

A HENGE REVEALED: RECENT WORK AT MARDEN HENGE

Talk by Jim Leary, 14th March 2013

Our 2012/13 Lecture Programme concluded with a fascinating and well-attended talk by our friend Jim Leary from English Heritage, about excavations at Marden Henge.

Marden is located in the greensand area of Wiltshire between Avebury and Stonehenge. The soil in this area is very fertile and this has led to a lot of archaeology being ploughed out over the centuries. The area has largely been ignored by researchers and it is not included in the Stonehenge/Avebury World Heritage Site. However, Marden deserves recognition as the largest henge in the country. It is unusual in that it is nowhere near circular; its southern side being formed by the River Avon.



Aerial view of Marden Henge ©English Heritage

A map of 1724 showed a massive mound, “Hatfield Barrow”, which may have been as high as 15 metres, positioned within Marden Henge. Unfortunately, in the early nineteenth century, the barrow was the subject of investigative excavations by antiquarians: the mound subsequently collapsed due to the underlying soil being unstable. Some pottery, animal bone and burnt human bone was found but very little else. The mound was then ploughed over and “lost”. Another mysterious element at Marden is an internal circular feature, also subject to investigation at the same time, revealing similar finds to those from the barrow.

No further work was undertaken at the henge for many years and in the 1950s, houses were built on part of the site. Eventually, in the late 1960s, the site was investigated by Geoffrey Wainwright, who confirmed that Marden was a Neolithic henge.

The English Heritage team were able to use modern techniques to investigate the site, including aerial photography, geophysics and target excavations. They were able to locate the Hatfield Barrow, where they found pig bone which was carbon dated to 2400 BC. The circular feature was

also investigated and found to be contemporary with the main site and the most likely explanation is that it is “a henge within a henge”.

The most interesting part of the excavation revealed a rectangular Neolithic building floor surface with compacted chalk and a huge internal hearth. Despite only digging a small area, the team found the butchered and burnt remains of around 30 pigs in the area surrounding the building, indicating that the site was used for serious feasting. Other finds were arrow heads, antler picks, needles, good quality grooved ware and the earliest known slipware pottery, with a white glaze made up of ground bone.



The Neolithic floor surface ©English Heritage

The building is in itself enigmatic. The hearth is so large that there is no place for people to live and it has been suggested that it was a “sweat lodge”, used as part of a ritual that involved the slaughter of pigs. Similar finds have been made at Durrington.

Water seems to be a key factor. There is evidence of springs at the site and it was noted in the late eighteenth century that the ditch around the barrow (then extant) was never dry. Marden sits at the head of the River Avon and there seems to have been a gravel walkway from the site leading to the river (again, this is found at Durrington).

There are plans to return to the area and look at the area immediately outside the henge.

Thanks to Jim for finishing our lecture season on a high and for enlightening us on what must be one of our most interesting but little-known prehistoric sites!