

**YARNTON: SAXON AND MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT  
AND LANDSCAPE  
Results of Excavations 1990–96**

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## Summary

Between 1990 and 1996 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) (now Oxford Archaeology (OA)) examined sites and landscape features dating from the 5th century AD to the post-medieval period in the ARC (now Hanson Aggregates) gravel extraction pit between Yarnton and Cassington, Oxfordshire. This work has formed only part of the larger Yarnton-Cassington Archaeological Project, within which sites from the Neolithic period onwards have been examined. The results from these excavations will be published as two further period-based thematic monographs in the Thames Valley Landscape series.

Early Saxon settlement was first identified on the edge of an Iron Age and Roman occupation site at Yarnton. Subsequent work revealed the presence of middle Saxon settlement immediately to the east, prompting the first excavation of a rural site of this period in Oxfordshire. Investigations further afield uncovered evidence for early and middle Saxon settlement adjacent to the neighbouring modern hamlet of Worton, and middle Saxon buildings were uncovered among Iron Age pits and postholes at Cresswell Field. These discoveries have had important implications for understanding settlement patterns in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, but have also highlighted the difficulties of locating middle Saxon settlements comprising posthole buildings and few durable objects.

The wider landscape context of these settlements was investigated by fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trenched evaluation, revealing manuring scatters, field boundaries, ploughsoils and trackways. Former river channels on the floodplain provided valuable sources of information for reconstructing the landscape and changes in agricultural practices over time, particularly the presence of pollen and waterlogged macrobotanical and invertebrate remains.

Romano-British settlements are present at both Yarnton and Worton. Within this context it has been possible to study the period of transition from the late Roman to the early Saxon periods, particularly on the more intensively excavated Yarnton site. Early Saxon buildings appear to have respected late Roman features, although no obvious traces of sub-Roman activity were recovered and the character of settlement is strikingly different to that of the Roman period. A similar pattern of contiguous but discontinuous occupation emerges from a survey of the sites in the immediate area. Despite the paucity of evidence for habitation through the 5th century the environmental indicators suggest that the land

continued to be farmed, though by less intensive methods than those employed in the Roman period. One explanation for permanence of settlement location may be the retention of farming units and land boundaries by Saxon settlers.

In the middle Saxon period the character of settlement became less dispersed, with more organised and intensive use of space on habitation sites and a greater diversity of building forms, including timber halls. At the same time, there is evidence of agricultural intensification in the form of increased quantities of charred cereals, a change in crops grown, including new varieties to Yarnton such as rye and legumes, the presence of horticulture and the importance of flax production. Initial depletion in soil fertility seems to have been countered by more effective weeding techniques and, probably, manuring. Hay meadow was created on the Thames floodplain, probably within substantial double-ditch-and-hedge boundaries.

It is suggested that the middle Saxon evidence represents indications of settlement nucleation and embryonic village development on the one hand, and the origins of the open field farming system in this area on the other. The dating evidence, although not very precise, suggests that these changes began in the 8th century but gathered pace in the 9th.

As a story of changing settlement and landscape, the record for Yarnton is truly remarkable, for it can be seen within a trajectory of over five millennia of human activity in the area. From the earliest evidence of settlement on the floodplain in the early part of the 4th millennium BC, it is possible to trace increasing permanence of occupation and clearance of the landscape. Yarnton can be seen to have shifted gradually eastwards from its Iron Age location to that of the middle Saxon period, and then north-eastwards towards the medieval village of Yarnton which appears to have been clustered around the Norman church. By the 17th century its focus lay further north, along the road between Kidlington to Cassington. Today modern housing is being built over the medieval open fields to the north of the village, between its 17th-century centre and the turnpike road between Oxford and Woodstock (now the A34). The opportunity to pursue this wide-ranging research has been afforded by a rescue situation, demonstrating that it is possible to undertake exciting, accessible and academically-stimulating archaeological investigations in these circumstances.

## Yarnton Summary

Entre 1990 et 1996, l' Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) (maintenant Oxford Archaeology (OA)) a examiné des sites et marques du paysage datant du V<sup>ème</sup> siècle après JC jusqu'à l'époque moderne, dans la carrière d'extraction de graviers d'ARC (maintenant Hanson Aggregates) située entre Yarnton et Cassington, Oxfordshire. Ce travail n'est que partie intégrante du plus large projet archéologique de Yarnton-Cassington, au cours duquel des sites datant de la période Néolithique et plus tard ont été étudiés. Les résultats de ces fouilles seront publiés en deux monographies thématiques supplémentaires par périodes chronologiques dans la série *Thames Valley Landscape*.

Une occupation saxonne précoce fut d'abord identifiée à la limite d'un site d'occupation de l'âge du Fer et de l'époque Romaine, à Yarnton. Des travaux ultérieurs révélèrent la présence d'un site d'habitation du milieu de l'époque saxonne immédiatement à l'Est. Cette découverte fut à l'origine de la première fouille d'un site rural de cette époque en Oxfordshire. Un peu plus loin, des recherches adjacentes au hameau moderne voisin de Worton, découvrirent les traces d'un site d'habitation du début et du milieu de l'époque saxonne. Des bâtiments du milieu de la même période furent également mis à jour parmi des fosses et trous de poteaux de l'âge du Fer à Creswell Field. Ces découvertes ont eu des implications importantes pour la compréhension des modes d'habitat aux VII<sup>ème</sup> et VIII<sup>ème</sup> siècles, mais ont également souligné les difficultés de localiser les sites d'habitation du milieu de l'époque saxonne, dont il ne reste que des bâtiments sur trous de poteaux et peu d'objets résistants.

Le large contexte du paysage entourant ces sites d'habitation a fait l'objet d'études diverses à travers des prospections, des relevés de terrain et des tranchées d'évaluation révélant du fumier épars, des limites de champs, des sols de labour et des sentiers. Des anciens lits de rivière, situés dans la plaine inondable, constituèrent des sources d'informations précieuses pour reconstituer le paysage et les changements dans les pratiques agricoles au cours du temps. La présence de pollen et de restes d'invertébrés et d'organismes macro-botaniques imprégnés d'eau en particulier ont fourni des indices de valeur.

Des sites d'habitat romain sont présents à la fois à Yarnton et Worton. Au sein de ce contexte, il a été possible d'étudier la période de transition entre la fin de l'époque romaine et le début de la période saxonne, en particulier sur le site de Yarnton, qui a fait l'objet de fouilles plus intensives. Des bâtiments du début de l'époque saxonne semblent respecter les vestiges romains tardifs, bien qu'aucune trace évidente d'activité sub-romaine ait été découverte et que le caractère du site d'habitat soit remarquablement différent de celui de la période romaine. Un

modèle similaire d'occupation contiguë mais interrompue dans le temps émerge à travers les études de sites de la zone adjacente. En dépit de la rareté des traces d'habitation au cours du V<sup>ème</sup> siècle, les indices écologiques suggèrent que la terre continuait à être exploitée, quoique les méthodes employées apparaissent moins intensives que celles de l'époque romaine. Une explication possible à la permanence apparente du lieu d'occupation pourrait résider dans l'utilisation des mêmes unités d'exploitation agricole et des mêmes limites de terrain par les colons saxons.

Au milieu de l'époque saxonne, le caractère de l'occupation devint moins sporadique, avec une utilisation de l'espace des sites d'habitat mieux organisée et plus intensive, ainsi qu'une plus grande diversité des formes de bâtiments, y compris des longues salles en bois. En même temps, des indices d'intensification agricole ont été observés sous la forme de quantités croissantes de céréales carbonisées, un changement des types de cultures, comprenant des variétés nouvelles à Yarnton telles que le seigle et les légumineuses, la présence d'horticulture et l'importance de la production de lin. Une diminution initiale de fertilité du sol semble avoir été corrigée par des techniques de désherbage plus efficaces et probablement par l'utilisation d'engrais. Des prairies à foin furent créées dans la plaine inondable de la Tamise, probablement à l'intérieur de limites substantielles formées de double fossés bordés de haies.

Il est suggéré que les évidences du milieu de l'époque saxonne représentent d'un côté des indices d'habitation nucléaire et du développement de village embryonnaire, et de l'autre les origines du système agraire à champs ouverts dans cette région. Les indices de datation, bien qu'ils soient peu précis, suggèrent que ces changements commencèrent au cours du VIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle mais prirent de l'ampleur au cours du IX<sup>ème</sup> siècle.

En tant qu'histoire des évolutions de l'occupation et du paysage, le récit concernant Yarnton est véritablement remarquable, car il retrace la trajectoire de plus de cinq millénaires d'activité humaine dans la région. A partir des indices d'occupation les plus précoces dans la plaine inondable, datant de la première partie du 4<sup>ème</sup> millénaire avant JC, il est possible de suivre la permanence croissante d'occupation et le défrichage du paysage. Yarnton apparaît avoir été déplacé graduellement vers l'est par rapport à sa situation à l'âge du fer jusqu'à celle du milieu de l'époque saxonne et ultérieurement vers le nord-est en direction du village médiéval, qui semble s'être rassemblé autour de l'église normande. A partir du XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, son foyer se situe plus au nord, le long de la route entre Kidlington et Cassington. De nos jours, les logements modernes se construisent au-dessus des champs ouverts médiévaux au nord du village, entre le foyer du XVII<sup>ème</sup>

siècle et la route barrière entre Oxford et Woodstock (maintenant l'A34). L'opportunité de poursuivre cette recherche à grande échelle a été permise par une situation de sauvetage, démontrant ainsi qu'il

est possible d'entreprendre des investigations archéologiques passionnantes, accessibles et enrichissantes d'un point de vue académique dans de telles circonstances.

## Zusammenfassung

Zwischen 1990 und 1996 erforschte die Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU, jetzt Oxford Archaeology, OA) in der Kiesgewinnungsanlage von ARC (nun Hanson Aggregates) Stätten und Bodenmerkmale aus der Zeit zwischen dem 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr. und dem Nachmittelalter. Diese Arbeiten waren nur ein Teil des umfangreicheren "Yarnton-Cassington Archaeological Project", bei dem Stätten ab der Jungsteinzeit untersucht wurden. Die Ergebnisse dieser Ausgrabungen werden in zwei weiteren, spezifischen Zeiträumen gewidmeten Monographien in der Serie *Thames Valley Landscape* veröffentlicht.

In Yarnton wurde am Rand einer eisen- und römischerzeitlichen Anlage eine frühe angelsächsische Siedlung identifiziert. Nachfolgende Arbeiten förderten direkt östlich davon eine Siedlung aus der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit zutage, was zur ersten Ausgrabung eines Dorfes aus dieser Periode in Oxfordshire führte. Untersuchungen im weiteren Umfeld erbrachten Hinweise auf eine Besiedelung in der Frühphase und Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit direkt neben dem heutigen Worton. Darüber hinaus wurden bei Cresswell Field zwischen eisenzeitlichen Gruben und Pfostenlöchern Gebäude aus der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit gefunden. Diese Entdeckungen hatten weit reichende Auswirkungen auf unser Verständnis der Siedlungsmuster im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr., sie verdeutlichten jedoch auch die Probleme damit, Siedlungen aus der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit zu finden, die aus Pfostenbauten und nur wenigen die Zeit überdauernden Objekten bestehen.

Der Umkreis der Siedlungen wurde durch Feldbegehungen, geophysische Prospektionen und Grabungsschnitte untersucht, wobei Scherbenscherben, Flurgrenzen, Ackerböden und Wege gefunden wurden. Einstige Flussläufe durch die Auen erwiesen sich als wertvolle Quelle für die Rekonstruktion der Landschaft und der zeitlichen Veränderung der landwirtschaftlichen Methoden, besonders unterstützt durch Pollenfunde sowie vernässte makrobotanische Reste und Reste wirbelloser Tiere.

Römische Siedlungen bestanden sowohl in Yarnton als auch in Worton. Mit ihrer Hilfe konnte der Übergang von der spätrömischen zur angelsächsischen Periode untersucht werden, besonders im intensiver ausgegrabenen Yarnton. Die in der angelsächsischen Frühzeit entstandenen Gebäude schießen die spätrömischen Strukturen zu respektieren,

auch wenn keine Spuren nachrömischer Aktivitäten offenbar wurden und der Charakter der Siedlung sich sehr von der römischen Besiedlung unterscheidet. Die Prospektion der Stätten in der unmittelbaren Umgebung zeigte ein ähnliches Muster einer direkt aneinander grenzenden, jedoch unzusammenhängenden Besiedlung. Obwohl für das 5. Jahrhundert nur kärgliche Behausungshinweise gefunden wurden, deuten ökologische Faktoren auf eine fortgesetzte landwirtschaftliche Nutzung hin, auch wenn diese weniger intensiv war als in der Römerzeit. Die Beibehaltung der Felder und Flurgrenzen durch die angelsächsischen Siedler kann als eine Erklärung für den Weiterbestand des Siedlungsortes gesehen werden.

In der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit verlor die Siedlung ihren Streucharakter. Die Wohnstätten wurden stärker durchorganisiert und intensiver genutzt und es gab ein breiteres Spektrum an Gebäudeformen, darunter auch Hallenhäuser ("timber halls"). Gleichzeitig fanden sich Belege für eine Intensivierung der Landwirtschaft, und zwar in Form einer größeren Menge an verkohltem Getreide, eines Wandel bei den Feldfrüchten (darunter für Yarnton neue Arten wie Roggen und Hülsenfrüchte), der Anwesenheit hortikultureller Merkmale und der Bedeutung der Flachsproduktion. Der anfänglich nachlassenden Bodenfruchtbarkeit begegnete man offenbar durch effektivere Methoden bei der Unkrautbekämpfung und womöglich durch Düngung. Auf den Themseauen entstanden Mähwiesen, die wahrscheinlich von mächtigen Doppelgräben und Hecken umgeben waren.

Es wird angenommen, dass die Funde aus der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit auf eine Siedlungskernbildung und frühe Dorfentwicklung sowie auf die Anfänge der Dreifelderwirtschaft in diesem Gebiet hindeuten. Die Datierungsmerkmale, obwohl nicht sehr präzise, weisen darauf hin, dass diese Veränderungen im 8. Jahrhundert begannen und im 9. Jahrhundert an Tempo gewannen.

Die wegen ihrer Hinweise auf die sich wandelnde Besiedlung und Landschaft äußerst bemerkenswerten Funde von Yarnton stellen einen Ausschnitt aus über fünf Jahrtausenden menschlicher Aktivität in diesem Gebiet dar. Von den ältesten Siedlungsspuren in den Auen, die auf das frühe 4. Jahrtausend v. Chr. zurückgehen, lässt sich eine zunehmend dauerhaftere Besiedlung und Rodung der Landschaft

beobachten. Von seinem eisenzeitlichen Standort aus verlagerte sich Yarnton langsam in Richtung Osten zu seinem Standort in der Mitte der angelsächsischen Zeit und danach weiter in Richtung Nordosten, wo das mittelalterliche Dorf Yarnton offenbar um die normannische Kirche herum gruppiert war. Spätestens zu Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts lag sein Schwerpunkt weiter nördlich an der Straße zwischen Kidlington und Cassington. Heute entsteht auf den

mittelalterlichen Feldern nördlich des Ortes zwischen dem Ortskern aus dem 17. Jahrhundert und der einstigen Mautstraße zwischen Oxford und Woodstock (der heutigen A34) eine Wohnsiedlung. Die Gelegenheit zu dieser weit reichenden Untersuchung ergab sich aus einer Notsituation, was beweist, dass auch in solchen Umständen anregende, zugängliche und stimulierende archäologische Forschung betrieben werden kann.

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Julie Rees-Jones took samples from palaeochannels on the Yarnton floodplain as part of her doctoral thesis to develop optically stimulated luminescence (OSL)

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The report was edited by Philippa Bradley and Wendy Sherlock. The illustrations were drawn by Lesley Collett and Rob Goller. Sarah Lucas and Amy Tucker undertook further illustrations and prepared the figures and plates for publication.

## About this volume

This is the first of three volumes to report on the largely English Heritage-funded archaeological investigations within the Yarnton-Cassington project. Work was undertaken in the field over nine years, from 1989 to 1998, and sites from the Neolithic to the late Saxon period were excavated on both the gravel terrace and floodplain of the river Thames. The scope of the project has been such that information on landscape and land use has been recovered in areas at a distance from habitation sites. Evidence for land use during the Saxon period, for example, has come from field walking over fields 1 km north of the settlement, and palaeochannel trenching 500 m to the south.

There are disadvantages with any method of splitting a large body of data that does not fit comfortably into a single report. However, the purpose of a landscape project is to understand not only individual settlements but also their broader environment, changing land-use patterns associated with them and their relationship to their neighbouring sites. In order to optimise the wide range of information available, it has been decided not to treat excavations on a site-by-site basis, but to split the volumes chronologically. Reports on the Iron Age and Roman settlement and landscape will follow this and, finally, a volume will cover Neolithic and Bronze Age activity in the study area. The weakness of this approach is that the investigation of transitions between periods cannot be as fully explored as may be desirable. In the present case, the interface between late Roman and early Saxon settlement is a key research question, and ideally both periods of occupation would be fully described in a single report. However, it is hoped that by presenting the evidence for late Roman occupation here in summary form, it will be possible to address this issue adequately as far as the Yarnton evidence will allow. As will be seen, the evidence for

continuity is not as strong as it was once thought to be.

This volume is not arranged as a standard excavation report, with the evidence from the site detailed at the beginning of the volume, followed by the finds recovered, and a general discussion drawn from these sections at the end. The emphasis here is placed on the synthesis and overview of the Saxon and medieval evidence (Chapters 1–4). This section of the report is intended as an account that can be read and understood without the need to look at the detail of stratigraphic or finds descriptions. However, the synthesis is fully cross-referenced to an account of the archaeological investigations which are presented as site-by-site descriptions (Chapters 5–12), and artefactual and ecofactual reports (Chapters 13–19). The level of detail provided in the site descriptions is intended to fulfil two aims, firstly to present sufficient evidence to support the views expressed in the overview and, secondly, to provide comparative data. Those with more detailed questions will need to consult the archive. A full site archive will be deposited with the Oxfordshire Museums Service (accession numbers 1989.101; 1989.126; 1991.24–6; 1991.33; 1995.168–72; 1996.76), and ultimately those records that have been computerised will be available through the Archaeological Data Service. Copies of all evaluation reports and post-excavation assessments generated through the life of the project have been deposited with the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

### Radiocarbon determinations

Radiocarbon determinations are expressed to a 95% level of confidence cal AD/BC and have been calculated according to Stuiver and Reimer (1986). Age estimates are given in *italics* and the mathematical modelling for these is described in Chapter 13.