

“Old Sarum – New Perspectives”

Talk by Alex Langlands 26th January 2023

Our first talk of 2023 was by Alex Langlands on excavations he has been leading in the environs of Old Sarum, just outside Salisbury. Alex has co-presented several TV series demonstrating experimental archaeology and currently lectures in medieval history at Swansea University.

The talk focused on the suburbs west and east of Old Sarum and also the riverside, not the site itself. The archaeological work was funded by the Society of Antiquaries (London) and mainly conducted by students. The study also involved consulting the findings of previous excavations as well as using Lidar and geophysics to explore wider areas.

The site of Old Sarum, being an Iron Age hill fort, is much older than the Norman castle and Cathedral that later occupied the site. The Bishopric was established in 1075 (replacing the sees of Sherborne and Ramsbury) and Bishop Osmund's foundation charter for the cathedral dates from 1091. The western suburbs were probably the site of an earlier Roman road. Early documentary evidence tells us that “houses and gardens of canons lie before the gates at the Castle of Sarum” and there were between 29 and 36 canons; quite a significant presence.

In 1225 the new cathedral was being built and the prebend at the old site was dissolved. In 1226 previous bishop's bodies were disinterred and moved to the new site whilst the old cathedral was being demolished; the stones being reused in the new cathedral close. However, documents suggest the site was not completely abandoned and there was a “newton” in the 14th century. Lidar shows settlements in the west, particularly towards the River Avon and Geophysics showed evidence of structures along Phillips Lane. Seventeen trenches were dug and finds from the late 12th and early 13th centuries were uncovered, some of which have been recorded on the Portable Antiquaries Scheme. However, the search for buildings was impaired by later plough damage. Saxo-Norman pottery from the 10th to early 12th centuries was found by the river, pre-dating the castle and cathedral.

Alex is satisfied that they have found evidence for the canons' close in the western suburbs and stated that the snapshot of the cathedral and auxiliary buildings preserved at this level is unique.

The eastern suburbs led to the main gate of the castle and accessing the cathedral this way would be via the castle. The site was excavated in the 1930s, 50s and 60s and a large building (with burials) found in the earlier excavation was probably Holy Cross church. The first phase of the settlement appears to have been fairly dense and relatively short-lived (12th to 13th century) with a large number of cess pits. The second phase of development involved low quality housing made up of reused building material.

A 1793 map of Old Sarum shows “Kingsbridge” to the south west of the site, crossing the River Avon. The name suggests a late Saxon date, although the crossing appears to be much earlier with a Roman road (as well as a later one) leading down to the river. A lot of medieval and some Roman pottery has been found and geophysics suggests that there many have been a Roman fort in the area. The evidence suggests there was a settlement straddling the river crossing such as you see at Langport (Somerset), Stockbridge (Hampshire) and Wilton (Wiltshire). Alex surmised that if Kingsbridge had survived it would resemble Stockbridge, Totnes (Devon) or Kingsbridge (Devon).

This proved to be a very interesting talk and it did indeed offer a new perspective on a site that many HADs members know very well.

Alan Sandford

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