THE FORESTERS' FOREST

The Foresters' Forest is a Heritage Lottery Funded Landscape Partnership programme to raise awareness and participation in the built, natural and cultural heritage of the Forest of Dean. 2016 marked the Development phase of the programme with £405,000 awarded from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to fund development plans and individual projects using volunteers from local communities.

One of the projects initiated, 'Unearthing our Heritage', sought to better understand the archaeology of the Forest and members of Dean Archaeology Group (DAG) were involved from day one.

Undertaken entirely on Forestry Commission land (for ease of access) 'Unearthing our Heritage' consisted of three main components: a Lidar validation survey, the compilation of a photo record of historical buildings or structures, and an excavation of a chosen site. DAG members did contribute to the photo record database but the Lidar survey and site excavation were the main focus.

Lidar (Light Detection and Ranging) is a form of aerial survey in which short pulses of laser energy are fired from an aircraft towards the ground, and the time taken for these to be reflected back to the aircraft is measured. Measurement of this time can be converted to distance by halving the return time and multiplying by the speed of light, and, so long as the height and position of the aircraft are known, this information can be used to create accurate maps of the topography of the ground surface. Crucially, Lidar can 'see' through the covering vegetation and therefore is an invaluable tool for surveying wooded areas.

Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service used Lidar as part of the wider Forest of Dean Archaeological Survey, a 10 year project which began in 2008 and this survey method identified 1700 potential archaeological sites in the Forest ranging from the Bronze Age right through to the 20th century. 'Unearthing our Heritage' aimed to build on the County Council survey by investigating and recording some of the 1700 sites identified and, in turn, identify opportunities for further study.

Four pilot survey areas in the Forrest were selected: Birchill, Blackpool Brook Woods, Great Bourts Inclosure and Welshbury hillfort. DAG had already been involved with an excavation on the latter site so we elected to again work on the hillfort. There were six volunteers (of which four were DAG members) in what came to be known as the Welshbury Crew. It is also important to mention however, that one of our members also worked on the Great Bourts Inclosure site and indeed ended up doing almost the entire survey after that team quickly dwindled to only one volunteer!

The project was managed on behalf of the Foresters' Forest by Worcester Archaeology and they began by organising a number of training days around the Forest. At these sessions we were briefed on the objectives of the survey, taught the necessary skills and issued with the equipment, lidar maps and reporting forms needed to carry out the work. Between a cold January and a mild April we made a number of visits to Welshbury, systematically walking over and around the hillfort:

recording, measuring and photographing everything we discovered. It was a very successful survey, not only did we validate many of the features identified by lidar but we also recorded a further 28 new features that had not been previously recorded. A full breakdown of all the features identified was:

Uncharacterised: 8
Charcoal platforms: 44
Quarries: 4
Trackways: 1
Banks: 2
Mounds: 8
Iron Working Site: 1

The discovery of the iron working site was particularly noteworthy since in addition to various earthworks, including a large pit, we also found iron slag (a waste product) and several sherds of Roman pottery. With the possible exception of the iron working it was not possible to date any of the discoveries, not that we expected to, as such features have been constructed in all periods since the Iron Age.

Participants in the lidar validation survey were then invited to attend the Yorkley and Tomlin Field School organised and run by the team from Worcester Archaeology. The school provided an opportunity to learn and put into practice field archaeology skills including excavation, recording and finds processing. It also had the objective of promoting the richness of archaeological sites in the forest and raising awareness within the local community. As a result there were many visits from local residents, schools and journalists.

The school operated for a total of nine days between 13 May and 24 May 2016. The two sites chosen for the excavation were only 500M apart. The first was a sub-rectangular earth bank on the edge of the village of Yorkley Slade. The feature is clearly visible on lidar photographs as indeed are three other such enclosures in the forest at Ruardean Woodside, Mile End and Wigpool. The similarity between these four sites has led to the suggestion that they are all fortlets built in the early Roman period to protect and manage the production of iron ore. In 2011 the Ruardean site was excavated by the Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service and based on the finds recovered was judged to be a Roman military site.

The purpose of the excavation at Yorkley was to determine the date and status of the enclosure and to identify whether the bank contained any structure that would help to understand the construction, use and abandonment of the site.

The deserted settlement of nearby Tomlin is believed to date to the 18th Century and was abandoned in the 1920s. The objective here was to produce a baseline record of the upstanding remains, to collect surface finds to establish the date of the settlement and its abandonment; and to stimulate further research into the history of the site. Some recording was undertaken at Tomlin but, sadly, had to be curtailed early on in the process due to the presence of Japanese Knotweed.

Fortunately the excavation at the Yorkley enclosure encountered no such impediment other than the odd rainy day which only served to make us all very

muddy! A trench measuring 15M long and 1.75M wide was dug across the bank and ditch and five test pits (1M x 1M) were dug in the interior of the enclosure. A total of 1007 pottery sherds were recovered mainly from the medieval period (55 sherds) and post-medieval/modern (950 sherds); with only two sherds being identified as Roman. Most of the post-medieval/modern pottery dated from the 19th and early 20th centuries and consisted of domestic rubbish that had been thrown into the depression overlying the enclosure ditch. Small quantities of glass, charcoal and iron slag were also recovered from across the site and one of the tests pits revealed part of a possible shaft furnace and associated furnace material.

Based on all of this evidence the indication is that the enclosure was used for metal working around the 12th to early 14th centuries AD.

This result is intriguing in that of the four sites in the forest that were thought to be Roman in origin, one has been proved to be of Roman date and one has been dated to the medieval period. So what of the other two: will they be Roman, medieval or an entirely different period? As ever, archaeology tends to raise more questions than answers. We will have to wait for an opportunity to excavate these two remaining sites, hopefully, in the not too distant future.