

THE SEDGEFORD HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT (SHARP): AN UPDATE

Gary Rossin, Project Director, SHARP

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Report by Ellie Mead

The Sedgeford Project began in 1996 as 'an experiment in democratic archaeology' to study the human settlement and land use within the parish of Sedgeford. The River Heacham is a significant feature within the landscape and the village moved across the river from South to North in the late 10th or early 11th century, thus leaving a greenfield site for study and excavation of earlier settlements. Gary Rossin took us on a tour through '5,000 years of human development' based on findings at this multi-period site.

Late Neolithic/ Bronze Age: In 2009 an early Bronze Age crouched burial was excavated. The skeleton was found to be that of a male, in bad health throughout his life and suffering from spina bifida. Dating to 2300 BC this burial was accompanied by a piece of worked Red Deer antler which appeared to have been deliberately snapped into three pieces.

Iron Age: Pottery from this period had been found in 1913 but unfortunately had been used as hardcore on a local road! In 2003 39 Gallo-Belgic gold staters (50-60BC) in mint condition were found hidden in a cow's femur! In 2004 the head of a torc was found; the rest of the torc had previously been found by a farmer in 1964. In 2008 a collection of small ornate mystery objects were discovered which are thought to be late Iron Age. The burial of a female in her 40s, dating to about 230BC, along with 6 beads, was also excavated and is thought to be one of only 30 Iron Age inhumation burials in Norfolk.

Roman: In 2005/6 the project worked on excavating a late Iron Age farmstead which fell out of use, but which was resurrected as a Roman farm/food processing centre. A system of flues, thought to be used for drying grain, contained a deposit of ash into which was mixed a scatter of human bones. Dating to about 370 AD these were probably the bones of a murder victim whose remains were thus disposed of!

Anglo Saxon: Of the pagan Anglo-Saxon landscape little is known, but since 1996 the mid to late Anglo Saxon period has been the main focus of the project, particularly in the area known as Boneyard Field. Between 1996 and 2007 approximately 300 burials have been excavated. All are East West aligned and there are no grave goods; most were shroud burials, only about 10 appear to have been coffin burials. Males and females are evenly balanced, the average being 35-40 years old at the time of death. Evidence from these burials would indicate a reasonable quality of life: the average male measuring 5' 10" and average female 5' 5". A low number of child burials could indicate low child mortality, unless children were buried in a separate, as yet unexcavated, area. It is estimated that there are about 300 more burials still to be dug.

A recent focus for excavation has been Chalk Pit Field where, since extensive geophysics was carried out in 2007, evidence has been found of a series of rectangular timber buildings, similar to those at West Stow. These could have been used for light industry eg. Weaving sheds. One area would appear to be a mussel processing plant; huge quantities of shell being deposited here; and another area could have been used for smithing and smelting. This year a 2 metre deep trench was dug in one area of Chalk Pit field and, at some depth, baked clay ovens were uncovered which could have been associated with malting grain. Next year it is hoped to continue excavation in this area; further ovens are expected.

Medieval: In 2005 a burial was found close to the site of the old Chapel. About 50 test pits have been dug in gardens in the village and much Thetford ware has been discovered. It is hoped to continue to excavate the medieval settlement in 2014.

World War 1 Aerodrome: RAF Sedgeford came into being in 1915 to counter the threat of German Zeppelins; within a year however it had become a training base with about 1200 personnel based there. We were shown photos of the mortuary building (required due to high mortality amongst pilots in WW1) and the foundations of one of the hangars. Several other buildings still exist and again it is hoped that further information can be revealed about this period of the site's history in the coming season.

Overall this was a fascinating and well-illustrated talk which I am sure has inspired many of our members to visit the site on one of its Open Days next summer. Further information is available from the website: <http://www.sharp.org.uk>