

Must Farm and New Ideas on Bronze Age Fenland by Mark Knight, Senior Project Officer, Cambridge Archaeology Unit. Joint Meeting with the Prehistory Society at Town Auditorium, Norwich Castle, 3rd October 2015



Using lots of photos, diagrams and maps of the area with great enthusiasm, Mark took us on a kaleidoscopic tour of the excavation from its origins up to the present moment. The site is at the western end of the Fens near Peterborough, 2km south of Flag Fen at the brickworks near Wittlesey. It is an exceptional excavation which clearly demonstrates the quality of the Fen landscape and its relationship to the past. He extended an invitation to all to visit the site which has been called an “iron age Pompey”.

The circumstances of the discovery, context and chronology of the Must Farm platform have a great deal in common with Flag Fen, where excavation directed by Francis Pryor began in 1982 resulting in numerous publications. Mark mentioned three important events which coloured the development of archaeology in the Fens. In the 1950s whilst a power station was under construction, Graham Clarke discovered a log boat in grey silt about 17 feet down. Cambridge University became involved dating the boats by bronze age pottery beneath it. Later, a trawler dredged up a lump of peat containing a harpoon point (now in Norwich Museum) which was sent to Graham Clarke who recognized it as being from the Mesolithic level at bottom of North Sea. Harry Godburn, a botanist of the Fenland Research Committee provided a Fenland drainage sediment sequence proving that dry land in the north Sea disappeared when the sea rose 55 metres due to glacial melting resulting in East Anglia being cut off from the continent. Peat beneath a clay sediment in the Fen basin went from dry to wet and the water pushed up settlement along the ridges of the basin.

Mark explained how it is difficult to use standard excavation methods in the Fenlands. A typical archaeological dig occurs because aerial photos of crop patterns or surface scatter indicate something lying beneath the top soil. Not so at Must Farm because the landscape observed now is completely different from that of the Bronze Age. Previously in Fenland, large open area excavations only happened where the cover was comparatively shallow; archaeologists focused on landscapes at the edges where evidence of prehistoric occupation was visible on the surface. Must Farm excavation takes the same large open area approach but at much greater depths. It is *deep space* archaeology invisible from the surface and undisturbed, revealing *dry* Neolithic and Early Bronze Age features buried deep beneath the *wet* fens. This is a preservation paradox: archaeology virtually undetectable but exceptionally well preserved because the prehistoric landscape isn't just deeply buried now, but was deeply buried in the distant past. Hence the things found have survived wonderfully intact unlike elsewhere in Britain where the cover is shallow and prehistoric archaeology has been erased by continuous occupation.

Finding this intact prehistoric landscape is very difficult. Such concave landscape archaeology would require sink holes to be deep, up to 20 metres below sea level. Luckily access was facilitated by Peterborough brick companies extracting Lower Oxford clay 20 to 30 metres below ground which cut a deep and broad section through the sediments. The large-scale pits previously yielded the fossilized remains of huge numbers of ancient marine reptiles and dinosaurs from the lowest levels of the Pleistocene. The Hanson UK brick pits of Wittlesey have enabled archaeologists to view the stratification levels and investigate Neolithic and Early Bronze Age remains dating back to 10,000 BC. The Fenland peat articulates and preserves features which have given radio-carbon dates from 3500 BC to BC/AD, commensurate with pre-history. Here depth equals time.

Must Farm sits on a low-lying stretch of the prehistoric Nean River, so resembling later prehistoric occupation of many other major river valleys in southern England. The community was distributed along the length of the river whilst the surrounding land was gradually being inundated with water. Pollen work and soil analysis indicate an early patchwork of woodland and grassland with some

cereals. Neolithic flints and pottery, plus burial pits with auroch and sheep bones, show that occupation was extensive rather than intensive, dislocated by extended periods of inactivity providing a sense of mobility rather than permanent residency



Evidently the onset of wet conditions which encouraged peat growth coincided with the end of the early Bronze Age. The land beneath the peat layer was unenclosed, and its features yielded impressive assemblages of Grooved Ware, Beaker and Collared Urn pottery. One of the best indicators of an open landscape is the presence of animal tracks. As the top of the old land surface was exposed (roughly 2,200BC), hundreds of hoof prints emerged from which the path of individual animals can be identified. These were made by large ungulates, including cattle, deer and pigs, and occurred either in large groups around the fringes of watering holes, or as linear tracks or paths of movement.

However, occupation was cut short or terminated around 1500BC. Peat covered the horizon leaving this part of the Nene surviving as a pristine late third and early second millennium BC landscape, unadulterated by subsequent human activities. Using diagrammatic maps, Mark illustrated how this was a dynamic landscape with large areas of low-lying land under water and the river replaced by a series of islands leaving less and less surface for settlement. A cross-section picture showed how the fenland separated and dislocated the river, pushing it upwards and sideways from its original course, resulting in causeways being required for access. Periods of estuarine and tidal water were followed by freshwater.

A local archaeologist who swam in the quarry pits as a child, remembered seeing wooden posts protruding out of the southern face of the old quarry pit at Must Farm. He suggested Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) should investigate. In 2004 and 2006 the site was revealed to be late Bronze Age (1300-800BC) and to comprise a succession of large timber structures. In its earliest form the channel was crossed by a series of massive, square cut oak piles (25cm by 25cm) made from trees felled around 1300–1250BC. The size and orientation of the piles seemed related to something much larger in the landscape. The uprights had partially collapsed, crushing a fish trap beneath, before new sets of posts were inserted. These posts included a large encircling palisade made up of tightly spaced, 7–15cm diameter ash poles which appeared to choke the flow of the stream.



Catastrophe struck again, when a major fire, dating to sometime between 920 and 800BC, seems to have brought a sudden and unanticipated end to the site, plunging its smouldering superstructure along with most of its contents into the depths. Fire, water and yielding silts guaranteed the preservation of all manner of things including a mass of charred wood, spears, bronze tools, awls, sickles, glass beads, a bronze bobbin with rows of knots, finely woven textiles and glass beads. Whole pots replete with 'vitrified' food, one with a wooden spatula, and drinking vessels, all in a NW European style were found. In an instant, a prehistoric 'household' was plummeted to the bottom of the stream where it was safely encapsulated in layers of organic mud to become a "Pompey of the Bronze Age".

Altogether 350 metres of this channel were excavated revealing traps and weirs of preserved wood. A local fisherman, Peter Carter came to see the traps and said they were similar to those of today; given their alignment he thought they had been set between April and June possibly to catch eels. Hearths, large watering holes, burnt mounds, ditches, fence lines, cremations and, for the first time, intact monuments including two Neolithic oval barrows, have been found. A well-preserved, waterlogged wooden fence line skirts by an intact burial mound which itself had long since dried out by the time this part of the landscape had become saturated. In 2008 the excavation was stopped and back-filled because it was too expensive and the artifacts too precious requiring proper conservation.

Since 2011 10 different log boats (narrow, short and longer 'punts', dating from 1700BC to 400BC) of different styles (narrow and short with longer 'punts' 9½ metres in length) and at different levels were dug out of the channel. These have now been dated to about 1500 BC, 200 years older than was first thought. Samples taken during the conservation process have revealed the boats to be made from oak, lime and field maple. Mark presented a layout map of the river showing where the various items had been found in 2011-12 plus cross sectional diagrams to show the vertical sequence and chronological order.



In 2015 English Heritage felt the site ought to be properly excavated. Funding from them and Hanson Building Products produced a budget of £1.8m. Work started September 2015 with the erection of a large shed and re-opening the trench to excavate the settlement and expose the timber structure and the pallsade. Metal detectors have been used to find sickles, cauldrons and a fine sword.



Mark invited the Society to organise a visit. Pictures don't do it justice; you need to see and smell the rotten egg aroma and gain a sense of what it is to excavate this most significant site which Dutch and Swedish archaeologists are coming over to view. The pattern of deposition suggests there must be more settlement and production. If excavation continues along the channel, more of the same would be found. There is every possibility that this discovery has come about because of circumstance rather than good fortune. Furthermore, the deep sediments of the fens are yet to be explored at the scale of current investigations. As the old surface becomes the new surface, on which farmers build and as Hanson UK go deeper and wider, so much more will be found.

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Roger Bellinger thanked Mark for such a detailed and enthusiastic lecture and invited questions from the audience, starting with one of his own:

What had happened to the boats? Where are they now?

The vessels are undergoing a two-year preservation programme at Flag Fen. They are in giant refrigerators being sprayed with a special wax to stop the timbers from degrading and then freeze dried.

Someone asked ***Has all this had been written up?***

Mark said some of it magazines and online; he suggested looking at www.mustfarm.com/archaeology. also on Facebook and Twitter.

Dr. Keith Robinson asked ***Were people interested in a trip to the site?***

Roger asked for a show hands which revealed a sizeable number. Mark said they could take a large group, weekday preferable; wait until Jan/Feb 2016.

Another question: ***Did the Excavation site show temperature change through the ages?***

Mark said he didn't know exactly but the stratification shows that at the end of the Bronze Age the climate moves from a very wet and warm weather to drier conditions.

Andrew Fakes asked ***How the boats were made and what were they used for? What were textiles made of?***

Mark said the boats were made of oak, lime and maple cut out of trunks – tool marks are plentiful – and probably used for trade, taking people and products inland and to larger vessels on the coast. The glass beads are similar to those from the Balkans; metal in a sword came from Portugal; pots match those from NW France. The textiles were made from plant fibres, rather than from animals – clothes somewhat like those of the Otzi Ice Man from South Tyrol.

Dr. Keith Robinson asked ***Was the burning of the village accidental or destruction?***

Mark thought the site might be defensive – the palisade part of fortification. Swords and spears with edgework damage coincide with the raised wooden architecture, suggesting conflict. Other sites also showed burning, However, very little by way of human remains – only some arms, legs and teeth.

Tony Bradstreet asked ***Were the artifacts ritual deposits as Francis Prior suggested?***

The recent finds seem natural which contradicts old ideas of ritual deposition. The practice of metal-work and its deposition, particularly weapons, is much more dynamic and doesn't fit this site. Ritual is an end interpretation rather than the process and use, for instance sickles are practical tools.

Someone mentioned that lime trees don't like water so this wood must have come from dry land. Mark agreed and added that cows and sheep don't swim easily so this meat probably came in from elsewhere perhaps upstream from middle England.

Mark ended with some thoughts about the nature of the timber constructions. As previous routes were broken by inundation, mobility and access became dependent on keeping both people and animals above the rising water utilising a small stream making its way through a saturated landscape of small islands, marsh and reed swamp. The ever rising sea had gradually transformed a low lying, dry terrain into a saturated embayment. Must Farm and Flag Fen were constructed right at the wet end of this spectrum. The people choose to resist a waterlogged landscape with buildings and causeways adapted to the environment.

Edmund G. Perry
Hon.Gen.Secretary
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