Palaeoecology Research Services

Technical report: biological remains from an Iron Age farmstead at Lathom, West

Lancashire (site code: DFL57)

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by

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Summary

Excavations have been undertaken by Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit at Lathom, West Lancashire, each year since 1999. These have revealed the earliest known (Iron Age) farmstead site in Lancashire. Two batches of material, comprising sediment samples and 'spot' samples of charcoal, recovered from these excavations were submitted for analysis of their bioarchaeological potential and suitability for dating via radiocarbon assay.

Almost all the samples yielded at least a trace of wood charcoal, generally in small fragments. It was often very brittle and crumbly and identification was difficult. Other dark coloured materials present in the samples were soil-dwelling fungus sclerotia, coal and cinder, and in two cases what had been thought to be charcoal proved to be somewhat 'coal-like' material which may be charred peat. With the exception of one sample all of the second batch of charcoal 'spot' samples consisted of or contained wood charcoal though, as previously, the material was often very brittle and crumbly, and identification was again difficult. In particular, many of the fragments had a glassy, fused ('vitrified') appearance and impregnation by iron compounds was common. The site was unusual in producing no charred remains of cereals of weed seeds, not even at very low concentrations. The remains call for no further comment other than to point out that the conifer wood could be unusual in the context of a late prehistoric site but that the presence of some partly-charred fragments in one sample might call its antiquity into doubt.

Although there is at least some material in most deposits from which a radiocarbon date could be obtained, the charcoal might well not provide a close enough date to be useful. Fragments from ?blackthorn roundwood stems in Sample 85 (Context 103) were the only remains recorded that could provide a reliable radiocarbon date. The lack of material that might provide reasonably close radiocarbon dating was particularly disappointing for the undated pit alignment fills.

KEYWORDS: LATHOM; WEST LANCASHIRE; TECHNICAL REPORT; IRON AGE; ROMANO-BRITISH; FARMSTEAD; CHARRED PLANT REMAINS; CHARCOAL

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Technical report: biological remains from an Iron Age farmstead at Lathom, West Lancashire (site code: DFL57)

Introduction

Excavations have been undertaken by Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit at Lathom, West Lancashire, each year since 1999. These have revealed the earliest known (Iron Age) farmstead site in Lancashire.

The main archaeological features of the site are post-holes representing five Iron Age/Romano-British roundhouses. Current evidence suggests that these represent the rebuilding of the farmhouse at slightly different locations between 200 BC and 150 AD (approximately). Other features of the site include those of associated structures (two small square granary buildings) and storage and refuse pits. A Roman trackway runs through the western edge of the settlement (with two others a little further, 80 m, west), and there are three series of undated alignment pits.

The material from Lathom consisted of a 'spot' samples for charcoal identification and a group of samples for which between 1 and 35 kg of sediment was sieved to 300 microns ('SPOT'/'GBA'/'BS' samples *sensu* Dobney *et al.* 1992), the light fraction being separated as a 'washover'. A second group of charcoal samples was submitted separately; for species identification and to assess their suitability for dating by radiocarbon assay.

The first material was submitted to Palaeoecology Research Services Ltd (PRS), County Durham, for analysis in December 2003, with the second group of charcoal samples arriving in April 2004. An initial informal assessment (of the first batch of material) was completed by 27 February 2004 and, on the basis of the findings, some additional material processed and recorded.

This report presents the results of both stages of the investigation.

Methods

Sediment samples

The lithologies of the samples were recorded, using a standard *pro forma*, and, for those selected, subsamples were processed, broadly following the procedures of Kenward *et al.* (1980), for the recovery of biological remains. Some of the samples were processed in their entirety (notably those from the pit alignments for which the possibility of recovering dateable material was of particular interest) and in some cases multiple samples from the same context were processed to maximise the chances of recovering useful remains.

In all cases, the material was initially examined wet. Plant remains and the general nature of the flots, the washover and the wet residue were recorded briefly by 'scanning', identifiable taxa and other components from those samples re-examined by AH being listed directly to a PC using *Paradox* software. The washovers re-examined by AH were also dried prior to examination using incident light microscopy.

Charcoal 'spot' samples

The material was examined under the binocular microscope and wood species identifications made for the charcoal if possible. The broken surfaces of charcoal fragments were used where feasible.

Results

Almost all the samples yielded at least a trace of wood charcoal, generally in small fragments (mostly less than 10 mm). It was often very brittle and crumbly identification was difficult. The other dark coloured material present in these samples proved to be Cenococcum (soil-dwelling fungus) sclerotia (resting bodies), coal and cinder, and in two cases what had been thought to be charcoal proved to be somewhat 'coal-like material' which may be charred peat. A few samples yielded some part-charred bark which is thought to be recent, as were (more clearly) the rootlets and a few weed seeds preserved by anoxic waterlogging which were present in several samples.

With the exception of one sample (consisting of a fragment of coal and some small clasts of undisaggregated dark grey sediment) all of the second batch of samples consisted of or contained wood charcoal though, as previously, the material was often very brittle and crumbly, and identification was difficult. In particular, many of the fragments had a glassy, fused ('vitrified') appearance and impregnation by iron compounds was common.

The results for all of the samples examined are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. Subsamples processed during the assessment stage are designated '/T' and those processed for the technical report '/T2'.

Discussion

These deposits offer no potential for further examination through the samples already investigated and it seems unlikely that others not so far processed will be productive. Although there is at least some material in most deposits from which a radiocarbon date could be obtained (in virtually all cases via AMS rather than a conventional assay), the charcoal might well not provide a close enough date to be useful if, as seems likely, it

may mostly come from large stems or trunks. If very broad dating were required, however, the samples marked '+' in Table 1 could provide suitable material. The lack of material that might provide reasonably close radiocarbon dating was particularly disappointing for the undated pit alignment fills.

A single sample from the second batch of material (Table 2) yielded material suitable for dating. Fragments from roundwood stems up to about 25 to 30 mm in diameter and identified as *Prunus* (perhaps most likely to be blackthorn, *P spinosa* L.) were observed in Sample 85 from Context 103. The remaining material was largely oak (where identifiable) and is probably only worth dating if, as noted previously, the possibility of a date rather older than that of the deposit in which the charcoal was found is acceptable.

The site was unusual in producing no charred remains of cereals or weed seeds, not even at very low concentrations. Given that charcoal fragments have survived within many of the deposits, it seems most likely that grains and weed seeds were never present within the deposits rtaher than that they have been lost to taphonomic processes.

The plant material calls for no further comment other than to point out that the conifer wood could be unusual in the context of a late prehistoric site but that the presence of some partly-charred fragments in one sample might call its antiquity into doubt.

Archive

All material is currently stored by Palaeoecology Research Services (Unit 8, Dabble Duck Industrial Estate, Shildon, County Durham).

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References

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Table 1. Notes on charred plant material from excavations at Lathom (site code DFL57) in context number order. All of the samples were initially recorded by JC those re-examined by AH are shown with the context and sample number in bold face. Spot samples are marked *. Samples marked '+' would provide some material suitable for dating, at least by AMS, though with the caveat that the date obtained might be 'rather too old' if the charcoal was from large stems or trunk wood. Key to charcoal identifications: ?A—cf. Alnus (?alder); C—Corylus (hazel); Co—Coniferae; I—indet.; Q—Quercus (oak); S/P—Salix/Populus (willow/poplar/aspen). The figure following the letter gives the large dimension of any fragment (in millimetres). None of the sediment samples yielded enough charcoal to score more than '1' on a four-point semi-quantitative scale of abundance (a score of '2' would signify the presence of charcoal at a volume of more than 1% of the original sample size).

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt	Approx. vol. of	Charcoal	Other material and notes
61	Post-hole, internal ring of roundhouse 1	65	Moist, light grey-brown to mid to dark grey-brown, slightly silty sand, with charcoal and stones (6 to 60 mm) present.	(kg) 3	washover (ml)	I (2)	Roughly equal parts cinder, sand and fine charcoal, with a little uncharred modern plant detritus.
156	Pit 11, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	124	Dry, indurated lumps of mostly light grey ash. Some patches of light to mid brown, in layers or other discrete patches (possibly baked clay or ?pot).	3	~3	-	A few modern uncharred and unidentified seeds. Modern invertebrate remains including a staphylinid elytron, a whole newly emerged 13-spot ladybird and a centipede.
206	Fill in posthole 1, 4- poster outside roundhouse 1	127*	Charcoal spot sample.	0.08	-	Q (5)	Some quite large rounded lumps (to 25 mm) of 'charcoal' which on breaking up proved to be indurated and somewhat iron oxide impregnated charred organic material, perhaps peat, almost becoming shiny and 'vitrified' in places.
		136/137	Moist, mid to dark greybrown, ?ashy, sandy silt. Stones (60+ mm) present.	4.5	40	I (8)	Mostly fine cinder (occasionally to 25 mm) and charcoal, with some tiny lumps of undiaggregated sediment (to 1 mm), traces of uncharred modern plant tissue and a few sand grains.
208	Post-hole 2, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	132	Moist, mid to dark grey- brown, slightly silty sand, with a little charred material present.	3	15	I (6)	Approximately one third sand, the rest being charcoal and ?cinder (2), with a little uncharred modern plant detritus.
211	Post-hole 3, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	142	Moist, dark grey-brown, slightly clay sandy silt, with a trace of ?charcoal present.	-	-	-	Not processed.

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt (kg)	Approx. vol. of washover (ml)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
217	Fill in post-hole 2, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	126*+	Charcoal spot sample.	0.145	-	?A (10) S/P (10)	Charcoal very brittle and showing some iron oxide staining. One flint fragment to 15 mm.
		131	Moist, mid to dark grey- brown, slightly silty sand, with a little charcoal.	3	20	I (10)	Mostly of charcoal and cinder (to 15 mm), with a little sand and modern plant tissue fragments and a few modern seeds.
220	Pit 3, pit group W of roundhouse 1	148	Moist, dark brown sand.	3	15	I (3)	Small lumps of undisaggregated sediment (2), cinder (2), charcoal and traces of ?slag. Modern plant remains were present in the form of fragments of tissue and seedlings and numerous seeds.
227	Fill in post-hole 2, 4-poster outside	130*	Charcoal spot sample.	0.06	-	I (3)	Fragments of indurated but brittle charred ?peat to 30 mm (as in Sample 127).
	roundhouse 1	133	Moist, light grey-brown, ?humic sand.	3	5	I (2)	Mostly of fine charcoal, cinder (2) and sand grains, with an occasional tiny fragment of coal. Modern algae growing.
231	Post-hole 2, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	140	Moist, light to mid grey- brown, sand, with some darker ?humic or charred patches.	3	10	I (2)	Roughly half sand grains and half fine charcoal with a little cinder. Uncharred plant detritus and soil-dwelling fungus (<i>Cenococcum</i>) sclerotia (resting bodies) were both almost certainly of modern origin.
232	Post-hole 1, 4-poster outside roundhouse 1	138	Moist, mid grey-brown, slightly silty sand, flecked with light grey to light grey-brown sand.	-	-	-	Not processed.
254	Fill of pit 4, pit group W of roundhouse 1	152*+	Charcoal spot sample.	0.05	-	?A (20) Q (25) ?S/P (20)	
		159+	Moist, dark grey-brown, very ashy silt, with a little charcoal and stones (60+ mm).	1.00	30	Q (10) S/P (10)	Mostly charcoal, with two charred seeds (unidentified) and some uncharred modern seeds. Clean charcoal with relatively little iron oxide impregnation.
275	Fill of gully, NE terminal of roundhouse 1 foundation trench	157*	Charcoal spot sample.	0.06	-	I (10) ?Q (10)	Charcoal crumbly, mostly not easy to identify, often encrusted with sand grains and breaking along iron oxide-filled cracks; one fragment may be oak.
288	Fill of ditch 1, E-W field boundary	160	Moist, mid to dark grey- brown, silty sand, with some stones (6 to 20 mm)	3+	15	A/C (5)	Mostly of cinder (2), charcoal and coal (5), with a few ?charred seeds. Modern remains included uncharred seeds and plant detritus and sclerotia of soil dwelling fungus. <i>Cenococcum</i>

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt (kg)	Approx. vol. of washover (ml)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
			and ?charcoal present.				sclerotia +.
295	?	161	Moist, dark grey-brown, silty sand.	3	10	A/C (5)	As Sample 160 (above) with the addition of modern seedlings. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia +; coal (5).
322	IA/R-B E-W field boundary ditch	163	Dry, light to mid greybrown, fine sand, with stones (6 to 60 mm) present.	-	-	-	Not processed.
328	?	167	Moist, mid grey-brown (flecked with light grey), sand.	-	-	-	Not processed.
371	Pit 6, large pit to E of roundhouse 1	175	Moist, mid to dark grey- brown, ?ashy, slightly	4.4	200	I (2)	Mostly of small undisaggregated sediment lumps, with a little charcoal, ?coal (2) and sand.
		217	silty sand.	-	-	-	Not processed.
372	Fill in gully, NE terminal of roundhouse 1 foundation trench	188	Charcoal and bone spot samples.	<0.005	-	I (5)	Unidentified burnt bone fragments (5). Charcoal with some orange iron oxide impregnation making internal structure too difficult to discern; crumbly and breaking along cracks with oxide coatings.
378	Gully, NE terminal of roundhouse 1 foundation trench	171	Dry, mid to dark greybrown, ?ashy sand.	3.3	20	I (25)	Mostly of charcoal (to 25 mm but most much smaller) and cinder (3), with a little sand and traces of ?slag and coal (3). There was also some modern plant detritus and a few unidentified modern seeds.
390	Fill of pit 12 in roundhouse 1	176	Dry to moist, light to mid grey-brown, fine sand,	3 (/T)	<10	I (5)	Of fine charcoal and sand, with some cinder (3) and modern (uncharred) plant tissue and seeds.
			with some brittle to crumbly lumps of ?silt and ash (to 20 mm).	5 (/T2)	<10	I (5)	As /T subsample. Cinders (5); coal (5) Charcoal with some iron oxide impregnation.
421	Trackway, track 1	35	Moist, dark grey-brown, slightly silty, fine sand, with some stones (20 to 60 mm).	3	5	I (3)	Small lumps of undisaggregated sediment (2), cinder (2), charcoal and traces of ?slag. Modern plant remains were present in the form of fragments of tissue and a few seeds and seedlings.
603	Pit 7, pit stratigraphically earlier than pit 6	200	Moist, mid grey-brown, sand.	3	10	I (2)	As Sample 140 but main components in thirds of fine charcoal, sand and small lumps of undisaggregated sediment, with a trace of coal (5).
610	Fill in hearth, pit 9,	203	Moist, mid to dark grey-	2	30	Co (5)	Mostly of small lumps of undisaggregated sediment and fine

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt (kg)	Approx. vol. of washover (ml)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
	roundhouse 1		brown, sand, with some indurated ?ashy lumps, a little charcoal and stones (6 to 20 mm) present.			I (5)	charcoal (approx. 30% by volume), with occasional small fragments of coal (5) and a little sand. Modern seedlings and fragments of plant tissue were also present.
615	Pit 9, hearth in roundhouse 1	-+	Charcoal spot sample.	<0.005	-	Co (10)	Some wood only partly charred: some wood on charcoal fragments was brown and not fully charred; examination of scraped cells from this material suggested the conifer was pine (<i>Pinus</i>).
616	Pit 9, hearth in roundhouse 1	-+	Charcoal spot sample.	<0.005	-	Co (10)	Some wood only partly charred: some wood on charcoal fragments was brown and not fully charred; examination of scraped cells from this material suggested the conifer was pine (<i>Pinus</i>).
628, 628/ 631	Pit 8, pit stratigraphically earlier than pit 6	208/209	Moist, mid grey-brown, sand.	-	-	-	Not processed.
634	Pit 5, pit group W of roundhouse 1	214	Wet, dark grey-brown, very ashy slightly sandy silt.	1.6	25	I (2)	Mostly of fine charcoal and sand grains, with a little ?cinder (2) and modern plant detritus.
704	Gully, roundhouse 2 foundation trench	387	Moist, mid to dark grey- brown, slightly silty sand, with some stones (6 to 20 mm) present.	3	20	I (2)	Mostly of fine charcoal and small lumps of undisaggregated sediment (3), with a little coal (5) and sand. Modern remains included many <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia (++) and scraps of plant tissue, seeds and seedlings.
980	Fill in post-Roman field boundary ditch 5	339	Moist,light to mid greybrown, sand.	3	35	I (5)	Mostly small lumps of undisaggregated sediment, with a little cinder (3) and a few sand grains. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia +; coal (5); trace of (?modern) uncharred weed seeds.
		333/339		22.5	20	C (5) I (5)	A single fragment of hazel charcoal; cinders (5); coal (5); trace of modern uncharred seeds. Volume of washover really was less than for smaller subsample (339).
1447	Short gully, ?natural	290	Moist, dark grey-brown, slightly silty sand.	3	200	I (2)	Mostly of small undisaggregated sediment lumps (2), with a little charcoal, coal (2) and sand, and a lot of modern plant detritus and seedlings.
1502	Fill in pit 16, pit alignment 2	433	Moist, mid to dark grey to mid to dark grey- brown, fine sand, with a	3 (/T)	20	I (5)	Mostly of sclerotia of soil-dwelling fungus (<i>Cenococcum</i>) +, with some fine charcoal and ?cinder (2). Other modern remains of seeds and plant tissue fragments were also present

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt (kg)	Approx. vol. of washover (ml)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
			little coal present.	35.00 (/T2)	15	I (10)	Cenococcum sclerotia +; modern rootlet, ?bark, fragments, weed seeds, insect remains. Charcoal rather eroded and iron oxide-impregnated. Volume of washover really was less than for smaller subsample.
1503	Pit 17, pit alignment 2	446	Moist, light to mid grey- brown, sand	3.0	15	-	Mostly of soil fungus sclerotia, cinder (5) and coal (5), with some modern uncharred weed seeds and a little modern rootlet material. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++.
1519	Fill in pit 18, pit alignment 2/3	436	Moist, light to mid grey- brown, slightly silty sand, with some stones (6 to 20	3.0 (/T)	5		Mostly of <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia (++) and sand grains, with a little coal and cinder (both to 4 mm) and modern plant debris (including seedlings).
		436/449	mm).	23.2 (/T2)	10	-	As above. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; cinders (5); coal (5); a few modern weed seeds, and a little modern rootlet material.
1520	Fill in pit 19, pit alignment 2	445	Moist, mid grey-brown (flecked lighter and darker), sand, with stones	3.0 (/T)	15	-	Mostly of soil fungus (<i>Cenococcum</i>) sclerotia (++) and fine cinder (5) and coal (5), with some modern uncharred seeds and other plant fragments.
			(6 to 60 mm) present.	13.50 (/T2)	20	-	As above. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; cinders (10); coal (5); modern rootlet fragments and some charred and uncharred bark fragments.
1558	Pit 1, pit in area of ?R-B agricultural activity	451	Moist, light to mid grey- brown, slightly silty sand	3.0	15	-	As Sample(s) 445 above. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; cinders (5); coal (5); a few modern weeds seeds, and a little modern rootlet material.
1701	Ditch 2, ?IA field/plot boundary	471	Just moist, mid to dark grey-brown, sand, with stones (6 to 60 mm) present.	3.0	-		Not processed.
1707	Fill in pit 14, pit alignment 1	458	Dry, dark grey-brown, ?ashy, fine sand, flecked	3.0 (/T)	<10	I (3)	As Samples 451 and 445 (above). <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; some partly-charred ?modern bark fragments.
			with light grey sand. Some crumbly lumps of ?ash and modern seedlings were present.	34 (/T2)	10	I (5)	As above. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; cinders (10); coal (5); modern rootlet fragments and some modern weed seeds.
1708	Fill in pit 15, pit alignment 1	483+	Waterlogged (probably from rainwater as the sample tub's lid was broken), mid grey-brown, thixotropic sand.	11.5 (/T)	20	Q (10) I (10)	Cenococcum sclerotia +; cinders (5); coal (5); modern rootlets and a few modern weed seeds.

Cont.	Context type	Sample	Sediment description	Wt (kg)	Approx. vol. of washover (ml)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
1709	Fill in pit 13, pit alignment 1	457	Moist, light grey to light to mid grey-brown, fine sand.	3.0 (/T)	<10	I (5)	Mostly of sclerotia of soil-dwelling fungus (<i>Cenococcum</i>) ++, with some fine charcoal and ?cinder (2). Other modern remains of seeds and plant tissue fragments were also present.
				19.9 (/T2)	50	I (10)	As above. <i>Cenococcum</i> sclerotia ++; cinders (40); coal (5); some modern rootlet fragments and weed seeds; charcoal crumbly.
1720	Ditch 3, ?IA field/plot boundary	463	Moist, mid to dark greybrown, sand, with small ashy lumps and stones (2 to 6 mm) present.	3	-	-	Not processed.
1724	Ditch 3, ?IA field/plot boundary	479	Moist, light to mid grey- brown to mid to dark grey-brown, sand, with some rotted charcoal and stones (6 to 60 mm) present.	3	10	I (3)	Mostly small lumps of undisaggregated sediment and sand grains, with a little fine charcoal and coal (3), traces of ?slag and modern plant detritus.
1797	Ditch 3, ?IA field/plot boundary	482	Moist, light to mid greybrown, sand, with some stones (20 to 60 mm) present.	3	10	I (3)	Mostly of very small lumps of undisaggregated sediment, with a little coal (3), cinder (3), fine charcoal and sand. There was also some modern plant detritus.

Table 2. Notes on further charcoal samples from excavations at Lathom (site code DFL57) in context number order. Samples examined by AH are shown with the context and sample number in bold face. Key to charcoal identifications: F—Fraxinus (ash); I—indet.; P—Prunus sp. (probably blackthorn); Q—Quercus (oak). The figure following the letter gives the largest dimension of any fragment (in millimetres). Charcoal was especially brittle and 'vitrified' in samples marked '\$'; weights of only a few grammes presented as '+'.

Context	Context type	Sample	Weight of charcoal (to nearest whole gram)	Charcoal	Other material and notes
40	Associated with roundhouse 1	69	+	Q (10) I (1)	Some unidentified diffuse-porous material \$.
59	Associated with roundhouse 1	78	40	Q (15)	The material appeared to consist entirely of oak (<i>contra</i> identifications for this sample—perhaps another subsample?—listed in context information sheet); coal and gravel also present; charcoal fragments rather rounded.
98	Associated with roundhouse 1	96	6	Q (20) I (10)	Some unidentified diffuse-porous material \$.
103	Associated with roundhouse 1	85	8	P (25) Q (10)	Charcoal still rather damp; <i>Prunus</i> roundwood fragments with bark, from stems about 25-30 diameter \$.
499+500	Fill of linear gulley	19	+	F (10) I (10)	Charcoal fragments worn and with purplish brown impregnation.
704	Associated with roundhouse 2	251	7	Q (15) I (10)	Charcoal angular \$.
705	Fill of RB linear gully	243	+	I (10)	\$
837	IA ditch fill	268	-	-	Coal and undisaggregated sediment (both to 5 mm).
826+877	Associated with roundhouse 4	265	+	I (15) Q (10)	\$
963	Fill of linear gulley	332	+	Q (10)	One fragment oak, two charred ?bark fragments (10).
?	Fill of RB linear gulley	245	+	I (25)	\$