

The Appleby Archaeology Group held their Annual General Meeting and Member's evening recently. On a mild January night, the members listened to a brief roundup of the preceding year as well as outline plans for 2015 and beyond. Following the AGM, those attending were treated to two short talks by Group members.

Firstly, Martin Railton, the group's research officer, spoke on the progress of the Group's new project which examines the history of the town of Appleby. For the National Festival of Archaeology in 2015, the group carried out a geophysical survey of the King George V playing field, where it is believed the first Grammar School, dating from the 15th Century, had been located. Magnetic anomaly & resistivity surveys were carried out and Martin displayed the resultant plots, which showed a great deal of disturbance but no clear building outlines. Bearing in mind the recent flooding in the town, Martin thought it conceivable that river deposits due to earlier periods of flooding could well be obscuring any remains. Excavation would be the only sure way to find out, which, in the playing field, was thought most unlikely!

Martin next explained that there was speculation that the medieval boundary of Appleby, prior to its medieval decline, might have extended nearly as far as Burrells. The group had therefore been fieldwalking in the area between there and Scattergate. Martin showed some slides of some of the pottery which had been found, which included a number of medieval jug handles, as well as various items dating between the 17th & 19th Centuries. Finds included a 17th C wig curler, clay pipes, a small metal hammer used for tamping tobacco and a prehistoric chert flake.

The final part of his talk concentrated on the Roman period. There is no direct evidence of Roman occupation in the town itself, although of course a major Roman road passed nearby. The best evidence for activity near the town appeared to be a small rectangular earthwork not far from Croft Ends, which has been suggested as a possible fortlet adjacent to the Roman road. The group carried out a magnetic survey on the site in late summer 2015 and the resulting plots were explained by Martin. Although there is clear evidence of the bank & ditch on the ground, the plots show that the feature is more indicative of a native farmstead containing roundhouses than anything Roman. It is possible that a Roman signal station was erected on the remains of the earlier structure, particularly so since the elevated site has a wonderful 360 degree field of vision, but in all likelihood, the remains are those of an Iron Age or Romano-British farm. Again, excavation should prove the site as one or the other. Members were somewhat amused by the fact that on two occasions in the recent past, the group had examined supposed Roman sites only to find that they were in fact earlier!

Phyl Rouston then spoke of her recent visit to the Bronze Age Copper Mines on Great Orme Head, a name familiar to those insomniacs who listen to the shipping forecast.

Great Orme Head is a massive dolomite peninsula of limestone above Llandudno in North Wales. Using slides she described the location and outlined the geology of what is known locally as Llandudno's mountain, before talking about copper mining.

Copper was the first metal to be used by man, in Asia from 8000 BC and in Europe from 4000BC. Traditionally it was thought that mining was introduced to Britain by the Romans, however it is now known that copper was mined on Great Orme 4000 years ago.

Evidence indicates that the Romans were mining in the area and more recently, between the 17th & 19th centuries, Llandudno was a mining village with 3 active mines. By the early 1850's the mines were in their decline. The principal reasons for closure were competitive copper prices from abroad, difficulties in pumping out flooded workings, and the fact that workers could gain better wages and improved conditions working in the rapidly developing Victorian tourist resort of Llandudno. In 1849 the miners broke into a large chamber 60ft below the surface, these were termed the "Old Man's Workings" where they found stone hammers, antler picks, bones, remains of fires and also some fragments of bronze which were thought to be Roman. Some antiquarians at the time thought the mines were earlier, in the terminology of the time either "Old Welsh" or "Celtic", reasoning that the Romans would have used metal tools.

In the 20th century researchers concluded that mining probably did originate in the Roman Period. However local enthusiasts continued to explore the Great Orme workings. In the 1980s an amateur archaeologist and keen mining explorer, Duncan James, gained entry, through removing a mass of backfilled spoil, to a set of tunnels very different to those observed in other parts of the mine. He soon realised that the shape of these passages, and the existence of stone and bone implements, indicated a much earlier period of activity.

Also in the 1980s Aberconwy Borough Council put forward a scheme to make all known mine shafts safe, in what was a desolate post-industrial wasteland, and in the process to provide a car park. An archaeological brief was carried out to ensure that any features and artefacts were recorded, surveyed and protected. All underground workings to depth of 20m were surveyed. These surveys led to the rediscovery of Bronze Age Mines in 1987.

Passages, tunnels and caverns were discovered containing over 1000 ancient tools, which included stone hammers and bone scrapers used by the miners. The bone tools and charcoal deposits were carbon dated to 1800BC. Until these discoveries, it was assumed that Britain was still in the Stone Age 4000 years ago and that metal mining began in Britain with the Roman invasion but now we know that the Age of Metal began 4000 years ago. It is estimated that in total 1,700 tons of copper was mined during the Bronze Age, enough to make 10,000 bronze axes. The site is now thought to have been the largest industrial site in the ancient world, with part of the output being exported to Europe.

In 1990 the site was opened to visitors while excavations continued. Excavations are ongoing in 2016, while visitors enjoy a very interesting and well-presented archaeological site.

Phyl's talk finished with a virtual tour of the mine.

The next meeting of the group will be on 9th February at Appleby Market Hall. The speaker will be Jamie Quartermaine of Oxford Archaeology North, who will talk on the relations between Romans and Native Britons.