

The Bratton Burials

Geophysics helps to narrow the search for some elusive skeletons

Successful cross-border collaboration between members of BACAS and Wiltshire Archaeological Society's Archaeology Field Group (AFG), some with dual membership, took place in March 2009 at a site near the village of Bratton, Wiltshire. However, friendly cross-border collaboration is far from what went on there nearly 2000 years ago.

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Our aim was to locate at least two, if not more, skeletons that were reportedly left in the ground after they were found in 1955. They had been found days after the discovery of another skeleton which was face down and with arms flexed behind the back. This skeleton had been excavated and taken to Devizes Museum by the then assistant curator Ken Annable. Until the AFG got involved in 2001, at the request of the landowner, the widely-held assumption had been that the skeletons were those of Danish prisoners killed after the Battle of Ethandun between King Alfred and the Danes in AD 878. However, radiocarbon dating in 2005 of the skeleton in Devizes Museum established that death occurred in AD 103 +/- 51 years i.e. within the Romano-British period.

So who were the people buried here, how did they die and why? Were they prisoners of war, criminals, outcasts, deviants, rebels, victims, or sacrifices? Are the nearby springs and/or the site's location on a Hundred boundary significant? Efforts over the past few years to discover more by finding the missing skeletons have been severely hampered by lack of information about the 1955 discovery and excavation, (e.g. conflicting grid references, missing excavation notes and drawings), resulting in uncertainty about the precise location of the burials. It was time for a new approach. Could geophysics help us find the missing burials by identifying areas of disturbance and/or grave cuts in the area we considered the most likely location?

But was geophysical survey feasible at all at this site? The site lies on the Upper Greensand and the clay band near the base of the Lower Chalk which gives rise to several springs close by; it is a wet area, now overgrown with trees and scrub, with streams and the remains of watercress beds. It was whilst work was being done at the then operational watercress beds in 1955 that the skeletons were found. Our 'most likely' location was a sloping 'platform' approximately 20m long and about 5m wide with a bank down to a stream on two sides, several mature beech trees, and ankle-turning dead wood hidden in a thick carpet of leaf litter. Hardly the best place to be wielding geophysics equipment which anyway would have to be carried 200m along a muddy path and up a steep slippery slope. But with very little hesitation John Oswin for the BACAS geophysics team took up the challenge.

So, on a dry sunny day, a 20m base line was laid out along the top of the bank of the stream on the northern edge of the 'platform'. A resistivity survey was carried out using a Geoscan research RM15 machine, first with a half metre bar and then with a one metre bar. A magnetometry survey was also carried out using a Bartington MS2 Magnetic Susceptibility meter which measures magnetic disturbance on the ground surface. For both surveys the extent of the grids on the southern edge of the platform was limited by a steep tree-covered slope up to a field.

The results were better than anticipated given the terrain and the type of features being looked for. The resistivity plot at 0.5m depth (*Figure 1*) showed an amorphous area of low resistance (white), indicating disturbance, approx. 2.5m x 2m at the eastern end of the 'platform' area. The white narrow vertical rectangle on the extreme right of the plot is probably the backfilled exploratory trench excavated in 2008 and the two small blank sections along the base line are trees. The low resistance area also showed up at 1m depth. The magnetometry (magnetic susceptibility) plot showed dark areas, indicating high magnetic disturbance, in the same general area as the area of low resistance.

This was good news – the results provided a clear target area for the excavation. This was carried out over six days in late March and early April and was guided by Robin Holley. A trench was

opened up across the area indicated as disturbed on the geophysics plots, and gradually extended to a length of 5.7m and a maximum width of 2.3m. A deep layer of humic loamy soil overlay silty greensand soil which in turn overlay a sticky greenish grey clay layer. Both the greensand soil and the clay had at some time been disturbed and, over much of the trench, represented fill rather than natural as there were lumpy areas of clay within the greensand soil. This confirmed the results of the geophysical survey exactly. But what had caused the disturbance and when?

The mystery deepened as we began to find possible features and disarticulated human bones. We found five stake-hole type features all at the bottom of the greensand soil layer and penetrating up to 41cm into the clay layer. A flotation sample of the fill of one of these stakeholes produced small fragments of wood, possibly hazel. A linear cut feature, V-shaped in profile, appeared to run more or less south to north across the trench and the fill contained artefacts from the Romano-British, Medieval and post-Medieval periods.

Human bones, including eight pieces of maxilla, one mandible, one ulna, two radiuses, one clavicle, and fragments of skull, were found scattered in the greensand soil and in the fill of the linear cut. These were lifted and examined by a specialist who has concluded from the maxilla that the bones represent a minimum of five individuals. There are two fragments of bone from a child's skeleton. None of the main bones found are part of the skeleton excavated in 1955 as they duplicate bones that were present.

Although we were hoping to find articulated skeletons, the presence of human bones is a reasonable indication that we are at last looking in the right place. John Oswin's excellent geophysical survey work has been invaluable in achieving this. We have proved there was more than one burial but are they all from the same period as the one excavated in 1955? Why were the bones so fragmented and scattered? Equally mysterious are the stake-holes, whose date and purpose can only be speculated on. We will carry on trying to find the answers to all these many questions.

References

Annable, F.K. 1955. Burials at Bratton and Longbridge Deverill. WANHM 56, 190-191
Maddock, S. and Mahon, P. 2006. A Romano-British prone burial from Bratton, Wiltshire. WANHM 99, 190-203

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Figure 1
The results of the resistivity survey of the 'platform' area at 0.5m depth.

