Blacklands 2010

Our focus on the Iron Age produced a wealth of data and surprises

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In June 2010 the Society returned to the Blacklands site at Upper Row Farm (see previous article for location) for a final research excavation which lasted seven weeks. We aimed to answer thirteen key questions, mainly concerning the structure and dating of major features, including three Iron Age roundhouses. To this end five carefully sited trenches were opened for sampling: 1900, 5500, 6000, 7000 and 8000 (*see Figure 1*). Trench 3000, which was already open, was revisited. The following trench summaries explain what was achieved. Grid north is at the top of all illustrations.

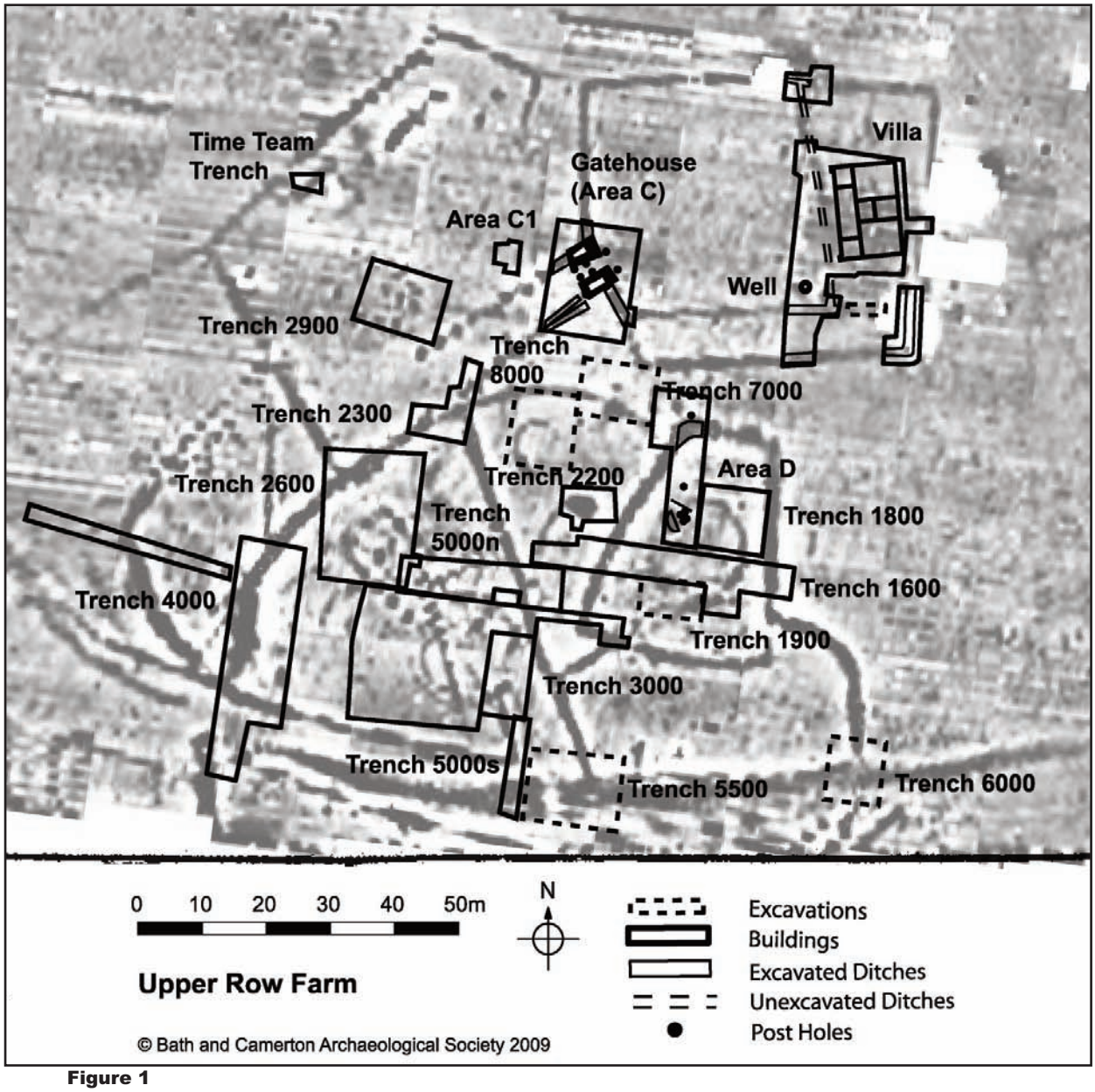


Figure 1
Plan of the Blacklands site giving the location of all the excavated trenches

Trench 1900

Our first target was the large roundhouse which stood within the trapezoidal enclosure. After several seasons of work on it we still lacked clear dating evidence and a convincing entrance. This new trench was sited to expose the hitherto unexcavated south western segment of its ring gully. After removal of a Romano-British cultivation layer, several earlier features appeared. An overhead shot of the whole trench (*see Figure 2*) shows these features after sampling. The ring gully was indeed present, but truncated by a two metre entrance causeway (*centre right*). In a later stage of development the original gully was backfilled by approximately two metres and three post holes were inserted into it

Figure 2
Trench 1900
The roundhouse entrance (1) lies between the ring gully terminals (2). Internal features include the bowl-shaped pit (3) and two double postholes (4)

Figure 3 right
Pottery sherds from Trench 1900 representing a total of 39 different pottery vessels! These were accompanied by two sharpening stones, a large fragment of a rotary quern, and abundant animal bone

on either side, perhaps to support a porch. A radiocarbon sample taken from the bottom fill of the ring gully returned a most probable date range of 358-276BC, comfortably within the Iron Age and representing an earlier phase of this building. The entrance causeway showed evidence of extensive trampling. In the interior, two double postholes are visible at either side of the entrance. Three further post pits oriented north-south lay partly under the eastern baulk of the trench to the right of the ranging pole. The plan of these new structural features must now be integrated with those from previous excavations before a firm interpretation can be made. At the top centre of the trench (*see Figure 2*) a large bowl-shaped pit can be seen, set inside the western terminus of the ring gully. This pit contained sherds representing a total of 39 different pottery vessels! These were accompanied by two sharpening stones, a large fragment of a rotary quern (*see Figure 3*), and abundant animal bone. These finds were contained in a bowl of small stone cobbles. This feature has many characteristics of a deliberately structured deposit of selected material, not casual rubbish disposal. It is closely paralleled by similar features found near the entrances of other Iron Age roundhouses in southern Britain. The pottery included fragments of large globular storage jars, smaller fine and coarseware jars and carinated bowls which may date from the Late Iron Age. Analysis of the pit contents is continuing. Having accomplished our research objectives in Trench 1900 we moved on to Trench 5500.

Trench 5500

This trench was sited to answer two questions. First, what was the nature of the gap in the long east-west Iron Age ditch which is clearly visible in John Oswin's geophysics plot (*see Figure 1*). The gap was exactly aligned with the proven causeway of undisturbed natural across a much deeper Iron Age ditch in the field immediately to the south.

An overhead shot (*see Figure 4*) of the sampled trench provides the answer. In the Romano-British period the ditch was crossed by a roadway of three superimposed layers of large flagstones (*lower centre*). A layer of Iron Age date beneath the flagstones showed that the ditch had been continuous then. It is highly likely that there was a crossing at this point in the Iron Age, however scant evidence for this remains. Intriguingly, the lowest large flagstone was totally contained within the Iron Age layer, hinting at the possibility of stepping stones or the base for a wooden bridge at this stage.

On either side of the roadway was what appeared to be a deep Romano-British cultivation layer extending to the east and west along the line of the ditch. On the northern edge of the ditch we were surprised to find an extensive area of hard-standing which merged into smaller paved areas of stone cobbles. At the very bottom of the modern ploughsoil, perhaps just within the upper Romano-British deposits, we found five low denomination Roman coins. They spanned from Postumus (AD260-269) through to Carausius (AD286-293). Interestingly, these two issues match the earliest and latest dates of coins found in the nearby Frome Hoard in April 2010.

Just inside the northern baulk of Trench 5500 we found two large post pits about two metres apart which were almost exactly aligned with the main ditch crossing. Running away to the east were traces of a plank and post fence which finally disappeared under the eastern baulk of the trench. No clear dating evidence for these features was found. They could represent a gateway and barrier to prevent livestock from within the main enclosure from grazing in a cultivated area along the big ditch.

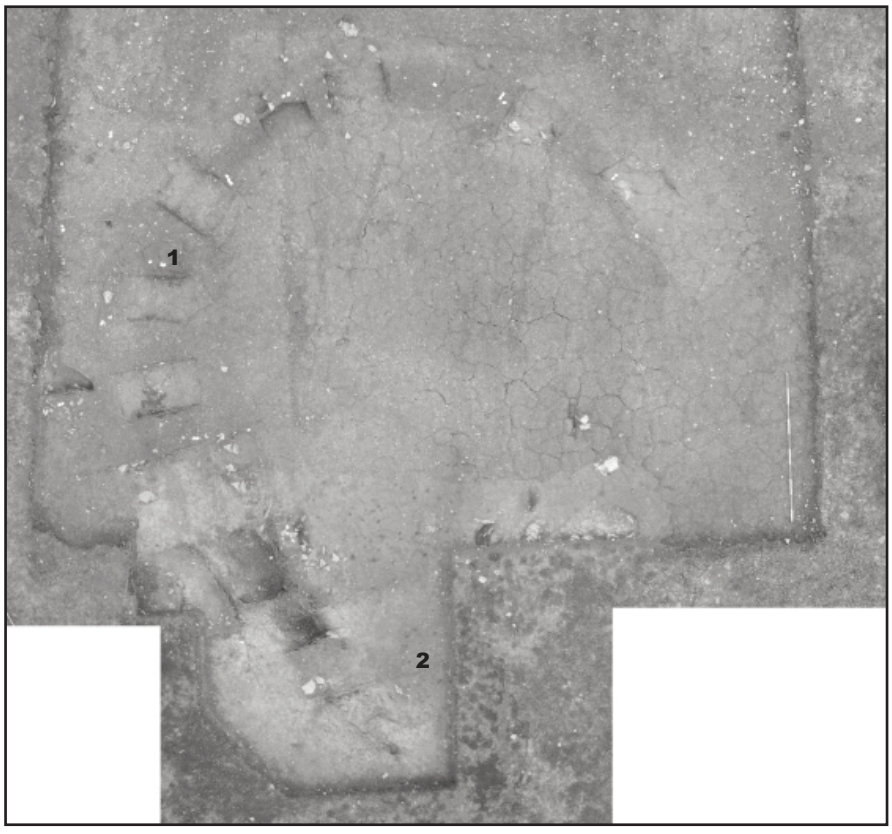
We were also interested in the junction of a long Romano-British ditch, running in from the north west, with the big east-west ditch. From previous work we knew that this ditch, part of whose function was to drain liquor from the large rectangular tanks discovered in Trench 5000n, was overlain on its western side by a stone trackway. Did this continue to its termination? The ditch enters the trench in the top right (*see Figure 4*) with traces of the stone trackway still partially covering it. Upon reaching the edge of the big east-west ditch it swings sharply to the east in a deep rock cut channel. It looks as though it was not thought desirable for its contents to penetrate a cultivated area.

Trench 6000

We wanted to date the long curving ditch which ran downhill from the south east corner of the trapezoidal enclosure to join the big east-west ditch. Figure 5 shows it entering the trench at the top of the picture. A later recut swerves across the original line to meet a gully running in from the west beside the northern edge of the big ditch. They all merge in a rock cut sump at this edge. From the pottery and small finds these features appear to be Romano-British in date. We then dug two sondages across the big east-west ditch (*middle of the picture*). To our surprise the ditch only survived as a wide shallow depression at this point, to be filled with what appeared to Romano-British cultivation soil. Below this a rammed layer of small stones lay directly on the natural rock. Two parallel linear depressions about 1.5 metres apart, possibly wheel ruts, were detected running along this surface.

Trench 7000

More dating evidence was required for the curving ditch shown in the geophysics plot (*see Figure 1*). The ditch also appeared to be cut by an interesting looking pit. This pit, although present, was much smaller than indicated. The strong geophysics signal turned out to be the remains of a post-Medieval bonfire! The sizable ditch appeared to continue east towards the trapezoid enclosure. On the way it cut another ditch running in from the north which was not visible in the geophysics. It was backfilled in a single event with almost clean clay. Although there were a few sherds of Iron Age pottery present, the bulk of the relatively scarce finds from all features were Romano-British.



Clockwise from top left
Figure 4
Trench 5500
A flagstone roadway (1) crosses the big east-west Iron Age ditch (2). A wide metalled 'yard' lies to the north (3)

Figure 5
Trench 6000
The Romano-British ditch (1) enters from the north before terminating in a rock cut 'sump' (2). Sondages (3) cut across the now shallow east-west Iron Age ditch reveal a metalled surface with parallel ruts

Figure 6
Trench 8000
The curving ring gully (1) of the 'ovoid' roundhouse has been ploughed out in the east. There is a southern entrance (2)

Trench 8000

This trench afforded the opportunity to explore the structure and date of a small class of roundhouse. Once the topsoil had been cleared it was apparent that most of the internal features and the eastern arc of the ring gully had been shaved off by the plough (*see Figure 6*). The building's somewhat ovoid appearance is accentuated by this, and the outward turning butt end at the western side of the entrance (bottom left of picture). Our sections of the ring gully gradually deepened to the south. The butt end was modified at least twice and is flanked by numerous postholes. We may have evidence of porch structures surviving here. A line of four internal postholes aligned along the southern baulk of the trench contained carbonised grain and some pieces of iron bloom. It was good to discover large quantities of carbonised grain, a comparatively rare occurrence on the site, in the ring gully. We found a few well stratified fragmentary iron implements including, evocatively, an ox goad! The pottery from the undisturbed features was exclusively Iron Age in date. Two samples were taken for radiocarbon assay from different parts of the ring gully. They returned calibrated dates in close agreement of AD19-126 and AD25-127 respectively.

Trench 3000

This trench had been left open from previous years, and although somewhat weathered it still preserved numerous internal features of the large multi-phase roundhouse within it. Earlier in the year we successfully excavated and planned many of these features. It now seems that there were at least three phases of development for this building. These are represented by an outer and inner ring gully, and a benchlike cut at the edge of the final roundhouse platform. Traces of wall cill beams and associated postholes survived inside the northern arc of the ring gullies. The postholes were set 140cm apart linked by the soil marks of straight wooden beams. These ran round about 1 metre inside the inner ring gully and seem to relate to it (*see Figure 7 top*). We have now detected a length of the same wall structure in the southern part of the building. Our work this year revealed a number of internal divisions in the northern half of the building, perhaps stalls for overwintering livestock. It seems that the main posts which supported the roof were set in shallow pits and were lodged in position with large flagstones at the surface. At the end of the excavation we took bone samples for radiocarbon dating from the bottom fills of the inner and outer ring gullies. The outer gully date range came back as 54BC-AD53. For the inner gully it was 3BC-AD80.

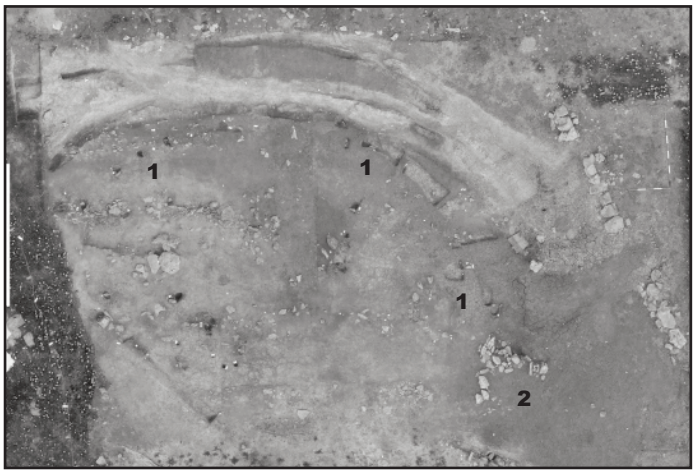


Figure 7
Trench 3000. The post and beam wall curve (1) is just visible heading towards the entrance in the east (2)

Conclusions

Radiocarbon dates were of significant help in sequencing the three Iron Age round houses we sampled this year. The data says that the Trench 1900 building was by far the earliest, with dates centred on the early third Century BC. Roundhouse 3000 came next in the late first Century BC/ early first Century AD. The latest was the ovoid structure in Trench 8000, firmly in the first Century AD, by which time Romanising influences could have been in play. We now have the answers to all thirteen of the Blacklands 2010 research questions, and much more besides. A detailed field report of this year's work is in preparation which will form part of the main project archive. Hopefully our efforts this year will have provided some missing links.

Acknowledgements
First and foremost, the objectives of this project could never have been achieved without the sterling efforts of Owen Dicker and Keith Burdon who were with me for the entire duration of the excavation. Jayne Lawes, the Blacklands Project Director came on site whenever she could, to give invaluable help with planning, section drawing, surveying and even digging. Keith Turner provided his usual staggering vertical photographs. We were also supported by a further 20 members who worked with us for periods ranging from days to weeks. What is more, they made a handsome voluntary contribution toward the cost of the excavation. We are indebted to the Council for British Archaeology who jointly funded the radiocarbon assays with the Society, which used the Dumbreck Legacy for this purpose. Finally, as ever, we could count on the support and understanding of Jess Hendy and her family at Upper Row Farm.