

Echoes of the Voices of WWI – the Larkhill 300 by Simon Cleggett

We had a memorable talk from Si Cleggett on Tuesday 8th October, on the excavations by Wessex Archaeology at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. Starting in 2014, they uncovered prehistoric features and an extensive unrecorded system of army training trenches from the First World War. Si has been managing the archaeological work of the Army Basing Programme, in preparation for housing troops and families returning from bases in Europe, with further sites at Bulford and Tidworth. Prehistoric features at Larkhill included an early Neolithic (3750BC) causewayed camp, a probably ceremonial 14-posthole structure and several Neolithic pits with 'structured deposits'. Monuments from the Bronze Age (BA) were mainly funerary, for instance early Beaker burials (one grave contained the remains of three children buried together, aged two years, eight years and twelve years), several round barrows with inhumations, and a middle BA urned cremation cemetery. The site is located just north of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site and results from these excavations indicate that the sacred landscape extends over a wider area than is currently recognised.

It was more recent archaeology which 'stole the show' however, because the discovery of practice trenches used from 1916 to train soldiers from Australia, Canada and New Zealand has revealed hitherto unseen aspects of trench warfare from the First World War. The work demanded careful treatment due to the constant risk of unexploded ordnance (they were using live ammunition, and this WWI training area was notorious as a hellhole) so experts from a bomb disposal company were always present on site. The excavation revealed masses of material from the daily lives of the recruits, as well as aspects of trench warfare not often present in battlefield trenches, which were frequently modified in the field as conditions required – and were not backfilled immediately after November 1918.

Associated with the trenches were tunnel systems, used on the battlefield as dressing stations and treatment centres, or for temporary refuge from the incessant noise of gunfire and shells. These would have been built by workers with specialist skills recruited from industries such as sewer building or mining, but the risk of rock falls meant archaeologists were unable to enter them. Within the tunnels they discovered many examples of graffiti made by soldiers in training, which have been recorded remotely by taking 3D images with scanning cameras. They are pencil marks which would not survive in open conditions, and three hundred names have been recorded which will be included in a database and made available for searching: already some individuals and their stories have been identified. The modern archaeologists were very much affected by seeing the record of young men who were training here almost exactly 100 years before. Images of the soldiers in their distinctive uniforms are engraved on the assembly hall windows of the new Larkhill First School to remind the families who are rehoused here of their former presence.

The significance of this dig was recognised in its nomination for 'Dig of the Year' at Current Archaeology Live in 2019, and the talk was presented as the OGS Crawford Lecture at the Hampshire Field Club in July 2019. We wish to thank Si for a thoughtful and moving experience and we hope to hear more once the full results of the excavation are published.

Sarah Hanna