

# Footprints from the Past

## The south-eastern extramural settlement of Roman Alchester and rural occupation in its hinterland: the archaeology of East West Rail Phase 1

by Andrew Simmonds and Steve Lawrence

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Front cover: Footprint of a young child or toddler on a roof tile from Building 7640 at Langford Lane East,  
within the south-eastern extramural settlement of Alchester

Back cover: Middle Iron Age crucible from South of Oddington Crossing

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# Summary

This volume presents the results of archaeological investigations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology in relation to a programme of improvements to the railway between Bicester and Oxford. The investigations were commissioned by Chiltern Railway Company Ltd (Chiltern Railways), who, assisted by Network Rail, undertook the East-West Rail Phase 1 Bicester to Oxford Improvements.

Following desk-based assessment and field evaluation, eight areas were selected for archaeological mitigation. The largest and most complex part of the project was located at Langford Lane, where a road diversion and overbridge were to be constructed around the southern edge of the scheduled monument of Alchester Roman town to replace the existing road, which hitherto extended across the north-eastern part of the scheduled area. Archaeological mitigation in this area comprised a detailed excavation of the footprint of two cable trenches that extended into the scheduled monument and evaluation of the alignment of the new road, followed by detailed excavation of two areas (Langford Lane East and Langford Lane South) and a watching brief during construction of part of the road alignment within an area of the scheduled monument.

Evidence for activity during the early part of the prehistoric period was scarce, reflecting the limited archaeologically detectable impact of populations of this date, although a notable find was a broken core tool that may date to the Palaeolithic or Mesolithic periods. Sedentary occupation may have begun during the middle Iron Age, and four excavations uncovered parts of settlements of this period. These may have included both open and enclosed settlements, and three were situated in close proximity to cropmark evidence for possibly contemporary ditched enclosures. An enclosure ditch at South of Oddington Crossing contained a dump of debris from copper and iron working that included fragments from at least two crucibles.

The investigations at Langford Lane uncovered parts of two successive Roman roads to Dorchester-on-Thames, *c* 25km south of Alchester. The earlier road by-passed the eastern side of Otmoor and was replaced by a more direct route across the middle of the moor at the end of the 1st century. Settlement beside the earlier road, excavated at Langford Lane East, may have been a successor to a pre-Roman settlement and appears from artefactual evidence to have been of relatively high status during the initial, military phase, although no contemporary

structural evidence was found. Stone-founded buildings were constructed during the late 1st-early 2nd century, including a probable strip building and two single-celled structures of uncertain function that may represent a gatehouse or a pair of shrines. The buildings were demolished by *c* AD 200. There was little evidence for industrial activity and it is possible that the extramural settlement was partly rural in character, engaged in farming the surrounding land. An insight into the diverse lives of the inhabitants is provided by finds that include part of a priestly headdress, two pairs of slave shackles and a group of roof tiles bearing the footprints of a young child. The landscape around the town appears to have been intensively managed for agricultural production, being divided into a pattern of rectilinear fields or pastures that were bounded by drainage ditches, some of which were designed to channel the natural watercourses that crossed the area.

At Langford Lane South, features beside the later road may have been part of either a second extramural area that extended alongside the road that extended across Otmoor to Dorchester or a discrete farming establishment. Occupation here began later than at Langford Lane East but likewise ended around the start of the 3rd century, and comprised successive arrangements of enclosures that were most likely used for livestock management. No buildings were identified but two large pits contained domestic refuse and building material.

Parts of three contemporary rural settlements of differing forms were excavated at South of Merton, Holts Farm Crossing and North of Oxford Parkway Station. The character of the site at South of Merton was difficult to ascertain, although an alignment of substantial postholes may be part of a large building on the frontage of the road from Alchester to Dorchester-on-Thames. The farmstead at Holts Farm Crossing appears to have always been of low status but was the most long-lived settlement investigated, with continuous occupation that extended from the middle Iron Age to the middle-late Roman period. The area excavated at North of Oxford Parkway Station formed part of an extensive agricultural landscape that had been recorded from cropmark evidence; a group of rectilinear enclosures, possibly animal pens, was succeeded by an arrangement of fields focused on a trackway associated with a settlement 400-500m to the south-west. None of the rural settlements appear to have continued long into the 3rd century.



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