Burnt mounds in Highbury Park

Near the stream in Highbury Park there are at least two, and possibly more, “burnt mounds”. These are mounds of heat-shattered stones and charcoal (the remains of the wood used to heat the stones) and date from the Bronze Age, 3000 years ago.

One of them is visible as heat-shattered stones and charcoal in the stream bank and it has been radiocarbon-dated to around 1200 BC. (All plants absorb radioactive carbon from the air while they are alive, and the radioactive carbon is also absorbed by animals that eat the plants. When the plant or animal dies, the radioactive carbon decays at a known rate, so by measuring the amount of radioactive carbon in a dead plant, in this case the charcoal, or animal, we can work out how long ago it was living, and therefore the archaeological site in which it has been found).

Another, which is visible as a mound on the bank of the stream, is about 13m long, 7m wide and 40cm high. In dry conditions the grass growing in it parches out, but a rectangular area not affected by parching is possibly an infilled pit like those found at other burnt mounds.

Two slightly raised areas, near the stream, which are also parched in dry weather, may be another burnt mound or they may be the end of a former field boundary. A slight but prominent mound near a former stream channel may also be a burnt mound.

Over 40 burnt mounds have so far been discovered in Birmingham, next to streams or wet areas, many of them in parks and open spaces. They are usually visible as a layer of heat-shattered stones in a stream bank, more rarely as an actual mound, and as concentrations of heat-shattered stones on ploughed field surfaces.

Burnt mounds have usually been explained as the debris from cooking food in water boiled by dropping heated stones into it. Although experiments have shown that this could have been the case, animal bones and other debris from food preparation and cooking are rarely found when the sites are excavated. Other explanations are that the

sites may have been used for dyeing or felting textiles, or for leatherworking or woodworking, or even for brewing beer. Another interpretation is that they are the debris from steam or sauna-type bathing. North American Indians and people in Northern Europe produced steam for bathing by pouring water over heated stones inside a tent or a hut.

Excavation of a burnt mound at Cob Lane in Bournville revealed holes from pressing pointed stakes into the ground. The stakes would have formed the framework of a tent into which hot stones were taken to pour water on them. A scorched area of ground showed where the hot stones were placed, and a pit next to it, on the edge of a former stream, would have been a sump from which water was ladled out onto the hot stones.

The people who created the burnt mounds would have lived on higher, drier ground beyond the street, where houses and roads are now. They were farmers, and they cleared woodland to create land where crops could be grown and animals could graze. Soil loosened and eroded by tree clearance was washed down the stream and accumulated as alluvium shortly before the burnt mounds were used. There were also actual tree trunks in the old stream bed. Beetle shells that were found under the Cob Lane burnt mound include species which live in the bark of lime, oak and ash trees, and dung beetles, so there were grazing animals nearby. Analysis of the charcoal shows that the type of wood used as fuel to heat the stones at Cob Lane was mainly alder, which would have been growing in damp ground near the burnt mound.

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