

Report

Sizergh: Dig in the Park 2013

After almost two years in the planning, and following on from a Landscape Survey of the Sizergh Estate undertaken in 2010, Levens Local History Group's 'Sizergh: Dig in the Park 2013' began on 5th July. The project is Heritage Lottery Fund supported, and is in partnership with National Trust with the professional assistance of Oxford Archaeology North. It is a community based project, intended to encourage local people to get involved in the archaeology of the National Trust's Sizergh Estate. The dig itself ran from the 6th-21st of July, and included the excavation of a putative burnt mound and a possible mediaeval park pale boundary earthwork and ditch, and also the surveying of the Great Barn and a portion of the surrounding Park. Training days for all volunteers were held in June, and outreach days with the participating school and YAC groups were held between May and July. The 5th July was spent in preparing the ground; marking out excavation sites, putting in barriers, erecting signs and accumulating equipment and tools ready for the big day. The weather was wonderful and warm and carried on, sometimes becoming too hot, for the rest of the project.

6th July: After a brief ceremony, filmed for a programme about National Trust, when Kath Whitelock, who first recognised the burnt mound for what it was, formally dug



out the first turf, the sites of the burnt mound and ditch features were surveyed so that detailed contour models of the sites could be produced in advance of excavation. We had enormous enthusiasm from the team, both volunteers and

professionals, despite the sometimes heavy labour of de-turfing two trenches close to the Castle, and by early afternoon we were starting to dig the initial features.

7th July: The survey concentrated on the park adjacent to the mysterious earthwork and ditch. It could be traced into the Sizergh gardens, indicating that it is earlier than the southern extension of the garden established before 1827. The putative burnt mound proved tough to de-turf, but soon stone a plenty was found, some of it fire cracked, and intermingled or sitting on deposits of charcoal. It truly was a classic Bronze Age burnt mound. The trenches through the ditch have been cleaned to reveal a wall/stone bank either side of the ditch, which is puzzling, and not what was expected for a feature thought to be associated with the management of the estate's deer park.



8th July: Excavation continued in the trenches through the ditch, but with hardly any finds. At the burnt mound, the topsoil is producing some 18th century pottery, and a small quantity of window glass. With the topographic survey over, the building survey of the Great Barn has started. The barn is being mapped in 3D using the point of a laser, and some fascinating clues as to the functionality and development of the building are being obtained.

9th July: Members of Westmorland Geological Society visit the burnt mound and report there is little of the natural limestone in the mound (limestone is not a good stone to heat unless you particularly want to create slaked lime) and the burnt stone is not from local geology, but is a sandstone brought to the site through glacial action. The ditch excavation has been cleaned to make a preliminary record, and given the complexity of the stone material, this is done by a photogrammetric method using a photographic mast and control points. The barn survey continues, producing internal plans and sections of the interior with some photography of the outside of the barn using a small helicopter, allowing the mapping of external elevations.



10th July: The recording of what we have found so far continues, but we also have an exciting discovery. There are a couple of upright stones within the burnt mound,

which we are tentatively suggesting might be a trough. Another significant discovery is a sherd of medieval pottery in one of the trenches through the ditch, which may be an indication that this feature is of an earlier date than first proposed. The building survey has now completed the upper floor interior of the barn, and generated the 3D data needed to prepare the final drawings. Carol Poole, one of the metal detectorists, has found musket balls in the marsh around the burnt mound.



11th July: The burnt mound is again photographed and surveyed the mound prior to starting the heavy work of cutting trenches into the body of fractured stone, which reveals substantial amounts of charcoal, and confirms the mound is sitting on peat, as was predicted. This confirms the potential for waterlogging with the probability that its contemporary environment can be described. The putative trough reveals another upright indicating it was probably quite a substantial feature. We are starting to excavate deep into the ditch trenches to obtain a profile, and a further sherd of medieval pottery is found. The geophysical survey [resistivity] of the parkland around the ditch is started, and we consider opening a third trench adjacent to the ditch.

12th July: A productive day with progress on all fronts but without any discoveries.

13th July: What a day – there appears to be the remains of a large plank lining the bottom of the burnt mound trough, together with uprights on either side and at one end. The upright stones we originally found appear to be outside this wooden box.



The third trench is de-turfed, and immediately reveals a platform of rock, possibly a building.

14th July: Core samples of the mound and surrounding area have been taken for analysis to build a picture of what the landscape was like in the past. Work continues at the trenches to uncover evidence to date and describe the purpose of this increasingly enigmatic feature. We are joined today by members of the Kendal Young Archaeologists Club [led round by David Maron of Oxford Archaeology North], who helped the excavation and recording of the newly found platform feature, and also spent some time in the 'hands on archaeology' activity area. This feature of the project runs at weekends, and is manned by National Trust volunteers and members of Oxford Archaeology North, and has been a great success. It provides archaeological activities, including a kids mini dig, an artefact handling table, artefact jigsaws, and a clay pottery workshop teaching Bronze Age coil and strap building techniques of pottery manufacture. A great time was had here by all visitors, young and old, learning about how finds are recovered, what they can tell us, and how they are made.



15th July: The work on the three trenches and the burnt mound continues, but without any further excitements.

16th July: Today we hosted Dallam School, Milnthorpe, who spent all day on the Dig. Jamie Lund, the National Trust Regional Archaeologist, and David Maron welcomed them to the project, gave a brief overview of our progress, and inducted them to site safety. They were then able to take turns working at four different activities. Some helped with the survey of the barn, others were able to dig at the burnt mound and in the trenches and possible stone building platform nearby. They all worked hard and we made excellent progress. We were also filmed on site by RDF Television who are making a series of programmes for ITV on six National Trust properties across Britain. They are to be narrated by Michael Buerk, who was present to interview Jamie Lund and Jeremy Bradley of OAN, and who even got his trousers dirty whilst trowelling at the burnt mound wooden trough. A fourth side has now been found to the trough and we are revealing the shallow construction trench on the outside of it. A layer of organic material containing preserved wooden branches and debris under the mound has been investigated further, and will provide the opportunity for good dating evidence. We are now certain that the stone banks either side of the ditch feature are

actually a later addition to the ditch itself, though quite how early the ditch is, is still a mystery, as the layers within the ditch are proving devoid of artefacts.



17th July: We hosted budding archaeologists today from Levens School and Crosscrake School. They were very enthusiastic and made great progress in Trench 3, which we are now sure contains the floor of a building, but we have no dating evidence. The school groups also paid a visit the burnt mound. Both ditch excavations are very close to being bottomed, but with a continuing lack of finds. We are beginning to wonder if these sterile fills indicate the ditches are of some antiquity. The exposed part of the burnt mound and the trough were thoroughly cleaned before hundreds of photographs were taken to be processed in an Agisoft programme that creates an accurate, three-dimensional image of the trough. We were very pleased to be joined by National Trust Head of Archaeology, Ian Barnes, who showed an admirable attention to detail, trimming the grass on the edges of the profiles before photography and recording, and also digging a big hole in the corner of the site to investigate what is probably the remains of a silted up-stream that flowed past the north-east side of the mound. The profile layers are intriguing and difficult to interpret. We will take sample columns through them to analyse the soil particles and other environmental remains. We have also been examining a mass of timber which lies beneath the mound. Is it the root system of a tree, or are they branches and twigs? If the latter, have they fallen naturally or have they been thrown down to form a platform?



18th July: We started to lift the timbers of the wood-lined trough. The wood is more fragile than it appeared, but came out in two large pieces, which have gone to the laboratory for careful cleaning and analysis. It is hoped to find marks on them to tell which tools were used, in addition to identifying the type of wood and getting samples for dating. Part of the burnt stone mound was removed to look for structures underneath. It is now apparent that the wood remains beneath the mound are a root system, as we have exposed part of the tree stump, which we will also date.



19th July: Today has confirmed that the mound is sitting on a tree stump and some of the roots appear to form part of the trough side. Is this significant? There is fantastic preservation of the bark, which confirms it was a birch. Today has seen prolific sampling and recording to ensure we have extracted all possible data and environmental samples. The ditch trenches are almost fully excavated though continue to fail to provide any evidence for date or function. However, that of itself is still interesting. Similarly, the presumed building platform, like its ditch neighbour, is evading dating and diagnosis. It also now appears to be a stone platform or plinth, rather than wall footings.



20th July : We had a good turn out of visitors today, and, up at the children's activity centre, had lots of budding archaeologists on the mini-dig and joining in the bronze age pottery workshop, trying their hand at building and decorating their own bronze age style pot. Following the days work, the volunteers all came along for a final site tour. The excavation of the ditches is complete, and Paul Dunn, Jeremy Bradley and

Jamie Lund explained their best theories of function and date, based on the evidence now available.



The ditch is quite substantial, and when cut the spoil appears to have been thrown to one side, forming a bank, which may suggest it is an enclosure ditch and bank, perhaps even defensive. The ditch then silted up with soil with no small finds to speak of. Whilst this doesn't categorically rule out this being a post medieval park pale, it does make it unlikely, and it does rule *in* some other intriguing possibilities, especially as it might be reasonable to expect more bits of pottery, clay pipe and other debris, in a post medieval ditch fill. Though we can't put a date to the ditch, we can suggest that it may be *early*... it may be in fact be medieval, early medieval, or perhaps Iron Age, however without any scientific dating, or typological dating from finds we can't be sure whether it is any of these, or indeed post medieval as originally anticipated. What we can say for sure is that the ditch is a substantial monument, that is certainly worth further investigation in the future, and that following the ditch filling up, two stony banks were built over either side of the infilled ditch, which probably served as headlands created by the ridge and furrow situated on either side the ditch. We were able to remove some stones from the building platform, which revealed they were sat on an outcrop of bedrock. This is a quite unusual arrangement, and its size may indicate it was the base for a substantial feature, possibly either agricultural or associated with the ditch. The Strickland family have always believed there was a former gate house on this side of the Castle, but that cannot, as yet, be proved as legend or fact.

At the burnt mound the removal of the soil immediately beneath the trough has revealed more roots and branches and we are trying to establish whether this is a natural phenomenon or a platform put down on uneven roots to provide a flat surface, or structural support, for the trough. The burnt mound at Sizergh has provided an excellent opportunity to examine a well-preserved example, which consisted of a wooden lined trough surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped mound of heavily fire effected stones and charcoal. These stones were not of the local limestone, but came from elsewhere, and were probably selected from local glacial erratics because of their suitability for the heating process. The mound was built on top of a dense layer of root and branches, and was close to a source of water, but contained no small finds or evidence of bones or other materials. What exactly was the function of a burnt mound? There are many theories of which the more plausible involve heating water, and hot water can be used for cooking, cleaning, washing, bathing, in various industrial processes, and of course boiling water helps make it safe to drink, either by itself, or as part of the brewing process. Perhaps when seeking an explanation none of



these should be considered to the exclusion of others. The many environmental samples taken from the mound will be analysed over the coming months, with the hope of providing clues to the functions of this enigmatic monument.

Levens Local History Group formally wishes to thank the following: National Trust, its staff and the Strickland family, for their help, hospitality and enthusiasm; the staff at OAN, who worked several weeks without a break to make sure the project was a success, and brought their usual knowledge, humour, and experience to the proceedings; the members of the visiting public who were so enthusiastic, keen to talk to us, join in the activities, learn what had been going on, and support what we were doing; and last, but by no means least, all those community, history and archaeology volunteers whose hard effort and enthusiasm made the entire project such a great success.

[P.S. In the course of all the planning over the last two years, a recurrent issue had always been the weather and how to cope with the extremities that British Summers bring, but had we ever anticipated that, at times, it would be too hot. In July last year the burnt mound area was completely flooded, and so we had a contingency budget for hiring water pumps to keep the dig viable. This year we had to spend time wetting the surface of the trenches and mound, and especially the trough, to prevent damage from heat and drying! The contingency was spent on bottled water to ensure that all volunteers and archaeologists did not succumb to the baking hot weather.]