



BASINGSTOKE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Number 35 September 1976

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CALENDAR

'State Archaeology'
Lecture by Mr. David Ball, Ordnance Survey.
St. Michael's Cottage, Basingstoke. 7.30 p.m.

Wednesday evenings - Willis Museum Annexe. 7.30 p.m.

Weekends until
31st October - Digging at Viables Farm 10.00 a.m. - 5.00 p.m.

STATE ARCHAEOLOGY

David Ball, our first lecturer in the present season, has chosen a broad title for his lecture. As Assistant Superintendent in the Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey he will concentrate on the archaeological activities of the Ordnance Survey but he will discuss them in relation to the activities of other government bodies such as the Department of the Environment, the Royal Commission and the Ancient Monuments Board.

Many members will already know what an important contribution the Ordnance Survey makes in maintaining varied and detailed records of sites and finds, conducting surveys and mapping our antiquities; but it may come as a surprise to know that they are the largest single state employer of people engaged in archaeology. Their work does not, however, include excavation which is outside their terms of reference.

There can be very few people who have not experienced the excellence of Ordnance Survey maps, which are unrivalled anywhere in the world. We have come to rely implicitly on their accuracy and to take for granted their clarity and detail. Our September lecture will give us a wider perspective and give us an understanding of one aspect of the work which goes into a fine British achievement.

This lecture is likely to interest people outside the membership of our Society. Please bring it to the notice of others and try to bring friends along with you.

Thursday 30th September at St. Michael's Church Cottage, 7.30 p.m.

NEWS AND NOTES

By now some of you have begun to wonder what, if anything, is going on and whether the Basingstoke Archaeological Society has ceased to function. The appearance of Newsletter 35 will no doubt clear up any doubts still remaining as to our vitality, but what have we been doing since Newsletter 34?

Less than 30 people attended the AGM on the 1st July, so the majority of members may be unaware of the lively discussion which took place over whether or not we should explore the possibility of changing our name to include the word 'historical'. It was clear from the beginning that the margin between those in favour and those against was a narrow one with very good points being raised by both sides. Because a change of name would require a further revision to the present Constitution, of which notice would need to be given and agreement reached at another general meeting, all the 1st July AGM could do would be to instruct the Committee to explore the idea further. In the event the proposal was narrowly defeated. Our name will therefore remain unchanged for at least one more year. The absence of several 'historical' supporters from this AGM might mean that we have not yet heard the last of it.

Excavations at Viabes Farm have continued at weekends throughout the entire long, hot, dry summer, despite minimal support from members. Often Duncan has been the only Society member on site and were it not for his efforts and those of his friends from Bracknell (!) Farnham (!) and Farnborough (!), nothing would have been done. We have said on many occasions that members are always welcome to visit the site without obligation to work, but few have bothered. Duncan would surely have been heartened by a visitor or two. When the Society votes, admittedly narrowly, to remain purely 'archaeological' is it too much to ask members to support its own 'archaeological' dig?

Duncan, who again contributes a brief resume of all that has been done at Viabes Farm in this issue, is to continue till the end of October. There is still time to show your interest. Failing weekends, he could do with help on the finds at the Willis Museum on Wednesday evenings. If more people were to turn up at the Museum it could easily develop into a club night, providing a regular activity and sustaining an interest.

The long, dry spell has brought something of a bonus to archaeologists everywhere. Thousands of hitherto unknown sites have come to light as if by magic to appear as crop marks in the fields and pastures. To give one example, on Cowdrey's Down to the north of Basing House, beyond the river Lodden, a rectangular enclosure, believed to be the site of a Parliamentary siegework, has been seen and photographed from the air and adjacent to it a series of ring ditches and rectilinear marks suggesting another Iron Age or Bronze Age settlement site. These features come within the proposed Chineham development area and are scheduled to be built on. It is expected that excavation will take place before destruction but it has not been decided who should direct the work, although it is likely to be a County body rather than a local one.

Very few people will not be aware that the Hampshire County Council Recreation Committee have re-opened Basing House to the public. It will remain open till October this year, re-opening in April 1977, and is well worth a visit. Apart from the ruins themselves, there is a small permanent exhibition, mostly of the Civil War associations, and a nicely produced, illustrated booklet is available at 20p.

On the 22nd July, Sir Mortimer Wheeler died at the age of 85. Apart from his many and spectacular achievements as scholar and excavator, it is for his role in popularising archaeology that we acknowledge him here. Nobody before him was able to kindle the interest in antiquity and archaeological discovery quite as he did. Without him archaeology might have remained the province only of scholars. It is because archaeology became a popular subject that there were sufficient numbers of sympathetic people to be rallied against the destruction of our heritage and that organisations like Rescue could be launched. Many of us too would not have discovered archaeology, and this Society, along with numerous others up and down the country, might never have been born.

With this issue of Newsletter you should receive your programme card for our winter lecture series. It has always been our intention to return to Chute House once the fire damage has been repaired. Although we cannot say with certainty, it is now very likely that we shall be able to meet there in 1977. Repairs are so well in hand that tentative bookings are being accepted.

Meanwhile the first half of our programme will be held at Church Cottage and promises to be varied and interesting. A notice about our first lecture appears elsewhere in this Newsletter. Our November speaker, Janet Arnold, has a well-established reputation for her books on the history of dressmaking and costume design. She is even better known perhaps for her consultancy work for television on costume dramas including the series on Elizabeth I and Henry VIII. She will no doubt attract a large audience and not only the ladies! The January lecture, omitted from the programme card, is likely to have a prehistoric flavour. Details will be announced shortly.

VIABLES FARM

Excavations are being conducted at Viables Farm in an attempt to define the nature of an Iron Age site within the area designed for future development. During road works 1973, evidence was revealed for an ancient site at Viables Farm. The Department of the Environment, Ancient Monuments Division, commissioned a Magnetometer Survey which revealed a rectangular enclosure with associated linear ditches and pits at SU 631502.

Excavations in 1974 revealed the primary ditch of the enclosure associated with Romano-British and native fabric pot-sherds including a Belgic type (late Iron Age 50 BC - 43 AD) urn. The site can be tentatively dated to the Iron Age by comparison with other known rectangular enclosures with rounded corners; for site of similar plan see Archaeological Journal Vol. CXXI Gandar Down, Nr. Tichbourne, Hants (of Iron Age Enclosures and Settlements on the Hampshire Chalklands 1970 by B.T. Perry).

The 1975 excavations were concentrated on the south-west entrance to the enclosure. Trench B cut over the western ditch terminal has revealed a multiplicity of intersecting ditches (at least four) which indicates a succession of phases not previously revealed. The earliest dateable ditch contained material which can be paralleled at Winchester dating between 200 to 100 BC. The latest ditch revealed Belgic material dating between 50 BC to 43 AD with a substantial amount of Romano-British pottery (1st century to 2nd century AD) in the upper fills of this latest ditch.

The 1976 excavations are being undertaken with two objectives in mind. Firstly, to obtain independent sections of the four ditches previously observed in trench B (1975). Secondly, the topsoil has been removed from the central area of the site which should enable us to identify structures and pits of the various phases of occupation.

At the time of writing we have two pits with rammed chalk surfaces within an area of post-holes which could provide useful evidence of the sequence of occupation. One of these pits is of particular interest owing to a recently observed post-hole cutting the rammed chalk fill which indicates that the post-holes are later than the pits. Finds from the pits and the post-holes should confirm this when excavation is complete. Roman occupation of the site is confined to pottery finds from the upper fills of the main enclosure ditch and from a small gully; however, Romano-British pottery occurs freely throughout the site in unstratified top-soil and hopefully a fairly extensive excavation of features should enable us positively to identify features of Romano-British occupation.

It would seem probable that the site remained as an active native settlement from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD; however, the precise nature of the changing ground plan over this period remains uncertain. Finds of animal bones indicate that the Iron Age people in the area reared pigs, sheep and cattle. Finds of spindle-whorls show that they were engaged in spinning and weaving woollen cloth. This site did not, however, develop into a grandiose settlement of the villa proper, although its function was based upon agriculture. It is unlikely that it developed beyond mere subsistence farming.

DUNCAN RUSSELL