



Location of early Neolithic pits

An intensive series of archaeological investigations, culminating in large scale excavations, was carried out before the construction of Great Western Park - to ensure that all of the archaeological evidence in the area was recorded and preserved. This is one of eight information boards which summarise the results of these investigations.

THE FIRST FARMERS IN DIDCOT

Farming was first introduced to Britain about 6000 years ago. The wheat and barley, and the sheep and goats, raised by the first farmers came originally from western Asia - and it took around 3000 years for the farming of these species, alongside pigs and cows, to spread across Europe and finally reach Britain. Before this date people lived by hunting and gathering (see Board 2).

The transition from hunting and gathering to farming is usually associated with other changes. In many countries, the first farmers were also the first people to use pottery and to make axes by polishing stone - and they were the first people to build permanent villages.

Small pits found at Great Western Park, dating from just after the introduction of farming to Britain, provide us with intriguing evidence for this momentous change, and suggest that in Britain it took a quite particular form.

Trees, fields and offerings

One exceptional pit at Great Western Park might provide evidence of rituals associated with this early agriculture. The pit contained a complete pot - amongst the earliest from Britain - which had been placed upside-down on the bottom of the pit.

Strikingly, the pit had been cut into a filled tree-throw hole - a hole formed as the result of a tree being either blown or pulled over. The first farmers would have had to clear woodland to make fields, and they may have done so by killing trees by removing a ring of bark, and then pulling them over once they were dead - creating a tree-throw hole. The upside down pot may, then, have been an offering, perhaps placed in the pit to ensure the fertility of the newly cleared land. Nothing was found inside the pot, but any organic material (such as an offering of food) would have quickly decayed.



Reconstructed Neolithic pot



Neolithic pot under excavation



Yarnton Neolithic house

Summer camps and winter houses

The other pits at Great Western Park contained much more mundane material - broken bits of pottery, discarded flint tools, a fragment of a polished stone axe, scraps of burnt animal bone, stray charred grains of wheat and barley, and charred hazel nutshell and crab apple pips - rubbish discarded by early farmers who must have lived nearby.

The earliest farmers in Britain built large rectangular timber houses (like the example found at Yarnton show on this board). No traces of any such building were found at Great Western Park, however, and it seems that the debris in the pits comes from more temporary occupation. The tools in the pits include serrated flint flakes which have a distinctive gloss on their edges which is produced when the tools are used to harvest crops such as wheat and barley.

The pits may mark the site of temporary camps, near the fields where wheat and barley were grown, which were occupied whilst the crops grew or perhaps when they were harvested. The harvested grain may then have been stored over winter in large houses such as the one at Yarnton.



Early Neolithic serrated flakes and fragment of a polished stone axe

Early Neolithic pottery and leaf-shaped arrowhead