

Alrewas causewayed enclosure

Two Early Neolithic causewayed enclosures at Alrewas and Mavesyn Ridware, dating to the mid-4th millennium BC, were first recorded in air photographs over 40 years ago, but only in the last few years have they been investigated on the ground as part of the Trent Valley Enclosures Project, led by Paul Garwood and Henry Chapman from the University of Birmingham. Causewayed enclosures are the earliest large-scale monumental structures in the British Isles, built from about 3750 BC (some 300 years after the initial emergence of farming societies in Britain). These comprise single or multiple concentric circuits of discontinuous ditches and banks surrounding mostly circular or ovate spaces of various sizes (the Trent valley examples are in the upper-mid range with internal areas up to 200-240 metres across). The purpose of these enclosures was primarily as arenas for gatherings of large numbers of people for ritual, ceremonial and other communal activities, though some also had a defensive role, especially in their later phases of use (after 3500 BC).

The Alrewas enclosure, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, consists of three concentric ditch circuits, around 10 m apart, surrounding a sub-circular area some 200 metres across. The site was surveyed geophysically in 2014 and 2015 (using magnetometry) and the air photographic mapping has been confirmed by re-transcription. In 2015, two trenches were excavated (with the kind permission of the landowner and Historic England) by a team of 35 staff and students from the University of Birmingham across the lines of the earthworks on the north-east and south-west sides of the enclosure. These revealed the plough-truncated remnants of three shallow ditches (surviving to a depth of only 0.2 to 0.75 metres) and evidence for internal banks beside all three ditch lines. There were virtually no flint, stone or pottery artefacts of any kind recovered from any part of the site or from surface collection, but exceptionally unusual finds of charred wood (including several planks) in the primary ditch fills have produced a series of important radiocarbon dates. These indicate enclosure construction very late in the age range for sites of this kind, within the period 3400-3200 BC, making Alrewas one of the last enclosures to be built at the very end of the Early Neolithic.

There was no evidence for a sequence of construction episodes or long-term activity, and it seems most likely that the Alrewas enclosure was built as a single architectural project that may have had a short use-life before being abandoned. There is some evidence for later prehistoric activity, probably Iron Age occupation within the ancient Neolithic earthworks that would still have been visible in the 1st millennium BC, as well medieval and post-medieval land boundaries cutting across the eroded enclosure site in recent centuries.

The results of Trent Valley Enclosures Project, which involved three seasons of fieldwork, are now being analysed by the project leaders, and will be the subject of a research monograph to be published in the next few years.

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