Blacklands 2009

Excavation suggests occupation of the site from 900BC to the 7th Century AD

Jayne Lawes

The excavation at Blacklands this year focused on two areas. We opened Trench 1800 next to Trench 1600 see plan, (*Figure 1*) over the large roundhouse in the trapezoid enclosure. The already open trench (Trench 3000) was extended to the north to investigate the full extent and nature of the rectilinear building excavated in 2006-7 and to the south to investigate the wide ditch running across the enclosure ditch of the segment of the area in which the roundhouse was located. As usual we were surprised by what we found!

Trench 1800

In 2008 we excavated a quadrant of the roundhouse and sampled the trapezoid ditch, but found little to help us date these features. The other problem that was encountered with this building was the lack of a clear entrance so we decided to excavate an area to the north of the previous excavation to try and resolve these two problems. (See *Figure 2)*, which is a composite of all the trenches dug in this area.

The dating of this particular house has always been difficult. There are very few artefacts associated with the construction and features around the building which tend to suggest that this is an early phase of occupation, possibly dating from the late Bronze Age. Some fragments of Bronze Age pottery were found in the gully last year and Carbon dates from features associated with the roundhouse in 2005, of around 850BC helped to establish this but we were hoping to have more positive evidence from this excavation. We now feel that the trapezoid enclosure and the roundhouse within it are of Bronze Age date and may not have been occupied for very long. The mystery of this enclosure is that it was so clean; there were few finds within any of the features and very few pits with rubbish.

The enclosure itself was very complex, not a simple ditch and bank construction, but the bank may have been carefully constructed within a wooden fence to retain the spoil, making it possible to have a high wall. The roundhouse seems to be the only structure within the enclosure and the fact that the space was not re-occupied at a later date is curious. We have evidence of activity in the later Iron Age (between 50BC and 50AD) when a large pit was dug through the gully (excavated in 2005) and smaller pits and gullies were dug in the enclosure, but no signs of extensive occupation. It was almost as if the enclosure had been deliberately left clear for many centuries. The entrance still eludes us, although it is possible that it was in the south east quadrant that was excavated last year. The gully appeared to be continuous, but was refilled with very clean clay in this quadrant. It almost seemed that the gully was dug and then backfilled. Very close to this area a whole cow's skull was deposited and could have marked the entrance. The other indicators could be the increased numbers of post-holes in and around this area, possibly indicating the strengthening of the entrance. This house was constructed in a very different way to the house in Trench 3000. The posts were taken into the ground into the side of the gully on many occasions (but not all). It was not a regular build which tends to suggest an earlier date. It is possible that this building and its enclosure was not intended for domestic occupation, but was set aside for some special function may be as a meeting place or, dare I say it, for religious purposes!

Trench 5000n

The extension to the north of Trench 3000 (5000n) aimed to identify the function of the rectilinear building excavated in 2006-7 (*see Figure 1*). We had uncovered the long northeast-southwest wall in previous excavations, but had failed to establish the full extent of the building and whether it was used for domestic or industrial purposes. This year's excavation has shown that this was not a dwelling, as the building housed two large tank features, as yet of unknown function (*see A /B Figure 3*). The tanks drained down slope to the east via a complex of gullies, some stone lined, into the ditch that ran alongside the track from the main entrance of the big circular enclosure. The gullies cut the earlier roundhouse gullies and were clearly dug to drain some liquids from the tanks. Where the

gullies passed under the walls of the building they were lined with stone. It was difficult to assess which came first the tanks or the building and it is most likely that they were contemporary. The shallow tank on the south westerly side appeared to belong to an earlier phase with the deeper tank with much of its stone lining intact being of later date. The tanks were obviously built to hold some liquid of some kind, but the exact process that they were designed for is still unknown (*see Figure 4*). It is possible that they were used for tanning. Further work will be needed to help establish the nature of these tanks and I would be very pleased to hear of any similar features found on early Romano-British sites in Britain.

Figure 1
Location of all the trenches dug at Blacklands.

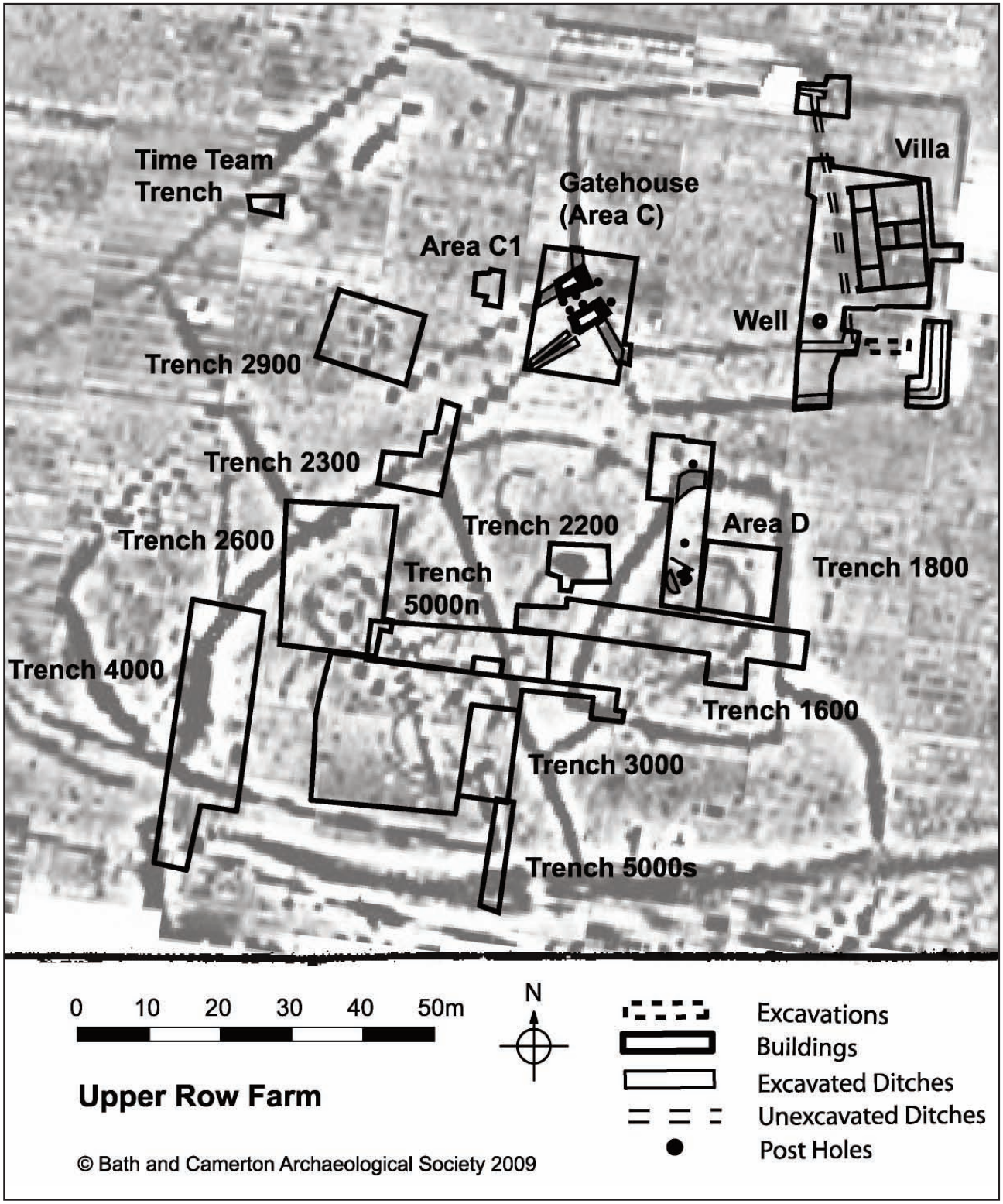
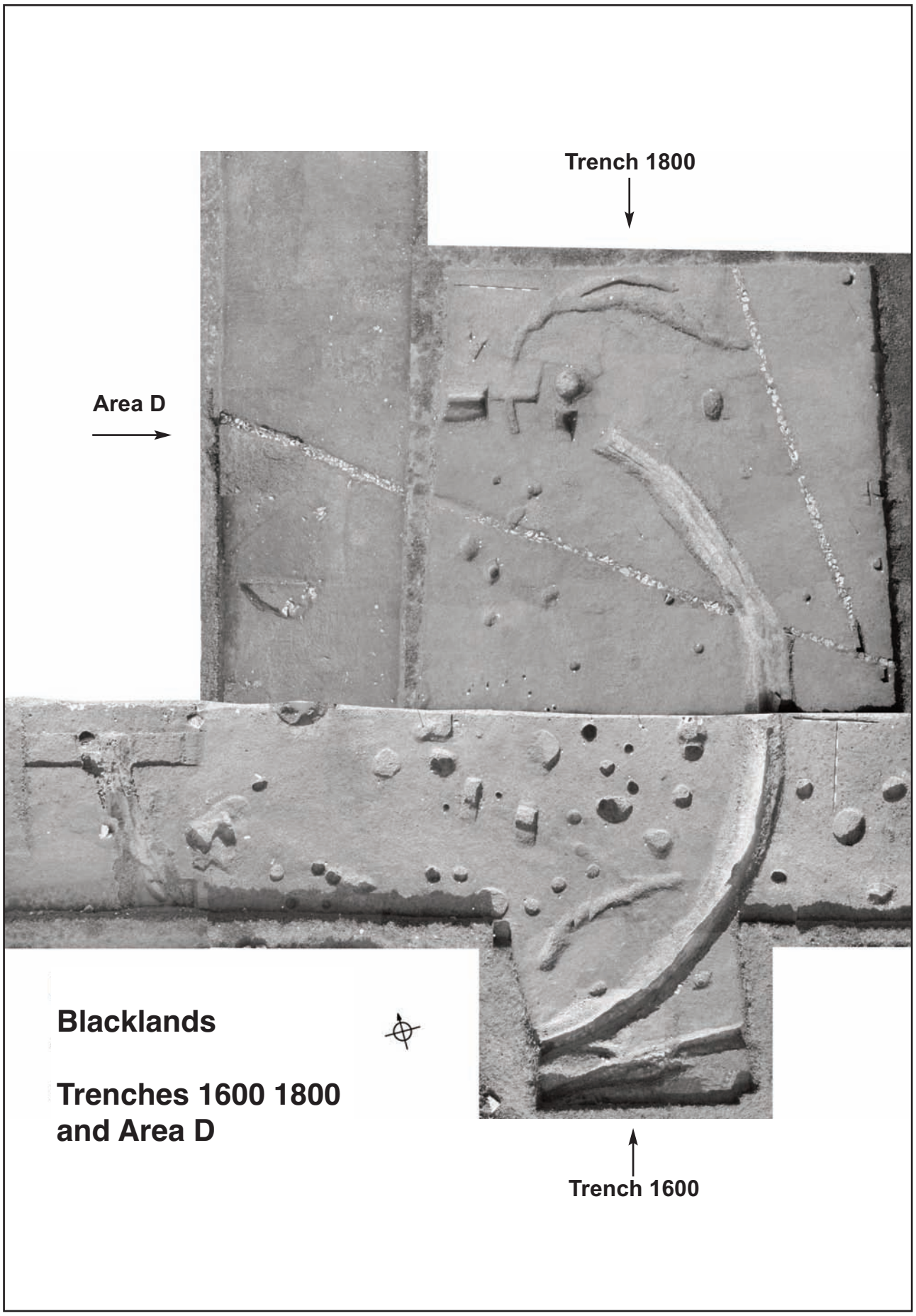


Figure 2
Composite of the vertical pictures taken over the roundhouse and Trapezoid enclosure.



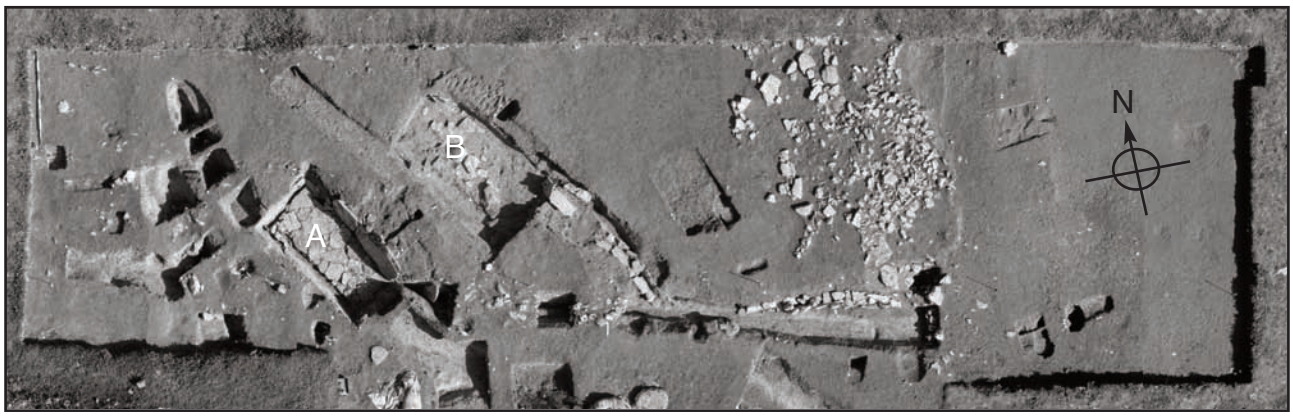


Figure 3
Vertical picture of Trench 5000n.

Figure 4
Composite of the vertical pictures taken over the area including the roundhouse and rectilinear barn.

Figure 5
Detail of the gullies C and D from tank B in 5000n.

Figure 6
Section of the Iron Age ditch in 5000s.

The trench opened on the south of Trench 3000 (5000s)was aimed at understanding the enclosure of the roundhouse and hopefully producing some dating evidence for the settlement around the double ditched roundhouse which has been excavated during the two previous seasons. The ditch to this part of the enclosure runs east to west alongside what appears to be a track way crossing the main enclosure. It was very wide at this point, but quite shallow due to the fact that we hit bedrock at about 1.3m. The most interesting layer within the ditch was a deep black deposit containing burnt daub, Iron Age pottery and numerous butchered bones. We recovered a number of severed pig skulls. This deposit helped to confirm the association with the Iron Age occupation of the roundhouse as a drain ran from the gully into this ditch. The wideness of the ditch at this point may be due to the fact that it was bridged to the east, possibly with a causeway (although we did not quite reach this area), which prevented the flow of water creating a pool rather than a ditch. This would have become wider as time went by as it could not drain away quickly. At some time it seemed to have been filled with the debris of a major fire. The burnt daub and ashy material found in the deep black layer may have been associated with such an event (*see A Figure 5*).

Further work was carried out in the area known as 3000, located over the roundhouse. We have now established that the roundhouse was probably rebuilt on at least two occasions. The gullies that surrounded the building were also re-dug on many occasions presenting us with a complex of intercutting gullies and postholes. Work will continue in this area over the coming year. The complicated sequence can be seen in the composite plan of all the trenches in this area in *Figure 6.*

Conclusion

This year has been the final year of the training dig at Blacklands as the areas we now have left to investigate are unsuitable for training purposes and there comes a point when the digging has to stop and the reporting has to be completed. Over the last eleven years we have been looking at different areas of this field and could probably spend another eleven years, but there has to be a point when you decide that the time has come to bring the investigations to a halt and leave something for future generations, who may bring better equipment and knowledge to the site.

We have established that this settlement was occupied for many centuries. The large circular enclosure was probably laid out in the Middle Bronze Age with the trapezoid enclosure with its roundhouse being constructed a little later, around 900BC. The site was probably occupied throughout the Iron Age with numerous roundhouses being built, but with a focus on the large roundhouse in Area 3000. This was subsequently abandoned in the early Roman period when a new farmhouse was constructed to the north east in an extended stock enclosure. The roundhouse site was re-utilised to take the large rectilinear building that was used as a barn and an industrial process, possibly tanning. At this time the site was wealthy and the small villa was probably one of the largest buildings around.

By the later Roman period the main focus for the wealthy occupation appears to have moved elsewhere. The site would have been unsuitable for a bathing establishment as running water was not available; also the position was not as favourable as other sites within a few kilometres. It is possible that the main house was moved to the villa at Lower Row and that the villa in Blacklands was maintained as a subsidiary farm. Occupation seems to have continued in some way until the later Roman period, possibly as late as the 5th Century AD, but on a less grand scale. The site seems to have been abandoned by the 7th Century AD, possibly in favour of the lower lying site at Homefield.

The next stage may be revealed in the next few years as this project comes to a close, but the Homefield project starts and so continues the story.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who have helped over the past eleven years, there are too many to name here, but everyone who has taken part has contributed in some way to this project and their help is both valued and appreciated. I would particularly like to thank Jess Hendy and all her family who continue to support the projects at Upper Row Farm and generously tolerate the regular intrusions of BACAS.