

Review article

Roundhouses and railways: developer-funded archaeology in England

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GWILYM HUGHES & ANN WOODWARD. *The Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Crick Covert Farm: excavations 1997–1998* (DIRFT volume I). 2015. xiv+314 pages, 96 b&w and colour illustrations, 12 colour plates, 13 tables. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-178491-208-6 paperback £48.

ROBERT MASEFIELD (ed.). *Origins, development and abandonment of an Iron Age village. Further archaeological investigations for the Daventry international rail freight terminal, Crick & Kilsby, Northamptonshire 1993–2013* (DIRFT volume II). 2015. vi+324 pages, 134 b&w and colour illustrations, 87 tables. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-78491-218-5 paperback £48.



These two volumes result from extensive developer-funded fieldwork in north-western Northamptonshire, in the English midlands. Under the system introduced in 1990, local authority curatorial

archaeologists assess the impact upon archaeological remains of planning applications, and make recommendations for any further investigative work. Developers are normally responsible for the costs of any archaeological evaluation or excavation work necessary, and they award the contracts to commercial field units who bid for this work in a competitive tendering process. Since 1990, there has been an enormous increase in the volume of such archaeological work in Britain and other European countries (Bradley *et al.* 2016), and these two volumes are representative of many of the best and worst aspects of this system.

The fieldwork consisted of a series of geophysical surveys, evaluations and full-scale excavations under-

taken in advance of the construction of the snappily named Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal (DIRFT). The various DIRFT site investigations were undertaken by different contractual units including Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU, now defunct), Northamptonshire Archaeology (now MOLA Northampton), Cotswold Archaeology, Foundations Archaeology, and several consultancy and geophysical survey firms. The DIRFT sites formed just one part of a wider series of archaeological projects within the Clifton Brook Valley and its surroundings. Yet the scale of the DIRFT investigations alone is impressive—at Crick Covert Farm (CCF), over 12ha were investigated at various levels of detail, revealing the ring gullies of over 100 roundhouses; the CCF site forms the focus of the first DIRFT volume. The second volume presents the results from additional investigations at Long Dole, Crick Hotel, The Lodge and Nortoft Lane, Kilsby, amounting to a further 24.7ha of coverage.

The evidence for earlier prehistoric occupation includes: unstratified or redeposited Neolithic flint at CCF, Long Dole and Crick Hotel; a Beaker pit at CCF; and Chalcolithic, Early and Middle Bronze Age cremation burials, pits, a trough and a waterhole at Nortoft Lane. At all of the DIRFT sites, however, the overwhelming majority of features are associated with ‘agglomerated’ or ‘aggregated’ settlement, characteristic of the earlier to later Iron Age in lowland southern and central England. Such settlements consisted of clusters of roundhouse ring gullies, enclosures, pits and other features, either unenclosed or at least not surrounded by clearly defined outer boundary ditches, although with a tendency towards enclosure during the late Iron Age. Aggregated settlements often show evidence for very organic development over time. Some clusters of features may have been inhabited by extended families, but others were clearly part of

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larger social groups, perhaps lineage- or clan-based rather than 'villages' in the medieval or modern sense. As is the case at DIRFT, even though there may be intra-site variations in the size and form of roundhouses and enclosures, there is often relatively little structural or artefactual evidence for any marked social differentiation on such sites. There is also some limited evidence for Romano-British agricultural activity from CCF, Long Dole and Nortoft Lane, and work at The Lodge produced an enclosure complex featuring Roman-period pottery, two undated ovens and an undated inhumation, as well as several Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured buildings and associated ceramics. More intensive occupation of the Clifton Brook Valley appears, however, to have ceased by the very late Iron Age/early Romano-British period.

Both DIRFT volumes are presented in the relatively conventional style of British archaeological site reports, with a clear distinction between data (with artefact categories treated individually) and interpretation. This is a useful, standardised format, but unimaginative. It can lead to arbitrary divisions between phases and material types that might not reflect past understandings, and can obfuscate spatial connections between features of different dates. At CCF, a more innovative approach was the holistic analysis of social activities, zonation and the 'experience of existence' (DIRFT I, p. 3), through consideration of the past sensory environment including viewsheds, colour, sound, taste and smell. Only preliminary results have previously been published (Woodward & Hughes 2007), so full presentation of the evidence from CCF has been eagerly awaited.

There are some extremely interesting details within these reports. At both CCF and Long Dole, several possible four- and six-post structures, often interpreted as raised granaries and/or fodder ricks, were also surrounded by small ring gullies. At CCF, just over half of the roundhouse entrances faced due east, with smaller numbers to the north-east and south-east (DIRFT I, p. 113). Despite sampling issues (see below), the CCF evidence suggests much pottery, bone and stone was deposited in roundhouse ring gullies at the time of, or after, abandonment rather than during the use of the structures. Preferred locations for these dumps of material changed over time, but differences were identified between the more dispersed and largely unenclosed structures on the slightly higher part of the site, and those in the

lower, more enclosed area (pp. 128–29), perhaps indicating different social groups. These results and suggestions of long-term traditions will inform continued debates about structure and agency, praxis and depositional practices. Some of the juxtapositions and superimpositions of ring gullies, enclosures and four- or six-post structures suggest deliberate attempts to connect physically with traces of earlier features, perhaps as part of mnemonic practices. There is also evidence at several DIRFT sites for seasonal Iron Age occupation, and the relative paucity of evidence for cereal cultivation and primary processing indicates an emphasis on pastoralism.

There are inevitably a few minor quibbles—at Long Dole within Ring Gully 6, the circle of 'free-standing posts' (DIRFT II, pp. 27–31, fig. 2.15) could equally have been the post ring of a mass-walled roundhouse, albeit potentially of specialised status or function. The circular 'entrance structure' at Enclosure E2.2 might have been a roundhouse ring gully deliberately inserted into the enclosure entrance at a later date, as it cut the fills of the original ditch. In contrast to the wider recurring spatial patterning of materials, discussion of so-called 'structured' or 'special' deposits is all too brief in both volumes. No attempt is made to present the criteria used to identify the possible examples, nor whether post-excavation work corroborated on-site interpretations. There are also some cross-referencing errors; for example, the report on worked stone and querns is referenced to Ruth Shaffrey in one part of the DIRFT II report (p. 292), but is actually by Fiona Roe and Lynne Bevan (pp. 211–13).

One considerable benefit of commercial archaeology has been the opportunity to sample extensive areas of the landscape. The large excavation areas potentially allowed for relationships between roundhouses and other features, and between distributions of artefacts and palaeo-environmental remains, to be investigated through spatial and volumetric analyses. In practice, this is often more problematic. Even at CCF, the sampling strategy was dictated by the exigencies of time and funding (DIRFT I, pp. 3–6). Only five per cent of each linear ditch was excavated, an utterly inadequate proportion now rejected in other areas of England where 20–25 per cent of such ditches may be investigated, and more in the case of enclosure ditches (Chadwick 2009: 137). At CCF, the text states that up to 25 per cent of each ring gully was sampled (DIRFT I, p. 3), but the site plans reveal that the actual figure was often far less. Trying

to determine quantities and patterns of deposition around roundhouses thus becomes problematic. At Long Dole and The Lodge, sampling was less intense and more haphazard (DIRFT II, pp. 14 & 115), while at Nortoft Lane, it is impossible to assess how well the ring gullies and enclosures were sampled—no percentages are listed, and the small-scale phase plans provide no details of where hand-dug sections were located. The scale of the plans published in the Nortoft Lane report also makes detailed comparison of the ring gullies and features with those found on the other DIRFT sites impossible. This is an infuriating situation. Regardless, it appears that the very minimalist strategy adopted led to a substantial loss of potential evidence regardless. One wonders how such inadequate sampling was permitted, but one suspects the nefarious influence of consultants. This can be contrasted with recent developer-funded work at Barton Seagrave in Northamptonshire, where around 60–75 per cent of each roundhouse ring gully was excavated (Simmonds & Walker 2012).

These variations in sampling practices and post-excavation analyses were probably due partly to the time and money available for each excavation, partly to the variations in the quality of briefs produced by the different developer-control archaeologists involved, and partly to the disparate excavation and recording methodologies of the different firms contracted. With competitive tendering, archaeological units inevitably cut costs in order to win tenders; one result is the varying standards and inconsistencies between organisations. Attempts to investigate past depositional practices systematically at inter-site, intra-regional and inter-regional levels are hindered by these discrepancies, and these two volumes reflect these wider problems.

As noted above, the structure of the volumes follows the standard model, yet oddly, the detailed description of the physical landscape and historical development of the area, and a summary of previous archaeological work, are provided in the second of the two volumes. Both volumes have generally good-quality illustrations, but the site plans are better for The Lodge, Long Dole and Crick Hotel in DIRFT II, while the DIRFT I volume has over-large plans that are very difficult to use. Although some site reports may present too many sections of ditches, postholes and pits, there is an almost complete absence of them in these two volumes, making independent evaluation of re-cutting and similarities in form impossible. Part of a pit alignment at CCF is only shown in

plan; and while many postholes did not survive later ploughing, where they did so it would have been useful to illustrate some of them in section to help assess whether roundhouses might have had internal post rings and wattle and daub, turf or cob walls. More detailed illustrations and additional site photographs could have been placed online, for example, with the Archaeology Data Service at York.

Some of the difficulties encountered during the fieldwork, analysis and publication are mentioned in the volumes. At The Lodge, autumn rains and an already high water table meant that part of the stripped area could not be investigated further; perhaps rising groundwater levels were one reason why the wider area was largely abandoned for settlement by the end of the Iron Age? One main explanation for discrepancies between the two DIRFT volumes was the demise of BUFAU before the post-excavation and publication programme was fully completed. This is only briefly alluded to in DIRFT I (p. ix), which states that even though the report and illustrations were largely completed by 2000, the report could not be finalised until 2013–2014, but with no major revisions of the text possible. Only three radiocarbon dates from CCF were funded, clearly inadequate for such a large and complex site. There were delays and uncertainties over funding for all the component projects, partly due to the involvement of multiple developers (DIRFT II, pp. v & 1). Nonetheless, despite all these problems, these volumes make an important contribution to knowledge of Iron Age settlement in Britain, and researchers will be scrutinising the details for many years to come. They represent a commendable attempt to draw together the different sites and disparate strands into two largely coherent volumes, and at a relatively reasonable price.

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