

THE OXON RECORDER

Issue 10

MARCH 2002

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM will be held in Thame on Saturday, May 4th, at 2.30 pm at the Thame Barns Centre. This is situated in Church Road at the Oxford end of the High Street, opposite the Six Bells public house. Car parking is available at the Centre.

Tea or coffee will be served before the meeting, from 2.0 pm. Afterwards Dave Bretherton from the Thame Historical Research Group will give us a guided walk around the town centre, looking particularly at ancient buildings. In the event of really bad weather he will be prepared to talk instead on Thame's historic inns.

There will be a charge of £2.50 to cover expenses. Cheques payable to the Oxfordshire Buildings Record should be sent by April 27th to Bridget Rudge, our new Events Secretary, using the accompanying slip. We look forward to seeing as many members as possible.

VISIT TO THE OXFORDSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

A visit to the newly sited Oxfordshire Record Office has been arranged for the evening of Thursday, June 13th. This will be an opportunity for members to view the imaginative conversion of a former church to another use, while retaining much of the internal architecture and fittings. This provides a fitting home for the Oxfordshire Archives, with a great deal more space for archivists, conservators and researchers, and for document storage, than was the case in the basement of County Hall. As well as a tour of the building, we shall be told about some of the records that have been deposited and which may assist in documentary research when looking for the history of a building.

We meet at the entrance at 7.00 pm. The Record Office is at St Luke's Church, Temple Road, Cowley, Oxford. This is situated off Oxford Road, almost opposite the junction with Between Towns Road. There is parking available at the Office, which should be adequate; if not, use nearby car parks. There will be a charge of £2, payable in advance. Cheques should be made out to the Oxfordshire Buildings Record and sent to Bridget Rudge, using the accompanying slip.

Some of Oxfordshire's Buildings 1750 Years Ago

During the summer of 2001 motorists on their way from Oxford to Wantage will have noticed a flurry of unaccustomed activity around the Noah's Ark restaurant and hotel at Frilford. More than usual numbers of cars and vans in the car park. Over the hedge the reason becomes clear. In the huge prairie-like fields of waving golden corn there were to be seen mounds of topsoil, groups of people digging away among tents and caravans, and others engaged in washing mounds of pot shards. Further figures were seen surveying with ranging rods and theodolites. This was the first of three seasons of excavations run by the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education Ridgeway Project. In previous years the hill forts of Uffington Castle, Segsbury Camp and Alfred's Castle have been investigated and much has been learned about the evolution of the landscape from Neolithic to the medieval period.

This year the aim is to explore the features of the Roman and Prehistoric settlement known to exist for thirty years or so. An extensive, unwallled, Roman rural settlement with cemetery has been located here, with a Roman temple overlying an Iron Age religious site. Richard Hingley, a post-graduate student, identified the circular plan of a large, bowl-shaped feature in the middle of the field as a Roman amphitheatre. Recent geo-physical surveys have pin-pointed further extensive buildings under the corn crop. The excavation's directors were therefore able to plan with precision where to put their trenches.

The results have been electrifying.

1. The amphitheatre has two entrances, one of which was excavated. A sloping passage, timber-revetted, led from the outside towards the arena. The arena had been dug out of the underlying rock and was covered in a grey, silty clay material. It was lined with a drystone wall, well shaped and well coursed stones on the side facing the arena and rubble at the rear. The remains of the bank was of orange sand laced with bands of clay and rubble walls at right angles to the inner revetment wall built to stabilise the sand bank. The excavators also found a well built, Roman rectangular cellared structure which they have (jokingly) labelled "the royal box". In fact at present its function is unclear.
2. In the middle of the field they have laid bare the foundations of a large, barn-like building. This is rectangular, on an east-west axis, and has a porch on one side with hard-core in the form of limestone rubble and Roman roof tiles apparently thrown down to establish a paved area. The resistivity survey shows further rectangular rooms added at each end. These will be excavated next season.
3. A series of ditches and pits were shown to be Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman in date and indicate spasmodic human activity on the site over 3000 years.
4. A section across the Roman road, which appeared as a light-coloured band on the resistivity survey, revealed that the make-up of the road was a substratum of sand, dug doubtless from barrow pits to the side of the road, and layers of gravel. These showed signs of extreme wear. The road had evidently gone on being used long after it ceased being maintained.

The site was of huge interest because amphitheatres are unknown in Britain when not attached either to a fort or a town. To find one, as at Frilford, in a rural context is exceptional. One wonders where the punters came from. The scale suggests that such a structure would have seated 4,000 – 5,000 people. Did they stream in across the countryside when an activity, entertainment or ritual was performed? Was there a connection between the amphitheatre and the temple? Where did the road go in either direction? What was the function of the T-shaped building? No doubt some of these questions will be resolved in future seasons of excavations. In the meantime dozens of students will have learned about the rudiments of practical archaeology and members of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record will have learned that much can be surmised from the buried remains of the foundations of Oxfordshire's buildings. The OBR, in fact, goes back at least 1,500 or 2,000 years.

John Steane

WHAT'S WHAT?

John Steane and myself are voluntary case workers, working on behalf of the Council for British Archaeology and the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, in the west of Oxfordshire. Our task is to visit a listed building deemed to be at risk from development, planning and demolition. We then report back to OAHs with our comments.

During one particularly interesting visit to Great Tew Park, John and I explored a little and found ourselves at the rear of the house, where there are tack rooms, coach houses etc. Outside, I noticed a pair of tall, wrought iron gates leading into the parkland at the back. On the top of the gates was written "Whatmidwell Orphanage". Could there have been such a place in this park?

Enquiries at the Archives, in VCH volumes, orphanage directories and other sources revealed no such place. Everyone was intrigued. What had happened to the orphanage and why had it been in this little park?

Simple really. Younger members of my family watched a film on television during the holidays. The film was based in the Cotswolds in a village called Whatmidwell and centred around an orphanage – complete with scenes from inside Great Tew House!

Historians used to be told to get out and get their feet muddy and archaeologists to study more documents. SOMETIMES NEITHER HELPS!!!!!!

Pat Harding

Historic Thatch

An important resource

Most members will be aware of the recent recognition of the survival of smoke blackened thatch (SBT), a unique resource for examining agricultural history, as well as the chronological thatching history of hall-houses. A chimney fire in a cottage in my home village of South Leigh, 3m SE of Witney, revealed that the building had once been two adjacent open halls, both with smoke-blackened timbers AND smoke-blackened thatch. I was fascinated to see the very plants that had been growing in the parish maybe 700 years ago, with examples of the types of crops, arable weeds, and heathland and wetland plants from fields I can still walk today, albeit with a changed ecology. I resolved to find out how such a remarkable survival could have come about.

When a thatched roof is first constructed, the common rafters are bridged with battens made from locally available materials, *e.g.* split oak laths, hazel /willow staves, or alternatively bridged with a 'fleeking' layer, *e.g.* water reed, wattle. The battens or fleeking are firmly pegged or tied, as they will support the full weight of the thatch. Then a base coat of any locally abundant material *e.g.* threshing waste, bracken, rushes, broom, gorse, is tied or pegged on; this layer is not necessarily waterproof, as it is never to be exposed to the elements. Over this is pegged ('sparred') the familiar bundles of straw in overlapping courses, with extra bundles over the ridge, in a manner which reflects local techniques and regional style. (Incidentally, the ubiquitous 'Norfolk Reed', a product of 1930's job creation and marketing, is only one regional style, requiring specific thatching techniques and pitch, and in pre-cheap transport times its use would have been precluded except in parts of East Anglia, due to the huge acreage of reed needed for one roof.)

A thatched roof has been described as a carefully managed compost heap. Only the outer layers should decay. This generally happens faster where the thatch faces the weather and sun than on the sheltered side. It will need intermediate repairs for bird and rodent holes. The exposed ridge decays fastest, having a lifetime of maybe 8 - 10 years. Next to go could be the weather face, say every 20 years, and finally the whole roof, say 30 - 40 years depending on local conditions, materials, pitch, etc. If the condition of the old thatch is not too decayed, the most economical way to re-weatherproof is 'spar-coating'. This is the application of another 8 - 12 inches (*ca* 20 - 30 cm) of fresh straw on top of the old, fixing the new layer directly onto the old outer surface with wooden 'sways' (horizontal rods) pegged on with 'spars' (thin wood twisted into a U-shape), or twine. Only if the lower layer is so decayed that it would not hold the new layer is the old layer removed. Thus, if the roof is well maintained, there should never be water damage to the base coat. Together with the preservative properties of smoke from below, the roof of a hall-house can show microscopic detail of plants and animals present at the time of original harvesting of the roofing material. It is not unusual to find a 4-foot thickness of thatch on an old building, and staggering to think that, without the decay factor, this could represent a 25-foot thickness of straw that has been placed on the roof over 500 years. It is interesting to note that as the ridge requires most frequent repair, and the eaves are often the most decayed and thus thinnest layer of material, in combination they have the effect of steepening the pitch of the roof when the whole lot is spar coated.

Wayside, South Leigh, SP 386091

The particular building that alerted me to the value of SBT suffered a chimney and thatch fire in February 1999. The subsequent examination of previously inaccessible parts of the building changed the interpretation of the construction sequences dramatically. Although 'listed' as 17th C, *Wayside* is revealed as an early 14th C hall-house.

It is confirmed as a timber-framed building, later clad in rubble stone walls. The west bay is the earliest hall, constructed very simply (without trusses) from common rafters on a roof-tree, the smoke from the open fireplace blackening the roof timbers and lower layers of thatch before escaping. Not too long after, a second hall was built to the east, where a new open fireplace created smoke blackening in the roof of this structure. This was rather better built, and the original hall seems to have become the unheated service end.



Wayside from the south, shortly after repairs to the section around chimneys, June 1999. Early 14th C hall to west (left), mid-14th C hall to east of inserted chimney, later stone walls and attic chambers

The first modernisation was to move the fireplace to near the party wall and the construction of a smoke-hood, an inverted funnel of timber and wattle lined with local clay, to catch the smoke and direct it out through a louvre in the ridge. A new roof truss was inserted into the second hall to support this hood. Next, a stone chimney was inserted through the smoke hood, leaving the blackened timbers and thatch *in situ*. Last, a second chimney and bread oven was inserted back-to-back in the original first hall, against the shared wall, which was reconstructed in stone. Meanwhile, the elimination of smoke from the upper part of both halls meant that upper floors could be inserted for bedrooms/storage. Extra roof trusses were inserted as part of these piecemeal conversions, differentiated because they are NOT smoke-blackened.

Spars holding later spar coat piercing SBT

SBT & timbers

Later repairs to thatch

Truss & wattle partition
Inserted after main
smoke
blackening

Ceiling joists inserted
after wattle partition



Wayside: west bay, looking west from chimney

All these development processes took place over some 300 years. As the timber-and-wattle walls decayed, they were rebuilt in stone *i.e.* the walls were built up under the existing roof. The final major construction phase was a further stone-built extension to the east, in late 18th C, now known as *Upper Wayside*.

This pattern of development seen at *Wayside* is a typical 'modernisation' sequence that can be detected in many other examples throughout the south of England. However, it is the survival of smoke-blackened thatch that makes *Wayside* so exciting. The roof has always been well maintained, and kept waterproof by spar-coating. This means that some of the original 14th C construction thatch is still in place, almost certainly locally derived material. Before the damaged thatch was repaired, The National Trust, the owners of *Wayside*, commissioned John B. Letts, of the University of Reading Department of Agricultural Botany & Rural History Centre, to survey the roof and prepare a report. He did much careful recording and sampling in chronological sequence, to obtain information on the thatching history of *Wayside* and the agricultural history of the area.

Much of the thatch is composed of different types of wheat straw. There is evidence of oats, barley and beans, all still grown in South Leigh fields, as well as rye, bracken and water reed, none of which are abundant locally today. The local variety of wheat which was used for many of the earlier coats of thatch on *Wayside* was much taller and carried far more genetic variation than the dwarf, genetically identical varieties grown on the same fields today. The grain yields would have been low, but the variations allowed for a reliable harvest whatever the season's weather conditions, and the large amount of long, stiff straw was valued for thatching, animal bedding, fuel, etc. The harvest would have been stored and hand-threshed in one of several surviving contemporary fields-barns that after Parliamentary Enclosure were incorporated into mid-19th C 'Model' farmsteads. Through the consecutive layers of thatch it is possible to see direct evidence of the history of agricultural plant breeding and selection, reflecting the 'building in its landscape' ethos which we also apply to other aspects of a building's structure.

John Letts has performed valuable research on growth height and grain yields of old varieties of wheat and other grain crops in 'ridges' and 'furrows'. He has looked at yields in different types of soils, including the type of intractable heavy clay found round South Leigh, where several fields still distinctly show medieval ridge-and-furrow. Evidence in *Wayside* and other buildings shows that the craft of the thatcher has not changed dramatically for many hundreds of years. From historical records of the numbers of residents of South Leigh, a projection can be made of the approximate number of buildings which would have needed thatching. Drawing together all these factors, an estimate can be made of the likely acreage of straw that would have been needed annually to maintain all the buildings. At a conservative estimate of post-threshing production of as little as 1 ton straw per acre, 20 acres would have produced enough straw to spar onto roofs annually, with up to the same weight again needed for new roofs. It seems likely that there would have been at least one full-time thatcher in South Leigh, a village with a relatively stable population of some 40 households. He would have spent the winter drawing straw into neat bundles from the threshed piles, and cutting 'spars' and 'sways', perhaps from coppice hazel and pollard willows still visible locally. The summer would be spent thatching new buildings and spar-coating older roofs.

On a more sombre note, John Letts reports that the repairs to *Wayside* were not all completed in the most sensitive way, considering the special characteristics of the building and the area. Rather than employing local thatchers, using local materials and styles, contractors from Huntingdonshire have used inappropriate styles of decoration, and instead of tying with the specified traditional tarred twine, they have fixed the straw with modern metal 'screws', too heavy for the relatively fragile antique roof structure. Moreover, the overall appearance of the south front has been changed at the eaves and window cheeks, with unnecessary overhang creating weak areas that may not last very long. However, we should not let that detract from the value of such a rare survival. To quote the National Trust report, this is "one of the oldest surviving examples of 'historic thatch' in the UK, and amongst the best preserved ancient plant remains ever recovered in Europe."

Now that the value of SBT has been recognised, we should all be vigilant. As building recorders, we are in the front line of observers.

Heather Horner

Thanks: John Letts for critical reading and permission to use published and unpublished material. Gary Marshall, Chief Archaeologist, National Trust, for *Wayside* access and building sequence interpretation.

Photographs: Heather Horner

Reference: John B.Letts: *Smoke Blackened Thatch. A unique source of medieval plant remains from Southern Europe.* English Heritage/University of Reading joint publication, 1999

Note from the Treasurer.....

First, thanks from the Committee to all of you who responded to the questionnaire. The numbers who volunteered to help with archiving and documentary research are very encouraging and your suggestions have given us some useful ideas. Our thanks also to the many members who have added a donation to their subscription. Please would the very few members who have not yet paid their subscriptions for this year send them to me as soon as possible.

Jessica Brod

SOME EVENTS IN AND AROUND OXFORDSHIRE

The Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society will be hosting **Oxfordshire Past 2002** on April 13th. This will be an all-day event – from 10.00 pm till 4.30 pm – and will be held at the Northcourt Centre, Northcourt Road, Abingdon. The cost for the day is £3 (to include tea and coffee but not lunch). Speakers include Paul Smith (County Archaeologist) and OBR members Manfred Brod and Daniel Miles (dendrochronology expert). For further information contact Roger Ainslie at 4 Sutton Close, Abingdon, OX14 1ER (Tel: 01235 529720).

The Council for British Archaeology (South Midlands Group) is holding its **Spring Conference 2002** on Saturday, April 20th, at the Buckinghamshire County Museum in Church Street, Aylesbury. This is also a full-day event, from 9.45 am to 4.00 pm, and costs £4 in advance or £5 on the door. The subject is **Ritual and Religion in the South Midlands**. For further information contact Mrs Christine Edbury, 18 North Street, Middle Barton, Oxon, OX7 7BJ.

The Oxford Museums Store will be open to the public on Saturday, April 27th, from 10.00 pm to 4.00 pm. It is a large, white, metal tent-like structure on Witney Road, Standlake (the A415), five miles south of Witney, just south of Harwick and just north of Standlake village itself. Workrooms and collection areas will be open to the public, with curators and conservators providing guidance and information.

A last chance to visit **Oxford Castle and Prison** is on Saturday, June 1st, before the buildings are converted into an hotel and heritage centre, as part of ‘**Open City**’ days in Oxford. Other historic buildings will be open on Saturday and on Sunday, June 2nd (Jubilee weekend), but check with local papers for opening times.

Please send me, Gillian Harrison, any material for the next issue by the end of May. My address is 3 Stert Street, Abingdon, OX14 3JF; my email is mjfh@waitrose.com.

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