



# Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team

## NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 61

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### Editorial

Your 2007/8 subscriptions are due on 1<sup>st</sup> April, and we have held the rate at £8 once again, although this will be increased next year to £10. Please send your cheque for £8 payable to MSFAT as soon as possible, using the form at the end of this newsletter. You can also register your interest in digging at Barcombe using the same form.

The Post Christmas party was again very successful, with around 35 members attending. A short presentation of our work over the last year was followed by a quiz and raffle, whilst a buffet was also provided. Many thanks to Anne and Tim Locke who again organised this event for us.

Barcombe starts again in early May, with our first planned weekend on site being the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> May. We will then be working every weekend through until the end of August. Before this, we will be machining off a new area to investigate the courtyard area in front of the main villa building and will need one or two members to assist with this exercise. This will be our last season on the main villa complex, and we have to return the whole site to the farmer by the end of September.

Our main excavation season at Barcombe this year will be the four weeks between the 16<sup>th</sup> July and 10<sup>th</sup> August. During this time there will be training courses run through the CCE at the University of Sussex, and opportunities to volunteer. MSFAT members can obviously volunteer to dig at any weekend throughout the whole season (May to August) without charge. Our open day this year will be Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> July, so please put this date in your diary.

Keep an eye on our website for the latest information on this and other fieldwork.

Chris Butler

## **Barcombe Villa – A new building, and Saxon occupation?**

The 2006 season saw some changes in the organisation of the Barcombe Villa excavations, with UCL withdrawing from the project, leaving MSFAT and the University of Sussex as the remaining two bodies involved in running the project.

Our objective for the 2006 season was to confirm the south-west corner of the villa complex, which we thought we had found in 2005, and to start investigating the courtyard area between the front wall of the villa complex and the villa building itself. We were therefore surprised to find, that as we stripped back the topsoil with a JCB, a completely unexpected building was located outside the villa courtyard in the south-west corner.

The south-west corner of the courtyard wall was found in 2005, and we have now traced this turning north-west and heading towards the west end of the main villa building. Last year we found what appeared to be the flint foundations of a buttress at the south-west corner of the courtyard wall. It is now clear that there was an entrance or gap in the wall between the corner and a short stretch of wall adjoining the new building to the west. The flint 'buttress' appears to have been intended to narrow the width of this entrance. We also found clear evidence for the demolition of the courtyard wall. A deposit of flint nodules, with discrete dumps of mortar, and mixed with fragments of tile and flint flakes and shattered pieces of flint, lying on the west side of the wall, appears to be debris from the demolition of the wall. The flint flakes and shattered pieces are all fresh and originate from the use of a pickaxe to demolish the wall, or from the use of a hammer to clean off the mortar from the flint nodules. The discovery of some late Saxon pottery sherds in this deposit gives us a clear date for the demolition.

The new building only survives as the chalk foundations of a simple building comprising a single large rectangular space, with two smaller rooms added to each side at the southern end. It is possible that the large room was subdivided, but no evidence for this survives, as demolition and later plough damage has removed everything to below floor level. It is difficult to assign a purpose for this building, but it could be agricultural or living accommodation. The two additional rooms at the southern end suggest that it may have had an impressive façade to match the façade of the aisled barn in the south-east corner of the complex, provided symmetry to visitors approaching from this way along the approach road. Although there is little to provide a date for this building, if it was there before the courtyard wall was erected, it might provide an explanation for the unusual angle this wall takes from its south-west corner towards the main villa building.

Within the courtyard, we found a number of features that help us to develop the story of the site. A line of postholes extends across the courtyard from east to west, roughly parallel to the south wall of the courtyard. Two very large postholes in this alignment seem to be a gateway, and this whole fence structure is likely to have been the southern boundary to an earlier phase of the villa complex, before it was enlarged and replaced by the wall. It turns to the north-west immediately before reaching the later boundary wall on the west side, and follows a similar direction, perhaps also respecting the new building we have found.

A number of later Saxon features were also discovered this year within the courtyard, and provides our first real evidence for Saxon occupation at the site. The first feature was a Sunken Featured Building (SFB), and was located astride the fence line mentioned above. It comprises a shallow oval depression some 4m x 2m in size, with a large posthole at either end, and a line of stakeholes along each side. Although severely truncated by ploughing, a number of sherds of Saxon pottery were recovered during the excavation from its lower fill. Nearby, a deep Saxon cesspit was excavated, and a Saxon pit had been discovered close by in 2005.

The field around the villa had been put down to set-aside in 2006, so we took the opportunity to carry out some trial trenching elsewhere in the field, targeting known or suspected features identified from the geophysical surveys we have carried out. A long trench to the south of the villa complex failed to find any evidence for a road approaching the villa from the River Ouse and the London-Lewes Roman Road, although a shallow Roman ditch on the right alignment may be a surviving flanking ditch. A possible prehistoric ditch was also discovered.

Another ditch, running east-west and perhaps fronting the villa complex was found on the south-east side, and although it could not be found on the south-west side, a lynchet suggests that fields were located immediately in front of the villa. Perhaps the most interesting discovery was at the top of the hill above the villa and on its west side. A geophysical survey had shown that there were some possible features here, so a number of test trenches were excavated. One of these located a well-preserved ditch at a depth of over 0.5m below the surface, together with a possible metallised surface. The ditch produced quantities of Roman pottery, including a possible votive miniature amphora or flask from a ditch terminal, and some cremated bone. We are wondering whether this is a possible shrine, however as the remains are well preserved and in no immediate danger from ploughing, we have backfilled this area and may return to it later in the project.

In 2007, we will be completing the excavation of the new building, and then extending the trench to uncover the remainder of the villa courtyard. Here we expect to discover more roundhouses, and perhaps features associated with the activities going on in the courtyard during the height of the villa's life, and will also investigate the important Bronze Age round barrow in front of the main villa building.

Details about training opportunities can be from The Centre for Continuing Education (an Open Course: An Introduction to Field Archaeology - alternate Saturdays starting 16<sup>th</sup> June, and four weeks of Excavation techniques courses running from the 16<sup>th</sup> July to 10<sup>th</sup> August – 01273 877888; [www.sussex.ac.uk/cce](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cce)) or for volunteer work from Chris Butler (01323 871021 or [www.msfat.com](http://www.msfat.com)).

Chris Butler & David Rudling

## Pyromania!

Too much of my youth was spent playing with smoky fires at the bottom of the garden and this fascination has never left me. My Big Chief I Spy Annual for 1956 told me the different ways I could light fires. I don't remember trying them out until much later when I was a young mum clearing flints from our garden on the North Downs. I was striking two flints against each other – the sparks flying haphazardly everywhere but on my carefully prepared tinder - watched by my 4 year old daughter. “What are you doing Mummy?” “Trying to make fire”, I replied. With all the wisdom of the very young she advised, “It's much easier if you use a match”.

Later still on the excellent Experimental Archaeology course run by Tristan at Michelham, we had a demonstration of the bow and drill method. The effort turned our demonstrator's face an alarming beetroot colour. A few of us tentatively tried working the bow, only to find whilst it was easy to make the drill hot, it was a lot harder to get any further. Eventually a pimply youth and I teamed up to work the bow together and we succeeded in coaxing our smouldering embers into flame. Still my enthusiasm was not quenched by this success and this summer I signed up to a WHOLE DAY on firelighting at the Peat Moor Centre on the Somerset Levels.

Our tutor was Firefox, - well actually he did have a proper name but I've forgotten it – Firefox sounds more evocative. He was a leaner version of Ray Mears, and he lived in a tepee. Firefox showed us the different methods of creating fire – friction, focusing the sun's rays, chemical, electrical and compression. We all had a go using different methods – great fun, but we all knew he was holding the biggest friction test – the bow and drill, till later. Next we learnt what materials are best for kindling fires. Here are some of them: charcloth, silver birch bark, old man's beard buffed up, the fungi *fomes fomentarius* (hoof or tinder fungus that grows on birch) and or *daldinia concentrica*, also known as cramp balls or Kings Alfred's cakes which resemble black warts that grow on ash and beech. Our ability to recognise different woods was then put to the test, and we learnt about their burning properties.

Our next task was to go foraging on the Levels for tinder, light it using a Swedish firestick, and then nurture our glowing embers for the 20 minutes walk back to base where we were to coax our treasure into life. As you can imagine, twelve people walking along blowing into their cupped hands and wreathed in varying amounts of smoke, got some very curious looks from passers-by.

Finally we were shown how to use the bow and drill. Our bows were hazel, and the drill, drill holder, hearth and underpans were willow. Firefox produced a flame in no time at all and then encouraged us all to do the same. Speed, angle and pressure are all important factors in achieving a nice little pile of black wood dust which eventually starts to smoulder. Very careful transfer of these embers on your underpan to your chosen tinder (buffed old man's beard), and gentle blowing to get that first lick of flame is difficult because you are shaking with the exhaustion of working the bow. Forty five minutes later seven of the twelve participants had succeeded. Everybody's success was met with whooping and wild applause. Our “tribe” was happy and had bonded and we would eat hot food that night!

Claire Goodey

## Chapel site at Ewe Down, Exceat Bridge, Cuckmere Valley

A small team of volunteers have been excavating a small site believed to be a chapel, which lies along the banks of the Cuckmere River just north of Exceat Bridge, east of Seaford.

It was found, depicted as a ruin on a map of 1618, during a research project of the Litlington area of the Cuckmere Valley being undertaken by Peter. This map was drawn by John Dewarde when he was instructed by the Commissioners of Sewers for Pevensey Rape to survey the tidal floodplain of the Cuckmere Levels.

Early documentary evidence could suggest this could be the lost site of St James hospital, originally a leper colony and later the site of Peter's hermitage recorded in 1372.

The site is on a level platform above the river cliffs on the west bank, adjoining Brockhole Bottom and lies directly opposite a causeway on the eastern bank which crosses the brooks in the direction of West Dean. This is a footway about a metre in height rising above the floodplain, and is also depicted on Dewarde's map. The causeway and chapel site are likely to be connected and may well indicate the location of an ancient river crossing point such as that at Bramber on the Adur and Pynham on the Arun; however no evidence of a crossing exists today.

Although no trace remains above ground, a geophysical survey was carried out last June and revealed the foundations of a building measuring approx 27m x 7m. This compares closely with the size, shape and position to the chapel shown on Dewarde's map. It also suggests this was typical of general purpose hospitals built in the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Century.

We started excavating in November by opening up initially two trenches at both ends of the structure, each running the full width to catch both west and east side walls of the building, Trench 1, to find the north end of the building and Trench 2 to determine the floor structure and explore certain anomalies shown in the side walls on the geophysics. A smaller trial Trench 3 was added to determine the south-western corner and establish the full width and length of the building.

Trench 1 contained foundations of the two side walls, each one approx.650mm wide and consisting of compact flint and mortar. This trench was further extended to determine the north western corner and fragments of faced stone were found. The north east corner proved to be interesting in that it appears the walls continue in a curved direction. Could this be some indication of an apsidal end to the north of the building?

Trench 2 again contained the both side walls, each similar in construction as found in Trench 1. However, there were further features found at the eastern side, which could explain some of the anomalies shown on the geophysics. It appears that a much smaller wall lies outside the main structure and appears to run parallel with the east wall. Between the two walls lies an area of compact mortar approx 140mm thick and appears to be a floor surface, the extent though remains unknown and requires further

excavation. The area between the two side walls only contained a scatter of flint nodules but as yet no evidence of a floor.

Trench 3 again proved the existence of the western wall but will require extending to find the corner of the building.

We aim to continue excavating very shortly to find out more about the size and structure of this building and to find if there is an apsidal end to it. We would also like to find out whether this building was indeed a chapel at all as little dating evidence has been found.

If anyone would like to help in this excavation please let either myself or Peter know.

Bruce Milton & Peter Bidmead

### **Forthcoming trial excavations at Hartfield**

We will be undertaking some trial excavations at Hartfield over the weekend of 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> April. The site is owned by MSFAT member Richard Hussey, and comprises a field, which is situated opposite the parish church, in which there are a number of possible house platforms. The project will be carried out by MSFAT members together with students from my CCE 'Excavation and Post Excavation' evening class.

We will undertake a resistivity survey on the Saturday, and then follow this up with one or more trial trenches across the possible house platforms on the Sunday. We will also draw up a plan of the field to show the location of the house platforms. A desk-top survey is also being carried out by one of the CCE students.

If you would like to take part in this project, please contact me as soon as possible to book a place.

Chris Butler

### **Last season at Little Furnace Wood**

Our last season of excavations on the Roman Ironworking site at Little Furnace Wood, near Mayfield, in conjunction with the Wealden Iron Research Group will be carried out at the end of April and early May. We hope to complete the excavation of the second furnace that was discovered last year, and then backfill the site.

There are limited places available, due to the small size of the excavation this season, but members who wish to visit the site before it is backfilled can contact me for details.

Chris Butler

***Please complete and return this form to Chris Butler  
at Rosedale, Berwick, Polegate, East Sussex BN26 6TB***

Name: .....

Address: .....

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Tel. No.: ..... Email: .....

- I enclose a cheque for my subscription renewal of £8 for 2007/8 made payable to MSFAT.
- I am available for finds washing/marking
- I would like to be added to the volunteer list for excavation/survey projects, and I am available at weekends/weekdays (please delete as relevant)

(details).....

- I would like to volunteer for the Barcombe Villa excavations. I agree that I have no personal interest in any finds that I recover during my work at the site, and acknowledge that they belong to the owner of the site.

I confirm that I have a current tetanus vaccination.

I would like to volunteer for:

❖ Excavation work .....

❖ Finds Processing .....

❖ Tour Guide .....

Current First Aid certificate      *Yes/No*

Signature ..... Date .....