

Glendale Local History Society visits the Excavations at Hunting Hall

15th June 2022

On a sunny June morning, a group of GLHS members met up at Hunting Hall Farm to be welcomed by Helen Evans of Lowick Heritage Group, which organises the excavations. From there, we could see the site in the distance, located on a plateau above the wide valley of the Low. We walked over to the site, which had been kindly mown for us the day before so we could see more clearly the sequence of banks and ditches which surround the site in typical Iron Age fashion. Our speaker from April, Kristian Pedersen, was on site to explain the location and tell us about what the recent excavations are revealing.

The site looks over the valley of the Low. Although now just a small stream, the valley was formed by glacial outwash, and may once have had standing water in it. 'Low' is an old Brythonic name meaning standing water which drains slowly. Lowick means the farm or trading point beside the Low. One idea is that originally Lowick was located here, only moving to its present location in later Anglo-Saxon times. The only Anglo-Saxon material so far found at the site is a brooch, dating from between 460AD and 510AD. However, before then, there has been a sequence of occupation, dating from at least the Bronze Age.

This year's excavations have focused on two areas. The first is at the north of the trench cleared this year, where a curve of stones has been found, along with some stone slabs, and objects including a spindle wheel and what looks like a quern stone for hand-milling. At the time, Kristian wondered whether this was a bronze age cairn, with the slabs covering a burial cist. [Since then, more excavation has revealed a more extensive surface of slabs, along with more domestic material and the idea now is that this is perhaps the floor of a high status iron age roundhouse – such is the continuous need for imaginative interpretation and re-interpretation in archaeological excavation!]



The second area is to the south, in the east-west part of the trench. There is evidence here of stone building and re-building, and some material has been dated to the later Iron Age (late 200BC into the Romano-British period). Very careful excavation is also being done in an area thought to be the central hearth of a round house, or perhaps a more industrial activity such as a smithy.

As we looked at what had been excavated and the very intricate excavation being undertaken by the volunteer archaeologists, many from Lowick Heritage Group, who have been working on the site now for several years, Kristian also explained some of the science which goes with careful archaeology. Because the overall project is not time-limited by the deadlines of major funders or an academic grant, it is possible to undertake scientifically-robust soil sampling, which can then be analysed slowly as time and volunteer effort permits. We returned to Hunting Hall farm where the team is able to make use of the Meeting Room there to set up microscopes to analyse the material carefully sifted from the soil samples. This includes animal and vegetable fragments which can then be sent for carbon dating. This is time-consuming work and the team have still to finish looking at a few of the 380 bags of soil collected from last year's excavation.

Overall, we were very impressed with what a team of volunteers, with the generous leadership of a dedicated archaeologist, have been able to achieve. The site, dismissed by English Heritage as just a waste dump, is emerging as a significant lowland iron age site, probably in occupation from well before the iron age, complementing the much better known iron age 'hillforts' in the uplands. The careful soil analysis should be able to provide much-needed evidence of farming practices and trading relations in this lowland area. The benefit of English Heritage's neglect is that there are no restrictions on what can be excavated. But it also means that much-needed funding is never easy to find. Each year, Lowick Heritage Group has to search around for the funds to keep going.

We urge all GLHS members to keep in touch with this project. This year's excavations go on until mid-July. Do go and visit, and consider putting in a bit of your volunteer labour, this year or in subsequent years. And why not make a donation as well? GLHS has made a small donation from us all in thanks for a really fascinating visit.



GLHS members at the site,
with Kristian Pedersen.

(Text: PH; photos: MO).