

Barby Hill Iron Age Settlement– part 5

It's almost a year since I last reported on the continuing exploration of the Iron Age settlement on Barby Hill.

For those who may have missed my earlier reports, the story so far:

- 4 years ago, traces of an Iron Age settlement (approx. 400BC to 50AD) were found when the water reservoir on Barby Hill was extended.
- We formed the Barby Hill Archaeological Project, and with funding from local authorities we have been steadily exploring the site ever since.
- We have carried out field-walking, metal detection and magnetometer surveys, which revealed traces of a huge settlement 400m by 300m, stretching across most of the flat hilltop, with the outlines of scores of Iron Age "roundhouses" visible below ground.
- After this detailed preparation, we carried out our first excavation in autumn 2013, mapping traces of occupation, and finding about 50 pottery fragments (and some bones from an ancient lamb stew!), which confirmed the dating of the site as 400BC to 0BC.

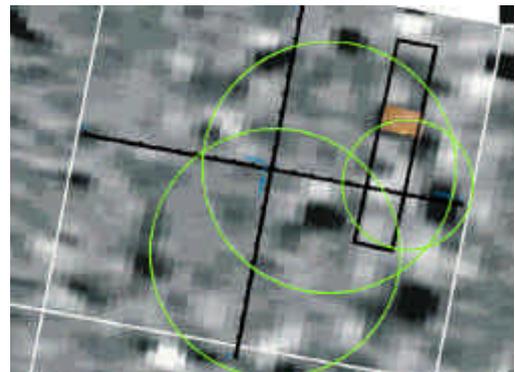
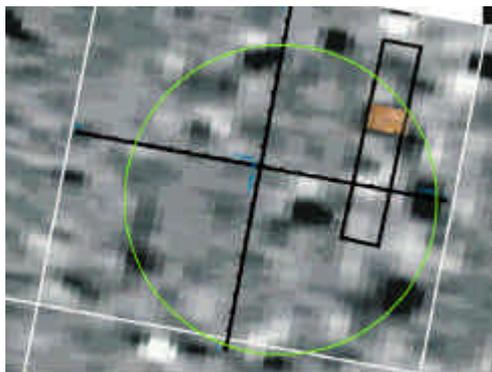
We are carrying out a further excavation this year – currently halfway through – on another roundhouse circle at the edge of a field of wheat (so we have compensated the farmer for cutting down some of his crop – the dig could not be delayed until after the harvest, as it will rapidly be re-sown for next year and we would not have enough time to complete the dig).

It is tricky work, for several reasons:

- The clay soil is either iron-hard (in dry weather) or liquid mud (in wet weather).
- It's not like a Roman-period dig, where one finds stone, tile and brick – all unaffected by rain. In an Iron Age dig, virtually everything that has survived is made of earth – house foundations, walls, and even the fragile pottery, all were made of local mud.
- Therefore it is extremely difficult to detect features – we must identify tiny differences between many almost identical shades of brown!
- Moreover, any traces that we find are soon destroyed permanently by heavy rainfall – so we must keep the trenches protected by tarpaulins and tents.



As I write, we have opened about 40sq.m. of trenches – and it is already clear that what looked like a single huge roundhouse in the geophysics plots is probably parts of several different structures built on this location at different times. This is illustrated in the two images below – the marked-up second image is currently our best guess, but the true picture will not be clear until we have completed the dig.



Because this site is so difficult to interpret – even for the professional archaeologists who act as our advisors – I decided to try a new technique; in addition to the geophysics and the digging, I am taking soil samples for analysis, in an attempt to study the distribution across our trenches of really tiny materials such as burned grain, plant seeds, fragments of charcoal, burnt flakes of stone and pottery, etc.

Each sample requires analysis of 40 litres of soil (about 40-50kg), which is a huge quantity – especially when you realise that I am taking samples from every square metre of the trench, ie the samples total about 1.5 tonnes of soil! Every sample is transported back to Kilsby, and wet-sieved in a special machine kindly lent to our project by the Northampton branch of Museum of London Archaeology (hereafter referred to as “MOLA”) – see photo on the right.



Each sample takes 4-5 hours to process (and it is very labour-intensive), and is then dried in paper-lined seed-trays in my greenhouse. After subsequent dry-sieving to sort the residue by size, each sample results in 4 boxes containing many thousands of small stones, pot flakes, ancient cereal grains and seeds, particles of charcoal, pollen grains etc – which will be analysed under the microscope over the autumn and winter, after the dig is over and the trenches are back-filled.



It's far too early to say what the results of all this will be. At the best, the soil samples might help me to identify the locations of former cooking-hearths and food-preparation areas – and I hope we will also be able to learn something about the diet of those early people who lived up on Barby Hill more than 2000 years ago. Adding these scraps of information to the plan-drawings and photographs of any features that we may uncover in the trenches – such as wall-foundations, drip gullies, post-holes etc – will, with luck, allow us to add further solid evidence to this fascinating archaeological project.

Gren Hatton, July 2014