

Archaeological Excavation: Mill Road, Sharnbrook

In December 2016 archaeologists working on a routine excavation in advance of a small housing development in Sharnbrook, sponsored by Hastoe Housing Association, recorded a small group of human bones. Found with fragments of pottery and other artefacts the bones are thought to comprise the remains of three individuals and date from the Roman period. In line with statutory requirements an exhumation licence was obtained from the Ministry of Justice and the remains were recorded and excavated to the satisfaction of Bedford Borough Council's Archaeological Officer, who monitored the project. During this period the site is thought to have been divided into one or more enclosures, perhaps indicating the presence of a settlement or agricultural activity. The bones were found at the top of one of the ditches. They are currently being examined by a bone specialist and, along with the other artefacts from the site, will eventually be stored at Bedford Museum.

Sharnbrook is an area of considerable archaeological and historical interest. The medieval village of Sharnbrook is included in the Domesday Book (1086), which mentions the presence of a mill, which may have occupied the site of the present Sharnbrook Mill Theatre. Finds of prehistoric and Roman pottery have come to light in the fields around the construction site and three ring ditches (ploughed out Bronze Age burial mounds) have been recorded on the south side of the river Great Ouse.

The first stage of the archaeological work comprised the excavation of four trial trenches. This took place last summer and a ditch, which contained prehistoric flints and fragments of Iron Age and Roman pottery was discovered. As a result, before the construction of the new houses could begin, the soil across the construction site was removed and a full archaeological investigation took place.

The earliest evidence from the site indicates that the area was occupied during the prehistoric periods. No traces of buildings, or other structures, of these periods was found but fragments of prehistoric flint tools were recovered during the soil stripping and within archaeological features of later periods.

During the late Iron Age period (1st century BC-1st century AD) a substantial ditch was dug across the site. It enclosed an 'arc' shaped area and extended beyond the edge of the site, in the direction of the Mill Theatre, and towards the river to the south. The pottery specialist will be able to identify, and provide dates for, the broken pottery fragments found in this ditch and animal bones, which are probably the remains of animals butchered for their meat, will provide information about the diet of the local inhabitants. There was no trace of buildings or other structures within the enclosure but lightly constructed buildings such as circular huts may have been present, or it may have comprised an animal enclosure.

The site appears to have been reorganized during the Roman period, when a second ditch, aligned from north to south, was dug in the west part of the site. This was irregular in shape and became deeper and wider towards the south. The base of the ditch, in the south part of the site, was waterlogged and environmental samples were taken, which will provide information about the local flora and fauna of the time. A substantial tree root was found at the base of this ditch which may be suitable for radiocarbon dating. The human bones were found in this ditch and will also be radiocarbon dated. The ditch may have been for drainage of natural rainwater but the presence of a number of small pits, some of which contained deposits of charcoal indicates the presence of settlement and light industrial activity may have

been taking place. One of these pits contained a well preserved pair of bronze tweezers. A trackway, surfaced with cobbles, was laid out to the north of these pits. Aligned east to west, it extended only as far as the ditch but it continued into the field to the west of the site and investigation of its course to the west must await a future opportunity.

Occupation at the site appears to have ceased after the Roman period. There is no evidence for the Saxon period but during the later medieval period a further ditch was cut across the central part of the site. Like its Roman predecessor, this was aligned from north to south but it was much narrower and shallower and may have been a minor drainage or boundary ditch. A halfpenny coin of King Henry III (1216-1272) was found at the top of this ditch.

Excavation work at the site has now been completed. The artefacts are currently being cleaned, sorted and catalogued and will be sent to specialists for more detailed investigation. All the artefacts and also the records made by the archaeologists, will be deposited in Bedford Museum and a report on the results of the project will be prepared for publication in the local archaeological journal.



Archaeologists at work on the site