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BASINGSTOKE AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGY

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In 1886, with summer heat making life unbearable in London, particularly as the sewers became blocked by the newly introduced tarmac surfaces melting into the drains, Prime Minister Gladstone convened his cabinet at 'a Basingstoke mansion'. This escape from the woes experienced by many led to much criticism in the press and W S Gilbert, who was writing the *libretto* for *Ruddy Gore* at the time (or *Ruddigore* as it became, so as not to offend late Victorian sensibilities) wove it into his creation. Not only is 'Basingstoke' a catch phrase for Mad Margaret throughout the operetta, but in the *finale*, she and Sir Despard sing '*We shall toddle off tomorrow, From this scene of sin and sorrow, For to settle in the town of Basingstoke!*' – which was guaranteed to bring the house down and hatched innumerable music hall jokes.

While the stigma of being at the butt end of many a jest evaporated over the first half of the 20th century it was replaced by a more particular scourge as the settlement bulldozed its way into the modern era. As one commentator put it '*Practically all the centre of the old town was demolished and redeveloped in a coarse and brutal manner in the 1960s, and since then there have been added on the outskirts tower blocks of offices surrounded by tangled knots of motorway roundabouts and housing estates, the whole now creating a huge and incongruous urban blot on the Hampshire landscape*' (Le Faye 2011, 504).

But there are two sides to every coin, and while we may have been denied much of a look at the archaeology of the historic core of this ancient market town, 90 per cent of the Borough of Basingstoke and Deane (245 square miles in extent) sustains agriculture or woodland. The area is a veritable treasure trove of ancient sites and finds and many discoveries have been made in the course of development, as the result of research, or through more recent agencies such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Two significant excavations were already underway by the late 19th century, at Silchester and Basing House, and both have continued to yield information, albeit on a somewhat different scale, down to the present day. Perhaps more typical of the early efforts was the discovery of a Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Dummer, excavated in 1888 by Dr Samuel Andrews. It involved the recovery of twenty Deverel-Rimbury type urns and resulted in a gentle tug-of-war between Reading Museum (Dr Joseph Stevens) and the Hartley Institute, Southampton (T W Shore), for the right to display some of them, refereed by the bemused landowner, Sir Nelson Ryecroft (HFC archives).

The same Dr Andrews was on hand in 1899, to examine a high-status Saxon burial unearthed at West Ham, Basingstoke, during the construction of the Alton Light Railway. The grave goods, which included fragments of hanging bowl and gaming pieces, indicate a 7th century date and reflect the importance of the area at that time (Hinton 1986). The finds are housed at the British Museum.

In the early years of the 20th century Dr Williams-Freeman was in the locality, surveying the county's defensive earthworks (Williams-Freeman 1915). Heading for Winklebury Farm, he found a 'typical example of a plateau fort', but by the time of his visit the farmer had already taken his leave and the estate was being cut up into small holdings. To his dismay he discovered that much of the site was mutilated, with a piece of bank surviving here, a length of ditch existing there. Enough remained in situ to plot an oval enclosure of 13 acres (5 ha), but no original entrance could be seen. His

search for a trackway leading to the site proved fruitless, but the Roman road from Silchester to Winchester passed close by to the west and, as this included a deviation from the straight line, Williams-Freeman speculated that it was purposely taken near to Winklebury as it was still an important native settlement when the road was created.

The first half of the 20th century saw a strong Field Club presence in the area and much of this was reflected in the activities of George Willis and his fellow 'flinters', John Ellaway and Herbert Rainbow. They were indefatigable collectors and published regular lists of their finds in the *Proceedings* (e.g. Ellaway *et al.* 1927) finds which would later form the basis of the local Basingstoke museum collection. With the encouragement of O G S Crawford, the first Archaeology Officer of the Ordnance Survey, Willis sought the elusive 'Levallois tortoise-shell core', with the arbiter being Reginald Smith of the British Museum. Any likely specimens were bagged up for their journey to London, and Willis or his errand boy would be waiting on Basingstoke station as the train from Southampton steamed in. Crawford would be waving his hat out of the window, in order not to be missed, and the potentially significant cargo would be handed over.

The archaeological material gathered by Willis and his companions was not limited to flints and was sufficiently rich and varied for a young Shimon Applebaum, who was gathering evidence for the nature of rural settlement in Roman Britain, to suggest to the Field Club that he should submit a detailed paper on the locality, because of the… 'singularly complete collection…made in this area over a long period of years'. This he duly did (Applebaum 1953). By this time excavations were beginning to take place in Southampton and Winchester, but Hampshire's towns saw little exploration, although in 1959 the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works did send Robertson-Mackay to sample the surviving enceinte of Winklebury, in advance of housebuilding (1977).

As noted above, the next decade saw the transformation of Basingstoke, with little regard given to its urban ancestry. Paradoxically, the arrival of the M3 motorway and outward expansion of the town heralded an explosion of fieldwork and excavation that went some way to redress the balance and resulted in the occasional spectacular find, such as the Winklebury stone coffin on show in the museum. The report describing the 1972–75 work at Ructstalls Hill (Oliver & Applin 1979), listed more than a dozen later prehistoric or Romano-British sites, many of them recently discovered by aerial survey, and the local maxim was that each new development would reveal a new archaeological site. One of the most remarkable was Cowdery's Down, excavated by the County Museum Service, which revealed evidence of activity from the Bronze Age to the English Civil War, the most significant phase being a Middle Saxon high status 'vill' (Millett & James 1983).

As well as local authority staff and the motorway rescue archaeology crew (Fasham & Whinney, 1991) there was the occasional use of national resources. The interior of Winklebury had the distinction of being 'CEU 1', Central Excavation Unit site 1, as it was laid bare by Dr Wainwright's crack team (Smith 1977). The newly formed Basingstoke Archaeological & Historical Society also had a part to play. Among their remarkable finds, and feats, from this time were the Late Iron Age or Early Roman double burial at Viables Farm (Millett & Russell 1984a) and the excavation, by hand, of a 26.7m (87') deep Romano-British well at Oakridge! (Oliver 1992; Maltby 1993).

The last thirty years have seen a large number of archaeological contractors competing for custom on a wide range of projects as the town has continued to grow and developments have peppered the Borough. The publication record for all of this endeavour is good and extends from substantial monographs, such as Brighton Hill South (Fasham & Keevil 1995) via conventional reports to brief summaries and online offerings. The majority of ventures find some expression in the pages of *Hampshire Studies* or mention on the Field Club's web pages in its annual review. A useful guide to information sources is also available online (Applin & Applin 2019). Works of synopsis and synthesis are also beginning to emerge (e.g. Pringle 2014) demonstrating, once again, what a 'singularly complete collection' from the area is available for study.

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