

# Gill Mill

## Later prehistoric landscape and a Roman nucleated settlement in the lower Windrush Valley at Gill Mill, near Witney, Oxfordshire

by Paul Booth and Andrew Simmonds

with contributions by

*Enid Allison, Sheila Boardman, Ceridwen Boston, Angela Boyle, Sharon Clough, Michael Donnelly, Matthew Fittock, Mark Gibson, Damian M Goodburn, Peter Hacking, Martin Henig, Kira Hopkin, Kath Hunter, Lynne Keys, George Lambrick, Louise Loe, Julia Meen, J M Mills, Quita Mould, Rebecca Nicholson, Cynthia Poole, Alice Rose, Mairead Rutherford, Ian R Scott, Ruth Shaffrey, Elizabeth Stafford, Lena Strid, R S O Tomlin, Jeff Wallis, Philippa Walton and Helen Webb*

and illustrations by

*Lesley Collett, Lucy Gane, Victoria Hosegood, Hannah Kennedy, Anne Kilgour, Sophie Lamb, Charles Rousseaux and Magdalena Wachnik*

## Part 1

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### **Cover images**

#### ***Part 1***

*Front:* Main late Roman settlement showing roadside enclosures, and a (headless) limestone female deity (SF 5810) from late Roman enclosure ditch group 9834. *Back:* Glass intaglio (SF 23128) showing Jupiter with sceptre in his right hand, thunderbolts in his left and eagle at his feet, from late Roman layer 23509.

#### ***Part 2***

*Front:* Main late Roman settlement showing roadside enclosures and modelled and painted head from a unique flagon or jug in Oxford colour-coated ware from late Roman enclosure ditch group 8221. *Back:* A lunate pendant of jet, perhaps an item of priestly regalia (SF 23310), from late Roman roadside ditch group 24173

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# Foreword

Minerals can only be worked where they are found and the terrace gravels along the valley of the River Windrush south of Witney to the Thames have been extensively worked for sand and gravel since the second world war. The impact of this long history of mineral extraction on the landscape of the Lower Windrush Valley has been to transform it from one of predominantly riverside pasture to an extensive mosaic of open water, though more recently, the schemes for restoration and afteruse incorporate major gains for public access and for biodiversity through habitat creation.

There is a continuing need for a steady and adequate supply of construction aggregates to maintain our built environment and support economic growth in Oxfordshire and this means that the Windrush valley continues to be an important source of sand and gravel. Gill Mill is the flagship quarry of Smith and Sons (Bletchington) Ltd and has been operating since 1989. A new planning permission granted in 2015 now gives the quarry planned reserves of sand and gravel that will last beyond 2035.

Mineral extraction has also provided a major insight into the historic communities that once lived on these fertile, free draining river terraces along the Windrush valley. Quarrying destroys archaeological remains but this irreversible loss is recognised and carefully managed through the planning process. Rigorous planning conditions require Smiths to work with the County Archaeologist to agree a comprehensive scheme of excavation and recording with assessment, analysis and dissemination of the results. The developer is responsible for funding this scheme and for over 25 years Smiths has worked with Oxford Archaeology as their chosen archaeological contractor.

This arrangement has allowed Smiths to win and work the important sand and gravel reserves along the valley and at the same time has provided a unique opportunity to reach back through time to understand more about the humans that inhabited this stretch of the River Windrush.

It was recognised early in the development of Gill Mill that archaeological remains would be found but not the extent, density and significance that that was subsequently uncovered. The work has been planned and undertaken by Oxford Archaeology to the highest standards and has yielded a wealth of artefacts and in turn knowledge of the Iron Age and Roman people that lived, worked and died in this valley two thousand years ago.

It is testament to the close working relationship that developed over the years between Smiths and Oxford Archaeology that the fieldwork kept ahead of the gravel extraction and rarely did it frustrate or interrupt the supply of sand and gravel to our customers. But teams of dedicated and skilled archaeologists working continuously on site for weeks at a time come at a price and over the years of archaeological investigation at Gill Mill the costs have been very significant. This has been borne by Smiths but also for the period between 2001-2014 shared with the landowner, the Harcourt Estate. Both Smiths and the Harcourt Estate are proud to have made possible such a significant contribution to the knowledge and further understanding of the archaeology of the Lower Windrush Valley. We hope that this publication is appreciated by professionals and enthusiasts alike and demonstrates the important contribution that the minerals industry can make to the further understanding of our past.

Martin Layer  
*Planning and Estates Manager, Smiths, Bletchington*



## Summary

Excavations at Gill Mill, just south of Witney, Oxfordshire, were undertaken by Oxford Archaeology from 1988-2014 in advance of gravel quarrying on the floodplain of the River Windrush. A total area of *c* 129ha was examined, of which about 75ha were subject to watching brief and strip, map and sample excavations.

Early prehistoric activity was at a very low level, the most notable element being a localised scatter of Mesolithic flintwork at the north-west end of the quarry. The first significant occupation of the area comprised scattered floodplain settlements of middle Iron Age date. At the south-east end of the quarry the largest of these foci, with a sequence from open to partly enclosed settlement, continued in occupation into the early/mid 3rd century AD. Its plan was radically transformed by the early Flavian period and subsequent development involved replacement of settlement activity with a series of stock enclosures and trackways, ultimately accessed through a complex arrangement of gateways.

North of this area a nucleated site of *c* 10ha developed de novo from the early 2nd century based around two minor roads: Road 1 running across the valley from north-east to south-west, and Road 2 running south-eastwards down the valley from a junction with Road 1 in the vicinity of the current Gill Mill House, which probably overlies the focal area of the settlement. Immediately west of the junction was a large open area surrounded by irregular enclosures, while further irregular enclosures lay north of Road 2 to the east. South of Road 2 an unusual inhumation burial under an earth mound lay within an unenclosed area.

By the mid 2nd century occupation in peripheral areas of the quarry (except for the long-lived south-eastern one) had come to an end. In the main settlement area a row of regular enclosures was laid out along Road 2, extending for 550m from a point just east of the mound burial. The more easterly of these enclosures, probably paddocks for animals, may have been out of use in the later Roman period, but elsewhere mid 3rd to mid-late 4th century activity

was intensive, and occupation extended further south along Road 1 than previously, while continuing in the area around the probable junction of Roads 1 and 2. Within and around the redefined enclosures the most prominent features were ditches and a very large number of pits, some with substantial finds assemblages. Structural evidence was scarce. Up to five simple rectangular stone-footed buildings were present (two seen only in evaluation trenches in an area not examined further) and other building traces were poorly preserved, although finds evidence suggests the existence of a shrine in the unexcavated area of Gill Mill House. Small groups of cremation and inhumation burials were mostly scattered around the margins of the settlement. They included a probable murder victim.

Some finds categories are quite poorly represented, but the pottery assemblage is substantial, dominated by products of local industries although with occasional exotica. Significant individual finds include part of a wooden cart wheel, a fibre basket and religious stonework – a genius altar, a goddess figure and a small plain altar. Venus figurine fragments and perhaps two dodecahedra are further additions to the repertoire of religious material.

Environmental evidence indicates that the setting of the site was dominated by damp pasture and the large animal bone assemblage was dominated by cattle. The site is interpreted as concerned principally with cattle management and marketing, the evidence for other economic functions being at a low level consistent with support of the primary pastoral role. Some aspects of site morphology, including the layout of a new enclosure north of the main settlement in the later Roman period, are specifically related to stock-management activities. It is argued that the site operated as a component of a larger estate structure and that, unusually for the region, occupation effectively ceased by about AD 370, before the end of the Roman period. The site then remained unoccupied until the establishment of the medieval mill, known only from documentary references.

## Résumé

Les fouilles de Gill Mill, au sud de Witney (Oxfordshire) ont été entreprises par Oxford Archaeology entre 1988 et 2014 précédant l'extraction de gravier dans le bassin fluvial de la rivière Windrush. Au total, environ 129ha ont été étudiés, parmi lesquels 75ha ont été le sujet de diagnostics et de fouilles archéologiques.

L'activité préhistorique était faible ; l'élément le plus notable est un assemblage de silex taillé de la période Mésolithique, localisé à la limite nord-ouest de la carrière. La première occupation d'importance de la région comprenait un éparpillement d'établissements de plaine fluviale de l'Age du Fer moyen. Situé à la limite sud-est de la carrière, le plus large de ces *foci*, allant de l'établissement ouvert à semi-fermé, à une séquence d'occupation allant jusqu'à la première moitié du 3<sup>ème</sup> siècle après J-C. Son plan a été radicalement transformé pendant la période flavienne et les développements suivant impliquèrent un remplacement de l'activité de l'établissement par une série d'enclos à bétail et de pistes, le tout accessible via un arrangement complexe de passages.

Au nord de cette zone, un site nucléé d'environ 10ha s'est développé *ab novo* à partir du 2<sup>ème</sup> siècle depuis deux routes mineures : la première (Road 1) traversant la vallée du nord-est au sud-ouest, et la seconde (Road 2) se dirigeant au sud-est de la vallée à partir d'une jonction avec la première route, situé dans la vicin角度 de l'actuelle Gill Mill House, recouvrant probablement le point central de l'établissement. Immédiatement à l'ouest de cette jonction se trouvait un large espace ouvert entouré par des enclos irréguliers, tandis que d'autres enclos se situaient au nord de la deuxième route à l'est. Au sud de la deuxième route se trouvait une intéressante inhumation, placée sous un tumulus au sein d'un enclos ouvert.

L'occupation dans les zones périphériques de la carrière arrivèrent à terme au milieu du 2<sup>ème</sup> siècle, à l'exception de l'agglomération au sud-est, occupée continuellement. Dans la principale aire d'occupation, une série d'enclos régulier a été placée le long de la deuxième route, s'étendant sur 550m à partir de l'est du tumulus. Le plus occidental de ces enclos, probablement un enclos à bétail, à probablement était mis hors d'usage pendant la période Romaine

tardive ; ailleurs, l'activité fut intensive entre le milieu du 3<sup>ème</sup> siècle et la fin du 4<sup>ème</sup> siècle, et l'occupation s'étendait plus au sud que précédemment le long de la première route, tout en continuant autour de la probable jonction des deux routes. Dans et autour des ces enclos redéfini, les faits archéologiques les plus importants étaient des fossés et un très grand nombre de fosses, certaines comprenant un considérable assemblage de mobilier. Les indices pour les structures étaient rares. Cinq fondations en pierre de simples bâtiments rectangulaire étaient présentes (deux ont seulement été observées durant un diagnostic dans une zone qui n'a pas subi d'étude plus approfondie) ; d'autres traces de structures ont été très mal conservés. Le mobilier indique la présence d'un sanctuaire dans une zone non-fouillée de Gill Mill House. Des petits groupes de crémation et d'inhumation étaient essentiellement éparpillés en marge de l'occupation. Elles incluent une victime d'un possible crime.

Certaines catégories de mobilier sont mal représentées, mais l'assemblage de céramique est riche, dominé par des productions locales, et occasionnellement exotiques. Certains objets significatifs incluent une roue de chariot en bois, un panier tressé et des sculptures votives : un autel pour génie, une représentation de déesse et un simple autel. Des fragments d'une figurine de Vénus et deux dodécaèdres viennent s'ajouter au possible répertoire religieux.

Les évidences environnementales indiquent que le site de l'occupation était dominé par des prairies humides et l'assemblage zoo-archéologique par des bovinés. Le site est interprété comme principalement concerné par la gestion et la commercialisation du bétail ; les indices pour d'autres fonctions étant faibles, compatible avec le rôle pastoral primaire. Certains aspects de la morphologie du site, y compris le plan d'un nouvel enclos au nord de l'occupation principale durant la période Romaine tardive, sont spécifiquement liés à la gestion des stocks. Il est soutenu que le site faisait parti d'un ensemble étatique plus vaste et que, de façon inhabituelle pour la région, l'activité cessa autour de 370, avant la fin de la période Romaine. Le site reste inoccupé jusqu'à l'établissement du moulin médiéval, seulement connu des archives.

# Zusammenfassung

Die Ausgrabungen in Gill Mill, unmittelbar südlich von Witney in Oxfordshire, wurden zwischen 1988 und 2014 von Oxford Archaeology im Vorgriff auf den geplanten Kiesabbau in der Talau des Flusses Windrush durchgeführt. Insgesamt wurde eine Fläche von ca. 129 ha untersucht, von der ungefähr 75 ha der Gegenstand von archäologischen Überwachungen (*watching briefs*) und Flächengrabungen waren.

Frühe prähistorische Aktivitäten lagen auf niedrigem Niveau. Der bemerkenswerteste Befund war ein örtlicher Fundplatz mit bearbeitetem Flint aus dem Mesolithikum am nordwestlichen Ende des Abbaus. Die erste bedeutende Besiedlung des Gebietes umfasste verstreute Talauensiedlungen aus der mittleren Eisenzeit. Der größte dieser Siedlungskerne am südöstlichen Ende des Abbaus, der sich von einer offenen zu einer teilweise eingefriedeten (*enclosed*) Siedlung entwickelt hatte, blieb bis in das frühe oder mittlere 3. Jahrhundert AD bewohnt. Mit dem Anbruch der frühen Flavischen Zeit hatte der Siedlungsgrundris eine radikale Umgestaltung erfahren. In der weiteren Entwicklung wurden besiedelte Bereiche durch Reihen von Viehgehegen (*cattle enclosures*) und Wege ersetzt, die letztendlich über eine komplexe Anordnung von Gattern zugänglich waren.

Nördlich desselben Bereichs entwickelte sich ab dem frühen 2. Jahrhundert im Bereich zweier untergeordneter Verbindungsstrassen *de novo* ein Siedlungskern. Strasse 1 verlief vom Nordosten nach Südwesten durch das Tal, während Strasse 2 sich in südöstlicher Richtung erstreckte, ausgehend von einer vermuteten Anschlussstelle mit der Strasse 1 in der Nähe des heutigen Anwesens „*Gill Mill House*“, das wahrscheinlich über dem Zentrum der Siedlung steht. Unmittelbar westlich des vermuteten Strassenanschlusses befand sich ein ausgedehntes, offenes, von unregelmäßigen Einhegungen umgebenes Areal. Weitere unregelmäßige Einhegungen lagen nördlich der Strasse 2 nach Osten hin. Südlich der Strasse 2 wurde innerhalb eines eingehegten Bereiches unter einem Erdhügel eine ungewöhnliche Körperbestattung angetroffen.

In den peripheren Bereichen des Abbaugebietes - nicht jedoch in dem langlebigen südöstlichen Bereich - kam die Besiedlung um die Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts zum Erliegen. Im Hauptsiedlungsbereich wurden eine Reihe von regelmäßigen Grabeneinfassungen entlang der Strasse 2 angelegt, die sich von unmittelbar östlich des Grabhügels über eine Strecke von 550 m hin ausdehnten. Der weiter östlich gelegene Teil dieser Einfriedungen -

vermutlich Viehweiden - war möglicherweise bereits im 2. Jahrhundert AD aus der Nutzung genommen worden. In allen anderen Bereichen jedoch herrschte im mittleren 3. und frühen 4. Jahrhundert intensive Siedlungstätigkeit, mit einer weiter als zuvor entlang der Strasse nach Süden reichenden Siedlungsausdehnung. Gleichzeitig setzte sich die Siedlungsaktivität im Bereich des Zusammenschlusses der Strassen 1 und 2 ungeschmälert fort. Die herausragendsten Befunde im Umfeld und innerhalb der neuangelegten Grabeneinfassungen (*enclosures*) waren Gräben und eine sehr große Anzahl von Gruben, einige davon mit umfangreichem Fundaufkommen. Bauliche Befunde waren selten. Bis zu fünf einfache rechteckige Gebäude mit Steinfundamenten waren vorhanden (zwei von ihnen waren lediglich in Suchschnitten in einem nicht weiter untersuchten Bereich beobachtet worden). Anderweitige bauliche Überreste waren schlecht erhalten, das Fundbild jedoch legte immerhin das Vorhandensein eines Schreines in einem nicht ausgegrabenen Bereich von Gill Mill House nahe. Kleine Gruppen von Körper- und Brandbestattungen traten zumeist verstreut an den Rändern der Siedlung auf. Unter ihnen befanden sich die Überreste eines möglichen Mordopfers.

Einige Fundkategorien waren nur schwach vertreten, die Keramikfunde jedoch waren äußerst umfangreich. Unter ihnen herrschten Produkten aus lokaler Herstellung vor, bei gelegentlichem Vorkommen von exotischer Keramik. Wichtige einzelne Fundstücke schlossen einen Teil eines hölzernen Wagenrads und einen Pflanzenfaserkorb sowie religiöse Steinmetzarbeiten - einen Genius Altar, die Figur einer Göttin und einen kleinen schlichten Altar - ein. Fragmente von Venusfigurchen und von möglicherweise zwei *dodecahedra* stellten weitere Ergänzungen zum Repertoire der religiösen materiellen Überreste dar. Umweltgeschichtliche Befunde zeigten an, dass das naturräumliche Umfeld des Untersuchungsgebietes von feuchten Weideflächen geprägt war, während in der Fundgruppe der großen Tierknochen das Rind vorherrschte. Die Untersuchungsergebnisse werden dahingehend gedeutet, dass die Siedlung im wesentlichen mit der Aufzucht und Vermarktung von Rindern befasst war. Ergebnisse die auf andere wirtschaftliche Funktionen hinweisen, sind von geringfügiger Natur und stehen in Einklang mit einer eher ergänzenden Rolle im Rahmen der vorherrschenden Weidewirtschaft. Einige Aspekte der Siedlungsform, einschließlich des Grundrisses einer

neuen Einfriedung nördlich der Hauptsiedlung in der späteren Römischen Periode, waren eindeutig auf Aktivitäten in der Viehhaltung zugeschnitten. Die hier vertretene Ansicht ist die, dass das Untersuchungsgebiet Teil eines größeren Wirtschaftsbetriebs war, und dass die Besiedlung in

einer für die Region sonst untypischen Entwicklung noch vor dem eigentlichen Ende der Römische Periode um etwa 370 AD zum Erliegen kam. Bis zum Bau der nur aus schriftlichen Quellen bekannten mittelalterlichen Mühle blieb das Gebiet dann unbesiedelt.

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