

An Assessment of the Archeological Excavation of Braybrooke NG Substation, Braybrooke, Northamptonshire

Introduction

In 2021 archeological field works were carried out by Network Archaeology Ltd. on behalf of National Grid for an access road to a new electricity supply substation at Braybrooke, Northamptonshire. A programme of strip, map and sample excavation and archaeological watching brief of two trenches was carried out. Works excluded the site of the actual substation as that area had been investigated by evaluation trenches in 2018 and excavated in 2019 by Oxford Archaeology Ltd. (Townend 2022, 6). During the 2019 excavation a large north to south orientated ditch and further boundary and enclosure ditches were unearthed. The dating evidence was very sparse, a few pieces of pottery sherds dating to the late Iron Age to early Roman and Saxon period (an Ipswich ware dated to the eighth century AD) were recovered. The authors speculate that the ditches were dug in the Saxon period or later and the earlier pottery found are residual. The function of the ditches was also in question (Scott and Howsham 2020, 13).

The aim of this paper is to summarise the results of an excavation of a multi-phase site using the site report with reference to the current research frameworks. Due to the limited wordcount the Medieval, Post-Medieval and Modern results are excluded and the earlier periods with substantial results are summarised. The chosen excavation site has been assessed by P. Townend who also addressed some of the research questions from the Regional Research Agenda (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012) as a part of the Updated Project Design (Townend 2022, 63). Period specific county overviews (<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/county-overviews/>) could also complement the research. Further site specific questions based on my notes were added to the existing research to enhance the results. I did not attempt to answer the research questions as that would exceed the limits of this study paper. The author of this work took part in the site excavations as a project supervisor.

Results of the excavation - Features and Finds

The mitigation area on the proposed haul road consisted of six smaller sites, Area A, B, C1, C2, D1, D2, with Area C2 and D2 being the more dense sections, containing numerous archaeological features. Areas E1 and E2 included the trenches, which were subject of the archaeological watching brief (Townend 2022, 4). The archaeological excavation on the access road unearthed features dating from the Prehistoric times to the post-medieval period, however no archaeological activity and artefacts were found in Area A. The monitored trenches also showed the absence of archaeology, and only a few modern interventions were noted (Townend 2022, 61). The majority of the excavated features were attributed to a phase (Phase 1-6) and features with no dating or stratigraphic evidence were listed as unphased (Townend 2022, 4).

Earlier Prehistoric

A small residual flint assemblage including flakes, a bladelet, a side scraper, a flake core and a bladelet core recovered from later features could indicate that the area was in use from the Mesolithic to Early Neolithic period, with another activity taking place in the Late Neolithic or Bronze Age (Devaney 2022, 2), however only one feature, a small pit with a flint flake in Area C2 could be securely dated as Prehistoric (Townend 2022, 61).

Iron Age

The Iron Age features were represented in Area C1 by two large, intercutting boundary ditches, one ran from northwest to southeast, while the other had northeast to southwest orientation. Both of the original ditches had been re-cut several times during their use (Townend 2022, 61). The features contained pottery of the middle Iron Age tradition and late Iron Age to early Roman sherds of shell tempered ware were also found (Mills 2022a, 5). Samples collected during the excavation from these features produced a very small amount of charcoal (Carrot 2022, 79), it is worth to note that the environmental sampling yielded similar results from the 2019 Oxford Archaeology Ltd. excavation (Scott and Howsham 2020, 13).

Roman

Series of southwest to northeast and southeast to northwest orientated linears of possible early Roman date were excavated in Areas C1, D1 and D2. These ditches formed a possible early field system containing pottery dated to the first century AD (Mills 2022a, 5), while a possible late Iron Age or early Roman curvilinear enclosure or ring ditch was excavated in Area D2 (Townend 2022, 62). There were two centres of Roman activity observed on site. Features in Area C2 included a series of pits, curvilinear gullies, intercutting linears truncating earlier boundary ditches and a possible rake-out pit of a kiln. Area D2 consisted of a boundary or enclosure ditch which was re-cut several times and a series of pits were also excavated (Townend 2022, 62). The pottery recovered from these features were dated to the Roman period from the first century AD to the second century AD, however there is evidence for another, later episode of Roman activity in the third to fourth century AD indicated by the pottery fragments in Area C2 (Mills 2022a, 5). Further fired clay fragments (blocks, lining and plates) identified as kiln furniture recovered from this feature suggesting a possible Nene valley type kiln (Mills 2022b, 30). Environmental sampling of the rake-out pit showed that alder, birch, hazel and heather were used as a fuel, in a form of small round wood (twigs, branches etc.). Charred remains of wheat were also observed. From other features charred oak pieces were identified, suggesting a secondary use of an early structural element (Carrot 2022, 80). Other finds dating to the Roman period include a possible coin and a quern or mill stone fragment (Foulds 2022, 64; Shaffrey 2022, 73).

Early Medieval

The early Medieval features were located in Area C2, these included a single southwest to northeast to southeast orientated curving ditch, a pit of unknown function containing unburnt human and animal bones (Lake and Holst 2022, 49), two possible graves and eight cremations (Townend 2022, 25-28). The excavation of a heavily truncated, shallow inhumation grave yielded a very small amount of disarticulated human bone (Lake and Holst 2022, 49), while grave goods recovered from a very shallow rectangular cut suggested a presence of a second burial, however no human remains were found due to later agricultural activities heavily disturbing the grave (Townend 2022, 25-28). The grave goods included a cruciform brooch, an iron belt buckle, five glass and nine amber beads and a fragment of a copper alloy sheet dating to the late fifth to mid-sixth century AD (Foulds 2022, 65). Three unurned and five urned cremations were investigated on site¹ (Townend 2022, 25-28). While the cremations contained burnt fragmented human bones representing one individual, it seems likely that the urn from Cremation 6 contained bones of at least two persons (Lake and Holst 2022, 49). Cremation 6 also contained a burnt bone disc with a faint knife mark, which was identified as an oval piece of cranium. It is suggested that the disc may have been a result of a trepanation² rather than a worked piece of bone (Lake and Holst 2022, 49; Riddler 2022, 53). Finds from the cremation pit fills or from the content of the urns included unidentified iron objects, a copper alloy sheet, hobnails³, residual late Iron Age and Roman pottery sherds⁴ (Foulds 2022, 65; Mills 2022, 9). Cremations 1, 3, 6 and 7 were dated based on the plain pottery urns to the fifth to ninth century AD, while one cremation, Cremation 5 containing a decorated, stamped vessel was dated to the sixth century AD (Blinkhorn 2022, 24). The features also contained charcoal which was identified from environmental samples. These samples contained alder, birch, hazel and oak remains. The sample from Cremation 6 contained traces of a possible food plant identified as onion⁵ (Carrot 2022, 81). The author of the assessment report also notes that the Anglo-Saxon archaeological remains were in the same area where the Roman features appeared in abundance (Townend 2022, 62).

Research Frameworks

¹ Unfortunately the majority of the cremations were truncated by later activity, which affected the completeness and the condition of the features and their content. Due to the fragmented state of the vessels three urns were block lifted and excavated off site in a controlled environment, while the others were excavated on site (Gray 2022, 34; Townend 2022, 25-28).

² There are no known examples of recorded trepanation from early Anglo-Saxon cremations, however further evidence of trepanation from this period can be found in the archaeological reports and most of the cases were found in east England (Lake and Holst 2022, 49; Riddler 2022, 53).

³ The hobnails from Cremation 6 may have been residual. They are dated as Roman, however a later date of early Medieval could not be ruled out (Foulds 2022, 65).

⁴ A fragment of a samian vessel (Drag. 18/31 or 31) found in the cremation urn of Cremation 1. The author suggested that the Roman pottery was curated (Mills 2020, 9).

⁵ Carrot (2022, 81) speculates that it could be an 'offering' for the burial, however this idea has to be treated with caution and needs further environmental investigation.

As mentioned in the Introduction some of the research questions were used for the Updated Project Design (Townend 2022, 63), which will outline the research of the site for the next analysis phase. For the summary I used the Leicestershire and the Northamptonshire Resource Assessments as the site is located on the borders of these two counties.

Iron Age

Evidence for the Iron Age presence on site was sparse, only two boundary ditches and their re-cuts survived and no other elements of a settlement or agricultural field systems were present. Evidence of re-cutting could indicate an extended use of the same field system (Townend 2022, 61). Iron Age archaeological material in both counties (Leicestershire and Northants) can be found.

There is evidence for extensive lowland settlements and land management from excavations and cropmark evidence in Leicestershire, however the transition from the Iron Age to the Roman era is uncertain. It is noted that some of the late Iron Age settlements were abandoned with the Roman expansion, while others continued to flourish (<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/4.-LaterBronzeIronLeicsRutland.pdf>).

In Northamptonshire densely populated landscapes developed by clearing woodlands as the population was continuously growing from the middle Iron Age. There is evidence of settlements transitioning through the early Roman times and the agricultural landscape become more mixed (<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/4.NorthantsLateBronzeIron.pdf>).

Due to the low number of Iron Age features at Braybrooke there is very little to tell what the site could represent. The Research Agenda (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 58) quoted by Townend (2022, 63) sets out the research objectives and the following could be relevant regarding the site: *4.6 Field systems and major linear boundaries* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 58)⁶. I would also add paragraph *4.8 The agricultural economy and landscape* with question: *4.8.1 Can we chart more closely the processes of woodland clearance and agricultural intensification, their impact upon alluviation and colluviation and variation between the areas?* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 58). The environmental evidence noted the lack of charcoal in the Iron Age samples from Braybrooke, which could add to this objective. The Research Agenda emphasises the importance of sampling as it can add further information regarding the diet, land use and site economy (Willis 2006, 133). Evaluations at Overstone Park, Clack Hill at Market Harborough revealed evidence of a large late Iron Age to Early Roman settlement and enclosure system and some Anglo-Saxon features (Walker and Peachy 2016), which is in the close vicinity of Braybrooke. Despite the small evidence of late

⁶ Research Questions include: 4.6.1 Can we shed further light upon the development of field and boundary systems? 4.6.2 What were the economic, social or political roles of the pit alignments and linear ditch systems that characterised many areas of the East Midlands? 4.6.3 What may we deduce from studies of linear boundaries with respect to changes in the agrarian landscape? (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 58).

Iron Age presence at Braybrooke, it would be great to compare the pottery to see if any connection could be drawn between these sites.

Roman

Most of the archaeological remains at Braybrooke were dated as Roman and two areas could have been the centre of the activities. The earlier field system was altered and larger boundary ditches were created (Townend 2022, 62), which could indicate a change in the function or in the size of the plot. The large boundary ditch with its re-cuts in Area D2 suggests a more permanent setting. The kiln furniture recovered from a possible rake-out pit could indicate local pottery production (Mills 2022b, 30).

In Leicestershire, larger towns (Leicester) were established along the roads, however these towns could have pre-conquest origins. Smaller towns, like Market Harborough may have been linked by roads to other settlements. Pottery producing sites are also recognised, and their products can be found in the region (e.g. Mancetter). The rural, agricultural settlements consisted of possible farms and farmsteads. Anglo-Saxon remains can often be found on fourth century Roman sites (<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/5.-RomanLeicsRutland.pdf>).

In Northamptonshire the rural settlements follow two distinct traditions: at the central and southern part the roundhouses are common but a gradual change can be observed in the first century AD and stone buildings become more popular, while in the northeast part people continue to use roundhouses until the second century AD. The roads could play a major role in the locations of the settlements, however the development and function of the small settlements are not explored. The landscape organisation, such as changing field boundaries, could mirror the changes in the social organisations. Agricultural practice evidence could be enhanced by further environmental research and new methods. There is real potential in industrial research especially in pottery production in rural areas (large pottery workshops are known from Nene Valley) (<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/5.NorthantsRoman.pdf>).

Townend (2022, 64) quotes the following main criterias regarding the Romano-British Updated Research Agenda (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 70): *5.1 Chronology; 5.4 Rural Settlement patterns and Landscapes*.⁷ The presence of a possible Nene valley type kiln on site would suggest a local pottery workshop. The nearest pottery production site could be southwest from Hillmorton. Comparing the products from these sites could also add further information of the pottery

⁷ The quoted research questions are the following: ‘5.1 Chronology 5.1.1 How can we enhance our knowledge of developing pottery industries, particularly during the Conquest period and 3rd to 4th centuries? 5.4 Rural settlement patterns and landscapes 5.4.1. How did the Conquest impact upon rural settlements and landscapes? 5.4.4 How did field and boundary systems relate to earlier systems of land allotment, and how did these boundary networks develop over time? 5.4.5 What patterns can be discerned in the location of settlements in the landscape? 5.4.6. Can we elucidate further the daily life of settlements and their role in the processing and marketing of agricultural products?’ (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 70).

industry (Mills 2022b, 30). I would also add further questions from the paragraph regarding the pottery studies from the Research Agenda 5.6 *Artefacts: production, distribution and social identity: 5.6.3 How many studies of the production, movement and consumption of pottery contribute to understanding the regional economy?* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 70). Further site specific research could include the connections to the Roman Market Harborough and cemeteries within the landscape.

Early Medieval

Anglo-Saxon archaeological remains consisted of a small group of cremations and two inhumation burials and one ditch concentrated within a small area, and the funerary features disturbed the earlier Roman features (Townend 2022, 25-28).

In Leicestershire the number of known Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and sites are growing. The early cemeteries could be directly connected to the Roman towns (Leicester, Mancetter etc.), which had importance in the early Saxon period. Other sites without Roman predecessors also exist. Cremation and inhumation cemeteries were excavated from the county but not all published. Very little known of the locations of the settlements associated with cemeteries <https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/6.-AngloSaxonLeicsRutland.pdf>.

In Northamptonshire there is little evidence of the use of field systems, the Roman traditions may have been continued in the early-middle Saxon period. Numerous cemeteries are known from the county (Heritage Environmental Records), and while they are easily recognisable due to the finds, there is little known about the contemporary settlements. Some cemeteries in Northants are also associated with Roman settlements and villa sites or roads.

(<https://researchframeworks.org/emherf/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/6.NorthantsSaxon.pdf>).

The site report (Townend 2022, 64) quotes the following Research Agenda questions: 6.1 *Demography and the identification of political and social groups*; 6.2 *Ritual and belief*⁸ (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 82). The investigation of the surrounding area of Anglo-Saxon burial sites are also important to establish the limits of the cemetery. Plough damage can make it difficult to observe burial practices. Samples could also help to reconstruct the early Saxon landscape and 'look for woodland regeneration' (Vince 2006, 170-174). I would add further questions from the Research Agenda, such as 6.5 *Inland Towns, 'central places' and burials: 6.5.1 How may Anglo-Saxon and British communities have utilised late Roman towns and their immediate environs?* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 82). It is also worth investigating the trepanations if any recorded in the nearby cemeteries or in the region.

⁸ 6.1.4. How far may studies of dress be advanced by analyses of inhumations, and how may dress accessories reflect social or political groupings? 6.2.2. Can 'sub-Roman' or 'British' cemeteries and cemeteries dating from the late seventh to ninth centuries be identified? 6.2.3. Can we characterise more precisely Anglo-Saxon and Viking cemeteries and identify temporal or spatial variability in funerary traditions? (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 82).

Summary

Despite the size of the site, the features excavated at Braybrook have great potential for further research. Unfortunately only a small proportion of the actual archaeological site was excavated, which limits the understanding of the early field systems and their development and changes in the historic landscape. The possible pottery production area is in question as the actual kiln (if there was any) was outside of the limit of the excavation, however the comparison of finds recovered can put another pottery workshop on the map alongside with the early Medieval remains. The limits of the small mixed rite 'cemetery' are also unknown, and there is a possibility that further graves can be located outside the mitigation area. The Regional Research Agenda and the updated strategy sets out a good direction for further research with potential to add new information and broaden the existing knowledge, which connecting sites, regions and people.

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