1842

FH1 IAM(14P)1185

BLACKLOW HILL, WARWICKSHIRE. TWO GRAVES AND SURROUNDING FEATURES

Introduction

Blacklow Hill, Warwickshire (SP 289676) was excavated by the Warwickshire County Museum Service, with a grant from the Department of the Environment, in 1971/2. The excavation, directed by John Hedges, now County Archaeologist, West Yorkshire, took place ahead of the building of the Kenilworth by-pass. The area of excavation was selected following a wide survey of the Kenilworth area in advance of the building of the Bath to Lincoln trunk road. This survey was organized by Bill Ford, now of the Tyne and Wear County Museum Service, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. The excavation was carried out with the valuable assistance of the Kenilworth Historical Society. All surviving records are held in the Warwickshire Museum.

The site was situated at the North-West edge of Blacklow Hill, which forms a promontory overlooking the valley of the River Avon. The northern edge of the promontory had been cut away by an 18th-19th century sandstone quarry. The natural soil was a brown sandy loam which overlay Kemper Sandstone bedrock. The site comprised three distinct sets of features: a series of slots, or channels, cut into the sandstone and running diagonally down the sides of the hill; about 270 rock-cut circular pits, carefully worked, with smooth, chiselled sides and bases; and some 50 squared-off post holes, also cut into the sandstone. The last two sets of features spread over the crest of the hill and in the centre of them were found two graves, side by side, approximately 1m apart. One grave contained a knife of Anglo-Saxon type. Plough marks, sometimes deeply incised into the rock, covered the entire site. A large assemblage of Mesolithic flints was uncovered during the excavation. The concentration of flints bore no obvious relation to the features excavated and no Mesolithic features were noticed. This assemblage is to be the subject of a forthcoming report by John Hedges.

Since 1972 the records of the excavation have become scattered and depleted. The following summary, taken from existing records, is unfortunately limited by the information now available.

In addition to the Kenilworth Historical Society, grateful thanks are due to C Boddington of the HBMC drawing office, Janet D Henderson of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory and the Institute of Archaeology for providing the report on the human bone, and Professor V I Evison of Birkbeck College London.

The History of the Site (Fig 1)

The North-West edge of Blacklow Hill had been used as a quarry for sandstone in the 18th and 19th centuries. A late 19th-early 20th century beech tree plantation on the crest of the hill was cleared by the Motorway Unit before the excavation began. In addition to the 19th century trees, there was evidence of an earlier plantation. Elm tree boles on the site were analysed by Peter Farmington of and discovered to be approximately 250 years old when felled, presumably to be replaced by the beeches, giving a date for the earlier plantation of sometime in the 17th century.

Beneath the elm tree boles, and sealing the primary features, was a layer of plough-soil 10-20 cm deep. Plough marks, in places cutting into the bedrock, were found across the entire site. An extensive period of ploughing post-dated the graves, pits, post-holes and slots.

The Features

To facilitate the recording of a large number of similar features and to minimize repetition in the record, the following scheme was devised to note the significant details of each feature:

1. Shape. Eg, circular, square, elliptical.
2. Nature of fill.
3. Finds.
4. Nature of the sides. Eg, tooling (direction, angle, spacing).
5. Nature of the base. Eg, fissured, tool marked, smooth.
6. Diameter. Complete plan measurements.
7. Depth. Average base to highest surrounding point.
8. Comments. State of preservation, plough marks, etc.
9. Soil sample taken.

For the purposes of this summary, one representative description of each type of feature, together with a plan and section drawing, has been chosen.

The Post-holes (Plate 1)

A total of 52 square, or rectangular, post-holes are recorded as having been excavated.

Those at the Eastern end of the side measured, on average, 45 x 35 cm. and approximately 40 cm. deep. They formed three sides of a rectangular enclosure measuring some 25 x 30 m. with the short side to the East (fig 1).

The post-holes at the Western end, although shallower, were slightly larger than those at the East, measuring on average 60 x 50 cm x 25 cm (depth). They formed a circle which closed off the Western end of the rectangular enclosure. To the North-West the circle has eroded and quarried away.

Four post-holes (F57, F55, F59 and F296) cut across the North-East corner of the rectangular enclosure; these belonged to a modern fence.

F38 (fig 2)

1. Rectangular hole.
2. Brown, sandy loam.
3. No finds.
4. Vertical tool marks on all four sides.
5. Flat smooth base.
6. 45 x 40 cm.
7. 32 cm.
8. Solid sides. No plough marks.
9. No soil sample.

The Slots (Plate 2)

On the crest of the hill a series of long shallow slots, or trenches, were excavated. Respecting the line of post-holes these ran diagonally down the slopes of the hill. They were cut into the bedrock and measured, on average, some 15-20 cm. deep and 50-60 cm. wide. They were dug at 15-20 cm. intervals. They had sloping sides and were generally rough and uneven at the bottom. The ends at the top of the hill tended to be rounded. Concentrations of these slots were found where the sides of the hill had been leasted eroded and where no quarrying had taken place.

F210 (fig 3)

1. End of slot, rounded.
2. Sandy soil.
3. No finds.
4. Sloped sides.
5. Base rock, no tooling, uneven.

6. 50 cm. across.
7. 12 cm. deep.
8. None.
9. No soil sample.

The Circular Pits (Plate 3)

Approximately 270 rock-cut circular pits were recorded. The majority have a diameter of about 1 m. and a depth of 20-30 cms. They appear to have been randomly spaced and are, on average, 50 cm-1 m. apart. All the circular pits were contained by the rectangular or circular enclosures formed by the post-holes. They were carefully made, having straight sides and even bases; most showed evidence of tooling both on the sides and on the bottom. Four larger pits are recorded with the circle of post-holes (F261, F265, F270) their average measurements were 1.6 m. in diameter and 40 cm in depth.

F107 (fig 4)

1. Circular.
2. Brown sandy fill with roots and humic patches.
3. None.
4. All sides intact but many roots penetrating joint planes. Some indication of diagonal tooling on the Western side - 0.06 cm spaces between grooves.
5. Sloping base with fissures. No evidence of tooling.
6. 1.10 m. diameter.
7. 180 cm.-250 cm. deep.
8. Plough marks on top of eastern wall.
9. No soil sample.

The Graves (Plate 4)

Two graves were excavated, aligned West-East. They lay at the Western end of the rectangular enclosure, just outside the circle of post-holes. They were

completely intact and equidistant (approximately 10 m.) from the North and South sides of the rectangle.

The original plans and descriptions of these graves are now missing. From Plate 10 it can be seen that they were dug into the sandstone bedrock. The more southerly grave contained an iron knife.

The Skeletal Remains - a report by Janet D Henderson.

Summary Individual Details - Blacklow Hill, Warwicks

A3408

The fragmentary remains of a human skeleton in extremely poor condition. Only fragments of skull, tibiae, calcaneii and tali (foot bones) were present.

Sex: ??Female, assessed on the size of the bones.

Age: Adult.

A3409

The fragmentary remains of a human skeleton in very poor condition. Fragments of the skull, right arm, right pelvis and both legs were present.

Sex: ?Male, assessed on the size and shape of the pelvis and femur.

Age: 20-25 years, assessed on dental wear (Brothwell 1981, Miles 1963).

Dentition: Wear: Slight

Periodontal Disease: Slight

Disease (general): Absent

Blacklow Hill, Warwicks - The Human Bone

Ancient Monuments Lab.
Report no. 4640
Ancient Monuments Lab.
No. 852735

Janet D Henderson
Ancient Monuments
Laboratory and Institute of
Archaeology
August 1985.

The Human skeletal remains from two greaves from this site were examined in the Laboratory. The bones were in extremely fragmentary condition with less than a quarter of the skeleton present in each case but it was clear that there were only two individuals present. Observations were made for demography (age and sex) but it was not possible to make any assessment of anthropology (normal variability) or pathology (abnormal variability), with the exception of the dentition of A3409.

The results of the examination showed that both individuals were adults and for A3409 an estimate of 20-25 years (ie young adult) was obtained. There was a marked lack of diagnostic evidence for sex in both cases but in spite of this A3408 was very tentatively identified as a female and A3409 as a male.

Only the left mandibular teeth were present for A3409 but it was possible to observe that occlusal wear and alveolar bone recession (evidence for periodontal disease) were slight and that there was no disease (eg caries).

No further observations could be made on this material.

References

Brothwell D.R.: Digging Up Bones.
British Museum (Natural History), 1981.

Miles A.E.W.: The dentition in the assessment of individual age in skeletal material. In: Brothwell D.R. (ed.): Dental Anthropology. p. 191-209. Pergamon Press. 1963.

References

Brothwell D.R.: Digging Up Bones.
British Museum (Natural History), 1981.

Miles A.E.W.: The dentition in the assessment of individual age in skeletal material. In: Brothwell D.R. (ed.): Dental Anthropology. p. 191-209. Pergamon Press. 1963.

The Knife (fig 5).

Total length 20 cm. (tip missing). Length of blade 15.5 cm, length of tang 4.5 cm.; width 3 cm.; width of back 1 cm. The cutting edge is straight. The back slopes slightly towards the missing tip, and angles down sharply to the tang. X-ray photographs reveal a line approximately 1 cm from the back, indicating that the blade was forged as a separate unit and welded to the back. Traces of horn were found on the tang.[1]

Discussion

This single bladed knife is a common Anglo-Saxon type. It is solid and heavy enough to be tentatively classified as a small seax, ie a knife that served as a weapon rather than a domestic utensil.

Kurt Böhner (1958) studied examples of knives from the Trier district. The Blacklow Hill knife can be classed as Böhner's 'narrow seax' type (op. cit., 135-8), a long knife with a narrow blade, dated to between 450 and 600 on the Continent. Parallels, for example, from North Leigh, Oxfordshire, length 11½ ins (28.5 cm) (Leeds 1940, 21); Burwell, Cambridgeshire, length 13 ins (33 cm) (Lethbridge 1931, 57; fig 2a); Londesborough, Yorkshire, grave 8, length 15 cm (Swanton 1963, 276) and Winnall, Hampshire, length 7.3 ins (18.5 cm) (Meany and

Hawkes 1970, 18; fig 13:14) suggest that the type continued into the 7th century in this country; North Leigh and Burwell being the latest in the group.

Some evidence that the Blacklow Hill knife may be of a later date than the examples quoted above is seen in the fact that the cutting edge appears to have been welded to the back. This technique, which was presumably to provide a harder iron or steel edge, is unusual. It was found on a knife from Ports Down, Hampshire. (Evison 1967, 33-6) dated to the 7th-8th centuries. In other respects, however, the Ports Down knife, which has grooves running down both edes of the back, is a superior object.

Anglo-Saxon knives and seaxs come in a very wide variety of shapes and sizes and are ubiquitous in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and settlements (Evison 1961, 226-230). They have seldom been the subject of detailed study and it would be unwise to make a definitive statement about an unassociated knife such as the Blacklow Hill example. The evidence points to its having been deposited sometime in the 7th century. Welded blades have not been noted (which does not preclude their existence) in the early pagan period, but in appearance the Blacklow Hill knife comes nowhere near the sophistication of the inlaid examples of the 8th-10th centuries (Evison, 1963-4).

General Discussion

The group of features found on the top of Blacklow Hill (a site otherwise noted for being the place of execution of Piers Gaveston, favourite of Edward II) raises a good many questions. The facts are briefly stated: the top of the hill had twice been used for planting trees, once in the 19th century and, before that, in the 17th. The 17th century elm boles were widely spaced and post-dated

a thick layer of plough-soil. Beneath the ploughing, and completely sealed by it, was a set of features which had the appearance of being a composite group. Apart from the flints and the Anglo-Saxon knife no datable material was found, indeed the site was remarkably lacking in small finds.

The most favoured hypothesis put forward to explain the site is that the circular pits and long trenches were cut in the sandstone for the purpose of planting trees, possibly in medieval times. (11) Certainly to this day trees are planted in trenches, and it is the case that in two historical periods Blacklow Hill was covered by a plantation of trees. However in the 17th and 19th centuries no effort was made to plant the trees either in pits or trenches.

Various technical objections can be raised against the suggestion that these features were dug for the planting of substantial, exploitable trees. The trenches, at 15-20 cm. intervals are too close together for planting even saplings; trees spaced at 1.25 m. require bi-annual thinning. The trenches on Blacklow Hill are cut into its slopes; tree planting trenches normally follow the contours of a hill to preserve moisture and prevent the erosion of valuable nutrients. A circular pit with hard, tooled sides and a flat base would restrict rather than promote the growth of a tree. Far better to cut a rough hole, deeper in the centre. Even trees such as birch or beech, which do not have a tap root, would not thrive in a shallow rock-cut basin. Moreover their roots would have broken the sides of the pits, making their careful smoothing unecessary. Again, the circular pits are too close together for any trees planted in them to grow satisfactorily. If this was a plantation, it could not have been a particularly efficient one. (12)

It is not difficult to find arguments against the plantation theory; to substitute another explanation for this site is more difficult. If the arrangements of features is pure happenstance, then the discovery of the two graves so symmetrically placed is of no significance. Viewed as a whole, however, the collection of features does appear to have some kind of internal cohesion. The post-holes enclose the pits, the slots run down the hill from the enclosure, the graves do appear to have been dug deliberately in the centre of the site. No feature cuts, or is cut by, another, suggesting that they were of the same period, or at least visible at the same time. If this was the case, and since one grave contained an Anglo-Saxon knife, what lay on Blacklow Hill is possibly of great interest. Why were the graves placed here in isolation? What was the function and purpose of the pits? If they were not suitable for the cultivation of substantial trees, could they nevertheless have contained shrubs, grown for some purpose other than providing wood? We know from Tacitus[3] that the Germanic peoples worshipped in sacred groves. Could Blacklow Hill be the site of a purpose-built grove?

If the plough-soil above these enigmatic features could be dated by tracing the field names back to Domesday, then the way might be opened for further and more profitable research. The present state of the evidence is sufficient only to prompt the most inconclusive speculation.

NOTES

1. Identified by the A.M.L.

2. A very small quantity of small finds of no diagnostic value are in the Warwickshire Museum.

3. Germania. English translation by H Mattingly 'Tacitus on Britain and Germany' Penguin Classics 1948, p. 108.

Bibliography

Böhner, Kurt 1958 Die Fränkischen Allertümer des Trierer Landes. 2 vols, Berlin.

Evison, V I 1961 Manor' Med. Arch. Vol V 1961, 226-230.

1963-4 'A decorated Seax from the Thames at Keen Edge Ferry' Berks. Arch. J Vol CXI, 28-36.

1967 'A Prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon Burial Ground, Ports Down, Portsmouth' Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club Vol XXIV, 33-6.

Leeds, E T 1940 'Two Saxon Cemeteries in North Oxfordshire' Oxoniensia, Vol V, 21.

Lethbridge, T C 1931 Recent Excavations in Anglo-Saxon Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, Cambridge.

Meany, A and Hawkes, S C 1970 Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Winnall, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series 4.

Swanton, M 1963 An Anglian Cemetery at Londesborough, East Yorkshire Yorks Arch. J, Vol XL, 262-286