

Higher Standen Farm – Excavation of a Bronze Age Ditch near Clitheroe

A summary from a talk by David Cockcroft (Archaeological Research Services) as part of the PHLP Community Archaeology Forum

Taylor Wimpey applied for planning permission to develop the land around Higher Standen Farm into houses. Archaeological Research Services Ltd were brought in by the client to look at the archaeology on the site more in depth, at the request of the County archaeologist.

The site sits on a ridge, north west of Pendle Hill, overlooking Clitheroe. The underlying geology – boulder clay (glacial till) above limestone and mudstone deposits – is a significant factor in this site.

The archaeological investigation started with a desk based assessment and geophysical survey by Archaeological Services Durham University in 2012. Initial surveys didn't identify any Bronze Age spots on the actual site – but records of other artefacts having been found close by (a roman coin was found).

The site was featured on an early map – Tithe Apportionment 1842 – as open farmland, and so there was potential that the farm buildings had historical significance. The majority of features identified during the geophysical survey and the archaeological evaluation were agricultural drains but geophysical survey and further site investigation did confirm the presence of a ring ditch which contained fragments of early Bronze Age pottery. So further archaeological investigation needed...

The excavation took place in 2018, 4 days after Beast from the East and so the weather made the site very difficult to work and it didn't finish until mid April.

The position and size of ring ditch has already been identified, but a few issues meant that only 75% of the feature could be accessed. During excavation, the archaeologists noticed that as the boulder clay had weathered, pink patches appeared around the ditch. The ring ditch itself have been eroded by weather, erosion and farming practices over time.

A circular pit was found that contained cremated human bones, and then 6 further pits were found plus some urns. Most burial pits were dug into the infilling of a fluvial glacial channel and disturbance made them invisible at sub soil level.

Two further burials were found. Cremation burials were analysed and in some cases, block excavated, before looking at other features of the site. Very little other material culture was found, apart from a dark grey piece of chert. This was analysed but didn't provide very much information about the site. It did show that there was probably human occupation in the area around 8000 BC.

Around half of the available surface of ring ditch was excavated. Remains of trees were found – potentially planted deliberately around the monument. There was a pit identified close to the ring ditch, but no finds were discovered. It was potentially a waste pit or post hole but that remains unconfirmed.

The cremation burials were analysed by an osteologist and dated using radiocarbon dating. The use of the pink weathered clay around the burial pits might be suggestive of the colour have a particular association – which can be seen in examples elsewhere, such as the use of ochre during this period or yellow sandstones found in Cornish burial cairns.

Two cremation burials were block lifted entirely, but some were not identified as they were not visible in the sub soil. The archaeologists obtained 7 viable samples, with a broad age range. Dates obtained by radiocarbon dating are accurate estimate of the age of the sample rather than events themselves, but we can estimate the date ranges of events more accurately, using Bayesian modelling.

Radiocarbon dating wood is tricky because the interior and exterior wood from a tree can give different dates depending on when the carbon was taken during growth (as tree rings). This also depends on the species as longer-lived trees have a much different between the interior wood and the exterior wood. Archaeologists compensate for this by using short lived tree species for radiocarbon dating.

Burial 4

- Most productive fragile remains of collared urn and young woman between 18 and 20 years old.
- Well preserved remains because of closely packed vessel.
- Identified Schmorl nodes in remains, which suggest development issues in the young adult, or physical trauma.
- Charcoal fragments included mature ash and oak heartwood, as well as hazel round wood (branches). So suggests that felled trees were used for the pyre, supplemented with branches.
- Evidence of barley also found charred with funeral fire – which could have been part of a symbolic ritual and indicates that whoever performed the funeral were involved in cereal cultivation
- Collared urn less well preserved
- Analysis suggests that this cremation took place between 1915 and 1750 BC

Burial 3

- Adjacent to pit of Burial 4
- Contained large upright urn, which was excavated around, urn was bandaged up in order to preserve it. Then the urn and its contents were lifted to be excavated off-site.
- Closeness between burial pits suggest a possible relationship between individuals.
- Sandy, clay urn with characteristic diamond motif.
- Remains very well preserved, including a skull fragment which suggest the remains are that of an infant/juvenile
- Also found a single burnt animal fragment – which suggests some sort of spiritual offering

- More varied charcoal assemblage than burial 4 – and indicates that a tree wasn't felled for this pyre, branches etc. were gathered and used.
- Analysis suggests that this cremation took place between 1895 and 1705 BC

Burial 1

- No urn in circular pit
- Possibly the remains of an adult male. Fragments of the femur suggested individual suffered some trauma potentially close to the femoral artery (maybe cause of death?)
- Charcoal assemblage included heartwood for the pyre.
- Analysis suggested that this cremation took place at a similar time as burial 3 between 1895 and 1705 BC.

Burial 5

- This was blocklifted, so the archaeologists cut around the feature, wrapped it up and excavated the entire thing inside.
- Fragmented collared urn with a characteristic motif, probably containing an adult and burnt animal bone in offering.
- Charcoal assemblage found roundwood (branches) used for pyre.
- Analysis suggested that this cremation took place between 1885 and 1700 BC.

Burials 8 and 6

- These weren't in very good condition.
- No cremated remains found in pit 6
- Pit 8 was adjacent to 6, and circular pit was excavated on site.
- Likely to hold the remains of an adult, but very poorly preserved.
- Charcoal assemblage suggested a pyre was created from heartwood of a mature hazel.
- Analysis suggested that this cremation took place between 1870 and 1680 BC.

Burial 7 (next to 6)

- This was excavated on site
- All that survived of the urn was remnant of rim
- Potential remains of adolescent
- Charcoal assemblage suggested that branches were used for cremation, and that remains of fruit stone also found (potential offering)
- Analysis suggested that this cremation took place between 1775 and 1620 BC.

Burial 9

- This was a rescue excavation as the area had been backfilled with subsoil before the feature was identified.
- Only obtained the bottom of pit
- No urn and not well preserved – potentially the remains of an adult.

- Did find evidence of wildflower and herb seeds – speculation could suggest an offering of a bouquet of flowers?
- Analysis suggested that this cremation took place between 1765 and 1635 BC.

Demographics of burials are not homogenous, and include different individuals. This could well have been an extended family group, who farmed in the area, however we will never know for sure.

The site is thematic with upland Bronze Age burials, where monuments are smaller scale. The pit with the juvenile remains includes a smaller urn carried in a larger urn. This could have represented something special, and we could speculate over the connection with the female remains due to close proximity of both burial pits.

No valuable grave goods were found and they were made using materials from where they were.