

Settlement on the Bedfordshire Claylands

Archaeology along the A421 Great Barford Bypass

by Jane Timby, Richard Brown, Alan Hardy, Stephen Leech,
Cynthia Poole and Leo Webley

with contributions by

*M. Allen, S.J. Allen, P. Blinkhorn, P. Booth, C. Boston, D. Challinor, P. de Jersey,
R. Devaney, D. Druce, E. Edwards, J. Geber, M. Holmes, M.K. Hounslow, C. Howard-Davies,
V. Karloukovski, L. Keys, R. Nicholson, R. Shaffrey, E. Stafford and D. Stansbie*

Principal illustrator

Georgina Slater

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Preface

The archaeology of most road schemes, from inception to mitigation, has a long gestation and the A421 Great Barford bypass is no exception. The first desk-based assessment (DBA) of the route was carried out in 1991 (Dawson 1992) and the second in 2000 as part of the preparations for the Design Brief issued in 2001 (BCCHEs 2001).

The earliest DBA was written when the first Environmental Statements were beginning to emerge (Ralston and Thomas 1993) following the adoption of the Environmental Assessment Regulations in July 1988. When the second DBA was prepared a decade later the Environmental Statement was a familiar part of the planning process and the intervening years had seen a significant accrual of archaeological data. Nevertheless the underlying principle of the process, the assessment, evaluation and mitigation of the impact of the scheme on the archaeology along the route, remained the same.

Geophysical survey was carried out in 2001 (NA 2001) and consent to build the A421 was granted by the Secretary of State after public inquiry in 2003. It was not until the issue of the compulsory purchase orders in 2004, however, that trial trench evaluation took place with the first of 185 trenches excavated on February 24th (NA 2004a). Managed by Jacobs Gibb on behalf of the Highways Agency, the project design was based on the Design Guide issued in 2001 but did not seek to assess the significance of the archaeology but to identify and characterise deposits along the route.

The archaeological mitigation process began with the appointment of the design and build partnership Capita Symonds and Edmund Nuttall Ltd as the main contractors in April 2004. With the trial trenching still underway and a time limit set for the confirmation of target costs under the ECI contract an intense period of consultation and assessment of significance began in June 2004.

The road route lay along the southern edge of the north Bedfordshire claylands, an area that was largely agricultural and which, in contrast to the valley of the River Great Ouse just south of the scheme, had seen little archaeological activity. The area was therefore relatively unknown. Yet since 1988 an increasing number and complexity of cropmarks on the crests of clay ridges, particularly in the parish of Dean and Shelton, had been noted by the sites and monuments team at County Hall (Clark and Dawson 1995), suggesting that the landscape may have been more densely occupied during the Iron Age and Roman periods than previously thought (Simco 1973).

The geophysical survey and trial trenching (NA 2004a–d) along the A421 established the location of nine areas of archaeological deposits with the potential for further investigation. At a series of meetings attended by representatives of the Highways Agency, the main contractors, the County Council, and the Highways Agency's managing agents, nine sites were identified for mitigation. In each case the sites had been assessed against the scheduling criteria and local research priorities (Oake forthcoming).

Six sites (2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9) identified by assessment and trial trenching were found to be significant when measured against the criteria and were confirmed for excavation. Four further sites (Sites 1, 6 and 7 and part of Site 2) were of less certain significance and were designated for Strip, Map and Sample (SMS). Site 1, at Roxton Road, had produced a single Anglo-Saxon bead during field artefact collection in 2001 (NA 2001) and when assessed in the light of survey work by Foard at Brixworth (Foard 1978; Hall and Martin 1979; Shaw 1994) had the potential to be the site of Anglo-Saxon settlement peripheral to a Roman-period settlement at Round Hill (Bilikowski 1980). The remaining sites had potential due to their proximity to known cropmark complexes off-route. Site 2 was peripheral to HER 482, Site 3 to HER 9916 and Site 4 to HER 9833. On the Great Barford scheme SMS was used specifically to test the significance of an area of archaeological potential, and at the completion of the Strip and Map part of the process a period was designated in the management cycle for the preparation of site specific project designs.

Fieldwork began in September 2004 and continued until March 2005 when the post-excavation programme began. Assessing the results of excavation, which by now included nine formally designated sites, was carried out not only in-house by Oxford Archaeology but through the mechanism of a research seminar. Hosted locally by CgMs at the Marston Valley Community Forest Centre, colleagues from neighbouring counties and whose work or interest lay in the themes of the Great Barford scheme as well as other stakeholders, were invited. The first draft of the Post-excavation Assessment was made available to participants and the resulting Updated Project Design benefited from the review process implicit in the research seminar. At the same time the preliminary assessment was made available to a wider audience in advance of publication.

Whilst significance and, therefore, value underpinned the mitigation strategy, the research sessions

also confirmed the commitment to publication as a driving principle of the project. The publication which follows was initiated by an extensive programme of fieldwork based on project designs with explicit objectives grounded in relevant research priorities. But the project was also designed to ensure that the experience of fieldwork, filtered through the critical analysis of excavated data in the post-excavation process, would be published within a timescale which allowed the results of analysis to feed back into fieldwork practices. The project was also designed to present the results to the wider community at time when the news of discovery was still current amongst the people of Bedfordshire. Not only was such an approach explicit in the sub-contract arrangements and in the ECI contract for the main works but it was carried through by a management approach which laid emphasis on key performance indicators (KPI), targets and consistent monitoring throughout the project including post-fieldwork analysis.

This volume is the result of three years intense effort in the field and in analysis. It reflects the high

level of teamwork between archaeologists and the main contractors. The Great Barford scheme is the first part of a two-part scheme which also involves the A428 Caxton-Hardwick Improvements on the claylands of Cambridgeshire. The team which made the whole scheme a success includes the Project Manager at the Highways Agency, Tim Hughes, the Highways Agency's regional advisor at WS Atkins, Janet Miller, the managing agents at Jacobs Babbie, Peter Fasham and Adam Brossler. On the contractor's side, the Project Director at Edmund Nuttall, Simon Whalley, from the designers at Capita Symonds, Tansy Forest-Takano, the Environmental Manager, and Mike Needham, the road scheme design manager. The scheme throughout was managed by Michael Dawson of CgMs, the Contractor's Archaeologist. The fieldwork team from Oxford Archaeology was managed by Richard Brown and the post-excavation work by Jane Timby.

Michael Dawson, FSA MIFA
Contractor's Archaeologist, 16 November 2006.

Summary

During 2004–2005 Oxford Archaeology carried out a series of archaeological excavations along the proposed route of the A421 Great Barford Bypass, Bedfordshire (NGR TL 102 513–TL 159 554). The route extends from the Black Cat roundabout on the A1 and runs to the north and west of Great Barford linking up at its western end to the A421 Bedford Southern Bypass near Water End.

A total of nine sites (Sites 1–9) were investigated in detail revealing evidence of activity from early prehistoric times through to the post-medieval period. Earlier prehistoric activity was sparse and largely evidenced through a light flint scatter over the entire route and a single early Neolithic pit on Site 2. Isolated early Bronze Age pits were located at Sites 2 and 6. Following an apparent hiatus in the middle Bronze Age small-scale activity reappeared at Site 2 in the later Bronze Age-early Iron Age.

More widespread occupation and associated activities were apparent from the middle Iron Age and have been documented at Sites 2, 4, 6 and 7. Three of these sites (2, 4 and 6) continued to be occupied into the later Iron Age. By the early Roman period Site 6 had become abandoned shortly followed by Site 2, but activity was still evident at Sites 1, 4, 7 and 8. Of these only Site 8 continued to be inhabited into the later Roman period, although a late Roman cemetery was excavated at Site 4, suggesting continued occupation nearby. Site 8 also saw some post-Roman activity as did the adjacent site at Site 9 where a small hamlet was established in the late Saxon/early medieval period possibly over an earlier mid-late Saxon settlement. Two new sites (Sites 3 and 5) saw small settlements established dating to the 10th–13th and 12th centuries respectively.

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The post-excavation phase of the project was managed by Jane Timby assisted by Leo Webley and monitored by Michael Dawson (CgMS Consulting) and Peter Fasham and Adam Brossler (Jacobs). Oxford Archaeology are grateful to Michael Dawson for facilitating the progress of the project both in the field and throughout the post-excavation analyses and for his useful input regarding the local archaeology. The report was edited by Chris Hayden.

Many people have contributed their time and expertise to the project. In particular the authors would like to thank Jessica Mills for supplying cropmark plots and allowing us to use her data; Stephen Coleman (Historic Environmental Record officer) for his assistance with accessing the records held on the Bedfordshire HER; Albion Archaeology, in particular Jo Abrams and Mike Luke, for allowing access to various unpublished reports and Anna Slowikowski for providing access to the Bedfordshire pottery type series and assisting in the identification of local fabrics; Vassil Karloukovski and Mark W Hounslow, of the Centre for Environmental Magnetism and Palaeomagnetism, Geography Dept., Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University for

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The complete project has been monitored from the onset by Martin Oake, County Archaeological Officer, and Lesley Ann Mather, Assistant County Archaeology Officer, and we are grateful for their advice and support.

As usual with a project of this size many individuals have contributed to the final product and without their hard work and enthusiasm nothing could have been achieved. In addition to the named contributors particular mention should be made of those individuals who ensure smooth operations behind the scenes: Leigh Allen (finds), Dr Rebecca Nicholson (environmental) and Nicola Scott (archives).

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The illustrations have been principally prepared by Georgina Slater, assisted by Sarah Lucas, Elin Sundmann, Magda Wachnik, Frances Chaloner and Julia Moxham. Lucy Martin photographed the artefacts. The cover was designed by Peter Lorimer.

Abbreviations

BCAS	Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (now Albion Archaeology)
BGS	British Geological Survey
CBM	ceramic building material
CP	ceramic phase
CS	circular structure
ctx	context
DBA	desk-based assessment
EVE	estimated vessel equivalents
FC	fired clay
HER	Historic Environment Record
MFW	mean fragment weight
NA	Northamptonshire Archaeology
NI	not illustrated
OA	Oxford Archaeology
PS	post structure
RS	rectangular structure
SF	small find
SFB	sunken-featured building
Sk	skeleton

