
FEATURE ARTICLE

Is East Ilsley older than we thought?

By Sue Burnay

Recently, I needed to clear some ground in my garden to put in a greenhouse. I knew from a previous archaeological dig that I was likely to find remains of the outbuildings of the old pub (the Lamb) that used to stand on the site of my house. So it was not surprising to hit a line of bricks just under the turf. At one end there were 3 complete courses of bricks preserved, reducing to just one layer at the other end where the slope of the garden meant that the brick wall had already been grubbed out. On the inside of the outbuilding wall the original floor was well-preserved, consisting of a layer of solid chalk blocks (about 4-6 inches thick) covered with a layer of lime putty. Removing this chalk floor was hard work – I had to resort to breaking up the chalk blocks with a large lump hammer and a chisel!



The remains of the outer wall of one of the pub outbuildings – up to 3 courses still intact (at west end), only one course at east end of dig. The chalk floor has been removed but the thickness can be seen at the top right of the photo.

Under the chalk floor was a layer of clay with flints, about 6 inches deep, containing quite a lot of pottery shards. Unlike the earlier dig, this time the fragments were much larger and some included rim and/or base section, which should make it easier to date the pottery. This layer was basically the remains of the medieval plough soil, the pottery coming from their practice of manuring, by spreading the contents of the midden on to the soil. The midden would contain all of the rubbish from the houses, including broken pots. Below this relatively shallow layer, the clay substrate continued but there were no more pottery finds and the flint pieces were larger.

So far, nothing unexpected, although with rather more pottery pieces than previously found. But there were some intriguing features also to be seen under the chalk floor. Two areas full

of gravel and flints, but with no pottery, were clearly visible and were distinctly different to the clay with flints that covered all of the area under the floor inside the outbuilding and continued outside the wall. These areas had a definite gap between them and continued outside the area I was clearing. Intrigued, I decided to see how far down this layer went and whether it was as distinct as it first appeared. To my surprise, a cross-section through one of these areas showed a very definite vertical edge to both sides of the gravel area. I went down about 30 inches and still did not find the bottom. At this point I stopped, since the area was supposed to be for my greenhouse and the growing season was fast approaching. The excavated area was filled in but the gravelly area still exists if ever I feel like excavating further.



A cross-section through part of the gravelly area found under the chalk floor – note how distinct the edges of the sides are – quite different to the layer of clay with flints alongside. The width of the gravelly section is about 36 inches.

So what was it? It was too narrow and rectangular to be a well and too distinct to be just an area that stones were cleared to. It also seemed too precise to be a field boundary. It was only when I was looking at the documents for the planning application in Pen Meadow that a comment in the archaeological report suggested a possible answer. When test pits were dug in Pen Meadow, they reported that there were some signs of Iron Age occupation. Is my strange gravelly area the base of a round house? If so, this pushes the occupation date of the village much earlier than we originally thought. Research on the origins of East Ilsley indicated that the village came into being as a settlement in the 11th century [1]. There was certainly a Roman presence at Compton and aerial photographs also indicate a network of Romano-British field systems between Ilsley and Compton. Perhaps there were a few earlier farmsteads already in the area that formed the nucleus of the village.

Maybe East Ilsley is a lot older than we thought!

[1] "The origins of East Ilsley and its name", Nigel Wardell, Sigma Books 2004