



Site Visit to the Culver Archaeological Project at Bridge Farm, Barcombe Mills.

Hosted by Rob Wallace and David Millum

Sat 2nd Aug 2015

The last weekend of July had been a washout, resulting in the site being flooded and unworkable. Given that the archaeological team were entering the penultimate of their annual six week allocation on site, this was not welcome. In the run up to the visit we were therefore expecting that it may have to be postponed or even cancelled. As it turned out, a few dry days and baking sunshine on the day itself meant that shorts and tee shirts were the order of the day instead of wellies and macs.

David started off by showing a selection of this year's finds in the farm building that has been assigned for their use. Notable amongst them was a tray of coins from various periods in Roman history. The amount of coinage lost must have upset a number of people at the time. As expected, a wide selection of pottery had been recovered, some of it having been identified as being made in France and other bits from further afield. Going outdoors, he showed us a large scale site map and how this year's activity related to the overall settlement. Some things that they were looking for in particular were a main road leading north and boundary ditches.

Moving on to the dig itself, an area set in the middle of a field of ripe maize, we saw a patchwork of half a dozen trenches scattered across a shallowly excavated site, with piles of spoil heaped up around the edges. It was fascinating to see for ourselves how the Roman ditches and roads had been created and the way they had changed over the centuries. Parts of a road surface looked as though it was sloping, but it was merely the fact that it had subsided into the backfill of an earlier ditch. The position and orientation of every feature provides valuable information as to events gone by, which is why it seems to take so long to make progress. For example, the shape, size and whether ditches are multiple is used to determine whether they had a military purpose or not.

Metal detectorists had used brightly coloured clothes pegs to mark the location of their finds for later removal. A ground penetrating radar (GPR) machine was also being wheeled across the site in an attempt to confirm the presence or absence of what was thought to be the base of a building. Such techniques allow the team to help pinpoint key areas of interest, so that as much as possible can be learned from the least physical effort. Spray paint is used to mark the outline of GPR features so it's easier to see the bigger picture on the ground. Team members were painstakingly trowelling away in the holes, sieving the scrapings for finds then then tipping their buckets into a barrow for disposal of the edge of the site. Even the spoil heaps were regularly monitored by metal detectors, just in case something had been missed.

Looking at soil profiles on a Time team TV program only illustrates coarse features, one really needs to be on site to see the subtle changes in texture and composition and deduce what activity had taken place. The site at Barcombe is unusual in that Roman remains only have been found, there has been no medieval activity to complicate the interpretation of finds. Therefore, the historical window being investigated runs from about 100AD to 400AD.

The final part of the tour was to a finds tent, where everything uncovered is recorded and catalogged, before going off to storage or, as in the case of many metal objects, for cleaning. It was fascinating to be able to see and hold 1800 year old pots that were largely complete as well as other domestic items from pins to jewellery; that doesn't happen in museums!

Everyone who visited said how much they were impressed by what they saw and were very grateful to Rob and David for their time spent in guiding visitors around. Of the 33 in the group, about half were members of the Preservation Society, a quarter were non-members and the remainder had seen it advertised locally or had ended up joining the wrong group.

The dig was scheduled to stop at the end of the following week, at which point the site would be back filled and returned to agricultural use, possibly for another crop of maize! The process of formally documenting all that had been found and then planning work for 2016 would then keep the team busy. Only small sections of any one site are ever excavated so that fresh material remains until such time as better instruments or techniques are available to gain a better understanding of the archaeology. A number of year's work lie ahead at Barcombe, which has proved to be far bigger and more significant than anyone had originally anticipated.

We look forward to Rob and David returning to the Preservation Society, probably in 2017, to talk about the latest developments and discoveries made on the site.

All monies raised went directly to the Culver Project, who rely totally on grants and donations for their work.

For further information, please visit their website at <http://culverproject.co.uk/>

Leycester Whewell, EHADPS secretary, 8Aug2015