

Phases 1 – 2 The Henge

3300 BC – AD 410

A ‘monumental’ ditch

The oldest feature discovered on the Kendrew Quadrangle site was, along with the Saxon mass grave, one of the least expected. As the burials were excavated it became clear that the bodies were lying in a large shallow ditch. Once they had been removed the ditch itself was excavated. It was found to be 2.5-3m deep, 8m wide and appears to be a segment of a much larger ring ditch which would have been approximately 150m in diameter. On better preserved sites, it can be seen that the spoil is used to create a bank external to the ditch and thus clearly of non-defensive design, which is a defining characteristic of a henge monument. No evidence for a bank survived though it is unclear whether this has been eroded by ploughing, quarrying or even if it was ever built in the first place.

Peeling back the years

About one third of the way up the fill in the ditch there was a turfline, showing that the ditch had settled, partly filled, long enough for plants to grow. On this was set a hearth associated with Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ‘Beaker’ pottery. Lower in the ditch was found a deposit of animal bone and charcoal as well as several red deer antlers that had been used as picks during the digging of the ditch and discarded (or reverentially offered to the earth they had just transformed) once it was finished. Both the hearth and the bone were dated by radiocarbon analysis, giving us accurate dates for construction and use of the monument. The bone found 0.3m above the base of the ditch, was dated to 2289-2120 cal. BC and the hearth was found to date from 2136-1948 cal. BC. These show that the ditch was dug shortly before 2289-2120 BC and there was a period of stabilisation during the natural infill process at around 2136-1948 BC.

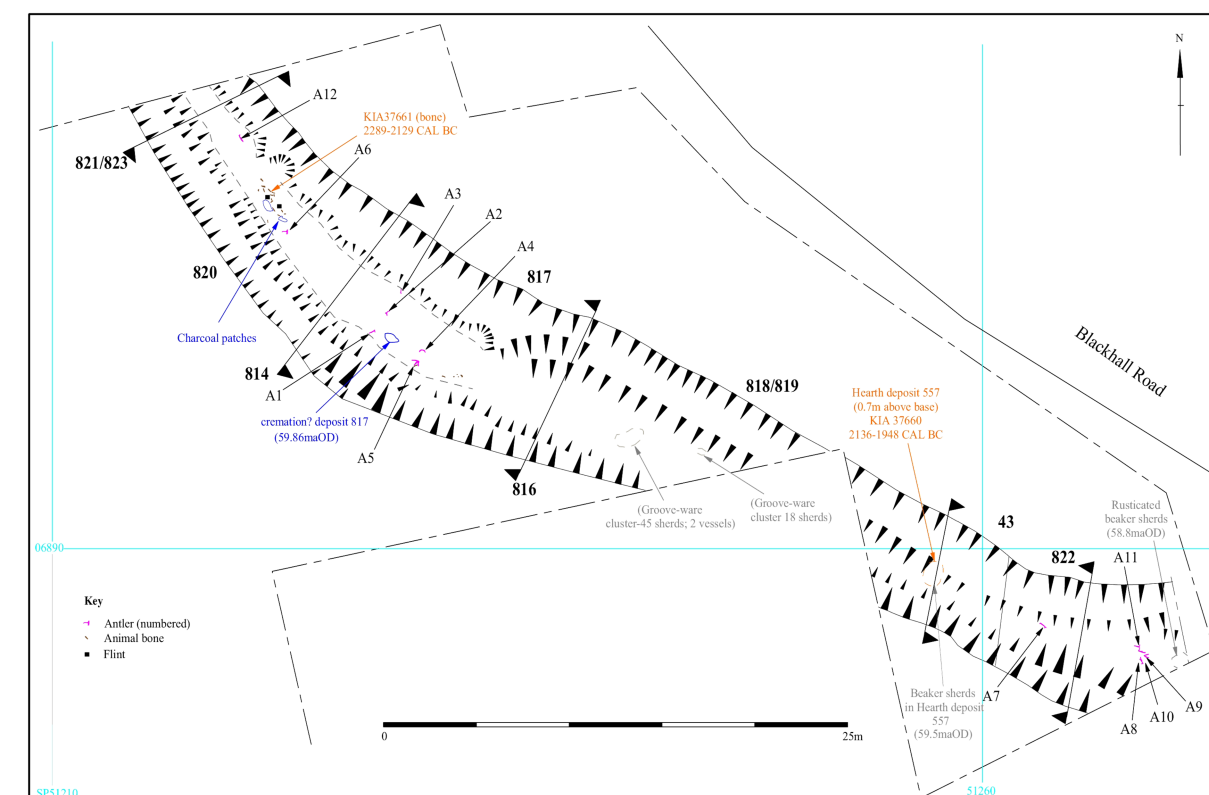
Picks and shovels

When it was constructed, the ditch was dug out using a variety of tools. Red deer antler picks were certainly used either as picks, or as wedges to loosen the spoil. Wooden tools may well have been used but we have no evidence of these, however, experimental archaeology has shown that cattle scapulae (shoulder blades) may have been used as shovels and wicker baskets are reasonably effective at removing the spoil. Experimental archaeology also gives an idea of the resources that would need to be committed to digging a monument like this. Assuming that the area was free of large trees, it is calculated that to dig a henge ditch the size of the one discovered here would take roughly 17 man-years. Additional time would have to be spent on the construction of any associated bank, and on clearing the land in the interior. To achieve the construction of the ditch alone in a month, possibly the longest period that people could be spared from other tasks, would require an excavation team of over 200. A large supporting population must also have been involved to feed and clothe the excavators whilst engaged in this (to modern minds) economically unproductive activity.

Landscape features

Monumental henges consist of a massive bank and ditch and must have been intended to mark out the land within them as special. They can be as large as 150m across whereas most henges are of more modest dimensions. The banks are placed outside the ditch thus making them non-defensive, indeed they look as if they are intended to keep something in rather than to keep something out. The banks may also have allowed a select audience a better view of the ceremonial activities taking place inside. Not all are perfectly circular. Some have a circle of standing stones or timber posts in the interior.

Henges are one of a range of near-contemporary monument types which are often found near one another, including stone circles, timber circles, round barrows and an enigmatic class of earthworks known as cursus monuments. Combinations of these monument types can form a complex and extensive ritual landscape, most remarkably around Stonehenge itself, but also known from, for example, at Newgrange and the ‘Bend in the Boyne’ in Ireland, while at Rudston in Yorkshire, four cursus converge on a standing stone. Closer to Oxford, there are monument complexes at Dorchester, Abingdon and Stanton Harcourt. These constitute a class of monumental landscape entirely restricted to the British Isles, apart from a few outlying examples in Brittany.



Left: Plan showing the henge ditch as excavated on the Kendrew Quadrangle site.

Right: Aerial photo of the henge, cursus and other features at Dorchester-on-Thames.



The importance of the Oxford henge

At present there is only a hint of an earlier Neolithic component to the prehistoric landscape of this part of Oxford and, on current evidence, it is the henge monument that is the new, dominant landscape feature which would have acted as a focal point for activity at the end of the Neolithic and into the early Bronze Age. Several ring ditches have been identified to the north of the site, in the area of the University Parks, which most likely represent levelled Bronze Age barrows. Other barrows have been noted to the southeast, in the University Science Area, and to the south at the Sackler Library and St Michael's Street. The evidence points strongly to the presence of an extensive early Bronze Age barrow complex surrounding the henge, in what could only be described as a ritual landscape.