

The report below relates to our lecture on Tuesday, 10th January 2023 held via Zoom. The scheduled speaker was unwell and Southampton Archaeology Society is grateful to James Brown, the Regional Archaeologist for the National Trust for Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex, and one of our Committee Members, who stepped in at very short notice to give the lecture below. It is hoped that the previously scheduled talk on the Walberton Warrior will be given at a future date.

Ankerwycke Revealed, Part of the “Runnymede Explored” Project

James explained that this National Lottery funded project was scheduled to run for two years, 2022-2023 and provided an update on the work and findings from 2022. The project involves two parts of one National Trust site covering the area of Runnymede, located south of the River Thames in Surrey; and Ankerwycke on the north of the river in Berkshire. Both names derive from Saxon, indicating places with a long history. ‘Runny Mede’ means ‘a place in-between’ or a ‘meeting place’ and Ankerwycke is linked to the word ‘anchorite’ and perhaps refers to a hermit on the site.

Possibly the two storey refectory of the Priory, adapted into one of the wings of the Tudor Mansion

Picture 1-Ankerwycke Ruins
Credit: James Brown, NT



Historic and Geographic context

Ankerwycke is the site of St Mary’s Benedictine Priory, a small part of which is still standing. Founded in 1160, it was dedicated to Mary Magdalene and a seal dated 1192 shows a timber framed church on the site with a thatched roof, which at some stage was converted to a chalk building. Another feature of the site is the Ankerwycke Yew, the National Trust’s oldest tree thought to be 2000-2500 years old, and there is a tale that Henry VIII wooed Anne Boleyn beneath it - a nice story for the NT website, but not one based on any evidence yet. There are some church records of male Bishops visiting the Nunnery to deal with “minor misbehaviour” and complaints made by the nuns that the Prioress had blocked windows overlooking the river. There is no extant plan of the Nunnery, only an inventory, but these establishments were usually based on Monasteries of the time which would have had a range of buildings on three sides around a cloister and a Church. Buildings would have included a dormitory, refectory, granary, barns, kitchens, brewery, bakehouse and piggery. It was hoped that the project might reveal more about the wider medieval landscape of the site.

The **Runnymede** site provided a convenient and neutral ‘meeting place’ for the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, with easy access along the Thames and situated at the boundaries of various Shires.

The exact spot on which the Magna Carta was signed has not, however, ever been established and was a focus of the work here. A map from 1912 indicated the site of the signing as a private island in the river but this is not proven and the project has focused on an area south of the river, as aerial views showed an ancient field boundary here. This land was enclosed in circa 1540 and a photograph from 1936 shows an area of land standing out above a flood plain. A 2004 Google Earth photo also showed extensive wet areas to the north and south of the field, possibly an ancient tributary from the Thames.

Year 1 work at Runnymede

Volunteers from Berkshire and Surrey Archaeology Societies undertook a geophysical survey of the area. Features included a possible Romano-British farmstead and an area of pits to the South, that volunteers excitedly connected to King John's Army or the Baron's Camp. These will be investigated further in 2023. A series of boreholes were also dug across the site, with two being of particular interest. These identified two channels going around the 'island/ field'. These bore samples contained mollusc shells and work in 2023 will involve additional sampling and radio carbon dating.

A metal detecting survey across the field site uncovered a late Bronze Age sword blade in one of the channels. (This might link with Runnymede Bridge, a Scheduled Monument, just beyond the NT site, where a Bronze Age meeting site was excavated during the building of the M25. Further information about this is available at Egham Museum (<https://eghammuseum.org/bronze-age>). Other finds included two Roman copper alloy coins from the Constantine period, 307-317AD, one clearly dated to 307-308AD. Further to this geo- archaeology, there will be some excavation work in spring 2023.

Year 1 work at Ankerwyke

Returning to Ankerwycke, apart from some references in Church records, there is little information about the Nunnery until approximately ten years after the Dissolution when Sir Thomas Smith purchased the site in 1550 and built a Tudor mansion. There are no maps showing it until Enclosure maps in the 1800s which showed a house but no outbuildings. A pencil sketch of the ruins of the Priory was made by J M W Turner in 1811. A new owner John Blagrove bought the property, demolished Ankerwycke house and the Priory to construct a Georgian mansion a little further from the river, adapting the Medieval and Tudor areas into pleasure gardens. A sketch of the house, including an avenue of trees has been found on 1870 sales information. An avenue of replacement trees still stands from this period, with picnic and boat houses built on the banks of the Thames.

During the modern period, the Georgian manor became a nightclub in 1935, with a swimming pool and tennis court. The house was bought by the County Council but by the 1990s a picture shows the derelict mansion before it was demolished. In 1993 the Council discussed the land becoming a Country Park, but this was not carried and in 1998 it was sold to the National Trust for £1.

During Lidar 3D modelling of the ground, the Ankerwycke area showed an outline of the priory and medieval fish ponds. A Google Earth map from 2004 shows a dry area around the Priory and Yew Tree surrounded by water, suggesting another dynamic landscape. Parch marks over the summer 2022 identified a cross shaped outline in the Tudor garden area. Geophysics work identified part of the front façade of the Tudor house, layout of a Tudor garden, the picnic area and boathouse and some activity at the entrance to the site. A 3D model has been created of the surviving L-shaped

building (pic 1 above), which it is thought might have been used in the later Tudor mansion as there is evidence of some Tudor repair work. The model can be found by following this link

<https://sketchfab.com/nta.lse/collections/surrey-landscapes-7bd0cf76ce6447b38eeade9fe9f9be21>

James shared research work by the University of Reading showing the peak building periods for the different monastic organisations in England and information about the layout of monasteries, which generally had a cloister to the south. Of 150 nunneries, only 61 have had the orientation of their cloisters identified and of those which were Benedictine, 25 were to the south and 10 to the north. Identifying the orientation of the cloisters was one of the questions it was hoped to solve in 2022.

In the summer of 2022, two trenches were dug with the work in Trench 2 described first.



Picture 2- Trench 2, Credit: Drone image- James Brown, NT

This was dug across the area of the garden platform near the standing L-shaped remains. A Tudor retaining wall was found across the trench, together with orange gravel and an area of chalk blocks. More detailed work suggested the gravel was river gravel brought into the site to build it up for the gardens to be laid on top of it. The chalk was thought to be rubble from the demolished priory buildings, similarly being re-used to build up the level of the land.

Trench 1 was dug to the north of the standing L-shaped remains and Ankerwycke Yew. A long corner wall was found, to the right of which (upper part of the picture) was identified the path believed to be the cloister walkway. An extension trench (in the box section at top right of image) found a wall which is thought to be the Church wall meaning the cloister walkway was roughly 3m wide and that the Ankerwycke Yew was at the east end of the medieval church. This layout supports the cloisters being to the north of the Church and the existing L-shaped building being the refectory. The long corner wall structure was chalk, with the side facing the cloister garth being made of stacked reused tiles, rendered to make them look like chalk. The walls sat on river silt.



Picture 3 - Trench 1 Credit James Brown, NT

Finds from Trench 1 included two fragments of medieval floor tile, pottery, Georgian clay pipes, brooches, an aglet, a metal bead and boar tusks. When backfilling the trenches, a metal detectorist found a bronze figurine which is yet to be investigated fully.

James reported that in 2023, the project aimed to carry out conservation work on the surviving L-shaped chalk structure, including drainage work and, possibly, to look more at the Church structure to identify if it was a cruciform or parallelogram layout. Some previous archaeological work was carried out in 1993, but the results are hard to interpret, so some of the trenches from that period will be reopened.

It is anticipated that there will be opportunities for volunteers this summer and James offered to keep SAS members updated via the newsletter.

Questions/ discussion:

In the subsequent questions and discussion, the following were raised:

With regard to the layout of cloisters for monasteries and nunneries, Frank Green raised the possibility that these might differ depending on whether they were pre- or post- conquest. He commented that for several nunneries in the Test Valley, the cloisters had been found to the south. Whether a difference between urban and rural contexts affected the orientation of cloisters was raised, as was the possibility that use of a site for earlier religious activities might influence layout.

The Nunnery Seal had been shown during the talk both on a document and as a reproduction seal. Differences were noted and it was thought that the reproduction had used some 'artistic licence'.

The absence of geophysical data re changes to building outlines for the Tudor Mansion was queried. One possibility was that, as this became a rented property, the incentive for making alterations was reduced. Frank Green noted that changes often occurred when properties changed hands.

The use of Runnymede as a meeting place, if it was prone to floods, was queried. James highlighted that its position both on the Thames and at the point of political boundaries was key. He referred to a recent talk on "Sites of Power and Assembly in the Thames Valley2 by Prof Alex Sanmark, which can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onS1XPspbHk&t=93s>

With thanks to Mandy Kesby for her detailed notes.

Sue Davies Jan 2023