

A MULTI-PHASE PREHISTORIC SITE IN A MIDDLE TRENT VALLEY LANDSCAPE: EXCAVATIONS AT ASTON HALL HOSPITAL, ASTON ON TRENT, DERBYSHIRE

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SUMMARY

The features uncovered at Aston Hall Hospital demonstrate a long-lived, possibly continuous, prehistoric use of the landscape overlooking the River Trent, which expands the timeline of the use of the landscape, and demonstrates the changes of use of space in the later prehistoric period. Pits dating throughout the Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age, and possibly the Mesolithic, dominate the early prehistoric landscape; although these pits do not have a clear function, their presence predates the local large-scale funerary landscape such as that at Swarkestone Lowes barrows and the Aston Cursus monument. The site shows a slow decline through the Middle and Late Bronze Age. The site is completely restructured in the Iron Age, with the implementation of linear ditched enclosures, trackways and pit alignments. Petrographic analysis of the Iron Age pottery also demonstrates a trade or migration network as far as Leicester, with Mountsorrel Granodiorite inclusions in some of the earlier Iron Age pottery.

All readers please note that the full archaeological report and specialist reports referred to can be found in the ADS Grey Literature archive (Flintoft, forthcoming).

INTRODUCTION

Located on the southern edge of the village of Aston on Trent, Derbyshire, the site of the Aston Hall Hospital (centred at SK 41692 29248) was subject to archaeological excavations in August and September 2014 by Trent and Peak Archaeology in advance of site development (Fig. 1). At the time of excavation, the site was occupied by the now-abandoned Aston Hall Hospital on the north side of the study area, with open playing fields across the southern side of the area. Previous evaluations by Trent and Peak (Hurford 2006; Davies 2014) have determined that any subsurface remains were compromised during development of the hospital, but archaeological remains were preserved beneath the playing fields on the south and on the open ground to the east.

The site of Aston Hall Hospital is located approximately 6 miles south-east of Derby, overlooking a section of the Middle Trent Valley from the north side of the Trent which

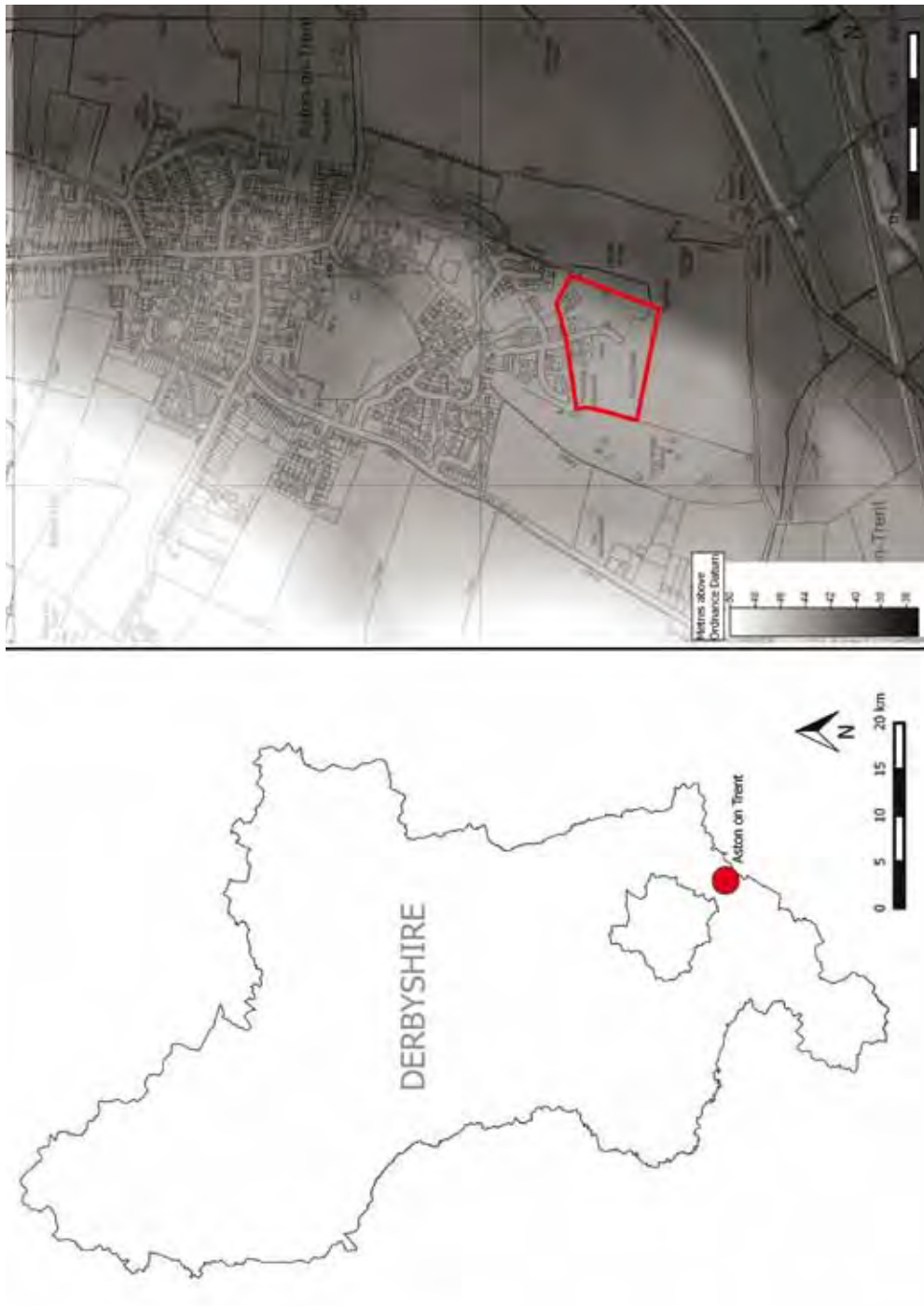


Fig. 1: Location of site; degree of shading represents height above Ordnance Datum.

flows from west to east. Situated on an outcrop of Gunthorpe Member mudstone of mid-Triassic Age, the site is covered in Pleistocene Beeston Member Sand and Gravel. This sand and gravel is part of the Trent Valley terrace sequence, representing periods of glacio-fluvial outwash throughout the Quaternary (up to 3 million years ago). The site of Aston Hall Hospital is located at the summit and shoulder of a slope down to the present Trent Valley; the excavated features were all at approximately 40m AOD, and the ground slopes to 35m AOD to the immediate south-east. This location provides views across the valley facing east towards Swarkestone and Hemington, both downstream from Aston on Trent.

This location is also on the edge of a riverine landscape that has produced a range of rich archaeological resources dating from throughout the Holocene (Loveday 2004). Within the immediate landscape around Aston is the Neolithic/Early Bronze Age Aston cursus monument. Located 200m east of Aston on Trent, the cursus is visible as a rectangular cropmark with a ditched boundary, and measures approximately 1800m long (Gibson and Loveday 1974; Garton and Elliot 1998; Castleden 1992, 64). The monument may respect the locations of earlier barrows, and is certainly succeeded by a Bronze Age and Iron Age funerary landscape, which includes the Potlock and Aston barrows (Knight *et al.* 2012, 52). Late Iron Age and Romano-British field systems have been recorded across the cursus monument, indicating reuse and reattribution of this landscape in later prehistory and beyond (Garton and Elliot 1998). Nearby linear cropmark systems have also been interpreted as Bronze and Iron Age settlements (Knight 2007, 200).

To the south and east of the Aston Hall Hospital site, several major prehistoric finds have been made within the alluvial sediments of the River Trent. Only 1km to the south-east of the site is the gravel extraction site at Shardlow. Excavations around Shardlow Quarry, at Argosy Washolme, Aston, revealed an intact log boat and a poorly preserved log boat (Howard forthcoming). The intact boat contained fragments of local stone, which may represent transportation of a quarried cargo. The well preserved boat produced a Middle Bronze Age date of 3117±35 BP (Garton *et al.* 2001; Knight and Howard 2004, 58). Shardlow has also produced a long pollen sequence which indicates that there was dense woodland in the area from the start of the Holocene, but by 2829-2490 cal BC the area was an open and heavily used grassland with areas of longer grass and hay, interspersed with small amounts of heather and woodland growing locally, or in the distance (Knight and Howard 2004, 52; 84). There have also been a large number of metal finds dating to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages found around Shardlow, including spearheads, rapiers, palstaves, and socketed axes (Knight and Howard 2004, 82). The Aston Hall Hospital site overlooks the stretch of the valley around Shardlow, and a cleared landscape would have lent very clear views of the area from Aston.

Only 4 kilometres upstream from Aston is the site of Swarkestone Lowes, where fieldwalking has revealed Mesolithic flint scatters on Mercia Mudstone outcrops overlooking the Trent (Elliott and Knight 1999; Knight and Howard 2004, 36). More significantly, a barrow cemetery has also been identified at Swarkestone Lowes, the only one still preserved along the Trent Valley, with a total of six identified barrow mounds (Elliott and Knight 1999; Knight and Howard 2004, 53). Pollen from the palaeosol beneath a barrow indicated an Early Bronze Age assemblage of mixed oak woodland, with hazel and grass, but no evidence of cereals, suggesting gradual clearance by animal grazing (Knight and Howard 2004, 53). The close proximity of these contemporary sites to the Aston Hospital site provides a backdrop that will be considered throughout the results and discussion.



Fig. 2: Areas excavated.

EXCAVATIONS

The site of Aston Hall Hospital was divided into three separate areas for evaluation, with a small area just east of the hospital buildings (Area D), and two larger areas (Area A and Area C) covering the recreational playing fields to the south (there is no Area B; see Fig. 2). The area between A and C was not excavated, and will remain landscaped as open ground. In total, the excavated area covered 1.9 ha. Excavation was performed by machine stripping the topsoil and subsoil, and hand-excavating all subsurface archaeological features.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All archaeological features were located just beneath the subsoil as a series of features cut into the natural Beeston Member sand and gravel. These features included a series of pits, a pit alignment, and linear cut features, all of prehistoric date (Fig. 2). These features have been dated by pottery and flint found within them, by radiocarbon dating and by relative stratigraphic dating. Only six fragments of charred faunal remains were retrieved on the site, which has been attributed to taphonomic processes within the acidic sediments, and unrelated to the period of activity represented by the features. Iron Age pottery was subjected to petrographic analysis, and archaeological sediments were processed for plant macrofossils.

Mesolithic

A single pit measuring 2.5m x 0.56m excavated in Area D has been very tentatively attributed to the Mesolithic period. There were no lithic finds within the pit, but a piece of indeterminate charcoal from the basal fill was radiocarbon dated to 5999±28 BP (SUERC-57559; 4970–4799 cal BC, 95% certainty) indicating that the initial backfilling of this feature was in the Late Mesolithic. Although there is no clear function for this pit, the date of the primary fill may extend the timeline of the landscape around Aston on Trent to as early as the fifth millennium cal BC. With Mesolithic flints found on nearby outcrops of mudstone overlooking the Trent, it is very possible that there was short term activity on the site. Similar scatters of Mesolithic features were discovered at Willington, providing supporting evidence for Mesolithic landscape exploitation in the vicinity (Beamish 2004). The single radiocarbon sample should be considered with caution, however, as it may be a residual piece of charcoal blown in from the surrounding landscape.

Neolithic and Early Bronze Age

Features dating to the Neolithic, although still sparse, are more securely dated. One pit in Area D contained the earliest securely dated fills, with a total of 53 sherds of undecorated, carinated bowl tradition pottery dating to the Early Neolithic (Beamish 2004; Woodward 2009, 88; Percival 2015). Residual Early Neolithic sherds were also found in a nearby pit dated to the Bronze Age. Flints dating to the Early Neolithic have also been recovered from areas A and C (Webb 2015). Within Area C flints appeared within a primary context, while in Area D flints have been recovered in a secondary context, as residual Early Neolithic artefacts within Bronze and Iron Age pit and curvilinear features.

All later Neolithic features are pits found mainly in areas C and D, many of which contained several kinds of datable material, including pottery and charred plant remains. Amongst the pit fills were several sherds of Grooved Ware of Clacton style (in use between 2900 cal BC and 2100 cal BC), and sherds of undiagnostic undecorated pottery (Longworth 1971, 48;

Percival 2015). Charred remains have produced dates of BP 5526±28 (SUERC-57554; 4414-4335 cal BC 95%) and BP 4329±27 (SUERC-57560; 2896 cal BC 95%). Basal fills of pits contained hazelnuts, mollusc shell, charcoal and indeterminate charred grain. Despite the secure dating of the pit, spelt and rye grains, usually found in later Bronze Age contexts, were also present within these pits (Monckton 2003). Three additional pits in area D that have produced residual Early Neolithic pottery, have secure material dating evidence indicative of a Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age deposition (Percival 2015).

Dating evidence from the Aston Cursus, Willington Cursus, and associated earlier and later funerary barrows have normally been attributed to the Middle and Later Neolithic, however, the Early Neolithic pits across the site, although infrequent, demonstrate human activity in this landscape as early as the 4th millennium BC. Early Neolithic pottery traditions also suggest that the population represented by the scatter of pits had ties beyond the small bluff at Aston. Similar undecorated, grog-tempered carinated pottery has been found at other local Trent Valley locations, including those at Willington, Eye Kettleby, Swarkestone Lowes, and Barrow 1 at Aston on Trent (Percival 2015; Beamish 2004; Woodward 2009, 88); although without petrographic comparison of fabrics, connections are difficult to discern. The presence of Early Neolithic pits resembling the same form as later pits, of flint within the dated pits, and of pottery with possible ties to the wider landscape, may represent a continuous use of the landscape throughout the Neolithic into the Bronze Age. Unfortunately, without local evidence of settlement structures it is difficult to reconstruct the Early Neolithic activities.

Late Neolithic activity temporally corresponds with the construction of the nearby barrow cemetery at Swarkeston Lowes, and the Aston Cursus monument. Despite the frequency of Late Neolithic pits on the site, there is no obvious function to them; no structural remains were revealed, and there is no solid evidence of intentional deposition into the pits. This lack of patterning is not uncommon in the East Midlands (Cooper 2006). There are theories that the presence of pits within the Late Mesolithic through to the Late Bronze Age may be indicative of settlement (Garrow 2007, 11), or perhaps be related to the nearby mortuary landscape, providing a place of ritual deposition alongside the dead overlooking the Trent Valley.

The presence of charred plant remains with Clacton style Grooved Ware together in a Late Neolithic pit is again not uncommon in the East Midlands; previously excavated examples have been interpreted as structured deposition (Passmore and Waddington 2009), but there is little contextual evidence for this at Aston Hall Hospital, particularly due to the types of grain found. The presence of rye and spelt within Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age contexts is an unconventional result which does not correspond with pollen from the Barrow Cemetery at Swarkestone Lowes; it may indicate, however, the importation of grain from further afield prior to land clearance; or perhaps small scale agriculture along this stretch of the Trent Valley.

Later Bronze Age

Only two features, on the western limits of Area C, have been securely dated as Middle to Late Bronze Age features. The two Bronze Age pits contained a combined total of 18 pottery sherds that may be attributed on typological grounds to an East Midlands variant of the Deverel-Rimbury ceramic tradition, currently dated principally to the Middle Bronze Age (Clay 2006, 83; Knight 2002). The inclusions of both grog and quartz as a temper and the fingertip impressions are consistent with examples from the wider region including Fisherwick, Staffordshire and Cotton Lane, Derbyshire (Quinn 2015; Martin and Allen 2001, 10; Smith 1976, 2-5; Chowne *et al.* 2001, 94-95). Aside from these two Middle Bronze Age

pits on the western side of the site, there is no additional evidence of later Bronze Age activity, perhaps indicative of a decline in use of the site prior to landscape restructuring in the Iron Age.

Iron Age

The character of the archaeology shifts at the end of Bronze Age, and a series of Iron Age linear features are superimposed onto the Neolithic and Bronze Age pits (Fig. 2). It is unlikely that this landscape restructuring was intentional; the relationship of the Iron Age archaeology with earlier pits suggests that these phases were never contemporary, and the creation of Iron Age field systems was not affected by previous land use.

A complex series of intersecting linear cut features and pits across Area A represents the implementation of a north-south orientated, ditched field system along an east-west orientated ditched trackway. There are also several small, perpendicular, ditched rectangular enclosures running along the north-south linear field system. A trackway aligned east to west at the southern end of Area A also appears as a pair of parallel ditches, up to 1.12m wide and 0.48m deep, although sections of the ditches have been severely truncated in places. The ditches terminated to the west, but appeared to continue past the excavated area to the east, and may continue down onto the floodplain. The final feature attributed to the Iron Age was excavated in Area D, where a pit alignment was set on a north-south orientation. This feature consisted of pits up to 2.4m wide and 0.8m deep. Four of the pits within the alignment contained evidence of continuous re-cutting. The alignment may have continued south into Area C, but the feature was too truncated to confirm its presence.

The types of features present within the excavation area at the Aston on Trent Hospital site, small rectangular enclosures, a trackway leading to the lower valley, and a pit alignment, suggest that this area was on the fringe of a larger farmstead complex. The small enclosed areas are interpreted as livestock enclosures. Close proximity of these enclosures and the trackway leading into the valley would have permitted easier access for herds to the valley floor, where livestock would have found grasses and water (Barker 1985, 206-207).

Regionally, pit alignments can be dated to the first millennium BC into the Romano-British period. Generally no datable material is recovered from pit alignments but a small body sherd of Middle-Late Iron Age pottery was found in a single pit at Aston (Percival 2015). Similar pit alignments have been identified nearby at Swarkestone Lowes, Barrow upon Trent, Besthorpe Quarry, Rampton, and Aston Hill. These have been interpreted as open boundaries, demarcating land divisions, but not used for keeping livestock or people in or out of the enclosure (Knight and Howard 2004; Elliott and Knight 1999). A lack of settlement features within the excavated area reinforces the idea that the pits acted as an outer boundary, set away from the settlement. A land boundary at the edge of an outcrop overlooking the Trent, and an adjacent trackway leading to the valley below, may indicate that although higher ground was separated into individual plots of land possibly with agricultural uses, lower areas around the wetlands and river edge may have been more communal ground used for grazing or movement along the Trent.

Sherds of Iron Age Scored Ware, which on current evidence may be ascribed in the Trent Valley to the 5th century BC to early 1st century AD (Knight 2002, 134), were found within three linear field boundary ditches, which suggests use of the field systems during the Middle or Late Iron Age. To the south, these ditches cut through earlier pits containing Middle to Late Iron Age pottery; pottery from both the linear ditches and earlier pits was sent for petrographic

analysis. All the sherds were found to have similar fabrics containing rounded quartz sand and clastic sedimentary rock fragments as temper. During petrographic analysis, a sherd collected from one of the earlier pits was found to include a Mountsorrel Granodiorite igneous temper; the nearest outcrop of this geology is located at Charnwood, approximately 11 kilometres north of Leicester (Quinn 2015). Pottery containing granodioritic rock fragments have also been identified at Swarkestone Lowes and Gamston, so the identification of these pottery types expands the Iron Age network of Aston not only across the Trent Valley, but also 40 kilometers to the south (Quinn 2015).

The trackway ditches contained occasional sherds of Middle-Late Iron Age pottery, dating the trackway from the 5th century BC to the 1st century AD (Percival 2015). These dates are supported by a charcoal radiocarbon date retrieved from an associated pit, which produced a date of BP 2352±29 (SUERC-57561; 379 cal BC 95%). Charred cereal grains were also retrieved from trackway contexts, which produced charred chaff and grain (Wilson 2015). There was poor preservation of environmental residues within Iron Age features, but a very small quantity of charred plant macrofossils and fragments of grain chaff were identified, potentially indicative of early grain processing (Wilson 2015).

Post-abandonment

There was no archaeological evidence post-dating the 1st millennium AD. Abandonment of the site possibly occurred in conjunction with a general widespread reorganisation of the landscape during Roman influence and occupation. Ditches do not appear to have been intentionally filled, so the area was likely left unused post-abandonment. No intensive activities occurred throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods, and it is likely that most of the site was arable fields, with north-eastern parts under open woodland, leading to better preservation of features within the unploughed soil in Area D.

Undated archaeology

A total of 122 features did not produce datable material or stratigraphic relationships. Based upon the morphology and the character of their fills, these features may relate to any of the prehistoric phases on the site, though, with the exception of the truncated pits likely related to the Iron Age pit alignment, none offered any indication of their use or date. A curvilinear ditch in Area A, also relates to the prehistoric archaeology, and although undatable, has been dated tentatively to the Neolithic due to the presence of flint debitage.

CONCLUSIONS

The Aston Hall Hospital site displays evidence of a multi-phase prehistoric landscape which spans the Mesolithic through to the Late Iron Age. The initial phase is represented by a possible Mesolithic pit and a scatter of Early Neolithic through to Late Bronze Age pits. These Neolithic and Bronze Age pits contained diagnostic pottery and charred plant remains, but their function remains unknown. It is possible that they relate to the surrounding mortuary landscape, the nearby Aston Cursus, or even represent intermittent settlement. Plant remains may indicate early use of spelt and rye, however this conclusion would require further evidence to prove that it is not a later fill of an early feature. A later Iron Age field system superimposed on to the landscape, is represented by a series of linear ditches and pits. Small ditched enclosures may have been livestock enclosures or small fields, while a trackway leads down towards the floodplain, possibly to aid livestock herding. The pit alignment could denote

the outer boundary of the field system and possibly of the community. Ceramic petrography of Iron Age pottery demonstrates a link between the inhabitants of the farmstead, the wider Trent Valley population, and ceramic production technologies as far away as Leicester.

The archaeology at Aston Hall Hospital has largely conformed with previous landscape interpretations of the Middle Trent Valley of southern Derbyshire, and has added details about the material culture and dating of activities in the locality. Interpretation of the surrounding landscape in both the Bronze and Iron Ages has suggested that the site was tied into a wider Trent Valley and Midlands trade network which ranged across the river valley as far as Charnwood, Leicestershire, together with a smaller scale network that utilised both the first terrace for funerary and possibly agricultural activity, and the lower valley and river edge for communal grazing. Abandonment of the Aston site indicates reorganisation of the landscape probably during Roman occupation, leaving this area as open ground with no intensive human activity from the 1st century AD into the medieval and post-medieval periods.

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