

## STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST NO 2

### UNIVERSITY PARKS BARROW CEMETERY

**Asset/Monument Type:** Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age Barrow Cemetery

**Summary:** Evidence from excavations, aerial photography and geophysics has demonstrated the presence of an extensive Neolithic-Bronze Age funerary and ritual landscape below central and north Oxford. The best preserved component of this landscape is a series of barrows and related features located within the University Parks. A number of the barrows form part of a linear cemetery. No extant earthworks survive however a geophysical survey in 2011 has provided good evidence for the extent of surviving features.

**Location (NGR):** SP51430717

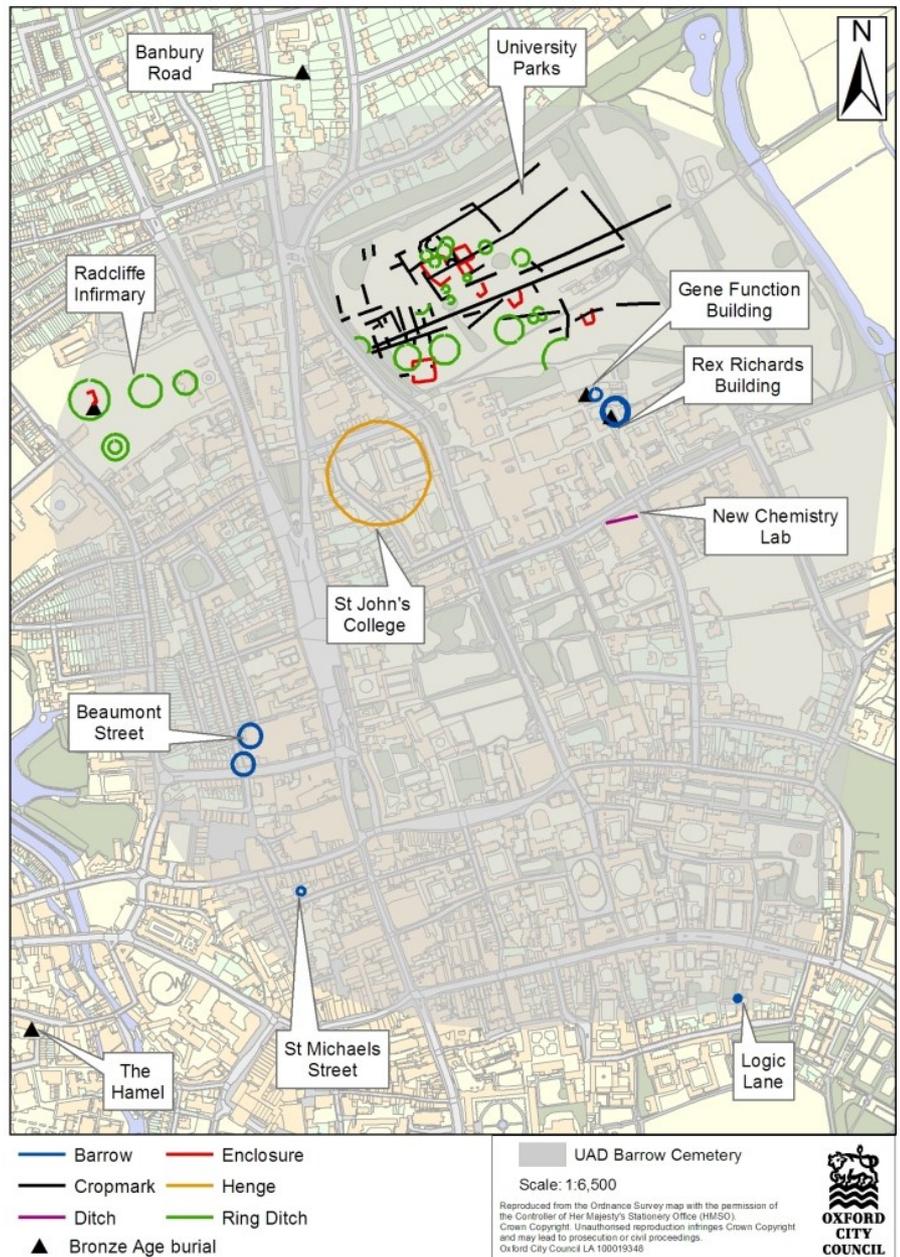
**Definition:** A round barrow cemetery is a group of five or more closely spaced prehistoric round barrows comprising examples of one or more of the following classes: bowl barrows, fancy barrows, pond barrows and ring cairns.

#### Key characteristics

*The following criteria (which are not in any order of ranking) are based on the Secretary of State's criteria for assessing Scheduled Monuments. They should not be regarded as definitive, but as an indicative provisional assessment.*

**1) Period:** Does the asset characterise a category or historic period?

**Assessment:** The Middle Neolithic enclosure identified beneath the linear cemetery at the Radcliffe Infirmary site indicates the presence of a monumental landscape active from the Middle Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. Barrow cemeteries are strongly characteristic of this period and the linear formation is a distinct pattern that characterises a small number of contemporary landscapes in the Upper Thames Valley. Linear cemeteries are known elsewhere but are absent from a number of nearby landscapes (e.g. the Chilterns). Barrow cemeteries span a period for which the number of known monument classes is fairly small.



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The evidence suggests that the barrows remained in the landscape until the Saxon period, later becoming a focus for early Saxon activity.

**Score:** High

**2) Rarity:** *What is the rarity of the asset in terms of regional and national context?*

**Assessment:** The exact number of round barrow cemeteries in England is not at present known, but a rough estimate suggests that between 300 and 500 examples have been recorded; at a county level there are 36 barrow cemeteries. Linear cemeteries form a subclass and far fewer examples are known. There is some debate over definition with a number of barrow clusters having linear aspects, however at least four distinct large linear alignments are known in the Oxfordshire/Berkshire Upper Thames Valley: the University Parks barrows, the extant Seven Barrows at Lambourn, Berks and linear alignments recorded at Barrow Hills, Radley and at Standlake, both of which have now been removed by quarrying. The survival of the University Parks barrows is therefore regionally distinctive (in terms of the Oxon/Berks Upper Thames).

**Score:** High

**3) Documentation:** *To what extent is the significance of the asset enhanced by existing documentation or lack thereof?*

**Assessment:** The barrows were first noted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as parch marks by Ashmolean Keeper Dr Plot. Subsequently aerial photography and geophysical survey have produced good quality evidence for the character and extent of the barrows. The wider monument complex has been extensively excavated and studied and is cited as the most extensively investigated dispersed barrow group in the Middle and Upper Thames Valley by Garwood (2011: 370).

**Score:** High

**4) Group Value:** *Is the value of the asset enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments or with monuments of different periods?*

**Assessment:** The University Parks barrows are associated with an extensive funerary complex that includes a Middle Neolithic enclosure, a henge, flat graves and satellite burials and a significant number of further barrows. At least nine barrows from the Oxford 2nd terrace have been subject to some level of excavation.

**Score:** High

**5) Survival/Condition:** *What is the estimated level of above and below ground survival?*

**Assessment:** No extant earthworks survive in the University Parks. A recent geophysical survey demonstrates the presence of ring ditch remains. Recent excavations at the western end of the linear cemetery undertaken as part of the Radcliffe Infirmary redevelopment have provided an indication of the kind of remains that can be expected to survive, including barrow ditches, associated posthole alignments and pits, cremations, animal bone and pottery.

**Score:** Medium

**6) Fragility/Vulnerability:** *susceptibility to change.*

**Assessment:** Whilst the linear cemetery lies within a Registered Park and Garden the wider landscape has been subject to applications and proposals for underground water attenuation tanks, geothermal arrays and IT trenching.

**Score:** Medium

**7) Diversity:** *Does the asset possess a combination of high quality features?*

**Assessment:** The recent excavations at the western end of the linear cemetery at the Radcliffe Infirmary site demonstrated the presence of a Middle Neolithic enclosure (possibly with a mortuary enclosure) under one of the barrows as well as satellite burials associated with the barrow. Parallels with similar landscapes at Standlake and Radley would suggest the

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potential for a wide range of monument forms and the geophysical survey results provide some evidence for this.

**Score:** High

**8) Potential:** *Is there a likelihood that currently unrecorded evidence can be anticipated?*

**Assessment:** There is a strong likelihood that previously unrecorded evidence is present.

**Score:** High

Overall score (22/24)

### **Overall Assessment of Archaeological Interest: High**

#### **HERITAGE ASSET DESCRIPTION**

The site lies within a Grade II Registered Park and Garden and is a publicly accessible area of maintained grass and sports field, with no extant earthworks other than a raised area which is assumed to be the result of modern landscaping. The site is maintained by Oxford University and has entrance gates that are locked in the late evening.

Parch-marks were first recorded within what is now the University Park on South Parks Road by Dr R Plot, first Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, in 1686 however they were not initially considered archaeological (Parkinson *et al.* 1996). The parch-marks were not recorded again until 1976 when the exceptionally dry conditions revealed more of the complex (Hassall 1986). Hassall suggested that the barrows may have formed part of a linear barrow cemetery, comprising at least three and possibly five barrows within the park itself. The recent 2009 excavation of two barrows and observation of a third on the same alignment at the Radcliffe Infirmary site some 300m to the west of the University Parks have confirmed Hassall's observation. In common with the cemeteries at Barrow Hills, Standlake, North Stoke, and Seven Barrows, the University Parks appears to be a Bronze Age cemetery constructed around earlier Neolithic monuments.

#### **Evidence by period**

##### **Mesolithic**

There is as yet no evidence for Mesolithic activity in the area of the barrow cemetery.

##### **Neolithic**

A watching brief during the construction of an IT trench through University Parks in 2010 identified a single Neolithic pit dated by the presence of a scraper, narrow blade, five waste flakes and part of a likely polished flint axe (Mullin 2011).

Neolithic activity has been recorded close to University Parks during excavations at Mansfield College in 1998 when a single pit containing 13 Neolithic flints was recorded in advance of construction for the American Institute on South Parks Road (Booth and Hayden 2000). In 2000-1 an evaluation and subsequent excavation at the adjacent site of the New Chemistry Lab recorded two small pits and a substantial boundary ditch of possible mid to late Neolithic date (Bradley 2005). Environmental evidence was also recorded at the New Chemistry Lab Site indicating both gathered and cultivated food debris although there was also some evidence of later contamination.

Excavations for the new Kendrew Quadrangle at St John's College in 2008 recorded evidence of a substantial Late Neolithic ditch, the curvature of which suggested a feature some 150m in-diameter. Radio-carbon dating carried out on bone found near the base of the ditch produced a date of around 2289-2100 BC. The feature is interpreted as a Neolithic henge that may have been the focus of the later Bronze Age barrow cemetery (Wallis 2010).

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The 2009 excavations at the Radcliffe Infirmary site some 400m to the northwest identified a Middle Neolithic enclosure with later Early Bronze Age satellite cremations that was subsequently enclosed by a large Early Bronze Age barrow forming part of the linear cemetery (Braybrooke 2010). Such an arrangement is unusual and the enclosure may be interpreted as perhaps a Neolithic mortuary enclosure broadly similar to sites in Northamptonshire (Deegan 2007). Radio-carbon dating from the primary fill of the enclosure ditch provided a date 3530-3600 cal BC (95% probability).

### **Late Neolithic-Bronze Age**

There is a considerable body of archaeological evidence for the wider Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age funerary and ritual landscape at Oxford. This is summarised in the period resource assessment for Oxford and not discussed in detail here. Here key adjacent and related sites are briefly summarised.

Aerial photographic evidence for parch marks is reviewed by Hassall (1986) and Barclay (1996). Geophysical surveys have been undertaken in the University Parks in 2008 and 2011 (MOLA 2008, Fig 11; Archaeological Surveys Ltd 2011). Possible Bronze Age features have been excavated within the University Parks in 2009 and 2011, however the results are inconclusive (Wessex Archaeology 2011; Heistermann and Norton 2011).

In the nearby Science Area, south of the park, barrows have been excavated at the Rex Richards Building (Parkinson *et al.* 1996) and the Gene Function Building (Boston *et al.* 2003). The Gene Function Building barrow appears to have been sited on an earlier flat grave. One of the associated burials had suffered from an indentation to the skull which has been suggested to represent the cause of death, perhaps from a bronze implement. If accurate this would represent an early and rare example of Bronze Age violence (*ibid.*). Excavations of a segment of a henge monument discovered at St John's College in 2008, located to the south-west of University Parks, revealed a substantial assemblage of Beaker pottery overlying an Early Bronze Age hearth radio-carbon dated to 2136-1948 BC (Wallis 2010: 12).

Excavations at the Radcliffe Infirmary site in 2009 examined the western end of the linear cemetery. Two ring ditches/barrows were recorded on the linear alignment (A and C) a third double ring ditch lay to the south (Ding Ditch B). The edge of another ring ditch on the linear alignment was recorded during a subsequent watching brief running under the existing Infirmary building (D).

The remains of two cremation burials were recorded next to Ring Ditch A. Radio-carbon dating from one burial provided a date of 2030-1870 cal BC (95% probability) (Braybrooke 2010: 16). Ring Ditch C was the best preserved of the three with a similar profile to A & B. It was around 48m in diameter. Ring Ditch D was badly truncated by modern quarrying and only a small section was recorded, however it was estimated that it was of a similar dimension to B (*ibid.*). Ring Ditch B consisted of two concentric ditches. The U shaped profile of the outer ditch appeared similar to the ditch of A with a width of around 3.8m and a depth of 1.2m and could be calculated as having a diameter of c.39m with reasonable accuracy. The inner ditch was around 19m in diameter with a V shaped profile and a width of around 2m and a depth of 1.1m (Braybrooke 2010). Optical Stimulated Luminescence dating of the upper fills has given an early Iron Age date for the later fills of the ring ditches (Braybrooke 2009).

### **Iron Age**

Evidence from parch marks and geophysical survey suggest the presence of an extensive complex of fields, trackways and enclosures within the University Parks overlying the Neolithic-Bronze Age landscape. The parch marks in the northern part of University Parks are thought to represent an Iron Age encampment similar to those found at Port Meadow. Chance

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finds of 'Belgic' pottery and animal remains were recorded beneath the nearby Clarendon Laboratory in 1956 (UAD 165). Excavations at the Rex Richards Building in the Science Area between 1982 and 1993 indicated that the two Bronze Age ring ditches were in-filled during the early to middle Iron Age (UAD 307-309: Parkinson *et al.* 1996: 41). Here a number of Iron Age ditches were recorded overlying the earlier monuments (Parkinson *et al.* 1996: 41). The recovered Iron Age and Roman pottery dated from the early to middle Iron Age with a few sherds of Late Iron Age to Roman 'Belgic' type pottery (*ibid.* 51).

Excavations in 2009 prior to the creation of rainwater attenuation tanks within the park recorded ditched enclosures associated with Middle Iron Age-Roman settlement (Wessex Archaeology 2011). At the 2009 Radcliffe Infirmary excavation the pottery evidence for Iron Age activity was limited with evidence of some Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age pottery from the upper fills from the double ring ditch (Ring Ditch B). At the 2008 St John's College Elizabeth House excavation the ditch of the Neolithic henge was demonstrated to have continued to gradually silt up throughout the Iron Age and the upper fills contain some evidence of Late Iron Age to Roman pottery. By this point the henge may have been little more than a shallow feature in the landscape (Wallis 2010: 11).

## **Roman**

Extensive evidence of Roman activity comes from the area immediately to the south of University Parks. At least seven inhumations were recorded within a series of ditches during a salvage excavation in front of the University Natural History Museum (Hassall 1972). It is likely that an Iron Age to Roman field system extended over much of the Museum and University site on South Parks Road, perhaps linked with the cropmarks recorded in University Parks. Excavations to the south of South Parks Road have recorded evidence of Roman rural settlement close by. At Mansfield College, there is evidence of at least one timber structure consistent with a low status 4<sup>th</sup> century settlement site (Booth & Hayden 2000). Environmental analysis also produced evidence indicating that arable agriculture was dominant in the area with some evidence for horticulture. At the adjacent New Chemistry Lab site in 2005 evidence was recovered for Roman activity dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century comprising a small number of pits and boundary ditches with an intensification of the boundary system towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Bradley *et al.* 2005). In the late 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century the complex system of boundary ditches was rationalised to produce a more coherent system; an inhumation was also recorded to the north of the boundary ditches. Further evidence of Roman field systems were recorded at the nearby Halifax House site where several ditches are on a northwest-southeast alignment (Anthony 2005). The 2008 excavations at St John's College recorded a 1<sup>st</sup> century hearth within the upper fill of the ditch along with a few sherds of early Roman pottery (Wallis 2010).

## **Saxon**

The 2009 excavations at the Radcliffe Infirmary site revealed a sunken feature building (SFB) possibly destroyed by fire, and other Saxon features and pottery suggesting limited settlement activity focused on the extant barrows in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century. A Late Saxon mass grave was recorded within the upper fills of the Late Neolithic henge at St John's college, indicating the continued significance of prehistoric features in the late Saxon landscape. A minimum of 34 well built adult males and two juvenile bodies were recovered, stripped of clothing and bearing wounds indicating that they suffered from violent deaths, apparently from one episode. It is possible that they are victims of the St Brice's Day massacre in 1002. Isotope analysis of the bones has suggested that the men may have consumed more fish than the local norm and may therefore be Scandinavian in origin (Wallis 2010).

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Oxford was founded as a defended burh in the 9<sup>th</sup> century utilising the natural fording point of the River Thames at Grandpont and the earliest phase of burh defences comprising a substantial bank and ditch likely dates to that time. Occupation within the burh was extensive and archaeological investigations have provided a wealth of evidence for domestic activity, street planning and the defences themselves. The University Parks are located well away from the known areas of mid-late Saxon settlement.

### **Medieval**

In the Norman-medieval period, St Giles became a busy suburb of the new town through the construction of the royal palace at Beaumont in 1133 and the foundation of a succession of religious and collegiate orders outside the northern city wall from the Carmelite Friary in the west (now Worcester College) to the Austin Friary on Holywell Street (now Wadham College). By the late 13<sup>th</sup> century the area immediately around the Northgate was substantially developed although the north end was still largely rural in character. Medieval settlement within the city will not be discussed in detail here (see Medieval Resource Assessment).

Excavations at the new Kendrew Quad, St John's College in 2008 recorded evidence of several plot boundaries laid out some time in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Wallis 2010), indicating that the henge earthworks were no longer a constraining factor. Little is known about activity within the University Parks area during the medieval period; the area is assumed to have been located within open fields.

### **Post-medieval**

Late medieval and/or post-medieval boundary ditches were recorded during an excavation undertaken prior to the extension of the sub station located at the southern edge of the University Parks in 2010 (Heistermann and Norton 2011). An evaluation undertaken in the science area, just south of the University Parks entrance in 2011 revealed a series of wheel ruts. One rut had been consolidated with fragments of oolitic limestone. The ruts contained residual medieval pottery and late 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>-century clay tobacco pipes. A ditch, possibly later re-cut, a bedding trench and a possible quarry pit had all been backfilled with soil and contained 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery. These features were interpreted as horticultural or landscaping features and probably relate to the use of the site as part of the University Parks (Hayward 2010). During the Civil War Oxford was adopted as the Royalist Capital and provided with earthwork defensive lines. De Gomme's map of the Civil War defences, records the earthworks passing through the south-west corner of the University Parks. Archaeological investigations have recorded sections of the Civil War defences at Jowett Walk, New College Sports Ground, Mansfield College and the Science Area.

### **Modern**

The area later known as The University Parks was purchased by Oxford University in 1853 and landscaping began in the 1860s under the supervision of William Baxter. The current park includes a Cricket Pavilion, several bridges and a pond. During the two World Wars much of the Park was given over to allotments for the war effort. The Park is now designated a registered Park and Garden Grade II by English Heritage (RPG 5168).

### **Academic statements**

Oxford is cited as the most extensively investigated dispersed barrow group in the Middle and Upper Thames Valley by Garwood (2011a: 370).

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'There does seem to be a general relationship between linear barrow groups and the presence of lavishly furnished burials [in the Upper Thames Valley]' (Garwood, 2011b, 418)

'A number of barrow cemeteries developed around Neolithic barrows (e.g. Lambourn, Radley, North Stoke) and in some cases barrow groups developed into highly structured barrow cemeteries, of which the linear cemetery at Barrow Hills Radley is the most well-known example. Work in advance of development in north Oxford, however, suggests that the barrows known in University Parks could be part of a similar barrow layout. On the whole, however, there are few linear cemeteries and most Oxfordshire barrow cemeteries have no obvious plan, although this does not mean that the positioning of individual barrows did not have significance at the time' (Hey 2006).

MPP Class Description- A round barrow cemetery is a group of five or more closely spaced prehistoric round barrows comprising examples of one or more of the following classes: bowl barrows, fancy barrows, pond barrows and ring cairns. Other possible components include urnfields and flat graves. The spacing of barrows within a round barrow cemetery varies considerably, but few barrows will be over 150m from their nearest neighbour; most will be less than 100m apart. The largest cemeteries contain up to about 30 barrows (English Heritage 1989).

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