Iron Age Ouse and Derwent

Conclusions and Interpretation

Round-houses at Wheldrake, 2019

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What were our Objectives?

Our project objectives have their roots in a community project that Archaeology North Duffield undertook between 2012 And 2014, led by Brian Elsey and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. We had been inspired by evidence, then unpublished, of settlements dating to the Iron Age or Roman period around North Duffield village (since published as Horne *et al.* 2021). We were motivated to reveal more about the settlements that came before the Anglian / Anglo Scandinavian village, moving the history of our historic landscape back in time!

For the Ouse and Derwent Project we were more ambitious, looking at understanding the prehistory of the low lying, riverine, landscape between the rivers Ouse and Derwent south of York. We undertook three excavations at Hemingbrough, North Duffield, and Wheldrake, with a small evaluation at Hardmoor Farm (also Wheldrake). Our work on the earlier excavation at North Duffield gave us a good spread of Iron Age and Romano-British evidence to consider, along with the evidence collected during our desk-based survey. The sites mentioned in this report are located on the map in Figure 1.

We set out to:

- Understand the character of late prehistoric settlement and land use in the area.
- Look for change or continuity in the Iron Age and Roman periods (e.g. could we see a change in land use relating to the building of a large military and civilian fortress and capital on the edge of the area?).
- Better understand evidence for variations in status between and within sites and through time.
- Understand the domestic nature of the agricultural settlements that we investigated.

Our project did not focus on burial practice and, despite evidence for square barrows on Skipwith Common and around Langwith Common (see Figure 1), no cemetery or burial evidence was included. Similarly, while earlier prehistoric activity was not a part of the project, we took note of such evidence as it suggests that the Vale of York immediately south of York was more extensively used for settlement than previously thought.

We drew the following conclusions from our desk based assessment, the earlier excavation project at North Duffield and our four current excavations.

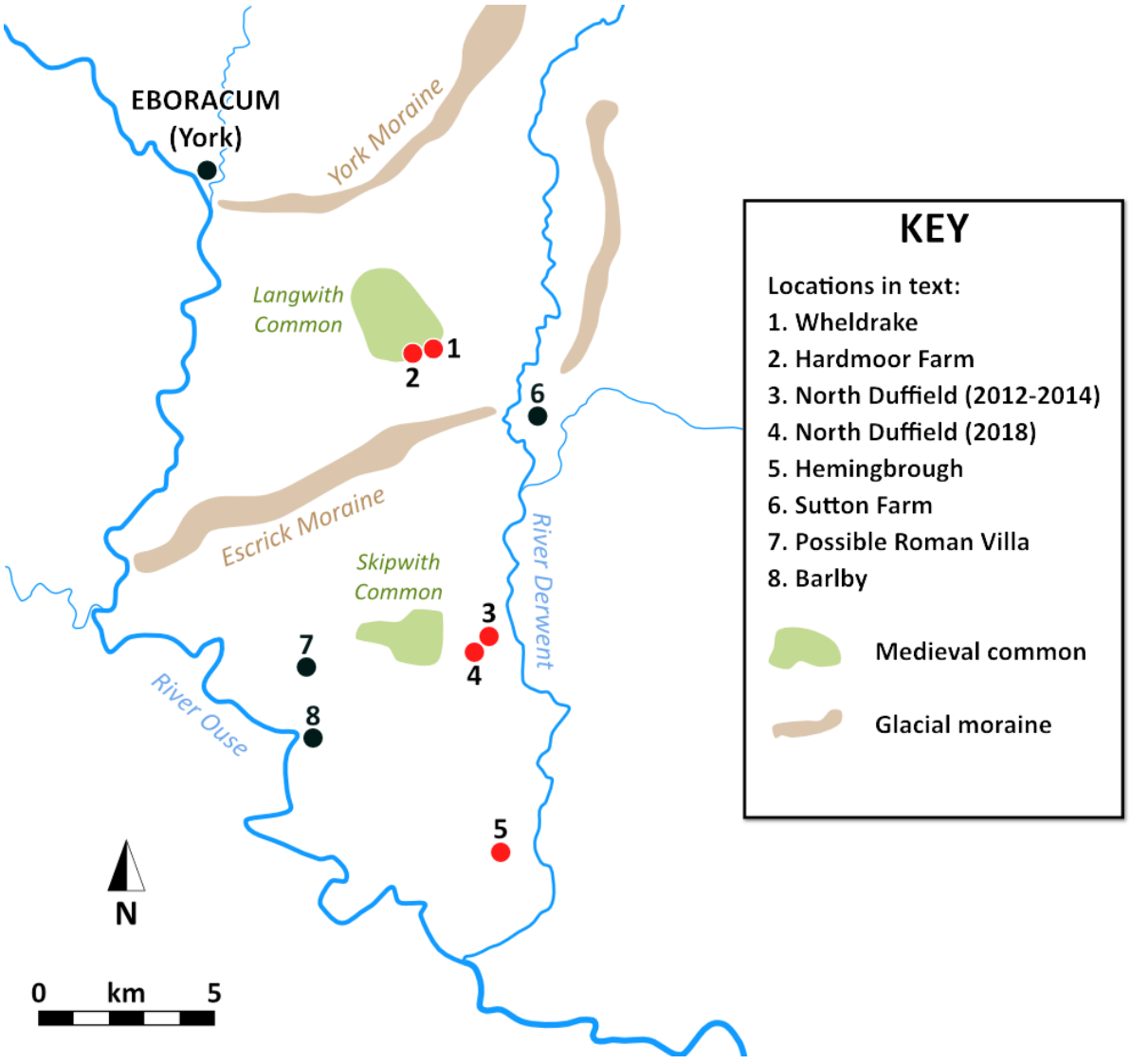

***Figure 1**: Map of the Ouse and Derwent research area, south of York.*

Pre-Iron Age activity in the Ouse and Derwent

As a community project we were interested in finding evidence for occupation before the Iron Age, and our excavations and prior field-walking projects with Archaeology North Duffield revealed several worked flint fragments. Discussion with Peter Makey, a flint specialist, suggested that this flint was coming from a source relatively nearby (Makey *pers. comm.*). This source was probably not, however, the Yorkshire Wolds to the east and the flint may have been derived from waterborne or glacial deposits in the landscape nearby. Although not the Iron Age and Romano-British focus of our project, we also observed this long occupation in the results of our desk based assessment. Evidence in the form of flint fragments, polished stone axes, henges (nearby up the river network at Ferrybridge, Kexby, Newton Kyme and a cluster between the Devils Arrows at Boroughbridge and Thornborough) all suggest Neolithic settlement nearby. Bronze Age burials, land divisions and droveways (not unlike those located on the Wolds to the east) are present on Skipwith Common, and radiocarbon dates recovered from charred grain during our excavations indicates continued arable agriculture between the rivers Ouse and Derwent from the Neolithic until the Iron Age.

Iron Age landscape settlement formation

Iron Age or Romano-British field systems and round-houses have been identified across the area by the English Heritage (now Historic England) aerial survey programme (Horne *et al.* 2021; see Figure 4). This is the evidence that we set about researching in more detail, through geophysical survey and excavation, taking our sense of community understanding of the landscape back beyond the early mediaeval origins of our villages. The Iron Age evidence we recovered from our desk based assessment and from the excavations revealed a progressively complex and intense occupation on the sandy subsoils: a trajectory that seems to go on from the Iron Age into the Roman period with some rearrangement of fields through time.

Living in the Iron Age landscape between the Ouse and Derwent means that you are never far from a river network. This network leads you from the North Sea to the east, into the north and west uplands, and even into the midlands to the south. A riverine network such as this is both an important immediate resource of rich ings marshland and a vital routeway, allowing prehistoric movement by boat across the British landscape. This mobility may well have linked Neolithic ceremonial sites in what we call Yorkshire today. The river network was clearly available in the Bronze and Iron Ages, too, and would have allowed local family-based groups to link to others, possibly leading to larger tribal linkages across wider areas.

Away from the water, however, crop marks seen in aerial photography suggest extensive trackways running across the Iron Age landscape, linking fields and farmsteads. These would have been just as crucial to the local communities, and we found evidence in our excavations for one such trackway delimited by a ditch at North Duffield (see Figure 2).

Although our project did not set out to investigate the rivers themselves, we can anticipate that they played a significant role as both a source of natural resources and means of transport, and their importance in prehistory and the Roman periods would be an excellent and highly relevant subject for future research

Iron Age social stratification

By social stratification, we mean the development of a ruling elite and possibly religious or craft based social groups, who might be expected to build larger structures or have more valuable possessions to reinforce their ‘high’ status in society. We hoped that we could identify higher status sites in our excavations, and the very large (22m diameter) round-house discovered in the 2012-2014 excavations at North Duffield (see Figure 1, no 3) may have suggested this. However, excavations and desk-based work during the present project suggests that this large house size is unusual in this area in late prehistory.

The very large Iron Age round-houses appear to originate during the Middle Iron Age, while later structures tend to be slightly smaller. The example discovered during our 2012-2014 excavation at North Duffield was dated to the Middle Iron Age (3rd century BC), as was the largest (more than 16m diameter) building uncovered at Wheldrake. We didn't get a date from the very large round-house excavated at North Duffield in 2018, but it was stratigraphically the earliest ring-ditch on the site and a Middle Iron Age date was obtained from another feature. These large round-houses seem to be common in our area during the Middle Iron Age, and perhaps we need to think of alternative uses for them: domestic accommodation, animal housing (or a mix of both), meeting spaces for clan or tribal gatherings, or communal work spaces are all possibilities.

Developing in the Middle Iron Age along with the large round-houses, we also saw surrounding enclosures at two of our sites, North Duffield (see Figure 2) and Wheldrake (see Figure 3), but not at Hemingbrough (see Figure 4). These enclosed farmsteads suggest social stratification and group organisation in the family clans beginning before Roman influence in the area.

Despite the enclosure of some farmsteads, we did not recover any obviously high status artefacts, suggesting a social hierarchy that was not driven by wealth, in the Ouse and Derwent area at least. Other sites further to the east, on or next to the Yorkshire Wolds, have revealed the expression of more wealth and an interest in martial activity through grave goods. This burial data is sparse in the Ouse and Derwent area, but we do have cemeteries of square barrows on Skipwith and Langwith Commons (see Figure 1). None of the excavated examples, however, have revealed artefactual evidence suggesting wealth or high status, apart from the fact that they have been afforded a square barrow.

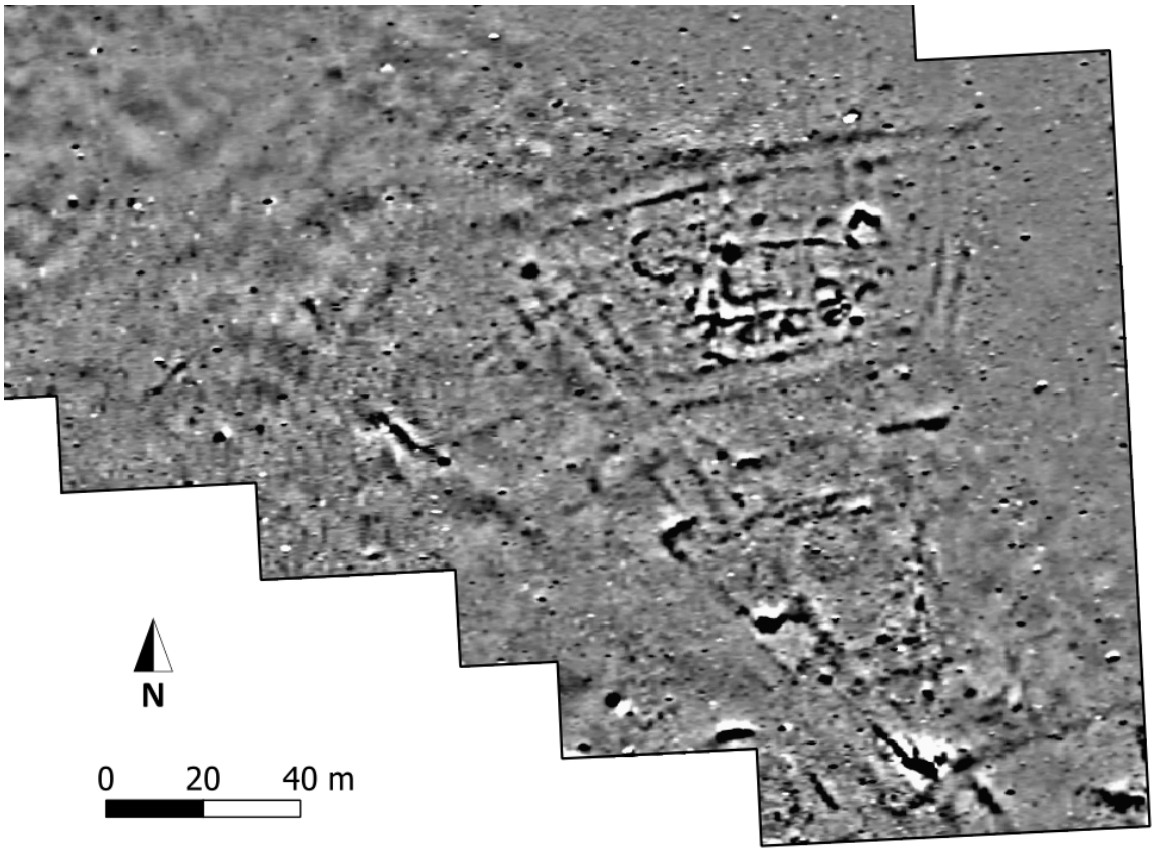

Figure 2: *Magnetometry results showing the large enclosure investigated at North Duffield.*

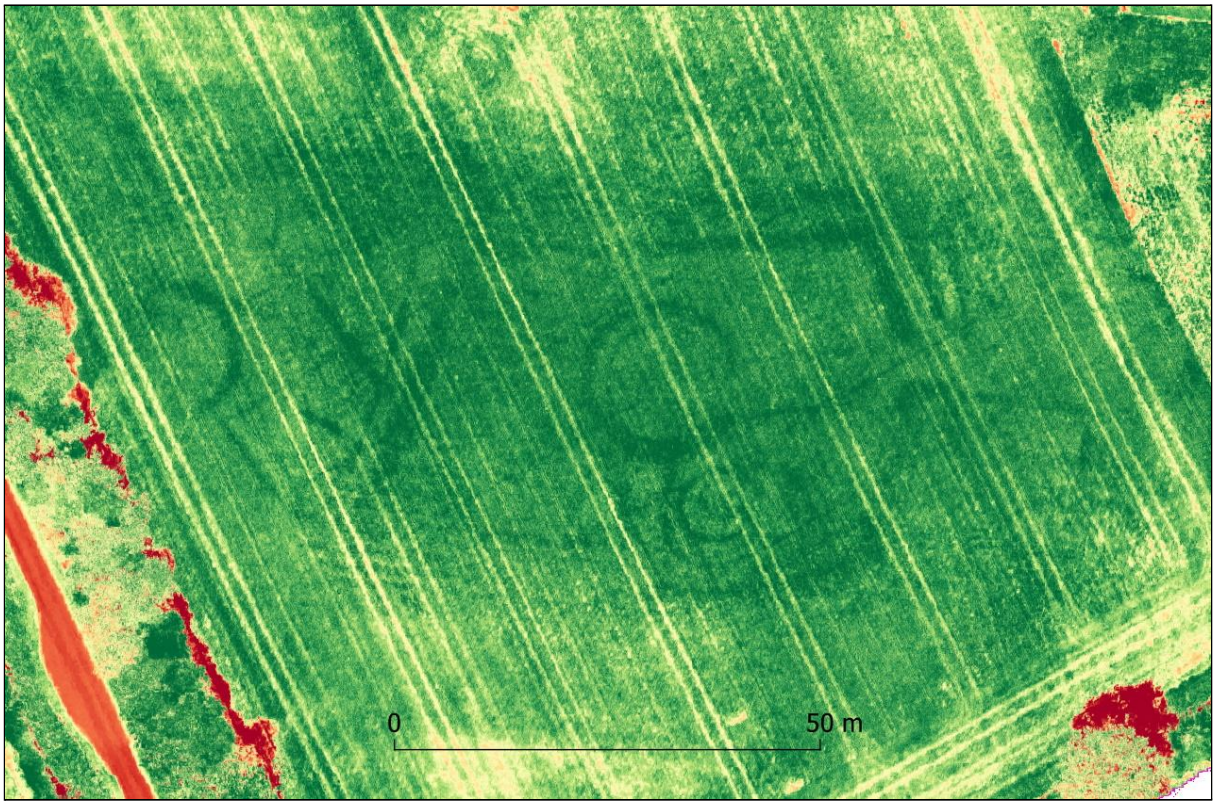

Figure 3: *The enclosure at Wheldrake, seen as crop marks in NDVI (Normalised Difference Vegetation Index) drone photography. Image: Tony Hunt/YAA Mapping.*

Iron Age domestic activity

In aerial photographs, the lowland Iron Age settlements appear to cluster on the sandy subsoils of the Ouse and Derwent, although this may be a result of crop marks appearing less clearly on the clays and gravels. The settlement pattern tends to take the form of large fields demarcated by ditches, and within these fields there sit either individual or clusters of round-houses. These clusters have been observed to the west (Chadwick 2009) and east (Halkon 2013 and Giles 2013) to become larger, taking on the appearance of more enclosed settlements. This is also the case for our sites at Wheldrake and North Duffield, which include enclosures containing unusually large round-houses as well as multiple smaller structures.

Artefactual evidence recovered during the excavations suggests there is significance to domestic activities such as weaving and iron working. We recovered several broken and partial clay loom weights discarded in ditches, along with a single unbroken loom weight which was placed in a clay post foundation pad in one of the round-houses at Hemingbrough. The reuse of an important part of a loom in the rebuilding of a new home, incorporating a still-usable part of a vital domestic activity in the construction, may have signified that weaving held more than merely functional importance to the builders. While we may never really know, it is easy to speculate that the round-house was built for a weaver, and that the loom weight, as a vital part of their life, was sacrificed to provide a spiritual or mystical foundation for the building.

Less evocative, but also suggestive of the work of craft workers, we had evidence of iron working, in the form of slag and waste materials, from our excavations at Hemingbrough (see Figure 1, no 5), North Duffield (see Figure 1, no 4) and Hardmoor Farm (see Figure 1, no 2). Peter Halkon has identified significant iron working sites a few miles to the east in the Foulness River valley: like those, our Ouse and Derwent area also contains sources of bog iron, that can be used for iron smelting, previously identified by the Soil Survey of England in a map in published in a paper discussing the historic landscape of Wheldrake (Sheppard 1966).

Our excavation at Hemingbrough also revealed partially germinated barley grains typical of malting processes, suggesting the brewing of beer or ale.

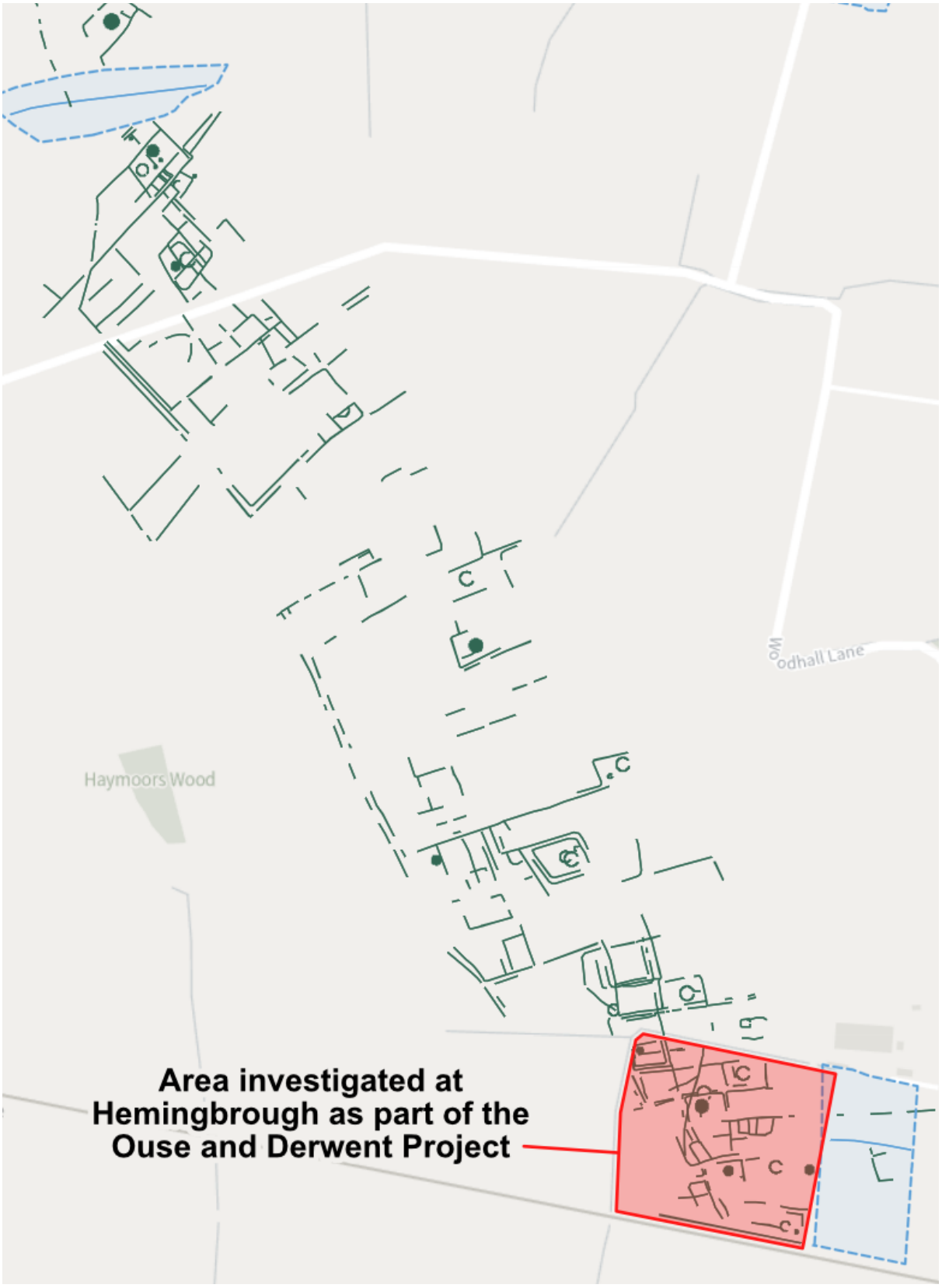

Figure 4: *Settlement patterns at Hemingbrough as identified from crop marks by Historic England's National Mapping Programme (Horne* et al. *2021). Image: Historic England.*

Iron Age summary

Although our Iron Age activity does not appear to display the wealth that is seen to the east in particular, we do still clearly have Iron Age peoples occupying and exploiting the land between the rivers Ouse and Derwent. We also see the development of enclosed farmsteads, with unusually large round-houses, that may represent the homes of clan or community leaders.

The low-lying lands of the Ouse and Derwent had plenty of sandy subsoils that are easy to work for arable crops, and the lowland climate provides a longer grass growing season for pasture. The sandy, slightly higher locations were not subject to seasonal flooding, although no one was far from marshy ings and the resources of the shallow river valleys. Whyman and Howard have suggested that the lowlands may have only been visited seasonally (Whyman and Howard 2005), but the domestic evidence we've found suggests otherwise. It is not impossible that the lack of wealth on display in the Ouse and Derwent area is a side-effect of only seasonal occupation, with valuables kept elsewhere. However, the investment of time and resources to create the enclosed farmsteads and large round-houses certainly suggests a more permanent settlement, occupied and used year-round.

The large, enclosed round-houses in the Middle Iron Age are of particular interest. Do they represent an adaptation for raising animals that can share accommodation during the winter with the humans, or are they meeting places for the lowland clans, a role that is elsewhere held by communal structures such as hill forts? Or are they 'merely' extra large homes for an extended family group, a societal configuration that changes later to be split amongst several smaller buildings? We noted a growth in complexity, although slow, through the later Iron Age and into the Roman period.

Increasing complexity into the Roman period

Our research, originally aimed at the Iron Age landscape, could not but continue into the Roman period as the sites straddle both eras. As we noted in the Iron Age evidence, the settlement pattern progressed from scattered fields to a more formalised laying out of boundaries, leading to more rectangular, measured systems in the Roman period. As it did in the Iron Age, this appears to represent a movement towards communal efficiency in agricultural and industrial activity, whereby production is increased by communities working together. However, this was not accompanied by any noticeable change in the expression of wealth, whether by better-off clan members or incoming landowners drawn from new Romano-British populations in the area. So, we might argue that the slightly more complex settlement features are simply a continuation of changes already becoming visible in the Iron Age, or perhaps the influence of nearby elements of the Roman Empire. Indeed, during the Roman period we may be looking at more significant change towards the end of the 2nd century AD, when the enclosed farmsteads show considerable change. The round-houses at Hemingbrough and the farmstead at Wheldrake go out of use entirely, whilst the enclosure at North Duffield is filled in and the round-houses replaced by a rectangular building.

Romano-British change

During the Roman period there were some important trading centres very near to the Ouse and Derwent landscape, the biggest and most obvious example being the Fortress at *Eboracum* (York) to the north (see Figure 1). There was also a military-related centre on the River Ouse at Barlby (see Figure 1, no 8) to the west and a small ribbon settlement at Sutton Farm (see Figure 1, no 6) on the east bank of the Derwent opposite Wheldrake. Recent commercial excavation near Wheldrake has also identified a Romano-British farmstead that suggested similar results to our excavations (Robinson 2009).

Other university, commercial and community excavations at the northern extremity of the Ouse and Derwent area at Lingcroft Farm, Kexby and Heslington have also revealed sections of the Romano-British

landscape. It is quite surprising that, apart from the more complex field systems, there is only a small amount of material culture filtering through trade down to the rural settlements nearby after the Romans arrived. The evidence from our excavations does however, suggest a significant change in the landscape use towards the end of the 2nd century AD, when the Roman presence at *Eboracum* (York) will have been well established and undoubtedly exerting a strong influence over the region.

Continued lack of high-status settlement

In the Roman period there is still little evidence for high status inhabitants in the Ouse and Derwent landscape. Some farmsteads, such as those at Wheldrake (see Figure 1, no 1) and North Duffield (see Figure 1, no 4) had already become more significant during the Iron Age, showing increasing complexity and appearing more tightly enclosed. This can be argued as a general trajectory that has been in place since their origin and through the Iron Age, with no real shift evident in the Roman period. It is also notable that only one Roman villa has been identified so far in the Ouse and Derwent area (see Figure 1, no 7), evidenced by a scatter of finds and building material between Riccall and Skipwith and reused stone in the church at Skipwith.

The lack of social stratification and wealth visible in the area (until, perhaps, a villa appears) is interesting. To the west, there are several villas on the river Wharfe running to join the Ouse from Roman *Calcaria* (Tadcaster), but only one so far between the Ouse and Derwent. It is possible that the Ouse and Derwent landscape is dominated by the military, perhaps as part of the territorium supplying the legionary fortress. It is also possible that the wealthier peoples living in our landscape were drawn into *Eboracum* itself, or even further north up the Ouse to the civitas at *Isurium Brigantium* (Aldborough). Unusually for this landscape, the population of *Eboracum* seems to have remained present and substantial throughout the period, because the army always had continual presence there.

It is also possible that there were few wealthy clans in the Ouse and Derwent area in the first place, but as it was occupied and productive that it was seen as the obvious place to establish a territorium to feed the fortress. It is even possible that the more complex field systems represent development to meet the needs and demands of the army, with some farmsteads even possibly occupied by retired soldiers in later years.

Thus the occupants of our sites might have been clan based extended families in both the Iron Age and Roman periods, forming small farming communities. During the Roman period they would likely also have included slaves, and perhaps retired soldiers: although the latter might be expected to result in more fragments of 'Roman' material culture as are common on military-related sites. The sites that we looked at contained enough Roman-influenced and imported pottery to show continued occupation and use through the Roman period, but not enough to suggest a significant change in the population or culture in that time. This seems all the more strange given the proximity of the sites to significant more-Romanised settlements. It should be noted that a minor Roman coin hoard was discovered less than two miles from the sites at Wheldrake and Hardmoor Farm, showing that Roman coins were present in the region while being completely absent from our sites.

The four sites excavated as part the current project, and the 2012-2014 North Duffield site, appear to have been producing enough surplus to allow some trade for finer wheel-turned Roman pottery, but not enough to permit wholescale adoption of 'Roman' material culture. There is a possible exception in the enclosed farmstead at North Duffield, which has a larger proportion of later Roman ceramics along with a possible beam-slot foundation rectangular structure appearing late in its chronology. This last phase at North Duffield, with the enclosure boundaries backfilled and a rectangular structure, may represent a change in landscape use towards more larger, centralised estates, perhaps also indicated by the appearance of a villa to the west (see Figure 1, no 7). The farmstead at North Duffield, however, doesn't seem to display any more significant wealth after this change, and the presence of a villa to the west is still unconfirmed, having only been briefly investigated some 20 years ago.

Wheldrake (see Figure 1, no 1) might be expected to have been more heavily influenced by its proximity to Roman track ways and *Eboracum*, but there is no significant difference, and it also doesn't survive beyond the 2nd century AD. Perhaps it was subsumed into a larger estate after this time, again harking back to the possible villa between Riccall and Skipwith (see Figure 1, no 7). This later portion of the Roman period is another area needing further research.

The river network during the Roman period

As we noted previously, the river network must have continued to be very important into the Roman period, both for transport and as a source of resources. Its significance can be seen in the presence of important Roman military sites and settlements sited beside rivers. Although we have not found fish bones to suggest riverine food sources, the rivers washing through glacial sub soils will also have provided cobbles for use as pot-boilers, which appeared in their hundreds on our sites.

What happened to our sites?

The settlement sites at Wheldrake and Hemingbrough appear to have been deliberately abandoned early in the 2nd century AD, with almost no unbroken material culture left behind. Meanwhile, the site at North Duffield changes before going out of use: the enclosure surrounding the farmstead is filled in, and a rectangular structure replaced the round-houses, taking the period of occupation into the 3rd or even 4th century before the site was abandoned completely. But in all cases, eventually, it is as if the population took everything they had and moved away, leaving their houses, round or rectangular, to fall into ruin.

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