Settlement on the Bedfordshire Claylands

Archaeology along the A421 Great Barford Bypass

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The geophysical survey and trial trenching (NA 2004a–d) along the A421 established the location of nine areas of archaeological deposits with the potential for further investigation. At a series of meetings attended by representatives of the Highways Agency, the main contractors, the County Council, and the Highways Agency’s managing agents, nine sites were identified for mitigation. In each case the sites had been assessed against the scheduling criteria and local research priorities (Oak forthcoming).

Six sites (2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9) were of less certain significance and, therefore, value underpinned the mitigation strategy, but no exception. The first desk-based assessment (DBA) of the route was carried out in 1991 (Dawson 1992) and the second in 2000 as part of the preparations for the Design Brief issued in 2001 (BCCHES 2001).

The earliest DBA was written when the first Environmental Statements were beginning to emerge (Ralston and Thomas 1993) following the adoption of the Environmental Assessment Regulations in July 1988. When the second DBA was prepared a decade later the Environmental Statement was a familiar part of the planning process and the intervening years had seen a significant accrual of archaeological data. Nevertheless the underlying principle of the process, the assessment, evaluation and mitigation of the impact of the scheme on the archaeology along the route, remained the same.

Geophysical survey was carried out in 2001 (NA 2001) and consent to build the A421 was granted by the Secretary of State after public inquiry in 2003. It was not until the issue of the compulsory purchase orders in 2004, however, that trial trench evaluation took place with the first of 185 trenches excavated on February 24th (NA 2004a). Managed by Jacobs Gribb on behalf of the Highways Agency, the project design was based on the Design Guide issued in 2001 but did not seek to assess the significance of the archaeological deposits and to identify and characterise deposits along the route.

The archaeological mitigation process began with the appointment of the design and build partnership Capita Symonds and Edmund Nuttall Ltd as the main contractors in April 2004. With the trial trenching still underway and a time limit set for the confirmation of target costs under the EC1 contract an intense period of consultation and assessment of significance began in June 2004.

The road route lay along the southern edge of the north Bedfordshire claylands, an area that was largely agricultural and which, in contrast to the valley of the River Great Ouse just south of the scheme, had seen little archaeological activity. The area was therefore relatively unknown. Yet since 1988 an increasing number and complexity of cropmarks on the crests of clay ridges, particularly in the parish of Dean and Shelton, had been noted by the sites and monuments team at County Hall (Clark and Dawson 1995), suggesting that the landscape may have been more densely occupied during the Iron Age and Roman periods than previously thought (Simcox 1973).
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also confirmed the commitment to publication as a driving principle of the project. The publication which follows was initiated by an extensive programme of fieldwork based on project designs with explicit objectives grounded in relevant research priorities. But the project was also designed to ensure that the experience of fieldwork, filtered through the critical analysis of excavated data in the post-excavation process, would be published within a timescale which allowed the results of analysis to feed back into fieldwork practices. The project was also designed to present the results to the wider community at a time when the news of discovery was still current amongst the people of Bedfordshire. Not only was such an approach explicit in the sub-contract arrangements and in the ECI contract for the main works but it was carried through by a management approach which laid emphasis on key performance indicators (KPI), targets and consistent monitoring throughout the project including post-fieldwork analysis.

This volume is the result of three years intense effort in the field and in analysis. It reflects the high level of teamwork between archaeologists and the main contractors. The Great Barford scheme is the first part of a two-part scheme which also involves the A428 Caxton-Hardwick Improvements on the claylands of Cambridgeshire. The team which made the whole scheme a success includes the Project Manager at the Highways Agency, Tim Hughes, the Highways Agency’s regional advisor at WS Atkins, Janet Miller, the managing agents at Jacobs Babtie, Peter Fasham and Adam Brossler. On the contractor’s side, the Project Director at Edmund Nuttall, Simon Whalley, from the designers at Capita Symonds, Tansy Forest-Takano, the Environmental Manager, and Mike Needham, the road scheme design manager. The scheme throughout was managed by Michael Dawson of CgMs, the Contractor’s Archaeologist. The fieldwork team from Oxford Archaeology was managed by Richard Brown and the post-excavation work by Jane Timby.

During 2004–2005 Oxford Archaeology carried out a series of archaeological excavations along the proposed route of the A421 Great Barford Bypass, Bedfordshire (NGR TL 102 513–TL 159 554). The route extends from the Black Cat roundabout on the A1 and runs to the north and west of Great Barford linking up at its western end to the A421 Bedford Southern Bypass near Water End.

A total of nine sites (Sites 1–9) were investigated in detail revealing evidence of activity from early prehistoric times through to the post-medieval period. Earlier prehistoric activity was sparse and largely evidenced through a light flint scatter over the entire route and a single early Neolithic pit on Site 2. Isolated early Bronze Age pits were located at Sites 2 and 6. Following an apparent hiatus in the middle Bronze Age small-scale activity reappeared at Site 2 in the later Bronze Age–early Iron Age.

More widespread occupation and associated activities were apparent from the middle Iron Age and have been documented at Sites 2, 4, 6 and 7. Three of these sites (2, 4 and 6) continued to be occupied into the later Iron Age. By the early Roman period Site 6 had become abandoned shortly followed by Site 2, but activity was still evident at Sites 1, 4, 7 and 8. Of these only Site 8 continued to be inhabited into the later Roman period, although a late Roman cemetery was excavated at Site 4, suggesting continued occupation nearby. Site 8 also saw some post-Roman activity as did the adjacent site at Site 9 where a small hamlet was established in the late Saxon/early medieval period possibly over an earlier mid-late Saxon settlement. Two new sites (Sites 3 and 5) saw small settlements established dating to the 10th–13th and 12th centuries respectively.

Summary

Michael Dawson, FSA MIFA
Contractor’s Archaeologist, 16 November 2006.
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The post-excavation phase of the project was managed by Jane Timby assisted by Leo Webley and monitored by Michael Dawson (CgMS Consulting) and Peter Fasham and Adam Brosler (Jacobs). Oxford Archaeology are grateful to Michael Dawson for facilitating the progress of the project both in the field and throughout the post-excavation analyses and for his useful input regarding the local archaeology. The report was edited by Chris Hayden.

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The aerial photographs shown in Plates 4.8 and 6.1 are reproduced courtesy of Edmund Nuttall Ltd.

The illustrations have been principally prepared by Georgina Slater, assisted by Sarah Lucas, Elin Sundmann, Magda Wachnik, Frances Chaloner and Julia Moxham. Lucy Martin photographed the artefacts. The cover was designed by Peter Lorimer.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCAS</td>
<td>Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (now Albion Archaeology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGS</td>
<td>British Geological Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBM</td>
<td>ceramic building material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>ceramic phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>circular structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ctx</td>
<td>context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBA</td>
<td>desk-based assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVE</td>
<td>estimated vessel equivalents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FC</td>
<td>fired clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER</td>
<td>Historic Environment Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFW</td>
<td>mean fragment weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Northamptonshire Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NI</td>
<td>not illustrated</td>
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<tr>
<td>OA</td>
<td>Oxford Archaeology</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>post structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS</td>
<td>rectangular structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>small find</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFB</td>
<td>sunken-featured building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sk</td>
<td>skeleton</td>
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