

Elmton Research Project Phase Two Report (2021)

Report on archaeological fieldwork undertaken May-July 2021



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CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Scope of Work.....	4
1.2 Location and Geology.....	5
1.3 Background.....	5
2. Methodology.....	7
3. Results.....	8
4. Conclusions.....	22
5. Acknowledgements.....	24
6. References.....	24

List of Figures

1. Site Location
2. Trench location plan
3. Annotated resistivity survey results
4. Gully feature from Trench One with fill removed
5. Stone loom weights from context [006], Trench One
6. Pit/posthole from Trench Two, with fill removed
7. Iron Age pot sherd from Trench Two
8. Iron Age pot sherd from Trench Two under microscope
9. Ditch/quarry pit under excavation in Trench Two (looking northwards)
10. Base of ditch/quarry pit in Trench Two (looking southwards)
11. Medieval pottery sherds and tile fragment and Mesolithic blade from Trench Three
12. Mesolithic chert blade from Trench Three
13. Medieval wall foundation from Trench Three
14. Iron Age pot sherd from Trench Three

1. Introduction

1.1 Scope of Work

In February 2019, MBarchaeology were commissioned by the Elmtun Community Association to undertake a three-year phase of archaeological training and fieldwork with a group of local volunteers at Elmtun, Derbyshire. The work was funded by the Nineveh Trust on a rolling year-by-year funding award.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, fieldwork was placed on hold throughout 2020 and early 2021 until lockdowns were removed. Work commenced again in May 2021.

The funding for Phase Three (2022) is dependent on the successful completion of Phase Two outcomes, of which this report is part of.

Phase Two fieldwork took the form of a fresh resistivity survey and three open trench excavations in a field on the northern side of the village. The resistivity survey aimed to provide further target areas for excavation based on previous survey results, initially undertaken in 2017.

Excavations were undertaken in July 2021 to coincide with the national Festival of Archaeology. Post-excavation finds analysis was then carried out in September. The results of these form the basis for this report.



Figure One: Site Location

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1.2 Location and Geology

Elmsall is centred at SK 50791 73006 and is approximately 3.5 miles north-east of Bolsover and 8 miles south-west of Worksop. The local geology is of Magnesian Limestone, and the village is set within a mainly agricultural landscape, and surrounded by a wider coal mining region.

1.3 Background

The first recorded settlement at Elmsall comes from the *Domesday Book*, where it is recorded as Helmetune and where lands belonging to Swain Cilt (Swain the Younger) were confiscated and given to the D'Aincourt (later Daincourt) family. In AD1086, this was to Walter, with the land passing to his son Ralf upon his death sometime between AD1088 and AD1103. The Daincourts made the village prosper, largely through the wool trade, and

although its value before AD1066 was just 40s, by AD1086 it had increased to as much as £7.¹ Ralf granted Elmton to the ‘cadet branch’ of his family.

Archaeological research by MBarchaeology as part of the *Elmton Research Project* (2009-present) has revealed evidence for the Nucleated Medieval Village owned by the Daincourts, which comprised a main road, back lane and toft/croft plots. Evidence for the village dovecote and Manor House has also been uncovered.

The *Domesday Book* references a church and priest at Elmton,² suggesting that there was already a church there as part of the Late Saxon settlement. In the 12th century Ralf Daincourt founded a religious house at Thurgarton and gifted to this all his churches. The Foundation Charter issued by Ralf at Southwell Minster in the 1140s names Elmton as one of these.³ In 1328 the church was valued as having ‘1 caracate of attached land at 10 marks’, and in 1530 (in the *Valor Ecclesiastica*) it was valued at 56s 6d.

In *The Dedications of Medieval Churches*, Richard Clark shows evidence in three wills, dated 1549, 1551 and 1555 respectively, of the church being dedicated to Saint Nicholas.⁴ Another will in the Lichfield Diocesan records, dated 1542, also refers to the church being dedicated to Saint Nicholas.⁵ In all subsequent records, for example Ecton (1742) and Cox (1875-1879) the dedication is to St. Peter.⁶

The present church of St. Peter was built in 1771 and is a Grade II Listed Building. Cox confirms that the present church replaced ‘a fine old cruciform church with a central tower, which was in bad repair’.⁷ A petition, now held in the British Library, was made by the villagers to the Quarter Sessions asking the Justices for a Brief to demolish the old church and rebuild a new one at the cost of £1,280.⁸

¹ John Morris (ed) *Domesday Book: Derbyshire*, Chichester: Phillimore, 1978, Entry 8-5

² *Domesday Book* 276 c, d

³ Information taken from research carried out by local historian Ellis Morgan and stored within his archive material

⁴ Richard Clark ‘The Dedication of Medieval Churches in Derbyshire’, *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 112, 1992, pp. 48-61

⁵ ECLHG archive

⁶ Clark, ‘Dedication of Medieval Churches’

⁷ J. Charles Cox *Derbyshire*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), p.153

⁸ The petition of the inhabitants of Elmton to the Quarter Sessions. British Library, 4 Anne, cap 14

Fieldwork between 2009-2019 by MBArchaeology and local volunteers has revealed evidence of the main road, southern back lane and toft/croft plots on the southern side of the village. Existing house boundaries and public footpaths to the north side of the village are equidistant to the southern back lane, which suggested there may well have been Medieval developments on this northern side. Phase One (2019) of the current project provided evidence for the northern back lane in two separate trenches, as well as evidence for a toft/croft boundary on this northern side.⁹ Phase Two fieldwork aimed to provide further evidence for the development of the village on the northern side.

2.Methodology

A resistivity survey of the field to the north of the main road and directly across from the Elm Tree Pub was undertaken in June 2021 across a gridded area measuring 40m x 40m. The survey used a RM15D meter manufactured by Geoscan Research and adopted a standard survey resolution of 1m x 1m over the series of grids, using 0.5m probe spacing.

Three open trench excavations were then undertaken to target potential features identified via the geophysical survey. Trench One measured 5m x 1m on a north-south alignment and was located over a circular feature that was visible on the ground and as a large, black anomaly on the geophysics results in the north-eastern grid square. The purpose was to try to identify if the outer circle was a ditch and whether any dateable material could be recovered.

Trench Two measured 2m x 2m and was located directly in the centre of the circular feature to explore the potential for an inner hearth or central post hole. Trench Three was located to the east of the circle, also in the north-east grid square, and initially measured 4m x 1m on an east-west alignment, although it was extended westwards by a further 1m during excavations. Its purpose was to explore one of the linear features (A) shown on the geophysics results.

⁹ M. Beresford "Elmton Research Project Phase One Report: Report on archaeological fieldwork undertaken April - October 2019", (2019)

All trenches were excavated by context, with context records, height levels, photographs and plans being completed. A one hundred percent sieving strategy was also employed.

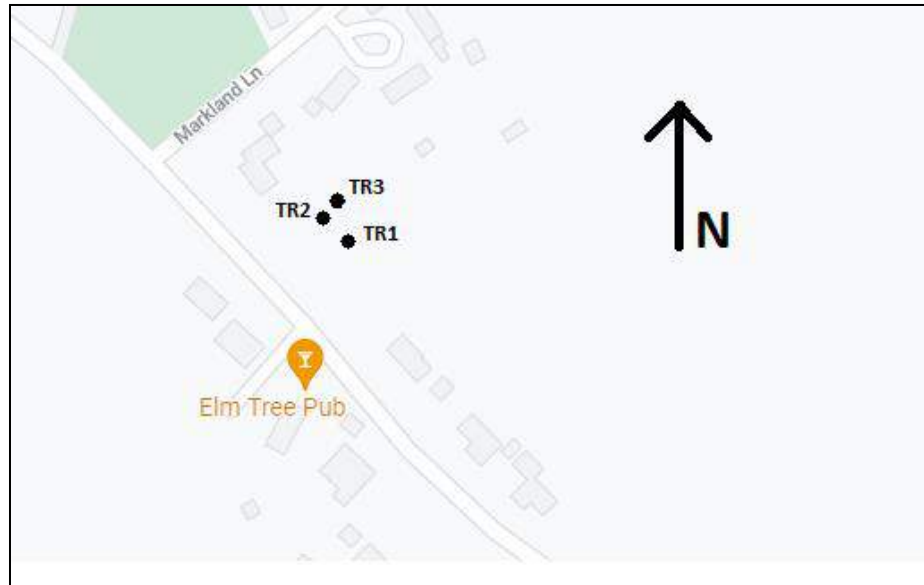


Figure Two: Trench location plan
(© MBarchaeology, 2021)

3.Results

Resistivity survey

The resistivity survey highlighted several features that are worth targeting via excavation in order to more fully understand them. The most obvious features are two linears (A) that run north-south across the entire survey grid, with a large black anomaly (B) approximately 12m in diameter sitting between the two in the north-east grid square. A second, smaller black anomaly (C) can be seen to the immediate north of this, and it appears to continue beyond the northern limit of the survey grid.

A further small, black square feature (D) is apparent at the southern end of the survey grid, sitting between the two southern grid squares. Two more square/rectangular features (E & F) can be seen along the western extent of the survey grid.

The two linear features (A) may well be field boundaries from an early, pre-Medieval village layout – the eastern most one aligns with the current house boundary just to the north of the survey field. Feature B, which is visible on some aerial photographs and Google images as a circular feature, can be seen on the ground as a shallow depression that is circular in shape and approximately 12-13m in diameter. Feature C is unclear but may be linked to feature B. Features D-F have the potential to be small buildings and may relate to the post-Norman tofts and crofts on the northern side of the main road.

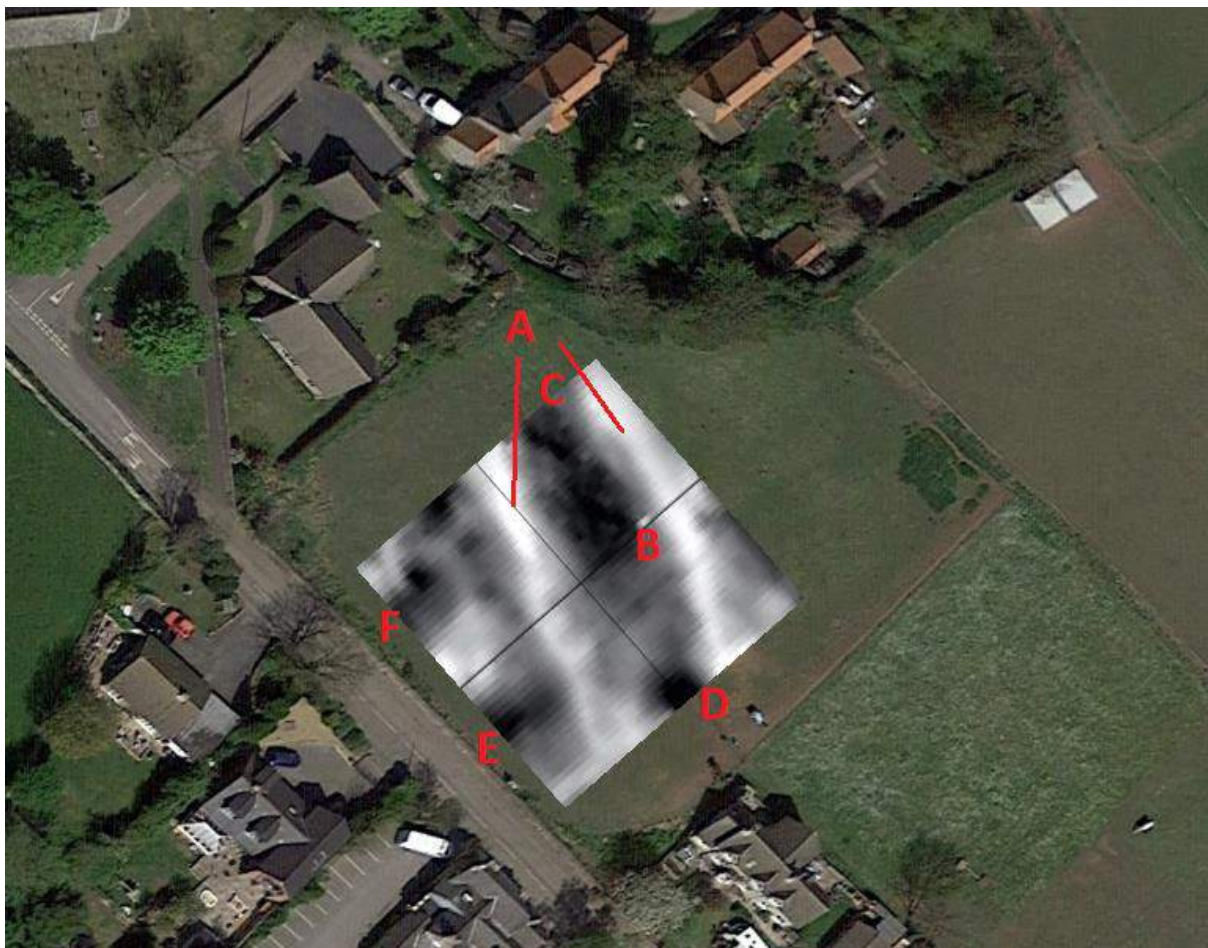


Figure Three: Annotated resistivity survey results
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Trench One (SK50334 73375)

Trench One had a thin layer (7cm) of ploughsoil [001] containing mixed artefacts, under which was an orangey-brown silt deposit [002] c. 10cm thick, that included moderate limestone pieces and occasional charcoal flecks/pieces. Again, artefacts were mixed but included several sherds of Medieval pottery and one piece of possible Iron Age pot.

Also at this level, under [001], and truncating [002], a gully/channel was uncovered on the alignment of the circular feature. This had a mid-brown sandy silt fill [003] that contained frequent limestone pieces and moderate charcoal flecks/pieces, but no artefacts. The depth of the gully was between 8-12cm and is visible on Google Earth images as a circular feature approximately 12m in diameter, although it shows on the resistivity results as a dark black anomaly.



Figure Four: Gully feature from Trench One with fill removed
(© MBArchaeology, 2021)

In the northern quadrant of the trench, a thin lense deposit was uncovered [004] 8cm thick and 45-50cm long. This comprised a greyish-brown silt (no artefacts) that sat directly on top

of another shallow (c.3cm) dump deposit [005] that comprised an orangey-brown silt. Limited artefacts were recovered from this layer although those that were recovered were mixed and included post-Medieval pottery, bone and metal items. Below this, an orangey-brown sandy silt [008] was exposed (c.14-18cm thick). Finds included pottery sherds spanning Medieval through to post-Medieval, bone and a small limestone loom weight. Natural bedrock sat directly below this.

Across the remainder of the trench, abutting [004] and [005], an orangey-brown sandy silt [006] was uncovered (c.2-5cm thick). This ran directly underneath the gulley cut [007] and sat above [008] at the northern end of the trench and the natural bedrock in the southern end and the middle.

Artefacts in [006] included seven loom weights (see Figure Five), animal bone, a small iron nail and a sherd of 13th-14th century Medieval pottery with an oxidised fabric and a mid-green suspension glaze. This suggests that the gulley is no earlier than the 13th century.



Figure Five: Stone loom weights from context [006], Trench One
(© MBArchaeology, 2021)

Trench Two (SK50334 73375)

Trench Two had a thin layer (c.20cm) of ploughsoil [010] containing mixed artefacts, including a piece of Iron Age pottery (see Figures Seven and Eight), under which was a compact orangey-brown silt with moderate limestone pieces [012]. This deposit had several Medieval pot sherds including splashed and suspension glazes and shell tempered fabrics, as well as two more stone loom weights and was approximately 10cm thick. In the centre of the trench, and continuing northwards, was a loose/friable infill [011] of a pit or large posthole (c. 1.3m in diameter but with large stones / bedrock in the southern area that were possibly used as post-pads). When removed, the fill (which was c.18cm deep) comprised a greyish-brown silty sand with orangey patches that included frequent limestone pieces and chunks. Artefacts were limited to just one small animal tooth and a small piece of metal slag.



Figure Six: Pit/posthole from Trench Two, with fill removed
(© MBarchaeology, 2021)



Figure Seven: Iron Age pot sherd from Trench Two
(© MBArchaeology, 2021)





Figure Eight: Iron Age pot sherd from Trench Two under microscope showing fabric of pot (above) and dimensions of inclusions in mm (below)
 (© MBArchaeology, 2021)



Below the pit / posthole, and continuing under [012] also, was what appeared to be the fill of a ditch or quarry hole. This was an orangey-brown silt [014] with degraded limestone patches similar in appearance to [012] but much less compact and with frequent limestone chunks. Occasional charcoal pieces and flecks were noted in the north-east corner of the fill of the feature. Again, like [011], artefacts were very limited, and comprised two small, abraded Medieval pot sherds at c. 10cm deep into the fill (30cm below ground level). Natural bedrock was reached directly below [014] at a depth of 72cm below ground level.



Figure Nine: Ditch/quarry pit under excavation in Trench Two (looking northwards)
(© MBArchaeology, 2021)



Figure Ten: Base of ditch/quarry pit in Trench Two (looking southwards)
(© MBarchaeology, 2021)

Trench Three (SK50334 73375)

Trench Three had a thin layer (c.8-10cm) of ploughsoil [013] containing mixed artefacts, under which an orangey-brown silty clay subsoil [015] was uncovered. At the same depth (c.10cm below ground level) a stone wall [017] was uncovered running approximately north-south at the eastern end of the trench. This was approximately 60cm wide and was constructed of two outer limestone ‘facings’ with a rubble and soil fill between the two. The construction cut was identified either side of the wall with the fill of this [016] comprising an orangey-brown silty clay with small limestone inclusions. This appeared to be redeposited [015], although recovered artefacts were all Medieval in date – eight sherds of 13th – 16/17th pottery, a fragment of Medieval tile (6cm x 2.5cm x 2.5cm) and some pieces of animal bone – except for a Mesolithic blade made from Derbyshire chert.



Figure Eleven (above): Medieval pottery sherds and tile fragment and Mesolithic blade from Trench Three
Figure Twelve (below): Mesolithic chert blade from Trench Three. The bulb of percussion can be seen at the top in the right-hand picture
 (© MBArchaeology, 2021)



The blade's tip has broken off but it is mainly intact and the bulb of percussion (the small 'lump' where the chert core was struck to remove the blade), or bulbar scar, can be seen on the reverse (see Figure Ten).

To the east of the wall, the construction cut [016] cut through a reddish-brown silty sand/degraded limestone [018] with no artefacts. Deemed natural. Underneath the wall and at the base of the construction cut either side of the wall was a thin make-up layer comprising an orangey-brown degraded limestone. This contained three sherds of early Medieval pottery – a pale cream fabric with yellow splashed glaze and two sherds of shell-tempered wares. These would all comfortably sit in the 13th century. Two further sherds of suspension glaze (one olive green, one yellowy brown) were recovered from within the rubble fill of the wall foundation, alongside a small piece of bone, a shell fragment and a small iron nail. All these finds give a construction date of no earlier than c. AD1250 for the wall.



Figure Thirteen:

Medieval wall foundation from Trench Three

(© MBArchaeology, 2021)

Context [015], which sat to the west of the wall and ran for over 3m to the western end of the trench and beyond, was tested via sondage to see if it comprised compact floor surfaces to a building or evidence of plough soils / trackway abutting a boundary wall. The sondage was removed 5cm at a time to a total depth of 80cm. No obvious change in soil composition was noted, although artefacts were recovered in the first six 'spits' (ie. up to 30cm deep from top of context). The final four layers (c. 35-80cm deep) were void of artefacts.

In spit one (0-5cm), twenty sherds of pottery were recovered and all were Medieval in date. These were majoritively 13-14th century except for a couple of pieces of 16-17th century pottery, and included splashed and suspension wares, shell tempered wares and part of a jug handle. Most were fairly abraded although three or four pieces had fairly sharp breaks. Several bone pieces were also recovered, alongside three pieces of clay pipe and a broken loom weight.

Spit two (5-10cm) also contained some animal bone pieces, two small clench nails (c. 1cm long) and eleven sherds of Medieval pottery markedly similar in form and fabric to those in spit one. Spit three (10-15cm) contained only five small, abraded sherds of Medieval pottery (suspension glaze and shell tempered wares).

Spit four (15-20cm) also contained five small, abraded sherds of Medieval pottery (suspension glaze and shell tempered wares) and five small fragments of bone. Spit five (20-25cm) had one single sherd of brown-glazed Medieval pottery and spit six (25-30cm) had one piece of an Iron Age rim sherd markedly similar in fabric to that from Trench Two, although the fabric was slightly darker.



Figure Fourteen (above and overleaf): Iron Age pot sherd from the lowest level of [015], Trench Three
(© MBArchaeology, 2021)



4. Conclusions

The 2021 Phase Two results of the Elmton Research Project have added further information into the development of the village on the north-eastern side of the main road. Phase One showed that there was indeed a second back lane and property boundaries on this side, and a second year of fieldwork during Phase Two has provided further Medieval evidence. The geophysical survey results appear to suggest further boundaries or subdivisions of land, and Trench Three gave an insight into the construction of these, at least in part. The stone-built wall shows the linear boundaries were permanent structures, and the dating evidence from within the wall and the construction cut indicates they are Medieval in date, and not Saxon or prehistoric as first thought. The question that now arises is to why they do not match the right-angled layout of main road/back lane and the toft/croft plots, although previous evidence such as the Medieval building in the beer garden of the Elm Tree Inn highlights that there are parts of the village that does not conform to the regular pattern.

Thus said, the presence of Iron Age pottery and loom weights (these are markedly similar to loom weights found in the Romano-British enclosures of Whitwell Woods several years ago) suggests that there is a pre-Medieval landscape within the village core and not just on the outskirts in Church Field. It still remains unclear as to whether floor surfaces to the immediate west of the wall (and to at least 25-30cm depth) are parts of a building, a trackway, or some other feature. 30cm seems a rather deep build-up for a trackway or house floor, and the linear features (feature A on the survey results) run for at least 30m so are more likely to be field boundaries or a trackway, and yet they are located within an area that should be the rear property yards and gardens of the village houses. Phase Three will see us explore the two rectangular anomalies on the road frontage (features E and F) and will hopefully prove whether these are indeed Medieval houses and may help us to understand the Trench Three results more clearly.

It was at first hypothesised that the circular feature explored in Trenches One and Two in 2021 may be evidence of an Iron Age roundhouse, and given the abundance of loom weights and the fragments of Iron Age pottery this theory did have some archaeological support. That said, no in situ evidence of any date could conclusively be tied to either the ring ditch feature or the central pit/posthole, and pottery recovered from contexts immediately adjacent to the

gully seem to indicate a Medieval date. It may be that the limestone quarry pit truncated or removed any in situ evidence, although the fact the circular feature is still visible as a slight depression on the ground strongly suggests it is a more modern feature. It is odd that no artefacts were recovered from within the fill of the ditch/gully, although only a narrow, one metre length of the complete ditch was excavated – a larger exploration of ditch sections may help shed light on to its age and purpose.

One possibility on the quarry pit in Trench Two is that it was the source of the large amount of limestone that would have been need to build the two linear walls/boundaries. The presence of the two abraded Medieval pot sherds shows that it was not a natural feature, and the dating from these appears to tie-in with that from the construction of the wall in Trench Three. It could equally have been the source for limestone building material for buildings on the south-west side of the main road, or the possible buildings in the current study zone. Again, further fieldwork in Phase Three in 2022 may help shed light on this.

In conclusion, there appears to be more evidence of the early Medieval village development discovered via Phase Two fieldwork. The challenge that now arises is understanding where in the village development this sequence fits, and may remain unanswerable until the end of the third and final season in 2022.

Acknowledgements

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