Digging East Walton. The 2022 Season

Since 2019 a dedicated group of citizen archaeologists has been working at Abbey Farm, East Walton. During that time we have been very happy for people from the village and beyond to come and see what we are doing, and see archaeology in action, rather than on TV.

Before the detail of the three seasons is explained, it is important to explain that without the active and interested support of the landowner, Mr. Henry Birkbeck, and Mr. Bill Lewis, on whose farm we are working, there would be no physical archaeological work being done at East Walton. Our organisation, East Walton Citizen Archaeology Project, (EWCAP) is eternally grateful for the support provided by both Henry and Bill, and in Bill’s case, the inconvenience of our presence digging up his lawn, each summer.

EWCAP, being a citizen project, is designed for everyone and anyone to take part in. Starting in April 2019 as a result of a series of test pits one metre by one metre by children from the local school and under the guidance of Mr. Nigel Roberts, as part of the village’s celebration of its history, the expansion to a full ‘dig’ began during the August for four days, under the guidance of two archaeologists, Ms Monica (Nicci) Gooch and Ms Natasha Snarey. The excavations of the children had provided tantalising evidence that the chapel ruins on the site... in fact in Bill’s back garden, which went out of service in the 15th Century, may have had its churchyard undisturbed, and if so, much information might be gained through examination of any bones found which would be valuable evidence of the state of health, amongst many other things, of the local population 600 years ago. It was decided before the dig started that no bones would be disturbed, as modern techniques could be used without removing them.

As the dig began that year, at the ‘correct’ distance from the chapel ruins, we really had no idea what we might, or might not discover. (Often what is not present is as interesting as what is present) The archaeologists ensured that correct techniques were used, both in the digging process as well as the recording of finds. The majority of those involved in the dig that year were new to it, so it was an interesting experience for all to understand that what we had all seen in programmes such as ‘Time Team’ would be applied, and then some, by practical experience under the instruction of the experts, Nicci and Natasha.

The length of the dig each year was set in 2019, as four days, as the volunteers could only offer that amount of time within their busy lives. But though it was four days there was a lot of organisation to do, and equipment to bring to, and afterwards take away from the site at the end. Nonetheless, 15 people freely gave their time.

The diggers initially learned why a mattock is a vital implement for the initial clearing of the surface, and as we worked into day two, mattocks now a fond memory for some, as trowels and wooden hand tools became the order of the day, after reaching a depth of 50 centimetres of soil which turned out to be disturbed by the re-design of the garden in the Edwardian period, as the depth reached 60 centimetres the two trenches that had been opened started to reveal bones, bird and animal bones at first, but as the depth by the centimetre increased, human bones were revealed, and by the time the depth had arrived at 65 centimetres, a fully articulated and complete human skeleton was revealed. This was an adult male, and showed little sign of any damage to his joints, as would be expected if he had arthritis or similar disease, and a fine full set of teeth that were not significantly worn down by wear, a combination of evidence which raised more questions than answers.

Other human remains were found in both trenches, and this confirmed that the chapel did in fact have a cemetery and that the state of preservation of the skeletons within it was high. But time had beaten us for 2019, and it was time for the two archaeologists to record the finds and make drawings and take photographs. There was a great deal to do as a report would be required by the Norfolk Archaeology unit at Gressenhall, the report which was subsequently produced being freely available should you wish to learn more about any of this or other EWCAP digs.

Back filling the site took a fair while on the last day, and as is traditional there was great care shown in ensuring that the grass was put back, so that in a few months no one would know we had been there... and bill could enjoy his garden again.

Plans for the 2020 season were interrupted by a rather irritating pandemic.

2021 saw the dig renewed in the last week of August. Word in certain circles had spread and an archaeology student from Glasgow University got in touch to take part, and 20 people, half of them ‘returners’ from 2019 were present for the excavation. After the initial briefing and training the intention this year was to attempt to discover the outer limits of the burial ground, but by the end of day two it was becoming obvious that the size of the burial ground had been under estimated, with several more articulated skeletons being revealed further from the chapel, all of which, strangely not showing evidence of injury or joint disease. There was some speculation about why this might be, but no convincing theory could be constructed on this relatively small sample.

Mr Richard Cullen, a gifted amateur historian, spent some time studying the chapel whilst the diggers... dug and revealed that a carved stone feature which was described in the literature as a base for a cross, was more likely to be a font. Proof, if proof was required that a fresh pair of eyes can be of great value no matter what the situation.

We were most fortunate during this season that both Bill and Henry had shown great interest in our work, and we were also visited by Mr. Steve Brown, a well known and respected metal detectorist, who was kind enough to offer his services for future digs, an offer that was enthusiastically received. In addition to Steve, we had been visited by many interested members of the public, both local and people using the farm campsite. It was gratifying to see the enthusiasm of the diggers animatedly explaining ‘their hole’, and infecting the listeners with their excitement.

With the site closed down again, and the garden looking reasonably flat, it was time to say goodbye, and express our heartfelt thanks to Bill and his family, who had treated us so well again this year. Now the report was to be written and sent on... now to the Norwich Records Office, as the Gressenhall Archaeology hub had been closed down and moved to Norwich.

Over the winter and spring meetings were held with Steve Brown, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the local area from his work, and had suspicions that there was an Anglo Saxon cemetery relatively close by where we were working. He suggested that we might dig test pits to discover whether his hunch was correct, and certainly, as the possible site was field walked during the spring of 2022 there were shards of pottery which appeared to be Saxon, lying on the surface. During the spring a ground penetrating radar survey was done on the chapel site, with some interesting results revealed, and confirming that the remnants above ground did indeed make up the majority of the site.

Once we knew how many citizen volunteers we would have for the 2022 season it was decided that there would be enough volunteers (25) to open a satellite site. This year we had several Archaeology students from Glasgow University so the level of onsite expertise at the chapel site would increase, and the investigation of the limits of the burial ground could continue.

As Natasha was an Anglo Saxon expert, she took control of the possible Anglo Saxon site with a team of both experienced and fresh diggers. Steve Brown had left markers where he thought it might be beneficial to put down test pits, so the team was looking forward to digging. The drought had turned the ground into semi concrete on this site, and the initial enthusiasm of the diggers was sorely pressed, but by the end of day one two pits had been dug.

At the parent site at the chapel 2022 was also a season of test pits initially, as the limits of the burial ground really needed to be identified. By the end of day one a test pit was suggesting the edge of the burial ground, but two others were indicating that the burial ground was much more extensive than had been thought. There was considerable excitement when what appeared to be a chalk coffin was revealed in one of the trenches, the discovery being shared with the team in the trench, and young James Lewis, a young man with a great future, who proved that just because you are a child, you can do an adult’s job, probably better than many adults. But, as has been mentioned before, a visiting retired archaeologist pointed out that what was being looked at and being proposed as a coffin was in fact a grave cut into the chalk bedrock. For archaeologists, theories change with the breeze...and observation!

Back at the proposed site of the Anglo Saxon graveyard both test pits had not revealed any evidence, so based purely on informed guesswork, two trenches were opened up nearby, the ground easier to work on thanks to Mr. Andy Thaxton, who farmed the land adjoining the site, who soaked the ground overnight using a water bowser, for which everyone was more than grateful.

One of the trenches proved to be most rewarding. Until the report is published no more can be said, but the diggers felt that their efforts were rewarded, and they could not wait to thank Steve Brown for his hunch.

Thursday, the last day of the dig, opened with constant thunder and lightning, and heavy rain. This dampened spirits, but by mid morning the diggers were back in their trenches, working up to the last moment, and only grudgingly closing down the trenches. By the end of the afternoon, the rain now a mere drizzle, Bill’s garden was returned to him, and the volunteers were heading home. What a season!

If you are interested in taking part next year (towards the end of August 2023) you will be welcome, whether you can come for a morning or afternoon, or the whole four days. This is a citizen project, and you are a citizen. It is free, and you will get all the training you need.

(Not sure how the editor of the magazine or website would like to deal with communication. It might be best to pass on my details via the editor or webmaster.)

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Sample photos attached to the email