

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2006

FIELD WALKING IN 2005 OF A MEADOW IN MARCHAM

Will and Janey Cumber, AAAHS members who farm in Marcham, had noted Roman potsherds showing in the top-soil during ploughing, and had requested help from AAAHS for a field-walking exercise, in order to determine the extent and quantity of these artefacts, and whether they indicated the presence of a small Roman farmhouse or villa?

An additional personal incentive for the Roman farmer was the presence of wild sea celery. Considerably smaller but far tougher than normal celery, this grows in saline areas – sea cliffs – but also where saline springs break through at ground level. Whilst considerable efforts have gone into draining these flood plain meadows, it is thought that the breakdown of land drains have given rise to the up-welling of the original saline spring, around which sea celery may have been originally deliberately cultivated, perhaps by Roman and Saxon farmers. If you have ever eaten simple pottage (read – plain porridge) then ANY improvement in flavour is welcome!! Will would very much like to see the restoration of this plant but what it says for his morning porridge I could not say!!

One thought relates to the location of this site relative to another local archaeological site, being investigated for the past few years by the University. Just 1 km distant is the great Iron Age /Romano-British site at Frilford, with temples and an ‘amphitheatre’. The latter may have been associated with an annual flooding and subsequent draining of this “great round thing” as it is affectionately known, providing a source of wonder and amazement to local people. Could the same ‘veneration’ have been directed to the saline spring, treating it as another ‘shrine’? Many such features in the landscape received similar attention in those far-off times.

The meadow in question is 47 acres in size – it has to be seen to realise the full extent of the area to be searched – over 500 metres by 300 metres!! It was decided to use 10 m long transects, searched 1 m on either side, for every 10 square metres, giving a 20% sampling of the area. This methodology is recognised as a recommended system, but required considerable effort to set out the necessary precise grid. The area was marked out in 50 m x 50 m squares and pea-sticks used to mark every 10 m interval.

Results from potsherds collected to date have been interesting but await full evaluation after washing and sorting. So far, it seems the upper half of the field contains largely Roman potsherds with the odd fragment of Roman glass, although the most interesting part –the saline spring area - is inaccessible due to swampy conditions – walk more than 5 paces forward into it and there is a risk you will be stuck there! It is adjacent to this region that several items of early 2nd century Samian ware have been found.

The lower half of the field, south of an old cart track crossing east-west, seems to contain much less roman ware but considerably more medieval up to Victorian potsherds. One interesting development, yet to be investigated, is the presence of slag from metalworking. It remains to determine whether this is slag used by an earlier farmer as fertilizer for the field (derived from modern blast furnaces) or – maybe – just maybe – it might arise from a bloomery or similar smithing activity from an earlier period. A more prosaic comment considered whether this could have arisen from raking out the fireboxes of the great coal-burning steam engines used for ploughing before the advent of tractors? Only time and hard work will give us answers.

Of the metalwork so far found, one is a lead token from the 17th or 18th century, probably used by farm labourers for purchases from farm shops. An alternative suggestion that these were used for gambling seems less likely, given the isolated nature of the field. A very precisely dated Roman coin from 307-310 CE, the time of Emperor Constantine, was found halfway down the field, well apart from the main Roman potsherd area in the north of the field, but shows that farming on this site had a continuity of at least 200 years. Another nice item is the pair of horseshoes from great horses – the big Shires used for ploughing.

Finally, from top to bottom of the field there are considerable numbers of flint fragments. Whilst these have mostly arisen from plough damage of small flint nodules, some are clearly worked items, showing the presence of early man, hunting across this area of flood plain when conditions would have been much different from today’s fields.

Progress across this winter landscape is steady, thanks to willing helpers who march steadfastly across the field, plastic collecting bag in hand, nose dripping and freezing in the frosty conditions, with wind-chill factors lowering temperatures even further. We hope to complete much of the walking within the next two months, followed by the cleaning and cataloguing of our finds. Once sorted, these will be plotted onto a map of the field to determine whether there are any special concentrations where extra effort might give further results for our search for the long-lost history of the field in Marcham.

Roger Gelder

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

NEWSLETTER - SUMMER 2006

WALKING BIG LEAS FIELD IN 2006, Manor Farm, Marcham

The Society had been asked by Will and Janey Cumber to organize a field walking exercise across the Big Leas 40 acre field, where Will had spotted Roman pottery whilst ploughing. The field was divided north-south down the centre, so that we could avoid the very boggy eastern half, where walkers stood a very good chance of leaving boots, Wellingtons and socks behind in three wet zones. The first half of the field was walked from September 2005 until April 2006, when the wheat crop stopped further collecting of potsherds because of the growing height of the plants. Altogether we collected some 700 bags of potsherds, representing 20% of the 20 acres walked in the western half. The wet zones had not stopped us taking a peek at the edge of these where we had found some very fine potsherds of Samian ware, in very good condition. On reporting to Will and Janey, together with the Director of the Frilford dig site, Gary Lock, we were asked to do more field walking of the wet area, once the ground had dried out in summer time.

On the weekend of Archaeology week, the Society had put a stall on the Frilford site, explaining the work of the Society, including our field walking. We were approached by the Risborough Countryside Group who explained they would like to assist in our next field walk, in order to gain experience in setting out and organising such events – talk about the blind leading the blind!!

The wheat was harvested early August and the field was dry enough by then for an initial ploughing of the eastern half of the field, making it ready for the second walk. However, Will had to continue the ploughing and harrowing in order to sow grass seed to change the field from arable to pasture use and needed the field cleared within a week or so!

Now read on:- Last week, 23rd to 25th August, I fought with GPS, tape measure and plain eye-sight, establishing an East-West baseline identical to the earlier line used through-out the winter-spring walk. Having got four out of my five points established, the fifth kept ‘jumping’ a couple of metres off-line, no matter how many GPS readings I took, so I settled for the old-fashioned line of sight and “bumped” the last point to match the others.

Once established, I could then use our set of 25 litre drums to mark the corners of each 50 m x 50 m square where walking was to be carried out. On the Saturday, aided by the Risborough Countryside Group, we placed our pea-sticks at 10m intervals, marking each transect where the field was to be walked – a total of 150 such transects. All was now ready for our Bank Holiday Sunday walk the next day.

The forecast was for sunny weather all Sunday, so starting at 10 am, we had walked all 150 transects by about 3 pm and even had time to collect some off-transect material which we hoped would provide solid dating evidence. This latter was kept separate from the transect collection, otherwise we would not be comparing like with like – the western half transects with the eastern half of transects, an essential procedure if we were to make any sense of all the information.

The material collected was generally sparser than that found on the western half, until we got to the final 10 transects, along-side the footpath at the most north-easterly part of the field. This was where we had found our earlier Samian and a few more fragments were turned up here, along with some three very rare Iron Age pottery fragments (we believe).

The numerous fragments of glass also found in this region were NOT our hoped-for Roman glass, but were beer bottle fragments, left by nineteenth century farm workers having their lunch, sitting along the edge of the pathway – Ah well, you can’t win ‘em all! Did the Risborough group gain the experience? Well, they looked as tired as I was at the end of their two days, setting out and collecting potsherds and they departed well satisfied.

Roger Gelder

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2007

Marcham Field Walk 2005, 2006 and 2007

For the past 3 years the Society has been field walking 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 redirect 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 AAAHS

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.

Jackie Smith