sherd
11	5 Ditch	6 flint flakes
12	2 Layer	1 flint flake
14	8 Layer	Tooth fragment
14	9 Layer	Bone fragment

TABLE 2: FINDS FROM MACHINED SUBSOIL SPOIL

TRENCH	FINDS	DATE
1	7 Flints	Neolithic
2	3 Flints	Neolithic
3	2 Flints	
5	2 Flints	
8	1 Flint	
9	10 Flints	Neolithic
10	2 Flints	
12	1 Flint & 1 pot sherd	