

## Looking back in time with SSARG

**From March 2008: Clare Randall, our Research Director wrote about Sue Jones' dissertation on the human remains from the South Cadbury hillfort.**

'Sue found that the information in the English Heritage report on the hillfort excavations is somewhat at variance with reality - for a start there are 6000 bits of disarticulated human bone rather than the 2000 reported. The evidence from the bones themselves seem to indicate that the massacre deposits in the SW Gate incorporated bits of people that had died at different times. Some bodies had been 'disassembled' (with cut marks....) and bits probably kept – especially feet (?!). Bones from different parts of the body and different age groups and sexes arranged in different parts of the deposits that they finally ended up in. There was in fact far more evidence of violence (60 cases to an originally identified 9, most of which were wrong). Blade cuts were most common on skull fragments, most of which came from one specific area, and where they could be sexed and aged, belonged to men of about 25-35 years of age. In the same area, all the leg bones that could be sexed belonged to females. There was quite a lot of evidence for light roasting of limb bones and breakage in a way reminiscent of processing animal bones to extract marrow. Draw your own conclusions.

'Because Sue included human bones from all periods and across the hillfort (in the process of which she found an extra whole skeleton that was dug up in 1941 by some men digging a potato clamp), none of which has ever been published, she was able to compare the material from the massacre deposits with everything else. She found interesting patterns of deposition of human remains with metal objects elsewhere on the hill in the late Iron Age, as well as evidence for interpersonal violence from the Middle Iron Age onward. It was also discovered that the Shrine building had a significant deposits of human bones belonging to at least three different people (which I found misfiled in an animal bone box), associated with more metal objects including weapons. Whatever was going on in the South West gate had a long history on the hillfort, and may have continued afterward.

'Specifically significant for SCEP\*, and ultimately for Sue's research, she examined the individual that we had found in the ditch at the Moor in 2005. A gentleman probably in his 60s, many of you will recall was folded up backwards in a cist cut into the late Iron Age ditch. Those with a faint grasp of human anatomy, when squinting at the photo will note the lack of lower legs and hands. It was immediately evident that this burial is unique in Southern Britain, although there are some parallels with some odd (in the sense of 'weird') burials on ritual sites in Gaul. On examination, Sue found that the missing limbs had been removed at around the time of death with a knife. This was probably to do with the burial rite. It is also interesting that these cuts are similar to the ones in the massacre deposits.



*Skeleton from the Moor*

‘That isn’t the end of the story however. This man had a spectacular amount of trauma evident on his skeleton, most of it gained many years before his death. Not only had he broken a collar bone and three ribs on the left side, but a couple on the right as well; his spine showed evidence of longstanding trauma, probably caused by a fall from a great height. Remarkably he had a fracture to one of his neck vertebrae that had healed but never reunited the two halves – a remarkable escape from a full broken neck. On top of all that, he had well healed cuts, probably from a sword, across his head and cheek bone. The conclusion that he was a warrior seems fairly evident, but not only had he a long history of injuries, but his death may have been violent. As well as the careful cuts removing his limbs, there is evidence of cuts and puncture wounds to several parts of his body that occurred at around the time of death. Those who live by the sword evidently do die by it.

‘The combination of this man’s probable occupation and status, with the uniqueness of his burial, tying in with the treatment of parts of people on the hillfort, may help us to understand why he was placed as an apparent closing deposit. Who better to protect the ancestral lands in death than one who had for so long protected it in life?’

*\*SCEP was the South Cadbury Environs Project, run by Richard Tabor and a precursor to SSARG.*

**An image from 2008 below:** Richard never liked heights and getting on the top of the Land Rover certainly made him nervous. Clare to assist of course.



**And from July 2011, Giles Cooper wrote about a village dig at Sandford Orcas:**

‘The first of three sessions took place on the weekend of the 25th/26th June. The event was strongly supported by SSARG's 'Great and Good' namely Clare, Liz, Mary, Nigel and Peter. They all clocked-in at Giles' and Dee's kitchen (HQ for the day) and scoffed coffee before being introduced to the seven village diggers who were already busy in their gardens. Nigel was completely unfazed when confronted with a test pit surrounded by masses of small children. In fact he spent most of the day with them! Other SSARG members circulated meeting the other 'L-plate' diggers in their gardens spread around the village.

Predictably the preliminary message was that medieval and Victorian residents of the village enjoyed smashing their crockery! However one digger (helped by one of Clare's fan club from Dorchester) found a piece of Romano- British BB1. This at least backed up our hunch that the village was visited in earlier times. We have two more weekends to establish whether this was just a stray find or whether there was a settlement somewhere. Sadly we do not have access to all the gardens in the village as some residents still prize their lawns! Nevertheless we expect that about 21 test pits will be excavated over the summer. Without exception those residents who participated enjoyed the experience and most were grateful for the advice and support given by the SSARG representatives.

**And from the Ed:**

‘Giles had organised an archaeological enquiry into the village where he lives: Sandford Orcas. This is a pretty Dorset village set in a lush valley with some gardens on steep slopes beside the stream, some gardens generous in size and others much more modest. Giles and Dee hosted the SSARG recruits with tea and coffees throughout the day and this was a welcome retreat. Some volunteers were assigned to help the villagers to dig their test pits and others to advise and help where needed. It's an ambitious project which started a small number of pilot test pits (7) on this the first weekend with plans to excavate up to 40 test pits by close of play at the end of August. No mean feat!

‘Giles had been encouraging the people in the village to dig the test pits themselves (unlike Dave Durkin's model last year in Sturminster Newton) which meant that progress was slow as by and large only trowels were used and sieving of all material was required throughout. One test pit was attended by numerous children who were supported by the indefatigable Nigel until the attractions

of the garden swimming pool grabbed their attention. One team had two enthusiastic diggers who made excellent and rapid progress but overall few test pits reached below 30 cms – rather short of the projected 'one metre or natural' targets. In some of the smaller gardens, the spoil heap from such limited excavations looked somewhat large and it seemed sensible in one case to proceed with a 50% section of the test pit.

'The next weekend for operations will be the last weekend in July and again the final weekend in August. It will be interesting to see how much has been learnt from this first weekend – was more progress made on the Sunday. Will a different approach be needed next time? Do more people in the village want to become involved? What can be learned about the development of Sandford Orcas which is the purpose of the digging? I think the SSARG volunteers all found it to be a good day out and maybe we can put this sort of project to good use in the future. (And we did, Ed) MC