

BONES WITHOUT BARRIERS – OAKINGTON ARCHAEOLOGY

The above title refers to what is now the Official site for our Archaeology and refers to the fact that we are one of the first archaeological sites to be allowed to operate without screens to hide the exhumations from the village. Set up as an experimental project this has proved to be enormously effective as, I am sure, you will all agree.

Oakington and the adjoining hamlet of Westwick form a small rural Cambridgeshire community on the edge of the fen. By tradition Oakington has always been a poor village, mainly agricultural labourers and was relatively undeveloped until the mid 1970s. In 1926 three Saxon 'Warriors' were uncovered at the site of a Plant Nursery, later to be levelled as the recreation ground in 1953. In 1993 the Parish Council installed a Play area for the children, during construction another 17 bodies were discovered. When the Sports Pavilion was built in 2006 a full dig had to be carried out at great expense. The man in charge was Richard Mortimer from Oxford Archaeology East. Who realised what a treasure we had here in Oakington. In 2007 a group of enthusiasts, lead by Nick Harrison, founded the Oakington and Westwick History Society, with a view to run a ten year Test Pitting project, in conjunction with Richard Mortimer and OAE to time line the village. On the first dig Dr Duncan Sayer was in the area and came along as a volunteer. In 2009 the children of the village asked for a larger more modern Playground. An estimate was given for the cost of the Archaeology, which the Parish Council realised had priced the project way beyond their budget. At this point Richard suggested that Dr Sayer stepped in and that perhaps the answer would be to use the Dig as a five year project for the students of Archaeology at University of Central Lancashire.

In 2010, with some trepidation on both sides, about twenty-four students and staff from UCLan, under the auspices of Dr Sayer, set up camp on the recreation ground. The main significant influence to the success of the project was that from the onset it was an 'Open' dig, requiring a special Home Office licence. This meant that the villagers were able to watch, interact with the students and most amazingly get involved. The dig also coincided with the annual Village Day. People who would not normally use the recreation ground were drawn in. The students set up a children's area, with mini-digs and finds on display. Some of the Skeletons were also displayed. Throughout the project there continued to be interaction with the village school, village groups; Brownies, Scouts and guides, W.I., History Society etc. Villagers also washed finds, made tea, cakes and generally pitched in. By the end of the first week the students were fully integrated within the community, even having their own Pub Quiz team. By 2011 the village looked forward to our next big Archaeology project, another great success. Many of the students had been in 2010 and so were familiar to the villagers. We were joined by Dr Faye Simpson, and her students from Manchester Metropolitan University

Nothing though could have prepared us for what would happen in 2012. With some mysterious foresight we had in place two young students who would be dedicated Community Outreach Officers, within days these young students were plunged into global media coverage, on top of liaising with the village. How they coped was totally amazing and a great credit to them.

Duncan Sayer along with students from UClan and MMU arrived in the village on the 13th June 2012. In what has become their usual manner, in order to start on the third phase of the excavation.

No-one could have anticipated what was to happen during the Village Day a week later. At first it was thought that they had uncovered a third horse, the second badly damaged horse being underneath what had formerly been the children's roundabout. Luckily we had on site a reporter from the Cambridge Evening News, here for the opening of the new Children's Playground. Closer inspection revealed that the 'horse' had a very strange head and it was realised that this was a very special sacrificial cow. As far as it is known this is the first cow burial to be discovered, ever, in England or indeed Europe. Even more interesting it was accompanying a very high status lady who had the keys to the chancel, possibly the most important person in Oakington at that time and very significant.

Our Cow and owner hit the headlines big time 'Bizarre Cow Woman found at Oakington' being the BBC Headline, the BBC social networking site receiving over half a million hits overnight. We, the small village of Oakington, have gone global. The Getty Institute in America, Adelaide University Department of Archaeology, celebrities too numerous to mention.

Our quiet backwater has flown to grand heights.

Duncan was heard on TV and Radio, he even persuaded me to join him very early on the Tuesday, I didn't sleep all night worrying about it. We were also a feature of the History Channel TV Programme. Twenty-eight skeletons in total were lifted, taking the total over 100 - the final count will possibly be around the 200 mark.

During 2012 I assisted with helping to raise money for a Bursary and to get funding for the new Website coming soon, it is very exciting and will link in with the local schools and societies. I have also provided a reference for Lottery funding for another new project which will be revealed later, also exciting as it involves all of you.

In April 2013 you may have observed that the students made a brief visit to carry out a series of Test Pits as part of their 3rd year assessment. We have established that the late Saxon community lived around Coles Lane and that there was, possibly, a medieval tannery

on land between Coles Lane and Lowbury Crescent. As usual they were treated to the generous hospitality of the people of Oakington, for whom we are very grateful.

The 2013 Summer dig revealed even more unusual finds with a triple grave. Three females of different age groups thought to be a family of mother, daughter and granddaughter. There was a male skeleton in his early forties, most unusual for this time; he had survived a serious head trauma living for several years with a hole in his skull. And, of course, the ditches, early middle and late Saxon, Medieval it goes on.

This year we will be digging in front of the Pavilion and between the MUGA and the stream. The students will be here between 13th June and 15th July and we wait with anticipation for what will be uncovered this year here in Oakington where the action is.

There may even be TV coverage..... watch this space!.

CAKE BAKING FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Once again Clare Chapman is in the process of rallying her many bakers to create wonderful cakes and breads for our guests throughout their stay.

We are now looking forward to June this year, for whatever it may bring. It is with no exaggeration that I finish by saying that this project has brought our community together

Julie Grove

Parish Council/History Society Liaison for Oakington Archaeology.