

Blacklands 2008

The complex archaeology of the Blacklands site confirms occupation in the Bronze Age

Last year's excavation was probably the most challenging to date. The weather was very difficult and the archaeology was very complicated. The summer was one of the wettest on record which affected the latter part of the excavation quite badly, but may have helped with the archaeology. As we have said in previous years the optimum for the dig at Blacklands is somewhat tricky. It is either too wet or too dry and the window when it is just right is very small.

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We have moved away from the Roman period of occupation on the site into the later pre-historic which means we have been dealing with soil features rather than walls. The same problem of ploughing out of features has been encountered, but a new problem has been added to the list, that of the features being hidden by a layer of accumulated soil between the Roman period and the earlier periods.

Despite all of these difficulties progress was made in the three large trenches that were open this year. The large trench – Trench 3000 over the roundhouse, begun last year, was extended eastwards to uncover the entrance to the building; another large trench – Trench 1600, over the trapezoid enclosure was opened and yet another large trench – Trench 4000, was opened over the possible western entrance of the big circular enclosure (*see Figure 1*). These areas were extensive and ambitious, but most were completed before the end of October.

Trench 4000

This trench was located on the brow of the hill to the east of the entrance to the field. The location was chosen because of the very prominent ditch features in this area and also because this may have been the area excavated a few years ago by another group, but never reported.

The geophysical surveys have shown wide ditches in this area, but also very stony areas. The trench was designed to clarify the nature of the features in this part of the field and to look at the ditch surrounding the possible pre-historic settlement. When Trench 4000 (*Figure 2*) was cleared by machine it became quite evident that the high resistance readings obtained from the resistance survey was due primarily to the outcropping limestone. The ditch had been cut through the limestone and as excavation progressed we realised that this area must have been used for the quarrying of stone for the Roman building phases. The width of the ditches was explained by this activity. Some of the ditches must have been initially designed as boundaries, but later extraction of stone had meant that some areas had become nearly 4m wide. It was noticeable that the sections of ditch that had been widened were located in the stonier areas. The dating evidence retrieved from these ditches also supported this hypothesis. The upper fills were very dark and entirely filled with Roman finds, whereas the lower fills, in the narrower ditches, contained earlier finds, chiefly of late Iron Age date.

To the east of the big ditch pits and gullies were found cut into the natural stone. These features were very hard to interpret because they were very shallow and near the surface. The topsoil covering the stone in this area was sometimes less than 30cm deep and modern ploughing had eradicated any old ground surfaces. It would seem very unlikely that there would have ever been any real depth of soil in this area as the nature of the geology would have been unlikely to have produced much soil build-up even in antiquity. The pits and gullies would have been within the large circular enclosure seen on the magnetic surveys and may represent part of the late pre-historic settlement activity. Dating evidence from these features was very sparse, but late Pre-Roman Iron Age pottery has been found here.

Trench 1600

This trench was located across the trapezoid enclosure at right angles to the previous Trench 1500, excavated in 2005. The trench also included the small area excavated by the Time Team in

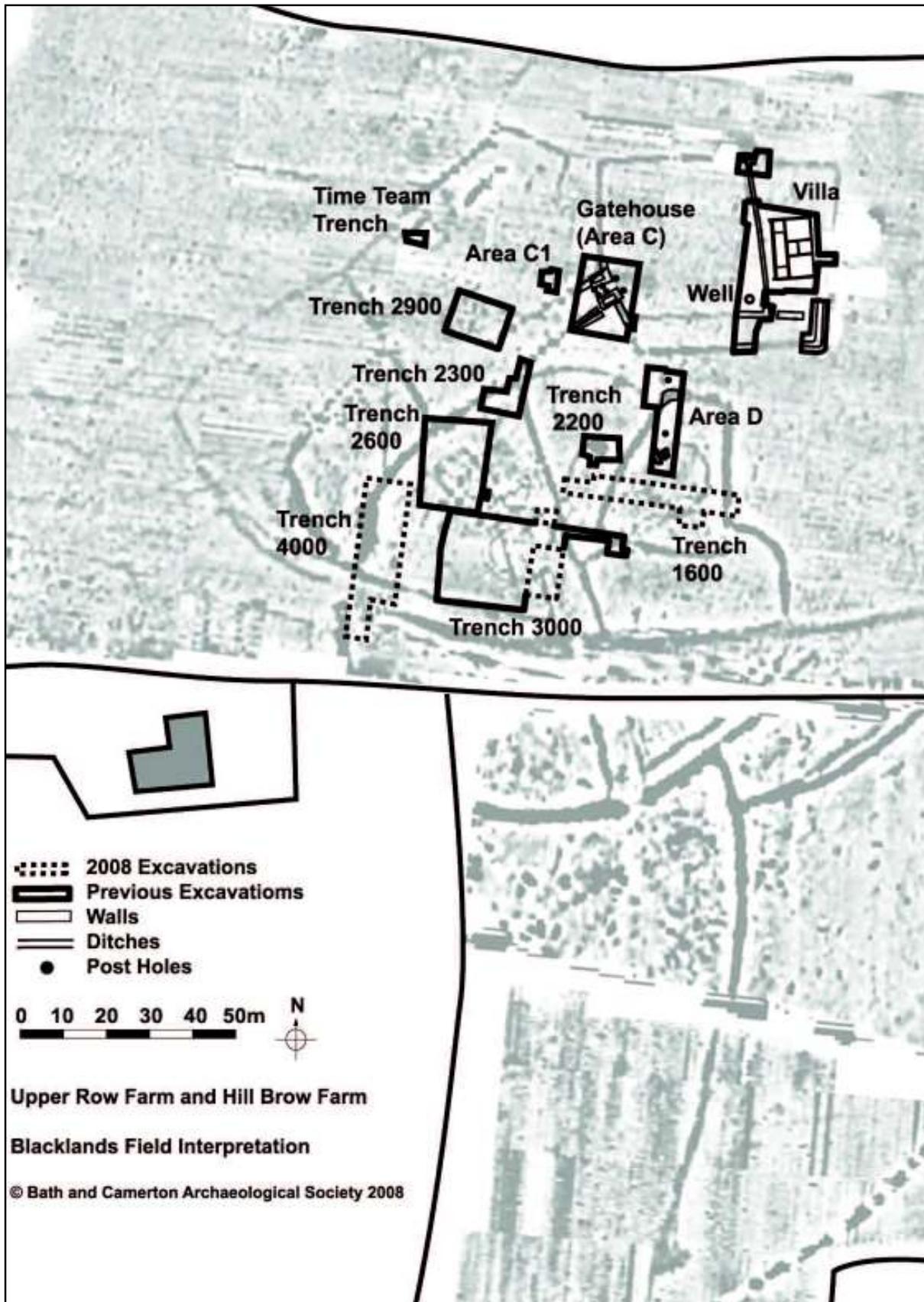


Figure 1
 The Blacklands site map made up from the geophysical survey results and illustrating the location of the found buildings and excavated trenches. Trenches excavated in 08 have a dotted outline.



Figure 2
Vertical photographic plan of Trench 4000.

2006 which purported to uncover the entrance to the large roundhouse apparently located in the trapezoid enclosure. This trench has been extremely revealing. We have now established that the trapezoid enclosure was dug in the late Iron Age, but the roundhouse within was probably earlier. What is not clear is whether the roundhouse was still extant when the enclosure was dug. The roundhouse may be significantly earlier than the enclosure, although firm dating has not been confirmed.

To the west of the enclosure ditch (outside) a series of circular pits were uncovered. These could either be large postholes or small pits. One contained a very dark fill of mainly burnt material and two sherds of late Bronze Age pottery. The type of pottery was recognised to be Deverell-Rimbury pottery named after the type site in Wiltshire (see *Figure 3*). The pottery is very distinctive and the fragments recovered were easily recognisable. These fragments would have been part of a large urn that had probably contained a cremation burial, unfortunately the ploughing of the site had destroyed the urn and only the lower fill of the pit remained. This could have been an inverted urn burial of the late Bronze Age, but we had insufficient evidence to confirm that. The lack of any other pottery or finds in the other pits on the same alignment may well support the dating of these features to an earlier period as sometimes the absence of finds can be more revealing than their presence!

The roundhouse gully was excavated in two sections (see *Figure 4*). This proved to be deep and steep sided. It had been re-dug on at least one occasion and was about 14m in diameter. This is a very large roundhouse. The structure of the house was supported on large timber posts and a very

Figure 3
Bronze Age finds from 2008.
A spindle whorl on the left and the fragments of Deverell-Rimbury pottery on the right.



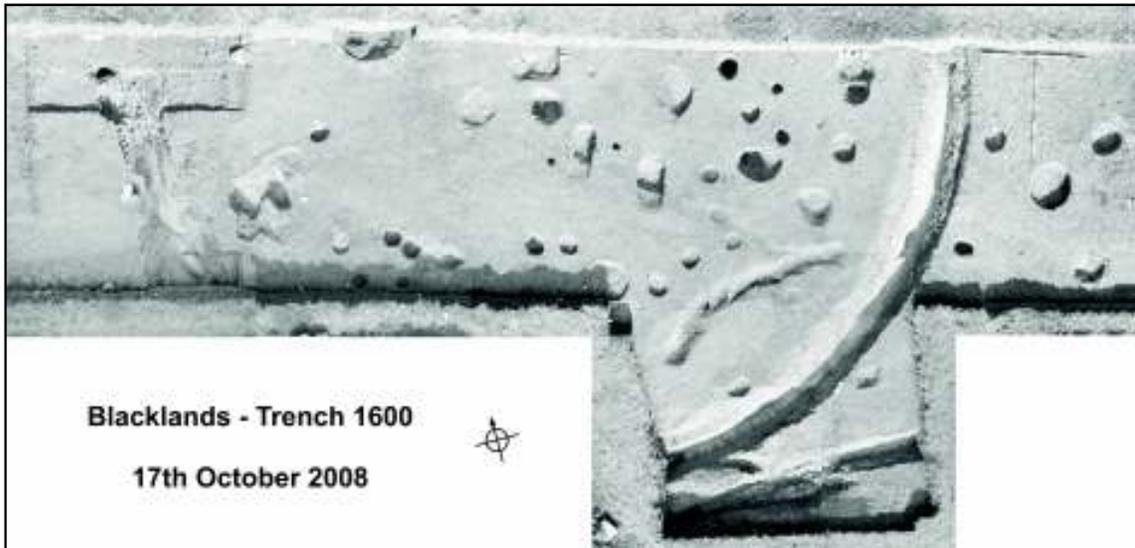


Figure 4
Vertical photographic plan of Trench 1600.



Figure 5
Vertical photographic plan of Trench 3000.

complex arrangement of postholes was found within and around the gully. Significant for the dating of this house, was the discovery of posts on the outer edge of the gully. This type of construction is more consistent with earlier roundhouses, possibly of the late Bronze Age or very early Iron Age. The finds recovered from the gully have yet to be fully studied, but may confirm this early date. We have recovered more early pottery from this trench than in other areas.

Later features were found cutting the gully and another Roman infant burial was located within the building area, but at a much higher level than the postholes associated with the building. This is the second articulated infant burial found associated with the trapezoid enclosure and we have recovered other infant bones from the same area. It may be that this area was used for later burials because it had been decommissioned as a dwelling.

Trench 3000

Trench 3000 was continued from the previous year. An extension was made to the east in the hope that we would find the entrance to the roundhouse with the double ditches that was partially excavated in 2007 (see Figure 5). This area has always been very complicated as a later entrance and boundary ditches had been dug through the building. In 2007 we found a track with a substantial stone kerb laid over the gullies and next to an earlier ditch. This track was further excavated this year and helped to establish a dating sequence for the building. The track and later ditch appeared to be of early Roman date and may be associated with the large rectangular building excavated in 2006-7 and the villa. This construction both cut and overlay parts of the earlier roundhouse.



Figure 6
Detail of the gullies and track in Trench 3000.

The entrance to the roundhouse was found on the south east side of the building, entirely consistent with this type of building, but the gullies and postholes are very complex as the building seemed to have been used for a considerable time and the entrance and drainage had been modified on more than one occasion. The complexity of this area is still not fully understood and further work will be required to complete this area. Dating evidence is in very short supply, but both middle and late Iron Age material has been found here. The double gully is the result of this extensive occupation and suggests that the building was repaired or maintained for many years. The inner gully may be earlier than the outer gully, but a true dating sequence has not been established as the finds from the excavation have not been studied.

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Conclusion

The three areas excavated in 2008 have all yielded interesting results. It is clear that the enclosure in Blacklands was occupied for a very long time. Every year we have added to the date ranges within the field and now it looks like the settlement was active from the late Bronze Age to the late Roman period. The later pre-historic settlement may have been centred in the area of the roundhouse in Trench 3000, which is contrary to our original theory that the trapezoid enclosure roundhouse may have been of this date. The intriguing discovery that the roundhouse in the trapezoid enclosure may be much earlier than the enclosure opens up new questions about the nature and purpose of this enclosure. It is a very unusual shape and the dating evidence from the two sections of the ditches excavated this year suggest that it is later Iron Age. If the roundhouse



Figure 7
Iron Age finds from the excavation.

settlement may have been quite isolated with little interaction with other communities. This evidence is entirely consistent with other sites of similar date in the region, however there are not many comparisons in the vicinity. Most of the pottery seems to be locally derived with some being imported from nearby Wiltshire. To date we have only recovered two sherds of Glastonbury Ware, but more may surface when all the finds have been cleaned.

The animal bone data is also interesting when compared to the later assemblage. The lack of diversity is very marked with a significant increase in pig bones. Pig was prevalent on late pre-historic sites and was easy to raise, particularly in wooded regions where they were allowed to roam. The lack of cattle bones may also be very important as it may indicate a different economy. The nature of the settlement, with its drove ways, suggests that animal husbandry may have been the main agricultural activity, and the lack of cattle bones may indicate that they were moved on the hoof and not processed at the site, possibly being too valuable for the settlement to use or that only sheep and goats were being raised. There is very little evidence of cereal production at all, but this has been noted for the Roman settlement and may simply reflect that the heavy soils of the area were too difficult to till.

We are set for another year of excavation, hoping to continue to investigate the roundhouse in Trench 3000 and open another trench in the trapezoid enclosure to investigate the purpose of this area and in addition establish a firm date for the roundhouse.

Acknowledgments

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in this area belongs to the late Bronze Age it was unlikely to have been still standing when the trapezoid enclosure was dug, so what did this enclose? Some of the Iron Age finds from the excavation can be seen in Figure 7.

One of the most overwhelming conclusions from this season is the difference in material culture between the late pre-historic and the Roman periods. The early Roman material culture is richly diverse with pottery, metal objects and glass sourced both locally and further afield whereas the material culture of the late pre-historic periods appears to have been extremely poor and limited. We have very little pottery and hardly any metal finds from any of the occupation layers associated with the roundhouses. There is also a big difference in the animal bone assemblage. From the Roman period we have a wide selection of animal bones, with cattle, sheep, horse, birds and pig. In the earlier period there is more pig than anything else with some sheep and very few cattle. This suggests a very different economy and probably a very different environment. The