

OXFORD WESTGATE: PREHISTORY

WESTGATE

OXFORD



Our site lies at the southern end of a gravel promontory and sits mainly over the northernmost limits of the Thames Valley. This situation, with dry south-facing slopes next to a plentiful supply of fresh water, offered a variety of environments for many different plants and animals. This area would have provided the ideal location for prehistoric settlement and activity.

To the north on the higher ground of the promontory itself, near the site of St Giles' church, there are the buried remains of a large Neolithic henge monument, a ritual centre formed of a 'circular' bank and ditch enclosing an open area, accessed from a limited number of causeways (similar to the early phases of Stonehenge).



University Parks grass-marks

as grass-marks in aerial photos of University Parks during a hot dry summer).

There are also traces of Iron Age activity around the city, perhaps most notably in the valley floor at Port Meadow, and closer still at Whitehouse Road (some 200m south of Westgate Oxford), where a small settlement of roundhouses was found in the 1990s.



Surviving earthworks of Iron Age houses highlighted by flooding at Port Meadow

However, given this potential, the Westgate has revealed very few prehistoric artefacts, except a handful of stone tools made from flint dating to the Neolithic.

The most enigmatic discovery of the excavation so far has been a simple flat gravel surface. We are still debating as to whether it is man-made or the product of natural forces. The surface, which is quite extensive (measuring at least 50 metres north-south and over 20 metres wide and absolutely horizontal) sits at the base

of the alluvial sequence and the top of the gravel sequence. It appears to be metallated, i.e. quite robust as if it were a causeway, or crossing route over the valley floor. However, there were no artefacts, features (such as post-holes or ditches), or marks/ruts made by wheels, or any other evidence for human use. All we know is that the surface is overlain by organic silts,



Cleaning the metallated surface

which have been dated to the Middle Bronze Age (when the burial mounds/barrows on the promontory were being constructed).

The overlying silts were deposited on top of the surface by hundreds of years of wetter climate and increased water in the valley. The floodplain, where plants had established themselves on top of the gravels, were then under permanent water, so the depth of silts shows how the environment changed.



Sampling the prehistoric surface



The prehistoric surface uncovered



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