

Going underground – digging for history in Dorset

Event	Archaeology Webinars
Title	Neolithic & Bronze Age: Webinar 1
Date	8 June 2021
Venue	Virtual – via Webex

Q&A Chair	Stuart Fox - Consultant
Presenters	John Boothroyd – Oxford Archaeology Amanda Chadburn – Historic England Steve Wallis - Dorset County Archaeologist, Dorset Council Tom Munro, Dorset AONB Partnership Paul Hamnet – Lead Project Manager, National Grid Dorset VIP

National Grid launched the first of a series of webinars on 8 June 2021, to showcase the fantastic wealth of archaeological findings uncovered in the 20 months since work began on the Dorset Visual Impact Provision (VIP) project in 2018.

This webinar, focused on the Neolithic and Bronze Age, is led by National Grid's Lead Project Manager, Paul Hamnett and John Boothroyd of Oxford Archaeology.

This document provides a summary of the questions that were asked during the event and additional questions that were submitted.

The Q&A summary reflects National Grid's thinking at a moment in time (8 June 2021). All information provided is therefore subject to change.

SESSION 1

Q. What installation material is used for the cables and what do you expect its lifetime to be?

A. The cable installation is manufactured from a material called Cross-linked polyethylene (XLPE) which is a very stiff, slightly insulative form of polythene that you make from polythene bags. That is the material that we use for the insulation. The design life of the cables is a minimum of forty years but they are expected to last much longer. They are placed in ducts which are buried in cement bound sand as seen on some of the photos. This helps to protect them from the wear and tear on the ground. We expect the cables to be in the ground for many, many decades and be relatively low maintenance compared to some of the overhead lines which is another benefit of underground cables.

Q. On the back of these findings from the project, would you have done anything differently?

From an Oxford Archaeology perspective, we don't believe that we would do anything differently.

One of the main things was that despite taking an informed approach – carrying out a geophysical survey and undertaking a trial and trench evaluation to gain that greater understanding of what

remains from present and what could be excavated – we far exceeded our own expectations. Due to this, we were on site for a lot longer than expected.

While the project ran smoothly and everyone worked really well together, had we done a bit more pre-investigation work we might have been slightly better informed. However, we're proud of the work we've done, and wouldn't change the way the field work was carried out. The methodology was implemented and hopefully Steve (Wallis) and Historic England support the approach we took.

Q. Can you identify the source location of the schist of the long barrow axe head?

A. We have not attempted to identify the location yet as it was one of our most recently recovered finds from the site. We suspect it has come from the South West, in the direction of Cornwall. We've had similar findings with some green stone axe heads which we believe come from Cornwall.

Q. How do you determine a barrow exists if there is no evidence at the surface due to farming?

A. In this instance, the geophysical survey from our trial trenching highlighted and identified ring ditches. The material recovered from them is characteristically Bronze Age which would indicate they are the remains of barrows. This is supported by the identification of burials. Only four of the ten barrows we excavated were identified by the geophysics.

One of the important takeaways from this and the Ridgeway Project is that we often don't know if barrows exist until schemes like this take place, and they are exposed and recorded. This is why it is important we are as well informed as we can be prior to starting excavation methodologies, and why in this instance, the entire route of the scheme was subject to some kind of archaeological monitoring. Several of the barrows were identified in areas that weren't considered for advance excavation but were targeted for other forms of mitigations and were then identified and excavated.

Q. Regarding the skeleton with the missing vertebral column, is the missing column known in other burials of this age? The skeleton looks very complete and intact apart from the vertebral column – is there any way to tell if this was removed at the time of death or would it have been necessary to wait until the body decomposed?

A. To answer your first question, we don't know if there are examples of this in other burials of this age. As to whether the bone was removed, the skeleton has been well preserved which would suggest this. Due to the burial being articulated so the legs are in the crouch position and the ribs being in place, it will be difficult to determine whether it was removed at the time of death or post death. We could look for marks on other aspects of the variables that remain but we do not expect that will reveal anything. Our inclination is that the vertebral bone was removed post death as it would be extremely difficult to do and we're not sure how this would have been carried out. However, it is unlikely that we will ever know as we don't think the evidence will survive in the archaeological record.

Q. With such strong geophysics results, was there discussion about limiting the trial trenching knowing that some areas would go to advance excavation anyway? Essentially, is there a value to high quality trenching when you have such good geophysics or should you limit it to blank areas?

A. Geophysics gives you the potential there is something there, but it doesn't tell you what it is without carrying out the trenching on those features. Yes, there are ring ditches, but these could relate to Iron

Age roundhouses or they could relate to the Bronze Age. Geophysics is not very good at detecting discrete features, for example, burials found within barrows. The two complement each other and it is important they're carried out together. The idea is to get as much information as possible so confirming the results of the geophysics is important. Similarly, it works the other way, by trenching in areas where geophysics suggests there are no archaeological features. You need both to supplement and gather as much information as possible to get an informed approach, so you know what you are dealing with. If you understand it is a barrow rather than a ring ditch, it is going to change your expectations and your methodology of approach for further excavation, what you expect to learn and what you can contribute to archaeological knowledge.

Q. What is the significance of the buried cow and has this been seen before?

A. There is an excellent site in Northampton where there is a barrow with hundreds of cow skulls in but no cow bodies. So yes, this idea of ritually burying things with barrows has been seen before. It is interesting to me that we have a cow in the barrow ditch and not the skull itself. It suggests the skull might have been in the barrow which has been lost or they have just discarded the cow in the ditch. The site in Northampton was also interesting because the cows were found to have been brought in from far and wide and weren't just local. This is quite important and a reflection of how significant these monuments are in the landscape.

Q. Will there be any visitor sites to see some of the items in the future?

A. The finds will be publicly accessible. Before we can share these with members of the public, our team of experts together with Historic England and the County Archaeologist have to thoroughly analyse and record everything we discover. The landowners will then be asked to agree to releasing the finds and donate them to the Dorset County Museum. We've been working with the museum throughout the project and it is prepared to host these finds.

It will take several years for us to analyse them all, and then they will be able to go on public display.

There was an intention to have an open day but unfortunately due to COVID we weren't able to deliver everything we would have liked to. Hopefully these webinars provide a bit of insight and we can follow up in the future with museum displays and other events.

Q. Is there any evidence of groups of houses in the area or was it mainly used for burials and farming?

A. This is one of the big questions. There is a lot of activity going on around the site we have investigated, but we have not found many structures indicating settlement. There is the Bronze Age settlement site but that is largely a round house, and the wider landscape activity of settlement from the Bronze Age is poor. There is settlement activity in Poundbury in Dorchester.

We often think of barrows being on hilltops when many are actually on hillsides which is what you will see from lower down. If you consider where the barrow is sited, it is often only visible from one side of the ridgeway and on one particular valley. This is probably telling that the family of the person who is buried there are likely to have been living in that valley. The barrows on the Weymouth side are visible for a long distance and we suspect in those cases, this is where families are living miles away but still want to see their family member and be able to point out the individual barrow to their families.

Q. How long do you anticipate the PX programme will take?

A. It will be done in two stages. We will do an initial assessment where we look at all the finds and all the material and decide what the key research questions are. We anticipate that process will take year and a half.

The following phase is where we produce the book. We are hoping to produce something similar to the two from the relief road. This is expected to take another three years. It will depend what comes out of the first assessment but we are looking at three to five years as a ballpark figure to get the final reports out. As the process goes on we will be answering more and more of the questions that the field workers raise. Hopefully we can do something to share this with you via National Grid's website.