

## Going underground – digging for history in Dorset

<b>Event</b>	Archaeology Webinars
<b>Title</b>	Roman Era: Webinar 2
<b>Date</b>	15 June 2021
<b>Venue</b>	Virtual – via Webex

<b>Q&amp;A Chair</b>	Stuart Fox - Consultant
<b>Presenters</b>	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 Roman Era, is led by National Grid's Lead Project Manager, Paul Hammett 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 (15 June 2021). All information provided is therefore subject to change.

### SESSION 2

**Q. Will any of the excavations be left open for the public to come and see or will it all be covered again?**

**A.** The programme to excavate and install the cables within the timeframe we have means that the archaeology excavations that we do will be backfilled and replaced with the construction scheme. We have spent nine months of this project carefully reviewing the archaeological landscape, and, as we have said, we hope to work with landowners and the museum to make these finds accessible to the public. Additionally, our reporting will make all our discoveries widely available, ultimately through the Dorset County Museum.

**Q. How deep were the excavations before you started finding artifacts?**

**A.** We do a strip of the top-soil with the archaeologists in attendance. As the ground is unearthed, if there is evidence of something, we will excavate to a depth on 1.5m - the typical depth of a cable trench.

**Q. Is the access to the Nine Stones at Winterbourne Abbas still closed by the construction road?**

**A.** Footpath access to The Nine Stones is currently suspended for the safety of our team and the wider community. Please keep an eye on our website [dorset.nationalgrid.co.uk](http://dorset.nationalgrid.co.uk) for updates as the

project progresses. We expect to complete the project in 2022, at which point the landowner has the option to re-open footpath in consultation with English Heritage which manages the Nine Stones site.

**Q. How many participants are there in the webinar?**

**A.** Today we've been joined by around 150 participants.

**Q. A question from Chris Baines, Chair of our national Stakeholder Advisory Group. How can we communicate this collaborative process between National Grid and the archaeologists to other large corporate organisations?**

**A.** There are a couple of ways to do this. We have already started speak to both local and national media like the BBC to promote the work that we have done, which helps take the story to a wider audience.

On an industry level, National Grid is an active member of the Major Projects Association, and they invite guest speakers to talk about major schemes around the country. At the moment we are doing a session about the River Humber project. There may be an opportunity there for the collaboration to be shared within the construction industry.

We also think these webinars are helping to tell this good story. John and Paul spoke at a recent webinar hosted by Dorset County Archaeologists, and it seems that some of those who have joined us today heard about it via that other webinar. We are seeing powerful word of mouth engagement here.

Amongst professional communities, whether that is construction industry or the archaeological community, we are seeing quite a lot of work going on these sorts of infrastructure-led developments, for example with HS2. The way that archaeologists are talking to each other and considering best practice from what worked, what didn't and how are we doing the valuation, how we are choosing routes for example, all of these things are shared professionally. This means that best practice can be used, as it was for this project, including the work done on this project to plan the route, for example.

**Q. What was the circular sunbeam type structure in one of the early photographs?**

**A.** That the excavation of the barrow at the very beginning. It looks like a sunbeam but it was actually the trenches and the barrow ditch. There is some excellent discussion about that in last week's webinar which is available on the National Grid website.

**Q. Would the walls to the buildings have been timber on top of stone?**

**A.** There is no definitive evidence but our inclination is to say yes there most probably were. We do have stone rubble but there isn't the quantity of materials to suggest these walls were of any height. However, we can't rule out that the stones were later removed by ploughing or theft. Our impression would be that there were stone foundations, timber walls and possibly then thatched roofs.

**Q. Could the corn dryers alternatively have been malt houses?**

**A.** Absolutely. We have suggested they are corn drying ovens, but we will get a better idea once we have processed the environmental material from them.

However, it is worth noting that without the construction scheme, none of this landscape would have been investigated.

**Q. Did you get enough coins to do a time period distribution?**

**A.** We can't yet confirm, although we suspect that this is something we may be able to do. We have found quite a few coins, but they do tend to be of a mid/late date. This would make getting a full distribution quite difficult. It is something we'll look at.

**Q. Can you say a little about the size of the mill stones? Do you yet have any idea of the source of the stone?**

**A.** We can't confirm the source of the stone as we've not yet looked at that detail.

Size-wise, some of these stones are huge. There are lots of the smaller simpler stones which are around 50cm in diameter. However, we have fragments of others nearer a meter in diameter.

**Q. Given the usual ground structure of the Iron Age buildings and the fairly clear rectangular shape of the six large post-holes within, does this demonstrate a physical transition in building styles from late iron age to Roman within a contiguous population?**

**A.** That was exactly our interpretation. Traditionally, we assume these circular structures are going to be Iron Age. However, it is interesting to go from a circular stone structure to a wooden post built structure. This means we will be trying to use carbon dating for the wooden post holes to try and pin down a date.

Certainly the rest of the evidence supports the idea that the settlement started in the late Iron Age/ early Roman era, and continues in use throughout the Roman period.

**Q. Does the cross section along the cable ditch indicate level of settlement in different periods?**

**A.** No because the landscape is very much a rural landscape, which means that the archaeological remains are all exposed at the point of ploughing. Farming cuts the underlying geological horizon. While the landscape does undulate, there is no build-up of archaeological deposits. There are some deposits in the valley, which had the potential to preserve archaeological remains either underneath them or within them. We have reviewed these extensively during the evaluation but they appeared to be sterile and accumulated quite early in the archaeological process.

**Q. Are the burials within the building likely to be earlier in date than the structure? Do you have an indication as to the difference in date? What came first, the burials or the buildings surrounding them?**

**A.** Currently, we don't have this detail. It seems too much of a coincidence that these burials are enclosed within the walls themselves. However, going back to the previous comments about round Iron Age and rectangular being Roman, the style of the burials suggests that there might be some reworking and the walls could be later but deliberately enclosing the cemetery. We won't know until

we have started doing scientific dating and have fully analysed the pottery that has come from the remains.

**Q. Do you think these structures are associated with the wider system of agricultural community or do they seem isolated?**

**A.** We strongly suspect they will be associated with the wider community. It is an incredibly exposed landscape and we suspect they are reducing grain-delivery time to the wider network, feeding settlements like Dorchester. We know from excavations along the Weymouth Relief Road that it is all an interconnected agricultural landscape. These particular settlements are isolated in that this is not a continuous landscape, but each settlement is connected.

**Q. Was any pottery found possibly indicating higher status of operation?**

**A.** We did have a few items including a very nicely decorated piece which had some figures on it. Most of the pottery is standard domestic use, but there were a few pieces of higher status pottery.

**Q. How do you think these rural settlements related to the capital of Dorchester?**

**A.** We imagine they tie into Dorchester itself. Dorchester is a huge site but there are other villas in the area, there is also one east of Weymouth. These are all producing grain and goods to survive and feed into these bigger towns, either to sell or to supply. The Roman roads show that this landscape is home to a connected network.

**Q. Were the burials of people who lived on the settlements? Was there any obvious difference in the status of the burial?**

**A.** There is no obvious variation in status apart from the tradition going from the fixed burials with pots to the burial without burial goods. This is more of a change in burial practice rather than a reflection of status.

**Q. Were the buildings for both animals and people to live in?**

**A.** There is some indication that these buildings are open on one side. It is possible that they are all enclosed, but we think it is more likely that some of the buildings are actually deliberately open on the southern side. This means that they are more likely to be either storage or animal enclosures. There is no direct evidence of animals, and the absence of floor surfaces means there is no compression or trampled surfaces to give us a clue.

There is some animal bone in the domestic rubbish pits, and as you'd think they wouldn't be going too far to get their food, the likelihood is that there were animals within the site. However, the lack of enclosure ditches is quite interesting in terms of stock control and management. In short, we're not sure.

**Q. Are the Dorset team planning to extend their investigations to those features that extend beyond the allowed perimeter?**

**A.** There are no immediate plans to continue these excavations. This project, along with the Weymouth Relief Road, have been a great opportunity to explore the landscape. As we said last

week, originally, we thought the Weymouth Relief Road was going to be the only slice through this landscape. We have been very lucky to have this second excavation opportunity provided by the National Grid VIP project which has added to the information we have. One of the great things we hope will come from this analysis is the possibility of comparing two slices (VIP project, and Weymouth Relief Road) and from that we will have a really good understanding of the ridgeway which will save us having to go and dig it all up.

**Q. Any idea why some of the baby skeletons were found in what might be a midden? Are they male or female or both?**

**A.** It is incredibly hard to sex the infant burials as there aren't the traits within the bone assembly to be able to do that. Why they are in the midden is quite interesting actually. In Roman culture there is a lack of respect for infant burials and they are quite often just discarded. For want of a better way of putting it, in this period you did not have any worth until you got to a certain age.

It is also not uncommon to see burials buried under the floor of Roman buildings. So while it is possible these burials could be in the midden, it is also possible that they are insertions from when the building was in use.

**Q. What was your favourite find from your own excavation?**

**A.** Most enjoyable was the surprise; we knew there was Roman activity, but to uncover these buildings was quite unexpected. It gives testament to why they do these things, and so the breadth of information we gain will be really interesting.

**Q. Was the circular structure with huge post holes actually circular or apsidal? We've seen something similar at Portesham.**

**A.** Quite possibly, the arch of stone survived to the north of the post-holes, but nothing continued to the south. This maybe because it was never there in the first place or, as we saw with other structures, this southern, downslope side has been truncated away. As we don't have the full plan of the structure it's hard to confirm its original form but if we can refine the dating we maybe able have a better guess.

**Q. What Roman remains (if any) were found on the rest of the VIP scheme?**

**A.** Interestingly, very little. The Roman remains were all identified to the south of the Ridgeway. Beyond the site discussed in the webinar (Area E), we had a fully heavily truncated land management ditches in at the very southern end of the scheme.