

*'Down to Weymouth town
by Ridgeway'*

**Prehistoric, Roman and later sites
along the Weymouth Relief Road**

by Lisa Brown, Chris Hayden and David Score

with contributions by

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Great Things

*Sweet cyder is a great thing,
A great thing to me,
Spinning down to Weymouth town
By Ridgeway thirstily,
And maid and mistress summoning
Who tend the hostelry:
O cyder is a great thing,
A great thing to me!*

an extract, by Thomas Hardy

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by Chris Hayden

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Summary

The construction of the Weymouth Relief Road presented an opportunity to investigate archaeologically a transect across a landscape of intricately varied geology that preserves a wealth of archaeological and historical remains dating from the Palaeolithic to the post-medieval periods. Remains of prehistoric and Roman date are particularly extensive in this area, and the variety and extent of this resource make it one of the richest and most important cultural landscapes in England.

The northern end of the Relief Road encroaches on the South Dorset Ridgeway, a stretch of land within which lie at least 500 recognised archaeological monuments, and which includes one of the densest concentrations of Bronze Age round barrows in Britain. The visible remains of several other periods have been identified along and in the lee of the Ridgeway and southwards towards the coastal plain to Weymouth. One of the best recognised of these monuments is the Iron Age hillfort of Maiden Castle, which excavation demonstrated to have a Neolithic precursor in the form of a causewayed enclosure. The adjacent site of Poundbury and the Romano-British town of *Durnovaria*, modern Dorchester, have also been the subject of frequent and extensive examination.

This volume presents the results of archaeological investigations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology (OA) during 2008-2009, prior to the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road. At two sites, Ridgeway Hill and Southdown Ridge, large scale excavation was undertaken in the light of the evaluation and assessment results. At the southern stretch of the road scheme at Redlands the previously discovered remains of a Roman settlement produced a requirement for small-scale excavation. This revealed further limited evidence of Romano-British activity in the form of boundary ditches and a possible trackway, and the investigations also defined the eastern extent of settlement. Limited investigations at Two Mile Coppice and Lorton Meadows, located either side of Redlands, produced no archaeological discoveries, and geophysical survey along the route of Littlemoor Road also revealed nothing of note.

Evaluation and earthworks survey were carried out at Bincombe Valley on the Ridgeway Fault just to the south of the Ridgeway Hill site. The site was selected for investigation because of the presence of previously recognised, well preserved strip lynchets, hypothesised as examples of possible Anglo-Saxon

features. Whilst the results of OA's work demonstrated a general sequence for the lynchets, it was not possible to confirm their date or whether they were deliberately constructed.

The most significant archaeological findings were at Ridgeway Hill and Southdown Ridge. At Ridgeway Hill a sequence of early, middle and late Neolithic pits was investigated and dated using radiocarbon determinations, small collections of pottery and spatial analysis. Several groups of early Bronze Age inhumation and cremation burials in pits and cists were also excavated. Although heavily truncated, the evidence suggests that these were probably originally associated with barrows, and a programme of radiocarbon dating revealed important information about their chronology. Several of the burials were associated with well preserved Beakers, and the excavation also produced an important collection of flints. Two Bronze Age ring ditches, a possible Roman field system and several Roman and Anglo-Saxon burials were also examined, along with a row of undated empty 'graves', a post-medieval stone building and trackway.

At Southdown Ridge the partial remains of a settlement that emerged during the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age transition were discovered lying adjacent to a truncated cross-ridge dyke and a set of early Iron Age field enclosures. The evidence suggests that the early inhabitants were engaged in shale-working as well as agriculture. After a possible interruption in occupation during the middle Iron Age, the settlement area was extensively remodelled during the late Iron Age, when the occupants continued working shale into armlets within a complex of stone built structures. The settlement was abandoned during the late Iron Age or early post-conquest period and the field boundaries were converted into a burial ground. Several individuals were interred here in accordance with the distinctive south Dorset burial tradition, which included the offering of grave goods. Three coffined burials in keeping with Roman customs indicated continuing funerary activity into the early Roman period. Around this time the area previously occupied by the settlement was converted to agricultural use by wholesale levelling with midden-like material, including pottery, that derived from the earliest phases of occupation. The only traces of post-medieval activity were a small collection of pottery, a poorly dated limestone quarry and a set of field drains.

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