

## **Arras 200: Revisiting Britain's most famous Iron Age cemetery**

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*In the bicentenary year of its excavation, remote sensing has revealed, for the first time, the full extent of this iconic type-site Iron Age cemetery and its landscape context in East Yorkshire. A total of 23 ha was surveyed, revealing new insights concerning the burial ground and damage through modern farming.*

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### **Research background**

*“I saw in my journey to York many hundreds of tumuli, which I take to be Roman ... at Arras on this side Wighton, not mentioned in any author which I intend to dig into and take a whole account and descriptions there of”. Abraham de la Pryme, January 1699 (quoted in Jackson 1870, 200).*

It was not until 1815-1817 that the burial mounds were excavated by Edward Stillingfleet, Barnard Clarkson and Thomas Hull and mapped by William Watson in August 1816 (Figure 1) (Stead 1979). Spectacular discoveries included the so-called King's barrow, — a chariot burial containing two horses— the Charioteer's barrow and the Queen's barrow, — a richly furnished grave of a woman with glass beads and a gold ring. In 1850, the Yorkshire Antiquarian Club undertook further excavations, followed by Canon William Greenwell in 1876. Ian Stead undertook limited excavation there in 1959, following a magnetometer survey by Martin Aitken, one of the earliest undertaken in the UK (Stead 1979).

The importance of the Arras cemetery and its early archaeological investigation made it the eponymous site for the so-called Arras culture, giving it an iconic status within British Iron Age studies. The Arras culture is perhaps best known for its chariot burials, all but three of the

27 or so UK examples are in eastern Yorkshire. The rather exotic character of Arras Culture chariot graves in Iron Age Britain, their resemblance to burials in northern France, and the name of the group inhabiting the region during the Roman era, the *Parisi*, led to suggestions of migration, which is still a topic of considerable debate.

### **Arras 200: The new surveys**

To commemorate the bicentenary of the original discoveries, and to monitor the present condition of the Arras cemetery site, a team directed by Peter Halkon undertook a new geophysical survey there in autumn 2017, covering 23 ha using a Foerster cart-mounted magnetometer with GPS (Figure 2). A limited resistivity survey was also conducted by the East Riding Archaeological Society (ERAS).

The Arras cemetery comprises square barrows, which are square enclosures surrounding a central burial, covered by a mound created from the ditch spoil. Some have a central grave pit, in others the burial was placed directly on the ground surface. Certain cemeteries in the region also contain small round barrows. The earliest date from the later fifth century BC, continuing into the first century BC. Closely resembling those in northern France and Belgium, with outliers as far east as the Czech Republic, eastern Yorkshire contains the biggest concentration of square barrows in the UK (Halkon 2013).

During the 2017 magnetometer survey, 34 barrows were detected (Figure 3), a surprisingly low figure considering many more are recorded through aerial photography and on earlier maps. Watson plotted 88 barrows in 1815. A further 12 were added by the Yorkshire Antiquarian Club excavation of 1850. On the 1852 Ordnance Survey map only 29 remained upstanding. In 1890 13 barrows were mapped, 11 in 1953 and only 3 in 1959. By 1970, none survived above the ground surface. Stead (1979) collated all existing information, recording that originally there were at least 100 barrows. Aerial photography in the 1970s and 1980s revealed still more barrows, appearing as crop marks; these were plotted by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) (Stoertz 1997). This survey showed the scale of the cemetery and its relationship with other features, including a settlement consisting of a drove-way flanked by enclosures extending over 1km to the north.

### **Results and discussion**

Because of the considerable disparity between the geophysics results and the barrows previously plotted, all available sources of information were consulted including 2007 Google Earth imagery, aerial photographs held by Historic England's National Monuments Record, and aerial photographs taken in the 1990s, 2007 and 2010 (Figure 4). The results have been integrated into a database that provides a concordance between all the different sources of information, giving a total of about 200 barrows within the Iron Age cemetery (Figure 5). Most of them were of the larger type, with rounded corners and no visible central grave. It should be noted that glacial features on the geophysics and aerial photographs make barrows in some areas difficult to distinguish. The difference between the number of barrows detected through aerial photography and geophysics may also be explained by unresponsive ditch fills, or plough damage. This was confirmed through drone photography on the north side of the A1079 in April 2018, which showed only 40 barrows still visible as soil marks, many of these scarred by cultivation in recent years (Figure 6). Only nine Bronze Age round barrows are protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments, however, none of these now stand above the field surface.

This new project exemplifies the benefits of an integrated approach, combining historical research, aerial photography, geophysics and excavation results. For the first time we have a complete picture of the iconic Arras cemetery and its limits. While still lacking a detailed chronological sequence, we can now start to identify different clusters of barrows that might reflect family groups within the cemetery (cf. Figure 5). Moreover, the presence of the Bronze Age barrows could indicate an attempt by Iron Age peoples to establish a link with previous monuments in the landscape, possibly as an act of territorial appropriation and the creation of tradition. The Arras cemetery was placed in a prominent landscape position with long views south towards the Humber Estuary and northwards over a major valley through the Yorkshire Wolds. Access to the Iron Age settlement from Sancton Dale to the south would have been through the cemetery. It might be no accident that centuries later the foot of Sancton Dale became the location of a large Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery, suggesting a similar territorial claim by new incoming peoples.

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## Figure captions

Figure 1- William Watson's map of the Arras Cemetery 5<sup>th</sup> August 1816 (courtesy of the British Museum).

Figure 2 – The landscape setting of the 2017 magnetometer survey at Arras by James Lyall (P. Halkon).

Figure 3 - Magnetometer survey results. The frequent parallel lines across the plot are glacial features (J. Lyall).

Figure 4 - Aerial photograph of the cemetery, August 2005 (P. Halkon).

Figure 5 - Square barrow distribution drawn from all sources (P. Halkon).

Figure 6 - The cemetery after ploughing April 2018 (UAV photograph: Tony Hunt, Yorkshire Archaeological Aerial Mapping).