

Road to the Manor

Excavations at Graven Hill, Oxfordshire, 2015–2016

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Front cover: Anglo-Saxon amber beads from finds group 1814 in Area C

Back cover: Areal view of the medieval masonry buildings in Area D

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Summary

Excavations between 2015 and 2016 at Graven Hill, a wooded hilltop *c* 2km south of the historic core of the modern town of Bicester, revealed evidence for a wide range of activity dating between early prehistory and the 20th century. Following trial-trench evaluation in 2013, five areas were subject to strip, map and sample excavation and watching briefs carried out at a number of smaller areas.

Earlier prehistory was represented by ephemeral remains including worked flint from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods and an unurned cremation burial dated by radiocarbon to the middle Bronze Age. The earliest evidence of more permanent occupation was a middle Iron Age settlement on the lower slope of Graven Hill. No buildings were recognised, but a boundary ditch was flanked by a pair of ditched enclosures, within which were pits and waterholes. The features produced sizable pottery and animal bone assemblages and a small number of finds including metalwork, glass, worked stone and fired clay. A cremation burial was also dated to this period in another excavation area, to the north-west of the settlement.

Late Iron Age activity was identified in two areas, most significantly in one area where an enclosed settlement with two roundhouses and other associated features was found. This settlement may have been occupied into the early Roman period but appears to have been fairly short-lived. Its abandonment may have been a consequence of the arrival of the Roman army at Alchester in the AD 40s, *c* 1.6km to the west of Graven Hill. The major Roman road of Akeman Street was constructed around this time, and sections of the road were identified in evaluation trenches, a watching brief area and one of the SMS areas. The road extended eastward from Alchester and curved around the northern side of Graven Hill before continuing approximately along the line of the modern A41 towards Verulamium (St Albans).

It is uncertain for how long this part of Akeman Street continued to be used into the medieval period, but it seems likely to have decreased in importance with the cessation of meaningful activity at Alchester and the establishment of Bicester to the north from around the 6th century, when the new town replaced Alchester as the primary settlement in the local area. This is signified by the diversion of Akeman Street along the modern A41 northwards to the town, while the road otherwise appears to have survived only as field boundaries to the north of Graven Hill into the 20th century. The only sign of early medieval activity found during the excavations was a find spot of *c* 6th-century dress items

including saucer brooches, a toilet set, glass and amber beads, and a possibly curated Roman finger ring. The context of these finds is uncertain, owing to later plough disturbance, but they probably originated from a disturbed cremation burial or a hoard.

The establishment of Bicester Priory at the southern end of the historic core of the town in the late 12th century seems to have initiated a rejuvenation of activity in the countryside around the town. This is seen most notably with the development of a village to the south-east of Bicester in the manor of Wretchwick (the deserted medieval village is now a scheduled monument) and, around the same time, activity just north of Graven Hill in the form of ditched enclosures that may have been related to livestock farming. From the 13th century, the Bicester hinterland seems to have witnessed an expansion of arable agriculture, evident as extensive ridge and furrow earthworks all around Graven Hill and the village at Wretchwick. A focus of the excavation was a 12th-century pastoral site with a series of stone-founded buildings organised around a central, possibly open-sided courtyard. The reuse of old Roman materials in the construction of the site indicates robbing, perhaps from the ruins of nearby Alchester, suggesting that some buildings there may have remained standing. The farmstead was connected to Wretchwick by a road, signalling the development of an integrated agricultural landscape, and it is possible that the settlement was home to tenants on land who were generating surplus products for sale at the town's market.

A large and well-dated pottery assemblage from the later medieval farmstead indicates that the site was quite swiftly abandoned in the mid-14th century around the same time as the village at Wretchwick, perhaps soon after the devastation of the Black Death. The farmstead buildings were largely robbed, but much of the foundations had survived and the site seems to have been used for some purpose given the evidence for dumping of material over the site, which included residual pottery and later items belonging to the 15th century. While local settlement seems to have reduced, farming continued, signified by post-medieval field boundaries that were retained into the 19th and 20th centuries.

In 1941, the entire landscape around Graven Hill was turned over to the Ministry of Defence and developed into a major Central Ordnance Depot supporting both British and American forces during the Second World War. The site continued to be an important military depot following the war until eventually being sold off for development into

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Graven Hill Village, which prompted the current archaeological project. Although continuing to be an MoD depot, the site underwent changes through the 20th century as its role altered following the end

of the Second World War. The archaeological investigation has been able to detect some of these changes, shining a light on life within the site during the war and immediate post-war years.

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