

The Exmoor Iron Project

(Newsletter No 10 2005) See also Sherracombe Ford article.



Excavating one of the structures at Sherracombe Slade.

(Photo: Terry Green)

The Exmoor Iron Project, known as ExFe and led by Dr Gill Juleff of Exeter University, is drawing to a close, after having examined Romano-British and Medieval iron working sites at Brayford, Sherracombe Ford, Blacklake Wood and now this year at Shircombe Slade. This year no NDAS members were involved, but nevertheless a small group of us paid a visit to the site on the Open Day, 4th September.

The site is about a kilometre up the Barle Valley from Marsh Bridge to the north of Dulverton. Some years ago Gill Juleff showed the site to a group of NDAS members when we still had a programme of summer visits. We were shown low mounds under the trees beside the river and fragments of iron slag. At a point where there was a fairly wide flood plain, there were slight earthworks, suggesting buildings. This is where the ExFe team has excavated this year.

Before excavation three heaps of slag were clearly visible as well as the earthworks suggesting buildings. At least two buildings were initially identified. The excavation revealed earthbonded rubblestone masonry representing three structures. Two of these were three-sided buildings (the open sides facing each other) containing the remains of stone-built furnaces and partly covered with slag heaps. They did not appear to be domestic, but were probably involved in the smelting process; one of these structures produced medieval pottery. The third building was a very roughly rectangular structure that contained little or no industrial or domestic material. However, the floor of this building was much lowered and may have been thoroughly cleaned – thereby removing any archaeological material. Such a pattern has been seen in a domestic context at such sites as the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy in Yorkshire.

Unlike the nearby Blacklake Wood site, which has now been radiocarbon dated to the later Roman period, this site appears therefore to be medieval. On the face of it, the scale of operation was quite small, though there are other sites along the Barle which, taken together, may add up to a moderately extensive industry.