

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

www.AAAHS.org.uk



NEWSLETTER – AUTUMN 2010

Meetings Programme

All at the Northcourt Centre starting at 7.45pm. Members free. Visitors welcome (£3.00 entry)

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| Thurs 16th September- | AAAHS AGM followed by lecture Wendy Morrison - "Enduring significance: the past, present and future of archaeology in Dorchester on Thames" |
| Thurs 21st October – | Michael St John Parker: <i>subject to be confirmed</i> |
| Thurs 18th November – | Peter Kirby: <i>"History of Culham Science Lab"</i> |
| Thurs 16th December - | The Christmas Social with the Vale Islanders |
| Thurs 20th January 2011 – | Ken Fosterkew: <i>"Miles Aircraft (Museum of Berks Aviation)"</i> |
| Thurs 17th February – | Stephen Miles: <i>"Bix – Lost Medieval Church"</i> |
| Thurs 17th March – | Adrian Ailes: <i>"Elias Ashmole's Heraldic Visitation"</i> (Lambrick Lecture) |
| Thurs 21st April – | Jane Harrison - <i>subject to be confirmed</i> |
| Thurs 19th May – | Gary Lock – <i>"Hillforts of the Ridgeway"</i> |
| Thurs 16th June - | Open Evening presented by members |
| Thurs 15th Sept – | 2011 AGM |

Chairman's Report

With the Society's year (September to September) all but over, it's a good time to look back over the past months, and also to look ahead. For the most part, 2010 has been a very good year for us.

Our lecture programme has been excellent. It started with Clark Friend talking about the enigmatic vitrified forts of NW Scotland; Alex Smith told us about the wide-ranging work of Oxford Archaeology on sites of many different periods in the Thames Valley and Julian Munby about his work on Edward 3rd's Round Table at Windsor; Brian Dix about 'Garden Archaeology', including his project at Stadhampton. For the Lambrick Lecture, we were very fortunate to hear Anne Dodd of (also of Oxford Archaeology) on 'The Saxons in the Thames Valley'. Those who came to the Open Evening heard talks from John Gibbs, David Rayner and myself, saw displays by Dick Barnes and Roger and Sally Ainslie, and enjoyed excellent refreshments.

A memorable aspect of this summer has been the trio of Society outings organised by Liz Drury: a walking tour of Oxford, led by Dr Malcolm Graham; a trip to the County Museum stores at Standlake; and a tour of the joint Oxford Archaeology-Oxford University excavations at Dorchester. A fuller report on these outings appears elsewhere in this newsletter; great thanks are due to Liz for arranging such an excellent set of visits.

Digging has also continued at the Abbey Fishponds as part of the 'Lost Abbey' project (an interim report will appear in the next South Midlands Archaeology) and at Kiln Copse, Marcham.

A much less satisfactory aspect of recent months has been the District Council's response to our suggestion that the Society could have an advisory input to the excavations on the Old Gaol site (where the Society itself excavated in the 1980s). Quite bizarrely, the Council seems to have taken exception to a local voluntary group suggesting that it might have something to offer, in the way of local knowledge and expertise, to the professionals carrying out the work. The Council's reaction to our offer of information and advice was to bar the Society from even seeing the excavations, thus preventing us from talking to the excavation team. This seemed a very immature response. It also flew in the face of government policy (which is to encourage greater involvement of local people in planning and heritage matters) as well as breaking a personal undertaking from the Leader of the Council to 'encourage good communication and interaction' between the Society and the professional archaeologists involved.

The excavations have now finished, and the organisation which carried out the work (John Moore Heritage Services) has kindly provided a preliminary report on the discoveries for this newsletter. There is, though, a wider point in this. As a result of spending cuts, local councils are likely to be very hard-pressed in the future when it comes to caring for the heritage. They should therefore be embracing the interest of committed and knowledgeable local groups, not trying to exclude them. You might want to make this point to your local Vale councillor (especially with elections approaching in May 2011).

The next Society event will be our Annual General Meeting on 16 September. An important part of the evening will of course be to elect a new committee. Three long-serving committee members (Jenny Devanney, Wendy Robbins and Jayne Todd), will be stepping down, and I would like to thank them very warmly for all their hard work. They will leave a big gap! At the time of writing, we still have fewer people offering to join the committee than there are spaces needing to be filled. Volunteers are therefore essential – if you think you might be interested, please let any member of the committee know. You will be welcomed very warmly!

I hope that you have all had an enjoyable and stimulating summer, and look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the AGM.

Roger Thomas, Chairman

Membership Secretary's Report

I am pleased to say that membership numbers this year are slightly higher than last year. Although 7 members from last year did not renew this was compensated by 12

new subscriptions. Counting family subscriptions as 2 members, this year we have 130 members compared with 121 last year. We would like to thank those members who kindly added a donation to their subscription which was very gratefully received. (Andrew Steele, Treasurer, adds that income from membership to 31 August 2010 was £1,028).

Those of you who were at the AGM last year will remember that it was voted to increase subscriptions from this year as the income from subscriptions was no longer covering our outgoings. Hopefully if we maintain or increase our membership numbers it will not be necessary to raise subscription rates again for some years.

Subscription rates for 2010/11 are:- Individual £12, family £18, concessionary (pensioner, student, unwaged) £8.50 and distant £4. A renewal form for 2010/11 is on the back of this newsletter. Subscriptions, due in September, can either be posted (address on form) or brought to the AGM.

Sally Ainslie

Mieneke Commemorative Event

This is a reminder to members that the society has organised an event entitled "Celebrating Abingdon's History: A Tribute to Mieneke Cox" on Saturday 9th October 2010. Coffee/tea will be available from 10.30am in the Church Centre and the programme will start at 11.00am. The venue for the programme is the south aisle of St Helen's Church. The format is three sessions of 90 minutes, each with a chairman; speakers will give talks of 20 minutes approx allowing ten minutes for questions. Admission cost is £5.00 and is by numbered programme.

The proceedings will open with a tribute to Mieneke Cox by Roger Thomas. This will be followed by a talk "Christ's Hospital and Its Contribution to Town Life – an Overview" by Jackie Smith. The third talk in the first session, "Interactions between the Abingdon parishes of St Helen and St Nicholas", will be given by Dick Barnes.

After questions and a break for lunch Session II will begin at 2.00pm. The three speakers will be: Michael St John Parker and Sarah Wearne: "Roissey to Godwyn: the role of the grammar school in re-establishing the prosperity of Abingdon; Janey Cumber: "Did the people of Abingdon miss the Abbey?" and Manfred Brod: "What's in a title? The political career of the first earl of Abingdon." There will be a break for tea and coffee in the Church Room.

Session III starts at 4.00pm. The opening talk, "The Restoration of the 14th Century Painted Ceiling in the Lady Chapel of St Helen's Church", will be given by Allan Doig. Peter Gale will talk on "the Development of a Town Museum" and the speaker is Ian Miles on the subject "Pageants and People".

Numbers are limited to 75 so buy your programme/admission voucher from The Bookstore in the shopping precinct or Mostly Books in Stert Street. We're also still looking for volunteers to help on the day – please contact any committee member if you'd like to help. Please support this event. All proceeds will go to St Helen's Church.

Jackie Smith

AAHS Outings 2010

Walking Tour of Oxford - 8 June 2010



AAHS members know what to expect when they sign up for an outing in Oxford. But Tuesday 8 June was something different. It started with the special leader: Dr Malcolm Graham, former Head of Oxfordshire Local Studies. And it quickly became clear that he knows all about what lies – or once lay – on either side of Park End Street, with just a dash of New Osney and a hint of Jericho walls, street names, stones, canal twists and turns, bricks, and medieval carvings, it was as though walking across this quarter of Oxford for the very first time.

And the weather made this journey unforgettable. But that didn't dull this group's determined enthusiasm: the rain just wet us together, and we numbered at the end what we numbered at the beginning: 'we few, we happy few, we band of brothers.'

This AAHS Oxford outing was indeed memorable, the group saw and learned so much, and our leader was always ready to supplement – under an umbrella, striding along, waiting for the rest to catch up, and at last over a pint – what he had originally explained and described. Just think what we had borne witness to compared to those who had not made it to Elizabeth Drury's list: the elevated Duke of Wellington, the precinct wall of Rewley Abbey, the overgrown LNER swingbridge.....

Bob Woodings

County Museums Store - 29 June 2010

As AAHS members parked outside the County Museums Store at Standlake many wondered: was this huge hanger-like building symptomatic of the future or the true guardian of the past? And then Esther Cameron stepped out of the door and we knew we were safe. She simply had control of what she was guarding – whether Edwardian advertising plates, Victorian plaster casts of architectural fragments or under-under garments.

But for this outing the objective was the archaeological collections, and we were led into the secrets of the special rooms - for conservation of leather fragments, for bronze materials, for glassware and so much more. Everywhere, from floor to ceiling and back again, were stacked the cardboard boxes that held the finds from excavations from the late 1960s and onwards across the county. Where readily available, Mrs Cameron had drawn out 'Abingdon' boxes and for some members of

the group it was almost like being reunited with old friends: those painted plaster flakes from the Barton Court site, pottery fragments from the Vineyard, and of course all those broken pipe-stems. Until the end of the visit were saved the most recent acquisitions alongside the relevant technical reports that had been published. But of course not only Abingdon finds were there: several of us can still “feel” the texture of that 12C hairshirt fragment: oh why did he have to be buried in that?

What was most remarkable about that building and its collections was that there were few space problems, fewer security problems, and even fewer decontamination problems. Instead the headache was how to index, categorise and computerise all those ‘finds’, whatever their origin, whether it be by type, by category, by place, by date, so that they could be easily located and be made available whenever required. Perhaps, one thought on leaving, AAHS ought to make a contribution to that huge problem by being careful about what to excavate! And such a reflection just shows how successful was the Outing Secretary’s second undertaking for June 2010.

Bob Woodings

Dorchester on Thames Archaeological Excavations - 15 July 2010

What is life like when an empire collapses and the barbarians are at the gate? This is one of the intriguing questions on which Paul Booth of Oxford Archaeology (OA) is hoping to shed some light through an excavation of part of the south-west quadrant of the six hectare Roman town of Dorchester. This is a joint venture by OA, Oxford University and the local community, and provides excellent training for archaeology students and local people alike. The trench is about 100 square metres of vacant allotments, which the Parish Council is kindly allowing to be excavated over a period of years.

Some twenty Society members were given an excellent tour of the excavations on the blustery evening of 15th July. A Roman street has been found, but (as yet) no major Roman buildings, suggesting that the area may have been open space (perhaps a market area) in the Roman period. A midden later accumulated here, and subsequently a Saxon ‘sunken featured building’ was constructed close to the street. Our group was shown samples of mass-produced Roman pottery and later, but cruder, Saxon sherds. Bone combs, late Roman bronze ‘horse head’ buckles and a collection of small denomination Roman coins of around AD 380-400 have also been found. Dorchester was certainly a significant local power centre at the twilight of the Roman Empire, and again from the 7th century AD (when St Birinus preached Christianity to the West Saxons from the town) but the nature and length of the gap between Roman and Saxon occupation remains to be fully illuminated. We await further news of the findings with great interest.

We concluded the evening by thanking Paul Booth very warmly, for giving up his evening (after a hard day’s digging!) to show us the excavation; we wish Paul and his team every success in future seasons.

John Rawling

Local History Group

The May meeting was well attended. It seemed to be my turn to be presenter, and I gave some ideas on the two original Abingdon charters of the 1550s, the one setting up Christ's Hospital and the other establishing the town as a corporate borough. I was concerned to discuss the main personalities involved and try to work out their motivations, but especially to point out that Abingdon was unique in the sheer volume of property, originally from the defunct abbey and guilds, that was handed into the keeping of the townsfolk. This explains the unusually careful survey work of Roger Amyce and the long gestation period of the incorporation. The advantages of the charters would be evenly split between town and crown; the leading townspeople would benefit from rising property values, while the central government would no longer have the duty of repairs and maintenance, which it had shown itself incapable of carrying out.

The next meeting of the group is scheduled for Tuesday 19 October. At the time of writing, no one has offered to present anything. Anyone who has any new work that can be discussed, please get in touch.

Manfred Brod

Dates for Your Diary

Oxford Open Doors – 11th and 12th September: Many interesting buildings and spaces open to the public. Details: <http://www.oxfordopendoors.org.uk/>

Abingdon Heritage Open Day – 11th September: Many interesting buildings and spaces open to the public. Details: <http://www.abingdonheritage.co.uk/> (offers to help would be welcomed – please contact Elizabeth Drury on 01235 553636)

Abingdon Anglo-German Club

13th Jan 7.30pm – Abbey Chapel, Checker Walk, Prof Robin Briggs: *“New Historical Views on the End of the Western Empire – The Germans and the Fall of Rome”*

Wallingford Historical & Archaeological Society

Fridays in Wallingford Town Hall (in the Market Place)

10th Sept - Martin Way: *“Glimmer in the Dark”*. A celebration of art and craftsmanship in Anglo-Saxon England with later Viking influences (set against a backdrop of everyday life)

Kennington History Society Methodist Church, Upper Road, Kennington

18th October - James Bond: *The History of Parks and Gardens in Oxfordshire*

20th December – Roger Gelder & George Ross: *The Search for Oxford's Medieval Wall: An Odyssey of the City's Historic Past*

Oxfordshire Museum Resource Centre Open Day – 10th October 10am – 4.00pm
Standlake, OX29 7QG

Sutton Courtenay Local History Society

30th September: 7.30pm - All Saints' Church Prof. Helena Hamerow: "*Local Anglo-Saxon Discoveries: A royal vill at Sutton Courtenay; some recent work.*"

9th November: 7.30pm - Village Hall Dr Pamela Horn: "*Servant lives in Victorian and Edwardian England.*"

25th January 2011: 7.30pm - Village Hall Dr Ron Dell: "*More buildings, houses and their inhabitants of Sutton Courtenay.*"

Editor's Notes

Thanks to all members for their contributions and feedback – all gratefully received. Any suggestions for outings, speakers or newsletter items are most welcome. Please note that the views contained in the articles are those of the contributors rather than the society itself, and contributions may be edited for content.

Tim Barnett, Newsletter Editor

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE OLD GAOL, ABINGDON, OXFORDSHIRE - Summary Report by Paul Riccoboni

Introduction

The Old Gaol site has previously revealed Iron Age, Romano-British, medieval and later remains, as well as small amounts of earlier prehistoric and Saxon material. Given this and its location within the Iron Age *oppidum*, in the historic town centre and close to the river and Abingdon Bridge, this is clearly a key site.

John Moore Heritage Services excavated two areas in advance of the Old Gaol development: Area 1, to the rear of Twickenham House, where work by AAAHS in the 1980s had revealed a Romano-British building and yard surfaces, and Area 2 underneath the site of the former Sports Hall.

Area 1

Prehistoric Period. The area contained remains of dense occupation from the Iron Age period. Gullies and postholes from this period were found across this area, surviving particularly well at its western end. Two hearths had surviving *in situ* burnt remains. Beneath one hearth were further archaeological remains including a large pit with carbonised seeds and lithics preserved within the fill. Finds from this area include a copper ring, large bone pin, slag and a spindle whirl.

Roman Period. Sealing the Iron Age features were Roman 'yard' surfaces consisting of thin layers of small rounded pebbles that seemed to form a series of successive resurfacing layers across this general area. Traces of these surfaces survived most consistently across the western area of the site but were also present in small patches in at least two different locations in the eastern end of the site.

Cutting through one layer of pebble 'yard' surfacing was a large Roman quarry pit, which had been filled with layers of Roman waste material. Other Roman pits located across the area also contained waste from this period.

Remains of the stone-walled building first identified by AAHS were further investigated and re-examined. The building was only partly exposed within the excavation area and measured 11.5m in length and had a minimum width of 9.5m. The remains were composed of partially robbed wall footings constructed of loosely compacted stone rubble, and areas of *in situ* floor surfaces of fine gravel overlaid by compacted clay. The building was in part constructed through the fills of the large Roman quarry pit where the rubble wall footings were deeper in order to reach more stable ground.

Medieval Period. This was mainly represented by large pits, containing various fills of decomposed organic materials and general waste from the period with broken pottery sherds and large quantities of butchered animal bones throughout. A medieval ditch also crossed the site on an approximate NE-SW orientation and seems to have acted as a boundary ditch with denser pitting on the western side.

Post medieval period. This was represented mainly on the eastern side of the site beneath the demolished building of No. 4 Turn Again Lane. Three cellars were excavated in this area which probably dated to this period. The truncated remains of walls related to buildings (which would have fronted onto Turn Again Lane) were also recorded. Domestic refuse pits were sampled to the rear of these property plots; one contained an entire horse skeleton.

No features connected with the construction of the Old Gaol were seen in this area. However, features and finds related to the Old Gaol are expected during the Watching Brief stage of works which is closer the Police Station and Old Gaol.

Modern. Some wall footings (mainly of red brick) within the northern area of the site related to greenhouses and other outbuildings that formed part of the Twickenham House complex of the 18th Century. Garden soil from this period formed as a result of the area being used as an orchard.

Area 2

The bases of nine medieval pits and a well were the only surviving features in this part of the development site.

Discussion and Conclusions

The archaeological excavations at the Old Gaol have provided an invaluable insight into the archaeology and history of Abingdon. The good preservation of features and finds from the prehistoric period fit neatly into an ever growing picture of the Iron Age settlement. Other find spots and features have been located within this general area of Abingdon which provide further direct evidence of the existence of an Iron Age *oppidum* at this location.

The prehistoric features seem to be related to a dense settlement with industrial activities taking place such as the manufacture of textiles and metal objects. Later

Roman 'yard' surfaces seal the earlier features indicating a change of function in this area during the Roman period.

The large Roman pit seen in Area 1 was almost certainly a Roman gravel extraction pit, which was subsequently filled with domestic waste. The stone walled building, although damaged by later medieval and post medieval pitting, did have some surviving wall footings and *in situ* floor layers. The work will allow the date of the Roman building to be revised.

The medieval linear feature may represent the remains of a boundary which divided separate tenement plots in the rear gardens of properties which fronted onto Bridge Street and Turn Again Lane. Different activities within defined plots can be postulated with the stone walled building on the eastern side of this boundary and dense refuse pits on the western side.

A full report on the excavation will be published in due course.

(This is an edited version of a longer report kindly provided by Paul Riccoboni of John Moore Heritage Services. It is hoped to place the full version on the AAHS web-site.)



Old Gaol, Abingdon, excavations - general shot of site looking south

