



East Dorset Antiquarian Society

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NEWSLETTER - OCTOBER 2008

Recent Events

At our first EDAS Lecture of the season Ben Ford, of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, gave us a talk on **'The Results from a large scale excavation at Staple Gardens, Winchester'**. This was an assessment excavation before building work to extend a group of public buildings over an adjacent car park. The initial digging revealed evidence of a well-preserved saxon street front, but, as we have learned from other city-centre sites, the archaeology soon revealed an extremely wide-spread archaeology ranging from the Iron Age/Roman period to the Second World War. The former was represented by ditches remaining from the Iron Age Hillfort, which were later developed with the building of a roman road. Other Roman remains and extensive culvert work showed that the stream associated with the original hillfort had been substantially diverted to make the town more defensible. Ben also told us about evidence from the dig that could support the proposal that Southampton was attacked in the early Roman-British period, and that this caused a migration to Winchester which created an increase in population and wealth.

Moving away from the earliest archaeology on the site, the team was also responsible for dealing with the air-raid shelter; many of these were built during the Second World War in towns near the South Coast. The shelter had been used in earnest many times during the war, and despite many stern notices inside that forbade bad behaviour and leaving graffiti, the walls inside were adorned with signatures, drawings and comments about the war. All these images were properly recorded, and some were shown on displays above ground (the public were not allowed to enter the site itself owing to Health and Safety aspects). This resulted in a very pleasant surprise when one elderly gentleman pointed out the drawings he had made himself on the wall during an air raid !

The site was an extremely interesting and challenging one, and the breadth of both archaeological time, and the types of artefact, show the very high levels of skill attained by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. (I understand that the excavation was also finished on time and to cost estimates!)

We thank Ben very much for an extremely interesting and well presented lecture - despite him having projector gremlins at the start.

An Excavator's Dream Discovering Vindolanda's Portable Roman Calendar

By Bryan Pople and Kate Sheehan Finn BSc, MSc, BA.

Every year, since the 1970s, excavations take place at Vindolanda Roman Fort and its *vicus*, near Bardon Mill in Northumberland. The Vindolanda Trust owns the site and oversees the annual excavations, which are largely carried out by volunteers from all walks of life under the guidance of a small team of dedicated, highly skilled archaeologists and specialists. The whole site is fascinating and constantly throws up surprises as it is systematically excavated, recorded and studied. We were fortunate to make one of those unexpected discoveries at Vindolanda on the 7th July, 2008.

Discovery



The morning was grey and soggy and we were excavating the clogged air channels beneath the stone floor of the eastern granary inside Stone Fort II, cAD213-410. The aim was to sample the soil from each channel - marked A to E and subdivided into two layers of 50 cm² sections - and to sieve the remainder for small finds and any visible organic remains (i.e. tiny animal bones). Figure 1 shows Channel A after excavation was completed. The whole soil samples will be subjected to environmental analysis and all the data will be used to try to deduce what materials or foodstuffs had been stored in each part of the building. We found some tiny rodent and bird bones, as well as a beautiful, complete copper alloy penannular brooch and several copper alloy coins to name but a few of the more exciting finds.

Figure 1: Channel A after excavation with the floor still *in situ* above
(author's own photograph).

Six days into the excavations and it was clear that the weather was conspiring against us with the overnight rain making sieving impossible and putting the scientific sampling process at risk. Andrew Birley, director of excavations at Vindolanda, decided to halt the soil sampling and asked us to create a fresh trench, excavating down onto a cobbled road surface several feet below the current ground level. Much of the road surface had already been exposed and we assumed that not much would be found in this area, because there had been relatively few finds above other parts of the road surface.

It was while digging through deep layers of collapsed building rubble above this road surface that we made a find that many archaeologists, professional and amateur alike, can mostly only dream about. We both simultaneously spotted a small, narrow, curved strip of metal lying among the rubble, which proved to be much more interesting than it appeared on first sight.

The Find

After lightly dusting the object off we immediately realised that there were several letters inscribed on one of its surfaces. All of the letters were capitalised and formed by dot impressions punched into the surface. There were letters at the top and the bottom of the curved metal strip. In the centre was a series of small holes punched right through the metal. We were able to read the word 'SEPTEMBER' above the holes and the letters spread at intervals beneath the punched holes were 'K', 'N', and 'ID'. Two more letters, 'AE', lay on their side on either side of the punched holes towards the end of the fragment (see Figure 2). After much discussion with Elizabeth Greene, Andrew Birley, Alex Meyer and Robin Birley, we realised that we were looking at part of the first portable perpetual Roman calendar ever to have been found in Roman Britain, and possibly the whole of the Roman world.



Figure 2: The Vindolanda calendar (author's own photograph).

The Roman Calendar

Briefly, the calendar used during the Roman period was the Julian calendar, named after Julius Caesar who reformed the old Republican calendar in 46 BC. At this time, the civic year was about three months ahead of the solar year and, as *pontifex maximus* (literally, chief priest), Caesar inserted approximately 80 days to realign the civic and solar years. Thus the year 46 BC was 445 days long and it was described as 'the last year of the muddled reckoning' (Macrob. *Sat.*1.14.3).

The piece of calendar found at Vindolanda represents the month of September, and the 'K' refers to the *Kalends*, the first of the month, whilst 'N' stands for *Nones*, which falls 9 days before the *Ides*. In the Roman calendar, the *Ides* falls on the 13th of the month in January, February, April, June, August, September, November, December, and on the 15th of the month in March, May, July and October (Oxford Classical Dictionary). The positioning of these letters beneath the holes naturally implies that the holes represent the dates on the calendar. It is probable that each hole represents 2 days, following the odd numbers in the sequence 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 etc. The *Nones* in September was on the 5th and the 'N' is correctly positioned below the third hole with the 'ID' below the seventh hole



which seems to confirm this interpretation. The letters lying on their sides between two holes representing the dates 21st and 23rd of September are 'AE' and it is likely that they refer to the *aequinoctium* or the autumn equinox that falls at this time (see Figure 3). These conclusions were drawn after discussion with Robin Birley on the site over a cup of tea and, needless to say, further studies are needed before firm interpretation of this remarkable find can be made.

Figure 3: Close up of the 'AE' symbol (author's own photograph)

Both Robin and Andrew Birley stress the importance of this unusual Roman artefact for increasing our understanding of how the troops stationed at Vindolanda kept track of the passing days and months while they were stationed at the fort and active in the field. A portable device, the calendar was round and about 25 cm in diameter. It is likely that pegs were inserted every 2 days to record the passage of time ensuring that orders could be carried out when they were supposed to be and that festivals were observed on the correct days. Andrew Birley (personal communication) said that the Vindolanda Trust "are delighted by the find, which we rank as one of the best to come from the site over the past 40 years." He also said that the calendar will go on display at Chesterholm Museum at Vindolanda this autumn, once conservation has been completed.

Conclusion

We were very excited to make this find and would like to thank sincerely the Vindolanda Trust for giving us the opportunity to work with them at what has to be one of the most interesting Roman archaeological sites in the whole of Britain. It is a privilege to work there. We hope that people who read this report will be inspired to visit the site and museum, and maybe even get involved in excavating too. Further information about the Vindolanda Trust can be obtained at: <http://www.vindolanda.com/>. For those who wish to read about the calendar in the local Northumberland newspapers please use the following links:

<http://www.newsandstar.co.uk/1.213337>

<http://www.hexhamcourant.co.uk/1.210333>



Figure 4: The June 29th excavation team led by Andrew Birley (Photograph courtesy of Andrew Birley).

Forthcoming Events

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The dates for EDAS events are underlined. The monthly evening lectures start at 7.30pm. Walks and field visits usually meet at 10.30 am at the published Grid Reference. Ring the leader if the weather is doubtful or if more details are required.

2008

- Wed 8 Oct EDAS Lecture: Life in a Medieval town with Nick Griffiths.
- Wed 12 Nov EDAS Lecture: Forensic Archaeology with Paul Cheetham of Bournemouth University.
- Wed 10 Dec EDAS Lecture: The South Dorset Ridgeway with Andy Payne of English Heritage.
- Wed 14 Jan EDAS Lecture: The Prehistory of Hengistbury Head with Peter Hawes.