CPAT Report No 1089

Excavations at Hindwell, Radnorshire, 2010-11





THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Excavations at Hindwell, Radnorshire, 2010-11

N W Jones March 2011

Report for Cadw

The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust 7a Church Street, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DL tel (01938) 553670, fax (01938) 552179 © CPAT 2011

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 As part of a programme of further investigations into a range of important prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments in mid and north-east Wales, and following on from a pan-Wales study, a number of sites were investigated in 2010-11 in the area of Hindwell, in Radnorshire's Walton Basin. Funding for the work was provided by Cadw.
- 1.2 The Walton Basin (Fig. 1) has long been recognised as an area of considerable significance in the grouping and variety of its prehistoric monuments. The earliest evidence of activity is provided by Mesolithic and Neolithic flint scatters, concentrating in the centre of the basin, mostly along a low ridge, but it is the complex of large-scale Neolithic monuments for which this area is now best known.



Fig. 1 The larger prehistoric monuments in the Walton Basin (after Jones 2009b, fig. 11)

- 1.3 A programme of recent survey and excavation has now confirmed the presence of a causewayed enclosure at Womaston, dated to around 3600 BC, together with a potential cursus near Hindwell which appears to be of a similar date (Jones 2008 and 2009b). There is also a second, undated cursus at Walton Green.
- 1.4 At the time of its construction the most impressive monument in the Walton Basin would have been the very large palisaded enclosure at Hindwell. Defined by closely set posts, the palisade enclosed an area of around 34ha, some 1400 mature oak trees having been used in its construction. To date, this is the largest Neolithic enclosure in Britain (Gibson 1999a, 155). A similar enclosure lies further to the south, at Walton, and is possibly associated with an avenue of pits. In the same area there is also a very large ring ditch, around 100m in diameter, which has been the subject of recent excavations, the results from which indicate that it may have been constructed around 2600 BC (Jones 2010).

2 HINDWELL CURSUS (PRN 33109)

2.1 Cropmark evidence from several seasons of aerial reconnaissance has revealed a more or less continuous feature defined by two ditches between 54m and 70m apart, extending for at least 800m from SO 2436 6050 to SO 2508 6087. There are also two further lengths of linear cropmark which may extend the northern ditch for another 1.6km as far as SO 2654 6155 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 2 Cropmarks at Hindwell showing the two linear ditches, together with the location of the excavations and geophysical surveys.

- 2.2 The site lies 1.3km north-west of Walton village, with the Walton Green cursus 2km to the eastsouth-east, while the Four Stones stone circle is close to the south-western end, and the northeastern end extends into the interior of the Hindwell palisaded enclosure (PRN 19376). A detailed geophysical survey undertaken in 1998 to investigate the palisaded enclosure also showed faint traces of the linear ditches, although there is no indication of their relationship with the enclosure (Gibson 1999b).
- 2.3 As part of the present project a magnetometer survey was undertaken in September 2008 in four areas at the south-western end of the cropmarks in an attempt to clarify the extent of the ditches in that direction (Fig. 2). The eastern area confirmed the presence of both ditches, approximately 80m apart, although the south-eastern ditch was rather less well defined than its northern counterpart. A 180m-long strip along the southern boundary of the field revealed evidence for the continuation of the north-western ditch, but no indication of the southern ditch. Two further areas were then examined in the adjoining field to the south, although in neither case was there any evidence for a continuation of the ditches (Jones 2009a).
- 2.4 Trial excavations were conducted over two seasons with an initial phase in 2009 investigating the southern ditch (Jones 2009a) and a second phase in 2010 examining the northern ditch. The following text summarises the results from the two excavations.

Southern ditch

2.5 A substantial ditch (14) was identified towards the southern end of the trench, cutting into the river gravels, and measuring 3.9m across and 1.8m deep, with steeply sloping sides and a flat base (see Fig. 3). The primary fill (29) consisted of fine gravel in a silt matrix, probably representing rapid weathering of the sides immediately after construction. A deposit of brown, stony, clay-silt (28) against the southern edge partly sealed the primary silting and contained frequent flecks and small fragments of charcoal, of which a sample was taken. Both deposits were sealed beneath a layer of stiff yellow clay (27) up to 0.08m thick, signalling a period of stabilisation. A series of gravelly deposits (24-26) against the northern edge of the ditch suggest a later phase of erosion which is likely to have been derived from bank material on that side of the ditch. The upper ditch fill (16) consisted of a deposit of clay-silt, the thickness of which implies deliberate infilling.

Northern ditch

- 2.6 The northern ditch proved to be slightly smaller than the its southern counterpart, measuring 3.8m across and up to 1.45m deep, although the profile was the same, with steeply sloping sides and a flat base (Fig. 3). The primary fills consisted of a thin deposits of fine silt (22) sealed beneath a compacted gravel deposit in a silty clay matrix (21). A period of rapid weathering is indicated by a series of layers and thinner lenses of silty clay and fine river gravels which were predominantly derived from the southern edge of the ditch. The uppermost of these (13 and 14) represent the end of an initial period of stabilisation, following which the ditch appears to have been subject to more gradual infilling with the deposition of a 0.45m-thick layer of pale brown silty clay (12). Later infilling consisted of further layers of silty clay (6, 7, 9 and 11), interspersed with lenses of gravel (8 and 10).
- 2.7 No cultural material was forthcoming from the ditch, although samples of hazel charcoal from contexts 12 and 17 (samples 103 and 102 respectively) have been submitted for radiocarbon dating and bulk samples from a number of contexts await further analysis.
- 2.8 Around 2.5m to the south-east of the ditch a 0.1m-thick deposit of river gravel in a clay silt matrix (23) lay beneath the topsoil and sealed a thin layer of clay silt (24) around 5mm thick. It is possible that this represents remnant bank material, perhaps with an intervening berm.

2.9 Around 2.5m to the north of the ditch a shallow gully (3) was identified, measuring up to 0.45m wide and 0.15m deep, aligned roughly east to west. The fill consisted of a pale yellow-brown clay silt. No artefacts or other dating evidence was forthcoming.



Fig. 3 Plan of the 2010 excavations and sections of the north and south ditches

Radiocarbon dating

2.10 Two samples of charcoal from the southern ditch were submitted to SUERC in East Kilbride for AMS dating.



SUERC-24834 Find 1004, context 16 Corylus charcoal



Conclusions

- 2.11 The results from both seasons of trial excavations have demonstrated the impressive size of the cursus ditches as well as providing evidence from radiocarbon dating which suggests a date of currency for the monument of around 3950-3630 cal. BC. The size of the ditches, at up to 3.9m wide by 1.8m deep place the Hindwell cursus amongst the largest cursus ditches so far identified. By comparison, the Rudston A cursus (Yorkshire) has a maximum ditch width of 4m, while the Greater Stonehenge Cursus (Wiltshire) measures around 3.3m by 1.5m towards the western terminal, although elsewhere it is far more slight at around 2.5m by 0.45m, conforming to the generally accepted pattern of cursus ditches becoming more substantial closer to the terminals.
- 2.12 If the cropmark evidence is to be believed the Hindwell cursus may extend for more than 2.4km, with neither terminal having yet been identified. As with the scale of the ditch, the length would also place the monument amongst the larger examples in Britain. Morphologically, the Hindwell cursus is unusual in that the ditches are not parallel with each other, varying between 54m and 70m apart. This irregularity is not unknown, however, as the Greater Stonehenge Cursus varies between 100 and 150m in width (Thomas *et al* 2009, 42). It has been noted that many cursus monuments incorporate seasonally wet ground, or even watercourses, into their layout (Brophy 2000), and at Hindwell the western end, as currently known, lies 300m to the east of the Summergil Brook, while the eastern end may extend as far as, or even beyond, the Knobley Brook.
- 2.13 Clearly further work is required to determine the precise dating and extent of this monument, although the anticipated radiocarbon dates from the 2010 excavation should go some way to corroborating the dates already acquired.



Fig. 4 The complex of enclosures at Hindwell, plotted from cropmarks and geophysical survey, showing the 1998 and 2010 geophysics, the 2011 trench locations and the extent of the palaeochannels with the blue line markings the upper edge

Fig. 5 Plan and section of the palisaded enclosure and Roman ditch



3 HINDWELL PALISADED ENCLOSURE PRN 19376

- 3.1 The large palisaded enclosure at Hindwell was originally identified from cropmark evidence in 1994 and then through further aerial reconnaissance in subsequent years. Trial excavations were conducted at two locations in 1995, followed in 1998 by an extensive programme of detailed geophysical and ground survey under the direction of Alex Gibson. The investigations demonstrated that the enclosure was defined by intercutting post-pits, each of which would have held an oak post around 0.8m in diameter. The posts had been charred, possibly as an aid to preservation, and radiocarbon dates from the outer growth rings indicated a construction date of around 2700 BC. The palisade enclosed an area of around 34ha, and it was estimated that some 1400 mature oak trees had been used in its construction. To date, this is the largest Neolithic enclosure in Britain. A similar enclosure lies further to the south, at Walton, and is possibly associated with an avenue of pits (Gibson 1999a; 1999b).
- 3.2 Cropmarks and geophysical surveys have also revealed other enclosures within the immediate area some, or all of which could be elements of a highly significant complex of prehistoric monuments (Fig. 4). These include the Womaston Causewayed Enclosure (Jones 2009b) and a double-ditched enclosure which partly underlies the Hindwell Roman fort and was investigated as part of the current project, the results of which are presented in section 4 of this report. A further set of triple ditches, again to the east of the Roman fort, has yet to be examined and remains undated.
- 3.3 The 2011 excavation consisted of a single trench (Fig. 5), measuring 11.75m by 3m, and aligned roughly north to south, positioned to investigate the relationship between the presumed southern side of the palisaded enclosure and a large, linear ditch (Trench 12 in Fig. 4). Both features were initially identified by the 1998 geophysical survey, and although this appeared to show a curving line of large pits the spacing appeared to be considerably greater than that observed during the earlier excavations. There was, therefore, an element of doubt regarding the form of the enclosure in this area and it was hoped that the excavation would provide some clarification of the morphology. The work was undertaken in conjunction with excavations to investigate a number of potential Roman features to the south of the fort as part of a Cadw-funded study into Roman vici. The following text does not, however, discuss any Roman archaeology in detail as this is covered by a separate report (Hankinson 2011).



Fig. 6 The partially excavated post pits of the Hindwell palisaded enclosure in the foreground, with the later ditch beyond. Photo CPAT 3241-0018

- 3.4 The turf, topsoil and former ploughsoils (300, 301 and 302) were removed by machine onto the surface of the natural glacial gravels, uncovering a substantial ditch (312) with a well-defined northern edge, although the southern side was rather less distinct. Given the size of the ditch the decision was taken to remove part of the upper fills (308 and 309) by machine. The subsequent excavation was then conducted entirely by hand.
- 3.5 The ditch, which was around 5.8m wide, was only excavated to a depth of 0.6m, which was sufficient to determine that it had been cut through an earlier feature, or features on the southern side. The upper ditch fills (308, 309 and 310) contained a few sherds of Roman pottery, together with a single flint flake. There was further evidence of Roman activity immediately to the north of the ditch, in the form of a pit (313), which had been cut through an earlier deposit (307).
- 3.6 The large ditch had cut through an earlier feature, which was initially thought to be another ditch, although limited excavation suggested that this was in fact a series of intersecting pits, of which two were identified with some certainty (316 and 317), while at least one other was probably present within the excavated area, but was not as well defined.
- 3.7 As with the ditch, only limited excavation was undertaken, to a depth of 0.6m. This revealed that the southern edge of pit 317 had a relatively gentle slope, while only a small part of pit 316 lay within the excavated area. There was no obvious difference between the fills of the two pits, which had an upper fill of orange-brown silty clay with frequent stones (314), overlying a less stony silty clay (315).



Fig. 7 The partially excavated ditch, to the right of the upright scale, with the truncated post-pits of the Hindwell palisaded enclosure to the left. Photo CPAT 3241-0012

3.8 The pits extended for around 2m to the south of the ditch, although there was no indication of their original dimensions owing to their truncation by the later feature. Comparison with those excavated in 1995 suggests that the pits could have been around 4m in length and perhaps 1.75m apart, centre to centre. At the level to which the pits were excavated there was no indication of any posts, although the evidence from pit 317 indicates that the large ditch could have removed

the position of the post itself, leaving the post ramp which was thus on the outside of the enclosure, whereas those excavated in 1995 were on the inside.



Fig. 8 View of the large palaeochannels between the Summergil and Hindwell Brooks. Photo CPAT 3241-0020

Conclusions

- 3.9 The recent trial excavations have confirmed that the curving arc of large pits identified through geophysical survey is part of the Hindwell palisaded enclosure and that at the point of excavation the pits have been truncated by a broad ditch of presumed Roman date. The spacing of the pits appears to be similar to those excavated in 1995, where they were around 1.75m apart. The apparent discrepancy between this and the geophysics results, which suggested a wider spacing, could be due to variations within the fills of the pits, perhaps with only some containing charred timbers on this side of the enclosure.
- 3.10 The excavation lay immediately to the west of a large and prominent palaeochannel between the Summergil and Hindwell Brooks (Figs 5 and 8), which is now around 30-40m across and perhaps 1.5m deep. Geophysical survey has now been conducted on either side of the channel and it is clear that the southern arc of the palisaded enclosure extends to the western edge of the channel, but there is no indication of its continuation beyond the channel to the east. Unfortunately, there is currently no evidence with which to date the channel, although it is possible that this represents an earlier course of the Summergil Brook, which later became diverted further to the east. The Hindwell Brook now issues from Hindwell Pool, which was enlarged, perhaps during the late 18th century, as a picturesque feature, but may well have incorporated the site of a natural pond. On current evidence it appears that the palisaded enclosure adopted the channel as its south-eastern boundary, whether it was a contemporary watercourse or not. The possible presence of a natural pond within the enclosure may also be significant.
- 3.11 The incorporation of a watercourse has been suggested too for the Walton palisaded enclosure, which lies around one kilometre to the south. To date cropmarks have only identified the western side of the enclosure, with an arc of individual pits extending to within 25m of the

Riddings Brook (Jones 2010a). Further afield the palisaded enclosure at Meldon Bridge, Peeblesshire may also have utilised a watercourse to form part of its circuit (Burgess 1976; Speak and Burgess 1999).

- 3.12 The presence of two palisaded enclosures in close proximity is perhaps a measure of the significance of this part of the Walton Basin during the Neolithic. The Hindwell palisaded enclosure in particular is a truly remarkable discovery, enclosing an area of 35ha, which makes it by far the largest such site in Britain (Gibson 1997, 23-7). In a European context the only larger, comparable enclosure is the early Neolithic example at Urmitz on the Rhine, near Koblenz (Gibson 1999a, 155-158).
- 3.13 The relationship between the two enclosures remains uncertain. The site at Hindwell has been shown to have been constructed around 2700 BC, on the basis of radiocarbon dates from carbonised oak posts. The Walton enclosure, however, was constructed using uncharred timber; although radiocarbon dates have been produced recently, they cannot be taken as providing a date of construction. Oak charcoal from within a post-pipe excavated in 1998 has produced a date of 2840-2470 cal. BC (SUERC 32384), while hazel charcoal from the fill of a post-hole excavated in 2010 has been dated to 2570-2290 cal. BC (SUERC 32383), both at the 95% confidence level.



Fig. 9 The Hindwell Double-ditched Enclosure and adjacent features, plotted from geophysical survey and cropmark evidence.

4 HINDWELL DOUBLE-DITCHED ENCLOSURE PRN 114489

- 4.1 The 1998 geophysical survey which investigated the palisaded enclosure at Hindwell also included the Hindwell Roman fort, together with an area to the east. Evidence was revealed which indicated the presence of a *vicus* flanking the Roman road, but also within this area was the partial circuit of a double-ditched enclosure, apparently lying in part beneath the fort and *vicus*. Aerial reconnaissance by RCAHMW in 2006 located the eastern side of the enclosure, as well as a short section between the Summergil and Hindwell Brooks. Further geophysical survey in 2010, undertaken by CPAT as part of the Cadw-funded study of Roman *vici*, provided additional evidence for the enclosure (Hankinson 2011).
- 4.2 A small-scale excavation was conducted in February 2011, as part of a programme which also included the investigation of the Hindwell palisaded enclosure (above). A single trench, measuring 6.4m by 1.5m, was excavated by machine across the outer ditch of the enclosure at a point between the two brooks (Fig. 9; Fig. 4, Trench 11).



Fig. 10 Plan and section of the outer ditch of the Hindwell Double-ditched enclosure

- 4.3 The removal of up to 0.45m of topsoil (101) and old ploughsoil (102) uncovered a ditch (103) around 2.7m wide. The upper fill (104), a firm, clay silt which extended beyond the ditch to the west, contained sherds of Roman pottery and a copper alloy coin.
- 4.4 The excavation of the ditch was impeded by flooding to the extent that work had to be abandoned before the ditch had been excavated fully, although sufficient evidence was recovered to provide clues regarding its form and function.
- 4.5 The ditch was excavated to a depth of around 0.8m, although its full depth was not ascertained. The inner, eastern edge sloped steeply, while the outer edge was significantly undercut to thsuch a degree that some voiding was evident beneath the overhanging lip. A narrow slot, around 0.25-0.3m wide, was apparent running along the centre of the ditch, within which there were notable concentrations of charcoal along either side (116 and 117) which were suggestive of charred timbers. The slot itself was generally filled by an orange-brown clay silt (114). The eastern edge of the slot was near-vertical, while the western edge sloped slightly, against which a thin layer of charcoal-rich clay silt (106) had been deposited, and from which a single flint flake was recovered. The slot broadened in the upper part of the ditch, where it was infilled by a 0.3m-thick layer of yellow-brown clay silt (105), sealed by a deposit of yellow-grey stony clay (111).



Fig. 11 The south-facing section of the double-ditched enclosure. Photo CPAT 3241-0035

4.6 The fill of the ditch was markedly different on either side of the slot. The eastern side had been infilled by compacted deposits of very stony material (108 and 110), while the western side was predominantly infilled by deposits of relatively stone-free clay silt (112) and clay (107), sealing a more gravely layer (113). This asymmetric infilling implies the deliberate dumping of material against a physical barrier, supporting the hypothesis that the central slot represents the former position of charred timbers. Charcoal flecking was noted within several of the deposits and samples were recovered from contexts 107, 110 and 112. A concentration of charcoal (109) was also noted in an area around 0.3m across, between the stony layers 110 and 108.



Fig. 12 Detail of the charred timber within ditch 103. Photo CPAT 3241-0044

Conclusions

- 4.7 The combination of aerial photography and geophysical survey has so far identified at least 55% of the double-ditched enclosure, which measures 250m across internally, with ditches 25m to 30m apart. The recent excavations investigated only the outer ditch, revealing it to be around 2.7m wide and at least 0.8m deep, with a steeply sloping inner edge and an outer edge which was significantly undercut. Unexpectedly, however, the excavation has demonstrated that the outer circuit at least was not constructed as a bank and ditch but rather as a palisade trench for vertically set, closely spaced timbers.
- 4.8 A linear 'slot' ran along the centre of the trench at the lowest excavated level. The slot contained concentrations of charcoal which suggested the position of a number of charred timbers around 0.25m across, although the conditions under which the excavation was conducted meant that it was not possible to identify individual timbers with any confidence. What is certain, however, is that the timbers were set vertically and the trench was then deliberately backfilled. The infill was asymmetric with the inner, eastern side consisting of compacted stony material, while the opposite side contained relatively little stone.
- 4.9 The upper fills of the palisade trench appear to represent a weathering cone, resulting from gradual infilling following the decay and/or removal of the timbers. The demarcation between the fills on the inner side of the timbers (108 and 110) and those within the supposed weathering cone (105, 111 and 114) remained consistent across the width of the excavation, presenting a near-vertical face against the position where the timbers would have stood. This consistency suggest that the timbers must have been very closely set, preventing any mixing of the fills from either side.

- 4.10 The evidence clearly signals parallels with the two previously known palisaded enclosures, at Hindwell and Walton, although there are certain differences, not the least of which is that this site has a double-ditched circuit. The timbers also appear to have been considerably smaller, measuring perhaps 0.25m across, rather than the massive 0.8m-diameter posts of the other two enclosures. There is also evidence to suggest that they may have formed a more or less continuous timber palisade that was set within a foundation trench rather than individual postpits. Although the inner ditch has yet to be investigated the form of the monument appears to parallel closely the palisaded enclosure in Wiltshire known as West Kennet I, which was partly excavated between 1987-92. The site, which was originally identified from cropmark evidence, seems to have been consisted of near continuous walls of substantial timbers perhaps standing as much as six metres above ground level. The associated pottery assemblage was almost entirely of Late Neolithic Grooved Ware, while radiocarbon dates from the complex as a whole focused on the period circa 2500-2000 BC, and although it is clear that the complex was a multi-phase one, neither radiocarbon nor pottery allowed a reliable phasing of the site to be constructed (Whittle 1991).
- 4.11 There are further similarities between the recently excavated site at Hindwell and West Kennet I. Both sites are around 250m across and enclosed by a double circuit around 30m apart, and both are also now bisected by watercourses: the Hindwell Brook and the River Kennet, respectively. The enclosure at Hindwell may also have a relationship with the Summergil Brook, for its southern extent as currently known stops just 10m to the north of the brook, with no evidence to suggest a continuation beyond the watercourse. Given the likely movement of the brook over the last three millennia it is possible that the southern side of the enclosure has been lost.
- 4.12 The position of the monument with respect to both the Hindwell and Summergil Brooks also raises an interesting question regarding its relationship with the larger Hindwell palisaded enclosure to the west. As noted previously, the latter site appears to respect a large palaeochannel lying between the two brooks and does not continue to the east, into the area occupied by the double circuit enclosure, the western side of which lies within a broad palaeochannel which now contains the Hindwell Brook (see Fig. 4). Whether either of these channels was active during the Neolithic is perhaps questionable but as landscape features they appear to have exerted some influence over the siting of both monuments.
- 4.13 Although the recent excavations failed to recover any cultural material to indicate a likely construction date it is hoped that radiocarbon dating of material from the charred timbers will allow us to place the monument in its chronological setting with respect to the other major Neolithic monuments within the immediate area. Further work is also clearly called for to investigate the inner circuit which may yet prove to be a second palisade.

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