

## TAS AND FIELD WORK

.....*By one who was there some of the time*

Way back in the early 1960s, a number of local amateur archaeologists amongst whom were Leslie Still, Alan Pallister and Joan Southeran, deliberated on the formation of an archaeological group to cover Stockton, Middlesbrough and the surrounding areas.

From those discussions came the genesis of Teesside Archaeological Society, so known in those days before acronyms became the fashionable trend.

I suppose it was inevitable that I became one of the founder members, always being fascinated, boy, youth and man, by everything historical, and given that Leslie was my persuasive boss at the Billingham Branch of Durham County Libraries. The early meetings of the Society were held in Elmwood Community Centre in Hartburn, Stockton and even then, a wonderful encouragement, eminent speakers gave talks.

I remember particularly Rosemary Cramp and Eric Birley coming along and sharing their knowledge and expertise with members. Leslie however, was rather more than an academic amateur who revelled in bookish theory alone, but was ever so keen to hold a spade and trowel in his hands and dig into history, particularly that in the Teesside area.

Not too far from Stockton, and a mile or so from Long Newton is the site of the deserted medieval village of West Hartburn, in the fields of Foster House Farm. It was at this site, and with the generous permission of the then farmers, Mr. & Mrs. G.W Pattison and under the direction of Leslie Still that TAS undertook its first excavation. Members of the society all were invited to participate in the dig, and amongst those who volunteered was myself. My particular historical infatuation was in the medieval period and consequently Leslie experienced no difficulty in enrolling someone whose eagerness to take part was pathetically obvious.

For my part and perhaps that of Leslie, a medieval site had the singular attraction of not being too far underground, and in theory would not prove over physical.

At West Hartburn the foundation stones of the walls of the long houses could often be seen protruding through the turf. Wonderful - two spades down and there you were at the occupational level, and those who prefer Iron Age sites are always welcome to them.

The first dig took place in the early summer of 1962 and was planned to take place over 8 or so weekends. This of course, was absolutely new to me, and once the site had been marked, and the work started, the revelation came to me that medieval plots may well be more physical than ever I had anticipated. Before digging could be embarked upon, turfs had to be cut and removed.

This primary stage in itself was a significant undertaking bearing in mind that the interior dimensions of the house were around 48ft by 14ft medieval measure, and that the excavation therefore needed to be somewhat greater. Unlike the pampered diggers at the site of Captains Cook Cottage in Stewarts Park, and other locations where TAS members were invited to participate, there was nothing mechanical to assist in the removal. All graft was purely physical and accompanied by much sweat, a few tears and every so often a little blood from raw blisters usually, but not uniquely.

Once the nuisance of the turf had been dealt with, and the turfs stacked neatly grass side to grass side because of the essential need to preserve them as well as could be for re-laying, the serious business of excavation could begin.

At this time there were between 20 and 30 volunteers at the site, with working being divided between those who trowelled, those who dug and barrowed, those who trowelled, and those who mapped and interpreted the site. How important trowelling was to the better understanding of the archaeology was quickly learned by new comers to the discipline. This work

revealed the internal lay out of a building, the divisions within it, marks left in the earth where wooden roof supporting posts had been, hearths, rubbish pits, and many other facets of a house. Unequivocally the most fascinating result of careful trowelling was a discovery of items and artefacts offering some insight into the everyday lives of the villagers. I recovered innumerable shards of pot, parts of a dagger, knife remnants, buckles, spindle whorls and other everyday bits and bobs. Nothing however could surpass the spectacular finds by my wife of a Henry 8 silver penny issued by the Durham mint 'and a silver pectoral cross' which (during the episcopacy of Bishop Thomas Ruthall, 1509-1523) had more the look of a washer than it did a cross. It was inscribed in Latin '**ISEUS NAZARET HUS REX IUDEO**' ('Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'). Durham University identified this as of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, and the furthest North such an item had been discovered. I am sure that no one finding such items could avoid a day dream of who owned them and what was said when the loss was discovered. At this time and being fresh to field archaeology, the prime satisfaction was my attempts to empathise with the residents, to walk where they had walked, to handle things they had handled, and to imagine life in a long house, particularly the middle of a dark, cold English winter when it was dark at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and with farm animals living behind a partition at the far end of the house, certainly my historical imagination developed well, an art so necessary to all archaeologists, but in particular the professionals.

Leslie Still, along with other knowledgeable amateurs were always at hand to explain the techniques of excavation, and what to expect and look for on the site. Recording the site was hugely significant, but for the life of me I could not understand why, with the honest eye of photography, people spent hours drawing every stone, post hole, post socket, and what-have-you in the excavation, a laborious and difficult

undertaking. I understand now of course that photography is rather too oblique and cannot truly convey a good overall plan of an excavation with each stone and feature well enough highlighted. Drawn plans also tend to be in printed illustrations for those reasons.

TAS conducted several more digs in which I took part including a supposed manor site close by Mc Mullan Road in Darlington, a medieval earthwork near Croft motor racing circuit, and a particularly frustrating site on West Newbiggin Farm in between Sadberge and Stockton where it was shown not so much what was there, as lack of evidence of what was supposed to have been. As close I imagine, to proving a negative, as is possible.

When I left the employ of Durham County Libraries, and my close professional association with Leslie Still, to my now regret, I lost contact with the TAS for far too long, until some years ago, when my wife and I rejoined. I was gratified to leave that field work remained an offer for those who would, this time working under the supervision of Tees Archaeology, and Steve Sherlock. I assisted the professionals at Catcote, Foxrush Farm, and in the site of Captain Cook's village in Stewarts Park. Just a little smugly I imagined that I knew so much about field archaeology, and so was humbled to find there was much yet to learn. Under the direction of Steve, Gary Green, and indeed fellow amateurs, my understanding of the techniques involved continued to expand thus making field work all the more intriguing. It must be understood that excavating can be hard work, and quite often muddy work, depending on the weather. It is however very satisfying and should one wish to graduate into a knowledgeable amateur I would recommend without qualification taking part in those digs open to TAS members. In my experience the site directors have inevitably given explanations and interpretations when asked, and have never failed to give good and solid advice on the techniques and tools used in the field.

Once upon a time in my naivety, I supposed the professionals spent their working day directing their diggers and trowellers, studying the site, nodding sagely, and spending many hours interpreting it. They do! But they certainly are no strangers to mattock, spade and trowel, and slave away with the rest of us. Gratifyingly of late, JCBs have removed the turf, and that, believe me is as valuable bonus as ever could be.

Given a reasonable degree of fitness, field archaeology is a fascinating hobby for the amateur, and the interest tends to grow with each excavation. The coming of summer means rather more than just holidays, because along with it comes the glow of the anticipation of another season of digs in which TAS members may participate. If you haven't already yet joined in practical field work, cease thinking 'should I go'? And volunteer! Give it a go.

Leslie Meynell

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