

# Kendrew Quadrangle: Monuments, Murder and Farming

## The excavations

In January 2008 archaeologists from Thames Valley Archaeological Services began excavating the area behind St John's College in advance of the construction of the new student accommodation block. This was instigated as a result of the planning process and took place at the behest of the then Oxford City Archaeological Officer Brian Durham. The 1960s wing of Queen Elizabeth House had been demolished and the debris cleared away when the archaeologists moved in to remove the topsoil and overburden from the site in order to expose the archaeological layers. Previous archaeological work that had been done on the site led to the expectation that garden and occupation features dating to the medieval and post-medieval periods would be found. The first deposits exposed did indeed contain the expected pits, postholes, hearth, walls and surfaces, all reflecting the different phases of the site's use.

However, below these mainly routine deposits a collection of human bones was found. As the area was cleaned back more and more skeletons came to light. As the sheer number of individuals became apparent and several wounds were recognised in the bones it became clear that this was a mass grave, probably as a result of warfare. Later study of the bones recovered from the grave and analysis of the way they were buried indicates that they belonged to at least 34 males who had been brutally killed and then dumped at the site.

As the mass grave was excavated it became clear that it was lying on top of a large ditch. Once the bodies had been removed for further study digging began on the ditch with the aim of discovering its size and purpose. When fully excavated, it measured 2.5m deep and 8m wide and appeared to be slightly curved. Finds uncovered during the digging showed that the ditch was prehistoric in date and is interpreted as being a segment of a massive henge monument. This large, circular ditch of unknown purpose is believed to have been approximately 150m in diameter, encompassing all of what is now Keble College and the Pitt Rivers Museum.



## Tools of the trade

Contrary to popular belief, the bulk of an archaeologist's digging is done using a mattock and shovel with a trowel only really being used for cleaning the finished slot and fine digging work. Fragile objects, particularly skeletons, are excavated as much as possible using wooden tools such as chopsticks. This is due to the length of time that the bones have been buried for as it makes them soft and easily damaged by metal implements. In extreme circumstances, such as those encountered in the excavation of the henge on this site, a mechanical digger may be used to quickly remove large amounts of spoil to speed up the digging process.



Above: General view across the site showing work in progress on the post-medieval layers

## The method behind the madness

Archaeological excavation works on the principle of stratigraphy: the newer layers lie on top of the older ones. Because of this archaeologists work in a way that will show them the cross sections of features. This helps determine the feature's original shape, the sequence in which it was in-filled, its relationship with intersecting features and, if datable finds are discovered within the feature, its date. These cross sections are obtained by excavating a slot in the feature. If the archaeologist comes across a layer which might contain organic remains, e.g. charcoal or waterlogged deposits, a soil sample will be taken. This sample will be sieved to extract the charcoal, seeds or other small objects that will then give the archaeologist clues as to the environment and diet of the time.

Once a feature has been excavated each cut 'event' and fill layer are numbered. A record is created using drawn, written and photographic means.

Left: Exposing the mass grave using chopsticks and brushes.

Right: A neatly half-sectioned medieval pit and hearth. Horizontal scale = 1m, vertical = 0.5m and 0.1m

