INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork at Whitwell Woods, Derbyshire was carried out by MBArchaeology and volunteers from the Community Archaeology Investigation Group based at Creswell Crags, Derbyshire between November 2011 and June 2012. The study focussed on two known earth and stone enclosures located within the boundaries of Whitwell Woods. The first enclosure, located towards the centre of the wood, had been previously excavated and contained Romano-British pottery. The current project aimed to record this feature through surveying and drawing. The second enclosure, located towards the north of the wood, had had no exploratory excavations conducted but had previously been attributed to the Medieval period due to its suggested relationship to other features within the landscape. This too was recorded through surveying and drawing, and test pit analysis was conducted in the hope of recovering datable material.

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THE STUDY AREA

Whitwell Woods is owned and managed by the Forestry Commission and sits at the northern fringes of the Southern Magnesian Limestone region, approximately 0.5 miles to the north of the village of Whitwell, Derbyshire. The wooded landscape rises
gently from east to west, sitting approximately 95m O.D. at its eastern edge and increasing to approximately 135m O.D. at its western edge. The wood also slopes down in a northerly direction, and in the north-west quadrant a deep valley runs approximately north-south culminating at the river. The two enclosures sit nestled at approximately 110-115m O.D. The closest water source is the Bondhay Dyke, which abuts the woodland boundary to the north.

Early maps of the woods and immediate area show Medieval ridge and furrow and earthwork boundaries (Enclosure Map of 1779), existing paths and woodland prior to the current wood’s creation (Ordnance Survey 1840) and the development of the wood into its present state with eights Drives laid out on behalf of the Duke of Portland (Ordnance Survey 1883) (Zeffertt, 1994).

PREVIOUS FIELDWORK AT WHITWELL WOODS

David Knight (now of Trent & Peak Archaeology) carried out field surveys of two earth and stone enclosures in 1986, although this remains unpublished. The features (355 and 619 on Figure 1) are similar in size and shape and are most likely Romano-British in date. Excavations by Whitwell Wood Natural History Society later recovered 154 sherds of pottery dating to between the 2nd and 4th centuries from enclosure 619. No field excavations have been carried out in enclosure 355 so its date remains elusive, but the similarities between the two features may well attest a similar Romano-British date.

Fieldwork by Creswell Heritage Trust was carried out in 1989 on a rectangular feature in the south-east of the wood (SK525789). The feature comprised stone wall foundations and post holes and showed signs of later disturbance including a bird trap deemed to be c. 1970s. Evidence of burning was also noted, although no datable material was recovered and the building’s date / function remains unknown.

A rapid archaeological survey was carried out at Whitwell Woods in the spring of 1994 by Torven Zeffertt (The Whitwell Wood Archaeological Survey) on behalf of the Forestry Commission. This survey covered the entire wood and identified over four
hundred archaeological features including four earthwork enclosures, banks and ditches, hollows and depressions, ridge and furrow and potential cave sites. No excavation or detailed survey work was carried out and many of the identified features remain undated. However, the survey has been instrumental in shaping later research and management strategies and provided a foundation for this project.

FIGURE 1: Whitwell Woods plan showing known archaeological features (Zeffertt, 1994)
EARTHWORK SURVEYS

It was decided, based on past exploratory work, to carry out detailed ground surveys and create up-to-date plans of two of the existing enclosure earthworks. Enclosure 619 (initially surveyed by Knight) was revisited as excavation has given a Romano-British date through pottery. Survey of this feature was two-fold: to provide information on how the earthworks have been affected by tree coverage since Knight’s survey some twenty-five years previous, and to act as a comparator for enclosure 398, which had not previously been surveyed, recorded or excavated. Enclosure 398, by far the largest of the four, was surveyed, planned and recorded and five trial test pits were excavated in the hope of recovering datable material.

Past fieldwork had placed this enclosure in the Medieval period given its association with other features. For example, to the west of the enclosure is a valley, which runs down to the water source of the Bondhay Dyke. It has been suggested that animals may well have been grazed on low-lying land adjacent to the river and then driven up the valley into the woods and corralled in the enclosure in the Medieval period (Watson, 1995). This may have been the case, but the question as to whether the enclosure was already in existence, and when it might have been constructed, remained unanswered. Given its location on a high point in the landscape, with the land sweeping away to the west, north and east, its function could have initially been defensive, possibly as early as the Iron Age. Other defensive sites are known in the area including Markland Grips hillfort, Clowne (Hart, 1984), Scarcliffe Park (Lane, 1973) and possibly Bolsover (Beresford, 2010).

Enclosure 619 measures 43m x 36m and is roughly D-shaped in profile. It comprises an inner bank constructed of limestone rubble and earth, which, in the present, is relatively low measuring between 0.5-0.8m higher than the ground level outside the enclosure. However, we must assume a good degree of erosion over time, particularly given its known date. The bank is then surrounded by an outer ditch measuring between 1-3m in width and approximately 2m in depth at its deepest point. The enclosure has only one entrance and this takes the form of a ‘bridge’ in that both bank and ditch terminate either side of the entrance passage. This ‘bridge’ is located on the
eastern side of the enclosure and is approximately 2m wide and runs from the outer ground surface to the inner enclosure floor, a length of approximately 5m.

To the eastern edge of the enclosure the ditch has been truncated by an earthen bank, which was almost certainly built during the construction of the Drives. This bank runs parallel either side of the current pathway for quite some distance. Due to the truncation, it is difficult to discern the width of the outer enclosure ditch, and the plan (Figure 2) reflects this truncation.

Enclosure 398 measures 92m x 64m and is again D-shaped in profile. It also comprises an inner bank constructed of limestone rubble and earth, but its bank is much steeper than enclosure 619, measuring between 1.7-2m higher than the outer ground surface in several places. The outer ditch measures between 2-3m in width and 0.5-0.7m deep generally, although in the north-west corner of the enclosure there is a much deeper rectangular pit that has been cut into the enclosure ditch. This pit measures 4m x 2m and is a further 0.5m deeper than the ditch cut. It is possible that this may have been used as a munitions cache during the Second World War, but its exact purpose is unknown.

The enclosure has four entrances in total, three of which take the form of the ‘bridge’ structure noted at enclosure 619. The fourth entrance differs in that the ditch continues across the entrance passage and a low-lying part of the bank also appears intact in the centre of the entranceway. This appears to have been the original entrance and may have therefore been defended, utilising the ditch as an obstruction. The three other entrances, then, would be later and reflect a more utilitarian function for the enclosure. This means that the original entrance would have given access to the flat land to the south of the enclosure, with solid walls defending the site on the three sides where the ground slopes away. This defensive purpose is strengthened by an obvious feature at the ‘tip’ of the D, where the bank has been extended in width and height – it is almost twice as wide and has a flat platform on top giving the feeling of a lookout post. Far reaching views into the valley below would be afforded from this position.
FIGURE 2: Survey plan of enclosure 619
FIGURE 3: Survey plan of enclosure 398
TEST PIT EXCAVATIONS

Five test pits were excavated inside enclosure 398 with the purpose of examining the inner structure for possible buildings / occupation, and to provide datable material. All of the pits were excavated to the general consensus for test pits (1m x 1m and with a depth of no more than 1.2m, excavated in 10cm spits). Location of the test pits was limited due to the number of trees growing within the enclosure. Areas that were free of trees and the potential for roots had to be selected, meaning that they could only be placed in certain locations. The location of the test pits is reflected in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: Location of test pits within enclosure 398
Test Pit #1

Test pit #1 was located in the centre of a shallow, circular feature that measured approximately 6m in diameter. It was thought this could possibly have been a house foundation. The first two layers comprised a dark greyish-brown organic build up with limestone pieces being quite frequent. Approximately 15cm deep a rubble spread was noted but this turned out to be a rather shallow deposit and the natural limestone bedrock was reached after 35cm, with the soil turning to a notable yellowish-brown colour. No artefacts were recovered, but three of the limestone pieces had grooves carved into them, approximately 1cm wide and 0.5cm deep. Two of the grooves had square sides and base, whilst the third was rounded (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Limestone piece with groove carved into it
Test Pit #2

Again the first layer was a rather organic layer, which overlay a rubble feature just 10cm below the surface. A trial strip extension 1m x 50cm was excavated on the east side of the pit and the rubble continued beyond this. A piece of limestone with a hole drilled through it was recovered in layer 2 (a possible stone weight) along with a fragment of a fire cracked pebble. As this could have potentially been part of a stone foundation for an inner building the pit was recorded and backfilled at this stage.

Test Pit #3

This pit reached a depth of 85cm before the natural bedrock was noted suggesting previous disturbance. The first four layers had evidence of fire cracked pebbles and charcoal, with the bottom of layer two and the top of layer three (20-30cm deep) housing twenty fragments of fire cracked pebbles and numerous charcoal lumps and flecks (>80%). These disappeared at a depth of approximately 50cm, when the soil turned from a light brown sandy silt to an orangey-brown silty-clay. No artefacts were recovered.

Test Pit #4

Layer one was again an organic dark-brown silt with occasional limestone pieces and flecks of charcoal. Also from this layer was a small cone-shaped stone weight with a hole perforated through it. Due to its size it could also be a spindle whorl. Comparison to a similar object recovered at Scarcliffe Park, approximately three miles to the south of Whitwell Woods, suggests a Romano-British date (Lane, 1973). Layer two was similar to layer one and also contained charcoal flecks. Layer three was an orangey-brown clayey-silt very similar to that in layer five from test pit three. In this layer was a small post-hole, 10cm in diameter, with a loose fill and compact orangey-clay around it. The post-hole was 16cm deep and was lined with small pieces of limestone at its base. At the bottom of layer three another stone feature was exposed, which was recorded and the pit backfilled. Also from this layer was a piece of crude, friable pottery almost certainly prehistoric. From its form and decoration it appears to be mid-late Iron Age (figure 6).
Test Pit #5

Organic dark-brown clayey-silt layer covering another stone rubble layer approximately 20cm below the surface. Possible floor layer as the stones were quite flat and covered the entirety of the pit. The feature was recorded and the pit backfilled. No artefacts were recovered.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

From this field research it has been possible to add new information to the known archaeology in Whitwell Woods. Accurately surveying and recording two of the enclosures has provided archival material for use by future generations, and it is hoped will be useful for future conservation work within the wood. Enclosure 398 posed an interesting study, especially as up until now its origins and purpose remained unknown. Zeffertt (1994, 8) noted that the path to the north-west is marked on the 18th century map and believed it to be a Medieval alignment. What was uncertain was whether the enclosure respected the path (making the enclosure Medieval or post-
Medieval), or vice-versa, making the enclosure at least Medieval in date and potentially earlier. No fieldwork had up until now been able to address this issue.

From current fieldwork at enclosure 398 certain points became apparent. First was the fact that the natural escarpment to the west does not rise enough to allow access to the woodland until at least two hundred metres to the south of the enclosure. This means that if Medieval farmers did indeed graze their animals in the area adjacent to the ginny spring before herding them back into the wood and coralling them in the enclosure, they would have had quite a distance to travel through open woodland before reaching it. There are no obvious earthworks to suggest a drover’s route up towards the enclosure, and if the enclosure itself was a Medieval earthwork, it would have made much more sense to have built it further to the south where the slope opens out into the woods. It therefore suggested that the enclosure was already in place before the Medieval period and was adapted for its suggested purpose.

Having stressed this point, recent LIDAR surveys undertaken on behalf of the Forestry Commission have highlighted a potential access path, which cuts up the gully and leads to the area close to the western entrance. This is only just visible from the ground, and is at present too narrow to be a drover’s route, but could have been wider in the past. It is possible this dates to the Medieval period and indeed provided a route for driving animals up from the lower grazing land. It was also noted that three of the entrances appeared later additions, including that to the west, and again this may have been during the Medieval. Finally, a section of ridge and furrow has been noted to the south-east of the enclosure, and this may well be related (Zeffertt, 1994, 8).

It was also noted, during recording of the enclosure, that there seemed to have been modifications on a number of occasions, for example the entrance ‘bridges’, the possible lookout point and the rectangular trench, which seemed to suggest quite a prolonged lifespan for the enclosure. Enclosure 619, also examined during this fieldwork, did not have this. The prominent position of enclosure 398, built to take advantage of the high ground in the north of the wood, also suggested a different purpose to that of the other enclosures – 619 for example is located on flat ground in the southern section of the wood. This position and the possible lookout point hinted
at an element of defence, and it was suggested it may have been Iron Age in its earliest origins. This theory was supported by the close proximity to the site at nearby Scratta Wood, where an Iron Age site reflected occupation right through into the Romano-British period (Challis & Harding, 1975). Whitwell Woods is also located on the southern Magnesian Limestone plateau, which appears to have been the territorial boundary between the Brigantes to the west and the Corieltauvi to the east. Local defensive sites are known at Markland Grips, Clowne (Hart, 1984), Scarcliffe Park, Whaley (Lane, 1974) and potentially Bolsover (Beresford, 2010), so a further defensive site within Whitwell Woods would come as no surprise and it is highly likely other sites await discovery.

A final point when comparing enclosure 398 with that of 619 (to the south) and 355 (to the west) is the size. 398 is considerably larger and has more entrances, but what seems to be its original entrance faces south, whereas the entrance in the other two enclosures face east. This makes sense for 619 and 355 as the prevailing winds blow from the west-south west, thus allowing an element of protection, and highlights a major structural difference between those and 398 (Watson, 1995, 10).

Excavation within 398 revealed very little in terms of artefacts, but location of test pits was limited to tree coverage. Three of the pits also revealed stone structures, so were recorded and backfilled at quite a shallow depth. Larger-scale excavation is needed to understand these features and provide more datable material. However, one sherd of Iron Age or potentially very poor quality Romano-British pottery was recovered. It seems most likely that the sherd is Iron Age rather than Romano-British, particularly due to its friable condition and its marked difference to that recovered from enclosure 619 by the Whitwell Woods Local History Group and indeed from other local sites. In the same test pit a small, stone weight or spindle whorl was recovered from layer one just underneath the organic topsoil. This is almost certainly Romano-British in date and indicates a preserved stratigraphy, with the Iron Age pot sherd recovered two layers below this. The artefact is markedly similar to examples found at Scarcliffe Park by Lane (1973) from within a similar sized enclosure, which was also built of limestone rubble and soil. A total of at least eight enclosures were identified at Scarcliffe Park, where evidence of lead working was noted (Beresford, 2012). Generally, lead working / extraction in the Roman period is restricted to the
Peak District for Derbyshire where the Lutadarum lead company were based. However, a small seam of galena has been discovered at Whitwell just south of Whitwell Woods, which may explain Roman settlement in the vicinity. It could be that the enclosures at Whitwell were located to manage the extraction of this, and the lead was worked at nearby Scarcliffe Park, as it seems highly unlikely that lead from the Peak District would have been transported to Scarcliffe Park.

Previous excavations within enclosure 619 recovered a total of 154 pot sherds, including grey ware and Derbyshire ware. These were attributed to a Derbyshire ware lid-seated jar, three grey ware deep bead rim bowls, an everted rim jar, also of grey ware, and five sherds of Samian ware (Watson, 1995). All these dated to between the 2nd and 4th centuries, mirroring the occupation date for Scarcliffe Park. However, one sherd of a sandy calcite-gritted ware dating from the 1st century was also recovered and this is earlier than is generally noted for Roman sites in the local region, as well as a flint waste flake (Zeffertt, 1994), both of which may attest to earlier occupation.

It seems likely that enclosure 398, at least, may well be of Iron Age date and was later re-occupied and modified in the Romano-British and Medieval periods. The close proximity of ridge and furrow to the enclosure at least attests to Medieval occupation in the vicinity, and the large scale occupation in the Medieval period for the wood as a whole is clear through the ridge and furrow to the west and south-east of the woods, as well as the large number of banks within the woods. Further excavation is needed in 398 in order to create a clearer chronology, and this needs to ideally be within the immediate future before further root damage occurs. What can be most obviously noted is that the earthworks at 398 remain much more prolific than those at the other enclosures within the woods, and clearly attest to a later re-use most likely in the Medieval or Post-Medieval periods.
FOCUS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

During his rapid survey, Zeffertt (1994) noted that as no internal features exist above ground level it is difficult to attest the purpose of the enclosures. Test pit excavations have revealed that archaeological features still exist within the enclosures, but that tree coverage is threatening the potential for more accurate information being recovered. Open plan excavation in the areas highlighted by test pitting would be hugely beneficial, particularly in understanding the purpose of the stone features uncovered, and also to recover more datable material.

Enclosure 355 would also benefit from up-to-date surveying and recording in order to gauge current preservation levels, and where possible test pitting may help to conclusively date the feature. Zeffertt (1994) advised that the enclosures are of potential national importance and that they may deserve protection through Scheduling. Evidence from this current fieldwork has only added more weight to this by showing that enclosure 398 has Iron Age / Romano-British archaeology preserved within it, and more detailed analysis of enclosure 355 may well reveal the same.

Finally, in terms of conservation and management strategies, Zeffertt (1994, 23-24) advised that the highest priority amongst all the features his survey recorded were the enclosure earthworks and that the threat from root damage was such that ideally they should be preserved in clearings and glades in order to protect them. Without this, the long-term survival of the features is drastically reduced. At present, the enclosures are all under woodland and as such their archaeological value is deteriorating, making surveying, recording and excavation, generally seen as a last resort, vital.

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REFERENCES

Beresford, M. (2010) An Early History of Bolsover. MBArchaeology Local Heritage Series Volume 1


