

4.3 Excavation Results; Trench 18

In order to examine the anomaly detected by the geophysics survey, Trench 18 was measured in and excavated on a north east to south west alignment over the north end of the anomaly. Initially planned as an evaluation trench it revealed the west side of a large cut feature, [154]. In order to carry out any excavation of this feature it was necessary to extend the trench from 3m to 4m in length and 1m to 2m in width. Even after this it is estimated that less than half the width has been revealed. All the fills encountered either ran beyond the edges or below the level of safe excavation.

Excavation initially removed around 0.45m of topsoil and subsoil to reveal two soils filling the feature. In the south west half of the trench was fill (160), a dark brown friable sandy silt. In the north east half was fill (148). Fill (148) was very slightly lighter than (160), however it was more easily discernable from (160) due to a high percentage of medium to large sub angular fragments of sandstone within it. When (160) was excavated it revealed the extent of (148) which now ran the full length of the trench. The removal of (160) showed that it had filled a 0.20m deep depression within (148). It seems likely that as the fills of cut [154] settled a hollow developed at the top and that (160) represents material which was deliberately tipped in order to level the ground perhaps as part of landscaping for the garden.

Excavation showed (148) to be on average 0.40m deep and with a slight north east to south west dip. As well as the large stones over forty sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from this fill. These seem to date from the mid to late 2nd century AD. into the 3rd and possibly the fourth centuries. The large size of stones within this layer and their concentration at one level suggests that they may have been deposited as a result of deliberate backfilling.

The removal of (148) exposed two more fills. Most of the trench was covered with fill (101) a dark grey-brown sandy silt containing flecks of charcoal and ash. At the north east end of the trench part of fill (149) was exposed. This was a mid to light brown silty sand which contained a high percentage of small stones. Fill (149) ran south west for 0.70m before dipping below (101).

Layer (101) increased in depth as it dipped gently to the south west. At that end of the trench where it entered the section it was 0.40m deep. Fifty two sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from fill (101). An initial assessment suggests that the sherds have a date range from the early 2nd century AD to the early 3rd century AD.

The excavation of (101) exposed fill (149) across the entire trench. It was clear that the north east to south west slope of (149) was much more pronounced than in previous fills. Below (149) this increase in the angle of slope became more pronounced with each new fill that was exposed. Fill (149) was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.40m, however the depth of the excavation had now reached its safe limits which meant that (149) was not bottomed. Eleven sherds of pottery were recovered from fill (149). One sherd is possibly mid 2nd century AD or later while another may be late Iron Age.

The excavation of (149) exposed three new soil types. At the very north-east end of the trench was (150) a light yellow-brown silty sand with very small fractured sandstone inclusions. Layer (150) is probably a natural layer rather than man made and could have been formed by the fracturing and erosion of the sandstone bedrock. Immediately below layer (150) the removal of fill (149) exposed the natural sandstone bedrock which, together with layer (150), probably mark the edge of cut [154].

The third soil exposed by the removal of (149) was another fill, (161). This was a mid grey-brown clay silt which in the area revealed within trench 18 had a maximum depth of 0.10m.

Two highly abraded sherds of Samian ware came out of fill (161) which are possibly 2nd century AD in date. Below fill (161) was (151). This was similar in colour and texture to fill (161) but contained a much higher percentage of charcoal and ash.

When fill (151) was excavated it revealed more of the sloping natural sandstone edge of cut [154]. As with other deep features cut into the bedrock the original excavators seem to have used the plating of the sandstone to assist their work. This results in a jagged edge, however, if appearance was not a major concern then it makes the job a lot easier. On the steps formed by breaking the sandstone plates, fill (152) had accumulated. This was a light grey-brown silt clay which within trench 18 had a maximum depth of 0.10m. It may have formed as a result of the edges of cut [154] eroding as well as material from the surrounding area being washed or blown into the cut while it was open. Nine sherds of pottery were recovered during the excavation of (152) one of which was a rim of a jar consistent with 3rd century AD forms.

Discussion

The final slope of the exposed edge of cut [154] was around forty five degrees and in total cut [154] was excavated to a depth of 0.95m which, when added to the topsoil and subsoil, gave a trench depth of 1.40m. The excavation of trench 18 confirmed the geophysical survey's location of an anomaly. Trench 18 did not lie at a right angle across cut [154]. The trench was aligned north-west to south-east and within it cut [154] ran north to south.

Trench 18 was designed as an evaluation trench. The size of cut [154] meant that only a part of it was exposed and this could not be fully excavated. This makes it impossible to interpret the feature with any degree of confidence. However the potential implications of cut [154] for the site at Mellor are such that it is worth speculating on its functions.

One possibility is that it represents one side of a ditch. If this is the case then it is likely to be of similar proportions to the section of enclosure ditch revealed in trench 1. However the current interpretation of the line of the enclosure ditch places its eastern arm some 80m to the east of trench 18. It is possible that when the enclosure ditch leaves the east side of Area B it swings sharply to the south and west rather than the current interpretation of a steady curve.

Three geophysical surveys have been carried out in the south west corner of Area D. Magnetometer surveys were carried out in 2000 and November 2002 and Ground Penetrating Radar lines were placed across it in 2001. In December 2002 two trial trenches were excavated across various anomalies detected by these surveys which might represent the east and south continuation of the enclosure ditch. No indication of the ditch was found in either of these trenches.

Another possibility is that rather than being part of the enclosure ditch cut [154] represents a major division within the enclosed hill top. It may run from the south arm of the enclosure ditch to the north arm. This might act as a division within the enclosure demarcating perhaps between an area for keeping stock and an area of human occupation.

Some of the fills of cut [154] seem to suggest that it was deliberately back filled and the pottery from these fills implies that this happened in the Roman period. The initial assessment of the pottery assemblage from the fills of cut [154] suggest that some of them contain sherds from pottery types dating to the 3rd and possibly 4th centuries AD. If this is the case then cut [154] seems to represent further evidence of occupation of the hill top during the Roman period. The nature of this occupation is uncertain. Previous sherds of pottery and features assigned to the

Roman period could easily represent the continuing occupation of the hill top by the indigenous population who adopted Roman culture. However if cut [154] is a ditch, excavated in the Roman period then its potential size would suggest that it is a military defensive ditch.

The topographic characteristics which made the hill top at Mellor so attractive to people in the Mesolithic period and the Iron Age, communication routes, unobstructed views and water, would have made it an excellent site for a Roman military post. The deliberate back filling of defensive ditches so that they could not be re-used by potential enemies was a common practice with the Roman army when they abandoned a site.

There are problems with the interpretation of cut [154] as a ditch, of whatever period. One question is why has no evidence for it been detected before? Until the geophysical survey of the garden of the Old Vicarage there was no particular reason to excavate at its eastern end, especially since crop marks and earlier geophysical surveys had highlighted other areas where resources could be productively allocated. 30m to the south of trench 18 is the graveyard of Saint Thomas's church where survey and excavation are not possible. 10m to the north of trench 18, beyond the drive to the Old Vicarage, is Area C. A geophysical survey, using a magnetometer, was carried out in this area in 2000. This produced a series of anomalies none of which seemed to indicate the presence of a ditch. Test pitting of the area and the excavation of trench 20 did confirm the presence of archaeological features but again nothing which suggested a ditch. Given the size of the test pits and trench 20 it is possible that the line of the ditch was not intercepted. A further magnetometer survey was carried out in Area C during November 2002 with the specific intention of looking for a continuation of cut [154]. A possible anomaly was detected although the evidence is inconclusive. It is hoped to carry out further excavation in Area C during 2003 in order to expand on the results of trench 20 and look for a continuation of cut [154]. However it is possible that if cut [154] is a ditch that it swings to the west and follows the line of the tarmac drive of the Old Vicarage.

A second problem with the interpretation of cut [154] as a Roman military ditch is that if it enclosed an area which now includes the Old Vicarage garden it might be expected that the archaeological evidence for Roman military buildings would be overwhelming in the trenches excavated so far in the garden. This is not the case.

Perhaps if there was a Roman military post at Mellor it was on a small scale such as a signal station, which would fit into the unexcavated area at the east end of the garden. Another possibility is that it enclosed an area to the east of the garden including parts of the graveyard, and houses around the present Vicarage and the area of the car park.

There are of course other possible interpretations of cut [154]. The naturally plated sandstone bedrock is relatively easy to lever out as thin blocks once it has been exposed. While these may not be suitable for constructing large structures they are ideal for making small walls, tracks and pathways. Archaeological excavations at Mellor have also shown that it was widely used for packing in post holes and foundation trenches. The evidence from trench 17 suggests that this stone was quarried in post medieval times and so the possibility must exist that cut [154] is evidence of earlier exploitation of this local resource