

“Digging for Millom” – Presentation for Final Event

24/08/2024

Introduction

Slide 1 – title

Introduction to what we have been doing and what there is should have been covered by Jan. I will be talking more about the technical side of the results and interpretation, as well as about some of the specific finds.

Slide 2 – location of trenches

We ended up excavating seven separate trenches – three in the grounds of the former Holy Trinity School and cottage, Trenches 1, 2 and 7

Slide 3 – detailed location of trenches 1, 2, and 7

And three on land at Beck Farm, Trenches 4-6

Slide 4 – detailed location of Trenches 4-6

The trenches in the area at the school were essentially just dug in the available space, but we obviously knew this was of interest because of the proximity to the castle and the fact that before the school was built the area was part of a larger field close to one named ‘Children’s Meadow’

Slide 5 – map of 1750

Slide 6 – detail of map of 1750 showing location of trenches 1, 2 and 7

The trenches at Beck Farm were targeting a range of features. Trench 3 was specifically cut across an earthwork bank that we had identified in the lidar imagery and the drone survey

Slide 7 – Trench 3 on drone survey

Trenches 4-6 were aimed at features in the geophysical survey, ideally those that might relate to the Bronze Age cremation urns that had reported as found in the area in the 19th century, but also a long linear feature showing up in the geophysics

Slide 8 – Trenches 4-6 on geophysics

Slide 9 – Trenches 4-6 on old map showing location of urns

Results

I will talk about Trenches 3-6 first, because they are the most straightforward and weren’t very deep, compared to Trenches 1 and 2, as will be seen.

Trench 3 was only 4m long and a little over 1m wide, cut across the bank and revealed, at a very shallow depth that this comprised an earth and boulder construction, with a small area of tumble on the north end.

Slide 10 – working shots

Slide 11 – figures

This undoubtedly forms part of a much larger area of ancient field boundaries, some of which remain as substantial earthworks to the north and east, which we can't date but would certainly fit within general form of late prehistoric to early medieval, perhaps most likely Romano-British

Slide 12 – figure of Trench 3 on drone survey again

Slide 13 – similar field system near The Green

Trench 4 was 20m long and 1.7m wide (a digger bucket width). It didn't find any evidence for cremations, and in fact the lower lying end of the trench encountered very pale silty deposits and the depth, at only just over 9m above sea level means that this area would have been tidal or even coastal wetland until the Bronze Age, which makes burials in this area very unlikely. However, the linear anomaly visible in the geophysics was present as a shallow ditch about 80cm wide and 20cm deep, with lots of charcoal in the fill. It seemed to demarcate the change between the more silty natural at the south-west end of the trench to more gravelly uphill at the north-east end, perhaps indicating different cultivation regimes or that one area was deliberately being cordoned off as not useful or not somewhere you wanted animals to stray. As with Trench 3, this can't be easily dated by itself although we could get a carbon date from the charcoal. There was apparently charred grain in the charcoal, possibly including oats, which weren't widely cultivated until the Roman period, but we are still waiting for confirmation on that.

Slide 14-15 – Trench 4 being excavated

Slide 16 – Trench 4 plan/section

Trench 5 was a similar size and aiming for some dark anomalies in the geophysics, which might have been pits, but found no features, only similar silty deposits at the west end, again suggesting low-lying wet conditions in this area.

Slide 17 – Trench 5 being excavated

Trench 6 was only 10m long and aimed at crossing the linear anomaly seen in Trench 4 again. This was discovered again and was a similar size and form, although with some evidence for initial erosion on the east side, with a very obvious difference in the underlying natural either side. Again, it can't be easily dated, although a nice flake of flint, obviously waste material but not easily dateable was found.

Slide 18 – Trench 6 being excavated

Slide 19 – Trench 6 plan/section

So, the area of the 'urn field', as Jan optimistically kept referring to it, proved to be a bit disappointing in that we didn't find any evidence relating to prehistoric cremations – in fact it seems highly unlikely that they were found anywhere near the location given, so either that is wrong or someone was telling fibs! Nevertheless, we did demonstrate that at least one of the linear features shown in the geophysics is a ditch, and perhaps part of an early field system, although we can't at present date it. It is possibly associated with the bank shown further up hill at Trench 3 and around, and suggests a widespread area of fields, perhaps initially laid out as shallow ditches in some areas and eventually forming banks on the steeper ground, covering large areas from perhaps as early as the late prehistoric period. Mapping these out in more detail would be a useful task.

Trenches 1, 2 and 7 were very different. I will go through them in what might be seen as reverse order of importance, depending on how you define that!

Trench 7 was a bit last minute and essentially intended to keep us busy in the last few days of the project! It was initially just 1m square but later extended to the west by another 1m. It did serve a useful purpose though – trying to see if there was any evidence for a continuation of the feature shown the lidar and drone survey heading west into the field beyond, which we knew in part followed the line of early field boundaries, but was potentially on the course of a (perhaps Roman!) road.

Slide 20 – drone survey

Slide 21 – Old OS map

Inevitably excavation showed up something completely different! Below the gravel and some old topsoil, which contained lots of 19th century pottery, was the remains of a drystone wall, probably corresponding to the one shown in the early maps and pre-dating the boundary wall that was clearly built at the time of the school and school house. This was sat on the natural gravel and no signs of a Roman or other road were present. If it was ever there it is possible it had been completely removed, or that it is slightly further north of where we could dig.

Slide 22 – excavation of Trench 7

Slide 23 – plan of Trench 7

Trench 2 was again very different, and ultimately very challenging, not least because of the depth we ended up having to excavate. It was 4m square and excavated in the lawned area to the south of the former school. The initial deposits comprised a thin layer of topsoil, with some remains relating to the Scouts, and some sparse rubble below, with a couple of Victorian coins. On the east side an intact, and possibly still working, water pipe was present, so we had to leave a big section of the area unexcavated in order to not damage it.

Slide 24 – initial shots

Below this was a substantial deposit of what initially just looked like a buried soil, but was revealed to actually be a massive dumped layer of material including lots of large stone including some dressed sandstone, particularly on the north side, but also broken up drainage tiles of horseshoe type, and gravel and clearly 19th century, although with some residual older finds. Once we finally got through this, on the west side of the trench where we could excavate, we ultimately revealed three massive pits. The southernmost of these was ultimately shown to be actually just below the surface but immensely deep, over 2m, and filled initially with sandy deposits and then lots of clinker and ash, but obviously 20th century as it contained things like ceramic breakers from a circuit board and fairly modern silvered glass. The top of it had the remains of a large timber post, possibly a telegraph pole although also maybe the remains of the scout flag pole, supported by a group of large boulders, but it seems likely, given its size, that it is actually something to do with water or septic tanks. The other two pits were covered by the thick dumped deposit and after much digging found to be of considerable depth and dug into the natural sand – they are probably therefore sand pits, dug to extract sand for building, perhaps even for building the school because while some medieval finds were recovered from the fill of these pits, there were lots of post-medieval finds, probably 19th century.

Slide 25 – massive pit

Slide 26 – sand pits

Slide 27 – plan of Trench 2

Slide 28 – section of Trench 2

Trench 1 was, to my mind, the most significant of the whole project. It was excavated in the garden to the south of the former school master's cottage, which was extremely overgrown but thankfully George turned up with a strimmer. Again, it was 4m square and initially we uncovered a fairly thick layer of garden soil, as might be expected, which included everything from plastic toys to bits of medieval pottery, which was fairly encouraging. The remains of a modern gravel path also ran north/south along the west side.

Slide 29 – Trench 1 initial shots

Excavation through this garden soil eventually revealed another nice layer of more brown sandy soil, which had a few stones in near the top but was otherwise pretty clear, with the exception of a pretty large amount of pottery, almost all consistently later medieval, animal bone, iron working slag, and some other small finds in metal and stone. This sort of layer is not unexpected but what was remarkable in this case was that it kept going down and ended up being up to 80cm thick, which took a lot of hand digging. Because of the depth by that point, we had to limit further investigation to a smaller area in the centre of the trench so that we could step the excavated area and this eventually got us to the bottom and revealed two ditch features, one very large one on the east side extending beyond where we could excavate, at least 40cm deep and 70m wide, and a narrower ditch to the west, 70cm wide and 30cm deep with a shallower spur running off to the west.

Slide 30 – General views of deposits in Trench 1

Slide 31 - excavated features in Trench 1

Slide 32 – plan of Trench 1

Slide 33 – section of Trench 1

The larger ditch on the east side is almost certainly a continuation of the moat, the only extant section of which is to the south but if you continue its line this feature is essentially right on where it would run. This would suggest that the moat is much larger than previously suggested and takes in a much larger area around the castle complex. The smaller ditch to the west is more enigmatic – is it perhaps a water course such as a leat powering something nearby?

Slide 34– trench and possible line of moat compared to Cowper's plan

Finds

In total there were 3,435 finds most of which came from the trenches at the school and of which the vast majority were post-medieval pottery and ceramic material such as brick and tile, most of which can be dated to the 19th century or even later. There were also 145 fragments of medieval pottery, which represents the largest collection from this part of the county. We also had a pretty substantial collection of iron working waste, both from smelting and smithing, which we know from documentary evidence was taking place on the castle estates and the name 'Furnace Beck' has long been taken as evidence for it. Obviously, it's not possible to talk about more than a small proportion of the finds in any detail.

Post-medieval pottery – lots of the fairly typical types of finds of the 18th and 19th centuries, but also a few earlier types from the 16th and 17th centuries

Slide 35-37 – post-medieval pottery

This also includes several examples of the 'Millom' mug and plate, particularly from Trenches 2 and 7.

Slide 38 – Millom mug sherds

The medieval pottery mostly came from the thick buried soil in Trench 1 and was mostly later medieval in date, so 14th – 15th century, with relatively little of 12th – 13th century. This typically tends to comprises large vessels like jugs and jars and the material from Millom was no exception.

Slide 39-40 – medieval pottery photos

Slide 41 – medieval pottery drawings

Then there were a range of other 'small finds' in stone and metal of particular interest, from the post-medieval

Slide 42 – metal post-medieval finds

Slide 43 – stone post-medieval finds

And a range of interesting metal finds and stone finds of medieval date

Slide 44 – metal and stone finds of medieval date

Conclusion

Ultimately the project has further demonstrated how much potential there is out there and that if you dig trenches almost anywhere near Millom you will probably find something of interest. The depth at which we had to dig made the work challenging, and perhaps didn't allow as much time to be spent on certain things because we were having to spend so long shifting material by hand and couldn't really get a machine in to excavate in Trenches 1 and 2. But everyone worked hard and as team, in a manner in which a town with a rich history of mining should be proud!

The question is perhaps really what to do next as there are so many options, if we can get permission.

Slides 45-47 – other areas of interest