

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2008

Secrets from the Depths

Dr Jill Greenaway, from the Museum of Reading, gave a most fascinating and enjoyable talk on the Secrets from the Depths - items in the museum's Thames Water collection - to the April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

Jill began by explaining the origins of the collection. The river has been managed since the first flash locks were installed in Jacobean times. The Thames Conservancy Board, and its successor Thames Water, dredge the river in order to keep it navigable and reduce flood risks. Many important items came to the surface, but as it was difficult to decide which side of the midstream 'county boundary' such came from, they stayed with the Conservancy. Reading Museum would then identify them, and decide which to add to the collection. There was a system of rewards for the workers on the dredgers - although the 10/- of the 1930s was still only 50p in the 1980s. The dredging was done by grab dredgers or by bucket dredgers - when there was a chance to 'spot' items in the bucket, the chute, or in the barge.

In 1932, Henry Wallis, the curator of zoological items at Reading Museum, managed to persuade the Conservancy to deposit the items already found, and any subsequent finds, in Reading Museum. In due course, these became assets of Thames Water plc, who donated the collection - now over 500 items - to the Museum in 1996.

Because of the way the objects have been discovered, some items are much more likely to be discovered - such as skulls, rather than long thin bones, even though there are not proportionately more skulls in the river. There also seem to be a variety of reasons for the items to have got into the river in the first place. Jill showed us a wide range of items from the collection. Some seemed to have been 'lost or discarded' - such as a starting pistol from Henley Regatta, or a quantity of ginger beer bottles found close to the Windsor race course. Some objects imply the river has been used for fly tipping in the past too.

Then another group of objects, such as a set of shackles, or a Smith and Wesson revolver found near Runnymede might be associated with crime - it is difficult to tell when the 'context' of the discovery is unclear.

Other items are more surprising finds - like a Zulu spear head - maybe a collector's loss, maybe by theft?, or a nazi dagger that had been well oiled, and apparently well looked after, and had not gone rusty.

The range of items discovered span a considerable period of time. From the last couple of centuries, the range includes glass 'pop' bottles, a wooden skittle ball, a weight from reign of George I and a hunting horn. From the Civil war period came the handle of a basket hilted sword and a breastplate. Both would have been 'high quality' goods - and it is unclear how they came to be in the river - maybe items of cargo lost overboard from a boat? From the medieval period, most objects are 'run of the mill domestic' - such as the top of a pitcher, or a well preserved table fork with a wooden handle (difficult to look after, as the ideal conditions for the wood are cool and damp, and for the iron, dry and hot!). Early medieval (ie Norman) discoveries included assorted axe heads - of the same style as can be seen in use on the Bayeux tapestry. From the slightly earlier Saxon and Viking era came some very unusual weapons - elaborately decorated with inlaid copper and silver. These were important possessions, which would not just get 'lost' in the river - and one possibility is that they were ritual offerings for worship of the river. Roman finds tended to again be 'everyday' items - although do include a pewter jar - the only item of Roman pewter found in the river

During the Iron Age, the river was the boundary between two tribes - the Catauvellauni to the north and the Atrebates in the south, and it seems likely that there was much trading between them across the river, judging by variety of items found. Again, there are some very finely worked items, such as scabbards, which are more likely not to have been practical weapons, but ceremonial, or used as 'offerings' to 'placate' the river, so it would not wash away the crops, or cause the drowning of the local people. It is evident that the river was seen as a 'holy' place - even more so in the Bronze Age, from which a large number of high quality weapons date. It was possible to see technological developments from a series of axe heads from that era. Jill showed us the complex method by which a hollow ceremonial spearhead - one of only 12 of its type known in Europe - was made.

Even earlier were the neolithic farmers axes - only the larger examples, however, are found during the dredging process, and similar items from the pre-neolithic period - about 10,000 years BC! Many items from the collection are on display - not only at Reading, but at other museums in the area, such as the River & Rowing Museum at Henley.
