

Swaledale Big Dig

Newsletter no. 9 - May 2015

A shorter edition this time reporting on our most recent activities and calling for volunteers for the forthcoming test pit weekends.

Over Easter we completed two more test pits in Reeth bringing the total to 29. Rob Nicholson and colleagues did the pit in Lane House, the home of Barbara Buckingham and Vivienne Coates, and sent this commentary on the day:

Given that we had already cancelled our first attempt at digging this pit because of snow showers, gusting winds and freezing temperatures, the glorious sunshine as we arrived in Arkengarthdale on Friday 10th April was a very welcome sight. The bleating sheep and lambs in the field at the back of Lane House, who obviously thought that we were their morning foddering visit, confirmed that spring had at last arrived.

The pit was to be dug in the back garden belonging to Barbara Buckingham and Vivienne Close, who told us that although the garden had been walled off from the adjacent meadow relatively recently, the property was obviously much older and had been the local clog maker's workshop with an adjacent barn. Adorning their back wall was a variety of metal objects all of which had come from their garden and so we were quite hopeful of finding evidence of earlier settlement activity.

After removing the turf the first context (0-10cm) was made up of a heavy loam with an assortment of modern debris including an electrical fuse and a Newcastle Brown Ale bottle top.

The next two contexts, taking us down to 30cms, contained evidence of later post medieval activity with pottery, remnants of shotgun cartridges, a small amount of bone (some burnt), together with clinker, coal and coke possibly from the clog maker's activity, in an increasingly clay-containing soil.

A few large stones at the bottom of context 3 led us to wonder whether there was some structure present, but alas no, as the next context did not contain any finds and culminated in the local yellow clay which we have come to recognise as the natural layer.

We did remove a further half section into context 5 which just confirmed we had indeed reached the natural and so after the final recording the pit was backfilled.

I'm writing this two days later and remembering last Friday's beautiful weather. It's currently pouring with rain and someone further up the dale said it snowed again yesterday!

We also dug a test pit on the same day in the rear garden of Tynedale, the home of Margaret Abson. This one took a little longer, from 9am through to 5pm, as we excavated down to a depth of 70 cm before encountering the 'natural' boulder clay. We made some interesting finds including clay tobacco pipe stems, a slate pencil, perhaps from the nearby 19th C Methodist School, window glass and significant amounts of lime mortar suggesting that there might have been an earlier building, now demolished, nearby plus a wide range of pottery. The pottery finds included one sherd of post-medieval green glaze and another of what we believe to be Tees Valley ware from the 13th C, see photo below.



Clockwise from the top left: Jane & Judith sieving with Andrea washing finds in the background, 10th April; Alan talking about the Big Dig at the Yorkshire Dales Historic Environment Day, 18th April, at Grassington; Medieval Tees Valley ware from Margaret Abson's garden, 10th April; at Roger Martlew's British Archaeology course, 16th April.

Early on in the Big Dig project we purchased geophysical surveying equipment to enable us to examine areas which we thought might reveal interesting archaeology without the need to dig and thereby avoid potentially harming the site. We continue to make good use of this equipment. Recently we have been working with Phil Abramson, an archaeologist with the MoD, to survey land at Marne Barracks, near Catterick. It is hoped that this land will be used as part of Operation Nightingale, a ground-breaking initiative to help the recovery and wellbeing of injured

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service personnel and veterans through their participation on archaeological investigations. For more information on Operation Nightingale see <http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/OperationNightingale> for example.

Our programme of free courses is drawing to a close as we enter the fourth and penultimate week of Roger Martlew's popular British Archaeology course. We plan to run one more specialist course on Geophysical Surveying. A key objective of the Big Dig is to leave a legacy of lasting skills, including geophysical surveying. To this end we hope to run three one day sessions not for those simply interested in geophys but focusing on the practical skills of surveying and interpretation so that we have a viable group of people who can carry surveying forward both in Swaledale and with similar groups elsewhere, after the Big Dig finishes in January 2016. Each session will focus on developing one aspect – magnetometry, earth resistance or interpretation, leading to three teams. Let me know, if you have not already, if you are interested in joining one or more of these geophys teams; alan@waag.org

As mentioned in previous newsletters, interest in the Big Dig has led to the creation of a Local History Group. Members of the group, working with the North Yorkshire County Records Office, have begun transcribing Swaledale Tithe Apportionments; they have completed Grinton Township which is now fully searchable and accessible to all via the SWAAG website; go to www.swaag.org and in the Swaledale Big Dig section click on the tab "Archival Info and Docs". The group is now working on the Reeth Tithe Apportionment. Other topics which the Local History Group is working on include making the Healaugh and Muker Manor books searchable, Roman roads, particularly the probable road over the Stang in Arkengarthdale, the medieval history of Fremington, Grinton and Reeth, medicine and health in the past, the history of the local schools and an oral history project. If you would like to get involved please contact Judith at judith@swaag.org

Forthcoming events

Our main Big Dig weekends for 2015 are 16th/17th May, 20th/21st June, 18th/19th July in Reeth, Fremington and Grinton respectively. We will shortly be contacting landowners and those who have volunteered their gardens to agree details.

We have emailed asking for volunteers and have a good number of positive responses – thanks to all those who will be helping – but could do with more so that we can dig as many test pits as possible. If you are able to help at all please do let Rob know now. rob@swaag.org. Don't be nervous about coming. It's not all digging; there's recording, sieving and finds washing to be done, as well as meeting and greeting visitors. We try to make sure everyone enjoys the day.

In addition, as last year, there will be activities for local schools and a pit on Reeth Green (29th May) during the Swaledale Festival, coinciding with our Social History walk. The tent will also be in use again this year with Big Dig displays for visitors.

You might have seen notice of the exhibition in Bedale on the Roman villa near Aiskew on 20th June. This coincides with one of our Big Days. Naturally we would prefer people to participate in the Big Dig so SWAAG has arranged for Jenny Proctor to talk to us about the Roman villa later in the summer. Jenny is Post-excavation Manager for Pre-Construct Archaeology who are working on the site on behalf of North Yorkshire County Council. Jenny has a leading role in managing the finds and interpreting the site. She will be able to talk to us about the wide range of finds from the site which include a mosaic pavement and a section of decorative wall plaster,

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as well as coins, and pottery – some from as far away as North Africa; on the Iron Age section of the dig, more fragments of pottery and evidence of iron and copper working have been discovered. We hope that you are able to both help with the Big Dig and come to Jenny's talk to hear in depth about this exciting site.

The Big Dig in the press

The Big Dig now has an entry on the Current Archaeology website at <http://www.archaeology.co.uk/digging/fieldwork/swaledale-and-arkengarthdale-archaeology-group.htm>

The May 2015 Reeth Gazette carried an article promoting the Big Dig.

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

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



Finally, many thanks to Roy and Julie at the Buck Hotel, Reeth www.buckhotel.co.uk for their support and for making a meeting room available to us free of charge.

Best wishes

Alan Mills

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