

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION ON LAND AT DERBY ROAD, ASTON on TRENT, SOUTH DERBYSHIRE

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In 2016, Headland Archaeology (UK) conducted an excavation on a parcel of agricultural land north of the village of Aston on Trent, Derbyshire (SK 41033 30970), prior to the development of a new crematorium (Fig. 1). The excavation covered approximately 2000m², on an underlying geology of Branscome mudstone, overlain by deposits of Allerton Terrace sands and gravels (NERC 2017). The following paragraphs provide a summary of the excavation; the full archaeological report is available through the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) OASIS Ref: headland3-289425.

Archaeological excavation followed a programme of geophysical survey and trial trenching which identified numerous archaeological features, including two enclosures, two large field boundary ditches and several discrete anomalies. Evidence of Iron Age settlement activity was revealed, alongside intermittent activity during the Bronze Age and Roman periods.

Two ditches, aligned north-south, were excavated towards the centre of the excavated area. Geophysical survey identified the more substantial of the two linear features continuing beyond the edge of excavation and forming part of a large sub-rectangular enclosure (Plate 1). The enclosure measured 30m wide x 50m long and contained four fragments of early Iron Age pottery. The adjacent smaller ditch terminated towards the centre of the site, and is assumed to be of the same period, although no dating evidence was recovered. Several discrete features were also excavated across the site and are thought to be contemporary with this enclosure.

The Iron Age enclosure was intersected by a later ditch running north-east to south-west across the site, containing a single Roman pottery sherd. Geophysical survey suggests that this ditch is part of an additional, larger enclosure continuing beyond the limits of excavation. Several discrete features thought to be contemporary with Romano-British activity were present across the site including pits and post-holes. One pit had been capped by a spread of large sandstone fragments, one of which was a large fragment of rotary quern dating to the Roman period.

Evidence for early activity on site is provided by a small assemblage of worked flint. Although these were apparently Bronze Age in date, the objects were clearly residual and widely scattered through later features.

The majority of the pottery recovered from the site was of Iron Age date, numbering 54 sherds. The earliest stratified finds comprised several small sherds of early Iron Age date recovered from the earlier enclosure ditch. Most of the Iron Age pottery sherds contain no diagnostic features, though the high firing temperature evident in their fabric could suggest a middle to late Iron Age date.

In total, five sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from across the site, including fragments of a grey dish and cheese press. Stratified Roman pottery was limited to a single

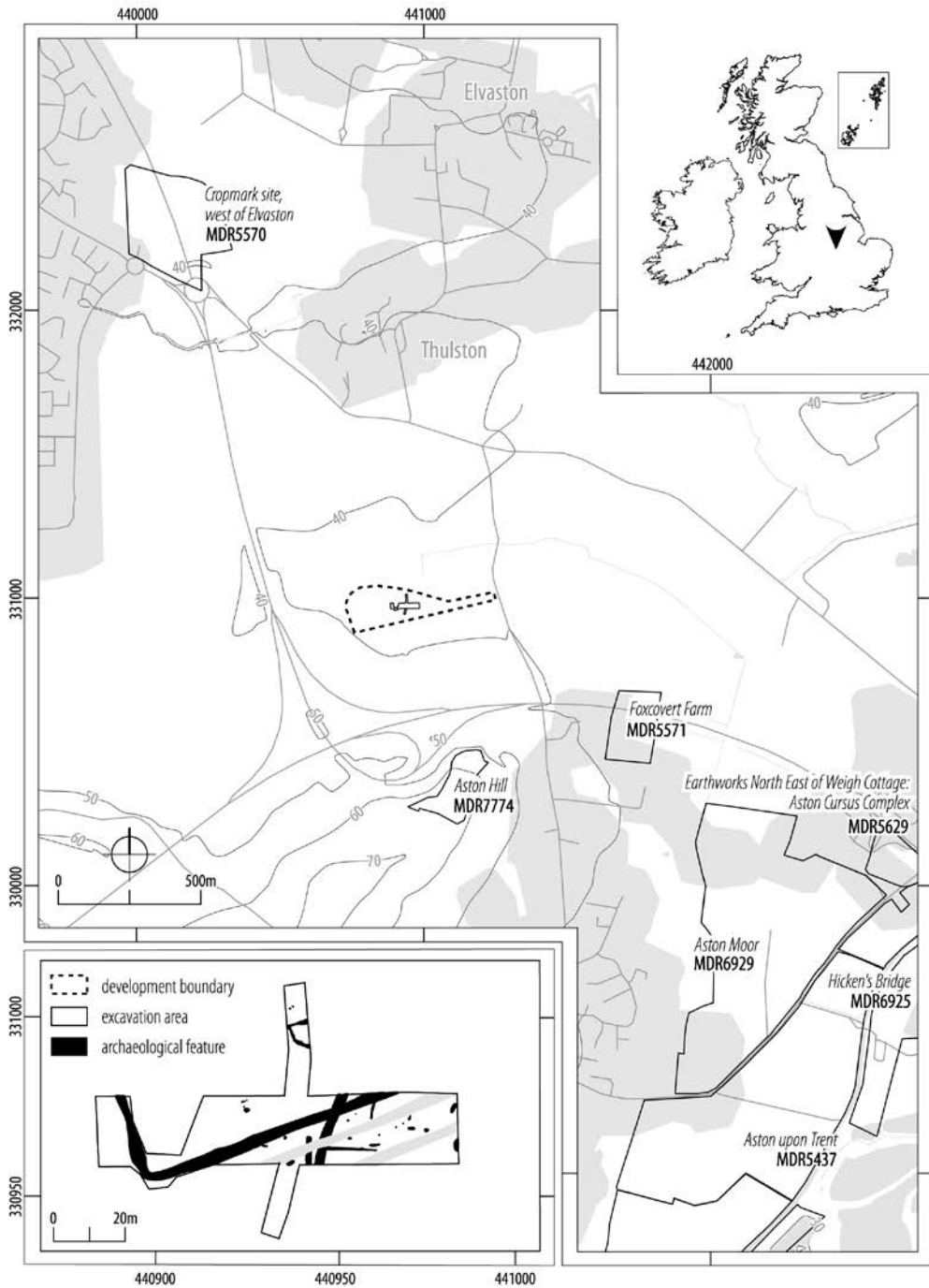


Fig. 1: Site location and distribution map.



Plate 1: Excavated sections across the Iron Age enclosure ditch.

possible oxidised jar sherd which was recovered from the later of the two enclosures. The fragment of rotary quern recovered from a pit to the north of the later enclosure is typical of the Roman period. The surface was smoothed with the remains of iron rynd and was decorated with concentric lines around its interior edge and bordered with a rim of radial lines. Two unidentified iron finds recovered from the larger enclosure are presumably contemporary but little else could be dated to this period.

Other examples of Iron Age enclosure systems can be found within the Trent Valley, with several comparable sites appearing within 5km of Aston on Trent. Sites include Barrow upon Trent (MDR4371) and Swarkstone Quarry (MDR4378), as well as the Iron Age enclosures and possible ring ditch recorded at Foxcovert Farm (MDR5571). Cropmarks of a suspected square Iron Age enclosure were also recorded west of Elvaston, North of Aston on Trent (MDR5570), and numerous enclosures and pits were recorded at Weston on Trent (MDR5436). The closest site with comparable features is likely the multi-period site at Hicken's Bridge, south of Aston on Trent, demonstrating extensive Iron Age enclosures, alongside numerous other features (MDR5437). This cropmark complex lies roughly 2km to the south-west of the site at Derby Road, with excavation revealing several small enclosures of an Iron Age date comparable to Iron Age square barrows in Yorkshire (Department of the Environment 1978).

The surrounding landscape appears to have become more intensively utilised from the middle to late Iron Age, with numerous excavated settlements and associated field systems showing broad levels of continuity, though some appear to have been abandoned prior to the

Roman conquest (Smith 2016, 151). Settlements excavated across the Trent Valley and Rises indicate a sharp decrease in previously dominant simple enclosed farmsteads during the 2nd century AD and a corresponding increase in farmsteads associated with the more complex enclosure groups. The latter outnumber the former for the first time by the third century AD (*ibid.*, 153). Such sites appear in the archaeological record as agglomerated groups of ditched enclosures and trackways of rectilinear form (Taylor 2006). Both the site at Derby Road, and the Aston on Trent cropmark complex to the south-east, allude to this pattern of continuity through a similar demonstration of intermittent Iron Age and Roman activity (MDR5437).

In summary, excavations suggest that the first phase of activity began in the Bronze Age, as represented by a small number of contemporary lithics. During the Iron Age, the site is characterised by a large enclosure, alongside pits and post-holes. The final phase of activity comprises a Roman-period agricultural landscape of ditches and pits, alongside rare, scattered finds. In light of East Midlands research objectives, the site fits well with the regional model of multi-period settlements and field systems on the flood plains of the Trent Valley (Knight *et al.* 2012). It is possible that the natural gravel geology of this area may have influenced the choice of site for agricultural practice as the land would have probably drained well; this may also explain why the same site demonstrates intermittent multi-period activity over an extended period.

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