

Archaeology at Barby Hill: part 1

As most of you know, my historical interest ranges from medieval to relatively modern times, but I do not normally get involved in "ancient history" (ie Anglo-Saxon and Roman era and anything earlier). However, the recent archaeological digs at Crick (1990s) and Barby Nortoft (2007) sparked my interest in the pre-Roman period of our local history, as it gradually became apparent that this area was densely populated before the Romans ever set foot in England:

- At the site of DIRFT1, evidence was found of an Iron Age community of about 100 people who occupied the site sporadically over a period of 500-600 years. There were traces of many round-house structures.
- Even more stunning were the finds on the DIRFT2 site at Barby Nortoft, where preliminary geophysics followed by detailed excavation revealed scores of round-houses (one or two were huge structures 15-17m across) together with large rectangular ditched compounds containing further round-houses. This was a large and relatively complex community of 300 people or more, which existed for perhaps 200 years or so but was abandoned in orderly fashion around the time that the Roman legions arrived.

Some Iron Age background facts

At that time, the area around today's Warks/Leics/Northants borders was a borderland between three major tribes (the Dobunni, the Corieltavi/Coritani, and the Catuvellauni). Archaeologists and historians therefore feel that the area just around Crick/Kilsby/Barby is very important, and it is now seen as being of national significance in understanding the social interactions between these tribes. For example, did the tribal borders fluctuate, were they fought over? Or might the Barby Nortoft site perhaps have been an inter-tribal trading area – could this explain why it was abandoned shortly after the Romans created the Watling Street and set up a line of fortified trading bases along it at Towcester, Bannaventa (Whilton), Tripontium (Dow Bridge), etc?

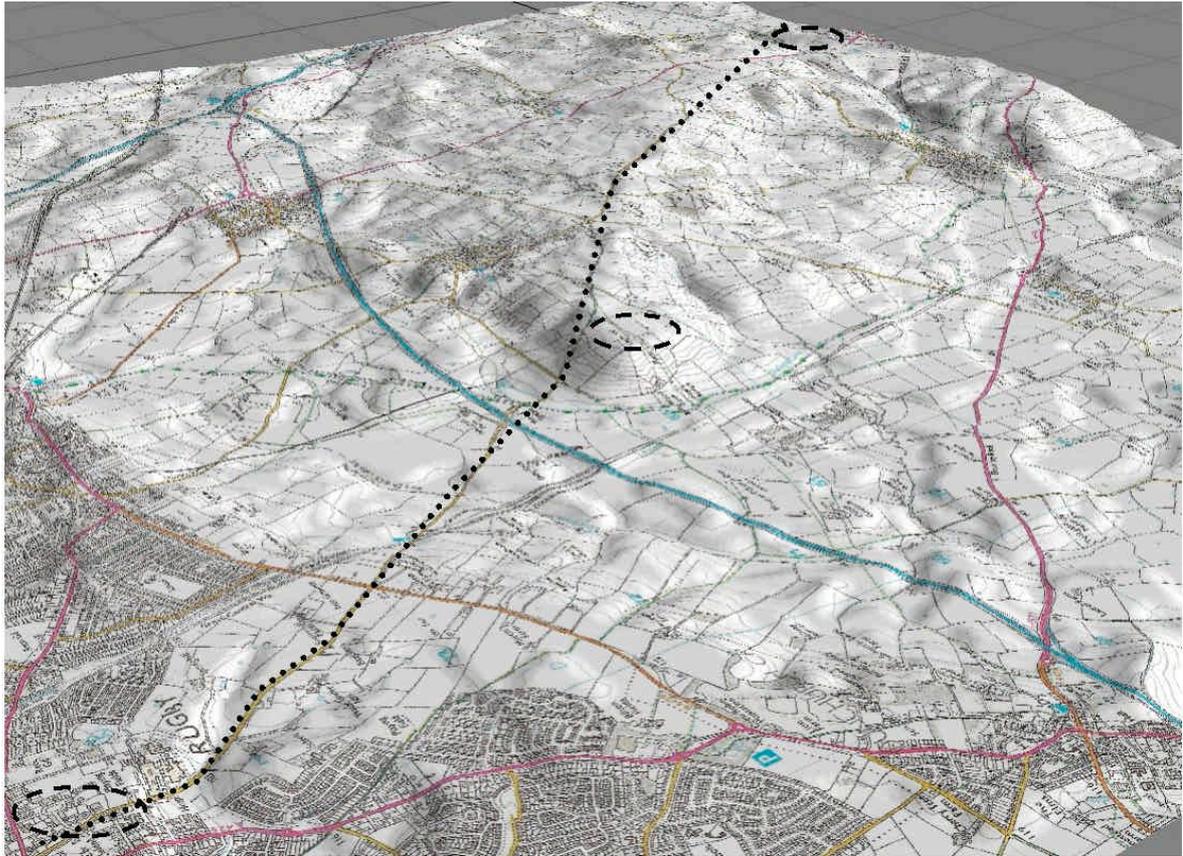
You are probably wondering why I am suddenly writing this article just now. Be patient, I'm getting there ...

Back in 2003-2005 I was working down at Onley, piecing together documentary and archaeological evidence to explain why the hamlet was suddenly abandoned around 1600, and establishing a time-sequence for how it grew over the period 1200-1600. As I worked in the fields, I kept looking up at the bulk of Barby Hill behind the abandoned medieval village – it was clearly an important vantage point, and Barby was a large and significant lordship in the Saxon period – might the hill perhaps have had a similar significance even before the Saxons arrived in the 500s-600s?

Another outcome of my work at Onley was the discovery that present-day Onley Lane is a very ancient road, which was already old in the 1400s when it was called "King Street". It continues as a field track straight up Barby Hill, emerges at the crossroads alongside Barby windmill, and continues along Welton Road; and it leads originally from Rugby, following Barby Road to join Onley Lane at the crossroads on Ashlawn Road. At the time I just filed this fact away – but the idea kept niggling at me, that "King Street" must have had some truly long-term significance.

A sudden breakthrough

I carried on playing with this idea – and, as sometimes happens, a breakthrough came when I least expected it. Earlier this year I was looking at the OS map when I suddenly noticed some curious coincidences (see map):



- “King Street” runs in an almost straight line all the way from Rugby to Borough Hill at Daventry (originally occupied in the Bronze Age, but still a fortified hilltop settlement in the Iron Age), along a ridgeway route. It would have been an obvious communication corridor in those far-off times.
- The western tip of Barby Hill lies exactly on this line, and overlooks the Rainsbrook valley, commanding views over the whole valley and the opposing escarpment (Ashlawn Road). It would have formed an ideal “advance post” for any main camp at Borough Hill, serving as a lookout point into a different tribal territory.
- Its ancient medieval name, “King Street”, suggests that there was considerable social significance to this route.

I discussed these ideas rather nervously with several professional historians and archaeologists – and was delighted to find agreement on all sides, that Barby Hill and “King Street” should be investigated as a priority.

Politics, finance and resources

Since that time, things have been hectic, as a succession of urgent tasks has called for attention. These have included (in roughly chronological order):

- Involvement of CLASP and NARC: These two Northants non-profit organisations have a whole-county remit, and are groups of experienced amateurs who carry out research in archaeology and metal-detection to highly professional standards. Many of you will have met some of them at the metal-detection exhibition organised recently in the village hall by Kilsby Local History Group.
- Bringing Barby LHG on board: It was clearly necessary to involve Barby Local History Group – and they have been very ready to appreciate the importance of this project and its relevance to their own village, and to give their support.
- Discussions with local landowners: In the same way, nothing can be achieved without the support and assistance of the respective local landowners (there are

about 15 of them involved in the overall project!). This has involved much discussion – but here again, everyone has been interested and supportive.

- Getting funding organised: Some of the investigation will involve geophysics measurements (of the kind seen on “Time Team”). The equipment required for this is very expensive, hiring it costs hundreds of pounds per day – and there will be many days of work involved. Several rounds of meetings have therefore been necessary with County Councillors, local District Councillors and Barby Parish Councillors, aiming to raise initial funding to allow trial investigations to commence. Here too, everyone has been positive and helpful – and agreement is now in place for initial funding of a 2-year investigation.
- Discussions with Natural England: Some of the land in question is protected by a government heritage scheme, and therefore it is necessary to apply for a formal permit to carry out archaeology. This has involved further meetings, and much filling in of forms and writing of specifications. The application is now submitted, and I hope that by the time you read this article the necessary permission will have been granted to allow work to commence in the autumn.
- Writing detailed project specifications: No work can be attempted until a clear statement has been produced defining the precise purpose and nature of the work, plus a detailed specification defining exactly how the work will be carried out, and how it will be recorded and archived. This has been a “learning curve”, involving much reading of other archaeologists’ reports, yet more discussions (this time with professional archaeologists and officers of Natural England), visits to other sites where excavation and survey work is in progress, etc.

This is the stage that has now been reached ... support has been gained, initial funding is in hand, local landowners and the local history society are supporting the project, and official permission has been sought. The aim is that work on site will start in September, and continue through the winter and spring – it will involve a mixture of field-walking, metal-detecting and magnetometer survey (geophysics). I hope to report on the progress of this work in future articles.

Much of this work calls for skill and experience – and I have already recruited a number of experienced members of CLASP and NARC who are willing to work as volunteers on this initial tranche of the project; one or two professional archaeologists have also kindly agreed to give some of their valuable time and experience, and to lend necessary items of surveying equipment. However, it is important to involve local communities in exploring their own heritage, and there is room for a small number of “beginners” to accompany the more experienced personnel on site.

For obvious reasons we do not want to encourage people to wander at will over private farmland; access to the site will be strictly by permit, and numbers will be limited because it is working farmland and we do not want to upset the livestock or cause damage to crops or any other problems. This project will be organised and managed as professionally as possible, by a small core team.

This will be a unique opportunity to explore our remote past; we are very fortunate to be sitting virtually on top of a site that is of national significance. If any readers would like the opportunity to be involved, please contact me and we will see what can be arranged.

Gren Hatton,

July 2011

PS: If you want to refresh your memory of what was discovered in the excavations at Crick and Barby Nortoft, visit the **West Northants Local History** website at <http://www.westnorthantshistory.co.uk/introduction> (you will need to register to access this page, but there is no charge, and there are no “strings” attached).