



A previously unknown Neolithic monument is discovered near Datchet



Pottery and animal bone (the remains of a feast?) close to the base of one of the enclosure ditches

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In last year's newsletter we reported on prehistoric discoveries at CEMEX UK's gravel quarry at Riding Court Farm, north of Datchet. This year we can report that the quarry has not yet given up all its archaeological secrets as, during the course of

further investigations in 2017, Wessex Archaeology discovered the remains of a previously unknown Neolithic monument. The monument is a causewayed enclosure, so-called because an area was enclosed by regularly spaced ditches, in between which were gaps or 'causeways'.

Causewayed enclosures were built in the Early Neolithic period between 3,800 and 3,500 BC. They are a rare monument type, with less than 100 known from Britain, mostly across southern England. The causewayed enclosure at Datchet is only the second known example of this monument in east Berkshire, although the other lies nearby at Eton Wick. Remarkably there are also two other examples known in this part of the Thames Valley at Dorney and at Staines (more-or-less under Junction 13 of the M25). The former has never been subject to archaeological investigation while the latter was subject to 'rescue' excavation in the 1960s prior to gravel extraction.

The importance of these monuments is that they represent the earliest examples in British prehistory of the formal enclosure of space. They also date to the earliest years of agriculture and the domestication of animals in Britain so they were constructed and used at a period of rapid and seminal change in society. So far only about 25% of the causewayed enclosure at Datchet has been exposed



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but the remainder will be investigated as the gravel quarry progresses across the site. Current calculations suggest the enclosure was 200m long and 100m wide, with just a single circuit of ditches defining the space within it. The ditches varied between 0.5m and 1.1m deep. There were no ditches along the north side of the enclosure where a stretch of boggy ground seems to have marked its limit.

So far very few contemporary Early Neolithic finds or deposits have been found within the enclosure – an exception is a very fine ground and polished stone axe, slightly damaged, but still an object of great beauty and highly tactile! The use to which the enclosure was put will therefore mostly derive from the finds that are recovered from



Neolithic polished stone axe from within the enclosure
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the ditches around it. To date an extraordinarily rich collection of Neolithic pottery, animal bone and struck flint has been found near the base of the ditches. Over 3,500 sherds of Neolithic pottery have already been recovered, while human remains were also found on the base of the ditches. The remains of a teenage young woman, face down, were found. Her remains were incomplete – for example the skull was missing – and it may be that her remains were intentionally

interfered with after her death. A human skull was found in another ditch segment but this was from a separate individual.

It is early days in the investigation of this intriguing monument. On present evidence it seems that the enclosure may only have been used for a short period of time. The finds suggest the monument was used for both domestic and 'ritual', probably feasting, purposes. While many of the finds can be considered 'everyday' items, the quantities and distribution of them in the ditches of the monument hint at more sophisticated and exceptional activities. More of this exciting monument will be excavated in 2018 and we will update readers in our 2019 newsletter!



The Riding Court Farm causewayed enclosure from the air looking east towards Heathrow and west London
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