

Preface

Since 1973 the Oxford Archaeological Unit has carried out a series of major excavations of prehistoric, Romano-British and early medieval sites in the Upper Thames Valley. These have been integrated into aerial survey, environmental studies and increasingly into field survey.

Rescue archaeology has been used as an opportunity to tackle specific problems of regional land-use and resources, intra- and inter-site organisation, the ritual and cultural use of the landscape, and economic, social and environmental change.

In view of the scale and number of these excavations it was decided to launch the Thames Valley Landscapes series in conjunction with the Oxford University Committee for Archaeology and with the support of English Heritage.

The Reading Business Park project is of interest not simply because of its important academic results, but also because of its place in the politics of British archaeology. This is one of the first sites whose discovery, excavation and publication were completely funded by the developer as a result of the local authority's archaeological policy.

Berkshire County Council was one of the planning authorities which from the mid 1980s pioneered a strengthened archaeological policy which emphasised the need for conservation, evaluation and mitigation. Without the pre-development evaluation stage the late Bronze Age settlements at Reading Business Park would probably not have been discovered and certainly not adequately investigated.

The results from the Reading Business Park showed the common sense of Berkshire County Council's policy and the possibility of carrying out archaeological work of good quality within the framework of developer funding. This may to some degree have encouraged the Department of the Environment to introduce Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, which has now broadcast such approaches across England as a whole.

The results of Berkshire's policy were twofold as far as the Oxford Archaeological Unit was concerned. For the first time we found ourselves in competition with another archaeological unit in its supposed 'territory'. Since 1985 the important matters of professional archaeological ethics and standards which this raised have been much discussed through the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

The second result for the Oxford Archaeological Unit was that it was able to work on a large scale in the Middle Thames Valley on sites of a period which had proved remarkably elusive in the Upper Thames Valley. Pessimists have assumed that competitive tendering in archaeology would automatically lead to a lowering of standards. The Reading Business Park project has shown that with clear-sighted curators in the planning authority this need not be the case. Rather it can broaden our perspective, stimulate interest in the work of colleagues and lead us to question our research aims, methods and techniques.

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