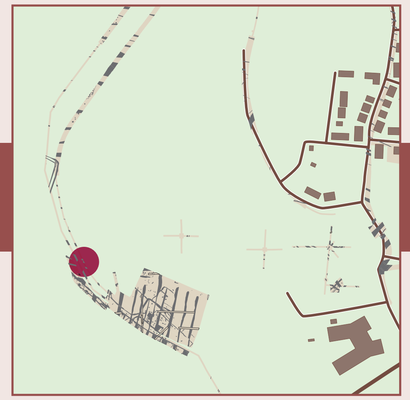


Anglo-Saxon sunken hut

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.

ANGLO-SAXON INVADERS

The way in which Roman rule came to an end in Britain, around AD 410, and the way in which the country was colonised by Anglo-Saxons, are both hotly debated subjects. Both appear to have been complex processes. At some sites there are signs of continuity: Dorchester is one place where it seems that a semblance of Roman rule was maintained after the Empire had abandoned Britain. At Great Western Park, however, the Roman settlement seems to have been abandoned before the end of the 4th century AD, and the next sign of occupation is a typically Anglo-Saxon structure - a sunken-featured building - probably dating from the 5th or 6th centuries AD.

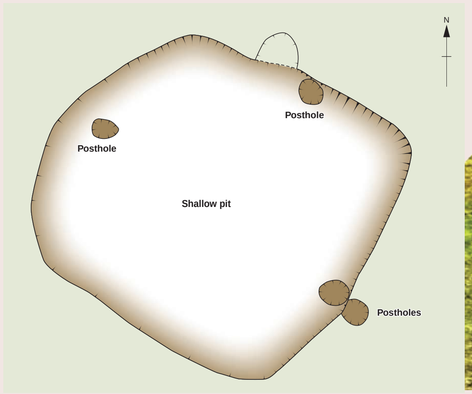
An Anglo-Saxon structure: the sunken-featured building

The Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured building at Great Western Park took the form of a shallow rectangular pit, with postholes at the middle of each three side.

After it had gone out of use as a building, the pit was reused to deposit rubbish, and it contained a large assortment of artefacts - Anglo-Saxon pot sherds, fragments of fired clay loomweights, and animal bone, as well as Roman finds including a coin and more pot sherds which may have been collected by the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of the site.

Such buildings are very common on Anglo-Saxon sites. They seem to have been general purpose structures constructed and used in various ways.

The posts at each end of the pit probably supported a beam which held up a gabled roof. Some buildings provide evidence for a raised wooden floor, but in others the base of the pit seems to have formed the floor. Weaving is one activity that seems to have been carried out in such buildings, and the discovery of a set of loomweights, even though they were deposited after the building had been abandoned, suggests that this might have been the case at Great Western Park.



Plan of the sunken-hut

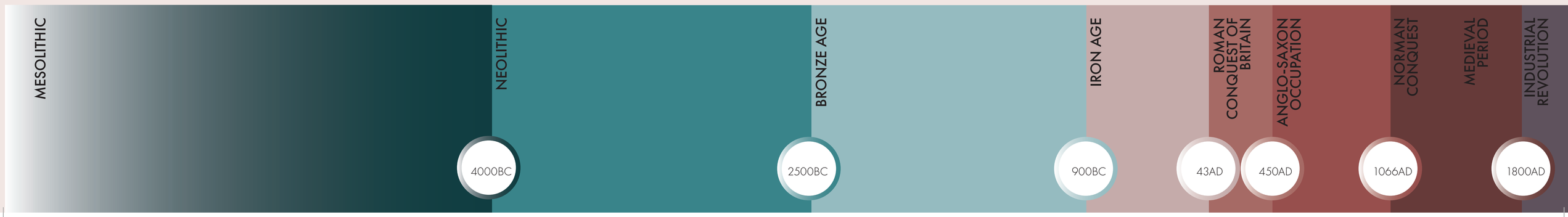
Anglo-saxon fired clay loomweights

Reconstruction of a sunken-hut, showing a women weaving

Reconstruction of a late Anglo-Saxon Hall at Yarnton

Whether sunken-featured buildings were ever used as houses is open to question. Large timber halls of 6th or 7th century date have been found a few miles to the north of Didcot at Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham - probably high status residences - and much cruder rectangular post-built buildings - perhaps lower status houses - have been found at Drayton.

Mobile once more?

The sunken-featured building at Great Western Park appears to have been isolated, but at other sites such structures often occur in large numbers. A group of 16 were found where Didcot Power Station now stands, and a much larger number, spread in a band 750m long was found at Sutton Courtenay.

Such large groups of sunken-featured buildings, spread over large areas, probably formed over time, as old buildings were abandoned and new ones built nearby. This gradual shift in the location of settlements over time is similar to that of the Iron Age, and contrasts markedly with the fixed pattern imposed in the Roman period. It would be several centuries more before a fixed pattern of settlement - preserved in many of the towns and villages we know today - would return.