

David Jacques, Senior Research Fellow in Archaeology, University of Buckingham Vespasian's Camp: Cradle of Stonehenge? 26th January 2014

Vespasian's Camp is the name given to an Iron Age hill fort overlooking the River Avon At Amesbury, about 1.5km west of Stonehenge. The area had long been ignored by archaeologists, because it had been assumed that landscaping in the 18th century had removed all trace of prehistoric archaeology. Work by the speaker and his team, begun in 2005, has radically changed that view. In an area in the north east of the camp, known as Blick Mead, is a spring and pond which has remained untouched by landscaping, and has provided evidence of continuous human activity stretching back over 9000 years.

Until the discoveries at Blick Mead intensive surveys of the Stonehenge area had identified a total of only 50 finds which could be dated to the Mesolithic period. These included the enigmatic "totem" posts discovered in the car park at Stonehenge, and it seemed inconceivable that these would have been erected without there having been some significant semi-permanent occupation close by. Blick Mead has proved to be that site. To date around 12,000 pieces of worked and burned flint have been unearthed, as well as over 500 pieces of bone dating from over 8,000 years ago.

The speaker gave a detailed account of the excavations that had taken place between 2005 and the present, and offered closely reasoned evidence dating at least semi-permanent occupation of the site from 7,500 BC onwards. He described how initial excavations had been hampered because the height of the water table prevented digging down more than about 0.5m. Once a pump was used, it was found that an early Neolithic horizon at about 0.6m had protected a layer of intense Mesolithic activity which yielded the finds described above. The typography of the flint finds, together with radio carbon dates from animal bones, confirmed continuous activity for 3,000 years.

Most pleasing, dates for specific finds correlated very closely with dates of the Mesolithic posts at Stonehenge. The speaker described the landscape of the area, and speculated that because of its topography, and because it would have been relatively free of trees, it would have been ideal for hunting aurochs and other cattle, and the posts could well have marked a significant point in the landscape towards which prey would have naturally have been driven. The presence of water – always a vital factor - at Blick Mead would have also been attractive for cattle. David also touched on finds at Coneybury Ridge, which show strong evidence of ritual feasting and other activities during the Mesolithic. He further drew attention to finds from within the earliest structures at Stonehenge, which actually significantly predated the structures themselves – an indication possibly that the Neolithic henge builders were recognising and celebrating their ancestors by depositing Mesolithic objects of significance to them.

Two recent finds were of particular significance. The first was a small (20cm) tabular flint, which had been set vertically into the ground.

Charcoal from beneath it gave a date in the late Mesolithic. The second was of evidence for an encampment or house, dating to at least 4,000 BC – the first tangible evidence for structures and more than temporary occupation at Blick Mead.

David finished with a polemic against the proposed Stonehenge tunnel. The cutting for this would lower the water table in the Blick Mead area, totally destroying any possibility of finding preserved wooden or other structures in the Mesolithic peat thereabouts. The environmental impact assessment for the proposed road had completely ignored 4,000 years of history, he said.

Further information and updates on the work can be found at <http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/research/hri/blickmead>