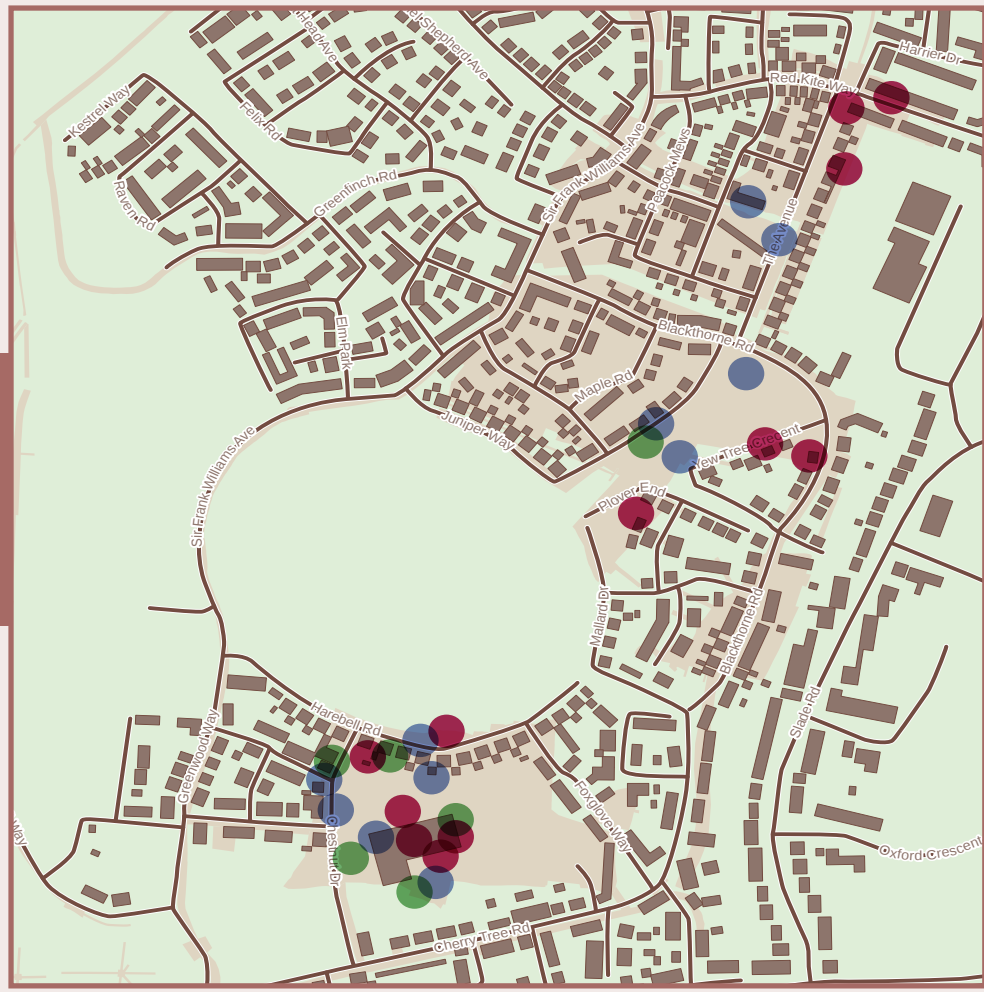




Green dot: Crop-drying ovens; Red dot: Wells; Blue dot: Burials

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.

LIFE AND DEATH IN ROMAN GREAT WESTERN PARK

The large scale of the excavations at Great Western Park provides a rich picture of Roman life. Although the painted plaster and hypocaust (see Board 4) indicate the villa was a building of some opulence, it lay at the heart of a large agricultural estate, and the excavation revealed many features which were related to its agricultural role. As well as showing how the Romans made a living, it also revealed some of the ways in which they treated the dead.



Agricultural technology in the Roman period

Although agriculture must have taken up much of the time of the prehistoric inhabitants of Didcot (see Boards 1-3), apart from storage pits, they have left us little trace of these activities. As well as laying out fields, pens and trackways (see Board 4), the Romans made a much greater investment in a range of permanent agricultural structures.

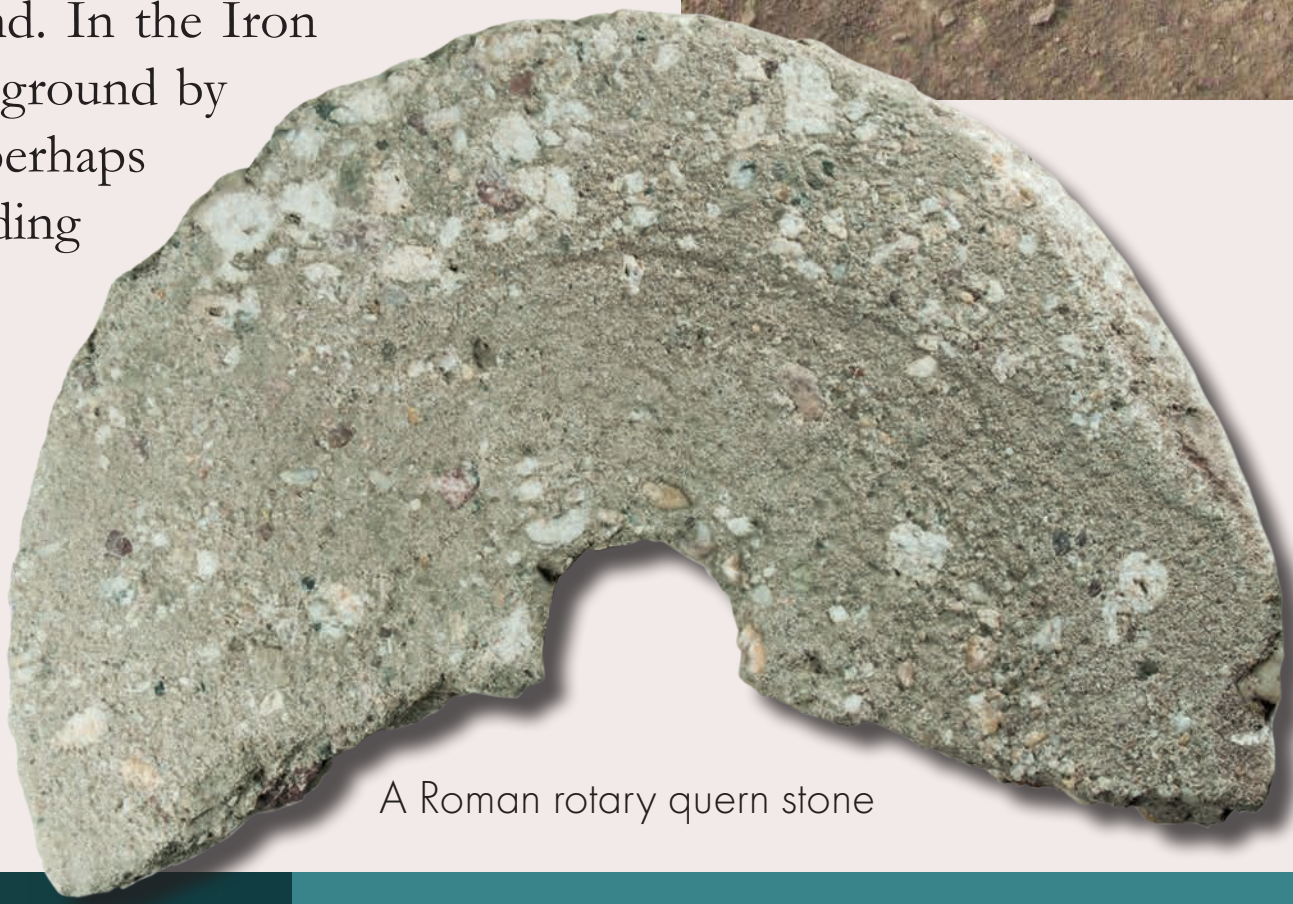
Perhaps the most striking of these are crop drying ovens - ovens used to dry the harvested grain before it was stored and perhaps also to produce malt for making beer. Drying crops requires only a low heat - to avoid charring the grain - and the ovens consist of a long flue, which carried heat from the fire at one end up to the floor of the drying chamber at the other. Only the stone foundations of these structures survive, but the fire pit, flue and opening into the drying chamber are usually easily recognised.



A Roman stone-lined well under excavation

The Romans also invested more heavily than their prehistoric predecessors in the supply of water. In the late Bronze Age, large pits were sometimes cut to provide water for people and animals, but in the Roman period, stone-lined wells were constructed - again presumably to supply water for both people and animals.

The excavations at Great Western Park also provide evidence for the existence of a mill for grinding grain. No traces of the mill itself were found, but a large number of fragments of millstones, which must have come from such a structure, were found. In the Iron Age, in contrast, grain was ground by hand, with each household perhaps being responsible for grinding its own grain.



A Roman rotary quern stone



Stone foundations of a Roman crop-drying oven

Markets and money

The much greater investment in agricultural facilities made by the Romans, compared to their predecessors, and the greater production that allowed, may partly reflect the fact that occupation of the site had now become fixed. It also, however, reflects wider changes in the economy and society.

The most important of these changes was perhaps the establishment of markets for the products of the estate, and the construction of roads and trackways - such as those at Didcot - which made it easier to transport goods.

The establishment of the Roman town at Dorchester would have provided the largest market in the vicinity of Great Western Park. It is also possible that a smaller market existed at Great Western Park itself. A collection of 64 coins was recovered from a metal surface which lay near to an open area at the front of the villa, where three trackways converged. Large numbers of coins have also been found at temples and shrines, and it is possible that these coins reflect the use of the area for rituals. But they may, instead, reflect the use of the area as a local market.



Roman coins from Great Western Park

Dealing with the dead

The excavations also provide limited glimpses of the way in which the Romans disposed of their dead. Only a small number of burials were found, and many of the occupants must have been buried elsewhere. The small number of burials which were excavated, however, were remarkably varied, and rather than being grouped into a cemetery, they were scattered about the landscape.

In most cases the bodies had been laid either on their backs or their fronts in simple rectangular graves. In the case of one woman, the head had been removed and placed in the grave by her knees. Some of the burials were provided with pots, perhaps originally containing food, and one had two coins, perhaps to pay Charon - the ferryman who carried the dead across the Styx into Hades. A few of the individuals had been cremated. One particularly unusual burial consisted of a bustum - a burial in which the cremation pyre was built over a grave, so that as they burnt, the cremated remains fell directly into the grave.



A Roman burial. The skull has been placed near the feet and a pot put in its place

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