Wargrave Local History Society

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Archaeological investigations at Greys Court

- John Hesketh

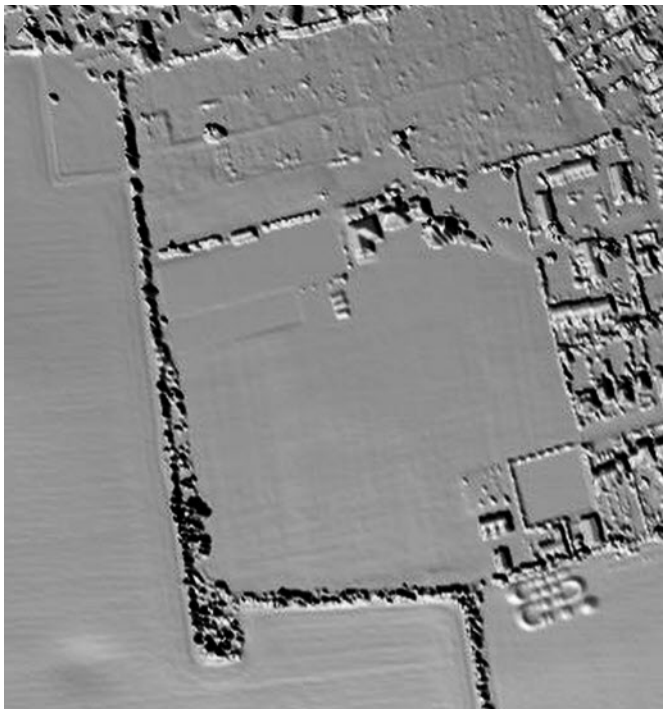
The November meeting of Wargrave Local History Society was a presentation by John Hesketh, who is a member of the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group. The group (founded in 1969), working with the National Trust, have been investigating some of the grounds of Greys Court, near Henley, during the last three summers, and John described what the work had so far revealed about the history of the property.

John began by explaining that 'archaeology' was the 'study of the human path through material evidence' - the important aspect being the effect of humans - to the disappointment of some school pupils, it is not about digging up dinosaur bones! There are three main tasks that would be part of an archaeological study - a survey, the excavation, and an analysis of what might be found.

The survey can include looking at existing records and collections. There may be items that are available in museums, for example, or those found by members of the public. Whether in private or public ownership, such objects can be registered on a database, as part of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, which provides an accessible record of what was found, and where it was found - these days with a GPS reference for the location. The objects that people have discovered do not need to be 'valuable' - a brooch or a coin is evidence of human activity, and it is important that this is recorded, as the object can help to work out when that took place. Similarly, old documents or maps can give clues as to what may have existed at a site in earlier times.

Another technique that can help identify a location of potential interest is to examine aerial photographs. Even though not visible on the surface, a buried structure will change the way in which crops - even grass - grow above it. Although there could be natural changes in the ground that can have those effects, something with a definite shape - maybe straight lines with right angle corners, or a clear circle, are most likely to be the result of human activity. Similar evidence can come from parch marks, where areas of grass have rather brown areas - especially of specific shapes as with aerial photographs.

A different airborne system involves using a laser from above to measure the precise height of the ground and objects - plants, buildings etc. Known as LIDAR (Light detection and ranging), the image extract (*right*) includes the Old Pavilion where the society was meeting (*just above the centre of the picture*), there is a depression in the adjacent field (*bottom left*), and it even reveals the boundary between the plots of the Woodclyffe Allotments, for example!



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Working on the surface, field walking - mapping the existence of flints, for example, and metal detecting can also provide evidence of earlier occupation. The majority of detectorists are very good, such as by checking the excavation spoil heaps, in case something had been missed whilst a trench was being dug.

More recently, geo-physical surveys have become one of the archaeologist's methods to detect if there is something worth closer examination, without the need at this stage to disturb the soil. One process - magnetometry - looks for changes in the magnetic fields in the ground - which can be caused by there being iron in the ground, or because the ground has been disturbed in the past, or maybe buried below are the results of something having been burnt - such as in a kiln. It does not need 'contact' with the ground, so is relatively quick to survey a large area this way. Another geo-physical approach is to measure the electrical resistance of the ground. As this needs direct contact with the ground, it tends to be slower than magnetometry. Sections of walls, or some types of soil, will give a higher reading than undisturbed soil - but resistivity measurement can give a more detailed 'picture' of a smaller area.

Once these surveys have been carried out, it maybe that an excavation is needed to discover what is actually lying below the surface. It is, John said, not possible to record everything! The first stage is likely to dig a test pit, about a metre square. This can establish how far down the real archaeology will be - the soil in a farm field having been ploughed, will not contain the identifiable layers that help in sequencing the objects and other evidence to be found. At each stage, both with a test pit and a subsequent trench to more closely examine specific areas, drawings will be made, photographs taken, and measurements recorded, so that the context of anything found can be seen, and how the various features relate to each other. After this, the ground is reinstated - but that is not the end of the task. The 'finds' need to be examined and analysed - maybe pieces of bone or pottery or metal, being weighed, analysed chemically, and for some samples, radio carbon dating used to calculate the age of the sample (although that is a fairly expensive process). There is a lot to be done after the actual 'dig' - and then a report written so that other researchers know about the work.

John then outlined some of the projects the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group had undertaken in recent years, such as at Wyfold Grange, near Sonning Common, where LIDAR had revealed a bank and ditch, and analysis of material found during the excavation showed it to be Anglo Saxon, dating from about 1030 AD, whilst at High Wood, near Harpsden, the excavations discovered painted plaster and many pieces of pottery from what wasclearly a high-status building. It turned out to be a Romano-Celtic temple, with evidence below it of earlier Iron Age activity.



John was one of the volunteer gardeners at Greys Court (*above*), and this led to a proposal that the group could collaborate with the National Trust, as some parch marks on the main oval lawn in front of the house suggested it would be worth investigating - but the Trust replied that they did not have a budget for such a project. The group pointed out that as a voluntary organisation, they did not charge - so in co-operation with Adrian Cox, the regional archaeologist for the National Trust - the task was planned.

The property is mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Survey, and a manor house is thought to have existed, although not on the site of the present house. A replacement dwelling was built of timber in the 1450s, and the present brick home built on the same site in Tudor times. The excavations began in the summer of 2024, with the Council for Archaeology keen for there to be public participation, so they have been invited to visit whilst the excavations have taken place. An eighteenth-century engraving of Greys Court showed towers and a courtyard that matched the parch marks towards the lower end of the grass area in front of the house, so a resistivity survey was done there. Once the turf was removed, remains of old brick walls were found to be just 10 cm below the surface. This seems to been part of the courtyard wall, with a gateway through, but also evidence of an earlier medieval wall at a lower level. Some pottery discovered during the work bore the date 1691, so providing a good clue to dating the other structures there.



When further investigations took place in the summer of 2025, the foundations of another building were uncovered a little further up the same lawn. These appear to have been for a guest house. In earlier times, the servants occupied the lower floor and 'the family' the upper one. For guests to reach their hosts, therefore, there is likely to have been a connecting walkway at first floor level, and it is thought that the bricked-up doorway (*left*) alongside the window was the access from the house to this passage. A drain, older than the walls, was also found during that year's excavations - maybe having led from the earlier manor house site. Other discoveries that year included some medieval floor tiling, and a wall nine courses of brickwork deep, but on a different alignment to the other structures, suggesting there were further medieval buildings to be found.

In 2026 it was possible to have two periods (typically these last about 10 days at a time) to further the work. The first took place in July, in connection with the Council for British Archaeology Festival of Archaeology, and enabled further discoveries to be made of the buildings that had been part of the medieval guest block in the old courtyard, below the oval lawn. The team were surprised to find a much deeper cellar, possibly part of the earlier gatehouse. The time available did not enable a detailed exploration of this, which may have been used as a cold store. In September, the group were able to undertake further excavations as part of the National Trust's Heritage Days., this time on the upper lawn, where, maybe, the earlier manor house had been. The geophysical results look to have been caused by sand infill, from demolition of an earlier building that seems to have been not just demolished, but material taken out for - perhaps - use elsewhere. The differing alignments of these features might mean there was more than one building there. It has been difficult to date them - no coins having been found for example - but the thought at present is that they were demolished in the 16th or 17th centuries. Maybe a more precise time will emerge from future work on the site.

In due course, a full report on the archaeology at Greys Court is expected to be published by the National Trust. In the meantime, more information about the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group and their projects, including the work so far at Greys Court, can be found at https://soagarch.org.uk/

For more information about the society, visit our website at https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk