

Clifton Quarry, Worcestershire (PNUM 5379): Digital Summary November 2007

An archaeological watching brief and contingency excavation undertaken at Clifton Quarry on behalf of Tarmac Limited revealed unexpectedly significant deposits of local, regional and national importance. Following assessment Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service have received ALSF PPG16 Assistance funding to allow completion of a full programme of analysis, which will significantly contribute to the ongoing development of a stronger research framework to underpin archaeological management of the aggregate extraction landscapes along the River Severn. It will also support design and implementation of future stages of watching brief required for the Clifton Quarry extension.

The mitigation strategy was designed in the light of a programme of pre-determination evaluation. The current programme of analysis focuses on the results from one element of the resultant mitigation strategy and aimed to identify, excavate and record any archaeological deposits or features beyond a defined 'core' area of later prehistoric settlement. Other mitigation work required includes ongoing analysis of palaeochannel deposits and, yet to be programmed, works including excavation of a later prehistoric settlement 'core' and a further watching brief in another part of the quarry.

Throughout the majority of the area covered only limited archaeological remains were recorded in accordance with the predictions of the evaluation. However, throughout the western quarter of the site, unexpected and significant archaeological features of Neolithic through to Roman date were identified.

The Late Neolithic activity comprised one isolated pit and four further closely spaced pits. The isolated feature was particularly notable. This contained an elaborate collection of six whole and fragmentary polished axes, numerous flint tools and debitage, and large quantities of Grooved Ware pottery. This is the most significant assemblage of Neolithic artefacts discovered in Worcestershire to date and the number of polished axes in a single pit is possibly unique in Britain. Abundant charred barley grains representing a cleaned crop were also preserved within this feature and potentially represent the richest charred cereal assemblage to have been recovered from a single feature in Britain. Numerous crab apple fragments were also present. The activity represented is thought to have been sporadic and can be related to temporary patterns of residence and ritual activities on the Severn floodplain.

Also present was a burnt mound and associated features including a trough, a large pit adjacent to the mound and a scatter of seventeen small shallow pits distributed alongside a former channel of the Severn. All of these features were associated with large quantities of heat shattered stone and charcoal. Associated pottery could only be attributed a broad early prehistoric date on the basis of fabric but the activity is tentatively dated to the Bronze Age as the majority of local examples are from this period.

Double-ditched field boundaries represented part of a field system and one pair of ditches appeared to be associated with a well or watering hole comprising a box-shaped structure of stakes and radially split planks set within a large circular pit.

This was initially believed to be Roman in date and associated with a Roman settlement located to the immediate north-west, however, dendrochronological dating has now shown that the well is of early 8th century AD construction and some doubt must therefore be cast on the date of the field system as well.

The Neolithic pits, burnt mound deposits and well structure were all located along the eastern margins of a palaeochannel understood to be a former course of the River Severn. Although preservation was poor within the channel margins encountered at this location, well-preserved organic deposits from another segment of the channel are currently being examined through a separate phase of developer-funded mitigation works. These have been demonstrated to date to between the Late Mesolithic (4690-4450 cal BC) through to the Late Neolithic/Earlier Bronze Age (2290-1910 cal BC), thus providing a broad environmental context for the pits and potentially for the burnt mound. While the pre-determination evaluation had identified and sampled palaeochannel deposits elsewhere on the site, it is noted that, despite the presence of evaluation trenches across this part of the site, no evidence for the channel, the Late Neolithic pits, the burnt mound activity or the early medieval activities were recorded at that stage of the project.

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