



Areas of Iron Age settlement

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 AGE OF IRON

The excavations at Great Western Park revealed one of the largest Iron Age settlements in the Thames Valley - a scatter of roundhouses, pits, and ditches, spread over an area more than half a kilometre across.

The initial impact of the introduction of iron to Britain was limited - artefacts previously made in Bronze were only gradually replaced by objects in iron. The form of settlements also evolved slowly, and the Iron Age settlement at Great Western Park, dating from between around 400 and 100 BC, shares much with the late Bronze Age settlement, dating from 1100-1000 BC, which lay to the south (see Board 3). But there were changes, and the Iron Age settlement at Great Western Park provides key evidence which helps us to understand these developments.

Pits, pits and more pits

The most striking feature of the Iron Age settlement is a band of over 800 pits, spread over a distance of 500m. Although the numbers are impressive, this band of pits was created over a period of 200 or 300 years - implying that only 3 or 4 pits may have been dug each year.

The function of these pits is uncertain, but many of them were probably used to store grain and perhaps other foods. When they were no longer used as storage pits, however, many were reused as rubbish pits. Most of the artefacts from the Iron Age settlement were recovered from these pits - pot sherds, fragments of animal bone, charred grain, fired clay loomweights, and, very rarely, stray lost objects in iron and bronze including a brooch and a knife.

A few of the pits, however, contained exceptional items. The most notable of these are human skeletons - or parts of skeletons - but there were also burials of animals. The significance of these special deposits of human and animal bone is open to debate. Most of the human remains were deposited in pits with few or no other finds, and thus appear to have been treated with some respect. In a few cases, however, the human bones were buried with pot sherds and other debris much like the material that was discarded in other pits. In these cases it seems that the human bone has been treated no better than everyday rubbish.



Iron Age pit burial. This individual's skull has been placed below his rib cage

Settling down?

The band of pits lay alongside a series of long ditches which seems to have marked a significant boundary, fixed in the landscape over the three hundred year life of the settlement.

One striking feature of the Iron Age settlement at Great Western Park is that whilst the band of pits seems to have formed a fixed point, the locations in which the associated roundhouses were built changed over time. The earliest houses lie to the south-west, later houses were built to the north, and the latest in the south-east. Rather than having lived in a village in a fixed location, it seems that (as in the late Bronze Age) new roundhouses were built for each generation in new locations (see Board 3). Unlike the pattern in the Bronze Age, however, the new houses now revolved around the fixed point marked by the band of pits. The inhabitants of Didcot had begun to settle down.



Reconstruction of an Iron Age roundhouse



Plan of the main area of Iron Age settlement, showing the band of pits



MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC

BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

ROMAN
CONQUEST OF
BRITAIN

ANGLO-SAXON
OCCUPATION

NORMAN
CONQUEST

MEDIEVAL
PERIOD

INDUSTRIAL
REVOLUTION

4000BC

2500BC

900BC

43AD

450AD

1066AD

1800AD