

Irton Archaeology Project

In 2012 a field to the west of St. Paul's church, Irton was geophysically surveyed and excavated as required by planning laws to extend the graveyard. Features were found that showed human activity that dated to a period spanning that of Irton Cross which has been in its place since the early 800s AD.

These facts gave rise to the long-held view that there had probably been a religious settlement on this remote, elevated sandy bank high above the River Irt to the north and the flooded Irton Moor to the south.

In order to check if this was likely a geophysics survey was made (November 2021) of a 2 ha. field to the north and west of the present church and that of Irton Cross. This field, No. 897 on OS map 2nd Ed 1899, is almost level ground and very slightly higher than the church. Features were revealed from magnetometry that were similar to those from the field surveyed in 2012 ie possible soil-filled ditches.

Because there are always uncertainties between geology and possible features of settlement a small project was organised in 2023 to evaluate the geophysics survey.

It was generously funded by Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society and Geological Disposal Facility Community Partnership.

Three trenches were opened, each one was 15 metres long by 1.5 metres wide and where the previous geophysics survey by a magnetic searching instrument indicated possible regular features, some were geological but there were also real, man-made features.

So, not a very large proportion of field was opened to be examined on this occasion. The topsoil was only about 200mm deep on top of what is the massive sand bank that the church and all around sits upon. The archaeologist, Martin Railton of Eden Heritage Ltd. said that the soil would have been much deeper long ago and will have been reduced by ploughing. A good number of post-holes of different diameters were found and could have been both supporting a building(s) and the smaller ones possibly palisade fencing. Boundary ditching was also found, the same in two trenches, probably continuous and so creating a large enclosure to the north of the present church site. Some of this ditching might connect with those found in 2012. That won't be known for sure until all is drawn up on the maps.

An intriguing collection of hollows were found in the eastern-most trench which resembled graves but no bone or grave goods were found so it seems unlikely they are. However samples of sand from within them and the post-holes have been taken and analysis may tell us more.

There were very few finds, a hand-size piece of iron slag, a possible loom weight, perhaps made from a tile, part of a metal bracket or hinge and small amounts of charcoal which hopefully could give us some dates that would tell us when these features were in use.

The survey in 2021 and this excavation were carried out by Eden Heritage Ltd. of Appleby. It will take a couple of months to have the archaeologist's report but when we do it will be available.

Grateful thanks are due to CWAAS, GDF and to the landowner who let us excavate the field and the Parochial Church Council of St. Paul's who allowed us to use the protection of the church in such weather.