

4.9 Trial Trenches 8 - 15

Trench 22, the trial trenches in the track way and Tr24 had been successful in tracing the line of the enclosure ditch east beyond Area B. Towards the end of the summer season the opportunity arose to carry out a rapid evaluation in Area D (Fig 21). This was before re-seeding of the field. The evaluation took the form of machine stripping the topsoil and subsoil from eight trenches and recording any potential archaeological features exposed within them (Fig 3). Time constraints did not allow for the excavation of any of the potential features. The idea was to try and pick up the line of the enclosure ditch within Area D. The trenches were excavated north to south across a projected line of the enclosure ditch. Most were 1.6m wide and they varied in length between 5.0m and 7.5m. In total eight trenches were stripped over a 120m line. The first trial trench was excavated eight metres east of the eastern wall of the track way and was positioned by aligning it with ranging rods placed in the excavated ditch in Tr22 and Tr24. The first trial trench, (8), was excavated 6.5m to the east of the east wall of the track way. Subsequent spacing between trenches was 6.44m; 2.79m; 7.86m; 12.85m; 46.27m and 34.61m. The eighth trench was excavated 30m to the south of the overall alignment on an anomaly detected by dowsing. The same method was used to align all the trenches however the distances involved soon made it impossible to refer back to Tr22 and Tr24 and so ranging rods were placed within the preceding trial trenches.

Trial trench 8 revealed a 1.4m wide band of mid brown sand silt, (800), running east to west across the trench on an alignment with the ditch in Tr24 and Tr22. Context (800) was generic number given to a similar soil seen in each of the trial trenches. This material was cut by a field drain running south west to north east. Trial trench 9 also revealed (800) running west to east. However in this trench it was narrower, c0.6m and as the trench was fully opened it was seen that the east end of the context finished in a curved terminus (Fig 22). Trial trench 10 was excavated only 2.5m to the east in an attempt to re establish the line of (800). Initially in the west side of trial trench 10 it was there was no indication of (800). However as the trench progressed it was seen to contain a mirror image of the situation in trial trench 9. In all a 3.5m long by 1.3m wide stretch of (800) was exposed running from the east section of the trench and ending in a curved terminus. Up until now the line of (800) had followed a fairly straight easterly projection from Tr22 and Tr24. Machine work on trial trench 11 had to extend slightly further to the north than its predecessors before (800) was revealed (Fig 23). In this trench it was again recognised as a 1.4m wide band of mid brown sand silt running west to east across the trench. Trial trench 12 also required a slightly more northerly position from trench 11 before (800) was fully revealed. After trial trench 12 the farmers re seeding operation had almost caught up with the evaluation trenches. It was therefore decided to greatly increase the distance between trenches. Trial trench 13 was located 46.27m to the east of trial trench 12. Trial trench 13 revealed a context very similar to (800) running east to west across the trench. In all the previous trial trenches it had appeared that the geological surface was boulder clay very similar to Tr22 and Tr24. The geology in trial trench 13 contained more sandstone including what seemed to be a line of stones running along the south boundary between (800) and the natural. The final trench along this line was trial trench 14 which revealed very similar geology to 13 with a 1.70m band of (800) running across it west to east.

Trial trenches 13 and 14 continued the northerly 'slant' first encountered in trial trench 11.

Trial trench 15 was excavated some 30m to the north of the line of the other trenches. It was positioned on the basis of dowsing results. The trench revealed an area of disturbed sandstone which lay above the natural boulder clay. Without excavation it is impossible to determine the nature of this deposit.

Discussion

The trial trenches in Area D should really be looked at in two groups. The first five trenches, although not evenly spaced, cover a distance of only 35m from Tr24 and the east wall of the track way. In terms of an archaeological assessment this represents reasonable coverage especially given the proximity of the trial trenches to their reference points of Tr22 and Tr24. Given the alignment and the comparable surface dimensions to the ditch cut in Tr22 and Tr24 it is reasonable to assume that in trial trenches 8 to 12, context (800) represents the top fill of the Iron Age enclosure ditch. However, as no excavation took place in the trial trenches there clearly has to be a note of caution in this interpretation. The distance of trenches 13 and 14 both from each other and other reference points makes the association of (800) in either of these trenches with its presence in any of the others tenuous. Nevertheless it is the case that a linear soil variation was clearly visible in both of these trenches.

As mentioned above the line of (800) in trial trenches 11 and 12 does begin to angle northwards towards Mellor Old Hall suggesting the possibility that (800) represents a landscape feature associated with the hall. One aspect of (800) in trial trenches 8 to 12 is that it corresponds roughly to the 215m (377') contour line. This is on relatively flat ground some 30m to the south of the 210m contour which represents the sharp break of slope on the hillside. If (800) does represent the fill of the enclosure ditch, given that (800) does not seem to follow a discernable break of slope and the lack of modern surveying equipment, then why would the Iron Age excavators set the line of the ditch towards the point where Mellor Old Hall now stands rather than continuing east in a straight line? It might be something as simple as trying to enclose the maximum amount of flat land as possible. To continue directly east from Tr22 and Tr24 would have meant beginning to run up hill. Perhaps the management of a drainage system required that the ditch continued to run down hill across Area D. Although it is impossible to say at the moment how deep (800) is it would not have been difficult for the Iron Age community to excavate a ditch with a gradient to allow drainage. Of particular interest is the possible entrance way represented by the termini found in trial trenches 9 and 10. It is after trial trench 10 that the northward angle begins. Perhaps the two are connected with drainage water from the east side of the entrance being channelled down slope lessening the likelihood of flooding.

The interpretation of context (800) as the enclosure ditch in trial trenches 8 to 12 would suggest that the Iron Age community were managing a landscape rather than confining themselves to an area at the west end of the hill. Such management is usually identified by a multitude of ditches of various sizes and lengths creating barriers and enclosing different areas of the landscape. If this is the case it does not exclude the possibility that there is an arm of the enclosure ditch which curves north and east across Area D as suggested by our early interpretation of the line of the enclosure ditch. Trial trenching and geophysics now suggest that if such a ditch exists it will curve some distance into Area D. Perhaps the area around the entrance in trial trenches 9 and 10 is the point the curve takes place with one arm running towards Mellor Old Hall and another turning north east.

If context (800) does represent the continuation of the Iron Age enclosure ditch in Area D then the implications for our interpretation of the settlement at Mellor are enormous. It would mean that during the Iron Age a much larger portion of the hilltop would have been looked upon as part of the 'managed' area of the settlement than we had previously anticipated. This would have clear ramifications for any assessment of population levels, scale of agriculture and the presence of industrial processes. In wider terms it would effect how we consider Mellor fitted in to the regional Iron Age community in social, political and economic terms.