

# **Horcott Quarry, Fairford and Arkell's Land, Kempsford**

## **Prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlement and burial in the Upper Thames Valley in Gloucestershire**

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*Front cover:* Aerial view south across the Thames Valley, with the first phase of Horcott excavations underway.  
Kempsford village lies left of centre just beyond RAF Fairford, with the Thames behind. Arkell's Land is  
off the image just to the left. © Robert Bewley

*Back cover:* Horcott, aerial view of the middle Roman stone-footed building

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EXCAVATIONS 2006–2013**

**by Rob Early, Edward Biddulph and Ken Welsh**

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## Summary

Horcott Quarry, Fairford, and Arkell's Land, Kempsford, lie some 4km apart in the Upper Thames Valley in east Gloucestershire, on the Second and First gravel terraces respectively. Excavations at Horcott Quarry revealed a discontinuous sequence of activity stretching from the early Mesolithic to the Anglo-Saxon period. The finds from the earlier Iron Age, the Roman period and the Anglo-Saxon period were particularly extensive, and comprised evidence for both settlement and, in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods, funerary activity. Less extensive evidence was found for activity in the early Mesolithic, the late Neolithic, the Beaker period, the middle Bronze Age and the middle Iron Age.

The earlier Iron Age activity comprised a dense array of postholes amongst which a number of roundhouses and a very large number of four-post structures – the largest number identified on any site in the Upper Thames Valley – have been identified. The dense array of postholes probably formed over time as the focus of settlement shifted over short distances. Three of the four-posters may have burnt down, and charred grain in their postholes may support the traditional interpretation of these structures as granaries. The large number of four-posters thus suggests an exceptional focus on the storage of grain, and raises significant issues in interpreting the nature of the agricultural economy at Horcott and other sites of similar date in the Upper Thames Valley which lack such large numbers of four-posters.

The Roman activity spanned the period from the beginning of the 2nd century to the end of the 4th century, although there is little evidence for activity after *c* AD 350. A system of ditched enclosures and droveways was associated with waterholes, crop-drying ovens, numerous pits and a small building with stone foundations. The small settlement may have had a limited and perhaps even transient

population, with a focus on agro-pastoral activity. A small group of burials dating from *c* AD 100–250 lay within the enclosure around the building, while a larger cemetery, dating from *c* AD 250–350, was established in a large enclosure to the east. A further isolated burial was situated both spatially and chronologically between the Roman cemetery and a group of early Anglo-Saxon burials to the north.

Activity in the Anglo-Saxon period was evidenced by a timber hall, two crop-drying ovens, some 33 sunken-featured buildings and burials of two phases. The earlier burials, dated *c* AD 400–550, comprised a small group consisting of women and children while three subadult burials were dated *c* AD 600–700. A series of radiocarbon dates provides details of the chronology of the Roman and Anglo-Saxon burials and clarifies the chronological relationship between them.

Arkell's Land lies in an area with complex patterns of river channels. The few features and finds of pre-Roman date included a cremation burial of the later middle Iron Age. Activity on a significant scale began in the later 1st century AD and comprised rectilinear and curvilinear enclosures and ditched boundaries. The most intensive phase of activity was in the middle Roman period. A trackway cut through some of the earlier enclosures and was associated with a complex scheme of further ditched enclosures which evolved through the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Low lying ground beyond these features was divided by field boundaries. In the late Roman period, further modifications were made to the enclosure complexes and to an isolated enclosure in use at the south-west margin of the site. The sequence of development can be correlated closely with those at the adjacent sites of Coln Gravel, Thornhill Farm and Claydon Pike. There was no significant post-Roman activity.

## Résumé

Horcott Quarry, à Fairford, et Arkell's Land, à Kempsford, se trouvent à 4km de distance dans la vallée haute de la Tamise, à l'est du Gloucestershire, respectivement sur la Deuxième et Première terrasse de gravier. Les fouilles à Horcott Quarry ont révélé une séquence discontinue d'activité hu-maine s'étendant du début du mésolithique à la période anglo-saxonne. Les indices pour l'âge du fer et les époques romaine et anglo-saxonne ont été particulièrement riches et indiquent à la fois la présence d'un établissement rural et, pour les périodes romaine et anglo-saxonne, d'une activité funéraire. Les traces d'une activité pour début du mésolithique, le néolithique tardif, la période campaniforme, l'âge du bronze moyen et l'âge du fer moyen ont été moins dense.

Le premier âge du fer comprend un grand nombre de trous de poteau, parmi lesquels ont été identifiés des maisons rondes, et un grand nombre de structure à quatre poteaux - le plus grand nombre jamais découvert sur un site dans la vallée supérieure de la Tamise. Ce dense assemblage de trous de poteau s'est probablement formé au fur et à mesure que l'établissement rural s'est déplacé sur de courtes distances. Trois de ces structures à quatre poteaux peuvent avoir brûlé, et des graines carbonisées retrouvées dans leurs trous de poteau soutiennent l'interprétation traditionnelle que ces structures furent utilisées comme greniers. Ce grand nombre de structure suggère donc une focalisation exceptionnelle sur le stockage de céréales, et soulève des questions sur l'interprétation de la nature de l'économie agricole à Horcott et sur d'autres sites de la même période dans la vallée haute de la Tamise, présentant peu, ou pas, de structures à quatre poteaux.

L'activité romaine s'étend du 2ème siècle à la fin du 4ème siècle, bien qu'il y a peu d'évidences au-delà 350 ap. J.-C. Un système de fossés et de conduits a été associé à des trous d'eau, des fours de séchage des cultures, de nombreux puits et un petit bâtiment aux fondations en pierre. Le petit établissement rural avait une population limitée, voire

même transitoire, focalisée sur une activité agropastorale. Un petit groupe de sépultures datant de 100-250 ap. J.-C se situe au sein de l'enceinte du bâtiment, tandis qu'un plus grand cimetière, datant de 250-300 ap. J.-C se trouve dans une grande enceinte à l'est. Une sépulture isolée est située au nord entre, physiquement et chronologiquement, le cimetière romain et un groupe de sépulture de la haute période anglo-saxonne.

La période anglo-saxonne est marquée par la présence d'un hall en bois, deux fours de séchage des cultures, quelques 33 fonds de cabane (grubenhäuser) et plusieurs sépultures appartenant à deux phases. Les sépultures antérieures, datées de 400-550 ap. J.-C, comprenaient un petit groupe composé de femmes et d'enfants tandis que trois sépultures d'adolescent datent de 600-700 ap. J.-C. Une série de datation au radiocarbone fournit des détails et clarifie la relation chronologique entre les sépultures romaines et anglo-saxonnes.

Arkell's Land se trouve dans une zone au complexe cours d'eau. Les quelques indices des périodes pré-romaines comprennent une crémation de l'âge du fer moyen tardif. Une activité plus significative a commencé à la fin du 1er siècle ap. J.-C, marqué par des enceintes rectilignes et curvilignes ainsi que des fossés de limitations. La phase d'activité la plus intense appartient à la période romaine moyenne. Une piste coupait à travers certaines enceintes des précédentes périodes et était associée à un groupe complexe d'enclos fermés, évoluant à travers le 2ème et 3ème siècle. Le terrain au-delà de ces faits archéologiques était divisé par des fossés. Pendant la période romaine tardive, des modifications ont été apportées au groupe d'enclos fermés et à une enceinte isolée située au sud-ouest du site. La séquence de développement peut être étroitement corrélée avec certains sites adjacents comme Coln Gravel, Thornhill Farm et Claydon Pike. Il n'y avait pas de traces d'activité de post-romaine significative.

# Zusammenfassung

Horcott Quarry, Fairford, und Arkell's Land, Kempford, liegen ungefähr 4km von einander entfernt im oberen Themsetal im östlichen Gloucestershire, auf der Zweiten beziehungsweise der Ersten Schotter Terrasse. Ausgrabungen in Horcott Quarry ergaben eine diskontinuierliche Abfolge von Siedlungsaktivitäten die vom frühen Mesolithikum bis zur sächsischen Zeit reichten. Besonders umfangreich waren die Befunde aus der frühen Eisenzeit, sowie aus der sächsischen und der römischen Periode, mit Belegen für sowohl Siedlungsaktivität, als auch - in der römischen und sächsischen Periode – für Bestattungstätigkeit. Weniger umfangreich waren die Nachweise für Aktivitäten aus dem frühen Mesolithikum, dem späten Neolithikum, der Glockenbecherzeit (Beaker Period), der mittleren Bronzezeit und der mittleren Eisenzeit.

Die früheisenzeitlichen Befunde umfassten eine dichte Anordnung von Pfostenlöchern, aus der die Grundrisse mehrerer Rundhäuser und einer erheblichen Anzahl von Vierpfostenbauten identifiziert werden konnten – es handelte sich dabei um die bisher höchste Zahl von Vierpfostenbauten von einer Fundstelle des oberen Themsetales. Die dichte Anordnung von Pfostenlöchern hat sich vermutlich über einen längeren Zeitraum herausgebildet, während dem sich der Siedlungsmittelpunkt über kürzere Distanzen verlagerte. Drei der Vierpfostenstrukturen waren möglicherweise abgebrannt. Verkohlte Getreidekörner in den betreffenden Pfostenlöchern scheinen die traditionelle Deutung dieser Strukturen als Getreidespeicher zu bestätigen. Die grosse Anzahl an Vierpfostenbauten legt den Schluss auf einen aussergewöhnlichen Schwerpunkt auf die Getreidespeicherung nahe, und wirft verschiedene Fragen zur Interpretation der Landwirtschaft in Horcott und anderen Siedlungen ähnlicher Zeitstellung im oberen Themsetal auf, in denen derartig Mengen von Vierpfostenbauten fehlen.

Die römerzeitliche Aktivitätsphase reichte vom Beginn des zweiten Jahrhunderts bis zum Ende des vierten Jahrhunderts, wobei allerdings die Nachweise für Aktivitäten nach 350 n. Chr. bescheiden ausgefielen. Ein System von Grabeneinfassungen (enclosures) und Viehtriebwegen war mit Wasserlöchern, Öfen zum Darren der Ernte, zahlreichen Gruben sowie einem kleinen Gebäude mit Steinfundamenten verbunden. Die bescheidene Siedlung dürfte eine begrenzte und vielleicht sogar nur zeitweilig

anwesende Bevölkerung aufgewiesen haben, deren wirtschaftliches Hauptaugenmerk der Weidewirtschaft galt. Eine kleine Gräbergruppe, die in den Zeitraum von 100 bis 250 n. Chr. datiert, lag innerhalb der Einfassung mit dem Steingebäude, während ein grösserer Bestattungsplatz, der in die Zeit von 250 bis 350 n. Chr. datiert, in einer grösseren, weiter östlich gelegenen Grabeneinfassung auftrat. Eine weitere isolierte Bestattung lag sowohl räumlich als auch chronologisch zwischen dem römischen Bestattungsplatz und einer nach Norden zu gelegenen Gruppe von frühsächsischen Gräbern.

Die Siedlungstätigkeit in der angelsächsischen Periode war durch eine aus Holz errichtete Halle, zwei Darröfen, mindesten 33 Grubenhäuser sowie durch in zwei Phasen erfolgte Bestattungen belegt. Die frühen Bestattungen datieren zwischen 400 und 550 n. Chr. und bestanden aus einer kleinen Gruppe von Frauen- und Kindergräbern, während drei subadulte Bestattungen zwischen 600 und 700 n. Chr. datierten. Eine Serie von Radio-Karbon-Datierungen lieferte zusätzliche Details zur Chronologie der römischen und sächsischen Bestattungen und klärte die chronologische Beziehung zwischen ihnen.

Arkell's Land liegt in einem Gebiet mit komplexen Mustern von Paläo-Flussverläufen. Die wenigen vorrömischen Befunde und Funde umfassten eine Brandbestattung aus der späten mittleren Eisenzeit. Die Siedlungstätigkeit begann in grösserem Umfang erst im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr. und umfasste rechteckige und gekrümmte Einfassungen und Begrenzungsgräben. Die Phase der höchsten Siedlungsintensität fiel in die mittlere römische Periode. Ein unbefestigter Weg, der einige der frühesten Einfassungen schnitt, stand mit einem Komplex von weiteren Grabeneinfassungen in Verbindung, der sich durch das 2. und 3. Jh. hindurch immer weiter entwickelte. Das tiefer liegende Gelände, das sich jenseits dieser Befunde erstreckte, war durch Feldbegrenzungen unterteilt. In spätrömischer Zeit erfolgten weitere Modifizierungen an dem Einfassungskomplex und an einer isolierten noch in Gebrauch befindlichen Einfassung am südwestlichen Rand des Gebietes. Der Ablauf der Siedlungsentwicklung lässt sich auf engste mit dem Besiedlungsverlauf in den benachbarten Siedlungsstellen von Coln Gravel, Thornhill Farm und Claydon Pike korrelieren. Für die nachrömische Zeit konnten keine nennenswerten Aktivitäten festgestellt werden.

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