Lossenham Project

Newsletter

ISSUE 28

Introduction

"A person who is tired of London is not necessarily tired of life; it might be that he just can't find a parking place."

From Sunrise with Seamonsters, by Paul Theroux (1985)

On 16 March 1973, Queen Elizabeth II opened the current London Bridge. It had a number of predecessors, all but the previous, 1831 bridge, located about 30 metres downstream from the current one (imagine the finds waiting on the riverbed there!) The Romans may have built one, but there was certainly a timber bridge in the 11th century. Then, in 1209, the most famous London Bridge of all opened.

Samuel_Scott, Old London Bridge

Old London Bridge had a chapel and around 100 houses on it (the exact number varied), which contained shops but also dwellings. It had 19 arches and a wooden drawbridge in the middle, for a total of 19 stone piers, each protected by a wide stone "starling", which together restricted the available width of the river, causing a big difference in the water level (up to 6 ft, apparently) when the tidal flow was at its most rapid. This also slowed the river flow upstream, which may have been one reason why it froze over more easily during the "Little Ice Age".

By the end of the 18th century, the bridge could no longer cope with increased traffic. A new bridge was built by John Rennie and his son and opened in 1831. That bridge was famously sold to Arizona, when it was replaced by the current bridge.

Åke Nilson
Chairman of the Janus Foundation

Castle Toll Time

We have started, in a small but meaningful way, the excavation of Castle Toll, by digging three test pits, one in the southern part of the monument, and one each on the NE and SW mounds of the northern enclosure.

Test Pit 3 in the southern enclosure was targeted over geophysical results, suggesting a pit, whilst the results were unable to confirm this, we did discover an 'occupation layer' with slag, carbon, and mixed clay.

Test Pits 1 and 2 took a preliminary look at the construction of the mounds making up the extant monument.

The NE mound (**Test Pit 1**) appears that to have been constructed by piling up layers of gravel and clay that is likely excavated from ditches dug surrounding the site, however there is extensive disturbance and damage, caused by rabbits and possibly badgers, to the upper layers of the mound. One particularly interesting deposit identified, surviving well, was the remains of a possible turf line in between the mound deposits, this may indicate a second stage of construction. Brian Davison, who trenched across the monument in 1965, noted evidence for the heightening of the banks in the mid-13th century. Are we seeing the same evidence here? We may also have found the edge of Davison's trench, made in 1965 by the then Ministry of Works, across the NE mound.

Test Pit 2 on the SW mound gave as a surprise with a linear (ditch?) feature crossing the test pit. Unfortunately, no finds were retrieved but it was sealed by a layer that included 19/20th century white China and coal!

Meanwhile, one of the coins from the priory site has been re-identified as a farthing (quarter penny) rather than a half-penny as originally thought. It was minted by King Alexander III of Scotland, who reigned in the 1280's, and among earlier finds, we also have a penny of his. It is interesting that we have found several Scottish coins here – maybe this is an indicator of connections between Lossenham and Hulne Priory in Northumberland, where the Scots were vying for power with the Normans throughout the 13th century.

Paul-Samuel Armour/ Andrew Richardson
Isle Heritage CIC

Sheets and Shoes

In another of our occasional articles looking at how people lived in the Lossenham area, this month I'd like to share with you the inventory of a Tudor man, William Browning of Sandhurst, who died in 1566. Inventories were made at the time of death and William's suggests he had been a man of modest means: he had only 6d in his purse and all of his clothes added up only to 10s. Sadly no will survives for him but his inventory also records '2 beds, 2 bolsters, 2 blankets, 2 bed covers, 2 pillows and 3 pairs of sheets', so we might guess that he lived alone or with only one other.

The most interesting things in William's inventory are '12 pairs of new shoes' and '1 pair of old wearing boots'. The latter were probably his own, but the new shoes? Was he a shoemaker? Tudor shoemakers were either cordwainers, who used new leather, or cobblers who mended old shoes. Yet William left no spare leather, no knives or nails, thread, awls or lasts. Of course, it is possible he had already passed those on to a business partner or relative. But if so, why not also the shoes? Perhaps he (or his wife?) were Tudor examples of the shoe-addicts we see today? Sadly, we'll never know, but through William's inventory we catch a tantalising glimpse of the oddities and intricacies of a life once led, in a world now lost to us.

Rebecca Warren

Late Tudor shoe, V&A museum

The Pottery Project

Philip Warren and I are partnering to continue with the Medieval Pottery Project at Lossenham this year and are putting out our first feelers for folk who might be interested in participating.

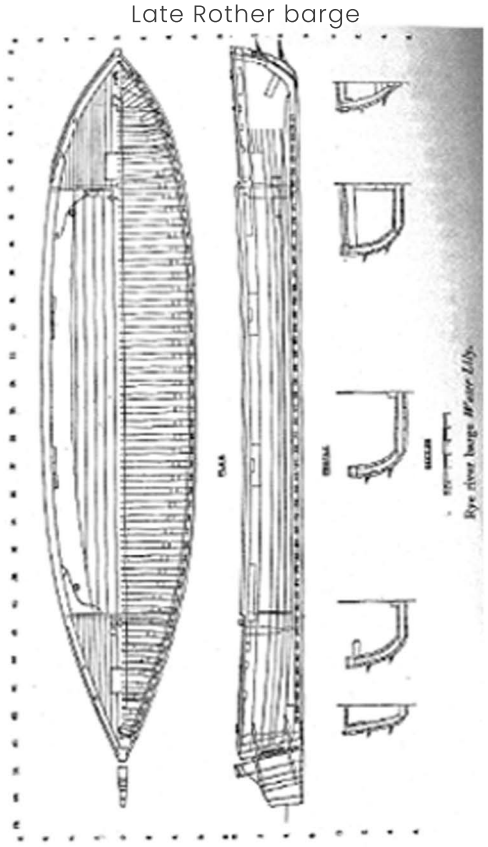
There will be a focus on refining our findings from last year's experiments, further medieval pottery research with visits to museums, the design and build of an improved kiln and particular emphasis on discovering early tile making/decoration techniques. This year we will be processing Lossenham clay together on site together and there will be demonstrations to help you create your own work for the fire.

If you wish to help progress this year's exciting endeavour (no previous experience required) please let us know by email - russell@lossenham.org.uk

River transport

on the upper Rother in medieval and Tudor times

Late Rother barge



In December 1571, George Sawyer from Ebony, otherwise known as Morrys, was with his brother Thomas from Newenden, on the river called 'The Channell' between Reading and Oxney. Both were 'lyghtermen' and onboard George's 'lyghter' or barge was a load of a thousand billets of firewood. George was in the stern with a long pole to manoeuvre the boat, while Peter Johnson on the riverbank helped by pulling it along. Suddenly George's pole got stuck, he fell into the river and drowned, although his body was not recovered until early February. At the inquest it was reported that the firewood (valued at 20s) and the boat (£5) were in the hands of Thomas and William Marden of Tenterden.

This sad accident is useful for what it reveals about river-borne traffic – boats and cargos at this and probably earlier times. According to the Kent Hundred Rolls, dated 1274/5, such barges had long been used by boatmen locally, the lord Richard of Newenden having 'wrongly' claimed tolls for all these craft during the previous 15 years. Similar boats were presumably used by ferrymen operating from Ebony, for example, paying the Christ Church Priory beadle for this privilege. Even though there is no mention of the cargo taken down river, it seems likely firewood was frequently carried, perhaps as far as Rye, before being transferred to larger vessels. Thus, the river played a vital role in the relationship between the Weald and the coast.

Dr Sheila Sweetinburgh
Centre for Kent History and Heritage

Dates for the Diary

March 2023
Monday 6th to Wednesday 8th: Excavation of Graves 10 & 11
Tuesday 14th to Thursday 16th: Site TBC
Tuesday 21st to Thursday 23rd: Site TBC

April 2023
Wednesday 12th to Friday 14th: Site TBC
Monday 17th and Tuesday 18th: Site TBC
Thursday 27th and Friday 28th: Site TBC

May 2023
Thursday 18th to Saturday 20th: Site TBC
Thursday 25th to Saturday 27th: Site TBC

June 2023
Excavation dates to follow.
Thursday 29th to Saturday 1st July:
Skin and Bone, Wood and Stone - mediaeval animals conference, Rochester (see https://blogs.canterbury.ac.uk/kenthistory/medieval-animals-heritage-and-exploring-the-lives-of-people-in-the-past/)

Note: these excavation dates are subject to weather conditions.
(Please make sure to sign-up in good time so we can plan our activities effectively.)