

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

www.AAAHS.org.uk



NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2007

**“New Light on Early Abingdon” - Saturday 19th May 2007
2.00 – 5.30pm at the Unicorn Theatre, Abbey Buildings, Abingdon.**

An event to mark the publication of “The History of the Church in Abingdon” edited and translated by professor John Hudson, University of St Andrews.

Programme:

The archaeology of the Abingdon area 5th – 7th centuries A.D. –

Dr Helena Hamerow

Abingdon and its Abbey – recent archaeological investigations – Tim Allen

Abingdon Abbey in the Anglo Saxon Thames Valley – Dr John Blair

The History of the Church in Abingdon – Professor John Hudson

Tickets (£5.00 to include tea and reception) available from Frugal Food, 17 West St Helen Street (01235 522239) or Abingdon School Box Office (01235 849063, Monday – Friday 9.00am – 1.00 pm term-time) or arts.sec@abingdon.org.uk

Meetings Programme:

All at the Northcourt Centre starting at 7.45pm. Members free. Visitors welcome (£2.00 entry)

MARCH 15th 2007 *Adrienne Rosen*

Another Town Charter Chipping Norton 1607

APRIL 19th 2007 *Simon Townley*

Oxfordshire Towns Recent Work by the Victoria County History

MAY 17th 2007 *Lorraine Lindsay-Gale*

**"Propaganda in Cuneiform" Early writing in Mesopotamia
(Ancient Iraq)**

21st June 2007 Members Evening

Various Members Projects: Usually very local and very interesting

Note: **Visit to Christ Church Cathedral** – Thursday 26th April at 7.00 pm.
Details from Roger Gelder at meetings or via outings@aaaahs.org.uk

Chairman's Report

Welcome to the Spring newsletter. What a lot has happened since September when I returned to the committee in such sad circumstances. The loss of Simon Owen was a great blow not only to the Society as a whole but particularly to the diggers who knew him so well. An obituary, which brings out some of Simon's excellent qualities, follows in this newsletter.

The highlight of the 2006-2007 season has to have been the Ock Street exhibition. Having seen the quality of the displays and the sheer quantity of hard work that went into the project I was not surprised that that it was such a fantastic success. I understand that that there are now plans to produce a touring version which will be shown around Oxfordshire's museums and which will bring its delights within reach of many more people.

Meanwhile the life of the Society has continued with another varied lecture programme. Ivan Cadge provided a memorable evening with his talk on building a scale model of the Abingdon branch line. The poor tea-makers hovered over the digestives in vain as the audience were entranced by photo after photo of fondly- remembered scenes. Another highlight was the visit of Roman re-enactors to the Christmas Social. Unfortunately I missed this one but I understand that those present could now sign up as passable auxiliaries.

The digging group have been busy with post-excavation work at our Marcham HQ, having finished helping with the Beedon excavation for the winter. A fuller report follows in the newsletter. As always, if you fancy getting involved, please contact Terry. The portacabin is fully heated, I understand, and toothbrushes and good company are provided.

The history group continue to come out of the archives and meet regularly to hear the preliminary results of each other's work and to share ideas. Again, if you are working on any aspect of Abingdon history, please contact Manfred for details of the next meeting.

Finally no Chairman's report would be complete without a call for more volunteers for the committee. Each year we need new faces and this is no exception. We meet once a month in each other's houses (with refreshments...) and aim to share the workload so that no one person has too difficult a job. It's a good way to make new friends and of course, to get more involved in the life of your Society. Try it and see!

Rachel Everett, Chairman

Report on the 2006 AGM

This year we invited the well-known TV archaeologist, Julian (Meet the Ancestors) Richards to speak at the AGM. In his honour we booked the Abbey Hall – tickets were free to members and on sale at £5. We thought the evening was a great success (although the Committee had a bit of a struggle

with the Guildhall staff and Julian had a bit of a struggle with his projector). Julian gave a very enjoyable talk and sold a lot of his books, and the Society covered its costs!

The AGM (which took place before Julian's talk) was consequently well attended: Julia and I had to present the reports in the sad absence of Simon. The outgoing committee made two proposals (see Summer Newsletter 2006) – to allow Committee members to stand for a second term and to adopt an Equal Opportunities Policy – and these were agreed after some interesting discussion.

Janey Cumber, Secretary

AAHS Membership and Treasurer's Report

Our 2005/6 accounts were scrutinised by two independent members acting as auditors, my thanks to Spencer White and Jane Poulter for giving generously of their time to this task and certifying that the records are true and fair. The accounts are available for inspection at the address below. This year 1st Sept 2006/31st Aug 2007 we have so far 100 memberships subscribed, of which 35 are families.

As a Society we have had a very active year, and looking to the future we will be seeking to add to our income from subscriptions. To maintain and improve our standard of speaker meetings, our financial position has allowed us to purchase a digital projector. This will give us a reduction in our accumulated funds at the end of the current financial year, as we are planning further expenditures which will generate future income. I expect a surplus of expenditure over income in this financial year of around £1500. This will still leave us with a prudent reserve of more than two years subscription income in our deposit account, but ideas for generating funds will be very welcome.

As always costs have continued to rise, I am grateful to those of you who have indicated they would like to receive this Newsletter via e-mail. I am afraid that I have not always contacted members to acknowledge receiving subscriptions received after we sent out membership cards, and apologise for this discourtesy. My poor excuse is that I have been very busy, as we all seem to be. I have had several requests to enable subscriptions to be paid annually by standing order (where you tell your bank to pay into the AAHS account at our bank) or direct debit (where you authorise our bank in writing to take money from your bank account and put it into our account). If you would like to use a Standing Order or Direct Debit to pay membership please contact me if you have not already done so, I will be sending out an example of a form that can be used to members who have requested it in May/June.

Julia E Brocklesby

tel: 01865 778194, e-mail: membership@www.aaahs.org.uk

Digging Report

St Helen's Church

Members may remember the excavation in the Parson's House and North Porch of St Helen's Church which was completed in autumn 2005. This was a very restricted dig, both in area, and the depth that we were allowed to excavate under the porch floor. But even so the dig was quite different to any of our excavations of recent years, and was both interesting and enjoyable to be involved in. (See Jeff Wallis's report in the Summer 2005 newsletter).

The post excavation work continues, and both Jeff Wallis and Julia Brocklesby, are working very hard on the report. They are both to be commended and thanked for their sterling efforts.

Thanks were also due to Mary-Nell Pilgrim, Shirley Kay, Christine Buckingham and Jenny Devanney for their help with the dig. This also provided some happy memories of Simon Owen who was actively involved.

The open day that we arranged outside the dig, was well received by very interested members of the public. (See the photos on our website.)

Again I would like to thank the St Helen's churchwardens for their help and support during the excavation.

Drayton St Leonards

At the invitation of the local historical society, and with the permission of the landowner, part of the digging team started an excavation, on a small scale, in Drayton St Leonard. This is in the garden of a house which runs down to the River Thames.

Before work commenced, a Geophysical Survey was carried out by Roger Ainslie (Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics). Following this we opened two small holes to investigate anomalies shown on the report.

This is still ongoing, but we seem to have uncovered a medieval ditch running at 90 degrees away from the river. In the second trench we have uncovered two more ditches, which at the time of printing are of unknown date.

Summer Excavation

We will again be helping the Beedon Archaeology Group at Beedon during the summer. We have been helping Victor Pocock with this very interesting Iron Age and Roman site for the last two summers. Anyone interested in helping please get in touch with me in the next few weeks.

*Terry Stopps
Digging Secretary*

Marcham Field Walk 2005, 2006 and 2007

For the past 3 years the Society has been fieldwalking the Big Leas field, Manor Farm, Marcham, We have covered an area of 47 acres, some 550 metres north-south by 300-350 metres east-west. Dividing the field into 100m x 100m blocks and concentrating on the dry western half, enabled weekend walkers to collect potsherds, metal, bone and flint from each 10m transect, 2 m wide, working from September 2005 to April 2006. The eastern half contained three very wet areas in which winter field walking was impossible.

Once the field dried out in August, the organic wheat crop harvested, field walking in part of the eastern half was carried out across an area where some very nice terra sigillata [Samian] potsherds had been noted but again without any obvious concentration being apparent. From September 2006 to February 2007, the nearly 800 bags of potsherds have been washed, sorted, catalogued and plotted on a map of the field.

The north western quarter showed predominantly Roman pottery, with Medieval potsherds scattered lightly north to south but with a heavy concentration of post-Medieval mid-field around an 1800s trackway crossing the field east to west. Oddly, the bottom 100m field of the field yielded practically no pottery but this may be due to the digging out and spreading of soil from the Norbrook some twenty years earlier, to improve drainage and re-direct the course of the River Ock.

It had been hoped that the scatter of Roman potsherds might indicate the presence of a Romano-British shrine, dedicated to the saline spring which would have run through the field before being re-directed in later times but hopes have not been fulfilled.

Finally, the Sites and Monuments Records at Swindon were contacted (February 2007) for any up-to-date aerial photographs of the field, mainly because Thames Water are about to run the new Goring to Oxford water pipeline diagonally across the mid-field area. Surprisingly, recent photographs (1994-1997) showed field ditch patterns considered to be Romano-British, covering the whole of the southern half of Big Leas and adjoining fields.

It is hoped that the pipeline cut may show sections of these field ditch boundaries and possibly the original course of the saline spring, with any deeper-buried pottery but this remains to be seen.

Roger Gelder
Field Walking Secretary

AAHS Archives Report

Members of longstanding will be aware of the problems experienced by the society in the past because of a lack of permanent premises where the society's records of all types could be stored. With the purchase of a Portakabin and a permanent location at Manor Farm, Marcham, work has

been underway for some time to gather together the varied material still stored in members' homes and select what should be kept for posterity. Several box-files of administrative records, deposited into the care of Abingdon Town Council by the late Mrs Jacobi, will be returned to AAHS in the near future.

The records encompass books, journals, excavation reports, some maps, photographs and exhibition material, notably that of the highly successful Ock Street Exhibition. Initially I have been assessing the contents of the society's library which is no longer as popular as it was in the early days of the society. Janey Cumber and I have looked through several boxes of books and extracted publications in the following categories to form the core of the society's collections:

1. local archaeological, historical, geological interest
2. specialist subjects eg vernacular architecture
3. relevant journals

There are many books in the library that were donated by members when the society's funds were not as healthy as today. These will be offered back to the donors, if required, or disposed of in a mutually agreed fashion. I hope that no one will be offended by this move but we really need to rationalise our holdings. Suggestions for additions to the library are always welcome and members will be kept informed of further work in this area.

Jackie Smith

Local History Group

The Local History Group is a specialised group of AAHS members who are actively engaged in local historical research.

At the last meeting on 5 February, Hilary Clare regaled us with a run of two years' expenses of maintaining a moderately wealthy 16 to 18 year old youth in the late 17th century. We speculated, with the aid of the books she had brought with her, on the clothes that were bought for him, on the destination of the enormous sums that his doting grandmother lavished on him as pocket money, and on why he had given £12 10s (when his servant received £3 a month) to a man who was 'the Rider of the greate horse'. Sad that he died at 23.

The informal discussions after the main item on the programme ranged widely - from green men and rabbits (oh no, they were hares!) joined at the ears to Trendel's Folly and sixteenth century Abingdon Christian names.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday 15 May. Dick Barnes will present his work on the 1880 restoration of St Nicolas' church, and there will be the usual opportunity for unstructured historical discussion over coffee.

Manfred Brod

Ock Street Group

The Ock Street Group, having recovered from its successful exhibition of last September, is continuing its activities.

We now have two websites. Anyone can get into <http://www.communigate.co.uk/oxford/ockst/index.phtml> which has general information about the group, while <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ockstreet/> requires registration and contains files, databases, and pictures relevant to Ock Street. There are direct links to these from the general AAHS website.

Some of our exhibition material will be on display at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies at the Westgate for two months starting early May, and we are beginning to plan for a new exhibition which will be at the Abingdon Museum in January-February 2008. This will differ from last year's in that it will centre more on objects and artefacts than on text.

Manfred Brod

Sub-Committee for Print Publications

The AAHS Committee has set up a sub-committee to consider a possible series of print publications of members' work. Such publications would cover the Society's archaeological digs, data being accumulated by the Ock Street Group, and general local historical work. I have been asked to act as convenor.

If anyone has any opinions on this subject, or has specialised experience of editing and publishing and is willing to be involved, please contact me on local@aaahs.org.uk

Manfred Brod

Congratulations

To Dick Barnes who has won the Judith Hunter prize for the best article published in Berkshire Old and New in 2006 (for details see below).

Recent Publications by Society Members

"Fitzharris Manor, Abingdon, from gentleman's residence to demolition"
Dick Barnes
Berkshire Old and New (Journal of the Berkshire Local History Association)
No. 23, 2006, pp 16-25

Historical Maps

As mentioned at previous meetings, the Society has been given a copy of a historical map of Oxford from 1874. Anyone wishing their own copy may order one direct from <http://www.cassinimaps.com> at £6.49 (ISBN 1905568185).

Website - www.aaahs.org.uk

Please check the AAAHS website regularly for details of what's new, the programme of lectures, interesting articles, photos and walks. It also has links to a number of useful websites.

Try these!

Some other websites of interest:-

Oxfordshire.gov.uk/referenceonline

Library website giving members free access to reference websites you'd otherwise have to subscribe to. Includes Britannica Online, Grove Art Online, Grove Music Online, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford reference Online Premium.

Nationalarchives.gov.uk

National register of archives

<http://www.ofhs.org.uk/web/parmapCounty/index.html>

Map of Oxfordshire parishes as at 1900 on the Oxon Family History Society website.

<http://www.oxfordshire2007.com/>

Website detailing events celebrating the County's "1,000th birthday".

<http://www.greenmantrail.com/>

Part of Oxfordshire 2007, a site dedicated to the mysterious folk image of the Green Man

<http://www.oxfordshirepast.net/>

The local pages from Victoria History of Counties of England detailing the history of towns and villages.

<http://www.old-maps.co.uk/>

Online historic maps of Britain.

<http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/pp-prospectus.pdf>

Prospectus of part-time and day courses offered by Oxford University's Continuing Education Department.

<http://www.sofo.org.uk/>

The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust's website containing Military records spanning hundreds of years

Dates for Your Diary.

Some talks with a historical bias:-

Abingdon Anglo-German Club Abbey Chapel, Checker Walk at 7.30 pm. Thursday 29th March: "Frederick the Great – How Great was he?"

Thursday 26th April: "Festivals at 17th Century German Courts: Art and Power".

Oxon Family History Society Exeter Hall, Kidlington at 8.00pm
23 April: Nigel Hammond on Social History Through Old Photographs

Oxfordshire2007 Christ Church, Oxford
25 March, On the 200th anniversary of the day on which the Act abolishing the slave trade received Royal Assent, there will be a service commemorating the abolition including the Gospel Choir, Black Voices, Blackbird Leys Choir, Gelede Dance, opera soloists and poets.

Oxford Folk Festival Various venues in Oxford
31 March to 1 April. Traditional and contemporary music and side attractions.

Voluntary Action History Society Wesley Centre, Oxford
Brookes University

Saturday 17 March 2007, 10.30am - 1pm. Make love not war: The impact of the 1960s on The Salvation Army in the UK.
Details: http://www.vaahs.org.uk/?page_id=6

Oxfordshire Past 2007 Barns Centre, Thame
Saturday 19th May. A day of presentations organised by OAHS, including Paul Smith's summary of the past year's archaeological work in the county. <http://oahs.org.uk/oxpast.htm>

New light on early Abingdon (see page 1)
Saturday 19th May 2.30-5.30. Tickets £5 from Frugal Foods.

The Institute of Field Archaeologists 25th Anniversary
Conference at the University of Reading on 2-4 April.
<http://www.archaeologists.net/modules/icontent/index.php?page=18>

Wallingford Visit

This took place on Thursday 5th October and a small but eager group attended. The day's rain stopped as the visit began and we made our way to the top of the castle mound, only descending once darkness fell (as we almost did). The castle was of strategic importance throughout the Medieval period, with royal births and deaths there and numerous battles around it.

Judy Dewey, the museum curator, could not be there and instead her husband Stuart explained some of the history in the warmth of the museum. A good time was had by all and we all left having learnt something new.

Simon Owen 1956 - 2006



As you will no doubt have heard we lost our past Chairman, Simon Owen, at the end of last year, after a short illness. Many of you will have fond memories of Simon and his unique charm and style of leadership. Simon first came digging with us over ten years ago when we were excavating in Bath Street and at Tuckwell's gravel pit at the bottom of Barton Lane. He was always friendly and enthusiastic and was one of those characters who could always make people laugh. On occasion we were even entertained, on site, by his bagpipe playing! In recent years Simon could no longer play an active part in our excavations due to an injury to his leg. However, he continued to be involved with the AAAHS and was an active committee member, being Chairman twice.

Simon was a passionate Welshman and rugby fan – I doubt if there is anyone reading this who could be unaware of these facts. On moving to Abingdon he became very involved in the local community and made many friends. He was a regular player in the quiz team at the Anchor, on Thursday nights (invariably making the biggest contribution to what was, due to his depth of knowledge, frequently the winning team), and played in a number of bands. He was a gifted musician and could play all of the several hundred different musical instruments in his possession. He was employed as a science technician at Oxford Brookes University where, again, he was highly popular.

It was good to see so many people at his funeral including a sizeable contingent from the AAAHS. The church was full to bursting and all seats were occupied.

Simon leaves a wife, Marion, and a host of saddened friends who respected him greatly and who are missing him very much.

Bob Eeles

Contacts and Contributions

Chair: Rachel Everett chair@aaahs.org.uk
Secretary: Janey Cumber secretary@aaahs.org.uk
Treasurer & Membership Secretary: Julia Brocklesby
treasurer@aaahs.org.uk; membership@aaahs.org.uk
Outings Secretary: Roger Gelder outings@aaaahs.org.uk
Digging Secretary: Terry Stopps diggers@aaahs.org.uk
Items for newsletters: Tim Barnett newsletter@aaahs.org.uk
Publicity: Wendy Robbins publicity@aaahs.org.uk
Webmaster: David Rayner webmaster@aaahs.org.uk

Abingdon Joint Environmental Trust (JET)

Elizabeth Drury is the Society's co-opted member on the Abingdon JET, a grant awarding body administered by the Vale of White Horse District Council assisting repairs to historic buildings and projects such as landscaping public open spaces. Recent actions by the JET which might be of interest to our members include:-

- (a) a grant for the repainting of the Usher's Seat or Master's Bench in the Guildhall, having established that it does not require a specialist restorer,
- (b) assisting the area around the Guildhall being repaved;
- (c) consideration of options for the repainting of the mural in the Stratton way underpass (these were the idea originally of the late Harry Knights and the Friends of Abingdon with Margaret Jones creating the murals).

If you have any suggestions that you wish to be put forward to the JET, please let Elizabeth know on 01235 553636.

Abbey Grounds Restoration Management Plan

The Society has been invited to attend meetings considering the plan and is keeping a watching brief.

AAHS – History of the Society!

The Society will celebrate its 40th birthday next year and we'd love to hear from any of the original members about how it came into being. Does anyone have any memorabilia or other "finds" from those early days – old newsletters, photos, etc. If you can help please let me (or any other committee member) know by email or at a meeting. Thank you!

Henry Neville – Abingdon’s oddest MP?

Abingdon has few memories of Henry Neville, its MP from 1649 to 1653, but he must surely be unique as the only one of its parliamentary representatives to have a solid historical reputation as a leading political theorist of his time, and, incidentally, as a rather shameless pornographer. An excellent recent thesis by Gaby Mahlberg of the University of East Anglia assesses his life and career, though what follows here is my reading of the facts rather than hers.

Neville was a republican. He was born in 1619, a younger son of the manorial family of Billingbear, East Berkshire. His step-father owned Italian books and Neville probably learnt the language from him. Any such library at the time will have included the works of Machiavelli, from which he may have imbibed the republican ethos. At twenty, he was forced into a sham marriage with a twelve-year-old heiress, intended to keep her property out of the rapacious hands of the king’s Court of Wards. There is no evidence the couple ever cohabited, or that Neville was ever able to enjoy a normal married life with a wife of his choosing. This will not have endeared him to the practices of monarchy. Soon after, as the Civil War was starting, Neville went off to Italy, where he would spend the next several years making intellectual friendships and studying the politics of the various city-republics. Returning to England just in time to fight on the parliamentary side, he became a drinking companion and political ally of Henry Marten of Longworth, then approaching the peak of his parliamentary career and leader of the oppositional republican grouping in the Commons. It was probably Marten’s influence that got him elected in 1649.

At about this time Neville was publishing a series of pamphlets under titles like ‘The Parliament of Ladies’. On one level, these were exposés of the sexual shenanigans of the great and powerful, like a modern ‘red-top’ though with pornographic detail and a deliberate coarseness of language that would be unacceptable today. But, like the modern red-tops, they were deeply subversive of established authority. The basic trope was that the wives of national leaders had taken over their places in parliament, and were debating matters of national importance. But each debate quickly declined into a discussion of the sexual prowess of the men concerned, on which all the women were supposed to have first hand knowledge. The conclusion the reader would take away was that there was no difference between the women’s lust for sex and their menfolk’s for power, and that both were equally irresponsible and equally indifferent to the public interest that parliament was supposed to be furthering. And, at yet another level, that men who couldn’t control their wives were unlikely to do much better with a fractious and divided post-war society.

Neville lost his seat at Cromwell’s coup of 1653, and his career thereafter does not particularly concern Abingdon. He would be a leading member and financial backer of the republican ‘think-tank’ the Rota Club, and author or co-author of a number of political treatises and tracts. After the restoration of the monarchy, he would be forced into exile and spend several more years with his friends in Italy. His later work was an attempt to reconcile his form of republicanism with the evolving Whig-liberal consensus, and Mahlberg follows this through as one of the strands that would lead, in the next century, to the American constitution. The style of political pornography that he pioneered would become a major form of political comment under the libertine Charles II. Neville died in 1690.

Manfred Brod