

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2012

The Cookham Paddock Excavation

At Wargrave Local History Society's June meeting Ann Griffin and Joy Blake, from the Marlow Archaeological Society, came to tell us about the Cookham Paddock Excavation - an archaeological dig in 2005 beside Cookham's Trinity Church.

Ann began by explaining that, as a teacher approaching retirement, she felt the need to find a fresh challenge. She saw a notice about a lecture course on archaeology, 'got hooked', and went on to do a degree and a Masters course. She added that she 'enjoys being out doors!' Marlow Archaeological Society covers both Marlow and Cookham, and over the winter she has been investigating Rookery Park in Marlow, but she is also involved with the survey of 'lumps and bumps' with the Berkshire Geophysics Team, and with the Knowl Hill Community Project.

The work at Cookham Paddock began in 2005, with the aid of a Lottery Heritage grant. Ann explained that digging a site can only take place if there is a source of funds to deal with the items that are found - conserving them, identifying them, dating them, and producing the reports about the work.

In archaeology, to tackle a job there needs to be a specific question to be answered - it is not just a case of 'dig to see what is there'. Cookham was an important ancient town (Maidenhead only became a sizeable town with the building of the bridge and later the railway). In an 8th century document the Queen of the area held Cookham, and a court was held at the Minster. It was the 'archaeologist's dream' to find the Minster - and the chance to dig on Cookham Paddock, alongside the church, could possibly answer the question 'is that where the Minster was?'.

A resistivity survey - measuring the electrical resistance of the soil across the site - was the first stage, and this found that there had been a channel across it. By taking samples with an auger across the channel, it was shown to have been a stream from ice-age times leading to the Thames. The resistance 'hot spots' also identified the areas where 3 trenches should be dug.

The first trench had deep rich top soil above river sand, and a gravel layer below. The useful information comes not from the bottom of the trench, but from the sides, where the relative strata can be seen. There were not many 'finds' here - some Norman pottery and some small bones.

In the second trench there were a number of 'special finds' - mostly flints, and some bones. One large smooth surfaced object that appeared - looking like a skull - turned out to have been a rather heavy stone - its purpose becoming apparent later.

In the third trench, the bulldozer used to remove the top level found a layer of stone very near the surface, so the driver to be quickly stopped! Ann told us that her 'special interest' was in ancient road structures, so she recognised this as a path, track or road. It was laid direct onto the sandy gravel, with large stones below and finer stones above. However, this was not local stone, but worked Roman masonry, and there was a distinct camber to the surface, but - surprisingly - no ditches either side. There had been a Roman villa beside the road to Maidenhead, so maybe this had been the source of the stone.

It was then realised that the material taken by the bulldozer might also have contained a lot of other

evidence. Although generally material is in layers according to its age, 'biological turbulation' (ie the action of animals in the ground) can cause things to move about in the soil. A river bank can be particularly 'active' in this way. So the task to sieve all of the spoil heaps was undertaken.

The Marlow Archaeological Society is keen to tell the public what they are doing, so that the community can become involved with the projects. Teresa May visited the excavations, as did the Mayor of Maidenhead, and there was a constant stream of other visitors, including all of the local schools. Most archaeologists do not like to have children on site, but as long as they do not get too close to the edges of the trenches, the Marlow team welcome them. Some children, however, seemed to think there would be 'treasure' to be seen, whilst others wondered if those who were doing the digging, in their old clothes, were 'gypsies'!

The most important part of the work was identifying the finds. Sadly, they did not find the site of the 'Minster'. All the pottery and ceramics had to be washed. Clay pipes were dated to between 1750 and 1825, as was a metal shoe patten (to aid people walking on muddy paths. The bones, identified by the layers they were found in, were sent for specialist dating at Bath University, flints went to Thames Valley Archaeological Services, whilst pottery items were sent to Bournemouth University. One larger ox bone was sent for special radio carbon dating in Belfast. It had been found with other bones bearing butcher's marks, and turned out to date from around 1249. It transpired that the heavy smooth surface stone would have been used as a 'hammer stone' to crush bones for extracting the marrow. The range of bones found went from pre-historic cattle bones to those of cattle, sheep and goats, pigs and fowl in the Roman and medieval periods, and also in later times roe deer and hare bones. Other 'finds' were rather more recent - from Victorian coal to a tent peg and a Coke can!

More information about the Marlow Archaeological Society can be found at <http://www.marlow-archaeology.org/>

In July, Society members will be visiting Fawley Hill Museum (for which all the available places are now taken). The next meeting, after our summer break, takes place on Tuesday, September 11th, when Geoff and Val Beckett will tell us about Berkshire's Lady Fliers, with stories and pictures relating to the lady aviators of the county.