

1. Introduction

1.1 Archaeological Background 1995-2002

Ann Hearle, Chair of Marple Local History Society and Dr Peter Arrowsmith of the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit (UMAU) first suggested the presence of an Iron Age Hillfort at Mellor in 1998. The suggestion was based on a photograph taken by Ann Hearle of the field to the north of her house at the Old Vicarage during the summer of 1995. The majority of the grass in the field had been bleached brown by the sun. However the photograph showed a line of lush grass arcing across the field. It was felt that the line might be following that of a filled in ditch. The less compact nature of the in fill of the ditch would retain water and so better sustain the grass above it in times of drought.

The next step was a geophysical survey which confirmed the presence of a below ground anomaly corresponding to the line of grass in the field (Area B) and others in the garden of the Old Vicarage itself (Area A). Excavation started in the summer of 1998. Tr1 over one of the anomalies in the garden revealed a large ditch cut into the sandstone bedrock. In places this section of ditch was over 4m wide and 2.10m deep. The top fills of this ditch contained fragments of Roman tile, pottery and glass. Lower down the fills contained pottery and other artefacts dating from the Iron Age. The high charcoal content of one of these fills near the base of the ditch meant that a sample could be taken for radiocarbon analysis. This sample produced a date of 430 BC + or - 140 years. In 2002 an evaluation trench, Tr18, was excavated over an anomaly detected by a geophysical survey at the east end of the Old Vicarage garden. This revealed the west side of a wide, deep archaeological feature cut into the sandstone bedrock, which because of the size of the trench could not be fully excavated and interpreted. However one possibility was that it might be part of a large ditch.

Trenches have also been excavated over the anomaly in Area B, to the north of the Old Vicarage. These have revealed a c400m stretch of an Iron Age ditch running southwest to northeast. The ditch in this field is around 2m wide and about 1.70m deep. The 2001 excavation on this section of ditch produced 125 sherds of pottery belonging to the same Iron Age pot. These have now been conserved and the pot reconstructed. Excavation has so far concentrated on defining the extent of this ditch to the north and west of the Old Vicarage. In November 2002 a geophysical survey using a magnetometer was carried out in the field to the south east of Area B to look for indications of an eastern arm of the ditch. On the basis of the survey results two trial trenches were excavated which failed to find any evidence for the ditch.

The archaeology within the area enclosed by the ditch has not been neglected. In 1999 Trench 3 was opened up in the centre of the Old Vicarage garden. In the eastern half of this trench the sandstone bedrock was covered by a layer of boulder clay. Cut into this layer was a complex pattern of postholes, ditches and gullies ranging in date from the Mesolithic period 5 to 10,000 years ago through to the Roman period. In 2002 a 10m square, Trench 16, was opened adjacent to Trench 3. Amongst the features found in Trench 16 were a series of gullies, which formed an arc within the west half of the trench. The results from this trench allowed a fuller interpretation of the features from Trench 3 to be made. This suggested that the curving gullies continued beyond the boundaries of Trench 16 presenting the possibility that they would form a complete circle typical of the drainage gullies found outside Iron Age roundhouses. Radio Carbon dates from charcoal taken from the fill of these gullies gave a date of between 380 BC and 520 BC. Finds from Trench 16 included a polished flint chisel of a style associated with the Late Neolithic Period. c2-3,000 BC.

In 1999 the Mellor Archaeological Trust was set up to develop funding for the excavations and control the work. The Trust has had great success in raising funds from Heritage Lottery grants

and from revenue raised on open days and other events held during the year. In addition the Trust has received generous financial assistance over the past five years from Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.

The excavations in 2003 were carried out entirely by volunteers under the supervision of three archaeologists from the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit who are funded by the Mellor Archaeological Trust and Mr Donald Reid, archaeological advisor for the Mellor Archaeological Trust.

1.2 Community Involvement

In 1999 the Mellor Archaeological Trust was set up to :-

Promote the investigation, interpretation and preservation of the archaeology of the area surrounding Mellor Church and of other parts of Mellor, Stockport, in the County of Greater Manchester.

Organise displays, educational activities, or other means of bringing information on the history and archaeology to the notice of the public.

The Trust has had great success in raising funds from Heritage Lottery grants and from revenue raised on open days and other events held during the year.

All the excavation is carried out by volunteers who in 2003 were guided by three professional archaeologists from the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit and Don Reid a highly experienced member of the Mellor Archaeological Trust. In 2003 over 90 individuals volunteered their time to help with the excavations and open weekend. Over the six weeks of excavation there were on average 21 people per day volunteering on the excavations. In addition the local communities support of the project was demonstrated by the loan of over £2,000 worth of equipment, free of charge, to the excavations by local firms.

The annual open weekends started in 1999 as a single day, which attracted over 800 visitors. It has now expanded to cover a whole weekend towards the end of the excavations. To date over 5,000 visitors have attended the open weekends, which includes an updated colour booklet about the site, guided site tours and various displays, and activities organised and run by the Mellor Archaeological Trust and staffed by members of the local community and the Friends Of The Mellor Archaeological Trust. One of the highlights is the replica Iron Age round house built by students of the Ridge Danyers College as part of the European Community Culture Programme, the Mnesonyme Project. This years open weekend is on the 4th and 5th of September.

The open weekend attracts great media interest and regularly appears on regional television news programmes. As well as the publicity and community involvement the success of this event is vital to the funding of the project. The Trust has commissioned a professional company to make a film record of the excavations called Ancient Mellor Revealed. This year the excavation was also the subject of a BBC Radio 4 programme. The production company made several recording visits throughout the 2003 season and the half hour programme was broadcast on Saturday 20th December. An article about the excavations also appeared in the December issue of Current Archaeology, the country's most popular archaeology magazine.

The Mellor archaeological project is also publicised through numerous lectures and talks given by members of the Trust, UMAU and GMAU which in the last year has included the Mellor Archaeology Trust hosting the Council for British Archaeology's regional annual conference at the Mellor Parish Centre.