

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT BERRYFIELDS MDA INTERIM STATEMENT

Archaeologists from Oxford Archaeology undertaking excavations in advance of a major development at Berryfields, Aylesbury, have uncovered evidence of prehistoric and Roman settlement, medieval field systems, a possible bridge, a Roman basket, and 2000-year-old eggs. The work was completed in accordance with planning conditions imposed by Aylesbury Vale District Council and agreed with Buckinghamshire County Council's Archaeologist. All investigation has been funded by the Berryfields Consortium, comprising Taylor Wimpey, Martin Grant Homes, Kier and Banner Homes. The Berryfields Major Development Area (MDA) is a new 187 Hectare housing development which lies to the west of Aylesbury on either side of the A41. When complete the site will accommodate 3,000 homes, as well as community facilities including open space and parks, areas for employment, shops and schools.

The site is located in an area rich in the remains of the past. Akeman Street, the Roman road that links London and Cirencester via St Albans, runs through the southern edge of the site, while a Roman roadside settlement or 'small town' is located about half a mile west at Fleet Marston. Extensive earthworks of a deserted medieval settlement and Tudor garden at Quarrendon lie to the north-east of the development area where they are to be preserved for future public enjoyment

Roman field systems, pits and a so-called ladder settlement – a set of narrow rectangular enclosures resembling a ladder – ranged along a trackway - were detected east of a prehistoric settlement. Sub-surface remains were found by a geophysical survey, and investigated subsequently in various phases of investigation including evaluation trenching. Larger areas were opened up for excavation in 2007/8.

This latter element of fieldwork revealed prehistoric remains to the north of the A41 in the western part of the MDA. A prehistoric settlement defined by enclosures, pits, hearths, a trackway, and at least three roundhouses was recorded. The pottery collected from the settlement features indicated that the settlement was occupied in the Iron Age (*c* 700 BC-AD 43), although smaller quantities of Bronze Age pottery, dated to *c* 2400-700 BC, pointed to some earlier activity. The ring-gully of one of the roundhouses had cut into the infilled ring-gully of an earlier, abandoned, roundhouse, suggesting that the roundhouses were built at different periods and represent a prolonged period of prehistoric settlement at the site. All three roundhouses had their entrances facing east. This orientation is typical for Iron Age roundhouses and would have maximised natural light and heat entering the structures.

Development adjacent to the MDA included the construction of Aylesbury Vale Parkway, a railway station and park-and-ride facility, south of the A41. As with parts of the MDA, this required an archaeological investigation, and a team from Oxford Archaeology set to work in 2007 and 2008. The earliest features here dated to the early Roman period (*c* AD 43-100). Ditches in the southern corner of the excavation area marked out an enclosure likely to belong to a more extensive field system. There were more field ditches to the north, but these could not be closely dated within the Roman period.

The people of Roman Berryfields were encountered in a more immediate way. Archaeologists uncovered the remains of three human burials – a cremation burial and two inhumation graves. The cremation burial was found in a field ditch, although it may originally have been placed in a formal grave and subsequently disturbed. A ceramic urn contained the cremated bone, which was identified as that of a male adult. A radiocarbon date from the bone indicated that the man lived sometime between the early 2nd and mid-3rd centuries AD. Later, in the late 3rd or 4th century, two adult females were buried alongside a ditch, close to the Roman road. Both women were placed, un-

burnt, in graves (inhumations) and were laid on their backs with their heads to the east.

The position of the inhumations close to, and parallel with, the road, is likely to be significant. Roman burial custom, particularly within Roman towns, typically placed burials prominently along roads, allowing travellers to contemplate the dead as they approached or left the settlement. No trace of Akeman Street was seen in the Parkway excavation, but the road was uncovered in the most recent phase of fieldwork some 300m south-east of the Parkway site. In 2011, two trenches across the projected line of the road revealed the metalled surface of the road and the two pairs of flanking drainage ditches that form the characteristic profile of a Roman road. In keeping with the Roman association between roads and burials, two skeletons were found in the roadside ditches. A subsequent watching brief further to the south-east – and on the alignment of the road – uncovered large timber piles on the south bank of the River Thames. Further work is needed to determine their function and date, but it is a strong possibility that the timbers formed part of a Roman bridge that carried the road over the river.

Excavation in 2011 to the north and south of Akeman Street uncovered further evidence of Roman fields and enclosures. These were aligned with the road, and shared the same alignment as the field ditches in the Parkway site and in areas north of the A41. Together, these reveal an extensive field system that was defined by the Roman road and developed in a systematic way within an organised landscape. Roman travellers on Akeman Street passing through the Berryfields area would have seen fields and enclosures on either side and, in those fields, cattle and sheep, judging by the animal bone evidence. Plant remains from the Parkway site were dominated by vetch, which may have been grown in the surrounding fields for fodder.

More roundhouse wall gullies, on this occasion dating from the mid and late Roman period (*c* AD 150-400) were recorded during recent work, as well as pottery, animal bone, fired clay and other evidence of domestic occupation.

The most spectacular finds of the 2011 fieldwork were recovered from a large pit on the edge of the Roman road. The pit appears to have functioned as a sump or tank, possibly associated with crop processing or some other agricultural or craft-industrial process. The pit was located in a naturally low-lying area, and as a result its lower fills were waterlogged. The wet muddy layers in the pit provided the perfect conditions for the preservation of organic objects, which normally do not survive on archaeological sites. Among the many finds were worked and unworked timber, leather fragments, including pieces from shoes, over forty coins (currently suggesting a 2nd/3rd-century AD date), complete and near-complete pottery vessels (including a drinking beaker), and two articulated animal skeletons.

Exceptionally, three complete eggs were also discovered. Unfortunately these were in an incredibly fragile condition and only one survived the excavation process intact, and this is now awaiting further analysis. One of the last objects to be recovered from the pit was an almost complete woven basket or tray. The object is still to be analysed, but the base appears to have been made of split birch, while the sides were formed from willow rods. Like the eggs, this is a very rare find in Britain; most Roman baskets that have been found on archaeological sites have been preserved in the dry conditions of North Africa. All the finds are currently undergoing initial processing, stabilisation and conservation at Oxford Archaeology's offices in Oxford.



The Berryfields MDA continued to be used for farming after the Roman period. Medieval ridge-and-furrow extended across all areas of excavation. However, no evidence of post-Roman settlement has yet been found. There is no evidence as to when Akeman Street's course changed. Further interesting discoveries may occur during archaeological investigation within the MDA in coming years.