



## **Archaeology: the science of investigation**

*Excavations at Wetwang in Yorkshire, UK*

### **Tony Spence:**

What have we got in this one, Charcoal and soil samples, we get all the best bits don't we? Bones, species human, east ditch. Human adult femur, shaft right; bone, that what's called a farrow ditch; bone, north-east corner farrow ditch. Some of this will be pig bones and piglet bones associated with the burial and we're actually keeping some of this in silver foil in case we want to do any further C14 dating so there's less risk of contamination.

Back in March 2001 we had a call from an associate of the department saying that they had found a large grave in Yorkshire and it looked like it had some interesting metal objects in it. The museum was really asked whether we could provide both the conservation expertise because we knew there was going to be metal in there and archaeological metals can be very difficult to lift and handle in the field, but also really to provide excavation support. So in mid-March 2001 I found myself heading for mid-Yorkshire and arrived on site to find that it was rather cold and wet, but that's the nature of British archaeology. When the museum arrived we were working in partnership with the guild house consultancy who had done the rescue excavations on the site in advance of the build, but because of the tree preservation order and the moving of the road this was seen as a sort of emergency measures so English Heritage very kindly came forward and sponsored the excavation, the actual cost of running the excavation as it was seen as an unforeseen archaeological discovery and Hogg the builders who were the owners of the site and doing the development, before anything came out of the ground, agreed to donate everything to the museum. The site itself, when we got there, was really quite restrictive, it ended up being, I suppose, about 10 metres square but partly truncated by the road. The grave cut itself, well it actually expands as you go down because of the compression on the soil, but it ended up being about 3 1/2 metres long by about 2 1/2 metres wide at its widest point, slightly sort of boat shaped really and restricting very much the size of the fixtures of the chariot that went in there.

The original excavation team comprised of Supervisor and Director of Guildhouse Consultancy and one further excavator. The museum was able to bring up two further excavators as well as myself and then we were supplemented with other personnel from the museum who had specialist skills so we were able to bring up two metal conservators to help lift the material when we got to that stage. We also had the use of a specialist Illustrator for planning purposes. One of my colleagues Tony Paceto was using a ground magnetometer which looks for variation in the magnetic, or the magnetic variation in the soil which will allow even the slightest disturbance to show up. This is also very good, of course, because it's magnetic in looking for metal which has a very clear signal. Once metal had been located as it was in the case of this grave we were then able to use a variety of metal detectors to ascertain exactly the scale of those pieces. But it's very useful to put as many techniques over the site before you start to excavate as you can. We didn't have the advantage that perhaps might one now use, for example ground penetrating radar which would give you instantly a three dimensional idea of what's happening under the ground. That wasn't available, way back then 6 years ago. Oh, or course the other key member, though non-digging, was the overnight security because when you are working on a site like this word gets out very quickly but you do need to have somebody there because the evidence is all about absolute detail.

From the excavation itself, relating to the burial, we had the iron fittings of the chariot and also supplemented at the yoke end with the bronze terrets, the rein rings, which also had coral decoration on them. All traces of the timber had disappeared but it had left in places some very interesting soil changes not just colour, we are used to seeing colour in archaeology, but in this case because the grave was rather strangely filled with clay we actually had a few voids which meant that we were able to take plaster casts of these voids showing the shape of some of these pieces of timber.

There it is, in all its glory. You can see, here's the limit actually of the original iron-age piece of wood shown in the grave coming along through here on that side and back along this edge, and then of course there's the bone of the human skeleton.