

1. Archaeological Background: 1995-2003

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 Hill fort 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. Trench 1 was excavated over one of the anomalies at the west end of the garden. This revealed a large ditch cut into the sandstone bedrock. This section of ditch was over 4m wide and 2.10m deep. The top fills of this contained fragment 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 produced a date of cal 830 – 190 cal BC (Beta 146416, 2 sigmas).

During November 2002 Trench 25 was excavated through part of the vegetable patch adjacent to the ditch in Trench 1. This 12m long trench showed that the current flat ground surface is a result of deliberate levelling of the natural slope of the hill in post medieval times. The implications of this are that the ditch found in Trench 1 would have been situated upon the break of a steep slope and would have been highly effective defensively, and a far more visible and imposing feature within the ancient landscape.

In 2002 and 2003, Trench 18 was excavated over an anomaly at the opposite end of Area A. This revealed a section of ditch very similar to that found in Trench 1. This section of ditch ran north to south and measured just over 4.0m wide and 1.90m deep. Within the ditch an abundance of artefacts were recovered dating from the 1st to the 4th century AD. These included 5 bronze Roman brooches, 221 sherds of Romano-British Pottery and fragments of quern stones. Most of these finds came from the upper fills and in some cases pottery from several different centuries was recovered from the same layer. Suggesting that the ditch was used as a dumping ground when the Roman occupation of the site ended in the 4th Century AD. It seems likely that the sections in Trench 1 and Trench 18 are part of the same ditch. This interpretation means that in the Iron Age the area of the Old Vicarage and Saint Thomas' church was surrounded by an imposing defensive inner enclosure ditch.

Immediately to the west of the ditch (*c.*2.33m) and contained within the same trench, a small stone filled slot was identified running parallel to the ditch. It was thought that this might be the foundation for a palisade running inside the ditch; however, this was

too short a length exposed to be certain of this interpretation. No evidence for an associated rampart was identified throughout the excavations.

Two trial trenches were excavated on the other side of the Old Vicarage drive, immediately opposite Trench 18, in Area C. These were intended to look for the ditch found in Trench 18 continuing into this area. The evidence for the ditch was unclear but one of the trial trenches suggested the presence of a curving gully perhaps associated with a roundhouse.

Trenches have also been excavated over an anomaly in Area B to the north of the Old Vicarage. These have revealed a c.400m stretch of an Iron Age ditch running southwest to northeast. The ditch in this field is around 2m wide and about 1.70m deep and probably represents an Iron Age enclosure ditch defining the limits of the settlement at Mellor. The 2001 open area excavation exposed a 13m length of ditch which produced 125 sherds of hand made 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 Area D to look for 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. Further geophysical analysis in the run up to the 2003 season led to the excavation of two trenches and eleven trial trenches designed to determine the line of this enclosure ditch beyond Area B. Results seem to show that this enclosure ditch does not turn back towards the church but carries straight on towards Mellor Old Hall. This implies that the ditch encloses an area of land far greater than previously anticipated and dramatically increases the potential size of the Iron Age settlement.

Palaeoenvironmental analysis of the archaeological fills within the enclosure ditch indicated the presence of mixed deciduous woodland, a nearby open body of water and an associated wet meadow, contemporary with when the ditch was open. The recovery of cereal-type pollens indicates the presence of a mixed farming economy.

The evidence from the trenches now seems to point to there being two ditches at Mellor. One is a large inner enclosure ditch which probably surrounded a relatively small area of the hilltop which is currently occupied by the grounds of the Old Vicarage and Saint Thomas's churchyard. The second is smaller but far more extensive outer enclosure ditch that may well extend over the greater part of the hilltop.

The area enclosed by the ditches has also been examined. In 1999 Trench 3 was opened up in the centre of Area A. 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 to form a complete circle typical of the drainage gullies found outside Iron Age roundhouses. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal within the fill of these gullies produced a date of between 380 - 520 cal BC (Beta-173892, 2 sigmas) Finds from Trench 16 included a polished flint chisel of a style associated with the Late Neolithic Period. C2-3,000 BC.

The excavation of Trenches 21 and 23 in 2003 confirmed the presence of an Iron Age roundhouse. Combining the results from several years of excavation produces a circular drainage gully for a roundhouse with a diameter of approximately 13 metres. A linear feature was found cutting the roundhouse gully and radio-carbon dated to 520-380 cal BC (Beta-173893). Indicating a changing use and occupation within the immediate area over a prolonged period of time. Not an No Iron Age finds were recovered from the sections of the gully excavated in 2003, however from the gully and the area immediately to the north, 97 flint flakes were recovered. Specialist analysis shows these to be characteristic of the Mesolithic Period and indicative of hunter-gatherer communities using the hilltop at Mellor as one of their seasonal bases over 10,000 years ago. It is likely that these were re-deposited from elsewhere, within the surrounding area.

As a continued part of the excavation of the hilltop the Mellor Archaeological Trust commissions each year a programme of geophysical survey. The results of the survey can provide valuable information which can be used when deciding where future excavation trenches should be placed (see figure 1).