



# Digging for Britons

## Community excavation of an Iron Age settlement at High Carlingill



## **Introduction**

The valley cut by the river Lune from Sedbergh to Tebay is the natural north-south route between the Howgill fells in the east, and the beginnings of the Lake District fells on the west. It is now taken advantage of by the A685, the M6 and the west coast railway. The hills on either side of the river offer summer grazing, and much of the lower land is fertile meadow which produces good hay and silage as well as winter grazing.

Although there have been changes in climate and vegetation, and the river may have changed its course slightly, the valley has been farmed and used as a corridor for travel for thousands of years. The most obvious signs of historical occupation in the area are probably the motte of the Norman castle at Tebay and the remains of the Roman fort at Low Borrowbridge. Quite a lot is known about the Roman occupation of Britain which began in 43AD and reached the North West by the early 70s AD and lasted until around 410 AD. The Romans left an indelible impression on the landscape through their largely stone built buildings as well as extensive written records compiled by their historians.

Relatively little is known about the native population at the time of the Roman occupation. Aerial photography and LiDAR have identified several native settlements along the side of the Howgills just above the minor road on the east side of the river. One at Brockholes, opposite Low Borrowbridge, was excavated in the 1970s, and appears to have been abandoned early in the lifetime of the fort. It was then apparently used by the Romans as a workshop for metal working.

The settlement at High Carlingill, which is on private land with no public access, was mapped by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in England (RCHME) in 1992 and can clearly be seen using aerial photography and LiDAR, a technique using laser photography from aircraft.



**Plan of site drawn by RCHME with results of geophysical survey superimposed**



**LiDAR image**

## Digging for Britons

This research project, funded through the National Lottery Heritage Fund, set out to shed light on the native Britons living in the region before, during and after the Roman period.

Following 2 days of preparation and survey, around 50 local people with a passion for understanding their heritage removed several tons of stone debris from 6 trenches to reveal the outlines of the settlement and several structures within it. The excavation lasted 5 weeks over 2 years under the expert professional supervision of Solstice Heritage.

Our volunteers included children from Orton school and members of the Young Archaeologists Clubs based in Kendal and Hawes.

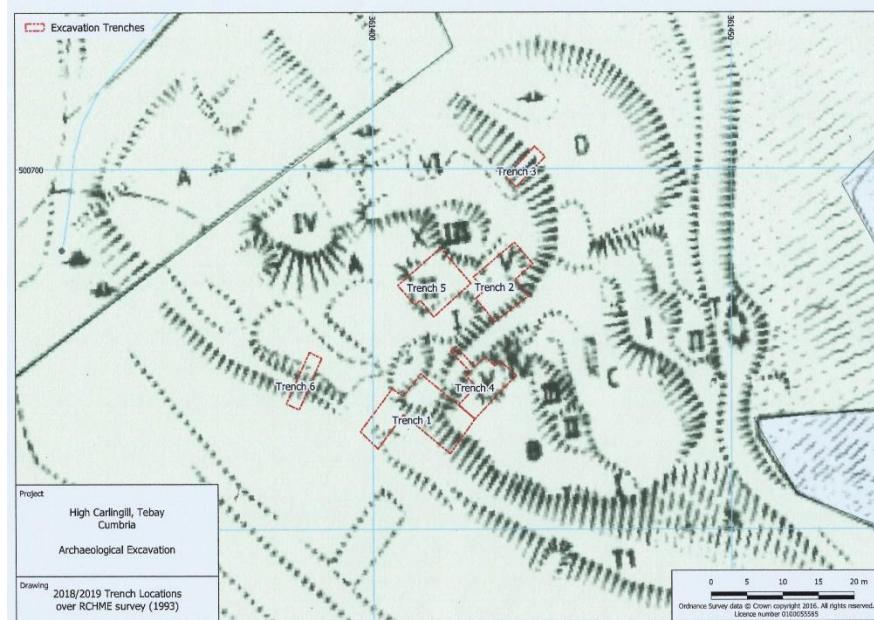


## The Excavations

The surveys suggested that the site consisted of an enclosure within which platforms cut into the hillside appeared to contain built structures. A second enclosure was attached on the south side.

In 2018 three trenches were excavated, to look at the junction of the enclosure banks and two of the platforms.

In our second year, we looked at two more platforms and tried to determine the structure of the west bank of the settlement.



Location of trenches 1-6

## Uncovering the settlement

The bank forming the smaller enclosure on the south side butted up to the main enclosure. This showed that the large enclosure was there first although the banks were broadly contemporary.

The banks were made of compacted stone and earth, with faced external walls. Large stones were used to stop the mound sliding down the hill. The main enclosure also had flat stones on top.

Some of the round stone buildings were built over and into the enclosure bank, suggesting that at least some of the buildings were built after construction of the bank.

The enclosure had been a substantial structure and would have taken a lot of time and manpower to build, as well as offering accommodation to a potentially large community.



## The buildings

Over the two seasons of excavation we found several sub-circular stone buildings. They were generally set on level platforms constructed against the hillside. Some of these were too small to be houses – they may have been used for storage, workshops or housing livestock.

The degree of preservation was variable – the walls of the buildings would likely have been low, and as they fell into disuse, they had tumbled down the slope. They were then covered in stones and earth that had been washed down the hill over the past two thousand years or so.

It took experienced archaeologists to distinguish the scree and tumbled stones from the footprint of the original building.



Two of the stone buildings that we excavated are big enough to have been dwellings. One of these, excavated in 2019, had the remains of a flagstone floor. This building lay just up the hillside above a cobbled area uncovered the previous year, and when the two areas were linked up a set of stone steps leading from the house to the cobbled yard appeared (to the right of the red and white pole in the photograph below).



Another building had a floor which mainly comprised packed earth. Although no hearth was identified, a broad smear of dark material extended across towards the gap in the wall where the door would have been. This occupation deposit was interpreted as the remains of burnt material swept out from the centre of the building. The entire occupation deposit – about 60 litres of material – was collected and sent for analysis to the laboratories at Durham University.



The buildings would have been constructed with low stone walls which supported a roof framework of timbers and branches. The thatch for the roof could have been bracken, turf or reeds from the wet ground by the river.

The roof would have been steeply pitched, extending beyond the walls to allow rainwater to drain away.

Interestingly, a large earth-fast boulder just outside the perimeter of one the buildings had a channel cut into it, running downhill. It seems likely that this was done to aid the drainage around the building.



**Iron Age roundhouse reconstruction  
(attribution Rod Allday.  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org>)**

## **The people who lived here**

Archaeology is not just about discovering and excavating a site. The ultimate aim is to try to understand the people who lived and worked there. A lot of information can be gained from lost or discarded objects. These are usually ceramic, worked stone and metal items since organic materials such as bone, textiles, wood, and leather decay relatively quickly, and only survive under special conditions.

### **Ceramics**

Almost all of the pottery from High Carlingill was Roman, and dated from the time of occupation of the fort. This suggests that the native Britons were trading with the Romans, perhaps providing the military with grain, meat, or labour.

The local pottery made in the Iron-age was poorly fired and easily broken. It doesn't survive well, and we found only one piece: enough to show that our Britons were making and using their own pots.



**Three pieces of Roman black  
burnished ware**

**Roman decorated samian  
ware**



**Iron age pot**



**Cooking pot showing  
evidence of burning  
from use over a fire**

## Stone artefacts

The most common stone artefact at High Carlingill was the whetstone. These were a variety of sizes, but were all long and thin, and showed a variety of wear patterns where they had been used to sharpen metal blades.

We also found pieces of quernstone. Querns were made of two circular pieces of hard stone, placed one on top of the other. Grain poured through a hole in the top stone was ground into flour as the stone was rotated on the bottom stone.



Whetstones (above) and  
broken quernstone (left)

## Metal objects

We found very little metal in the excavation. There were some iron nails, and a hobnail, often seen in Roman military boots.

An iron object lying in the floor of one house could not be easily identified. As it rusted it had become fused to the earth and stones around it, and it came out as a solid lump. When x-rayed it appeared as a long blade, and a second lump contained a buckle or fastening of some kind.

Although we found no evidence of metal working on the site, this may have been carried out further away from the main buildings to reduce the risk of spreading fires from a furnace.

The presence of several whetstones shows that iron tools, whether made on site or imported, were being used and maintained.



X-ray shows that the corroded metal encased in rust and attached stones is a knife blade

## **Laboratory analyses**

The material from the floor of the large building was analysed in the laboratories of Durham University.

Flotation and sieving is used to separate the heavy soil particles from lighter organic matter. The light fraction is then examined under a microscope. Seeds, grains, tiny pieces of charcoal, twig, heather and nuts, and microscopic animal remains can all be isolated and identified. This organic material can then be used for radiocarbon dating.

## **Radiocarbon dating**

All living things take up the C-14 form of carbon as a result of normal metabolic activity. This is stored in the plant or the tissues of the animal throughout their life time. Once the organism dies, the C-14 starts to decay and the amount of C-14 present in the remains decreases over time. In simple terms, the older the sample, the less C-14 it will contain.

The relationship between C-14 and time since death is not linear and is affected by environmental events such as nuclear tests and the burning of fossil fuels. However, a lot of research has been undertaken to determine the amounts of C-14 present in the atmosphere over the last 50,000 years, and a calibration curve has been produced which can be used to date organic material on the basis of the C-14 content.

## **Organic remains from High Carlingill**

Our samples contained charcoal and grains, some of which were subjected to C-14 dating at the University of Glasgow.

The charcoal was shown to come from hazel, birch and willow or poplar trees, giving us an insight into the types of woodland in the area when the settlement was occupied.

Charred hazelnut shells were also found: these are common in prehistoric sites and are often present in large numbers. Hazelnuts were obviously an important food stuff, and roasting them makes them keep better, perhaps for eating over the winter when there is little to forage. The Britons at High Carlingill were also farmers. Charred grains of barley and spelt (an early form of wheat) were found.

Nine of the C-14 dates for the settlement ranged from the first century BC through to at least the third century AD. Charred nut shells from a single sample from each of the two excavations were dated much later, to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. While this suggests that the site was occupied from the Iron Age through the period when the Roman fort was in use, it is difficult to know whether that occupation continued after the Roman period, or whether the latest dates come from material deposited during casual use or perhaps even during clearance of the site.

## Conclusions

Radiocarbon dating has suggested that the bank enclosing the settlement at High Carlingill was constructed late 2nd-early 1st century BC. The site was still in use in the third century AD, although houses will have been rebuilt, modified, perhaps abandoned or demolished and other buildings constructed in their place. The settlement could have supported a sizeable population.

Our Britons grew wheat and barley and ground flour on quernstones. Although we found no evidence for animal husbandry (bone and animal products do not survive well in that environment) sheep and cattle will have grazed the hillside. Some of the buildings may have been animal pens.

They used metal tools, sharpened on whetstones, and may have made their own. Although we found no evidence of smithing, we have investigated only a very small proportion of the site. While they had locally made pots, they also possessed some very nice Roman pots—perhaps used for best—probably exchanged for grain, meat or labour.

Someone used the site in the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century AD: a passing shepherd, someone clearing the land, or maybe a family lived there, we cannot say from our evidence. 1000 years later farms existed along the valley, much as today, and they still provide a living for families who keep sheep on the hills, although there is no longer any arable cultivation.

## Acknowledgements

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