

Chris's 2016 Dig Diary

Well off we go on our 2016 Big Dig. This year we've been invited by the owner of Warnford Estate, Andrew Sellick, to investigate the lumps and bumps in Warnford Park, situated deep in the Meon valley. We know a bit of the history of the place – up until the fifties there was a large Regency mansion on the site and there is a listed ruin behind the parish church, King John's House, with the park being landscape by Capability Brown – but the big unknown on the site is a Tudor manor house. Check the [Big Dig page](#) for more details.

1/8/16 - Dear Reader, my diary....

I wasn't around for the set-up week ("Coward!" I hear you cry) but Techer and his little team oversaw the arrival of the containers, and he and Ted Barnes created a new set of metal shelving to replace the wooden battens we've used for years – they should last longer and be much easier to erect annually as well as break the down at the end.

So on with the digging. The key reason we didn't manage to have a dig in 2015 was that our chosen site was indicating, through David Ashby's geophysics, archaeology but at depth, and the sort of depth which would have meant that we diggers would spend most of the fortnight taking off the top layers, much of which would have been demolition rubble. Not conducive to us having a good time, which is our main priority!

So thanks to grants from both the Hampshire Field Club and CBA Wessex, we have been able to fund a mechanical digger and its driver which will allow us to get stuck in to real archaeology as quickly as possible AND reduce the backfilling burden, again extending the amount of time we can be digging on site.



The first two days have, as a result, already produced features and structures. We are exploring the west side of the demolished Regency buildings where the archaeology is deepest and a number of features associated with water and drainage management have appeared. These show different phases and period, but it's too early to date them yet and establish whether we are getting close to our target of the Tudor building.

Ian has taken a feature down some three feet to where it appears to feed a culverted drain, but is it fed from a circular cesspit or is it later?



Geoff and Judy found a fascinating brick feature (above) which seems to abut an older, plastered flint-based wall with curious layers, maybe floor levels. The brick structure is very poorly built, with little interlocking of brickwork, a characteristic which seems to be appearing across the trench, which we know covers the area of the ancillary buildings to the main Regency mansion.

Don and his able assisted Ed have found drainage gullies above and potential surfaces below a rectangular feature which may or may not relate to Regency, Tudor or somewhere in between. Such could be the complex nature of this site. Let's see what tomorrow brings.



This Sunday, when I arrived, everybody seemed to quietly enjoy themselves in the sunshine. Nick, Iseabail and Mandie, as first timers were, I hope, suitably impressed by WARG's world-renowned professionalism – fed by custard creams and bourbons or course.

Update 3/8/16

It's now day five of the dig and real progress is being made on this multi-phase, multi-period site.

One of the exercises done following on from today's on-site briefing to new volunteers was to explore where the original Regency building, "Belmont", was located. There are light parch/crop-marks where the foundations of the building show through, especially near where the bay windows were located. The distance between these windows was known (67 feet), so it was possible to locate them and establish the relationship between them (and therefore the Regency house) and our trench.

Establishing these locations now enables us to compare the walls on the 1897 drainage plan with what we are seeing in our trench. But, perhaps not surprisingly, the locations of the walls versus the plan isn't quite right. The plan doesn't show some of the older structures, and some of the relationships leave a bit to be desired. That's why excavation is important, I guess. Reality v. conjecture!

Much of the trench contains flint walls, which we are saying are likely to be the earliest structures, possibly Tudor (dating evidence – PLEASE!), though even some of these appear to have been done in stages, as at least one is cut by another.

Curiously many of these have courses of red building brick on top of them as if they were used as the foundation for later walls, or were they part of a repair phase, or remodelling. As ever, we really need more dating evidence. All that has popped up today was a 1994 German coin (!) and a boar's tusk (well, I think it's a boar's tusk, it could be a very small mammoth).

After our euphoria over Geoff's sand and brick structure, the reality is that we don't know what it is, or was. Even visits from Winchester City Council's archaeologist and conservation officer failed to shed any light! It appears to have been slotted in to an earlier floor layer characterised by a black bitumen-like surface, or perhaps trodden-in coal deposits – maybe the debris from the last use of this particular room. Desperate Google searching and Facebook pleas have started to see if anyone out there has any ideas.

The foundations of the Regency part of the trench continue to be consistent red brick, which contains oddments such as a hearth (or at least burning site) which we are trying to date from its brick construction (bricks by NEWTON, any ideas?); and small features which mainly relate to drainage or internal features (ladders, cupboards).





The southern (Don's) parts of the trench has produced some intriguing drainage features (considering Don Bryan's reputation for bringing on the rain perhaps this is most apposite). You can see some of them to the left. A mixture of tracing their route through and out of the trench, and comparing them with the 1897 drainage plan may help us simplify the complexity.

I do remember someone on the Dig Committee saying that given the documentation and the known history of this site, the archaeology should be quite simple. I wish I could remember who it was...

Update 6/8/16

The early showers and overnight rains are a thing of the past – in fact we haven't lost a single minute of digging time due to adverse weather, though it got close on Monday. Now it's on with the sun block and conditions are starting to get "dusty" in the afternoons, though conditions are perfect in the mornings. We have our lunch and tea-breaks in the open air and the whole site is generally very convivial.

That conviviality spreads to all our compadres. People are really get stuck into their allocated features and working as teams, whether processing the (increasingly interesting) finds or pairing up to mattock and shovel to clear large areas of demolition rubble. Because it is the demolition of BOTH Regency and Tudor buildings which is taking all our attention.

It is clear now that we have Tudor (though it may strictly be Jacobean, as the earliest building was built around the turn of the 17th Century) structures, and those structures are incorporated into the fabric of later buildings, whether as actual structure, or as rubble foundation. What is really interesting is how some features have been either reused, or replaced, especially the drainage. We have found early courtyards, with cobbled surfaces and brick-built drainage gullies. But some of these have been truncated (trashed) by some later agent. I'd like to put a picture in here, but the late afternoon contrast on the pic that I took had far too much shadow/contrast – mental note, must photograph when cloudy or the sun high.

Today (Saturday) we were a small but dedicated bunch, not the least dedicated being the landowner's wife who got stuck in like the rest of us. Now I wouldn't normally mention stuff like that if it weren't for the fact that she uncovered our star Exhibit A so far – a beautiful figurine buried in a drainage channel, probably washed down with the silt just before demolition rubble from the Jacobean building filled in the open courtyard area in which it was found:



The figurine in situ with the hand and shovel that found it.

By far the most important aspect to the digging is, however, the various walls and how they relate to each other. Today we set aside some time to properly orientate ourselves and double check the measurements of the Regency mansion from the drainage plan with reality. Lo, we were able to pin down exactly what many of our walls represented, but we are by no means sure about their age yet. We hope for some clear dating evidence or, as next week progresses, the relative stratigraphy to become clearer.

Sunday the 7th is our traditional Open Day. We have the signs up and the gates will be open. If you want to come along, we're open from 10am till 4pm. Here's where I'll be:



Update 7/8/16

Open Day. We always have our open day on the middle Sunday of the dig, and generally speaking it's just at the point where we have

- 1) Got lots of open areas to show people
- 2) Got to grips with the story so that Techer and Dick can tell really interesting stories to people, some of whom will know little about archaeological technique, or the periods represented by the dig, others being experts
- 3) A dearth of diggers – why is it that our digger list is small on the middle Sunday?

Of course a small digger list didn't stop the diggers and we concentrated on a small number of features today, tidying up loose ends before the heavy gang reappears during the second week.

I got a better view of the figurine Candi found yesterday. After cleaning it's scrubbed up a treat even if I still can't focus the camera properly. The figure has a hole in the bottom as if it was mounted on a cane/stick or even an implement of some sort.



Candy's figurine. Any guess as to its subject and date?

The Open Day attracted about 100 people, which is great considering that Warnford is a bit off the beaten track. Pretty well the whole congregation of the Church of Our Lady, Warnford, came to have a look after their Sunday service. The church (founded by St. Wilfrid in 682) contains the tomb and effigy of Sir Thomas Neale of the Neale family who built the very Tudor building we are currently looking for.



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There was a steady flow of locals, members of WARG and other worthies, many of whom were able to add personal testimony of the time the Regency house was in use during WW2. Then, of course, few knew of the Tudor building under their feet.

That building is making its presence felt more and more as we expose more flint wall, and now cobbled surfaces with drainage ditches which seem to be internal courtyards. In themselves these are fantastic features and people are getting a real sense of period when they think of themselves walking over the surfaces of the past.

But as importantly they are acting as a backdrop to the later construction, demolition and modification of the Regency west wing and the slightly less sympathetic treatment of the site during the war.

Here we see the (Tudor) brick drainage gullies running through between sloping cobbled surfaces, and running under a later wall which will have been one of the walls of the Regency west wing buildings.

Some of the courtyard areas were cut through to make drains for the Army's latrine or shower blocks, and getting a full picture of how that 20th Century drainage is starting to emerge.



All-in-all a very successful, if small scale, day from an archaeological point of view. But plenty of visitors got a look at the site, and there was a two-way flow of information from locals. Now we get back to the serious work of getting as much digging done in the remaining 5 days or so, and vitally, to ramp up the recording process – drawing, photographing, filling in the context sheets and getting as much from the excavator's heads of their thoughts as they actually dig.

This is assuming there are any thoughts floating around in there. One such person who shall remain nameless was seen to scratch his follicly-challenged head as he attempted to reassemble parts of a decorated plate found in the rubble. Luckily he gave up and placed them in his finds tray so that the people who knew what they were doing could process them properly!



Update 11/8/16

A few days since my last update, mainly because I've been busy with all sorts of stuff in the evenings, not least of which was a visit to the site by the Hampshire Field Club. The HFC has been very supportive of our dig this year and it was good to show its members around. From some of those visitors two very particular points came out. The first was that somebody spotted in one of the historical pictures of the Regency house that the building which adjoined the main house and was under the spoil heap of our trench had a particularly sagging roofline. Also that same roof appeared to have some other sections, it wasn't just two sloping sides. Could it be that the main Elizabethan

house was to the east of our trench, and the courtyard features we are finding? It's an interesting proposal.

The second snippet was a potential use for the brick and sand structure. It's now emptied of its contents, which was basically sand and nothing else. The supposition is that the structure was a sand pit for the safe checking that guards' rifles had been fully unloaded of live ammunition - we suspect live ammunition would have been used in the war! Soldiers would check their gun barrels by firing into the sand pit. If a round was still in the gun it would be safely lodged in the sand structure, not in a compatriot!



The "Sandpit" – emptied of its sandy contents

In the meantime back in the trench the courtyard feature continues to pop up across the excavation. It's not consistent though, the width of the drainage gullies varies, in terms of number of bricks and, more worryingly, in terms of the width of the bricks. Are they Tudor or not, or do we have the same design at different periods. We have research documents which give standard brick sizes throughout the ages, and that is helping, well helping to confuse us at the moment.

We have pinned down the reason for our own "Silbury Hill" in the middle of the trench. It's actually the top of a beehive well. We have a well which goes down about 2.4 metres to a water level (possibly the water table of the River Itchen), was formerly (no idea when yet) a cylindrical well lined with chalk blocks, and covered with a brick beehive shaped structure at some later point, either because other ways were found to extract water, or the well fell into disuse. Whatever its history, it's position is very interesting. We are thinking it is very close to a central entrance to the main Elizabethan house from the courtyard. It's not the first time a house has had a well in the front porch!

We're moving into the latter parts of the dig now, that means that no new areas are being opened unless they clarify questions raised. What is important now is that we document, record, photograph and thus archive the knowledge we've gained and evidence we've found. We got some pretty good aerial shots of the site on Wednesday which I share with you, dear diary, below. They show the relationships of the walls, drains and surfaces, which will add to the record produced on tracing paper and context sheets. They also show some very happy diggers a little perplexed by the antics of the pilot/photographer/idiot taking the pictures.

