The Hardwick Estate: A Journey Through Time

Fieldwork report on the Medieval village site, the Duck Decoy and the World War Two military camp

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Introduction

In the summer of 2011 a group of Derbyshire County Council Learners undertook The National Trust’s new Archaeology Trail with the purpose of feeding back general thoughts and suggestions on both the route and the heritage features. From that evaluation session, three areas were flagged up as potential research areas for the future – the site of the Medieval village, the old Duck Decoy and the World War Two military camp. From this, a six month Community Research Project was set up under the Limestone Journeys Project in order to carry out active research including archaeological surveying, planning and drawing, map work, documentary analysis, oral history and archive research. The aim was two-pronged; to help collate new material for the Hardwick Estate in order to feed into interpretation and visitor information, and to train people up in field skills and active research methods.

The Old Duck Decoy

The first stage of the project centred around the Old Duck Decoy. The Decoy appears to have been built in 1860, and according to Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey’s 1886 work The Book of Duck Decoys, was the only existing Decoy in Derbyshire, although there were others in neighbouring Nottinghamshire – ‘A very perfect trap Decoy exists here, similar to those in use at Haughton, Ossington Hall, and Park Hall, in Nottinghamshire’.¹ The Decoy at Hardwick was constructed by building a circular bank and ditch roughly one hundred and fifty metres in diameter, with the stream leading from the Great Pond running through the centre. The area inside this earthwork was flooded except for an inner ‘island’ which contained the Decoy’s netted cage, with trapdoors at each end in order to capture wild ducks. Each trapdoor was controlled using a pulley system housed inside a stone structure built into opposite banks:

‘There are two trap doors, one at each end of the cage, and this is necessary on account of the ducks changing their position according to the wind. Either end can then be worked by means of two wires with separate wind-lasses from one “sight-house,” as the cage being of wire netting the ducks can be easily seen through the partition in its centre. The Decoy birds are always fed inside the cages, and plenty of food is strewn therein at all times to tempt the wild birds to enter. Both trap doors are left up, and as soon as the Decoyman observes any wild birds in either partition, he slowly, and inch by inch, lowers the door that closes it, and so entraps the birds therein.’²
Generally, Decoys were built on former marshes or mudflats in order to catch ducks and wildfowl. From a structural point of view, they usually had a high fence or wide ditch surrounding them. Hardwick’s Decoy was no different, and a huge earthen bank and ditch surrounds the inner ‘island’. Between 1857-61 much of the natural habitat at Hardwick was damaged by cleaning and improving the Great Ponds and by the straightening of the Doe Lea river. The Duck Decoy was built in order to make up for this damage, and to help maintain the levels of wildfowl, at a cost of £950 16s 8d in 1860. The Hardwick example is thought of as the best ‘cage decoy’ in England, and was one of only nine of that type.

When it was constructed, it had a footbridge that ran from the north-east sight hut into the centre of the island, with both the bridge and both sight huts’ doors being painted ‘with five coats of bronze green’. Both the bridge and the doors have not survived, supposedly taken down in the 1920s, but the stone-built sight huts can still be seen within the earthen bank (Fig. 2). The cage, located in the middle of the island, was built with a brick base and low-lying, sunken wall foundations, with a wood, metal and wire housing sat on top of this. The method for opening and closing the cage trapdoors can be seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 1:** Early drawings of a Duck Decoy showing the cage structure (right) and the Decoyman capturing the wild birds (left)
Figure 2: Plan of the north-east sight hut, drawn by the Research Group

Figure 3: Plan of the cage and operating method taken from Gallwey’s book
The plantation that surrounds the Decoy was constructed at the same time, and consisted of five thousand spruce firs, five hundred yews, Common and Portugal Laurel and one hundred Rhodendron.\textsuperscript{5} Ironically, the original planting failed as it was destroyed by game, and a second planting was necessary in 1864-65. The Great Depression in the late Victorian period saw the majority of Decoys abandoned, and Hardwick had a similar fate. By 1893 it had fallen from use, and by 1900 the inner area had begun silting up.\textsuperscript{6} Interestingly, when the current Research Group was undertaking a section drawing of the bank and ditch (see Figure 4) a large scattering of waste material, including broken pottery and glassware and dating from the late 19\textsuperscript{th} / early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, was noted spreading down the eastern side of the bank and into the ditch. This seems most likely a dump deposit, perhaps from the nearby Hardwick Inn, and corresponds to the period when the Decoy fell out of use.

Figure 4: Section drawing of the bank and ditch drawn by the Research Group, at scale 1:20
Figure 5: Sample of artefacts from the bank and ditch recovered during fieldwork (M. Beresford)

Figure 6: Gallwey’s plan of the Duck Decoy showing the inner island and position of the cage
Figure 7: Plan of the surviving cage feature showing measurements, drawn from fieldwork undertaken by the Research Group (G. Eley)
World War Two Army Camp

This element of the project was relatively short and aimed to test the feasibility of a long-term study. Initial assessments flagged up the huge potential for this, and an abundance of evidence was noted that includes documentary sources, maps, oral testimonies and buried archaeology.

**Documentary sources:** A small archive of material exists at Hardwick which shows that the Camp was extremely important. It was set up to train the Parachute Regiment, and a detailed plan of it exists alongside photographs which add detail to certain buildings. By matching the shape and design of buildings reflected in the photographs to the plan, it is possible to start piecing together the layout of the camp. Other documentary archives almost certainly hold material that would add much to this exercise.

**Maps:** Several old maps show the location of the Camp and its various outlying buildings. A detailed plan was sourced and overlain onto a modern map of the Estate at Hardwick. This allowed us to work out where various features would have been ‘on the ground’ and the potential for surviving evidence ‘in situ’ is good.

**Archaeology:** A walk-over survey of the Camp area showed the potential for existing features. There are several ‘lumps and bumps’ in the area. With the Camp long since demolished it was unclear how much may survive, but recovered material from mole hills reflected pieces of Ceramic Building Materials (brick and tile), glass and metalwork. A couple of features are exposed through the turf, and one square, brick-built structure was located towards the top of the slope at the eastern edge of the Camp area. This was fully exposed and recorded and is shown in the photograph below.

![Figure 8: Brick-built structure from the eastern edge of the camp](image)
Figure 9: Plan of the World War Two camp at Hardwick
Oral Testimony: The potential here is huge, with several of the group members having friends or relatives that remember the Camp and have valuable information on it. Opening up a wider Oral History element to a project would undoubtedly reveal much more information.

Conclusion

The result of this examination suggests that a long-term project of 2-3 years duration would be needed in order to reveal the full history of the Camp and provide information that could be used to inform development / management, tourism and visitor information. There is not the scope under the current Limestone Journeys provision for this sizeable project, and the best way forward would be for the establishment of a group who could procure external funding, supported by the National Trust and others.
Field Research at Blingsby Medieval Village

Introduction

Prior to the current project being undertaken no archaeological fieldwork had taken place at Blingsby except for Clive Hart’s detailed ground survey of existing earthworks (Hart, 1984). This shows that the village appears to have been located on the slope of the escarpment, starting around the Blingsby Gate entrance and covering the slope until it reaches the high point at the top, where the ground then levels off. No earthworks are visible in this top section, and it was assumed that it did not extend beyond this point.

Figure 10: Clive Hart’s groundwork survey of Blingsby village (Hart, 1984)
Blingsby is known as a Medieval village, but its exact date is uncertain. The village is recorded in the *Domesday Survey* of 1086, suggesting its origins were therefore datable to the Saxon period. However, the very name ‘blingsby’ and in particular the suffix ‘-by’ is indicative of potential Viking origins, further supported by the local settlement of Stainsby. There is also the church at Ault Hucknall, which is also known to date to the Saxon period. There is, however, no known settlement at Ault Hucknall dating to the Saxon or Medieval period.

The earliest phase of the project saw the four local settlements mentioned in Domesday – Blingsby, Stainsby, Bramley and Rowthorne – plotted onto the Ordnance Survey map. These settlements must all have been in existence in Late Saxon times given their inclusion in Domesday, and once plotted on the map a diamond formation was observed. Bramley survives today as Bramley Vale and formed the northern point of the diamond. Stainsby also survives as a small, nucleated village and forms the western point. Rowthorne, too, survives and is the eastern point. Only Blingsby, of the four, no longer exists as a settlement, but does survive as a place name in Blingsby Gate on the Hardwick Estate and forms the southern point of the diamond. Once plotted, Ault Hucknall is then located at the very centre of the diamond, and footpaths or narrow roadways lead from the church to all four of these settlements, suggesting each track may well have been in existence since Saxon times. It is therefore possible that the church was established and located centrally in order to serve the four communities.

**Test Pit analysis**

In total, we excavated five test pits in varying locations in order to assess the existence and preservation of buried archaeology. The locations of the test pits are highlighted on the plan below. Each test pit was 1m square and excavated in 10cm spits to a depth of 1.2m or when natural bedrock was reached.
Test Pit #1 was located centrally inside a circular, earthen feature that was approximately 5m in diameter and consisted of a ‘scooped’ hollow that was 50-60cm in depth. Initial opinion was that this may have been a house platform. It was excavated to a depth of 1m and comprised of topsoil (spits 1 and 2), a dark brown clayey silt with charcoal abundant (spit 3), a light brown sandy, silty clay with red and yellow patches, again with charcoal present (spits 4 and 5) and a light yellowish-brown silty clay with charcoal present (spit 6). Spits 7-10 comprised a thick clayey layer with no artefacts recovered.

Finds from Test Pit #1 included a green glazed Medieval pot sherd, c.13\textsuperscript{th}/14\textsuperscript{th} century from spit 1, a piece of Late Saxon ‘shelly ware’ pottery and what seems to be a small piece of Saxo-Norman pottery (c.12/13\textsuperscript{th} century), orange on the exterior and light grey on the interior, both from spit 5. Chronologically, the pottery seems to be undisturbed, and the abundance of charcoal and red and yellow patches is indicative of burning. The conclusion is that it could have been a small dwelling with a hearth inside. The only piece of recovered
material that did not fit chronologically was a small broken flint tool from spit 4. This is white in colour, has a clear bulb of percussion on the rear and is approximately 2cm in length. The line of break and shape of the tool suggest a maximum unbroken length of approximately 3.5cm. It appears to have been a small Bronze Age arrowhead.

**Test Pit #2** was located on the flat ground at the top of the slope, just to the west of the path. The first two spits comprised of topsoil with occasional stone pieces. Spit 3 was an orangey-brown sandy silt that was full of stone pieces and occasional pieces of charcoal. At a depth of approximately 30cm a rubbly layer was exposed that consisted of large limestone pieces. When this was excavated and cleaned up it appeared to be part of a stone wall foundation with a variable depth of between 30-50cm, and had a circular feature in the centre and a thin, narrow ‘gulley’ that ran from the eastern edge of the trench and into the circular feature.

Artefacts recovered were slight, but included the broken tip of a slate pencil approximately 2cm in length from spit 1, and a single sherd of Late Saxon pottery from spit 2, which also contained a sherd of 19th century pottery. Spits 2 and 3 also had small pieces of what looks like un-worked jet.

![Exposed stone feature from Test Pit #2. Note circular sunken feature (centre) with narrow gulley running into it (M. Beresford)](image)

**Figure 12:** Exposed stone feature from Test Pit #2. Note circular sunken feature (centre) with narrow gulley running into it (M. Beresford)
**Test Pit #3** was located approximately seven metres further south than Test Pit #2 with the hope of seeing whether the potential stone building discovered in this pit continued. Again, the first two spits comprised of topsoil, and spit three was of a yellowish-brown clayey silt that contained stone pieces and occasional pieces of charcoal. Spit 4 contained frequent stone pieces and at a depth of between 38-46cm a stone floor was exposed. Again, a piece of Late Saxon pottery was recovered from this layer. This was cleaned and recorded and a small area was removed in the north-east corner in order to determine the depth of the stone work. Underneath the stone floor, a greenish-grey silty clay was exposed at a depth of 61cm, suggesting the floor was approximately 20-25cm thick.

![Figure 13: Stone floor exposed in Test Pit #3 (M. Beresford)](image)

**Test Pit #4** was located approximately half way up the slope and close to an earthen bank within the village earthworks. The area seemed to have been exposed to consistent burning and spits 2-4 all consisted of a light-brown clayey silt that became a sandy silt towards 40cm deep. Pieces of burnt stone and charcoal pieces were abundant in all three layers. At a depth of 40cm frequent pieces of tufa were uncovered, and at 45cm this became quite a thick deposit. The presence of such an amount of tufa and snail shells from c.40cm deep suggests a good degree of water-logging, which is strange given the location half way up the
No known water source can be noted anywhere in the immediate vicinity. The pit was backfilled at this stage.

No artefacts were recovered, other than a couple of pieces of CBM from spit 1, and what might be very degraded pieces of bone from spit 3, although these could easily be pieces of calcified tufa. One piece of what appears to be burnt stone is of a shape that suggests it might be crude pottery, but again this is difficult to tell. The lack of artefacts is surprising given its location in what should theoretically be the heart of the village, but the evidence for water-logging may explain this.

Test Pit #5 was located fourteen metres to the south of Test Pit #4 and consisted of dark-brown clay in spits 1 and 2 leading into light-brown clay in spits 3-7. At approximately 70cm a layer of skerry (mud) stone was encountered. There were no inclusions in the pit apart from a piece of modern pottery in spit 1 and a small piece of slag in spit 3.

Conclusion

The results of the test pit evaluation clearly shows that archaeological evidence directly related to the village still survives in situ. From just five test pits datable material has been recovered and this corresponds with the chronology of the village outlined in the introduction. There is clear evidence that the village was in existence in the later Saxon period and through into the Medieval. We still do not know when, or why, the village was abandoned, nor when it first came into existence. The discovery of a flint tool in Test Pit #1 is not surprising, as an abundance of prehistoric flint tools and debitage have been recovered at Hardwick by extensive field walking carried out by Sherwood Archaeological Society, the results of which are stored at Mansfield Museum.
The discovery of what seems to be a stone wall foundation and flooring of a potentially substantial building was a surprise, and further evidence is almost certainly expected. Datable material recovered from the layer above the stonework attests to an early Medieval date, possibly c. 1300s. That nothing has been recovered post dating this period so far suggests a relatively short lifespan for the village, possibly only three hundred years or so. However, more extensive excavations are required in order to address this fully. That the building is located on the high ground above the village may suggest it was a defensive structure, and there is a notable mound and steep incline just a few metres away. There is also the possibility that it could be ecclesiastical, although the presence of Ault Hucknall church less than a mile away makes this unlikely.

The flat area above the noted earthworks where the stone structure is located would certainly benefit from some geophysical surveying being carried out, and a more targeted ‘open trench’ excavation would help to clearly define the buildings size and purpose, and hopefully provide more tight dating evidence.

1 Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey The Book of Duck Decoys, London, 1886, p. 69
2 Ibid. p. 71
3 A Survey of the Gardens & Park of Hardwick Hall, National Trust, 1986, p. 137
4 Ibid. p. 137
5 Ibid. p. 138
6 Ibid. p. 139