

On the Ranch Feb 2020

The weather has forced indoors this month, all field work subsequently being put on hold until more clement weather conditions are upon us. Joking aside, the on-going field work in question is largely geophysical surveying at Penselwood (continuing the large scale resi survey at Home Pits/Pen Point) and the long-term landscape magnetometry survey at Stapleton Farm (see Figures 1, 2 and 3 below).

Though the Stapleton Farm survey is more about access to the fields in the poor weather/ ground conditions, the Penselwood survey is highly dependent on the ground conditions. As soon as the conditions improve, we will be re-starting both of these extensive pieces of work.



Figure 1 Target research area Stapleton Farm

However, this enforced break from fieldwork has given us the opportunity to crack on with the huge amount of bulk environmental soil samples we've taken from Stapleton Farm, particularly the Tithe Mead excavations of 2014 – 2017. The process, known as flotation is best explained by this definition taken from the Oxford concise dictionary of Archaeology (p.148):

A method of extracting carbonised plant remains, molluscs, small animal bones (mammal; avian; amphibian), insect remains and microscopic fauna & flora, though these last two are generally recovered in laboratory conditions, from ancient soils and sediments. The process involves stirring the soil/sediments into a large barrel (tank! NH) of water so that the lighter materials floats and can be scooped off or floated over a weir and into a fine mesh sieve.



Figure 2 Area Surveyed Stapleton Farm



Figure 3 Doug Gurzynski the person who started the ball rolling in 2011

We have focussed on the samples collected from the excavation of the midden (2015–16) and the excavation of the dryer (2017), the aim being to try and get some material(s) which may suggest what was actually being processed in the dryer.

The dryer excavation (Figure 4) turned up very little relevant or useful evidence, with approx. 6 – 12 single charred grains recovered over the whole area of excavation. The feature appeared to have been cleaned out with just a single deposit of horse bones found in the top right of the flue cavity (Figure 5).

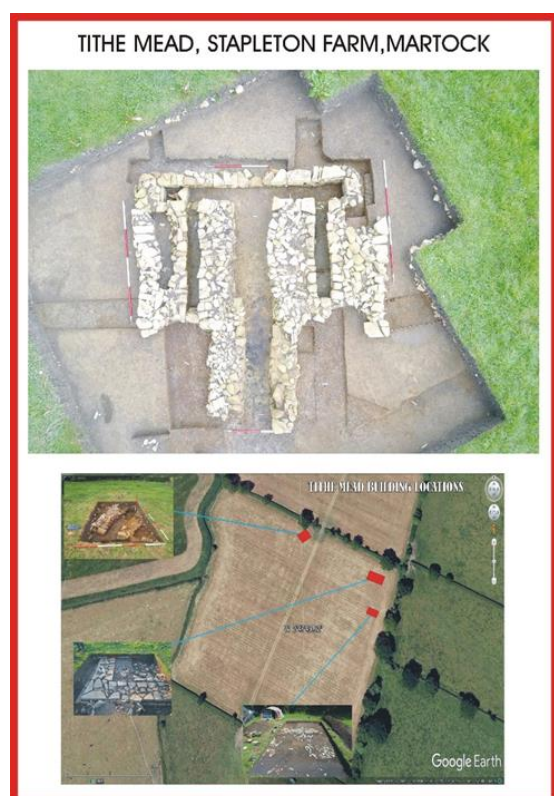


Figure 4 Tithe Mead Excavations 2013 - 17



Figure 5 Deposit of animal bone (horse) in dryer flue

Once processed, the samples from 2017 taken from the flue, the fire pit and the cavities below the drying floor, individually produced at least twice as many charred grains as were recovered during the excavation. On closer inspection of the flots and the residue at >4mm and 2mm – 4mm also contained charred seeds, peas and other materials yet to be identified, though there was some talk of vetch seeds (also known colloquially as ‘poor man’s peas’) and other legumes.

The other materials identified so far include small mammal and fish bones, insect parts (wings & carapaces), along with the general materials commonly found such as wood charcoal, larger bone fragments and slag material. Below Figure 6 shows the material recovered from a single sample/flot.



Figure 6 Materials recovered from a single soil sample/flot.

In lab conditions, utilising different methods of flotation, other materials such pollen grains (Figures 7 & 8), diatoms and ostracods (JFGI – Google it!) can be recovered and can tell us a great deal about the climatic and ground conditions prevalent when the material(s) were first deposited. This ‘enviro’ information can and does add a great deal to our further understanding of archaeological sites generally and is now widely used when writing up archaeological sites.

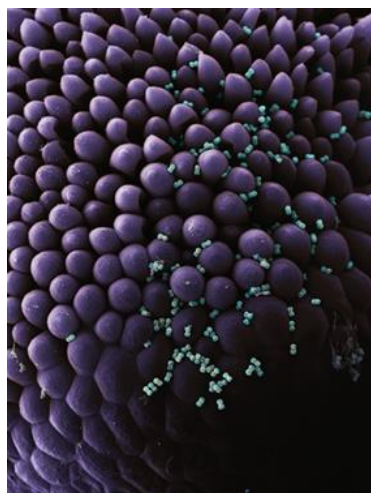


Figure 7 Forget-me-Not pollen



Figure 8 Persian silk pollen

Though it's still too early to draw any firm conclusions from the materials recovered so far, we can now say that there is now more than circumstantial evidence that grain was indeed one of the products dried and processed, and that other materials such as vetch, or at the least the residual material from processing it, is likely to have been used to fire up the dryer!

Work on the flotation continues at the farm/unit on Tuesdays and Thursdays until further notice. If you would like to come along and have a go at flotation, learn about the materials produced and help to sort the residues then contact

harveytron@hotmail.com / liz.caldwell@hotmail.co.uk for further details.

It's not the easiest of archaeological procedures, you will get damp and cold, but the return on the efforts taken are great. Done correctly and systematically, bulk enviro processing can add a great deal to our overall understanding of archaeological sites from all time periods, particularly where the material culture or larger artefacts available are scarce.

Now a quick update on the site at Bower Hinton Farm first identified by detectorists Greg Wales and Johnny March.

Below is the updated scatter map (Figure 9) overlaid with the magnetometer survey carried out by SSARG in April 2019.

Bower Hinton Farm – High Close / Pit Close Roman and Iron Age Metal Detecting Finds & Gradiometry Results



Figure 9 Bower Hinton survey with overlay of finds spots

The map is, I trust, self-explanatory, but does highlight the benefits of working collaboratively with detectorists where at all possible. It also demonstrates what can be achieved by some basic recording of find spots creating a clearly defined pattern of distribution of finds.

Greg and Johnny have carried on detecting the site (along with another on the farm – more of which later) at intervals and are finding more objects of interest including pottery (New Forest coated wares), coins and brooches including Iron Age coinage (Figures 10 and 11). These, taken with the worked flint (possibly late Neolithic, mid and late Bronze Age) suggests continual habitation through many time periods. The farm, which is still very active, is approximately 220m to the North-East of the site.



Figure 10 Iron Age Coins



Figure 11 Roman Plate brooch

Figure 10 is a gold/silver alloy quarter stater. It is a Durotriges "Boat" type and dates to c.80-50 BC. Figure 11 shows a Roman plate brooch - both were found at the site of the survey at High Close/Pit Close recently by Greg and Johnny.

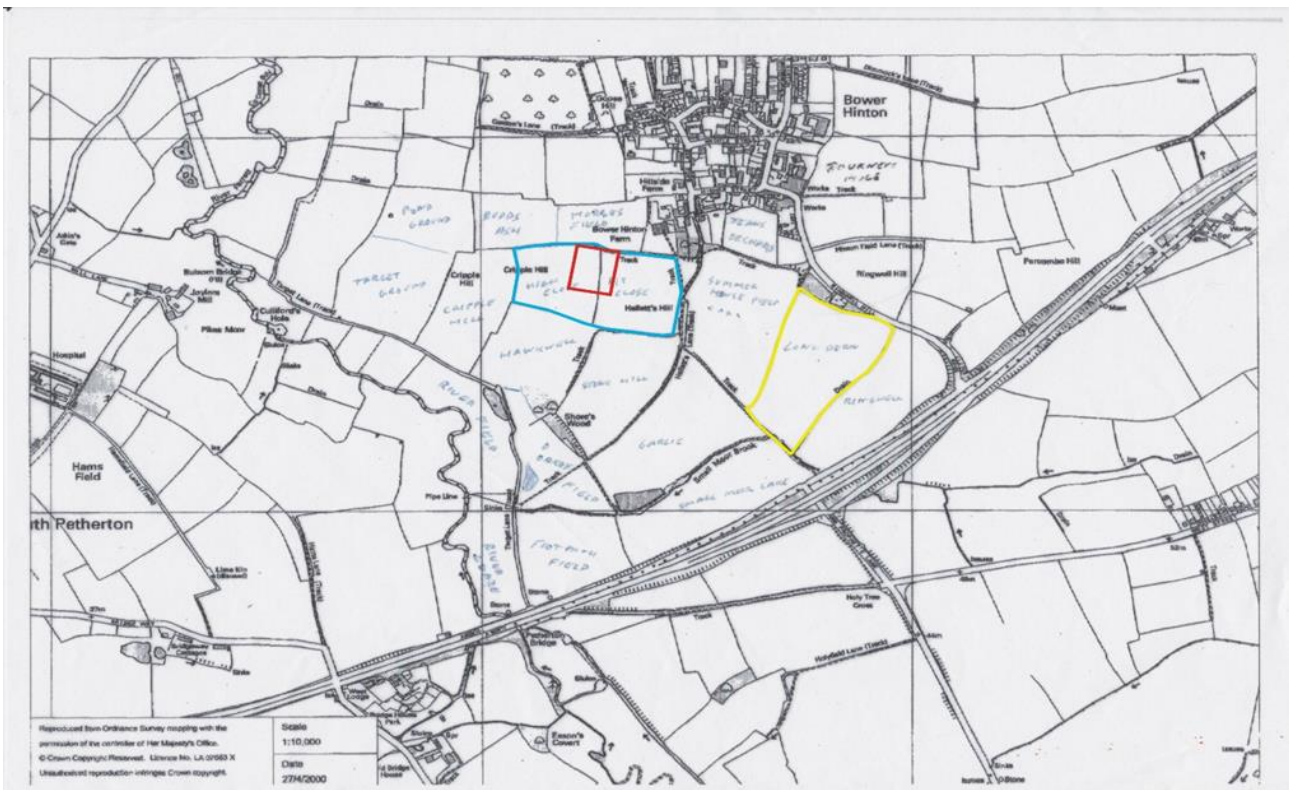
The other site at Bower Hinton Farm is approximately 550m to the east of the site, known as Long Dern. Long Dern is already on the Historic Environment Record (HER) and can be seen as two distinct dark patches on the cusp of the slope. The site can be seen when travelling eastbound along the A303 as you approach the exit for Bower Hinton, Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Crewkerne etc. The map below indicates the site near Bower Hinton.

The fact that you can see dark patches from the road suggests that the site is being compromised by ploughing, which is churning up materials from the archaeological zone and may be lost at some point. Therefore, we are aiming to get back there in the autumn to conduct a mag survey of the site. Below are links to the copper alloy stater (from Pit Close) and base silver (Billon) stater (the lower of the two Iron Age coins from High Close).

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/938280>

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/944638>

The next phase of work, should you all agree to continue with this project, will be to survey this other site to see if anything remains beneath the surface.



If you (Yes You!) are curious about how we conduct the survey work and/or want to be actively involved (good mild cardio-vascular exercise) then email either ssarg.org.uk or alternatively contact harveytron@hotmail.com liz.caldwell@hotmail.co.uk for when the where and the how to.

Finally, as you read in the last issue, we are in need of some of you to step up and help us share the load. We are one of the more active groups in the region, something we always have preserved since starting the group in 2007/8. To maintain such a presence in the field and to also offer partnership roles to the other local history groups takes work, commitment and time.

We can only sustain the level of fieldwork, plus all the added extras such as talks/presentations, field trips/visits and even this newsletter we need some of you to become more actively involved in the administration and running of the overall project that is SSARG. In the near future, we may have to reduce our fieldwork commitments, arrange fewer talks and not conduct as many outings/site visits etc.

This would be a shame and can be avoided by some of you making some time available to help carry the load. Just to remind you all we're looking for somebody to take on the IT work associated with running a group such as this (see page 11), a membership secretary (see page 2). For further information please contact harveytron@hotmail.com / liz.caldwell@hotmail.co.uk or alternatively you contact the membership secretary directly using the address on the membership form.

In next month's issue I will doing a small piece(!) on our Facebook page, go and have a looky-like beforehand and see what it's all about.



So, there you go. Happy Valentine's Day and I look forward to seeing you all in the new Eden(!) on Saturday morning. Stay safe from the flu, stay classy and enjoy the quarantine. N'Tron