

FINDING THE EARLIEST INHABITANTS OF BOSTON SPA

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A few years ago the group discovered a multi-period prehistoric site by carefully recording surface scatters of flint tools and concentrations of waste from their manufacture over an area of 25 hectares in Boston Spa near the River Wharfe. Over the next four years further fieldwalking doubled the area surveyed. There is a full range of tools from the Mesolithic (about 9000-4000 BC), Neolithic (4000-2000 BC) and Bronze Age (2000-600 BC) periods, suggesting hunting, camping and settlement. The good-quality flint comes mainly from the east coast, with a small proportion of poorer material from the Yorkshire Wolds.

A large quantity of burnt flint was also found spread across the site. A grant helped us to thermoluminescence-date the burning of one nodule to prehistoric times and another to the medieval period. A late-Neolithic scraper, thought to be burnt after manufacture, was subsequently given a medieval date. This suggests that, although some of the burnt flint comes from prehistoric activity, some may result from stubble burning or land clearance in later periods, when scrub and woodland was burnt to clear more land for farming.

In prehistoric times flint was sometimes heated to make it easier to knap into tools. Nodules were also used as pot-boilers heated in a fire and put into water or other liquids to heat them for cooking purposes. We have experimented ourselves with this form of cooking at our annual re-enactment events and found it very effective. Flint was also burnt, then crushed to use as temper for making pottery. So it was an important material in those times.

After having a geophysical survey done to locate features hidden underground, our most recent excavations targeted a line of pits aligned on a central feature, which had more pits set into it. The central pits seemed to have begun as a natural feature and had probably been adapted by the people who dug them. The separate pits were free of remains or settlement waste, which suggested they had a ceremonial rather than domestic purpose. Each had an arrangement of stones visible in its top layer, whereas the pits dug into the central feature had a few stones deposited in them. In fact, buried face down in their own separate pits, we found two carved rocks.

The style of the carvings places them in the Neolithic period and therefore helps to date the pit alignment itself. Some of the carved patterns are reminiscent of ones at sites like Skara Brae Neolithic village in Orkney, Newgrange Passage Tomb in Ireland and other places on the continent. They would have been fashioned with flint, antler and stone tools. In an adjacent pit we found two prehistoric rubbing stones and a hammer stone, also deliberately buried, perhaps when the inhabitants moved on, as has been recorded before on other sites.

I think the carvings on the stones represented in symbolic form something about the relationship of these prehistoric farmers to their land. Burying the stones meant closure - moving on to another site. There would be no point in taking them somewhere else. The stones were rooted there, in a field on the edge of a place that thousands of years later became Boston Spa.