

Archaeological Excavations at the Street, Easton, Suffolk – October - November 2016

Neighbourhood Plan Community Summer Event 21.7.18

Notes from presentation given by Tom Woolhouse – PCA Pre-Construct Archaeology

The Hopkins Homes site in Easton, as with most sites of any size, must before development takes place arrange for investigation to see whether any significant archaeological remains are present. If there are, the developer must then fund the excavation and recording of the remains so that they are preserved by record prior to construction.

The developer appoints through their consultant an Archaeological Services company to carry out the exercise of excavation and analysis.

Initially 'non-intrusive' investigations take place to get an idea of what is below the ground without digging. This can help to identify possible archaeological features and target excavation accordingly. Geophysics took place which involves sending electrical pulses into the ground and measuring the speed at which the signals return to the machine. Trenches were dug at intervals across the site, covering approximately 5% of the overall development area, to see whether there was any archaeology and where it was.

Significant archaeological remains identified by the trial trenches are then targeted for full excavation, and this was the case for this excavation, where the trial trenches identified an area of Iron Age and Roman settlement, leading to the opening of a c.0.5-hectare open area in the northern part of the site.

On rural sites like the Easton site, topsoil and other overburden is generally stripped by a machine working under archaeological supervision, to reveal any underlying archaeological deposits.

All further digging is by hand, with mattocks, shovels and occasionally trowels.

The excavation found evidence of human activity here from the Late Mesolithic period, perhaps as early as 10,000 BC, through to the end of the Roman period. Perhaps most significant is the evidence for continuous settlement at the site from the Early Iron Age (around 800 BC) to the mid-4th century AD, a timeframe of over a thousand years.

Late Mesolithic period (just after the end of the last Ice Age). -Mobile groups of hunter-gatherers, probably following the Deben valley, regularly visited this spot, specifically to collect flint for working into tools. While almost any site, anywhere, yields a little bit of struck flint, it's relatively unusual to find this much struck flint (more than 750 pieces), mostly from this early period, in one place. The character of the flint is also interesting – it is almost all small flakes of primary working waste, from the initial working of raw flint nodules into prepared 'cores' from which flint tools could then be struck. The conclusion is that the site was a favoured place for stopping off and gathering flints – why?

The flint here is from glacial deposits – it's material that been rolled around in glaciers during the Anglian glaciation (c. 500,000 years ago) and has been exposed to weathering on the ground surface,

not in-situ beds of high-quality flint such as were mined at the well-known Neolithic/ Bronze Age flint mines at Grimes Graves near Thetford. The reason that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers came here may simply have been convenience: the site is on high ground very close to the Deben river valley where they would have been hunting and gathering. However, there may also have been an element of 'tradition', perhaps consciously considered, or perhaps almost automatic – that this where their group or tribe had always collected their flint and was therefore the 'right' place to do it.

Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age -Somewhat later, from the early part of the Bronze Age (c. 2000 BC), we have a pit containing a large part of a profusely-decorated pottery cup called a 'Beaker'. It used to be thought that Beaker pottery, and other elements of distinctive material culture, including bronze-working, and the custom of burying the dead under circular burial mounds or barrows, were brought to Britain by people – the 'Beaker folk' – who migrated here from central and eastern Europe in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC. After the middle of the 20th century, these ideas gave way to a greater emphasis on objects travelling across long distances as a result of networks of trade, communication and exchange of ideas rather than being carried here by migrations of people.

However, the balance of the evidence is now starting to tip back the other way. One well-known example is the burial of the 'Amesbury Archer' near Stonehenge: an Early Bronze Age grave containing distinctive objects including bronze weapons and several of these Beakers. Isotope analysis of the minerals in his tooth enamel showed that he grew up in the Alps, probably southern Germany, Austria or Czechoslovakia. A recent DNA study, looking at several hundred Bronze Age burials from across Europe, has concluded that there was indeed a large-scale movement, and potentially, replacement, of Neolithic farmers by new migrants to Britain around this time.

Beakers are often found accompanying inhumation burials. It is not certain whether that was the case here as there was no trace of a body. Despite the acidic sand geology, bone preservation at the site was generally quite good, so we might expect some bone or staining from the body to have survived if one was originally present. Instead, the pot was found on its own in the base of the pit. If it wasn't a grave, it would nevertheless still appear to have been a deliberate burial. There is ample evidence from other prehistoric sites that objects were imbued with meanings and symbolic significance and were often deliberately buried to emphasise beginnings or ends, to commemorate special occasions, or to draw attention to divisions in space. In the Neolithic period and Early Bronze Age, deliberate burial of objects in pits can be seen as populations who were still semi-nomadic – and may have visited the site seasonally and camped here as they moved around seeking grazing for their livestock – starting to stake a claim to parts of the landscape. The beginnings of them becoming settled communities.

Middle Bronze Age cremation -Perhaps around the same time, or a little later, we have more concrete evidence for the people themselves, in the form of a cremation burial, which has been radiocarbon dated to between 1879– 1665 BC (most likely 1785–1681 BC). Cremation seems to have been a common burial rite in south-eastern Britain for some thousand years or more throughout the Bronze Age and earlier Iron Age. Unusually here, we have some quite detailed evidence for the way that the body was treated after death – there is some evidence from the cremated bone that the body was first excarnated – that is, left exposed to the elements, and to scavenging animals, so that it was stripped of soft tissue, before the bones were then gathered up, placed on a wooden pyre which appears to have been built on top of a deliberately laid bed of flint cobbles, and burnt. Objects, presumably some of the possessions of the deceased individual, were burnt on the pyre too. In particular, we have seven faience beads, probably from a composite necklace of beads and copper wire, which were found amidst the cremated bone and have also been heavily burnt. These are rare objects; only eight other sites with them are known in the rest of East

Anglia, with these having a total of 19 or 20 beads. After the body had been burnt, at least some of the small burnt bone fragments, burnt beads, and other debris, were carefully picked up from the pyre, and buried in this small pit. The pyre was probably not far away, as the charcoal and burnt bones were still hot enough to scorch the sand at the edges of the pit when they were deposited.

Individual was probably an adult man aged 19–44

Excarnation sounds gruesome to modern sensibilities but could have been a perfectly 'respectful' way of treating the dead. By giving the body to animals and the weather, it might, for example, have been seen as returning the body or spirit to nature.

Faience = ceramic but not clay-based. Silica (sand/ crushed quartz) + sodium and calcium. Glaze from plant ash – including seaweed; copper-based colourant derived from bronze.

Later Bronze Age to Early Iron Age settlement and field system -By the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, perhaps around 800 BC, there are the first remains of permanent settlement on the site, in the form of two probable roundhouses, part of an associated ditch-defined field system, and some quite large 'dumps' of pottery and other finds.

Five or ten years ago, there was almost no evidence for Bronze Age field systems in Suffolk and Norfolk, but there is now a growing body of evidence for the laying out of extensive field systems in the Middle and later Bronze Age (from c. 1600 BC) across the areas of lighter soil, particularly the main river valleys. We've recently excavated parts of similar Bronze Age landscapes in Martlesham, Felixstowe, Trimley St Mary, and at several sites around Ipswich. There's also some evidence that settlement and farming were pushing onto the heavier soils of mid-Suffolk, which were more difficult to work with prehistoric technology (they only had ards for digging a furrow, not mouldboard ploughs for turning over heavy clays – these only arrived during the Roman period).

This site is typical of the others that have been excavated: occupying light sandy soil, on a south-facing slope to get maximum sunlight, near a river for watering livestock. The field systems are routinely rectilinear, that is, they are laid out on a regular 'grid-like' pattern, and almost always seem to be aligned north-west to south-east and south-west to north-east (probably to do with sunlight, for both practical, and perhaps more symbolic reasons). Occupation was low-density, with one or two houses dotted about within the fields and possibly shifting site every generation or so.

Unfortunately, the environmental remains from this site are very poorly-preserved so we have little idea exactly what crops they were growing, but we know they had sheep and cattle. Other Late Bronze Age/ Early Iron Age sites in the county have had evidence for cultivation of barley, emmer and spelt wheat.

Middle and Late Iron Age occupation -Later in the Iron Age, occupation seems to have shifted slightly away from our excavation area but there are definite indications of continuing settlement, perhaps just to the east of the site, close to the stream in the valley bottom. We have, for example, a disused grain storage pit (a common type of feature in settlements of this period) which contained pottery, a circular loom-weight from weaving, sheep and cattle bone, and charcoal which has been radiocarbon-dated to 361–164 BC or 127–123 BC. In the later Iron Age, Easton would have laid more or less on the tribal boundary between the territory of the Iceni to the north (the tribe that rebelled against Roman rule under Boudica) and the Trinovantes of Essex to the south. From this period, one of the scatter of rubbish pits on the edge of the presumed settlement to the east contained a copper-alloy ewer (jug) handle. **This is a very rare object and so far, our specialist has found no parallel for it in Britain.** Its presence suggests inhabitants of some status and might also suggest

that in the years before the Roman Conquest, the native Iron Age elite were starting to eat and drink in Roman fashion, perhaps even serving and drinking imported wine.

This is interesting, as evidence for adoption of Roman objects and behaviour is not widespread in Icenii territory – the Icenii appear to have been quite culturally conservative (with a small ‘c’) and inward looking in their attitudes compared to some other tribes in south-eastern Britain, such as the Cantiaci of Kent or Catuvellauni of Hertfordshire, who were more receptive to Continental ideas and goods in the decades before the Roman Conquest in AD 43. This may be one reason for the Icenii resistance to, and rebellion against, Roman rule.

Roman -In the last few decades before the Roman Conquest, so from c. AD 0 – AD 43, the settlement started expanding or shifting back onto our site from the east/ south-east. It then developed – apparently without any break – into a farmstead which was occupied throughout the Roman period.

We have just the southern edge of the settlement, bounded by an east–west boundary ditch which separated it from the agricultural land to the south and south-east. The remains include the foundations for a rectangular timber building which may have been a house or a barn, remains of rubbish pits and two large midden heaps, which don’t sound amazing, but they are fantastic for archaeologists, because we can learn a great deal from people’s rubbish! The settlement probably extended up the hill, underneath what is now the school and playing field.

Based on the pottery and other finds, the inhabitants were not rich, but they were moderately successful farmers, able to produce enough to feed themselves and sustain the farm over perhaps 10 or more generations, up to around AD 350, and also to produce modest surpluses that they could have traded or sold to buy goods that they could not produce themselves. There would have been a market in the nearby small Roman town at Hacheston, which was part-excavated in the 1970s, and Roman roads ran from Coddensham to Hacheston, and on a similar alignment from Coddensham through Earl Soham towards Peasenhall. It is always difficult to tell for certain, but the balance of the evidence seems to point to the inhabitants being the descendants of the same people who had lived here before the Roman Conquest – alongside new Roman wheel-made pottery, they continued to use handmade vessels and other objects, such as loom-weights, of Iron Age types, identical to those used by the Iron Age occupants.

The finds from Roman features give us a picture of everyday life on the farm – there are fragments of daub from timber and wattle-and-daub buildings, including one large fragment from a door sill, cooking pots – including a particularly nice late-1st-century example with holes for suspending it over a fire, internal limescale and sooting on the exterior, fragments of amphorae from Baetica (southern Spain), indicating that they may have had access to imported foodstuffs like olive oil, loom-weights, butchered animal bone from slaughter and domestic cooking, bones of sheep, cattle, pigs, and dogs, a few 3rd- and 4th-century coins, knife blades, a pair of iron shears, a linch pin for holding a wheel onto an axle, hobnails from the soles of sandals, and part of a child-sized shale bracelet.

There are cropmarks of a field system in the fields to the east of the site, which seems to join up with the Roman settlement boundary, and with some ditches found in the evaluation trenches. This is really interesting because we rarely get to see both a farm or settlement and its associated agricultural land.

Why the settlement came to an end around AD 350 is not clear from the excavation. It may have contracted or shifted slightly away from the excavation area. However, there is a wider pattern of

'decline' visible at other excavated Roman sites in eastern and central Suffolk, and apparent from the distribution of the later-4th-century Roman coins. This may be due to documented raiding by Saxons and Picts along the east coast, or to the impact of the 'Saxon Shore Forts'. These were a network of coastal fortifications extending around East Anglia and the south coast from Brancaster in north Norfolk to Portchester near Portsmouth, probably primarily built to defend against Saxon raiding. The burden of supplying the troops garrisoned in them may have fallen unduly on the immediate hinterland around the east coast.

There is no sign of continuing settlement after the 4th century AD. Interesting that a site which had seen more-or-less continuous occupation for over a thousand years was abandoned. This may say something about how profound the impact of the withdrawal of the Roman army and administration in the early 5th century was. It seems to have been followed by major disruption to settlement, even at the level of small subsistence farms, and a marked decline in population such that even prime locations like this were abandoned. Two centuries later, the Deben valley was one of the core areas of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia, with a royal hall at Rendlesham, the internationally-famous royal burial ground at Sutton Hoo, and other rich burials at Snape.

The final report on the excavation is due in November this year. Many of the best finds are currently being looked at by specialists which meant that they could not be part of the display today.