

October 2020

The Devonshire Archaeological Society(DAS) Zoom lecture - Thorverton Community Archaeology Project
Recorded for the Thorverton History Society by K A Marshall

On Wednesday 21st October DAS held its first zoom lecture on our own Thorverton archaeological dig which took place in 2019. With 77 participants it was well attended and with many interested academic as well as local contributors.

The talk started with a minutes silence for John Morton Coles (1930-2020) from Thorverton a valued contributor to experimental and prehistoric archaeology.

Paul Rainbird for the DAS then took us through some of the significant prehistoric sites of the area and the background to the dig before explaining the results.

Introduced as an area already known for its rich prehistoric archaeology, he identified existing examples in our neighbourhood: Raddon's early neolithic and iron Age hill fort, Upton Pyne Barrows (Bronze Age barrows identified near Burrow Farm); in Nether Exe a series of monuments, enclosures and ring ditches as well as the Killerton Park hill fort, scheduled for further investigation...which all point to an already acknowledged area of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity. In addition, the field walking work of John Uglow was recommended in corresponding widespread flint scatters.

The project itself was initiated by the Parish Council to investigate an area proposed for the extension of the graveyard of St Thomas a Beckett across from Dark Lane. Initial pits and ditches indicated the possibility of both pottery and worked flint shards from the middle Neolithic Period which together are unusual for Devon and so a full investigation was sought before an extension of the graveyard. Heritage Lottery funds were subsequently accessed to facilitate a community archaeological project in a larger area of 20 hectares. So, with help from the Primary School, a geophysical survey using a magnetometer, historical documents such as tythe maps and an open day with more than 350 people attending, the stage was set for more than 40 volunteers to dig two areas of interest in the last two weeks of September 2019!

Area 1

This was the area originally identified for the graveyard extension and had previously already indicated 345 pieces of flint scatter alone. The archaeologists identified a ditch with a gentle profile which although truncated by ploughing was identifiable and also cut through a number of pit features which contained significant finds. There were 118 fragments of pottery, 58 from the topsoil and others from within the pits. This included fragments of a decorated rim shard and Peterborough Ware (Mid Neolithic) as well as charred hazelnut shell fragments typical of Neolithic sites. Two radio carbon dates ranged the finds between 3352 to 2945 BCE, firmly dating these into the Middle Neolithic. A decorated shard was particularly significant and very rare in Devon, made of Gabbroic clay sourced from The Lizard. It is unusual to find pottery from non local clay!

The ditch feature could possibly have been extended further than the dig area and may have been associated with a Middle Neolithic cursus type enclosure with a possible bank on the West (internal side) of the area.

Area 2

This was an area picked from the geophysical survey indicating a section of a ditch and gully feature as well as pits and post hole pits. The diameter of the completed round ditch was extrapolated to be some 30m and was approximately 1.5m wide by half a metre deep. There were also impressions of post holes indicating a wooden palisade. Four further post holes made another smaller ring of 10m diameter within the ditch and still included post packing stones indicating two consecutive structures within the enclosed area of the ditch. 38 shards were found in this area, 35 of which were Middle Neolithic, however, paleo-environmental samples also indicated evidence of Spelt Wheat and there is no evidence of this before the

Bronze Age. Radio carbon dating also fitted dates to the Late Bronze Age so it was felt that we had a timeline of habitation and usage for an Early Bronze Age/Beaker settlement into a later Bronze Age ringwork. Comparative structures in the SE indicate a central roundhouse, often with a wooden palisade and enclosed by a circular ditch. Although these have sometimes been confused with henge monuments from the Neolithic, all the evidence here is for two successive domestic roundhouse structures within the Bronze Age but located close to previous Neolithic activity. A reconstruction of the Hill Barton, Exeter structure by Mark Gridley shows what this could have looked like.

The talk concluded by reaffirming how good these results were and the DAS roundly thanked for their contribution.

End.