

Summary

This report describes the results of archaeological investigations carried out between 2003 and 2006 on behalf of the Northmoor Trust in the parishes of Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham, Oxfordshire. The work included examination of cropmarks, large-scale geophysical surveys covering over 60 hectares, fieldwalking covering just over 50 hectares and three seasons of significant excavation in 2003, 2004 and 2005, plus further limited excavations in 2005 and 2006.

Geophysical survey was concentrated in and around the scheduled hillfort at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham (Oxfordshire SAM No. 208), and revealed a smaller hilltop enclosure within the hillfort that excavation established was of Late Bronze Age date. The geophysics further suggested that features within the hillfort were otherwise scattered, an impression largely borne out by trenching. A section across the hillfort ditch and rampart failed to produce conclusive dating evidence, though in the interior both Early and Middle Iron Age pits were found, including a number containing human burials or bones. The hillfort ditch appears to have been kept clear throughout the Iron Age.

The hillfort was also used in the late Roman period, when very large rectangular pits were dug, and midden material was piled up behind and over the back of the Iron Age rampart. Pottery suggests a later 4th century date. People were also buried in the interior at this time. Saxon finds were very few, but a period of medieval occupation in the late 12th/13th centuries is attested by a medieval pit and a probable quarry of the same date. Coring of peat deposits by students from Oxford Brookes beside the Thames north of Castle Hill provided evidence of the environmental succession from the Early Iron Age onwards.

On the plateau below the hillfort a dense settlement was revealed by cropmarks and geophysical survey stretching 700 m west, to Hill Farm and beyond. This included a Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age midden some 50 m across, a Middle Iron Age curving boundary ditch 700 m long, with smaller sub-rectangular enclosures adjacent, and Early and Middle Iron Age penannular enclosures, four-post structures and pits. There seems to have been a shift southwards and westwards in the Middle Iron Age. Ditches of Late Iron Age or early Roman enclosures were also found near to Hill Farm.

The Roman settlement evidence was mainly of 2nd-3rd century date, and appears to have consisted of four enclosures, one of which contained a substantial building (now largely destroyed) with mosaic tesserae, painted plaster and a tiled roof. This enclosure was approached by a ditched trackway, and a second larger enclosure alongside the track further west may have contained a second building. A Roman inhumation was found north-west of this. A third enclosure was partly revealed north of Hill Farm, and a fourth enclosure (undated) lay alongside parallel Roman field boundaries west of Hill Farm. No substantial evidence of later settlement was found, although Saxon finds had been made previously west of Hill Farm.

The results of the project have confirmed an unique combination of elements, a Late Bronze Age hilltop enclosure with an external settlement and an adjacent midden. In the Early Iron Age the hilltop enclosure was replaced by the hillfort, where feasting occurred, while the adjacent settlement around the midden grew to be one of the largest in the Upper Thames valley. The use of the midden stopped in the Middle Iron Age, and a long boundary ditch may have divided this ancestral area off from further settlement, but beyond the boundary settlement expanded yet further west. There was also more

activity within the hillfort, including a much greater emphasis on burial, and the hillfort ditch was maintained throughout the Iron Age.

In the Roman period the settlement changed character but continued, and probably included a small villa, while the hillfort itself was probably reoccupied in the 4th century AD. Intriguingly both Roman cremations and inhumations continued to be buried around and within the hillfort, suggesting a continuity of burial location spanning at least 1000 years.

Geophysical survey and evaluation trenches were also dug across a cropmark complex at Neptune Wood east of Long Wittenham, revealing an Early Iron Age enclosure ditch, a Roman trackway and associated fields, and a pair of large Middle Saxon pits or waterholes. There were also possible early medieval ditches and later cultivation furrows.

A combination of geophysical survey and test trenching was carried out in Clifton Meadow by the Thames, to trace the continuations of a Roman trackway crossing an earlier field system. Both features were traced into the meadow, and waterlogged evidence of Roman haymeadow recovered, but no dating evidence was recovered from the earlier boundaries.

A riverside terrace behind Little Wittenham manor was trenched, and late and post-medieval terracing appears to belong to the creation of a formal garden. A variety of other fields were walked and/or surveyed by magnetometer, some over cropmark sites, producing evidence of Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman occupation.

Acknowledgements

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the geophysical results. The comments on resistivity findings are based in part on notes supplied by Roger Ainslie.

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