

2004 Excavation Results

5.1 Trench 26

Figures: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14.

The work within Trench 26 continues a process of archaeological investigation within Area C that began with a programme of test-pitting in April 2002. These test-pits, along with Trench 20 opened in the same year, suggested a high level of archaeological survival cut into the natural boulder clay of the area. In 2003, two trial trenches (6 and 7) were opened within Area C, c.5m north of Trench 18, with the purpose of both further evaluating the archaeological potential of the area and of ascertaining whether the large ditch excavated in Trench 18 continued north into this area. Whilst neither of these trenches established the presence of the ditch, both confirmed the same high level of archaeological survival revealed the previous year. In particular, a section of a curvilinear gully was found within trial trench 6. This bore similarities in its design to the round house gullies excavated within the Old Vicarage garden in Trenches 16 and 21. If this were the case, then the zone of occupation upon the hilltop would extend further than previously thought, as the evidence for Iron Age roundhouses so far had been limited to an area enclosed within the large ditch excavated in trenches 1 and 18. In order to confirm the preliminary findings from trial trenches 6 and 7, Trench 26 was opened during the summer of 2004.

Trench 26 was quadrilateral in plan. Measuring 22.5-25m east-west by 2.3-8.6m north-south. A hand-dug east-west rectangular extension 7.4m long by 2.4m wide was added to the north-east corner of Trench 26 after initial cleaning had revealed a cluster of archaeological features within this area.

The turf and topsoil (779) and subsoil (780) were carefully removed by machine excavator under the supervision of archaeologists. During excavation both layers produced sherds of 18th-20th century pottery as well as 18th and 19th century clay pipe stems, glass and ferrous objects. Immediately beneath the subsoil was a layer of wet light-mid grey clay sand silt (781) with c.50% small-medium sandstone inclusions. This layer varied in depth between 5-25cm, effectively sealing the archaeological deposits below and seems to be an interface layer between the natural clay geology and the more humic soils above. No finds were recovered from (781) during excavation. The remaining layers and deposits were all excavated by hand.

The natural geology of this area is composed of reddish brown boulder clay. The upper 5-10cm of this clay (702) was friable and regularly mottled, and lighter in hue than (703) due to weathering and root/animal action, and far more compact layer. In the western third of the site a very compact c.20cm deep layer (805) of probably glacially introduced small rounded and sub-rounded pebbles lay under (781) and over (702). A broken blue green glass bead of possible Roman date was recovered from (805) during cleaning.

Trench 26 revealed a complex and densely packed arrangement of often inter-cutting features. The majority of these were typically denoted by their dark upper fills and the frequent presence of small-medium sandstone within them. These features clearly stood out from the natural boulder clay of the area through which they were all cut. A series of curvilinear gullies and sub-circular pits dominated the eastern and central areas of the trench. To the west there was a noticeable change in the nature of the archaeological features, though the area still contained a high level of archaeological activity the majority appear to be postholes.

Due to the density of the archaeology within Trench 26 this report section has been broken down into feature types i.e. gullies, post-holes and pits. Where possible relationships exist between features of a different type this is commented upon.

5.1.2 Gullies

A total of 19 curvilinear gullies were discovered during excavation within Trench 26. Due to the inter-cutting nature of these features it initially proved difficult to establish the complete line of the individual gullies; therefore, some were assigned more than one cut number during excavation.

The extent of gully [565] was difficult to trace through the complex of inter-cutting features in the area with an estimated diameter of *c.*8m. It does appear to continue to the southeast outside of the excavated area. [565] was orientated southeast-north, possibly terminating in an unexcavated area directly to the east of gully [638]. It had a width of 0.45-0.55m, a concave base and a depth of 0.23m. [565] is possibly associated with gully [784] 2.4m to the north, which would create a northwest entranceway to a roundhouse, with an estimated diameter of *c.*10m. This feature ran north-south for 1.9m, to the north section of the excavated area and had been broadly truncated by gully [637].

Gully [639/558] was curvilinear in plan and was orientated north south. It measured 0.48m wide and 0.15m deep with very steep sides and a flat base. [639/558] had a rounded terminal (in common with all the gullies) to the north giving a known circumference of 9.6m. This feature cut gully [637] and was in turn cut by gullies [552], [558], [565] and [743]. It is possible that [639/558] is the corresponding arm of gully [657] creating an entranceway facing north/northwest. This would give a width of 1.1m for the entranceway and an estimated diameter of 10-11m for this roundhouse. [657] was orientated east-southwest. It measured 0.16m wide and 0.12m deep and ran from its rounded terminal for 3.4m before being cut by the linear grouping of pits to the east (see below).

Feature [559] was a curvilinear gully 0.4m wide and 0.24m, with shallow irregular sides and base. It ran for 3m north-southeast from its rounded terminal before being cut by gullies [637], [639], [552], [565] and [638]. [559] would appear to correspond to the gully [806] and together form a drainage gully for a roundhouse *c.* 11-12m in diameter. Gully [806] measured 0.3m wide and ran south-north for 2.2m into the north section of Trench 26.

Gully [656] was orientated north-east. It measured 6.6m in length by 0.8m wide and had a maximum depth of 0.25m. There exists a possibility that gullies [808]/ [809] and [767] are associated with [656] and together form the ground plan for a roundhouse gully measuring *c.*12m in diameter. Gully [808] was a 3.8m section of a seemingly curvilinear gully running east-west and terminating 1.4m north of the rounded terminal of [656]. This gully cut a similarly orientated feature [809] and may represent a re-cut. Gully [767] lay within the extension to Trench 26 and ran northwest-south for 1.4-1.5m. Caution must be taken in any interpretation of this feature as it was unexcavated (see Trench 26 extension).

The chance discovery of a curvilinear gully within trial trench 6 in 2003 was partly responsible for the excavations within Trench 26 taking place, though at the time only a small segment of it was visible. The 2004 excavation showed that this gully [638] ran south in a continuous arc from the northern section trench 26, 12.4m to the far southeast corner of the trench (where trial trench 6 had located it). This feature ranged greatly in both its depth and profile, varying from 0.55m deep with a square profile in the southeast to 0.25m deep with irregular sides and base to the north. As with those gullies excavated within Trench 21 during the 2003 season, it would

appear that depth was not an issue when it came to excavating a drainage gully for a roundhouse and that it was enough to ensure that there was a sufficient gradient for the gullies to work efficiently. Unlike the majority of the gullies' fills within the trench, [638] (along with [552]) had a high percentage of washed-in natural clay, especially within its basal fills. This would suggest that these two features were principally filled-in through a natural silting/erosion process rather than being deliberately in-filled during a rapid levelling of the site. These gullies are unusual in other respects, as [638] is potentially the latest of the many gullies to be cut in this area (the other potentials are [743] and [581], though [638] has the more stratigraphic relationships) and [552] may denote a different type of activity within the area (see below).

Gully [552] was the most consistent in its profile of all those excavated within Trench 26 and the most puzzling. [552] had a square profile with very steep sides and a flat base, a width of 0.45-0.65 and a depth of 0.35-0.55. From its western rounded terminal it ran southeast for 6.5m partially exiting the trench before curving back to run to the northeast for 8.7m and finishing in a rounded terminal. The distance between the two rounded ends of this gully is 8.7m. The size of this entrance would argue against this feature from being a typical drainage gully for a roundhouse and probably signifies that [552] served some other function as yet unidentified. [552] cut the probable roundhouse gullies [565] and [639] and was in-turn cut by gullies [638] and [743] and so lie stratigraphically between different phases of roundhouse gully construction/renovation. It is possible therefore, that gullies [565] and [639] represent an earlier phase of roundhouse on the site which was followed by a break in occupation and a re-use of the area (perhaps to pen animals?) as denoted by [552] before reverting once more to the citing of roundhouses. Gully [552] serves as a reminder that as yet interpretations as to the nature and function of many of the features within Trench 26 must remain limited.

Gully [637] (0.45m wide x 0.18m deep) was orientated north-east and had no discernable break for an entranceway along its exposed length. [637] ran for a length of 12.3m, giving a visible diameter of 7.5m, and extended to the north and east outside the area of excavation. This gully had an irregular base and steep sides, cut gully [784], and was in turn cut by gullies [638] and [579].

Gully [581] measured 0.3m wide x 0.12m deep. It ran for 3.8m from its rounded terminal to the southeast before continuing north beyond the limits of excavation. This feature was the only example in Trench 26 of a potential roundhouse gully with an entranceway to the south-east. The rest of the roundhouse gullies whose entrances were visible had them located to the north/northwest. Whilst not unheard of, this tends to contradict the dominant tendency of roundhouses from other sites in this and other areas, which tend to have the entranceway to the southeast, perhaps to maximise the hours of sunlight and/or to shelter from the prevailing wind. This gully also strongly suggests, due to its distance from many of the other gullies as well as the unique placing of its entranceway, that a separate roundhouse to the one/s discovered within Trench 26 lies just to the north of the area of excavation. [581] cut gully [657].

Gully [473] was the furthest west of all the potential roundhouse gullies uncovered within the trench and was located at the extreme northwest of the excavated area. This feature measured 0.4m wide x 0.18m deep and had concave sides and a rounded base. [473] was orientated northeast-west and ran 2.2m before exiting the trench to the east and west. A very similar feature [675] was immediately to the north of [473] and one of these two gullies may represent a recut of the other. Taken together they do appear to suggest another roundhouse well to the west of the principal cluster of gullies and may symbolise that occupation continues to the north and west of Trench 26, though as these features were only partly exposed and lay mainly outside the evaluated area assumptions as to their nature must remain limited.

Feature [743] ran west-east from its rounded terminal for 2.3m before continuing beyond the confines of the trench. No corresponding return of this gully was observable and though there is a strong possibility that any such return has been cut away by the large series of pits lying just to the north (see below), it is possible that [743] is a linear feature rather than a roundhouse gully and unconnected with that grouping. Some circumstantial evidence for this may be inferred through both its lack of a return and its stratigraphic relationships to the roundhouse gullies [656], [552] and [637] through which it cut.

Feature [766] would appear to be the northern terminal of a roundhouse gully and runs northwest-south for 1.4m within the extension of Trench 26. This feature was unexcavated however and so no conclusions can be drawn.

Discussion

The curved nature of these features is highly suggestive of drainage gullies surrounding Iron Age round houses. These gullies are traditionally seen as running below the eaves of the roof, which projected beyond the walls of the roundhouse. Excavations at other Iron Age sites have found that these gullies were regularly re-cut in order to keep them functioning properly. In many cases slight realignments took place either as a form of repair or to reflect a change in layout or reconstruction of the buildings they served. In common with those gullies discovered within Trenches 16 and 21, the majority of these features had been in-filled with a dark grey clay silt, which regularly contained a high percentage of charcoal flecks and pieces. It would appear from this similarity that these gullies underwent a repeated process of rapid abandonment and/or infilling. Whether this process involved the deliberate deposition of charred remains (possibly from the hearth or other cooking site?) within the redundant gully, or whether it denotes that the house was burnt-down and built afresh on its new location is unknown. The presence of very small fragments of burnt and calcified bone from within the fills of many of the gullies, combined with the absence of any clay daub would suggest the first possibility is the likelier. No finds were recovered from any of the excavated sections of gully.

The many gullies found within Trench 26 could not all have been contemporary and drained the same roof due to their inter-cutting nature and so must either reflect numerous phases of one house or separate ground plans of independent houses. It would seem likely that the roundhouse gullies discovered within Trench 26 represent two or three separate roundhouses. There also exists a possibility that the nature of the occupation changed with gully [552] suggesting that a distinct break in the function of the settlement occurred between two separate phases of roundhouse constructions.

The nature of the round house gullies identified at the east end of Trench 26 probably indicates use and re-use of the same area for a single round house suggesting a long occupation of the same piece of land for domestic dwellings. Moving west along Trench 26 there is a 13m long area devoid of curving gullies with the possibility that this type of feature reappears in the North West corner of the Trench. This pattern was seen in Trench 16 excavated in 2002 where the curving gullies of the round house occupied only the west half of the trench the east half being occupied with a number of pits and post holes. Together the evidence from Trench 26 and Trench 16 seems to indicate that particular zones within the settlement are dedicated to housing and that there are areas in between these that are allocated to other uses. The potential uses of these spaces are unknown, but must use significant numbers of wooden posts as shown in Trench 26. Trenches 28 and 29 support the theory of an expanded zone of settlement indicating that the level of archaeological activity seen in Trench 26 continues north and west in Area C.

5.1.3 Post-Holes

A total of 54 post holes were excavated within Trench 26, with a further 16 identified post holes unexcavated. During excavation of several of the curvilinear gullies, a number of post holes (e.g. [704], [579], [567] and [429]) were discovered which had not been identified previously due to their upper fills' similarity to the fills of the gullies through which they cut. It is highly likely therefore, that other as yet unidentified post holes lie within unexcavated segments of the curvilinear gullies.

Many of the postholes were stone packed and contained flat sided small-medium sandstone, which appeared to have been set on-edge around the sides of the posthole. It is likely that these represent packing wedged into the posthole and had been used as a prop or chock to support a wooden post. This may suggest that these postholes required a solidity of support, which was not required of those postholes without such packing. Features of this type were typically sub-circular or sub-oval in plan, measuring 0.45 x 0.4 with near vertical sides, a u-shaped or flat base and a depth of 0.2m. Those postholes without stone packing tended to be circular and smaller in plan averaging 0.3 x 0.3m with v-shaped profiles and an average depth of 0.3m.

During the Iron Age, the cutting of the defensive inner enclosure ditch and to a lesser extent the outer enclosure ditch would have provided a vast quantity of potential building stone excavated/quarried during the construction of the ditches. Prior to this in the Bronze Age, and subsequently in the Romano British period ground fast timber structures may have been used. Indicating the possibility of classifying the post holes containing no stone packing as belonging to these periods.

Though no ground plans were observed with the majority of the postholes, several did appear to form an arrangement. Feature [489] was a large (0.76 x 0.55 x 0.14m deep) sub-square posthole with irregular sides and a flat base, in the western half of the trench, which contained frequent small-medium sized angular packing sandstone, and could easily be the base of a 2002 test pit. Feature [489] cut a large sub-circular posthole [686] on its eastern side (measuring 0.5 x 0.5 x 0.35m deep), with a v-shaped profile. [489] bore similarities in its form and plan to posthole [490] 2.3m to the north, which was sub-circular in plan (measuring 0.76 x 0.65 x 0.22m deep) and also contained frequent stones packed tightly together. This feature had also cut a large sub-circular posthole [701] (measuring 0.5 x 0.4 x 0.32m deep) with a v-shaped profile. The similarities in both form and placement between [489]/ [490] and also with [686]/ [701] would imply that they are associated. Their siting would suggest that they functioned as postholes for a structure orientated north-south. What form this structure took is unknown at present though it is possible that features [489] and [490] represent a different phase and substantial modification to the structure which postholes [686] and [701] had initially helped to form. The siting of [489/490] would appear to mirror that of [686/701] and may be indicative of either a long standing structure which required new structural supports over time, or of a change in layout/reconstruction which necessitated more substantial stone packed postholes.

Discussion

In separating the features excavated within Trench 26 into various sub-categories there exists a tendency to see them as forming separate phases/functions of occupation, whereas many are inter-related and represent different activities associated with settlement patterns. Perhaps this is particularly the case for postholes, for while gullies represent the outlying footprint of a roundhouse they do not form part of the structure itself, which would require wooden uprights to support the roof and walls. It is therefore, quite possible that many of the postholes represent the timber uprights of roundhouses and are associated with the previous sub-group of features. No

definite ground plans were observed altogether. There does appear to be a general east-northwest arrangement in the postholes' orientation in the eastern half of the trench. This mirrors that of the roundhouse gullies and does suggest that some at least are associated with roundhouses. There are however, several potential problems with this interpretation. Only two of the potential roundhouse gullies in the east of the trench, where the majority of the gullies are, had not been either directly or indirectly cut by a posthole. Furthermore, out of a total of 70 postholes, 35 lay to the west of the trench and were seemingly unassociated with any potential roundhouse gullies. It is possible therefore that many of the post holes in the eastern half of the trench were also not associated with the gullies and may represent a different phase and character of occupation to them. They need not be associated; they could be outbuildings associated with the roundhouses and refers to a zone of ownership.

Additional areas of excavation adjoining Trench 26 are needed in order to gain a wider picture of the posthole ground plans and could prove highly informative on the changing forms of occupation within the area.

5.1.4 Pits

A total of 16 pits, (with 4 more possible examples) were excavated within a substantial group of pits that dominated the eastern extent of the trench. These features were intercutting and formed an irregular linear arrangement orientated south-northwest 1-3m wide and 8.2m long that continued to the north of the trench. Two sections were placed across this arrangement in strategic places in order to gain an understanding of these complicated relationships. Both of these revealed a rather haphazard and seemingly unrelated sequence of inter-cutting pits, with very similar mid-dark grey clay silt fills containing frequent charcoal flecks and regular small and fragmented burnt bone. The pits were all sub-circular or sub-oval in plan, averaging 0.8m x 1m, and most had a relatively shallow depth of 0.2m. Pits [749] and [751] were both substantially deeper at 0.5m and both had been partly in-filled with re-deposited clay which overlay a light grey silt clay basal fill. It is interesting to note that both these pits were uncut by other features and together may denote a later phase of activity.

Feature [482] was an oval pit in the western half of the site measuring 2m x 0.8m wide with a depth of 0.4m. Pit [482] was unusual not only in its shape and size, but also that it was the only large feature other than [747] and the possible feature [705], that was filled with friable light brown grey silt clay. The nature of this fill suggests that it was formed either through a slow process of natural erosion and silting, or that the features were rapidly backfilled with the originally excavated material. It is unclear as yet what this in-fill denotes but it is tempting to associate these features with an early phase of activity within the area, though until (705) is excavated (see below) interpretations must remain limited.

A sub-oval patch of fire reddened clay [778] adjacent to gully [656] and within the arcs of many of the potential roundhouse gullies was initially thought to represent a hearth for one of the roundhouses sited here. Excavation of the feature proved inconclusive, but a similar small patch of reddened clay to the west [700] proved to be a small pit with frequent scraps of lead within its fill. The waterlogged conditions that frequently occur on the areas of boulder clay would not be conducive to the survival of hearths. However if the interpretation of the curving gullies as roundhouses is correct, then we may expect to see more evidence for hearths. If the hearths were raised upon a portion of abundant stone, then the likelihood of finding this surviving in situ would be rare.

Pit [474] was identified early in the excavations due to the unusually large sandstone block (0.8m long x 0.6m wide x 0.26m deep), which appeared to cap the feature. Upon removal of the stone, [474] was filled with a compact charcoal rich mid-dark grey clay silt with frequent small fragments of burnt bone. A cylindrical bead was recovered during the excavation of this feature from its fill. [474] had near vertical sides and a rounded base and a depth of 0.45m. The pit was half sectioned only as it lay partly outside of the trench.

Discussion

This large group of pits represents a sustained and repeated use of this swathe of ground. It remains unclear as to what function this action served. The recovery of burnt bone and charcoal may suggest that the pits were dug to dispose of the residue of cooking and/or fires, though examples such as [749] and [751] would suggest that this was not the entire group's purpose. The pits' linear arrangement may suggest that this area was specifically appointed for this purpose or that it lay between areas of occupation/usage, which limited the availability of space. Of particular interest is the groups' relationship to the roundhouse gullies. Other than gully [657], which is cut by the line of pits, the separate groups appear to respect the layout of each other, though it seems unlikely that they are contemporary. Several sherds of Roman orangeware pottery from the 2nd century A.D. were recovered from an unexcavated feature (812) within the line of pits, which would appear to suggest that the group is of Romano-British date rather than Iron Age. This raises questions on the dating of the roundhouse gullies themselves, as examples of roundhouse construction within the Romano-British period are well known. Further excavation to the north of Trench 26 in order to establish whether any more of the roundhouse gullies have been cut by these pits would help resolve this question.

5.1.5 Trench 26 Extension

During excavation within the east-west extension to Trench 26, a flint dagger was recovered lying flat upon the upper surface of context (705) immediately adjacent to the possible gully [767].

Context (705) was an unexcavated deposit of friable light brown grey silt clay, which may be the uppermost fill of large (>2.2m x >1.7m) pit. (705) had been cut by gullies [766] and [767] and by feature [768]. A grouping of 6 stake holes ([760]-[765]) were located along its western edge and although not definitely associated, shared the same fill type in contrast to the other features in this area. A small chert flake of possible Bronze Age date was recovered from its surface during cleaning.

Feature [768] was a irregular deposit of large (<0.6 x 0.6 x 0.25m deep) sandstone fragments measuring 1.1 x 1.3m. It is unclear whether these formed a discrete feature or whether they are an isolated concentration of stones possibly infilling gully [767].

Context (769) was the number given to a concentration of small sub-rounded and flat angular sandstone, which filled the eastern third of the extension. This area was not fully excavated down to the natural geology due to time constraints and (769) may be a layer of stones within the subsoil.

It is possible that the dagger is associated with either [768] or (705), which may be unidentified features of Bronze Age date, or with the gully [767]. It is also possible that the dagger was displaced from its original deposition during the construction of [767] or other feature.

Discussion

Daggers such as these are extremely rare within the Greater Manchester/Cheshire area, with the nearest parallel coming from Saddleworth (where a broken example was discovered at Ragstone), and are classically associated with Beaker burials of the early Bronze Age. As yet, the flint dagger cannot be assigned to any specific feature within Trench 26, due to its un-associated deposition and the limited area of excavation surrounding its find spot. Due to the importance of the find and the limited time remaining during this seasons' work to comprehensively investigate the area around the dagger, it was agreed that excavation within the extension would cease and that the area would be a focus of the following season's work.