



Newsletter December 2013

Dates for your diary

Tuesday 28th January 7:30pm Small Hall, Thropton. We will be reviewing the results of the 2013 season at the mill site at Barrowburn and the progress we're making with the dig on the Hepden Burn. We'll look ahead to 2014 and outline plans for the year. Speakers will include Richard Carlton, John Nolan and David Jones.

February 12th 7:30pm Small Hall, Thropton. Volunteers from the Blyth battery will talk about its history and refurbishment. The battery was for coastal defence, built in 1916 to defend the port of Blyth and the submarine base there and upgraded for World War 2.

In **March** Jules Brown of the North of England Civic Trust will talk to us about the challenges of building conservation and the development of historic areas

Tuesday April 15th 7:30pm Small Hall Thropton. With 2014 the centenary of the outbreak of World War One, Keith Maddison will be talking to us about the work he has done on trench systems in Belgium and France.

Thursday May 1st 7:30 Main Hall, Thropton. The AGM, which will follow the usual format of some business, followed by a talk. This year the historian, hill walker and author, Chris Davies, will discuss the search for aviation accidents in Northumberland and tell us the stories behind some of them. Refreshments will be provided.

Later in the year, Richard Carlton and Alan Williams will talk about their discovery of a 200 year old waggonway at the Neptune Yard in Walker, and Gordon Moir will lead a walk along some waggonway routes in the summer. Barry Mead will provide a tour of the site of the Bedlington Ironworks he described so vividly in October. Clive Waddington has agreed to give the 2014 David Dippie Dixon lectures; among other things, he will undoubtedly be focusing on this summer's dig at Hauxley.

New CCA Treasurer Sought

Janice Henney will be stepping down as Treasurer after the AGM in May, and we're looking for a replacement. If you are interested

in helping CCA in this area, please get in touch with Chris Butterworth (01669 621955 or c.butterworth@btinternet.com), who can give you more details about what is entailed.

Barrowburn Update

There are two main items of news to cover – one looking back and the other looking forward.

Firstly, Jacqui Huntley, the North-East science advisor for English Heritage, has been kind enough to analyse the charcoal fragments we've been finding at some considerable depth near the line of the wheel shaft at the mill site.

Her findings show that the vast majority of the fragments came from young pieces of hazel and birch. The curvature and number of rings show that they came from an age range spanning one year old twigs to 11 year old branches. There were traces of other woods, such as willow and hawthorn, but from some 130 fragments only four came from ash trees, and two or three from oak.

One conclusion we can draw from this is that the charcoal is not the result of the burning of the mill machinery or beams or posts used in any building. It would seem, instead, to come from a smaller fire or fires – either linked to the working of the mill, perhaps heating water for use in fulling, or else lit on the site after the mill had been abandoned.

We submitted a piece of 5 year old hazel for C14 dating. With 95% certainty, it originated from between 1280AD and 1400AD. This shows it's clearly medieval, but doesn't really tell us whether it was contemporary with the working mill or a bit later. And we still don't have a better date for the mill being abandoned – although we do think it was very likely to have been at some stage in the 14th century.

Looking forward, we have a small amount of grant funding left, and the Heritage Lottery Fund has let us extend the project to October 2014. This means we can fund some limited activity at the mill site next year, and we're currently planning to do some more work there in July, alongside further exploration of the structure by the Hepden Burn.

Although no final decision has yet been reached, one area that clearly needs further investigation at the mill site (and which would be easy to get to) is the paved area just upstream from the western wall that we started to uncover in 2013.



Here, the wall is on the left of the picture, and the paved area just to the right of centre. On the extreme right of the picture you can make out the carefully positioned spoil heap that stopped us investigating the full extent of the paving – although, to be fair, time ran out on us as well.

Exposing more of this would be very interesting. It's outside the mill compound (which we think was demarcated by those two boundary walls); it might, perhaps, have been the floor of a building – maybe one used for storage, or even a dwelling house.

We'll talk more about this at the meeting on January 28th.

1914 Remembered in 2014

August 2014 will mark the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War and there are plans afoot to mark the occasion in Coquetdale appropriately.

One project being spearheaded by the Rothbury & District branch of the Royal British Legion in close cooperation with other bodies in the valley involves trying to track down the names of all those who answered the call to serve, whether they returned or not. So the project's organisers want information from those living in Coquetdale today who had family members who went off to war between 1914 and 1918.

In particular they are looking for the names of those who served in the Armed Forces, in the war industries or elsewhere. They would love to see any memorabilia such as letters, diaries, photographs and such like. The project hopes in this way to compile a record of the sacrifice of the valley and its families in World War One. So if you can help with any details about loved ones who took part, please contact either Rev. Michael Boag on 01669 620482 or via his e-mail rector@coquetdaleanglican.org or Sandy Hunter on 01669 620404 or afchunter@hotmail.com.

The Bedlington Ironworks

In October Barry Mead gave us a fascinating description of the lost ironworks at Bedlington in the lower Blyth valley.

The area is now covered with parkland, but in the 18th century it was the site of the only blast furnace in Northumberland, while in the 19th century it was a key location in the development of the railways.



It produced malleable iron rails that allowed the construction of long distance railway lines such as that from Stockton to Darlington, and Barry showed us some of the documentation and bills associated with that work.



The ironworks also saw the manufacture of locomotives; the first passenger train out of King's Cross was hauled by a Bedlington engine, and they operated on the early railways in many European countries.

There are traces of walls and kilns around the site; exploratory work has shown that culverts and foundations are still there below the grass.



Being on the river, many of the finished goods would have been taken away by boat, although the site is right on the limit of the tidal flow. Near the modern bridge there are the remains of old river walls and quays where the barges would have tied up.



David Dippie Dixon Lectures

This year's lectures were given by Paul Frodsham - the Historic Environment Officer for the North Pennines AONB. Paul's lecture to the Rothbury and Coquetdale History Society on Dippie Dixon in 2003 was the catalyst for a National Park project which eventually became CCA – so perhaps we can think of Paul as our godfather. Today, a lot of his time is dedicated to another community project called Altogether Archaeology (AA).

The first lecture described the area in which AA operates in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty of the North Pennines. This spans parts of Northumberland, Cumbria and Durham; it does not contain any World Heritage Sites but has a great deal of archaeological interest ranging from the Mesolithic (with sites everywhere) to a substantial industrial heritage associated with the 19th century lead mining industry in the dales.

AA's work has revealed previously undocumented round houses and field systems in the area near High Force in Teesdale, and several medieval settlements have been identified. LIDAR (a remote sensing technology that measures distance with a laser and analyses the reflected light) was used to measure some of the humps and bumps and this resulted in the production of a model medieval landscape of the area.

AA has also been involved with the Epiacum Roman Fort near Alston, which Stewart Ainsworth of English Heritage & Time Team has described as "the best preserved Roman fort in the Empire". The fort is on the Maiden Way, which runs between Kirby Thore near today's A66 and Carvoran on Hadrian's Wall. Landscape surveys in the vicinity have revealed the *vicus* (a civilian settlement) and other farmsteads slightly

further away; these may have been occupied by Romano-British miner-farmer families, because the fort was important in the economy of lead mining and possibly that of silver and copper.



The fort is a scheduled monument, so human excavation is unlikely. The moles, however, are less constrained and AA has been involved in sieving the spoil from their heaps for artefacts. The project has ignited considerable media interest with an appearance on the BBC One Show as well as on local radio. Finds include jet beads, pottery, iron nails which may have come from a timber barrack block and a bronze dolphin thought to have been part of a bathhouse tap.

Paul gave examples of other work including a mound on the eighth fairway of Appleby golf course, long thought to have been a Roman signal station but which turns out to be Bronze Age in origin with several cremation burials. *(When your editor played there he couldn't even find the fairway, let alone a mound; here he is looking for his ball on that very hole. It's still in the lake for future archaeologists to find).*



AA has also carried out survey work at Long Meg stone circle, which is aligned on sunset at the winter solstice. And a very recent example of a find was at St Botolph's field in Weardale, where humps and bumps had been investigated by local people. A stunning piece of masonry was unearthed, thought to be the left point arm of an Anglo Saxon Cross, while children from the local primary school made finds of medieval pottery.

In his second talk, Paul compared the archaeology of the North Pennines with that of Coquetdale. Our area is rich in rock art but there is little in Durham with most of it being concentrated in Teesdale. Paul suggested that it only occurs in special places within the landscape. One major difference (although later than rock art) is that Coquetdale has many Iron Age hill forts whereas there are none in the North Pennines and very few in Durham.

One factor related to archaeological discovery is ploughing and the opportunity for field walking. There are few ploughed fields in the North Pennines, unlike the lower parts of Coquetdale, so systematic research is not possible. This means that the finds they do make are either related to known sites or else turned up by chance.

However, there is no metal mining history in Coquetdale (apart from one abortive and costly attempt in the 19th century on Lordenshaws), so this valley has no industrial mining heritage.

The Mesolithic in the Western Isles

In November we were fortunate to have Professor Peter Rowley Conwy from Durham University come to talk to us about the search he and his colleagues have been conducting for Mesolithic settlements in the Western Isles.

There are some 250 such sites in mainland coastal Scotland, so the potential for such sites would seem to be there – but it's been very hard to actually find them. This is partly because the sea level is now some two or three metres higher than it was then, partly because of the presence of blanket peat – and partly because of wind-blown machair sand dunes – although this does give us beautiful beaches and landscapes.



However, analysis of pollen and charcoal remains in the area implied that there had been two periods of burning between 7800BC and 8000BC. If these fires had been set by humans, the search might not be fruitless.

The first success came at Northton on Harris.



Excavation revealed a ground surface with the remains of quartz tools, a little flint, over 6000 fish bones and a few animal bones, while C14 dating on a hazelnut returned a date of around 7000BC. A second site on Harris, Temple Bay, yielded a better selection of bones from seals and hares, and was dated to between 5600BC and 5700BC.

At a third site, on Lewis at Tràigh na Beirigh, the team found an oyster shell cut into a circle with a hole in it; with the help of material from a shell midden the site was dated to *circa* 4300BC.

Two further sites have been found, and it's clear now that there was human activity in the Outer Hebrides over a long period and at different times of the year. Fishing seems to have been a staple occupation: at Northton there were bones from wrasse, cod and pollack, while at Tràigh na Beirigh there was only small saithe. Although the people must have had boats to get to the islands, the size of the bones implies these were from inshore fish – and sometimes from winter catches. So perhaps they were being caught in traps rather than on the open sea.

Some of the stone tools were from local material, but some seems to have come from sources a little distance away, such as the Shiant Isles (below) or Skye, across the Minch – and there are stylistic links with sites on the Inner Hebrides.



Analysis of DNA from a hare bone has shown it's very similar to a modern Irish hare, but that leaves several questions open. How did those animals get to the islands? There is no good evidence of deer; if hares were the largest mammal did the burning take place for reasons other than to improve grazing?

We don't know the size of these communities. A sustainable group probably needs to number at least 400, but this would be very large for the outer islands – so perhaps there were fewer actual settlers who were in turn part of a larger transient social group. Their activities may not have been restricted to the beaches. Finding the sites will be hard, but perhaps they also lived or camped inland near salmon runs. Possible traces of one such site have recently been located.