

SUMMARY REPORT

Beechbrook Wood (TQ 0193/1542)

As part of an extensive programme of archaeological investigation carried out in advance of the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by Union Railways (South) Limited (URS) to maintain a Targeted Watching Brief on the site of a proposed railhead at Beechbrook Wood within CTRL Project Area 430/570 between October 2000 and July 2001. Investigations prior to the construction programme had revealed traces of a poorly preserved prehistoric landscape of an agricultural nature, thus the site was designated a Targeted Watching Brief. During the course of the programme, more extensive remains were uncovered and a subsequent classification of the site as a Significant Discovery Individual (SDI) was made. Included in this assessment are two phases of fieldwork (ARC BBW00 and ARC BWD98).

The size of the construction site totalled 37 ha. The fieldwork revealed extensive multi-period remains, ranging in date from the Mesolithic through to the early Roman period. The earliest prehistoric evidence was restricted to the north of the site and consisted of pits with occasional *in situ* artefact assemblages, including a concentration of flint-knapping debris from a large late Mesolithic feature. Other isolated features contained early Neolithic flint tools and Plain Bowl pottery. The nature of activity during these periods is difficult to interpret but could represent quite intensive use of the site from the late mesolithic onwards, perhaps as a favoured temporary camp site.

During the Beaker period, activity is more intense, and includes evidence suggestive of settlement and burial activity, including a substantial and varied domestic Beaker assemblage, recovered from a group of features. A small ring ditch, possibly a roundhouse or barrow ditch, is dated to this period by pottery finds, as are two intercutting barrow ditches.

Groups of features dated to the middle/late Bronze Age are very few in number but finds include metalwork and loomweight fragments. Although the nature of the activity in this period is difficult to interpret, some regionally important new transitional ceramic types were recovered.

The main prehistoric occupation of the site commences during the Late Bronze Age. From this time the settlement focus experiences periodic shifts towards the lower lying terrains to the east and south, whilst the northern plateau lies abandoned. Land divisions may be associated with an only partly exposed settlement at the eastern boundary. The latter produced rare evidence for contemporary superstructures within an extensive assemblage of daub. Truncated cremation burials are found in repeated association with the field boundaries. A further ring ditch nearby produced a small amount of Late Bronze Age pottery and may indicate a contemporary structure. Evidence for the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition is limited to one securely dated ceramic assemblage from a shallow pit.

A double-ditched enclosure was established during the Middle Iron Age at the south-western extreme of the site which revealed evidence of entrance remodelling and placed deposits including cremated human remains in its ditch fills. A new regional pottery fabric series was identified within the extensive ceramic assemblage from this structure. Use of the structure may have been relatively shortlived. A small group of urned cremation burials outside its limits may represent a closing deposit.

During the Late Iron Age, two foci of activity are present. To the south, further enclosure activity, including the construction of at least one possible causeway, occurs around the perimeter of the earlier enclosure. The function of these earthworks remains unclear, but they may have served pastoral or agricultural purposes. To the north, artefactual evidence from two industrial plots is suggestive of metalworking and trade. The two areas appear broadly contemporary, possibly indicating occupational zoning. Ceramic evidence indicates that activity in both areas continued into the Early Roman period without noticeable changes in their nature. The site appears to have ceased to be used around AD 250; this may be due to a gradual settlement shift towards the north and south.

There is some evidence for peripheral use of the site by manorial complexes to the north and south during the 13th century. After *c.* AD 250 there is little evidence for activity other than agricultural use of the land until the post-medieval period.

The preliminary phasing can be summarised as follows:

- Phase 1. Mesolithic. Flint tool technology, artefactual evidence for habitation.
- Phase 2. Early Neolithic. Flint tool technology, limited artefactual evidence for sedentism and agriculture.
- Phase 3. Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (Beaker). Settlement, ritual land-use.
- Phases 4-5. Middle-Later Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Land division, agricultural subsistence, settlement, metalworking, barrows and cremation burials.
- Phase 6. Middle-Late Iron Age. Multiple enclosure, agriculture, expansion, structured deposition.
- Phase 7. Late Iron Age/Early Roman. Industrial plots and occupational zones, ritual activity associated with enclosures.
- Phase 8. Roman. Possible trackway, metalworking, cremation burials.
- Phase 9. Earlier Medieval. Evidence for off-site local pottery production, peripheral agricultural use.

The key themes and ideas that have emerged as a result of the Fieldwork Events and the post-excavation assessment suggest that there is excellent potential to address most areas of research interest that were identified in the Fieldwork Event Aims and the Landscape Zone Priorities. There is excellent potential, particularly through the application of scientific techniques, to refine and confirm the sequence and dating of activity on site.

