



ARCHAEOLOGY

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE BERKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Spring 2008

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DAY SCHOOL REMINDER!

Our annual day school will take place on Saturday 1st March starting at 10.00 a.m. This time the venue is Saint Nicolas Church Hall, Newbury, Berkshire, RG14 5HG. Admission is £10 per person (no concessions) and you pay at the door!

Solent Thames Research Framework

The Research Framework for the Solent Thames is intended to survey and define all aspects of the rich and diverse past of this area which covers the historic counties of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, and to produce an agenda to address the key heritage issues and gaps in our knowledge. The project aims to ensure that decisions about future development are undertaken with the most up-to-date information to hand and that the research potential of the archaeological work is quickly recognised and opportunities for investigation are seized. It will also enable this archaeological resource to be displayed to best effect, providing learning opportunities for all.

Following the launch of the project in November 2005, a team of 40 contributors analysed the archaeological and, where appropriate, historical records and produced a Resource Assessment for every period in each county. These county documents have been published on the project website, hosted by Buckinghamshire County Council, and on the Oxford Archaeology website. During 2007 a period of consultation was held when everyone was invited to comment on the documents and to attend seminars held in each county to discuss them.

Since then the Lead Authors for each period have been preparing a combined Resource Assessment from the county documents and drafting a Research Agenda. The Research Agenda is designed to identify those areas where our current knowledge is incomplete and suggest approaches to address the questions which have arisen. These documents are now nearing completion and will be appearing on the two websites in the next few weeks.

Again there will be a consultation period, lasting until the end of June 2008, and comments from all stakeholders, whether professional or amateur, are invited. There will also be a further round of seminars, this time based on the chronological periods, for those with a particular interest and expertise.

More information about the Solent Thames Research Framework and copies of the project documents can be found at:

<http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/bcc/content/index.jsp?contentid=-222423834>

http://thehumanjourney.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=187&Itemid=40

Please send comments or queries to: ill.hind@oxfordarch.co.uk

Jill Hind (Oxford Wessex Archaeology)

Spring Tour 2008

There are still some places available including single rooms on the above which will take place from Friday 18th to Monday 21st April and will be to South Wales. The trip will include visits to prehistoric burial sites and landscapes, an Iron Age Hillfort, a Bishop's Palace, abbeys, a church, a Roman Town, castles and two industrial archaeology sites. If you are interested and have not yet reserved your place please contact Barrie Randall on 0118 983 2607 or at banda.burghfield@hotmail.com.

Barrie Randall

Renewing your membership of the Society

Membership of the Society runs from 1st April 2008 to 31st March 2009. Please find enclosed a form to renew your membership. If you have email, then you can elect to have the Society email you both notices and newsletters.

This will ensure that you keep up to date with the work of the Society and save the Society money.

Andrew Hutt

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Meetings

Oxford Castle

At our December meeting Andy Norton, Project Officer, talked to us about the findings of the excavations at Oxford Castle.

Oxford was founded in 911 and has changed very little in shape since. The mot and bailey castle was built on the west side of the town in the 11th century of timber and rebuilt of stone in the 12th century. The first evidence of a jail on this site dates to 1246 when it was used for rebellious scholars. During the 15th century it was used for the Court of Assizes, but no evidence for this has been found. From 1500 A.D. there were executions on site. In 1577 there was an outbreak of jail fever and afterwards the prison was allowed to decline.

In 1785 C and D wings were constructed for the use of debtors and felons. The last execution here took place in the 1950s. The prison was closed in 1996 and the council decided to redevelop the site.

In the prison area the concrete fittings for B wing were found. Also a crude rubble wall with sherds of Saxon pottery was found. This was later determined to be a prison phase garden wall. The Saxon town defences were found below this revetted by a stone wall. In D wing the trenches revealed walls, presumed to be of St Georges Chapel.

In the area of the cellars for B and C wings the outer face of the Norman ramparts was found. This had survived well as there had been no other use of the site except for the prison. This was a huge earth work measuring 45 m wide.

On the hotel site 63 burials dating from the late 16th to the 18th century were found. Some of these showed signs of anatomical dissections. They were almost certainly executed prisoners of the jail. The graves were shallow to stop them rolling down the moat infill. The earlier of these burials followed the line of the moat. Those relating to the middle of this period were on a true East/West Christian burial alignment, and those from the end of this period were placed in a service trench behind the site, again respecting the line of the moat.

Once the burials were removed the moat fill was excavated below the water table. At the bottom of the moat a huge collection of 11th century shoes, which have served as dating evidence, was discovered.

A late Saxon cellar pit with a laminated effect lime floor was found. The best interpretation of this so far is that as it became damp a new layer was put on top. But this would have been a posh cellar for the date given it, around 950 A.D.

Saxon post holes were found which were probably from the annexe to a Saxon hall. The Saxon rampart and hall are known to have co-existed, but it is not known which was constructed first. Other Saxon finds included cess pits suggesting tenement blocks, baby bones, and an ice skate made from a horse metatarsal.

Pottery of Scandinavian style was discovered, as were many bones and part of a horse bridle, the only other like example of which was found in Scandinavia. In 1002 A.D. there was a massacre of Danes in Oxford. They took their revenge for

this in 1009 A.D. by torching it. Does this explain the period of inactivity found above the post holes and below the rampart? The Danes are known to have lived in Saxon Oxford, and the evidence found here begs the question was this the Danish quarter?

Evidence was also found indicating that this area of Saxon Oxford was levelled to make way for the construction of the castle.

St George's Tower is a curious structure and its age is uncertain. However, this excavation has cast some more light on its possible origins. A Saxon rampart which runs up to the tower was found. In the vicinity of the tower burials were found which pre-date the castle. These would indicate the existence of a Saxon church which would have had a tower. Is this St Georges Tower which was later incorporated into the castle? If so this would make it the tallest Saxon building in the country. Also there is no moat in this area, which implies that the tower could have been used as the gate to the castle.

The developer has not yet made the full funding available for the two years needed to write up this excavation. Given the interesting nature of the discoveries hopefully this will happen soon.

Julie Worsfold

Woodland Archaeology

Dick Greenaway came to our January meeting to talk about woodland archaeology in West Berkshire.

Woodland archaeology involves studying the history of the landscape using its features, the distribution of plants within and around, and maps and estate documents.

The latter can be very useful. At Beckle Wood, for example, they show that the deer park, set up in the 13th century as a result of the right to impark, forced the road to go round the park and not through as it had previously.

From an archaeological perspective our woodlands are largely unexplored and unmapped. Yet they hold their archaeology intact as they have not been disturbed by large machinery or the plough. An example of this is the Celtic/Roman field system near Streatley which has been ploughed out but remains in the wood. Likewise in Park Wood there is a Bronze Age Barrow, the twin of which on the other side of the valley is in a field and is now only barely visible.

Archaeological clues can come from trees and plants. If the tree is on a bank then the bank is older than the tree. In Savernake forest there is a cathedral oak tree which is more than 1,000 years old growing on an obviously older bank. Plants such as anemone, bluebell, purple orchid and bulb garlic are all ancient woodland species which indicate that the soil has not been disturbed for a long time. But tree species within a wood will change depending on the local requirement at any given time.

Trees in woods were often cut down to make way for cereal production, but cereals need some chalk in order to grow. So any non-chalky soil would have needed chalk added. As this was a laborious and not always fruitful task such fields were often abandoned. Large areas of dog's mercury, which

likes chalk and not acid soils, are indicative of an abandoned field.

Large holes tend to be quarries. The vast majority of these are not mapped. They may have been clay quarries. Farmers used to use clay to make the soil in their fields less acidic. Another reason for quarrying was to make and maintain roads, which was the responsibility of the local parishes until 1888. Many quarries fell into disuse after this, and ultimately trees started to grow on these sites.

Smaller holes tend to be potash pits. At Park Wood there is a potash pit which is 9 m wide and 0.6 m deep. Potash is one of the earliest known industrial chemicals and is made by burning wood in a shallow pit. It is then put in a barrel and topped up with water. This will produce Lye (potassium hydroxide) which is used as washing liquid. Adding lime and animal fat to this will produce soap. The British potash market died out around 1830 as a result of a better quality product being brought in from North America and Sweden.

Saw pits are also to be found in every wood which is more than 100 years old. Saw pits are 4 to 5 m long and 1.2 to 1.5 m wide. They were used by sawyers for tree cutting after felling.

In the Berkshire area many woods contain relics of World War II constructions. These were used to hide munitions and troops prior to the D-Day landings.

Julie Worsfold

Berkshire Iron Age Project

Over the last four years, three of us have been researching the Iron Age in and around Berkshire and we have reached the point where we have completed the basic research. This has given us an understanding of the hillforts, settlements and ritual sites in a study area which extends from Abingdon in the north to Basingstoke in the south, and from Marlborough in the west to Heathrow in the east. Furthermore, we have found first hand evidence of Iron Age technical innovations in iron working, the use of rotary motion in pottery wheels and lathes, and farming. Finally, the use of landscape, pottery and coin evidence has allowed us to develop an understanding of some of the social and political tensions which turned Berkshire into a border area.

The next step in this work is to complete a book, a public exhibition and a web site. I am looking forward to bringing parts of the exhibition to meetings of the Society to gain members reaction to the work.

Andrew Hutt

Roman Berkshire Project

There are now a core team of some 7 people who are meeting on the first Wednesday every month and researching aspects of Roman Berkshire.

In December, we reviewed a chronology of Roman Britain and concluded that, during the Roman period, those living in Berkshire must have experienced significant rises and falls in their living standards, while for those living in Northern England life must have been interrupted by incursions by war bands from southern Scotland and Ireland. In January we reviewed details of settlement, ritual and industrial sites.

We have now contacted the Historic Environment Records/Site and Monument Records for Berkshire and the surrounding counties to collect details of towns, villas, settlements, and ritual and industrial sites. The next step is to create a gazetteer of these sites and to start summarising evidence from them.

Please contact me if you would like to join us.

Andrew Hutt

The Berkshire Archaeology Research Library

Many members are using books, journals and pamphlets from the library. If you would like to use these materials please call me.

During the autumn, I have sold unwanted books to bookshops and individuals and donated unwanted journals to archaeology groups in an area which extends from Lincolnshire in the north, to Bristol in the west and Kent in the east. We are now in the position where all the unwanted pamphlets and books have gone but have still to donate unwanted journals to two museums.

We have a large number of spare copies of the Berkshire Archaeological Journal. I will be bringing these to meetings of the Society in February and March; anybody, who wants to take some home, is welcome to do so. The only condition is that when you no longer want to keep them, bring them back to a meeting of the Society so that other members can have them.

Finally, over the next few months, I will be creating some more library boxes to hold books such as the reports of the original excavations at Silchester which I discovered as we were moving out of the Department of Continuing Education in August 2007. Please call me if you are able to accommodate some of these boxes.

Andrew Hutt

The Berkshire Archaeological Journal goes online

The Berkshire Archaeological Journal is now available online at:

http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/library/berks_bas_2007/index.cfm

Please try to access this resource.

To date, the Society has scanned some 46 volumes of the Journal and its predecessor publications, around 8000 pages, and sent them to the Archaeological Data Service in York. The Archaeological Data Service has made 10 volumes available on the Internet and is planning to make the rest available at 8 volumes per month over the coming months. The challenge for us is to keep ahead by scanning the remaining 40 volumes

Andrew Hutt

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Practical Archaeology

Bronze Age Berkshire: a field-based research project

Silchester Roman Town excavation and field school

(applications for this need to be made immediately).

Details from: The School of Continuing Education, University of Reading, London Road, Reading, RG1 5AQ. Tel: 0118 378 8347.

E-mail: continuing-education@reading.ac.uk

Web site: www.reading.ac.uk/conted

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Details from: OUDCE, 1, Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA. Tel: 01865 270360; Fax: 01865 270309 email: enquiries@conted.ox.ac.uk Web site: www.conted.ox.ac.uk

BERKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY



Patron: H.M. THE QUEEN

President: Professor

Michael Fulford FBA FSA

The Society was founded in 1871 and for over 100 years has encouraged and supported archaeological activities in Berkshire.

Everybody with an interest in archaeology is welcome to attend our meetings and join the Society. It does not matter whether your interest in archaeology is new found or long standing, the Society offers activities from regular lectures and outings to opportunities for fieldwork and excavation.

All members receive a regular newsletter, full of news about events in Berkshire. The Berkshire Archaeological Journal is also free to members.

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