

PREHISTORIC - A POSSIBLE BRONZE AGE BURIAL MOUND OR BARROW

Oxford is located on a long north-south gravel promontory between the Thames and the Cherwell rivers; beyond these floodplains rise hills to the east and west. There is now mounting evidence that in the Neolithic and Bronze Age this promontory was a sacred area scattered with ritual and burial monuments.

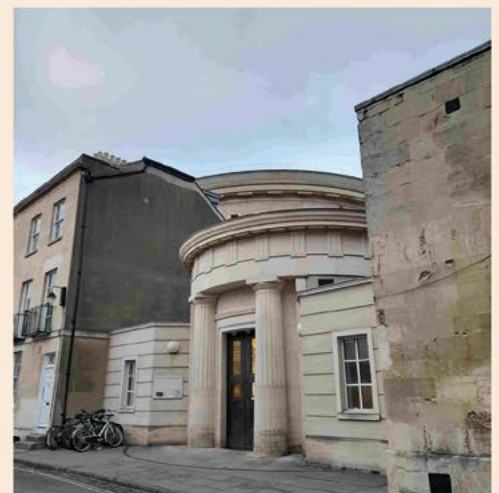
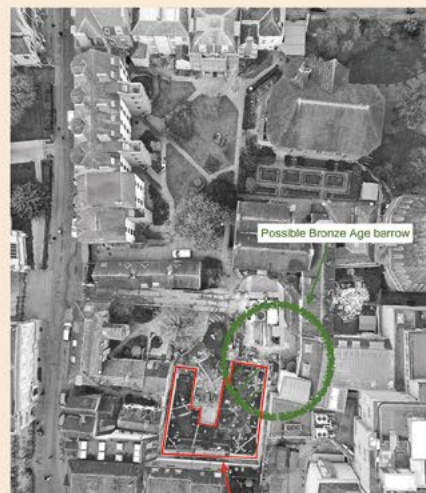
Part of the enclosure ditch for a 4,300 year old Late Neolithic henge monument was discovered under Kendrew Quad at Keble College. Defining an internal space measuring 150 across it is one of the largest such monuments known in the country. Henges are often considered to be sacred places where gatherings and rituals took place during Summer and Winter Solstices and Spring and Autumn Equinoxes. The entrance ways are often aligned to points in the surrounding landscape that interact with sunrises and sunsets on these important days in the solar calendar. Later in the Early Bronze Age some 4,000 years ago the henge became a focus for human burials memorialised by large circular mounds enclosed by a circular ditch. In other parts of the country the burials in these monuments, called barrows, indicate they were probably reserved for the elite of the community. Dark circular crop-marks that appear during very dry summers in University Parks are thought to indicate the ring ditches around long-since ploughed out Bronze Age burial mounds.

Parts of Bronze Age barrow ring ditches have also been found during the redevelopment of the Radcliffe Infirmary site, and construction of the Sackler Library. In fact, the circular Sackler Library building is built exactly over the position of a circular Bronze Age barrow ditch.



Left: The location of the possible Bronze Age Barrow in relation to other prehistoric monuments. [after Lambrick G, 2013, *Oxoniensia*, Figure 13]; **Right:** Disarticulated piece of human jaw

At Frewin Hall we are starting to see the remains of an earthwork constructed from natural gravel and reddish soil. The nature and colour of this material is exactly what you would expect from the mound of such a prehistoric barrow. We have also found a disarticulated piece of human jaw. We do not yet know if this combined evidence is evidence for a Bronze Age barrow but the possibility is tantalising and if so it would be a rare survival within the historic core of the city.



Left: Parch-marks of Bronze Age ring ditches in University Parks; **Middle:** The location of the possible Bronze Age barrow on a recent drone photograph of the site; **Right:** Sackler Library at corner of Pusey Place and St John Street