



Red: ridge and furrow

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.

AN ANCIENT AND MODERN LANDSCAPE

Some of the signs of Didcot's recent history - the looming cooling towers of the power station, completed in 1967, and the railway, which reached Didcot in 1839 - are hard to miss. And it is easy to assume that the countryside which surrounds it preserves more ancient patterns.



The creation of the modern landscape: medieval open fields and 19th century enclosure

Many aspects of the countryside today - the division of the landscape into fields, defined by hedges, and the roads and lanes which run between them - are the products of enclosure in the 19th century.



Ridges and furrows at Godstow

Prior to enclosure, the land around Didcot was farmed using an open-field system. Under this system the land around Didcot was divided into three great fields. The inhabitants of Didcot were each assigned a number of narrow strip fields within these great fields to cultivate, and would have shared rights to common grazing land. The excavations revealed extensive remains of the parallel ridges and furrows - created by ploughing - which mark the location of these narrow strip fields.

Unfortunately, the excavation provided little evidence for the date at which this system was established, but it is likely to have been in use for much of the medieval period.

Acts of parliament provided the means for dividing up these shared great fields and common land into smaller, enclosed fields which were privately owned. Awards of enclosure for Didcot and the neighbouring parishes of Harwell and West Hagbourne were made between 1800 and 1860, transforming the countryside around Didcot into something like the form we know today.



The area around Great Western Park in Rocque's 1761 map of Berkshire

The persistence of boundaries

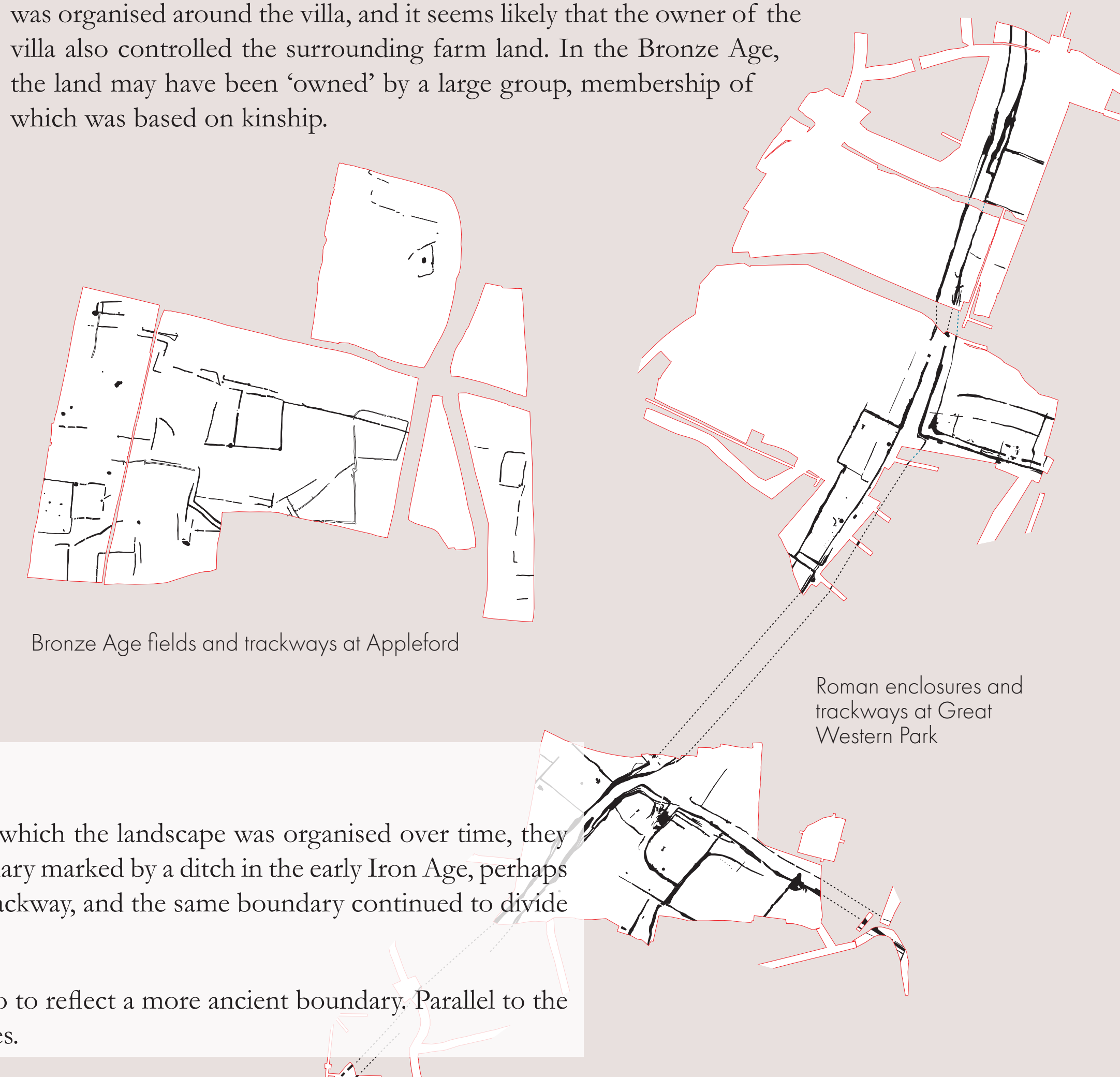
Although the excavations reveal great changes in the way in which the landscape was organised over time, they also demonstrate remarkable elements of continuity. A boundary marked by a ditch in the early Iron Age, perhaps around 400 BC, was preserved in the location of a Roman trackway, and the same boundary continued to divide strip fields throughout the medieval period.

The parish boundary between Didcot and Harwell seems also to reflect a more ancient boundary. Parallel to the medieval ditch which marked the boundary lay Roman ditches.

Roman and Bronze Age enclosure

The 19th century was not, however, the first period in which the landscape had been enclosed. The landscape to the west of Didcot had been divided into fields, enclosures and trackways in the Roman Period. And the land to the north of Didcot, around Appleford, was first divided up into fields during the Bronze Age.

The further back in time we go, the more we have to speculate about how the land was distributed, and who owned it. In the late Roman period (see Board 4), much of the landscape was organised around the villa, and it seems likely that the owner of the villa also controlled the surrounding farm land. In the Bronze Age, the land may have been 'owned' by a large group, membership of which was based on kinship.



Bronze Age fields and trackways at Appleford

Roman enclosures and trackways at Great Western Park

MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC

4000BC

BRONZE AGE

2500BC

IRON AGE

900BC

ROMAN
CONQUEST OF
BRITAIN

43AD

ANGLO-SAXON
OCCUPATION

450AD

NORMAN
CONQUEST

1066AD

MEDIEVAL
PERIOD

INDUSTRIAL
REVOLUTION

1800AD