

FAIRFORD ARCHAEOLOGY: AN UPDATE

There have been several archaeological investigations in and around Fairford in recent years which have revealed new evidence on the extent of early settlement in the area. Most of these investigations have resulted from plans to build new housing on agricultural land. The reports of these investigations have been published and are summarised here.

Cirencester Road

Three investigations took place prior to new housing being built on both sides of Cirencester Road in the west end of Fairford. In 2013 and 2014 an archaeological evaluation and investigation was carried out at Home Farm on the north side of Cirencester Road in preparation for the building of Fairford Gate. This was a very productive site as it revealed ditches and pits dating from the Iron Age as well as five potential Anglo-Saxon sunken floor buildings (SFBs) with associated pottery and bone. Sunken floor buildings are small, usually circular, buildings with the floor dug below the ground surface and which would have been thatched. Originally thought to have been the houses of Anglo-Saxons and earlier settlers, the SFBs are now believed to have been ancillary buildings, used perhaps for storage or as workshops. However, the most interesting find at Home Farm was the discovery of a Neolithic crouched burial of a woman found in a shallow pit. Neolithic burials are uncommon in the upper Thames region so this was a significant discovery. Three more burials were found in Iron Age pits. A separate investigation at nearby Pips Field in 2013 discovered features of an Iron Age field system with associated pits similar to the field system found at Horcott Pit about one mile to the south.

The last investigation took place in 2015 on the south side of Cirencester Road and this revealed similar archaeology to that found at Home Farm. Neolithic and Iron Age pottery was discovered and three more Anglo-Saxon sunken floor buildings. Among the artefacts found from the Anglo-Saxon period were a bone comb, 23 loom weights and a spindle whorl, the latter items indicating that spinning and weaving were taking place on the site.

Horcott Road

In 2016 an archaeological investigation was conducted in two fields west of Horcott Road adjacent to Lakeside and immediately to the east of the Fairford Gate development on the south side of Cirencester Road. A total of 20 trenches were put in and this proved to be one of the most productive archaeological investigations in Fairford in recent years with features and artefacts from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon periods being found. Evidence of extensive Anglo-Saxon settlement was found including 15 potential sunken floor buildings and a rectangular arrangement of 16 postholes which possibly represented a substantial hall-type building. From the Neolithic period the partial remains of a round barrow was discovered as well as ditches containing worked flints and pottery sherds. The round barrow may be connected to crop marks in the Coln House School playing field across Horcott Road which are thought to indicate the presence of a possible barrow complex.

In 2018 an archaeological evaluation was made at Coln House School in order to support any future planning applications. An investigation in 1999 had revealed Anglo-Saxon features and a medieval field system. The 2018 investigation comprised two trenches in which were discovered traces of five ditches containing a total of 21 fragments of pottery dating from the 10th to the 15th centuries together with a single piece of Roman pottery.

Some of the Anglo-Saxon evidence discovered in the investigations at Cirencester Road and Horcott Road is thought likely to be contemporary with the extensive Anglo-Saxon cemetery partially excavated by William Wylie in 1851. The evidence from the recent digs also supports the growing appreciation that the Anglo-Saxon exploitation of the upper Thames Valley was more extensive and more intensive than previously thought.

East End

A small-scale archaeological investigation at a piece of land to the east of Beaumont Place in 2017 for a failed building application revealed several undated ditches and pits with pottery fragments and animal bones dating from the Bronze Age, Roman and post-medieval periods.

London Road

In preparation for the building of Keble Fields on the eastern outskirts of Fairford, an archaeological investigation took place in 2013. The dig included 12 trenches which discovered ditches, pits and pottery believed to be from the Iron Age as well as a single worked flint and animal bone from the Neolithic era.

Meysey Hampton

One of the most interesting archaeological discoveries in the area in recent years took place at Meysey Hampton in 2016. An archaeological evaluation and investigation took place along the route of a new buried electricity cable from Cirencester to a sub-station in Fairford. Various evidence of Bronze Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon archaeology was found along the route but the most unexpected and significant discovery was a small middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery found at the crossroads on the A417 just north of the village. Burial sites at crossroads are not uncommon in the medieval era. The cemetery consisted of 16 graves containing the well-preserved remains of 18 individuals; seven identified as males, three females and eight infants or juveniles. All the bodies had been laid out with their heads to the west indicating that this was a Christian burial, although not associated with Meysey Hampton's church which was some distance to the south west and was not built until the 13th Century.

Two burials stood out as being significant. One grave was a double burial with two young men buried side by side. One of the men had been decapitated with a single cut through the second cervical vertebrae and was interpreted as an execution. The skull showed signs of a healed head wound, most likely from some earlier blunt force trauma. The other man in the double grave had a small healed cut on his right collar bone and may also have died violently. Radiocarbon dating gave a indication of

death sometime between the late 7th Century and the first three quarters of the 8th Century. The other interesting burial is that of a male adult who measured 185 cm (6 feet 1 inch), well above the average height for an Anglo-Saxon male.

Perhaps the next few years will result in other interesting archaeological discoveries in the Fairford area which will help to illuminate the long and very rich heritage of the upper Thames Valley.