Great Western Park, Didcot, Oxfordshire

Phase 1 excavations, 2010–2012

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Front cover:
Late Roman corndryer 16655, in the Southern Excavation Area, under excavation, looking north towards Didcot Power Station

Back cover:
1: Late Mesolithic incised plaque from flint scatter 3002
2: The complete early Neolithic bowl, found in inverted, in pit 1154
3: Conygar barbed and tanged arrowhead from the gleyed deposit (34163) in the early Bronze Age paved hollow (34166)
4: Early-middle Iron Age roundhouse 10459
5: Cattle and horse skulls and other animal bone in the base (9090) of early-middle Iron Age pit 9087, Pit Group IV
6: Late Roman well 35682

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Summary

This monograph presents the results of the first phase of excavations carried out prior to the construction of the Great Western Park housing development to the west of Didcot. The excavations produced a number of significant discoveries ranging in date from the early Mesolithic to the medieval period.

The earliest significant evidence consists of an early Mesolithic flint scatter, dated to *c* 8300–8000 cal BC, which was found within a hollow, and associated with a stone plaque decorated with an incised motif.

Several early Neolithic pits, which can be divided into two phases, represent the next major episodes of activity. The earliest phase, dating *c* 3800–3650 cal BC, was represented by an isolated pit cut into a tree-throw hole which contained a complete, inverted ceramic bowl, and by a second isolated pit which contained a large assemblage of Carinated Bowl pottery and other finds. The later phase, dating *c* 3650–3500 cal BC, was represented by a group of four pits and another isolated pit, all of which contained Plain Bowl pottery, worked flint, and charred grain and hazelnut shells.

Very little evidence for activity in later phases of the Neolithic was found, but activity resumed in the Beaker period and early Bronze Age when a shallow hollow was cut between 1900 and 1600 cal BC. The hollow had a stone surface which was associated with Beaker pottery and a striking assemblage of worked flint, including three barbed and tanged arrowheads. An unusual form of ring ditch surrounding a sunken central area was also found but remains undated.

Activity in the middle Bronze Age is represented by a small number of cremation burials dating from 1450 to 1250 cal BC.

A small settlement consisting of three widely spaced post-built roundhouses and a rectangular six-post structure (the postholes of which were cut into the upper fills of the early Bronze Age hollow) was associated with pottery with Deverel-Rimbury attributes but has been dated to *c* 1100 to 1000 cal BC. It was set within a series of roughly rectangular ditched enclosures which formed part of a wider field system.

An extensive early and middle Iron Age settlement, covering an area nearly 500m by 300m, was perhaps the most significant discovery. It comprised as many as 23 post-built roundhouses, 11 penannular or semicircular gullies that may have surrounded further roundhouses, around 1000 pits, 35 four-post structures, a post-built rectangular structure, a series of ditched boundaries, and a large circular enclosure. Many of the pits lay in groups and rows, the alignment of which was followed by a series of ditches. A number of deposits of articulated and disarticulated human and animal remains as well as other exceptional deposits were recovered from the pits. Although roughly two-thirds of the pottery associated with this settlement is of early Iron Age type, radiocarbon dates suggest that it post-dated 400 cal BC and was occupied up to *c* 100 cal BC.

The Iron Age settlement was succeeded by an extensive series of Roman enclosures and trackways which spread over most of the excavated area. These features included a southern complex consisting of enclosures, pens and trackways associated with corndryers and wells to the south of a late Roman villa building. A second, eastern complex consisted of a north-south aligned trackway with a series of enclosures laid out to the east. The villa building was largely preserved *in situ*, although limited excavation suggests that it dates from the middle of the 3rd century. A number of Roman cremation and inhumation burials were also discovered.

Little evidence of later activity was found, although one sunken-featured building probably dating from the 5th to 6th centuries AD contained a set of loomweights and a number of apparently curated late Roman objects. Extensive evidence of furrows related to strip fields that formed part of Didcot's open field system was also found.

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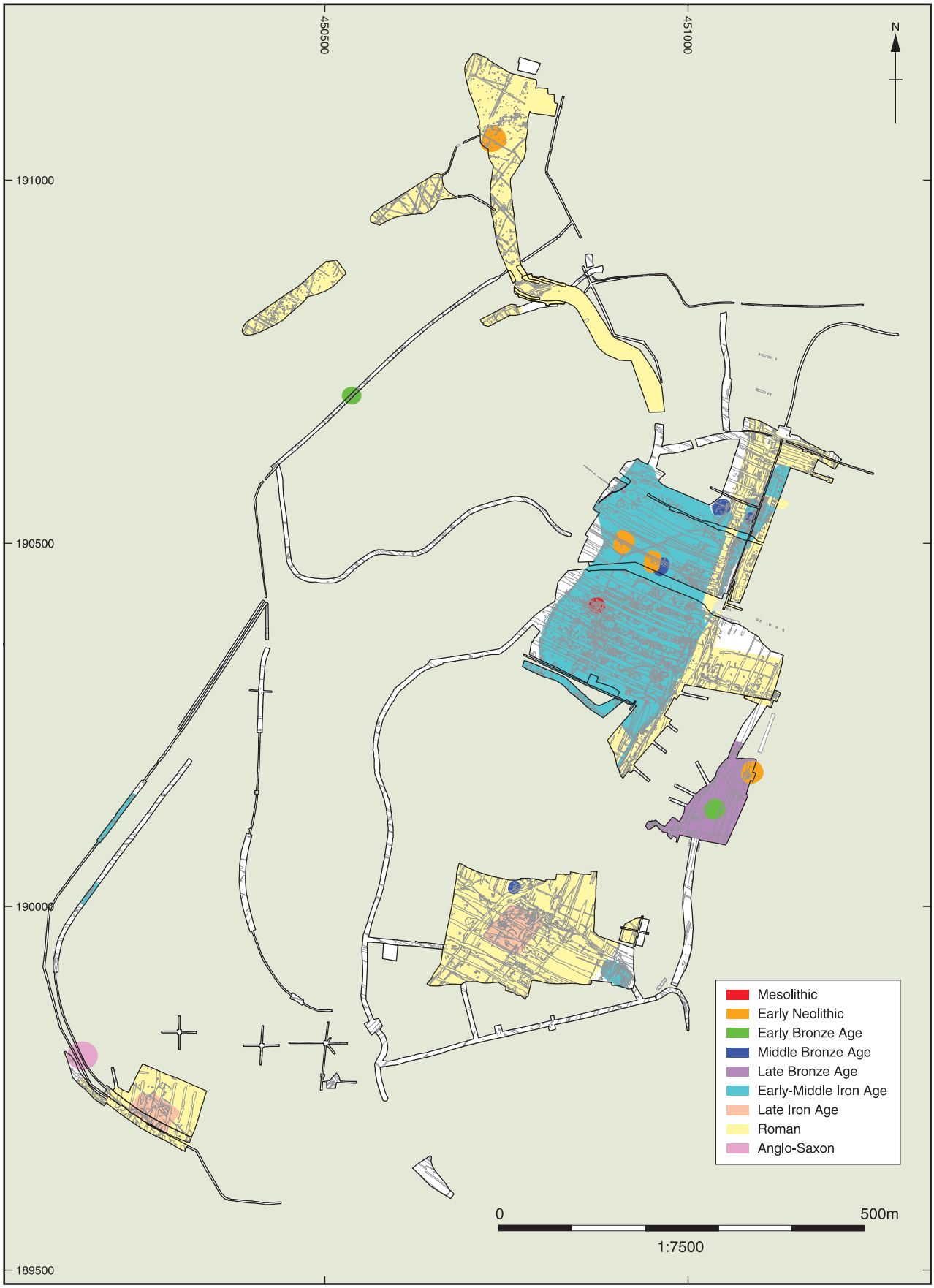

Fig. 1.1 Overall plan of the site showing the main areas of activity by period