

# The Iron Age and Roman landscape of Marston Vale, Bedfordshire

## Investigations along the A421 Improvements, M1 Junction 13 to Bedford

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*Front cover:* early Roman pits with dark fills rich in burnt chaff being excavated at Site 2,  
and the A421 at its opening (photograph courtesy of the Highways Agency)

*Back cover:* Reconstruction drawing of a samian Drag. 30 bowl from Site 7, decorated with mouldings  
of a group of warriors and made at Les Martes-de-Veyre. Dating from c AD 100–130, the vessel  
illustrates the interest of the site's occupants in such aspects of Roman culture, and may have been an  
antique by the time the sherds were deposited in waterhole 15735, probably during the 3rd century.

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# Summary

Between November 2008 and July 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a programme of archaeological fieldwork in advance of improvements to the A421 between Junction 13 of the M1 and its junction with the A6 on the southern outskirts of Bedford. Following a programme of field evaluation, excavations were undertaken at nine locations, comprising one area of open area excavation complemented by strip, map and sample excavation and a further eight areas of strip, map and sample excavation. Watching briefs were maintained during stripping of topsoil in advance of surfacing at two construction compounds and in advance of carriage-way widening at Cowbridge Junction, as well as during the stripping of topsoil and subsoil at a borrow pit. Earthwork surveys were carried out at three locations in order to create a record of historic earthworks that would be unavoidably destroyed by the Improvements. Geophysical survey and field evaluation were also carried out at the site of a proposed borrow pit that was ultimately not required and so was not taken to full excavation.

The remains uncovered by this project were almost exclusively Iron Age and Roman in date. They shared similar geological and topographical settings within Marston Vale, and so formed a particularly coherent group, providing an opportunity to study the exploitation and evolution of the local landscape during this period. The area appears to have been little used before the middle Iron Age, earlier evidence comprising a sparse distribution of worked flint, among which a small but distinct late Mesolithic/early Neolithic element was identified, and a single cremation burial dated by radiocarbon

to the early Iron Age. Colonisation during the middle Iron Age was represented by two open settlements and an enclosed settlement defined by multiple ditch circuits. The subsequent history of settlement in the Vale was punctuated by two major episodes of settlement dislocation. The first of these occurred during the later Iron Age, when the settlements that had been established during the middle Iron Age were abandoned and replaced at new locations by four settlements composed of complexes of conjoined enclosures. The late Iron Age settlements all continued to be occupied into the Roman period, apparently unaffected by the conquest, until they were in turn abandoned during the late 1st-early 2nd century and two new farm complexes were established. The latter dislocation may have been associated with a wider reorganisation of the landscape during which ownership was consolidated in a smaller number of hands. The level of activity at both sites declined during the late Roman period and they were abandoned during the early part of the 4th century. Throughout the late Iron Age and Roman period the settlements were all modest rural farmsteads. No evidence for more nucleated or higher status settlement forms was found. The only evidence for activity during the Anglo-Saxon period was a single spur dating from the 10th-11th century. The medieval settlement pattern was consolidated around the historic villages that are scattered around the Vale, many of which are still inhabited, leaving the route of the A421 Improvements as agricultural land, as was demonstrated by the ubiquitous evidence for ridge and furrow cultivation that was recorded during the investigations.



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