

Barby Hill Iron Age Settlement– update

Work is still continuing to explore the Iron Age settlement on Barby Hill.

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

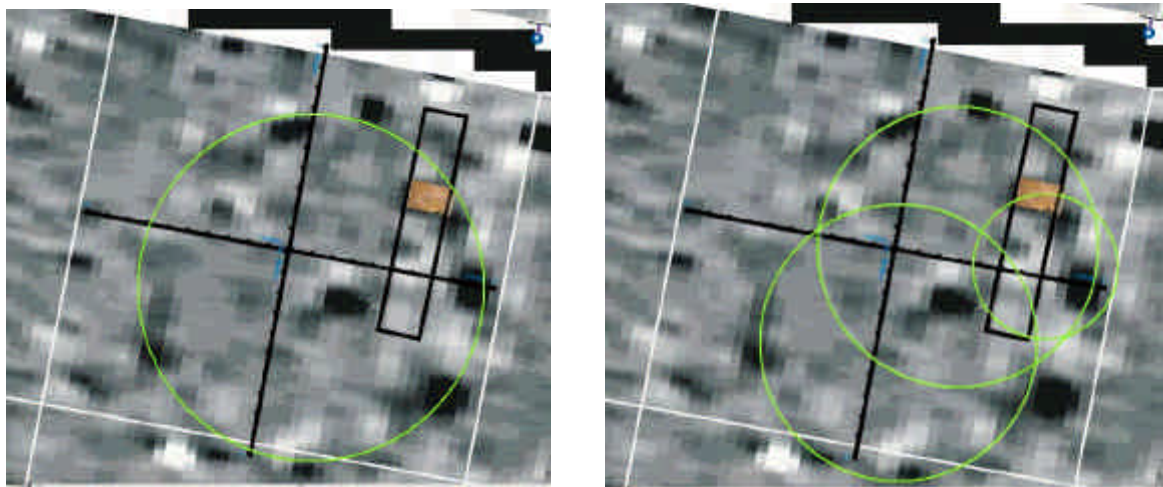
- 4 years ago, traces of an Iron Age settlement (approx. 400BC to 50AD) were found when the water reservoir on Barby Hill was extended.
- We formed the Barby Hill Archaeological Project, and with funding from local authorities we have been steadily exploring the site ever since.
- We have carried out 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 3-month excavation this year – currently halfway through – on another roundhouse complex at the edge of a field of wheat (we compensated the farmer for cutting down part of his crop – the dig could not be delayed and started after harvest-time, we would have insufficient time to complete the work before the field is re-sown).

It is tricky work, for several reasons:

- The clay soil is either iron-hard (in dry weather) or liquid mud (in wet weather), so we must lightly water the trenches frequently to control soil workability.
- 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.
- Thus it is extremely difficult to detect features – we are looking for tiny differences between almost identical shades of brown!
- Moreover, any traces we find can be 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 now 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 done more work.



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 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 (40-50kg), which is a huge quantity – especially when you realise that we are 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 me by MOLA Northampton (formerly Northamptonshire Archaeology) – see the next image.

Each 40 litre sample takes 3-4 hours to process (and it is very labour-intensive), and is then dried in newspaper-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, or even whether it will be successful at all – but that is the nature of archaeology, especially when trying out new methods. At the best, the soil samples may help us to identify the locations of former cooking-hearths and food-preparation areas – and we may also learn something of the diet and living conditions of those elusive shadowy folk who lived on Barby Hill over 2000 years ago. Adding these scraps of information to the plan-drawings and photographs of any features we uncover in the trenches – wall-foundations, drip gullies, post-holes, pits etc – will, with luck, allow us to add further solid evidence to this fascinating but challenging archaeological project.

750 words, plus 4 images