

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 1998

The Eton Rowing Lake Excavation

Tim Allen, of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, began by outlining the background to the project, which began in 1985. The Rowing Lake will be about 2.5 km long and 700 m wide, and at one time was considered as part of the nearby flood relief scheme. Although that has not been possible, the combined archaeological work over a 10 year period will result in the most intensive excavation in the Thames Valley, revealing 10,000 years of history.

Initial evidence came from aerial photographs, where crop marks show the site of earlier wet and dry areas, former channels of the River Thames and Bronze age barrows. The dry areas seemed to be of most interest, but as work progressed it became apparent that this was not so. Flints, dating from 10,000 to 6,000 years ago, were found in the wet areas, and showed that the huntergatherer people had camped by the edge of the lake making flint tools. Over 2000 struck flints were found in just 3 trenches, many being small (2-3 cm long) as used in multiple edge tools. Investigations in the channels revealed rich black peat, with beetles, snails, leaves etc contemporary with the mesolithic settlement. The Thames from Reading to London is rich in such deposits, but these - some 1.5 m thick - had layers of charcoal, flint and pottery sealed in. There were several phases when the land was dry, when the flood plain was lived on. The top layer was dated as 2,000 BC, and the others were earlier still. A former main channel of the Thames, used until Roman times, about 2km long, ran through the site, and this became the priority for excavation.

The river area was rich in organic material, such as snails, pollen and beetles. The types that lived there would vary on the conditions, and so it will be possible to work out what was happening around the human activity. Animal bones were also found. Those on the flint gravel were poor, due to the acidity, but in the peat they were well preserved. Nearby were lots of pieces of timber - most of which had been gnawed by beavers. Although beavers can change the course of a river, this probably did not happen here - but people, tending to be lazy, would use the timber felled by the beavers for their own purposes. These people would have included some of the very first farmers to arrive and settle from the continent.

The finds of pottery and flints number some 32,000 in just 2 years. Although there are no houses or burials from this period, the pottery and animal bones are found just as they were dropped 6,000 years ago. These were the 'every day' rubbish, rather than the items put in specially dug pits or wells elsewhere, and the position of every fragment found has to be plotted. Amongst the pottery was a pot used by the earliest of neolithic farmers from 4,200 to 3,800 BC.

By the Bronze Age, the site was less important. A number of burial sites were found, although later ploughing has removed some of the evidence. The land was wooded, with clearings, until about 1500 BC, but this then changed to major field systems for arable and grazing. The remains discovered have included burnt material from when the land was cleared, and Bronze Age wells, full of pots and bones, with burials around them. These included cattle and sheep as well as people.

Another area of interest is a 200 metre stretch of the old river course. Over about 1000 years, 6 bridge like structures had been built here. Large timbers had been driven into the ground, in pairs or triples, across the river. Most of the decking had gone, but wattle hurdles that formed a trackway, secured to older posts, were found. This seemed to be a ford making use of the supports of an earlier bridge.

Much work remains to be done to analyse the work done so far, and a third of the site has still to be examined, so we hope to have another report when the excavations are completed.

Tim Allen has published a web page with photographs in conjunction with Eton College's web site and the work has also been described in *Current Archaeology*.
