

Marcham, Oxfordshire

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A site in Marcham in Oxfordshire that was excavated last year for Bloor Homes is continuing to reveal its secrets, with some fascinating – and unusual – discoveries being made during the subsequent post-excavation assessment.

The earliest feature recorded was a C-shaped ditch in the central part of the site. It dated to the middle to late Bronze Age and may have formed part of a small enclosure. A pit next to the enclosure contained an unexpected find: several bones belonging to aurochs (wild cattle). While the bones are possibly residual, given that the species died out in the middle Bronze Age, the discovery is a notable one.

A series of ditches recorded across the central and southern areas of the site formed part of a trackway and a field system. One of the Roman enclosure ditches contained a bone that came either from a very large chicken or a peacock. Peacocks were by no means unknown in the Roman world, as depictions on mosaics and wall-paintings show. The site is close to the Roman temple complex at Frilford, and it is possible that unusual, high-status animals were once present there. Quite why the bone came to be at Marcham, however, remains something of a mystery. Alternatively, it is possible that the bone is much later in date and intrusive, the site having suffered from truncation from modern ploughing.

A more certain late iron age or early Roman date can be given to a cremation grave recorded north of a substantial Roman ditch, a radiocarbon date indicating a 1st century BC to 1st century AD date for burial.

A distinctive area of tree-throw holes was recorded in the north-western part of the site and these contained a mixture of medieval pottery and residual Roman pottery. An area of dense, intercutting pits was also located south of the area of tree-throw holes. These were generally sub-rectangular in plan, and some were aligned in rows. A handful of the pits contained Roman pottery and medieval ceramic building material and were cut by medieval ditches. Further geoarchaeological and environmental analysis of these should illuminate the function of these pits, but it is possible that they were medieval osier beds, where willow was planted and coppiced to produce withies for baskets, fish-traps, and similar objects. Radiocarbon dating has suggested an 11th–12th century date range.

A timber beamslot building was recorded in the north-western part of the site. Two fragments of mid-12th to 14th century pottery were recovered from the beamslots, while several rubbish pits east of the building contained later medieval pottery and small finds. The paucity of finds in the vicinity of the building is suggestive of a low-status rural dwelling.



Area of possible osier beds



A substantial medieval ditch

A substantial later medieval field system was set out across the northern part of the site, and another field system was recorded across the southern part of the site, though on a slightly different alignment. The network of ditches may have been designed to drain and enclose swampy and waterlogged seasonal pasture in the 12th–14th

century. The site was part of the estate of Abingdon Abbey in the later medieval period, and the area provided a variety of resources, including meat, vegetables and fuel.



A timber beamslot building dating to the mid-12th-14th century