

Church Meadow Excavation July 2012 – Interim Report

The first season of excavation as part of the Church Meadow Project has been completed. As previously described in the EEHAS newsletter a series of excavations will be carried out over the next few years to excavate a 10 metre wide strip in Church Meadow running parallel to Churchyard No.4, which has been consecrated and will be incorporated into the graveyard in due course. The projected line of Stane Street, the Roman road between London and Chichester, runs through the site and it is hoped to confirm its alignment and find evidence for roadside activity. The project is run by an independent steering group, but for the first season all volunteers were either members of EEHAS or Surrey Archaeological Society. Each society contributed financially to the project and this was supplemented with grants from the Council for British Archaeology and Surrey County Council's Local Committee Fund. Reverend Russell Dewhurst and the Parochial Council of St. Mary's Church have supported the project from its inception, as has Bourne Hall Museum, where the artefacts and written records will be archived.

About seventy volunteers were involved over the three week period of excavation, either digging or in finds processing. A 10m wide by 30m long trench was opened by JCB, and the turf and 30cm topsoil removed. This topsoil may be meadow build-up and contained few finds. Finds within the plough soil beneath this layer included a few medieval and post-medieval finds but Roman pottery, coins and other objects from this period dominated. A number of flint spreads were identified within this layer, together with three pits/ scoops towards the Church Street end of the trench. The field has been used to graze dairy cattle in the past and these flint spreads may represent hardstanding over boggy areas around a cattle trough, for example. The pungent smell indicative of farmyards was particularly noticeable during the backfilling of the trench.

At the base of the plough soil were a series of narrow flint linear features running NNW-SSE i.e. across the width of the field. Initial interpretation suggests that these narrow ridges are all that remains of a flint surface that has been ploughed out; it seems likely that a single event of deep ploughing, possibly by steam plough, post 1850, had taken place; where the plough was knocked off-course by the flint, or misaligned, these narrow strips of unploughed archaeology survived. Between some of these lines clumps of flints appear to have been deposited after the plough has dragged them along, and then jumped over the obstruction before continuing. The direction of the ploughing can be observed in the way the flint clumps have been deposited. The flint area appeared to be concentrated towards the middle of the trench and may represent an area of hardstanding or a building platform. The flint feature is likely to be of Romano-British date with the deep ploughing responsible for the large amount of Romano-British pottery and coins above it. Most of the pottery, including several sherds of a samian cylindrical bowl form, Dragendorff 30, datable to c.AD 140-180, is unabraded so does not appear to have been subjected to frequent ploughing.

A ditch of Romano-British date was identified running NNE-SSW, parallel to the alignment of Stane Street identified from previous excavations in the churchyard (Pemberton:1973). The ditch appears to have either been recut, or a shallower ditch cut to its south side after it had gone out of use. A pit was found to have been cut into the main ditch, and a substantial part of an amphora found lining its north-east quadrant. The fabric of the vessel was badly laminated, but parts of at least two further vessels, both reduced wares, were found within it. The pit was lined with mortar and it is possible that together with the amphora it represents an industrial process of some kind.

Two gullies were identified towards the south-west end of the trench running at a right angle to the line of Stane Street; one contained a linear spread of charcoal, and the other cut an earlier pit. These gullies may represent boundaries and/or may have been used for drainage. The earlier pit, when

sectioned, revealed an almost complete Roman bowl. A number of flint flakes were also found in this area of the trench, as well as two sherds of Neolithic Durrington Walls-style grooved ware pot. This pottery is often found in a ritual capacity but is rare in Surrey; a number of sherds were found at Hatch Furlong (Cotton & Sheldon:2010). Also found was a sub-circular flint surface within a mortared bowl, possibly a fire pit, its date unknown but at a similar level to the Romano-British pits and ditches. The trench will be re-opened as part of next year's excavation to complete investigation of the identified features.

Full identification of pottery and coinage has not yet taken place but the range of Romano-British pottery fabrics and forms retrieved spans both high quality imports such as samian and decorated Central Gaulish ware, as well as Alice Holt reduced wares from both the earlier and later industries, and pottery from the Verulamium and Oxford industries. Identification and quantification of the pottery will help ascertain when the settlement was active. More than 150 Roman coins were found either during excavation or by the metal detectorists on the team, Bill Meads and Mairi Sargent. Many coins were 3rd-4th century small denomination coins but there were also larger denomination coins of several periods. Other metal finds included at least three complete, or near complete, Roman brooches. These are datable and will add to the picture of activity on the site. Non-metal finds included a number of bone pins, a large decorated bone toggle, and a gaming die and counter.

Part of the project's remit was to raise awareness of archaeology within the community and this was taken forward in two ways. Firstly, David Brooks of Bourne Hall Museum co-ordinated several school visits from Ewell Grove School, Greenways School and Ewell Castle School. Three hundred and thirty children visited the site over three days and their enthusiasm was palpable, especially when Roman coins were found as they watched on. Secondly, an Open Day was held on 14th July, coinciding with the Ewell Village Fair. A display of artefacts found this season, together with information boards on the project and replica pottery, were exhibited. More than 150 visitors were shown round the site, including Museum Club youngsters and their families. It is hoped to stage a further, more detailed display in St. Mary's Church Hall towards the end of the year.

The trench was ably supervised by Assistant Director, Emma Corke, supported by trench supervisors Roger Brookman, Rose Hooker, Nick Moore, Jenny Newell and Phil Stanley. The finds team was directed by Frank Pemberton supported by Chris and Gay Harris, and Lou Hays, who also organised the volunteers. My thanks go to all of them for their hard work and support. Thanks, too, to David Bird, the project's director and to the members of the steering group, Clive Orton, Jon Cotton, Steve Nelson, Jeremy Harte and Harvey Sheldon for their advice and direction. Jane and Rob Peddler, owners of Church Barn were most generous, allowing us access for storage, water supplies and wet weather finds processing. Russell Dewhurst gave us permission to carry out the dig, allowed access through the vicarage drive, and visited often to see our progress. David Slattery, who maintains the churchyard kindly gave up his time to mow paths and strim areas for the tents. My final thanks go to all the volunteers who turned up day after wet day, and worked enthusiastically and without complaint (well almost!).

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References

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