

Appleby Archaeology April 2009

Appleby Archaeology group welcomed Patricia Shaw, the Environmental Specialist at North Pennines Archaeology and a long time member of the group, as speaker for the last talk of the season. The title of her talk was *The Bronze Age in Cumbria - Unearthed*.

The Bronze Age artefacts discussed were unearthed in West Cumbria on the Abbeytown Ridge near Overby Quarry in June 2008. The area is fairly flat with shallow ridges. Several sites have been excavated in recent years in three phases, prior to gravel extraction. None were on the highest ground but the sites looked to the northwest across the Solway to Criffel.

In 2003-2005, three phases of excavation were undertaken at New Cowper. Evidence was revealed for important prehistoric activity in the form of a series of pits containing early Neolithic pottery and cremated material. This soil matrix is to be further analysed for bone and plant material. A Bronze Age burial cairn, which had been damaged by ploughing, was also identified. This contained three Beaker vessels, one of which was found to contain beeswax. Also identified were a possible palisade enclosure, a square enclosure, droveway, field boundaries, and pits of possible Bronze Age, Iron Age or Romano-British date, which are highly significant for Cumbria, and may indicate extensive activity at the site throughout the later prehistoric periods. These excavations are soon to be published as a monograph.

In May 2008 trial trenches were dug as part of an archaeological evaluation at Overby Quarry. One of the trenches contained a collared urn with the remains of a cremation in it. This was a major find and signified the potential importance of the site. Permission was obtained for further excavation and a larger area was opened. This revealed a concentrated area of burning and pits where approximately thirty cremations were uncovered, some were contained within urns and most of these were collared, some 30 cms in height. Collared urns are found widely throughout the United Kingdom and are dated to the early and middle Bronze Age. Typically they have a small base, a conical body and a heavy overhanging rim or collar.

Bronze Age cremations are fairly rare in Cumbria. The most famous sites are at Garlands Hospital near Carlisle, which produced at least fifteen urned cremations when the hospital was built, and at Ewanrigg, c.10km south west of the Overby, where a series of excavations by Bob Bewley in the

1980s identified a total of 29 cremation burials and a single cist burial. Radiocarbon dates from Ewanrigg (2470 cal BC - 1520 cal BC) suggest that burials were being interred over a period of about 940 years during the Bronze Age. More recently, excavations at Allithwaite in the early 2000s by Oxford Archaeology North uncovered a series of Early Bronze Age cremations, including a complete and three fragmentary urns within solution hollows in the limestone paving and in 2005, Durham University found one unurned and two urned cremations of provisional Late Bronze Age date at Milnthorpe. Both the excavations at Ewanrigg and Allithwaite showed association of the burials with natural features.

The cremations pits from Overby Quarry, most of which contained fragments of burnt bone, were arranged in satellite pits around the central area of burnt material and cremations. The arrangement suggesting that there was central focus. Some of the pits had been intercut and some were quite deep. These findings indicate that the cemetery had been used over a period of time, perhaps spanning several generations.

Tricia, using excellent slides of the site and artefacts, described the meticulous excavation of the urns. A number were intact and had to be wrapped in cling film and further protected by bandages or foam before being removed from the site. Others were removed with the soil still around them, which ensured that all fragments of any broken pot were kept together. One large pit contained an intact pot and charred wood, which can be dated, and the species identified. Cremations not in pots, and other burnt materials were sampled for further analysis.

Everything archaeological was removed down to the natural soil level. Every stage of the excavation was recorded. Written records, detailed plans and photographs were taken of each level of the excavations to ensure that the contexts and relationships of the finds was noted to help in the interpretation of the sequence of events on the site.

In conclusion Tricia spoke about the detailed post excavation work that, subject to funding, would be done. It is hoped that a full analysis by experts in their field will be done on the pottery and its contents, the burnt bones, wood fragments, and a general environmental analysis to determine, amongst other things, the plants and other possible remains that would have been deposited at the same time as the cremations. In time it is hoped that the broken pots will be reconstructed and these and other material will be displayed locally.

There were many questions from the floor and the group concluded that Tricia would have to return in the future to report on the post excavation work. She was thanked and warmly applauded.