

ACTIVE ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP REPORT 2017 - 2018

Since the Spring Newsletter, we have had relatively few active projects, but have been investigating a number of possibilities, some of which may still come to fruition.

Three Locks. After a period of absence we returned to this site. The nettles had taken over and the first session was to clear them.



As Three Locks is considered to be the best preserved of the Northern Group of engines, the Canal and River Trust (CRT) asked us to fully excavate one of the two boiler pits, and record it in detail. This involved moving some of the large stacks of bricks created when an unstable wall was taken down, as well as most of our own spoil heaps, in order to access the area. We chose to excavate the western boiler pit, partly because it was better preserved, and partly because it involved less movement of spoil and bricks. The CRT did move one stack of bricks and much of our spoil without being asked and in our absence.

We already knew that the northern wall was not original, and seemed to cut across where we thought the chimney was. We excavated the space between the northern wall and the north end of the western boiler pit, and essentially found nothing other than a bedspring embedded in cement. We excavated most of the western boiler pit revealing that it was around 2 ft deep from the current floor level, with a central ridge that must have helped support the boiler. The southern end appeared to be the stoking area, and there was also a possible drain at this end, which connected with a similar feature from the eastern pit, and then to the outside.



There appeared to be a walkway between the two boiler pits. In the course of excavating this, we found that the floor was in several layers, two of them very black and sooty, and another which was mostly soft pinkish mortar. Since both boiler pits were filled with rubble (mostly broken bricks) we considered that these layers represented the various uses that the building had been put to after the boilers went out of use. It was at one time used as stabling for the barge horses, and this was apparently when the northern wall was built to allow access –

presumably after the chimney was demolished. There were several large lumps of concrete with rectangular depressions in their upper surfaces, looking as if something like railway sleepers had been placed on end in them. They were in a line, and could possibly represent the stall divisions for the horses – but could equally well be something else.

The western boiler pit was constructed mostly of engineering bricks, many of which bore the name of manufacturers in Stourbridge and Swadlincote. The brickwork of the pit was of a high standard, but the infill between the two pits was significantly inferior, and was built of softer non-engineering brick.

We did not fully excavate the eastern boiler pit, but did look at both ends and a part of the middle. It was of similar construction to the western pit, but not identical. The brickwork was not as well done as that of its western companion, and there was more of the poorer infill brickwork (the work of apprentices?). The bricks in the eastern boiler pit were mostly from works in Church Cressley, which only opened in 1830. This tends to confirm our impression that the western boiler pit was constructed first, and the eastern one later, possibly with the western one already running. Apart from large quantities of bricks, mostly broken, we found many of bits of ironwork, much of it difficult to identify but including some huge handmade nails. We also found another less decorated clay pipe.



Ironwork Items from Three Locks



Jeffs Clay Pipe

We have no more work planned apart from doing some of the backfilling before the CRT takes over. We understand they will rebuild the western wall and complete their infilling with gravbel, a membrane, and concrete floor. We will be returning to the Wendover Arm to try to locate the pivot point of the swing bridge near Whitehouses.

Stoke Mandeville. We are aiming to work with HS2 on the evaluation and excavation of this site where geophysics had earlier shown an enclosure and some probable ditches. The old Stoke Mandeville church stands here, so in April, after some very wet weather, we carried out a fieldwalk across the adjacent field. This is outside the area that will be used for HS2 but it was hoped we might be able to help date the site and inform the further investigations on the main site. The field had been ploughed but not harrowed, and the soil was very sticky. We found less than we expected and could not definitely date the site, though most of what we found was Roman, as well as some medieval pottery.

Work has now begun on excavating the area that HS2 will go through, and we were invited to meet with the professionals working on the site for a tour and explanation of what is currently happening, which we did on 31st July. So far, a number of ditches have been found, some of which may throw some light on the watercourses in the area, which have been modified over a long period. Work has not yet reached the church. We were pleasantly surprised by how enthusiastic the professionals seemed to be about the prospect of working with us, and the number of ideas they had as to what we might be able to do. Currently we cannot say more.

Aston Clinton A larger group of us were able to take up an invitation to visit an extensive building site near the Holiday Inn close to Aston Clinton. Some of the trenches had already been backfilled for safety reasons, so the tour did involve a certain amount of imagination. However, we were also shown some of the finds, which include a very fine almost complete medieval floor tile, and a number of large sherds of medieval pottery – including some Brill ware.



During our work we were entertained by a pair of grey wagtails who had a nest in a hole in the west wall of the building. We think there were three chicks, and the parents were very devotedly feeding them. They had fledged by our last day

Indoor Activities

The CBA South Midlands Spring Conference in Winslow on 15th April was well attended and well supported by AAG members – Doug Stuckey was one of the speakers, three AAG members were responsible for the teas and coffees, and AAG put on a large display, while the group members were, responsible for the teas and coffees..

The next conference will be in October, provisionally 21st, and will be held in Bedfordshire, the theme to be buildings.

The Roman pottery identification day held by CBA SM in Milton Keynes on 2nd June was very interesting, but less well attended than had been hoped.

We have had displays at the BAS 170 events that have taken place so far, at High Wycombe and at Missenden Abbey, with quite a lot of interest expressed in our group.

We will also put on a display at the BLHN conference in Aylesbury on 29th Sept.

Pauline Hay