

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2000

The Oracle Excavations in Reading

The Hannen Room was full for the Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting, when Ben Ford, of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, gave an interesting illustrated talk on the excavations at the Oracle site in Reading.

Ben began by explaining the relationship between the archaeologists and the site developers. There was a fine balance between the need to record as much as possible and the need for the building project to progress. Some of those associated with the building work were fascinated by the weight of evidence revealed - whilst others only saw the archaeology as a waste of money. The former brewery site had been examined in the 1980s by Wessex Archaeology, so this work looked at the area of the Yield Hall, the Oracle, the rear of the George Hotel, the site of St Giles' Mill, and the old Reading tram depot.

Now-a-days only the Holy Brook and the River Kennet can be seen, but in former times there were 6 or 7 braids of the river passing this way. The land in the bottom of the valley was therefore fairly soft, but the peat layer here had preserved the wood, leather and metal objects particularly well. Parts of the valley bottom had been reclaimed over time by filling the wetlands with waste material - a large quantity of leather offcuts, old shoes etc, for example - and industrial sites built on top.

Just below the surface was found the remains of the newest part of the old Yield Hall. This had been demolished in 1931, but the outer skin dated from the 1600s, with an earlier timber frame inside it. Originally this would have had an open fire, but the addition of separate fireplaces and chimney stacks meant that individual rooms could be heated - leading to a different way the building could be used socially. When constructed, the builders did not know how to deal with areas of wet and dry ground, believing that putting a lot of dry material on top would suffice, but the walls had tended to crack as the building had settled.

The next building, by the old Heelas depository, was of the early post medieval period. This was built of chalk, on an island reclaimed from the water meadows, and may have been used for cloth production, as there are various water channels around it from the Minster Mill Stream. Minster Mill was one of 6 documented in Reading in the Anglo Saxon period., and as millers did not like to move their site, it was likely that an earlier mill would be found underneath. Timber foundations were found, along with post holes containing grain dated as 11th century.

The Oracle is noted on a map of 1801, and was built in 1728 by John Kendrick, to be a workhouse providing employment in the cloth trade, but the latter failed soon after, so it was used for other industries until 1850. The oldest bridge in Reading was found near here, but this 17th Century structure could not be saved. Below the workhouse was found an area that had been a tannery, with many holes for the barrel vats. These had, it seems, not been used for very long, but beneath

them were found medieval levels, with the chalk and flint walls of a large hall, and even earlier structures below that, with wooden piles dating from 1267.

Across the Kennet, recording took place of the buildings above ground of the bus depot, and St Giles Mill - below the old power house. Here was a substantial timber structure - to stand firm in the soft ground, whilst operating - dated from about 1600, with two water wheels, whilst below were remains of an earlier single wheel mill, built around 1300. The details of a toothed wheel from this mill were particularly well preserved.

A book on the project is to be written shortly, describing this part of Reading in various time periods from the discoveries made. Some information about the work at the Oracle can be found on the Oxford Archaeological Unit's website, <https://oxfordarchaeology.com/oalibrary>
