

3. Braehead Ironage Settlement — A Volunteer's Tale

Bruce Henry

[First published in *A Touch of GAS* Autumn 2001]

- 1939 -** the Luftwaffe take some aerial photos of Barclay Curle, Scotstoun, the docks and Renfrew - Braehead stands out clearly.
- 1950s -** Dr. J. K. S. St Joseph takes further photos of the farmland to the west of King George V Dock.
- 1968 -** the RAF take even more photos of the area.

With all this photography going on something had to be found to justify it so in March 1973 the late Jack G. Scott started excavating a ditched enclosure identified from the air at Shiels Farm, soon to be developed as a whisky blending and bottling plant (a waste of good malt). He had a grand total of under 10 excavators, but he called in the first volunteers – always assuming the Luftwaffe and RAF used conscripts. By August 1974, the familiar team of students and volunteers had established sites of at least three round houses within the 45m (max) diameter oval ditch dating from the late Bronze/early Iron Age.

Over a quarter of a century later, word got out that Ikea were planning to open a store at the Braehead shopping development. As the only substantial piece of land lay between the whisky bottling plant and the KGV Dock, close to Jack Scott's enclosure, the aerial photographs were revisited. A vague outline of a possibly similar site was identified as worthy of further investigation. Then one evening in late 1999, when heading to a meeting of the Renfrewshire Local History Forum, Derek Alexander noticed that heaps of spoil had been dumped on the site.

Contact with WoSAS revealed that there was concern that this could be an archaeologically sensitive location. To support their efforts RLHF wrote to Glasgow City Council Planning Department expressing concern and received a very sympathetic response. By mid May 2000, the site had been cleared of the fly-tipping material and AOC Archaeology Group had been brought in to carry out an evaluation. AOC quickly confirmed the importance of the site and the City Council imposed a planning restriction resulting in an application from the developers, Capital Shopping Centres, to carry out a full archaeological excavation. With the previous interest shown by RLHF the Council required that the dig should involve the local community.

Barely a year later, around Easter 2001, we were all starting to feel withdrawal symptoms from the lack of surveys and digs caused by the Foot & Mouth outbreak. Relief came when it was confirmed that AOC had secured the contract for the full dig and would be starting in mid-May 2001 continuing over 9 weeks to the end of July. Not quite Time Team but as a complete excavation a lot of work had to be done in a short time. With just four weeks to go the voluntary sector input had to be organised, while AOC got on with setting up the site with such luxuries as cabins for a canteen, office, exhibition, equipment and other storage, not forgetting essentials such as toilets. Oh - and there was a tent for the wet-sieving - in case the sun got too hot!

Slowly at first, volunteers came in from all quarters, GAS, ACFA, RLHF, University students, all seeking either a bit of excavation experience or just the opportunity to

spend a day digging such a prestigious site. Eventually, we had nearly 60 volunteers to organise - initially at a maximum of 5 per day Wednesday to Sunday - Iron Age ritual demanded Mondays and Tuesdays as days off as the site was open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays. After AOC had organised the machine stripping of the turf and top soil, we descended on the site along with about a dozen full-time employees. They were a truly international brigade - Katinka from Denmark, Tessa from Canada, Rod from Australia, the lovely Patrice from Belgium - not forgetting li'l Lindsey from Biggar and bigger Lindsay from Edinburgh, Paul from Clarkston, Scott, Ralph, Chris, Dave, mad Andy, Doug and several others who came and went over the weeks. And I must not forget the Director, Dr. Clare 'It's that time again folks' Ellis.

The first few weeks were reasonably dry with the result that Susan Hunter soon thought she was excavating in the Western Desert - dream on. The wind and a bit of sun soon dried out the surface and as the wind backed to the west the sand was whipped up. A black fleecy lining called teffram was laid down to try to stop the hard won trenches from filling with sand overnight. Later this ploy failed as the rains came and we discovered what the ditches really were - moats or fishponds?

Gradually the three ditches were excavated. The outer one was strangely shallow, not even a metre deep at its eastern arcs either side of the entrance. A total of seven possible round houses proved an enigma at one stage - one was cut by the inner ditch, another cut the ditch and another cut the first round house. There was certainly occupation over a long period with several changes made to the layout of the settlement. Then there were the palisade slots which seemed to cut all the other structures, criss-crossed each other and stopped and started in all sorts of strange places. Who said 'only excavation can tell'? - bunkum it only asks more unanswerable questions!

Artifactual evidence seemed pretty thin on the ground. Some sherds of very coarse pottery, hammer stones, some useful pieces of timber which may help with the dating process and some pieces of worked coal and slate or shale. The last was often in the enigmatic form of a shale disc with a central hole. Varying in size from about 50mm to 300mm in diameter suggested uses were also just as varied. Were they pot-lids - oh yes and the hole was either to put your finger in to lift it off the steaming, hot pot or held the valve for a pressure cooker. Blanks for bracelets or shale necklaces? Obviously of ritual significance suggested one eminent visitor. Finally, everyone came down to earth and it was agreed they were probably weights for fishing nets, or loom weights.

A lot of extremely hard work was put in by everyone. Some of us have never worked so physically hard in our lives. Everyone really enjoyed the experience and the opportunity to learn or just be part of the team on such an important dig. Even Ian Marshall relished the experience of wet sieving in the tent trying to find environmental evidence from endless buckets of muddy samples.

We all await with interest the results of the post excavation work. As we packed up the site, hundreds of soil samples and artifacts awaited transportation to Edinburgh. So don't hold your breath for the report - it's scheduled to be out in Autumn 2003!