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The iron-age wetlands of central Somerset

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Iron-age studies based on the Central Somerset Levels have inevitably been dominated by the so-called lake villages of Glastonbury and Meare. These, like many of the other known iron-age sites and finds from the area, were discovered in the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries. Unlike the neolithic and bronze-age periods the Iron Age did not benefit from major new discoveries through the work of the Somerset Levels Project as any iron-age sites within the peat mining area would have been destroyed before the advent of archaeological recording. The potential for iron-age archaeology in the wetlands is undoubtedly high but opportunities to access it are limited and circumstances overall are not conducive to discovery.

Much of the archaeological evidence we do have derives from the Brue valley where the environment varied from extensive salt marshes in the west to areas of raised bog, open water, reed beds and fen carr further east. The landscape was broken by islands of sand and rock which provided locations for settlement. These sites include Brent Knoll, a 1.6ha hillfort located on the highest point of a prominent Lias island surrounded by salt marsh; the marsh would presumably have provided summer grazing for sheep. To the south of Brent Knoll is a middle iron-age site at Alstone, in the parish of West Huntspill, located on a Burtle Bed island (Miles and Miles 1969). Other sites lay within the areas of marsh and swamp. Just north of Brent Knoll at Blue Coat Farm, Lympsham, there is evidence for middle iron-age occupation on the saltmarsh (Broomhead 1991; Webster and Croft 1991). Further east a potentially very important site was discovered at Crannel Farm in 1893. Arthur Bulleid, who only the previous year had begun work at Glastonbury Lake Village (only 1km to the north east), was informed of the discovery of timberwork during construction of a road to the farm. Given the opportunity to investigate he excavated a ten-foot square trench. The results were never published beyond a passing mention and the excavation archive comprises just two photographs of the site (see Figure 12.1 on the following page), two sketches and reference to the fact that a few sherds of pottery and pig bones were found (the finds cannot now be traced). The site is apparently a substantial linear structure formed of horizontal and vertical planks and wattlework, the latter held in place by posts of alder. The structure shows some similarities in woodworking techniques to the “causeway” at Glastonbury Lake Village. This, together with the fact that Bulleid noted the pottery to be similar to that from the lake village, argues for an iron-age date for the Crannel Farm site. The farmer also informed Bulleid that, in the neighbouring field, timber piles periodically appeared above the ground surface which he sawed-off prior to mowing. An iron-age log-boat, now in the Glastonbury Lake Village Museum, had been found very close by in 1884. A priority for the future must be to relocate the sites of the linear structure and piles to obtain samples for dendrochronology and environmental data and then to clarify their function – were they related to settlement on the island now occupied by Crannel Farm or were they wetland sites comparable to the lake villages?

Chance finds from the Levels include a number of log-boats which illustrate the importance of water

Figure 12.1: *A previously unpublished photograph of the 1893 excavation of a probable iron-age site at Crannel Farm.*

transport in the Iron Age. Besides the Crannel Farm find these include the Shapwick canoe retrieved in 1906 and now in the Somerset County Museum, a damaged log-boat utilised in the Glastonbury Lake Village foundations and "Squire Phippen's big ship" which was discovered and subsequently broken up for use as fuel in the first half of the nineteenth century (Stradling 1849, 52).

A number of probable special deposits come from the area, notably the Meare Heath sword-scabbard found in 1928 2km south of Meare Lake Village and the remarkable Polden Hill hoard of terret rings, bridle bits, horse trappings and other objects, discovered around 1800 somewhere near the village of Edington and dating to the first half of the first century AD. Other iron-age objects of note from the area include a fine brooch from Moorlinch, a terret ring from Bawdrip and a neck-ring from Westonzoyland.

Sites on dry land fringing the Levels doubtless had interests in the wetlands but these sites are poorly understood. The most intensive programme of fieldwork on the margin of the Levels has been carried out by the Shapwick Project (Gerrard this volume). Although some evidence for middle and late iron-age occupation was found, the Iron Age proved to be the least visible of all periods from the Mesolithic onwards (Aston and Gerrard 1999). Excavations by Somerset County Council staff on the site of a major complex of Roman buildings found in Shapwick parish as the result of the discovery of a large hoard of Roman denarii provided evidence for iron-

age occupation in the form of Glastonbury ware and a south-western type (Durotrigian) coin but the nature of this occupation is unclear.

At the beginning of this century, as at the beginning of the last, the main focus for iron-age studies falls upon the Glastonbury and Meare "lake villages". The discovery of Glastonbury Lake Village remains one of archaeology's remarkable stories. Arthur Bulleid, fascinated by the Swiss lake villages, became convinced that the wetlands west of his home in Glastonbury could conceal similar sites. He began to search in 1888. Four years later he noticed a field containing low mounds just 2km to the north west of the centre of the town. Examination of mole hills yielded pottery and bone. A request for permission to excavate was granted. With the discovery of waterlogged wood and large numbers artefacts Bulleid very quickly recognised that he had discovered the type of site he was seeking. Between 1892 and 1907 he excavated all 8900m^2 of the site. Until 1898 Bulleid worked full time on the lake village – six months digging and six months on processing finds, conservation and museum displays. There was a gap in excavations from 1898 to 1902 after which he was joined as co-director by Harold St George Gray, curator of the Somerset County Museum. The site was published in two large and sumptuous volumes (Bulleid and Gray 1911; 1917). The result with its multi-specialist and multi-disciplinary approach was a model for its time and a credit to the two excavation directors and their respective organisations, the Glastonbury Antiquarian Society and the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

In 1895 Bulleid's attention was drawn to a second site at Meare some 5km west of Glastonbury Lake Village. Meare also appeared as a series of low mounds in a pasture field and consisted of two distinct areas which became known as Meare Village East and Meare Village West. In 1908, the year after the end of the Glastonbury excavations, Bulleid and Gray cut trial trenches:

> "... the finds were exceedingly numerous, and the one small trench through this mound [Mound 7] yielded more objects than were found in many of the largest Glastonbury dwellings. There were few spadefuls of earth that did not contain something of archaeological value. Fragments of pottery and bones of animals alone filled several barrows" (Bulleid and Gray 1908, 3).

A programme of excavations followed from 1910 until 1956 (1910–1932 at Meare West and 1933–1956 at Meare East), probably the longest running site-based fieldwork ever undertaken in this country. There were years in which excavations were suspended, for example during the two world wars and a few occasions when heavy rain resulted in the cancellation or curtailment of a season's work, but in total there were 33 seasons of excavation. The intention was undoubtedly total excavation of both sites but time and resources did not allow this. Progress with the excavations slowed down after the Second World War as severely-limited funding permitted only small-scale fieldwork and, at times, the ageing Gray and his wife were obliged to undertake some of the heavy labouring work themselves. Bulleid did not live to see the final seasons of excavation, he died in 1951. Gray died before publication of the third and final volume of the Meare Village West excavation reports which appeared in 1966. Meare Village East remained unpublished other than as a series of interim notes until brought to a conclusion by John Coles and the Somerset Levels Project (Coles 1987).

Further work was carried out at Glastonbury, Meare East and West by Michael Avery in the 1960s and the Somerset Levels Project in the late 1970s and 1980s. Avery's work has to date gone largely unpublished whilst the latter's added significantly to knowledge of the sites and their environments.

The Glastonbury and Meare sites are apparently unique and remain of considerable importance. The remarkable organic remains, which included some of the first archaeologically recognised iron-age buildings, and the wealth of artefacts meant that Glastonbury, in particular, was long influential in interpretations of the Iron Age of southern Britain. By the 1960s, however, it was apparent that the site was actually poorly understood. The excavation reports contained little in the way of interpretation and failed to answer the kinds of questions by then being asked of archaeological evidence. Attempts were made to re-examine Glastonbury Lake Village by E K Tratman (1970) and D L Clarke (1972) but a recent evaluation of these papers has revealed many flaws in their use of the evidence (Coles and Minnitt 1995, 180–190).

Figure 12.2: *Large wooden objects such as this "knobbed pile" were re-buried on the site of Glastonbury Lake Village in an attempt to preserve them for the future.*

Unlike Tratman and Clarke, Coles and Minnitt examined, in detail, all the surviving records – the published volumes, notebooks, finds catalogues, correspondence, photographs, reports from original specialists, etc. New specialist reports were commissioned to study aspects felt to be of particular value to the reassessment – the environmental setting of the site and certain categories of artefacts including the metalworking evidence, human remains, stone, glass and worked bone and antler. Whilst many problems were encountered the quality of the evidence was high for the period of the excavations and enabled the identification of a site history based upon four phases and the elucidation of social and economic activity. As this work is already published elsewhere (Coles and Minnitt 1995) the details will not be elaborated on. It should be stressed, however, that the analysis was not comprehensive, there remains much scope for further detailed studies, particularly of the artefacts.

The site of Glastonbury Lake Village also retains highly important archaeological deposits. Although ostensibly totally excavated not all material was removed. Areas of timber foundation were left *in situ*, providing a future opportunity for obtaining samples for dendrochronology and therefore the possibility of refining the dating of the site which at present is based upon artefact typologies. The waterlogged conditions doubtless preserve an enormous amount of environmental evidence. Certain structural features, such as a decorated clay hearth or table, were left unexcavated thereby preserving both them and the deposits below. Little excavation took place beyond the immediate vicinity of the outside of the palisade, the environs of the site are of undoubted archaeological importance. Some of the larger wooden artefacts were re-buried on site in an attempt to preserve them at a time when conservation techniques were unreliable (Figure 12.2). These objects remain buried, the success of this approach to preservation has yet to be tested by re-excavation.

Whilst there is every reason to believe that the careful management of Glastonbury Lake Village by its owners, the Glastonbury Antiquarian Society, ensures that conditions are reasonably stable with little threat of degradation to the remaining archaeology, the same is not true for Meare. Excavations by the Somerset Levels Project in the 1970s and 1980s at both Meare West and East clearly demonstrated the organic evidence to be suffering the destructive effects of a lowered water table. There was a marked contrast with the wet conditions experienced by Bulleid and Gray and organic remains, in particular the wood and environmental evidence, were found to be undergoing serious degradation. The situation was further exacerbated by the archaeologically damaging activity of worms, insects and moles, the drier conditions had, for the first time, given them access to the iron-age levels. Continued lack of a management regime for the sites inevitably means that there has been further deterioration over the past fifteen years (Figure 12.3 on the facing page). Scheduling provides an inadequate means of protecting these nationally important sites. Unless action is taken Meare East and West face the inevitable prospect of becoming dryland sites with the consequential loss without record of an enormous amount of archaeological data. The only options apparent to this writer are the introduction of controls for the management of water levels or the total excavation of both Meare sites.

It is important that a review be undertaken of the vast amount of evidence already accumulated from

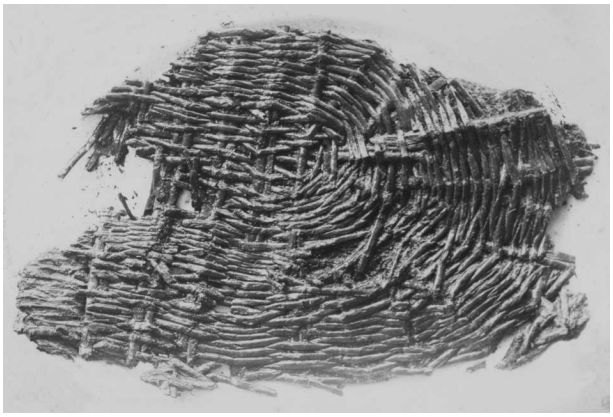

Figure 12.3: *Basketwork found in Meare Village West Mound 34. Unexcavated organic remains at Meare are suffering degradation and ultimate loss due to the long-term drying out of the sites.*

Meare together with the use of non-invasive techniques of investigation on the sites themselves in order to better understand them, their development, relationship, structures, on-site activities and place within the wider world. Some progress has been made. One issue of importance for both the understanding and preservation of the sites is the need for more specific data on their extent and internal arrangements. Bulleid and Gray published figures showing the presumed extent of the two sites based upon mounds visible in the fields, these figures have formed the basis of all subsequent site plans (eg Bulleid and Gray 1948,2). These mounds varied in height from over 4 feet to just a few inches and represent locations where clay had been deposited for use as floors, the higher the mound the greater the number of superimposed layers of clay. Individual visible mounds were plotted at Meare East (Coles 1987, 18) but not at Meare West, where we have only plots for those areas which were excavated. Excavations in 1979 also showed that not all deposited clay was visible as mounds on the ground surface (Orme *et al.* 1981). There was therefore uncertainty as to whether the full extent of both sites was known and whether the Meare East mound plots represented the full picture. In 1996 and 1997 Geophysical Surveys of Bradford were commissioned to carry out a full geophysical survey of the both sites. The results, primarily derived from resistivity, proved variable. Meare West, probably because the site has suffered more extensively from the various programmes of fieldwork, produced only general background readings. Whilst lacking detail the results do coincide reasonably closely with the presumed area of archaeological activity. The results for Meare East were more positive. Again the indications were that occupation coincided quite closely with the site limits drawn by the early excavators but, importantly, discrete areas of high resistance were identified within the site which probably represent clay "floors". Some coincided with known mounds others, particularly in the western half of the site, did not and indicate that the apparent gaps in the visual plot do not reflect open or unused space. Occupation/activity would seem to have been more intense than previously thought. Support for some of the resistivity survey results together with the identification of other possible areas of activity was provided by a subsequent survey by the University of Hull Centre for Wetland Archaeology using a global positioning system designed to detect subtle topographical changes. These results will be published elsewhere.

Following these surveys some coring and environmental work was carried out to the north of Meare East, beyond the Scheduled area, by both the Centre for Wetland Archaeology and Gerard Aalbersberg, then a research student at the University of Exeter. Important outcomes of this work include the fact that occupation-related debris spread at least 30m north of the presumed limit of the site towards an area of open water. In 1908 Bulleid and Gray found a similar situation when they cut trenches over 15m in length to the north and south of Meare West in search of a non-existent palisade. The environs of the two sites therefore contain important archaeological evidence and must be included in any future management, monitoring or excavation plans. Gerard Aalbersberg's work was also important in helping clarify the local environmental conditions at the time of the establishment of the sites. Earlier work had suggested that the sites were constructed upon the surface of a raised bog, it now appears that the area was fen carr.

The enormous quantity of artefacts from Meare has undergone many studies over the past twenty years. Some were part of the work of the Somerset Levels Project, others were part of individual research, including, for example, the important work by Julian Henderson which identified Meare as a rare example of an iron-age glass working site specialising in bead production. The site archive retains

a huge potential for further research. Examples of recent and on-going work include a pilot study of lipids extracted from pottery which has recently been carried out by Stephanie Dodd of the School of Chemistry, University of Bristol, to establish the potential of such a line of research for the study of pottery usage. Whilst in general the preservation of lipids was poor there were useful outcomes. Higher plants and ruminant and dairy fats were identified and some of the vessels were demonstrated to have been used for cooking or processing over a fire. One Glastonbury ware bowl was shown to have been used for processing beeswax. Dr Roger Doonan of the School of Conservation Sciences, Bournemouth University, is currently working on the metallurgical evidence from Meare. This includes both copper alloy casting and iron smithing. Whilst the quantity of evidence is relatively modest preliminary results promise to shed important light on the organisation of metal working activities. Other artefact studies are planned for the future.

The central Somerset Levels in all probability conceal much important evidence for iron-age activity. It, however, like the Meare sites is probably a dwindling resource suffering the irreversible effects of drying out. Protection of the unknown is obviously a very difficult issue, failure to respond to the relentless loss of the known is inexcusable.