

2005 Excavation Results

5.4 Trench 36

Figures: 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51 and 52.

Trench 36 continues the process of large, open area excavation within Area C, and forms, together with Trench 26, the largest area excavated upon the hilltop. The trench was designed to answer four principle questions; firstly, to identify the remaining extent of the multiple roundhouse drip gullies identified within Trench 26. Secondly, to establish if the separate zoning of the gullies and postholes continues towards the opposite side of the roundhouses. Thirdly, by exposing the proposed south-east portion of the gullies, produce the expected and standardised entranceway into the roundhouses. Finally and most significantly, to investigate the immediate area surrounding the discovery of the Bronze Age dagger in 2004. The 2004 excavation around this area was halted upon discovery of the object in order to allow for an appropriately sized area and strategy to be incorporated into the 2005 season.

Trench 36 was unusual in plan, sub-L-shaped, and designed to maximise the use of potential areas available for archaeological investigation. Positioned directly abutting the eastern edge of the previous excavation, Trench 26, and providing a large area surrounding the copse of trees within Area C. The main body of the trench was sub-triangular in shape and measured 15.41-16.91m east-west and 4.58-13.50m north south, with its shortest axis at the western end. The extension ran towards the driveway and measured 7.01-8.66m north-south and 4.33-6.60m east-west with a 3.00 by 1.5m wide trench extension.

The turf and friable, dark brownish grey humic silt clay topsoil and mid-brown silty clay subsoil were carefully removed by a six tonne machine with a ditching bucket, under the constant supervision of a professional archaeologist. During excavation both layers produced numerous items of 18th–20th century material, including pottery, clay pipe stems, glass and ferrous objects. As with Trench 26, immediately beneath this the subsoil was a layer of wet mid-greyish brown clay silt, identical to (781) in Trench 26, in that it contained a high percentage of small-medium sandstone inclusions. This layer is the interface between the natural clay geology below and the humic soils above. No finds were recovered from this layer.

The natural geology is identical to that identified elsewhere within Area C; a compact reddish brown boulder clay.

Trench 36 revealed a complex and very densely packed arrangement of inter-cutting features. The majority of archaeological features were typically denoted by their dark upper fills and frequent presence of small – medium sandstone inclusions. Due to the complexity of the multi inter-cutting features, identification of individual features and potential extents relied upon frequent and regular re-cleaning of the targeted areas.

Due to the density of the archaeology within Trench 26, this section is broken up into feature types, i.e. gullies, postholes, pits and stake holes, where possible relationships exists between features of a different nature then these are commented upon.

As the level of exposure within Area C is much greater than that of 2004, results and interpretations have subsequently developed, been refined and some have changed considerably from the discussions relating to the Trench 26.

5.4.1 Gullies

A total of 9 gullies were discovered during the excavation of Trench 36. All of which are located to the western end of the trench and its shorter arm. Due to the inter cutting nature of these features it initially proved difficult to establish individual gullies, therefore many were assigned more than one context during the excavation. Wherever possible, gullies that appear to be continuations of those located in Trench 26 are identified as such.

The terminal end of gully [251] was located towards the northern extent of the trench and in close proximity to the inter cutting pits. The extent of the gully was identified throughout the various parts of the trench extensions and is a continuation of [638] located in trench 26. Heavily packed with large stone inclusions, the light grey silty clay contained occasional fragments of charcoal and burnt bone fragments. In profile the gully was relatively shallow 0.23m and averaged 0.50 – 0.55m wide. The gully was excavated at three points across its extent and found to cut gully [364]. Within the southern trench extension, the gully was cut by two unrelated postholes [322] and [341]. Overall the feature measured 12.6m in diameter, with its north-eastern extent running out of the excavated area.

Feature [203] was a small sub circular gully, originating close to the inter-cutting pits in the northern portion of the trench. This gully was found to be a continuation of gully OVM04 [656] and formed a semi-circular enclosure with a diameter of 8.80m. The gully is not regular in shape and shows signs of distortion towards its south western extent. The eastern terminal end is much thinner than that identified to the east, 0.42m and 0.79m respectively. In profile the gully contained undulating sloping sides and a rounded base, and was 0.25m deep. The primary fill was a pale grey silty clay containing frequent inclusions of angular and sub-angular 0-15cm sandstones and the secondary a mid-brown silty clay with similar inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks were identified within both fills; however, no dateable artifactual material was uncovered from this gully. A 2.00m long section was excavated over the eastern terminal end and a further 1.00m wide section further to the south. The gully cuts a number of other gullies, [361] and [363], and is cut by [552] and [743]. Identification of any associated postholes was hindered by the extensive inter-cutting nature of the gullies and homogenous upper layer of the repetitively inter-cutting pits.

Within the southern extension of Trench 36 a gully terminus was identified [231], cut by gully [320]. [231] is only identifiable through the section placed over the terminus. This feature appears to be a continuation of OVM04 [565], and would therefore be another semi-circular gully, similar in nature to [203] and [251] and consists of an identical fill. The gully was approximately 6.3m in diameter, 0.55m wide and 0.40m deep. No archaeological material was recovered from this feature.

The partial remains of another similar semi-circular gully were identified, running into the eastern trench edge and found to be a continuation of OVM04 [552]. This feature was not excavated during the 2005 season. However in total the diameter measured 8.4m and appeared to show two definite terminal ends. It cut gullies [320] [231] and appears to be the latest of this particular type of feature.

Within the southern extension of Trench 36, gully OVM04 [743] was identified and continued for a distance of 0.40m from the trench edge in a south-easterly direction before stopping. As the majority of this feature was excavated during the 2004 season, no excavation of this gully continued during the 2005 season. Stratigraphically the feature cuts gullies [552] and [203].

During the excavation of the slot across the area located against the eastern trench section a total of seven inter cutting gullies were identified, of which two have already been discussed [251]

and [231]. The remaining gullies [354] [355] [356] [357] [358] were identified within this small trench.

Further gullies were present at the edge between Trench 26 and Trench 36, however it was not possible to follow them as they were cut by the area of inter cutting pits located to the north. Covering the entire area of the southern arm of the trench is a deposit of light-mid grey silty clay, 0.10m deep, containing frequent deposits of irregular sized sandstone deposits (447). This layer is a continuation of the same located within Trench 26. Only after careful removal of this layer are the underlying features visible.

Discussion

The presence of layer (447) makes identification of the underlying features difficult and subsequent removal of this layer reveals the underlying archaeological features. The complexity of the surviving archaeology within the area is staggering in that a large portion survives but is complicated by the subsequent inter-cutting nature of the gullies. The form in plan and section of these gullies shows multiple features of differing forms. Taking the 2004 results into account there are four different categories into which these can be positioned.

The first is a large circular gully, [251], can be classed as a drip gully of a round house. If subsequent excavation proves this feature to be fully circular then the identification of a terminal end within Trench 36 would indicate a north-east facing entranceway into the structure. If this is a form of round house, then the presence of an entrance way to the north-east is unusual compared to round houses from alternative sites, whose entrances tend to face in a south-easterly direction. It is expected that this is not the case for [251] due to the typological nature of the immediate area. A south east facing section would place this in direct line of the usual prevailing wind direction but by moving to the north-east this problem is avoided.

However, there is the possibility that this represents the remains, not of a round house, but, due to the high fractured stone content, the kerb of a burial mound. This interpretation would tie in with the discovery of the Bronze Age flint dagger, placed on the natural ground surface encompassed within the feature possibly suggesting the ritual deposition of the dagger. If classified as a burial mound, then a burial would be expected within the centre of the structure, the location of which would be within the area of the inter-cutting pits, and therefore, at present, excavation has not been conducted over this particular area.

The second type of gully arrangement is characteristically semi-circular in plan. A total of three have been identified, [231], [203] and [364], and there is the potential for more of the gullies to be classed within the same grouping but which cannot be immediately placed within these as their complete extent and form is as yet unknown. All three are semi-circular in form and are arranged in the same orientation, the gully to the south and the opened side to the north. Provisional interpretation is that these features are not roundhouse gullies and could be earlier settlement structures, but more probably animal enclosures. All three stratigraphically predate the largest, complete gully [251], and cannot be present at the same time as they cut each other.

The remainder of the gullies cannot be classed as either at this point, as the excavation does not identify their true form. The area exposed within Trench 26 and 36 does show that the notion of zones of occupation can still be upheld, and that this immediate area contains multiple examples of occupational usage over a prolonged period of time, indicating that the area itself was particularly important in relevance to its particular usage. Areas without occupational structural features, such as those to the west would have been separated by use and remain as important to the archaeological records as those with continuous re-use.

5.4.2 Pits

Within Trench 36 a large collection of inter-cutting pits were uncovered. These are a continuation of those identified within the north eastern extent of Trench 26. In plan the pits appeared to be one homogenous irregular layer, consisting of a mid-dark grey silty clay containing frequent rounded and sub-rounded inclusions. The extent of the swathe of pits continues in a north-east to south-west orientation and measures *c.*16.5m long and *c.*4.10m wide. To the south the pits cease *c.* 2.56m from the Trench 26 southern edge, and continue into the Trench 36 northern edge.

During the 2005 excavations four slots were placed over the single mass. The first, alongside the northern trench edge and at the pits' eastern most-extent, was 1.20m long by 1.00m wide and excavated to a depth of *c.*0.20m. Identified within were the remains of four irregular inter-cutting pits, ranging in size from 0.60m wide to 1.30m wide and all containing frequent amounts of rounded and sub rounded sandstone inclusions. No dateable material was recovered from this area.

The second slot, located alongside the northern trench edge towards the centre, produced evidence of three inter-cutting pits, [209], [210] and [212] measuring between 1.00m and 1.8m in width and containing frequent deposits of rounded and sub-rounded sandstone inclusions.

The third, located towards the centre of the trench, was 1.50m by 0.90m and designed to establish if gully [251] continued beneath the pits. A further three pits 0.90m in width were identified containing frequent deposits of rounded and sub rounded sandstone inclusions. The pits did not cut [251].

The fourth, was a re-excavation and realignment of the section over the pits within the trench 26 extension and revealed nine inter-cutting pits of assorted sizes.

Compared to other pits excavated upon the site, the universally high frequency of fire cracked pebbles contained within the fills is highly unusual. A strategy of sampling was introduced in order to evaluate the quantity and type of material that was contained in a proportionate sample of the pits excavated. As the identification of the pits was difficult during excavation, the stone inclusions were saved from the respective sections. [219], [250], [249] contained a total of 504 individual stones, which produced a weight of 41.00kg, of which 605 were sub-rounded and 405 sub-angular. A total of 70 % of these were fire cracked in form, the smallest measuring 0.05m x 0.03m x 0.05m

Pits [331], [332], [333] and [334] contained a total of 216 individual stones, producing a total weight of 47.00kg, of which 60% were sub-angular and 40% sub-angular. A total of 20% were in fire cracked form, the smallest measuring 0.01m x 0.01m x 0.02m and the largest measuring 0.15m x 0.12m x 0.05m.

Pits [361], [362], [364] and [365] contained a total of 194 individual stones, producing a total weight of 74.00kg, of which 70% were sub-angular and 30% sub-angular. A total of 85% were in fire cracked form, the smallest measuring 0.01m x 0.02m x 0.03m and the largest measuring 0.03m x 0.18m x 0.23m.

Discussion

The large series of inter cutting pits revealed within Trench 26 and 36 is a type of use not discovered in other trenches so far excavated on the Mellor site, and appears to be localised into this immediate area. If future excavation across the site establishes this to be the case, then it would suggest that the area held some particular relevance to their functions. It is conceivable that the close spatial relationship between the pits and the roundhouse gullies implies that they were associated and belong to a similar phase. The repeated re cutting of the gullies denotes that the area was occupied and re-occupied over a substantial period of time, which would therefore account for the large number of pits and their repeated inter cutting nature.

This could be due to the pits having a function linked with some other activity or feature in the immediate area, or that the area itself was ideally suited to their particular purpose. It is important to note the possibility that there is little evidence, other than a common immediate locale, to suggest that these pits were part of a series or group. Indeed it is highly probable that individual pits of various dates and functions lie within a larger group of possibly associated pits. This probability appears to be supported by the few artefacts recovered from the fills of the excavated pits. These include flint flakes along with shreds of Romano-British pottery along with the late Iron Age date recovered from the pit/posthole [283]. The possibility of re-deposition of artefacts and sample cannot be discounted, particularly due to the frequent inter cutting nature of these features. It seems likely that they indicate a repeated and prolonged use of this area over various periods of time for the cutting of small pits. The questions posed by this are related to the specific purpose of the pits and the significance of this particular area.

The two questions may not be mutually exclusive. It is possible that the pits were placed here to exploit the natural resource of the geological boulder clay of the area, which unlike the majority of the site (which possesses an underlying stone bedrock) forms a band of natural boulder clay that runs approximately north-east to south-west through the central portion of the hilltop. The clay could have been utilised for a number of purposes, including a providing part of the structural integrity to the roundhouse walls, and would therefore have proved to have been a highly desired local resource.

No re-deposition of the boulder clay was identified within the fills of the pits. It appears therefore that the boulder clay was extracted from the pits and utilised or placed elsewhere. Whilst this may have been part of the pits' function, the nature of their infill suggests another primary purpose. Each of the pits contained a very high percentage of small sub-angular and more commonly, sub-rounded stone within their fills. Many of which were fire reddened and cracked. Stones such as these are classically known as 'pot boilers' and are associated with the heating and boiling of water after initially being heated themselves. The impermeable nature of the boulder clay would have served as an ideal receptacle in which to contain water, into which stones were immersed after being initially heated. The pits therefore, would appear to have served a primary purpose connected with the boiling water. Whether this served a domestic, industrial or ritual purpose is unclear and it is possible that all three could have been fulfilled at one or more stage. The nature of the stone inclusions assessed by the sampling produced a remarkable difference in weight. The pits with the highest portion of fire cracked stone were also the heaviest by a significant proportion.

The recovery of the Bronze Age flint dagger from Trench 26 may suggest that ritual activity took place within the area due to this objects funerary associations. Where pits have been found closely in association with Bronze Age ritual / funerary activity on other sites. The excavations have suggested that they may have been utilised as saunas connected to a purifying ritual.

In a domestic context, the pits may have been utilised either in the preparation of food, or to heat water for bathing. Occasional small burnt fragments of bone were recovered from the fills of

the pits and therefore may suggest a connection with the cooking of food. Similarly, many of the stones from within the pits were volcanic in origin and ideally suited to a slow release of stored heat which would have proved beneficial in the cooking process.

An industrial purpose is also a potential explanation for some of the pits. An unusually high concentration of red ochre was found both in and around the pits location, which may have been used in the production process of a textile as a dye. It seems likely therefore based on the above possibilities, that both the pits and the specific area of Trench 26 and 36, served numerous purposes over a period spanning some 3000 years. Continuity such as this is a recurrent theme upon the Mellor site and signifies its importance within the landscape over the ages.

5.4.3 Postholes

Within trench 36 a number of postholes have been identified, numbering twelve within the trench. Identification of the postholes is extremely difficult due to the complexity of the inter-cutting gullies and pits. Many of the postholes were stone packed and contained flat small to medium sandstone inclusions, which appear to have been sat on-edge around the sides of the posthole and it is likely that these would have acted as packing stones holding up a central post. Post holes of this type were sub-circular or sub-oval in plan, measuring 0.45 x 0.40m with near vertical sides and a flat, possibly u-shaped base and an average depth of between 0.20 and 0.30m.

It is particularly difficult to separate the identified post holes into any different uses and structures as the complexity and multi-period usage of the surrounding features does not allow for any individual phaseological relationship to be established.

One post hole of particular note was located in the centre of the southern arm, located inside an arrangement of gullies, [283]. This was sub-circular 0.37m diameter, 0.33m deep post hole, containing very steep sides and a gently rounded base. The upper fill (284) consisted of a friable mid-grey clay silt containing occasional small flecks of charcoal and occasional small sub-angular stone inclusions. The secondary fill consisted of a friable very dark grey clay silt containing multiple fragments of charcoal and flecks of burnt bone. Fragments of what appeared to be pottery were recovered from this fill, later analysis by Dr Chris Cumberpatch pointed towards the fragments being the waste from an industrial process, possibly metalworking and maybe parts of a crucible. A charcoal sample was recovered from this fill and radiocarbon dating produced a calibrated date of BC 190 to 40. (Beta-209510) The primary fill was a mid-greyish brown firm clay containing occasional flecks of charcoal; the deposition of this fill was natural, occurring from silting of natural sides of the posthole.

Discussion

There is a strong possibility that [283] was not a posthole, the quantity of deposited industrial waste material would suggest that if a post were present this would not have been possible, therefore the feature could be a small pit, containing the waste material as a deliberate phase of backfilling or deposition, providing the possibility of industrial activity upon the site during the late Iron Age. No other pits of this form and fill have been identified within the excavated areas of Area C.

The post holes occur across both trenches, covering the entirety. Post holes within the immediate area of the gullies can possibly be interpreted as being the foundations of large posts which would have supported the roof of a structure. However, it is almost impossible to identify particular layouts of these posts, due to the complex inter cutting nature of the gullies and pits,

so that any associated layout is masked. Along with the possibility that the majority of the postholes are not going to be contemporary, in that they would relate to each phase of round house and be very similar in location.

Identification of the post holes in 2004 led to the interpretation of two distinct zones, one of gullies and one of numerous postholes in between the zones of occupation. Therefore it was expected that there would have been a significant number of postholes identified to the east of the gullies. This was found not to be the case, there were occasional postholes, but not found in the concentrations located to the west of the gullies. Indicating a possible change of use within the different areas. Is this the furthest extent of the round houses and settlement, within the confines of the outer enclosure ditch? Or is this an area set aside for a different use, possibly that of cooking pits?

5.4.4 Stakeholes

A total of 51 stake holes were discovered within Trench 36. These can be distinguished into three separate groups. First and second are two parallel lines of stakeholes approximately 1.50m apart, orientated in a north-west, south-east alignment, The northern most line contains fourteen, whereas the southern line contains eleven.

Typically the distance between each stake hole is 0.40-0.45m apart and comprises of small sub circular features, averaging 0.10-0.20m in width and between 0.10m and 0.32m deep and are cut into the natural geology and filled with a friable light-mid greyish brown silty clay containing no inclusions. The average profile of these appears to be steep almost vertical sides sloping inwards to form a point at its base.

The remainder of the postholes remain classed as individual features as no apparent grouping can be assigned to them and therefore they must be classed as separate. It is expected that these would have formed parts of other groupings but it remains impossible to differentiate between them.

Discussion

Within the two parallel lines, the stake holes appear to form the original space into which the steaks had been placed. Due to the nature of the stake holes. It is possible to state that they would have consisted of roughly circular wooden post with a shaped, sharpened end. This end is placed into the ground, by force, not by digging a hole first. These posts would then become the uprights and more flexible branches would then be weaved in between these in order to construct a temporary solid wicker fence.

The two parallel lines of stake holes represent two parallel fences that can be related to each other. In terms of function and use, there are multiple options; firstly these could be enclosures for containing animals, abutting to the roundhouses. Secondly they could stand alone, as no stratigraphic relationship can be identified between the stake holes and the gullies. The stake holes definitely denote a temporary wall, demarcating a particular area for usage, whether this be for animals, industrial processes or simply an entranceway into a particular area. The natural clay surface provides a suitable background against which to identify these, suggesting that these may be present in other areas which have been excavated, but are not recognised due to the complexity of the background natural and the surrounding features.