Archaeology of the Barby Hill area

Introduction

Recent archaeological work in west Northamptonshire has done much to increase knowledge of earlier inhabitants of this area. Development of new industrial facilities around the M1/A5 junction provided the stimulus for funded professional archaeology at the DIRFT1 and DIRFT2 sites, some of which is described elsewhere on this website. In addition to this, much valuable work is being done by local amateur archaeological groups, who have an important role to play in investigating sites where no commercial developments are planned and hence there is no big-company investment to fund archaeology.

Iron Age communities in the Warks/Northants/Leics borderlands

Our understanding of the occupation of this area before and during the Roman occupation is still very patchy. Excellent work has been done on some of the large Bronze Age and Iron Age hillforts in Northamptonshire - notably at the Raunds and Hunsbury Hill sites, and to a lesser extent at Borough Hill Daventry - but these are isolated islands of detail. The archaeological work carried out at the DIRFT1 industrial site during the 1990s - and particularly the subsequent work at the DIRFT2 site in 2004/5 - revealed that there had been a fairly large settlement at Barby Nortoft in the Late Iron Age, which appears to have been deserted not long after the Roman occupation commenced (ie probably somewhere in the period 40-80AD). It is also apparent that this had been a peaceful and undefended settlement - it may perhaps have functioned in the pre-Roman period as a location for inter-tribal trading between the well-established Dobunni and Corieltauvi tribes, whose borders lay in this general area. More details of the archaeological work on the Iron Age site at Barby Nortoft are given in another section of this website.

Several other areas around the M1/A5 junction also show evidence of both Bronze Age and Iron Age occupation, though on a smaller scale than at Barby Nortoft - and following abandonment of the Barby Nortoft site, several areas under the DIRFT1 land show signs of being developed into small farms during the Roman period.

It has thus become gradually apparent to historians and archaeologists that the three-counties borderlands of Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire - which experts believe may closely mirror the former boundaries of 3 powerful pre-Roman tribes (Dobunni, Corieltauvi and Catuvellauni) - is an area of national importance in the interpretation of inter-tribal relationships and the effect that the Roman occupation had upon them.

However, it is impossible to interpret individual sites in isolation; much more information is needed about other Iron Age and early Romano-British sites. For instance, was the abandonment of Barby Nortoft a pattern repeated at other sites? And where did the displaced population move to?

This is where ongoing archaeological work by amateur groups can make a valuable contribution, by examining other areas of the countryside so as to fill in the gaps between the work carried out by professional archaeologists on the large commercial development sites, enabling archaeologists to establish a more complete picture of social evolution for the whole area.

Work by CLASP

CLASP (the Community Landscape and Archaeology Survey Project, see their website) is just

such a group of amateurs, operating in west Northamptonshire and coordinating archaeological research on a number of small sites in west Northamptonshire where there is little prospect of commercially-funded archaeology ever being carried out. The group's most notable achievements during its approximately 15 years of existence have been the excavation and comprehensive documentation of the
Roman villa at Whitehall Farm
near Nether Heyford, and the project 'Local People, Local Places' which aims to characterise the wider area and understand the mechanisms of settlement and social evolution in west Northamptonshire during the Iron Age and the Roman period. A further major project is currently being carried out by the group, to extend knowledge of the settlement pattern at the Roman camp on Watling Street at Bannaventa (near Whilton). For more details as this work continues,
see the CLASP website
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Watling Street and King Street

Fieldwork in the area between Rugby and Daventry, combined with topographic map studies, has produced evidence to suggest that there was probably a long-distance path leading through this area in the Roman period, and perhaps even earlier.

- Documents of the 15th and 16th centuries refer to this route as 'King Street'
- This name is also preserved in fieldnames right up to the present day
- Legends dating back to at least the 1700s specify the point where the route crosses the Rainsbrook (the modern Nothants/Warks county boundary) as the site of a mythical great battle between 3 kings - perhaps a historical legend referring to ancient inter-tribal conflict?
- The route leads almost exactly in a straight line, from near to the centre of Rugby,

crossing the Rainsbrook valley at its narrowest point (which may be significant if the valley had previously been marshy), then following a hilltop ridgeway

- The route heads directly towards the pre-Roman camp at Borough Hill, Daventry
- Archaeological excavations associated with commercial developments in the Daventry area have revealed evidence of Romano-British field systems all along the route of 'King Street' in that area

Further possible evidence appears when the wider area is considered:

- The lines of Watling Street and King Street converge gradually - and if the line of King Street is extended hypothetically to the south-east beyond Daventry, it meets the Watling Street precisely at the western outskirts of Towcester, which seems rather more than mere coincidence.
- The alignment of King Street is similar to the alignment of Watling Street south-east of Towcester.
- An extension of the hypothetical line of King Street to the west, beyond Rugby, crosses the Fosse Way at Stretton under Fosse, and eventually rejoins the route of Watling Street in the Mancetter/Hartshill area, which was a major pottery centre producing mortaria in the Roman period. Here again, these may also be mere coincidences, but the number of 'convenient' coincidences seems high.

The Barby Hill Archaeological Project (BHAP)

The above considerations regarding the possible significance of 'King Street', the knowledge that nearby Barby Nortoft had proved to be a significant site in the Late Iron Age, and the fact that Barby Hill affords extensive panoramic views to the south and west, into what may have been the borders of pre-Roman Dobunnic territory and would thus have been a very suitable site for a Late Iron Age settlement, combined to provide the rationale for an archaeological investigation of Barby Hill and its environs, to be carried out by a group of local residents.

The preparatory work included meetings and discussions with local history societies and other interested residents, local parish and district councils, local landowners, and many other bodies. In time, support was gained from the local community and from Northamptonshire County Council, including initial funding to cover operations in the first year. A committee was formed to hold and administer the funds, and teams of volunteers were recruited - both from the local community, from experienced members of CLASP, and also from experienced members of the metal-detection group NARC (Northamptonshire Artefact Recovery Club, for details see their website). Essential supplies of surveying and storage equipment were purchased, and a project director was appointed to plan and manage the work. Links were also established with the necessary authorities, including English Heritage / Natural England, Northamptonshire Heritage & Environment Record (HER, formerly the Sites and Monuments Record, or SMR), Warwickshire HER, and with senior professional archaeologists at Northamptonshire Archaeology and Cotswold Archaeology (who had both carried out work in the neighbouring area).

As time has gone by, requests for further funding have been supported by other organisations, both at local and national level; fund-raising is an ongoing activity, most of it being allocated to cover the significant costs of hiring specialist surveying equipment, site insurance, purchase of reference materials, specialist consultancy, etc. Members of the BHAP committee are also active in giving talks and presentations to local schools and at heritage fairs and similar events, to promote the project and raise awareness of the results that it is producing. The skills of local community members are also being developed, via basic training in site surveying and archaeological investigation, and in the use of specialist items of equipment such as magnetometers.

Fieldwork at Barby Hill

Initial work during the first and second years has consisted of three types of survey:

- Fieldwalking

- Metal-detection
- Magnetometry

Fieldwalking and metal-detection are carried out in arable fields, during the period after sowing the crop and when it begins to shoot through above ground, to detect any objects turned up by the plough and harrow, plus metal objects buried below the surface. The two tasks are best performed together, since they can use the same layout of survey poles, saving considerably on labour.

Each field is first marked out into a grid of squares 20m x 20m, using surveyor's poles to set a base-line (usually along a straight hedge line) and an optical square to lay off the main axes at right angles to this, with pea sticks pushed in at 20m intervals to mark each individual grid along these perpendicular axes. The grid is located with reference to fixed points in the field corners, measured and recorded and identified by permanent marker posts hammered into the ground, so that the grid can be re-eastablished accurately at any later date. Initial surveys then examine a strip 1m to either side of each line of sticks (ie a 2m-wide strip at 20m intervals), so that the initial survey covers exactly 10% of each field. This is sufficient to get a feel for the content of the field, and discover and locate any 'foci' or concentrations of finds. If any such concentrations are detected by the initial survey, they are then examined in more detail, using a 10m x 10m fine grid aligned with the previous coarse grid, and searching every square metre within each grid; this is obviously more time-consuming, therefore it is reserved for areas of concentration detected in the initial survey.