

Archaeology in the Area

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The Earlier Prehistoric

The parish of Roxby cum Risby is particularly rich in evidence for the earlier prehistoric period, and thanks to the generosity of local collectors who have donated their finds to the museum, we possess several thousand flint artefacts and pieces of flint-working waste from this parish alone.

The very earliest implements known from the parish are two flint hand axes dating from the middle Palaeolithic (c. 70,000 BC), a time when glaciers advanced and retreated, and our earliest forebears hunted animals like the woolly rhinoceros, bison, elk and horse. One of these axes is on display at the museum, along with some extremely rare 'points' or arrowheads from the late Palaeolithic (c.12,000 BC), found at Risby Warren. When the ice sheets retreated for the last time (c. 10,000 BC), groups of Mesolithic hunter-gathers were attracted to open, sandy heaths like Risby Warren, which Harold Dudley (curator of Scunthorpe Museum 1913 — 1956) described as “..the greatest centre of prehistoric settlement in North West Lincolnshire.” Wind erosion of the sand in the early part of the 20th century allowed thousands of finds to be recovered, many from stratified contexts.

Sheffield's Hill, north of Dragonby, is another important Mesolithic site. The main tool-making raw material, flint, could be found on the surface in nearby deposits of glacial soil. Mesolithic hunter-gatherers were skilled at making points and barbed weapons using very small worked flints, known as microliths — there are many hundreds of these in the museum collections.

Beginning about 4,000 BC, the peoples of the Neolithic period were living and hunting in the parish. The evidence again comes from Risby Warren, where fragments of the earliest types of pottery to be made in this country have been found. The sherds are coarse and thick, but do have incised decoration. Distinctive Neolithic tools such as the beautiful leafshaped arrowheads of that period are also in the museum collections.

Another interesting (wartime ?) find from the parish was a late Bronze Age sword from Highfield Farm

The Iron Age

Finds which may indicate Iron Age settlement in North Lincolnshire are often more difficult to track down than those from the earlier prehistoric. The single recorded find from this period within the parish comes from Roxby Hall Farm, where a fragment of a ribbed bracelet was found in 1980. It is a rare representative of the East Yorkshire 'Arras' culture within our area, and is on display at the museum.

However, just outside the parish boundary, in an area known locally as the 'Money Field', lies the important Iron Age/Romano-British settlement at Dragonby. Parts of the site were excavated between 1964 and 1973, when open-cast mining threatened to encroach. Founded before 100 BC by

peoples who may have only recently emigrated from the continent, the late Iron Age settlement was characterised by an irregular pattern of streets, with properties being surrounded by ditched enclosures. The dwellings would have been thatched wooden 'roundhouses'. At its maximum, the settlement could have covered 8 hectares (20 acres), which in effect made it a small town. It is thought that it was a major tribal or clan centre; the amount and range of the finds suggest an advanced, affluent and flourishing society, whose members were engaged in agriculture, stock-keeping, craft and industrial activities. There was almost certainly trade with other regions, and perhaps even the continent.

Wheat and barley were the principal crops, and the diet included beans, hazelnuts, sloes, blackberries, crab apple and elderberries. Vast quantities of animal bone were found — cattle, sheep, horses and pigs were being kept nearby, and many animal bones were reused for making pins and tools for weaving. The many spindlewhorls found, and the discovery of woad plants in a pit, suggest that textile manufacture and dyeing were being carried out. There is evidence of metalworking in iron, copper and silver, and it is possible that brooches were made on the site. No pottery kilns were discovered, although it is thought they must be nearby. A large display case full of Iron Age vessels from Dragonby can be seen at the museum.

Miniature votive offerings suggest the presence of some kind of shrine or temple. Some high status people lived at Dragonby — the linch-pins of carts or 'chariots' have been found.

Please note — The Dragonby site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and is protected by law.

The Romans

After the invasion of 43 AD, the Iron Age tribes in this area accepted Roman rule — their leaders seem to have mostly sued for peace, although some rebels were doubtless hounded by the Roman army. Occupation at Dragonby was uninterrupted, but the population seems to have declined for about 30 years. A new pottery kiln was established almost immediately to produce exotic wares, although they seem to have been purely for 'export' and were not used on site. Following this dip in habitation, the settlement flourished again. Romano-British roads followed the same alignments, and the Iron Age roundhouses were demolished and replaced by rectangular buildings. Quantities of domestic pottery were used, including imports from Gaul. Much meat and fish was consumed, as well as cereals and exotic herbs such as coriander. Many coins, brooches and rings, were mislaid, only to be recovered almost 2,000 years later. Iron metalworking tools were used, and more pottery kilns came into use. Agriculture seems to have concentrated on pastoral farming, until a switch to mixed farming with a big increase in cereal growing midway through the Roman period.

Some kind of religious temple continued to feature at Dragonby, albeit for the benefit of a different set of Gods. A fine statuette of Mars may have been used there — it is now on display at the museum. Potential evidence for the later adoption of Christianity comes from a fish, scratched onto the side of a pewter flagon, which was recovered from a Roman well. The fish was a symbol of the early Christians.

The Romans were also busy elsewhere in the parish of Roxby. An ongoing survey of the Elwes estate by the Scunthorpe Metal Detector Club has recorded many Roman coins and brooches from new areas, which may indicate hitherto undiscovered small settlements.

Roman pottery kilns are known from the fields south west of Roxby village — some almost complete vessels were discovered in the early 1960's while laying an electricity cable (see display case). Another focus of settlement was the village of Roxby itself.

The Roxby Pavement

In 1699, the Broughton cleric and diarist Abraham de la Pryme took part in what must be the earliest recorded archaeological excavation in North Lincolnshire. Part of a Roman mosaic pavement had been exposed while repairing a fence, most of which had been already destroyed by local schoolboys. This is his account:

Haveing got a spade, a shovel, and a besom, we fell to work, and with a great deal of labour, bared about a yard and a half squair , in bareing of which we cast up many pieces of Roman tyle, ye bone of ye hinder legg of an ox or cow, broken in two, and many pieces of lime and sand, or plaster, painted red and yellow, which had been ye cornish either of some altar, or some part of ye building that was there, whatever it was; and we observed, likewise, that several great stones, in their falling, had broken through ye pavement, and there lay , untill that we removed them. Then, having swept ye space aforesayd, that we had bared, very clean, ye pavement look'd exceeding beautifull and pretty, and one would not imagine that such mean stones could make such pretty work, for they are nothing but four squair bitts of brick, slate, and cauk, set in curious figures and order, find are only of colours red, blew and white, specimens of all which I have sent by the bearer (of the letter here quoted), amongst which is one as larg again as any of the rest, of which many whole rows and rectangular figures of the same bigness, consisting of blew, red, and white, were composed all on ye outside of ye smaller work. Ye material that these little pavers are set in, is a floor of lime and sand, and not plaster as many are, which floor is so rotten with time, that one may easily take up ye little pavers, some whole flowers of which I intend to take up whole, and send to Hatfield, if it be possible.

100 years later, the design of the pavements was engraved and published by William Fowler of Winterton. Repeated exposure and idle souvenir-taking continued to damage the pavement until 1873, when the new landowner V.D.H Cary-Elwes carefully exposed and recorded as much as he could, before boarding over and back-filling to protect the site.

In 1972, the pavement was re-excavated by Chris Knowles of Scunthorpe Museum, when extensive damage was noted. Combined with further observations from a 1989 developer-funded evaluation, we now have a good idea of the plan of the villa. It was a massive building, perhaps 20 metres wide and 40-50 metres long. The main mosaic comprised the floor of the central room 11 metres (35 ft) square, with north and south aisles to either side. There may have been a bath-house at this end of the building. Who lived here, and was this villa a working farm, like the nearby Winterton villa ?

The Sheffield's Hill — a double Anglo Saxon Cemetery by Kevin Leahy and David Williams

Sheffield's Hill is located between the Romano-British villa at Winterton and the Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Dragonby. Before the discovery of the Anglo- Saxon cemeteries it was best known as an important early Mesolithic site but, in 1990, local metal detector users reported finding Anglo-Saxon metalwork on the field. At first these finds, while interesting, did not cause too much excitement. Some months later, however, a more significant find was made on the site. Two gold and garnet pendants and several beads, including an amethyst, were found on the ground surface. This was exciting, as they clearly came from a ploughed out 7th century burial. An evaluation was carried out and it was found that the site was being destroyed as the erosion of the light sandy soil caused the plough to bite ever deeper into the sub-soil. There was also rabbit activity on an epic scale. In view of this it was decided to carry out the total excavation of the site, which was achieved over

five seasons with volunteers directed by staff from the North Lincolnshire Museum at Scunthorpe.

The site lies on the crest of Lincoln Edge, the limestone escarpment running north-south through Lincolnshire. The limestone here is overlain by wind-blown cover sand, giving a highly acidic soil which has dissolved the skeletons leaving in some cases pseudomorphs of the bodies, like the 'sand men' seen at Sutton Hoo. This phenomenon is not understood, but it is thought that the decomposition of the bone had locally raised the PH, allowing a precipitation of mineral salts. What we saw was not the outline of the body but an area of staining around the dissolved bones. The lack of skeletal material was compensated for by the remarkable survival of other organic traces. Coffins appeared as dark stains, and it was possible to see outlines of wooden vessels in the graves. In some graves the body stain was overlain by the traces of tree branches, a practice that can be paralleled at the Cleatham cemetery in North Lincolnshire, where many graves contained masonry from a nearby Romano-British villa. It is probable that this practice was intended to protect the corpse from scavenging animals. Some organic remains were preserved by metal corrosion products, with textiles, wood and leather surviving in both their original arid mineralised forms. Because of the high level of survival the grave groups could not be excavated on site and were lifted as earth blocks, which are being investigated at the laboratory of the York Archaeological Trust. As work progressed on Sheffield's Hill it became clear that we had two distinct cemeteries, one dating to the 6th century and, ten metres to the south, a second cemetery of 7th century date. Both cemeteries had sub-rectangular boundaries marked in places by shallow ditches and the outlines of tree roots. Aerial photography showed that the eastern side of our field contained an ancient field system on the same alignment as the cemetery boundaries. Unfortunately, ground conditions meant that the crop marks did not extend over the site, but it is likely that the cemeteries lay within these fields. The fields are as yet undated, but they could be Romano-British.

At Sheffield's Hill we have a classic example of paired Anglo-Saxon cemeteries

Cemetery I was typical of the 6th century with its random scatter of inhumations and two urned cremations. The burials were accompanied by the usual range of grave goods, brooches, sleeve clasps and beads. There were few weapon burials, which is typical of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Lincolnshire. On the edge of the cemetery were two graves, surrounded by small ring ditches. These lay on the crest of the escarpment, although their small size would hardly have made them prominent features in the landscape. Within the ditches were two 6th century graves, one containing a spear and the other a group of female dress fittings. Between the two ring ditches was a third grave also containing female dress fittings. While these burials are well equipped with grave goods, none could be described as being rich or otherwise out of the ordinary. Around the ring ditches were the graves of several children. Nothing survived of the bodies, but most of them contained small domestic pots.

Cemetery II is typical of what is known as the 'Final Phase' of early Anglo-Saxon burial, which occurred towards the end of the 7th century, when Christian influences began to appear. This cemetery was more organised than its predecessor: the graves were arranged in irregular rows, and, with one exception, were all aligned west-east. No cremations were found, the rite having gone out of use. The grave goods found in Cemetery II are markedly different from those found in the 6th century graves. Large brooches and polychrome beads were no longer worn, and, as is typical of the Final Phase, most graves contained few if any finds. The exception was a small group of rich burials, which contained gold pendants set with garnets or glass jewels, silver bullae and amethysts. With them were the graves of two men who were buried with fine pattern welded swords. These rich burials were clustered together and perhaps represented a dominant family group. We may be looking at evidence for the rise of an aristocracy with privileged access to resources. There does not appear to have been any continuity between the two Sheffield's Hill cemeteries. Indeed, as some 7th century grave goods such as work boxes and chains recognised elsewhere in Lincolnshire are absent, there

may have been a hiatus or a missing phase. No evidence was found for buildings but the quantity of pottery on the site suggests that the settlement was not too far away. One of the 6th century graves was cut through what can be described as a 'fire pit,' which contained Anglo-Saxon pottery.

The Vikings in Roxby

We have very little evidence of Viking settlement in the parish. However, both the principal placenames are of Norse/Danish origin. Roxby derives from 'Hrok's farmstead' — *Hrokr* is an Old Norse personal name. Risby comes from 'The farmstead among the shrubs' - *hris* is Old Norse for shrubs or brushwood. Dragonby seems to be another Viking placename, but it was invented by Lady Winifrede Elwes in 1912 as a name for a new settlement of ironworker's cottages !

Our only piece of physical evidence was found several years ago during the metal detecting survey of the Elwes estate. It is a 9th century mount; this fine piece of Ninth century Irish metal work is decorated with interlaced animals, and was probably lost by an Irish soldier in the Viking army.

Medieval Roxby

'Roscebi' was mentioned in Domesday (1086) as the property of two owners (Norman de Arci and Ralf Pagenel), and of course the village still thrives. However, Roxby parish has 3 Deserted Medieval Villages, all within 2km of each other: Low Risby, High Risby, and Sawcliffe. These villages once had their own parish of *Sawcliffe cum Risby*, a church, and up to 200 inhabitants in total. Why were they abandoned, and what remains of them ?

Sawcliffe

Mentioned in Domesday as 'Saleclife', this village was the property of three absentee landlords, one of which was the unfortunately named Roger de Bully. The population at that time has been estimated by Ray Carey, local historian, at about 70. By 1265 the Manor had passed into the hands of Robert de Insula, whose descendants the Lyles held it until the mid 15th century. A watermill is also mentioned in 1265. By 1336 the population may have been as high as 100, living in about 20 dwellings. It is often difficult to pin down the precise reasons for depopulation of medieval villages, but Sawcliffe seems to have suffered badly from the plague, or 'Black Death'. It began in 1349, and revisited the parish for several years after — it is thought that plague may account for the three priests which are recorded within one year. 55 % tax relief was allowed the village in the same year (1354). Sawcliffe then disappears from the records as a village — the remaining occupants may have been moved to the Risbys, and the land became the grounds of a grand new manor house. The building platforms of houses which once part of the village are still clearly visible as earthworks, however. A large ornamental moat was dug near the manor house, which still survives as a water-filled feature, but the house itself is now gone. The farmhouse that remains has 17th century origins.

Sawcliffe DMV is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

High Risby and Low Risby

‘Risebi’ is mentioned in Domesday, but the distinction between Magna and Parva, or High and Low Risby, only becomes clear in later documents. At High Risby was the church of St Bartholomew, which probably had Saxon origins, and the combined population was about 15 households or 70 people. By 1334 the population may have risen to about 160. Shortly after the Black Death, the population appears to be about the same, probably because Sawcliffe is now being added to the figures. However, by 1431 depopulation has happened — less than 10 families are recorded. This drastic loss is probably not connected with plague, but is caused by conversion of arable fields to sheep pasture — the parish was now owned by Thornholme Priory, who generated much income from wool. The last vicar of St Bartholomews was in 1662, after which the church either fell down or was pulled down, and the parish was combined with Roxby in 1714.

The site of the Church of St Bartholomew is still visible as an earthwork at High Risby, and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The earthwork remains of the villages themselves survived until the mid 20th century — the streets and houses are clearly visible on aerial photographs dated 1947. At some time after this, they were destroyed by ploughing, when the pastures were brought into arable cultivation.