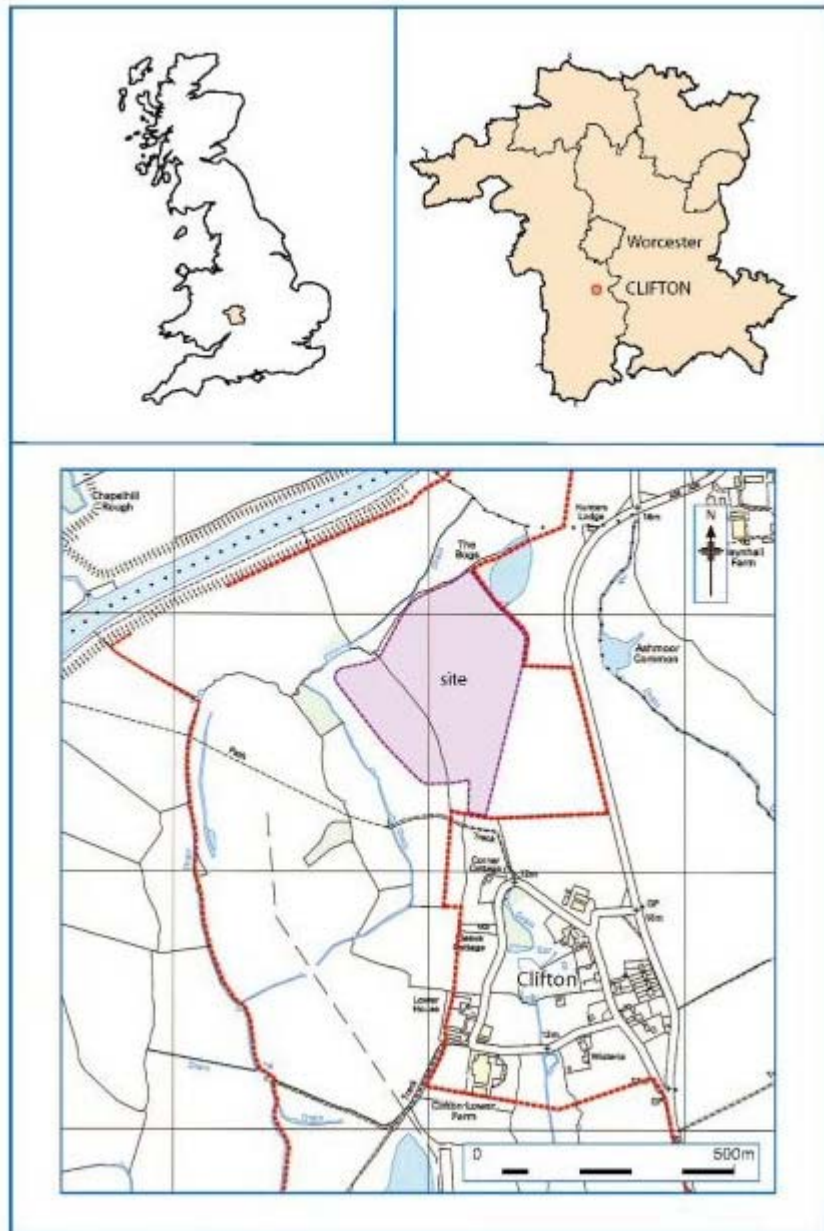


Clifton Quarry



Background

An archaeological excavation, undertaken at Tarmac's Clifton Quarry, in Severn Stoke, has revealed one of the most important sequences of prehistoric and early medieval deposits and palaeoenvironmental remains recovered to date from the central Severn Valley (that is in the area that occupies the river and its terraces between Bridgenorth and Gloucester)

These features included Late Neolithic Grooved Ware pits, one of which contained an elaborate and unique collection of artefacts and environmental remains. A burnt mound and associated features were recorded in addition to an early 8th century well used in association with flax processing. These archaeological remains, allied with environmental information, have provided

evidence for the use and changing landscape of the river valley from the Mesolithic through to the early medieval period and highlighted the archaeological potential of the floodplain.



The project was supported by Tarmac and was undertaken as part of a carefully designed programme of archaeological works required during the extension of its operations at the quarry. Due to the unexpected discovery of deposits of local, regional and national importance during the course of the fieldwork and the fact that appropriate development control processes have been followed, further funding for the project has been secured through the Aggregates Sustainability Levy Fund (ALSF). This grant has been issued by English Heritage and has allowed detailed analysis of the results which will be published in due course.

Early prehistoric activity

Residual Mesolithic flints imply that the area was at least seasonally visited at this time, although it was not possible to establish a chronology for these visits or define particular activities. Palynological evidence from a palaeochannel dated to the Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic (4690-4450 BC) through to the Early Bronze Age (2290-1910 BC) has shown that these communities did not have an impact on the natural environment. At the end of the 5th millennium BC the landscape was densely wooded with alder carr dominating the floodplain and oak, lime and elm woodland beyond. These would have provided many resources for the Mesolithic hunter gatherer communities to use, ranging from fish and rushes growing alongside the riverbank, to deer and numerous plant foods growing in the adjacent woodland.

The most important early prehistoric remains dated to the period after the Mesolithic, the Neolithic and more specifically to the Late Neolithic. These remains comprised a number of pits, one of which contained an elaborate collection of six whole and fragmentary polished axes, numerous flint tools and debitage (waste material from manufacture), significant quantities of Grooved Ware and abundant charred barley grains and crab apple fragments.



Charred grain and apple seeds from this feature have produced a radiocarbon date of 2900-2600 BC. Absorbed residues from some of the Grooved Ware contained dairy and porcine fats suggesting that cattle and pigs provided elements of the diet of local communities. These activities appear to have been taking place within semi-permanent clearings in a densely woodland landscape that would have provided pasture for cattle and sheep, forest cover for pigs and land for cultivation.


The Grooved Ware assemblage, a mixture of Durrington Wall and Clacton Styles, is the largest to have been found in Worcestershire and the collection of six polished axes insert image from one feature is unique for Britain. One of these axes is at present not provenanced and may have been created from a source material located outside of Britain. Axes such as these were highly valued objects. They were made from stone and flint and were roughly shaped out, painstakingly ground and polished to form the finished article.

The large quantity of charred grain that appears to have been purposefully deposited into a single pit is an unusual find away from the major ceremonial monuments of this period. The amount of grain recovered suggests that, although it was probably a valuable commodity for these people, it was available in considerable quantities. Together with the evidence of the domesticated animal fats found on the pots as well as the crab apples, this site demonstrates the wide range of cultivated, herded and collected foods used by these early communities of hunters, gatherers and farmers.

A significant quantity of the material deposited into the pits appears to have been exposed to ferocious heat that had damaged, and potentially deliberately transformed the appearance of, many of the artefacts prior to deposition. Some of the pottery sherds and flint tools also showed signs of having been stored in a midden prior to deposition within the pit. However, it is not possible to ascertain whether the artefacts were exposed to fire immediately prior to disposal or earlier in their depositional histories. When these items were collected for deposition only selected remains entered the features; again it is not possible to be sure whether this was accidental or an intentional act. There was some evidence, nevertheless, from the feature containing the richest assemblage that the contents had been carefully placed within the pit, suggesting that this activity represents more than just the casual disposal of domestic remains. The deposition of cultural remains such as pottery, flint tools, axes and biological remains within pits is a well-documented phenomenon within Neolithic Britain. It not only reflects the disposal of everyday remains as part of the general domestic activities but also the symbolic nature of communities who viewed such depositional events

as a means to control and assign meaning to the landscapes they inhabited. Therefore the activity represented is thought to have resulted from temporary patterns of residence and more formalised ritual activities on the Severn floodplain.

Bronze Age activity

By the mid 2nd millennium BC the pollen record indicates that significant quantities of the surrounding lime, oak, alder and hazel woodland had been cleared and replaced with more permanent areas of pasture and cultivation. Within this landscape Bronze Age activity focused around a burnt mound and its associated features. These were constructed and filled with frequent heat shattered quartz pebbles and small charcoal fragments. Radiocarbon dates suggest this activity was short-lived beginning around 1410-1300 BC and ending 1370-1250 BC. It is suggested that the activities undertaken at the mound were seasonal and took place over a number of years. A group of small pits flanking the edge of the channel also contained frequent burnt quartz pebbles and are thought to represent the use of similar hot stone technologies as the burnt mound. . Although the function of these features cannot be confirmed, it is thought they may have had a ritual element to their use, possibly having been used for cleansing activities associated with sweat lodges.

Roman remains

Two Romano-British graves were discovered at the site, although the acidic nature of the soil had eroded the bone leaving only hobnails, an iron bracelet and pottery fragments. These burials are thought to be two of the inhabitants of a Romano-British settlement identified through field walking to the north of the site.

Early medieval activity

Early medieval archaeology was also identified and provides rare evidence of agricultural and small-scale industrial activity at this time. This consisted of double-ditched field boundaries and a timber lined well constructed from stakes and radially and tangentially split planks.

