

## A Neolithic Timber Circle in Priddy – and some wonderful pits – insights from Jodie Lewis

In July 2019, I directed archaeological excavations at a newly discovered site in Priddy. The site was initially found in 2018 through geophysical survey by the local community archaeology group Archaeological Landscape Extreme Research Team (ALERT). The University of Worcester and ALERT have worked closely together for nearly a decade and the excavations detailed also here form part of a research programme called the Priddy Environs Project (PEP). PEP, now in its 9<sup>th</sup> year. It is investigating the origins and development of human activity in Priddy and is run by myself and Dr David Mullin.

The geophysical survey undertaken by ALERT showed what appeared to be a small circle of pits in a field close to the centre of the village. Nothing is visible on the surface so these pits must only survive below ground. Another form of geophysical survey, ground penetrating radar, was subsequently undertaken by the University of Worcester to confirm the earlier geophysical survey results and provide more detail. Together, the two surveys revealed that the circle was around 16m in diameter and comprised 12 subsurface pits.

Prior to excavation it was apparent that the pit circle could represent only one of two site types and be of only one of two dates. Firstly, it could be a Late Neolithic timber circle, a type of monument used for community gatherings, acting as a ritual enclosure. Secondly it could be a variant of a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age round house, dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. If a timber circle, it would be the first confirmed example from Somerset, though examples are known from neighbouring counties. Neolithic timber circles are rare with fewer than 60 known from England. If a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age round house, it would be a very large example indeed. A recent survey of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Wessex has highlighted that most round houses measure between 5-10m, with only a few unusually large buildings reaching 15m. It has also been noted that structures over 15m would have been very difficult to construct and maintain yet would have been the only ones that could contain a large number of people. Thus, if the pit circle represented a round house, its scale suggests a specialised function, rather than simply 'settlement' and would be another rare example for Somerset.

Answers would only come from excavation, so in July 2019, we brought a team of around 25 staff, students and volunteers to investigate this enigmatic site. The location of the circle was established using a Global Positioning System and a 20m x 20m trench was opened by hand. As the site is on private land and managed under an Environmental Stewardship agreement, permission was gained from the landowners and a derogation granted by DEFRA to allow the excavations to take place.



After removing the turf and topsoil it became obvious that the limestone bedrock was fairly close to the surface and as such, the pits must have been cut into the bedrock for them to be showing up on the geophysics. It was also decided to excavate a sample of the site and leave some of it undisturbed and preserved in-situ.

*Left: A pit prior to excavation. Photograph Jodie Lewis*



After much mattocking, shovelling and trowelling, slowly the top of the pits began to reveal themselves. They were visible as broadly circular patches of soil, contrasting with the surrounding bedrock. This soil represents the filling of the pits: at this stage there was no way to be certain how deep the pits were and so excavation of the pits involved removing 10cm of this soil fill at a time. Each 10cm 'spit' was given a unique identifier code which allowed any artefacts within the spit to be recorded horizontally and vertically. As is standard practice in archaeology, the pits were half-sectioned which means that initially only half of the soil fill in each pit was removed, leaving a clean vertical section. This allows for the profile of the pit (how steep the sides are; whether the base is flat) to be revealed and recorded before the other half of the fill is removed.

*Left: A pit being half sectioned. Photograph: Jodie Lewis*

In total, six pits were fully excavated and a further two pits half-sectioned only, as they fell outside the main area being excavated. This work showed that the pits were spaced regularly at 2 metre intervals and had been cut into the bedrock to a depth of around 1 metre. Two of the postholes, in the south-east of the circle, were found to be deeper than the others and this could indicate they held larger posts, forming an entrance. Interestingly, one side of each pit in the circle was sloped whereas the other side was cut vertically. Excavations at other sites have shown that such sloping sides acted as an aid to erecting timber posts, which could be slid into the hole and then levered up against the vertical faces of the pit.



*A fully excavated pit. Photo: Jodie Lewis*



*Aerial view of the pit circle after excavation. Photo: James Atkins*

The soil fill of the pits was remarkably uniform, apart from at the base. Here, the fill contained significant quantities of charcoal. Rather than an accidental blow-in of charcoal from fires, these are distinct, discrete pockets resulting from burning the base of timber posts to prevent rotting. The charcoal was retained and analysis after the excavations revealed it mostly to be oak charcoal, suggesting that the pits once held oak timber posts. The pits also contained small slabs of Old Red Sandstone, which could be deliberate packing around the posts to help keep them in place. At some point in the life of the site, the timber posts were removed, and the open pits backfilled with the uniform soil deposit described above. The only artefacts



recovered from the pit fills were flint flakes and debitage. These do not seem to represent deliberate inclusions and it is likely instead they became accidentally incorporated when the pits were backfilled. At the centre of the circle, a small U-shaped cluster of stakeholes was found and we speculate that these could represent a lightweight structure, perhaps a wattle screen. This could have hidden or contained activities happening at the centre of the site.



*Artist reconstruction of the timber circle. Artwork by Leah Marshall*

At the close of the excavations, we had no dating evidence that allowed us to confidently date the site. However, the charcoal described above, along with other carbonised plant material from the pits, was sent for radiocarbon dating. 11 samples were submitted for dating and apart from one rogue Mesolithic hazelnut and a post-medieval date from a disturbed top layer, the remaining nine dates cluster around 3000 BC. This confirms that the pit circle is a Late Neolithic timber circle, the first dated example from Somerset, and a site of both regional and national importance. Timber circles were freestanding, rather than roofed structures and represent some of the earliest circular architecture in Britain. They are monuments that acted as an arena for ritual activities, which may have included the observation and celebration of celestial events. The timbers may have been carved or painted and it is possible that they also supported lintels, as seen acted out in stone at Stonehenge itself. A characteristic of many timber circles is a central feature, suggesting that activities focused on the sacred centre of the sacred circle. The U-shaped cluster of stakeholes identified at Priddy adds further weight to this.

The Priddy Timber Circle is our latest addition to the Neolithic Mendip landscape. In recent years, we have uncovered an Early Neolithic enclosure on North Hill, close to the Priddy Nine Barrows, and a further Late Neolithic enclosure, close to this timber circle site. We also previously excavated at the Priddy Circles and were the first to confirm that the Circles also date to the Later Neolithic period. Together, this work is showing that during the Neolithic, the Mendip Hills were without doubt one of Britain's most significant ritual centres.

There is still much post-excavation analysis to carry out on this and the other sites, but we intend to bring all the work together and publish it as a monograph. (This piece first appeared in the **Mendip Society** newsletter and is reproduced here with their kind permission.)

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