

Swaledale Big Dig

Newsletter no.7 - December 2014

It has been a few weeks since the last newsletter and as usual we have been extremely busy, despite it being passed our digging season. We have been out surveying in the snow (!), organizing and attending courses, and we had our end-of-season event looking at what we have learnt so far.

But first, the Finds Handling & Identification Day, on Saturday 8th November 2014



Sixteen people attended this popular hands-on course, pictured above, and delivered by finds experts Jenny Vaughan and John Nolan of Northern Counties Archaeological Services. Hopefully we can now all tell our Cistercian Ware from Tees Valley Ware and Northern Reduced Green Glaze!

At the end of the month we held our End-of Season event in Reeth Memorial Hall. This began on a cold foggy Friday evening with a number of presentations followed by an Open Day on an equally cold and foggy Saturday. Forty-eight people braved the inclement weather to attend the presentations and eighty-nine on Saturday. Several people later emailed to say how well they thought it had gone. For example

JB of Richmond: *Thanks very much Alan. It was an excellent display of all your work in the Memorial Hall at the weekend. I will follow the Big Dig from now on with interest.*

MM, also of Richmond: *Well done all of SWAAG! The exhibition was very well presented, well set out, and Very informative, well worth coming to see on a foggy November day.*



Examining the finds at the Open Day, Saturday 29th November 2014

The presentations and displays showed what we have done over the last year including digging twenty-seven pits, geophysical surveying, offering a wide range of free courses, leading a number of heritage walks and working with local school children. We also looked at what our work has told us about the development of Reeth.

Over the course of the year we have recovered over 2000 sherds of pottery including 1 piece of Roman pot, 53 from the High Medieval period (12th/13th C) and from the 21 Late Medieval (14th-16th C). Pottery distribution maps are on our website at <http://sbd.swaag.org/#!album-56>

The marked decline in the number of pot sherds from the High Medieval to the Late Medieval shows how hard hit Swaledale was in the 14th century. Two natural disasters and one man-made hit this region. First, the so-called mini ice-age at the beginning of the century leading to crop failures and famine, then raids by the Scots, sacking Marrick and Ellerton Priors, burning

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the local villages and to cap it all, the Bubonic Plague from the 1360's on. The decline in the pottery finds reflects the fall in the population of around 40% or more.

The distribution maps also suggest that perhaps there was a dwelling in the middle of what is now the Green; more work needs to be done before we can say for sure though.



Left: the potential medieval settlement in the sun Right: later, it began to snow!

On Wednesday 3rd December we began our surveying course, led by Miles Johnson of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. The following Sunday ten intrepid souls set off in glorious winter sunshine to begin surveying the potential medieval settlement in Fremington, see above, only to have it turn bitterly cold by midday and then begin to snow; we shall return in the New Year !

In between the above activity, our newly created Local History Group met. A number of members decided to begin with a project to transcribe the Grinton and Reeth Tithe Apportionments. Will Swales and Alan Mills met with colleagues at the North Yorkshire County Record Office who were very supportive of the project such that we came away with the records on a memory stick and also printed out onto A3 to make them easier to read. More on the group in later newsletters as projects develop.

Finally, in this section on activities, Alan & Judith Mills visited Long Preston last week to hear an excellent presentation by Carezza Lewis (Cambridge University and Time Team) and discuss with colleagues there their proposed Big Dig. They too will be applying for Heritage Lottery Fund support. We wish them every success and look forward to sharing knowledge, practice and experience with them.

Forthcoming events

- (i) We will continue surveying the potential medieval settlement at Fremington in January on 3rd & 4th, 8th & 9th, weather permitting. Contact dave@swaag.org
- (ii) The Finds Handling and Identification day, focusing mainly on pottery has proved so popular that we are running this again on 14th March. It is already full but if you are interested in attending then let me know and I will put you on the reserve list.
- (iii) In the Spring we will offer a follow-up to Roger Martlew's popular short course on British Archaeology. This is free and scheduled for 5 weeks from Thursday 16th April 2015 to Thursday 14th May inclusive, 7pm-9pm, Reeth Memorial Hall. Let me know if you wish to join in: alan@swaag.org
- (iv) We will also be offering a free short course in the New Year on interpreting geophysical survey results; let me know if interested: alan@swaag.org
- (v) Finally, our Big Dig weekends for 2015 are provisionally set for 16th/17th May, 20th/21st June, 18th/19th July.

The Big Dig in the press

The November edition of the Reeth Gazette carried an article referring to the Big Dig. The Friends of the Swaledale Museum Autumn Newsletter included an article about the Big Dig. The Darlington and Stockton Times, 28th November 2014, printed an article "Big Dig project highlights village's medieval heritage". See http://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/11633378.Swaledale_Big_Dig_reveals_Reeth_s_medieval_past/

The Northern Echo, 29th November 2014, carried an article "Medieval past of village is uncovered by Big Dig team"; this is not on the Northern Echo website at this time.

How you can get involved

There are many opportunities for all to become involved in the Big Dig. If you are interested and able to participate in any of the following activities please contact the person shown:

Test-pitting, Rob Nicholson: rob@swaag.org

or Philip Bastow: philip@swaag.org

Surveying incl geophys : Mike Walton: mike@swaag.org

Documentary research / Local History : Judith Mills: judith@swaag.org

General enquiries or for more info on courses etc: bigdig@swaag.org or alan@swaag.org

We are particularly keen to hear from people in Fremington and Grinton with gardens or land where we might be able to put a test pit.

If you are interested in some other aspect of history (eg family history, vernacular buildings etc) then we can put you in touch with relevant groups; if you are interested in archaeology generally then please join SWAAG (see the website)!



This is the QR code for the photo album website. Use an app such as QR droid on your smartphone to take you straight there.

You can follow the progress of the Swaledale Big Dig on Twitter @SwaledaleDig

If you do not use Twitter then the Twitter feeds are displayed on the SWAAG website and also on the Reeth Memorial Hall site at <http://www.reethmemorialhall.co.uk/> under the Regular Users tab.

This is the QR code for the SWAAG website www.swaag.org



I would particularly like to thank Jim & Jackie at the Buck Hotel, Reeth for making a meeting room available to us free of charge; it is very much appreciated.



www.buckhotel.co.uk

Finally, may I wish everyone involved in the Big Dig a Merry Christmas and a Happy, Healthy New Year. Your interest, support and involvement has enabled us to be so successful in 2014.

Best wishes

Alan Mills