



BASINGSTOKE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

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CALENDAR

- Wednesday 26th November: University of Southampton, Dept. of Adult Education 'Aspects of Antiquity' lecture 'The Medes and Early Achaemenians'.
Dr. David Stronach, O.B.E., M.A., F.S.A.,
Director of the British Institute of Persian Studies, Tehran. To be held in the University, Physics 'A' Building, 7.30 p.m. Admission 50p.
- Thursday 27th November: 'The Mesolithic Period and the Kennet Valley'
Lecture by Mr. C.L. Cram, Archaeologist,
Reading Museum. Leisure Centre, 7.30 p.m.
- Wednesday 3rd December: University of Southampton Archaeological Society Lecture. 'Repton: the Anglo-Saxon Church. Excavations 1974-5.'
Martin Biddle, Director Winchester Research Unit.
Arts II Building, Geography 2 Lecture Theatre,
7.30 p.m.
- Thursday 11th December: Society 'Members Evening' and 'Links with the Past'. Leisure Centre, 7.30 p.m.

THE MESOLITHIC PERIOD AND THE KENNET VALLEY

For our November lecture we go back to the stone ages. The term 'Mesolithic' or 'middle stone age' is given to the transitional period, around 8,000 BC, between the withdrawal of the Northern ice sheet and the beginnings of agriculture. The English Channel had not yet been formed and there was a general coming and going of hunting peoples following the herds of larger mammals, on which their livelihood depended, across the land bridge between the European continent and the peninsular of Britain. With the retreat of the ice the vegetation was changing from stunted sub-arctic tundra to the beginnings of woodlands and grasslands with the birch as the dominant tree. Red deer and elk were replacing the reindeer as the main source of meat. Only the dog had been domesticated.

The principal tools were of flint although antler and bone tools were also made. All mesolithic cultures include scraping and boring tools but the most striking characteristic is the inclusion of tiny stone implements called 'microliths', designed for mounting as arrow heads, fish hooks, or drills depending on the culture, and even mounted in series as knives in a grooved haft.

To the west of Newbury in the Kennet Valley a number of mesolithic sites have been recorded and excavated and it is on these that Leslie Cram will concentrate in his lecture on November 27th.

Early prehistoric archaeology is his speciality and Reading Museum has built up something of a reputation for producing eminent prehistorians. Undoubtedly the most eminent is John Wymer who has devoted some of his recent work, for the University of Chicago, to the mesolithic period in Britain.

This will be our first ever lecture on a stone age topic and should come as a fascinating and enjoyable change.

Leisure Centre, 7.30 p.m. 27th November.

'RUBBISH'

Several separate things have prompted this note, apart from Richard's request for contributions to the newsletter. It is written with a sense of irritation/frustration with the media (horrible word, but it does describe them in one word).

1. After Leys had been featured on Southern TV's Day by Day twice in a short time, without any mention that Leys are not accepted by orthodox archaeologists, having to tell curious friends, relatives and colleagues at work that Leys should be treated carefully, perhaps with a pinch of salt.

2. Trying to persuade some American visitors that the Druids did not have much relevance to Stonehenge, even though they may have used it. That the sophistication of Stonehenge as an astronomical computer claimed by some writers is probably incidental to its use as a simple indicator of the moon's phases and the seasons, that its main purpose was probably religious (not Druidic religion, either) and that simple astronomy was involved in the religion, i.e. the 'priests' knew how to work the 'computer' - the congregation didn't.

3. Some copies of a newspaper, 'Stonehenge Viewpoint', published in California. One copy was a coherent account of a visit to Stonehenge, but the others were odd: Glastonbury zodiac, Haloes, Canopies, Leys.

The flavour of the paper is best summed up in a sentence from the Editor's answer to a correspondent's question about movement of the earth's pole. Having quoted the scientific view and the folk traditions that the pole moves by large amounts, he reiterates what he had previously written, that the pole did not move, and goes on 'Thus, I am standing almost alone in thinking that both camps are wrong!' The papers make entertaining reading, not sense.

Archaeology was an 'art' that became a science. Over the last twenty years or so the science has developed rapidly and this development has been greatly assisted by application of the physical sciences. Carbon dating comes immediately to mind, but a whole range of scientific techniques are used at each stage of a 'dig'.

For the layman (I am a layman and it is from that viewpoint that this note is written) who wants to keep himself informed, there are journals of varying level of detail. 'Current Archaeology' and 'Antiquity' give the broad outlines nationally and internationally (even with these journals one is exposed to the prejudices of the editor!) the journals of the learned societies carry the detailed reports. Locally there are the Hants Field Club publications, Rescue Archaeology in Hampshire and the equivalent publications by museums and other town and county societies.

Most of what is published in this way is approved for publication by the standard method in whatever field is involved - Judgement by Peers (academic peers, not the Upper House). In this way the orthodox versions of current theory and practice are perpetuated and the standards of reporting are maintained. New ideas are subjected to detailed scrutiny before they are allowed to be put forward to the archaeological public, many of whom, although informed, are probably not informed enough to make critical judgements of all aspects of the science. In this way the archaeological public are to some extent protected from cranks and fraud. Professor Thom (widely quoted, probably without his knowledge or approval, in 'Stonehenge Viewpoint'), whose theories on megalithic monuments are now widely accepted by archaeologists, had difficulty at first in getting his ideas accepted. It was because he was able to show that he had arrived at his conclusions by meticulous scientific research and had not selected his data to fit a preconceived idea that his theories have been accepted.

The same judgement by peers does not always occur in books that are published commercially. Archaeology is big business in the book trade, and it would appear from some of the books one sees that some publishers will take anything that is presented to them. One can be told on the dust jacket that the author is presenting important archaeological ideas. It is only on delving further into it, or on reading a review in one of the journals mentioned above, that one finds out that the author is an archaeological crank. Judging from some recent reviews, it would seem that sometimes newspapers and magazines employ 'oddballs' as reviewers of archaeological books. The 'Daily Telegraph', 23rd October 1975, has a review of 'Circles and Standing Stones' by Evan Hadingham (Heinemann) - the reviewer, Anthony Powell, has written a rather strange novel about Glastonbury (Barbara Applin). One is treated to a long review recounting facts from the book and the reviewer's views of the metric system (unfavourable) and is given the impression that it is a rehash of Professor Thom's books. The book is not criticised, constructively or destructively.

How then does one avoid wasting money and time buying and reading the 'crank archaeology' if one is after the mainstream or, perhaps more importantly, is it possible to prevent the general public being conned into thinking the cranks represent mainstream thinking? Of course, the cranks sometimes make interesting reading, if only to see how weird some people's ideas can be, and it is not suggested that they should be completely scorned.

Perhaps archaeological books could have some sort of 'seal of approval' by a review panel. This smacks of censorship and the Index, although one would not be prohibited from reading the 'unapproved'. It could be that publishers would only publish the 'approved', and that is bad. The cranks should be able to have their say, but let one be told clearly that their ideas are unorthodox.

The best way at present is to read the book reviews. Get the opinions of several reviewers and try to make a judgement whether the book is worth borrowing or buying; never buy on impulse.

It is hoped that this note does not read too pretentiously. One has learnt the hard way in the past by wasting money on books that are worthless. Judging from the correspondence in 'Stonehenge Viewpoint', there are many people in this country who are swallowing a lot of rubbish and going back for more.

BOB APPLIN

EXCAVATIONS AT VIABLES FARM 1975

Duncan Russell has submitted detailed notes on the excavation he has been directing for the Society at Viables Farm over recent months. Members unfamiliar with the site may like to be reminded that it was originally discovered fortuitously by a workman excavating a water trench in 1973. Following this in 1974 trial excavations were directed by Pam and Phil Judkins and a gradiometer survey was made by Tony Clarke of the Department of the Environment which indicated that the site was a roughly circular ditched enclosure with a clearly defined entrance on the southwest side through the ditch.

The main objective this year was to excavate the two ditch ends at the entrance area and two 7m x 2m trenches (Trenches A and B) were set out corresponding to the ditch's terminal positions on the D.O.E. survey plan. Trench A, on the eastern side, revealed a large pear-shaped feature overlying the ditch end. Excavation of this feature had to be halted when a small subsidence produced a 2 metre deep by 1 metre hole in the section. First interpretations of this would suggest a well of Roman date, but because we do not have the equipment to excavate it properly we have shored it up and fenced it off at least for the present.

Trench B on the western ditch terminal has also proved more complex than was expected. After top soil removal the presumed butt end was discovered, but as work proceeded the weathered chalk edges gave way to a loamy soil containing pot boilers and charcoal - obviously not natural - which ran below the supposed natural chalk surface. After trowelling over on the southern side, three stack holes were revealed associated with Romano/British pottery and fragments of Samian ware. Duncan believes the chalk level to have been a deliberately made up chalk floor which gave a false reading on the gradiometer survey. Below it further a substantial ditch came to light running northwest to southwest cutting the known ditch at about 80 degrees. So, two ditches, not one!

By the end of October both ditches had been excavated to their lower fills. The east/west ditch (2) is shallower than the northwest/southeast ditch (1). Ditch 2 also appears to cut through an earlier pit, of which only the hollowed out base remains. What appears to be the hollowed out base of a third ditch is showing in the section on the southern edge of ditch 2.

Dating this complex of ditches and the questionable pit is going to be more than usually problematical for Duncan because it would seem that in cutting ditch 2 the residual material from ditch 1 and the pit (?) would have been confused. However, the upper fills of ditch 2 have produced clearly definable early to mid 1st Century AD material including Belgic pottery. Ditch 1 suggests a mid to late Iron Age date from its undisturbed layers where fragments of a distinctive Iron Age bowl and saucepan pot can be dated to 2nd to 1st Centuries BC.

Two other small trenches (B and C) were opened which traced a shallow v-shaped ditch and produced further Iron Age pottery. This ditch was not indicated on the D.O.E. survey which may also have missed other significant features.

Many questions remain unsolved at Viabes. In fact, the more we try to find answers to known problems the more new problems present themselves. Fortunately no building is yet scheduled so we will be able to return next year and attempt to clear up some of the mysteries.

SILCHESTER

Members may be wondering about the Society's involvement in the discussion on Councillor Corfin's proposed tourist bonanza at Silchester. Following the article in the Midweek Gazette it was decided that a reply was called for. Regrettably the Gazette chose to do another feature and quote only a small part of the Society's letter. For your information the following is the full text of our letter.

The Editor,
Basingstoke Midweek Gazette.

7th November 1975

Dear Sir,

As the only recognised archaeological society actively working within the Basingstoke District we would like to comment on some aspects of the suggestions put forward by Cllr. Corfin and subject of the controversial article on Silchester in the Midweek Gazette of the 4th November (p 16-17).

We are of the opinion that from previous excavations over the past hundred years or so and from ground and aerial surveys, there is no evidence to suggest that there is anything sufficiently spectacular remaining buried which would warrant excavation and conservation as a tourist attraction. Even if the contrary were true, as Cllr. Corfin himself acknowledges, there would be no money available in the present economic situation to sponsor such an excavation anyway, when government grants are given only for emergency rescue operations for sites threatened with destruction. Since Silchester is a scheduled ancient monument enjoying statutory protection such a threat is not even remotely likely.

The suggestion that excavation there could be done by any amateurs and volunteers able to wield a fork or shovel might misleadingly encourage people to go and dig for themselves within the walls at

Silchester. It should be pointed out that it is illegal to disturb or remove anything from the site of a scheduled ancient monument without authorisation and anyone so doing would be liable for prosecution.

Archaeological excavation, if it is to be done properly, requires skill, knowledge and experience which can only be gained from working with organised groups and societies. This Society is always keen to welcome and train new volunteer diggers to help on its excavations in advance of road works and town development within the District. Anyone interested is invited to write for details.

Yours faithfully,

Richard H. Searle
Hon. Secretary
Basingstoke Archaeological Society

SARSEN SURVEY

A reminder that the Sarsen Survey is continuing. Sarsens are greyish sandstones, remnants of an overlying strata, found mainly on chalk downs in N. Wiltshire and S. Dorset and sometimes transported to other areas. The name 'sarsen' derives from 'saracen', i.e. foreigner or stranger. Another name is 'grey wethers' apparently referring to their occasional sheep-like appearance.

We are interested in all sizes from small stones to large monoliths such as those at Avebury and Stonehenge. The area of interest is that bounded by grid references SU 600700, 400700, 400400 and 600400, roughly Beenham - Hoe Benham - Chilbolton - Chilton Candover. Any known or suspected sarsens should be reported to Tony Robson (8 Eastfield Avenue, Basingstoke, Tel. Basingstoke 22029). He will then be able to visit the site and record the necessary physical, archaeological and geological details. A standard tally card is being used to ensure uniform stratification. Large sarsens may have been cleared to the side of fields, built into walls or trackways, or utilised as gateposts or mile stones. An interesting specimen can be seen painted black and white (by an early nomadic tribe of Newcastle United supporters?) at Herriard Crossroads on the A339 to Alton.

TONY ROBSON