

April 2022

Iron Age Northumberland and the Excavations at Hunting Hall

Lowick

Talk by Kristian Pedersen

Our Speaker began by announcing that the excavation at Hunting Hall would begin again this year on the 2nd May and encouraged us all to go along to have a look and maybe get involved. The site covers multiple periods from the Bronze Age to early medieval times (ca 1600BC to 600AD)

What first attracted Kristian's interest was that Hunting Hall was occupied during the Iron Age and so represents an Iron Age Fort in a lowland area. There are many Iron Age hill forts in the uplands in Northumberland and the Borders but many have not been excavated. Kristian pointed out that the lower-lying areas were cultivated extensively and wondered if there was any connection between the hill dwellers and those who lived on the plains. Revisiting the Iron Age to research this might bring interesting answers.

The lowland areas have little to notice on the surface but Lidar investigations have discovered settlements not only at Hunting Hall but also at nearby Kentstone. Our speaker wondered if there could be some connection to the present settlement of Lowick and the Devil's Causeway, which passes nearby, with some signs of earlier settlements. Kristian speculated about the possibility of hostility between the lowland and upland groups.

The Hunting Hall project came about when there was speculation locally about the name Lowick which suggested a commercial farm on the Low. Lowick is currently not situated on the Low. A search began to find the original settlement near the Low and the Hunting Hall site was discovered. The site is near the current farm, and is a promontory fort above the Low. The Low occupies a glacial drainage valley. Interestingly the Lowick enclosure and promontory fort was dismissed by English Heritage as a slump rather than something to schedule. Promontory forts using a river as a defensive feature are quite common but mostly unexcavated. Hunting Hall is very special site as much of the land has been left as pasture for many, many years which reduces the damage done by cultivation.

The Celtic word 'low' is often used to refer to features on the coast but was also used to name areas where water stands in pools as it does by the Low at Lowick.

The excavation began with a few trenches and these trenches eventually joined together. Aerial photographs showed banks and ditches. The initial trench discovered nothing significant but the area was a wonderful place for farming with flat cultivatable land and grazing on flood meadows. A Geophysical Survey showed more detail revealing a pallisaded structure, a rectangular structure and circular structures which are possibly of Bronze Age. The rectangular structure dates far too early to be from the Anglo-Saxon period.

Where did the people who settled here come from? There is speculation about bubonic plague spreading from Eurasia and causing the movement of people. In the Late Bronze Age more people moved in to Britain (More so in the south rather than the north) but it does not seem that people already here were displaced. Instead, DNA evidence suggests that the immigrant population merged with those already there. There is speculation that there were two phases of immigration to Britain at this time but this is to be properly established.

At Hunting Hall, trenches were dug on the basis of Lidar evidence. Interestingly this tends to make things look more robust and bigger than they really are. At the beginning a trench is opened by a mechanical digger to remove the topsoil and this is examined to a limited extent. The next layer shows discolorations from occupation. At Hunting Hall the search is thorough and not time limited as is the case in commercial digs which are often undertaken for planning reasons. Kristian hopes to use this more thorough method on other sites.

Material has been found indicating settlement in both the Bronze and Iron Ages. Bronze Age cinerary urns have been found within this settlement. The urns may contain the remains of up to 5/6 people plus animal bones. Kristian is not expecting to find Iron Age burials as these are very rare. Lots of artefacts have been found including flint and agate dating to 3000BC; also a Bronze Age socketed axe - 5" or so in length (1200BC to 1000BC).

Dating can be difficult with more than one method being ideal but this makes it very expensive. Radio Carbon dating can date back 80,000 years. Strontium analysis for animal remains can be affected by lime in the soil or lime applied to the land.

There was a lot of stone in the excavations with Iron Age houses built on top of each other, demonstrating a sequence of occupation. The excavation site was made more complex by a drainage trench which crossed the site and also a ditch which too crossed the site.

Economic evidence is also useful with finds of pottery and animal bones. A horse bone (a rib) was found from a small horse. Cattle bones formed 80% of the bones and showed butchery marks. Sheep, goat and pig bones formed 20%. There were no fish bones. The lime in the soil might have helped to preserve bones. Animal teeth were found too and were attractive finds. The pottery found was Iron Age and survived because it was buried. Often referred to as 'Grot Pot', this low quality everyday pottery as is easily destroyed when not buried. The top find is a brooch in the form of a metal ring dating to 460/510 AD.

All the soil is bagged and carefully examined which has resulted in interesting finds. A beetle has been found of a type associated with manure. Insect remains can indicate climate conditions, while seeds can give an indication of weeds and crop rotation.

The excavation will this year last two months from the 2nd May. This is an ongoing research project and ultimately Kristian would like to be able to connect this site near the coast with what was going on in the hills.

DI and PH

13.2.22